Tibetan thangka paintings: conserving a living religious heritage in Australia

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**Abstract**

Tibetan scrolls paintings or thangkas are present in public and private Australian collections. Religious ritual objects in their original context, thangkas are considered from a different perspective in Australia and the Western world: from sacred objects they become artworks in their new context. Conservation of thangkas is much more than a technical challenge posed by the diversity of materials present (painting on cloth, textile, wood and metal). In a holistic view of conservation, it encompasses an understanding of their original context and significance and an assessment of their value in their original culture. This relates thangkas to the broader theme of conservation of sacred objects originating from another culture, and our relationship with these objects. The thesis explores conservation of thangkas from the different perspectives of the Australian conservation professionals and collectors, and of the contemporary Tibetan Buddhists. It reviews the current attitudes, existing conservation codes of practices and publications about conservation of sacred objects, as well as the existing literature about conservation of thangkas. The thesis states that although thangkas are treated with the highest standards of conservation, their religious aspect is acknowledged but not addressed, in spite of existing concerns in the literature in the last 30 years. The issue is not specific to thangkas, and has been addressed for many sacred objects from pre-colonised cultures; existing frameworks for conservation of sacred objects from Indigenous cultures in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and USA provide useful models that could be adapted to the conservation of thangkas. Conservation of living religious heritage requires flexibility of conservation ethical standards and their adaptation to the needs of the users. This thesis argues that engaging with contemporary cultural groups and including the religious significance of thangkas into the conservation process is part of the mission of conservators. This mission goes beyond the traditional boundaries of conservation to include the development of a respectful dialogue with the users of the objects, in a constant questioning of the social relevance of our profession.
Student declaration

This is to certify that

(i) The thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters of Arts,
(ii) Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
(iii) The thesis is less than 50 000 words in length, Inclusive of footnotes, but exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices as approved by the RHD Committee.

Sabine Cotte

The total word count of the thesis (inclusive footnotes but exclusive of bibliography and appendixes) is 39096 words.
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Unless otherwise specified, all photos by Sabine Cotte.
Introduction

Tibetan scroll paintings or ‘thangkas’ belong to the rich Tibetan cultural heritage and are an integral part of many public and private collections of Asian Art in the Western world. Thangkas consist of a rectangular painting on cloth framed in an elaborate silk border comprising two wooden rods with ornate finials on the lower rod; they are hung on the wall and can be rolled when not displayed. Thangkas are essentially religious paintings, whose iconography is often complex, and which are used as a support for meditation and worship, as well as for religious teaching. They are relatively well represented in public and private Australian collections specialising in Asian art, although these collections are much smaller in size than American and European collections of Tibetan art.

Fig.1 Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche teaching in front of a thangka

Thangkas first came to Australia as curiosities brought back by English people serving in India in the early twentieth century (Galbally 1987). Like many other objects from ‘unexplored’ regions of the world, these acquisitions primarily reflect the ethnographic interest of the collectors at the time. More Tibetan objects have been collected as Western countries (including Australia) developed an increasing interest for Buddhist
art and religion, a trend sustained by the political events of mid twentieth century that brought Tibetan culture to the world’s attention and resulted in a massive exodus of Tibetan cultural objects from their original location in Tibet. To my knowledge, in Australia, thangkas are mainly housed in art galleries and private collections, while in Europe they can also be found in other types of museums (mainly ethnographic). While they exist within a religious context and are sacred objects in their original culture, in Australia and more generally in the Western world thangkas are considered from a different angle derived from the aesthetic and/or historic approach governing the collections policies.

Fig.2 Thangkas hanging in a monastery

This thesis focuses on the particular issues that arise regarding the conservation of thangkas in an Australian context. The thesis relates them more broadly to the conservation of sacred objects originating from a different culture and the conservation of cultural heritage from non-Western cultures. This has recently become a topic of self-interrogation and discussion for the conservation profession in the Western world. Issues of cultural identities and the role of conservation in their interpretation are now regularly explored in congresses and conservation literature, where traditional conservation practices are increasingly being questioned, especially in the case of material cultures of diverse origins (Mellor 1992, Clavir 1995, 2002, Peters 2007). These reflections are linked to recent thinking in Western museology (Pearce 1994, Allen 1998, Simpson 2009, Chaniotis 2009), which is trying to redefine the social role of
museums in transcultural relationships and where professionals are seeking to engage in ‘substantive dialogue and partnership with the people who hold the heritage’ (Kurin 2004).

Recent writings in conservation such as Clavir (2002), Ogden (2007), Peters (2008), Sully (2008) and Thorn (2008) have exposed the complex issues linked to the care of material culture from Indigenous groups in countries such as Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, all of them coming to terms with a colonial past. Beyond the particularities of each cultural group, these reflections introduce new concepts into the conservation field. The notion of heritage in use or ‘living religious heritage’ as defined by ICCROM (Stovel 2003) is pivotal in this current discourse and calls upon a broader understanding of heritage significance linking the present to the past in a synchronistic relationship. Munoz Vinas (2005) has recently described the shift in focus from truth-based conservation (where the objects alone, allegedly containing the truth in their physical reality, dictate the conservation choices), which largely prevailed in the first half of twentieth century, to meaning-based conservation, where the subjects enter the debate. The transfer of meanings, advocated by thinkers such as Hubert (1994) Byrne (2004) and Wisejuryia (2005), is becoming central to conservation aims, sometimes even superseding the physical integrity. The introduction of the spiritual or supernatural elements as part of the intangible aspects associated with material culture, and therefore worthy of conservation, is chartered by the recent texts (Burra Charter, Australia, 1979, revised 1999, Nara document for Authenticity, 1994 among others). It is also given a central place in the recommendations of the UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Heritage (2003), which complements the 1972 World Heritage Convention for the protection of tangible heritage.

Discussing heritage conservation principles and practices in Australia and the Pacific, Logan believes that heritage professionals, while grappling with the necessity to respond to these conventions and incorporate the intangible into conservation practice, are moving towards ‘a more holistic approach to heritage conservation’ and are becoming aware of the necessity to ‘give voice to the region’ (Logan 2006). In this process, heritage practitioners are increasingly recognizing not only the need to use cross disciplinary thinking but also cross cultural discourses and approaches, in order to better integrate symbolic meanings into heritage practice (Sharma 2004; Wisejuryia 2007).
It is now widely recognized that conservation has a role to play in finding more dynamic ways to engage with material property from diverse cultures (Clavir 2002, Bloomfield 2008, Sully 2008). This thesis proposes to look at the activity through the case of Himalayan thangka conservation. The conservation community now admits the ‘cultural and social significance of the act of conservation’ (Brooks 2008), but just how this can translate into conservation practice is unclear and subject to many interpretations and debates. By recognizing the challenges that arise when one attempts to implement theories and principles, this thesis aims to establish the conditions for the translation of a respectful intercultural dialogue into conservation practice.

Through the case study of thangka conservation, the thesis proposes to challenge our ability to look beyond the rational system of thinking which still influences conservation practice and to further expand our decision making process by including the wider cultural context the paintings come from. By doing so we can take into consideration the concerns contemporary Tibetan groups may have in relation to the representation of their cultural identity.

The first chapter of the thesis will review the existing literature about thangka conservation and expose the various approaches since the 1960s. Parallel to extensive technical studies and art history research, conservation of thangkas has in the recent decades generated reflections that go beyond solving technical problems and interrogates the profession’s philosophical foundations (Agrawal 1984, Bruce-Gardner 1988, Shaftel 1991, Cotte 2007, Ballard & Dignard 2009).

The second and third chapters will describe the ‘adoptive’ context in Australia, both in public and private collections. The new set of values assigned to the thangkas is presented as a product of Western culture, whose points of reference are mainly artistic and ethnographic. Consultations with curators, collectors and conservators reveal that history, iconography, style and technique are the privileged areas of study. Display and conservation choices (in public and private collections) emphasize these interests, reflecting the broader cultural policies of museums, while the spiritual dimension of thangkas is left unaddressed. Heritage professionals are confronted not only with the challenges of connecting cultures within a museological approach, but also with the question of what professional position to adopt towards objects deemed sacred for another cultural group. Issues of cultural respect and cultural representation are central to this reflection and raise the questions of intercultural engagement as a dynamic process.
The fourth chapter of the thesis will examine the historic and religious context surrounding thangka production, consecration and worship. Thangkas, considered here as emblematic of Tibetan Buddhism’s cultural heritage, offer characteristics that make them a particularly interesting object of research: concepts of identity, knowledge and connection/rights to the land, which underlie much of the discussions surrounding Indigenous cultures, are in this case compounded by crucial issues of cultural survival out of the geographical boundaries of the place of creation. This political and cultural dimension cannot be ignored in the process of decision making in the conservation of Tibetan heritage in Australia, which equally operates from an external (Western) cultural source. For this research, interviews were held with Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, both those involved and those not involved in the cultural heritage sphere, about current issues and attitudes in relation with Tibetan thangkas. The findings expose apparently conflicting views between museums and cultural group representatives, revealing a close relationship between control of knowledge and cultural identity.

The fifth chapter of the thesis will explore current theories in conservation reflecting the profession’s perspective on cultural gaps issues, and how it is increasingly expanding its research beyond the conservation sphere towards anthropology and social sciences. The involvement of cultural groups through consultation and shared cultural authority, now practiced in the USA and Canada within the framework of new community-oriented museums, is also developed in Australia for Indigenous cultures, locally and in the Pacific. A look at these practices in and outside Australia shows the importance of acknowledging the dynamic status of cultures and of engaging with the contemporary groups to understand the objects’ significance in both past and present. This inevitably leads to a questioning of conservation ethical tenets and an argument to accommodate traditional methods and community’s needs within the conservation process. Flexibility and dialogue become the tools for achieving respectful compromises, which recognize that conservation is linked to original context as much as to actual context. The review of recent codes of ethics and conservation texts shows that theoretical frameworks are present in addition to the existing practical models, and that sharing authority over cultural heritage is a recent but well signalled path for both Indigenous people and heritage professionals. A closer examination of the vocabulary employed, particularly the word ‘respect’, enlightens the challenges that arise from a collaborative approach.
In the discussion I suggest that although the attitude of the Tibetans about their material heritage is ambivalent, the consideration of the spiritual dimension of objects is integral to conservators’ mission. We usually prefer to dialogue with people that are similar to us, whose authority we recognize and whose knowledge comes from institutions recognized in our world system. Although this scholarship is immensely valuable and useful, I argue that it is also necessary to give voice to the objects’ users and provide consideration to their requests. Examples of protocols integrating the traditional owners are provided by many museums and art galleries for the care of their collection of Australian Indigenous cultural material. By expanding the existing practices to other cultural groups, broadening its consultative base and actively engage in an effective and respectful intercultural dialogue with the culture’s owners, the conservation community can fulfil its mission, taking into account more dimensions for cultural heritage. Some practical recommendations are suggested in Appendix 1.

I acknowledge the fact that I am a non-Tibetan professional conservator, presenting answers to Western questions about conservation-related issues, therefore inevitably creating a biased discussion framework. However, recognizing its inherent limitations, this thesis should hopefully constitute a first step in the direction of dialogue and a tool for a more open and collaborative way of preserving Himalayan heritage in Australia.
1. Literature survey

Early texts about thangkas include Rahula’s Sankrityayana’s ‘Technique in Tibetan paintings’, Asia Magazine, 1937 (pp776-80) and Giuseppe Tucci’s thesis ‘Tibetan Thangka painting’ in 1949, which offers the first classification of thangkas and describes in minute detail their iconography. Literature about thangkas, their iconography and their stylistic study is abundant in the art history field (Tucci 1949, Stoddard 1975, Klimburg-Salter 1982, Lo Bue 1993, Jackson 1996, Rhie & Thurman 1996, Heller 1999, Kossak & Casey-Singer 1999 to name a few), but scarcer in the conservation field, and can be divided in two main avenues: studies of the technique and the materials (either scientific studies or studies of local sources), and reflections surrounding their conservation. Either way, mentions of thangkas in the conservation literature are mostly recent and coincide with the first exhibitions exclusively dedicated to Himalayan art in Europe, and the USA in the late 1970s (‘Visual Dharma: The Buddhist Art of Tibet’, Cambridge, MIT, 1975; ‘Dieux et démons de l’Himalaya, Art du Bouddhisme lamaïque’, Paris, RMN 1977; ‘The silk route and the diamond path’, Los Angeles 1982).

1.1. Written sources and field studies

Huntington brought thangkas into the conservation arena with a series of articles in the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC) journal Studies in Conservation (Huntington 1969; Huntington 1970a; Huntington 1970b) where he described the materials and technique of these paintings, and also gave the first reports on conservation practices related to thangkas. His analysis of the construction and iconography of thangka mountings (Huntington 1970 b) is, to date, the most complete study on the topic and a key resource for conservators to understand the structure of the textile aspect of thangkas. This study describes in detail the different elements of the textile mounts and emphasizes the symbolic value of each of them, which characterizes thangkas as highly spiritual objects. In another article, Huntington (Huntington 1970a) gives a technical account based on the study of Tibetan and non Tibetan written literature and personal examination, and relates techniques and pigments with regional stylistic schools.

Jackson and Jackson's study of thangka paintings’ methods and materials is based on data collected on the field with living thangka painters from the 1970’s to the 1980’s
(Jackson & Jackson 1984). This study offers the most complete account of traditional methods used by the artists, iconometric practices, sketching techniques, pigments, grounds, techniques of painting and shading, brushes; it is completed with a glossary of Tibetan terms and an appendix written by a thangka painter on ‘Techniques of thangka painting using modern techniques and commercially available materials’, such as gouache and poster paint. Jackson also mentions the fact that the artists obtained their pigments directly or indirectly from a government office: the Lhasa government was controlling mining (in the Tibetan region of Tsang for azurite and malachite, in central Tibet for yellow ochre and white and in the South Eastern region of Lho-brag for cinnabar) and pigments distribution (Jackson & Jackson 1984, pp 78; 80; 82). Gold is frequently used as a pigment for holy bodies, clothing or decorations on thangkas, and it is interesting to note that in Lhasa, gold powder was the monopoly of the Newars merchants from Kathmandu. These merchants kept their method of grinding a secret, although it almost certainly involved the use of crushed stones or glass as a grinding intermediate, a technique employed also by artists in Eastern Tibet (Jackson & Jackson 1984, p 85). However, the symbolism attached to gold, which explains its frequent use on thangkas, might have been tempered by economic realities: Tabasso reports that in the twenty thangkas she examined, the gold in the decorations was systematically mixed with a small quantity of silver (from 1.64% to 9.71%; Tabasso & al. 2008, p 228).

A short but very refined study of the technique of thangkas by Robert Bruce-Gardner, accompanies the catalogue of the exhibition ‘Sacred Visions: early paintings from central Tibet’ held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1999. Observations made on several thangkas are linked with technical information and reflections on their methods of execution. This study provides invaluable insights on the realisation of thangkas and on the variation of processes from one painting to another, particularly underlining the variations in the thickness of the paint layer, obtained by using a thicker medium to raise some motifs or by selectively burnishing gold areas (Bruce-Gardner 1999).

A recent scientific analysis carried on a thangka from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art revealed selective applications of a glue varnish to modulate the gloss of paint throughout the composition (Leona & Jain 2003). It is worth noting that the discovery of this practice of ‘selective glue varnishing’ on that particular painting impacted on its conservation treatment; in light of this finding, the conservators eliminated certain methods of consolidation, considered potentially risky of compromising the glue varnish effect, thus linking closely the technical investigation to conservation treatments.
1.2. Conservation approaches since 1969

In 1975, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, Rome (ICCROM), in liaison with the Central Conservation Laboratory in New Delhi’s National Museum, organised the Asia-Pacific Seminar on Conservation of Cultural Property, called ‘Conservation in the Tropics’. The proceedings provided some very accurate descriptions of the particular climatic conditions and the causes of deterioration to local architectural cultural heritage, at the time largely unknown in the Western world. Mehra (Mehra 1970) and Agrawal (Agrawal 1975) were the first Indian conservators to share their technical approach to Buddhist portable paintings, which opened Western conservators’ eyes to the difference in technique, materials and forms of Asian cultural heritage and to the realities of local conservation practice. The particularities of the movable cultural heritage of South East Asia, from palm leaf manuscripts to thangkas, and the specific techniques required for conserving this heritage, became the subject of the 1984 book Conservation of Manuscripts and paintings of South East Asia (Agrawal 1984), who in Chapter 6 specifically discusses the treatment of thangkas. The chapter draws largely on Sankrityayana, Huntington and Tucci for the historic and descriptive information, which also provides the symbolic meaning of all the elements constituting a thangka and points to the fact that thangkas are no ‘ordinary’ paintings, but deeply religious significant objects. After an inventory of the principal causes of deterioration and enumeration of the necessary steps for condition assessment, it also invites conservators to consider aspects other than physical and to integrate the religious and cultural particularities of these paintings in conservation decisions.

The first point underlines the fact that thangkas are ‘scroll paintings which have to be rolled and unrolled; [they] should therefore be mounted in such a manner that it remains flexible’ (Agrawal 1984, p256). A look at the history of treatments on thangkas in Western museums in the last three decades shows that this point has been (and sometimes still is) partially overlooked. Agrawal’s second recommendation: that the borders are an integral part of the thangkas and ‘should on no account be discarded or thrown away’ shows also that keeping the characteristics of the paintings is a primary concern for him. He advises that the habit at the time of separating the internal painted section from the borders and presenting it on a rigid stretcher or in a frame is ignoring ‘the essential character’ of the thangka and will make it ‘merely look like a European easel painting’ (p 256). This point also has been widely overlooked in the West, and it
is interesting to wonder why these recommendations were not given all due consideration. The 1970s and 1980s were a time of great expansion of technical and scientific studies in conservation, maybe to the detriment of cultural and religious aspects, but also saw many codes of practice being written, most of which include the respect of physical integrity (Venice Charter 1964; ICOM-CC 1984). Separating the integral components of the thangkas (borders and painting) is not in line with the principles advocated by the codes of practice. More often than not, it happened before the thangkas entered the museum, particularly for thangkas reaching the West in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Bruce-Gardner 1988). This shows the prevalence given to the Western appreciation of the painted component as a work of art. Nevertheless, such separations also happened in museums in that period, generally justified by the poor state of the mounting (pers.comm. Bazin 2007) and still occur today (pers.comm. Namgyel 2010). Despite the existence of Huntington’s articles and Agrawal’s book, conservators and curators obviously were not aware of the equal importance of all the elements. The textile borders (often more damaged than the painted part) were probably assimilated to frames that could be removed or replaced when damaged.

It took another 20 years to bring the importance of cultural and religious aspects to the forefront of conservation ethics. This view is best developed by Canadian conservator Miriam Clavir in her 2002 book *Preserving what is valued*, which defines conservation as a choice between different sets of values and argues for the importance of the original users’ values system (Clavir 2002). The detailed description by Jacki Elgar of the recreation of a thangka mounting for a painting without mount from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts is a good illustration of this renewed way of thinking, completed by the author’s call for collaboration in the creation of a database of information on mountings (Elgar 2006).

Conservation literature that is read in the West is generally found in international journals, books and conferences, mainly delivered from a European or American source. As a consequence most articles (including this author’s) aimed at an international audience, spend a great deal of space describing the construction of thangkas, their spiritual character and their constitutive materials, in more or less detailed manner, while the information on conservation practice is more briefly discussed. This is particularly visible in the titles of the first articles in *Studies in Conservation*. ‘Studio and workshop notes on the conservation of Tibetan thang-kas’ (Huntington 1969), ‘Note on the technique of conservation of some thang-ka paintings’
(Mehra 1970), and ‘The technique of Tibetan paintings’ (Huntington 1970a), ‘The iconography and structure of the mountings of Tibetan paintings’ (Huntington 1970b). The comparison clearly shows that the principal approach was scientific, intended to inform the (Western) reader of one or another material characteristics of thangkas that had been studied in relation to their spiritual meaning, while the two conservation oriented articles are more ‘notes’ on case studies and are much shorter. Linking the scientific and spiritual contexts with the conservation practice was further developed in later articles. Shaftel explains the religious significance of thangkas and examines briefly the main types of damage that can occur (Shaftel 1986); in another article she presents three case studies illustrating mistaken attempts of conservation of thangkas prior to their entrance in a museum’s collection (Shaftel 1991). The same critical presentation, this time of some local thangka repairs is developed by Mary Shepherd Slusser in a vivid account of her purchase of 15th and 16th century thangkas while residing in Kathmandu in 1967 (Slusser 2003). Careful examination showed that the paintings had been ‘restored’ for sale by inserting pieces of other similar paintings in missing parts, regardless of composition and meaning. The paintings subsequently were dismounted by a Japanese conservator, remounted (in a Japanese scroll manner? The article does not mention it and no general view is available) and, for presentation, blank canvas inserts were placed in the losses with no attempt to reconstruction. The paintings, which by then were possibly presented like Japanese scrolls laid on paper, were later extensively inpainted when they changed hands in the 1980s and again when some of them entered the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, a fact which the author seems to moderately agree with. More than anything, this is a good illustration of the chaotic life of Himalayan paintings since they became marketable goods for Westerners, which, in addition to their previous ritual life accounts for each painting potentially becoming an extraordinarily complex palimpsest of events, people and places.

Bruce-Gardner (Bruce-Gardner 1988) goes some steps further by comparing the ‘conservation parameters for thangkas’ in both Tibetan culture and the West. According to him, Tibetan approach historically would have been ‘to repaint the damaged image or simply, to make a new one’, evidence of which is frequently found on mural paintings; the same evidence was found on a 17th century thangka bearing an inscription of dedication stating that it supersedes a 15th century, quoted by Pal (‘Arts of Nepal’, Vol.2, p 23-24, quoted in Bruce-Gardner 1988, p 6). He identifies this as ‘the most fundamental difference not only in ethics but in motivation between the perception and treatment of Himalayan scroll paintings in their original context and in the
collections of the Western world' (p 6). In the meantime, he notes that the primary ethnographic interest for thangkas in the West has evolved towards 'an increasing appreciation of the paintings as individual works of art' (p 6). This critical analysis leads him to conclude that a 'middle ground' ethical path should be advocated for thangka conservation in Western museums, either as a principle or on a case-by-case basis, 'but it will be one of our own defining, as it cannot be one that equates with the practices and perceptions of the Tibetans themselves' (Bruce-Gardner 1988, p 7). However well intentioned, in writing that the perceptions of Tibetans cannot be equated, when he has stated that these habits were in the past and has not provided a perception from contemporary Tibetans, he seems to consider that the potential for Tibetan tradition to evolve with social and political changes is negligible. If historically Tibetans would have made a new image because they had 'no Western concept of restoration' (p 6), it may not be the case nowadays as will be discussed in Chapter 4, section 4.4.1 and 4.4.2.

Bruce-Gardner then proceeds by detailing the practical procedures of cleaning, consolidation, structural treatments including lining options and inpainting, linking in each case his practical options with the context of the museum, tempered by the original context. He claims that presenting thangkas with no reconstruction or visual reintegration of losses 'condemns intrinsically great paintings to remain subjects only of narrow or academic interest' (p12). Therefore he advocates a careful approach to inpainting, mixing toning, glazing and reconstruction based on examination of remaining traces and of comparative material. His approach, although probably more sympathetic to the original context than was usual at the time¹, is mainly based however on the assumption that museum professionals alone make the decisions related to the objects. That these decisions should be as well informed as possible, although a very valid point, does not include the possibility of consultation or participation of the concerned cultural group in the decision making process.

These decision making processes related to conservation of thangkas were the topic of a study by Jacinta Bon Nee Loh who in 2002 investigated treatments carried out in

¹ The article is critiqued by the abstractor in AATA on line database for its not rigorous enough approach for a museum: "[Abstractor's note: The author presents a point of view which favors modern Western conservation methods over the more traditional techniques. This is an interesting and well-written article, but the procedures discussed may not be suitable for museum artifacts. The Japanese approach to conservation may offer some suitable alternatives.] S.M.B."

Abstractor: S.M. Bradley ; AATA Nos.:1989-16734 and 26-435
various Western museums. Bon Nee Loh identified significance, context, stakeholders, time and causes of damage as the main points to be considered (Bon Nee Loh 2002). She proposes the use of decision trees to integrate all concerns in a decision-making framework based on models published previously for preventive conservation strategies. Although the model shows the complexity of decision making, it highlights three different possibilities; preventive action, no action, and remedial conservation treatment. The concepts of material integrity and conceptual integrity are used as assessment tools for case studies. She concludes however that because interpretation depends closely on context, and because each museum has different policies and priorities, these will be dominant in their decision making, unless ethical standards are recognised in the handling and treatment of thangkas. The possibility of establishing such a set of guidelines ‘with the assistance (when possible) of a member of the cultural or religious group’ is briefly mentioned, with the concern that objects should be treated with respect (Bon Nee Loh 2002, p 14).

Among the case studies assessed by Bon Nee Loh are some thangkas treated in Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which inspired the museum to organize a one-day symposium on the topic in September 1992. At the time, senior paper conservator Victoria Blyth-Hill presented the history of thangka conservation, acknowledging the superimposition of one culture’s aesthetic on the other in various cases, and the ‘lack of understanding among conservators and curators about thangkas as a whole’. She advocated more communication and ‘collaboration between conservators, collectors, curators and scholars’ about issues such as ‘recreating original presentation and borders, re-consecration of restored paintings, Western framing techniques, and inpainting as opposed to repaintings’. It is significant however that Tibetan Buddhists were not at the time included in this list for collaboration. Further described treatments involved various techniques of paper and textile conservation to present thangkas stretched on light support, with as much as possible the appearance of a free hanging work, but without retaining their flexibility (Goldman 1993; Blyth-Hill 1993).

A special mention should be given to an opinion article published in Orientations in 2004, in which two curators of the Rubin Museum of Art, New York, and one scholar from the Institute of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies in Vienna deplore the fact that Himalayan paintings have been over restored in the last twenty years to satisfy market conditions, to the extent that it may challenge the scholars’ knowledge with odd iconography, and ‘changes the way many of us believe Himalayan painting looks like’. In the authors’ view, this is leading collectors and museums to chase ‘impossibly
perfect paintings’ because a certain level of damage is not acknowledged (Linrothe, Luczanits & Watt, 2004). The authors rightly point out that ‘over restoring’ is contrary to the profession’s ethics, although they acknowledge the benefits of restoration: ‘minimizing aesthetically distracting damage and loss, and preserving the work in its present state or enabling its exhibition’ (p 74). They advocate for open discussion about restoration of key works, and for a compulsory mention of any ‘major restoration’ in museum catalogues. This point is illustrated with an analogy with famous Western ancient masterpieces such as Bellini’s ‘Feast of Gods’, about which no well informed art historical study would be written without acknowledging the various conservation campaigns. They conclude that if this discussion does not happen we are ‘turning a blind eye to the art we proclaim to admire’, shaking up the market’s certitudes and questioning our ability to accept a certain extent of damage in Himalayan paintings. The Tibetan perspective of ‘not worshipping a defaced deity’ (pers. comm. Namgyel 2005) discussed in the following chapter, balances this. It also echoes the experience recounted by V. Blyth-Hill where she describes leaving a painted niche empty (tinted in neutral tone) for lack of iconographic information about the deity that should have been depicted, only to discover later that an art historian had based his research on the unusual occurrence in this thangka of an empty niche (Blyth-Hill 1993). Clearly this shows that creating more bridges between art historians, collectors, Buddhist practitioners and conservators would be beneficial to all concerned.

If it seems to be a consensus in the conservation field about the inadequacy of the methods used in the 60s, giving priority to Western or to Japanese techniques of conservation and mounting and therefore turning the thangkas into either flat Western paintings or Japanese scrolls on paper, yet there remains no general agreement about thangka conservation. In the last twenty years, thangkas or technically similar Asian paintings were regularly mentioned in conservation conferences and journals. Williamson (1983) described the remounting of Tibetan thangkas in new silk borders by a Tibetan painter and tailor, Thubten Norbu, for the American Museum of Natural History, a solution also chosen by Ephraim Jose in collaboration with Bhutanese monks for the 2008 exhibition ‘The Dragon Gift, Treasures of Bhutan’ (Jose 2008). On the other hand, Tessy Shoeholzer-Nichols describes the cleaning and consolidation of the silk frames of thangkas from the Tucci collection, stressing that the two main criteria chosen for the treatment were to enable display with a sound structural support and to retain the flexibility and ‘rollability’ of the thangkas (Schoeholzer-Nichols 1988, and chap. 11 in Tabasso 2008). Terrier and Boyer describe briefly their methods on the Asian Art website (2003) and in Orientations (Terrier, Roman & Boyer 2004),
emphasizing that the result should allow ‘a total visibility of the two sides, free from all constraint’ (p 3). Coural, Gerin-Pierre, Cailleteau, Dal Pra and Beugnot (1996) treated 10th century silk painted banners from the Chinese site of Dunhuang by freeing them from previous constraining restorations and presented them in their original silk mountings consolidated in various manners including sleeves, stitched backing with attachments, stitching on transparent temporary support or on rigid textile support. Takami and Eastop treated a Korean double-sided painted banner with adhesive reactivated patches to stabilize slits (2002). These two contributions describe ‘holistic’ treatments of thangkas including their silk frames. This author has described in detail semi-transparent relining of the painted part of thangkas on adhesive-reactivated silk crepeline, which allows re-stitching it in its textile border. This approach is justified through both safety of the process and respect for the original context (Cotte 2007). More recently, contributions to the half day ‘Forum on thangka conservation’ at the 2008 ICOM-CC conference in New Delhi (Ballard & Dignard, 2009) reflected the challenges in this seminar field from various professional and geographic perspectives; Projects in the region were described and their conclusions shared, including the very useful documentation project in the monasteries of Ladakh undertaken by Sanjay Dhar with the help of NIRDAC2, which encompasses innovative storage solutions and the use of a purpose made condition report form (Dhar 2009). This project could be developed throughout the entire region to gain both a general awareness about conservation within monasteries and a significant contribution to the inventory of property, with training of local people in theses areas. K. K. Gupta and Nilabh Sinha gave insights into treatments undertaken by INTACH3 and National Museum, New Delhi, where display options were negotiated with the owners, inpainting was carried out with advice from a lama or scholar and the possibility of delegating the inpainting to competent people discussed (Gupta 2009, Sinha 2009). Collaboration between Western conservators and local monks were illustrated with the long term conservation training project linked to the Bhutanese ‘Dragon’s Gift’ exhibition which saw extensive conservation treatments completed in Bhutan by monks during conservation workshops (E. Jose 2009). This conservation training project continues to run even though the exhibition opened in 2008 and is currently touring the world, an effort to be commended when so many valuable projects in the region in the past two decades were discontinued through lack of funding. Collaboration and dialogue between communities (monks, lay practitioners, painters, conservators East/West) was advocated by this author and illustrated through collaborative treatments involving

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2 Namgyal Institute for Research on Ladakhi Art and Culture
3 Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage
monks and painters (Cotte 2009). Western approaches including lining thangkas on Japanese paper (Wheeler 2009), sewing the painted component onto a transparent silk mounted on a stretcher (Hulbert 2009) were presented, as well as technical studies projects on materials including the documentation of introduction of new synthetic pigments in thangka painting (Grywacz, Mass &al., Pretzel & al. 2009). The contributions overall highlighted that ethics and values are the key factors to the different approaches discussed (Ballard & Dignard, 2009).

1.3. Field publications

To facilitate the preservation of heritage in its original context, several handbooks for local monasteries caretakers have been published in the last ten years and distributed in the monasteries and local communities free of charge.

The first publication, for Bhutanese temple caretakers, was published in 2000 as a joint project involving Bhutan, Australia and France and involved a Bhutanese representative of the Department of Cultural Affairs, an architect and a paintings conservator (Cotte, Dorji & Nock 2008). The handbook, with abundant illustrations and minimal text, is bilingual English/Dzongka and privileges a simple and affordable approach to the preventive conservation of buildings and artworks. The page about thangkas shows them as valuable objects that can be restored and should not be discarded (which can happen quite frequently), and refers owners to local conservators through the monastery authorities, without going into further detail.

A second handbook was created in 2008 for the Bhutanese Textile Museum by Friends of Bhutan’s Culture and the Getty Foundation, with consultant Julia Brennan (Brennan 2008). Also bilingual English/Dzongka and with many illustrations, it provides simple recommendations for prevention, handling, moving, maintenance and storage, adapted to local context and with advice to seek assistance and refer damaged objects to skilled conservators; a list of trained people is provided at the end of the book thereby making this recommendation easier to follow. Simple steps are detailed for rolling, examining and assessing the condition of thangkas and other textile objects. A condition report form and a list of suppliers are also provided.

In 2007 V. Blyth-Hill and Thaw Charitable Trust published a handbook entitled Care and handling of thangkas, a guide for caretakers, bilingual Tibetan/English. The handbook has different sections focusing on vulnerabilities, handling, emergency
response, documentation and resources. An example of a thangka examination form is provided as an appendix, which may be very useful for the inventories of monasteries collections. Preventive conservation measures are suggested in accompaniment to the description of damage caused by water, light, pollution and fire. Photographic illustrations focus on storage conditions, privileging the ‘how-to’ approach by providing step-by-step instructions for rolling, wrapping and storing thangkas in a museum-like fashion. While it describes safe storage techniques, the materials employed, which are usual in Western museum practice, would probably be unaffordable for local monasteries, and this may diminish the potential impact of the handbook. Nevertheless, it is a useful tool that has been distributed free of charge through Himalayan countries, and it is hoped that it will contribute to the preservation of thangkas in monasteries.

1.4. Material and techniques

1.4.1. Pigments

The study of the technique and materials of thangkas has been an ongoing interest for conservation scientists since Sankrityayana and Tucci. The scientific analysis by Mehra (Mehra 1970) Colinart (Colinart 1995, 1996) and Duffy and Elgar (2001), who investigated thangkas housed in European and American collections, confirmed most of the literature references. These list mainly mineral pigments such as azurite, malachite, cinnabar, orpiment, realgar, red lead, yellow and red ochre, associated with organic pigments in less frequent use: blue and red lakes, carbon black. The examination of more recent thangkas (18th and 19th centuries) from Mongolia revealed small but significant technical differences which would help the identification of Mongolian origin, including predominance of kaolin as a filler for the ground (as opposed to chalk in Tibet), coarser and more open weave canvas, white lead as a primary white pigment and copper chloride as green in addition to particular techniques of outlining and shading (Vestergaard 1996).

Bruce-Gardner however notes the slight differences between the pigments quoted from ‘questionable literary sources’ (Bruce-Gardner 1988) and the ones found by scientific analysis. Bruce-Gardner quotes from Tucci listing ‘green obtained from vitriol…vermillion obtained from carmine’, and from a Tibetan author, Trungpa, describing ‘yellow made from sulphur, green from tailor’s green stone’, statements which he finds ‘confusing and sometimes bizarre’ (Bruce-Gardner 1988, note 13, p 14). Mehra’s analysis of samples taken from 34 thangkas dating from the 16th to the 19th
centuries (Mehra 1970) seems to indicate that indigo was of common use (while it is mentioned as rare in literature). On the other hand, Jackson, during his field study with contemporary thangka painters, could not support the use of lapis, though it is often mentioned in literature (Jackson & Jackson 1984, p 79). Bruce-Gardner thinks it is 'worth endorsing Jackson’s findings, for in the infra-red examination of over 400 pre-19th century paintings, not once was the presence of lapis detected' (p 4), although he does not mention his source of scientific data. Results of more recent scientific examinations (Colinart 1995; Colinart 1996) on the collection of Musée Guimet, Paris, confirm this opinion, with the notable exception of an arsenic-based white pigment, detected in an early 14th century thangka, singled out as a most unusual finding in a painting palette. However, Moioli and Seccaroni, in their thorough scientific examination and study of 35 thangkas from the Giuseppe Tucci collection at the Museo Nazionale d’Arte Orientale in Rome, also note the presence of arsenic in certain colours (cream, pale pink and white) but attribute it to the adjunction of minimal quantities of orpiment to the colours, or to a degradation product of the same orpiment in the case of a white colour. Orpiment is a yellow pigment, a natural tri-sulfide of arsenic, which is mined in Eastern Tibet and in the nearby Yunnan province of China and is always found associated with realgar (red sulfide of arsenic) (Tabasso, Policchetti and Seccaroni, eds. 2008, p 224). Worth mentioning also is the scientific study of a Nepalese 15th century thangka from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which detected pigments such as gofun (shell white) and copper chlorides never previously documented in Himalayan painting on cloth (Leona & Jain 2003).

1.4.2. Support and ground
The support of the painting has been identified mainly as cotton cloth, although linen and silk have also been documented (Huntington 1970, Jackson 1984, Bruce-Gardner 1998, Elgar 2006). The composition of the ground varies from kaolin and calcium carbonate or calcite and kaolinite to calcite and lead white, the binding medium being animal glue (Mehra 1970, Huntington 1970, Elgar 2006). Tibetan contemporary artist Ge Wanzhang mentions also the use of a reputedly insect resistant vegetable medium made from the heart shaped root of a plant called ‘dbang po lag pa’ (Elgar 2006).

1.4.3. Colour notations
A particular area of interest for scientists is the study of the colour notations traced on the prepared ground after the drawing and prior to painting and their correspondence with the colours used (Duffy & Elgar 2001; Tabasso & al. 2008). This topic is also mentioned in Colinart's brief technical study in the exhaustive catalogue of the Tibetan
Buddhist paintings of Musée Guimet in 1995 and in Jackson’s study with contemporary painters (1984). Notations can be viewed with infrared reflectography examination and are generally Tibetan letters or numbers. While this practice is not always encountered, it has been regularly noted on thangkas as early as the 14th century and is frequent throughout Asia (Elgar 2006). It can be interpreted as a means of controlling the execution and its adhesion to the strict iconography rules, thus hinting that the planned painting had to be ‘approved’ by a monastic authority. This would be even more necessary in the case of Chinese assistant painters, as the presence of Chinese characters may attest (Tabasso & al., 2008, p.171). However, on some of the thangkas studied, the sheer abundance of notations seems to indicate that they were also used for practical execution needs. In these cases, the practice could have been to fill all areas of the same colour at one time. This practice may be derived from the use of hot glue as a binder, which sets rapidly and does not allow much modelling time. This constraint led artists to favour a sequenced work or sometimes a work in series. The abundance of notations also indicates the collaborative nature of the work divided between assistants and students (Elgar 2006, Tabasso & al., 2008). Elgar points out that colour notation is also used as a means to evaluate the exact amount of each pigment to be mixed so as to minimize waste, which explains that they are frequently found on paintings belonging to sets (Elgar 2006). The same practice of colour notations justified by work division and work in sequence is documented in European medieval painting, which was executed at the time with tempera technique, creating similar technical obligations and limitations (reduced modelling time, rapid setting of the medium) and also by large workshops (Tabasso &al. 2008). Jackson confirms this hypothesis and documents the use of the colour notations by contemporary master painters, as an indication for their assistants (Jackson & Jackson 1984, p 93). This does not however exclude the possibility of monastic control in certain cases of important commissions.

Variations between the notation and the colour observed are extremely rare, a conclusion shared by all authors, who mainly differ in their interpretations of the codes. The nine numbers of the Tibetan magic square of astrology (each number corresponding to a colour) are a common reference, but numbers can also be used with a colour code not derived from the same source (Tabasso & al., 2008, p.173). Jackson has documented the use of an alphabetical colour code based on the main consonantal elements of the name of the colour, with personal variants according to artists for mixed colours (Jackson 1984, p 93). Colinart and Béguin also suggest that the letters may refer to the colour but also to its material composition (Colinart 1995),
while Tabasso & al. reflect upon their mixed nature (Tibetan, Sanskrit and Chinese characters, letters and numbers) which they summarize refers to the base colour (letter) refined by numbers for different tones or gradations (obtained by various techniques) of the same colour. In any case, the use of the chromatic notations suggests a high level of preparation of the work, possibly shared within a painting workshop, which is consistent with both discussion in the literature of the rigorous training required to become a painter of thangkas and current contemporary practice.

1.4.4. Underdrawing

Under drawings have been studied in several cases (Colinart and Beguin 1995; Bruce-Gardner 1998; Tabasso 2008), suggesting that even if it is sometimes difficult to detect, scientific examinations always show the presence of a preparatory drawing, made with a fine brush, probably on top of a first stage with charcoal, as it is the case in current practice (personal observations in Zorig Chusum Institute, Bhutan, 1997 and in Tsering Art School, Nepal, 2005). Other methods of preparatory drawing include pouncing through stencils or printing with a woodblock, in which case a grid of vertical and horizontal lines can be applied using the snapping of a red or black inked cord (Elgar 2006). There are several known examples in museums and collections of iconographic treatises dating back to the 15th century, made by artists and masters, which provide the proportions of the deities and of specific themes (some of them contain also colour notations). Pentimenti (changes of composition, usually visible in infrared light) are not very frequent and usually limited to small details such as hairdos, belts and hemlines, again something consistent with the strenuous training and strict iconographic rules (Tabasso & al. 2008). Pal however has emphasized that ‘Tibetan painting offers us an astonishing variety of styles and manners which clearly demonstrate the fact that even the most stringent iconographic tradition cannot stifle the creative impulse of the artist as long as the source of his faith has not dried up’ (Pal 1984, p19). In the case of a complex but symmetrically composed image, the graphic indications for the construction may be fully developed only on one half of the image, a practice encountered on several of the paintings studied (Tabasso & al. pp137-138). Tabasso also details the technique of outlining the figures and details at the end of the execution, a typical characteristic of Tibetan painting.

‘Outlines are called ‘Chae’ in Tibetan, meaning distinctive boundaries, as the verses states ‘Sa-yee Gyen-ne Chag-re-yin’, (the glory of the land is the boundary). So too for painting, with ‘Tson-ghi Gyen-ne Chae-yin’ (the glory

Outlines are sometimes made with two different colours in the same painting, like in the definition of the eyes where the upper eyelid is delineated in black or indigo while red is used for the lower eyelid, following particular correspondences of colour (Tabasso & al. p 137). According to Vestergaard, they are generally more pronounced and with fewer nuances in Mongolian painting than in Tibetan painting (Vestergaard 1996).

On the whole, the disparate character of the research and research contributions and the historical differences of perspectives between conservation in the Himalayas and in Western museums make any type of consensus about thangka conservation a challenging goal. In the last twenty years, however, in the current stream of reflection about sacred objects and their care, some issues have been regularly identified as crucial for thangka conservation. The literature reflects an increasing need for discussion and for an agreement on renewed ethical standards for the care of these artworks. To achieve this will require continuing a collaborative reflection that includes Tibetan practitioners, contemporary communities, museums and conservators, and the sharing of experiences, questions and conclusions within frameworks such as the Forum on the Conservation of Thangkas at the 2008 ICOM-CC conference in New Delhi, or through internet-based discussion networks such as suggested by U. Griesser at this same forum.
2. Australian context

2.1. Private and public collections

This section and the information about collections and policies it contains reflect the discussions held with Australian collectors, curators and conservators involved with South East Asian art, within the framework of this research. The persons consulted are cited by name the first time unless otherwise requested, and referred to by initials thereafter. The research methodology is detailed in Chapter 3.

2.1.1. Description and characterization

Thangkas in Western collections come from the entire area of Tibetan influence, which goes roughly from Ladakh in the West to Sikkim in the East, and from Mongolia in the North to Nepal and Northern India in the South. Tibetan objects in Australia can be found in three main contexts; art galleries, private collections, and Australian Tibetan monasteries. The latter generally comprise only contemporary thangkas, which do not particularly require conservation; therefore these paintings have not been included in this research.

The collections in Australia and in the Western world grew from the interest for exotic or curious countries. The objects brought back by travellers (British colonel Younghusband in 1904, French explorer Jacques Bacot in 1907) together with their travel accounts (from Marco Polo to Mongolia in 13th century, to French adventurer Alexandra David-Neel in 1927 and war prisoner Heinrich Harrer in 1950) contributed to sustain this interest (on the circumstances surrounding the collecting of Tibetan objects during the Younghusband expedition, see Carrington 2003). Later expeditions in the first half of 20th century (Lionel Fournier, Giuseppe Tucci) led to further acquisitions of Tibetan objects. The political events in Tibet in mid 20th century caused a massive influx of Tibetan art on the Asian markets, arriving there through smuggling or looting.

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4 Jean du Plan Carpin, Franciscan monk, published ‘the History of Mongols’ after his visit to Kuyuk khan in 1246, where appear the first information about Tibet; Athanasius Kirchner published in 1677 the travel notes and sketchbooks of fathers Gruber and d’Orville who stayed two months in Lhasa in 1661. Capuchin father Desideri stayed in Lhasa from 1716 to 1721 and his book was published in 1904; George Bogle, Scottish emissary to Tibet seeking in 1774 the establishment of Anglo Tibetan commercial relationship, studied the language and civilization and married a Tibetan woman. His travel account was published only in 1876. Missionary fathers Huc and Gabet reached Lhasa in 1846 and their travel account became very popular. Swedish explorer Sven Hedin left numerous sketchbooks and maps from his travel to Western Tibet in 1906-1909. British representatives in Sikkim McDonald and Bell were admitted in Lhasa and published fine observations about Tibetan culture. Alexandra David Neel Voyage d’une Parisienne à Lhasa (Travel of a Parisian woman to Lhasa) in 1927 became extremely popular, as was Heinrich Harrer Seven years in Tibet in 1950.
or being sold by the Tibetans themselves for subsistence. Some of the major Western collections (mainly in the United States and Europe) have been formed in this period\(^5\). Private donations often constituted the basis for public institutions wishing to integrate other cultures in their collections, which then grew around these first building blocks.

A crucial factor for public collections is the legal provenance of the artworks. A museum has a strong legal obligation to check the provenance of any object (UNESCO 1970; ICOM 1995, Resolution 3). Countries that have accepted or ratified the UNESCO convention (Australia has accepted the convention on 30/10/1989) shall ensure that any object coming out of its country of origin after 1972 (when the convention entered in force) is accompanied by an 'export certificate'. Some argue that it is extremely difficult in the case of Tibetan art, which was often smuggled out of Tibet by Tibetans themselves after 1959. The certificates are given by China for Chinese works of art, but apparently not for Tibetan works of art (Carol Cains, curator, National Gallery of Victoria, 26/10/07; SL, oriental arts dealer, Hobart, 22/11/07); as there is no governmental authority internationally recognised who can deliver an export certificate, there does not seem to be any proper legal position for Tibetan artworks. For objects entered after 1972, the galleries must decide whether or not to adhere to the convention (which states that any public gallery is accountable for the objects in its care), and whether or not to take the risk of accepting an object of uncertified provenance\(^6\). Consequently, objects of known provenance have a very high price tag, making them unaffordable to most Australian public galleries. This situation has impacted on the growth of the public collections of South East Asian art and is one of the factors for their small size (CC, 26/10/07).

### 2.1.2. Public collections

Tibetan culture is represented in Australia in both public and private collections. Although there is not a museum of Asiatic Art per se, national and state galleries have significant Asian collections. For this research, only the galleries that house thankas have been considered. Overall the representation of Tibetan culture in Australian public

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\(^5\) John and Berthe Ford collection, USA, Shelley and Donald Rubin collection, USA, now exhibited in the Rubin Museum of Art, New York, Jucker collection, Austria, Rossi collection, Italy are some examples.

\(^6\) Recent events in the US have proved this risk to be serious: legal actions started by the Italian Government in 2005 against several museums such as J.P. Getty Museum or Metropolitan Museum of Art resulted in the return of extremely important pieces to Italy, while a separate trial is still in progress involving the former Antiquities Chief Curator from the Getty museum on the ground of conspiracy to acquire looted cultural property (FitzGibbon 2009, Povoledo 2009).
collections is relatively small compared to European countries (France, Germany) and the USA.

The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) has an important Asian department, with the Indian and Indian-derived traditions of South East Asia being given a central place (Galbally 1987). Tibetan and Himalayan art are classified in the ‘Art of South East Asia’ section. The collection has grown from early 20th century acquisitions; in fact the first objects to enter the NGV collection from the Indian subcontinent were from Tibet, and were mainly objects of ‘ethnographic interest’ (Galbally 1987, p 239). The earliest purchase in August 1922 was an apron worn in Tantric exorcisms, made from carved human bones. Other Tibetan objects were purchased in the following years, mostly coming from people serving in India, reflecting the increasing Western access to this country. Later acquisitions made through the Felton Bequest7 include a magnificent bronze standing figure of Avalokiteshvara dating from 18th century. In 1982 the separate department of Indian and South East Asian art was created, and the same year Sir James Plimsoll gave his collection of Indian and South East Asian sculptures and paintings to the NGV, most twenty one pieces of highest quality (Galbally 1987, p 239). This added ‘a depth and a range’ to the gallery’s collection. Today, for curator Carol Cains, the logic in the acquisitions is to favour objects of high artistic quality representing periods or geographical areas actually missing in the collection, with the aim of establishing a cultural panorama of the art in the region.

Several exhibition spaces are dedicated to Asian art, with a special gallery for South East Asian Art; a specific room, the ‘Asian Temporary Exhibition Space’, is dedicated to Asian Art thematic exhibitions. Though most Asian cultures are represented in the collection, Chinese art has a particularly large number of objects. There are 15 thangkas in the collection, along with other types of Himalayan artwork such as wood and bronze sculpture, paper, textile and jewellery. Some of the thangkas are displayed in the permanent exhibition, on a rotating basis, and some have been part of temporary exhibitions. Thangkas on display are usually hung vertically on the wall, in large window cases, together with other artworks such as sculptures and textiles. The curator of the NGV expresses interest for contemporary Tibetan art, although opportunities for acquisition have not yet emerged. She stresses that the gallery must weigh a number of factors when deciding to acquire a new artefact, including scarcity

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7In 1904, tycoon Alfred Felton left the equivalent of today’s $40 million to the NGV for acquisition of works of art, making it one of the most endowed galleries in the British Empire at the time. Since then, more than 15000 artworks have been bought with the bequest.
of high quality work, affordability and integration of the South East Asian collection. This broader context goes from Himalayan Buddhist art to Hindu Gandharan art, through other forms of Buddhist art (such as Thai or Cambodian) and other forms of Indian or Indonesian art.

The Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) also has a significant Asian collection, which started in 1879 with the gift of a large group of ceramics and bronzes by the Government of Japan. The collection has then developed around this, through acquisitions and with the help of individual donations. The new Asian Galleries opened in 2003 and allow extensive display of the permanent collection, as well as a temporary exhibitions space (Dr Chaya Chandrasekhar, Curator of South East Asian Art, 4/09/08).

Within the Asian Art Department, the Tibetan Art is found in the South Asian Art section, divided by countries. The collection has a total of 14 thangkas, as well as other objects (bronze sculpture, wood sculptures, and religious objects). The AGNSW website section on Himalayan art focusses on the religious significance

‘...The goal of an enlightened mind (bodhicitta) is achieved through practices which develop the ideals of wisdom (prajna) and compassion (upaya). One of the means by which to achieve this aim is through meditation. In the Tibetan tradition works of art are created as aids to ritual or meditative visualization. A work of art is thus a means and support to an experience of Buddhahood; it is intended not simply to be 'looked at' but 'entered into'. One artform unique in this regard is the thangka or 'portable icon'. Other distinctive visual forms of the Vajrayana tradition include mandalas (literally a 'circle', or sacred diagram), iconographic sculptures and ritual objects and implements.’ (AGNSW)

Thangkas are displayed on a rotation basis within window cases. The gallery organised in 2002 a major exhibition called 'Buddha. Radiant Awakening' which spanned Buddhist art from the second century to contemporary artistic expressions and displayed a large number of thangkas, coming from institutions and collections in Europe, USA and Australia (CCh, 4/09/08). The historic and religious meanings and practices were explored in detail in the catalogue in addition to the stylistic studies. Another major exhibition titled 'Goddess. Divine Energy' in 2007, exploring the many
manifestations of the divine female in Hindu and Buddhist art, included thangkas from the AGNSW and from private collections.

The National Gallery of Australia (NGA)’s Asian Art Department mostly houses works from Chinese, Indonesian, Thai and Japanese cultures. One of the strengths of the collection is Hindu and Buddhist sculpture, in which are found lost-wax cast bronzes of India and Southeast Asia. A highlight of the collection is the number of Southeast Asian textiles. The gallery’s website lists twenty Tibetan objects and five Mongolian objects; a small number of 19th century sculptures (some of them are sometimes on display), two manuscript covers, two daggers, three thangkas fragments and four thangkas, three of which are gifts to the gallery, make the extent of the Himalayan collection. The only thangka purchase dates back to 1999. At present, Himalayan art acquisition is not among the NGA’s collection acquisition priorities, and the NGA does not at the moment employ curators whose area of specialty is Himalayan art (Dr. Robyn Maxwell, South East Asian Art curator, 10/11/08)

The gallery has a large exhibition space dedicated for Asian art, divided by geographic regions. Only two of the thangkas have been displayed since they have entered the collection, each time as part of a temporary exhibition; at the time of my visits (10/11/08 and 26/09/09), one fragment was on permanent display (‘the Dakini Dechen Gyalmo’ 15th century) in a mount framed under glass, in the Mongolian section.

Fig.3 Small painting on display at NGA
2.1.3. Private collections

In Australia, the circle of Tibetan Art collectors is very small and connects curators of public collections, private collectors, Tibetan scholars and oriental art dealers in a close-knit network. The size of the collections is generally smaller than in European and American private collections. Interviews of some private collectors conducted within the framework of this project provided interesting insights into this world.

As previously mentioned, private collections of Himalayan art arose from the general interest in Tibetan Buddhist culture that developed worldwide in the last four decades. Motivations to collect art in general are various, ranging from financial investment to addition/compulsion, often with a sense of continuity and a passion for the things collected as a common point (Formanek 1994). This passion, subjected to financial means, times and personalities, is orienting the lives of the collectors, as explained by Misha Jucker, an important Swiss collector of Tibetan Art, in the foreword to the book dedicated to him and his wife’s collection

‘...These Tibetan thangka are... an inseparable part of our lives. Although we have not become scholars in these fields or converted to Buddhism or Hinduism, we have been immeasurably enriched by these wonderful manifestations of the ancient cultures of the Himalayas and subcontinent. Thangkas started their existence as an integral part of the religious life of Tibet, and now, in our part of the world, they have come to be appreciated as beautiful, fascinating and eloquent exponents of its ongoing heritage’ (Kreijger 2001).

Collections are different from accumulations; a collection is ‘an extended self’ opening different times and places for the collector, while establishing a type of order and control on the objects specific to one person and often impossible in museums (Pearce 1992). Art ownership generally implies education and refinement, linked to both a desire for social prestige and a sense of security procured by the possession of objects (Baekeland 1994). Collecting is a personal strategy of identity preservation, which frequently evolves in some urge for long-term recognition resulting in legacies to museums (Pearce 1992). Collecting has evolved through time, from the eighteenth century when the accent was on the curiosities, tangible witnesses of ‘an earlier stage of human culture, a common past confirming Europe’s triumphant present’ (Clifford 1994) to the twentieth century where ‘the attention turned from ‘things’ to ‘issues and people’ (Pearce 1992). Private collections reflect the trends of the time and are the
fertile ground for the creation of museums (for example the bankers Medici for the Uffizi Gallery in Florence; the prince of Condé for the Musée Condé in Chantilly; the explorer J. Bacot for the Musée Guimet in Paris; the ethnologist J. Kerchache for the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris).

The Australian private collectors of Himalayan Art interviewed for this research (two private collectors and one collector/art dealer) fit this profile. The choice of collecting this specific art, an extremely specialized area shared by few, gives them a particular place within the art collectors’ world. One couple mentioned that their interest for thangkas is generally not understood, because Westerners perceive the images as barbarian, horrible or bizarre.

The collectors interviewed generally concentrate on a particular type or a few different types of objects: bronzes, amulets, clay pressings, paintings, tsakli (small ritual paintings, generally on paper). In the collections visited for this research, thangkas’ representation varies from being only a small part of it to almost the totality of the objects.

One of the collections (comprising about thirty pieces) is centred on paintings (thangkas or tsakli), encompassing also Japanese or Chinese paintings, the driving factor here being the aesthetic. A coloured leaflet edited by the owners describes the collection, which is sometimes viewed by groups, in a museum-like manner.

The other collection expresses the deep interest for Tibetan culture of the owner, a recognised Tibetan scholar, at the time of interview working on his PhD in Tibetan studies. In this collection of a few dozen pieces the objects are not necessarily extremely precious or spectacular; it comprises amulets, tsakli, thangkas and domestic objects such as rifles or clay pressings. Although the collection is limited by space and economical constraints, the common thread is that most objects have significance in relation to the collector (period or character studied, connection with the topic represented). The main purpose is a visual and emotional dialogue between the objects and a particular individual. This collection has a highly personal and emotional identity that readily distinguishes it from a museum collection, by definition directed at a general audience.
Of particular interest within this research is the collection of an oriental art dealer based in Australia. Between a collection and a stock of merchandise (but referred to as 'a collection' by its owner), it is made of objects purchased through yearly travels in the Himalayas and China, which are then offered for sale in international art fairs and via Internet. Although some pieces remain the private property of the art dealer, most circulate freely in a not differentiated home/shop space. The collection is by far the most extensive and eclectic visited for this research. Many sorts of objects (sculptures, paintings, objects, costumes, textiles, etc.), of many sizes and periods are represented. The collection is driven by a passion about oriental objects, with a strong emphasis on Himalayan culture, and an extensive knowledge acquired through years of travelling and studying objects. This collection is a ground in which other dealers and collectors (in Australia, but mainly in Europe and USA) pick and build their own collection.

Economic factors are impacting on the building and evolution of Himalayan art collections. Interestingly, thangkas -once relatively easy to find and buy, are becoming unaffordable even for a primary market dealer; the reasons are the scarcity of good pieces (after the affluence of artworks in the 1960s) and the strong competition from collectors in China. The emergence of a rich middle class in an economically fast growing China has allowed people to buy antiques, whereas Western buyers previously largely dominated the market. No longer are thangkas sought after by scholars, museums and oriental art amateurs only, but also by a larger audience of Asian art-sensitive customers (SL, 22/11/07). The auction houses’ results in oriental art have significantly gone up in the last years, mainly due to that new component. At Christie’s Asia week, in autumn 2008, 12th to 16th centuries thangkas from the renowned Zimmermann collection of Himalayan art sold for prices going from US$242 500 to US$662 500 ⁸. The prices at a Himalayan art sale from a European private collection in New York City in September 2009 ranged from US$45,000 to over US$750,000⁹.

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⁸ Source: www.thecityreview.com/f08cas1.html, accessed 2/09/09

2.1.4. Choices of presentation

From this research, it appears that aesthetic quality is the primary criterion for selection in the public collections. In private collections, display options are more contrasted and reflect the different personalities of the owners; some collectors have chosen a museum-like display of thangkas in frames under Plexiglas, with particular care given to the choice of materials. All pieces are framed according to conservation standards on an acid free backing mount, using a reversible process (i.e. they are not adhered on the backing). If existing, the mounting is framed as well, in a box type frame, with the rods removed if possible (for the collectors’ aesthetic concerns). One thangka complete with rods and finials is displayed vertically on the wall without frame. In the art dealer’s collection, thangkas are displayed for sale either framed or free hanging, according to their condition, so as their aesthetic value is valorised, and accompanied by a description that situates them in their religious context.

On the other hand, one collector’s thangkas and Tibetan objects are displayed ‘in a homely Tibetan way, in an incense filled room’, mixed with books and statues, creating a Tibetan home environment for his home study room. The thangkas are free hanging, with scarves draped on them in sign of respect in the Tibetan manner. Only when they are too fragile are they framed in ordinary frames, as a temporary preventive way to avoid further damage.

The aesthetic choice fits the traditional Western paradigm of museums, based on artistic achievements, historic value and rarity (Pearce 1992). One of the primary missions of the museum, cited by the curators interviewed, is to display these artworks and preserve them for future generations. Aesthetic qualities and good material conservation are linked in the notion of ‘museum quality’ often mentioned in the art world. In this idea, objects of recognised artistic value may not be selected for a collection if their material condition is considered not good enough.

Although the artistic quality is the common thread through the museum, objects are classified for presentation to the public. The most common criterion is geographical, which refers to established and recognized scientific division of land, whereas historic or stylistic classifications result from interpretation. However, the aesthetic appreciation and understanding of the meaning of objects originating from other cultures can be uneasy without reference to the context. To overcome this limitation and link places to cultures, galleries use labels and notices. The exercise is presenting many difficulties;
how to present the context, which angle and which words to privilege within the museum context cannot be an impartial act, but instead is establishing the representation that the museum has of this other culture. Linguist Louise Ravelli, from University of New South Wales, analysed museums texts and concludes that 'objects do not speak for themselves; those who say and believe they do, are simply hearing their own pre-existing frameworks speaking back to them'. On the same issue, American museums professionals reflecting recently about labels in relation to sacred art identified areas of incertitude such as confusing or inexact words and differences in focus according to the background of the person writing the label (Hugues & Wood 2009). Recommendations included using both new and traditional vocabulary and overcome the limitations of one single person’s view by occasionally using multi labelling, i.e. present multiple perspectives from curator, insider to a tradition, faith leader, scholars, and attribute them clearly on the labels (Hughes & Wood 2009).

In the Australian galleries visited and in most private collections, the objects are de-contextualized. The context is referred to in the label or in the room’s general introduction. It may be a deliberate choice to enhance the physical beauty of the works or a strategy to attract people’s attention first to the object and then to the label. In all cases the agreement is that presentation is a balancing act between the imperatives of the general aesthetic policies of the galleries and the need to give an idea of a different culture in its original context. Curators and conservators acknowledge the fact that the Tibetan artefacts are out of context in Australian public collections. However, modifying this situation is not generally seen as a priority or even a necessity as the objects fall under the galleries’ general policies favouring the presentation of works of art above the presentation of the context (CCh, 4/09/08; CC, 26/10/07; RM, 10/11/08). Wishes are sometimes expressed for extended labels, or photos of thangkas in a monastery to give more information about the context, but are considered difficult to realize because of logistical reasons such as space restrictions (C.Ch 4/09/08).

The same attitude prevails regarding the religious aspect of the objects, which is generally acknowledged in the label, but not considered of paramount importance, again in line with the galleries’ policies. Attitudes can be nuanced however, with religion taken into account in the classification of objects, which are grouped not only by geographical area but also with objects from the same faith (NGA); or with emphasis on the faith on the website section referring to Tibetan art and in the room’s

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introduction text (AGNSW). At the same time, galleries are differentiated from places of worship. Sacred objects that originally were only intended to be seen by initiated people can also be objects of high artistic qualities, and are displayed in their new context as extraordinary artworks. As Richard Davis expresses, objects or ‘images’ have an ongoing life

“The lives of the...images... are made and remade through their encounters with differing audiences, who reciprocally bring with them different ways of seeing and acting towards the images they encounter…That the same object can be animated as idol or as sculptural art is considered a part of its life or biography, which is not limited to the time of their creation’ (Davis 1997, p 263).

Opinions differ however on the issue of displaying an object restricted in its originating culture; some curators have expressed their will not to offend any cultural group. If particular restrictions, confirmed by extended research, apply to some pieces (such as some black thangkas), they would prefer to follow them and not to display publicly the piece (CC, 26/10/07). Consulting with the cultural group concerned is mentioned as a means to inform these issues, as well as consulting with scholars in the field and accessing published research. Reedy’s study about the opening of Tibetan sculptures to access the contents, deemed disrespectful by most of the religious people consulted (Reedy 1991) is an example. Curators admit that particular requirements might not be possible to meet, and that compromises would have to be found. However, at the moment the issue seems to remain mainly theoretical, as there is little time for the research.

On the private scene, the collectors interviewed recognised thangkas as sacred objects for Buddhists, and respect them as sacred in other people’s belief and culture. They are ‘generally treated with respect’, ‘treated with great respect: kept high, never touch the ground’ However the religious aspect is not considered the most important in the new context. The importance is either the aesthetic quality or the personal meaning and connection of the owner to the object. For example, when seriously sick, some years ago, one collector bought a medicine Buddha thangka. In the same spirit, he always has on his desk a coin or a stamp related to the period he is working on, that ‘acts as a time machine’ and stimulates his mind for his research by placing things in location and time.
To summarize, the field research shows that collectors are mostly following privately the galleries’ aesthetic approach in the presentation of their thangkas. Galleries justify this approach by the general classification of museums and the ensuing differences between their policies. The assumption is that the study and representation of the intangible aspects of the objects is the mission of ethnographic museums, while the historic study and its representation in art are the mission of the art galleries (RM 10/11/08). The display of geographically identified and label-contextualized artworks is relying upon the objects’ aesthetic qualities (enhanced by the gallery’s context and its selection of objects) to establish a relationship between them and the viewer. It is also a choice that privileges the ‘surface value’ of the objects (Yaoi-Wei 2000) over the intangible meaning embodied into them.

2.2. Shift of values: from religious image to artwork
Collections are inseparable from the notion of value. Each collection is an image of a particular value or significance assigned to particular objects or group of objects. Chapter 4 describes in detail the values borne by thangkas in their culture of origin. These are firstly the spiritual and sacred value deriving from their connection to the gods, via the consecration ceremony and their use for religious meditation; secondly the social and historic value related to their subject or their role in religious teachings, and their prominent place in a society structured around Buddhism (see Chap 4. 2.).

The new context in which we now look at thangkas is shaped from a very different point of view. The traditional paradigm of an art gallery is based on a prominent value given to the artistic quality (see Chap. 2.1.). Being part of a museum collection is a guarantee of an object’s artistic value, confirmed by scholars who give it the academic seal. In this context, value also derives from rarity and authenticity, from the preciousness of the materials used (material value), or the high level of skills required for the object’s production, and from the object’s historic and social connections (Clavir 2002).

Historically the introduction of other cultures’ objects in the museums came both from the desire to reinforce Western identity through the exhibition of differences (in the wake of nineteenth century cabinets of curiosities) and to preserve these cultures, perceived as being inevitably on the verge of disappearance through their contact with modernity. Preservation in this case was intended not to show cultural models but
rather references against which civilization could define itself (Ames 1992, McDonald 1998).

In a Western collection, the original meaning of the objects is superseded by their artistic qualities and their historic and geographic relevance within the collection. This shift of value redefines objects to fit the criteria of the modern and secular world of collections; the spiritually and socially empowered elements of a given culture (including Western Christian culture), expression of this culture’s creativity, become ‘objects’ or ‘artworks’ which now relate to other artworks instead of to people (Price 2001). When Asian images became celebrated for their artistic qualities in the late 1890s, their idealisation as ‘sublime works of art’ went in parallel with a complete lack of interest for their ‘cultic and social functions’ (Faure 1998). Faure finds our modern gaze on Buddhist icons ‘violent’ because it operates a ‘dissection’ of the images that is protecting us from their power by elaborating a new theory of response to them. Faure recognizes however that this power is being acknowledged in modern art theory, and sees Walter Benjamin’s seminal notion of the ‘aura of the work of art’ as another way of defining the cult value of the work in spatial terms (Faure 1998).

Like museology and art history, conservation derives its ethical principles from modern scientific belief and is largely shaped by this mind set, reflecting Western values rather than the values of the non-Western creators of some of these collections (Clavir 2002). However professionals are questioning this attitude and preconising new approaches.

‘Until recently, ethnographic collections were considered primarily as witnesses to the past rather than as part of the cultures of people living in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. That they could be both, and that they could catalyse a dynamic two-ways relationship benefiting the people who created them as well as the museums who house them, is a principle many museums are now embracing’ (Clavir 2002, p 31).
3. Method of research

3.1. Methodology

After this overview of thangkas in their Australian context, it becomes clear that discussions with both Australian heritage professionals and contemporary Tibetan Buddhist practitioners are necessary to answer the purpose of this research: a critical assessment of conservation of thangkas in Australia in relation to their nature of living religious heritage. With these discussions in mind, the contemporary response to similar questions around the world will be examined, as well as how these questions are treated in conservation codes of ethics and practice. An informed discussion of the situation will then lead to conclusions and recommendations.

Given the specialization of the field, the chosen methodology was a qualitative analysis, conducted with two distinct groups of people

- Australian curators, collectors, art dealers and conservators in charge of Himalayan Art
- Tibetan practitioners in and out of Australia

The research was conducted via a series of in-depth face-to-face interviews (up to 1.5 hour), based on a discussion guide approved by the University of Melbourne Ethics Committee. With the agreement of the interviewees, extensive notes were taken during the discussions, which were not audio-recorded. Examination of the condition of some thangkas was conducted when possible.

Table 1 shows the type of people interviewed, the medium, the date and the approximate length of discussion. For the first group of people, the analysis was undertaken at 4 main levels

- Collection description and display (3 questions) concentrates on what types of objects make the collection, and on a simple description of the thangkas’ storage and display conditions with no further comments.
- Context and decisions (4 questions) explores the motivations behind the acquisition and display choices and asks the comparative importance of the religious aspect of the thangkas in the collection, in relation to display, handling, storage and conservation.
- Conservation issues (3 questions) surveys the technical issues and assesses whether they might be an impediment to the collection building and display.
- Conservators and Conservation treatments (3 questions) focuses on what the participants consider are the necessary qualifications and qualities for a conservator treating thangkas, and which steps are deemed or not useful for the conservation process.

The discussion was tailored to the needs of each participant, elaborating only on the points relevant to his/her case.

For the second group (Tibetan Buddhist practitioners), interviews were conducted either in writing or in a face-to-face discussion. Tibetan Buddhism practitioners discussed their feelings about conservation of thangkas in an Australian collection in relation with their religious view. The discussion led to questions such as whether thangkas displayed in Western collections had in their view lost their religious function, or whether certain practices in conservation or in museology were considered incorrect or offending to them. The question of whether or not consultation of a Tibetan cultural group by the collector/curator/conservator was appropriate or necessary was also raised.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of interviewee</th>
<th>Type of discussion</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Approximate length of discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.Tibetan scholar and art collector, Melbourne</td>
<td>face to face</td>
<td>24/10/07</td>
<td>2 hours (including thangkas examination)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.Curator, South East Asian Art, National gallery of Victoria</td>
<td>face to face</td>
<td>26/10/07</td>
<td>1.5 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.Collector of Himalayan Art, Melbourne</td>
<td>face to face</td>
<td>19/11/07</td>
<td>2 hours (including thangka examination)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.Textile Conservator, National Gallery of Victoria</td>
<td>face to face</td>
<td>15/11/07</td>
<td>1.5 hour (including examination of 1 thangka) joint interview with No 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Paper Conservator, National Gallery of Victoria</td>
<td>face to face</td>
<td>15/11/07</td>
<td>1.5 hour (including examination of 1 thangka) joint interview with No 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Oriental Art dealer, Hobart, Tasmania</td>
<td>face to face</td>
<td>22/11/07</td>
<td>3 hours (including examination of thangkas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Tibetan Reincarnate Lama, Chairman of NGO, Nepal</td>
<td>Via email</td>
<td>22/12/07</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Textile Conservator, having previously worked on thangkas in UK</td>
<td>face to face</td>
<td>17/3/08</td>
<td>45mn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Curator, South East Asian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales</td>
<td>Face to face</td>
<td>4/09/08</td>
<td>1.5 hour joint interview with No 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Conservator of Asian works on paper, Art Gallery of New South Wales</td>
<td>Face to face</td>
<td>4/09/08</td>
<td>1.5 hour joint interview with No 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Curator, South East Asian Art, National Gallery of Australia</td>
<td>Face to face</td>
<td>10/11/08</td>
<td>2 hours (including examination of thangkas). Joint interview with No 12, 13, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Textile Conservator, NGA</td>
<td>Face to face</td>
<td>10/11/08</td>
<td>2 hours (including examination of thangkas). Joint interview with No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The total of 17 interviews is a pleasing result, considering the research’s very narrow statistic base and some additional contextual factors, mainly linked with the research’s timing and political context.

A number of Tibetan practitioners contacted by letter or email chose not to participate, sometimes explaining their choice by the fact that they were not specialists in thangkas. This can be interpreted in several ways.

Firstly, Tibetan practitioners are concentrating on their role of diffusing Buddhist religion by teaching and practicing, and the success of this religion in Australia leaves them with little time for such queries.
Secondly, there was no big project such as an exhibition linked to this thesis and this may have accounted for the general feeling of ‘non emergency’ regarding this research. Tibetan monasteries in Australia are extremely solicited for all sorts of religious and philosophical advices, and participating in a university research might not be on top of their priorities.

Thirdly, the timing of this research was unfortunate. Questions were sent with a cover letter in February/March 2008, just before uprisings erupted in Lhasa (capital of Tibet Autonomous Region) in relation to the upcoming Beijing Olympic Games. The ensuing repression and its political repercussions on Tibetan government in exile resulted in a ‘Special Meeting’ of Tibetan authorities and organisations worldwide in Dharamsala in November 2008 to redefine the political line of the exiled Tibetan community in light of the recent events. While a growing number of the exiled Tibetans favour a more radical line, the ‘median way’ followed by H.H. the Dalai Lama was reasserted, but with much shorter term expectations, and a shift to more radical actions in case of failure of this renewed strategy was not excluded. The intensity of the tragic 2008 events and the overwhelming grief and questioning that are resulting for the Tibetans may understandably supersede in their minds the necessity to give advice to an Australian researcher about the attitude adopted by museums and collectors for the care of thangkas.

And lastly, there is generally a feeling in cultures victims of oppression to consider themselves less authorized to speak on specific topics, or a tendency not to push forward their opinion for fear of all sorts of problems linked to politics of power. Tibetans have a long experience of such things and a strong knowledge about tolerance and self-detachment through their religious practice. They may well prefer being left in peace rather than entering potentially controversial discussions, particularly when there is no scandalous or hurtful treatment at stake for objects or people.

Nevertheless, within the framework of this research, the persons from this group who answered the questions have largely concurring views; similarly, the views of the collectors and of the museums’ professionals are broadly concurrent, although not on the same topics. The findings are developed in more detail in sections 3.3 and 4.4. These discussions help mapping a tentative panorama reflecting the different approaches of the groups of people concerned by thangka conservation in Australia.
3.2. Key issues in material conservation

‘I believe it is important to preserve, enhance, extend and restore the precious Buddhist culture of Tibet. This culture guides and makes meaningful the lives of the Tibetan people and he many people who follow the Tibetan Buddhist tradition…. I feel that the Tibetan Buddhist culture has a unique heritage, born of the efforts of many human beings of good spirit…. I feel very strongly that Tibetan culture will have a role to play in the future of the whole of humanity’.

(His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Dharamsala, India, 12 October 1998, foreword to Rhie & Thurman 1999)

From visits and visual observations made during this research, conservation issues for thangkas in Australia appear to be related to the previous life of the thangkas. They often bear material traces of this life and use, and this may put their physical integrity in danger. For easier understanding the conservation problems are classified in two main categories, structural and aesthetic.

3.2.1. Structural issues

These are mostly coming from the regular religious use of the thangkas, which involves carrying, frequent rolling and unrolling, and hanging of a traditionally lightweight and relatively fragile work. Traditional storage in trunks in large numbers can also cause degradations, as can rodents and exposure to humidity, in storage or on the walls.

- Weakness of support: when not in use, thangkas are rolled tightly and stored in trunks often housing a large number of thangkas. The weight of other paintings stored on top is a major cause of damage for thangkas, as is the frequent rolling and unrolling. They produce structural degradations that range from brittleness of the canvas, crease and broken threads or slits, tears and lack of adhesion of the ground and paint layer to the support. When hung on the wall, such weaknesses can rapidly evolve into major tears and subsequent creasing and folding of the torn parts under their own weight’s constraint. Humidity also contributes to weaken the support, sometimes causing extreme brittleness in case of prolonged exposure. More fragile parts of the thangkas such as the muslin veil, the textile mounting and the ribbons are more prone to degradation by light, smoke, humidity and vertical hanging, and are often found in very
unsound physical condition, with tears and holes next to the hanging points or ruptured vertical threads in large areas, causing sagging of the remaining textile.

Fig.4 Thangka rolled and tied in the traditional manner

Fig.5 Tear to the upper part of the thangka, caused by hanging
- Missing parts of the textile mounts and/or the painted part are usually the result of rodents’ infestations. They very often consist in a series of repeated holes in one edge, decreasing in size with their position from the outside to the inside of the rolled thangka. Absence of the veil and ribbons and a bad structural condition of the hanging cords are frequent.

Fig.6 Repeated holes to the textile mounting from rodent attack

- Flaking of the paint layer and loss of paint in repeated long horizontal lines is characteristic of damage caused by rolling, unrolling and crushing in travel or storage. Long creased vertical lines attesting folding and crushing are sometimes present, referring to the sometimes difficult conditions in which the thangka was put after removal from its original setting (i.e. smuggling in backpacks, burying in safe places, and so on). Degradation of the glue-based
binding medium sometimes leads to powdery state of the paint layer, which does not evenly adhere to the support anymore and eventually to paint loss.

Fig. 7 Horizontal creases due to repeated rolling and unrolling

Fig. 8 Folding lines and loss of paint (from Pal 1984)
3.2.2. Aesthetic issues

These issues also arise from the use of the thangkas, as well as from the conditions of their storage, display or transport. As per any aesthetic damage, acting on them to reduce their visual impact is a debatable point that needs to consider the history of the piece and its intrinsic religious part. This will be discussed in the following chapters.

- Water damage is a major issue since the materials used in the painted part of thangkas are water sensitive. Water can cause aesthetic damages varying from stains and tide lines to complete dissolution of the paint and loss of image, with all intermediary states such as blurring of details and local micro losses due to water drops. Water exposure in storage is the most damaging because thangkas are rolled, which means the damage will affect more than one area of the paint. It generally results in vertically repeated paint losses decreasing in size from the outside to the inside of the roll.

- Surface deposits, mainly soot and dust particles, results from the exposure to butter lamps, and again are inherent to the religious use. A common term is that thangkas are ‘smoked’; as thangkas are generally hung above an altarpiece where the butter lamps are lit, the soot deposit affects generally the upper half more than the lower half. The thickness and darkness of the soot layer depends on the length and frequency of exposure; what can visually appear as a shiny patina is sometimes so dark that it makes the painting illegible or difficult to read. The greasy surface also attracts more dust and particles that contribute to the obscuring of the image and can be dangerous to the paint and textile due to their acidic nature. Other types of deposits can include pigment powder (ritual spreading), accidental accumulation of butter from the lamps, insects’ droppings or cocoons and any accidental paint or mud drops from adjacent repainting/repairing of a wall or an object.
Fig. 9 Humidity stain on the edge of a thangka

- Other aesthetic damages include repairs that have become too dark or brittle, or can be made of fragments of other pieces, local over painting and light fading. The latter is not very frequent when thangkas are in use because they usually hang in relatively dark places. However private shrines or any dealer shop in subsequent episodes may not offer the same light condition. Usually the textile part of the thangka, being more sensitive to light, fades before the painted part, and serves as an indicator that the light exposure is excessive.

Over painting of the main faces is not uncommon, and usually happens over a very dark layer of soot that made the face almost invisible, as it occurs also on gilded statues whose faces are regularly repainted. It is however more likely to happen to large compositions where the deity’s face is prominent visually. Other types of repair that have an aesthetic impact can include patches sewed directly through the paint layer with subsequent loss of paint through the holes, or adhesives that have penetrated from the reverse and stained the face of the painting.
3.3. Australian perspective on conservation

Conservation depends on the context in which the objects are placed. The opinions and attitudes about conservation collected in this research are logically linked to the general approach described in Chapter 2. All conservators interviewed, sometimes conjointly with the curators, sometimes individually, either presently work or have previously worked in public institutions, have at some point in their careers been confronted with thangkas for conservation treatment and have determined their approach in agreement with the curators legally in charge of the objects. In the private sector, the collectors interviewed had not come across conservators having experience with thangkas, the author being the first to their knowledge. This explains the lack of private conservators in the interview panel.

3.3.1. A paper, a textile, a painting?

Interestingly, thangkas needing conservation are usually treated by textile conservators working in liaison with their colleagues either of paper or painting specialty. For this research, I was referred alternatively to paper or textile conservators, while painting conservators either briefly participated to the interviews or not at all, according to their involvement with thangka conservation treatments. The choice seems to depend mainly on the interest shown by the conservators, as well as on their availability. Most conservators have attended an academic training in conservation in Australia, with the exception of a conservator specialized in treatment of Asian scrolls, who trained in Sichuan and was in charge of the treatment of thangkas at the AGNSW.

In the past years there has been two workshops on thangka conservation in Australia, the first one in 2005 at the NGV in Melbourne, delivered by Ann Shaftel, a Canadian thangka conservator; the second one was held recently (October 2009) at the NGA in Canberra, by Mike Wheeler, paper conservator and Teresa Heady, textile conservator, both from the UK. David Wise, a painting conservator from the NGA who presented pigments’ analysis, Edie Young, a Masters candidate on appliqué thangka technique, also from the NGA and myself also participated to the workshop presentations. Both workshops were mainly attended by paper and textile conservators, and only very few private painting conservators (from personal observations and comments collected during interviews).

Interestingly, in the interviews made during this research, the conservators described the painted part of the thangka as ‘painting’, ‘paper’, or ‘linen’ (technically it is a
distemper paint on cloth - most of the time cotton, sometimes silk, rarely paper or linen). This illustrates the difficulty to fit thangkas in any traditional conservation classification organized by materials, because of their composite nature. The existing gap between them and ‘traditional’ Western paintings leads to a relative lack of interest from painting conservators, at least in Australia. This is not reflected internationally, with many recent publications on thangkas due to paintings, paper and textile conservators (Elgar 2006, Cotte 2007, Wheeler 2009). The Textile, Painting and Ethnographic Objects groups recently organized a forum about thangka conservation during the 2008 ICOM-CC conference, which shows that collaborative approaches are gaining interest from conservators.

Thangkas are only one of many groups of objects that do not fit neatly any material category (think of mixed media installations, audio visual or electronic works of art, painted textiles, ceremonial masks for example). While traditionally conservators have strongly identified with materials of their specialty, the increasing realization of the inherent flaws of this attitude leads to a growing acceptance that the future of conservation lays in collaborative approaches. Another remark raised by these recent workshops and symposia is the growing interest for thangkas amongst conservation professionals. This can be put in the broader context of conservation’s examination of its role and possibilities in approaching other cultures’ objects that has informed a lot of recent thinking in the field.

3.3.2. Minimal approach
Conservators described generally their approach to thangkas as minimal; great care is given to the documentation and condition report, while intervention is in line with the overall preventive approach of the galleries: local consolidation of the paint layer with low concentrated water-based adhesive is the type of treatment that was mentioned. No attempts have been made for cleaning by conservators in the major galleries, as it is considered either unnecessary or undesirable.

There is a general consensus amongst conservators on inpainting: less is more, or in this case, nothing is best. Being in general justified by the overall good condition of the artworks, but also by the lack of necessity or suitability, it is a non existent issue:

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11 The International Council of Museums, Committee for Conservation, holds a triennial international meeting dedicated to conservation issues. The Committee for Conservation is divided into working groups defined by either materials or interests. The Textile, Painting and Ethnographic objects groups organized a half-day symposium on thangka conservation as a joint venture during the September 2008 conference.
aesthetically damaged artworks will not be purchased by galleries, nor will damaged artworks be borrowed for exhibitions if they need more than a minimal intervention\(^\text{12}\).

### 3.3.3. Storage

Storage is always addressed carefully, with many different solutions applied within the same collection according to the physical condition of the objects. The emphasis lays on preventive conservation, so conservation decisions are usually not driven by emergency. The assumption is that when an object enters the gallery, it is unlikely to deteriorate further as it will be regularly monitored (RM 10/11/08).

According to their condition, thangkas will be stored flat in a non acid box, separated with tissue paper, sometimes on a padded mat, or rolled with intermediary tissue paper and wrapped in tissue paper, in a custom made non acid box. The NGV plans to purchase a metallic drawer unit to store thangkas flat in individual drawers, laid on archival non acid trays, which is hoped to be completed soon (depending mainly on available time). Some problematic cases (damaged thangkas donated to the gallery) lay in storage in flat drawers on sheets of acid free card and are protected with tissue paper, should one day the decision be made to display (and therefore treat) them (NGA). Thangkas which have been changed by previous interventions before their accession to the gallery are stabilized as they are: in one case the painted part was laid on masonite or on paper (NGV), in another one a large thangka was stretched on a stretcher (NGV); at present there is no project for any fundamental intervention in both cases. From the conservators’ own admission, the work schedule is driven by exhibitions, and the workload such created is so big that there is no time for the backlog.

### 3.3.4. Textile mountings

Where present, textile mountings are treated with a similar minimal approach, i.e. local consolidation with heat sealed patches or stitched silk backing. The emphasis is on the backing colour being the closest possible colour match, and on preserving every information such as previous stitches, labels, etc. Dismounting and remounting may be necessary to treat the different parts, and this is done if possible reusing the same stitching holes. The consensus here is to keep the mount on the thangka and do what is necessary to make it structurally sound, enabling the display in a way sympathetic

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\(^{12}\) This concept of minimal intervention is being challenged by Salvador Munoz-Vinas who prefer to speak of balanced loss compensation, which acknowledges the subjective decisions made by conservators (Munoz Vinas 2009).
with the artist’s original intent. Cleaning is more routinely performed in textile conservation and therefore the textile components of thangkas have sometimes been cleaned, using either dry or wet techniques. However, a textile conservator who previously worked on thangkas at the British Museum prefers a no-cleaning approach, as dirt is informing the use in a temple and therefore part of the artwork’s history.

Generally no attempt is made to recreate or suggest a textile mount when it is missing. However it can be done occasionally, for private thangkas only, which have been borrowed by galleries for a particular exhibition (AGNSW). The conservator, trained in a Sichuan centre, deducted the proportion of the mounting from the painted part’s dimensions, and could recreate the missing mount; the principal aim was to present the thangkas looking their best for the exhibition.

3.3.5. High professional standards for all types of objects

To my knowledge, there are no particular guidelines for sacred objects in the galleries visited. All the persons interviewed, however, declare being aware of the religious character of thangkas. The Asian Paintings conservator mentioned several times that he ‘asks the lama’ about the appropriate attitude. This could be the necessity of treating cracks, the relevance of inpainting or the recreation of a mounting on a private thangka for an exhibition at the AGNSW. The lama he refers to seems a moral authority more than a physical one; he describes the process as not directly asking a Tibetan lama but consulting ‘Chinese people who know about it’. His training and his habit of consulting the lama are leading his practice, and his advice is ‘to understand something to Buddhism prior to trying to treat a thangka or any Buddhist object’. This brings in mind Yaoi-Wei’s statement (2000) that museums bear a significant responsibility in the way they introduce the public to other cultures. In Australia, access to Buddhist culture is largely open via literature, media, Internet, and sometimes via local monasteries. However, for a visual experience, people rely essentially on the galleries.

The conservator adds that if a (private) thangka with a recreated mount is not dismounted after exhibition, but is maintained permanently in this new state, it will then need a consecration by the lama. Although the gallery does not challenge the conservator’s expertise, there is clearly a line drawn on compromises; replacing little bits of brocade is accepted, while recreating a mount is reserved for private objects on loan for exhibition. The conservator’s practice informed by specific knowledge and
religious consultation is accepted as long as it coincides with the overall minimal conservation approach of the gallery.

In both other galleries, the minimalist and preventive approach adopted is generally felt in line with the respect required for such objects. Every object is handled with gloved hands, as a precaution that can also coincide with a mark of respect. Storage in a box (= in darkness) echoes the muslin veil that covers the thangkas, translating respect in a museological sense. The treatments are based on material specificity rather than on religion, and are discussed with curators and conservator colleagues within this professional framework, at a highly professional standard. Researching contexts and appropriate measures is the curator’s mission, who then relays it to the conservators. Conservators research technique and materials, and seek information from other institutions having the same experience, using direct contact or on-line forums; they sometimes express the wish for more research/discussion time to reach a more overall approach, which is not always possible due to time constraints. Potential religious restrictions are not an issue, as the objects are now in a museum environment, which supersedes any previous context. However, if there are any restrictions that the conservators are made aware of, they will be sensitive to them: for example, since the 2005 thangka workshop, the NGV conservators avoid pointing at the thangkas with the hand facing down, and are aware of the religious practice of water aspersion\footnote{A practice which consists in projecting blessed water towards the thangka using the fingers.} which explains some water traces on thangkas.

The scientific framework is clearly the reference here; knowledge comes from research about history and context, which enlightens any particularities, precautions or attitudes to be potentially encouraged/discouraged. Consultations with religious people are mentioned either as a possibility if there is a feeling of existing knowledge that is indispensable or as something unnecessary in the case of an art gallery. In both cases an analogy is drawn with other objects from different cultures, arguing that no consultations are being done with Japanese Buddhists, Indian painters or African artists before treating scrolls, miniatures or masks. The feeling is that the institution creates a culture of its own, with its own references and rules, which models and protects the people and the objects alike within its moral authority. Research seems to be privileged with people operating in similar frameworks, whose knowledge is accepted and relied upon, while cross field research involving interaction with people whose references and sets of values are radically different is a more exceptional approach.
4. Thangkas: a living religious heritage

4.1. Description and technique

4.1.1. Structure

Tibetan painted banners or thangkas not only belong to the Himalayan cultural heritage, but also are still produced and worshipped today as part of a living tradition. Their existence is linked to the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet in the 7th century, although the earliest known examples date from the 13th century, probably because of their physical fragility (Beguin 1995). Thangkas can be found in the whole area of Tibetan cultural influence, which stretches from the Himalayas (they are also called “paubha” in Nepal) to Mongolia in the North (Pommaret 2002). The essentially religious character of Tibetan art is well expressed by the Tibetan words describing painters or sculptors: lhadripa (deities’ draftsman), or lhazopa (deities’ maker) (Lo Bue 1997).

The central painted component, often studied stylistically, is only one element of the complete thangka. The silk mounting has its own iconography and symbolism, which has been described in detail with its structural evolution and regional stylistic variations by Huntington (Huntington 1970). The shape of the silk framing has evolved throughout the centuries, from two rectangular pieces placed on top and bottom only and no side pieces to trapeze-shaped superior and inferior parts, with long and narrow side pieces, with many variations inside this overall description (Huntington 1970). Each part of the silk frame has a symbolic significance, and ‘each thangka, complete with its borders, represents a complete cosmological picture of the universe as well as an image of a specific deity’ (Huntington 1970).

The thang-mtha (silk frame) is composed of (see fig.10)

- The ja’-dmar-ser (red and yellow rainbow) (2) are the two narrow red and yellow silk frames directly surrounding the painting, and symbolizes the cosmic brilliance emitted by the deities in the composition (source: Huntington 1970).

- The long side parts are called gya-pa (right one) and gyon-pa (left one) (3), symbolizing the exoteric (unsecret) and esoteric (secret) teachings of Buddhism. They are also considered as pillars or paths along which Buddhist ascend to the state of transcendental knowledge.
- The lower part surrounding the *rtsa-ba* is called in Tibetan the *sa* (‘earth’ or ‘place’) (4); it implies the earth as one of the five cosmological elements, and includes a notion of equality in all things, in that case the monk practitioner and the deity on the painting.

- The *thang-sgo* (door of the thangka) or *rtsa-ba* (root or source) (5) a rectangular piece of fabric placed in the centre of the lower part, symbolizes the passage to the transcendental knowledge and the cosmogeneric source of the entire thangka.

- The horizontal upper part is called *gnam* (sky) (6). It is a sort of counterpart to the *thang-sgo* (where all things arise) and symbolizes *sunyata*, the concept where all things return, and ‘the ultimate unity of the individual’s reintegration with the cosmic universal in Nirvana’ (Huntington 1970).
Other elements complete a thangka: a wooden rod (thang-shing) ormed with metal chiselled finials (thnag-tog) and a smaller upper rod serve to hang and to roll the thangka from lower part to upper part. The mousseline veil (zhal-khebs) has two functions: protecting the painting from dust and soot, and protecting it from the gaze of uninitiated viewers. The ribbons (thang-'dzar) also serve two functions: weighed by a small amount of sand, they fall on both sides of the veil, preventing it from lifting in drafty conditions, and can also be used to tie the thangka once it is rolled (Beguin 1995). The cords are stitched to finish and protect the internal and external edges of the silk frame, and the optional leather corners (on the two upper corners) reinforce structurally weak points. A fabric cord stitched through the upper edge serves to hang the thangka. The part of the cord that lies on the face just under the upper rod, also serves to maintain the veil lifted (personal observations).
Thangkas are usually hung above an altar in a temple, a monastery or a private shrine. The Tibetan name *thangka* is generally translated as ‘something you can unroll’ (Beguin 1995, Ngari Rinpoche 2005) or ‘something to roll’ (Schoenholzer-Nichols 1988, Bruce-Gardner 1988) from the Tibetan *thang* (flat surface) (Dhungel 2005, Jackson 1894). This refers to one of their main physical characteristics; unlike Western paintings, thangkas are not stretched, but remain flexible and are alternatively seen in a rolled or unrolled state according to the moment. Another interpretation of the name is a derivation from the Tibetan *thang yig* meaning ‘annal’ or ‘written record’ (Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche 1975).

Fig.11 Thangka hanging in a monastery

The central part of a thangka is painted, embroidered or made of appliqué technique. This technique consists in the assemblage of numerous pieces of fabric cut to shape, stitched on a fabric background. It is generally used for giant thangkas, which are unrolled periodically for specific ceremonies, requiring dozens of people for the operation, and then cover the entire façade of a temple or even the side of a hill (Jackson & Jackson 1984), but smaller pieces can also be found. Painted thangkas are however the most common ones and will be the focus of this thesis. Their technique is described in more detail in the next section.
Fig. 12 Giant thangka unrolled on a hillside in Amdo, Eastern Tibet, circa 1930
(From Jackson & Jackson 1984)
4.1.2. Technique of thangka paintings

This technique is a living tradition that has varied little since the early ages. It is still taught in paintings schools such as Tsering Art School in Shechen monastery, Nepal, Norbulingka Thangka School in Dharamsala, India and Zorig Chusum Institute in Thimphu, Bhutan, as well as in numerous workshops in the Kathmandu valley. The painting support is generally plain weave cotton, varying from very fine and tight weaving to coarse and loosely woven fabric. Prior to execution, the cotton canvas is manually stretched on a wooden frame, using a system of wood sticks and lacing. In this way the surface is maintained flat to allow drawing and painting. After completion, the canvas is released from the working frame and left ‘free hanging’ (Jackson & Jackson 1984)
The ground is made of animal glue and white chalk or kaolin, sometimes slaked lime; it is worked into the fabric from both sides, carefully polished with a pebble between successive layers (Jackson & Jackson 1984). Polishing is very important to obtain a smooth and thin surface to receive the paint and to ensure enough flexibility for frequent rolling and unrolling. When the ground has not been carefully worked into the canvas, but only spread on the surface, it becomes more prone to cracking and flaking. Technical examination of thangkas in Western collections has confirmed this technique, with the presence of regional variations (Mehra 1970, Huntington 1970, Agrawal 1975, Colinart 1995a and b; Colinart 1996).

The drawing is made with charcoal (nowadays pencils), directly or by the pouncing method. Iconographic rules are very strict and it takes several years of apprenticeship to master the correct proportions and acquire the proper dexterity (Jackson & Jackson 1984). Tibetan Buddhists believe that drawing with wrong or clumsy proportions is disrespectful for the deity represented; moreover, because the contours are redrawn at the end of the execution to visually close the shapes, the definition and the fluidity of
the lines are extremely important. Tibetan painters achieve a very high degree of precision and balance in their paintings, which does not exclude some vividness and humour in the numerous peripheral scenes in the composition (Jackson & Jackson, 1984).

Fig. 15 Detail of a thangka from Musée Guimet, Paris.
Fig. 16 Sketches and colour testing on the side of a thangka

The colours are traditionally mineral pigments (yellow and red ochre, malachite, azurite, cinnabar, orpiment, chalk and kaolin are commonly used), and a few organic pigments (carbon black, indigo, and red lakes and dyes); today the pigments are often synthetic, readily available in India, but some painters maintain the traditional palette (Mehra 1970, Jackson 1984, Colinart and Beguin 1995). (See chap 1.4. for more details on pigments)

Pigments are mixed in a mortar with animal glue, and thinned with water for execution (Jackson & Jackson 1984; personal observations, Bhutan and Nepal, 1996, 2005). The colours are applied flat as a first layer; the details and shading are then put in place, in several superimposed layers; the final outline is made usually with indigo or dark red colour; the golden details are also added at this stage (Jackson & Jackson 1984). Colours are associated with specific deities and have a symbolic meaning, as described by Amy Heller

‘The ritual stipulation categorizes white as the base colour for peaceful deities, yellow as the colour for deities associated with development of wealth and worldly aspirations, red for deities worshipped for subjugation of
evil influence and black or dark blue for fierce protective deities or coactive rites. The walls of mural paintings of the wrathful guardian chapels were typically painted with black background in correspondence to the rituals for these protectors. The portable paintings thus reflect the ritual models. ‘(Heller 1999, p 193)

Once laid, the golden areas can be burnished (flat burnishing of the whole area, or selective burnishing when patterns are drawn with a burnisher on golden flat areas), creating different gloss effects that would show in the low and raking light of the butter lamps placed on the temple’s altar (Jackson & Jackson 1984; personal observations).

At this stage, some thangkas of particular importance or belonging to a large set receive inscriptions in gold letters under each major figure. Some artists would then burnish the back of the painting, as they believed that it would make the painting soft and more resistant to cracking (Jackson & Jackson 1984).

There is no protective coating on a thangka. After completion, the painted part is inserted in the silk brocade using stitches. The upper and lower wooden rods are inserted into sleeves prepared in the mounting. Often the lower wooden rod is also glued to the mounting (personal observations).

The muslin veil, plain or block printed and the two silk ribbons are stitched to the top. The mounting is finished by the stitching of a thin cord inside the window for the painted image, and outside the vertical edges. The thangka is then hung by a leather or cotton string on the top (Huntington 1970b).

Fig.17 Reverse of a thangka with backing. The flap window allows seeing the inscription on the reverse
A backing of raw silk is sometimes present, stitched to the perimeter on the reverse. Its dimensions are slightly larger and longer than the front, thus allowing easy rolling without overstretching or tearing the backing. When the thangka is unrolled, the backing flows on the reverse with a few bulges (Jackson & Jackson 1984).

4.2. Religious and spiritual context

4.2.1. Historical and cultural context

The name ‘Tibet’ brings immediately to the Western mind images of red-robed monks in a landscape of snowy peaks; in reality Buddhism, generally considered to have always been the main religion and the fundamental of Tibetan society, was introduced from its surrounding neighbours India and Nepal in the seventh century, and developed in a pastoral society previously mainly organized on a war footing (Snellgrove 1968). The early Tibetans tribes saw men as easy prey to the demons ever present in the rugged landscape. Their religion, known as Bön, was a complex system of shamanic practices revolving around mountain ancestors-gods (the most famous of them being Mount Kailash, still a prominent pilgrimage site) who needed to be propitiated in compensation for the use of their domain (Snellgrove 1968, Karmay 2005). These local demons were held responsible for misfortunes and diseases, and regular sacrifices were offered to appease them. Snellgrove and Richardson (1968) and Tucci (1970) describe the Tibetan predilection for the fantastic, monstrous and magical

‘The entire existence of Tibetans is suffused and coloured by the experience of the sacred; ... man is face to face with divine and demonic powers, touchy beings inclined to anger...who will need worship and nourishment... Tibetans live in a permanent state of anxiousness and uneasiness, searching for the cause of threatening events and means to ward it off ‘(Tucci 1970)

The conflict between helpful (whose protection has to be gained) and harmful (whose anger is to be appeased) forces was the basis for the complex web of rituals, sacrifices, conjurations and magical practices that is still preserved today in some areas of Tibetan culture (East Tibet and Mustang mainly) (Tucci 1970, Dhungel 2002, Karmay 2005).

Buddhism in its ancient Indian tradition became around the seventh and eighth centuries the dominant religion in Asia, but started in Tibet only as a court interest,
favoured by the kings’ Chinese wives and followed only by the high society (Snellgrove 1968). Buddhism had two periods of diffusion in Tibet. The first one in the seventh/eighth century with the great Indian tantric Master Padmasambhava coming to Tibet and establishing the foundations of the tradition (notably founding the monastery of Samye in the eighth century) ended with the assassination of King Lang-dar-ma’s circa 842, which opened a troubled political era in the region. The second diffusion of Buddhism started with the visit of the Indian spiritual Master Atisha in 1042 and saw the successive foundations of the different traditions and their monasteries. In time, Tibetans were to develop such an enthusiastic interest that it is impossible to separate the history of Tibet from that of lamaic Buddhism. Tibetans developed Mahayana Buddhism (where the ultimate goal is the enlightenment of all sentient beings) and gradually turned it into ‘a unique blend of indigenous culture and foreign influence’ (Snellgrove 1968), which has sometimes been regarded as a corruption of original Buddhism, polluted with demonic worship (Lopez 1995). Bön absorbed Buddhist doctrines and practices while Buddhism fitted old Tibetan Bön gods and indigenous rites into the framework of the new religion. Buddhism disappeared from India in the twelfth century, mainly due to Muslim advance in Northern India, and gradually from all adjacent countries with the rise of Hinduism. By the thirteenth century the Tibetans were the sole practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism, which they practiced almost unchanged until the mid twentieth century (Snellgrove 1968).

Tibetan Buddhism is divided into four main religious schools: Nyingmapa, Sakyapa, Kagyupa and Gelugpa (the Dalai Lamas’ tradition). They mainly differ by the importance given to particular texts and oral teachings from great spiritual masters (lamas). However all of them follow the same general doctrine, based on the impermanence and on the karma (weight of actions), and encompassing the concept of the cycle of reincarnations (samsara) from which all humans aspired to be freed through enlightenment (Pommaret 2002). The ritual practices have a great importance and are aimed at accumulating merits through pious actions, in order to be successively reincarnated in better living beings, and ultimately reach Enlightenment.

All four religious orders emphasize the monastic discipline and the study of the philosophy through the great masters’ texts and all practice the tradition of philosophical debate. Snellgrove and Richardson believe that Tibetans, although they became extraordinarily competent in gaining knowledge (translation of sacred Sanskrit texts was a very important activity for centuries) and in the practical uses (mainly yoga and magical practices), never developed much creativity and imagination in relation to
the religion. To illustrate their point, they state that Tibetan great custom of religious debates is based on the tradition they learned from, but never includes doubts or questions concerning this very tradition. This infallible faith in the words of the great masters explains to an extent the ‘extraordinary potency of the religion practices’ (Snellgrove 1968) and the overwhelming presence of religious rituals and artefacts in Tibetan life. Claire Harris however challenges this idea of a relatively sterile creativity in her 1999 study of contemporary Tibetan painting (in the exiled community as well as in Tibet). Her study shows that nowadays there are other forms to Tibetan painting than thangkas or religious murals, which leads her to question ‘the existence of ‘Tibetan art’ before 1950 as anything other than an object constructed in the paradigms of Western knowledge’ (Harris 1999).

Until 1950, religion permeated the whole layers of society and was the only component of ‘high cultural life’ (Snellgrove 1968). Through time it became intimately linked with history with the rise to political power of the Dalai Lamas (‘Ocean of Wisdom’) in the seventeenth century. Monasteries developed through close relationships with the adjacent villages, catering for each other’s needs. Religious people performed ceremonies and rituals against offerings of tea, food or money, allowing every person to accumulate merits for their future rebirth. The political system known as chösi nyindre (‘religion and politics joined together’) gave to religion ‘a much more powerful role than commonly found in other societies’ (Goldstein 1998). This complete interpenetration of religion and everyday life remained remarkably unchanged until 1950, in a society characterized by the ‘ready acceptance of the traditional order of things’ (Snellgrove 1968). The extreme conservatism of the monastic order led them (unfortunately, in light of the later events) to oppose the thirteenth Dalai Lama’s desire for foreign contacts in the first part of the twentieth century. This hampered the establishment of any close relationship with other countries (apart from local trading) and resulted in a complete isolation on the international scene (Pommaret 2002), which was to have dramatic consequences. When Chinese armies occupied the country in 1950, Tibet’s lack of alliance treaties, of solid relationship with another country or of membership to international organizations resulted in the world’s reaction not being much more than stern condemnations, leaving the people defenceless and with no other choice but submission. A few years later, in 1959 the 14th Dalai Lama (then aged twenty three) and numerous Tibetans fled the country to India. During the subsequent Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), it is estimated that about 90% of Tibetan heritage was destroyed (Harris 1999). The ensuing looting of monasteries or selling of their treasures by exiled Tibetans for survival contributed to feed the international
market that had first emerged with the objects brought by the few Westerners who travelled to Tibet in the first half of the century. As a result the most important part of Tibetan ancient heritage is today in the hands of Westerners, either in private or in public collections.

Since the Chinese occupation of Tibet, Tibetan society has strived to maintain its culture in exile. The fourteenth Dalai Lama heads the Tibetan government in exile in Dharamsala (Northern India) and travels the world on a regular basis to create general awareness for his culture. Tibetans have always played an historic role in the region as Buddhist advisers and spiritual teachers to the Mongol, Ming and Manchu emperors, in exchange of military protection. This comforts today’s Tibetans in their view of ‘religion as a symbol of their country identity’ and in their belief that ‘they are the representatives of a great and indeed exemplary civilization’ (Goldstein 1998). The enthusiastic reception given to Buddhist teachings in their adaptation to Western audiences reinforces the feeling of worthiness of this culture, not only in the Diaspora but also in the broader international world.

Tibetan scholarship before 1950 had traditionally been confined to classical studies (literature, history, traditional medicine and religion), perceived as belonging to the higher culture (Snellgrove and Richardson 1968). Since Giuseppe Tucci’s first studies of Tibetan culture, which established connections between classical Tibetan texts and history, architecture, art and iconography, Western scholarship on Tibetan culture has developed. The emergence of a new generation of Tibetans educated in the West and publishing in Western languages (i.e. Samten Karmay, Dawa Norbu), the presence of well established chairs of Tibetan studies in Europe (London, Paris, Rome, Bonn are the main ones), and in the USA (Seattle, Berkeley, Bloomington and Harvard Universities) where Tibetan and Western staff work in collaboration (quoted in Snellgrove 2003 edition) is now a strong indicator of cultural survival in the future.

In the land itself, after imposing a total closure of the country for a few decades, China has very recently realized the touristic potential of Tibet. As a result it started a program of renovations of monasteries and opened its doors under particular conditions. In 2006, a train line reached Lhasa, allowing thousands of Chinese and foreign tourists to enter ‘the forbidden city’, and to visit the Potala (Dalai Lamas’ palace) and the Jokhang (most important temple). At the same time, demonstrations for Tibetan independence in 1987, 1988, 1989 and 2008 have been severely repressed; religious practice is forbidden to interfere into daily life, and in Lhasa drastic modernization of the city led to
the replacement of the ancient areas by modern concrete buildings, keeping only the tourist landmarks. The Tibetan culture in Tibet is slowly diluted by Chinese influence and is being reduced for commercial purpose to an authorized folklore (Pommaret 2002). On the other hand, Tibetan culture in exile is emphasizing its traditional expressions and actively building cultural continuity by creating monasteries and centres of Buddhist studies in several continents. The Dalai Lama believes that cultural survival can be achieved through the integration of Tibetan culture in other contexts.

‘Despite the great hardships Tibetans have faced for many decades, they have been able to ... preserve their compassionate culture and maintain their unique identity. At the same time the unprecedented spread of Tibetan Buddhism in both East and West and the prospect of continuing to flourish in the future gives us hope that it may yet survive’ (Dalai Lama 2010).

The future of Tibetan culture in its duality lays in this capacity for revival and for integration of modernity into the tradition.

4.2.2. Traditional use of thangkas
Tibetan Buddhist tradition gives great importance to rituals, and images are integral to this practice. Rituals are performed for many diverse purposes, both in daily life and in high religious practice; to appease wrathful deities, to develop favourable conditions for the well-being of an area or an individual, to subdue or annihilate evil spirits that have taken possession of a place or a person, to commemorate important religious events, to help the journey of a human soul from one life to the next or to enhance the visualisation and the concentration required for meditation and worship. They are addressed to the Buddha, to great tantric teachers, to the deities of the Buddhist pantheon or to local deities (Pommaret 2002). Central to ritual performance, thangkas and sculpted images are believed to embody the spiritual energy of the deity or religious teacher they depict, and to ‘transmit a living presence’ to the community (Rhie & Thurman 1996), as it is beautifully expressed by a thirteen century Tibetan pilgrim

‘When one prays to an image and the notion arises that it is a real Buddha, then the image truly expounds the Doctrine...But if one [considers] it...a material thing, a fashioned image, then the blessings decreases...When one
beholds sacred images, they [must] be considered to be the very Tatagatha [an epithet for Buddha’]. Tibetan pilgrim Chojepel (1197-1264)\textsuperscript{14}

As a basis for meditation, images help the practitioner to focus attention on the deities’ visions described in the texts while contemplating the inner meaning of the teachings. This spiritual quest is symbolized by the different material elements of the thangka. (Reedy1992). Jackson describes the importance of the chosen iconography to the practitioner

‘Tibetan Buddhists who were accomplishing the preparatory practices of the Vajrayana often had paintings made which depicted their teacher and his lineage in the form of a ‘tree of refuge’. A painting of the refuge tree inspired and strengthened the meditator’s own internal image of the vast assembly towards which such practices are going for refuge, bowing in homage, and the offering of the symbolic mandalas were directed. In the same vein, a monk who everyday recited the Confession Sûtra might commission a thangka of the 35 Buddhas of Confession in whose presence he envisioned himself when reciting the scriptures. Similarly, meditators who applied themselves to the main practices of Vajrayana often kept thangkas not only as objects of devotion and sources of inspiration, but also as points of reference for clarifying their visualization. Thus those who were about to enter a special retreat would sometimes order a painting of the deity who was to be intensely worshipped and propitiated’ (Jackson & Jackson 1984).

Beside the lives of the main historic teachers, thangkas used for teaching purposes often represent refuge trees; these help to locate the Buddhist teachers within their religious family and to inscribe them in time and space, as well as reminding the viewer that there were many others teachers before - a notion of humility (Jackson & Jackson 1984). But perhaps the most popular theme is the Wheel of Life, used to explain the cycle of reincarnation to monks and lay people. This theme is found not only on thangkas but also on the mural paintings adorning every temple’s entrance, together with the Four Guardians of the Directions, and provides protection to the worshippers.

Thangkas commissioned after a person’s death often depict either the protective deity connected to the person, in accordance with this omnipresent idea of protection, or the very graphic vision of the Bardo, also known as ‘Tibetan Book of the Dead’. This is one of the most famous ‘revealed’ teachings (texts believed to have been divinely revealed through visionary experience and mystic meditations. These ‘revealed teachings’ could be biographies, wills, or series of protective deities). Amy Heller explains the concept of Bardo in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy

‘...Rather than envision death as a tragedy, death is conceived as an opportunity for transformation... The Tibetan teachings describe the path of the deceased as he or she encounters many deities and manifestations of energy during the Bardo due to the karma accumulated over many lifetimes. Ultimately the energy coalesces toward the next reincarnation’ (Heller 1999, p 147).

This vision is extremely graphic, detailing successively the thirty three deities with bird and animal heads, led by the winged Che chog Heruka with six arms and three heads (Heller 1999). The importance of the concept, but also its visual appeal for artists and its impact on viewers explain its popularity in mural paintings, tsakli cycles and thangkas.

Thangkas are seen as ‘windows on the enlightened world’ (Rhie & Thurman 1996), but are not used only by religious people; they are linked to all important events of life and to funeral rites, acting both as protection through ritual performance and as inspiration for more ordinary people to achieve enlightenment.

Every ordinary Tibetan, living in a world that he sees as dominated by both evils and benevolent deities, is naturally seeking an auspicious environment for himself, his family and his community. Some actions are deemed to be particularly suitable for protection, such as reading aloud some sacred texts, restoring or redecorating a chorten (small construction containing relics, found along roads), engraving sacred formulas on rocks, repainting a lhakhang (temple) or creating a new sacred image (Tucci 1970; Jackson 1984). When someone is very sick or is having troubles that prove difficult to solve, ordinary Tibetans traditionally resort to the lama or religious preceptor, who would often recommend the commission of a painting for the ‘removal’ of physical and mental obstacles or to create the prerequisites for a long and healthy life. The lama would choose the deity most related to the person, usually by consulting
astrology treaties, but Jackson underlines the important connection also existing between the chosen deity and the desired result

‘Tara, for instance, was effective in removing obstacles and granting protection, while Amitayus bestowed long life. After the creation of the sacred image, the patron was often expected to practice the recitations and prayers appropriate for that deity’ (Jackson & Jackson 1984).

More simple actions also include everyday practices such as plants fumigations, offering of butter lamps or circumambulations around sacred places, but if money allows, commissioning an image is considered as a highly meritorious act for both painter and commissioner. This course of action remained unchanged until the Chinese occupation; it was still not uncommon to see some of the substantial financial profits made by Tibetans after World War II in the India-China trade turned into ‘some grand religious gesture’ like commissioning a fine new image or paying for the Great Prayer Festival of the New Year (Snellgrove & Richardson 2003).

In return, the personality of the commissioner could bestow value to the thangka: for instance some thangkas commissioned by the Dalai Lamas are considered worthy of enormous respect, by an extension of the veneration due to their persons. The same extension of respect exists for thangkas representing historic persons: predicators such as Padmasambhava (eighth century) founder of the Nyingmapa order and credited with introducing Buddhist teachings in Tibet; historic abbots of monasteries such as Sangye Yarjon (1203-1272), head of Taglung monastery, central Tibet; founders of religious schools such as Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), founder of the Gelugpa order; historic dignitaries such as the fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) who accomplished the reunification of Tibet and set up the structure of the state that is still valid today. Known as ‘the Great Fifth’, he was also a mystic and a writer, and is one of the most revered religious and historic personalities of Tibet (Snellgrove & Richardson 1968; Beguin 1995; Heller 1999; Pommaret 2002).

The diffusion of images was insured by itinerant monks carrying paintings around to villages and teaching the sacred texts to lay people, using thangkas as illustrations in a form of ‘didactic entertainment’ (Snellgrove & Richardson 1968). It is no wonder that some aspects of the iconography, particularly the attire and mounting of the deities (felt hats and boots, helmets, mules, antilopes, yaks) graphically translate the pastoral and warlike traits of Tibetan society into the sacred realm, thus reinforcing the deep rooting
of religion into the real life (Tucci 1970). Interestingly, the tradition sometimes continues superficially, with contemporary paintings keeping the physical form, the traditional subjects and spatial arrangements of a thangka, adapted to everyday modern life. I have recently found in Australia a small recent thangka representing Hva Shang (a merry fat monk often associated with the 16 Ahrats (disciples of the Buddha), who is a popular character always surrounded by children; here he is represented playing the khur (musical square chord instrument) surrounded by modern day children, as a sort of Buddhist Santa Claus, which shows the evolution of traditional painting into the semi secular field.

![Fig.18 Villagers viewing thangkas at a religious gathering](From Jackson & Jackson 1984)

4.2.3. **Consecration**

Images representing divine beings do not become infused with sacred powers without some specific ritual. To transcend their material status as an image and acquire their full spiritual power, thangkas need to be consecrated after their completion (Dzongsar
Ngari Rinpoche 2003; Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche 2005). The ceremony of consecration is performed by a lama, in the location where the thangka is to be hung. This ceremony is of utmost importance, as it gives the object its liturgical value by inserting in it the Divine Spirit. The text of the ritual can be roughly translated into English as

‘Those almighty, transcendent energy embodiments of wisdom, may transmit or enter into these representations of body, speech and mind of enlightened ones, created hereby and abide in them till all beings with consciousness living in the worlds as far as to the end of the space, may fully overcome all unhappiness of mind, body and spirit and till then bestow on them blessings and radiate positive energy and protect them from all dangers and evils’ (Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche 2003).

The ‘opening of the eyes’ of the deity, painted in the end, is the essential ritual in this ceremony

‘As you open the eyes of a divine representative the gateways open to allow streams of compassion, power and energy of transcendental wisdom to flow via the icon throughout the universe, for the betterment of all beings’ (Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche 2003).

Most of the times, an inscription on the reverse recalls a particular mantra associated with that deity and the ceremony that placed the spiritual energy within the thangka. The text can be simply a sacred mantra: the sacred syllables OM AH HUM are written in red letters on the back of the canvas behind the forehead, throat and heart of each main figure. It can also be an invocation or dedication such as

‘… May this prayer be consecration of this thangka which represents the physical bodies, the words and the thoughts of those eminent teachers…May there be prosperity by the act of making such a portrait, which represents the lineage of the Buddha, Avalokiteshvara, Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyal and Guru Chobang and his son and the lineage of lamas. May all beings obtain the strength of genuine achievements of all these bearers of knowledge’ (translation of an inscription on a painting from the Pritzker collection, quoted in Heller 1999).
In certain cases, eminent religious teachers’ hands prints are placed on the reverse of thangkas during the consecration ceremony, and may be identified by an inscription. Hands and footprints are sometimes left unpainted on the face of the thangka and gilded during the consecration ceremony. Such prints can only belong to a very prominent religious person and show the exceptional character of the commission (Beguin 1995). Thangkas bearing such prints are assigned religious significance but also bear great historical and legendary value, the respect due to the historical person being embodied by the painting itself. As an example, the tradition recalls that the Fifth Dalai Lama himself applied his hands and feet to a painting of his previous reincarnations during the consecration ceremony. A seventeenth century series of thangkas with hand and footprints, conserved in Musée Guimet, Paris, are believed by some Tibetan people to be showing the true footprints of the Fifth Dalai Lama (Béguin 1995). The thangkas themselves have become religious relics, another testimony of the ever-present proximity of the legendary and magical realm in Tibetan character.
This tradition of association with high religious dignitaries, conferring extra value to a thangka, is still valid nowadays, though adapted to the circumstances. Thangkas of no particular aesthetic value to the Western eye, may enjoy a special veneration because a much respected reincarnated lama placed a painting in a particular place, or restored it by replacing missing parts or repainting on top of damaged areas (Sanjay Dhar, ICOM-CC 2008). This can be called the ‘social’ value of thangkas, which blends religious status, affective value, social rank and overall respect.

Consecration therefore confers to thangkas their high level of spirituality and intimately connects them to gods and people. The significance of thangkas in Tibetan culture derives mainly from these social and spiritual connections, while the acknowledgement of their artistic qualities remains secondary.
4.2.4. Worship, housing and storage

The ritual worship of images often includes the burning of butter lamps in front of the paintings. The soot deposit on the paintings gives them this characteristic darkened and shiny aspect, sometimes to the extent that the image is barely legible. Thangkas are protected from smoke and dust by their muslin veil, held up only at times of worship. It is not uncommon to see thangkas with darkened veils, attesting both their presence in an area of regular worship with butter lamps, and that the veil was kept down most times to protect the image from view and from damage (personal observations).

Fig.21 Thangka hung in a monastery, protected by its veil, on top of butter lamps

Most monasteries house a very large number of thangkas (this is the case in all areas of Tibetan culture nowadays, and let us imagine the wealth of images in Tibetan monasteries before 1966), which are displayed in particular occasions for special ceremonies. The thangkas are 'read' by the higher lamas (pers. comm., Lama Tsewang Rigzen, 2003) to the young monks, and serve as support for meditation and chanting. As part of ceremonies, series of thangkas depicting the lives of prominent historic religious characters are hung in the temple on dedicated days and the
ceremonies unfold with the recitation of the texts related to this deity. ‘Miracles of the life of the Buddha’, ‘the sixteen Ahrats’, and ‘the life of Milarepa’ are some of the cycles commonly found, the number of pieces in the series varying from 3 or 4 to 16, 20 or even more (Beguin 1995).

There are several places in a monastery where to find thangkas; usually many of them are in storage and some of them are permanently hanging in the temple, in open view or protected by the veil. In that case they may be particular tantric images that can only be seen by the initiated during a special meditation; the veil is lifted only during these meditations or during the initiation rituals (Reedy 1992). Paintings representing terrifying protective deities known as ‘yidams’ are usually found in the chambers dedicated to these deities, behind or adjacent to the temple, the entrance to which is often restricted (personal observations).

The size of the thangka collection varies according to the size of temples or monasteries, but as a constant, images will always be present in a temple. Storage facilities also vary in size and location, the traditional way being to store thangkas rolled, piled on top of each other in wooden trunks to avoid rodents attacks (Ngari Rinpoche 2003; personal observations).

There is rarely a formal inventory for the objects in use in monasteries, but the caretakers in charge generally have a good knowledge of their collection (personal observations).

In private homes there is always a space dedicated to a shrine, with a makeshift altar and a thangka, or simply a thangka hanging in the kitchen (common room). More recently some thangkas have been made from photographs mounted in synthetic brocade and between rods, conserving the form but using different materials for a cheaper result. These are sometimes found hanging in private shrines, associated or not with painted thangkas. (Personal visits, Mustang, Nepal, 2008).
This brief survey of the traditional use of thangkas reveals an intimate relationship between them and the worshipers: thangkas are regularly used or manipulated, even if only once a year; they are looked at, meditated upon, rolled, transported in bags, unrolled and hung in different places, used to teach and to accumulate merits on behalf of a deceased; symbols of the strong faith of the Buddhist Himalayan community, thangkas are integral to the living Tibetan culture.

4.3. Tibetan cultural identity and knowledge

4.3.1. Heritage as an identity asset

As mentioned in the previous section, Tibetan heritage has been destroyed almost entirely during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), and most of what has been preserved is either in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) or in Western museums. The community in exile (about 100 000 persons) largely dominates the concept of Tibetan identity in the West. Exiled Tibetans see themselves as the custodians of the ‘true’ image of Tibet, which in the absence of a land, denied to them as a direct source of self definition, functions as ‘a profound signifier of identity’ deeply characterized by its condition of statelessness (Harris 1999). Although the Chinese Red Guards have attempted in the 1960s and 1970s to erase all material traces of Tibetan culture, by ransacking and destroying the monastic buildings and forcing the Tibetans to cast their household icons into fires (Karmay 2005), these attempts were not successful, because material heritage is only a part of what makes culture (Pommaret 2002, Harris...
The spiritual, intellectual and artistic tradition is alive both in the exiled community and in the community living in TAR under Chinese rule. Although there is a contemporary artistic expression based both in Tibet and (to a lesser extent) in the exiled communities, which is distancing itself from the religious tradition and explores social situations and incertitudes (Harris 1999, Heller 1999), the international focus is very much on the maintenance and revival of the traditional culture led by the government in exile. The continuity of the traditional artistic techniques, privileging the conservative ‘New Menri’ as an ‘official style’ is considered ‘essential for self determination’ (Harris 1999) and actively promoted by the Dalai Lama and his Dharamsala government, as a part of its general politics of cultural continuity and transmission of the Buddhist tradition.

The question of cultural representation arises particularly in the case of Tibet because of its dual status and location, and leads some authors to point out the limitations of an identity, deployed in response to oppression, that would ignore modernity and social changes in its definition of authenticity. At stake is the challenge for Tibetans to articulate a militant preservation of tradition with a social modernization (Adams 1996, McGranahan 2005). Harris believes that Tibet mainly exists in people’s imagination and memory, its form and expressions varying with the different settings of its representation. She argues that contemporary art informed by and encompassing the traditional forms, is equally significant in the cultural continuity of Tibet. However, she thinks that most of the time, Tibetan art in Western museums remains locked into a series of Orientalist paradigms, such as agelessness, timelessness, namelessness (Harris 1999, p 18).

In addition, collecting plays a central role in Western identity formation, displaying a wealth of knowledge and experiences (Clifford 1994). Non-Western material heritage in Western collections is then participating in both representations of identities carrying the histories of their peoples and their encounters (Thomas 1991) which resulted in the presence of the objects in their new context.

Museums actively participate in the construction of the meanings of objects through their interpretation and representation of social and cultural identities: ‘Social ideas cannot exist without physical content, but physical objects are meaningless without social content’ (Pearce 1992). The validity of representations of cultures in museums is regularly questioned, and institutions are now widely acknowledging the dynamic character of societies and cultures, distancing themselves from traditional ways of
representation that ‘freeze others into academic categories and to that mythical anthropological notion of time called ‘the ethnographic present’ (Ames 1994). Indigenous cultures (previously thought to be doomed to disappear once put in contact with the modern world) have survived, the Tibetan culture being only one of them. Their survival challenges early 20th century heritage policies that define conservation as a means to transmit the artistic achievements of previous historic civilizations to future generations (Heumann-Gurian 1999, Price 2001). Indigenous people around the world, often bearing histories of colonization, displacement or oppression strongly insist, as we see in the case of Tibetans, that their culture is still the vital force in their lives. Moreover, through the various vicissitudes they have encountered historically, which often include loss of their land and silencing of their political voices, their cultural identity might be their only strong point of reference (Berger 1985, quoted in Ames 1992).

Cultural identities evolve by incorporating changes while retaining the fundamental concepts of the tradition, and making both exist harmoniously together. From devotees answering their cell phones in traditional temples to the Dalai Lama blessing collections of Tibetan material culture in the West, de facto operating their ‘transmutation’ into possible repatriation collections in the event of a future liberation of Tibet (Singh 2008), there are plenty of examples showing how tradition and modernity are being linked. The emergence of socially modern identities while remaining culturally indigenous is further consolidated as indigenous people advance through the educational systems of the dominant societies, making their voices heard in these societies’ own languages and systems of references to convey the message of their political right to speak about themselves (Sully 2007, Ames 1994b).

There is no wonder then that heritage is one of the main areas where indigenous peoples claim their right to interpretation and repatriation, since it is not only the most visible and symbolic representation of their culture and their identities in the public area but sometimes all that they have left as tangible marks of this culture. Objects are ‘cultural witnesses’ and tangible manifestations of a society’s identity, and sacred and ceremonial artefacts particularly are ‘resources for cultural renewal for Indigenous people who have lost most of their heritage’ (Simpson 2009). Cultural identity can be established and reinforced through the repetition of ritual acts that contribute to the passing of knowledge to actual generations (Hooper-Greenhill 1998, Sully 2007). In the last decades of twentieth century, Indigenous people have entered the political arena through the cultural door and claimed their right of control over the interpretation of
their material culture, while in certain cases actively claiming back parts of this material culture. Furthermore, various cultural groups have stated that the sacred character of their objects still remain in its Western museum context (Allen 1998, Sharma 2004, Wisejuriya 2005, Simpson 2006). This confers a potent status of being part of a living heritage to objects held in Western museums, and makes unsustainable the argument that once they have entered a collection, the religious life of the objects is a thing of the past. Tibetan religious objects are no different and Buddhist practitioners agree that their presence in a Western collection is not synonymous of desecration (as noted already by Reedy in 1992), which will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

4.3.2. Dynamic vision of traditional knowledge
During the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership there was a shift in Tibet towards a more pragmatic and tolerant view, which enabled the Tibetans to enact a vibrant Buddhist revival (Goldstein 1998, Karmay 2005). Unfortunately, the recent developments have proved the limitations of this evolution and seen a return to a more tightly controlled system. Tibetans have gained international sympathy for their cause long ago but pragmatic political limits make the liberation of Tibet advocated by activists groups an elusive reality. In this context, Tibetan cultural heritage, showcased in many Western museums and increasingly the object of study and display, becomes a focal point of cultural recognition for the people of Tibet. In their community in exile in Dharamsala, Tibetans refugees have presented objects to the Dalai Lama in order to secure these objects for the future, a ‘deeply symbolic act where individual ownership is subdued by collective ownership’ (Singh 2008). In Tibet’s context of a nation without a land, the proper place for these objects has been found through their expatriation.

The deliberate choice by the Tibetan Diaspora to make the tradition anew in Dharamsala, to ‘allow Tibetans in exile some ability to re-appropriate their history’, shows an incredibly strong ‘cultural solidarity in the face of loss’ (Harris 1999), even if it can raise the question of the authenticity or integrity of the Tibetan culture in Lhasa compared to the Tibetan culture in Dharamsala (Adams 1996). Craft skills are maintained in the Tibetan communities in exile but not confined to purely religious production. The industry of tourism, coupled with an increasing familiarity of Westerners about the aesthetics of lamaic representations have provided a potentially profitable outlet for the artistic production: several thangka paintings centres produce good quality paintings on traditional religious themes or medicinal themes, for the tourist market as well as for Buddhist centres or monasteries. There is also a growing interest in Western societies about Tibetan traditional medicine and its use of plants.
This evolution of traditional knowledge in response to the challenges posed by the social environment is characteristic of many Diaspora cultures, who express through transnational networks and maintain community by both preserving (or reviving) traditions and customizing them (Clifford 1994b). Using their traditional knowledge in this dynamic way makes it a vital part of their contemporary lives (Langton & Rhea 2005, Sunder 2007, Wane 2008). With no neat distinction between traditional and modern knowledge, traditional knowledge becomes linked to the broader theme of intellectual property and its protection for economic purposes (Sunder 2007, UNESCO 2005).

‘In knowledge age, wealth lies not only in access to other’s knowledge, but also in the ability to produce new knowledge and benefit from it culturally and economically’ (Sunder 2007).

Meanwhile, on the international scene, Tibetan people of the Diaspora are forming multiple attachments and accommodations with their host societies. While the exiled government has selected the artistic style it wanted to be preserved, firmly defined in Tibet’s pre-1959 tradition (Harris 1999), it is at the same time ‘secularizing’ its monasteries in United States and Europe; financial support for the monastic practice comes from activities such as marketing the religion in a secular manner (Adams 1996). This has created a string of followers in the West supporting Tibetan identity affirmation. Tibet House, New York, for instance, is a flagship centre for Tibetan culture in the United States, whose entire collection is publicly intended for repatriation when the political situation will allow a return to traditional Tibet. The Dalai Lama’s very publicized presence at many cultural exhibitions and in many publications about art and culture is both a religious caution and an implicit claim by Tibetans of their moral rights over their displaced heritage.

At the same time, contemporary Tibetan art is slowly gaining exposure in Western art galleries: Tibetan artist Gonkar Gyatso was exhibited by London based Rossi and Rossi Ltd. art dealer at the Art Dubai fair in 2008 (Art Knowledge News 2008) and contemporary Tibetan artists increasingly emerge in oriental art galleries. It is a tribute to Tibetan people's resilience and a sign of Tibetan culture’s vitality that it can both

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15 UNESCO 2005 World Report “Towards knowledge societies”, predicts that social, cultural and economical freedom will require access not only to the products but to the process of creating, while underlining the importance of information (which triggers creativity), as one of the principal assets of any society (UNESCO 2005).

16 source: www.tibethouse.com
maintain its tradition alive and develop in more modern expressions, again showing its distinct and dynamic identity.

**4.4. Tibetan perspective on conservation**

Within the framework of this research, Tibetan practitioners were identified either through the author’s personal connections or by websites about Tibetan-Australian Buddhist monasteries, and contacted via email or mail. When possible a face-to-face discussion was held, leading to develop the topics that people felt important. Three of the four people represented are religious persons. Dzongsar Ngari Thingo Rinpoche, a high reincarnated lama, (1945-2008), living in Nepal and Sikkim, was involved in numerous activities of sustainable development and conservation in these regions; Matthieu Riccard, a French born Buddhist monk, co-director of Shechen Monastery, Kathmandu, Nepal, who has often worked as an interpreter to His Holiness the Dalai Lama; Geshe Konchok Tshering, resident teacher at the Atisha Centre of Bendigo, Australia, a Buddhist centre affiliated with the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, a network of Buddhist centres in Australia and around the world. The fourth is a Tibetan member of the Diaspora, Deki Tsering, living in Australia and whose family is involved in the Tibetan Government in exile’s administration. They are referred to in the following text by their initials.

The discussions focused on two main levels
- The religious/sacred character of the objects held in Western collections, and whether or not it was maintained in the new context
- Whether it was appropriate to carry any conservation work on thangkas, and if so, the recommendations and limits that were felt necessary

**4.4.1. Religious character of the objects**

There was absolutely no doubt in all interviewees’ minds that Tibetan religious objects in general and thangkas in particular keep their sacred character in all circumstances, and this was stated firmly and clearly. Furthermore, in accordance to the Buddhist doctrine, the benefits of being in presence of sacred objects are felt not only by Tibetan Buddhists, but also by any sentient being. All religious people underlined this point.

‘The religious importance comes from the power of the object: Since the representations of enlightened beings in Thangkas have generated the
mind of enlightenment, practiced the path, and attained complete
enlightenment solely to benefit all sentient beings, anyone who sees these
Thangkas will receive benefit whether they have faith or not, but of course
the benefit is more powerful if one has faith’ (GKT).

The concept of benefits involves a particular sensation of time, intimately linked to the
cycle of reincarnations: Geshe-la considers that the blessings received from looking at
thangkas may trigger the potential for developing wisdom in one of the successive lives
of the same human being, regardless of whether he is a Buddhist or not. He cites an
historic example: Shariputra (one of Buddha Shakyamuni’s disciples) was a courier in a
previous life. During one of his courses he took shelter in a temple in ruins and was
mending his shoes at the light of a candle when his eyes fell on the remains of mural
paintings. While gazing at them, a wonderful feeling of calm and faith came to him,
which later influenced his rebirth as Shakyamuni’s disciple.

Even in a Western collection, thangkas are not desecrated, again a point emphasized
by all interviewees. While for Matthieu Riccard they become ‘a bit dormant’, Geshe
Konchok Tsering ‘strongly disagrees’ with the desecration idea. For him, thangkas
retain their power whatever the circumstances, and can inspire everyone. Thangkas
help to the transformation of negative feelings and help to create some space in the
mind to develop more peace. He speaks of religious objects as ‘platforms for the
awakening of a Buddha potential’. Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche reinforces this opinion by
adding that the consecration ceremony confers a ‘mandate’ to the thangka, for ‘the well
being, help and spiritual development of all living beings’; this mandates runs ‘from the
consecration ceremony until the thangka dies from the effects of the four elements,
earth, water, fire, wind’ (Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche 2005).

In this context, thangkas are to be treated in a particular way when located out of a
Buddhist environment. Selling them ‘as piece of merchandise’ is felt disrespectful, as is
placing them in inappropriate contexts (bathrooms for example) or within foreign
display contexts (Matthieu Riccard gives the imaginary example of thangkas used in
contemporary art installations, or mixed with pop art). All interviewees used the same
word: ‘respect’ to characterize the best attitude with thangkas; ‘display in a generally
respectful environment’ (MR), ‘displayed in a clean, high place, and so that feet would
not be pointed in the thangka’s direction’ (GKT), ‘treated with respect, acknowledging
their significance, always hung higher than we are’ (DT), ‘avoiding smoking next to a
thangka as cigarette and drug’s smoke is considered defiling in the Tibetan tradition’
(MR), avoid stepping or jumping over the thangka (DNR, GKT, MR) and in some cases avoid inhale over the thangka (DNR).

While no one expressed strong discomfort about it, there are some different feelings about the new life of the thangkas: Geshe Konchok Tsering feels that because they are made for the benefit of all, they would be right and useful in any place, provided they are treated with respect. He believes that the museum’s secular character ought to be interpreted as defined by H.H. the Dalai Lama: secular does not mean ‘no religion’ but that one should have equanimity towards all religions and atheists alike; secular is then synonymous of ‘respect for all beings’. However, he underlines that the directors of museums have ‘a responsibility to display thangkas in a way that can bring maximum benefits to all, whether the director is a Buddhist or not’. In the same line of thought, he would never ‘look down’ at an image of Jesus Christ, because he is ‘well aware of the compassion teachings of the Christian religion; the correct attitude is respect’ (GKT).

Deki Tsering adds that ‘if it was seen as only art, I would feel it not right; if a thangka was hung with no respect, I would feel a bit sad’; she believes however that generally thangkas are treated with respect in Western collections, because people are aware of their sacred nature. Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche on the other hand deplores the dispersion of sacred objects around the world, because ‘they have lost their roots and core importance forever; if there were some documentation of those treasures of Tibetan monasteries…we could today recognise them and make efforts to repatriate them back to their original places’ (Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche 2003). The act of buying sacred objects from Tibetan communities in impoverished Buddhist countries for resale is also seen as ‘a businesslike attitude, very negative; it is better to seek other ways to benefit the people and leave antiques there’ (GKT), although it is acknowledged that Tibetans themselves have had to sell them for subsistence (Deki’s mother had to sell her jewellery when she came to India), therefore entrusting the responsibility to the new custodians. It is interesting to link these opinions to the Nepali’s historian Ramesh Dhungel’s critique of some Western Tibetologists studying Mustang, a culturally Tibetan area of Northern Nepal

‘One could also ask why he [Tucci] did not develop or establish curatorial institutions locally, in the same country or region where those cultural and historical objects could be collected, processed, and preserved while maintaining their intrinsic value, instead of throwing them onto European markets, where supply and demand set their new value’ (Dhungel 2005, p 26).
Indeed it seems that while they are not actively claiming repatriation for cultural objects, the attitude of the Tibetan persons is ambivalent; the feeling of being dispossessed is present, but somehow accepted. Nevertheless, when they are given voice, these facts are mentioned and desires of a different attitude are expressed.

4.4.2. Conservation work on thangkas

Tibetan Buddhist practitioners interviewed have been unanimous; it is desirable to carry conservation work on damaged thangkas. ‘Bringing an antique back to life is a very good thing’ says Geshe Konchok Tsering. Matthieu Riccard adds that ‘no Tibetan spiritual authority would think that it is great to keep a thangka in a damaged form’, while Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche dissipates any ambiguity.

‘According to Buddhist teaching, conservation and restoration are allowed and have a long tradition. It is in fact regarded as very pious to restore and renovate holy places. .... Unfortunately, in many of these monasteries restored in the Indo Himalayan region, particularly by local initiatives with the best intention but lack of expertise, important ancient paintings are overpainted with bright synthetic colours etc., through which greater damage is made instead of preserving and improving’ (Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche 2003).

He advocates the crucial need of expertise for this task and the need for collaboration with Western experts for training and carrying work in the region. He got involved himself in many occasions: it has been a fantastic experience for me to work together in preparing (2003) and leading (2005) a UNESCO workshop on conservation of thangkas held in Nepal for regional people. In this workshop he taught religious and ethical issues about conservation while myself and two other conservators were teaching practical conservation skills to twenty-five participants (monks and lay people) from the whole Himalayan region. His participation did not stop to his daily teaching and he closely collaborated to each decision we made about the treatments we carried on several thangkas from the Chhauni Museum, Kathmandu. With his unexpected demise in 2008, the Tibetan Buddhist culture has certainly lost a fervent advocate of collaborative and sustainable cultural heritage conservation.

Both Matthieu Riccard and Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche however mention some exceptions; thangkas painted by great spiritual masters, which are considered to be
sacred relics, require ‘utmost respect and minimal work’ (MR). So do thangkas infused with very high energy by a powerful spiritual personality, which should be left untouched (DNR).

Consultation with Buddhist practitioners is generally felt highly desirable, to understand the meaning of the thangka and avoid mistakes due to lack of knowledge. Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche however cautions against a too general approach: ‘If you find someone who really knows something ‘truly’ - only then it is useful to consult those people’. This acknowledges the fact that being a member of a community does not confer authority in every subject related to its culture. Consulting a Tibetan practitioner has to start with identification of consultants with the community, to make sure that the person consulted has the necessary knowledge. There is a risk otherwise that the consultation process becomes a pre determined formality to deliver green light to conservation projects (Sully 2007).

On a more measured note, Matthieu Riccard believes that consultation is not essential ‘if the purpose is to bring thangkas back to their original perfection’, although he acknowledges that this notion encompasses so many different layers of significance that it seems difficult to draw a neat line between technical actions and religious meaning. The approach here is a more nuanced one, feeling the necessity to link conservation with meaning by sharing thoughts on thangkas as religious meditation vectors and on some iconography, but not to provide the conservator with unnecessary information for his/her purpose.

According to the persons consulted, non Buddhist conservators can work on thangkas, ‘provided that conservators are respectful…he or she should keep in mind that this is an object of great respect for practitioners’ (MR), that they ‘have respectful understanding of the objects they are working on’ (DNR), that they ‘know the materials with which the Thangka is made, and if the object is still ’living’, [that they] know that there is something invisible behind the material’ (DNR). For Geshe Konchok Tsering, it is however ‘vital’ that they collaborate with those who know the details and meaning of the thangka being restored, to ensure that the conservator understands ‘the necessary details of the thangka’. A definition of ‘necessary details’ is unclear, although he added that in the case of ‘restricted’ thangkas, it was unlikely that a non-initiated person could give an error-free explanation of the tantric imagery. However for conservation purpose there is not necessarily a need to understand the whole iconography and symbols; the
appreciation of how much knowledge should be imparted to the conservator to enable respectful work definitely belongs to the concerned religious group.

In order to get a better view of his perspectives on conservation, based on tangible examples, and at his request, different examples of conservation treatments were shown during the discussion with Geshe Konchok Tsering. (The two other interviewees are already aware of this, from various experiences and participations in conservation workshops). Minimal retouching was highly praised, but judged satisfactory only until a certain point of degradation. When a crucial piece of iconography is missing, Geshe-la feels that it is necessary to reconstruct the image to allow the contemplation. A Tibetan Buddhist, like any devotee of any religion, cannot worship a defaced deity, so the important point is to 'have something complete and meaningful' (GKT), always keeping in mind that thangkas' mission is to act as platforms for Buddhist awakening; the display of a thangka in an archaeological manner (with neutral tones only in missing parts) seems senseless and therefore unnecessary to him. Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche largely shares this opinion and draws a clear line between living religious heritage and other forms of heritage. Being aware of technical possibilities given by conservation is a very important step for informed discussions: with these examples, the ‘less is more’ approach was very appreciated by Geshe-la (as it has been previously by Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche and Matthieu Riccard), particularly for its ability to lead to acceptable results for most cases (see fig. 23,24). The reconstruction approach was nevertheless not eliminated and deemed suitable for ‘serious’ cases, although it was neatly defined by Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche during the workshop, for the benefit of Himalayan conservators and monks.

‘Restoring is not repainting. The artistic tradition or the general scheme of contours and colours should not be changed; the original painting should be adhered to as much as possible’ (Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche 2005).

The three religious practitioners agree that such reconstruction is to be done by someone having the appropriate training, who ‘paints in a deep meditative state, without distraction’, because quality production can be done only through proper motivation (DNR, GKT). This seems to exclude conservators and advocates for collaboration with artists in specific cases, an approach that we experimented with success during the Kathmandu workshop (Cotte 2008); this attitude is also adopted for native sacred objects in some American and Canadian museums (Johnson, Heald, McHugh, Brown & Kaminitz, 2005).
Fig. 23 Thangka damaged by regular horizontal creases

Fig. 24 The same thangka after minimal inpainting
In conclusion, the salient points of these discussions are

- The firm belief that the sacred objects’ power remains intact even in a Western collection and that thangkas still carry energy ‘until the last small piece of this thangka remains’ (Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche 2005), which highlights the importance of a respectful attitude towards Tibetan religious objects.

- The desire from Tibetan practitioners to be involved at some level into the conservation process, by providing necessary knowledge to the conservator, by evaluating the degree of inpainting necessary for mental reconstruction of the image, or by having a Tibetan painter with appropriate training doing the replacements of missing parts.

- The will to compromise on conservation, recognizing the benefits of a minimalist approach, particularly on inpainting; but equally the desire that Western conservators and heritage professionals compromise by admitting the necessity of a ‘complete and meaningful’ image resulting from conservation treatment.

- The remarkable message of tolerance from the Tibetan people, and the frequent reminder that positive energy and blessings generated by thangkas should benefit all human beings, which explains the absence of ‘militant’ claims for repatriation. As Geshe Konchok Tsering puts it, ‘what is crucial is the transmission of the Mahayana tradition, the universal responsibility to give long term education to assimilate the full body of Buddhist teachings; the world needs it; the world really needs it’. This is not denying the political importance of the Tibetan cause, but putting it in perspective and balancing the priorities to remain faithful to his profound belief of peace and tolerance for all humans (a message tirelessly advocated by H.H. the Dalai Lama, which won him the Peace Nobel Prize in 1989).

All things considered, from these discussions we can conclude that Tibetan religious people rightly acknowledge the artistic quality of thangkas, old and new, and far from being bound by old habits of repainting, readily include conservation into their tradition to respond to the incredible changes in their society with a dynamic process.
5. Conserving sacred objects. Ethical issues

5.1. Sacred objects and trans-cultural connections

The previous chapters explored the different attitudes towards thangkas, in their new context (Australian collection) or in their original context (Himalayan monastery or private home). The various approaches that have been expressed, which all relate to culturally different backgrounds, highlight the fact that conserving sacred objects from another culture is a very delicate and sensitive task. The simple presence of these objects in a Western collection is in itself a witness to both their historic past and the circumstances of their acquisition. Shedding light on these often forgotten circumstances helps to understand the mixed feelings that contemporary communities may have about the status of their cultural objects in Western public collections.

As an example, the detailed description by the historian M. Carrington of the looting of Tibetan monasteries by the British army during the Younghusband expedition in 1903-04 is revealing. According to Carrington, the English officers used intimidation and force to bring back astonishing amounts of objects (he quotes from officer McDonald’s diary describing the 400 mule loads of objects, rare manuscripts, armours, weapons, paintings and porcelains that he alone brought back from Tibet). Myths of vast treasures held in monasteries and an increasing demand for oriental artefacts (used to assert the British Empire’s superiority over exotic societies), coupled with political events, inspired the expedition. It became one of the most controversial in the history of British India, even challenging India’s viceroy Lord Curzon’s conception of a moral empire. Eventually it was only reported in the press by sanitized accounts so the Empire’s image would be preserved. Replacing the event in the historical perspective of the British Empire’s crisis in Asia and Africa at the time, Carrington explains this controversial looting by a quest of knowledge about others, which confers power and was therefore thought to be the most important profit in an already declining empire (Carrington 2003).

Clearly not all Himalayan artefacts present in Western collections came along the same traumatic path; nevertheless, such a story illustrates how objects taken out of their original context (sometimes violently) are reconfigured to a new state upon entering a collection and acquire new meanings not necessarily intended or agreed upon by the original cultural group.
‘What was indigenous, in becoming American or Australian, now conveys something of our projects in foreign places and of our aesthetics, something which effaces the intention of the thing’s producers’ (Thomas 1991).

The interpretation of non-Western objects by Western museums and Indigenous people’s rights over their cultural heritage are at the heart of the discussions and controversies that emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century (see Ames 1990 and 1992, Eyo 1994, Pearce 1994a and 1994b, Weil 1999, Greenberg 2004a for example). In the USA, it led to the 1990 legislation Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which allows Native Americans to reclaim part of their cultural heritage held in museums, on the grounds of its sacred or ceremonial character. An incredibly important milestone in the history of American collection management, it has triggered the establishment by institutions of contacts networks with native cultural groups. This has generated reflection going far beyond the repatriation issue, which benefited the whole conservation community. This reflection comes at a moment when the notion of modernity as the only model for globalization is questioned and when border thinking systems recognizing multiplicity and diversity of social orders are advocated as an alternative to universalism (Mignolo 2000). As a consequence, cultural institutions start to distance themselves from a cultural order based on rationality and begin to take into account alternative knowledge that was previously considered subaltern, such as religious, traditional or folkloric (Escobar 2007).

Museums are thus reconsidering their role in presenting religious objects, which are an important part of many collections, regardless of these objects’ original cultures. Although generally religion is not included in the mission statement of a museum institution, there is nevertheless a religious response to some collections from culturally associated communities (Hughes & Wood 2009). Museums begin to realize that, in complying with their founding dispositions, they have often distorted the cultural meaning of their displayed objects (Gulliford 1992, Thomas 1991, Edwards 2004). This reflection calls upon the need to reshape their policies and missions, as advocated by Ames criticizing ‘museums’ appropriation of other people’s material’ (Ames 1992) or Weil qualifying them of ‘old salvage warehouses…that operate…as if collections were still at the centre of the museum's concerns’ (Weil 1999). Institutions are increasingly accepting that they should no longer be ‘operating in isolation from the living cultures (they) represent’ and no longer be ‘breaking the connections between objects and
people who made and used them’ (Sully 2007), lest their very ‘integrity as educational and research entities’ be at risk (Edwards 2004).

As a consequence of this reflection, collections are re-examined and reclassified; the notion of ‘Culturally Sensitive Collections’ and the ensuing specific protocols involving originating groups are becoming more widely acknowledged and discussed worldwide, although there are notable exceptions. French Museum of Quai Branly, for instance, opened in 2007, prefers to focus on the aesthetic dialogue of cultures, excluding the religious aspect in application of the principle of ‘laïcité’ (secularity) in the institutions, and firmly limits intercultural dialogue to the frame of international diplomacy (Price 2007). Thomas however criticizes this type of attitude, which he sees as a denial of the former context. For him, it implies the tacit assumption that the original producers have lost the capacity to perpetuate their own uses and constructions, therefore anchoring the display in the colonial tradition (Thomas 1991).

Museums housing collections from other cultures now tend to redefine themselves as ‘stewards’ of collections rather than owners (Edwards & Sullivan 2004), whose mission is to provide ‘a forum committed not to the promulgation of received wisdom but to the encouragement of a multicultural dialogue’ (West 2004); they also acknowledge contemporary cultural practices, as opposed to cultures frozen in the past, and more importantly, are committing to create ‘genuine relations of recognition and reciprocity between traditional custodians and museums’ (Sullivan 2004).

5.2. Conservation and context

Appadurai calls the shifting in status of the objects from sacred to artwork a ‘commoditization’, because it puts them in a circuit of exchange to which they did not belong previously (Appadurai 1994, 2006). Becoming such a commodity (although of high value) completely redefines objects within their new context; it is precisely this context that determines the needs addressed by conservation.

The justifications of conservation in a Western context can be multiple: it can arise from the material condition of the artefact itself, but also from a complex set of desires and projects associated with the collection, its owner or custodian, and the originating culture. These include impending exhibitions about the objects’ culture or faith of origin (or broader geographical themes), rotating displays, loans, or simply for private collectors the fact that they are precious to them (CC, 26/10/07; RS, 15/11/07; MF and RM, 10/11/08). The consideration of an object’s condition comes as a consequence of
a curatorial decision to display that object, and conservation is therefore adjusted to allow the object to fit within this context at its best physical appearance. As was discussed above, in this process the initial function and status of the objects, which still appeal in the original way to their contemporary cultural community, can be forgotten.

To address the cultural shift, conservation needs to value meanings and material equally: ‘Significance is not anchored in materials, but changes with societies and their interests’ (Pye 2009). Decisions need to be informed not only by the context in which conservation is being carried out, but also by an understanding of cultural use and significance; this has become as central as understanding material fabric and mechanisms of deterioration (Peters 2007). Scientific criteria for assessing deterioration have not lost relevance, but should be considered in a different light; a sound understanding of the materials deterioration and the remedial possibilities are the basis for elaborating treatment proposals. These options can then be examined according to their impact on the preservation of the cultural material’s significance (Odegaard 1995, Ogden 2004). The pesticide contamination of many ritual objects in the museums during the last century and the possible harmful consequences for users of the objects is a good example of conservation treatment (deemed appropriate in its days) impacting on the possible repatriation and ritual use of collections (Ogden 2004).

In Australia, texts such as *Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections* provide assistance to the process and aim to be ‘a sound basis on which to make collection management decisions relating to conservation, preservation and access’ (Heritage Collections Council, 2001, revised in 2009). However, it must be remembered that assessing significance in a trans-cultural context can only be subjective. Meanings assigned to others’ material culture are inevitably informed by our view and our interactions with the objects. They encompass new meanings linked to our culture in the process defined by Thomas as ‘entanglement’ of objects with multiple cultures and people (Thomas 1991).

This important change of attitude towards objects echoes the conservation profession’s acknowledgement that conservation is mainly rooted in the values assigned to material heritage (de la Torre 2002, Wisejuriya 2007). It derives from the profession’s expansion beyond the Western borders during the twentieth century and the subsequent reflection upon its mission in different cultural contexts (Barringer 1998, Mac Donald 1998, Dias 2008). Twentieth century heritage practice, based on the international heritage charters (Athens 1931, Venice 1964) that privilege the
material integrity, is now recognized by some authors as inadequate for the living religious traditions of many cultures (Byrne 2004, Visejuriya 2005, Cotte 2006). Heritage conservation professionals are increasingly recognizing that

‘Most people in the world do not approach heritage objects and places in a rational manner. They consider them to be part of a universe that is energized and animated by various forms of divine or supernatural power’ (Byrne 2004).

Conservators therefore have to examine their relation to other cultures, including their material heritage and their values, and reflect on how to include other contexts into their practice and decisions. The IIC\textsuperscript{17} 21st congress in 2006, on the theme ‘\textit{The object in context: crossing conservation boundaries}’ contributed to expand these concerns in the international conservation community. IIC’s General Secretary David Leigh publicly advocated during the closing remarks that conservation now has to ‘move away from the comfort zone of Western conservation values’ (Leigh 2006).

Although real, these changes in focus are nevertheless slow: when Canadian conservator Miriam Clavir organized a vote on a philosophical topic linked to conservation (should Native people who have given or sold their objects to a Canadian museum be part of display and conservation decisions) at the 1994 IIC Congress in Ottawa, it triggered heated discussions in the audience. Many people did not even wish to consider involving Natives as an option, since for them they had sold their moral rights over the objects at the same time as the objects themselves. Fourteen years later, a vote on a related topic\textsuperscript{18} showed a relative majority of people in favour of keeping the use of the objects, while at the same time emphasizing the necessity for preliminary discussions with the community and within the museum (Clavir 2007). Although mentions of access and use have existed in American and Canadian Codes of Ethics since 1994\textsuperscript{19}, this shows that the conservation profession is only slowly

\textsuperscript{17} The International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works

\textsuperscript{18} The question was: should some objects created by Native artists for the teaching collection - regularly used by groups- be transferred to the permanent collection of a Canadian museum- and therefore not been used anymore- because of their quality?

\textsuperscript{19} The 1994 edition of the American Institute for Conservation Code of Ethics states: ‘While recognizing the right of society to make appropriate and respectful use of cultural property, the conservation professional shall serve as an advocate for preservation of cultural property’ (Art III, Preamble, AIC 1994). The 2000 edition of Canadian Association for Conservation of Cultural Property Code of Ethics, states as
moving towards more inclusive practices. It is also symptomatic of the needs for protocols of agreements and specific standards of practice for the preservation of Indigenous heritage. This has to be done with caution; Sully has rightly pointed out that the development of codes of ethics and best practices systems can also be a hint to eliciting local responses from specific people. Too comprehensive codes of ethics can also impede the ability for conservators to generate information that might challenge the dominant interpretations of the culture (Sully 2007). General principles can only be broad guidelines for negotiations with the contemporary communities associated with the objects, which require above all an open and flexible approach to the application of conservation principles.

5.3. Contemporary codes of practice and cultural policies

The changes in the profession are reflected in its reference texts. Codes of practice and cultural policies have now incorporated the importance of preserving the intangible meanings and the social dimension of cultural heritage. International texts such as the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), drafted in cooperation by ICOMOS, ICCROM and UNESCO at the Nara conference on Authenticity, set the principles of conservation of cultural diversity

‘...Cultural heritage diversity exists in time and space and demands respect for other cultures and all aspects of their belief systems’ (Art.6).

Acknowledging the fact that judgment of values may differ considerably from one culture to another, it adds

‘...The respect due to all cultures requires that heritage properties must be considered and judged within the cultural contexts to which they belong.’ (Art.11) (Nara Document on Authenticity, UNESCO, ICCROM, ICOMOS 1994).

This is relayed by the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage, whose purpose is ‘to ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the

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it first Principle: ‘... it is the responsibility of the conservation professional, acting alone or with others, to strive constantly to maintain a balance between the need in society to use a cultural property and to ensure the preservation of that cultural property’ (Art I, CAPC 2000).

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20 International Council on Monuments and Sites
21 International Centre for the Study of the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage, Rome
communities, groups and individuals concerned’ (Art.1, UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage, 2003). Intangible heritage is defined as

‘Practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities…recognize as part of their cultural heritage’, providing communities ‘with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity’ (Art.2, UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage, 2003).

The convention promotes ‘recognition of, respect for, and enhancement of the intangible cultural heritage in society’ (Art. 14.a) through access, documentation, transmission, educational awareness and participation of the communities to planning programs worldwide (UNESCO 2003).

From a general to a local context, conservation codes of practice have also integrated the notion and adapted it to their specificity. As early as 1993, ICOMOS New Zealand Charter recognized to the Maori people of New Zealand the right to guide conservation decisions no matter who the legal owner was, on the grounds of their knowledge of their cultural values. Art 2 of the Preamble states

‘The Treaty of Waitangi is the historical basis for indigenous guardianship. It recognises the indigenous people as exercising responsibility for their treasures, monuments and sacred places. This interest extends beyond current legal ownership wherever such heritage exists. Particular knowledge of heritage values is entrusted to chosen guardians. The conservation of places of indigenous cultural heritage value therefore is conditional on decisions made in the indigenous community, and should proceed only in this context.’ (ICOMOS New Zealand, Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Heritage Value, 1993)

At the same time, the 1993 Australian policy Previous Possessions, New Obligations-Policies for Museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, developed by the Council of Australian Museum Associations, stated as its first principle

‘Museums support the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to self-determination in respect of cultural heritage matters.’ (PPNO, 1993)
This is further developed and detailed in the following twelve principles, outlining the necessity of involvement of Indigenous people in the management of collections, the prevalence of the tradition regarding access and restrictions, and the equal importance of the cultural material and the information relevant to it. Furthermore, the text encompasses the idea that conservation practice needs to be flexible

‘Museums must assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community groups in the care and preservation of objects. Conservation practice must adapt to cultural requirements, most particularly in respect of secret/sacred items’ (PPNO, 1993, Principle 8)

P. Edmonds and E. Wild described in 2000 the implementation of these principles at Bunjilaka, (the Aboriginal Centre of Melbourne Museum), and remarked that the care of collections, previously done with little or no participation from the Indigenous communities, was now planned in a totally different way. Access to their heritage is provided to communities in the Keeping Place, balancing the preventive care and the need for handling by community members (Edmonds & Wild 2000). While recognizing that consultation related to conservation may not always be easy, the authors emphasize that it creates a communication pathway to resolve issues, and mention also the outside activities undertaken by museum staff such as training and assistance with preservation, in application of principle 7

‘Museums have a responsibility to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the management of cultural property and in providing training in research and documentation to people of those communities ‘(PPNO 1993).

Reviewed in 2000, the policy became Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities (Museums Australia, 2005), which sets the framework for the role and responsibilities of museums in Australia. CCOR reinforces the intellectual and cultural property rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals. It modifies the museums’ approach to indigenous collections by incorporating the notion of custodianship rather than ownership, recognizing not only the value of intangible material associated with the objects but also the contemporary character of cultural practice. CCOR acknowledges the authority of traditional custodians over the care of sensitive objects and the necessity of their input into the management of collections of their cultural heritage. Flexibility of conservation practices is explicitly mentioned in Article 1.1.5 that states
‘Relevant Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people should be involved in decisions regarding the care and preservation of their cultural material held in museum collections. This may require the adaptation of conservation practices to meet cultural requirements, particularly when an item is secret or sacred’ (CCOR, Museums Australia 2005, p15).

Regarding secret/sacred items, the policy is quite precise

‘Museums may hold secret/sacred items if requested to do so by their traditional custodian/s or those authorised by them. In such cases a museum is to abide by any reasonable conditions sought by those custodians. Agreements reached between museums and custodians regarding the storage and care of secret/sacred items should be subjected to a regular review process.’ (CCOR, Museums Australia 2005, Art 1.5.6)

‘Museums shall store secret/sacred items in ways that respect their significant nature and separately from other collections’. (CCOR, Museums Australia 2005, Art.1.5.7)

‘Traditional custodians are to be consulted on the best ways to store and preserve secret/sacred items and only people given permission by traditional custodians or those authorised by them, such as the museum’s management, shall have access to secret/sacred items’ (CCOR, Museums Australia 2005, Art.1.5.8).

In application of CCOR, consultation policies with Indigenous groups are in place at the National Museum of Australia in relation with sacred/secret objects. These policies involve restricted access or display only with authorization of the relevant custodians, and seeking similar authorization for any scientific research (NMA 2006). No conservation intervention is carried out on this sacred/secret material unless required by the traditional owners (pers. comm., David Kaus, Senior Curator, Repatriation Program, NMA, 20/04/2010).

In the same spirit, the Australian Museum in Sydney is developing a program of visits by cultural experts from Pacific nations or territories. The program facilitates access to the collections, with the double benefit to allow communities to revive traditional practices and designs as well as to recreate artefacts, and to gather intangible knowledge related to the museum’s collections (Daniel 2008). The Pacific Virtual
Museum project incorporates some of the information gathered, and is protected by appropriate filters to control access according to customary methods for knowledge management (Daniel 2008). However the museum is aware of the challenges to conservation posed by such projects and initiatives, and suggests that the profession should review its code of ethics to accommodate the newly recognized needs of intangible knowledge and access (Daniel 2008).

More focused on the specific mission of conservators, the AICCM Code of Ethics and Code of Practice (last revised in 2002) states clearly the principles of respect for cultural diversity and collaboration

‘All actions of AICCM members must be governed by an informed respect for cultural property, its unique character and significance, and the people or person who created it’ (Art.1).

‘It is recognized that the significance of cultural material may have a bearing on conservation decisions’ (Art 4).

‘The AICCM member should be informed and respectful of the cultural and spiritual significance of cultural material and should, where possible, consult with all relevant stakeholders before making treatment or other decisions relating to such cultural material…. When undertaking conservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander cultural property, the AICCM member should recognize that the objects and the information relevant to them are of equal importance, and that conservation practice must adapt to cultural requirements, particularly in respect of secret/sacred items.’ (Art 5, p 4, AICCM 2002)

It is worth noting that flexibility of the conservation practice is also mentioned here but limited to the care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural property. This echoes the growing concern in Australia during the last twenty years regarding the situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and the political, social and cultural policies that aim to remedy this situation. Smith and Scott recently reviewed the historic and contemporary contexts in Australia and New Zealand, and surveyed professional members of conservation bodies in both countries. They believe that codes of ethics and codes of practice reflect rather than influence changes in practice,
and call for regular critical review for the codes to be relevant, accommodate emerging values and engage with all communities concerned by the conservation process (Smith and Scott 2009).

Other texts such as the Burra Charter (ICOMOS/Australia, revised 1999) or the Report on the stewardship and acquisitions of sacred objects (Association of Art Museum Directors, USA, Canada and Mexico) include similar principles: ‘Conservation is based on a respect for the existing fabric, use, associations and meanings’ (Art 3.1, Burra Charter). Flexibility regarding rules is again identified as a necessity and AAMD stresses

‘...The importance of consultation and collaborative discussion with indigenous cultural and traditional religious leaders regarding questions surrounding sacred objects...AAMD encourages museums to consider cases when it may be important to go beyond the law and adopt special stewardship or interpretive responsibilities for sacred objects that are not … subject to specific …laws and treaties’ (Monroe 2006).

While all the texts emphasize collaboration and flexibility in a general manner, the Burra charter explicitly addresses a particular issue when it evokes the possibility of conflicting sets of values. ‘Co-existence of cultural values should be recognised, respected and encouraged, especially in cases where they conflict’ (Art 13, Burra Charter). The next section will examine these different sets of values and how they interfere in the care of Himalayan thangkas in Australian collections.

**5.4. Conflicting sets of values**

Fundamental principles of our Western system of values, such as human and democratic rights, freedom of choice and non discrimination are reflected in museums and collections policies, which enhance visual, aesthetic and historical relationships, and promote the right to knowledge and information. In our Western cultures, the past and the present are separated, and objects are preserved to enable a lecture of the past; access to heritage is separated from daily life and usually confined within the framework of an institution (private collections often recreate the same presentation, but for a personal enjoyment). Appreciating cultural heritage is a visual and intellectual experience supported by academic knowledge (Clavir 2002).
In the Himalayan culture, the system of values is quite different; the past and the present are united in a fluid relationship through the cycle of reincarnations (*samsara*); this cycle is illustrated in the Wheel of Life, the ultimate goal being to escape it by reaching Enlightenment through meditation and merits accumulation. Some reincarnations have a particular spiritual signification, as in the concept of *trulku* (reincarnated lama). Specific to Tibetan Buddhism, this state is an innate quality that has to be recognized by high ranked lamas, and can be described as a ‘spiritual heritage’ where a person is both himself and his predecessors in the lineage, all of them sharing the same name. Such a lineage starts with a spiritual master declaring that he will be reborn in this world for the well being of humans (Pommaret 2002). This system is still valid and widely used for important religious people. The most famous example is the designation of the Dalai Lama (spiritual leader and head of state), although the actual Dalai Lama has recently indicated that, confronted with a blocked political dialogue, he might consider different processes of succession such as the election of a new leader during his own lifetime.\(^\text{23}\)

![Fig. 25 Detail of a thangka: Religious Master with a thangka above his head depicting his lineage (From Rhie & Thurman 1996)](image-url)

\(^{23}\) Source: Phayul.com
In Himalayan culture, spiritual beliefs are the basis of knowledge in lieu of scientific facts, and the explanation of the world includes a strong emphasis on the actions of deities. Relationships with these deities are mediated by the use of objects and the practice of rituals by initiated people acting as intercessors for the non-initiated. Lay people also perform rituals involving objects, thus creating an intimate and organic relationship with these objects, based on personal and emotional connections to them and the associated deities (Tucci 1970, Pommaret 2002, Yangki 2008). These relationships may also include restrictions to information linked to initiation rites or gender, rituals to keep the objects ‘alive’ and regular use of objects in performing ceremonies (Puntshok Tashi 2009). The culture is preserved through this continual use of the objects, which are merely a means to transmit a philosophy. This cultural life and philosophy is considered the most important thing to be preserved (Geshe Konchok Tsering, 12/08/09). The preservation of the tradition may incorporate physical changes to the material heritage to reflect evolving times, while the fundamental principles such as continuity remain unchanged, making the past an integral part of the life in the present (Wisejuriya 2007).

It is clear that the recognition of cultural diversity promoted in international texts implies the emergence of dissenting voices and new questions challenging the Western principles. In Australia, in Canada, in the United States and in New Zealand, some active Native groups are ‘finding intellectual, legal and ethical grounds for taking back power for making decisions about how their cultures and material heritage are treated and displayed in museums’ (J.Haas, quoted in Peters 2008). Although in Australia Tibetan groups are not a very active part of this movement, this research proves that their position is far from indifference. Their priorities do not lie with the conservation of their cultural objects housed in Australian collections but with the teaching of their doctrine and philosophy of life (GKT). However, the persons interviewed have all expressed either a desire to be consulted for interpretation (GKT) or indicated that they would respond positively to such a demand (MR, NR). The fact that most of the Tibetan movable cultural heritage is in Western hands through historical and political circumstances has been acknowledged as regrettable but here again, does not constitute a pretext for uprising. There are more important things for the Tibetans than fighting for the repatriation of their heritage or for the rights to be consulted (although it is a possibility that with a future change of leadership a more active stance could be taken in that area as it might be on the political scene). The Dalai Lama has repeatedly
expressed his view that ‘Tibetan culture based on Buddhist values of compassion and non-violence benefits not only Tibetans, but also people in the world at large’. Therefore Tibetans consider that thangkas in Western collections benefit also the non Buddhist people viewing them, and keep concentrating on ‘preserving and promoting [their] distinct cultural and spiritual traditions…. while broadening [their] modern education hand in hand with [their] traditional values’ (Dalai Lama 2010).

However, this does not imply that Australia and other Western countries do not have a role in this cultural preservation. What emerges from this overview of the different values systems is the identification of power relationships as a crucial point in all negotiations with cultural groups (Eastop 2006). Power is not an ultimate goal for Tibetan Buddhists who prefer their spiritual quest; however there are many ways for conservators to share authority over cultural material that are not always been felt as disempowering.

5.5. Integrating the sacred. Theory and practice

As seen in the previous sections, conservation professionals generally agree on broad principles about trans-cultural work. However, grounding the principles found in the charters into conservation practice requires more than merely intellectually admitting them; it involves changing the general approach to heritage, ‘decolonizing conservation’ to adopt a hybrid approach that ‘reveals the voices hidden in artefacts’ (Sully 2007) (also see Flynn 2001, Galla 2004). Byrne observes that generally, ‘the assumption is that the public should learn about conservation rather than conservationists learning from the public about the social value and context of places’ (Byrne 2004).

Himalayan culture and heritage is no exception in that respect and is often managed either in the field with foreign funds and foreign experts’ authority, or in Western collections under the policy of the institution it belongs to, with the authority of academic scholarship. The religious character of thangkas and other ritual Tibetan objects is generally a point of contention in museums. Neutrality is often invoked as a principle to avoid introducing social and religious values within art collections. Museum professionals, however, are now questioning neutrality, on the grounds that ignoring religious significance is not a neutral position, but one that privileges the curatorial perspective over the others (Hughes & Wood 2009). Participants to colloquia about the place of the sacred in museums (Five Faiths Project, North Carolina, 2006) agree that for them, being fair and neutral means including multiple perspectives when displaying
sacred objects and respecting people with faith and no faith equally (Hughes & Wood 2009). This perfectly echoes H.H. the Dalai Lama’s definition of ‘secularism’ as respect for all religions and none equally (GKT, 12/08/09), which can apply not only to the politics of the Tibetan state but also to the politics of conservation. To engage with the cultural and social dimension of conservation, there is no other way but to ‘engage with the people who own and use the culture we conserve’ (Cane 2009) and combine these multiple approaches to preserve the cultural significance as much as possible, by reinvesting art objects with some of their original meanings.

There is currently a process of reversing the museums’ previous appropriation of non-Western sacred objects as artworks by ‘re-inscribing them within museums as religious icons’ (Guha-Thakurta 2008). This can lead to elaborate attempts at recreating the performing religious context around the objects; an example is the construction of the Tibetan Buddhist altar at the Newark Museum (USA) in 1990, for the display of Tibetan sacred objects, including thangkas. The altar is not conceived as a display setting, but as a religious structure, and has been consecrated by H.H. the Dalai Lama, with the aim of integrating aesthetic and sacred character within a re-created space of devotion, a point still debated amongst scholars. What is certainly underlined in such a setting is ‘the constant blurring of boundaries between sacred and secular’, and that the two worlds of art and religion cannot be kept safely apart (Guha-Thakurta 2008).

There is a sense that the sacred nature of objects is also being experienced by other groups than the originating culture, which might help eliciting collaborative attitudes with cultural representatives for the care and conservation of these objects.

Guha Thakurta suggests ‘thinking of ‘artistic’ and ‘religious’ less as fixed and stable values and more as a shifting ground for the positioning of these objects (Guha-Thakurta 2008). Similarly, participants to the Five Faiths Project consider that the museum is a safe ground to discuss religion, as it can clearly differentiate the language about the sacred -which is the museum’s approach, from the experience of the sacred -which is the religious approach (Hughes & Woods 2009). They redefine museums as ‘translators of objects’, from ritual value to artistic value, and accordingly consider that their mission might not be principally the transfer of knowledge, but the transfer of awareness of other cultures and faiths. Excessive scholarship, condescension and silence are identified by them as ‘enemies of mindful engagement of the museum’s visitors’; this leads them to the suggestion that rather than supplying answers to questions that have not yet been asked, the museum’s mission might be to assist the visitor in articulating excellent questions (Hughes & Wood 2009, p 102).
Embracing Clifford’s idea of ‘museums as contact zones’, the participants determine their duty as conveying something of the religious world that created and surrounded the objects, while simultaneously engaging with the appreciation of beauty. This calls for an ‘evocation’ rather than a recreation of the religious setting, using music and props such as candles (not lit), regrouping objects used to celebrate a cult, or singling out some objects to concentrate interrogations around them (Hughes & Wood 2009, pp 55-57) The authors advocate a multi-vocal approach that includes faith practitioners and is transparent for the public (such as multiple -and signed- labels for the same object), as a way to address the possibility of the museum’s actions compromising the special relationship between sacred objects and culturally associated people.

On a similar note, Sully advocates to integrate sacred meanings into conservation practice by giving voice (and consideration) to the concerned community, and by embracing its vision. For him, ‘challenging the power relations involved in the existing approaches to the management of this heritage’ is ‘a liberating process’ opening to a new discourse ‘not solely confined by Western reference points’ (Sully 2007). Price equally believes that ‘Western authored history of Art’ is increasingly incorporating a multiplicity of alternative frameworks (Price 1989) that will give voice and legitimacy to minorities and culturally specific visions of sacred property.

As a consequence, respectful management of sensitive collections requires a shift in conservation purpose and active seeking of a broad range of knowledge and opinions beyond the strict realm of material conservation. ‘Interweaving of different knowledge systems’ (Sully 2007) is a key to producing intercultural agreements and finding creative compromises between the museum’s legal restrictions and the requests or concerns voiced by communities. Clavir has cited Canadian Museum of Civilization accepting food offerings to be placed next to Native masks, provided that they would be frozen beforehand to kill any potential infestation, which is fine for the Native people (Clavir 2002). Another telling example of this type of compromise is given by both NMAI\(^{24}\) and Alutiiq Museum (Alaska) on how to accommodate the request for gender restrictions associated with certain categories of objects, which cannot be enforced as it would be contrary to the American non-discrimination legislation. The solutions proposed go from asking the staff to voluntarily abide and remove themselves from uncomfortable situations, to limiting physical contact with the objects by wearing gloves and handling boxes or trays rather than objects in the case of female staff being the only possible person at the time (NMAI 2004; Haakanson 2004 b; Capone &

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\(^{24}\)National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, USA
Lauren, 2004). Both museums, however, admit that not all requests can be fully accommodated and that they endeavour to find ‘workable solutions’ to sensitive issues at all times, through dialogue and consultation. NMAI adds another dimension by stressing that it is committed to maintaining a comfortable and culturally sensitive environment ‘while the items are in its care’ (Henry 2004). This is a powerful reminder of the non-permanent status of the collections and an acknowledgement of the many changes that occur in societies and result in the movements of objects from one cultural sphere to another.

5.6. Respect: is there a shared meaning?

Having discussed so far the implications of the recognition of cultural diversity and the respect of the cultural heritage’s significance, it is worth examining more closely the vocabulary. ‘Respect’ is the word present in every single text or discussion about this topic. While there is no denying the necessity of respect in intercultural dialogue, dissenting voices are nevertheless arising, highlighting that ‘respect’ has distinct meanings and varying connotations for each of the partners, and claiming their right to their own interpretation of ‘respect’. James Pepper Henry describes one of these misunderstandings

‘Physical anthropologists may believe that they are treating human remains with ‘respect’ by refraining from using any destructive form of analysis, while Native representatives may regard any handling at all or simply the possession of an ancestor’s human remains as disrespectful’. (Henry 2004)

This is a relatively common state of things (cf Cassman & Odegaard 2004) happening where cultural gaps exist. In a recent on-line newspaper article, the (otherwise scientifically interesting) findings of DNA analysis carried on Pharaoh Tuthankhamamon’s mummy were discussed with reference to ‘King Tut’ or simply ‘Tut’. This article illustrates well enough the distance that time has created between the social and political person of the Pharaoh and his mummy, now considered as a scientific object of study devoid of humanity. This separation is leading to attitudes that might be regarded as disrespectful by contemporary Egyptians (Artdaily, 17-02-2010). On a similar topic, the Brooklyn museum takes a different view and advocates an innovative approach to conservation. The museum’s conservators have recently ‘rewrapped’ one of its collections’ mummies, which had been stripped from its ritual wrapping in the 1950s, using the original fabric that had been (luckily) left in storage. This operation involved long and delicate studying of the creases to guide the refolding of the
wrappings, and occasional addition of new fabric strips to bind them together. The museum’s pioneer approach, which it insists is a mark of respect for the mummies, has apparently been noted and appreciated by the US museum community (Loos 2010).

Even the use of certain words such as ‘ethnographic’ or ‘objects’ may elicit negative feelings from the receivers of those labels; they feel categorized as ‘others’ and not treated equally as a cultural group, while their material heritage is considered as folkloric rather than historic, somehow disconnected from their contemporary selves. The intimate relationship between objects and societies has been powerfully reminded to conservators at ICOM-CC 2008 conference by conservator Tharron Bloomfield: ‘I am not an object’s conservator; I am a conservator of people’s objects’ (Bloomfield 2008). This statement not only reframes conservation practice in social terms, but also enlightens the fact that the very words used to define our practice are inappropriate and dusty, carrying a wealth of obsolete and unwanted connotations.

Addressing the same issue of respect, and reframing it within negotiations around conservation, Clavir has underlined the importance of clearly stating the benefits sought by each party. This can sometimes reveal that one action may satisfy completely different goals (i.e. covering an object can both protect its spirit from being viewed by non initiated people and protect the object from dust) and therefore be considered a successful agreement where both parties’ concerns have been respected (Clavir 2007).

Holden and Jones, from British think tank DEMOS, take a broader view and link respect to the building of cultural literacy, or capacity for people to read and adapt to the many different cultures encountered in an interconnected world.

‘...We need to broaden curricula not only to include knowledge about other cultures, but also to encourage an understanding of all cultural forms (from the objects we look at in museums to the media we see and the food we eat in the streets) as conveying something about people’s identity and attitudes’. (Holden and Jones 2008, p 53)

Incorporating McNiven and Russell’s vision of cultural borders as spaces of meeting, of contestation and of negotiation of identity (Russell 2006), they see culture as ‘a space where we relate to one another’ and conservation as ‘integral to sparking the interests of others, and enable the cultural heritage to reflect…multiple values…back
to the public’ (Holden & Jones 2008). Furthermore, considering that modern Western society has now more access to different cultures than ever in history, which can elicit both thrill and confusion, Jones observes that this confusion may also trigger recourse to old and outdated stereotypes of defence and defiance. In his analysis, heritage can help to build new approaches to thinking about multiculturalism by offering an entry to other cultures (Jones & Somers-Cock 2010).

Elizabeth Crooke shares this view and advises museum professionals to consider understanding the nature of community group formation and the features enabling its survival as crucial means to appreciate the role heritage awareness may play (Crooke 2007). According to her, multiculturalism needs to be promoted as an ideology to foster public recognition and respect of different values, beliefs and lifestyles. Collections seen as a form of social capital become a powerful political tool to convey messages about societies and help management of cultural differences by promoting curiosity and understanding between communities (Crooke 2007). However, some authors deplore the politicization of the cultural debate on the grounds that culture cannot be owned (Conn 2009, p 59). The risks of extremist views leading to reverse exclusion (Conn 2009) are real, but are generally considered worth taking in regards to the benefits of sharing authority. Crooke encourages museums to build more consistent links with communities, arguing that only people can bring significance and value to collections; for her, if a museum does not forge associations with people then it has little meaning (Crooke 2007), which joins the conclusion of Bloomfield and of Hughes & Wood for whom the museum is ‘a place for meaning’ (Hughes & Wood 2009).

Heritage in general and conservation in particular appear therefore as privileged arenas where social multicultural links should be built along with trust and confidence among different societies. Because ‘conservation should be agreed upon’ (Munoz Vinas 2005), it has an important role in promoting tolerance through ‘strengthening interfaith dialogues on conservation issues’ (Stovel 2003) and recognizing situations where traditional values and intangible aspects are more important than the physical fabric of the object (Logan 2006). Establishing mutual confidence and ‘respect for traditional conceptions of heritage and its management’ (Logan 2006) is a key to finding ‘a place of trust where decisions can be made’ (Jessica Johnson, in Symposium Preserving aboriginal heritage: technical and traditional approaches, Ottawa 2007).
6. Discussion and conclusion

In this research, conservation of thangkas has been identified as being much more than a mere technical specificity of art conservation. Thangkas have multiple layers of meaning that extend far beyond their artistic quality only; these encompass the history of their creation and of their arrival into Australian collections, the different values they are given in their successive different contexts, the sacred nature of their creation and their ritual use as well as the relationships they symbolize with contemporary Tibetan and Himalayan cultural groups. Seen from the Australian or from the Western scene, conservation of thangkas relates to the broader topic of conservation of sacred objects originating from a different culture. The previous chapter showed how reconsidering the aims of the conservation process in terms of its effect on people rather than in terms of how well it is preserving the objects’ physical integrity implies ‘an engagement in the social network around conservation’ (Sully 2007). There is also a growing realization by heritage professionals of the importance of the local history and knowledge, and the relative inadequacy of ‘universal’ ethical standards of practice to particular cases such as living cultural heritage. As the ideological tenets that have dominated the conservation of cultural heritage are challenged (Cane 2009), new directions emerge that are distancing the practice from scientific rationality only and include other references previously ignored. From universal principles being the objective and rational way to manage heritage, conservation is moving to ‘value-driven planning’ acknowledging the subjective relationships between people and places, and between people and objects (Avrami 2009). In grappling to implement inclusive processes seeking broader public input, conservation is waking up to the fact that increased public awareness is best reached through collective involvement and through public access to professional discourse (Avrami 2009).

Contemporary conservation ethics and theory promote the recognition of other systems of value, respect for the sacred value held by another culture, involvement of and ongoing relationships with contemporary communities. This acknowledges the social character of conservation, and that the social value may sometimes supersede the scientific foundations of the discipline in decision-making. The concept of ‘cultural integrity’ (Kaminitz & al. 2009), slowly emerging in conservation literature, is now an alternative to ‘physical integrity’. At the interface between social and physical characterizations of an object, it encompasses views previously deemed in contradiction with the ethics of preservation. Cultural integrity (and how best to retain it) is opening the door to new ideas, such as integrating maintenance or reconstruction.
into conservation practices. The idea of compromise, which semantically is almost the antithesis of ethics, is now increasingly considered as an acceptable practice (Clavir 2009), and as a result shifts the focus of conservation from the objects to the strategies to employ to reach these compromises (Johnson & al. 2005, Costain 2007).

Discussions with Tibetan Buddhism practitioners within the framework of this research have established that Himalayan thangkas always retain their sacred value for the Buddhist community. This is the case for most communities, whether or not with a colonial past, whose cultural material is held in Western museums. The Tibetans are a divided community, whose part remaining in the original land is undergoing a process similar to colonization, while the Diaspora is striving to maintain its culture in exile and adapt it to the realities of modern life. But while there is much effort put into the survival of the Tibetan culture in exile, sustained by hopes for a liberation of the land, there are no claims for repatriation of objects, even though the Tibetan spiritual leader has founded a new ‘patria’ in exile. Because of the historical links between their religion and their political power, and of their Buddhist philosophy of impermanence, the Tibetans have often been thought not to attach much importance to their material culture. When expressing on that topic, Tibetan personalities say that this is not the case; they have expressed hopes for preservation of their material heritage as a witness to their cultural past and as a marker of their contemporary identities through their cultural practice (HH the Dalai Lama, foreword to Rhie & Thurman 2005).

The literature survey shows that concerns about the religious and spiritual dimensions of thangkas have been present since the 1980s (Agrawal 1984, Bruce-Gardner 1989, Shaftel 1991) in the conservation literature. Chapter 4 has described the dynamic character of Tibetan culture and the willingness of religious personalities to integrate conservation concepts within their religious system. It has emerged in this research that although their priority is to preserve and to teach the Buddhist philosophy, there is nevertheless a desire from Tibetan Buddhist practitioners to see thangkas respected and cared for in the best way, and to be consulted for their interpretation and display. That this desire has not become a militant demand does not deny its existence and the ensuing duty for conservators to try their best to convey some of the significance of the thangkas, for example by engaging with contemporary representatives of the community. This does not mean necessarily relinquishing conservation work as we understand it but engaging in discussion, bringing technical knowledge to assist the social and religious approach of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, and giving consideration to different views. My personal experience of conservation workshops in
the Himalayan region showed me that these discussions are often enlightening and that negotiating acceptable compromises is relatively easy, provided that conservators remain flexible and respectful, seeing themselves as advisors rather than authorities.

Integration of the spiritual dimension through collaboration with Indigenous communities is a familiar experience in Australian museums; for the last two decades, museums policies regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander objects, and now Pacific communities material, have established and reinforced the right of Indigenous people for determining how their culture is cared for and presented in museums. Relationships with cultural leaders and outreach activities are shifting conservation focus; from being strictly limited to the lab, it becomes a social activity that can also be located out in the public place and in the communities.

However, this research has shown that the existing models, theoretical or practical, are not necessarily implemented for cultures other than the ones originating from the same land. In the case of Himalayan thangkas, the spiritual dimension is recognized but generally not addressed. Economic factors such as the small size of the collections of thangkas in Australia and the large size of the conservators' workload in public collections (or the necessity to accommodate clients' desires in the private sphere) are certainly impacting on this state of things. Social factors like the fragmented nature of the Tibetan community in the Diaspora and its geographical dispersion across several continents are also contributing. The small Australian Tibetan community seems at present much more focused on expanding its doctrine and reviving its arts and crafts tradition to keep its cultural practice alive than on actively reclaiming thangkas or contesting the way they are displayed in art galleries.

Cultural factors are important; it is not culturally in Tibetan nature to seek confrontation. The Middle Way, the path advocated by the Dalai Lama in his political relations with China, is a good illustration. The duality of the position of Tibetan religious representatives in this research is typical of their attitude to the world; things and people are transient and have no real importance compared with the general state of the world and the quest for enlightenment for all beings (GKT, DNR). Regarding thangkas, most of Tibetan religious leaders do not actively seek to be involved, but the few who voiced their opinion admit that they would probably appreciate being consulted about display or conservation.
From the Australian point of view, there is no political or cultural emergency to address these points since no one is claiming them as issues. However, my view is that inclusive processes of conservation need not necessarily emerge out of conflict or requests, but are part of the general principles developed in the codes of practice. Therefore they are, whenever possible, one of the mission of conservators. The implications are far reaching; as noted by Moira Simpson (2009), sacred objects are resources of enormous importance for cultural renewal, linked to broader community initiatives to perpetuate and renew cultural knowledge and find a place and identity in modern society. Sully (2007) has also remarked that preservation of objects in partnership with a community can have long terms effects on the general well being of this community, in facilitating a renewed sense of self esteem and relevance, and creating social networks for its members. Simpson urges the museum community to

‘Look beyond the walls of their own institutions and the local community and recognize the values and needs of source communities, and to consider the contribution that museums can make to society as a whole, not just to museum visitors and the academic community’. (Simpson 2009)

Engaging with others in the discussions that underpin conservation decisions and allowing different perspectives to be heard is not necessarily akin to opening a Pandora box, but rather enhances the mission and the relevance of the profession in a renewed and rewarding way. As Dean Sully notes, this type of cross-cultural working can ‘provide new sets of questions about the role of conservation in developing a more human heritage’ and contribute to shape ‘a more hopeful collective future’ (Sully 2007, p 238).

However, consultations with the identified cultural authorities do only make sense if there is a possibility to amend the policies about the collections to accommodate this different knowledge. This supposes a fundamental shift in vision about collection management to acknowledge the tensions between Western standards of collections and local ritual or tribal practices (Sadongei 2004). In most cases however, shared control over sacred material mostly consists of passive accommodation of the religious practice, i.e. providing museum standards of care and not engaging in conservation practice that would compromise the future use of the objects. Integrating traditional methods also means that certain actions can be delegated to the traditional owners if the conservator does not feel comfortable with carrying them out him/herself. Such actions include reconstitution of missing parts, according to the traditional craft skill,
and are best executed by the appropriate craftsperson (Smith 2006, Cotte 2006, Johnson & al. 2005)). However, conservators’ input is important in providing advice on the physical properties of the materials, their impact on each other and on the general conservation of the object. It also includes discussing such ideas as intervention limited to losses, if compatible with the ritual use, which is generally the case. As an example I have personally showed the technique of minimal retouching to several Tibetan religious leaders and discussed its results, that most of the time have been considered appropriate and sufficient to visually reconstruct the deity’s image on a thangka. My role as a conservator was to share this technique but not to enforce it over other options; as a result, once aware of technical and visual possibilities, the religious leaders could make informed choices instead of perpetuating old schemes out of technical ignorance. Similarly, when thangkas were too damaged and crucial parts for their identification were missing, I have collaborated with traditional painters to provide a ground enabling the reconstruction of the image to be limited to losses, thus reaching an ethically and religiously satisfying compromise.

Fig.26 A thangka painter reconstructing the missing parts of a damaged thangka, Nepal 2005

Other examples include the recent exhibition ‘The Dragon’s Gift’ actually touring the world, which present thangkas and ritual objects from Bhutan. Most of them have never been taken out of their monasteries and are due to reintegrate them once the tour is completed; for the Bhutanese, this exhibition is made of living objects that need
particular rituals to be kept alive and retain their spiritual power. Not only have all the thangkas displayed been conserved in such a manner that they can be hung according to the tradition, but the exhibition also travels with two monks for ritual purpose. The monks visit on a daily basis to perform the necessary rituals, much to the interest of the other visitors who learn about the spiritual dimension of the objects and thus feel some respect for them. From the admission of the Bhutanese Crown Prince, the main function of thangkas is their ritual function; however the Bhutanese people are happy to share the beauty and the spiritual message of thangkas and ritual objects with other cultures by letting them be displayed around the world (Niermans 2009).

D. Eastop aptly points that new understandings of objects that privilege their intangible value over their tangible value are more likely to be debated than approaches resting on widely admitted scientific principles (Eastop 2009). However, the models for such attitudes already exist in the codes of ethics and practice, and are currently applied for many objects originating from previously colonized cultures. The framework therefore exists for the adaptation of these models to other cultural materials, but it also needs to be integrated within the basic principles of conservation. Conservation training until now has not necessarily prepared professionals for this inclusive approach. Johnson & al. describe how unprepared NMAI conservators have over the years refined their listening skills and their mind flexibility, relying more and more on their personal experience informed by previous mistakes and less heavily on the curator for appropriate behaviours. They also realize the importance of question formulation to elicit thinking from the consultants about what the community considers is a desirable appearance for objects, as opposed to questions that already orientate the answers (Johnson & al., 2005).

However it is also important for conservators to understand the necessity to collaborate and to delegate; as noted by Odegaard, spiritual care of objects is generally not an appropriate activity for the typical conservator (Odegaard 1995). Identifying and listening to the knowledgeable person and insuring that treatment does not compromise the cultural and spiritual integrity of the object are such activities. Professionals also have to realize what their mission really is; a call to respect traditional cultural beliefs is not a call to believe in them, but an acknowledgement that these beliefs are the foundations of another culture. In some cases the conservator’s role can be limited as a consultant, while physical intervention on the objects is the task of the relevant crafts-person. The conservator’s role is also to document the process, as a witness to the treatment’s rationale and in acknowledgement that any decision only
reflects the prevalent concern at a given time. Conservators’ mission now include more than technical and scientific skills and require an ability to look beyond conservation boundaries, which has been well summed up by the director of the Centre for Folklife and Cultural Heritage at Smithsonian Institution Richard Kurin in his address to the ICOM 1994 General Conference in Seoul

‘Charged with the twin duties of cooperation and respect, museums will have to cross all sorts of boundaries … they will have to overcome prejudice of class, difference and taste, recognizing a diversity of legitimate aesthetics and values…Clearly, the skills needed by museum professionals to work with people and communities in this type of engagement are much more akin to community development than they are to materials conservation. You have to specialize in diplomacy, local history and psychology more than you do in glass, wood and metal’ (Kurin 2004).

Far from being overwhelming, this renewed approach to heritage conservation opens a path to enriching and exciting developments for all individuals involved, and a rejuvenating journey through professional life sustained by curiosity, out reaching attitudes and constant questioning of the social relevance of our profession.
Appendix 1. Guidelines for conservation

a. Identification of cultural representatives

Some institutions have practiced consultations for the last twenty years and the experience has taught them that ‘consultations cannot be forced to conform to a methodology that can be used by all institutions’ (Johnson & al. 2005). Consultation practice raises the issue of cultural representation, as being a member of a cultural group does not automatically confer knowledge about every issue related to this group. Johnson & al. recommend that the community identifies within itself the persons with the appropriate knowledge for each object or type of object and recommend them to the institution (Johnson & al. 2005). It is nevertheless important to acknowledge that religious and social information is by nature linked to context and people. This view is complicated by the fact that ‘culture is not a fixed thing; within its community, members disagree about their cultural values’ (Riles 2008). Lindholm (2008) thinks however that while a culture is never wholly unified, internal divisions do not make collective identities less compelling to those who belong to them. While not pretending to be universal, it is therefore relevant to consult chosen members of a community regarding specific questions.

Keeping these considerations in mind, the desirable steps should be to contact local Tibetan cultural groups (for example through monasteries network listed on the internet) and ask them to identify the persons best qualified for the consultation purpose (they could be a lama and/or a craftsperson). This is probably best done in collaboration with curators who have specific knowledge about the culture and may already have established relationships with some of its representatives.

Recording precisely the process from the early stages will allow future consultants to understand the path leading to each choice of person. Documenting the discussions is important to justify the decisions made at a given time. Again it is very important for conservators to situate themselves: they are looking at a belief system that is structuring the culture and informs the conservation decisions, but not necessarily endorsing the belief system themselves. The idea is not to provide answers but to learn about what is important culturally and to propose ways to maintain objects in a way that respects cultural values.
b. Handling

Thangkas can be delicate to handle because of their dimensions or because of their condition and the complexity of their construction. The weight of the rods and finials can cause stress to thangkas so it is always recommended to roll the thangka before turning it over if that is necessary. Placing the thangka between two sheets of transparent film or of muslin to roll and unroll it is a good option, particularly if it is damaged. Thangkas should always be placed high, on a table or a bench but never on the floor. Accordingly, the persons working around thangkas should avoid walking or stepping over them as this is considered as a lack of respect for the deity. Pointing the finger towards the deity is also considered disrespectful; alternatives such as pointing a light to indicate areas under discussion or using words to describe areas can be explored. Smoking, drinking or eating in front of thangkas is considered defiling in Tibetan religion; however these attitudes are usually not compatible either with good conservation practice.

c. Display

There is no consensual approach to the display of thangkas, although it is now more admitted by conservators that whenever possible they should not be separated from their borders and should be retained in their entirety (Thangka forum, ICOM-CC, Delhi 2008). The display most faithful to original intent or character is vertical hanging, using the string tied to the upper rod. However, the condition of the different elements of the thangka might create a problem for such display: the textile mount can be too fragile to support the weight of the lower rod or even its own weight, and the same can also happen with the painted part; the cotton string also can be broken or too fragile.

Alternative options are available. These range from the most ‘archaeological’ form of display where the thangka is located within a frame to the relining and recreation of mounting, with middle alternatives such as supporting the rods and/or providing a reclining position of the thangka for display. Framing thangkas can include their mounting and rods, which can be supported inside the frame; it also has the benefit of protecting the textile mounting and the painted part of a thangka, which are sensitive to fingerprints and humidity. This option however denies the free-hanging, three-dimensional and double-sided qualities of thangkas, which characterises their traditional display and ritual use. Considerations other than the material condition of
the thangkas, including their original and traditional use, can then become relevant in the display choice. This is an example of where discussion with consultants on a case-to-case basis may lead to conservation treatments enabling a sympathetic approach to the original, living character of the thangka.

d. Structural treatment

As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, consolidating structurally unsound thangkas has been undertaken in various ways in the past. Thangkas have been laid on rigid supports, on canvas or on transparent films, and presented on boards, frames or stretchers (see Chapter 1, paragraph 1.2). However, if the treatment is going to include consideration of the ritual character of thangkas, it is preferable to respect their flexibility and preserve access to both sides whenever possible. Keeping in mind that thangkas are not stretched (but should be free hanging, and therefore strong enough to support themselves) then the tear repair does not need the same resistance to strain as it does with stretched paintings.

Textile mountings can be consolidated with stitched or heat sealed silk patches, and can also be doubled on silk crepeline if needed (see Schoenholzer-Nicholls 1988; Coural & al 1996, Takami & Eastop 2002). Another option in case of severe degradation is the replacement of the borders (see Williamson 1983, Jose 2008), which can also be done with the help of a traditional tailor (sometimes a monk) specialised in framing thangkas in their silk borders (Elgar 2006).

The painted part can be consolidated using thread-to-thread tear repair (consolidated with gesso from the reverse, as explained by Terrier & Boyer), or transparent silk strips in a similar manner as the textile borders. Various propositions of stretching on karibari (Japanese style drying mount) ((Goldman 1993), wooden stretcher (Hulbert 2008) or cardboard strips and metallic stretcher (Bergeaud & al. 2006) all involve mounting a strip lining of transparent silk (either stitched or heat-sealed); however, as previously mentioned, in acknowledging the respect due to their ritual character, it is preferable to retain the ‘rollability’ of the thangka when possible. This leads to an exploration of relining options, which allow the painted part to support itself. Possibilities include lining with Japanese paper and wheat starch paste, which retains flexibility and allows remounting in the borders with stitches (Wheeler & Heady 2008). This option requires experienced conservators as using water-based adhesive can become potentially dangerous for the paint layer, as would be the case with the gesso
consolidation. Another relining option by solvent- reactivating a conservation grade acrylic adhesive on silk crepeline (Cotte 2007) gives satisfactory results regarding transparency and flexibility, allowing stitch mounting and free hanging and is easily reversible by dry peeling.

**e. Surface treatment**

The issues relating to consolidation of powdery or flaking paint are similar to those encountered on easel paintings or paper, the main issue being to retain the matte character of the paint layer. The presence on a 15th century Nepalese thangka of selective ‘glue varnishing’ by the original painter (Leona & Jain 2003) is a further reason to avoid general consolidation that would saturate the paint layer and potentially change its appearance. General humidification by spraying with deionised water is sometimes efficient enough to regenerate the binding medium. Consolidation adhesives for matte paintings such as vegetal glue, various types of methylcellulose, ethyl cellulose or hydroxypropyl cellulose, and animal glue can all be efficient but have to be maintained at the lowest effective concentrations to avoid staining.

Cleaning is a treatment motivated in a large part by aesthetic, although some types of dirt (fly frass for example) can cause deterioration to the paint layer due to their acidic nature. Soil from butter lamps smoke is a part of the history and attests to the religious ritual use of the thangkas, so its removal should be carefully considered, although the acidic nature of carbon particles in the oil should also be taken into account. However there are other consequences to a soiled surface such as accrued brittleness and excessive dust attraction. Dry cleaning methods can be quite effective on the textile parts of the thangka, and to a certain extent on the painted part to remove all extraneous material. However wet cleaning methods are required to attenuate the smoke and the various stains and tide lines caused by water damage. It should be emphasised that it is impossible to remove the totality of the soil layer on a thangka, as the paint layer is highly porous and not protected by any layer. The different films of dirt are therefore partially embedded into the paint. Cleaning should be confined to attenuating disturbing or damaging stains and tide lines, and recovering the visibility of the composition. The treatment choices are crucial here as thangkas are highly water sensitive; therefore any rubbing of the surface with a water-based solvent is potentially dangerous. Mixtures of water and ethanol, or water and methyl ethyl ketone can be used to transfer the dirt from the surface onto blotting papers, until an acceptable attenuation is reached.
Inpainting is a complex topic that can be related to the ritual use and to choices of display. From a minimal toning intervention to recreation of missing parts, the palette of possibilities is wide. The decision should be considered on a case-by-case basis, in consultation with a cultural representative and eventually with the collaboration of a traditional painter for the missing parts. Thangkas are generally very detailed paintings that are visually greatly disturbed by long lines of paint loss, caused by rolling and creasing; non intervention is a choice that aesthetically gives precedence to the accidents rather than the original painting. Toning down the losses to a ‘patina like’ tone (a light-brown tone that imitates the patina acquired with age, see figures 20 and 21) is a good compromise that can be efficient in many cases by visually ‘stitching together’ the damaged areas of the same colour. Using the same tone in all paint losses means there is no interpretation from the conservator, and also allows an understanding of some previously illegible paintings.

Using colour in the losses is also an option. The degree of reintegration is variable according to the extent of the damage and the decision relating to the final appearance of the thangka.

A balanced approach is recommended as it is the case with paintings in general; in this case, discussions with lamas including examples of toning down inpainting and colour inpainting are often enlightening (discussions with Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche 2003, 2005; Matthieu Ricard 2005; Geshe Konchok Tsering 2009). Some areas of the painting might need very little treatment to be visually and mentally reconstructed by the viewer, while others will require more extensive work with tonal reintegration or with colour. The use of reversible materials such as pigments in methylcellulose or watercolours is the more appropriate option, placing the inpaint on top of filling materials similar to the original gesso, or on an isolating layer of hydroxypropylcellulose.
f. Storage

Traditionally, thangkas are stored rolled upon themselves and tied with cotton strings. The rolled thangkas are stored in wooden trunks; the weight of the thangkas can cause squashing and creasing of the inferior rolls.

Flat storage is safer and compatible with ritual beliefs (Dzongsar Ngari Rinpoche, personal communication), provided that the face should be protected from sight. The muslin veil usually takes this function, however it could be protected itself from dust by tissue paper or muslin.

Thangkas can be layered in flat storage on trays or in boxes, separated by layers of tissue paper; however, consultation by scholars or Buddhist practitioners often involve a sighting of the back to study the consecration inscription, or to check its existence. Access to the last thangka is always more difficult.

Rolled storage is a good option if a layer of tissue paper, muslin or Tyvek® is placed under the thangka and subsequently rolled with it. The ends can then be tied with cotton strings to avoid the creasing sometimes caused in the centre by too tight tying the thangka. The textile mount can easily be damaged by creasing so it is important to align the veil flat as much as possible before rolling. Rolling should always start from the lower rod up; this allows the thangka to rest on the bigger rod when rolled, and shows respect to the deity by keeping the head above the feet. To avoid excess weight of thangkas, they can be stored in individual boxes or tubes and padded to avoid sliding in the box. The boxes can then be stored on top of each other or on shelves. Traditionally thangkas should be kept in the dark and only exposed when in use; this protects the spirit of the deity depicted on the thangka. Storage in the dark also fits the Western conservation criteria to protect pigments from discoloration. Certain thangkas depicting particular tantric teachings should not be viewed by people non-initiated to these teachings; lamas are the best persons to identify these thangkas.

g. Preventive conservation

The main agents of alteration of thangkas (when not in use in temples) are humidity and light. Keeping them at a distance from both agents is therefore necessary, using veils and curtains for example and controlling humidity by regularly insuring that there are no leaks in the storage room and by elevating the storage boxes from the floor.
(on bricks for example). Display should be protected from direct natural light, which is
damaging both pigments and textile. The textile component is the most fragile;
therefore preventive measures adapted to textiles are the best for thangkas.
Displaying thangkas in rotation (which allows some time in storage for all thangkas) is
always a good solution, as well as a regular monitoring of the displayed thangkas.

Strain from hanging is also a potential factor for damage, and various solutions can
be implemented or combined, such as supporting the lower rod (with discreet support
devices or with nylon threads hanging from the upper rod), relieve the stress from the
hanging cord and the top textile section by lining this part and insert the rod in the
lining, or simply rotating the thangkas to limit their time in display and allow them to
rest in storage as it is the case in traditional settings. Here again traditional care and
preventive conservation measures merge in practices that have different backgrounds
but similar effects.

**Materials**

Silk crepeline: Tassinari and Chatel, 11 rue Croix Paquet 69001 Lyon, France.

Plextol B500: Rohm and Haas, Independence Mall West Philadelphia, PA19105, USA.

Hydroxypropylcellulose: Klucel G, Talas, 330 Morgan Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11211, USA

**Methylcellulose:** Lascaux Colours & Restauro, Barbara Diethelm AG Zürichstrasse 42,
CH-8306 Brüttisellen, Switzerland

Tyvek (type 1443R), DuPont, available from Conservation Resources International,
L.L.C., 5532 port Royal Road, Springfield, Virginia, 22151, USA

**Health and safety**

Ethanol is flammable and can be toxic if inhaled for long periods or ingested
Occupational exposure limits (8-hour reference period) 1000 ppm (1900 mg/m³). It is an
eye and skin irritant so appropriate protection should be worn (gloves, goggles, masks)
if prolonged exposure, or areas of contact thoroughly washed with water and mild
detergent (hands) or water (eyes). Work in well ventilated areas. (Source: Ethanol
Methyl ethyl ketone (2-Butanone) is a skin irritant and can be toxic if inhaled in quantities superior to 200ppm. Appropriate skin and eye protection should be worn and work should be done in well-ventilated areas. Symptoms of acute exposure are: headache, dizziness, drowsiness, vomiting and numbness of the extremities. Irritation of the nose, eyes and throat can also occur. Symptoms of chronic exposure are dryness and irritation of the skin. (source: Occupational safety and health guideline for 2-butane, [http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/81-123/pdfs/0069.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/81-123/pdfs/0069.pdf)).
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