



# Painters of Gods

The word *thangka* derives from the Tibetan word *thang-yig*, meaning “a written record”. As such, a *thangka* was originally intended to serve as a visual guide to the complexities of Buddhism. *Thangkas* are paintings on silk or cotton fabrics, which usually depict a Buddhist deity or a *mandala*, geometric figures representing the universe in Hindu and Buddhist symbolism. Groups of scholars and priests used to travel by yak to distant regions in the Himalayas, setting up tents and unrolling the *thangkas* for a spiritual lesson with the locals before moving on. Very quickly, the popularity of the paintings grew with the spread of Tibetan Buddhism. From the 14th to the 18th century, *thangka* painters were heavily influenced by Chinese culture as well. More recently, over the last decade, this ancient art form has gone beyond religion to flourish within secular art circles. Dharmapala Centre in Kathmandu, a traditional Buddhist *thangka* painting school founded more than 30 years ago, has been creating high-quality *thangkas* that closely adhere to traditional painting customs and supervised by lamas of the Nyingma order. In fact, its outstanding paintings have been featured in exhibitions worldwide - from the US, Japan, Europe to Australia - bearing testimony to the skills of its talented artists. Set up by Karsang Lama, the school has trained over 300 artists.

We follow a master, Karma Lama, and his artists in his studio in the heart of Kathmandu, as they go through the meticulous process of producing a piece of *thangka* art. TEXT AND PHOTOS: BERNARD HENIN





Opening spread, from left: Master Karma Lama (middle) working on a new painting with other artists; according to Master Lama, *thangkas* were first created in Ladakh, India, then spread to the Kingdom of Nepal more than 1,500 years ago before finding its way to Tibet. A *thangka* usually represents one of the 350 deities in Tibetan Buddhism. This page, from top: Each colour is made from scratch, using blocks of dye, which are crushed and mixed. Colour preparation requires long training; tools of the trade and reference books used for the paintings



Each imagery has specific rules on depicting the gods, their colour, position, and associated artefacts and subjects. Once the drawing is completed, there are three stages in the painting. First, the less experienced artists apply the colour and shading. Next, a more experienced artist adds gold, linings or borders. Finally, the visages and eye expressions are painted by the most experienced artists or the master himself. Depending on the size and complexity of the *thangkas*, each painting can take months to create. *Thangkas* can keep their bright colours for a long time if stored in a dry place, where moisture won't affect the quality of the silk or cotton








This page, from top left: Penciling of a *thangka* scenery; working on the background scenes. Deviating from the rules of *thangka* is not permitted as the paintings should reflect, first and foremost, the spiritual message. There is only room for personal artistic expression in the surrounding landscapes and ornaments; the canvas alone takes at least three days to manufacture. It is impregnated with a mixture of mud and yak skin, dried out in the sun and then scrubbed manually with a round stone several times; a *thangka* in progress

An apprentice preparing a canvas on the studio's roof top, under the watchful eye of Master Karma Lama. At aged 11, Master Karma Lama was sent to a remote monastery in Tibet to learn the fine art of *thangka* and the spirituality associated with it. He returned six years later and became a well known *thangka* artist in his area, mainly commissioned by local monasteries or for burial ceremonies. "In those days, I never imagined people other than practising Buddhists would be interested in buying my paintings." However, things changed when he first visited Kathmandu in 1979 with his grandfather. He recalls, "The *thangkas* being sold then to tourists were poor imitations that didn't respect the rules and norms of true *thangka* paintings. I couldn't understand any of them." Master Karma Lama returned to his village disheartened by what he saw. "These were artists without spirit, what was the point?"





Master Karma Lama in his studio. In 1982, he returned to Kathmandu with Master Karsang Lama to challenge the artistic landscape of *thangka* paintings in the capital. They set up a workshop and though it was tough in the beginning, their business slowly started to grow. Thirty years later and with hundreds of artists trained, the result is inspiring. "We are living in the new golden age of *thangka* paintings," he says

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