

Editor's Introduction

Reimagining Himalayan Art and Culture: Visuality, Tradition, and Modern Transformation

Himalayan art has long been understood through the lenses of religious devotion, artistic canons, and regional traditions. Yet the visual cultures of the Himalayan world are far from static. They have continuously evolved through encounters with political authority, social transformation, technological innovation, and changing cultural identities. Today, as globalization, digital media, and heritage preservation reshape the production and circulation of art, Himalayan visual culture offers an especially fertile field for examining the dynamic relationship between tradition and modernity.

This special section presents four papers organized by the Tibet Thangka Art & Culture Association for the 2026 Annual Conference of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS). Bringing together complementary interdisciplinary perspectives—including art history, visual studies, religious studies, media studies, and cultural heritage research—the collection reflects the breadth and vitality of current scholarship on Himalayan art and culture. Although each article focuses on a distinct historical period and artistic medium, they are united by a shared inquiry: how do visual forms negotiate changing structures of power, belief, identity, and cultural transmission?

The first article traces the genealogy of the *Dual-Seated Portrait of Emperor and Imperial Preceptor* (帝师并坐图), demonstrating how visual representation functioned as a political and religious strategy for negotiating Tibet's shifting relationships with imperial authority. By revealing the historical evolution of this iconographic tradition, the study highlights the capacity of images not merely to record political realities but to construct sacred legitimacy and mediate political crises.

The second article shifts attention to the contemporary preservation and dissemination of Thangka art. Drawing inspiration from the institutional model of the Hubei International Triennial of Lacquer Art, it proposes a new framework for a Himalayan Thangka Triennial that integrates ritual continuity, digital technologies, museum practice, and cultural industries. Rather than viewing sacred heritage and contemporary innovation as opposing forces, the paper argues for a dual-track model through which preservation and creative transformation can reinforce one another.

The third article examines the secular transformation of Tibetan visual language from the socialist period to the emergence of the New Tibetan Art Movement. Through the works of several influential artists, it demonstrates how traditional Buddhist artistic vocabularies were neither abandoned nor merely preserved, but strategically reinterpreted to articulate new forms of cultural memory, artistic agency, and modern identity. The study offers an important contribution to broader discussions concerning artistic continuity under conditions of profound political and social change.

The final article turns from painting to media spectacle, investigating televised Tibetan Losar Galas produced between 2003 and 2025. By analyzing spatial organization, visual design, and performance aesthetics, it reveals how state-sponsored cultural spectacles simultaneously

construct national narratives and provide spaces for negotiating Tibetan ethnic subjectivity. The study moves beyond binary interpretations of state control versus cultural resistance, demonstrating instead the complex processes through which identity is continually mediated and reconfigured in contemporary public culture.

Taken together, these four contributions demonstrate that Himalayan art is not simply a repository of religious tradition or cultural heritage. Rather, it constitutes a living visual system through which communities continually reinterpret the relationships among sacred authority, political power, artistic creativity, and cultural identity. Across historical murals, ritual paintings, contemporary artistic practices, and televised performances, the studies collected here illuminate how visual culture functions both as an archive of historical memory and as an active participant in shaping the future of Himalayan societies.

By bringing these diverse perspectives into dialogue, this special section aims to encourage further interdisciplinary research on Himalayan art and culture. It also seeks to expand conversations beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries, demonstrating how visual culture can serve as a productive intersection for the study of history, religion, politics, media, and heritage in the Himalayan world.