Presenting, Handling and Treating Sacred Thangkas According to Western Standards and Respecting Their Cultural Context – An Achievable Common Purpose?

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ABSTRACT: Using examples of treatments on thangkas, this paper aims at building a goal-oriented multidisciplinary network of experts that are engaged in thangkas and other sacred objects. Networkers and sponsors are in demand! In the exchange of specialized knowledge, there is a chance of promoting international understanding which will help in finding the best way to a problem when dealing with, working on or presenting this cultural property. For Tibetans, thangkas are powerful articles of daily use. Their renewal has an equal, or (as a way to spiritual fulfilling) even higher value than preserving historic relics. For western cultures, cultural possessions as for example, thangkas collections, should be protected to the best of our knowledge and belief. The different value systems may at times present a dilemma for conservation. However, finding sustainable methods for working with relics and ritual objects that take into consideration the different value systems must be given priority.

Introduction

The idea for building up a network came to me when I worked for the Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) in Eastern Tibet in 2002, when I recognized the urgent need for conservation treatments there.

Figure 1 shows the complete structure of a thangka, opened for show. The painting transports the Buddhist doctrine - as a reference to a special deity, a dedication for an ill person or as an expression in wishing spiritual and physical health - in a symbolic way using strong formal rules with defined colour systems adopted from great Tibetan masters in meditation or mystical perception. The textile mounting has not only practical aspects but also an iconographic meaning. In conserving a thangka there is a risk of losing sight of its cultural origin and of its use as a ritual object.

It is important to note the following about rolling and unrolling a thangka, when it is not used or being transported: one should begin along the lower edge against the paint layer, to protect the figured deities in the best way.

Guidelines in Tibetan Buddhism

Are there any guidelines in Tibetan Buddhism on how to handle sacred objects? To quote Miss Lavizzari-Raeuber in her 1984 (German) book Thangkas: Scrolls from the Himalaya, Arts and Mystical Meaning:

‘If an artist in his past life did not go through all Initiation rituals, then under the guidance of a Lama he has to undergo the Initiation into the Mandala of that divinity, which he has been ordered to paint, when it belongs to a Tantra-class to which he so far did not attain intellectual and meditative access. This inauguration consists of the blessing of the Lamas and instruction in the recitation of Mantras and in a more or less long period of separation of the artist, who needs to be brought deeply into himself.’ [Author’s translation.]

Figure 1 (Left): A thangka opened for viewing, showing its complete structure.

Figure 2 (Right, top): Tibet (Kham) in May 2002: Monasterial ceremony, Gelup-ka Order Pilgrims going under several free hanging thangkas in order to touch them.

Figure 3 (Right, bottom): “Please do not touch!” A museum display of thangkas in sealed acrylic cases. (Source: Photographic Archives of the Art and Exhibition Hall, Bonn, Germany.)

Depending on whether a thangka is being cared for as an artwork in western civilizations or whether it is cared for as an object of daily use in other societies, there may be irreconcilable conservation requests made to it (Figure 2 and 3).

Different Values

The artificial original in Tibet and related countries around the Himalaya region has a different value than in western civilizations. Making new has an equal or (as a way to spiritual fulfilling) even higher importance than preserving historic relics.

I became aware of this after a practical operation in Eastern Tibet in 2002 by giving support to the Tibet Heritage Fund in finding methods for conserving fragile wall paintings in a monastery near Kandze (Kham/Chinese district of Sichuan). On the main wall on the front side of the temple of this monastery, I discovered the original painting painted over in a simple way. A large loss in this approximately 30 year old paint layer...
revealed the original paint layer underneath (Figure 4). Both layers showed the same divinity and fit together perfectly. The difference was in the way it was repainted. The technique and the materials were poorer than in the original painting used.

**Figure 4:** Left: Part of a fragile wall painting in a monastery near Kandze (Kham/Chinese district of Sichuan), which was repainted approximately 30 years ago. The area within the yellow box is enlarged on the right. Right: A large loss in the newer paint layer reveals the original paint layer underneath.

**Figure 5,** left and right: Two examples of thangkas framed in a western fashion in gold frames. These are some examples of thangkas I have worked on between 1995 and 2008.
Seemingly to Tibetans, it is an even a more deserving act to repaint a painting or a thangka of lesser quality, than conserving the original painting. What effect does this have on the authenticity of this wall painting? Is the new painting more authentic for Tibetans?

Formal western conservation practice would try to conserve the original paint layer underneath, and possibly would consider this overpainting as a sacrilege.

The nice gold frames added to thangkas as shown in Figure 5 are another example of western cultural values applied to thangkas… Maybe Tibetans think of this as a sacrilege that we have done to these thangkas.

**How Can We Do It Right?**

The following are some case studies of thangkas which were treated in my studio between 1995 and 2008, that illustrate some of these dilemmas.

Respecting the Value of Rolling and Unrolling

In Figure 6 (left), you can see a detail of a thangka. The owner of this thangka was a Tibetan (now deceased) living in Germany who brought it as a gift to Tibet for a Tibetan lama. In preparation for its monastic use, my conservation treatment was aimed at making it possible to roll and unroll the thangka again. The rolling is to be carried out directly against the paint surface in order to respect the Tibetan tradition.

Figure 6 (centre) shows a detail of the back side of this thangka before treatment. I had to remove almost 150 cloth patches that stabilized tears in the support. The support was very weak, which is why new tears had appeared along the edges of the patches.

Figure 6 (right) shows the same detail after treatment where tears have been locally stabilized and then covered with a wide-meshed flexible fabric on the whole back side.
Value of Free Hanging Mounts

In Figure 7, the top left image shows a thangka from a private collection before treatment. The two images on the right show the thangka after removal of its back side board and frame. The bottom left image shows the thangka’s appearance after conservation treatment. I think that we should accept the free hanging character of a thangka by using a free hanging support, even if there are unsightly non-removable stains in the original mount.

Figure 7:
Top Left: The thangka treated by the author, before treatment.

Right: The thangka (shown at the bottom) after removal of its backside (at top).

Bottom Left: The thangka as it appeared after treatment.
Adequate Way of Treating Losses

Figure 8 shows a thangka I worked on in 1995 for the exhibition Wisdom and Compassion – 1000 Years of Tibetan Buddhism at the Art and Exhibition Hall in Bonn, Germany. I was faced with having to decide whether or not to substitute the losses in the thangka’s support.

In such cases I would say no, not to replace a loss, but to present it as a unpainted fragment using a middle-tone dyed fabric (in this case, linen). This can be seen in the detail shown in Figure 9. The owner of that piece agreed with my treatment proposal. Even the oil stains (visible above the unpainted fill), I my opinion, should remain as a historic document.

A Very Special Current Case

What is for you an adequate way to treat this repaired loss (Figure 10)?

Figure 10 on the right shows a detail of a thangka with a four-armed divinity (Uddiṣṭāna Kurukullā) before treatment. Losses in the support were in the past treated in a special way: one of the arms was “recreated” by using a piece of another thangka attached on the back side of the loss (Figure 10 left). My opinion is: preserving the historicity and significance of this old conservation treatment is important enough to leave this patch in its place.
Inpainting the Deity Yamantaka

One anecdote may give a better understanding of the extent of the differences in the above-mentioned value systems, and how important it is to build up a network. Briefly, this is what happened. I treated and inpainted the thangka shown in Figure 11, which represents figures of the deity Yamantaka (he is the divinity fighting against death).
When I showed the before and after inpainting photographs of Figure 11 to a Tibetan monk, this monk wondered how it may be that I, an uninitiated person, am still alive! This made me wonder: is a neutral retouching technique an adequate way for a Buddhist to visualise this strong divinity?

*Using Natural Pigments: Yes or No?*

**Figure 12** shows a small detail of a thangka coloured with natural pigments. In traditional buddhist culture, using finest pigments like azurite, malachite, ochre etc. seems to be a deserving act, too. A Tibetan thangka painter I recently asked said that it is important to use the same pigments that was used for painting the original thangka.

![Figure 12: Details of a thangka coloured with natural pigments. Left: Before treatment. Right: After inpainting.](image)

Binding and matching problems can occur using the available mineral pigments with different particle sizes. For inpainting, the media must be strong enough to keep the pigments in place. Otherwise there is the risk of new losses occurring.

Another anecdote illustrates another problem: I have heard of a Tibetan monk who lives in Switzerland and who retouches damaged paint areas of thangkas by scratching pigments from undamaged sectors, and filling these pigments into the losses. For him the use of additional materials destroys the ritual function of the thangka.

Does this mean that we must not bring any material into a thangka used in rituals? But if we have to use additional materials, does the thangka have to be blessed again?
Figure 13: A thangka during (left) and after (right) treatment from the Heinrich Harrer Collection, Switzerland.

Figure 14: Detail, upper right corner, of the thangka shown in Figure 13. Left: before inpainting treatment. Right: after treatment. From the Heinrich Harrer Collection, Switzerland.
Inpainting Technique

To conserve the historicity of a water damaged thangka from the Heinrich Harrer Collection in a Swiss museum, I inpainted the losses using the technique of fine lines, as you can see in Figure 13. Figure 14 shows details of the upper right corner and Figure 15, a 18 cm x 12 cm large detail in the middle part of this thangka (with part of the halo), essentially before and after the inpainting treatment.

The efforts to protect the historicity of the Thangka by keeping the retouched areas visible may irritate the eye of the contemplator - the meditative Buddhist who visualizes the contents deeply. Yet the interested viewer who takes a closer look at the technical finesse of this paint sector may appreciate the distinction between the original and the later addition.

Extent of Treatment

Figure 16 shows a damaged wall painting in a Tibetan monastery before treatment (left) and after infilling damaged areas and losses (right). This in-situ treatment in Eastern Tibet in 2002 was intended as a practical operation: the plan of the relief organisation which sponsored it was to use local materials for conservation, for example local loam or clay.

In Figure 17 left, which shows a detail of the wall painting, the colors to be chosen for inpainting are evident: blue and orange. In Figure 17 right, the unknown iconography led to the decision to inpaint the area in a neutral colour, as is usual in traditional western conservation.

However, a drawback is that, after treatment, it looks quite unfinished (Figure 18). “Is this the adequate way of retouching this wall?”, I asked the monks who live in this monastery. The Asian politeness and kindness led to the answer: “Well done, Ms. Griesser, thank you so much.” – Perhaps not the true concrete answer felt by many in this religious community… I am left wondering: was this an adequate way of retouching?
Figure 16: A damaged wall painting from a Tibetan monastery. **Left:** detail of extensive damage to the support. **Right:** Same area after infilling damaged areas and losses.

Figure 17 (left and right): Details of the wall painting shown in Figure 16.

Figure 18: Overall of the wall painting from a Tibetan monastery, after treatment. Details are shown in Figures 16 and 17.
Building a Network of Thangka Specialists

The examples and anecdotes may have illustrated how important it is of building up a network to help find answers to current and future possible questions. This Forum of the Conservation of Thangkas held in New Delhi, as well as two other presentations on thangkas at conferences last year2, 3 hopefully will have been successful in spreading this networking idea.

In my opinion, the necessary network participants are:

- Conservators experienced in treating thangkas;
- Practitioners of the respective religion or religious direction;
- Ethnologists;
- Religious and cultural scientists;
- Teachers of language and literature;
- Sociologists;
- Anthropologists;
- Art specialists;
- Representatives of relief organizations of the relevant countries;
- Media representatives;
- Political representatives.

In my opinion, these are the reasons a network would be useful:

- To further exchange between practitioners on conservation treatment methodology and ethics;
- To get to know other cultures and their value systems;
- To build up or develop our own cultural understanding in contact with different cultures;
- To acquire or reinforce a sensitivity for other cultures and cultural heritage;
- To achieve internationally valid guidelines when dealing with sacred objects;
- To create a network that helps in answering questions quickly and unbureaucratically when dealing with different sacred objects;
- To establish a pool of the above-mentioned disciplines for each religion/ethnic group;
- To assist in publishing the acquired guidelines to create standards;
- To assist in starting up projects for the exchange of knowledge and experiences of the relevant countries;
- To support projects for international understanding.

What do we need from the network participants?

In my opinion, I think we need:

- Interdisciplinary exchange without reservations or prejudices;
- Mutual acceptance, that respects each other;
- Openness and readiness, “to look beyond one’s own nose”;
- The willingness and ability to compromise and to develop and implement the acquired guidelines;
- Global cooperation, based on internalising and actively practising respect for other cultures.
The logistic problem of creating such a network can be solved with a network similar to the European Cultural Heritage Network (ECHN) developed at the University of Applied Sciences in Cologne, Germany by Oliver Stahlmann (Figure 19). I quote him:

“So, what is the network idea and why did we start this initiative? We felt that information on conservation research is still under-represented on the internet compared to other scientific areas. So first we wanted to create a platform where specific information on conservation research is supplied to the public and secondly, we wanted to supply researchers with tools to provide content about their research work fast and easy.”

![Figure 19: An example of a network: the European Cultural Heritage Network, a content management platform for conservation research. See: http://www.ECHN.net.](http://www.ECHN.net/enviart/ENVIArtHome/tabit/36/Default.aspx)

“… We are providing you with easy interactive tools to manage your files and to create your own content on the internet without knowing any programming languages. So you the researchers and experts in cultural heritage preservation play an active role in creating input for your research partners and in creating public awareness.”

For more information about the network and how it works, see: http://www.ECHN.net
http://www.echn.net/enviart/ENVIArtHome/tabit/36/Default.aspx

I discussed this matter with Mr. Stahlmann and in his opinion, a budget of 1 000 to 2 000 euros will be enough for creating a web presence that allows communicating with each other. I welcome input from colleagues on this proposal and to decide on the network’s name.

Endnotes


BIOGRAPHY: Ute Griesser is an independent paintings conservator from Cologne, Germany. She obtained her conservation diploma in 1994 from the University of Applied Science in Cologne, Germany. From 1995 to 2000, she worked as a conservator at the Art and Exhibition Hall in Bonn, Germany. In 2002, the author carried out conservation work for the Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) in Eastern Tibet. She specializes in the conservation of thangkas and other sacred objects.


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