

11 Materializing Buddhist care through conservation at a Sikkim museum

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Abstract This chapter explores what a Himalayan decolonizing museum practice might look like through the case study of the restoration of a consecrated Buddhist statue at Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) in Gangtok, Sikkim. Focusing on the care ethics involved in this conservation work, which was carried out by an exclusively local team of professionals, I show how Himalayan conservation extends beyond the material care of objects to include their intangible religious aspects. The care that unfolded at NIT in 2018 included a complete Buddhist consecration ritual which was considered as (if not more) important than the material work of cleaning the statue, replacing broken parts, and restoring it to its original aesthetic beauty. Caring for Buddhist material objects in a Himalayan museum context thus involves privileging religious concerns and Buddhist beliefs over the secular scientific and aesthetic criteria that prevail in European and North American museums. It also involves addressing very local financial, environmental and ethical challenges. By bringing scholarly discussion on decolonizing conservation into dialogue with this example of how conservation is approached by a local team in Sikkim, this chapter offers insights for museum practice in both the Himalayas and beyond.

Keywords conservation, decolonization, Himalayas, materiality, museology, Sikkim

Introduction

Situated in Gangtok, Sikkim, on the southern slope of the Himalayas, the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) was founded in 1958 by the king, Chögyal Tashi Namgyal (1893–1963), and developed together with his son, Gyelsé Palden Thontup Namgyal (1923–1982).¹ NIT's primary focus has been its library, which contains many Tibetan Buddhist manuscripts. But it also holds a substantial collection of objects, most of them Buddhist, which are displayed in the institute's in-house museum. In 2018 and 2019, NIT implemented a major project to create a database of photographs and information on the objects in its collection. In connection with this, the museum decided that its most important object, a statue of Manjushri,² needed restoration. This triggered a number of problems and questions related to the consecrated nature of the statue and the issue of sacred Buddhist material objects in secular museum spaces more generally. At the heart of these was the question of how such objects can be restored while respecting their sacred nature.

This chapter explores NIT's restoration of the Manjushri statue, revealing what I argue is a Himalayan Buddhist way of caring for consecrated objects. 'Care' and 'caretaking' are key functions of museum practice, but for the purposes of this chapter I draw on political scientist Joan Tronto's understanding of care as

a species of activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Tronto 1993: 103)

Tronto makes it clear that her vision of care encompasses objects and that 'the repair person fixing the broken thing' is an actor in

1 In Sikkim, *chögyal* (*chos rgyal*) and *gyelsé* (*rgyal sras*) are the respective titles given to the king and crown prince.

2 The staff at NIT use either the Sanskrit name *Manjushri* or the Tibetan name *Jampayang* (*'jam dpal dbyangs*) to refer to this statue, depending on whether their interlocutor understands Tibetan or not. Since most visitors to the museum are Indian tourists, *Manjushri* is preferred by the museum staff when they present the collection to them.

‘care-giving’.³ Nuala Morse (2021: 212–3) applies this definition of ‘care’ to museum practices and links it with the social role of museums, especially community engagement. She also broadens it through the idea of a ‘care-ful museology’ that brings together the different contexts of care in the museum: ‘care for things, care for stories, care for heritage, care for the issue, care for the people, care for the community, care for staff, care for the present and the past and care for the future’ (213). For her, ‘care ethics’ allow one to develop new forms of museum practice and institution.

In this chapter I explore the care ethics involved in NIT’s restoration of the Manjushri statue and the insights they offer for museum practice in both the Himalayas and beyond. As I will show, NIT’s restoration of the Manjushri statue involved a twofold practice of care that attended to both material imperatives, such as cleaning and repairing the object, and immaterial concerns related to how the statue connects with religious beliefs. The conservation work carried out in 2018–2019 included a complete Buddhist consecration ritual. To the Sikkimese museum professionals this was as (if not more) important than the material work of cleaning the statue, replacing broken parts and restoring it to its original aesthetic beauty. Lay and monastic museum staff worked together with local artisans and monks on the restoration, which was based above all on their Buddhist knowledge and skills. As a result, even though the statue is displayed in what might be considered a secular museum space, its consecrated nature still activated the Himalayan Buddhist care due to it as a consecrated object, offering an example of what decolonial Himalayan museum practice can look like. Before going on to describe and analyse this decolonial Himalayan Buddhist care practice in more detail, however, I first situate it within broader scholarly discussion on decolonizing conservation.

Caring conservation and Himalayan collections

Over the past two decades the question of how to decolonize museum practices has begun to be raised and explored. Dean Sully (2007) argues that the decolonization of conservation allows us to explore and develop different (and hopefully better) approaches to conservation

3 Tronto breaks down the notion of ‘care’ into four categories: ‘caring about’, ‘taking care of’, ‘care giving’ and ‘care receiving’ (1993: 106–7).

and ways of working. Whether ‘participatory conservation’, ‘community-based conservation’ or ‘context-focused conservation’, he insists that decolonial approaches must consider what is important for the community of origin of the object and keep a flexible mindset in terms of object conservation ‘to acknowledge the existence of alternative conceptualizations of cultural heritage’ (41). Similarly, Christina Kreps’ cross-cultural vision of curation opens the door to a ‘comparative museology’ that not only encourages us to study different forms of museum or object preservation systems, but also genuinely frees up our thinking on museological behaviour (2006: 458–9).

A key issue in discussions on decolonial museum practice is the place of the sacred in the museum and how religious objects are managed and displayed. François Mairesse (2019: 20–1) highlights the secular vision of the museum that dominates in Europe (especially France) and North America and how its scientific or aesthetic approach to the world confines sacred objects to ethnographic or historical study (20–1). However, as Crispin Paine (2013) discusses, some museums in both Euro-American and other contexts do leave some space for religious beliefs and even encourage worship (38–44), even if French museums are a “bastion of secularism” (77). Among the examples he gives are the creation and consecration of a Tibetan Buddhist altar at the Newark Museum and the ritual creation and destruction of sand mandalas by Tibetan monks within museum spaces (38–44). Moreover, some museums have started to engage with communities of origin and their curatorial practices and protocols as part of the curation of religious objects in their collections.

Sully (2007) and Kreps (2006) both discuss engagements with non-Western conservative practices drawn from the Oceanic context. Marion Bertin (2019) offers another example from Oceania in her detailed reflection on the management and display of sacred Vanuatu objects at the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (VKS) institute in Vanuatu, which is grounded in local cultural protocols. Other scholars have offered similar reflections and examples from North America. They have described, for example, what ‘traditional care or indigenous curation’ might look like when applied in American museums to Native American sacred objects (Flynn and Hull-Walski 2001), and explored how museum conservation standards in Canada can be combined with the care requirements of the First Nations, which include access, use and active participation to maintain the intangible aspects of their material heritage (Clavir 2002). These studies make it clear that diverse museological forms and practices exist and have become

increasingly important to museums engaged in decolonial and social justice work.

Taking a care-oriented perspective inspired by Tronto (1993) and Morse (2021), this chapter applies these discussions on decolonizing conservation to a Himalayan Buddhist context, asking: What do local communities see as vital to the preservation of consecrated objects in museums? How do local curators and conservators take care of these objects? How do they judge when and how restoration work is undertaken and what kind of restoration is needed?

The first of these questions has been addressed to some extent in the existing literature on the conservation of Tibetan Buddhist objects, notably in important studies that reflect on the opening of statues in museums outside of the Himalayas for the purpose of scientific enquiry. Chandra Reedy (1991, 1992) describes the violent opening of consecrated statues at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the ethical dilemmas this raised. These became apparent during her interviews with Tibetan Buddhist masters who commented on the murderous effects of opening a consecrated statue, which ‘not only desecrates it, but kills its very essence’ (Karma Gelek Yuthok, cited in Reedy 1991: 30).⁴ Sakya Trizin, head of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism, explained to her that:

A Tibetan Buddhist would avoid opening a consecrated statue unless there was a very important reason, such as the need to disassemble or move a statue during the renovation or repair of a temple. In such cases, specific rituals are performed before the contents are removed, and the image must be reconsecrated after they are placed back inside. (Cited in Reedy 1991: 20)⁵

The importance of consecration and the specific respect and care required when restoring a statue in a Tibetan or Himalayan Buddhist context has thus been clear for decades. Nevertheless, ten years later in 2001, a decision was taken at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London to remove the remaining objects inside a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha (inventory n°IM.121-1910) revealed by X-ray. According to Annie Hall (2002), this decision—made after much deliberation—was based

4 The Los Angeles County Museum of Art requested a Tibetan Buddhist master to re-consecrate the statues and replace the offerings inside (Reedy 1991: 8).

5 Also quoted in Tythacott and Bellini 2020: 11.

on the fact that the sculpture had already been opened at a previous, unknown date, allowing the discovery of drawings from the thirteenth century, now preserved independently of the statue. Although the museum consulted a representative of the Tibetan community in the UK, the option of resealing and reconsecrating the statue with the objects placed back inside was rejected due to their art historical significance.⁶

Only a few years ago Louise Tythacott and Chiara Bellini (2020) reaffirmed the importance of consecration rather than location in making Buddhist objects sacred (11) and renewed the call for curators in the West to be aware of the sensitivities surrounding the modification (including opening) and placement of such objects. Nevertheless, it seems that the way that the consecration of Himalayan Buddhist objects is looked at in (at least some) Western museums has begun to change. Conservator Sabine Cotte (2013), for example, explores the conservation of consecrated tangkhas, developing some practical ideas for museum professionals on how to give appropriate care based on discussions with four Tibetan Buddhist monks and artists. In her analysis of the Buddhist display at the World Museum in Liverpool (opened in 2005), Louise Tythacott (2017: 123) gives an example of a Buddha statue commissioned by the museum that was desecrated while passing through customs in Nepal, but then reconsecrated at the Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London before being exhibited.

These studies give us an insight into how recognition of the sacred aspects of Himalayan and Tibetan Buddhist objects—in particular, the importance of consecration—has evolved in Western museums. Tythacott and Bellini (2020) briefly discuss the display of consecrated objects in museums in Himalayan Tibetan Buddhist monasteries by way of comparison, drawing on examples from Ladakh. But within the existing research on Himalayan objects preserved in museums, there is a serious lack of studies taking into account the conservation work carried out by local teams in museums located in the Himalayas. Paying attention to this work is crucial for the kind of critical and comparative museology that Kreps (2006) advocates and its application to the conservation of Himalayan Buddhist objects.

In her groundbreaking work on ‘decolonizing methodologies’ Linda Tuhiwai Smith pushes us to think about how research is transformed ‘when Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the

6 See also Malkogeorgou 2012 for a critical analysis of this case and the debates it has generated.

researched Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms' (2022: 250). As this chapter will show, the same can be said for how museum conservation is transformed when practiced by a team that is part of the community of origin—in this case Himalayan Buddhist. By addressing how conservation is approached at a Sikkim museum in the Himalayas by an exclusively local team, the case study it details serves as a comparison to the types of conservation work more synonymous with European and North American museums. As we will see, the conservation practice of the team at NIT was derived from both museological training *and* Himalayan Buddhism and local artisanship. This allows us to discuss decolonial conservation as a practice at NIT.

The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology: A local team for local collections

While NIT's main mission is to collect and preserve Buddhist texts from across the different Tibetan Buddhist schools, it has built a collection of objects through donations and purchases. This collection now comprises 474 works, most of them Buddhist objects such as statues, ritual objects, painted and embroidered tangkhas, manuscripts and masks, along with some non-religious objects like jewellery, musical instruments and coins. In the 1980s and 1990s, awareness of the importance of material heritage at the institute led to the development of an exhibition space with a museography that emphasizes the Sikkimese decorative style. However, the conservation of objects in a Himalayan context involves a number of challenges that are linked to environmental, financial, material and human resources. In this regard, NIT's museum is a rare example of a local initiative developed by a lay institution and not a monastery.

The team working on the restoration of the Manjushri statue consisted of both lay and monastic NIT staff. At various stages local artisans were engaged for their craftsmanship and local monks were brought in for their ritual expertise. In all, a dozen people from the institute were involved either in the decision-making process or in the material and ritual aspects of the restoration. If we add the external contributors, there were around twenty people involved in the project. Pema Kesang Sherpa was the museum assistant in charge of the

collection during the restoration. She was the first of NIT's museum staff to be trained as a conservator at the National Museum Institute in Delhi.⁷ During an interview, she told me that she knew it would be challenging to work as a conservator in Sikkim because of the lack of availability of required materials and the lack of space and tools for preventive conservation operations at the institute. But she had made a point of returning 'home' after her training to 'take care of our objects' (interview, 6 April 2023).

As part of the project, research assistant Purbha Tsering Bhutia and archivist and research assistant Karma Sherab were able to photograph the Manjushri for the collection catalogue, since the statue had to be removed from its glass display case for the restoration. Though they had previous professional experience in making video documentaries and archival digitization, respectively, they were not professional photographers. Nevertheless, due to their ingenuity and capacity for self-training, they set up a temporary studio around the statue. They managed to take good pictures despite the large dimensions of the statue and were also able to document the restoration process.

I was involved in NIT's project to document their collection and create a database, which started before the restoration of the Manjushri in 2018. This meant that I was able to talk at length with the team about the restoration, but only after it had been completed as I was not present at the institute when most of the work was done. I was able to observe part of the restoration in person during April and May 2019; by that time the statue was receiving offerings on a temporary altar in an adjoining room, waiting for the auspicious date of its reconsecration to arrive. It is important to point out that I was not involved in any decisions relating to this restoration. As an art historian, my involvement with the NIT team focused solely on the creation of the database for the collection, based on my experience in several French museums. This point is crucial to my analysis, as it is all about observing, as an external witness, the choices and work of an exclusively local team.

7 Pema Kesang Sherpa completed her training at the National Museum of Delhi in 2004. After working for some time at the Mehrangarh Fort museum in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, she joined NIT in 2008. Since 2020, she has been working at the Directorate of Handicraft and Handlooms on the opening of a Heritage and Handicraft Museum in Namchi, South Sikkim, which is where I interviewed her in 2023.

A statue of Manjushri rooted in Sikkimese history

The large statue of Manjushri dominates NIT's museum space, positioned in the centre of the main display case and facing the entrance. The statue is a remarkable, precious and rare work. Made of copper alloy and covered with fine silver plates,⁸ it embodies Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, seated in diamond (or lotus) posture on a lotus base (Figures 11.1 and 11.2). In accordance with the standard iconography for Manjushri figures, the statue wields with his right hand the sword that 'is the symbol of prajna, the supreme knowledge that cuts through the darkness of ignorance' (Cornu 2001: 353). But his left hand is unusual. The thumb and index finger form a wheel, evoking the teaching mudra, but the hand is placed horizontally in front of his lower torso with the palm turned upward toward the sky, whereas it would normally be held vertically, palm open toward the front. His left arm bears the standard blue lotus stem (Skt. *utpala*) on which a book is placed to symbolize knowledge, but in a departure from most Manjushri statues, this is sculpted and attached as a separate carved piece. The statue's face is gilded with matte gold and his hair is in a high bun. The ornaments and folds of his garment appear to be carved directly into the silver plating. However, some golden ornaments set with precious stones (coral and turquoise) have been added to the statue's crown, earrings and necklace. The statue sits on a throne formed of a square-based pedestal, decorated with two lions flanking a Dharmachakra (wheel of Dharma), and an arched back panel upon which are superimposed the standard chimeras, horsemen, makaras and nags.

This statue of Manjushri has a unique history and status within the collection as it is linked to the royal family of Sikkim. Princess Pema Choki Yapshi-Yuthok Lhacham (1925–1969) donated it in 1961 on behalf of her father-in-law, Kalon Yuthok, who had served as the governor of Chamdo in Kham, eastern Tibet (Sinha 1984: 40). She was the youngest daughter of Chögyal Tashi Namgyal and married Yuthok Rigzin Tseten Namgyal (1928–1968) in 1950 (Travers 2006: 102). The statue was commissioned in Chamdo for the old Yuthok House, the residence of the Yuthok family in Lhasa (Sinha 1984: 40). The family, originally from Kham, had been propelled into the highest echelon of

8 The demarcation between the copper alloy and silver plates is clearly visible at the neck, where small rivets are also visible on the sides.

the Tibetan aristocracy and adopted the name Yuthok when one of its members was recognized as the 10th Dalai Lama, Tsultrim Gyatso (1816–1837) (Tenzin Dickie 2016). This prestigious gift is testimony to the good relations between these two elite Himalayan families.

The gifting of the statue to NIT led to a reorganization of their display of Buddhist objects, as mentioned in the President's speech at the General Council meeting on 7 December 1961:

Princess Pema Choki has offered to install as a gift on behalf of Yuthok House, a very large image of Manjushri in the ground floor altar, where till last week we kept the two ancient stone images brought here in May 1960 by His Excellency Professor Kabir as gifts from the Government of India. (Cited in Tashi 2008: 71)⁹

It is worth noting that the word 'altar' is used to refer to the display case and that the choice was made to move two statues donated by Nehru in order to display the Manjushri statue.¹⁰ Until 1987, the large hall of the present museum was occupied by the general library of the institute. Photographs taken in the 1970s clearly show the large statue of Manjushri on display well before the development of the museum. The staff thus see this Manjushri more as a protective deity than as a museum object.¹¹

For a Himalayan Buddhist statue to be entirely covered with silver is rare.¹² As there is no information in any records of the institute to suggest otherwise, the younger NIT staff assume that the statue was gifted from Tibet to the institute silver-plated, but this might not have

9 Humayun Kabir (1906–69) was an Indian-Bengali educationist and politician.

10 These two sandstone sculptures from the Sarnath Museum represent the Teaching Buddha and the standing bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (NIT.S.2008.129 A-B) and have been moved to the Ajanta room on the top floor of the institute, thus out of the museum's exhibition space. Sinha (1984: 38) dates them to the middle of the ninth century.

11 Some photographs are published in Tashi (2008) and Banerjee (1982). Others, unpublished, were kindly shown to me by the Deputy Director, Kelsang Choden during our interview in May 2019.

12 The only comparable work of which I am aware is a Vajravarahi sculpture, also covered in silver, which is preserved at Ogyen Choling in the Tang Valley of Central Bhutan; Françoise Pommaret showed me a photograph of this statue.

been the case. Blanche Olschak (1965: 114–16) provides a precious visual testimony of the ongoing installation of the statue at the beginning of the 1960s.¹³ In three of her pictures, a man poses next to the Manjushri statue in front of the bookshelves of the general library. The caption mentions ‘der tibetische Künstler ruht neben seinem Werke’ (the Tibetan artist resting next to his work), but the name of this individual was not found in the museum’s register and no one at the institute, including its senior members, could identify him. However, Lama Kunga Yonten Hochotsang, a retired research coordinator who was working at the institute in the 1960s, suggested that the man might be the silversmith who had assembled the silver plates on the statue. Although he could not remember who at the institute had commissioned this silver work, he knew that it had been done in Kolkata (pers. comm., 10 April 2023).

Since its early years, NIT has had a history of instituting Himalayan practices of care and expressions of immaterial value that one would not find in a European or North American museum. As we have seen, the Manjushri statue was preserved and cared for as if in a monastery. It was placed on an ‘altar’ and (perhaps) adorned in silver plating. If the decision to cover it with silver was made at the institute, the purpose would not have been to increase the statue’s monetary value. Rather, the silver plating would probably have been seen as a precious offering that would result in the accumulation of merit.

Finally, one last element revealed during my discussions with Lama Kunga Yonten Hochotsang and other senior members of the institute sheds further light on the history of this statue. Younger members with whom I spoke assumed that the statue was newly made in Tibet as a special gift for the newly opened institute in 1958. As we have seen, the records tell us that it was in fact donated in 1961. Moreover, senior members mentioned that it was not donated alone but as a set of three statues: the Manjushri statue was gifted to NIT, a Jowo Buddha statue was gifted to Ngor Gumpa, a Sakya monastery in Gangtok, and a third statue was given to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. The description of this last statue differs from one interlocutor to another, so it is difficult to precisely identify and locate it today. Yet, this information demonstrates the importance of orally transmitted knowledge in documenting the history of the collection, especially

13 The author heartily thanks Anna Balikci-Dejongpa (Research Coordinator at NIT) for kindly sharing this reference.

when the written records are limited. We can now assume (as the senior members of the institute do) that the donation of this set of three statues was connected to the political context in Tibet during the 1950s. Sending these statues from their place of origin in Tibet—now subsumed under Communist Chinese rule—to three institutions in exile would have been a way to protect them from the destruction that was taking place in Tibet at the time, which prefigured that of the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976. Moreover, the exodus of Tibetan refugees—and along with them treasured objects—had started in the early 1950s (e.g., Koksvedgaard Zeitzen and Brox 2022: 1716–18), even if it gained momentum after the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959. Indeed, when Kalon Yuthok accompanied the Dalai Lama on his visit to India in 1956–7 he chose not to return to Tibet (Dickie 2016); it was perhaps he himself who carried these precious statues into exile.

Conservation and Himalayan ideas of care

How is such an important statue cared for in its Himalayan museum? The dimensions of the statue meant that it required special handling when it was moved, cleaned and photographed. When it was about to be moved in September 2018, the staff found that the wooden base of the display case had been damaged by termites and the insects were escaping through the holes. They broke off the damaged boards to reveal a termite mound roughly 70 cm high. As this lower part was a sealed box it had been impossible to monitor. This presented a unique situation in the history of the institute and was critical in terms of preservation because of the risk of infestation elsewhere. It was therefore deemed essential to have a joint consultation. Pema Kesang Sherpa, the director Rinpoche Tashi Densapa (1942–2021) and other senior members of the institute came together to determine what measures to take. They agreed that before anyone was allowed to touch or move the statue, they needed to ensure that the restoration would include a consecration ceremony. This process of decision-making reflects the moral values of the Sikkimese team: important decisions must be taken jointly in agreement with the oldest members, and religious concerns prevail over those of conservation even in the case of such an emergency.

Once the consecration ritual had been agreed, the material restoration of the statue could begin. Pema Kesang Sherpa had to close the Lepcha Gallery of the museum—a small connecting room attached to



Figures 11.1 and 11.2

The statue of Manjushri at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology before and after its restoration in 2018–19 (inventory n°NIT.S.2008.117, 1.67 m high, 1.15 m wide and 74 cm deep). Photographs by Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. Used with permission.

the main hall—to secure a private space to proceed with the cleaning work, which lasted for about a month. Access was restricted to the team directly involved in the work, namely, the local labourers hired to help move the heavy statue and the monks who participated in the cleaning. As the process would be long and tiring, Pema Kesang Sherpa enlisted the help of monks working at the institute to carefully clean the statue, right down to its smallest nooks and crannies, from the folds of the garment to the intricate jewellery. Based on knowledge acquired during her conservator training, she chose to use a few drops of ammonia solution mixed into kaolin powder as a cleaning agent, and a simple cotton cloth as a rubbing tool to make the whole process as non-invasive as possible. Thanks to this long and meticulous work, the statue was restored to its full brilliance. Figures 11.1 and 11.2 illustrate the striking contrast between the dull state of the statue before the work and the luminous shine restored by its thorough cleaning.

During interviews conducted either just after the statue's cleaning in April and May 2019 or in March 2023, all of the people involved—from Pema Kesang Sherpa to the other lay staff and monks—clearly expressed the positive impact that the restored brightness of the statue had on its power, as well as on their own karma. This demonstrates how the religious and the material intertwine. Making this Manjushri shine again was about much more than its aesthetic effect. It was the material manifestation of a perceived need to regenerate the immaterial power of the statue, participation in which allowed them to accumulate merit. As striking as the restored brilliance of the statue might be for a conservator who does not share these religious beliefs, we have to remember that it probably resembled the original state of the statue. For comparison, there is a photograph of the newly installed Manjushri in Olschak's book on Sikkim (1965: 115). Even in black and white print, the brightness of the statue is clearly visible. In a Himalayan Buddhist context, the patina of ageing and agency that had discoloured the statue over five decades did not have the value that would be attached to it in other contexts. In an art market or a European museum, for example, a patina would add value to the object or be preserved as part of its history. But in the Himalayan Buddhist context, luminosity (*gsal ba*) and the immaterial religious power associated with it take precedence over everything else.

There were other material aspects to the restoration. The back half of the lotus base made of tin upon which the statue sat was corroded, so a local craftsman put in place a new metal plate and covered it with silver paint. The termite mound at the base of the display case was cleaned up and a new base was made from bricks and cement to replace the empty interior space under the statue. The structure of this solid base was reinforced with a mesh of thick metal rods to prevent the statue from falling. Such an accident would be interpreted as a bad omen; buddha and bodhisattva images should never touch the ground.

For the members of the institute who were monks or former monks it was unthinkable to proceed with a restoration that did not involve reconsecration. Tibetan Buddhist beliefs are grounded in the related concepts of karma (*las*; action) and merit (*bsod nams*; Skt. *punya*). Depending on whether an action is wholesome or not, it will, according to the law of cause and consequence, have some kind of positive or negative result in this or a later life. It is therefore important to accumulate merit by engaging in positive actions. Not respecting the consecrated nature of a statue would constitute a negative action and

thus lead to suffering in the future. Conversely, respectfully restoring the Manjushri statue to its original brilliance and including a ritual of reconsecration in the process of restoration not only restores the power of the object but also generates merit for those involved. As Brox (2022: 208) writes, the ‘promise of fruits, such as merit, blessings and good fortune is at the core of Tibetan valuations of efficacious Buddhist material objects’.

The lay staff members expressed similar motivations. Pema Kesang Sherpa, who oversaw the cleaning and material restoration, related:

I was born Buddhist, but I am a museologist. I combine these two things for my NIT work. Whenever I have to use any of the objects, I always do puja before touching it. I used to take permission of that particular god, then only I can do. If I was just a museologist, I would have [to] just pick it up and start cleaning. So this is how I combine my religion and my profession. (Interview, April 2023)

In concrete terms, the devotional practices that I witnessed Pema Kesang Sherpa performing at the museum (which she referred to as puja) included making offerings of bowls of water, flowers and incense in front of the Manjushri statue, and murmuring mantras and praying silently in front of statues and paintings representing buddhas and bodhisattvas (whom she referred to as gods) before touching or handling them.

In short, what might be seen as a simple conservation practice in a museum, such as moving an object, taking its picture or cleaning it, can be more complex in the Himalayan context where the sacred nature of the object is heeded by the museum staff who uphold certain values and Buddhist faith. This example shows us that Himalayan conservation goes beyond the material care of objects to include their intangible religious aspects, as well as respect for the museum professionals whose interactions with the object are imbued with their Buddhist beliefs. Like many museums in India, NIT has to make decisions based on scant available resources, both financial and human. Nevertheless, it draws on a wealth of local, particularly Tibetan Buddhist, knowledge and skills as part of its museum praxis. In the case of the Manjushri statue, the Sikkimese team chose to collaborate with Tibetan Buddhist monks and to include the required Buddhist ritual in the restoration process.

Consecration as material preservation

In Buddhism, consecrated objects are the most venerated because they are considered receptacles for Enlightened body, speech and mind. The ritual of consecration (*rab gnas*) is also practised to invite a *lha* (deity), such as a buddha or bodhisattva, to be present in the statues and paintings made in their image. It is performed after the object has been completed and may be repeated every year or on the occasion of the visit of a great master. When an object needs to be restored a ritual called *arga* is performed, during which the *lha* is asked to temporarily reside in a mirror for the duration of the restoration (Bentor 1996: xx–xxi, 57). As Yael Bentor (1996) notes, consecration entails a transformation of the receptacle, which ‘is no longer a conglomerate of profane substances, as it was at the beginning of the consecration ritual. It has been transformed into an embodiment of the *lha*’ (294). Furthermore, the *lha* is requested to ‘firmly remain in the receptacle as long as samsara lasts’ (314). The consecration ritual thus transforms the object into a worthy receptacle for receiving offerings and thereby accumulating merit (21, 198).

In the case of a statue, the consecration ritual is also an opportunity to place offerings into the hollow centre of the object, created through the *cire perdue* or *repoussé* techniques used in the making of statues depending on their size. The bottom of the statue is then sealed and must not be reopened afterwards in order to preserve its consecration. During the restoration of the Manjushri statue, the replacement of the back plate of the base broke the seal. As we have seen, within European museums Buddhist statues have been opened on the grounds of scientific merit. At NIT, the more pressing concern was avoiding desecration of the object and preserving its status and efficacy as a Buddhist power object through its reconsecration.

From the viewpoint of NIT’s late director Rinpoche Tashi Densapa, its senior officers, the museum assistant in charge of the collection and the rest of the Sikkimese team, it was important to engage Buddhist monks in the restoration in order to respect Buddhist beliefs. From an etic perspective, this choice raises questions over the status of the place where the statue was situated. The institute is not a monastery or other sacred space; it is a government institute. However, it was created with the main mission of studying and promoting Mahayana Buddhist doctrine. Unlike a monastery whose library is focused on the texts of its school, the institute is a resource centre that gathers the texts of the

different schools of Mahayana Buddhism in one place. Although it is a government institute, Buddhism is thus at the very heart of its mission, which makes this choice of restoration less surprising.

Since its foundation, the religious and secular have been intertwined at the institute. While its foundation stone was laid by Fourteenth Dalai Lama on 10 February 1957, the institute was inaugurated by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on 1 October 1958 (D'Rozario 1973: 63).¹⁴ It has been impossible to clearly separate its secular missions as a research institute and museum from its Buddhist context, within which the institutional model remains the monastery. Crown Prince Palden Thontup Namgyal expressed the dual status of the collection of objects owned by the institute at the General Council Meeting on 10 October 1960, saying: 'Our collection is both a museum and a sacred repository with lamps burning round the clock' (cited in Tashi 2008: 69). This reference to the burning of (butter) lamps, which are usually lit as offerings in Buddhist monasteries, illustrates how the objects entrusted to the institute exceed the status of a museum collection. Here, in the Himalayan context, they have found a place that also respects and cares for their sacred nature. Even today the museum is a hybrid space, secular or religious depending on the visitor. While many Euro-American tourists wander around as in any other museum, visitors from different parts of the Himalayas usually begin their visit by prostrating in front of the Manjushri statue and the staff place daily offerings (bowls of water) before him as a sign of respect. Although there has been a blurring of the boundary between sacred and touristic space within monasteries (Tythacott and Bellini 2020: 18), the status of the institute's museum is less clearly defined than that of museums created within monasteries. As Tythacott and Bellini (2020: 17–18) point out, the latter are an integral part of the monastery as a consecrated space; as such the question of what ritual to perform if a divine image is moved from one place to another within the site does not arise.

In 2019, when I asked the director, Rinpoche Tashi Densapa, about the future of the museum and possible purchases to enrich the collection, he insisted on the 'responsibility' the institute has 'to care, restore and display the objects in the most respectful way possible' as 'they were given to the institute to safeguard them' (interview, May 2019).

14 The Fourteenth Dalai Lama subsequently blessed the collection during his visits to the institute in 1981 and 2010.

He was referring primarily to the objects given by Tibetan refugees in the 1960s and 1970s. The relevance of the notion of respect when it comes to religious objects in museums has been remarked upon more generally in scholarship. Paine writes about how difficult it is to define this notion of respect and stresses the importance of the wishes of the religious object's community of origin:

'Respect' when applied to objects is a highly elusive concept, for all that it is so often demanded. Perhaps the most useful definition is 'to pay attention to, in a culturally appropriate way'. In practice, this normally means respecting the wishes of the communities from which the object came, even if this may mean the wishes of the modern-day leaders of the religion they represent. (Paine 2013: 57)

Paine then goes on to describe five practical categories related to 'respect' for works in practice (2013: 58). NIT's treatment of the Manjusri statue corresponds to the fifth, 'active honoring,' which refers to the practice of routinely subjecting specific objects to designated rituals in order to maintain their power or to honour them. NIT's restoration of the Manjushri statue offers an insight into what respect looks like in a conservation setting in the Himalayas where the consecrated nature of an object conditions the way in which it is cared for.

The process of (re)consecrating the Manjushri statue can be divided into four main stages. The first was to find skilled monks. NIT had a few monks among its staff members and relied on their local network to find monks qualified to perform specific parts of the reconsecration. Lama Khenpo Karma, a research officer at NIT who has been connected to the Sowa Rigpa section of the institute since 2021, was trained in the consecration ritual at Dzongsar Shedra in Himachal Pradesh. As he explained, it is always better to ask a fully ordained monk (*dge slong*) to place the new offerings inside the statue (interview, 31 March 2023). This is more auspicious and beneficial. For this, he sought help from a Rinpoche from Rumtek monastery. Monks from the neighbouring Deorali Chorten monastery, just up the hill from NIT, were invited to perform the other parts of the consecration ritual with the help of Lama Khenpo Karma and Lama Tshultim Gyatso, another research officer at NIT. These monasteries belong to different Buddhist traditions: Rumtek is Kagyu, whereas Deorali is Nyingma. But the collaboration between their monks was not an issue as the main intention was to give the best possible rituals for Manjushri; they are, after all, part of the same Sikkimese Buddhist community. Thus, the required

prayers and offerings were made before the Manjushri was moved and after its restoration so that the statue could be properly reconsecrated.

The second part of the consecration process was the first important ritual to be performed and deals with a crucial intangible aspect: keeping the energy of the deity alive. Tibetan monks at the institute referred to this energy during interviews as the *yeshé sempa* (*ye shes sems pa*).¹⁵ The living energy of the deity must be temporarily transferred into a mirror to allow the statue to be moved, cleaned and restored. The ritual to effect this transferral lasted about one hour. After the prayers, the mirror was entirely wrapped in a ceremonial scarf (*kha btags*). It had to be kept in the same room, close to the statue, on a temporary altar where daily offerings had to be made. This step allowed for the material restoration to commence.

The third part concerns the material aspects of the restoration: in addition to the statue being cleaned and the damaged metal plate at the back renewed, monks also prepared new offerings known as *zung* (*gzung*) to be placed inside the statue before it was resealed. When the base of the statue was opened for repair, it appeared that the *zung* that had been placed inside during the original consecration were rotten. Lama Kunga Yonten Hochotsang, a retired Research Coordinator who was a member of NIT in the early 1960s, told me that when the statue was originally consecrated the *zung* consisted of rolled scriptures (mantras), semi-precious stones (turquoise) and incense made of pine branches or *sang* (*bsang*). The new *zung* mainly consisted of new rolled mantra scriptures prepared by monastic members of the institute over the course of two to three weeks. The paper used for these mantras was special and had to be ordered from a monastery. Once received, it was soaked in saffron water before being dried and rolled tight. These rolled scriptures were then wrapped in pieces of cloth that tightened them even further. This process is related to the idea of purification while at the same time preventing insect infestation. The different parts of the statue required different mantras. In total, more than 100 rolled mantra texts were used to fill the cavity of the Manjushri statue. Thus, more offerings were prepared for this consecration than for the earlier one. Any old *zung* that were not damaged were put back in place along with these new mantras. To avoid any insect infestation in the future, the monks chose not to make the

15 For more details about the invitation of the *yeshé sempa*, see Bentor 1996: 231–2.

usual sang offering but instead used cotton to completely fill the inner space of the statue.¹⁶

Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2022) details the composition of zung and the importance in Buddhist practice of recycling old consecrated objects into new ones to increase the blessing power of the latter. Similarly, the reuse of old offerings by carefully placing them back in the Manjushri statue not only represented continuity from the original consecration but was also believed to increase the effectiveness of the statue's reconsecration. Holmes-Tagchungdarpa explains that materials that 'are subject to decay or disintegration, such as dairy products or incense, may be periodically replaced through renovation, or packaged and repackaged to prevent the contamination of other contents' (2022: 129–31). At NIT, the decision to replace the pine branch incense with cotton testifies to the fact that consecration is a living tradition that evolves. Although based on ancient written sources that describe the ritual stages with precision, the consecration was adapted to the contemporary conditions of a museum environment where insect pests should be avoided.¹⁷

Once the statue was filled and sealed, the face of Manjushri received a new layer of matte gold before the fourth and last part of the consecration process was performed. This is another intangible aspect since it involves sending the living energy of Manjushri, temporarily invited into the mirror, back into the statue made in his image (Figure 11.3). Once the statue had been put on its new base inside the display case, some offerings were placed in front of it: a butter lamp, incense sticks and bowls of rice and water. The temporary altar set up with the mirror was then brought in front of the deity so that the living energy of Manjushri could return to the statue. The ceremony lasted about two hours, during which the museum was closed to the public. Only NIT staff were authorized to attend; it was their private moment with Manjushri.¹⁸

16 People usually believe that the statue must be completely filled with offerings as any void might be filled with negative energy. See also Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2022: 129.

17 On the textual sources for the consecration ritual, see Bentor 1996. For further examples of contemporary adaptations to zung, see Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2022: 131.

18 See also Tythacott and Bellini (2020: 3–4) who also highlight the importance of this consecration process.



Figure 11.3 The reconsecration ceremony of the Manjushri statue in 2018–19 at the NIT museum. Photograph by Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. Used with permission.

Thus, the intangible and material are intertwined during the consecration process. For the Sikkimese team, the religious aspects were ultimately more important than the aesthetics of the restoration. The silver paint on the new plate at the back of the lotus base was not of the same quality as the rest of the statue, but the most important thing was to renew the offerings that would remain hidden inside. In this Himalayan context, Buddhist criteria prevailed over the usual aesthetic restoration criteria applied in European and North American art museums. The latter are often based on the idea that materials chosen for restoration should preserve the overall harmony of the work of art, while remaining visible and easily identifiable by the public. But when research officer Lama Tshultim Gyatso talked about the external qualities of the Manjushri statue, its brightness and its golden face, he noted that: ‘It is charming from outside, but the main thing is the zung inside’ (interview, 10 April 2023). The depositing of offerings inside the statue

is the material evidence of the ritual performed, which transcends the aesthetics of the exterior form. Although beauty in form—and luminosity in this case—are perceived to contribute to the power of the deity represented, Lama Tshultim Gyatso's remark clearly expresses the idea that, without the consecration ritual, this beauty and luminosity would remain ineffective. Even if it is of great aesthetic quality and is appreciated as such, the statue remains an empty, lifeless form without consecration.

As already noted, the Manjushri statue holds a special status at the institute due to its remarkable history and link with Sikkim's royal family. At first I thought that this explained the importance given to the religious aspects during the restoration process. However, my long-term collaboration with the NIT team over seven years helped me to understand that this restoration set a precedent for others. In the local context of a Sikkimese institute dedicated to the study of Buddhism, consecration is the first question raised when it comes to conservation. This is especially the case if there is an insect infestation as this means that the inner part of the statue has to be cleaned and, most often, the incense offerings made of pine branches removed. Respecting the sacred aspect of the statue really matters to the current head of the museum, Samten Choden Bhutia, who wishes to establish reconsecration as a policy for future conservation projects.¹⁹

Conclusion

The restoration of the Manjushri statue at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok was carried out by a Sikkimese team that respected the consecrated nature of the statue, as well as the Buddhist beliefs of the people involved in the project, especially those related to karma and merit. There were thus different levels of respect involved: for the object, for the people who care for it, and for the long-standing Buddhist tradition of consecration and its continuity as part of NIT's present and future museum practice. This seems to correspond well to Morse's (2021) proposal for a 'care-ful museology'. As a case study, the restoration reveals not only the importance of valuing the work done by a local team, but also the impact of the local context on

19 I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to Samten Choden Bhutia for her support during the final research for this chapter.

conservation, and the importance of paying attention to oral knowledge and including the source community (in this case the current and retired staff of the institute; in others it might be the community of origin). It also serves as an example of decolonial conservation in that it tells us how sacred objects in a ‘secular’ museum space can nonetheless activate particular kinds of care.

There was no direct intervention in the Manjushri statue restoration by any European or North American curator, nor by Sikkimese staff trained in Europe or North America. The local team carried out the restoration according to their own knowledge and without taking standard European or North American restoration processes as a reference. Their work offers an example of ‘Himalayan Buddhist care’ for both the material and intangible dimensions of the object, based on Tibetan Buddhist knowledge (ritual texts) and skills (e.g., the making of the inner offerings). It demonstrates how religious rituals can find their way into the space of the museum when relevant, especially when an object is consecrated. It may provide food for thought for museum professionals in the Himalayas who would like to define a common framework for the restoration of sacred works kept outside monasteries. The young and upcoming generation of museum professionals trained in the Himalayas are very conscious and concerned about this matter.

Finally, this case study also shows European and North American museums that a model of restoration exists for Buddhist sacred objects in the Himalayas that diverges from their standard model. In particular it highlights the importance of consecration. The fact that a statue, painting, book or other object has been consecrated during its life preceding its entry into a museum’s collection must be taken into consideration when it comes to conservation. As Tythacott and Bellini (2020: 11) emphasize, it is the consecration not the location of an object that makes it sacred: “Once images, such as paintings and sculptures, are consecrated, they are forever considered sacred by Himalayan and Tibetan people, wherever they are placed—even if transported to the West and displayed in museums, sold by dealers or at auction.”

This pushes us to move conservation away from focusing solely on the object, its materials and its life in the museum to a broader approach to Buddhist materiality that establishes conservation protocols in relation to the object’s Himalayan (or other) Buddhist community of origin. The kind of decolonized conservation I envisage here would combine the conservation processes developed in Euro-American museums with the knowledge of the Himalayan Buddhist community of origin.

As a process, it would involve compromise as museum professionals and community members together define how best to preserve and restore an object with respect for its consecrated nature. Even if compromise proves impossible, this dialogic process would at least allow for differences in understanding and approach to be understood, named and clearly defined (Sully 2007: 225). NIT's restoration of the Manjushri statue thus provides an example of a respectful Buddhist restoration in the Himalayan context that may inspire museum professionals elsewhere who are dealing with consecrated objects from the Himalayas.

Note on the author

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