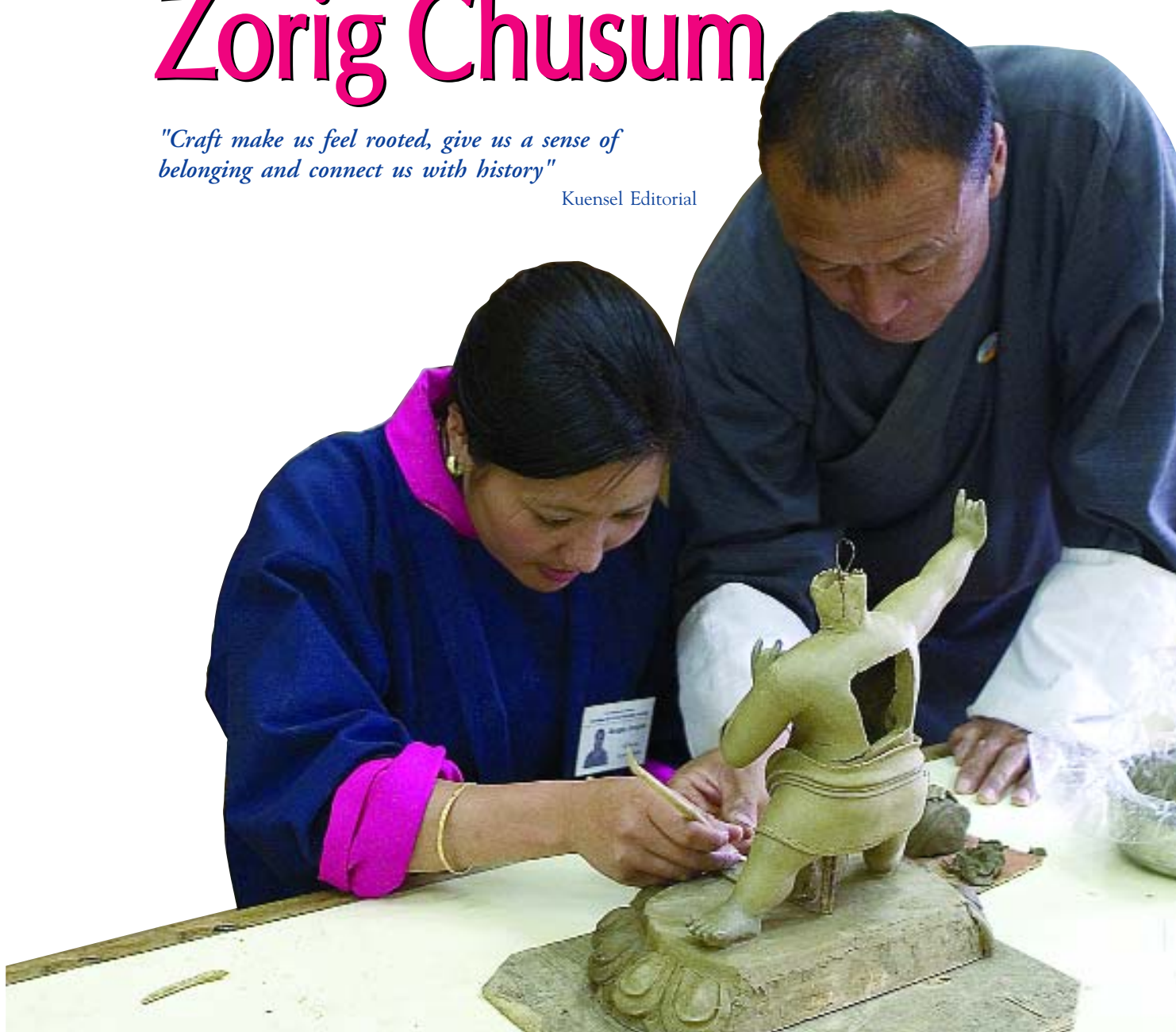


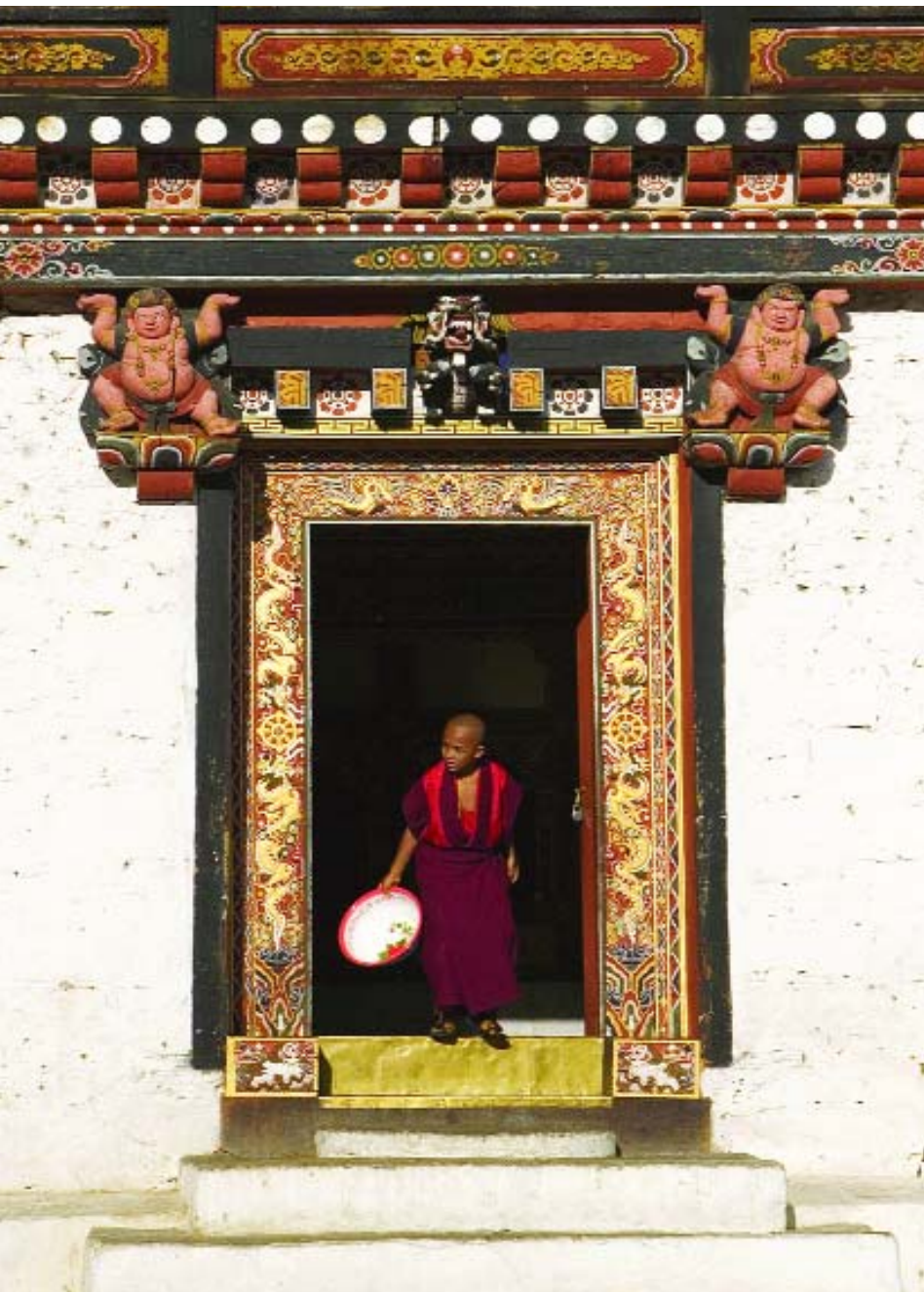


The National Institute of Zorig Chusum

*"Craft make us feel rooted, give us a sense of
belonging and connect us with history"*

Kuensel Editorial





The National Institute for Zorig Chusum, Thimphu, was set up in 1971 with two objectives - to preserve traditional arts and crafts and to create job opportunities for the youths of the country.

Bhutan's art and crafts have played a vital role in shaping its unique cultural identity, and if it were not for the patronage of the government through the National Technical Training Authority, these centuries old arts

would have been lost to history. Generations of Bhutanese artisans have passed down incredible artistic skills and knowledge, beginning with the first artistic skills taught by Tertön Pema Lingpa, the great treasure discoverer of the 15th century and forefather of the Bhutanese Royal family.

Bhutanese group traditional arts and handicrafts under one heading, Zorig Chusum - 'the thirteen arts'. Zo means to make, rig science and chusum thirteen. Codified at the end of the 17th century during the reign of the 4th temporal ruler - Tenzin Rabgye (1680-1694), these arts and crafts are: painting (lhazo), sculpture (jinzo), woodwork (shingzo), stonework (lugzo), wood, slate and stone carving (parzo), blacksmithy (garzo), silver and goldsmithy (serzo ngulzo), bamboo and canecraft (tshazo), papermaking (dezo), weaving (thagzo), embroidery (tshemzo), masonry (dozo) and leather work (kozo).

In Bhutan, arts and crafts are very much a part of living tradition and have roots in Buddhism. There are three main characteristics of Bhutanese art: it is anonymous, it is religious and as a result it has no aesthetic function by itself. The artist does not work to make a work of art but a work of faith which should be made as beautiful as possible. A number of Bhutanese art objects, such as thangkas and sculptures are picture tools to convey spiritual meaning and guide the viewer's thoughts along the mystic path. While rooted in history, other crafts like wood and leather works are mostly used for everyday life.

The National Institute of Zorig Chusum was set up in 1971 to provide training in the 13 traditional arts and crafts. Its two main objectives are: (a) to preserve and promote the traditional arts and crafts and (b) to create job opportunities for the young people.

The most sought after studies in the Institute are painting and sculpture. Out of 124 first-year students, only 40 get a chance to join the painting classes. In Buddhism, painting of deities is an exact science with different units of measure for different parts of the body. The artist has very little composition freedom and



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has to follow the precise and symbolic iconometric and iconographic rules codified in the treatises. Each deity has a special colour and attributes which cannot be changed. This tradition is called *lhazo* and it encompasses all types of paintings including *thangkas*, wall paintings and decorative paintings.

Sculpture (*jinzo*): Bhutan's deep and ancient devotion to Buddhism manifests itself in the ritual objects and clay sculptures. Their size varies from the tiny images that are placed inside portable chapels to gigantic statues of two or three metres high. In a recent renovation of Punakha Dzong, sculptors made one of the largest clay figures in Bhutan - a 35 ft image of Shakyamuni. It was crafted by a team of Institute graduates out of five precious substances and medicinal clay.

A number of painting and sculptor graduates join the high paying career of painting *thangkas*, murals, scrolls, adornment of buildings and erection of statues in new monasteries, both within and outside the country.

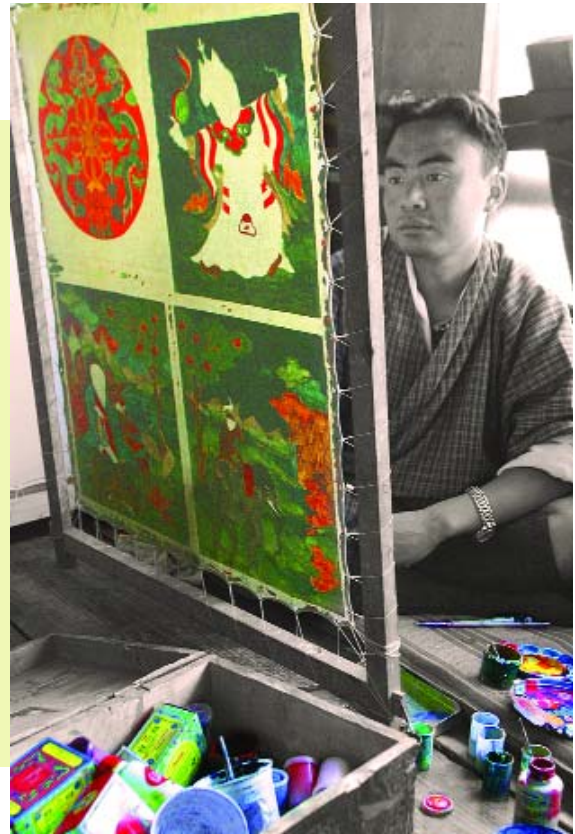
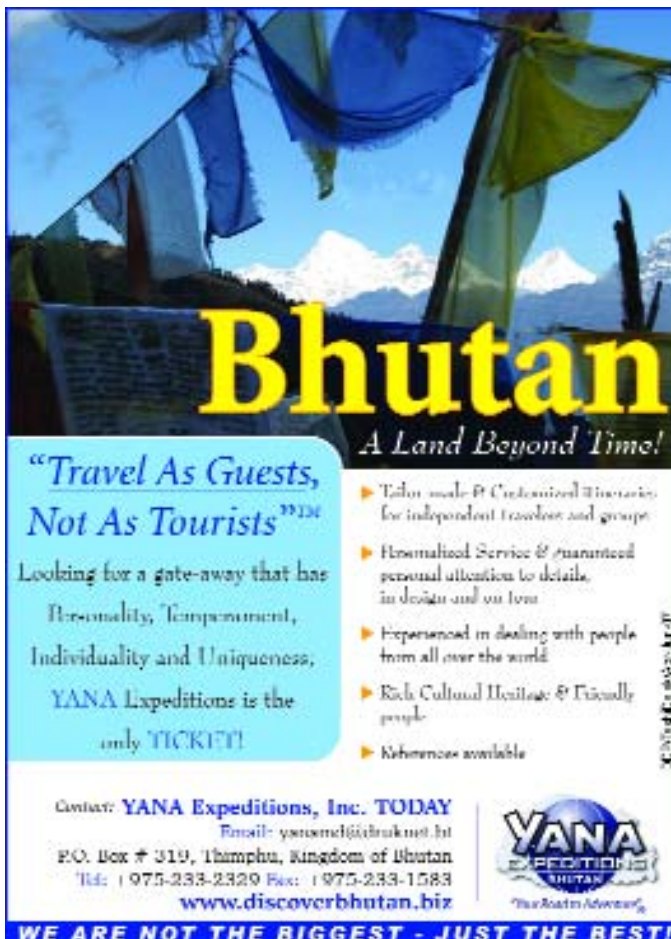
Woodcraft (*shingzo*): This craft includes colourful carved cornices for castle-like dzongs, monasteries and temples. The craft also includes kitchen utensils as well as carving of wood blocks for printing mantras on prayer flags. Wood block carving was the first form of repetitive printing done only by monks and lamas. After graduation, woodcraft students take up carpentry and furniture making as their profession.

Slate carving (*parzo*): This is an art of carving on wood, slate and stone. Deities carved on slate tablets are known as *mani stones*. Sometimes these memorial tablets are

When Principal Jigme Yezer walks into a classroom at the National Institute for Zorig Chusum, the students jump to a standing attention seen more commonly in military institutes. My wife Cathy and I were recently treated to the Royal Tour by Yezer. Before he took over leadership of the Institute, it admitted only boys.

"It wasn't an official rule or anything," explained Yezer, "It was just an understanding that girls stayed at home."

But now there are 103 girls and 222 boys. The average age of students is seventeen, with the youngest thirteen. To prepare them for the real world, the Institute teaches them basic computer skills so that they can order supplies and become business people. A pilot training programme was started in 2005 by the Department of Labour and Human Resources to help the graduates become capable of opening their own shops. The school has three international students, two from Japan and one from the Netherlands. All of them are learning painting. The Institute expects a student from Austria to arrive soon.

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carved with the visual image of the mantra: oh-mani-pad-me-hung and scenes from Buddhist history.

Embroidery and appliqué (tshemzo): This craft is used for making thangkas and thongdroels which are portraits of Buddhist saints on cloth. Unfurled on the second or the last day of some of the most important festivals, it is believed that a mere sight of them lead the believers to enlightenment.

Weaving (thagzo): It comprises the entire process of cloth-making - from spinning the yarn to dyeing and the final weaving. Because Bhutan has a thriving weaving craft as a cottage industry, the Institute did not offer a course on weaving until recently. But on public demand the craft was introduced two years back. Bhutanese weavers mainly use back strap looms. Some of them do use floor looms with harness for simple patterns. Bhutan has not so far opted for modern looms which make weaving faster but result in the demise of culture built over centuries. The aim of the Institute is to preserve the camaraderie of weaving and the comfort and friendship found in creating art together.

The Institute also offers training in bamboo craft, pottery, gold and silversmithy, metal casting and blacksmithy. Apart from the maximum six-year course, it also conducts short term courses aimed at reviving some of the dying arts such as crafting of traditional boots and religious drums.

Text and Photographs: Robin Smillie

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