Reviving and restoring mineral pigments in Bhutan

The tradition of extracting pigments from rocks, minerals and plants for traditional Bhutanese paintings which was once lost is gradually making a comeback.

Rinzen Dorji was inspired to pick up mineral pigment after he discovered that the mural paintings painted over years were losing colours quickly.

It takes him over a month to extract colours from stone ores and condense them through systematic filtering. It is worth the effort as natural colours do not fade or lose their natural sheen like imported colours.

Before Bhutan started importing paints, it is said that natural pigments derived from plants were predominantly used for painting and dyeing clothes. However, with the onset of trade, chemical paints began to replace indigenous pigments, contributing to the decline in the use of mineral and plant pigments for painting. Recently there is the beginning of a revival of natural paint.

Penjor Dorji and Norbu Tshering founded Green Pigment Arts, an enterprise that aims to revitalise traditional paints and dyes in Bhutanese artwork. To date, about 15 colours have been documented. The artists plan to compile the information they learned into a book. They hope that the book would contribute towards the revival of this precious culture.

Rinzen Dorji has arranged around 30 mineral pigment sample colours at his workshop at Taba, Thimphu. He wants to minimise the use of imported colours in traditional painting.

There is a revival of using natural pigments for painting. Paintings done using natural pigments last for more than two centuries. Moreover, because of their natural state, plant-derived pigments are also considered non-toxic and comparatively cheaper.

Moreover, the plant pigment does not contain any chemicals, unlike the imported ones.

Traditional symbols and motifs, *chosham*(altar), thangka or *thongdroel* (religious scrolls) with the images of Buddha and other deities are a trademark of traditional art painted following precise, symbolic iconographic rules codified in ancient Buddhist texts. They depict the relationship that human-beings share with nature, animals and religion. Another singular feature of Bhutanese paintings is anonymity. *Lhadrips* never sign their work as an act of humility and devotion in the service of the larger religious symbolism of the painting. Natural earth pigments *(sa-tshoen)* are employed in traditional Bhutanese paintings, known by their common names *sa–na*, "black earth," *sa-tsag,* "red earth" and *sa-ser*or "yellow earth".

For more information on Bhutanese painting vist https://asiainch.org/craft/painting-lhazo/

Students in the natural pigment course at Trashiyangse College of Zorig Chusum, collect raw materials from nearby areas, which are subsequently processed. The raw materials are boiled and soaked in water until colour seeps out. Dark brown colour is derived from walnut covers, yellow from marijuana, light green from mint, dark green from oak leaves, and orange from madder.

The primary goal of including Natural pigment art as a course was to revive the tradition and minimise the import of chemical paints.
There are so many natural pigments available across the country, but there are no documents available on them."

While traditional art is included in the curriculum, not much importance has been given to reviving the tradition of deriving colours from nature like plants or rocks. He stressed the need for time and budget for research on natural pigments as it is available in the country.

Penjor Dorji is another person who is promoting the use of natural pigment. He has founded a company called Green Pigment Arts and has pigment for sale.

Green Pigment Arts works on extraction of natural pigment from plants, trees, vegetables, soil etc. to make natural dyes, which is an age old tradition. Penjor's Green Pigment business is not only eco-friendly, but also helps in preserving a dying tradition. Green Pigment Arts also produces paintings on traditional Bhutanese paper, which also preserves Bhutanese culture and substitutes import of colors and materials from other countries.

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The work that Penjor Dorji and Rinzen Dorji are doing underpins the work we have been dong at Paro College in relation to natural pigments.