

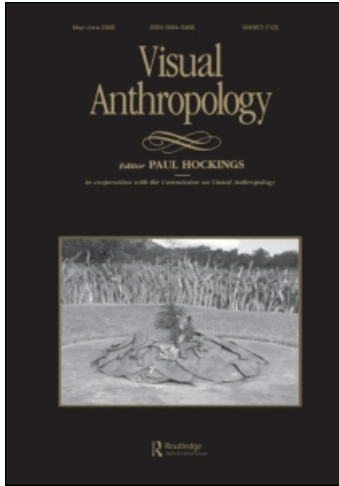
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## Buddha's Painter

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## *Buddha's Painter*

*Buddha's Painter (Buddhas Maler)*, film by Thomas Gonschior, 2004; DVD, 55 min. Distributor: [www.indieflix.com](http://www.indieflix.com).

From the perspective of its primary narrator, the Buddhist Lama Purevbat, the film discusses the revival of Buddhist art, specifically *thangka* painting, in Mongolia today. The Lama's personal story is a captivating one. As he tells it, he grew up in the countryside and loved to paint as a child. This drew him to Ulaan Baatar, the capital city of Mongolia, where he studied traditional Mongolian painting. Realizing that he needed to master Buddhist art, he became a monk and brought the art of *thangka* painting back to Mongolia from the Dalai Lama's school in Dharamsala, India.

The film was shot primarily at the Mongolian Institute of Buddhist Art in Ulaan Baatar. Interviews with the Lama and his students are interspersed with landscape shots and shots of Buddhist monasteries and of the standing stones, including the "deerstones" that are found across Central Asia and into Europe, and other topics.

The continuing threads throughout the film are the history of Buddhist art in Mongolia and art as the basis of Buddhism. We are told how Buddhist art was introduced from Tibet and flourished, then almost disappeared when communism took over in the 1930s. We are shown chilling evidence of the mass killings and mass graves under this repressive regime, as well as how monasteries are being rebuilt throughout Mongolia now that it is independent. One such restoration project is the building of a stupa with bricks made from the murdered monk's cremated remains. Thus, the monks hope to expiate this dark era and contribute to the renaissance Buddhism is undergoing in Mongolia today.

Lama Purevbat describes how a *thangka* painting is thought out beforehand ("You don't make decisions while you are painting"), and how the traditional model must be followed. The Lama instructs his pupils in the conventions, showing the geometry of the drawings that underlie a painting to ensure the correct proportions. As a deity embodies inner perfection, we are told, a *thangka* artist has to reach a high spiritual level attained by strict discipline (endurance and patience) and the following of precise guidelines. "What we learn here," the Lama explains, "is a way to enlightenment."

The film is beautiful—visually and aurally. Anthropology students who viewed it commented on the music and how well the soundtrack was linked with the imagery. It begins with *Chod* practice (generally a hidden practice), but the

informed viewer wonders how this will relate to Mongolian Buddhist art. Here, as in what follows, the viewer needs a context for the montage of images and ideas. Without an overview, it is difficult to follow the main themes and to understand how the disparate parts relate. The film moves from *Chod* practice to art school to politics, then back to art. As one of our students put it, "I just got interested in something and the film went on to something else." It is not until the head teacher of the art school discusses *thangka* art specifically that the focus of the film becomes apparent. (*Thangka* art, incidentally, is never clearly defined for the novice.)

There are some sweeping generalizations that misinform about Mongolian history; for example, the Lama's claim that "the traditional Mongolian culture is Buddhist culture." The deerstone and other standing stones that are cut into the storyline, ostensibly to convey a sense of history and of place, predate Buddhism in Mongolia. The comment ignores the ancestral tradition—shamanism—upon which Buddhism (introduced from Tibet in the 16th century) was superimposed. Both traditions suffered under repressive regimes and both are undergoing a revival in Mongolia. Today, Buddhism is the official state religion of Mongolia, but many Mongolians remain shamanists or blend shamanism and Buddhism in their beliefs and practices.

While the focus of the film is Mongolia, it would be beneficial to show how Mongolian art is different from other Himalayan Buddhist art. While this was briefly discussed in the depiction of animals, Bön art also has animals in the *thangka* paintings. In the paintings that we do see, the colors appear fresh and modern, and are presumably synthetic. One wonders why there was not some discussion of how and why the use of traditional earth colors mixed with yak-hide glue has been replaced with what the students were learning to use. Such a discussion could include *thangka* painting technique as well as the social, economic, and political changes that have affected Buddhist *thangkas* in Mongolia.

While one of us liked hearing the Lama's voice as the main narrator (in Mongolian), there were problems with reading the English subtitles when the white text was superimposed over white backgrounds. (Minor spelling errors could easily be corrected.) The filmmaker makes the views of his main speaker preeminent and gives a sense of the film as a collaborative venture. This is a strong point of the film, but it also means that the filmmaker's vision is compromised; consequently, the film lacks cohesion.

This is an "indie" film by Thomas Gonschior Productions. It may be ordered online (at a very modest price) from a company that offers distribution opportunities for an interesting range of films without mainstream distribution channels. We would like to be able to recommend this film for university-level courses in anthropology, religious studies, Central Asian history, Mongolian studies, or fine arts. Certainly it is relevant to the revitalization that Mongolia is undergoing and to the place of Buddhism in its future. It would be difficult, however, for a student or novice to benefit from the complex ideas the film addresses without

an instructor familiar with the material. The necessary broader context is missing from the film itself. It tries to do too many things at once for an audience that is too general.

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