Divine Details
Picturing enlightenment in Tibetan scroll paintings

By Laura Holland

Set against dark blue walls in the Mead Art Museum, Tibetan scroll paintings, or thangka, appear as apertures into unearthly light. Graceful forms of humans and deities—with skin colors of brilliant red, saturated blue and earth-toned beige, or tinged with ivory—sometimes hum, sometimes buzz with inner incandescence. A softer luminescence suffuses the background landscapes, and silk brocade bordering each painting carries a subtle sheen.

While painted panels catch the eye, another key element is a brocade panel under the painting, a "door" through which the spirit of a person meditating can enter the world of the thangka. Silk veils with loosely dyed floral patterns protectively drape atop each scroll, and long ribbons, representing flower garlands, descend over the painted image. (For exhibition, these silk strands are pinned to the side, but when thangka are used for meditation, the ribbons dangle down.) On their reverse, unseen but significant, thangka are consecrated with handprints, footprints, even fingerprints of a high lama or Buddhist priest, and sacred syllables align with the head, throat and heart of the main figure on the front.

From their moment of consecration, thangka suffer the indignities of this world. Continually rolled up and unrolled, the fabric crackles, and pigment flakes off. Exposed outdoors, fragile paints and textiles face danger from sunlight; on indoor walls, they endure mold and water damage. Add on centuries' worth of sticky, smoky residue from yak butter lamps burning in Tibetan monasteries, and it's a wonder that the thangka appear as pristine as they do. During a two-year restoration project, the decision not to repair the wear and tear caused by regular ceremonial use enhances our sense of the age as well as the art of the scrolls.

These thangka come, literally, from another world: they are sacred objects in the realm of Tibetan Buddhism, created (and consecrated) as spiritual guides for practicing Buddhists. Even the paint reveals its Tibetan origin: ground mineral pigments and yak-hide glue.

So how can eyes trained in conventions of Western art see? Fortunately there are multiple pathways to appreciate these pictures of enlightenment. Marilyn Rhie, the Jesse Wells Post professor of art and professor of East Asian studies at Smith College, identifies aspects of the art of Tibetan Buddhism, while Robert Thurman, the Jey Tsong Kappa professor of Indo-Tibetan Studies at Columbia University, addresses the Buddhism of Tibetan art. The two scholars are collaborating on a catalogue of Amherst's collection of scroll paintings, scheduled for publication in summer, 2012.

Thurman attributes to Rhie the description of Tibetan Buddhist art as either a "surreal naturalism" or a "naturalistic surrealism" that bridges the natural and supernatural worlds with a wealth of realistic detail. Most of the Amherst College thangka are in New Menri style, established by the great Tibetan artist Choying Gyatso in the seventeenth century and still practiced today. As Rhie explains, the New Menri Style grew out of the fifteenth-century Menri Style, created by the master artist Menla, who shifted from a two-dimensional grid-like composition for sacred scroll paintings to a naturalistic landscape, transposing the entire viewpoint and placing Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in our own three-dimensional space.

The painting style echoes Buddhist philosophy in that the two worlds—our mundane world and the supernatural realm—come together as one. Menla's style required great skill, and it died with him. However, two centuries later, Choying Gyatso revived the style and revitalized its incredibly detailed naturalism under the patronage of the Fifth Dalai Lama.

Classic New Menri style, Rhie explains, includes figures in flowing garments, highly patterned in brilliant orangey-red, against a beautifully rendered blue and green landscape depicting craggy rocks and outlining even individual leaves in minute, precise detail. Unlike Western art, with its single viewpoint, the thangka conflate space to embrace multiple perspectives within each painting. We look up; we look down; we gaze outward, at far distance; we turn inward, toward depicted inner visions.

"As a viewer, you can go anywhere, and you can enter the painting at any point," notes Rhie. "As viewers, we enter in and explore these ideas. We are in our own space and, at the same time, we see that there is something strange and glorious."

However, the paintings move beyond three dimensions into the fourth or fifth dimension, conflating time. For example, the densely packed family tree of Buddhist deities on the nine-foot-tall "Assemblage of Divinities" brings together transcendent deities and historical figures at the same time and in the same place, moving beyond three dimensions portrayed in two-dimensional format, bursting through all barriers, all the way to Enlightenment. "And this is how the thangka tie in to Buddhist teachings," says Rhie. "We construct time and dimensions because we need them as human beings on earth, but in Buddhism there is no time and no space; all are one in Enlightenment."
Thurman describes "the Buddhist adventure" as a re-education, moving away from the idea of individual identity and the conviction "I am the one" towards the goal of insight into the nature of reality. "You are the one?" says Thurman. "Well, find the one you are. You find you are a changing process that is really all different things. Not a fixed, rigid 'one' but a living, breathing, integrated being more aware of and empathetic with others."

The surprising thing about Buddhism is not the discovery of suffering, he explains, but freedom from suffering. Buddhist education leads to realization of that goal, along various paths. The true reality of life, nirvana, is already here, but our ignorance prevents understanding.

"And that's where art comes in," he declares—as a stratagem that motivates people towards the goal of freedom from suffering and enables them to perceive the beauty in the dunghill. Buddhist art aims, in a highly structured way, to show the exquisite beauty in ordinary things. In the glorious light of jewel-like detail, the thangka render everything beautiful, in essence, as enlightened eyes might see the world around us. In and out, God breathes in the details of the Tibetan thangka.


© 2012 The Valley Advocate