

SPECIFICITY OF TANG-KA RESTORATION AND CONSERVATION

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Resumen

Este tipo de pinturas, únicas en su aspecto “doble cara” se presentan habitualmente enrolladas, como lo están a menudo ciertas pinturas chinas y japonesas, aunque en este caso el soporte recibe una imprimación por ambas caras. El reverso vehicula los “mantras”, ritos litúrgicos, así como otras inscripciones de carácter histórico o religioso. El tejido, se convierte a la vez en soporte y armazón de estas dos superficies imprimadas paralelamente. Las obras realizadas antes del siglo XV, se presentan rematadas en sus lados superior e inferior, mediante una costura simple.

El proceso de Conservación-Restauración de un tang-ka, depende por igual de su concepción y de su ubicación, así como de manipulaciones externas. Son obras exclusivamente religiosas, veneradas en monasterios o capillas privadas, expuestas constantemente a la acción mecánica de enrollado-desenrollado y en condiciones de higiene particulares. Son igualmente muy numerosas las obras deterioradas por vandalismo. Todo ello genera en las pinturas un desgaste matérico, así como otras alteraciones específicas que serán el objeto de nuestra ponencia.

The characteristic of a tang-ka, its most distinctive feature, is that it is painted on both sides. It lays on a canvas support coated on both sides. It is rolled, as Chinese and Japanese works often are. The back of a tang-ka is as carefully prepared as the front, so that consecrated formulas, mantras, and other religious or historical writings can be inscribed on it. Before the 15th century, a presentation textile was added by a mereseam on its superior and its inferior borders.

All these particularities make restoration and conservation of tang-ka a very specific job. Their conception, the place where they were kept and the way they were handled have also to be taken into consideration. Tang-ka are exclusively religious works of art, honored in monasteries or private shrines, incessantly rolled and unrolled by the light of the butter lamps were that cause of dirtiness we do not find in western countries . Many tang-ka have been vandalized during the last 50 years. This set of conditions causes specific mechanical wear, and alteration, which will be developed in this presentation.

Tibetan paintings have to be freely rolled and unrolled. In their original form, they come with neither easel nor frame, the presentation textiles sewed on their superior and inferior borders being there only for display purpose. Considering that both sides of tang-ka have to be visible, we had to develop very specific conditions of conservation. New theoretical, methodological and solutions had to be found, combining occidental technology with Tibetan history.

A- Methods used in museums and collections up to the present

In France, before the 60's, most Tibetan paintings were kept at the Guimet Museum and were restored by a famous Parisian relining workshop with an exclusively occidental approach. Torn tang-ka or tangkas with a weakened support were relining and stretched on a frame, which made it impossible to see their back or roll them.

In the USA, to let the back of the tang-ka in view, some restorers had the idea to glue them on Plexiglas panes, more or less thick and flexible, with a synthetic adhesive. Again, the ability to roll them was lost, and so was the aesthetics of their original display.

Some tang-ka were transferred on a paper support, the Chinese or Japanese way, but this process crushes, flattens, stiffens a work of art that draws all its beauty from movement, depth of field, and suppleness. This method also occults the back of the tang-ka.

Sometimes the presentation textiles were removed, or inappropriately replaced by others with no consideration for style or period.

As to the treatment applied to the pictorial coating, the ignorance of the original Tibetan techniques lead to disastrous results:

- use of high retention solvents
- use of vacuum tables wearing out the edges of the tears unprotected by the coating
- drastic cleansing out taking into account that each coating or color requires a specific treatment
- Use of aggressive and non-selective varnishes that spoil the specific shine of the different original paints.

Since the 60's-70's, the tang-ka arriving on the market have shown little traditional Tibetan restorations made with small sewed or glued pieces of textiles. These restorations were seldom and often rough, with a minimal intervention on the surface of the painting. Stenge enough a real traditional Tibetan method exists, involving the sewing or gluing of a strip of canvas and then an integration made with a final coating but they used it only for the initial preparation of the canvas and never for reparation purposes.

To sum up we can say that many attempts have been made to find a suitable method of conservation for these specific works of art, none of them being satisfactory. In Tibet, the concept of restoration and conservation is not in the ways

B- Intervention: situation the restorer is bound to encounter

The restorer will find a normal size painting with the graphic precision of a miniature or an illumination.

The Buddhist Tibetan pantheon is very complex. Tang-ka are the vectors of this pantheon and they reflect its complexity by an extremely varied iconography. The basis of Tibetan painting is accurate drawing and juxtaposition of shaded colored areas.

The accuracy, even the miniaturism of the performance of a tang-ka, the indispensable comprehensive knowledge of the depicted subject, exponentially increase the difficulty of any intervention on a painting.

C- Development of our method

First, we perform a thorough examination of the work of art, following the usual scheme.

>Treatment of the support

Whenever an intervention of consolidation of the support is necessary, it is crucial that it should be done without lining. Conventional restoration of easel painting with a very degraded support is usually conducted by relining and doubling techniques; as tang-ka are painted on both sides, as they need to be rolled and unrolled freely (1), we have to deal with a totally different problem.

> Problems on the support of the tang-ka

To understand and analyze the alteration of tang-ka -which is often glue problem- it is sufficient to examine the dynamics and the flexibility of the roll.

Other cases are more complex:

- The roll is rather firm, flexible, without tear, but the examination in transmitted light reveals a variable state of lacuna. When a tang-ka has not been too much handled, the weaving remains strong, even if a traction at the periphery of a lacuna could in term reduce the resistance of the fiber, leading first to a crack, then to the unweaving of its edges, then eventually to a tear or a hole.

- The roll is very softened, dry and fragile. This could be caused by a sizing problem, loss of molecular linking in the glue, or by a bad initial preparation of the tang-ka.
- Previous rudimentary restorations
- Vandalism: tearing, wrenching, laceration, maculation, stamping, crumpling, neglect.
- In later tang-ka (after the 15th century), a presentation textile (often made of silk) is sewed on the four borders of the paintings, and it reacts to humidity problems in a various ways.

D- Conducting of the method

We will keep in mind at all time the need for preserving the homogeneity and organic quality of a tang-ka. We need a comprehensive perception of the work of art and the problems involved in its whole, as coherent and living body, displaying the total visibility of its two sides, free of all constraint.

1- The straightening

a) Preliminary

A first optical analysis should show if lightening is necessary :

- patches and various restorations on the back of the tang-ka
- too brittle and very dry paint
- various maculations (animal dejections)
- very greasy stains
- state of dirtiness

b) The straightening

The restorer will lay a rather flexible intercalated support on his/her working table. This support is compulsory for every intervention. The straightening will proceed with a light moistening and a low temperature ironing using a protective film of sulfured paper (greaseproof paper), done with a steady and movement on the back of the tang-ka.

When the painting has recovered its position and its natural cohesion, we can start the incrustations, and the thread-to-thread .The original dimensions should be rediscovered and rebalanced the painting to preserve the perennity of the whole.

The inferior and superior borders are important for the display and the hanging of the painting: they should be given the necessary solidity. the lateral borders will prevent the horizontal cracks from appearing and consolidate the previous work.

2- The thread-to-thread operation and the incrustation

To proceed a thread-to-thread operation, a particular care should be given to the choice of the textiles to be used: quality of the cloth, the thread torsion, weaving, composition of the fiber, dye, suppleness have to be thoroughly checked. In the case of a lacuna, the first task is to eliminate the fraying and the greasy residues at the end of the fibers. It is a very delicate taste, with many variants: dry or brittle , numerous or scarce fibers, etc.

Once the fibers are clear, they are finely carded on ½ millimeter at the utmost.

An incrustation of canvas is prepared; the shape of the lacuna is accurately reported on it, using tracing paper. The edges of the incrustation cloth are carded the same way. The canvas is “decatie” on a frame is then prepared, dyed, glued on its both sides with starch or animal glue, the Tibetan way, then coated to fit, with the accurate amount of kaolin, chalk, glue, glycerin. The coating is then colored with watercolor or pigments .

The assemblage is done on the back of the painting, by the ½ millimeters of free fiber ends, using a diluted flexible non acid vinyl glue in adequate quantity (aqueous emulsion of vinyl homopolymers). The cohesion of the two parts is obtained by pressure.

The point is to prevent the incrustation zone from becoming a weakening area in the future, a source of cracking for the coating plaster and pictorial layer, and to integrate it into the flexibility and the cleavage of the whole painting.

3- The refixing

We can then proceed to the refixing of the painting, partial or general, diluted animal glue.

4- The reintegration of the coating on the back of the painting

This is the determining operation on this side of the tang-ka, which has been untouched till now.

The efficiency of this consolidation of the support will give the intervention its final quality.

The work of art is not, at this state, totally mechanically safe, as the fibers are still free on the back of the tang-ka and would cause, if not filled up, unilateral tractions prejudicial to the work of art.

The colored coating is prepared with an adequate animal glue: kaolin gives flexibility; chalk makes the load. These materials should have a density and a strength slightly inferior to those of the original work of art; the coating should be very finely ground and very homogeneous, laid while fluid with a brush. All the ingredients will be tested or prepared by the restorer. Their reversibility must be maximal.

5- The cleansing (method and cases)

The analysis of the paint composition allows us to carry out this most delicate operation. If, for example, the percentage of dye is very high, the cleansing will require maximal care. If the orpiment dominates, the balance will be hard to obtain as its surface tends to oxydate. A too brutal lightening could be irreversible.

Various cleansing techniques can be used:

- A mechanical removal of the dust particles on the colored zone depending on their homogeneity
- A surface hypotensor in feeble percentage can be used in a selective manner, and without any rubbing ever.

6- The reintegration of the pictorial coating

The reintegration of the coating is made with the same mix of chalk, kaolin and glue as the one used on the back of the painting, and laid with the same care.

The particularity of these techniques lies in the extreme attention and rigor applied to the execution. A coating laid on an inadequate assemblage would create a breaking point during future handling

Considering the specificity of the original pictorial techniques, our conception of reintegration implies the total making of our colors, the choice and grinding of pigments as well as the percentage and mixing of the liants.

7- Final evaluation of the restored work of art

We must keep in mind that the ultimate aim is to reconstitute the original coherence of the work. Therefore we will constantly throw the process back into to revise, if necessary, the choice made, to ponder the relative importance to give to each color. To let the painting rest while work is performed, to position it vertically in order to consider it with a fresh eye, it after a while ,will help not to carry the intervention too far, by fear of losing the bloom of the painting.

The reintegration will be adapted to the specific original technics, various matt and lightning glasses inherent to the original conception.

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⁽¹⁾With modern occidental advertising posters, a cotton cloth doubling allow the poster to be rolled and unrolled.