

## Culture Served With Tea

By *Danielle Gensburg* Posted: 03/30/2009

As guests enter the reception hall on the third floor of the Michael C. Carlos Museum, they are greeted by a table on top of which lies a kettle of hot water, a pile of green napkins, a plate of sugar cubes and a basket filled with brown bags of chai tea. The guests wait in line, anxious for a taste. The aroma of the tea spices up the atmosphere as the guests take their seats, cups in hand, and await the presentation.

On Thursday, the Carlos Museum hosted AntiquiTEA: Patriarch of Ngor Dynasty, as part of Emory's Tibet Week, where artist-in-residence Tenzin Norbu discussed several Tibetan thankgas depicting the lives of the many Dalai Lamas.

Norbu and Dolmakyap Zorgey, scholar and deputy managing director of the Norbalinkga Institute, have been residents for several weeks at the Carlos Museum, discussing Tibetan thankga painting techniques.

A thankga is a painted or embroidered Buddhist banner, usually in an upright rectangular form, which is hung in a monastery and often carried by monks in ceremonial processions. The thankga is a type of painting done on a flat surface so that it can be rolled up when it is not used for display.

Since thankga paintings often aim to portray a spiritual master's life, usually through detailed scenes, Zorgey described the current project underway at the Norbalingka Institute, a fine arts center in India for teaching, training and research, to create thankgas depicting all the scenes and events in each of the lives of the 14 Dalai Lamas, 11 of which have already been completed. Each thankga painting requires the help of several painters and the master artist.

The portrayal of each of the Dalai Lama's lives begins on an empty white canvas. Using pencil, the artists sketch the Dalai Lama and the images of his life, using detailed measurements. Next, the artists use paint, which is made from stones that the artists grind themselves, to follow the guide of the initial sketch.

To provide a visual aid, Zorgey turned his guests' attention to the screen where a slide show began with the first thankga painting, telling the life of the very first Dalai Lama, Gendun Drup.

Through a translator, master artist Tenzin Norbu began to describe the images presented in each one of his thankga paintings. The thankga paintings are defined by their intricate details, beautiful scenes and bright colors. They depict only the most significant incidents and anecdotes in the life of each Dalai Lama.

Every thannga is characterized by the Dalai Lama, who sits clad in robes of red and gold with a lotus flower in his hand.

The lotus flower is a reference to the Avalokiteshvara, a bodhisattva or enlightened being that, in the hands of each Dalai Lama, symbolizes purity.

Many of the thanngas depict scenes of the monastic life and training of the Dalai Lamas, with images of nature, such as detailed trees, flowers, lakes and mountains, and images of monks, temples, and people present in each piece.

The artists spend one year on each painting, aiming to create images that capture the history of the Dalai Lama in the form of art, instead of language. The thannga paintings are incredible not only because of their intricate details, but because they express the life and significance of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The overall mission of the Norbalingka Institute is to maintain Tibetan tradition by promoting an environment where Tibetan family and community values can prosper, as well as to provide education, training and employment for Tibetans.

Zorgey described the Norbalinkga Institute as a place of great beauty, filled with trees, birds and people where members focus on the preservation of Tibetan art.

Like the Norbalingka Institute, Emory's commitment to the preservation of Tibetan culture is made evident through the display of tradition and art that characterized AntiquiTEA as well as the many other events held on campus to honor Tibet Week.