Artwork from a troubled land

Mead prepares for display of newly-forgotten Tibetan masterpieces

by Dylan Klempner
Gazette Contributing Writer

For decades, the 17 treasures — gold and silver paintings of Buddha-like deities, paintings depicting the Buddhist doctrines of karma and samsara, and cloth paintings with Buddhist symbolism, printed and sewn fabric with designs, woven with hand-woven textiles — have been on display in the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College. Most were not on display before 1958.

The delicate pieces of artwork are Buddhist thangkas — cloth paintings depicting Buddhist deities and samsara, woven into fine silk and wool, which are rare and valuable. They have served as cultural and religious symbols and texts.

From Tibet to Amherst

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"I was very excited to see these and was sorry to learn from the expert members of our own staff that they were too fragile to put on view," Barker said, referring to the richly colored and elaborately decorated thangka pieces — some as big as king-sized mattresses and adorned with paint made of gold. "Every time we handle them, we injure them a little bit more."

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Thangka thangkas are important devotional medallion masks in the monastery where this thangka was once displayed. It would have visualized this image of their guru surrounded by deities and enlightened beings.
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Continued from Cl

political situation, says Amherst College professor Paola Zanperini. Tibet is under China’s rule, and Tibetan_Grants, the 14th Dalai Lama, has for over a half century, lived in exile. The 1956 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, he travels the world, speaking about Buddhist practices and its behalf of Tibet and its people.

Because of the upheaval in their country, many Tibetans have sought refuge in foreign countries, including in the United States. The Pioneer Valley has been designated by the U.S. government as a resettlement area for the refugees, and today, some 100 Tibetans live in the Valley, which is the site of the Shang Shang Institute of Traditional Tibetan Medicine, located in Conway.

“The Hamiltons’ knowledge about Tibetan issues remains a mystery, says Zamperini, an assistant professor of Asian languages and civilizations at Amherst College and a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. ‘I don’t know if Hamilton himself was aware of how sensitive this issue would become,’ she said.

Shining a light

The Thangkas are very important devotional objects for practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. They are not just representations of deities but are used in the practice of meditation itself, said Zamperini. They are used in design educational programs for the Five Colleges, related to the thangkas. (See sidebar.)

The cultural, religious, spiritual significance of the Mead’s thangkas, and other thangkas in general, cannot be underestimated, she said. “They are important objects for people who may not know about Tibetan culture to begin to engage with that tradition.”

Indeed, for Tibetans, the thangkas are like maps that show how their culture developed and how it will move forward, says Phuntso Wangmo, a Tibetan and a doctor and teacher of traditional Tibetan medicine at the Shang Shang Institute. Thangkas are used to illustrate the Tibet’s cultural, scientific, and religious history, she said. Some tell the history of the Tibetan people and their leaders, or others may be used in medicine.

The ones found at the Mead relate specifically to the religious aspects of Tibetan culture, and illustrate the history of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, Wangmo said. They show a school’s lineage and the relationship between masters and disciples.

As Buddhism, Tibetan culture, and Chinese history have risen to prominence, both as academic subjects and as matters of popular interest, experts suggest that the Mead’s thangkas can be used to further enlighten a light on that culture and disciplines.

“We’re really hoping that these Tibetans who are now living and becoming part of the Pioneer Valley community will see these thangkas as part of their own cultural heritage,” Zamperini said. But, while she says she is looking forward to working with members of the local community from Tibet, including the scholars and teachers from Shang Shang Institute in Conway, to develop plans for exhibitions and educational seminars related to the thangkas, cleaned, have their painted surfaces stabilized and their silk supports reinforced.

When they arrive at the center, director Camille Myers Breeze photographed the thangkas, vacuumed them and did some initial testing to determine how far they want to take the cleaning. The goal is not to make the thangkas look new again,” Breeze said, “but to see how much we can remove of the deterioration products that have accumulated over time in order to improve the preservation of the pieces.”

— DIAN KLEMPNER

Restoring the fragile thangkas

In 2009, Elizabeth Barker, director and chief curator at the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College, began to search for funding for the conservation of its collection of 17 thangkas — writing grant applications with an eye toward receiving them for exhibition.

Thanks to a $49,000 grant from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, six of the Mead’s Tibetan thangkas are now at the Museum Textile Services, a textile conservation facility in Andover, where, over the next several months, they will be treated.

Dancers from Amherst Ballet perform at the New York Botanical Garden.

Dirce and Dickinson

Students from Amherst Ballet gave four performances of the company’s original ballet, “Emilys of Amherst,” as part of the New York Botanical Garden’s recent exhibition about Emily Dickinson. Will Dickinson, Paola Zamperini’s daughter, performed in the ballet. Dickinson’s letters and poems and an original score based on music found in the Dickinson family library, the ballet is meant to familiarize audiences with the poet and her daily life in Amherst.

“The ballet brought Emily to life in a new and unique way,” said K een Joseph, director of public education and interpretation at the botanical garden. “It made her seem like a real person, and you get a sense of what her life was like in the

Tibetan Thangkas offer educational opportunities

Elizabeth Barker says she is eager to put the Tibetan thangkas to use as teaching and research tools. It’s all part of her general long range plan for the Mead Art Museum, where she is the director and chief curator.

“One of the initiatives I’ve been really excited about is the potential for having them here in the museum, and they will be housed internationally,” said Barker, who is on board at the Mead in 2009. “The Mead College plans to collaborate with other Five College departments and with the local Tibetan community, Barker says, to create a series of educational events related to the thangkas.

The first event, an intensive course called “The thangkas for Five College faculty, is tentatively scheduled to be held at Amherst College next June. The seminar will be held by a $500,000 grant from the Andrew W Mellon Foundation based in New York City, which will help the Mead strengthen its academic role of the museum’s collections and programs, according to the museum’s website.

Faculty seminars are one of the four initiatives to be funded by the Mellon grant. In the coming years, Barker says, the museum will bring in leading international experts, who will share their special knowledge with the museum staff and college faculties.

In addition, the grant will provide funding for a full-time staff person who will work with faculty and museum staff to develop ways to further use the college’s art collection for teaching and research.

Additionally the grant supports two year post-baccalaureate curatorial fellowships for recent Five College graduates, and provides curatorial stipends for guest faculty to create exhibitions and catalogs at the Mead.

“This prestigious grant enables the college’s commitment to using its art collection to its fullest potential,” Barker writes on the museum’s website. “The Mellon Foundation’s generous support will allow Amherst to deploy its wonderful art collection in the service of pedagogical innovation — to your bold leaps in interdisciplinary liberal arts education, as well as in museum work.”

— DIAN KLEMPNER

Taste of Amherst

Amherst Area & Florence Savings Bank Present The 19th Annual TASTE OF AMHERST June 17, 18, 19, & 20 On-The-Common Thursday 5-9pm, Friday 5-10pm, Saturday 12-10pm, Sunday 12-4pm

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