

THE PATH OF JOY

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Interview with Carmen Mensing

by Email

The Art of Thangka Painting

What made you choose thangka drawing/painting? Was it your interest in Buddhism or art?



My interest in art has always been there. As a little girl I was always drawing, so after high school it was a logical step to go to art school; where I later graduated as a graphic designer.

From an early age I was interested in Buddhism as well, but really started reading more about it during art school.

I visited centres from the different Buddhist traditions and followed several meditation retreats (*vipassana /Lam Rim*) before I finally took refuge in Tibetan Buddhism.

I was also interested in Buddhist art and its meanings, especially after a trip to the wonderful monasteries in Ladakh, Northern India.

So, to my great surprise, one day I saw that the Buddhist centre I visited offered a weekend course in thangka drawing. I never knew this was actually something a lay person could learn!

That weekend I met my teacher, Andy Weber, and I became totally 'hooked' on thangka drawing & painting. Then it grew from there.

*'When you paint a Buddha,
you're painting your own mind'*

What are the difficulties of learning thangka and what advice would you give to a beginner?

I think the biggest difficulty is thinking 'I cannot do it' or 'I'm not good enough' which is actually an ego-based emotion. Try to let it go. It's not about the result but about what you experience on the way.

During the years I've been teaching, I've experienced that even if you have no drawing experience, with meditation, concentration, the grid patterns we use and the help of the Buddhas, everybody is able to create a wonderful piece of art.

Just try it! You will be astonished.

Is there such a thing as fusion art for thangkas? Is there any difference in thangka painting when done by a westerner?

There are many people making a kind of modern fusion-buddha-art, but in my teachings and the lineage I come from, we like to pass on the thangka tradition in the traditional way, as I think it's important to preserve it for future generations.

Besides this, it's not just a drawing or painting but a full practice: a combination of meditation, Buddhist philosophy and iconography.

As far as differences in paintings created by easterners/westerners are concerned, I noticed they can be mainly found in the faces. The Green Tara face of my teacher (a westerner who studied with a Tibetan) looks still very much Tibetan. But my teacher says the face of the Green Tara that I painted looks western. Not something that I intended to do; it just happened that way, and that's fine.

Through the ages, Buddhism and Buddhist art have shown their ability to adapt to different countries and cultures in an organic way, without losing the essence of the teachings and tradition.

As the lamas say, *"When you paint a Buddha, you're painting your own mind."*

So you paint what you are familiar with. Sounds quite logical, right?

Are the dyes used for thangka painting natural or synthetic or a mixture of both? Have they changed over the centuries? Is there any health issue with regard to handling and using the dyes for an extended period of time?

For many centuries, the dyes *thangka* painters were using came from pigments made out of stones, minerals and plants. Now we know some of those dyes were very poisonous, but centuries ago they didn't know that. There have been reports of painters (not only *thangka* painters) who died from licking their paint brushes (to give them a fine point), not knowing this way each time a bit of poison entered their body. One example is the very poisonous arsenic sulfide, which was the basis for yellow pigment.

During the past 30 - 50 years or so, this has very much changed. Nowadays hardly anyone paints with the traditional pigments any more as they are very expensive and difficult to make. A small piece of stone, for example, takes many days of grinding. These days most *thangka* painters choose to go to the art store and buy gouache paint (colors are most similar to the traditional pigments) or acrylics from a good quality brand.

Can you give our readers some idea of the standard requirements of a traditional thangka e.g. size, theme, colour scheme etc. Have these changed over time?

The subjects of a *thangka* are almost endless. In Tibetan Buddhism, there are many different Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Lamas, mandalas and symbols. Almost all have their own grid-patterns we work with. These are the traditional measurements that we use to create a Buddha, and which

ensures the continuation in the tradition. The size can be as small or big as you prefer.

As for the color scheme, you are very free in a lot of ways, but there are some restrictions like, for example, the colour of a Buddha (a Green Tara obviously cannot be painted purple!). This is because everything on a *thangka* is there for a reason, and has a meaning.

Different painting styles can be found over the centuries but also within the different Tibetan traditions.

When people acquire thangka whether for aesthetic or religious purposes, what should they do to maintain these art pieces at their pristine condition bearing in mind, in particular, that in a tropical country like Singapore, humidity is a major problem.

To be honest I don't know much about the best way for the conservation of *thangkas* in a humid country. It will also be different for a hot or cold humid country as the following example shows.

A student of mine from Venice, Italy, had the problem that one of her *thangkas* started to show some mould after 2 - 3 years, especially on blue and green colors. Venice is very humid because it's built on salt water which settles in the bricks. After noticing this, she made sure the *thangka* did not touch the wall directly anymore and she started to heat up the (dark and cold) room some more.

If you've had *thangkas* for many years and they are still fine, there's no problem.

If the *thangka* shows signs of humidity after a few years, you might want to consult a conservator of a museum.

