Each part of a thangka has a function. These parts help us understand the work’s history. The thangkas on view originally included all of the following components. Due to conservation concerns, some parts have been removed to prolong the life of the thangka.

This diagram contains details of the thangkas on view in this exhibition before conservation.

Traveling monks hung thangkas from tent poles using strings or ribbons in order to share the ideas of Tibetan Buddhism through images. Now, thangkas are hung in monasteries, palaces, caves, dining halls, homes, and even on mountainsides.

A cloth curtain is lowered when the thangka is not in use. It covers the thangka completely and protects the central image during rolling and unrolling.

Some thangkas include a square of fabric, called the door, below the central painting. Practitioners use the door as an entry point into the scene during visualization.

Monks or lay artists may create the central painting. They first apply a layer of cow- or yak-hide glue to a fabric support, typically cotton. Images are then painted with mineral- or plant-based pigments bound together with glue.

Dowels provide support to the thangka when it is hung and aid in rolling it for storage. Early Tibetans were nomadic and had to roll up their thangkas for travel.

Experienced tailors fabricate the mounting and borders from different types of cloth, ranging from rare silks to dyed cottons.
The works on view previously suffered from condition issues that prevented them from being exhibited publicly. Ephraim Jose, a Seattle-based conservator specializing in Tibetan and Bhutanese art, conserved them specifically for this exhibition.

Why would a thangka or painted mandala need to be conserved?

The natural materials used, such as cloth, animal-hide glues, and mineral- and plant-based pigments, deteriorate and oxidize over time, causing shrinkage, flaking, or color changes.

Natural materials attract insects and rodents. Buddhists believe in compassion for all living things, so pests are not killed if they are damaging works of art. Natural herbs are used as a deterrent.

During ceremonies and rituals, thangkas hang near shrines containing burning incense and yak butter lamps. Smoke and debris collect on the painting surfaces, eventually building up layers of soot and dirt.

Tailors piece together mountings and borders from multiple fabrics with varying weights and types of weave. These textiles shrink over time, causing stress on the painting.

Storing rolled thangkas with other objects may crush the paintings or damage the wooden dowels.

What happens during conservation?

In keeping with the Buddhist concept of impermanence, the conservator’s goal is not to make the work of art last forever, but rather to make it last longer. Jose teaches conservation methods and safe storage techniques to Buddhist monks in order to help them prolong the lives of these sacred objects.

New silks may be cut and dyed with natural pigments to replace shrunked mountings. To stabilize the dyes and prevent color bleeding, conservators immerse the fabric in a solution that may contain tree ashes, vinegar, and chemical elements such as nickel.

If the original curtain has shrunk or is badly damaged, it is necessary to replace it using older, repurposed fabrics or completely new materials.

What materials does conservator Ephraim Jose use?

- **Vegetable pigments** for in-painting
- **Animal-hide glue** made from a mixture of fish, whale, pig, or cow hides
- **Brushes** made of rabbit or badger hair for applying animal-hide glue and natural paints
- **Silk fabric** to reinforce tears or cracks in the surface
- **Hand-made papers** made from mulberry trees to reinforce the backside of the works of art and give the paintings more stability

Natural materials such as roots, barks, plants, branches, and alder tree cones for dying, painting, and tinting new materials to appear aged

Alder tree cones

Watering can with small holes to delicately wash soot and dirt from fabrics and to resize silks