



Figure 1: Two of the painters complementing lost sections on the entry wall.

Restoration of the Murals of Dzong Monastery, Mustang, Nepal

Final Report; July 1, 2025 – October 31, 2025

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December 17, 2025

Summary

Throughout the Summer Kunjon Thakuri kept in contact with Noor Jahan to explore options for starting the final restoration phase. In the end, Noor Jahan and her team could only resume restoration work on the Dzong murals in early September, requiring an extension of the project into October. The on-site restoration work was completed on October 14.

Unfortunately, we only received Noor Jahan's report on November 26. Since Christian Luczanits was too busy with his work to finish this final report at the time, we requested another extension to mid-December, when his teaching was completed.

Report June – October

No work was done at the site before the phase 2 campaign, undertaken in September and October. Kunjon Thakuri and Noor Jahan regularly discussed the planning and composition of the work team. In the end, the team included three local painters who had previously worked on the restoration of the monasteries in Lo Manthang, thereby gaining experience in proper conservation painting. This included preparing the pigments (Figure 2), adapting the new painting to the existing murals in terms of pigments and colour, and repainting the deities in the extant style. This training may allow them to perform minor painting restoration work in the future, such as the work done at Lo Gekhar Monastery.

The works completed during phase 2 of the restoration project are detailed in the report provided by the lead conservator, Noor Jahan, which is provided separately. It includes a set of before-and-after photographs showing the paintings' integration.

As reported by Noor Jahan, towards the end of the phase 2 campaign, the Khenpo asked the restorers and painters to do other tasks not covered by the project. These included painting furniture, cleaning metal sculptures, and repainting the sculptures' eyes. The request to clean the sculptures was particularly problematic, as the lead conservator was no longer on site. Further, Christian Luczanits in April brought a conservator to Mustang to do the cleaning of the sculptures, as this was discussed previously, but at that time, the Khenpo was unable to organise access to the sculptures.

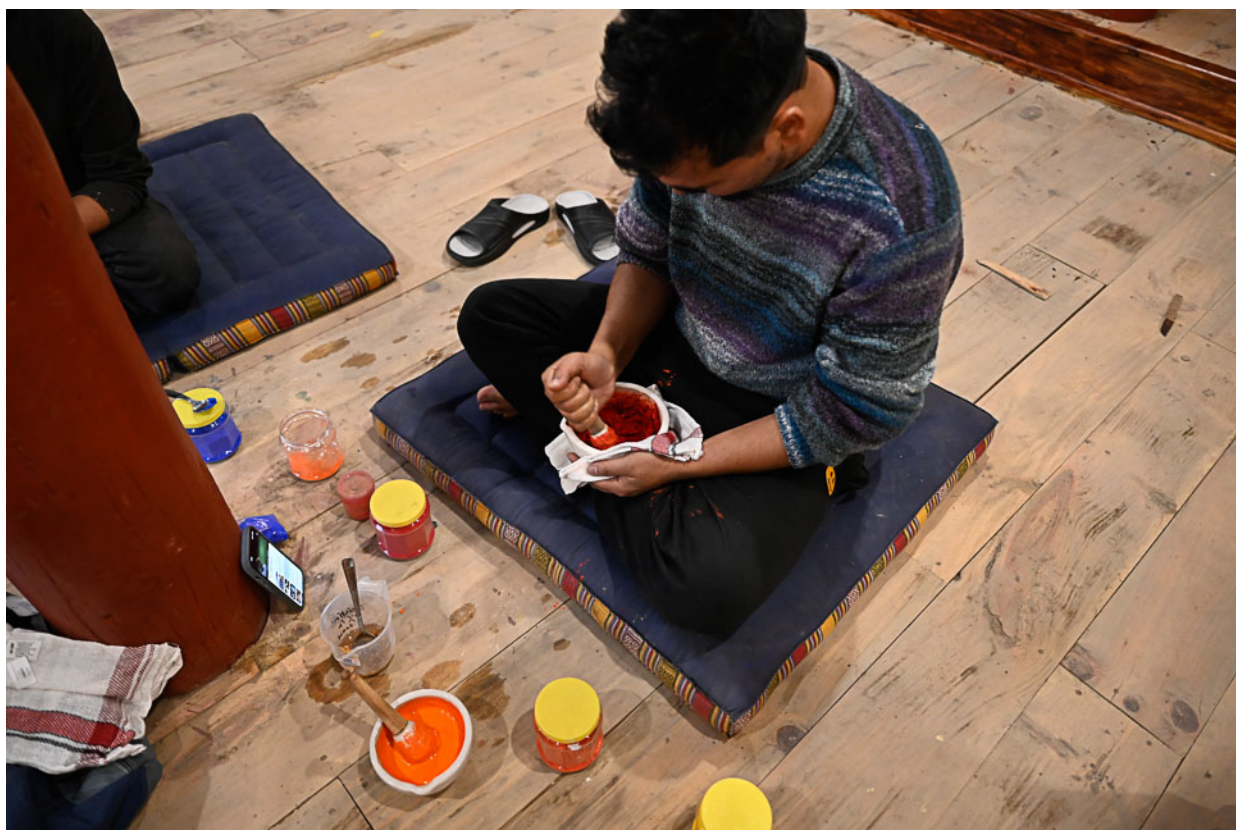


Figure 2: Preparing the pigments to create the different shades of colour needed for the inpainting.

Final Report

The restoration of the Dzong murals was planned and undertaken to complement the architectural restoration, with the Norbusum Foundation stepping in at short notice. At that time, contacts with the art restoration group led by Noor Jahan from Ladakh, India, had already been established through prior work she had done for the Gönpa Gang project. In Ladakh, Noor Jahan has already assembled a small team of local art conservators and conservation painters with practical experience in restoring ancient murals. The Norbusum Foundation, thus, planned this work from the outset with Noor Jahan in mind. In autumn 2024 the project was fortunate that Noor and her team could commence with Phase 1 of the project on short notice, but Phase 2 had to be delayed to autumn 2025 as the art conservators were not available in May as initially planned, as they had in the meantime received significant funding for a project in Ladakh.

The organisation of the project into two phases, Phase 1 focused on cleaning and consolidation and Phase 2 on finalisation and inpainting, worked very well. It also allowed for the high-resolution documentation and the iconographic and stylistic study undertaken by Christian Luczanits between the two phases, and the results of the study could be used to complete the inpainting of lost sections. Of course, ideally, such high-

resolution documentation is supposed to precede any work and follow it, but this was not possible within the timeframe required to finish the work. Further, the conservators' and the Norbusum Foundation's documentation before, during, and after the work is sufficient to document the original damage and the restoration's progress. Still, it lacks the quality to present the work properly in directly comparable images, as the murals are highly reflective. The presentation of progress throughout the project period in this final report thus must rely on pictures of varying quality and taken at different angles.

In the following four areas of the murals are presented to document the overall progress of the restoration, shifting between overviews and details of the work undertaken.

Buddha Akṣobhya



Figure 3: Buddha Akṣobhya prior to the restoration work.



Figure 4: The same section with Buddha Akṣobhya after consolidation of the paint layer and cleaning.

The murals on the main wall sections to the sides of the niche, featuring two Buddhas on each side, were covered with clay throughout and thus in worse condition than any of the other murals. In the case of Buddha Akṣobhya this included the loss of a painted area underneath the beam, flaking murals and water streaks (Figure 3). Here, the cleaning and consolidation undertaken in phase one already had a major impact on the appearance of the murals (Figure 4).

Phase 2 then focused on restoring the areas around the Buddha's head that had been lost. The new paintings were first outlined, then gradually painted in, with the colouring adjusted to that of neighbouring areas. Thereby, the small Buddha images around the halo had to be reconstructed in the same style as the extant ones. Final adjustments assured the integration of the new murals with the old ones. The following images document different stages of this process and conclude with two views of the final appearance.



Figure 5: Outlining the halo of the Buddha.



Figure 6: The outlines now include the Buddha images around the halo.



Figure 7: The same are with the background painted in.



Figure 8: Painting the surrounding Buddha images.



Figure 9: The same area with the surrounding Buddhas partially painted.



Figure 10: Two views of Buddha Akṣobhya after the restoration work was completed.

Protector Pañjara Mahākāla

Also the sections of the protective deities on the entry wall were covered with streaks resulting from water intrusions. Above Pañjara Mahākāla there was also a lost section of his flaming mandorla. Again, consolidation and cleaning improved the murals' appearance considerably, and the lost sections were painted in.



Figure 11: Pañjara Mahākāla before and after cleaning; some of the white spots in the left picture are reflections.



Figure 12: The area of the loss with the flames drawn.



Figure 13: The area of the loss with the Buddha image and the flames painted in.



Figure 14: Two views of Pañjara Mahākāla after completing the inpainting.

Wealth Deity Vaiśravaṇa

The situation around the wealth deity was similar to that in the previous example, but here an iconographically complex area featuring some of the eight generals surrounding the deity had to be complemented. Also the background colour around the loss has already been altered in a previous restoration. Further, being right next to the entrance, the lower part of the murals was more damaged than usual. These damages were left untouched, as the paint layer preserved here is original. With no direct extant model for the generals, more remote comparisons were suggested as reference points. The painters also had to ensure they correctly understood the remaining traces and reconstructed the generals in their original positions.



Figure 15: The wealth deity Vaiśravaṇa before and after consolidation and cleaning.



Figure 16: The painter drawing the outlines of the missing Buddha images and generals.



Figure 17: Some of the lost area already painted.



Figure 18: The inpainting of the Buddhas and generals is completed.



Figure 19: View of Vaiśravaṇa with the surrounding deities completed.

Green Tārā and Padmasambhava

The most significant paint loss was in the area underneath the goddess Green Tārā and Padmasambhava. Both are surrounded by complex iconographic configurations, namely the twenty-one forms of Tārā and the eight manifestations of Padmasambhava.

Further, neither deity was preserved in its original form; both had already undergone prior restorations, obscuring the original iconography considerably. Reconstructing the lost sections was thus unusually difficult and continued to be discussed during the restoration with the abbot. In the end, the reconstructions proposed by Christian Luczanits in the previous report were followed.



Figure 20: This photograph, showing the large losses under Green Tārā and Padamsambhava, was taken in 2021, before the new borders were painted.



Figure 21: The same area after the borders were painted, as well as after cleaning and consolidation.



Figure 22: Drawing the missing forms of Tārā along the bottom area.



Figure 23: The new lotus pond and lotus stem painted underneath the foot of Green Tārā. To the sides are the outlines of other forms.



Figure 24: The painter working on the deities underneath Green Tārā.



Figure 25: The goddess Green Tārā with her lotus pond and the missing forms complemented.

Among the eight manifestations of Padmasambhava, the location of Guru Nyima Özer was particularly contested. Christian Luczanits suggested that it must have been in the bottom centre before the lotus stem. While the Khenpo originally agreed to this reconstruction, when it came to painting it, it was questioned again. Only when Christian Luczanits could point out another example with the same composition was this reconstruction accepted.



Figure 26: Outlining Guru Nyima Özer underneath Padmasambhava.



Figure 27: Completing the lotus underneath Padmasambhava.



Figure 28: Much of Padmasambhava's lotus is painted, but the figure of Nyima Özer is still to be done.



Figure 29: Much of the lotus and the figure of Nyima Özer are completed.



Figure 30: The restoration of Padmasambhava and his eight manifestations is completed.

Evaluation

Leaving aside the delay in completing the work, the painting restoration was largely completed as planned. That it will not be easy to do the inpainting with a patchwork of styles already extant was clear from the outset. The original plan foresaw that the visits of the art historian Christian Luczanits and the conservation painters would overlap, so that the work could be discussed on site, but the delay in phase 2 made this impossible. This meant that only some of the open questions were discussed in consultations mediated by Kunjon Thakuri as needed. Nevertheless, the results of the inpainting are overall satisfactory.



Planning the work on site was problematic from the outset, as the Dzong Khenpo would have preferred not to have an outside body undertake it. As such, the Norbusum Foundation was in a difficult position, even more so when Kunjon Thakuri also insisted that the three villages nominally under the monastery's care be included in discussions about the restorations. Thereby, it became clear that the relationship between the three villages and the monastery is not harmonious, with the Khenpo feeling unsupported and the villagers feeling uninformed. Accordingly, the Foundation and the restoration project were sitting between chairs, which was felt throughout the work.

Nevertheless, this painting restoration project was a useful trial run for the Norbusum Foundation, as it made clear which areas require particular attention in a painting conservation project. This experience will be helpful for the painting restoration of the Gönpa Gang, the planning of which will be adapted accordingly.