

CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN CONSERVATION DISCIPLINES IN THE TREATMENT OF ASIAN THANGKAS

CAMILLE MYERS BREEZE AND KATE SMITH

ABSTRACT – Asian thangkas are devotional paintings framed by layers of textiles that are frequently rolled for storage and transport. Ceremonial use and handling take a toll on each thangka's components, as do subsequent generations of conservation interventions. When Museum Textile Services (MTS) began the conservation of a group of eighteen Tibetan thangkas belonging to the Mead Art Museum in 2009, MTS set out to cross the boundaries between textile and paintings conservation. Consultant Kate Smith was essential in the development of a comprehensive treatment approach for the collection. She provided treatment assistance and training for the MTS staff. A thorough reading of literature on thangka conservation identified scholars in the field, several of whom were contacted during the project. By the time the two-year project was complete, a series of treatment procedures had been created that address challenges including when and how to clean and stabilize fragile silk, replace a missing thangka mount with appropriate modern fabric, remove and remount a painting, and how and when to consolidate, line, and inpaint a thangka painting. The authors concluded that many of the skills required to conserve thangka paintings and their fabric mountings overlap and inform each other.

RESUMEN – Las tankas asiáticas son pinturas espirituales enmarcadas en capas de telas que a menudo se guardan o trasladan enrolladas. Su uso ceremonial y manipulación degradan los componentes de las tankas, como así también los métodos de conservación utilizados a través de las generaciones. Cuando los Servicios del Museo Textil (MTS, por sus siglas en inglés) comenzaron con la conservación de un grupo de dieciocho tankas tibetanas que pertenecían al Museo de Arte Mead en 2009, los MTS decidieron cruzar las fronteras entre la conservación de telas y pinturas. La asesora Kate Smith fue fundamental en el desarrollo de un método de tratamiento integral para la colección. Brindó asistencia en el tratamiento y capacitó a los miembros del MTS. Una lectura profunda de literatura sobre la conservación de tankas identificó a los eruditos en la materia, varios de los cuales fueron contactados durante el proyecto. Después de dos años de proyecto, se desarrolló una serie de procedimientos que resolvían cuestiones como en qué momento y de qué manera limpiar y estabilizar la seda frágil, cómo reemplazar el montaje faltante de un tanka por una tela moderna apropiada, cómo sacar y volver a montar una pintura, y cómo y cuándo consolidar, alinear y usar *inpaint* en una pintura tanka. Los autores concluyeron que muchas de las habilidades requeridas para conservar pinturas tanka y sus montajes de tela se superponen y utilizan conjuntamente.

1. INTRODUCTION

When Museum Textile Services (MTS) began the conservation of a group of eighteen Tibetan thangkas belonging to the Mead Art Museum in 2009, conservators 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 contacted during the project.

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A devotional painting is most often the focus of a *thangka* (figs. 1, 2). However, a *thangka* may also be made entirely of appliquéd and pieced fabric, such as in a colossal hanging displayed from a monastery or hillside (fig. 3). 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 (Mass et al. 108). As 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 1988, 143).



Figures 1 and 2: Seventh Dalai Lama and His Chakrasamvara Initiation. Tibetan, late 18th century. Courtesy of Mead Art Museum. With veil raised (left) and lowered (right)

A sacred *thangka* is consecrated during an "Opening of the Eyes" ceremony, which is traditionally performed by a monk or a religious teacher (Shaftel 1986, 100). If the painter has not already done so, the monk may write the Tibetan characters for the syllables "OM AH HUM" on the painting's reverse behind the forehead, throat and heart of the main figure, corresponding to the second, third, and fourth 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 1988, 143). The names of certain deities and prayers of request or praise, as well as the handprints or fingerprints of respected teachers may also be placed on the back of the painting, as seen on the many of the Mead Art Museum *thangkas*.

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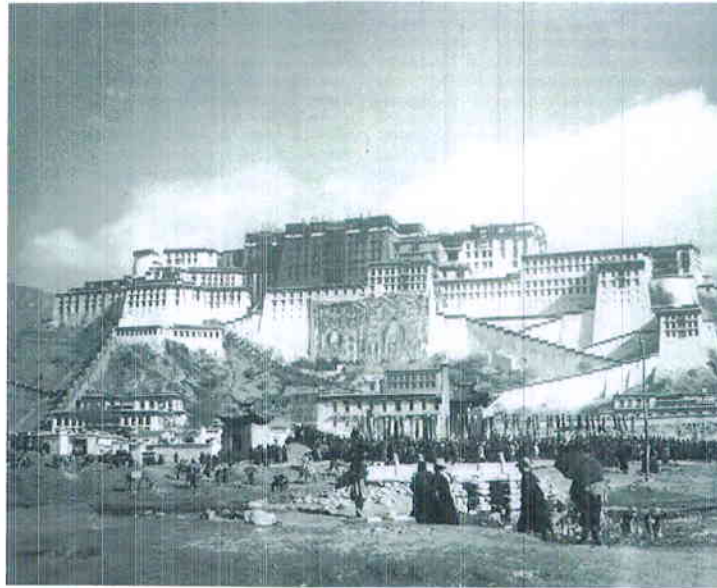


Figure 3: The Potala Palace, Lhasa, Tibet (Jackson 1988, 4)

An example of a carefully designed approach to the conservation of the paintings and textiles can be clearly seen on the thangka entitled, “Buddah Calling the Earth to Witness, surrounded by Illustrations of the Jutaka Stories” (fig. 4). This painting and its fabric mount were among the weakest in the Mead Art Museum's 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 conservators lightly toned losses in the red and blue halos, as well as the Buddah's hair, robes, and cushion (fig. 5). The inpainting allows the central figure to be seen as whole and vibrant within its allegorical landscape. Lastly, a full cotton lining was stitched behind the thangka and nylon net was overlaid on the entire front of the fabric mount.



Figure 4 and 5: The Buddha Calling the Earth to Witness, Surrounded by Illustrations of Jataka Stories. Tibetan, 18th-19th century. Courtesy of Mead Art Museum. Before treatment (left) and after treatment (right).

2. TREATING THE PAINTINGS

The distemper paint used to create thangka paintings is susceptible to moisture, as seen in the left detail where the water damage reveals underdrawing below the paint. Crystalline deposits were also found on many paintings (fig. 6), which scholars suggest relate to rituals performed near the thangka (Barton 1993, 26). Figure 7 shows planar distortion, a liquid-borne stain with associated pigment loss, pigment abrasion, and horizontal cracks from rolling.



Figure 6 (left): *Assemblage of Divinities* (Tsog-Shing). Tibetan, 18th-early 20th century. Courtesy of Mead Art Museum. Figure 7 (right): *Guru Padmasambhava, Fourth Manifestation*. Tibetan, 18th-19th century. Courtesy of Mead Art Museum.

To line a painting, tensioned silk crepeline was coated with a 1:2 mixture of ethyl acetate/methylcellulose (1:1) and Plextol B500 (75% solution in water). When dry, the adhesive coating was reactivated with ethyl acetate, the silk was pressed to the back of the painting, and a seal was created through a piece of silicone-release Mylar (fig. 8). When the adhesive was dry again, the painting was turned face up and the silk released from its stretcher, carefully trimming excess silk from the edges of the painting (Breeze 2012a and 2012b).

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Figure 8: Bodhisattva Padmapani and other Deities. Tibetan, late 18th century. Courtesy of Mead Art Museum.

Conservators built a temporary spray booth outside to accommodate the largest of the thangka paintings (fig. 9). 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.

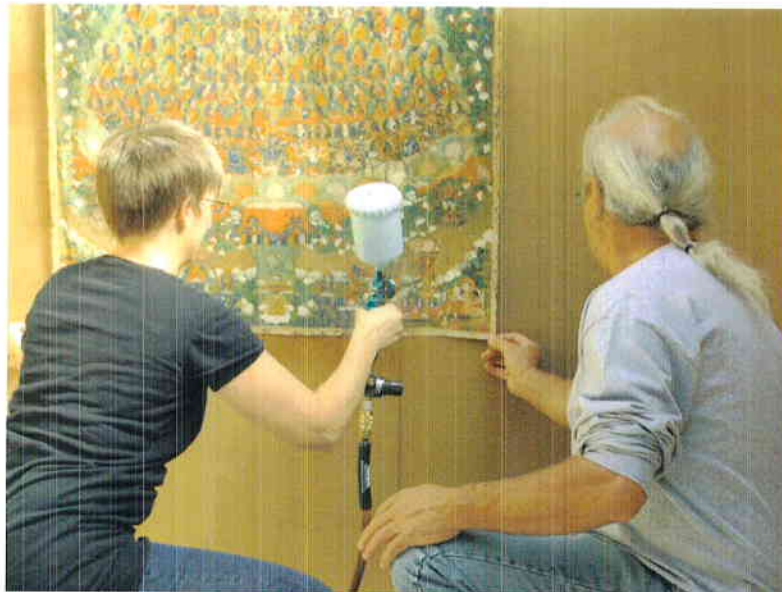


Figure 9: Assemblage of Divinities (Tsog-Shing). Tibetan, 18th-early 20th century. Courtesy of Mead Art Museum.

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Once the paintings were structurally sound, legibility of the painted images was addressed (fig. 10). Some larger losses to the paint layer were filled with Modostuc putty and these and other infilled damages were inpainted with gouaches, chosen for their reversibility and the opaque, matte effect they provide.



Figure 10: Guru Urygen Dorje Chang, First Manifestation. Tibetan, 18th-19th century. Courtesy of Mead Art Museum.

3. TREATING THE TEXTILES

Without exception all thangkas were heavily soiled by soot from lamps and fires as well as an array of vegetable and particulate material. The backs of the objects would have absorbed moisture from damp walls or been rained on while traveling. Surface cleaning the textiles was accomplished with the aid of a micro-suction vacuum and vulcanized rubber sponges (fig. 11). A distinction was drawn between environmental and ceremonial soiling when establishing a cleaning procedure; dirt and other potentially harmful deposits were reduced while the ritual deposits were left to tell the thangka's story.



Figure 11: Kalachakra. Tibetan, late 18th century. Courtesy of Mead Art Museum.

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The weakest of the silk mounting fabrics required an underlay of cotton fabric and an extensive network of laid-couching stitching (fig. 12). Losses in a silk thangka veil were repaired with patches of silk pongee that we hand-painted with Golden MSA paints. Cotton thread was passed through the original stitch holes during reinstallation in order not to weaken the surrounding canvas. The painting is stitched to the cotton support fabric that had been attached behind the silk mounting fabric.



Figure 12: Guru Uryen Dorje Chang, First Manifestation. Tibetan, 18th-19th century. Courtesy of Mead Art Museum.

Four of the thangkas in the Mead Art Museum collection did not have original textile mountings. Working with Director and Chief Curator Elizabeth Barker, conservators drew up a plan for creating new fabric mountings in order to restore the original presentation style. To stabilize weak edges of the thangka depicting the Bardo Deities, cotton fabric was adhered behind areas of the canvas using the same adhesive formula as the lining. Brown cotton was toned with Golden MSA paints to camouflage the complete edge loss. Figures 13, 14, and 15 show this thangka prior to conservation treatment, after removal of non-original mount materials, with painted cotton patches supporting the edges and a new blue mounting.



Figures 13 and 14: Bardo Deities. Tibetan, 18th-early 20th century. Courtesy of Mead Art Museum.



Figure 15: Bardo Deities. Tibetan, 18th-early 20th century. Courtesy of Mead Art Museum.

4. CONCLUSION

By the time the two-year project was complete, Conservators at Museum Textile Services had established a series of treatment procedures that addressed the major challenges of the Mead Art Museum thangka collection. These included how to safely remove and reinstall a painting, when and how to clean and stabilize extremely fragile silk, how to create an appropriate new mount for an unmounted thangka, and how and when to consolidate, line, and inpaint a thangka painting. They concluded that many of the skills required to conserve thangka paintings and their fabric mountings overlap and inform each other. With a better understanding across the conservation disciplines, composite artifacts such as Asian thangkas will receive more informed, appropriate, and reversible treatments.

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These eighteen thangkas were exhibited in two groups over the course of the 2011-2012 academic year in *Picturing Enlightenment: Thangka in the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College*. A comprehensive essay written by Camille Myers Breeze entitled "Opening Doors: Conservation of the Mead Art Museum's Thangka Collection" appears in the 2013 publication, *Picturing Enlightenment: Tibetan Thangkas in the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College* edited by Marylin Rhie.

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CAMILLE MYERS BREEZE began her textile conservation career in 1989 at the Textile Conservation Workshop in South Salem, New York. After earning a BA in Art History from Oberlin College, she received an MA in Museum Studies: Costume and Textiles Conservation from the State University of New York: Fashion Institute of Technology. She spent five years in the Textile Conservation Laboratory at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City before moving to the Textile Conservation Center at the American Textile History Museum, in Lowell, Massachusetts. Camille founded Museum Textile Services in 1999 as a full-service textile conservation studio serving museums, historical societies, and private collectors. She is the author of numerous articles, a book on American tapestry conservation techniques, and has taught in the United States, the Dominican Republic, and Peru. Email: museumtextiles@gmail.com.

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