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# The Conservation of Tibetan Thangkas: a group of symposium papers

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## Modern Traditional Painting in Nepal

*by Ian Alsop*

In this presentation, I will discuss modern techniques and materials used in the art of thangka or paubha painting. Paubha, by the way, is the Newari term for the type of painting which is called thangka in Tibetan; that is, a scroll painting with religious themes used for religious purposes. Whereas in Tibet, a Buddhist country, all thangkas were Buddhist, in Nepal, they were also used by the Hindu population.

First, I think it might be interesting to consider who it is who creates thangkas and paubhas and whether there has been any change among the modern painters from past practices. In the case of thangka painting among the Tibetans, both laymen and monks can be found engaged in thangka painting now, and I believe this reflects past practice. In Nepal, the arts were particularly the preserve of the Newars, the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, and in this group there has, in fact, been a break from past tradition. It would appear that at least since the 14th century, the painting of paubhas was the work of the Newar caste of chitrakars (citrakara), which literally means "picture makers."

In modern times, however, painting has been taken up by many other people outside this caste, including Newars of other castes and non-Newars. It is certainly worth noting that the patronage has changed, both for Tibetan and

Nepalese painters. Previously, paintings were commissioned solely for religious reasons; nowadays, paintings are made mostly for commercial purposes to satisfy demands from a largely foreign tourist clientele. Religious patronage does, of course, still exist, and in many cases there is a kind of mixture. For instance, you may find foreign Buddhists seeking out thangkas from Tibetan or Nepalese painters, and while such patrons are fully cognizant of the paintings' religious connotations and meanings, they are also deeply appreciative of their artistic value.

The patronage of the foreign or tourist market has had a mixed effect on the Tibetan and Nepalese painting traditions. On the one hand, many completely bogus thangkas painted in bizarre colors and often depicting deities whose iconographical identity has been entirely mangled have flooded the market, particularly in Kathmandu. On the other hand, some Western patrons have appeared who have shown a readiness to pay high prices for really good work and who demand accuracy and faithfulness to the traditions.

Most writers have used the terms "gouache" or "opaque watercolors" in their technical description of Tibetan and Nepalese paintings. I feel this terminology is misleading since both gouache and watercolor refer to a painting with a gum arabic binder, and gum arabic is not now used--and probably was never used--as a binder by Tibetan and Nepalese painters. At one point several years ago, Roshan Shakya, one of the best modern painters, experimented briefly with a gum called "gumd," which may in fact be a gum arabic. But he quickly discovered that it was not a strong enough binder to provide permanence, and the painting soon started to flake. The binder used in the past is still a bit of a mystery, but it is clear that almost all Tibetan and Nepalese now use animal skin glue, the Nepali term for which is "sares." Most painters believe that this is the traditional binder that was used in the past. Clearly, however, such paintings should be classified as "glue tempera" or "distemper," rather than gouache.

The support is always cotton cloth; nowadays, usually a commercially-produced closely-woven cloth of Nepalese, Indian, or Chinese manufacture. The cloth may or may not be stretched on the traditional frame. Whether stretched or not, it is prepared by coating with one of several applications of gesso, which is usually made of glue and zinc oxide white, called in Nepali "bala." The canvas is usually burnished with a stone after gessoing to produce a smooth and lustrous surface.

The drawing is transferred to the canvas by several techniques. The Tibetan painters usually rely on a rigorous system of proportion, the "thigse" (thig tshad), where a geometrical grid is laid out and the figures traced inside the geometric pattern. Nepalese painters, though aware of proportional and iconometrical rules, seem to rely less on such systems and often draw freehand, although a rudimentary grid is often laid out to insure the accuracy of the overall proportions. Often a master drawing is used, and various techniques are employed to transfer the master drawing to the canvas. Sometimes it will be copied directly onto the canvas, occasionally using a simplified geometric grid to accurately place the figures and other elements of the drawing. Sometimes a tracing technique is used, particularly with thinner

canvases, where the original drawing is taped to the canvas and both are held up to a strong light source, usually a window with the sun shining through it, and the drawing placed onto the opposite side of the canvas. A pouncing technique is also used where black color, usually lamp black or perhaps powdered charcoal, is sifted through a pierced drawing onto the canvas to form the general outlines of the drawing. In a kind of dot-to-dot technique, the lines are connected with ink.

The colors most frequently used these days are commercially produced poster paints. However, over the past few years, particularly in Nepal, there has been an attempt by painters to return to the pigments used in the past. I think that it is worthwhile to mention here what these colors are. The palette of Nepalese and Tibetan paintings is made up of relatively few building blocks, and these building blocks can be divided into pigments of mineral origin and those of vegetable origin.

Mineral pigments include white, which may have in the past been a clay white of some kind: whiting, kaolin, or china clay, or possibly a white derived from shells: lime white. Of all the pigments of the ancient palette, white has been the most difficult to identify, and painters in Nepal still debate what the ancient white was. Most painters who use other mineral and vegetable colors still rely on commercially produced zinc white, "bala," for their white. Red is vermilion, red mercuric sulfide, which is called "hingula;" orange-red is sometimes used, particularly in Tibetan painting, which is red lead or minium, called "sindura;" yellow is orpiment, sulfide of arsenic, known in Nepal as "haritala" (very poisonous and treated with great respect by the painters, who learn not to lick their brushes); orange-yellow is realgar, arsenic disulfide, called in Sanskrit "manashila," related to orpiment and having many of its properties, also very poisonous (although it may have been used in the past, it is not used very often now); blue is azurite, used traditionally by the Tibetans and now also used by the Nepalese painters, although there is some evidence that it wasn't used in the past by the Nepalese when a combination of indigo blue with white was used for almost all blue tones. Whether lapis blue, ultramarine, called in Sanskrit "rajavarta," was used extensively in the past is unsure. Producing ultramarine from lapis is not a straightforward task. It is not just a question of grinding the lapis, you have to put it through many separate procedures to get the ultramarine color out of it, and I do not know of any painters who use it now. I believe that even in European medieval painting, there is a lot of confusion between azurite and lapis, and I think that many people believe that ultramarine was used in Renaissance painting when the pigment is actually azurite. Green, malachite, also was used extensively by the Tibetans and not so frequently by the Nepalese, and again there is a question as to whether it was used in the past. The Nepalis normally would produce green through a combination of indigo blue and orpiment.

The vegetable pigments are essentially two: red lac, the vegetable resin red, basically a highly colored shellac, known in Nepal as "mina" or "la" and in Sanskrit as "laksarasa." Used for shading and contrasting with the lighter vermilion, it is the combination of mina or lac and vermilion that creates the hot red tonality of most Nepalese paintings. The lighter red is put on first and

then the darker lac is shaded in. Indigo, "nira," is from the indigo plant, producing a deep, almost black blue when it is in its pure state. Indigo was used in Nepali paintings shaded with various amounts of white which produce different shades of blue.

Black is supplied by lamp black, "dhvamso" in Nepali. It is created by burning an oil lamp with a little ceramic or clay cup above it that collects the black, which is used as a color. There are some other colors that may have been used in the past although we really cannot be sure: red ochre, "geru" or "gairika," still widely used for coloring the walls of houses, mica or "abhra" may have been added to create the scintillating effect found in some old Nepalese and Tibetan paintings, although there is a possibility that there was a certain type of orpiment which may have created that effect in yellows and greens. Other colors included madder yellow, "corrupted-word status=tibetan" and perhaps carmine red, "krmiraga," although the latter is doubtful. We should also mention gold, which is added at the end of the painting process. The gold used in painting is produced exclusively by the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley in a dangerous process where it is made into an amalgam with mercury. It is then sold in pellets, which can be mixed with the binder and painted. The binder for gold is in fact "gumd," the gum mentioned earlier which may be gum arabic. Gold, when applied, is matte in appearance. It is the same as the cold gold you will find on the faces of Tibetan statues. It is brought to a shiny finish by using a small pointed burnishing stone, and often patterns are created with matte and shiny portions.

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