

Portable Heritage in the Himalayas

The Example of Namgyal Monastery, Mustang: Part II, Books and Stupas

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The first part to this article, which appeared in the March issue (pp. 120–30) introduced Namgyal monastery in Mustang, and focused on the richness and diversity of the sculptures preserved in its collection. In the standard classification of material supports for Buddhist practice they represent the first of three categories: that of the body. Examples for representations of the speech and mind of the Buddha in that collection are introduced in this second part.

The documentation presented is part of an ongoing research project in that remote region of Nepal. During four visits since 2012, the first three of them funded by the Rubin Museum and one by Heritage Watch International, I documented six monastery collections, photographing and measuring each object. The collection of Namgyal monastery is the most important of those documented so far.

In 2014 a one-day survey of eight of the approximately eighty old books preserved at Namgyal revealed that many are of considerable antiquity, and that a surprisingly large percentage of the manuscripts had some form of art, usually a combination of woodcarving and painting. Tibetan books are piles of loose paper folios held together

by two wooden panels and a leather band wrapped around it (Fig. 1). Often the folios are further wrapped in cloth to protect them from dust. The wooden covers of more precious books are painted and carved, while the manuscript folios may be illuminated. In the case of multiple volume sets, the volumes are numbered with the letters of the Tibetan alphabet, beginning with the letter *ka*. The volume number may also be carved on the sides of the cover.

Documentation in 2015 focused on the books of Namgyal monastery. At the outset, I expected that we would be able to document approximately half of the books in the given time period, but we managed to finish the entire corpus in six long working days, resulting in almost 10,000 photographs and 450 gigabytes of data. This could not have been accomplished without the help of Jaroslav Poncar, who joined the documentation this year voluntarily and did most of the photography (Fig. 2).

Needless to say, the assembly of this unexpectedly massive amount of data in a very short time, in combination with an intermittent electricity supply, was a challenge in its own right, especially in terms of immediate backup. Sorting the photographs by book took a week, and the cataloguing is still



Fig. 1 A volume of the Mustang proto-Kanjur with painted covers



Fig. 2 Documentation of the manuscripts in summer 2015, with Jaroslav Poncar photographing and Nawang Tsering Gurung and Bhirat Thapa turning the pages

ongoing; the details below thus have to be considered preliminary.

A good portion of the documentation covers a hitherto unknown proto-Kanjur (the collection of the words of the Buddha before its canonization) organized in a unique way, both in terms of the texts and illuminations that accompany each volume. Altogether 42 volumes of this corpus are preserved,

and only three are missing. These volumes make up more than half of the books documented. The volumes are classified in two sections: a *Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajnaparamita*) section originally comprising fourteen volumes, and a discourse or sutra section of originally 31 volumes. Each volume contains at least four illuminations, two on the first page and two on the last.

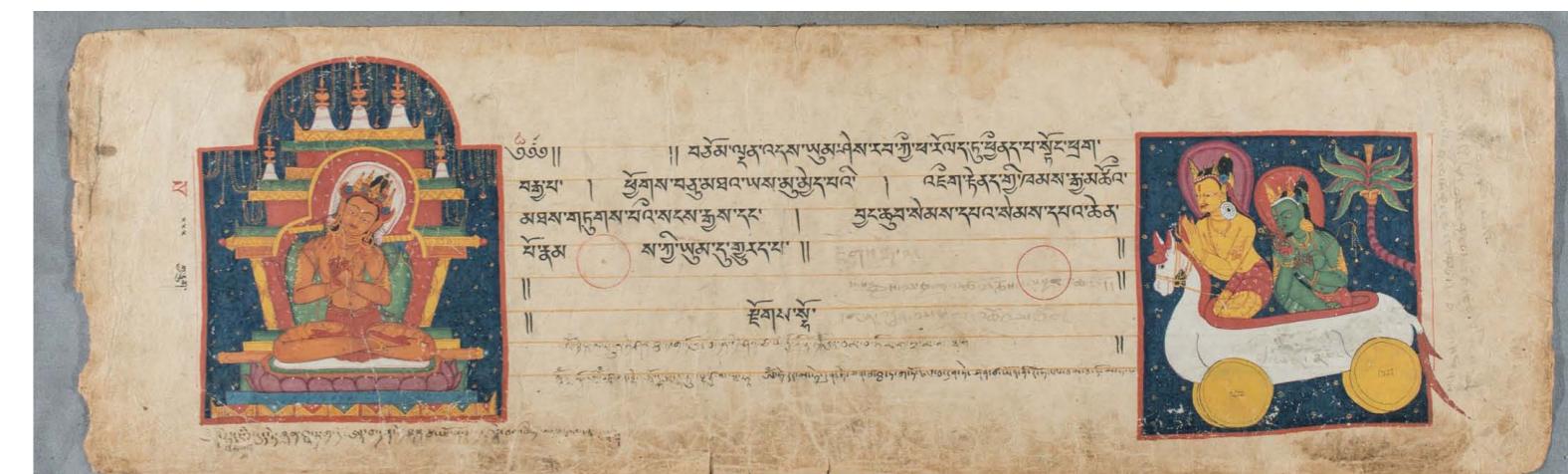


Fig. 3 Last folio of the Perfection of Wisdom section (volume *pha*, folio 386 recto)
Mustang, first half of the 14th century
Ink and pigments on paper, 70 x 22 cm
Namgyal monastery (Book 33)

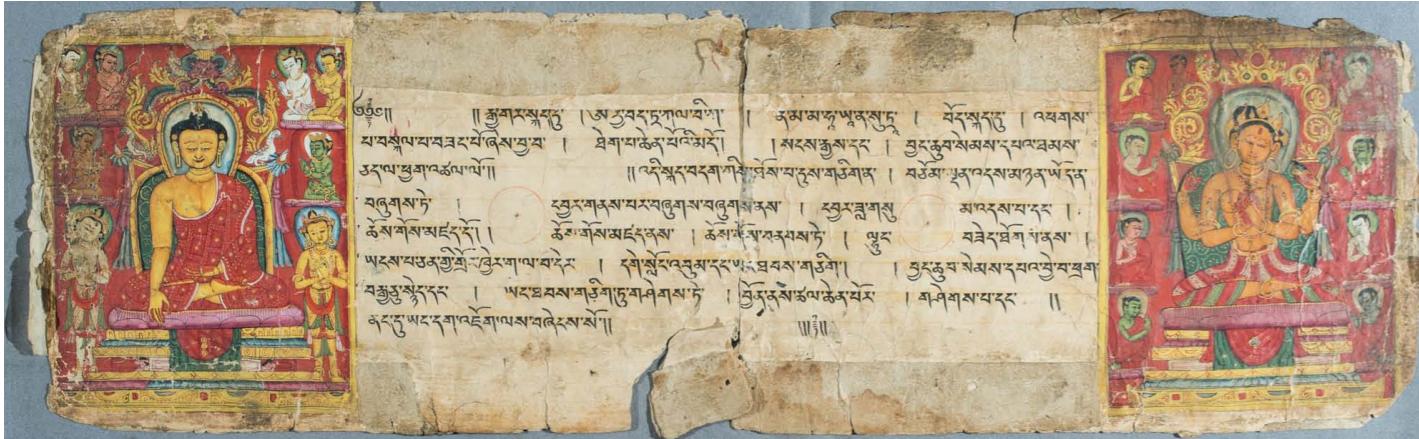


Fig. 4 The first folio of the sutra section with larger illuminations of Shakyamuni and Prajnaparamita with an assembly of eight figures each (volume *ka*, folio 1 verso)
Mustang, first half of the 14th century
Ink and pigments on paper, 66.7 x 20.2 cm
Namgyal monastery (Book 67)

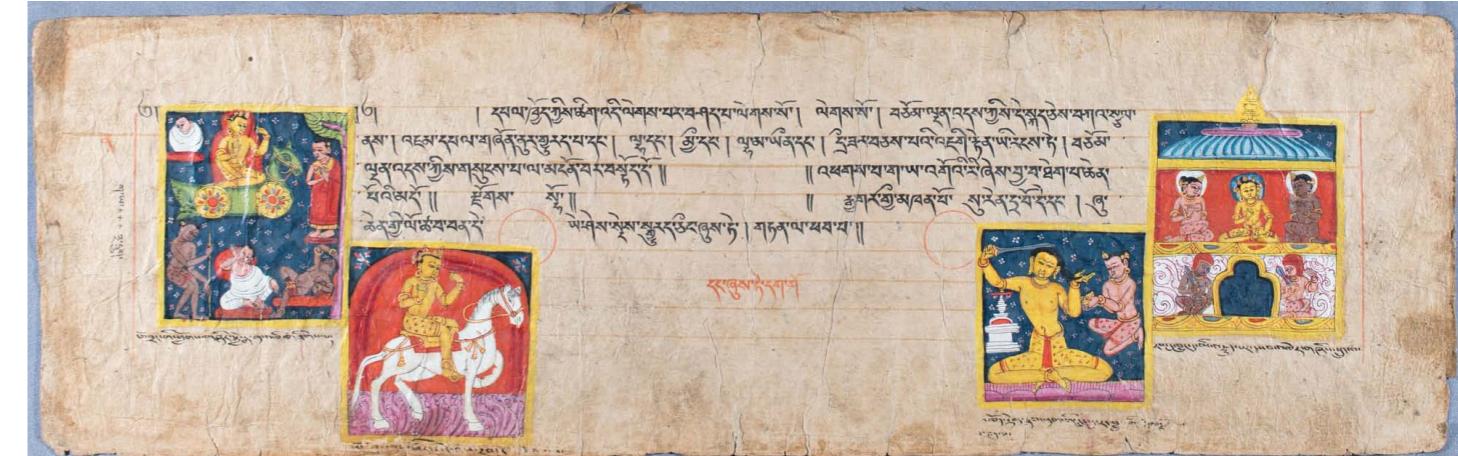


Fig. 6 Four scenes of the 'great departure' (volume *na*, folio 326 recto)
Mustang, first half of the 14th century
Ink and pigments on paper, 67 x 21 cm
Namgyal monastery (Book 13)

There are thirteen volumes (*ka* to *pha*) from the *Perfection of Wisdom* section, with only one missing (*nya*). That *pha* is the last volume of this section is indicated by the illuminations on its last page, depicting the bodhisattva Dharmodgata teaching from within a pavilion on the (proper) right side, and the bodhisattva Sadaprarudita and the merchant's daughter paying homage to him from a horse chariot on the left (Fig. 3). This refers to the story of Sadaprarudita in search for the *Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajnaparamita*) which is also contained in the last chapters of the text in this particular volume, the *Perfection of Wisdom in Hundred Thousand Verses* (*Shatasahasrika Prajnaparamita*; on the importance of depictions of this story see Luczanits 2010). This pair of illuminations differs from the usual pairs in that it provides narrative clues, as opposed to the more usual frontally depicted figure on the right and one seated sideways in veneration on the left.

All other volumes are from the sutra section, which comprises 29 volumes (*ka* to *a*). Of these, one volume (*nya*) occurs twice; the textual content of the two volumes is largely identical, but one of them lacks illuminations. It is noteworthy that these double volumes have the same signature as the missing volume in the *Perfection of Wisdom* section, which may point to a *Perfection of Wisdom* volume having been confused with a sutra volume at some time. This indicates that there must have been another set of similar age, but probably without illuminations. Two



Fig. 5 Rebirth as a fabled animal with a bird's head (volume *ja*, folio 334 recto)
Mustang, first half of the 14th century
Ink and pigments on paper
Namgyal monastery (Book 41)



Fig. 7 Hariharivahana Lokeshvara (volume *a*, folio 336 recto)
Mustang, first half of the 14th century
Ink and pigments on paper
Namgyal monastery (Book 14)

volumes of the sutra section are missing (volumes *ma* and *ha*). In terms of content, the sutra section contains texts that should not feature there; in particular, the last volume of the section contains *dharani* texts, which are more commonly included in a tantra section.

Except for those on the first page, featuring Shakyamuni and Prajnaparamita (Fig. 4), the illuminations in the sutra section are smaller and more varied than those of the Prajnaparamita texts. Their sequence reveals that the volumes are carefully organized in their entirety. The last page of the first volume (*ka*) begins a series of illuminations representing the previous lives of the Buddha (*jataka* tales). Rather than narrating a specific event, the depictions focus on the main protagonist alone, emphasizing the different types of rebirth a bodhisattva can take: as gods, as animals and also as a bird-headed, herbivorous mythical animal (Fig. 5). Sadly, the last two illuminations of the final volume of this theme (*ta*) are historic replacements, so we cannot be sure how the transition to the next subject was conceived.

The illuminations of the following seven volumes (*tha* to *ma*) are dedicated to the life of the Buddha, the first scene showing the teaching bodhisattva in Tushita heaven. Volume *na* emphasizes the 'great departure', with four scenes on the last folio instead of the usual two (Fig. 6). Read from left to right and top to bottom, these depict the 'four excursions', in



Fig. 8 The first and last folios of volume *sa*, featuring Nyingma-derived deities (folios 1 verso and folio 333 recto)

Mustang, first half of the 14th century

Ink and pigments on paper, 66.5 x 21.2 cm

Namgyal monastery (Book 23)

which the Buddha encounters an old man, a sick man and a corpse, as well as a monk; the bodhisattva in the palace with the entrance gates watched by guards; the actual 'great departure' riding a horse in the clouds; and the cutting of the hair. The *parinirvana* scenes were probably represented in the missing volume *ma*, as the succeeding volume features a different theme.

The following five volumes (*tsa* to *zha*) are dedicated to Buddhas, beginning with the five esoteric Buddhas in their *sambhogakaya* aspect and continuing with Buddhas in monastic dress, among them the Medicine Buddhas. They are followed by bodhisattvas, two forms of Manjushri and six forms of Avalokiteshvara (volumes *za* and '*a*'), among them the Hariharivahana-Lokesvara, a form that references Vishnu (Fig. 7). These are then followed by volumes on

deities of long life (*ya*), enlightened protectors (*ya* and *ra*), wealth deities (*la*), and worldly protectors (*sha*). Volume *sa* contains Nyingma school-derived deities, among them Adibuddha Samantabhadra, Heruka and the Lion-headed Dakini (Fig. 8). The primary teacher of this school, Padmasambhava (Fig. 9), is found on the first folio of the last volume, with a monk taking refuge with him in the other illumination. Finally, the wealth deity Vaishravana and the protective goddess Palden Lhamo Remati conclude the well-conceived iconographic programme spread across the volumes.

The last three volumes further have worshipper depictions along the bottom edge of the last folio. Monks are only found on the first of these depictions, while the others feature lay worshippers, usually couples in Tibetan dress. Each of these depictions is composed around a group of ritual implements

and offerings between them. There may well be a hierarchy in their depiction across the volumes, but since none of them preserves legible captions (and those fragmentarily preserved appear to be later additions) they do not help in the chronological and geographical attribution of this proto-Kanjur.

The illuminations are generally of good quality, but occasionally damaged (see Fig. 4) and historical repairs have been applied to many of the illuminated folios: since they are at the top and bottom of the books, they are also most prone to suffer from mishandling. Stylistically they do not link directly to other known manuscript illuminations, those of neighbouring Dolpo (Heller 2001, 2009) being much more Newar in style. The most notable comparison to regional murals is offered by the depiction of Palden Lhamo Remati (Fig. 10a), which compares well to the depiction of the same deity on the base of the stupa in the Luri cave (Fig. 10b), commonly attributed to the late 13th century. This comparison supports the first impression: that this uniquely illustrated proto-canonical was made in Mustang in the first half of the 14th century.



Fig. 9 Padmasambhava (volume *a*, folio 1 verso)

Mustang, first half of the 14th century

Ink and pigments on paper

Namgyal monastery (Book 63)



Fig. 10a Palden Lhamo Remati (volume *a*, folio 289 recto)

Mustang, first half of the 14th century

Ink and pigments on paper

Namgyal monastery (Book 63)



Fig. 10b Palden Lhamo Remati

Luri cave, late 13th to early 14th century

(Photograph: C. Luczanits)



Fig. 11 Folio 1 verso and folio 2 recto of the first volume of a *Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 Verses*
Mustang, 16th century
Ink and pigments on paper,
silk brocade and metal nails,
folio size 21 x 64 cm
Namgyal monastery (Book 18)



Fig. 12 Folio 1 verso with the beginning of the title in repoussé and illuminations of Buddha Shakyamuni and the goddess Prajnaparamita
Mustang, 16th century
Ink and pigments on paper,
silk brocade and metal nails,
folio size 21 x 64 cm
Namgyal monastery (Book 18)

The standard book cover for these volumes is relatively thin, and has two lines of Lantsa script outlined in gold on a red background (see Fig. 1). The front edge is carved with Buddhas in between elegant scroll motifs containing animals such as geese, lions and *kinnara*. There are no volume signatures on the covers. Of course, the association of covers with the manuscripts as they are found today is often the random result of many historical reorganizations. Future research will reveal if there is a way to approximate their original usage and arrangement on the basis of the depicted motifs.

A significant number of the remaining books are precious volumes in gold and silver on black paper. They are mostly versions of the *Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajnaparamita* in 100,000, 25,000 and 8,000 verses), but there are also volumes with the *Discourse of the*

Fortunate Aeon (*Bhadralikapikasutra*), the *Discourse of the Great Decease* (*Mahaparinirvanasutra*), the *Discourse of the Incantations of Ratnaketu* (*Ratnaketudharanisutra*), and the *Discourse of Supreme Golden Light* (*Suvarnaprabhasottamasutra*). Their quality varies widely: some of them are exceptionally well produced and lavishly decorated, while others are mere copies of the texts. Their quality reflects the material means afforded for the manuscript and thus the affluence of the commissioner. Here I focus on one high-quality book, a *Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 Verses*, documented as Book 18.

The best-quality books have a thicker first page, made by gluing together a stack of pages and fastening them with nails, which in this case form little blossoms in silver and gold. Openings are cut

into the glued pages to house the beginning of the title and two flanking illuminations covered with curtains of precious silks (Fig. 11). In this book there are eleven layers of differently coloured and fabricated silks above the central panel (in the most elaborate case we counted fifteen layers). The beginning of the title is modelled in silver repoussé with gilt letters (Fig. 12). They are composed of two main sheets side by side with two smaller ones attached to the main sheet to complement or correct the appearance of the letters and the punctuation.

As is common with *Perfection of Wisdom* texts, the first pair of illuminations depicts Shakyamuni and Prajnaparamita. They are followed by the bodhisattva pairs of Maitreya and Manjushri, Samantabhadra and Nirvaranavishkambin, Avalokiteshvara (Fig. 13) and Vajrapani, and Kshitigarbha together with Akashagarbha. These are the Eight Great Bodhisattvas, also called the Eight Close Sons of the Buddha, a group popular since the very beginning of esoteric Buddhism. These illuminations are done in gold relief on gold ground, some of which is polished. The representation of Avalokiteshvara in Figure 13 shows the subtlety and sophistication of this technique.

Black-paper books usually have thick and heavy gilded wood covers with carvings on both edges and a volume signature on one edge. Many are painted



Fig. 13 The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara painted in gold relief
Mustang, 16th century
Ink and pigments on paper, illumination 11 x 8.5 cm
Namgyal monastery (Book 18)



Fig. 14 Inner side of the top cover, with Shakyamuni teaching different audiences
Mustang, 16th century
Pigments on wood, 21.5 x 64 cm
Namgyal monastery (Book 18)

on the inside, most frequently in gold relief on a red background of remarkable finesse. The majority of these paintings depict groups of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, but there is also one cover with the god Indra flanked by the Four Great Kings, and one with the Five Protective Goddesses (*Pancharaksha*). One cover of Book 18 has a more complex composition with the teaching Shakyamuni flanked by diverse audiences and surrounded by the Buddhas of the Ten Directions (Fig. 14). Another cover showing this composition is coloured and accompanied by its matching pair showing the bodhisattvas of the ten stages, the highest one in the centre, surrounded by different audiences. These depictions are captioned, and the cover of Book 18 has an additional four-line text along the bottom that has yet to be deciphered.

It was a challenge to make the gold relief of the illuminations and covers apparent in the documentation photography. These are actually made for viewing at an angle in natural light, which makes the relief stand out sharply and the background sparkle. Jaroslav Poncar photographed one of the covers under these conditions, to stunning effect (Fig.



Fig. 15 Buddha Ratnasambhava in gold relief on red Mustang, 16th century
Pigments on wood, height of the scroll 11 cm
Namgyal monastery (Book 46)
(Photograph: Jaroslav Poncar, 2015)

15). However, it was impossible to document all of them in this way on this occasion for various reasons, including the weather.

The Namgyal monastery collection also has numerous remarkable stupas, some of them too large to be moved for documentation. On both sides of the main altar are large, richly ornate repoussé stupas, one of which is illustrated in Figure 16. Featuring a silver *harmika* (the block above the dome), garlands and jewels decorating the dome, Lantsa-script characters covering the circular terrace-rings, and scrolls and auspicious symbols on the square base, effectively no surface of the stupa remains undecorated. The stupa's shape refers to victory over the demon Mara and thus celebrates the awakening of the Buddha. While the shape and proportions are Tibetan, the projecting points at the corners, formed by triple jewels symbolizing the Buddha, his teaching, and the monastic community, are a local feature assimilating a characteristic of Kathmandu valley architecture.

The stupa is said to be dedicated to the prolific teacher Kunga Dolchok (1507–66), who was born in Lo Manthang and transmitted teachings of both the Sakya and Jonang schools but remained more influential in the latter. A sculpture of him is housed in the niche of the stupa's dome. Incidentally, Kunga Dolchok was a son of Tsewang Zangpo, likely the commissioner of some of the bronzes presented in Part I of this article (see *Orientations*, March 2016, pp. 120–30). Confirming the identity of the sculpture from elsewhere and researching his biography will add further detail to the historical background of the Namgyal collection.

There are many other interesting stupas in the Namgyal collection, among which one stands out for the material used (Fig. 17). Uniquely, a cloisonné cup forms the dome of this stupa. Its shape, with five circular lotus terraces underneath the dome, commemorates the birth of the Buddha at Lumbini. The stupa is part of an incomplete set of eight, each substantially different in shape, commemorating the eight main events of the Buddha's life. A similarly varied set is known only from a mural in the Red Temple of Tsaparang in West Tibet, a comparison that confirms the association of Mustang with that region.

The works discussed here and in Part I (*ibid.*) are just some of the outstanding examples for the 'three supports'—representations of the body, speech and mind of the Buddha—preserved in the collection



Fig. 16 Stupa of Kunga Dolchog (1507–66)
Mustang, Namgyal monastery, 16th century
Gilt-copper repoussé, 130 x 69 cm
Namgyal monastery
(Photograph: C. Luczanits, 2013)

of Namgyal monastery. Approximately half of the documented sculptures and objects, and two-thirds of the books are of outstanding quality. Needless to say, the value of such objects on the art market would be considerable, but their value for the heritage of Mustang is immeasurable.

Nevertheless, across the Himalayas such heritage is endangered in many ways, not least among them the wish for development, renewal and expansion. I have already shown what has happened to the murals of the Maitreya temple in nearby Lo Manthang under the mission of bringing them back to life (Luczanits, 2014), and this work has continued since. Following the 2015 earthquake, Namgyal will likely replace all of its architectural heritage in the expansion that has begun with the monastic quarters. Using concrete for the living quarters of the monks also reinforces the recent tradition to relocate them in winter to the monastery near Pokhara, keeping only minimal staff and the fierce dogs at the main monastery.

The loss of portable heritage through sale or theft is only one of the dangers. Strikingly, none of the institutions I have worked with had proper records of their collections prior to this documentation. Traditional inventories record what is represented and the name of the donor; if more detailed records with measurements have been created in the recent past they neither contain sufficient information on the objects themselves nor adequate photographic documentation. One aim of my research, thus, is to provide such records and to update them in future on the basis of new research.

Other dangers result from the usage, management, storage and display of such portable heritage. Many of the Namgyal objects would benefit from some conservation work ranging from repairs to



Fig. 17 Birth stupa with cloisonné dome
Mustang, Namgyal monastery, 15th–16th century
Bronze and cloisonné, 30 x 14.5 cm
(Photograph: C. Luczanits, 2013)

mere cleaning, but if this is done in the same manner as the painting of the faces of the bronzes, it will do more harm than good. Collections of such size and quality would also profit from coherent object management by dedicated and trained monks rather than the traditional caretaker, a post that commonly rotates among younger and less educated monks.

As the combined result of the construction work and the earthquake, the Namgyal objects and books are today dislocated to cramped, inaccessible storage spaces and it is unclear when they will be accessible again in future. Before the earthquake I worked on the design for the new Lamdre Lhakhang within the newly built quarters, combining both traditional religious usage and display. It is still unclear how the rebuilding of the main temple will affect these plans. My suggestion to Khenpo Tsewang Rigzin was to include the collection in the planning process of the new building. Needless to say, this will only be possible if adequate funding can be found.

In the broader perspective on Tibetan Buddhist art, the Mustang documentation is crucial for a better understanding of the nexus between Tibetan and Newar art in a Sakya school context. In contrast to works in Western collections, the in situ documentation allows for establishing whether there are distinctive regional art schools and when they flourished. In addition, the bulk of the artworks can be attributed to the 15th and the 16th century, an extremely innovative period of Tibetan Buddhist art, with distinctive regional styles and new forms of portraiture. Of prime importance is the large corpus of inscribed objects with regard to the mentioned donors, the identification of the depicted historical personages, and the establishment of object sets depicting lineages or groupings of deities. Concerning the latter, we were only able to establish that Indian teachers in one of the lineage sets at Namgyal are distinguished from Tibetan ones through the use of a darker metal alloy because a large portion of this set was preserved in one place.

The discovery of an almost complete hitherto unknown illustrated proto-Kanjur and numerous other illustrated books adds a further dimension to the documentation, both in terms of research and the labour involved in their cataloguing. It was also a surprise that almost all older books at Namgyal comprised some form of art and that many of the paintings are done in relief. Recording entire collections of books provides mutual context for the wooden covers and the actual texts, which otherwise

are studied separately. Of course, the full historical value of the Namgyal books can only be assessed once they are catalogued in their entirety.

Beyond that, the documentation of monastery collections also opens an entirely new perspective for the implementation of this research through a more direct engagement in questions of collection management, object interpretation, and display. Rather than transposing traditional museum concepts for display to Himalayan monasteries, as has been implemented by Hemis monastery in Ladakh, I hope it will be possible in future to combine traditional display concepts with the visual accessibility and didactic information of a museum display. But even through the direct on-site engagement described here, the documentation already contributes to a broader perspective on the basis of which future decisions will be made.

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To support the reconstruction efforts of Namgyal monastery contact information is found on its website (namgon.org/site/). If funds donated should specifically be used for the conservation and display of the collection within the new monastery structures, please also contact the author.

Unless otherwise stated, photography is by Jaroslav Poncar and Christian Luczanits.

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