

# Architectural Woodwork in Nepal

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Nepal was once rich in excellent timbers. The five hundred miles of Nepal's Terai region and the two third of the mountain areas were covered by thick Sal and other species of good timber till the middle of the twentieth century. The people of the Kathmandu Valley have been using these treasures of wood from the beginning of the Christian Era. It is abundantly evident in their architecture. The wood works are beautiful, eye-catching, enchanting and lively thanks to the skillful craftsmanship. The carvings have beautiful floral and geometrical designs, motifs of their various divinities, natural and legendary animals and birds. As a result at present we have the carved doors, pillars, lintels, struts and windows in our monasteries, temples, palaces and private houses. They are most distinguished features in the Nepalese architecture.

Kathmandu Valley is the epitome of the Nepalese Arts and Culture. It is also a unique architectural museum, which has been aptly declared by UNESCO as one of the World Heritage Sites. Broadly speaking the traditional architecture of Nepal, as seen today, characterized by elaborately

carved wooden windows and doors fitted into brick-built facades. In the Valley, this rich architecture flourished during the Malla period (1482-1768 AD).

Though Nepal abounds in such wooden heritage, it is difficult to date them correctly. The carved brackets or Tunals often lend themselves to dating from the descriptive labels contained in them or, with lesser ease, the carved forms themselves, in the absence of any recorded inscription. They have retained their characteristics uniformly throughout. Some remaining struts dating from the thirteenth-sixteenth century temples indicate that Nepalese wood carvers were capable of producing images of extreme beauty.

It was around the middle of the eighteenth century, however, that the woodwork reached the level of sophisticated design for which Nepalese architecture has become known all over the globe. The three palace squares of the Kathmandu Valley and various *Maths* or monasteries of Bhaktapur and the Buddhist *Vihars* or monasteries of Patan and Kathmandu clearly show the high standard of craftsmanship, comparable to eighteenth century woodwork of Gujarat or Cairo to

name only two places of outstanding wooden architectural decoration.

The craftsmanship developed during the Malla period continued to flourish under the patronage of the Shah Kings in the valley. Not only did these craftsmen contribute to the development of the palaces in Kathmandu, but they also built palaces in Gorkha and Nuwakot in the hills where the Shah Kings ruled from the sixteenth to eighteenth century. It is the Shah Kings who established present-day Nepal at a later period. In fact, the majority of woodworks in Nepal dates back to the period of the Shah Kings who took over control of the valley in 1769.

Nepal was opened to the tourists in 1951. The rich architectural heritage of the valley particularly the wood work got a lot of appreciation from the foreign visitors. They not only feted their eyes with these beautiful works of arts but also expressed their desire to take some of the replicas or miniatures of these excellent works back home. The miniatures of the famous peacock window of Bhaktapur become a very popular gift item among the tourists. The models of various windows, doors, tympanum also became the popular items. Similarly, many other household items like toilet boxes, cotton boxes and photo frames etc. began to be popular souvenirs.

During the period of the Rana Administration (1846-1951) the artistic tradition of the valley was much discouraged. The colonial or neo-classical architecture became dominant in the new Rana palaces and houses. The Rana were proud to use European and other exotic architectural designs. This brought a great setback in the long tradition of Nepalese craftsmanship. In due course of time many families of Nepalese artisans

simply forgot their traditional skill and techniques. After the fall of the Rana autocracy in 1951, the democratic government of Nepal tried to revive the Nepalese architectural heritage but it took many years of labourous efforts to bring proper atmosphere for revival.

With the objectives of reviving and restoring the artistic heritage of the people of the Kathmandu Valley, HMG/Nepal and the Federal Republic of Germany co-operated in 1974 in launching the Bhaktapur Development Project. This project had undertaken many renovation and restoration activities of important buildings and monuments at Bhaktapur. In the course of these renovation activities, many traditional craftsmen such as wood carvers, metal workers, masons and so on had a chance to revive some techniques which had remained dormant upto that time. Even some of the lost techniques were revived. The wood carvers formed a cooperative and still produce artistic works for the commercial market. Tourism was encouraged and local handicrafts were promoted to help improve the local economy.

With a similar objective, HMG/Nepal had launched the Hanuman Dhokha Renovation Project with the collaboration of UNESCO / UNDP in 1972. One of the main objectives of this project was to form a skilled team of competent craftsmen as a basic work force to assist the Department of Archaeology, responsible for the conservation of this heritage. This project is still continuing. In fact, the renovation programme in the Hanuman Dhokha Palace had acted as a testing ground for many techniques for repair and conservation. The favourable impressions created by this project brought about both local and inter-

national support for an integrated conservation programme. It was realised in the preparation of a Master Plan for the conservation of the Cultural Heritage of the Kathmandu Valley at the request of HMG/Nepal by UNESCO/UNDP in 1977. For successfully implementing this Master Plan, the then Director General of UNESCO had made an international appeal in June 1979 to the member states but the response of the member states has not been very encouraging. HMG/Nepal is happy to express its gratitude to the governments and people of Federal Republic of Germany, United States of America, Japan, Belgium, Italy and Austria for their generous help and cooperation in implementing this Master Plan to some extent.

We hope that if UNESCO, ICOMOS, and other international agencies like PATA and so on would once again make vigorous campaign in raising funds for the conservation of the artistic heritage of the Kathmandu Valley, the effort will go a long way in preserving one of the most valued heritages of mankind for posterity.

In conclusion, while discussing the monuments of Nepal, the architectural wood-carving must be mentioned, not only as a highly refined system of structural articulation, iconographic representation, and facade ornamentation, but also as something typically "Nepalese".

The Department of Archaeology has developed a framework for restoration and preservation of the woodcarvings often undertaken by foreign aid projects. Successful methods of cleaning, repair and chemical treatment have been developed. Although past success must be acknowledged, new measures be undertaken to deal with the restoration and conservation of threatened wooden works of the Kathmandu Valley. The challenge remains in encouraging private owners to restore and maintain such important parts of architectural heritage. Incentive programmes must be developed to subsidize the costly repair, cleaning and chemical treatment of those pieces.

Even in developed countries, private investment has usually not come until financial reward are established. Subsidies might be in the form of reimbursements for works completed, tax benefits or a special task force to perform the work at reduced cost. Last but not the least, a far-sighted approach to conservation, therefore, will be to seek additional funding for monuments in the public domain as well as to establish a new framework in private hands.

Therefore, both the concerning government and people should work together with the help and cooperation of international organizations and friendly countries to conserve this wonderful tradition of human heritage for posterity.