

# NEPALI ART: NEPALI UTOPIA

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## Introduction

Nepali art has the most distinctive identity of all the cultural artefacts of this country. The identity can be seen at both the vertical and horizontal levels— in the system of culture through the times and the socio-political structures that Nepal saw with every change within the country and in the neighbouring countries, India and China (Tibet included). Therefore, the study of Nepali art involves the study of its history, government, politics, role of elites and cultural policies adopted at different times.

Nepali art reflects the history and the socio-political structure. But most important of all, it reflects the Nepali way of looking at the world, at the human life, beauty and hopes and premonitions of doom and apocalypse. It reflects the Nepali Utopia. These visions of Utopia have often shaped Nepali art, its various genres, and the Nepali way of looking at the world. The focus of this introduction is thus the critical study of the Nepali aesthetics reflected in its various forms, especially in paintings.

This article has two sections. The first section covers a period of Nepali art that is considered its formative period as well as its golden age. The various forms of Nepali art were created simultaneously at different periods in the Nepali history. Over the centuries many art forms were lost, and especially in the recent times, many art pieces were taken by the Western collectors. Now these items have formed the basis for the study of Nepali art by scholars some of which have been listed at the end of the survey. The dispersal phenomenon is thus a very important aspect of the study of Nepali art. The second section will cover a period of transition to modernity and introduction to the works of the few contemporary artists showing the trends in contemporary art.

## Early Nepali Art

The early Nepali art should be studied against the historical background because the socio-political changes and the policies adopted by the rulers have had important impact on the evolution, and the consummation and

operational modes of the Nepali art. Pal (1985: 17) divides Nepali history of art from A.D. 300 into five broad periods:

Lichavi (330-879)

Transitional (879/80-1200)

Early Malla (1200-1482)

Late Malla (1482-1769)

Shah (since the conquest of the Kathmandu valley, the capital city, by the king of the hill state Gorkha, the forefather of the present king of Nepal, in 1769)

Early period is unique in a number of ways, but the perpetuation of the Nepali art forms developed and executed earlier can be seen as the continuity of a mode of art itself.

The Brahminical and Buddhist mythology is the main subject of the early Nepali art. The dual features of the Nepali art can be noticed in all historical periods shown above. The painters could boast of a richer repertoire than those of the sculptors whose work was mainly concentrated on the creation of icons and ritual objects. The painters' range was broader; they could more productively use the mythology; their medium was more versatile; they could use a wider variety of themes and styles.

The Chinese descriptions of Nepali taste for art during the Lichavi period (330-879) say that the people decorated the walls of their houses with paintings. But the paintings of the period have not been found yet. The earliest paintings go back to the eleventh century. The early paintings were the manuscript illuminations executed on palm-leaf sheets and the wooden covers which were used to protect the manuscripts. The style of manuscript illuminations was employed in the fifth century India to decorate the shrines. The Nepali manuscript illuminations are quite distinctly related to these illuminations at Ajanta and the monasteries of Eastern India. In such manuscripts gods and goddesses are depicted in a hieratic manner, and the forms and style are set and defined.

The artist's skill and originality can be seen in the dexterous delineation of the motif however stereotyped they may be. The diminutive deities were made with considerable skill and the use of the primary colour, especially red, heightened the personality and the aura of their power and charm, their erotic and demonic manifestations.

The Nepali art of the early period had a uniqueness of its own. It was different from the Indian art in a number of ways. The styles of the illuminations were distinct. The Pala style of illuminating palm-leaf manuscripts was more conservative than the Nepali style which was more "expressive and more painterly" (Pal 1975: 17).

In the extensive studies of the Nepali art in various books and survey articles different scholars have shown the uniqueness of Nepali art especially in relation to the Indian art of the similar vein prevalent in the Eastern Monasteries of India. But many scholars and observers tend to ignore the uniqueness of the early Nepali art and draw hasty conclusions about the extension of Indian influence on it.

The Nepali illuminations have been considered as the provincial versions of the Pala period (9th-11th century A.D.) Pal quotes Indian art scholars' interpretations of the Nepali art in this regard (1978: 134-5). As early as 1927 Coomaraswamy said that "distinction of style as between the Bengali and Nepali illustrated manuscripts is so slight as to be scarcely definable in a few words." In a comprehensive article written few years after this date Stella Kramrish considered the Nepali art as the emulation of the Nalanda and other styles. Pal says that the Indian scholars have for a long time taken a disdainful attitude towards the Nepali art. They consider Nepali art either as the deviation of the Pala style or inferior art. There is a consistent attitude of disdain of the Indian scholars towards the Nepali art. But in reality, "The manuscript illuminations from Nepal reveal not only richer repertoire than those preserved from Eastern India, but often displays far more complex compositions which are pictorially more exciting." (1978: 135)

Nepali artists have used the art forms and the media to make them flexible enough to express their response to the canonically defined art forms. These responses can be noticed in the execution of the painting and the *paubhas*. The wood-cover illumination of the manuscript *Prajnaparamita* which Bajracharya (n.d.) claims to be the earliest Nepali painting now under the custody of the Shakyas of Patan was executed in 920 A.D.. Bajracharya's claim pushes the history of Nepali painting one century earlier than that recorded by foreign scholars on the basis of the manuscript illuminations found in foreign collections. This painting has Nepali character which can be noticed in its rebellious character and syncretic forms of the deities. The Buddhist illuminations make use of the styles used in Saiva paintings. In Saiva paintings gods and goddesses are richly attired. This painting shows the tall pyramidal hat of Pancha Buddha and other garments somewhat clumsily made which perhaps shows the style of the tenth century Nepali painting.

The painting makes very effective use of colours and their tonality. They are very functional in terms of their use for accentuating the volume and roundness of the different parts of the body. The colours even after a thousand years have not lost their lustre and freshness which show the uniqueness of the Nepali art.

The manuscript illuminations are classically defined conservative forms. There was very little innovation in them. Most of these illuminations belonged to the same traditions as those of the similar paintings in India. But Pal says the Nepali paintings show perceptible stylistic differences. The generally employed primary colours red, blue and yellow and to her colours like white and green differ in "intensity and tonality" in Nepali paintings (1985: 186). The Nepali red is "tinged with crimson" as against the brighter vermilion as used in Indian illuminations. The pigment shades in Nepali illuminations are more subdued than in the East Indian illuminations. The Nepali palette has a richer variety than that of the East Indian artists. The liberal use of mauve, purple and pink in Nepali art shows this very clearly. The exuberant cubical rocks used by the Nepali artists is not found anywhere in Eastern Indian paintings.

The Nepali painting must have developed from its native tradition. The wall paintings were familiar phenomena in Nepal as early as the mid-fifth century A.D. The murals which decorated the monasteries and temples of Lichavi period in Nepal impressed the Chinese Emperor Wang hsuan-tse in the seventh century so much that he admired them as great works of art. The Monastic style of painting as done in the illuminations of the eleventh century must have been derived from those murals of the Lichavi period which must have been executed in the same style as the wall paintings in the Buddhist caves at Ajanta. So the Eastern Indian Monastic paintings and the Nepali Monastic paintings must have a common source in the Gupta tradition (Pal 1978: 43). So, to say that the Nepali painting of the early centuries is a direct emulation of the Eastern Indian Monastic painting is an exaggeration. The other evidence to this act can be found in the sculptures as well. The Nepali sculptures were influenced by the Gupta India (A.D. 320-600). But the Nepali sculptors developed an independent style of their own. The sculptures that have been found in Nepal are not Indian. No Indian sculptures are found in Nepal. So much so that "While large numbers of Indian bronzes have been discovered in the remote monasteries of Tibet and even as far off as Japan, not a single bronze of Indian origin has emerged from a Buddhist monastery in Nepal (Pal 1985: 36)." This also shows how independently did the Nepali artists develop the art forms basically retaining the classically defined forms.

Nepali art, thus, developed as a Nepali aesthetic response to the ways of gods and men and women. It represents Nepali mind, and a configuration of their spiritual and worldly experience.

A sense of competition that dominated the religious norm of the day between the Buddhist and the Saivites had a positive impact on the development of Nepali art. To popularise the religious motives artists made

beautiful illuminations for the manuscripts. These illuminations were made mainly for people to get a good impression about the religious and mythological text. To establish an inter-textual, inter-painterly and text-painterly pragmatics was the main aim of the artists and scribes of Nepal. The main thrust of the communication was to produce a spiritual impact on the audience. This spirit of communication impelled the leaders to make monasteries, meeting places in different parts of the town in the cities of the Kathmandu valley. Murals, paintings and scrolls with the attractive pictures of the deities to be exhibited on the walls were executed by skilful artists. The exuberance in the attires of the deities in the Saiva paintings had impact on the Buddhist art, which must be attributed to the sense of competition between the artists of the two schools of faith. This tradition can be noticed in the periodic exhibition of the scrolls, paintings and figures of deities in temples and monasteries even today. Manuscripts about the methods of illumination are also displayed in monasteries and other holy places.

The Nepali paintings from the tenth upto the sixteenth centuries were executed either with the religious fervour or with the fulfillment of a certain role given to the artists by the society. The paintings of this period follow the classical method. The lining patterns and their delicate use, the concept of harmony and balance, the glazing fast colour, the fully filled up space within the field of action are the stylistic features of the art of these centuries. Moreover, the decorative execution of the twigs and branches and the flame shapes, and the concept of harmony between the facial expressions and the body, concept of harmony between the facial expressions and the body symmetry of the deities are other continuous features of the style of this period.

Nepali artists used paper medium after it was introduced into Nepal from Tibet in the thirteenth century. The narrow horizontal format of the leaves was not immediately broken, but it allowed more space and wider folio to the artists. Paper medium gave a new impetus to the development of Nepali art. By joining the folio edge a folding paper book was formed. Such books were called *thyasaphu* in Newari. Such a continuation of the folios in folds was a very useful medium for narratives in both languages and paintings. The folios were full of beautiful paintings and very telling sketches.

Paper material was also used for painting. In fact the most exquisite paintings were done on the narrow cloth material shaped horizontally. Some of the best paintings are available in Nepal and foreign collections executed on this medium. The didactic narratives were depicted on them in both the Buddhist and Saiva traditions.

The Hindu artists used the album pictures in the seventeenth century under the influence of the Mughal and Rajput artists. The *Ragamala* poetical

literature, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* stories, devotional songs such as *Devimahatmya* and the story of Lord Krishna's life and achievement his were the subject matter of the album pictures. The texts were written either on the back or at the margin and the space was occupied by the art. The Buddhist artist did not seem to use the picture album.

The Nepali painting has been mainly anthropomorphic. The human shapes of the divinities were the subject of these pictures. There is no transparency of the natural scenery. But stones and trees and the cubical shiny gold shapes represent the nature in the paintings. But the Newar artists came under the Mughal and Rajput influence by the mid-seventeenth century. The narrative scrolls depict nature on a continuous basis as the background of the painting. The mountains, some snow-peaked ones, the grass mass, clouds and birds are depicted in the paintings. In these paintings, especially in the creation of the impression of nature and landscape the artists seem to be influenced from the Mughal and Rajput or from the Tibetan arts. But the native tradition continues.

The *Paubha* (*pata* in Sanskrit and *thanka* in Tibetan) occupies a special place in Nepali art. The *Paubhas* are done by both the Buddhist and Hindu artists. There are certain important differences in style and themes. But equally important are the similarities.

The paintings are done in water colour, and resin is used as an adhesive. The Buddhist or Brahminical images are painted on coarse cloth. The emphasis is on symmetry, order, balance and harmony. The rich red and brilliant warm tonality is used in Nepali *Paubhas*. Bright yellow, deep green and intense blue colours are also used to form the environment for the paintings. The foregrounding for the forms and colours is hieratic. Many natural objects form the symbol in the *paubhas*.

The earliest *paubha* goes back to the twelfth century. It is the painting of *Ratnasambhava* and the *Eight Bodhisttvas* now kept in a Los Angeles collection (Pal, 1975: 16, 33). Many features of the *paubha* have remained the same such as the figurative mode, use of the natural forms as symbols, and decorations, use of thrones and shrines, lack of spatial dimension within the picture plain, a uniform distribution of light, non-existence of shades, defined positions of the sitting figures using rich attires, jewellery, a meticulous precision in drawing, apart from the colour structuralism as discussed above. But in the *paubhas* executed after the second half of the fourteenth century, the portraits of priests and donors drawn along the bottom of the picture became the common features of this form of art.

The painters were working in a tradition of art and were part of a group of artists who balanced their aesthetic perceptions with religious motifs. The sculptors, for instance, represent in a tangible form the mode of Nepali

aesthetics as expressed through different media. To understand the history, tradition and the pragmatic intent of the painters we should also look at the Nepali sculptures, especially their three dimensional projection of the same motifs as handled by the painters in their two dimensional forms. To understand the Nepali paintings— their structuration and their modes of expression, therefore, we should briefly look at the sculptures.

The Nepali sculptors used stone, metal, terracotta and wood as their media. The icons are strewn around, as it were, in the cities of the Kathmandu valley. They are in the temples, monasteries, lanes, courtyards, business centres, waterspouts and the paddy fields. Bangdel claims that the Nepali icons can be traced back to the first century B.C. or first century A.D. (404). The early predominant icons were those of mother goddesses. The sculptors belonged to Saiva, Buddhist and Vaisnava schools. The icons represent the above deities both in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. The icons mainly served the religious functions. Therefore the aesthetic and religious impulses meet in the sculptures.

The sculptors have become less and less rigid, but like the painters the sculptors have always followed certain classical norms. There may not be much space for their own minds to work in this medium. But the very exquisite sculptures sufficiently show the sculptor's personality and skill.

The Lichavi images of Vishnu in stone, bronzes and the terracotta figurines maintained their appeal up to the later date. So the Nepali sculptures share a strong tradition with the Gupta sculptures in India. Nepali sculptors also went to Tibet and China. A team of Nepali sculptors under the leadership of Arniko went to China where he made the monumental *Swetachaitya*. In the early Malla period, Nepali sculptors had developed a unique style of their own.

The facial features became Nepalized. The artists created their own world, their own milieu and within this world they created their own version of the symmetry, facial features and the divine and demonic manifestations. There is a strong human feature in the sculpture.

Even in the late Malla and Shah period, the Nepali sculpture continued to maintain its tradition of more than a millennium. The sculptors remained creative through ages and the number of icons made over the centuries were numerous.

The sculptures and architectures in Kathmandu valley have an urban base. Both sculpture and architecture reflect the spatial impact on Nepali art over the centuries, its urban designs and its meeting places, exhibits the Nepali aesthetic construct which was a combination of artistic form and religious beliefs.

The wood carving which is part of the traditional architecture had also been an important feature of Nepali art since the twelfth century. The wood

carvings can be seen in the temples, monasteries, private homes, palaces and public places. The wood carvings show a secular concept of art. The subject-matter for the strut carving are the events of daily life and the cycles of the season and life. The famous eighty-four sexual postures that can be seen in the struts at the Saiva temples in the heart of Kathmandu show the Saiva tantric tradition but it also shows the artist's free use of the secular motifs.

The struts have two categories: a. the corner struts, and b. the struts at other places. The struts are arranged slantingly standing at 45 degrees supporting the sloping horizontal beams above. Since the slanting struts project their dominant spatial position, the art works – the colourful decorations and carvings on them tend to draw the eyes of the viewers. The struts, therefore, were considered by the artists as the very important medium for creating the aesthetic effect. The struts either carry religious or semi-religious motifs and they are classified under the name of lion or the position of the principal deity. Since the struts were made at a time when tantrism was at its heights, they bear the images of the tantric gods – the tantric manifestations of Shiva and Parvati, Vishnu and Lakshmi, Bodhisattavas, Lokeshvara and various mother goddesses. There are smaller panels below the main motif depicting different figures well-known in the mythological systems, dancers and erotic figures.

The struts project very charming visual effect. They are like the paintings in their use of colour and decoration, dexterous manipulation of religious motifs. Such a dexterous performance of the artist can be seen not only in the struts, but also in different panels, windows, doors and the wooden items of daily use.

We have introduced the sculptures and strut carvings only in so far as they project a common pattern in the choice of motifs, and they represent the artist's combination of the religious subject – matter with their aesthetic and secular perception of art.

### **Transition**

In the seventeenth century, the influence of Indian Rajput and Mughal traditions influenced the Nepali artists. But the Nepali artists did not produce perspective and depth of field under the influence. After this period, however, the Nepali palette became richer and pictures of the vegetation became more prominent than before. The Rajput fashion in clothes became more visible. The influence of the portrait making of the Mughal and Rajput India influenced the Nepali artists, and it was a turning point in Nepali paintings.

Though the portraits, the idealized images of persons, were depicted in the *paubhas*, the full portrait making of the Royalties became popular only after that period. Some of the early portraits of the kings of Nepal were done either



by some Indian artists or by Nepali artists in direct emulation of the Rajput Mughal style. The portrait received great impetus from the royal commission and patronage. The turning point in the portrait making came with the visit of the first Nepali prince Jung Bahadur to Europe – Britain and France, in 1850. The princes loved their own images and they employed artists, the family painters. The Newar artists of Kathmandu who are still known by their family name *chitrakar* or the picture maker.

In their love for themselves, and love for projecting their awe and power, the princes and royalties trained Nepali painters and sculptors in the western tradition. They commissioned the busts in Europe. The Rana Prime Ministers' huge figures riding horses now installed around the open space in the heart of Kathmandu town show their love for power and exclusiveness.

One artist named Bhajuman Chitrakar accompanied Jung Bahadur to Europe in 1850. Bhajuman was a court artist in his thirties when he went to Europe. He was a traditional artist, who did beautiful sketches and made pictures of birds and animals. This artist had executed several portraits of Jung Bahadur and his father and brothers.

Bhajuman's visit to Europe can be considered a significant event in Nepali portrait making. Though direct evidence of his emulation of the Western paintings can not be found but from the artist's execution of Queen's portrait and her words of praise for the portrait can be taken as evidence of the fact that he had keen eyes for arts – for the portraits. He was inspired to do portraits of the Queen after seeing her portraits at the Royal Palace which means that he brought Western techniques of paintings home. As a very talented artist he must have learnt many things from his European visit. A careful study of the portrait he executed after his return to Nepal from the European visit can show many things in terms of the Western influence in Nepali art.

The Chitrakars remained basically the court painters. They also executed paintings about the sociocultural life of the Newars of the Kathmandu valley. Their motifs range from secular to religious and they are narrative in structure. The lineage of the Chitrakar artists is a very interesting subject of study for any art historians of Nepal.

Another Chitrakar named Dirghaman accompanied Prime Minister Chandra Sumshere Rana to Europe in 1908. Dirghaman executed the portrait of Edward VII for which he is said to have received ten thousand sterling pounds, but for the sake of 'prestige' he refused to take the prize. With Dirghaman's visit more Western influence came to Nepal. But since no other forms of art were done in Nepal the Chitrakars were commissioned to do the portraits of the Royalties– the portraits of the rulers and their families. Since 1850 a

large number of portraits were executed. This tradition remained through the entire period of the Rana rule in Nepal which lasted up to 1950.

The Ranas were aware of the Western influence. They wanted to encourage the education of the Western style of art. In 1918 Chandra Sumshere Rana sent Chandra Man Maskey for training in Western art to Calcutta School of Art that was already established in 1854 by the Indian and British art lovers of the city, and the school was subsequently taken over by the British government. The Western influence on the art of the subcontinent and Nepal is a very important point for consideration. In recent times, especially with the emphasis on orientalism on the one hand and the pervasive Western influence on art education on the other, the subject of Western influence in oriental art has become an important subject for discussion. A short background to Western influence, modernization and the merger of the traditions in art in this part of the world should be presented here to understand the nature of the contemporary or the modern art scene of Nepal and the subcontinent.

### **Influence, Modernity and Nepali Art**

Paradoxically, the European art in countries like India with a rich artistic and cultural tradition was able to set a norm of standardization more easily than it could do in countries with a large number of ethnic diversities in art and culture. The reasons were like this. The Indian art had broad-based concept of aesthetics and it was more pervasive in time and space as standard norm of art than any minority art forms would be in a position to achieve. The Indian viewer of art who expected to acquire the immediate visual information in the picture, the affluent colour harmony, and the very articulate lines and kinesis suggested by their movements in the picture had already a cultivated taste for art. The viewer knew what art was. The viewer was familiar with the universality—the standard or notions of artistic perceptions.

In terms of medium also the Indian and Nepali artist had already used “gouche: mineral, vegetable and animal pigments mixed with gum arabic, often with embellishment in gold and silver, applied to a prepared paper or, more rarely colour support (Topsfield 1984: 5).” The Mughal art of courts decorated in gold and colour, the bright Rajput arts, and all the other forms of art were united by the fact that they integrated mythological, poetical and mythical allusions. The impact of the music especially of the *ragas* in paintings, the taste of Mughal emperors for art and patronage of the court had set a standard of norm for art in India which had a direct or indirect impact on Nepali art of the later period as discussed above. Paradoxically, the Eurocentric compartmentalization of art—the standardization of art in various neat forms—found it easier to set its own standard as the norm of art.

But talking about Western influence we should ask, did the Eurocentric genres of art undermine the cultural standards by suppressing or downgrading the traditional arts, and trying to impose forms that are alien to the native traditions. It is often said about the impact of the European colonial rules that they imposed a standard for amalgamating the diverse cultural traditions and thus the pluralistic views of the world into a standard model for the purpose of ruling and imposing its own forms of culture. As a result of this and the all pervasive use of the media the identities of culture get blurred. But the Western art standard made its impact in a number of ways. One is the standardization of culture.

The Eurocentric art forms did not necessarily depress the traditions of art in countries like India and through its impact the arts of Nepal. But their thrust for Standardization of culture took its tools. Many small and minority artistic traditions stood neglected. But the establishment of the Arts School in Calcutta had a direct impact on the promotion of modern art in Nepal.

When Nepali painter Chandra Man Maskey joined Calcutta Government School of Art in 1918 for a formal training in art the concepts about art were changing. He brought in the Western technique of painting to Nepal. But he also worked with the indigenous traditional Newar artists of Kathmandu whose family name itself is Chitrakar, and whose art shows the influence of the earlier traditional paintings of the subcontinent— from the Pre-Mughal art to the other religious and court paintings of the later times.

The Westernization of the Nepali art does not mean the loss or the complete rejection of the traditions; it certainly makes a departure. But modern artists of Nepal create their own milieu and create their works in it. Their 'modern' is basically a Western concept, but they only exploit the Western education to broaden the range of their skills in painting. So, the Nepali identity of the artists in this country should be sought in their own cultural and folk environments created by themselves in their works by making the best use of their skills, whether they be Western or Oriental.

Management of the modern galleries, art schools and logistics and the modalities of the execution of the paintings, the use of media and the display of the individual artist's paintings on the wall to show an individual's expressionistic projections, most of them, if not all, are the acquired modalities from the Western training. Now the 'Modern art' has become a norm in Nepal like anywhere else.

The exhibition of Bangdel's paintings in the oldest college gallery in Kathmandu in 1962 marks the turning point in the history of Nepali art. It is perhaps the beginning of the contemporary or modern period of Nepali paintings.

Bangdel's initial training took place in Calcutta Art School and later he got exposure to Western schools in France and Britain including the study visits to Spain. The modern artist's exposure to the Western art, and the direct encounter of the Western galleries, schools and management of arts-exhibitions and other activities was a very significant event for Nepali art.

Bangdel's paintings were Western in their orientation. The blue period of Picasso's paintings influenced his early works. One can notice the pattern of emulation in these paintings. The cultural basis of the subcontinental and Nepali art saw a new configuration of emulation which was new, alien, complex and challenging. But in the abstract canvas the viewers of Kathmandu saw a possibility, and hope for freedom and expression, since for the first time in a painting many Nepali viewers saw a unique presentation of human drama.

To take one painting entitled "Twilight" displayed at the exhibition in 1962 a world of different nature spreads across the canvas. This is an unusual twilight created by the artist. The imagery is drowned into the abstract form. The coloured shapes and the brush strokes give the painting a pattern. The colours themselves, not the images, spring to the eyes of the viewers and influence the mind. The colours have emotional appeal, but the abstraction of the normal in terms of the use of colours and patterns present a picture that exists in the experience – an unusual kind of experience for the Nepalese viewers (Subedi, 1992: 2-3).

Since the sixties Nepali paintings made tangible departure from the tradition. The traditional forms of art, the portrait making, the narrative and spiritual paintings represented a different world altogether. The modern painters, most of them trained in the Indian and Bangladeshi art colleges, fully used the techniques and the media now universally recognized as occidental.

In the modern Nepali paintings artists experimented with all levels of presentation – themes, media treatment of the subject. Though most of them faithfully followed the well-defined order, mostly rigid in the modernist classical sense, some deliberately disrupted it. They did not violate the concept of balance in art, but there appears to be a violation of the balanced placing of the images and colour bands and mass.

The linings of the traditional Nepali art was very important because they were set in a defined system. But in modern Nepali paintings artists used lines expressively. The visible lines were charged with the artist's passion. The invisible lines were entirely new phenomena. The bands of colour and modality of form made up the invisible lines. So, the modern paintings became the vehicles of the artists' feelings, their problems, frustrations and hopes in the changing context of the country and culture.

Colours were used expressionistically. The expressionistic value of colour was realized in the context and the structuralism of the motif. The modern Nepali artist's palette had a greater variety than the Eastern Indian Monastic paintings in the early paintings. But in recent times the Nepali artists do not seem to maintain the uniqueness in terms of the use and combination of colour. Though some artists while delineating the cultural motifs use the traditional forms of colours, the main thrust of any combination is expressionistic, not rigid and defined.

The symbolism in modern Nepali paintings is unique. The universalism in the choice of motifs plays important role in modern Nepali paintings, but the most important feature of the modern Nepali art is that the artist is divided between rejection and the acceptance of the tradition – its values and techniques. In some very well known paintings, the tension itself is the subject-matter of the painting.

The modern paintings create the motion not necessarily by referring or responding to the outer events affecting the life of the artist, but by creating an internal, psychological reality. Therefore, the modern Nepali paintings do not necessarily depict the event and times of the transitional Nepali society. But they are certainly the expressions of the modern Nepali artists' response to the changing times, the changing values and norms.

The works of three artists, one representing the early modern and two—one woman, representing the current generation are introduced here briefly to give a cross-view of the scenario.

The critical review of the works of the three modern Nepali artists will show the nature of the contemporary Nepali art. They certainly are not the only Nepali artists working today. But their works have important commonalities with the works of other artists like Uttam Nepali, Shashi Shah, Krishna Manandhar, Indra Pradhan, Batsa Gopal Vaidya, Shanker Raj Suwal, Sharad Ranjit, Shashi Kala Tiwari and others. but their works are unique in a number of ways.

Manuj Babu Mishra belongs to the second generation of modern artists. His treatment of modernity is different from either Bangdel's or Uttam Nepali's. His works reflect the physical crisis in a very tangible form, but in each canvas he introduces ideas which are directly related to the catastrophe depicted in the art. The base of the dramatic relationship between modern scientifically fortified war machinery and the helpless anthropomorphic forms in the art is humanism. His subjectmatter is humanism – its catastrophe, thwarted hopes and bleak futurity. Overt representation rather than a subtle one is the feature of his art. Because of the need to foreground the theme, the subject of the predicament of humanity under the shadow of the war, he does not delineate the theme in a subtle manner.

Manuj Babu's themes are topical today when each week or even day, children die in the refugee camps due to famine, or fall under the army guns. Women are raped or murdered and genocides are committed. But the mode of the terror drama in Manuj Babu's paintings is shaped by the last Great War, and the structuralism of the European paintings of the War period like Picasso's *Guernica* and *The Charnel House*, Carl Hofer's *The Black Rooms*, Jacob Lawrence's *War Series, No 6* and other post-war crucifixion paintings.

Some of the recurrent images in his paintings are the missiles, tunnels, birds, serpents and terrified heads. These images evoke fear at its rawest form. The archetypal images that evoke fear glibly find place in his paintings. But the symbols though they are supposed to represent and dramatize the universal patterns of fear and hope, love and hatred are supposed to carry the burden of contemporaneity—of four times. His paintings carry the times just as his missiles carry the sophisticated lethal explosives. The scientific sophistication and the bellicose mood that pervades the atmosphere in his paintings are reminiscent of the major events of our times.

There is a great mobility in each canvas. Missiles are fired at, heads shoot around, human figures are subjected to go through the excruciating pain in the blue, red and yellow world. There is movement, targeting, destruction and overriding. But the very important point about all these mobilities and actions is the conspicuous absence of the agency. Each painting therefore, presents the pain of the sufferer, the receiver. The agent, the doer is behind the action, which shows the impersonality and the inhumanly indifferent automation.

Host of his paintings, especially those executed recently, present the drama very vividly. In these paintings birds come out of the cannons, devotees huddle at Buddha's feet with missiles ready for action, the Swayambhu chaitya with Buddha's unwinking bleary eyes carries warheads; a saint is seen in a vertical canvas carrying missiles with the force projected by the yellow in the foreground and grim and sombre at the background; the artist himself is poised for a certain action with missiles jauntily tucked on his hat; there is a parade of heads with all the primary colours heightening the effect. There is irony about the trinity, peace, mobility and progress; and the yellow Buddha is going to Lumbini in the contemporary context. Manuj Babu Mishra, to drive home the irony and the symbolism in his paintings, juxtaposes his own cultural milieu—the deities, their diverse manifestations with the dramatic presence of the warheads and other atrocious objects associated with modern war technology. This is a recurrent phenomenon in nearly every painting.

His treatment of the theme is overt not subtle, therefore, his paintings use the techniques of modern occidental paintings to project the artist's sense of the times we are living in and the atrocities committed by people to people in

tangible images and symbols. The most dominant motif in his paintings is time seen against the background of the apocalypse that, according to the artist, is at hand.

Kiran Manandhar is a versatile Nepali artist of the younger generation. His works are subtle, and their impact is charming and warm created by the structuralism, by the effective combination of the media and the treatment of the motif.

In the vertical paintings represented here we can see some features of his art. We should look at the field of action itself— the vertical sized Himalayan rice paper. As we have seen, Nepali artists extensively used Nepali paper in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But a modern artist's rediscovery of the medium is an interesting phenomenon. The paper gives the artist an opportunity to create a dialogue not only between the form and the subject-matter, but also between the canvas and the other media— colour and lines. The primitive Himalayan paper enters into a dialogue with the Western media and creates a unique work of art.

Kiran in his paintings makes a liberal use of visible and invisible lines and creates a sense of force in each. Each painting emerges out of the paper canvas — through the rough surface glistening the dry Himalayan grass, tendrils and wigs. Each paintings comes to the foreground, as it were from the depth. Kiran's paper canvas is made by superimposing one layer upon another. This gives the artist a dramatic canvas to sink the lines and colour in each layer.

The most important structural feature of Kiran's paintings is the creation of *mandala*, a dynamic pattern of the movements of the bands of colour and lines. The distribution of colours and lines in the paintings is designed to create a movement within the entire field of action. Once the field of vision acquires a pattern of the kinetic visible and invisible bands and lines, the impact of the canvas works on a psychological plane. The viewer's mind acquires the same motion as the paintings. The mind acquires such dynamism in two ways.

Kiran involves the sky in his paintings. The viewer can see the sky in the vertical movement of the invisible lines and the openness of the field of action. The composition has no limit. The other way one can notice the sky in the paintings is the structuration of a *mandala*, the mobile use of the colour, lines and images. The brush strokes show field of vision— the path that the viewer's eyes have to follow. The sky becomes a consciousness, the mind that must find a place in the structure. We should return to the colour symbolism to see the sky in his paintings. The undulating fast changing colours, the sudden disappearance and emergence of the same colour at another

space creating thereby a sense of mobility, the use of thick white, blue and light yellow create the sky in his paintings.

In his thatched 'terracotta' cottage below the Swayambhu hill—below the bleary eyes of the Buddha I saw him executing some of these paintings. I could feel how the sky entered his canvas. The nature outside, especially the light and the wind find a place in his paintings. In the traditional architecture in temples and houses in Kathmandu a space is created for the sky. The sky being one of the five elements should find its place in paintings, dance, music and the space in a temple or home. The sky in Kiran's paintings is its theme and structure.

Another significant feature of his paintings is the creation of the female form through the abstract pattern. The female richness, immense creative possibilities and charm are the other attributes of Kiran's paintings.

Ragini Upadhya who also represents the young generation of artists has also used the Himalayan paper as her canvas in several of her paintings. Her paintings done on Nepali paper directly synchronize the folk themes with the folk material.

A graphic artist by training, Ragini has been using other techniques and combining different levels of skills in her paintings executed at different times. For instance, in the works done on Nepali paper she has used paints through the medium of graphic prints by the technique of superimposition. The colour blotches albeit not very prominent, have very interestingly served to make the narrative islands in the fables drawn from children's story books, myths and living comic strips—the game of politics which she has depicted in these vertical canvases to create a sense of irony.

Each of the paintings in this series has a commonality with each other, but each is unique in a number of ways. The commonality exists in the use of media and the theme that runs through all the paintings with variations. Her entire body of works is a symphony with variations in each canvas.

Ragini in the paintings of the Nepali paper series has captured the weak points of human nature, especially the games monopolised by men as their prerogatives, like politics, violence, backbiting and fighting for gains. Woman also figures up in these works but only as someone who standing by the corner of the horizontal space watches the drama. But the narrator, the moderator and the censor of these stories is a woman. So the invisible character in these paintings is a woman. The gap between the visible and the invisible therefore is the state of irony in her paintings.

One should be familiar with the stories of the classical Sanskrit myths and other folk tales told in this country to fully understand the themes in these paintings. But there are patterns which are universal like the wickedness and leg pulling and using fair and foul means to achieve one's selfish ends.



There is charm in her paintings. The paintings easily interact with the viewers either through the familiar media and stories if viewed natively or through the dramatization of the universal human psychology through the alien media if viewed outside. The charm and simplicity in her paintings continues in either case.

The painting opens up like a wall and the anthropomorphic forms, lines, colours, the figures of animals and birds, and the *devanagari* scripts appear as graffitis. But these graffitis do not only speak about the contemporary issues, they also dramatize the universal human nature. These paintings, combine the comic with the serious, the graphics with the paintings, fun with sadness and forms with empty space. Ragini continues to make experiments in her works. The paintings referred to here represent her latest experiment and they represent it effectively.

### Conclusion

We have made a brief survey of Nepali arts especially paintings of the last one thousand years. It is a very interesting and challenging subject in its own right. The pattern of Western influence can not only be seen in the use of the media and technique and the expressionistic use of colour but more importantly, in the management of art, through the exhibitions of works in one place by making it possible for people to buy them. The early Nepali paintings were produced for the local use, for religious and ritual purposes. But the priests, and the art lovers of this country value only their ritual part. They ignore the great charm, beauty and power of these paintings which certainly must have been highly appreciated by people when they were executed. Every culture has its own aesthetic traditions. The Nepali aesthetic tradition as seen in the paintings is rich, unique and polymorphous.

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