


Chapter 35

Thangka Paintings and Sikkim's Heritage Art as a Pillar of Cultural Identity in Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will explore the convoluted relationship between Thangka paintings and heritage tourism in the mountainous region of Sikkim, India. Thangka paintings, a traditional Buddhist art form, serve as cultural artefacts and tourist attractions, playing a critical role in preserving Sikkimese cultural identity. Through a detailed examination of the art's history, religious significance, and evolving role in the tourism industry, the chapter will present an analysis of how heritage tourism can support the sustainability of local culture.

INTRODUCTION TO THANGKA PAINTINGS

Thangka a scroll painting made on canvas had a great influence on the Buddhist people and is considered a mystic art in Buddhism which looks complicated and is a composite of three-dimensional objects. Thangka is a beautiful wall hanging painting i.e. is further decorated with gold, silk, and wood, and while making also the artists have to maintain a certain discipline. Dorji (2003) Further added that Thangka meaning seal, talks about the life of Buddha and the teachings of Buddha and it's a symbol of spirituality. Thangka has been used for meditation purposes for the transformation of the practitioner and to develop inner strength. Thangka paintings are a very important part of Buddhism and its practice as it is considered an integral part of Buddhism. Peng (2014) explored various arts and crafts of Tibet, which was considered an important aspect of Tibetan Buddhism. But the paintings have religious value in front of local people and have always been crucial in both the religious and ordinary Tibetan people because the paintings illustrated the importance of Buddha and the life of Buddha in picture form. Paintings have become one of the ways to transfer the knowledge of Buddhism from one generation to another in a pictorial form, they have learned the traditional techniques, methods, and materials used in paintings which are considered an important part of learning as an artist.

The history of thangkas dates back more than 1400 years Wang (2014) Thangkas are Tibetan Buddhist paintings on cotton or silk, usually depicting Buddhist deities, subjects, or mandalas. Thangkas are traditionally stored unframed and rolled up when not on display, fixed on some textile backing, with additional silk covering on the front. Thangka is a scroll

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painting made on canvas, which is hung in a Buddhist monastery or a family altar and carried by monks in ceremonial processions. It is a very unique form of art that belongs to the Buddhist community, in Tibetan the word 'than' means Flat, and the suffix 'ka' stands for Painting. The Thangka is thus a kind of painting done on a flat surface but which can be rolled up when not required for display. Gardner (1988) observed the Thangka paintings are considered religious paintings among the Buddhist community, which was unknown to the rest world unless the people started traveling across the Himalayas. Thangka paintings gave illustration to the people about the presence of God in paintings form which importance spread among other communities as well. Rawat et al. (2021) thangka paintings aid in the understanding of Buddhism in a better way which are intricate paintings of Buddha, Buddhist deities, or mandalas. Namgyal (2014) It is considered a cultural art of Tibet and has placed a very important place in the heart of Tibetan Buddhists because it has spiritual value for the people and it is not a painting for the locals it is considered a religious purpose. Shrivastava (2018) However, the development and origin of art and craft in the region across North Asia with the influence of Buddhism and paintings has been considered as a major source of information about Buddhism. Lama (2016) also found that the art of mastery in meditation was found in painted tapestries or linen scrolls thangkas religious representations of deities and religious figures generally depict spiritual or historical events and are typically painted on cotton or line. Shaitel (1991) further stated that thangkas are complex objects with intricate iconography and technical construction, and the conservators must be fully aware of a thangka's religious and cultural aspects before attempting treatment. Combining media such as textile, painting, wood, and sometimes leather and metal, thangkas require a balanced approach in conservation treatment. Bhutia et al. (2018) also studied Thangka. This religious art originated in Tibet for meditation purposes and has played a significant role in the lives of the Buddhist people, as those paintings have a considerable role to play in the lives of locals. This art has been an integral part of the local people as it is the way to express their culture and traditions to the world. Peng (2014), however, found it was considered an essential aspect of Tibetan Buddhism, and the art skill has been passed from generation to generation. More importantly, the style has to be the same, and the artists must follow strict discipline to be part of this art. Kapsner et al. (2011) further illustrated that the painters needed to follow a systematic way to draw Thangka, which included six steps for making. The first step is the preparation of the painting surface. Second comes the establishment of a design on that surface using a sketch or transfer. The third step involves the initial coats of paint, followed by steps four and five: shading and outlining. The sixth and final step consists of several finishing touches. As a Thangka painting is designed to be rolled up in a scroll fashion, it is painted on cloth with a surface that has two layers: the support and the ground. The most common cloth, or support, used today is lightweight Indian cotton, which features a fine but slightly open weave. This open weave allows the 'gesso'—a type of white paint—to settle more evenly. This underlying material holds the subsequent layer of ground and paint. Once the artist has acquired the cloth, it is washed, dried, and cut to fit the wooden frame upon which it is stretched. This must be done carefully to avoid any bulging, once the fabric is secured onto the frame, three steps are taken to prepare the cloth for painting. First is the sizing of the cloth, which involves preparing a warm solution of hide glue that is applied to both sides of the cloth using a large brush or a wadded rag. After the cloth is saturated, any excess glue is removed, and the cord connecting the cloth to the stretcher is tightened. The canvas is then set aside to dry.

The second step involves coating the cotton support with gesso, which is a mixture of chalk or white clay combined with a size solution until it reaches a consistency similar to buttermilk. This mixture is strained to eliminate lumps and is applied to both sides of the cloth in thin, even coats. The artist checks the cloth after the first coat dries to determine if a second coat is necessary; if light penetrates through, another application is made. The final step is polishing the surface until it is perfectly smooth and ready for painting Kapsner et al. (2011).

Jackson (2012) stated that there is also extensive effort while making Thangka paintings, and there has to be more extra effort for beginner artists because the painting process is very different from Thangka paintings. The colour has a difference that makes it interesting. Thangka making is more often regarded as spirituality and is believed to bring merit to the painter. Tarlow (2011) states that we see art anywhere we find that embodiment of the soul in communication with others' souls. As such, we may also think of both cultural and religious expression as a form of art. Doza (2013), however, found that the painting has a great connection with the Pala dynasty. This art form was very much influenced and started growing throughout the country. Kapsner et al. (2011) state that the origin of the painted image of the Buddha is believed to have emerged in central India, in the area now known as Bihar. It is said that during the Buddha's lifetime, two kings, Udayana and Bimbisara, who lived in the region, used to exchange gifts. One day, King Bimbisara, upon

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