

TIBETAN ART

How to understand this thanka

To the Western eye this painting may at first seem to have little meaning. But to the Buddhist people of Central Asia its style is very familiar. The painted 'thanaka' is a traditional Tibetan art form which is used in teaching and worship by followers of Tibetan Buddhism.

There is a well known Buddhist thanka that portrays life as an unbroken wheel which is held tightly by the demonic 'Lord of Death'. That ancient painting has some superficial similarities to this Christian thanka, but the concepts illustrated show a number of crucial differences.

It is a basic Buddhist belief that, because we are attached to worldly things, our 'souls' continue to remain within the 'wheel of life'. After death, reincarnation in various forms occurs many times until eventually we manage to rid ourselves of our earthly desires and obtain enlightenment. Only then is it possible to escape rebirth and enter the 'undefinable essencelessness' known as 'nirvana'. Although the Buddhist thanka's wheel of life remains unbroken, in this Christian painting the circle is broken in two places: once when Jesus came into the world and again when He ascended into heaven. This illustrates the fact that when Jesus entered the world from an unchanging eternal realm He came fully omniscient (all knowing) and it also shows that He did not have to enter the Buddhist process of repeated rebirth in order to escape from the wheel of life. Jesus' leaving the circle at His ascension symbolises the opening up of the way to enter the kingdom of heaven.

In the Christian painting the Lord of Death, who once held the wheel of life, has been forced to let go because Jesus conquered death when He rose from the dead. This is powerfully symbolic to Buddhists because the Lord of Death is seen as a terrifying being, trapping them in the wheel of life. In the bottom two corners you will also see demons fleeing from the circle and entering eternal judgement.

The cross in the centre of the wheel, representing our salvation, replaces three animals which are found on the Buddhist thanka. These animals represent ignorance, desire and hatred. The replacement of these animals illustrates the total forgiveness of sins through Jesus dying on the cross.

To show that Jesus was a human being you see His face once – when He was a baby. However in the other pictures of Jesus His face is not portrayed, reminding those who see this thanka that it should never be made an object of worship.

The Tibetan writing used here is in 'every day' language so that most Tibetans will be able to understand the script.

The top of the thanka reads:

“BEFORE ANYTHING WAS MADE GOD EXISTED.”

The writing around the wheel states:

“GOD IS SPIRIT AND THOSE WHO WORSHIP GOD MUST BE LED BY THE SPIRIT TO WORSHIP HIM ACCORDING TO THE TRUTH. THE WAY TO GOD THE FATHER IS THROUGH JESUS HIS SON.”

And the wording at the centre of the wheel is:

“JESUS DEFEATED SIN, DEATH AND THE POWER OF THE LORD OF THE DEMONS.”

The various sections of the thanka show the earthly life of Jesus.

His birth. *Luke 2, verses 6-7.*

Discussing in the Jewish temple. *Luke 2, verses 46-50.*

His baptism followed by his temptation. *Luke 3, verses 21-22. Luke 4, verses 1-2.*

Teaching the people. *Matthew 5, verses 1-2.*

Healing the sick. *Luke 4, verses 38-39.*

His authority over evil spirits. *Luke 8, verses 26-39.*

The last supper. *Luke 22, verses 14-16.*

The trial. *Luke 23, verses 13-14.*

The crucifixion. *Luke 23, verses 32-46.*

The Resurrection. *Luke 24, verses 1-7.*

Jesus appears to his disciples. *Luke 24, verses 36-48.*

The Ascension. *Luke 24, verses 50-52.*

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