HIMALAYAN BUDDHIST ART

Volume 2.

Himalayan Art is largely religious and expresses the faith and ideals of people. Art of the Himalayas has its origins along the 'Silk Route' - northern India, Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, other parts of Central Asia including China and Iran. Himalayan Art and culture have in fact a blending of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Buddhism was founded in the 5th century BC by prince Gautama, the Buddha, born at the foothills of the Himalayas. After his death, charming stories of his life (often featuring animals) were illustrated, but Buddha himself was represented only symbolically. The Buddha image developed in the 1st century AD and soon there evolved a pantheon of other Buddhas and Bodhisatvas, who were assigned symbols and characteristics as represented in their art.

Vajrayana, the most important school, of Buddhism was mainly responsible for Tantrism in the Himalayas, relying on magical formulae (Mantras) and magical ceremonies (Tantras). It also introduced pantheon of goddesses (Taras) and other Gods, demigods, Siddhas, Arhats etc.

Thangkas are traditional Buddhist scroll paintings drawn on cloth. Himalayan art is popularly expressed in these thangkas. They are wonderful compositions with geometrical arrangements (Mandalas) and are steeped in Oriental tradition. Yet they are full of colour and fantasy.

Buddhist Religious Thangkas generally depict Jataka tales which recount events in past lives of the Buddha. They also depict stories from lives of other Buddhist saints.

It has not been the practice with the Buddhist artist to create something new which expressed his own ideas, but to preserve the continuity of the old traditions. As a rule, there was no attempt to depart from the conventions. It would have been disrespectful to his religion to do so. Moreover it may also diminish the spiritual efficacy of the image. Craftsmen were trained as apprentices in monasteries where they worked mainly by copying well known images of the deities and scenes. But they seldom signed their thangkas and bronzes. Therefore Buddhist art is almost always anonymous.

Some of the thangkas depict terrifying scenes - details portraying bodies disintegrating, ejecting blood, skeletons; dead creatures and various mutilations of the body. They represent mystical motifs and unearthly scenes.

Tantric thangkas depict siddhas, gods, goddesses, demons, apsaras, yoginis in various asanas (poses).

Tantrism stands for Mahamudra, the esoteric doctrine propounded to free the living beings more quickly from Samsara (wordly ills).
In Hindu Tantrism, the female is regarded as the active element of the partnership and is called Shakti. In Buddhist Tantrism on the contrary, she is regarded as the passive partner, called prajna. When the Buddhist deities are pictured in union, the female symbolises the absolute while the male represents the upaya or the expedient by which beings are liberated. Tantric thangkas are believed to ward off the "Evil Eye" maleficent influences, prevent disease like small pox, Cholera, plague and mental depression etc.

This selection is made to represent thangkas showing various aspects of their imagery and treatment, in Himalayan Buddhist Art. The selection has been made out of a large collection of thangkas so that details of the themes are reasonably discernable even after considerable reduction in size from the originals.

A brief description of the plates is given below. Original Tibetan text in calligraphy is printed above the English translation.

GREEN TARA

In the centre is pictured green TARA (SGROL-MA) protector of the world, born from the tear drop of AVALOKITESHWARA (SPYAN-RAS-GSIGS) in order to free beings from Samsara. She is the embodiment of great compassion. Her right hand is in the Varada Mudra (MCHOG-SBYIN-PHYAG-RGYA), the gesture of bestowing the highest blessing. In the left hand she holds a lotus in the heart of which is a Dharma Chakra (wheel of the law). With the exception of the three figures placed directly above the central image of the goddess, she is surrounded by twenty smaller images of the same goddess. In the upper centre from left to right are shown VAJRASATTVA (RDO-RJE-SEMS-DPA), APARIMITAYUH (TSHE-DPA-‘R), and AKSOBHYA (MI-RHRUGS-PA).

TSONG-KHA-PA

In this woven thangka is pictured Tsong-Kha-Pa, founder of the Yellow hat sect, who flourished in the fourteenth century. His hands are in the Dharma Deshana Mudra or preaching posture and he is shown with two disciples.
In the upper right-hand corner is an image of the Buddha who symbolizes liberation from the Wheel of Samsara.

**BHAVACHAKRA**

This Thangka depicts the wheel of existence (Bhavachakra), which is held in the grip of a wrathful demon symbolizing Karma (deeds). In the centre are pictured a cock, snake and pig symbolizing passion, hatred, and delusion respectively. These are surrounded by a circle divided into white and black halves. In the white portion are pictured beings who, having done virtuous actions are rising to births in the fortunate realms, while in the black are shown evil-doers falling into states of woe.

In the next circle are depicted the six realms of samsaric existence. Beginning at the top and proceeding in a clockwise direction, they are the realm of gods, demigods or titans, hungry ghosts, hell-beings, animals and men. These in turn are bounded by the twelve links of the chain of interdependent origination (Pratityasamutpada). Beginning in the lower left with the blind man representing ignorance and proceeding clockwise is shown the potter representing mental formations. Next is usually shown a monkey representing consciousness, which, in this case is not depicted. Next is shown two men in a boat representing name and form. Next is shown an empty house representing the six sense spheres. Next is shown a woman which perhaps was meant to represent consciousness, but is normally placed after the potter.

Next is a man kissing a boy, representing contact. Next is a man whose eye is pierced by an arrow, representing feeling. Next is shown men drinking and playing music, representing craving. Next is a man picking fruit, representing grasping. Next is a pregnant woman representing becoming. Next is normally shown a baby being born, representing birth which is here symbolised by a group of houses. Last are men carrying a corpse representing old age and death.

In the upper right hand corner is an image of the Buddha who symbolizes liberation from the Wheel of Samsara.
BUDDHA AND BODHISATTVA

In the centre the Lord Buddha is shown in the SA-冈NAM-BSAG-PHYAG-REGA or the posture of meditation and subjugation of the defilements. Surrounding the central figure are from AVADANA episodes from the career of the Buddha and Bodhisattva.

In the lower portion is shown the subduing of the great elephant of KING AJATASHATRU by the lord through miraculous powers. The Elephant which had been released by the KING on the advice of the evil DEVADATTA with the wish to kill the Lord, later became a follower of the Buddha.

On the left of the central figure is depicted the story of the two sons of KING Brahmadatta, the elder of whom KASHISUNDRA, renounced the world and became a recluse living in the forest known as KSANTIVADIN. Upon the death of Brahmadatta the younger of the two brothers, KALABHU was picnicing in the forest with his retinue. Becoming tired the king lay down to sleep. While he slept, his wives and attendents left him and went to offer respects to the hermit KSANTIVADIN. Upon waking and perceiving his followers paying homage to his elder brother KALABHU, he became furious and struck KSANTI-VADIN many times. Later seeing his kingdom fall into ruin KALABHU begged forgiveness of his brother who in fact had never harboured the least enmity towards him.

In the upper left hand corner is shown the story of SUVARNA-PARSHVA. In a former life the Bodhisattva was born as a deer possessed of a wonderful golden colour living in a remote part of the forest. One day seeing a man carried away by a swiftly running river, powerless to save himself SUVARANA-PARSHVA was moved by great compassion and leaping into the stream rescued the helpless victim. Upon reaching the safety of the bank the man was exceedingly grateful and wished to repay him. Declining all his offers, SUVARANA-PARSHVA asked only that the location of his abode not be revealed. In that land there ruled a King MAHENDRASENA whose queen CHANDRAPRABHA dreamt of a golden coloured deer with the power of human speech and wished greatly to have this marvellous animal. So she requested that it be brought to her. The king who was unable to locate such a deer offered a handsome reward for the capture of the deer. The man who had been saved from the river by SUVARNA-PARSHVA became greedy and disclosed the hiding place of the deer to the king. Captured by the king, Suvarnapashva was brought to the royal palace where established on the throne, he instructed the king and his court in the dharma and was worshipped by all the royal company.
In the upper right hand corner is depicted the story of the brothers Kalyanakari and Akalyankari sons of King Mahendrasena. Kalyanakari was greatly devoted to the practice of charity, and so emptied his father's treasury in giving to the needy. Troubled by depletion of fortune, Kalyanakari resolved to go to the sea in order to fetch a wish fulfilling gem with which he would be again able to satisfy the needs of his people. He and his younger brother going together successfully obtained the gem, but on their return journey their ship was wrecked and all but the two brothers were killed. One night while Kalyanakari lay sleeping, Akalyankari being envious of his brother and wishing to possess the wish fulfilling gem, blinded his brother with thorns and robbed from him the jewel. Thereafter Kalyanakari remained for sometime with the folk of that country. He was possessed of an excellent voice and was skilled on playing a lute. The wife of a herdsman in whose house Kalyanakari had taken shelter fell in love with him, but when he refused her affection, she accused him of improper conduct and he was forced to flee. He came to a country ruled by King Punyasena who had a daughter Manorama. At that time an assembly was gathered so that the princess might choose her husband. Of all those present she chose Kalyanakari who tried to persuade her to choose another saying that he was blind. But Manorama vowed she loved only him and that one of his eyes might be healed if she spoke the truth, which happened. She then asked what Kalyanakari would do with his brother on his return to his own country. Kalyanakari replied that he loved him as before and would do nothing to harm him. The princess found his words hard to believe, but he vowed that if he spoke the truth, his other eye would also be restored, which also came to be. Thereafter, Kalyanakari returned to his native country and after recovering the wish fulfilling gem from his younger brother continued to bestow countless benefits on the people of his Kingdom.

In this thangka is depicted the wrathful deity Rahula or Maha Vishnu, lord of planets. He has nine human and one crow's face, a thousand eyes and four arms. Seated in a lake, his lower body is that of a serpent. He wears elephant and human skins. In the four corners are pictured the demons of his retinue. He protects his devotees from epilepsy.
Separate prints in genuine raw silk frames are also available.
All prints are available in full size posters showing greater details - size 30" x 30" app.
GREEN TARA
RAHULA