

An Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics of the Eight Auspicious Patterns of the Tibetans

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Abstract: The Eight Auspicious Symbols constitute a foundational set of visual icons deeply embedded within Tibetan Buddhist culture. They serve as potent embodiments of core religious philosophy and express a distinctive ethnic aesthetic sensibility. This research employs a multidisciplinary methodology, drawing extensively upon relevant textual literature (including Buddhist scriptures and historical records), diverse historical documents, and ancient visual materials (such as thangkas, murals, and ritual objects), to trace the historical evolution and unpack the multifaceted symbolic meanings of these eight symbols. The study conducts a detailed formal analysis, scrutinizing their characteristic visual forms, specific color symbolism, and the profound significance implied by their compositional elements and traditional representations. This systematic examination rigorously delineates their essential artistic attributes, including their stylistic conventions, compositional principles, and patterns of decorative usage. Furthermore, the paper reveals the rich cultural connotations carried by the symbols, exploring their connection to fundamental Buddhist doctrines (like the Noble Eightfold Path and concepts of auspiciousness) and their role in reflecting Tibetan cultural values and worldview. Finally, the investigation delves into the unique aesthetic significance of the Ashtamangala, analyzing how their harmonious visual language, symbolic potency, and ritual context contribute to their enduring power and central place within the artistic and spiritual practices of Tibetan Buddhism.

Keywords: the eight auspicious symbols, Tibetan patterns, Tibetan culture, artistic features.

1. Introduction: overview of the Eight Auspicious Symbols in Tibetan Culture

1.1. Definition

Tibetan eight auspicious patterns, also known as “eight auspicious” or “eight auspicious”. From the literal meaning of understanding, eight auspicious patterns is composed of eight patterns with auspicious connotations. Eight auspicious patterns is one of China's traditional graphics, in Buddhism also represents eight kinds of objects, is the most common in the Tibetan traditional art and is rich in deep religious connotations of the combination of decorative patterns. The Eight Auspicious Patterns of the Tibetans consists of eight patterns symbolizing good fortune, perfection and happiness, and belongs to the combination-type image, whose constituent graphics include the

precious umbrella, the wonderful lotus, the precious vase, the right-handed conch, the victory block, the Dharma Wheel, the lotus flower and the goldfish. Each of the Eight Auspicious Patterns contains a unique symbolic meaning and is expressed in a variety of forms. These patterns are usually presented in the form of combinations, usually two and two pairs, four pieces into a group or multiple pieces convergence, constituting horizontal, vertical, round, square and other geometric structures. And the combination is often supplemented by fluttering ribbons or auspicious clouds and other elements for decoration, forming a vivid and complete pattern unit, part of the combination will be used in which seven patterns together constitute the shape of the vase, as a substitute for the vase pattern itself. The visual system constructed by the Tibetan people with the help of these eight auspicious symbols conveys the aestheticized expression of the Tibetan people's happy life, and also expresses their hope for a happy and beautiful life.

1.2. Origin

The origin of the eight auspicious motifs may be traced back to before the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet, but different people hold different views on the origin of the eight auspicious motifs, and the vast majority of people still believe that the eight auspicious motifs originated in Buddhist thought. Japanese scholar Ozaki Xunmori points out that “the Dharma snail, the Dharma wheel, the treasure umbrella, the treasure cover, the lotus flower, the treasure vase, the goldfish, and the disk length are religious motifs.” [1] It is recorded that when Shakyamuni was born, the celestial beings made eight offerings, which later became the prototype of the Eight Symbols of Good Fortune. In addition, the eight symbols are also seen as integral parts of the Buddha's body: the umbrella for the head; the goldfish for the eyes; the vase for the neck; the lotus for the tongue; the golden wheel for the feet; the victory block for the “body”; the conch for the ‘speech’; and the auspicious knot for the “mind”. The conch represents “speech” and the auspicious knot represents “meaning” [2]. Along with the continuous development of Buddhism, in Tibetan Buddhism, Tibetans draw this symbolic pattern on items such as monasteries, residences, utensils, and ornaments. The Eight Auspicious Patterns have been widely utilized in all areas of Tibetan Buddhist painting and living artifacts, and have almost become the iconic pattern of Tibetan Buddhism, and have since become an indispensable part of Tibetan life.

1.3. Classification

The Eight Auspicious Symbols, abbreviated as Wheel, Conch, Parasol, Canopy, Flower, Vase, Fish, and Knot, represent eight objects symbolizing the power of Buddhism. Each corresponds to one of the eight wisdoms in Buddhism: sight (eye), hearing (ear), smell (nose), sound (speech), mind, body, thought, and storehouse. Their symbolic meanings vary but are all intrinsically connected to the characteristics of the objects themselves. For example: The Treasure Vase (Vase), with its broad body and short, narrow neck, symbolizes wealth in Buddhism and is associated with the fulfillment of material needs. The Sacred Lotus (Flower), representing the lotus blossom, signifies mental purity, wisdom, and liberation. The symbols are illustrated in the following order (see Table 1).

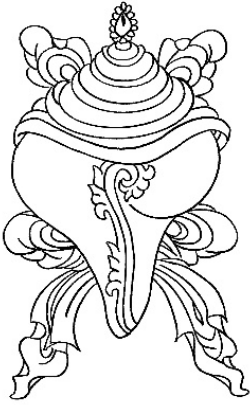


Figure 1. White Conch

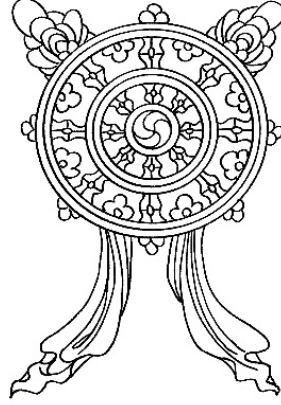


Figure 2. Golden Wheel



Figure 3. Auspicious Knot(self-painted by the author)

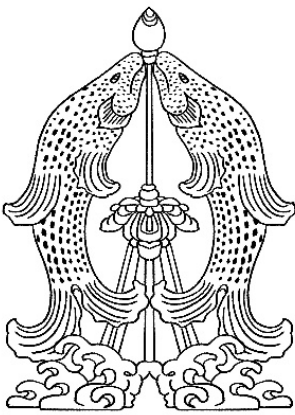


Figure 4. Goldfish



Figure 5. Treasure Vase

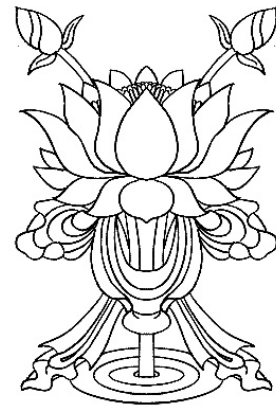


Figure 6. Myriad Lotus(self-painted by the author)

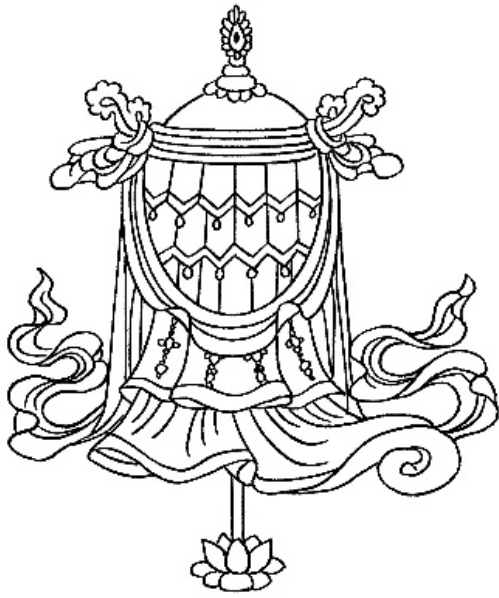


Figure 7. Victory Block

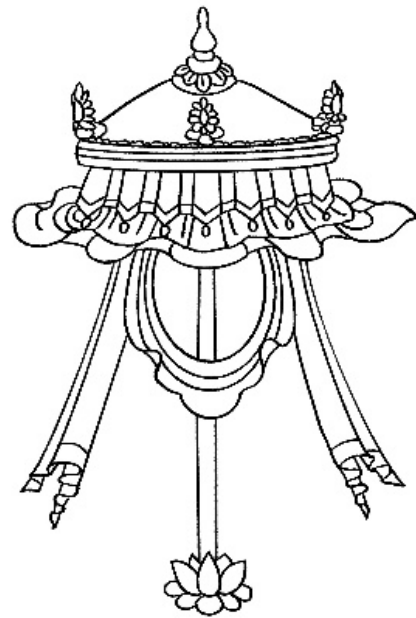


Figure 8. Treasure Umbrella(self-painted by the author)

2. Characterization of the art of Tibetan eight auspicious patterns

2.1. The formal characteristics of the Tibetan Eight Auspicious Symbols patterns

The evolution of the Eight Auspicious Symbols' forms is intrinsically linked to the development of Tibetan Buddhism. As early as the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, these motifs began appearing in cave temple carvings. During this embryonic stage, they primarily existed as individual symbols—such as simple dharma wheels and lotuses—characterized by bold, unadorned lines and strong religious connotations, having not yet entered secular life. During the Tang and Song Dynasties, as Buddhism spread to the Central Plains, the Eight Auspicious Symbols appeared in the murals of Dunhuang's Mogao Caves and began to emerge as a complete set of "Eight Treasures." Influenced by the era's economic prosperity, their designs grew increasingly intricate and ornate, though they retained strong religious overtones. By the Yuan Dynasty, as Buddhism's influence deepened in the Central Plains, the Eight Auspicious Symbols gained popularity and were incorporated into Han Chinese craftsmanship, appearing on porcelain, textiles, and gold/silverware—yet still maintaining Buddhist associations. Their compositions also became standardized, with prescribed features like the vase's tapered waist and the lotus's eight petals. The Ming Dynasty saw these motifs become more decorative and folkloric. Building upon Yuan-era patterns, they grew even more refined and elaborate. Cultural exchange with Tibet led to unique hybrid designs, such as the "Interlocking Branches Supporting Eight Auspicious Symbols" (combining Han-style scrolling vines with Tibetan Buddhist motifs) and the "Eight Treasures of Good Fortune" (merging Han's "Eight Immortals' Symbols" with the Eight Auspicious Symbols) [3]. During this period, the symbols gradually shed exclusive Buddhist ties and entered folk arts—appearing in New Year prints, paper-cuttings, furniture carvings, and other everyday applications.

The arrangement sequence of the Eight Auspicious Symbols has varied historically, primarily influenced by religious symbolism and socio-historical developments, though minor regional,

sectarian, or contextual differences exist. From a religious logic perspective, the traditional Tibetan Buddhist ordering is as follows : Parasol (protection from suffering) ,Golden Fishes (spiritual liberation),Treasure Vase (fulfillment of material needs),Lotus(purity and enlightenment),White Conch (the proclamation of Dharma),Endless Knot (infinite wisdom),Victory Banner (triumph over ignorance),Dharma Wheel (the perfection of Buddhist teaching) [4]. This sequence reflects a symbolic progression in Tibetan Buddhist practice—from "sheltering from suffering" (Parasol) to the "ever-turning Wheel of Dharma" (ultimate fulfillment).

From the course of historical development, the order of the eight auspicious patterns in the Ming and Qing dynasties before there is no clear standard, more random; and after the Ming and Qing dynasties, the order gradually stabilized. Yongle period, the basic order for the wheel, screw, umbrella, cover, flowers, fish, vase, knot; to the Wanli years, the order changed to the wheel, screw, umbrella, cover, flowers, vase, fish, knot. The positions of the goldfish and the vase were switched. This order was used until the Qing Dynasty; only in the Tongzhi period did it change to the order of wheel, umbrella, knot, screw, flower, vase, fish and cover.

The Eight Auspicious Symbols manifest in two primary forms of representation. First, as the main pattern, the eight treasures appear in sets, but each auspicious symbol can still be used individually, through a certain arrangement as a whole symbol appears, constituting a harmonious and unified visual system, mostly found in thangkas, murals, carpets or ceremonial appliances. There are three kinds of arrangement, namely: round around, that is, the layout of the altar, symbolizing the order of the universe; symmetrical arrangement, such as the left and right of each of the four pieces, commonly found in the frescoes of the Buddha Hall; linear sequence, puja banners or scroll paintings according to the cultivation of the next order of arrangement; the second is as an auxiliary pattern appeared in the eight jinxiang pattern appears in the main body of the pattern around a pattern [5]. To summarize, the form of the Eight Auspicious Patterns is often composed of squares, circles, and scattered dots, and the arrangement is mostly bipartite or quadripartite; it is often symmetrical. The historical evolution of the form of the Eight Auspicious Patterns, from natural simplicity to exquisite decoration, not only reflects the cultural fusion between Tibetans and Han Chinese, but also demonstrates the tolerance and innovation of the development of ancient Chinese art.

2.2. Color characteristics of the Tibetan Eight Auspicious Symbols patterns

The color characteristics of the Eight Auspicious Symbols exhibit distinct religious symbolism and cultural integration, with their color system demonstrating rich variations across different historical periods and artistic mediums. The primary color scheme consists of white, yellow, red, green, and blue, corresponding to the Five Dhyani Buddhas and adhering to Buddhist symbolic traditions. Among these, the golden hue represents supreme wisdom and eternal indestructibility, frequently used in thangkas and ritual objects to highlight Buddhism's nobility and sanctity. The red spectrum symbolizes compassion and authority, commonly seen in monastery murals and monastic robes. White signifies purity and liberation, often applied to the eaves of Tibetan-style architecture. The blue palette embodies the wisdom of emptiness, typically used as fill colors for treasure vase motifs, reflecting the profound connection between the Eight Auspicious Symbols and religious significance. Notably, the colors of these symbols are closely tied to their diverse mediums. For instance, in religious artifacts, monastery murals often feature vermilion-red backgrounds outlined in gold and blended with turquoise-green washes, creating a solemn visual effect. Gilded bronze ritual objects are often inlaid with turquoise and coral, showcasing distinctive Tibetan

characteristics. This chromatic system not only reinforces the symbols' doctrinal associations but also showcases the interplay between religious art and regional material culture.

Moreover, the color application of the Eight Auspicious Symbols demonstrates notable diachronic evolution. In their early manifestations (7th-9th centuries), influenced by Indian and Central Asian art, the motifs primarily featured monochromatic flat washes, as seen in Dunhuang murals where earthy reds and azurite blues dominated through mineral pigments. A significant chromatic transformation occurred during the Qing Dynasty through Han-Tibetan cultural synthesis. Imperial kilns innovatively combined the traditional five-color technique with these Buddhist motifs, creating famille-rose porcelain adorned with the Eight Auspicious Symbols. These works preserved Tibetan Buddhist iconography while incorporating Han aesthetic sensibilities, exemplified by softer pastel hues and delicate gradations.

This chromatic evolution vividly mirrors two parallel processes: the secularization of sacred Buddhist art into decorative forms, and the artistic interchange between ethnic cultures. The color system maintains strict adherence to religious canons while dynamically adapting to regional and temporal aesthetic preferences, ultimately forging a unique visual lexicon that bridges sacred symbolism and worldly artistry.

2.3. The symbolic significance of the Tibetan Eight Auspicious Symbols patterns

As highly representative visual symbols in Tibetan Buddhism, the Eight Auspicious Motifs embody profound spiritual values and ethnic characteristics. Each of the eight sacred objects corresponds to specific Buddhist teachings, reflecting both religious philosophy and Tibetan cultural identity. Below is a detailed analysis of their individual symbolic meanings.

The golden fish symbolize the sacred rivers of India, the Ganges and the Yamuna, analogous to the left and right energy channels in the human body that govern vitality, linking to Buddhist breath-centered practices. They represent the freedom and happiness found in flowing waters, while in Indian Buddhism, they metaphorically signify the reproductive vitality of female fertility, akin to fish thriving in water. Upon entering China, this motif evolved into the auspicious meaning of "abundance year after year." The rare clockwise-spiraling white conch, prized for its uncommon rotation, was an emblem of imperial authority in ancient India. In Buddhism, it represents the resonant proclamation of the Buddha's teachings, symbolizing the timeless and unchanging nature of Dharma. The sacred lotus, untainted by the mud it grows from, embodies purity and noble character. The Buddha seated upon a lotus throne signifies divine origin, while its combination with the vajra represents the union of form and emptiness, wisdom emerging from the opening of spiritual channels within the body—a metaphor for the Buddha's transcendent purity amidst worldly existence.

The precious parasol, originally a royal object for sheltering against sun and rain, extends metaphorically as a "protective canopy" shielding beings from suffering, symbolizing exalted status. The white parasol, in particular, represents the compassionate refuge of the Buddha's motherly aspect, safeguarding sentient beings from harm and reflecting humanity's spiritual yearning for divine protection. The treasure vase, with its broad body and jeweled lid, was traditionally filled with gems and buried in the earth by Tibetans as a symbol of boundless prosperity. In Buddhism, it signifies every individual as a vessel brimming with wisdom and blessings, with the image of Avalokiteshvara holding the vase becoming an enduring emblem of compassion. The endless knot, derived from the chest emblem of Buddha images, is known as the "swastika spiral" in its rotating form, representing the wisdom of perfected merit and the attainments of great adepts. In Han Chinese culture, it conveys wishes for health and longevity, while in Buddhism, it symbolizes the

union of wisdom and compassion, the perpetuation of Buddhist teachings, and the infinite nature of the Buddha's wisdom. Its interwoven, endless structure mirrors the interconnectedness of all phenomena through karma.

The victory banner, originating from ancient Indian war standards, symbolizes the triumphant flag overcoming discord and chaos, representing the ultimate wisdom that vanquishes evil forces and dispels ignorance and greed. It serves as a tool for awakening wisdom and is commonly seen adorning temple rooftops. The golden wheel, as a solar symbol, signifies the continuous motion of the cosmos. In Buddhism, the "turning of the Dharma wheel" metaphorically represents the cessation of suffering and the propagation of teachings. Its hub, spokes, and rim correspond to the threefold training of discipline, wisdom, and meditation, while the eight-spoked wheel directly points to the Noble Eightfold Path. Like sunlight illuminating all, the wheel's rotation spreads the Dharma's benefits to all beings.

In summary, the figurative expression of the Eight Auspicious Symbols provides a tangible vehicle for abstract Buddhist doctrines, serving as a vital medium for Tibetan Buddhist practice.

3. Conclusion

This study conducts an in-depth exploration of the "Tibetan Eight Auspicious Symbols." Building upon previous research, it analyzes the historical origins of their patterns, artistic characteristics, and religious significance, grasping their core symbolism as embodying the Tibetan people's aspirations for a better life. The evolutionary trajectory of these motifs—from sacred religious objects to everyday decorations—vividly demonstrates the remarkable adaptability and innovative spirit of Tibetan culture. This symbolic system encapsulates millennia of Tibetan civilization, where the patterns serve not merely as decorative elements but as multidimensional texts carrying faith, history, and wisdom, continuously enriching the diversity of Chinese culture.

The contemporary reinterpretation of ethnic cultural metaphors often begins with historical research into specific cultural elements. This paper's thorough interpretation of the Eight Auspicious Symbols' connotations contributes to understanding the core values and modern significance of Tibetan culture. Furthermore, it aims to lay the groundwork for future design-based approaches that could revitalize these motifs for the modern era. Such efforts would not only meet the spiritual and cultural needs of contemporary society but also facilitate the preservation and development of these symbols, ensuring their dynamic continuity as living cultural heritage.

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