

International Workshop

Tibetan Monastery Collections and Museums: Traditional Practices and Contemporary Issues

8th–10th November 2018
SOAS University of London

Tibetan monasteries are known as repositories of a wide range of ancient objects. Some of these have found their way to the West, while others still serve their original purpose as part of a monastery's collection. Originally a considerable part of these collections was an integral part of the furnishing of the monastery and its temples, and thus accessible to the visitor. Today, many monasteries have added museum spaces to their premises. While the original impetus for such spaces appears to be rooted in an attempt to accommodate the needs of tourists, the aims and contents of these vary greatly. These spaces are an expression of a modern transformation, the impact of which on the collections is the main focus of this workshop.

This workshop, thus, addresses the usage, management and display of institutional collections of Tibetan artifacts both in situ and in the West. Its main aim is to reflect on traditional practices and contemporary solutions for dealing with collections in monasteries across the Himalayas with the goal of identifying best practice. The workshop is part of an AHRC-funded research project—'Tibetan Buddhist Monastery Collections Today'—which directly collaborates with monasteries in Ladakh and Mustang to document, assess and support the management of their collections. Representatives of these institutions will participate in the workshop.

The workshop will be organised into the following panels:

Monastery Collections

This panel will analyse the management, usage and display of collections in monasteries both historically and in the present day. It will reflect on the role collections of portable artifacts play within a monastic context, as well as examine traditional attitudes towards the preservation and conservation of such collections. Participants will also be asked to share their vision for the future of such collections.

Monastery and Museum

The addition of museum spaces to monasteries provokes questions about the status of such spaces and their effects on the collection. What is the historic precedence for such spaces? Is there a difference between the objects in the temple and those in the museum? Does the museum transform the experience of the monastery? Can we also observe a degree of museumisation of the temple?

Collection Records

Both monasteries and museums maintain records of their collections, but they differ considerably in their nature, purpose and accessibility. This panel will assess these differences and will reflect on how the respective systems may learn from each other. It also assesses how the adoption of current standards for such records by monasteries may affect the management and accessibility of their collections in future.

Curating Collections

Any collection requires curation, but how are monastery collections curated and are these traditional methods adequate today? Further, there is no traditional precedence for curating museum spaces. Here, recent trends in the curation of Tibetan collections in Western museums provide a considerable range of options. Can these practices be transferred to a monastery museum context or do these sites have particular requirements?