

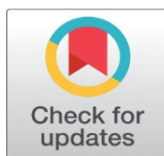


## TANG-KHA PAINTING: AN APPRAISAL

Dr. Ankush Gupta <sup>1</sup>  

<sup>1</sup> Faculty, Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India



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### Corresponding Author

Dr. Ankush Gupta,  
[ankushgupta010887@gmail.com](mailto:ankushgupta010887@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

The present research paper is on the art of *Tang-kha* painting. *Tang-kha* is term used for the traditional Tibetan scroll painting. It is portable paintings that one can carry along by scrolling it. Tibetan scroll paintings are famous for their richness in terms of religious themes and use of vibrant colours. The art of painting was borrowed from Ancient India and developed by monks of Tibet. The *Tang-kha* painting was a medium to spread the teaching of Buddha among the illiterate through illustration. The origin and development of *Tang-kha* painting and its different regional variation along with the general characteristic feature is discuss in the present paper.

**Keywords:** Tang-Kha, Buddhist Art, Tibetan Art, Cloth Painting

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tibetan art originated and developed in Tibet and has always been associated with Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan art can be categorized into jewellery, textiles, paintings, and sculptures in wood, clay, metal, and stucco. Most of these artifacts are religious belonging to Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan painting is the most popular art, it was introduced in Tibet along with Buddhism from India. It can be divided into three broad categories, these are wall painting, cloth painting, and scroll painting. Tibetan scroll paintings are famous for their richness in terms of religious themes and for preserving the tradition of early Buddhist art. The present paper is an attempt to examine them.

The primary objective of the research study on *tang-kha* painting is to provide a comprehensive appraisal that explore the historical origins and evolution of *tang-kha* painting, including the cultural significance and religious contexts in which *tang-kha* are traditionally used. The research study aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of artistic techniques, material and style employed in *tang-kha* painting. The present paper could serve as valuable resource for scholars, art historians and enthusiasts interested in broader context of Tibetan art and its form in term of *tang-kha* painting. It may also contribute to exploring the influence of early Buddhist art on neighbouring region and the role of *tang-kha* painting in religious practices.

The traditional Tibetan scroll painting is known as *tang-kha*, *tangka*, or *thangka*, which literary means “thing that one unrolls” usually painted on canvas prepared through cotton or linen cloth. *Ras-bris* or *Ras-rimo* is another name used for the *tang-kha*. The meaning of *Ras* in Tibetan is cotton and the meaning of *ras-bris* and *ras-rimo* is painting or design on cotton. *Tang-kha* is portable paintings that one can carry along by scrolling it. It is a religious object of Tibetan Buddhism and is used as an aid to various religious practices and teachings. The art of painting *tang-kha* was borrowed from India and developed by nomadic monks of Tibet. At that time it was known as *patta-chitra*, which later developed in Tibet as *tang-kha*. Initially, these nomadic monks travelled extensively to far-flung areas on yaks and horses to spread the teachings of Buddha through *tang-kha* paintings. When monasteries were built, *tang-kha* were hung over the walls of shrines for religious and meditation purposes. The *tang-kha* form of painting developed alongside the tradition of Tibetan Buddhist mural painting, which was mostly painted on the walls of Buddhist monasteries in Tibet.

Tibetan Buddhist painting developed from well-known traditions of early Buddhist paintings of Ancient India. The only surviving early Buddhist paintings in India are from Ajanta Caves, Maharashtra. During the Pala period (8th -12th century CE), a similar style of painting continues in a simpler form of illustration on palm leaves. These palm-leaf manuscripts were written and painted for the monks of Buddhist monasteries in Eastern India. These palm leaf manuscripts were made up of dried palm tree leaves with an average dimension of 5cm in height and 60cm in width. The illustrations painted on these manuscripts are of Buddhist deities, usually painted in the centre of the text or in between the columns of text. The size of these painted deities was around 2-3 inches in height and 3-4 Inch in width.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Palm Leaf Manuscript of the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita, Pala Period.

Source Behrendt (2014), p. 25.

During the 8th to 12th century CE, many Buddhist scholars and teachers were invited by the kings of Tibet for reforming the Buddhist knowledge and religion. For this many Buddhist scholars (Padmasambhava, Kamalasila, and Santaraksita, Tilopa, Atisa, and Naropa) reached Tibet with Buddhist palm leaf manuscripts. These Buddhist manuscripts were translated into local Tibetan script. Because of

the unavailability of palm leaves in the region, they started copying these manuscript's text and painting on paper. After the downfall of the Pala Empire, the art of palm leaf manuscript painting ceased to exist in India but continued in the Tibet region in the form of paper painting. The earliest known Tibetan painting is stylistically very close to the art of the later Pala and Sena paintings of Eastern India during the 11th and 12th centuries [Huntington \(1970\)](#). Many Bengali scholars like that of Atisa, who visited Tibet in the 11th century, also introduced the art of *patta-chitra* to the monks of Tibet. *Patta-Chitra* is a traditional cloth painting of Bengal and Odisha, which inspired monks of Tibet to create their own form of *patta-chitra*; i.e., *tang-kha* [Brown \(1920\)](#), [Pal \(1969\)](#). Initially Tibetan art developed from the Pala-Sena art of north-east India.

Three dominant painting styles were influenced by the Indian sub-continent, showing direct links with Bengal, Kashmir, and Nepal [Stoddard \(1996\)](#). Other influences on Tibetan art over the centuries came from Chinese Buddhist art [Rowland \(1967\)](#). The influence of regional art of Nepal, Kashmir and Central Asia (Khotan) can be also seen in the *tang-kha* as well as on wall paintings of monasteries of western Himalaya and referred to as Himalayan art. Tibetan painting was originally inspired by geographical proximity [Singer \(1994\)](#), the painting of Central Tibet is closely related to the art of Eastern Indian art, whereas the painting of Western Tibet is closely related to the art of Kashmir. The painting of Eastern Tibet is influenced by Chinese art. This regional variation in the *tang-kha* painting style was first noticed by Giuseppe [Tucci \(1949\)](#). Tibetan *tang-kha* continued to develop in its distinctive style, which was a mixture of regional art of Kashmir and Nepal, Tucci called it “*Gu-ge* school” [Tucci \(1949\)](#). Most surviving examples of *Gu-ge* School are from two monasteries – Alchi in Ladakh and Tabo in Spiti. Around the fourteenth century the landscape background of some *tang-khas* were borrowed from Chinese paintings [Rhie & Thurman \(1991\)](#). Around the seventeenth century the *Gu-ge* school of art was influenced by the Chinese regional art, which can be seen in the form of portrayal of animals, clouds whirls, flames, stylized trees, and cliffs in painting of the monastic centers and referred to as Sino-Tibetan art.

The art of *tang-kha* painting is transmitted from master to student through an apprenticeship system, and a student works with a master for many years to learn style and technique [Shaftel \(1986\)](#). *Tang-khas* were painted by monks as well as lay artists. According to Tucci most of the painters of these *tang-kha* were laymen [Tucci \(1949\)](#). According to [Jackson \(1990\)](#) “In old Tibet it was the custom for lay people to commission the creation of sacred images, not only to facilitate their religious practice, as meditational aids or as objects of respect and offering, but also to have *tang-kha* painted in times of sickness or troubles or on the death of a relative or dear one, to assist them in achieving a happy rebirth”. *Tang-kha* are very rarely signed but, some *tang-kha* have inscriptions on their back recording that they were the personal meditation image of a monk or a lay person. The scroll paintings are considered sacred and are used to illustrate the life of Buddha, Bodhisattva, religious founders of sect, saints, Tibetan Buddhist deities like Green or White Tara, Avalokiteshwara, or an event from the past and were used for teaching and meditation purposes [Khosla \(1979\)](#). They also depict Kalachakar, Mandalas and Jataka stories in these paintings. The iconographic details are followed as prescribed in Tibetan Buddhist scriptures. Modification of these iconographic details are strictly forbidden.

There are two types of *tang-kha* painting based on the material used, these are as follows- Embroidered (*Tsem-tang*) and Painted (*bris-tang*). The first category required needle and thread work whereas the second category required colors and brushes. They are further sub-divided into several types, which include, applique

(*gos-tang*), lacquered (*tson-tang*), (*nag-tang*), or precious bead-inlay *tang-kha*, gold and silver thread-*tang-kha*, and block-printed *tang-kha*, etc.

The *Tang-kha* consists of different parts, which include – a painting canvas which is mounted on a cloth frame having a dowel (*Thang Thog*) rod (*Thang Shing*) at both horizontal ends with knobs, strings attached to the cloth frame for hanging *tang-kha* on the wall, a cover made of silk fabric (*Zhal Khebs*) to protect paintings for dust and oil fumes and lastly a ribbons ties for securing the *tang-kha*. Most *tang-kha* are portraits in rectangular shape but square shape *tang-kha* also exists.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** A Diagram of Tang-Kha Showing all Major Parts and Tang-Kha Painting of Medicine Buddha. (Front and Back).

**Source** Photograph by Author

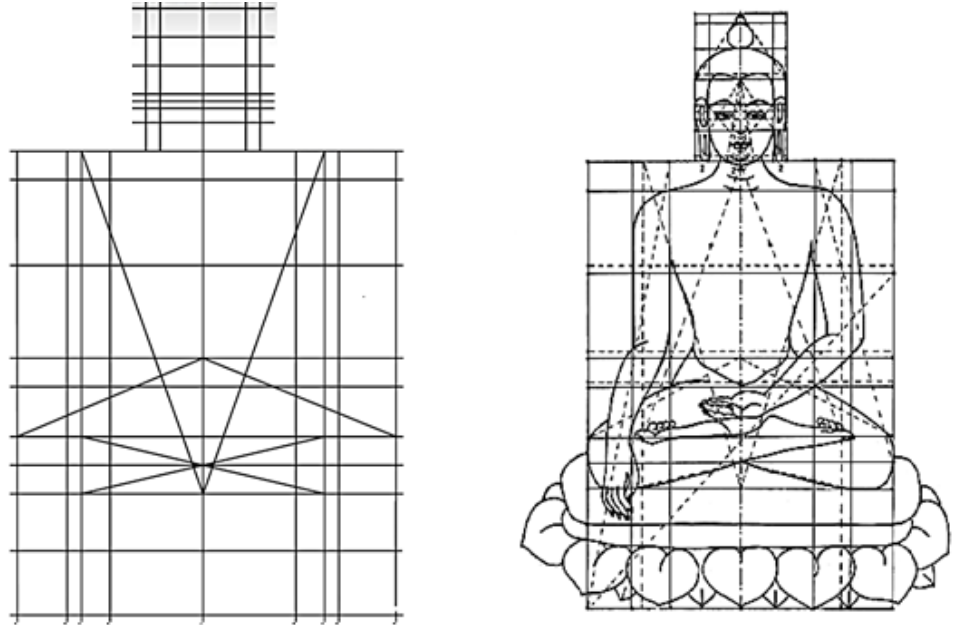
The size of *tang-kha* varies from 20 cm to 45 meters in width and 30 cm to 55 Meters in length. Small *tang-kha* are usually painted with colours while the large ones are made up of silk threads by embroidery method. The average width of a traditional *tang-kha* painting is 20 inches and the length is around 30 inches. Small *tang-kha* are usually hung over the walls of monasteries, houses, doorjamb, and sacred places. Large *tang-kha* is unfurled during the monastery festival or on some special occasions only. [Gupta \(2019\)](#)

The *tang-kha* are painted on canvas prepared from various fabrics. The most used fabrics are cotton, linen, and silk cloth, few examples in leather or skin also. The use of leather or animal skin for canvas however is quite rare. Silk canvases are mostly used in China. The canvas is prepared on a support made up of cotton or linen cloth, which is taken in the proportion of 4:8 or 2:5 [Tucci \(1949\)](#). This support is called as *kajee* in Tibetan. The cotton cloth or support is put in the stretcher, through four separate bamboo rods, which are sewn on the edges of the cloth. The canvas is prepared by applying the ground (*gesso*), a mixture of fine lime or chalk powder, and animal glue evenly on both sides of the support and then placed in indirect sunlight to dry. The most common animal glue used for *tang-kha* painting is the glue of yak. Once the surface of the canvas is dry, another coat of ground (mixture of lime and animal glue) is applied as per requirement. The canvas is then rubbed with a sea shell or smooth river stone. One should keep rubbing the surface until it makes no scratch sound. After getting the smooth surface by polishing, the canvas proceeds for painting which includes several traditional steps [Shaftel \(1986\)](#). These traditional steps are as follows:

- 1) *Thig-tse* (measurement and layout of canvas)
- 2) *Kya-ri* (rough charcoal sketch)
- 3) *Leb-tson* (application of flat colors)
- 4) *Ri-mo* (outlining of figures by using dark colors)
- 5) *Dang* (shading)
- 6) *Ser-ri* (application of gold polish using Onyx stone)
- 7) *Rab-ne* (consecration ceremony)

In the first step (*Thig-tse*) geometric markings are marked by using a charcoal marking thread on the backside of the canvas, which divides it into various sections. These geometric markings are marked as per requirement, which forms a grid of angles and intersection lines. It helps the artist to draw a layout of the figures and other background details. After this rough sketch are composed by pencil or charcoal on a grid pattern marked by the charcoal marking on the front side of the canvas. The outline of figures and background is done in the second step (*Kya-ri*).

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** First (*Thig-tse*) and Second (*Kya-ri*) Step of Tang-Kha Painting.

**Source** Drawing by Stanzin Nurboo

In the third step (*Leb-tson*), flat colours are applied with a paintbrush made up of animal hair, mainly rabbit or goat hair used for filling the colours. The colour, figures, circles, and lines are traditionally fixed according to Buddhist texts. There are six pure colours, out of which sixteen basic colours are prepared and used in the scroll paintings. All these colours are organic colours prepared from minerals and plants. In rare cases, the dust of gold and silver is used for highlighting the jewellery. These colours are used one by one, the painting begins with blue colour which is followed by green, and then other colours are used. The artist first of all prepared the background by painting the sky followed by the background and then the foreground. The figures are painted in series with dark colours first and then followed by lighter colours. The artist starts with dark blue followed by light blue, green, light green, light orange, then pink, deep orange, red, yellow, skin colour, gold, and lastly white colour.

Figure 4



Figure 4 Tang-Kha Painting after Application of Flat Colours

Source [Enlightenment](#) [[@enlightenment.thangka](#)]. (2019, February 7).

Figure 5



Figure 5 Tang-Kha Painting After Completion of Ser-ur Step

Source [Enlightenment](#) [[@enlightenment.thangka](#)]. (2019, March 3).

After the application of the flat colours, the outline of the figures is marked by the indigo and brownish-red colour in the step called *Ri-mo*. The hair of the figures is painted in black colour only. The faces and eyes of the figures are always painted in the last. In the fifth step (*Dang*), dry and wet shading is done by organic dyes. In the next step fine gold lines are marked on the flowers, rocks, leaves, cushions, and robes. Lastly, the gold colour is polished with the help of onyx stone, which gives a lustrous look and is known as *the Ser-ri* stage. The borders of paintings are painted using red and yellow colours. Once the colours on the canvas is dry, it is cut out from the stretcher, and the final touch is given by stitching to the mounting frame made

up of brocade fabric. Securing ribbons, hanging strings, covering silk (*Zhal-Khebs*), knobs (*Thang-Thog*), and the rods (*Thang-Shing*) which keep it stretched laterally are attached to the mounting frame. In the end, there is a consecration ceremony (*Rab-ne*) for *tang-kha* painted by monks.

The painting was a medium to spread the teaching of Buddha among the illiterate through illustration. The monks received the basic training in painting and thus were entrusted with the work of decoration in the Buddhist temples. Painting was considered one of the important branches of knowledge [Khosla \(1979\)](#). Tabo monastery is one of the oldest monastery in India, which is located in the Spiti region of Himachal Pradesh impart *tang-kha* painting to the novice monks. Presently, monks learn and practice the art of painting for six to eight years under a professional monk in the monastery. They are guided by their masters, especially on the use and control of colors related to the representation of sky, fire, and vegetation [Tucci \(1949\)](#). The professional monks train the monks on proportionate representation of facial features, hand, feet, and hair, which is practiced by the students on chalk board. The painters give importance to facial details, hair, eyes, and expressions. The central painted figure used to be the largest and the lines were more stylized and graceful with dynamic and animated pose [Khosla \(1979\)](#). Possibly the central figure was most important and the rest were subsidiary figures. The training was imparted to reproduce real expressions of the figure. This painting style is unique and thus needs to be protected so that practice does not die.

**Figure 6**



**Figure 6** Novice Monks During Tang-Kha Painting Learning Class at Tabo Monastery, Lahual & Spiti, Himachal Pradesh.

**Source** Photograph by the Author

## 2. CONCLUSION

The origin of *tang-kha* painting are linked to the transmission of Buddhist teaching from India to Tibet. Initially influenced by Indian artistic traditions, adapting them to convey Buddhist themes. The cultural exchanges between India and Tibet and neighboring regions, enriched the iconography, symbolism and techniques seen in *tang-kha* art today. The intricate details, symbolic representation and religious narratives found in *tang-kha* often reflect the impact of Indian art. The early connection with Indian art have left a lasting imprint on the style and content of these traditional Tibetan Buddhist Painting, however *tang-kha* art developed its own unique Tibetan style and characteristics, reflecting the evolving cultural identity of Tibetan Buddhism. *Tang-kha* became an integral part of Tibetan Buddhist culture. The *tang-kha* painting stands as a fascinating testimony to the rich cultural heritage and artistic expertise rooted in Tibetan and Himalayan traditions. These intricate paintings were not only used for religious practices, conveying spiritual teaching through visual representation, but also as aids for meditation and rituals. Over the centuries, *Tang-kha* painting evolved, incorporating unique Tibetan styles and cultural elements. Its complex details, vibrant colors, and spiritual symbolism not only make it a visually outstanding masterpiece but also a philosophical expression of religious devotion.

**Figure 7**



**Figure 7** Three Storey Tang-Kha of Lama Gyalsras Mipham Rinpoche, the Founder of Hemis Monastery, Ladakh. Only Unfurled After a Gap of 12 Years, During Hemis Festival Only.

**Source** Photograph by Stanzin Nurboo



## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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