Conservation of Thangkas: Preserving a Living Religious Heritage

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ABSTRACT: Thangkas are not only artworks but part of a living religious heritage. Conservation of this type of heritage requires a different approach to assess what values are carried by the objects and what is to be conserved. It implies the necessity to broaden our thinking beyond the actual Western conservation ethical standards, which may be oriented too exclusively on material conservation. Some examples of acceptable compromises can be found through dialogue with all involved communities and by sharing knowledge and experiences with them; the aim is to find innovative ways to integrate conservation awareness within a living culture.

Introduction

Thangkas are part of a living religious heritage, as is every object and building related to Tibetan Buddhism. The tradition is very alive and the objects are still in use in their area of origin. Thangkas are used as supports for meditation by religious and lay people, and also used for religious teachings by monks travelling in villages and monasteries. They depict particular deities and episodes of their lives, or religious and historic people, and by extension thangkas themselves become objects of veneration. This paper examines what “preserving a living religious heritage” means in terms of conservation and what the significance of this heritage is in its original cultural context. It proposes that as a consequence, Western ethical standards of conservation should be reviewed and adapted to this type of heritage. A few examples of bridges created between Tibetan communities and Western conservators are provided, as means of integrating conservation standards within a living religious culture, and as possible means of finding acceptable compromises between ritual use and conservation.

Living Religious Heritage and Cultural Values

Living religious heritage has several layers of value: spiritual value when in use (the respect due to the deity extends to the painting which embodies it, conferring it a sacred value during a consecration ceremony) (Figure 1); historic and social value, when they represent highly respected religious teachers and their lineage or when they include important historic or religious texts (Figure 2) or illustrate these texts; legendary value, when thangkas are associated with miracles or represent them; sacred but also historic and artistic value when they are displayed in a local museum, becoming also cultural identity markers and objects of pride.
Figure 1. A thangka in a temple, with silk scarves and butter lamps placed in front, and veil half lifted.

Figure 2. A monk deciphering a text on a thangka.

Figure 3. A thangka in a private western collection, framed under glass.

Figure 4. Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche looking at a thangka. This image and figure 2 show the intimate physical connection between people and thangkas.
When thangkas are entering Western collections, there is usually a shift of value from sacred to artistic and historic, according to Western scale of museum values. This translates into the way they are displayed, looked at and conserved (Figure 3).

To acknowledge the sacred value of thangkas leads to a review of our ethical standards, which are very oriented to materials conservation. Using a cultural heritage object, let alone preserving this use, is generally not included in our codes of ethics. We tend to talk of “objects” or “artworks”, which in the case of a thangka, is only an aspect of its multiple qualities. Thangkas and other religious artworks in the Himalayan culture are valued because they are connected to gods and to people rather than because they are works of art (Figure 4). That they can be both, and that both are equally valuable and need conserving, is a relatively recent attitude (Nara Document on Authenticity, 1994) and leads to a rethink of our conservation practices. This attitude does not have to be limited to conservation in the Himalayas: even in museums, objects are part of a living tradition, and not witnesses of an extinct past. A Western museum can also provide meaning and context to its collections in many creative ways.

To preserve the object within its context, conservation options have to take into account the intangible aspects before any treatment decision occurs. This means examining the traditional use and the needs of the community owning this heritage, as well as the material condition of the object.

Conservations Options Reconsidered

How can we adapt to the realities of a living heritage? These realities include an intense and widely shared faith, frequent rituals involving regular use of the thangkas, frequent transportation of thangkas, regular rolling and unrolling, lighting of butter lamps. They often also include poor and harsh environmental conditions, damp storage places, dust, rodents and water infiltrations (Figures 5 and 6). The challenge for both conservators and users is how to integrate conservation awareness within the living tradition and find common goals.

Figure 5. Two lamas riding to the nearby village for their weekly journey. A lama is often in charge of several villages and shares his time between them. They can also carry images if needed for ceremonies.

Figure 6. Ceremony in a temple for auspicious omens to the area. Such ceremonies are frequent events.
Creating bridges between communities seems to be one possible way. The following summary of a treatment of a much damaged thangka during a UNESCO workshop in Kathmandu aims at illustrating some possible compromises between the needs of the different communities involved: the lay community, the monastic community, and the different conservation communities.

The first issue was the decision to reline the thangka. It was necessary to support a structurally unsound thangka, although some other options would be considered in a purely museum-oriented conservation approach. The reasons to do so were to take into account the spiritual character of the thangka and to maintain the possibility of a religious traditional use, thus allowing for a traditional vertical display (Figure 7). The relining had to be flexible enough to allow rolling and unrolling, even if this would not necessarily be the case after treatment. It also had to allow visual access to the back, to read the inscription (Figure 8) which is part of the consecration of the thangka and confers its spiritual presence. The technique of semi-transparent reining developed has been fully described elsewhere (Cotte 2007) and will not be discussed here; this article will focus on the “crossing bridges” aspects of this type of treatment.

Crossing Conservation Bridges

The treatment involved collaboration between textile and painting conservation; numerous discussions resulted in opening the range of materials and techniques available. The use of silk crepeline as a reining support -- crepeline is of common use in textile conservation, but not for this purpose, and is never used in paintings conservation -- perfectly illustrates the cross-disciplinary nature of thangka conservation.

The use of an adhesive reactivation technique for safety (thangkas are water sensitive paintings) also draws on both disciplines: not using water-based adhesive as such to avoid the risk of colours running; but also not using heat-seal to avoid any risk of staining and darkening of the colours. Our goal of creating a strong enough, yet not overly strong, bond (keeping in mind that thangkas are not stretched and that their total weight is small) led us to choose this additional compromise between textile and painting techniques.
The use of a screen printing technique to prepare the silk backing draws on the printmaking community’s tools, and has been used in conservation in the past for applying the right amount of adhesive for a relining. In this case, the silk is the relining backing support itself, and having the silk backing lightly stretched and fixed onto a screen allows for easy and precise handling and positioning (Figure 9).

Crossing Community Bridges

Involving the Monks in the Conservation Process

Involving monks in the conservation process is essential: monks are the main caretakers and users of the thangkas, for their own meditation practices and on behalf of the community during ceremonies. They will not necessarily do conservation treatment themselves, but being made aware of the possibilities in conservation will help them make informed decisions for their heritage. Once aware of conservation practices the monks can refer damaged thangkas to conservators, rather than considering them beyond repair. They can also act preventively by modifying the storage and hanging conditions: for example, choosing to place the butter lamps a further 50 cm away from the thangka can make a real difference.

Another benefit of involving the monastic community is communication. At the same time conservation skills are shared, the iconography and the spiritual meanings can be discussed with the conservators, as well as the practical religious needs. Acceptable compromises can be found in most cases. Monks can also make conservators aware of the particular nature of these objects and advise them about respectful attitudes to be adopted when handling and treating a thangka (Figure 10).
It is very important that monks participate in the conservation process, if only by visiting workshops or giving lectures about thangkas, as it has an enormous visual impact on the community at large: the words of the religious authority is not challenged and their endorsement legitimates the process. Their recommendation creates another level of awareness about heritage conservation. It ensures that no compromise to the thangkas’ significance to people has been taken.

Involving the Traditional Painters

Painters can be monks or lay people, and they undergo a long and rigorous apprenticeship to master the technique, the iconography and the proportions. They are very often consulted because they are the only persons with enough skills to undertake conservation. Particularly in places where skilled people are a scarce resource, ignorance will only result in neglect or damage to the heritage and to the people’s culture. Thangka painters can carry out informed and less interventive treatments. At the same time, they are skilled enough to carry out the visual part of a conservation treatment. A conservator can introduce them to minimal inpainting, which may be enough for many thangkas: toning down the losses to make them recede visually is often enough to allow complete optical reconstruction and as such is religiously appropriate, while being both aesthetically pleasing and ethically respectful (Figures 11 and 12). The degree to which this type of reintegration is appropriate must be judged by someone from the concerned cultural group and faith. Some deities are easily identified by characteristic attributes and will suffer more “wear and tear” and still be recognizable. Other more complex depictions may require more extensive inpainting.

Figure 11. Detail of a thangka showing characteristic horizontal losses due to repeated rolling and unrolling.

Figure 12. Same detail after minimal inpainting (toning down with watercolours).
When the degree of damage is considered too important, or the deity is felt to be defaced and therefore the thangka cannot anymore be the medium for worship, it becomes necessary to replace missing parts. Conservators do not have the necessary religious training. However, in a collaborative approach, they can promote the idea that the inpainting is limited to the paint losses only; in this manner, an acceptable compromise between total overpainting of the thangka and standard museum approach can be found (Figure 13).

**Sustainability**

Finally it is essential, if the new practices are to endure, that the process may be easily reproduced on site. Finding equivalent local materials will enable local conservators to work without huge budgetary constraints and will ensure the continued local sharing of conservation techniques. Finding the proper local sources can also be a very interesting and stimulating experience and lead to the discovery of new materials.
Local conservators and painters can gain confidence by learning to evaluate and to test local materials. Understanding material properties and defining the parameters required for each treatment will encourage conservators to make certain they can adapt their treatment to their needs. The history of conservation shows that universal recipes have never proved successful, while accommodations to a particular context may allow for better results. Simple adhesive strength tests at different concentrations and on different textile materials, or of different dyes for the backing to test transparency and legibility, were performed during the workshop and had a great impact (Figures 14 and 15).

Involvement of monastic and artistic communities in conservation awareness and practice has also a role to play in the economy. The acquisition of skills that are readily applicable to the local context is a benefit for a person and a valued resource for a country. Too often the skills acquired abroad are not adapted and consequently not valued or used. This situation does not provide incentives for further skills acquisitions; it can also drive skilled people to other countries where their efforts are not frustrated. Although the problem affects more than just the heritage conservation field, innovation in this area could result in an incremental step towards valuing a culture’s heritage in a different manner, as an important economical asset for tourism and country income. A dynamic way to engage with their heritage can become a valued quality of Himalayan countries and be more appreciated by visitors than merely replicating Western museums display features and conservation processes in cultures that do not share the same rational values.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to stress the importance of integrating the sacred value of living cultural heritage in the conservation practice. We should not consider only the Western set of values to which we are trained and accustomed, we need to broaden our approach. Treating objects originating from another culture, we must re-evaluate our practice and open our minds by allowing context, tradition and community values enter into the decision making processes. Strict ethical standards devoid of context may not be the best solution: the best scientific way is not necessarily the best way in the case of living religious heritage. We as conservators would all like to find a way to preserve both the cultural and spiritual qualities of the heritage as well as their artistic and material qualities. As perfectly worded by Canadian conservator Miriam Clavir, talking about North American First Nations cultures, preserving living religious heritage is also “preserving what is valued by its users” (Clavir, 2002). This does not always exactly coincide with what is valued by the viewers’ culture and underlines the necessity of consultations to make informed and respectful decisions.

To find innovative and efficient solutions for conservation of living religious objects, it is necessary to engage in a dialogue between the communities who are involved: the religious and artistic communities, the other conservation specialties, and the general community (for example by communicating about conservation, inviting people to the conservation studio, collecting and valuing their experience). Only with an equal dialogue, an open mind and an even sharing of knowledge can conservation become a dynamic process, and living cultural heritage become a valuable asset worth preserving in its own right.
References


BIOGRAPHY: Sabine Cotte received a diploma in conservation of paintings from the Institut Français de Restauration des Oeuvres d’Art, Paris, in 1990. She also graduated from the ICCROM mural painting conservation course in 1994. She has worked in conservation of Himalayan paintings since 1992 and has completed various missions for UNESCO and private foundations in Bhutan and Nepal, on conservation of thangkas and mural paintings. She has published several articles and posters on this topic, in international journals and conferences. She has worked in Paris as a private conservator for ten years, both on Himalayan and Western art, mainly for institutions. She moved to Australia in 2001 and works privately in Melbourne, Victoria. She is currently enrolled in a Masters in Conservation at Melbourne University, her research topic being “Conservation of thangkas in Australia”.

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