

TIBETAN APPLIQUE HANGINGS IN EUROPEAN COLLECTIONS

By

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The purpose of this article is to discuss several Tibetan hangings in appliqué work to be found in collections in Western Europe. It is thus intended as an addition to Eleanor Olson's study on Tibetan appliqué work hangings in America.¹

The appliqué technique was put to unique use in Tibet for making large hangings to be shown during the great yearly open-air festivities at monasteries and temples. Quite a number of diplomats and travelers who saw such pictures on these occasions tell us about them, and we occasionally come across a photograph of such an enormous tanka in accounts of voyages. Heinrich Harrer, who was present in the New Year's festival in Lhasa, mentions a tanka he saw on the high Potala wall - a "silken tapestry, so heavy that fifty monks are needed to hoist it in place on the south façade," in his extensive article, "My Life in Forbidden Lhasa," published in *THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE*, July, 1955. The reproduction on page 19 shows the giant piece, with Sâkyamuni as central figure.² And in the October, 1935, issue of the same monthly, an article, "Sungmas, the Living Oracles of the Tibetan Church," by Joseph F. Rock, shows in a photograph the courtyard in the Yungning lamasery. "A large banner embroidered in gold and silver scintillates in the sunlight from a frame in front of the hall," at the Tson-k'a-pa festival. An article "Gangtok" by John Scofield, published in *THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC*, November, 1970, illustrates on page 704 "masked deities [who] re-create an incident from Padma Sambhava's life. . ." at an event taking place inside Rumtek Monastery. In the inner courtyard a hanging of unusual dimensions is exhibited. As a rough estimate, I would say it is two meters high and eighteen to twenty meters long. [6' 8" x 66' 8". Ed.].

I was exceptionally lucky some years ago in discovering a rare painted tanka that shows just such a large hanging.³ The painting represents the monastery of Tashilhunpo. Viewed as from a helicopter, all the buildings are there to see, with fine details, many passageways, the colorful courtyards surrounded by colonnades, the different constructions housing the colleges, the *chorten*, the Labrang, the mausolea of the Pan c'en Lamas. . . and the nine-story high Gö-Ka-pes (the Kiku), the huge building against the façade of which the gigantic picture of Dipankara Buddha is displayed. In the *CATALOGUE OF THE TIBETAN COLLECTION AND OTHER LAMAIST ARTICLES IN THE NEWARK MUSEUM*⁴ we read the following on this subject: "At Tashilhunpo it appears to have been the custom to display

gigantic figures annually on several successive days in honor of the anniversary of the death of Sakyamuni Buddha. From the tenth to the fifteenth day of the fourth month, immense silk banners were displayed on the façade of the nine-story tower called Kiku. . . A hanging approximately one hundred feet long, showing the Buddha Dipankara, occupied a prominent place. The next day . . . to the sound of deafening music a gigantic banner showing Sakyamuni Buddha was brought from the lamasery and substituted for the Dipankara Buddha." On the tanka, in the righthand top corner, such a hanging can be seen on the Kiku (Fig. 1). Is it possible that the tanka depicting Tashilhunpo was painted in remembrance of these yearly festivities?

In her article,⁵ Miss Olson mentions "six loose fragments probably belonging to one big temple banner and in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts." This drew my attention to the existence of a large hanging in a private collection in France (Fig. 2). It is indeed a remarkable piece. In fact, it could be called a giant tanka in that the 'picture' (about 15' x 11' 8") is mounted in the traditional way, sewn in a frame of silk fabrics. The complete tanka measures about 33' 4" high and 16' 8" wide. The present owner writes me that "the hanging has been authenticated as having been a piece commissioned by the 8th Dalai Lama (1758-1805) in honor of his guru Yeshe Geltsen, both represented on the tanka." The lower part of the picture has a text, but it has unfortunately been damaged so that it is impossible to give a complete translation. Nonetheless, we know that it begins by invoking Tson-k'a-pa and his Five Manifestations, which are to be seen in the upper register of the tanka. The central figure of this hanging is Maitreya, "foremost ornament of the one hundred gods of Tusita." An acquaintance of mine who is versed in the knowledge of Tantric art suggests that the word, "Tusita," because it is mentioned in Sanskrit in the text, could be interpreted as d Ga'-ldan, in Tibetan, which is the monastery founded by Tson-k'a-pa. Perhaps this hanging was commissioned by the eighth Dalai Lama, whose name appears in the text on the tanka. Possibly he had a predilection for Galdan, one of the four great Ge-lug-pa or established church monasteries (the others being De-pung, Sera and Tashilhunpo). The eighth Dalai Lama, 'Jam-dpal rGya-mts'o, is represented at Maitreya's left. This Dalai Lama's features must have been far from average and as such have lent themselves to one of the rare instances of portraiture in Tibet. The elongated sharp face is immediately recognizable in another picture of him in Schulemann's *GESCHICHTE DER DALAI-LAMAS* (Abb. 34). There is little literature about his life. We might cite D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson, *A CULTURAL HISTORY OF TIBET*: "He was disinclined to worldly activities;" and G. Schulemann, *GESCHICHTE DER DALAI-LAMAS*: "He proved himself to be a worthy high priest but alas failed in willpower and independence." (Free translation). To the right of Maitreya, the guru of the eighth Dalai Lama is

seated. This may be the third Pan-c'en Lama, bLo-bzan dpal-ldan Ye-s'es (1738-1780), who received the eighth Dalai Lama's vow of dGe-tso'ul when he was a child of five. This hanging merits a separate study.

The appliqué technique is used not only for large hangings like these, but also for tankas with measurements that are commonly met with in painted tankas. Before we go on with a discussion of such works in western Europe, I would like to draw attention to a hanging that I got to know incidentally (Fig. 3). It belongs to a private collection in the United States and was purchased in Darjeeling. It is sewn to a Bhutanese mount, according to the owner. The subject is quite clear. It represents three of the Sixteen Arhats: Pindola Bharadvaja above; at lower left, Panthaka; and Nagasena to the lower right. Pindola Bharadvaja goes to the Magna Mountain in the eastern Vidêha country. The green mountains are shown to the left, with trees bearing fruits and small flowery plants. Panthaka dwells in the Trayastrimçhas heaven, the heaven of the Thirty-three Deities. On the serene dark background two little ducks are gently bobbing on the calm waters of the heavenly pond. Nagasena dwells on Mount Vipulaparçva represented as a big thick cloud behind him.⁶ Since this appliqué tanka has only three arhats of the sixteen, we may conclude that it is one of a series of similar tankas depicting together the entire group.

Although outside the scope of this article, I should like to draw the attention of the reader to an embroidered tanka (Fig. 4); in this piece, no appliqué material has been used, even in the large background areas. The whole surface is embroidered. Certainly this technique in tanka treatment must be related to appliqué; but it merits separate study.

To return to appliqué work, the reports of following examples are of interest. In OEUVRES D'ART ET DE HAUTE CURIOSITE DU TIBET, the catalogue of a sale that took place in Paris in 1904, Collection G contains two tankas in appliqué work. They are No. 649 (Kālacakra et sa çakti) and No. 661 (Tārā verte). No. 649 is described as ".exécuté en morceaux de soie de diverses couleurs et rapportés sur un fond également de soie où ils sont maintenus par des fils d'or cousus, qui dessinent les contours des corps, des attributs, et des détails du décor." Under No. 661, it says: "Tout le décor de cette étoffe est exécuté en morceaux de soie multicolorés, découpés dans les formes voulues et cousus." The dimensions are not given. I do not know what became of these two pieces. It would be interesting if they could be traced. Also in connection with a public auction, Robert Byron writes: "Some years ago a large piece, 112 feet 6 inches long and four feet 2 inches wide, was offered for sale at Sotheby's and withdrawn. . .half if not more of the width was devoted to a hanging openwork tracery of flayed animals and human skins, swags of viscera, pendant eyeballs. ."⁷ This huge, exceptional piece now belongs

to the museum in Calcutta, together with a second - "partly appliquéd, partly embroidered, partly painted," - about 20 feet long. The motives of both hangings are the same. Eleanor Olson refers to these pieces in her study.⁸

In the Linden Museum in Stuttgart, I came across an appliquéd tanka, a magnificent work of about 4' 10" x 2' 4". A color reproduction is to be found in TIBETICA 1, page 105.⁹ It was displayed at the exhibition, "Tibetische Kunst," held in Switzerland in 1969 and is described in the catalogue under No. 24 as "broderie en application de Yamantaka, divinité protectrice des Lamas Dge lug pa, forme terrifiante de Manjusri."

The Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde at Leiden possesses a tanka in this technique representing Padmasambhava (Fig. 5), who introduced Tantrism into Tibet during the reign of king K'ri sron lde btsan. Padmasambhava is particularly worshipped by the rNin-ma-pa, the sect of Red Cap Lamas which he founded. He is depicted in the well-known traditional manner as a deified historical person, seated on a lotus throne, *dhyana-sana*. He holds thunderbolt, alms bowl, and magic wand (*vajra*, *patra* and *khatvanga*).

In the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford there are two appliquéd tankas with embroidered details. They are both of the usual dimensions. Only one deity is represented on each of them. Although embroidery is used for the attributes of the deity, this technique is not employed for the plant motives in the background. As a result, the backgrounds are very simple compared with those in the painted scrolls. The first of these two appliqués (Fig. 6) represents Amitayus (Ts'e-pag-med in Tibetan), the god of Infinite Life, adorned with the Thirteen Ornaments, holding in his lap with both hands the vase of life-giving ambrosia from which arises a tree, the symbol of immortality. He wears the ornaments of a bodhisattva, long locks of hair hang over his shoulders. This is Amitayus in his most common form. In the foreground we notice several ritual objects, among them, a conch shell and a sacrificial cake. The other appliquéd shows the Dhyani bodhisattva, Vajrapani (Fig. 7). This deity is known under different aspects, some Tantric, some not. The figure here has much analogy with 2B5 in TWO LAMAISTIC PANTHEONS by W. E. Clark, where his name is given as "Hsiao Vajrapani," and he holds the thunderbolt in his uplifted right hand, his left hand being in the *karana mudra* in front of his breast. A. Gordon in the ICONOGRAPHY OF TIBETAN LAMAISM says, "Candavajrapani: steps to the right; holds *vajra* in uplifted right hand; left hand is in *karana mudra*." But she does not add a picture. Before and below the deity, several of the Seven World-ravishing Gems are laid. Such series of objects are not always rendered in full, and various divergences are known to exist. They are presented as offerings to the deity.

The British Museum in London has a representation in appliqué of an Abbot or Grand Lama of Peking or Bhutan. It is supposed to be of Chinese workmanship. The picture was given to the Museum by Sir Charles Bell, who obtained it from the Maharajah of Bhutan.

Finally we should mention two appliqué tankas in the Merseyside County Museums at Liverpool. They are from the collection of J. Claude White and were obtained on Younghusband's expedition in 1904. One represents the head lama of Sanga Chelling Monastery. He is seated on a flaming throne, hands in argument, umbrella above with sun and moon. In front of him is a table with bell, thunderbolt, butter lamp and libation set. The second depicts the head lama of Dharmarajas monastery. He is seated with hands in the *mudra* of argument. Above his head is Amitabha with an ambrosia vessel, a landscape with clouds and trees behind the throne. In front of him is a table with butter lamp, libation sets; attendants and lamas below to left (with wheel) and to right (with conch).

Let us now look at appliquéés in private collections. Needless to say, they are more difficult to explore. One hanging in Brussels (Fig. 8) is an outstanding example. From the arrangement of the deities and combination of colors emanate a quiet harmony, but most captivating is the fascinating gaze of the central figure, the blue Medicine Buddha, Bhaisajyaguru. The tanka represents the group of Medicine Buddhas with Tson-k'a-pa in the upper register. In studying the subjects of most appliqué tankas, we notice that representations of Tantric deities are infrequent (would it be fair to suppose that this owes something to technical difficulties in rendering?) and that usually only one personage is represented. An exception to this is the piece shown in Fig. 9. Although the dimensions of this tanka are not exceptionally large (3' 2" x 2' 2" within the frame), the central deity, Usnisavijaya, is surrounded by no less than seven other deities. Flower motives cover a major part of what is left of the surface, and in the upper part two heavenly beings, or *kinnaras*, are hovering. Blending the many small strips of silk and brocade into a whole tableau that gives the impression of a painted tanka requires exceptional workmanship. One detail will suffice to illustrate this. The background against which the central deity is shown, framed by a floral silk and then by flowers, shows large circular motives woven in the same hue. The two blue backgrounds to the left and to the right of Usnisavijaya were chosen in such a way that part of the woven circular decoration gives the impression of a supplementary halo. It is a pity that the photograph fails to render this detail. Embroidery was also used in this tanka, confined not to the faces and hands, but also applied to the ornaments and the attributes of the seven smaller figures. Let us consider, for instance, the Tantric figure in the bottom righthand corner (Fig. 10). This detail clearly renders the wrathful facial expression and may be compared with painted

examples. Note the tiger skin, for instance, on which the dark yellow shade is heightened by a touch of paint while the darker stripes are embroidered. The impression is of a tiger skin so real that one feels inclined to touch it and is amazed that it is not a genuine pelt. The fine quality and the fact that on a relatively restricted surface as many as eight figures are represented give this piece particular value.

The subject is also of special interest: the central deity is Usnisavijaya, or Tsug-tor-rnam-par-rgyal-ma, the Victorious Goddess of the *Usnisa*, having the intelligence of the most splendid Perfect One, guardian of the water of life, invoked - after the necessary offerings and preparations have been made - in the following manner:

". . .the conjurer imagines the deity as being born out of a moon-white syllable BHRUM, white in color, with three faces, three-eyed, as a young woman with the divers ornaments; having eight arms, with a yellow face to the right and a black face to the left side; the four right hands with the fourfold vajra, a Buddha on a lotus flower, an arrow, and in Varadamudra; in the left hands, a bow, a lasso with the forefinger making the Abhayamudra, a full vessel, and crowned with the Vairocana crown (Dhyanibuddha) who rests in the secret germ of a stupa (not shown on the figures); when he has invoked her in this manner, he imagines her element in his heart lotus, upon which he sees the five syllables HUM TRAM HRIH OM AH on his skull, his forehead, his throat, his navel and his feet, and then he pronounces the invocation OM BHRUM SVAHA." (Free translation).¹⁰

Although Usnisavijaya is "one of the earliest feminine divinities and very popular in Tibet," she usually occupies a secondary place in tankas. Herbert J. Stooke in *ARS ORIENTALIS* 1961 discussed some tankas in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, among which is "a portrayal of Usnisavijaya as a central figure." He goes on to say, "Usnisavijaya is sometimes accompanied by Avalokitesvara on her right and Vajrapani on her left but the two figures seen here cannot yet be identified as such. Four figures of Hayagriva can be seen above and below Usnisavijaya. (who) often appears in paintings in the center of a mandala, which leads me to believe that this tanka is a complete mandala."

Is the appliqué shown in Fig. 9 a complete mandala? Or is it rather one of a series of three representing the 'Tshe-lha-gsum' - the Three Deities of Life, or the guardians of the Water of Life - Amitayus, Sitatara and Usnisavijaya? Usnisavijaya, the central figure, is flanked by Padmapani to the left and Vajrapani to the right of the spectator. Above Usnisavijaya is enthroned the Adibuddha, Vajrasattva. More difficult to

identify are the Tantric manifestations in the four corners. The two deities in the upper part are depicted in A NEW TIBETO-MONGOL PANTHEON, Lokesh Chandra, Part IV: No. 248 Acala; No. 250 Niladanda. On our tanka, both lack the small serpent in their flaming hair. The lower two, the manifestations with three heads and six arms, are perhaps two of the ten Krodhas, Mahabalavajra and Nilandavajra. Nos. 348 (Astakapi-Acala) and 356 (Khro-bo-me-brcegs) in TWO LAMAISTIC PANTHEONS by W. Clark show affinities with these two Tantric figures. But we had better leave the solution of this problem to specialized Tibetologists.

NOTE: The editor wishes to thank Eleanor Olson, Curator Emeritus, and Valrae Reynolds, Curator of Oriental Art at the Newark Museum, for valuable help in correcting and editing the article.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Eleanor Olson, "Tibetan Appliqué Work," THE BULLETIN OF THE NEEDLE AND BOBBIN CLUB, Vol. 34, Nos. 1 and 2, 1950, p. 13 ff.
- (2) A photo of the same hanging is published in David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson, A CULTURAL HISTORY OF TIBET, 1968, p. 35.
- (3) L. P. Van der Wee, "A Cloister-City Tanka," JOURNAL OF THE INDIAN SOCIETY OF ORIENTAL ART, 1971. 2nd semester.
- (4) Eleanor Olson, CATALOGUE OF THE TIBETAN COLLECTION AND OTHER LAMAIST ARTICLES IN THE NEWARK MUSEUM, Vol. IV, Textiles, Rugs, Needlework, Costume, Jewelry and Related Articles, 1961, p. 11.
- (5) *Op. cit.*, p. 25.
- (6) In his INTRODUCTION TO THE TIBETAN COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ETHNOLOGY, Leiden, 1951, Dr. P. H. Pott mentions a very unusual painted scroll (No. 2978/7) where the entire group of arhats ride on the backs of several large animals. "Perhaps the various animals symbolize the countries to which the arhats traveled in order to preach the doctrine, their principal task."
- (7) Robert Byron, "Tibetan Appliqué-Work," THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE, LVIII, June, 1931.
- (8) Eleanor Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
- (9) TIBETICA 1, Aufstellungskatalog, Stuttgart.
- (10) Grünwedel, MYTHOLOGIE DES BUDDHISMUS, 1970, page 149.



Figure 1. Detail of a "cloister-city tanka." Van der Wee, Antwerp.



Figure 2. Appliqué tanka of Maitreya. E. Hamilton, Paris. 15' x 11' 8".



Figure 3. Appliqué tanka with Three Arhats. T. V. Littleton, Colorado. 2' 7 5/12" x 1' 11 1/2".



Figure 4. Embroidered tanka. Van der Wee, Antwerp.



Figure 5. Appliqué tanka of Padmasambhava. Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden. 1' 11 1/2" x 1' 4 1/2".



Figure 6. Appliqué tanka of Amitayus, Tibet or Bhutan, 19th century. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, property of E. M. Scratton, Esq. 2' 1/4" x 1' 5 1/2".



Figure 7. Appliqué tanka depicting Vajrapani, Tibet or Bhutan, 19th century. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. 1' 8" x 1' 2 1/4".



Figure 8. Appliqué tanka with a group of Medicine Buddhas, Claude de Marteau, Brussels. 6' 8" x 3' 4".



Figure 9. Appliqué tanka depicting Usnisavijaya. Van der Wee, Antwerp.
3' 2" x 2' 2".

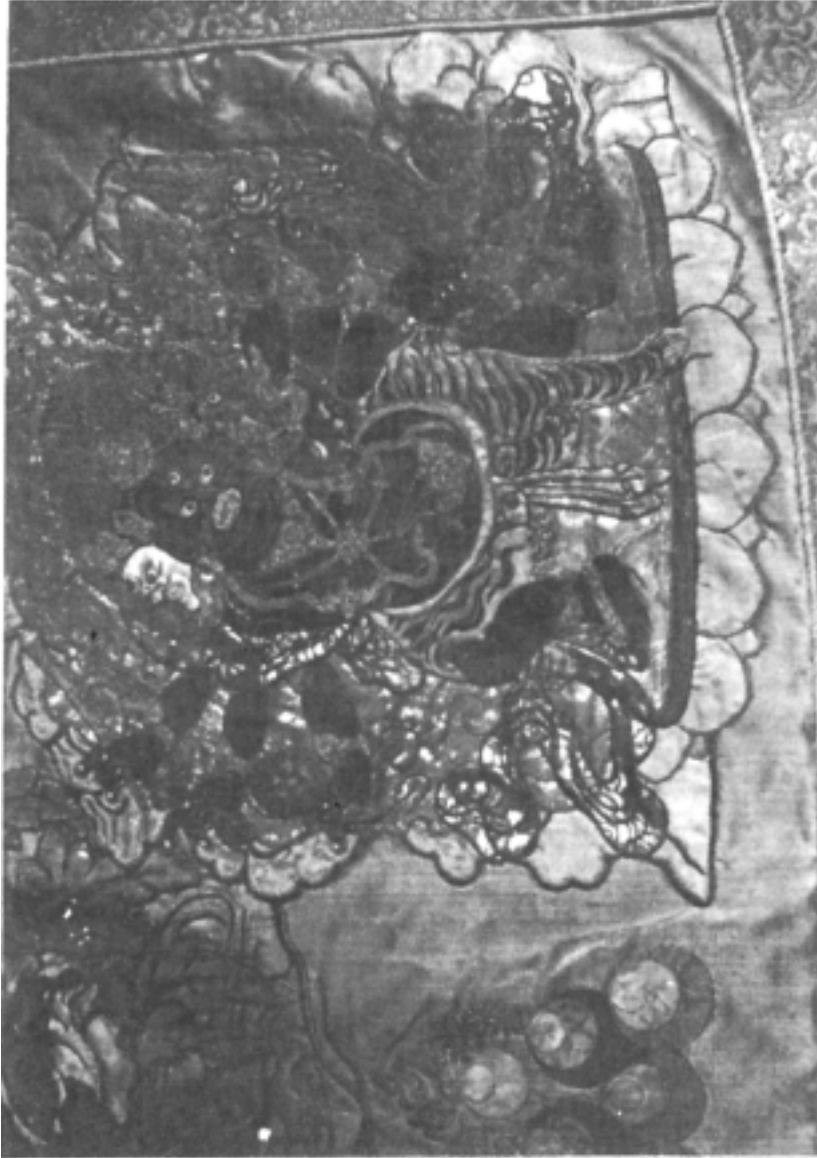


Figure 10. Detail of Figure 9.