

Crossing the Boundaries between Conservation Disciplines in the Treatment of Asian Thangkas

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Chaos is inherent in all compounded things.
Strive on with diligence.
-The Buddha



When Museum Textile Services (MTS) began the conservation of a group of eighteen Tibetan thangkas belonging to the Mead Art Museum in 2009, we set out to cross the boundaries 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 also 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 reinstall a painting; when and how to clean extremely fragile silk; how to create an appropriate new mount for an unmounted thangka; and how and when to consolidate, line, and/or inpaint a thangka painting. We concluded that many of the skills required to conserve thangka paintings and their textile mounts overlap and inform each other.

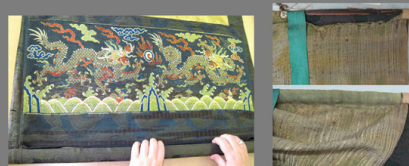
With a better understanding across the conservation disciplines, it is our hope that composite artifacts such as Asian thangkas will receive more informed, appropriate, and reversible treatments.

Treating the textile mount



Without exception all the thangkas were heavily soiled by soot from lamps and fires as well as an array of vegetable and particulate material. Evidence of water damage was also found on almost every thangka. The backs of the paintings and textiles would have absorbed moisture from damp walls or been rained on while traveling.

We made a distinction between environmental and ceremonial soiling when establishing a cleaning and inpainting procedure: dirt and other potentially harmful deposits were reduced while ritual deposits were left to tell the thangka's story. Surface cleaning the textiles was accomplished with the aid of a micro-suction vacuum and vulcanized rubber sponges.



The weakest silk mounting fabrics required an underlay of cotton fabric and an extensive network of laid-couching stitches. The cotton was purchased from Phillips-Boyne and we chose Gütermann Skala polyester thread for the laid-couching. We repaired losses in a silk thangka veil with patches of silk pongee purchased from Dharma Trading that we hand-painted with Golden MSA paints.



This image shows more than one set of stitch holes, which suggests that the painting has been remounted. We used the original stitch holes during reinstallation to prevent weakening the surrounding canvas by creating new holes.

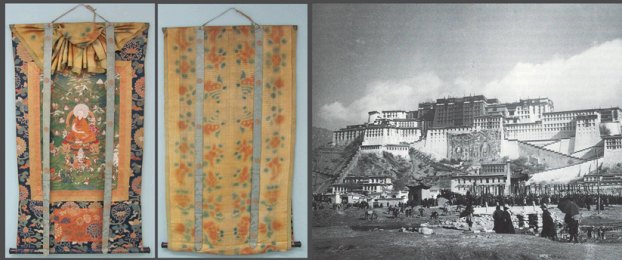
This image shows a thangka painting being reinstalled using cotton thread. The painting is stitched to the cotton support fabric we had attached behind the silk mounting.



To stabilize weak edges, cotton fabric was in some cases adhered behind the painted canvas using the same adhesive as the lining. The color of the cotton was sometimes enough to camouflage the fabric loss. These three images show the thangka depicting the Bardo Deities a) prior to this conservation treatment, b) after non-original mount materials were removed, and c) with dull red cotton patches supporting the edges and new blue mounting.

Works Cited

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A devotional painting is most often the focus of a thangka. However, a colossal hanging displayed from a monastery or hillside is also a thangka, even though it is made entirely of appliquéd and pieced fabric. The origin of the word thangka has been traced to its function as a rolled-up image, which alludes to the need to be transported from site to site or taken out for auspicious occasions (Hass et al. 108). As author David Jackson explains, "...to function as a sacred object of worship the painting had to be mounted in a cloth frame and then consecrated through the ceremony of vivification" (Jackson, 143).



A sacred thangka is consecrated during an "Opening of the Eyes" ceremony, which is traditionally performed by a monk or a religious teacher (Shaffel, 100). If the painter has not already done so, the monk may write the syllables "OM AH HUM" on the painting's reverse behind the forehead, throat and heart of the main figure, corresponding to the 2nd, 3rd and 4th chakras. These represent, "the essence of the enlightened body, speech, and mind with which the figure was to be imbued during the consecration ritual" (Jackson, 143). The names of certain deities, prayers, as well as the handprints of respected teachers may also be placed on the back of the painting, as seen on this thangka of Guru Urygen Dorje Chang, the Fourth Manifestation of the Guru Padmasambhava.

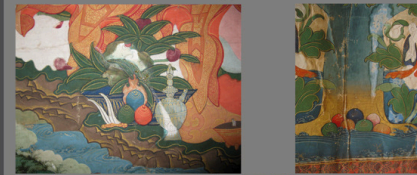
Collaborative results



The result of this carefully designed approach to the conservation of the paintings and textiles can be clearly seen on the thangka of The Buddha Calling the Earth to Witness, surrounded by illustrations of Jutaka Stories. This painting and its fabric mount were among the weakest in the collection. Extensive areas of wear and horizontal lines of damage tell a story of heavy use, frequent rolling and unrolling, light exposure, and poor care. To bring this painting to the level of legibility of the others in the collection would have involved an inappropriate amount of intervention. Instead, losses in the red and blue halos, as well as the Buddha's hair, robes, and cushion were lightly toned, allowing the central figure to be seen as whole and vibrant within the allegorical landscape. A full cotton lining was stitched behind the thangka after which nylon net was overlaid on the front.

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Treating the painting



The distemper paint used to create thangka paintings is susceptible to damage from moisture, as seen in the left detail where the loss caused by moisture reveals underdrawing below. Crystalline deposits were also found on many paintings, which scholars suggest relate to rituals performed near the thangka (Batton, 26). The right detail shows planar distortion, a liquid-borne stain with associated loss of pigment; additional loss of pigment from abrasion, and horizontal cracks from rolling.



To line a painting, we coated tensioned silk crepe-line with a 1:2 mixture of ethyl acetate/methylcellulose (1:1) and Plexol B500 (75% solution in water). When dry, we reactivated the adhesive coating with ethyl acetate, placed the silk on the back of the painting, and created a seal through a piece of silicon-release Mylar. When the adhesive was dry again, we turned the painting face up and released the silk from its stretcher, carefully trimming excess silk from the edges of the painting.



We built a temporary spray booth outside to accommodate the largest of the thangka paintings. Kate Smith taught the other team members how to consolidate the back and front of each painting with two to three coats of methyl cellulose solution in ethanol and distilled water.



Once the paintings were structurally sound, we worked to improve their legibility. Some larger losses to the paint layer were filled with Modostac putty and these and other unfilled damages were inpainted with gouaches, chosen for their reversibility and the opaque, matte effect they provided.