

**Lineages and the Principles of Composition
in Tibetan Buddhist Paintings: Reading
Tibetan Thangkas as Records**

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LINEAGES AND THE PRINCIPLES OF COMPOSITION
IN TIBETAN BUDDHIST PAINTING:
READING TIBETAN THANGKAS AS RECORDS

by

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Although to the uninitiated, Tibetan painting can seem to be a chaotic and inexhaustibly variable universe, in fact its iconography is limited, orderly, and, above all, hierarchic. To understand this art, one of the first steps is to recognize the hierarchic arrangements in which its sacred figures have been placed. In order to understand the main conventions of precedence and hierarchy, one must furthermore learn to interpret in detail the depictions of guru lineages. This task, moreover, yields several important results. Lineages are, for instance, one of the few sources of reliable historical clues for dating a Tibetan painting, and therefore for an art notoriously lacking in clear chronological signposts, this in itself would be reason enough to justify the careful study of guru lineages and their conventions of temporal descent.

In certain ways Tibetan scroll paintings or thangkas can be read and interpreted almost as one would read a written text. A painting of this tradition has its rules of "grammar," so to speak, which allow one to interpret its arrangements systematically. As in many written languages, one can distinguish in a painting several levels of description, such as those corresponding to letters, words, and sentences. To follow the analogy of language and reading, the sacred figures in a thangka could be considered to be like the words in a language. The individual attributes of a figure--i.e. the iconographic elements such as colors, hand gestures, dress, ornamentation, etc.--are like the letters of the words. And to determine the correct ordering of the figures, there are the rules governing composition--corresponding to rules of *syntax*, if you will. Let us here try to clarify some of the main "syntactic" rules of Tibetan painting.

Traditional Tibetan Classifications of Buddhist Art

Tibetan painters and learned religious masters were very much aware of the hierarchical rules and chronological conventions expressed in paintings. Such rules were important aspects in the complex and highly developed tradition of religious art maintained by the Tibetans. In traditional Tibet, art was by and large religious, and according to Tibetan "iconological" theories recorded in treatises on sacred art (*bzo rig bstan bcos*), art works were traditionally classified into three main types of sacred objects, each corresponding to an aspect of Buddhahood: enlightened body, speech or mind. Thus the main types classes of sacred objects, in ascending order, are the three "supports" (*rtan*):

1. Bodily supports (*sku rtan*)
2. Verbal supports (*gsung rtan*)

3. Mental supports (*thugs rten*)

Further Classifications: Sculpted and Painted Figures

Body-supports can be further divided according to their spatial extension into two classes: (1) painted (*bris*), i.e. two-dimensional, objects, and (2) sculpted or otherwise outwardly extending (*'bur*) three-dimensional objects. Here we will be concerned exclusively with bodily supports (*sku rten*) of the first type: painted artworks (*bris sku*), especially with painted scrolls (*thang ka; thang sku; sku thang*).

Classification of Painted Images according to Function

Painted images can furthermore be classified into several types, according to their main function (though this is not a classification scheme traditionally used by Tibetans):

1. *Simple "body supports"*, which are plain iconic representations of a divine figure;
2. *Narrative paintings*, which place the figures within a historical or legendary story, such as a saint's life. {Slide: The Life of Mi-la Ras-pa; {Slide: Jātakas
3. *Didactic paintings*, which symbolically represent religious truths. {Slide: symbolic representations: Srid pa'i 'khor lo
4. *Astrological diagrams*, which are meant to luck and repel bad fortune,
5. *Representations of offerings*, especially to protective deities, which are meant to gratify and placate such deities.

General Historical and Stylistic Development

Even when we restrict ourselves to simple iconic and narrative paintings, one quickly notices within a group of twenty or thirty paintings a considerable variety of styles. This is to be expected given the geographical location of Tibet. It is situated between the two great civilizations of Asia: India and China, and the two strongest stylistic influences on Tibetan Buddhist painting originated from these neighboring lands.

When one examines a number of dateable paintings from the twelfth through nineteenth centuries, one notices tremendous changes in style. Basically the styles change from older Indian, styles toward later, more Chinese-influenced, styles. This effects the depictions of divine figures to some extent, but the for the backgrounds and other decorative details of a painting the changes cannot be overlooked.

Among other things, this entails a movement from a mainly red and orange color scheme, with abstract decorative designs in the background, to a primarily green and blue color scheme, with more or less stereotyped elements of Chinese landscapes in the background. The arrangement of figures progresses from a strictly linear arrangement in columns, to a more staggered arrangement in the landscape. The dimensions of the painting itself goes from an almost square shape (especially with 14th/15th century Newar-style paintings) to a more pronounced rectangle.

Concerning the basic conventions of figure positioning, they are at first clearly Indian. It may be that some of the later developments (right-left alternation beginning at top-

center) reflect a penetration of Chinese traditions. Certainly this convention was well suited to figures placed in the sky of a Chinese-style landscape.

Principles Determining the Size and Placement of Figures in a Painting

Since Tibetan Buddhist art is, in general, a very conservative, formal and orderly world, in which nothing of significance can occur by chance, we might well ask what the organizing principles are that determine its composition. (Note that here "composition" does not mean the layout of such secondary elements as landscape, but specifically the choice and positioning of figures.) The main organizing or "syntactic" rules of composition are not complicated, and they can be summed up as three expressions of precedence or hierarchy in three separate contexts:

- (1) A figure's status as a "main" or "minor" figure.
- (2) To which iconographic class the figure belongs within the levels established by (1).
- (3) Which special rank, if any, an individual figure has within the iconographic classes established by (2).

(1) Distinguishing Levels of Priority: The Hierarchy of Main and Minor Figures

The first essential distinction is easy, and it consists in the determination of which figures are of main importance, and which are to be treated as lesser figures. Most paintings contain at least the two levels:

- I. Main figure (*gtso bo*)
- II. Minor figures (*lha mgon*, "guest deities")

(Here for the sake of simplicity I have limited the minor figures to just one level (II.). Some thangka paintings do have, however, two or even levels of lesser figures, i.e. III., IV., and so forth.)

A deity becomes a "main figure" or "minor figure" in a given painting according to the immediate spiritual wishes or priorities of the devotee or patron commissioning the work. (For a lay person, these priorities would have been established through the advice of a religious preceptor, who might even sketch a simple plan showing the position of each deity.) To put it another way, a figure is chosen as the "main figure" (or group of main figures) of a painting simply by being religiously important, for one reason or another, to the patron. For example, a certain deity such as White Tārā is often chosen as the main figure to ward off illness or threats to the patron's longevity.

One can immediately recognize and distinguish the members of priority-level (I.) and (II.) because a main figure is usually shown in the middle of the painting on the central vertical axis. Moreover, a main figure is larger, while minor figures are smaller. In fact, the artist has used different units of measures for each priority-level: the sizes of the faces or of the palms of the hands (these are classical units of measure, each made up of twelve finger-widths) are much larger for a main figure than for the minor ones.

It is theoretically possible for all figures to be on the priority-level of main figure, and for a painting to have no minor figures. But this is rare in actual practice for paintings having more than two or three figures. A main figure (or group of main figures) supplies a welcome aesthetic focus and spiritual center of gravity to most paintings.

(2) Hierarchy of Iconographic Classes within Each Priority-Level

In contrast to the first distinction, which in some ways is based on personal, almost arbitrary factors, the second main distinction has to do with a more absolutely and permanently established hierarchy, namely that of the different iconographic classes within the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. For that pantheon does in fact consist of sacred figures belonging to one or another relatively higher or lower class. The main classes of sacred figures include, in descending hierarchical order:

1. Masters of the lineage
2. Tantric deities (*yi dam*)
3. Buddhas in Sambhogakāya and Nirmāṇakāya forms
4. Bodhisattvas
5. Goddesses (i.e. female bodhisattvas)
6. Pratyekabuddhas; Śrāvakas/Sthaviras.
7. *Ḍāka* and *ḍākiṇī* (*mka'* 'gro and *mka'* 'gro ma), i.e. beings of high realization associated with tantric practice.
8. Wrathful protectors of the Dharma (*dharmapāla*), e.g. *Vajrapāṇi*
9. *Yakṣa* deities (*gnod sbyin*), e.g. the four great kings, guardians of the directions.
10. Wealth-bestowing deities (*nor lha*), e.g. *Jambhala*
11. Other lesser deities (*mahānāga*, *gter-bdag*, etc.)

This list expresses, of course, a spiritual hierarchy. The prior classes embody higher realizations, while the subsequent ones embody relatively lower ones. For example, the realizations of a perfectly enlightened Buddha are higher than that of a bodhisattva (who is, after all, a candidate to Buddhahood), and of course they are higher than those of a worldly deity. This same spiritual hierarchy is expressed ritually by the order in which such deities are invoked in the ceremonies of Tibetan monasteries. In consonance with Vajrayāna doctrine, the gurus take precedence over all else.

How is this hierarchy expressed in a painting? The hierarchy or spiritual precedence of one class over another is obviously manifested, first of all, through its vertically higher placement in the painting, relative to the other classes of the same priority-level. A very good example showing the hierarchy or classes is the so-called assembly-field (*tshogs zhing*) type of painting.

Secondly, a higher or lower status of a class is expressed through larger or smaller physical proportions (again, relative to other classes on the same importance-level). There exists in fact an exact system of figural proportions by which higher ranking classes possess larger proportions than the ones beneath them. The scale of measurements (i.e. the actual length of a "face-length" or "finger-width" unit), however, remains the same within one importance-level.

Usually there is only one main figure (*gtso bo*) and thus the division into classes only concerns the minor figures. But occasionally there are painted *thangkas* with two, three, or

more "main figures." In that case the rules of placement according to class hierarchy operate within that group.

(3) Hierarchies within the Same Class of Sacred Figures.

The third basic hierarchical distinction, that which influences the placement of figures within a single iconographic class on the same priority-level, is not in fact found in every iconographic class. Sometimes all the figures within a class enjoy the same status, and their ordering within their class can be made arbitrarily (though members of established groups are often depicted according to an established order, based, for instance, on a canonical text or a famous older painting that functions as a model).

But when a true hierarchy does exist it may reflect a doctrinal superiority or a spiritual seniority. The deities of the Anuttarayoga Tantras, for instance, are accorded a higher status doctrinally over those of the Yoga Tantras and the other still lower tantra classes. In the representation of a lineage of teaching masters, by contrast, the order expresses the precedence of relative seniority within that lineage. A spiritually more senior figure takes precedence over a junior one. This does not necessarily mean seniority in age (though in fact a chronological succession of older to younger masters is the typical case). Nevertheless, here the decisive factor is spiritual seniority, which is established by being the religious teacher of the other.

Artistically, precedence may also be shown for figures on roughly the same vertical level by placing superior figures either closer to the center, or to the right hand of their inferiors. Thus, within a lineage or series, the position at the first figure's right hand usually has precedence over that to his left, reflecting ancient Indian conventions for showing respect and, perhaps originally, customary uses of the respective hands for cleaner or dirtier tasks.

Special Exceptions Regarding the Guru

There were occasionally paintings where the depictions of the patrons's personal guru or the great founding masters of his tradition are pushed to a higher or more central position within their class (i.e. to a position of higher respect), motivated by special devotion to that master.

There also exists at least one painting where a figure of the guru has been elevated to a position in the highest priority-level, and in fact to a seat on the crown of the main figure.

Summary of the three levels of hierarchy

To summarize, then, the placement of figures is governed by hierarchic rules that operate within three contexts according to: (1) the immediate spiritual importance of the figures for the patron, (2) the iconographic classes within a given priority-level, and (3) the relatively higher or lower position of the individual figure within a given iconographic class. Moreover, the same hierarchical principles apply both within a single painting and within a set of numerous paintings. In the latter case they determine the arrangement of the whole set.

Lineages

But what does it mean, concretely, to say that the individual figures within an iconographic class are "positioned hierarchically"? There exist in fact a number of conventions to express positions of decreasing precedence in a painting, and in the course of history quite a few of them were actually employed by the Tibetans. The modern scholar must take special care to be sure he has identified in each case which hierarchic conventions in fact have been used. Here the presence of a guru lineage in the painting can be extremely useful, since it often sets the pattern for the rest of the composition.

The Preeminent Position and Importance of Lineages

As we saw already, the masters of teaching lineages belong to the highest of all iconographic classes. Even when depicted as "minor figures" in relation to the immediate spiritual priorities of the patron, they still occupy the highest positions in a painting. Their presence can therefore hardly be missed at the top, or at both the top and right and left side-columns, of many important old paintings.

Lineage and History in Tibetan Buddhism

Throughout much of their history, Tibetan Buddhists have demonstrated a proclivity for depicting guru lineages. The resultant portrayals are of great importance not only as a record of a given lineage's history and the iconographic representation of its masters, but also, when the lineage is complete, as very important clues for dating the paintings.

Tibetan Buddhists in other contexts of ritual and practice, too, carefully recorded and transmitted their teaching lineages (to the extent it was possible), no doubt because of the importance of the guru lineage in the esoteric or Mantrayāna traditions of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the Tantric traditions such lineages were of religious importance: the lineage gurus needed to be ritually invoked as a preparatory step in practice. This respect of lineages contributed to a deep and very concrete sense of history among many Tibetan Buddhist tantric masters (in contrast to the typical dialectically trained scholar-monks (*geshes*), whose main training consisted of systematic non-tantric doctrine and debate).

In Tibetan Buddhist practice the importance of lineages led to the setting down in writing of books recording the lineages that an individual master received from his various teachers. These books often consisted of little more than bare lists of names and book or teaching titles, and they made up a genre of writing called "record of teachings received" *thob yig* or *thos yig*. Artistically this same attention to lineages was expressed in the careful portrayals of many lineages of gurus. (Note: Refer to Dan Martin's statement in his introduction to his bibliography on the importance of lineages.)

Special Chronological Conventions for Lineages

As elsewhere in the planning of a painting, so too in the portrayal of lineages one usually finds an orderly and exact system at work. Indeed, painted lineages can be read chronologically and thus interpreted as historical records. But for a correct interpretation one

needs to determine in each case the particular convention for chronological descent that was used.

In analyzing lineages, it is often best to begin by identifying (A) the starting point. Then it is much easier to follow the continuation of the lineage, and thus to determine (B) the exact convention used for depicting the temporal sequence or chronological descent of the subsequent figures.

(A) Main Conventions Regarding the Starting Point

Lineages usually begin, as would be expected, with the earliest teacher. Thus, they almost always begin with a Buddha, who, for the tantric traditions, is the tantric original-guru, Vajradhara for the "New Translation Schools" (gSar-ma-pa), a blue-colored Buddha in Sambhogakaya form holding a vajra and bell in his crossed hands. (For tantras of the "Old Translation Schools" (rNying-ma) the first figure is the original Buddha Samantabhadra, Tib. Kun-tu-bzang-po.) For non-tantric traditions one can expect as the starting point a figure such as the historical Buddha Śākyamuni.

Where this first figure sits indicates the beginning of the lineage. There existed in fact several artistic conventions regarding the starting point of lineages, but the two most common starting points are:

1. **Top right corner** (relative to the deities, which is the top left corner, relative to the viewer). This seems to be the oldest convention, and it is well suited to paintings where the figures are arranged in straight rows and columns.
2. **Top central position**. This has become, since around the early 1500s, the most common convention. It is suited to figures placed in a more realistic landscape (which at the top of the painting means in the sky).

There are also exceptions, such as the special case where the first figure sits just to the left (relative to the viewer) of the top central position. Here another figure (the patron's own guru) has for reasons of special respect usurped the top central position.

(B) Main Conventions Regarding Descent

Once the beginning has been located, it is normally not difficult to see how the lineage continues, whether straight across or down columns, or in an alternating fashion that jumps back and forth.

(i. Manners of Descent Starting from the top left)

1. straight across the top (for short lineages).

Among the various conventions of descent from the figure Vajradhara at top left, one of the oldest and simplest is to proceed straight across the top row, from the viewer's left to right. This is well suited for lineages of up to ten or twelve figures.

2. straight across the top and down one column

Ngor-chen's ordination lineage. Zimmerman collection.

For cases where there are more than say twelve or thirteen in the lineage, one solution is to run the continuation from the upper right corner down the right side-column.

3. straight across the top and down one column, then down the other column

A rare continuation of the above entails a jump from the bottom of the right side-column to the top of the left side-column, from where the lineage continues down that column.

(ii. Manners of Descent Starting from the top, center)

1. across to left and down column, then across to right, and down column

Slide: Wisdom and Compassion, no. 71 (p. 222, Mahākāla Pañjaranātha).

This painting begins with Vajradhara at the top middle, progresses three figures to the viewer's left, and then drops down the left column. Then it returns to the first paṇḍita in the top row (Sa-paṇ), goes right, and finally descends down the right column. Again Sa-chen occurs in an anomalous position owing to the great veneration paid him by the tradition.

2. across to right, and then alternating.

Slide: Wisdom and Compassion, No. 70 (p. 221).

This is an example of an alternative (and evidently quite old) way of beginning the lineage. The top row begins on the far left and progresses to the right, before adopting a left-right alternation between columns.

3. across to left, then across to right (and then alternating below)

4. alternating left, right, all the way down. **Slide:** Wisdom and Compassion, no. 64. Paṇḍita Gayadhara (as master of the Lam 'bras) with surrounding lineage.

In this painting, the minor figures are arranged according to the fairly standard convention:

1. top center, 2. *his* right hand, 3. *his* left, and so on. Thus the top row would be: 8, 6, 4, 2, 1, 3, 5, 7, 9.

Is the Lineage Complete?

It is possibly to be fooled in one's interpretation of lineages. For instance, to avoid error, one should try to determine whether the painting depicts a complete lineage of masters, or just a fraction thereof.

A Single Lineage in One Painting:

Some paintings end the lineage with the last minor figure. Others end the lineage by jumping from the last teacher among the minor figures to the main figure. Taken together, the main figure (or sometimes a pair of figures) and minor figures represent a single complete lineage.

Possible Combinations of Partial and Complete Lineages:

It was very common to have one lineage partially represented by a single main figure, and another complete lineage depicted by a series of smaller minor figures. Here the lineage of the main figure is continued by other paintings in a multiple-work set.

It was also possible to have a partial lineage as the main figures—say two or four masters of Lam 'bras--and to surround them with minor figures representing a complete lineage of gurus of another teaching line.

A further possibility was to depict parts of two separate lineages, one partial lineage consisting of multiple main figures and the other as multiple minor figures. As an example we can examine a painting of four Lam 'bras masters and a half of a second lineage.

Finally, it may happen that two distinct lineages are depicted by the minor figures. For example: the main figure(s) depict one lineage, and two series of minor figures, to right and left, represent two distinct lineages.

Other Groups that Resemble Teaching Lineages

One has to be careful, moreover, not to identify as teaching lineages all similar-looking arrangements of figures that look like teaching masters. A row or descending column of paṇḍitas or siddhas might in fact be some standard arrangement of Indian masters such as the "Six Ornaments and Two Best Ones" (*rgyan drug mchog gnyis*) or the "Eight Great Adepts" (*grub chen brgyad*), and not the start of a lineage. Since about the mid-1600s, moreover, there is the increasing danger that a lineage of a reincarnate lama ("trulku") might have been depicted.

The Accuracy of Lineages

Generally speaking, the painted depictions of lineages are an accurate representation of contemporary knowledge and opinion about the particular lineages. Especially for the most recent generations they portray, they can be trusted as a fairly reliable record, as can sometimes be confirmed by checking the parallel written sources. Often the lamas planning the painting must have based themselves on the standard written sources.

In some cases, moreover, the contents of paintings serve as a very rare record of otherwise unattested lineages. (The early Indian segments of lineages no doubt often embody legendary materials of questionable historical accuracy, but all references to Indian masters should by no means be dismissed out of hand.)

Conclusions

Thus depictions of lineages are an extremely valuable source for students of Tibetan art, since they help unlock the overall structure of the painting. Moreover, if they were accurately reproduced and are correctly interpreted, lineages can be important for a better understanding of Tibetan art history, iconography, and even religious culture in general.

(1) The Significance of the Last Figure in the Lineage for Art History

The lack of exactly datable pieces has long plagued the study of Tibetan art history. A knowledge of some of the key elements of style can allow one to give one a rough dating of a painting—say to within about a century or so. But many paintings contain additional evidence that can be used for a more exact dating. These kinds of evidence include, of course, written inscriptions (mainly on the front by sometimes also on the back of a painting). But even without inscriptions, the presence of a teacher-lineage will also allow a more exact dating.

If the lineage is complete, and it has been properly interpreted, the identity of its last figure enables an approximate dating to within about one generation. The last figure of the lineage can be assumed to have been the teacher of the person who commissioned the painting.

One must be careful not to wrongly interpret a half or fraction of a lineage as a whole one, though usually the later style will give warnings that this has occurred. One also must be careful where a lama as main central figure or figures may represent the final figure(s) of the lineage, thus bringing the lineage forward another generation or two.

(2) The Importance of Lineages for Iconographic Studies

Paintings depicting lineages are extremely rich and so-far nearly untapped sources for establishing the iconography of major and minor Indian and Tibetan masters, not to mention for the deities also portrayed beneath them, elsewhere in the painting.

(3) The Significance of Lineages Religiously and Culturally

The paintings of guru lineages furthermore give witness to what seems to be a special feature of Tibetan (esp. Tantric) Buddhism and even Tibetan culture in general: a strong sense of concrete tradition and history. The very special care paid by the Tibetans to recording actual lineages in art (as well as in ritual practice and in keeping written records) is unique, as far as I can determine, within the Buddhist cultural realm, and it may even be unique in the world.

Given the manifold importance of depictions of lineages, one can therefore only hope that historians of Tibetan art will in the future give them, as well as compositional structure in general, the careful attention that they deserve. After all, one cannot pretend to have really understood the contents of a painting until one has understood the placement and ordering of its figures.