On the Inheritance of Thangka from the Modified Model of Stylized Painting Language

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Abstract

Based on image analysis, iconology theory and Gombrich's cultural psychology, this paper discusses the essence of thangka art and the spiritual elements of its inheritance from the programming language and style evolution mode. In the process of industrialization, we reflect on the impact of Thangka art on the cultural significance and sacredness, so as to protect the spiritual core of Thangka heritage.

Keywords

Thangka; Religion; Stylization; Modified Mode

Introduction

In recent years, with the deepening of Tibetan studies, Tibetan Buddhist Thangka, as the carrier of Tibetan culture, has begun to receive widespread attention. Religious art, as a medium linking religious principles with the thinking of believers, requires painters to describe sacred content with fixed techniques and proportions based on scriptures and classics, and cannot create or adjust without authorization. Although there are certain norms, the characteristics of the shaping of art works determine that religious art is not as rigid as literature and difficult to change. Thangka painting is a visual interpretation of religious principles by religious believers. It is a manifestation of religious rituals and practice processes, and this is its spiritual core.

The Influence of Stylized Painting Language on the Religiosity and Industrialization of Thangka

Thangka art is a stylized painting language, which restricts the individuality of the painter to a

certain extent. For a long time, Tibetan Buddhist paintings did not have the concept of "art" or "work" at all. Tibetan Buddhist believers also do not appreciate "painting" as independent "art works" or "painting works", but understand and practice them as part of their practice.

The Influence of Religiosity on Thangka Art

All painting production activities are carried out in a certain social context. The specific social situation can not only stipulate the sub functions suitable for special images, but also dominate the overall functions of images. Composition, color and lines are the aesthetic connotation of Thangka. Thangka is full of rich plateau and nomadic characteristics. In terms of color, although the tone change of thangka is relatively simple, mainly including blue-red, red-green, gray-green and green, the overall color tone is extremely bright, which can make people feel the brilliant sunshine of the plateau. According to the theory of Tibetan Buddhism Tantrism, red, yellow, white, blue and green correspond to fire, wind, water, earth and heaven. In Thangka paintings, yellow and red are used to express the story of Buddha jātaka (one of the most literary works in Buddhist scriptures). The yellow and red colors set off the majesty, richness and holiness of the Buddha statue; blue and green represent the beautiful world of Buddhism; crimson and navy blue are used to show the majesty and terror of the angry statue of Dharma protector. Different cultures put forward different requirements for visual images: the most common is the requirement of substitutes, and the most restricted is the requirement of creating scenes according to a certain point of view.

Gombrich pointed out: The essence of artistic representation is the representation itself. The reappearance of an image is not based on similar appearance, but on substitutes. The important meaning of substitutes is not similarity, but the inheritance of functions. For example, the proportion of the Buddha must be a perfect "ten-calorie measurement image"; the Great Saints, Luohan, and Mother Buddha are "nine-card measurement image"; the various images of Dharma deities are "nine-card measurement image"; and the majestic images such as King Kong Hercules are "seven-calorie measurement image". For example, the proportion of the Buddha must be a perfect "10 cards image measurement"; the Mahatma, Arhat, and Mother-Buddha are "9 cards image measurement"; the various images of Dharmapala are "9 cards image measurement"; and the majestic images such as King Kong Hercules are "7 cards image measurement". All statues have strict scale requirements, through which the gods and Buddhas can be distinguished and expressed. Therefore, it is not difficult to see that any style of religious art, in fact, is to achieve the aesthetic ideal by depicting specific gods and setting off the picture atmosphere.

The types of Thangka statues are mainly manifested in the aspects of the modeling of the Kind Look God, Fierce Look God, and Kind-Fierce Look God. Represented by Buddha, Bodhisattva and Tara, the Kind Look Gods emphasize the spiritual realm of emptiness and compassion, and

expresses the cordial, serene and peaceful manner. Represented by Yamantaka, Ming King, the Fierce Look Gods emphasize the spiritual realm of protecting and subduing demons, being fierce and kind inside, and showing the momentum of being fierce, angry and powerful. The Kind-Fierce Look God is represented by the Padmasambhava, the Mahasiddha, the Arhat, the Dakini, the Sad Look, Thinking Look, and Yaksha Look. This statue features both kind and fierce spirits, and emphasizes the spiritual realm of Buddha crossing all living beings and equality of all things. The visual image produced by Thangka art has a certain dependence on the conventions or visual symbols within the scope of the image that can be described: the works of art produced in the specific traditional range provide visual hints for information collection. This kind of information collection tries to be consistent with the hints provided by a possible object, situation or event seen from a particular location. The hint becomes explicit when depicting the narrative activity. At this point, the relationship between the image and the text becomes as supreme as the custom of selecting rituals and gestures.

The Influence of Industrialization on Thangka Art

With the rapid development of cultural industry and tourism, the drawing of Thangka has evolved from the pure religious behavior in the early stage to the production of Buddhist handicrafts. Thangka production began to develop gradually to industrialization, which challenges the cultural connotation of Thangka art. The original cultural significance and sanctity of art works have been impacted, the traditional mineral pigments have been replaced, and the mechanized assembly line production has led to the simplification of traditional techniques. For example, in drawing Thangka, the first task is to draw the outline with pencil according to the *Statue Measuring Scripture* in Tibet. Traditionally, artists use black ink to draw manuscripts. These contours include the bottom line around, the vertical line in the middle, two diagonal lines, and the shape of all objects. These lines are similar to "line drawing" before they are covered by color. When drawing lines, different techniques should be used for different objects (such as parallel lines, leaves and clouds). When all this work is done, you start to color the background. According to the general size and complexity of Tangka, the process is about 30 days.

Driven by economic purposes, a small number of Tibetan painters have completely abandoned the traditional rules and painting techniques. In order to complete the works as soon as possible, some painters gave up the basic draft, even gave up the *Statue Measuring Scripture*. Therefore, there are many Thangkas in the market that do not comply with the requirements of the measuring scripture, and there is no trace of outline.

In addition, the main body of Thangka is a religion with a complex deity system. These deities are drawn in strict accordance with the standards of the *Statue Measuring Scripture*, so they often give

people the same feeling. People who don't understand the religious connotation are hard to find a knack. Most tourists who buy Thangka pay more attention to the price of goods than the quality, which leads to the majority of people only regard Thangka as "handicraft" rather than "art".

The Transformation of Thangka Painting Style under the Stylized Painting Language

Changes in Early Thangka Style

Religious art is a stylized painting language. Therefore, even in a major cultural and historical period, artists' creative activities are not only affected by cultural changes, but also restricted by religious stylization. Throughout history, there are not only regional differences in the artistic style of Thangka, but also obvious differences in aesthetic taste of patrons. Taking the founders of Miantang School and Qinze School as an example, Khamanra Dhondup and Qingzi Qinmo started from the same school and were also influenced by the Han style, but the different styles of supporters were quite different.

The peaceful painting style of Khamanra Dhondup was appreciated by the the first Dalai Lama; Master Qingzi is good at depicting angry images and is supported by the eminent monk Gongga Nanjie. What can cause reform is always the right time, the right place and the right people. The change of style in history is inseparable from the cultural fusion caused by political reasons. Since the Tubo era, the Thangka painting style has experienced two obvious "transfer" from "west" to "east". The facial modeling of the characters starts from the square Indian Polo type with broad chin, thick and convex lower lip, wide and narrow upper and lower face, to the Gandhara and Persian style with round face, full bust, thin waist, wide buttocks, small feet and bow eyes; to the Nepalese type with wide and narrow head, lower eyes and slender limbs; then to the collection of local Tibetan characteristics, and finally to the character image which is completely inclined to the Chinese aesthetic characteristics of the Central Plains.

When a foreign painting style was introduced into Tibet, Tibetan painters would constantly revise the schema while accepting and learning new styles. This kind of revision originates from the aesthetic characteristics of the nation. Through corrections, they merged different painting traditions together. Of course, this process of perfection is also evolving. We can sum up the change of the style of the model schema as follows: "Schema → Modification (integration) → Perfection". There are five types of pictorial styles in history: the Baltic type of India; the Kashmir type combining Gandhara style with Persian art tradition; the Nepalese type originated from the Indian Gupta Dynasty art; the Central Plains Chinese style; and the "standard style" derived from the new Mian school. These five types organize the overall context of the history of Thangka painting style.

Transformation of Modern Thangka Style

There are always a lot of amazing coincidences in history. When Europe began the Renaissance, in the remote Tibetan plateau, people's aesthetic orientation of painting changed with the transfer of schema style: from divinity to human nature, from ethereal to secular. The inner spiritual pursuit of painting has also shifted from the beautiful realm of expressing religious spirit to advocating the material sense stimulation of secular society.

In the 1930s, under the impact of Western painting theories and the influence of modern photography, the issue of realism was directly faced by Thangka artists. As the basic problem of painting, the problem of realism has existed to varying degrees in the art history of any nation and any region. Religious painting is to express "knowing" rather than "seeing". Therefore, the tradition of Thangka image making is a process of abstracting, generalizing, and choosing from metaphorical religious doctrines, and refining the painting language system through symbolic and stylized means based on metaphorical religious doctrines. This process has consciously abandoned the problem of realism. Nowadays, only the image of the supporter and the guru in the Thangka seems to be a little "realistic", we can call it portrait art. But in the concept of Thangka artists, there is no difference between the depiction of the Buddhas and guru. Ancient artists achieved compromised reality through "correction" of formulas.

Under the impact of Western painting techniques and photography, Amdo Jampa brought us "realistic" Thangkas like *Chairman Mao is with Us* and *Tenth Panchen Lama* in the 1950s. And like the Renaissance, he used real girls as models to depict the Tara Bodhisattva, forming the "Amdo Qamba Style". Painted in 1999 and now in the collection of the China Tibetan Medicine Culture Museum in Xining, Qinghai, the *China Tibetan Culture and Art Colored Paintings* inherited the traditional Tibetan art and painting techniques, but also absorbed the techniques of Western painting, while using pure natural plants and Painted with mineral pigments. At present, the emerging "multi-sect" style Thangka has also seen many innovations and changes on the basis of inheriting traditional techniques. For example, from image production to artistic creation, the subject matter also shifts from religion to secular. The aesthetics of the representative work *Water Moon Bodhisattva* has also shifted from traditional to modern. The conflicts between realism and decoration, three-dimensional and plane, have repeatedly occurred in the history of art, and there has never been a standard answer. But no matter how the painting style changes, Thangka painting always follows the principle of stylization. The development process of painting school and painting style is to follow the pattern of "Schema → Modification (integration) → Perfection", continuously enrich and improve its own characteristics, and finally make it a process of setting.

Conclusion

Gombrich described "making and matching" in the book *Art and Illusion* as a slow and systematic correction of the schematized image to match the motif to be expressed. At the same time, he pointed out in this book that the artist cannot copy what he sees, but is subject to the techniques and conventions he knows and masters, that is, simple established patterns. The measurement scriptures of Tibetan Buddhist paintings are just a typical model of the schema, and the development of style and the effort to reproduce the truth are the process of correcting and merging the schema. Every appearance of painting theory and classic works is the result of perfection at this stage. In essence, this is an art exploration behavior that the art practitioners outside the tradition have the same goals as those within the tradition. Religiousness is the spiritual core of Thangka painting; the stylized painting language is the embodiment of religion; the revision mode is the secret of Thangka's inheritance. In addition to the support of the spiritual core, the ability of Thangka to inherit the millennium is largely due to the orderly and excellent model of "Schema → Modification (Integration) → Perfection".

Today, with the rapid development of economy, Thangka is not only a tool to promote religious teachings, but also a work of art. Under the impact of foreign culture, Thangka art began to innovate, began to enter the industrialization from the early pure religious behavior, and evolved into a new industry dominated by the production of Tibetan Buddhist handicrafts. Stylized painting language reduces the difficulty of getting started with Thangka to a certain extent. To ensure the continuation and development of the spirit of Thangka in the form of industrialization has become the most important and difficult part of the inheritance and innovation of Thangka.

We should reflect on the psychological impact of the Thangka industrialization on the painters. We cannot blindly seek economic benefits and forget the fundamentals of inheritance. Thangka is the cultural accumulation of the Tibetan people for thousands of years. It represents not only a painting technique, but also a cultural dissemination. Under the impact of the modernization process, under the premise of ensuring the authenticity and integrity of Thangkas, the purposeful and planned inheritance, protection, rescue, innovation, exploration and development of Thangkas are our current priorities.

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