

MEDIEVAL BUDDHIST ART IN NEPAL: PENETRATION OF PAL INFLUENCES IN THE HIMALAYAS¹

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Introduction

The expression "Nepal" throughout the paper is used in the traditionally limited sense to include the Kathmandu valley only, which embraces the three ancient cities of Kantipur, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur. The spatial dimension of the Kathmandu valley is a little oval, elongated in shape, covering an area of 200 square miles.² Nepal's contribution to the evolution and development of Buddhist art in Asia is of monumental significance relatively out of all proportion to her small size and limited human and physical resources.

All the schools of religious and artistic movements in South Asia registered their impact on Nepal. By the seventh century A.D., Buddhism was on its decline and in the process of largely disappearing from India. The description of the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang indicates that Buddhism by the time of Harsha of Kanauj Buddhism was already in neglect, and there were few believers.³ Nepal thus became the home of Buddhist art in South Asia from seventh century onwards. Hundreds of well finished Lichchavi *chaityas* of pristine Hemispherical form are found scattered all over the Kathmandu valley bearing testimony to this fact. At present, there are 314 *bahas* and *bahis* (Buddhist monasteries) in the Kathmandu valley alone.⁴

Evolution of Buddhist Art in Medieval Nepal

Three factors helped significantly in enriching Buddhist art in medieval Nepal. First, the sweep of Bhakti cult in Nepal led to a greater urge for creative vision and artistic expression. The Bhakti cult was primarily responsible for the evolution of the cult of Adhi Buddha (akin to the Hindu Brahma), who, according to the *Swayambhu Purana* and the popular Nepali tradition, was manifested in the form of a flame in Nepal. He then decided to take the form of five celestial Buddhas. Subsequently the five Dhyani Buddhas were associated with their families (*kulas*). The result being that the

female deities like Tara and Vrikuti assume towering significance. All these elements entered quickly into the cosmogony of Nepali Stupa art. Thus, even Adhi Buddha also receives his iconographic forms of either Vajradhara or Vajrasattava, who is also represented by his *sakti yab-yum*.⁵ Second, the Pal influence in Nepal helped in the final evolution of Buddhist art in the Valley, not only in its conceptualization but also in its medium of expression and the final style of execution, and finally, after the fall of Nalanda as a centre of Buddhist learning due to the invasion of the white Hunas, Nepal became the home for the Tibetan Buddhists, and the Nepali artists had to cater to their needs.⁶ As Buddhist deities in Nepal multiplied with the entry of Hindu-styled local gods and goddesses and spirits, they also formed a distinct part of the Buddhist cosmogony of the Nepali stupa. Thus, the Vajrayanic art that attained its final evolution and perfection in Nepal is, in fact, the completion of the evolutionary process that was set in motion from the time of Sakyamuni onwards.

Nepali *bahas* and *bahis* of the Kathmandu valley are the finest treasures of the Pal-styled art in South Asia. The Pal-styled Buddhist art of medieval Nepal is superb in its plasticity and in the style of execution. There is a balance in composition, rhythm and vigour. Nepali art from this period breathes with life and is pleasing to the eye. Though predominantly religious, the art is secular enough to embody the metaphysical concepts of art. Here the artist is moved by the spirit of syncreticism rather than parochial or sectarian outlook.⁷

Pal influence in Nepal is so wide-spread that it is seen in every nook and corner of the cities of the Kathmandu valley, like the Dhvakha Baha, Nag Baha, Vinche Baha and other *bahis* of the Valley.⁸ However, this was not a one-way traffic. Nepal influenced the Nalanda school of Buddhist art also. As Ulrich Von Schroeder points out:

Among the hundreds of cast images excavated at Nalanda two copper images of Nepalese origin representing Vajrapani in the standing and seated positions shows that at one time Nepalese artists were commissioned to work there.⁹

Buddhist gods and deities are depicted as *yogis* with matted hair, wearing few garments. But they are profusely ornamented, including necklaces, bracelets, and earrings. A way of further beautifying the Buddhist deities is the painting of the palm in red. Under the Pal influence the Buddhist male and female figures became as numerous as their Hindu counterparts; and they are richly associated with animals. The Pal-styled seated as well as the standing Buddha figures representing the Master in the *varad*, *vyakhyan*, and *bhumisparsa*

mudras and wearing the Sarnath type of wet drapery was very popular in Nepal in the early medieval period; this tradition continues even today. Today they can be seen in the Buddhist Chaityas of Swyambhunath and Mahaboudh temple of Patan. It is easier to recognize the Buddha figures when they are standing; but it is often difficult to differentiate the seated Buddha images from the Dhyani Buddhas, which are more popular and more plentiful in Nepal.

Specific Examples of Pal-styled Buddhist Deities in Nepal

a. **Padmapani Avalokesvara** (13th. or 14th. century A.D.): This beautiful Buddhist deity is one of the proud possessions of the Nepal Museum, Kathmandu. The bronze cast and gilded figure is seated in a double petaled lotus flower. The figure is inlaid with precious and semi-precious stones especially in the crown and ornaments. The face reveals the characteristically gentle smile that is typical of Padmapani (the bearer of lotus). The slender figure is expressive of beauty and mildness. His lower right hand is making the gesture of giving (*varada*); and his left hand is holding a lotus stem which rises behind him to the level of his shoulder and there blossoms into a flower. The upper half of the body is unclothed, while the lower half has an attractive *dhoti*, supported by waist-band with many hanging pendants. In one hand he is supporting the *dhoti*, the other is in a blessing posture. The earrings of the deity are very remarkable. He also wears a necklace of seven pendants, thus making it a perfect example of symmetrical order. The central pendant, being big and attractive, was taken by the artist as the central point. He wears a double tier crown, and the head is little bent with half closed eyes of compassion. This sculpture is indicative of the Pal style in its ornamentation, drapery, crown and facial expression.

b. **Vasundhara** (13th – 14th. century A.D.): This is another possession of Nepal national museum, Kathmandu. Vasundhara, the second wife of Lord Vishnu, enters into the tantric Buddhist pantheon of Nepal. She is a very popular Buddhist deity in Nepal. Being a treasure-giver, out of her six arms she is shown holding in four of her hands. In the left hands from top to bottom she holds a book, ears of grain, and a pot containing jewels. A shining gem sticks out of the pot. In her middle hand there is another gem with a string of brooch jewels suspending from it. The top and bottom right hands make significant gestures. She wears a five spoked crown behind which is shown another crown. She is profusely ornamented in the manner all Pal-styled Buddhist deities of Nepal. Her right leg is bent hanging casually down, with the foot resting on the lotus. Her waist is slender, and her breasts are

well executed with prominent nipples. Her body is further beautified by a garland of pearls reaching to her waist and a necklace that is made of two-tier beads with a hanging pendant. The stones inlaid in this figure are uncut star-ruby, garnet and other semi-precious stones.

c. Water Spout Icon of Tara (12th. Century): This stone icon is found inside the water spout of Nala. Her left hand is holding a stem of lotus. The hair is tied in a knob without a headdress. A very distinctive waist-band decorates her waist which is similar to the river Jamuna of the Pashupati area. The figure shows the same kind of dress used in Nepali and Indian figures during the Mathura and Gupta schools of art. The hollow stela is very much indicative of the Nepali school of art in the medieval period. This is not found in the Pal art of India. The double *prabhavali* (nimbus) depicted in the figure indicates the first of its kind in the figures of the Kathmandu valley. This certainly is the impact of Pal art in Nepal. Afterwards, this style is copied meticulously by the artists of medieval Nepal. The double *prabhavali* is still an important feature of contemporary Nepali sculptures.

d. Sculptures with life-scenes of Buddha: The sculptural representation of the life-scenes of Buddha are relatively fewer in Nepal. Two sculptures of circa ninth century representing life-scenes are remarkable for their elegant plasticity and narrative presentation. One from Yangal-Hiti (now in the National Museum, Kathmandu), depicts a fragment of a scene from Mara's temptation. Two daughters of Mara are depicted in standing seductive posture, trying to tempt the Master. Besides a large number of Mara's associates, especially goblins and demons, including a skeletal figure resembling Chamunda (a buffalo-headed demon) and Ganesh wielding axe, are shown launching further attacks on Sakyamuni. The other figure comes from Deo-Patan (now in National Museum, Kathmandu). The sculpture depicts the scene of nativity and shows Mayadevi standing in graceful *tribhanga*, holding a branch of tree. The infant Buddha is standing on a lotus against an oval *prabhavarli* represented on her right flank. The newly born Buddha is being bathed by a pair of flying celestial devotees with water mixed with lotus blossoms from upturned vases.

e. Buddhist Deities from Nepali Paintings: The manuscript illuminations and illustrations constitute the earliest expression of Nepali paintings. One of the earliest Nepali paintings is now in Los Angeles County Museum. It shows a very rich Pal influence in composition of the theme, for example the depiction of the eight principal events in the life of Buddha, as well as the use of colours and the stylistic representation. The above painting depicts the

birth of the Master. Here we see a fully grown Buddha with no pretension of being an infant. He emerges from the left hip instead of the right of the Indian tradition. He then stands on pyramid of lotus flowers and is attended by Indra and the multi-headed Brahma. While Indra carries the fish, Brahma holds a basket. Here we see a strange combination of a supernatural birth combined with a realistic social ceremony the artist may have witnessed at home. The Nepali artist did not follow the dictates of rigorous tradition; frequently he is inspired by his own imagination and personal experience. So far from being carried away by the traditional norm, he gives a touch of newness and elegance.¹⁰

More important illuminations come from a Buddhist manuscript text in the National Archives, Nepal, containing minatures of Dhyani Buddhas and the minature deities. These are four leaves with minatures from palm-leaf manuscript. First, is the protective goddess (Maha) *pratisara* in white, with eight hands and four heads. Four right hands hold from top to bottom; sword, arrow, thunderbolt, and jewel; while the four left hands hold the axe, bow, trident and sling. Second, the Dhyani Buddha, *Vairochana* is in white, and his hands reveal the gesture of preaching (*dharmachakra mudra*). Third, the protective goddess (Maha) *sitavati* is in green. She possesses three heads and six hands. Three right hands from top to bottom possess: arrow, thunderbolt, gesture of protection (*abhaya mudra*). Three left hands bear the ensigh (*ratnadhvaja*) and sling. Fourth, the Dhyani Buddha *Amoghasiddhi* is in green with his right hand in the gesture of protection. All the four figures are seated on lotus blooms above a rectangular plinth and are enclosed within a nimbus.¹¹

Nepali paintings are richest in the Buddhist cosmogony. They reflect the Buddhist deities like the Dhyani Buddhas and Manjushri. It is true that Nepali paintings reflect Pal influences, yet they also reflect stylistic differences such as in the setting of the background of painted rocks, the figure in the backdrop of red and blue, and the overall use of pigment and colours. While talking about the paintings in Nepal, the *pauva* Art or the *thankas*, the culmination of Nepali painting tradition, occupies the central place. Though the Nepali *pauvas* can be dated only to the beginning of the nineteenth century the school of Nepal art is much older and is the finest expression of Nepali use of colours.

The *thanka* paintings of Nepal can be taken as the most representatives of Nepali art, where tradition reigns supreme. The *thanka* painting in Nepal, unlike modern art, eschews the process of experimentation and innovation. It consists of imitations of methods, which are already valued beautiful as opposed to attempts to discover new forms of beauty. There is no room for a free hand in the *thanka* paintings, for they represent subjects and images

from the Buddhist religion in a meticulously worked out methods as handed down from generation to generation. All the figures are laid in geometric fashion and conform with the perfect proportion of the ideal divine body. The drawing always begins with the central figures. The Buddha figure alone has thirty-two major and minor characteristics, each of which is faithfully reproduced even in the fingernails of Buddha.

Once the drawing is finished, colours are applied to the canvas with the traditional hair brush. First, the two colours of the landscape blue and green are applied in basic blocks. As the iconography of the *thangka* painting is dictated by formal unchanging rules, so are the colours, which are specific and individual to each deity. A true *thangka* painter will even today prefer natural colours bound with glue from animal skin. The minerals and herbs traditionally used were: lapis lazuli for indigo or blue, arsenic for yellow, and cinnabar or conchineal for red. After the basic colours are fixed, many months are spent in details. The serene posture of Buddha, the depiction of his hands and fingers is done with all profusion and fineness. It is because of the rigorous method that the *thangka* paintings appear to be repetitive; but up on a close scrutiny, one always sees the ingenuity and the skill of the artist in the execution of the details. Thus, a talented *thangka* artist can give a two-dimensional *thangka* a touch of life and make the central figure "step off the canvas and speak to you."

The *thangka* painting is an act of faith dedicated to the Lord -- The Master. The final proof of the dedication is the gold work. Goldingots or gold leaf and mercury are ground together with crushed calcite and sometimes mixed with sugar and honey to make a smooth paste, which is delicately applied to bring the finest details. It is the patron of the *thangka* who supplies as much gold as he can offer to the god.

The final touch is when the three letters "Om Ah Hung" the mantric symbols for the body, speech, and the mind are painted at the back of the *thangka* in red. These are believed to help the patron in his meditation and the religious ceremonies. As the Nepali *thankas* are acts of faith and devotion, they are never signed. But in the lower of the corner of the painting is the figure of the artist in a full devotional kneeling posture who has sacrificed his skill and soul for the glorification of the Buddha.¹²

Two other themes are peculiar to Buddhist art in medieval Nepal. First is the dedication of commemorative images after the death of a person or the votive types installed after completing a pilgrimage or fulfilling a vow. Second is the Old Age Rite.

The Old Age Rite: Bhima Ratha (Janko)

According to the ancient tradition, the Old Age rite is performed after a man has seen one thousand full moons. But a Nepali Buddhist performs his *janko* when he reaches the age of seventy-seven years, seven months and seven days. After performing this rite, his place is assured in the heaven of Amitab Buddha. A stupa is built to commemorate the Bhim Rath, also known as *ushnishavijaya*. The Newars perform this rite with great pomp and show, dedicating a painting depicting the goddess within the stupa. The stupa is placed on a high pedestal in front of which is attached the portrait of the donor riding a chariot drawn by three horses. The ride is, perhaps, symbolic of his ride to the western paradise of Buddha Amitab. Attached to the circular body of the stupa is the effigy of the goddess Unsnishavijaya. The super-structure of the stupa is a spire of thirteen rings representing the thirteen stages of enlightenment. The spire is sheltered by a parasol (light umbrella) to which is attached festive streamers and which is crowned by a vase of immortality. This stupa may grace the domestic shrine of the donor's family or be dedicated to the monasteries.

Conclusions

To conclude, the Nepali medieval artists were not just imitators of Pal art, and they were innovators and had both ideas of their own and a long artistic tradition, that had been shaped by Nepali's history and environment. While Nepali artists assimilated the artistic experiences of India, they moulded them into their own fold according to their needs and requirements. Nepali medieval Buddhist art has been characterized by certain features that are quite distinct from the contemporary Indian art. First, in Nepali Buddhist art one witnesses the inlaying of precious and semi-precious stones like the star-ruby, garnet, moon-stone, and turquoise in ornaments. Second, the figures in Nepali bronzes and paintings indicate a very heavy use of gold. The use of gold continues in the gilding of the roof of Buddhist temples and the beautification of the *gajurs* (pinnacle). Third, the outlines of Buddhist figures in paintings are drawn with careful lyrical fluency, which stands in contrast to the lively figures of Pal art, and finally the landscape, architectural element, and use of colours are different from those of Eastern India. Nepali figures are painted in the background of rocks. The colours also differ in intensity and tonality. For example, in Nepal the red is tinged with a touch of crimson, whereas brighter illuminations are in vogue in the Indian tradition. Thus, the pigment shades in the Nepali illuminations in manuscripts and wall paintings are generally more subdued than the Indian example.¹³

Nepali artists beautifully synthesized the foreign elements into their art work and came up with some of the finest specimen of Buddhist art in Asia.

While the Pal art disappeared from India after the Muslim invasion, Nepal was able to preserve and develop it, for the Nepalis made their art-work a part of their socio-religious life. This was done in two ways.

- a. The abstract vajrayan philosophy was simplified for the laymen in visual aids by paintings and sculptures in the *bahas* and *bahis*. The tradition of painting was kept alive by painting the auspicious symbols like the stupa, the eyes, the *kalasa* and the *pancha* Buddhas in the walls and the door-ways.
- b. There also developed a tradition among the Newar Buddhists of Nepal to build a stupa with a painting of Ushnishavijaya inside it to commemorate the seventy-seventh birthday of a Buddhist. Again, paintings and sculptures of a family Buddhist deity were also made after completing an austere vow or after coming from pilgrimage.

It is the above socio-religious factors that have been responsible for preserving the Vajrayanic school of art in Nepal. Thus, a student of Nepali art history will come across thousands of Pal-styled art in the Kathmandu valley in all mediums – stone, wood, bronze and canvas. They certainly far exceed in number the collection in all the museums of India and elsewhere in world. After the destruction of the Nalanda University, Nepal became the home of the Pal-styled art in South Asia. Nepal not only evolved this school of art to perfection but also managed to export it into Tibet, China, and inner Mongolia. This art is still a living tradition in Nepal.

Notes

1. This paper was presented at an international seminar on “Pal Art”, Patna University, held on September 21 and 22, 1991.
2. For more on the spatial location of Kathmandu, see P. Karn, *Nepal- a Cultural and Physical Geography* (Lexington: Kentucky, 1960); H.M.G., Nepal, *The Physical Development of Kathmandu Valley* (Kathmandu: H.M.G. Nepal, 1969); also Harka Gurung “Geographic Foundations of Nepal,” *Himalayan Review*, Vol. I, 1968, pp. 1-10; Harka Gurung, “Landscape Patterns in Nepal,” *Himalayan Review*, Vol. IV 1971, pp. 1-10.
3. The account of the pilgrim is given in Samuel Beal, *Life of Hiuen-Tsang* by Shaman Hwui-li (Delhi: Oriental Book Reprint Co., 1969), p. 178.
4. The expression *baha* (*bahal*) is the distorted form of the Sanskrit term *vihar*. *Bahi* also denotes a Buddhist establishment in Nepal; but if *baha* refers to a bigger Buddhist settlement, then *bahi* refers to a smaller Buddhist enclave. Among 338 total Buddhist monasteries in Nepal, only 24 of them do not belong to the Kathmandu valley. The number of

- viharas* according to their specific location include: Patan (185), Kathmandu (106), Bhaktapur (23), Thimi (9), Sakhu (9), Banepa (2), Panauti (1), Khampu (1), Nala (1) and Dolakha (1). For more on *Bahas* and *Bahis*, see John Locke, *Buddhist Monasteries of Nepal: A Survey of Bahas and Bahis of Kathmandu Valley* (Kathmandu: Sahayogi Prakashan, 1985).
5. The expression *yab-yum* denotes both holy father holy mother. For more on cosmogony of the Nepali stupa, see Krishna Deva, *Buddhist Art in India and Nepal* (Banarasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1987), pp. 1-22.
 6. The result being that "Lhasa" to a great extent a became a Nepalese colony. And it was chiefly Newars who built temples there, painted images; their reputation spread all over central Asia, and they were called from far away, even in more recent times, for decorating religious buildings." Sylvain Levi, *Le Nepal*. Vol. IV (Paris: Bibliotheque d'Etudes, tomes, 1905-1908), p. 63.
 7. See also D.R. Regmi, *Medieval Nepal*, Part I (Calcutta: K.L. Mukhopadhyaya, 1965), pp. 614-667.
 8. Pal influence in Nepal is also seen in the cult of Mahisasur Mardini and the Dakshinkali cult. Another important cult in western Nepal that is a subject of much contemporary research is the *masta* cult. The *masta* cult, which embodies both male and female deities together with the *ath bhais* and *bara bhais*, also comes from Bengal and reflects Pal influences. See Chakravarti, chintaharne, "The Antiquity of Tantricism", *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. VI, 1930, pp. 114-126; C. Chintahrne, "The Cult of Bara Bhais in Eastern Bengal", *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. XXVI, 1930, pp. 379-388.
 9. Ulrich Von Schroeder, *Indo-Tibetan Bronzes* (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, Ltd., 1981), p. 301.
 10. See Pratapaditya Pal, *Art of Nepal: Catalogue of the Los Angeles Country Museum Art Collection*. Berkely: L.A. County Museum, 1985, p. 148.
 11. See also Ernst Waldschmidt, *Nepal: Art Treasures from the Himalayas*, trans. by David Wilson (New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 67-68.
 12. For the above information, the writer is grateful to the greatest living Nepali *thanka* painter, Siddhimuni Sakya. His paintings are alive and full of colour. Today his single piece of painting is sold in the international market from 60,000 to 200,000 Nepali rupees.
 13. See also Pratapaditya Pa, *Art to Nepal*, op, cit. p. 147-48.