

Higher Education KOOPERATIONEN

Austria India



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NAKO RESEARCH AND PRESERVATION PROJECT (NRPP)

International Conservation Project in India

Nako and the temple complex

The small mountain village of Nako is situated in the north Indian federal province of Himachal Pradesh, just a few kilometres from the Tibetan border at an altitude of 3700 m in the midst of an isolated mountain landscape. Because of its seclusion it has retained a hardly comparable originality, which is clearly reflected in the structure of the village and the architecture as well as in the way of living of its approximately 400 inhabitants.

In the highest position at the edge of the village rises the temple complex which looks modest and unostentatious from the outside.

The construction of the four differently sized temples, which were built in adobe style, dates back to the 11th century and is linked to the thousands of years old pilgrim and trade routes which led through this mountain area.

Because of its great and mostly well-preserved interior decorations with wall paintings, clay sculptures and polychromatic wooden ceilings that are characterised by Hindu-Buddhist form language and iconography this temple complex is one of the most significant early examples of this region.

An earthquake in the region in 1975 and the lack of maintenance are the main reasons for the extensive damages and the catastrophic state of the complex. Moreover the extreme weather conditions with snow and frost during winters and heavy rain during the monsoon season cause extreme strain on the temple complex. Therefore urgent and extensive measures – from documentation and static stabilisation of the architecture to conservation and preservation of the wall and ceiling paintings – are necessary.

The project

The Nako Research and Preservation Project (NRPP), which derived from the research project of the Austrian Science Fund entitled "Cultural history of the western Himalayas" of the Department for Art History of the University of Vienna

(head: Prof. Dr. Deborah Klimburg-Salter) is dedicated to the exploration, preservation and restoration of this temple complex which is important both in terms of art history and cultural history. Since 2004 the Conservation Department of the University of Applied Arts Vienna (head: Prof. Dr. Gabriela Krist) has been an active partner of the project and the contact institution for questions related to conservation. The interdisciplinary work group consisting of Austrian art historians and restorers as well as architects from India and local craftspeople links the scientific investigation of the building and art history of the temples with the development and implementation of both long-term preservation strategies and urgent restoration measures. Especially in the carrying out of constructional measures the involvement of the local villagers plays an important part. The temples are to be used as central places of pilgrimage and worship again after the completion of the project. And this particularly is the special challenge of the project: to take into account the local necessities in a special way and yet at the same time introduce international standards of conservation and restoration.

Tasks and goals of the project

By agreement with the president of the Nako Buddhist Society Hokum Chand Negi the primary goal of the project was defined as follows: Conservatory interventions that preserve the original substance and that should if possible apply to the entirety of the complex are to be favoured rather than complete restorations of individual groups of objects.

In June 2004 a team of restorers of the Conservation Department of the University of Applied Arts Vienna travelled to Nako for the first time in order to become familiar with the situation on-site, to assess the condition and damages and to work out the primary planning of the future course of action. The dramatic condition of one of the roofs of the temple required urgent action: emergency safeguarding measures were carried out

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Gabriela Krist

in the temple Lhaxhang Gongma and a concept for the treatment of the polychromous wooden ceiling was worked out.



In September 2004 the planned restoration of the roof and of the ceiling was prepared on site and in May 2005 and July/August 2006 it could be completed. An essential basis for this were the accompanying examinations of the condition and technology of the ceiling paintings carried out in Vienna in the meantime. Another major priority activity in 2006 was the cleaning and consolidation of the wall paintings in this temple. In the main temple Lotsaba Lhaxhang conservatory measures were taken at the important sculpture of Prajna Paramita (goddess of wisdom), which included a partial reconstruction (carried out by a Buddhist sculptor) as well as a correlative integration in terms of colour.

Outlook

The next campaign in Nako is planned for the summer of 2007. To begin with the work will continue to concentrate on the interior of the Lhaxhang Gongma temple in order to complete all necessary conservational interventions at the plaster, wall paintings and sculptures. At the same time conservation and restoration

of the interior of the main temple Lotsaba Lhaxhang will begin.

Through the integration of the project into the current study programmes of the University there is currently research going on at the Conservation Department in the framework of papers and theses as well as dissertations of Austrian and Indian colleagues, which provides the appropriate scientific basis for the conservation work.

Further work campaigns will follow until all measures – also with the two smaller temples of Gyapagpa I Lhaxhang and Karchung – have been completed so far that the temple complex can be used without restrictions by the inhabitants of Nako and of the neighbouring villages as well as pilgrims again. Moreover the installation of a small museum as an information and documentation centre has been planned.

In 2007 His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, who has welcomed and supported the project, will pay a visit to Nako. ■



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