

Institution: SOAS University of London

Unit of Assessment: 32 - Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory

Title of case study: Preserving, Cataloguing and Displaying Tibetan Monastic Collections

Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 - 2020

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Christian Luczanits	David L. Snellgrove Senior Lecturer in Tibetan and Buddhist Art (PI)	September 2014 to present
Dr Louise Tythacott	Pratapaditya Pal Senior Lecturer in Curating and Museology of Asian Art (CI)	September 2014 to January 2020
Dr Kunsang Namgyal-Lama	Postdoctoral Researcher in Tibetan and Buddhist Art	November 2016 to May 2017
Dr Chiara Bellini	Postdoctoral Researcher in Tibetan and Buddhist Art	November 2017 to March 2020

Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 31 July 2020

Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? ${\sf N}$

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Research undertaken at SOAS has supported monastic institutions in Ladakh (India) and Mustang (Nepal) through cataloguing, assessing and displaying their collections. The project has created awareness about their content and value, engendered new approaches to their upkeep and presentation, and contributed to their accessibility and preservation. It has also helped revive local interest in the cultural history of Tibetan Buddhist practice. Beneficiaries include the monastic communities, local communities and tourists visiting the monasteries, tour and museum guides, and the Department of Archaeology, Government of Nepal.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Mustang (Nepal) and Ladakh (India) are sources of rich information about religious history in the Himalayan region. However, they are endangered by long-standing border disputes, artefact theft, isolation and poverty. In many cases artefacts have been locked away, and local communities have lost touch with their material culture and its historical value. In the past, research into this rich heritage largely focused on temples and the monasteries themselves, while their collections of portable works - such as sculptures, paintings, books, and other objects considered valuable - were hardly studied. Hidden away in boxes or piled into crowded altar cases to avoid theft, most collections were inaccessible for detailed assessment of their composition and features or their religio-historical and artistic value. Many were not even accessible to local believers as objects of worship.

The practice-based AHRC-funded research project "Tibetan Buddhist Monastery Collections Today" (2016-2020, GBP356,759) built on an explorative visit to Mustang by Dr Christian Luczanits (PI and Senior Lecturer at SOAS since 2014) and subsequent annual visits by the PI along with other project members, notably by Dr Louise Tythacott, Senior Lecturer at SOAS since 2017-2020, and the postdoctoral researchers Dr Kunsang Namgyal-Lama (at SOAS in 2017) and Dr Chiara Bellini (at SOAS 2018-2020). The research team gained unprecedented access to collections in the project regions, comprising two collections in Ladakh and ten in Mustang, and documented them in detail. Using this documentation, inventories were created for each monastery and advice offered on the management and display of the collections.



While monastery collections are partially accidental assemblages, they provide information on the monastery holding them and its wider historical networks. The documentation of multiple collections allowed the project team to establish links between collections and to other cultural heritage utilising an interdisciplinary methodology, including historical research, comparative material and aesthetic analysis, oral histories and interviews [3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6]. This approach also enabled the identification of depictions across collections and media [3.6]. Given that the objects documented have an undisputed provenance and include object categories that have not become collector's items, research on the collections has provided a valuable corrective for the art history of the respective regions [3.1, 3.4].

The project team carried out the most comprehensive documentation at Namgyal monastery, Mustang, whose collection was captured in 32,269 photographs (December 2019). This collection includes 302 sculptures (half of these metal images, and half of those with dedication inscriptions, usually naming the depicted figure, the benefactor and the religious intention of the commission), 22 stūpas (symbols of the Buddha's teaching/mind), four paintings, 126 books, and 70 other objects [3.1, 3.4, 3.6]. More than 80 ancient books with some form of artwork, half of them dating back to the 14th century, were documented in their entirety. To date the objects of ten monasteries and one private collection have been recorded in Mustang, comprising approximately 1,950 objects in 44,205 photographs. Furthermore, the project has continued to do research on monuments in the region [3.2] and related heritage [3.3], helping to assess the collections. Findings emerging from this ongoing practice-based research indicate the historical importance of discrete monastic contexts and the regional networks they are embedded in. They also allow for making clearer distinctions between regional artistic schools, highlight links between different monastic schools and circles of patrons, and show connections between objects from different territories.

In Ladakh, work focused on assisting Hemis and Chemre monasteries with their respective museums (see Section B4) and included the documentation of 452 objects in 4,505 photographs. Research by Tythacott focused on collection management and the monastery museums [3.5]. Findings emerging through the work of cleaning, curation and display of objects suggested a need to strike a balance between traditional local restoration, community engagement practices and metropolitan museum approaches to preservation.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- 3.1 Luczanits, Christian. 2016a. "Portable Heritage in the Himalayas. The Example of Namgyal Monastery, Mustang: Part 1, Sculpture." *Orientations* 47 (2): 120–30 https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/id/eprint/22358. 2016b. Part 2, Books and Stupas." *Orientations* 47 (5): 22–32. https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/id/eprint/22358
- 3.2 Luczanits, Christian. 2018. "Unveiling a Unique Nyingma Pantheon: The Art of Gönpa Gang." In, edited by J Harrison, C. Luczanits, C. Ramble, and N. Drandul (eds), *A Blessing for the Land. The Architecture, Art and History of a Buddhist Nunnery in Mustang, Nepal* pp.54–99 & 140-143. Kathmandu: Vajra Publications. ISBN: 9789937928823. Available on request
- 3.3 Luczanits, Christian. 2019. "A Crucial Link in 15th-Century Tibetan Art." In M. Clemente, O. Nalesini, and F. Venturi (eds) Perspectives on Tibetan Culture. A Small Garland of Forget-Menots Offered to Elena De Rossi Filibeck. *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 51, pp 203–26. Paris. http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret 51 10.pdf
- 3.4 Bellini, Chiara. 2020. "Surrounding the Sacred Space: Two Painted Scrolls from the Collection of Namgyal Monastery in Mustang, Nepal." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1–44. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186320000413
- 3.5 Tythacott, Louise, and Chiara Bellini. 2020. "Deity and Display: Meanings, Transformations, and Exhibitions of Tibetan Buddhist Objects." *Religions* 11 (3): 106. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11030106
- 3.6 Luczanits, Christian 2020. "Establishing an Iconography The Case of Early Tibetan Representations of the Medicine Buddhas." *Journal of Tibetology* 22: 119–148. https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/34702/



The above are outputs of the AHRC funded project, Tibetan Monastery Collections Today. Of these publications [3.4, 3.5, 3.6] are peer reviewed, [3.1, 3.2, 3.4] are the first publications on the respective collection [3.1], monument [3.2] or object type [3.4], and thus are reference points for future research. E.g. Viehbeck, Markus. 2020. From Sūtra Collections to Kanjurs: Tracing a Network of Buddhist Canonical Literature across the Western and Central Himalayas. Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines 54, 241-260, p. 243: "For a first summary of the monastic objects at Namgyal and their documentation, see Luczanits (2016a) and Luczanits (2016b)." [3.1]

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

By working closely with 2 of approximately 15 main monasteries in Ladakh, and 10 of approximately 30 monasteries in Mustang and their local communities, the research project has enhanced heritage preservation, transformed monastic approaches and built the capacity of monasteries to manage their own heritage. This created a domino effect with two other communities in Mustang that decided to undertake similar work on their own. The research also enhanced connections between locals and their religious and cultural heritage, as well as the tourist experience, and prepared monks and locals to engage in government tourism initiatives.

Building skills to preserve, protect and display heritage artefacts in monasteries

The project team has worked steadily in both Ladakh and Mustang, moving from one monastery to the next as a result of word-of-mouth and personal recommendations from abbots - the leading authority figures for both monasteries and local communities - who were willing to vouch for the team's cultural sensitivity. The team catalogued the collections of 10 monasteries in Mustang (Namgyal, Kagbeni, Ghami, Gheling, Garphuk, Lo Gekhar, Jarkhot, Chödzong, Dzong and Lo Manthang Choede monastery museum, between 2015 and 2019), 1 monastery in Humla (Tumkot, 2019), and 2 monasteries in Ladakh (Hemis and Chemre, between 2015 and 2019). At most monasteries, the work involved cataloguing all the artefacts and creating inventories (with photographs), naming, dating and describing the religious and artistic significance of the artefacts. The team also advised on managing, cleaning and restoring these artefacts, planned and put together displays including cases, wrote labels, advised on display and lighting, and taught these skills to monastery authorities and monks. In several cases, the project team were asked to design new displays. At Chemre monastery, they designed new museum and library spaces including display cases (2017, 2018). The cases were made, and the new museum display was installed in June 2019, including labels. Through documenting, evaluating and describing the objects, the project set a new standard for recording collections in the region, creating greater awareness, skills and self-assurance in monastic communities regarding the value, management, curation, handling and display of their historical objects.

The photograph-based inventories not only provided irrefutable proof of ownership, but also information on the direct relevance of the artefacts to the monastery's history. The inventories provide evidence to claim ownership in cases of theft and have made it unnecessary to hide the objects from locals and visitors for security reasons. Senior monks have been made aware that hiding valuable objects alone is not sufficient to protect them, and that photographic records are indispensable to secure future preservation on site or restitution. Noting the work of the project team in meeting their obligations to document and catalogue these artefacts, the chief administrator of Hemis monastery, states: "Even the expert from Indian government said that we must have catalogue because... without having catalogue if in case we lost any items from Museum and if we found somewhere else in other part of the world we don't have right to claim because we don't have any documentation." [5.1, p2 and 3]

In some cases, the research raised awareness of the inscriptions and age of the objects, leading to an immediate cultural re-evaluation and new forms of outreach. Working with the team Abbot of Namgyal realised that some of the most precious manuscripts in the collection of his monastery are rare and unique examples of national and global interest [5.2 p3]. As a consequence, the Abbot requested the first publication of the Namgyal collection in a popular Asian Art magazine, Orientations, to raise funds for planned renovations [3.1]. He also asked for assistance in



removing the poor-quality painting applied to its sculptures in 2011, which made it possible to document them in 2018 as they had originally been conceived.

Two institutions beyond the reach of the project have taken its work as a model for their own heritage work. Choede monastery in Lo Manthang, Mustang, did not grant access to the researchers. However, in 2015 and 2016, a monk of the monastery who is versed in photography and has semi-professional equipment, documented their objects, explaining "what I have seen of Christian's work in Namgyal Gonpa [or monastery]... inspired me to do such kind of work at Choede Gonpa in Lo Manthang... My first [i.e. previous] work... that I did before I met Christian, it was so bad that I had to destroy it" [5.3, p1]. In 2016 the local youth club also asked the monk to document the collection of the remote Chödzong monastery. This documentation was subsequently made available to the researchers to create an inventory, and the project team supported the monk in improving his documentation skills in 2017. Not only did this impart valuable skills, but it enabled a greater appreciation of the stored artefacts. "The second documentation, which I did after I worked with Christian, was better, and now we have a kind of list [of] what we have and what kind of objects we have. I showed the book of all the things that I photograph to Christian, and when he saw the book, the things that we thought third class are old ones, made in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Our people don't know the importance of these things. So they keep third class looking objects in a storage.... We have to mix the new and old ones" [5.3, p1 and 2].

Increasing local communities' knowledge of and connection to their Tibetan Buddhist heritage Improving the displays has forged better relationships between monasteries and local communities as the latter reconnect with devotional objects and artefacts associated with their ancestors and pass their knowledge on to the younger generation. The Head of Kag Cheode monastery in Kagbeni confirms: "It should help the people, especially the younger generation to learn, to learn about this important collection" [5.11, p2]. A local resident of Kagbeni states: "I'm Buddhist, I follow all the rituals and all. But I don't know where it belongs to, where you know what belongs to where, you know? So that's like complicated for me. But now, seeing all these things, oh... I have strong feelings for them and I respect them...I always believe in them. And they have like positive vibes, you know." [5.4, p5]. New displays of artefacts have given communities a chance to closely examine, reclaim and celebrate them as part of their joint heritage. A local tour guide notes "The things that Hemis monastery already had... was like a myth to the locals. Since my childhood. I knew that Hemis monastery contains a lot of valuable stuffs, but people of Ladakh could never get a chance to see them." [5.5 p1]. The security guard of Hemis Museum confirms that "local people come to see the Thangka [painting of a Buddhist deity] and it is very good, very old...and the Koshen Serpo [yellow silk document], they have only seen it in the Hemis monastery" [5.6 p2].

Improving the visitor experience and increasing the link between remote monasteries and government tourist initiatives

The improved access and better display and labelling of artefacts has had a significant effect on the tourist experience. During the tourist season more than 1,500 tourists visit the Hemis Museum daily **[5.1, p3]**. It is rated 4.5 stars out of 5 on Tripadvisor from 267 reviews. Rads2k commented in August 2019: "With a beautiful museum displaying all handicrafts and monuments, this place is spread out and well maintained." **[5.7b, p6]**. Of Chemre monastery (4.5 out of 5, from 69 reviews on Tripadvisor) clare c wrote in August 2019: "...We savoured a cup of tea and looked at kitchen artifacts (sic) well preserved and displayed...It was special to see photos and information about the missing Panchen Lama on display. It has been restored by many dedicated people volunteering here in the past. So all this makes it quite special amongst the gompas and monasteries of Ladakh." **[5.8b p3]**

As a result of the research project and the labelling of objects undertaken during it, local guides are now better informed and able to direct tour groups and visitors more competently. The tour guide in Ladakh states "...everybody gets out [of the museum] so impressed... [The descriptions] are informative and... I can differentiate between the Tibetan art and Gandhara art... [and between monasteries].. I can use them for comparison. If somebody wanted to do a comparative study of art and artefacts, this is a good place... Tourists are mainly very interested in arts and artefacts



and I have recommended to several people" [5.5 p1, 2 and 3]. The local resident who also acts as a guide in Kagbeni, Mustang, states "Now I feel like, it's arranged now I can narrate a story to the guest or tourist, and also [to] the local people" [5.4, p5]. On Tripadvisor (4.5 out of 5 rating from 11 reviews) foreign visitors came away with a greater understanding of the history of the artefacts, one commenting in October 2016: "The monastery, itself is very ancient, with scrolls that are about 800 years old... If you are lucky enough to get to Kagbeni, this is a must." [5.9b, p4]. In the visitor's book of Hemis Museum, One commenter noted in 2016 "Preserve[s] all ancient items in a very systematic manner as I have never ever seen these items before in my life. It is very great" [5.10 p41]. This compares favourably to comments from before the impact of the project. For example, in 2012 one visitor requested that the monastery "please include more information" [5.10 p28] and another stated that they "would like to know more about the paintings" [5.10 p 26].

The improved visibility of the artefacts through the new displays and the information about the objects created through this research have encouraged monastery authorities to embrace tourism as an extra revenue stream [5.11, p4], and to work with the government to boost the recognition of heritage in the Himalayan region. As the Chief Administrator of Hemis monastery states, "Many politicians... say that this Museum is extra special, so we are ready to provide any kind of support from the government level" [5.1, p2]. A database containing the collections of five monasteries in Mustang has been delivered to the Department of Archaeology, Government of Nepal to help populate inventories of the country's cultural heritage at national and eventually, at international level.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1. Interview transcript, Chief Administrator, Hemis Monastery. Interviewed by Rinchen Wacher, July 2020
- 5.2. Interview transcript, Abbot of Namgyal. Interviewed by Kunzom Thakuri, November 2020
- 5.3. Interview transcript, Monk and photographer Choede monastery. Interviewed by Kunzom Thakuri, July 2020
- 5.4. Interview transcript, local resident and tourism operator, Kagbeni. Interviewed by Kunzom Thakuri, July 2020
- 5.5. Interview transcript, local resident and tour business operator, Hemis. Interviewed by Chiara Bellini, July 2019
- 5.6. Interview transcript, security staff, Hemis Museum. Interviewed by Chiara Bellini, July 2019
- 5.7. **a**) Hemis Monastery on Trip Advisor: https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction Review-g2287330-d3440124-Reviews-or5-Hemis Monastery-

Hemis Leh District Ladakh Jammu and Kashmir.html#REVIEWS; b) PDF version

5.8. a) Chemre Gompa Monastery, Leh on Trip Advisor:

https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction Review-g297625-d2354468-Reviews-

Chemre Gompa Monastery-Leh Leh District Ladakh Jammu and Kashmir.html; b) PDF version

5.9. a) Kag Chode Thupten Samphel Ling Monastery, Kagbeni on Trip Advisor:

https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction Review-g737053-d10317618-Reviews-

Kag Chode Thupten Samphel Ling Monastery-

Kagbeni Dhaulagiri Zone Western Region.html; b) PDF version

- 5.10. PDF of images from Hemis Monastery Museum visitor book
- 5.11. Interview transcript, Head of Kag Choede Monastery. Interviewed by Kunzom Thakuri, July 2020