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An ancient spiritual tradition with an uncanny affinity to twentieth century art:
Tantra Song is a singular collection of rare Tantric art edited by acclaimed poet Franck André Jamme



Hidden communities of *tantrikas* open to Jamme after a deadly bus accident

Tantra Song originates in acclaimed French poet Jamme's journey to India twenty-five years ago when he first searched in vain for the source of these beautifully concise and rare Tantric paintings. On the road to Jaipur, he survived a bus accident in which seven others were killed, returning to Paris with wounds that took two years to heal. Back in India just a few years later, he met a soothsayer who proclaimed that Jamme, in his suffering, had paid sufficient tribute to the goddess Shakti. The soothsayer asked Jamme to take a vow—to visit the *tantrikas* alone or only with someone he truly loves. Since then he has gained access to the very private communities of adepts who make these paintings for their spiritual practice.

“Things of beauty” used to awaken heightened states of consciousness

While they invoke the highly symbolic cosmology of Hindu Tantra, these contemporary, anonymous paintings from Rajasthan are unlike the more familiar strands of Tantric art such as geometric yantras or the erotic illustrations of the *Kama Sutra*. The progeny of hand-written, illustrated religious treatises from the 17th century, these paintings have been copied across many generations, separating over time from the original texts and evolving into a distinct visual lexicon. In this tradition, the younger family members study with an elder *tantrika* who teaches them not only how to render the painting but to sharpen their inner vision so that they can visualize and recall the image under any circumstance. While they are often imbued with specific spiritual meaning (e.g. blue refers to consciousness, spirals and arrows symbolize energy, an inverted triangle represents the goddess Shakti), their meaning is not always strictly fixed.

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TANTRA SONG: Tantric Painting from Rajasthan, edited and with writings by Franck André Jamme

With an introduction by Lawrence Rinder, an essay by André Padoux, and an interview by Bill Berkson. Translated from the French by Michael Tweed.

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Paintings from the book will be exhibited at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, September 10 - December 10, 2011

In his *Tantra Song* essay, “Of Images & Beauty,” scholar André Padoux describes the paintings as both “things of beauty” and “supports of cosmic visions.” The adepts who paint them do not see themselves as artists though some may see this as an aesthetic as well as religious activity. Like musicians playing *ragas* of classical Indian music, tantrikas draw in a concentrated state of mental rapture, repeating and subtly reinterpreting the melodic structures of line, color, and shading. They paint with tempera, gouache, and watercolor on salvaged paper, drawing on the life of the paper itself. When complete, the paintings are pinned to the wall to use in private meditation to awaken heightened states of consciousness.

A magnetic, vibratory beauty inspires acute attention even in the uninitiated

For Westerners, Jamme says, “these pieces, upon being discovered for the first time, without knowing anything about them, often seem immediately familiar. Like mother’s milk.” While they have an uncanny affinity with a range of 20th century abstract art, they also have a magnetic, vibratory beauty that inspires acute attention, even to the uninitiated. Says Berkeley Art Museum director Lawrence Rinder in his introduction:

“I have noticed in the Tantric works how the simplicity of their conventional, geometric forms is complemented by the infinite complexity of their particular execution: water stains, flaws in the handmade paper, fragments of unrelated text combine to make each work not only unique but somehow perfect. . . . It’s not just a desire for the antique or a nostalgic patina that makes the incidental marks so important, it’s precisely that ideal forms—forms plumbed from the depths of the mind, of the soul—need to co-exist with randomness and the emptiness of chance. How is it that a symbol of god alone is so dull, but when juxtaposed with a smudge or a smear it comes alive?”

A gorgeous book that inspires contemplation and illuminates a rarely seen art form

Tantra Song brings these stunning works into wider view, with the intention of presenting the reader with as direct and intimate means of engaging them as possible. Reproduced in sumptuous color with an emphasis on clarity and detail, each painting is presented on a single page so that the reader has unreserved space for boundless contemplation. Jamme’s luminous texts further open readers to their subtle but copious magic. Sensitive to both the unique potential as well as the complications of seeing these works through novice eyes, Jamme explores the richness of Tantra itself, its ambiguities and contradictions. His lyrical acuity reflects the ways in which Tantric painting itself departs from contemporary notions of authorship, Western epistemology and phenomenology. Having spent more than two decades in conversation with Rajasthani tantrikas, Jamme—like Michaux, Leiris, and Bataille before him—draws on an extraordinary and unconventional body of knowledge, accumulated as a poet-ethnographer engaged with the world. A convergence of East and West, the spiritual and the aesthetic, the ancient and the modern, *Tantra Song* is a revelatory book illuminating an occluded art form and revealing a fascinating culture of contemporary religious art.

Franck André Jamme is one of France’s leading contemporary poets and the author of more than a dozen books. His publications in English (translated by John Ashbery, Charles Borkhuis, David Kelley, and Michael Tweed) include *New Exercises*, *Another Silent Attack*, *Moon Wood*, *The Recitation of Forgetting*, and *Extracts from the Life of a Beetle*. Described by Henri Michaux as “a writer of rare quality,” Jamme has also collaborated with a number of artists including Phillippe Favier, Suzan Frecon, Acharya Vyakul, and Hanns Schimansky, as well as translated the works of John Ashbery and Lokenath Bhattacharya. A specialist in *art brut*, Tantric and tribal arts of India, he has curated and contributed to exhibitions at The Drawing Center, Centre Georges Pompidou, and Beaux-Arts de Paris, among others.

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