

LET'S TALK



What Are You Doing to Protect Your Buddhist Treasures?

Ann Shaftel says there are many things we can and must do to preserve sacred Buddhist art.

These days many Buddhist practitioners have some form of sacred Buddhist art in their home, perhaps a thangka, a framed print or calligraphy, a Buddha statue, or other treasures to inspire their meditation practice. The dharma centers they attend also contain various assortments of sacred art.

The term “sacred art” can feel weighty and elicit reactions ranging from awe to trepidation

ANN SHAFTEL is a preservation consultant and conservator specializing in Buddhist art. Her clients include museums, governments, universities, and Buddhist monasteries around the world.

when it comes to its care and ownership. As an art conservator specializing in the preservation of Buddhist art, I have been asked thousands of questions about these treasures. The question I care least about is, “How much is it worth?” A question that I carefully respond to is, “How can I care for this treasure so it will survive to inspire future generations?”

Basic preservation principles are practical in nature and consist of factors you can control and those you cannot. You can wisely decide to place a painting, calligraphy, or sculpture in a safer location; for example, away from direct sunlight, bright lamps, and fluorescent lights; away from a heating duct or source; not in a basement or attic; and not in the hands of an untrained framer or restorer. These are choices over which you have some control. Factors outside of your

control relate to how the artwork was originally made, what kind of natural deterioration it may develop, and how it was handled in the past; for example, was it over-cleaned and over-restored by an untrained restorer or framed with poor-quality mat board that has hastened its deterioration?

The work of professional art conservators is based on scientific principles and carried out with respect and minimal intervention to the sacred art. We join together in harmony a scientific understanding of materials and their behavior with internationally accepted preservation and conservation strategies, as well as traditional principles of respect for sacred treasures.

Often when people think of art conservation, what comes to mind are dramatic before and after images of a painting that was cleaned: “before” is dark and grimy and “after” is fresh and bright. However, the contemporary approach to art conservation is that of proactive measures to safely protect and preserve treasures *before* they are damaged or lost forever.

A crucial step in preservation is the creation of a disaster-preparedness plan that includes an inventory of treasures in your home, a dharma center, or a traditional monastery. I am currently developing a comprehensive project for digital documentation of monastic treasures in India, China, Bhutan, and Nepal.

The very existence of an inventory of cultural holdings can protect collections in times of conflict, and also discourage thieves. For example, if your dharma center is robbed and a statue stolen, then a record of it exists that may assist authorities in locating and returning it.

For centuries, sacred treasures found in monasteries have been cared for by resident nuns and monks. As more and more Western practitioners find themselves caretakers of sacred art, it’s important that they learn how to keep them safe. With our gentle and informed care, the inspirational treasures now in our homes and dharma centers can survive to inspire others long after we are gone. 