

“Western techniques of restoration developed in a Tibetan environment”

by Sara Scioscia

In the past 9 years I've been involved in several projects for the restoration of Tibetan monasteries, dated from XIII to XIX century, scattered through the Nepalese, Bhutanese and Chinese Himalaya. All projects required the training of local people in all the operations of restoration: a task not easy at all. The fact that most of the times the selected trainees were mainly farmers or people who never touched a brush, quite often not even a pen or a pencil, turned any project in something really challenging. The trainees needed to develop good skills to be able to work on murals or statues, as they were required to give effective results as well. In my mind it was nonsense to teach complicate notions such as chemistry or theory of colour for unfortunately most of them had no basis to comprehend those subjects. The majority of the training had to be based on practice, and through that, the main operations of restoration would have been successfully transferred.

But the training was not the only trouble to be taken care of. Working in a Tibetan environment required we restorers to face several problems we would not have had if working in western countries. The most serious of all being the fact that most of the materials for restoration have been tested mainly in western countries and developed for western techniques of paintings. The majority of consolidators, mortars and chemicals have never been scientifically experimented, so far, on clay-based paintings, which is the basic support of mural paintings found almost in all Himalayan monasteries.

Furthermore, working in such remote locations implied that the amount of equipment required be wisely chosen for it would have been impossible to buy, on site, materials that may had run out. Storage of materials during the winter became an additional serious issue because some chemicals would have lost or changed their properties under extremely low temperature. Transportation turned to be another big deal, especially for bulky gears, because in many cases they needed to be carried on horseback or by porters. This influenced what had to be bought from outside and what could have been used on site: most of the times in fact, solutions had to be invented for the simplest of operations, like propping a mural or adhering a *stacco* onto a on-site made support.

Last but not least, the Buddhist aesthetical point of view. In all this years on the Himalaya I have matured the idea that we restorers should try to come to terms with the locals and their philosophy. Paintings in a monastery are not at all considered for their artistic value but only for their religious one. People still go to the monastery to worship an image, not to appreciate the artistic skills of a painter. That's why the main issue in all the projects I've been involved with, was about the reconstruction of missing parts. For a Buddhist, it is impossible to worship an image with half of his body or with a face damaged, defiled. Yet, for religious purposes, painting something new rather than preserving old and damaged images gives people a better *Karma*. Besides, the matter is also related to difficulties in understanding the concept of preservation, since the philosophy itself is based on the impermanence of things: they have to die and be reborn! And whenever the conservators choose not to reconstruct anything, following the purest theory of conservation, the locals will manage to complete what is missing, after the restoration project will be completed. Unfortunately, that is what is already happening in some projects that have been completed.

Hence, how much a restorer should relate his intervention to the religion and how much to the theory of conservation?