

Thangka Treatments: Forty Years Hindsight by Ann Shaftel

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Submitted by Barbara Borghese on 18 Aug 2017



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The following article, written by Ann Shaftel, gives us a precious insight in the development of a treatment methodology for Thangka paintings, developed during a career lifespan of over forty years. The author, prompted by a request from an emerging conservator, recalls her choices and explains them in the context of a different time, when methodology for such items was still in its infancy.

Recently, an emerging conservator interning in a museum conservation studio contacted me to learn more about my thangka treatments forty years ago. She was not met with the expected reticence nor a senescent haze; rather, my enthusiasm to view and review past treatments with her. We reviewed my treatment notes and, in a lengthy telephone discussion, we discussed the research and history behind the developing thangka treatments of that time.

Background and Treatment History

Forty years ago, paintings were often infused with wax/resin on hot tables or with irons, and textiles were encased in netting or flattened onto cloth-covered mounting boards. Composite objects were often disassembled. In most museums, thangkas were relatively unknown, as it was before the market surge in international thangka popularity and purchases.

When I began researching thangkas in 1970 in India, I was fortunate to meet three thangka experts at that time: His Holiness Karmapa 16, His Eminence Khamtrul Rinpoche, a master thangka painter and lineage holder, and Gelek Rinpoche who at the time was a scholar at Tibet House, Delhi. In 1972, I met Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Buddhist teacher and master painter, with whom I worked closely on preservation of Buddhist art until his death.

By the time I worked on contract at this museum, I had travelled extensively in Himalayan monasteries, and had interviewed master thangka painters, and Buddhist teachers to obtain background in the traditional use, care, and traditions associated with thangkas. "Informants", or my sources of information on all things thangka, included traditional Tibetan teachers, artists and accomplished scholars.

During my discussion with the emerging conservator, it became clear that she was viewing conservation treatments of forty years ago, through the lens of a 2017 conservation training

programme approach and treatment parameters.

In the 1970s, art dealers in India, New York and Paris were beginning to remove the paintings from the textile mountings, discard the mountings, and “retouch” the paintings towards a perfection commanding a higher purchase price. The paintings were often framed in western aesthetic frames. A few museums were removing the textile mountings and using Japanese or Chinese paper mounting techniques to create paper scrolls of thangkas. I was fortunate to begin collecting discarded thangka textile mountings at that time, and I continued to collect and document them to this day. I look forward to a museum exhibit on thangka textile mountings, as they contain valuable textiles carrying the history of commerce and political/religious continuity through the years.

In the early 1970s, I studied the thangka collections in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, American Museum of Natural History, University of Philadelphia Museum of Art and University of Michigan Museum of Art and later the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Most of these significant thangka collections were untouched by the museum staff at the time, unless already altered by donors. Thangkas were mostly stored rolled up, but they were not routinely disassembled and reduced to only paintings. Thangkas were not considered important enough collections at that time to merit extensive conservation laboratory time, nor major museum exhibition space.

In the early 1970s, monasteries and dharma centres requested me to make minor mends to the textile mounting and cover, reinforce tears in the painting support, mend and/or recreate cording used to hang-up the thangka form, and to clean or re-attach the tho, or decorative knobs found on the end of the bottom wooden dowel. Monasteries and Buddhist centres I was working with forty years ago needed their thangkas to be useful: usable for display to serve their purpose of displaying a specific iconography for visualisation practice, in a traditional complete thangka form that had been blessed to activate the deities displayed.

In general, when a thangka in a monastery had become too darkened with incense grit and butter lamp smoke to clearly display the iconography, or the painting was too weak to receive a replacement mounting, then the thangka was respectfully replaced with a copy of the painting’s iconography painted by a thangka painter, and set in a new and appropriate textile mounting sewn by a tailor. The original was hung in a master’s room, behind other thangkas in a shrine hall, or stored respectfully, and some were included in side Chorten or stupas as blessed objects. The unrealistic and imposed standard of western museum perfection was not a model for monasteries at that time, nor was it for centuries previous.

My conservation treatment of this museum’s thangkas forty years ago came out of a combination of early 1970s conservation training, discussion with Buddhist meditation and painting masters, and agreement with the museum curator. Regarding the usual discussion between conservator and curator of the time, this was pre-computer; thus, the extensive discussions were not documented, and the typed treatment notes provided to clients were succinct.

No, the thangka paintings I worked with then were neither wax-resin lined, nor transformed into a paper scroll painting, as was done to thangkas in other collections in the 1970s. Yet no treatment is ever immune to criticism or questions from other conservators, and perhaps that is the very nature of conservation: open discussion with a tinge of perfectionism. These days, there are conferences about treatment of thangkas with robust open discussion about cleaning and consolidation. However, back then, as today, this conservative approach to maintaining the original form without deep cleaning the painting or removing the textile mounting, is still my preference, as informed by my Buddhist teachers and thangka painting masters.

The intern was calling to find out the background of these early thangka treatments. These were minimal treatments, fully discussed with the museum’s curator, and designed to stabilise the

thangkas for their future in the home museum and for loans. The curator of the time agreed that an enclosure should be created to serve as frame for exhibition, for safe storage and shipping for loans: all in one. Forty years later, most of the thangkas are still in these enclosures.

In the early 1970s, I designed these deep shadow box enclosures for the full thangka form with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the master painter and meditation teacher.

Trungpa Rinpoche's approach to conservation of his own work was practical. For his own paintings, Trungpa Rinpoche wanted me to "protect them from his devoted students" who wanted to touch everything.

Trungpa Rinpoche's own traditional thangka paintings had been rolled and unrolled and crunched by his students. Because of that, Trungpa Rinpoche and I designed a shadow box installation that set the thangkas deep into the frame, so that the original entire thangka form could be retained. He stated clearly that he did not want thangkas reduced to framed paintings without the traditional textile mountings.

The custom-made shadow box enclosures that we designed together had a simple dark finish on the wood, UV filter plexiglass was installed as glazing, and the reverse was appropriately sealed. This presented a traditional appearance for these traditional complete thangka forms. This is the shadow box installation for thangkas that was subsequently used in museums with thangka collections, and for many of my private clients.

The shadow box enclosures were well-sealed; however, in the museum under discussion, shortly after I completed my thangka treatments there a staff member opened the back of the enclosure. Many thangkas have two pendant tabs that traditionally hang in front of the painting, and thus can block the view of the thangka's painting in its entirety. The museum staff entered the enclosure, and folded these traditional tabs up into themselves and sewed them tightly, thus creating a non-traditional presentation of the thangka form. This is not a choice I would have made; however, other than the unnecessary alteration of the thangka's original appearance (tabs hanging down), no damage was done.

The museum's thangkas received conservative and respectful conservation treatment and are still in the enclosures that I designed for them in the 1970s with input by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and other Buddhist masters, who were interested in both treatment and further preservation measures. These early treatments and enclosures were considered to be respectful both to the traditional form of thangkas, but also respectful to the religious and cultural import of blessed treasures. For forty years, these thangkas have remained stable and safe, through storage, display, handling, shipping, loans, both in this museum and in other collections. Certainly, as the museum changes curatorial and conservation staff, the preservation enclosures of these thangkas can be revisited.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche's own thangkas are no longer in their deep shadow box frames. In 1995, I was asked by his heirs to remove the thangka from the frame, and the paintings from their textile mounting, just for long enough for scanning. The paintings were scanned for reproduction sales. Following the scanning, his heirs requested that the paintings be framed in conventional western style frames.

I have kept the original thangka textile mountings, and the original 1970s shadow box frames. These two textile mountings, selected by Trungpa Rinpoche himself, are in my collection of thangka textiles, along with a thangka textile mounting photo-documented as belonging to HH Dalai Lama in the Potala Palace.

It was most informative to have the opportunity to undo the shadow box framing, working backwards. Conservators are deeply interested in how things age, including their own treatments and interventions. The following images show a 1995 reversal of the framing package presentation designed by the meditation teacher and artist himself in the 1970s. Although the framing package used UV filtered plexiglass, the thangkas were displayed in bright sun, and with bright spotlights in meditation rooms. The plexiglass had not been updated, and clearly the light

levels were very high.

Before he died, Ven. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche requested that sometime in the future, I “save” his paintings, and correct the damage to the paintings by “inpainting”. The thangka paintings had previously suffered damage from rolling and unrolling through the years after they were painted in India. Trungpa Rinpoche had been trained in Tibet to use highly refined yak hide glue and finely ground mineral pigment colours from the mountains, both prepared by apprentices. When he painted in India upon arrival, the quality of his materials was different, and thus these paintings developed streaks and losses. The painting supports had been pierced by the tailor’s needle while sewing them into their original textile mountings. Thus, when his heirs requested this prior to scanning for reproduction, I in-painted according to his exact request.

Conservators appreciate the opportunity to be available to those emerging in the profession (such as to the intern who called), and to review and discuss our own past treatments. Forty-seven years ago, when I began working in Himalayan monasteries and in museums, my thangka conservation treatments were informed by the science-based approach to conservation, and also by my extensive research into thangkas with Buddhist lineage figures, master painters and scholars who are no longer with us.

About the author

Ann Shaftel is a Dalhousie University Adjunct Scholar. She is a Fellow of the International Institute for Conservation (IIC) and a Fellow of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC). Ann is a member of the Canadian Association of Professional Conservators. She has an MS degree in Art Conservation and MA degree in History of Art. She has written and published many scholarly and practical articles, including in the Journal of Art Theft.

Ann’s work with the Digital Monastery Project can be seen here:

<http://treasurecaretaker.com/> ^[3]

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