

Ancient murals at Tsuglakhang Monastery brought back to life

THF specialists train local restorers

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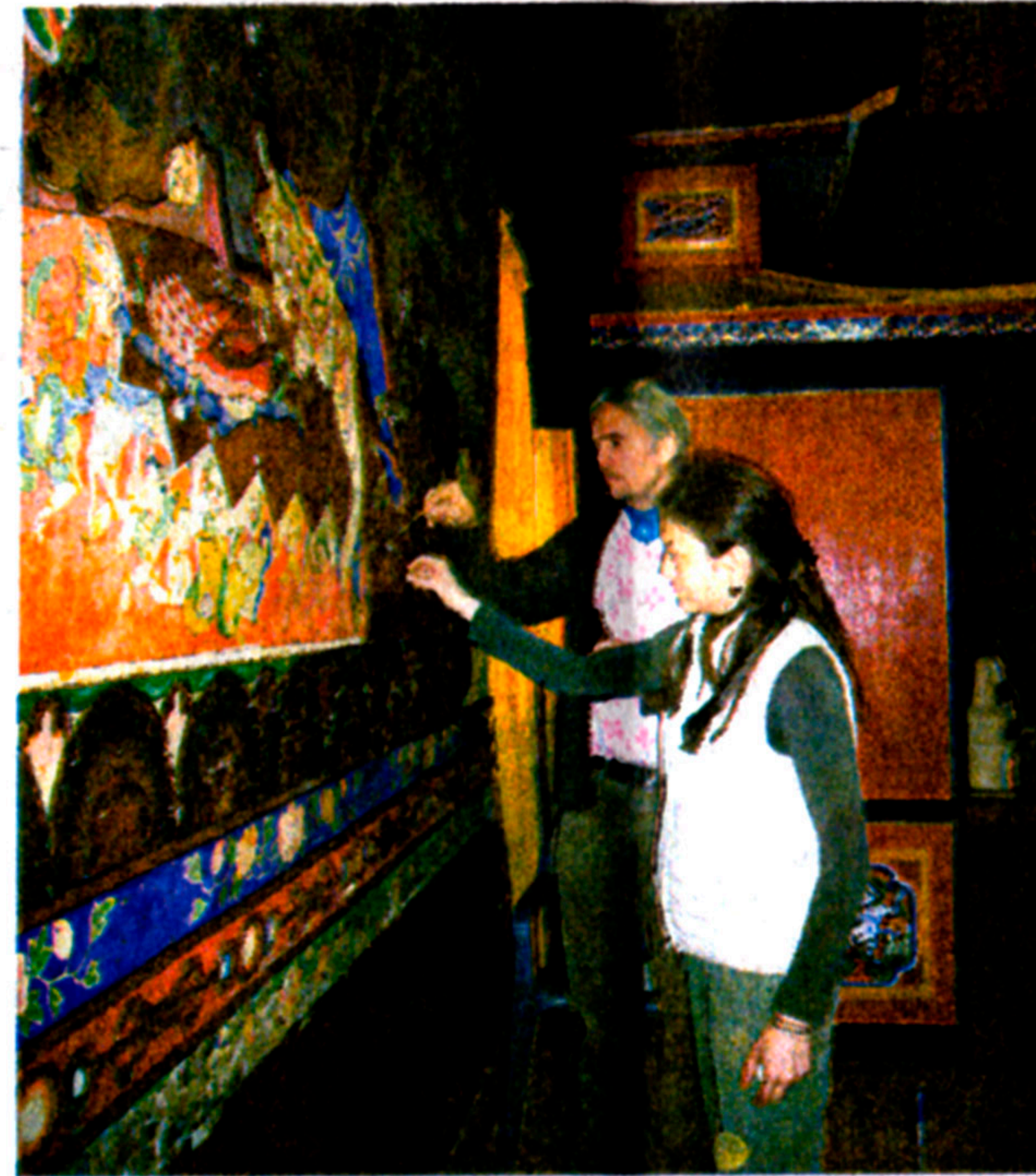
GANGTOK, March 30:

The mural paintings dating back to 1920s, which was showing initial signs of flaking at the Tsuglakhang Monastery are being restored by famous conservation architect-researcher-author Andre Alexander and specialists from Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) under the aegis of the Tsuglakhang Trust.

"These sacred paintings, after completely restored will be a spectacular piece of art," said Alexander, who is also the one of the founders and directors of THF, an international NGO engaged in preservation of architectural heritage in the Tibetan Cultural Realm, including also Mongolia and Ladakh.

Soot and varnishes on the murals in the main hall of the monastery, depicting manifestation of the ferocious and wrathful form of Avalokitesvara, known as Tamdin (Hayagriva) are carefully washed with soap, cleaned with water and rubbed with tinges of alcohol. "These murals are not bad in shape even as there are deposits of soot produced by burning of butter lamps and varnishes that are no longer visible to the naked eye," Romanian restorer Anca Nicolaescu, a conservator specialised in mural painting said.

These murals originally painted by Panchen Lama's Lharipa, Hope Leezum, daughter of Chogyal Thondup Namgyal (Sikkim's last Chogyal) said were made on the plan



and instigation of Tharing Rinpoche Jigdel Pao with Chogyal Tashi Namgyal as the sponsor. Tharing Rinpoche happened to be the son of Maharani Yeshey Doma and Lashay

Kusho, she informed.

There are murals on Lord Buddha's life and others including that of Tibetan scholar Thonmi Sambhota.

Officials from the State

Cultural Affairs and Heritage Department also visited the monastery and interacted with the specialists, who, it is informed are chipping in voluntary services. Some government officials have also offered support in cash and kind to further the work and those willing to do the same are welcomed by the Trust.

The specialists are also providing training on conservation free of cost to local restorers, who can recognise the damages and take care of the same in future. THF's wall-painting conservation programmes, Alexander explained has four main aims - research and identify historic wall-painting technologies used within the Tibetan cultural realm, train local restorers, help to preserve endangered historic wall paintings, restore historic wall-paintings so that the needs of local Buddhist practitioners can be met while also

adhering to international practices of distinguishability and reversibility.

Interestingly, with the kind of meticulousness witnessed in the restoration work at the royal palace from compiling a database to mapping, photography and conserving the paintings, the task seems daunting. Local restorers opine that this kind of restoration will leave no place for criticism.

"We'll be filling in fine mud in the cracked walls triggered by earthquakes and will try to locate the exact painting," Alexander said when asked about fractures visible on the monastery walls.

Members of the Tsuglakhang Trust maintain that locals who get trained under Alexander and Anca will work wonders in the vast murals in Sikkim's Nyingma monasteries. Alexander, it is informed has worked for almost two decades studying

Lhasa and together with a team of Tibetan artisans trying to preserve what little is left of the city's rich cultural and artistic heritage. He has also worked eight years in Ladakh – the first monastery he restored was the 9th century Meru Ningpa in Lhasa in 1998-2000.

Current and recently completed THF wall-painting conservation projects include the Leh Guru Lhakhang (2004-2005), the Leh Red Maitreya Temple (2005-2008) and the Alchi Tsatsapuri Temple (2006-on-going) – the 13th -14th century monasteries in Ladakh, the Achung Namdzong cave temple (2005-2006) and Ragya Monastery's Gyupa Dratsang (2003-2006) in Qinghai. Patrick Jürgens has prepared a summary report of the 2008 intervention in Alchi Tsatsapuri. Alexander also did some restoration of Jokhang – Tibet's most sacred Buddhist temple.