

Himalayan Nature Representations and Reality

EDITED BY ERIKA SANDMAN AND RIIKA J. VIRTANEN

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**Himalayan Nature
Representations and Reality**

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ERIKA SANDMAN AND RIIKA J. VIRTANEN



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Himalayan Nature: Representations and Reality

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HOLY GROUNDS: LANDSCAPES IN TIBETAN THANGKA PAINTINGS

Pekka Lehtisalo

ABSTRACT

Tibetan sacred art is based on the Indian tradition of depicting buddhas, bodhisattvas, gurus, meditation deities and other figures abundant in tantric Buddhism. Having taken some influence from Chinese landscape painting, Tibetan artists started to fill the background of the picture with elements of landscape and developed a unique Tibetan style.

The landscape backgrounds of thangka paintings generally represent Himālayan scenes in their fresh and luxuriant aspect with snowy mountains, green meadows, streams and cascades. If there are any buildings, they mostly have an appearance reminiscent of Tibetan architecture. The treatment of the subject is highly idealized and stylized. Although there are not strict iconographic rules in depicting the background as there are in respect to the holy figures themselves, the landscape is usually painted very formally. Mountains, water, clouds, etc. tend to repeat few basic patterns. This formality and conservatism is based on the purpose of sacred Tibetan art. It is not a medium of individual artistic expression but a way to transmit the visionary experiences of spiritual masters. The thangka backgrounds are made to match the firm, vibrant and crystal clear nature of their visualizations of the embodiments of enlightenment.

1. THANGKA

Thangka (Tib. *thang ka*) is a general word for Tibetan painting made on canvas. In traditional Tibetan culture these paintings were mainly made for religious purposes. There are also other kinds of thangkas, such as didactic paintings for medical use, depicting symptoms of diseases or medicinal plants. One category of thangkas deals with ritual implements and magical or astrological diagrams. So-called narrative thangkas have historical or biographical motifs. As they depict the lives of persons with spiritual significance they are closely connected to religion and mythology, but the style may be less formal than in the actual

religious thangka-paintings with strict iconographic rules and conventions. The vast majority of thangkas belong to this category depicting the figures of the Buddhist pantheon. These figures are considered embodiments of enlightenment, personifications of the absolute in their *sambhogakāya* (Tib. *longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku*) aspect. Thus they are neither material nor transcendental beyond all conceptualizations but pure forms of energy. As such they also create around themselves a large sphere of pure energy, which is called a buddha-field (Skt. *buddhakṣetra*, Tib. *sangs rgyas kyi zhing*), a pure land. The buddha-fields are not the same as heavenly paradises even if they may be described in similar terms and the highest heavens on the *arūpaloka* level are sometimes called pure lands or pure abodes. Even the highest heavens belong to the saṃsāric system, but buddha-fields are manifestations of enlightened consciousness without any dependence on saṃsāric causalities.¹ In principle, the thangka-backgrounds ought to represent these spheres, though there are exceptions. For example, the future buddha Maitreya (Tib. Byams pa) is often depicted in his present abode as a bodhisattva in Tuṣita (Tib. dGa' ldan) heaven.

In the scriptures – sūtras, tantras, *sādhanas*, *dhāraṇīs* – detailed descriptions of various pure lands can be found. According to them, there are some characteristic features of the nature of pure lands. There are all kinds of precious materials in profusion, the pure lands outright consist of them, and even the water is of liquid jewel. Everything there is perfect and flawless, everything sheds light. The forms are often geometric, the scale is gigantic. Still, the thangka-backgrounds are not painted following those descriptions literally. Instead, the typical backgrounds rather look like idealized and stylized Himālayan sceneries. The landscape is fresh with green hills and water; arid areas so typical of Tibetan highlands are rarely presented in thangkas. The weather is fine and looks like summer or spring; there is snow only on mountaintops. Occasionally in the background of pictures depicting wrathful deities there might be seen thunderclouds and lightning on the horizon. There is also a shading method called “rain shading” (Tib. *char mdangs*), which means that the sky is shaded using vertical strokes and the result looks like a distant rain. Nevertheless, special backgrounds of this kind for wrathful deities are not common; they are mostly similar to those of the peaceful ones.

¹ In Buddhism the heavens are not considered to be eternal states, but heavenly beings incarnate back to the lower spheres of existence after their good karma has been exhausted. On the contrary, beings who incarnate in pure lands no longer fall to the cycle of *saṃsāra*, but will definitely mature to attain complete enlightenment.

The perspective of landscape is not natural (as it is not in most artistic traditions of the world – the European classical period from the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century being only a rare exception). Tibetan thangka-backgrounds have strong influence from Chinese landscape painting and its idea of perspective in which the landscape is not meant to be viewed as a whole but as separate glimpses as would be seen by a traveller passing through it from different vantage points with differing perspectives and horizons. Nevertheless, this kind of perspective also has a spiritual significance, which reflects the nature of pure lands where the earthly optical rules and incomplete ways of perception are not valid.

Although some elements like clouds, hills, etc. may be shaded in order to highlight their three-dimensional form, the elements cast no shadows on the ground. Just as in the case of the perspective, this also has its roots in the artistic traditions that have not shared the European tendency to realism, but it also reveals the quality of pure lands: there cannot be any shadows because everything emits light.

Besides normal multicoloured thangkas, there are some other styles in which one colour strongly dominates, viz. gold, red, and black thangkas. In gold thangkas (Tib. *thang gser*) the figures are usually drawn on a golden base with black or red outlines. It is also possible to make various structures on the golden surface by using different finishing techniques, either with a brush or other tools by polishing, scratching, etc. (Butters 2002: picture 13). The red thangkas (Tib. *thang dmar*) are often painted only with red and gold, typically drawn with golden outlines on a red base or vice versa, but there are also multicoloured pictures on a red base (Butters 2002: picture 20). The black thangkas (Tib. *thang nag*) are the most common of these one-coloured thangkas. Their range of colours is wide: from golden outlines on a black base to darkly tinted multicoloured paintings (Lauf 1975: picture 70). One has to remember that the blackness is just an aesthetic style and there is not any nocturnal allusion. Moreover, there is no reason to associate black thangkas with the “powers of darkness” or anything of that nature. It might be that the wrathful figures are depicted a little more often in black thangkas than the peaceful ones but the proportion is not obvious – besides, the wrathful figures are not demons but certain forceful manifestations of enlightened consciousness.

In addition to these three basic categories of thangkas with a limited palette, there are also greyish thangkas in which the colours are tinted more or less to grey. The results vary from cool clearness to a soft atmosphere of misty light according to the hue of the grey. Some artists have also painted silver thangkas, and in many contemporary thangkas silver occurs in combination with gold, but

traditionally it has seldom been used because it darkens in time and loses its lustre.

The landscape elements are mostly drawn as somewhat regular patterns with slight variation. The basic structure behind the alternation of land and water is a set of triangles: triangular land elements point upwards and triangular water elements point downwards (Fig. 1). In the simplest paintings this pattern is so evident that it is almost geometrical, even symmetrical, but mostly it is irregular and complex.

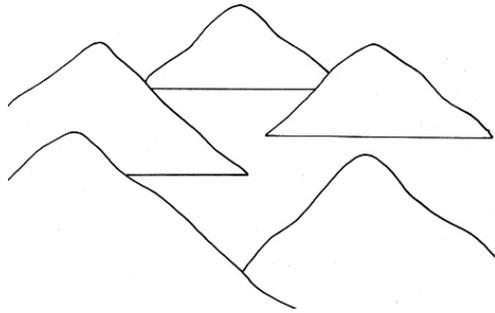


Figure 1

In narrative thangkas one can sometimes detect signs of an effort to a little more realistic mode of rendering the details of landscape. This is caused by the character of the genre with its historical and biographical aspects. In many cases there can even be found buildings that have physical counterparts, e.g. Potala palace in Lhasa.

A few pure lands are usually painted according to textual sources. The most common are buddha Amitābha's Sukhāvātī (Tib. bDe ba can) (Butters 2002: picture 21) and guru Padmasambhava's Copper Mountain (Tib. Zangs mdog dpal ri) (Lauf 1975: picture 14). Even there, the landscape and buildings are much more reminiscent of those of the Himālayan area than the fantastic places in enormous scale described in the texts and oral tradition.

Still, the background landscapes are in their own way fantastic and otherworldly. Sharply defined details give them an air of visionary clarity, landscape elements are vivid but at the same time still and firm, the colours shine, contrasting hues vibrate.

Still, the background landscapes are in their own way fantastic and otherworldly. Sharply defined details give them an air of visionary clarity, landscape elements are vivid but at the same time still and firm, the colours shine, contrasting hues vibrate.

2. LANDSCAPE ELEMENTS

In most of the thangkas the figures occupy the greatest part of the canvas and there is not much room for background landscape, often only narrow areas between nimbi and lotus thrones. Even in the simplest paintings with only one figure, the central area is usually well occupied by it. Consequently, most of the landscape elements are painted in a very small scale.

2.1 Land

The majority of dry land is composed of green hills, reminiscent of Himālayan highland meadows. The hills are often slightly shaded to get some impression of three-dimensionality. The outlines of hills are broken by painting rows of regularly arranged small specks, which often look like plants, along their edges with darker green colour. Depending on their shape and imagined distance from the viewer, they can be considered as tufts of grass, small bushes or distant trees (Fig. 2). Occasionally there may also be some specks in the middle part of a meadow area but mostly they are painted only along the edges of the hills and the meadows are plain green fields without any allusions to separate plants.

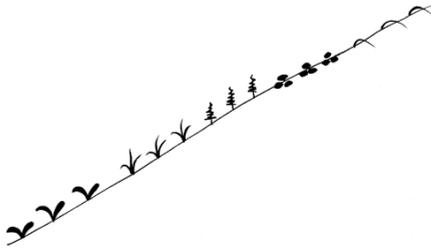


Figure 2

Here and there, usually by water areas, the meadows end in steep cliffs of bare rock. The drop curves inwards and the meadow's edge projects (Fig. 3). A typical formation is also a triangular hill with rocky cliffs behind another similar hill, seemingly rising up from an empty sky (Fig. 4).

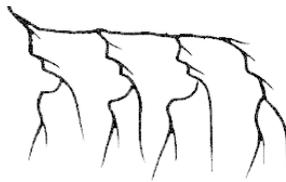


Figure 3



Figure 4

2.2 Stones

The general shape of stones is somewhat angular with jagged and concave edges (Fig. 5). Even the stones that are in contact with water are no more rounded or polished.

The stones are painted in a colourful way using blue, green and different brownish hues and often outlined with gold. The most usual combination is blue



Figure 5

and green. A typical method is to divide each single crag into two zones – outer and inner – that represent receding and projecting layers. Normally the outer one is painted blue and the inner one green and shaded so that the colour is darker on the outer edge of both zones. On the lighter-coloured areas there is often added a contrasting colour: reddish and yellowish hues of brown. Brownish stones are also common and they may appear either independently or among blue-green stones as a contrasting element.

In addition to precipices, stones are found as single crags or larger formations that are mostly standing erect in the landscape either straight or tilted (Fig. 6). The patterns of formations may be fantastically twisted, sometimes almost spiralling (Fig. 7). Occasionally they even take the shapes of faces, animals or ritual implements.

There may be holes or caves in them from which a rivulet or a cascade is flowing. The caves are depicted as glittering cavities of precious stones and bright waters, not gloomy underworlds.



Figure 6



Figure 7

2.3 Mountains

Mountains are high with very steep slopes thus resembling the geologically young and unworn mountains of the Himālayas. However, the mountains in thangkas are often even more precipitous than their models in the physical world (Rhie & Thurman 1999: 468).

Typically a mountain range stands on the horizon behind green hills, against the sky. This means that the mountains are often located in the middle area of a painting's vertical axis where there is not much room between the nimbus of the main figure and the edge of the painting. In this kind of composition there are only a couple

of small distant peaks visible on both sides of the scenery.

Mountains are usually totally covered with snow which folds around them as thick drifts. Bare mountains or mountains with just a small snow cap are not so common. The mountaintops are pointed. They are often a little rounded by snow (Fig. 8) but sometimes mountains with concave sides may also have extremely sharp snowy peaks (Fig. 9).

The colour of mountains usually varies from white to light blue and the edges of enfolding snow are painted with darker blue. Occasionally the snow may have a greenish or turquoise tint, which gives a powerful contrast against an orange or yellowish horizon.

2.4 Water

The water elements are streams, cascades and ponds that traverse the landscape. There normally seems not to be large lakes, even if the lack of natural perspective allows one to view the water areas as larger or smaller. In some thangkas, the landscape consists only of water and the figure is seated on a huge lotus growing on it.

The water is painted in a stylized manner and it seems to be some kind of solid substance rather than liquid: there is neither transparency nor reflections;



Figure 8

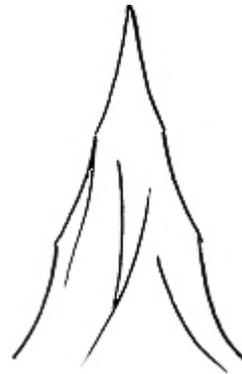


Figure 9

the patterns are firm and regular. Water areas are divided into zones by more or less undulating white or light blue lines (Fig. 10). The zones between the lines are shaded so that the darkest blue is down in the front and lightest blue up near the line. Thus the water surface has a wavy

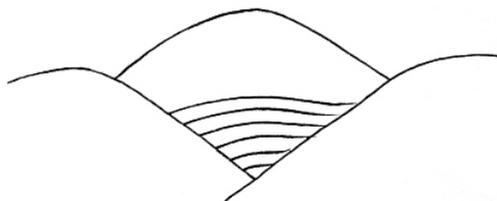


Figure 10

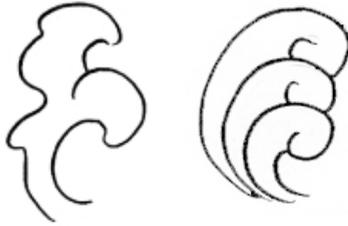


Figure 11

about the same width; the possibility of creating an impression of perspective deepness by manipulating their intervals is hardly ever utilized. On the other hand, a river that is flowing from the distance towards the front area usually becomes broader, thus reflecting the natural perspective. Sometimes a cascade ends in mid fall. This phenomenon reflects the reality in the Himālayan mountains where a small cascade falling from a high precipice may evaporate before it reaches the bottom.

Under cascades, along banks and sometimes also in the middle of a lake there are splashes of water. The splashes are strongly stylized (Fig. 11) and mostly arranged in somewhat regular patterns. As with the water in general, the splashes give an impression of solid firmness but – at least in the best paintings – also of movement and vibrant energy.

2.5 Sky

In normal multicoloured thangkas the sky is blue, though other colours may also appear. The colour is shaded so that the tone becomes darker going upwards. This kind of transition is also evident in the physical world but in thangkas the effect is often intensified. The horizon is light blue, sometimes even white, or there is a red glow that gradually changes into blue. The blue tone at the zenith varies from medium light to very dark.

Skill and patience are needed to make a smooth transition of hues using only a brush – as the artists traditionally have done – and that is why the shading of sky may be rather rough in the simple, quickly made paintings. Sometimes the sky is painted using only two shades of blue in uniform zones and the border is softened with a wet brush. This kind of rough border can also be hidden behind clouds and other elements in the sky.

In some paintings there is not even a distinct horizon but the green colour of land becomes more and more bluish while disappearing in the distance and

appearance. In less elaborate paintings the lines may also be white or lighter or darker blue than the water in general and the shading is omitted. In ponds and lakes the lines are drawn horizontally, accompanying the banks in some places. In flowing waters, i.e. streams and cascades, the lines are drawn according to the course. The zones are usually

changes little by little into the blue sky. An area of water may also change into the sky without a visible horizon (Rhie & Thurman 1999: 103).

The background may also be nothing but sky where the lotus thrones of the figures are either placed on small clouds or just float in the air without any support. Especially maṇḍalas are often painted in this way, either on a bare sky (Halén 1987: 117) or floating over a landscape (Li, Gu & Kang 1991: 136–137). The blue background may have the same kind of transition of hues as the colour of sky in normal landscape backgrounds, but it also may be plain and monochromatic.

2.6 Clouds

Basically, there are two kinds of clouds in a thangka landscape: plump cumulus-type and layered stratus-type. The former may appear both behind hills and mountains and high in the sky, the latter float solely on the upper atmosphere, often only partly visible projecting from behind the edges of the picture.

The basic pattern of the plump clouds is a line of round lobes reminiscent of the edge of gingerbread. The simplest wisps of cloud consist only of few lobes but the more complex ones have several series of lobes rising from behind one another. Often the structure takes a spiralling shape with a dark hole in the middle (Fig. 12). The cloud may also be symmetrical with two spirals and holes (Fig. 13). Many times the plump clouds have a thin or foggy “tail” swaying in the wind or winding around mountaintops, occasionally penetrating through holes in the mountain’s side. Often a thick foggy tail ends abruptly in a straight edge (Landaw & Weber 1993: Plate 7). Some plump clouds, especially those that float high in the sky, have a straight bottom painted with a couple of soft horizontal lines, upon which the plump cloud is based.

The layered clouds are very simple and formal and their structure tends to look two-dimensional. They consist of some thin horizontal layers that are here and there connected to each other by short vertical isthmuses (Fig. 14). The ends



Figure 12

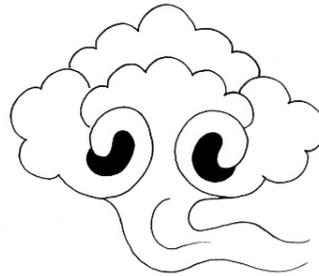


Figure 13

of the horizontal layers are mostly rounded but sometimes also sharply pointed.

There is a wide variation in the colours of clouds. Mostly they are light blue, grey or green but they may also be pink, yellow or orange, even brownish. It is common that there are clouds of different colours in same picture. The clouds, especially those of the layered type, may also be multicoloured.

Unlike the other landscape elements, the clouds are normally not outlined with dark thin lines – at least in traditional

Central-Tibetan styles (Jackson & Jackson 1998: 118). Instead, the cumulus-clouds may have a dark edge of tiny gingerbread-lobes painted with dark indigo colour (Fig. 15) and especially in more recent paintings a dark, softly fading zone around a cloud increasing its contrast against the sky.

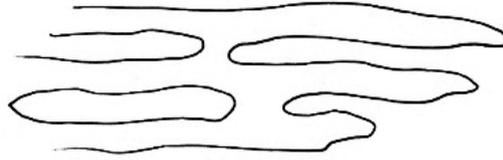


Figure 14



Figure 15

2.7 Rainbows

Rainbows are quite common elements in thangkas and there are often many of them in one landscape. Their shape is unnatural and fantastic: they twist, make loops, wind around each other and end abruptly in the middle of the air (Jackson 1996: Plate 62). An ordinary, naturally behaving rainbow is almost impossible to find in thangkas.

According to Indian tradition, a rainbow is composed of five colours: red, orange, yellow, green and blue. A Sanskrit-epithet for a rainbow alluding to this five-fold nature (*pañcālīka*) occurs as a loan word in Tibetan, both in transliterated (*pañ tsa li ka*) and translated (*kha dogsna lnga*) form (Das 1995: 778). Nevertheless, thangka-rainbows are not very often five-coloured. They may consist of four colours (orange excluded) or even less. Rainbows with only two or three stripes are often painted using different hues of just one colour or using warm colours: yellow, orange and red. Sometimes in the rainbows with two stripes both are painted with the same colour. There are also rainbows with as many as ten or

twelve stripes but just a few colours are used repeatedly. Regardless of the number of colours, their order is not necessarily that of the normal prism refraction.

The rainbows are mostly painted with opaque colours so that they rather seem to be solid objects than those nearly immaterial misty formations they are in nature. The colour-stripes may be shaded so that they are lighter on one side and darker on the other or golden zigzag-lines are drawn on their borders. It is common that the width of a rainbow changes while winding and looping. This creates an impression of movement and deep perspective: ribbons of tangible light rushing through the sky from great distances.

Many times rainbows appear in connection with the halo of a holy figure. The halo may have a rainbow-edge or a bunch of rainbows is rising from behind it. Stūpas or temples – buildings that are loaded with spiritual energies – often have rainbow formations around them (Jackson 1996: Plate 58). There is also a way to represent a buddha-figure as a rainbow body (Tib. '*ja' lus*'), i.e. a body that is vanishing in or appearing from a rainbow-coloured light (Halén 1987: 49). So the rainbows depicted in thangkas seem to comprise a much wider range of forms of light and energy than plain atmospheric rainbows.

2.8 Heavenly bodies

The sun and moon are almost always present in the sky of the thangka-landscape.² If one of them is not there it is in all probability because another element – a cloud or a side figure – hides it from view. The sun and moon are situated symmetrically near the upper edge of the picture more or less near the corners. The sun ought to be on the right; the moon on the left (seen from the viewer) but sometimes it is vice versa. Especially in some new – but of traditional style – thangkas painted in Nepal, their placement seems to be reversed regularly.³

The sun and moon are usually of the same size, as they really are seen from the Earth. The colour of sun is orange or red, the colour of moon white or light blue. They are painted very simply and formally, often only as two disks. There may be a ring or stylized beams of light around the sun or both of the disks (Fig. 16).

² In some narrative thangkas and those that have strong biographical aspects, e.g. thangkas depicting certain yogins and gurus, the scenery may be unambiguously nocturnal without the sun (Downman & Beer 1989: 100).

³ Occasionally, pictures of thangkas in books may be represented as mirror images owing to mistakes in the printing process but those are easy to detect by the postures and attributes of the figures.



Figure 16

The moon may also be represented as a crescent, either as a bare crescent or as a dark disk with a light crescent on it.

Sometimes there are also a few stars in the sky. Usually they are gathered near the moon; many times some of them are situated unnaturally inside the crescent (Butters 2002: picture 11).

2.9 Plants

Apart from the verdant hills with indistinct vegetation there are usually not very many plants in the landscape. There may be some separate trees, bushes or flowers but not forests or flower-covered meadows.

Every single leaf and flower is painted individually thus reflecting the extreme visionary clarity of pure lands. Typically all the visible leaves and opened flowers are turned towards the viewer but the buds may be depicted as seen from the side. All leaves and flowers are fresh and sound without any signs of decay or withering. The flowers are usually drawn rather simply (Fig. 17) due to their tiny size

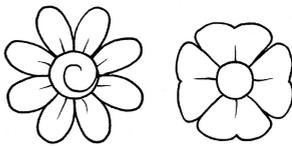


Figure 17

but their symmetric and concentric shapes, especially when there are many of them together, give them an intense appearance.

The dense foliage of trees and bushes is arranged in a regular pattern: typically roundish foliage concentrically (Fig. 18), or elongate in horizontal rows (Fig. 19). The leaves in the centre of the foliage are painted whole, the following ones more and more behind the preceding ones thus creating an impression of three-dimensionality. If there are flowers or fruits among the foliage they are mostly scattered fairly irregularly, but in small, concentric sprays they are often located in the centre. The flowers along the edges of foliage are usually painted slightly turned in accordance with the convex, three-dimensional shape of the plant.

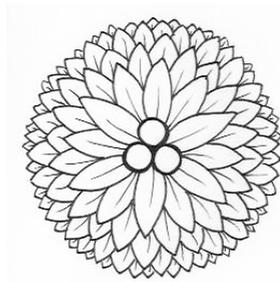


Figure 18

Trunks of trees may be straight and simple or they may be twisted and distorted (Fig. 20).

Quite often a thin tree grows winding around a thicker one, either softly as a creeper or in a strange angular manner (Fig. 21).

In addition to the plants of the background scenery, there are plants that are more or less connected with the holy figures. The first category consists of attributes of the figures, i.e. the flowers they hold in their hands and wear as headdresses or ornaments. These are not included in landscape elements. The second category is lotus thrones on which the figures are depicted. Although the lotus thrones can rather be considered as parts of the figures, they have a connection to the landscape in those cases when they are growing in water. This kind of lotus has a stylized flower similar to lotus thrones in general, but with more natural leaves and stem. The size of the green parts of the plant is in accordance with the flower, so it is much bigger than other lotuses in the same pond, if there are any.

In the third category there are plants around the nimbus or as parts of it. The latter cannot be considered as landscape elements, but the growing plants have at least a connection to the scenery. The most typical case is a flowering bush or small tree growing right behind the figure. Free and mostly asymmetric but still well proportioned, it forms a neat frame around the nimbus and often the plant is partly covering it. Being the biggest and most important plant in the picture it is painted most carefully. Flowers and leaves are painted individually, not as a set. The impression is considerably lively. The leaves are seen from different angles, the tips may be twisted so that the lower surface is exposed a bit (Fig. 22). The ribs are clearly visible and often intensified with gold.

In many cases the species of plants in thangka-landscapes are difficult to recognize. Some of them are purely imaginative, some have their models in the Himalayan wild but are strongly stylized; some

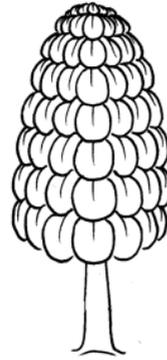


Figure 19

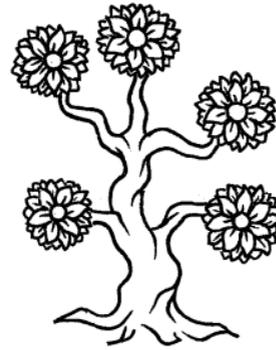


Figure 20



Figure 21

are painted on the basis of examples in Chinese or Indian art without knowing the plant in its natural form.

A lotus flower is occasionally replaced by a peony, which is a common decorative motif in Chinese art and perhaps was more familiar to some Tibetan painters than the lotus, which

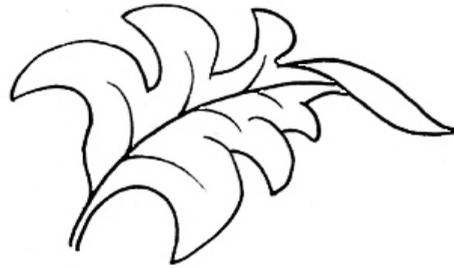


Figure 22

does not grow in Tibet (Jackson & Jackson 1998: 121). Lotus thrones are always stylized lotuses but sometimes flowers around the nimbus or held in the hand may in fact be peonies.

2.10 Jewel-trees

Quite often small trees have around them or sometimes between them hanging strings that look like golden necklaces. These decorated trees represent the jewel-trees, which are mentioned in the descriptions of pure lands.

The Tibetan expression *rin po che'i shing* as well as its Sanskrit equivalent *ratnavr̥kṣa* can be understood both as a tree that is decorated with gems and as a proper jewel-tree that actually consists of gems. In the textual sources on pure lands both kinds of trees are described. There are normal – but faultless – growing trees, e.g. palm-trees⁴ and bodhi-trees are named, though a bodhi-tree (Skt. *bodhivr̥kṣa*, Tib. *byang chub ljon shing*) in this connection does not necessarily just refer to the species *Ficus religiosa* but may have a more symbolic meaning. Some of the living trees are decorated with strings and nets of jewels or pearls, thus being jewel-trees of that kind.

In addition to these, there are actual jewel-trees, giant trees consisting of precious materials. In the *Sukhāvāṭīvyūha* (*bDe ba can gyi zhing bkod pa*) – a description of the pure land of buddha Amitābha (Tib. 'Od dpag med), the most well-known pure land – there are mentioned seven different gems of which the jewel-trees consist: gold, silver, lapis lazuli,⁵ crystal, red pearls, emerald⁶ and

4 Because the majority of the texts in the Tibetan Buddhist canon are of Indian origin, there are many plants and animals that do not exist in Tibet mentioned.

5 In Tibetan *bai dū rya*, a loan word from Sanskrit *vaidūrya*. It is commonly translated as lapis lazuli; other translations are chrysolite and malachite (Das 1995: 877).

6 In Tibetan *rdo'i snying po/rdo snying*, a direct translation from the Sanskrit word *aśmagarbha* meaning literally 'the pith of stone'. It is normally translated as emerald but the Tibetan word also

coral⁷. In the larger version of the *Sukhāvativyūha* (which does not belong to the official Tibetan canon) there is a more detailed description of these trees in which it is explained how some trees consist of only one precious material, some trees of two, some of three, etc. different parts of a tree being of a different gem (*The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. XLIX: 33–36). These materials are not meant to be understood too simply and concretely, but as a way to describe the crystallised forms of pure energy and underline the perfect and immaculate nature of pure lands. Just as in the case of the water of liquid jewel, the jewel-trees have qualities that surpass those of earthly gems: they are soft to touch and emit a sweet odour. The jewel-trees are gigantic; according to, for example, the *Amitāyurdhyānasūtra*, they are 800 yojanas⁸ tall (*The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. XLIX: 172).

However, these kinds of trees are not painted in thangkas but in concordance with the cosy Tibetanized vision of pure lands they are represented by small trees and bushes decorated with gems.

2.11 Living beings

In addition to the holy figures there may also appear other beings in a thangka landscape: animals, mythological creatures, human beings, gods. It is not always clear which of these are merely landscape elements and which are connected to the main figure – and often it is not either or.

Usually the animals appearing in thangkas as a part of the landscape are harmless herbivores such as rabbits or antelopes (Rhie & Thurman 1999: 114, 398), although carnivores may also sometimes occur, especially in connection with wrathful figures and frequently in historical and biographical thangkas. In so-called “cemetery fields” around certain maṇḍalas of wrathful figures there regularly appear predators attacking their prey and eating cadavers.

Birds are quite common in thangkas. They are depicted standing or lying on the ground or wading or swimming in the water (Jackson 1996: Plate 57). Often

has the meanings jasper and iron (Das 1995: 703).

⁷ In the Tibetan text (aciprelease.org/r6web/webdata/monastic/open/html/KD0115M.html, folio 196, side 2, row 2) *spug gi shing* instead of the common Tibetan word for coral *byu ru*. In the *Mahāvīyutpatti* (de Kőrös 1984: 202) the Sanskrit equivalent of *spug* is *musāragalva/musāragalpa*, which is the name of some kind of coral. However, *spug* may also mean a precious article in general thus corresponding to the word *rin po che*. That is why the meaning ‘coral’ has been made clear by adding the word *shing*, which means a tree. Coral is considered a tree-like formation of precious material as can be seen from such epithets as *rin chen sdong po* and *nor bu'i'khri shing* (Das 1995: 889).

⁸ The length of one yojana varies according to different calculations from 2.5 to 9 English miles (Monier-Williams 1997: 858).

they are seen spreading their wings but not flying in the air – a flying bird is rare in traditional paintings (Rhie & Thurman 1999: 325).

If there is a pond in the foreground there is usually a couple of goldfish swimming in it. Because the water is painted as opaque, the fish have their heads or both heads and tails rising out of the water in order to be visible. If there are two fish, usually one of them raises its head and the other its head and tail (Landaw & Weber 1993: Plate 18).

Besides the natural animals, there can also be seen mythological ones. From the traditional point of view, the boundary between those groups has been vague. The mythological animals were believed to exist, at least on some level. On the other hand, the natural animals that do not live in Tibet, like lions and elephants, were known only from stories and had around them an aura of fable. Moreover, the snow leopard (Tib. *gsa'*), which belongs to the Himālayan fauna but is rare and seldom seen, is partly mixed up with the lion and semi-mythologized. In paintings it is presented in a strongly stylized manner as a white, lion-like animal. This snow-lion, like some other both natural and mythological animals, also has a symbolic status, e.g. as symbols of five buddha clans. In thangkas the mythological and/or symbolic animals often have a decorative function as a part of the throne or supporting it, as snow-lions often do. A pair of *makaras* – sea-monsters that look like combinations of crocodile and elephant – is normally seen forming a maṇḍala-gate. Dragons are seldom seen in classical Tibetan thangkas though in modern ones painted in Nepal they are common motifs, especially in decorative frames but also flying in the sky. It is even rumoured that the abominable snowman, yeti, has made an appearance in some old thangkas but those seem to be extremely rare. Moreover, it is not unlikely that the “yetis” were meant to be some kind of demons or goblins.

A few animals with a symbolic status may appear as natural animals in the landscape. Most typical are goldfish, a pair of which forms one of the eight auspicious symbols. However, unlike a formal, symmetrical emblem they are swimming freely in the water. The animal-symbol of buddha Amitābha's clan, the peacock, is also commonly seen in the landscape, usually a couple of them together. Sometimes the snow-lions are seen running on the remote hills, even if carnivores are not very often depicted in thangka backgrounds. Perhaps its mythological status and role as the Tibetan national animal separates it from normal predators.

Human beings in thangkas are usually painted as parts of the composition of figures, e.g. as disciples of the main figure. Only seldom do they appear as plain landscape elements in normal thangkas. However, in narrative thangkas there are often human beings and some of them may be there without any connection to

the story but just providing more liveliness to the scenery. Thangkas that depict the whole transmission lineage of certain traditions are called refuge trees or assembly fields (Tib. *tsbogs zhing*). The figures are painted on the branches of a giant tree and around its base there are many beings – animals, humans, gods – paying homage (Halén 1987: 115).

Human beings in thangka backgrounds are usually painted in a style that in Western eyes is reminiscent of naïve art. The clothes, hairstyles and racial features represent mostly those of the Himālayan area, sometimes with Chinese or Indian tinge. In paintings that depict historical events in foreign countries, mostly in India, an ignorance of cultural and historical variations is evident: foreign people from distant ages look like Tibetans. Exceptions are those figures whose outward appearances have somehow been preserved in the continuity of tradition and iconography, e.g. yogins with their bone-ornaments and *devas* and bodhisattvas wearing the jewellery of ancient Indian aristocracy. Although the original orange colour of monks' robes in Tibet has changed to dark brownish red, still monks in orange robes are not uncommon in thangkas.

The heavenly beings, *devas*, appear in the thangkas both as members of a retinue of the main figure and individually, though the distinction is not always evident. The *devas* are flying in the air⁹ or sitting or standing on small clouds, sometimes strewing flowers in the air or pouring down nectar. Their clothing and jewellery resembles those of bodhisattvas.

2.12 Buildings

Buildings are not very common elements of landscape in thangkas depicting esoteric buddhas, bodhisattvas and meditation deities, but in narrative thangkas and those that depict pure lands somewhat according to the literary sources, they are abundant. Thangkas depicting spiritual masters – human buddhas, gurus, lamas, yogins – often have some biographical aspects painted in their background scenery even if they are not actual narrative thangkas, e.g. there may be seen buildings that have some connections with the life and activities of the main figure.¹⁰ Sometimes these buildings may even be recognizable.

9 *Devas* and levitating yogins fly freely or supported by a bare cloud, whereas the figures in the sky that belong to the actual composition are sitting or standing on lotus thrones. However, when a flying yogin appears as the main figure of a thangka, he or she is still depicted without a lotus throne. For example certain *mahāsiddhas* are presented flying in this way in iconography (Dowman & Beer 1989: 144).

10 In typical narrative and biographical thangkas all of the most important events of the life – or even previous incarnations – of the principal character are depicted. So there are several scenes in one painting, though they are usually not separated by partitions (Jackson 1996: Plates 53–54).

The buildings in thangkas usually represent Tibetan style – also those buildings that are meant to be fantastic structures of spiritual realms. There may be Chinese style roofs (which are used also in Tibetan architecture, e.g. the central part of Potala palace built by the fifth Dalai Lama) and extra decoration, sometimes even some fanciful details, but usually there can not be found anything that has no models in the architecture of the Himālayan area.

A building – generally a stūpa – can also be the main figure of a picture. In this case it is not a landscape element but represents the body of a buddha just like an anthropomorphic figure.

2.13 Offerings

On the ground in front of the main figure there is usually a group of small objects. These are offerings dedicated to him/her. Typical offerings are various gems, flowers, fruit, incense, conch shells, cups and vases filled with precious substances, sometimes also books and musical instruments. Offerings for wrathful and semi-wrathful figures are often placed in skull cups. The contents may be gems but also parts of a cadaver – typically a brain – and often flames are rising from it (Jackson 1996: Plate 29).

3. A LIVING TRADITION

In spite of its general conservatism, the Tibetan art of thangka-painting has gone through changes during centuries but since the Chinese occupation the art – as the Tibetan culture in general – is in a drastically new situation. Many artists in the diaspora have continued painting in the traditional style but new ways of depicting the enlightened beings and their transcendental realms have also been developed. Émigré artists from different parts of Tibet and different regional schools of painting have come together in exile and learned from each other. Moreover, Tibetan artists have taken new influences from foreign forms of art and foreign artists have been acquainted with Tibetan painting. Many of the foreign thangka-painters endeavour to strictly follow the traditional styles and methods, some of them being even more conservative than most of the Tibetans, but there are also artists, both foreigners and Tibetans, who do not hesitate to use new techniques and develop new styles. It is not beyond dispute which pieces of art created by them are real thangkas and which ones rather represent some kind of a thangka-inspired art, but at least most of those with a correct iconography

of the holy figures can be considered thangkas even if their backgrounds may be very untraditional.¹¹

All the unconventional nuances are not necessarily intended, but the cultural background of an artist has an effect on his or her manner of expression. Even in many of those modern thangkas that are purposely painted in a strictly traditional way there can still be detected delicate indications of something that is not classical Tibetan style. Even when the utensils are traditional, the painting techniques of a modern artist may be extraordinary. Various classical styles of the Western painting tradition have been applied to thangkas: pointillism, cubism, surrealism, photorealism etc. Some modern thangkas are painted roughly with strong strokes ignoring minor details. In not so few cases this seems to indicate not only a lack of patience and precision needed in painting the traditional way but also the artistic styles and aesthetic ideals that the modern artists have embraced.

The modern innovations are of two kinds: materials and techniques on the one hand, style and motifs on the other. Materials like industrial colours and painting utensils in general fall beyond the scope of this study but sometimes they may also give a noticeable effect to the style, e.g. using an airbrush and masking film or fluid an artist can quite easily make very fine-grained shadings and colour transitions, especially in the large areas like sky, that are impossible to get in the traditional way (Dowman & Beer 1989: 160). There are even thangkas that have almost entirely been painted with an airbrush.

Totally new possibilities are made available by digital techniques. A computer can be used as an aid while making a scheme and choosing colours; regular repeating patterns can be drawn quickly and easily, stencils can be manipulated and printed. Special effects can easily be added to painted thangkas and the result displayed in digital form and painted figures can be scanned on a digitally created background (j.halso.net/oldsite/kehy_tha.htm). It is possible to make the whole thangka or its background digitally from the beginning; even animation and three-dimensionality may be added.

3.1 New visions of pure lands

Those artists who have a strong inclination to personal expression but who still want to portray the embodiments of enlightenment according to the iconographic rules can experiment with backgrounds and paint the figures in a more

¹¹ A thangka as a religious object is considered to be valid only after a consecration ceremony (Skt. *pratiṣṭhā*; Tib. *rab gnas*).

traditional way. It is precisely the background sceneries where there has always been the most room for artistic freedom even if in the traditional Tibetan styles this possibility is seldom utilized.

In several genres of modern thangka backgrounds there is an increasing tendency towards realism, but on the other hand, abstractionism and minimalism is also evident. In addition, there are artists who paint fantastic and surrealistic or abstract backgrounds. Some artists have been influenced by Indian and Nepalese Hindu art, often mixed with a tinge of realism.¹² In Nepal, there has been developed the so-called New Newar style, which reflects the classical style but has a more realistic touch to landscape and figures.

Many Westerners find the profusion of elements and colours in Tibetan thangkas confusing. Some artists want to clear the background in order to give prominence to the main figure – and perhaps also spare their efforts. To this end, an artist may paint the figures on a sky, water or plain monochromatic background or just simplify the landscape by reducing its elements to a minimum. This is reminiscent of the simplest traditional thangkas with only a couple of green hills as a landscape, but it may be taken even further and approach sheer abstractionism either by geometrizing the forms (Landaw & Weber 1993: Plate 24) or softening the outlines so that the landscape details disappear into a misty haze (Landaw & Weber 1993: Plate 17).

A minimalistic background is not a totally new invention, as there are also traditional thangkas with a plain background that may be decorated with geometric patterns or strongly stylised plant motifs painted with a slightly different hue (Rhie & Thurman 1999: 436). A monochromatic background, especially when it is blue, is generally considered to represent sky or space or the emptiness from which the figure is emerging, but it may also be seen as just a plain background.

In some modern thangkas the cosmic space is painted as a background. In classical thangkas the sky may darken to almost black at the zenith and there may even be a few stars but the dark starry cosmic space has not been used as background scenery. In the Indo-Tibetan tradition there has not been a clear distinction between atmosphere and space. The Sanskrit word *ākāśa* refers to everything that is above the ground level: atmosphere, sky, heavens, space and in addition to these the mental, inner space. The same meanings are shared by the Tibetan equivalent *nam mkha'*. Another Tibetan word for space – *dbyings* – is even more connected to the metaphysical planes of the inner space. The space-backgrounds of the modern thangkas vary from stylized stars arranged in

¹² e.g. Siddhartha V. Shah, who paints both Buddhist and Hindu deities. See his homepage <www.tantricart.net/index2.html>.

a regular pattern to realistic space sceneries. Space may also be depicted fantastically or hyper-realistically, as it is seen in the pictures taken by space telescopes with their colourful rendering of the wavelengths that are not visible to human eye.

Artists of the realistic trend depict the landscape according to the laws of natural perception. There are variations from sheer naturalism and photorealism to stylized landscapes with only some realistic features such as natural perspective, transparent and reflecting water surfaces, or shadows on the ground. The landscape may be painted traditionally, but the shapes of clouds, mountains, plants, stones, etc. are more natural and less formal than in conventional paintings.

There are modern *thangkas* in which the landscapes, regardless of their degree of realism, may represent the landscape and sceneries from somewhere other than the Himālayan area. Sometimes there are only a few foreign elements such as tropical flowers in a landscape that otherwise looks like a Himālayan highland meadow. The entire landscape may also be recognizably foreign like the desert of the American South-West with cactuses and mesas. Karma Phuntsok – a Tibetan artist immigrated to Australia – has utilized Australian sceneries as *thangka* backgrounds and even painted bodhisattva Mañjuśrī hovering over the skyscrapers of Sydney and the goddess Tārā in a street of Melbourne.¹³

Naturally, these innovations easily meet with opposition by traditionalists and the unconventional compositions may even be considered not to be *thangkas* at all.¹⁴ However, Buddhist art has always gone through changes. As Buddhism spread from India to South-East Asia, China, Japan, Tibet and Mongolia, its practices received influence from local cultures and natural environments – and so did its art. Nowadays, when Buddhism is spreading to the Western world, it is only natural that Buddhist art is finding new forms and getting new ideas from there. It is impossible to know what each and every artist had in mind while constructing their sceneries but from the point of view of the Buddhist world scheme there is no reason why visions of the personifications of enlightenment have to be limited to certain cultural or geographical areas – not even to this planet. Tibetan Buddhism has inherited the Indian cosmology according to which there are countless world-systems – “as many as there are grains of sand in the Ganges”. Especially in some *mahāyānasūtras* (e.g. Lotus-*sūtra*) this kind of cosmic scenery is fully utilized: Numberless enlightened beings operate all over the endless universe and maintain their pure lands. Even if those pure lands are

13 Karma Phuntsok's homepage: www.karmaart.com.

14 About contradictions between modern *thangka* artists and conservatives among Tibetan refugees in India, see Butters (2002: 33–38).

described as being situated beyond infinite distances in all the ten directions of space, they still can be in contact. Thus the pure lands exist not only somewhere far away in mystical dimensions beyond this world of saṃsāra but not being bound by time and place they are also present right here, right now and it is only a matter of the level of consciousness as to whether one can realize them. In this perspective it is possible to get a glimpse of the realm of enlightenment in the streets of Melbourne as well as in the Himālayan mountains. Just as the Tibetan artists developed their own style and depicted the pure lands as seen through their own native landscape, devoted artists in other countries and cultures can do the same.

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