



Boyer, Marion.

*La peinture bouddhiste tibétaine: découvrir, comprendre
et conserver les thangkas.*

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Thangkas are scroll paintings mounted on a textile background depicting religious topics, such as Buddhist and Bön deities, symbols and historical and quasi-historical religious figures. Produced in a geographically wide area under Tibetan cultural and religious influence including today's Himalayan region, Mongolia and partly China, they have a history dating back as far as the second half of the first millennium CE. Nonetheless, the painting of thangkas is a living art and even today the painters in the region as well as in the West produce thangkas with traditional motives and iconography.

Thangka iconography has been studied by Western scholars mainly as part of the Buddhist or Bön religion; scholarly works dealing with the technology of painting have been far fewer. An important step in the study of technology of thangka paintings is represented by the works of David and Janice Jackson (for example *Tibetan Thangka Painting*. London: Serindia, 1984). Their approach combines both the study of historical sources and thangkas, as well as the close examination of painting methods used by contemporary artists.

Thangkas are kept in many museums and collections in the West. The early collectors were without doubt fascinated by their beauty, strangeness and artistic novelty in comparison with the known paintings from the surrounding areas of India and China. However, they did not know how to keep them in good condition. Often, thangkas were badly damaged even before they entered the museums and collections, as a result of their previous use: hanging near smoking oil lamps and fireplaces in otherwise damp and cold altars or in nomadic tents. As a result, many of them were torn, scratched, and blackened with smoke. Keeping thangkas in good and aesthetically pleasing condition thus represented a significant problem. Ann Shaftel devoted several studies to the history and methods of conservation and restoration of thangkas (see "Notes on the Technique of Tibetan Thangkas" in *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Autumn, 1986, pp. 97–103, "Intent, In Tents and Intense" in (<http://annshaftel.com/>), and "Conservation Treatment of Tibetan Thangkas" in *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 30, 1991: 3–11) Shaftel points out

that thangkas were usually mistakenly conserved in the same way as Chinese and Japanese scroll paintings. Thangkas were stretched, smoothed and mounted on paper or silk scrolls. However, by doing so, the thangkas were forcibly transferred to another cultural context. Shaftel envisages approaches which better corresponds to the cultural and historical background of the thangkas.

Hand in hand with better understating of the historical and cultural significance of thangkas, ongoing analytical research examines the technology of painting thangkas (see for example Mass, Jennifer, Jo-Fan Huang, Betty Fiske, Ann Shaftel, Xian Zhang, Richard Laursen, Courtney Shimoda, Catherine Matsen and Christina Bisulca, "Thangka Production in the 18th–21st Centuries: Documenting the Introduction of Non-Traditional Materials into Himalayan Painting Practice" in Mary Ballard and Carole Dignard, eds. *Proceedings of the Forum on the Conservation of Thangkas*, International Council of Museums – Committee for Conservation ICOM-CC, 2009. pp. 108–117).

The book written by Marion Boyer provides the readers with a concise history of thangka painting, their styles and topics as well as methods of restoration, technology of paintings and materials used. Boyer (<http://restauration-thangka.fr/>), is a restorer specializing in thangkas, and her works are kept for example in the Musée Guimet and Musée Cernuschi in Paris. Her book is based on her own experience of a restorer, though it is intended for the wide audience of art dealers, art connoisseurs, and students of art and Tibetan culture. It is without doubt a good reference point for restorers, although they might find other more detailed studies. The same can be said about the scholars of Tibetan culture: they can rely on more extensive works, but Boyer's study can serve as a general basis for a better understanding of the materials and methods used for the painting of thangkas.

Boyer's book is divided into two parts dealing with history and conservation of thangka paintings, subdivided into chapters and sub-chapters. The texts are accompanied with colour pictures, found almost on every page, and forming an integral part of the book that provides the readers with large pictures of thangkas as well as close details. They illustrate the process of thangka restoration, showing what a good result should look like, or what should be avoided during the restoration. The significant presence of images influences the reading. The reader can read chapter by chapter from the beginning to the end of the book, or browse through the book according to his or her interest. However, the abundance of images is both a strong as well as a less favourable trait of the book. On one hand, the pictures, especially the very detailed ones, lead the viewer directly into the world of thangkas, on the other hand, the readers who prefer verbal depictions might think that the textual parts of the book are probably too concise. Moreover, the key topics such as, for example, the usage of pigments reappear in different parts of the written text. During the linear reading of the book, this organization might give a feeling of redundancy with regard to certain information. On the other hand, the images represent a helpful aid for restorers and art connoisseurs, who might give them priority over the written text.

The book begins with the opening (Préface, p. 6, Introduction, p. 8), which summarizes the history of thangka paintings within Western culture. As opposed to the art of ancient Egypt and classical antiquity, thangkas appeared in Western collections rather late, during the 19th century, but since that time their popularity has been growing steadily. The first part of the book ("*Comprendre la peinture tibétaine*") is divided into three chapters. The "*Brève histoire de la peinture tibétaine*" (pp. 20–69)

outlines the history of thangka painting, with emphasis on the cultural exchange between Tibet and regions of China, central Asia, Nepal and India. Boyer then describes the main styles of thangka paintings, with particular attention to the depiction of details of central figures as well as rocks, flowers, foliage and architecture in the background. The description of the style is summarized in concise and clear tables. The "Iconographie des thangkas" (pp. 70–159) was written together with the Tibetanist Étienne Bock. First, the history of Buddhism and its main schools in India, its spread in Tibet as well as the Bön religion is outlined. Later, the iconography of thangkas is described, namely the image of Buddha and other figures such as bodhisattvas, male deities and female dakinis, and portraits of religious teachers, including their styles of clothing, hand gestures, seat positions, and their symbolic objects. As an example of interpretation of iconography of a thangka, the 19th century portrait of a yogi Thangtong Gyalpo (1385–1509) is presented (p. 153). The detailed account of iconography is represented in the next chapter entitled "Lexique des détails iconographiques" (pp. 160–195), dealing mainly with real and mythological animals and birds, plants and flowers, mountains and stones, or jewellery and dress embellishment.

The second part of the book ("Conserver la peinture tibétaine. Technique et pratique de la restauration", pp. 196–314) is divided into four chapters. The chapter "La conception picturale d'un thangka" (pp. 196–213) focuses on the knowledge of perspective and usage of various colours. The chapter entitled "Les composants de la peinture tibétaine" (pp. 214–263) discusses the textile support and the use of the mineral-, animal- and vegetable-based pigments and binders. First, the various types of textile supports are discussed, with detailed images provided to show damage to the support, and methods for its conservation, then followed by the discussion about pigments and binders. In the chapter "La conservation-restauration des thangkas" (pp. 264–307), Boyer deals with the ethics of restoration. After a short introduction to the history of thangka restorations, she mentions mainly the restorer's mistakes and incorrect procedures in the restoration process, as well as depicting the contemporary analytical methods used in thangka research. This part contains numerous examples and detailed information about the restoration process. The last chapter, "La conservation préventive" (pp. 308–314), describes how to keep thangkas in good condition during exhibitions and in museum depositories, and how to handle them in order to prevent further damage. The "Conclusion" (pp. 315) closes the book with some personal remarks on the author's attachments to thangkas, their history and aesthetics.

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