Restoring Bhutanese Thangkas

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ABSTRACT: This article presents the author’s experience in conserving Bhutanese thangkas and in establishing the Thangka Conservation Project, which provides sustainable, long-term conservation training to local monks.

The Thangka Conservation Project

Thangka Conservation is a new concept in Bhutan. For the monks, conservation is copying the old Thangka.

The Thangka Conservation Project that I have been involved with is a ten year program. I believe little knowledge can do more harm. So it is either I show the monks everything I know, or nothing at all.

Since 2005, we held five Thangka conservation workshops in Thimphu (Figure 1). Each workshop lasted for four weeks. It was impossible to train all the monks at the same time so they took turns training in Honolulu for three to four months. I was able to share my expertise on a one-to-one basis. We have trained ten monks in Honolulu.

Figure 1: The author (fourth from the left) teaching 6 monks during a workshop in Thimphu.
During their free time they learned how to surf and paddle surfing. They in turn taught us about the GNH -- the Gross National Happiness. In these times of economic instability, I think we should follow their footsteps.

Monks Holding Official Conservation Duties

There are over 2500 temples in Bhutan. My mission is to help the monks to preserve their Thangkas. In 2005 I started with 16 monks and I am now down to 9. When the workshop ended, the monks returned to their daily duties and routines. Some of them were transferred or assigned to other duties. They did not practice what they learned in the workshop. To avoid losing more of my students, I lobbied for these monks so that they could become full time conservators. Last year the government and the Monastic Body agreed to set up a conservation department within the Monastic Body.

Treatment Approaches

Silk Brocade

Silk Brocade is an important part of a Thangka. You want to use the best silk borders that are appropriate. We often now see new cloth fabric being used as a border. If the silk brocade is of good quality, we will wash it and repair the damage. If the silk is brittle, we apply seaweed paste to the silk. When the solution dries, it becomes like a film that holds the fabric together. We sew the fragile silk brocade to a fine silk to support it.

As a rule we use the good, original silk brocade as much as possible.

It is impossible to find rolls of silk that can be used to mount a century old Thangka. I copied many patterns from the silk brocade from old Thangkas in various Dzongs, and I consolidated them to the new silk brocade that was woven in Japan. We have over 15 rolls of different designs. All of them were in white. The monks have learned how to dye the white silk to blue by using indigo, yellow and red with roots and barks of plants. We use only natural dyes that can be found in Bhutan. All the colors had different tones so none would look the same but we made sure that their appearance blended in well with the painting.

As silk ages, it becomes brittle so when sewing the silk borders to the paintings we use new thick silk thread. The white and red string highlights are made from new single threads.

Painting Conservation

Conservation of the painting part of the thangka takes time and effort. The condition of each Thangka varies and we have to be careful with each procedure we perform. The monks have learned to write condition reports and to examine the Thangkas. They are developing skills in photography. Pictures are taken during the treatment for record.

All the Thangkas we worked on have two common problems: insect specks and flaking mineral pigments. Insects are attracted to the bad smelling cow skin glue the Bhutanese
use. Removing the insect specks is a required skill. The skin glue is the binding agent of the color pigments. The first thing we do is to remove every fly speck. The next step is to consolidate all the color pigments with a refined animal skin glue that does not smell bad. We apply a weak solution of water and glue, and it is brushed to the color pigments, color by color. When the application dries, we repeat the process 6 to 10 times.

Cleaning the painting with distilled water (Figure 2) is a difficult part in restoring the painting. We use the osmosis process to remove the dirt residue and when the stains are too difficult to remove, we use a suction table in a clean room. When the paintings are badly damaged, we back them with a fine silk so you can see the writings on the back. Most of the time we just stretch the thangka to make it flat.

Inpainting (Figure 3) the damaged and missing areas is another difficult part in restoration. It is not commonly practiced that a conservator recreates a missing area, but we were required to paint on the missing area to the best of our ability (Figure 4). The inpainting is done while the art work is still stretched on the drying board.

Sewing the brocade to the painting

Sewing the silk brocade to the painting must be done properly. The previous practice was that the tailor would measure the painting and then sew the border silk together. It was then sewn to the paintings. A problem with this method is that often it did not match. To avoid this problem, we sew the silk border around the painting, section by section. This
**Figure 4:** Detail of a thangka from the Honolulu Academy of Arts collection, treated during one of the workshops. Left: Before inpainting treatment. Right: After treatment.

**Figure 5:** The Shakyamuni thangka, treated during one of the workshops. Left: Before treatment, showing extensive damage to the silk. Right: After treatment.
makes the Thangka flat. I showed the monks the proper way of sewing the brocade and the painting together (Figure 5). Now they sew faster than I do.

We use the services of the local silversmiths and carpenters to make the end knobs. It is preferable if all the materials we use can be found in Bhutan.

**Preventive Care**

Handling and storage is a very important part in the conservation of Thangkas. All our restoration work will be in vain if there is no follow-up on educating the monks on the care of their Thangkas. We teach preventive conservation and provide detailed instructions on the handling of thangkas (Table 1).

Thangkas in the Dzongs are stored in large trunks (Figure 6). The Thangkas in the bottom of the trunk get squashed. If an insect or a mouse gets into the trunk, they will be quite destructive. Most of the damages to Thangkas can be easily avoided. We are now in the process of editing a video clip where His Holiness Je Khenpo explains what happens when they do not take care of the Thangkas. It will also feature the monks showing the proper way of handling Thangkas.

For centuries, the Chinese, Korean and Japanese have been using incense and sachets as fragrance and as insect repellant. We are developing a sachet, but we only use herbs that can be found in Bhutan such as Cinnamon, Clove, Hibiscus, Ginger, Cedar Saw Dust, Iris roots, Camphor Lemon Grass and Hemp. Japanese sachets have become popular in Bhutan since I introduced them in 2005. We put the sachets inside the trunks and in the tubes we have provided to several Dzongs. The sachet last 2 to 3 years in enclosed containers.
Table 1. Instructions on handling a Thangka, taught during the monks’ training.

**Instructions on Handling a Thangka**

**Handling the thangka:**

- Make sure hands are clean before handling the thangka.
- Dirt and oil from your hands will stain the areas of the thangkas that you touch.
- Always avoid touching the area where the image is (the painting is the most fragile part of the thangka, especially when it is old). By touching, the image areas will crease the painting and will loosen the color pigments.

**Carrying the thangka:**

- Always hold by the outer knobs.
- If the thangka is large, have someone assist you.

**Unrolling the thangka:**

- Always handle the thangka by the knobs and avoid handling the image area.
- If the painting is large, three or more people are necessary.

**Rolling up the thangka:**

- Hold the ends of the thangka.
- Gently pull fabric borders outwardly to prevent creases.
- Never touch the image to correct creases.
- Gently roll the thangka but not too tightly.
- When tying the thangka, tie loosely and avoid creasing.

**Specific instructions for large thangkas:**

**Unrolling:**

- Have a team of four to six people.
- Clean hands before handling the thangka.
- Unroll the thangka on a flat surface.
- Make sure the table or the floor is clean.
- Unroll the thangka by holding the two end knobs.

**Rolling up:**

- Place the thangka on the clean floor.
- Roll the end knobs.
- Have the team stretch the silk borders while rolling up the thangka.
- Avoid touching the image.
We have also provided the monks with boxes of clean, old bed sheets that Hilton Hawaiian Village and Ohana Hotel have donated. Old sheets are best since they are softer than new ones. We sew bags for the Thangkas. Each bag is customized. This will protect and keep the Thangkas clean.

**Continuity and Sustainability**

Several conservators have visited Bhutan and have shown the locals conservation techniques, but major problems are follow-up and continuity. When the next conservator arrived, there was a new beginning again and with different people. This is an endless cycle that keeps repeating in Bhutan with conservation work sponsored by the small scale NGO’s (non-government organizations).

Consistent workmanship and quality control is something that is still not practiced widely in Bhutan. Instilling in the monks a sense of pride in their workmanship has been an uphill battle. As often as possible, I invite government officials, head monks and foreigners to view the good work the monks have done (Figure 7). They are slowly getting the message. I often tell them that they are praising Buddha when they restore the Thangkas properly.

The monks have painted surfboards in Honolulu to raise funds to buy conservation materials and equipment. We were able to purchase a suction table, a professional digital camera and lenses, three computers and other conservation material. My goal is for them to restore Thangkas from museums and private collectors. We have restored several Thangkas from the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. If we can restore a dozen or more Thangkas a year from abroad, the money will be enough to buy the materials we need to restore twenty or more Thangkas from the Dzongs throughout Bhutan.

*Figure 7: Bhutanese ministers visiting during a workshop and examining thangkas worked on by the apprentice-monks.*
For the past years our workshop was in the capital Thimphu. Last October (2008), the workshop was held in Trashigang (Figure 8), which is a two-day trip from the capital. We restored nine 18th century Thangkas. The set of paintings depicts the manifestation of Guru Rimpoche.

The next workshop is in autumn of 2009. It will be in Eastern Bhutan at Monjar. New monks have joined the group and hopefully they will continue the work.

Figure 8: The author (middle, wearing white) with the group of monks trained during the workshop in Trashigang, Bhutan, in October 2008.
Conclusion

We have come a long way. Since 2005, we have restored 89 Thangkas. We have a Thangka conservation studio in Thimphu and in eastern Bhutan at Trongza. This is where the new Ta Dzong Museum is located. Both studios are small, but this is better than nothing. All the Thangkas that you see in the exhibition were restored in Bhutan and in Honolulu by the monks.

Acknowledgements

The Thangka Conservation Workshop would not have been possible without the support of: the Royal Government of Bhutan; The Central Monastic Body; The Robert Ho Family Foundation; the Honolulu Academy of Arts; Terese Bartholomew; and my hard working and loyal staff.

ALOHA and TASHI DELEK.

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