The Continuously Evolving Form of Thangkas

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ABSTRACT: Thangkas are a sacred art form still in active use. All conservation efforts must be wide-awake to both the evolving form, and the continuous sacred nature of thangkas. This paper uses examples from decades of work with thangkas in the Himalayan region and in Western museums and private collections.

Introduction

The ICOM-CC Conference in Delhi, where this paper was first presented, was a valuable opportunity for Conservators to share information and work together towards safe and respectful methods of thangka preservation.

Figure 1: Meditation Hall on Losar, New Year Celebration, 2007 Rumtek Monastery, Sikkim.
My first work with thangkas began in 1970 in India. I work with monks and nuns in the Himalayan region, and maintain an active website that attracts enquiries from tourists; both are good sources of information for research. Through these years of preservation work and research, I have created a study collection of thangkas: the full thangka form, paintings only, textiles only, covers, ribbons, decorative finials, leather strips, and thangkas from differing regions and dates. The study collection documents changes in the thangka form.

Evolution of the Thangka Form

Because thangkas are a sacred art form still in active use (Figure 1), and because the form and style of thangkas are in flux, all conservation efforts must be wide awake to both the evolving form, and the continuous sacred nature of thangkas.

The thangka form is evolving with changes both in cultural influences and in the materials available to the painters and tailors. This red flocked velvet thangka (Figure 2) is one preferred by several of the Himalayan nuns I was teaching in the past few years. They chose this form of thangka to hang in their rooms.

The lucrative tourist trade is changing the way that thangka paintings are produced. Many paintings are produced quickly as "antique", at high prices, with no textile surround. These paintings are sold to cultural tourists seeking to bring home "a thangka" to add spiritual value to their lives.

Figure 2: Contemporary thangka with red flocking.

Figure 3: Thangka painting sold as 400 years old and "smoked" for the tourist trade.
For example, this painting shown in Figure 3 (analyzed in the scientific survey also published within these Proceedings’), is part of my study collection. I purchased it in an outdoor market in Asia. I had asked the street vendor for an antique thangka. He sold this painting to me as 400 years old. The smell of freshly BBQ’d pork was still present when I purchased it. Scientific research proved that it had been smoked in animal fat to look old.

The painting shown in Figure 4 was created in the Himalayas in "poster paint", with no ground layer, on a wide, commercially woven contemporary support. The tourist who purchased it was told that monks deeply treasured it as one of the oldest thangkas in their monastery, but had to sell it.

Contemporary techniques, however, can also be valued as a path to the respectful production and distribution of thangkas for numerous devotees. A conservative Tibetan woman owns this transitional thangka shown in Figure 5. It has a traditional textile mounting surrounding a picture panel made from a printed image on plastic.

![Figure 4. Thangka painting created to appear old and damaged.](image1)

![Figure 5. Printed plastic picture panel in traditional textile mounting.](image2)

This detail from a recent thangka (Figure 6) shows the combination of printing and painting techniques depicting a contemporary and highly respected meditation master. The painting is sewn into traditional textile surrounds.

Some contemporary thangkas, made for devotional and not tourist usage, are completely constructed from synthetic materials. In the image when in Figure 7, it is being used in a traditional Buddhist environment by the choice of the Buddhist teacher seated beside it. Even the dowel on the bottom is plastic and not wood.
Figure 6: Detail from a recent thangka that shows a combination of printing and painting techniques depicting a contemporary meditation master.

Figure 7: Thangka constructed of synthetics, in usage in a Shrine Hall.

Figure 8: Contemporary thangkas made with traditional techniques and materials, in usage in a Shrine Hall.
However, traditional materials are still commonly being used. For example, a Buddhist master in the Himalayan Foothills whom I encountered, chose to have new thangkas created as close as possible to the traditional thangka form in technique, materials and style (Figure 8).

Evolution of Thangka Conservation Techniques

As the thangka form evolves, so will conservation techniques evolve for these new forms. In homes, shops and offices in the Himalayas, plastic "calendar" thangkas and traditional thangkas can hang side by side (Figure 9). The conservation techniques that will be required to preserve and restore these diverse forms of thangkas will differ.

![Figure 9. Traditional thangka and plastic calendar thangka.](image)

Just as the thangka form has changed, thangka conservation approaches have also changed, from laboratory to laboratory and from conservator to conservator, from decade to decade through the evolution of the conservation profession. Whatever treatment we undertake, either for high-end art collectors, or treatments we teach in traditional societies, it is crucial that our work does not change the essential nature of the thangka form.
The thangka support shown in Figure 10 was lined with polyester film on the reverse so that the empowerment syllables on the back would be visible. However, the polyester film could not withstand the mechanical stresses on it in everyday use in a monastery. Due to the rolling and unrolling of the thangka in its textile mounting, and due to extreme changes in temperature and relative humidity, the polyester film lining has cracked and peeled.

Some conservators are applying and teaching the use of techniques from Chinese and Japanese scroll painting restoration; that is, starch paste and paper linings. When used skillfully, excellent results are obtained. These techniques, however, can cause problems during treatment due to the use of water on a painting bearing both a support and paint layers with a hide glue binder. Even a small amount of moisture can soak in through the reverse, and irreversibly change the subtle and layered ground, and paint layer structure.

In addition, although traditional Chinese and Japanese scroll mountings may be changed regularly, in a Himalayan monastery, a paper lining may not withstand active use (Figure 11) and may not be renewed.

According to some aesthetics, paintings have more intrinsic and monetary value than textiles. In many western thangka collections, only a painting is present; called a thangka, it is actually a framed painting that was once part of a complete thangka form (Figure 12). Even with aesthetically sensitive and archival quality matting and framing techniques, it is still a painting, not a complete thangka.

Restoration techniques originally designed for Western oil paintings are sometimes transferred to use on thangka paintings. Some solvents are simply too strong for use in a painting structure with a hide glue binder and no varnish layer. Often, strong solvents are used for cleaning, when, in fact the type of darkening found in thangka paintings is most difficult to reverse. The butter lamp grease and incense grit combine and penetrate deep into the paint layers. The darkening is not a surface phenomenon.
In Asia, when techniques are taught involving the use of strong solvents similar to solvents used in the restoration of western oil paintings, there are potential health hazards. Sometimes the use of carcinogenic solvents can cause harm when the solvents are left behind and used without sufficient safety precautions.

There are controversies about how far to go with cleaning attempts to remove the combined grease and grit layers from butter lamps and incense smoke, that darken the surface of many thangka paintings.

Most thangka paintings come from workshops, similar to the workshops of the European master painters, where the master laid down the composition and then supervised his apprentices who paint the flat areas of colour and minor detail. The master then paints the final fine details in face, hands, clothing and the gold details that bring a thangka painting to visual life.

It is all too easy to clean away the fine surface details done by the master painters, while you are trying to make the thangka painting appear "clean". Since there is no protective varnish layer, the darkening is smoke borne; it permeates deep through the many layers of paint, sometimes into the ground layers below.

The tradition of copying, once a well-used thangka becomes darkened or damaged, is a strong and continuing tradition. In other words, if your client, museum or monastery wants a new looking thangka, a new painting can be copied from the darkened one.
The detail in Figure 13 shows a painting that was removed from its traditional thangka form, and then over-cleaned. The painting was then mounted as a scroll with wet paste, using borders different than traditional thangka textile surrounds.

When the textile surrounds become weak, they were replaced with traditional style replacements. Some replacement textiles can appear too new, too bright and are too strong for older and damaged paintings, as shown in the detail of this thangka (Figure 14) from a Himalayan monastery.

![Figure 13. Over-cleaned and scroll-mounted thangka painting detail.](image1)

![Figure 14. Replacement textile surround](image2)

My philosophy when working on a thangka, and when teaching thangka conservation, is one of minimal intervention\(^2\) - an attitude instilled in me by my Buddhist and conservation teachers (Figure 15). I take a conservative approach, opting to stabilize and preserve both the painting and its textile surround.

![Figure 15. Thangka Preservation Class in Thimphu, Bhutan, 2008. This project was organized by Friends of Bhutan’s Culture and funded by the Getty Foundation.](image3)
Conclusion

Since the thangka form is changing rapidly, now is the time to preserve all parts of the traditional thangka form; painting, textile, metal, wood and leather. As sacred objects in everyday use, the owners and users of thangkas in traditional cultures make final decisions. Moreover, decisions in conservation treatment can be further informed by free and open sharing of our research and active international communication. Because thangkas are a sacred art form still in active use, and because the form and style of thangkas are in flux, all conservation efforts must be wide awake to both the evolving form, and the continuous sacred nature of thangkas.

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Endnotes


2. For further information on this topic please consult: Ann Shaftel, “Care in the Community”, News in Conservation No.1, August 2007, p. 6; also available online (as of March 2009) on the IIC website at: http://www.iiconservation.org/publications/nic/nic.php.

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