



NEPALI ART: THOUGHTS & MUSINGS

Author: Madan Chitrakar
Country: Nepal
Language: English
Genre: Painting
Publisher: Sirjana College of Fine Arts
Publication date: March 2021
Media type: Print
Pages: 252
Illustrations: 193
ISBN: 978-9937-0-8808-4

***Nepali Art: Thoughts & Musings* by Madan Chitrakar**

Kathmandu: Sirjana College of Fine Arts. (2021). pp. 252, illustrations 193.

ISBN: 978-9937-0-8808-4.

Reviewed by Yam Prasad Sharma, PhD

Nepali Art: Thoughts & Musings by Madan Chitrakar throws light on the aesthetic dimensions of Nepali arts. It covers traditional and modern Nepali arts including painting, sculpture and architecture. These artworks are based on the myths and native cultural roots. Contemporary works use modern techniques, yet they are attached to context. The author interprets the artworks with new perspective and broadens the history of Nepali art.

The creative and critical discourses on art provide the picture of artists, people, culture, politics and history of Nepal. Despite the inclusion of diverse subject matters, all the articles and essays are all about Nepali art. Subjective narratives in lucid language make the work worth reading. Qualitative research method has been used to analyze the text since the artworks and texts can be interpreted in multiple ways.

Renowned artist, art writer, researcher scholar, art historian and art educator

of Nepal, Madan Chitrakar is the son of Tej Bahadur Chitrakar and Mana Kesari Chitrakar. Tej Bahadur Chitrakar was a renowned modern Nepali artist who became a source of inspiration for the author. He studied Applied Art at Sir J.J. Institute of Fine Arts, Mumbai. He also completed his Masters in Arts (MA) in Ancient History and Culture from Tribhuvan University. He also studied Graphic Communications at The Hague, the Netherlands. He is a visiting Professor at School of Arts, Center for Art and Design, Kathmandu University. He also taught Graphic Communications at Lalitkala Campus, Tribhuvan University. At present, Chitrakar is the Principal of Sirjana College of Fine Arts.

Chitrakar has held six solo exhibitions of his paintings. His first watercolor painting exhibition was held in 1977.

His paintings have a blend of modernity and tradition. He redefines art emphasizing the proper communication between the artist and the beholder to

ensure an immediate and pure response. His compositions are substantial in terms of an impression on a beholder. He has rejected the convention, experimented with new techniques and made his compositions as simplified as geometry and mathematics (Shah 2021).

He is the author of several books including *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar: Icon of a Transition* (2004), *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany* (2012), *Nepali Painting through the Ages* (2017), and *Nepali Art: Thoughts & Musings* (2021). About a hundred research articles by the author have been published in journals, magazines and newspapers. His critical essays on art depict his profound knowledge of the history of Nepali art and aesthetics. In his verbal expressions, he articulates his significant contents in lucid language.

Nepali Art: Thoughts & Musings includes diverse subject matters including traditional paintings, development of contemporary paintings and modern art techniques in relation to Nepali art. The title itself suggests that the essays are meditative and the author's genuine responses in relation to the creative works.

The contents include such topics: "Paubha Art: Pride of Newars", "Paubha Painting: A Tradition through the Ages", "Mural Art has Ancient roots in Nepal", "Sugauli Treaty & Nepali Art", "Raga-Malas: A Rare Phenomenon", "Chandeswori Bhairava: An Iconic Mural from Banepa", "Gorkha Durbar: A Forgotten Masterpiece", "Modern

Paubhas: Contemporising an Ancient Tradition", "Raj Man Singh Chitrakar", "Bhaju Man Chitrakar", "Krishna Man Chitrakar", "Purna Man Chitrakar", "Dirgha Man Chitrakar", "Ananda Muni Shakya", "Prints as Works of Art", "Celebrating Colors", "The Changing Face of Nepali Walls", "Visuals from Buddha's Life", "Water Colors on the Rise again", "The Dividing Lines", "Minimalism: A Rare Presence in Nepali Art", "Jan Vermeer", "The Spirit of Nepali Painting" and "Nepali Art: Now". The themes look diverse but all of them are connected to Nepali art in one way or other. The variable 'Nepali art' is the key to organize the book as an invisible thread keeps the tapestry intact.

Despite the diversity of contents and themes, all the issues address Nepali art, and "the essays basically are personal viewpoints or interpretations, but have sought best to delve deeper, with due references" (p. 9). His essays explore multiple genres of art like architecture, sculpture and painting. In other words, it is an overview of Nepali art.

The book is interesting and valuable since it has been written by the artist himself not the theoretical pundits. It does not only discuss the theories, themes and subject matters but also focuses on formal features and technical aspects used by the artists. He links arts to the creative process of the artist. The awareness of artist's experience, techniques and media contributes for rich aesthetic experience and reliable significances.

Chitrakar (2021: 11) himself expresses his view: "When we talk about a work of art, it is about an idiom essentially different; and usually not much familiar to a theoretical pundit. The art of painting and sculpture stand as the glaring examples; which have entirely different tools and the creative language. To comment on it, therefore, one must adhere to a template – also with discussions on the related skills, with specific academic references. Only then, a judicious observation can be expected: and is best made."

"Moreover, credibility is best achieved when discussions, especially on historic shifts and nuances in visual art, are made by a writer – with strong familiarity with the overall native roots and also, being a keen observer of the changing times and the trends, for a reasonable length of time. That is, in addition to theoretical – analytical competence, broad factual information remains equally vital. In absence, for sure, there's always a risk of disinformation – a naïve distorted or even a biased view."

"It mostly happens, when we, for our own reasons, take pride and feel privileged – to prefer or invite outsiders to judge on us – our art or the heritage. Early observations made on Nepal and the Nepali society, even by writers of repute like Sylvain Lévi, are not so kind. Such observations continue to remind us that local efforts are needed: and do remain important. And it explains my continual and humble efforts, to be in these lines."

The author opines that native writers have deeper understanding of their art and culture.

The book has the balance of texts and visuals. The author has used artworks to illustrate the issues, style and techniques. The reading experience renews our perception due to the diverse visuals and texts. The works have been explained, analyzed, interpreted and critiqued to support the statements on creations. The leading ideas of the essays have been reinforced linking them with related images, symbols, shapes, colors and patterns. Despite the diversity, the ideas have been coherently connected to each other making an organic unity. The rhetoric of the writer makes the verbal compositions convincing and persuasive. There lie strong arguments under the surface of lucid language. Going through the pages of this work provides not only historical and cultural information but also aesthetic pleasure. The visual and verbal exploration of the cultural archetypes, icons and images taps our collective unconscious leading us toward our roots.

The author brings mythical narratives through the visual composition. The artwork is not only aesthetic object but also a key for the broader cultural context. The article, "Lord Ganesha: A Timeless Presence in Nepali Art" (pp.19-20) states: "Lord Ganesha is an archetypical divine brahmacharin – that is a celestial bachelor. And accordingly, in many of the shrines and temples Ganesha is usually presented or painted single or without a spouse.

But surprising it may sound, a holy text, Matsya Purana describes Ganesha as the owner of *riddi* (success and prosperity) and *buddhi* (intelligence and wisdom). In Siva Purana, *buddhi* is replaced with *siddhi* – meaning by almost the same as earlier. And these heavenly attributes are visually manifested with female companions. In Nepali art too, in some stone sculptures, the god is seen with either of the two companions. The popular shrine of Siddhi Ganesha located in the corner of Rani Pokhari is an exquisite example of this belief." The author further describes a painting related to Ganesha: "He has two beautiful damsels seated in his either side of laps, the rest of the ladies are shown trying their best to woo or please him. This kind of depiction of Ganesha is absolutely rare" (p.20). The work presents magical elements.

The book explores various types and genres of art like, sculpture, architecture, photography, paubha, thanka, mandala and murals. In the article "Paubha Art – The Pride of Newars", The author (p.30) points out the features of Paubha: "Paubha as an art, as stated in earlier lines, has always been created as a collective expression of religions – Hinduism and Buddhism. In other words, it never meant to be an expression of individual artists then. So Paubha a visual diagram is and has always been guided by related sacred texts – known as iconographical descriptions from either of Buddhist or Hindu/ Brahmanical pantheons. A related iconographical description provides the details like the complexion (*Varna*), attributes,

a vehicle or mount (*Vāhana*) or the hand gestures (*Mudrā*) of a particular deity to be given a visual look. An artist provides a visual form as per the descriptions. Since the tradition had had a long history, it was only natural that the successive generations of artists succeeded to develop a set style or a form to any particular deity – giving rise a distinct school. However the artists from the different generations were found to take liberty in the depiction of peripheral motifs and additions. And it helped to locate the changing time and taste of each generation" (p.30). Despite existence of certain iconography, individual artists have added something new in the composition in contemporary times.

The author has traced the roots of Nepali art from the existing visual. In the article "Mural Art has Ancient Roots in Nepal," he Chitrakar (2021, p65) states: "'Murals' as a work of serious art too had appeared long ago and had found deep roots in the history of Nepali painting: and had long remained an integral part of the central stream of painting since then. And unlike today, the driving spirit and the motives to paint in wall – the murals or frescoes was to illustrate the religious beliefs – or to serve as constant reminders of the faiths. Surprising it may seem today, the importance of 'Murals' as an art then, remained so vital not only in the making of the history of art but also has remained equally instrumental in a social evolution – creation of a caste artists 'Chitrakars' in the medieval Nepal" (p.65). In ancient times, murals have both aesthetic and didactic purposes.

The article "Sugauli Treaty and Nepali Art: Opening of New Avenues" explores the issue how Nepali artists began to practice western realistic techniques in Nepal. Chitrakar (2021, pp. 76-77) writes: "And what has remained amazing is that all the drawings were made based on or under the direct supervision of a European eye or Brian Hodgson himself; to follow the natural forms with full three dimensional effects. As a result, the works revealed the earliest notion of perspectives, light and shade and of course, a sense of proportion in the annals of Nepali Art history. It was a phenomenal beginning not intended to achieve then. Added to it is an earliest of appearance of watercolor in these pioneering sketches as a medium in the annals of art here. It is hard to conceive today how complex scenes were created with full sense of perspective and proportion at that early stage. The credit undeniably leads us to the visionary thoughts and guidance of Brian Hodgson" (pp.76-77). This brought remarkable changes in the domain of Nepali painting.

The author presents the relationship of music and painting in the article "Raga-Malas: A Rare Phenomenon in Nepali Painting". Chitrakar (2021, pp. 84-85) states: "Raga-Malas is a combination – art of music with the art of painting. Highly inspired by Vaishanava thoughts, the visuals, in fact, is the pictorial depiction of divinities from – usually Lord Krishna and Radha along with other divinities, primarily to celebrate various moods of nature, like spring or a rainy season. And each visual

is created or associated with a melody or Raga – attributed to particular season.

A visual or an image thus, is to represent a chosen melody – or a Raga. That is, in essence, each picture is a visual interpretation of a chosen melody or a Raga. As for example, if there's a Figure walking in a rain, it represents 'Mallaar' – a melody for a rainy season. Put together, the entire collection is then, described as a Raga-Mala or a garland of melodies. In Indian tradition, it's believed there are forty-two allied melodies" (pp.84.85). Music is common element in both visual and verbal arts.

In the article "Chandeswori Bhairav: An Iconic Mural from Banepa", the author digs out the interesting myth under the visual surface of the mural. The author reveals: "In Hindu beliefs, a Bhairav is regarded as the wrathful manifestation of Lord Shiva, one of the three primary deities in the belief. As according to the beliefs here, Bhairav has five million sub-manifestations: and this Bhairav is considered only one of the many Bhairavs protecting various corners of Nepal.

But interestingly, the temple where the mural of Bhairav is painted is dedicated to a mother Goddess – Chandeswori, not to the Lord. Before understanding why not the Lord, it is desirable to know first, little about the well-known cult of 'Eight Great Mothers or the cult of 'Astamatrika'. The beliefs associated with the cult have that all the Mother Goddesses are the wrathful manifestations of Goddess Parvati, the

eternal spouse of Lord Shiva himself, why he is here – in the mural. Here, he is more as the protector of his spouse – always in guard and vigilant outside her abode – the temple. And it also explains why he is known as Chandeswor Bhairav or the Lord of Chandi, his spouse" (pp.91-92). The painting has cultural and mythical roots.

In the article "Gorkha Durbar: A Forgotten Masterpiece" presents the attitude of Nepal scholars toward particular artworks. The author (2021, pp.97-98) points out: "The general habit of Nepali intelligentsia to perceive and treat differently – any art associated with the recent past – the Ranas and the Shah rules, in particular. This is regardless of inherent importance in broader cultural narratives of Nepali Art. No wonder, for the same reasons 'Gorkha Durbar' also may have been overlooked or dismissed, in purpose. Secondly, there's also a known habit of scholars here, to confine within the works of art found abroad – in the museums or in the prints: than to self-explore on locally found works. Instances of this kind are found galore. And no less important is the issue of the local art-intelligentsia whose ability to read, discern and analyze works of art critically; which for sure, has had always remained in question" (pp.97-98). The author points out such questionable condition in the domain of Nepali art but there seem to be similar situation in education, administration and politics as well.

The article "Modern Paubhas: Contemporizing an Ancient Tradition"

presents the development and innovations in Nepali paubha paintings. The author explains: "Their choice to express in 'Religious or Traditional' subject is entirely due to their profound love of the subject. What resulted is a marvelous combination of Western understanding of human body – expressed and embellished with exotic religious decorative elements" (pp.114-15). Use of light and shade to create three dimensional image has added new aspects in the traditional painting.

The author argues that history is not the fixed document but rewritten again and again revealing the new dimensions. In the article "Raj Man Singh Chitrakar", the author mentions: "History has long taught us that the narratives of the past must remain open-ended, for there always exists a possibility of new findings or arrival of new revelations giving strange and uneasy twists to earlier notion or established assertions. There have been numerous instances when established history had to be rewritten in place of well-established and hitherto unchallenged texts. Chances of occurrences of such lapses in softer human pursuits like art, literature or music are more likely and real, for they are often being more prone to being over-shadowed by more powerful issues like intrigues of consequential proportions, politics or war. Precisely because of such reasons we are yet to see a credible and comprehensive history of Nepali Art with an unbroken chain of sequences" (p. 117). Things are explored from new perspectives and new facts are found creating a new narrative.

In the article "Celebrating Colors: Artists do the Most and the Best", the author presents the importance and significance of colors in life and art. He writes: "In a Hindu society, a vermilion red essentially connotes a symbol of warmth, good luck and prosperity. Precisely so, immediately after the marriage, a married Hindu with a very little exception woman wears red dot or a Bindu on her forehead. Similarly, application of red or saffron powder in the parting of hairs over the frontal head also marks a woman as married. And as a bridal wear, women unfailingly only wear red sari and the rest of entire dress in red as a mark of good luck or Saubhagya" (p.128). He has explored the color in terms of its effects and symbolism in detail.

The article "Nepali Art – Now: Towards the Roots" argues that Nepali art has been connected to its native roots despite the use of modern techniques and media. The author concludes: "All the remarks made above on the general trend of Nepali art, present only a sample study. In fact, the general trend is unmistakably leading towards the native roots. There should be no second doubt on it. The powerful presence of native roots thus, can hardly be ignored; and by no means, be underestimated" (p. 267). Nepali arts of present time reintegrate the native contents in modern forms.

Conclusion

Madan Chitrakar's *Nepali Art: Thoughts & Musings* presents a mosaic of Nepali art including the research articles on Nepali paintings, sculptures and architecture. He has traced the native

cultural roots and myths in the artworks including the connection of tradition and modernity. Thematic undercurrents along with stylistic innovation have been presented in flowing language of the veteran art writer and critic. The work points out the different dimensions of Nepali aesthetics. The essays are representative of certain genres, forms and issues. To have the view of holistic picture of Nepal art, more explorations in the uncovered issues are expected from the author.

Reference

- Chitrakar, M. (2021). *Nepali Art: Thoughts and Musings*. Kathmandu: Sirjana College of Fine Arts.
- Chitrakar, M. (2017). *Nepali Painting: Through the Ages*. Kathmandu. Patan Museum.
- Chitrakar, M. (2012). *Nepali Art: Issues Miscellany*. Kathmandu. Teba-Chi (TBC) Studies Centre.
- Chitrakar, M. (2004). *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar: Icon of a Transition*. Kathmandu: Teba-Chi (TBC) Studies Centre.
- Shah, K.P. (2021). *Nepali Abstract Paintings: A Development Analysis*. Kathmandu: Department of Painting, Nepal Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA).
- Sharma, Y. P. (2021). *Socio-political Dynamics of Nepali Paintings*. Kathmandu: Department of Painting, Nepal Academy of Fine Arts.
- Shrestha, B. (2002). *Symphony of Colors*.
- Shrestha, M. M. (2021). "Foreword". *Nepali art: Thoughts & Musings*. Kathmandu: Sirjana College of Fine Arts.
- Shrestha, S. (2017). *Madan Chitrakar's Arduous Journey*. <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/mycity/news/madan-chitrakars-arduous-journey>

www.eartsnepal.com