

Conservation of Nepalese Wall Painting



*Chhairo Gompa
Lower Mustang Region
Pokhara, Nepal
Oct 24 to Nov 7, 2015*

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Introduction

My name is Erin E Murphy and I am a US citizen. At the time I applied for this fellowship, I was a 27 year-old student at UCL's Institute of Archaeology, studying for my MSc in Conservation for Archaeology and Museums. My work placement in conservation during this final year of my studies was in London, at the Horniman Museum and Gardens. This past year, in September of 2015, shortly before leaving for Nepal, I submitted my MSc dissertation and have now qualified for my degree.

I am a general object conservator, but have tended to specialize in ethnographic and natural history objects. For instance, my MA dissertation was based on an investigation of Australian Aboriginal objects, and I chose the Horniman for my work-study year partially due to its wonderful ethnographic collection. These objects are often the most interesting and challenging to work on, and I hope to broaden my abilities to work respectfully with them. Since finishing my studies and taking this trip I am currently back in the US, applying for jobs primarily in natural history and ethnographic museums. I am also contemplating establishing myself as an independent conservator, and applying for a grant to return to Nepal and continue the work I have started there.

While working at the Horniman, a visitor to the conservation department shared details of the Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship and encouraged my application.

Study Trip Information

The purpose of this trip was to learn about, and participate in, the restoration of Nepalese Buddhist wall paintings at Chhairo Gompa (or monastery) in Nepal. Further goals included learning about the Buddhist approach to restoration and conservation of art, as well as contributing to object conservation within the temple grounds. I traveled under the auspices of Restoration Works International. This trip was led by Carl Kopman.

Itinerary:

- 24 Oct, 2015, Flew from London to Katmandu.
- 25 Oct, Arrived in Katmandu, spent night and met with partial group travelers.
- 26 Oct, Flew Katmandu to Pokara, rendezvous with full group.
- 27 Oct, Flew onto Jomsom, the world's 7th deadliest airport, on a tiny plane. This area is sandwiched tightly in a valley in the Annapurna mountain range of the Himalayas. From the airport, we were transferred to Chhairo via truck.
- 27 Oct - Nov 5, Worked at Chhairo Gompa.
- Nov 5- 6 Overnight excursion to Muktinath.
- 7 Nov, Returned to Jomsom and then Pokara and on to Kathmandu, spent night.
- 8 Nov, Returned to London.

Objects worked on included wall paintings on plaster, painted Mani stones and plaster and bronze statues. This was the final season of the work at this location supported by RWI.

Cost of Trip

<u>EXPENSE</u>	<u>COST(£)</u>	<u>DETAILS</u>
<u>Return travel</u> from the UK	581	London to Kathmandu (overnight flight)
<u>Course fee</u> including: Travel within destination Accommodation Subsistence	1927	All-inclusive after arrival in Nepal
<u>Visas</u>	16	Nepalese visa
<u>Insurance</u>	66	Travel Guard Health/travel coverage
<u>Cost of written report</u>	15	Fixed cost as per Zibby Garnett

<u>Total trip cost:</u>	2605	
<u>Zibby Garnett Fellowship:</u>	800	
Remainder:	1805	Donated by family and from savings

Restoration and Conservation Work

Background:

The Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal is a landlocked country in Asia located in the Himalayas between India and China (previously Tibet). Mt Everest, the tallest mountain in the world, is located here, as well as eight of the world's tallest mountains. Buddhism is historically linked to Nepal, however only 9% of the population practices it. Mustang, a northern region of Nepal, contains a common route through the Himalayas to Tibet. Historically, Tibet has exerted a large Buddhist influence along these traditional trade routes.



Figure 2: Map showing Mustang region of Nepal (modified from GeographicGuide, 2015)

I traveled to Nepal to contribute to the restoration of a Buddhist gompa (monastery) in the Mustang region. My aim was to gain familiarity with the fresco techniques used by the monks, and hopefully to also gain an understanding of their view of conservation. I was particularly interested

in this since, as Buddhists, they embrace the impermanence of material objects. On site, I was able to observe and help paint at the Chhairo Gompa. However, the monks were no longer conserving the old wall paintings at this gompa, instead they were painting new ones in a new construction (the area referred to as the gyalpo). I was also able to help with preservation efforts in other parts of the gompa. I learned about the traditional fresco technique, and gained insight into what elements of their religious art they consider to be the most important to preserve or conserve.



Figure 3: Chhairo Gompa courtyard, main gompa (left) and Guru Rimpoche shrine room (right).

The Chhairo Gompa:

The Chhairo Gompa was important in the establishment of the Nyingma sect of Buddhism. In the late 1950s, the Chinese government closed the Nepal Tibet border at the Mustang passes. With the opening of alternative routes and changing modes of transport, Chhairo Gompa became less and less

influential. Over time, community use of the gompa declined as the local population moved away looking for employment opportunities.

Until China took over Tibet, monks regularly held pujas (rituals) at the gompa. Then, as with many religious institutions in the region, eventually no monks remained at Chhairo. By the 1970's only a couple nuns remained to attend to the shrine rooms. After they died, the villagers took on all the responsibilities of day-to-day caretaking.

Recently, the community has started to rebuild Chhairo's Gompa, It is important to identify some of the individuals whose restoration work has made this renaissance possible. The Tulachan artists are a group of Buddhist artists from a single family who are working to preserve and repair Buddhist art around this whole region of Nepal. Kamal Dhoj, the nephew of lamas active in this region of Nepal, was the first of this family to train as an artist specializing in frescoes, thangkas and clay/metal statuary. He painted both new frescoes and renovated old ones across the Mustang region. Kamal Dhoi began his training at the age of twelve and perfected his technique under a variety of different masters. Three of Kamal Dhoj's sons, Krishna, Shashi and Chakra, studied under their father, who also trained other regional artists.

Lama Shashi, one of Kamal Dhoj's sons, is an important spiritual leader of Chhairo Gompa. At age 9, Shashi began assisting his father, travelling throughout the Mustang to paint frescoes and thangkas. Because much of Tibetan religious art is formulaic, he began by learning the correct

proportions for standard figures. By the age of 18 he had received his first solo assignment to paint the Mani Lha K'an of Gemi village, Mustang. Shashi Dhoj also designs metal statues for monasteries around the world. This includes the central Buddha statue in Karma Samtenling monastery at Lumbini.

In 2012, in order to re-establish Chhairo gompa's monastic purpose, seven young boys from the midwest region of Nepal came to Chhairo and were initiated into the monkhood. They are learning classical Tibetan so that they can read and memorize the scriptures. Other activities include taking part in the pujas (acts of reverence to a god or spirit through prayers, songs, and rituals), and participating in all aspects of life at the gompa.



Figure 4a and b. (a) Lama Shashi Dhoj working with the young students, (b) group image of young monks (Chhairo Gompa, 2015).

The young monks generally learn by watching their elders. Shashi, Chakra and the lamas prepare the paints and work in the gyalpo. The children observe and help with pujas led by Shashi Lama and supported by monks from nearby gompas. In time they will need to learn to make tormas (ritual offering cakes), play religious instruments, and become masters of the various rituals associated with prayers and festivals.

Much of this renaissance, or local rebirth, at the Chhairo Gompa, has come about because local lamas have inspired the village's younger generation. Locals formed the Chhairo Reconstruction and Maintenance Committee, and, by 1998, they had raised some funds and engaged an architectural firm to assess the scope and costs of reconstruction.

Outside forces have also been instrumental in conservation and reconstruction efforts. Since 2004 Restoration Works International (RWI) has also supported reconstruction projects at the Chhairo Gompa. RWI is a non-profit organization that provides monetary and labor resources. This money stimulates the local economy and supports the practice of traditional knowledge and crafts. My trip was under the auspices of RWI. RWI has helped in the reconstruction of phase 1 of the gompa (as seen in figure 5.), which has been completed this year.

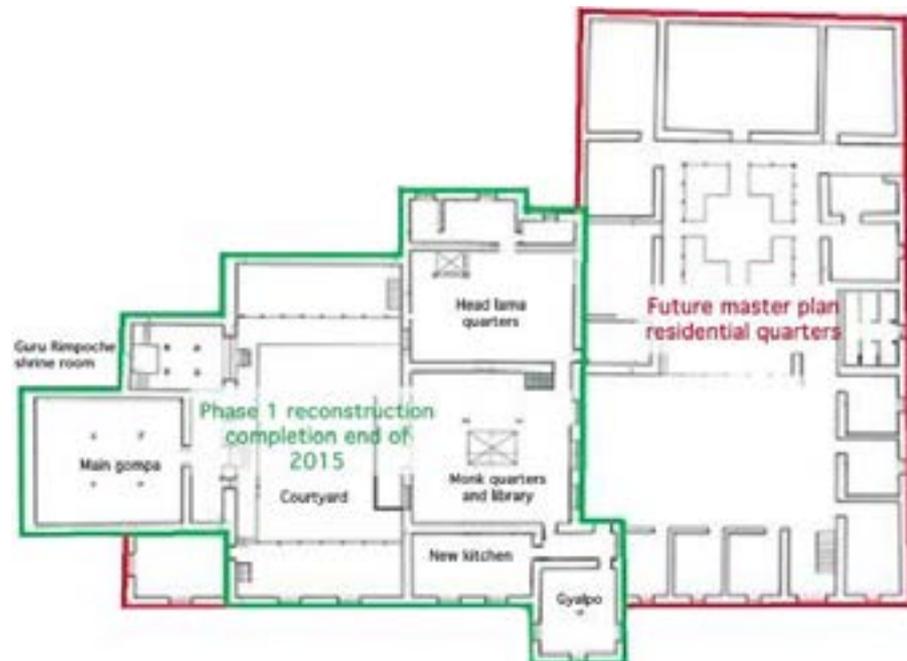


Figure 5. Layout of restoration work at Chhairo Gompa (Chhairo Gompa, 2015).

Until Nepalese authorities opened Mustang to tourism in 1992, locals had been emigrating in increasing numbers to Kathmandu and the cities of South Asia for employment. It is essential that the local culture be preserved, both for the locals and those coming to study and enjoy what makes Nepal unique.



Figure 6: Detail of a completed painting in the gyalpo.

Conservation and restoration work specifics:

The religious art is an important part of the restoration efforts of the gompa complex. The young monks, as well as visiting villagers, absorb and watch the evolution of the wall paintings. The monks will eventually transfer what they see to their own drawing and the future maintenance of the paintings. I was able to both observe and help with the following painting procedure. Paints are made from traditional pigments, mixed with glue from cowhide and water. The painting involves:

- Grinding the chalkstone into a powder.
- Forming the powder into bricks (Figure 7).



Figure 7. the chalkstone before (left) and after (right) grinding and being made into manageable bricks for future use in paints.

- Grinding up the bricks for use. Add raw traditional pigment; hide glue & water, as needed.
- Warming on coals (Figure 8) before use in thangkas or on plaster.



Figure 8. Warming up the paints before use.

The colours used by Buddhist artists are inherently symbolic. This is especially meaningful in the creation of tantric mandalas, the circular representations of the universe done in paint or sand (PBS, 2015). Figure 9 shows many of the prepared paint colours commonly used.

- Blue/black = wrath, pollution
- Red = love, attachment, power
- Yellow = ascendance, riches
- White = peace, purity



Figure 9: The paints used in the gyalpo in Chhairo. This represents a common colour palate.

The production of a Buddhist wall painting follows a specific procedure. First, the head artist, in this case Shashi Lama, first sketches out the images onto a prepared smooth plaster base (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Brothers Chakra and Lama Shashi Tulachan making the charcoal sketches.

When satisfactory, the image is secured by tracing it in ink, and the most inexperienced helpers fill in the big blocks of background paint (Figure 11).



Figure 11. A partially completed panel.

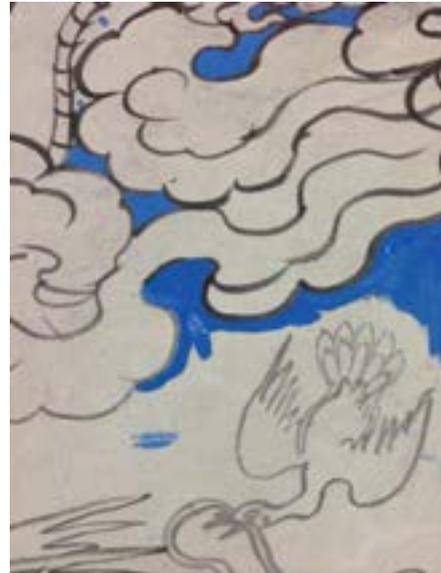
More experienced artists paint layers over the background colour blocks. Each layer is more detailed, until finally the head artist, Shashi, applies the final details on the paintings. Gold details are added after all other colours. However, areas that will have large blocks of gold are first given a yellow base, and then the gold is painted on top.



Figure 12: A completed panel, sans the animal glue varnish.

When the painting is complete, the whole surface is covered with a rawhide varnish. I was encouraged to contribute personally to several steps in this

fresco procedure. In addition to observation and the mixing and production of paints, I worked in multiple locations on the block background painting (Figure 13) as well as some overlaid detail work.



Because I am an object conservator, I was also appointed to assess a room of plaster

Figure 13. One of the areas where I contributed to the background painting.

sculptures. I began by reviewing proper dusting techniques with several young monks and my two designated helpers from RWI. These objects had clearly been neglected for a long time and the top surfaces, heavily coated with dust, had deteriorated severely. Sadly, there was not a lot that could be done. This dust, combined with decayed organic burnt offerings, had combined to impregnate and destroy many surfaces. My helpers and I cleaned the objects as best as possible within the time available. In addition to the plaster sculptures, we also worked on stone carvings and a bronze statue located on the altar and shrine. To protect underlying paint, I usually began cleaning very lightly with a sable hair paintbrush. We also cleaned the entire altar of mouse droppings and juniper leaves.

Although dusting objects might seem to be rudimentary, this was an important learning experience for me. It was a challenge to teach young monks that didn't know much English how to be gentle with the statues. I also emphasized the importance of continuous maintenance.



Figure 14. Working on the bronze statue of a lama in the main gompas.

Because there was not any proper conservation equipment, we needed to improvise, which was a good practical challenge for me. I settled on a cleaning solution that was fairly benign; its main active ingredient was isopropyl alcohol. This was applied with chopsticks (for lack of bamboo skewers) and cotton balls, (see Figure 14). When finished with this work, I felt very hopeful that the improved condition of the objects would be maintained, and that they would not be allowed to deteriorate to that level again.

Buddhist Views on Conservation:

One of my major goals for this trip was to gain insight into Buddhist views on conservation. I quickly learned that colour and form were very important aspects of their religious art and it was most important to them that this be conserved. It was not necessarily important who executed or maintained the artwork, so long as it was a historically accurate and the result was a recognizable figure from the sutras. As part of a now working monastery, the art of Chhairo Gompa has a job to do. It serves to instruct and inform the local people and the monks about Buddhist scriptures. And, just like a winged lion would clearly symbolize Saint Mark to a medieval Christian, it is important that the iconic figures of Buddhist teachings be readily recognizable so that they continue to tell their stories.



Figure 14: Before and after treatment of decorated Mani stones in the main gompa.

Because it is very important to maintain accurate artwork, older established lamas like Shashi Lama are in great demand when restoring religious artwork in gompas. The skin tone of the figures is *very* important when identifying who they are. They must also hold the correct objects and in the proper way to be recognizable. Unlike much Western art, originality or creativity is not a prized attribute. However, a quick accurate hand, with an encyclopedic knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures is essential. It was very impressive to watch Shashi Lama at work as he was clearly using these objects as a projection of his knowledge. He was constantly teaching those around him.

Side Trips in Nepal:



Figure 16. The holy waters of Muktinath.

Although there was not a large amount of time for sightseeing on my trip to Nepal, our group did go on a two-day trip to Muktinath, a holy site for Buddhists and Hindus that is located at a very high altitude. The water at

Muktinath is considered holy and pilgrims shower under the 108 holy taps. We took a bus there, and then hiked up to the temple. We hiked to a neighboring town to spend the night. The next day we returned via horseback to Jomsom and then via bus to Chhairo in time for dinner.

We also took a day hike to Tukuche to attend a Buddhist festival where area lamas of the Nyingma sect of Buddhism gather to dance their version of the Buddhist stories. The lamas consult an almanac, and pick an auspicious day for the festival. This year it happened to fall on a day that we could attend. People traveled from all around Mustang to gather, celebrate and see the Buddhist stories portrayed in dance. It was a very fun and colourful experience, with people packed into every nook and cranny of the Tukuche gompa (Figure 17).



Figure 17: Tukuche lama dance festival.

Conclusion

Altogether, this was a very worthwhile experience. I observed, and was able to participate in, the restoration of the wall paintings within the rebuilt gompa. Clearly, as a working gompa, it is most important that the paintings be intelligible to the worshipers and monks that view them. For Buddhists, it is essential that a learned lama design and finish off the wall paintings to ensure that they are accurate portrayals of the scriptures. However, these paintings are a team effort, and the contribution of others when renewing or restoring wall paintings is perfectly acceptable.

From a Western point of view, the monks are generally restoring, not conserving, the paintings. Intelligibility is essential, and they feel that bright clear paint and lines are preferable to any ambiguity that might result from deteriorated paintings. They do prize the contribution of specific artistic lamas, but this is mostly for the knowledge that they bring to the work. I have learned that context is important for whether an object is restored or conserved. Since so much of the Chhiaro Gompa has physically deteriorated, it is a challenge to maintain the artwork on the walls. Essentially these are protected outdoor works of art, and the monks primarily want to maintain for legibility. Unless the meaning of an old fresco is still clear, or could be made clear easily, they prefer painting a new fresco to 'conserving' the old.

I appreciated the opportunity to be included in this work, since it is customarily the work of lamas and their students, and it was an honor to be adopted and given this perspective. This experience will help me

understand and conserve the Buddhist artworks that I encounter in ethnographic museums. The only change I would make to this trip would be to make it longer. The monks of Chhairo Gomba encouraged me to obtain another grant and return to work on the other statue in the adjoining Guru Rinpoche shrine room (See Figure 18). It is in desperate need of repair, and I feel I could make a positive impact there. This placement has helped me see what kind of conservator I would like to be in the future. It taught me new techniques and perspectives on conservation, as well as providing the opportunity to engage in productive work while building international relationships.



Figure 18. Statue of Guru Rinpoche in need of conservation at Chhairo Gomba. (Chhairo Gomba, 2015).

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