

RELIGIOUS CONTEXT AND SYMBOLISM

The *thangka* serves as a basic document detailing the lineage of the central figure, including various beings and symbols set in an idyllic landscape.

An **Entourage** of related figures such as *bodhisattvas*, deities, or historical personages surrounds the central figure. Bodhisattvas are fully realized beings who remain at a level just below total enlightenment in order to assist others toward that goal.



Buddha Shakyamuni



Avalokiteshvara



Guru Drakpo



Yeshe Tsogyal



Vaishravana



Vajradahu

A *thangka* charts the central figure's lineage, or tradition of learning passed down from teacher to pupil. The lineage can be traced back to a **Root Deity** such as a Buddha or other divine being.



Teachers, known as *lamas* or *gurus*, are essential for transmitting Buddhist teachings to practitioners and serve as mentors and spiritual guides. *Thangkas* usually depict the central figure underneath his or her teachers.

A **halo** and a larger **mandorla** often encircle figures to reinforce their importance and suggest their powerful inner light.

The **Central Figure** is the largest and most important being depicted in a *thangka*. Buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, historical teachers, and wrathful and Tantric deities may occupy this central position along with their symbolic attributes.

Protectors often appear in the lower portion of a *thangka*. While Protector beings may appear terrifying, their role is to guard Buddhist concepts, individuals, or holy places such as temples or monasteries.

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CREATING *THANGKAS* AND *MANDALAS*

Monasteries or individuals may commission *thangkas* from a monk or trained lay artist to commemorate an event, such as a new building or a birth, or to serve as a focal point for meditation and visualization. *Mandalas* are most commonly used in Tantric initiations. Prayers and rituals accompany the making of *mandalas*, which only monks create.

The compositions of *thangkas* and *mandalas* must adhere to strict guidelines in order to fulfill their functions; therefore little artistic license is permitted. Tibetan Buddhists regard the creators of *thangkas* and *mandalas* as anonymous interpreters of high spiritual teachings, since their work exists to help others understand Buddhist ideas and beliefs. The making of these artworks is considered a devotional act that brings merit to the artist and, by extension, to the devotee through his or her engagement with the image.

SYMBOLISM



Among the **Tantric staff's** symbolic meanings is the union of two aspects of enlightenment: wisdom and method. The three heads, which appear to be in various states of decay, reference the attempt to overcome jealousy, pride, and ignorance.



The **Lotus** is a symbol of good fortune and rebirth. The lotus flower strives toward the light, breaks out of the mud unsoiled, and blooms just above the water, connecting the flower with notions of purity and renunciation.



Mudras are gestures enacted in rituals and depicted in art that signify specific attributes or actions such as protection, connectedness, or discussion.



The **landscapes** featured reflect the rising mountains and lush valleys of the Himalayan region.



Mahakala's **five-skull crown** represents five negative obstacles (ignorance, pride, attachment, jealousy, and anger) that Buddhist practice aims to transform into positive attributes (knowledge, sameness, discernment, accomplishment, and reflection).