



# Modes and Methods of Character Creation in Nepali Paintings

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## Abstract

*Character creation is probably the most important mode of paintings by artists and the most avowed practice and recognised ontology of the anthropomorphic predominance in art anywhere in the world. This phenomenon can be productively discussed in the context of the art traditions. Discussions about character creation in paintings sound tautological but such practices and styles of the painters of any culture and tradition can be a heuristically productive and viable topic. Though the subject is very broad, we can find some interesting creative developments by studying the traditions of art in any society and culture. The subject can encompass broader geo-cultural spheres like Eastern and Western art, and more specific topics like character creation in Nepali paintings—a study of tradition and development. In this article I will focus on this very aspect of Nepali paintings, not sculpture, by bringing my own experience of appreciating, visualising and theorising the human motif primarily body and secondarily features related to that. Though I briefly allude to some historical developments I will focus more on the later developments especially from the time when pedagogy in art started in earnest from the early decades of the twentieth century. The basis of the survey is my own understanding of the subject. I have evoked briefly my own perception of the subject as written in my art reviews and articles.*

**Keywords:** character creation, Chitrakars, artists' education, Nepali modernism

## **Background of the tradition**

Character creation in paintings is a very broad subject. There are long traditions of character creation in the paintings of both the East and the West. A massive body of literature exists for study in that area. The purpose of this short article is to put some visceral impressions and thoughts about the evolution of character creation in Nepali arts. I will examine this phenomenon by drawing some allusions from the previous studies and also from my own previous articles mostly published in magazines and reviews over the years. In other words, this is a retrospective writing. There are two reasons for focussing on my own articles for that. First, I have focussed mostly on the character creation or the anthropomorphic forms executed by painters from the start of the last century to the present. Second, I have chosen to focus on the evolution of the character creation in Nepali paintings at different times over the centuries. Such creations cover different historical and artistic contexts. But because of constraint on space and time, only a brief allusion to the history of the creation of the humans is made in this study. Before writing about experiences and observations about the human form and the element of narration, I would like to allude to the use of the human forms in Nepali paintings of the past. The creation of characters in paintings is linked to the study of the tradition of character creation in the Indic and European paintings. The cross-cultural influence of human forms in paintings is a favourite subject on the study of art.

The history of human character creation in Nepali art goes back to earlier centuries. Some murals and paintings of the past show some developments and established styles in the creation of human forms in paintings. One important feature of the paintings of that period in this region is the creation of divine forms. An admixture of human and divine forms is the principal feature of paintings. Das Gupta (1968: 14-15) in one of the early attempts to study Nepali paintings of the traditional order made some important observations. He traced the illustrated manuscripts from Eastern India from the tenth century. The Nepali paintings on the folios and the wooden covers of manuscripts are discussed in his book. Very significantly he gives a list of about twenty sources to find the Nepali paintings. He has correctly traced the early works of Newar artists of the Kathmandu valley known in the parlance of cultural history as Nepal Mandala. He regards the painting as the most important form of art because, he rightly says, this genre shows fusion more clearly than any other forms of art. Though his analysis mixes certain categories, he has done commendable work especially in terms of trying to find out the human forms out of the plethora of both the religious and cultural formations. Pratapaditya Pal (1985) interprets Nepali paintings and sculptures that are used as important resources in the field of Nepali art studies, including a catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Collection that has distinctly identifies paintings, drawings and sculpture, and has meticulously interprets them.

Madan Chitrakar (2017) meticulously brings out the features of the Chitrakars' tradition and heritage of paintings. In Foreword of his book Sangeeta Thapa appreciates Madan Chitrakar's overall treatment of the subject. She also highlights inclusion of "the work of Chitakar artist, Rajman Singh Chitrakar (1797-1865) who was guided by Brian Houghton Hodgson (1833), British resident and pioneer ethnologist, naturalist and artist, to make drawings and paintings". She rightly considers Rajman Chitrakar's oeuvre as the "first modern works by a Nepali artist as these works are a departure from prevailing traditional forms." The other important feature of Madan Chitrakar's work is his insightful study of the phenomenon of the transfer of the features of the deities into human forms. He gives the examples of *Paubha*, *Bilam Pau* scrolls and other forms. He says the paintings appeared since the 11th century in their divergent forms. He says, "The spectrum remained so wide and divergent, it ranged from: hanging scrolls to paintings on cloth and paper; murals on the walls of temples, viharas and palaces to festival masks and painted earthen pots used in the ritual art." He goes to say that these paintings exist in the Kathmandu valley, and they all have religious value. But the paintings show a very subtle tension between the encompassing and dominating divine imagery and the human figurality crying for recognition. Though this feature may not be 'secular' in the proper sense of the term, it shows a humanistic thrust through the expressive depiction of the forms. This aspect appears to be



**Raj Man Singh, Owl**, c. 1824-25, Watercolor on paper, National History Museum, London.

overlooked by art connoisseurs and critics. The evolution of the human form also means the evolution of human expressions. Madan Chitrakar's description introduces some very necessary information and arguments. The coloured plates of the selected paintings show, in some more powerfully than in the others, the features of human characters that remain embedded in the divine motifs. But the human cry for recognition is there.

The above phenomenon of establishing contact zone between the divine and the human is discussed, albeit not clearly, by

such artists as the famous Amar Chitrakar in his book (2034 B.S.) and the well-known painter and art historian Lainsingh Bangdel in his book (2034 B.S.). It is a well-known fact that images of deities and, in some cases, human characters feature in the early paintings made on different mediums. The anthropomorphic forms appear on the murals as well as on the scrolls and text illustrations. In the later times the need to make human portraits and figures was considered to be a very important priority of paintings in Nepal especially in the Nepal Mandala. There are some other important studies of the Nepali paintings of the genre and types discussed above by other scholars. Because of space I have not included them in this brief survey. Similarly, I am excluding the sphere of sculptures that provide powerful examples of the creation of human forms alongside those of the deities or separately. The sculptors appear to have been making human forms very effectively and successfully for a long time. In itself this is a very fascinating subject. My interpretation of the evolution of characters, narrative features and experimentations in Nepali paintings follows.

Art historians' treatment of the subject has a common pattern. They naturally and productively present the historical accounts of the creation and usage of the art traditions. But some productive discussions are made about the knowledge and politics of the fusion of the art forms with the norms of aesthetics and the politics of the time. The fusion

of different categories of cognition in traditional Nepali art evokes discussions of political nature because the art forms are used to celebrate the power of the human and divine authorities. The people treat both with the same degree of veneration. But what I would like to stress here is that the paintings are not entirely dominated by the divine or the religious motifs; they also project the power of human expression. Vid Simoniti (2021: 559) regards the ancient struggle between philosophy and the arts as competing modes of persuasion. We can see such competing modes of persuasion in the traditional Nepali art. The existence of such forms in Nepal Mandala is phenomenal. Though many forms of the cultural resources are not relevant to the study of art, the pervasiveness and variety are united by the competing modes of persuasion. Kamal Prakash Malla (2015:484) sums up the nature, size and complexity of the heritage of the Nepal Mandala in a visceral manner:

During the last three decades, between 1979-2009, I studied medieval Newari texts, literary, historical and epigraphic, edited/ translated some, compiled words from these, coordinated a major lexicon-cum-dictionary project comprising a database of nearly 56,000 older words. I find some of the documents compiled here read like a jigsaw puzzle.

We should take into account the various elements that go into the making of the fusion of art forms in the Kathmandu

valley. Malla's experience gives idiom to that very phenomenon.

There are many sources that can be mentioned in relation to the study of the fusion of divine and human forms in early Nepali paintings. Some are mentioned above. Works of one American scholar named Mary Shepherd Slusser are known among the researchers of Nepali art published in two volumes under the rubric Nepal Mandala. (1982, 1998). But in another collection of her papers entitled Art and Culture of Nepal "with contributions by Gautama V. Vajracharya and Manuela Fuller" (2005) Slusser has carefully listed with descriptions the paintings from the American, European and Nepali collections. These paintings show human and divine rage that occurs whenever they meet in art forms. The artist dramatizes such rage in the human position that occurs in relation to the divine characters.

I would like to close this part of the discussion with the above allusions and observations. In the following section I want to present how Nepali paintings covered various modes methods of character creation. As stated earlier, I have mainly used my perceptions presented in selected reviews and articles.

### **Nepali paintings in reviews and reflections**

A significant shift happened in Nepali paintings. I consider art education outside Nepal as the most important mode of

change in Nepali paintings. I would like to mention the training of Chandraman Singh Maskey and Tejbahadur Chitrakar in Calcutta as the first principal mode of transformation in Nepali art. Their training brought Western techniques in figurative and space paintings. The glorious heritage of paintings maintained by the Chitrakars entered a new dimension. Madan Chitrakar (2017) has discussed with coloured plates the works and achievements of the Chitrakars from Bhajuman to those of the later times who had not received Western education available in India but they had got some access to the techniques and the use of colour and figurality. I do not want to discuss that part of the story here. I would only like to cite some lines about the art apprenticeship of Chandraman Singh Maskey (1900-1984) and Tej Bahadur Chitrakar (1898-1971) in Calcutta in the second decade of the twentieth-century as an important beginning of the era of modern paintings. Their apprenticeship gave Nepali painters the first ever exposure to the Western techniques, modes and methods of art. I have put that as follows:

The example of these two artists who were sent to study paintings or art to Calcutta at the Government College in the same year 1918 has been overlooked by art critics in their discussions about modernism in Nepali paintings. That is the reason why I have introduced them in the discussions about modern art in order to understand the genesis of Nepali modernism in paintings as in



**Uttam Nepali**, *Eyesight*, 2003, Acrylics on canvas, 61 cm x 61 cm.

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literature by tracing down the history of exposure to the art education and literature through print capitalism and experiment with ideas and techniques at various times. (Subedi 2021:13).

As I have already written about the features of the paintings of these two artists in the cited article, I would

only like to stress that their training in Calcutta coincided with the important art movements in terms of pedagogy, ideology and technique.

I have written about the impact of art education on Nepali art, especially paintings. By giving examples of only a few artists who received art education

outside Nepal, mainly India, France and Britain, I have concluded that such pedagogy changed the nature of Nepali paintings. The number of the artists who got art education outside is far larger than I have covered in the article. In Nepal, art education played a very important part in changing the very nature of Nepali paintings. If we look at the works and engagements of the artists trained in India and Europe, we can see the impact of their education. In conclusion, I have said that Nepali artists' education in India and Europe produced many talented, famous and very original artists. Such trainings have also introduced academic studies. Today, Nepali universities have Faculties of higher education in art. But the history of training outside Nepal shows how those who have opened Faculties of art in Nepal did benefit from art education. Such is the creative use of art education (Subedi 2017a: 82). Over two dozen painters, sculptors and intaglio artists received art education in different art schools in the Indic region, Europe and other countries. Ecole des Beaux Arts, J.J. School of Arts, Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Dhaka University, Faculty of Fine Arts of M.S. University of Baroda, Visva Bharati, Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan, art college in Australia are some of the institutions that have produced Nepali art graduates.

Character creation in Nepali paintings can be broadly categorised under the famous rubrics – traditional paintings as discussed above, fine and abstract arts. The choice of motif in the first phase was a fusion of divine and human figurality.

Deities are painted in human shapes. But the important point to consider in such studies is the human element, the conditions of emotion, ecstasy and rage. The painters were mainly portraitists. But with the art education character creation in Nepali paintings was transformed. But as a literary writer and poet I have always maintained that some Nepali painters if not all tried to find common voices among the artists of other mediums. They opened out to the poets and sought to discover common experiences of character creation. I have written about the shared canons and contexts of Nepali painters and poets (Subedi 2092). Similarly, I have written an article by directly citing the poetic creation of painters and their perceptions about characters under the heading "Nepali paintings and poetry: reviews and reflections". I have described the strong modern painter Uttam Nepali's experiment of achieving a fusion of poetry and painting in these words:

Uttam Nepali made his first major attempt to bring painting and poetry together in an exhibition of his abstract paintings at NAFA in September 1975. The thirty-two abstract paintings exhibited on the occasion covered the names of the major modernist poets of his times. Uttam Nepali himself wrote/writes poems. So he recreated the spirit of the works of these poets with a great sense of closeness and sympathy. His style of representing poetry in art was by directly writing short text along the conceptual dimension of the painting.



The title of the exhibition was 'Poet, Poetry & Painting', a straightforward title. (Subedi 2017b:10).

First, the Nepali painters followed the patterns of character creation that was acquired from art education. The features were universal. Second, the grammar of colours, anatomy and other features of figurality came with the universal modes of art education. But the Nepali painters created their own forms of character. The diversity cannot be covered in one article. There are generational, thematic and conceptual shifts. For heuristic reasons I have selected some painters' styles of character creation and their treatment of themes from my review articles. For heuristic reason, I have selected the theme of diversity from articles mostly published in *Sirjanā*: The Journal of Arts and Art Education, and some from other sources.

I want to start with SKIB-71. The following quote is chosen to cover the diversity of the four painters in the SKIB-71 group:

SKIB-71 were not seeking to be fixed in their different stylistic spheres. They had common goals, which was to achieve fluidity. But as their search for metaphor covered many areas including poetry and sculpture and works with other contemporary artists like Sashikala Tiwari and others, their images were amorphous. They did not limit themselves to any fixed forms. Even Sashi Shah's recurrent stallions are metaphors of diversity. Batsa Gopal's icons assume new meanings

when they are handled with the techniques of modernist art. (Subedi 2019:18)

It shows the nature of their paintings, which was free and anarchist in nature.

So character creation in paintings was an open subject for them. They even created symbolic human characters through the stallions. There was no anxiety about the verisimilitude of the figures. The next comes from my other review:

Manuj Babu Mishra adopted a method of using figurality in paintings that used semi surrealistic and abstract paintings. Mishra was trained in Dhaka of the then East Pakistan in the late sixties of the last century. Despite his political statements occasionally, he was basically an artist. He was a peaceful man behind the hurricanes of hard times he created. He was also a portraitist who believed that the portrait of a person is also the portrait of the world outside him or her. He had said that to me when he was drawing my portrait. (Subedi 2018:7)

Manuj Babu marks a unique departure from the traditional style. Here we encounter another problem. Though the forms of the paintings are different thematically the artists treat the same cosmogonic motifs, deities and their drama in the world are created by the humans and the non-human agencies. Human characters are created in bizarre shapes sometimes. This is a feature of universal modernist art of both the East and the West. The one dimensional theme

of the traditional paintings takes free forms in the modern paintings of both the West and the East. Character creation in Manuj Babu Mishra's paintings may look out of way and at times bizarre, but they evoke the spiritual crisis through that.

Similarly I have cited the following from my argument about the shift in style and modes of perception and their representation in art. Nepali painters have widened the spheres of their art for character creation. This is related to the fusion of the two mediums – painting and poetry as part of the widening of the spheres of art. Let me quote myself:

My theory is that the creative cultural dynamics was responsible for the widening of the sphere. Such widening of sphere with arts and literature sharing experiences is a theme that dominates most crucial discourses on the subject in the West and other parts of the world, in what Geeta Kapoor as cited above says, "Modernist myths tested once they cross the threshold and encounter cultural modalities of modern as it is actually practised around the world. (Subedi 2021:26).

Another observation occurs in yet another article from Sirjanā. It is a very important subject in modernist Nepali paintings. Character creation in paintings has covered a familiar path anywhere in the world. The shift from the familiar or the fine forms to the abstract has become a familiar subject. Character creation in Nepali paintings moved away from the traditional style to the realms of

abstraction. I view this phenomenon as follows:

Artists and critics of Nepali abstract paintings appear to combine two elements in the early phase of its use. They were considered as making a combination of unique mode of gaze and the expression of a certain rage against the traditional norms and forms of art. But the element of rage was less pronounced than a new mode of experiments in technique and a desire to create new forms in art. My view is that Nepali abstract paintings came partly as a result of education especially in Western art and partly as the need to give continuity of the tradition. But there was a strong desire to make new experiments in style and the use of unconventional motifs in paintings. In this short article I want to make some interpretations about this dual nature of the abstract paintings of Nepal. (Subedi 2022:10-11).

My other observation comes from my introduction to Kiran Manandhar. I must have written dozens of catalogue articles and reviews about his paintings. He broadened the horizon of character creation in his art by making this practice interdisciplinary. I have worked with him on theatre, documentaries and literary forums. The following sums that up for the moment:

My voyeurism too has a history. First I observed Kiran's paintings spontaneously as aesthetic objects, and then became involved with them.

How this happened is something that I should write about because several of us have made similar journeys in different realms of art in Nepal over the last quarter of a century and it is very important to share our experiences and tell the readers from outside Nepal how we have covered miles over the landscape of culture and arts. I have written essays on most of Kiran's major painting exhibitions. Since most of his representative paintings have been represented in this volume, I would like to recapitulate some of my observations. (Subedi 2006:6).

The above words occur in an introduction to a remarkable book about Kiran Manandhar and his entire oeuvre entitled *Kiran: Saga of a Modern Nepali Artist*. That is a remarkable book. Like every other book about art, I gather, the general readers do not easily find it. Kiran Manandhar's method of character creation is different from those of his predecessors and his progeny a talented painter Sagar Manandhar.

My last observation comes from a review of the paintings of Ragini Upadhyay. Her character creation is unique, rebellious and challenging. Her exhibition of paintings is recently happened at the Nepal Art Council. Let me quote what I said about her in my review article about her paintings executed in diverse styles of character creation:

In the present series of works she has strongly turned to body as the locus or the universe of her art. The

previous exteriority that characterised her paintings with sometimes politics, mismanagements and the brazen faces of the social changes has turned into the great interiority in these series of paintings. Though the viewers may get the impression of the apocalyptic imaginaire of the artist in these paintings, a careful study of them reveals a sense of amelioration and liberation that the artist has visualised through the paintings that are time sensitive and deeply felt motifs. The other aspect of these paintings is the articulation of the sense of pain projected through mainly figurality, use of primary colours and their free admixtures. (Subedi 2023:44).

The paintings make a fusion of techniques and motifs. The characters are created out of human pain, which is supposed to emanate from life and struggle. But that raises the same question in art – are the creator's sufferings reflected in her art or is that a methodology and technique of character creation in art? I have briefly discussed that in the review article, but that subject is discussed productively in art criticism.

## **Conclusion**

Character creation is the most important single theme of paintings anywhere in the world. The discourse that began with the traditional paintings and concluded with the modern approach to the character creation in Nepali paintings one point that I would like to stress is that character creation has always been the most dynamic, creative and challenging

subject in this genre of art in Nepal. This article has only alluded to the diversity of the subject. The subject of character creation in Nepali paintings assumes greater significance and importance when the sphere of experiments is supported by the art pedagogy and wider practice of art exhibitions, reviews and interactions, which is a growing practice today.

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