

Photo Essay

Shambhala and the Prague *Thangka*: The Myth's Visual Representation

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This photo essay addresses the visual aspects of the Shambhala myth in Inner Asia, in particular Mongolia, Amdo, and Buryatia. The last Shambhala king, Raudracakrin, is usually depicted in two basic forms: either as a quiet, Nirvanic ruler on the throne in Kalápa, the capital of Shambhala, or as an angry, wrathful, and merciless military commander in the last battle of Shambhala.

A Shambhala *thangka* (figure 1) in the National Gallery in Prague, Czech Republic, represents ninety-eight years of Raudracakrin's rule (2326–2424)¹, depicted in Kalápa in the upper part whereas the lower part depicts the last battle prophesied to unfold in the year 2424. The subjects of this analysis are primarily the wrathful forms of Raudracakrin, the last ruler (*kalki*) of Shambhala, and special attention is paid to his armor, lance, and *vajra* (ritual weapon). His name literally means "the angry one with the wheel," and for this reason we must also analyze the wheel, whose nature, as well as Raudracakrin's, is ambivalent. Its quiet form symbolizes teaching (Skt. *dharma*), and its wrathful form represents a weapon, which is used in battle or as an instrument of torture in hell.

Drawing on visual sources, some of which have not been published before, this essay provides a cultural-historical analysis of the Shambhala myth in the Tibeto-Mongolian interface with the Prague *thangka* serving as a focal point. The photo essay in this special issue of *Cross-Currents* on "Buddhist Art of Mongolia" is devoted to the Prague *thangka* for two reasons: the *thangka* has been neither described nor published outside the Czech Republic, and the depiction of Shambhala (including the Prague *thangka*) is the subject of the article by Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz in this issue.² Theoretically, the essay is situated in the research field of global history. Its main aim is to explore aspects of cultural transfers and entanglements among Tibet, Mongolia, Western Europe, and the Russian empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it also addresses different modes of representing the Shambhala myth in contemporary Tibet, Mongolia, and China.

¹ The exact dates are not consistent in Tibetan Buddhist sources. See Wallace (2004, 2011); Kollmar-Paulenz (1992–1993, 2008).

² Both contributions were originally presented at the thirteenth seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies held in July 2013 in Ulaanbataar, Mongolia) and are closely related.

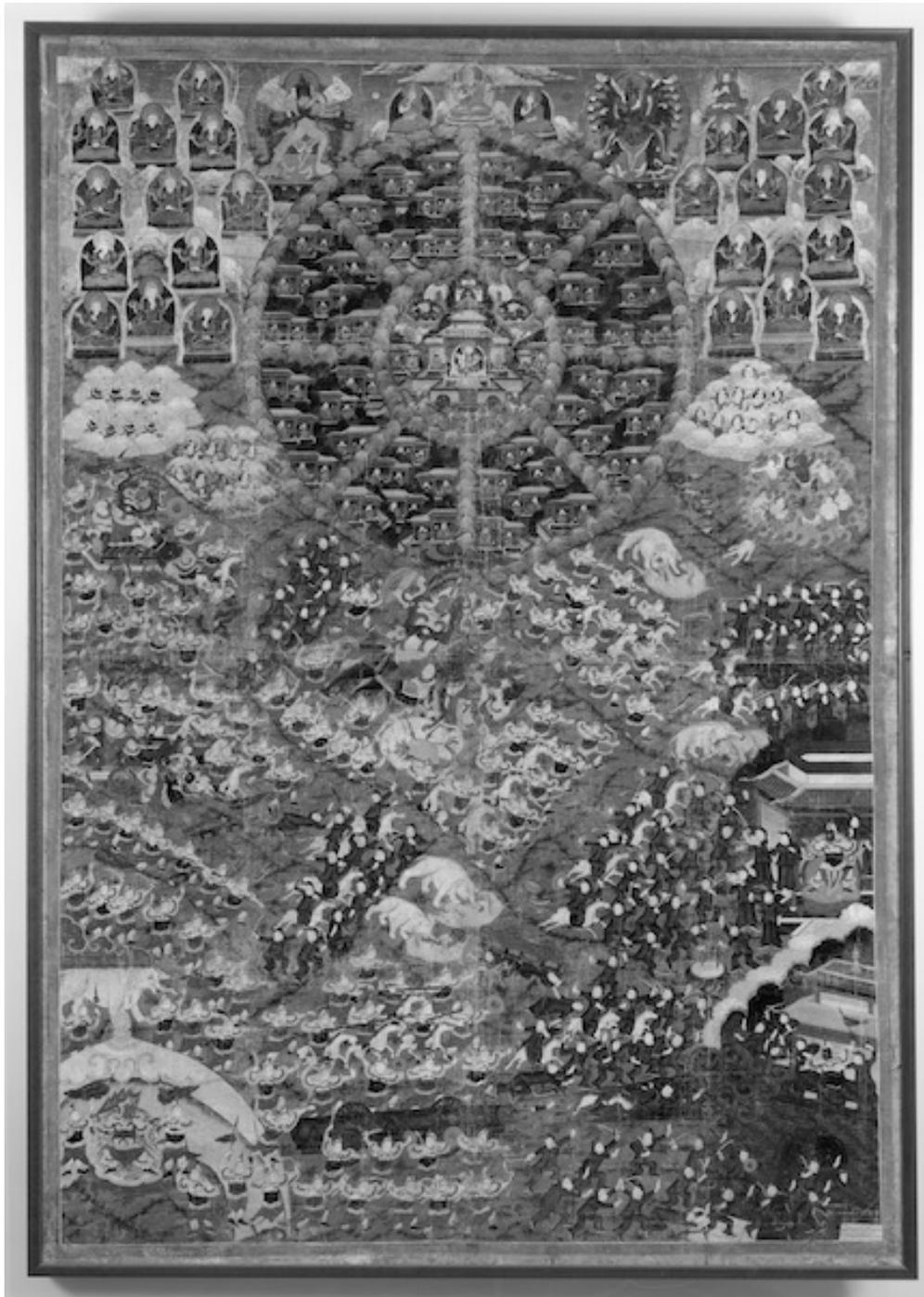


Figure 1. *Thangka* depicting Shambhala, late 19th century. *Source:* Bělka (2014). Photo courtesy of the National Gallery Prague.

In 1986, the Asian Collections of the National Gallery in Prague gained a significant asset: a large *thangka* depicting Shambhala.³ It is helpful to view the painting with knowledge of several basic facts. Its place and time of origin are not known. The Asian Collections of the National Gallery purchased the *thangka* from a private person, a Prague citizen, and it is impossible to find out when and from what source the painting was acquired by its last owner. The circumstances surrounding the *thangka's* discovery thus remain obscure. It is therefore necessary to apply methods of comparative art history in order to determine its provenance. Nora Jelínková⁴ mentions Tibet as the place and the “latter half of the 19th century” as the time of origin in the first short publication about the painting in the Czech language (Jelínková 1998, 37); however, these claims remain uncertain.

The record card of the Asian Collections of the National Gallery of Prague includes the following important facts: registration number Vm 5951; size: height 195 centimeters and width 135 centimeters; painted with mineral colors on a canvas that consists of two pieces sewn together; torn in several places; the color is wiped off in patches and secondary retouches are apparent; the overall tone is bluish-green. The painting is glued onto the canvas and, according to an information card in the gallery was “glued to a frame in 1998 (removable acrylate and lath).” The *thangka* was cleaned and restored by the professional team of the National Gallery before it was exhibited in 2014.

The *thangka* has been on exhibit several times in the Czech Republic but nowhere else. The first exhibition was held in Prague in 1986, the year it was acquired, in the Exhibition of New Acquisitions of the Asian Collections of the National Gallery; it was displayed again in an exhibit titled, “Orientální umění” (Oriental art) in 1990 in Litoměřice. In October 1998, the *thangka* was placed in the Permanent Exhibition of the Asian Collections of the National Gallery, and it has rarely been exhibited since then. Photographs of the painting have never been published apart from the color reproduction in Gyaltso (2012) and Jelínková's abovementioned brief book in Czech.

About fifteen *thangkas* that are either similar or identical to the Prague *thangka* have been identified. All of them have been published in books, articles, or specialized websites. One well-known *thangka* comes from Mongolia and is located in Ulaanbaatar (Zanabazar Museum of Fine Art). Its dimensions are 81 cm x 60 cm; it has been published four times (see Tsultem 1986, fig. 37); Béguin and Dashbaldan 1993, 189–191; Berger and Bartholomew 1995, 182; Fleming and Lkhagvademchig 2011, 514–517).

A *thangka* located in New York's Rubin Museum of Art (acc. no. F1997.38.2) measuring 59.7 cm x 39.4 cm has been described in detail (Rhie and Thurman 1996b,

³ In addition to the black-and-white images that accompany this essay, the Prague *thangka* can be viewed in color at

<http://masterpieces.asemus.museum/masterpiece/detail.nhn?objectId=10497>.

⁴ Jelínková's very brief description of the *thangka* includes only basic information; for example, of all the depicted figures, it only mentions Atisha and Raudracakrin. A color reproduction and two detailed images of the *thangka* were published by Lenka Gyaltso (2012, 18–21), with a concise, exact description.

484–485, fig. 197) and published online. Another well-described *thangka* is located in Basel's Museum der Kulturen; its dimensions are 64.5 cm x 46 cm (Essen and Thingo 1989, 205, fig. 125).

One of the oldest *thangkas*, first described by Giuseppe Tucci, is found in Zurich's Völkerkunde Museum der Universität (inv. no. 13090). Its dimensions are not specified; a reproduction has been made available only as a black-and-white photograph (see Tucci 1949, 598 [plates 211–213]).

The *thangka* in the Musée National des Arts Asiatiques–Guimet is typologically different; its dimensions are 112 cm x 222.5 cm. The main difference is in the composition: this *thangka* from Tibet is oriented not vertically with the capital city of Shambhala Kalápa in the upper part of the picture and the last battle taking place below, but horizontally with the scenes next to each other (see Rhie and Thurman 1996a, 158–159, figs. 43, 43.1).

A similarly composed *thangka* in Buryatia has appeared in two publications (Terentyev 1983; Vanchikova 2008, 34–35). Neither author, however, mentions its precise location and size. An analogous depiction with dimensions of 175.3 cm x 196.9 cm is part of the private Zimmerman Family Collection (see Rhie and Thurman 1996a, 482, fig. 238). Another similar, almost square, large-format painting is located in Erdene Zuu Monastery in Mongolia (inv. no. 65-854); its size is 156 cm x 168.5 cm. This *thangka* has been published twice (Frings, Müller, and Pleiger 2005, 374, fig. 415; Vanchikova 2008, 153).

A similar depiction is located in the Tibetan monastery of Kumbum but, unlike the painting at Erdene Zuu Monastery, it lacks the battle scenes; only the city of Kalápa is depicted. It is shown in Badmazhapov (2003, 52), but its dimensions are not specified. Other *thangkas* in Kumbum include the battle scenes and thus represent the traditional depiction of Shambhala with Kalápa and the last battle (Badmazhapov 2003, 59).

All of the abovementioned *thangkas* are historical works whose origins date back several centuries. Recent depictions are represented by the Tibetan painting located in Namgyal Monastery in India. It is shown, again without its dimensions, in Harrington (1999, 39). Typologically, this painting belongs to the vertical portrayals that include Kalápa and the last battle, as well as all the remaining depictions. A historical *thangka* of the same composition and typology, but unknown dimensions, is located in the Mongolian monastery of Shankh. The first probably bears the closest resemblance to the Prague *thangka*; the second has fewer similarities. A final example is from the Dahortsang Collection; it is shown, but its dimensions are not specified, in Brauen (2004, 235, fig. 184).

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