

SPIRITUAL, BUT FAKE?

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ABSTRACT-As complicated, composite objects, the complete thangka form presents a complex challenge in the spectrum of fakes, forgeries and fabrications. Thangkas are a sacred art form still in active use. Traditional thangkas are created from an unbroken chain of instruction, descending from teacher to student in the conservative cultural and religious traditions of this Himalayan Buddhist art form. Because thangkas are composite objects, the various components of a thangka may or may not be original to each other, as parts are replaced and restored over the years. For example, the textile mountings may have been changed several times in the object's history. Confusing the issue further, new thangkas using traditional iconography but non-traditional materials or non-traditional iconography with traditional materials and methods of manufacture have appeared in the marketplace. In some cases, these thangkas have been made as intentional fakes with the deliberate purpose of deception and profit for the maker and seller. In other cases, these unconventional thangkas are used in the traditional manner. This paper seeks to define the thangka in the context of an evolving cultural tradition

TÍTULO – ESPIRITUAL, PERO ¿FALSO? RESUMEN – Como objetos compuestos y complejos, la forma completa de la thangka representa un gran desafío en el campo de las falsificaciones, imitaciones e invenciones. Las thangkas son una muestra de arte sagrada que todavía se usa en la actualidad. Las thangkas tradicionales se crean a partir de una cadena ininterrumpida de instrucciones del maestro al alumno en las tradiciones conservadoras culturales y religiosas de esta expresión artística del Himalaya Budista. Debido a que las thangkas son objetos compuestos, sus diversos componentes pueden o no ser originales, ya que las partes se reemplazan y restituyen con el paso de los años. Por ejemplo, el fondo textil se puede cambiar varias veces a lo largo de la historia del objeto. Lo que confunde aún más es que en el mercado han aparecido nuevas thangkas con iconografía tradicional y materiales no tradicionales, o con iconografía no tradicional y materiales y métodos de elaboración tradicionales. En algunos casos, las thangkas son falsificaciones intencionales con el objetivo deliberado de engañar y obtener una ganancia para el fabricante y el vendedor. En otros casos, representan a una nueva religión que ha adoptado el uso de la thangka. El objetivo del presente trabajo es definir la thangka, para poder así establecer una diferencia entre una tradición cultural en evolución y las falsificaciones.

1. INTRODUCTION

One would hope that with a sacred art form still in active use, there would be no concerns about fakes, forgeries and fabrications, the subject the AIC Annual Conference held in Richmond, Virginia in April 2007. However, these terms become difficult to apply to a living spiritual tradition. Himalayan Buddhist thangkas are complicated, composite objects that are changing in form with both the changes in the sociological, economic and geographic situations in which they are used and the

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media that contemporary artists utilize in their manufacture.

Textiles are an integral part of sacred and secular life in traditional societies where thangkas are used. The textiles used in the construction of thangkas are evidence of the history of development and changes in textile techniques from that region of the world. The change in the thangka form is a continuation of this history. Should a contemporary thangka completely constructed from synthetic media be considered a fake, a fabrication, or simply a continuation of this process of change?

2. TEXTILES IN THANGKAS, A LIVING TRADITION

A shrine room in the Northern Buddhist tradition may be decorated with textiles everywhere. In addition to thangkas, chevron hangings, seat covers, rugs, text covers, and the robes of monks waiting to be worn at the next session are utilized as decoration. These textiles might be from progressive centuries, as shrine decorations are replaced. Newer textiles can be pieced in with much older ones, since no scrap of precious cloth is wasted, as seen in the Rumtek Monastery Main Shrine Hall in 2007 (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Rumtek Monastery Main Shrine Hall, 2007.

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As complicated, composite objects, the complete thangka form presents a complex challenge in the spectrum of fakes, forgeries and fabrications. The historical relationship between the painting panel of a thangka and its current textile mounting is also complex. The varied components of a complete thangka form may or may not be “original” to each other. For example, the textile mountings may have been changed several times in the history of a specific iconographic panel, painting or appliqué. Or, a patron might donate funds for a new mounting for a thangka or thangkas in a monastic setting, for example. There are methods to determine how many mountings a specific picture panel may have been sewn into during its history. The fragile silk cover may have been replaced, or the decorative knobs on the bottom dowel may not be original to the mounting that you presently see.

The physical relationship between the painting panel of a thangka and its textile mounting is complex. Since thangkas are composite objects, there is often mechanical stress between the components, especially at the area of stitching holding the iconographic panel into the textile mounting (fig. 2). The relationship becomes more stressful as the separate components age, and through exposure to damaging handling associated with their repeated use and subsequent storage in trunks.



Figure 2. The Abbot of Trongsa Monastery in Bhutan is concerned about the shredding of the dark blue silk of an important thangka in his monastery.

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3. THANGKA CONSTRUCTION

3.1 PARTS OF A THANGKA

A thangka is a complex construction including a painting, a textile mounting (sometimes with leather corners), pendant ribbons, a textile cover, a cord to hold up the cover, a cord or ribbons from which to hang the thangka from top and bottom dowels (fig. 3), and decorative knobs on the bottom dowels. An iconographically complete and useable thangka consists of a painting and a mounting: a painting without a mounting is incomplete (Shaftel 1986).



Figure 3. Thangka form, 2007.

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Figure 4. Front of empty mounting cover down, Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.



Figure 5. Front of empty mounting cover up, Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

3.2 A THANGKA IS NOT JUST A PAINTING

In the western art market, what is sold as a thangka is often just the painting that was once part of a complete thangka construction. In the originating culture where textiles are so valued, the textile mountings were also considered of high value. Thangka mountings carry the history of development of textile techniques and some are very beautiful, yet few art galleries in New York, Paris or London would sell textile thangka mountings without a painting inside (figs. 4, 5).

Early thangka mountings were constructed from Ming and Ch'ing Dynasty court robes. The “door” or “gate” section of the mounting sometimes used the animal section of the robe, woven or em-

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Figure 6. Door of a thangka mounting, Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

broidered, which designated the wearer's rank at court (fig. 6). Certain teachers interviewed explained the Door or Gate as the entrance into the world of the thangka iconography, as you would enter a temple through a Door or Gate.

3.3 A THANGKA PAINTING MAY NOT BE A PAINTING AT ALL

The central iconographic panel of thangkas often referred to as a “thangka painting” may not be a painting at all, rather an appliqué. The appliqué art form is still alive today and is often used in larger thangkas (figs. 7, 8). The huge thangkas that are traditionally displayed on the side of a monastery wall or on a mountainside for a day or week each year according to the lunar calendar



Figure 7. This contemporary thangka has an appliquéd iconographic panel.

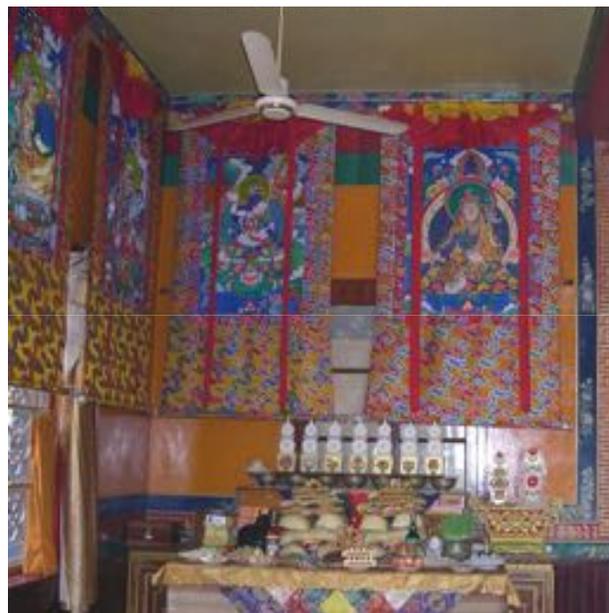


Figure 8. Nechung Temple, Dharamsala, 2007.

are usually appliquéd. Appliqué as a traditional art form is taught in schools of traditional arts and crafts throughout the Himalayan region. Some of the older appliquéd thangkas are extremely complex, with the use of many layers and types of silk pieced together to form a three-dimensional construct, often including precious and semi-precious gems and the use of gold and silver thread (fig. 9).

4. A BLEND OF OLD AND NEW

One painted picture panel may have several textile mountings throughout its history; as the textile mounting wears out from use, and/or a donor offers funds for new mountings. If a painting comes to your conservation laboratory with several lines of stitch holes, which progressively move towards the center of the support, you may recognize remounting as the possible cause for this. On some paintings, significant areas of the iconographic design become covered by the later textile

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Figure 9. A student hand wraps silk thread around horsehair to include in her appliqué work at Norbulingka in Dharamsala, 2007.



Figure 10. Lines of stitch holes reveal several previous mountings, Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.



Figure 11. A new textile mounting that has been machine sewn around an old painting.

mountings. Sometimes the lines of stitch holes can tear through the support (fig. 10). This is especially true if a new textile mounting has been recently added with the use of a commercial sewing machine that was designed for use on strong contemporary fabric. Yet, even an old painting which

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has been machine sewn into a recently woven synthetic textile mounting cannot be easily labeled, for the purposes of this paper, a fabrication (fig. 11).

Over the past 37 years of thangka work, I have asked thangka caretakers, monks, abbots and high teachers about the fate of the textile mountings after they are retired from use in a complete thangka form, replaced by newer textile mountings. Some replied that the textile mountings are rolled up



Figure 12. Dancing monk at Rumtek Monastery in 1992 wearing a treasured costume pieced together from textiles of different ages.

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and put away in respectful storage in a shrine room or a storage area close to a shrine room because they were part of a thangka, they retain blessings; the textile components of the thangka mounting are not reused. Others reported that once removed, the textiles from thangka mountings are reused, either as tiny robes for small statues or pieced together into elaborate dance costumes (fig. 12). Does the age of a thangka or the technique of manufacture affect a thangka's importance as a religious and cultural artifact? The determination of importance, or inherent value, changes depending on the point of view: traditional monk, a caretaker, a householder, an antique dealer or a museum curator.

5. CHANGES IN THE THANGKA FORM AND IN THE DEFINITION OF "THANGKA"

5.1 CHANGES IN ICONOGRAPHY

A new thangka that a western curator or collector might label a "fake" could be in daily use in the spiritual/cultural life of a Buddhist in the Himalayan region, or in the West. Some collectors label a thangka fake if its iconography is not traditional even if it is painted and mounted in a traditional manner. For example, there is a "Celtic Thangka". "Celtic Buddhism" is led by a former butler from England. Their thangka is painted in traditional technique, with recently invented iconogra-



Figure 13. The office of Abbot of Trongsa Dzong, a major monastic center in Bhutan. He has a "calendar thangka" on his wall directly next to a traditional painted thangka of his lineage.

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phy to illustrate a new religion. If this painting is sewn into a traditional textile mounting form, is it a thangka?

5.2 CHANGES IN MEDIA AND TECHNIQUE OF MANUFACTURE

Does the technique of manufacture affect a thangka's value as a religious and cultural artifact? In the Himalayas, even deeply traditional shrine rooms may hang thangkas that are printed on "plas-



Figure 14. Iconographic panel printed on synthetic support, set into a traditional textile mounting,

tic" supports or synthetic coated paper. These are often sewn into a traditional textile border. Local merchants distribute "calendar thangkas" with an iconographic image above months of the year with lunar day celebrations (fig. 13). These "calendar thangkas" are hung in homes, shops, and offices and sometimes in shrine halls.

The lesser initial monetary cost of these iconographic images is a consideration here, as well as the

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perception that the printed images on synthetic supports are stronger than traditional painted images on cotton supports. When I interview a range of informants about the use of these “calendar thangkas”, it is often mentioned that the printed thangkas on synthetic supports assumed to last longer through rolling, unrolling, etc. than thangkas painted in a traditional way on cotton supports. However, over the last ten years, some printed synthetic support thangka “paintings” are exhibiting serious deterioration. Figure 14 shows how these supports can deteriorate from rolling, unrolling, display, re-rolling, and storage in trunks. Traditional thangkas are hung on the wall on either side and behind this thangka.

What do traditional religious figures say about these thangkas with printed images instead of hand-painted images? I have asked these questions of Buddhist teachers from different sects for many years. Their answers are revealing and relate more to spirituality than to traditional Western connoisseurship. One highly respected teacher admitted in a private conversation that he was relieved that his monastery in Nepal relied on newly painted thangkas for use in ceremonies and meditation sessions. He was concerned about theft: the increasing disappearance of older thangkas from monasteries and their reappearance in western art collections.



Figure 15. Traditional usage of thangka entirely made from synthetic materials



Figure 16. Bottom dowel of this thangka made from synthetic materials is made of hard plastic, instead of the traditional wooden dowel.

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Recently, there was a major blessing, or Transmission ceremony, at a Buddhist center. The teacher was reading to his students from a text, a terma, which was revealed by a great teacher. Since this was a terma, or original teaching, the iconography of the main figure was not found elsewhere, and a painter was asked to create a thangka painting just for this occasion. With little notice, he painted it in three days, and emailed the image as a jpg file to the teacher via email.

The teacher asked me to create a full thangka form for use as the main shrine object in the blessing ceremony. We decided to print out the jpg to a size approximate to an average smaller thangka painting. I searched through my collection of textile thangka mountings from which the painting has been removed. Through the years, I have been given these empty thangka mounting textiles by collectors who considered them as valueless textiles because they contained no painting. A collector might feel that the only value lies in the painting part of the thangka form, which was the most important part, and the only important part of value.

I found a traditional thangka textile mounting which fit well with the jpg print. Since the jpg had been printed out on heavy, thick, plastic based paper, many needles were bent and snapped as I hand sewed into the textile mounting using traditional stitching. The thangka form was completed to the satisfaction of the teacher, who lives deep in a remote area of Tibet, and the blessing ceremony proceeded. He also requested that the jpg be used to print out smaller images of the painting for use by students in their daily meditation practice. He felt that the iconographic information contained in the images was of great value.

Another Tibetan teacher approved the use of a thangka constructed entirely from synthetic materials. He found it practical to have a number of these thangkas produced to give to his students and to monasteries and Buddhist centers as presents. The iconographic image (figs. 15, 16) is printed on a synthetic support. The cover looks traditional but the fabric is nylon, and the “radish stamp” design is not hand applied, it is machine printed. The mounting textile is totally synthetic and even the bottom dowel, traditionally made of wood, is plastic in this recent thangka.

6. NEW THANGKA FORMS

New forms of thangkas are emerging and the name thangka is applied to mail order prints, machine woven wall decorations, etc. I am fortunate to work in Bhutan, teaching thangka conservation to nuns. When I shop with the nuns for presents, some request a certain type of thangka for their room. This thangka form is not what a curator or collector in the west would consider a great treas-

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Figure 17. A contemporary thangka form, with velvet and glitter

ure. While walking through the market, I have heard tourists label these thangkas as “fakes”, yet the nuns valued them for spiritual inspiration. I was recently given such a thangka as a gift from a visiting Buddhist scholar; it is shown in figure 17. Though the materials of construction have changed, the meaning of this thangka has not. These thangkas are certainly not “fakes” but are examples of an ever evolving thangka form.

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7. SUMMARY

The determination of the value of a thangka may differ from the points of view of a traditional nun or monk, a caretaker, a householder, an antiques dealer and a museum curator. Today, traditional thangkas are still available, created from an unbroken chain of instruction, descending from teacher to student in the conservative cultural/religious tradition of this Himalayan Buddhist art form. As complicated, composite objects, both the traditional and the evolving thangka forms present a complex challenge in the spectrum of fakes, forgeries and fabrications

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