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## The nature of artistic images in Tibetan thangkas

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### Abstract

The article is devoted to the history of thangka painting and aims to study the nature of artistic images in Tibetan thangkas. It pays attention to the fact that the unique genre of Tibetan painting called thangkas was formed under the influence of Indian, Nepalese, and Chinese traditions—both Buddhist ones and those of fabric painting. The article points out that the complex symbolism of thangkas can be deciphered both from the perspective of the history of Tibet and on the basis of the continuing tradition of Buddhist teaching. The most important signs of the symbolism of thangkas include the system of characters, composition, the features of landscapes, and the colors of paintings. Having considered the nature of artistic images in Tibetan thangkas with due regard to the history of the the formation of the genre, the author of the article comes to the conclusion that the orientation of thangkas towards spirituality is their most important feature distinguishing them from Western European painting: thangkas are a metaphor of the spiritual path, used primarily as an object of spiritual work. This function of thangka painting determines its main artistic characteristics, such as the traditional composition and their color scheme, symbolism, and anonymity.

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### Keywords

History of Tibet, Buddhist art, traditional art, thangka, fabric painting, Tibetan art, Tibetan painting.

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## Introduction

The art of Tibet is a complex multigenre system in which the worldview of the Tibetan people, the dogmas of Buddhism and views on the correlation between the material and the spiritual in our world are embodied in an artistic form.

Thangka painting is one of the most peculiar genres of Tibetan art. The history of thangkas dates back more than 1400 years [Wang, 2014, 88]. Thangkas are Tibetan Buddhist paintings on cotton or silk, usually depicting Buddhist deities, subjects or mandalas. Thangkas are traditionally stored unframed and rolled up when not on display, fixed on some textile backing, with additional silk covering on the front. Having been treated in this way, they can be stored for a long time, but they are stored in dry places because of their vulnerability. Thangkas vary in size: they are usually small, but can reach several meters in each dimension; such large thangkas were intended for a short demonstration on the walls of monasteries during religious holidays. Most thangkas were intended for personal meditation or training of monks.

Thangka painting is a type of traditional Tibetan fine art, embodying not only the spiritual content of the teaching of Buddhism, but also the artistic ideals of the Tibetan understanding of beauty developed over the centuries. The aesthetics and nature of artistic images in thangkas are complex and interesting.

## Research results

Tibetan Buddhist painting developed on the basis of widespread traditions of early Buddhist paintings, which are now preserved only in a few places, such as the Ajanta Caves in India and the Mogao Caves on the Silk Road. The earliest surviving Tibetan paintings on fabric were also found here. Thangkas developed together with the traditions of Tibetan Buddhist wall paintings, which are mainly found in monasteries [Klimburg-Salter, 1996].

The early history of thangkas is easier to trace through frescoes, which have been preserved in greater numbers than paintings on fabric: "Buddhist monumental and decorative painting almost exactly transfers thangka icons to the walls. The paintings clearly express canonically stable iconography, in which the influence of Indian, Nepalese and Chinese art can be traced" [Asalkhanova, 2014, 192].

Most thangkas were ordered by believers to acquire merit before the Buddha. Then they were often given to the monastery or another person. Some thangkas have inscriptions on the back indicating that they were personal meditative images of monks. Most artists were probably monks. An artist's remuneration was traditionally viewed as a "gift", not a fee. The word *thangka* in the classical Tibetan language means "a thing that is unfolded". An author's signature is very rarely found on a thangka, but some artists are known though they were more famous as monks than as artists. Painting was a significant achievement for a monk [Wein, 2016].

There is a legend about how thangkas originated. The tradition of painting thangkas came from India. The Buddha's chief patron Anathapindika, having received his blessing, sent his daughter to Sri Lanka to marry the king of this country. Thus, the King of Sri Lanka established relations with the King of India (at that time the King of Padma) and gave him many different jewels such as diamonds, pearls, and rubies, including a precious conch. He wanted to get something unique from the King of India in return for these offerings. The King of Padma considered an image of the Buddha to be something unique and asked the Buddha's permission to depict him. The Buddha agreed, and many artists were

sent to portray him. However, the artists were unable to depict the Buddha faithfully, with all the incredible details such as the rays of light he emanated or the ushnisha on the top of his head. Having realized that the artists were unable to portray him, the Buddha went near the lake one day; having seen his reflection in the water, the artists painted the Buddha on a large piece of cloth.

The Buddha sent this painting, along with many quotes from the sutras, to the King of Sri Lanka. Since the thangka was very large, the king hung it in his palace. Such is the history of the origin of the first thangka and the origin of the tradition of depicting the Buddha as a form of visual art.

During and after the time of King Ashoka's reign in India many stones were engraved with images related to the Buddha. In India and China there was a tradition of depicting the Buddha on cloth before Buddhist teachings reached Tibet. Thus the tradition of depicting the Buddha in thangkas and other art forms preceded the coming of these teachings to Tibet.

The history of the formation of thangkas as a genre is inextricably linked with the history of Tibet. The art of Tibet, as well as its culture, was formed in close interaction of the traditions of India, China, and Nepal. According to legend, the religious art of Tibet originated from those artifacts of religious art that two wives of King Songtsen Gampo (the early 7<sup>th</sup> century) brought as their dowries: the Nepalese princess brought a statue of the eight-year-old Buddha and many sacred images, and the Chinese one brought a statue of the twelve-year-old Buddha. These statues are still kept in Lhasa. In addition, Songtsen Gampo ordered a Nepalese master to make a full-length image of Avalokiteshvara.

The history of Buddhist art, as well as the history of Buddhism in Tibet, is obviously divided into two large periods—the early (the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the late (since 11<sup>th</sup> century) ones.

The Jiang Jin period (the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries), when Buddhism was persecuted, left few monuments of art: "the compositions of the works of this period are laconic; four colors—blue, yellow, red, and white—are mainly used. People were portrayed almost completely naked, only belted with a rope and with eight symbols of Buddhism; the central character was depicted relatively large, the contours were rectilinear" [Wang, 2014, 89].

The earliest surviving Tibetan fabric paintings were found in the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang on the Silk Road in Gansu province, China. The "library cave" was a repository of old or worn-out manuscripts, paintings, engravings, textiles, and other items that were sealed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century after several centuries of storage. Many of the paintings had Tibetan inscriptions or were executed in a style that can be recognized as Tibetan, in contrast to the dominant Han Chinese style and some works reflecting Indian styles. Although it is difficult to date these works, they are believed to belong mainly to the period 781-848, the reign of the Tang dynasty.

Further periodization of the history of thangkas is associated with the development of the authentic style:

- the period of external influence (the 11<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries);
  - the heyday of local art schools (the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries);
  - the period of mixing art schools and the dominance of local styles (the 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries)
- [Ibidem].

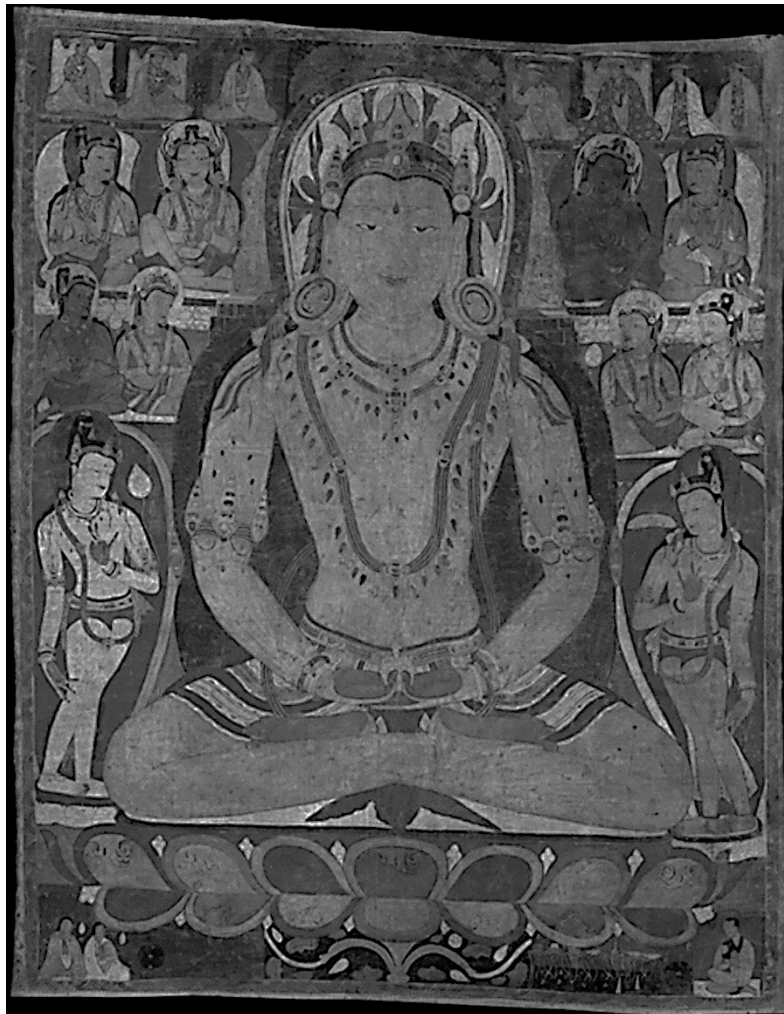
Thangka art dates back to the art of China, Central Asia, India, Kashmir, Nepal; the stylistic trends of the art of these countries have had an enormous impact on the art of Tibet. Paintings in ancient monasteries demonstrate the influence of various styles.

The late period of the development of thangka painting began during the reign of the Guge dynasty in western Tibet, near Ngari. Most of the masters—architects and painters—who built and decorated temples were natives of northern India or Kashmir; the discovered works demonstrate the influence of the styles of the Pala dynasty and Central Asia: "The earliest known Tibetan paintings are stylistically

closely related to the art of the later Pala and Sena dynasties in Eastern India in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. These thangkas are rare, and several well-known paintings are distinguished by their simplicity and boldness from the later ones" [Huntington, 1970, 122].

Tibetan art has also been greatly influenced by ancient Chinese art: the earliest surviving Tibetan paintings are paintings on silk from Dunhuang, in which the influence of Chinese aesthetics is obvious; the surviving paintings of the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, in particular wall paintings in the monasteries of Aivansa and Jatansa, also show this influence [Weidner, 2009]. The thangka genre rested on the Chinese art of scroll paintings done during the Song dynasty.

Thangkas on the fabric from Tibet has been preserved since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, after the revival of Buddhism; about 20 thangkas of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries have been preserved. These early works also had a complex composition, but to a lesser extent than later thangkas. A central figure surrounded by smaller figures is a typical composition of thangkas; the deities are often framed, or surrounded by flaming halos, or sitting on small clouds. A landscape background, on which the sky occupies a large place, is often depicted behind these figures. The central figure can be a deity, an arhat or an important monk; the same characters are depicted more finely. According to Buddhist theology, some of the characters may be different "aspects" or reincarnations of one another (Figure 1).



**Figure 1 - Amitabha Buddha in the center (the portraits of the sponsors of the image being depicted below). The 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century [The Buddha Amitayus..., www]**

One of the early thangkas is shown in Figure 2. The painting from the collection of John and Berthe Ford depicts the goddess Tara and the attendants in a mountain cave. This painting is distinguished by great virtuosity, unsurpassed in technical skill and artistic subtlety. The forms are elegant and voluminous, the details are brilliantly intricate. The composition indicates a mature phase of the refined tradition of religious painting. Tara and her four assistants (pig-headed Marichi and Asokakanta on her right; Ekajata in a tiger skin skirt and Mahdmayuri or Arya Janguli on the left) are seen inside the triple arch of the mountain cave. Other figures, including Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and monks, appear in caves in smaller fragments along the upper and lateral borders. In the lower row there are five figures of six-armed deities with swords, as well as a monk sitting in front of various offerings. Above the mountain peaks surrounding the upper row of deities, there is a jungle, where one can see bare-chested creatures, as well as lions and elephants playing. The mountain peaks are filled with tiny figures of people and animals playing and making offerings to the deities. Tara is depicted in her form as Green Tara and Khadiravani Tara ("dweller in the khadira (acacia) forest"). She is also known as Ashtamahabhaya, an image in which she helps those who are exposed to eight perils, illustrated by eight Taras sitting along the left and right borders of the image. Her languid body is decorated with a lot of jewelry. A thin orange cloth falls almost imperceptibly on her limbs. A transparent shawl, barely visible on her shoulders and chest, is decorated with an elegant circular motif. Her thin, tapering fingers hold the lotus stalk on the left, and her right hand offers a gracious gesture of bestowing gifts (varadamudra) [Singer, 1994, 96].



**Figure 2 - Tara. The late 11<sup>th</sup> century. 122×80 cm. The collection of John and Berthe Ford. Photography by J. Taylor [Ibidem, 100]**

Tibetan painting, both wall and thangka painting, continued to develop in its own direction over the next centuries, balancing between two main influences—Indo-Nepalese and Han Chinese painting, despite the fact that Buddhism in these regions was already in decline [Slusser, 1993]. Styles varied considerably in different regions of Tibet. The regions closer to Nepal and China were more influenced by local styles. Bhutanese thangkas were mainly influenced by Central Tibet. Various monastic orders had slightly different stylistic preferences (Figure 3).



**Figure 3 - The Jina Buddha Ratnasambhava. Central Tibet, Kadampa Monastery. 1150-1225 [The Jina Buddha Ratnasambhava, www]**

Many thangkas and statues were made for monasteries in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the Sakya sect received the support from the Yuan dynasty. Most of these works were made by Nepalese masters in accordance with their national styles and ideas of beauty. The vigorous development of monasteries, supported by the Sakya, led to the active development of Buddhist fine art, when the culture of Tibetan Buddhism was formed on the basis of a consistent combination of foreign cultures: "The paintings and sculptures of the Chinese Tang and Song dynasties penetrated into Tibet, and Buddhist images that are common in Tibet, spread to China" [Wang, 2014, 90] (Figure 4).



**Figure 4 - The Buddha with one hundred Jataka tales.  
Tibet. The 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century [The thangka..., www]**

The development of Buddhist doctrine, translations and philosophy led to the development of fine art as a method of visual embodiment of high truths. Thus, the fourth head of the Sakya School Jian Jun wrote works on painting techniques and the theory of creating Buddhist images. The fifth head Basypa painted frescoes and thangkas, drew mandalas in Sakya Monastery.

The first thangka painting school was founded by the painter Tsiu Gompa in southern Tibet. It was the first to unify borrowed figurative and aesthetic samples; in particular, it established the mandatory use of red and yellow colors as the main ones. The thangkas created by Tsiu Gompa have been preserved to this day, in particular, in the Domenta pagoda in the city of Gyantse and Kumbum Monastery in Qinghai province.

Tibetan painting included many elements of Han Chinese painting from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. One of the distinctive features of this style is the emphasis on space and landscape backgrounds. In general, the style of depicting figures in thangkas goes back to the Indo-Nepalese tradition. Tibet had been ruled by China since the Yuan dynasty, but when the Qing dynasty came to power, the court's interest in Tibetan Buddhism increased, and many exquisite and elegant works were created by imperial artists and sent to Tibet, influencing local styles. As it is noted, "amongst the

profusion of early thangkhas, we can distinguish five or six major styles up to the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century: Li lugs in Central Tibet during the earliest period; followed by rGya lugs in dBus and Lho kha; Bal ris in gTsang; Kha che lugs in Western Tibet from the earliest period right on through; and the "Red-Green-Blue-Gold" style which also probably runs through the whole period" [Stoddard, 1996, 47].

The complete artistic system created by the Tibetans had developed in the Gyantse area in western Tibet by the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The mutual penetration of the arts of the Sakya and Xiafu and Chinese art resulted in the formation of the national painting style distinguished by the following features.

- 1) One can often see the forms with a high back characteristic of the wooden furniture of the Middle Chinese plain of the Ming dynasty in the illumination and the throne of the Buddha. The images of the halo and radiance in the background reflect the transition from horseshoe shapes to round ones.
- 2) Characters based on the continuity of the styles of Paraga and Xiafu began to be depicted even more elongated and soft; the combination of two elements in the depiction of faces—the square shape of the Paraga style and the shape of the inverted triangle of the Xiafu style—gave a perfect circle shape.
- 3) Five crowns and a crown of flowers and herbs, branches and leaves, original and diverse images of earrings coexisted.
- 4) Dresses and hanging ribbons, compared with the Xiafu style, became more diverse and loose, the number of the "tight-fitting clothing" patterns of the Tian style decreased under the influence of the Chinese style.
- 5) The lotus bottom had a large number of variations of a single-layer or two-layer shape, the petals are more turned in profile, the feeling of squariness and hardness of the lotus leaves of the Paraga style was replaced by a heart shape, which is the result of the combination of round and triangular shapes.
- 6) There is a tendency in the composition to break with the tradition of staggered arrangement; it is more lively and changeable.
- 7) There is striving for the ornamentation of clothing, jewelry and backgrounds, connecting the figures surrounding the Buddha with him with the help of flowers and herbs, fluffy pink clouds.
- 8) Colors were more complex and bright, the main emphasis was on the juxtaposition of red and green" [Wang, 2014, 91].

These features of the national style reflect the tendency of Tibetan painting to mobility of lines, decorativeness. At the same time, there are many regional variations of the national style of thangkhas: "Western art historians, starting with Giuseppe Tucci, have focused their attention on the style of Central Tibet. This style usually represents the effect of denser layers of paint and less subtle mixing of colors than more oriental styles" [Shaftel, 1986, 98].

Thangkhas have their own classification. They are traditionally divided into:

- *tsong-tang*—fabric painting;
- *go-tang*—applique thangkhas: embroidered, woven, lined with silk, made of brocade;
- *nag-tang*—sewing with gold threads on a black background;
- *tsem-tang*—lace woven;
- thangkhas painted according to a monochrome contour printed from wooden boards [Wang, 2014, 88].

In addition, there are smaller varieties: *matan*—embroidered with gold threads on a red base; *shetan*—embroidered on gold or silver fabric, etc. [Obodoeva, Abaeva, 2017; Purevbat, 2019].



Thangkas were not only embroidered and were made not only on canvas; patterned silk, brocade, and pearl inlay were used to create them already in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Thangkas are often painted according to the laws of complex compositions, including a lot of small figures. The central deity or character is often surrounded by other figures in a symmetrical composition [Needham, 1978]. Narrative sequences of scenes are less common. As A.L. Barkova notes, the figures of characters correspond to their spiritual nature: "the highest ranks of the pantheon are endowed with tall stature, slender and light build; bodhisattvas are built the same as Buddhas, but they are shorter; the system designed for the "heroic" type depicts a heroic physique, a stocky figure with a heavy torso, a large belly, short and thick limbs, a short thick neck, a large head, a square or round face, round bulging eyes, a fleshy nose and a wide-open mouth with predatory elongated sharp teeth; the dharmapalas of the lower rank and the spirits are even stockier, their legs being shortened, their bellies hanging to their knees. <...>. This system of correspondences clearly reflects one of the main features of human thinking in general—the juxtaposition of calm spirituality and angry rage as high and low. In this case—in the literal sense of the word" [Barkova, 2007, 501] (Figure 5).



**Figure 5 - Yama. Tibet. The 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> century [Yama, www]**

The Buddha is traditionally the most important object depicted in thangkas: "The creation of the thangkas portraying Shakyamuni Buddha was based on his complete biographies, such as Buddhacarita

and Lalitavistara, as well as sutras (the Abinishkramana sutra, the Achchhariyabbhuta-dhamma sutra, etc.). Certain episodes from the life of the Buddha—his twelve deeds—are usually paid special attention in the Tibetan tradition. <...> The stages of the spiritual path are fixed in the iconography of the image of Shakyamuni Buddha, in his appearance. He is depicted in the clothes and ornaments of a prince as a bodhisattva, in a monk's robe as an ascetic, and with a mandorla (as a rule, a double one) as a Buddha" [Arsent'eva, 2010, 208].

The arhats—the first disciples of the Buddha who achieved enlightenment through their own efforts—are one of the objects depicted in thangkas. Their function consisted in protecting dharma, the Buddhist structure of the world, until the coming of Maitreya Buddha [Little, 1992, 255].

The centuries-old tradition of thangka painting has developed its own symbolism of poses, gestures, images, and colors: 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]. "The canon of painting thangkas includes a number of colors that are correlated with the elements of the cosmic system of the universe, and 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. These colors were perceived as five images (deities): white—Vairocana, yellow—Ratnasambhava, blue—Akshobhya, red—Amitabha, green—Amoghasiddhi, thanks to which one can cognize everything and build a colorful model of the universe" [Dashieva, 2013, 154].

Thangkas reflect both the principles of Buddhist art illuminated by time, and Tibetan ideas about their own time, transformed into iconographic themes such as spiritual lines and hierarchical portraits [Singer, 1994, 87]. It is important to note that the content of thangka paintings is primarily spiritual [Gupta, 2019], since they are part of the system of spiritual Buddhist art, which is "a visual system of representing symbols of enlightenment and also the way of inducing the experience of enlightenment. This system conveys and gives support to spiritual facts" [Kramrisch, 1960, 23].

Thangkas serve as an important tool of Buddhist enlightenment, depicting the life of the Buddha, influential lamas and other deities and bodhisattvas. The Wheel of Life (Bhavachakra), which is a visual representation of the teachings of the Abhidharma (the Art of Enlightenment), was frequently depicted. Printed reproductions of painted thangkas, the size of a poster, were usually made for religious or decorative purposes.

Thangkas perform several different functions. The images of deities can be used as teaching tools when depicting the life (or lives) of the Buddha, when describing historic events concerning important lamas, or when retelling myths related to other deities: "The images of Buddhist art help a believer to perceive dogmas that are often too difficult to understand" [Klimova, 2018, 163].

Objects of worship in thangkas can be important during rituals or ceremonies and are often used as objects to offer prayers. In general, religious art is used as a meditation tool to help a person to move further along the path to enlightenment. Those practising Buddhist Vajrayana use the images of their yidams, or the deities of meditation, as thangkas, visualizing themselves as these deities, and thereby assimilating the qualities of the Buddha [Makarova, 2016]. Thangkas hang on or near altars, and also occupy the walls of bedrooms or offices of monks and believers. "The realization of the 'enlightened aspiration' (*Bodhi Sadhana*) through deity yoga (*Deva Yoga*) is a fundamental practice in the Tantric art of Vajrayana. If the Mahayana sutra method needs deities for blessings, then the Vajrayana tantra method requires transformation into a deity during practising yoga in the process of realizing a yidam"

[Badmazhapov, 2015, 371].

Having become a national form of Buddhist art, thangkas not only reflected the national worldview, but also recreated the development of the national form of Buddhism in Tibet and China. Thangka painting was perceived and is perceived by Buddhists as a kind of great work [Kurasov, 2013, 45]. It is important to note that the tradition of thangkas, by and large, is anonymous, since it reproduces the fixation of traditional culture on the expression of eternal truths, and not self-expression: "on the contrary, the method of rejecting "individual creativity" is manifested in Tibetan thangka art: using the repeated artistic experience, it is necessary to demonstrate permanent divine forces transcending time and space. This is "creativity without creativity", the originality of which originates in its religious character and the needs of society" [Wang, 2017, 106].

Thangkas were painted in all areas where Tibetan Buddhism was widespread—in Mongolia, some parts of Himalayan India, and so on, and Tibetan painting greatly influenced the further development of Buddhist fabric painting [Bal'zhurova, 2017; Dashieva, 2015; Elikhina, 2019; Zhambaeva, 2016]. The conservation and restoration of Tibetan thangkas are an important area of work with them [Anchukov, 2017].

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## Природа художественного образа в тибетских танка

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### Аннотация

Статья посвящена истории танкописи и природе художественного образа в танка Тибета. Танка как уникальный жанр тибетской живописи сформировался под влиянием индийской, непальской и китайских традиций – как буддийских, так и традиций живописи на ткани. Сложная символика танка поддается расшифровке как с позиций истории Тибета, так и исходя из сохраняющейся традиции буддийского учения. К важнейшим признакам символики танка относятся система персонажей, композиция, особенности пейзажа, колористика картин. Важнейшей характеристикой танка, отличающей их от западноевропейской живописи, является их устремленность к духовному деланию: танка есть метафора духовного пути, используемая в первую очередь как объект духовной работы. Из этой функции танка исходят основные ее художественные характеристики, такие как традиционность композиции и цветового решения, символизм, анонимность (или непринципиальность авторства).

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### Ключевые слова

История Тибета, буддийское искусство, традиционное искусство, танка, живопись на ткани, тибетское искусство, живопись Тибета.

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