

Textile-Supported Mural Painting at Tawang Monastery: Material Adaptation and Canonical Continuity in an Eastern Himalayan Monastic Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emergence of textile-supported mural painting at Tawang Monastery (Gaden Namgyal Lhatse) in Arunachal Pradesh. It analyses it as a case of material adaptation within a stable Tibetan Buddhist canonical system. While Tibetan Buddhist murals have traditionally been painted directly on mud-plastered earthen walls using mineral pigments and organic binders, the extensive reconstruction of Tawang Monastery during the 1990s introduced a shift toward murals on textile supports adhered to reinforced concrete surfaces. Based on fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2024, this study documents the technical features, visual structure, and material transformations of these murals. It argues that this material change does not break with artistic tradition but instead represents a controlled adaptation to architectural changes and institutional contexts. Iconographic systems, iconometric proportions, compositional hierarchies, and ritual roles remain firmly rooted in established Tibetan Buddhist canonical frameworks. By situating Tawang within broader eastern Himalayan monastic networks, the study contributes to Himalayan art-historical discussions by demonstrating that continuity in Tibetan Buddhist painting depends on canonical discipline rather than material permanence.

KEYWORDS: Tawang Monastery; Tibetan Buddhist painting; Textile-Supported Murals; Eastern Himalaya; Canonical continuity; Material Adaptation; Controlled Adoption.

Introduction

Tawang Monastery (*Gaden Namgyal Lhatse*), located in Arunachal Pradesh, is one of the most significant Gelugpa monastic institutions in the eastern Himalayas. Its painted interiors form an integral part of the sacred environment, visually articulating doctrinal narratives and protective deities through canonically regulated iconographic systems. As in other Tibetan Buddhist contexts, mural painting at Tawang has functioned not merely as

decoration but as a structured visual expression of ritual and doctrinal order (Norbu, 2016).

While scholarship on Tibetan Buddhist painting has extensively addressed stylistic development, regional schools, and iconographic classification, comparatively little attention has been paid to the material conditions that shape mural traditions within living monastic settings. In particular, the relationship between architectural transformation and the pictorial

substrate remains underexplored in the eastern Himalayan context.

The large-scale reconstruction of Tawang Monastery between 1990 and 1997 provides a critical case for examining this issue. Structural deterioration necessitated rebuilding the monastery using reinforced concrete, fundamentally altering the physical conditions for mural production. Earlier murals had been executed directly on mud-plastered walls using mineral pigments and organic binders. During reconstruction, however, cloth was affixed to concrete surfaces and painted in situ—a technique referred to here as textile-supported mural painting. In subsequent years, vinyl-printed devotional images were also introduced, adding another material dimension to the monastery's visual environment.

This article argues that the shift from wall-based painting to textile-supported murals and later to vinyl installations reflects a process of material adaptation shaped by changing architectural and institutional conditions, while core elements—iconographic systems, proportional canons, compositional hierarchies, and ritual functions—remain consistent.

The sections that follow trace the earlier wall-based phase, analyse the emergence of textile-supported murals during reconstruction, examine the Bhavachakra as a case study, and consider the later introduction of vinyl installations. The study ultimately demonstrates that continuity in Tibetan Buddhist mural traditions lies less in

material permanence than in the disciplined transmission of canonical form.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative art-historical methodology based on fieldwork conducted at Tawang Monastery from September 2023 to October 2024. Methods include photographic documentation of existing murals, close visual analysis, and semi-structured interviews with monastic authorities and hereditary painters involved in renovation phases. In the absence of surviving pre-reconstruction murals, earlier phases are reconstructed through published photographic documentation (Sarkar, 1981) and corroborative oral testimony, integrating visual comparison, architectural observation, and field-based inquiry. This triangulation of visual, oral, and architectural evidence strengthens the study's interpretive framework of the study.

Although this study focuses on a single site, its findings can be situated within broader eastern Himalayan cultural and monastic contexts. Monastic centres in regions such as Bhutan, western Arunachal Pradesh, and adjacent Tibetan cultural areas have long shared artistic practices, mobility, and exchange networks (Pommaret, 2002). The involvement of Bhutanese painters during the 1990s reconstruction further reflects these interregional connections. While not a comparative study, this research suggests that the adoption of textile-supported mural techniques at Tawang may form part of a wider pattern of material adaptation in response to evolving architectural conditions.

Historical Background and Earlier Wall-Based Practice

The architectural and artistic history of Tawang Monastery has been documented in administrative and regional studies, notably in Niranjan Sarkar's (1981) work, which provides valuable visual evidence of the monastery's interior prior to late twentieth-century reconstruction. Sarkar describes the monastery as a traditional Himalayan complex constructed primarily from timber, stone, and earthen materials—features consistent with broader trans-Himalayan building practices, where plastered surfaces served both structural and pictorial functions.

Historical records further indicate that mural production at Tawang has long involved artists from outside the immediate region. Norbu (2016, p. 95) notes that in 1812, mural paintings in the Dukhang and library were executed by twenty-seven painters from Ai and Chonggye in Tibet. This demonstrates Tawang's participation in wider trans-Himalayan artistic networks and the longstanding practice of engaging external specialists.

Photographs reproduced in Sarkar's study show extensive painted surfaces in the Dukhang and adjoining spaces prior to reconstruction. Although Sarkar does not provide a technical account, the images clearly indicate that murals were painted directly onto architectural walls rather than on textile supports. This is corroborated by oral testimony collected during fieldwork. Sonam Tsering, a senior

painter of Tawang, recounted that earlier murals were executed on mud-plastered walls using mineral pigments mixed with animal-skin glue.

Oral accounts further suggest a significant mural phase in the mid-1950s. Sonam Tsering reported that his father, Sonam Phuntso—trained in Lhasa under a traditional guru-disciple system and later associated with the Government Craft Centre in Bomdila—supervised mural work during this period. According to this account, murals were painted directly onto prepared plaster surfaces using natural pigments. Although based on oral recollection, this description aligns with established Himalayan wall-painting techniques in which image and architecture are materially unified.

No physical traces of this phase survive today. The earlier structure was dismantled during the reconstruction beginning in 1990, and the present monastery is largely constructed of reinforced concrete. Consequently, evidence of earlier murals is limited to photographic records and oral testimony. While this restricts technical analysis, the available sources consistently indicate that mural painting at Tawang was historically integrated with plastered architectural surfaces.

This wall-based practice represents a mode of production in which architectural structure and pictorial surface were materially inseparable. The wall functioned simultaneously as a structural support and a ritual image-bearing surface. As a result, the durability of murals

depended directly on the stability of the building itself. When structural deterioration—particularly of timber elements—rendered the monastery unsafe, this integrated system was fundamentally disrupted. Reconstruction with reinforced concrete not only replaced the architectural fabric but also transformed the material basis of mural production.

The loss of plastered wall surfaces marks the end of this earlier phase of wall-integrated mural practice. While canonical iconography and compositional conventions continue in later phases, the intimate structural relationship between image and wall is no longer preserved. Given the absence of surviving material evidence, this reconstruction of earlier practice relies on photographic documentation, oral testimony, and comparative technical understanding.

The following section examines how the 1990s reconstruction led to the emergence of a new approach: textile-supported mural painting on concrete surfaces.

Reconstruction and the Emergence of Textile-Supported Murals (1990s)

A significant transformation in mural production at Tawang Monastery occurred during the extensive reconstruction between 1990 and 1997. According to Lama Kesang Norbu, a senior monk on the renovation committee, severe structural deterioration—particularly in the timber beams and columns—necessitated the dismantling of the original structure. The monastery was subsequently rebuilt using reinforced concrete, while

maintaining its external appearance and ritual spatial organisation.

Reconstruction began in 1990 and continued for several years. While engineers and government agencies contributed to the rebuilding process, monastic authorities ensured that the new structure preserved the original dimensions, proportions, and functional layout. Although some timber elements were reused, the primary structural framework and wall surfaces were constructed from reinforced concrete, significantly altering the conditions for mural execution.

The commissioning of new murals during this period marked an important development. Lama Kesang Norbu noted that a team of five painters from Bhutan, trained in Thimphu, was engaged for the project. Two senior artists led the team, assisted by three others. The selection followed evaluation of both artistic quality and financial considerations. Materials, including cloth and pigments, were reportedly brought from Bhutan.

Crucially, the murals were not painted directly onto concrete walls. Instead, plain cloth was first affixed securely to the wall surfaces, creating a textile ground integrated with the architecture. The compositions were then drawn and painted directly onto this cloth in situ. In this system, the textile functions not as a detachable support but as the primary painting surface bonded to the wall. This distinguishes the technique from panel painting or *thangka*

production, where images are created independently and later installed.

This method represents a clear material adaptation, introducing a textile layer between pigment and structural surface in place of earlier mud-plastered walls. Despite this shift, the murals remained architecturally integrated and ritually functional.

The adoption of this technique can be understood as a practical response to the challenges of painting on reinforced concrete. Traditional plaster-based methods are not readily transferable to such surfaces, and the direct application of mineral pigments poses technical difficulties. The use of cloth allowed painters to maintain established techniques and visual conventions while adapting to new architectural conditions.

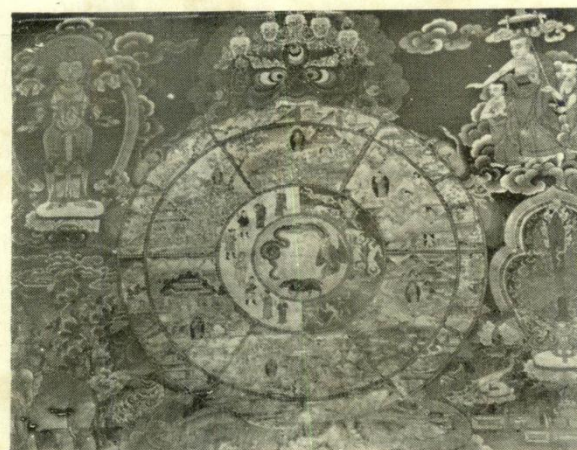
The 1990s reconstruction thus marks the beginning of a second material phase in Tawang's mural history. While iconographic and compositional continuity is preserved, the physical relationship between wall and image is fundamentally reconfigured. This shift becomes more evident through comparative visual analysis, which the following section explores.

Comparative Visual Evidence: The *Bhavachakra* Case Study

A comparative study of the *Bhavachakra* (Wheel of Life) mural provides clear visual evidence of both continuity and change in Tawang's mural history. Sarkar's 1981 publication includes a photographic reproduction

of the *Bhavachakra* on the east wall of the monastery vestibule (Figure 1), illustrating how the mural appeared before the late-twentieth-century reconstruction. A photograph taken during fieldwork in September 2023 shows the mural's current condition (Figure 2). Comparing these two images allows analysis of iconographic preservation, as well as stylistic and material changes.

Figure 1 *Bhavachakra* (Wheel of Life), on the eastern wall of the vestibule, Tawang Monastery. Reproduced from Niranjan Sarkar, *Tawang Monastery*



(1981)

Figure 2: *Bhavachakra* (Wheel of Life), eastern wall of the vestibule, Tawang Monastery. Photograph by the researcher, September 2023.



In both versions, the canonical structure of the *Bhavachakra* remains the same. The wheel is held within the jaws and claws of Yama, the Lord of Death; the six realms of existence are arranged within the circular framework; and the three poisons—pig, snake, and rooster—occupy the central hub. The outer rim depicting the twelve links of dependent origination is also maintained. The compositional organisation follows established Tibetan iconographic conventions, showing continuity in doctrinal representation and iconometric proportion. No significant difference in core symbolic elements is apparent between the earlier and later versions. Despite this structural consistency, notable differences are evident in stylistic execution and pictorial treatment. In Figure 1, the composition appears relatively compact, with limited depiction of surrounding landscape elements. The pictorial field remains closely connected to the wheel's circular form, and the background areas are comparatively subdued. In contrast, Figure 2 exhibits a more expansive pictorial environment. Mountainous forms, layered cloud bands, and atmospheric effects extend beyond the wheel's immediate boundary, adding greater depth and visual energy.

Variations are also evident in figural rendering. The three central animals representing the poisons retain their symbolic positions, but their drawing style, body proportions, and orientation vary subtly between the two versions. Yama's facial expression in the later mural appears more strongly modelled, with more

detailed eyes and a more prominent treatment of skull motifs along the crown. These differences reflect stylistic reinterpretation within established canonical frameworks rather than iconographic revision.

Importantly, the continuity of the mural's iconographic program indicates that the reconstruction did not entail a conceptual redesign. Instead, the mural was re-created while maintaining its doctrinal structure. The compositional template—location, subject, and hierarchical arrangement—remains consistent across both visual records. What changes are the methods of execution, the treatment of space, and the nature of the pictorial surface.

The material shift described earlier cannot be observed solely in iconography; however, it provides the foundation for the production conditions of the later version. While the earlier mural was painted on plastered earthen walls integrated into the structure, the current mural was created on cloth attached to reinforced concrete. The visual continuity of the *Bhavachakra*, therefore, demonstrates that the canonical form remains consistent across different physical materials.

The *Bhavachakra* case shows that while stylistic interpretation and pictorial treatment may vary over time, the image's core structure remains unchanged. The mural's replacement of materials did not change its doctrinal organisation, reaffirming the authority of its canonical form despite different substrates.

Vinyl-Based Interventions and the Third Material Phase

A further stage in the material evolution of painted surfaces at Tawang Monastery is marked by the installation of vinyl-printed images within selected architectural zones. These interventions were limited in scope and did not replace the principal mural cycles of the monastery. According to oral testimony from Lama Kesang Norbu, during the twenty-first century, certain wall areas—particularly on the first floor—were supplemented with digitally produced images. Installed directly on interior walls, these prints serve as visual substitutes for painted murals. As shown in Figure 3, multiple printed panels are affixed side by side to create a unified devotional composition, their modular structure and surface sheen clearly setting them apart from hand-painted works.

Figure 3: Vinyl-printed devotional images forming a composite wall installation, first-floor interior, Tawang Monastery. Photograph by the researcher, 2023.



Unlike the textile-supported murals created during the 1990–1997 reconstruction, vinyl prints are industrially produced images rather than paintings made on site. They are produced externally, transported to the monastery, and installed as finished surfaces. This introduces an additional layer of mediation between image and architecture in material terms. While both wall-based and textile-supported murals embody the labour of trained painters working within the canonical discipline, vinyl prints incorporate mechanical reproduction into the monastic visual environment.

Oral accounts suggest that practical considerations mainly drove the adoption of vinyl images. Printed images provided a cost-effective, quick alternative to commissioning new mural paintings, especially in areas in need of renewal. In this way, their use reflects broader technological and economic changes shaping modern visual production across the Himalayan region.

From an iconographic perspective, however, the subject matter of the vinyl prints follows established canonical themes. Deities, protective figures, and ritual diagrams reproduced on vinyl maintain recognisable compositional conventions and symbolic attributes. The substitution, therefore, does not involve doctrinal innovation; instead, it changes the mode of production and the material presence of sacred imagery.

More importantly, vinyl installation establishes a structural separation between painterly labour

and architectural space. The act of painting—traditionally rooted in ritual intention, iconometric measurement, and embodied skill—is replaced by industrial fabrication. Although the iconographic program remains canonically regulated, the change in production method redefines the relationship among the sacred image, the artist, and the architectural setting. Vinyl installation may thus be viewed less as a traditional mural practice and more as a devotional image installation within architectural space.

However, even within this technological mediation, the symbolic hierarchy of the monastery's visual program remains unchanged. The authority of the canonical form continues to govern the subject matter and arrangement, maintaining continuity despite material changes. The implications of this reconfiguration are explored in the following section.

Material Transformation and Canonical Continuity

The three material phases described above—wall-based execution, textile-supported mural painting, and vinyl installation—exhibit significant transformations of the pictorial substrate without altering the iconography. Throughout these changes, the physical support of sacred imagery shifted, but the overall visual grammar stayed consistent.

In the earlier wall-based phase, image and architecture were materially unified. Pigment

applied directly to prepared earthen plaster created structural integration between the wall and the pictorial surface; the mural's endurance depended on the stability of the building fabric itself. This mode of production aligns with long-standing Himalayan practices in which painting functions as an architectural extension of sacred space.

The reconstruction of the monastery with reinforced concrete altered this configuration but did not destabilise the canonical order. The use of cloth as an intermediary support enabled painters to preserve established compositional methods, iconometric systems, and ritual iconography while adapting to new architectural conditions. Painting continued on-site, even as the surface transitioned from earthen plaster to textile. The cloth layer thus served as a technical intermediary rather than a conceptual shift.

The subsequent installation of vinyl-printed images signifies a further technological shift. Here, images are mechanically produced and applied as finished surfaces, separating fabrication from architectural space. However, deity forms, compositional hierarchies, and symbolic attributes still adhere to traditional rules. What changes is the mode of material presence; the canonical framework remains.

This distinction between substrate and canonical structure is central to the Tawang case. Tibetan Buddhist painting traditions are governed by codified iconometric systems and

textual prescriptions that determine proportions, gestures, attributes, and spatial hierarchies. While regional styles introduce variation in line, colour, and landscape articulation, the underlying compositional logic remains disciplined by canonical authority (Jackson, 2012). The material transitions at Tawang demonstrate that such regulation continues even when architectural supports and production technologies evolve.

From the perspective of conservation discourse, these developments prompt a reevaluation of authenticity. Modern preservation paradigms often prioritise maintaining the original fabric of the material. However, in Himalayan Buddhist contexts, periodic renewal has long been part of ritual maintenance. As Cotte (2006) notes, the value of sacred paintings often lies in iconographic accuracy and ritual effectiveness rather than in material antiquity. At Tawang, replacing earthen walls with concrete—and subsequently using textile and vinyl supports—did not diminish ritual authority. Instead, these changes ensured the continued expression of canonical imagery under altered structural conditions.

The Tawang murals, therefore, illustrate continuity rooted in disciplined transmission rather than in the unchanging nature of physical surfaces. The canonical form serves as a stabilising principle across different substrates, enabling material adaptation as a practical response while maintaining doctrinal and ritual coherence.

Conclusion

This study examines the transformation of mural production at Tawang Monastery through three material phases: wall-based execution on mud-plastered surfaces, textile-supported mural painting introduced during the 1990–1997 reconstruction, and the later installation of vinyl-printed devotional images. Although each phase shows notable shifts in architectural conditions and production technology, these changes did not cause iconographic or doctrinal ruptures. Instead, they reveal adaptive strategies within a canonically regulated visual system.

The reconstruction of the monastery using reinforced concrete fundamentally changed the material basis for sacred imagery, leading to the adoption of textile mediation and, later, mechanical reproduction. Yet, despite these shifts, the core principles of Tibetan Buddhist visual grammar—iconometric proportion, compositional hierarchy, and symbolic attribution—remained fundamentally consistent. The primary change lies in the material method of image creation, while the canonical framework governing sacred representation remains constant.

The case of Tawang Monastery, therefore, challenges conservation models that equate authenticity mainly with material permanence. In Himalayan Buddhist traditions, regular renewal and material replacement have long been part of ritual maintenance. Continuity at Tawang relies

not on unchanging architecture but on the disciplined transmission of canonical forms. Material change happens through a process of controlled adoption in response to structural needs, economic factors, and technological resources, rather than as evidence of a conceptual break.

By emphasising the connection between substrate change and iconographic stability, this article contributes to wider discussions in Himalayan art history about authenticity, conservation, and the evolving material life of sacred images. The durability of canonical structures across different supports in Tawang shows that resilience in Tibetan Buddhist mural traditions relies on the disciplined transmission of canonical form rather than on the preservation of original materials.

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Name of Informant	Age	Role/Position	Type of Source	Date of Interview
Sonam Tsering	76; 77 years	Senior traditional painter of Tawang	Personal Interview	Sept, 2023; Oct, 2024
Lama Kesang Norbu	Approx 70–72 years	Senior monk and member of the monastery renovation committee	Personal Interview	Oct, 2024
