REVIEW ARTICLE

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The book is a collection of seventeen papers on sculpture, painting and architecture, including minor arts published over a period of twenty-five years (1972-1996). As most of these stretch over decades, the latest as old as fourteen years, “it is evident that certain aspects are out of date” (Preface, p. v.). The datedness of most papers is aggravated by the delay between planning (September, 1997) and the actual date of release of the publication on 6th November 2005—to mark the author’s 86th birthday.

Two attributes of the publication can’t escape any careful reader. The selection is from more than fifty short as well as long papers Slusser has published since first she fell in love with the arts and culture of the Kathmandu Valley following her exploratory walks in its streets, lanes, courtyards and monuments begun in the mid 1960s. Given the catholicity of her taste and interests, it covers a staggering range of subjects from inkpots to monumental structures. Secondly, it is a work of someone who is, not only interested in all forms of Nepali aesthetic expression, but also of someone who is hopelessly and deeply in love with her subject. Her infatuation with Nepal is complex and problematic. So much so that she is more of an admirer than a connoisseur or a cold detached critic trying to convince the reader of the aesthetic merit (rarely, if ever, of glaring demerits) of the work she chooses to discuss, analyze, interpret and evaluate. We have to take her canons of aesthetics, whatever these be, for granted as soon as we agree to read a paper she chooses to write on.

This will be in a striking contrast with her claim when she wrote: The papers included are less about art as an aesthetic experience than about art which for the most part plays, or played, an active role within the cultural milieu in which it was produced. That it can be validated by the cultural dimension of historical chronicles, inscriptions and the living culture is in my opinion what gives Nepalese art its special appeal and why I have spent three decades in its study (Preface p.vii).

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With formal training and degrees in archeology, anthropology, and art history from such centres of excellence as Harvard, Colombia and New York, Slusser came to Nepal in 1965 to accompany her consort who held a diplomatic post. It hardly seemed to matter if her doctoral dissertation was on the archaeology of South America, and before coming to Nepal, she had published a work on Vietnam. A Research Associate at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC she is evidently and eminently qualified to investigate “the special appeal of Nepali art” against its cultural and historical context, particularly with “intensive collaboration of stellar Sanskritists and historians of Nepal”. By all means, by training, profession as well as by chance and her station in life she is destined to study Nepali art forms in their social, cultural and historical context.

**Sculpture**
As it won’t be possible to review all the seventeen papers we will focus on the major ones on leading Nepali art forms only. Clearly, Slusser’s primary interests in Nepal are its ancient and medieval sculpture and architecture. Her early papers (e.g., *Kathmandu: A Collection of Articles*. Kathmandu: American Women’s Organization in Nepal, 1969) were on the visual feasts for the tourist which a city like Kathmandu dispenses any inquisitive visitor who cares to stand and stare by its “surface archaeology” as a museum without walls. She attempted at a systemic synthesis of her studies, in collaborative work in explorations in “surface archaeology” in *Nepal Mandala* (Princeton, 1982). However, its major focus was on the political chronology of a theatre -state playing out and investing heavily on a drama informed by classical Hinduism and Buddhism. Hypothetically, religion and the art forms were the primary stuff of which the cultural study was made. Yet the whole focus was on an exercise to weave a strand of consistent narrative, or the grand narrative of Nepali political history pieced together from “cultural data” contained in about 190 ancient inscriptions in Sanskrit, 120 early medieval ones in pseudo-Sanskrit, supplemented by a dozen temple/court diaries and a couple of chronicles in hybrid Sanskrit/newari. Of course, there were also ubiquitous vernacular chronicles compiled between the reign of Bhimsen Thapa and Bir Shumshere in the late 1880s.

Some of the essays/papers in this volume are the bye-products of Slusser’s “intensive collaboration with stellar Nepali historians” such as Mahesh Raj Pant and Gautam V. Vajracharya. “Some Nepalese stone sculptures”, “Further Notes” and “Nepali Sculptures: New Discoveries” are
among the representative writings which exemplify her approach to analysis and interpretation of Nepali masterpieces in the light of Indian tradition of sculptural art. Not too familiar with the scripts or the languages, her access to supporting documentary evidence is facilitated by her colleagues. Except for some brief essays by Baburam Acharya, P.R. Sharma, R.N. Pandey, and Ramesh Jung Thapa there was nothing worthwhile by native scholars before Lain Singh Bangdel’s *The Early Sculptures of Nepal* (New Delhi 1982). Most students cited either Kramrisch’s 1964 Asia Society Exhibition Catalogue, or N.R. Banerjee’s brief monograph (1966), or Anita Ray’s summary volume (1971) prior to Pal’s influential dissertation, submitted to Cambridge in 1972 and published in two parts in 1974 and 1978 (not in 1973, nor in 3 volumes as Slusser lists).

The central article of Slusser’s approach to Nepali sculpture is that ALL works in stone, wood or metal, are aesthetically meritorious and valuable, and as they *ought* to have a firm chronology they are *ispo facto* datable, if not absolutely, at least relatively on “stylistic considerations”, on considerations such as anatomical/physiognomic features, facial expressions, hair-style, dress, ornaments, or presence or absence of diagnostic attributes. Such attributes (e.g., the size of the hips, fleshiness of the body or slenderness of the waist, or the nature of erotic curves etc.) are, however, hypothetical than real. Verifiable canons of iconography, such as the *Citrasūtra* of the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* or the *Pratīmālakṣaṇa* or the *Rūpamaṅgala*, are far and few between, and they are rarely, if ever, cited by Nepali sources. Neither the caste of stone masons nor that of bronze-casters were too literate communities. The documentary sources Slusser appeals to are the *vamsāvalis*, inscriptions and local court/temple diaries. On their own each of these sources can’t be validated, since they are neither “historical” nor reliable unless confirmed by other contemporary sources. On pp. 192-193, she has published a revealing table of the total corpus of 13 dated stone and 17 metal sculptures from Nepal belonging to the long span of seven centuries between A.D. 467-1167. Even when a work is dated and inscribed, the numerals or texts and readings are fiercely contested. The late Dhanavajra read the inscribed repoussé plaque in Jack Zimmerman Collection twice, and each time he came up with different texts! A classic example may be the so-called “Purandi Hoard Piece” dated by Slusser to the eleventh century, based on a dubious reading of a letter numeral as 1 whereas all paleographic evidence shows that it is 4. Thus he hoard can only be dated to late 14th century as there was no paramount ruler named Arjunadeva in the Kathmandu Valley in A.D. 1065.
Like in Nepal Mandala, Slusser has taken the Nepali publications of her stellar collaborators (rising epigraphists or Sanskritists they may be then, but in the 1960s they weren’t any art historians) as infallible words of authority in her analysis and interpretation of Nepali sculpture. Based on their reading of a passage in the late 14th-century chronicle (folio 21b), Slusser assigns a number of Nepali Viṣṇu sculptures to the brief reign of abhita feudatory Viṣṇugupta who usurped political power from the de jure Licchavis and was assassinated later by Narendradeva in A.D. 643. Among his donations or kirtī are said to be the Jalasayin līṅga popularly known as “Budhānālakānṭha”, the “Balānlakānṭha” at “Balaju”, the Viṣṇu at the bank of Bagmati, popularly identified as Rāma with two sons Lava and Kuśa, and the aturmukha līṅga of Viṣṇu at the Paramesvara Prapālī, or the Nārāyan Hitī. Before giving credence to the chronicle or its literal interpretation by her collaborators, Slusser should have questioned its authenticity on a number of details. For example, there was no dynastic overthrow, only a soft coup by the abhitas, nor was there any Jivagupta ruling 74 years before Viṣṇugupta. The big stone sculpture of Viṣṇu at the eastern banks of the river Bagmati was NOT made to his image, as Slusser understands, but made according to the facial proportions of the primary donor (svatamapramāṇena—a common practice among munificent devotees (see the unfortunate legend, the so-called portrait of Viṣṇugupta in Fig. 3, opposite p. 91). The interpretation of the be-mustached Cāṅgu Gāruḍa as “an idealized portrait” of Mānadeva or the Hādi-gānu Gāruḍa as an image of Anuparna Gupta seem to us “touristic”, if not the wildest flights of imagination. The identification of Paramesvara prapālī with Nārāyan Hitī is at best questionable as the later vernacular chronicles ascribe the foundation to King Dharmadeva, Mānadeva’s father. So the Caturmūrtṭī Viṣṇu līṅga or Samkarṣaṇa (Fig. 25) too may not be of that age. However, Slusser’s assessment of the Jalasayin nārāyanā, together with Viṣṇuvikrānta and Dharani Vāraṇā sculptures as “outstanding achievements” in truly “Nepali idiom” of sculpture, successfully assimilating classical Hindu mythical subjects and artistically localizing the Gupta sculptural practice is fully documented and convincing. This has long been a part of received wisdom in our “conventional art history”. The real breakthrough that she made was in her “discoveries” of a tradition or traditions that went further back in time and praxis to the centuries earlier than the Licchavis arrived on the scene. Although she firmly disputes a “kīrāta period or style” in Nepali sculpture (see p. 100 note no.36 ), her paper on “new discoveries” written in 1968-69, though published in 1972, is one of the earliest to focus on “the puzzling group of images worshipped in the
Kathmandu Valley” as “śitala” or simply Mother Goddess. This was a decade before Bangdel published his volume on early sculptures of Nepal. In part these “discoveries” are the result of her belief that “Nepali art should not be viewed as merely provincial Indian” but as “reinterpretation of Indian tradition into something quite distinctive” (p. 91). Her entire efforts in these papers went into an exploratory fieldwork to define this uniqueness that sets itself apart from the Indian tradition, i.e., Indian in tradition yet Nepali in expression and practice. The so-called “smallpox goddesses” are the earliest of sculptures that have been found here, documenting a style or styles which are pre-Gupta in many of its formal features—such as massive buttocks, large ring anklets, heavy ear ornaments. Slusser sees a close affinity of these images with Kuśāna art of the 2nd century A.D. its provenance being the art of Kṣatrapas of Mathurā. Although she says that this early paper was included in the volume “largely to illustrate the undeveloped state of art historical research in the Kathmandu Valley as late as the 1970s” later findings and publications confirm the existence of Kuśāna influence in the history of Nepalese art (pp. 106-107).

The same impulse to push the upper limits of art history back by centuries informs the papers on metal and repousse art forms. The dating of sculptures, stone as well as metal, was hitherto based on stylistic evidence about which opinions widely differed. The received wisdom was that the Nepalese bronze sculpture could not be dated earlier than the thirteenth century. Piecing together various strands of evidence, documentary as well as sculptural, Slusser concludes,

from the three inscribed images—two cast and one repousse—we now know from the firm basis of epigraphy that the art of metallurgy flourished in Nepal at least as early as the sixth century A.D. From the technical sophistication of the three images coupled with the inscribed testimony of the (Cāmgu) Narāyaṇa sheath, we can safely deduce that the Nepalese were master metalsmiths long before that time (p. 166).

Though this statement is not contestable several details which went into its structure are worth examination, if not open to debate. The late Dhanavajra’s translation of the inscribed text on the kavaca or the metal sheath as paraphrased in English on p. 161 is not accurate. For instance, the two Sanskrit words, svasaṃsthaya doesn’t refer to the replacement of the sheath by Amśuvarman himself; it refers to the epoch-era begun in A.D. 576 by him by dropping the century figure. Varāmame, too, doesn’t stand for “at present” but for the “current reckoning” as against “expired reckoning” of any given
calendar year. The accurate conversion in Julian calendar is, thus, February 4, 608, not A.D. 607. The testimony of the T’ang Annals on the opulence of Nepali court and its decorative metal crafts in itself speaks volumes for their antiquity as well as splendor.

Slusser brings all her intellectual resources to full play in the Purandi hoard paper. Though she fails to inform her readers if there was any cultural site or structure in Purandi, the site where the “hoard” comes from, it is, undoubtedly, a masterpiece among her recent publications displaying her diligence in methodical analysis of all available and relevant data except paleography a field out of her grip and expertise. The initial drift of the paper was to a clearly and closely argued approach to defining “an emerging eleventh-century style in sculpture”. It was not that she was convinced of any intrinsic aesthetic merit of the hoard; she was merely overwhelmed by the alleged antiquity of the hoard. By the end of the paper, the argument loses momentum as soon as she comes to grips with stylistic details relating to “shoddy pieces of workmanship” marked by “a lack of conviction”. This comes as an unexpected conclusion. She doesn’t even discuss why nearly all the images are seated.

Out of the sixteen metal objects found in the hoard, three are mere gilt copper fragments, two are cast bell and eleven repoussé, nearly all round in shape. The most remarkable was a rectangular 27cm gilt copper repoussé work depicting an image of Ardhanārīśvara of śiva-Pāvatī containing a damaged 9 line inscription at the top (see p. 208 for a roman transliteration, English translation and Appendix Fig. 2 for an orthographic reconstruction of its text). A gilded copper finial (suvannarasita tāmraprasthika) from Pīnā, north of Phanapingu-visāya, contains a far better preserved inscription. As all repoussé images have two to four or more holes evidently they are devamārtittis (a term used in the inscribed text itself) intended for carrying in portable temples for local festivities, firmly nailed or tied with strings to a wooden board or timbre. In the 74-page long paper Slusser discusses neither the function nor the iconography of the images. Misled by her informants she believes that the dates are NS 140 and NS185. However, the first letter numeral in both the inscriptions is not ‘a’ (equivalent to 100) but ‘ka’ (equivalent to 400). So the pieces are three centuries later in time. This conclusion is substantiated by the fact that there was no paramount ruler named Arjunadeva ruling in Tistung, Pharping, nor the Kathmandu Valley in A.D. 1020 or 1068 whereas Arjunadeva/Jayārjunadeva was alive till A.D 1382 in Bhaktapur Kvācēṃ, though not politically kicking. The paleographic competence of Slusser’s scholarly collaborators can be assessed by reviewing.
the gross inconsistencies among the roman transliteration, the English translation, and above all the “reconstruction” of the Ardhanārīśvara repoussé inscription.

Though brief, a striking contrast to the above is Slusser’s early “musings” on the splendours of “riot in woodwork”, particularly Nepali wood brackets. Although several scholars have cursorily dealt with it, by the mid-1970s few drew attention to the aesthetic merits of a group of early 12-13th century brackets depicting the yakṣi/śālabhaṇḍikā theme that goes back to early centuries in the Indian art history. Even a scholar of Tucci’s eminence was enamored more of the erotica of the late brackets inspired by esoteric religious iconography than by this group of exquisite woodwork. The nine sensuous and enchanting Yakṣis from Uku Bāhā, three from Itum Bāhā, four from Yatkha Bāhā, and several from Tvāya Bāhā, seven from Tyāgal tole and fifty-one brackets from Panauti Indrēśvara temple comprise an earliest corpus, exhibiting “a spontaneous rhythm”. Nearly all have “firm breasts, delicate waists, ample hips, and swelling thighs.” However, the later ones were of lesser aesthetic merit, though Slusser’s judgment that they were the output of an emerging trend “on the route leading to the decadence of the later tradition” (p. 129) sounds too harsh. She deeply laments the decline of the Newar Buddhist institutions which could no longer sustain the annual exhibits of the precious art treasures in their monasteries. In 1974, these exhibits were already “a thing of the past” as a result of rising pace of art theft and transactions encouraged by mafias using national as well as international networking. Her elegiac postscript (p. 130) on the later “dispersal” of these pieces of treasures, once worshipped by people, in the art market and finally in well-endowed museums in the USA strikes a familiar note. Now there is already a sizable volume of literature on stolen art from Nepal.

**Painting**

Slusser, not unlike a traditional gurmā, sitting amidst credulous devotees or a tourist party comes to her full swing and eloquence when she discussed a painting, a tattered God-foreshaken fragment though it may be. It doesn’t seem to matter so much what it depicts or how accomplished it is as a work of art: the fact that it is dated and, above all, in the Cleaveland Museum of Art donated by a munificent donor seems to her a self-evident reason to wax eloquently on its “narrative content”. The alleged Svayambhu Purāṇa (as Slusser unsuccessfully interprets) or a Tīthā Mahātmya (as Stella Kramrisch claimed) is a bilampau, a patacitra depicting various holy spots, river-
confluences and shrines in the Kathmandu Valley—both Buddhist and Hindu, sanctified by gods and sages without any sectarian persuasion. Register A depicts Dvādaśa tīrthas and Aṣṭāvittarāgasa, the eight śiva liṅgas reinterpreted as Eight Passionless Beings in local Buddhist lore whereas register B is the legend of śāntikara and his rain-making nāgaśadhanā. The 36 extant frames barely fall into any “narrative intent” Each frame is an individual vignette, barely related to what goes before or comes after, much less to the whole. If the extant painting has any thematic unity it may be the quest for rains which ultimately feed the few rivers of the valley. Unfortunately, Slusser wastes all her time and analytical energy to recapitulating the milestones of the legend than the art piece she was to discuss. Though she claims that it is of “profound interest” (p.259) there is more about the Svayambhū monument complex and Pratāp Malla’s magical (mis)adventures than about the merits or demerits of the painting and its style and technique. The black and white plates are nearly useless and the colour reproduction barely useful.

Slusser’s discussion of the 16th-century I-bahil “Pilgrim’s Guide” Painting dated NS 685 aṣaṭha 10 Sunday. (equivalent to A.D. 1565 July 10?) is interesting as it vindicates the Western art specialists’ and collectors’ care and love against the native ignorance and deplorable neglect, “the painting when last displayed in the vihāra was, like the monastery itself, in a deplorable state. Framed by crudely stitched, coarse white cotton perhaps provided by the pair of pious eighteenth-century donors shown in the appliqué cartouche below, the painting was dirty, crumpled, and torn...liberally spattered with red and yellow colours flicked at it during worship, and everywhere the paint, chalky from damp, was flaking away, taking with it precious inscription” (p.291).

The history of this painting since August 1967, the last date of its public display, is exciting on its own. It was bought by A. Peter Burleigh, a well-intentioned American diplomat posted in Kathmandu in the 1960s. He has “bequeathed” it to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, USA. This, in part, is how most Nepali art ended up in “dispersal”—to use Slusser’s harmless term because of their “deplorable” treatment in Nepali hands! How it survived for four full centuries before the arrival of Western art lovers and art specialists in the late 1960s is still a mystery, however. The intensity of this “art care and love affair” began so fast that by 1989, when Jurgen Schick and Lain S. Bangdel independently studied and published on the art-(up)lifting industry in Nepal, some 180 solid sculptures weighing tons had
left Nepal, albeit by diplomatic routes, presumably swimming in petrol tanks of overland vehicles.

Slusser goes into great detail while discussing the pictorial pilgrim’s guide to the sacred geography of the Kathmandu Valley. She finds it “a striking composition, coherent, wonderfully coloured, and eminently satisfying esthetically... conceptualizing and giving form to complex notions in an undeniably spectacular composition.” (p. 310). Unlike the previous paper, stylistic points of interest in art history are discussed systematically though “in his naivete the painter is quite undaunted by laws of perspective or gravity”. Most objects, people, places, flora, fauna are symbolic rather than “naturalistic”. Yet she finds it “eminently instructive in matters of art history, geography, social and religious practices” which makes it a unique piece.

The volume is enriched by three minor papers on painting though they are not strictly by Nepalese nor are they from Nepal. One is an eighteenth-century penwork, or *kalamkāri* scroll, an imported piece seven metres in length and a metre and a half in width, brilliantly painted sometime between A.D. 1750-1800, probably commissioned by the court, depicting the Navadurgās on textile using mordants and dyes in complex processes of fibre penetration and colourfastness evolved by Indian craftsmen over millennia. Its lamentable condition touched many a soft heart before it was ultimately “rescued from its ignominy when it was hawked about in the USA”. It is now purchased by persons devoted to the arts and culture of Nepal for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Slusser narrates this sad tale on page 367 with no small relish or sense of achievement at this “relief and conservation programme of great delicacy and heavy investment”. As Slusser draws our attention to this banner and its 12 by 15 centimeter repair patch appliqué at its bottom she concludes that much of its design elements are from the Mughal repertoire. Since there are “at least two other surviving specimens still in use in the Kathmandu Valley”, one at Harisiddhi *Jala pyākham* and another at the Brahmāyatī shrine in Bhaktapur we have some lingering hope to continue to see and enjoy this art form in Nepal.

“A Document on Himalayan Painting” illustrates yet again how flotsams and jetsams of artifact, disconnected with one another, land in high places of art in the West en route tourist markets. One of the painted wooden covers contains a couple of Buddhist mantras in Raṅjana script “written in an unscholarly manner” (p. 389, footnote No. 2). Slusser has an astonishing ability to weave a lengthy paper out of nearly anything so that she talks at length about this “document on Himalayan Painting” even though it merely consists of a numbered folio of some “unidentified canonical Tibetan
Buddhist text" written on nilapatre and two covers with Buddhist sketches and paintings in Kar ma sGa bris style, (see Colour plates X and XI) presumably a work of a Newar artist commissioned by a Tibetan patron in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. This, coupled with the evidence of sketchbooks prepared by his Tibetan associate for Jivarāma in A.D. 1652/3, leads her to conclude that “paintings that are now labeled ‘Tibetan’ may actually only be ‘Tibetan style’ produced in fact by a Newar, even one working in Nepal” (p. 397).

The final paper is all the more exceptionally rich as it discusses the identity, form, substance and symbolism of a small John Gellaty bequest to the Smithsonian Institution, depicting the so-called red and green Spice Goddesses painted on two sides of a 34.1 cm high, made of round sewn paper as a silk fan with a handle. The inscription in Tibetan reads, “You who bring down a rain of divine incense powder, you hold various sorts of incense powder. May you worship with a shower of incense powder pervading all clothing, ornaments, and coiffures.” The paintings are probably from central Tibet in the 15th century Bal bris or Sakya style, i.e., Tibetan painting in Nepali tradition—a style too common then as “there was no convent which at the moment of its foundation or of its greatest prosperity, was not embellished by (Newar artists) with statues or frescoes” (Tucci. 333:1949, vol I).

Architecture and Minor Arts
Slusser is at the height of her analytical and interpretative powers in the papers which discuss some medieval architectural monuments. She succeeds in bringing all available resources, including the best in her collaborators, in order to muster all published sources in Western languages as well as in Sanskrit, Nepali, Newari and other non-Western languages. The central premise of her approach to Nepali architecture is that its model, motifs and groundplan are classical Indian, going as far back as the Vedic mandapa or sabhā, assembly-halls so often referred to in literary sources. The columns, the pilasters, the flora and fauna decorating these are all in origins Kushan or Gupta. She hopes to reconstruct the Licchavi religious as well as secular architecture by assembling the abandoned columns in stone or by analyzing the decorative motifs and arches carved on extant Licchavi and transitional (pre-Malla period) stone śārānas and caityas. In her optimism, she firmly believes that “the structures which embellish the Valley today are clearly not of local inspiration. They represent end points in a long tradition whose sources lie elsewhere” (p.581).
Launching from this convenient post, the rest of her exploratory journey in
the Valley becomes a matter of prosaic “ferreting the sources”
documenting, for example when the Kāśṭhamanḍapa was built, who built it,
who lived there until recently. The puzzling question is why was it ever built?
Nobody builds such an unwieldy structure for fun. Unfortunately, the extant
sources are unrelenting and ambiguous at best. We do not know for sure
whether it was a public hall, a shopping mall, or a coronation stage. The first
documented use of its name in A.D. 1143 is grossly cryptic. The alleged
Gorakhanātha stone sculpture placed at the central hall with no visible ritual
role in the surrounding community may be a later embellishment. As Tibetan
sources claim, it may rather be of Padmasambhava who is said to have
preached there. At least, the Buddhist community of Tāmākārs use it for
alms-giving on Pañcanadāna. It may, on the other hand, be the public hall
where a King of Upper Kathmandu receives his scepter every twelve years
from Pacali/Pañcali*ga/Bhairava, symbolically representing the people of the
settlements of Dākṣinakoli grāma (the southern village of the oilpressers).
They shout on a given day that salt and oil are yet “sold at different prices” so
that Lord Luipāda, the benefactor, should continue to be in the Valley for its
continued prosperity.

However, Gorakṣanātha as such is not mentioned in the copperplate, as
Slusser claims (p.451). If we peel off the multiplicity of functions and rituals
connected with the Kāśṭhamanḍapa it clearly is neither a pāṭi, nor a pilgrim’s
rest-house, certainly not a dharmasāla. The centrality of its location near the
ancient royal place complex at Gun-po or Hit chowk is all the more
puzzling. Colonel Kirkpatrick’s facile remark, equating it with “wooden
Mundubs occasionally met with in other parts of India,” which Slusser quotes
approvingly (p. 461), is thus at best misleading. If one analyzes the earliest
dated copperplate, dated NS 454, attached to this building, it was in origin an
assembly hall dedicated to Pacali Bhairava, the tutelary deity of the then
ruling consortium of eight houses of Mahāpātras of Kathmandu. “Pacali
Bhairāha” is the deity the three feudatories of lower Kathmandu mentioned
as the ‘witnesss’ in the copperplate stipulating the principal article of their
agreement (thiti) to boycott, or not to follow, the cult of Jugi (Yogi)
Samaragi, evidently a proponent of Nātha sect. Thus there appears to have
been a patronage conflict and an emerging cultural tension between the Nātha
cult followed by the reigning or contending House of the Mallas and the
Pañcali*ga Bhairava cult followed by ruling Mahāpātras. Once the grip on
political power of the feudatories weakened, the later copperplates granted by
Yakṣamalla handed over the building to the Kapālikas, relegating the symbolic presence of Pacali Bharava to a nearby Bhūtaśāla!

Often, availability of documents becomes a liability rather than an asset for Slusser when they make room for multiple interpretations like the A.D. 1379 copperplate of Sthitirājamalla, a problem aggravated by “the difficulty of reading the original, a blackened and warped plaque nailed high in an almost inaccessible place” (p. 451, note 60). Recently, a learned Vajracharya published a Newari monograph claiming that Luipa was none other than Līlavajra, the preceptor-founder of Shikhoṃī Mahāvihāra!

The two other monuments Slusser analyzes are less problematic, particularly the thirteenth-century Indreshvara Mahaṃdeva temple at the village of Panauti. This is so because as she says, “architecturally, the shrine is disappointing, being somewhat ungainly and severe. But by virtue of the remarkable woodcarvings it incorporates, the temple ranks among the foremost art treasures of Nepal.” (p.505). The temple contains twelve corner brackets, four śārdalas support the top roof; four griffons the middle one, and two śārdalas and two griffons the lower one. The remaining forty brackets conform to a general design: each is composed of a major figure, a deity, a demigod, or an epic hero/heroine canopied by foliage, borne by a pair of caryatids, mainly a pair making love, ensconced in a symbolic rocky setting.

Paying glowing compliments to their merit, Slusser speculates that the stone carvers of yore had largely abandoned their traditional medium to work in wood. “The architectural arts of the Licchavis, known principally from stone surface debris, is faithfully reflected in wood”. (p.520, note 42). “It is in the extraordinary sumptuous treatment of dress and coiffure, attributes and ornaments of the principal bracket images that the master carvers of Panauti perhaps best reveal their virtuosity.” (p.515). Among the main brackets, those of Rāma, Yudhiṣṭhira, Hanūmān, Arjuna, and Yakṣīs are outstanding ones, indeed. An elaborate analysis of other aesthetic merits of the carvings is provided on pp. 516-517, substantiating her claim that the medieval wood carvings are “profoundly infused with the ghosts of the Licchavi stone carvers” (p. 519).

Fortunately, the ghosts of Licchavi stone carvers were not invoked yet again in dealing with another monument, the terracotta temple of Mahābuddha, at Patan partly because there was no such model in Licchavi Nepal, but mainly because it was avowedly an imitation in terracotta of the one in Bodhagāya where Siddhārtha, the historical Buddha, attained enlightenment. Its foundation was laid in A.D. 1564 by Abhayarāja sākya who designed it, but it was completed forty-six years later by his descendants in A.D. 1610. Though a vaguely reminiscent imitation it has a number of
unique modified architectural features which do not go with the śikhara style—e.g., the torana. It is “an outstanding example of the little known art of terracotta in Nepal and of “Nepalization of arts that have come to it from elsewhere”, (p.597) Though the paper purports to deal with architecture, briefly analyzed on pp. 596-599, it unfortunately drifts, from the teeming wealth of terracotta imagery, to subsidiary topics of the Maravijaya theme in Nepal’s Buddhist sculpture and painting, to a cursory discussion of an eighteenth-century torana and a sixteenth century paubhā. The “mixed nature of the paper” is reinforced by additional paragraphs, “far beyond the scope of this paper” dealing with caturmukha caityas in Bodhagaya and Nepal.

The astonishing catholicity of Slusser’s love for and interest in the objets du art from the Kathmandu Valley is nowhere better exemplified than in her charming paper on what she calls “inkwells” or the šiyahidāna as the Mughals called these portable ink containers, resembling the Chinese snuff-bottle in size or the Buddhist-Hindu pūrṇakalaśa in shape. She draws our attention to hitherto neglected artistic but secular, utilitarian, ethnographic items of day-to-day use such as oil-lamps, water vessels, spinning wheels etc., because “these utilitarian objects issued from the same Kathmandu Valley workshops that produced the splendid images of the gods... created by the selfsame hands and minds that fashioned what we now choose to categorize as art.” (p. 627). The inkwell as well as the metal pencase has its origins in Mughal India though many a decorative motifs they contain are a part of timeless Buddhist-Hindu symbolism of life, fertility and well-being. As these inkpots are exquisitely decorated with designs of dragons, makaras, kinnaras, nāgas, sārdalas, personified river goddesses, vegetation, sea-waves, they are indeed a microcosm of the culture of Nepal. Slusser goes further, “the pair of kinnaras with enormous convoluted, foliate tails depicted on one vessel seem almost to have been copied from a seventh century stone relief that once embellished a temple in Kathmandu—a relief that in turn draws its inspiration from more ancient Gupta India” (p. 632, Fig. 5 and Fig. 28).

For those who are interested and have patience to read it through the collection of Slusser’s seventeen papers, published and scattered in a number of not too easily accessible art journals is most welcome, especially because it is launched on the initiative of a Nepali publishing house. The book contains hundreds of black and white plates, maps, drawings as well as colour plates—mostly Slusser’s own. As she can make any object both a worthy theme and an infatuation, reading her may turn out to be an addiction, enriched by her flamboyant prose studded with meticulous documentation of all sources on Nepali art accessible to her or her collaborators.