

TRADITIONAL ART IN UPHAEVAL: THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN COMTEMPORARY ART IN NEPAL

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The development of art in Nepal since the middle of the 1960's has been surprising, first and foremost, by reason of its sudden, unusual innovations: from Europe abstract painting came to Nepal. The rhythm of Nepalese art, rich in tradition and defined by its religious content, had already begun to change several decades before, however, and this paved the way for the acceptance of abstract modern art.

The new artistic efforts had a revolutionary effect in comparison to the serene, centuries-long course of traditional painting.

How did this modern way of perceiving things come about? What preceded these changes? To answer these questions one must turn the clock back on Nepalese history with its social, political and religious changes, from which traditional art emerged-and ignorance of which would make the latter all the more difficult to understand. I shall divide this article into two parts: first, a characterization of traditional art up to the Rana period; second, the coming into being of the modern development within and following the Rana period. For purposes of a better understanding I would like to preface my remarks with a summary division of -- documented -- Nepalese history into periods up to the Rana era: Nowadays it is customarily divided into

The Licchavi period (300-879 A. D.),

The so — called Thakuri period, from 879-1200 A. D.,

The Malla era, from 1200-1769,

The period of the Shahs, who, in the person of Prithvi Narayan Shah, founded modern-day Nepal; this period was interrupted by the Ranas' seizure of power, but the traditional reign of the Shahs was recontinued as of 1951.

Nepalese art came into being in the Nepal Valley, the present-day Kathmandu Valley. Closely associated with this art is the Newar ethnic group, which gave Nepal its name. It has, more generally, received the imprint of the teachings of various religious orientations and their orthodox rules, such as Buddhism and Hinduism -- as well as a large number of sectarian groups and their cults within the spectrum of these more universally applicable religions, as, for example, Shaktism, Tantrism and Shivaism, with the Shivalinga cult of the latter specific to Nepal. These various religious influences in connection with ideas and legends of folk beliefs have always produced a wealth of motifs for painters, sculptors, architects, gold—, silver— and coppersmiths, wood—carvers and stonemasons.

Of primary importance for the development of religious art in Nepal was the influence of India -- both political-social and cultural. The production and pictorial representation of the first figures of gods — and the associated crystallizing out of an iconographic canon date in India to about the second century A. D. This influence was passed on by the Indian Gupta rulers to the Nepalese ruling house of Licchavis in the third century.

The Licchavis, who were to rule in the Kathmandu Valley for five hundred years, probably come originally from northern India, where they were likely threatened by expansionistic neighbours, whereupon they retreated to the Kathmandu Valley (favorably located on a major transport artery), which at the time was inhabited by the Kiratas, an Indo—Mongoloid mountain tribe, and the Newars, whose Tibeto—Burman language had presumably developed from the Kirata language. The Kiratas were driven off, and the Licchavis instituted a caste system in the Newar Valley in accordance with Indian precedent. Membership in these castes entitled a person to engage in a particular occupation. Indications to the effect in stone inscriptions composed in Sanskrit point to the fact--and one also assumes--that it was in this period, too, that the basis for the subsuming of the work of art under the sway of the caste system was created.

As the Kathmandu Valley represented a transitional zone between the regions of cultural influence of Tibet/China and India, the local population came constantly under

new cultural influences from both sources which contributed to the fact that art and works of art here developed a character all of their own.

The powerful Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo furthered this cultural exchange in the 7th century by having the trade routes over the Himalaya through the Newar Valley to India expanded and by taking the daughter of a Licchavi prince for his wife. She is still honored today, both in Tibet and Nepal, in the form of the so-called Green Tara, and is said to have contributed to the spread of Buddhism in Tibet.

The trading arteries have been regarded since that time as the best connection over the Himalaya, and were later to contribute to the cultural flowering of Nepal.

During the Licchavi period the Chinese pilgrim Hsuantsang gave an impressive description of the daily life of the Nepalese as well as their artistry in manipulating metal, stone, wood and paint. Such still significant temple sites as the Shiva sanctuary Pashupatinath and the Vishnu temple of Changu Narayan, as well as the stupa of Svayambhunath and that in Bodhnath, were already built at the time. Certain decorative motifs, such as therianthropic beings, vessels and plants show influences from the Sarnath and Mathura schools of the Guptas in India.

During the Licchavi period the rulers tolerated the various religious practices of the Valley population, even though by origin they tended especially towards Hinduism. This period is not only famed today, from the view point of art history, as a golden age--it is significant, too, that at this time, namely 605 A. D., the Indian system of reckoning time customary up till then was replaced by the Nepalese one still current today.

Sparsely documented years, generally designated the Thakur period (879-1200 A.D.), follow upon this time. According to written sources, various Indian princely houses ruled over the Valley at the time, and if political conditions were blurred, still many writings in Sanskrit and in the Newari language bear witness to a stimulating religious and cultural atmosphere.

Under the influence of northern India, Vajrayana Buddhism and Tantrism developed within the Valley; Tibetan monks came to Nepal in order to receive the new religious teachings and to carry them further to Lhasa and other religious centers of Tibet and also China.

It has never reached the point -- at least it would seem so up to now-- where armed conflict has broken out in the Nepal Valley because of different religious beliefs or

questions of caste. Mention is made even in old sources that attempts were made to discuss the different opinions of belief in public debate.

However, one is not of one opinion on this matter: there is, for instance, the legend that during the Thakuri period Shankaracharya, the philosopher and yogi who came from India, forced some people of opposing beliefs--Buddhist monks--to marry nuns, only to expose them afterwards to the derision of his followers.

In 1200 the rulers of the Kathmandu Valley started calling themselves Malla, though the circumstances of whatever transfer of power occurred are not known. Where they came from is still not clear. It is supposed--as in the case of the Thakuris--that their title, Malla, meaning wrestler or athlete, was a term of honor.

Along with many orthodox Hindus, they fled to Nepal after the invasion of the Muslims, or Moghuls, commenced in the 12th century.

The Malla era is divided into two periods: first, from 1200 to 1482; and second from 1482 to 1769, up to the conquest by Prithivi Narayan Shah. Both periods are significant for the social, religious and cultural development of the Valley. Today one tends to view this part of history as Nepal's flowering, but it also had its dark side for the population of the Valley, though this is often overlooked. In the second part of the period, however, the three city kingdoms of Patan, Bhaktapur and Kathmandu, so well known to us, developed with their incomparable splendor.

Under the ruler Jayasthiti Malla (ruled 1382-1395) the Valley population was divided into a caste system oriented towards the orthodox Hinduism of India. The country's entire structure was given a foundation which remained valid up into the 18th century. With this the previously prevailing, and to a certain extent chaotic, conditions were ended in favor of a rigorous Hinduization, in a way in which it had not existed before in such a codified form. Out of a--for all practical purposes--open society which was always able to assimilate newly arriving groups, the king made a society which was closed in upon itself. With this step he wanted, among other things, to wipe out the less strict forms of Vajrayana and Tantrism; moreover, by means of this tight organization, he surely wished to attempt to save Hinduism and the old order, which was threatened in its existence and further development by the Moghuls in India.

This rigid ordering assigned a low caste status to the artisan professions. Neither at this time nor in the years that followed, under the successors of Jayasthiti Malla, do written documents make special mention, for example, of any particular artist or school of artists--a situation we are familiar with from the European Middle Ages--, whereas in

Tibet and China, under the ruler Kublai Khan for instance, Nepalese artists enjoyed particularly high esteem. Under the Mallas they were regarded as social forces in the services of nobles and priests, carrying out the latter's wishes and informing the religious canon with a sense of artistry in accordance with fixed rituals and rules.

In 1482 a later successor to Jayasthiti Malla assigned the cities of Bhaktapur, Patan, and Kathmandu to his sons as independent domains of rulership. The Mallas were at this time probably under the nominal rule of the Moghuls (in the early 14th century, for example, the names of Moghul princes of India were inscribed on Malla coinage). This influence may be recognized, for example, by the clothing and coiffure of the Mallas and in their maintaining of a harem in the courts.

Miniature painting, moreover, experienced an upsurge; the wall paintings of the period reveal a diversified scheme of ornamentation, lacking in depth.

The Kathmandu Valley, however, by reason of its relatively protected geographical location, was able to keep its Hindu heritage intact through all the years.

Urged on by the mutual rivalry of the city kings, artistic creativity of the late Malla period experienced a great flowering. In tandem with one another the three main cities were built up and adorned. Stonemasons, wood-carvers and thangka painters of the time, from the Newar ethnic group, created works of art of particular note. Various cults arose during this period, as, for example, the Kumari cult. Even though the northern/Buddhist and southern/Islamic influences were considerable, Malla art was conspicuous for its own creativity and peculiar powers of expression.

Present-day critics call the late Malla period one of debauched living at the expense of the Nepali folk. The life of luxury under the protection of the Moghuls led to an unhinging of the state economies of the three rulers, who in the meantime had come to compare themselves to god-kings, a phenomenon familiar from European history. Large tax levies became necessary in order to finance the pomp in the courts. The personal bickerings among the three ruling houses and the efforts spent in outdoing one another in power and the display of majesty ate away state monies and furthered huge projects requiring artisans and artists. Never had so much fashioning out of pure gold, silver and precious stones been done as in this era; the decking out of temple sites with sumptuous figures and motifs dates from this period. State-sponsored art became the symbol of status and power, as was later to be the case in Rana times; under the Mallas, however, the artists do not seem to have made any profit--their names and schools have remained forgotten up to the present day.

Under Jayaprakash Malla of Kathmandu, the political situation towards the outside got so bad that the king was even forced to sell jewels and temple treasures, including those of Pashupatinath, in order to be able to recruit troops for his military.

This situation was changed by Prithvi Narayan Shah, who conquered the Valley in 1768. His ancestors probably came from Rajasthan, and had fled in the 15th century to the settlement of Gorkha, west of Kathmandu. There they had successively conquered the various princely and small kingly states and united them under a new charter of government, which gave its due to the tradition of the local ethnic groups. This legal foundation was the most important step for the later unification of the country under Prithvi Narayan Shah.

The Shah rulers, though not imposing upon the old, traditional artisan profession, did not particularly support it either, as its attention was directed more to the formation of a new nation and the unification of the western and eastern areas of present-day Nepal.

Of significance for the further development of the artisan profession and the plastic arts, with reference to the later Rana period, was the relation of the Shahs to Tibet, or more broadly China, and the British. There were repeated outbreaks of armed conflict, over trading resources, with Tibet, which at the time was under the sovereignty of the Chinese Manchus. Following the peace treaties with the Tibetans and Chinese, direct contacts were established with Peking, which at the time was a kind of safeguard against the British, who were then active in India, having been present there since the end of the 18th century. The Shahs had no particular sympathy for them. They maintained very restrained relations, fearing not only having to share trading privileges with the foreigners that might develop, but also harboring feelings of disdain for people who did not revere their gods.

Border problems finally led to war between Nepalis and British. In 1816 a peace treaty was signed which declared, among other things, that in the future Gurkha soldiers from Nepal might be recruited by the British, while mandating the establishment of a British residence in Kathmandu. In spite of reservations on the part of the Shahs toward them, the British gained increasingly in influence as a result of various trading advantages. Moreover, intrigues began to weaken the royal family.

Cultural life was greatly neglected during this politically unsettled period. The heritage of religious and traditional art nevertheless survived, but confined itself largely to the popular level. From a religious point of view, the Shahs tolerated only Hindu and Buddhist teachings. Muslims and Christians, whose presence and activities had not been limited under the Mallas, were now expelled or limited in their activity.

The reason I have described in some detail the relation of the Shahs to the British will become clear in the second part. It is, in fact, their influence that was to become one of the decisive factors in the development of art in the period that followed.

In 1846 an officer of the Shah army, Jang Bahadur Rana, put a bloody stop to the intrigues at the court of the Shahs, thereby establishing a family oligarchy that was to last for more than a hundred years. By means of a strict administration and new legislation the Rana prime ministers hoped to insure the collection of taxes and the preservation of law and order. Moreover, the Ranas were able to appropriate the entire economic power structure for themselves.

In order to provide safeguards in their dealings with China/Tibet and to prevent a revolt under the opposition living in Indian exile, the Ranas, in contrast to the Shahs, maintained close relations with the British. Close trading ties were formed with India, which had been experiencing rapid industrialization and urbanization ever since British occupation. Nepal exported more to it than it imported; the profits flowed into Rana hands.

The traditional artisan professions were under threat at the time, in as much as only a few people to commission works could be found. The Ranas along with the Nepalese aristocracy, in their leanings towards the British identified themselves more with Western cultural and consumer products--this a means of displaying their power.

But it was precisely this demonstrativeness that paved the way for voices of opposition against the regime. The independence movement in India also added fuel to the fire; and thus it came as no surprise when, in 1936, followers of the Shah royal family and opponents of the royal system retired to India, there to come together in an anti-Rana movement, from which later the Nepali Congress party emerged. After India obtained independence from the British in 1947, it was only a question of time before the Ranas had to give up power. In 1951, after King Tribhuvan had fled from Nepal to India, the Ranas were forced to accede to a coalition government, which was agreed to, under Indian mediation, among representatives of the royal family, followers of the Nepali Congress Party and members of the Rana family.

The cultural changes in Nepal under the Ranas had been deep-cutting. Thanks to their close contacts to the British they had taken on the Western cultural tastes of the latter, as expressed in their adopting a neoclassical, Victorian influenced architecture. They also had a predilection for European furniture, fashion and pompous military parades. In painting, one felt one's way into the naturalism of English artists, and an infiltration of Nepalese religious art by Western motifs of purely aesthetic intent set in. Within this first

cultural interaction with Europe, limited to the Nepalese aristocracy, artistic needs were reduced to the Ranas need for wall decorations in their palaces — such as family portraits, hunting scenes, nude paintings, landscapes and still lifes.

Part of the demand was covered by imports from abroad; court painters employed especially for this purpose were confronted with the newest advances.

During Jang Bahadur Rana's visit to England the Newari artist Bhaju Man was taken along, a first-time event that signalled a turning point in the value placed on Nepalese artists.

On the whole, however, artists had to attempt as best they could to copy from Western paradigms and to incorporate new techniques and a different conception of color from European pictures, to the extent that their differing tradition allowed.

A new sense of the concept of art set in in Nepal: namely away from a mythic-religiously motivated one towards works of art that served the ends of personal uplift and thus possessed a purely aesthetic character.

The artists used new techniques: alongside gouaches, oil painting and water colors found preferred use. Canvas and hardwoods were imported from Europe for processing.

Stylistically, the idolizing, flat character which oriental influences had lent to Indo-Nepalese painting was replaced by motifs conceived in a depth perspective and naturalistic in effect.

Two persons grew up in this drastically changing cultural milieu who were later to become the precursors of the developments of contemporary art. These were Chandra Man Maskey (born in 1900) and Tej Bahadur Chitrakar (born in 1900 and died in 1971). Previously, as related, there were only a few artists active in the court, those from the Newari Poon families, called in Nepali Chitrakar, which translated means painter. The efforts made by these court painters to assimilate Western artistic influences into their style of painting were hesitant beginnings--more instinctive than anything. Their influence on society in Kathmandu was of minimal significance only.

I have previously described the subordinate social status artists in the courts of the Mallas had to put up with. This began to change during the Rana period, as is shown by that regime's support of individual talent. In this connection, the works of Maskey and Chitrakar are seen today as the turning point in the development of art in Nepal.

Interestingly enough, there are many common points in the lives of these two men: they were born in the same year, both received their education in art at the same school (the Calcutta Government School of Arts), took their examination at the same time (1926) and together brought the influence of the Bengali school of art with them to Nepal. They were the first officially recognized master teachers of painting in Nepal.

The various undercurrents and influences of the Bengal School of Arts left deep impressions on the two men. In particular, at the time the school was a cultural center of the Indian nationalists opposed to the British. The intellectual elite of the country, for example Bose and Tagore, were then active in the school.

After their return to Nepal, however, the two artists found themselves caught in a conflict: namely, on the one hand, their sympathies towards the Rana regime which harbored trust for the British, and which after all financed their studies; and, on the other, their attitude, formed by their education, against the British and for India's, and Nepal's social and political independence. For all that, the impressions of the various worlds with which they were confronted--the deeply ingrained medieval-religious and the Western--did not loosen their grip on them; and so today the works of their lifetime are called by Nepalese artists themselves--and I quote--"a curious mixture of social realism, historical romanticism and religious sentimentalism" (from a personal communication with the Nepalese artist Jagdish Chittrakar in 1986 in Kathmandu).

Maskey's and Chittrakar's conceptions of painting were similar, but as regards their social status in Nepal, there were enormous differences between the two.

Chandra Man Maskey was a member of a high level caste of the Newar community; Chittrakar, on the other hand, belonged to the previously mentioned painting family of Chittrakars, who were ranked low in the caste system of Nepal. In Nepal's traditional social order this meant for the painting families--showing obedience towards their benefactors and sources of commissioned works. Art was not thought of as a means of individual expression but served, rather, the religious-ritual claims of society. Chittrakar, having grown up with this attitude, carried such centuries-old ideas around with him, a fact expressed in his moderate and complaisant personality, as contemporary Nepalese artists testified to me. Moreover, as they said, Nepal's society of the time, still deeply rooted in the past, was not of the frame of mind to accept someone with a socially low status in a leading role. His influence was therefore more limited, having its effect predominantly on the members of his family and those of his rank within Nepal's caste hierarchy; it did, however, greatly strengthen their sense of themselves.

Maskey's background was a different one: his decision to become a painter broke with tradition; by caste he belonged to those who were used to having commands and orders carried out and not, as in the case of the Chittrakars, to those who were on the receiving end carrying them out. But probably it was precisely this accustomed high rank that allowed him to have his way in the face of all prejudices, and against his own original aim of studying medicine in India, and to follow his own inclination--that towards art. To this can certainly be added the fact that the artistic movement in the Bengal School of Arts was in tune with the rebellious zeitgeist of the intellectual elite.

Once he returned to the them forbidden kingdom of Nepal, he had to proceed further in the direction he had set out in, without coming completely into conflict with the social situation and his family there. His decision in favor of an art of individual expression inspired and encouraged young persons in Nepal to set themselves, too, against other time-worn social values.

His example strengthened, in addition, the sense of self-worth and self-knowledge of the Chittrakars in their role as painters. Their socially weak position was thereby revalued upwards; Tej Bahadur Chittrakar would never have been able to achieve this alone. Their common influence, however, undergirded a shift in values and a rethinking out of things within the caste hierarchy. Moreover, during this time, that is between 1930 and 1950, Nepal's social order found itself in an upheaval; the influences of the Indian national movement against the British also had their effects on the oppositional Nepali students who were educated in India and professed these new ideas. They set themselves mainly against the Rana regime in its role as collaborator with the British, and for having kept Nepal for decades under strict control and behind closed doors.

It was thus entirely natural that the nationalistically inspired movement which had been initiated during this period in Nepal should go hand in hand with a search for new possibilities of individual expression, as in the past these had been-- I don't wish to say suppressed, since that's not true, but--left unrealized, the preconditions for such being absent.

Maskey's and Chittrakar's interests were in this connection the same; only the possibilities they had to fulfill them differed. In the end, this had the effect of bringing together different, slowly disintegrating caste groups and of allowing new activities to unfold. During this time the painter families began to change their names from Poon, the Newari name designating their caste status, to Chittrakar, the Nepali name for painter--this in order to distance themselves from the caste hierarchy.

Maskey followed with interest the latest trends in Nepalese art up into old age. His first exhibition in Kathmandu, in 1928--the first official exhibition ever in Nepal for an individual's works of art--represented a turning point in the direction of contemporary art. He presented his works for the last time in Kathmandu in two exhibitions in 1981 and 1983.

Tej Bahadur Chitrakar died in 1971; since then his works have been in the safekeeping of his family.

Although the works of the two men do not differ very much in expressiveness, content and technique, still two different trends came out of them: Linking up to the ideals of Maskey, there developed in the following years a school of--I would call them--painters and sculptors uncompromisingly open to classic modern European art who increasingly ignored traditional values and moved away from naive landscape and portrait painting. Its adherents generally did not come from the Chitrakar families. The latter were traditionally still very much bound to the old values which had for centuries shaped their creative work. Thus it is understandable that around them crystallized the school of so-called conventional Nepalese art.

Two adherents of this school went on to become among the most interesting artists to the present: namely Amar Chitrakar, today in his middle sixties, and Manohar Man Poon, by now more than sixty-six.

It was particularly his portrait painting that made Amar Chitrakar well known. He endowed it with a dramatic expressiveness unknown up to then, which he gave form to in accordance with the artistic freedom those commissioning his works allowed him. In 1979 he was appointed by King Birendra as a member of the Royal Nepal Academy, which had come into being in the intervening years.

M. M. Poon had always lived a fairly retired sort of life and was true to the old, traditional values, as one recognizes from his having retained his Newari name. These values also found expression in the treatment of his themes: he had a predilection for naturalistic representation and illustration of events within the life cycle of Newari society, as, for example, initiations or marriage rites. His works symbolize a deep, abiding involvement with the traditional religious ideas of the Newars. Moreover, they document the cultural drift--the changes--of the Newars in the last decades: for, like all the other ethnic groups, the Newars, and they in particular, today feel the consequences of the country's modernization, which has been going on since the opening of the Kathmandu Valley and the concomitant development of a monetary economy, the new changing

fashion in clothing--all this to be understood in the context of the influence of Western technical skills and styles.

The caste system and religious obligations are also in a phase of complete transformation. Poon is a typical representative of this society, or, to be exact, the Newars who continue to be firmly rooted in their culture; in recent years, for example, they have intensified their struggle for the preservation of their literary heritage, and they are making efforts to keep their language alive.

There are still, of course, as there always have been, Newari artisans in contradistinction to artists working individually. They continue to work according to prescribed patterns and rules, are active in small-scale trade and, in recent years, have profited above all from tourism. Since, however, the expectations of tourists cannot be compared to those of earlier persons who commissioned works of arts from generally religious motivations, one can observe a falling off in artistic form, for example, in the casting of statues and in the art of metal-working.

After the end of the autocratic Rana regime in 1951 the country, under the liberal rule of King Tribhuvan, for the first time opened itself up to outsiders coming in, and modern ideas reached Nepal from all over the world. In the first years of this opening a kind of general euphoria prevailed in the country at the new freedoms and, for example, better educational opportunities; and a decade went by in search of political and administrative solutions for the country's problems, against the background of its changing social structure.

In order to do justice to these trends, new educational facilities and other new institutions were needed to further cultural creative activity in the country, and to be able to offer communication and exhibition facilities.

To fulfill these expectations, many artists were sent for studies to India or the West. The help of experts and teachers was needed who could understand and direct development.

Lain Singh Bangdel was one of the first master teachers, and in 1961 was named a member of the Royal Nepal Academy by King Mahendra; in 1979, under King Birendra, he became director of the academy. Bangdel, born in Darjeeling in 1923, completed his art studies in 1945 in Calcutta and, following that, widened his knowledge in London and above all Paris, where he came into contact with modern European art, particularly cubism and abstract art. This experience led to the ripening of the idea in him of initiating

a school of modern abstract art in Kathmandu. At the time this idea was a challenging task, as the profession was still too little known.

At the same time he was presenting his artistic ideas to the Nepalese public and other Nepalese artists, several young artists happened to return from stays abroad, and they were drawn enthusiastically towards Bangdel, who apart from his artistic talent was able to offer good learning and teaching opportunities by virtue of his representation in the Royal Academy. Thus his creative output and his works stand in an exemplary manner for the development of abstract contemporary art in Nepal. Its upsurge in the past decades can be followed in the meantime in the galleries which have opened in Kathmandu, and in the Institute for Applied Art and Art History affiliated with Tribhuvan University. More recently, modern Nepalese art has also found its way into the halls of international exhibitors.

The various Nepalese representatives of modern art trends continue to be characterized by a use of color tones entirely specific to themselves and by their choice of themes, into which are interwoven again and again the traditional events in the country's life.