

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

Amullya Rai^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Thangkas are intricate paintings of Buddha, Buddhist deities or mandalas that have existed as an art form since ancient times in Tibetan Buddhism. This study follows the research paradigm of case study to understand the role and significance of Thangka paintings as perceived by Thangka painters of Darjeeling, India. There were 2 male participants in this study. Both of the participants practiced Buddhism and had 30-40 years of Thangka painting experience. They had learnt the art from masters of the craft themselves. Looking at the life history of the artists, it was revealed that a calm temperament was impertinent when making a Thangka. Religious knowledge and a feeling of goodwill was also found to be necessary to make a Thangka. It was revealed that Thangka painting was a therapeutic process for the artists as they found peace when working on their craft. They also reported being less aggressive and being happier in their lives because of the art. There was also a need to maintain high levels of patience and concentration when making a Thangka that promoted the feeling of calmness in the artists.

Keywords: *Thangka, calming effect, mandala, art, Buddhism, case study*

A traditional Tibetan Buddhist painting depicting a deity, scene or a mandala is known as a Thangka (Tibetan: ཐང་ཀ་; Nepali: थौभा; Hindi: थान्का). The literal translation of ‘thang-ka’ in Tibetan would roughly mean ‘recorded message’ as it conveys a message to the viewers (Lama, 2016). It is done on cotton and silk appliqué with the paint consisting of pigments in a water-soluble medium of animal glue. Both mineral and organic pigments are used such as saffron, cinnabar, lapis lazuli and other natural substances. The ancient art style is preserved in esoteric graphs called tiksays that are handed down from master to student throughout generations of such painters (Jackson & Jackson, 1984). The origin of Thangka is unknown but it has been noted that its first traces were found in Nepal during the reign of Angshuvarma in 7th Century. A similar art form ‘Pattachitra’ existed in Hinduism and both these art forms had co-existed during the reign of King Ashoka (271 BC to 236 BC). During the 11th Century it was seen to have spread throughout the Northern Himalayan regions of modern day Tibet and Bhutan. (Srivastava, 2018)

¹ Montfort College of Psychology, Bangalore University, Darjeeling, West Bengal, India

*Responding Author

Received: January 1, 2020; Revision Received: January 18, 2020; Accepted: February 10, 2020

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

Thangkas are intricate paintings that require the artist to have proper training in the art form and have sufficient understanding of Buddhist philosophy. Depending on the intricacy it may take a few months to years for an artist to fully complete a painting. Painters often portray the life and form of Buddha, various other deities, bodhisattvas (an enlightened being), the wheel of life amongst others which is why Thangka paintings are generally overflowing with symbolism and allusions. Therefore, artists must follow strict rules specified in the Buddhist scriptures regarding proportions, shape, color, stance, hand positions, and attributes in order to personify correctly the Buddha or Deities (Lipton & Ragnbus, 1998).

Thangkas are used as teaching tools by masters to their students when depicting the life of Buddha or other such holy figures. But most Thangkas, especially those that are mandalas, are intended for personal meditation or instruction of monastic students that help bring them further along the path of enlightenment. Thangka painters on the other hand are not considered artists or creators but channels through which the ancient knowledge is passed who has to rise above their own consciousness to deliver a higher truth into this world. Ambar Lama, a master Thangka painter of Nepal who had started painting since he was 7 years old, describes Thangka painting as having a 'deep spiritual meaning' and says that is used for meditational purposes (Lama, 2016). Professor John Listopad of Sacramento State University, a specialist in Buddhist art and himself a fully ordained Thai Buddhist monk, identifies Tibetan art to be of a psychological and meditational nature that brings about peace, calm and balance in one's life (Watanabe, 2000). Thus, it is on the pretext of this spiritual meaning that this research is based.

Originally, Thangkas were carried in rolled bundles by monks during their travels. It was used to spread the teachings of Buddhism through the ease of a picture. Thangkas was considered individual property of the monks for their meditation and preaching but later were donated to monasteries. Thangkas are rarely signed unless it is a personal meditation image known as 'thug dam'. The artists were usually monks or monastic leader although today the tradition is no longer practiced.

In India, Thangka paintings is practiced in Ladhak, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Lahul, Spiti and Dharamshala. In other parts of the eastern world such as Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, northern China, parts of Russia and Mongolia the tradition of Thangka painting is still alive. While in western counterparts Thangka painting has seen a surge of interest and there have been many painting schools that teach such an art form.

As the origin and dissemination of Thangka as an art form clarifies its religious practice, it also justifies its purpose which was to attain a higher state of consciousness. Therefore, to learn Thangka painting a person must be ready to inculcate religious practice into their lives and have the intention to transcend the immediate world as reported earlier in the case of Mr. Lama who derived a sense a spiritual connect through the paintings.

The process of Thangka making is a very elaborate process. There are a number of steps that entail making of Thangka, which are in sequence:

1. Selection of base and the fabric. The right fabric and base serves the purpose of religious conduct. It is usually prepared by applying Yak hide glue.
2. Study of the measurement graphing the images of deities and figures.
3. Sketch development as according to the necessity or request.
4. Applying colour of identification to the foreground.
5. Then outlining of figures.

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

6. The shading, followed by highlighting gold ornamentation of the picture.
7. Mounting onto the silk or brocade to finally present for sanctification ceremonies. (Srivastava, 2018)

Hence, the making of a Thangka requires the person to be patient, relaxed and focused on the Thangka. The process of making a Thangka also being a very ritualistic process gives insight into the calming effect that it may have over viewers and painters alike, but the degree to which may vary depending upon the individual. Many monks have personal Thangkas of a deity that they devote their focus and attention to attain a state of meditation. They focus on every detail of the Thangka and try to capture the image in their minds as precisely as possible. In doing so, they perceive a calming effect and peace in their lives.

As much data has been acquired on the calming/meditative effect of Thangka (mandala); there is very less understanding as to why it does so. Having outlined the problem, there surfaced a need to study the phenomenon as a case study to form an in-depth understanding of the influence Thangka painting has had in the lives of practitioners of the art. Therefore, this study aims to look at Thangka painting through the lens of a Thangka painter to reach a better understanding of the (meditative) effect it has on them.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter consists of previous studies conducted on art, mandalas and its effect on mood and well-being. It lays the context on which Thangka (mandala) is looked at as an art form, outlines the gaps in research and adds to the knowledge of this field. As this topic is fairly unexplored most of the researches illustrated below are relating to Thangka as a creative process/activity and its effect on the artist.

The researchers from the University of Gloucestershire investigated primary care process and mental wellbeing through an intervention of art, the progress through the intervention, changes in well-being and factors associated with those outcomes (Crone, et al., 2018). They evaluated data from 1297 primary care patients (including those that required complex care needs) in South West England. The patients were referred to an eight or 10-week intervention. Updated findings were presented from a prospective longitudinal follow-up (observational) design study of an arts on referral programme in UK general practice, over a 7-year period (2009–2016). The process utilized here was of ‘arts-on-prescription’ scheme that provide art courses where patients can choose to learn how to draw, paint, create mosaics, or playwright. The courses were community-based rather than being based on specific medical needs and the groups that were referred were usually small, between three and ten individuals. The researchers evaluated evidence from patients referred for arts activities through ‘Artlift’, a charity based in South West England that provides courses with local artists across the region. The work carried out by Professor Diane Crone and her team at the University of Gloucestershire also shows that this intervention is effective in increasing wellbeing in what is perhaps the most complicated, but increasingly important group in primary care; those with multiple health conditions. The team have been able to identify just over 200 people within the dataset that have multiple medical conditions across different categories like cancers, diabetes, pain conditions, mental health problems, and cardiovascular diseases. Findings confirm that art interventions can be effective in the promotion of well-being for those that complete, including those referred with multi-morbidity, with significant changes in wellbeing evident across the intervention periods.

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

Researchers at the University of Otago constructed a study to understand if creativity impacts one's emotional well-being. (Crone, et al., 2018) Based on models of creativity as a tool for promoting well-being, the present study examined cross-day relationships between creative activity, affect, and flourishing. They evaluated the responses of 658 young adults every day for 13 days. Each day the participants maintained a diary of how much time they spent on creative endeavours as well as the positive and negative emotional changes they perceived. The researchers, on reviewing the responses of the participants through the course, found that the participants who indulged in creative activity everyday had an "upward spiral of well-being and creativity". In brief, creative activities provided a measurable boost in positive affect. The participants were also examined by a "flourishing scale" that asked individuals to rank responses to various questions such as "Today my social relationships were supportive and rewarding." The results indicated that these rankings correlated to creative engagement, implying that creativity may, impact both happiness in social relationships and positivity in the workplace. Although, if the creative affect causing well-being over the next day remained inconclusive as it was more specific to creative activity predicting general well-being. The above mentioned studies have implications on Thangka as art form to ensure well-being of the artists.

In a study conducted on medical students of the University of Hong Kong, it was seen how creating mandalas would create an opportunity for reflection on their mental state (Potash, Chen, & Tsang, 2016). A sample size of 180 students in their 3rd year of college were taken into consideration here. Their responses were analyzed and coded according to the mandala classification framework 'Archetypal Stages of The Great Round of Mandala'. The results indicated that the students were actively struggling in integrating conflicting perspectives as they were attempting to reconcile their professional identity as doctors. Additional results pertaining to psychosocial characteristics included navigating difficult emotions, requiring nurturance, handling endings, contemplating existential concerns and managing stress. The study has implications for making use of mandala making within a Jungian framework as means to reflect on their emotional state and achieve psychological balance.

The effect of art on mood and happiness is illustrated by the following researches. In a study conducted by researchers of Arcadia University in Glenside, Pennsylvania it was found that drawing reduced negative mood (Smolarski, Leone, & Robbins, 2015). The authors examined whether instructions to express emotional states represent an active ingredient in the mood enhancing properties of drawing. A sample of 45 undergraduates were asked to make a list of recent stressful events (negative mood induction) before being randomly assigned to one of three conditions: drawing to express happiness (positive expression), drawing to express current stress (venting), or tracing and coloring a simple line drawing (distraction control). A POMS (Profile of Mood Status) was acquired to provide a baseline, pretest and posttest status of mood. It was seen that mood improved in all three conditions, but the positive expression condition showed significantly greater improvement than either the tracing or venting groups. Venting and tracing produced similar levels of mood elevation. Positive emotional expression appears to be an active ingredient in the beneficial effects of drawing on mood.

It was concluded in another study conducted on undergraduates of Arcadia University in Glenside, Pennsylvania that drawing within a circular boundary has specific efficacy for improving mood state, the circular shape here being that of a mandala (Babouchkina & Robbins, 2015). It was seen that it enhanced mood and acted as active ingredient that uplifted it. A convenience sample of 67 adult participants was randomly assigned to one of 4

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

conditions following negative mood induction: (a) coloring a blank circle with instructions to express feelings, (b) coloring a blank circle with instructions to draw freely, (c) coloring a square with instructions to express feelings, or (d) coloring a square with instructions to draw freely. The two circle (mandala) groups reported significantly greater mood improvement compared to the two square conditions that was derived from a POMS (Profile of Mood Status) rating scale. Although the circular shape clearly represents the active ingredient in group differences, the results do not illuminate the mechanism behind the circle effect or if at all the circle would be representative of an actual mandala drawing. As seen in this study, drawing mandala has had a positive effect on mood implying that artists would be in a better mood through the practice of this art form.

A study conducted to strengthen the evidence base of a relationship of health and art was undertaken by a handful of Australian researchers that yielded positive results. (Davies, Knuiman, Wright, & Rosenberg, 2014) The aim of the study was to develop a framework pertaining to the relationship between arts engagement and population health that included outcomes, confounders and effect modifiers. A sample of 33 adult Western Australian participants were randomly selected who engaged in some form of arts for leisure, entertainment and hobby. They were administered a semi structured interview guide developed by the research team. The framework outlined 7 outcome themes: mental health, social health, physical health, economic, knowledge, art and identity outcomes within which a positive, negative and unintended outcomes of public and individual consequence were identified. Physical, mental and social factors were classified as 'health' outcomes, while art, economic, knowledge and identity factors were classified as 'health determinant' outcomes. It was seen that mental health outcomes was mentioned seven times more frequently and social health outcomes was indicated five times more frequently. This paper however does not identify the health-art confounders and effect modifiers but only addresses a need for a framework to such a sort. Thus, applying these findings on the present study on Thangka paintings, would mean that the engagement in Thangka painting (by virtue of it being an art form) would have mental health and social health outcomes (that would be positive as illustrated by other researches in this chapter).

It has been seen that mandalas and art are capable of reducing anxiety and promoting peacefulness which has implications on the effects that Thangka painters could experience. A study conducted by David Alan Sandmire, Sarah Roberts Gorham, Nancy Elizabeth Rankin & David Robert Grimm (2012) examined the psychological effects of art making in a sample of 57 undergraduate students. One week prior to final examinations, participants were randomly assigned to either an art-making group or a control group. The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory was administered before and after participation. Art making activities included painting or colouring pre-designed mandalas, free-form painting, collage making, still life drawing, and modeling with clay. The mean state anxiety score between pre-activity and post-activity decreased significantly in the art-making group, whereas no difference was found in the control group. Similarly, the mean trait anxiety score between pre-activity and post-activity in the art-making group was significantly lower, and no difference was observed in the controls. These findings suggest that a brief period of art making can significantly reduce a person's state of anxiety, which may have implications for art and art therapy programs that offer methods for helping college students and others coping with stress. (Sandmire, Gorham, Rankin, & Grimm, 2012)

A study conducted by Renee van der Venneta and Susan Serice in 2012 showed that colouring a mandala reduces anxiety to a greater degree than colouring a blank sheet of paper

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

or a plain design. A total of 64 non-random sample of undergraduates were divided into 3 groups. For each group, a different mood (anxious, calm and neutral) was induced through a brief writing exercise after which anxiety levels were measured three times using the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory; at the beginning, after the anxiety induction and after the colouring intervention. The results showed that colouring a mandala reduces anxiety to a significantly greater degree than colouring a plain design or a blank paper (van der Venneta & Serice , 2012).

Pisarik and Larson (2011), studied the effects of creating mandalas on the facilitation of improved awareness and evaluation of one's authentic self. A pretest-posttest, non-randomized, control group research design was utilized and the participants consisted of students enrolled in a university course titled "Life Skills Needed for Success." The data was collected at the beginning of the first class and at the end of the last one for a week. All participants were asked to complete the pretest measures which consisted of two subscales of the Authenticity Inventory [awareness subscale and unbiased processing subscale] (Goldman & Kernis, 2002) and two subscales of Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being (RSPW) [self-acceptance and personal growth] (Ryff, 1989). After this, the participants in the mandala condition were given colouring materials and instructed to, first, trace a large circle, and then fill the circle with representations of themselves in the current moment while the ones in control condition were allowed to leave and participants. After 50 minutes had passed, participants were asked to complete a worksheet for interpreting their mandala. After 3 days the group met again and followed the same procedure. After finishing the interpretation worksheet, participants were given a post-test that assessed the same measures listed for the pre-test. The results showed that there were statistically significant effects for measures of authenticity and psychological well-being, with an increase in authenticity awareness for the mandala group pre-test to post-test, and higher levels of self-awareness, unbiased processing, and personal development for participants in the mandala group (Larson & Pisarik, 2011). Here, mandalas act as a mode of reflection and mindfulness further illuminating the type of effects it has on the artists.

In the recent times, colouring of mandalas has been a trend in art therapy. The psychologists utilize it as a tool for self-expression, conflict resolution, self-awareness and healing. Conflict resolution and peacefulness are also seen to be the highlight of mandala drawing. In one research, mandala drawing has also been seen to be very effective in dealing with sexually abused children as they may be unable to discuss sensitive information, but be able to express themselves symbolically and find peace of mind through mandalas (Henderson, Rosen, & Mascaro , 2007).

Mandalas have also seen to improve attention and focus implicating the meditative aspect it has on the artists. In a research including children with Attention-Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder researchers examined the use of mandalas as a centering and focusing mechanism. The researchers, using a single-subject, multiple-baseline research design, investigated the creative growth and behavioral changes through the drawing of mandala. During specified intervals of treatment, a drawing was requested, "Draw a person picking an apple from a tree," and rated according to the guidelines of the Formal Elements Art Therapy Scale (FEATS). Through examination of the drawings and objective findings of this scale, it was seen that a visual measurement of creative growth was achieved. Preliminary findings indicated that the mandala exercise has the effect of increasing attentional abilities and decreasing impulsive behaviors over time, allowing for

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

better decision making, completion of task, general growth in developmental level, and an interest in personal aesthetics.(Smitheman-Brown & Church, 1996)

In 'A Study of Jung's Mandala and its Relationship to Art Psychotherapy', Maralynn Hagood Slegelis concisely puts together the Jungian idea of mandalas and its healing properties. Jung claimed that the mandala or circular art form had a calming and centering effect on its maker and the viewer. In one of his books, Jung wrote: "The pictures differ widely, according to the stage of the therapeutic process; but certain important stages correspond to definite motifs. Without going into therapeutic details, I would only like to say that a rearranging of the personality is involved. A kind of new centering. That is why mandalas most appear in connection with chaotic, psychic states of disorientation or panic. Then they have the purpose of reducing the confusion to order, though this is never the conscious intention of the patients. At all events, they express order, balance, and wholeness. Patients themselves often emphasize the beneficial or soothing effect of such pictures" (Jung, 1969). He believed that mandalas are inner images gradually built up through (active) imagination, during psychic imbalance or when a thought cannot be found and must be sought for, because it is not contained in holy doctrine. He used mandala in his own personal therapy and believed that it was a manifestation of statement of his psychic state at the moment it was created. He noted symbolism that appeared in the mandalas that appeared in the dreams of his patients and the people he worked with. He would then use it to bridge the conscious and the unconscious. Jung often encouraged his clients to understand and interpret these symbols themselves and used it to bridge himself away from the patient and help them gain would attain autonomy (Slegelis, 1987). Art psychotherapists today often employ the mandala as a basic tool for self-awareness, conflict resolution, and as a basis for various other art psychotherapeutic techniques in a variety of situations. The centering effect of mandalas as explained by Jung acts as a guide to understanding the effects of Thangka painting on the artist. Critics however accuse Jungian school of thought to be too mystical and unempirical. Reitman (1951) challenged Jung's universal quality of symbols and claimed, "The Jungian method is a priori and not empirical." This investigator has sought to examine Jung's theory of the mandala and to empirically explore Jung's choice of the circle as a context for art expression leading to psychological healing. It is also worth noting that in Gestalt psychology simple, closed forms are more quickly perceived and recognized as more meaningful than others (Fincher, 1991) (Kohler, 1929).

METHODOLOGY

Research Question

How do Thangka painters perceive the art of Thangka painting?

Research Paradigm

The research tool opted for here is case study. Case study is a type of descriptive research approach used to obtain an in-depth analysis of a person, group, or phenomenon. Typically, data is gathered from a variety of sources using several different methods such as personal interviews, direct-observation, psychometric tests, archival records, to name a few. The research may also continue for an extended period of time, so processes and developments can be studied as they happen. It involves reconstructing 'the case history' of a single participant or group of individuals or simply observing what happens to them. Case studies allow a researcher to investigate a topic in great detail than might be impossible when trying to deal with a large number of research participants. It allows for a holistic perspective and can help us generate new ideas. They can help illustrate theories and show how different aspects of a person's life are related to each other.

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

Settings

The research was based in Darjeeling with regards to the availability of the Thangka painters.

Population and Participants

The participant was chosen with regards to the fulfillment of the inclusion criteria. The selection of the participant was based on expertise and age. The participant was chosen through counsel of the lamas and kusholas of the Buddhist monasteries in Darjeeling. The participant were comfortable to converse in Nepali or English.

Inclusion Criteria

1. Participants must practice Buddhism.
2. They must be at least 35 years of age.
3. They must have practiced Thangka painting under a master for at least 20 years.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Any participant that fits the above mentioned criteria but has cognitive deficits and mental illnesses as assessed through a Mini Mental Status Examination.
2. Candidates who have discontinued the practice of Thangka painting.

Data Sources and Collection Process

Consent form and information sheet are presented to the prospective candidate. If they agree to participate, then an appointment was made to meet and conduct an interview. A semi-structured interview with the participant regarding the topic of inquiry was conducted. Semi-structured questions allowed for open ended questions that give way for follow up questions which gave rise to discussion. Before beginning the interview, the participant was seated comfortably and rapport was established. A mini mental status examination was taken. During the interview, the participant was asked the open ended semi structured questions which was recorded using the audio recorder application on a phone.

Data Coding

The recorded interview was transcribed and then summarized. Crucial points in the life of the participant was noted. Any pattern or theme was taken into close inspection to understand the nature of the effect it had on the participant.

Data analysis procedure

Narrative analysis is a method to analyze a phenomenon. In narrative inquiry, the story and experiences told to researchers by the participants is collected and explained through a psychological perspective. It provides an opportunity to the researcher access to the personal experiences of the participant. Storyteller speaks and declares life as experiences in a narrative form that is called story. Thus, the researcher has an opportunity to study the subjects in their natural setting and understand the behaviour, actions and feelings in a whole context.

Ethics

Participants were briefed about the study and their ethical considerations surrounding the same. The participants were asked for consent to record their voice in an audio format for analysis. After receiving their consent to participate in the study, a semi structured interview was conducted with regards to the topic of discussion; Thangka painting.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to understand the calming effect of Thangka as perceived by Thangka painters.

The data was collected from 2 Thangka painting experts of Darjeeling, India. Both of the participants had over 30 years of practice painting Thangka and learnt the art through renowned masters of the art form. The participants were professionals living in their own homes and not monks of a monastery.

For this study, all the prominent monasteries of Darjeeling were visited in search of Thangka painters. As there seemed to be no Thangka painters presently there the researcher had to take the counsel of the senior lamas of each monastery that he had visited. After having talked with each lama of respective monasteries, there seemed to be a mention of two people. Thereafter, they helped the researcher with the contact details of these individuals who were approached to participate in the study.

PT was the first one approached. He is a 54 year old man born in Darjeeling from a middle class socio-economic background. He is ethnically Tibetan and works as a full time Thangka painter. He has only studied till class 4. He lives with his wife and has a nuclear family of three. His son is working abroad.

The second participant of this study is DB, a 58 year old man born in Darjeeling from a middle-class socio-economic background. He is ethnically Tibetan and works as a full time Thangka painter. He has studied up until the 1st year of college. He lives with his wife and his son and daughter in law live elsewhere.

Participant 1

History

The first participant PT, began his narration by talking about his childhood. When he was 14 years old he became the disciple of his master in a monastery in Darjeeling. He had only studied till class 4 and was interested in art so after some people suggested him to pursue Thangka painting he went and became a disciple of a Thangka master by the name of NawangNorbu in a monastery in Bhote Busty, Darjeeling. In the initial years, he recollects doing all the chores for his master such as getting groceries, making tea, cleaning the house, washing his clothes, etc. And it was only after around 4 years of having stayed with the master that he was taught the very basics of Thangka. In 1979-80, his master took him and 2 others to Mysore to the master's monastery. There he learnt Thangka up until 1987 and returned to Darjeeling. Ever since he has been practicing Thangka and it has been over 30 years that he had been indulged in this art.

The participant works professionally as a Thangka painter but is not a monk. He took up Thangka painting as a profession as he was uneducated and could not do anything else. So, for financial reasons he has been practicing Thangka painting and selling them. He has over 35 years of experience in Thangka painting.

On Thangka painting

The participant stated that to be an expert in Thangka painting depends upon a person's innate ability, interest and knowledge of Buddhist scriptures. Thus, it could vary for every student of the art form. He however did mention that to learn Thangka art one must be very dedicated, religious and understand the Tibetan text properly. He said to make Thangka the right

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

mindset is absolutely necessary. He then compared it with modern art where he says that the clarity and feeling is not all necessary whereas for Thangka painting conviction and religious outlook is very important as it flows from the heart. He said that whenever he paints he has to keep in mind the person who he is making the painting for and the world at large and pray for them. He also said his lifestyle is of a religious person visiting the monastery and donating what he can whenever he can. When he makes Thangka he hopes that it will do good to the person who it has been made for. He wishes that his work is good and is sincere. He starts the painting after having found an auspicious day during the month to begin such a venture and also when he has to finally cut the canvas he makes sure to see a good auspicious day to do so.

The participant, during the discourse, said that Thangka painting is very much promoted in Buddhist practices as it has very deep meaning associated to it. Multitudes of allusions can be seen in just one painting which for the untrained eye is impossible to detect. Moreover, Thangka is made for people who are in need of it. For eg. a sick person, a student in need of concentration or a person who wants a peaceful passage into the afterlife.

When asked if it was beneficially to learn Thangka, he said that in the very practical sense there is a lot of money involved in making Thangka so it could help people financially. But if it is done only to generate money in one's life then it is not beneficial. Only if one paints with a pure heart and religious dedication can a person actually benefit from it.

On Calming Effect

When asked what well-being means to the participant, he said it is when a person is able to do their work properly and not have diseases and ailments. On further inquiry as to effect of Thangka in his life he recollected living a very flippant lifestyle where he only looked towards entertainment. In many ways he was referring to a hedonistic life. Even when he was under his master he had not taken the art seriously and only when he really started looking into it with concentration was his idea of life changed. After Thangka came into his life he became religious. Nowadays he does not like going out of his home and does not like playing loud music and singing like before. His family life has also improved very much. Before he used to have plenty fights at home and outside but it started becoming peaceful after he had taken up Thangka seriously. His social circle also seemed to shrink and now he said he has no friends.

The participant told me, when he sits to make a Thangka he does not like to be disturbed. It makes him angry if someone were to disturb him during that time as he would be giving his full attention to it. Once he has touched the brush he likes to get up only when the painting is complete. This however is impossible but he sets goals for the day (such as, colouring the background) that he makes sure to accomplish. He said that Thangka has a calming effect on him and helps him feel relaxed. Whenever he has to take a break from a painting he feels agitated and uncomfortable. It also bothers him if he has finished a painting and there is no other painting to do. He said that sometimes he feels his paintings actually speak to him when he is drawing them. He also noted that to make Thangka being calm is a requirement that you cannot overlook.

History

The participant was introduced to Thangka through his father who was also a painter. He took interest in painting from a young age and helped his father. By the age of 17, his father was dependent on him in making Thangkas. He had learnt to make almost everything and his

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

father only did the finishing touches to the painting. As his father started growing old he took over the business and continued to paint for the customers. He is a professional not a monk.

The participant stressed on having to take up a Thangka as a profession due to the circumstances he faced in his life. By the time he was in 11-12th standard all his siblings had left home. There was financial pressure at home as his parents were getting older and all the responsibilities were piling up on him being the youngest son. When he met with monks they suggested him to take it up as a profession himself as his father was also a very proficient painter. During the time when he was working under his father, one of his father's friends took him to a monastery at Ghoom, Darjeeling (when he had completed the first year of college) where he met his master. But the participant denied working under him at that time. After his father's death, he was called by the master and for 6 years he worked with him at the monastery during which his work had a drastic improvement. Thereafter his master returned to Tibet and he was called for by one of the biggest master of Thangka in Nepal. He recollected being burdened with work there and after 3 years he returned to Darjeeling in 1984-85. In Darjeeling, The participant continued his work independently and continues to make Thangka even today. He has over 45 years of experience painting Thangka.

On Thangka Painting

According to The participant, in order to reach a master level in Thangka painting it would at least take 30-40 years (15 years to learn, 20 years to become a professional). Thangka painting has a religious meaning in his life and he perceives his talent to be religious. He perceives Thangka paintings to be a way to awaken faith in people's heart. It is also a representation of Tibet in entirety including its history, culture and religion.

During the conversation with the participant, he said it was only natural that the spread of Buddhism would lead to the spread of Thangka as an art form. He highlighted the trend setting in the Western world where Buddhism is gaining popularity and how it has interested various people of different ethnicities to be interested in making Thangka. He said that if a person is Buddhist, they would undoubtedly want to keep Thangkas in their home. In religious ceremonies such as Buddha Purnima or a funeral there is a need of Thangka. The participant also talked of Tibetan history and how Thangka had influenced the spread of Buddhism in Tibet.

The participant said he is not very religious but that fact remains that he is a person who reads a lot of prayers. During the discourse he disclosed that right before I had arrived at his home he was listening to the His Holiness Dalai Lama's preaches. He however maintained that there are very few people who are religious in the truest sense and most are drawn towards destruction. He said that he does talk about religion and often writes about it as well but after becoming a family man it is very difficult to follow the path set by any religion. He said that sacrifices are needed to be made in order to become religious. He also said there is no guarantee that making sacrifices would make one more religious. In conclusion, he stated that it all depends on the person. Whether this person has the ability to sacrifice and be happy with it or not.

On Calming Effect

When asked on his perspective of well-being, the participant alluded it to the emotional and mental aspect of life. The participant stressed in honesty being a very important factor in determining a person's well-being. Giving instances in his life where he was cheated by his customers who made only half payments, he said that he did his work honestly and holds no

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

grudges against ill doers. He said that to find a healthy being in today's world is very rare as most people have ill thoughts such as anger, desire and jealousy that corrode the person internally. He also spoke of 32 virtues that men must follow but it is impossible for anyone to do so as being human we are bound to fall short.

The participant said that Thangka has had a positive impact in his life. Through Thangka painting, he has become more sensible and understood how words have a very big impact in people's life. He derives happiness from his customers' appreciation of his work. Thangka painting has also given way for a lot of reflection at life. He gave an example about having to make a Thangka for a funeral and empathizing with the family of the lost one. Every time he has had to make a Thangka for such a family he said he is reminded about the life and death of man. He comforts the customers who have come to him for commissioning the Thangka and makes his mind to put a lot of effort when making the Thangka. He stated that if he paints the Thangka well, the dead will be peaceful and the family will also find comfort and peace in the painting.

The participant stated that he is very patient with his work and whenever he sits to make a painting he takes care to be in the right mind to do such a thing. When he makes Thangka he always carries good thoughts and prayers for the person and their families. He also stated that if one makes a Thangka within 10 days there it would be equal to any other painting but Thangka in itself is a religious monologue. Thus, whenever he agrees to do a painting he takes it up as a challenge upon himself to make something that is beneficial to his customer religiously and is also of extremely high quality. He mentioned that the biggest achievement after having painted Thangkas for more than 4 decades was peace of mind and patience.

It is not during the process of making the Thangka that he finds peace but after having finished it does he feel so. After having painted, he does not get into arguments, he is mindful of his words and is peaceful in general. He hopes that the peace he has derived from painting the Thangka can be spread through the Thangka itself to the people it has been commissioned for. He is happy and calm when painting and it sometimes becomes a point of scrutiny by people around him complaining that he is not very social. The participant is however unsure if this feeling of peacefulness could be felt by all Thangka painters as it is very individualistic in nature.

During the conversation, the participant also stated that he tries to see reality through the lens of the deity he is painting. He questions a lot and wonders how a deity must have been and why they used specific words. When he is asked to paint a deity he has to make sure to keep the characters of the deity within himself. In doing so he is able to paint the precise postures and gestures needed for the deity to be represented correctly. When asked if he would also inculcate aggressiveness when painting deities who are aggressive or destructive, he said that he would have to keep in his mind but not emotionally moved by it. He said he reads about them from the holy texts and have to paint them accordingly.

When asked why he thinks Thangka brings about peace in his life, he stated that it depends on the individual. He said that it is of utmost importance when making a Thangka that one is in the state of peace. He also said that once he has handed off the Thangka to the customer and seeing the customer's happiness in receiving it makes him very happy as well. If he were to be in a negative mood while painting the Thangka, he would not be able to put out his best work. The customer would also not be happy and that would make him unhappy as well. Thus, Thangka painting requires him to be peaceful and keep calm which is why it has

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

brought peace into his life. Furthermore, he explained that when a person sits to make a Thangka it requires a lot of focus and concentration which helps your mind align in the correct path and find peace.

Commonalities in the narration

The participants disclosed that both of them had an inclination towards the creative arts from a young age but it was the financial pressure at home that actually made them look towards Thangka as a mode of income. In the cases of both participants, there was a general narrative of religion governing the art form they were involved in. It was also stressed by both that Thangka painting is an art form that required the knowledge of Buddhist texts and the Tibetan language. Thangka painting has deep seated roots in Tibetan Buddhism with the painting being a representation of the Tibetan culture and religion itself thus, there are innumerable allusions related to the same. Thangka painting was seen to have religious meaning in the participants' life.

The participants both had stressed on the need for a Thangka painter to have a pure heart. The need for a painter to be clear in his/her thoughts surfaced throughout the interviews. It was seen that it was impertinent for the painter to have a genuine hope for the betterment of the person who had commissioned the Thangka. It was seen that there was a feeling of good will whenever the painters were painting towards the client and the world at large. It was also noted from the discourses that Thangka being a religious art form must not be exploited as a business for it to not lose its authenticity. They both agreed on the fact that Thangka was extensively used in Tibetan Buddhism because of its traditional value and its requirement during various Buddhist ceremonies.

Both the participants spoke of finding peace through Thangka painting. However, one said he found it during the process of painting it while the other found it after he had finished the painting. It was also noted by both the participants that a calm state was a prerequisite of Thangka painting. The participants also spoke of the positive changes in their life after being involved in Thangka. Both of them spoke of getting into less arguments and feeling less aggressive. It was seen to boost the participants to continue painting and they both derived happiness from it.

Also, it was interesting to note that both the participants had diminished desire for social interaction.

Uniqueness in the narration

Participant 1

1. The participant stated that in his early days he lived a life of enjoyment and merry making and it was only later in life that he got into Thangka painting seriously due to financial constraints.
2. He was of the opinion that mastering Thangka painting was an individual process depending upon the interest, ability and knowledge of the individual.
3. He considered himself a religious person who did his part as a Buddhist by visiting the monastery, praying and donating the little he could.
4. His concept of well-being was of a person who was able to do his work and not affected by diseases.
5. He believed that Thangka was extensively used in Tibetan Buddhism for the deep meaning associated with it.

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

6. The participant said that for a layman to learn how to make Thangka would only be beneficial if that person had the right intent to do so and not just to make money.
7. He expressed his agitation on being disturbed during painting, when he's taking breaks from the painting and when there is no project to do.
8. He sometimes felt that his paintings spoke to him.

Participant 2

1. The participant was a dutiful son and disciple and had helped his father from a young age in his Thangka business. It seemed he had learnt most of the work by the age of 17 as his father depended on him by then.
2. He maintained that to be an expert in Thangka one must at least have had 15 years of training and 20 years of professional experience.
3. He said that he does not consider himself a religious person as he cannot undergo the sacrifices it requires. Although, he confessed to speak on, write about and listen to religious paraphernalia a lot. His idea of a religious person could be termed as an idealistic one.
4. He made note on the rise of Buddhism in the West that has given way to the popularity of Thangka.
5. According to him, honesty was the most important virtue that a man must possess that would ensure well-being.
6. Through Thangka he understood the impact of words on people and had learned to use them carefully.
7. He spoke of every Thangka being a challenge for him to outdo his previous work and provide the client with high quality product.
8. When his client was happy with the Thangka he too felt content and happy.
9. His biggest achievement through Thangka has been peace of mind and patience.
10. He said that he could not definitely say if learning Thangka painting would be beneficial for everyone as it is individualistic.
11. He made note that when he paints a deity he tries to see the world through their lens and inculcate their characteristics during the painting process.
12. He explained that Thangka having a requirement for a calm mind helped him find peace in his life.
13. He also expressed that Thangka painting became a mode of reflection into his life.

Through the lens of a researcher, it can be seen that Thangka painting is a very complex art form immersed in Tibetan Buddhism. The symbolism and religious allusions are innumerable and would require a person to have proper knowledge of the religion to fully appreciate it. However, from an artistic standpoint, it generates an awe in the viewer because of its immaculate detail, symmetry and colour schemes. One can only imagine the hard work and practice needed to reach such a level of expertise.

A well-made Thangka yields a calm temperament in the viewer due to the amount of detail that one can find in the paintings. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it is overwhelming with visual stimuli. Perhaps, concentrating into the details increase the focus required to be aware of one's surroundings and away from the preoccupations. So to say, be present in the 'here' and 'now'. It is said that many high ranking monks could even meditate and remember every detail about a deity as drawn in a Thangka and could also reproduce the image on a canvas as precisely as imagined in the mind.

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

There seems to be a natural relationship with Thangka painting and a peaceful mind. As seen from the review of literature, art promotes well-being and happiness. Making mandalas has seen to lower anxiety levels and enhance mindfulness. It also seen to elevate mood and help people reflect on life. It has also been explained in the literature about the peaceful effect that mandala has on people. This however must be explored in greater detail using different methods to understand this very relationship.

As this study is fairly novel; in the sense that there is very less literature that one can draw from, the findings derived are also very novel and unseen in other literature. While most literature regarding art and mandala look to see the effect has on people, there has been no research that illustrates what creates this effect. Thus, in this study the perspectives of Thangka painters is studied to understand the relationship of calmness to the Thangka painting. The findings are further illustrated in the following chapter.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to understand the perspective of Thangka painters on Thangka paintings. It was seen through this study that there was a calming effect perceived by Thangka painters. The participants threw light on the need of having to be a calm before and during the painting process which helped produce the peace that they experienced. Also, having to paint elaborate designs that took weeks, months or sometimes even years to produce there was a need for concentration and focus that promoted the calming effect. They both also expressed a diminished desire to interact socially turning the focus more on their craft and isolated reflection.

As mentioned in the Jungian theory on mandalas (Slegelis, 1987), we can see the ‘centering effect’ it has had on the participants. Both participants have found peace through Thangka painting and has in many ways been a therapeutic process for them. They talked of having less feelings of aggression and more calmness because of their profession as Thangka painters. There was also a ‘rearrangement of personality’ in one of the participants from a hedonistic to a religious lifestyle. The participants also expressed having less desire to interact socially. They preferred their solitude and autonomy as referred in the Jungian theory on mandalas. Both participants talked about expressing good will towards one and all which could be a product of the centering and peace they have found in their lives but more research must be conducted to conclusively determine this relationship. Also, noteworthy is the implications of Thangka painting acting as a tool for reflection.

As seen in the case of the researches as mentioned in the literature regarding well-being and art, the relationship shared here has not changed. Thangka painting has uplifted the mental and emotional side of the painters and offered them relaxation from the stresses of life. The participants referred to using it as a tool for reflection (Potash, Chen, & Tsang, 2016). There was an improvement in mood (Babouchkina & Robbins, 2015), and self-awareness (Larson & Pisarik, 2011). Their focus and attention had also improved (Smitheman-Brown & Church, 1996). There was a reduction in feelings of anxiety (van der Venneta & Serice, 2012) as the participants agreed that through Thangka painting they have become calmer and happier. Positive effect on mood elevation was also noted to be an important factor influencing the participants. In general, it was seen to promote well-being (Crone, et al., 2018).

Individually, the participants had differing concepts regarding religious practice. They also differed in their idea of well-being as individuals. There was a stark contrast in the upbringing and past-life of the participants although they both had similar reasons to have

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

taken up Thangka painting as a profession. It is worth mentioning that one of the participants alluded to having metaphysical connection to his art while the other made comments about having to inculcate the values and characteristics of the deity he was drawing.

As the prerequisite to Thangka painting is to be calm and focused, the artists had to master meditation. Their mind is clear of all thoughts and worries, focusing only on the Thangka. They have an intention of good will and harmony towards the world. This creates a peaceful mind to begin the Thangka painting. Throughout the painting process, the artist maintains a calm temperament. The painting of Thangka (mandala) as referred in the literature has a positive effect on the well-being of the artist. Uplifting his mood, reducing anxiety, promoting autonomy, increasing the attention and promoting well-being. They are self-aware and reflect into their life and make peace with death; as expressed by one of the artists. All these effects have a holistic effect on them and thus, a feeling of calm sets in. One of the participants said he had conversations with Thangka. In that regard, it can be seen to be transcendental and mystical which might be hard to prove empirical.

Summary

This study is an attempt to understand the perception of a Thangka artist on Thangka painting. The participants were chosen through referral sampling and interviewed. Through their answers regarding Thangka painting it was revealed that they experienced a calming effect. The prerequisite of having a calm mind and harmonious intent was also stressed. It was seen that along with calmness, the participants had elevated mood, self-awareness, autonomy and peace. There were a few individual differences.

Limitations

As the research paradigm was a case study it is very individualistic in its core. The results generated cannot thus be generalized. This study was done on professionals of the craft therefore, a monk practicing the art of Thangka may have differing views. Due to the lack of many Thangka painting experts, availability of participants is compromised if there is a need to replicate this study. Case studies have also been known to be subject to researcher bias.

Implications

This study is an in-depth look into the perspectives of a Thangka artists. It shows their individual ideas regarding the calming effect that Thangka has had on them. It would be beneficial to understand the working of Thangka (mandalas) to use in art therapy programmes. It can also be used in workshops to inculcate calmness. This research can also be beneficial for researchers who would like to conduct further researchers in Thangka.

Recommendations

Further research in this area can focus on variables such as elevated mood and idea of peacefulness. Longitudinal study of novice Thangka painters as they become experts can be conducted to greatly understand the phenomenon. Creation of a scale that determines the level of peacefulness or calm can also help to quantify the phenomenon. Furthermore, the effectiveness of Thangka as a tool for achieving peace can be looked into. There being little to no research done on this area brings about a necessity for more empirical data to understand the phenomenon completely.

REFERENCE

Babouchkina, A., & Robbins, S. J. (2015). Reducing Negative Mood Through Mandala Creation. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 32:1, 34-39.

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

- Conner, T. S., DeYoung, C. S., & Silvia, P. J. (2018). Everyday Creative Activity as a Path to Flourishing. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 181-189.
- Crone, D. M., Sumner, R. C., Baker, C. M., Loughren, A. E., Hughes, S., & James, D. V. (2018). 'Artlift' arts-on-referral intervention in UK primary care: Updated findings from an ongoing observational study. *European Journal of Public Health*, 404-409.
- Davies, C. R., Knuiman, M., Wright, P., & Rosenberg, M. (2014). *The Art Of Being Healthy: A Qualitative Study to Develop a Thematic Framework for Understanding the Relationship Between Health and the Arts*. BMJ Journals.
- Fincher, S. F. (1991). *Creating Mandalas for Insight, Healing and Self-Expression*. Boston: Shambala Publications.
- Goldman, B. M., & Kernis, M. H. (2002). The Role of Authenticity in Healthy Psychological Functioning and Subjective Well-being. *Annals of American Psychotherapy Association*, 1087-1100.
- Henderson, P., Rosen, D., & Mascaro, N. (2007). Empirical Study on the Healing Nature of Mandalas. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts*, 169-183.
- Jackson, D. P., & Jackson, J. A. (1984). *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods & Materials*. Boulder, Colorado: Shambala Publications Inc.
- Kohler, W. (1929). *Gestalt Psychology: An Introduction into New Concepts in Modern Psychology*. New York: Liveright.
- Lama, A. (2016, April 1). Thangka: Painting the Roadmap to Enlightenment. (J. DeHart, Interviewer) Retrieved from The Diplomat: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/Thangka-painting-the-roadmap-to-enlightenment/>
- Larson, K. R., & Pisarik, C. T. (2011). Facilitating College Students' Authenticity and Psychological Well-being: An Empirical Study. *The Journal of Humanistic Counselling*, 84-98.
- Lipton, B., & Ragnbus, N. D. (1998). Treasures of Tibetan Art: Collections of the Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art. *Journal of the History of Collections*, 117-118.
- Potash, J. S., Chen, J. Y., & Tsang, J. P. (2016). Medical student mandala making for holistic well being. *Medical Humanities*, 42(1) 17-25.
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is Everything, or is it? Explorations on the Meaning of Psychological Well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1069-1081.
- Sandmire, D. A., Gorham, S. R., Rankin, N. E., & Grimm, D. R. (2012). The Influence of Art Making on Anxiety: A Pilot Study. *Journal of American Art Therapy Association*.
- Slegelis, M. H. (1987). *A Study of Jung's Mandala and its Relationship to Art Psychotherapy*. The Arts in Psychotherapy.
- Smitheman-Brown, V., & Church, R. R. (1996). *Mandala Drawing: Facilitating Creative Growth in Children with ADD or ADHD*. Journal of the American Art Therapy Association.
- Smolarski, K., Leone, K., & Robbins, S. J. (2015). Reducing Negative Mood Through Drawing: Comparing Venting, Positive Expression and Tracing. *Art Therapy*, 197-201.
- Srivastava, N. A. (2018). Buddha and Buddhism as the Subject Matter in Thangka Painting: A Study to Understand the Development of Thangka Paintings in North Himalayan Regions. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 204-218.
- Van der Venneta, R., & Serice, S. (2012). Can Colouring Mandalas Reduce Anxiety? A Replication Study. *Art Therapy: A Journal of American Art Therapy Association*, 87-92.
- Watanabe, T. (2000, June 26). Prophecy, Karma and Buddhist Icon in Glendale. Retrieved from Los Angeles Times: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-jun-26-mn-44988-story.html>

Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I want to thank my family and friends for their support throughout my life and also in my academic pursuits. I would like to thank my participants who took time off their busy schedule and sat for the interview necessary for me to produce data for this research. I would like to express my gratitude towards the Director and the Principal of Montfort College who gave me the opportunity to conduct the study as part of the 4th semester. I would also like to thank my supervisor, SudharshanHebbani, for guiding me through the research process. I am grateful towards everyone who helped me in unknowing ways to put forth this research. Finally, I want to thank Montfort College for providing me a beautiful environment to grow and learn to be a better human.

Conflict of Interest

The authors colorfully declare this paper to bear not conflict of interests

How to cite this article: A Rai (2020). Thangka painting through the eyes of a Thangka painter: a case study. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(1), 43-60. DIP: 18.01.006/20200801, DOI: 10.25215/0801.006