

On Tibetan Art

The Tibetan culture is saturated with Buddhism, and Tibetan art thus is expressly Buddhist art. For the most part, paintings and statues depict enlightened beings, deities and gurus, but – to some extent – there is also art that has been made for more secular educative purposes, for example paintings displaying medical plants and anatomy. Beginning from the seventh century CE, Buddhism started to spread from India into Tibet, and along with it, other cultural influences too – even the Tibetan alphabet has been composed on the basis of Indian exemplars. In Tibet, Indian Buddhist art would be combined with other influences, such as Chinese landscape painting, and the synthesis developed into a unique Tibetan style.

Because of its sacral nature, Tibetan art is not based on the artist's free self-expression, but is formal and defined by strict rules; in this respect it is comparable with the Christian Eastern Orthodox icon art. The figures' proportions, positions, gestures, facial expressions, attire and jewellery, as well as the items they are holding in their hands, have to be portrayed exactly in the way they have been described in the oral and written tradition. All of these have their own meaning, and the entirety they form denotes each figure's spiritual quality. In some details that are insignificant from an iconographic point of view, and especially in background landscapes of paintings, the artist has more freedoms, although very original ideas have seldom been carried out in those either. The artist's role is to be an anonymous mediator, and works of art are traditionally not even signed.

A painting can have one or several, even hundreds of, figures, but normally their amount range from a few to about twenty. Many of the figures can be portrayed together with their wisdom consorts. This illustrates the union of wisdom and compassion, the unity of emptiness and beatitude, and the enlightened consciousness that transcends dualism and conceptuality. Some figures can appear in a furious form, as harsh and powerful manifestations of enlightened energy. Among the furious figures are also the protectors of the doctrine. Many of them are originally pre-Buddhist Tibetan mountain gods who have been defeated and tamed by Buddhist gurus and turned into protectors of Buddhism.

A typical arrangement has one large central figure who is surrounded by other figures; in the upper part of the picture is the Primordial Buddha or other buddha characters, as well as lamas and gurus, in the lower part, there are furious protector deities. Composition has not strict rules, however, but every picture is a logical entirety of its own, and all kinds of figures can be placed in whichever position. Different manifestations of the central figure appear often also as auxiliary figures. On the other hand, in some paintings, around the central figure is a large quantity of very tiny repetitions thereof, usually filling the entire canvas. An entire guru lineage, with meditational deities related to it, is represented in the form of a so-called refuge tree. In an image like this, there is a big tree that can have as much as over a hundred individual figures painted on its branches. Uppermost is the Primordial Buddha, and a group of beings – humans, animals, gods – have been gathered around the tree in order to pay their respect. On the other hand, so-called narrative paintings can depict a person's life story as separate acts, often sprinkled around a large central figure.

The most crystallised composition of sacred art is the mandala, the map of the mind and the cosmos. A typical mandala consists of a circle, surrounded by concentric rings, and, inside of it, a quadratic palace whose gates face the four compass points. In the middle of the palace resides the meditational deity who rules over the mandala and is surrounded, in various points in the mandala, by deities who, in essence, are manifestations of the central figure. At the same time, they represent the energies of the mind, the body and the cosmos, which has to be faced when travelling to the midpoint of the mandala – the world.

The word *thangka* in the Tibetan language means a flat surface or a plain, but, in addition to this, the word also refers to a traditional scroll painting which is made on a canvas. The painting procedure is started by tensioning a linen or a cotton canvas on a wooden frame. Thereafter, the canvas is primed with a mixture of glue and chalk, and made completely even and smooth. On this surface, a precise proportional scheme is composed in order to ensure correct proportions for the figures that are to be depicted. In most cases, a central perspective is used, and the central figure is placed exactly at the vertical midline, and other figures symmetrically to it. In narrative paintings, or when depicting lamas, gurus and yogis, a two-point perspective and an asymmetrical layout can also be used. At first, the figures are drawn as a line drawing, and thereafter, the picture is coloured, gilding is added, and the contours are traced with a very thin brush. The gilding can also be polished by rubbing it with a blunt metal peg. Traditionally, paints are derived from ground minerals and mixed with water-soluble glue which serves as a binding agent, and gilding is also made with gold dust mixed with glue. Once completed, the painting is sewn on to a brocade frame which symbolises the empty space. Between the painting and the brocade, there usually is a 'rainbow border' consisting of a red and a yellow shred, and underneath the image is a rectangular piece of cloth of a different colour, a 'gate'. On the edges, there are two narrow cloth ribbons, 'wind strips', hanging freely. Furthermore, in front of the painting is a thin protective veil which is folded up when the image is on display.

The material of statues is usually copper into which other metals, for instance gold, silver, lead, zinc, and antimony, are mixed. In this way, different colour hues can be produced. The exact formulæ for different alloys are secrets that are developed and protected in families of artists over the centuries.

Statues can be cast either as unique pieces or as series work. In the former case, a wax cast is used. A clay gob is coated with wax into which the features of the upcoming statue are sculpted, and this wax model, for its part, is coated with clay. The needles that are pushed through the layer of wax hold the piece of clay inside of it in its place while the wax is melted away. Thereafter, molten metal is poured into the gap that has been created between the two layers of clay, and after the metal has been solidified, the cast is broken, and the statue is taken out. An openable cast, which is to be used multiple times, is in turn produced by coating a completed item with clay. Before the clay has dried, it is opened up with a thin knife, and the model is removed. The cut surface is covered with coal dust in order to prevent sticking, and the cast is closed and let to dry.

After having been cast, the statue is finished. Roughnesses are removed, details are touched up, and engravings and inlays are made. The statue is ground, polished and possibly gilded. An usual method is to apply gold-mercury amalgam on the surface that is to be gilded, whereafter the object is heated up, which causes evaporation of the mercury, and the gold gets attached to the metallic surface. Those castings that are highest in quality do not usually even get gilded, because the statue is desired to be preserved as fine in details as possible. A statue, especially a big or a complex one, can be assembled of pieces that are cast separately. The pedestal, the nimbus and certain hand-held items are often separate.

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