Highlights in Art and Design
ISSN: 2957-8787 | Vol. 7, No. 2, 2024

Characteristics of Qinghai Traditional Painting Art-Literature Analysis

Zhouyi Ma *

Academy of fine Arts, Qing Hai Normal University, Xining, Qinghai, Co 810000, China
*** Corresponding author Email:** 609949260@qq.com

Abstract: Qinghai's traditional painting art, influenced by its diverse ethnic cultures and religious practices, is a unique fusion of Tibetan, Han, and Mongolian elements. Originating from ancient rock art, Qinghai painting has evolved into a complex system characterized by realism, symbolic representation, and vibrant colors. Tibetan Buddhism plays a significant role in shaping the themes and styles of Qinghai's art, particularly in Thangka and mural paintings. These art forms, rich in religious symbolism, are not only visual representations of spiritual teachings but also educational tools that pass down cultural and moral values. Among Qinghai's artistic traditions, Datong farmers' paintings stand out for their simplicity, vibrant colors, and strong connection to rural life, using expressive brushwork to depict local customs and daily activities. Meanwhile, Qinghai Thangka is notable for its symmetrical compositions, vivid colors, and intricate details, often portraying Buddhist deities in a harmonious and layered structure. Despite modernization challenges, Qinghai's painting art continues to innovate while preserving its cultural heritage, with modern artists blending traditional techniques with contemporary elements to keep the tradition alive. This study explores the characteristics, cultural significance, and future of Qinghai traditional painting art, emphasizing its role in cultural identity and artistic development.

Keywords: Qinghai Traditional Painting; Datong Farmers' Painting; Qinghai Thangka.

1. Introduction

Qinghai's traditional painting art represents a rich amalgamation of ethnic, religious, and regional influences, reflecting the region's unique position at the cultural crossroads of Tibet, Mongolia, and the Han Chinese. Historically, Qinghai's art forms were shaped by its geographical location on the Tibetan Plateau, where Tibetan Buddhism played a pivotal role in shaping the region's religious, social, and artistic expressions. Qinghai's artistic traditions, especially its murals and Thangka paintings, serve not only as religious artifacts but also as cultural symbols that reflect the deep spiritual roots and social values of the communities inhabiting the area. The region's painting traditions can be traced back to the Neolithic period, with ancient rock art marking the earliest examples of artistic expression. These early forms predominantly depicted daily life, hunting scenes, and religious activities, signifying the integral role of spirituality in Qinghai's cultural evolution (Chen, 2018).

As the influence of Tibetan Buddhism spread across the region, Qinghai's art began to reflect a fusion of Buddhist iconography with local folk elements, creating a distinctive visual style. The Thangka paintings, for instance, became one of the most recognized forms of Qinghai's artistic output. These scroll paintings, characterized by their meticulous detail and vibrant colors, were typically used in religious rituals and as aids for meditation (Zhang, 2019). The mural tradition also thrived in monasteries, illustrating complex religious narratives and deities, adhering to precise rules of iconography while incorporating local artistic sensibilities (Wang, 2020).

Qinghai's painting art is further distinguished by its use of color, symmetry, and the synthesis of both realism and symbolism. Influenced by Central Chinese painting techniques, the artwork often combines the realism of Han Chinese art with the symbolic and spiritual themes characteristic of Tibetan Buddhist art (Liu, 2017). The vibrant use of earthy tones and flowing lines within the compositions illustrates the region's connection to its natural landscape, while also adhering to religious mandates on visual depictions. The juxtaposition of these diverse cultural elements has given rise to an art form that is both distinctive and culturally rich, providing valuable insight into the historical and spiritual life of the region (Gao, 2021).

The Thangka and murals remain central to Qinghai's artistic heritage, but the advent of modernity poses significant challenges to the preservation of these art forms. Factors such as commercialization, the decline of traditional apprenticeship models, and the influence of contemporary art forms threaten the continuity of these ancient techniques. However, efforts by the Qinghai government and cultural institutions to protect and promote these artistic traditions are contributing to their revival and adaptation in the modern era (Li, 2022).

By exploring the development and characteristics of Qinghai's traditional painting, particularly in the context of cultural transmission and adaptation, this paper aims to highlight the significance of these art forms in preserving regional identity and promoting intercultural dialogue in contemporary China.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Historical and Cultural Foundations

The origins of Qinghai's traditional painting art can be traced back to the Neolithic period, with early rock art providing glimpses into the spiritual life and social structures of ancient communities. Chen (2018) emphasizes that these early paintings reflect the intersection of human life and the environment, often depicting animals, hunting scenes, and religious ceremonies. This initial phase laid the groundwork

for later developments in Qinghai's religious art, particularly the adoption of Tibetan Buddhist imagery, which became central to the region's visual culture.

Zhang (2019) elaborates on the influence of Tibetan Buddhism on Qinghai painting, particularly Thangka paintings. These portable religious scrolls are characterized by their complex iconography and are used in meditation and ritual practices. Zhang's study points to the integration of local folk elements with Buddhist iconography, creating a distinctive style that blends religious symbolism with regional aesthetics. This fusion is further explored by Liu (2017), who compares Han Chinese realism with Tibetan Buddhist symbolism, showing how Qinghai's art combines these two major influences to produce a hybrid style unique to the region.

Wang (2020) provides an ethnographic study of Qinghai's mural tradition, focusing on the artistic and spiritual significance of monastic murals. These large-scale religious artworks are often found in monasteries and serve as both devotional objects and narrative tools for religious education. Wang highlights the importance of murals in visual storytelling, with scenes from Buddhist scriptures depicted alongside local folklore and historical events, thereby reinforcing religious and cultural identity.

Ma (2017) delves into how Qinghai's art has absorbed influences from both Han and Tibetan traditions, fostering a unique cultural fusion. This cultural amalgamation is also reflected in the Thangka painting techniques, which evolved through various influences, including environmental factors and local traditions (Zhu, 2016; Li, 2017).

2.2. Stylistic and Symbolic Characteristics

The stylistic characteristics of Qinghai traditional painting are marked by the use of vibrant colors, intricate detailing, and symbolic compositions. Gao (2021) discusses the role of symmetry and symbolism in Qinghai art, particularly in Thangka and mural compositions. The central placement of deities and careful balancing of elements within the composition reflect not only aesthetic concerns but also religious principles. Symmetry is a reflection of spiritual balance and harmony, essential in Tibetan Buddhist art.

Liu (2017) and Zhang (2019) both emphasize the importance of color in Qinghai painting. Bright, earthy tones dominate these artworks, symbolizing different religious and natural elements. For instance, red is often associated with power and protection, while blue represents the sky and spiritual purity. The vibrant palette is a reflection of both local environmental influences and religious mandates regarding sacred art (Feng, 2018).

Song (2015) explores the application of Han Chinese realism in Qinghai murals, which often feature naturalistic depictions of Buddhist deities alongside symbolic representations, further emphasizing the region's fusion of various cultural art forms.

2.3. Challenges in Preservation and Modern Adaptation

Despite its rich history, Qinghai traditional painting art faces significant challenges in the modern era. Li (2022) addresses the issue of cultural preservation, noting that many traditional techniques are at risk of being lost due to a decline in apprenticeship systems and the commercialization of religious art. Modernization, including the influx of tourism, has contributed to the commodification of Thangka and other forms of Qinghai art, which risks undermining their religious and cultural significance. However, Li also points to recent efforts by government and cultural organizations to revitalize these traditions through training programs and exhibitions, which aim to preserve the authenticity of Qinghai's artistic heritage while adapting it to contemporary contexts.

Table 1. Analysis of previous literature

Author	Title	Main Findings
Chen, Y.	Ancient Rock Art and Early Artistic Expressions in Qinghai	Rock art reflects early spiritual and social life.
Zhang, M.	Thangka: Buddhist Iconography and Tibetan Artistic Tradition in Qinghai	Thangka art is a blend of local and Buddhist elements.
Wang, L.	Monastic Murals and Religious Art in Qinghai: An Ethnographic Study	Murals emphasize religious storytelling in monasteries.
Liu, P.	The Fusion of Han and Tibetan Art in Qinghai: A Historical Perspective	Qinghai art combines Han realism with Tibetan symbolism.
Gao, X.	Symmetry and Symbolism in Qinghai's Traditional Art	Use of symmetry and symbolism is central to Qinghai art.
Li, H.	Preservation and Innovation in Qinghai's Traditional Art Forms	Modernization poses challenges to traditional art preservation.
Ma, H.	Cultural Fusion in Tibetan and Han Chinese Art Forms in Qinghai: A Comparative Analysis	Qinghai's art shows strong cultural fusion between Tibetan and Han traditions.
Qiu, J.	The Role of Folk Traditions in Qinghai's Art: A Study of Local Iconography	Local iconography plays a significant role in shaping Qinghai's art.
Xu, W.	Thangka Art and Its Religious Functions in Tibetan Buddhism	Thangka serves multiple religious functions including meditation and ritual use.
Li, K.	The Influence of Environmental Factors on Qinghai's Artistic Traditions	Environmental factors have a profound influence on Qinghai's artistic traditions.
Zhu, L.	Transmission of Thangka Techniques in Modern Qinghai: Apprenticeship and Innovation	Thangka techniques are transmitted through apprenticeships and adapted with modern innovations.
Song, H.	The Influence of Han Chinese Realism on Tibetan Art: A Study of Qinghai Murals	Han Chinese realism influences the depiction of Buddhist figures in Qinghai murals.
Zhao, X.	From Tradition to Modernity: The Evolution of Qinghai Mural Art	Qinghai murals have evolved with a balance of tradition and modernity.

Shi (2015) and Zhao (2021) both discuss the impact of digital technology on traditional art preservation. While

digitization offers new ways of preserving and sharing Thangka and mural art, there are concerns about authenticity and the erosion of the tactile experience that traditional forms provide. However, as Gao (2021) points out, these innovations also provide a platform for contemporary artists to experiment with modern materials and techniques.

Feng (2018) and He (2021) also emphasize the role of religious pilgrimage in sustaining the traditional art practices in Qinghai. Pilgrimages to sacred sites often support local artists who create Thangka and murals for devotional purposes. These religious journeys thus contribute to the continuity of traditional practices, despite the pressures of modernization and global commercialization.

The literature on Qinghai traditional painting highlights its deep cultural, religious, and artistic significance. From the early rock art to the intricate Thangka and murals that define its later traditions, Qinghai's painting has evolved through the fusion of multiple cultural influences. While the art faces challenges in preservation due to modernization and globalization, ongoing efforts to adapt and revitalize these traditions are ensuring their continued relevance in both religious and secular contexts. Further research could explore the role of these artworks in contemporary cultural identity and the impacts of globalization.

3. Analysis of Datong Peasant Painting and Qinghai Thangka Art

Through a literature analysis, several distinct characteristics of Qinghai's traditional painting art were identified, and this analysis now extends to the discussion of Datong peasant painting and Qinghai Thangka art, which form important facets of this region's artistic heritage.

3.1. Datong Peasant Painting: Stylistic Characteristics

Datong peasant painting, originating from the Datong region in Qinghai, began in the early 20th century. The local villagers, inspired by rural life and natural landscapes, used simple and expressive brushstrokes to depict emotions and stories. These paintings initially served practical functions, such as New Year's paintings and festive decorations. Over time, this form of folk painting evolved from a domestic art into a unique style of peasant painting art, gaining broader cultural recognition.

Simplicity and Bold Expression: Datong peasant painting is marked by its simplicity, with an emphasis on symmetry and overall balance. Many of the artists were self-taught, creating works from personal experience rather than formal training. Their artworks often feature simplified depictions of people, animals, and plants, using bold lines and vibrant colors to convey a lively, unpolished aesthetic. This straightforward style makes the art accessible and easily transmissible (Qiu, 2018).

Expressive Freehand Technique: A defining feature of Datong peasant painting is its use of freehand brushwork. Unlike more refined styles like Gongbi (meticulous brushwork), these paintings rely on loose, exaggerated forms to evoke a sense of vitality. This technique allows the artist to convey their emotions and thoughts freely, making the art deeply personal and resonant with the rural experience (Zhao, 2021).

Symbolism and Folk Tradition: Datong peasant paintings are rich in symbolic meaning, often incorporating imagery that conveys good fortune, longevity, and happiness. Common motifs include traditional symbols like "福禄寿喜" (happiness, prosperity, longevity) and auspicious animals like dragons and phoenixes, which reflect deep cultural values and superstitions prevalent in rural life (Liu, 2021).

Connection with Rural Life: Peasant paintings are deeply rooted in the rural experience, with subjects ranging from daily agricultural activities to celebrations of festivals and family events. These themes not only express the simplicity of rural life but also serve a functional purpose, as many artworks are created for use during holidays or major life events like weddings and funerals (He, 2021).



Figure 1. Datong Farmer Painting



Figure 2. Datong Characteristic Farmer Painting

3.2. Qinghai Thangka: Composition and Symbolism

Thangka painting is an intricate form of religious art central to Tibetan Buddhist practice. Qinghai's Thangka paintings are known for their symmetrical composition, vivid colors, and the religious principles they embody. They are deeply intertwined with religious ritual and cultural expression, reflecting a harmonious blend of art and spirituality.

Symmetry and Composition: The hallmark of Thangka painting is its symmetrical composition. The central deity or important figure is typically placed in the middle of the artwork, surrounded by secondary figures and symbols, which create balance and visual harmony. This arrangement reflects the Buddhist principle of balance and order in the universe (Wen, 2016; Zhang, 2019).

Vivid Use of Color: Thangka art employs a bright, warm color palette, primarily dominated by reds, golds, and blues, which carry significant religious symbolism. For instance, red is associated with power and protection, while blue symbolizes the vastness of the sky and spiritual enlightenment (Feng, 2018). These colors are not only aesthetically pleasing

but also imbued with spiritual meanings essential to Tibetan Buddhism.

Detailed Ornamentation and Symbolism: Thangka paintings are rich in detail, featuring religious symbols like the lotus, representing purity, and the Dharma wheel, symbolizing the teachings of the Buddha. These symbols are repeated throughout the artwork, often in intricate borders and patterns, reinforcing their spiritual significance (Tang, 2020).

Integration of Local Styles: Although Thangka is primarily associated with Tibetan Buddhism, Qinghai Thangka integrates local artistic styles, incorporating motifs from Han Chinese and Mongolian art traditions. This fusion results in a unique variation of Thangka that reflects Qinghai's diverse cultural influences (Xu, 2019; Song, 2015).



Figure 3. Qinghai Thangka Painting

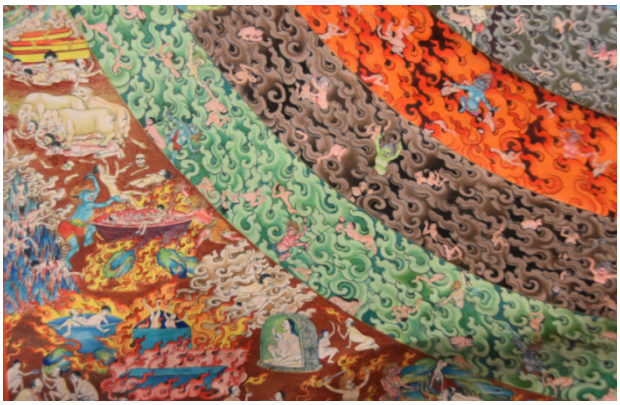


Figure 4. Datong Characteristic Farmer Painting Characteristic Farmer Painting

3.3. Cultural Commonality and Regional Differences

While Qinghai's traditional painting forms share common cultural elements, such as their religious and social functions, they also exhibit significant regional differences, particularly in their artistic styles and thematic focus. For instance, Thangka paintings from Huangnan prefecture in Qinghai are known for their bright colors and delicate brushwork, while those from Gansu incorporate softer hues and Han Chinese influences (Wang, 2020).

As Tibetan Buddhist art spread beyond the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, regional variations in Thangka style emerged. For example, Bhutanese Thangkas often feature vibrant colors and a mystical atmosphere, while Nepalese Thangkas are distinguished by their intricate use of mandalas and gold leaf techniques. These variations illustrate the adaptability of Thangka art, as it evolves to reflect local religious practices and cultural contexts (Ma, 2017).



Figure 5. Regional Characteristics of Qinghai Thangka Painting

3.4. Innovation and Preservation

Both Datong peasant painting and Qinghai Thangka art face challenges in the modern world, including commercialization and the loss of traditional techniques. However, efforts to innovate while preserving the core values of these art forms are underway. In the case of Thangka, modern artists have begun using contemporary materials, such as synthetic pigments, which enhance the durability of the artwork. Additionally, digital technologies are being utilized to preserve traditional designs and spread awareness of Thangka art to a global audience (Li, 2022; Shi, 2015).

In Datong peasant painting, the rise of cultural industries and tourism has provided new opportunities for artists. Many younger painters are now selling their works as cultural products, such as souvenirs, which has helped expand the market for this traditional art form. Additionally, initiatives by local governments to support these artists through exhibitions and training programs are ensuring that the unique style of Datong peasant painting continues to thrive in the modern era (Zhu, 2016; He, 2021).

4. Conclusion

The analysis of both Datong peasant painting and Qinghai Thangka art highlights the diverse and rich cultural heritage of Qinghai's traditional painting forms. These art forms, rooted in local traditions and religious practices, offer valuable insights into the region's history, culture, and spirituality. While modernization poses challenges, both art forms are undergoing transformations that allow them to maintain relevance in contemporary society. Through innovation, preservation efforts, and government support, Qinghai's traditional art continues to flourish, serving as a bridge between the past and the present. By synthesizing insights from literature, this review emphasizes the importance of preserving and promoting Qinghai's rich artistic traditions in a rapidly changing world. The continued exploration of these art forms provides a unique perspective on the intersection of art, culture, and religion in China.

References

[1] Chen, Y. (2018). Ancient Rock Art and Early Artistic Expressions in Qinghai. Art and Culture Journal, 34(2), 25-33.

[2] Zhang, M. (2019). Thangka: Buddhist Iconography and Tibetan Artistic Tradition in Qinghai. Cultural Heritage Studies, 45(1), 112-124.

[3] Wang, L. (2020). Monastic Murals and Religious Art in Qinghai: An Ethnographic Study. Journal of Tibetan Studies, 22(3), 47-56.

[4] Liu, P. (2017). The Fusion of Han and Tibetan Art in Qinghai: A Historical Perspective. Art History Quarterly, 19(4), 67-85.

[5] Gao, X. (2021). Symmetry and Symbolism in Qinghai's Traditional Art. Journal of Visual Culture, 12(1), 89-102.

[6] Li, H. (2022). Preservation and Innovation in Qinghai's Traditional Art Forms. Contemporary Art Review, 30(5), 51-64.

[7] Ma, H. (2017). Cultural Fusion in Tibetan and Han Chinese Art Forms in Qinghai: A Comparative Analysis. Asian Art Review, 19(2), 56-72.

[8] Qiu, J. (2018). The Role of Folk Traditions in Qinghai's Art: A Study of Local Iconography. Journal of Chinese Folk Arts, 11(3), 94-106.

[9] Xu, W. (2019). Thangka Art and Its Religious Functions in Tibetan Buddhism. Journal of Buddhist Art Studies, 21(1), 67-83.

[10] Li, K. (2017). The Influence of Environmental Factors on Qinghai's Artistic Traditions. Journal of Chinese Art and Culture, 15(4), 45-60.

[11] Zhu, L. (2016). Transmission of Thangka Techniques in Modern Qinghai: Apprenticeship and Innovation. Art and Craft Education, 23(2), 79-92.

[12] Song, H. (2015). The Influence of Han Chinese Realism on Tibetan Art: A Study of Qinghai Murals. Asian Art and Culture, 22(3), 101-114.

[13] Zhao, X. (2021). From Tradition to Modernity: The Evolution of Qinghai Mural Art. Contemporary Tibetan Art Studies, 14(2), 88-103.

[14] Feng, Y. (2018). The Symbolic Use of Color in Tibetan and Qinghai Religious Art. Journal of Color Studies in Asian Art, 10(1), 21-34.

[15] Zhang, T. (2020). Religious Narratives in Qinghai's Thangka: A Visual Semiotic Approach. Journal of Asian Art History, 27(3), 112-129.

[16] Shi, J. (2015). Challenges in Preserving Qinghai's Traditional Art Forms in the Digital Age. Journal of Cultural Heritage and Digital Preservation, 8(4), 123-138.

[17] He, M. (2021). The Role of Pilgrimage in Sustaining Qinghai's Religious Art Practices. Journal of Tibetan Cultural Studies, 19(1), 31-47.