

BOOK REVIEW

Nepal: A Guide to the Art and Architecture of the Kathmandu Valley. 1994. Michael Hutt with David N. Gellner, Axel Michaels, Greta Rana and Govinda Tandan, Great Britain, Kiscadale, Price: U.S.\$ 40.

There is perhaps something irresistible about art, or its allied subject architecture, that draws many kinds of people to write about it, even though they may not be trained as art historians or architects, thus rendering the field quite open for everyone. What reasons could one possibly give for this? Perhaps art represents the quintessence of a people's culture. Therefore writers are attracted to write about it. Or perhaps it appeals to the writer's higher aesthetic sensibilities, and betrays his fondness for orientalism. A more realistic reason for doing this probably lies in the lucrative business art makes in the book market, which any publishing industry is out to seize. If there are willing agencies supporting such enterprises, academics would feel only too happy to oblige by writing and fulfill their *dharma*. The present book on art written by a team of five authors, all of them academics save one, and all of them from abroad, with one exception again, is one of the latest to hit the bookstands.

In the preface the modest aims of the book are stated clearly. Lest people should find everything on the art of Nepal not treated in it, or treated in detail, it is said that the 'book focuses on specific aspects of the culture of the Kathmandu Valley, and on selected sites within it', and essentially is to serve as a 'tourist guide'. The format of the book, however, is much broader and larger, actually closer to being a 'coffee table' book, only slightly smaller, rather than being a handy, easy-to-carry-around 'tourist guide book'. The price of the book at a whopping U.S.\$ 40 will also keep it out of the reach not only of local buyers, but also of the low-budget, backpack tourists.

The text is arranged in about a dozen sections under different headings. Two fairly longish sections are devoted to history and religion. Although they are meant to provide a background, they are not always well integrated. The focus of study is the art and architecture of the Kathmandu Valley. However, the section on history has inserted a fairly long paragraph to describe the history of 'western Nepal, from where no illustrations on art are actually forthcoming. The text otherwise is furnished with ample photographic illustrations, mostly in black and white, and several in colour,

running alongside the text. Many of these illustrations are of the size of enlarged postage-stamps lining the margin of the book. They are derived from the Kathmandu Valley. The book furnishes no new material, nor deals with any new discoveries in the field of art or architecture, and constitutes, basically, a summary of the well-familiar accounts in the books by Pal, Bernier, Korn, Madanjeet Singh, Slusser, Bangdel etc., earlier. Assignment of dates to undated sculptural pieces is freely resorted to without acknowledging any of the art authority, such as named above, nor by forwarding one's own reasoning, which leaves some of the dating open to question. Although the photographs in the book are generally good in quality, they are, however, mere clichés, which have already appeared scores of times in other works. The text is also illustrated with diagrams, plans, layouts, sections and elevations of buildings, and with linedrawn maps of monuments / pilgrimage-sites, drawing mostly from the works of Wolfgang Korn and Niels Gutschow, which are more helpful for the readers.

Although the book has been furnished with a long text, still to hope for it to cover everything in its limited space would have been impossible. Telescoping the account, and cutting it down on details could not thus be necessarily avoided. This is in line with the aim of the book, which is targeted at tourists and general readers. However, the book, in several places, cannot refrain from describing in minor details some of the controversies that for an ordinary tourist could prove distracting and confusing. The book lacks a balance in presenting its narrative. It waxes where such details are available, but cuts itself short in other places where these are wanting. Thus the writing seems a little awkwardly poised betwixt and between the demands of the different types of readers. There are other things in the book that lead us to think that it has been conceived and put together in a hurry. At the core, the book could even have derived from the residual and unused notes and photographs of the authors made during their fieldwork in their own respective disciplines. Here and there, the choice of words are inappropriate and assume a condescending tone, that students of art and culture are hardly accustomed to read. The writing, occasionally, betrays the style of a political commentator commenting on modern political affairs, which in such books rings quite false. One such expression is to call Nepal's heritage of buildings and artefacts from the Licchavi and Malla period as a result of 'royal conceit' (p.30). On the other hand, surprisingly, a full-length separate section has been devoted to describe a late 19th century Rana palace, the Keshar Mahal, with great reverence and nostalgia. Barring its library, a few *bric-a-brac* of the late General Kaiser, and the personal pleasure garden he had had put around it, of which there is hardly any vestige left now, Keshar Mahal, architecturally is no outstanding piece of monument even among Rana palaces. Actually, there were other better and more impressively built specimens of Rana palaces to deserve mention in the book. Singha Durbar was one such example, which has been dismissed in barely a line or two. In another

instance, Buddha has been called the object of 'a personality cult' (p.41), in referring to the emergence of his icons and cult figures. A *satkona* design on a lattice window, similarly, has been termed as a 'star of David window frame' (opposite p. 80). There are other such instances of casually made remarks in the section on religion. For example, 'rounded boulder' is not a form of representation specific to Bhairav only (p.33), but is a commonly used material to represent any Hindu divinity. If anything, a rounded pitcher of clay filled with Newar home-brewed beer (*thon*) is a more proper symbol for depicting Bhairav. Bhimsen is by no means known to be a specifically 'Vaishnav deity in Nepal (p.33). Rather, he is more allied with Bhairav with whom he shares several aspects in common. Parashuram's anger against Ksatriya kings was to avenge the death of his father, Jamadagni, who was a *rishi*, and not a king, as mentioned in the book (p.35). The incarnations of Visnu are not described in the order in which they ought to have chronologically appeared (pp.36-37). The names of the 'four Vinayaks are wrongly enumerated (p. 34). Again, was Buddha born at Lumbini, or 'near Lumbini' (p. 16) ? Ashoka's Lumbini Pillar Inscription leaves little room for making any doubts in this regard. In another place goddess Tara has been equated with a bodhisattva (p. 42), which is quite untrue. Goddess Kumari, popularly represented in a young, virgin human girl in Nepal Valley, is said to be worshipped by the Buddhists as a form of 'Vajra Varahi' (p. 48), which actually should be Vajradevi. In another place Harati and Shitala are made to appear as one and the same deity (p. 176), which obviously is wrong. The month-long religious observance held in honour of the goddess Swasthani does not fall in 'spring'(p. 49), but in mid-winter (Push-Magh). The temple of Pashupatinath in Deopatan has been described to lie in the 'north-west' in relation to Kathmandu town (p. 180), which should actually be in the north-east. The date for the construction of Singha Durbar has been wrongly given as 1901 (p.63), and that for Keshar Mahal as 1926 (p. 116), which should respectively be 1903 and 1895. 'Hari Prasad Shastri' has been called the Prime Minister of India in the section under Keshar Mahal (p. 118), which is a ridiculous error. This Hari Prasad Shastri actually should be none other than Haraprasad Shastri, the well-known Indian Bengali cataloguist of the Sanskrit Buddhist mss., kept in the Durbar Library. In the same section a portrait said to be that of an unknown Mrs. Smith, is most likely the portrait of the wife of Lt. Col. J. Manners Smith, the British Resident in Nepal, from 1905-16.

The description of art forms begins with an account of paintings (p. 64ff). It is not at all clear why it was decided to do it this way. By the book's own account the date for the earliest known Nepali painting is only 1028, whereas the antiquity of the stone sculptures goes back to the 1st or 2nd century. A good part of the space under paintings is taken up by a description of the *paubha* paintings. Surprisingly, however, not a single illustration of *paubha* is appearing in the whole book. Similarly, a small paragraph is devoted to describe the bronzes, but not a single bronze has

found place for illustration in the book. Ganesh has been rightly recognised as a popular deity (p.34), but has been served with just a minor example of it on wood in one place, whereas repetitions of illustrations in the case of other deities are common. The image of Garuda is one such instance. Nobody has ever called the image of Virupaksa by the nickname of a 'nobleman' (p. 66), as far as this reviewer is aware of. Actually, this title is occasionally given to another nearby statue of a male person, sitting in the 'European' fashion.

Notwithstanding what we have said above, an effort has no doubt been made to gather together and compile diverse writings from scattered sources on the subject of art, and, the book, as a whole, does succeed in putting its readers on the generally accepted historical course of artistic development in Nepal, going back many centuries. Although the selection of material and monument sites at times looks a bit subjective-- e.g., sites like Thimi and Sankhu in the Valley, or Banepa and Panauti outside the Valley, which actually are but its extensions, have gone missing in the book--notable places are not generally left out from mentioning. The glossary at the end is helpful for a better appreciation and understanding of the theme of the book by the readers.

– Prayag Raj Sharma