

Himalayan Buddhist Heritage in India Safeguarding and Celebrating



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Matho Monastery stands on a quiet hilltop, overlooking the Indus Valley, in Ladakh, a region in the most northern part of India. It is the only monastery of the Sakya order of Himalayan Buddhism in this part of the country.



Matho Monastery surrounded by the peaks of the Himalaya.

Dating to the fifteenth century, the monastery is home to an outstanding collection of over two thousand Buddhist artefacts, ranging from the ninth to the twentieth century, and incorporating artistic styles from Kashmir, Nepal, Tibet, and China. The collection includes thangkas (paintings on cloth), bronze and ivory sculptures, and ritual objects such as papier-mâché masks, tiger skins, and turquoise arm bracelets. The latter are the accoutrements for the annual Oracle Festival, an ancient rite wherein roaming spirits take possession of two monks and foretell the local village's fortune.

While the collection grew through the centuries, it also decayed. As sculptures gathered dust, thangkas blackened with soot from oil lamps, and once-vibrant silks lost their lustre, the objects gradually fell into disuse, and were stored away.



Monks performing puja (worship) in one of the monastery's temples.

Breathing New Life into the Collection

Since 2011, three NGO's, the Butter Tea Association, the Himalayan Art Preservation Association, and the Cultural & Welfare Society of Matho Gonpa, led by the French art restorer Nelly Rieuf, are putting to work a team of international experts – art restorers, architects, engineers, and art historians – as well as the local monastic and village population to breathe new life into the collection with the aim of safeguarding and promoting Ladakh's cultural heritage.

To this end, the team is building a museum on the monastery site. The mudbrick construction is traditional and durable, and only makes use of renewable materials that are native to the valley. Art historians are in charge of documenting and researching the collection, putting together a carefully designed exhibition. Three floors, covering a total of 470 square meters, will showcase twelve centuries of artistic output. On the first floor, the visitor is taken on a time-traveller's journey into the past and introduced to the origin of styles and the virtuosity of early masters. The second floor has an iconographic focus as the visitor encounters a "Who's Who" of Buddhas, bodhisattvas and deities, and receives a crash course in Buddhist philosophy. The third floor is reserved for the mystery of powerful Buddhist rituals, dance, and music, as well as the monastery's history.

Skills Development and Capacity Building

Local village women and monks are provided with on the job art conservation and museum management training as they will be responsible for the day-to-day running of the museum upon its completion. Today, almost twenty young women, having mastered the properties of colours and chemicals, as well as drawing techniques, are working full-time to revive the collection, making use of natural materials and pigments only. With this unique skillset, these women stand at the vanguard of cultural heritage preservation in the region.



Some much needed dental work is provided by local women trained in art conservation.

Natural Disaster

The region is prone to earthquakes (two on average each year) as well as flash floods. In the summer of 2010, a cloudburst and heavy rains triggered flash floods that damaged over seventy towns and villages. Art theft poses an additional threat. Many monasteries have locked their collections away in order to prevent looting, thus inhibiting the use of the objects for ritual and aesthetic enjoyment.

In order to overcome the challenges posed by natural disaster, the museum building is designed specifically to cope with the impact of earth tremors. Clay between the foundation stones will absorb shocks, and the walls are each a metre thick. In order to support the walls, one double belt (two wooden planks that hug the wall on the inside and outside, and are linked by wooden crossbars inside the walls) is put into place per metre elevation.

Much attention is also paid to the implementation of safeguarding measures: a comprehensive disaster response plan details the handling of and care for objects in various scenarios.



A local carpenter carves poplar wood from the valley for the museum



Masons at work in preparation for the mudbricks.

A Holistic Model of Cultural Management

Community participation is key for the success of the project, and one of the most challenging aspects of the project lies in balancing different approaches to art and cultural heritage. In workshops, participants discuss the different values that an object or site may embody - religious, monetary, historical or aesthetical – and how these might be prioritized in different settings, and by different audiences. A bronze fifteenth century statue of the bodhisattva of compassion Avalokiteshvara might be considered as valueless by a Buddhist monk when the deity no longer resides within the object. To an antiquities dealer in London the same statue might present itself as a valuable financial investment. A visitor to the monastery might just be captured by the beauty of its svelte forms, and the way the light refracts on its bronze surface.

In order to deal with different cultural perceptions and priorities, the project gives shape to and puts into practice a holistic model of cultural heritage management that encourages local and international cooperation, and does not prioritize one 'knowledge' over another. Thus the museum is both a display of admirable works of art and a temple where the divinity that resides in the objects can be venerated. The artefacts, accordingly, are restored not only to enhance their aesthetic quality, but also to render them once more suited as vehicles of the Buddhist pantheon.



A virtual model of one of the museum's rooms. The colours conjure the atmosphere of a temple.

A Celebration of Ladakh's Buddhist Heritage

The Matho Museum Project is on a mission to protect Buddhist art from the widespread threats posed by local neglect, the black art market and natural disaster. To this end, it instils the local population with the knowledge necessary to safeguard the region's artistic output, and to facilitate its dissemination to a broad audience. Throughout all its efforts runs a genuine desire to enduringly contribute to the region's cultural, social and economic development. When the museum opens its doors in 2016, we hope all will be able to participate in a veritable celebration of Buddhist art and culture among the peaks of the Indian Himalaya



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