A New image of the mandala with fibers

Sue-Hyun Lee

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE COLLEGE OF IMAGING ARTS AND SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

A NEW IMAGE OF THE MANDALA WITH FIBERS

BY

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A NEW IMAGE OF THE MANDALA WITH FIBERS

SUE-HYUN LEE
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is motivated by a desire to find a new way of working with textiles that is built upon my own interpretation of the mandala. The focus of study is placed, in particular, on the development of the image of the mandala by researching the ancient mandala diagrams of Tantric Buddhism and discovering a new technique to express my interpretation of this diagram.

Over a period of six months, two paintings and two sculptures were carried out from the study of the mandala diagram and from the various technical experiments with fibers.

The historical background and symbolic systems of the mandala diagram are discussed in Part one.

My thesis work, the Mandala Series was guided and inspired by the Mandala diagrams and are discussed in Part Two.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

From the early fourth century to the middle of the seventeenth century, Tantrism was the strongest religious movement in India. It influenced Indian philosophy, mysticism, sculptures, diagrams and literature. Tantrism was involved with Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. Tantrism was introduced to Buddhism by Asanga and Nagarjuna. From the seventh century, Buddhism influenced the fundamental attitude of Tantrism and came to emphasize the ritual ceremony.

Tantrism is a religious system of Tantra and Tantra is a special manifestation of Indian feeling and art. It may really be understood, in the last resort, by people who are prepared to undertake inner meditative action. There can be no quick and easy definition. There are many variations of practice and belief. However, there is one thread which can guide us through the labyrinth; and all the different manifestations of Tantra can be strung on it. This thread is the idea that Tantra is a cult of ecstasy, focused on a vision of cosmic sexuality. Life-styles, ritual, magic, myth, philosophy and a complex of signs and emotive symbols converge upon that vision. Tantra also includes images and ideas from the oldest strata of Indian religion, many from the Aiyan Veda and Upanisads, often reinterpreting them in visual terms by diagrams and personification.

Other systems except Tantrism agree in asserting that our real world is a meaningless illusion and that the mental play of forms which we call our experience of life and the world is utterly without value. They show that all those experiences which ordinarily we cherish most are merely traps, whose grip on us has to be prised loose. To achieve such insight one may dwell on the misery of the human condition. To help detachment, one may meditate with special attention on the agonies, despair and crimes of which one knows there are plenty. One may also focus one's mind on the 'disgusting' aspects of one's own body and the bodies of others, thinking of them as mere transient bags of phlegm, shit and putrefying.
offal. One can then discover how easy it is to say 'No' to the world enjoyed by such bodies, to deny the claims of all apparent but vanishing possessions. When all this is quite clearly seen, one's libido is freed from its idle imagining, its motions may be stopped, and one can fix it on the eternal, changeless light. By oppressing the body and the mind with fasting, asceticism and vigorous discipline, one can obliterate from one's consciousness every last shred of the interest that knots the self to any piece, part, fragment, image, movement or memory of the world of illusion.5

Tantra does not dispute the fundamental truth of this position. But it believes that the methods used are absurd. It declares that there is no need for such a desperate upstream struggle to reach the shore, that such an ideal of life produces a dreadful world for those as yet unreleased.6 Tantra asserts that, instead of suppressing pleasure, vision and ecstasy, they should be cultivated and used. Because sensation and emotion are the most powerful human motive forces, they should not be crushed out, but harnessed to the ultimate goal. Properly channeled they can provide an unparalleled source of energy, bringing benefits to society as well as continually increasing ecstasy for the individual. Different forms of Tantra cultivate elaborate frameworks, like the mandala diagram of qualification and ritual procedure, to make quite sure that its followers did not fall into complacent ways of self-indulgence.7

Tantra has a particular wisdom of its own. This sets it a apart from all other religious systems, including Orthodox Buddhism. Visualization of the mandala, related to Buddhism, was influenced from the Tantrism of India. The mandala diagram was regarded as a significant ritual instrument.8

The Sanskrit word mandala means "circle" in the ordinary sense of the word. In terms of the etymological study, mandala is composed of two words, 'manda' and 'la'. 'Manda' means the truth or essence and 'la' signifies possession or achievement; and the mandala can then be translated as 'achievement of the
truth’. In terms of the doctrine, this translation is applicable to ‘bodhi citta’, the aspiration for Buddhahood.
SYMBOLIC SYSTEM

The role of the mandala diagram in the ritual ceremony is to assist the viewer’s awareness of reality. It means that the viewer can reach the world of enlightenment by reading the truth represented in the mandala diagram.

To present the world of reality, the mandala diagram uses a refined symbolic system. The symbolic system of the mandala diagram can not be easily explained because that system is involved with the history of the ancient Indian culture and religion, and there are various patterns of the mandala diagram.

There is however, one leading pattern which co-ordinates all the many possible mandalas of Tantric Buddhism, which is often believed to be the only Vajrayana mandala.\(^\text{11}\) (Figure 1) The explanation of the symbolic system is based on the description of this mandala. Vajrayana mandala is the mandala of the peaceful or Dhyani Buddhas, supplemented by matching mandalas of ‘Knowledge Holders’ and ‘Wrathful’ devatas. The important thing here is that none of them in itself alone represents enlightenment. All three mandalas used to be superimposed and fused, transformed into a single image.\(^\text{12}\)

Those mandalas occupy Vajrayana’s three upper cakras - of fire at the heart, of air at the throat and of aether in the crown of the head. Each mandala must be inwardly ‘realized’, with its full complement of meaning, at its appropriate cakra-level of knowledge. They are all conceived as groups of five circles roughly on a plane, one at the center and one at each of the four directions, south, east, north and west of each mandala. Each circle is an elemental region occupied by its own presiding Buddha of appropriate symbolic color, in symbolic sexual union with his female wisdom-condition, i.e. in a specific state of intuition. The Buddha-states in each mandala are focused in the figures at the center; and each mandala represents a transformation of the others. Each of the set of five, at all three levels, represents the modification and sublimation of grades of the five major human
emotional hindrances, correlated both with the sense-realms and with the psychological categories (skandhas) to which all experience is reduced according to Buddhist tradition. Each also has a special kind of insight. The five regions are: the blue center region, Buddha Vairocana, whose emotional realm is ‘fascination’, sense-field ‘sight’ and skandha ‘visible form’; the yellow southern region, Buddha Ratnasambhava, whose emotional realm is ‘pride’, sense-field ‘touch’ and skandha ‘feelings’; the white eastern region, Buddha Aksobhya, whose emotional realm is ‘rage’, sense-field ‘sound’ and skandha ‘intellectual discrimination’; the green northern region, Buddha Amoghasiddhi, whose emotional realm is ‘envy’, sense-field ‘taste’ and skandha ‘traces of habit-energy from past lives’; and the red western region, Buddha Amitabha (or Amitayus), whose emotional realm is ‘lust’, sense-field ‘smell’ and skandha ‘ideas’. Each ‘direction’, save the center, has its own special terrifying guardian figure, also represented in sexual union with a female counterpart. These last are the particular deities of the people, of those on the outside of the circle of initiates.13

The Knowledge-Holders’ names and those of their females are all formed from the names of the esoteric emblems which link the stages of Buddha-transformation. (C. Buddha, S. Ratna, E. Vajra, N. Karma, W. Padma, symbolized by wheel, jewel, vajra, sacrificial sword and lotus).14

These esoteric emblems, especially the lotus suggests important meaning. The lotus is a symbol of the unfolding of the self and expanding consciousness, which cuts through psychic opacity and ultimately raises the aspirant from the dark depths of ignorance to the radiant heights of inner awakening. Just as lotus plants grow in the ‘darkness of mud’ and gradually blossom out to the surface of the water, unsullied by the mud and water which nourish them, so the inner self transcends and transforms itself beyond its corporeal limits uncorrupted and untarnished by illusion and ignorance.15
THESIS CONCEPT

As a foreigner, I have spent two years experiencing a different culture in the United States. A totally different language used makes me uncomfortable in communication and a different way of living has forced me to doubt my age-old viewpoint of human life. The confusion I experienced from the differences between two cultures made me reserved and thoughtful.

My interest was moving toward the reality which went beyond the various languages and viewpoints. I wanted my work to be involved with that reality; and when I came to know the mandala of Tantric Buddhism, I found the possibility.

My thesis work was influenced from the mandala in many aspects. First of all, my work is meditation-provoking like the mandala diagram. I tried to guide the viewer to the world of enlightenment through my works. Visualization of the enlightenment is literally impossible, and Tantric Buddhism has a positive attitude of that visualization. As a partial solution, the mandala diagram of Tantric Buddhism used the refined symbolic system. The main images of my mandala series was also based on traditional symbolism. I tried to transform the traditional symbolism of the mandala into my own interpretations by the use of abstraction and various fiber materials.
Initially, the decision of the image which provoked the meditation and the mystery was my main concern. Several sketches were made based on symbols and colors in the traditional mandala. The lotus, typification of the doctrine of perpetual cycles of existence, was determined as the main image.

From the sketches, I took five, and by using the oil pastel, gouche, charcoal, and Indian ink, five drawings were made.

The image of Drawing I (Figure 2) was handpainted onto the silk fabric with liquid Procion. An alginate was used to thicken the dye for controlling the brush-stroke and a chemical water solution was used for the watercolor technique. The watercolor technique needed to work quickly, wet on wet. To stop the silk from drying out too quickly during painting, the whole fabric was brushed with a chemical water, then paints were applied briskly on to the wet silk. I started with a lighter color, like yellow, working downwards to the medium tones and the darker tones. To give some accent on the image, I used white acrylic paint with a medium that transformed the acrylic paint into fabric paint.

This process and technique was also applied to Drawing II (Figure 3). To give some change, I painted on a flower-jacquard silk fabric. A plastic fencing net, which I happened to find in the hardware shop, stimulated me to combine it with the silk painting, because the grid effect from the net reminded me of the checker-board image of the mandala diagram.

I cut up one of my sketches to make strips and wove them through the net. The general effect from the experiment was satisfying. However, the net was not stiff enough to hold the paper. A sturdier galvanized steel net was chosen to combine with the silk paintings. The wire net had a tendency to be rolled and it looked like a large cylinder. The cylindrical form gave me an idea to make a free-standing fiber sculpture.

First, I cut strips out of the first silk painting and acetate. Then I wove
the strips vertically through the cylindrical wire net. The edges of the strips were stretched with the threads to ensure straight lines. (Figure 4) The original drawing was better than the rolled cylindrical image; therefore, I straighten the rolled piece and wove with a steel rod both top and bottom edges. The silver color of the net was too strong so I partially sprayed it with a black enamel paint to unify the image. After spraying, I wrote my favorite phrase of the Upanishad on the acetate strips with black ink.

With the second silk painting, I tried this process again; however, there were some differences. The initial difference was the way of weaving. I wove horizontally with the silk strips and left one part unwoven to achieve some see-through images. To hold each edge of the strips, I made an eyelet on each edge and stretched them with cotton and silk threads. (Figure 5)

The remaining drawings (Figure 6, 7, 8) were painted on paper to express a more controlled image. Procion dye on fabric or paper alone was extremely fluid and dried very quickly and the color was often too powerful to control. I used the combination of dyes, acrylic paint, Indian ink and oil pastels.

The third mixed media painting from Drawing III was slashed and made into strips to use the same procedure as the first piece. The difference was the method of stretching the edges. I applied the eyelets on each edge of the paper strips and stretched them with metallic cords. Drawings IV and V were applied on both sides of one large sheet of paper.

The last painting was made into a labyrinth-like sculpture. Keeping it stable was a major problem. I tried to hold the net with wood sticks; however, they did not harmonize with the piece. Plexiglass rods were experimented with, but they were too fragile to hold the steel wire net. A solution was achieved with a piece of the net. (Figure 9) By using a coiling technique, each edge of the net was covered. To achieve a see-through image, I made small punched holes in the paper.
DESCRIPTION OF PIECES

MANDALA I

This wall relief was conceived as an experimental exercise that combined metal, acetate and silk fabric. The coldness from the steel net and softness of the silk fabric with reflected light on the acetate strips induced the meditative sensibility.

White, black, yellow and red are the basic colors of the mandala and are composed in my image of the lotus. I united the shape of the petal of the lotus and the circle in this image.

MANDALA II

In “Mandala II”, I tried to represent the symbolism in the lotus. The lotus is a symbol of purity and perfection because it grows out of mud but is not defiled, just as Buddha is born into the world but lives above the world.16

This piece reflects the expressive sensibility in its bold brush-strokes and powerful colors. The lotus emerges from a storm of rapid strokes.
MANDALA III

The blend of acrylic paint with dyes gave me an intense, vivid color and an attractive brushed quality that expressed the symbolism of the lotus and the circle in this piece. To have a varied transparent effect, I used white oil pastel over the red lotus, which carried out a mysterious atmosphere.

MANDALA IV

In Mandala IV, I tried to visualize the world of enlightenment. At the bottom of this sculpture, I painted three white circles signifying seeds which represented the fundamental material. Above the seeds I depicted lotuses. I punched small holes over the lotuses to show dew-drops, which lie on the lip of the lotus leaf, before it falls into the peaceful obscurity of the lake (i.e., before disappearing into Nirvana). Punched holes also represent the window to see the inside image.
CONCLUSION

In reflecting back upon my thesis work, I recognized that my work is a small step toward the world of the Mandala.

I believe, by using the symbolism of the traditional Mandala, meditative and mysterious sensibilities are involved in my pieces. To transform the traditional symbolism into my own interpretations, symbols were simplified, overlapped, repeated and exaggerated. A new vision of the Mandala was achieved by experimentation with various fiber materials.

I will continue to study the visualization of the spiritual world and to experiment on the harmonious combination of various fiber materials.
ENDNOTES

3. Ibid., 7.
4. Ibid., 7.
5. Ibid., 9.
6. Ibid., 8.
7. Ibid., 9.
8. Ibid., 7.
12. Ibid., 175.
13. Ibid., 178.
17. Ibid., 258.
Figure 1, Vajrana mandala
Figure 2, Drawing I
Figure 3, Drawing II
Figure 4, Detail of Mandala I
Figure 5, Detail of *Mandala II*
Figure 6, Drawing III
Figure 7, Drawing IV
Figure 8, Drawing V
Figure 9, Detail of Mandala IV
Figure 10,  **Mandala I**

size:  7'(W) x 6'(H)

medium:  steel rod, silk fabric, dye, acetate, acrylic paint, acetate ink, cotton thread, vinyl cord, galvanized steel wire net, spray enamel
Figure 11, **Mandala II**

size: 21"(Diameter) X 6'(H)

medium: galvanized steel wire net, flower jacquard silk fabric, dye, acrylic paint, cotton and silk thread, eyelet, spray enamel
Figure 12, Mandala III

size: 12'(W) x 6'(H)

medium: galvanized steel wire net, steel rod, metallic cord, dye, acrylic paint, watercolor paper, Indian ink, oil pastel, spray enamel, eyelet
Figure 13, Mandala IV
size: 35"(D) x 6'(H)
medium: galvanized steel wire net, metallic cord, dye, acrylic paint, watercolor paper, Indian ink, oil pastel, spray enamel
BIBLIOGRAPHY


