

The Tibetan Tangka

Sacred Silver from the Roof of the World

by [Michael Marotta](#)

Tibetan tangkas were minted from 1792 to 1948. They exhibit a wide array of varieties and yet maintain a consistent fabric and type. The tangkas that make their way to the Western collector usually were minted between 1900 and 1924. The commonest of these can be had for a pound or two, though some rarer varieties fetch L30 to L50. A few are so rare that the catalogs give no price for them.

Historical Context

The first Tibetan tangkas were struck in 1772. They followed the Nepalese fabric and type with minor differences to assert their local origins. The Gurkhas of Nepal briefly reclaimed their prerogatives, but the debased coins were extremely unpopular. China sent help to Tibet in its war against Nepal and the Chinese stayed on afterwards. The sho is a coin that was issued with Chinese and Tibetan legends from 1792 to 1820. In fact, like the tangka, the sho is very close in style and weight to the Nepalese mohur, itself a local variety of the Indian rupee.

At first, the Tibetan tangkas remained nearly invariable for several decades. Kann identifies five different types based on details of design, but all bear the same date, regardless of when they were actually struck. Colin Bruce II, editing the Krause *Standard Catalog of World Coins* devoted a lot of energy to Tibet. He cites two Kong-par tangkas that are dated 13-46 and 13-47 (1792 and 1793 AD) and which were struck into the 1820s and 1860s. The Kong-par tangka preserved a very old fabric and some issues have the "Lansa" (or "Lant-sha") holy script which has yet to be deciphered as it is written on coins.

The Ga-den tangka dates from about 1850 and it is the one you are mostly likely to find, especially from its later years. Thirteen major varieties have been catalogued. In all, there are at least 37 known minor varieties, but possibly 50 or more that could be noted.

The Obverse

Six mints have issued tangkas in volume: Dodpal; Giamda; Dode; the Tip Arsenal; Ser-Khang; and Tapchi. (One issue from the Lhasa Mint is known, from 1792, and it is listed as rare.) Differences in type and fabric are minor and there are no mintmarks. The obverse shows eight lucky symbols from

the lore of Lhasa Buddhism:

umbrella of sovereignty
two golden fish of good fortune
amphora of ambrosia
lotus
conch shell
emblem of endless rebirth
banner of victory
wheel of empire

These are usually arrayed around a central lotus. Their actual order and specific designs vary over time. Many differences are recognized as varieties by Krause and Mischler.

The Reverse

The two sides of the coin have the same orientation. To read the reverse, rotate the coin about its vertical axis. Starting from the top, the reverse says: RNAM RGYA-LA DGAH LDAN PHO BRANG PHYOGS LAS. Literally, this means: In the Cycle, Rebirth Palace direction from." Or, as Kann renders it: "In the year (year) from the Palace of Celestial Beatitude."

The legend is written in such a way as to fit into eight circles. These are actually derived from an earlier style in which the characters were inside lotus petals.

Chinese Invasion

In 1949, China invaded Tibet. By 1958, temples were closed and Buddhism was outlawed. Today, the Dalai Lama is in exile. However, totalitarianism is a wholly urban phenomenon and Tibet is hardly an urban society. The Gurkhas of Nepal and various Chinese warlords have often impressed themselves on the town of Lhasa and its environs. Not much else is worth having, in the traditional view of conquest and aggrandizement. For themselves, the people of Tibet are more concerned with basic survival. Even today, in a climate as cold as the Hebrides and as dry as the Sahara, the men sleep outdoors under animal skins, giving the tents to the women and children. Conquerors come and go.

Virtually devoid of natural resources, the wealth of Tibet stemmed from providing hospitality to pilgrims and other travellers. Owning at least one tangka adds an interesting, even esoteric, coin to your collection.