

## COSMOS

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## CONTENTS

Editorial	
Emily Lyle	115
The Earthen Long Barrows of Northern Europe: A Vision of the Neolithic World	
Magdalena S. Midgley	117
British Hill-Figures: A Celtic Interpretation	
Miranda Green	125
Cosmic Scripts and Heavenly Scriptures: The Holy Nature of Taoist Texts	
Stephan Peter Bumbacher	139
Insights for Contemporary Artists from the Traditions of Russian Icon Writers and Tibetan Thangka Painters	
Deborah J. Haynes	155
Reviews	173
Indexes to Volumes 1-10	
Title Index	195
Author Index	201
Name and Subject Index	209

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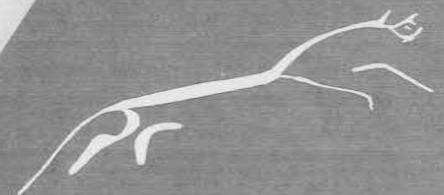
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## Insights for Contemporary Artists from the Traditions of Russian Icon Writers and Tibetan Thangka Painters

DEBORAH J. HAYNES

In this paper I set out to explore a specific dimension of Russian Orthodoxy and Tibetan Buddhism. Although these are very different traditions, each with its own distinctive world view, there are significant similarities to be found in the roles of Russian icon writers and Tibetan thangka painters. By emphasising four aspects of these roles – anonymity and the contrast to contemporary glorification of the artist over the process and the work itself; long apprenticeship and training; sense of spiritual mission and calling informing the work; and practices of inner purification – I suggest that these traditions may provide inspiration and insight for artists working today who are seeking an alternative to the materialist and commercial values that drive the contemporary art world. I begin by putting the two traditions in historical context.

### RUSSIAN ICON WRITERS

Orthodox Christianity was brought to ancient Russia by Byzantine missionaries. Following earlier unsuccessful forays into the region by some of these missionaries, Vladimir, then the imperial leader of Russia, married the sister of the Byzantine Emperor around 988, converted to Orthodoxy, and began the process of Christianising the country (MacKenzie 1993: 40–2). It remained primarily an Orthodox country until 1917. The tradition of icon painting can be traced back to Hellenistic and Roman imperial portraits, busts on sarcophagi, and Egyptian mummy portraits, among other early forms. When such images were placed in early churches, they were copied as wall frescoes and mosaics. Slowly, as the use of holy portraits or icons developed, other materials and the rectangular form became more popular. The act of painting an icon is described with the linguistic metaphor of translation: the painter quite literally creates a *perevod*, a translation. Hence the icon painter is more accurately an icon *writer*.

In the western church, artists were free to interpret religious doctrines and stories according to their own wishes, while in the eastern Orthodox churches, strict guidelines were developed for the painter (Galavaris 1981: 1–2).

The first icons were apparently brought to Russia from Greece in the eleventh century, but few paintings survive prior to the 1230s and the Mongolian invasions (Gerhard 1957: 119). But, in thirteenth and fourteenth-century Novgorod and Pskov, a so-called “National Style” and “Golden Age” developed. These two centres were not only isolated from Byzantium, but were also the only two cities not conquered by the Mongols. In the mid-fourteenth century, Pskov gained independence from Novgorod and developed its own culture and painting style; but by 1500 the centre of icon painting had begun to shift to Moscow (Bunt 1946: 81–2).

During the seventeenth century, western influence prevailed, and the use of western perspective is especially evident in icons from this period. The split in the Russian Orthodox Church between the “True Believers,” supporters of the state church, and the “Old Believers,” or heretics, led to further developments. In the first half of the century, portrait icons were made, and later they began to portray life realistically. A later decline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was marked by icons painted according to the price they would bring, and by a so-called saccharine style.<sup>1</sup>

Although icons were not meant as objects of aesthetic appreciation, at least until the 1600s, they do embody general aesthetic principles. Prior to the strong influence of western ideas, perspective tended to be of three types: 1) an aerial view, where all persons and objects are visible; 2) relative or ranking perspective, where size concurs with the figure’s importance; and 3) reverse perspective, represented as if seen from those within the icon (Onasch 1963: 28–35). A combination of these forms of perspective can be seen in the icon of Divine Wisdom illustrated here (Fig. 1).

Depicted as a fiery-faced angel, Divine Wisdom sits on her throne in the position typical of Russian icons from Novgorod (Zelensky 1992: 198). In her right hand is a caduceus; in her left a scroll that she holds at her heart. To Sophia’s right stands Mary; to her left, John the Baptist. Above her, Christ as Pantocrator is in a small gloriole. At the top is the preparation of the throne; surrounding angels gesture toward the throne and toward Sophia. The predominant colours in this icon are red, brown, green and gold. Sophia is often depicted as red, the colour of Dawn, because she precedes the days of creation.



Figure 1 Icon of Divine Wisdom, tempera on panel, Novgorod, 16th century. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University: Acc. No. 1951.31.12.

Generally, as is apparent in the icon of Divine Wisdom, early icons have shallow spatial depth, which helps to differentiate the space of the icon from naturalistic space. Images are presented frontally, with a centric composition; and light seems to come from within rather than from the world. For this reason, traditional icons do not use chiaroscuro. The use of colours was based on polychromy rather than colourism: colours were independent of their use in the natural world and most often had both moral and spiritual significance (Onasch 1963: 30–1, and Alpatov 1974). Russian icons also often contain titles and phrases, inscriptions that are essential to the icon.



Icons served and continue to serve a variety of functions in the Orthodox church (Cavarnos 1977: 30–5, and Belting 1994: 203–4, 314–23). They enhance the beauty of a church, but, more importantly, they are the focus of church ritual and serve as teaching tools. They are also objects of devotion, since the theory of icons is based on the idea that the icon is a channel of grace, enabling a change of identity in the person who venerates or worships it. *Theosis*, divinization or deification, is the final goal of an Orthodox Christian (Ware 1993: 236–7). Based in the idea that redemption, salvation, and transformation of the individual are possible, *theosis* is available to all Orthodox practitioners through the practices of daily religious life, such as going to church, receiving sacraments, reading scriptures, and venerating icons. This is a social process that must be conducted within a community; icons are integral to the process.

Given this context, the role of the traditional Russian icon painter was very carefully prescribed. Initially icon painters were anonymous, and even today many icon painters do not sign their icons. This anonymity of the icon painter is analogous to the anonymity, and the action, of the priest who offers prayers and sacraments. “Similar to the way in which the priest constitutes the Lord’s Body ‘through the Divine Word’, the icon-painter ‘in place of the Word, paints and depicts and gives life to the body’” (Uspensky 1976: 10). The creation of an icon by a painter was compared in some Russian texts with the transubstantiation practised by a priest offering the eucharistic bread and wine.

Icon painters usually followed *podlinniki*, or pattern books, for painting their subjects. Though the form and iconography of the image were carefully prescribed in these *podlinniki* with diagrams and inscriptions, painters often added individual stylistic touches. Like the eighth-century text of John of Damascus, the pattern books used in Russia affirmed the correspondence between the word/ear and the icon/eye: “what the word recalls to the ear, the icon presents to the eye: the icon and the verbal memory are equal” (Uspensky 1976: 10).

In contrast to our present understanding of the artist, not anyone could pick up the materials and claim the identity of icon painter. Most traditional icon painters were monks; prior to the twentieth century, they usually worked in a workshop or studio under a master painter. Values of obedience (to God, the tradition, and the church), patience, and faith all combined with a strong anti-individualistic ethos. Prescribed content, form, material, and technique then became the outer framework or matrix for inner experience and inner

freedom. The intention of icon painters, whatever their relative skill, has generally been the same: to give form to the sacred tradition of the church, thus enabling the viewer to see, indeed to enter into, the invisible world of the spirit that coexists within and throughout the material world. The icon painter traditionally served three major aspects within Orthodoxy: the dogmas, expressed through the Bible, creeds, and other texts that are central to the life of the church; the liturgy or worship practices; and the prayer that lies at the heart of both the sacred texts and the liturgical tradition.

The Orthodox tradition, like other forms of Christianity, assumes that human beings are fallen, sinful, and in need of redemption. In Orthodoxy there are two main paths out of this state of fallenness. The first involves ordinary church life; the second is a more rigorous monastic path that was traditionally associated with the training and spirituality of icon painters, as well as those wishing to be monks and nuns.

Indeed, the icon painter had to be a “transformed person in order to be able to present in his work a transfigured being and a transfigured universe” (Galavaris 1973: 29). The artist does not design images, but unveils what is already there: “You [the icon painter] help us to remove the scales that cover our spiritual eyes. With your help we now contemplate, not your skill and mastery, but the very real existence of the countenances themselves [for instance, the Mother of God]” (Florenskii 1976: 18). Consequently, the character and behaviour of the painter were extremely significant.

Two existing historical texts give information about the qualities and values that were central not only to the lives of monks and nuns but also to the training and practice of icon painters (Baggley 1988: 62–74). St. John Climacus (c. 570–649) wrote the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, which details thirty stages in the transformation of consciousness from the material to the spiritual. *The Philokalia*, collected by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain (1749–1809) and St. Makarios of Corinth (1731–1805) in 1782, contains diverse writings from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries, and was based on a way of praying called “hesychasm,” from the Greek *hesychia*, meaning stillness, tranquility, and concentrated attention.

Values taught in *The Philokalia* include attentiveness and watchfulness, desire to travel this path, the abandonment of passion, attention to memory and fantasy so one does not get caught in either the past or the future, purification of the heart through prayer, detachment from desire and the attractions of the world, patience, hu-

mility, silence and stillness. In contrast to wisdom, which is acquired through meditation on scriptures and grace from God, spiritual knowledge is developed especially through silence and inner stillness (Nikodimos 1979). Such characteristics clearly would also affect the way an icon painter worked.

Originally, the icon was seen as a medium for expressing ideas rather than depicting reality, as in the painting traditions in Russia and elsewhere that valued naturalistic representation. In contrast to such traditions, icons were a form of "living metaphysics" (Florenskii 1976: 30). The power of the image or symbol was that it could actually convey several ideas simultaneously. The spiritual dimension of the icon painter's work was the attempt to understand and express the essence of life. For the Orthodox believer, the themes of Incarnation, life-in-Christ, and human deification were the most important. The icon was thought to be a mysterious vehicle of divine power and grace, and a means of knowledge for the person who venerates it.

However, just as the icons became marketable objects in later centuries, so the painter's role changed radically from priest or monk to producer for a consumer market. The earlier anonymity of the icon writer was replaced by painters who signed each icon (Nichols 1991: 131–44, and Galavaris 1973: 29). The painter's primary patron shifted from the church to the consumer market. Other values that had been esteemed earlier, such as long training, a sense of spiritual mission, and practices of inner purification also underwent considerable change. Similar values and transformations can be seen in the use of *thangka* paintings and in the training of *thangka* painters within Tibetan Buddhism.

#### TIBETAN THANGKA PAINTERS

From their origins in India, Buddhist traditions travelled throughout Asia, finally arriving in Tibet in the seventh century CE, when the Buddhist teacher Shantarakshita was invited to the country. Shortly afterward, Padma Samhhava, a famous Tantric teacher and exorcist, joined him to help construct the first monastic complex. The first small group of monks were ordained, and textual translation began (Hoffman 1990: 371–99, and Rhie 1991: 20–38).<sup>2</sup>

It is probable that the first Buddhist missionaries brought sacred images with them that immediately helped to shape the artistic developments in Tibet. The origins of movable paintings on cloth or

paper may date to pre-Christian times, when caravan traders carried signs for safety, protection, and general auspiciousness (Pathak 1986: 18). Buddhist texts explicitly detailing the practice of painting deities date from the Common Era. A diverse set of Indian and Chinese influences may be noted. Indian Buddhist Mauryan, Gandharan, and later Gupta and Pala styles, developed in Buddhist universities, travelled into Tibet via Kashmir. Even the early Ajanta frescoes (100–500 CE) may have had an influence on the painting traditions. For example, one of the representations of the Buddhist Wheel of Life has been seen as a precursor to the Tibetan *thangkas* on this theme. From the fourteenth century there was also frequent contact between Chinese monks and Tibetan lamas. But even earlier, from the construction of the Dunhuang caves (366 CE), Chinese influences on Tibetan styles were notable (Cammann 1950). Printed pounces or transfers for Buddhist designs, as well as Buddhist diagrams, were found at Dunhuang from the ninth–tenth centuries. In addition, the introduction of landscape elements, softening in the drawing, elaboration of detail, and even the addition of red and yellow borders (originally made of Chinese patterned silk from ceremonial robes), came from China. Generally, four traditions contributed to the creation of Tibetan Buddhist art: Indo-Nepali, Central Asian, Chinese, and indigenous Tibetan art. Buddhism has proven remarkably adaptable in new and changing environments, as can be seen in the diversity of Buddhist art in those settings.

After a period of decline, Buddhism was revived in the tenth and eleventh centuries; its evolution continued with succeeding "waves" of Sakya, Kagyu, and Geluk influence. The full sacralisation of Tibetan society was completed, and the tradition of the Dalai Lama instituted, by the Geluk order in the fourteenth century. As Robert Thurman has astutely observed (Rhie 1991: 31):

The Tibetan worldview dating from this period can be understood as a kind of alternative modernity, a spiritualistic or interior modernity in contrast with the Western materialistic or exterior modernity we are familiar with. It is this different kind of modern quality that makes Tibetan civilization and its arts so fascinating to us, and so worthy of our study and emulation.

Just as the European West was developing a thoroughly secular and rationalised modernity, Tibet was moving in the opposite direction. Its arts reflect this mostly vividly, for the traditions of bronze



and clay sculpture, painting in the forms of *thangkas*, temple banners, rolled wall hangings, wall frescoes, and mandalas, as well as the creation of other objects for ritual use, testify to the richness of the Tibetan Buddhist worldview.

Of the many arts from Tibet, *thangka* painting has an especially well-developed set of values concerning their production and the role of the artist. The earliest surviving *thangkas* probably date from the ninth-tenth centuries CE, although the earliest *thangka* with an inscribed date is 1479 (*Catalog* 1971: 43).<sup>3</sup> In general, *thangkas* were made for various purposes: as a donation that might result in immediate benefits to the donor, such as material success in one's endeavours, longevity, good fortune and so on; for commemoration of the dead; for teaching; and to invoke certain deities as an act of piety or devotion (Pal 1969: 23–4, and Pott 1951: 58). Like mandala paintings, they are aids to meditation, and can become abodes of the divine.

For instance, the Tibetan Wheel of Life (Fig. 2) is a complex diagram depicting fundamental Buddhist teachings about the origins, causes, and alleviation of suffering. At the centre, a cock, a snake, and a pig symbolise the three basic causes of rebirth: greed, hatred, and ignorance. Around these animals a second wheel pictures the paths leading either to bad rebirths or to liberation. The six conditions of rebirth are also depicted, along with the twelve interdependent causes of rebirth. The Wheel itself is held in the jaws and claws of the Lord of Death, symbol of the transitory nature of all phenomena. Outside the wheel are Shakyamuni, the Buddha as teacher of freedom, and Avalokiteshvara, who helps humans to become free. In contrast to Russian Orthodoxy, traditions such as Tibetan Buddhism see humans not in terms of sin, but as blinded by desires and hence unable to achieve liberation from the wheel of existence without tremendous effort.

Very little is known about the social background of individual Tibetan *thangka* artists of the past, except for the Newari artists from the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal who work in Tibet.<sup>4</sup> In general, these artists can be of two basic types. Most of them are ordinary artisans, pious laypeople who come from families whose primary occupation is painting. A smaller group of painters can be called yogis, tantric initiates whose work follows set ritual steps and visualisations. This group has included lamas and monks, as well as *karmapas*, the black-hat abbots of the Kagyu order. Organised into guilds, some of these painters moved around among monasteries and temples. As mem-



Figure 2 *Thangka* (Wheel of Life), colours on cotton cloth, Tibet, eighteenth–early nineteenth century. Newark Museum, New Jersey: No 8268.

bers of specific ateliers or guilds, their work may also be seen as “the product of collective will and collective effort” (Pal 1969: 23).

But regardless of their background, all traditional painters worked under canonical authority and strong artistic tradition. Technical aids to painting these and other images include fixed patterns, spray sten-

cils, imprints, illustrations in manuscripts, block-prints, certain texts (especially when a life history is to be portrayed), and painter's manuals containing further data about colour and other details. Hence, as in Russian icons, there was little place for the kind of individual artistic expression that has characterised post-Renaissance western art. Nevertheless, opportunities for individual expression can still be found in decorative details such as landscape and ornamentation.

Also as in traditional Russian Orthodoxy, the qualities or values to be expressed by the thangka painter are very carefully prescribed in terms of technical skill and personal conduct. Technically, the thangka painter needs to be skilled in drawing and depicting correct proportion. In fact, all of the elements of composition – ornaments, gestures, etc. – are to be depicted following canonical guidelines so that the lineage of artistic transmission is maintained. The thangka painter uses a manual not unlike the *podlinnik* that illustrates and explains traditional iconography and iconometry. The strictness of these guidelines is emphasised by a description in an early fifteenth-century treatise by the lama, sMan-bla don-grub rgya-mtsho (Dagyab 1977: 37). He defines the seven religious aspects of painting and sculpture as follows: 1) defining correct dimensions and measurements; 2) correcting the errors in other written works; 3) detailing the consequences of wrong measurements; 4) tracing the books of reference; 5) naming the virtues of accurate execution; 6) defining the spiritual prerequisites of the artist and patron; and 7) describing the method of painting. Five of these seven guidelines deal with the accuracy and consistency of reproduction from and within the tradition.

Related to such concerns, the traditional artist also must be able to discriminate between the content of higher (inner) and lower (outer) tantras, as well as to understand all of the characteristics of both peaceful and wrathful deities. Specifically, in order to depict the deities of the inner tantras, the artist must have received the appropriate training and empowerment and must perform daily rituals, such as meditation, visualisation, and mantra recitation, related to the deities depicted. By centring themselves while they worked, these painters could produce work that would make spiritual values accessible to others (Wilson 1986: 18).

Beyond these technical issues, the thangka painter should also embody certain personal qualities (Goswamy 1976: 24, and Lama 1983: not paginated). This person should be restrained, compassionate, patient, without vanity, slow to anger, and not concerned with

wealth. The painter should also be clean, scrupulous in conduct, and able to work in a sustained manner without procrastinating. Finally, when the thangka is completed, the painter must be able to explain it clearly to the patron. Traditionally, thangka painters were well paid for their work, with patron and artist negotiating the amount of gold and other special materials, as well as the payment for the artist.

It was rare for thangka artists to sign their works, although their names are sometimes found in texts, wall inscriptions, and some individual thangkas and bronzes (Pal 1983: 51–3, and Daggyab 1977: 36–8). There were two interrelated reasons for this anonymity. First, because the artist served as an instrument of the divine, that person's individual identity was insignificant. Second, a major precept of Buddhism is to destroy the ego (Rhie 1991: 24). In this context, signing one's name would be an egotistical act. Because images created were used for Buddhist rituals and meditation, the artistic process was also considered to be a form of yoga, and the artist, a yogi. This is analogous to the idea that the icon painter was a priest. More recently thangkas, like icons, are being painted for commercial markets in Asia and the rest of the world.

#### INSIGHTS FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

What do these major cultural traditions have to teach us about the practice of art and the education of artists today? How can such models concerning the artist be reappropriated or "reaccented" in our time?

Reaccentuation is a term Mikhail Bakhtin used to describe the way ideas can never be limited by their past use or expression. "Every age re-accentuates in its own way the works of its most immediate past, [thus] their semantic content literally continues to grow, to further create out of itself" (Bakhtin 1981, 421). In his last published writings from 1974 Bakhtin reaffirmed this idea even more vividly (1986: 170):

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue.

This radical view of the ongoing openness of words, art, and ideas is intrinsic to my consideration of Russian Orthodox icons and Tibetan Buddhist thangkas. Traditions change and evolve through time, and this is certainly true of both of these. For instance, contemporary thangka painters, now working in Kathmandu, Nepal, as a result of the forced exile of Tibetans from Chinese-occupied Tibet, learn their trade as artisans from many different tribal and professional backgrounds in schools for the commercial market. Co-existing with this type of school are more traditional settings, where lay painters and monks paint thangkas for both commercial and temple patrons in a traditional master-apprentice system, and where monastically-trained lamas work in the most traditional manner for temples only. Adherents of both Russian Orthodoxy and Tibetan Buddhism might bemoan the inevitable shifts that occur through the migration and assimilation of western cultural and commercial values, but these changes cannot be halted (Harris 1993: 104–14).

My discussion here is not meant to idealise the traditions of the icon and thangka painter. Perhaps, working from a postmodern western secular perspective, artists might be able to aid in the conservation of significant values in these two traditions. This possibility can best be described through consideration of how the contemporary education of artists might be affected by these traditions.

At the risk of oversimplifying and reducing cultural differences, I suggest that certain values were highly esteemed in the training of both Russian icon and Tibetan thangka painters, and have been lost under modernist, avant-garde, and postmodern aesthetics. Under commercial pressure in the late twentieth century, many of these values are no longer rigorously practiced in either Russia or Tibet (or in other countries where icons and thangkas are produced). Consequently, the fact that I describe them in the present tense is less related to present practice than to past reality and future possibility.

These values include, first, a recognition that one is part of a tradition whose methods and techniques should be honoured and conserved, as evidenced in the pattern books that were used by both Russian and Tibetan artists. Second, the artist's ego, although that word might not have been employed, is insignificant. The artist is not the self-proclaimed actor, but the instrument of creativity. Third, both traditions clearly saw the act of painting, and the necessary training that preceded painting, as part of a spiritual practice, with both inner and outer dimensions. Fourth, technical skill was cultivated through long apprenticeship. While there are undoubtedly other

areas of overlap, let us consider each of these further, as they pertain to the education of contemporary artists.

First, one's relationship to a sustaining tradition. The nature of what constitutes "one's own" tradition has changed rapidly in the postmodern world. The fact that the history of world cultures, and the artistic traditions that have sustained and nurtured their change over time, is available to us in the late twentieth century means that a broad well-grounded study of these traditions is essential. In contrast to some modernist or avant-garde aesthetics that rejected the past with its particular histories and traditions, I maintain that it is necessary to engage actively with the multiple pasts that have contributed to the formation of the present.

In a small way, this article attempts to model a dialogue between contemporary concerns, coming from a European-American background, and objects and practices from other cultural chronotopes, or constellations of space and time. For instance, to enrich one's study of art of the past by looking closely at two particular traditions, such as the Russian icon and Tibetan thangka, presents intriguing possibilities for the contemporary practice of art. What might an artist, interested in these forms of art, do with that knowledge? Appropriation is a powerful aesthetic strategy, especially when used with a modicum of understanding of what one is appropriating. Parody, unlike satire or empty pastiche, involves a special form of dialogue with the past that understands its value, but also is critical and transgressive. It may move in contrary or unexpected directions, crossing previously established boundaries to create new forms.

Second, the artist's selfhood: anonymity versus self-aggrandisement. It is unlikely that artists in contemporary culture will adopt an ideal based on anonymity. The modern artist-hero, semi-divine creator, the avant-garde prophet, and the postmodern bricoleur were and are all devoted to art as a form of ego-gratification, with the attendant financial and psychological rewards that accrue with it. Such values will probably remain the major motivating factor for many artists, as they are so central to what drives European and American life.

However, there are alternatives to a practice of art based on self-promotion and self-aggrandisement. Here I am thinking of the idea that the work of art is a gift rather than a commodity to be sold. Lewis Hyde has eloquently articulated the idea of a gift economy versus a market economy in the arts, suggesting that art and the imagination die to the extent that art aspires to enter the market as



commodity (Hyde 1983: 274). In giving a gift, the artist is not necessarily anonymous, but the presence of a second person, and a second consciousness, radically transforms the event of art into a full aesthetic and moral act.

What is the source of an artist's work? Many artists and writers have acknowledged that inspiration itself often comes as a mysterious gift, and in this sense it cannot be taught or learned. "The imagination is not subject to the will of the artist" (Hyde 1983: 148). The word *mystery* comes from the Greek *muein*, to close the mouth. This meaning may have originated in the practices of ancient mystery rites, after which initiates were sworn to silence. But perhaps this image of closing the mouth has another meaning: that what has been learned cannot be shown or described; it can only be experienced directly. Creative imagination, too, can be experienced, but is very difficult to describe. Analogously, what would happen in the practice of art if this sense of the mysterious *gift* were to replace, even partially, the sense that art practice is supposed to be a profit-making activity? Such questions cannot be answered didactically or theoretically, but must find their way into the cognitive framework and art practice of aspiring, and experienced, artists.

Third, the nature of art as spiritual practice, with both inner and outer dimensions. On the one hand, the icon or thangka artist was engaged in practices of inner purification through the work. In this regard, the artist had to be a transformed person, or at least engaged in transforming the self through the cultivation of values such as attentiveness, detachment, patience, humility, silence. On the other, the artist was giving form to religious and moral teachings. As such, the artist's work can be seen as expressing a sense of calling – a vocation – to make spiritual teachings available to various publics. For artists already interested in or committed to a particular spirituality or religious practice such as Christian prayer, Hindu yoga, or Zen Buddhist meditation, this second dimension might be easily incorporated into their working process.

But a different set of problems are encountered by modern and postmodern secular artists, many of whom may actively repudiate any form of organised religion. In contrast, the inner dimension of art as spiritual practice is more readily accessible to all artists. What if, as a regular part of studio education, artists were taught how to meditate or were trained in the techniques of visualisation? What about the role of silence? In the howl of contemporary life, where do we have the time or the space for silence, except in the artist's or

writer's studio, the religious community, and the scientist's laboratory?<sup>5</sup> Silence allows one to experience life at a different level, to listen not only to the self, but also to the many other audible (and inaudible) voices that surround us.

What about other values such as attentiveness, acceptance, or contentment? Contentment, like full attention, is paradoxical in two senses. It happens best when it includes no self-consciousness. Full attention means no notion of attention, no-self-to-attend, as a Buddhist would say. Contentment and attention are paradoxical in another sense: both can lead to loss of ego, but they can also mean working in the most ego-bound manner to please others – parents, family, church, university, or other institutions (Hall 1993, 23–6). My point here is that even the inner dimension of artistic practice is related to external demands.

Fourth, the nature of training and the attainment of technical skill. Here I do not mean to look back at an idealised past, whether Tibetan or Russian, when to be an artist meant that technical skills were highly developed. But I am in favour of rigorous technical training in the arts that might include, depending upon one's orientation and focus, drawing from life, learning how to move, speak, and sing, so that one's performances are not mundane, or acquiring a full range of computer-based skills. The world of images requires informed and trained designers, artists, and architects, for each of these persons brings a unique perspective to the task of interpreting and reshaping that world. Various forms of electronic communication play an increasingly major role in our environment; understanding how to use new technologies is essential.

In face of the potentially depressing, even devastating, situation that artists face in the contemporary art world, artists need to cultivate specific attitudes and virtues, not necessarily in the following order (Freeman 1994: 256). They need "developmental realism": a recognition of their present status in relation to past experience and future aspirations. Artists need to develop conviction, humility, and resolve; to keep vigilance over true desire (in contrast to the false desires to "be an artist" that develop as they try to succeed in the art world); to become conscious of how the mystique of art and being an artist, rather than other more intrinsic desires, shape one's work; to care for, relate to, and be affiliated with others; to work from both a self-defined (intrinsic rather than extrinsic) motivation and a larger self-transcendent motivation, which was originally and again might be provided by ideas about the sacred. In my view, artists should be

self-determining but not overly individualistic, guided by moral purpose and a sense of living tradition, and they should believe in and act on the communicative power of art. For help in understanding how the education of artists could foster these values, there are no better guides than the traditional worlds of the Tibetan thangka painter and the Russian icon writer.

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#### Notes

- 1 Overviews of the history of the development of Russian Icons are given in Bunt 1946, Gerhard 1957, Galavaris 1973, Ouspensky and Lossky 1972 and Vorobyev 1986.
- 2 Other details of my account are also drawn from Roerich 1925, Snellgrove 1968, Pal 1969 and *Catalog* 1971.
- 3 More about the purposes of thangkas, their iconography and construction can be found in Pott 1951: 49–51, 58, Pal 1969: 24–5, Chandra 1986, Roerich 1925: 16–21, and Pallis 1939: 336–8.
- 4 Materials in English about the training of thangka painters are few. The information here is gleaned from the following sources: Jackson 1984, Lama 1983, Pal 1983, Macdonald 1979, Tucci 1949, Dagab 1977 and Olschak 1987.
- 5 I must credit this particular way of seeing silence in the studio to Carol Becker, from a conversation at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, November 1994.

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