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Color semiotics of Tibetan Buddhist art: the thangka genre

Sergei V. Kurasov

Doctor of Art History, Professor,
Head of Stroganov Moscow State Academy of Arts and Industry,
125080, 9 Volokolamskoe hwy, Moscow, Russian Federation;
e-mail: info@mghpu.ru

Abstract

The article aims to present the results of the analysis of the color semiotics of Buddhist art. It deals with the thangka genre. Tibetan thangkas are a form of fabric painting. They embody a developed system of Buddhist iconography and visually support Buddhist doctrine in Tibet and other regions where people practise northern Buddhism. The article pays attention to the fact that color semiotics includes many levels of interpretation and complements the pictorial details of the paintings. Having studied color semiotics in Tibetan Buddhist art with due regard to the features of thangkas, the author of the article comes to the conclusion that their pure colors, coupled with other details of fabric painting and its subjects, remind a person, a parishioner and a believer, of the divine beauty of the Absolute. In the coloristic theory of Buddhist art, there are two basic teachings. According to the first teaching, five primary colors with numerous correspondences serve as a basis for all other colors. According to the second teaching, there is one "mother" color (white) and seven "father" colors, and other colors—"son" colors—are produced by mixing them. The author makes an attempt to consider two thangkas from the perspective of their coloristic symbolism.

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Keywords

Tibetan art, Buddhist art, color symbolism, thangka, painting.

Introduction

Tibetan Buddhist art is diverse and is represented by various unique genres—from architectural (stupas) to sculptural (butter sculptures) ones. However, thangkas—fabric paintings—designed for worshipping deities, meditating, detaching oneself from everyday worries, have undoubtedly become a distinctive sign of Tibetan culture. Thangkas in the Tibetan system of philosophical and religious education belong to the section of painting (like sdeb-ri murals) and as part of "art" is one of the "five higher scientific fields" [Obodoeva, 2019, 31].

The recognition of thangka subjects, with the variety of characters inherent in the culture of Tibetan Buddhism, is a challenging task. The analysis of the iconography of Tibetan Buddhism requires taking into account many factors: "Each deity of the Vajrayan pantheon is given a definite iconographic identity through the symbolic mode. The moods, attitudes, sitting postures, hand-gestures, number of faces and arms, colors, costumes, attributes, etc. not only constitute the characterising symbols that reflect the inherent virtues, faculties and potentialities of different deities, but these also identify those deities with their respective *parivars* (families)" [Handa, 2019, 222].

The complex iconography of thangkas is saturated with the symbolism of forms, subjects, and characters, as well as color symbolism. Color semiotics in thangkas is complex and diverse, but it has its own laws described below.

Research results

Color is one of the basic constants of the culture of the people [Aitmagambetova, 2015]. Each culture develops its own system of visual communication, including color symbolism: yellow and red, as well as golden, with all the richness of connotations, have acquired special significance in the Ancient Orient worshipping the solar deity; green and white are endowed with symbolic meaning in Muslim culture [Shalimova, 2015].

The Buddhist artistic tradition aims to illustrate and maintain the relevance of the eternal truths of Buddhist doctrine: it reflects the ideals and visually supports the doctrine. Buddhist art, therefore, is an integral part of the history of Buddhism: "it seems important to deal with images, subjects, styles, the canon and other topics that are usually referred to the field of art criticism, also as an integral part of the history of religion" [Al'bedil', 2015, 27].

Buddhism developed its own system of color meanings. In Mahayana Buddhism, in particular, there is a color sequence of the path leading to the Buddha: black, blue, red, yellow, white, and golden. This is a kind of path to enlightenment, from the darkest color to the lightest one [Evtykh, 2018, 594].

Despite the apparent diversity of Tibetan thangkas, their central characters, as a rule, are designed in several traditional colors. This cosmic spectrum includes gods and goddesses, sometimes merciful, sometimes angry, sometimes universal, sometimes local, almost always represented in one of the five colors of Vajrayana Buddhism—white, green, yellow, red, and blue (black in some cases) [Thukral, 2013-2014, 175]. Five colors (white, red, blue, yellow, and black) are mentioned in the work of the 15th-century scholar Bo-tong Pan-chan; this is the oldest known source on the topic. Bo-dong Pan-chen wrote that all other colors are produced by mixing the five primary ones [Ricciardi, Pallipurath, 2016, 487]. And today scholars confirm that "on the first steps on the hierarchical ladder there are five colors (*Panchavarna*), which symbolize the state of the soul, the heavenly Buddha, body parts, mantra parts, etc.—red, white, yellow, blue, and green" [Dashieva, 2013, 154].

The number five is not accidentally viewed as fundamental in Tibetan sacred coloristics. Tibetan

Buddhism is based on five basic elements—earth, water, fire, air, and space, which are richly reflected in colors, shapes, and symbols [Zhang, 2013].

The symbolism of the primary colors in Buddhism is presented in more detail in the treatises of Sum-pa mkhan-po (1704-1788), Mi-pham-rgya-mtsho (1846-1912), and Rong-tha Blo-bzang-bstan-rgyan-mtshan (1863-1917). These treatises are respected not only in Tibet, but also in Mongolia and Buryatia. The concept of these scholars divides colors into seven "paternal" colors (blue, green, red, orange, yellow, indigo, and burgundy) and one "maternal" color (white); the other 14 colors are produced by mixing "maternal" and "paternal" colors and called "son" colors [Obodoeva, 2019, 32]. Mi-Pham-rgyamtso and Sumpa Mkhanpo are also mention two additional colors—"elder sisters" (tea and smoky) and the "servant" (a mixture of cinnabar and ink). However, Dil-mar dge-bshes Bstan-'dzin-phun-tshogs and Bstan pa rab brtan do not mention "maternal" and "paternal" colors, but they distinguish the "primary" colors (white, yellow, blue, green, red, black, orange, and brown) and the "secondary" colors produced by mixing the "primary" ones [Ibidem, 33].

There is a hierarchy of colors in Buddhism: "White represents the *rajasik* (regal) temperament, yellow stands for the *satvik* (moderate) mood, and red, blue and black signify the *tamasik* (fierce) disposition. As a rule, the gods are depicted white and yellow; the goblins are represented red and the demonic characters are painted black" [Handa, 2019, 225].

The colors used to depict heavenly Buddhas correspond to the five cosmic elements: white—space, blue—air, yellow—earth, green—water, and red—fire. K. Thukral writes in more detail about this aspect of symbolism: white is a symbol of space and represents the world; red symbolizes fire and denotes strength; yellow is the color of the earth, it means growth and improvement; green symbolizes air and implies all actions performed by living beings; blue represents water and indicates the positive side of anger, as well as the destruction of anger and negative energy [Thukral, 2013-2014, 175-176]. Colors symbolize the following deities: white—Vairocana, yellow—Ratnasambhava, blue—Akshobhya, red—Amitabha, green—Amoghasiddhi [Dashieva, 2013, 154].

The results of the study of color semiotics in Buddhist thangkas are presented in Table 1 where the primary colors correspond to shapes, directions, deities, sounds, images, chakras, symbols, etc.

Table 1 - Color semiotics in Buddhist thangkas¹

Colors	Element	Shape	Deity	Direction	Seed syllable	Symbolism
yellow, golden	earth	square, cube	Ratnasambhava	south	Lam	jewel
white	water	circle, sphere	Vairocana	center or east	Vam	wheel, Vajra
red	fire	triangle, pyramid	Amitabha	west	Ram	lotus
green	wind, air	crescent, half-sphere	Amoghasiddhi	north	Yam	sword, double vajra
blue	void, ether, space	vanishing point, water drop	Akshobhya	east, center, top	Kham	vajra, wheel

Let's analyze the color symbolism of one of the Tibetan thangkas depicting the meeting of the spiritual teacher and the lord of death Yama (Figure 1).

¹ The table is based on [Evtykh, 2018; Zhang, 2013].

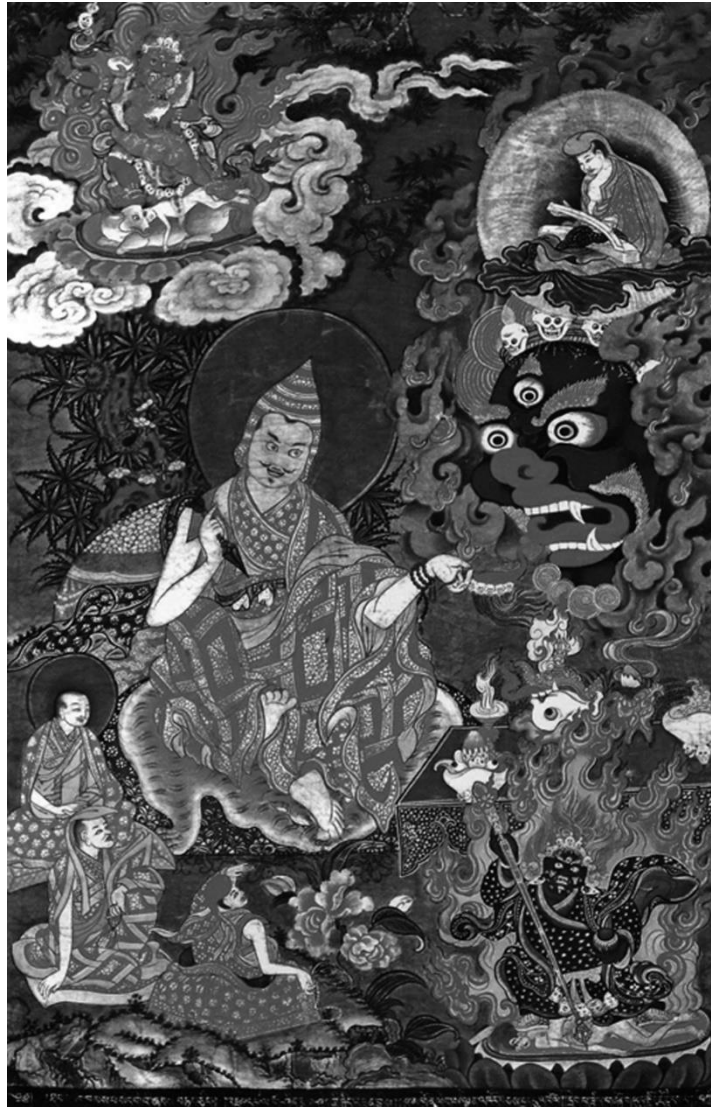


Figure 1 - Yungton Dorje Pel and his vision of Yama. Tibet, the Gelug tradition. Ground mineral pigment on cotton. Private collection [Thukral, 2013-2014, 183]

Yungton Dorje Pel (1284-1365) was the third and last Tibetan guru recognized as pre-incarnations of the Panchen Lama. The thangka depicts Yama (Tib.: Shinje), a deity of death. Sitting on a tiger's skin with a phurba (ceremonial dagger) in his right hand, Yungton Dorje Pel offers a blood sacrifice to Yama in five human skulls. He is able to enslave Yama, thereby ensuring freedom from samsara, the cycle of birth, decay and death.

Yungton Dorje Pel's complexion is white (purity), the robe is designed in red and yellow—the colors of life, emotion, perfection, and beauty [Sangharakshita, 2013, 14-16]. These are the colors of his monk's robe but the cap, designed in the same colors, is a scholar's cap. The green aura indicates the teacher's closeness to people, his healing abilities. Yama is depicted with a blue face since he is a deity of the underworld; he has a crown of skulls and a blazing fire around him [Ryabovolova, 2007, 61]. On the top left there is a fiery red zone: the angry patron deity Rakta Yamari is depicted standing on a buffalo. On the right, in a sphere of blue-white light, there is a lama wearing orange robes and a pandita hat and reading a text from a folio. On the bottom left there are three monks in orange, and on the right there is the black and blue angry defender of wisdom Mahakala Gonpo Legden.

Let's consider another image—Maitreya Buddha (Figure 2).



Figure 2 - Maitreya Buddha [Thukral, 2013-2014, 198]

Maitreya (Tib.: Champa Gonpo), the Buddha of the future and Shakyamuni's successor, resides in the Tushita heaven, waiting for his descent to earth. His arrival will mean the end of the middle times in which we live at the present time, described as the lowest point of human existence between the epochs of Gautama Buddha and Maitreya. This thangka depicts him sitting, his feet being on the ground, which indicates that he has not yet completed his accession to his throne.

Maitreya as the Buddha of the future is depicted here in orange—the color of spiritual searches and enlightenment. The ornaments on the Buddha's legs attract attention: they are multicolored, which reflects the diversity of the world that the Buddha is ready to rule.

Such an analysis of the color semiotics of thangkas allows us to conclude that colors in thangkas have different meanings, and their combination, if interpreted correctly, enhances the spiritual impact of the image intended for meditation. The primary colors of the Buddhist canon prevail in both thangkas but chiaroscuro is more actively used to convey volume in the second thangka.

It is important to take into account the fact that Buddhist art, like any sacred art, is perceived fundamentally differently by people outside culture and those inside it. A. Grünwedel, one of the first European researchers investigating Tibetan art, points out that this art is aesthetically characterized by the religious, contemplative nature of objects and closely related to it; a European scholar calls this comprehension of the artistic significance of the subject, and a Buddhist says: when true believers approach the sacred images, the images come to life, the gods stand before the believers, while they are dead and devoid of any essence for an outsider [Grünwedel, 1905, 10].

Other Buddhist cultures, closely related to Tibetan Buddhism due to mentorship and succession, may use slightly different symbols. In particular, color semiotics is more connected with the colors of folk ornaments in Kalmyk sacred painting. In Kalmyk culture, blue is associated with the sky, symbolizing immortality and courage; white is a symbol of the purity of spiritual thoughts and teachings; yellow represents the sanctity of the church; red is the color of the sun; and black is the opposition to white [Batyreva, 2009, 147]. Despite the fact that Kalmyk icon painters used Tibetan treatises on painting, they made a number of additions to the tradition.

Conclusion

Tibetan thangkas, a unique art form, have a long history. They embody a developed system of Buddhist iconography and visually support Buddhist doctrine in Tibet and other regions where people practise northern Buddhism. Coloristics plays a role in the complex system of thangka symbolism: color semiotics includes many levels of interpretation and complements the pictorial details of the paintings. Moreover, the pure colors of thangkas, coupled with other details of fabric painting and its subjects, remind a person, a parishioner and a believer, of the divine beauty of the Absolute.

In the coloristic theory of Buddhist art, there are two basic teachings. According to the first teaching, five primary colors with numerous correspondences serve as a basis for all other colors. According to the second teaching, there is one "mother" color (white) and seven "father" colors, and other colors—"son" colors—are produced by mixing them. The author makes an attempt to consider two thangkas from the perspective of their coloristic symbolism.

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Цветовая семиотика буддийского искусства Тибета: жанр танка

Курасов Сергей Владимирович

Доктор искусствоведения,
профессор,
ректор,

Московская государственная художественно-промышленная академия им. С.Г. Строганова,
125080, Российская Федерация, Москва, ш. Волоколамское, 9;
e-mail: info@mghpu.ru

Аннотация

Статья посвящена анализу цветовой семиотики буддийского искусства в применении к жанру танка, тибетской живописи на ткани. Тибетские танка воплотили в себе развитую систему буддийской иконографии, став важнейшей визуальной опорой буддийской доктрины в Тибете и других странах северного буддизма. Семиотика цветов включала много уровней истолкования и дополняла изобразительные детали картин. Чистые цвета танка в купе с другими деталями и сюжетами живописи на ткани напоминали человеку, прихожанину и верующему, о божественной красоте Абсолюта. В колористической теории буддийского искусства можно выделить два основных учения. Согласно первому, существует пять основных цветов, имеющих многочисленные соответствия, которые служат базой для остальных. Согласно второму, есть один «материнский» цвет (белый) и семь «отцовских», и остальные цвета-«сыновья» составляются на основе их смешения. Автор рассматривает два образца танка с точки зрения колористической символики.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

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Ключевые слова

Тибетское искусство, буддийское искусство, символика цвета, танка, живопись.

Библиография

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