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A Reflection on the Film Screening at UBC
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From Bhutan and Ladakh in the Himalayas to the Dunhuang Grottoes on the Silk Road in China, the spread of Buddhism has left numerous historical artistic treasures. Many of them, however, have already disappeared or been damaged. The sumptuous film “Buddhist Art: A Fragile Inheritance” by award-winning filmmakers Mark Stewart Productions tells the story of the valuable but vulnerable wall paintings in Bhutan, Ladakh, and the Dunhuang Grottoes, and the efforts that have been made to save these inheritances. This film was presented at the University of British Columbia’s Frederic Wood Theatre on February 17, followed by a question and answer session with Professor David Park, Director of both The Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Centre for Buddhist Art and Conservation and the Conservation of Wall Painting Department at the Courtauld Institute of Art.

Today, approximately five hundred million devotees around the world follow Buddhism. Throughout history, Buddhist figures and deities have been significant to Buddhist practitioners and even ordinary people in Buddhist societies and regions. In today’s Bhutan, hundreds of young

students still receive training in the tradition of ancient painting every year. The painting instructions have to be followed and passed on from generation to generation. To ordinary practitioners, paintings with Buddhist images are regarded as visual aids, which allow the eye and mind to focus on particular aspects of Buddhist teachings. To the painters, the painting process also involves the mental practice of visualizing the deities and dissolving oneself within the supreme qualities of the deity. To historians and artists, Buddhist wall paintings in Bhutan, Ladakh, and Dunhuang Grottoes are great inheritances, reflecting the original spreading of the faith through India, Central Asia, and China. Yet most of the wall paintings have already disappeared, and many of the delicate survivors are under threat, mainly due to natural disasters, changing climates, and human pressure.

The film switches back and forth between different monasteries and caves in Bhutan, Ladakh, and Dunhuang. The environment and especially natural disasters, is the common factor that leads to the decay of the wall paintings. Painted on a clay layer, most of the wall paintings are exposed, only protected by rocky caves. As a result, large areas of the paint have peeled off the wall due to erosion. In Bhutan and Ladakh, earthquakes are one of the major causes of cracks on the walls. Although plaster has been used to fill the cracks, the structures of these walls or monasteries still require repairs to prevent further cracking. Unusual weather events, such as sudden floods, are another factor that damages the caves, architecture, and the historical wall paintings in Ladakh and Dunhuang. Located between the Gobi and Taklimakan deserts, the wall paintings and caves at Dunhuang Grottoes are under terrible threat from sand erosion and encroaching desert. Long-term studies are in process with several institutes, including Dunhuang Academy and the Getty Conservation Institute. An experimental system has been built, one that includes temporary fans, natural barriers, and a protective wheat-grass grid that reduces sand damage.

Human activities, or even some Buddhist practices, also damage the wall paintings. In Bhutan, fire is a particular hazard to paintings housed in traditional wood buildings. One monastery was badly burned, most likely due to traditional butter lamps. In Ladakh, many historical sites are in high and remote areas, forgotten by villagers and gradually falling apart. Local people and officials have not recognized the importance of the unique iconography found on these sites and as such, the conservation work is sometimes difficult. On the other hand, the situation at the Dunhuang Grottoes is completely different. As a popular tourist site, the Dunhuang Mogao Caves attracts thousands of visitors every day. Excessive human activities bring pressure to the fragile Buddhist wall paintings and sculptures and the overcrowded caves and walkways also lead to an uncomfortable tourist experience. Sustainable tourism is urgently needed and replica caves are now under construction, in the hope of replacing and saving the original historical sites.

Unskillful repairs and renovations are problems too. In fact, the repair work itself is controversial. Among Buddhist communities, the Buddhist idea of impermanence influences the attitude towards the Buddhist wall paintings and their threats. Since everything goes through the cycle of birth and rebirth, the damaged paintings should be repainted as a natural process. However, over-painting and restoration of ancient art is contrary to the Western view of conservation that aims to understand and slow down the process of deterioration, and to stabilize the condition of art works. Restoration, on the other hand, focuses more on the aesthetics and appearance of the painting.

The conflict between conservation and restoration may reflect two different value systems and aims. During the question and answer session after the film screening, a few audience members also raised this concern. Professor Park indicated that most of the wall paintings in the aforementioned areas, Bhutan for example, were done in the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries. Only a handful of these paintings are authentic historical works. While new wall paintings are still being created, these fragile treasures require protection and preservation. Communication with local villagers, officials, and even royal families has been done to pursue better understanding and cooperation. Professor Park also noted that this documentary was produced for television and will be shown around the world in the future.