
Title of Object

Shakyamuni Buddha

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: Central Tibet (Buddhist)

Date of Object: 1440-1470

Country: Tibet

Accession Number: 2000.31.5

File Created: 5/17/2016

Material/Medium: Opaque watercolor and gold on cotton

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Tour Topics

Group 3 tour, ancient culture, artist/patron, fashion/dress, gods/goddesses, power/status, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism, Buddhism

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. What attributes can you see that identify this central figure as the Buddha?
 2. Tibetan art is almost always religious; what purpose do you think this hanging cloth might have served?
 3. There are so many figures on this painting, can you think of anything that you are familiar with that has a lot of faces or figures on it? (class picture? composite?)
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Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

This textile from Tibet shows the Buddha (Shakyamuni= Sanskrit name meaning “able to be humane’ with muni=sage) in his moment of enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. His body is radiant, shown by

the halo around his head and body. Several things identify this figure as the Buddha: he has the extended earlobes, the ushnisha (cranial extension or bump on head!) his eyes are cast downward and he sits on a double lotus petal throne. He also holds a begging bowl and wears patched robes, both symbolizing his commitment to an ascetic existence. (* there are 32 physical attributes that identify the Buddha.) He extends his right hand downward in a mudra called bhumisparsha or “asking the Earth to bear witness to his struggles with the demon, Mara. He has won the struggle and reached enlightenment. His name becomes Buddha meaning “he who is now awake”. This image captures that moment.

Almost all Tibetan art is religious, and this painting on cloth is called a THANGKA. These images probably began on cave walls, evolving to textiles and feature figures symmetrically arranged around the Buddha. The use of gold on the painted cloth also identifies the central figure; gold was usually reserved for the Buddha, not used in representations of other deities or monks. This example is from 1450 and was painted with pigments in a water-soluble medium of animal glue. The composition is highly symmetrical and the layout requires deep understanding of Buddhist symbolisms. Each explicitly religious symbol and allusion must be in strict accordance with all rules * see visual aids

Thangka are uniquely Tibetan and the word means “recorded message” / it may also mean “scroll that is rolled up”. They have religious subject matter and often elaborate compositions including many small figures usually organized around a central deity. They are mainly painted on cotton, though some become silk, appliqué and even jewels later. Most are unframed and kept rolled up like a Chinese scroll and they are usually not large because they are intended to be teaching tools. The cloth, scroll-like quality also makes them portable. Many thangka have inscriptions on the back, often a mantra.

The myriad of faces and figures on this Thangka would have been familiar to most who saw it. This cloth features a Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas; they wear head dresses or crowns and reflect Indian influence. Then they are surrounded by a myriad of small seated figures who are lineage masters, the forefathers of Buddhism. The registers below the lotus throne hold the Chinese Buddhist monk, Xuanzang with his Tiger companion. The 5 Buddhist deities or ‘self-born buddhas’ , also called Five Wisdoms- including the Red Cosmic Buddha, Amitabha, are shown along the bottom.

Buddhism came to Tibet in the 7thC and became the State religion in the 8th C. Tibetan monks traveled regionally to study in India, Kashmir, Nepal, N. Burma and developed art that reflected these diverse styles. After the 13th C Nepalese artists were commissioned to paint THANGKS and make sculptures for Tibetan patrons. By the 15th C, there was stylistically, truly TIBETAN ART.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

The thangka were used as personal meditation aids or instruction for monastic students. They were kept rolled up like a scroll and used as teaching tools, but were also important to helping to bring someone down the path of enlightenment. The thangka itself is considered a visual expression of the fully awakened state of enlightenment, the ultimate goal of all Buddhists’ spiritual path. The subject of the Buddha at his moment of enlightenment was a common subject although they could also depict other deities or even a mandala. The thangka itself is sometimes called ‘the roadmap to enlightenment’

The early forms were murals in monasteries or kept within caves along the Silk Road. Originally hanging on or beside altars, now they are considered works of stateliness and are found in the halls, offices, and living quarters of monks. They were later commissioned by individuals who believed they could acquire

religious merit by doing so, similar to art patrons in many cultures all over the world. Sometimes the donor's portrait would even be included in the lower register! The artists' creative process itself was also considered an act of devotion and so the painting of a Thangka also was worthy of religious merit.

The Tibetan Thangka 'artists' required an intense training and explicit religious understanding of Buddhist scripture: proportion, shape, color hand positions, etc. The composition requires an intricately-regimented grid in order to establish continuity and correct transmission of the figures. ALL the arms, legs, even nostrils had to be laid out in specific angles and intersecting lines! The figures are stylized and somewhat flat but the symbolism and religious allusions are demanding to master. The painter needs an exact knowledge of the measurements and proportions of each deity as specified by Buddhist iconography and artistic practice.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

The golden, radiant body of the Buddha is depicted at the moment of his enlightenment in this stunning thangka. He wears a patchwork monastic robe and carries a begging bowl, both of which he adopted after choosing asceticism over his former princely life. His right hand reaches for the earth and a raised golden halo surrounds his head and body. Two bodhisattvas stand at either side of his lotus petal throne.

He is surrounded by lineage masters, many of whom gesture in lively debate. A line of protective deities appears at the bottom, along with the monk Xuanzang, who walks next to his tiger companion and an emanation of the red Cosmic Buddha, Amitabha, who is associated with the west. Xuanzang was a Chinese Buddhist monk who traveled to India in the seventh century and wrote about his journeys there.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Class notes and curator lectures

Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thangka>

Lipton & Ragnubs, *Treasures of Tibetan Art*

Encyclopedia Britannica

DREPUNG GOMANG MONASTIC COLLEGE (gomang.org) from the "Preface" by Rezin Dorji, The Tibetan Thangka: http://www.gomang.org/catalog_files/cat_thangkas.pdf

This is a great site at the Asian Art Museum for information on Tibetan thangkas and other teacher resources: <http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/background-information/tibetan-thangka-painting-sacred-pictures>

http://education.asianart.org/sites/asianart.org/files/resource-downloads/Symbolisms_of_Colors_in_Tibetan_Art.pdf

<http://education.asianart.org/sites/asianart.org/files/resource-downloads/Sacred-Arts-of-Tibet.pdf>