

# CURATORIAL PERSPECTIVE

## PAINTINGS, PASSION, AND PURPOSE

MoNA offers visitors the opportunity to view and learn about the arts of Nepal and to meet and engage with its current living masters. As a conservator working with the preservation of art in Nepal since 1970, an enhancement to your MoNA experience will be some tips and shared experiences on caring for your art, especially when it is considered "sacred".

When you think about art conservation, you might think about dramatic "before" and "after" images of a painting that was cleaned: "before" is dark and grimy, and "after" looks new and shiny.

However, the conservation of sacred art treasures as a hands-on discipline has changed with deepening respect for historic evidence of usage, and with increased access to sophisticated analytical instruments, as well as with routine use of digital tools.

Since 1970, I have regularly interviewed elders, scholars, and master teachers in order to join their wisdom and advice with up-to-date scientific techniques when caring for sacred art, and when advising others.

For example, an Elder of the Mi'kmaq nation of the Canadian Maritimes, states that "A sacred object, while it may have designs incorporated in it, is not a piece of art" Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche, a deeply respected Buddhist teacher, told me "Sacred art is not just for beauty. It is for teaching and developing inner wisdom and compassion. Since it is not meant just for decoration, such art should be kept in a clean and appropriate place".

Recently, when I interviewed the famous contemporary artist Lok Chitrikar, he drew a distinction between empowered sacred art meant for meditation practice, and other works which are not empowered, and are simply decorative. To be a good art conservator, one must form an intimate relationship with the object being treated. Without knowing the art's significance, in addition to its properties as a material object made from atoms and molecules, it is harder to accurately preserve and protect it. The work of a professional art conservator is based on scientific principles and carried out with deep respect and minimal intervention in sacred art.

Therefore, the current trend in thangka "restoration" of aggressively over-cleaning and repainting can not only permanently damage blessed and historic thangkas but can be considered disrespectful.

Thangkas, in their own traditions, were never subjected to severe cleaning and repainting. Traditionally, monastery care of thangkas was only intended to keep them in working condition as sacred art forms in daily use.

Although thangka textile mountings were sometimes replaced during this history of traditional usage, only minor repairs were enacted. If the iconography became obscured, a thangka painter was engaged to copy it and paint a new thangka, that could serve as a guide to visualization and illustration of texts. These days, we prefer to stabilize the condition of the original, historic, and blessed thangka, and utilize digital restoration, working



virtually from high-resolution images of a thangka, to recreate and reveal the original iconography. This offers a safe path toward the respectful understanding and analysis of iconography and style for thangka paintings, textiles, and texts of historic and spiritual significance. It is so useful for thangka artists to refer to and recreate obscured iconography, and for scholars to read traditional texts where the script has become unreadable.

Conservation also strives, not only to stabilize and reveal sacred art damaged by traditional worship but to help owners to prevent more damage in the future. For example, the contemporary approach to art conservation is that of proactive measures to safely protect and preserve treasures before they are damaged or lost forever. The first and most profound step in preservation is the creation of a disaster-preparedness plan that includes an inventory of treasures in your home, your monastery, and your community. We use a simple Risk Assessment approach and encourage the creation of an inventory. We can share with you how to do that using your own mobile phone. For your own treasures, as for galleries and museums, and monasteries, basic preservation principles are practical in nature and consist of factors you can control and those you cannot. For example, you can wisely decide to place a painting, calligraphy, or sculpture in a safer location away from direct sunlight and bright lamps; away from a heat source; not in a basement or attic; and not in the hands of an untrained restorer or framer.

Factors outside of your control relate to how the artwork was originally made, and what kind of deterioration it may develop due to the methods and materials of its creation. For example, how it was handled in the past: was it aggressively cleaned and repainted by an untrained restorer or framed with a poor-quality mat board that has hastened its deterioration?

You are the current guardian of the treasures in your world, and conservation advice is available to you. Whether an artwork is considered to be empowered and sacred or not, you have the choice to make a difference in whether it may continue to inspire future generations.

*ANN SHAFTEL is a preservation consultant and conservator specializing in Buddhist art. Her international clients include museums, universities, and Buddhist monasteries. She is available for conservation advice and is currently leading a five-year community campaign in remote Nepal called The Tsum Preservation Project.*