

[Interview with Carmen Mensink, Dutch thangka painter](#)

Oct 12th, 2009 by [Leslie Edit](#) |

It's finally here! The first interview in my intercultural artist series!



Carmen Mensink painting a Medicine Buddha thangka

Today we meet Dutch thangka painter [Carmen Mensink](#). An enthusiastic and dedicated painter, teacher, and Buddhist practitioner, Carmen was trained by [Andy Weber](#), co-author and illustrator of *Images of Enlightenment: Tibetan Art in Practice*, one of the books I often refer to for inspiration. Carmen lives in Amsterdam and teaches drawing and painting workshops throughout Europe and in North America.

Here are her responses to my questions about being an intercultural artist:

1. What drew you to this “foreign” culture? Is what initially attracted you different from what keeps you connected now?

In the beginning it's mainly the rituals and colors that attract. The monks and nuns, the kindness, the bells, the smell of incense.... It's just so exotic and so different from what you are used to. But from my first trips to 'the east' on, I felt very much at home in these traditions and started to read about Buddhism and the Buddhist philosophy because I wanted to know about the background of these cultures. Then you start to meditate, going to teachings of Lamas, doing retreats... and your practice is getting deeper and, through the years, you slowly start to understand the meaning of the rituals, colors & symbolism. It comes alive even more and the connection becomes even stronger.

2. When and how did your involvement begin?

It began 10 years ago when, soon after I became a Buddhist practitioner, I met my thangka teacher Andy Weber. He was one of the first Western thangka painters and teachers.

After the first weekend course I took with him, I was 'hooked'!

It's such a wonderful combination in practising Buddhism and art at the same time.

3. Describe your experience of being trained in traditional art.

It's a long and difficult learning process, not only the painting and drawing of enlightened images (which you can always refine more) but especially learning about all the deities and symbolism. There are so many different Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, mandalas, symbols, etc. it's like you never stop learning about the symbolism. My teacher has been painting for over 30 years and is still learning all the time.



Carmen holds a work in progress, Vajrayogini

4. Were you working in another art medium or theme previously? And did you have any previous formal education in art?

Yes, I went to the Academy of Arts where I graduated in graphic design and typography. Thangkas, in a way, are also quite graphic, so this background does help. At art school I developed a steady hand, a good knowledge of materials and I know how to mix the colors that I have in my head.

5. How does the artistic philosophy and education in the adopted culture differ from your own?

In the Western world these days most art is very expressive, quite quickly made and outgoing, and sometimes is after a shock effect (animals preserved in formaldehyde for example).

In Tibet most of the art still has a religious background. Slow, meditative, going within. Big difference.

6. Do you consider yourself an artist or a craftsman (or both or neither)? Is there a difference?

To me it feels like being something in between an artist and a craftsman. Or both. And oh boy, I've had so many discussions with people over the fact that they don't consider it Art!

I think a good craftsman is an artist and a good artist is also a craftsman.



Green Tara, the Mother of All Buddhas
© Carmen Mensink

7. How have you modified tradition in the work you produce?

Naturally you will bring in your own taste in colors and of course your own hand in painting. Besides this, you will bring in your western background, not necessarily on purpose.

My teacher says for example that the Green Tara that I painted has a Western face.

a. Do you feel an obligation or responsibility to maintain some kind of purity in the tradition?

Yes I do very much.

Especially in these days where (in contrast to the former days) thangkas are for sale in an 'open market'. A lot of the thangkas that you can buy in India and Nepal are made for tourists. So this attracts people who just paint for the money, just copy, and do not know about the symbolism and do not practise themselves. I've seen important details that were left out of the enlightened images. So unfortunately this leads to degeneration of the tradition. Even 'thangka factories' exist, where one person only paints the sky, another the scarves etc etc. You can imagine these thangkas do not have much 'soul' and energy in them as they would have when they were painted by 1 person with devotion (doing the meditations and reciting mantras of the deity, blessing the brushes, paints and canvas etc.) and knowledge of the tradition and symbolism.

b. Have you adapted traditional techniques? Blended them with other traditions or contemporary trends?

No, I prefer to stick to the tradition (see previous answer).

c. What is the role of change and evolution in traditional arts?

Most Buddhist art functions as TEN-PA, literally 'supports'. Thangkas are, like statues, objects to support the Buddhist practitioner in his or her practice.

As Buddhism changed and evolved through the ages and has been adapted to different cultures, the Buddhist art follows. Just look at the differences in Japanese, Chinese, Thai and Tibetan Buddhist art. And since Buddhism only recently (40-50 years) has set foot in the West it will be very interesting to see how 'Western Buddhist art' will evolve.

8. How do you think your experience as a traditional artist is different from that of other artists?

Well, to me this art is very meditative and going within, to lessen your ego by practising the Buddhist philosophy – which is almost the reverse of Western contemporary art. (see also question 5)



Carmen painting a mandala

9. How do you think your experience as someone from outside the culture is different from that of traditional artists coming from within the culture?

I think because it's not your culture, you dive deeper into the books to find out about the right meanings and symbolism. It's more a thing of Western culture to always ask 'why?'.

10. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Yes! If this interview made you curious about thangkas, my work or courses on traditional Tibetan thangka painting, please visit my website: www.carmenmensink.com