

Conserving a Mid- 20th century Cambodian Painting: A Cross-disciplinary Treatment Approach

INTRODUCTION

“Buddha descending from Tavatimsa Heaven” (Acc. No. 1999-00056) (Figure 1) 192.5 x 84.5 cm., a Cambodian painting by Som Lin from the mid- 20th century was selected in 2016 for the *Faith and Belief* gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. The conservation of the painted textile led by the HCC Paintings Conservation Section offered an excellent learning opportunity for the author in which experience and knowledge of materials and treatments were shared, discussed and taught during the project amongst the textile and paper conservators in order to achieve the best approach for the preservation of the artefact.

PAINTING

Description- The painting, known as ‘*preah bot*’ “... ‘*preah*’ ... meaning ‘sacred’, and ‘*bot*’ which derives from the Sanskrit ‘*pata*’, meaning to weave ...” (Roveda and Yem, 2010, p.11), is “*probably a section from a series depicting the Jataka Tales (stories of the Buddha’s past lives)*” (SCMS, AIF 11/03/1999). It was donated to a temple by Mr. Tep Heam as an act of merit (Roots, 2016) and it is likely that it was hung in a temple to teach about Buddhism (SCMS, AIF 11/03/1999). The painted textile, a rectangular portrait beige cotton piece with tabby weave and apparently no ground presents an oil paint layer. The paint with its generally matt finish is applied thinly on the surface, with slightly thicker areas mainly located on the figures and objects for an enhancement. Signs of previous repairs in a form of stitching were present on some tears and the top pole sleeve.

Condition and Technical Examination- The textile support was characterized by its lack of structural stability, with losses and some severe tears as well as the bottom pole sleeve having unstitched parts (Figure 4 and 5). Examination of the artefact with raking light showed small irregular creases throughout the entire surface and also vertical and horizontal ones, which are the result of the painting being rolled and folded several times through its use (Walker, 2013, p.9) (Figure 2). Areas of loss of paint layer all over the whole surface due to the manipulation were enhanced with transmitted light, showing the worn out areas of the painting (Figure 3). Nevertheless, despite this damage, the interpretation and aesthetic appreciation is still possible. In addition, infrared examination revealed the underdrawing, slightly noticeable under visible light, which might have been done with pencil.

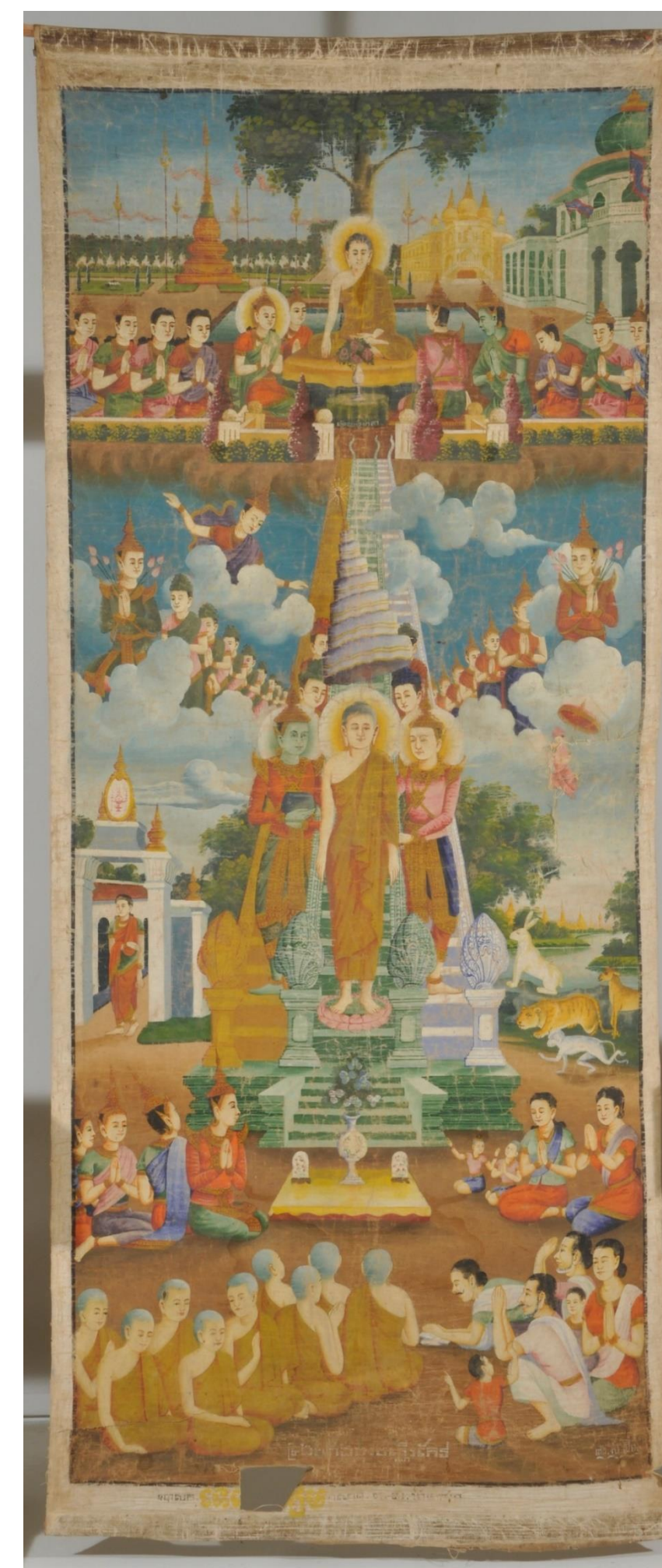


Fig. 1 Recto in Visible light¹.

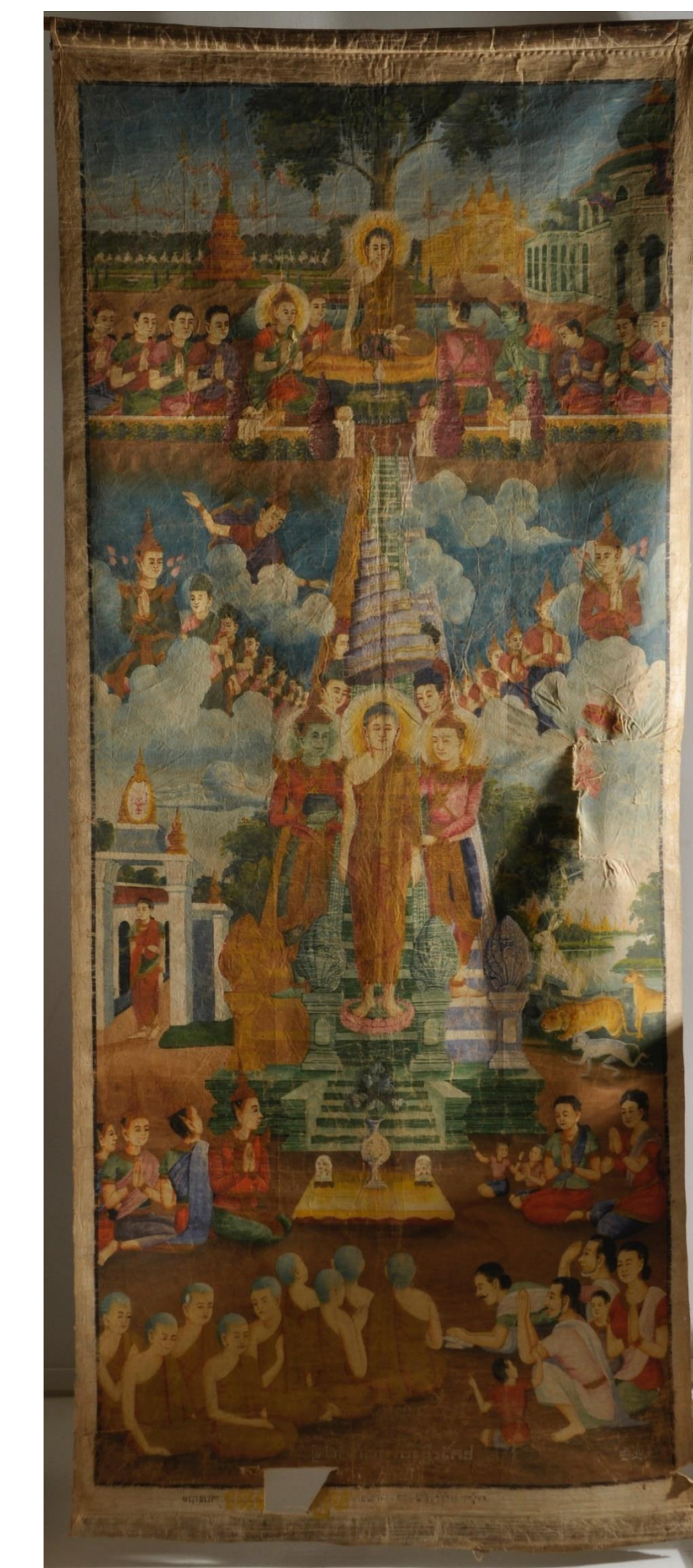


Fig. 2 Recto in Raking light¹.

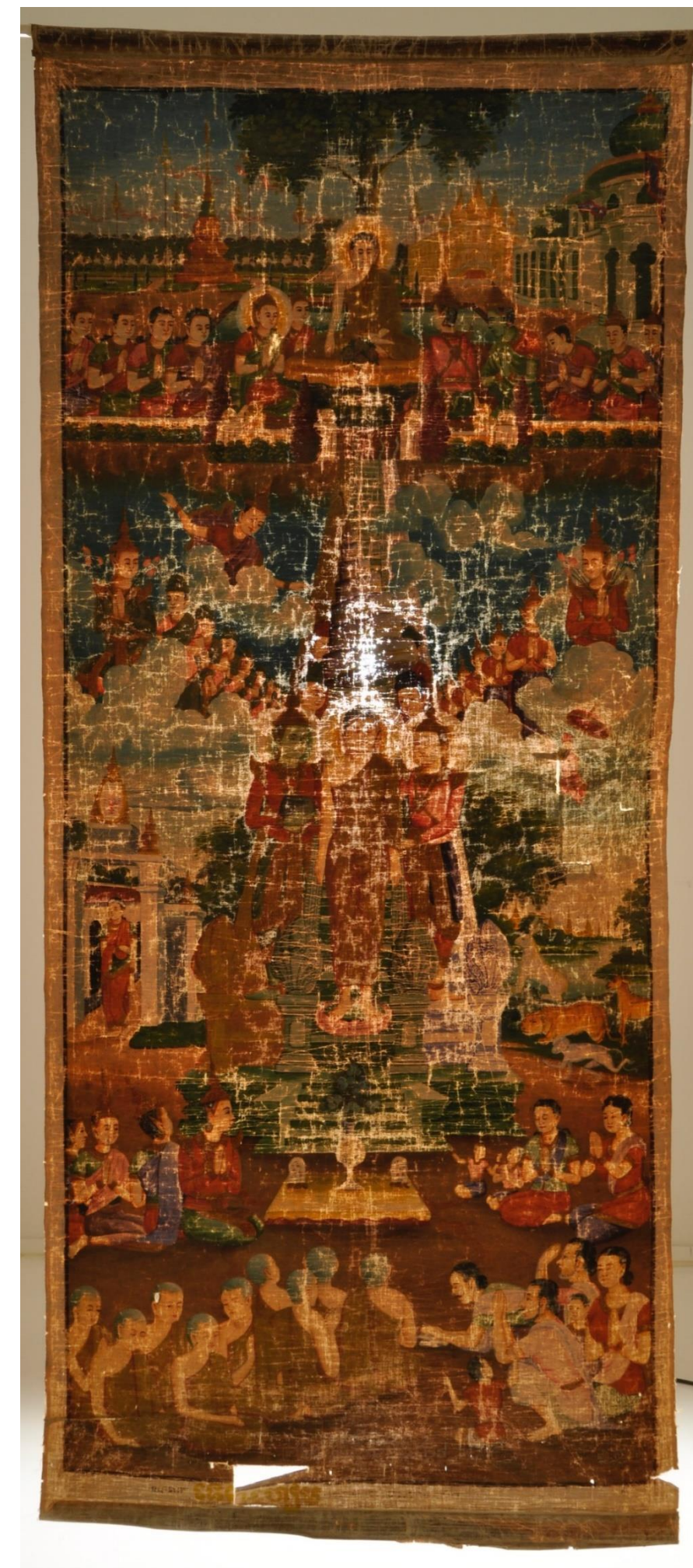


Fig. 3 Recto in Transmitted light¹.

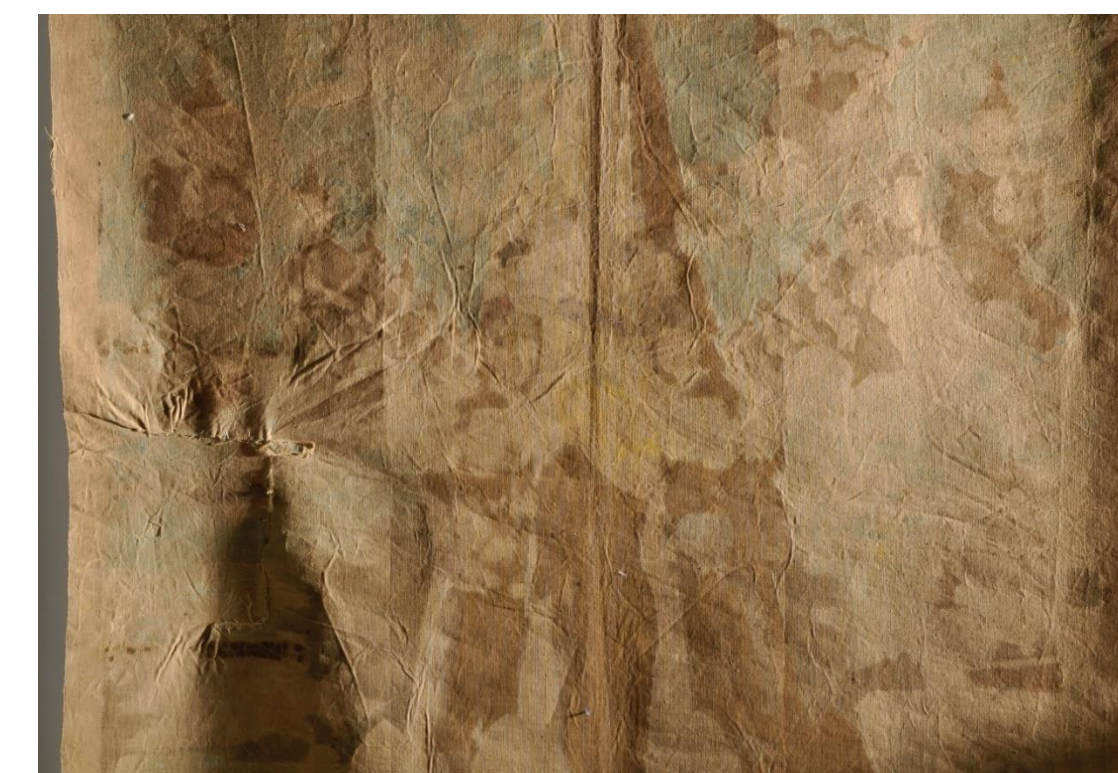


Fig. 4 and 5 Damages, Verso in Raking light. Middle and bottom parts.

TREATMENT

The main purpose of the conservation treatment is to structurally stabilise the painting by addressing the major damages previously mentioned. To respect its current aesthetic condition and original system of display are also important goals of this project.

Surface cleaning and Removal of old repairs

Surface cleaning was performed using a vacuum with low suction and a soft brush on both the recto and verso. Previous repairs were removed for not following conservation standards and compromising the painting’s structure.



Repairs-Stitching.

Repair of the pole sleeves

The pole sleeves were conserved with the purpose of maintaining the original structure for possible future usage. Sections of both sleeves were slip-stitched with a fine polyester thread² and making use of the same existing original holes. On a section of the reverse of the bottom sleeve, where there were abrasions, a localized patch support using cotton voile and Beva[®] 371 film was inserted and adhered.



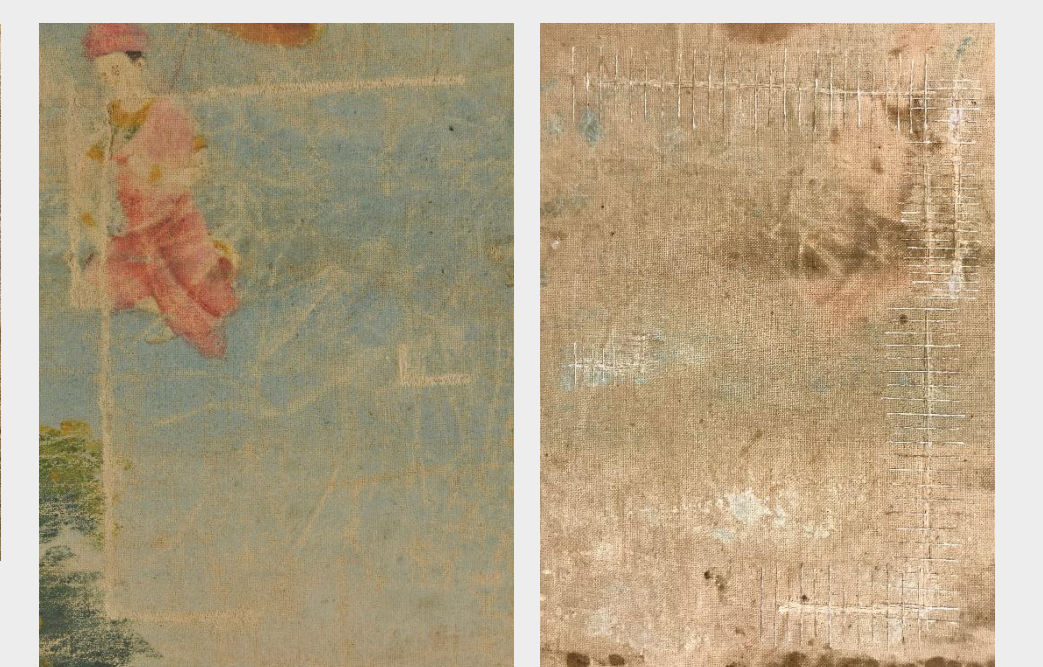
Left figure, During stitching. Right figures, Before and during application of the patch support.

Tear mending

Tears were repaired using a mixture of sturgeon glue and wheat starch paste. When yarns from the original textile were missing, threads from thin linen canvas were added. These were also placed on the tears as a bridge for reinforcement using the same adhesive mixture.



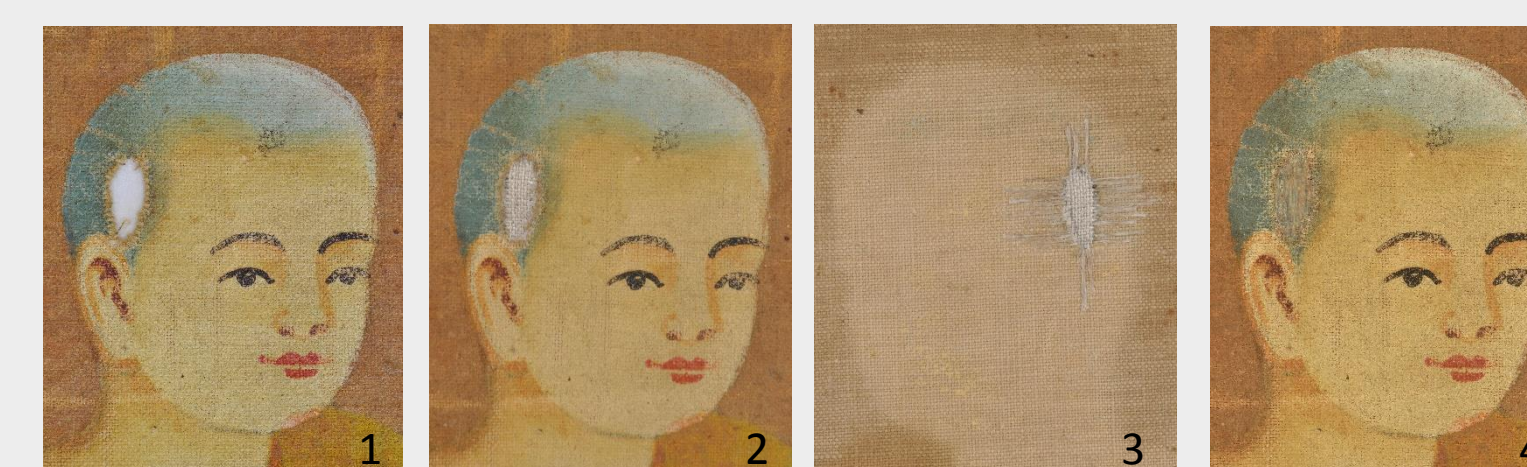
Left, During application of bridges. Right, Tear after treatment.



Tear after treatment. Recto and Verso.

Inlays and Patches

Big holes were addressed with inlays with thread arms using thin linen canvas. Inlays were adhered to the painting with a mixture of sturgeon glue and wheat starch paste and coated with methyl cellulose. The patches, which had the purpose of reinforcing the small holes, were prepared with Japanese paper RK 17 previously dyed with watercolours and applied with wheat starch paste.



Treatment of hole:

1. Before treatment, recto.
2. After application of inlay, recto.
3. After application of inlay, verso.
4. After infilling (sturgeon glue and calcium carbonate) and inpainting with watercolours.

Strip lining, Mounting and Framing

Strips of 36 cm thin linen canvas were cut and the threads of the inner edge were frayed and thinned down. Wheat starch paste was applied with brush on the canvas and placed on the verso of the painting and weighed down. A strainer board was used as an auxiliary support. It was covered with Calico, washed and ironed prior to use. After infilling and inpainting, the painted textile was stretched on the strainer board and framed.



- Mounting and framing:
1. After application of the strip lining, verso.
 2. During adjustment of the painting on the auxiliary support.
 3. After framing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- [1] Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum. Gift of Mr. Percy Vatsaloo.
- [2] Gütermann™ MARA 220.

CONCLUSIONS

The conservation of this painting is an example of the importance of working in an institution that promotes cross disciplinary collaboration. This artefact provided a valuable opportunity for testing materials such as fabrics and adhesives, exploring applications and manipulations as well as learning various treatments and approaches from other disciplines. The conservation has helped to improve the visual appearance and the structural integrity of the painted textile. The treatment results prove that knowledge sharing between conservators can have a positive outcome on the conservation of our heritage.



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