

REFLECTIONS OF THE DIVINE
Treasures of Tibetan Painting

The Ulrich Wörz Collection

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The collection of Ulrich Wörz provides an insight into the richness of the subjects and the variety of styles of Tibetan painting, with works of art spanning from the middle of the thirteenth century until the late twentieth century. Every one of the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities and people depicted in these thangkas is rooted in the rich religious traditions of Tibet. This tradition extends far beyond Buddhism, as is demonstrated by the Khyung thangka, which originates from the Bön religion. The chosen subject can also transcend the different schools within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and display a personality collectively worshiped by believers of all Buddhist affiliations, as in the case of the painting of the famous doctor Yuthok Yönten Gönpo. Some paintings reveal fundamental religious practices and ceremonies, such as the image of the Thirty-Five Confession Buddhas, who often served as the confessors for possible transgressions and the restorers of religious commitments. Other images, such as those of Buddha Amitabha and the Medicine Buddha, indicate that many monks, nuns and laypeople hoped to be reborn after their deaths in one of the Buddhist paradises. In addition, the faithful wished to obtain aid and assistance for mundane affairs, as the depictions of the White Tara and the Twenty-one Taras illustrate.

However, believers did not only reverently approach peaceful bodhisattvas and Buddhas for help and guidance. The support of wrathful deities was also sought to remove mundane and spiritual obstacles, and to destroy enemies of the Buddhist teachings. These protectors of the doctrine, such as Yamantaka and Mahakala, possessed great power and offered effective protection from all sorts

of dangers. The thangkas depicting them can be counted among those paintings which can be attributed to specific schools of Tibetan Buddhism. For instance, it can be assumed that the image of Yamantaka Yangdog Mäputri was commissioned by supporters of the Drigung Kagyü school. On the other hand, the thangka depicting Mahakali and Mahakala Face-to-Face originated in the Karma Kagyü School, where these wrathful deities were prominently worshiped.

Religious reverence and worship existed not only for deities, but for outstanding personalities as well. The thangka of the monk Tsongkhapa, who founded the Gelug school, impressively demonstrates this phenomenon. His life and endeavor to achieve enlightenment were regarded as exemplary. The tantric activities of mahasiddha Naropa, regarded as a spiritual forefather of the Kagyü schools of Tibetan Buddhism, was of similarly high importance. In general, such thangkas also served to affirm a religious identity and to make an observer aware of the spiritual heritage that was cultivated within a school. Thangka series depicting an incarnation line were created in order to demonstrate a religious and personal continuity. Some of the images in the collection presented here, such as the thangkas of mahasiddha Naropa and the ruler Relpachen, as well as the image of Vaishravana, once belonged to such sets of paintings. They were hung up in the chapels and halls of monasteries and could consist of numerous pieces. In most cases it is no longer possible to say with certainty from which monasteries the thangkas originated. However, by analyzing the style, one can say where an image was probably made and where its clients lived. The thangkas in

this collection were painted not only in western, central, and eastern Tibet, but also in northern China and Mongolia, and demonstrate the impressive geographical expanse of the regions where Tibetan Buddhism was practiced. At the same time, this collection provides insight into the multifaceted nature of image creation and the compositional structures of their respective times. Where the thangka of Buddha Amitabha in his paradise and Buddha Shakyamuni in the Mahabodhi temple follow an often used compositional pattern, the Namasangiti Manjushri thangka offers an individual and unique pictorial representation. In the catalogue section of the book, the individual paintings are discussed in detail. The twenty-two thangkas are arranged in chronological order, beginning with the oldest painting from the second half of the thirteenth century and ending with twentieth century images. The iconography is presented in detail with regard to both political and religious peculiarities. If the image was part of a series, this series is also included in the description and the original historical and artistic context is provided. The style of the thangka is also assessed with reference to relevant comparative pieces. In addition, the framing, if still extant, is described.

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READER'S NOTE

Tibetan names and terms are given in the transcription developed by The Tibetan and Himalayan Library (THL) in order to make Tibetan terms phonetically accessible for the non-Tibetologist. At the end of the book, their transliteration in Wylie is listed in an appendix. Chinese words have been written according to the Pinyin romanization. A simplified form without diacritica is used for names and terms in Sanskrit.



No. 1 THIRTY-FIVE CONFESSION BUDDHAS

Tibet, 2nd half of 13th century,
water-based mineral pigments on primed cotton, 31 × 25,5 cm (painting),
13,5 × 25,5 and 35 cm (mounting top), 14 × 25,5 and 36 cm (mounting bottom)

The confession of misconduct and the restoration of broken oaths are both important elements in Tibetan Buddhism. The ritualized form of these confessions was based on the *Sutra of the Three Heaps*, the *Triskandhadharma Sutra*, whose title refers to the three principal parts of the Sutra, which concern the confession of transgressions, rejoicing in virtue, and a request to the Buddhas for instructions. During the ritual, one pays reverence to the thirty-five Buddhas. As their leader, Buddha Shakyamuni rests on a richly decorated lotus throne (pl. 1.1, no. 1). The bodhisattvas Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara attend him on either side. They are surrounded by thirty-four confessional Buddhas, all of whom resemble Shakyamuni. In addition, one sees two Buddhas, painted smaller than the other Buddhas, diagonally above the rainbow-colored body nimbus of the main figure. They represent the Buddhas of the Past and Future (nos. 4, 5). A practitioner takes refuge in both during the confessional ritual. Their appearance resembles the other Buddhas. They are often portrayed as Dipankara, the Buddha of the Past, and Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future. This consistent similarity is characteristic of early representations of the Thirty-Five Confession Buddhas. Later, other representations developed which were bound to other iconographic traditions. In the system of Sakya Pandita (1182–1251), which is based on the five Buddha families, including Vairocana, Akshobhya, etc. the thirty-five Buddhas are similar in their color and hand gestures, but not with regard to the objects in their hands. There are comparatively few thangkas depicting this system. Another more popular system was created by Tsongkhapa (1357–1419). It goes back to one of his visions. In this system the individual Buddhas have different colors. They show characteristic hand gestures and hold certain items.

The thangka was painted in the so-called Beri style, which has shaped Tibetan painting for many centuries. David Jackson distinguishes three phases. The first phase, the early Beri style, began

around 1180 and ended around the middle of the 14th century. During the second phase, the middle Beri style, Beri became the prevailing style in Tibet. This middle period stretched from about 1360 to the first half of the fifteenth century. The third phase, the late Beri style, followed the middle period and ended around 1600.¹ The thangka with the Thirty-five Confession Buddhas belongs to the early phase. The use of the Beri style does not allow any conclusions to be drawn about the religious affiliation of the commissioner of the thangka, since these stylistic conventions were applicable to all schools of this period. In the absence of any further specific details, such as individual teachers and students it is impossible to say which particular beliefs the owner of the thangka held. The early Beri style can be divided into two periods, with the 1260s serving as the transitional phase. The present thangka can be dated to the second half of the thirteenth century, between approximately 1260 and 1300.



1 Buddha Shakyamuni, 2 Avalokiteshvara, 3 Manjushri, 4 Dipankara, 5 Maitreya

The composition is strictly symmetrical, with figures in graduated sizes, starting with the prominent figure of the Buddha in the center of the two Buddhas of the past and future. The remaining thirty-four Buddhas were arranged evenly at the sides of the painting, but without frames separating the individual figures. But one can still surmise the former frame of the inner-field enclosing Buddha, the accompanying bodhisattvas and the throne. On the edges, the painting is marked by a continuous red frame. The painter obviously refrained from depicting a frame of alternating blue and red squares or fields shaped like single lotus leaves, both of which are characteristic of the Pala style, and have been observed for some time in Tibetan painting.² This composition thus basically follows other thangkas from this period, such as a western Tibetan thangka of Buddha Vairocana currently housed in the Koelz Collection of the University of Michigan, and a central Tibetan thangka of Buddha Amitabha in the former Jucker Collection, both roughly dating to the twelfth or thirteenth century.³ The almost square proportions of the canvas also show that the thangka has left the Tibetan version of the Indian Pala style behind in favor of attributes of the new Beri style.⁴

As mentioned above, the painting is framed by a uniform border, as is characteristic of the early Beri style. A border of alternating colored squares, characteristic of the Pala style, obviously was not preferred by either the painter or the commissioner. However, such a color-alternating frame was chosen for the halo of the Buddha, even though the preferred border would surely have been a continuous strip. The individual color squares are ornamented with vines. They are framed by the spiraling tail of the mythical Makara creatures, painted in green, which at first glance look like bulges in the halo. At the point where the tails meet, one sees a garuda, a mythical golden bird. Together, they comprise the upper part of the throne support. On the sides of the throne one can see the hybrid creature known as Vyala, with a lion's head, the upper body of an elephant, and the lower body of a horse. They stand on an elephant which seemingly carries a boon-granting jewel on its back. In the broad substructure of the throne, one recognizes a pair of lions in the side panels. In the middle part, a human figure, perhaps an athlete, kneels. It

appears that the figure has female breasts. It would also be possible that it is a heavenly musician. They are sometimes reproduced in the lower panels of a throne, where they also perform a supporting function. However, musicians are usually reproduced as mixed beings, with the upper body of a woman and the lower body of a bird.⁵

On the throne, one sees the Buddha leading the thirty-four Buddhas and, at the same time, Buddha Shakyamuni expounding the dharma in the present age (no. 1). The majestic and tranquil Buddha wears a monk's robe, unadorned except for golden seams, and leaves his right shoulder bare. As is customary in sculptures and paintings of the late Pala Dynasty, the garment clings to the body without forming folds. Only the ends of the outer garment are bundled and thrown over the left shoulder. The folded end of a garment can also be seen below the legs.⁶ This mode for a seated Buddha can be found in various thangkas of the period, as, for example, in a painting of a Medicine Buddha from the second half of the thirteenth century.⁷ Both painters follow in principle the above-described model inspired by Pala art for a sitting Buddha figure. In both cases, the painters used slight shading at the edges of the limbs to create physical volume. However, divergent approaches between the two painters can be observed in the design of the backrest. The painter of the Wörz thangka behaves more conventionally by decorating the fabric of the dark-green cushioning with the typical vine, as is often the case with images of peaceful divinities and religious teachers in the early Beri style. In the case of the Guimet thangka, one recognizes the desire to modify this design by using various textile motifs for the design of the cushioning.

Buddha is accompanied on either side by Avalokiteshvara and Manjugosha (nos. 2, 3). The white Avalokiteshvara holds the stems of a white lotus flower. The orange Manjugosha carries a blue lotus flower. Both have adopted a triple-bend standing posture. They wear short and transparent Indian clothing. The depiction of both bodhisattvas in some respects resembles the paintings on a set of ritual cards, so-called Tsakali, created in the thirteenth century.⁸ There are some similarities between the designs of the face and the head ornaments. The crown is accentuated by three pointed elements and laterally by fan-shaped trimming.

They pass into long strips which touch the shoulders. The jewelery is also similar. The lively, weakly s-shaped eyebrows are highlighted below with a bright hue. The bowed eyelids were reproduced with a black line, whereas the lower edge of the eyes is violet. One can, however, also recognize differences, such as the appearance of the hairline, which in the Tsakli consisted of hair locks, whereas here they are not further developed on the thangka, and left as mere black lines. Overall, the two bodhisattvas show how the painter was still committed to the Indian pala style.⁹

The Buddhas, who are composed around the central figure, are very similar. The various colored halos are enclosed by a red body nimbus. Both are executed simply and without embellishment. In contrast, the cushion of the backrest is filled with the already mentioned vine motif. The upper end of the backrest is depicted with triangular fittings, which can be seen behind the back cushion. As is customary in Tibetan art, these repeating figures are painted relatively schematically. The very reserved design of the landscape is particularly noticeable. The spacing remaining next to the figures is filled with indigo blue and red flowers, here executed as dots. The only variation on this pattern occurs above the halo of the central Buddha in the form of dark green palm leaves. The painter takes up this decorative element, which appeared in various forms very early in the eleventh and twelfth centuries on paintings, book covers, and ritual crowns.¹⁰

The fabric is certainly not the original mounting and of a later date (pl. A 1.2). The relatively good conservation status rules out its originality, as do the still visible needle holes at approximately equal intervals. The upper and lower rods are no longer extant, nor is the dust cover. The type of mounting corresponds to the so-called Nepalese type.¹¹ For this fabric framing, no lateral cloth panels are attached and a special square in the lower part of the thangka is dispensed with. Usually the upper part of the fabric is slightly smaller than the lower one, but the thangka of the Wörz Collection shows that there were also fabric frames in which both parts had identical dimensions. The same applies in this case to the angle at which the trapezoidal panels are held. As is customary with this Nepalese type, the fabric is of blue tint and without pattern. The

only ornaments in the present case are the golden and orange parallel cords, which form decorative lines. Unfortunately, the mounting of thangkas is rarely discussed in the relevant literature. One can, therefore, just refer to a single comparable example at the Musée Guimet. It is a painting depicting Sangyé Yarjön (1203–1272).¹² The thangka of the late thirteenth century has a Nepalese type of mounting with a very similar pattern of decorative lacing.

On the back, one can read several inscriptions written with red ink, which are partially erased and therefore only partially readable. Moreover, one finds the three seed syllables *Om Ah Hum*, with which the image was consecrated. They are repeated on the left, right and bottom edges. They frame a longer inscription found in the center of the image. Only the beginning of this inscription can still be read. It is the formula of dependent origination, whose corresponding Sanskrit words begin: »Ye dharma.« Dependent origination is one of the most famous Buddhist tenets, and was already used to consecrate religious objects in the early days of Buddhism.

- 1 For a detailed discussion of the Beri style, see Jackson 2010.
- 2 Jackson 2010: 86. For various examples, see Jackson 2010: fig 4.10, 4.13, 4.14, 5.1, Kossak 2010: 82 fig. 56, 85 fig. 57, 114 fig. 73, 128 fig. 81.
- 3 See Huntington and Huntington 1990: no. 109, Klimburg-Salter 1997, Kreijger 2001: no.7, Sotheby's 2006: lot 48, HAR 89121.
- 4 Jackson 2010: 86.
- 5 Huntington and Huntington 1990: no. 34, Bsod nams dbang 'dus and Huo Wei 1994: 138 fig. 106, Phrin las mthar phyin 2001: fig. 79. Kossak and Singer 1998: 112 fig. 25.
- 6 For a Pala sculpture of the eleventh century, see, inter alia, Huntington and Bangdel 2003: no. 2.
- 7 Béguin 1995: no. 386.
- 8 Heller 1997.
- 9 Cf. also Kossak and Singer 1998: 51 fig. 1, 61 fig. 4, 81 fig. 13, 85 fig. 15, 105ff. fig. 23a, 23b, 23c, 109 fig. 24, 112 fig. 25, 122 fig. 29, 155 fig. 42; Heller 2001: 21 fig. 4; Kalista 2009: no. 5; Kossak 2010: 97 fig. 64, Jackson 2010: 19 fig. 1.23, 21 fig. 1.25, 93 fig. 5.25, 94 fig. 5.29, 128 fig. 6.35.
- 10 Kossak and Singer 1998: 42 fig. 42, 50 fig. 1, 72 fig. 9, 77 fig. 11, 112 fig. 25, Kossak 2010: 65 fig. 62, 178 fig. 118.
- 11 Huntington 1970: 199ff.
- 12 Béguin 1995: no. 416, Jackson 2010: fig. 2.21, HAR 85903.



No. 2 WHITE TARA

western Tibet, 17th century,
water-based mineral pigments on primed cotton,
45 × 35 cm (painting), 20 × 34,5 and 40 cm (mounting top),
19 × 34 and 39 cm (mounting bottom)

This White Tara thangka probably depicts a White Tara in the tradition of the great Kashmiri scholar Shakyashribhadra (1127–1225), in which she is traditionally accompanied by eight similar Taras (pl. 2.1).¹ The visualization opens with the practitioner imagining an ocean of milk. A lotus stalk arises from its center. The lotus flower has eight white petals and a moon disc, on which the White Tara is sitting in meditation, with her legs lying one above the other. She has the appearance of a fifteen-year-old girl, wearing rich jewelery and precious silk robes. Her headdress is adorned with a small image of Buddha Amitabha. Her right hand shows the gesture of giving, while her left hand holds the stem of a white lotus that blooms at the height of her left ear. Her body emits countless beams of light. Eight white Taras sit on the eight white petals of the lotus, facing her, and following her appearance as a shadow follows a body. On the thangka from the Wörz collection, the main deity assumes the central position of the image (no. 1), while the eight surrounding Taras are grouped at its edges (nos. 2–9).

The painting style as well as the mounting suggest western Tibet as the thangka's place of origin. The mounting follows the Nepalese style, which was also common in the western regions of Tibet (pl. A 2.5).² The structure is simple, consisting of an upper and lower trapezoidal part, each of which are equipped with a wooden stick at the top and a round wooden rod at the bottom. The upper stick is usually sewn, whereas the lower rod is glued or fastened with strings.³ A silk curtain serves to protect the painting from dust and dirt. It has not been preserved, nor have the upper stick and lower rod. The trapezoidal parts are made from a woven cotton canvas which has been dyed dark blue. There is no inner and outer fabric framing in this type of mounting. Instead, the painting was framed with a thick red line while the remainder of the canvas

was colored in shades of green and blue. These colors correspond very closely to the overall coloring of the image, which is based primarily on the colors green, red, white and blue. For selected elements, the painter used other colors as well, namely gold for jewelery and the lotuses of the minor figures, orange for the stamens and the edge of the central capsule, and the stylized lotus flower, beige for the halo of the main figure and for the undergarments of some minor figures, and, naturally, black for outlines and shading. The color indigo, which was very popular, for example, in Karma Gardri painting in eastern Tibet, is completely absent. Transparent elements are missing and the color palette is comparatively saturated and dark. Nevertheless, the image is not dark and subdued, but lively and dynamic. This is achieved mainly by the vibrating and irregular lines, which one encounters in the rays of light in the halos and in the



1 White Tara, 2–9 Eight Taras, 10 Amitayus