Understanding Tibetan Painting Materials: An Intermuseum Project
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ABSTRACT:
Understanding the materials and techniques of Tibetan painted artifacts informs historical interpretation and helps determine appropriate conservation goals and treatment methodologies. Material studies also are important for developing greater scholarship on the dating of painted works. For example, the identification of such pigments as emerald green and synthetic ultramarine, unknown before the XIXth century, aids in establishing a terminus a quo for Tibetan painted works that previously have been dated on the basis of decorative style. Another example with important conservation implications is the detection of yellow toning material on metal leaf (imitation gilding) that otherwise might be mistaken for a discolored coating. This paper discusses these and other results stemming from an intermuseum project to study Tibetan painted works including thangkas from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Newark Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, British Museum, and elsewhere. The results are being compiled into a database of paint materials to provide a valuable tool for conservators to plan treatments and art historians to better estimate the age of Tibetan painted artifacts, and to offer insight into the evolution of the Tibetan color palette and pigment availability.

BIOGRAPHIES: Beth Price is Senior Conservation Scientist and Section Head of the Scientific Research Laboratory at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA). Beth obtained degrees in art history, chemistry and liberal studies from The State University of New York and Rutgers University. Prior to her arrival at the Museum in 1990, she worked as Research Chemist at FMC Corporation in Princeton. Beth's interest in polychrome materials stems from a study undertaken with conservator Sally Malenka on a painted Ming Dynasty Chinese reception hall at the PMA. Beth's current research interests include the identification and introduction of western pigments in Himalayan polychrome furniture and thangkas. Beth is a chair and Board member of the Infrared and Raman Users Group, a not-for-profit corporation that disseminates scientific data via the web and biennial conferences to the conservation and cultural heritage communities.

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