Tibetan Thangkas or Devotional Paintings



20th c. Thankga from Tibet

First and foremost, thangkas are works of religious art related to Tibetan Buddhism. Thangkas fall loosely into four categories: 1) they portray Buddha and scenes from the life of Buddha; 2) they portray other deities in the Buddhist pantheon; 3) they portray Bodhisattvas (Buddhas-to-be) or famous sages; and 4) they portray cosmic diagrams and maps of inner consciousness known as Mandalas. Thangkas transform Buddhist truth into a system of visual statements to facilitate learning.



Thangka or devotional painting with mandala or 8 auspicious symbols

The general framework for Tibetan Buddhism includes three very important ideas: 1) to look and experience, 2) to think and meditate, and 3) to practice what has been learned in order to realize this learning. Unique to Tibetan Buddhism is the concept that the mind can be focused on external objects for contemplation and learning. Focusing on thangkas, therefore, can be viewed as one technique for the realization of all three ideas simultaneously.

Thangkas are usually executed on canvas or paper which is covered with a mixture of chalk and sizing. The surface is rubbed down with a stone or shell to allow for a flat, smooth surface. A network of lines or “grid-system” is then used to transfer outlines to the surface. Other methods include using a tracing cloth or perforated stencil which is dusted over with a fine black powder. Once transferred, the lines are carefully gone over with ink. The real painting only begins when the artist fills in the spaces between the lines with color. Artists had to be trained under the watchful eye of an experienced and qualified monk and were often monks themselves. Not only were artists bound by theme, composition, and the physical proportions of the figures reproduced, they also had to be instructed in the sacred texts which the thangkas were illustrating. The commissioning or ordering of a thangka to be created, and the act of painting itself have always been considered highly meritorious, sacred actions.