

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

2011 Work Report



Funded by:
Cultural Section of the German Embassy in New Delhi
Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation
The Tsuklakhang Trust
Private Estate of the Chogyal of Sikkim

André Alexander / Tibet Heritage Fund
20. Dezember 2011



Table of Contents

German Summary Report Text	3
Introduction	3
Project History	4
Description of the Tsuklakhang	4
Building Condition at Project Start	9
Project Organization and Cooperation	9
Preparations	10
Implementation	12
Training Component	14
Earthquake in Sikkim	19
Project Results	20
Local Press Reports about the Project	24
Project Team	26





Gangtok, with the Tsuklakhang on the hill-top to the right.

Below: downtown Gangtok. Far below: view of Kangchendzönga mountains from the Tsuklakhang .

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.





*The Gangtok
Tsuklakhang, surrounded
by monks' quarters.*

*Below: main altar and assembly space.
Far below: detail of decorated timber column.*

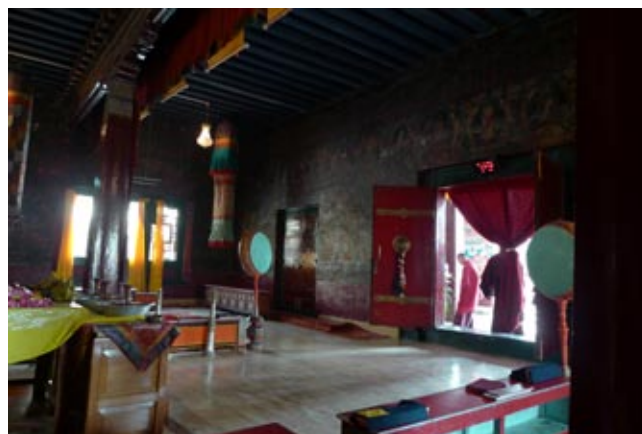
Project history

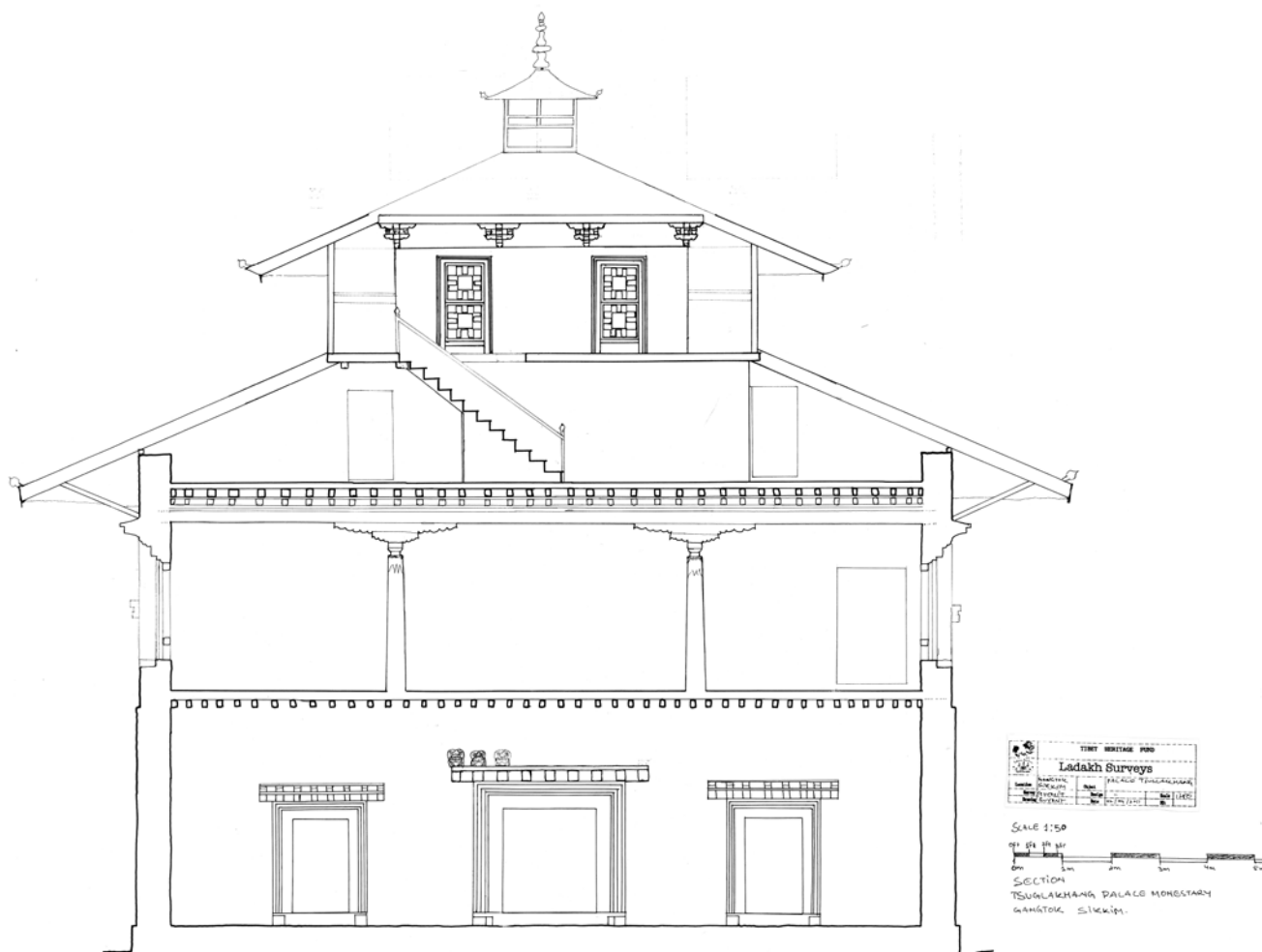
On private initiative, HRH Highness, Princess Hope Leezum Namgyal, daughter of the last reigning Chogyal, Palden Tondup Namgyal (r. 1963-1975), invited THF's André Alexander to inspect the condition of the Tsuklakhang's wall-paintings, which had become very dark. Until then there had never been proper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

Description of the Tsuklakhang

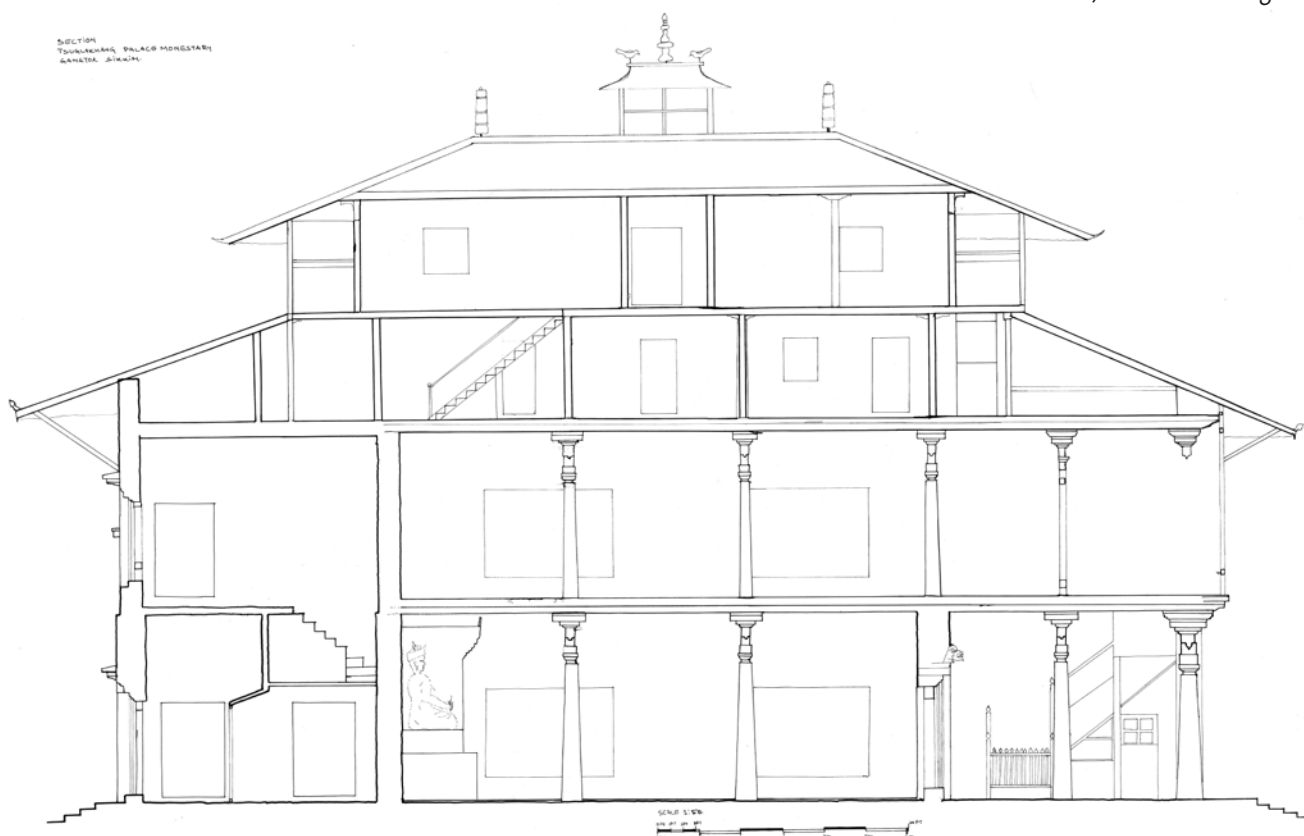
The Tsuklakhang is built in traditional Tibetan temple architecture, east-facing, four-storeys tall with a typical gabled roof, white-washed stone walls, mud plaster and an internal timber frame.

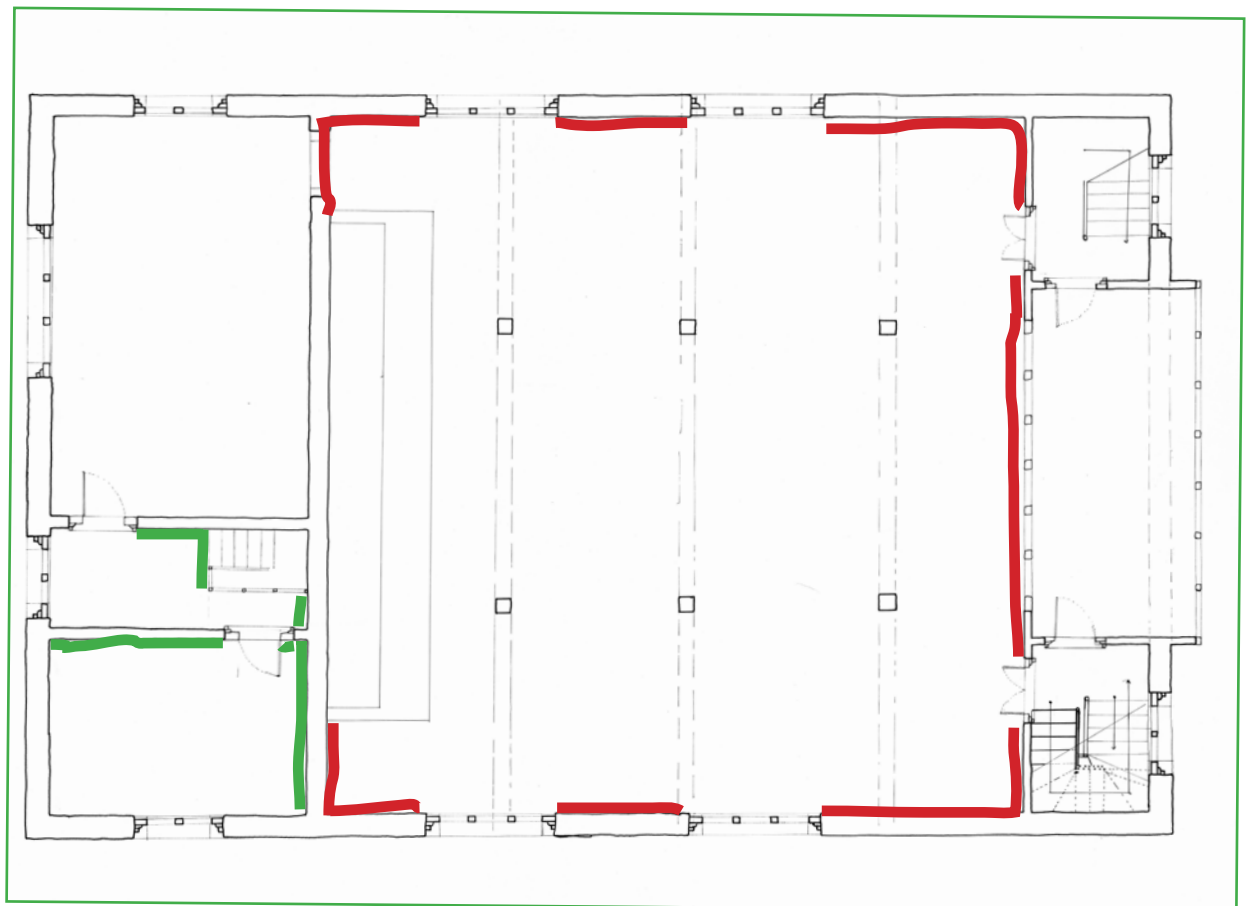
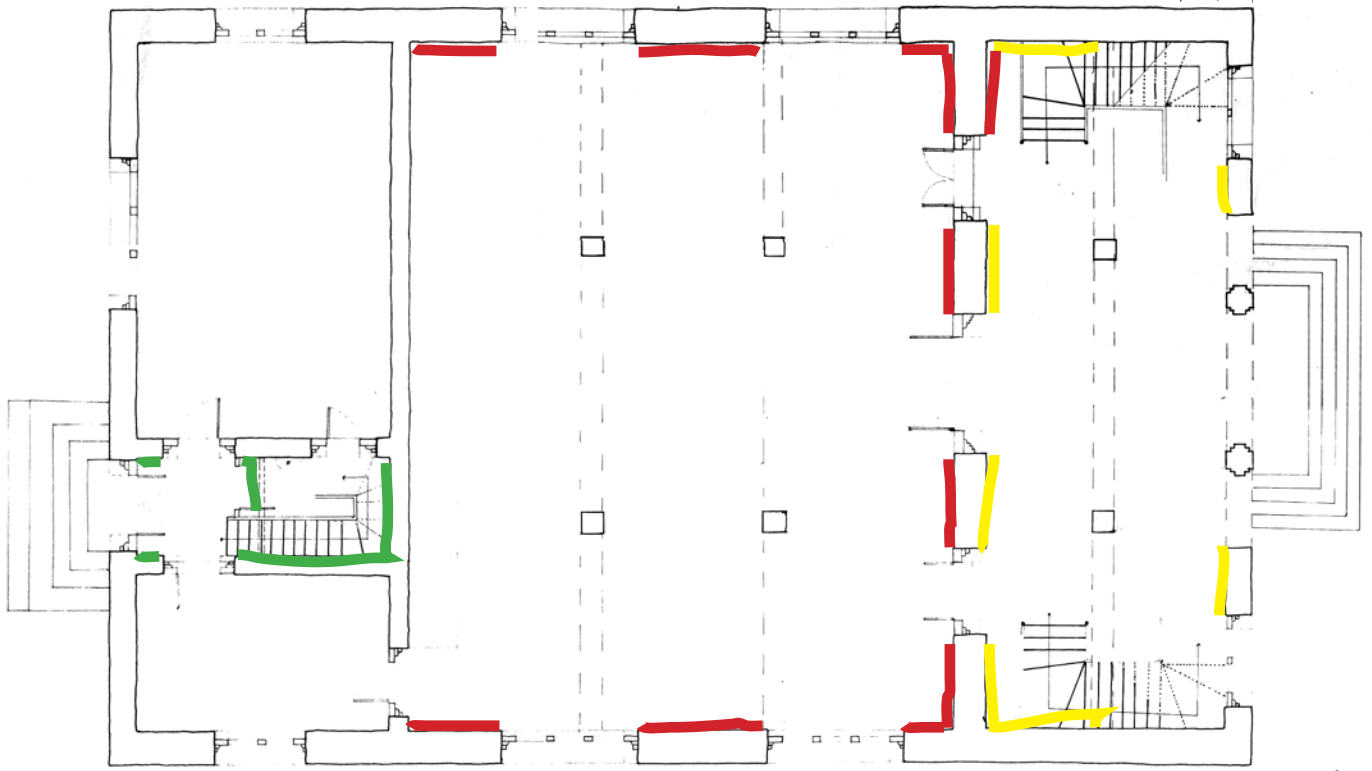
The ground floor has a large assembly hall and altar, on level 2 is another large hall. There are also two smaller shrine rooms, and private rooms for visiting religious dignitaries on the top, including quarters for the Fourteenth Dalai Lama who stayed here in 1954 and visited in 2011.



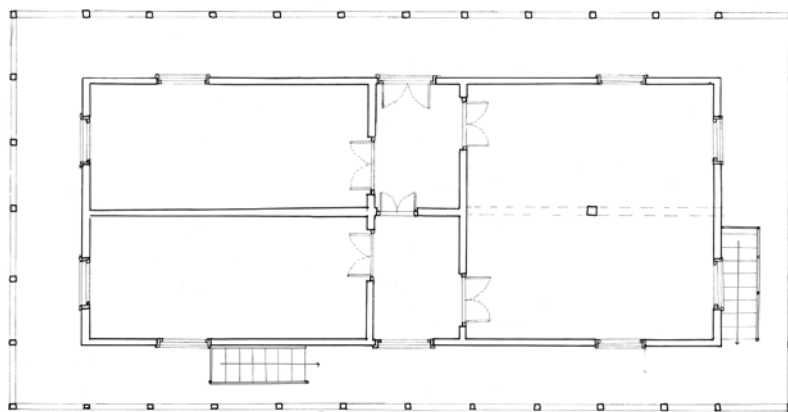
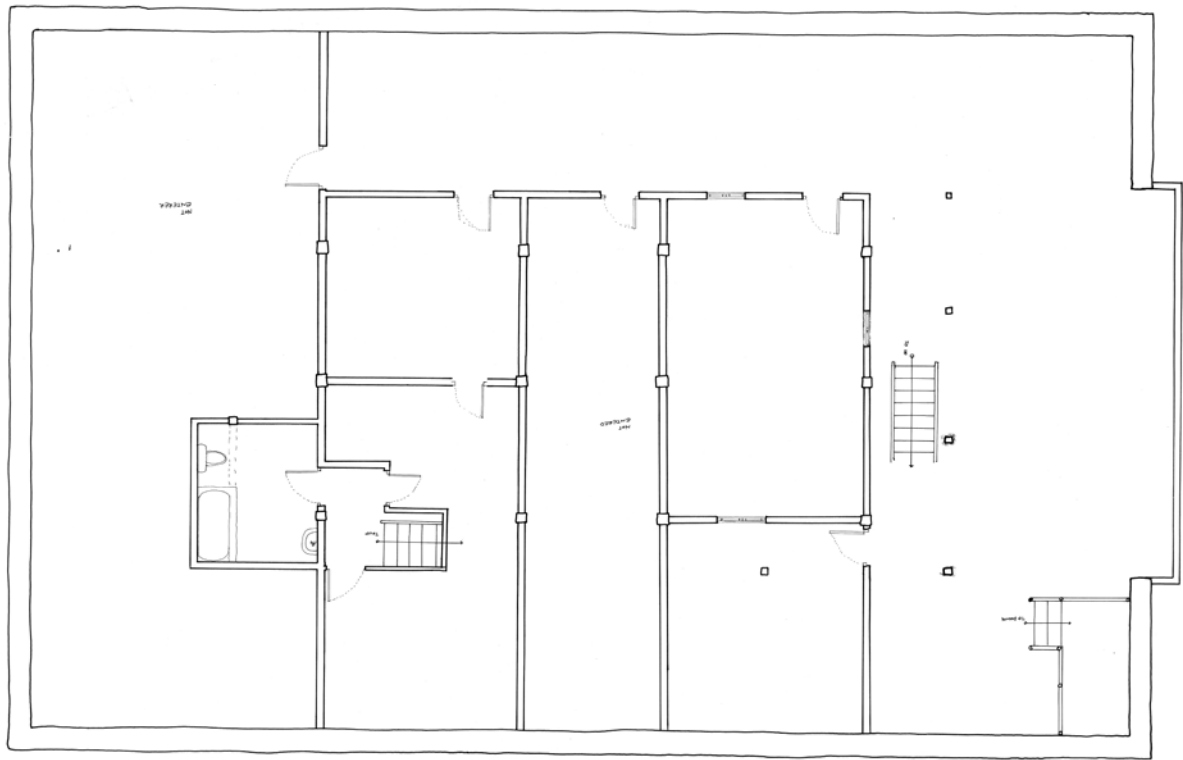


Top: south-north section.
Below: west-east section.
Both: THF/Gurmit Tsewang.





- 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.

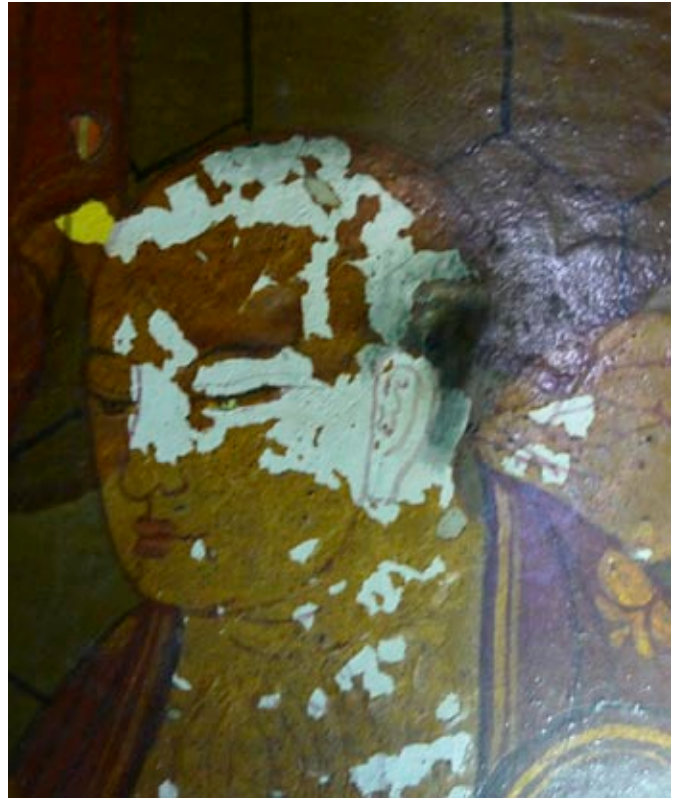
She was assisted by the team of Ladakhi trainees, Yangchen Dolma, Tsering Chorol, Skarma Lotos, later joined by Kesang Angmo. Project leader André Alexander coordinated the efforts, investigated the building for hidden structural damages, and participated in the building documentation.

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

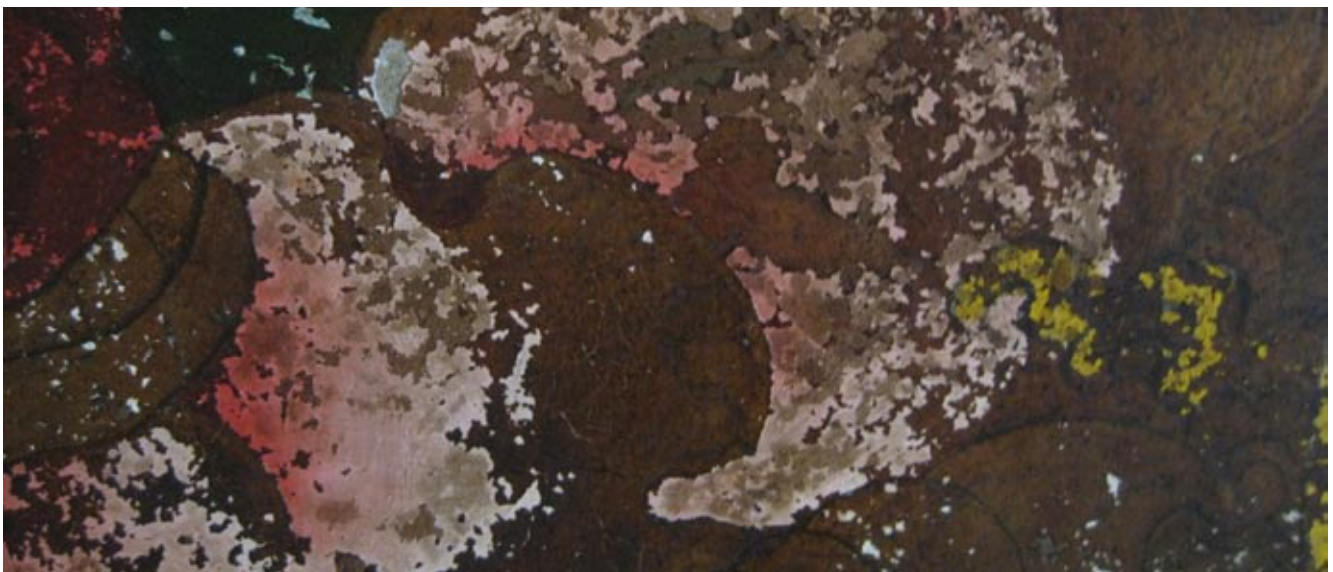
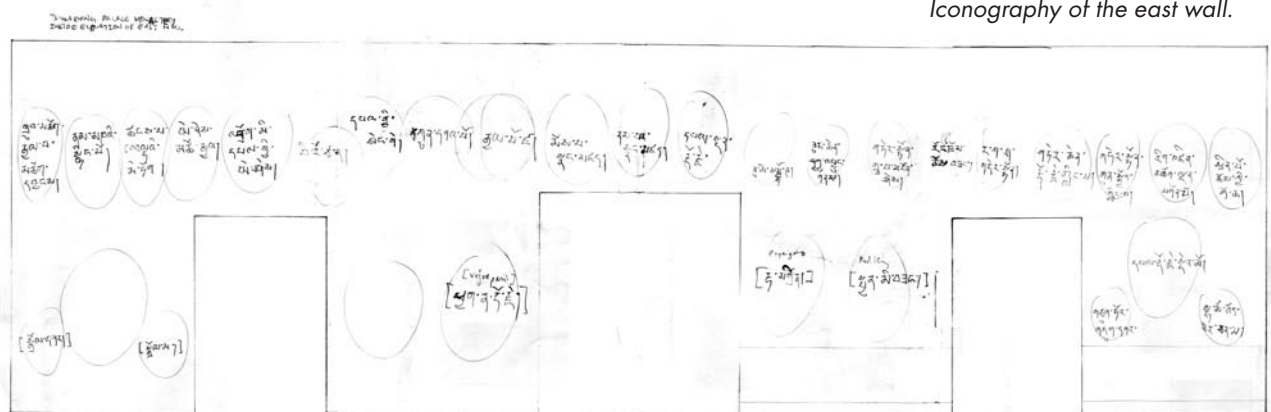
The wall-paintings of the Tsuklakhang were like a catalogue of different damages afflicting wall-paintings. Their overall appearance was very dark, but there were also numerous instances where the paint layer, the plaster, or just single paint layers had peeled off.

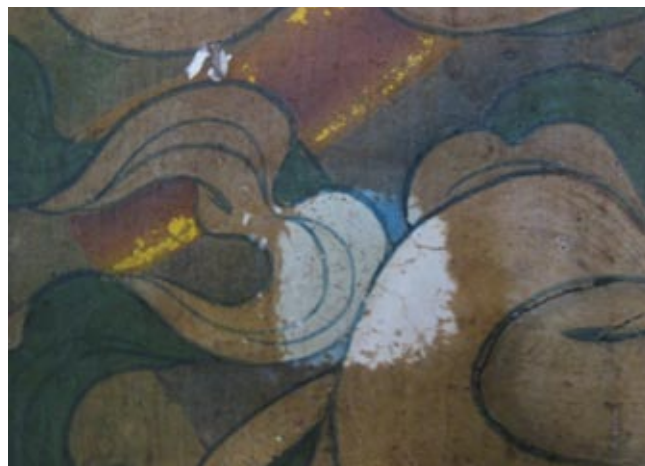
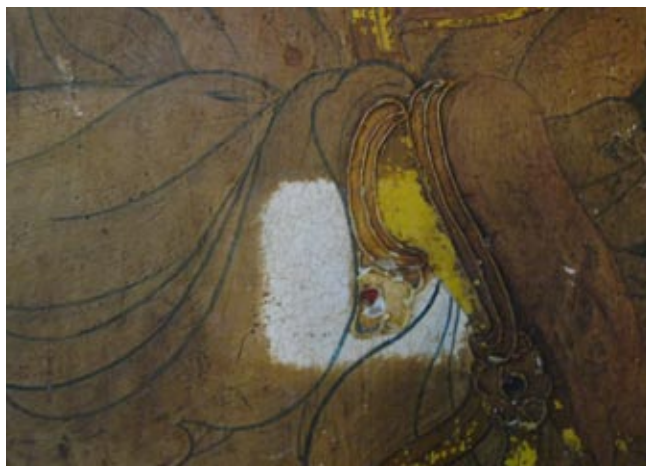
All examples are from the ground floor main assembly hall.





Iconography of the east wall.





Implementation

Anca Nicolaescu 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.

Cleaning trials by Anca Nicolaescu - different colours can react differently to solvents. Particularly the gold leaf was vulnerable, so that we had to carefully apply different methods to different painting areas.





Anca Nicolaescu and the Ladakhi team.





Anca Nicolaescu teaches the princess of Sikkim (left); Ladakhi Yangchen Dolma (below and below left) is the most experienced trainee, who can carry out several aspects of conservation works on her own; cleaning trial (centre left).



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.



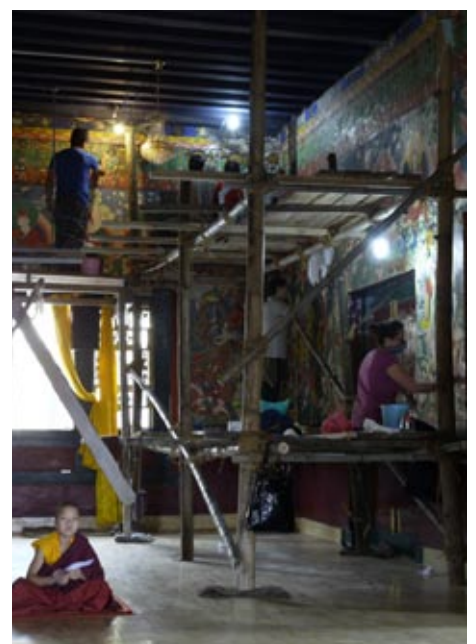


*Top: Anca Nicolaescu explaining the work to a visiting school class.
Below: Princess Hope Leezum explaining to the local monks.*





Clockwise from top: Charlotte Bellizzi; Tsering Chorol; Skarma and Tsering; work continued even during praying hours; monk trainees; training session.

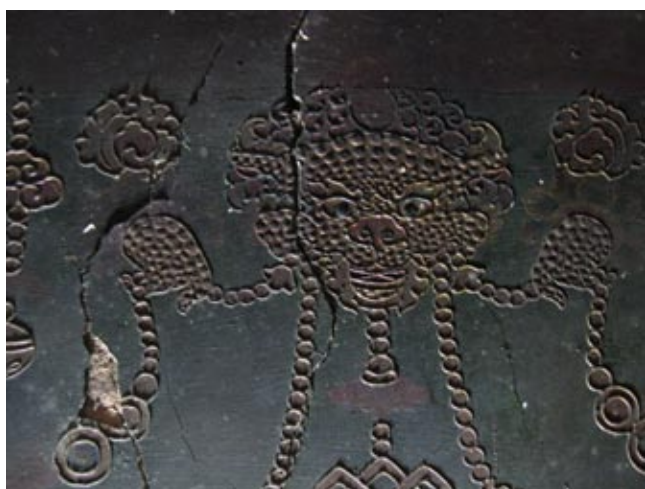




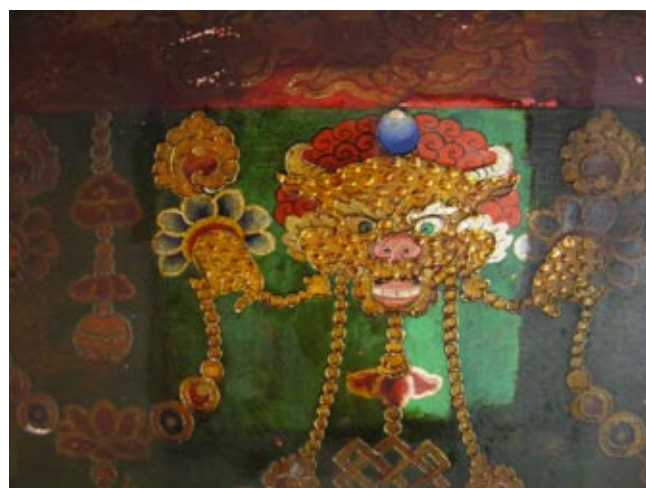
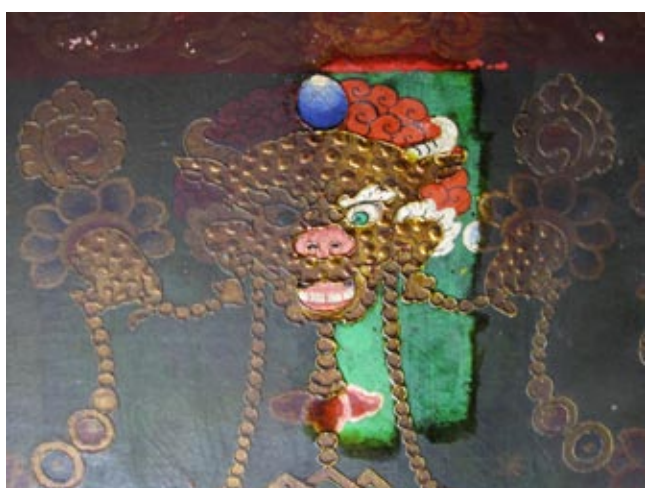
Impressions from the eight-month work.



Work progress: details of an image of the deity Durkar (Usnisa-sitatapatra) 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: kirttimuka) before, during and after cleaning.

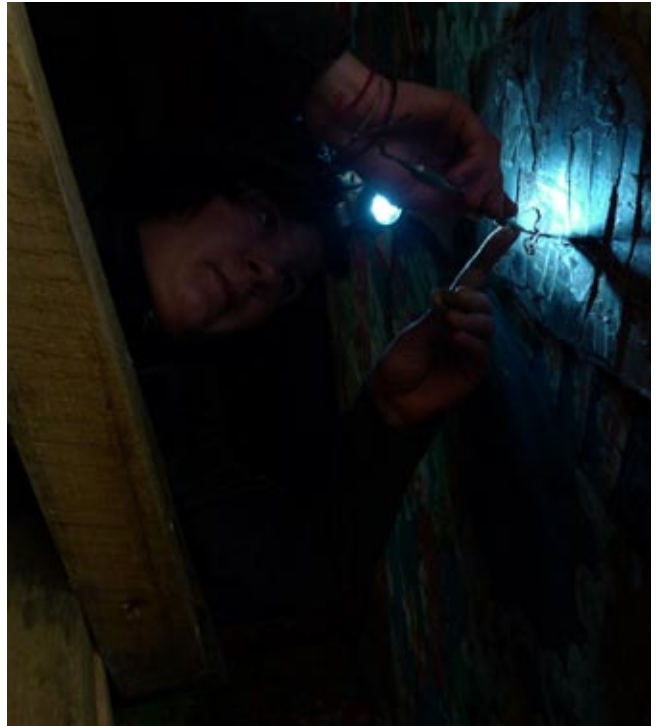


Earthquake in Sikkim

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.

Below: painting fragments collected after the earthquake; and after re-attachment.



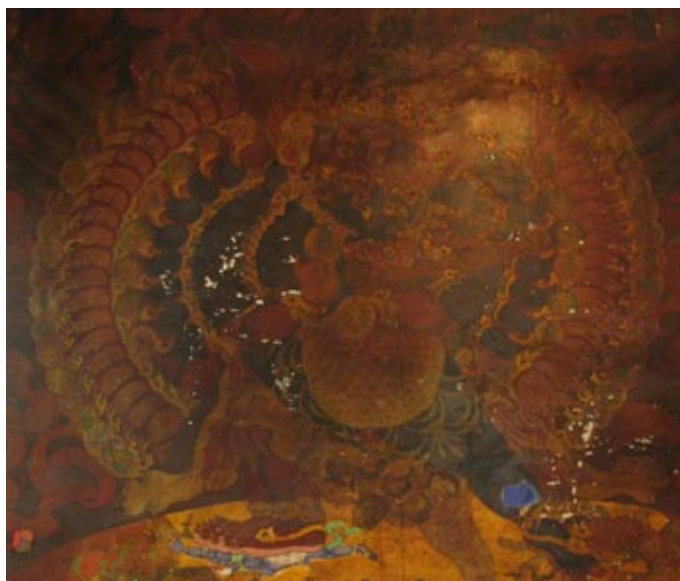
Restorer Lena Kätzel working on a puzzle - re-attaching painting fragments.



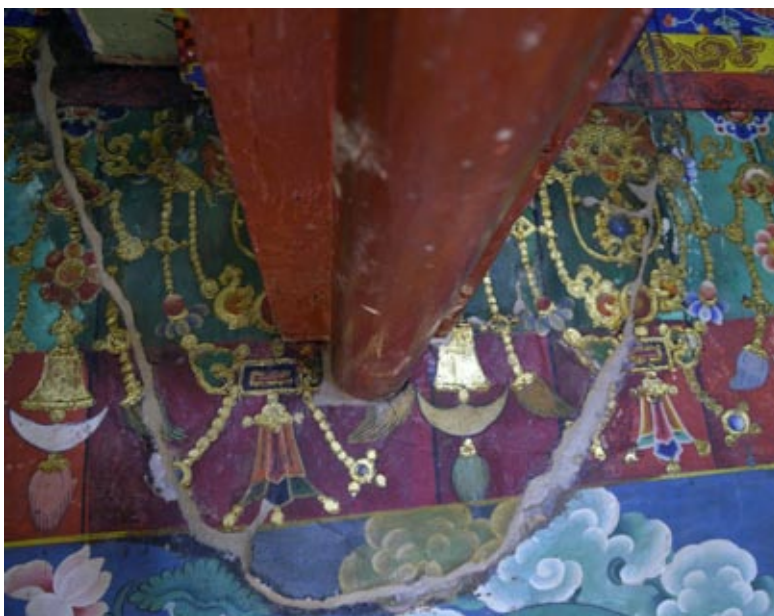
Project Results

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.



31 March, 2011

FINAL ONE

Restoration brings shine back to frescoes at Tsuklakhang

AMEET OBEROI

GANGTOK, 30 March: Restoration work is under way on the frescoes at the Tsuklakhang Monastery situated in the palace premises here in the capital. The restoration is being overseen by two respected architects who have worked extensively on conservation of Tibetan architecture - Andre Alexander from Germany and Anca Nicolaescu from Paris, who are in Sikkim on the invitation of the Tsuklakhang Trust.

"This is my first project in Sikkim, but I have worked eight years in Ladakh and another seven in Tibet and also head the Tibet Heritage Fund," informed Andre, who has studied Tibetan Architecture in Lhasa and is a Conservationist Architect.

"Actually, I work on whole buildings and have done Meru Ningpa [a 9th century monastery in Tibet] in 1998-2000 and some 14th Century buildings and murals in Ladakh," he further said.



He also informed that the Tsuklakhang monastery has wall paintings on the "least around 100 years old."

"When we first came here last year, we took photographs, marked the areas and then did mapping of all

the drawings," explained Anca Nicolaescu, the restorer from Paris.

"We are now removing dust and soot that has accumulated on the paintings by cleaning them with soap water and then using alcohol diluted in different concentrations to clean the yellow varnish that was used on the paintings," she added.

The work is already impressive, with the contrast between the restored sections and the still grimy artwork, making a strong statement on the treat of restoration that awaits the monastery.

"There are cracks and gaps that have appeared in the walls which will be filled with mud plaster then the repair of the paintings will follow and finally the retouching will be done," she said, adding that the whole process could take around a year to finish.

"The Tsuklakhang wall paintings are one of the finest Buddhist wall-arts in the world today," endorsed Hope Leezum, who is also the

Chogyal's representative in the Tsuklakhang Trust.

"This is a completely voluntary work and even though Andre is busy with his work in Lhasa, he, along with Anca, on the invitation of the Tsuklakhang Trust, have come to work here in Sikkim," she informed.

"The Tsuklakhang monastery is open to the people to visit and anyone wishing to help is welcome," she added, informing that many government officials were already helping out in various capacities such as arranging a supply of distilled spirit from the Excise Department for the restoration work.

She added that three artists from Ladakh, who have been trained by the duo, were also helping out and Sikkimese people interested in such restoration works could also be trained to carry on such works for free.

"Preserving Buddhist heritage in the long run means preservation of the heritage of Sikkim," she said.

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.

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FIRST WITH THE NEWS



RESTORATION, AN ART: Restorers at work on the century-old frescoes at Tsuglakhang Monastery in Gangtok. A set of three trained restoration artists from Ladakh are working on restoring the wall murals at the monastery to their original glory. The effort, coordinated by the Tsuglakhang Trust is being over seen by Conservation Architects Andre Alexander from Germany and Anca Nicolaescu from Paris. [turn to pg4 for detailed report]

SDF band 31

SAGAR CHHETRI

GANGTOK, 30 March: Sikkim Democratic Front called a 48-hour Siki Bandh on 04 and 05 April. The bandh will be effect from 6 AM of 04 April to 6 AM 06 April. The party has called for all shops, offices, schools to remain closed the two days. This has been called to press for a set of demands with local protection by way of employment taken up most of the points will also included are demanding with the Centre.

Ambulances, medical shops, milk transport vehicles, press, Fire Department, Police, armed forces and paramilitary traffic, and garbage vehicles and class X and XII board examination students have been exempted from the purview of the bandh.

Addressing a press conference today, SDF spokesperson, Bhim Dahal, explained that the party was compelled to take up this "strong demand".

SIKKIM EXPRESS, THURSDAY, 31 MARCH, 2011 GANGTOK 6

Ancient murals at Tsuglakhang Monastery brought back to life

THF specialists train local restorers

YISHEY D.

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 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 Tandin (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

Kutho, 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 artists 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 Achang Namdzong cave temple (2005-2006) and Ragya Monastery's Gyapa 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.



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.