



Leh old town

Introduction

I am a student of conservation and restoration of mural paintings at the University of Applied Science in Erfurt.

This year, in 2007, I spent four months in Ladakh to gain practical working experience.

The first part of the following paper deals with one particular conservation project in detail, which is representative of several projects that the University of Applied Sciences in Erfurt is involved in:

the Conservation of mural paintings from the 14th century in the Buddhist temple Champa Lhakhang in Leh.

By means of a short conservation report an insight into the practical work done, the approach that was used and about the skills which the local trainees Yangchen, Skarma and Dolker acquired during their practical training with THF, is provided.

Furthermore, in the second part, the important role which the practical training of Yangchen and Skarma plays, not only for the preservation of Buddhist mural paintings but also for the preservation of the unique culture of Ladakh in general, is explained.

What is the LOTI-project?

The cooperation-project LOTI helps to support the THF programs in Ladakh, especially the conservation project of the old parts of the town in Leh.

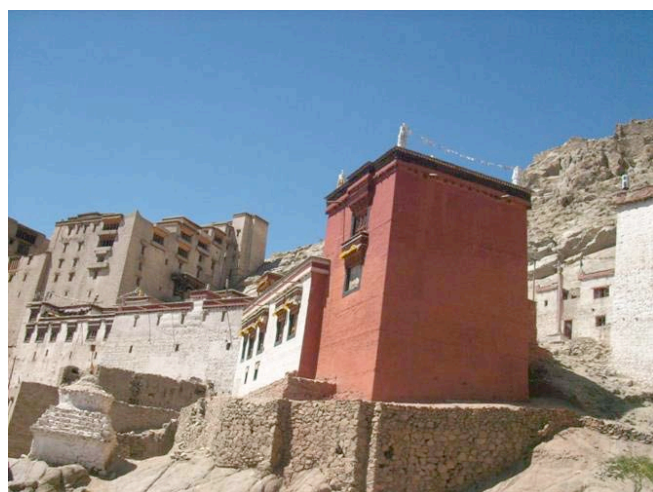
The LOTI-project's aims are to offer locals 50% co-financing for adequate rehabilitation of homes, the restoration of important public monuments such as Buddhist temples and a training (and employment) program.

Members of the THF/LOTI team are two local employees Konchok Rafstan, being the local project manager, and the accountant Stanzin Dolker. They are going to be in charge of managing the LOTI team during the absence of Andre Alexander, who is the project manager.

The 4th term in the studies of conservation in Erfurt is intended for the students to gain some practical working experiences.

Students from the University have been given the possibility to do their practical training in the 4th term in Ladakh for three years now.

The Conservation of mural paintings from the 14th century in the Buddhist temple Champa Lhakhang in Leh, the capital of Ladakh



Champa Lhakhang

The Champa Lhakhang is build highly visible on the steep slope in the old town of Leh. It is part of a complex of three monasteries, which used to be the main sites for Buddhist practise and celebration of the annual festivals that have taken place in the past. Even today, they are still in use for such religious activities.

The Temple, which was built in the year 1430 is dedicated to Maitreya, the Buddha of the future age.



Statue of Maitreya

Author: Jovana Glaß, TFH Erfurt

The historical mural paintings, which are also dated back to the beginning of the 15th century and which are said to be the oldest mural paintings in Leh, can be found on the outer northern and western walls of the temple.

In the 1850's the temple was in such a dilapidated condition that it was partly demolished and afterwards rebuilt at the same place but on a smaller scale. Only the old western and northern walls had been preserved in order to protect the new temple from water flowing down the slope.

For that reason the space, that was at our disposal while we were working, was quite small with only about half a metre of width.

The Conservation of the mural paintings 2007 in the Champa Lhakhang temple constitutes the continuation of the work, the four Erfurt students as well as Yangchen and Skama had started with last year.

The Picture shows Lama Nagwang Tsering, who is responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the temple, Skama, Yangchen and the four German conservators.

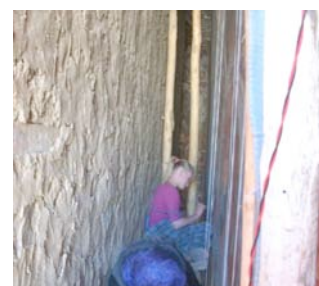


Team of 2006



Western wall: Condition / appearance before and after conservation

They restored the paintings on the whole western wall and a small part of the northern wall.



Dolker and Rebekka (Erf) on the

Author: Jovana Glaß, TFH Erfurt



Some details

As it used to be and still is a common practise for the construction of temples in Ladakh, the foundation consists of two separate layers of earthen plaster, which is put on a masonry build from rubble stones held together by mud plaster.

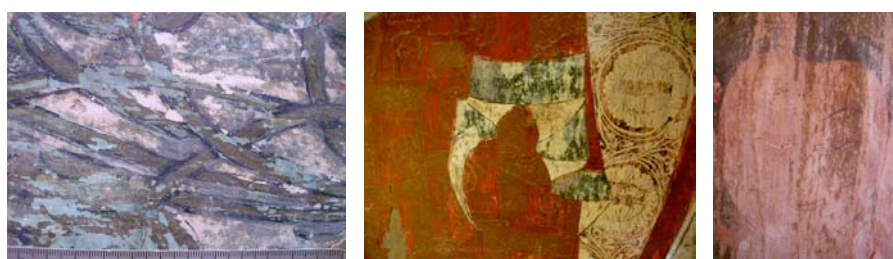


Foundation layer, paint layer

Natural pigments and animal glue were applied as colour for the paint layer, which is also very typical for Buddhist paintings in the Himalayan region.

The paint layer, again, also consists of several layers: usually a ground coat; a preparatory sketch, with exactly devised construction lines; one or two layers of colour and, finally, fine details, outlines and gildings on the top.

The execution is from an extraordinary quality and the multitude of details reminds of miniature paintings.



Author: Jovana Glaß, TFH Erfurt

paint layer: preparatory drawing (light green under dark green), gildings, guidelines

In order not to damage the mural paintings, for instance in case of removal interventions from the top-coats it is inherently important to prepare cross sections of the paint layer. The restorer needs to have knowledge about the different layers of paint and the sequences, in which the paint layers had been painted over during the history of the object.

The only equipment that is needed for stratigraphical analysis is a microscope, which perhaps could be possible to purchase for a Ladakhi restorer.



Yangethen and Skama in the laboratories of the university of applied sciences in Erfurt



overcoat of paint

Also in this case, in an extensive area the surface was painted over with a thin overcoat of clay.

Until 2006 the whole surface of the northern and western wall was covered.

The THF discovered the huge amount of wall-paintings in 2005 during survey and building analysis and first emergency interventions on the roof.

Our first practical intervention was the removal of the overcoat which we achieved by the use of soft brushes and scalpels.

The trainee Dolker had to learn to work very carefully and well-directed and to observe exactly what happens with the original paint layer while she was working.



layer of paint after the removal of the over painting



damage due to moistening before and after Conservation

Another major damage had been caused by penetrating water through a hole in the roof. Damage due to moistening is very typical for architecture and wall paintings in the Himalayan region because the construction with mud-mortar is very water sensitive.

In Ladakh, it hardly ever rained, but as a consequence of the world wide climate change, the intensity and frequency of rain have increased rapidly during the last few years.

Damage due to moistening is for example discernible in the accumulations on the painted surface caused by deposits of mud mortar, detachment between the support layers or deep support lacunae caused by a loss of adhesion of the plaster. The water soluble paint layer is also affected by the water leakage. The infiltrations washed out the colours.

The support detachments was been consolidated before new mortar layers in several places were been applied.

Powdering and unstable colours had to be consolidated, which was achieved with warm fish glue. Heavily soiled parts had to be cleaned carefully.



Dolker and Rebekka during tests

Before each single Intervention extensive tests were conducted, in order to elaborate suitable methodologies and to find proper materials. Everything was be done together with Dolker and it was tried do make her aware of the different materials and possible interactions between them.

The restoration has been of course more complex.

But it should give a general Idea of the diversity of the essential knowledge that the trainees of the THF need to acquire, to be able to restore historical wall paintings in their country.

Due to the different possibilities, circumstances, preconditions, backgrounds and cultural differences between Ladakhis and Europeans, concerning the purchase of materials, instruments and equipment in Ladakh, the main emphasis should be put on the most important and urgent interventions.

So I would like to briefly summarize again the most important similarities in Himalayan wall paintings and the skills one has to acquire to restore them.

Similarities of Himalayan wall paintings

- Himalayan wall paintings are all located in a similar climate
- they all have mud mortar as foundation layer, similar preparatory technologies like use of natural pigments with animal glue as binder; moreover the whole architecture has followed the same way of construction for centuries

→ So the damage is, up to a certain degree, often quite similar.

But if the trainees are made aware of the differences in materials they will also perceive, and be able to solve, various problems.

Skills

- The first aim of conservation is the stabilising of the foundation- and the paint layer. So the trainees will have to know the different types of damage and their causes.
- The first aim of the restoration is to achieve a well balanced aesthetical appearance because usually, the murals are still part of a temple still in use, visited by locals and more and more by tourists.
- The trainees were also taught some basics in photography and the drawing up and production of simple maps illustrating the damage and ensuing interventions



In addition to that, it was tried to get across the idea as to why the respect of heritage authenticity is so important.

The training of local restorers is important for the preservation of Buddhist wall-paintings but also makes a contribution to the preservation of Ladakh's unique culture in general.

Of course the work, that is the preservation of the wall-paintings, is in the centre of our attention.

But the subject of this work is a great part of the ancient culture of the Ladakh.



Monks praying for the success of our work

To the Buddhist' way of life belongs the belief in the transience of everything. For that reason the preservation of old stock may appear funny or strange to a Buddhist.



Even the children observe us with interest

During the time, the Ladakhis took an interest in the work and generously gave us their support. A fundamental comprehension and understanding of the work, however, was undoubtedly out of the question and could not have been expected.

Until a few years ago, the project would simply not have been possible because Ladakh was almost isolated from the rest of

the world so that the culture stayed mostly unchanged.

But more recently, progress and slight changes are noticeable, also in Ladakh, and life has become faster and more and more orientated towards consumption. Perceptible, just like anywhere else in the world, traditions give way to progress.



Modern Buddhist wall painting

This picture shows a modern Buddhist wall painting. Whether the applied colours are suitable for Himalayan conditions and whether their durability is satisfactory remains doubtful. It is, however, certain that their application can be carried out much faster and easier.

This is the way, how proven and reliable traditional skills slowly but surely are getting lost. Similar to the phenomenon of modern wall paintings, the traditional mud-mortar architecture gives way to buildings made of concrete, which are not at all suitable for the climate and the needs of the Ladakhi people.

This is just one example of the loss of traditional skills that are no longer useful in modern economy and consequently, even though they are a fundamental part of the cultural identity, due to rapid economic changes, about to get lost and forgotten.

We do not want to do missionary work. We only want to draw their attention to the point, that progress does not always necessarily mean improvement

On the contrary, the price for progress is the loss of parts of the cultural identity due to the changes and needs in a modern economic world.

And, as already mentioned in paragraph 8, in THE NARA DOCUMENT ON AUTHENTICITY, which took place in Japan in cooperation with the UNESCO, ICCROM und ICOMOS in (1994).

“It is important to underline a fundamental principle of the UNESCO, to the effect that the cultural heritage of each is the cultural heritage of all.” So it does concern all of us as well.

In India, in the south of the Himalaya, especially in Delhi, students have the possibility to make a supplementary qualification in the protection of historical monuments and conservation.

In Ladakh, Yangchen und Skama will be the first trained specialists in conservation.

The aim is to draw attention to the importance of the preservation of the traditional culture and that one day our trainees will be able to work independently and the THF can hand over the projects into their responsibility.

Development means in this context the support to uphold a functioning system in the framework of progress.