Conservation of Tibetan Thangka Paintings from the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin

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ABSTRACT: This article describes the treatment of three thangka paintings. Close collaboration between paper and textile conservation disciplines led to devising treatment strategies to conserve the painted images whilst retaining the integrity of the pieces as a whole. In all of the cases described, it was necessary to consolidate the paint surfaces to prevent further losses of pigment occurring. Proposed is a low tech answer which is effective and uses little equipment. Materials can be sourced locally or brought in with minimum expense, and although skill is required, it is a skill that can be taught in the field. Most importantly, it remains easily reversible. In each case the thangka paintings retained the ability to be used in the manner that they were made for, were stable in any type of environment, no writing or images to the back were obscured, and at all times the thangka paintings retained their integrity, became stable, cleaner and visually more coherent. The main treatment issues were to consolidate the flaking paint and to strengthen the textile substrate without compromising the overall flexibility.

Introduction

National Museum of Ireland’s Bender Collection

The National Museum of Ireland (NMI) houses a small but significant collection of Tibetan thangka paintings donated to the Museum by Alfred Bender. The refurbishment of the Asian collection galleries in 2008 and the re-display of the paintings necessitated the conservation and remounting of twenty-one of these paintings.

Albert M. Bender (1866-1941) was born in Dublin, the son of Rabbi Philip Bender. By the time he was an adolescent he had emigrated to San Francisco, California where by the turn of the 20th century he was one of the most successful insurance brokers on the west coast of the United States. Although first attracted to book collecting and modern art, both of which he generously supported, he also became interested in Asian art. In honour of his mother, Augusta Bender, he donated approximately 260 artefacts of mostly Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan origin to the National Museum of Ireland between 1931 and 1936. The then Director of the National Museum, archaeologist Adolf Mahr, was Albert Bender’s main point of contact throughout the donations. Although the National Museum had collected Asian applied arts from the late 19th/early 20th centuries, this was the first significant series of donations given to the National Museum during the early years of Irish Independence. This fact was acknowledged at government level by the
opening of the ‘Augusta Bender Memorial Room of Far Eastern Art’ by the then President of the Executive Council, Eamonn De Valera in June 1934.

The objects collected by Bender and subsequently donated to the NMI include a rare set of thangkas (paintings on cotton) of the Arhats (disciples) of Buddha and four Lokapalas (Guardians) of the Four Quarters of the World from a Tibetan-Buddhist temple dating to the 18th century. Also included are textiles associated with the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 AD), Japanese Ukiyo-e (woodblock prints), a Daoist priest’s robe from 17th/18th century China, and several decorative arts objects in the areas of metalwork, ceramics and wood.

Synopsis of this Study

This paper discusses the treatment of a selection of thangkas from the Bender collection carried out by the authors and workshop participants in April and May 2008 at the Conservation Department of the National Museum of Ireland. The treatment strategies described are a result of the active collaboration of a paper and textile conservator using a combination of conservation approaches to retain the authenticity of the object whilst making it stable enough to be displayed. In order to achieve an integrated result, it was decided to separate the painting from the silk brocade which surrounds it, to treat the two elements separately and then reunite them after treatment.

Background and Ethical Approach

In the past, thangkas have often been treated by those trained in the conservation of easel or wall paintings. There has been a tendency to treat the painted images in a similar way in which easel paintings have been conserved rather than as three dimensional devotional objects which are an integral part of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Assuredly, thangkas in western museum collections do have a different function, but they remain complex three dimensional objects whose authenticity is inextricably linked with their original function as religious objects. It is vital that the original function of the object is retained and that any conservation treatment does not significantly alter the object’s character.

The paintings at the NMI are thought to date from the mid 19th century and are all from the same donor source. The material was being prepared for the display entitled A Dubliner’s Collection of Asian Art: The Albert Bender Exhibition, which opened in November 2008. Due to the scarcity of information in the conservation literature on suitable treatments of thangka paintings, the authors were invited by the National Museum of Ireland to demonstrate the techniques used for many years in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) to treat this type of object. This workshop took place in the NMI on the 23rd and 24th of May 2008.

Initial Survey of the Thangkas

Prior to beginning treatment, the paintings were surveyed in early April 2008 by one of the authors (Teresa Heady) who prepared treatment proposals and indicated treatment options and priorities. As a result of this initial examination, it was determined that four or five of the paintings were suffering from extensive pigment losses (Figure 1) and the paint was in a highly unstable condition which made them almost impossible to handle.
without incurring further paint losses. In addition, the poor state of preservation made them unfit to be mounted for the intended new display. In nearly all of the cases, it is sad to note that the majority of the pieces had lost both their rollers and veils.

It was clear that many of the paintings needed extensive overall consolidation of the paint layer rather than local treatment (Figure 2). Furthermore, two of these thangkas (the Ajita thangka and the Hva Shang thangka) were in exceedingly poor condition, with a highly weakened painting support as well as silk brocade surrounds which had been degraded by prolonged exposure to light. It was decided that these two items required overall lining as well as pigment consolidation. Both textile brocades and the cotton painting supports were in need of immediate strengthening if the paintings were to be safely displayed in a vertical orientation on the wall.

**Treatments**

The original sewing used to attach the thangka to the textile border was carefully unpicked and the original sewing thread retained. The paintings and their textile borders were separated (Figures 3 and 4).
Treatment of the paintings entailed prior humidification in a Sympatex® sandwich followed by washing on blotting paper which had been moistened with deionised water (Figure 5). The humidified thangka was placed face up on the blotter and was then sprayed with a 50:50 mixture of water and ethanol to help minimise the likelihood of tidelines occurring and to help break down any surface tension which might impede the cleaning process. Periodically the paintings were re-sprayed with the ethanol and water mixture and the transfer of discolouration to the blotter below checked. Areas with staining or existing tidelines (Figure 6) were repeatedly sprayed and then carefully blotted with pads of lens tissue to help absorb the discolouration.

![Figure 5](image1.png)  ![Figure 6](image2.png)

**Figure 5:** After prior humidification, the thangka was placed face up on blotting paper soaked in deionised water. This proved effective in reducing water staining and drawing out discolouration.

**Figure 6:** Detail of the Angaja thangka before treatment. Water staining of this type is effectively reduced by washing on blotting paper.

The merits of overall lining versus local consolidation were carefully assessed. Two of the case studies described in this paper required overall lining with Japanese hand-made paper (the Ajita, and the Hva Shang thangkas) and wheat starch paste to strengthen the highly degraded textile as well as allowing the adhesive to re-adhere the flaking paint as a result of the paste penetrating the interstices of the cotton fabric. Past experience of lining works of art on paper suggested that strengthening with Japanese Sekishu paper and wheat starch paste might be effective in both giving strength to the support whilst also penetrating the paint layers and acting as an effective means of overall consolidation. This type of lining would also allow any inscriptions to remain visible (Figure 7). After washing on blotter, the paintings were placed face down on polyethylene film cut 200 mm larger than the work on all four edges. The pasted lining paper was brushed down on to the humidified painting. Wheat starch paste diluted to a thin cream consistency was used to adhere the lining paper which was cut 100 mm larger than the painting on all edges. The edges were given a further reinforcement of strips of Sekishu paper adhered to the verso of the lining paper with wheat starch paste (Figure 8).

The lined painting was then allowed to dry face up on felts (Figure 9). After thorough drying, the lined thangka was sprayed lightly with water and a 30 mm strip around the edge of the lining paper was pasted up with medium thick paste and the work was then transferred to a Japanese drying board. It was allowed to dry on the karibari board for a minimum of one week.
Figure 7. Inscriptions/dedications on the verso of thangkas are important clues to their origins and significance as religious objects. Lining with thin Japanese paper and wheat starch allows these inscriptions to remain visible.

Figure 8. After lining with Japanese Sekishu paper, the edges of the thangka were reinforced with another layer of paper to minimise the risk of the border splitting when the lined work is put on the karibari board.

Figure 9. The Hva Shang thangka after lining is dried face on felt to allow shrinkage of lining paper before putting it onto the karibari board.

Following the two-day workshop, the textile conservator removed the lined painting from the karibari board, trimmed the lining paper and then reattached the painting to the conserved textile borders using the original stitch holes where possible and using new thread\(^2\). The thangka was then stitch-mounted to a fabric covered padded board made from conservation grade materials\(^3\) (Figures 10-12).

In the third case study (the Angaja thangka), the painting support was in relatively good condition, whereas the paint was extremely fragile and was poorly adhered to both the painting support and the ground layer. This painting was first humidified from both sides between sheets of Sympatex\(^\circledR\) for two hours and was then placed face upwards on woven polyester fabric. The humidified painting was sprayed with a 0.5% solution of low viscosity methyl cellulose (Fluka MC 64620) in water mixed 50:50 with ethanol (Figure 13). A spray gun and compressor was used which is of a relatively heavy duty construction, similar to the type of equipment used for applying varnish to easel paintings. This process was repeated several times to allow the highly degraded paint
surface to absorb a sufficient amount of the consolidant to prevent further paint losses occurring. The painting was then air dried and, on examination, the paint appeared to have been effectively consolidated. The treatment also had a very beneficial effect on the aesthetic appearance of the piece since the dilute methyl cellulose helped to re-saturate
the colours slightly whilst retaining the original matte appearance of the paint surface. Finally, it was re-humidified between Sympatex® and then lightly pressed between felts for a week. The *Angaja* thangka was then reattached into its original brocade borders using the original sewing holes (Figure 13, right).

The flexibility of the lined thangkas were retained as a result of using reasonably thin Japanese paper and dilute wheat starch paste. It would have been possible to re-roll the thanka after treatment if required.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the authors feel that the treatments described here are also eminently suitable for use in the field, and although the lining procedure requires a reasonable level of skill, it can be carried out with minimal equipment. If Japanese paper is either not available or is too expensive, then good quality Nepalese paper may be an acceptable substitute and methyl cellulose adhesive can be used in place of wheat starch.

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**Endnotes**

1. Participants of the workshop: Dora Murphy, Textile Conservator, NMI; Ciara Brennan, Independent Fine Art Conservator; Cliodna Devitt, Independent Textile Conservator; Rachel Phelan, Independent Textile Conservator.

2. Anchor stranded cotton yarn, single ply, shade 374.

3. The boards were made from polypropylene/polyethylene copolymer sheeting, covered with polyester felt and with a top fabric of Baumann Unisono II, shade 91.

**Suppliers of materials**

Sympatex® breathable membrane: Available in UK from Preservation Equipment Ltd.

*Sekishu* paper: Available from Masumi Corporation, Japan.

Fluka® Methyl Cellulose (Methocel MC 64620): available in the UK from Fisher Scientific.

**BIOGRAPHIES:** **Mike Wheeler** has worked as a Senior Paper Conservator at the Victoria and Albert Museum since 1995. He has been a tutor on the RCA/V&A Conservation Course, specialising in Indian and Asian Art on Paper and the conservation of architectural drawings. He has lectured and taught in Australia, India, Netherlands, Finland and Singapore. He has advised on projects in India & Egypt. After graduating from the University of Northumbria in 1984 he worked in Sheffield for the Area Museums Service before emigrating to New Zealand to take up the position of paper conservator at the Auckland City Art Gallery in May 1987. He was awarded the Andrew W. Mellon fellowship at the Metropolitan Museum
of Art in New York City in 1990. In 1993-94 he worked at the Better Image in New York City as a conservator of photographs and carried out three months field work at the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta, India in 1995. Mike has been an accredited member of the Institute of Conservation since 2000 and is a member of the professional accreditation committee.

Teresa Heady has worked as a textile and ethnographic conservator for over 20 years, first at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, freelancing for several years after leaving the Met, then took up a position at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco before emigrating to England to be first year Lecturer at the Textile Conservation Centre at Hampton Court. From there she moved to be Deputy Head of Collections Conservation and Care at the Horniman Museum and Gardens. While there for 6 years she also was acting Head and spent several months teaching preventive conservation and conservation in Mongolia, Tibet, Nepal and India. She then went on sabatical for a year and worked with the Textile and Thangka collections among other conservation duties at the Rikjes Musee voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, the Netherlands. From there she worked in Nepal as part of a team from UNESCO teaching the conservation of Thangka paintings to a group of Nepalese, Bhutanese, Tibetan and Indian professional conservators, collections care managers and monks from different monasteries throughout the Himalayas. For the past 3 years she has been the Senior Objects conservator at St Paul’s Cathedral, London and has various duties from collections care to the conservation of objects, preventive conservation and environmental monitoring of the entire contents of the Cathedral. She still spends time teaching thangka conservation in Europe and Asia as well as teaching on the RCA/V&A master program for conservation and at the Camberwell School of Art’s BA conservation program and is doing a part time masters in the Art and Archaeology of Tibet and the Himalayas at the School for Oriental and African Studies, London.

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