

5.1. RELIGIOUS ARTS AND CRAFTS

5.1.1. Painting

Bhutanese paintings are quintessential of the arts and crafts tradition known as *Lhazo*. Bhutanese paintings are religious in their orientation and are not created in isolation. The traditional painters are called *Lhadrips* (one who makes drawings of *lha* - higher beings). A *lhadrip* paints and decorates a new house with traditional symbols, paint a *chosham* (an altar) or a *Thangka* or *Thongdroel* with the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and deities with strict adherence to the already accepted norms. Another striking feature of Bhutanese paintings is anonymity. Bhutanese *lhadrips* would never sign on their works. It is, however, the names of the patrons who are mentioned on the paintings, if mentioned at all. By the same token, it is believed that the traditional painters gain lots of merits by the act of painting these religious arts. These paintings are aimed at providing spiritual lessons to the viewers and therefore assume meditative functions.

The painters use naturally pigmented soils that are obtained from different parts of the country. The yellow colours are found in the districts of Gasa and Bumthang while the red colour is found in Wamrong under Trashigang District, black soil comes from Phuentsholing and Trashigang and white soil from Paro.

Lhadrip apprentices learn to paint a wide range of images including simple motifs like the eight lucky signs and gradually move on to more complex subjects such as *thangkas* – large painting scrolls. *Thangkas* are complex because they depict various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and the deities and saints with their follower and appropriate backgrounds. They are often painted on canvas and then stitched in silk frames.

Traditional paintings are classified into four categories:

5.1.1.1. Mural Painting

The mural painting is called *debri*. The inside walls of the temples are usually filled with mural paintings of different kinds. The surfaces of the inside walls are first smoothed and plastered with fine clay and then left to dry. Sometimes they use another technique by carefully laying a fine sheet of cotton cloth over the plastered walls which is not easily visible. The mural paintings vary from the images of Lord Buddha and Guru Rinpoche and their activities, *bhavacakra* (*sidpakhorlo*) or wheel of existence, varied icons of deities (*lhatsog*), adepts and saints. We also find the paintings of Mandala. These



frescos are, therefore, strictly religious and strikingly beautiful.

5.1.1.2. Statue Painting

Statues are either moulded from clay or cast out of bronze and metal. Once they are completed, then the *lhadrips* paint them using appropriate colour. The clay statues are painted all over while the metal statues are painted only on the face, often with gold.

5.1.1.3. Scroll Painting

Scroll (*thangka*) paintings are different from mural paintings as they are painted on canvas for hanging on the walls. Scroll paintings can be kept folded in a safe place and unfolded and displayed on auspicious occasions. In order to make a *thangka*, the painter fixes a damp piece of canvas onto a wooden frame. Then a mixture of lime and gum is scrubbed on the surface. The surface is then polished and smoothed. The artist then draws a grid to guide him. When the colour is applied these lines disappear.

A *thangka* is stitched with silk and brocade border of appropriate colours and has two frames fixed to the upper and lower borders to suspend and stretch. *Thongdroel* is a much larger version of a *thangka*. It is believed that merely seeing the painting can liberate



sentient beings from samsara. Thus, it brings merit not only to the believers but for the painters as well.

5.1.1.4. Wood Painting

Shing tshon (Shing means wood and tshon means colour painting) is done on the wooden structure. The outside walls of the temples, monasteries and farm houses are normally whitewashed while the wooden structures are painted with varied patterns and symbols often in accordance with different names accorded to different parts. These are bow, phana, pem, choetsi, norbu and bagam. Although the choice of colours may vary from one painter to another, often depending on the choice of the owner or main architect, the style of paintings are generally uniform. Paintings on the walls depict the traditional patterns like flowers, traditional symbols, eight lucky signs or *Tashi Tagye* (eight lucky signs), and the four lungta signs of *Tag Seng Chung Druk* (Tiger, Snow Lion, Garuda and Dragon).

The painting of the Four Friends is popular on the walls. Some walls are also painted with phalluses. In order to paint on the wooden walls, the method called 'pounce and spray' is used. A painter uses an outline of a pattern or the design on a piece of paper to be painted on the walls. The outlines have pricked holes through which a powdered colour contained in a cloth is pressed to produce dotted pattern of the original patterns on the paper. The painter then traces these outlines to paint.

5.1.2. Clay Sculpture

Jimzo is a traditional art of sculpture making of the images and objects of worship and veneration using clay as a principal material. The art of sculpting in Bhutan probably dates back to 7th century when first Buddhist temples like Kyerchu and Jampa Lhakhang were built to keep the statue of Jowo Buddha Maitreya. The art was widely promoted during the time of *Terton* (treasure revealer) Pema Lingpa (1450-1521). In

Bhutan, *jimzo* was codified and included as one of the thirteen traditional arts and crafts of Bhutan by the 4th Desi Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye in the late 17th century. Since then the art of sculpting has been maintained and passed from teacher to students over many generations until today.

Bhutanese *jim zop* (sculptors) are known for the quality and intricacy of creating delicate clay sculptures. They practise sculpting as a pious act since it is based on the iconographic principles of Buddhist art. It is very important to adhere to the rules that prescribe the precise measurement of the body structure in relation to the limbs, postures, eyes, ears, fingers and nose and the body tints, garments and ornaments.

5.1.2.1. Religious Statues and Ritual Objects

Sculptors make clay statues, ritual objects and *tsha tsha* (miniature clay stupa) and clay masks worn during festivals. Numbers of exceedingly fine and intricate religious sculptures and ritual objects made of clay can be seen in every temple, monastery, and the dzongs of Bhutan. These clay sculptures vary in sizes, varying from tiny statues to over twenty feet. There are clay sculptures of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, various deities, gods, goddesses and prominent religious figures which depict the foundation of faith, worship and reverence for the Buddhists.

