

Thang-ga's Painting Techniques and Their Spiritual Significance

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Abstract: The primary way of passing down Thang-ga is to carry forward the painting techniques. This paper explores the spiritual significance of Thang-ga's painting techniques based on the aesthetic culture and philosophical ideas that underlie the techniques: as the spiritual significance of Thang-ga determines the procedures of Thang-ga making, each painting step and brushstroke represents the philosophical ideas and the spirit of Tibetan Buddhism. But if techniques are unduly emphasized and Thang-ga's spiritual significance is neglected, Thang-ga will become mere forms deprived of artistic values.

1. Introduction

Since Tibetan Thang-ga was added to the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of China in 2006, the art of Thang-ga making, which is the lifeline for the survival and development of Thang-ga, has undergone a tough time of being passed down. Art is dynamic and living and hence has the potential to develop and evolve amid the trend of globalization. Though contemporary Thang-ga paintings are more exquisite than before, they are less impressive and lack religious appeal. In the author's view, Thang-ga making involves not only the procedures and techniques of painting but multiple other elements, including Tibetan beliefs, concepts, and aesthetics. The elements mentioned above codetermine the philosophical and spiritual significance of Tibetan art.

2. Technical paradigm and structure of Thang-ga making

"Paradigms are the source of the methods, problems, and standards of solution accepted by any mature scientific community at any given time." [1] They are "theoretical systems generally accepted by a community at a particular time." [2] Though there are differences in style and techniques among the existing schools of Thang-ga making, the schools follow a common paradigm – "Three Sutras and One Commentary." [3]

Thang-ga is about painting deities, and its fundamental difference from other paintings is what it's intended to represent and convey. What Thang-ga is intended to represent are the doctrines of Tibetan Buddhism. During the painting process, it is necessary to conform to the measurement of the statue as stipulated in "Three Sutras and One Commentary," [4] where measurement refers to the shape and proportion of the statue of Buddha as different images of deities have different proportions. For example, the length of a

Buddha's face is one xie, which is the width of twelve fingers. The neck of a Buddha measures the width of four fingers, and there should be one xie between a Buddha's neck and each of its shoulders. A Buddha's arm measures one and two-thirds xie, and its forearm measures one and a third xie. The length of a Buddha's palm is one xie (Figure 1). There are also detailed instructions on the proportions of Dharma Protector and Dara. For example, "the deity Dara has a face that takes the shape of a sesame seed, eyes that resemble the petals of a flower, lips that look like acacia fruits, and hands that look like blossoming flowers." [5] (Figure 2) Artists have to observe the measurement strictly as it serves as the paradigm of Thang-ga making. The key to making an exquisite Thang-ga is the accurate measurement of the statue in the painting.

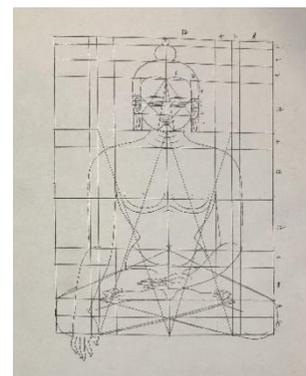


Figure 1 The measurement of a sitting Buddha in *Buddha's Sutra on the Measurement of Statues*

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Figure 2 The face of a Dara

"The accuracy of measurement determines how divine the Buddha looks ... If the measurement is inaccurate, the Buddha will be deprived of its divinity." [6] Measurement can influence the representation of the relationship between the form and spirit in the art of Buddha statues. It is recorded in the Buddhist sutras that if artists fail to portray the deities following the measurement requirements stipulated by the sutras, they will face "punishments" for their negligence – they may suffer disabilities, become dumb or dull, or be born poor in their next life. The reason for this is that Buddha statues, as the physical manifestation of Buddhist beliefs, are where the sacredness of Buddha lies. Damba Rao Dan (deceased), a representative inheritor of the national intangible cultural heritage, a Thang-ga artist belonging to the Miantang school, and a professor at Tibet University, once said, "The virtue of a perfect Thang-ga painting lies in its measurement. Good measurement is the basis of the divinity of a Buddha statue, and a painting featuring a Buddha will not be qualified to be called a Thang-ga painting if the accurate measurement cannot be ensured." Measurement lies at the heart of the techniques of Thang-ga making, and the act of conforming to relevant requirements reflects the logic that underlies Buddhism. The measurement requirements help artists build the image of the deity that a Thang-ga painting features and the requirements are also symbols inherent in Thang-ga that represent Thang-ga's values.

The "structure" in this paper can be understood as "essentialism," which is about the intrinsic properties of something and the special form of the thing that distinguishes it from other things. The inherited Thang-ga technique has its process and "structure," and the inherent painting procedures and paradigms construct the sacred properties of Thang-ga.

The creation of a Thang-ga starts with selecting the material for the canvas and brushes and making them. The pigments also have to be collected and refined in advance. The painting process involves drawing the initial lining, sketching, coloring, outlining, and drawing the face of the deity. After the painting is finished, the deity in the Thang-ga will go through a special ritual of "enlightenment." [7] Besides conforming to the measurement requirements stipulated by "Three Sutras and One Commentary," rigorous procedures must be followed to make a Thang-ga. The artists have to frame the canvas, polish it with yak bone gelatin, and refine the

mineral pigments after collecting them in the wild. When sketching, coloring, outlining, and drawing the face of the deity, the artists have to concentrate fully, as no error is allowed. An exquisite Thang-ga boasts not only perfect measurements but the attention the artist has paid to the details, which is represented by impeccable outlining and coloring and the look of compassion and benevolence in the Buddha's eyes. It's the piety and reverence that the artist harbors when making a Thang-ga that gives the Buddha life.

The steps of making Thang-ga are a series of interlocking activities. Though Thang-ga making is a process of practicing the techniques, it's not a rigid, lifeless routine but a religious ritual with the artists' reverence infused into each step of the process. In this sense, making Thang-ga is a process of spiritual purification, and the techniques involved epitomize the spiritual significance of Thang-ga.

3. Spiritual significance of Thang-ga's painting techniques

The religiousness of Thang-ga lies not only in the images and their symbolic meanings but in the painting techniques that underlie the art form. The religious logic the techniques connote is an important manifestation of Thang-ga's value as an intangible cultural heritage.

Firstly, Thang-ga making is viewed by monks and Thang-ga artists as a way to practice Buddhism. Thang-ga making can be seen as an activity that trains concentration, as the mastery of the outlining, touching up, and glazing techniques requires great patience. Khenan Lechu Rinpoche, the founder of Jokhang Thang-ga Training School, believes that "when making Thang-ga, one can reach a state of full concentration and experience the unity of mind and body. In a certain sense, Thang-ga is not for business profits or tourists. The first to benefit from a Thang-ga painting is the artist engaged in making it. What's more, as artists' brushwork conveys their piety, the worshippers can be influenced by the power of faith as they admire the exquisite Thang-ga paintings." [8] (Figure 3) In addition, Thang-ga artists are required to subject themselves to the Buddhist discipline when making Thang-ga, hence banned from smoking and drinking. From what's mentioned above, it can be learned that the painting techniques of Thang-ga are not merely about ways to finish a painting. They are a series of sacred activities that carry religious significance.



Figure 3 A monk working on a Thang-ga painting – photographed in June 2018 at Jokhang Thang-ga Training School

Secondly, the art of Thang-ga making is regulated by Buddhist philosophy and beliefs, and the deities should be painted in line with the requirements stipulated by the Buddhist scriptures and rituals, which specify the proportion, appearance, and stance of each deity, the musical instrument each deity holds, the ornaments each deity wears, and the characteristics of each deity as well as the aura surrounding it. Alfred Gayle views art as a technical system. He believes that "art provides a technical means by which people can subject themselves to the basic rules and desires spawned by the social order amid which they live. As a technical system, art is the product of a social outcome, and social outcomes are attributable to the production of works of art. The influence of artwork has its root in the technical procedures it entails".[9] The scriptures, as the source text for the creation of Thang-ga images, regulate the artists' art behavior. Contrary to how "art" is generally perceived, Thang-ga making does not allow artists to take painting as a way to express their individuality. The aim of painting in accordance with what the scriptures and rituals stipulate is to eliminate the artists' delusion of grandeur. The prayers offered by the artists in accordance with the Buddhist rituals when making Thang-ga instill into Thang-ga the spiritual power of piety. Distilled in the artists' brushwork, the spiritual power makes Thang-ga paintings more sacred.

Thirdly, the art of Thang-ga-making reflects Buddhist aesthetic logic. As a sacred art form, Thang-ga carries unique aesthetic beliefs. According to *Buddha's Sutra on the Measurement of Statues*, Buddha has thirty-two physical characteristics and seventy-two secondary characteristics. The Buddha in Thang-ga must be painted in accordance with the stipulated proportions so that its majestic appearance and fine features can be better portrayed. The Buddha in Thang-ga paintings should have a face as fair as the full moon, eyes that resemble lotus flowers, slender, rounded eyebrows, and a soft, straight body. "The accuracy of measurement determines how divine the Buddha looks. If the measurement is inaccurate, the Buddha will be deprived of its divinity." [10] Measurement can influence the representation of the relationship between the form and spirit in the art of Buddha statues; the rule in Thang-ga making also helps ensure the unity of the form and spirit. The deities represented in Thang-ga are classified into two types: static deities and angry deities. The static deities mainly include Buddha, Bodhisattva, and Dara, and the deities often have a compassionate and peaceful look. The paintings featuring static deities are characterized by smooth lines and soft tones. When drawing the faces of the deities, the artists pay great attention to the portrayal of the deities' looks, which are mainly reflected in the deities' features, including eyes and mouths. On the other hand, the angry deities mainly include Vajra, Ming King, and Dharma Protector. The angry deities are often portrayed as having stern, horrific looks. The paintings featuring angry deities are characterized by dark colors and rough brushstrokes, adding to the deities' majesty and mysteriousness.

Not only should the deity in a Thang-ga painting be portrayed as divine and sacred, but the background

landscape of a Thang-ga and the aura the painting conveys should work to represent the "pure land" where Buddha sits. The landscape in a Thang-ga should be painted following the guidelines laid out in the Buddhist scriptures, and the artists also depict the landscape based on their conceptions of nature. As the world of Buddha is perfect and spotless, Thang-ga artists should ensure the paintings are clean and refrain from using colors that may stain the paintings or make them less aesthetically pleasing. The rarest mineral pigments should thereby be employed in Thang-ga painting to convey the solemnity and divineness of the world of Buddha. It can be learned that Thang-ga painting techniques should not be seen as lifeless routine procedures. The painting techniques are the technical epitome of Buddhist philosophy and constitute an art with religious significance.

4. Reflections on the undue emphasis on Thang-ga's painting techniques

The undue emphasis on Thang-ga's painting techniques generally refers to the overly complicated decorations in the paintings, and the loss of Thang-ga's religious appeal caused by the techniques turned into a lifeless routine. This loss of Thang-ga's religious appeal is manifested primarily in the artists' failure to conform to the measurement requirements stipulated by the Buddhist scriptures and the liberties the artists have taken with Thang-ga's painting techniques. As Thang-ga evolves into a part of the world's cultural heritage, Thang-ga paintings, apart from assuming the role of religious art, start to represent the national culture. Thang-ga has hence become known by the public as an art carrying both religious and cultural significance. Thang-ga gained attention for its cultural values; however, Thang-ga's painting techniques started to be perceived as unfavorable for diversified artistic expression, and the religious rules that underlie Thang-ga making started to be dismissed as constraints on artists' self-expression. Therefore, the "new" Thang-ga paintings (Figure 4) have come as a result of some artists breaking free of the traditional restrictions on measurement. But along with the new forms of Thang-ga paintings, a new question arises: will Thang-ga be deprived of its sacred "true nature" if the traditional Thang-ga making techniques are modified and the traditional ways to perceive Thang-ga's aesthetic appeal are subverted?

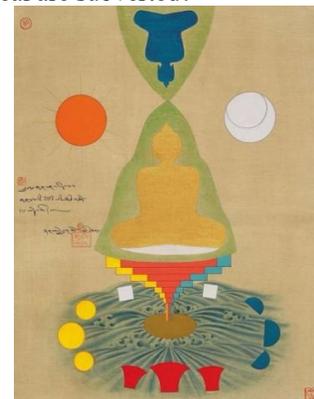


Figure 4 The "new" Thang-ga painting

As a type of technical practice, the technique can change as individuals who possess it vary. The technique is also subject to the influence of the natural and social environment. In the case of artworks in general, the artists' technique is important for the realization of the values of the artworks. Though the art of Thang-ga requires superb technique, exquisite brushstrokes, and elaborate decorations to represent the splendor and majesty of the world of Buddha, most contemporary artists have taken elaborate decorations and exquisite brushstrokes as the sole criterion for defining good Thang-ga paintings. In addition, contemporary Thang-ga artists have subverted Thang-ga's technical paradigm and incorporated techniques and forms borrowed from other arts into the art of Thang-ga, which is a result of the artists neglecting the close connection between Thang-ga's technical paradigm and its spiritual significance. The artists have also failed to show their piety and reverence in their paintings, which causes the loss of the paintings' religious appeal. (Figure 5) Though the "new" Thang-ga paintings are marked by exquisite brushstrokes and delicate lines, the deities in the paintings look dull and stiff. Moreover, the paintings have failed to create a good sense of space without distinct spatial layers.

As a 'holy object' in the realm of sacredness, Thang-ga is viewed as the physical manifestation of Buddha. Thang-ga paintings are worshipped by the monks in Tibetan monasteries, and they are also present as sacred items in important ceremonies in the life of Tibetans, such as weddings and funerals. The sacredness of Thang-ga is epitomized by its painting techniques. Thang-ga is an art form that highlights the process, which means that the painting process is much more important than the result. The artists' emotions and piety are infused into their brushwork. In Thang-ga paintings, such emotions and piety are manifested in the delicate and smooth brushstrokes, the clear distinctions between layers, and the serene aura the paintings convey. (Figure 6) Admiring a Thang-ga is not only a visual experience but a chance to feel its symbolic and spiritual significance, which is represented by its painting techniques. Hence an exquisite Thang-ga, with its sacred spiritual significance, has to be underpinned by a complete technical paradigm and structure which cannot be modified or changed as the art of Thang-ga is passed down.



Figure 5 An elaborately decorated Thang-ga painting



Figure 6 A Buddha with a newly-drawn face

5. Conclusion

If Thang-ga's painting techniques are viewed from the perspective of art history, it can be learned that Thang-ga's painting techniques are constantly evolving, with various schools and styles featuring different techniques formed at different times. If Thang-ga's nature is considered, it can be seen that all the schools and styles make Thang-ga based on Thang-ga's nature as a religious art. The technical paradigm of Thang-ga paintings reflects the Buddhist rules and laws that no artist can refuse to obey, and the systematic techniques of Thang-ga making regulate artists' behavior and thoughts as well as the forms of Thang-ga paintings. In this sense, Thang-ga's painting techniques are inseparable from its spiritual significance. In addition, upgrading Thang-ga's painting techniques is not contradictory to conveying Thang-ga's artistic characteristics and spiritual significance using the techniques. It's necessary for Thang-ga artists to "innovate" in the new era while preserving the traditional technical paradigm. As long as the innovations do not go against the religious logic that underlies Thang-ga, upgraded techniques can be used to improve the paintings' aesthetic appeal, as superb technique should serve primarily to convey the splendor and sacredness of the world of Buddha rather than to help the artists express their individuality or contribute to the paintings' sensuality. The knowledge of the relationship between Thang-ga's painting techniques and its spiritual significance is therefore indispensable to the sustainable development of Thang-ga as an art.

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