

DIVINE INTERVENTION



Words and Photography by Matt Dutille

In Bhutan, a small team of monks serves as custodians of the Himalayan country's great spiritual heritage.

Lopen Namgyel Dorji, director of the Department of Antiquity of the Zhung Dratshang Preservation & Antiquities Conservation Center. *Opposite page:* Kinga Dorji, embroidery specialist of the ZDPACC.

In the dim light of the Jangtsa Dumtseg Lhakhang temple, I glimpse a pair of scarlet robes just before they vanish.

They disappear behind a circular column painted with bright yellow and orange Shakyamuni Buddha figures seated in the open-palmed lotus position. The whispers of my guides — two Lopen, a title given to mean both teacher and master in Bhutan's monastic order — coax me forward through the building's ring-shaped center.

The spherical temple, built in the 15th century, is an oddity in the otherwise angular sacred spaces of the Himalayan nation. Tucked into a quiet corner of Paro, surrounded by rice terraces and farmhouses, the temple is unassuming until you step inside. There, three ever smaller and higher concentric stories reveal masterworks of artisan monks created centuries ago. Hundreds of Buddha line the first story; wrathful Mahakala patrolling Bardo, the transitional state between death and rebirth, coat the second; and 84 Mahasiddha, the tantric masters of Vajrayana Buddhism practiced throughout Bhutan, glow in various forms across the third. Some interpret these stories to represent the planes of heaven, hell, and earth.

Legend has it that the temple owes its conical shape to Thangtong Gyalpo, a wandering Tibetan yogi and master engineer of the early 15th century, who demanded the temple be built with a hollow interior to entice a troublesome naga spirit to wrap around it, thus subduing the spirit's power and bringing peace to the surrounding land. In the 19th century, the 25th Je Khenpo (the spiritual head of the monastic body) Sherab Gyeltsen added a protective 12-pillared octagon and outer temple. The resulting architecture recalls a set of wooden blocks: a cone stacked upon a flat circle on top of a square box.

It is the temple's latest round of renovations, completed in 2019, that have brought me here, to meet with my robed guardians, Lopen Sonam Tshering and Lopen Namgyel Dorji of the Zhung Dratshang Preservation & Antiquities Conservation Center. Founded in 2003 by a small team of monks, the center is dedicated to the preservation and continuity of Bhutan's spiritual heritage. Whereas monks once created the sculptures, murals, scrolls, and *thangka* (religious scroll paintings) of the Himalayan region, they now serve as the artworks' custodians.

The preservation of culture is baked into Bhutan's national identity. Indeed, it is one of the four main pillars of Gross National Happiness. The philosophy was developed by Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth Druk Gyalpo (Dragon King) of Bhutan, in the early 1970s as an answer to Gross Domestic Product and guides the governance of the country by prioritizing the collective well-being of its citizens above their economic output.

As we wind our way clockwise down the temple's steep stairs, their wood worn by the bare feet of devotees, Lopen Sonam pauses to note where his team has completed restorations. As head conservation trainer, he oversaw a team of 15 individuals, from monk conservators to traditional craftspeople. The rotten cores of massive 19th-century wooden pillars were replaced then reclad in their century-old exteriors; murals of some of the oldest and largest representations of Avalok-

iteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion and mercy, in Bhutan were refreshed; the foundation of the temple was resealed, the stones repositioned exactly as they had been; and a high canal was moved behind a new wall — all of it intended to preserve the temple's original character. "We aim to bring back 30 to 40% of the colors and details," explains Lopen Sonam, as I struggle to find traces of their efforts in the murals. "Some elements we bring back to 70% of the original work, but never to 100%," he demurs.

The next morning, at the newly consecrated ZDPACC building in the capital of Thimphu, Lopen Kencho Gyeltshen, ZDPACC's conservation chief, invites me to witness restorations in progress. We make our way to the thangka conservation room, removing our shoes and placing them in cubbies before entering. It is here that the monk conservators conduct some of their most incredible work.

Inside, three monks hunch over their tasks. Namgay Tenzin, a painting specialist, helps Sonam Tenzin, the resident object conservationist, clean a set of ritual bowls belonging to the Royal Grandmother. The bowls have been in near constant use for the last 30 years. Utilizing soft-bristle toothbrushes and a mixture of water and ash, the two gently scrub, peeling off layers of soot without damaging the golden decoration.

At the other end of the studio, bent over one of several large, low tables, is Kinga Dorji, an embroidery specialist. With delicate pulls and an almost rhythmic cadence, he repairs the outline of a sinuous dragon on an orange cream soda-colored silk brocade. It frames a nearly 9-by-5-foot thangka from the Tashichho Dzong monastery that is displayed during the annual *tshechu*, a religious festival featuring masked Cham dancers.

On the series of remaining wood tables, layers of a thin, cotton fabric obscure everything but the outline of the thangka, each no more than a few feet wide. Thangka are traditionally painted on cotton or silk and decorated with religious figures. Intended to aid in meditation, rituals, and teaching, they are then sewn into a patterned silk brocade, covered by a silk-screen cloth, and rolled around a wooden pole for transportation and storage. In their early years, the scroll paintings were carried throughout Bhutan by Tibetan Buddhist scholars and teachers, used in the instruction of monastic students and laity. In fact, the very meaning of thangka is "that which one unfurls."

Around the room, I see thangka in various states of disrepair. A Buddha and consort face each other — embracing in the traditional *yab-yum* form, with the consort seated on the Buddha's lap — on a fiery red background that has nearly fallen apart. Long tears stretch across the artwork where it has dried and cracked.

Where thangka restoration differs from Western conservation techniques is the end goal.

"In conservation, if something is missing, you keep it as it is," explained Lopen Sonam. "We have to ensure the thangka continues its use in rituals. So the idea of conserving itself is unique. These objects were consecrated by great masters, accomplished masters, and to maintain the sanctity of the object is paramount." //



Lopen Sonam Tshering is head conservation trainer of the ZDPACC, which manages over 800 temples.



Monks of the Zhung Dratshang have been the custodians of Bhutan's sacred objects for centuries, but the formal work of the ZDPACC began a little over 20 years ago.

