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Il mondo del Mandala tra arte e simboli

Carmen Mensink an artist of Thangka

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Carmen Mensink is an artist of traditional Tibetan scroll paintings called "Thangka".

I had been honored to meet her a last year when I attended one of her courses about drawing "White Tara Thangka" and she gave me a very interesting support and a lot of info about this original, and ancient tools for prying and meditation.

We have exchanged some word about her story, her work and experience with Thangka.

Here our conversation:

Annalisa: Well, Carmen, what is a Thangka?

Carmen: A Thangka painting is a traditional Tibetan Buddhist scroll painting and the images on it are that of Buddhas and Mandalas. It is a medium through which the Buddhist philosophy can be explained.

The literal translation of the Tibetan word THANG KA means 'recorded message'. Thangkas communicate a message to the practitioner, serving as an aid to teaching and as an aid to meditation through the visualisation of the deity.

A: Which materials are most used to create a Thangka?

C: In the early days they used a combination of bone glue and natural pigments

made from rocks, minerals and plants.

Nowadays it's mostly gouazzo paints on cotton. The colors of the gouazzo paints are most similar to the natural pigments.

Also sometimes acrylic paints are used.

A: Do you remember when you saw your first Thangka?

C: Yes!

It was in 1998 when I traveled through Ladakh (a part of North India, where the Tibetan Culture is very well preserved). I visited all the important monasteries, the walls were full of thangkas and I also saw thangka painters paint the walls of the monasteries.

I thought it was so very beautiful and I was wondering what the meaning was of all these different images.

A: How did you start drawing, and creating Thangka?

C: Shortly after this trip I looked for a Buddhist Centre in Amsterdam (where I live) to practice the Dharma (teachings of the Buddha) and I did my first meditation retreat. Again I saw these beautiful thangkas hanging on the wall and somebody told me there was a famous thangka painter in England, Andy Weber, who comes to Holland now and then to teach thangka.

I took my first weekend course with him and it really felt as I was coming home!

I knew this was the path that I had to go...

Since then I have been studying with my teacher for in total bout 13 years - and I'm still studying.

The first few years it was just drawing, drawing, drawing. To practice my hand and to understand the lines and the special way of Tibetan drawing.

After a couple of years I painted my first Buddha - Buddha Shakyamuni (our historical Buddha).



A: What is the difference between a Mandala and a Thangka?

C: A thangka is just a scroll painting. The images on it can be all kinds of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Mandalas. So a Mandala is also a thangka.

Tibetan Mandalas (which are different to new age mandalas) are geometrical patterns that symbolize the 'palace' or 'residence' of a Buddha. Each Buddha has his or her own special mandala.

Here for example is the Mandala of Chenrezig (Avalokiteshvara), the Buddha of Compassion:
http://www.tibetanhangkapainting.com/artwork_thangka_mandala_avalokiteshvara.html



A: Do you think that there are common prejudices or misunderstandings about Thangka? If so what are most common?

C: Well, thangkas are not just 'pretty pictures', otherwise we could also paint Micky Mouse, haha!
Thangkas have a deep meaning (every detail on a thangka refers to a part of the Buddhist philosophy) and are connected to the Buddhist practice.
That's why in my teachings I always give the meditations with it and also slideshows for the explanation.

Also you need to understand that it takes a long time to paint a detailed thangka. In the West we are always so focused on the end result and want to finish quickly, but in the East they say that it does not matter at all if you only paint 1 thangka in your life – it's about the WAY instead of the result. The drawing & painting of thangkas is a meditation in itself.

And because we are working with grid-patterns as an example, everybody can do it, also people with no drawing experience whatsoever!

A: A part of your work is teaching to create a Thangka, for this reason you make trip around world. Could you share with us your next project? And When will you come to Italy again?

C: My next teachings in Italy will be from 3-8 luglio in the beautiful retreat center of Kushi Ling, in Arco, vicino a Lago di Garda.

We will be drawing Chenrezig (Avalokiteshvara) the Buddha of Compassion. This is a very beautiful and famous Buddha, he is seen as the protector of Tibet. And also the Dalai Lama is seen as the incarnation of this Buddha.
In the course there will also be meditations on this Buddha and an explanation of the famous Mantra of this Buddha: Om Mani Padme Hum.

Here you can find more information on this course:



http://www.tibetanhangkapainting.com/courses_thangka_workshops_italy.html

I would to invite you all!

A: Thank you so much for sharing your great experience with us.

C: Thank you for inviting me for this interview!