

# The National Museum of Bhutan: An Architectural and Cultural Adventure

Virginia Henderson



*Paro Dzong*

Bhutan's National Museum in Paro, one and a half hour drive from the capital, Thimphu, is perched on a hillside just above the impressive Paro Dzong, described as the finest example of Bhutanese architecture. In Bhutan, dzongs, the large white fortresses which overlook the country's 20 districts (dzongkhags), dominate the towns and serve combined functions of monasteries, administrative headquarters and protective structures.

Built in 1648 by Langonpa Tenzin Drugdra, a half brother of Zhabdrung Rinpoche (Ngawang Namgyal, 1594-1651) who was one of Bhutan's three great lamas along with Sakyamuni Buddha and Guru Rinpoche, the National Museum's formidable circular structure was originally the watchtower of the Paro Dzong. It is reminiscent of a medieval New York Guggenheim which spirals six levels underground through narrow tunnels into dungeons laden with artifacts of the country's rich history.

The museum's inspired assistant director, respected monk Khenpo Phuntsok Tashi, is a keen researcher of Buddhist art. Formerly employed at the National Library in Thimphu, Khenpo Tashi has worked hard over the past two years in managing and improving the exhibition of Bhutanese cultural treasures.

Highlights of Bhutan's National Museum include the vibrant embroidered thangkas (religious wall hangings) of Bhutan's important saints and teachers, pre-1652 brass, copper and earthenware teapots elaborately decorated with naga and elephant spouts and handles, and a collection of 17<sup>th</sup> century armour (including fascinating fish scale helmets) mostly captured during Tibetan invasions. A small 15<sup>th</sup> century wooden phurpa (a dagger for destroying evil spirits) which was bought by a foreign collector for \$10,000 in 1974 and returned to the museum in April 2001 is eye-catching. There is also an informative display of the development of the Bhutanese script and examples of the traditional costumes worn by ethnic groups around the country. A special mention is given to the "Divine Mad Man", Drukpa Kunley, the most popular man of religion

in Bhutan who holds a special place in Tantric Buddhism and is famous for his extravagant and shocking behaviour in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In the Tshogshing Llakhang (temple) on the top floor, the intricately carved Tree of Wisdom shows the various schools and propagation of Buddhism in Bhutan. Guru Rinpoche is seen at one of the centres of the Tree surrounded by Dzogchen lineage holders - Atisha representing the Gelugpa school, with Vajra Dhara (Dorje Chang) and Gampopa representing the Dagpo Kagye and Drukpa Kagye schools, the most widely-followed in Bhutan today.

Khenpo has also been instrumental in cataloguing the major travelling exhibition "The Living Religious and



*Religious hanging embroideries, thang Kas*

Cultural Traditions of Bhutan" which was on display at the National Museum in New Delhi and the Indian Museum in Kolkata during October-December 2001. The exhibition features over 170 rare artifacts dating back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and some of which have never been shown outside Bhutan before. It includes Buddhist religious images, ritual objects, thangka paintings, stone vessels, exquisite hand-woven textiles, and a photographic display of traditional Bhutanese architecture. Performances of mask and folk dances and songs accompany the exhibition, as well as live demonstrations of ancient Buddhist rituals, such as religious sand mandala (kilkhor), finely decorated ritual offerings made of sculptured butter and dough (torma), and the ritual binding of colourful strings (dhey thangne). Also included are some primary examples of Zorig Chusum, Bhutan's thirteen traditional arts and crafts:

- Painting (Lhaso) - thangkas, wall paintings, decorative paintings (using earth paints)
- Carpentry (Shingzo)
- Carving (Parzo) wood, slate, stone
- Sculpture (Jinzo) clay
- Casting (Lugzo) sandcasting and lost wax method - bells and ritual instruments, jewellery
- Blacksmith (Garzo) swords, knives, axes, darts, chains
- Bamboowork (Tshazo) bows, arrows, baskets, hats

- Goldsmithing and Silversmithing (Serzo Ngulzo)
- Weaving (Thagzo) back strap
- Embroidery (Tshemzo) including boot-making and applique for thangkas
- Masonry (Dozo) stone walls
- Leatherwork (Lkozo) bags and belts
- Paperwork (Dezo)

Referring to the close religious and cultural links between India and Bhutan, India's Minister of State for Culture, Mrs Maneka Gandhi said at the exhibition opening that it was "a rare glimpse into a heritage that has been able to preserve its intrinsic qualities in its purest form." Lyonpo Jigme Thinley, Bhutanese Foreign Minister, said the exhibition would "unravel the enigma surrounding Bhutan in the eyes of the outside world."

Although taking a year and a half to prepare, this exhibition of Bhutanese religious and cultural traditions is not scheduled to tour further after India. Future plans for the National Museum depend on money and manpower, both very limited. Right now the public relations section is producing material in English and Dzongka to help communicate to the public what the museum has to offer. Khenpo Tashi is also working on a brief guide to the highlights of the collection, largely a result of the travelling exhibition. The National Museum has its vision, "to develop the collection to include more anthropological items representing the various people and cultures of Bhutan. To show daily life in the whole country." Many students visit Paro to research at the museum. Khenpo also dreams of expanding the space with an audio-visual unit for visitors to rest and absorb the museum's interesting information in an alternative mode. But first, the most pressing task for Khenpo's team is to record the museum's entire collection of antiquities onto a computerised database. To do this, he needs professional help photographing all the items and setting up new systems. Education and heritage preservation are key functions of the National Museum and the dedicated staff does its best to ensure a memorable visit for people venturing into the Paro Valley of Bhutan.

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*All photographs by Virginia Henderson*