

## Photo Essay

# Sacred Strokes: Iconometric Precision and the Evolution of Thangka Art in Sikkim

Karma Norbu Bhutia

*University of Delhi*

Mitashree Srivastava

*University of Delhi*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2025.10626>

### Abstract

---

Himalayan Buddhist regions such as Sikkim preserve vibrant traditions of thangka painting, where sacred imagery, ritual practice, and precise iconometric systems converge. Yet, compared to other Himalayan artistic centers, Sikkim's thangka traditions have received limited scholarly attention. Drawing on 2024 ethnographic fieldwork and guided by theoretical approaches from Gell's notion of art as agency, Malinowski's emphasis on embodied practice, and Sharf's view of Buddhist images as enlivened through consecration, this paper analyses how iconometry (thig tshad), ritual discipline, and lineage-based apprenticeships structure artistic creation. It also shows how these sacred arts persist even as tourism and new markets influence how they are made. In the end, the study highlights thangka painting in Sikkim as a vibrant living tradition, where skill, devotion, and ritual vitality remain central.

### Keywords

**Keywords:** thangka art; iconometry; ritual images; Himalayan Buddhism; Sikkim.

---

### Recommended Citation

Bhutia, Karma Norbu and Srivastava, Mitashree. (2025). Sacred Strokes: Iconometric Precision and the Evolution of Thangka Art in Sikkim. *HIMALAYA* 44(2): 68–86.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

## Introduction

Sikkim, situated in the Eastern Himalayas, is shaped by a long history of cultural exchange, monastic lineages, and trans-Himalayan movement (Lama 1994). Its Buddhist traditions are expressed most vividly through thangka (Wyl. *thang ka*, ནଙ୍କା) and mural paintings, visual forms that function simultaneously as ritual supports, pedagogical images, and embodiments of sacred presence. Like other Himalayan regions, such as Ladakh, where Kashmiri, Tibetan, and Central Asian influences intersected to shape thangka and mural traditions (Dorjey 2016; Luczanits 2023). Sikkim's thangka art developed within networks of mobility, monastic exchange, and religious patronage.

Thangka are scroll paintings that depict the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, historical scenes such as the life histories of the Buddhas, wheel of life and mandalas. Thangkas are created for various reasons, including seeking prosperity, healing illnesses, guiding the deceased through rebirth, or ensuring a healthy childbirth. For instance, the goddess Tara (Figure 1) is thought to positively influence childbirth (Beyer 1988, 289; Makley 2003, 612), and Vajrapani is believed to protect against unforeseen evil and misfortune. Each deity in Vajrayana Buddhism holds its own unique significance (Lepcha 2024). Hence, thangkas are more than just portable paintings; they function as *sku rten* (Wyl. *sku rten*, གྲୁ ར୍ତେン)- supports of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind. Consequently, they are seen as energized ritual objects rather than solely aesthetic images (McGuckin 1996). During my interview with Tashi Dorjee Lepcha, a monk at Enchey Monastery in Gangtok, who was formerly a student and now a teacher at the Traditional Arts School (TAS) located in Gangtok, Sikkim, he explained that "thangkas were originally used to spread the Buddhist teachings to a broad audience, as they could be easily rolled up and transported to distant locations." (Lepcha 2024). The creation of thangka adheres to strict iconometric measurement systems (*thig tshad*, Wyl. *thig tshad*, ད୍ଵିତ୍ତଶଦ), which

are the traditional sacred measurements and proportions used in Buddhist art). It involves spiritual discipline, demonstrating the artist's technical skill and moral discipline (Jackson and Jackson 1984). Making thangkas accumulates merit for both the patron and the artist (McGuckin 1996, 33). Patrons commission thangkas for reasons such as healing, merit-making, guiding the rituals, and monastic offerings, highlighting their important role in daily religious practices (Catanese 2019).

This paper presents ethnographic research conducted in the Gangtok district of Sikkim, India, in 2024. It argues that Sikkim's thangka tradition remains a vibrant Himalayan visual art form, characterized by precise iconometry, ritual offerings, and practical apprenticeships that uphold its sacred integrity, despite the increasing influence of tourism, market pressures, and new audiences. Similar trends are observed elsewhere in the Himalayas, such as Ladakh, where monasteries encounter challenges related to the visibility of rituals and the interest of tourists (Gohain 2025; Lundup 2013). Sacred images once kept secret are now being adapted for innovative uses and purposes.

The title *Sacred Strokes* illustrates how technique, devotion, and embodiment merge. Each brushstroke in thangka painting is both a precise technical action and an ethical act driven by discipline, intention, and ritual holiness. Through these repeated, embodied, and ritually meaningful strokes, Sikkimese thangka art maintains its role in shaping spiritual experiences and cultural identity. By exploring the historical roots of Sikkim's thangka tradition, analyzing its iconometric systems, and considering its modern developments, this paper presents thangka painting as a living practice that blends devotion, discipline, and identity in the Eastern Himalayas.

## Theoretical framework

This research explores thangka painting by focusing on theories related to agency, embodiment, and ritual practices. Alfred Gell views art as an active participant in

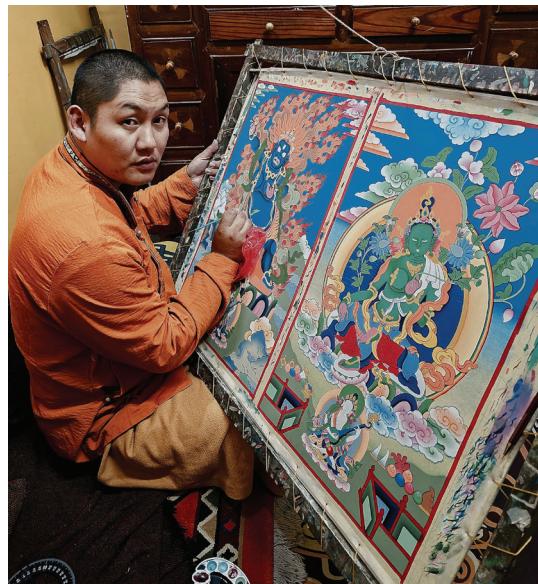


Figure 1: Thangka painting featuring Green Tara © Photograph by the author, 2024.  
 Figure 2: Features an image of Tashi Dorjee Lepcha, with a mural painting of Guru Padmasambhava, who is the founder of Vajrayana Buddhism and his eight manifestations in the background. The picture was taken at Enchey monastery, Sikkim. © Photograph by the author, 2024.  
 Figure 3: Tashi Dorjee Lepcha working on a thangka painting—on the right is the Green Tara, and on the left is Vajrapani. © Photograph by the author, 2024.

social relations, considering thangkas as agents that facilitate connections among artists, patrons, monastic authorities, and deities (Gell 1998). Bronislaw Malinowski emphasizes the importance of subtle, embodied practices in everyday life, highlighting how in Sikkim, measured brushwork, mantra recitation, and disciplined training show that artistic technique also serves as a moral and devotional act (Malinowski 2014). The significance of thangkas is shown through Robert Sharf's view of Buddhist icons as lively beings brought to life through consecration, which Tucci describes as calling the deity into the image (Sharf 2017; Tucci 1949). These

theoretical perspectives allow us to see thangka painting as a dynamic tradition rather than a static art form which is maintained by skill, rituals, and the vitality of sacred images.

### Historical Evolution of Thangka Art

Various accounts about its origins exist, making it important to distinguish myth from history. Two ancient Tibetan artworks, *Thupa chu lenma* (Wyl. thub pa'i chu len ma, ཐུພ་པ་ཆུ་ලྚེན་མ་) and *Hoed Zerma* (Wyl. 'od zer ma, ཚོད་ཟྡྚྱ་), are believed to depict the Buddha through reflections and beams of luminous light (Thaye 2000). These stories trace the

emergence of thangka art to the time of the Buddha himself; however, the stories belong to a mythological realm rather than to historically verifiable accounts (Bhutia 2025).

Research shows that painted scrolls began appearing in early tantric Buddhism in India around the sixth century. Tucci (1949) notes that Thangka evolved from *Prabha*, a storytelling art used by Indian bards to illustrate divine stories. The important Sanskrit text, *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (MMK), offers guidance on creating painted cloths (pata) for tantric rituals—sacred objects that contain deities after invocation (*Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* n.d.). The detailed instructions in the MMK highlight the spiritual and artistic significance of thangka. Kapstein notes that making these paintings was considered a sacred act that required precise attention to proportions, colors, and the preparation of ritual fabric. Practitioners purify cotton and adhere to esoteric Buddhist principles. They receive initiation into the deity, and their work is accepted only if it upholds tantric vows (Kapstein 1995, 247).

As Buddhism spread from India to Tibet, Thangka became vital in visualizing Buddhist teachings. These artworks beautifully depict sacred texts, religious symbols, and the lives of the Buddha, serving as a meaningful resource for meditation, learning, and devotion (Tucci 1949; Lopez 2004). Although early Thangkas in Tibet drew inspiration from Indian and Nepalese art traditions, Tibetan artists gradually created their own unique style that authentically reflects Tibetan Buddhist cosmology and ritual practices (Thaye 2000).

Over the centuries, Tibetan thangka painting has evolved into a rich tradition filled with meaningful rituals and detailed iconography. It provides detailed guidelines on proportions, colours, and symbolism, all meticulously established by early Buddhist scholars (Sangpo 1996). Hence, the role of thangka in Tibetan Buddhism goes beyond being merely an art form; it has become a vital part of Tibetan spiritual and cultural life. The tradition of Thangka painting in Sikkim started with the arrival of Tibetan

Buddhism, especially after the founding of the Namgyal Dynasty in 1642 (Subba 2008). When Chogyal Phuntsuk Namgyal declared Tibetan Buddhism as the official religion (Risley 1894), it opened the door for Tibetan monks, artisans, and scholars to travel to Sikkim, bringing with them the beautiful tradition of Thangka painting. In the beginning, local artists didn't make Thangkas on their own; instead, these detailed artworks were imported from Tibet or commissioned from Tibetan painters who decorated monasteries. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Tibetan artists mostly created Thangkas in Sikkim, using the Mendri style that blended influences from Central Tibetan and the Western Himalayas. These Thangkas followed Buddhist iconographic standards and played a significant role in religious and meditative practices within monasteries (Tamang 2018).

During the early 20th century, Thangka production blossomed as local artists from Sikkim embraced this beautiful art form. This joyful shift was inspired by several factors, including the decrease in Tibetan migration and changing political landscapes, especially after China's annexation of Tibet in 1950 (Smith 2008). This opened wonderful opportunities for gifted Sikkimese Thangka painters to shine. The transformation was sparked by artist Rinzing Ihadripha<sup>1</sup>, and later carried forward by his talented students Ganden Lhadripha, a former arts teacher at the Directorate of Handicraft and Handloom (DHH), and Tenzing Norbu Bhutia, who now serves as the Principal of the Traditional Arts School (TAS). Throughout their career, they have mentored many students, including Tashi Dorjee Lepcha, who learned the art at the Traditional Arts School from Tenzing Norbu Bhutia and now teaches there himself, demonstrating how knowledge is passed through a lineage-based system (Bhutia 2024; Lepcha 2024). This period brought a wonderful shift away from strict Tibetan artistic traditions, as local artists began to include patterns inspired by local flora and fauna and explored vibrant new colour palettes. While these exciting developments took place, the foundational



Figure 4: A contemporary thangka incorporates unconventional colors and simplified iconographic details. © Photograph by the author, 2025.



Figure 5: Traditional Arts School student poses with his creation, a thangka of Vajrapani. © Photograph by Pem Tshering Lepcha.

iconometric guidelines remained essential, as artists feel they are the heart of the thangka (Bhutia 2024). Influenced by Rinzing Lhadripha, thangka art has become even more vibrant and diverse, featuring more local plants, animals, and a broader range of colors, with the next generation of students adding their own creative touches, resulting in more captivating and expressive paintings (Lepcha 2024). Artists in Sikkim still follow the Mendri style of thangka painting, which is known for its use of rich, darker shades of color with the dominance of blue and green. This style focuses on creating realistic-looking pictures with intricate details (Bhutia 2024).

During the latter part of the 20th century, thangka painters adjusted to evolving market conditions following a decline in monastic patronage. As the demand for thangkas in monasteries decreased, artists shifted their focus to a broader audience, including tourists and private collectors to generate income because for many it was their only source of livelihood. This transition sometimes resulted in the simplification of iconographic details. These market patterns beautifully mirror wider trends found in research on tourist art. The interactions between tourists and locals, which are often viewed as superficial and stereotypical in anthropological studies, give birth to what Graburn describes as a cross-cultural code—much like a pidgin language that bridges different cultures. Tourist art tends to feature simple motifs that symbolize a specific place or ethnicity across diverse cultures (Graburn 1976; Bhutia 2025). Thangkas often display minimal shading and can be either overly simplistic or overly detailed, with additional elements (Figure 4). Pastel colors are typically used to appeal to Western tastes (Bentor 1993). Xue (2024) highlights how commodification can lead to conflicting value systems, with thangkas serving as both sacred items and market commodities.

A key feature of traditional Thangkas is their ritual consecration (*rab gnas*, Wyl. *rab gnas*, རྔ དྙ མ ཉ), in which a monk or religious teacher invites the deity to reside

within the image, thereby endowing it with sacred power (Jackson and Jackson 1984, 25; Shaftel 1986, 101). This ceremony is more than just a symbol; it bestows a divine presence on the thangka, integrating it into spiritual practice. Heller illustrates that consecration rituals have been essential to Tibetan art from its inception, as seen in imperial tomb offerings and monastery reliquaries (Heller 2006, 50). After this ritual, the thangka shifts from being just an artwork to a *sku rten*, གྭ ན ད ལ, which supports the body of the deity (McGuckin 1996). After a thangka is consecrated, it remains sacred and should be handled carefully, even if it shows signs of fading or damage (Bhutia 2025). When disposal is needed, it should be done via a ceremonial ritual involving burning instead of improper discarding (McGowan 2008, 60). An unconsecrated Thangka is considered incomplete until the consecration process is completed by a Buddhist master who invites the deity to dwell in the image, transforming the artwork into a spiritually potent medium. This belief is connected to the Vajrayana Buddhist concept of liberation through sight (*mthong grol*), in which simply gazing upon a consecrated image is thought to generate merit and assist in the journey toward enlightenment (Tsomo 2018). Despite these challenges, institutions like the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT), Directorate of Handicraft and Handloom (DHH) and the Traditional Arts School (TAS) in Gangtok, Sikkim, are dedicated to reviving and preserving the beautiful tradition of Thangka painting (Bhutia 2024; Lepcha 2024).

## Iconography and Colour symbolism

The strict adherence to iconometric guidelines and symbolism is crucial for both thangka and mural painting in Sikkim. This tradition stems from centuries-old practices grounded in the ritualistic and spiritual use 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 a thangka

accurately depicts the deity's enlightened presence. 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 the rules (Jackson and Jackson 1984, 67). As Tenzing Norbu Bhutia and Tashi Dorje Lepcha, the thangka artist, repeatedly stressed during the interviews in Sikkim: "Even if the painting looks beautiful, if the measurements are incorrect, the deity will not inhabit it." (Bhutia 2024; Lepcha 2024).

Thangka art typically depicts the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, historical scenes, peaceful and wrathful deities, the Wheel of Life (Bhavachakra) or mandalas (Figure 6, Figure 7). These images often feature the five distinctive colors of Vajrayana Buddhism—white, green, yellow, red, and blue. Fifteenth-century scholar Bodong Panchen identified five primary colors in Tibetan color theory: white, red, blue, yellow, and black, from which all other colors are considered to originate (Jackson and Jackson 2006, 91). Thukral highlights that the five sacred colors used in Vajrayāna Buddhist thangka—white, red, yellow, green, and blue—go beyond mere colors, representing elemental forces and spiritual qualities (Thukral 2013, 175-176). These hues carry deep symbolic meanings linked to Buddhist beliefs. In thangka art, colors serve as powerful symbols, each representing an element and conveying specific messages. White signifies Space and tranquility, while red, linked to Fire, symbolizes strength and vitality. Yellow embodies Earth and represents growth and development. Green, linked to Air, represents the actions and deeds of conscious beings. Blue, connected to Water, can signify anger but also serves a positive purpose by aiding in the dissipation of rage and negative energies (Figure 8), promoting transformation and spiritual growth (Thukral 2014; Dollfus 2015; Bhutia 2025).

The wheel of life (Bhavachakra), often seen in beautiful Thangka paintings and murals, is a meaningful symbol in Buddhism. It

beautifully illustrates important ideas like birth, death, rebirth, and karma (Sopa 1984). More than just a picture, it acts as a gentle moral guide. Teiser (2008) emphasizes that canonical texts like the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* Vinaya specify this very image at monastery entrances—not merely for decoration but as a threshold between worlds, warning viewers of impermanence before entering ritual spaces. He shows that the Wheel of Rebirth was not a commercial object but a teaching tool that Buddha instructed monks to paint on monastery gates to illustrate karmic principles. Its placement at the threshold beautifully presents the wheel as a powerful educational tool, inviting us to reflect on *samsāra* before stepping into the sacred space (Teiser 2008, 145). At the heart of the wheel of life, a pig, rooster, and snake are depicted chasing each other in a close circle—symbolizing ignorance, desire, and aversion caught in endless motion. The entire wheel is held within the claws of Yama, Lord of Death, whose wide-open mouth appears ready to devour it, while above, the Buddha calmly gestures toward the moon, symbolizing liberation (Figure 6).

This cosmological logic is echoed in another core visual structure in Buddhist art: the mandala. Like the Bhavachakra, the mandala is not merely decorative but a schematic representation of the universe, spatially directing the viewer from periphery to center, from *samsāric* dispersion toward enlightened stillness. As Xu (2010) explains, it models a universe organized around a central sacred dwelling, a stabilizing axis that contrasts with the Bhavachakra's restless rotation. When viewed together, the Bhavachakra and the mandala (Figure 7a, 7b) present complementary pedagogies: one reveals the endless motion of karmic entanglement, the other maps a cosmic order and the possibility of centering, clarity, and release. Each image, then, serves as a visual theology of movement and stillness—a moral warning at the threshold and a cosmogram of liberation within.

Tibetan Buddhist visual language is deeply rooted in long-standing symbolic systems that existed before the development of



Figure 6: This painting depicts the Wheel of Rebirth (Bhavachakra), functioning as a visual cosmogram that emphasizes the Buddhist idea of cyclical existence (samsara). It is located at entry gate of a Lha khang (prayer room) at Do Drul Chorten, Deorali, Sikkim. © Photograph by the author, 2024.



Figure 7a, 7b: Images of Mandalas captured at Enchey Monastery, Gangtok, Sikkim. © Photograph by the author, 2024.

thangka art. As Robert Beer highlights in his detailed study of Vajrayāna iconography, many symbolic elements—such as the lotus, wheel, conch shell, parasol, treasure vase, and other auspicious symbols—originate from early Indian Buddhist and pre-Buddhist traditions before being organized into the Tibetan Buddhist tantric canon (Beer 2003). These symbols serve more than decorative purposes; they embody purities or enlightened qualities associated with deities. For instance, the lotus (Skt. Padma, Kamala; Tib. Pad-ma) represents spiritual development and the rise of virtuous deeds amidst worldly impurities. Similarly, the conch shell (Skt. Shankha; Tib. Dung dkar), often used in rituals or as mural borders, signifies the message of the Dharma (Beer 2003). Another common motif is the vajra (Tib. rdo rje), frequently depicted with tantric deities. It represents indestructible wisdom, the unwavering clarity of an awakened mind, and the union of method and insight in Vajrayāna Buddhism. These symbols add religious meaning to the painting, elevating it from decoration to a depiction of Buddhist cosmology and ethics. Beer's analysis shows Tibetan iconography summarizes doctrine, ritual, and cosmology; thus, Sikkimese thangka painters participate in a Himalayan semiotic tradition where symbols convey truths, authority,

and spirituality. Including these symbols maintains style and transmits a rooted Indic visual language, adapted through Tibetan practices. Hall's dictionary of sacred symbols explains how these elements function in Himalayan Buddhist art. Many key objects in Vajrayāna iconography, such as the lotus, parasol, vajra, conch, ritual bell, and animals, come from older Indic, Near Eastern, and Central Asian systems before being adopted into Buddhist tantra. These symbols were initially associated with natural forces, ritual activities, or cosmological ideas, and only later became divine attributes (Hall 2018).

### The Iconometric System (Thig Tshad)

The proportional relationships of the divine body are governed by a precise system of measurement called *thig tshad*, which Tibetan thangka painters work within. Twelve small units combine to form one large unit, which is the foundation of the system. The two principal units are *cha chen* (large unit) and *cha chung* (small unit). These are proportional relationships that scale with the image, whether it is a miniature or a mural, rather than fixed lengths. The majority of terms, including the “face measure” (*zhal tshad*), the “palm” (*thal mo*), and the “finger width” (*sor mo*), are derived from anthropometric references (Jackson



Figure 8: Thangka painting of *Senge Dradog*, one of Guru Rinpoche's eight manifestations. The deity is linked to protection from evil forces and the destruction of ignorance, which is one of the poisons that trap humans in the cycle of life and death. The blue color symbolizes wrath aimed at reducing anger and negative energy. © Photograph by the author, 2024.



Figure 9: Thangka painting featuring Guru Padmasambhava at the center, the founder of Vajrayana Buddhism. To the right is Avalokiteśvara, known as Chenrezig in Tibetan Buddhism, a revered Bodhisattva linked to Great Compassion. At the top center, Amitābha Buddha, whose name means «Infinite Light,» is depicted, while on the left is Lord Buddha. The Thangka also includes symbols such as a lotus, vajra, conch shell, and birds. © Photograph by the author, 2024.

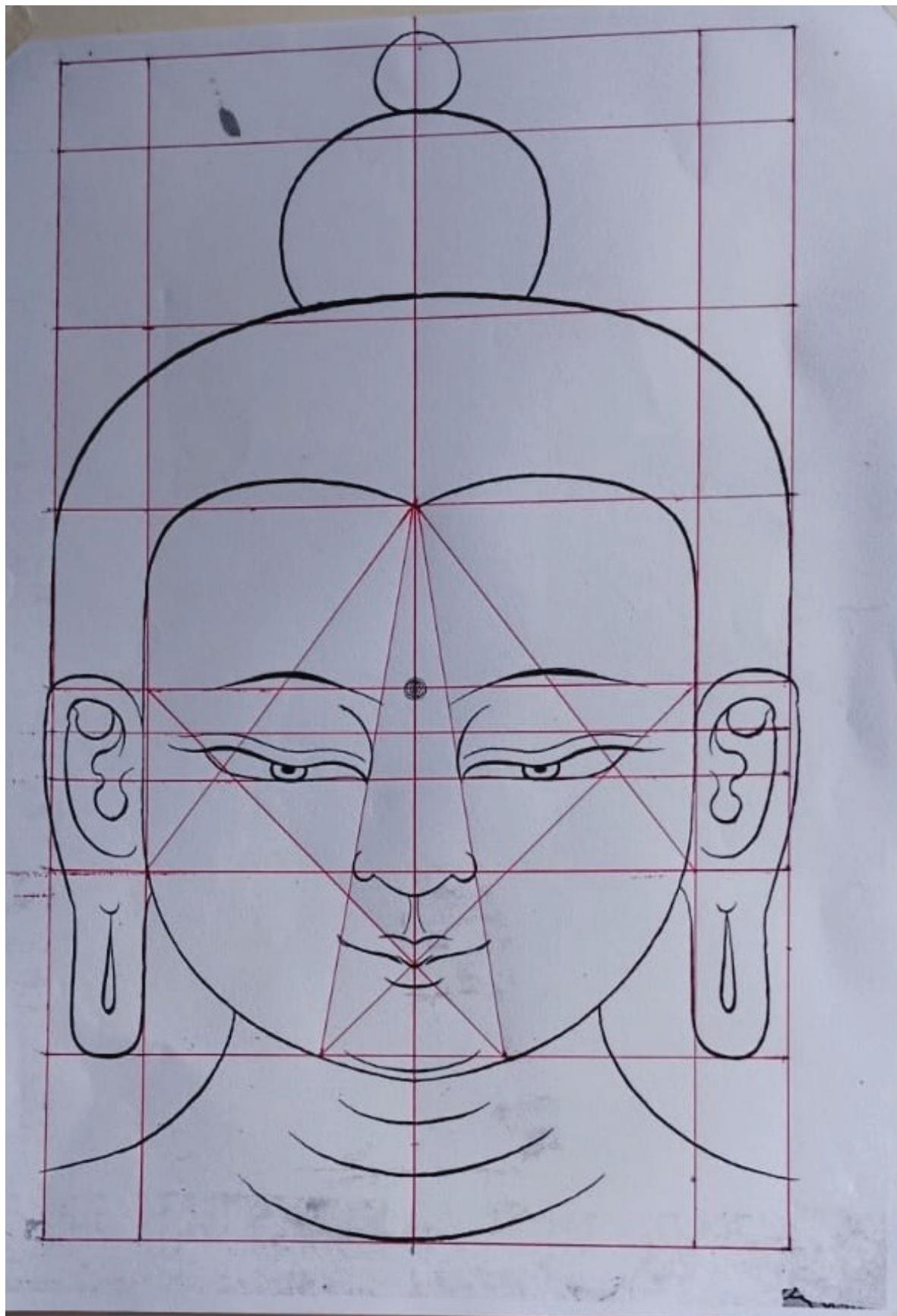


Figure 10: Proportional grid of the Buddha's face, showing iconometric divisions based on the 12½ sormo measurement system. © Photograph by the author.

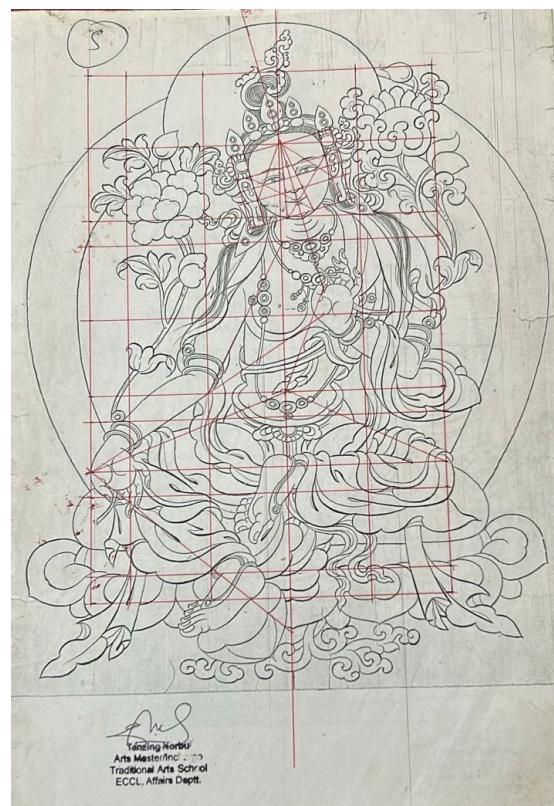
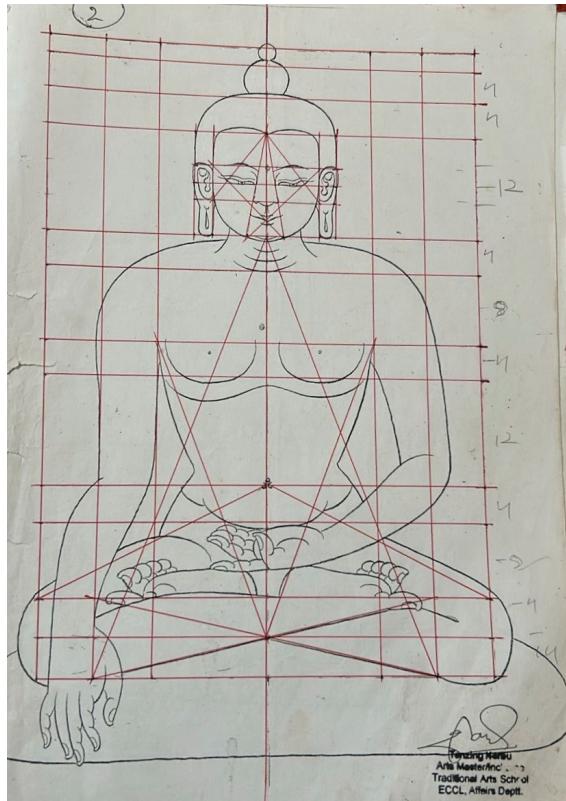
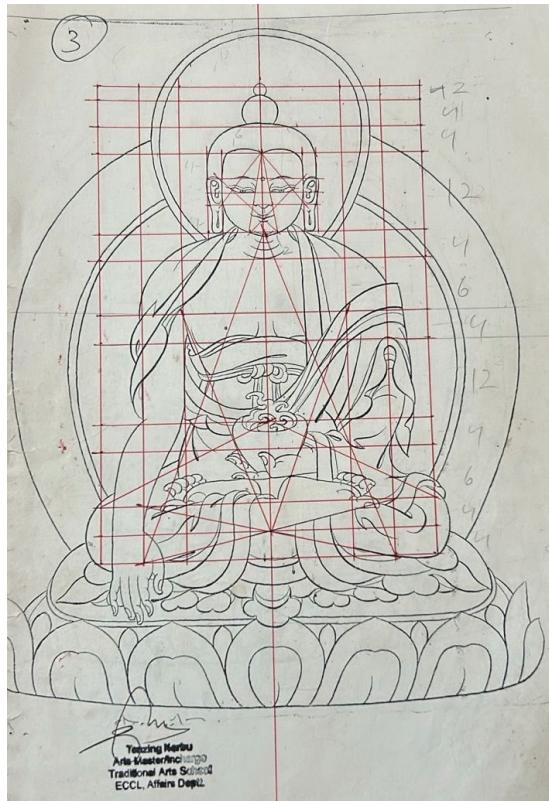


Figure 11: Proportional diagram of the seated Buddha. © Photograph by author.

Figure 12: Proportional diagram of the seated Buddha in naked form. © Photograph by the author.

Figure 13: Full-body proportional diagram of the Vajrapani. © Photograph by the author.

Figure 14: Tārā (Dolma) proportional diagram with ninth Thalmo measurements. © Photograph by the author.

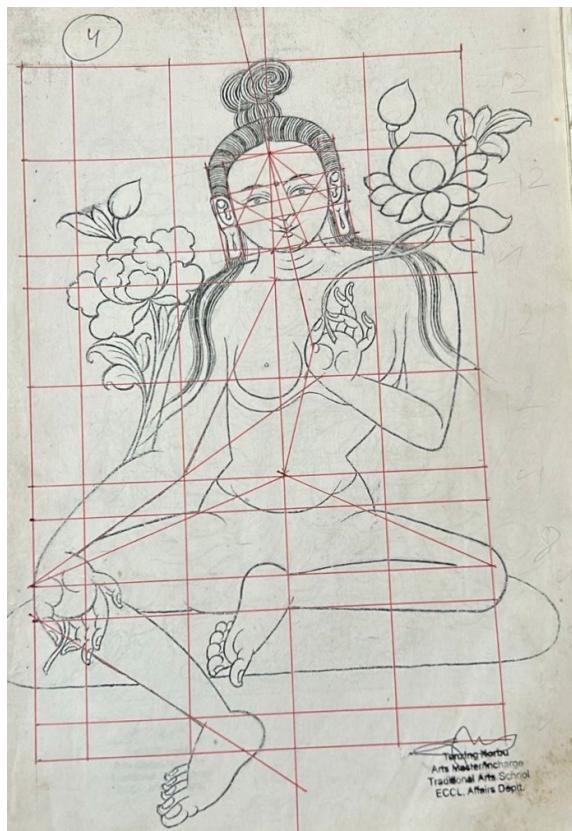


Figure 15: Tārā (Dolma) in naked form, proportional diagram. © Photograph by the author.

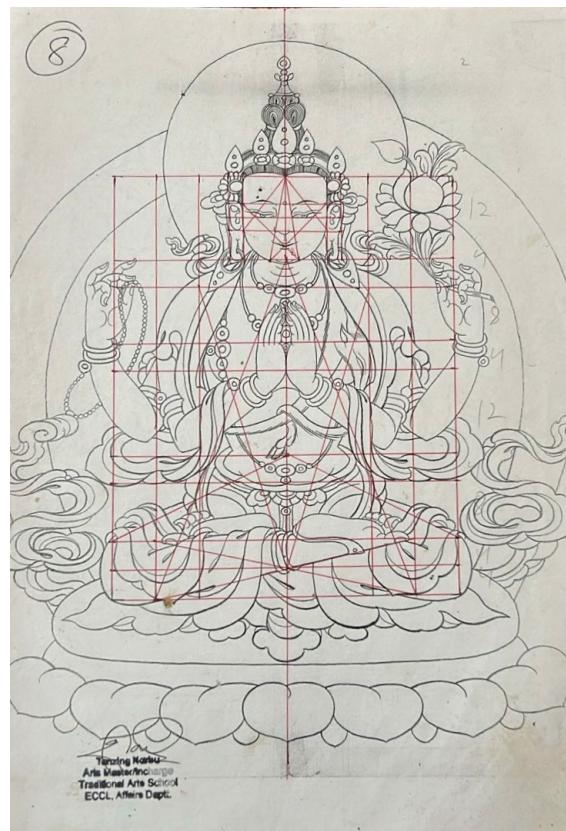


Figure 16: Chenrezig proportional diagram. © Photograph by the author.

and Jackson 1984, 50). The foundational unit is the face measurement *sor tshad* (Wyl. *sor tshad*, རྴ ཕྲ ད), with each unit corresponding to the width of the artist's finger.

The correctness of *thig tshad* is not only technical but also spiritual. Canonical texts define drawing as a ritual discipline that requires meditative focus and ethical intent. Beer's research explains why iconometry (*thig tshad*) is regarded as a sacred practice rather than merely an aesthetic rule. In Vajrayāna art, every proportional system, measurement, or gesture aims to express the deity's "purities," attributes such as compassion, omniscience, or wrathful protection (Beer 2003, 19). In Sikkim today, artists trained at institutions like the Traditional Arts School (TAS) or in monastic lineages continue to uphold these proportional systems; at the same time, commercial workshops sometimes disregard them for speed or tourist appeal. The tension between adherence and compromise illustrates how iconometry remains a living discipline,

simultaneously a sacred grammar and a marker of authenticity in the thangka trade.

According to canonical manuals, the four main proportional categories are:

- Buddhas: 12½ face units
- Bodhisattvas: 10 face units
- Female deities (e.g., Tārā, Dolma): 9 face units
- Wrathful deities (e.g., Vajrapāṇi, Kalachakra): 8 face units

### Facial Proportions

The head of the Buddha is drawn with geometric precision (Figure 10). The *ushnīṣa* (Tib. *gtsug tor*, Wyl. *gtsug tor*, ຖ ຖ ຕ ຕ), the cranial protuberance that symbolizes supreme wisdom and spiritual attainment, occupies one unit; the Buddha's nose and lips fall within two units; the neck folds into three divisions, signifying compassion, wisdom and meditative stability; and the eyes align across three units with an eye-length gap between them (Sangpo 1996, 34). Doctrinal



Figure 17: A senior student of Traditional Arts School, Gangtok, is constructing the proportional grid for a deity using the 12½ sormo system. © Photograph by Pem Tshering Lepcha.

meaning is visually encoded through the use of diagonals and intersecting lines, which guarantee balance and symmetry.

## Full-Body Proportions

The standing Buddha is constructed around the Central Perpendicular Line (*Brahma line*), with the body width calibrated to 120 *sors*. Shoulders, chest, abdomen, thighs, and calves are arranged through horizontal lines at 4, 8, 12, and 24 *sors* (Wyl. *sor*, ཟ୍ରୋ), or finger-width units, which provide the most minor scale for determining the proportions of limbs and facial features. In seated Buddhas (Figure 11) (Figure 12), the same ratios apply but are compressed into the lotus posture without breaking proportional harmony (Sangpo 1996, 40).

## Wrathful and Multi-Armed Deities

Wrathful manifestations such as Kalachakra and Vajrapani (Figure 13) follow the same iconometric framework but are extended to 125 *sors*. When seated, their height is reduced by 24 *sors* to account for bent knees. Additional heads and arms are placed according to radial divisions of the central axis, ensuring that even the most complex tantric forms adhere to sacred geometry (Sangpo 1996, 42).

## Female Deities

Tārā (Dolma) (Figure 14) (Figure 15) is drawn within the ninth Thalmo division, which softens proportions and narrows the face. Horizontal divisions at 2, 4, 6, 8, and 12 *sors* regulate posture, gestures, and ornamentation, producing a visual language of compassion and grace distinct from the upright authority of Buddhas (Sangpo 1996, 62).

## Conclusion

The development of thangka art in Sikkim demonstrates how this sacred Himalayan visual tradition continues to evolve while remaining rooted in its ritual, doctrinal, and iconometric origins. Originally passed down through Tibetan monastic networks, thangka painting has never been static;

it is a living practice that combines technique, devotion, and cultural memory. The thig tshad system, consecration rituals, and apprenticeship methods keep the art grounded in a sacred ontology, even as artists explore new audiences, adapt to changing patronage, and encounter expanding markets.

Rather than seeing modern changes as a decline, I contend that Sikkimese thangka art is developing, mirroring broader Himalayan patterns where sacred art moves through ritual spaces, heritage institutions, and commercial venues. These changes demonstrate how artistic authority, monastic legitimacy, and cultural identity are constantly renegotiated rather than lost. What remains constant is the core connection between the painter, deity, and community, preserved through careful iconometric techniques and a disciplined approach to craftsmanship.

Sacred Strokes goes beyond the technical skill of thangka painters. It represents a living tradition where measurement becomes meditation, and artistic creation turns into devotion. As long as artists, monastic communities, and local practitioners maintain the harmony between sacred knowledge and adaptable creativity, thangka art in Sikkim will continue to be a vital part of Buddhist visual culture in the Eastern Himalayas.

**Karma Norbu Bhutia** is a PhD candidate in Anthropology at the University of Delhi. He can be reached at knorbs8@gmail.com. **Mitashree Srivastava** is an Associate Professor in Anthropology at the University of Delhi. She can be reached at mita.buddha@gmail.com

---

## Endnotes

1. Rinzing Lhadripha is known as the first native of Sikkim who started the tradition of thangka painting; hence he is seen as the founder of thangka painting. “Lhadripha” is the title given to the thangka artist (Bhutia 2025).

---

## References

Beer, Robert. 2003. *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*. Chicago: Serindia Publications.

Bentor, Yael. 1993. “Tibetan Tourist Thangkas in the Kathmandu Valley.” *Annals of Tourism Research* 20 (1): 107–137. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(93\)90114-I](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(93)90114-I).

Beyer, Stephan. 1988. *Magic and Ritual in Tibet*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass.

Bhutia, Karma Norbu. 2025. “Negotiating Sacredness: Buddhist Iconography and Market Dynamics in Ladakh’s Thangka Trade.” *Journal of International Buddhist Studies* 16 (2): 33–53. <https://so09.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jibs/article/view/7094>.

Bhutia, Tenzing. 2024. Interview by Karma Norbu Bhutia. Gangtok, Sikkim, March 26.

Catanese, Alex John. 2019. *Buddha in the Marketplace: The Commodification of Buddhist Objects in Tibet*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Choudhury, Maitreyee. 2006. *Sikkim: Geographical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.

Dollfus, Pascale. 2015. “Perceiving, Naming and Using Colours in Ladakh.” *The Tibet Journal* 40 (2): 261–280. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/tibetjournal.40.2.261>.

Dorjey, Skalzang. 2016. “Ladakh Monastic Art and Architecture: A Case Study of Its Developmental Perspective in Relation with Tibet.” *The Tibet Journal* 41 (2): 21–28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/tibetjournal.41.2.21>.

Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gohain, Swargajyoti. 2024. “Monastic Visibility: Monasteries, Tourism, and Outreach in the Buddhist Himalayas.” *Contemporary Buddhism* 25 (1–2): 78–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2025.2455913>.

Graburn, Nelson H. H. 1976. “Introduction.” In *The Arts of the Fourth World*, edited by Nelson H. H. Graburn, 1–31. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hall, James. 2018. *Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429499937>.

Heller, Amy. 2006. *Tibetan Art: Tracing the Development of Spiritual Ideals and Art in Tibet, 600–2000 A.D.* Milan: Jaca Book.

Jackson, David Paul, and Janice A. Jackson. 1984. *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion.

Kapstein, Matthew T. 1995. “Weaving the World: The Ritual Art of the Paṭa in Pāla Buddhism and Its Legacy in Tibet.” *History of Religions* 34 (3): 241–262. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062941>.

Lama, Mahendra P. 1994. *Sikkim: Society, Polity, Economy, Environment*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing.

Lalou, Marcelle. 1930. *Iconographie des étoffes peintes (Paṭa) dans le Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*. Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner.

Lepcha, Tashi. 2024. Interview by Karma Norbu Bhutia. Gangtok, Sikkim, March 2.

Lopez, Donald S., Jr. 2004. “Tibetan Buddhism.” In *The New Qing Imperial History*, 22–32. London: Routledge.

Luczanits, Christian. 2023. *Alchi: Ladakh’s Hidden Buddhist Sanctuary*. 2 vols. Chicago: Serindia Publications.

Lundup, Tashi. 2013. “Contemporary Ladakh: Culture, Commodification and Tourism.” Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09050>.

Makley, Charlene E. 2003. "Gendered Boundaries in Motion: Space and Identity on the Sino-Tibetan Frontier." *American Ethnologist* 30 (4): 597–619. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2003.30.4.597>.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. 2014. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315772158>.

*Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (MMK). Translated in 84000: *Translating the Words of the Buddha*. <https://84000.co>.

McGowan, Dianne. 2008. "Materialising the Sacred." In *Negotiating the Sacred II: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts*, edited by Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Maria Suzette Fernandes-Dias, 55–66. Canberra: ANU Press.

McGuckin, Eric. 1996. "Thangkas and Tourism in Dharamsala: Preservation through Change." *The Tibet Journal* 21 (1): 31–52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43302277>.

Risley, Herbert Hope. 1894. *The Gazetteer of Sikkim*. London: Government of India.

Sangpo, Pema. 1996. *The Clear Mirror Depicting the Pearl Rosaries of Thangka Painting of the Tsang-pa Tradition of Tibet*. Darjeeling: Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Centre.

Seckel, Dietrich. 1964. *The Art of Buddhism*. New York: Crown.

Shaftel, Ann. 1986. "Notes on the Technique of Tibetan Thangkas." *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 25 (2): 97–103. <https://doi.org/10.1179/019713686806027998>.

Sharf, Robert. 2017. *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Smith, Warren W., Jr. 2008. *China's Tibet? Autonomy or Assimilation*. London: Bloomsbury.

Sopa, Geshe Lhundup. 1984. "The Tibetan 'Wheel of Life': Iconography and Doxography." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7 (1): 125–146.

Subba, Jash Raj. 2008. *History, Culture and Customs of Sikkim*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.

Teiser, Stephen F. 2008. "The Wheel of Rebirth in Buddhist Temples." *Arts Asiatiques* 63: 139–153. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43486579>.

Tamang, Nirnay. 2018. *Thangka and Mural Paintings in Sikkim since the Eighteenth Century*. Gangtok: Directorate of Cultural Affairs, Government of Sikkim.

Thaye, Pema Namdol. 2000. *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Portrayal of Mysticism*. Delhi: Niyogi Books.

Thukral, Kishore. 2013. "Thangka: Art Extraordinaire." *India International Centre Quarterly* 40 (3–4): 174–205. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24394397>.

Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. 2018. "Imagining Enlightenment: Icons and Ideology in Vajrayāna Buddhist Practice." *Journal of Dharma Studies* 1 (1): 31–43.

Tucci, Giuseppe. 1949. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*. Vol. 1. Rome: La Libreria dello Stato.

Xue, Ming. 2024. "The Travel of a Thangka: Crossing Gender and Cultural Boundaries with Lutso's Stories." *Journal of Material Culture* 29 (1): 102–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591835231193969>.

Xu, Ping. 2010. "The Mandala as a Cosmic Model Used to Systematically Structure the Tibetan Buddhist Landscape." *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 27 (3): 181–203. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43030905>.