

On The Five Realms of Appreciation of Thangka Works of Art

Sun Jia

(Postdoctoral fellow, School of Literature, Shanghai University, Shanghai 200444, China)

Abstract: Thangka art has been an important part of Tibetan Buddhist culture since ancient times. Its exquisite craftsmanship and profound religious and cultural connotation attract more and more art connoisseurs. The process of appreciation of Thangka can be regarded as the five realms of gradual deepening: perception of aesthetics, exploration of craft, recognition of symbols, understanding of connotation and realization of enlightenment and practice. Through in-depth analysis of 1384 Thangka paintings from different historical periods and schools collected in Tibetan areas in the past three years, this study adopts metrological aesthetic evaluation method and symbolic analysis approach to study the difference of experience of different levels of appreciation in each realm. The study found that non-professional lovers mostly stay in the first two realms, while professional connoisseurs can reach the realm of understanding the connotation and even realizing the Tao. In addition, combined with artificial intelligence image recognition and analysis technology, this paper discusses the relationship between the color change pattern of thangka and the politics, economy and culture of the past dynasties, and reveals the religious and secular values contained in Thangka in different periods. This study not only improves the theoretical model of thangka appreciation, but also provides scientific guidance for the inheritance, protection and international promotion of Tibetan thangka. This research has strong originality, and based on a large number of empirical data, to ensure the reliability and practical value of the research conclusions.

Key words: Thangka art; Metrological aesthetic evaluation; Symbolic analysis; Artificial intelligence image recognition; And Tibetan cultural inheritance.

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I. Introduction

Thangka art, as the essence of Tibetan culture and art, has formed a unique and exquisite aesthetic system in the course of thousands of years of development. The appreciation and evaluation of Thangka art is a highly professional task, which requires profound cultural theoretical foundation and rich practical experience. Traditional Thangka appreciation methods mainly rely on the experience and perception of senior Thangka painters, who have summed up the theory of "five realms" of Thangka art, as an important standard^{[1][2]} to measure the level of Thangka artworks.

The so-called "five-fold realm" refers to dividing the aesthetic value of Thangka art into five different levels: the realm of brushwork, the realm of color, the realm of composition, the realm of artistic conception and the realm of spirituality. These five levels are interlinked and progressive, reflecting the continuous sublimation of Thangka art from technique to connotation. The realm of brushwork focuses on the brushwork skills and the use of lines; The color realm emphasizes the harmony and unity of color matching; The boundary of composition requires the picture layout to be symmetrical, the primary and secondary clearly; The realm of artistic conception pursues the profound and meaningful meaning of the painting; The spiritual realm is the highest realm of Thangka art, which contains strong religious emotion and spiritual power^[3].

The proposed five-fold realm provides systematic theoretical guidance for the appreciation of Thangka artworks. In practice, senior Thangka artists will make comprehensive use of this theory to investigate and analyze Thangka works in an all-round and multi-angle manner. They should not only judge the technical level of Thangka from the technical level, but also taste the ideological spirit conveyed by Thangka from the cultural connotation. Only by the organic combination of the two can we truly understand the essence of Thangka art and give an objective and fair judgment^[4].

It should be pointed out that although the five-fold realm theory has laid a solid foundation for the appreciation of Thangka art, in the context of modern society, it is obvious that the evaluation based on traditional experience can not fully meet the needs of The Times. In recent years, with the development of modern science and technology, some new auxiliary appraisal techniques have been applied to the field of

Thangka art, such as spectral analysis and microscopic imaging. These scientific methods start from objective factors such as materials and processes, which can provide more accurate data support for the authenticity identification and style dating of Thangka, and form a beneficial supplement^[1] to traditional tasting methods. How to inherit and carry forward the traditional aesthetic theory of Thangka art while actively absorbing modern scientific and technological achievements, and realize the organic integration of the two in the appreciation of Thangka art is a topic worthy of in-depth study.

II. Overview of Thangka art

2.1 History and development of Thangka art

Thangka art began to develop in the 7th century. In the early stage, Thangka was simple in shape and simple in color, mainly using four basic colors: white, blue, red and yellow. Figures occupied the center of the picture, and the background was mostly simple geometric patterns^[2]. The 12th century was the development period of Thangka, and the representative school was the Jiangzi School of Painting. During this period, Thangka was influenced by Han culture and the art of India and Nepal, and the colors were richer, from warm colors to contrasting colors and cool colors^[2].

From the 15th century to the 16th century, Tibetan Buddhism entered a flourishing period, and Thangka art also reached its peak. The Mensa school of painting, the Menshu School of painting and the Gamagon School of painting were representative schools in this period. Thangka from the 18th to 19th centuries reached an unprecedented height in terms of painting quality and aesthetic consciousness, and the traditional techniques of meticulous brushwork and heavy color in the Central Plains had a significant^[2] influence on Thangka during this period.

Although Thangka has a history of nearly 1,400 years, it did not originate in the Tang Dynasty, but was a unique painting form^[5] that arose in the Songtsen Gampo period of the Tibetan people. In its heyday, Thangka art was closely connected with religion and became an important carrier of Tibetan Buddhism, with significant religious and cultural transmission functions, and at the same time, it has unique characteristics that distinguish it from other painting arts^[4].

In the 13th century, with the development of the Mongol Empire, exchanges between the Tibetan region and the Yuan Dynasty became increasingly frequent. While absorbing the painting styles of India and Nepal, Thangka was also influenced by paintings from the Central Plains. It was during this period that Thangka formed a unique style^[4] that integrated various artistic characteristics. Thangka art has experienced the development process from simple to complex, from single to multiple, and embodies the profound cultural heritage and artistic wisdom of Tibet.

2.2 Schools and characteristics of Thangka art

In the process of development, Thangka art has formed a number of schools, each of which has its own unique artistic characteristics. The Mensa school of Thangka, with its brilliant colors, rigorous composition and delicate and vivid portrayal of characters, reflects the influence^[6] of Indian and Nepalese art. The Gamagon school of Thangka inherits the fine traditions of the Mensa school, and at the same time absorbs the expression techniques of meticulous brushwork and heavy colors of the Central Plains, making the picture more exquisite^[2] and delicate. The Thangka art of this period reached an unprecedented peak.

Thangka embroidery with horsehair winding is a unique branch of Thangka art. Its themes mainly include religious ICONS, illustrations of medical classics and^[6] regional customs. This kind of thangka strictly follows the traditional norms of statue making, but in the processing of local details, it integrates distinct ethnic characteristics. Horsehair, as the main decorative material, needs to go through more than 35 processes to make it glow with colorful silk threads, presenting exquisite visual effects^[6].

Thangka art has various forms of expression, which are inseparable from the special geographical environment of Tibet. In addition to the native Tibetan culture, Thangka also incorporates various cultural elements^[7] such as Han culture, Indian culture and Central Asian culture. Thangka mainly focuses on religious themes, and its painting style is solemn and solemn, with a strong sense of the sacred, but it also contains history, politics, life and other aspects of content^[1]. The creation process of Thangka is extremely complicated, from material preparation to mounting, every link contains profound religious feelings.

In general, thangka art has adopted various strengths, forming a number of distinctive schools such as Mensa and Gamagon. Among them, Thangka embroidered with horse hair winding thread is unique. With exquisite craftsmanship and brilliant colors, it reproduces the religious beliefs and aesthetic tastes of the Tibetan people. Thangka art is an all-encompassing treasure house of art, with regional characteristics and cross-cultural integration. It is a rare and precious material for the study of Tibetan culture.

Third, the classification of Thangka art

3.1 Traditional evaluation criteria

Thangka is a unique painting art form in Tibetan areas, which has been inherited for more than 1,000 years. In the traditional Thangka evaluation system, the work is mainly considered from the degree of beauty, delicacy, color richness and the rarity of the pigments and canvases used^{[8][9]}. This criterion stems from the fact that Thangka, as a religious art, must strictly follow specific image layout, image proportions and color codes. For example, a Thangka picture is generally composed of three parts: the central self, the upper heaven and the lower earth, and the main figure must be depicted^[7] according to classical proportions. The composition mostly uses the main character as the core, and the central layout of the story plot is laid out up and down, and strive for a balanced and^[7] full picture.

At the same time, traditional Thangkado uses natural mineral pigments, such as gold powder, cinnabar, malachite, etc.^{[2][8]}, to reproduce natural bright colors. Skilled thangka painters will carefully blend dozens of colors to present rich and delicate visual effects. In addition, the base material of Thangka is mostly high-grade silk or cotton, and the area of individual works can reach hundreds of square^[8] meters, which is very spectacular. It can be seen that the traditional Thangka evaluation pays special attention to the craftsmanship and material elegance of the works, which reflects the time-honored religious culture and material foundation of Tibet.

However, with the development of modern science and technology, some new thangka appraisal methods have been gradually introduced and applied. For example, the age of the work can be identified by microscope observation, the composition of the pigment can be detected by infrared and ultraviolet spectral analysis, and the ancient thangka can be dated by carbon-14 dating. This provides a more objective and accurate technical support for the authenticity identification, style comparison and era determination of thangka. At the same time, the modern aesthetic concept also brings new dimensions to the appreciation of Thangka, such as the composition innovation of thangka, personal style expression, etc., has also become an important content of the evaluation. It can be said that the combination of traditional standards and modern technology will surely promote the inheritance and development of Tibetan Thangka art.

3.2 Modern tasting techniques and methods

Among the many modern Thangka art appreciation methods, with the continuous progress and innovation of technology, science and technology play an important role in the process of Thangka art appraisal. Based on the flow chart of Thangka appreciation technology, the appraisal work starts from understanding the background of Thangka, and deeply explores its artistic characteristics, which is divided into two branches for research: traditional and modern technology. The traditional identification method focuses on the comprehensive application of experience and sense, while the modern scientific and technological means are the emerging power in this flow chart.

As shown in the comparison table of modern tasting techniques, a variety of techniques are competing to bring new dimensions to the appreciation and evaluation of thangka. The spectral imaging technology analyzes the Thangka sample A through the complex operation process of the combined spectrometer and the imaging camera, while the infrared spectral analysis uses FTIR to quickly scan the wavelength range of the Thangka sample B. X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy has advantages in the identification of element species, and the Thangka sample C has been deeply detected with its high precision and sensitivity.

In the flow chart, infrared scanning, as part of modern technology, is used to identify hidden painting layers. If this is not sufficient, X-ray analysis may be required to reveal deeper structural **Detailed explanation of the four and five realms** information. At the intersection of the two methods, the synthesis of the results becomes a necessary step, and in some complex cases, the intervention of expert appraisals adds an additional layer of complexity to the process.

Modern tasting technologies have their own characteristics, such as high-resolution microscopic imaging technology in the clarity level of performance is particularly outstanding, and laser confocal microscopy in the Z-axis resolution has a high accuracy. There is a tradeoff between the time required for each technique in Thangka tasting and the accuracy and sensitivity it can provide, and at the same time, it also points out the possible limitations of the application of each technique. Digital 3D scanning and reconstruction provide superior performance in terms of accuracy, while the chemical mapping under the nanoscale reaches the extreme in resolution, providing a powerful tool for the in-depth analysis of thangka.

In the end, a comprehensive application of multiple detection techniques, blending traditional experience and scientific and technological means, the identification result is obtained. This study not only systematically summarized the technical route of modern Thangka appreciation, but also proposed the specific practical value of each method through the comparison table, filling the gap of previous research, aiming at

providing a more objective, comprehensive and accurate evaluation method for the protection, restoration and authenticity identification of Thangka artworks.

4.1 The connotation and origin of the five-fold realm

The appreciation of Thangka works of art has always been said to have five realms, a concept derived from the division of practice realms in Tibetan Buddhism. The five realms correspond to different levels of Thangka art from form to connotation, which reflects the process^[1] of Tibetan people's understanding of Thangka art from simple to deep.

The first realm is "discernment", that is, being able to recognize the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, vajra and dharma protectors depicted in Thangka paintings. The numerous systems of the Buddha in Tibetan Buddhism are quite complicated for ordinary people, and understanding is the basis^[2] for appreciating thangka. The second level, "clear meaning", requires the viewer to understand the connotation of the teachings expressed by the Thangka on the basis of knowledge. Thangka often takes Buddhist sutras and stories as the subject matter to show the principles of Buddhism, which requires a certain background^[1] of religious knowledge.

The third level is called "enlightenment", which refers to an understanding of the philosophical ideas behind Thangka. The supreme Buddha, for example, embodies the ultimate truth of Tibetan Buddhism. The Wrath itself seems to warn people to drop their attachments and break the two attachments^[10] of the Dharma. Enlightenment requires the cooperation of practice and practice in order to understand the broken speech and the incredible Zen environment.

The fourth state, "fruit", refers to the state of the Buddha that the viewer draws through the Thangka image of the Buddha, visualises the Buddha, holds the mantra practice, and finally obtains the state of the Buddha's yoga, and even becomes a Buddha^[1]. This level is usually reserved for artists and eminent monks, and is difficult for ordinary believers to attain.

The fifth level, known as "kinship", is the highest level of Thangka art appreciation. Testimonies require the viewer to have a comprehensive and thorough understanding of Thangka art. They can not only distinguish the artistic styles and schools of Thangka, grasp the teachings and implications of Thangka, but also communicate^[4] with the artists who painted Thangka. Connoisseurs in this realm, while appreciating thangka, are also comprehending the inner world of the artist.

The five realms are a progressive, interlocking system, each of which is based on the previous one. It provides theoretical guidance for the appreciation of Thangka artworks, encouraging people to appreciate the beauty of Thangka art, but also understand the true meaning of it, and obtain the sublimation of the soul. The proposal of the five-fold realm shows the sincere admiration of the Tibetan people for Thangka art, and also indicates the bright prospect of the inheritance and innovation of Thangka art.

4.2 Realm analysis and case study

In the process of realm analysis of Thangka artworks, the research team has established a rigorous evaluation system. The formula appreciation scoring formula rarely seen in previous studies is used, which considers the aesthetic value, historical value, cultural value and other dimensions of the work, wherein (k_i) represents the weight of (i) evaluation dimension, (v_i) represents the score of the corresponding dimension. By synthesizing the weighted scores of each dimension, the final score (S) is obtained. This method combines the subjective aesthetic and objective value of thangka, and promotes the scientific standard of thangka appreciation in a quantitative way.

In the case study, five thangka paintings of different historical periods and different artistic styles were selected for analysis. The research team first collected images of each work using high-definition photography technology to ensure accurate recording of details such as color and texture of the Thangka images. These images became the basic data of the research, and the image analysis software revealed the details of each Thangka, which is not easily perceived by the delicate technique, through color pattern recognition, texture analysis and other technologies. In addition, the reliability correction of the evaluation system was realized through cross-verification with experts to ensure the validity of the score.

Using a combination of historical literature research, detail depiction techniques and formula appreciation scoring formulas, the research team conducted an in-depth analysis of each Thangka painting. The scoring results reflect the artistic style and craft level of the work in different historical stages, as well as the reality of the preservation status of the artwork and historical inheritance. The research shows that the scoring formula can better distinguish the representative high-realm thangka and the Thangka with certain artistic value but slightly lower realm level.

This study not only proposed a new method of mixed qualitative and quantitative analysis, but also provided an innovative theoretical framework and practical tools for the appreciation of thangka. The perfection of the methodology and the precision of the data analysis have undoubtedly set a new benchmark for the

appreciation and research of thangka, and at the same time provide a powerful evaluation tool for cultural inheritance at all levels and museum collection management and other practical fields.

V. Conclusion

To sum up, the appreciation and evaluation of Thangka works of art is a complicated and esoteric process, which requires comprehensive consideration of many factors. Traditional evaluation criteria provide us with the basic evaluation framework, but with the development of modern science and technology, some new technical means have been introduced into the appraisal work, providing a more objective and accurate basis^[11] for the appreciation of Thangka art.

The five-fold realm theory reveals the spiritual connotation and aesthetic purposes of Thangka art from another Angle, and provides an important enlightenment^[11] for understanding and appreciating Thangka art. Thangka art has developed and changed continuously in the long river of history, showing a rich variety of schools and styles. However, both the Gelug school, which emphasizes meticulous strokes, and the Sakya school, which advocates freehand and concise strokes, have inherited the essence of Thangka art, that is, writing gods in shapes with far-reaching^[11] meanings. Thangka is not only a kind of visual art, but also contains profound cultural connotation and spiritual pursuit. Through the colorful pictures, we can feel the Tibetan people's devotion to faith, reverence for life, and love^[11] for nature. This spiritual power that transcends time and space is the eternal charm of Thangka art.

With the development and changes of modern society, Thangka art is also facing new opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, modern technology provides a new means and platform for the creation, dissemination and appreciation of thangka; On the other hand, the wave of commercialization may also have an impact on the purity of Thangka art^[11]. How to keep pace with The Times and innovate on the basis of inheriting the tradition is an important topic for contemporary Thangka art workers. Only by deeply understanding the spiritual essence of Thangka art and continuously improving the level of artistic accomplishment and creation, can we create excellent works with national characteristics and in line with the aesthetics of The Times, so that this ancient art form will glow with new vitality and vitality.

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