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TIBETAN BLACK *THANG-KAS*: NEW EVIDENCE  
ON THE ORIGINS OF A PAINTING TRADITION

Tibetan black paintings (*nag-thang*) constitute a very specific group in the *corpus* of Tibetan *thang-kas*. They are painted using a linear technique on a dark ground, which can be black, blue or brown. The outlines of the figures are drawn in gold, with only occasional touches of other colours for the highlights, generally white and red, to achieve a very dramatic effect. From a technical point of view they are very similar to another group of paintings, the *gser-thang*, or gold *thang-kas*, which employ the same linear technique with blue or red on gold ground or gold on red ground. *gSer-thangs* can represent either wrathful deities or Buddhas, *bodhisattvas* and peaceful deities, while *nag-thangs* are used to portray the wrathful protective deities (*yi-dam*) of the monastery for which they are painted. They are kept and used in the *mGon-khang*, the chapel for *yi-dams* in the monastery.<sup>1</sup>

The problem that will be addressed in this article concerns the antiquity of the tradition of *nag-thang*, in the light of the new evidence provided by a previously unpublished painting.

Tucci discusses the two groups of *gser-thang* and *nag-thang* among the paintings that he considers difficult to date and to attribute to a specific school of Tibetan Buddhism. Nevertheless, at least for *gser-thangs*, he thinks that they are rather recent and he declares that he has “never seen any specimen that can be considered earlier than the XVIIIth century”.<sup>2</sup> Pal, who merges the two groups into one, basically accepts

<sup>1</sup> GIUSEPPE TUCCI, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, Roma: La Libreria dello Stato, 1949, vol. I, p. 320.

<sup>2</sup> GIUSEPPE TUCCI, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 317.

Tucci's opinion that none of these *thang-kas* can be dated earlier than the eighteenth century, even if he proposes a possible dating to the seventeenth century for some of them. He then makes the hypothesis that black *thang-kas* could have been invented in eastern Tibet, deriving their inspiration from gold and black frontispieces of Chinese *sūtras*.<sup>3</sup> Stoddard addresses the problem of the origin of the tradition of black *thang-kas* in the context of her study of the Gold Manuscript of the secret biography of the Fifth Dalai Lama, now in the Guimet Museum in Paris.<sup>4</sup> Observing that the technique used by the painter of the illustrations of this manuscript is basically the same as the linear technique in gold on black ground used in *nag-thang*, she points out at least two possible early sources for it. The first one are the ninth century banners found in Dunhuang, in which silver pigments are used to delineate the figures on a solid colour back ground.<sup>5</sup> The second one are the twelfth century Nepalese manuscripts, written with gold and silver pigments on black paper.<sup>6</sup> This tradition, as Stoddard points out, was known and imitated in Tibet from very early times, as proven by the Tibetan *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript of the Newark Museum, written in gold on black paper and radio-carbon dated to 1195 A.D.<sup>7</sup> Stoddard concludes that the Gold Manuscript, produced between 1674 and 1681, "stands as the earliest dated manifestation of the 'black thangka' genre of painting".<sup>8</sup> Béguin, in his study of the black paintings from the Lionel Fournier Collection, observes that the *thang-kas* which look most an-

<sup>3</sup> PRATAPADITYA PAL, *Tibetan Paintings. A Study of Tibetan Thankas Eleventh to Nineteenth Century*, Basel-Scranton: Ravi Kumar-Sotheby Publ., 1984, pp. 159-160.

<sup>4</sup> HEATHER STODDARD, "The Style and Artistic Context", in KARMAY, SAMTEN GYALTSSEN (ed.), *Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama*, London: Serindia Publications, 1988, p. 19-26.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, JACQUES GIÈS and MONIQUE COHEN (eds.), *Sérinde, Terre de Bouddha. Dix siècles d'art sur la Route de la Soie*, Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1995, p. 271, pl. 207.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, W. ZWALF (ed.), *Buddhism Art and Faith*, London: British Museum Publications, 1985, pl. 173-175.

<sup>7</sup> VALRAE REYNOLDS, AMY HELLER and JANET GYATSO, *Catalogue of the Newark Museum Tibetan Collection. III: Sculpture and Painting*, Newark: The Newark Museum, 1986, p. 139-141, pl. 7.

<sup>8</sup> HEATHER STODDARD, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

cient are the ones painted on silk.<sup>9</sup> However, his tentative stylistic dating to the sixteenth century of the two *nag-thangs* painted on silk of the collection, numbers 71 and 72, seems to be based more on the indisputable quality of the paintings than on specific stylistic comparisons. Béguin, as we shall see, is absolutely right when he notes that the treatment of the illustrations of the Gold Manuscript is too sophisticated to be the first manifestation of this kind of painting. The earliest datable *nag-thang* yet published is the dPal-ldan lha-mo in the Ford Collection.<sup>10</sup> This painting has been convincingly dated to circa the 1630s and before 1642 on the basis of the inscriptions that identify the three *bla-mas* represented.

The *thang-ka* here studied (Fig. 1) measures 52 by 40 centimetres. It still retains the original mounting, consisting of two trapezoidal panels of orange-brown silk attached one to the top and one to the bottom of the painting. A thin yellow silk ribbon is stitched to the left and right sides of the painting, to protect them. A yellow silk veil, decorated with a simple tie-dye motif, is attached to the top of the mounting. Its purpose was probably to protect and conceal the painting when unrolled and not in use. From a technical point of view, this *thang-ka* is a typical example of *nag-thang*. The painting is executed on very thin black silk, using only three colours. The linear work of the contours of the figures, as well as most of the details of the drawing, are rendered in a gold pigment and only some of the highlights are painted in red or in a very transparent white. Red is also used to depict the flames in the halos of the figures. The black ground is left exposed in most of the painting. The back of the painting carries two long inscriptions in gold, in Tibetan *dbu-med* script, enclosed in the drawings of two *stūpas*, placed in correspondence with the main figures on the front side. The inscriptions are made up of various *mantras*, some for Mahākāla,<sup>11</sup> written partly in Tibetan and partly in Sanskrit, tran-

<sup>9</sup> GILLES BÉGUIN, *Art ésotérique de l'Himālaya. Catalogue de la donation Lionel Fournier*, Paris: Éditions de la réunion des musées nationaux, 1990, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> MARYLIN M. RHIE and ROBERT A.F. THURMAN (eds.), *Wisdom and Compassion. The Sacred Art of Tibet*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991, p. 301, n. 115.

<sup>11</sup> Heather Stoddard has transcribed part of these inscriptions.

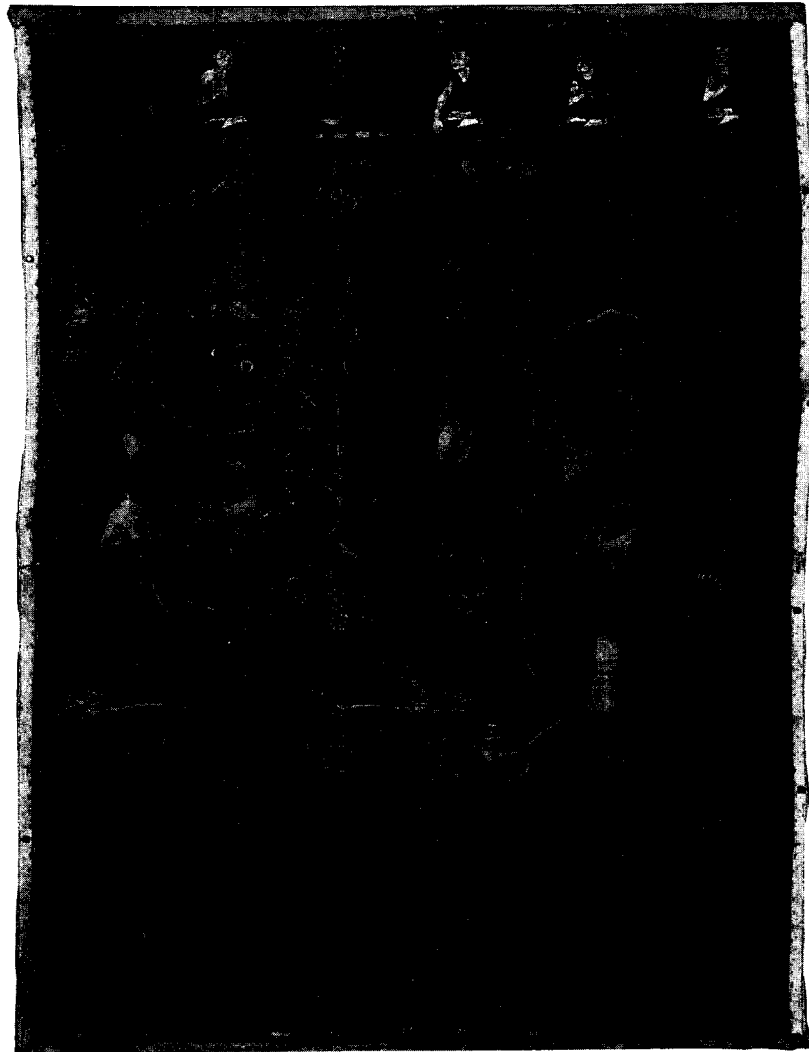


FIG. 1. *Two Mahākālas* thang-ka. 52 × 40 cm. Private collection.

scribed using the Tibetan alphabet. Each figure represented on the front has the “Om̐ a hūṃ” *mantra* written on the back.

The two main deities are two forms of Mahākāla (Nag-po chen-po) and are each supported by a lotus flower. On the

left (Fig. 2) is represented a two-armed form of Mahākāla, in *pratyālīḍha* on a corpse, holding a skull-cup (*kapāla*) and a chopper (*kartrikā*) and wearing a human skin knotted round his shoulders. On the right (Fig. 3) appears a four-armed form of the same protective deity, seated in *lalitāsana* and holding a skull-cup and what could be a piece of flesh or a heart in the first pair of arms and in the second pair, a flaming sword and a trident (*triśūla*). These two wrathful aspects of Mahākāla, both with bulging eyes and gaping mouths, share a common halo of flames, among which five figures, belonging to their retinues, appear. Above the heads of both the Mahākālas are representations of two-armed Saṃvara and Vajravārāhī in sexual union (*yab-yum*). Flanking the four-armed Mahākāla are two female figures offering a pot,<sup>12</sup> while the two-armed one has to his right two birds carrying human flesh in their beaks and a yak trampling on a corpse. In the upper corners behind the halo, a goddess seated on a bird is represented on the left and yet a different form of Mahākāla appears on the right. The whole scene is set in a cemetery, parts of which can be seen behind the halo in the upper part.

Below the main image, sixteen figures are arranged in two registers. In the first, from left to right, appear dPal-ldan Lha-mo, followed by a two-armed form of Mahākāla, holding a sword and a skull-cup. Then there are two wrathful male deities, with animal heads and five female ones, also with different animal heads.<sup>13</sup> The lower register contains an offi-

<sup>12</sup> The same two offering figures can be seen in a late Pāla sculpture representing a four-armed Mahākāla, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. SUSAN L. HUNTINGTON and JOHN C. HUNTINGTON, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree. The Art of Pala India (8th-12th Centuries) and Its International Legacy*, Dayton: The Dayton Art Institute, 1990, p. 153, n. 27. Susan L. Huntington makes the hypothesis that these two figures "are probably human devotees, not goddesses, since they are not cast as attendants or part of the deity's retinue but rather as supplicants". The fact that they reappear on a Tibetan painting makes me think that they probably had a rather more substantial role in the iconography of this form of Mahākāla.

<sup>13</sup> They could be Kālī, Karālī, Varālī, Kankālī and Mahākālī, the five *yoginīs* who can be represented together with two and four-armed forms of Mahākāla. See MARIE-THÉRÈSE DE MALLMANN, *Introduction à l'iconographie du tântrisme bouddhique*, Paris: Bibliothèque du Centre de recherches sur l'Asie centrale et la haute Asie, 1975, p. 238.

ciating monk in front of *gtor-ma* offerings contained in a skull-cup placed on a tripod. Then a female form of Mahākāla is represented, followed by five more wrathful male deities with animal heads. All the gods and the goddesses of these

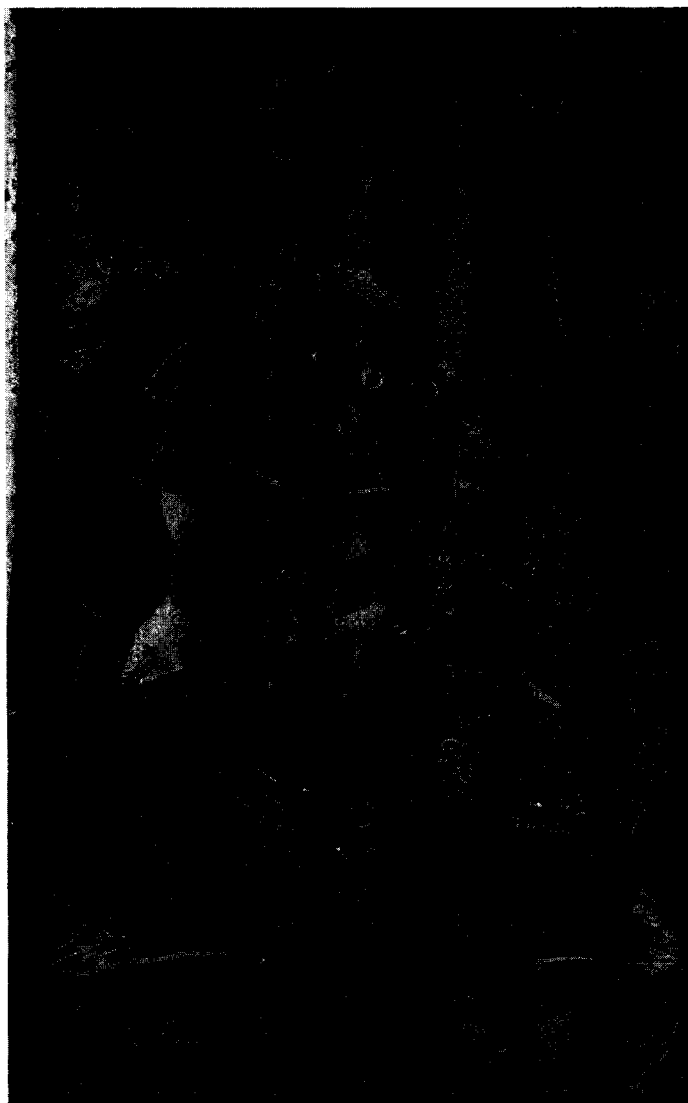


FIG. 2. Detail of Fig. 1. The two-armed Mahākāla.

two rows are portrayed in flaming auras, while the monk is shown sitting in front of a curtain.

Above the main icon there is a single register with a lineage of six figures. These figures, except for one, are not

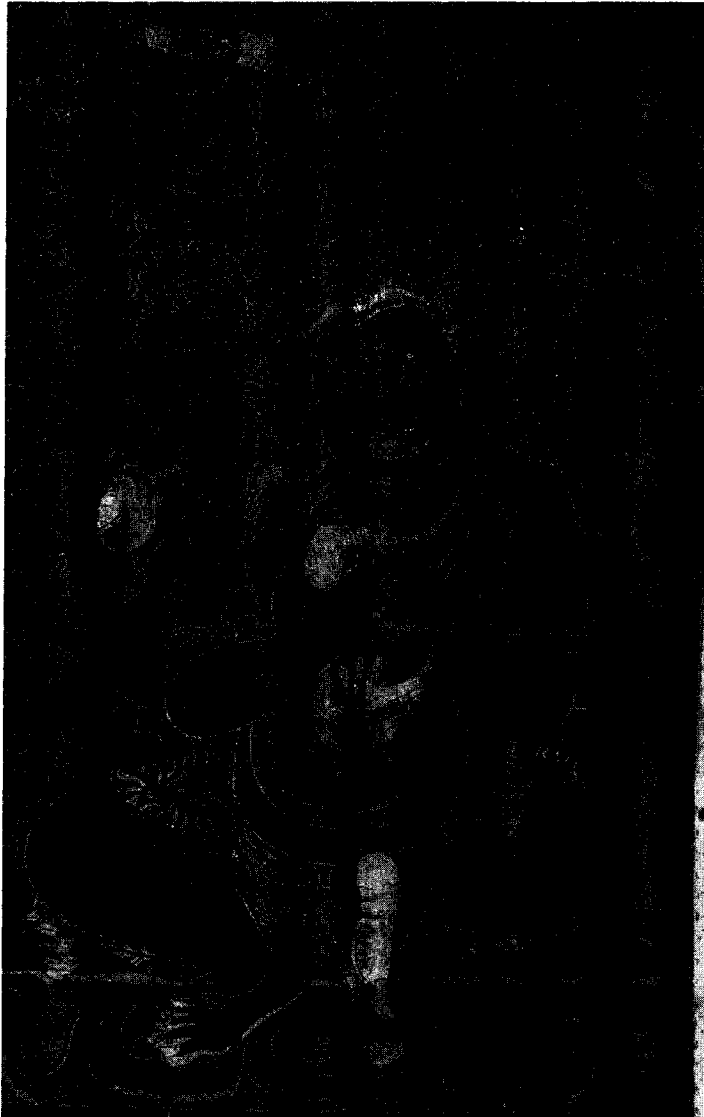


FIG. 3. *Detail of Fig. 1. The four-armed Mahākāla.*



FIG. 4. Detail of Fig. 1. Jñānatapa and Sang-rgyas Yar-byon.

easily identifiable on iconographic grounds because their iconography is not particularly distinctive. From left to right appear an Indian *mahāsiddha*, holding a skull-cup, followed by an Indian monk. The third figure is the only one easily recognisable (Fig. 4, left): it is the *mahāsiddha* Jñānatapa, wearing the typical *pandita* hat and holding a casket and a trumpet. A *thang-ka* portraying Jñānatapa has recently been studied by Singer.<sup>14</sup> She has shown how Jñānatapa, an Indian *mahāsiddha* in the tradition of Tilopa and Naropa, was also considered to be a previous incarnation of Sang-rgyas dBon-po (1251-1296), the monk who in 1273 and for only one year was the fourth abbot of sTag-lung monastery in dBus. He was replaced as abbot by his cousin Mang-ga-la guru (1231-1297), who was supported by 'Phags-pa (1235-1280), Regent of Tibet at the time, and the first *Sa-skyā bla-ma* to be linked to the Yuan Emperor in the 'Patron and Priest' (*yon-mchod*) relation.<sup>15</sup> Sang-rgyas dBon-po had to escape to Khams, where in 1276 he founded the monastery of Ri-bo-che.<sup>16</sup> The other three figures of the lineage are dressed as

<sup>14</sup> STEVEN M. KOSSAK and JANE CASEY SINGER (eds.), *Sacred Visions. Early Paintings from Central Tibet*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998, p. 130, n. 33.

<sup>15</sup> DAVID SNELGROVE and HUGH RICHARDSON, *A Cultural History of Tibet*, Boston & London: Shambala, 1986, p. 148.

<sup>16</sup> GEORGE N. ROERICH, *The Blue Annals*, Delhi: Motilal Banaesidass, 1976, p. 650-652.



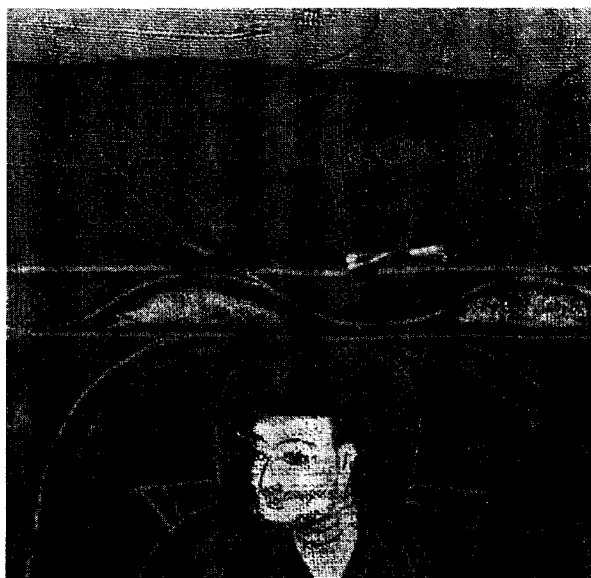


FIG. 5. Detail of Fig. 1. The inscription above the first Tibetan *bla-ma* in the top register.

Tibetan *bla-mas*. The first one can be identified because of a fortunate coincidence. The stitching of the mounting at the top of the painting had become loose in some areas, revealing some faint inscriptions at the top edge of the painting, which would be normally be covered by the mounting. These inscriptions were probably made to help the painter in the correct placing of the figures of the lineage. Some of these inscriptions were photographed before the mounting was stitched back. Above the first Tibetan *bla-ma* it is possible to read "Yar-byon-pa" (Fig. 5). The inscription clearly identifies the monk portrayed as Sang-rgyas Yar-byon Shes-rab (1203-1272), third abbot of sTag-lung, from 1236 to 1272 (Fig. 4, right).<sup>17</sup> No inscription is available for the second Tibetan *bla-ma* and above the third only the syllable "-bzhu-k..." is readable. This is sufficient to identify the lineage as a sTag-lung one, even if it does not make it possible to ascertain if the painting was produced for sTag-lung or for Ri-bo-che monastery. Whichever the case, two *bla-mas* after Sang-rgyas

<sup>17</sup> ROERICH, *op. cit.*, p. 627-628.

Yar-byon, would bring the lineage to the beginning of the fourteenth century, since Sang-rgyas dBon-po died in 1296 and Mang-ga-la gu-ru in 1297. Such a dating for the *thang-ka* is supported also by a radio-carbon test (C<sub>14</sub>) of it, which gave 1285-1399 A.D. as the possible range for the dating of the silk on which the painting was executed.

A dating to the beginning of the fourteenth century for the two Mahākālas *thang-ka* is not surprising also considering some of its stylistic features. The way the three Tibetan *blamas* are portrayed, with the flesh in solid gold and the folds of the garments rendered by thin unmodulated lines, is exactly the same as what can be seen in a set of consecration cards (*tsakali*), studied by Heller.<sup>18</sup> This set, commissioned by Sang-rgyas dBon-po and dedicated to Sang-rgyas Yar-byon, was produced at sTag-lung between 1263 and 1272. The cards are painted on paper with a brilliant vermilion red background and the figures drawn using a linear technique in black or darker red. The flesh of the figures is rendered using a gold pigment and the hair is painted in black. Other colours, especially white, are sparingly used to highlight some other details. This set of *tsakali* could possibly represent the beginning of the gold *thang-ka* (*gser-thang*) tradition, which, as we have seen, differs from the black *thang-ka* tradition only in the choice of the background colour, even if the colours used for the drawing of the figures are here dark red and black and not gold. The two Mahākālas, that appear with the same iconography in other sTag-lung *thang-kas*,<sup>19</sup> display all the characteristics of the Indian Pāla style as rendered in thirteenth century Tibet. These two very lively figures have a strong volumetric presence achieved not by the juxtaposition of contrasting colours, as normally happens in *thang-kas* of this style, but by contrasting the rather plain bodies with a

<sup>18</sup> AMY HELLER, "A Set of Thirteenth Century *Tsakali*", *Orientalia*, 10, 1997, pp. 266-270. See, in particular, Fig. 3a, a portrait of Sang-rgyas Yar-byon.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, the four-armed Mahākāla in the bottom right corner of a portrait of Sang-rgyas Yar-byon, in STEVEN M. KOSSAK and JANE CASEY SINGER (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 95, n. 19, and the two-armed Mahākāla, second from right in the bottom register of a portrait of Sang-rgyas dBon-po, in JANE CASEY SINGER, "Taklung Painting" in JANE CASEY SINGER and PHILIP DENWOOD (eds.), *Tibetan Art. Towards a Definition of Style*, London: Laurence King Publishing, 1997, pp. 52-67. p. 59, fig. 41.

much busier background of flames. Specific conventions, typical of the style, are applied. For instance the four-armed Mahākāla wears a long *dhōṭī* made of a tiger pelt which comes down to the ankles and still most of the leg is seen as if the *dhōṭī* were transparent. This 'transparent *dhōṭī*' convention is typically seen in the depiction of standing *bodhisattvas* in Indian style.<sup>20</sup> The scarf covering the shoulders of the two-armed Mahākālas is rather simple and less naturalistic than the later examples seen in *thang-kas* influenced by Chinese styles of painting. The petals of the lotuses on which the figures are represented are very plain and the flames in the halos are built up by overlapping simple triangular shapes.<sup>21</sup> The much more complex scrollwork used in Nepalese style painting for flames and backgrounds does not appear in this painting. The two Mahākālas *thang-ka* can therefore be considered a typical example of the Indian Pāla style, as practised in thirteenth century central Tibet, with no stylistic influences either from Nepalese or Chinese painting.

To conclude, the relevance of the two Mahākālas *thang-ka* to the history of Tibetan painting is at least twofold. It pushes back the tradition of *nag-thang* to the beginning of the fourteenth century, two and half centuries earlier than was previously thought, and firmly associates the origins of the tradition with the Indian Pāla style practised in central Tibet.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, STEVEN M. KOSSAK and JANE CASEY SINGER (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 104, n. 23. Wrathful deities are often depicted with a short *dhōṭī*. There are other examples however of wrathful deities wearing long tiger *dhōṭīs* in which the 'transparent *dhōṭī*' convention is applied. See, for instance, STEVEN M. KOSSAK and JANE CASEY SINGER (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 83, n. 14.

<sup>21</sup> This convention for representing flames can be seen in other Indian style *thang-kas*. See, for instance STEVEN M. KOSSAK and JANE CASEY SINGER (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 89, n. 17 and JANE CASEY SINGER, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-67, p. 60, fig. 42.

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*ABSTRACT*

Black *thang-kas* are a very specific group of Tibetan Buddhist paintings. Western scholarship has considered them to be a relatively late development in Tibetan Buddhist art. The earliest firmly datable example found in the art-historical literature goes back to the first half of the seventeenth century. However, the *thang-ka* representing two Mahākālas studied in this article, which can be dated on the basis of inscriptional and stylistic evidence to not later than the beginning of the fourteenth century, proves that the tradition of producing black *thang-kas* existed at least two and half centuries earlier. The beginning of this tradition appears to be connected with a Tibetan version of the Pāla style.

*KEY WORDS*

Tibet. Buddhist Art. Black *thang-kas*.