Conservation of the Wall-Paintings in the Gangtok Tsuklakhang in Sikkim

2011 Work Report

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Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation
The Tsuklakhang Trust
Private Estate of the Chogyal of Sikkim

André Alexander / Tibet Heritage Fund
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Gangtok, with the Tsuklakhang on the hill-top to the right.

Introduction

Sikkim is the youngest member of the Indian Union. It existed as independent kingdom from 1642 to 1975, ruled by kings with the title of Chogyal (Tib. Religious Ruler or Dharma Raja) that descended from Tibet. In 1975 Sikkim was merged with the Indian Union after a controversial referendum.

Sikkim’s capital was moved to its present site at Gangtok (sGang thog) only in 1894, at an altitude of 1437m above sea level. Around 1920, the then Chogyal, Tashi Namgyal (r. 1914-1963) had a central Buddhist temple built close to the royal palace. The Tsuklakhang, designed by Taring Rinpoche, served as Gangtok’s central Buddhist temple.

Sikkim’s population historically consisted of the indigenous Lepchas, and the Bhutias who descended from 15th century Tibetan settlers, as well as ethnic Nepalese (who today from 75% of the population). The Sikkimese court enjoyed close relations with then-independent Tibet, and so the best artists from Lhasa and Shigatse were sent to paint the Tsuklakhang’s murals.

After the merger with India, ownership of temple and palace were given to the newly-created charitable Tsuklakhang Trust.
Project history

On private initiative, HRH Highness, Princess Hope Leezum Namgyal, daughter of the last reigning Chogyal, Palden Tondup Namgyal (r. 1963-1975), invited THF’s André Alexander to inspect the condition of the Tsuklakhang’s wall-paintings, which had become very dark. Until then there had never been proper conservation efforts in Sikkim - damaged temples were simply rebuilt, old murals were painted new.

Description of the Tsuklakhang

The Tsuklakhang is built in traditional Tibetan temple architecture, east-facing, four-storeys tall with a typical gabled roof, white-washed stone walls, mud plaster and an internal timber frame. The ground floor has a large assembly hall and altar, on level 2 is another large hall. There are also two smaller shrine rooms, and private rooms for visiting religious dignitaries on the top, including quarters for the Fourteenth Dalai Lama who stayed here in 1954 and visited in 2011.
Top: south-north section.
Below: west-east section.
Both: THF/Gurmit Tsewang.
historic paintings conserved in 2011
modern paintings
historic paintings not yet conserved
Plans of floors 1, 2, 3 and 4
(THF/Gurmit Tsewang).
Details of the paintings in the ground floor main hall.
Building Condition at Project Start

In November 2011, the small THF delegation of André Alexander and Gurmit Tsewang found that the temple’s building structure was in good condition. The wall-paintings had darkened, with some cracks and losses of plaster due to an earthquake decades ago.

Project Organization and Cooperation

THF and the Ysuklakhang Trust agreed to jointly take on the project to restore the paintings to their original condition, on a cost-sharing basis. Crucially, the Trust supplied lodging, food, purchase of locally available tools and materials, and some of the travel costs and costs for local artisans involved in the project (eg. for building the scaffolding).

THF supplied personnel and covered some administrative costs. The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation paid for some of the international wall-painting conservation experts (Charlotte, Lena and Ulrike).

The bulk of the work was financed by the Cultural Section of the German Embassy in Delhi, paying for the Ladakhi conservation teams and Anca and André.
Preparations

In March 2011 the THF arrived in Gangtok to start the project. Ladakhi draftsman Gurmit Tsewang surveyed the Tsuklakhang and prepared measured drawings. Paris-based restorer Anca Nicolaescu from Romania documented the paintings and damages, and then carried out a series of tests to determine the best way to restore and conserve the wall-paintings.

She was assisted by the team of Ladakhi trainees, Yangchen Dolma, Tsering Chorol, Skarma Lotos, later joined by Kesang Angmo. Project leader André Alexander coordinated the efforts, investigated the building for hidden structural damages, and participated in the building documentation.

The team also gave a presentation of their previous work in Tibet and Ladakh to Sikkimese government officials.

The wall-paintings of the Tsuklakhang were like a catalogue of different damages afflicting wall-paintings. Their overall appearance was very dark, but there were also numerous instances where the paint layer, the plaster, or just single paint layers had peeled off. All examples are from the ground floor main assembly hall.
Iconography of the east wall.
Implementation

Anca Nicoleascu determined that the paintings were covered by soot and dust on the surface, and that the varnish applied probably soon after completion of the paintings in the 1920s had darkened and peeled off in many areas being improper as quality and way of application (unevenly, leaking...). The soot could be cleaned with special restoration soap (potassium hydroxide), and the varnish had to be removed with an alcohol-based solution. There were also many instances of flaking paint layer, which had to be stabilized. At the support level there were few important cracks and detachments of the plaster from the wall, which were in danger of falling. These had to be filled using a mix of finely sieved local clay and soil in a proportion, which was set up after trials.

Once the method was fixed, eight months of delicate cleaning and stabilizing work followed.

The painting conservation work was directed by Anca Nicolaescu (March), followed by Charlotte Bellizzi (May-June) and Lena Kaetzel and Ulrike Haase (September-December), coordinated by André Alexander and Yangchen Dolma.
Anca Nicolaescu and the Ladakhi team.
Training Component

The project trained the first Sikkimese restorer, tangka painter Tenzing from Lachen. Several monks also received basic training, as did princess Hope Leezum and family members.
Top: Anca Nicolaescu explaining the work to a visiting school class.
Below: Princess Hope Leezum explaining to the local monks.
Clockwise from top: Charlotte Bellizzi; Tsering Chorol; Skarma and Tsering; work continued even during praying hours; monk trainees; training session.
Impressions from the eight-month work.
Work progress: details of an image of the deity Durkar (Usnisasitatapatra) before, during and after cleaning.

Work progress: details of an image of the decorative frieze on the upper register with the ‘Face of Glory’ (‘Dzi dpar, Sanskrit: kirthmuka) before, during and after cleaning.
Earthquake in Sikkim

On 18 September 2011, Sikkim was struck by an earthquake of 6.9 Richter scale magnitude. Fortunately, not many people were hurt or killed, but many buildings were damaged, including a large number of historic monasteries.

The Tsuklakhang was unharmed. The already completed conservation of the paintings on the ground floor helped to prevent any damages, while on the upper floor, some pieces of already loosened plaster fell down. These were immediately saved by the team, and later reattached to the walls.
Project Results

The paintings in the main hall on the ground floor were completely cleaned and stabilized. The paintings in the hall on level 2 were also cleaned and stabilized, and earthquake damages repaired.

Examples of before and after THF’s conservation work.
Details of cleaned and conserved wall-paintings on the ground and first floors.
Reactions in Sikkim

Since this was the first restoration project of its kind in Sikkim, it generated great public interest. All the leading newspapers and magazines reported about it, and the temple received constant visitors.
Ancient murals at Tsuglagkhang Monastery brought back to life

TSHE D.

GANGTOK, March 30:
The mural paintings dating back to 1930s which was showing faded signs of flaking at the Tsuglagkhang Monastery are being restored by famous conservation architect-researcher-author Andre Alexandre and specialists from Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) under the aegis of the Tsuglagkhang Trust.

"These sacred paintings, after completely restored will be a spectacular piece of art," said Alexandre 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 Region, including also Mongolia and Ladakh.

Art and vanishes on the murals in the main hall of the monastery depict manifestation of the ferocious and wrathful form of Avalokitesvara, known as Tsomdi (Bya-rgyas) are carefully washed with soap cleansed with water and rubbed with tinges of alcohol. "These murals are not bad in shape even as there are deposits of dirt produced by baring of ancient lumps and varnishes that are no longer visible to the naked eye," Romanian restorer Ana Neaxituru, a conservator specialized in mural painting said.

These murals originally painted by Punchen Lamas Lhatso, Hope Lhamo, daughter of Chogyal Thondup, Nongpal (Sikkim's last Chogyal) and were made on the plan and initiation of Thangri Rinpoche Jigme Poo with Chogyal Tashi Ngalag as the sponsor. Thangri Rinpoche happened to be the son of Maharani Yeshey Doma and Lachab Kalsang, she informed.

There are murals on Lord Buddha's life and other including that of Tilopa, scholar Thomas Samtsho.

Officials from the State Cultural Affairs and Heritage Department also visited the monastery and interacted with the specialists, who, it is informed are working 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 in conservation fine of art to local restorers, who can recognize the damages and take care of the same in future. THF's wall-painting conservation programme, Alexandre explained has four main aims - research and identity historic wall-painting technologies used within the Tibetan cultural realm, train local restorers, help to preserve endan-

get 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 ultra royal palace from the past - mapping, photography and conserving the paintings, the task seems daunting. Local monks opine that this kind of restoration will have a long time for fruition.

"We'll be filling in fine mud in the cracked walls triggered by earthquakes and will try to locate the exact painting," Alexandre said when asked about fue-
tures visible on the monu-

mcent walls.

Members of the Tsuglagkhang Trust maintain that locals who get trained under Alexandre and Ana will work wonders on the vast murals in Sikkim's Nyigam monasteries. Alexandre, it is in-

formed has worked for almost two decades studying拉萨 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 monastic site recorded was the 7th century Monastery in Ladakh - the first monastic site recorded was the 7th century Nara Pungi in Ladakh in 1998-2000.

THF Project Team

Project manager: André Alexander, THF
Painting conservation concept: Anca Nicolaescu
Supervision of Conservation Work:
Anca Nicolaescu (Romania/Paris), Charlotte Bellizzi (Malta), Lena Kätzel and Ulrike Haase (Germany).
Conservation team: Yangchen Dolma, Tsering Chorol, Kesang Angmo, Skarma Lotos (Ladakh), Tenzing (Sikkim), Emily Hick (Scotland).

Thanks to: HRH Princessin Hope Leezum and husband Yapla, the Tsuklakhang Trust especially Tsetop Rakashar, Alex Gardner, Clara Duske and the staff at the German Embassy, and many Sikkimese friends and supporters.