



**Proceedings of the
Forum on the Conservation of Thangkas
Special Session of the ICOM-CC 15th Triennial Conference,
New Delhi, India, September 26, 2008**

Hosted by the Working Group on Ethnographic Collections,
the Textiles Working Group and the Paintings Working Group

Editors: Mary Ballard and Carole Dignard

Published by the International Council of Museums – Committee for
Conservation (ICOM-CC)

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Documenting Thangkas: A Conservation Strategy

Sanjay Dhar

ABSTRACT: This article presents a discussion on documentation and preventive conservation of Thangkas based on various projects that the author has carried out in Ladakh, India.

Introduction

Religion, acting as a catalyst for the physical manifestation for devotion, has contributed in large measure to the cultural heritage of civilization. Whereas modernity has affected a change in most parts of the world, Tibetan Buddhism until recently had been insulated, primarily because of the geography of the region (the Himalayas) in which it is prevalent and practiced, remaining inaccessible to outside influence.

Tibetan Buddhism, often referred to as the *Mahayana* (the higher vehicle) Buddhism with its esoteric practice of *Vajrayan* (Tantric) Buddhism, is widely practiced along the Himalayas, with its primary seat in the Tibetan Plateau and important areas of practice ranging from Ladakh in the North of India to Bhutan, the other extreme of the Himalayas. Despite a clear regional identity, the cultural manifestations are homogeneous. They as such provide a unique opportunity for the study of preservation issues that can address and influence a wide geographical area and prevent the rapid loss of physical manifestation of a culture¹.

In 1998, I visited Ladakh for the first time for a preliminary investigation of a wall painting site, for a local NGO (non governmental organization), the Namgyal Institute for Research on Ladakhi Art and Culture (NIRLAC). NIRLAC was looking to develop projects that would have a long term impact on the preservation and conservation of physical manifestations of the local culture, with emphasis on affecting the mindset of religious institutions and people at large. The financial implications of such an endeavor are not hard to imagine, therefore it was essential to find means to extend the benefits of our work, to a wider context.

This paper delineates the context and strategy adopted for addressing a wider section of the cultural heritage, focused around the Thangka with an emphasis on the custodian.

Background

Ladakh, due to its geographical location, remained inaccessible through most of the year until very recently, when road and air links were improved, resulting in a higher influx of tourists and visitors from all over the world. The improvement in communications and better connectivity has brought about a major change in Ladakhi society and, importantly, in cultural traditions. In the past, a large number of young novices used to join the monastic order, but now this number has dwindled due to increase in opportunities and growing affluence of the society. This change has affected the functioning of the monasteries as they do not have enough monks to cater to the ecclesiastical needs of the laity, to perform rituals and prayers. Consequently the aspects related to the physical maintenance of the monasteries that used to be performed by young novices have been drastically affected. Monasteries today prefer to use material that is easy to maintain and economical, for example printed Thangkas have become very popular. This change has in turn affected the traditional production of cultural material which is now primarily manufactured for the tourist trade.

Today there is a better understanding of the value of traditional items, in the monasteries, ironically because of thefts and black market trade in art works. These problems have led to the perception in favor of tighter security, unfortunately resulting in limited use of traditional objects in rituals etc.

The Namgyal Institute for Research on Ladakhi Art and Culture (NIRLAC) was set up by the former ruling family of Ladakh, who also are the patrons of one of the largest sects, the *Drukpa* (red hat), that owns monasteries and temples all over the region. NIRLAC initiated several projects for the preservation of wall paintings in the region with support from international and national funding agencies. It was clear in the beginning that to achieve a wider impact, it would be necessary to design these projects in a manner that public participation was ensured, and also such that the community at large would be introduced to the concept of heritage preservation and conservation.

The broad objectives of the programmes are listed as follows:

1. To increase sensitivity towards heritage material not only for economic use but also to support aspirations for a better future.
2. To create better awareness of preservation and conservation issues in the region.
3. To communicate macro-issues pertaining to conservation in the context of usage patterns and storage of heritage material.
4. To find better solutions to deal with the consequences of change in the social and cultural milieu of Ladakh.
5. To utilize the presence of subject specialists in assessing the conservation needs within the community, with emphasis on monasteries.
6. To help the monasteries improve the inventory process, with emphasis on training.

7. To help develop better storage facilities and systems, with emphasis on utilizing the local infrastructure and reproducibility of systems.
8. To identify areas or mediums of intervention that will have maximum impact on the overall condition of cultural material.
9. To promote knowledge sharing and transparency in the processes, to address issues of trust and confidence.
10. To demonstrate the scope of conservation in restoring an object, to build awareness ensuring damaged articles are not disposed of, but stored and kept.
11. To utilize funding and project opportunities with a wider interpretation and objective in addressing conservation issues across mediums and materials.

In 2000, NIRLAC received funding for preparation of preliminary reports concerning providing emergency treatment and designing a conservation strategy for the *Chamba Lakhang*, in Basgo, and the *Dorje Chenmo* Temple in Shey. I was appointed consultant (in wall paintings) for the two projects, and was expected to spend more than a month in Ladakh. I felt that this would be a good opportunity to start interacting with the communities and monastery administration, to understand their concerns with respect to the material heritage in their custody.

As a result of this initial interaction, we felt that a project on the documentation of Thangka paintings would be able to achieve many of the objectives that had been set out. Further to this, the specific aims of the documentation were set as follows:

1. To assess the state of preservation on Thangkas in the monasteries of Ladakh.
2. To create an inventory of holdings of participating monasteries.
3. To help reorganize the stores and improve conditions of storage.
4. To improve systems of better upkeep, with an understanding of the limitations of resources and manpower building on current practice and aspirations.
5. To improve the general understanding of the nature of holdings within a monastery for the conservation professionals and academics. (It was felt that we could provide basic input for the care of different categories of ritual objects that form part of the ritual life in a monastery such as textiles, sculpture, masks etc.)
6. The data collected would be made accessible to researchers/students of art history and conservation after digitization and collation.
7. Statistical study of the data would help understand some conservation issues. (The homogeneous nature and large numbers provide a unique opportunity to undertake such a study).

The Form

The content of the form used for our survey is provided below. It is divided in 4 sections. Comments or basic directions for filling out the form are provided in italics. Most of the headings are self-explanatory. The goal was to solicit entering only objective data.

Section I: LOCATION (Storage / Display)

This section identifies the object's exact location within the structure where it is housed. A schematic of the floor plan was to be prepared and, with the help of monks, the nomenclature (vernacular) as used was recorded. The main purpose, other than the inventory, was to understand the relation between damages, deterioration and display / storage spaces.

Room: *Name the room and identify it on a schematic drawing of the building.*

1. In use / Rolled / Framed:

2. Wall orientation / Display position / Height from the ground:

The height from the ground was introduced to establish a relationship with the presence of grime or grease and mechanical damage due to easy access. It must also be noted that the ceilings in most monasteries are low.

Storage:

3. Almirah: Open shelves / Glass front:

4. Box: Wood / Metal:

5. Remarks:

Storage / Display (condition):

6. Close to soot source:

7. Exposed to light:

8. Exposed to ritual offering:

9. Display wall humid:

10. Placed under water seepage spot:

Inside monasteries, some walls usually have areas that have been affected by water seepage. Around these areas there is substantial deformation and accumulation of clay run-off. Often these areas are repaired and in the process, the Thangka in the vicinity may get clay splatter etc.

11. Presence of uneven pressure in storage:

This is to reflect a situation when the Thangkas are piled on top of each other tightly inside steel boxes.

12. Inappropriate tie ribbons:

The thickness and nature of tie ribbons affects the surface of the paint layer; thinner cords cut into the support or create an indentation.

13. Cord(s):

Refers to the hanging cord. Often when it is damaged, it is wrapped around the rolled Thangka and has the same effect as an improper tie ribbon.

14. Remarks:

Section II: PHYSICAL DATA

This section gives the details of the physical parameters of the Thangka, ranging from the length and breadth, to measurements of each of the elements. A schematic drawing (Figure 1) is used to define the various elements. Additionally weight and thickness measurements have also been added. This was done to create data that can be statistically analyzed to identify relationships to damages and deterioration. An important aspect of this exercise is also to create a database for authentication and art historical studies.

1. Medium:

Traditionally in India, Thangka medium is described as 'tempera'; however a more technically correct description would be 'distemper'. We have used the traditional description, implying pigment bound with water soluble glue, which, in the case of Thangkas, is usually of animal origin.

2. Dimension: (In centimeters) (Letters refer to diagram in Figure 1 below.)

A _____ B _____ C _____ D _____
 E _____ F _____
 G _____ H _____ I _____ J _____

3. Front (Painted area): K _____ L _____

4. Back (Painted area): M _____ N _____

5. Veil: O _____ P _____ Ribbon: Left _____ Right _____

6. Upper rod (length): X _____

7. Roller (length): Y _____ End diameter: _____

8. Yarn count (fabric; 1cm x 1cm):
 Painting: _____ Backing: _____

9. Weight: (In grams) _____

10. Fabric thickness: (In microns)
 Backing + Border: _____ Border: _____ Backing: _____
 Painting: _____ Veil: _____

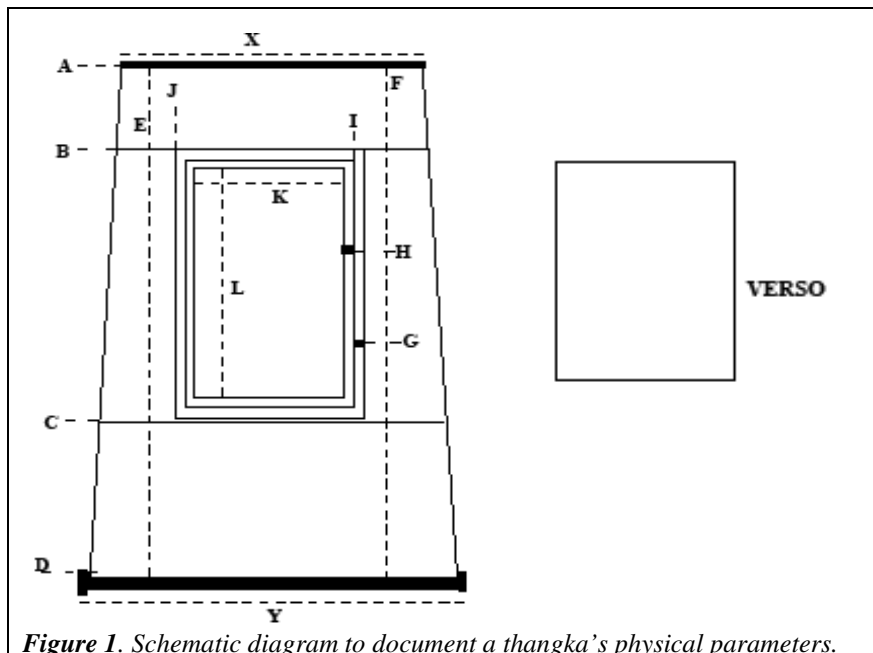


Figure 1. Schematic diagram to document a thangka's physical parameters.

Section III: INSCRIPTIONS and ICONOGRAPHIC DETAILS

This section covers information that can be recorded with the assistance of local monks, with emphasis on usage of local terminology. This was one of the most fascinating exercise for conservators, as there is much to learn, in particular the relation of the clergy with the paintings becomes apparent. For example, when studying black Thangkas (a type of painting with black background and painted with gold, usually depicting fierce gods), the monks are very cautious and always have stories of the wrathful nature of the deities.

Also when designing the format for this part of the form, I was aware that the conservators recording the data may not be able to make subject identification, so it was important to document the iconography using more objective parameters.

Inscription:

1. Front:

2. Verso:

3. Seal / Marking:

In the 1980's, the Archelological Survey of India created a register of Thangkas and inscribed many with a seal, marking them out as 'antiquity'.

Iconography:

4. Subject:

5. Main Deity:

6. Number of minor deities:

7. Shape of arrangement around the main figure:

8 Identity of minor deities (from right to left):

9. Remarks: (Usage pattern / special feature / significance etc.)

It was important to collect information related to usage patterns within the context of a living tradition.

Section IV: DESCRIPTION and CONDITION OF OTHER ELEMENTS

A) Veil:

1. Number of pieces:
2. Colour (main):
3. Design Pattern: (*Description of the design*)
4. Local name of pattern:
5. Condition: *Attempt was made to keep the Condition parameters as objective as possible; any other information was to be filed under Remarks².*
 - i. Edges frayed:
 - ii. Fabric weak and worn:
 - iii. Soot deposit:
 - iv. Colour faded:
6. Remarks:

B) Border fabric:

1. Brocade:
2. Cotton / Silk / Any other (specify):
3. Number of pieces:
4. Colours (main):
5. Original / Changed:
6. Local name of design / pattern:
7. Condition:
 - i. Fabric abraded, %:
 - ii. Fiber condition:
 - iii. Tears:
 - iv. Losses, %:
 - v. Stains (Nature):
 - vi. Discolouration (Nature):
8. Remarks:

- C) Stitching:** 1. Original / Later:
2. Condition:

- D) Cord:** 1. Original / Later:
2. Condition:

- E) Rods:** 1. Top:
2. Bottom:
3. Condition:
4. Remarks:

F) Auxiliary support (Backing cloth):

1. Cotton / Silk / Any other (specify):
2. Number of pieces / Colours:
3. Original / Changed (Local name of design):
4. Pattern:
5. Condition:
 - i. Fabric abraded, %:
 - ii. Fiber condition:
 - iii. Tears:
 - iv. Losses:
 - v. Stain (Nature):
 - vi. Discolouration (Nature):
6. Remarks:

G) Primary support: *(This documentation is supported by graphical reporting.)*

Verso:

1. Cotton / Silk / Any other (specify):
2. Priming:
3. Fiber condition:
4. Condition:
 - i. Tears:
 - ii. Losses, % :
 - iii. Stains (Nature) :
 - iv. Discolouration (Nature) :
 - v. Abrasion :
 - vi. Fold marks:
 - vii. Creases:
5. Remarks:

Paint layer:

1. Priming:
2. Fiber condition:
3. Condition:
 - i. Tears:
 - ii. Losses, %:
 - iii. Stains (Nature):
 - iv. Discolouration (Nature):
 - v. Abrasion:
 - vi. Fold marks:
 - vii. Creases:
 - viii. Surface soiling, %:
 - ix. Thinning, %:
 - x. Water damage:
 - xi. Previous Intervention:
4. Remarks:

H) Embroidery / Patch work (appliqué):

Besides painted Thangkas, other common formats are embroidery and appliqué.

1. Cotton / Silk / Any other (specify):
2. Number of pieces:
3. Colours:
4. Type of stitch:
5. Pattern:
6. Condition:
 - i. Fabric abraded, %:
 - ii. Fiber condition:
 - iii. Tears:
 - iv. Losses :
 - v. Stains (Nature):
 - vi. Discolouration (Nature):
7. Remarks:

I) Photography detail:

J) Logistic details:

Discussion and Conclusions

It was very important to ensure that the methodology for documentation was clearly established and understood; to this end, discussions with the local monks who were helping us, was significant. We laid great emphasis on understanding the cultural and religious nuances in handling the Thangka. A Thangka is foremost a religious object and by definition has the deity residing in it, so understanding and respecting the Thangka as a living individual was very important. Our manner of working was initially closely watched by senior monks and only when they were satisfied, did we get almost unlimited access to the stores. This was a major achievement for the team as Ladakh has a small population and information travels very fast even across seemingly large geographical areas. After the first mission in the Stakna monastery, with the blessings of the *Rinpoche* (the living Buddha) of Stakna, it was easier for us to get access to other monasteries that were then keen to participate in the programme.

We had requested the monastery authorities to assign monks who normally handled the Thangka to assist us. The purpose was to explain the various nuances of proper handling. While examining the Thangkas, we were also able to illustrate damages resulting from improper handling and storage. This had a significant impact on the junior monks and how they functioned through our stay. It was with a sense of achievement that we observed that the monks who were working with us paid great attention to things around them and raised pertinent questions relating to their maintenance and upkeep.

Noteworthy was to learn from the senior old monks that many conservation principles and practices were already part of the tradition, for example, I was told that the person rolling a Thangka should have the strength of a Yak, so that the roll is tight and without wrinkles.

The monks demonstrated the system that had fallen out of use, so the documentation team along with the novices and junior monks could practice rolling properly in the traditional way. In this manner, the documentation process put the senior and junior monks together and helped revive the traditional system of knowledge-transfer within the context of heritage material.

As a result of recording yarn count and design pattern, we were able to make some preliminary observations. It would appear that the monasteries in the past had campaigns for tidying Thangkas: a master craftsman for fitting borders would be called and he would change damaged and soiled fabric. Noteworthy is the fact that mostly the back covering fabric would be changed and the brocade border repaired with patch mending. These campaigns could be numbered based on the type and print of fabric that was used. But this system has now fallen out of use as not many monks could remember any such campaign in the recent past.

A small percentage of funds for the documentation were earmarked for fabricating sample storage solutions. Primarily, the concept of protective tubes with lids on the ends was introduced as an effective method for long term storage (**Figure 2**). Also, for stacking the tubes, a locally-fabricated metal box with slots for the tubes, was designed and used. The project was conditional, in its objective, on not donating the material for

storage but on involving the monastery administration in sourcing and fabricating so that the resource could be used sustainably and without assistance. I have observed that many monasteries are now using this system for storage of valuable Thangkas.



Figure 2: Storing Thangkas into locally-fabricated metal tubes and metal box.

During the time that I spent on the other projects in Ladakh, I was able to undertake the restoration of a few Thangkas. This was fully documented, with the local community participating as observers at various points in the conservation process. The results were then presented to the community elders and senior monks from various monasteries. This helped in creating awareness towards the potential of conservation in restoring a Thangka to its near original state. As a result, several monasteries took stock of their holdings, particularly of the damaged Thangkas, and stored them in a proper manner until such time that they can be restored.

The data collected during the documentation process has been digitized, however the programme did not have enough funding to take it forward.

More monasteries across the region need to be covered under this documentation project, with a systematic digital database and software programme for access and for further study, both scientific and art historical.

A basic empirical study of the data collected establishes the validity of the methodology as a viable scientific tool for quantifying the relationships between damages and deterioration and the environment in which an object exists. Importantly, such an approach also helps in developing viable solutions for ensuring safety of physical manifestations, within the specific context of the dynamics in the environment of a cultural milieu.

Endnotes

1. I have a difficulty in using the terms ‘artifacts’, ‘art works’, ‘antiquity’, etc, within the context of objects that are part of a living tradition. I prefer to use the terms, ‘physical manifestation’, ‘cultural outpourings’, etc. In my view these terms are more appropriate, since the context of these works is outside that of a museum or a more modern interpretation that contextualizes its environment outside of its original intent.
2. Quantification of the problems of deterioration was given in percentage. This was a subjective element; however during the process we were able to establish some basic standardization in reporting percentages

BIOGRAPHY: Mr. Sanjay Dhar is currently Chief Conservator and Senior Vice-President, Center for Archival Research and Development - CARD, Osian's Connoisseurs of Art Pvt. Ltd., a well established organization with diverse activities ranging from auction to publishing and film festival, in India. Mr. Dhar has many years of experience in wall paintings, and is also an expert in Thangka conservation. He was for many years the centre Director of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), in New Delhi, India, before opening his own private practice.

CONTACT: Email: snjydh@gmail.com .

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