

## **«Thanka» in the Buddhist Painting Art of the Mongols and its Transmission to the European and American Cultures<sup>1</sup>**

Lubov L. Abaeva\*  
(Ulan-Ude)

**Abstract:** It is well known that the Buddhist Canon includes “Five big” and “Five small” sciences. Art, grammar, medicine, logic and ‘internal’ science including the arch of Buddhist disciplines belong to the “Five big”. Astrology, poetry, rhythmic, lexicography and dramatic art belong to “Five small sciences”. However, at the very beginning of the emergence, the fundamental sciences in the context of a Buddhist Canon were – art, grammar, medicine and logic. Art in Buddhist practice was, first of all, the technological process connected with art creativity. Art, from the Buddhist point of view, isn’t the level of pure and simple architecture, sculpture and painting, but the “area of the exact sciences” concentrated on the analysis of consciousness, on the unity of macrocosm and microcosm with various polysemantic and polysymbolic paradigms. Buddhist “thanka” – (icon) drawn on fabric, according to Canon, – presents not only image, form and color of a deity, but also participates in the meditative practice in the context of sacral space and time.

At the beginning of the XXth century the Buddhist painting and actually “thanka” began to penetrate to the European countries and the United States of America. Obviously, it is connected, first, with the crisis of Christian culture in these regions, and, secondly, with the processes of interaction, interference and cross cultural communications and contacts among the European countries and

---

<sup>1</sup> The research was supported by the Russian Scientific Foundation in the framework of the Research Project “Buddhism in the Socio-Political and Cultural Processes in Russia, Inner and East Asia: Transformations and Prospects”, № 14-18-00444.

\* Abaeva Liubov Lubsanovna, Dr.Sci.(Hist), Professor, Principal Researcher of the Department of Philosophy, Cultural Anthropology and Religious Studies, Institute of Mongolian, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies, Siberian Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences (Sakh`yanova str., 6, Ulan-Ude, Republic of Buryatia, Russia, 670047; luba-abaeva@mail.ru.

America with Buddhist Asia. Special intensity this process took place in the fifties of the XXth centuries when, thanks to the known historical reasons, the highly educated and practicing Tibetan and Mongolian monks appeared in America and Europe. A peculiar Renaissance of the Buddhist “thanka” has begun. Thus the traditional symbols Buddhist “thanka” were for a little bit transformed, but nevertheless, it is subordinated not only to the art norms and spiritual laws which are thought over by artists, but also intended for contemplation and is perceived as a support for concrete practice.

**Keywords:** Buddhist art, painting traditions, thanka, Tibetan and Mongolian style, penetration and evolution, thanka in Europe and America

**Özet:** Bilindiği üzere, Budist külliyatı “beş büyük” ve “beş küçük” ilmi içermektedir. “Beş büyük” ilmin içerisinde sanat, dil bilgisi, tıp, mantık ve “iç” ilim yer alırken, astroloji, şiir, ritmik, sözlükçülük ve tiyatro ise “beş küçük” ilmi meydana getirmektedir. Ancak Budizm’in ortaya çıktığı ilk yıllarda, Budist külliyatın içerisindeki en temel ilimler sanat, dil bilgisi, tıp ve mantıktı. Budist geleceğinde sanat, öncelikli olarak, sanat yaratıcılığı ile bağlantılı olan teknolojik bir süreçti. Budist bakış açısına göre, sanat saf ve basit düzeyde bir mimarlık, heykeltıraşlık ya da ressamlık olmayıp bilinç çözümlemesi ve çeşitli çok anlamlı ve çok sembolü örneklerle birlikte evren ve insan birliği üzerine yoğunlaşan bir müspet ilimler sahasıdır. Budist külliyatına göre kumaş üzerine çizilen Budist resimler olan “thanka”lar, bir tanrının biçimini ve rengini temsil etmenin yanı sıra kutsal yer ve zaman bağlamında meditasyon uygulamaları için de kullanılmaktadır.

Budist resimleri ve “thanka,” 20.yüzyılın başlarında Avrupa ülkelerinde ve Amerika Birleşik Devletlerinde yayılmaya başlamıştır. Açıkça görülmektedir ki, bu durum ilk olarak söz konusu bölgelerde görülen Hristiyan kültür bunalımı, ikinci olaraksa Budist Asya ile Avrupa ülkeleri ve Amerika arasındaki etkileşim süreci ile kültürlerarası iletişim ve ilişki ile bağlantılıdır. Bu süreç, yoğun olarak 1950’li yıllarda, bilinen tarihî sebeplerin neticesinde, eğitilmiş ve dindar Tibetli ve Moğol Budist rahiplerin Amerika ile Avrupa’da bulunmaları ile gerçekleşmiş ve özgün bir Budist “thanka” uyanışı başlamıştır. Böylelikle geleneksel Budist simgesi “thanka” küçük bir dönüşüm geçirmiş, fakat yine de, sanatçılar tarafından ortaya konmuş sanat kuralları ve dinî kurallara bağlı kalarak meditasyon uygulamaları için somut bir malzeme olarak görülmüştür.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Budist sanat, resim gelenekleri, thanka, Tibet ve Moğol stili, yayılma ve evrim, Avrupa ve Amerika’da thanka

The increasing interest in the Tibetan religious painting and the available various Buddhist literatures with all aspects of different commentaries from the historical and philosophical points of views, show that the tradition of the Tibetan religious iconography, despite the antiquity, continues to exist within Buddhist traditional schools and institutes today. Thanks to preservation of a transmission line of Buddhist philosophy (since the Indian Nalanda University) and the line of continuity of teachers, the Tibetan culture is reflected in the modern world as a unique phenomenon having centuries-old experience.

Technology of painting “thanka” in Buddhist tradition generally was based on iconographic manuscripts and treatises – Shariputra's sutra of “Pratimalakshana”, Chakrasamvara's tantra Kalachakra, Raktayamari-tantra as well as on some other Buddhist compositions of the different historical periods in different Tibetan schools of Art. The Mongolian Buddhist painting in general, of course, repeated the Tibetan tradition of painting “thanka”. However, in the course of the evolution the specific Mongolian ethnocultural characteristics and parameters of painting “thanka” were connected with traditional painting of the Mongolian people – “Mongol Zurag”. Moreover, it would be desirable to pay attention, that the color symbolic of the people of Central Asia – actually the Tibetans, the Tibetan speaking ethnic groups and ethnos of Himalaya and the Prehimalaya regions, and also the Mongolian, Turkic and Manchurian people - was almost identical. Here we use the term “Central Asia” which is settled in oriental studies.

Buddhist art recreated an external form in the cultural phenomena of the Mongols and at the same time has greatly influenced on their traditional art changing their traditional lifestyle and mental ability. Of course, it was not only the influence of Art – the whole system of Buddhist Culture with its philosophy, anthropology, astrology, religious rituals and believes of the Tibetans influenced somehow on the Mongolian Culture.

From the point of view of the cultural and moral wealth of the time therefore the works of Tibetan Art are considered in the Mongolian society as the live objective documents not only in their everyday lifestyle, but also touched on their internal human life of last eras. Therefore the Tibetan

manuscripts and treatises on the form, size and composition of “thanka” represent a great interest for studying the cultural history of the Mongolian People. The Indian and Tibetan classical Buddhist manuscripts and treatises on painting “thanka” were traditionally connected with medicine and anthropology where the classification of physical types of a person in the digital description are given. Studying regularities of a human constitution, ancient physicians had chosen the most characteristic indicators of measurements of a body in length, width and a circle. Having rejected all individual, private deviations and discrepancies, they gave structural modular formulas of seven types of a constitution inside the Art. The results of studying of laws of statistical and dynamic balance of a body were presented and canonized in Buddhist manuscripts and treatises on the composition process of the painting Art. Ancient physicians opened value of the center of gravity for balance of a body in a combination of rest and movement. They understand balance as the balanced provision of parts of a body concerning the center of gravity in various, symmetric and asymmetric positions. They knew concept of a contra post or natural change of provision of axes of humeral and femoral belts at shift of the center of gravity to the left or to the right from a starting point of rest. According to it they entered concept of a foreshortening, or changes of statistical proportions of a body in the movement, visible reduction or lengthening of statistics. In composite drawings the grid of dynamic proportions on a vertical projection is given. In Buddhist manuscripts on composition also the technology of geometrical constructions is described: such geometrical terms and concepts as “parallelism of lines”, “perpendicular section of inclined lines”, “radius”, “concentric circles” etc. are given. Without knowledge of geometry and technology of drawing the artist couldn't make composite drawings according to one verbal description of the management. Buddhist iconometric manuscripts on the painting composition in the traditional system of medieval Indo-Tibetan sciences belonged to the department of technical knowledge, to the highest category of “Art of a body”. There appeared the religious art, the cult of painting, sculpture and architecture. In aspect of the esthetic theory their contents are consolidated to a statement of necessary conditions for

execution of a perfect work of Art. Such condition is a type of some observance of the law of a measure - unity of form and content, or quantitative and qualitative definiteness of the pantheon of deities inside an initial Artistic image.

The pantheon of deities in Tibetan Buddhism considerably extended with development of philosophical concepts of Buddhism, especially in the philosophical concepts of Mahayana Buddhism. Buddhist icon painters and teachers began to symbolize various philosophical psychological concepts of various deities. Particularly, it is evidently seen, with development of Buddhist ideal of a bodhisattva. There was a set of bodhisattva's images - men's type and females': men's type, as Avalokiteshvara - bodhisattva of Love and Compassion. And females', as Tara White and Green etc. With the development of the concept about three bodies of Buddha, the pantheon of deities extended even more. According to the Vajrayana Buddhism, Buddha after the Enlightenment found out three bodies: Dharmakaya - a sacred body of his brightened-up consciousness; Sambhogakaya - a body of various demonstrations which can be used for rescue of living beings and for the sermon; and Nirmanakaya - a physical body in which Buddha is presented in the physical world on this earth. There are many images of Dharmakaya - the highest body. For example, Buddhist Canon and its commentaries mention, such names as Adibuddha, Vajradhara, Vajrasattva – as all descriptions of Dharmakaya i.e. a body of the Law or a body of a perfect condition of Consciousness. Sambhogakaya - this body of manifestation a body in which Buddha teaches bodhisattvas. According to Canon, Buddha could demonstrate his unique abilities in different types in all worlds of the Universe, even in a flash if it is necessary ... These demonstrations might be both of a masculine and female gender, can be animated and inanimate, can be in the form of angry and peace deities. Lokesh Chandra in his publication “Materials on history of the Tibetan literature” mentioned the most prominent masters on Tibetan Buddhist Art. Tibetan and Mongolian texts, first of all, refer to Menla Dondub Chzhamso. He is the founder of the Tibetan icon-painting menry style (XYc.); in Tibet Londol a lama (XYIIIc.), in Amdo – Sumba Khenbo Ash Pelchzhor (XYIIIc.) and Lobsan

Danbi Chzhalsan (XYIIc.), in Mongolia – Agvan Lobsang Keydub (XIXc.). In the Tibetan educational anthology the main sources on the iconometric theories as the most valuable is considered Tantrakalachakra - system of 125 fingers, module 12,5; 2.[10]

Sumba Khenbo gives the icon size classification of a pantheon consisting of seven groups of this composition: Buddha Nirmanakaya and Sambhogakaya - 10 palms; idam, angry rishi - 12 parts; bodhisattva - 9 palms; gods and keepers of the parties of a quiet look - 9 palms; angry gods, yakshas and others angry - 8 palms; Ganesha and other dwarfs of - 6 palms; shravaka, pratyekabuddha, ordinary people - a measure of four elbows. Actually Sumba Khenbo gave two main traditions of a Buddhist icon measures: later, Tantric, with the module in 12,5 fingers for system of 10 palms and early with the module of 12 fingers for systems 9 and 10 palms. Sumba Khenbo admitted that the most authoritative in “thanka” painting is Kalachakra's tradition. In turn Lobsan Danbi Chzhalsan claims that the main primary source of painting “thanka” are tantras (tantric sutras). [10, 11, 12]

Well-known Buddhist Gelug School and its founder Dzh.Tszonkhapa finished unification of a “thanka” pantheon, having taken as a basis the theories of Kalachakra's tantra, formally referring to Chakrasamvara's tantra. In Tszonkhapa's composition systems the size of deities in “thanka” - 125, 120, 108 and 96 of fingers with exact reference to the corresponding categories of a pantheon are given.

The Mongolian tradition of “thanka” painting was closely connected and nearly alike with the Tibetan tradition. But in the processes of its evolution there appeared some specificities based on the ethno cultural sources of the Mongols. Dzhebzun Damba Hutukhta - reincarnation of Taranatha and the first Head of Mongolian Buddhist Confession was himself a prominent Buddhist artist. Agvan Lobsang Haydav's theory (XIXth century) in this regard is very interesting. He gave some recommendatory list of references for artists: 1) Tantrakalachakra and its comments; 2) Tantrachakrasamvara and Ratnarakshita's comments; 3) Tszonkhava's treatise of “Lha-sku'iphyag-tshadrgyal-ba'igzugs-brnyanlegs-parblta-ba'ime-long” - “Mirror, clearly showing metrics of a body of

gods”; 4) the treatise of the great wise man from Mantkhan of “Chatschadyid-bzhin-nor-bu” with the note that this work doesn't contradict a technique of the compositions called above; 5) treatise of one of four avatars of Taranatha – “Phreng-kha-badpal-ldanblo-grosbzang-po” 6) Taranatka's work on metrics “Phyag-tshad-kyigzhung”; 7) treatise by Lobsan Danbi Chzhalsan. All those compositions don't contradict each other and correspond to the correct technique; therefore, it is necessary to know them well. [7, 8, 9]

Pozdneev A. M. mentioned three names in Mongolian tradition of “thanka” painting: metric standards at the treatise Sumba Khanbo and Lobsan Danbi Chzhalsan: 1) “Vachirunu-tzagurt-zabsar” - composition of a body of Buddha in height and width; 2) “Degedu-amugulan-sanvar” - classification of a shape of faces Buddhas, etc., and also the description of a metrics of hands and feet. The general instructions on length of a body of deities relating to the system of 12 palms; 3) “Tsagun-hurde” - description of eyes, Buddha's nose and the description of measurements of volume of his body. [5]

In Buryatia – the most northern part of the former Mongol Empire in the past, and the part of Russian Federation nowadays - iconography and a sculpture treatises of two Tibetan authors Sumba Khanbo and Lobsan Danbi Chzhalsan were known generally. K. M. Gerasimova mentioned about them. [1]

As a rule, the composition of “thanka” is under construction symmetrically rather vertical axis of a cloth, thus one deity in the center is often represented, and in the lower part of a cloth gifts are placed. If “thanka” is multifigured, the main deity in the center is much larger, and the accompanying characters are represented the smaller size. Plots in different “thanka” are extremely various and the quantity of figures strongly varies. In the most general case, the central deity might be accompanied heavenly apsara with gifts around, and defenders, gifts of five sense organs, good symbols are represented below. The central figure traditionally is surrounded with types of figures similar to it (for example, Green Tara - in 21 Tara's environment or Buddha - in one thousand environments Buddhas). From the three-figured it is thin plots are

widespread: Buddha Shakyamuni and two arhats (Shariputra and Maudgalyayana); three deities of long life (White Tara, Amitayus, Ushnishavidzhaya); three patrons of Tibet (Avalokiteshvara, Mandzhushri, Vадzhrapani), etc. Such is an arsenal of attributes with which Buddhist Art school of painting “thanka” allocated various deities.

The landscape on “thankas”, on the one hand, has to be realistic (so, for example, concrete animal species or plants are represented), on the other - it is desired to be high-esthetic, “paradise”, penetrated by the atmosphere of Pure Earth. On a background artists can place images of various beings, palaces and buildings, happy signs, gifts — everything has to look esthetical. In different traditions artists can have certain addictions, give preference to these or those elements. For example, Indians often represent Bodkhi Tree, flowers; in Chinese tradition there are a lot of ornaments, decorative elements, rich thrones and amusing sketches. In Kashmir works on “thanka” - the lakes and ponds occupied by water beings, trees and medical plants. Feature of Nepalese tradition is the set of rainbows and clouds, trees decorated with jewelry, motley birds. As for Tibetan “thanka” traditions - the hills covered with herbs, canopies on four columns, a great number of various animals are lovely to heart of the mountain and rock: yaks, horses, hares, elephants, etc. [3]

In style of “thanka” painting karma-gadri the landscape is characterized by strong Chinese influence: rocks, water streams and falls, trees, set of clouds, etc. At a landscape surely there have to be five elements:

- “earth” - dense, material substance. These are hills and mountains, rocks. Colors: light-orange, olive-green, reddish, turquoise;

- “water” - liquid, fluid substance. These are falls, the rivers and streams, the sea (including the sea of blood on “thankas” with images of defenders — for example, Paldenkhamo). Colors: blue, indigo, turquoise;

- “fire” - active, hot, possesses the big transforming force substance. It can be tongues of flame in auras of angry deities. Peace images of deities are supplemented with the element of fire which is



presented in the warm flowers and shades — orange, yellow, red, brown;

– “air or a wind” is mobile substance. These are the growing trees and flowers running clouds, the fluttering clothes, dynamic gestures; “space” — habitat of characters everything concludes “thankas”, space in itself, heavenly space. Blue shades. [3]

In a Buddhist iconography there are some types of poses, or asanas to whom deities are presented in pictures. In one of these poses we see a deity sitting with crossed feet. It is Buddha's pose, for its designation some terms (according to type of a throne on which a deity is sitting) are used: padmasana – a lotos throne, vajrasana – a diamond throne, simkhasana – a lion's throne. One more pose which is considered especially widespread among the images of bodhisattva, is makharadzhaila. When the deity is presented in this pose, it sits on a throne, having lowered the right foot down. Sometimes deities sit in a European way. It is considered that this pose is characteristic for a bodhisattva of Maytreya and symbolizes that bodhisattva is ready to descend from a throne and already lowered feet to be to the world of people. Such explanation of this pose is offered by Buddhist monks. Other characteristics which might help to distinguish various deities are the symbolical gestures of the hands of deities. The “language” of the positions of hands and fingers during commission of religious rituals and ceremonies counts great number; we will list only the most widespread: Dharmachakra-mudra, it is wise sermons and manuals. Hands are connected before a breast; index and big fingers of the right hand hold one of fingers left; Vitarka-mudra, it is wise arguments. The right hand is raised, big and index fingers are connected; Abhaya-mudra, it is wise fearlessness. The right hand is raised, the palm is turned outside, fingers are squeezed; Vara-mudra, it is wise generosity. The right hand is lowered, the palm is turned outside, as if giving something; Dhyana-mudra, it is wise meditations. Both hands are connected on a lap; Bhumisparsha-mudra, is wise earth contacts (in the English text - “attestation”). The right hand concerns the earth, as if confirming determination. It is claimed that Buddha accepted this pose, confirming

that he will become Buddha, and calling the Earth in witnesses, during the night under Bodkhi Tree.

Except asanas there is a quantity of attributes which serve for recognition of numerous forms of deities. According to Shiva cult number of these attributes resolutely increases. Vajra, or the lightning, is an ancient Indo-Iranian symbol connected with Indra. It is considered said that a certain symbol of lightning of Persian-Iranian origin is stored in the monastery Sera which was founded in 1417 by Chamchen Chordzhe. The crosswise form of a lightning often meets in pictures of “thanka” (sanscr. - “visvavazhdra”). [11, 12]

Therefore in the Tibetan language we won't meet the concept “beauty” as that, but three complexes of the words transferring various aspects of its understanding: - dpe, byad, dpebyad – “the size, a proportion, symmetry, harmony”, that is beauty as an izmerennost, steadiness, organization; - bzang-ba, legs-pa, dbe-ba – “kind, good”, that is beauty as compliance to a true order of things, to an ideal of good and sanctity ; - mdzes, bkra – “motley, decorated”, that is beauty external, elegance of a form. These three senses in total also give Buddhist understanding of the fine.[9, 4]

At the beginning of the XXth century penetration of Buddhist painting and actually “thanka” to the countries of Europe and the United States of America begins. Obviously, it is connected, first, perhaps, with the crisis of Christian culture in these regions, and, secondly, - thanks to interaction, interference and crosscultural communications and contacts between the European countries, America with Buddhist Asia. Special intensity this process gets in the fifties of the XXth century when during the known historical reasons in Tibet, in Europe and America there appeared highly educated practicing monks of the Tibetan and Mongolian origin. A peculiar Renaissance of Buddhist “thanka” begins at that time. Thus the traditional symbols of understanding and interpreting the main senses of Buddhist “thanka” were for a little bit transformed according to the European and American mental abilities. Nevertheless, “thanka” among neophytes is subordinated not only to the Art norms and spiritual

laws which are thought over by the artist, but also intended for contemplation and is perceived as a support for a concrete practice.

### **Conclusion**

Different Buddhist and especially tantric schools introduce a quantity of different attributes, still hard to be determined. The symbols of tantric icon painting are still very difficult to be commented, and scholars can hardly understand a set of those symbols. But there is a vague hope that will come a day, when the main case of Tantric literature will be explained and interpreted to the Buddhists and non-Buddhist adequately. The roots of the Tibetan art originated from traditions of Buddhist culture of Ancient India. Its formation is connected with great achievements of culture, anthropology, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, geometry, logic and philosophy in a uniform spiritual and moral complex in that territory. Characteristic feature of the Indian Buddhist Canon is the knowledge of anatomy of a human body and glorification of its spiritualized terrestrial beauty that was rejected by Buddhism. The tradition of “Thanka” painting was deeply developed by the greatest Mongolian sculptor Dzanabazar and had been penetrated among all the Mongolian People. A peculiar Renaissance of Buddhist “thanka” begins in the middle of XXth century when “thanka” with Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist monks appeared in Europe and America. The traditional symbols of understanding and interpreting the main senses of Buddhist “thanka” were for a little bit transformed according to the European and American mental abilities.

### **Literature/References**

1. Gerasimova K.M (1971:). Pamyatniki esteticheskoy mysli Vostoka. Tibetskiy Kanon proporsiy. Traktaty po ikonometrii I kompozitsii Amdo, XYIII vek. – Ulan-Ude: Buryat kn. izd-vo. pp. 303
2. Gumilev L.N (1975:). Staroburyatskaya zhivopis: Isoricheskie suzhety v ikonografii Aginskogo datsana. – M.: Iskusstvo. pp. 110
3. Obodoeva B.V (2015): Buddiyskoe Iskusstvo v vektore otechestvennoy istoriografii. – Vestnik Buryatskogo universiteta. – Filosofiya, sotsiologiya, politologiya, kulturologiya. – Ulan-Ude.pp. 108-112

4. Oldenburg S.F (1914): Materialy po buddiyskoy ikonografii Xara-Xoto. – SP-b.pp. 80
5. Pozdneev FA.M (1887): Ocherki byta buddiyskix monastyrey I buddiyskogo duxovenstva v Mongolii. - SP-b.
6. Pagsam-Dzhonsan (1991): Istorija I xronologija Tibeta. - perevod s tibetskogo R. E. Pubaeva. – Novosibirsk: Nauka. pp. 264
7. Terentyev A. A. (2010): Sandaloviy Budda Udayany. – SP-b.: Nartang.pp. 112
8. Bhattacharyya B (1958): The Indian Buddhist Iconography. Calcutta.pp. 478 .
9. Chögyam Trungpa (1975): Visual dharma: Buddhist Art of Tibet. - Boston: Shambhala. pp. 142
10. Dagyab L. S. (1977): Tibetan Religious Art. – Wiesbaden,pp. 173
11. Chandra L. Dictionary of Buddhist Iconography (1999-2005): 15 vol. – New Delhi
12. Loden Sherab (2005): dagyab rinpoche. – M.: Shang-Shung, pp. 168 .
13. Tucci G. Tibetan painted scrolls (1949): 3 vol. – Roma: La libreria dello stato, Vol. 1-3.