

Evolution Through Art and Being Connected

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Ans Swart is a painter and long time practitioner in the Dzogchen Community. We talked with her about her [thangka](#) painting and also about how she met Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and the [Dzogchen Community](#).



Ans painting in her studio in Amsterdam

The Mirror: Ans, recently a very beautiful [Mandarava thangka](#) that you painted was sold for the benefit of the construction of the Dzamling Gar Gönpa and Dzamling Gar. When did you start working on that *thangka*?

Ans: I think I started already in the 90's to make the drawing that became the base for the painting. I did that with my first teacher, Andy Weber from London. Most people know him. Andy Weber pointed me to a Dutch woman *thangka* painter and teacher called Marianne Van der Horst.

The Mirror: When did you first start studying *thangka* painting?

Ans: I started in 1994 when I made my first Buddha head at the Maitraya Institute in the

Netherlands. I went to visit my cousin there; he is a Gelugpa monk and a Geshe. Also in 1994 Andy Weber was teaching *thangka* painting at the Maitreya Institute and I took courses with him. So it was with Andy Weber when I made the first line drawing for the Mandarava *thangka* in black and white. I still have it. Then I transferred it to a canvas and started the *thangka*. I also used gesso because I also use that in my other artwork.

The Mirror: So you have also studied traditional western art?

Ans: Yes and I did that before I began *thangka* painting.

The Mirror: Let's go back to the beginning. Before you ever met Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, you were an artist and you studied formally at an art institute?



The sale of the Mandarava thangka at Dzamling Gar

Ans: I studied art at the art academy in Arnhem in the east of the Netherlands. In the 80's I went to Berlin with a studio exchange. It was there that I developed my painting in space, with dancing and using my voice and making big paintings on the wall. I also danced a lot in Berlin at that time; I was half dancer and half painter. The dance was free modern dance and I did a lot of contact improvisation. I worked with Ruth Zaporah from the action theatre. She also taught at Naropa Institute and she lived in Berkeley at that time. I studied with her in Holland, in Berlin and also in 1988 I went to Berkeley to study with her and at the end of my study there I also did a performance. It was very nice. There was also a woman there who was a musician who also came to the

Dzogchen Community later, Sylvia Nakkach. I was looking for a way to merge the arts, with dancing, music and color painting and we worked together. It was a funny accident that I worked with her and she also came to the Dzogchen Community. So then I had to integrate all of this into performance art, because alone in your art studio you can feel free, but performing with an audience you don't feel free and my mind was making a lot of noise during the performances. If I would do a performance now I would have learned a lot more to make my mind calm and not focus on all these things.

The Mirror: Now you are more focused on the visual arts and *thangka* painting?

Ans: In my performances I used to express myself – my anger and emotions. It was really an expression. I think I needed that. But I already had a tendency that I wanted to be “in” my paintings, so I was in this kind of environment for making a painting. They were abstract and I called them sound paintings. You see a result and the performance is in time, so, you cannot really speak from music, and the layers cover the music. I made one of these in Berlin that was 40 meters long and 240 meters high, and this was amazing. With this one I could run along the wall and dance. My studio was in a big abandoned factory so there was enough room.

The Mirror: How did you go from there to *thangka* painting?

Ans: In *thangka* painting you are working more inwardly and I do not need this expression any more, so much. *Thangka* painting is more internal.

The Mirror: So then you went to the Maitreya Institute?

Ans: I went to visit my cousin Jan and he made me make the first Buddha head. Thereafter I followed the *thangka* making courses of Andy Weber. And this was my first experience of making *thangka* paintings. I continued studying with him and he is also the one who helped me shape the figure of Mandarava.

I finished the painting with Marian van der Horst because her style different from Andy, her style is more fine and subtle, with a lot of shading. Andy's style is more like filling everything with color. I liked Andy's style in the beginning but now I like Van der Horst's style more, which is the Karma Gadri style. She studied with Geka Lama in Nepal or India. In 1999 I went to Merigar West to do a workshop with Lama Gyurmed and Paola Minelli, where we made a Medicine Buddha.

The Mirror: Do you paint every day? Are you still producing *thangkas*?

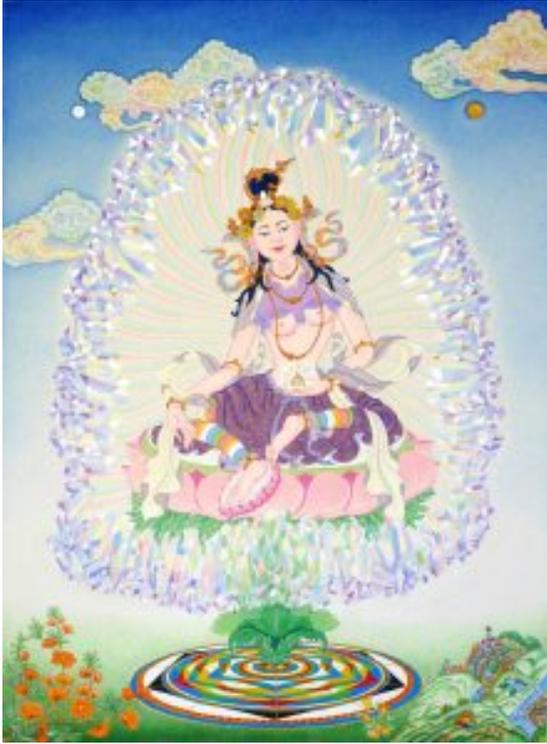
Ans: I am a slow painter; I do it for my pleasure. At first my *thangkas* took four years to finish. Now it takes me less than one year because I take my *thangka* and it fits in my valise and bring it to Tenerife and work there as well.

The Mirror: Do you ever have shows of your work?

Ans: Yes I did a *thangka* show with other *thangka* painters at the Maitreya Institute in Amsterdam.



Mandarava thangka by Ans



Goma Devi thangka by Ans

The Mirror: Are you able to sell your work?

Ans: Yes, at the moment, and also because I am now able to show my pictures in printed reproductions. I did that at Merigar West and now at Dzamling Gar, so people come to me and ask me if I can make this or that *thangka*. So in the last two years I had two commissioned *thangkas*. And now I have another new commission, which is a wrathful deity. I have not done wrathful deities before. There are a lot of flames around. Before I focused on white and green Tara, Mandarava and Akshobya. Now I am working on Simhamukha. I am very happy with that.

The Mirror: Is there a different experience working on a wrathful deity as opposed to a peaceful one?

Ans: In a way there is no difference, but there is also an experience that there is more energy in the wrathful deities, and it says also that the wrathful deity is about movement.

The Mirror: Are there certain practices that *thangka* painters do?

Ans: I learned from Lama Gyurmed that even when you wash your brush you say a *mantra*. Also you bless your paints. And bless the water. And while you are doing the painting you say the *mantra* of the deity. And the Lama said when you paint on the deity; you are in *yab yum* with the deity. So this is a really deep connection.

The Mirror: So tell us about the evolution of your artwork overall.

Ans: It went from very expressive to very inward. Now I have a pension and I have more time to devote to painting, especially *thangka* painting. But I still need to do my own artwork; I need the freedom when I feel the necessity to express something.

The Mirror: Do you feel a change in your own artwork as a result of the *thangka* painting?

Ans: Yes I do. In a way it is a little the same because I am in silence and more connected with myself when I paint. I feel more when I do my own work, what is necessary and what I want to tell. I mostly work abstractly. I am more open to what could happen; in *thangka* painting it is more structured in where it should go and what it should be totally. I am also happy with that because it gives you a structure.

The Mirror: How long do you have to study to make the grid, the base of all *thangkas*?

Ans: If you already know how to draw and paint, you can master it easily. Actually anyone can learn and develop the coordination.

The Mirror: Do you also do calligraphy?

Ans: I studied at the art academy and I made the syllables for the Vajra Dance film, A AH HA SHA SA MA.

The Mirror: Do you want to talk a little about the relationship of your personal work and *thangka* painting? Do you find that your personal work drops away more and more or?



The painting called Transformation

Ans: My own free work was also very influenced by the teachings. I made a series around the time of changing of the centuries about the Six Lokas. So I chose the complementary colors to be the wisdom side of each *loka*, and the colors touched each other, and then it becomes grey in the middle when they are true opposites. So this took me some time to play with and this series is called Transformation. It is very big, 1.20 x 2 meters and there are six in a row, so you really can face it when you are in front of it. Later other artists inspired me and I wanted especially to make the *thigles*, but it does not mean I had these visions. I am not so much a visionary person. It is more about one pointed concentration where you see, and you are going inside the painting; it takes you. I made big ones and also small ones. So the practice has influenced my personal art. For example, I made a series when my mother died; I painted out a diary she kept, a daily diary from the last year of her life, especially about the weather. The Dutch word for weather is “weer”. The second meaning is “again”. So “Weer is mijn moeder” means “weather is my mother” or “again is my mother”. My mother was very keen on the weather, which you find mentioned many times in her diary, and I shaped her “again”, but now in paintings. This painting helped me to digest her death.

But I am also happy I am out of this chasing after galleries and finding sellers, especially in these difficult times and Holland is not so much art minded. Even in Amsterdam you have to have a name, but with this Mandarava I became a little famous, in the Community! It is a nice side effect.

The Mirror: So now are you living in Tenerife part time?

Ans: Yes part time and also part time in Holland. I also give painting lessons both places.

The Mirror: One more question about the actual process of *thangka* painting and then we can go into how you met Chögyal Namkhai Norbu. So what is the sequence of a painting?

Ans: First you make the grid, and the drawing, and with the drawing you begin with the deity, with the head and the clothes and then you form the landscape around and you do not make the eyes yet. Then you transfer the drawing to transparent paper and prepare the canvas and put the line drawing behind it. Then there is a light box and you can draw over that image with a soft pencil so the drawing is transferred and you don't have to erase or anything directly on the canvas. Then you begin first with the landscape, then the deity and all the ornaments, clothes, the fire around and all the surroundings, and then you begin filling in with color. You begin with the sky. So you shade the sky with pointillism, and you have millions of tips of paint, so you always begin with the sky and the clouds and then the landscape, and then you make the lotus and the sun and moon. Then you put the deity on it with all the entourage around, and then there is the lining, then after the lining you add the gold for the jewels etc., and then you also line the gold and then you do the eyes. The eyes are always painted last on a special day.

I learned something similar studying the painting of *yantras* at the end of the 70's. In these paintings you circle around in the right direction and make the lines first and then the paintings and when the painting is ready, you add the dot. And then the deity is implanted, like with the eyes of the *thangka*. I didn't learn anything about *mantras* at that time. I could not bring this to the art academy because it was too structured; at the academy it was encouraged to be very free and we were even dancing. We would put the easels aside and dance. So that is where I first was introduced to movement and visual art.

The Mirror: So now we would like to know about how you met the teachings..

Ans: It is very much connected to my art because I came from Berlin and then back to Arnhem, and then I wanted to go back to Amsterdam because I come from the west, kind of close to Amsterdam. So I made an exchange with an artist, who wanted to go back to Arnhem, and I went to his house in Amsterdam and it was exceptionally good and I still live in this house, which is also my studio. And when I was in Amsterdam and I wanted to dance. I found an announcement that said, "Dancing with the Dakinis", or "as the Dakinis"...and the name under it was Stoffelina Verdonk. This was in 1988. I did her course with all the colors, movements and singing, and it was very interesting and then she asked if we could do a performance together. The theme of the

festival was “death”. So to prepare for our performance we interviewed some people and we went to see a man who had written a very important book and what he said to us was, “You need a master in your life.” And then we went to see Sogyal Rinpoche and Stoffelina said, “Go to the front and feel what you feel”, and I did feel something heart to heart with him. I did not know that Stoffelina had a master at that time. So we did our performance.

Then she invited me to come to Finland where she was teaching young dancers. Also I did some drawing sessions with them. It was very nice. Then I would see her sitting in her room silently and I asked her if she was meditating and she was very secretive and would not tell me very much. I told her I was interested and then I went along to a “meeting” and the first meeting was a *Ganapuja*. What was talking to me the most was the Song of the Vajra and I was always happy when we were singing it. This was in 1989. Then people said to me, “You have to go to Merigar and meet the Master!” I did not really know what it was all about but I said, “Ok, I will go.” So then I went at Christmas time in 1991. Stoffelina was there also.



Ans with Chögyal Namkhai Norbu in the Gönpa at Merigar West

Everything was new to me, I didn't know anything, even about Buddhism. Also the teachings, I did not understand them. There were many difficult words. Also it was translated from Italian to English and my English was not so good. I did not really understand but I felt something. So then I heard they were dancing the Song of the Vajra and I became even more interested.

Then I started to have dreams of the Master and what I understood from my dreams was that the teachings are very complete. They are complete teachings and you don't need anything else, everything is in it. So I didn't have to look any further. And now here I am living in Tenerife. Also many nice things happened this year and it makes me very joyful and grateful to Rinpoche for bringing me on this path.

The Mirror: Thank you Ans.



Self-less self portrait

Dzamling Gar March 13, 2016

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