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NEGOTIATING SACREDNESS: BUDDHIST ICONOGRAPHY AND MARKET DYNAMICS IN LADAKH'S THANGKA TRADE

Karma Norbu Bhutia
Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, India
Author for correspondence email; kbhutia@anthro.du.ac.in

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, artists in Ladakh have made significant changes to sacred Buddhist art, particularly in how they create thangkas. Thangkas were primarily used in religious ceremonies, but are now sold in tourist markets and monasteries. This commercialisation of thangkas raises questions about their authenticity, ritual value, and cultural continuity. This paper is based on ethnographic work conducted in the Leh district of Ladakh, India, in 2025, which integrates semi-structured interviews with artists, shop proprietors, and women conservators of the Shesrig Foundation with visual analyses of paintings and murals. The findings show that artists respond differently to commercial pressure. Rabden and Chuskit adhere closely to canonical iconometry, consecration rituals, and devotional discipline, whereas Birju and Tsewang modify imagery, pigments, and production speed to cater to the demands of tourists. Synthetic colours have replaced mainly natural, mineral-based colours, although natural materials continue to be used in conservation work and for high-value commissions. Shop owners often act as cultural mediators, educating buyers about cultural significance and the ritual placement of thangkas, and encouraging their participation. The women conservators of the Shesrig Foundation are a big change in a field that has mostly been run by men. This study demonstrates that changes in Ladakh's thangka trade are not a story of decline, but of ongoing negotiation, where livelihood, ritual practice, and cultural continuity coexist in dynamic tension.

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INTRODUCTION

Thangka (Wyl. thang ka, ཐང་ཀ་) is a sacred art form in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, with deep historical and traditional roots. It has served as a potent medium for disseminating messages, visualising myths, cosmology, and the meditative practices of Vajrayāna Buddhism (Bhutia, Srivastava, and Singh 2025). The origins of thangka painting can be traced back to ancient India, where religious art relied heavily on narrative iconography (Das 2003). Tucci suggests that thangka originated from Indian painting styles, such as those found in pata, mandala, and hagiographic paintings. These elements were integrated into Tibetan religious practices, giving them a significant liturgical role and formalising them according to strict iconometric standards (Tucci 1949, 271).

Different accounts of its origin exist, and it is essential to distinguish between mythic traditions and historical development. Two ancient Tibetan works of art, *Thupa chu lenma (*Wyl. *thub pa'i chu len ma,* ཐུབ་པའི་ཆུ་ལེན་མ་) and *Hoed Zerma (*Wyl. *'od zer ma*, འོད་ཟེར་མ་), are said to have captured the Buddha's form through reflections and beams of radiant light (Thaye 2000). These stories emphasise the divine aura of Buddhist imagery and its sanctified role in Vajrayāna traditions (Bhutia and Srivastava 2025, 5). However, they belong to the realm of mythological stories, rather than verifiable history.

Scholarly research contextualises the emergence of painted scrolls within early tantric Buddhism, originating in India around the sixth century. Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa (MMK), an important Sanskrit text, is a key part of this history. Chapters IV–VII provide instructions on making painted cloths (*paṭa*) for tantric rituals (*Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* n.d.). These *paṭa* are described not as narrative illustrations but as consecrated ritual objects, intended to house deities once they have been properly invoked. Marcelle Lalou's pioneering study reveals that the MMK categorises *paṭa* into three principal sizes: large, medium, and small; each *pata* is linked to specific ritual aims, ranging from Buddhahood to worldly prosperity (Lalou 1930). Distinct from the maṇḍala, the *paṭa* was always painted on cloth and emphasised figural compositions rather than geometric ground diagrams. The MMK's detailed instructions and categorisation of *paṭa* sizes provide a systematic approach to thangka painting, contributing to its ritual and artistic significance.

Building on this, Matthew Kapstein argues that the production of such paintings was itself a ritual act: the MMK prescribed not only iconometric (*thig tshad*, Wyl. *thig tshad*, ཐིག་ཚད་, the traditional system of sacred measurements and proportions used in Buddhist art) proportions and colours, but also ritual preparation of the fabric, beginning with the purification of cotton by initiated practitioners who follow the unique vows and promises of esoteric Buddhism (*samayapravistāḥ sattvāḥ*) (Kapstein 1995, 247). Painters had to go through initiation *(dbang bskur,* Wyl. *dbang bskur*, དབང་བསྐུར་) into the deity they were painting, and their work was accepted when done in accordance with tantric vows (Jackson and Jackson 1984, 12). From this perspective, thangka painting was not merely a craft but rather a sacred discipline situated within the tantric ritual order.

The perceived sacredness of thangkas rests on three interlinked dimensions*:* (1) the ritual process of painting, ideally performed by initiated artists (*dbang bskur*); (2) the symbolic act of 'Opening of the Eyes' (*spyan dbye*), which awakens the image (Jackson and Jackson 1984, 139; McGuckin 1996, 37)

and (3) the consecration ritual (*rab gnas*, Wyl. rab gnas, རབ་གནས་), in which a monk or a religious teacher invites the deity to dwell in the image (Tucci 1949, 309). Once a thangka has been consecrated, it retains its holiness and must be handled with care, even if it fades or is damaged. When it is time to dispose of a thangka, it should be done through a ceremonial ritual that involves burning rather than being thrown away carelessly (McGowan 2008, 60). This ritual and doctrinal framework distinguishes thangkas from narrative Buddhist paintings, which function primarily as aids in didactic storytelling.

Thangka paintings have long been used in Ladakh for religious and educational purposes, representing lineage, regional identity, and artistic skills. However, over the last 20 years, this tradition has undergone significant changes owing to tourism, the growth of commercial markets, and the increasing involvement of women and younger artists. For hundreds of years, artists have followed strict rules for creating thangkas. However, the ritual uses of thangkas often clash with global demand. As McGowan observes, sacred art differs from religious art precisely because of its consecration protocols, which elevate it beyond mere representation (McGowan 2008, 56). With regard to the question, "How are Buddhist myths reinterpreted when sacred art enters the marketplace?" This study explores how these distinctions are negotiated in Leh. How do patronage, training facilities, and sex contribute to the maintenance or modification of visual codes? How do modern artists strike a balance between commercial appeal and ritual fidelity? This study examines the continuities and disruptions within Ladakh's thangka tradition through ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and visual analysis, emphasising the significant influence of contemporary factors such as shifts in artistic styles, the commercialisation of thangkas, and the changing roles of women and young artists in preserving tradition.

SACRED GRAMMAR: ICONOGRAPHY AND COLOUR IN THANGKA ART

The rigidity and symbolism of Tibetan Buddhist iconography, essential to both thangka and mural painting in Ladakh, originate from centuries-old traditions rooted in the ritualistic and spiritual applications of art (Seckel 1964). In Tibetan Buddhist painting, one important idea is the codified set of iconometric rules (thig tshad) that determine the sizes of divine figures. These rules are not artistic conventions; they are ritual prescriptions that ensure that a thangka accurately depicts the enlightened presence of a deity. It is believed that changing these proportions makes the painting less holy (Jackson and Jackson 1984, 45). Different Buddhist texts discuss the negative consequences that can befall an artist who fails to adhere to rules (Jackson and Jackson 1984, 67). Rabden and Chuskit, the thangka artists interviewed in Ladakh, repeatedly said, "Even if the painting looks beautiful, if the measurements are wrong, the deity will not dwell in it" (Rabden 2025; Chuskit 2025).

Dorjey's observation that monastic art in Ladakh followed strict canonical rules, emphasising reproduction over originality, aligns with the concept of repetition in sacred art, where strict adherence to canonical standards is valued more than originality (Dorjey 2016, 25). Sangpo stressed that thangkas are not just things to look at; they are sacred beings that should be interacted with, worshipped, and cared for. The intricate grammar of colour, proportion, and symbolic representation is what makes thangka painting so special (Sangpo 1996, 34). This aligns with Penner's perspective that Buddhist myths serve as symbolic grammar, wherein visual and narrative frameworks express doctrinal and social dichotomies (Penner 2009).

Each deity, gesture (mudrā), tool, and compositional structure is part of an iconometric system that is very much based on Vajrayāna cosmology. These visual elements are encoded layers of tantric philosophy; each symbol, such as a vajra, bell, or flaming jewel, embodies cosmic functions and spiritual insights structured according to meditative logic (Beer 2003).

According to fifteenth-century scholar Bodong Panchen, Tibetan colour theory identifies five primary colours: white, red, blue, yellow, and black. All other colours are believed to have originated from these five (Jackson and Jackson 2006, 91). These colours are not only found in the robes and halos of deities, but also in mandalas, murals, and prayer flags throughout the Himalayan region. Thukral also emphasises that the five sacred colours in Vajrayāna Buddhist thangka art (i.e., white, red, yellow, green, and blue) are more than just colours; they represent the elemental forces and spiritual qualities associated with them. For example, white represents space and peace, red signifies fire and power, and blue represents water and the transformation of anger (Thukral 2013, 175-176).

The textual origins of this symbolic system can be traced back to the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha* (Compendium of Principles of All Tathāgatas), a foundational work in Yoga Tantra that introduced the concept of the five esoteric Buddhas. In this mandala system, Vairocana is located in the centre and depicted as white. Akṣobhya is in the east and blue, Ratnasambhava in the south and yellow, Amitābha in the west and red, and Amoghasiddhi in the north and green. Each Buddha leads a family (kūla) of the Bodhisattvas, goddesses, and wrathful deities. They are all connected using the same colours, gestures, and traits. Even though some later artistic traditions mix these ways of representation, for example, in the *Sarvadurgatiparišodhana* Tantra, where the eastern Buddha is white and the southern Buddha is blue, the basic five-fold structure of colour, direction, and spiritual quality is still a key part of Himalayan Buddhist visual culture (Luczantis 2023, 748-750).

Direction	Buddha	Colour	Element	Symbolic Quality / Emotion
Centre	Vairocana	White	Space	Universal wisdom, clarity
East	Akṣobhya	Blue	Water	Mirror-like wisdom, stability
South	Ratnasambhava	Yellow	Earth	Generosity, equanimity, increase
West	Amitābha	Red	Fire	Compassion, passion transformed to love
North	Amoghasiddhi	Green	Air/Wind	Action, accomplishment, fearlessness

Table 1. The five esoteric Buddhas according to the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*, showing their directional placement, colour, elemental force, and spiritual qualities.

As Luczanits notes, the symbolism of the five esoteric Buddhas, especially their colour codes, became very important in mandala art (Luczanits 2023). Consequently, this influenced thangka painting, mural programming, and ritual art throughout the Himalayan Buddhist world. Dollfus highlights that people of Ladakh also engage with these hues in daily life, naming white (*dkar po*), yellow (*ser po*), red (*dmar po*), and blue (*sngon po*) as primary colours, with green (*ljang ku*) and black (*nag po*) added to different contexts (Dollfus 2015, 264). In the Vajrayāna practice, the five colours serve as ritual codes: white for purity, yellow for prosperity, red for subjugation, blue for wrathful force, and green, which is created by mixing white, blue, and yellow for accomplished action. In daily practice, these colours are manifested through prayer flags, chortens, and deity images, connecting doctrinal teachings with lived experiences (Dollfus 2015, 274-75).

Adding lucky symbols such as the lotus, conch shell, or parasol to thangka scrolls reflects profound awareness of spiritual protection and the attraction of desired outcomes. Beer states that the lotus (Skt. Padma, kamala; Tib. Pad-ma) is a symbol of spiritual emergence, and the blossoming of wholesome deeds amid worldly defilement. It represents the idea of non-attachment, which means that enlightened beings do not let the suffering of saṃsāra affect them while they engage in compassionate actions within it (Beer 2003, 8). The conch shell (Skt. Shankha; Tib. Dung dkar), often used in ritual offerings or as a border for murals, is another sign of Dharma's message. Beer states that the spiralling shape and resonant tone of the object represent how the Buddha's teachings spread in all directions (Beer 2003, 232). Another common theme was the parasol (Skt. chatra; Tib. gdugs), which is often shown over the heads of gods or as part of ritual processions. It symbolises both spiritual strength and protective care. The shadow cast by the parasol guards against the intense tropical sun, while its cool shade offers protection from the painful heat of suffering, desire, obstacles, illnesses, and harmful forces (Beer 2003, 3; Tsewang 2001).

These symbols imbue the painting with layers of religious significance, transforming mere decorations into dynamic expressions of Buddhist cosmology and ethics. Hall further recorded the significance of symbolic animals, including lions, elephants, deer, and birds, in various Asian traditions. In Tibetan Buddhist thangka art, these animals are protectors with symbolic meanings. For instance, lions symbolise the Buddha's voice, elephants stand for strength and mental steadiness, and deer evoke the Buddha's first sermon in Sarnath. Their inclusion demonstrates how thangka compositions integrate plants, animals, and ritual tools into a symbolic ecology that conveys moral and cosmological values (Hall 2018, 34, 23, 18). Additionally, thangka have a substantial visual impact due to the way layers of symbolic meaning function together. Jackson and Jackson describe how thangka painters slowly add pigments, which creates a meditative rhythm while they work (Jackson and Jackson 1984, 78).

Figure 1. Image of *Chuktor Dharshak Lhaku displaying a parasol, lotus, and conch shell*. Painted by Tenzing Norbu Bhutia. © Photograph by the author, 19 June 2025.

Figure 2. *Thangka portraying elephants, deer, cranes, and birds.* Painted by Tashi Dorjee Lepcha. © Photograph by the author, 19 June 2025.

However, these symbolic grammars are not always preserved in the thangkas sold in Ladakhi shops. As subsequent interviews revealed that shifts in materials, outsourcing, and customer preferences complicated the deployment and interpretation of these colours and guidelines.

RITUAL CONSECRATION AND THE COMMERCIAL TURN

In Tibetan Buddhism, the materiality of sacred art cannot be distinguished from its ritual role. Shaftel emphasises that sacred Buddhist paintings are not merely images; they constitute ritual assemblages in which fabric, pigment, and consecration converge to create a unified devotional presence (Shaftel 1986). In this context, ritual assemblage refers to the collection of physical and spiritual components involved in the creation and use of a thangka. Each element contributes to sacred power and effectiveness.

Two key moments mark this ritual: The first is the "Opening of the Eyes' (*spyan dbye)*, in which a thangka painter inscribes the pupils, symbolically awakening the image. Jackson and Jackson stated that the canvas is already considered sacred when it is prepared with offerings and prayers. However, the painting is not complete until the eyes are painted, which is an important act that brings the painting to life (Jackson and Jackson 1984, 139). Shaftel likewise observes that thangkas only attain spiritual potency after this ritualized act of opening the eyes (Shaftel 1986, 101).

However, the decisive transformation occurs through a ritual consecration ceremony (rab gnas), in which a monk or religious teacher ritually invites a deity to reside within the image (Jackson and Jackson 1984, 25; Shaftel 1986, 101). This ceremony is more than a symbol; it endows the thangka with a divine

presence and integrates it into spiritual life. Heller shows that consecration rituals were fundamental to Tibetan art from the beginning, evident in imperial tomb offerings and monastery reliquaries. These visual objects served as ritual expressions of sacred authority (Heller 2006, 50). According to McGowan, consecration generates meta-materiality, blending physical material with metaphysical significance, transforming pigment and cloth into carriers of divine agency (McGowan 2008, 55). Once this ceremony is complete, the thangka is no longer merely a painting; it becomes a sku rten (Wyl. sku rten, སྐུ་རྟེན་), or support of the body of the deity (McGuckin 1996, 33). Under this condition, it represents both symbolic significance and real presence and influence. Importantly, consecrated thangkas never lose their sanctity, even if the pigments fade or the cloth deteriorates. When damaged, they must be disposed of through a ceremonial ritual that involves burning rather than being thrown away carelessly (McGowan 2008, 60).

In addition to individual practices, the dissemination of commercially produced images into monastic settings further blurs the distinction between sacred and commercial. Increasingly, people are giving thangkas and even cast sculptures purchased from shops as gifts to monasteries, stupas, and *chö khang* (Wyl. *mchod khang*, མཆོད་ཁང་, domestic prayer rooms within households) as gifts. Once ritually consecrated *(rab gnas),* these objects are reclassified as sacred embodiments within the ritual sphere regardless of their origin in a market economy. This dynamic mirrors Bentor's observations in the Kathmandu Valley, where tourist thangkas acquire legitimacy through ritual consecration rather than through provenance or artisanal lineage (Bentor 1993, 134). Heller emphasizes that the ontological status of Buddhist art lies in consecration rather than production, as it is only through ritual that an object truly becomes a support for the deity (Heller 2006, 60). Therefore, Buddhist items for tourists can also be used as gifts in Ladakh. This process can be described as a cycle that moves from the holy to the commercial and back. These modes of buying and gifting make it difficult to distinguish between devotional and commercial art. They demonstrate that sacredness is not an inherent trait but rather something constructed through rituals and the patron's intent.

However, interviews with modern thangka shop owners in Leh showed a widening gap between sacred purposes and commercial practice. As the art form becomes more suited to tourists' tastes, the ritual aspects, especially consecration *(rab gnas)*, are often omitted. Some artists still follow iconometric rules and explain the symbolic meaning of their work to buyers, but many agree that thangkas sold in stores are not consecrated. If there is any responsibility for the ritual activation, it falls on the buyer. This separation shows a change from relational to transactional aestheticism from thangka as a medium to an object.

This tension between the devotional function and the commodified form contradicts David Morgan's concept of the 'sacred gaze,' which McGowan applies to demonstrate how culturally specific observers perceive the thangka as a living entity (McGowan 2008, 62; Morgan 2005). In the marketplace, the sacred gaze is often replaced by an aesthetic or tourist gaze, which consumes rather than venerates. However, even in the business world, there are signs of holy discipline. Artists such as Rabden and Chuskit still decline commissions that alter the proportions of canonical works, emphasizing the importance of their incorporation. Shop owners, such as Tsewang, a 24-year-old thangka artist and proprietor of the Ladakh Manjushree Mandala Art shop in Leh, explicitly instruct customers not to place thangkas near kitchens or toilets, and encourage them to take the painting for rab gnas after purchase. These examples suggest that, even within the commercial economy, accommodation remains the decisive threshold of sacredness, distinguishing thangka-as-artwork from thangka-as-embodiment.

TRAINING, GENDER, AND THE QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP

In the past, thangka paintings were passed down through monasteries or family lines. However, modern artists in Ladakh now learn through formal institutions such as the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (CIBS), informal apprenticeships, or family workshops. Women, who were mainly excluded from this domain, began entering the field and negotiating their place within the male-dominated tradition.

The case of Chuskit, a pioneering female thangka artist and art conservator, exemplifies both obstacles and evolving opportunities for women in this sacred visual practice. Inspired by her father, a monastery thangka artist, she enrolled in the six-year thangka painting course at CIBS (2012–2018), becoming the first woman to complete full training. "Earlier they used to say that girls do not know anything; this is a guy's work," she remarked, "but in reality, it is not like that. Anyone can do thangka work; there are no restrictions on it" (Chuskit 2025). Her journey illustrates broader changes in Ladakhi society, where traditional gender roles related to artistic work are gradually breaking down, particularly in urban and semi-urban regions.

Figure 3. *Chuskit is working to restore an ancient Buddhist script.*
© Photograph by the author, 19 June 2025.

Now affiliated with the Shesrig Foundation[1] in 2024, Chuskit works on conservation projects in monasteries, stupas, and *chö khang*, combining painting and preservation. She adheres to the *Changti style*, known for its minimal use of colour and refined linework. She works full-time on conservation projects every day and runs her own shop, where she paints and sells thangkas and *chokchis* (small traditional tables). She emphasised her dedication to canonical practice, despite market pressure: "I always follow the right iconometric rules that my thangka masters taught me" (Chuskit 2025). This spiritual discipline resonates with Jackson and Jackson's observation that Buddhist artists are expected to maintain ethical discipline by treating the painting process as a form of meditative offering (Jackson and Jackson 1984). For Chuskit, painting remains a devotional act even when her work enters the marketplace.

Nevertheless, the commercialisation of thangka art is causing increasing tension. As seen in interviews with shop owners like Birju and Tsewang, many thangkas today are created solely to meet tourist demand, often without proper iconometry (*thig tshad*) or ritual consecration *(rab gnas)*. Chuskit was worried about this trend: "Some shops make the gods look weird; they do not follow any rules. It is affecting our culture" (Chuskit 2025).

Figure 4. *A modern thangka by Birju, a self-trained artist, features non-traditional colours and altered deity forms, exemplifying the commercialisation that concerns conservators like Chuskit.*
© Photograph by the author, 18 June 2025.

[1] Shesrig foundation is a women-led conservation initiative in Leh district of Ladakh, India. Founded by Noor Jahan, the organization is dedicated to restoring and preserving regions cultural heritage (Jahan 2025).

Chuskit also noted that the way artists use materials has changed, and that most artists now use synthetic pigments because they are easier to obtain and less expensive. Natural pigments, such as ground stone colours, are typically reserved for rare, valuable works of art or conservation projects. This shift from natural to synthetic pigments is similar to what Tsewang and Leshram, shop owners, have observed that mineral-based pigments are gradually being replaced by synthetic pigments in everyday thangka production.

Regarding the question of ritual, Chuskit clarified that although no pre-painting rituals are performed, the artist writes sacred mantras (such as "*Om mani padme hum"*) on the back of the completed thangka (figure 5). In addition, seed syllables are placed on the body of the deity—*oṃ* at the forehead, *āḥ* at the throat, and *hūṃ* at the chest—each representing a fundamental aspect of existence and consciousness: *oṃ* symbolises the essence of form and the universe, *āḥ* represents speech and expression, and *hūṃ* signifies the enlightened mind. These inscriptions imbue the painting with spiritual energy and blessings, enhancing its potency as an object of meditation and devotion (Chuskit 2025). Jackson and Jackson also mention that painters inscribed the syllables oṃ āḥ hūṃ on the back of the canvas, directly behind the forehead, throat, and heart of the deity, as part of the consecration preparations. In this way, ritual activation gives them an enlightened body, speech, and mind (Jackson and Jackson 1984, 143). The final *rab gnas* are the buyers' responsibility. Shaftel emphasises that it is through the opening of the Eyes ceremony that a thangka becomes spiritually potent (Shaftel 1986, 101). Importantly, Chuskit stressed that the decline of consecration practices and influx of non-traditional imagery pose a threat to Ladakhi Buddhist visual culture. Her critique reinforces the larger argument of this paper: Market pressures alter both the symbolic integrity and the intergenerational transmission of sacred knowledge.

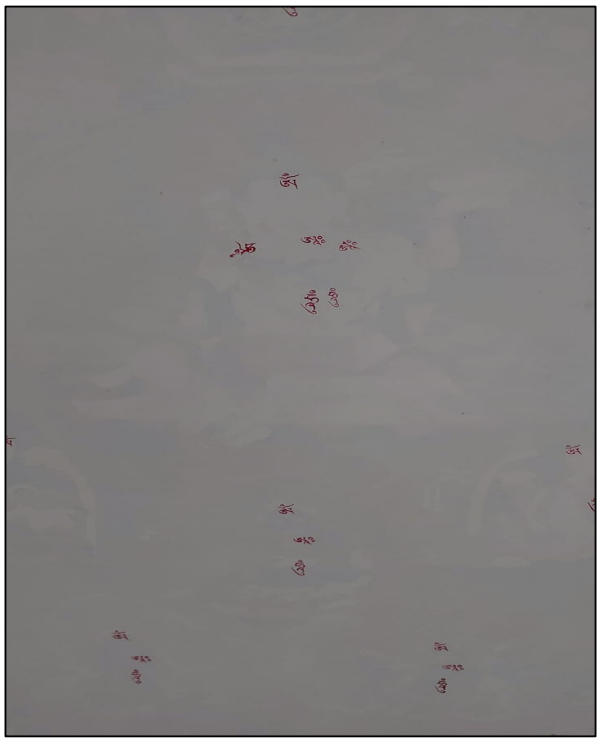

Figure 5. On the reverse of the thangka, seed syllables are placed at specific points on the deity's body—*oṃ* (Wyl. *om*) on the forehead, *āḥ* (Wyl. *aḥ*) at the throat, and *hūṃ* (Wyl. *hung*) on the chest. Painted by Tenzing Norbu Bhutia. © Photograph by the author, 24 June 2005.

She also offers insights into the symbolism of flora and fauna, noting, for instance, that the trees depicted in thangkas often represent longevity. She also discussed the significance of five specific colours–white, red, blue, yellow, and black–and how other colours were created by mixing these five colours. Her knowledge reflects Tibetan colour theory, which considers the existence of five colours: white, blue, red, black, and yellow (Jackson and Jackson 2006, 91; Ricciardi and Pallipurath 2016, 487). Chuskit's journey shows how women artists create new roles for themselves in Buddhist culture, not just as decorators, but also as ritual practitioners, conservationists, and cultural custodians. She believes that only three to four women have signed up for formal thangka classes since she graduated, but her presence and that of the Shesrig Foundation indicate that women are reclaiming sacred spaces.

THE MARKETPLACE AND THE MYTHIC IMAGE

The commercialisation of thangkas has led to significant shifts in their sourcing, production, iconography, materials, and ritual treatment. Interviews with Thangka artists and shop owners in Leh show that the area is marked by both compromise and resistance. Traditional Buddhist values often do not align with the needs of tourists, market economics, or global aesthetics.

Rabden, a classically trained artist from Dharamshala who now paints in Leh, talked about the difference between sacred time and market pace: "We are not machines. A thangka takes time" (Rabden 2025). This highlights the deep contrast between the sacred, deliberate process of creating a thangka and the fast-moving demands of the market.

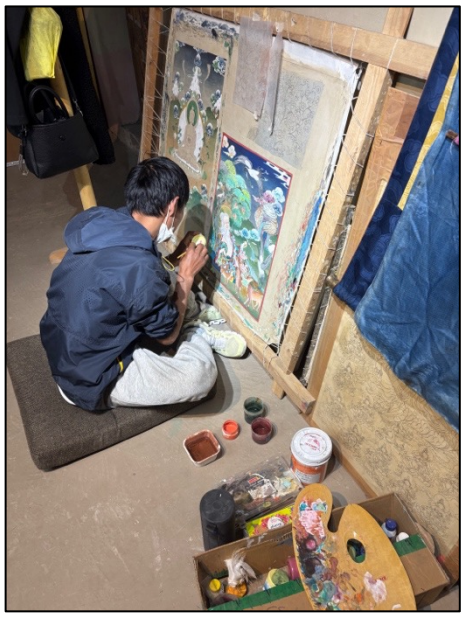

Figure 6. *Rabden works on thangka art.* © Photograph by the author, 24 June 2005.

Having followed the *Menri* style since 2008, Rabden insisted on strict iconometric discipline and refused commissions that compromised religious accuracy. Many customers now want their orders to be delivered faster, and they bring printed references from the Internet. Nevertheless, Rabden reminds them, "If you want something sacred, give it sacred time" (Rabden 2025). He agrees that minor adjustments are needed for modern consumers, but he will not alter the forms of the gods or omit ritual intent. "These are not merely images; they are embodiments" (Rabden 2025).

Rabden's training took place in Dharamshala with a cohort of 23 students, only two of whom were Indian. He was the only one to complete the program with a degree, but he dismissed the credential as symbolic: "Art is skill and willpower, not a piece of paper' (Rabden 2025). His training emphasized not only technical mastery but also spiritual discipline, including meditative focus on the deity before painting and learning the 12 deeds of the Buddha.

He discussed the importance of thangkas as rituals throughout life. For instance, people create thangkas of Vajrapāṇi for dying as a way to spiritually protect themselves and ask for forgiveness. Writing mantras like "Om Ah Hum" on the back of a thangka and blessing it through the rab gnas rite is an important part of the tradition, but it is often omitted in commercial contexts. "People now just paint on the side of the road in dust," Rabden said. "That is not right. Some even hang thangkas near toilets" (Rabden 2025).

Rabden is always committed to conventional training and being responsible. He still paints for monasteries and villages, and does not charge for paintings that deal with death. He makes canvases using animal glue made from yak or sheep skin and paints them with both synthetic and natural colours. However, he noted that natural pigments, such as stone colours, are becoming especially scarce in Ladakh and are now mostly available in Tibet. "Stone colours never fade; the murals of Alchi Monastery, which are from the 11th century, are painted using stone colours, and they are still intact and vibrant," he emphasises (Rabden 2025).

Rabden adheres to the Menri style, known for its detailed figures, dominance of blue and green tones, gold embellishments, and relaxed postures (Thaye 2000, 17). He warned that with more people entering the trade without formal training, strange and inauthentic images are proliferating. "Art without training is not sacred, it is just decoration" (Rabden 2025).

Birju, on the other hand, is a self-taught thangka artist from Bodhgaya who is also a Hindu. He takes a more practical approach. Birju has run a shop in Leh for 11 years and says that most of his thangkas are for tourists: "Most of what we sell are mandalas and Wheel of Life paintings (Figure 7); the army men and tourists are our main buyers" (Birju 2025). In contrast, Teiser demonstrates that the Wheel of Rebirth was not a commodity, but a teaching image that the Buddha instructed monks to paint on monastery porches to instruct them in the principles of karmic law. Its placement at the threshold framed the wheel as a teaching tool, making people think about saṃsāra before entering sacred space (Teiser 2008, 145). At first, Birju said that he followed iconometric rules but subsequently admitted that he had no official training and had learned much by watching. Birju does not see thangka painting as a means of worshipping God; instead, he sees it as a way of earning a living. "I think thangka is a business. This is what people want. But I also tell the tourists what it signifies' (Birju 2025). McGowan observes that in such transitions, the thangka is re-imagined and re-written, not as an object of sacred worship, but as a fine art object precious to Western art tastes (McGowan 2008, 60).

Figure 7. *Thangka painting of the Wheel of Life, using pastel colours and featuring many imagined details, painted by Birju.* © Photograph by the author, 18 June 2025.

Birju's remarks underscore a dual reality: while commercialisation brings livelihood opportunities, it also compromises artistic integrity. His store, like many others, now primarily uses synthetic pigments due to cost and availability: "Stone colours are too expensive and hard to find" Birju also saw a change in what younger people are interested in, saying, "the younger generation is not really showing interest, the knowledge system is fading" (Birju 2025).

Birju's role as a teacher for people from other countries blurs the line between commodification and devotion. He was self-trained and did not receive any formal iconometric training. However, he sees himself as a teacher to outsiders, mostly Western tourists, who see thangka painting as an art form instead of a religious activity. Birju values accessibility to orthodoxy. For example, Shani, an Israeli citizen, learned the art of mandala paintings in his shop (Figure 8). He teaches basic patterns, techniques, and colour schemes without the strict rules that artists usually must follow when creating Tibetan Buddhist art. This informal approach to teaching thangka art not only spreads it beyond Buddhist cultures but also changes how we perceive it as a skill that can be learned anywhere and does not need to be acquired in a monastery or through a formal setting. These interactions show how untrained individuals can become cultural heritage mediators in the market, making art more accessible to the public and making rituals less traditional. Thangka serves as both a memento and a means for people from different cultures to learn from each other. This demonstrates the evolution of religious art in the global market. Birju and other artists are a growing group of people who engage in both art and business. They try to find a balance between earning money and gaining respect. His methods may not be strict, but the fact that he wants to teach shows that he understands the importance of thangka in Buddhist culture. For instance, his claim that mandalas should only be painted with black, white, red, and yellow shows that he has partially learnt about traditional knowledge, even if it is sometimes too simple.

Figure 8. *Shani, an Israeli citizen, learns the art of mandala painting in Birju's shop, which is part of Birju's effort to pass on knowledge freely to new generations and visitors.* © Photograph by the author, 18 June 2025.

A more complex middle ground is reflected in the practice of Tsewang, age 24, the owner of Ladakh Manjushree Mandala Art. Coming from a lineage of thangka artists, Tsewang's father and uncle, who trained in Dharamshala, taught him to paint at the age of 22 through family instruction. His shop sources thangkas from Himachal Pradesh as well as from Ladakhi artists and their own studio, adapting to the demands of tourists. Tsewang said, "Vajrapāṇi (Figure 9) is fierce, so we do not make much of him. Green Tārā (Figure 10) is more popular because she is depicted as peaceful" (Tsewang 2025). Market preferences often determine which deities are depicted, with iconic representations, such as Kalachakra and the Wheel of Life, consistently attracting attention (Figures 12 and 13).

This modern preference for peaceful deities has historical precedent. Specific deities were depicted more frequently in the past because they were central to rituals, and people wanted to honour them. For example, Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo supported the growth of Avalokiteśvara (Chenrezig) (Figure 11) and sGrol ma (Tārā) in Western Tibet and in Ladakh (Lamo 2021). Tucci noted that many images of sGrol ma (Tārā) in early Western Tibetan art demonstrate that she remains popular as a saviour and protector (Tucci 1949). These examples indicate that reliance on iconographic production predates the tourist economy by a significant margin. The preference for peaceful deities has not changed in the current context; rather, it is the agents who shape it that has changed. In the past, monasteries and patrons directed demand. Today, tourists and market circulation determine which deities are reproduced.

Figure 9. *Thangka of Vajrapāṇi, painted by Tenzing norbu Bhutia*.
© Photograph by the author, 13 June 2025.

Figure 10. *Thangka of Green Tārā, painted by Tenzing norbu Bhutia*.
© Photograph by the author, 13 June 2025.

Figure 11. *Thangka of* Chenrezig*, painted by Tenzing norbu Bhutia*.
© Photograph by the author, 13 June 2025.

Figure 12. *Painting of the Wheel of Life sold by Tsewang (painter unknown). Created using natural stone colours and partially painted with pure gold, the work adheres to proper iconometric guidelines and is valued at* ₹ *eight lakhs*. © Photograph by the author, 13 June 2025.

Figure 13. *Painting of the Kalachakra sold by Tsewang (painter unknown)*.
© Photograph by the author, 13 June 2025.

However, Tsewang does not treat the thangka purely as merchandise. He affirms that all the artwork sold in his shop is created by trained artists who adhere to proper iconometric guidelines. He educates buyers on placement ethics, such as "do not keep thangkas near toilets or kitchens" (Tsewang 2025), and encourages them to visit monasteries for *rab gnas* rituals after purchase. Although most thangkas in his shop remain unconsecrated at the point of sale, ritual options are left open to the consumer.

His practices also integrate ecological and symbolic knowledge. Tsewang explained that flora and fauna in thangka are not decorative, but embody Buddhist ecological principles. This metaphor is for someone who has reached a higher level of understanding. Animal symbols remind us of Buddhism's teaching of living together in peace; all living beings have feelings and deserve kindness. He went on to say, "Animals even represent the Tibetan calendar," referring to the astrological system shared by Tibetans and the Chinese (Tsewang 2025).

Tsewang's shop utilises both synthetic and natural pigments, including gold leaves and plant extracts. However, he noted that natural pigments require 15 to 20 days to grind, making them less suitable for a market that operates quickly. "Commercialisation affects our culture," acknowledging that the cost and effort of authenticity often push artists toward shortcuts (Tsewang 2025). However, they avoided printed thangkas and adhered to ethical codes during their training. "If we do not follow proper guidelines, it is a sin"(Tsewang 2025).

The various ways in which iconometry, rituals, and pigments are used demonstrate how sacred symbols and capitalist logic are intertwined. The modern thangka trade in Ladakh is a dynamic field of negotiation in which heritage, livelihood, and authenticity are constantly being redefined. This is evident in Rabden's resistance, Chuskit's careful adherence, and Birju's compromise.

This careful balance of tradition and adaptation is echoed in the Tibetan Thangka Art Gallery run by Leshram Gurung, a 30-year-old shop owner and curator from Leh. Leshram does not paint himself like artists such as Rabden or Tsewang. Instead, he assembled a collection of handcrafted thangkas from Nepal that tourists appreciate as souvenirs. He said that "Mandalas and the Wheel of Life are always in demand," and that sales are highest in July and August, when there are many tourists (Gurung 2025). Some of his gallery's most elaborate pieces, such as a ₹12 lakh Wheel of Life, are made with synthetic pigments, while those created with natural stone colours or gold detailing can take up to three years to complete.

Although the paintings are not consecrated prior to sale, Leshram insists on educating customers about their religious and cultural significance. "People should know what they are buying," his business uses Instagram and WhatsApp to conduct business, which demonstrates how digital platforms now handle the sacred commodity (Gurung 2025). Aware of the shifts brought on by commercialisation, he reflected that earlier, "one person made one thangka; now it is common for three or four people to work on a single piece' (Gurung 2025). Although they have a collective model, their shop does not sell printed thangkas and still values the symbolic integrity of the original works. "There is meaning behind all flora and fauna," he added, confirming the artwork's deeper cosmological aspects (Gurung 2025).

These market dynamics are indicative of general trends in research on tourist art. Tourist-local interactions, often described as superficial and stereotypical in anthropological discourse, produce what Graburn refers to as a cross-cultural code resembling the pidgin language. Tourist arts utilise several basic motifs that signify a location or ethnicity across cultural boundaries (Graburn 1974). Thangkas often display little skill in shading and are sometimes either too simple or too complicated with added elements. Pastel colours are used to appeal to Western tastes (Bentor 1993). This situation resembles what happens in the Ladakhi market, where the need to meet tourist expectations often leads to the use of well-known gods such as Avalokiteśvara or Green Tārā, depicted in bright, standardised designs. Artists interviewed in Leh confirmed that they altered iconographic details and colour choices to accommodate customer preferences.

McKean explains that tourism in Bali promotes a thriving arts scene, creating an "economic dualism" where artists cater to both the local, sacred market and the international, secular market (McKean 1989). Comparable dualism is evident in Ladakh, where thangka painters and shopkeepers navigate between sacred obligations to deities and monasteries and the demands of tourists seeking portable aesthetic commodities. Simultaneously, McGuckin challenged the idea that commodification always diminishes spiritual significance. He demonstrates that the creation of thangkas can generate merit, as long as it adheres to canonical rules, even when conducted outside a religious context (McGuckin 1996, 45). McGuckin's argument implies that thangkas retain their capacity to serve as devotional instruments, aesthetic entities, and commodities rather than forfeiting their spiritual significance upon entering the marketplace.

CONCLUSION

Today, thangka painting in Ladakh is not just a static ritual art form or a tourist attraction; it is a dynamic field in which sacred tradition and market forces intersect. Tourism and commercialisation have altered materials, symbols, and rituals, but they have not diminished the holy value. Artists such as Rabden and Chuskit still follow the rules of *thig tshad*, devotional discipline, and ritual awareness, which involve a deep understanding and respect for the symbolic meanings and spiritual significance of the art. Conversely,

artists such as Birju and Tsewang modify their work to cater to the needs of tourists while still maintaining and transmitting symbolic codes and encouraging *rab gnas*. Even thangkas produced for the tourist market can re-enter sacred circuits when ritually activated, indicating that authenticity is negotiated rather than extinguished.

Equally important is the growing presence of women conservators and artists, particularly through institutions such as the Shesrig Foundation, which expands authorship and reshapes cultural transmissions. Adding thangkas and sculptures produced for the tourist market to monasteries and *chö khang* collections demonstrates how consecration is transformed, making it more difficult to distinguish between objects of worship and commerce. Modern thangka trade is not a story of decline; it is an ongoing negotiation in which livelihood, ritual practices, and cultural continuity coexist. This dynamic context engages us in the evolution of thangka, preserving it as a vessel of layered meaning and living sacredness.

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