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# DRUK GI LHAZO

THE ART OF BHUTANESE PAINTING



Agency for Promotion of Indigenous Crafts (APIC)  
Ministry of Economic Affairs (MoEA)



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## A NOTE FROM THE CEO

The emergence of Buddhist painting dates back to the living era of Lord Buddha in India. It reached Tibet and Bhutan during the great Tibetan King Song-Tsen-Ghampo's reign in the 6th century followed by Guru Padma Sambhava's visit in the 8th century. Over the years, eminent masters like Tertön Dorji Lingpa, Gyalwa Longchen Rabjam, Phajo Drukgom Zhipgo, Ngawang Chhoejay, Drukpa Kuenley, Drupthop Thangtong Gyalpo, Tertön Pema Lingpa, Trueku Chhogdhen Gonpo and Rigzin Khamsum Yongdrol made notable contributions of their own to Buddhist paintings and sculpture. Later on, after Zhabdrung's arrival it was further enhanced and consolidated in the year 1642 through the accomplished Buddhist iconographer Tsang Khenchen Palden Jatsho, whose main disciples included the likes of the "Six Gyamtsho" or the "Ocean of Knowledge" and many other Bhutanese students as well. Many of his Bhutanese students further spread those skills throughout the kingdom. Back in the medieval days, paintings in the Bhutanese Monasteries were done only by the highly spiritual lamas and learned scholars.

Bhutanese scholars like Gyalsay Tenzin Rabgay, the 4th Desi of Bhutan and the Choglay Trueku Yeshey Ngedup, the last Desi of Bhutan had immensely developed, enriched and categorized Bhutanese Thangka and Mural painting system with super fine characteristics and qualities. Later on, the 20th century accomplished Buddhist Masters of the likes of Lopon Sonam Zangpo of Kurtöe Dungkar, Lama Monlam Rabzang of Trongsa and Lopon Choedra of Kurtöe and renowned Bhutanese painters like Lhadrip Lhakpa of Tshamdra Gonpa, Lopon Sanga Dorji of Drupchu Gonpa in Dramitse, Lopon Phugay of Kengkhar in Mongar, and Lam Kota of Khalong in Mongar, made sizeable contributions to the promotion of Bhutanese painting and sculpture. Consequently, over the following years, an extensive list of their students such as Lopon Rinzin Norbu, Lopon Ugyen Lhundup of Kengkhar, Lopon Tshewang Tashi of Khalong Dramitse, Lopon Tawtao of Bumthang, Dasho Shingkar Lam Kuenzang Wangchuk of Ura, Dasho Lam Sanga of Ura Sumthang amongst many others, continued to maintain and ensure that the elaborate skills of these arts were retained intact and passed down to younger generations, safe from the ravages of time.

It is mainly due to the constant patronage of our beloved Kings and Royal Families that our unique arts & crafts have survived through all these years, retaining all their exquisite qualities, intricacies and stylistic uniqueness. Most importantly, it was the establishment of Zorig Chusum Training Institutions in Thimphu in the West and Trashiyangtse in the East, under the auspices of the Fourth Druk Gyalpo His Majesty the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in the late 1990s, which served as a major milestone in that direction. Graduates from these two institutes gradually spread over the entire nation and the artistic influences thus generated and set into motion has enriched and rendered the quality of our Thangkas highly commendable to say the least.

The Agency for Promotion of Indigenous Crafts APIC, was established by the Government in 2011 to commemorate the Royal Wedding. Amongst the many other important mandates that APIC is entrusted with fulfilling, the compilation of a products catalog remains devoted to as an integral aspect and is duly accorded the priority it merits. Up till now we have come out with catalogues for Cane & Bamboo products; Wood Carving, Turning & Lacquering, Metal Crafts and Textile Weaving. This is our fifth venture and we are pleased to present the “Druk Gi Lhazo”- “The Art of Bhutanese Painting.” We look forward to our modest efforts being instrumental in providing at least some basic information with regard to our age-old and time-honored culture and contributing to keeping them alive for future generations. The room for improvement is kept quite large and it is our earnest hope that whatever informative lacunae that remain to be filled can be accordingly attended to in due course of time.

Tashi Delek!

**Lam Kezang Chhoephel**







A *Debri* painting in progress





An exquisite example of *Shingtson* in the temple hall a Dzong





## INTRODUCTION

Bhutan is a landlocked and mountainous Himalayan kingdom situated in the Southern slopes of the Eastern Himalayas. Due to our long isolation and the strong influence of Vajrayana Buddhism, the country has been able to preserve its rich cultural heritage, which includes the traditional skills, customs, values and a way of life that binds the society and instills a sense of peace, tranquility and unique identity, as a source of inspiration to our unique development philosophy of “Gross National Happiness.”

Bhutan’s art and crafts display unique characteristics harmonized by the strong influences of Vajrayana Buddhism which played a pivotal role in its formation. Over time, it evolved into a series of traditional arts and crafts skills which are, besides being ancient and colourful, very sophisticated in many ways.

Mainstream art in Bhutan has taken a distinct character, the tone of which is set by the highly respected disciplines of “*Zorig Chusum*” or the “Thirteen Traditional Arts and Crafts” of Bhutan. These unique skill sets have been taught and passed down to each new generation of Bhutanese artisans since time immemorial. Skills in these highly developed traditional arts were passed down from mother to daughter and father to son, depending upon the art form and its gender association.

The 13 traditional arts include:

Wood-works(*Shingzo*), Stone-works (*Dhozo*), Carving-works (*Parzo*), Painting-works (*Lhazo*), Clay-works (*Zhinzo*), Casting-works (*Lugzo*), Woodturning-works (*Shagzo*), Black smithy-works (*Garzo*), Silver/gold smithy-works (*Troko*), Bamboo-works (*Tsarzo*), Paper-works (*Dhezo*), Thread-works (*Tsemzo*) and Weaving-works (*Thazo*).

The 13 arts enjoy immense patronage and support from all sections of the society, from the Royal Family to the

common folk. The government's development policy is also to promote and preserve its rich cultural heritage for all future generations.

A renaissance of these arts and crafts appears to have occurred in the mid-fifties during the reign of our Third Druk Gyalpo, His Majesty the King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, who provided great impetus to the cultural life of the country. He was very keen on the traditional arts of Bhutan being preserved and upgraded to keep pace with changing times. To that end, he established the first National Institute of Traditional Arts by bringing together a faculty of learned art masters from all over the country. Later the artisans thus trained were employed by the Government to meet the needs of the Bhutanese officialdom as well as of the society at large. As a consequence, living communities of these artisans became bigger, catering to the ever growing demands for its products and services.

Although the history of arts and crafts in Bhutan is as old as history itself, the sector is partially perishing due to supposedly low economic benefits and a general preference for white collar jobs over those that require manual dexterity. Of the thirteen, only about seven to nine are being practiced today. The rest of the skills are either practiced on a small scale for personal needs or almost becoming obsolete.

The Agency for Promotion of Indigenous Crafts (APIC) has considered the need for cataloguing the major forms of Bhutanese paintings for documentation and product diversification as a priority measure amidst changing market conditions. But like in all forms of arts and crafts, enhancing product range also poses threats of the rich indigenous knowledge, practices and eventually the cultural heritage itself being diminished. So it is of paramount importance to initiate activities to identify Bhutanese paintings/products and document related information such as categories, forms, designs and utility that are still an integral part of our community today.

APIC has already developed catalogues for cane and bamboo works, woodworks, metal works and textiles. This cataloguing of Bhutanese paintings is anticipated to take our efforts yet another step closer to the promotion, preservation and diversification of indigenous arts and crafts.







*Kachen* painting with richly carved capital





A painting of the six syllable mantra *Om Mani Padmi Hung* at a pilgrimage site (Nye)





## BRIEF HISTORY

### *Evolution and significance of Bhutanese painting*

The history of Bhutanese art is shrouded in partial obscurity as a result of the lack of any authentic records of the arts and accounts of its evolution. Like other art forms in the Himalayan region, Bhutan being a country of Vajrayana Buddhism, the development of art forms and themes have evolved in line with the spread and influence of Buddhism from Tibet. Bhutanese art is strongly believed to have been influenced by art forms and styles reminiscent of the period right from the time of the visit of Guru Rinpoche in the 7th Century, and the revival of Buddhism in Tibet during the 11th Century, which got simultaneously reflected in the visits and activities of many eminent religious Teachers and *Tertoens* in Bhutan. Starting with Gyelwa Lhanangpa (1164-1224), Phajo Drugom Shigpo (1184-1251), Longchen Rabjampa (1308-1363), Barawa (1320-1391), Dorji Lingpa (1346-1405), Thangtong Gyelpo (1385-1464), Drukpa Kunley (1455-1529) and Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1651), it is almost certain that they brought with them a stream of artistic influences because there is always a logical correlation between the Dharma activities of these great religious figures and the Buddhist art forms and iconography of that time.

However, due to the lack of surviving evidence of arts and paintings dating back to the aforementioned religious renaissance, there are serious difficulties in tracing the history and evolution of Bhutanese paintings. This is further exacerbated by the need for the artisans to strictly adhere to the requirements of established iconographical definitions and use similar tools and mediums. Nevertheless, Bhutanese art is still believed to have developed its own unique art forms and styles over time. Just to put things into perspective - a Bhutanese master craftsman or a painter can, authenticate and determine if a particular craft or painting is a genuine Bhutanese work



or not just by a mere glance.

Bhutanese art can be distinguished by three general but distinct characteristics. They are anonymous, highly religious and as a result they have no aesthetic function by itself. Bhutanese paintings and/or any other forms of arts are not viewed as a works of art but as a religious work, the main motivation being piety for gaining merit based on the Buddhist philosophy of altruistic compassion and the wellbeing of all sentient beings. So, unlike mainstream Western art, Bhutanese art is not created in the context of art for art's sake but rather have a strong didactic intent revolving around religious themes and spiritual practice. This is perhaps one of the main reasons why aspects of artistic creativity, stylistic distinctions and identity of artists are not important in Bhutanese art and paintings.

In other words, Bhutanese art and paintings are essentially religious actions or what is called “skillful means” to convey the profound teachings of the Buddha, serving as idealized objects or icons of visualization, meditation, veneration and practice. Therefore, the deities, symbols and motifs represent various ideals, qualities and truths projected externally in order to internalize and integrate the profound meanings and values more effectively within an individual's mind.







The beauty and elegance of gold embellishments in *Thangka* painting



# MAIN CATEGORIES OF BHUTANESE PAINTING

Bhutanese painting is known as “*Lhazo*” meaning “crafting of Godly Beings.” This traditional art form ranges from decorative paintings to highly sophisticated mural and scroll paintings. These type of paintings are usually commissioned either by the Government or by private individuals for various purposes. It could be for demonstrating one’s devotion to the Dharma practice, for general health and wellbeing, invoking good luck, diminishing worldly troubles or to help the dying and the deceased.

Bhutanese painting can be classified under the following main categories:

## DIDACTIC

This category of art is mainly used for instruction. Didactic art represents symbolic action of the teachings by the Buddha and Buddhist philosophies. The best example of this category is the “*Sidpa Khorlo*” or “the Wheel of Existence.” It explains the basic tenets of rebirth and illustrates the path to salvation. The spokes focus on the Sensual Realms, namely Gods, Demi-gods, Humans, Animals, Hungry-ghosts and Hell. The outer realm depicts the cause and consequences of rebirth into any one of the Six Realms. The wheel held by a monster symbolizes the transitory or impermanent nature of all earthly existence. Finally the figures outside the wheel are those that have already freed themselves from suffering in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.







*Sidpa Khorlo* - Wheel of Life - an example of didactic Outer-*Debri* painting





Mural painting depicting a scene from the 12 Virtuous Deeds of the Buddha





## **NARRATIVE**

In this category, the subject is shown within a definite temporal framework (more or less specific situation or event). The narrative painting provides straight forward simple illustrations of Buddhist parables and stories of specific historical times. They narrate story episodes from the lives of enlightened beings. The painting representing the Twelve Virtuous Deeds of the Buddha is a good example of this category.

## MEDITATIVE

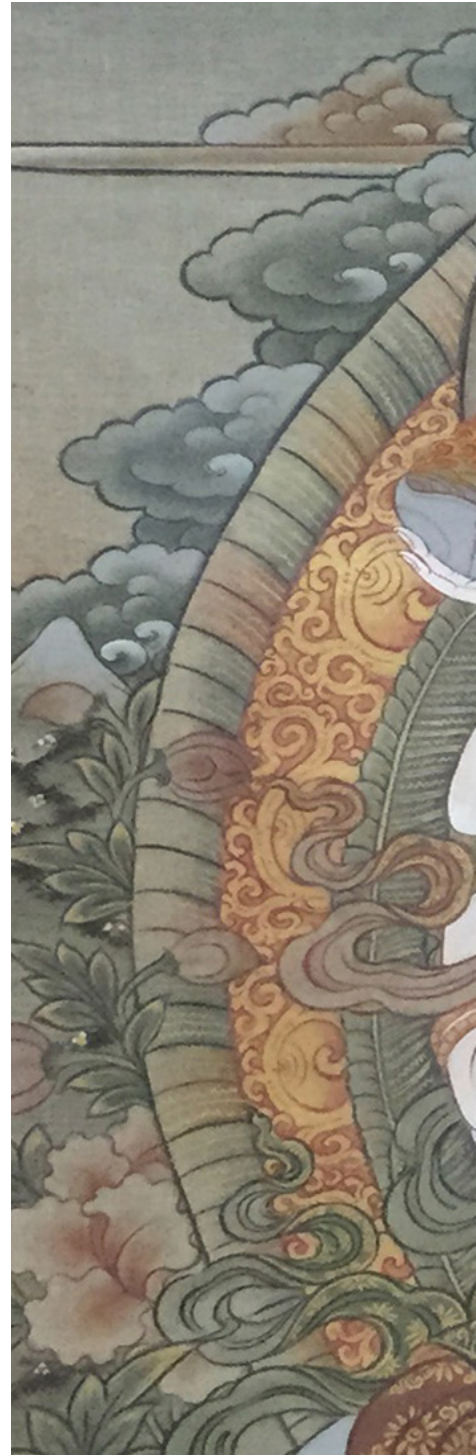
Meditative paintings are used as visual aids for meditation and during recitation of the confession sutras. The best examples would be the mirror image of paintings of the Root Gurus, Deities "*Yidam*," *Dorji Sempa*, *Nam-Gyem* amongst others. Here, creative art is applied for meditative purposes, allowing for the creation of space between the often negative, anxious thoughts and emotions, thereby enabling people to get connected with the true selves as opposed to the fleeting or false sense of identity that they often get entangled in.

## DECORATIVE

Decorative Bhutanese paintings are of both religious and secular types. It became popular and received greater appreciation after the proliferation of the *Zorig Chusum*, with its multitude of the Thirteen Arts and Crafts. Almost about ten or more of them are said to require the refinement of decorative arts. These are exemplified by the skillful demonstration of the artistic abundance that comes with the various religious signs, symbols and motifs that are strongly connected to the paintings so as to generate auspiciousness and good luck, and diminish and/or destroy negative energies.

## CONTEMPORARY

Contemporary painting is an emerging modern art form. With a free rein to the subjects and expressions of contemporary art painting, artists of the time use a whole range of approaches, subjects, media, tools and materials to execute the paintings, by integrating traditional forms and styles with that of the modern art styles and techniques.







Meditative Painting representing Vajrasattva (*Dorji Sempa*)





Debri-Mural painting on the walls inside a Dzong





## MAIN TYPES/FORMS OF BHUTANESE PAINTING

Bhutanese painting can be identified into four major types/forms - “*Debri*” or mural wall painting, “*Kuthang*” or “*Thangka*” painting, “*Shingtson*” or house/artifact painting and contemporary modern painting. These main types/forms of Bhutanese paintings are directly connected to the three main categories of paintings as explained before.

### ‘*DEBRI*’- MURAL PAINTING

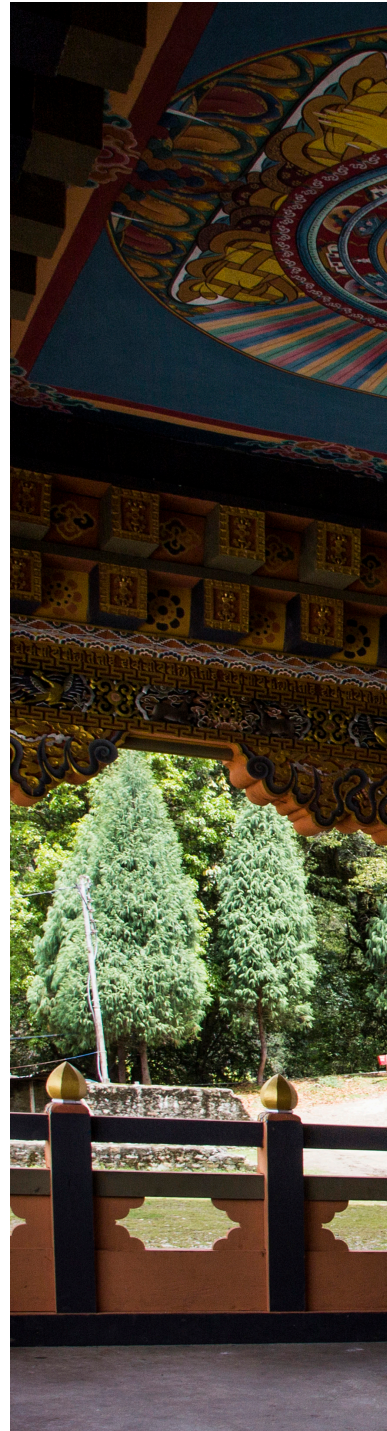
“*Debri*” or mural painting on the walls of Temples and Monasteries is one of the most resplendent of Bhutanese art forms. The mural paintings transcend from mere decorative to profound didactic roles and concerns depiction of innumerable themes such as the Buddha and his life, the Twelve Great Deeds of the Buddha, the Eight Manifestations of Guru Rinpoche, Guardian Kings of the Four Cardinal Directions, The Wheel of Life (Six Relams of Existence), Cosmology *Mandalas*, “*Thuenpa Puenzhi*” (The Four Friends), “*Rigsum Gonpo*” Deities, “*Zhabdrung Phuensum Tshogpa*” and “*Nga Chudruma*” amongst others.

While the “*Debri*” technique from olden days is said to involve direct painting work on mud or clay plastered walls, the more recent technique involves the use of prepared cloth and canvas glued to smoothened walls to execute the mural paintings. Some sources of information revealed that the adoption of this technique could perhaps be responsible for the loss of many ancient mural paintings which could otherwise been made use of to trace the evolution and techniques of the mural paintings from the distant past. Three major types of “*Debri*” or wall paintings have been identified, as explained briefly in the following sections:



## OUTER *DEBRI*

The outer reaches of the Dzongs and Monasteries, by virtue of their architectural style and structure, have open spaces, entrance-ways (*Gorikha*) and courtyards. The walls alongside these spaces display some of such most splendid examples of “*Debri*” or Wall Mural paintings. The significance of such painting is said to be protective - keeping the Dzongs and Monasteries safe from evil and negativities. The Wall Paintings range from the “Guardian Kings of the Four Directions,” the “Four Harmonious Friends” (*Thuenpai Puenzhi*), Cosmology Mandalas, “*Tshering Drukor*” (Six Elements of Long Life), “*Sokpa*”, “*Naktso Reldri*,” and “*Sidpa Khorlo*” (Wheel of Existence), to the Four Power Animals.







Outer *Debra* : Wall painting depicting the Guardian Kings of the Four Directions and *Mandala* on the ceiling





Outer Deбри : *Thuenpai Phuenzhi* (The Four Harmonious Friends)



Outer Debri : Tshering Drukhor ( Six Elements of Long Life)





A beautiful painted facade of a Dzong entrance









Inner *Debri* : Guru Rinpoche and his manifestations





### **INNER *DEBRI***

The walls of the inner spaces such as the main halls of the Temple storey are also adorned with beautiful wall paintings of the Pantheon of Gods and Goddesses such as the *Guru Tsengye* (Eight Manifestations of Guru Rinpoche), the Eighty Four *Mahasiddhas*, the Sixteen *Arhats*, the Divinities of *Kagyu Lhastshog* and many more.





Inner *Debri* : Je Khenpos





Inner *Debri* : Zhabdrung Rinpoche and Kagyu Lams



## INNERMOST *DEBRI*

The innermost sanctum of the Dzongs and Monasteries comprise of the chambers of the Protective Deities. The hallways and walls are covered with wrathful wall paintings of the *Choesung*, *Kasung*, *Phurbai Lhatshog*, *Gyeom Chamdrel Sum*, *Lhamoi Retinue* and the like, which are normally painted on matt-black background with contrasting colorful lines.







Innermost *Debri* : Wrathful wall painting (*Phurba*)









An example of an Innermost *Debri* painting



## MANDALA PAINTING

*Mandala* Painting is one of the most fascinating and awe-inspiring of the Bhutanese paintings. The *Mandala* is fundamentally something secret and extremely complex but commonly thought of as the Palace of the Gods. It usually comprises of highly colorful paintings of magical circles representing fire, Vajra shield, river, ocean of blood, lotus etc. with round geometric or symbolic diagrams, or typically circles that surround a square with a central symbol or an icon. They are explained as symbols of the cosmic elements, as models for certain visualizations and aids to self-discovery and meditation on the transcendental. As a rule, “*Mandala*” or “*Kyilkhor*” is a strongly symmetrical diagram concentrated around a center and built up on concentric circles and squares possessing the same center. Buddhists view the “*Mandala*” as an allegory and symbol of the totality of man and the cosmos. Practitioners use it to meditate to lead towards enlightenment.







Octagonal lotus petal *Mandala* with a seed syllable in the center



## **“KUTHANG”- “THANGKA” or SCROLL PAINTING**

“*Kuthang*” or “*Thangka*”- Scroll painting is one of the most prominent forms of Bhutanese Religious Display Art, normally done on canvas or cloth. This art form bears the reputation of being the most skillful in terms of the preparation or production, coupled with a much greater preference by users, probably owing to the relative convenience of display, storage and transportation. “*Thangkas*” are of three main types - the first type being Didactic, or the type used for instructions and teachings by religious personalities. The second is Narrative, which are used for illustration of religious histories and stories associated with the Buddha and other enlightened beings. The third type is Meditative, used as visual aids to visualize and focus on icons and ideals represented by the image of the “*Thangka*.”

“*Kuthang*” or “*Thangka*” paintings are usually commissioned either by Monasteries or monks or even the common laity. Once the painting of a preferred icon is completed, it is stitched by positioning it appropriately with surrounding silk brocades which convey specific meanings. For example, the top portion of the silk border represents the sky, bottom part the earth and the sides represent the teachings of the Buddha. The surrounding red and yellow lines symbolize sacred radiance. The small rectangular inset of silk at the bottom of the painting symbolizes the doorway or entrance to the world of the ideals that the icon represents.





*Kuthang* of Shakyamuni Buddha with the Sixteen *Arhats*





*Kuthang of Vajrasattra*





*Kuthang* of Shakyamuni Buddha





*Kuthang of Nam Gyelma*



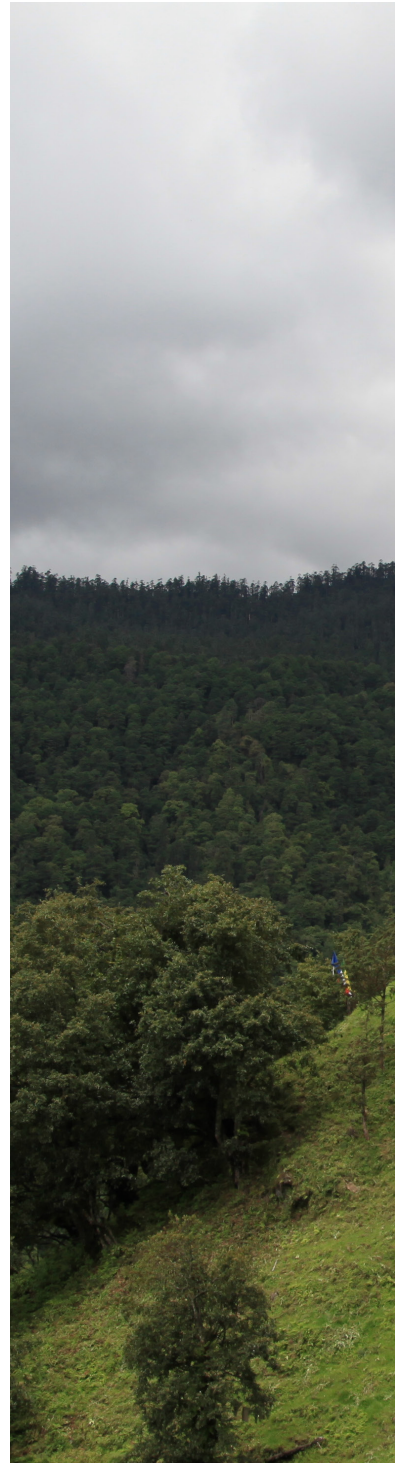


*Kuthang of Guru Ugyen Norlha*



## **“SHINGTSON”- HOUSES AND DECORATIVE PAINTING**

“*Shingtson*,” literally translated as “Wood-paint” is a distinctive category of Bhutanese painting. This particular category encompasses paintings of all forms painted on timber or wooden objects, materials and parts, irrespective of whether they are parts of a building structure such as Dzongs, Monasteries, Palaces, Lordly Mansions or houses of common people. “*Shingtson*” also pertains to religious decorative objects such as Statues, “*Thri*,” “*Choesams*,” “*Choedroms*,” and Masks as well as other non religious items like furniture and “*Chhagam*.” Paintings on the doors, windows, “*Kachens*,” cornices and walls are some of the examples that fall under this category. However it needs to be noted that the wall paintings in the Dzongs and Monasteries are quite different from those of the Palaces, Lordly Mansions and houses of common people.







Example of *Shingtson* on a Monastery





Front facade of the entrance to the *Kuenra* in Trashichhodzong



*Shingston* beautifully painted windows and cornices





## DZONGS/MONASTERIES/PALACES PAINTING

The most prominent of the “*Shingtsen*” paintings in the Dzongs, Monasteries, Palaces and Lordly Mansions are those that are done on the doors, “*Kachens*,” cornices and windows. While the doors are much sober in terms of the design and painting, normally painted with the ‘*Khorlo*’ (Wheel of Dharma) in the center, surrounded by rising dragons and en-chained motifs of jewels and “*Dorjes*” (Vajras) on the two sides; the “*Kachens*,” on the other hand are adorned with more immaculately carved or painted dragons, juxtaposed with an array of motifs like “*Gakhil*,” Makara head, Dragons, “*Jachung*” (Garudas), Snow Lions, Cloud Swirls, Trigrammes etc. on the capital.

Similarly, the cornices and windows depicts yet another artistic resplendence, interspersed with an amalgam of so many repetitive motifs, designs and geometric shapes of “*Lhentsa*” Writings, Flowers, Circles, Animals, Auspicious Symbols and Precious Jewels.

- Doors and *Kachens*
- Cornices and Windows







An example of a well painted main entrance to the prayer hall in a Dzong





Exquisitely carved and painted *Kachen*



## ORDINARY HOUSE PAINTING

While the overall architectural concept of ordinary houses is quite similar and harmonized, there are some differences in terms of style and artistic presentation. One aspect that depicts the difference is the painting. Overall, both the windows and cornices are much simpler and sober, adorned with repetitive designs of Flowers, Triagrammes, Auspicious Symbols and Precious Jewels. Unlike the Dzongs, Monasteries and Palaces, “*Lhentsa*” writings are not seen in the ordinary houses. The doors also carry only the “*Khorlo*” or the Auspicious Wheel Symbol, juxtaposed with symmetrical designs of Flowers and Precious Jewels.

However, there is an exception - the walls of ordinary houses are also adorned with paintings of the Eight Lucky Signs, Four Power Animals and the famous inseparable Four Animal Friends (*Thuenpa Puenzhi*). Some of the more advanced and esoteric signs and symbols found in the Dzongs, Temples and Monasteries are not found in ordinary houses.







A typical Bhutanese house with painted doors and windows





Painted windows, walls and cornices of an ordinary Bhutanese house

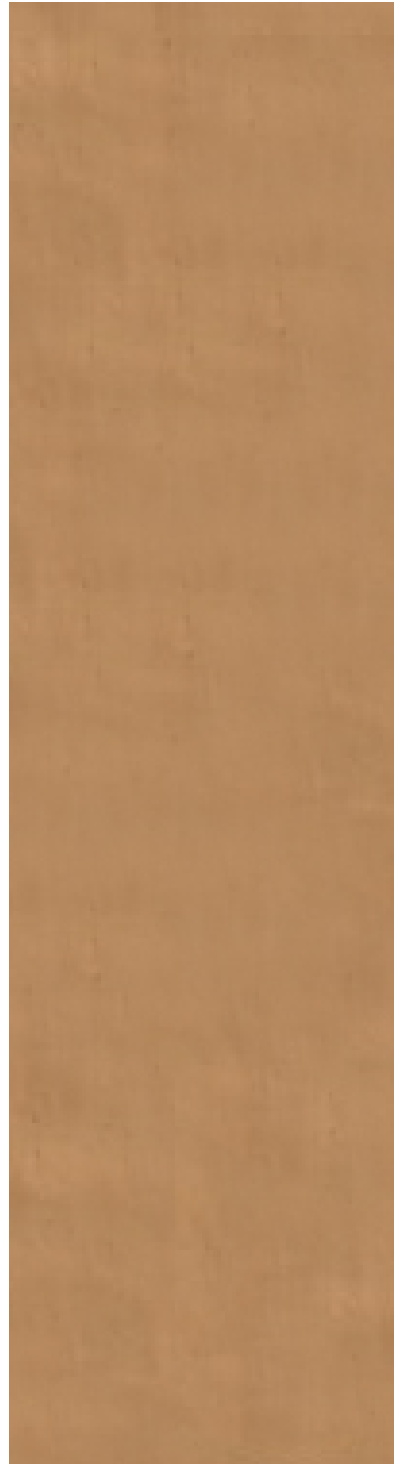






## PHALLUSES PAINTING

The symbolic significance of phallus painting is ingrained in Bhutanese culture. It can be categorized under “*Shingtson*,” and is more conspicuous in the ordinary houses of rural Bhutan. Traditionally the symbolic paintings of erect phalluses is said to drive away evil spirits and subdue negativities. Being a direct influence of the 16th Century Buddhist Saint Lam Drukpa Kunley who is said to have used his phallus to subdue malevolent spirits to restore peace and tranquility in the communities, the tradition of phallus painting is noticeably more common in rural communities than in the urban areas.







A phallus painting guards the entrance of a Bhutanese house



## DECORATIVE PAINTING (RELIGIOUS)

Decorative paintings can be sub-divided into two categories: Religious and Non-religious. Some of the religious artifacts that call for the execution of decorative painting are as listed below. However, irrespective of whether it is for the religious or non religious artifacts, the use of colour, media, designs and motifs for the respective articles are usually governed by prescribed symbolism and their painting requirements.







Decorative painting done on statues





Decorative painting done on *Chhoeshom* (altar)



Decorative painting done on *Toh-Tri*





Painted *Thri*



Painted *Chhoedrom*





Painted Masks





An assortment of painted masks





Samples of various painted 'Tsalee'





Painted Drums(*Nga*) and Drumstands(*Ngazins*)





Decorative wall painting of flowers and “*Jachung*” (Phoenix)









Decorative painting of non- religious items





Decorative painting of non - religious items



## CONTEMPORARY ART PAINTING

Contemporary paintings as a category or form in its strict sense is a relatively new phenomenon in Bhutan. While any references to Bhutanese art is mainly directed towards the traditional arts and crafts of *Zorig Chusum*, references to an emerging modern art form as being contemporary has come into being since about a decade ago. With a free rein to the subjects and expressions of contemporary art painting, artists of the time use a whole range of approaches, subjects, media, tools and materials to execute the paintings, by integrating the traditional forms and styles with that of the modern art styles and techniques. Some of the exemplary contemporary painting art works go beyond the traditional and are done on canvas, board, paper, glass, fabric, papermache, acylic sheet, wood etc, just to name a few.



Artist : Lop Tshewang Tenzin



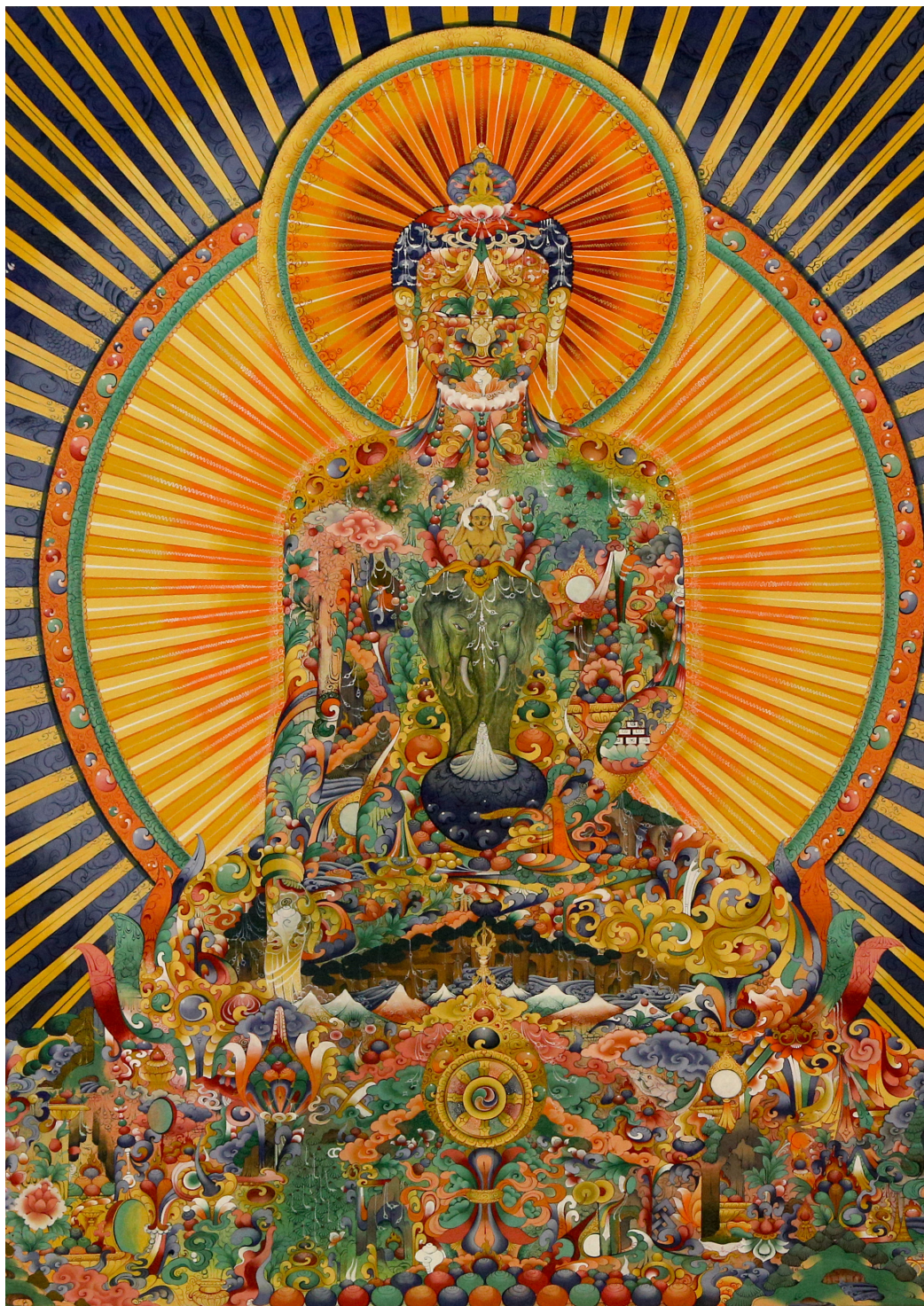
Aritst : Gyempo Wangchuk





Contemporary painting - blending of traditional with modern style





A new perspective of Shakyamuni Buddha

Aritst : Gyempo Wangchuk





Aritst : Azha kama

Presence





Aritst : Azha Kama

Impressionist Landscape





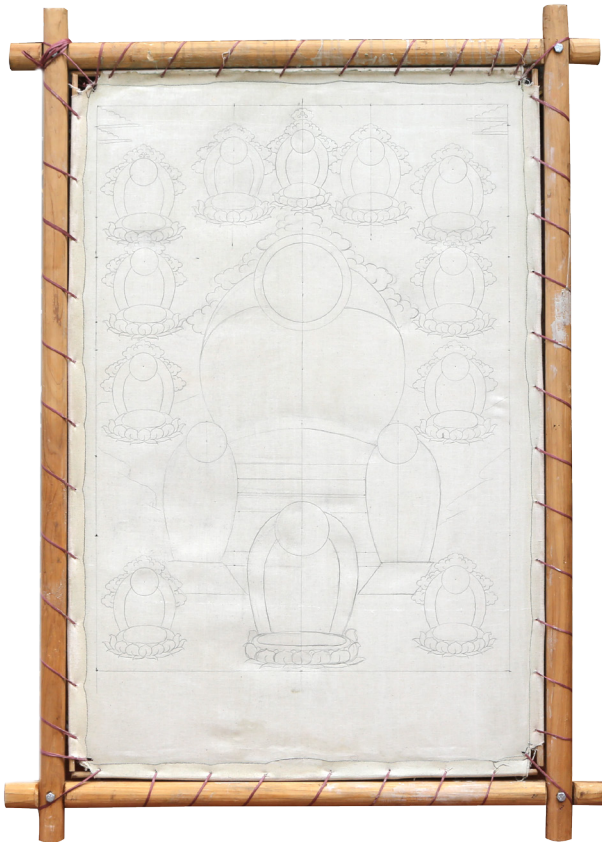
Aritst : Jampel Cheda

Mindscape



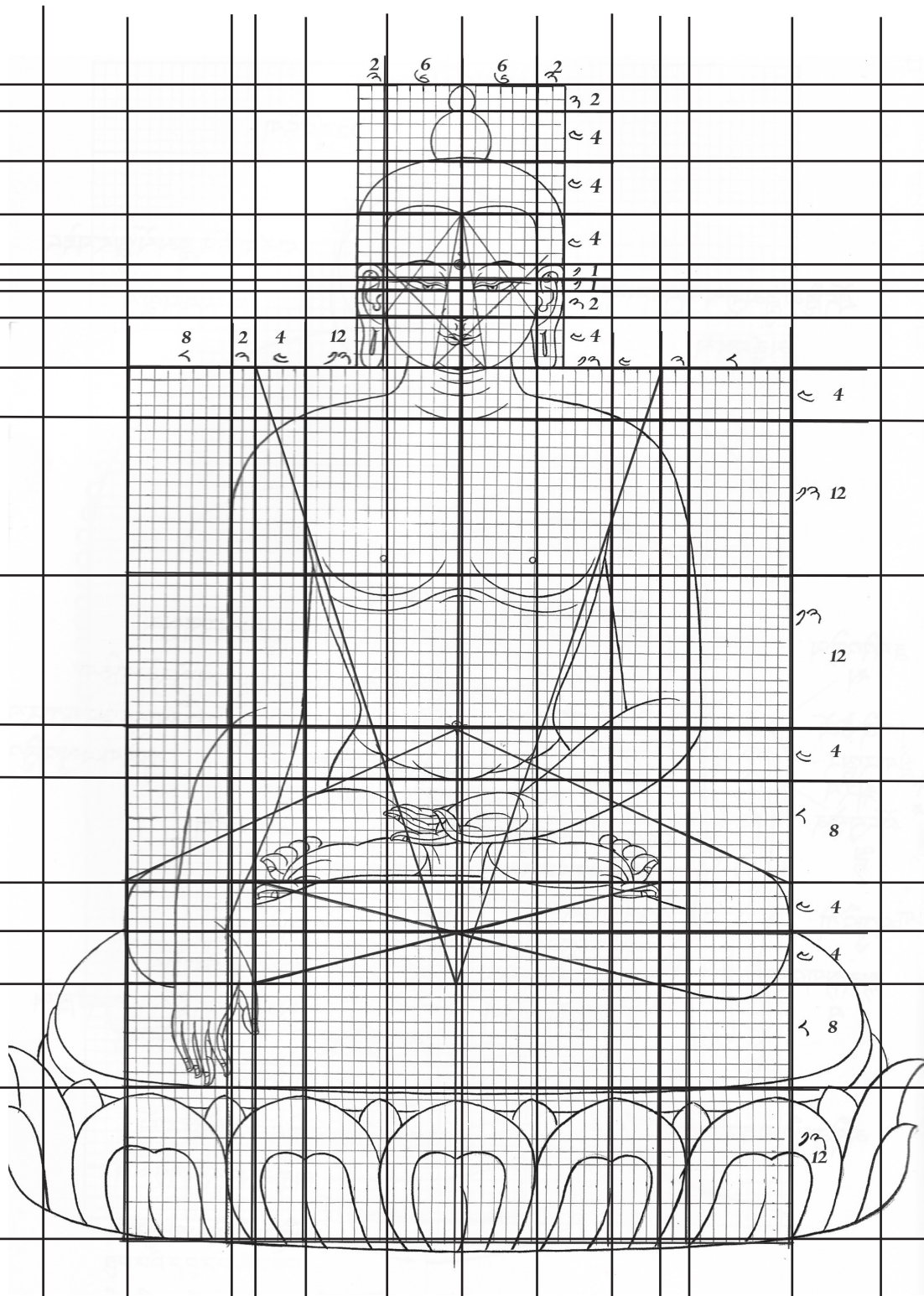
## GENERAL METHODS AND PROCESS OF PAINTING

In most traditional Bhutanese paintings, be it for “*Debri*”-mural painting, “*Kuthang*” or “*Shingtson*,” the methods and process follow a more or less uniform standard technique. While the need for undertaking certain purification rituals based on astrological divinations was followed in the past for ensuring auspiciousness, particularly of the religious paintings, these traditional requirements have more or less become a thing of the past. The following steps elaborate the important general methods and process followed, irrespective of whether the subject is religious or secular.



A fully prepared canvas, ready for painting





Iconometric details of Shakyamuni Buddha



## SURFACE PREPARATION

The preparation of the surface on which the painting is to be executed is considered as one of the most important step and requires much attention to consistency and detail. It is like preparing the foundation for building a house. Because one of the leading factor for producing a quality painting work depends upon how well the surfaces are prepared, much care is exercised in the completion of this stage. Besides determining the capacity of the surface to absorb various colors/pigments, the quality of the surface is also a factor for its longevity. Paintings done on well prepared surfaces are said to survive the vagaries of time and climate conditions for several centuries. Depending upon the type of surface prepared, artists make use of smooth round stones, conch, sandpaper and even knives to polish them.



Polishing Tools







A Canvas being mounted and polished for *Kuthang* painting



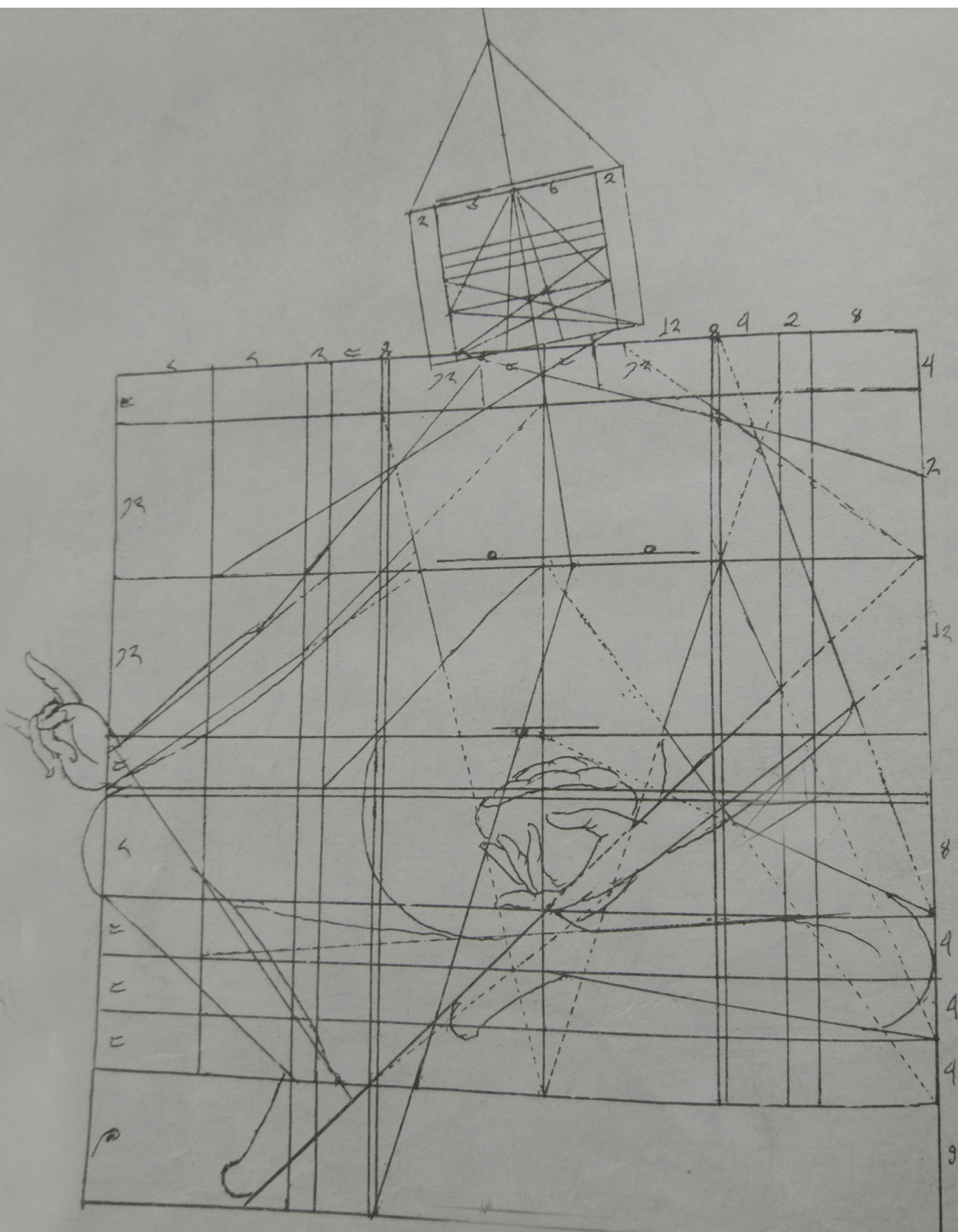
## PRELIMINARY SKETCHING AND TRANSFER OF IMAGES TO THE SURFACE

To undertake the painting as required by the practice of established iconography, preliminary sketches of various tutelary deities, narratives and motifs are prepared in accordance with the iconometry. Generally, this process involves following standardized compositional structures with geometric layout and codes of the designs with the help of snapped lines and/or rulers. Compasses are employed mainly for the construction of *Mandalas*. For repetitive motifs and designs, perforated stencils are used to transfer the lines of images by dusting gently with charcoal or any other colour such as ochre powder to achieve the accuracy in terms of the proportions and hierarchical stratifications of the images. The composition, shapes, proportion and colors of Bhutanese religious paintings are never determined by individual choice of the artists but are strictly governed by these sacred iconometric rules instead.



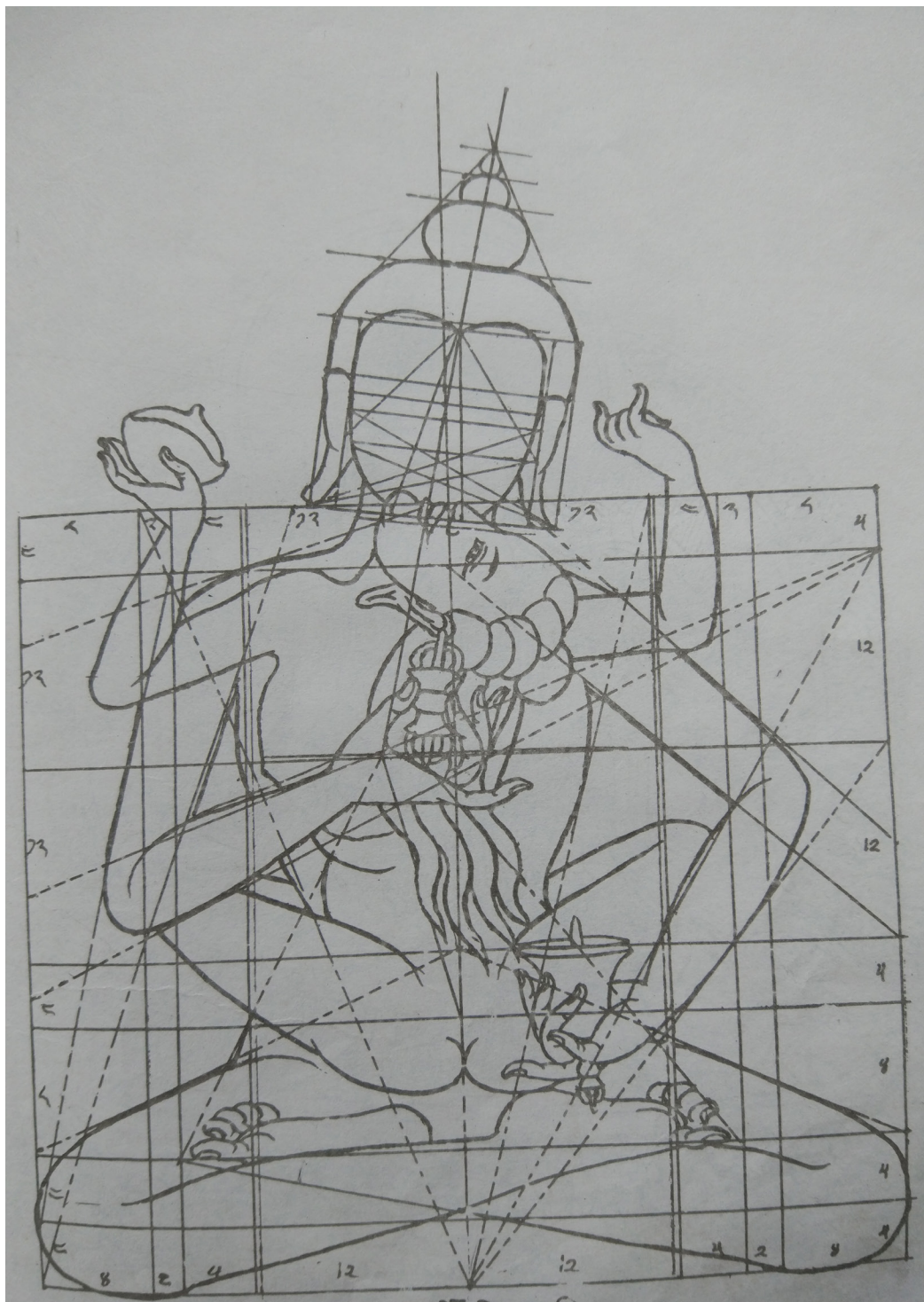
*Theek* - Stringmarker





Iconometric details of Guru Rinpoche





Iconometric details of Vajrasattra Yab-Yum





Sketch of a wrathful deity ready to be transferred on to the painting surface





Stone pigment colours





## PAINT APPLICATION

Colour is more than a mere visual perception in Buddhism. The painters prepare the required colours that are extracted from minerals and organic dyes using different methods. Tantric Buddhist texts are rife with explanations of bewildering shades of symbolisms related to the use of colours and their justification. In the same way, painting follows a visualization scheme indicative of the icons and the sketch through a form of abbreviated notation system representing the respective elements and names of the colours.







Stone pigment colour (*Dotsoen*)



Earth colours (*Satsoen*)





Commercial colour (Zangtsoen)



Acrylic colours



## SHADING AND GRADING

Once the initial so called flat colours as dictated by the rules of the icons, images and motifs are applied in accordance with the prescribed notations and/or the names of the colours, painters apply diluted dye colours to produce the required shades. This process makes shading an effective way of adding effects of volume and dimension to the images. This method also helps to produce a gradual transition of colour tones to produce various chromatic values. For example, treating blue and green with indigo produces a range of excellent effects of progression. “Wet shading,” a method of gradual blending of colours to different areas in line with the perspectives is another method of colour grading. Similarly, “dry shading,” involves at least four kinds of granular shading which is done when the initial flat colour coats become dry.



Shading in progress







*Loen-dhang (Wet Shading)*



*Kam-dhang (Dry shading)*



*Sum-dhang (3-colour shading)*

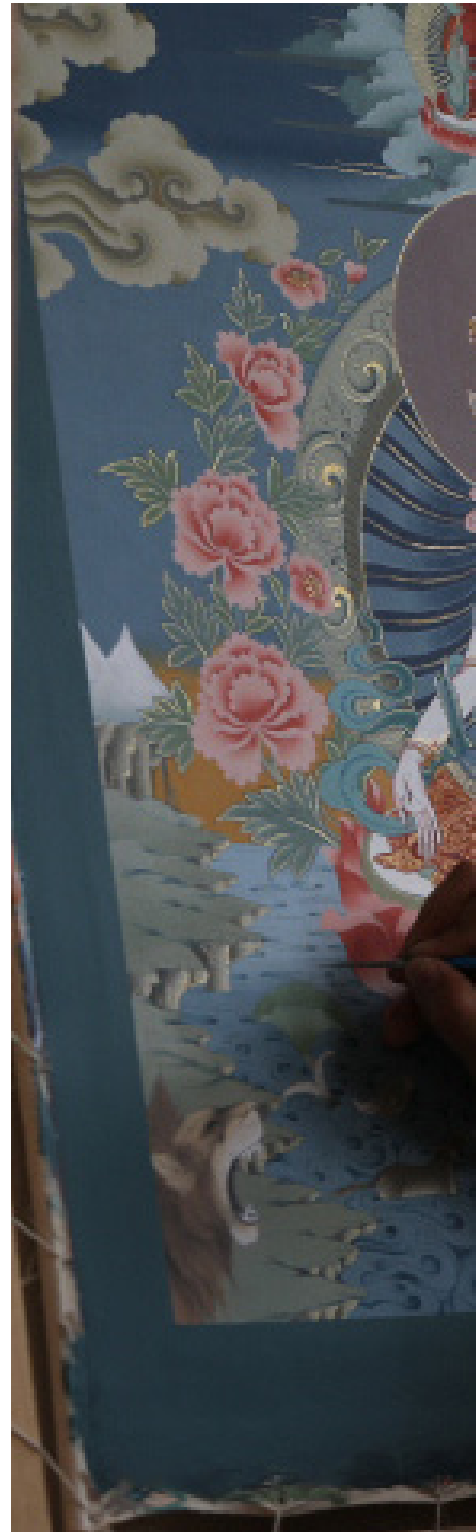


## OUTLINING

This method is utilized by painters when artworks like “*Kuthang*,” “*Thangka*” or “*Debri*” are painted. It is the process of highlighting the images or objects from the background or other sections or forms of images and objects by using a related outlining colour. For example, white outline is used to produce the effects of water and gold is used to produce the golden hues and distinctiveness of the golden brocades, ornaments and jewelries.



An artist outlining parts of a *Kuthang* painting











A Lama performing consecration of religious paintings





## CONSECRATION OF PAINTINGS

Once the various types and forms of painting are completed, a final step of performing the consecration is considered as an important necessity. The purpose of consecration is said to be three - fold. Firstly, it serves to remove possible negative influences or energies that may cling to the finished artifacts or paintings. Secondly, it is a purification to remove defilements that may otherwise hinder the user from receiving the full range of blessings and positive energies. Finally, the consecration is meant to invoke the enlightened beings and wisdom deities to inseparably unite their minds with the finished artifacts and paintings. Therefore, this process is not only important from the point of view of merely 'completing' the undertaking but also in order to derive the full benefits of removing obscurations and negative Karma, thereby revealing the true Buddha nature.

Upon completion of the consecration process, Bhutanese paintings, particularly the ones that are religious in nature cease to be mere work of art. Rather the icons and deities depicted in the paintings become ultimate symbols of the perfected state of Buddhahood, serving as idealized manifestations of the state of awakened energy.





## CONCLUSION

To this day, Bhutanese paintings as one of the Thirteen Traditional Arts and Crafts (*Zorig Chusum*) have not just survived but even flourished. Despite lack of authentic records of its evolution and survival, historians and painting experts believe that Bhutanese painting has, over time, evolved and developed its own elegant forms and styles. The policy of the Royal Government in promoting and preserving our rich cultural heritage can be attributed to this artistic renaissance which came into being right from the time of our Third Druk Gyalpo and continued to the reign of our present Monarch His Majesty the King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. It also flourished mainly because Bhutanese paintings carry a deeply religious relevance to the people. For instance, there is not a single social and cultural activity that is devoid of the use of religious arts and paintings. As such, today, Bhutanese paintings are considered not only as religious, social and cultural assets but also as a distinct avenue for modern entrepreneurship that provides decent economic returns and employability for our younger generation. Moreover the establishment of the National Museum in 1968 and the National Institute of *Zorig Chusum* (NIZC) in Thimphu in 1971 and Trashi Yangtse in 1997 has helped in no





small measure to further the artistic progress of this sacred art.

In this regard, two distinct conclusions and recommendations can be made to advance and sustain the value of the eloquence of our artistic heritage:

- There is a need to carry out more in-depth studies on the history, evolution and significance of Bhutanese paintings. This has to be done by exploring the possibilities of finding datable works of arts and paintings right from the time of the arrival of Guru Rinpoche to Bhutan and the resurgence of Buddhism in Tibet and Bhutan from 11th Century. This is perhaps the only way to ascertain the iconographic and stylistic characteristics that distinguishes our paintings as being truly Bhutanese.
- There is a need to find the right balance between the strong forces of entrepreneurial commercialization and the farsighted policy of preservation and promotion of the traditional arts and crafts. In this, the traditional forms of artistic learning such as those that are imparted by the NIZCs should be further promoted and the temptation to proliferate diversification of newer art products in the wake of the market expansion should be controlled.



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A number of secondary sources have been referred for gathering the available information on Bhutanese Arts and Painting. Although no prior permission has been sought or obtained to use these publications, we would like to hereby acknowledge and put on record the following references and their Authors/ Publishers.

1.The Dragon's Gift- The Sacred Arts of Bhutan, Serindia Publications and Honolulu Academy of Arts, First Edition 2008.

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Research and write up: Nim Karma and Azha Kama

Design and Layout: Azha Kama, Barun G, Tandin Chofel

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Edited by: Tashi Pelyang Lhendup