

TIBETAN MONASTERY
COLLECTIONS AND MUSEUMS

TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AND
CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

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CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

EDITED BY

CHRISTIAN LUCZANITS & LOUISE TYTHACOTT

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DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
CHAKDZOD NAWANG CHOSPEL, CHEMREY MONASTERY

**A senior monk of Chemrey
Monastery examining the
new museum display**

Photo C. Luczanits 2019 D7617.

CONVENTIONS

In this book both a phonetic rendering of Tibetan words, based on the system of The Tibetan & Himalayan Library,¹ and an exact transliteration in parentheses, according to the principles described by Turrell Wylie,² are provided with the first occurrence of a term. In later occurrences, only the phonetic rendering is given. In cases where a different phonetic rendering is more commonly established, for example, Namgyal instead of Namgyel, the common convention is also used. Diverging phonetic spellings are also used with names provided locally and used by the contributors.

1 See <https://www.thlib.org/reference/transliteration/phconverter.php> (accessed June 30, 2022).

2 Cf. Turrell Wylie, "A Standard System of Tibetan Transcription," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 22 (1959): 261–67.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume emerged from papers presented at an international workshop which took place at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, from 8th-10th November 2018 - *Tibetan Monastery Collections and Museums: Traditional Practices and Contemporary Issues*. We are grateful to Chiara Bellini and the SOAS conference centre staff for their work in supporting the organisation of the workshop, and to the contributors and participants for providing such an intellectually stimulating atmosphere.

The workshop was tied to an extended stay of the monastery representatives from Ladakh and Mustang to visit cultural institutions in London. We are grateful to Burkhard Quessel from the British Library, Imma Ramos from the British Museum, as well as John Clarke and Diana Heath (both since deceased) from the Victoria and Albert Museum in facilitating our visits.

We also express our gratitude to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for funding the workshop as part of a wider research project - *Tibetan Buddhist Monastery Collections Today* (2016-20). The postdoctoral researchers - Kunsang Namgyal Lama (2016-17) and Chiara Bellini (2017-20) - both made invaluable contributions to the project. The research in the Himalayas also benefitted greatly from the local knowledge, expertise and translation skills of Kunzom Thakuri.

Locally in India and Nepal, the project enjoyed sustained support from a wide range of monks and officials, who generously gave their time to collaborate on the documentation and exhibition work undertaken. In Ladakh, our work on monastery collections and their display was originally initiated by the Drukpa nun Nawang Jinpa (Estelle Atlan), now a PhD candidate at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. It was then generously supported by His Holiness the 12th Gyalwang Drukpa Jikmé Pema Wangchen, the Hemis Chakdzod Nawang Othsal, the late Chemrey Chakdzod Nawang Chospel, Jigmat Chonjor then in charge of the Hemis Museum, Tsering Tharchin from Chemrey as well as many other monks

from these two monasteries supporting the work on site and accommodating us during our visits. Ngawang Rinchen Wacher supported the communication with the Ladakhi monasteries in our absence.

The work in Mustang was generously supported by Khenpo Tsewang Rigzin and Khenpo Khenrab Sangpo of Namgyal Monastery, Khenpo Tenzin Sangpo of Kag Chöde Monastery, Khenpo Tenpa Sangpo of Dzar Chöde Monastery, Khenpo Ngawang Choephel of Dzung Chöde Monastery, Khenpo Jamyang Balbar Bista of Ghami Monastery, Lama Tsering Tashi, originally the principal of Lo Möntang Chöde Monastery and later Vice-President of the Mustang Sakya Buddhist Association, and Tsering Yonten of Gheling Monastery. Further, Suvarna Kumar Bista supported the project in enabling access to Lo Gekhar and Garphuk Monasteries. More recently, the Norbusum Foundation, led by Kunzom Thakuri, acted as local representative for the project. The successive directors of the Department of Archaeology, Government of Nepal, expressed their support for the work undertaken in Mustang. Of course, there are many others in the various monasteries and beyond to whom we also owe a deep debt of gratitude. Special mention should be made too of interviewees in the Kagbeni area, who provided their views on museum developments, and to Heidi Tan for her work on the interview documentation.

Tenpa Sangpo made useful comments on the proofs, Amy Matthewson provided expert copy editing and Margaret McCormack devised a detailed and thorough index. Members of the Vajra Academic Editorial Board - especially Charles Ramble - responded efficiently to our initial draft and we are indebted to our peer reviewer, Clare Harris, for expert and supportive feedback on the manuscript. The printing of this book was supported by funds from the SOAS Research Allowance.



INTRODUCTION

CHRISTIAN LUCZANITS & LOUISE TYTHACOTT

Tibetan monasteries are known as repositories of a wide range of ancient objects. Some of these have found their way to the West, while others still serve their original purpose as part of a monastery's collection. Originally, a considerable part of these collections was integral to the furnishings of the monastery and its temples, and thus accessible to worshippers and visitors. Today, some monasteries have added museum spaces to their premises. While the original impetus for such spaces appears to be rooted in an attempt to accommodate the needs of tourists, the aims and contents of these vary greatly. These spaces are an expression of a modern transformation and are the main focus of this publication together with collections of Tibetan culture and their display more broadly.

The chapters assembled in this publication are an outcome of an international workshop on “Tibetan Monastery Collections and Museums: Traditional Practices and Contemporary Issues” that took place from the 8th to 10th November 2018 at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London (Fig. 7). While organised in the manner of an academic conference, more than half of its participants were monastery representatives from the regions of Ladakh, India, and Mustang, Nepal, with which the organisers had established connections. The aim was to have their voices and opinions represented on an equal footing with that of academics working on collections of objects deriving from areas of Tibetan culture. Thereby, the workshop was part of a week-long stay of this group of eminent monks

Fig. 1: Statue of Buddha about to be documented at Gheling Monastery, Mustang, Nepal

Photo Kunzom Thakuri,
September 17, 2018.



Fig. 2: The monastery representatives in front of the British Library

From left to right: Tsunma Nawang Jinpa (Estelle Atlan), Kunzom Thakuri, Khenpo Tsewang Rigdzin, Lama Tsering Tashi, Tsering Tharchin, Chakdzod Nawang Othsal, Jigmat Chonjor, Khenpo Tenzin Sangpo, Ngawang Rinchen Wacher. Photo C. Luczanits, November 8, 2018.



Fig. 3: The monastery representatives examining Tibetan manuscripts in the British Library

From left to right: Jigmat Chonjor, Khenpo Tenzin Sangpo, Khenpo Tsewang Rigdzin, Lama Tsering Tashi in the foreground and Tsunma Nawang Jinpa (Estelle Atlan) and Burkhard Quessel in the background. Photo C. Luczanits, November 8, 2018.



Fig. 4: Imma Ramos presenting an Amarāvātī relief in The Asahi Shimbun Gallery of the British Museum to the monastery representatives

Photo Chiara Bellini, November 7, 2018.

that included visits to the exhibitions and storages of prominent libraries and museums in London (Figs. 2–6). The workshop addressed the usage, management, and display of institutional collections of Tibetan artefacts both *in situ* and in the West. Its main aim was to reflect on traditional procedures and contemporary solutions for dealing with collections in monasteries across the Himalayas with the goal of identifying best practice.

The workshop was part of an ongoing research project on “Tibetan Buddhist Monastery Collections Today” which was funded through a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council ([AHRC](#)) from 2016 to 2020 (project reference [AH/N00681X/1](#)). This project collaborated directly with monasteries in Ladakh and Mustang to document (Fig. 1), assess and support the management of their collections, and in this way further their preservation on site.

Christian Luczanits has been undertaking field research in diverse Himalayan regions since 1990, and much of his research has been based on primary documentation made during those visits. His original focus was the earliest monuments preserved in the western Himalayas, but a 2010 visit to Mustang, where large parts of the monastery collections are on display, made these collections a focus of his research. At that time, Luczanits was working at the Rubin Museum of Art, New York, and the project to inventory monastery collections was originally conceived to complement an exhibition. However, with his move to the School of Oriental and African Studies in autumn 2014, the focus of the project shifted towards documentation and research.

During successive visits from 2012, the project documented the collections of ten monasteries in Mustang through photography and object measurements, the most important among them Namgyal Monastery near Lo Möntang. Further, in 2012 he was approached by Hemis Monastery in Ladakh to assist in the assessment of their museum collection and its display, a visit that led to the engagement there and at Chemrey Museum in Ladakh. This resulted in new research material, the amount and interest of which far surpassed expectations.

Louise Tythacott joined the AHRC project in 2016 as the co-investigator (CI), focusing on the interpretation of museum displays. In this capacity, she facilitated focus groups and discussions in the region, and undertook interviews with a range of monks and other key stakeholders between 2017 and 2019 in both Mustang and Ladakh to ascertain their views on the role of museums in monasteries.

During the AHRC-funded project, they were joined by Kunsang Namgyal Lama (2016–17) and Chiara Bellini (2017–20), as postdoctoral researchers, who supported the fieldwork and prepared initial inventories of the respective collections, which have been delivered to the monasteries for their records. Furthermore, Chiara Bellini did much of the organisation of the workshop mentioned above.

The aims of this research are manyfold, the following list mentions the most important only:

- The composition of monastery collections and what it may tell about religious affiliation, history, local artistic traditions, and status of the place.
- The role(s) of collections within the monastery in the past and present: what do monasteries collect, how do they collect and how do they manage and display their collections? What kind of displays would they like to create in future and how do museum concepts inform these ideas?
- The devotional and ritual function of collections, contrasting previous usage and function of objects as recorded in inscriptions and historic photographs with usage today.
- The nature of Tibetan Buddhist monastery collections and how they can be defined.
- Sets of objects within the collections and hitherto neglected object groups that form an integral part of collections, such as objects in papier mâché, and their importance for the understanding of Tibetan Buddhist art, ritual tools, musical instruments, and weapons.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The importance of *in situ* monastery collections for our knowledge of Tibetan art and its development can be gleaned from publications, such as Ulrich von Schroeder's *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*,¹ and exhibitions, such as *Tibet - Klöster öffnen ihre Schatzkammern*.² These publications focus on a selection of the most ancient or otherwise remarkable items —incidentally the same types of objects favoured by the art market—and do not consider the collections as such, their original function or their display. So far, no research has been undertaken on historically grown monastery collections in their entirety, even though their composition, assembly, maintenance, and display is an important aspect of Tibetan Buddhist practice.

The collections focused on as part of this research are on the periphery of the Tibetan Buddhist world, namely the regions of Ladakh, India, and Mustang, Nepal. In these areas, the collections have remained largely undisturbed by the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) but may have been partially depleted in recent decades by the increasing demand from the international art market. In Ladakh, the collection of Phyang Monastery has been published to some extent³ and that of Matho Monastery is the subject of a current project (The Matho Museum Project initiated and run by the conservator Nelly Rieuf),⁴ though the rudimentary collection records are only available informally. The collections of Hemis and Chemrey Monasteries are only known to the extent that they are exhibited in their respective museums.⁵

1 Ulrich von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet* (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2001).

2 Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch, ed. *Tibet - Klöster Öffnen Ihre Schatzkammern* (Essen: Kulturstiftung Ruhr, Villa Hügel, 2006). Other major exhibitions of Tibetan art focus on objects already in western museums and private collections.

3 Angelika Binczik and Roland Fischer, *Verborgene Schätze aus Ladakh - Hidden Treasures from Ladakh* (München: Otter Verlag, 2003). It remains unclear how much of the collection was included in this publication and the information on the objects is rather limited.

4 See Rieuf (Chapter 8) on the museum side of this project.

5 Hemis published a slim catalogue featuring some of these objects: Khanchen Tsewang Rigzin, ed. *Hemis Museum*

Mustang collections were partially documented by the Department of Archaeology, Government of Nepal, and the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) of the National Trust for Nature Conservation, but this documentation is inaccessible.⁶ Our project has now documented the collections of 17 monastic institutions, private houses or societies fully or partially, amounting to 2,100 objects and almost 50,000 photographs, as eighty-five books have been photographed in their entirety. All of these are at least partially researched for the inventories provided to the owners, but publications so far have focused on the collection of Namgyal Monastery.⁷

In terms of the representation of museums in Asia more generally, there is now extensive literature on the topic. The pioneering work on indigenous museology by Christina Kreps, especially that of Indonesia, in *Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation* (2003) has had a pivotal impact on the field of museum studies.⁸ In particular,

(Leh-Ladakh: Hemis Monastery, [no date]), but the information on the objects is rudimentary and faulty. An updated version of this catalogue has been prepared by this project but not yet published.

6 Despite trying to get access to this documentation for the first years of this project, Christian Luczanits was unsuccessful in this regard. In fact, it is even unclear where the documentation is housed.

7 Luczanits, Christian, "Portable Heritage in the Himalayas. The Example of Namgyal Monastery, Mustang: Part 1, Sculpture," *Orientations* 47, no. 2 (2016): 120–30; Luczanits, Christian, "Portable Heritage in the Himalayas. The Example of Namgyal Monastery, Mustang: Part 2, Books and Stupas," *Orientations* 47, no. 5 (2016): 22–32; Bellini, Chiara, "Surrounding the Sacred Space: Two Painted Scrolls From the Collection of Namgyal Monastery in Mustang, Nepal," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (2020): 1–44; Luczanits, Christian and Markus Viehbeck, *Two Illuminated Text Collections of Namgyal Monastery. A Study of Early Buddhist Art and Literature in Mustang* (Kathmandu, Nepal: Vajra Books, 2021). The contributions of Hans-Werner Klohe (Chapter 2) and Isabella Cammarota (Chapter 3) assess further objects of this collection.

8 See also her other publications, such as: "The theoretical future of Indigenous museums: concept and practice," in *The Future of Indigenous Museums: Perspectives from the Southwest Pacific*, ed. Nick Stanley (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2007), 223–234; "Indigenous curation, museums, and intangible cultural heritage," in *Intangible Heritage*, eds. L. Smith and N. Akagawa (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2009), 193–208; (2014) "Thai monastery museums," in *Transforming Knowledge Orders: Museums, Collections and Exhibitions*, ed. L. Förster (Paderborn: Fink Verlag, 2014),

Fig. 5: Diana Heath (deceased) explaining the technical aspects of the Virūpa image in the The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Galleries of Buddhist Art in the Victoria and Albert Museum

Photo Chiara Bellini,
November 7, 2018.



Fig. 6: The monastery representatives in the storage area of the Victoria and Albert Museum with Diana Heath, John Clarke (both since deceased), Louise Tythacott, and Christian Luczanits

Photo Chiara Bellini,
November 7, 2018.



Fig. 7: Chakdzod Nawang Othsal, translated by Ngawang Rinchen Wachter, presenting at the workshop held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

Photo Louise Tythacott,
November 8, 2018.



her notion of comparative museology as “the systematic study of the similarities and differences among museological forms and behaviour cross-culturally” (2011: 458) is explicitly drawn upon in this book by Rebecca Bloom (Chapter 6).⁹ Of particular significance to the concerns of this volume is Clare Harris’ work on museology in Tibet, above all her seminal publication, *The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics, and the Representation of Tibet* (2012), which examined histories of collecting and representation in museums in Lhasa, in India, and elsewhere. Other authors have analysed the complexity and specificities of museum development, displays, and visitor experiences in South Asian contexts—notably Bhatti (2012) and Mathur and Singh (eds. 2015). Cai’s forthcoming edited volume, *The Museum in Asia*, promises to be an important addition to the body of literature.

This edited volume is intended to contribute to wider debates regarding the displays of religious objects in museums. Inspired by Carol Duncan’s *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (1995), over recent decades a range of scholars have been concerned to analyse relationships between museums and notions of the sacred, with much now published on this topic.¹⁰ There is also an

230–256; “Appropriate museology and the ‘new museum ethics’: honouring diversity,” *Nordisk Museologi* 2(S) (2015): 4–16.

9 Other publications have focused on museological practices in specific parts of Asia. For publications on museums and Southeast Asia, see Heidi Tan, *Meritorious Curating and the Renewal of Pagoda Museums in Myanmar*, PhD thesis (London: SOAS, University of London, 2020); Heidi Tan, “The Shwedagon Pagoda Museum, Yangon,” *Gods’ Collections*, <https://www.godsollections.org/case-studies/the-shwedagon-pagoda-museum-yangon> (accessed July 1, 2022); Louise Tythacott and Panggah Ardiyansyah, eds. *Returning Southeast Asia’s Past: Objects, Museums, and Restitution* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2021). For publications on East Asia, see Tracey Lu, *Museums in China: Materialized power and objectified identities* (London: Routledge, 2013); Masaaki Morishita, *The Empty Museum: Western Cultures and the Artistic Field in Modern Japan* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2010); Marzia Varutti, *Museums in China: The Politics of Representation after Mao* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2014); Kirk Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2014).

10 See for example, Chris Arthur, “Exhibiting the Sacred,” in *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion*, ed. Crispin Paine (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000), 1–27; Yiao-hwei Chuang, “Presenting Buddhism in Museums,” in *Godly Things:*

increasing number of articles and book chapters which examine the specific issues to arise from the display of Buddhist and Tibetan objects in museums.¹¹ While museums in the West as secular institutions have traditionally been concerned to expunge or render inactive the religious potency of objects, authors such as Paine and Sullivan have explored the ways that, for religious adherents, the sacred can be activated and images worshipped in contemporary museological spaces.¹² Bloom in this volume (Chapter 6) also notes how museum professionals in the West have shifted their methodologies to question the traditional separation of the sacred and the secular: an increasing number of curators attempt to mitigate the museum’s de-sanctification process—through re-constructing the original religious contexts in displays, often with the collaboration of relevant religious communities.

Authors in this book explore the complex relationship between museums and Tibetan sacred material, identifying the rituals, ceremonies, community activities, and religious experiences that take place within

Museums, Objects and Religion, ed. Crispin Paine (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000), 107–119; Ivan Gaskell, “Sacred to Profane and Back Again,” in *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*, ed. Andrew McClellan (London: Blackwell, 2003), 149–62; Crispin Paine, ed., *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1999); Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Bruce Sullivan, ed., *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

11 John Clarke, “The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Gallery of Buddhist Sculpture,” *Orientalism* 40 May, no. 4 (2009): 1–7; John Clarke, “Planning the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Gallery of Buddhist Sculpture,” in *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums*, ed. Bruce Sullivan (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 67–79; Louise Tythacott, “Curating the Sacred: Exhibiting Buddhism at World Museum Liverpool,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 34, 1. (Dec 2017): 115–133; Louise Tythacott and Chiara Bellini, “Deity and Display: Meanings, Transformations, and Exhibitions of Tibetan Buddhist Objects,” in *Religions*, Special Issue on “Religion in Museums” Vol. 11, no. 3 (March 2020): 1–28; Imogen Clark, “Exhibiting the Exotic, Simulating the Sacred: Tibetan Shrines at British and American Museums,” *Ateliers d’Anthropologie* 43 (2016): <https://journals.openedition.org/ateliers/10300> (accessed July 1, 2022).

12 Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums*; Sullivan, ed. *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces*.

various exhibitionary spaces (Luczanits and Tythacott, Bloom, Shao, Collick, and Lisowski). A number of chapters discuss important considerations in terms of the specific placement of Tibetan images in museums—for example, the proscription concerning the situating of images nowhere near the floor or dirt (Luczanits and Tythacott, Bloom, Rieuf, and Collick), or the prohibition regarding publicly displaying wrathful/tantric images, which are considered by adherents to be too powerful and potentially harmful to the non-initiated (Luczanits and Tythacott, Bloom, Rieuf, and Collick).

Specific issues associated with the museum exhibitions of sacred images in relation to Buddhist societies are addressed, in particular, by Luczanits and Tythacott, Bloom, Shao, Rieuf, and Collick. Shao (Chapter 7), for example, focuses on the display of objects in two museums in Bhutan, through an analysis of layout, narratives, space, and display. Though these museums are distinctive in terms of their embrace of notions of the sacred and secular, Buddhist ceremonies are performed in both.

What differentiates the chapters in this volume from much of the existing literature on museums and religion, however, is the focus on displays located within Himalayan monastic institutions, for here the sacred/secular divide does not operate in the way it does in the West (Luczanits and Tythacott, Bloom, and Rieuf). In Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, the entire compound is consecrated, and so monastery museums are always located in sacred spaces. As such, they are automatically sites of ritual and reverential behaviour, usually with a requirement to remove shoes at the entrance (see Luczanits and Tythacott, Bloom, Rieuf, and Tythacott and Bellini, 2020). Bloom, for example, observes how in monastery museums, “the boundaries between aesthetic work and empowered icon ... are ... blurred and amplified” (Chapter 6, page 192). Luczanits and Tythacott’s chapter is also concerned to investigate how sacred/secular distinctions might operate in monastery museums in Ladakh and Mustang (Chapter 1). Buddhist deity figures and other sacred objects once consecrated are inalienable, and thus re-location to a

museum building has no impact on their religious efficacy.¹³ Some of the chapters in this volume consider these processes by which Tibetan Buddhist objects accrue power as a result of consecration (Luczanits and Tythacott, Bloom, and Shao).

The establishment in recent decades of museums in Himalayan regions is analysed by several contributors. Tythacott’s interviews identify key motivational factors behind the emergence of these spaces: preservation, education, tourism, and money, as well as the objects on display themselves being considered to bring blessings for the local Buddhist community (see interview sections in Luczanits and Tythacott, Chapter 1). There is an important security element too: interviewees indicated they felt material would be safer if kept on public display where they could be watched over and guarded by the monks. Rieuf’s chapter on the development of the Matho Monastery Museum identifies cultural shifts in an increasingly globalised world as factors leading to the emergence of museums in Ladakh. Shao (Chapter 7) explores how the National Museum of Bhutan was established in the 1960s as part of the country’s drive for modernisation. Filsnoël notes how, in the desire to preserve past objects, the Museum of Ogyen Choling in Central Bhutan emerged in the early twenty-first century (Chapter 5).

Chapters in this volume are also concerned to identify the reasons for selecting specific types of objects for display in Himalayan museums. In Shao’s chapter, an Austrian curator who was part of the team that conceived the display at the Royal Heritage Museum in Bhutan recounted how he was initially shown damaged items for the new museum—broken statues and torn *tangka*—because museums show ‘old’ things, which have no function anymore (Chapter 7, page 213). This way of thinking is corroborated in Luczanits’ and Tythacott’s interviews in Ladakh and Mustang and the workshop presentations by invited monastics (Chapter 1). The abbots of both Kagbeni and Namgyal Monasteries in Mustang, for example, suggested that museums could be for objects that have fallen out of use. Interviewees

13 Tythacott and Bellini, “Deity and Display,” 27.

at Hemis Monastery in Ladakh and Gheling Monastery in Mustang asserted that museums were for the “old” stuff. At Matho Monastery, Rieuf notes how people began to “put objects in museums when an object’s function in its natural environment was diminishing” (Chapter 8, page 242).¹⁴ Emma Martin’s chapter, by contrast, tackles the reasons for the *absence* of collecting and displaying material culture at the New Tibet Museum in Gangchen Kyishong, Dharamshala (Chapter 9).

The importance of documentation of collections is a theme running through several chapters (Luczanits and Tythacott, Klohe, Cammarota, Rieuf, and Martin), and issues of conservation and preservation are also much to the fore (Luczanits and Tythacott, Helman-Ważny, Filsnoël, Rieuf, and Lisowski). The impacts of vermin and insect pests on artefacts are discussed (Luczanits and Tythacott, Helman-Ważny, and Filsnoël), as are tensions, incompatibilities, and differences between local and Westernised approaches to conservation, preservation, and curation (Helman-Ważny, Bloom, and Martin). Helman-Ważny, in her chapter “Challenges in the Preservation of Tibetan Written Heritage” (Chapter 4), highlights cultural differences in the care of objects, remarking, “conservation (in Mustang) is understood as the replacement of an old object with a new one” (page 166). Yet, as well as discussing different perceptions, a number of authors also document the very effective cross-disciplinary team-based museum projects they have undertaken in Himalayan museums (Luczanits and Tythacott, Bloom, Rieuf, and Martin).

Based on the documentation of the Namgyal Monastery collection, the chapters of Klohe and Cammarota demonstrate not only the value of collections as sources of history, but also the extensive labour required to assess them. The two contributions further establish the importance of sets in monastery collections, and how their conception influences the individual depictions, in this case of hierarch portraits forming a teaching transmission lineage (Klohe) or the contents

¹⁴ See also Rieuf (Chapter 8, page 228) for the selection of artefacts at Matho.

of book covers (Cammarota). To research such sets is one of the ways in which monastery collections expand our understanding of Tibetan art more broadly.

BOOK STRUCTURE

This is the first edited volume entirely devoted to the development of museums, collections, and displays of Tibetan material *both* in the Himalayan region and elsewhere. By bringing together scholars and practitioners, the book presents a multidisciplinary engagement with the topic. The authors included in this volume have a range of backgrounds—some of whom are curators or curatorial advisors for the museums they discuss—and they represent a diversity of disciplinary perspectives—art history, history, museum studies, Buddhist studies, religious studies, conservation, and manuscript studies.

The book analyses collections, museums, and displays from both the Himalayan region (Bhutan, Nepal, Ladakh, and Dharamshala in Northwest India) as well as in the UK and Switzerland. An extended editorial chapter presents an overview of the work undertaken as a result of the AHRC project. This is followed by chapters on collections and displays in Tibetan areas (Klohe, Cammarota, Helman-Ważny, Filsnoël, Bloom, Shao, Rieuf, and Martin), and then case studies from Europe (Collick and Lisowski).

The book opens with a chapter comparing the development of monastic museums in Mustang and Ladakh. Here, the contributions by monks and others from these regions at the 2018 workshop are combined with observations, discussions, and interviews made during fieldwork visits, mainly between 2017 and 2019.¹⁵ Luczanits and Tythacott demonstrate how the two project regions differ considerably in terms of governance, finance, and museological developments, in line with their different periods of opening to outsiders. The creation of Western-style museums at the monasteries of Hemis and Chemrey in Ladakh is contextualised in

¹⁵ We had originally hoped to be able to publish the contributions of the monastic invitees at the workshop. Thus, in preparation for the workshop we posed specific questions for them to cover, but this was only partially successful.

relation to decades of modernisation and exposure to international tourism. The chapter examines the formation of monastery collections, notions of aesthetics and impermanence, traditional displays of images in temples, as well as histories of trade and theft. It draws upon interviews with monks and local people in both regions to ascertain current perceptions of museums in monasteries. While conversations and interviews with monks in Ladakh were based on their views of existing museum displays, feedback from monks and local people in Mustang was aspirational, as museums have yet to be built. Nevertheless, it is noted how the emergence of the idea of the museum is tied to the development of tourism and the associated desire to preserve collections in visibly safe sites.

The book moves on to two chapters which examine distinct groups of objects at Namgyal Monastery. Located at an altitude of 3,850 metres on a hill just west of Lo Möntang (*glo smon thang*), Mustang, in north central Nepal, this monastery holds a particularly informative historic collection.¹⁶ In Chapter 2, Hans-Werner Klohe presents a detailed analysis of an inscribed Lamdré lineage set by donor Lodrö Gyaltzen. He analyses 17 of originally 24 sculptures in their broader religious and art historical context, examines their iconographic features, and discusses the likely patronage of the set. Further, Klohe demonstrates how the artistic conception of the set as a whole influenced the depiction of the individual figures.

Isabella Cammarota's chapter then investigates what a group of Tibetan style book covers found in the Namgyal Monastery collection can tell us about their manufacture. In many cases, divorced from the manuscripts they originally contained, these covers are carved on the outer sides and painted in gold on red on the inside and thus are informative enough to establish their original usage. Cammarota's reconstruction identifies 17 volumes belonging to three texts, discusses their distinctive features and their relationship to the texts they were made for, and proposes an approximate date for their manufacture based on a stylistic analysis.

Reflecting on their construction, she argues that the production of the books was a collective enterprise involving at least seven or eight artisans with different competencies. In her assessment, the three texts the covers belonged to must have been commissioned in the late sixteenth century by members of the Mustang elite.

In Chapter 4, Agnieszka Helman-Ważny also addresses a group of manuscripts in the wider Lo Möntang area, but focuses on the challenges of their preservation. The manuscripts, famously found in a cave at Marzong, east of Lo Möntang, by a group of climbers in 2008, later became the property of the people of Lo Möntang, and were placed under the custodianship of Chöde Monastery and its "antique museum". While the discovery of these manuscripts was well-publicised, Helman-Ważny asserts that key conservation issues have yet to be addressed. She highlights the significance of the material form of books, stressing the importance of consultation with a professional conservator. Her chapter outlines the documentation and measures undertaken to safeguard these precious manuscripts, with differences between Western and local practices of care and conservation noted.

In the following chapter, Monique Filsnoël explores the displays of the Museum of Ogyen Choling in Central Bhutan, a private estate that opened in 2001 to a wider public. Perched on a hill at an altitude of 3,000 metres, Ogyen Choling and its Foundation has as its purpose the preservation of both the site and religious traditions. The collection comprises two elements: objects displayed in the museum in the Utsé, the main building and former family accommodation, and the sculptures and *tangka* belonging to the adjoining temple. The museum collection includes artefacts once used by the family—kitchen utensils, furniture, tools, masks, dance costumes, and musical instruments. Filsnoël describes the origins of the museum, its layout, the various thematic displays across the three floors, the reconstructions, labelling, and achievements after two decades, as well as discussing the important conservation and safety measures implemented by the Foundation.

¹⁶ See note 7 above.

The ensuing chapter too analyses a museum display, though from a different perspective. Rebecca Bloom discusses the original museum at Chemrey Monastery in Ladakh which opened in 2009. At the invitation of the monastery in 2015, she worked as part of a team to suggest new ideas for display, and to train monks in object handling and conservation practices. Bloom draws on Kreps' concept of "appropriate museology" to discuss the "innate sense of local curatorship and the appropriateness of placement of objects" (Chapter 6, page 196) at Chemrey. The aim of the museum was to educate both local and foreign audiences. Accessing the spiritual blessings of the objects too was clearly essential, for the museum is an extension of the rest of the monastery. Bloom's chapter argues that multiple experiences may take place simultaneously at this site—visitors are able to both worship and encounter the space as a traditional museum.

Ziyi Shao continues the exploration of the sacred/secular divide through a comparison of two museums in Bhutan—the National Museum of Bhutan in the capital Thimphu and the Royal Heritage Museum in the central area in Trongsa in Chapter 7. Shao is concerned to identify different approaches to the public display of Buddhist sacred images in museums in this Buddhist society. She analyses the layout and spaces of the museums, their narratives and distinctive approaches to exhibiting Buddhism. While the National Museum is linked to modern Bhutanese nation building, where the sacred and the secular are not opposed but blended, the Royal Heritage Museum, with the help of Austrian architects and curators, juxtaposes instead white cube spaces with galleries reconstructing traditional Bhutanese sacred temples. Both museums, however, incorporate rituals, whether it be monks chanting in the galleries or purification ceremonies.

The following two chapters represent important and often undocumented reflections on curatorial practices and processes. In Chapter 8, Nelly Rieuf discusses the work she has led over a number of years towards the development of a new museum at Matho Monastery in Ladakh. The Matho Museum project, as it is called, was

initiated by the monks of the monastery in 2011. Rieuf notes how the trend for monasteries to create museums in this region is linked to globalisation. The fear of theft in the 1970s, when tourists first arrived in the region, resulted in the locking away of precious monastic collections—as previously noted—and it was only recently that monasteries decided to bring objects out of storage and onto public display. Her chapter describes, in detail, the various steps undertaken to develop this innovative museum, in terms of selection, conservation, design, layout and themes, textual interpretation, security, and audiences. She reflects, too, on the importance of consulting with the monks at every stage, and how displays must respect the appropriateness of placement of sacred images.

Chapter 9 moves on to explore a very different case study—that of "curating absence" in the New Tibet Museum in Gangchen Kyishong, Dharamshala in North West India. Here, Emma Martin, as curatorial advisor and "overall curator" for the site, focuses on the work behind the scenes. She notes how since its inception in 1998 the Tibet Museum has not considered objects principally as part of its collecting remit. Her chapter is thus an analysis of how to deal with this "absence of things". Drawing on the extensive museological literature, curating absence in the New Tibet Museum, for Martin, is an "an act of opposition and self-representation that uses emptiness to call attention to who, today, is speaking for Tibetan material culture and why that is so" (page 252). Her chapter describes these dilemmas over collecting, the collecting search parties, the video testimony, as well as initial plans for the museums.

The final two chapters address curating Tibetan objects in museums in the West. Naomi Collick focuses on the displays at Chiddingstone Castle in Kent in the UK, where she works as curator. Here she considers whether the collections—70 Tibetan objects amassed by Denys Eyre Bower (1905–1977) in the twentieth century—should be exhibited as originally intended by the collector. Through research in the museum archives, she analyses Bower's collecting preferences and interests, especially in relation to "Orientalist" attitudes,

typical of the early twentieth century, where Tibet was conceptualised romantically—and problematically—as a mysterious, treasure-filled land. Collick’s chapter explores whether the sacred qualities of religious images should be considered in displays of Tibetan Buddhist material in museums in the West. With such consecrated objects, appropriate placement, she asserts, is important. In her plans for a new Buddhist room, she will move away from Bower’s out-moded approach, aiming instead to link objects to the people who made, commissioned, and used them, engaging the views of local Buddhist groups.

In the final chapter, Karolina Lisowski presents a case study of curating in the Tibet Museum in Gruyères, Switzerland. Based on the private collection of Alain Bordier, and located in a former Christian chapel, the museum, which opened in 2009, includes over 350 Tibetan statues, *tangka*, and other ritual objects arranged according to the instructions of the owner. None of the objects have labels, some are on open display, and visitors are invited to touch. The sensory atmosphere is augmented by music. The chapel, as a religious space, was considered especially suitable by the collector, for it “intentionally blurred lines between museum space and ... temple or church setting allowed for diverse attitudes towards the contents of the rooms” (page 300). Importantly, Lisowski’s chapter focuses on the experiences of museum visitors. Based on surveys and interviews, she examines audience perceptions of the space, concluding that most visitors appreciate the co-existence of a Christian chapel with Tibetan objects.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Despite considerable delay in finalising this publication after the workshop, three more planned contributions, unfortunately, did not make it into the volume. On the basis of his presentation at the workshop, we prepared a chapter for Nawang Othsal, then the Chakdzod of Hemis Monastery, on “The Management of Hemis Monastery and its Sacred Treasure”, but did not manage to obtain permission to include it in this volume. Tsunma Nawang Jinpa (Estelle Atlan) also drafted a detailed study

explaining the terminology around Tibetan monastery museums from an emic perspective but was unable to finalise her contribution. Equally, Chiara Bellini, who organised much of the workshop and worked for the Tibetan Buddhist Monastery Collections project until March 2020, took on other obligations afterwards and could not complete her contribution. We very much hope that their perspectives will be published in future.

Even though we have tried to be as inclusive as possible, there is no way that any single publication can represent all relevant perspectives pertaining to Tibetan monastery collections and their display. The collections themselves are a treasure trove, reflecting their creation and usage across time, and the spaces housing them range from traditional displays on and around altars, via improvised museum spaces for broken things, to localised versions of contemporary museum spaces. In fact, each monastery provides materials for a wide range of different perspectives on questions relating to their collections, all of which are worthy of exploration.

Clearly, despite our attempts to encourage contributions in this regard, we were unable to include local perceptions in this volume. The workshop presentations by the invitees, and the conversations and interviews we had locally, clearly indicate that there is considerable potential to explore emic perspectives further. To bring these to publication will be a challenge, but we can now build that into future iterations of this project.

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CHAPTER 1

MONASTERY AND MUSEUM IN MUSTANG AND LADAKH

CHRISTIAN LUCZANITS & LOUISE TYTHACOTT*

Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and village temples are major store houses of heritage. Some of their structures date back centuries, as do the murals and sculptures they contain. They also house more or less expansive collections of portable objects, ranging from books and sculptures to traditional everyday items that are no longer in use. While architectural features, permanent sculptures and murals have been used in scholarship to date and study these monasteries, their portable artefacts have received much less attention.¹ In

* The authors would like to thank the workshop participants from Ladakh and Mustang for their contributions, which are summarised in this text. We are grateful to Chiara Bellini for preparing the first transcript of the workshop presentations and for all her work on setting up the workshop at SOAS in 2018.

1 Detailed monument studies range from purely architectural—such as André Alexander, *Temples of Lhasa: Tibetan Buddhist Architecture From the 7th to 21st Centuries* (Chicago, Bangkok: Serindia, 2005); André Alexander, “The Lhasa Jokhang – is the World’s Oldest Timber Frame Building in Tibet?” *Web Journal* (<http://www.webjournal.unior.it/>) 1 (2006); André Alexander, “Rme ru nying pa, an Extant Imperial-Period Chapel in Lhasa,” in *Art in Tibet. Issues in Traditional Tibetan Art From the Seventh to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Erberto F. Lo Bue (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011); or Peter Harrison, *Fortress Monasteries of the Himalayas: Tibet, Ladakh, Nepal and Bhutan* (Osprey Publishing, 2011)—via multi-disciplinary approaches—such as Gyurme Dorje, *et al.*, *Jokhang: Tibet’s Most Sacred Buddhist Temple* (London, New York: Editions Hansjorg Mayer, 2010) and David P. Jackson, *A Revolutionary Artist of Tibet: Khyentse Chenmo of Gongkar* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2016)—to predominantly art-historical ones—such as Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter, *Tabo – a Lamp for the Kingdom. Early Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Art in the Western Himalaya* (Milan, New York: Skira, Thames and Hudson, 1997); Ian Baker and Thomas Laird, *The Dalai Lama’s Secret Temple: Tantric Wall Paintings From Tibet* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000); Christian Luczanits, *Buddhist Sculpture in Clay: Early Western Himalayan Art, Late 10th to Early 13th Centuries* (Chicago: Serindia, 2004). Such studies and overview works—like Michael Henss, *The Cultural Monuments of Tibet: The Central Regions* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 2014)—may

**Fig. 1: Bronze sculptures in the
Lima Lhakhang in 1991**

Potala Palace, Lhasa. Photo
U. von Schröder (also von
Schroeder, 2001, fig. II-1).

particular, prior to our project on “Tibetan Buddhist Monastery Collections Today” that resulted in the workshop (see Introduction, page 11), they have not been understood or researched as collections that need to be considered in their entirety and in relation to the monastery as a further source for the establishment’s history.²

One of the responsibilities of a monastery is to maintain its collection of sacred items. Traditionally, most of these items are stored in temples and dedicated rooms within the monastery that may or may not be accessible to visitors. In addition, they may have dedicated storage rooms with items used on special occasions only. Smaller items and those that could be harmed by mice and insects are usually stored in boxes. The few existing photographs of temple interiors made in the

also take exceptional collection items into account, but these do not contribute to the evaluation of the monument as such.

For the project regions, Ladakh and Mustang, notable more detailed studies are Roger Goepfer and Jaroslav Poncar, *Alchi. Ladakh’s Hidden Buddhist Sanctuary. The Sumtsek* (London: Serindia, 1996); Peter van Ham, *Heavenly Himalayas. The Murals of Mangyu and Other Discoveries in Ladakh* (Munich: Prestel, 2010); Erberto Lo Bue, ed. *Wonders of Lo: The Artistic Heritage of Mustang* (Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2010); Chiara Bellini, “Examples of Beauty at the Court of Seng ge rnam rgyal: The Style of Painting in Ladakh in the 17th and 18th Centuries,” in *Tibetan Art Between Past and Present, Studies Dedicated to Luciano Petech. Proceedings of the Conference Held in Rome on the 3rd November 2010*, ed. Elena de Rossi Filibeck (Pisa, Roma: Fabrizio Serra, 2012); Chiara Bellini, “The Mgon khang of Dpe thub (Spituk): A Rare Example of 15th Century Tibetan Painting From Ladakh,” in *Art and Architecture in Ladakh: Cross-Cultural Transmissions in the Himalayas and Karakoram*, eds. Bue Lo and John Bray (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014); John Harrison, et al., eds. *A Blessing for the Land. The Architecture, Art and History of a Buddhist Nunnery in Mustang, Nepal* (Kathmandu: Vajra Publications, 2018); John Harrison, *Mustang Building: Tibetan Temples and Vernacular Architecture in Nepal Himalaya* (Kathmandu, Nepal: Saraf Foundation for Himalayan Traditions and Culture, 2019); Barbara Gmińska-Nowak and Tomasz Ważny, “Dendrochronological Analysis of the Ancient Architecture of Kingdom of Lo. Upper Mustang, Nepal,” *Dendrochronologia* 61 (2020).

2 A collection focused study is, for example, Ulrich von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet* (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2001), presenting the most exceptional objects only. For the project regions Angelika Binczik and Roland Fischer, *Verborgene Schätze aus Ladakh - Hidden Treasures from Ladakh* (München: Otter Verlag, 2003) on Phyang Monastery is most relevant.

first half of the twentieth century demonstrate that sacred objects were also supposed to be accessible to visitors to bestow their blessings, converting some of the monasteries’ temples into rather overcrowded spaces of display. A prime example of such a space is the so-called Lima Lhakhang (*li ma lha khang*), “Temple of Metal Sculptures”, in the Potala Palace, which houses an impressive collection of metal sculptures ranging from at least the fourth century CE to the twentieth century (Fig. 1).

The advance of modernity has affected such display spaces and the way monasteries manage their collections in a number of ways, and this chapter will assess those changes in the regions of Mustang, in Western Nepal, and Ladakh, in Northwest India. The following account combines contributions by the workshop participants from these regions with the experiences, discussions and interviews made during diverse field campaigns to these regions since 2012. The latter will be used to frame the discussion, and also to complement what has been offered during the workshop by summarising the range of positions expressed during these visits.

The two project regions differ considerably in their development, which is in line with their respective opening to outside visitors and road access. Ladakh opened to tourism in 1974. Since then, tourism has gradually increased with the largest spike resulting from the sharp increase in domestic tourism from the beginning of the twenty-first century (Fig. 2).³ Ladakhi monasteries, thus, had to adapt to visitors early and tourism has long become a major income stream. Of course, by far the biggest effect of these changes is felt only in main monasteries along the Indus Valley (Fig. 3), while other regions of Ladakh, such as the Zangskar or Nubra have

3 As Ngawang Rinchen Wachter, then president of the Young Drukpa Association, in his contribution to the workshop demonstrated, modernisation and tourism have a detrimental effect on traditional Ladakhi culture more broadly, the loss of which he addresses personally through making recordings. See Ngawang Rinchen, “Vision for Heritage Records” (paper presented at the “Tibetan Monastery Collections and Museums: Traditional Practices and Contemporary Issues” conference, London, SOAS, November 8–10, 2018).

Fig. 2: Leh city centre in 2016

Photo C. Luczanits D4901.



Fig. 3: Aerial view of the Indus Valley, 2019

Photo C. Luczanits D7169.



Fig. 4: Road and electricity lines on the southeastern outskirts of Leh, 2005

Photo C. Luczanits D5909.





Fig. 5: View of Upper Mustang from Ritseling towards the south with the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri massifs flanking the Kali Gandaki river valley

Photo C. Luczanits 2013 D7637.



Fig. 6: Group of adventure tourists on the footpath between Chele and Samar in 2010

Photo C. Luczanits D3017.



Fig. 7: The new road between Chele and Samar in 2021

Photo C. Luczanits D8552.

only seen modest changes by comparison. However, the project has only worked in the main valley so far, and the following account thus reflects this region (Fig. 4).

For Mustang the situation is more diverse. While Lower Mustang, being part of the Annapurna circuit, could be visited by outsiders even before Ladakh was opened, visits to Upper Mustang were, and still are, restricted through a permit levy charged by the central government (Fig. 5).⁴ Lower Mustang is visited by a regular stream of tourists, often hikers focusing on the Annapurna circuit, who are thus less interested in local culture. Upper Mustang is sold by travel agents as a “lost Tibetan kingdom”, implying time travel into a lost past and culture, and an adventure tourism destination (Fig. 6). Over the last decade, however, the completion of a road connecting Lower and Upper Mustang in 2015 and earlier truck access in winter through the Kali Gandaki river gorge have started to transform the region considerably, and the current expansion of the road to become another major link to China has accelerated the pace of this development (Fig. 7). The following observations have to be seen against this background of development and modernisation, which directly affected how the regions dealt with their heritage in the past and the aspirations they have for the future.

MONASTERY AND MUSEUM

Before going into detail on the situation in the regions of Mustang and Ladakh, a few general observations on monastery collections and their display may be in order. As with any religious institutions, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries thrive on their interaction with their lay followers, largely the community surrounding them. Families in these communities not only fund the running of the monastery but also contribute to it in

4 The current levy is \$50 US per day for a minimum of two persons at a time and ten days. Earlier fees were higher and there was a restriction on the number of visitors permitted per year. These permits have to be applied for before travelling to the region. It is said that 30 per cent of this fee is supposed to go to the region, but protests by the Mustang youth threatening to stop tourism altogether indicate that this has not happened.

different ways, including through providing children for the monkhood. Beyond those immediately associated with a particular monastery through community and family collections, pilgrims and the local and more remote cultural, political and religious elite are major contributors, in particular during festivals. Thereby, giving in any form is a prime activity, and usually this is either in the form of supplies or of money.

Monastery Collections

Sacred objects are commissioned or given on special occasions, such as the establishment of a new monument, the fulfilment of a vow, or in memory of somebody who has died, be it a relative or a high monk. Other occasions at which objects may enter a monastery are the abandonment of another monastery or village temple, the joining of monastic institutions,⁵ head institutions distributing objects among smaller ones⁶ and similar interactions between monasteries. The establishment or renovation of a monument, exceptional teaching events,⁷ or the planned visit of a high religious dignitary are often also an occasion for monasteries to commission or purchase new sculptures or sets of books. In other words, monasteries are collecting institutions, and in times of peace can amass large quantities of objects through a wide range of interactions. Since most of the collected objects are considered sacred, they have to be treated with respect.

5 In the fifteenth century Namgyal Monastery was expanded by joining three earlier monastic institutions, a historical fact that is also reflected in its collection; see Christian Luczanits and Markus Viehbeck, *Two Illuminated Text Collections of Namgyal Monastery. A Study of Early Buddhist Art and Literature in Mustang* (Kathmandu, Nepal: Vajra Books, 2021), 20 and 367.

6 Our documentation in Mustang provides evidence for one such distribution, as sculptures from a large Lamdré set commissioned by a certain Jamyang Rinchen Gyeltsen (*'jam dbyangs rin chen rgyal mtshan*) are distributed across several Sakya monasteries in Upper and Lower Mustang.

7 In Mustang, a number of Lamdré lineage sets were commissioned in the late fifteenth century after the Fourth Ngor Abbot Künga Wangchuk (*kun dga' dbang phyug*; 1424–1478) gave a Lamdré initiation to more than 900 students and died shortly afterwards in the region. On this visit, see Jörg Heimbel, *Vajradhara in Human Form. The Life and Times of Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po* (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2017), 334–35.

Objects may also leave a monastery or become inaccessible for a number of reasons, among them as sacred content of larger sculptures or as gifts to high visiting dignitaries. A renovation may weed out damaged or incomplete objects, which are usually disposed of as sacred content in *chörten* (*mchod rten*), the Tibetan style stupa.⁸

While these objects are not needed for Buddhist practice as such, they are seen as supporting it. *Chörten* literally means “support for worship”, and it is often referred to as mind support (*thugs rten*). “Speech supports” (*gsung rten*) are religious books, be they canonical literature or the writings of hierarchs of the respective traditions. Figurative images are commonly referred to as “body supports” (*sku rten*). This classification also represents a hierarchy of efficacy and spiritual value in the order mentioned here. All monasteries have objects representing these three types. While we have not come across a recommendation in this regard, their presence seems to be indispensable for a functioning monastery or even village temple.

Regardless of the type, the objects attain their sacredness through consecration, which in the case of texts and *chörten* is also inherent in their content.⁹ Objects consecrated by high dignitaries are considered particularly sacred, as are objects associated with, or used by such a high dignitary, be it in the present or the past.¹⁰ This also makes objects of everyday usage sacred, and their usage may be reserved to that dignitary, his reincarnation, or another high teacher of the tradition. The consecration converts a work of art into a religiously active item, the activation explicitly intended

8 As apparent from the case of the Mardzong manuscript finds, see Chapter 4, caves may also have been used in Mustang and West Tibet for this purpose.

9 Sacred texts are inherently consecrating, this is particularly true of the *ye dharma* verse, the citation of which represents a minimal form of consecration. On the Tibetan consecration ritual, see Yael Bentor, *Consecration of Images & Stūpas in Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996).

10 Hemis Museum, for example, contains many items used by previous heads of the monastery, the diverse incarnations of Taksang Rinpoche.

to last forever.¹¹ This means that Tibetan sacred objects remain sacred and religiously active regardless of the environment they are in. Further, the touch or usage of an object by a high dignitary or any other person of high spiritual accomplishments adds to this consecration or may replace it entirely.

In the common understanding observable in Tibetan religious practice, consecration “loads” an object with sacredness and can be applied cumulatively. Further, multiple consecrations may also add to the overall sacredness. The visitor, be they a worshipper or a tourist, partakes in this sacredness through both active worship and passive viewing. This is often expressed as the “blessing” (*byin brlabs*) sacred objects exude. Sacred objects, thus, have agency through their presence. This is particularly true for images, which—similar to the body of the Buddha and deriving from it—are thought to be beneficial by merely seeing them.¹² This is one of the prime reasons for their traditional display, which is discussed further below.

The person holding responsibility for the objects within a temple is the *könnyer* (*dkon gnyer*),¹³ the shrine-keeper, a temporary position for one or two years. Rather than “curating” the collection as such, he maintains it, gives access and handles the objects when necessary. His primary functions are, however, to perform the daily rituals and provide access to the shrine. At the beginning

11 That is, in religious terms, “as long as *saṃsāra* lasts”.

12 This notion is described for the superior cloth painting (*paṭa*) in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and referenced at different points in the history of Tibetan art; see, e.g., Kimiaki Tanaka, “The Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa and the Origins of Thangka,” *The Arts of Tibetan Painting. Recent Research on Manuscripts, Murals and Thangkas of Tibet, the Himalayas and Mongolia (11th–19th century)*. PIATS 2010: Proceedings of the Twelfth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Vancouver, 2010 (2012): <http://www.asianart.com/articles/tanaka/index> (accessed September 9, 2012), Christian Luczanits, “Beneficial to See: Early Drigung Painting,” in *Painting Traditions of the Drigung Kagyu School*, ed. David P. Jackson (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2015), and Sarah Richardson, “When Walls Could Talk: The Powers of Tibetan Paintings in a Buddhist Library,” *Archives of Asian Art* 71, no. 2 (2021).

13 The term is probably an abbreviation of *dkon mchog gsum gi rten gnyer*, “keeper of the supports of the three jewels”, but there are numerous other interpretations as well.

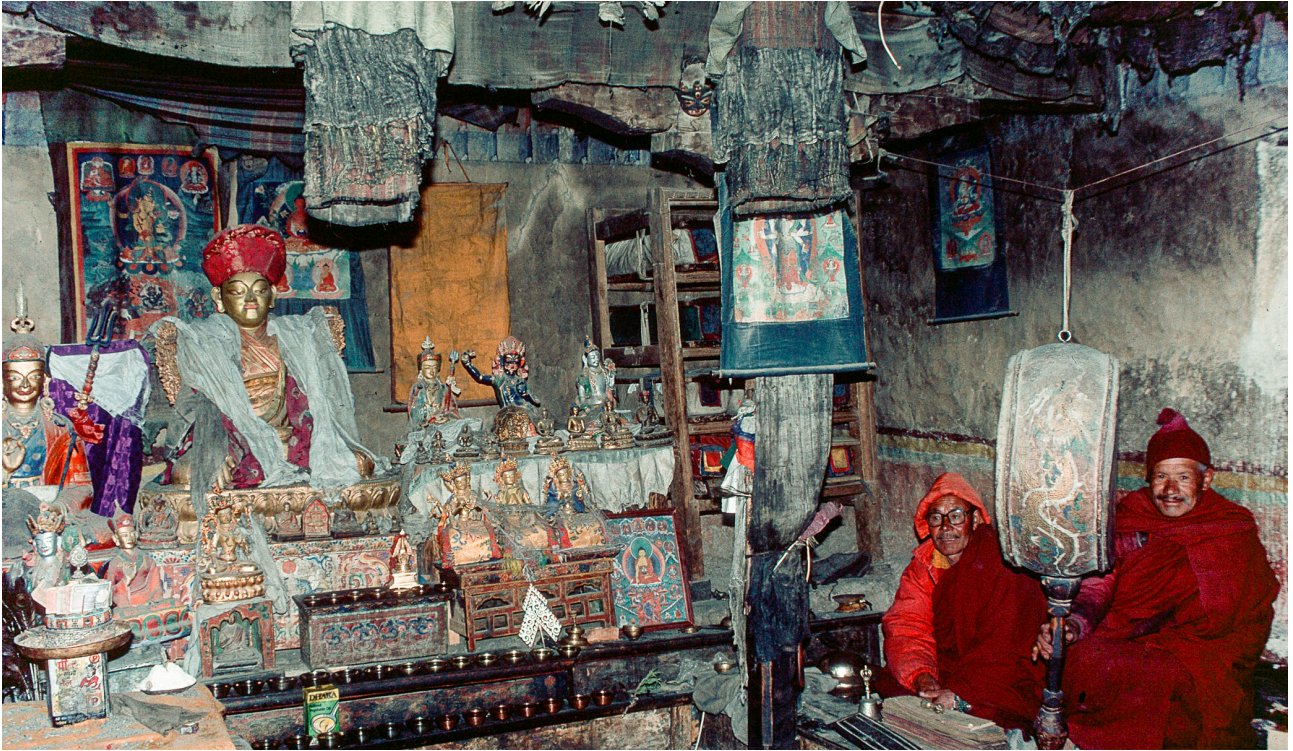


Fig. 8: Two senior monks of Lamayuru monastery inventorying the possessions of a village temple of Wanla in 1994

Photo C. Luczanits 36,01; WHAV.

of his tenure, he takes over an inventory of objects he is accountable for, which will be checked again at the end of his tenure (Fig. 8). He may accession new gifts, which are formally noted down in the inventory recorded at the end of his tenure, but any other form of “curation” is rather the charge of monks holding more senior positions. As the examples below demonstrate, the actual practice differs considerably from monastery to monastery.

Aesthetics and Impermanence

Given the primacy of their function, it may seem surprising that many objects in monastery collections are of extremely high material and aesthetic quality. While

in traditional Buddhist parlance it is the intention of a gift that counts, the nature of the gift needs to be proportionate to the means of the giver. Richer donors and the monastery themselves often made an effort to commission objects from the best craftsman available at the time. Sociological factors, such as the special occasion for the commission and/or competition between noble families, further contribute in this regard.

In terms of maintenance, it is the sacredness of the objects and their function, rather than their quality, that guides the care afforded to them. Thereby, objects linked to particularly appreciated religious ancestors, such as Padmasambhava or Nāropa, are considered most potent. Such objects are often not of the highest



Fig. 9: This vajra is believed to go back to the time of Padmasambhava (eighth century)

Hemis Monastery Museum, Ladakh.
Photo C. Luczanits 2013 D7637.

quality and show considerable wear, they also may have scarves attached to them that become part of the object and the carriers of its blessings, and also to cushion the object when stored (Fig. 9). Musical instruments, often particular pairs of cymbals or bells, may be especially appreciated for their sound or the circumstances of their ostensible origin, regardless of their material or aesthetic quality.¹⁴

Despite the adherence to Buddhism, the Himalayas have always been a turbulent area, with secular rulers and religious schools vying for supremacy. Besides being subjected to raids, monasteries and village temples may be victims of fires or natural disasters, the entire southern stretch of the Himalayas being an earthquake zone. Any of these events may affect the collection as much as the monastery structure itself. Single objects, and especially metalware, may be recovered unharmed from such events. Another major cause for the loss of collection objects is the decline of monasteries or temples due to lack of maintenance or support. In such cases, the structure and the collection it contains may simply be neglected to the degree that the building collapses.

¹⁴ Objects associated with Padmasambhava are, for example, found in many monasteries. Surprisingly, almost every monastery also has a special pair of cymbals associated with historic events.

As it is still a sacred space and the objects belong to it, they may remain there until such a collapse and only be recovered later, if at all. An interesting case of neglect is the ruin of a twelfth century monument in Sumda Chung, Ladakh, where local superstition resulted in its wooden sculptures being exposed to weathering over decades within the temple ruins (Fig. 10).¹⁵ In Mustang, the neglect of the royal palaces, some of them containing considerable treasures, due to an interfamilial feud, is particularly noteworthy.¹⁶ Sacred objects may thus get damaged and are then considered not fit for worship.¹⁷ They may then be weeded out, and most commonly are deposited in *chörten*. Some may be restored, but often

¹⁵ See Rohit Vohra, "Dating of a Maitreya Relief in the Mid-8th Century From Sumda Chen," *South Asian Studies* 9 (1993); Rohit Vohra, *A Journey to Zaskar in Ladakh to Sum-mdha chung and Sum-mdha c'en* (Grosbous: Rohit Vohra, 2005); Tibet Heritage Fund, "Tibet Heritage Fund 2009 Annual Report." (no date): <http://www.tibetheritagefund.org/> (accessed January 7, 2021). The date provided for one of the images in Vohra 1993 mistakes the BP date with the actual one.

¹⁶ Without going into detail, it is said that this feud was recently resolved after more than three decades.

¹⁷ While this is true in principle, it is clear that damaged sculptures have remained worshipped in many places. Obviously, this also depends on the nature of the damage, sculptures with severed limbs may, for example, still be worshipped, while those whose head is damaged are effectively dysfunctional.

Fig. 10: The temple ruin of Sumda Chen with twelfth century wooden sculptures exposed to weather in spring 1994

Photo C. Luczanits 49,26, WHAV.



the skills required are lacking.¹⁸ Ancient books may be reassembled even if the texts are incomplete and mixed up, as they still fulfil their function as representing the word of the Buddha.¹⁹

Real or assumed neglect of monasteries and their collections—and more generally the Buddhist attitude towards heritage preservation—is today often perceived as the consequence of the Buddhist acknowledgement of impermanence, but this is an obvious misunderstanding. How would one then explain the preservation of monuments and collections for many centuries? In fact, monasteries and village temples are often repaired, restored, and refurbished, a major contribution to heritage loss today.²⁰ But older structures may also be

18 Restored objects are more frequently encountered in smaller monasteries and village temples, probably because of the lack of funds for new images.

19 The library at Tabo Monastery in Spiti, Himachal Pradesh—studied in detail in Paul Harrison, *Tabo Studies III. A Catalogue of the Manuscript Collection of Tabo Monastery. Volume I: Sūtra Texts* (Ser phyin, Phal chen, Dkon brtsegs, Mdo sde, Myaṅ 'das) (Roma: ISIAO, 2009)—can be considered exemplary in this regard.

20 For an art historical perspective on this matter see Christian Luczanits, “Conservation and Research in Buddhist Art From an Art-Historical Perspective,” in *Art of Merit: Studies in Buddhist Art and Its Conservation. Proceedings of the Buddhist Art Forum 2012*, ed. David Park, Kuenga Wangmo and Sharon Cather (London: Archetype, 2013).

abandoned for new ones, a process that has increased manifold since the opening of the respective project regions to tourism due to abandonment of traditional maintenance, a broader base of the population having excess wealth, and donorship from afar.²¹

Monastery and Display

Considering the traditional display of images in temples, one has to differentiate between the main images and the subsidiary ones, as they are treated differently both by the monasteries and the visitors. Main images are more often permanent than portable and are the sacred focus of the temple. They are commonly covered by textiles, ceremonial scarves, and other offerings. Daily offerings are made in front of them, and they are the focus of rituals. This leads to the paradox that the holier an image is, the less visible it is as an object or work of art (Fig. 11). Viewing it is, at times, enabled through sponsoring special ceremonies at which the image is repainted, the paint adding to the sacredness of the image.²² From an art historical perspective this

21 For example, the funds for the building housing Hemis Museum are from Malaysia, as a board in front of the original entrance acknowledges.

22 Prime examples for this practice are the holiest images of Tibetan Buddhism in Lhasa, the Jowo Śākyamuni image in the



Fig. 11: Main image of the Alchi Dukhang with dress and ceremonial scarves

Photo J. Poncar.

Fig. 12: Traditional display at Hemis Monastery, Ladakh, in 1981

Photo Michael Henss.

also adds another layer of obscuration to the image. Secondary images are displayed around the main ones though they receive much less ritual attention and can more easily be viewed. In a Tibetan context these images may also be dressed, and their faces and hair may be painted. Providing the textile and the funds for painting the faces are acts of merit which a donor can choose to sponsor. Nevertheless, the visibility of secondary objects is hampered by their crowded display rather than other factors (Fig. 12).

Given that each image contributes to the overall sacredness of the space, the display of as many sacred items

Lhasa Drülnang Tsuklakhang ('*phrul snang gtsug lag khang*) and the Pakpa Lokeśvara (*phags pa spyan ras gzigs*) image in the Potala Palace; see, in particular, Ian Alsop, "Phagpa Lokeśvara of the Potala," *Orientalia* 21, no. 4 (1990), and Cameron David Warner, "The Precious Lord: The History and Practice of the Cult of the Jo Bo Sakyamuni in Lhasa, Tibet," diss., Harvard University, 2008.

as possible is desirable. Tibetan temples are therefore also display spaces for images, which are often complemented by books, *chörten* and murals. A typical assembly hall thus contains a central image focus within a larger altar space, a collection of books with the Buddha's words (*Kanjur*) displayed on either side, and *chörten* as part of the altar arrangement or elsewhere in the room (Fig. 13). Its walls are profusely painted with a pantheon of deities in a hierarchical arrangement from the centre to the door. Village temples and house shrines are similarly arranged and commonly have all three types of supports, but they are rarely painted. The presence of the Buddha (*sanggyé*, *sangs rgyas*), his teachings (*dharma*; *chö*, *chos*), the monastic community (*saṅgha*; *gendün*, *dge 'dun*), and the teacher (*lama*, *bla ma*) may be another consideration when arranging a shrine.



Main monasteries often have many more objects than they can house within their shrines, and thus may have additional dedicated object spaces. The books containing the words of the Buddha and their interpretations (Kanjur, *bka' gyur*, and Tanjur, *bstan gyur*),²³ for example, may be housed in a Kanjur Temple (*bka' gyur lha khang*), images representing the teaching transmission of a particular school of Tibetan Buddhism may be displayed in dedicated rooms named accordingly. For example, Sakya School monasteries often have a Lamdré Temple, a shrine dedicated to the lineage of the “Path with the Fruit” (*lam 'bras*) teachings, a core teaching of the school.²⁴ As mentioned above, there also

23 The phonetic spellings used here are those most frequently used in Western literature. Using the same convention as for other terms they would have to be spelled Kagyur and Tengyur.

24 Namgyal Monastery in Mustang had such a Lamdré Lhakhang in which most of the Lamdré lineage sculptures were assembled

may be dedicated spaces for metal sculptures. Portable scroll-paintings (*tangka*) may be displayed long term as well, but many of them appear to have been used on special occasions only. The latter can be concluded from the condition of a number of such paintings going back to as early as the twelfth century. Other objects, too, in particular exceptionally sacred items, are used only on special occasions. The six bone ornaments of Nāropa housed at Hemis Monastery, Ladakh, and other objects used at the festival at which those are shown are used only once every 12 years. Traditionally such items are stored in boxes or cabinets until next usage.

As such, temples and monasteries have much in common with museums,²⁵ but they are sacred spaces

before its reconstruction in 2012.

25 That a monastery is, in a way, already a museum has been expressed by both Khenpo Tsewang Rigdzin of Namgyal



Fig. 13: Main Temple display at Namgyal Monastery, Mustang, in 2012

Photo C. Luczanits D0286.

and their display is functional rather than aesthetic, even though aesthetic criteria do have a role in both the creation of objects and their display.

Trade and Theft

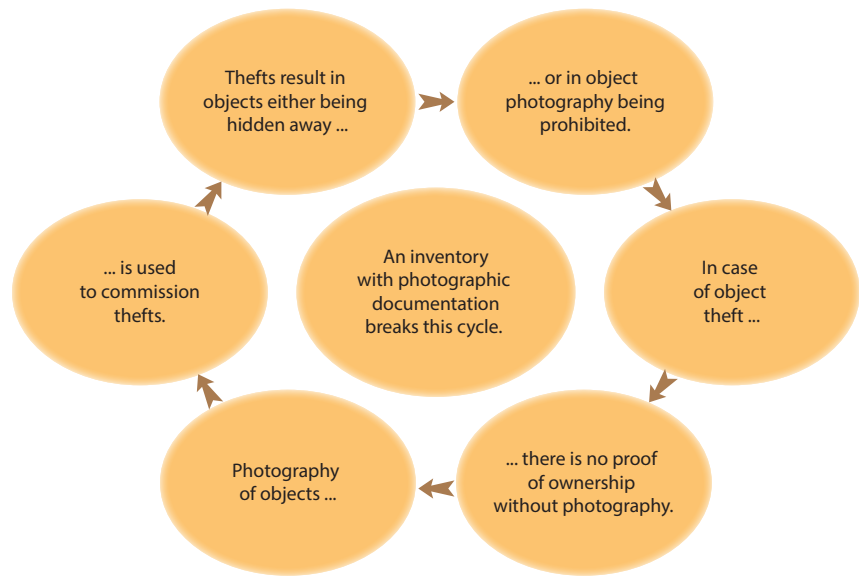
In the recent past, the traditional care and display of monastery collections have been severely affected as their objects have been increasingly recognised for their monetary value.²⁶ Across the Himalayas, the

Monastery and Khenpo Tenzin Sangpo, of Kag Chöde Monastery, both in Mustang. See Khenpo Tsewang Rigdzin, “Traditional Curating of a Monastery Collection” (paper presented at the “Tibetan Monastery Collections and Museums: Traditional Practices and Contemporary Issues” conference, London, SOAS, November 8–10, 2018) and Khenpo Tenzin Sangpo, “A Museum in the Monastery” (paper presented at the “Tibetan Monastery Collections and Museums: Traditional Practices and Contemporary Issues” conference, London, SOAS, November 8–10, 2018).

²⁶ As travel accounts of visits to Tibet indicate, sacred paintings and sculptures were not commonly traded. See, for example, Tucci, Giuseppe and Eugenio Ghersi. *Secrets of Tibet, Being a Chronicle of the Tucci Scientific Expedition to Western Tibet (1933)* (London & Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1935), 46–50, for the purchase of a Buddha statue at Lalung, in the Spiti Valley, or the account of the visit to Tibet by Wilbur L. Cummings in the 1930s in David M. Ellerton, ed. *A Journey to Western Tibet: The Journal of Wilbur L. Cummings, Jr.* (Santa Barbara: University of California Santa Barbara and

Fig. 14: Vicious cycle around the photography of collection items

Graphic C. Luczanits.



opening of a region to travellers has entailed an immediate rise in fraudulent trade and commissioned thefts. In the former case monks, even though they do not have the authority to do so, may be tricked into selling ancient objects for modern replacements. Thefts are often commissioned from outsiders using photography and accomplished by, or with the cooperation of, insiders. But there are also stories of violent thefts in which large parts of collections, often metal sculptures, have disappeared.

In Ladakh, which opened to tourism earlier than Mustang and without restrictions, such incidents led to the hiding of valuable portable items within monastery collections. Usually, they were removed to rooms not accessible to the public and/or stored in boxes. Thus, while the first visitors to Ladakh still met crowded traditional displays, later visitors experienced the same monasteries without their collections.²⁷ This obviously

also affected local worshippers, who equally were deprived of the blessings the objects radiate. In Upper Mustang, which has only a limited number of visitors per year, traditional displays were largely retained, but they were placed in altars behind glass (Fig. 13). Items considered particularly valuable and small metal sculptures were also hidden away or stored in boxes. In addition, photography became strictly prohibited.²⁸ Thus the religious value of these items was largely retained. Given its usage for commissioned theft, the photography of objects in monastery collections came under suspicion throughout the Himalayas. Therefore, there is little documentation of such objects *in situ*. This also means that if an object disappears through fraudulent sale or theft, the monastery has no way to prove that it once owned it, and thus cannot claim it back even if its loss is registered with the police (Fig. 14). Our project works on breaking this vicious cycle through making

The Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2011).

²⁷ Christian Luczanits visited Ladakh for the first time in 1990, when valuable items were largely hidden. It was at smaller, remote institutions rather than at major ones, that ancient items were still in view. The opening of Hemis Museum in 2007 was thus an eye-opener with regard to monastery collections.

²⁸ Researchers working in the region in recent decades maintain that they never photographed valuable sculpture as they were told that if they did so and the object disappears, they may be blamed for its disappearance. In fact, Christian Luczanits and Kunzom Thakuri, who supported the documentation of monastery collections regionally, had to sign an agreement with Namgyal Monastery in 2012 to refrain from misusing photographs in this regard.

high quality photographic inventories of monastery collections, and thus creating indisputable proof of ownership. Documentation is therefore a prerequisite for further involvement in other questions of managing and displaying the collections.²⁹

In the following accounts we will focus on presenting the situation in the two project regions, incorporating both what was presented by workshop participants and our interviews. Both project regions are severely affected by the modern developments summarised in this section, and these have also affected the care for and usage of the collections. Our project thus has encountered the monastery collections in a period of transition, where the traditional ways of caring for structures and their content are being disrupted and new ways to use and maintain the collections are being considered. Thereby, Mustang reflects an earlier stage of this disruption in comparison to Ladakh, where modern developments in the care and display of collections have progressed further. In the following, the two regions are discussed in this order.

MUSTANG

The region of Mustang or Lo in Western Nepal flanks the northernmost section of the Kali Gandaki river (Fig. 5). This “black” river has carved what is said to be the deepest gorge in the world between the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri ranges, and the only direct north-south route across the Himalayas. Consequently, the region has always been along a trade route, the full potential of which was exploited in the fifteenth century, when the Kingdom of Lo ruled the wider region from its capital Lo Möntang (*glo smon thang*).³⁰ Much of Mustang’s heritage, including the city wall and two major monuments in Lo Möntang itself and about half of the items

²⁹ The challenge monasteries face in this regard is to decide who is trustworthy and who is not with such projects, and how the usage of the documentation is guided. At the workshop in 2018, several participants mentioned that many experts approach monasteries for different purposes.

³⁰ On the city of Lo Möntang see, in particular, Maïe Kitamura, *La Cité Fortifiée de Lo Manthang: Mustang Nord du Népal* (Paris: Éditions Recherches, 2011).

in the diverse monastery collections, are the remains of this prosperous time. Objects from this period are commonly of exceptionally high quality, and thus have a high market value (Fig. 15). It is in this period that the Ngor School, a branch of the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism, was firmly established in the region.

But besides the Bon religion, Buddhism was already well established before the Mustang Kingdom, and many Mustang collections contain objects and books preceding the time of the Mustang Kingdom. For both the monuments and the objects of this period, the exact school affiliation remains unclear. Donorship appears to have focused on charismatic individuals rather than a particular school. The famous painted cave structures, such as the Mentsikhang³¹ in Lower Mustang and Luri,³² Könchokling³³ and Ritseling³⁴ in Upper Mustang, date from this time (Fig. 16).

Following a period of decline, the Mustang valley split into two dominions that roughly reflect the current differentiation between Upper and Lower Mustang, the Kingdom of Lo continuing in the upper region. Buddhist donorship continued at a lesser, but still impressive scale, with the seventeenth century being a particularly flourishing period. Major monuments

³¹ Susanne von der Heide, “Hidden Gems Revealed: Clay Statues and Murals at the Mentsün Lhakhang Cave-Temple in Mustang, Nepal,” *Orientalia* 42, no. 5 (2011); Susanne von der Heide, “Tathāgata Buddha Vairocana in the Rinchen Zangpo Tradition at Mentsün Lhakhang, Mustang, Nepal,” in *Elegante Zusammenkunft im Gelehrtengarten. Studien zur ostasiatischen Kunst zu Ehren von Jeong-Hee Lee-Kalisch / Elegant Gathering in a Scholar’s Garden: Studies in East Asian Art in Honor of Jeong-Hee Lee-Kalisch*, ed. Ansgret Bergmann, et al. (Waimar: VDG, 2015).

³² Niels Gutschow, “The Chörten of the Cave at Luri,” *Ancient Nepal* 136 – Special Edition on Mustang (1994); Helmut F. Neumann, “The Wall Paintings of the Lori Gönpa,” *Orientalia* 25, no. 11 (1994); Helmut F. Neumann, “Paintings of the Lori Stüpa in Mustang,” in *Tibetan Art*, ed. Jane Casey Singer and Philip Denwood (London: Laurence King, 1997); Helmut F. Neumann and Heidi A. Neumann, “Early Wall Paintings in Lo: Luri Reconsidered,” in *Wonders of Lo: The Artistic Heritage of Mustang*, ed. Erberto Lo Bue (Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2010).

³³ Christian Luczanits, “The Cave of Great Adepts,” *Orientalia* 45, no. 5 (2014).

³⁴ Research on this cave has not yet been published.

**Fig. 15: Wealth deity Vaiśravaṇa
commissioned by minister
Tsewang Zangpo**

Mustang, late fifteenth cen-
tury; metal alloy with silver
and copper inlays; 30 x 20 x 12
cm; Namgyal Monastery. Photo
C. Luczanits 2018 D8375.





Fig. 16: Stupa cave of Luri, c. 1300

Photo P. Lieberman 1993.

of the Nyingma School, such as Lo Gekhar,³⁵ Kutsap Ternga³⁶ and Gönpa Gang³⁷ date from this period and

35 Lo Gekhar is considered the oldest monument of Mustang, its foundation can be traced back to Padmasambhava and the events around the founding of Tibet's first monastery, Samye in the late eighth century. The present appearance of the monument, however, likely dates to the same period to which some of its high-quality papier-mâché sculptures can be dated. Also the stone reliefs, which are a major part of the decoration, can be dated to this period.

36 Franz-Karl Ehrhard, "Concepts of Religious Space in Southern Mustang: The Foundation of the Monastery Sku-Tshab Gter-Lnga," in *Buddhism in Tibet & the Himalayas: Text and Traditions* (Kathmandu: Vajra Publications, 2013).

37 Harrison, *A Blessing for the Land*.

the Sakya School and its Ngor branch continued to be supported. Portraits dating to this period preserved in collections across the region indicate that donorship again coalesced around certain charismatic teachers visiting the region (Fig. 17).³⁸

38 Relevant portraits are those of Ngadak Püntso Rindzin (*mnga' bdag phun tshogs rig 'dzin*; 1592–1656), a Nyingma master from Sikkim who visited Mustang in 1651 (see Franz-Karl Ehrhard, "The Mnga' bdag Family and the Tradition of Rig 'dzin zhig po gling pa (1524–1583) in Sikkim," *Bulletin of Tibetology* 2 (2005)), Mipam Püntso Shérab (*mi pham phun tshogs shes rab*), a Drukpa master who stayed at Lo Gekhar around 1700, and Katok Rikdzin Tsewang Norbu (*kaḥ thog rig 'dzin tshe dbang nor bu* 1698–1755).



Fig. 17: Portrait of Ngadag Püntso Rigdzin (1592–1656)

Mustang; mid-seventeenth century; papier mâché; h. c. 90 cm; Lo Gekhar Monastery. Photo C. Luczanits 2014 D9560.

Due to an economic downturn, donorship clearly declined in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and has picked up only after 1992 with new income streams resulting from the international expansion of Tibetan Buddhism and tourism. Thereby, the initiative for restorations or new foundations more commonly comes from the monasteries themselves rather than particular donorship.³⁹ The economic downturn and ancient

items gaining in trade value also meant that there was—and still is—a continuous flow of objects from the Mustang region onto the market. There is probably no museum with substantial Tibetan collections worldwide that does not have objects from the region. Many of these come from private ownership, and in terms of monastery items, fraudulent trade and thefts by outsiders are cited locally.⁴⁰ A major violent theft in Gheling

³⁹ For example, Namgyal Monastery has expanded greatly, modernising its monastery, and constructing a nunnery in Upper Mustang, and building two complementary monasteries in the Pokhara region for the winter months. Funds for these projects have been raised by the monastery. In contrast, the new temple at Kagbeni has been funded by a single private sponsor.

⁴⁰ For Ladakh and West Tibet, the assemblage of the Koelz collection (Carla M. Sinopoli, *The Himalayan Journey of Walter N. Koelz: The University of Michigan Himalayan Expedition, 1932–1934* (Ann Arbor: Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, 2013)) and Giuseppe Tucci's travel reports (Giuseppe Tucci and Eugenio Ghersi, *Cronaca Della Missione Scientifica Tucci Nel Tibet Occidentale*

targeted both the monastery and a household.⁴¹ Further, the reverse of the Maitreya sculpture of Gönpagang was forced open to extract the treasure deposited there for the maintenance of the building.⁴² Ancient *chörten* have systematically been raided for valuables throughout the region,⁴³ and as recently as 2008, the Samdrup Chörten (*bsam grub mchod rten*), halfway along the road between Tsarang and Lo Möntang, was looted during or immediately following a restoration.⁴⁴

Collections Today

As part of the project, the workshop presentation of Lama Tsering Tashi (Chhing Chhyope Gurung), then vice-president of the Mustang Sakya Buddhist Association and former principal of the school of Chöde Monastery in Lo Möntang, provided insights into the traditional perceptions and handling of monastery collection objects as well as the impact of modernisation on the region.⁴⁵ Lama Tashi, as he is commonly called, describes the system of caretaker and the yearly inventory of a collection as a regular occurrence. But he also points out that such inventories are insufficient in this modern age, as they do not allow objects to be identified individually. Photography is specifically

(1933) (Roma: Reale Accademia d'Italia, 1934); Giuseppe Tucci, *Santi e Briganti nel Tibet Ignoto (Diario Della Spedizione nel Tibet Occidentale 1935)* (Milan: 1937) and their English translations) provide unique insights into the change of ownership of sacred items in the first half of the twentieth century. In Mustang, Kampa (*kham pa*) resistant fighters stationed there are blamed for the first disappearance of objects in the Mustang region, and in open conversations any disappearance of objects is blamed on foreign visitors. However, private conversations also acknowledge the involvement of locals and private sales.

41 A theft at Gheling Monastery is particularly remembered as it was accompanied by cutting the tongue of the caretaker monk.

42 It is said that this theft happened in the early 2000s.

43 There appears not to be a single *chörten* in Mustang that has not been opened up at some stage to remove its valuable contents. This includes the *chörten* of Luri.

44 While this theft has not been registered with the police, it is widely discussed in the region.

45 Tsering Tashi, "Vision for Collection Records" (paper presented at the "Tibetan Monastery Collections and Museums: Traditional Practices and Contemporary Issues" conference, London, SOAS, November 8–10, 2018).

mentioned as beneficial for such an inventory, so that the lost or damaged object can be restored or replaced. This latter view indicates that the religious value is considered more important than the ancientness and authenticity of the object. Further, it is clear from his account that damaged objects may be disposed of, but he did not specify how that may happen.

Importantly, Lama Tsering Tashi pointed out that not all objects in a monastery's collection are for public viewing, using the example of the protector Mahākāla, a form of which is considered the most important protective deity in the Sakya School. He specifically refers to the need for initiation before viewing such objects. Indeed, one of the few objects not documented at Kag Chöde Monastery remains a sculpture of this deity in a chapel dedicated to it to which access is restricted.⁴⁶ On the other hand, viewing as such cannot be the issue, as Lama Tashi himself accompanied his presentation with a fabulous picture of a whole assemblage of such papier-mâché images in a monastery cabinet. This conforms to the emphasis in the presentation itself, where Lama Tsering Tashi emphasised that the main issues are the questions that may be asked by inquisitive foreigners about the object and the associated practice.⁴⁷

Considering the dangers that affect monastery collections, Lama Tashi specifically refers to insects, mice, excessive rainfall, earthquakes and neglect leading to the collapse of structures. He demonstrated the potential of loss by showing a sculpture cabinet with excellent fifteenth century papier-mâché sculptures of the Lamdré lineage in Dolpo, the structure around which allegedly collapsed.⁴⁸ Insects and rodents are further

46 Locally this sculpture is considered very powerful, and the abbot's main concern was that villagers may be upset if the object is documented. In another Mustang monastery, all wrathful images were excluded from the first documentation.

47 Nevertheless, Lama Tashi did not want this image to be included in this publication.

48 Again, Lama Tashi did not want this photograph to be published here.

Fig. 18: The “Antique Museum” established in 2008 in a room accessible from the courtyard of the school building of Chöde Monastery in 2013

Photo C. Luczanits D3104.



Fig. 19: View of the museum room in the Chöde Monastery museum after rearrangement by this project in 2013

Photo C. Luczanits D7525.



Fig. 20: View of the entry area of the museum room in the Chöde Monastery museum after rearrangement by this project in 2013 with *tangka* above and wooden print blocks stacked below

Photo C. Luczanits D7520.



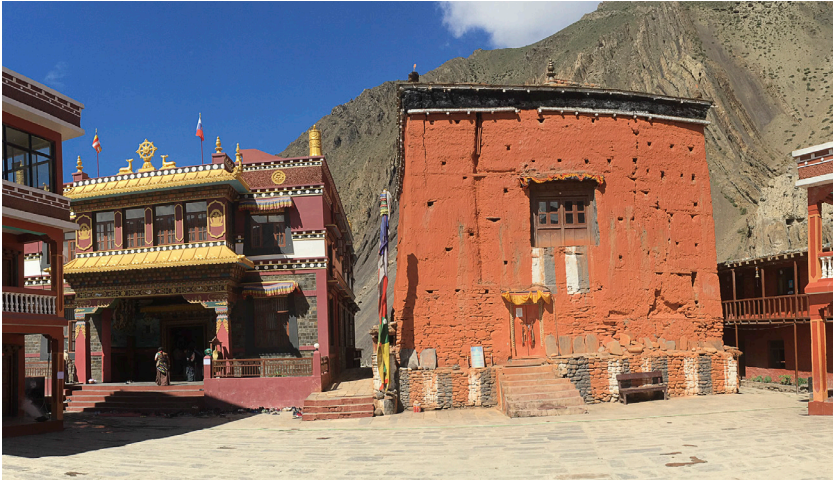


Fig. 21: The new and the old temples of Kag Chöde Monastery in 2019

Photo C. Luczanits D0979.

cited as particular sources for object damage, both of which have also been observed by our project.⁴⁹

While school principal at Chöde Monastery, Lama Tsering Tashi was also responsible for setting up the museum in a room of the school building (Fig. 18). This room mostly houses objects removed from religious use due to damage, with the value and quality of objects varying greatly across the collection (Fig. 19). Lama Tashi specifically mentions that he has picked some of its objects “from the garbage”,⁵⁰ but there are also objects of considerable historical value, such as a number of fairly well preserved sculptures and *tangka* of considerable historical importance (Fig. 20). The museum also houses the remaining manuscripts of the Mardzong cave complex—the blue bundles on the left side of Fig. 19—which are the focus of one of the contributions to this volume (Chapter 4).

Khenpo Tenzin Sangpo, abbot of Kag Chöde Thupten Samphel Ling Monastery in Kagbeni from 2001, in his workshop presentation, reinforced some of the points

49 Living off the daily offerings, mice or rats are a considerable problem in some temples in Lower Mustang. Besides scratching everything that may remotely be nourishing, including the face paint of new sculptures, their excrement may surround the bases of objects. At Hemis Museum the project encountered the larvae of moths in some of the textiles of the museum in spring, even though the museum is exceedingly cold in winter.

50 Tashi, “Vision for Collection Records.”

made by Lama Tsering Tashi, but went further insofar as he details the issues of preserving ancient objects in a monastery in the past and today.⁵¹ Considering the history of his own institution, he emphasised that in the past monks of the monastery commonly lived with their families, rather than in the monastery itself. He mentioned the occurrence of several thefts in the past. Now his question is what to do with old objects that are not religious but have fallen out of use and are distributed in diverse stores within the old temple building. And it is here that the “wild idea” of a museum comes in.

Museum Aspirations

In the course of our project, paralleling the construction of the new temple at Kagbeni Monastery, Khenpo Tenzin Sangpo has certainly developed his ideas about the relationship of a monastery and a museum. With the new temple and its much larger assembly hall consecrated, the old temple building has partially fallen out of use (Fig. 21). A sign board the Khenpo has put up in front of the old building acknowledges that the old monastery building has become “a precious museum in its best original form” (Fig. 22). Indeed, with only some of the larger sculptures moving into the new temple, the old temple still houses most of the ancient sacred

51 Sangpo, “A Museum in the Monastery.”

items including the library of handwritten and printed books.⁵²

As the removal of two large sculptures from the altar display left empty spaces, the Khenpo was content for us to implement a thematic redisplay of the remaining sculptures within the altar cabinet in 2018.⁵³ This was achieved by simply adding a few wooden mounts and rearranging the sculptures within the four windows flanking the central one (Fig. 23). Further, to facilitate the curiosity of Western tourists and to make our research publicly available, the project also supplied a booklet explaining the subject of each window display and providing basic information about the objects (Fig. 24).

In the presentation of his vision for a museum at Kagbeni at the workshop, Khenpo Tenzin Sangpo expressed his uncertainty about having sacred objects in a museum setting, citing local people who may find this inappropriate. He thus suggested holding a workshop on site to “educate” locals about such an idea and thus alleviate concerns in this regard.

The abbot of Namgyal Monastery in Upper Mustang, Khenpo Tsewang Rigzin, appears to feel much less restrained.⁵⁴ His vision of rebuilding the monastery in its entirety since 2012 appears to be widely supported both inside his monastery and in its immediate local environment. In fact, Namgyal Monastery has transformed since he became abbot in 2004, with four separate monastic buildings constructed in both Upper Mustang and Pokhara, where the majority of the monastic community moves to in winter.⁵⁵ As at Kagbeni, the building and expansion of monastic schools is at the core of his modernising efforts. The project was fortunate to arrive at the Namgyal main monastery just at the beginning of these modernising efforts (Fig. 25). In 2012, documentation was only permitted with the objects in

their crowded altar spaces (Fig. 13), but in the following year the objects could be documented properly from all sides (Fig. 26) and their measurements taken (Fig. 27). As Namgyal Khenpo stated in his presentation, it was important for him that the senior monks were present while the documentation took place.⁵⁶ Furthermore, an abbot must be sure that the person who does the documentation can be trusted.⁵⁷

At the time of the first documentation in 2012, Namgyal Khenpo told us that he wanted to make a museum for objects that had fallen out of use. The first documentation thus included objects such as begging bowls (*pātra*), large cooking pots and a horn of a chiru (also called Tibetan antelope; Fig. 28). This initiated a discussion on different visions for a museum or museum-like spaces. The 2015 Nepal earthquake also necessitated the rebuilding of the circa 65-year-old temple itself, resulting in the creation of a temporary museum at the far end within the largest room of the building serving as a monastic quarter during reconstruction (Fig. 29). A colourful curtain separated this space from the rest of the room, and the objects assembled there combined sacred and secular items considered at little risk of theft, among them an object which was at least a thousand years old. As the boards posted in front of this room (Fig. 32) indicate, this space was meant for tourists visiting the monastery.

Namgyal Monastery owns a relatively large collection of sacred items of exceptional quality, including several sets of Lamdré lineage sculptures in both metal (see Chapter 2) and papier mâché. The latter were originally assembled in a dedicated Lamdré Temple, which was within the monastic quarter building demolished in 2012. This room, with its high density stepped display of sacred sculpture, was arguably the most impressive display during Christian Luczanits’ first visit in 2010.

52 All objects and books are fully inventoried.

53 In this work, the authors were joined by Chiara Bellini and Kunzom Thakuri.

54 Rigdzin, “Traditional Curating of a Monastery Collection.”

55 Most Mustang monasteries today have winter quarters either in Kathmandu or Pokhara.

56 The same was true for Ghami Monastery, where the presence of all senior monks in 2017 made the documentation possible.

57 Both the Namgyal Khenpo and both representatives of Hemis Monastery, Ladakh, mentioned that they get many proposals for works by foreigners, but that it is extremely difficult for them to judge who is actually an expert for the work proposed and who is not.



Fig. 22: Information board at Kag Chöde Monastery in Kagbeni photographed in 2016

Photo C. Luczanits D1184.



Fig. 23: Rearrangement of the sculptures in a thematic display in the old temple of Kagbeni Monastery in 2018

Photo C. Luczanits D3131.

Fig. 24: Two spreads of the explanatory booklet supplied to Kagbeni Monastery following the rearrangement

Written and edited by Chiara Bellini and Louise Tythacott, 2019.

The last remnant of a traditional display in the region, it also inspired our documentation and research project. In the newly constructed temple, these images will again be displayed in a dedicated room.

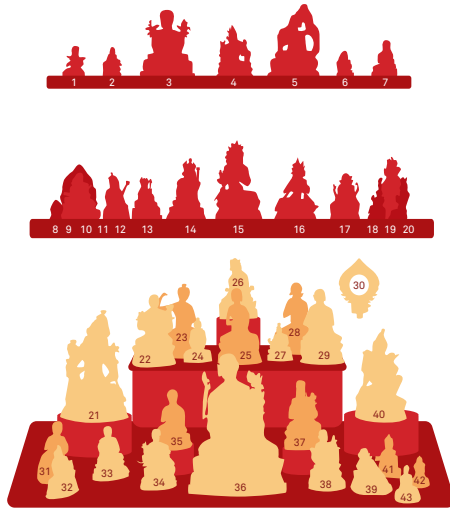
More broadly, the discussions about a museum at Namgyal Monastery reflect the tension between opposing visions of a monastery museum that crystallises in the use and display of sacred sculpture. As presented by Namgyal Khenpo, the primary purpose of the museum is to enable international visitors to see the objects and,

in this way, attract them to the monastery,⁵⁸ which currently is only visited by a fraction of those who reach the nearby capital Lo Möntang. He thus considers the establishment of a museum a matter of importance. On the other hand, he also acknowledges that the temple itself could be interpreted as a museum. How objects are

⁵⁸ For evidence that the attraction of a monastery is a traditional concern see Gregory Schopen, "Art, Beauty, and the Business of Running a Buddhist Monastery in Early Northwest India," in *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters. Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India*, ed. Gregory Schopen (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

Lineage Masters

SHRINE FIVE



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In Tibetan Buddhism, a prominent position is occupied by the figure of the teacher. Tibetan Buddhists consider their own teachers more important than actual Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, because they represent an indisputable link between the practitioners and the Buddhas, as well as the only possibility to undertake the path of dharma (teachings).

Among the diverse teachers represented in these statues - many of them important Sakya masters - it is important to highlight the Indian yogi Padmasambhava. He lived during the latter half of the 8th century and is considered a 2nd Buddha. According to Tibetan sources, he travelled to Tibet on the invitation of King Tri Songdetsen (742-797), who wanted him to subdue a demon which was hindering the construction of the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet, that of Samye (767-779). This project was completed under the direction of the great Indian sage and scholar, Shantarakshita, from the prestigious Buddhist university of Nalanda.

The name Padmasambhava, literally 'Lotus-Born', refers to this teacher's affiliation with the Lotus Family, and underlines his spiritual ties with Avalokiteshvara and Amitabha with whom he forms an important triad symbolising the 'Three Bodies' of the Buddha: Padmasambhava represents the nirmanakaya, that is the physical body; Avalokiteshvara the sambhogakaya, the divine body; and Amitabha the dharmakaya, the immaterial body attained in ultimate reality.

One of the most important Bodhisattvas represented in this altar is Avalokiteshvara or Lokeshvara. He is spiritually linked to the family of Amitabha and, in India, he was especially popular in the Buddhist tradition of the 'Great Vehicle' (Mahayana).

He later became the most revered of all Bodhisattvas in Tibet. He is 'The Lord Who Looks Down' compassionately upon those beings who need to be saved. Songtsen Gampo (617-649), the Tibetan king who unified Tibet in the 7th century, making it one of the most powerful kingdoms in Central Asia, was considered to be an earthly manifestation of this important Bodhisattva whom he adopted as his own tutelary deity. A thousand years later, the Dalai Lamas are also considered manifestations of Avalokiteshvara.

The dates of birth and death of the historical characters are indicated between parentheses, while the century specified at the end of the label indicates the dating of the object. If 2 options for birth or death are indicated - (ie. 1447/1448-1480/1461) - this is because the dates are not entirely certain due to discrepancies between sources. Generally, the first date is the most probable.

- 1. Vajrasattva**
རྗེ་ཤེས་རབས་པལ།
16th century
Vajrasattva, 'vajra being', is a particular form of Vajradhara. He is a Buddha who embodies all of the Five Esoteric Buddha Families. He is represented performing mudras holding a vajra and bell. He sits cross-legged on a double-lotus base.
- 2. Vajrasattva**
རྗེ་ཤེས་རབས་པལ།
18th-19th century
See 1 above.
- 3. Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo (1382-1456)**
སངས་རྒྱལ་ལྷུང་མགོ་མཚོ།
20th-21st century
This figure depicts one of the most prominent Sakya masters, founder of the Ngor-subsect of the Sakya school. He visited Mustang several times, where he was mainly responsible for the revival of Buddhism.
- 4. Green Tara**
ལྷོ་མཁའ་མཚོ།
16th century
This statue represents the important female goddess Tara. She is believed to be a compassionate saviour from the 'Eight Great Dangers'.
- 5. Adept**
ལྷ་མཁའ་མཚོ།
17th-18th century
This unknown teacher performs the gesture of debate (vitarka mudra) with his right hand, while his left-hand rests on his lap holding a book.
- 6. Green Tara**
ལྷོ་མཁའ་མཚོ།
19th century
See 4 above.
- 7. Jetsun Drakpa Gyaltzen**
རྗེ་འཕྲུལ་གྲུབ་པལ་ལྷོ་མཁའ་མཚོ།
16th century
This statue portrays the renowned master Drakpa Gyaltzen (1147-1216), who was the 3rd of the 'Five Great Patriarchs' of Sakya, credited with founding the Sakya school.

- 8. Vajrayogini Tsha Tsha**
རྗེ་ཤེས་རབས་པལ་མཚོ།
14th century
Vajrayogini is one of the principal female deities of Tibetan Buddhism. She is a representation of complete Buddhahood in female form.
- 9. Padmasambhava**
པདྨ་སངས་པལ་ལྷོ་མཁའ་མཚོ།
16th century
Padmasambhava, the 'Lotus Born' teacher, is worshipped as a second Buddha. He is believed to be an 8th-century historical person from Uddiyana, present-day Swat, in northern Pakistan. Padmasambhava is credited with converting the native spirits to Buddhism across the Himalayas. In this image he is portrayed with his typical dress and attributes: the thunderbolt sceptre (vajra) and skull-cup (kapala), while the tantric staff (khatvanga) is missing.
- 10. Padmasambhava**
པདྨ་སངས་པལ་ལྷོ་མཁའ་མཚོ།
18th-19th century
See 9 above.
- 11. Padmasambhava**
པདྨ་སངས་པལ་ལྷོ་མཁའ་མཚོ།
15th-16th century
- 12. Padmasambhava**
པདྨ་སངས་པལ་ལྷོ་མཁའ་མཚོ།
19th-20th century
- 13. Padmasambhava**
པདྨ་སངས་པལ་ལྷོ་མཁའ་མཚོ།
18th century
- 14. Padmasambhava**
པདྨ་སངས་པལ་ལྷོ་མཁའ་མཚོ།
15th century
- 15. Vajradhara**
རྗེ་ཤེས་རབས།
16th century
Buddha Vajradhara is considered the Primordial Buddha in the development of Buddhism in Tibet. He is a secret form of the Buddha Shakyamuni. Vajradhara performs a mudra in which he simulates the tantric embrace, or 'vajra-embrace' (vajrahumkara mudra), with his consort. He holds the thunderbolt sceptre (vajra) and bell, his main symbols.
- 16. Vajradhara**
རྗེ་ཤེས་རབས།
16th century
See 15 above.
- 17. Shadakshara Lokeshvara**
ལྷན་པལ་ལོ་ཤེས་པལ།
14th-15th century
Avalokiteshvara Shadakshara is the Bodhisattva of Compassion, the 'Lord Who Looks Down' upon all beings. Tibetans recognised the first Tibetan emperor, Songtsen Gampo (617-649), and later also the Dalai Lamas as emanations of this Bodhisattva. With his main hands he performs the gesture of greeting (anjali mudra), while the other two hands hold a rosary and lotus flower.
- 18. Shadakshara Avalokiteshvara**
ལྷན་པལ་ལོ་ཤེས་པལ།
16th century
- 19. Shadakshara Avalokiteshvara**
ལྷན་པལ་ལོ་ཤེས་པལ།
18th-19th century
- 20. Shadakshara Avalokiteshvara**
ལྷན་པལ་ལོ་ཤེས་པལ།
16th century

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KAGBENI MONASTERY | 14



Fig. 25: Namgyal Monastery as seen from the south in 2010

Photo C. Luczanits D3741.



Fig. 26: Photographic documentation at Namgyal Monastery in 2013

Photo C. Luczanits D6730.



Fig. 27: Tashi Bista measuring a sculpture during documentation of the collection of Namgyal Monastery in 2013

Photo C. Luczanits D6732.

Fig. 28: Horn of a chiru in the collection of Namgyal Monastery

Photo C. Luczanits 2012 D3793.



to be displayed in future also reflects anxieties about their security. Even before the documentation, Namgyal Khenpo was acutely aware about the preciousness of some of the objects in his collection, and his workshop presentation documented his fears of visitors misusing photography for illicit purposes. However, now that documentation has been undertaken, Namgyal Khenpo also wants to produce a catalogue of the collection, as he considers it important to provide information about the objects.⁵⁹ He also considers the work done by our project so far as exemplary and of benefit to other monasteries in the region.

Between the 2010 visit to Namgyal Monastery and the first documentation in 2012, the faces of all metal sculptures were repainted under the leadership of one of the senior monks.⁶⁰ However, the painting was done with bright acrylic colours and minimal painting skill, spoiling the appearance of the objects in the eyes of Namgyal Khenpo, who was not present when this occurred (Fig. 33). This event may well have helped to enable the documentation, and removing and redoing these paintings became part of his plan for the new temple spaces. Thus, in 2018 the paint was removed

⁵⁹ The first detailed study focuses on two text collections at Namgyal Monastery, Christian Luczanits and Markus Viehbeck, *Two Illuminated Text Collections of Namgyal Monastery. A Study of Early Buddhist Art and Literature in Mustang* (Kathmandu, Nepal: Vajra Books, 2021).

⁶⁰ The repainting of the faces of sculptures in gold and their hair in blue (peaceful) or red (wrathful) is a traditional form of religious maintenance in Tibetan Buddhism. In the case of the most sacred sculptures, such as the Jowo and Pakpa Lokeśvara images in Lhasa, the whole body of the sculpture may be painted in gold. Usually this is done by experienced painters specially commissioned for this work.

in a joint effort between Namgyal Monastery and our project, revealing the original appearance of the sculptures, all of which were documented again (Fig. 34).⁶¹ In 2019, the faces were repainted by a professional painter in preparation for the temple display.

Finally, the oscillation in opinion and vision about a monastery museum at Namgyal was also a result of the internal dynamics at Namgyal Monastery. Senior monks are often much more conservative than those, such as the Khenpo himself, educated in major monastic centres in India. Namgyal Khenpo's decisions on the documentation of the objects and their publication in an article⁶² to support the reconstruction of the monastery were met with opposing voices within the monastery, especially when their first publication did not yield any funds in support.

Interviews and Discussion

In September 2018, Louise Tythacott undertook interviews with Buddhist monks and abbots in different monasteries in Mustang. From June-July 2019, she conducted further interviews with a non-randomised sample of 27 residents in Kagbeni (Fig. 35), as well as in neighbouring villages of Pakling, Phalak (Fig. 36), Dakarjhong and Tiri, with the purpose of ascertaining

⁶¹ Namgyal Khenpo wanted the project to advise and assist in this process.

⁶² Christian Luczanits, "Portable Heritage in the Himalayas: The Example of Namgyal Monastery, Mustang: Part 1, Sculpture," *Orientalia* 47, no. 2 (2016), and "Portable Heritage in the Himalayas: The Example of Namgyal Monastery, Mustang: Part 2, Books and Stupas," *Orientalia* 47, no. 5 (2016) were written on behalf of Namgyal Monastery for this purpose and provide a first survey of the collection.



Fig. 29: Part of an improvised museum display at Namgyal Monastery in 2016

Photo C. Luczanits D6345.



Fig. 30: Stupa of type popular in the western Himalayas from the seventh to the thirteenth century among the objects in Fig. 29

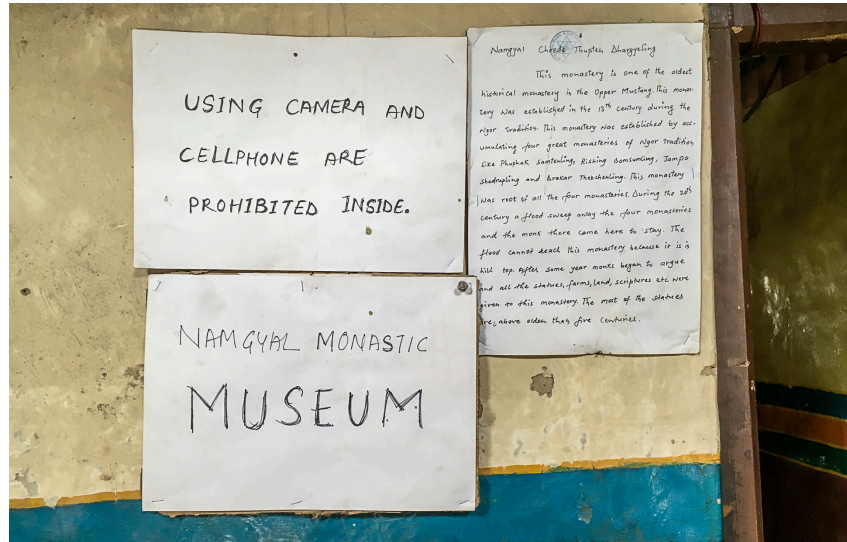
Greater Kashmir region, ninth century; metal alloy; 16 x 9.5 x 9 cm; Namgyal Monastery. Photo J. Poncar & C. Luczanits, 2016 D8153.

Fig. 31: Same stupa as in Fig. 30 from a different angle

Photo J. Poncar & C. Luczanits, 2016 D8157.

Fig. 32: Information boards for the improvised museum at Namgyal Monastery in 2016

Photo C. Luczanits D1307.



local views on the possible future museum displays in the old monastery building.⁶³ These two sets of interviews are discussed below, laid out in relation to the specific questions asked. The responses identify many shared ideas and a range of suggestions in response to the questions. While not intended to be representative of the whole region, these nonetheless provide a basis for understanding the initial ideas and aspirations of monks and local people in relation to establishing museums in their Buddhist monasteries.

The initial question asked of all monks and local people was *why do you want to create a museum?* The Khenpo at Kagbeni, Tenzin Sangpo, clearly asserted the importance of building a museum “as there is nothing like this presently in Mustang” and there are many valuable historic objects that can be displayed.⁶⁴

I could have a small museum, where I could display those very old objects for which we have no use now, because we are always having trouble where to place them, at the same time we can't also use

63 The residents of these villages all use the monastery in Kagbeni as their focus for worship. We are extremely grateful to Kunzom Thakuri for all her work on this.

64 Interview September 29, 2018; Sangpo, “A Museum in the Monastery.”

them. I can't throw them and I can't sell them and sometimes we can also use them, so that's the main reason for me to have the idea of having a museum in the monastery.⁶⁵

Many things used by local people are now disappearing, he remarked, and religious objects, which are discarded, not used or not appreciated, in particular, really need to be preserved.⁶⁶ Lama Tsering Tashi too observed that many monasteries in Mustang contained important Buddhist artefacts, with material which cannot be placed on shrines, but could go into museums instead, some with “really nice stories”.⁶⁷ While many monks have a deep knowledge of Buddhism, he noted, they do not have the necessary skills to protect their material culture.⁶⁸ For the Khenpo of Namgyal Monastery:

The new plan for a museum will enable international visitors to visit and see things ... We need a museum because this kind of information has be-

65 Ibid.

66 Interview, September 29, 2018.

67 Interview, September 16, 2018.

68 Ibid.



Fig. 33: Sculpture of Vajravidāraṇa with repainted face and jewellery as documented in 2013
Namgyal Monastery; Mustang; fifteenth century; metal alloy with inlays in silver and copper; 18.5 x 13 x 10 cm. Photo C. Luczanits D3474.

come important and of interest. The aim is to preserve objects for future generations.⁶⁹

One of the monks at Gheling Monastery, in addition, noted that a museum should fundamentally be created for “old stuff”, as everything was made by hand, and this is different from today’s material.⁷⁰

The interviews undertaken in 2019 with local residents in the Kagbeni area all indicated strong community

support for the idea of a museum (Pie chart 1).⁷¹ When asked *why they would want to create a museum*, the most frequently cited reason was to attract tourists, specifically to see “ancient things” (29 per cent). Closely related to this was the idea that a museum would preserve tradition, lifestyles and the history of Buddhism (25 per cent). Equally important was its money-making role and the benefit to the monastery, local people and their livelihoods (21 per cent). Several respondents also felt that Kagbeni, as a centre for the region, should have a museum to make it better known (13 per cent). Others

⁶⁹ Rigdzin, “Traditional Curating of a Monastery Collection.”

⁷⁰ Interview, September 28, 2018.

⁷¹ We are grateful to Heidi Tan for her work drafting the interview data, discussions and pie charts.



Fig. 34: Sculpture of Vajravīdāraṇa with cleaned face and jewellery as documented in 2018

Same sculpture as in Fig. 33.
Photo C. Luczanits D9115.

suggested a museum would educate people (4 per cent), collect new things (4 per cent) and show cultural objects (4 per cent).

When asked about the *function of a museum in a monastery*, the monk at Gheling Monastery argued that fundamentally it would both “protect stuff” and show others what had been used in the past.⁷² The museum, he said, would function as a place for the public, tourists, and children to understand “things not commonly seen”.⁷³ Lama Tsering Tashi suggested the function of

a museum would be to tell Mustang’s history as well as to protect and preserve.⁷⁴ The interviews with local people in 2019 reinforced these points—that a museum should be a place to preserve the past as well as ensure a future for the younger generation. More specifically, interviewees suggested a museum could be a place to show how life was lived in earlier times and to learn about Buddhist philosophy. For some, a museum could even function as a means to change ways of thinking, create memories and tell stories. Further interview questions tested general perceptions of the museum’s role, with suggestions by the interviewees in order to

⁷² Interview, September 28, 2018.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Interview, September 16, 2018.



Fig. 35: Louise Tythacott interviewing monks at Kagbeni Monastery, June 2019

Photo Kunzom Thakuri.



Fig. 36: Louise Tythacott interviewing workers in Phalak, Mustang, June 2019

Photo Kunzom Thakuri.

prompt responses (Pie chart 2). Most perceived the museum to be about history and the past (35 per cent), the future (30 per cent) and about culture or the present (17 per cent): several thought it should be for art (8 per cent), while others indicated education (5 per cent).

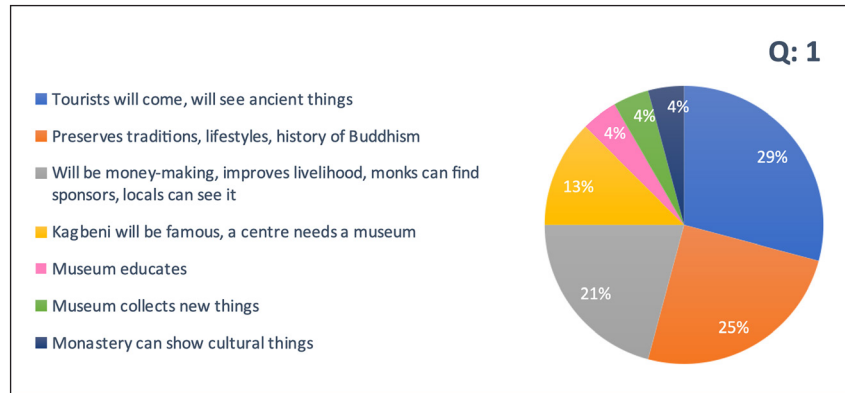
In terms of the *aims of the displays* (Pie chart 3), Buddhism in general and Sakya Buddhism, in particular, were the most frequently suggested by local residents (25 per cent), followed by the history, architecture and life of the monastery (21 per cent). Others suggested the regional Mustang culture (18 per cent) and history of Kagbeni (12 per cent), while several preferred local history and culture of ethnic groups e.g. dress and farming

objects (11 per cent). It is also notable that a number of respondents (18 per cent) said they would simply leave decisions up to the Khenpo, indicating the power and status of this abbot within his local community.

The difference between Buddhist objects in a temple or on display in a museum was one of the key ideas probed in our interviews, the status of sacred objects in museums now being a key area of academic research in the West.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ See for example, Chris Arthur, "Exhibiting the Sacred," in *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion*, ed. Crispin Paine (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000), 1–27; Yiao-hwei Chuang, "Presenting Buddhism in Museums," in *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion*, ed. Crispin Paine (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000), 107–119; John Clarke, "The Robert H.

Pie chart 1: Q.1 – Would you like to see a museum in Kagbeni? Why does Kagbeni need a museum?



We were concerned to investigate how sacred/secular distinctions might operate in exhibitions located in the consecrated spaces of Himalayan Buddhist monasteries. It was evident from the interviews, that a museum set up in these monasteries would be an inalienably sacred space and that the religious potency of objects would be exactly the same for believers, whether placed on an altar in a temple surrounded by offerings or spot-lit in the relatively more sterile environment of a museum display case. As one monk at Gheling Monastery observed: “you already have a monastery to do prayers, but when you see it in a museum, you can still pray inside yourself ... you don’t have to do offerings even if

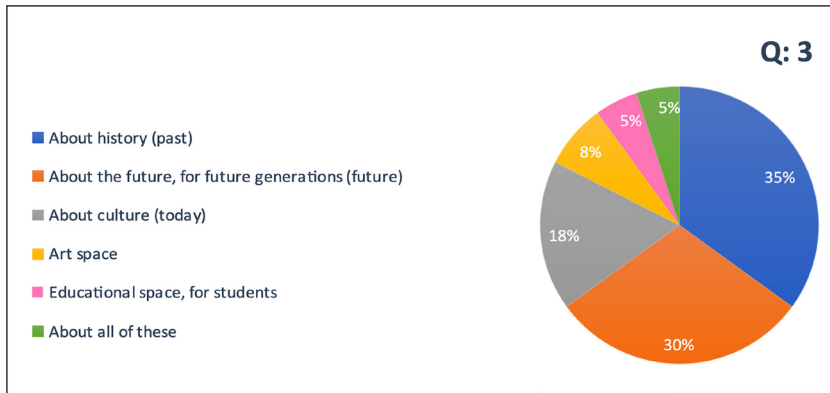
an object is sacred, mentally you can respect things”.⁷⁶ There would be no need for de-consecration ceremonies, he noted, if objects are moved from a shrine to a museum. The Khenpo at Kagbeni was clear that while a museum in his monastery would be different from a shrine, objects could be worshipped in both: “A shrine is a place to worship, whereas a museum is not only for worship but for learning too. If the museum included religious objects, they can still be worshipped in the museum space.”⁷⁷ In his interview, Lama Tsering Tashi referred to the fact that Buddhist objects need to be shown respect and identified the various prescriptions, in terms of behaviour, required in front of sacred things. Visitors must, for example, take off their shoes and hats before entering a museum with sacred objects on display, and Buddhist statues should never be placed on the floor or near feet or dirt.⁷⁸ Responses from the 2019 interviews with local people in Kagbeni also corroborated the importance of respect being observed in a monastery museum, recommending that visitors should take off their shoes and hats, wear appropriate clothing, avoid taking photographs or touching objects, and even consider wearing special footwear provided by the museum. Other informants suggested that rules could be explained and that information about the

N. Ho Family Foundation Gallery of Buddhist Sculpture,” *Orientalisms* 40 May, no. 4 (2009): 1–7; John Clarke, “Planning the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Gallery of Buddhist Sculpture,” in *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums*, ed. Bruce M. Sullivan (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 67–79; Ivan Gaskell, “Sacred to Profane and Back Again,” in *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*, ed. Andrew McClellan (London: Blackwell, 2003), 149–62; Clare Harris, *The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics and the Representation of Tibet* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Crispin Paine, *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000); Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Bruce Sullivan, Bruce, ed., *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Louise Tythacott, “Curating the Sacred: Exhibiting Buddhism at World Museum Liverpool,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 34, no. 1 (Dec 2017): 115–133.

⁷⁶ Interview, September 28, 2018.

⁷⁷ Interview, September 29, 2018.

⁷⁸ Interview, September 16, 2018.



Pie chart 2: Q.3 – Should the museum be about the history (the past), culture today (the present), or the future? Is the museum considered more of an ‘art’ space or an educational space for non-Buddhists/tourists?

regulations should even be displayed on a signboard or explained by an interpreter.

We asked a range of monks *how objects would be selected for a new museum and who would do this?* Our informant at Gheling Monastery suggested it would most likely be the younger monks, though they would need to gain permission from older monks (some of whom had been working there for 30–40 years). The older monks would assess who has the ability and then allocate responsibilities. Our informant suggested that different objects should be kept separated in a museum—monastic/sacred items from kitchenware and from arms and armour—so “you can get the feeling of things”.⁷⁹ In Kagbeni, the Khenpo said he would be the main person to decide, in collaboration with the local community, and, similar to the monk at Gheling Monastery, he would initially separate objects by putting them in sections—one religious, another for general items. The Khenpo would like a museum to include things relating to the culture, religion and daily life of people in the Mustang region: religious objects would be included, importantly, to demonstrate the significance of the belief system. A number of monks asserted they did not have the skills to make decisions about object selection and display and thus would draw on “external specialists”. Lama Tsering Tashi, for example, said he

would ask “experts” to help select and design the space as this would be “a good opportunity to learn so many things”.⁸⁰ In Gheling Monastery, our informant talked of experts helping to show them how to group things,⁸¹ and Kagbeni Khenpo acknowledged:

... we didn’t have the idea how to best preserve these objects, at the same time also we make those available for others ... but we don’t have an idea of technical idea or skill ... we can’t do anything yet ... I am here to learn from you.⁸²

When asked *who the museum would be for and what sort of entrance fee would be appropriate*, respondents once again gave a range of responses. The monk at Gheling Monastery wanted a museum to be for tourists, in particular, but also for locals. For him, income generation was significant: an entry fee for a museum would be important in helping to maintain the monastery, though income, he remarked, was not the most important thing, but “if you don’t charge, there won’t be any value”.⁸³ Kagbeni Khenpo too mentioned tourists, local people and Nepali children, suggesting there should be a difference between locals and foreigners in terms of the entrance fee. For Lama Tsering Tashi, a museum

79 Ibid.

80 Tashi, “Vision for Collection Records.”

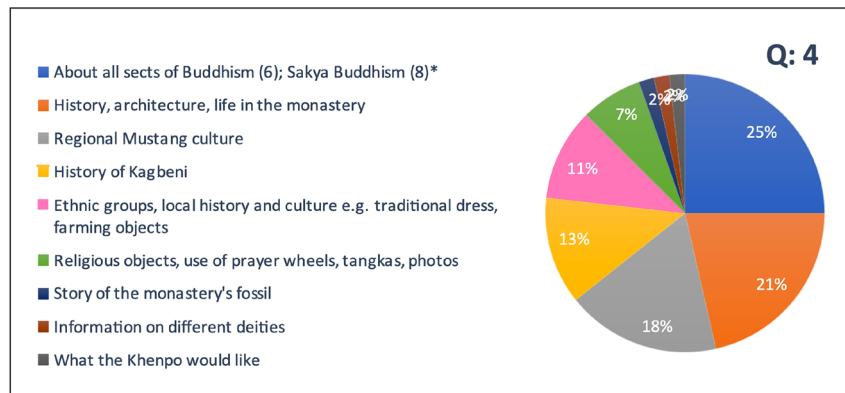
81 Interview, September 28, 2018.

82 Sangpo, “A Museum in the Monastery.”

83 Ibid.

Pie chart 3: Q.4 – What should be the aims of the displays? What kinds of displays would you like to see? What should the new displays be about 1) Buddhism in general, 2) Sakya Buddhism, 3) Buddhism and/or culture in the Mustang region, 4) the history and future of the monastery in Kagbeni, 5) Local history of Kagbeni, 6) architectural history 7) anything else?

* numbers in brackets refer to number of respondents



would benefit local people, the younger generation and tourists who wish to know more about these cultures: local people who believe in Buddhism can worship in a future museum and for tourists it will represent “preservation”. For him, appropriate entrance fees would be 300 rupees for tourists and 50 for locals.⁸⁴ Many of the residents in Kagbeni diplomatically answered that a museum should be for “everyone” (41 per cent), while others suggested for tourists (26 per cent), local visitors (21 per cent) and more specifically the monastery and monks (9 per cent) and younger generations (3 per cent). Most felt that there should be a fee for the museum with varying amounts paid by different visitors (77 per cent), though almost a quarter felt that local visitors should not be charged. Most (59 per cent) believed that foreigners should pay more, while several indicated that all should pay a modest fee (14 per cent). A small number suggested that there should be different levels of payment for foreigners, Nepali and local Tibetans (4 per cent). Ticket prices here ranged from US\$10 (or 1,000 NPR) for foreigners and US\$5 for locals to NPR 300–400 for foreigners if locals are free.⁸⁵

84 Interview, September 16, 2018. A traditional Nepalese meal—*dal bhat*—costs around 100 rupees.

85 A pricing system of that type has already been introduced for the temples of Lo Möntang, where the equivalent of 10 USD is charged to foreign visitors.

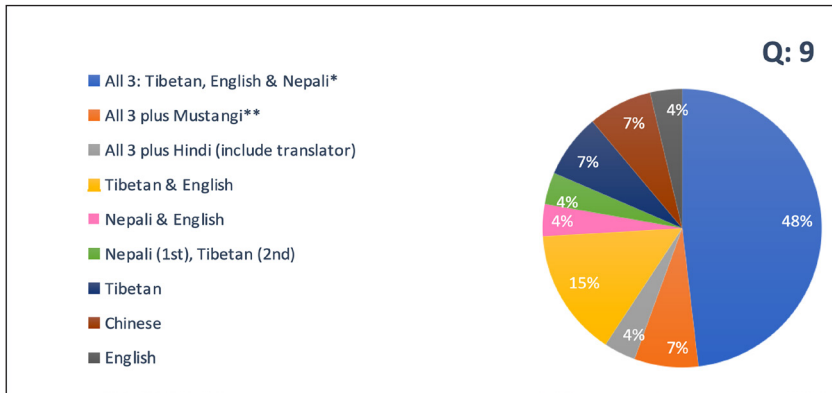
In terms of the *texts to be used and the interpretation in a museum*, all interviewees believed that multiple languages will be needed for future museum labels and text panels. Our informant at Gheling Monastery suggested Nepali, English and Tibetan, supplemented by the explanations of museum guards (Pie chart 4).⁸⁶ Lama Tsering Tashi too identified these three languages, though in a different order—Tibetan, Nepali and English for main titles—with descriptions overall in English. Kagbeni Khenpo initially considered English and Nepali, with each object including information on the function, date, and usage.⁸⁷ Interviewees in the Kagbeni area noted clear preferences for producing interpretive materials in Tibetan, Nepali and English with the addition of Hindi. Most envisaged that interpretives could take the form of leaflets or be uploaded on social media. Other suggestions included television, newspapers, and flyers for local distribution.

Summary

The observations and interviews presented above have to be seen against major changes in the development of the Mustang region since 2010. In particular, the

86 But if there were too many visitors, he noted, you would need labels next to objects. Interview, September 28, 2018.

87 Interview, September 29, 2018. He later suggested English (mostly), Tibetan, Nepali, and possibly some Chinese. (Interview April 8, 2019).



Pie chart 4: Q.9 – Which languages should be on the texts in the new museum?

completion of a road and its subsequent expansion, which is still ongoing, has offered the opportunity for larger construction and restoration projects, and this has also affected the monasteries. In addition, the monasteries' leaders have become widely travelled, with a large diaspora community in and around New York city and spiritual communities in Taiwan and Southeast Asia, inviting yearly visits which are also used to raise funds. The public spaces of museums are known to them through these travels, but also through the tourist areas of the Kathmandu valley, with the fees charged there likely serving as an example. The idea to create a museum derives from these experiences, as well as the impulse to offer something geared towards visitors who do not come to the monastery for religious reasons.

The impulse to create museums can thus be seen as a by-product of modernising the monastery in emulation of Western museum spaces. The Monastery leadership is influenced by the opinions of visitors, with those raising the possibility of funding particularly influential.⁸⁸ As the museum at Chöde Monastery and the temporary display at Namgyal Monastery demonstrate, the selection and quality of the objects to be displayed, and whether they are actually attractive enough to increase the target audience or charge the fees proposed, only

⁸⁸ In the case of Namgyal Monastery, the proposals made by our project, which do not promise funding, compete with at least two other proposals that do promise at least partial funding.

plays a very minor role.⁸⁹ As such, the imagined displays compare well to early museums in Ladakh, such as Likir Monastery.

By 2021, this research project is aware of four museum projects in the Mustang region. The future of Chöde Monastery's small museum is unclear since the school building that housed it has partially collapsed in 2019 due to heavy rain. Namgyal Monastery has started to build a two-room museum in front of the complex with outside funding, but what it should contain, remains a matter of discussion. The abbot of Kagbeni has also considered the establishment of a museum, and in this case the sacred sculptures and books would remain in the assembly hall of the old temple while other objects, such as *tangka*, stone carvings and household items, are to be displayed on the floor underneath. Finally, Dzong Monastery in Lower Mustang has reconstructed its main temple after it was damaged in the 2015 earthquake with US Ambassadors funds, and now plans to display a part of its collection of sacred sculpture in the newly constructed upper floor of the temple. It is noteworthy, that each of these projects is intimately tied to a major construction project, be it the addition of a new

⁸⁹ At Chöde Monastery in Lo Möntang, Swiss visitors suggested financing a catalogue for the objects in the museum established within the school there. This project was pursued for some time but apparently abandoned.

building or the complete reconstruction or restoration of an old one.

LADAKH

The core region of Ladakh is located along the Indus River flowing from West Tibet to Pakistan (Fig. 3), and including the valleys immediately north and south of it such as Nubra and Zangskar. Much of this region became a loose part of the Tibetan Empire when it was used as a corridor for Tibetan troops to secure the strategically important passes around present-day Gilgit (former Bolor). Rock engravings and inscriptions from this period and leading up to the twelfth century along the Indus document this activity.⁹⁰ At that time, warfare connected to the spread of Islamic kingdoms in the wider region of present-day Afghanistan has pushed long standing trade connections between South and East Asia into these mountainous areas.

Profit from trade also explains the wealth of the West Tibetan kingdom of Purang-Guge, of which Ladakh became part in the late tenth century. The ruling elite of the Purang-Guge Kingdom systematically supported monastic Buddhism, and the earliest monasteries preserved today are the result of this campaign. While from the late tenth to the middle of the thirteenth century Ladakh was first part of and then closely aligned with the Purang Guge Kingdom, it appears to have been largely ruled independently as one of three dominions (Ngari Korsum, *mnqa' ris 'khor gsum*). The later Ladakhi Kingdom, which emerged in the late sixteenth century, traces itself back to this dominion, and ruled the region largely independently until the nineteenth century (Fig. 37).⁹¹ Not accidentally then, the region has preserved its own dialect, the pronunciation of which

90 See the detailed study of one of the largest clusters of such inscriptions at the Alchi bridge in Tsuguhito Takeuchi, "Old Tibetan Rock Inscriptions Near Alchi," *Journal of Research Institute: Historical Development of the Tibetan Languages* 49 (2013), 29–69.

91 Luciano Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh c. 950–1842 A.D.* (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1977).

appears to reflect an earlier layer in the development of the Tibetan language.⁹²

Culturally, the Purang-Guge Kingdom—and even more so Ladakh—was closely connected to the Kashmir Valley, from which it drew both Buddhist teachings and material culture. The Alchi group of monuments, datable to the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries and clustered in a small geographic area in Lower Ladakh, are a late expression of this connection.⁹³ The establishment of Tibetan Buddhist schools from Central Tibet from the thirteenth century onwards then resulted in a reorientation towards Tibet and an alignment with artistic developments there. The monastery collections of the region document both phases, with the earliest objects recorded so far dating back to the seventh century (Fig. 38).⁹⁴

In Ladakh, there is a clear distinction between main monasteries and branches spread throughout the villages. The main monasteries are large institutions with many monks and the main monastic schools (Fig. 39). They are linked to even larger monastic higher education centres in other parts of India, in particular, Bylakuppe, Karnataka, and Dehradun, Uttarakhand. It is the main monasteries that own substantial collections of portable items, while those of branch monasteries are relatively small. The entirety of the collections is administered by the main monastery, which also decides on the caretakers of branch institutions and undertakes inventorying (Fig. 8). The monastic landscape of Ladakh is more diverse than that of Mustang, with

92 In this way Ladakh parallels the situation in Mustang insofar that, at the very periphery of the Tibetan cultural realm, an older dialect of the language remains. But Ladakhi is much more widespread than Seke, reflecting the size of the respective political dominions over the more recent centuries.

93 While Likir Monastery and a few scholars still maintain an eleventh century date for these monuments, there is overwhelming evidence for the date provided here, see Christian Luczanits and Jaroslav Poncar, eds. *Alchi, Ladakh's Hidden Buddhist Sanctuary* (Chicago: Serindia, 2023).

94 Comparisons of this bronze to early bronzes of the Palola Śāhi kingdom of Gilgit allow for attributing this bronze to the mid seventh century at the latest. Rob Linrothe's team identified the Buddha more specifically as Nageśvararāja, interpreting the protection from the *uṣṇīṣa* as snakes.



Fig. 37: Leh Castle and Palace, two royal foundations, in 2016

Photo C. Luczanits D4893.

main monasteries of the Drikung, Drukpa, Geluk, and Sakya Schools spread throughout the region. So far, our project has only worked with monastic institutions of the Drukpa School, namely Hemis (Fig. 39) and Chemrey (Fig. 45), located along the main valley, which is also the region most affected by tourism and modernisation.

The region of Ladakh has been open to tourism from 1974 and has since had considerable exposure to Western and more recently, domestic tourists from other areas of India. This influx, along with Ladakhi youth being educated abroad, has considerably altered local culture, with many traditional arts and crafts on the verge of dying out.⁹⁵

In Ladakh, the first wave of museums were established in the early 1990s, when rather small spaces within the main monasteries were dedicated to “old objects” of little or no religious value. The museum at Likir Monastery can serve as an example in this regard, as it remained practically unchanged since its establishment. At that time, the main instigation to create a museum was to cater to the interests of foreign tourists, with the possibility of charging an entrance fee.

⁹⁵ See Ngawang Rinchen, “Vision for Heritage Records” (paper presented at the “Tibetan Monastery Collections and Museums: Traditional Practices and Contemporary Issues” conference, London, SOAS, November 8–10, 2018).

For about a quarter of a century, Ladakhi monasteries hesitated to sell tickets for monastery visits, but they came to realise that the sharp increase of such visits by tourists did not result in a similar increase of donations, as would traditionally be the case. Creating a museum thus made sure that tourists also contributed to the maintenance of the monastery.

Early visitors to the region would photograph monastic interiors with substantial collections of precious sculptures and other objects (Fig. 12), while those coming a few years later hardly saw any. Thefts and illicit sales accompanying the opening of the region to tourism resulted in the monasteries hiding large parts of their collection in storage. In this regard, the opening of a museum at Hemis Monastery in 2007, which made some of the objects originally on display available again (Fig. 40), marks the beginning of a new trend to make hidden collections accessible once more, leading to the developments that our project is directly engaged in. A new attitude towards making some of a monastery’s collection known can also be seen in the pioneering catalogue of Phyang Monastery published under the leadership of Chetsang Rinpoche Könchok Tenzin Künsang Thrinle Lhündrup (*dkon mchog bstan 'dzin kun bzang phrin las lhun grub*, b. 1946) the 37th throne holder of the

Fig. 38: The oldest metal image documented so far in Ladakh

Buddha; Gilgit (Greater Kashmir), mid-seventh century; cast metal alloy with silver inlay in eyes; h. 20 cm; Chemrey Museum [previously in the Chemrey Gönkhang]. Photo C. Luczanits 2013 D6983, courtesy of Chemrey Monastery.





Fig. 39: Hemis Monastery with the museum building in the front left of the central compound in 2018

Photo C. Luczanits D6122.



Fig. 40: Three Buddha bronzes from Kashmir in the display rearranged in 2015

Hemis Museum, photo C. Luczanits D5352, courtesy of Hemis Monastery.

Drikung Kagyü Lineage.⁹⁶ Tikse Monastery also created its own museum. The museum in Stakna Monastery was set up in 2007, located initially on the upper floor in the Rinpoche's quarters, but was later moved downstairs because the Rinpoche needed the space.⁹⁷ In one

⁹⁶ Binczik and Fischer, *Verborgene Schätze aus Ladakh - Hidden Treasures from Ladakh*.

⁹⁷ Interview with two monks, April 12, 2017. We are grateful to Kunsang Namgyal Lama for interpreting many of these interviews in Ladakh.

large former assembly hall, with rows of *tangka* hanging down from the ceiling, the space consists of low desk cases arranged around the walls below the murals, containing copper and brass teapots, copper vessels, arms and armour, trumpets, cymbals, horse decoration and saddles (Fig. 41). In terms of material culture, there are consistent categories of objects displayed in monastery museums in Ladakh: statues, *tangka* and other ritual objects; manuscripts and books; objects associated with

Fig. 41: View of a section of the museum in Stakna Monastery with custom made cases below the murals

Photo C. Luczanits 2017 D1278, courtesy of Stakna Monastery.



the history of the monasteries, the founders and the lamas⁹⁸; kitchen utensils⁹⁹; and arms and armour.

Managing a Collection

The Drukpa School monastery of Hemis is arguably the richest monastic institution in Ladakh (Fig. 39). It was founded in 1630 by the charismatic Drukpa teacher Taktsang Repa Ngawang Gyatso (*stag tshang ras pa ngag dbang rgya mtsho*, 1574–1651) with the support of king Senggé Namgyal (*seng ge rnam rgyal*, c. 1570–1642), during whose tenure, the fairly young Ladakhi Kingdom reached its apex (Fig. 42).¹⁰⁰ Linked to the royal house since, Hemis owns large areas of land¹⁰¹ and administers around two hundred branch institutions throughout

98 *Tangka* paintings which depict the lineage, deities, prayer wheels or items such as hats, carpets, saddles.

99 Teapots, bowls, jugs, containers, plates and ladles etc.

100 On the murals going back to the foundation of Hemis and Chemrey, see Chiara Bellini, “Examples of Beauty At the Court of Seng ge rnam rgyal: The Style of Painting in Ladakh in the 17th and 18th Centuries,” in *Tibetan Art Between Past and Present, Studies Dedicated to Luciano Petech. Proceedings of the Conference Held in Rome on the 3rd November 2010*, ed. Elena de Rossi Filibeck (Pisa, Roma: Fabrizio Serra, 2012).

101 The Chakdzod mentions 30,000 to 40,000 Kanal, which would be a maximum of around 5,000 acres or 20 square kilometres; Nawang Othsal, “Managing a Monastery Collection” (paper presented at the “Tibetan Monastery Collections and Museums:

Ladakh. Consequently, the hidden treasures of Hemis are legendary, both locally and internationally. At the time of our research, the daily affairs of the Hemis Monastery were run by a Chakdzod, Nawang Othsal, whose title translates to “treasurer”, but the treasure in this case is the entire monastery and its estates. He was appointed and is supervised directly by His Holiness the 12th Gyalwang Drukpa Jikmé Pema Wangchen (*jigs med pad+ma dbang chen*, b. 1963), who is the supreme head of the Drukpa Lineage. In fact, it was the wish of the Gyalwang Drukpa to open a museum in 2007, and all decisions pertaining to the museum are those of His Holiness (as discussed below). This direct leadership is the result of the fact that the current incarnation of Taktsang Repa, who would be the nominal head of Hemis Monastery, is living in Tibet and thus not available to lead it.¹⁰²

In his presentation at the workshop in 2018, Chakdzod Nawang Othsal provided a concise overview of the position of Hemis Monastery in Ladakh and its

Traditional Practices and Contemporary Issues” conference, London: SOAS, November 8–10, 2018; interpreted by Nawang Rinchen).

102 Hemis maintains contact with the Taktsang Rinpoche as far as possible under the political circumstances.

administrative structure.¹⁰³ The latter was laid down in three silk documents made under Gyalse Rinpoche Mipham Tsewang (*mi pham tshe dbang*, c. 1745–1808)—who is also considered the 3rd incarnation of Taktsang Repa—and Kathok Rigdzin Tsewang Norbu (*ka thog rig 'dzin tshe dbang nor bu*, 1698–1755), when the latter was negotiating peace in the area. Of these, the red silk brocade contains the regulations for the monks, the yellow silk brocade those regarding the lands, and the white silk brocade the administration of the monastery.

What interests us here is the administration pertaining to the collections. The overall keeper of the monastery, and thus the person responsible for all its collections including those of affiliated monasteries and villages, is the so-called *dunyer* (*'du gnyer*), who has other keepers under him, while on a shrine level the *konyer* (*könnyer*; *dkon gnyer*) has responsibility for a shrine's content. Storages and boxes are sealed, often by multiple representatives, and inventories are checked at regular intervals. If an object, such as a mask necessary for a dance, is lent to another branch, it is the *dunyer* who hands the object over, takes note of it, and collects it again.

As Chakdzod Nawang Othsal points out, the origin of the monastery's rich collection is based on religious custom. When a prince of the royal house entered the monasteries, his personal possessions may have been given as well; often statues are donated in the memory of a deceased. In addition, in its role as overall caretaker Hemis appears to have assembled objects from all its branches, especially when their preservation was endangered. A recent example is an early thirteenth century wooden door of a temple ruin in Sumda Chung (Fig. 43), which was transported to Hemis in 2015 once the ruined structure that was holding it had given away completely and the new road enabled its transportation (Fig. 44). On a visit in 2019, this door was on display in the first room of the museum.

103 Nawang Othsal, "Managing a Monastery Collection."

Hemis Museum

The richest monastery in Ladakh, Hemis, has the most extensive collection of objects and the largest museum in the region.¹⁰⁴ Opened since 2007, the museum has been laid out in galleries devoted to sculpture, ritual implements, paintings, weapons, dance costume, and kitchen utensils, and is located in the basement of the monastic complex, with no natural light.¹⁰⁵

Given the complex administrative structure of Hemis Monastery, with senior monks taking on diverse roles over the years, the administration of the museum simply represents a contemporary variant of this. Four monks are appointed by the Chakdzod to manage the museum. The monks are supported by two security guards, lay followers who have taken on this duty after their retirement, one of them also staying in the immediate vicinity of the museum overnight. There is a strict security protocol that guides the opening and closing of the museum and CCTV is installed. Visitors are asked to leave their cameras and smartphones in lockers to protect the objects.¹⁰⁶ The museum objects are also recorded in an inventory, which is checked once a year.¹⁰⁷

It is clear that the appointment of monks to administrative positions within the monastery also considers the candidates' abilities and interests. When Christian Luczanits worked with the monks on reorganising the display within the museum in spring 2015, the

104 The former Hemis Chagdod, Nawang Othsal noted, "In this museum we have a huge amount of statues. We also have armour and above that we also have earlier traditional kitchen stuff, the material we are using. We have a library also, where we have Kanjur and Tanjur. So many books are there, about the lives of Lamas, the life of head Lama also ..." Nawang Othsal, "Managing a Monastery Collection."

105 The museum is now laid out in five galleries: the first is an introduction to the collections, followed by display cases focusing on guru Padmasambhava, *tangka* paintings, weapons, masks, dance costumes and kitchen utensils (Jigmat Chonjor, "Hemis Museum: Its Development and Prospects", paper presented at the "Tibetan Monastery Collections and Museums: Traditional Practices and Contemporary Issues" conference, London: SOAS, November 8–10, 2018, interpreted by Nawang Rinchen).

106 Othsal, "Managing a Monastery Collection."

107 This appears to be a traditional type of inventory, the details of which are unclear.



**Fig. 42: Mural of Taktsang Repa
surrounded by Drukpa masters**

Old Temple of Hemis Monastery; seventeenth century with multiple restorations. Photo C. Luczanits 2016 D3911, courtesy of Hemis Monastery.

monks—Kalzang Dawa, Nawang Thinles and Nawang Namgyal as well as Jigmat Chonjor—quickly understood the intentions behind the redisplay and provided valuable suggestions. Indeed, the display of the Cham dancer’s case was entirely their creation.

Jigmat Chonjor, who was in charge of the museum at the time of the workshop, first joined the team in

a secondary position and learned on the job. He was not daunted by the responsibility for objects that potentially are of high economic value. By contrast, his predecessor, Gen Sangye Tsering, who was appointed to this position when the museum was founded in 2007, had no chance to familiarise himself with this new



Fig. 43: Ancient wooden door of Sumda Chung in situ in 1998

Photo C. Luczanits 109,48, WHAV.



Fig. 44: Detail of the wooden door of Sumda Chung photographed in 2016 at Hemis Monastery

Photo C. Luczanits D4990, courtesy of Hemis Monastery.

responsibility. He was probably chosen for the position due to his scholarly historical interests.¹⁰⁸

The emergence and future of Hemis Museum was the subject of Jigmat Chonjor's presentation at the

¹⁰⁸ In his workshop presentation Jigmat Chonjor described the situation as follows: "As earlier my administrator [Chakdzod] told you yesterday, the museum belongs to the monastery. All the departments are run by the monks. Monks are actually only trained in the traditional way, not specific with regard to the museum. For example, I have been working in the museum for the last nine years, but this doesn't mean that I am highly expert in all the statues and all these things, but because I love my monastery and I really want to take care of this. This is why I have worked for nine years in the museum" (Chonjor, "Hemis Museum: Its Development and Prospects").

workshop.¹⁰⁹ As he recounts, Hemis Museum was founded at the instigation of His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa to make sacred objects from the storage, the so-called "dark room", available again for bestowing their blessings. Many of the sculptures that are in the museum today were actually on display in the temples previously (Fig.12), but stored away once the region was opened to tourism and thefts had occurred. Both this intention and the focus on sculptures in the first part of the museum make Kutenkhang (*sku rten khang*, a structure for bodily supports), as the museum is called

¹⁰⁹ Chonjor, "Hemis Museum: Its Development and Prospects."

in Ladakhi or Tibetan, a fitting local designation for this site.

A first meeting about founding a museum took place in 1998, and subsequently a large multi-storied building was constructed for this purpose in the corner of the monastic courtyard. Today, the museum occupies just one floor of this four-storey building, but it was planned from the outset to expand it to three floors. The museum opened in 2007, even though the building was not yet finished in its entirety, which is a good indication of the perceived urgency.

The original display was conceived by a group of senior monks and local scholars. Objects were brought from the “dark room” on a first come basis and a selection was made from those items. It is clear that only a small part of the available collection was used. While the display was organised by object type in the succession of sculptures, ritual implements, *tangka* and documents, dance, and items for daily use, the display within those sections and the cases were not organised as such.¹¹⁰ It is this mixture and the absence of labels that resulted in some critical comments in the visitor’s book.¹¹¹ These comments ultimately brought Rob Linrothe and Christian Luczanits to Hemis and Chemrey museums in 2013. This first visit was mediated by Nawang Jinpa (Estelle Atlan), a nun tasked with helping the museum in addition to her historical research.¹¹²

The one-floor museum is only seen as the first step in getting the new institution running. There is a plan to fill additional floors of the museum building with displays in future, and ideas for thematic galleries in the new display are being discussed. Proposals presented by Jigmat Chonjor included a Kashmir sculpture gallery,

110 While it is clear that considerable reflection has gone into the original display, the monks and local scholars involved lacked experience in arranging the items in a museum context.

111 The absence of labels was partially made up for by the publication of a museum catalogue by Khanchen Tsewang Rigzin, with rudimentary information about selected items: Khanchen Tsewang Rigzin, ed. *Catalogue Hemis Museum* (Leh-Ladakh: Hemis Monastery, [no date]).

112 As Jigmat Chonjor reports, other expert visitors to the museum also provided critical suggestions.

a *tangka* gallery, and a Hemis Buddhism gallery, as well as a section dedicated to the popular early Tibetan ascetic Milarepa (1040–1123).¹¹³ Clearly there is a greater emphasis on information with outside visitors in mind than was previously the case.

There is no doubt that Hemis Museum has become a key cultural institution in Ladakh, visited by both locals and tourists. As of 2018 almost 9,000 locals and 130,000 tourists visit the museum each year. Of the latter, the majority are domestic tourists while foreign tourists have decreased from 30,000–40,000 a year to around 18,000.¹¹⁴ The plans to expand the museum and to make visits more convenient will only enhance its importance in future.¹¹⁵

Chemrey Museum

Chemrey Monastery (Fig. 45) on the east side of the Indus Valley opposite Hemis is intimately connected to Hemis and under the same spiritual leadership. Chemrey was founded by Taktsang Repa in 1644 in the memory of king Senggé Namgyal, and consecrated in 1646 (Fig. 46).¹¹⁶ It was established in a former fortification that also housed a small temple, known as Lhamo Lhakhang owned by the king.¹¹⁷ While also demanding

113 Hemis owns a *tangka* set depicting Milarepa’s life and many sculptures depicting him. As teacher of Rechungpa Dorjé Drakpa (*ras chung pa rdo rje grags pa*, 1083/4–1161), he is also a crucial master of the Drukpa tradition.

114 These numbers were provided by Jigmat Chonjor in his answer to a question after his presentation. The number of local visitors is known, as they are given free tickets for the museum visit.

115 Being in a modern concrete building without heat and the requirement to take one’s shoes off for visiting, the museum is known for being extremely cold even in the middle of summer. Remedies in this regard are planned as well, but difficult to implement.

116 Luciano Petech, *The Kingdom of Ladakh C. 950–1842 a.d.* (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1977), 57.

117 Information provided in Tsering Tharchin, “Traditional Monastery Collection Records” (paper presented at the “Tibetan Monastery Collections and Museums: Traditional Practices and Contemporary Issues” conference, London: SOAS, November 8–10, 2018).



Fig. 45: View of Chemrey Monastery in 2018, with the new building housing the new museum added in front of the central complex

Photo C. Luczanits D6508.

considerable land,¹¹⁸ this monastery has been more exposed to historical conflicts than Hemis. At the time of his presentation at the workshop, Tsering Tharchin was in charge of the construction of the new building which includes the new museum. He provided a short historical overview, presented the main festivals celebrated at Chemrey, and explained its estates. Among its sacred treasures, he emphasised a set of 29 canonical volumes written in gold and silver script (Fig. 47), as well as its images (Fig. 38) and scroll paintings (Fig. 48).

At the suggestion of the Gyalwang Drukpa Rinpoche, Chemrey established a museum in the former living area of His Holiness at the very top of the monastery. It comprised six rooms—an entrance area, a large main space with deity figures, ritual instruments, musical instruments, arms and armour, followed by a chamber devoted to objects linked to the founder of the monastery. There was a display area for kitchen utensils and a small gallery for a set of *tangka* dedicated to the life of the Buddha (Fig. 54). According to Tsering Tharchin, the museum displays 70 per cent of the collection,

¹¹⁸ According to Tsering Tharchin, Chemrey Monastery houses a total of 120 monks, it has over 60 monastic branches all over Ladakh but predominantly in Changthang, the eastern area of Ladakh. Its land ownership amounts to some 40,000 Kanal, which is similar in size to that of Hemis, but dominated by pasture land (Tharchin, “Traditional Monastery Collection Records”).

which has been carefully selected by the Management Committee of the Monastery. Its display and arrangement are discussed elsewhere in this volume in some detail and thus not focused on here (see Chapter 6).¹¹⁹

In the meantime, Chemrey has established a new museum space resulting from an expansion of the monastery’s courtyard. Located on a hill, this expansion necessitated the construction of a four-storey building on the front side of the monastery, the top floors of which were planned to be used for a museum and a library (Fig. 45). However, neither the spatial divisions of the floors nor the windows were adapted specifically to this purpose, as the same principal spatial units are replicated on all four floors (Fig. 49).

It was at this stage that our project was asked to create a proposal on how to use the top floor for a museum and the floor underneath for a library. The resulting concept not only arranged the available objects thematically in the museum space, in part reacting to the emphasis on the history of the monastery and its founder in the original museum, but also relates the two superimposed spaces to each other (Fig. 49). In particular,

¹¹⁹ See also Louise Tythacott, “Transforming Chemrey Museum: Monastic Curating and Co-Curating in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery in Ladakh,” in *The Museum in Asia*, ed. Yunci Cai (Routledge: Leicester Readers in Museum Studies, 2023).



**Fig. 46: Mural of Taksang Repa
surrounded by Drukpa masters**

Lama Lhakhang of Chemrey Monastery; late seven-
teenth century with multiple restorations. Photo C.
Luczanits 2018 D4554, courtesy of Chemrey Monastery.



Fig. 47: Title page of a *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript with Buddha Śākyamuni and eighteen-armed form of goddess *Prajñāpāramitā* on display in the Chemrey Museum

Ladakh, seventeenth century; Paper, silver and gold ink, and silk; measurements. Photo J. Poncar, 2019 D7556; courtesy of Chemrey Monastery.

a major fifteenth century sculpture of an enthroned Buddha Śākyamuni and *tangka* representing his life were placed along the back wall of the space (Fig. 54). The corresponding space in the library underneath will be occupied by the Buddha’s teachings in the form of the Tibetan Buddhist canon. The case with a prominent sculpture of the monastery’s founder, Taktsang Repa, and other historical items is juxtaposed with the seat of the present teacher for teaching sessions within the library. The proposed concepts were accepted by the monastery’s management committee, which also decided to prioritise the museum.

Subsequent work, thus, focused on the museum and continued with the design of cases (Fig. 51) to be produced locally in wood, the making of these cases (Fig. 52), and their painting as desired by the monastery. Finally, in June 2019 the objects were moved from the old museum space into the new one, with themed areas dedicated to, *inter alia*, music and dance, the life of the Buddha, the history of the monastery, ritual artefacts, Mongol dress and metalware (Fig. 53). Overall, the museum is designed so that visitors are encouraged

to move in a clockwise direction, the direction of ritual circumambulation (*korwa, skor ba*).¹²⁰ The new museum space is open to the public, but issues of high light exposure and lighting remain to be solved.¹²¹

As in Hemis Museum, the new space at Chemrey represents a compromise between Western ideas of a museum display and traditional forms, which are retained in the painting of the room and its cases.¹²² The modern space in concrete clearly favoured this type of display. New for the region is that the cases themselves are adapted to the objects to be displayed in them, and that there are three slim cases that emphasise a single sculpture each (Fig. 54).

Interviews and Discussion

As with Mustang, the initial question asked of all monks was their reason for wanting to develop a museum in

¹²⁰ Tythacott, “Transforming Chemrey Museum.”

¹²¹ The Covid pandemic has suspended this work, but it is hoped that it can continue in the near future.

¹²² See Tythacott, “Transforming Chemrey Museum.”

Fig. 48: A *tangka* of a Tibetan Teacher in Amitābha's Pure Land in the collection of Chemrey Monastery

Central Tibet, nineteenth century, mineral pigments and distemper on cloth; 68 x 43 x 3 cm (painted canvas 29.5 x 21 cm).
Photo C. Luczanits 2018 D4457.



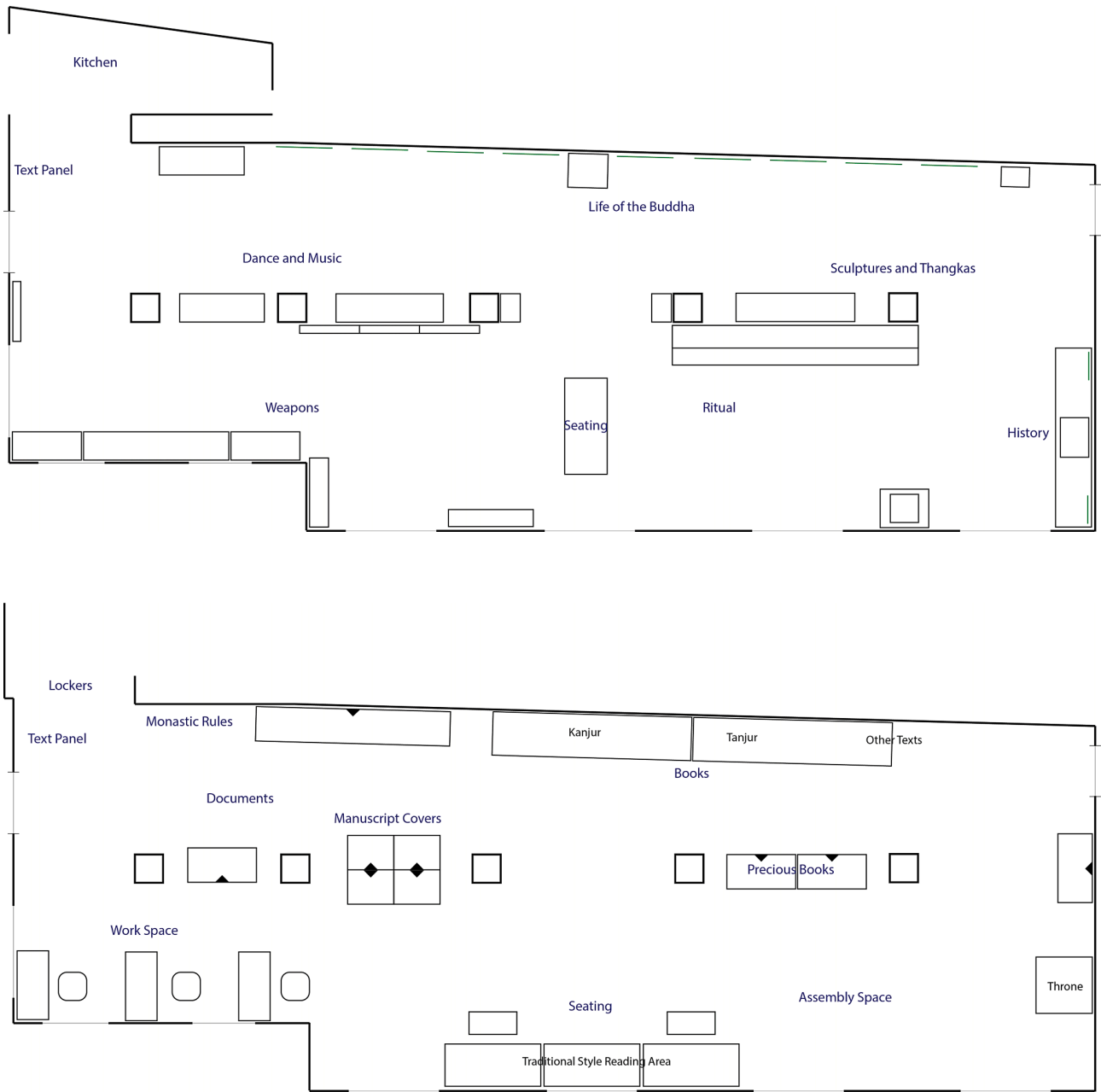


Fig. 49: The corresponding concepts of the new museum (top) and library (bottom) spaces planned for Chemrey Monastery in 2017
 Planned by Christian Luczanits, Kunsang Namgyal Lama and Louise Tythacott.

Fig. 50: The empty architectural space to be used for the new Chemrey museum at first inspection in 2017
Photo C. Luczanits D1145.



Fig. 51: Three-dimensional plan of the new Chemrey museum display including case designs
Plan by C. Luczanits.



Fig. 52: The making of the cases according to the plan in summer 2018
Photo C. Luczanits D8756.





Fig. 53: The new Chemrey museum display as completed in June 2019

Photo C. Luczanits D7660.

their monastery. Unlike in Mustang, however, the influence of a head Lama or Rinpoche tended to be cited first of all as a fundamental rationale. At Hemis, in particular, informants consistently stated it was specifically due to the Rinpoche, the 12th Gyalwang Drukpa, Head of the Drukpa lineage, that the museum was set up. The former Hemis Chakdzod or Chief Administrator, Nawang Othsal asserted it was “... under the kind instructions of His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa” that they decided to create a public museum.¹²³ Jigmat Chonjor at Hemis concurred: “it was with the kind blessing of His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa that they were able to build this museum”¹²⁴ (Fig. 55); the Hemis Museum guidebook too explicitly acknowledges the vision and design of this Rinpoche.¹²⁵ At Chemrey, the Chakdzod, Nawang Chospel and Tsering Tharchin both asserted that it was on the suggestion of the 12th Gyalwang Drukpa that they opened their museum.¹²⁶ This was a way, as Bloom notes, “to display for the benefit of visitors those objects that had long been hidden away” (see Chapter 6, page 193 f.).

Stakna Monastery museum was set up on the advice of the Archaeological Survey of India in 2007 as, according

¹²³ Othsal, “Managing a Monastery Collection.”

¹²⁴ Chonjor, “Hemis Museum: Its Development and Prospects.”

¹²⁵ Khanchen Tswang Rigzin, *Hemis Museum (Sku-rtem khang)* (Leh-Ladakh: Hemis Museum, nd), 12.

¹²⁶ Tharchin, “Traditional Monastery Collection Records.”

to one of the monks interviewed, “they have much old stuff and needed to put it all together” (Fig. 56).¹²⁷ In the monastery guidebook, it was the Rev Kushok Thiksey who wrote the introductory message:

There is a great need to preserve and promote the valued ancient Tibetan cultural heritage in its pristine tradition in our part of the Himalayan region. We need to ensure that we save and retain all that has been suppressed from the county of origin within this unique ancient civilization.¹²⁸

In the guidebook’s Foreword, the Stakna Rinpoche added:

Since Stakna Monastery also has huge collections of various old and antique statues, thangka-paintings and scriptures, we felt to preserve and conserve this vast and rare heritage in a separate house in a specific way. For this purpose, the monastery built a good museum ...¹²⁹

As in Mustang, preservation, protection and security were other key reasons cited for establishing museums. Many monasteries have large, historic collections, but for the security reasons outlined above (page 36 ff.),

¹²⁷ Interview, April 12, 2017.

¹²⁸ NA, *Stakna Monastery and its Museum* (Leh: Stakna Labrang, 2007), v.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, vii.



Fig. 54: Central area of the new Chemrey museum display with three sculpture cases and the paintings of the life of the Buddha along the back wall

Photo C. Luczanits 2019 D7617.

only accommodate a small percentage of their objects in the shrines and temples. A number of respondents asserted that collections would be more secure if placed on public display.¹³⁰ At Phyang Monastery, as one monk put it, in a museum “the objects won’t be lost”.¹³¹ In certain monasteries, individual monks are the designated key-holders for the museum rooms: they act as the guardians of these spaces, unlocking the doors and often remaining in the entrance areas in order to watch

¹³⁰ Interviews with Sangye Tsering (April 8, 2017) and Ngawang Rinchen (April 2, 2017).

¹³¹ Interview, April 5, 2017.

over visitors. During a visit to Stakna Monastery by the authors, the lights in the single room of the museum were not working,¹³² and this darkened space, with limited visibility of the objects in cases, seemed to function fundamentally as a safe, secure storage area for the placement of their collections.

The importance of access to the collections for both “blessing” and education were noted as other key reasons for the development of monastic museums in Ladakh. Jigmat Chonjor argues that the main reason

¹³² Except through windows from outside. Monks said that the lights were not on in the museum due to lack of electricity.



Fig. 55: Louise Tythacott interviewing Jigmat Chonjor in the courtyard of Hemis Monastery in April 2017

Photo Kunsang Namgyal Lama.

for the establishment of the Hemis Museum was that the collections were considered to be inaccessible, and so were moved into a public space to give people the opportunity “to have blessings and to worship.”¹³³ The introductory panel to Hemis Museum reaffirms this:

The core mission of the museum is to share the blessing of sacred objects with the general public and to preserve the unique heritage of Ladakh and of the Drukpa Lineage. The museum is used as a means to both educate visitors and to keep precious artifacts safe from time.

A number of monks stressed the importance of showing Ladakhi and Buddhist heritage to outsiders, which has clear implications for the tourist industry. The Hemis guidebook notes: “The museum has come into being at a time when Ladakh has already seen the impact of modern international tourism for three decades”.¹³⁴ Exhibiting the collections is

... an urgent need in the present international scenario ... It is hoped that the museum will enable the modern people to appreciate the great achievement of the ancient people in the field of art and

culture at a time when we are overwhelmed by the advances in science and technology.¹³⁵

Bloom notes that the mission of Chemrey Museum is “to preserve Ladakhi cultural heritage” and “to educate the local population and empower them as keepers of their own cultural heritage” (Chapter 6, page 200). A monk interviewed at Likir Monastery explained how they wanted to “show ... the cultural stuff” because they “have foreigners coming”.¹³⁶ Rieuf in this volume notes how it was the monks of Matho Monastery who initiated the museum project, and this she associates with broader cultural shifts in Ladakh due to global influences (Chapter 8, page 225). As with the responses in Mustang, financial issues were considered significant too: revenue from museum entrance fees is increasingly important for monasteries with museums. Ladakh’s museums, then, are to a degree pursuing a Western-style approach under the impact of increased foreign tourism.

The implications of the relocations of sacred Buddhist objects to a museum display space was one of the key questions in the interviews. And similar to Mustang, responses made it clear that objects are fundamentally the same whether on a temple altar surrounded by incense, flowers and other offerings, or placed on a plinth

¹³³ Chonjor, “Hemis Museum: Its Development and Prospects.”

¹³⁴ Rigzin, *Hemis Museum*, 11.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Interview, April 4, 2017.

Fig. 56: Louise Tythacott and Kunsang Namgyal Lama interviewing a monk at Stakna in April 2017

Photo C. Luczanits 3039.



in a glass case in a museum: “They are all objects for the dharma”, noted one monk, “there is no difference”.¹³⁷ Statues thus can be moved from a shrine room or temple to a museum space in a monastery with no requirement for de-consecration ceremonies (Fig. 57). All that is needed, as one monk informed us, is the “right mindset”. For the former Hemis Chagdod, Nawang Othsal: “This is a very important point: the Hemis Museum is not different from the Monastery”.¹³⁸ As the entire monastery compound, including the museum, is sacred space, in theory it is possible to worship—“make puja”—in a monastery museum.

Indeed, incense is lit every day in Hemis Museum and morning prayer is performed. An incense holder was also evident in the entrance area to the original Chemrey Museum and a ritual took place each day in the room originally used by the founder of the monastery. Bloom in this volume discusses the way she observed local visitors to Chemrey Museum worshipping in front of certain images (Chapter 6) and Rieuf remarks too how the space of the new museum at Matho Monastery was blessed by the monks in a ceremony before construction started, and that certain lamas sanctified the space as it developed. The monks at Matho will clearly be able to worship in the new museum in future as the

entire monastic complex is sacred (Chapter 8). However, these monks specified that religious artefacts could not be placed in the stairwell because of “feet turning towards them between the steps” and that statues of the Buddhist masters had to be placed lower than the Buddhist manuscripts.¹³⁹ The importance of respecting these spaces is articulated well by Jigmat Chonjor of Hemis Museum:

... we have to remove the shoes. The reason is that it’s a living museum. The local people remove shoes and pray, make prostrations in front of the images because they are sacred objects. Otherwise lay people can walk without attention and it’s not good for the images. We have to pay respect to those images. In English we can put the name “Museum”, but in our language we use the name “*kuten khang*”, this means that it’s like a temple. For this reason, we don’t want to change the name and use a proper translation of the word “museum”. So, local people can easily understand and remove their shoes.¹⁴⁰

With their intention to attract foreign tourists, the audiences to these museums are clearly diverse, and

¹³⁷ Interview, April 8, 2017 (Sangye Tsering).

¹³⁸ Othsal, “Managing a Monastery Collection.”

¹³⁹ It thus is surprising that at Chemrey the planned library space is underneath the museum space. When questioned in this regard, the then Chagdod did not consider this to be a problem.

¹⁴⁰ Chonjor, “Hemis Museum: Its Development and Prospects.”



Fig. 57: Jigmat Chonjor resting on a bench in front of Hemis Museum during the transport of the Padmasambhava sculpture from the old temple to the museum in April 2016

Photo C. Luczanits D9651.

it was evident from interviews and from observations in the museums, that the activities of visitors are not proscribed and people are free to behave in different ways in the spaces.

Museum and temple spaces are obviously laid out and designed in visually and spatially distinctive ways. As one monk stated, in terms of interpretation in the museums: “Tibetans and Ladakhis don’t need labels—they just worship. Outsiders need explanation”.¹⁴¹ At Hemis Monastery, in particular, many of the visitors are either Indian (mainly Hindu) or from other parts of the world, and, if not Buddhist, do not worship the images. Visitors to these monastery museums are varied, and their anticipated perceptions of the materials on display are complex. While the sacredness of the Buddhist material remains the same for believers regardless of its location, the interpretations and views of non-Buddhist museum visitors are clearly very different—and while a multiplicity of perceptions is obviously understood and accepted by monastic communities, all

visitors, regardless of belief, are required to remove their shoes as a sign of respect.

As with Mustang, our interviews also raised the question of *how objects would be selected and who would do this?* Unlike the tendency in Mustang, however, it was evident that decision-making in monasteries in Ladakh is largely communal. All museum-related proposals are discussed by committees, though the Rinpoche (at Hemis) will always have the final say.¹⁴² At Stakna, for example, it was an assembly of monks who decided on what to select and on the organisation of the objects.¹⁴³ At Likir Monastery too, the monks had an initial meeting to agree on selections.¹⁴⁴ At Chemrey, the Chagdod Nawang Chospel reflected with all the monks and selected the objects as a group. They thought about the many possibilities for display and there was a clear

¹⁴² For example, as Tsering Tharchin explained, the Management of the Museum is “Currently a Committee constituted by the monastery, comprising mostly Chemrey Monastery monks in-charge of the inventories” (Tharchin, “Traditional Monastery Collection Records”).

¹⁴³ Interview, April 12, 2017.

¹⁴⁴ Interview, April 4, 2017.

¹⁴¹ Interview, April 8, 2017 (Sangye Tsering).

rationale for the selections.¹⁴⁵ When our project was invited to develop a proposal for a new museum display at Chemrey in 2017 we were required to present our ideas initially to the monastery committee for their approval. As is evident in her chapter, Rieuf consulted with monks and local people every step of the way for the design of the new museum at Matho Monastery (see Chapter 8).

One of the common observations was the desire to draw on outside experts for help with developing museums, an idea previously raised in our interviews in Mustang. One monk explained how at first the idea was just to show objects in boxes, but then they had “much advice from outside”.¹⁴⁶ Jigmat Chonjor noted how at Hemis they consulted with experts from Ladakh and wider afield. He acknowledged, for example, the advice of Christian Luczanits in relation to displaying *tangka* and how Luczanits had explained to the monks the necessity for the paintings to “rest”. We used to “mix everything together”, said Jigmat, then we were advised to display things thematically.¹⁴⁷ The development of Matho Monastery museum outlined in Chapter 8 notes the range of consultation with external specialists. Bloom’s chapter in this volume also discusses the team of scholars from the US and elsewhere who were invited to work on Chemrey’s initial re-displays in 2015.

As with Mustang, one of the questions posed as part of the interviews concerned visitors and museum audiences. Bloom observes how the institutional mission for Chemrey is education for local visitors and tourists alike (Chapter 6, page 200): indeed the previous Chakdzod informed us that Chemrey Monastery is especially keen to target children for their new displays.¹⁴⁸

The price for entry to the old monastery was 20 rupees for locals and 50 for international visitors, though the fee for the new museum has yet to be established.

145 See also Tythacott, “Transforming Chemrey Museum.”

146 Interview, April 8, 2017 (Sangye Tsering).

147 Chonjor, “Hemis Museum: Its Development and Prospects.”

148 They think they have between 200–1,000 visitors per year at the moment but they don’t make calculations. Perhaps 20–30 per day in summer or more.

Indian and foreign visitors are charged 20 rupees at Likir Monastery, whereas locals are free. The monk we interviewed here too noted cultural differences: Indians, he observed, do not tend to climb to the top floor because they are exhausted by the temples, whereas foreigners do. He then reflected wistfully how they should have put the museum lower down.¹⁴⁹ At Matho Monastery too, they are keen to target local people for the new museum: while the museum will be free, visitors can still donate (Chapter 8, page 236).

In relation to the idea of audiences, we also asked questions about the rationale and choices of languages and texts used in the museums. One monk clearly asserted: “Museums should explain things and have labels. This is the role of the museum”.¹⁵⁰ Indeed there was a distinct feeling throughout our interviews that one of the defining features of a museum is the inclusion of labels and written explanation. At Hemis, the present labels are in English with Tibetan names along the tops. The prominent signage before entering the museum is in Tibetan, then Hindi, followed by English. As noted elsewhere in this volume (Bloom, Chapter 6), Nawang Jinpa (Estelle Atlan) worked for a number of years on the research and writing of labels for both Hemis and Chemrey: specifically, the labels in the original Chemrey Museum were researched by a scholar-abbot, Tsewang Rigdzin, from Hemis and then edited and translated by her.¹⁵¹ They decided to write them mainly in English, with Tibetan along the tops, and the labels in the new museum will follow the same format (Tibetan object identifications along the top and the rest in English). At Likir Monastery too English is used for labels, though they will perhaps consider Hindi and Ladakhi in the future.¹⁵² The text panels and labels at Matho Monastery will be in what Rieuf describes as clear and simple “international English”.¹⁵³

149 Interview, April 4, 2017. The move of Chemrey museum to a lower location was also justified on the basis of easier access.

150 Interview, April 8, 2017 (Sangye Tsering).

151 Othsal, “Managing a Monastery Collection.”

152 Interview, April 4, 2017.

153 Rieuf considered Ladakhi, Tibetan and Hindi too but in the end decided against these languages on texts (see Chapter 8, page

Summary

The developments of Western style museums at the monasteries of Hemis and Chemrey is to be seen against the backdrop of a prolonged period of modernisation and the sustained exposure to relatively large numbers of tourists. With the initiative for them coming from their religious head and a structure within the traditional organisation of the monastery, these museums are hybrids. They are temples dedicated to objects without an incentive for the visitors to worship, and they are an accessible storage for items only used on special occasions. Besides sacred objects, they also contain everyday items and curiosities, such as the mummified “vulture’s pup” in Hemis Museum, the viewing of which is considered auspicious.¹⁵⁴

The hybrid nature of these institutions can also be observed in the names used for them. The Tibetan term for museum is Dremtönkhang (*‘grem s ton khang*), literally meaning an exhibition or display space and combining the verbs for “spreading things out” (*‘grem pa*) and “seeing” (*ston pa*) with the word for “room” or “house” (*khang*). However, this term is only used at Likir Monastery for its small museum. Instead, Hemis prefers to call its museum a Kutenkhang (*sku rten khang*), a term that emphasises the sacred images contained within it. The term “museum” is thus only used in English, for foreign consumption.

While these new institutions within the monastery are modern in conception and appearance, their collections are still managed in the traditional manner. To our

238).

154 On this object the 2015 label stated: “This is believed to be a *lak khyi*, a vulture’s pup. Seeing one is believed to be extremely auspicious by the locals, and it thus has a prominent position in this museum. The story goes that, once in a while, a vulture will give birth to an animal looking and sounding like a puppy along with the rest of the eggs. Although this creature has no wings, it is said that to be with its mother, it follows her shadow on the ground. Because of its extreme rarity, the creature is considered a *norbu*, a ‘wish-fulfilling jewel’. They are said to only appear to very wise persons. It seems that the *lak khyi* on display here was the pet of one of the reincarnations of His Holiness Satsang Repa. As such, it is considered particularly auspicious for two reasons: for what it is and for who owned it.”

knowledge, no monastery has so far developed its collections management: the objects are neither uniquely identified, nor is their location tracked. There are lists of items in the museum, either handwritten or computer-typed, but they contain no detailed information on the object. Often, monasteries do not have a monk with sufficient historical interest to evaluate the objects in terms of their age and origin, and it is this fact which led to our monastery collections project.

Equally, the cleaning, conservation, and restoration treatment of objects have been undertaken in the traditional manner. While these traditional tasks are based on considerable expertise, conceptually they are not rooted in the preservation of the object, but in retaining its blessing or auspicious character. This approach also affects the presentation of the objects. In the museum at Hemis almost all objects are either well-preserved or restored, and we know from conversations with monks familiar with the process that broken objects were not chosen, regardless of their age. At Chemrey, by contrast, there is not a single utilitarian object that is not broken—these items have become unusable in terms of their original purpose—while the sacred items presented are in excellent condition.

In other words, the museums of Hemis and Chemrey are modern in their presentation, but their procedures are rooted in tradition, and there is no specialisation in terms of museum tasks. Therefore, they often rely on external expertise for any major changes. Proposals in this regard go through a decision-making process involving several parties and ultimately seeking the approval of His Holiness. This process transforms the outward advice to an internal choice that may well be substantially different from what was originally proposed.

CONCLUSION

This chapter merely summarises the different attitudes around the development of museums within Buddhist monasteries in Mustang and Ladakh. It should be emphasised that while the conversations with monks in Ladakh were based on experience and feedback

in relation to existing museums, in Mustang, the responses from both the monks and local people were more aspirational, as museums have yet to be built. While the collecting and display of artefacts is an integral part of a monastery, the idea of a “museum”—based on the Western notion of a separate space, with objects in glass cases, labels, and access for outside visitors—is relatively new.

As we have seen, monasteries often have an excess of things, many of them originally displayed in their shrine rooms. Our observations have demonstrated how temples and museums have much in common: the objects in both continue to radiate their sacred powers and similar behavioural requirements are deemed necessary—shoes must be removed, purification rituals take place, images may be worshipped, and sacred objects have to be elevated, located away from feet and dirt. Yet the new museums are also distinct in terms of their display technologies—the glass cases, text panels, interpretative labels, lack of a profusion of offerings—and the aspiration to target foreign tourists.

Our interviews and conversations with monks and local people confirm that the emergence of the idea of the museum is tied to global shifts in tourism, domestic as well as foreign, and the concomitant need to preserve these collections in visibly safe spaces. The opening up of these regions to outsiders in the late twentieth century resulted, as we have seen, in thefts which in turn led to the removal, storage and concealment of objects from foreigners. Initially, monastery displays were of objects of low value in terms of the market. Later, when bronze items and other valuable things were included in the displays, the motive was for their protection.

We can see similarities, as well as differences, between the cultural and social situations of the monasteries in Mustang and Ladakh which impact on their desire and ability to develop museums. In both regions, leading monks are keen and actively engaged with the conception of museums in their monasteries, for the reasons just summarised. However, clear differences can be observed in terms of finance and museum governance. The Ladakh region of northwest India is wealthier than

Nepal’s Mustang District and the two main monasteries of our project—Hemis and Chemrey—as rich landowners, have been able to afford the cost of creating additional display rooms within their monastic complexes. Chemrey Monastery, for example, funded an entirely new museum space between 2017 and 2019, complete with specially designed, painted wood and glass cases and lavish interior decoration. Hemis dedicated an entire new building to a museum that eventually will span three floors. In this connection, it is remarkable that even if new structures are built with the establishment of a museum in mind, the architectural plans are not adapted for this purpose, making it rather challenging to arrange displays in these spaces and also limiting the objects that can be displayed successfully. Further, the newly created museum spaces are invariably built in concrete, resulting in an interior temperature that is good for the objects but tends to be too cold for the visitors, especially if shoes are to be removed.

The monasteries in Mustang, by contrast, struggle financially due to their dispersal across multiple locations. While Kagbeni in Lower Mustang has successfully redeveloped its monastic complex, with a new temple and much expanded school buildings, this is largely the result of a single local donor and the dynamism of the Khenpo, his fundraising abilities and his international connections, especially with Buddhists in Taiwan. In all cases the emphasis is on modernising—with abundant use of concrete—and not preservation, the latter often the result of outside initiatives.

Another difference emerging from our research is the role of governance. In the Ladakhi monasteries we worked in, all decision-making is undertaken by committees and final decisions are ultimately in the hands of one person alone—the 12th Gyalwang Drukpa.¹⁵⁵ By contrast, in the monasteries we are familiar with in Mustang, individual monks seem to have much more freedom. The head of the Sakya School, the Sakya

155 As previously noted, our project so far has only worked on museum displays in Drukpa monasteries in Ladakh (with the 12th Gyalwang Drukpa as the head).

Trinzin, for example, has not been involved in the development of museums in Sakya monasteries in Mustang. While he was personally responsible for appointing Khenpo Tenzin Sangpo in Kagbeni, this abbot now seems free to decide upon the development of the monastery, the documentation of its collection and what will go into the future museum. Likewise, the transformation of Namgyal was inspired by and under the leadership of Khenpo Tsewang Rigzin from 2004.

The two regions also differ considerably in terms of the development of their museological landscapes and their relative accessibility for outsiders. Ladakh, which has been open to tourists since 1974, now has an increasing number and variety of museums in its main town, Leh, and it is only a matter of following the main route along the Indus Valley to access the museums of Stakna, Hemis, Chemrey and Matho (Chapter 8) monasteries and Stok palace. Monasteries in Mustang, by contrast—a region only opened to outsiders since the 1990s—are more difficult to reach. Unlike in Ladakh, there is no identifiable town functioning as a hub for culture and tourism. However, the development of a fast road in recent years has already stimulated substantial change.

Despite these differences, our project has encountered these monasteries at a key transitional period—with new ways of caring for and displaying material being actively explored. We are witnessing a shift from the older indigenous practices of “curating” to the cautious embrace of Western museological techniques, which are often combined with local display styles and aesthetics. While Mustang is at an earlier stage, and Ladakh much more developed, overall, our project seems to have arrived in these regions at a crucial time of their museum development.

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