

BUILDING THE FIRST CONSERVATION CENTER IN BHUTAN



IN ART CONSERVATION
a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing: should I fully train the monks or should I walk away?

It all started with *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan*, a unique exhibition that traveled the world illuminating not only Buddhist art but also the cultural preservation of this unique Himalayan Buddhist kingdom.

Since 2005, I have been living in Bhutan two months a year, sharing with a group of monks my expertise on how to restore their old and damaged thangkas. We brought the monks to The Honolulu Academy of Arts, so they could train one-on-one with and work alongside western conservators, gaining a wider perspective on both the methods and importance of art conservation.

Since those days the monks have learned to sew and repair the old silk brocades that border the thangkas. When the borders were too damaged, they learned to use natural dyes to make new silk take on the look of the original brocade. Cleaning thangkas is a delicate task. Over time the monks have learned not to over-clean, so as not to lose the character and patina of the original art. When a thangka has too many

tears, they now know how to back it up with very fine silk. Painting the damaged and missing areas on a thangka is never easy; the monks know when to stop painting so that it will not look new.

My goal has always been not just to train this first generation of monk conservators, but also create a tradition of conservation that they can pass to subsequent generations. Who better to restore sacred religious art but the monks themselves?

In April 2011, I was given land by the Bhutanese government to build the first conservation studio for the monks. This center will be dedicated to restoring damaged thangkas from all the temples in the country. The monks will also be housed here, as there is a shortage of housing for the monks in the capital of Thimpu. This center will also serve as a training facility for the next generation of monk conservators.

Since the summer of 2005, the conservation workshop, which currently occupies a few temporary rooms in a small rented building in Thimpu, has restored over 180 very important thangkas. Sixty five of them were exhibited in *The Dragon's Gift* exhibition.



HRM The Grand Queen Mother Ashi Kesang Wangchuck (center) and HRH Ashi Pem Pem Wangchuck visit the workshop.



If we are unable to secure funding for this center, the monks' diligent work and sacrifices to preserve the sacred arts of Bhutan will be lost. The monks will go back to their respective monasteries in the countryside and will be assigned to other duties.

Conservation is a new concept in Bhutan. Housing the monk conservators under one roof creates a show-place for the learning and appreciation of Buddhist sacred arts. The monks will learn to handle, store and preserve their thangkas for future generations of Bhutanese, and for visitors who will better understand and appreciate Buddhism. We will all secure the destiny of this wonderful legacy from the past and keep it alive.

Tashi Delek,

Ephraim Eddie Jose

For more information about the conservation center, special tours of Bhutan and donating to our training program, please email us:
info@DrukPreservation.org



Detail before conservation



After conservation

Guru Pema Jungney, Late 17th Century. Ink and mineral colors on cotton, mounted in silk brocade as a thangka. H 237 cm x W 118 cm. Traschicho Dzong, Thimphu, Bhutan.