



**The Musical Court of Lord Indra.**  
*Picture courtesy: Narottam Das and Indira Shrestha Guthi*

# THE SPIRIT OF NEPALI PAINTING:

## *What has hath Driven the Art*

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### **Abstract**

*(Note: Herein the term, 'Nepali Painting' exclusively refers to the earlier art of Painting - rooted in religious faiths: and not the art that emerged after the arrival of western notion of painting.)*

*For centuries, 'The art of Painting in Nepal' remained confined to the visual forms associated with spiritual beliefs: or as a description of imageries from Hindu and Buddhist pantheon. Occasionally, the visuals also narrated rise or decline of particular thoughts or a cult within a given time. The complexities found in the art also, have had intrigued many - by the impressive presence of myriad set of imageries - representing varied meanings or beliefs, expressed in diverse visual forms.*

*But little is explained and argued on or about the underlining reasons or the deeper human desire to envision so. To argue on it or explain it, it remains a challenge. To dwell on it, it also becomes imperative to go behind - look to the earlier times when chosen thoughts were appeared first or impressed upon the early people. This is necessary so as to understand the state of mind and their perception of life then. Only then, one can or may imagine or analyze what may have had led them to the chosen beliefs and to the visual forms that we call art today. This should be described as the driving spirit of the art.*

*Present essay therefore, is a brief and a modest attempt to unravel some of such driving spirits - based on the available references and also, personal observations.*

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If one is to make a comparative study of growth and evolution of Nepali art - especially with the art of painting in other civilizations, Europe, China or even India, within a common given timeline, Nepali Art presents some very distinct features. This is for number of reasons. First, since its earliest appearance in 11th CE and right up to second half of 19th CE, it continually stuck to the ideas of religious dictums, except a few occasional examples of secular forms. During the

period, while in other civilizations, the art traversed divergent courses - to reveal varied changes in thoughts - mixed along with the external influences; Nepali Art, on the other hand, comparably remained rooted - essentially in the basic thoughts of two religious practices - Hinduism and Buddhism.

Secondly, no other art is so replete with an amazing array of multitude of exotic anthropomorphic forms of deities, as is



*A Kalash-top of the temple spire.*

found in the art of Nepal. And each is presented with the unique features of own – complexions to emblems to unearthly forms of multi-heads or multi arms. Each hand or head represented diverse attributes one can imagine of. Nepali art thus, presented a panorama of a complex set of deities or images, resulted out of two competing religious thoughts, often co-existing or even with converging views in many respects, at almost the same time. The additional arrival of divinities in the art – adapted or derived from the southern – Gangetic plains and the northern – Tibetan influences, led to create an outstandingly a very rich feature. Also, added to it were the imageries of locally evolved deities – mostly from the Shakta cult – that enjoyed a great respect in the Valley of Kathmandu, during one stretch of time in Nepali history. It all helped add and enrich further, the art here.

But the most important part in the present contexts, in Nepali Art is the significance



*Kalash-as the deity of Annapurna temple, Ason.*

and the very purpose of their presence in the local beliefs, and in the visuals. Irrespective of the faiths, each deity has had a reason and so, accordingly, each motif or detail found in the art, also have had a reason and a meaning. Categorized broadly into two, the deities usually, either remained of benign character or in an angry or fierce mood. Apparently, there is no third option here, as is found in the aesthetics of Indian art – like 'Navrasa'. So is the envisioning of attributes like the emblems to vehicles to the ascribed colors of complexions, as needed of a chosen deity. The divine beings thus, with benign looks are usually, considered to be prayed or worshipped – to attain eternal peace - after one's death: and enjoy a state of well being during the life time. But the presence of wrathful deities means they're to be feared. So there's a need to appease or worship – for seeking protection from all the potential evils and devils, during the bad times while living or after the death.



*Heaven and Hell, Picture courtesy: Rajendra Chitrakar, Bhaktapur*

### **Human Instincts: Driving Spirit behind the Art**

The argument above clearly suggests that a rise and evolution of any spiritual thoughts, since the very beginning, were essentially depended on and are shaped by the space, time and the circumstances the men or women lived. And it is the circumstances, the time and primarily, the basic human instincts that guides or have guided or led to a particular chosen religious thought. When we argue about the basic human instincts, obviously, the primary concern of a man has had always remained to stay alive: or to remain safe and secured. And probably, the second most important need or an instinct of man is to survive and lead a comfortable

life. And only then, a man is usually found concerned on the issues after death - rebirth, salvation or Mokshya. The thoughts of Nepali Art remained no different to these truths.

So while dwelling in brief with certain chosen examples, let's begin with the envisioning of Vedic gods. Vedic gods essentially represents an array of forces of nature – like rain, fire, wind and so on. Men then being unable to understand the elements of nature, perceived it all as the destructive forces bent on destroying the humans. They sought ways to protect from it. As they feared these forces, they envisioned them in anthropomorphic forms, Surya as the sun god or Indra as the god of rain (*see page 21*) and Agni as



**Goddess Vasundhara**  
Picture courtesy: Nepali Painting - through the ages, Patan Museum.

the god of fire and so on. And then began the ways to appease them and try to remain safe from these destructive forces. By 900 BC, men had already composed of Rig-Veda, along with iconographic details and envisioned the elements of nature - as the deities one must not ignore but propitiate to appease, to stay alive. Then, the stage was set to be translated or imagined of visually as the Vedic gods, as described in the holy Vedas. This remains a glaring example of how the man's primary instinct worked - initially to stay alive or the question of fear from the unknown! And in absence of other better ways, sacrifice or the sacred fire - Yagya, was chosen or conceived to be the best ways to appease those early divinities.

Often it's argued that after the Vedic times, the next primary concern of human beings then, thought to be free from second birth or to be able to assimilate with the absolute. That is to seek final salvation or *Mokshya*, after the death. This notion led to the age of primacy of devotion. A gradual decline of earlier deities led gradually to the rise of *Trimurti*, the Hindu trinity - mostly in benign postures. But men continued to fear death and now; began to seek refuge in devotion and arrived an era of hymns or the devotional songs. And also, it led to the arrays of visuals of benign deities appeared - as a visual medium to concentrate upon. Blessings were sought from these deities with the unmistakable and eternal wish 'to be able to reside in heavenly abode - Swarga - the heaven. The concept of '*Paap or Punya*', soon dominated man's instincts.

And in the art of painting, it was followed by the series of imagining of heavenly beings, and the life in heaven or a hard

life in hell to those who committed sins. Soon man was made aware of possibility of punishment in hell and therefore, a need to earn virtues by doing noble things during life time. At one stage of time, as a reflection in art, a notion of Heaven and Hell became a very popular theme in Nepali Painting as well (*see page 23*). But essentially, it was a concern specifically focused to the life after death. Men normally assumed them, the thoughts of Hinduism are unequivocally meant to earn enough virtues - *Punya*, so as to be able to attain heaven.

The popular phase of Buddhism - known as Mahayan, also delivers an almost similar a message to its adherents. It envisages a concept of Bodhisattvas or *Lokeswor* in popular art forms. They are the sages - who have almost attained enlightenment but have chosen to wait to redeem other humans in distress. In Nepali Painting, thus this thought too has had dominated and was able to earn a primary and an important space. It was because of the immense popularity the thoughts commanded amongst the laity since its very advent. Accordingly, paintings based on the Mahayan thoughts have led to impressively a large body of imageries depicting five celestial Buddhas, their spiritual consorts like Tara (*see page 27*), *Lochani* or *Mamaki* etc and of course the series on *Lokeswor* - one of the most popular being '*Padmapani*'.

### **Instincts to Seek Prosperity**

Contrary to a common notion that, men are thought to be more concerned of life after death, as the argument made above, in fact, human instincts to live happy and prosperous while alive, have had also remained equally strong and important. This human instinct is well evidenced



*Goddess Luxmi as seen in a ritual art.*

and reflected in the spiritual thoughts, and of course in the visuals of Art. This is found in both the religious thoughts - Buddhism and Hinduism. Imagining of divine beings - with attributes to bless prosperity and riches, provides a glaring example. Goddess Luxmi is a very popular deity - she is regarded as the one who showers her followers with riches and prosperity. In Nepali Art - in painting and in sculpture, she occupies a very important art space. In Nepali Painting form, she is depicted different than as found described in the holy Vedas. In Nepali Art, she has many unique features as a deity of good-luck and prosperity both. In visual forms, in addition to paintings seen with her spouse Lord Vishnu, she is also well featured in ritual art - celebrated during a special event or a festival - dedicated to her worship. Here, her visual form is seen flanked by her attendants - carrying sacks of precious jewels. One of them is the demi - gods - Kubera. All the sacks

with riches are meant to be showered to her devotees. A different form of goddess Luxmi - known as Dhan-Dhanya Luxmi is also found conceived in Nepali Art - Painting.

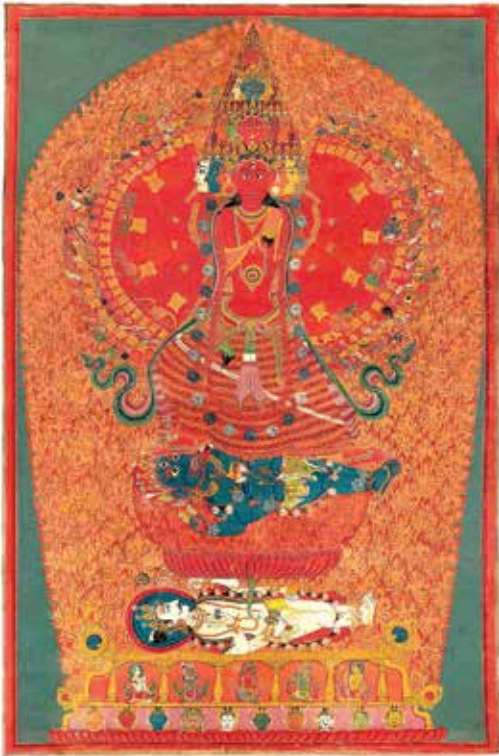
And what's more interesting is a fact that the notion of prosperity has had been equally popular in Nepali Buddhist practices: and is also, well reflected in Nepali Painting. A typical Buddhist Paubha - a religious vertical scroll, almost always feature an image of goddess Vasudha or Vasundhara as part of a composite composition. She is regarded as a spiritual consorts of one of the celestial Buddhas. In our contexts here, her relevance is on her abilities - to grant boon of prosperity and the blessings of well being or an ability to sustain life with - much needed food grains. In visual form, in addition to other emblems, she is seen holding a Kalasha - an auspicious vase and also strands of grains - as a symbol of life sustainability.

Here, few more words may be need to dwell on 'Kalasha' - as mentioned above. Since the early times, 'Kalasha' has had remained a very important symbol in the religious life of Buddhists as well as to the Hindu followers. To begin with, an observer would note that in Newar architecture, every religious shrine or any holy architectural form is topped by a Kalasha: the practice has had remained in practice since the time immemorial. In a normal visual form, a 'Kalash' is a jar filled with holy water. But symbolically, it suggests an embodiment of the full prosperity: and even a glimpse of a Kalasha would lead to bring good luck as well. Accordingly, Nepali society, Newar society in particular, this emblem has had a long history as an unmistakable symbol of prosperity. In a very popular ritual art



*Goddess Tara - note the presence of 'Vasudhara' in bottom center.  
Picture courtesy: the author.*





*Mother Goddess Durga - as an example from Shakta cult.*

form known as 'Asta-Mangal' or eight auspicious symbols, Kalasha remains one of them but has a special place. Often, when there's a need to combine all in one, this form remains the very basis – on which are added other symbols. No festival or rite and ritual are initiated or are considered sacred without a visual or physical form of Kalasha in Newar society. Most amazing is its growing popularity in its use and application in the present modern day Nepali modern society. Kalasha – a symbol of prosperity is often found as a logo of financial institutions and so are its depictions – in graphic forms in the main entrances and in the main gates of many modern buildings.

Moreover, the timeless popularity of notion of prosperity is glaringly narrated by the presence of many popular shrines in the city of Kathmandu – with some huge stone-sculpted forms of 'Kalash' in open. But some are located inside the sanctum-sanctorum – with 'Kalasha' alone as the central deity. The temple of famous Annapurna at Asan – a core area of the city, stands as a most visible example. Everyday hundreds of devotees throng to and pay obeisance to the shrine – seeking blessings of prosperity and for well being. Many localities in the Valley are also named after the auspicious jars of a particular locality.

### **Wrathful Deities: Protection from the Evils**

Few words are also needed on the presence of wrathful or angry deities in Nepali art. Angry deities are found in both the beliefs – Hinduism and Buddhism. But in the both the beliefs and the wish for blessings remain the same. Protection from the probable doomsday – diseases, evil spirits, demons, ghosts so on. The concept of *Asta-Matrika* (Eight Great Mothers), Bhairavas and other similar emanations remain interesting examples in this regard. All the visuals of wrathful- angry Hindu deities lead directly to this direction. Even in esoteric Buddhism, many wrathful deities are found with similar message. Outside any medieval Buddhist Vihar, the main entrance is unfailingly flanked in the either sides by the images of Lord Ganesha – the elephant headed god and Mahankal – an angry god but an emanation from one of the five celestial Buddhas, – here as the guardians of the Vihar or the monastery.



*'Mahankal' - an angry deity from Buddhist faith. Picture courtesy: National Gallery of Painting, Bhaktapur.*

In short, the concluding lines remain that human instincts and the desire is continually looking for ways to stay alive, prosperous and also, is seeking to attain salvation after death. And through the religious thoughts, men longed to see it all in visual forms – in painted form or as a work of sculpture. The presence of amazing array of gods and goddesses found in Nepali Art – Painting, strongly drives the point – either in anthropomorphic or in symbolic forms.



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*Madan Chitrakar is an eminent artist and an art writer. Three well acclaimed books "Tej Bahadur Chitrakar - Icon of Transition" (2004), "Nepali Art - Issues Miscellany" (2012) and "Nepali Painting - Through the Ages" (2017) remain to his credit, in addition to the numerous writings on Art and Culture in English and Nepali.*

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