

## STUDIO AND WORKSHOP NOTES

## ON THE CONSERVATION OF TIBETAN THANG-KAS

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**Abstract**—A survey is given of problems encountered in the conservation of Tibetan painted banners. Deterioration of the binding medium can be treated with polyvinyl acetate solutions, but a thang-ka should not be glossy. Methods of reinforcing the fabric of the painting are described. Original borders should be saved and inscriptions on the back should be left exposed.

The Tibetan painted banner or thang-ka has several unique problems which separate it from other types of paintings in terms of conservation. It is usually painted on a thin cotton support that is frequently rolled and unrolled. Occasionally other materials are used as supports, for example silk and leather, but this report will only deal with the one that is by far the most common, cotton.\*

Size, ground and paint are applied to the support in varying quantities ultimately resulting in a thick layer of a relatively homogeneous nature. Glue derived from animal skins serves as size, medium and, on occasion, glaze. Mounted in borders of silk, the end product is hung as a banner and treated more like a piece of cloth than a painted surface. For comparison, one may think of Chinese hanging scrolls, which are also rolled but no longer retain the quality of fabric due to the method of mounting.

Thang-kas, on the other hand, are very seldom mounted with a backing in the same way as Chinese paintings. If they are backed, it is a fabric covering for ritual purposes rather than structural considerations.

This paper is concerned with some of the problems that may arise in Tibetan paintings and the author's approach to their solutions. It must be stated here that it is the opinion of the author that the common mounting method of affixing a thang-ka to a surface with one of several adhesives is unsatisfactory, because it usually involves the loss of the original border and does away with the qualities of fabric that are part of the inherent nature of a thang-ka.

The first and most serious problem that is to be faced by a person working on a thang-ka is the frequent deterioration of the binding medium. Such a thang-ka is in imminent danger of severe paint loss. A satisfactory emergency treatment for this condition is the application of a fine mist of a 5% gelatin solution. This treatment may be repeated several times if necessary, but at no time should the surface of the painting be more than damp from the application of the solution. Water is actually the worst enemy that the thang-ka has and it must be used with great care. The main use of the gelatin binder arises from the possibility of applying it before whatever cleaning is necessary. It has been found that, although detergents and ethers are the most useful agents for cleaning thang-kas, there is no single answer and that experimentation with the various common solvents is necessary in almost every single case.

\* The reader is referred to the literature [2-8] for details on the technique and iconography of Tibetan paintings.

with a teflon-coated iron. Sewing and refitting the borders may then be carried out with a greater assurance of achieving a smooth surface.

The whole assembled thang-ka may then be attached to a linen canvas, as described previously, or, if strength permits, remounted in the traditional manner. In spite of traditions, it is advisable that even a well-restored thang-ka or one in nearly new condition be stored in a manner that reduces the chances of flexing the painted surface, as this action could still result in cracking and even subsequent paint loss.

A word of caution: the inscriptions on the back of thang-kas are frequently of great importance to the Tibetologist who is studying iconography or religious institutions. This is especially true when there are hand prints and long dedications or prayers. If at all possible, these should be left exposed or readily accessible for academic examination and, in any case, carefully recorded with good-quality photographs attached to the back of the cover of the frame.

#### REFERENCES

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**Abstrait**—On donne un aperçu des problèmes que soulève la conservation des bannières tibétaines peintes. La détérioration du liant peut être traitée avec des solutions d'acétate polyvinyle, mais un thang-ka ne doit pas être brillant. On décrit des méthodes de consolidation du tissu. Les bordures originales doivent être conservées et les inscriptions à l'envers laissées visibles.

**Kurzfassung**—Es wird eine Uebersicht der Probleme gegeben, denen man bei der Konservierung von tibetanischen gemalten Rollbildern begegnet. Die Zersetzung des Bindemittels kann mit Polyvinylazetatlösungen behandelt werden, aber ein Thang-ka soll nicht glänzen. Die Verfahren zur Verstärkung des Leinwand-Bildträgers werden beschrieben. Ursprüngliche Randleisten sind zu retten und Inschriften auf der Rückseite sollen nicht bedeckt werden.

**Riassunto**—Si passa in rivista un numero di problemi sorti nel conservare bandiere tibetane dipinte. Il deterioramento del legante può essere trattato con soluzioni di acetato polivinilico, ma un thang-ka non dovrebbe essere luccicante. Si descrivono metodi per rinforzare il tessuto del dipinto. Le orlature originali andrebbero salvate e le iscrizioni sul retro dovrebbero rimanere visibili.

**Extracto**—Se da un resumen de los problemas encontrados en la conservación de banderas pintadas tibetanas. La deterioración del medio aglutinante puede tratarse con soluciones de polivinil acetato, pero una bandera thang-ka no tendría que ser lustrosa. Se describen métodos de reforzar la textura de la pintura. Bordes originales tendrían que ser conservados e inscripciones en la parte trasera tendrían que dejarse expuestos.



Polyvinyl acetate (P.V.A.) in solution with either methanol or toluene may be used in a 10% concentration of standard 33% stock solution as a penetrating binder to re-affix the pigments and ground to the support. This treatment decreases the flexibility, but the adhering qualities are excellent. The surface may have the resulting gloss removed by being swabbed gently with toluene. The author has recently re-removed the gloss from a P.V.A.-treated thang-ka the appearance of which had been virtually ruined by a restorer who had seen fit to leave the gloss. To the Tibetologist the gloss is a most offensive and unwarranted addition to the surface of the thang-ka and to the original concept of the artist.

If the support is damaged the thang-ka should be unmounted from the fabric borders and prepared using some or all of the following methods. In the case of a severe damage, tears, losses, etc., a nylon net that has been dipped in a solution of P.V.A. should be affixed to the back of the painting. (Care must be taken that all inscriptions are recorded as legibly as possible prior to the application of the net.) The application may be made by either of two methods, by gently ironing the surface of the thang-ka with a teflon-coated iron pressing the back of the painting against the net, or by applying a P.V.A. net moistened directly to the back of the thang-ka. Both methods have advantages and disadvantages. The ironing method allows one to spend as long as desired arranging fragments and inlaying patches but has the defect of mechanically disturbing the surface. The direct application method, while not disturbing the surface, demands that the final arrangement of tears be done with the thang-ka face down. This latter difficulty may be overcome by working on a sheet of glass suspended over a mirror. Therefore the latter method is generally preferable as a means of attaching the net. The advantage of using net reinforcing rather than affixing the thang-ka directly to a flat surface is that the fabric nature of the original concept is not lost.

If the original borders of the thang-ka are lost or beyond repair the following procedure is recommended to mount the painted section for display. Once the thang-ka has been backed, or if it is unnecessary to back it, the rectangle containing the painted surface may be sewn to a suitably stretched linen canvas with nylon monofilament. If the condition is near new or if the net backing method has been used, it may be sewn around the perimeter as in the original mounting. In the case of weakened but not damaged supports the thang-ka may be tacked at convenient mid points to the linen. The edges of the linen canvas and the cotton support may then be covered with a suitable silk and the whole is then framed.

If the original borders are extant then every effort should be made to save them. Too many people dealing with Tibetan paintings remove the borders for 'convenience' or because they are dirty and troublesome to clean. They are part of the original concept of the painting and as such are the cosmogenesis of the configuration depicted in the painting proper. In repairing the borders of a thang-ka the application of a nylon net by the iron method is very satisfactory and may be done exactly in the manner described by Beecher [1]. If necessary the borders may be removed and washed gently with a mild detergent in water. Color checks must always be made even on what appear to be well-known dyes. One way of washing fragile fabrics is to sponge the surface while the silk is on a blotter. The amount of residue that may be removed in this manner is quite surprising and several applications are necessary to do a thorough job. If the backing of the border has been removed this too should be washed in the same manner. One point of caution: on no occasion should the washing take place with the painting still in the borders. Thang-kas, especially the older ones, are extremely subject to water damage, and even the slightest accident could cause severe paint loss.

In returning the borders to the painted portion it is generally advisable to align the borders