
TIBETAN TOURIST THANGKAS IN THE KATHMANDU VALLEY



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Abstract: This case study of Tibetan tourist thangkas in the Kathmandu Valley stresses the historical and cultural background essential for understanding the specific modes of commercialization of sacred art. The specific circumstances under which the tourist thangka market developed led to the existence of an "intermediate audience" located between the "internal" and "external audiences" typical of most tourist markets. This "intermediate audience," while introducing a slight shift of emphasis in the purpose of thangkas, promotes an adherence to tradition which has had an effect even on the tourist outlets. The producers of thangkas for the tourist market in the Kathmandu Valley are predominantly non-Tibetans who stage the authenticity of their paintings. **Keywords:** tourist art, thangka, Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism, Nepal, Navajo sandpaintings.

Résumé: Les thangkas touristiques tibétains de la vallée de Katmandou. La présente étude de cas des thangkas touristiques tibétains dans la vallée de Katmandou souligne le cadre historique et culturel, ce qui est essentiel pour comprendre les différentes façons de commercialiser l'art sacré. Les circonstances dans lesquelles s'est développé le marché des thangkas touristiques ont mené à existence d'un public intermédiaire entre les publics interne et externe qui typifient la plupart des marchés touristiques. Ce public intermédiaire, tout en provoquant une légère modification à la signification des thangkas, favorise une adhésion à la tradition qui a eu son effet même sur les débouchés touristiques. Les producteurs des thangkas touristiques dans la vallée de Katmandou sont principalement des non-Tibétains qui montent l'authenticité de leurs peintures. **Mots-clés:** art touristique, thangka, Tibet, bouddhisme tibétain, Népal, peintures de sable navajoes.

INTRODUCTION

A visitor to the main monuments of the Nepalese heritage is likely to find in adjoining tourist shops not Nepalese paintings but rather a variety of paintings called Tibetan thangkas. This paper is a case study of this phenomenon, which will be analyzed with reference to current theories of tourism and tourist art. The marketing of tourist thangkas in Nepal has already been described by Schempp (1987). His work,

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however, does not emphasize the historical and cultural circumstances, which are essential for understanding the specific processes in the commercialization of Tibetan thangkas and the rationalizations provided by Tibetans for the commercialization of their sacred objects, and which will be the focus of the present paper. The author is not a social scientist but a Tibetologist with an interest in Buddhist religiosity.

As to the cultural background, Tibet became a literate culture in the 7th century, at approximately the same time as two other nations flanking the older civilizations of Eurasia: England and Japan. At that time, Tibet began to adopt the Buddhist religion in its Mahâyâna Tantric (Vajrayâna) form that then prevailed in northern India. Over the following centuries, the adoption of the new religion involved the systematic and accurate Tibetan translations of most Sanskritic Buddhist texts, then circulating in northern India, western China, and Central Asia. A brief decline occurred in the mid-9th century, but this was soon followed by a marked resurgence that led to the establishment of monastic centers of lasting significance, an increase in the number of Tibetan Buddhist teachers, a renewed dedication to the translation of scriptures and treatises from Indian languages, and a great increase in the number of original compositions by Tibetans. This situation only benefitted from the unfortunate decline of Buddhism in its countries of origin in India, in the 12th century.

Until the 1959 takeover by the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army, Buddhism had a virtually uncontested reign over the hearts and minds of Tibetans, while "high" literary culture flourished—numerous works of poetry, drama, biography, history, as well as commentaries on Buddhist scriptures and treatises, were composed. Buddhist theories were subjected to thorough rethinking, tested with highly critical deliberation and debates, and further developed, often along lines that led to an increasing awareness of sectarian differences. Monastic religious practices, including meditations and rituals, were performed without break. In the 70s and early 80s, when the US Library of Congress sponsored the printing of Tibetan books to be found in the Himalayan countries and in the possession of Tibetan refugees, approximately 5,000 separate volumes were published.

While it may be an exaggeration to speak of Tibet's remoteness and isolation, given its historical openness to ideas and cultural influences from the outside world (Miller 1988), there is some truth to this portrait, if only in the 19th to 20th centuries, partially as an effect of official Manchu policy (Goldstein 1989). Then, in 1959, approximately 100,000 Tibetans who escaped the Chinese Communist takeover began to establish new communities in exile, mainly in India, but also in Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan (Avedon 1979/84; Nowak 1984). During their first years, they were engaged in a daily struggle for survival, many of them finding work in road building, one of the most back-breaking and unremunerative occupations. In recent years, the economic situation of many Tibetan refugees has improved dramatically, in part due to entrepreneurial jobs in the tourist-related businesses or, particularly in Nepal, in the carpet industry (Fürer-Haimendorf 1989). Improvements in economic power have had their effects, as educational institutions and monasteries are built, books published, and

traditional customs, clothing, etc., preserved. These efforts are all part of a general attempt to preserve Tibetan culture. The recent destruction in Tibet has supplied diaspora Tibetans with a sense of mission; they feel that they themselves are responsible for Tibetan cultural transmission and survival. It is this sense of mission that is, in great part, responsible for their success in the cultural revival, particularly in India and Nepal.

The geographical area of this paper is Nepal. About 10,000 Tibetan refugees escaped to Nepal (Forbes 1989; Gombo 1985). A great deal of the Tibetan exile activity is concentrated in the Kathmandu Valley, especially around two sites traditionally held sacred by Tibetans, the Bodhanath, and Swayambhu Stûpas. In recent years, over two dozen new Tibetan monasteries have been built in the vicinity of these two monumental structures, perhaps the most visible indication of the Tibetan cultural renaissance.

Thangkas Made for Internal Use

Thangkas are Tibetan scrolls depicting sacred subjects, primarily although not exclusively painted. Some especially valued thangkas may be made of a combination of embroidery and stitched or glued appliqué, while still others may be tapestries of handwoven silk or woodblock prints (Dagyab 1977:40). Tibetans traditionally conceive of these thangkas as embodiments of the enlightened being or reality (*ye-shes-sems-dpa'*). Throughout the centuries, thangkas played an important role in the creation and transmission of religious sentiments and concepts.

The internal consumers of thangkas in Nepal are both Tibetan private householders and individual monks, as well as monasteries as a whole. Installed in the temples and shrines of the newly built Tibetan monasteries in Nepal are images, wall paintings, thangkas, and other sacred objects, almost all made recently by traditional artists—exiled Tibetans, ethnic Tibetans residing in northern Nepal, or sometimes Bhutanese. Smaller images, thangkas and so forth are kept on family altars, which are found in virtually every Tibetan home. Thus, Tibetan culture and traditional arts are a vital part of Tibetan life today in the Kathmandu Valley.

It should be noted that the population of Tibet is composed of both sedentary and nomadic people, and the nomads, no less than village and city dwellers, kept thangkas hanging in their homes. Wrapped in silk, they were rolled and packed on animal backs with the rest of their household goods when they moved. Thus, though delicate, thangkas are traditionally portable, and were carried by wandering story tellers as well.

In the West and, of course, among Western tourists, thangkas are most usually considered to be aids in meditative practices of Tibetan monks or yogis. Yet the great majority of thangkas painted for internal use are made for purposes other than meditation (Dagyab 1977:24–27; Jackson and Jackson 1984:9–11). As the Tibetan author Dagyab writes on Tibetan religious art in general, “The most general reason for the making of new works was to create objects of worship in order

to accumulate merit." Thangkas and "... images are made for a variety of purposes and not solely for use in meditation" (1977:28, 26). The key notion in the making of thangkas is the accumulation of merit. This is by no means a recent or a Tibetan innovation, but an idea well rooted in Buddhist tradition. To give an example, the vastness of the merit accumulated through the building of images and *stûpas* is the principal message of a Buddhist scripture entitled *Abhutadharmaparyâya*, of which a 6th-7th century manuscript was found in Gilgit (the text itself is probably older). Considerable evidence, much of it archaeological, supports the actual performance of practices prescribed in the text (Bentor 1988). Through the commissioning of a religious object such as an image, *stûpa*, or *thangka*, the patron accumulates merit that can be dedicated for various purposes.

The merit of having a *thangka* made is very often dedicated toward the better rebirth of a recently deceased person. A considerable number of the *thangkas* found in private homes were made in the name of a family member who had passed away. Among the funeral rites commonly performed by monks for deceased persons, is one that consists in the dedication of the merit resulting from the making of a *thangka* toward a favorable rebirth in the next life, and of course also for the ultimate attainment of Enlightenment. According to the most common Tibetan belief, after a person dies, he or she remains in an intermediate state (*bar-do*) for 49 days before entering into a new life. During this period, relatives and friends may perform various deeds for the sake of the deceased. It is important to stress that even though Tibetans doubtlessly have made certain contributions to the Buddhist concept of the intermediate state, mortuary rituals for transferring merit to the dead are practiced within the Theravâda tradition as well (Gombrich 1971/91:251-84; Tambiah 1968).

The merit accrued by the commissioning of a *thangka* may be dedicated not only to the deceased, but also to the living. Since suffering and misfortune result from unwholesome deeds performed in the past, a virtuous action such as the creation of religious art can serve to counteract the demerit that leads to suffering and misfortune. In such cases, the merit is not transferred, but directly earned. People facing impediments such as diseases, problems, or calamities earn merit by erecting an image, *thangka*, etc. This may be done as a precautionary measure, especially in times when people feel vulnerable to mishap (for example, at the critical ages of 13, 25, 37, 49, and so forth). Economic circumstances permitting, a *thangka* may be commissioned to keep at bay all manners of future obstacles, whether physical or mental.

Once a *thangka* is made, regardless of whether it was made for a deceased person or for oneself and one's living family, it is hung in a place of honor in the house where it serves as an object of worship and offerings, enabling the family to create further merit. Moreover, the *thangka* itself may help induce religious inspiration and devotion. With time, a deeper apprehension of the symbolic representations depicted in the *thangkas* can develop. For similar reasons, *thangkas* are hung in public temples and shrines. These are sponsored either by the monastery, to which the temple or shrine belongs, or by individual

donors who wish to accumulate merit, and thereby enable others to gain merit as well.

Thus, the primary purposes of *thangkas* are the accumulation of merit in the act of making them and the creation of new objects for worship and offerings. Secondarily, *thangkas*, especially those commissioned for the sake of removing obstacles to personal health and welfare, are often used by laypersons in relatively simple practices involving recitations related to the depicted Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. Only in the minority of cases do *thangkas* serve a function similar to that imputed by Westerners to be their main function, namely, to serve as a basis for the practice of meditative visualizations. It is this usage, however, that has captured the imagination of Westerners, including tourists.

The usage of *thangkas* in meditation is related to the principal Buddhist tantric practice (*sādhana*), which consists in the transformation of oneself into a chosen Buddha (*yi-dam*). This transformation is accomplished, in part, through the visualization of oneself as that *yi-dam*. A *thangka* depicting a *yi-dam* may assist in this visualization. Therefore, those engaged in such practices may employ a *thangka* of the *yi-dam* to be visualized. This is not a necessity, however. In fact, some Tibetan lamas do not recommend the use of aids to visualization, fearing that the meditator may fixate on the physical representation; “. . . the concentration has to be on the projected image seen in the mind, for the realm of *tin-ñe-dzin* (*samādhi*) is not accessible through the physical organs of perception” (Dagyab 1977:26). Images and *thangkas* are recommended only in the preliminary stages of meditation as a focus for concentrating the mind. These stages are not included in the *sādhana* proper. “It is only after one has succeeded in training the mind that one can seriously start to meditate in order to advance along the path leading to enlightenment. By the time this stage has been reached, it is pointless to concentrate on the physical image in front of one” (Dagyab 1977:26).

Thangkas of *yi-dams* are not the only ones to serve in ritual practices. There are also *thangkas* of mandalas. As these are perhaps the most popular ones with tourists, one should elaborate a little on their ritual use. These depict the abode or residence of a certain *yi-dam*, together with the *yi-dam* residing in it. While *thangkas* of *yi-dams* belonging to the Highest Tantra class (*Anuttarayoga Tantra*) usually show the *yi-dam* in the form of a single deity with or without a consort, these *yi-dams* are generally manifold—fivefold, ninefold, thirteenfold, etc. These manifold aspects are depicted as distinct deities surrounding the main aspect in a symmetrical array. Mandala paintings always portray such manifold *yi-dams* and the divine palace that serves as their abode, even though the presence of the deities themselves may be indicated merely by syllabic mantras or emblems.

Mandala paintings are only rarely owned by individual Tibetans, and are unlikely to be seen displayed in Tibetan homes. Mandalas are most commonly found painted on the ceilings of temples. Cloth paintings of mandalas may be used in the monastery’s assembly hall during rituals such as initiations, consecrations, collective *sādhanas*, and so forth. Unlike *thangkas*, these are usually not framed in brocade. In

the most elaborate forms of these rituals, a colored sand mandala is drawn only to be erased at the conclusion. As the making of such a sand mandala requires considerable time, skill, labor and resources, permanent paintings of mandalas are often used as substitutes in these rituals, although sand mandalas are definitely preferred. Still, both sand and painted mandalas belong to the category of material mandalas. These material mandalas are the lowest category of mandalas, the middle category being the mandalas visualized during practices or rituals. The material mandalas may serve as basic representations of the visualized or internal mandalas. Finally, there is the ultimate mandala that corresponds to the reality itself. The visualized mandala is a projection of the ultimate mandala in the world of forms (Mammitsch 1991:15–25). Nevertheless, outsiders to the Tibetan tradition do not make any distinction between the material mandala and the visualized or internal mandala. They regard the physical mandala as the actual sacred symbol. This distinction between the physical and visualized is similar to the one holding for *yi-dams* portrayed in thangkas and their visualized forms.

Another interesting use of thangkas is as didactic aids. There is a class of wandering storytellers, called *Ma-ni-pa*, who carry their thangkas with them. They may hang a thangka on a wall in the street, while crowds of curious listeners gather around them. As they tell their stories, the *Ma-ni-pa* will indicate the parts of the thangkas that illustrate them with a pointing stick. Most frequently, the thangkas used by the storytellers are of the type in which a large central figure is surrounded by narrative scenes. The most usual subjects are the life of Milarepa, the great yogic anchorite; the popular oral epic of Gesar, the legendary king of Ling; and the life of the Buddha. Also, although not so much narrative as doctrinal in content, they may show a thangka of the Wheel of Life (see Figure 1). One is most likely to encounter the Wheel of Life on walls next to the doorways of Tibetan temples.

No matter what sacred beings or structures might be found in it, as a sacred object the thangka should be consecrated. In consecrations, the physical aspects of the painting are dissolved and transformed into embodiments of Enlightenment (Bentor 1991). The consecration of a thangka is usually performed by a highly regarded lama very soon after the painting is completed. No Tibetan would think of keeping a thangka that they had themselves commissioned without getting it consecrated. Without a consecration, a painting is considered to be nothing more than an aggregate of cloth, paint and form. The consecration transforms it into a sacred religious object, a living presence.

According to Buddhist philosophy, objects of worship such as thangkas and images, as well as practices of worship and accumulation of merit, exist only on the level of conventional truth. In ultimate reality they lack inherent existence. Their purpose is to assist the practitioners who are advancing toward Enlightenment as long as they have not realized the ultimate truth. The purpose of worshipping a thangka or an image is not “propitiation” but rather to serve as a means for the pursuit of Enlightenment that is the responsibility of the individual, not of a god.

The "Intermediate Audience"

Investigators of tourist art usually distinguish between "internal" and "external audiences" (Graburn 1976:8). While the "internal audience" includes members of the producing ethnic group, the "external audience" is characterized as unfamiliar with the tradition of the producers and their aesthetic values. In the case of consumers of Tibetan style thangkas, there is also an "intermediate audience", which ranges between the "external audience" and the "internal audience." This "intermediate audience" is made up of two segments. The first includes Buddhist groups in various parts of Asia, mainly the more well to do of them, including Japanese and overseas Chinese. For members of this group, the pan-Buddhist subjects of some of the thangkas, especially the life of the Buddha Śākyamuni, are not at all alien, even though the Tibetan style of painting is quite distinct from their own national styles. Both Japanese and overseas Chinese visit Nepal as tourists and pilgrims, especially to Lumbini, the birthplace of Śākyamuni Buddha, found within the present-day borders of Nepal. In recent years, the export of thangkas to Japan has undergone rapid growth, and this also has had its influence on the local scene.

The second segment of the "intermediate audience" is composed of non-Tibetans who have in varying degrees adopted the Tibetan style of Buddhism, along with some attendant aspects of Tibetan culture. In recent decades Tibetan Buddhism has had remarkable success in Western countries as well as in non-communist Chinese communities in Asia (Bechert 1984; Harvey 1990), in Japan and Australia, and more recently in eastern Europe and Latin America. In 1984, there were 111 Tibetan Buddhist centers in the United States and, in 1987, 17 such centers in the United Kingdom (Harvey 1990:309, 312). It is estimated that about 100,000 people in the West have developed strong practical interest in the Tibetan form of Buddhism. Some have made their interest into a major commitment by becoming monks and nuns in the Tibetan tradition. Recently, recognized reincarnations have even been discovered among non-Tibetan followers of Tibetan Buddhism.

The patronage of non-Tibetan followers of Tibetan Buddhism has played a very important, perhaps essential, part in the revival of Tibetan culture in exile. These "foreign Buddhists" are also instrumental in making Tibetan Buddhism in general, and thangkas in particular, known to other people back home. Many of them visit Nepal, alone or in groups led by their lama, where they receive teachings and initiations from various lamas, go on pilgrimage and procure religious objects, including thangkas. Some of these "intermediate consumers" use the traditional method of directly commissioning thangkas from Tibetan painters. Their relationships with the painters resemble the more personal relations between producers and consumers that tend to exist at the early stages in the evolution of a tourist market (Ben-Amos 1976:332-333), except that in this case a tourist market was already in place in Nepal. Since the painting of a good quality thangka requires at least a few weeks of continuous labor, most "intermediate consum-

ers” do in fact resort to the market of “ready-made” thangkas. To some degree, these buyers are familiar with various aspects of Tibetan culture and its symbolisms; therefore, they cannot simply be classified as an “external audience.”

While in Nepal, the foreign Buddhists are a rather extreme case of what has been called the “existential” tourist. Cohen has suggested a fivefold

phenomenological typology of tourist experiences by analysing the different meanings which interest in and appreciation of the culture, social life and the natural environment of others has for the individual traveller. The degree to which his journey represents a “quest for the centre”. . . . [Among the five types] . . . the “existential” mode in its extreme form is characteristic of the traveller who is fully committed to an “elective” spiritual centre, i.e., one external to the mainstream of his native society and culture. The acceptance of such a centre comes phenomenologically closest to a religious conversion, to “switching worlds”. . . . (1979:183, 189–190).

The “existential” tourists, according to Cohen, are engaged in periodic visits to their “spiritual” centers abroad where they find true meanings for their lives. Their everyday lives at home, on the other hand, are rather hollow. Many among the followers of Tibetan Buddhism have gone a step further than this. They strive to create in their home countries imported “elective” spiritual centers where they can practice Tibetan Buddhism as close as possible to the form they find among Tibetans in Nepal and India. They build Tibetan-style temples or shrines and invite various teachers to instruct them in Buddhist teachings and meditation practices. The “flying lama” phenomenon has become so common that it has led Tibetans in India and Nepal to complain about the “brain drain” of Tibetan lamas to the West. Furthermore, the foreign Buddhists incorporate the Tibetan religious lifestyle into their non-Tibetan lifestyles. Still, the actual center of their religion remains abroad. Therefore, like the “existential” tourists, they repeatedly visit their “elective” center, in this case Nepal and India. Here the distinction between ‘tourist’ and ‘pilgrim’ has been quite consciously blurred, since these categories are in fact blurred in the experience of the “foreign Buddhist.”

Compared to other tourists in Nepal, the foreign Buddhists are better acquainted with Tibetan culture and its symbols in general and thangkas in particular. Moreover, just like their Tibetan teachers, they are highly concerned with the authenticity (Cohen 1988) of the thangkas they are buying. For them, they are definitely not just “souvenirs” or aesthetic handmade paintings, but religious objects. The more the foreign Buddhists are “absorbed” into Tibetan culture, the more they will be content only with thangkas that strictly adhere to tradition. It should be emphasized, however, that there is no real uniformity in this “intermediate” group. Rather they form a continuum that finally blends into the “external audience.” An “external consumer” may be transformed into an “intermediate” one. Thangka retailers in any case usually fail to distinguish between them, since there are no necessary distinguishing marks. Still, this “intermediate audience” has had an

impact on the marketing of tourist thangkas. They have made the "external audience" more familiar with thangkas, while their concern with authenticity created some pressure for more traditional types of paintings in the marketplace.

As the "intermediate audience" ranges from the "external" almost up to the "internal audience," its uses of thangkas vary considerably. It is interesting to note that a considerable number of "intermediate audience" bring a significant shift in emphasis in their reasons for acquiring thangkas. While Tibetans commission thangkas primarily for the accumulation of merit and the creation of objects for worship and offerings, many members of the "intermediate audience" believe that thangkas are primarily meant to form a basis for the practice of mediative visualizations, and most foreign Buddhists of non-Asian origins acquire thangkas for just this purpose. This shift of purpose is most likely due to stances against idolatry prevailing in their cultures of origin. It may also derive from the way Buddhism has been presented in the West. Influenced by the Protestant tradition, and by the school of rationalism which prevailed at the time the West came into its major encounter with it, Buddhism was understood to be an ethical and philosophical system, and the Buddha a great philosopher. Many of the religious aspects of Buddhism were simply disregarded or condemned as later violations of the "rational, philosophical" core of "original" Buddhism. The effects of this Western appropriation of Buddhism are still prevalent today, and the rational and meditational methods of Buddhism are much more highly appreciated than its rituals and worship.

Still another factor in the Western view of thangkas may be suggested. The categories of official and popular religion, while problematic in their application to religion in any culture, are even more so in Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan thinkers take a variety of stands on these questions, whereas Western admirers of Tibetan Buddhism are fairly uniform in regarding worship, offerings, and merit-making, as well as popular religious practices, as unworthy of their serious attention. However, there are signs that this "elitist" attitude may be eroding, especially among Westerners within the "intermediate audience," as their appreciation of Buddhist religious culture deepens.

There is a basic difference between the "external audience" well-known to tourism studies and the "intermediate" category: While the "external audience" may purchase items that bear a religious meaning for the sake of their aesthetic or ethnic qualities, the "intermediate audience" preserves, at least in a general way, the religious significance, while narrowing it down to one particular religious usage, which, however, is not the primary one for the "internal audience."

The "External Audience": Tourist Thangkas

The number of tourists visiting Nepal has increased from 6,000 in 1962 (Stevens 1988:68) to 90,000 in 1975, 180,000 in 1984 (Schempp 1987:62), and 266,000 in 1988 (WTO 1991). In 1989, the number dropped slightly to 240,000 (WTO 1991). The members of this "external audience" for Tibetan thangkas visit Nepal for reasons not at all necessarily related to Tibetan culture. The Himalayan mountains ex-

ert a great drawing power of their own, as do Newars, Nepalis, and the many other ethnic groups in Nepal. Still others visit Nepal as just one stop in an Asian tour package. While these latter spend only a few nights in Nepal, usually only in the Kathmandu Valley, the trekkers stay much longer (Baumgartner 1978; Stevens 1988). The trekking routes pass through areas inhabited by ethnic groups who follow their own local forms of Tibetan Buddhism, such as the Sherpa, Manang, Tamang, and Gurung. Some of the "external audience" have heard about thangkas already in their home country through the activities of the foreign Buddhists or from art books.

A number of qualities make thangkas suitable as tourist art. Thangkas are portable; traditionally they were designed to be so. Nowadays, many retailers even supply poster-tubes; and Nepal imposes no export restrictions on new thangka paintings (as it does on carpets). There is a range of prices for every pocket (Schempp 1986:67). Good quality thangkas, meaning ones that are well painted, have considerable artistic value; their rich colors and details make them attractive. Sometimes, they are framed in glass, like Western paintings. As with other tourist arts, they are appreciated as handmade products of different and "simpler" people (Gordon 1986:143). But thangkas have something extra, the mystique associated with Tibet, the "country of Shangri-la," and their use in meditations and esoteric rituals adds to their appeal. Particularly powerful symbols are the mandalas with their symmetrical designs and strong visual impact. Even though very few tourists understand the concept of the mandala as maintained in the Tibetan tradition, mandalas are known to them according to their Jungian explanation. Even Tucci, one of the most influential Tibetologists of the last generation, wrote his book on mandalas (1961) along the lines suggested by Jung. Above all, it is the Tibetan mystique that guarantees their popularity with tourists.

The six main tourist sites (except for Bhaktapur) in the Kathmandu Valley were surveyed for the present paper and over 50 thangka shops located there were revisited in January and February of 1992 as a participant-observer in the thangkas' outlets. Clusters of thangka shops are found in Kathmandu's Durbar Square; Patan's Durbar Square; Swayambhu; Bodhanath; Thamel, in northern Kathmandu; and Durbar Marg, Kathmandu. The first four are the major tourist attractions in the Kathmandu Valley, nearly always on the itineraries of even one-day tourists. Thamel, especially popular with younger trekkers, is the area of lower-to-middle priced tourist accommodations, while the Durbar Marg in Kathmandu has the higher priced accommodations along with the more expensive shops.

The Painters

The Tibetan exile community in Kathmandu Valley, currently undergoing a revitalization, employs (through commissioning) traditional painters for both private thangkas and temple murals. Predominant among these traditional painters are ethnic Tibetans (that is to say, mainly Tibetan exiles, but also cultural Tibetans of Nepalese national

origin such as Tamangs, and even Bhutanese). Tibetan painters need not be monks. There are both monastic and lay thangka painters. Most painters in Tibet were born into families of painters, thereby apprenticed from a very early age. It was not, however, a "caste" occupation, caste as such being unknown in Tibet. The possibility of becoming an artist was open to anyone with sufficient skill. Young monks served as apprentices to older monks. Also, painters must be religious, in the sense that they are required to have received the appropriate tantric initiations for the deities they intend to paint. This is not just an unheeded prescription, but is in fact commonly practiced (Dagyab 1977:27; Jackson and Jackson 1984:6).

As in sacred arts of other cultures, Tibetan paintings do not express the "genius" of the artist, but are an expression of the tradition itself and its symbols. Paintings must conform to strictly prescribed rules of iconography and iconometry. Naturally, there have been some historical developments in the field of iconography and iconometry. But since the 14th century, a growing systematization and adherence to selected rules was practiced in Tibet (Lo Bue 1990). There are as well certain regional stylistic variations among Tibetan artists (Dagyab 1977; Rhie and Thurman 1991). The iconographic and iconometric rules apply only to the elements of religious significance, such as the proportions of the various Buddhas, their symbolic attributes, and the colors in mandalas. The artist is free to choose the various aspects of ornamentation and even to decide upon the entire composition. These secondary elements have no bearing on the religious meaning of the thangka, but they do add to its aesthetic qualities, which increase with the fineness of the details. Especially appreciated from the aesthetic point of view is the shading created through a laborious process of dotting, a kind of pointillism; shading is often the main criterion for judging the skill and experience of a painter. While these artistic skills may be appreciated, one must underline that Tibetans demand iconographic correctness first, with the artistic quality being only secondary. Thangka painters are not called "creators" (to call a painting *rang-bzo*, "individually created" or "made-up" would be the strongest form of condemnation), but "depicters of deities" (*lha-bri-ba* or *lha-bzo-ba*). Thangka painters are also anonymous, as a rule. If any name is mentioned in relation to a work of art, it is the name of the patron who, by the act of commissioning the work has performed a religious act worthy of merit and memorialization. Few names of artists are known from centuries of Tibetan history, and still fewer can be associated with particular works of art. There are also foreign painters, who mostly belong to the "intermediate" group. Their thangkas are not sold in Nepal (except in the form of prints and greeting cards produced outside Nepal), but in the West. Sometimes, like other Western artists, they sign or initial their paintings.

The "intermediate audience" patronizes those who paint for both the "internal" and "external audiences." Acquisition of thangkas from "internal" painters is done by means of commission. Still, until the present time, no institutional framework has been established for bringing foreign patrons together with Tibetan artists. This happens,

most generally, through word of mouth. The likelihood of purchasing from an "internal producer" increases as the potential consumer achieves greater familiarity with Tibetan people and their traditions.

Buyers in ready-made thangka shops normally do not meet the painter, but only a retailer. While the majority of thangkas sold in tourist shops in Nepal are not painted by Tibetans, consumers are routinely led to believe otherwise. "Staged authenticity" (MacCannell 1973) by intermediaries, rather than artists, is known in many tourism destinations. In the present case, the mysticism surrounding Tibet is an important element in the selling situation. Actual authenticity is important to "intermediate" buyers, but "external" buyers are made content with an authenticating story. This misrepresentation of the artist translates into significant increases in sales, and this applies not only to thangkas. Quite a few other tourist arts in Nepal, from images of Confucius to necklaces of imitation gems, both imported from Hong Kong, are assigned Tibetan origins. Some shopkeepers exploit potential buyers' fascination not only with things Tibetan, but also with the "old way to do things" and the "natural" way. The author was told by one shopkeeper that the artists working for him were Tibetans living up in the mountains near the Tibetan border, where they continue their old way of life, far from the reach of the modern world. All the shopkeepers for low-quality thangkas in the Durbar square of Kathmandu stated that their thangkas were painted by Tibetans. Nevertheless, the proprietor of one large enterprise (not just a shop, but rather a showroom for an export business) in Durbar Marg in Kathmandu, which employs high standards of quality control, did not attempt to cover the fact that its 90 painters are all Tamang. In Patan (the city immediately to the south of Kathmandu), retailers asserted that their own relatives were the painters, enabling them to eliminate the middlemen and keep prices low. Thus, the identity of the artists is a problem negotiated in different ways by retailers, in the hope that they will maximize sales. Many, but not all, make assertions about the artists being "Tibetans living in Kathmandu" or the like.

The majority of painters for the external market are Newars, although various culturally-Tibetan groups originating from northern parts of Nepal (such as the Tamang) also produce thangkas for the tourists. While exiled Tibetans form a small minority among them, Newars and Tamangs are dominant. Newars, Tamangs, and other Nepalese groups also engage in the retailing of thangkas. Not a single Tibetan retailer of thangkas was encountered in the survey made of thangka outlets. A closer look at the Newar and Tamang painters will shed more light on the subject.

The Newars (Slusser 1982) are the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley who in the 18th century lost their political hegemony to the Gurkhas. The Newar language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family. The Newar religions are Buddhism and Hinduism. Newari Buddhism belongs to the Mahâyâna Tantric school, what is also called Vajrayâna (Lienhard 1984). This form of Buddhism is shared also by Tibetans, although both groups tend to emphasize the distinctive rather than the common features of their respective traditions. Each group regards itself as holding the authentic version of Vajrayâna.

Newars had a profound cultural influence on Tibet in the early centuries of the advancement of Buddhism in Tibet, and their artistic influences were considerable. Since Tibetan painters copied the Newari style in the temples of central and southern Tibet, the oldest murals “do not differ in the least from the Nepalese manner, to such an extent that in some cases we cannot establish with certainty whether the paintings are Nepalese originals or Tibetan copies.” (Tucci 1949/80:I 279). Later, as Tibet developed its own artistic styles, Newari Buddhist culture began its decline. In the 16th century, the direction of cultural influence between the two countries was reversed (Slusser 1982:70). With the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley by the Hindu Gurkhas, the Buddhist Newari tradition suffered a serious blow. Newar lands that had provided income for Buddhist institutions were by degrees transferred to the new rulers (Lo Bue 1985:263). When in the 15th century, Tibetan painting had fully developed a style all its own, Newari artists began to produce Tibetan-style *thangkas* and murals for Tibetan patrons (Lo Bue 1985:270). Although this occurred several centuries before any such tourism business existed in Nepal, it helps to illustrate the adaptability of Newari artists to external markets. The Newari painters always worked under the guidance of a priest — a Newari priest when they produced for Newars (Blom 1989:5) and a Tibetan lama when the work was commissioned by Tibetans.

The greater number of Newari painters did not work for foreign or even wealthy local patrons, but for ordinary households in their neighborhoods. Blom (1989) has recently studied the painters of Bhaktapur, the third largest town in the Kathmandu Valley (note that though Bhaktapur is primarily a Hindu town, most painters there were Buddhist; Blom 1989:5). According to her findings, the painters in Bhaktapur used to paint seven to eight *paubhās* (Newari equivalent of *thangkas*) a year. Most of their time was dedicated to colored block-prints used in rituals and festivals, decoration of private houses, painting or repainting of temple walls and struts, painting ritual masks used in dances and processions, painting pots used in family rituals, and drawing on people’s skin for healing purposes. However, “In the last thirty years, the position of the painters in the Nepalese society has changed a great deal. . . . Nowadays their main task is the endless reproduction of *paubhas* and *thangkas* for the tourist market” (Blom 1989:6–9).

Newari artists, whose ancestors contributed significantly to the evolution of Tibetan *thangkas*, now often pretend to be Tibetans. In the tourist shops, their paintings are called *thangkas* rather than *paubhās*. *Paubhās* are still produced for the Newari internal audience. Thus, within the Newari community there exists a sharp distinction between production for internal and external audiences. For the internal audience, there are *paubhās*; for the external, Tibetan-style or, rather, imitation Tibetan-style *thangkas*. Occasionally, one does see *paubhās* in the tourist shops, even though they are not inexpensive. In producing for the tourists, Newari painters do not receive any guidance from a priest. Furthermore, as the market flourishes, other Newars who are not members of painting families have taken up the occupation.

Another group of *thangka* painters for the “external audience” are

the Tamang. Among the numerous ethnic groups in Nepal, the Tamang are perhaps the closest in religious tradition to Tibet (on Tamangs, see MacDonald 1989, and references supplied there). While the sacred liturgical language of the Newars is Sanskrit (as it had been also in Indian Mahâyâna Buddhism), Tamang sacred books are written in Tibetan. Their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family, but is much closer to Tibetan than is Newari. The Tamang cultic objects are very similar to those of the Tibetans. Yet Tibetans generally look upon the Tamang as a Nepalese people.

A few Tamang are employed also by the "internal audience." Most of the thangka shops surrounding Bodhanath Stûpa, the holiest Tibetan center in Nepal, are Tamang, and not Tibetan. Their owners sell mostly to the "external audience" of tourists who frequent the site. As already mentioned, about 90 Tamang painters are employed by a large thangka export enterprise marketing to both "external" and "intermediate" audiences. Of all the groups of painters, the Tamang painters as a whole have succeeded in producing thangkas that appeal to the broadest spectrum of potential buyers.

The Thangkas Described

The subjects of thangkas for internal consumption are many. A Tibetan who wishes to commission a thangka generally consults first with a lama who decides which subject would most befit the occasion. Widespread are depictions of various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Tibetan yogis and saints, as well as scenes from the life of Sâkyamuni Buddha. Monasteries or individual monks may own thangkas of important lamas in their school or lineage, while those engaged in the *sâdhana* of a particular *yi-dam* may prefer a thangka of that *yi-dam*. Popular also are thangkas of the protectors of the Buddhist religion such as Mahâkâla and Śrîdevî (Thub-bstan-sangs-rgyas 1981). All these subjects are popular with tourists as well. Yet, two of the most popular subjects for tourist thangkas, mandalas, and the Wheel of Life are not popular with Tibetan householders.

Nowadays, certain commercial products have penetrated the internal market. An inexpensive alternative to commissioned thangkas are the poster reproductions of thangkas printed in India and Tibet, now widely available in the Kathmandu Valley. For the most part, these reproduce thangkas that adhere to the traditional iconographic standards. These may have been inspired by the widespread Indian trade in posters and calendars depicting Hindu deities. Not only are they quite inexpensive and widely available, but they can be obtained quickly without the prolonged periods of waiting often required for paintings to be completed. The innovation in their materials is part of their attraction (Maduro 1976:240). The Tibetan tradition posits no scruples about the reproduction of sacred items; indeed, the practice is encouraged in scriptures and considered meritorious when done with a devotional attitude; Tibetan exiles in Nepal, within their means, avidly photograph, photocopy, and record thangkas, books, and sacred chants. Still, posters do not take the place of thangkas in their traditional use as means of acquiring merit. In actual use, they do to a

certain extent fill the same role of "decoration" as they do for some external consumers.

On the whole, thangkas commissioned by the "intermediate audience" are of quite similar qualities, subjects and styles as those provided to the "internal audience." Standard time-saving techniques, employed more often in the case of the "intermediate audience," are reducing the amount of shading and omitting or simplifying secondary details. Still, the strict iconographic and iconometric rules are preserved, and this is what gives a painting its potential as a religious object.

The classifications of tourist thangkas supplied by retailers reduce them to basically four types: mandalas, the life of the Buddha, Wheel of Life, and "figures." The first question asked in a large number of tourist shops was, "Would you like to see mandalas?" By rough estimate, mandala paintings comprise more than half of the stock of thangka paintings in most shops. These esoteric paintings seem to have the greatest appeal for tourists. Scenes from the life of the Buddha offer the customer a narrative painting with various episodes: the birth of the Buddha, His escape from the palace, His Enlightenment and final *nirvāna*—all easily comprehended scenes with which tourists are likely to be familiar. By "figures," thangka retailers mean any thangka depicting a Buddha, Bodhisattva or *yi-dam*, in other words, the most common subjects of thangkas in the internal market.

As with tourist arts in other areas, preserving the high quality demands of the "internal audience" would make the marketing of thangkas to a tourist less profitable. Unlike the "internal audience," the "external audience" is for the most part unwilling to pay the high prices that would be required for thangkas employing traditional craftsmanship. Therefore, many of the thangkas sold in tourist outlets suffer from a decline in their quality and aesthetic value (c.f. Jules-Rosette 1984:16). Furthermore, a considerable number of the non-Tibetan painters (and they are the overwhelming majority) are not familiar with Tibetan tradition and do not understand the symbolic meanings of their paintings. Because of their unfamiliarity with Tibetan culture and lack of guidance, thangkas for external consumers are generally incorrect from the Tibetan point of view. Most tourist thangkas do not adhere to the iconographic and iconometric rules. Some combine unrelated symbols, or exchange one symbol for another, admixing some elements of their own. Most of these alterations will not be noticed by the "external audience," and so the cultural blindness of both sides converges to construct an idea of a "thangka" quite different from what Tibetans intend by the word. While degeneration of tourist arts usually occurs as their producers realize that their audience does not understand the aesthetic values and symbols of the culture, here these values and symbols are not understood by the producers as well.

Examples of the fusion of unrelated symbols are provided in Figures 1-3. Figure 1 is the Tibetan Wheel of Life which shows the suffering nature of existence (*samsāra*). Māra or Yāma, the personification of delusion and death, holds the wheel. The rings, in order from the outermost toward the center, illustrate the doctrine of the chain of interdependent causation (one of the highest Buddhist teachings), the six realms of possible rebirth in *samsāra*, the rise and fall of humans



Figure 1. The Tibetan Wheel of Life. Reprinted with permission from Jackson (1984:39)

depending on their practice or non-practice of religion, and finally, at the center, the three passions—attraction, repulsion and befuddlement—that lie at the root of the endless sufferings of *samsāra*. Figure 2 shows a Tibetan diagram used in astrology. This is a mere diagram and not a sacred painting. The central motive of this diagram is drawn



Figure 3. A tourist thangka from Nepal intermixing motives from the Tibetan Wheel of Life and the astrological diagram (photo by the author)

the Wheel of Life as being “a Tibetan calendar.” While the figures in the outer circle of the Wheel of Life symbolizing the twelve chains in the Buddhist doctrine of interdependent causation are certainly difficult to explicate, representing as they do the central mystery of the Buddha’s Enlightenment, they most definitely have nothing to do with “January, February, March . . .” as some retailers explained.

Another alteration in the Wheel of Life is meant to provide a myth to assist in selling the thangka. One of the six realms of possible rebirth in *samsāra* is the animal world, traditionally represented by depictions of various animals. In a number of the tourist thangkas, the section

corresponding to the animal world contains only a single *nāga* (mythical serpent-spirit). This supplies the salesperson with an opportunity to tell the myth of the origins of the Kathmandu Valley in which the *nāgas* are said to have played an important part. Introducing this particular alteration supplies the customer, salesperson, and perhaps even the painter with a Newari myth to tell to others. The actual Tibetan interpretation is much more complex, more difficult to transmit quickly to the buyer, and probably not understood by the salespersons themselves. This is just one example of how extraneous cultural items have been inserted into the Tibetan Wheel of Life.

Another alteration in the Wheel of Life occurs in the worlds of the gods (*deva*) and demigods (*asura*). Traditionally, the gods and demigods are engaged in an eternal combat. In a large number of tourist thangkas in the Kathmandu Valley, the realms of the gods and demigods have been transformed into a battlefield between Chinese soldiers and Tibetan monks. Thereby, they not only provide a story to tell, but also make a political point about the recent history of Tibetans in the Peoples Republic of China.

It should not be inferred that all tourist thangkas are of an inferior quality from an artistic point of view, or that they necessarily depart radically from traditional iconography. Moreover, even though incorrectness often goes with lower aesthetic qualities, this is not invariably the case. Among the six sites for thangka shops in Kathmandu Valley, higher quality thangkas which adhere to traditional iconography were mostly to be found in Durbar Marg, and to a lesser extent in Thamel, which is to say in the areas where hotels are also found. Shops located in the other four sites, which would generally be visited in conjunction with sightseeing, had paintings which were less-well painted and deviated more widely from tradition (although such paintings were also plentiful in Thamel). The largest concentration of thangka shops was to be found at the Kathmandu Durbar, which is perhaps the most frequented tourist site. These outlets were arranged in a row, numbering about two dozen. They offered mostly incorrect thangkas from the Tibetan point of view and of the lowest artistic quality.

Still other intentional alterations are introduced. These are especially interesting as the general purpose of the marketers is to supply paintings as similar as possible to the Tibetan traditional thangkas, and to present them as authentic Tibetan productions. One alteration, most notable in the case of mandala paintings, is to make the paintings appear antique by the use of turgid colors or by "smoking" them for some time. Although these and other methods do give the impression of age, salespersons do not claim that their thangkas are old. This particular alteration serves another purpose, since the bright colors of Tibetan paintings are not appreciated by all consumers. (Western painters of Tibetan style thangkas introduce changes to the coloration as well: In order to suit the color preferences of Westerners, they may paint in "pastel" colors, even while taking care to adhere to the prescribed iconography.) Still other more technical innovations are introduced. Thangkas may be produced in sizes smaller than the traditional sizes, some as small as 15 by 15 cm. This miniaturization reduces production time, lowers prices, and makes them more likely to be

bought without consideration for baggage limits and space. The paintings are also often simplified by eliminating secondary details. Shading, a very time consuming task, is often eliminated.

In recent years, Newari artists have developed new genres of paintings for the "external audience," which seem to demonstrate a transition to heterogenetic art. (See Cohen in this issue). These paintings have no doubt developed from traditional *paubhá* paintings of pictorial maps memorializing the pilgrimage of patrons to holy sites in the Kathmandu Valley (Banerjee 1989; Slusser 1985). The patrons are depicted in front of the most important temples in the valley. These pilgrimage depictions have been transformed into tourism depictions. The new genre sold in tourist outlets, depicts the temples and palaces of the valley together with other tourist attractions in Nepal such as Pokhara, Chitwan, Tangboche Monastery, and even the faraway Potala Palace of Tibet. Unlike Tibetan style thangkas, these paintings are signed; they quite wonderfully suit the purposes of a souvenir. The paintings not only remind one of the trip, but provide views of a great number of the sites actually visited by tourists. Often camera-wielding tourists are depicted in these paintings as well. Another type is sold mainly to foreign expatriates residing in Nepal. It shows their own house at the center of the picture surrounded by the temples and palaces of the valley. These paintings are, of course, done by commission. They have an obvious appeal in the sense that they "locate" foreign residents in Nepal, even at the "center" of the picture. In paintings for both the traditional pilgrims and modern tourists or expatriates, the purchasers can see themselves as "part of the picture."

Nowadays, Sherpa painters make similar drawings showing the main monastery in their area, Tangboche, and scenes surrounding it (for an example, see Fisher 1990:plate 15). The Tangboche Charitable Trust makes various blockprints in a similar style. These blockprints depict the pastoral life, both monastic and lay, in the high Himalayan mountains surrounded by snow mountains, including Mount Everest. As souvenirs, they illustrate the "ideal" (or idealized) life, the "natural" life away from the big cities, as well as contemplative recluses in the mountains, various features that draw so many visitors to the Himalayas and to Nepal.

In one artist's shop in Patan, there was a painting of the Kathmandu Valley and its temples drawn not in the usual vivid colors, but rather in shades of grey. The artist explained that this represented the valley under the curfew imposed during the recent political events. Nepal has just undergone considerable turmoil during protests against the political system, which finally resulted in certain democratic reforms. Such political paintings seem to be, in themselves, an expression of new democratic freedoms. This "commercial" painting is in fact an expression of the artist's own experience, and loaded with political connotations (for similar political themes in the art of Hmong, see Cohen 1990). This, however, is a marginal example. The author was unable to assess the level of demand for such political art.

The fact that a story about the traditional use of an object helps promote sales has been recognized in various tourist markets (Jules-Rosette 1984:211; Parezo 1983:184). Explanations of the symbolism

of thangkas and mandalas increase customer interest. While Navajo painters may write brief explanations of the painting's use in Navajo culture on its back (Parezo 1983:184), thangka retailers provide oral explanations. Of all such explanations heard in Nepal, only one young Tamang entrepreneur clearly demonstrated his apprehension of the traditional Vajrayâna view on thangkas. The most commonly demonstrated misinterpretation by retailers (who are not only Buddhist but also Hindu) involved the symbolism of the mandala. While "the mandala represents the citadel of Enlightenment" (Jackson and Jackson 1984:26) which brings an end to *samsâra*, the explanations heard from retailers represented the mandala as depicting exclusively the *way to paradise*. Retailers often asserted that the lower part of the painting represents hell, the upper part paradise. Bad actions lead around the mandala to hell, while good actions allow one to enter the mandala, leading to heaven above. Yet, according to the Tibetan tradition, the mandala symbolism is centripetal rather than vertical. Retailers said that "angels" or "good people" control the upper direction, gods the left, goddesses the right, and bad people the lower direction. Such distinctions have no place in traditional mandala symbolism. This "up is good and heaven" while "down is bad and hell" explanation is equally inaccurate when applied to thangkas with figures.

Another marketing tool which has, in part, replaced oral explanations or stories is the book. One shop owner in Thamel showed potential clients a copy of Argüelles (1972) book on mandalas. Another shop, one of the few with valid claims of adhering to traditional Tibetan standards, displayed a Tibetan sketchbook to back its claims. Still another technique is to keep one or two very low quality thangka paintings in order to "educate" the customer about the superior quality of the rest. Customers are offered small magnifying glasses in order to study the differences in the details. Many also claim that real gold is used in their thangkas, and "educate" the customer to distinguish between "real" gold and gold paint (the former is much shinier!). Actual gold is used in the internal Tibetan thangka market; the value of the gold becomes part of the offering, increasing the merit. Patrons often supply the artists with a piece of gold especially for the purpose, or offer an amount (sometimes equal to the amount they will offer to the painter) separately for the purchase of gold. While real gold is often used by Tibetans, imitation gold was in use already in traditional Tibet (Jackson and Jackson 1984:7). Even though most salespersons do their best to convince their customers otherwise, no real gold is used in tourist thangkas. Retailers frequently claim that their thangkas are painted with handground mineral and vegetable colors. In fact, the type of paint used in tourist thangkas is always of the commercially available type, as is the case nowadays even in a majority of Tibetan internal thangkas.

Commercialization of Tibetan Thangkas

Mandalas and thangkas were not unknown in the West prior to 1959. Private and public (museum) collections of Tibetan thangkas (Rhie and Thurman 1991) did exist. Already in 1949, Tucci published

his *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, illustrating numerous thangkas and mandalas, and this monumental work was by no means the first to publish photographs of thangkas. Under the hard circumstances following the Tibetan exodus of 1959, some Tibetan exiles were persuaded to sell the thangkas that they had taken out of their country with much difficulty and danger. The ridiculously low prices paid by the American and European buyers compared to the high prices they fetched from collectors in their countries are now legendary.

It was not the sale of thangkas, but rather the weaving of carpets (Gombo 1985) that was instrumental in the rehabilitation of Tibetan refugees in Nepal. The carpet industry in the Kathmandu Valley is not only a major source of livelihood for Tibetans; it now ranks with tourism as one of the largest foreign currency earners for the state of Nepal (Gombo 1985). Cohen (1989) has pointed to two major factors in the process of commercialization of ethnic arts: "the vitality of the local ethnic culture" (1989:161) and "the source of initiative for commercialization" (1989:162; i.e., whether the process was spontaneous or sponsored). The process of commercialization of the Tibetan carpet industry was that of a culture in decline, since the enterprise was founded during the early years of exile, and under sponsored initiative. The exiled Tibetan carpet industry was from the outset meant for the external market. It has sustained innovations in both designs and colors, employing high standards of quality control. Some traditional motives are employed, but more and more abstract and geometrical designs have developed over the years. Unlike Navajo rugs (Parezo 1983:65), Tibetan carpets do not incorporate sacred motives. Tibetan carpets are secular objects, not necessarily culture-bound, and of practical use. What they do have in common with thangkas is their hand-made character and their cultural roots. Yet, the prospering carpet industry, with its many outlets selling to tourists in Nepal, helped familiarize Tibetan refugees with the potentials and processes of tourism marketing. Some of the Tibetan thangka painters were even directly involved in the carpet industry as designers.

Still, the evolution of tourist thangkas in Nepal took a different course than the carpet industry. Very few Tibetans were involved in the production of tourist thangkas for the "external audience," and this never became a significant source of income for the Tibetan community. The commercialization of Tibetan thangkas in Nepal began soon after their exile from Tibet in 1959 for obvious economic reasons accompanied by religious motivations. The supply of Tibetan thangkas painted in Tibet before 1959 was quickly depleted, while prices for them climbed steeply. At the same time, the Nepalese government began to encourage tourism as part of its development efforts (Stevens 1988:68). As both "intermediate" and "external audiences" for Tibetan thangkas developed, non-Tibetans stepped in to meet the rising demands.

The differences between Tibetan painters and non-Tibetan producers of Tibetan-style paintings are striking. Tibetan artists produce, for the most part, for the "internal" and "intermediate audiences." Many of them are presently engaged in the highly successful renewal of Tibetan culture in exile. Thus, as an internal Tibetan phenomenon, commer-

cial thangkas are products of what Cohen (1989) has termed complementary commercialization. That is to say, they are produced by a currently vital culture through spontaneous initiative.

One of the characteristics of complementary commercialization is that it "appears, on the whole, little to disturb local culture and social relations, particularly since it usually remains limited in scope" (Cohen 1989:162). This certainly applies to the effect of tourist thangkas on the exiled Tibetan community in Nepal. The internal market for Tibetan thangkas remains quite isolated from the tourism business. The latter, therefore, has had no recognizable effect on the internal market. This type of commercialization is quite contrary to the commercialization of carpets.

At the other end of the thangka production spectrum are found the Newars who paint mostly for the external market. They belong to a culture which has been in a slow decline during recent centuries, although not without recent signs of recovery. To follow Cohen's (1989: 162-163) classification, their thangkas are products of substitutive commercialization (a declining culture producing through spontaneous initiative). This decline is not primarily due to the conditions of the "modern era," but to a process which has continued for a few centuries. As usually occurs in substitutive commercialization, also in this case, the quality of their products deteriorated. (While sponsored production of tourist thangkas, exerting quality control, and training artists does exist in Nepal, such enterprises produce mainly for export outside Nepal and so are not within the scope of this presentation.)

Economic and religious factors have contributed to the commercialization of Tibetan thangkas. The adaptable nature of Buddhism, and especially of Tibetan Buddhism, has been very conducive to the commercialization of thangkas. Buddhism has long been a missionary religion, its history serving as evidence. From its country of origin Buddhism spread to Sri Lanka, Southeast, Central, and East Asia. The current spread of thangkas to the West is regarded by Tibetans as but a small feature of a general process of propagating their religion. Moreover, Buddhism has traditionally been very open to new methods of religious transmission. The concept of employing skillful means (*upāya*) in imparting the Buddhist teaching according to the needs and level of the Buddhist or potential Buddhist has a long history in Indian Buddhism (Pye 1978). The interest of foreigners in thangkas has been seen as a starting point as good as any other.

These facilitating circumstances were combined with motivating factors. The destruction of Tibetan culture in its homeland clearly created a crisis situation for the tradition. After the takeover of Tibet culminating in 1959, the new communist rulers forbade religious practices, destroyed or closed temples and monasteries, outlawed monasticism and religious teachings and executed many former ecclesiastics. Many felt that the complete disappearance of Tibetan Buddhism was imminent. The transmission of Tibetan Buddhism to the West was conceived as one possible method for its preservation. Under these circumstances, teachings previously held to be esoteric were more openly transmitted to those capable of preserving them. Foreigners also were frequently initiated into mandalas of the Highest Yoga Tantra. Thus,

under the threat of extinction, Tibetan Buddhism spread to wider circles. The dissemination of mandalas and thangkas was just one small aspect of this larger phenomenon. Yet it should be emphasized that once the important role of foreigners in the preservation of Tibetan culture had been recognized, Tibetans saw it essential to ensure the accuracy of the foreigners' knowledge. With regard to thangkas the implication is that thangkas, even tourist thangkas, should be correct.

This crisis situation was created not only by events in Tibet, but also by forces at work within the exiled Tibetan communities. The Tibetan society in Nepal is undergoing a modernization process similar to that of other developing cultures. For example, in the past, monasteries nearly monopolized educational opportunities, while nowadays Tibetan secular schools in Nepal (and also in Kalimpong and Darjeeling) are considered to provide the best education (Gombo 1985). Furthermore, some among the exiled Tibetans blamed the conservative nature of old Tibetan society, with its apparent xenophobia, for the loss of their country and called for the speedy adaptation of Western values, political systems, and so forth. Thus, there was an internal threat within the exile community as well. While the number of exiled Tibetans who in some degree turned their backs on tradition rose, foreigners developed greater and greater interest in Tibetan Buddhism. Some of these foreigners were apparently even stronger in their devotion, sincerity, and intellectual advocacy of Buddhism than most Tibetans. This internal situation helped to create the feeling of a tradition in crisis, while foreigners who sought guidance in Tibetan Buddhism came to form a new class of patrons, the "intermediate audience," which became an important factor in the commercialization and popularization of thangkas.

Westerners and overseas Chinese who follow Tibetan Buddhism contributed significantly to the revival of Tibetan heritage in exile in various ways. Even today these patrons directly support lamas, monasteries, and monastic and lay educational institutions. Their active involvement in Tibetan religious life carries with it important economic dimensions as well—offerings made for Buddhist teachings, expenses of sojourn among Tibetans in Nepal, acquisition of religious objects, including thangkas, and so forth. The patronage of these foreign Buddhists is much appreciated by thangka painters, for the obvious reason that they may have more economic resources to offer than most internal buyers. However, these patrons are only a minority among the new consumers of thangkas. The main contemporary market is the "external audience."

Economic considerations played a decisive role in the commercialization of the thangkas for the "external audience." The larger economic picture in Nepal may be seen as the main cause for the entrance of non-Tibetan painters into the business of making thangkas. The poor economic infrastructure of Nepal (Khadka 1991; Stevens 1988) does not provide Nepalis with a large variety of employment opportunities. Tourism is now one of the most important sources of personal income. Unlike the old days when painters were usually following the family occupation, quite a large number of Nepalis (of all ethnic groups) are now engaged in some phase in the production and marketing of tourist thangkas (Schempp 1987:71).

As Tibetan thangkas underwent commercialization, Tibetans developed certain rationales justifying their sale. These rationales are applied not only to the "intermediate audience," but also to the "external audience." According to the Tibetan tradition, unconsecrated thangkas cannot serve as embodiments of Buddhas or *yi-dams* nor can an unconsecrated mandala serve as their abode. But thangkas sold in tourist shops are never consecrated. Interviewed Tibetans did not regard thangkas bought by tourists, who are ignorant of the tradition, as sacred objects. They regarded such thangkas as mere "decorations." They claimed that, since these thangkas are unconsecrated, they cannot have any good or bad effect on their owners. Yet, one cannot avoid a certain degree of ambiguity with regard to the "sacredness" of an unconsecrated thangka, so there is yet another rationalization at work.

The Buddhist religion places great importance upon the role of the individual. Ultimately, thangkas exist for the sake of their "users," who through their own actions advance toward Enlightenment. For those who do not seek Enlightenment, thangkas do not have any results, whether good or bad. For a follower of the tradition, a thangka can cause negative consequences if it is disgraced (cf. Parezo 1983:63), if it is incorrectly made, and so forth. Most "external" tourist thangkas are disgraced, as their owners are not familiar with the Tibetan traditions of paying them respect. Almost all thangkas drawn by painters who do not have very intimate relationships with Tibetan culture are considered to be incorrect. Yet, these thangkas, according to the informants, are not capable of harming the innocent tourists who, after all, do not "believe" in them.

Thangkas that deviate from the traditional iconographic rules are incorrect from the Tibetan point of view. Most of their painters are not very familiar with the Tibetan tradition; they do not maintain any relationships with Tibetan lamas, nor do they receive initiations for the deities whom they paint. Consequently, the Tibetan public at large does not regard most thangkas sold in tourist shops as part of their tradition. For them, they are not thangkas at all. Apart from a few concerned individuals, they pay little or no attention to tourist thangkas.

CONCLUSIONS

One characteristic of the tourist thangka market that sets it apart from other more typical tourist art markets is the existence of an "intermediate audience," consisting of non-Tibetan Asian Buddhists as well as other non-Tibetan followers of Tibetan Buddhism. This group's high concern with authenticity helps to promote some degree of adherence to traditional standards, reflected especially in some tourist shops located in the vicinities of the main hotels. Consumers more familiar with Tibetan cultural and religious traditions tend to acquire thangkas more similar to those produced for the internal audience. Those who are most familiar with Tibetan culture, mostly followers of Tibetan Buddhism, enter into the traditional artist-patron relationship by commissioning their thangkas. This "intermediate audience" also helps in educating others about Tibetan thangkas. They do not, like buyers of

other traditional arts, make thangkas submit to an *entirely* new meaning, but they do bring a shift in emphasis to the traditional purpose of thangkas. This “intermediate audience” also contributes substantially to the revitalization of Tibetan traditional arts and culture through various activities that go far beyond the mere purchasing of thangkas, in contrast to the “external audience” who contribute little or nothing to this.

Most of the painters for the “external audience” are non-Tibetans who have adapted the Tibetan style to some extent, when circumstances made it profitable to do so. Such adaptations of the arts of one group by another have occurred in other places apart from Nepal (Stromberg 1976). The Newar involvement in this enterprise at least has precedents in their history. Moreover, the Newars themselves have had a strong historical influence on the development of Tibetan artistic styles beginning in the 7th century. Even while staging authenticity, these nonnative painters have introduced many alterations, mostly resulting from their unfamiliarity with the Tibetan tradition, but also reflecting their attempts to give their thangkas a patina of antiquity, or to suit the color preferences of the “external audience.”

It is especially interesting to compare and contrast Tibetan attitudes about the sale of tourist thangkas with the corresponding attitudes of Navajos on the sale of sandpaintings (Parezo 1983; for an article comparing Tibetan sand mandalas and Navajo sandpaintings, see Chiao 1982). There is a remarkable resemblance between the two, beginning from their traditional ritual usages up until the processes of their commercialization. The rationalization provided by each culture for the commercialization of its sacred objects is a result of its own cultural presuppositions about those objects.

With regard to ritual usage, especially striking is the similarity between Tibetan colored sand mandalas and Navajo sandpaintings. Parezo’s definition of traditional sandpaintings as “. . . temporary resting place of holiness . . .” and “. . . strictly prescribed and . . . always destroyed at the end of the ritual” (1983:1) can be fully applied to colored sand mandalas. (The main difference is in the purpose of the rituals in which they are employed—the objective of the Navajo ritual is healing, while the Tibetan ritual is basically soteriological.)

While the dynamic of the commercialization of both Tibetan thangkas and Navajo sandpaintings can be defined as “complementary commercialization” (vital culture, spontaneous initiative; Cohen 1989), the commercialization of Navajo sandpaintings faced larger hurdles than that of Tibetan thangkas. “Two major steps were prerequisites to the making of commercial sandpaintings. They had to be put in permanent form and taken outside the ceremonial context . . .” (Parezo 1983:22). While creating a permanent form for Navajo sandpaintings was a serious break in tradition, which was considered risky, permanent Tibetan mandalas were already in common use in Tibet. Besides the religious barrier, the creation of permanent sandpainting had to overcome technical obstacles (Parezo 1983:105, 118), as their permanent form was still made from colored sand. Permanent mandalas already existed in Tibet in the forms of painted thangkas, murals, and three-dimensional structures. The gradual process of shifting the use

of sacred paintings away from the context of ritual was easier in the Tibetan case, as also in traditional Tibet laypeople commissioned thangkas to be hung in their home. The baseline object was not restricted to priestly specialists.

Parallels to the factors described as instrumental in the commercialization of Tibetan thangkas are found also in the Navajo case. While the missionary and adaptive nature of Buddhism facilitated the commercialization of Tibetan thangkas, the Navajo culture is also characterized by Parezo as "pragmatic and receptive to change" (Parezo 1983: 5). The Navajo singers as well felt that they were teaching the Anglos about their religion (Parezo 1983:36-37, 149-150). Hosteen Klah, one of the most instrumental Navajos in the commercialization of sandpainting, seems to have believed that foreigners would carry the Navajo religion into the next world (Parezo 1983:29, 149-150), thus serving an important eschatological role, even were the Navajo to die out as a people.

One primary religious motive contributed to the selling of thangkas to non-Tibetans—the threat to the survival of the Tibetan tradition created by the destructive events in recent Tibetan history. It is similarly the case that the hope for preservation of Navajo tradition in general was a major consideration in the creation of permanent sandpaintings during the early stages in their commercialization (Parezo 1983:30, but also 149 for the later period). Furthermore, ". . . the idea that Navajo religion was doomed was an important factor convincing Navajo singers to make permanent sandpaintings . . ." (Parezo 1983:5). The comparison between Navajo and Tibetan cases goes a step further, since in both cases the feared extinction of their own culture (for the Tibetans, those in exile) did not actually occur (Parezo 1983:5). Yet, one cannot doubt the importance of the initial sense of crisis to the revival of Tibetan culture in exile.

Another contributing factor to the commercialization of thangkas included the greater readiness of foreigners to study the Tibetan heritage than many Tibetans. This brings to mind Parezo's statement that, ". . . the singers took on the Anglo researchers as the apprentices many could not find among the Navajo" (1983:30). These Anglo researchers influenced the first steps in the commercialization of Navajo sandpaintings.

With regard to the rationalizations for the commercialization of sacred objects, there were some differences between Tibetans and Navajos. The Navajo introduced certain modifications in the commercialized products.

This involved intentionally changing or omitting at least one element in the design, color symbolism, or composition (Reichard 1963:160). This rationalization stemmed from the belief that completeness and accuracy were the crucial factors in the sanctification of sandpaintings. They argued that this simple device of changing details would prevent the Holy People from being called and impregnating the painting with power, since the paintings would no longer be exactly as the gods described. Since the painting could not be consecrated, therefore, it would remain a secular object. In addition, this rationale

meant that supernatural power would not be taken out of the tribe and used by nonbelievers, an important consideration for several singers (Parezo 1983:75).

Still, the introduction of changes into the sacred tradition was controversial.

Again, Navajos were not in agreement. Some felt a reproduction or a rug should not be changed but should be an exact replica of a sacred painting. Errors angered the gods, who would be called regardless of the accuracy of the painting and their anger would be great if people produced incorrect paintings. Accuracy was a sign of respect (Parezo 1983:76).

Tibetans, by contrast, are quite unanimous in their objections to any and all deviations from the traditional iconography.

It seems that the greater vagueness with regard to the exact moment in which a painting becomes sacred in the Navajo tradition influenced their particular solution to the problem of commercializing sandpaintings. According to Parezo (1983:77), some Navajos held the view that, upon its completion, a painting was sacred. While such a view is held by a few Buddhist thinkers, the general trend of the Vajrayāna tradition is to assume that a *yi-dam* would embody a thangka only through a consecration ritual.

According to Navajo tradition as presented by Parezo, since gods would come to inhabit a painting without being invited, any inaccuracy in the painting would arouse their anger. Tibetan *yi-dams* on the other hand, would not embody a thangka of their own volition. They are always benevolent, even when their appearance is wrathful. Yet, according to Tibetan belief, ghosts might do so instead, if the painting does not receive a timely consecration. Moreover, incorrect painting has no impact on the *yi-dam*; it has consequences of the negative sort for the owner or painter alone. Finally, according to the above citation, some Navajo singers feared that supernatural powers would be used by nonbelievers. Tibetans rule out the possibility of the manipulation of a *yi-dam* by non-believers. One may conclude that, since the Tibetan tradition is more clear about the exact moment and mechanisms of the consecration and emphasizes the power of the adept rather than of the divinity, the Tibetan rationalizations for the commercialization of thangkas are based on the absence of consecration, and on the lack of belief on the part of the "external" tourist owner.

The incorrectness of thangkas painted by non-Tibetan Nepalese is not the result, as in the case of Navajos, of a conscious mistake, but of their lack of familiarity with Tibetan tradition. The effects of these mistakes are, however, similar. The deviations of tourist thangka painters from Tibetan tradition make the thangkas they produce into objects in fact almost entirely external to the Tibetan tradition. They are not considered by Tibetans to be sacred Tibetan art objects, but secular paintings produced in violation of the tradition by outsiders for the decorative usage of still other outsiders.

In spite of numerous similarities between Tibetan and Navajo paintings, both in traditional use and in the process of commercialization,

the differences of cultural presuppositions of these two traditions have led to certain distinctions in the rationalizations provided for the commercialization of their respective sacred arts. There are also special historical conditions that distinguish the Tibetan from the Navajo, as well as many other tourist art markets. Most notably, the majority of "Tibetan" tourist thangkas are not made by Tibetans. Additionally, there exists a rather large "intermediate audience" that does not fall within the usual categories of tourism studies, and this has had a strong traditionalizing influence, even on the tourist art market.

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