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If These Walls Could Talk: Restoring 15th Century Paintings in Upper Mustang

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WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY
B.A. ART HISTORY



If These Walls Could Talk: Restoring 15th Century Paintings in Upper Mustang

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The Walled City of Lomanthang, Nepal

Giuseppe Tucci, 1952:

“The great temple of Thugchen¹ is on the verge of collapsing... This noble monument of the best period of Mustang is fated to disappear. It is very lucky that I arrived in time to collect the memories which still remain”²

An April Morning, 2022:

At 9am, work begins at the Thupchen monastery. People who have lived near this place for their whole life take the time to do three prostrations in reverence of the space. Women wrap themselves in sturdy wool blankets before a day of work in the cold weather, and the daily interpersonal exchange of foods, household goods, and rich conversation commences. When the painters arrive, a sense of the communal importance to do this work feels palpable. As I bear witness, I cannot help but feel grateful that Giuseppe Tucci’s words were no portend.

¹ Giuseppe Tucci refers to Thupchen. Spellings of the temple vary, and Tucci references a Tibetan transliteration system which he identifies as T’ugs rje c’en po.

² Giuseppe Tucci, and Diana Fussell. *Journey to Mustang 1952*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 2003, 160.

Abstract:

The Thupchen (ཐུབ་ཅན་མོ་ལྷོ་མོ) monastery, or gompa (རྒྱལ་ལྷོ་མོ་ལྷོ་མོ), in Lomanthang is a site that hosts monumental 15th century Buddhist artworks, which reflect an abundant history from the key trade region of Upper Mustang, Nepal. This site, after neglect and use as a storage space until the 1990s, has seen radical change in the past two decades through an ongoing painting restoration project. Since these restorations began, there have been discrepancies between how scholars and restoration artists believe the work should be done, and how the local community of Lomanthang wants their monastery to be restored. This study aims to examine why the temple went out of use and halted its function as a devotional worship space, and why it became recognized as such a space once again in the 1990s. I will be discussing the value of restorations at the local level, since many locals of Lomanthang were employed through these restorations and received years of artistic training. By understanding and contextualizing the restoration methods and challenges at hand, this paper will demonstrate how the Thupchen monastery reflects cultural values of the local community of Lomanthang. Specifically, I will explore how locals perceive their own goals of conservation and preservation, and how this project provides a space for Buddhist women to engage in religious and artistic work, as well as how they understand their own role as women in these religious endeavors.

Historical Background:

In order to understand the significance of the Thupchen monastery, a brief geo-political history of Lomanthang contextualizes the interior artworks and origins of Thupchen. The records of Thupchen outline a saga for the centuries; a monastery that has seen international trade and religious developments since its genesis, all which remain crucial to our understanding of Tibetan Buddhism and the political histories of Tibet, India, and Nepal.

Sitting on the Tibetan plateau at 3,809 meters in elevation, the village of Lomanthang maintains a key location along historic trade routes. While national borders have changed, the concept of trade across borders has not; centuries of trade coming from all cardinal directions has generated a primary source of affluence in Lomanthang to this day. The physical position of Lomanthang, just north of the Himalayan range, allows for ample connections further east to Tibet,



Fig. 1. Exterior, Thupchen Monastery.
Photo by Ellie Penner

as Lomanthang sits atop the pass that connects the Kali Gandaki River and the Brahmaputra basin in Tibet.³ These two water passes have shaped the main trade routes, as well as religious pilgrimage routes, that have historically linked Tibet to India. As people from the different cultures within Nepal, such Newar artists from the Nepal Valley, traveled along these routes to reach Tibet and further east; they passed through Lomanthang on their way.⁴ While the development of a modern road allows access to any travelers who can obtain the

³ Erberto Lo Bue, "Wonders of Lo: The Artistic Heritage of Mustang." *The Tibet journal* 38, no. 3-4 2013, 81.

⁴ Lo Bue, 77.

right permits, reaching this high plain once marked the accomplishment of a true physical feat, requiring brief stays and interactions amongst pilgrims and travelers as they made their journeys.

Although Lomanthang occupies the region now known as Upper Mustang, in the Dhaulagiri zone of northwest Nepal, this village also has a history of identifying with geo-cultural Southwest Tibet.⁵ One aspect to this shared culture came with the emergence of the Sakya sect of Buddhism in Lomanthang. A high Sakya lama, Ronggom, indicated that the spreading influence of Sakya within Lomanthang dates all the way back in the 12th century.⁶ At this time, Lomanthang certainly donned its own contributions to the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism. For example, translations of Buddhist canonical texts took place in the Lomanthang region and brought in people such Sherap Rinchen, who was a disciple of Sakya lamas Darpanacharya and Ravinda, and eventually became the teacher to one of Kublai Khan's religious instructors.⁷ This became significant to international relations with Tibet, because in the 13th and 14th century Tibet underwent a political and religious takeover by the Yuan dynasty, led by Kublai Khan, under whom the Sakya sect prevailed.⁸ While this dominating Sakya influence felt abrupt and unfamiliar along other parts of the Tibetan plateau, Lomanthang had already been part of the Sakya sect, which allowed for a flourishing relationship with Tibetan powers under the Yuan.⁹ It was not until later under the Tibetan kingdom of Gungtang that Lomanthang would eventually seek its independence as a separate kingdom in the fifteenth century.¹⁰

⁵ Erberto Lo Bue, 16.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Linrothe, Robert N., Christian. Luczanits, and Melissa R. Kerin. *Collecting Paradise: Buddhist Art of Kashmir and Its Legacies*. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2014, 192.

⁹ Erberto Lo Bue, 11.

¹⁰ Elke Selter, "Upper Mustang: Cultural Heritage of Lo Tso Dhum." *UNESCO Kathmandu* (2007), 7.

The Thupchen monastery came into existence after this decisive moment of independence for the Lomanthang, or the Kingdom of Lo. King Amapel declared the Kingdom of Lo as independent in 1440, and to mark this event he wanted to move the seat of his kingdom to a new location.¹¹ There are many accounts of how Amapel determined this new location on the plains of Lomanthang, such as Michael Peissel's documented oral histories, heard from locals of Lomanthang in the 1960s, where Amapel followed a herd of sacred goats to the mystic plains and felt compelled to grow his kingdom where the goats were found.¹² While the recounted tales vary, one thing that remains certain was the rather unusual location to seat a newfound kingdom. Most contemporaneous kingdoms utilized the natural protections offered by high mountains or cliff sides, as seen in the fifteenth century kingdoms of Ladakh, Lhasa, and Tsarang.¹³ Art Historian Ernesto Lo Blue suggests that perhaps we can take the precarious location of Lomantang atop a great plain as an indication that Amapel felt very confident in the status of his new kingdom.

Amapel also knew the importance of establishing religious institutions and using artistic patronage to consolidate political and religious power. Amapel frequently invited Tibetan Buddhist masters to Lomanthang.¹⁴ This establishment of religious connections in the 15th century created a Himalayan hub of Buddhist practices, beliefs, and importantly, Buddhist arts. Records of Lomanthang under Amapel demonstrate high Sakya lamas coming to Upper Mustang in order to consecrate sacred artworks such as Yogic Mandalas.¹⁵ The Thupchen monastery, however, was not established until Amapel's son and successor took power, King Tsangchen Trashigon. Trashigon laid foundations for his grand monastery in 1468 and completed the building around 1472.¹⁶ For Trashigon, the Sakya lineage of this

¹¹ Lo Bue, 81.

¹² Michael Peissel, *Mustang: A Lost Tibetan Kingdom*. India: Books Faith, 1968.

¹³ Selter, 23.

¹⁴ Lo Bue, 81.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

monastery was key, as the Trashigon had his own motivations for expanding into Western Tibet and connecting with the emerging Ngor subsect of Sakya that was seeing its rise.¹⁷ In fact, the founder of the Ngor Sakya monastery in Tibet was present for the consecration of construction to begin at another important site in Lomanthang, the Jampa Lhakhang, in 1447. The name, Thupchen, comes from an epithet for Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha who was a part of the Sakya clan. Under Trashigon and during the painting of the Thupchen monastery, Lomanthang witnessed a huge influx of Tibetan scholars, not only from Tibet but in Nepal Valley, India, and Sri Lanka all coming to Lomanthang and working on textual translations.

The temple itself reflects Trashigon's endeavors to establish his own power, both at home and in pursuit of territorial expansions. Art historian John Harrison argued that both the scale and intricacy of the paintings inside Thupchen suggest the kingdom's interest in exemplifying the developments within Tibetan art and architecture at the time.¹⁸ The level of intricacy also likely indicates that good money was spent by Trashigon to employ the best available hands to paint these artworks. Art conservator Luigi Fieni claimed that this period of artistic growth present at Thupchen rivals with the best contemporaneous works in Tibet, such the grand artworks inside Gyantse.¹⁹ Finally, to make a concerted effort to establish his new kingdom as a hub for Buddhist scholars and Tibetan religious studies, Trashigon established a three-year long religious council at Lomanthang, which also served as a way to bring in important scholars to the village from 1472 to 1475.²⁰ This important council was held inside the very walls of the Thupchen monastery.

¹⁷ Ibid. The rest of this paragraph is gleaned from the same source.

¹⁸ John Harrison, "Wonders of Lo: The Artistic Heritage of Mustang." *The Tibet journal* 38, no. 3-4 (2013), 29.

¹⁹ Erberto Lo Bue, 77.

²⁰ Elke Selzer, 27.

Restoration Beginnings

When restorations began at the end of the twentieth century, the project began as a community-led endeavor. Speaking to a former painter, Tashi Gurung, who was hired as a young teenager to join the restoration team, he recounted the beginnings of work on the site.²¹ Tashi remembers that when tourists were allowed to enter Upper Mustang in 1992, people in Lomanthang began to hear about the potential historical value in the damaged artworks at Thupchen. Two years later, the Raja of Lo²² himself formally requested aid from the American Himalayan Foundation, hoping to get funding and specialists who could clean the paintings. In 1996, a team of international specialists arrived to restore wall paintings within multiple buildings at Lomanthang. At the time, the team was composed of multiple Italian artists trained in art conservation and restoration.²³ At first, this collaboration with the Raja and Italians seemed to suffice initial restoration goals. However, the Raja wanted the community to be more involved in the actual painting within the monastery.

The Italians were tasked with involving the local community due to the delicate nature of their cultural heritage, which not only represented the history of the region, but a living culture that prevails today. Locals such as Tashi, who was working as a construction worker around Lomanthang as a teenager back in 1996, was sought out by the restoration team, who advertised that they needed some local construction workers to help establish the architectural soundness of the building.²⁴ However, eventually a small number of construction workers, including Tashi, were kept on the project team to train as painters. This was an honorable ask, because when Tashi began, he was joined by 80 or 90 construction workers on the project at the time. “At the time, I had no idea how to paint, and I had no idea how to

²¹ Interview with Tashi Gurung, translated by Pema Yungdon Gurung. The rest of the page is gleaned from this interview.

²² The former King of Lomanthang.

²³ Luigi Fieni, “Wonders of Lo: The Artistic Heritage of Mustang.” *The Tibet journal* 38, no. 3-4 (2013): 123.

²⁴ Interview with Tashi Gurung.

work with the Italians inside the monastery.” Tashi remembers that there were no trained artists working in Lomanthang at the time, so the American Himalayan Foundation brought the only team here. Around the year 2000, one day the American Himalayan Foundation called a meeting with everyone in Lomantahang, and according to Tashi, “they told us that they needed local people to help work on the team. It was very challenging,” Tashi recalls, “to get used to training from 9-6 every day.” However, by the end of the first season in training as a painter, Tashi could tell you about how the different chemicals and pigments interacted with each other, even chemicals that were imported from Italy. In addition to this cross-cultural teaching and learning, this involvement of the local community allowed for an understanding of the communities needs and perspectives, which elicited unanticipated challenges to be addressed.

One of the foreign conservation artists on the team, Luigi Fieni, quickly realized the discrepancies between the community’s goals and the conservators’ goals. In a 2013 interview, Fieni claimed that when he was drilling to inject mortar into walls to stabilize them, locals expressed extreme concern. “You are piercing our gods! They are not images; they are our gods! They are going to be harmed, defiled! You cannot do that!”²⁵ This interpretation of Fieni’s actions reflects a greater narrative of how Buddhist cultures perceive art, which does not always align with Western perceptions and definitions of art. When art historian Chiara Bellini conducted a survey of Himalayan art, she noted key functions of arts and material culture as a vessel for worship, a house for deities, and an aid for devotion.²⁶ This can be important to differentiate from Western concepts of artistic value, where perhaps an emphasis on aesthetic or sheer antiquity holds greater weight. Rather, in the context of

²⁵ “Mikel Dunham’s interview with Luigi Fieni – Master restorer of the 15th century Buddhist murals in Mustang” *Mikel Dunham*. Accessed May 15 2022. <https://www.mikeldunham.com/mikeldunham/2013/05/mikel-dunhams-interview-with-luigi-fieni-master-restorer-of-the-15th-century-buddhist-murals-in-mustang.html>.

²⁶ Chiara Bellini, “Wonders of Lo: The Artistic Heritage of Mustang.” *The Tibet journal* 38, no. 3-4 (2013): 137.

Himalayan art, Bellini argued that elements such as age and style are not valued arbitrarily or in a vacuum, but in how they relate to the overall function of art as a vessel for devotion.²⁷ After understanding these implications, the restoration artists would refrain from touching any deities until the important ceremony called Arga was performed, where a mirror is used to collect any deities that are housed in the wall paintings. The mirror can then protect and contain the spirits to avoid any harm that the restoration work might bring; the mirror is ceremoniously wrapped in a protective scarf.²⁸ This sentiment, to enliven and protect the devotional material culture, echoed throughout all of Lomanthang during my time there and became apparent in interview descriptions of how locals perceive the ultimate purposes of paintings.

Many interviews reiterated this overall idea, and the culmination of oral narratives layered important details and nuances onto local perspectives of the Buddhist paintings at Thupchen. Jampa Gyatso, a monk at the Choede monastery just a few blocks from Thupchen, stressed the importance of visualization within his own worship and Buddhist practice.²⁹ For Jampa, to be able to physically see the deities that are involved in his meditative practice and devotion is of immeasurable importance to this visualization. With the aid of an artistic rendition of these spirits, a practitioner such as Jampa would ultimately be hoping to conjure these images within their own mind's eye, and familiarity with the images in the monastery makes this possible.

While worshiping practices remain central to the value of many Buddhist arts, members of the community also discussed different reasons why this project was important to them. For example, one woman, Dolma Tsering, told me that it has been very upsetting in her life to see the paintings at the Thupchen become so damaged; she felt that the monastery was

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Fieni, 129.

²⁹ Interview with Jampa Gyatso. The following sentence also gleaned from this interview.

not only for worship and religion, but also a way for the people of Mustang to show their own history.³⁰

Dolma believed it was important for locals to be able to learn about the different styles of painting that existed in the fifteenth century, because this allowed a community to understand their ancestors. At this time, Dolma also expressed her concerns that younger generations of Mustangis should learn about the content of the paintings too, and through the restoration project they can learn by looking at old

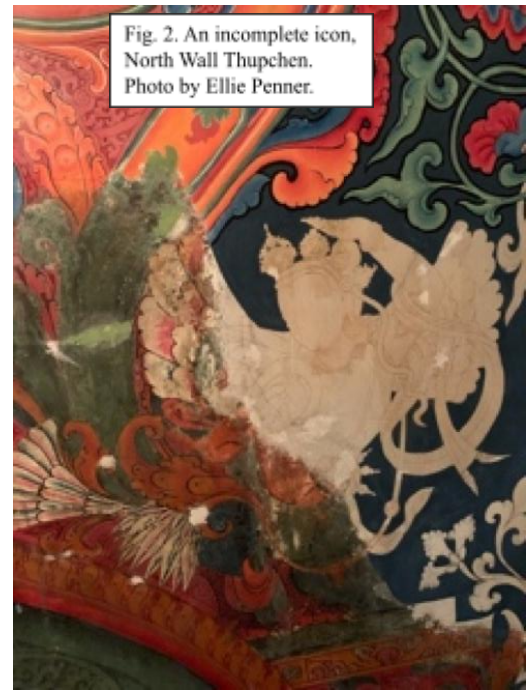


Fig. 2. An incomplete icon, North Wall Thupchen. Photo by Ellie Penner.

pictures of Thupchen, as well as seeing photos of similar monasteries from around the world to understand a broader scope of Thupchen's history.

Another important sentiment, one that struck a chord with the Italians back in 1996 and still does with many scholars today, is that the community wants to see their monastery *completed*. Completion, to them, means filling in all the blanks on the walls, and ensuring that all depicted figures and deities are whole once more. Speaking with two painters who are working at Thupchen this season, Palden and Ngawang, I began to understand the gravity of this concept. Palden and Ngawang are both Tibetans, and they were willing to discuss the importance of reconciling fragmented paintings within Thupchen. They both talked about their own Buddhist dharma, and how leaving paintings of deities incomplete, or “dismembered” is extremely dire and sacrilegious.³¹ The painters believe that they themselves are at risk in their next lives if the deities are left without any effort to reconstruct them. Ngawang and Palden also feel obligated to work on these issues, because of the risk to any

³⁰ Interview with Dolma Tsering.

³¹ Interview with Palden and Ngawang.

Buddhist practitioners who worship dislocated deities. According to Palden and Ngawang, the incompleteness can be dangerous and harmful to practitioners as well. In fact, both of these painters acknowledged that their jobs are not bringing in much financial gain, especially compared to what good Thangka artists in commercial galleries can make, which was how they were both trained. However, for them money is not a heavy concern. They claimed that they were indifferent to the monetary aspects, and they seemed to feel proud of their robust sense of purpose to complete these Buddhist works.

State of Paintings Pre-Restoration

Originally, in the 1470s after Trashigon's royal commission, the Thupchen Lhakhang was just one single entrance hall, flanked with seven rows of six columns.³² Later, additions to the space included an entrance vestibule with four protective guardian sculptures and a partially re-done north wall, both estimated by the head painter, Dawa Dhondup, to be added around 200 years ago. According to art historian John Harrison who investigated the site, this addition moved the North wall inward significantly from its original placement.³³ However, before this addition the original wall represented a typical feature of Tibetan architecture: four walls and a flat roof supported by beams and pillars.³⁴ Thupchen's roof reaches particularly impressive heights of 22-27 feet. Marking the capitals of these pillars are long and elegantly carved cloud motifs, some gilded with Sanskrit mantras, which resembled the style of Central and Southwestern Tibet.³⁵ These scrolls can also be seen in Alchi and other early Ladakhi temples, along with some particularly Tibetan features of lotus leaves and tiny cubes.³⁶ Another major stylistic comparison comes from the famous Tibetan monastery of

³² Harrison, 31.

³³ Harrison, 29.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Harrison, 33.

³⁶ Ibid.

Gyantse. One of the main iconographic elements inside Thupchen is a depiction of Vairochana above the entrance door facing East, which matches the Vairochana in Gyantse.³⁷ From the association to Gyantse, Erberto Lo Bue posits that this placement was an intentional attempt on behalf of a ruler, Trashigon, to associate himself with a central cosmic Buddha such as Vairochana since this is what had been the case at Gyantse.³⁸ These iconographic elements only reflect a small portion of Thupchen in the fifteenth century, but many other key elements were lost over time from damage that occurred to the paintings between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

According to the former project lead Luigi Fieni, the restoration team was first called to examine and assess the existing conditions at Thupchen. The site was in total disrepair. By looking through the Nepalese Institute of Seismology, the team found evidence of high magnitude earthquakes occurring in the sixteenth century, and again in the eighteenth century, which Fieni believes collapsed what used to be a second floor inside Thupchen, as well as breaking up significant parts of the original North wall.³⁹ These earthquakes also substantially lowered the elevation of the temple floor, which has now sunk below the road to the point where a staircase is necessary to descend into the space, around 1.6 meters below an estimated original position.⁴⁰ In addition to the changes forced by strong earthquakes, there was also evidence of multiple periods of paintings and a multitude of different artists.

Pursuant to Fieni's assessment of these differences, the wall paintings can be separated into a total of seven different time periods. However, each wall still contains some remnants of the earliest paintings from the fifteenth century. On the north wall, the restoration team found evidence of an early 'restoration' that took place either in the 16th or 18th century, where artists only painted within sections that had been lost, to complete the images

³⁷ Lo Bue, 82.

³⁸ Lo Bue, 83.

³⁹ Fieni, 123.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

at hand.⁴¹ Moreover, their use of a red plaster mixture that differed from the original made this early restoration easy to identify. Fieni also notes that this would not have been typical, as most commonly, donors can show off and accumulate more Buddhist merit by completely making their own paintings, rather than working with what is already there.⁴² Perhaps the evidence that previous artists tried to work with the existing paintings suggests that they too were seeking to complete their idols, and they were interested in maintaining the original style that existed before them.

Speaking to the head painter at Thupchen, Dawa Dhondup, I learned that another layer of damage found throughout the monastery was that left by smoke.⁴³ From centuries of visitors giving butter lamp offerings within the monastery, the original varnish became totally blackened over time. Moreover, the restoration team discovered that all the paintings are *secco* rather than *fresco*, indicating that the varnish on the outer surface could be more important to the integrity of the paintings rather than if the painting had been completed on wet plaster.⁴⁴

After learning about these key sources of damage, I was interested in finding when this temple stopped functioning as the space for Buddhist congregation and worship that it had once been. Without giving a specific date, Dawa explained to me that at some point in all of the earthquakes and smoke damage, there had also been an accumulated buildup of moisture from the very snowy winters at Lomanthang. This rising moisture and dampness completely destroyed most of the lower register of paintings inside, with people remembering how the plaster from the lower register was literally hanging off the walls, the flakes of paint already having disappeared into dust below.⁴⁵ Fieni also claimed that after a certain point,

⁴¹ Fieni, 125.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Interview with Dawa Dhondup.

⁴⁴ John Harrison, 30.

⁴⁵ Interview with Dawa Dhondup.

with such damage and widespread loss, monks refused to perform any rituals in this space; it would be too dangerous to worship here for deities and practitioners alike.⁴⁶

I also asked Tashi Gurung to recall his memories of Thupchen before any restorations began.⁴⁷ One thing I learned is that everyone in Lomanthang, who is old enough to remember, seems to have their own comical memories of the prior state of Thupchen. Some locals discussed using the holes in the wall to hold cooking utensils, and Tashi recalled the children who would run inside to throw small stones at the pigeons who lived in the ceiling, and of course inadvertently hitting the paintings if they could not nail the birds. Tashi also said something that I found to be an echoed sentiment by many others in Lomanthang: the community did not see a real sense of the importance for the paintings inside Thupchen, because they had lost all devotional function.⁴⁸ Nowadays, almost everyone in the town knows about the 15th century origins of these paintings. But clearly, the importance of these works of art derive from a different source than just the enticing fifteenth century date that's written on tourist pamphlets. Rather, the function of a devotional space takes precedent. With the damage to Thupchen, at no fault of their own after centuries of accumulated moisture, smoke damage, and natural disaster, the space at Thupchen lost that devotional function.

However, everything has changed since restorations began. People once again see the site of Thupchen as a sacred space, and there are even important Buddhist rituals held within the Thupchen walls to this day. For example, the sacred practice of constructing sand mandalas has been reinstated within Thupchen during community festivals.⁴⁹ While I was working in Thupchen, I saw many monks leaving from morning prayers within the monastery as we walked into work, and this has been reimagined as the norm in Lomanthang.

⁴⁶ Luigi Fieni, 130

⁴⁷ Interview with Tashi Gurung.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Luigi Fieni, 131.

Current Challenges and the Search for the Jataka Tales

The feeling of excitement towards the new season of work at Thupchen was palpable upon my entrance to Lomanthang. When I arrived, Tsering Karma, an elder member of the community, was excited to be speaking about the upcoming resurgence of Thupchen restorations.⁵⁰ Every year, the team at Thupchen only has five months to work on restorations, as winters are too extreme to withstand. Tsering, at age 83 and having lived in Lomanthang his whole life, told me that I had beat the painting team to

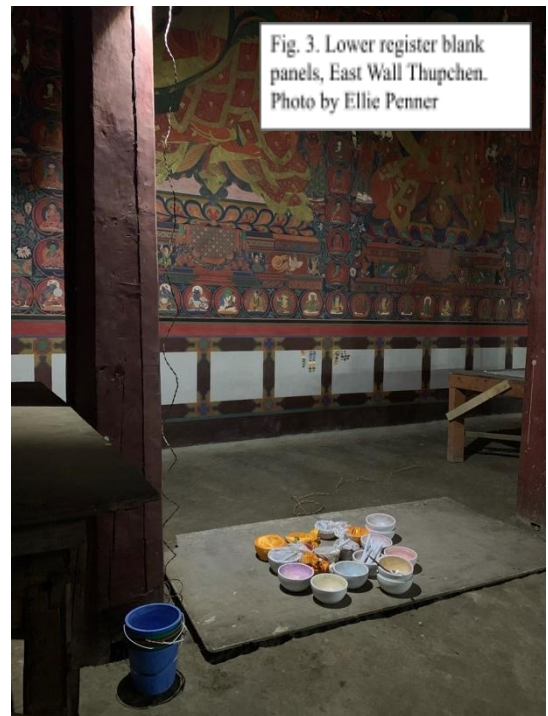


Fig. 3. Lower register blank panels, East Wall Thupchen. Photo by Ellie Penner

Lomanthang by a few days; he knew exactly when they were arriving. All the men sitting around him, at the gate entrance to the city where he was situated, nodded as he spoke, confirming that the painters were on their way. These older men were animated as they acted out the painting and pointed in the direction of the monastery. Tsering was very proud to share his own familial connection to the work at Thupchen, as his daughter has worked there since the genesis of the project in 1999. He also mentioned how the project is very important because for him, the main purpose of paintings is to feel good while doing prayers and rituals, which always helps his worship.

This current season of work at Thupchen marks the return from a two-year hiatus mandated by COVID-19. However, the preparations specific to this summer's work began long before the temporary halt in work. One of the priorities for this season is to complete the bottom register of paintings that band around the North and East walls of the building. The

⁵⁰ Interview with Tsering Karma.

bottom register is marked by the scenes of the Jataka tales. The Jataka tales, a popular visual in Buddhist art, recount the many past lives of the historic Gautama Buddha before he reached the life where he could attain enlightenment.⁵¹ In total, the Thupchen monastery contains 108 rectangular panels spanning two walls, each of them telling one tale of the Buddha's past lives. However, the team's endeavor to work on the Jataka tales on the bottom register quickly becomes complicated by the fact that out of the 108 panels, 60 have been totally lost to damage over time.

In hopes of understanding the methods for drawing up something from nothing, I asked Dawa about the process of determining which Jataka tales had existed on the walls. The first step for this particular project was to gain the proper approvals to complete the bottom register.⁵² At this point, there was not much to 'restore' in the sense that an artist would just be cleaning and saving what remains, and the local community and project team hoped to see the bottom register completed, as opposed to the white blank rectangles that exist now. To gain approval, Dawa, the head painter, told me how it was important for him to get permission from His Holiness the Sakya Trizin, the head of the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhism. They made their case to His Holiness, and the following description of their methods was the explanation he too received.

The community could not do much to speculate about how the preexisting scenes on the wall appeared,

nor determine their style and content. In fact, the panels that have stood the test of time do not



Fig. 4. Dawa holds open photos from the Shalu monastery in Tibet
Photo by Ellie Penner.

⁵¹ Khan Academy. "Jatakas: the many lives of Buddha as Bodhisattva." *Khan Academy*. Accessed May, 15.2022. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/beginners-guide-asian-culture/buddhist-art-culture/a/jatakas-t-he-many-lives-of-buddha-as-bodhisattva>.

⁵² Interview with Dawa Dhondup. The rest of the page is also gleaned from an interview with Dawa.

necessarily give any indication about what remains in the panels to follow, because in the Buddhist canon there are over five hundred different recorded scenes of the historical Buddha's past lives. Yet, this problem has been on the minds of project heads Luigi Fieni and Dawa Dhondup for years, and they have anticipated many solutions.

The most important step in their troubleshooting the mystery of the lower register has been researching other similar temples. According to Dawa, the most similar temple in terms of style and content lies in the Tibetan city of Shigatse, within the walls of the Shalu monastery. Within Shalu, they initially found that the 32nd story from the Jataka tales in Thupchen was an exact match to the same story in Shalu. From there, iconographic matches to forty other existing panels at Thupchen were found. Moreover, the scenes resemble striking stylistic similarities. For these reasons, Dawa and Luigi chose to consult the 108 Jataka tales within Shigatse to determine that the same scenes should be implemented at Thupchen. Both Dawa and Luigi went to the Shalu monastery to extensively photograph the interior depictions of the Jataka tales and understand the styles and possible artists at hand. From there, these photographs turned into adapted scenes from Luigi and Dawa's hands, incorporating some of the stylistic nuances from Thupchen to better replicate what would have been originally present on the bottom register. Having worked within Thupchen for two decades now, they know the stylistic nuances within Thubchen better than most. For example, according to Dawa it is likely that multiple artists worked at Thupchen contemporaneously using a multitude of different styles, even back in the fifteenth century. Best exemplifying these stylistic nuances are two figures in the corner where the North and East walls merge (fig. 5). The figure on the right is nearly



Fig. 5. Two icons of different styles.
Photo by Ellie Penner

unrecognizable from that on its left; his slim neck and slender nostril, surrounded by circular decorations does not resemble the left-side icon's brick-shaped nostril and bulging neck, surrounded by a ring of undecorated color.

Appealing to the head of the Sakya sect of Buddhism, who thought their methods were sound and considerate, the team still needed to garner funding for this season of work. However, once the work for the lower register was approved to move forward by the American Himalayan Foundation, a larger team was hired to sustain the larger project this season. While I was at Thupchen there were many working parts within the monastery that all had to be done simultaneously; some panels had to be replastered, the pigments must be grinded and mixed, and the painters had to work to trace all the panel drawings.

However, issues of ancient damage were still arising during my time at Thupchen. One scholar in art restoration, David Scott, claims that problems that occur as a painting ages, due to its original material, is known as an inherent vice.⁵³ For the paintings at

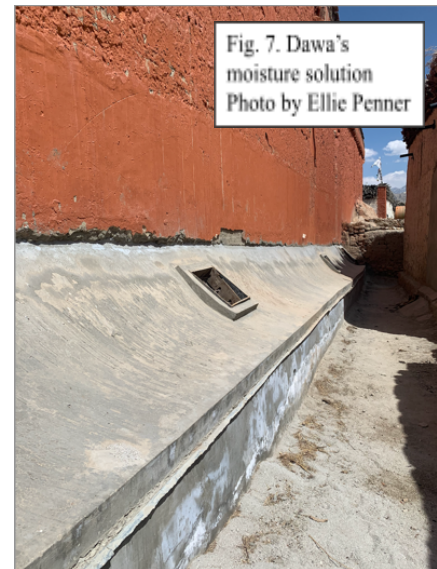


Thupchen, most of them have some layer of animal glue that was used as a varnish.

According to Dawa, as seen in Fig. 6, these layers proceeded in the following order when first constructed at the end of the fifteenth century: the first layer contains a mixture of cow dung, clay, and fiber, followed by the second layer of river pebbles, sand, and more clay. The third layer smooths the surface with a fine gray clay, and then the priming layer of white clay and calcite can be applied. After this, artists could complete underlying drawings, apply stone

⁵³ David A. Scott. "Art Restoration and Its Contextualization." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 51, no. 2 (2017): 92.

pigment, and finally add a finishing varnish. Animal glue would also be used to raise outlines of jewels, giving them a firm texture.⁵⁴ However, Dawa claims that these layers of varnish are water soluble. Thus, when there are high buildups of moisture from winter snows or summer rains, the pigment colors show bits of change every year. Nowadays, the team has access to varnish that is not water soluble, but it is very expensive. They certainly do not have enough for all their needs and have to resort to water-soluble varnishes at times. However, two weeks into this season's work, Dawa found a spot on the walls that had been restored a few years ago; it had already begun to start changing color. This did not come as a surprise to him, as Dawa is always remarking on the impact of higher rain levels each year, which has also been confirmed by recent climate data that shows high trends in rainfall from recent years.⁵⁵ However, Dawa remains unconcerned about upcoming years of high moisture regarding the lower register, due to his new technique of keeping water away from the most vulnerable walls.



A few years ago, Dawa installed bands of cement around the lower exterior walls that receive the majority of moisture. These cement barriers, as seen in Fig. 7, also have grated openings to allow for air when there is no snow or rain. This has stopped a great majority of water from seeping into the cracks of Thupchen and sinking into the bottom register.

Another preventative change that recently developed was the mass removal of butter lamps from their typical position in front of the large statues that abut the South wall of Thupchen. Now, standing in front of the entire Thupchen complex, we see a room adjacent to

⁵⁴ Luigi Fieni, 127.

⁵⁵ Bipul Rawal, Rija Joshi, and Hemendra Bohra, *Historic towns in transition- Documentation and Restoration of the Earthen Palaces in Upper Mustang*, 1.

the monastery entrance that is the designated place reserved solely for butter lamps. This development has not gone totally unrefuted, and the monk who keeps the keys to Thupchen has had to stop people from sneaking into the monastery with their butter lamps, since they ideally would like to place the lamps before the statues of their gods. However, the movement of the butter lamps and development of a designated spot for them has also informed people throughout the community about the potential risks that flames pose inside a space where *secco* wall murals are present. With this, most have come to accept the change of their traditional butter lamp offering.

Once all approvals were gained, and the team was totally hired, we started to work on the Jataka tales. From the station of male painters tracing the original scenes done by Dawa and Luigi, the women were handed these tracing to use a pouncing technique, where a needle is used to poke a sequence of holes in the tracings to create a stencil that can be used on any vertical surface, such as the lower register. This technique, also the traditional method used back in the 15th century, is also known by its Italian name, *spolvero*.⁵⁶ This way, artists could trace these drawings from a more well-lit and comfortable space as opposed to tracing the wall from the confines created by sketching in the lower register. Traditionally, *spolvero* also allowed for less-skilled artists to work with the aid of a traced outline, while more skilled painters could focus on bigger challenges.

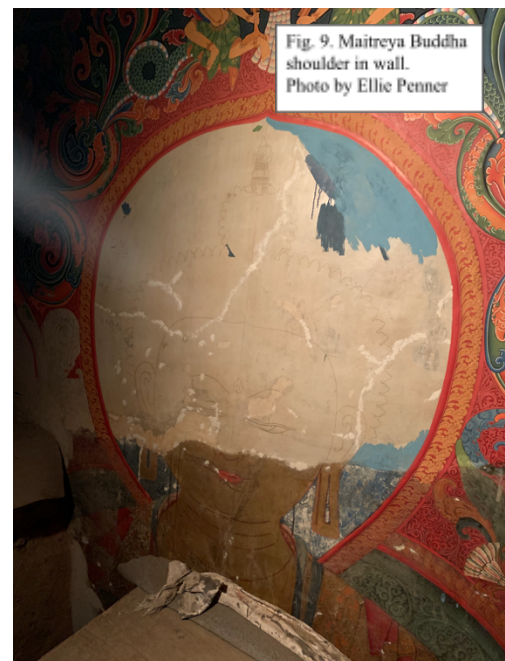
With twigs inserted into a sewing needle, we fashioned the perfect tool for this technique by embedding the non-sharp edge of the needle into



⁵⁶ Interview with Dawa Dhondup.

the circumference of the twig. From there, we could hold the twig and adjust the length of the handle to our liking. With the needle in hand, the women began poking the completed tracings. The entire outline of a scene must be poked with the needle in even increments along the penned outline. From here, the tracings are held against the wall and lined up with the rectangular shape of the blank panels. A powder is applied and rubbed into the artwork, only permeating through the pre-applied holes. This creates an outline of the entire scene written on the walls, where the artist can then work on underlying drawings before applying paint.

One final challenge to mention, in all its uncertainties, was the damage acquired during the 2015 earthquake. The structure itself remained miraculously sound. However, there was a monumental shift on the Northern wall that caused movement by about three or four inches along a crack in the wall, shifting everything to the right. One of the largest icons painted on the walls of Thupchen, which has been undergoing restorations, is the Maitreya Buddha on this North wall. Since the earthquake, the icon has slammed into the restored north wall that was constructed two hundred years ago. As you can see in Fig. 9, this icon's right shoulder is now dislocated from the body as it juts behind the added wall. It is not clear how this recent damage will be addressed, but Dawa hopes that the added north wall can be successfully removed to allow for recovery of the Maitreya icon.



Community Perspectives on International Collaboration:

On my third day in Lomanthang, there was a puja held at the building which hosts the women's association of Lomanthang. Here, the puja marked the 49th day since the death of Richard Blum, the founder of the American Himalayan Foundation. According to their local representative for the foundation, Yangchen Gurung, the American Himalayan Foundation funds approximately 98 percent of all community projects in Upper Mustang. The foundation is well known throughout the community and deeply appreciated.

After this Puja, I was curious to learn more about how foreign funding was generally received by the community and if people thought of foreign funds as generally good or bad. One sentiment that I heard from a couple painters on the restoration team was that when funding comes from outside of their control, they can never feel



Fig. 10. Puja for Richard Blum at the women's association in Lomanthang
Photo by Ellie Penner.

certain that it is guaranteed. For example, before the season officially started, two painters told me funding might not continue after this season of work, even though they would not be able to finish the whole project in these five months. When asked why they thought this, they said the project is always being encouraged to garner a local source of funding, which they take as an indication that foreign aid will end soon. However, the American Himalayan Foundation actually paid a visit to Thupchen during my time there and assured that this project would be funded. However, the concerns about local funding remain. This year, the team is trying to use tourist ticket fees that are paid to visit the monasteries in Lomanthang as a way to supplement funding. However, the ticket fees are less than the equivalent of 10

USD, and when they need to buy an imported varnish this money would likely not be enough to cover those added costs. Many seemed excited about having funding from the local community, and multiple members of the project team said they would like to see a slow transition to becoming locally funded in the future.

In addition to monetary exchange, another big foreign influence had been through the exchange of ideas and trainings. For example, for painters-in-training such as Tashi Gurung as a teenager, he remembers receiving five years of special trainings and going on trips to other nearby countries that took place in order to teach locals how to paint from early drawings to polished works with stone pigments.⁵⁷

However, these trips to other countries also had another important aspect to them. When the team got to a village in an undisclosed location,⁵⁸ Tashi met members of smaller villagers who oversaw their own monasteries. In these villages, people faced a similar need for restoration experts in regard to their local monasteries. Tashi explained that the situation had been very dire for these small communities, at a time when their government had been oppressive of the Buddhist religion. During this time, as a protective act to save their paintings, locals would completely cover the interior walls with layers of mud plaster. Thus, if a government officer were to inspect the building, no paintings would be visible, but rather they would find an unsuspecting flaky wall of cow dung patties and mud. These protective measures were successful, especially when those government officers would light fires within the monasteries, covering the walls in blackness. Under this blackness, and under the mud guardians, lie the original paintings. Tashi felt incredibly prepared through his study under the Thupchen restoration team because the smoke damage was similar to that with which he had worked in Thupchen and he knew how to carefully remove the plaster underneath the

⁵⁷ Interview with Tashi Gurung. The rest of this page pulls from this same source.

⁵⁸ Location anonymous due to possible lack of government knowledge about the presence of these paintings.

smoke and recover the paintings. Yet, Tashi explained how people of those communities would still like to see their monasteries come back to life and their artworks to function once more, beyond a mere cleaning. Tashi, coming up on a decade of receiving training for restoration, became a teacher in this village, passing on the restoration knowledge he had gained. The ability to share knowledge, especially where governments are not sponsoring their own people, shows an important quality present in international collaborations.

For one monk, Phuntsok, living at Choede monastery down the street from Thupchen, foreign aid and intervention has always been a matter of balance. According to Phuntsok, in the ancient times when Lomanthang was originally built, it was greater than anything that Westerners could imagine. Then, overtime, somehow a sacred space such as Thupchen became closer to a storage room than a monastery. He stated that when Western travelers started to come to Lomanthang and talk about its historic value, they were saying things that the local community already felt but approached in a different way. “I think it is good to know the Western ideas about ‘value,’ because their studies help us understand the ancient ideas and methods of our people; who were so great. We all look up to our own ancestors’ ancient methods the most, but we don’t do the same things as the Western scholars. Those are the people who can match all the paintings on the walls to other places they have traveled and tell a story about them. Instead, we have devotion.”

Phuntsok believes that if people from the west have the capability to use their methods in order to help something such as the Thupchen monastery restore their paintings correctly, then the relationship can be mutually beneficial. Phuntsok says that ultimately, the priority comes down to worship. He says that when older generations from Lomanthang get the chance to travel to other monasteries, study is not a priority, especially on pilgrimage. Since Buddhist paintings all over the world have a strong devotional function, most people from Lomanthang are not looking at an artistic style with a critical eye. Therefore, this monk

believes that people who do look at paintings with a critical eye, and without any devotion, should use what they find to help those who hold their devotion most dear. “The Westerners who come here and study everything might as well do so to benefit those who live here and worship.”⁵⁹

Women at Work:

As soon as I started preparing to go to Lomanthang, I hoped to speak to the women on the team about their experiences working at the Thupchen monastery and understanding what the project meant to them. According to Luigi Fieni, when he first began restoring paintings in Lomanthang in 1999, women had not been allowed to work on any sacred images or sites within Lomanthang, including within the Thupchen monastery.⁶⁰ However, nowadays the local women comprise the majority of the restoration team. This dramatic shift in the last two decades made me interested in hearing about how women perceived their own roles in these sacred spaces. Yet, understanding the perspectives of the women on the team would prove to be the most difficult aspect of my field work. Before the team of Tibetan painters arrived, I could not find any women who would agree to be interviewed, except one, Dolma Tsering, who briefly answered two or three questions. This was before either of us knew we would be working besides each other for the next four weeks. Everyone else who I asked had decidedly refused and assured me that they did not know much, and that



⁵⁹ Interview with Phuntsok.

⁶⁰ Fieni, 123.

I would not get any good information by talking with them. However, after the period of working alongside all the women on the project, they were interested in sharing their opinions and experiences.

First, I was interested in hearing about how this project employs women in Lomanthang between seasons of seeding and harvesting. The seeding season ends mid-April, and most crops are not harvested until the beginning of September. At this time, a lot of women want to stay in Lo Manthang; they have five months of the beautiful summer landscape when all of the blooming buckwheat light up the fields in rows of pink, and tall green grass lines the horizon for endless miles. Important cultural festivals, such as Tiji, also occur during this period. Many members of the community prepare for Tiji throughout the entire year. For example, a plethora of traditional dances and songs are performed by women at this festival, and they must be learned and practiced for months. Recently, with trends of outmigration among younger people in Lomanthang, there has been a smaller group of youth that can perform these pieces. The Youth Club of Lo Manthang is one organization that is very dedicated to preserving traditions in the form of song and dance. With funding from the HimalAsia foundation, locals in their twenties and early thirties are paying local elders to teach them songs that have been passed down orally for hundreds of years by different generations of Mustangis. Moreover, many dances accompany the songs, and in tandem they will be done in front of an audience at Tiji.

However, without an employer, some women cannot find a reason to stay during the summers at Lo Manthang. This could easily translate to being a reason to leave Lo entirely, because during the Winter season almost nobody stays during the harsh and cold conditions. Only a few grandparents from the village, and one woman working at the Thupchen project, Chhiji Wangmo stays all year, Winter included.⁶¹ Yet, if Summer is out of the picture, for

⁶¹ Interview with Chhiji Wangmo.

some there would not be much reason to stay only for seeding and harvesting seasons, which is only a total of four months; March, April, September, and October. This would be a lifestyle bordering on seasonal nomadism rather than a very common routine of going to India for just two out of twelve months a year. The Thupchen restoration project not only accommodates this agricultural season, but directly employs around eleven local women from Lomanthang. Employment through Thupchen also provides an opportunity to women to participate in important religious work. I asked every woman on the project if they knew of any other jobs that allowed women to engage in religious work, and they all said no. For this reason, they are very proud of their involvement at Thupchen.

The workspace within the walls of Thupchen remains very gendered; while I was there, women all worked together, as did the men, but the tasks were delegated separately by gender. After I had first spoken to the former painter Tashi Gurung, when I asked him about women's roles in the monastery, he was very dismissive. He assured me that women do not draw or put any colors on the walls, but they are allowed to grind pigments and bring supplies to painters. Then, minutes later, he remembered that women are also allowed to do retouchings on the walls, but only with watercolors. He also mentioned, which is critical to understanding the self-perception of the women who work at Thupchen, that "outside of their work from 9-6 in the monastery, women have to work in their house and in the fields. After all of this, their hands are no good." Every woman above the age of 30 on the project that I interviewed agreed with this idea. They told me multiple times that their hands were not fit to be painting; the field work is too harsh. This comes from a place of strong reverence for sacred art; the women felt that if someone is going to be painting a Buddhist icon, they would hope that their hands are preserved in order to do so, and kept away from harsh conditions. Thus, being a woman may not categorically exclude any of them from painting, but working in the fields certainly would.

However, the younger generations of women working in Thupchen do not totally agree with this notion. Many of the younger girls expressed a desire to work, and even said that some of the painters had promised to train them in painting but had not followed up. Though the women value this opportunity, they also find themselves wanting more. For example, my translator Pema Gurung explained the intricacies of dealing with a women's menstrual cycle inside a sacred space. Most of the women I spoke to agreed that they only feel comfortable doing work during menstruation if they can complete all their work while sitting down rather than having to get up. Otherwise, the work would not be as acceptable or desired. The younger women, in their twenties, told me that they do not fully agree with the restrictions during menstruation, but they will certainly be reminded by the older woman of their expectations. In regards to the concept of doing work while seated, I noticed that my presence in the monastery caused some interesting and perhaps unprecedented situations. When I began working at Thupchen, Dawa allowed me to participate in stations where only the men had worked, such as the table where all the men stand and trace the original panel drawings. On the one day that I worked at this station due to the absence of a male painter, at different points in the day the younger women came up to the table to trace with me. As seen on the cover photograph, one woman, Rinzin, had come up to the table to stand by me and hold a ruler as we finished the work. This perhaps demonstrated an acceptance of the exception that was made for me, and an eagerness to participate in tasks delegated to men.

All of the women on this project expressed their love for working at Thupchen, and how they felt the project was extremely important to their culture; all of whom were born and raised in Lomanthang. However, the expressions that women also want to be capable of doing more and participating in less restricted ways cannot be ignored. One thing I noticed was that the Thupchen monastery also generates a space for inter-generational communication amongst the women. For example, I witnessed many discussions about

politics and the local elections coming up, as well as holding each other accountable to all go see the Tibetan doctors who were coming through Lomanthang to give check-ups. The women would also frequently be sharing and exchanging household resources at work, bringing extra items they have if someone mentioned what they needed. This space, while generating income and Buddhist merit, also generates a profound sense of Mustangi community, where important conversations are being had every day.

Foreign Aid, Foreign Expectations:

As soon as I learned about the Thupchen restorations, I also discovered common critiques of the project. A few scholars over the years have published opinion pieces regarding their disapproval for the restoration methods employed by the team at Thupchen. For example, Christian Luczanits' "Bringing a Masterwork Back to Life?" and John Sanday's "The Wall Paintings of Thubchen Lo Manthang, Upper Mustang: In Defense of History" serve as reminders that the restorations are not welcomed by all. Essentially, both of these articles argue that the restorations are inappropriate and have gone too far. The decision to fill in blanks throughout the monastery has sparked controversy, and scholars such as Luczanits claim that any additions preclude an understanding of the original state, due to issues such as a stripped outer layer of original shading that discolors the current appearance.⁶²

However, underlying these technical critiques, these articles reflect a negative sentiment towards the project that is perhaps more targeted at the local community of Lomanthang. For example, Luczanits cites "a general naiveté" that remains "characteristic of conservation projects in the Himalayas."⁶³ Moreover, Luczanits mentions that he finds it ironic to see local painters on the restoration team selling drawings of the restored paintings to tourists. In Luczanits' negative assessment of the sale to tourists, he conjures an image of

⁶² Christian Luczanits, "Bringing a Masterwork Back to Life?" *Orientalism* 45, no. 2 (2014), 4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

the local painters as people who may not understand how the paintings appear in a slightly different tint than the original 15th century walls. However, he fails to acknowledge the major accomplishments and pride associated with the work at Thupchen, and eagerness of painters to share their enlivened monastery. Speaking to a former painter who sells these paintings, I learned that he believes the Thupchen monastery is one of the most important projects to the community of Lomanthang—it seems like he is selling an apt gift to tourists who are interested in local projects.

The negativity towards the actions of local painters perhaps reflects a larger sentiment of scholars' resistance to contemporary change within the communities they study. Art historian John Harrison argued that cultural change and development is not categorically bad, but if it happens too rapidly then traditions are at risk for being lost.⁶⁴ Perhaps scholars and historians may not feel a responsibility to the communities or to living cultures, but rather to the preservation and study of the history from which those communities arise. Thus, discrepancies between a community being free to make changes within their own culture as they see fit, and the tension for others to preserve traditions may not always align.

Even the head painter, Dawa, who is not a local of Lomanthang but from Tibet, has his own complex set of expectations as a Tibetan living in exile. Though he does not live in Lomanthang, for Dawa the Thupchen monastery is every bit as much of his own cultural heritage as it is for the local Mustangi women, due to its connection with the Tibetan empire. Interestingly, Dawa also does not appreciate it when painters leave the project to sell their work commercially. As someone who had trained many of the local painters, Dawa can feel frustrated to see a trained painter leave. His goals are certainly more centered around the project than around the local painter, who might be interested in honing their painting skills and using them however they see fit. While Dawa feels he had invested in their skills, we

⁶⁴ Harrison, 36.

must keep in mind that the local painters also had to work to invest in their own skills as well. Local painters may not share the expectation that in return for being trained as an artist, the painter is obliged to indefinitely work for a specific project and under the terms of another. Moreover, these former painters still mostly live in Lomanthang, often having their own small gallery shops and they willingly helping around the Thupchen monastery if they are ever needed.

Despite a resistance to change, the most common critique of the restorations that I heard during my time there was discontent with the lack of digitization and mechanization within the restoration process. “Why don’t you just use a photocopier?” came from the mouths of nearly every European and American tourist after I had explained the poking technique of *spolvero*. However, in addition to the tourists, there was an anonymous source who had been invited to Lomanthang and remained heavily critical about the lack of digitization that could heavily expedite the process. This source felt that the methods used at Thupchen were inefficient, and could be done much faster if the team integrated modern technology. The *spolvero* technique especially was categorized as “tedious” and “meaningless,” and this interlocutor wanted to reduce the amount of work that had to be completed by hand. Moreover, this source thought that the delegation of “tedious” tasks to the women on the team was degrading, and taking advantage of the fact that they cannot work as official painters on the project. In light of these critiques, I wanted to understand how the community perceived their own definitions of efficiency.

Through conversation, interviews, and hearing about recent local events, the community values of Lomanthang helped shape my understanding of how they view the efficiency of their restoration process. For the team of painters, one of the most important aspects to this project has always been employment. With many locals leaving Lomanthang for different parts of the year, this project actually brings people into Lomanthang. In this

sense, it would be rather inefficient to cut jobs in favor of a machine, if the goal is employment. Another goal, according to Dawa, is to use traditional methods of artmaking. This is one way that Dawa can preserve his own Tibetan cultural heritage, but teaching traditional skills. If the goal is to learn the techniques used back in the 15th century, then a machine would be very inefficient. To outline these perspectives further, a brief event that happened in Lomanthang shortly after I arrived demonstrates how local factors influence different definitions of efficiency.

One day, the women at Thupchen were speaking quickly in the Mustangi language, seemingly under a sense of collective distress. Thus, I inquired about their topic of conversation. The story I was told came in confusing bits and pieces, and it was not until the night I left when a local informed me about the story in full. Apparently, a team of locals went to gather wood for construction from a plot of land nearby the Thupchen monastery. On this plot of land, a hotel had been built a few years back. After the wood had been gathered by cutting a tree on the land, there was an incident with a young woman in town. Suddenly, this woman in her twenties had suddenly been possessed by a local spirit, around the middle of April, following the tree-cutting. During this state of possession, she spoke in a perfect Central Tibetan dialect that previously she had not known. Then, through her possession she spoke about representing the local spirit that resides in a plot of land right outside the village wall. She claimed that years ago, when the hotel was built, that the construction cut off her hands and left the spirit wounded. This spirit also recalled that it had been waiting to possess a local in order to tell them to stop cutting from this specific plot of land. It warned that when the tree was cut, this had hurt the spirit again.

In this situation, it would certainly be faster to take the wood from the nearest plot of land, which happens to be the one where the spirit resides. However, nobody wanted to keep cutting the wood from this area. To the people of Lomanthang, this seemed like an obvious

decision to make. They would prefer to walk further, to import wood, or find another material for this construction scaffolding because this alternative would not be disturbing any local spirits, and thus paying respects to their own land and deities.

Without consulting the local community, or making an attempt to understand their goals, collaboration is doomed for discrepancies and foreign expectations are doomed for disappointment. Different conceptions of efficiency can all be regarded as valid, but mutual understanding remains crucial for different cultural values to translate.

Conclusions:

From smoke damage to sand mandalas, the sacred space of Thupchen has seen yet another life in Lomanthang. The restoration projects have allowed for extensive study of the space inside Thupchen, uncovering many secrets from long ago. The painting restorations have returned this space to a functional and devotional center of worship. As people once gathered in the fifteenth century to discuss Buddhist religion and translate canonical texts, now multiple generations of locals from Lomanthang gather to discuss their own culture and the future of their cultural heritage. The opportunity for employment is especially felt by the women on the project, who engage in work that had been previously unafforded to women.

In addition to the community amongst locals, there are also cross-cultural collaborations amongst American, Italian, Tibetan, and Mustangi populations. Different values and goals remain present in these different populations, such as the preservation of Tibetan history, adorning a space of worship, as well as expediting processes through mechanization. For the local community, the essence of Thupchen lies in the function of the material culture. Thus, understanding the value of these fifteenth century artworks as vessels of worship within the greater context of devotion and tradition allows us to have a community-informed understanding of Mustangi material culture. Only with this

understanding can we truly comprehend the intentions behind local conservation efforts and wishes.

Methods

To complete this project, I wanted to take an emic and ethnographic approach by working in the Thupchen monastery and conducting interviews within the community. From 9-6, I would follow suit in the tasks delegated to women, and though the head painter allowed me to participate in the activities that the male workers typically complete, I primarily worked alongside the women on the team. We worked in three stations: grinding stone pigment, tracing copies of original scenes, and needle-poking holes in the copies. Outside of this time, I conducted interviews with members of the community outside of the team, the monastic community, and former employees of the project. Throughout the day, I documented all of my observations and inquired to the head painter who answered all my technical questions. For my interviews with the project team, Dawa allowed me to pull people one by one at different times, which did not interfere with their pay at all, and did not disturb the project since only one person was leaving at a time. Many of the women who were interviewed did not want to be singled out by name in my paper, but allowed me to use their names in the bibliography section. Some names are only a first name per request.

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