

ARTICLE

Reflections Around the Conservation of Sacred Thangkas

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Tibetan thangkas (Buddhist scroll paintings) are created as religious ritual objects. The fact that they are mainly considered as artworks in the Western world impacts on the decisions made for their display and conservation. This article explores the current approach to thangkas in Australian public collections and compares it with the views of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism practitioners. It underlines a few misconceptions at the source of conservation decision-making, and discusses practical outcomes of integrating the sacred dimension into professional practice against the backdrop of conservation's Codes of Ethics. Conserving living religious heritage requires that professional ethical standards are adaptable to the needs of users. Existing frameworks for the conservation of sacred objects of pre-colonised, indigenous cultures provide useful models for the conservation of thangkas. This article argues that engaging with contemporary cultural groups to conserve religious significance is part of the mission of conservators. This is viewed as an expansion of conservation practice into the social realm, in a search for purposeful conservation that establishes the social relevance of our profession.

Introduction

Tibetan thangkas (Buddhist scroll paintings) are regularly encountered in Western museums and private collections. Whilst they are created for religious purposes in their original culture, thangkas and ritual objects are generally considered as artworks or ethnographic objects in Western collections.

The ritual function, iconography and historical context of thangkas have been studied for a long time, while issues related to their conservation have appeared in the literature more recently (Cotte 2011). The current published literature touches on issues that go beyond the conservation of material objects; i.e. notions of cross-cultural attitudes, trans-disciplinary conservation and the ethics of conservation of living cultural heritage. This is set in the broader context of the profession's rethinking of its approach to conserving sacred objects from different cultures. This article focuses on the different perspectives of the Australian conservation profession and contemporary Tibetan Buddhists, and discusses their respective positions against the backdrop of the existing ethical framework on the conservation of sacred objects. It explores how conservation practice can seek an integrated approach, balancing ethical issues with cultural requirements. By drawing on existing models of collaborative approaches to the conservation of objects from indigenous cultures, it proposes increasing engagement with the contemporary Tibetan community around specific objects to accommodate cultural requirements as much as possible.

Background***Historical Context***

The thangka form developed in the Himalayan chain (Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Northern India) after Buddhism was introduced in Tibet from Northern India in the eighth century.

Buddhism gradually became an integral part of the history of Tibet, permeating all layers of society (Snellgrove and Richardson 1968) until the twentieth century. Tibet's political and cultural situation dramatically changed in 1950, when the Chinese army occupied the country. Nine years later the fourteenth Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans fled to India, where they founded a government in exile. It is estimated that about 90 per cent of all Tibetan heritage was destroyed during the subsequent Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) (Harris 1999). The ensuing looting of monasteries and the selling of personal treasures by exiled Tibetans for survival contributed to an international art market that had been growing since the collections of the first travellers of the early twentieth century (British Lieutenant Colonel Younghusband in 1904, French explorer Jacques Bacot in 1907 for example). The travel accounts of explorers, diplomats and priests became very popular in the first half of the twentieth century and helped to sustain the cultural interest in the West for Tibet¹.

Today, the most important parts of Tibetan heritage are in the West, either in private or public collections (Musée des Arts Asiatiques Guimet, Paris, France; John and Berthe Ford Collection, USA; Rubin Museum of Art, New York, USA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA; Jucker Collection, Austria; Rossi Collection, Italy for example).

Today, Tibet has a dual status and location. The historic land, now called the Tibet Autonomous Region, lives under

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the political authority of the People's Republic of China. The community in exile in Dharamsala, Northern India, whose government is led by the Dalai Lama, supports the revival of its traditional cultural expressions, while actively building cultural continuity through monasteries and centres of Buddhist studies on several continents².

Religious Context

Ritual objects are central to the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. Thangkas and sculpted images are believed to embody the spiritual energy of the deity or religious teacher they depict, and to transmit a living presence to the community (Rhie *et al.* 1996; Boon Nee Loh 2002; Pommaret 2002). All the components of a thangka (silk border and central painted component) have iconographical significance (Huntington 1970). Thangkas are consecrated after their completion. Consecration is believed to allow a thangka to transcend its material status as an image and give it spiritual power. The ceremony of consecration, performed by a Lama, is of utmost importance, as it gives the object its liturgical value by placing within it the Divine Spirit. The 'opening of the eyes' of the deity is the essential ritual in this ceremony; the painter paints the pupils of the eyes (left blank until then) during the ceremony, which allows streams of compassion to flow from the image for the benefit of all beings (Ngari Rinpoche 2003, 2005). Often an inscription on the reverse recalls a particular mantra associated with that deity and the ceremony that placed the spiritual energy within the thangka. These intimate connections to gods and people are central to the significance of thangkas in their original Tibetan culture (**figure 1**).

In Himalayan culture, spiritual beliefs are an important basis of knowledge. The Tibetan explanation of the world includes a strong emphasis on the actions of deities. Relationships with these deities are mediated by the use of objects and the practice of rituals by initiated people acting as intercessors for the non-initiated (Jackson and Jackson 1984; Reedy 1992). These relationships may include restrictions to information linked to initiation rites or gender, rituals to keep the objects 'alive' and regular use of objects in performing ceremonies (Puntsok Tashi 2009).

New Context

From the outset, Western collectors have had a different approach to their thangka collections. Initially labelled as 'curiosities' in the European market, thangkas and other ritual objects gradually acquired the status of fine art as their study developed (Hevia 2003). In the process, they were reconfigured to a new state and 'acquired new meanings not necessarily intended or agreed upon by the original cultural group' (Thomas 1991). They now belong to the broader category of cultural heritage, which is often appreciated in Western culture as 'a visual and intellectual experience supported by academic knowledge' (Clavir 2002; **figure 2**).

Contemporary Tibetans have not claimed repatriation of their cultural heritage. However, the Dalai Lama has repeatedly stated that their cultural identity and living tradition is still the vital force in Tibetans' lives, and their only strong point of reference, considering the historic



Fig. 1: Thangka hung in a temple in Nepal



Fig. 2: A thangka exhibited in a public gallery in Australia

loss of their land and the local silencing of their political voice (Dalai Lama 2010).

Such issues of cultural identities and the role of conservation in their interpretation, particularly for living religious heritage (Stovel 2003), are now regularly explored in conferences and the literature,³ and Western practices are increasingly questioned in the case of material cultures of

diverse origins (Jones-Amin *et al.* 2006; Thorn 2006; Ogden 2007; Sully 2007; Peters and Romanek 2008). These publications suggest that cultural and social significance exist regardless of context, and that this should impact on conservation approaches in Western collections.

Theoretical Framework

Contemporary conservation ethics and theory promote the recognition of all systems of values, respect for sacred values held by another culture and involvement of, and ongoing relationships with contemporary communities (Munoz Vinas 2005). International texts such as the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994) and the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003) set the principles of conservation of cultural diversity and acknowledge that judgment of values may differ considerably from one culture to another. Access and use of material cultural heritage is mentioned in various Codes of Ethics and Codes of Practice (AIC 1994, Art. III; AICCM 2002, Art. 4 and 5; CAPC 2000, Art. I; Museums Australia 2005 (1993), Art. 1.1.5). Flexibility in conservation practice, according to these texts, is informed by the significance of material heritage and the notion of 'cultural integrity' (Kaminitz and West 2009), and sits at the interface between the social and physical characterization of an object. Encompassing views previously at odds with the ethics of preservation, cultural integrity opens to new ideas, such as integrating traditional maintenance or reconstruction into conservation practices. Compromise (such as reconstruction done by a craftsman, but limited to the area of loss) is now increasingly considered as an acceptable practice (Clavir 2009) and, as a result, shifts the focus of conservation from the objects to the strategies employed to reach these compromises.

However, while sharing authority over cultural heritage is a recent but well signalled path for both indigenous people and heritage professionals within existing theoretical frameworks, it remains at the discretion of conservation professionals to find means to put the principles into practice. Most of the protocols so far concern native cultures of colonised lands, and are underpinned by the issue of sharing a place, which is not the case with Tibetan heritage in Western museums.

Thangka Conservation in Literature

Since the 1970s, aside from technical and art historical studies, articles have explored the practical challenges surrounding thangka conservation and their status as sacred objects (see Cotte 2011 for a review). As early as 1970, Mehra wrote that 'the original nature of the painting...is to be considered before relining...this aspect of rolling and unrolling should not be impaired by the relining method' (Mehra 1970: 212). Agrawal (1984) pointed to the fact that thangkas are no 'ordinary' paintings, but deeply significant religious objects. He invited conservators to consider other aspects than the physical, and to integrate religious and cultural particularities of these paintings in conservation decisions. Advocating that thangkas should be mounted in such a manner that they remain flexible, or that borders are an integral part of the thangkas, he

concluded that presenting them on a rigid stretcher or in a frame is ignoring 'the essential character' of thangkas, which then 'merely look like European easel paintings' (Agrawal 1984: 256).

However, a look at the history of thangka treatment in Western museums in the last three decades shows that Mehra's and Agrawal's recommendations are still partially overlooked today (Boon Nee Loh 2002). For example, separating integral components of thangkas (borders and painting) to retain only the painted part, a practice still encountered today, is not in line with the respect of either the physical or cultural integrity of the cultural material; presenting thangkas on stretchers or in frames without textile borders is also a choice reflecting primarily a Western sensitivity.

Conservation Principles and Misconceptions

Conservation in Australian Public Collections

Interviewing curators and conservators in Australian collections during this study⁴, the author observed high professional standards of conservation used for all objects (including thangkas) in the collection. In the galleries visited, thangkas are usually treated by paper and textile conservators, with very little intervention from painting conservators⁵. Their approach to thangkas is generally minimal; great care is given to the documentation and condition report, while intervention is in line with the overall preventive approach of the galleries (local consolidation of the paint layer with low concentrations of water-based adhesive is the type of treatment most often mentioned). Cleaning or compensating visual loss is considered either unnecessary or undesirable. This is usually justified by the good condition of the artworks, as galleries will not purchase aesthetically damaged artworks, nor will damaged artworks be borrowed for exhibitions if they need more than a minimal intervention⁶.

Thangkas that have entered the collection already laid on board or on a stretcher are left in this condition. Generally no attempt is made to recreate or suggest a textile border when it is missing. However it can be done occasionally, for private thangkas only, which have been borrowed by galleries for a particular exhibition (as was the case at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) in 2001). The conservator, trained in a Sichuan arts centre, deducted the proportion of the mounting from the painted parts dimensions, and could recreate the missing mount; the aim was to present the thangkas 'looking their best' for the exhibition⁷. The gallery accepts the conservator's practice, informed by specialized knowledge and occasional religious consultation (mentioned in practical terms as 'asking a Chinese Lama who knows about it'), as long as it coincides with the overall minimal conservation approach.

In two other public galleries, the minimalist and preventive approach adopted is generally felt to be in line with the respect required for such objects. Every object is handled with gloved hands as a precaution and also a mark of respect. Storage in a box (in darkness) can be also read as an echo of the muslin veil that covers the thangkas, translating respect in a museological sense. The treat-

ments are based on specific materials and are discussed with curators and conservators. Researching contexts and appropriate measures is the curator's mission, who then relays it to the conservators. Conservators research technique and materials and seek information from other institutions having the same experience, using direct contact or online forums. They acknowledge, however, that research is limited by time constraints due to exhibition priorities (pers. com. with conservators, National Gallery of Victoria (NGV)).

The reference framework is scientific. Knowledge comes from research into history and context, which enlightens any particularities, precautions or attitudes to be potentially encouraged or discouraged. Consultations with people of religious authority are mentioned either as a possibility, if there is a feeling of existing knowledge that is indispensable (NGV) or as something unnecessary in the case of an art gallery (National Gallery of Australia (NGA)). In both cases an analogy is drawn with objects from different cultures, the argument being that no consultations are held with Japanese Buddhists, Indian painters or African artists before treating scrolls, miniatures or masks.

Potential religious restrictions are not an issue, as the objects are now in a museum environment, which supersedes any previous context (interviews with conservators, 2007–2008). However, if there are any restrictions that the conservators are made aware of, they will be sensitive to them: for example, since a thangka workshop was run at the Gallery in 2005, the NGV conservators avoid pointing at the thangkas with the hand facing down.

Principles and Misconceptions

This approach to thangka conservation rests on various principles or commonly admitted notions, one of which is the neutrality of the institution, invoked by the curators and conservators interviewed, on the grounds that their institution's mission is secular and therefore does not include promoting religion.⁸ Other international institutions have the same policy; the French Museum of Quai Branly, for instance (opened in 2007), prefers to focus on the aesthetic dialogue of cultures, excluding the religious aspect in the application of the principle of *laïcité* (secularity) in the institutions (Price 2007). Malko-georgou (2013) quotes the curators of the Victoria and Albert museum, London, UK, arguing that 'the museum is not a temple' to justify the removal of relics from inside a bronze statue in 2001 and concludes that 'the argument was won in the name of the secular character of the museum and its values'.

However, museum professionals are now questioning this neutrality, on the grounds that ignoring religious significance is not a neutral position, but one that privileges the curatorial perspective over any other (Hughes and Wood 2009). Museum professionals participating in several colloquia concerning the place of the sacred in museums (for example the Five Faiths Project, North Carolina, 2006) considered the museum as a safe ground to discuss religion, since it can clearly differentiate the language of the sacred -which is the museum's approach, from the experience of the sacred -which is the religious approach

(Hughes and Wood 2009). Embracing Clifford's idea of 'museums as contact zones' (Clifford 1997), the participants determined their duty as conveying something of the religious world that created and surrounded the objects, while simultaneously engaging with the appreciation of beauty. Among their suggestions were: evoking rather than recreating the religious setting, using music and props such as (unlit) candles, regrouping objects used to celebrate a cult, or singling out some objects to concentrate interrogations around them and providing multiple signed labels for the same object, showing the different perspectives of the art historian and faith leader or practitioner (Hughes and Wood 2009: 55–57). Considering the museum as 'a place for meaning' rather than a place for exhibiting art, they agreed that for them, being fair and neutral means including multiple perspectives when displaying sacred objects and respecting people with faith and no faith equally (Hughes and Wood 2009). This perfectly echoes the Dalai Lama's definition of 'secularism' as respect for all religions and none equally (quoted by one interviewee, 2009).

Another argument to explain the priority given to an aesthetic and historic approach is that sacred objects allegedly lose their spiritual power when taken out of context and placed in a museum. Art historian Richard Davis, for example, considers the successive contexts resulting from multiple displacements of Indian objects as successive lives. According to him, all these lives have equal value and therefore none should get precedence over the others: 'The lives of the...images... are made and remade through their encounters with differing audiences, who reciprocally bring with them different ways of seeing and acting towards the images they encounter...That the same object can be animated as idol or as sculptural art is considered a part of its life or biography, which is not limited to the time of their creation' (Davis 1997: 263).

Conservator Stephen Mellor argues in an article concerning African objects, that 'Africans do not perceive that objects carry magic or power outside of their cultural context' (section 3), although his sources for this statement are not well detailed (his article is a commonly quoted point of reference⁹) (Mellor 1992). The use of objects within their original context is well documented through a survey of 'curators, art historians, anthropologists, and Africans in the museum field who had contact with African cultures and could provide cultural insight' (section 2). Deductions are then made on the grounds that 'without access to the people who made and used these objects, the best approach is to look at the use, function, and maintenance of objects in their cultural setting in an attempt to extrapolate how Africans feel' (section 2). The author advocates in conclusion that conservators should 'remain vigilantly informed about African cultures... by pursuing dialogues with Africanists, anthropologists, art historians, and Africans and by studying pertinent literature', in order to treat the objects 'with dignity' (section 5).

Considering objects of another culture and religion, conservator Virginia Greene explains that Jewish ritual objects are divided in two main categories, 'those that carry a quality of holiness; and those that are essential to

the performance of a particular ritual or commandment but that have no intrinsic quality that can be defined as sacred or holy' (Greene 1992: introduction). For some of these objects (mainly those 'containing words, specifically the name of God, but by extension any words divinely written or inspired, from which the quality of holiness is derived' (section 2), conservation treatment is inappropriate; other ritual objects 'may be treated by any qualified objects or textiles conservator, with ... a preference for minimal treatment' (section 4).

Closer to our topic, conservator Robert Bruce-Gardner (1988) mentions the difficulty of finding an ethical middle ground for thangkas between 'respecting the integrity of the object at almost all costs' and giving significance only to the painted part, 'the iconographical importance attached to [the object's] entity relating to a *defunct ritual status*' (Bruce-Gardner, 1988: 7, author's emphasis). Referring to the Buddhist habit of entirely repainting old paintings, he concludes that the ethics of thangka conservation 'will be one of our own defining, as it cannot be one that equates with the practices and perceptions of the Tibetans themselves'. Such habits are indeed not uncommon in Himalayan villages, where they may reflect a complex web of local social issues and a lack of technical information. However, discussing the issue with more informed people (see below) shows a different perspective, just as discussing conservation in Australia with a heritage professional, or with a complete stranger to the field, would no doubt show.

More recently, in this journal, Titika Malkogeorgou mentioned that at the Victoria & Albert Museum (London, UK), 'in general, the argument put forward is that because such religious art is no longer within its true context, other aspects of the object's significance give it special value; mainly its appearance and educational value are its predominant features' (Malkogeorgou 2013).

These examples illustrate how the definition and handling of sacred objects can vary with cultures, religions and context. It also shows that generalising concepts or guidelines from one culture to another might be inappropriate, or at the least inaccurate; the aim of my research has been therefore to seek Tibetan Buddhist practitioners' advice on this topic, as exposed in the next paragraph.

Tibetan Perspectives on Conservation

Methodology

Discussions were held with four Tibetan Buddhists in Australia, Bhutan and Nepal, from 2003 to 2009.¹⁰ Three were religious authorities: a reincarnated Tibetan-born high-rank Lama living in Sikkim and Nepal, a monk - co-director of a large monastery in Nepal, and acting translator to the Dalai Lama and a Geshe (high rank Lama), at the time Director of a monastery and meditation centre in Australia. The last one was an Australian-Tibetan whose partner is actively involved in the Tibetan exiled government, providing a lay-person perspective. Some discussions occurred during conservation workshops and were developed over time, others were conducted via email and face-to-face, lasting from 45min to 1h30min. The discussions focused on two main questions:

- Whether the religious/sacred character of objects held in Western collections was maintained in the new context.
- Whether it was appropriate to carry out any conservation work on thangkas, and if so, the limits and recommendations that were felt necessary.

The data was then compared to written sources on the same topic, either produced for UNESCO conservation workshops in the region (Ngari Rinpoche 2003, 2005), for conservation articles on similar subjects (Bruce-Gardner 1988; Elgar 2010; Hall 2004; Reedy 1991, 1992) or for exhibition catalogues (Dalai Lama 1996).

Findings

The people interviewed were unanimous on one point; there is absolutely no doubt that Tibetan religious objects in general, and thangkas in particular, keep their sacred character in all circumstances, even in a non-religious context; one high Lama specified that thangkas still carry energy 'until the last small piece remains'. Furthermore, in accordance with the Buddhist doctrine, not only Tibetan Buddhists, but also any sentient being can feel the benefits of the presence of sacred objects.

When considering the secular character of museums that could preclude them from emphasizing the religious aspect of cultural materials, one Lama quoted the Dalai Lama's definition: secular means that one should have equanimity towards all religions and atheists alike; secular is then synonymous of 'respect for all beings'. This Lama also feels that Directors of museums have a responsibility to display thangkas in a way that can bring maximum benefit to all, whether the Director is a Buddhist or not. They would never look down at an image of Jesus Christ, being well aware of the compassionate teachings of the Christian religion; respect, is for them, the correct attitude. This also means in practice that they would prefer thangkas to be displayed with silk borders rather than in frames.

The discussions also revealed the desire of the interviewees to be involved at some level in the conservation process. In 2005, a Bhutanese participant in the UNESCO conservation workshop led by the author expressed this core belief: a Buddhist cannot worship a defaced deity. It is then necessary to reconstruct the image when a crucial piece of iconography is missing, even if the thangka is not in a temple setting. Displaying a very damaged thangka in an archaeological manner (with neutral tones only in crucial missing parts) seems senseless for a Buddhist. However, since conservators are not usually trained in traditional thangka painting practice, such treatments must develop in collaboration with traditional painters. In most cases, the Lama's participation in the conservation process would include evaluating the degree of in-painting necessary for the mental reconstruction of the image, and, if necessary, sourcing a Tibetan painter with the appropriate training for reconstruction.

For less disturbing damages, examples of minimal in-painting (toning down with a patina-like tone) were shown to the interviewees and were judged very satisfactory in



Fig. 3: Detail of a thangka with horizontal paint losses

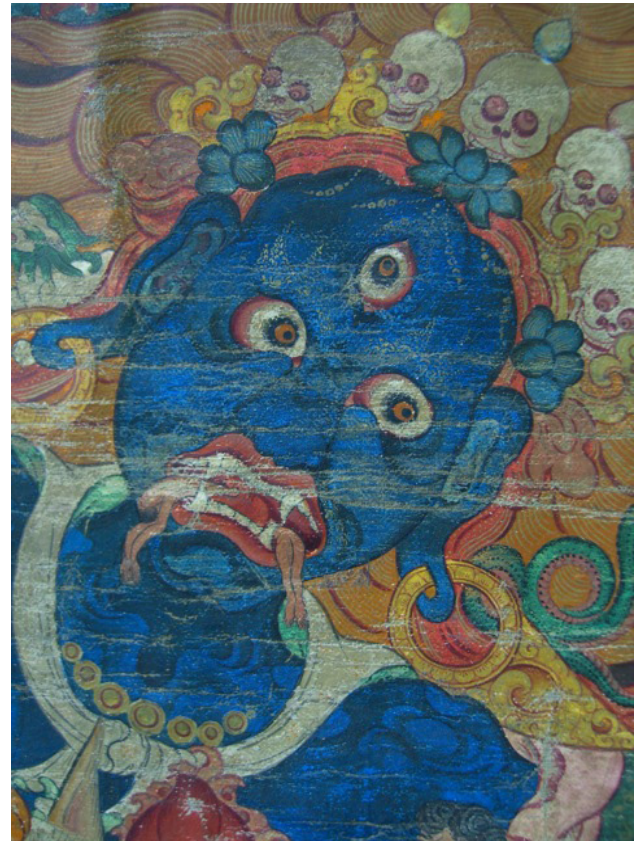


Fig. 4: Same detail after minimal toning

most cases. The discussions showed that toning down the losses was a relatively new approach for all the participants, as was the case in the previous workshops led by the author. Traditionally the paintings would either have been left as such, or retouched, sometimes quite heavily. This approach provides a different technical option in preserving the integrity of the painting (**figures 3 and 4**).

The discussions revealed a will to embrace conservation principles; for example, to recognize the benefits of a minimalist approach, particularly on in-painting. Equally, the desire was expressed that Western conservators and heritage professionals should compromise and display thangka in their integrity, with textile borders, and admit the necessity of a complete and meaningful image resulting from conservation treatment (thus implying the possibility of the reconstruction of damaged sections with painters' participation if necessary).

This position is very different from the misconceptions often encountered in the conservation world that Buddhist people always advocate replacement rather than conservation (Blyth Hill 1993; Bruce–Gardner 1988), or that religious objects lose their sacred meaning when entering a Western collection (Bruce–Gardner 1988; Mellor 1992). This last position has now become difficult to reconcile with the fact that museum objects of various faiths indeed regain their sacred status within their communities upon repatriation (Simpson 2009: 126). This research shows that the Tibetan personalities chosen for their position and cultural knowledge for consultation on conservation are ready to blend tradition and modernity.

A salient point of these discussions has been the remarkable message of tolerance from the Tibetan persons interviewed, and the frequent reminder that positive energy and blessings generated by thangka should benefit all human beings. This, and the priority given to the teaching of the Buddhist doctrine, explains the absence of 'militant' claims for repatriation.

One Lama nevertheless deplored the dispersion of Tibetan sacred objects around the world, stating 'they have lost their roots and core importance forever; if there were some documentation of those treasures of Tibetan monasteries...we could today recognise them and make efforts to repatriate them back to their original places' (Ngari Rinpoche 2003). The act of buying sacred objects from Tibetan communities in impoverished Buddhist countries for resale was also mentioned as a negative attitude, although it is acknowledged that Tibetans themselves have had to sell them for subsistence, therefore entrusting responsibility to the new custodians. It is interesting to link these opinions to Nepali historian Ramesh Dhungel's recent critique of a Western Tibetologist's study of Mustang (a culturally Tibetan area of Northern Nepal) in the 1950s:

'One could also ask why he [Tucci] did not develop or establish curatorial institutions locally, in the same country or region where those cultural and historical objects could be collected, processed, and preserved while maintaining their intrinsic value, instead of throwing them onto European

markets, where supply and demand set their new value' (Dhungel 2002: 26).

Times have now changed and cultural heritage is protected from leaving countries by international charters (UNESCO 1970). However, in Western countries, the material legacy of these displaced objects must be considered, which is the source of the ongoing reflection previously mentioned, as important to conservation as the scientific study of materials. It must be considered that, as a community without a place, Tibetans can look for a reinforced sense of belonging through their culture and its diffusion in the modern world. In this context, there is no denying the political nature of conservation decisions in privileging one aspect of the objects over another.

Integrating the Sacred: From Theory to Practice

As noted by the personalities consulted, the fact that thangkas retain spiritual power does not preclude their treatment by non-Buddhist conservators, provided they respect the thangka's sacred character. Thangkas should always be placed high, on a table or a bench, never on the floor. Accordingly, the persons working around thangkas should avoid walking or stepping over them, as this is considered to show a lack of respect for the deity. Pointing a finger towards the deity is also considered disrespectful; alternatives such as pointing a light or using words to indicate areas under discussion can be explored. Smoking, drinking or eating in front of thangkas is considered defiling in Tibetan religion (these attitudes are usually not compatible with good conservation practice either).

The previous paragraphs showed that consulting with Buddhist practitioners is desirable, in the case of thangkas treated within a gallery by a non-Buddhist conservator. We can source inspiration from some institutions (National Museum of American Indian, USA; Museum of New Mexico, USA; Te Papa Tongarewa, New Zealand; Museum Victoria, Australia) that have practiced consultations for the last twenty years. Experience has taught them that there is no 'one size fits all' methodology of consultation that can be used by all institutions (Johnson *et al.* 2005). Consultation raises the issue of cultural representation, as being a member of a cultural group does not automatically confer knowledge about every issue related to this group. To help narrow the search for the consultants' identification, Johnson *et al.* recommend that the community identifies within itself the persons with the appropriate knowledge for each object or type of object and recommend them to the institution.

Keeping these considerations in mind, the desirable steps should be to contact local Tibetan cultural groups (for example, through monasteries network listed on the internet) and ask them to identify the persons best qualified for the consultation purpose (they could be a Lama and/or a craftsperson). Collaborating with curators who have specific knowledge about the culture and may already have established relationships with some of its representatives might help. Precisely recording the process of identification and documenting the discussions

will allow future consultants to understand the reasons for choosing each person and the decisions made at any given time.

Practical Conservation Issues

The most common conservation issues encountered with thangkas are: structural damage, loss compensation and inadequate storage conditions. Most of them are addressed in existing literature and a summary can be found in a review of this literature (Cotte 2011).

In light of the discussions held with Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, it seems desirable to design structural treatment with the aim of displaying thangkas free hanging, as they would be in a temple. Various options (Boyer and Terrier 2003; Cotte 2007; Wheeler and Heady 2008) have been published for both the painted part and the textile frame. If replacement of the silk frame is chosen, the question of appropriate proportions often arises (Elgar 2010; Jose 2008). To ensure that accurate proportions between the silk borders and the painting are respected, it is best to collaborate with traditional tailors (sometimes monks) specialised in that trade. If a local, qualified person is not available, the addresses of thangka-making centres in the Himalayas can be found on the internet. One option is to provide the textile fabric to the tailor to ensure museum standard stability and avoid colour clashes with other pieces in the collection. Another option is to simply order the silk border by giving the dimensions of the painting and sending a photo. The conservator can then stitch the painted part into the new silk frame using existing holes.

Cleaning is generally a delicate operation and should be limited. It should be emphasised that it is impossible to remove the entire soil layer on a thangka, as the paint layer is highly porous and not protected by varnish. The different dirt films are therefore partially embedded into the paint. Cleaning should be confined to attenuating disturbing or damaging stains and tide lines, and recovering the visibility of the composition.

According to the consultation results, thangkas should not be left untouched if damaged, but treated to recover the legibility of the image. Various techniques of loss compensation have been discussed elsewhere (Cotte 2011) and need not be discussed again here. Some areas of the painting may need very little treatment to be visually and mentally reconstructed by the viewer, while others will require more extensive work with tonal reintegration or with colour (**figure 5**).

Handling thangkas can be delicate and an effective approach is to roll them before turning them over, which can be done relatively safely by placing them between two sheets of transparent film. Traditional Tibetan storage of thangkas (rolled in wooden trunks) often causes squashing and creasing of the rolls placed at the bottom of the trunk. Flat storage is safer and compatible with ritual beliefs (Ngari Rinpoche, pers. comm.), provided that the face is protected from sight. The storage should allow easy access to the reverse for scholars or Buddhist practitioners who wish to study the consecration inscription.



Fig. 5: An example of collaboration: a thangka painter is reconstructing the missing parts of a thangka.

Rolled storage can also be a good option if a layer of tissue paper or muslin is placed under the thangka and subsequently rolled with it. The textile mount can easily be damaged by creasing, so it is important to align the veil flat as much as possible before rolling. Rolling should always start from the lower rod up; this allows the thangka to rest on the bigger rod when rolled, and shows respect to the deity by keeping the head above the feet. The ends can then be tied with cotton strings to avoid creasing in the centre caused by tying the existing ribbons too tightly. Thangkas can be placed in individual boxes or tubes, which can then be stored on top of each other.

Traditionally thangkAs should be kept in the dark and only exposed when in use; this protects the spirit of the deity depicted on the thangka. As storage in the dark protects pigments from discoloration, it also meets conservation criteria, an example of different aims attained by the same means.

These recommendations consist mostly of passive accommodation of the religious practice, i.e. providing museum standards of care and not engaging in conservation practice that would compromise the future use of the objects. Museums can go further by actively accommodating religious practices, as illustrated by the recent exhibition 'The Dragon's Gift' which toured the world in 2008–2009, presenting thangkAs and ritual objects from Bhutan (Tse Bartholomew and Johnston 2009). Most of

the objects had never been taken out of their monasteries and were to return there afterwards. For the Bhutanese people, these living objects need particular rituals to be kept alive and retain their spiritual power. However, they were happy to share their beauty and spiritual message with other cultures by letting them be displayed around the world.¹¹ Not only were all the thangkAs displayed conserved, so they could be hung according to tradition, but two monks travelled with the exhibition to every location. They performed the necessary rituals within the exhibition on a daily basis, providing a learning experience for visitors not necessarily aware of the spiritual dimension of the objects.

Holly Amin Jones (Jones-Amin 2006) described another interesting experience at the Asian Civilisation Museum of Singapore, whereby a protocol was drafted to allow musicians to play an Indonesian traditional Gamelan within the museum settings, raising the question of the maintenance of spiritual belief in a museum context.

Conclusion

For displaced communities, sacred objects are resources of enormous importance for cultural knowledge renewal, helping them to find a place and identity in modern society (Simpson 2009; Sully 2007). Heritage conservation is one of the few areas in Western societies to highlight the diversity of cultural values to the public (Jones and Holden

2008: 53). This article's aim is to correct some misconceptions regarding Himalayan thangkas that may cause misinterpretation of the values of a culture. This reflection expands professional practice and gives it a broader perspective in terms of social context.

Research in Australian public collections has shown that while the spiritual dimension of Himalayan thangkas is always recognized, it is not always addressed despite existing theoretical or practical models. One can argue that there is a religious dimension to many collections, and this makes it difficult to keep the two worlds of art and religion apart.¹² In addition, in a public collection, the sacred nature of objects is also experienced by groups other than the originating culture (Guha-Thakurta 2008).

Economic factors such as the small size of the collections of thangkas in Australia and conservators' workload in public institutions (or the necessity to accommodate clients' desires in the private sphere) are certainly impacting on this issue. Outreach activities are time-consuming and are not necessarily perceived as profitable if not dictated by an upcoming exhibition, or a desire to create a new image for the museum. Power relationships, a central point in all negotiations with cultural groups having different values systems (Eastop 2006), also play a role in the absence of such outreach activities. The belief that the museum context supersedes any other previous context illustrates this, alluding at the same time to the power structure within institutions, where the words of people participating in a debate may not carry the same weight (Malkogeorgou 2013). Socio-economic factors also explain this lack of action: in the current context of shrinking budgets for the conservation profession, conservators simply might not be in the position to request consultations if their institution does not suggest doing so.

There is a real shift of focus in cultural institutions towards a more inclusive practice, as shown by many initiatives and publications: The International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC) General Secretary, David Leigh, publicly advocated during the closing remarks of 'the Object in Context' congress in 2006 that conservation now had to 'move away from the comfort zone of Western conservation values'. Other voices have been even more explicit, such as curator Bruce Bernstein speaking in 1992 of repatriation issues: 'we cannot sit and wait to be approached by Indian communities; we must seek them out... we should welcome the opportunity to consider more voices in our preservation and interpretive programs... it is time to open ourselves and our institutions, to listen, and to let the information flow both ways' (Bernstein 1992: conclusion). However, this shift occurs slowly, and many collections still bear the legacy of their Western roots: for example in large collections in Europe and the USA, it is still common practice to see the painted part of thangkas presented in frames, without silk borders, as they are in most art history publications.

Other social factors such as the fragmented nature of the Tibetan community in the diaspora, and its geographical dispersion across several continents, are also contrib-

uting. The small Australian-Tibetan community seems at present, much more focused on expanding its doctrine and reviving its artistic tradition in order to keep its cultural practice alive, than on actively reclaiming thangkas or contesting the way they are displayed in art galleries.

Confrontation is not a trait valued in Tibetan society, as shown by the Middle Way, the path advocated by the Dalai Lama in his political relations with China. Regarding thangkas, most Tibetan religious leaders do not actively seek to be involved¹³, but the few who voiced their opinion during this research admit that they would probably appreciate being consulted about display or conservation. Therefore, it is hoped that this article will encourage more consultation and dialogue with Tibetan Buddhists regarding the conservation of their cultural heritage.

Engaging with others in the discussions that underpin conservation decisions and allowing different perspectives to be heard is likely to develop in conservators skills 'more akin to community development than they are to materials conservation' (Kurin 2004). This makes for an uplifting journey through a professional life sustained by curiosity, outreaching attitudes, and the constant questioning of the social relevance of our profession.

Notes

¹ Jean du Plan Carpin, Franciscan monk, published *The History of Mongols* after his visit to Kuyuk khan in 1246, where appears the first information about Tibet; Athanasius Kirchner published in 1677 the travel notes and sketchbooks of fathers Gruber and d'Orville who stayed for two months in Lhasa in 1661. Capuchin father Desideri stayed in Lhasa from 1716 to 1721 and his book was published in 1904; George Bogle, Scottish emissary to Tibet seeking in 1774 the establishment of Anglo-Tibetan commercial relations, studied the language and civilization and married a Tibetan woman. His travel account was published only in 1876. Missionary fathers Huc and Gabet reached Lhasa in 1846 and their travel account became very popular. Swedish explorer Sven Hedin left numerous sketchbooks and maps from his travel to Western Tibet in 1906–1909. British representatives in Sikkim McDonald and Bell were admitted in Lhasa and published fine observations about Tibetan culture. Alexandra David Neel's *Voyage d'une Parisienne à Lhasa (Travel of a Parisian woman to Lhasa)* in 1927 became extremely popular, as was Heinrich Harrer's *Seven years in Tibet* in 1950.

² www.tibetnetwork.com lists an impressive number of centres world-wide.

³ *Preserving aboriginal heritage: technical and traditional approaches*. Ottawa, Canada, Canadian Conservation Institute, 2007; *The object in context: crossing conservation boundaries*. Munich, IIC, London, 2006; *Stewards of the sacred*, Washington, American Association of Museums, in cooperation with the Center for the Study of World's Religions, Harvard University, 2004 are some recent examples of conferences with associated publications.

- ⁴ National Gallery of Australia (NGA); National Gallery of Victoria (NGV); Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW). These institutions were chosen because they have significant Asian collections including thangkas. The discussions approached the rationale for decision-making in conservation. 'Is the religious aspect important in the process?' was one of the questions.
- ⁵ This is not reflected internationally, as shown by the forum about thangka conservation organised jointly by the Textile, Painting and Ethnographic Objects Working Groups during the 2008 ICOM-CC conference (ICOM-CC 2008).
- ⁶ Interviews with curators at the NGV, AGNSW and NGA, 2008.
- ⁷ Interview with conservator and curator at the AGNSW, 2008
- ⁸ The same principle also arose in informal discussions between the author and a curator at Musée des Arts Asiatiques Guimet in Paris, France.
- ⁹ This article was quoted to the author during interviews, during the process of peer reviewing articles on thangka conservation, and during informal conversations with conservators and curators in Australia and France.
- ¹⁰ Tibetan Buddhism practitioners were identified either through the author's personal connections or by websites on Tibetan-Australian Buddhist monasteries, and contacted via email or mail to participate to the research. The mailing occurring at the time of the 2008 tragic Tibetan unrest in Lhasa may explain the relatively poor response. However, the high position of the participants in the religious or lay hierarchy provides an acceptable level of qualitative research.
- ¹¹ Interview with the Bhutanese Crown Prince, *Points de Vue*, October 2009
- ¹² A debated example of integration is the Tibetan Buddhist altar (consecrated by H. H. the Dalai Lama), at the Newark Museum (USA), constructed in 1990 for a display of Tibetan sacred objects integrating aesthetic and sacred character within a re-created space of devotion.
- ¹³ Many centres contacted for this research, including the Dharamsala thangka painting school, declined to participate on the grounds that they were not conservation specialists.

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