

Zorig Chusum: Bhutan's Living Arts and Crafts

by Dorjee Tshering and Thinley Wangchuk

The artistic traditions of Bhutan have been kept alive, promoted, and further developed because they are useful, ennobling, and inspirational. In fact, Bhutanese life and culture remain robust and richly colorful due in large part to the continued teaching and practice of *zorig chusum* (thirteen traditional arts).

Zorig chusum include the following arts: *yigzo* (calligraphy), *lhazo* (painting), *jimzo* (sculpture), *lugzo* (metal casting), *troezo* (gold- and silversmithing), *shingzo* (carpentry), *tshemzo* (tailoring and tapestry), *tsharzo* (bamboo and container work), *shagzo* (wood turning and lacquering), *thagzo* (weaving), *dzazo* (pottery), *chakzo* (blacksmithing), and *dozo* (masonry). *Shogzo* (paper making) and *poezo* (incense-stick making) are closely tied to and often practiced with the traditional arts of *zorig chusum*.

Many Bhutanese arts and crafts have been practiced for centuries and, since the seventeenth century, have been fostered by great builders of *dzongs* (fortresses). Historian Lam Nado wrote that the great unifier of Bhutan, the Zhabdrung, invited artists from neighboring countries to refine the arts of clay sculpturing, painting, and calligraphy; build the Punakha, Trashichodzong, and Wangdiphodrang *dzongs*; and set a formal curriculum for



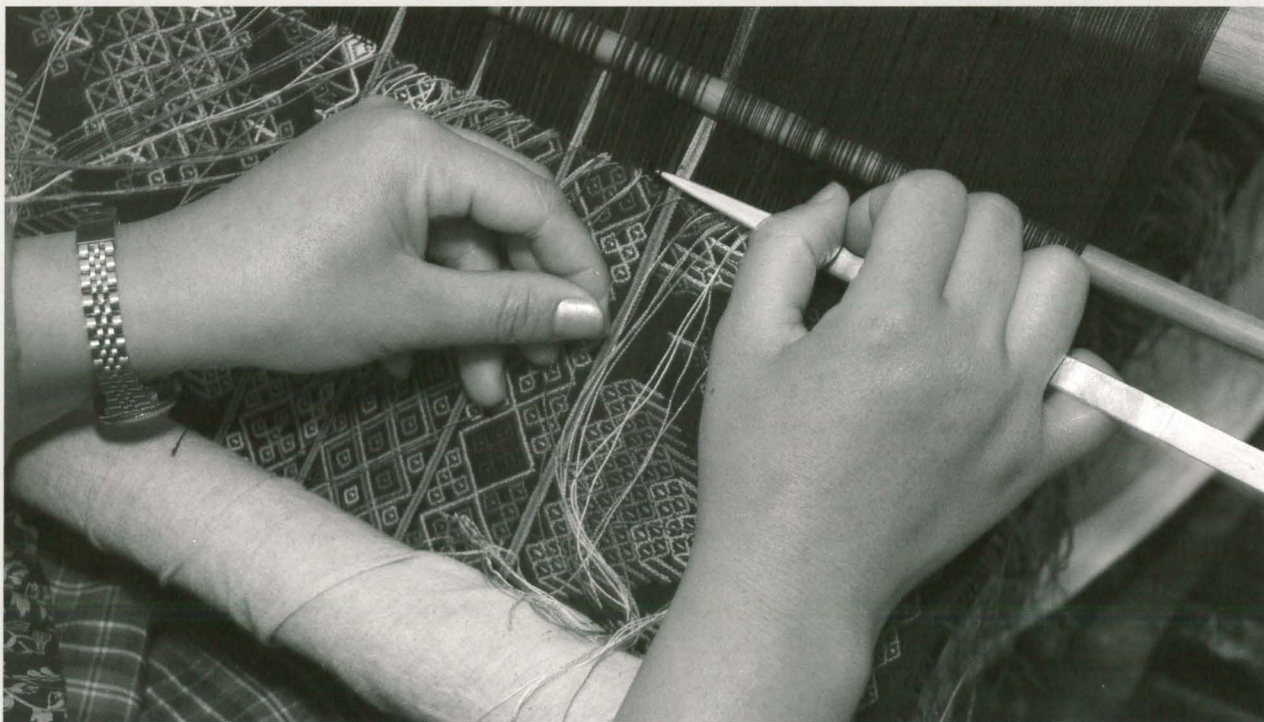
The art of carving in Bhutan dates back many centuries. Artists engrave wood or slate with images and texts to help communicate the Buddha's teachings. Photo by Preston Scott

monastic studies. Bhutan's fourth *desi* (secular ruler) established a school of arts and crafts in the seventeenth century that institutionalized *zorig chusum*. Since then, the visual arts have been carefully cultivated as the primary means for expression of Buddhist teachings, even in secular daily life.

In contrast to many artistic traditions elsewhere, the visual arts of Bhutan were never considered merely decorative. While beauty is clearly cultivated and appreciated, the fundamental purpose of the arts in Bhutanese society is to express Buddhism and convey genuine life experiences.

Bhutanese textiles are some of the most coveted in the world. Each region of Bhutan has its own specialties, passed down through generations. Weavers still obtain dyes from locally available vegetables and minerals. Pieces include complex symbols and may take more than six months to weave.

Photo courtesy Bhutan Department of Tourism



Throughout Bhutan today, you can see houses, temples, monasteries, government, and other public buildings that include elements of *zorig chusum*. Buildings typically require masonry, carpentry, and carving expertise. They feature stone foundations, rammed-earth walls, and elaborately carved wooden structures, windows, doors, pediments, and stylized architectural embellishments. Because most Bhutanese buildings are wooden, they are easily painted with designs that symbolize harmony and good fortune. Important religious and government buildings usually feature murals, wall paintings, and sculptures that portray major religious and political figures from Bhutanese history and Buddhism. They often display complex mandalas, richly designed compositions, and designs that represent understandings of the cosmos, life, and death.

All around Bhutan, one can see *zorig chusum* in the colorful, intricate weaving of garments—women’s *kiras* and men’s *ghos*. The threads and dyes that color them are produced by hand from local and prized remote sources. Because most cloth in Bhutan was traditionally made by hand and woven (or stitched) thread-by-thread, textiles and related products have always been highly valued. Like the building arts, they have an important role in ritual life. For example, huge embroidered religious tapestries are hung outside on the final morning of the annual masked dance festivals in the country’s many valleys.

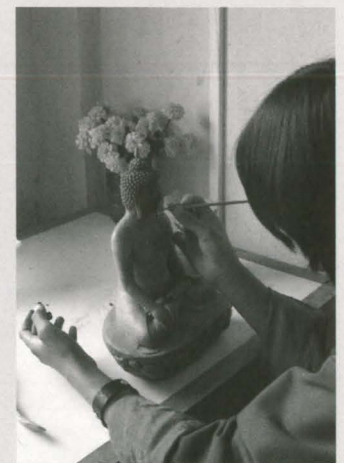
While many, if not most, *zorig chusum* have their origins in the monastic communities of Bhutan, they have been thoroughly

incorporated into all aspects of Bhutanese society. In order to preserve and promote the thirteen arts and crafts, the Royal Government of Bhutan established the Institute for Zorig Chusum in Thimphu in 1971. Another campus was subsequently opened in far eastern Bhutan in Trashiyangtse. The campuses create meaningful job opportunities for a new cadre of highly trained Bhutanese artisans and craftspeople.

Thanks to the students who have received formal training in *zorig chusum*, Bhutan’s rich cultural heritage enhances the lives of new generations of Bhutanese, as well as the experiences of people who visit the kingdom. Some artists are beginning to explore other forms of artistic expression not traditionally practiced in Bhutan. These include filmmaking and other recently introduced visual arts. Bhutanese appreciate the artistic gifts and traditions of their visionary leaders and work to keep the arts alive and healthy for the benefit of all.

Dorjee Tshering became the director of the Department of Culture under the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs for the Royal Government of Bhutan after working for many institutions of higher education in Bhutan and directing the National Library. He is on the curatorial team for the Festival’s Bhutan program.

Thinley Wangchuk is the director of the National Institute for Zorig Chusum. He has extensive knowledge of Bhutanese crafts and trained in sword smithery in Germany. He is helping curate the arts and crafts component of the Bhutan program.



(Left) *Thangkas* are traditional Bhutanese paintings on cloth that are displayed during important ceremonies. They also occupy places of honor in homes, temples, monasteries, and even contemporary offices. The artist initially draws a complex grid of geometric lines on the cloth to organize the overall composition. *Thangka* geometry is taught according to very strict artistic principles from which there is little deviation. For centuries, the visual arts have played an important role in teaching basic Buddhist traditions in Bhutan. Photo by Preston Scott

(Center and right) Bhutan’s *zorig chusum* (thirteen traditional arts), which include clay sculpting (*jimzo*), still decorate major public structures, such as fortresses (*dzongs*) and temples, as well as houses. Photo (center) by Sean Riley. Photo (right) by Preston Scott

Further Reading

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