

# MEMOIR OF LIGHT AND DUST

(THINGS THAT ENABLE ONE TO SEE AND THINGS THAT ONE ACTUALLY SEES)

SAROJ BAJRACHARYA

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## Abstract

*This write up aims to understand the relationship between the ancient and the modern art in relation to the foundation of the unbound state of mind that has been flowing from primitive time in Nepal. State of mind is generally defined as the mental state or mood of a person at a particular time. But in this context, time is an extended and stretched playground for artists where they have sometimes connected and at times disconnected from their primitive native continuity of individual aesthetics and collective social beliefs. And this connection and disconnection from what appears as the ancient state of mind is rather the elementary characteristics of our society that has merged with western propagated modernity in terms of arts as well as science; we have local modern art façade which got fueled around the mid 19th century in Nepal and combusted in the mid 20th century here. When one enters into this creative façade, one can still feel the unbound state of mind that emanates mystic, relaxed and harmonious qualities in some of the artworks by local artists. When these qualities unify with popular styles of expressions in Nepal, we coincide with the Nepaliness in a work of art of recent times.*

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## Introduction

This account focuses on both traditional and the modern developments in art and culture in order to understand the collective contemporary art scene in Nepal. However, more subjective approach is persuaded because the idea of state of mind itself is rather subjective than objective. This approach is undertaken also to pass up unnecessary details and length of the article.

## Literature review

Two segments have been introduced here to project the idea of the state of mind that the Nepali art bears; i.e.- the ancient art and the art in the modern context bridging them with the pre modern advancement in art. The write-up has attempted to focus on and compares between these eras in order to understand the overall art psyche of Nepal.

## **The ancient continuity**

In the 8th century A.D.

Padmasambhava came to Nepal from north-west India. A prince once but he forsook his position in search of surpassing the limited concept of liberation of any kind; to truly be free. The predecessor of Vajrayana, a tantric Buddhism to attain Nirwan, the seeker meditated in various parts of Nepal before journeying Tibet. This sacred ground indeed reserves immense spiritual magnetism. Many a sages and wise have found unconditional solace here. Various religious doctrines and rituals were initiated in this land. Indeed Nepal was a land to practice discipline, understand rational social system, and experience individual growth as well as cultivate collective awareness. Sages in the likes of Gautam Buddha, Machhendranath, Gorakhnath and Nagarjun made this land their sacred haven to inhale internal peace and exhale compassion.

Unparallel for its spiritual vibes, this land was equally prominent for its trade route, as few centuries ago Nepal was the connecting route for trade between India and China. This surely helped both the neighboring countries to prosper.

Arguably there are two significant components that refine the quality of a nation; firstly the more evident one is the material prosperity which is generally measured by economical affluence and its circulation, and

secondly which is rather hidden is the spiritual abundance that can be realized by experiencing peace and compassion in that territory. Both these material and spiritual qualities were the salient features of Nepal. And both these exceptional qualities that brought human civilization to its full bloom then were all manifested through the arts here. Therefore, collective state of mind of the inhabitants here was shaped by these two qualities. However, the very definition of art back then was much different than now. Avertment religious values were at its prime and societies were more communal towards religion; making art a tool for religion and a device for ritualistic objectives. Henceforth, the concept of god was significant than any human emotions or values. This particular characteristic of social structure forbade artists to have claim over their artworks, simply because they were creating images of gods and deities and it was considered unethical or even a sin to sign or engrave human name on god. Because of this reason artists of the ancient era remains unsung. Not that they were disrespected, rather the social conditions were different and religiously collective than now.

In all this network of religion, art and social beliefs, Araniko in the 12th century made a quest to launch the art of Nepal to the neighboring countries. He was summoned to Tibet to create architectural monuments. Art brings



White stupa at Miaoying Temple, Beijing. Constructed by order of Kublai Khan under the supervision of Nepali architect Araniko, 1271.

significant incidents that occur in various time and space into a singular plane so that humans can envision newer possibilities of their own evolution as well as the growth of their surroundings. It would not be an exaggeration to state here that an art created with positive intention and a clear vision makes everything relative with everything else. Therefore, art begins from individual abstraction, proceeds towards the physical collective then merges with the unified conscious abstraction again. In order for the art to mature, humans themselves have to mature. And in Nepal till the Malla monarchical system, art gained such heights that it had subtly begun to influence even

religion which was a prime human point of saturation then. In many cases, it was difficult to differentiate art from religion. This happened because rulers as well as the citizens knew the influence of art.

Ancient art here were not only based on religious beliefs or the traditional values and visuals. The viewers did not only communicated with these attributions; rather at the same time such art also arouse a quality towards perceiving life, brought confidence and the concentration that channeled their thought process to flow in certain harmonious pattern allowing the viewers to express and shape their behavior in certain ways. From such situations was the state of mind structured of the Nepali people.

From Kirants to Thakuri, Lichhavi and the Mallas art was a tool for communal connectedness. It was used to manifest religion, the one component that sought out solidarity amongst the civilians. That is what the leaders needed- connected collectivity to maintain their stature. However, whatever the reasons behind their promotion of arts, the harmonious state of mind surely flew unbound through it. Art manifested the revival of prosperity.

### **The begetting of the modern**

After the descent of medieval era and the ending of the Malla regime, Shah dynasty unified and ruled Nepal. Until the Malla regime, art

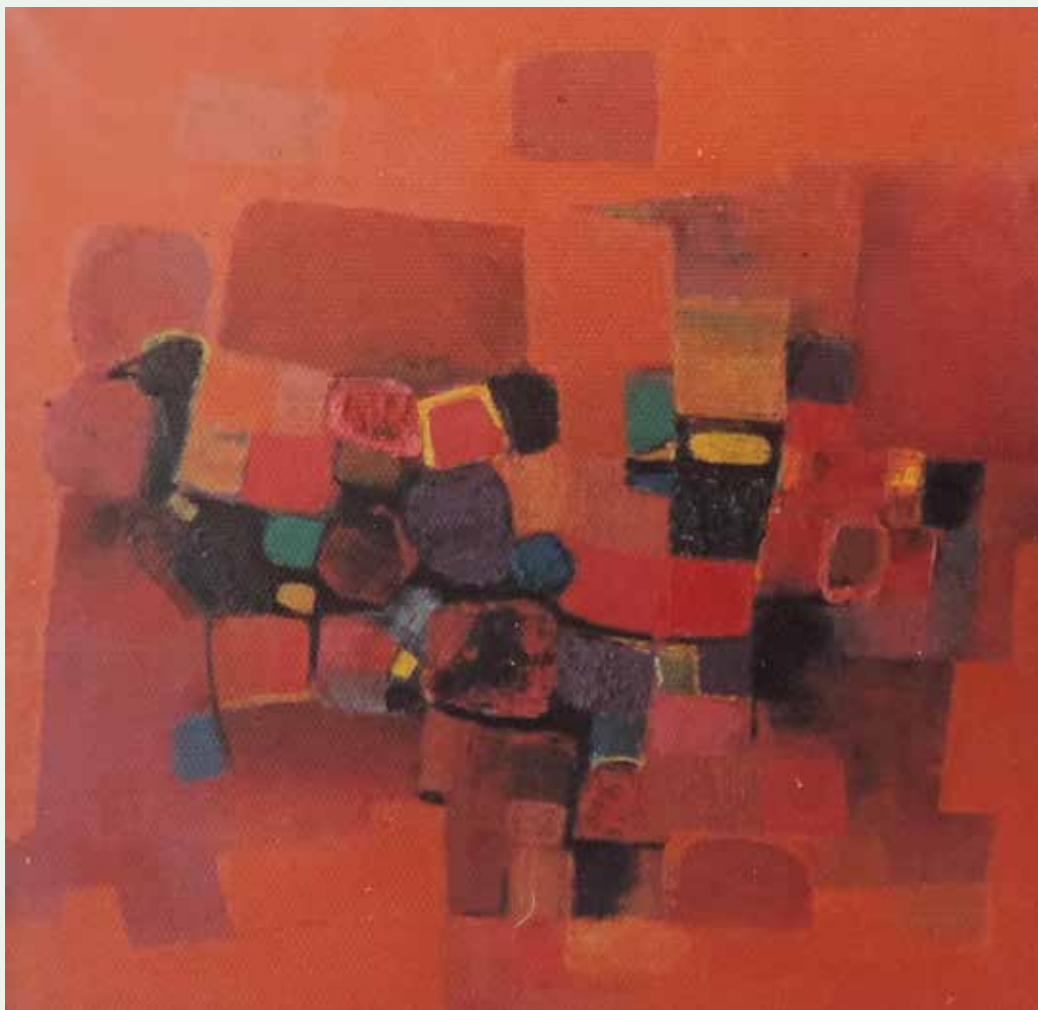
was one of the primary necessities of the rulers because the religious cultural association of the people was evidently very dominant. And in order to express this association, the rulers created magnificent arts in forms of *pawua* which is a traditional painting, sculptures of deities and kings and architectural monuments like temples, and palaces. However, with the beginning of the Shah regime, the kings began focusing more on politics and diplomacy and less on arts and culture. Then the Rana takeover of the kingdom of Nepal in the mid 19th century changed the direction of arts here. The idea of popular modernism was not carefully observed and analyzed while they are initially being used here. The introduction of the western technique and subjects in art created a shock to the artists and the audiences alike.

It was a time when the British had colonized this side of the subcontinent and even though Nepal was not colonized, the Rana aristocrats were always in a pursuit to have positive terms with the British. For this reason they began adapting to British ways of arts and etiquettes. This is when more western styles portraits and figures in paintings began to appear which were done by local and western artists. And in all this whirlpool of happenings, the local art of the region gradually began to mislay its mark. However, individual artists were practicing such art but the state was more focused on the



**Dirgha Man Chitrakar**, *A Life Size Portrait of Jung Bahadur Rana*, 1936. Oil on canvas. National Museum, Chhauni, Kathmandu.

newly introduced art from the west to assert their stature and relevancy in the global community. All this had very less to do with the tranquil state of mind that art of this side bore. Even though the introduction of western art brought immense possibilities, in a way the unbound creative state of mind was sadly breached. The continual harmonious flow was broken. After the Rana authority was dethroned in the mid 20th century, Nepal entered into a democratic political phase. Until this time the harmony of way of thinking has subtly altered. In the later phases of the 20th century some considerable



**Krishna Manandhar**, *Composition*, 1975. Oil on canvas.

steps were taken to promote the modern art by the government, but negligible precaution was carried out to restore the harmony and the source that our ancient art carried. However, not merely the visuals and the skills to execute the traditional art is suggested here nor just the religious content it bore; rather how the work of art and its interactive quality brought

about transformation on the collective psyche is of grave importance. That is the primary source that cultivated harmony in minds of the inhabitants.

### **Conclusion and a little more**

State of mind is very important in order for the artist to get in tuned with nature. This comes with immense preparation and time

tested experiences. From unrecorded history to the recorded ancient phases of Nepal, the arts here have directed civilization into newer level of understandings. Navigated by religion, the ultimate message in art was harmony and connectedness with the surroundings.

The pre modern art here was the British influenced art. Subsequently, after the abolition of the Rana supremacy during the Shah regime, Nepali art entered into modern era which was much influenced by modern art of India, particularly of the neo tantric movement. Most of the conceptual qualities of ancient art have had been lost up until now. However, the artists of the initial modern art phase did surely keep the Nepaliness alive via various motifs they were incorporating in their works; however, bringing back the harmonious state of mind that persisted from thousands years were indeed a challenge for the first generations of artists here. Artists in the likes of Shahi Bikram Shah, Uttam Nepali, late Manujbabu Mishra, late Ramananda Joshi, Batsa Gopal Vaidya to name a few did bring back the lost glory. But since publications, documentations and interactions on art are negligible, these affluent works is yet to be connected with the timeless state of mind of Nepal.

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## Saroj Bajracharya

*Saroj Bajracharya is an artist, a writer and a curator. He has been active in art for more than two decades. He has been actively involved in many facets of art that include painting, writing, teaching, curating, organizing and coordinating art events and exhibitions.*

*Various solo exhibitions, group shows and two books titled **Future of History** and **A Concise Introduction to Nepali Modern Sculpture** are to his credit.*