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WELL-PRESERVED BUDDHIST ARTWORKS ARE A PARADISE
FOR KEEN COLLECTORS



Sometime during the 11th century, in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, its indigenous Newar people started to create paubhas, canvases rich in traditional religious iconography. Frequently depicting Buddhist and, less occasionally Hindu deities, these colourful and vibrant paintings were then used as meditation aids or as a feature at religious festivals.

One school of thought believes that, as of the 12th century onwards, these canvases were exported to neighbouring areas, including present-day Bhutan and Tibet. Here they became one of the key inspirations behind the Himalayan thangkās – silk or cotton panels produced in celebration of Buddhist beliefs.

In addition to the vibrant colours and symbolism of the finished works, the other unusual element of these thangkās was their three-dimensional approach. Describing their complex structure, Ann Shaftel, a Canadian expert on these early religious works, says: “Thangkās are complicated, composite, three-dimensional objects. They consist of a picture panel which is painted or appliqued and a textile mounting.

“They also feature one or more of the following – a silk cover, leather or metal corners, wooden dowels at the top and bottom of the mounting, metal or wooden decorative knobs on the bottom dowel, as well as ribbons and cords to hang the thangka and drape the cover.”

In the case of vast majority of paintings, the exact identity of the artist is lost to posterity, but their purpose remains clear. They were created, like the paubhas before them, as guides for contemplation and meditation.

Explaining their use, Shaftel says: “You could use a thangka as a reference for the details of posture, attitude, colour, clothing and so on of a figure located in a field or a palace.”

The central figures featured in the thangkās differ according to lineage and meditation practice. A popular figure could be Tara – a female Bodhisattva (enlightened being) who represents compassion in Buddhist lore. In a sense, the thangkās serve as image-based instruction manuals on Tara meditation, a usage widely endorsed by many Buddhist authorities.

The iconography, one of the most important elements in the contemporary valuation of a thangka, is somewhat complicated. According to Shaftel, even a subtle change in colour can alter the message of an icon, making it something of a challenge to gain a true understanding of the overall message any thangka is seeking to convey.



In truth, though, it is the rich history of these early thangkas, combined with the abiding mystery that shrouds some of their central figures, that creates much of the appeal for today's collectors. According to Sandhya Jain-Patel, Head of Sales at Christie's New York-based Indian and Southeast Asian Department, it is an appeal that is clearly growing. She says: "There are now dedicated collectors all over the world, including Europe, America and China. As a result, there have been several outstanding results when certain thangkas have come to auction over recent years."

Particularly fine thangkas tend to command prices of around US\$5,000 (HK\$39,000). One particularly memorable example recently sold at auction in Sotheby's New York for US\$3,750. The piece – The Thangka of Chakrasamvara is thought to have originated in 19th century Tibet. Its central figure (also known as "Samvara") is considered to be one of the principal meditating deities of Tibetan Buddhism and is typically depicted with four faces, twelve arms and a blue body.

In this particular thangka, Samvara is depicted embracing his consort, Dorje Pakmo, the Tibet-an representative of high bliss. Surrounded by a pantheon of other deities, the painting has the typical vibrancy of the very finest thangkas, in terms of both colour and iconography. This particular example, however, is in something of a faded condition and is a relatively recent work, both of which factors combined to reduce its value.

The poor condition of many thangkas is a common problem, according to Shaftel. The nomadic lifestyle of their Himalayan creators over the centuries has contributed hugely to the wear and tear of their colourful legacy, as has the use to which the pieces were once put.

Explaining the problem, Shaftel says: “Thangkas were important treasures for the nomadic monastic groups of medieval Tibet. It was not unusual for a group of scholars, yogis and meditation masters to travel to distant regions by yak, set up tents, unroll their thangkas, instruct the locals, then move on to another area.”



Damage to these early Tibetan thangkas, then, was somewhat inevitable, particularly in light of the damp conditions in many of the stone temples where they went on show. Even today, with thangkas still a significant part of Buddhist study in Tibet, their comparatively rough handling and the poor storage conditions sees potential damage remain an ongoing issue.

As a result, premium prices are paid for any thangkas deemed to be both significant and in prime condition. When it comes to valuation, Jain-Patel says: “Most auction houses look at the rarity of the subject matter, the dating of the item and its overall state of preservation. Many thangkas have only one or two of these qualities – when all three are present, the value of the piece soars.”

Indeed, it was Christie’s who sold the most expensive thangka at auction, in September 2012 in New York. Simply catalogued as “A Rare and Important Thangka of the Green Tara, Tibet, 12th/14th century” the painting eventually realised a record US\$1.76 million.

Explaining its valuation, Jain-Patel says: “In terms of subject, it is the earliest known example of Green Tara being depicted in association with Twenty-one Taras and the Eight Fears, making it quite rare. It’s also not been subject to any restoration work, so the original iconography is still visible and therefore

incredibly important.

“In terms of its dating, the 13th/14th century is exceptionally old for Himalayan paintings, as these are fragile items and, typically, do not survive long. Finally, it also came from a very well-known and long-established, collection, meaning its provenance is undeniable.”

Tara is a significant meditation deity, ranked amongst the group of Buddhas (or Bodhisattva) related to compassion and emptiness. The Green Tara symbolises enlightened activity and is said to aid her followers in overcoming dangers, fears and anxieties. By some experts, she is even believed to be the original Tara.

The next lot in the same sale was also quite remarkable. Consisting of a 13th century thangka depicting Amitabha (a principal Buddha, known for his longevity), it is believed to have been commissioned and painted in western Tibet. Explaining its significance, the Christie’s catalogue said: “Unlike most representations of Amitabha, this thangka has replaced the customary peacocks that support his throne with lions, indicating that perhaps this is from a set of five paintings of the Five Buddhas.” The painting was ultimately sold for US\$1 million.



The two thangkas that were sold at the auction were both part of the collection of Dr. Eugenio Ghersi (1904-1997), an Italian naval hero and a distinguished surgeon. He is considered to be one of the last great explorers of Tibet and built an impressive portfolio of photographs and artworks from the Himalayas.

Lowell Thomas Jr. (b.1923) is another traveller to Tibet to have created an impressive Tibetan photographic legacy. One of his 1949 photographs features a thangka painter in Lhasa. Although the artist is featured amid decidedly humble surroundings, the artwork he is creating is clearly a beautiful and sophisticated piece. The skill and pride the artist takes in his work is also expertly captured.

Towards the end of 2013, a thangka commemorating Milarepa, one of the leading lights of 11th century Buddhism, went up for auction in London. Inevitably, given the rarity of its subject matter and its excellent condition, it excited much interest across the world.

Benedetta Mottino, an Asian arts specialist for Dreweatts, an international auctioneering group, described the thangka as “a piece of sublime beauty, tranquility, and ecstatic clarity.” Again, it was thought that there was a strong provenance, as the item had been directly sourced from a European vendor. This rare combination saw the thangka sold for £522,000 (HK\$6.62 million).

In terms of the general market, Asian art has enjoyed an unprecedented boom over the last eight years. While the initial focus was very much on ceramics and jade, interest in thangkas – and other lesser-known artifacts – is definitely increasing, as the recent auction successes clearly testify.

Unlike ceramics and jade, the market for thangkas is apparently just as strong in Europe and the United States as it is in China. The Milarepa thangka, for example, was sold to a European buyer. This could be down to a number of factors, including speculators wagering on the fact that Chinese demand will continue to rise, continually pushing up the value of thangkas. XXXXX



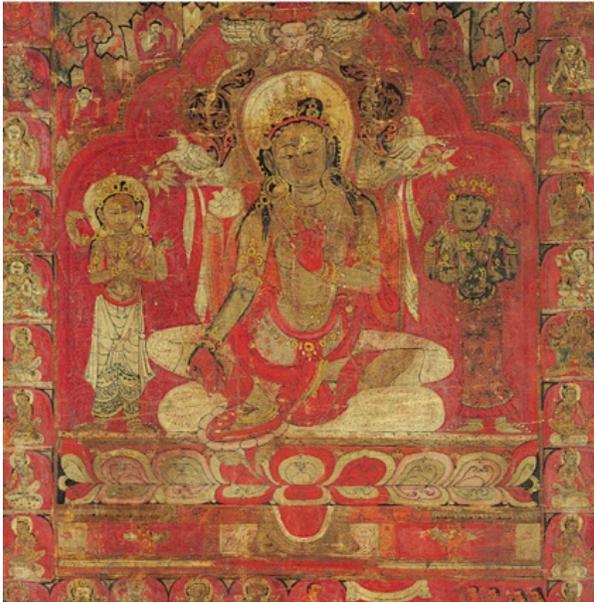
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As with any booming market in antiques and pre-20th century artifacts, counterfeit items have now become a considerable problem. It is well-known that there are fake thangkas of varying quality in circulation, many of which are being sold as authentically pre-19th century items. This not only poses a problem for investors, but it is also likely to offend Buddhists – particularly as many painters do not see their works as art forms, but rather as acts of religious expression. Such is the extent of the problem that validating such thangkas has now become almost an academic discipline in its own right. Ann Shafteel is one such expert.

While not an extensive collector herself, Shafteel focuses her energies on conservation and consultation work for thangka collectors, museums and monasteries. Despite living in Canada, much of her work is focused on Asia.

She says the most important thangka in her modest collection was painted by the 8th Kyabgon Khamtrul Rinpoche in 1970, when the two met in India. The Khamtrul Rinpoche is the head of one of the lineages of Buddhism, and considered to be a “Master,” with responsibility for passing on his knowledge to the next generation.

According to Shafteel, her prized thangka is particularly valuable as it belongs to “a unique category of thangkas created as the result of a grand vision by a great meditation master and actually painted by him or her.”

Explaining the particular rarity of her own artwork, she says: “The 8th Kyabgon Khamtrul Rinpoche painted a thangka for me in 1970. He also signed and dated it on the reverse, which is, again, unusual. He also wrote an inscription activating the qualities of the deity. The fine line details are free hand and lively,

with the wrathful quality of the deity perfectly captured and transmitted.”

Shaftel’s experience underlines the significant importance of the art form at both a personal and religious level and also shows that the practice is still very much alive today. Simply put, to most followers and to many students of Himalayan art, thangkas are quite beyond monetary value.

Despite this, there is clearly a market for them, one which is performing strongly and one which looks set to grow. Ironically, the very reason thangkas were so long exempt from the Asian art boom – their complexity – may well now be the reason for their escalating popularity.

Thangkas are – almost literally – interwoven into the fascinating and complicated world of Buddhism, alongside its various lineages and teachings. To understand each thangka is to understand the particular teaching of the lineage of Buddhism that inspired it – and that is quite a challenge.