

Blaze and Sublime — A Preliminary Study on the Aesthetic Characteristics of Red Thangka

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Abstract

The red Thangka not only reflects the Tibetan people's reverence and yearning for the vitality of life, the brilliance of the sun and the purification of the deity, but also contains the artistic pursuit of fierce and lofty emotions. Through the systematic analysis of 150 works of 20 red Thangka artists, this paper reveals the multiple symbolic meanings of red in red Thangka and the regularity and difference of emotional expression. The results show that the selection and collocation of red is not only the inheritance of traditional Tibetan aesthetics, but also the innovation of modern aesthetic trends. The combination of schematic design, line use and composition form a fiery and lofty aesthetic style of red Thangka. The aesthetic characteristics of red Thangka not only provide us with a new perspective to better understand Tibetan culture, but also provide a rich mass foundation and creative inspiration for the artistic creation and cultural inheritance of red Thangka in the future. The research results confirm that the artistic creation and cultural inheritance of red Thangka have important practical significance and academic value in the sustainable development of Tibetan art and culture.

Keywords: Red Thangka, Tibetan painting, religious painting, Blaze and Sublime

1. Introduction

Red Thangka, this Tibetan treasure, is embedded at the intersection of religion and art, carrying a mysterious and passionate aesthetic spirit, attracting the attention of generations of artists and believers. Red, as the soul of red thangka, its rich color and vigorous vitality present an unparalleled attraction in thangka art. This study delves into the application of red in red thangka from the perspectives of religious rituals, Tibetan culture, and aesthetic emotions. Through a detailed study of 20 red thangka artists and their 150 works, this article aims to reveal how red permeates the aesthetic expression of thangka and its impact on the emotions and thoughts of the Tibetan community. The fiery red color not only highlights the exquisite skills of Thangka, but also reflects the profound religious beliefs and strong passion for life of the Tibetan people. The study also found that when telling mythological stories, depicting Buddha images, and depicting natural landscapes, the use of red in thangkas demonstrates a devout reverence for divine purification, vitality, and the radiance of the sun. In addition, the changes in the depth, brightness, and warmth of the red color depict the deep contemplation of the Tibetan people towards life and death, suffering and happiness, simplicity and complexity in the vast world. The differences and regularities in the use of red not only reveal the adherence of Tibetan artists to aesthetic traditions, but also reflect the new understanding and pursuit of color in contemporary Tibetan society in the fusion of tradition and modernity. And this aesthetic interpretation and transformation are fully reflected in the strong colors and highly symbolic graphics of the red thangka. Whether it is the mysterious patterns outlined by fine lines or the numerous gold foil embellishments, they elevate red to a supreme religious and cultural symbol. The aesthetic characteristics of Red Thangka undoubtedly add an important color to the treasure trove of Tibetan art and even world cultural arts. From the contemporary creation of Red Thangka, artists not only inherit classics

but also constantly incorporate innovative elements, making this art form more colorful and vibrant while maintaining its religious and cultural value. This study not only provides a new perspective for understanding the special position of red thangka in Tibetan culture, but also makes valuable theoretical and practical explorations for the sustainable development of Tibetan art and culture.

2. The Historical Origins of Red Thangka

2.1 Tibetan Buddhism and the Origin of Thangka

Red Thangka, as an important component of Tibetan Buddhist art, carries rich religious culture and ethnic aesthetics. Its historical roots are deeply rooted in the beliefs and practices of Tibetan Buddhism, and the origin and dissemination of thangka are closely related to the rise and development of Tibetan Buddhism. According to existing historical records, the origin of thangkas is directly related to the first thangka of the Tibetan ethnic group. One of the earliest records is the statue of the goddess Ram painted by King Songtsen Gampo with his own nasal blood. After Songtsen Gampo unified Xizang, Buddhist culture came to Tibet from the princess. With the integration of Tibetan and Tang culture, Buddhist art gradually took root (Jing Haoran, 2022). The early embryonic form of Thangka art can be derived from the scroll paintings of Bon religion in Xizang, which indicates that the embryonic form of Thangka art in Tibet has a trend of localization (Hong Shijun, 2020). At the same time, in terms of form and content, Thangka absorbed the influence of art from Nepal, India and other neighboring countries (Mao Yi, 2017), and in the Han, Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties, it constantly integrated the artistic elements of the Central Plains and Han, forming a unique artistic style with Xizang's local characteristics. As a type of thangka, the use of color in red thangka is particularly prominent. The multiple symbolic meanings of red in thangka reflect the admiration and longing of the Tibetan people for vitality, the radiance of the sun, and the purification of divinity. It not only symbolizes the fervent faith in religion, but also represents the longing for a better life. Currently, in the process of inheritance and development, the red thangka not only retains ancient traditional elements but also constantly aligns with modern aesthetics. This process has given rise to a large number of exquisite and unparalleled red thangka works, which not only play an important role in religious activities, but also become an important medium for showcasing Tibetan culture and aesthetic pursuits.

2.2 The Formation and Development of Red Thangka Schools

Red Thangka art, originating from the deep belief soil and cultural integration of Tibetan culture, is a profound reflection of the sacred symbols of Buddhism and Tibetan aesthetic emotions. Among numerous Thangka schools, red Thangka has gradually become a prominent subject due to its passionate and passionate color characteristics and exquisite artistic expression. The establishment and development of the Red Thangka School is closely related to the exchange and integration of Tibetan Buddhist culture and Chinese culture. Research has shown that the composition of the red thangka is rigorous, with clear color layers, and the use of red is ingenious, endowing the work with fiery vitality and noble religious significance. The development of the genre of red thangka has gone through a process from simplicity to complexity, from roughness to refinement. It not only carries the fusion of diverse cultures, but also gradually forms its own unique expression style and technical system. In long-term artistic practice, artists continuously absorb the essence of foreign art, forming the characteristics and technical elements of various schools of red thangka. The red thangka has exquisite craftsmanship, often using golden lines to enhance the beauty of details in the artwork, while also presenting a dazzling texture in color and luster, reflecting the sanctity and solemnity of the Buddha statue. In addition, in terms of production techniques, the red thangka incorporates a large amount of gold powder embellishments, making it more luxurious and fully demonstrating the Tibetan culture's worship of light, sunshine, and power. In the specific process of artistic creation, the works of Red Thangka often require months or even years of meticulous craftsmanship, and each process reflects the producer's pursuit of perfection and profound understanding of Buddhist teachings. From composition and layout to pigment selection, from line delineation to area filling, artists pay attention to the handling of every detail, striving to give their works a modern aesthetic emotional resonance while maintaining religious sanctity, making the use of red more bold and layered. Nowadays, the Red Thangka School has become a treasure trove of Tibetan culture, and its profound cultural connotations and rich artistic expressions are still being continuously inherited and developed.

3. The Aesthetic Connotation of Red Thangka

3.1 Religious Imagery and Symbolic Significance

As a treasure of Tibetan Buddhist art, the use of red thangka's colors is extremely precise and profound, expressing rich religious imagery and symbolic significance. Red, in Tibetan Buddhist thangkas, usually expresses the fiery power of life and the supreme sacredness. This is not only a direct symbol of the sun and flames, but also contains deep meanings of power, passion, and change. Through in-depth research on the color culture of Tibetan Buddhism, red is often used to depict the images of high monks and Buddhas such as

Amitabha Buddha and Master Tsongkhapa, reflecting a state of reverence and nobility. The widespread use of red in thangka fully reflects the Tibetan people's continuous pursuit and aesthetic desire for the spiritual world. The color usage strategy of red thangka is often closely related to its religious symbols and emotional expression. For example, the red flame pattern symbolizes the brightness of wisdom and the purification function of troubles, indicating that through devout practice, viewers can illuminate their hearts, wash their inner troubles, and reach the Pure Land of Heaven. At the same time, the use of red is also associated with the Five Wisdom and Five Forces of Buddhism, symbolizing the infinite wisdom freed from troubles and emphasizing the importance of current awareness and wisdom. In addition, the natural mineral pigments such as cinnabar and rubies widely used in red thangkas not only add unique regional colors, but also make the color of the entire thangka work natural and dazzling, deepening the sense of sacredness and immersive experience evoked in religious ceremonies (Beijing Institute of Technology, 2017; Zhang Qianqian, 2018). This delicate and precise use of color makes the religious imagery and symbolic significance in red thangkas an indispensable bridge between believers and the Buddha. The aesthetic connotation of Red Tangka is closely integrated with the living customs and spiritual needs of the Tibetan people. It not only portrays the national character of loyalty and courage, but also highlights the sacred position and role of red in singing praises of life and beautiful things in the world. From detailed image analysis, we can observe that the use of this color plays a decisive role in enhancing the artistic image and religious atmosphere of the red thangka, leaving an indelible aesthetic footprint for Tibetan art.

3.2 Color Application and Aesthetic Emotions

The use of color in red thangka is an important component of its aesthetic connotation, playing a crucial role in reflecting and expressing Tibetan religious emotions and aesthetic concepts. The color of red thangka is not only used for visual beauty, but also carries profound cultural symbols and emotional value. In the production process of red thangka, the selection, combination, and application of colors demonstrate extremely high skills and exquisite aesthetic design. Research has shown that the color matching of red thangka strictly follows the color matching rules of color studies and cleverly applies the most basic color matching principles (Zhang Qianqian, 2018). In every work of Red Tangka, we can see that red usually occupies a dominant position. Its fierceness and distinctiveness are not only a manifestation of visual impact, but also a profound expression of Tibetan people's power, passion, and sacredness. In the creation of traditional red thangkas, artists usually use red pigments from natural minerals, which are finely ground and blended to convey the unique aesthetic emotions and religious beliefs of the Tibetan people with their unique brightness and purity. During the creative process, artists carefully mix various colors based on the theme and symbolic significance of the artwork to ensure that each color can appropriately reflect the artistic beauty and emotional power of thangka. Not only that, the contrast of brightness and warmth in color is also the key to the art of red thangka color. Through these contrasts, artists can form a strong sense of three-dimensional and dynamic in the picture, giving viewers a sense of religious solemnity and sublime beauty. For example, the contrast between red and yellow is good at expressing the solemnity and mystery of the Tangka deity; The combination of red and blue reflects the deep understanding and respect of the Tibetan people towards the universe and heaven. In terms of conveying aesthetic emotions, red thangka utilizes the strong contrast and depth changes of colors to create a grand and infectious emotional atmosphere. Through delicate color rendering, it conveys more refined and rich aesthetic emotions. Through image analysis of 150 red thangka works, the study reveals the regularity and differences in the use of red thangka colors, reflecting the noble religious pursuit and passionate emotional expression of the Tibetan people. The color art of Red Tangka is not only to satisfy the enjoyment of visual aesthetics, but also to deeply reflect the spiritual beliefs and emotional sustenance of Tibetan culture.

4. The Tradition and Innovation of Aesthetic Characteristics

4.1 Traditional Patterns and Production Techniques

As an aesthetic treasure in Tibetan culture, the design and production process of the red thangka are deeply influenced by Tibetan Buddhism. It not only incorporates diverse religious symbols, but also reflects a kind of inheritance of historical traditions and innovation in modern aesthetics. The traditional pattern of Red Tangka originates from the "Statue Sutra", and its standardized design, color application, and symbolic significance are all based on clear religious beliefs. Its production process combines divinity and rigor, and the drawing process requires months or even years of careful polishing and careful examination to create a compliant work. The traditional Tangka has a wide range of pigment sources, often using gold, silver, minerals, and plant-based pigments. These natural materials give the red Tangka a dazzling color and long-lasting luster. In terms of technology, the red Thangka is made strictly in accordance with specific religious rituals. In terms of technology, fine craftsmanship such as gold inlaid Paper Cuttings, stone foundation make-up pasting, and line sketching are adopted, making each red Thangka a unique art treasure. Along with tradition, the art of red thangka is also constantly innovating. Artists combine contemporary aesthetic trends and social culture, gradually integrating

modern elements, promoting the diversity and world view of their works. For example, the color application of red thangka has become more diverse. In addition to traditional red based on saffron and cinnabar, more other color components have been added to expand the visual experience. In terms of composition, the new-style red thangka works have infused more vivid national characteristics and modern spiritual connotations through the transformation of traditional lines and forms. In addition, there have been innovations in production techniques, with some artists attempting to use modern materials and tools in the drawing process to achieve more precise color levels and pattern details (Guo Xiaojun, 2020). Overall, the aesthetic characteristics of Red Tangka not only inherit the rich Tibetan artistic tradition, but also demonstrate a sense of innovation that keeps pace with the times, and continuously expands its value and influence.

4.2 Innovative Elements and Modern Aesthetic Trends

In the study of the aesthetic characteristics of red thangka, the inheritance and innovative integration of traditional elements are indispensable. The innovation of Red Tangka is not only reflected in the innovation of artistic style and expression techniques, but also in the practice of integrating modern aesthetic trends into traditional culture. With the interaction and collision between Tibetan art and global culture, artists have gradually integrated their personal creative concepts, using modern technological means, especially digital equipment and software, to adjust and optimize the production process of traditional thangkas, achieving precision in color management and efficiency in replication, in order to meet the growing demand of the art market. In the selection and matching of red thangka colors, artists draw on modern color theory, adjust hue, saturation, and brightness, such as using design software such as CAD to simulate color effects, and use scientific methods to measure and predict the visual impact and psychological response of colors, ensuring that every artwork can meet aesthetic and spiritual requirements. In addition, artists also apply modern aesthetic principles such as contrast, harmony, and rhythm to pattern design, exploring patterns and composition methods that cater to the tastes of contemporary audiences. More and more red thangka works are gradually expanding into the field of art collection and display while maintaining their religious ritual function, and their aesthetic function and cultural value have been widely recognized and highly evaluated. During this process, the artist's modern interpretation and emotional attachment to Buddhist storylines is a modern extension and enrichment of the complex patterns and profound connotations of traditional red thangkas. Therefore, it is particularly important to achieve an organic combination of traditional elements and modern aesthetic trends, maintain the vitality of thangka art, and push it towards a broader cultural and artistic field. Continuously pushing this unique form of red art to the pinnacle of world culture, ensuring its significant position and influence on the international stage, is undoubtedly the best interpretation and affirmation of the artistic creation and cultural inheritance of red thangka.

5. Case Analysis: The Embodiment of Fierceness and Nobility

5.1 Analysis of Typical Red Tangka Works

Red Tangka, with its fiery colors and lofty religious significance, has become an indelible artistic treasure in Tibetan culture. In the production of traditional red thangkas, red not only represents strength and passion, but also embodies the religious pursuit of life and spiritual purification. Through in-depth analysis of typical works of red thangka, we can discover its unique aesthetic characteristics and cultural symbolic significance. The widely used red and gold border in the works of Red Tangka creates a visually stunning and solemn atmosphere, reflecting the Tibetan people's admiration for Buddhism and their understanding of the universe. The use of gold is undoubtedly a representation of the radiance and wisdom of Buddha, and its interweaving with red showcases the superb skills of Tangka artists in color application. In specific pattern designs, red thangkas often depict stories of Buddha's birth, and each artwork is not only a record of a religious biography, but also a profound emotional expression. Embroidery techniques use exquisite and complex lines and color combinations, allowing viewers to feel the vibrant vitality and divine atmosphere in the picture. Through the quantitative image analysis of 150 works of 20 red Thangka artists in Xizang and neighboring provinces, we can see that their color application has both regularity and difference, which not only highlights the unique personality of each artist, but also reflects the rich historical connotation and diverse religious beliefs of the entire Tibetan culture (Qu Zhi, 2021). In addition, research has shown that the use of red in red thangkas not only has visual impact, but also serves as an important carrier for emotional release and spiritual sustenance among Tibetan people. It conveys not only the emotions of characters in religious stories, but also a pursuit of ideals and beliefs and a praise for vitality. The deep connotation of red in red thangka art is a profound understanding and noble expression of Tibetan culture, religious beliefs, and natural ecology by artists. It showcases a nation's unique insights and emotional projection on the universe, life, and spiritual world, and is a rare artistic treasure and spiritual symbol of Tibetan culture.

5.2 Artistic Expression of Passionate and Noble Emotions

Red, as a core color in Thangka art, holds an indispensable position in the aesthetic expression of red Thangka

due to its intense and noble emotions. Red in thangka is not only a color symbol, but also a medium for transmitting energy and releasing emotions. The changes in the brightness and intensity of this emotional color contain praise for vitality and a longing for sacred purification. The red thangka creates a visual sense of mystery and ritual through specific color combinations and schematic arrangements, allowing viewers to feel the Tibetan reverence for the divine power of nature and their longing for a beautiful life through visual contact. Artists use rich red tones and enhance the visual impact and emotional tension of their works through techniques of contrasting colors, such as strong collisions between red and blue. In the red thangka work “Manifestation of Charm”, the artist uses intense and vivid red to contrast with a serene and profound blue background, showcasing the sacred halo of the work subject and expressing the pursuit of the beautiful vision of the “Five Realms” in Tibetan Buddhist doctrine. Through precise use of red and clever color matching, it reveals the special preference and emotional attachment of Tibetan culture towards red in aesthetic pursuit. The application of red is not limited to surface decoration, but delves into every creation of thangka, highlighting the vitality of life and the tranquility of pilgrimage. This exploration of the symbolic significance of red culture has opened up a new dimension of red in Tibetan art. From a research perspective, the image analysis of 150 representative works is based on color theory and aesthetic principles, demonstrating how these artists embed personal emotional and socio-cultural experiences while maintaining religious traditions. Through the medium of red, they express their deep identification with the inner world and outer universe of humans. The fierceness and nobility portrayed by the Red Tangka is a portrayal of the spiritual world of the Tibetan people, as well as a hymn to the indescribable beauty in life. Analyzing these works can’t help but make people feel that as a special cultural heritage, the red thangka not only embodies the exquisite skills of Tibetan art, but also represents a nation’s passionate and tranquil emotional appeal for the connection between life and the universe.



Figure 1. Red Tangka “micro anger holding Vajra Bodhisattva”

Source: The Palace Museum of China.

6. Conclusion

This study conducted a comprehensive image analysis and color theory to deeply analyze the aesthetic status of red thangka in Tibetan culture and its unique expression of color vocabulary. It was found that it is not only a medium for religious expression, but also an important carrier for Tibetan people’s emotional release and aesthetic pursuit. The red elements used in the red thangka not only reflect the Tibetan people’s reverence and longing for vitality, the radiance of the sun, and the purification of divinity, but also contain the artistic pursuit of fierceness and sublime emotions. Through a systematic analysis of 150 works by 20 red thangka artists, the multiple symbolic meanings of red in red thangkas and the regularity and differences in emotional expression were revealed. The research results show that the selection and combination of red is not only a continuation of traditional Tibetan aesthetics, but also an innovation in modern aesthetic trends. The combination of graphic design, line application, and composition methods together shape the fiery and noble aesthetic style of the Red Tangka. The aesthetic characteristics of red thangka not only provide us with a new perspective to better understand Tibetan culture, but also provide a rich mass foundation and creative inspiration for the future artistic creation and cultural inheritance of red thangka. The research results confirm that the artistic creation and

cultural inheritance of red thangka have important practical significance and academic value in the sustainable development of Tibetan art and culture. It provides data support and suggestions for local policies and cultural development, and also makes positive contributions to the cultural and artistic development of the province or region. Specifically, it is reflected in the following aspects: the study of the color rhythm of red thangka provides an important basis for the development of modern color studies (Zhang Qianqian, 2018); The analysis of its various aesthetic expression characteristics and artistic character reveals the aesthetic taste of the Tibetan people (Duanzhi Pengcuo, 2019); At the same time, the rich decorative significance and color symbols of red thangka have become a powerful proof of the integration of modern art and traditional culture. The in-depth analysis of this study aims to provide a comprehensive and unique interpretation of the aesthetic status in Tibetan culture and its expression in visual art, pointing out the direction for subsequent research and practical activities of red thangka, and making significant explorations in promoting local artistic characteristics and cultural diversity.

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