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Regional collaboration and the preservation of cultural heritage

The Lampang Temples Project, Thailand

Since their founding in November 1946, both UNESCO and its NGO partner in the museum field, ICOM (International Council of Museums), have promoted the idea that museums offer a vital means of developing understanding between peoples across national and cultural borders.

By the early 1970s, Australian museum leaders including Eric Westbrook (Director of the National Gallery of Victoria 1955–1973) turned affirmatively to highlight the importance of our cultural engagement in the Asia-Pacific region. While Australia's fulfilment of this commitment has had a somewhat chequered history, the legacy of our best efforts is certainly evident in the work of many professionals in recent years.

One effective means of pursuing cross-cultural diplomacy through museum programs is through direct partnerships. The great benefit of a direct interchange approach is that it necessitates a high level of cultural learning amongst all participants — including organisers. In the process of sharing specialisations and negotiating the design and operation of programs, the collaborators can informally learn from each other, and the potential is enhanced for new learning models to emerge. Moreover, professional and personal interchange may grow into longstanding relationships and provide the foundations for further initiatives and continuing innovation.

Collaboration is central to working across national and cultural borders. Employing this ethos, a Deakin University team undertook a pilot program to develop collections management training for Buddhist monks in Northern Thailand (this team included Dr Jonathan Sweet, Dr Jo Wills and conservator Susie Collis). Essential partners in the project were Chiang Mai University (Fine Arts Department), UNESCO Bangkok, the monks themselves, and community representatives of the city of Lampang, where the program was held.

The Lampang Temples Project, as it became known, was a six-day museology workshop that took place at Wat Pungsamuk, Lampang, in Northern Thailand (16–21 June 2009).
Cross-cultural learning opportunities enable museologists both to broaden their understanding of their discipline and enhance their own skills. The temples project challenged museology from the outset, because the Buddhist temples of northern Thailand are of course not strictly museums. In the Thai context, however, the temples are heritage sites that act as community centres and living repositories for community culture and memory - therefore a rich subject for museological exploration and reflection.

The Buddhist monks are custodians of a diverse range of material that has been donated by community members over time, only some of which is on display. The Lampang program was therefore designed to investigate ways to help these experienced cultural custodians achieve a level of confidence in museological disciplines, and to make informed decisions about the long-term management of the artefacts that are in their care. These include many items of aesthetic, spiritual and historical significance.

One of the challenges for Deakin staff working on this project was therefore to consider how to apply their own culturally formed learning to a new and different cultural context. This opportunity for the ‘trainers’ to reflect on cultural learning, and in so doing refine their own practice, was invaluable. It required recognising the specific cultural and spiritual needs of the participant communities, whilst integrating best-practice methods of museological knowledge into a flexible and engaging learning program.

After preliminary meetings and workshop preparation at the beginning of 2006, both Deakin and Chiang Mai University staff designed and delivered a museum training program for twenty-two Buddhist monks and ten Chiang Mai University post-graduate students. The program was designed to provide the participants with appropriate skills to manage and interpret significant cultural collections, compose a bi-lingual workbook and relevant resource materials, and to create an ongoing support network that participants could access following the workshop’s completion.

The planning began early in 2009, with Deakin University staff attending preliminary meetings in Bangkok, visiting temples in Lampang with staff from Chiang Mai University, meeting with consulate staff from the United States of America to secure additional funding, and discussing key learning needs and interests with local stakeholders. Information gleaned from this preliminary ‘reconnaissance’ phase provided vital contextual background and ensured that the needs of participants and local stakeholders remained central throughout the project as it was advanced.

The intercultural dialogue between Deakin and Chiang Mai university staff also ensured the best possible mix of culturally appropriate training that met the needs of the participants. The diverse Buddhist images and artefacts, as well as other community collections that are held within temples, are important to both monks and the broader community.

An understanding of how to approach long-term care of this material in its full social and spiritual setting - a rich context of intangible heritage values - is crucial to its ongoing conservation and management. As such, while the Lampang training was based on well-developed museum practices (collections management, significance assessment and object interpretation), it was mindfully designed to be conducted at a temple for monks directly responsible for the care of their collections in a living centre of both religious ritual and community cultural engagement.
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The twenty-two Buddhist monks involved were of various ranks and ages, and they represented a number of temples in Northern Thailand, particularly in Chiang Mai, Lampang and Lamphun districts. The secondary participants were post-graduate students from Chiang Mai University, who were keen to develop their knowledge of museology.

These Thai students were critical to the project and contributed directly to its success. They became involved in many logistical aspects of the workshop and they worked alongside the monks, providing additional English language skills and some technical assistance. In some cases, these participants also provided important specialist knowledge, particularly concerning local approaches to the cataloguing of artefacts and the design of displays. This integration of local people and local knowledge into the program was therefore critical, and invaluablely increased the ultimate benefits for all who participated.

The Lampang training program was designed to provide an understanding of an integrated approach to conservation practice. Participants were encouraged to see the preservation and interpretation of artefacts as a process requiring attention to a range of associated issues and involving a number of key activities. The many aspects of a designed learning process were introduced in tailored presentations, and then mirrored in subsequent practical exercises.

Participants were divided into groups at the beginning of the workshop, then completed activities using representative objects from temple collections, later incorporating the final group presentations. These presentations were lively and engaging. They demonstrated a keen understanding of the issues discussed, as well as displaying a fine sensitivity to the complexity of object significance and meaning. During the post-workshop evaluation discussion, the monks identified that the group projects, and the opportunity to work in a collaborative manner, were key strengths of the learning program.

The Lampang Temples Project was a pilot within the UNESCO Museums Capacity Building Program, a broader initiative in which Deakin University has provided specialist advice to identify a range of needs and priorities for museums and collecting organisations in the Asia-Pacific region, together with the development of relevant museum programs for intellectual learning and skills-acquisition.

The Lampang Temples Project strongly demonstrates the capacity of museum work to promote both the preservation of cultural material and the value of conducting local training in relevant environments, so that communities can reconnect and engage in new ways with their own long-held heritage collections. The project also provides a fine collaborative model for the advancement of mutual understanding and cultural engagement through museology in the Asia-Pacific region.

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Monks wearing white cotton gloves for conservation work. 
Photo: Tu, Chiang Mai University.
During the workshop the monks were introduced to basic preservation techniques. Photo: Angela Srimuangvitthana.
Presentation of findings concerning a palm-leaf manuscript. Photo: Tu, Chiang Mai University.
Conservation analysis and significance assessment of a palm-leaf manuscript. Photo: Tu, Chiang Mai University.