



Chandra Man Singh Maskey. *A Newar lady*, c.1940. Oil on canvas.
Picture courtesy: Prof. Dr. Santosh Man Maskey, Kathmandu.

DYNAMICS OF CONTEMPORARY NEPALI PAINTINGS

DR. YAM PRASAD SHARMA

Abstract

The article explores the multiplicity of contemporary Nepali paintings in terms of Nepali tradition and contemporary experiments. Globalization enhanced the creative flow of ideas and events in the domain of art. The condition of cultural encounter and ambivalence appear in the context of Nepali art as the effects of globalization. We can trace the native images, symbols, icons and forms interacting with western techniques in the artworks. The paintings depict the representation of cultural self and cultural other. Using the techniques of irony and parody, the visual texts respond and accommodate the alien forms. We can see how heterogeneous images, genres and cultures are criss-crossed within the paintings in the context of pervasive semiotic flow. The artworks present the dialogue of vision and textuality, tradition and modernity along with continuity and change making the work open-ended and plural having multiple significances.

Keywords: cultural encounter, ambivalence, appropriation, plurality, alienation, inter-art

Background

A tentative borderline of contemporaneousness of Nepali arts can be considered from post-1950s. Nepali paintings until the mid-twentieth century are referential in religio-realistic mode and also everyday worldly ideas and events. They represent the objects, characters and events of the Hindu and Buddhist mythologies. These referential artworks can be classified in two types: religious paintings and the paintings of worldly objects and events. Religious paintings represent the characters and events of the religious texts. They are narrative, mystical and didactic. These paintings have been

created mainly for religious purpose like worshipping, praying and meditating. The artworks are found in the form of manuscript illumination, paubha, pata and mural. The artists were guided by the religious iconography. Next types of early paintings attempt to represent the object and events of the world in realistic mode. They are found in the form of portrait, landscape and still life. Both types of paintings are referential and representational although there are differences in subject matters and their presentation.

After the mid-twentieth century, we can see changes in Nepali art in terms of contents and forms ((Singh 211). Nepali artists have been exposed to various western art forms and techniques due to the crossflow of people. The western influence can be found intense after

the end of Rana rule in 1950s. Nepali artists directly encountered western art forms because of traveling possibilities and mass communication. The artists have been exposed to various western art techniques like impressionism's fragmented colors, lines, and rough texture, cubism's geometric shapes, expressionism's distorted images and colors, abstractionism's plural forms, surrealism's dreamlike images, abstract expressionism's spontaneity and stress on the process of creation, and installation and performance art's intermingling of painting with other genres of arts like sculpture, photography and literature (Malla 16-17).

Native Contents and Western Art Forms

Western art forms facilitated Nepali artists to break away from referential representations providing the opportunity to express their personal feelings and imagination in the process of creation. Traditional Nepali artworks also influenced the contemporary artists. As a result, referential native artworks and plural western art forms have interacted and coexisted in contemporary Nepali paintings. The artists like Lain Singh Bangdel, Ramandana Joshi, Uttam Nepali, Manuj Babu Mishra, Shashi Shah, Batsa Gopal Vaidya, Krishna Manandhar, Pramila Giri, Shyam Lal Shrestha, Madan Chitrakar, Govinda Dangol, Shashi Kala Tiwari and K K Karmacharya along with other contemporary Nepali artists have assimilated native themes and modern techniques in their paintings. Manuj Babu Mishra points out the changes in the art scenario of Nepal after 1950: The political environment for the development of art gradually turned out gNepali artists appropriated the western techniques with their own native art forms. Sanjeev Uprety

writes about this situation: In some cases, the forms of western modernity were imitated or copied, in some other instances they were rejected as the non-western societies sought to protect the forms of their own indigenous traditions. In addition to these two cultural responses of mimicry and indigenization, a third alternative was also possible. This consisted in a selective appropriation of the forms of both western modernity and native traditions in a production of what might be called hybrid forms in the areas of music, economy, painting and literature. (22)

Contemporary Nepali artists created their own mode of expression exploiting native motifs and western techniques. They used western techniques to respond native subject matters. Contemporary Nepali artists are attracted toward plural western art forms. But they are aware not to lose their own native tradition. Abhi Subedi writes about contemporary Nepali paintings: Modern Nepali paintings do not necessarily depict the event and times of the transitional Nepali society. But they are certainly the expressions of the modern Nepali artists' response to the changing times, the changing values and norms. The imagery is drowned into the abstract form. . . . The colored shapes and the brush strokes give the painting a pattern. The colors themselves, not the images, spring to the eyes of the viewers and influence the mind (124-125). The distorted images, symbols and colors are more significant than mimetic figures. They express the artist's feeling and experiences. The forms and techniques become more important than subject matters. The artworks are subjective expressions of artist themselves rather than objective representations of the



Tej Bahadur Chitrakar. *Portrait study.* 1927. Oil on canvas.
Picture courtesy: Madan Chitrakar, Kathmandu.



Batsa Gopal Vaidya. *Ganesh*. 1989. Oil on canvas.

external world. Some paintings present only colors, lines and abstract shapes. The art form stands for its own sake.

Nepali artists did not copy western forms and techniques blindly but selected them to suit their purpose for their personal expression. They have attempted to carve native identity in contemporary Nepali paintings. Art critic Ram Kumar Pandey remarks: Some of the contemporary artists

are successful in evolving their styles by a selection of symbols and abstract forms. . . As such very few artists influenced by western styles and colours are successful in giving Nepalese touch and identity in their works while most of artists share the same features. (41)

The influence of western art techniques brought confusion in Nepali artists in



Krishna Manandhar. *Mountain series.* 2018. Acrylics on canvas.

the beginning. But gradually, the artists used western techniques appropriately to present native themes. Nepali artists not only used the western art techniques but also "sought the representation of their own culture, society and life " (Shrestha 29).

The artworks are different from the traditional Nepali paintings because

they are subjective and non-referential. They are not objective representations of the culture, myths and objects of the external world. However, they attempted to present their own culture, nature and society in distorted and expressive mode. About contemporary Nepali paintings, Manuj Babu Mishra again remarks: "Contemporary art of Nepal today is



Uttam Nepali. *The vision.* 2003. Acrylics on canvas.

proceeding with various trends. Some artists are akin to reflect national identity in art, whereas others look interested to assimilate some prevailing trends from outside world to give out a unique creation" (22). Images of the Himalayan mountains and culture come together in the canvas. This situation in painting contributes for creating native identity in art. Contemporary Nepali paintings

combine native contents with western art techniques and forms to express their inner emotions and feelings.

Integration of Tradition

The structure of mandala, themes of meditation and concentration, two dimensional colours, decorative patterns and religious iconography, the features of

manuscript illuminations and paubhas, reappear in unconventional and altered forms. Contemporary Nepali artists read anew the tradition of Nepali art forms in their artworks. They learned from the past and they are trying to develop Nepali art with the use of western forms of art. Julia Hegewald comments on contemporary Nepali artists: They consider tradition not as something static, but as a continuously changing and progressing movement, out of which they have emerged, and on the basis of which they are trying to elaborate. They are working on improving and progressively developing their ancient artistic heritage into 21st century, their main criterion for judging whether their art deserves to be called "Nepali" being that it be good. Only good art, influenced by new and foreign ideas but allegedly coming out of their own tradition, as they would have it, is considered to be true modern Nepali art. (100)

On the process of creativity, the influence of the other in the formation of the self-creativity is an important phenomenon. To be more specific, the structure of mandala, Shivalinga as icon, trident as symbol, and decorative pattern of Mithila folk art have been presented with expressionist and surrealist forms. Likewise, some artworks reinterpret the paubha of Nritesvara, the early Nepali art form depicting the union of Shiva and Shakti, Prakriti and Purusa, the male and the female principles, the self and the other, the individual self and the universal spirit. The age-old images revitalized forms.

The artworks also explore the issues of intertextuality presenting the interconnectedness of native visual and verbal texts with western forms.

Exploiting modern techniques, the artists present the images and symbols of manuscript illuminations and paubhas in altered forms. They recreate the traditional mandala in abstract form. Intertextuality in art gives a sense of sharedness and coexistence among heterogeneous cultures.

The visual arts explore the religio-cultural rituals and renew the art forms and viewer's perceptions. Some of the core ideas of Nepali culture can be perceived through the images, icons, and symbols in the artworks. The iconography brings up the discourse of the religious rituals related to the process of meditation. The artists incorporate the icons of gods and goddesses, and images of temples (Bibas, "Nepalese Contemporary" 134). Native culture is intertwined with western techniques through intercultural interaction. Such paintings represent cooperation and cultural harmony. Due to the coexistence of heterogeneous images, the paintings speak of the self and the other.

Inter-art Relationship

Inter-art relation is another important feature contemporary Nepali paintings. Intergeneric art forms integrate not only painting but also sculpture, photography and poetry blurring the boundaries between various art genres (Sharma 4). The artworks break and redraw the boundaries among various art forms to give expression to the creative urge of the artists. They create a pastiche by assembling the heterogeneous art forms. Transgressing the boundary, one genre of art interpenetrates the other. About inter-art activities, Gallery Nine states in its prospectus: "Mixing high and low art forms, merging the traditional

and modern with the postmodern and experimental, ... It aims to enable artists and art lovers to open up to new ideas and new media, cross-pollinating their fields with others."

The artists cross the traditional rules of creating painting. As a result, such paintings are experimental. The creation of inter-art relationship is not the contemporary phenomena but as old as Nepali culture. Cultural rituals in Nepal integrate various art forms like painting, sculpture, music, recitation of mantras, installation and performance art creating inter-art relationships. In such rituals, one can see the painted mandalas on the floor, installation of the images of divinities, prayer and devotional songs accompanied by dance and worshipping. Contemporary Nepali artists share the features of such rituals in different forms with different purposes. Presenting poems and paintings together, contemporary artworks give continuity to the early art traditions of manuscript illuminations despite the difference in the mode of expression. The artists juxtapose words and visual images on the canvas simultaneously. They go beyond defined rules and principals of art.

Exploration of Alienation

Some contemporary Nepali paintings present melancholy and mental horror of contemporary Nepali youths through distorted images and colors. Lack of opportunities has brought complexities in Nepali society. The young people are suffering from mental torture. They lose the hope of bright future and become the victim of alienation. Sunil Sigdel comments on contemporary Nepali paintings: In such divided realities of

economical inefficiencies, religious prejudices and political incompetence, modern human is pressurized in such a way that his/her natural growth is unknowingly obstructed. Therefore, this exposure to mental and physical disorder has made human beings unnatural animals in many ways. And delving deep into the human psyche, the many symbols that we have created for various reasons also bear unnatural forms. ("Bonsai") The issues of fragmentation and degeneration are expressed exploiting western techniques of painting. The artworks create socio-political critical awareness in contemporary time depicting the existing contradictions and ironies in Nepali society. The authorities having responsibility to serve people turn out to be agents of darkness and brutality. The paintings present humor and satire toward political leadership through parody, pastiche and analogy.

Conclusion

Contemporary Nepali paintings go back to their cultural roots depicting the features of various early art forms, myths and rituals. The presented images, icons, symbols, colours, lines, textures and forms in contemporary Nepali paintings create the atmosphere and ambience of Nepali socio-cultural context. The artists respond contemporary complexities of the society using western techniques as tools to explore the native subject matters. The artworks also present the interconnectedness among other art genres and heterogeneous images that represent the cultural self and the cultural. The artworks show the potentiality of multiple interpretations since they are the creative plays of realism and abstractions, and deviations and distortions. Plurality,

ambivalence, appropriation and inter-art are the dynamisms of contemporary Nepali paintings. The art of contemporary Nepal is the story of its culture in metaphoric mode.

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Dr. Yam Prasad Sharma

Dr. Yam Prasad Sharma earned his Ph.D. in English from Tribhuvan University (TU), Kathmandu, Nepal. He has been doing research in contemporary Nepali arts and critiquing the artworks. He has been teaching English, Art History and Aesthetics at Lilitkala Campus, TU. His articles on art have been published in various journals, magazines, exhibition catalogues and newspapers. Dr. Sharma is the author of the books, 'Nepali Painting: A Critical Analysis' and 'Contemporary Nepali Paintings: A Distinct Cluster'. He is also the co-author of the book, 'Alternative Art: Shifting Trends in Aesthetics'.