



**HIMALAYAN BUDDHIST ART
THANGKA PRINTS**

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HIMALAYAN BUDDHIST ART

Volume 1.

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 Bodhisattvas, 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.

འཇམ་མཐོན་གྱི་སྐུ་ཡི་དམ་པ་བཞུགས་སོ།

HEVAJRA YAB-YUM

Divine body of the Yab with 20 arms and his YUM (Nairatma). The absolute unification of all duality is the real principle of union SAHAJA MAHASUKHA (The joy Innate).

'My inner nature is tranquil, and holding Nairatma in loving embrace, I am possessed of tranquil bliss.'

དམ་པ་སྐུ་དམ་ཅན་ཚོས་རྒྱལ་ཡའ་ཡུལ་མ་དེ་ལ་ཅན་དང་།
མཐོན་བཞུགས་ཀྱི་སྐུ་ཡི་དམ་པ་ལ་སོགས་པའི་ཚོས་སྐུ་རྣམས་བཞུགས་
སོ།

CHAKRASAMBHAR YAB-YUM

This Thangka graphically illustrates the struggle to overcome base animal desires of six senses including conflicts in the mind. This struggle is the basic principle of Hatha Yoga. Only after conquest of the six senses, yogi is ready for the eternal bliss.

'All tantrism presupposes mastery of the intricate Hatha Yoga training'.

དཀྱིལ་འཁོར་གྱི་དབུས་སུ་བཞུགས་པའི་ཡི་དམ་འདི་ལ་ཕྱག་དུག་
 དང་། རལ་གསུམ་དང་ཕྱག་ རྟོ་མཐའ་དུ་མཁའ་འགྲོ་མ་དུ་མའི་
 འཁོར་གྱིས་བསྐོར་བ་བོད་ཀྱི་རྗེ་ལུགས་ཀྱི་འཕ་བལ་བོདི་ལུགས་ཀྱི་ཡི་དམ་ཞིག་
 ཡིན་པར་སྣང་།།

VAJRA MANDALA

In the centre of the Mandala are the figures of Vajra, with 6 arms in the union with his Yum (Sakti) surrounded by his escorts, minor gods and goddesses, demons, yoginis, thus creating the full expression of Mahasukh, the ultimate blissful harmony.

"The door of Mandala is open and the face of the Divinity is seen".

དབུས་སུ་སྐྱོབ་དཔོན་ཚེ་བོ་བུ་འབྲུང་གཞས་དང་། སྐྱ་རྒྱལ་གྱི་རྟོད་དུ་
 དཔོན་དང་བུ་རྒྱུད་པའི་དཔལ་ལྷན་སྤྱི་མ་དམ་བ་རྣམས་དང་། གཡམས་སུ་བྱང་
 རྒྱལ་མེམས་དཔའི་ཚོགས་དང་། གཡམས་དུ་མཐོན་པོས་ཀྱི་ཚོགས་དང་། སྐྱ་
 མ་དུབ་དུ་དུག་གསུམ་གྱི་མཐའ་རྒྱལ་དང་། རྟོ་མཐའ་བསྐོར་དུ་ཡི་དམ་དང་།
 མཁའ་འགྲོ་ཚོས་སྐྱོད་སྤྱད་མའི་ཚོགས་ཀྱིས་བསྐོར་བ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

PADMASAMBHAVA

The central figure in this Thangka is Padmasambhava shown in union with consort, or in Yab-yum posture, symbolizing the conjoining of means and wisdom (Upaya and Prajna). Behind Padmasambhava is a heap of scriptures representing the Dharma. To the left of the central figure is shown an assembly of Bodhi-sattvas, while on the right is shown a gathering of disciples (Sravakas). The three figures below the central figure represent the tathagatas of the three times: past, present and future. In the sky above are shown the root Buddha (Samantabhadra) at the very top with the line of gurus below. On the lower branches of the tree are depicted the guardians of the doctrine. In the lower left hand corner is shown a lay devotee while in the lower right hand corner a monk is shown.

ཐམས་པོའི་བྱིས་ལུས་ཀྱི་ལྷ་ཚེན་པོ་ལྷོ་གླེང་།

TARA-YABYUM

The central figure in this Thangka is Tara shown in union with her consort, in Yab-Yum posture, symbolizing the conjoining of means and wisdom (Upaya and Prajna). The central figure is surrounded by Taras in different avatars as worshipped at different times and different places. Their different Vahans (Vehicles) birds, animals, demi-humans are shown along with each goddess.

The lower portion depicts demons, dakinis etc. of the underworld of spirits. These Tara goddesses protect their areas against disease, famine, lightening etc.





བཤམ་པོའི་བྱིས་ཀྱི་ཡིད་དམ་བཟུགས་སོ།

HEVAJRA YAB-YUM



ཇམ་ཚམས་ཀྱི་རྒྱལ་པོ་ཡལ་ཡུམ།

CHAKRASAMBHAR YAB-YUM



བཅའ་པོའི་བྱིས་ལུས་སྐྱེ་ལ་ལའ་འགོ་དང་ཚེས་སུ་དམུམ་གྱིས་བསྟོར་བའི་སྒྲ་ཚེན་པོ་ལྟོས།

VAJRA MANDALA



དཔལ་སྐུ་སྲོལ་དཔོན་ཚེ་བོ་པུ་འབྲུང་གཞན་དང་མཐའ་བསྐོར་དུ་སྐྱུ་མ་ཡི་དམ་
 སངས་རྒྱལ་བྱུང་སེམས་དཔའ་བོའི་མཐའ་འགྲོའི་ཚོགས་ཀྱིས་བསྐོར་བ།

PADMASAMBHAVA



ཐའ་ཡའི་བྱེད་ལུགས་ཀྱི་སྐྱ་ཚེན་པོ་ལྷོ་།

TARA-YABYUM

