

THE PURPOSE OF CONSERVATION: SEEKING RELEVANCE IN A LIVING HERITAGE CONTEXT

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Conservation training in developing countries is both a necessity and a challenge; in countries where training facilities are lacking or are insufficient, international organisations have organised training sessions for local people, focused on ethics, principles and practical training. In addition, most international conservation worksites have now a training component for local people, taking into account their particular needs that may differ from our conservation traditional standards. The notion of living heritage is a key factor to integrate into conservation programs that aim at both raising awareness and provide sustainable training. During several workshops and on-site training work in Nepal and Bhutan, for UNESCO and private foundations, the author has developed an approach to conservation that includes various members of the community and promotes dialogue as a tool to achieve sustainable results. This includes involving the religious community, the traditional painters, sourcing and testing local materials, developing basic preventive conservation training tools for temple caretakers and working closely with village communities to adapt technical interventions to social needs. Conservation in this context becomes a way of reinforcing social cohesion through a shared appreciation of cultural heritage as a traditional, cultural and economic asset.

INTRODUCTION

Amongst the many aspects of conservation to be questioned at present is its practice in developing countries. Increased emphasis on culture, together with the development of tourism have contributed to more awareness in developing countries of their own culture and the importance of preserving it for cultural identity and as an economic asset. Modern conservation skills being traditionally more based in Western countries, it has become common practice for international organisations to set up projects in order to share the knowledge and help preserving the local heritage.

Most international conservation worksites now have a training component for local people, teaching conservations techniques and basic principles in situ, with the aim of creating local conservation experts. However with experience I have noticed that in the long term, people trained in these programs do not

always integrate them within their practice. While there are often logistical, political or financial impediments that may contribute to this, it also calls upon a questioning of the suitability of what is being taught during the training sessions. Conservation as we know it is operating within a well-established ethical framework, which may not be as universal as it claims to be. With the conservation profession now questioning its own practice and turning to a value based discipline, the purpose of conservation is shifting from strictly preserving the materials to include the conservation of the meanings associated with the material culture (Muñoz-Viñas 2005; Bloomfield 2008; Peters 2008). The concept of 'physical integrity' that should be respected during all conservation processes is gradually replaced by 'cultural integrity' (Kaminitz & West 2009), which encompasses intangible aspects linked to the material culture and rests at the interface between social and physical characterizations of an object.

In this context, reviewing the long-term legacy of some training workshops abroad leads to recognize that conservation traditional standards are not necessarily tailored to the local needs. A significant difference between our Western conservation system (which mainly revolves around public or private art collections) and the conservation in developing countries is the notion of living heritage. It describes cultural materials that are in regular use by the relevant cultural group for ceremonies, rituals or dances and generally do not enjoy the same type of protection that artworks do in our museums. A large part of the heritage in developing countries belongs to this category. That notion is therefore a key factor to integrate into regional conservation programs that want to raise awareness and provide sustainable training.

Through my experience in Himalayan countries, I will reflect on how this translates into conservation practice and look at some ways to approach cross-cultural conservation.

THE CASE OF HIMALAYAN HERITAGE CONSERVATION

Himalayan heritage is essentially religious and includes tangible and intangible aspects (buildings, artworks, dances and masks, etc). The region is characterised by a harsh climate with large range of temperatures, going from rainy seasons and snowy winters to hot summers and mild falls. Altitude and infrastructure development makes the access to heritage sometimes difficult.

Most of the heritage is living heritage, which means that it is not only viewed but also used; the objects are deeply infused with meaning and valued for it as

much as (if not more than) for their artistic qualities. This does not exclude artistic value but recognises that for the users it is quite often less important that the religious and social significance. Temples, mural paintings, statues and thangkas are part of the monks' living quarters and are in regular use for ceremonies, whether they are in a monastery or in a village temple.

Heritage in use means it is readily accessible, people can handle it and perform various forms of ritual devotion in front of it: butter lamps in front of thangkas or mural paintings, hanging of particular thangkas in particular places to attract the protection

of certain deities. This is vastly different from the conservation ethos we were trained in and are more familiar with, i.e. galleries visitors, private collectors or academic scholars. For a Western trained conservator, trying to reconcile the use value and the conservation requirements is confronting. Being imaginative is certainly the main challenge



Figure 1 | "Puja" ceremony in a village temple, Nepal.

faced by conservation professionals when dealing with living heritage. However, integrating the living practice and the conservation practice seems the only sustainable way of preserving this type of heritage. Therefore it is paramount for cross-cultural projects to include cultural sensitivity and give voice and value to different perspectives.

Strategies for cross-cultural conservation

Purposeful conservation

At the core of the projects is the question of what is the purpose of this conservation action? It is essential for a project to identify the needs of the community, to understand the social and/or religious value of the material heritage, which will enable the planning of

conservation interventions. This is best done through local institutions or organisations: the local monk community, local NGOs, local council, and social groups (particularly elders' and mothers' groups) are usually amongst the best placed to identify the religious and secular needs of the community. The groups reflect the various socially meaningful activities of the community and provide a link with the religious rituals that are a regular pattern of daily life, be it printing prayer flags, lighting small fumigation braziers, or performing 'pujas' (ritual ceremonies) before any major seasonal task (Figure 1).

Cultural materials have a prominent place in the community's rituals. In its original context, cultural heritage is not disconnected from the present but an integral part of everyday life, which cannot be understood without the notions of use and access. People develop intimate and organic relationships with their heritage that contribute to the ongoing affirmation of their cultural identity through the values of religion as a framework to development.

It is therefore essential to reframe conservation projects within this context and adapt conservation methods and treatments to the preservation of what are the privileged meanings. Only if conservators respect the community's values can they hope the conservation process to have any relevance in the local context.

Local agency

The crucial point is the agency of local communities in the preservation of their heritage; projects are not

always initiated at the local community's demand and are often mainly or entirely financed by foreign funds. However, confusion should not be made between lack of financial power and disinterest for one's own culture. Economical capacity and social agency should be distinguished and projects should always have the community's best interest in view. This cannot be achieved without community's participation at every stage, from the outset of the project.

Most importantly, the religious community that is the custodian of the spiritual needs, must be involved

in all aspects of conservation: not only are they very often physically in charge of material heritage, which is mostly kept in temples and monasteries, but they also have an uncontested moral authority within the community. In this perspective their endorsement of any project is crucial for its success in the community at large.

When training monks is impossible then it is always a good idea to share objectives and results with them so

they can in turn transmit it. For example when we invited journalists and high lamas to visit the conservation studio of the national Museum of Bhutan and did show them the works in progress, it generated articles in the national paper and discussions within the monk body that proved quite successful in terms of communication and raising awareness to the broader community.

Not only consultation but also making decisions in shared capacity ensures proper respect of spiritual



Figure 2 | The painted part of a thangka is sewn back in its silk mounting after conservation treatment.

meanings and therefore sustainability of the conservation method. People won't practice what was taught in workshops if it does not fit their community's religious needs, but should the problem occur they would rarely raise it because doing so is often not appropriate in their culture. This reinforces the necessity for agreement on objectives and desired outcomes. In thangka conservation I have worked with monks who underlined the essential importance of the inscription on the reverse of the paintings and the need to preserve them, while at the same time being able to handle, roll and unroll the thangka. It is the conservator's responsibility then to use their technical skills to offer a conservation treatment that allows this type of manipulation to be possible (Figure 2).

Input of the tradition and sustainability

In order to provide technical expertise that can be tailored to the needs of the community, it is usually quite helpful to look at traditional methods. This is where modern conservation principles can be integrated: for the thangkas we retained the use of fabric as a relining support but replaced the traditional cotton and paper (which stiffens the painted part and delaminates) by a very fine silk fabric, and replaced the traditional starch paste which is quite attractive to insects by a more inert acrylic adhesive that can be reactivated. This technique of semi transparent relining is very safe and reversible, retains the flexibility (so thangkas can be rolled and unrolled, and sewn back into their silk borders) and allows very good reading of the inscriptions (Cotte 2007).

Sustainability also implies that the method can be replicated relatively easily in the area: sourcing and testing local materials to find the right ones and do

mock-up tests to ensure their qualities is a good way to do that. For this task, collaborating with local people is essential to navigate through local retailers and products; in any case it is also a very entertaining experience that reinforces communication and often creates treasured shared memories. I vividly remember scouring fabric shops in Kathmandu with a Nepalese conservator, looking for plain white silk chiffon, which comes in all sorts of prints but rarely plain, and receiving numerous fashion advices by eager shopkeepers on which print suited better our complexions rather than the dull (and elusive) white! We eventually found some and upon testing it in various capacities (adhesion, transparency, stretching) concluded that it would be an affordable substitute to the very expensive and necessarily imported silk crepe line. Doing simple testing using mock-up models made in situ also contributes

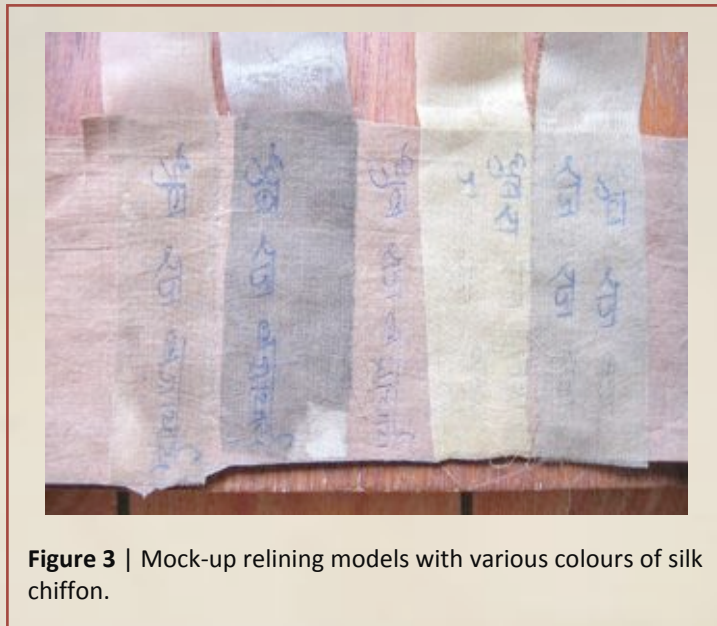


Figure 3 | Mock-up relining models with various colours of silk chiffon.

to demystify the image of conservation as a complicated science far beyond the reach of local practitioners and encourages people to embrace it more (Figure 3).

Link with the contemporary artists

Living cultural heritage is also part of a living tradition of art and crafts. The artists are therefore very important people to work with; their input is invaluable when it comes to recreate missing parts, which is necessary for religious artworks to keep their status as objects of devotion. The training necessary to become a thangka painter is quite long and conservators who are no painters themselves do not have that expertise. It is certainly very productive to work in collaboration with artists; they are a common entry point for community's queries

about conservation and are usually willing to expand their knowledge to conservation work.

Loss compensation is usually the crucial point in many conservation works (this is not specific to the Himalayas), as the result of this operation will largely determine the community's appreciation and acceptance of the conservation project. Traditionally mural paintings and thangkas have been periodically repainted or replaced by new ones. However, there is also a growing trend towards conserving the ancient ones that have become invaluable because of their age. It is then essential that local users be informed about the technical and aesthetic options and most importantly that they can have an image of the potential aesthetic result linked to each option.

The discussion about the outcomes has to be held with local authorities (religious or lay authority) to get their endorsement. Because these people are most of the time not conversant with any conservation vocabulary or trend, bringing images of paintings where losses were compensated using various inpainting techniques is absolutely essential. By allowing people to visualise the various aesthetic possibilities, images give them the necessary tools to assess the conservation project's future result. During this discussion, the conservators can promote (and support) the idea that reconstruction can be limited to the losses while acknowledging that artists are the best placed people to effectively do this reconstruction. Minimal inpainting with patina tone can also be promoted by showing its potential to 'bring out' paintings that are often considered damaged beyond repair. The strong visual impact of

images makes them a key resource that reinforces the capacity to reach a shared and informed decision.

The discussion is essential in the long term perspective; in the visual end result lies most of the dissatisfactions felt by the local community, which in turn determine its appreciation of conservation's relevance to their particular case. The community's general awareness about conservation (and to a certain extent the state of their cultural heritage) relies heavily upon the effectiveness of communication between parties for all the project duration.

Combining approaches

It is important to be realistic at the same time and determine priorities or degrees in conservation treatment. Not everything requires a sophisticated technique of conservation; conservation of mural paintings for example often entices collaboration with carpenters, masons etc. who have to fix the building before conservation starts inside it. The level of conservation skills required is not



Figure 4 | Village women repainting the temple's walls with red mud, Nepal.

necessarily the same for rotten carved joists and for the mural paintings. Local craftsmen's skills are invaluable in this part of the project; their contribution ensures that the local technical traditions are followed, which does not exclude modifications for more effective preservation. The particular expertise gained during the project may broaden their skills and become an extra asset for them in their local market. As an example, during a project in Mustang (Northern Nepal), the local community, in collaboration with Nepalese architects, dismantled the temple's mud roof, replaced the rotten joists with new ones carved by

the village carpenter. The villagers then rebuilt the roof with mud and repainted the outer and inner walls with local red mud, as is the tradition for religious buildings; Improvements to the inside building such as security banisters in the very steep stairs were installed by the carpenter. A retaining wall designed by the architects was added by local workers to the cracked outside wall to prevent it from subsiding in the slope. At the same time, more specific conservation techniques were employed for the mural paintings in the adjacent puja room of the temple (Figures 4 and 5). This type of project inclusive of local people shows that conservation and living traditions are compatible and reinforces the community's connection with their temple and its maintenance.

On-going processes

For living heritage, prevention and maintenance are the key points to preservation. To do that, actions can be taken at all levels; decision makers may be slow or reluctant, but people at the local level can do a lot to prevent the damage to happen further. Because the cultural material (temple, murals, ritual objects) belongs to the community, then the community can also have an impact in its preservation. In Bhutan we have developed basic tools for the persons in direct contact with the material heritage (the temple caretakers) who often have no previous training in conservation at all. After a survey of various temples in Bhutan, conducted in

collaboration between the Bhutanese government, architects and conservators, we produced a handbook to assist the temple caretakers in their duties.

This handbook is a cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural collaboration that promotes simple ways to help addressing problems and avoid them becoming bigger. It relies on images rather than text, which is kept to the minimum for a more user friendly approach. The handbook addresses the more frequent damages, gives ways to identify their causes so the

effect can be stopped. For example in the case of rising damp, which can cause very serious problems on buildings where the mortar is made of mud, the handbook takes the following steps: visual identification of the problem and its cause, and simple ways to address it (drains, eaves), that can be undertaken with the help of the local builder. It also deals with use and misuse of the buildings and tries to provide simple solutions such as padding, relocation of butter lamps, etc. (Figure 6).

This handbook is a renewable energy: it is still in use in Bhutan and is an on line resource for the Collasia program run by ICCROM. It has also inspired local custom made versions such as the one created for the lay owners of a specific cave temple in Mustang in 2009 by post grad heritage architects students, and the one created by the Bhutanese Textile Museum for their staff in collaboration with the Getty foundation. Such simple tools are a great



Figure 5 | Conservation treatment of the mural paintings in the puja room of the temple, Nepal.

help to make preservation a shared concern within the community and empower them to have a positive impact on their material heritage.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would suggest that in an increasingly global world, an important mission of conservation is to seek relevance within the context in which it operates. Cultivating international partnerships might require a new language for conservation practice ('meaningful' or 'purposeful' conservation) that addresses the local specific approaches to cultural heritage and combines them with both ethical standards and technical skills. As we share Western and Eastern approaches to heritage care, conservation assessments of living heritage can be made from different cultural platforms; it requires flexibility of conservation principles, creativity and the recognition of different levels of expertise, all of them equally valuable. When considered in this context, conservation can become a tool for reinforcing social cohesion, by effectively 'preserving what is valued by the users' (Clavir 2002), and allowing them to live it, maintain it, share it and use it as a cultural and economic asset.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Sabine Cotte started her career in art conservation in 1985. After graduating from Institut Français de Restauration des Oeuvres d'Art in Paris she worked in France for 11 years before migrating to Australia with her family in 2001.

During her years of practice in France she has worked on an great variety of paintings ranging from European 14th to 19th century, to modern and contemporary world-renowned artists

(Modigliani, Soulages, Buren). The projects include preserving three dimensional installations in various media and techniques, treating 18th century painting ensembles heavily damaged in a fire, preparing exhibitions for Museum of Modern Art from Paris to Japan, or cleaning delicate 17th century Dutch paintings on copper.

In Australia her conservation projects include complex treatment of a very damaged early Arthur Boyd for Heide Museum of Modern Art, delicate cleaning, tear repair and inpainting of artworks by

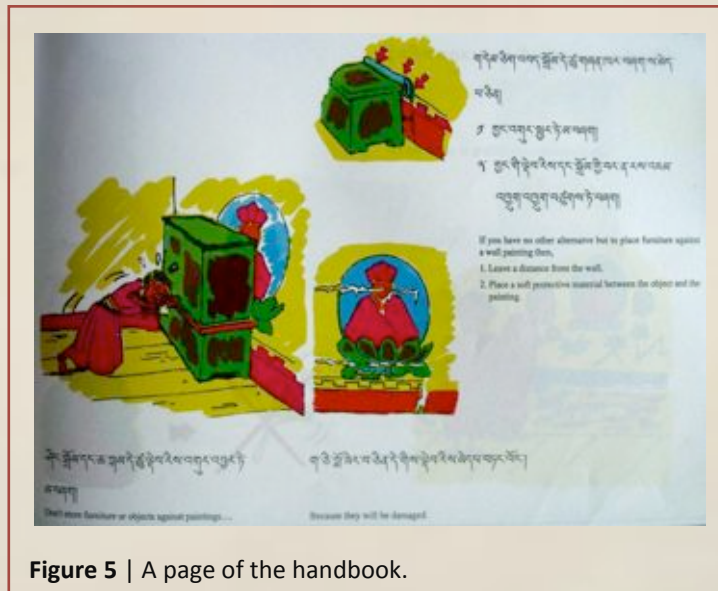


Figure 5 | A page of the handbook.

colonial artist Eugene von Guerard and Frederick McCubbin, treatments on modern and contemporary paintings (Ian Fairweather, Charles Blackman, Clarice Beckett, Brett Whiteley) and treatment of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal paintings (Brook Andrew, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Judy Watson, Janet Forrester). She has recently conserved several public mural paintings and mosaics from Melbourne's iconic artist Mirka Mora, in close collaboration with the artist.

Her interest in Himalayan art started in 1992 in Bhutan with a project to develop a handbook on preventive conservation of temples and artworks, sponsored by the Royal Government of Bhutan and UNESCO. This project won a Rolex Award for Enterprise in 1996 and the handbook is still in use in the region. Since then she has led several UNESCO workshops in the Himalayas, participated in local sustainable conservation projects in remote areas, trained conservation students in Taiwan and published several papers in international conservation congresses and journals.

