



What Is Bhutanese about Paintings from Bhutan?

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SO FAR, BHUTANESE ART HAS ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY BEEN DEFINED ON THE BASIS of iconography and place of origin, while stylistic distinctions remain vague. In this contribution we attempt to define a Bhutanese painting style on the basis of a select group of Bhutanese scroll paintings (thangkas) dating from the late 18th to mid-19th century, in the collection of the Rubin Museum of Art, New York. Taking a mid-19th century thangka of Vajravarahi of unusual high quality as a point of departure, we describe and analyse a group of paintings, with predominantly wrathful subjects, in view of their stylistic commonalities. On the basis of this discussion, we then attempt to define what may be distinctly Bhutanese about the selected paintings in stylistic terms.

In the exceptionally fine painting depicting the goddess Vajravarahi (figure 1), the figures are emphasized and rendered with amazing care and fondness for detail. The jewellery, the naturalistic sow's head on the side of the head of the main figure, and the curved knife held against the mandorla rim are of extraordinary detail. The eight dynamic goddesses are framed by contrasting pointed mandorlas, the broad flaming edges of which are either naturalistically rendered or ornamental. The goddesses and the three teachers at the top of the painting are placed against a dark landscape that conveys the sense of an artificial stage.

On the thangka's reverse (figure 2), the outlines of the deities painted on the front are visible. This side not only reveals the exact placement of the purification mantra (*om ah hum*) at the back of each deity, but also features a range of other elements, including a precisely drawn stupa covering the area of the main deity and representing her mind form. Inside the stupa her mantra is written in Lantsa characters, representing the speech form of the goddess. Besides the purification mantra, the three teachers at the top have an additional mantra in two lines in which the dancing goddesses, or "sky-walking *dakinis*", are evoked as teachers. Only the Forbearance Verse² in the centre of the stupa's base is written in a semi-cursive Tibetan script.

This painting was purchased as a Bhutanese work of art. But what exactly is Bhutanese about it, and how are its stylistic features placed into the art history of Bhutan?

Bhutanese Painting

In the absence of surviving examples, the origins of Bhutanese painting remain shrouded in darkness.³ The earliest paintings that survived until recently, the murals of the protectors' chapel of Changangkha⁴ dating from the 13th century, are too remote and distinctive to be linked with the later developments in Bhutanese painting. Even the possibly earliest phase of Bhutanese art from the time the country attained its present unified statehood is not of relevance here, as no safely datable and attribut-

¹ Thangka of Vajravarahi with mounting. Bhutan, Punakha Dzong, mid-19th century. Pigments on cloth with silk brocade; 128.27 x 85.41 cm. Rubin Museum of Art, C2009.18 (HAR 65858).

able examples from this period are available to us. Moreover, could the art of the 17th century, before the unification of the country, be a distinctive expression of Bhutanese identity? In fact, the continuous close links of Bhutan both to the neighbouring regions of Tibet and to prominent seats of the Drukpa Kagyu School in other Himalayan areas, ranging as far as Ladakh, certainly resulted in lively artistic exchanges, tending to blur the distinctive character of Bhutanese art. Nevertheless, even independent of possible nationalist attitudes in this regard, one has to assume that the art of Bhutan has its own distinctive character based on the country's unique cultural background and geographical position.

Is it possible to define what is distinctly Bhutanese about paintings from Bhutan? In the following sections we take a rather pragmatic approach to this question. By systematically describing in stylistic terms a selection of thangkas in the collection of the Rubin Museum of Art, which can safely be attributed to Bhutan, we explore whether there are any consistent stylistic criteria that would allow us to identify a painting as Bhutanese. We focus on a selection of paintings that are related to each other in different ways. But before we look at these paintings in detail, we need to review the criteria by which a painting may safely be attributed to Bhutan.⁵

Identifying Criteria

Probably the safest criterion to attribute a painting to Bhutan is textual evidence, in particular inscriptions and captions identifying depictions of prominent figures in Bhutanese history. Identifying captions are usually written in gold below the figure, while inscriptions with historical information may be found on the back of the painting.⁶ Generally, only a small group of paintings contain such textual information, and among our selection only one painting contains such identifying captions (figure 6). In this painting, dedicated to the protector Mahakala in a four-armed form, the figure in the upper left corner is identified by a caption as representing Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594–1651).⁷

The figure of the Zhabdrung is, in fact, found on most of the paintings from the Rubin Museum of Art selected for this discussion, and his depiction has long been recognized as the single most important criterion to identify paintings from Bhutan.⁸ While his actual form changes from painting to painting, his depiction is distinctive enough to often allow for secure identification. A good example is a painting dedicated to him as the main figure (figure 3). The Zhabdrung is most commonly shown with a long, pointed beard, an inner dress wrapped around his chest, a meditation band crossing above it from his right shoulder, and an outer mantle or robe. His depiction commonly lacks the sleeveless vest usually worn by Tibetan and Bhutanese monks, such as the four teachers who flank his seat and the table below.

The source of his dress is made explicit in this painting, the composition of which differentiates two distinct groups of lineage holders. The upper figures place the Zhabdrung in the succession of the early Kagyu teachers, and into an immediate relationship to Milarepa who also wears a meditation band above his white robe. The four figures below are his successors, most likely his heart incarnations, which would make the last figure the Fifth Zhabdrung Rinpoche Jigme Norbu (1831–61), thus dating the painting in the mid-19th century. The youthful depiction of the last teacher certainly supports this identification, but it would need to be verified if it is appropriate for this teacher to be shown wearing the rounded blue hat, that is another iconographic

signifier for Bhutanese painting, as we see below.

The Zhabdrung is seated with folded legs in meditation posture on a mat throne with its back draped in auspicious white silk scarves. His hands joined in meditation hold a longevity vase (*tsebum*). His legs are wrapped in the heavy cloth of his mantle, its ends overlapping in front. Peony-like flowers and their foliage surround his throne and separate this central portrait from the other figures, which are placed in a landscape with tall, snowcapped mountains in the background. Abstracted rock formations, undercut grassland, fanciful clusters of clouds, some of them pink, and dark water courses accentuate the landscape, but do not form a consecutive environment as such. The lineage figures placed within the landscape have no relationship to it.

While in this *thangka* Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal is shown as middle-aged and with a black beard, in the Mahakala painting (figure 6) he is shown as an elderly man with a white beard. Throughout our selection of Rubin paintings, the Zhabdrung's depiction varies considerably, and there are also depictions of Bhutanese monks with a similar beard, for example the seated monk at the upper right in figure 8. Thus, even if a Zhabdrung-like figure is depicted in the painting, its Bhutanese origin can only be considered secure if other criteria support its identification.

The rounded blue hat worn by the last incarnation of the Zhabdrung in figure 3 certainly is such additional evidence. Called locally the "hat of dependent relations" (*tendrel üzba*), this hat is said to have originated with the Zhabdrung and is passed down to consecutive "lord abbots" or Je Khenpo,⁹ but not restricted to them. It is worn only on special religious occasions during which one moves between the winter and summer residences.¹⁰ A depiction of such a blue hat is also found in the Vajravarahi painting, worn by the senior teacher on the upper left (figure 1).

Motifs shared by the Drukpa Kagyu School in general are found in, but not distinctive of, Bhutanese painting, though they may provide valuable hints.¹¹ Such motifs are, for example, white-clad teachers (*repa*) depicted as part of the lineage after Milarepa. However, there are also distinctive Bhutanese teachers depicted wearing a white robe, in particular the father of the Zhabdrung, Yab Tenpe Nyima (1567–1619).

The depiction of deities that are revered prominently in Bhutan, such as Mahakala, is only of little use in itself, as these deities are popular in other Himalayan regions as well, and securely identifiable local forms are rare. Depiction of the lion-riding mountain goddess Tseringma paired with the white drum-holding Dorje Yudronma may well, however, reference Bhutan.

Another signifier is the textiles used for a painting's frame. In many of the Bhutanese paintings, a unique type of maroon fabric¹² of simple design is chosen for the background support and framing. A number of the Rubin Museum *thangkas* have such distinctive textiles on the back, among them the Vajravarahi painting that is the focus of this contribution (figure 2). Of course, such textiles could have been added to paintings imported from elsewhere, an issue that needs to be considered when evaluating the origin of a painting.

The paintings preserved in the monasteries, fortresses (*dzongs*), cultural institutions and private houses of Bhutan provide the most substantial base for defining Bhutanese painting. However, both painters and their products may well have come from outside,¹³ and throughout the Himalaya painting styles distinctive of one region are found as outliers in others. Regardless of their style, all murals found in Bhutan are part of the cultural heritage of the region. *Thangkas*, in contrast, may well have

2
Back of the Vajravarahi
thangka in figure 1.



been imported and thus not be reflective of Bhutanese painting at all.

The paintings attributed to Bhutan from the collection of the Rubin Museum of Art are equally diverse, and in most cases the criteria for their attribution remains unclear. For this contribution we chose a small number of objects that can be attributed to the region by the above criteria and/or by their stylistic and iconographic relationship to each other. We are thus talking about a rather small group of related paintings to extrapolate some characteristics that may be distinctive for Bhutanese thangkas.

The Diamond Sow

The painting of Vajravarahi is of exceptional artistic quality and in a perfect state of preservation (figure 1). The sensually modelled dancing deities are set against an abstracted landscape dominated by waterbodies and vegetation islands and a sky filled with triangular clouds. Vajravarahi (Dorje Phagmo) stands with her left toe on the sex of a male figure, representing obstacles to enlightenment, lying on a golden sun disc covered with a flower pattern and placed on top of a lotus with lobed petals. The rendering of the deity is both subtle and dramatically expressive, and the signs of her gender are emphasized to an unusual degree. Particularly noteworthy is the dark grey squealing sow's head projecting from Vajravarahi's main head (above her right ear), which is depicted in a highly naturalistic manner. She grasps a curved knife in her right hand and a skull-cup in her left. She is framed by a mandorla imitating repoussé work, which is set against staggered clouds that project behind it. She is surrounded by a retinue of seven more dancing dakinis, all but the upper right one dancing on the same leg as she does. The playful variations in their lotus bases and mandorlas signify the accomplishment of the artist.

The practice of the aspiration deity Vajravarahi is popular in all Kagyu traditions, and thus also among the Drukpa Kagyu. At the top centre we have three representatives of this school, a rather youthful looking central teacher making the gesture of argumentation (*vitarkamudra*) and holding a vase, flanked by an elder bearded person wearing the blue hat of the Je Khenpos of Bhutan, and another elder person with a scholar's hat. The representation of a Je Khenpo and the Bhutanese textile used on the back (figure 2) are the best indicators identifying this painting as Bhutanese. The teachers have padded cushions as seats and as back-rests, the latter framed with a white scarf knotted at its upper corners, a frequent motif in Bhutanese painting and that of neighbouring regions. Noteworthy also are the variations in the representation of their outer garments.

The landscape is surprisingly abstract, combining a cloudy dark blue sky with a ragged ground, the sharp edges of which are outlined in gold. Only the blossoming peony-like flowers that surround the diagonal rock projecting into the painting from the bottom left corner provide a sense of paradise. The same colours and petals used for the flowers are also used in the lotuses on which the goddesses stand in the bottom row. There are no trees, but only bushes and shrubs lining the edges of the grassy islands projecting from the water, which undercuts them and reveals their soil. There are no high mountains on the horizon, just a single grassy hillock at the left. The clouds, too, do not provide any true sense of nature: those in the sky are triangular in shape with flat base, while those along the edge of the mandorla have a lozenge form with a single dark swirl at the centre. The clouds surrounding the central lineage figure are of the same pink colour as some of the lotuses.

There is no clue in the painting concerning the identification of the three teachers on top, except their relative hierarchy and their distinctive features. No doubt, the personages depicted must have been important religious hierarchs of the time the painting was made. One possible scenario would be that the top central figure represents the Forty-second Je Khenpo Thinle Gyaltsen (1839–99). Then the figure on the left wearing the blue hat would be the Thirty-second Je Khenpo Tshuldrim Gyaltsen (1802–60), who held office only for the last two years of his life. He is depicted with a meditation band between his inner and outer robes.¹⁴ If we assume that the painting was made during the actual tenure of the Thirty-second Je Khenpo, it would be datable

to the years 1858–60, when Thinle Gyaltzen was about 20 years old. This would be the earliest date possible, but the painting could also have been made in commemoration.

This scenario has one major drawback: it is not supported by the usual conventions seen in Tibetan painting. While it is not impossible to see higher incarnations represented in superior positions, the teacher is always more prominently shown than his pupil. This is not the case in the proposed interpretation, which could only be explained through the higher social status of the central figure.¹⁵ Being of the distinguished Amorimu family that is associated with the Seula monastery and Punakha Dzong, it may well make sense that Thinle Gyaltzen is depicted in the top centre despite his young age if the painting was made as a commission from his family.¹⁶

A mid-19th century date for the thangka may at the first glance appear surprising, but it does explain the portrait-like depictions of the three historical personages and the extremely naturalistic delineation of the sow. In this scenario, both the Zhabdrung painting already discussed (figure 3) and the Vajravarahi derive from the same time period and general geographical area. While the Zhabdrung painting is rather provincial, the Vajravarahi represents the highest quality of Bhutanese painting at the time. Comparisons between them nevertheless reveal a number of shared characteristics, such as the dark inconsequential landscape, the usage of the peony flowers, the abstracted blue-green rocks, the way the seats of the figures are seen from a top angle, the incorporation of pink clouds etc. Taking these shared characteristics as point of departure, we shall now look at other examples of Bhutanese paintings to see how much they could help to identify Bhutanese painting stylistically.

The Glorious Goddess

Depictions of Palden Lhamo or Shri Devi are popular throughout the Himalaya, as she counts among the primary protective deities of Tibetan Buddhism. The goddess is also very popular in Bhutan, and the thangka in figure 4 likely comes from the same area as the previous paintings. At the top centre likely is again Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who here is flanked by the Indian adepts (*mahasiddhas*) Tilopa and Naropa. While their principal postures are similar to their representations in the Zhabdrung painting (figure 3, top corners), their iconography differs in details. In both paintings Tilopa holds a fish, but only in this painting Naropa holds a ritual implement (*vajra*) and skull-cup (*kapala*), as is fitting for the wrathful subject. Between them and underneath the Zhabdrung is Sahaja Chakrasamvara embracing his consort Vajravarahi, the two-armed form of this principal aspiration deity of many Kagyu schools. Again, this arrangement of the lineage figures can only really be understood in a Bhutanese context, as the Zhabdrung takes the highest position in the painting, above the flanking *mahasiddhas*.

Palden Lhamo is shown in her smoke-clad form, with four arms and riding a white-nosed ass. She holds a fresh skull-cup, skin still attached to it, and a sword with scorpion handle in her two right hands, and a tantric staff (*khatvanga*) and a three-edged ritual dagger (*kila*) in her left hands. A peacock feather adorns the crown on her head; a snake and a lion come forth from her ears. A corpse is caught between her teeth. Wisps of red flame and clouds of dark billowing smoke surround her and her retinue of three black furies holding a skull-cup and a heart each.

The bottom black fury is flanked by two protectors in wild chase, each occupying a green island. The one on the left rides a bull and shoots an arrow looking back, while



3 Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594–1651). Bhutan, mid-19th century. Ground mineral pigment on cotton; 98.42 x 77.15 cm. Rubin Museum of Art, c2006.66.248 (HAR 360).

the one on the right rides a horse, wears armour and attacks with a spear. These possibly are two local protectors associated with the area of Punakha, namely Damchen Gomo, the protective deity of Gönyül and the northern Punakha valley,¹⁷ and Tsenchen Jagpa Melen, the warrior deity of the kingdom of Bhutan.¹⁸

In this painting the black background of its wrathful subject is combined with a small portion of blue green landscape at the bottom of the canvas, creating the sense that we are looking beyond the coastal rocks onto the ocean of blood in which the goddess rides with her retinue under a black sky. The edges of clouds, smoke, flames and rocks are highlighted in gold, and form an irradiating setting for the black goddess, who despite her dynamism exudes a sense of calm within this busy environment. Equally, the rockscape in the foreground features flowers and birds unimpressed by the wild hunt taking place around them.

Given that this is a black background painting, comparisons to the ones discussed



Text

so far are limited. Certainly, the rock formations, the undercut islands of grass, the outer shape of the clouds closely resemble those we have already discussed. Simpler versions of the fleshy plants can also be found on the Zhabdrung painting (figure 3), and the arrangement of clouds compares to that in the Vajravaraḥi painting (figure 1).

Another Rubin Museum painting on cloth (silk?) represents the same goddess (figure 5). Again it is the presence of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, here in the upper left corner, that indicates its Bhutanese origin. The teacher in the upper right corner has not yet been identified. In this painting Sahaja Chakrasamvara is placed between the two teachers at the top centre, as is more common, and the four-armed goddess is set in a continuous landscape, with all the three furies accompanying her placed along the bottom of the canvas. In comparison to figure 4 the outlines here are bolder and more dominant, which is also due to its smaller size. Some of the details, especially the movement of the figures and animals, are less refined.

Among the possible Bhutanese characteristics are the prominent white scarfs framing the back-rests of the two lamas, and the rocky outcrop along the right edge.



5
Glorious Goddess Palden Lhamo. Bhutan, late 18th century. Pigments on cloth (silk?); 68.58 x 58.42 cm. Rubin Museum of Art, F1998.1.2 (HAR 602).

The clouds are clustered and have prominent tails directed towards the sides of the canvas. Tails are vaguely discernible in some clouds in figure 4, but here their conception is remarkably different. Certainly, the two paintings derive from different temporal or geographical contexts, the exact nature of which needs further clarification.

The Great Black One

Two more paintings on black ground further demonstrate the diversity of Bhutanese portable painting ~~in the 19th century~~. The first of these is focused on the four-armed protector deity Mahakala, another ubiquitous deity of Tibetan Buddhism (figure 6). The composition of this painting is similar to that in figure 5, and in terms of painting style it represents a middle ground between the two Palden Lhamo paintings. Again, this painting contains a number of features we have not met with so far.

At the top centre again, is the aspiration deity Sahaja Chakrasamvara, flanked by two teachers, identified here by captions. As already mentioned, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal is on the left. The second teacher is identified as the Reverend Sherab Senge



6
Four-armed Mahakala. Bhutan, late 18th century. Pigments on cloth; 68.10 x 48.74 cm. Rubin Museum of Art, c2006.66.146 (HAR 115).

(1724–93),¹⁹ possibly the Sixteenth Je Khenpo of Bhutan who is known under this name and held office from 1784 to 1791.²⁰

In the centre, the four-armed Mahakala embraces his consort seated on his lap with his two main arms that also hold a curved knife (*katrika*) and skull-cup (*kapala*). This form of the deity appears to be popular with the Drukpa School and is particularly frequent in Bhutanese painting.²¹ His two other arms hold a sword and a tantric staff (*khatvanga*) respectively. The couple is flanked by the goddess Ekajati (Relchikma),



with one eye and one tooth only, and the Raven-headed Wisdom Protector (Yeshe Gönpö Charokdongchen).

The continuous cluster of clouds around the top of the centre figure and fanning out above along the edge of the canvas connects this painting to figure 4, but the actual shape of the clouds with tails is comparable to figure 5. The landscape in which the deity is set is curious insofar as its top and bottom parts differ considerably in aesthetic and perception. At the head level of the main deity pointed mountain tops

⁷ Mahakala Kakamukha. Bhutan, early to mid-19th century. Pigments on cloth; 84.77 x 76.20 cm. Rubin Museum of Art, C2006.42.8 (HAR 89189).

are painted with washes of blue and green as if they were rocks. At the bottom of the painting a flat grassy ground is indicated by horizontal washes of green. Occupied by a stupa, as well as vultures and dogs feeding on corpses and intestines, this represents a charnel ground presided over by Palden Lhamo. Large fleshy plants consisting of two or three leaves and small shrubs occupy the ground in some places. In this painting, it is rather remarkable how the central couple are set off from their surroundings through the usage of colour and gold, their bodies receiving a shadow-like quality.

A unique raven-headed form of the Great Black One, Mahakala Kakamukha, is the focus of another painting (figure 7), the Bhutanese origin of which is purely based on the popularity of this deity there.²² The deity known locally as Raven-headed Wisdom Protector (Yeshe Gönpö Charokdongchen) is again shown with consort, who holds a sword and clings to his body. He holds a curved knife and a skull-cup and is surrounded by three more raven-headed deities with consorts, all similar to the main couple, and a protective deity riding a horse, possibly again Tsenchen Jagpa Melen (see page 89). Above the main image is another four-armed Mahakala embracing a consort, and above that is the defaced image of a master of the Drukpa Kagyu School. The figure wearing a meditation band and monastic dress is likely again Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who is closely associated with this form of Mahakala through the story of his flight from Tibet in 1616.

This painting, formerly in the Jucker Collection,²³ differs considerably from the other black-ground thangkas discussed so far. The teacher at the top is framed by clouds expanding towards the edge, the clouds are shaded in blue and green and occasionally have tails, as does the smoke surrounding the protector in the bottom right corner. Remarkably the main deities not only fill the entire width of the painting, but even project beyond it, with the wings of two of the secondary deities cut off. Equally, the much more typically shaped and shaded rocks only occupy the bottom edge. The lotus of the central deity not only has petals lined in gold but also a distinct section between them and the disc, the interpretation of which is not entirely clear. The disc on top of the lotus is again decorated with a lotus scroll.

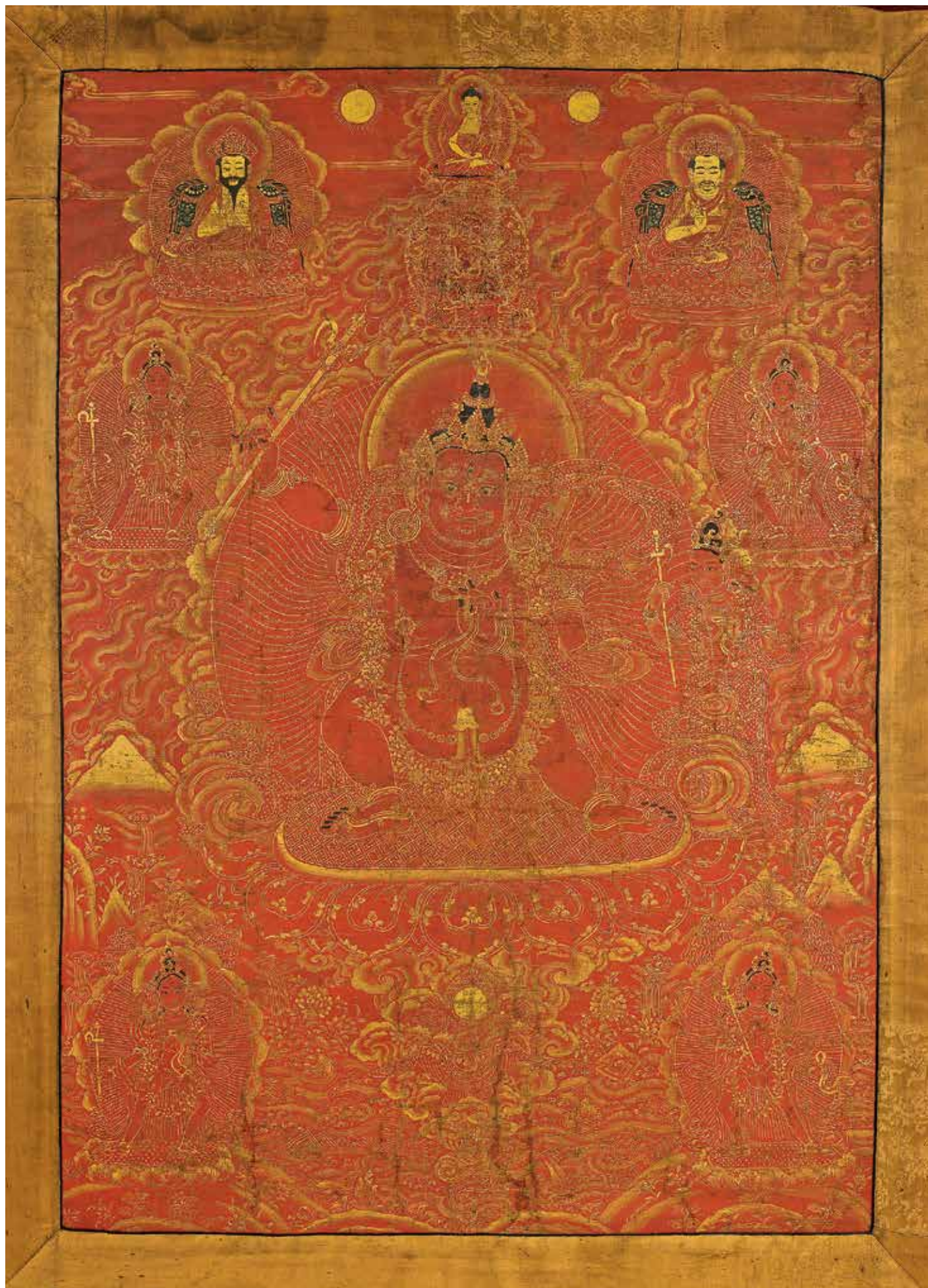
The Great God

Another unusual iconographic form known in Bhutan, deriving from the Nyingma tradition, is that of the Great God (Mahadeva; Lha Chenpo), better known as Shiva in a Hindu environment (figure 8). In the context represented by this painting, the Great God is considered an emanation of Avalokiteshvara, as can be recognized by the red ground used for deities and personages associated with the western direction and the presence of Buddha Amitabha, whose colour is red, and who is depicted at the top centre. Below Amitabha is the horse-headed Hayagriva, the principal wrathful deity of Amitabha's lotus family. A Bhutanese origin is again suggested by the teachers in the upper corners: in the top left Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, now performing the teaching gesture (*dharmachakramudra*), and in the top right a bearded monk making *vitarkamudra* and holding a vase.

Holding an elephant-goad (*ankusha*) and a noose (*pasha*) as his attributes, only the erect linga or male sexual organ hints at the origin of this deity. Here too, his consort is known as Uma Devi, and she holds the same attributes. The couple is accompanied by four more goddesses, also holding elephant-goad and noose.

In Bhutan, this Mahadeva is venerated in the Wangchug Lhakhang in Punakha

8
Mahadeva. Bhutan,
early to mid-19th century.
Red, black and gold pigments
on cloth, with brocade border;
114.30 x 73.66 cm.
Rubin Museum of Art,
c2008.36 (HAR 65842).



Dzong, originally built in 1637. Since this is the only place in which this deity is found within a Buddhist edifice, it has to be assumed that this painting is in some way related to that temple.

In terms of style, however, this painting links to the previous one through the shape of the lotus petals for the seat of the central deity, how the cushion is decorated with a swastika pattern, the shading of the clouds, and the way the fire is rendered around the main deity. As in the Vajravarahi painting (figure 1), clouds surround the halos of the figures, but only the ones of the teachers at the top are comparable in shape. Clouds also surround the mountain peaks, as is the case in the painting of the four-armed Mahakala (figure 6) and, partially, the Zhabdrung painting (figure 3). The snowcapped mountains, also found in other paintings, are more extended due to the technique used in this painting, and the plants in the bottom are similarly large and fleshy as we have seen in other paintings discussed.

If we are right that the Zhabdrung and Vajravarahi paintings date to the mid-19th century, and the Mahakala painting (figure 6) to the late 18th century, then it is likely that clouds with tails are earlier than those without, at least in the group surveyed. This would make the Palden Lhamo in (figure 5) one of the earliest paintings in the group, which is also supported by its more classical depiction of iconography and landscape. The other Palden Lhamo (figure 4), with its innovative landscape depiction and its agitated figures and animals, appears more modern in conception and compares in sophistication and probably also date to the Vajravarahi painting. Early to mid-19th century dates may then also be attributed to the Mahakala Kakamukha and Mahadeva paintings (figures 7 and 8 respectively).

Conclusion

Given the rather small sample of paintings discussed, the likely narrow time frame they date to, and the relationships that can be established between the paintings, the stylistic diversity of this group is stunning. Of course, the first two paintings differ in subject and type from the others, but even among the black-ground paintings alone each of them is distinctive enough that it appears impossible to find stylistic criteria that may be considered characteristic for Bhutanese painting. This is especially true for single motifs such as clouds, rock formations etc. While there are elements that may be extracted as common to a number of paintings, there is also at least one element in each that differs entirely from all the others.

Looking at the four black-ground paintings alone, there are nevertheless a number of commonalities. Most important among these is the composition of the paintings, which communicates preferences that may well be characteristic. Moving from the bottom up, the need for a ground at the bottom of the canvas is noticeable in all paintings and accounts for some of the inconsistencies noticed in the conception of the landscape the figures are set in. For example, the coloured triangular hills set between the two grassy islands at the bottom of one of the paintings dedicated to Palden Lhamo (figure 4) and the flat ground at the bottom of the Mahakala painting (figure 6) are both an expression of this need. Solid ground elements are found on all paintings, be these vaguely defined hills as in figure 5, or a line of rocks as in figure 7. Such elements are also found in the Mahadeva painting (figure 8), and in the Vajravarahi (figure 1) the landscape at the bottom is the one most well conceived. One of the reasons for the need for such solid ground elements may be to block off the high

waves of the ocean most clearly expressed in the Palden Lhamo painting (figure 5), probably one of the earliest paintings in this group. Proportionately large waves are actually found in a number of paintings, including the Mahadeva thangka (figure 8).

Another more unusual element is the decoration of the sun disc on top of the lotus that the deities sit or stand on. This is most obvious in the Mahakala, where an elaborate lotus scroll decorates the disc (figure 6), and where the relationship of the disc to the lotus petals is least clearly expressed. Scroll and flower patterns are also found in the paintings of Kakamukha (figure 7) and Vajravarahi (figure 1), and a swastika pattern covers the lotus disc of Mahadeva (figure 8). The use of such patterns on the discs may be the result of the rather high angle from which the discs are seen, making them relatively large surfaces which would otherwise be empty. The same extreme angle can be observed for the seats of the teachers, most evidently so in the Zhabdrung painting (figure 3).

While the ground is definitely important, a continuous landscape against which the deities are set is not. The landscape elements at the sides of the deities have little, if any, conceptual relationship to the bottom area. Often the horizon of the composition remains entirely unclear, most commonly because it is obscured by the flaming aureoles of the main deity, as is most apparent in the first Palden Lhamo (figure 4), the Kakamukha (figure 7) and the Mahadeva (figure 8) paintings. Instead, clouds appear to be of considerable importance; they surround primary and secondary figures to emphasize them, and structure the sky area. Remarkably, in most cases clouds also emphasize the vertical axis of the thangka, linking the main figure with whoever is represented above it. Whatever their shape, in most cases the clouds are also painted in different colours; in the Zhabdrung (figure 3) and Vajravarahi (figure 1) paintings, pink clouds are used to emphasize the central axis. Finally, in several paintings, for example in figure 4, the topmost part of the central cloud spreads along the top edges of the picture, as if it would support something above it we do not see. Generally, clouds are relatively dominant in all the paintings, and when the upper corners are not occupied by figures there are banks of clouds.

While these observations can be applied to all the paintings in different degrees, the shape of single motifs is less decisive and only connects certain of the paintings with each other. If this sample is representative, then there were numerous artistic schools active at the same time which each retained its distinct artistic style. This is even more pronounced if we are right in attributing most of the works discussed to the same geographical region around Punakha. As such, it is practically impossible to speak of a Bhutanese style, but the observations made here indicate that there is the possibility of a common stylistic base shared by the painters active in Bhutan around the first half of the 19th century.

Of course, the observations made on the basis of this small sample of paintings would have to be supported by further studies, including in situ wall paintings, which at times can be linked stylistically to portable paintings. There is no doubt, though, that until Bhutanese painting is studied more rigorously and comprehensively in terms of the preserved wall paintings and its diverse painting schools, the iconography of scroll paintings remains the best and often only means to identify Bhutanese works.

- 1 This contribution is the result of regular discussions between the authors on the Bhutanese paintings in the collection of the Rubin Museum of Art during the period of Dorji Namgyel's fellowship there in 2013/14. Other Bhutanese paintings in the Rubin Museum collection have earlier been discussed in Maki 2010.
- 2 On this verse and inscriptions on artworks in general see Martin 2001.
- 3 Tracing the origins of Bhutanese art back to Pala India or even the introduction of esoteric Buddhism during the alleged visit of Padmasambhava/Guru Rinpoche to Bumthang—as recorded in a biography he arrived in Chag khar (lcag mkhar) in Bumthang on the invitation of the king Sindhu Raja in 737 CE—is beside the point, as no examples are preserved.
- 4 The paintings of Changangkha (lCang sgang kha), the focus of an article by Helmut F. Neumann and Heidi A. Neumann (2011), today only survive in rare photographs.
- 5 This section compares closely to what is attempted in Bartholomew 2008.
- 6 It is also maintained that Bhutan has a distinctive form of cursive script called Jogyig (mgyog yig); see mkhan po Phun tshogs bkra shis, *Brug gi bzo rig bcu gsum bshad pa mkhas pa'i dga' ston*, Thimphu: bsKal bzang gzhan phan, 2003, pp. 194–208, “Development of Cursive Bhutanese Writing”, but we have not come across any example that uses the script as a criterion for identifying a painting as Bhutanese.
- 7 The caption on the left reads: “*mthu chen ngag dbang rnam rgyal zhabs*”—“Great Magician Ngawang Namgyal”.
- 8 See, for example, Bartholomew 2008; Jackson 2012, pp. 205–31; Maki 2010 and 2011.
- 9 Drukpa lamas believe that wearing the blue cap (*tendrel üzha; rten 'drel dbu zhwa*) avoids rebirth in the lower realms (*ngan song*). Tradition has it, that this hat goes back as far as Tsangpa Gyare (gTsang pa rgya ras; 1161–1211), the founder of the Drugpa Kagyu tradition. While Tsangpa Gyare was staying in mountain retreats like in Kharchu (mKhar chu) confronting the treacherous weather conditions, a *dakini* (*khadroma; mkha' 'gro ma*) appeared and offered him this hat, which was the shoe of the dakini, to use in the cold weather. However, having thought carefully on the gift of the dakini, he thought it would be inauspicious to wear it as a shoe and instead he wore it as a hat. Nowadays, a blue cap with a gold finial is also characteristic of Gyalwang Drukchen Rinpoche. The first Je Khenpo (*rje mkhan po*) was His Holiness Pekar Jungne (Pad dkar 'byung gnas; 1651–73), and the present Je Khenpo Tulku Jigme Chödrak ('Jigs med chos grags; b. 1955) is the seventieth.
- 10 The blue hat may also be worn by the selected provincial abbots (*lama neten; bla ma gnas rtan*). There are a number of clay images especially of the Zhabdrung Khamsum Zilnon and other gurus showing them wearing this hat.
- 11 Jackson (2008) argues that Drukpa Kagyu paintings can often be recognized from the iconography of their lamas, especially the distinctive white-robed Lingrepa Pema Dorje (Gling Ras pa Padma rdo rje; 1128–88) and his student Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje (gTsang pa rGya ras Ye she's rdo rje; 1161–1211).
- 12 This special type of textile fabric (of maroon colour) chosen for the background framing of the Bhutanese thangkas contributes to the distinctive look common to almost all of them.
- 13 For example, a number of foreign painters were invited to Bhutan during the period of Gyalse Tendzin Rabgye (*rgyal sras bsTan 'dzin rab rgyas*) in the 17th century, and produced murals, thangkas and various other works of art in the country.
- 14 Bartholomew and Johnston, eds. (2008), no. 95, where he is shown crowned and teaching, but with similar facial proportions and beard.
- 15 On the family of Thinle Gyaltsen and their role in Bhutanese history see Ardussi 2000.
- 16 Another young portrait of this teacher is published in Bartholomew and Johnston, eds. (2008), no. 96. Note the protector at the bottom of this appliqué and embroidery.
- 17 On this local deity see Ardussi 2000. Yonten et al. (2008), p. 23, n. 20, states that Damchen Gomo (Dam can sGo mo) is another name for Damchen Godü Chenpo (Dam can sGo bdud chen po), whose conversion myth is narrated in Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993, pp. 241–42. On a silk appliqué of Seula Gönpa this deity is featured underneath Je Tinde Gyeltsen (1839–99), where it is shown in the same posture, but riding a black horse (see Bartholomew

- and Johnston, eds. [2008], no. 20), which appears to be his common depiction.
- 18 On Tsenchen Jagpa Melen (btsan chen Jag pa me len) see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993, p. 242.
 - 19 The right hand caption reads: “*rje btsun shes rab senge'i zhabs*”—“Reverend Sherab Senge”.
 - 20 See Bartholomew and Johnston, eds. (2008), p. 372, and TBRC (accessed October 2013), p. 540. The office dates are taken from TBRC.
 - 21 In a wall painting documented by Françoise Pommaret and available on HAR (accessed July 2014), no. 82115, this form is identified as “*dpal ye shes gyi mgon po yab yum*”. Oddly, the location of this mural is not given. Further, among the 11 deities of this form assembled on HAR (<http://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=3077>) and including this painting, at least half are Bhutanese.
 - 22 See Bartholomew 2008, p. 55.
 - 23 See Kreijger 2001, no. 57, where this painting is dated to c. 1700.

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