Crossing the Boundaries between Conservation Disciplines in the Treatment of Asian Thangkas
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When Museum Textile Services (MTS) began the conservation of a group of eighteenth-century Tibetan thangkas belonging to the Fordham University Museum in 2005, we noticed the gaps in the understanding between textile and paintings conservation. Kate Smith, paintings conservator in private practice, was brought on to the project as a consultant to help develop a comprehensive treatment approach, and to provide training for the MTS staff in techniques specific to paintings conservation. A thorough reading of existing literature on thangka conservation identified scholars in the field, several of whom were consulted during the project.

By the time the two-year project was complete, we had established a series of treatment procedures that addressed our major challenges including how to safely remove and relace a painting; when and how to clean extremely delicate silk; how to create an appropriate space for an unsupported thangka; and how and when to consolidate, thin, and/or inpaint a thangka painting. We concluded that many of the skills required to conserve thangka paintings and their textile mounts overlap and interlock.

With a better understanding across the conservation disciplines, it is our hope that overscaled artifacts such as Asian thangkas will receive more informed, appropriate, and respectful treatments.

The weakest silk mounting fabric required an underlay of cotton fabric and an extensive network of helix-stitch stitching. The cotton was purchased from Phillips-Byrne and we chose Nielsen’s Silk polyester thread for the helix-stitching. The original textile was a silk thangka on cloth supported with pieces of silk pongee purchased from Drama Trading that we hand-painted with Golden Acrylics

This image shows more than one set of stitching which suggests that the painting has been remounted. We used a large press and grommets during the remounting to prevent warping of the supporting canvas for creating new folds.

This image shows a thangka painting being re-laid onto cotton thread. The painting is re-attached to the cotton support under we had attached behind the silk mounting.

A devotional painting is often the focus of a thangka. However, a cooked hinge painted on a monastic or temple cloth is also a thangka, even though it is more centered on the central concept of a devotional subject. The original of the word thangka has been traced to its function as a rolled-up image, which alludes to the need to be transported from one site to another. Hence the term is used in both academic literature and in the everyday use of the term (Jacksin, 143). As such, this discussion focuses on the role the thangka plays as a devotional image.

A sacred thangka is consecrated during an “Opening of the Eyes” ceremony, which is performed in a ritualistic manner. The ritual begins with the consecration. If the image has not already done so, the monk may write the syllables “OM AH HUM” on the center of the crown with red color. Then, the image faces the main figure, corresponding to the 1st, 3rd, and 4th chakras. This reorientation, the act of placing the fabric to the eastern side, north, and west with images, was to be included during the consecration ritual (Jackson, 145). The names of certain thangkas, however, as the number of possible variations, they also can be placed on the back of the painting, as well as on the thangkas of Guru Drub, Dorje Chang, the founder of the Drukpa Lineage.

Collaborative results

The result of this patient treatment was to create a fully restored thangka that is now securely mounted to the fabric. The painting and its fabric mount are among the best in the collection. Extensive areas of wear and degradation of the cover are a story of many layers of painting and collaring, which were then re-laid onto cotton thread. This painting and its fabric mount are among the best in the collection. Extensive areas of wear and degradation of the cover are a story of many layers of painting and collaring, which were then re-laid onto cotton thread.

The thangka painting is made of cotton fabric that was in some cases stretched over a canvas. The canvas using the same adhesive as the lining. The color of the cotton was sometimes enough to determine the fabric size.

These images show the thangka depicting the Guru Dakini at the time of this conservation treatment, in after-natural merger materials were removed, and with dull red cotton paint supporting the edges and new mount mounting.

We took a temporary paper mount to accommodate the insights of the thangka painting. We then treated the painting as well as the paper mount using cotton thread carefully lifting the outer silk from the edges of the painting.

Once the painting and the thangka rest on a soft surface, we wanted to improve their display. For this reason, we made to paper layer were filled with their desired thickness and this step was eventually abandoned. The top layer was removed, and then a thin layer of cotton thread was applied to the painting’s surface. The thangka was then ready to be placed back into the collection.