

Thangka – Seven Buddhas of the Past

Thangka is also known as “Thang-ga”, which is a phonetic translation of Tibetan. Thangka is a unique religious scrolled painting in the Tibetan culture with distinctive Tibetan characteristics, prominent religious colour and distinguishing artistic style; which depicts the sacred world of Buddha with bright colours. This form of art is mainly served at religious life. Temple is the center of Tibetan religious culture; most of the Thangka, especially the masterpieces, are gathered together in temples.

In terms of craftsmanship and material, Thangkas are classified into many types. Hand-painted Thangkas are divided into Coloured Thangka (with a white background, painted with different colours), Golden Thangka (with gold background), Silver Thangka (with silver background), Red Thangka (with red background) and Black Thangka (with black background). Embroidered Thangkas are braided together with silk threads of different colours, which are tough and durable, and are not easily damaged.

Silk Tapestry Thangka is a type of silk crafts, and a premium product of silk-woven portraits of Buddha; the longitude of such portraits is braided with raw silk while the latitude is weaved together by different types of refined silk with a small weaving shuttle. The vertical threads would only be knotted with the horizontal threads at the pattern, this technique is known as “Joint horizons with severed vertical”, which eventually forms tiny holes and gaps between the patterns and the background, as well as between different colours on the portrait. “Lifting up to look at it against the light, the patterns look like a carved statue, thus it is named Silk Tapestry”.

The royal Silk Tapestry Thangka of Seven Buddhas of the Past, is also known as the Seven Primal Buddhas. It is written in Sutras that, there were seven Buddhas in the Saha world of the past, they were Vipasyin, Sikhin and Visvabhu, which were the three Buddhas of the Adorned Eon; Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, Kasyapa and Sakyamuni, these were the four Buddhas of the Auspicious Aeon.

This set of Thangka has an outer edge framed by red threads and golden rods, with the inner edge surrounded by golden dragons playing with pearls, its empty space is filled with gracious clouds, and the four corners are scribed with the phrase “Endorsed by Emperor Qianlong in Dingyou” (1777) in the characters of Chinese: Han, Manchu, Mongolian and Tibetan. The top and bottom sides of the inner edge are decorated with the seven golden sacred artefacts, from left to right respectively, these artefacts are the wheel, the lamp, the minister, the empress, the elephant, the horse and the general; the eight treasures of fortune are arranged in progressive order at both left and right sides. The top of the portrait is scribed with quotes from the mantra in Chinese: Han, Manchu, Mongolian and Tibetan, which serves to praise the gracious presence of the Buddha. Whenever a background is drawn, there must be a tree, and there must be fruits on the tree; the center portraits the Buddha sitting upon the lotus throne, with two disciples on his sides, and there are also four followers underneath those two disciples.

Silk Tapestry was invented during the era of Wei-Jin, but the larger pieces of work only started to emerge during the Northern Song Dynasty, however these works were treasured dearly across generations due to its high weaving cost; there were not many Silk Tapestry Thangkas braided in the palace of Qing Dynasty, these seven pieces of Thangkas displayed golden statues surrounded by a black background, the light behind the Buddha’s back was shown as golden halos with the compliment of small dense golden threads, the robe of the master was weaved by the Silk Tapestry technique with golden patterns. The top hair buns and images of some artefacts were weaved with colourful threads, which gives off a magnificent glitter and further emphasised its solemnness, a display of superb craftsmanship.

Source of information and images: Hua Xia International (Macau) Art Exhibition Center Limited
Translation: NTC Communication & Translation Services