Restoration and Conservation of Tibetan and Nepalese Thangkas

Alan Farancz

ABSTRACT: Thangkas often come into a conservation laboratory after having suffered much damage; often as well they have undergone extensive past restoration attempts. In this article, the author describes, illustrates and comments on some typical examples of damage and of past treatments that he has come across during his many years of private practice in this field.

There is very little known written documentation about the restoration of thangkas in the 19th and early 20th century. There is only information derived from the actual artwork. It is believed that damaged thangkas were either stored or deconsecrated and put in stupas.

Thangkas that we have worked on have had various types of treatment in the past. Some had been rolled up tight and in storage for many years. Most have been rolled and unrolled numerous times. This has caused them to have horizontal cracks and be out of plane. We have seen several past attempts to correct these problems: they have been attached to various other substrates such as cloth, Plexiglas, Mylar, cardboard and Japanese paper. They have been attached to these supports with adhesives such as paste, hide glue, and synthetic resins. Many have been attacked by insects and vermin. They have been torn, had pieces removed, and had holes burned into them from butter lamps. In previous attempts to correct these losses to the paint and structure, they have been patched with sections of other thangkas, and various types of fabric (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Thangka with patches where an older thangka was used to reinforce losses.
Many of the thangkas we have treated have had water run down the paint layer. They have been smoked with candles, and have been covered with the excrement of flies and other insects. The paint layer has been cleaned with dough, kerosene, gasoline and all manner of liquids. The surface has been coated with gelatin, hide glue and other materials.

It has been a hard road that these objects made of cotton and silk cloth, chalk, gesso and distemper have traveled.

In the later portion of the 19th century and earlier, traditional materials like fabric and even sections of old damaged thangkas were glued on to cover the damage, usually with hide glue (Figure 2). In the later part of the 20th century, thangkas began to be conserved using non-intrusive methods and materials.

In the early 20th century, techniques were being used on thangkas, such as paste linings, that were traditionally used as supports on other structures such as prints and paper objects.

These treatments have their disadvantages as they are deleterious for objects that have paint layers that are hygroscopic (Figures 3 and 4).
In the later part of the 20th century, with the advent of plastic materials, thangkas were lined to materials like Mylar and plexiglass.

The thangka shown in Figure 5 was treated in the past by attaching it to a piece of Mylar with a polyvinyl acetate resin. Although it was possible to remove the Mylar, the adhesive cannot be completely removed because it permeated through the thangka’s materials.

The thangka shown in Figure 6 has been treated in the past and attached to a piece of Mylar with an unknown adhesive, probably a crosslinking type. The adhesive could not be dissolved with any solvents typically used in painting conservation.

In the later part of the 20th century, as these Tibetan paintings became more valuable, the stupas were raided and Tibetan thangka paintings that were 30-50 percent intact were repainted with the original painting techniques. This made them more valuable but also made the repainting more difficult to determine. Unlike western paintings where the use of ultraviolet light examination and infrared as well as x-rays can easily determine what has been done, on thangkas however, these methods do not work as easily or clearly.

It is important to realize that thangkas are fundamentally paintings with a textile mount, that is a separate entity. Their past and present treatments indicate some confusion as to what they are made of. Continued research on materials and methods will help demystify that aspect of the thangka painting.
Figure 5: Thangka treated in the past with a polyvinyl acetate adhesive.

Figure 6: Thangka treated in the past with an unknown adhesive.

BIOGRAPHY: Alan Farancz is a private conservator working in New York City, USA. He studied at the Conservation Center, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University and has been treating thangkas privately since the 1970s.

CONTACT: Farancz Painting Conservation Studio Inc., 361 West 36 Street, New York, NY 10018. Tel.: 212-563-5550; Fax 212-947-1186. Email: farancz-conservart@att.net

Disclaimer
These conference session papers are published and distributed by the International Council of Museums – Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC), with authorization from the copyright holders. They are published as a service to the world cultural heritage community and are not necessarily reflective of the policies, practices, or opinions of the ICOM-CC. Information on methods and materials, as well as mention of a product or company, are provided only to assist the reader, and do not in any way imply endorsement by the ICOM-CC.