

Paubha or Thanka Painting of Nepal

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Introduction:

i. The Origin of Buddhist Art of Painting

The earliest Buddhist art may be traced back to the Buddha's life time although some art historians are of the view that it originated some centuries after the Buddha's great Parinirvana. We find many exegetical references to strengthen evidences in the Sutra texts, i.e Vinaya and Tantra, including *Manjushrimulakalpa*¹ and so on. It appears that Buddha himself considered painting to be an important subject as he mentioned methods of painting in sutras such as *Buddha Pratimalaksana sutra*. This is apparently a very late Buddhist text-perhaps after 10th century A.D. These scriptures explain how to make the image of deities and spiritual figures.

Two kings of Magadha, Bimbisara and Udrayana were, very close friends and they would often exchange gifts. Once, when Udrayana, King of Vatsa sent a priceless gift to his friend, King Bimbisara responded by deciding to send a painted scroll of the Buddha. But when the artist began to look at the Buddha, they were so overwhelmed by the splendor and light emitting from his body that they could not draw His Image. One seeing this Buddha cast his shadow on a sheet of cloth and advised the artists to trace it. This is supposed to have been the first painted figure of the Buddha.

Similarly, at one time, the Buddha, residing in the Nyagrodha Grove at the city of Kapilavastu, now in the territory of Nepal, was teaching the Dharma to thousands, including his father Siddhodana, and queen Mahaprajapati, accompanied by her attendants. Mahanama, the sakya prince asked Buddha to teach his wife obstinate and haughty Sashiprabha. While Buddha was teaching, Shashiprabha asked her slave girl Rohita to bring her pearl necklace to show up her beauty. While she was rushing to get pearl necklace back, she was struck by a cow, and died instantly. She was reborn in Srilanka as a princess called Muktalata. Showers of pearls fell down when she took birth therefore named as Muktalata (The Pearl Creeper) when a group of merchants was travelling to Sri Lanka, they began to chant a hymn dedicated to Lord

¹ Ganapati shastri's *Manjusri Mulakalpa*(ed) in Three volumes, published by Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1925

Buddha. Princess Muktalata, hearing the songs of the Buddha, called the merchants to take offering back to Buddha. Lord Buddha accepted the offerings with pleasure. Lord Buddha in return sent a cloth painting of himself inscribed with some teachings to Princess Muktalata. She saw the portrait and deep faith arose in her for the Buddha and consequently realized the truth and attained the state of stream entry (skt: strotapanna). Later, it came to be known as the portrait of "Rasmimuni" i.e (Radiant saint). It is said to be the second portrait during the life time of the Buddha².

II. History of Nepalese painting

To trace the history of Buddhist art in Nepal in pre-lichchavi period (before 464 A.D.) is quite a difficult task due to lack of documentary evidence. Nepalese history of art is documented only after the date 464.A.D. the date of a stone inscription at Changu Narayana. However, the Lichchavi period (464-880A.D.) is said to be the golden age of Nepalese art. Several beautiful sculptures dating from this period have been found. For example Padmapani Bodhisattva image at Srigaha vihara dating 550A.D. is the one best example. Unfortunately, not a single painting from that period has been found.

It is well known that Buddhist art was introduced into Tibet from Nepal in the seventh century. When King Srong btsan gampo (617-650) married the Nepalese Princess Bhrikuti Devi. The presence of Newar artists in Tibet from the early 7th century to the mid- ninth century is frequently noted in the Tibetan historical records. Furthermore, " it is fairly certain that there were trading connections between Nepal and Tibet long before the Tibetans became a recognized political power. At Lhasa itself local tradition maintains that that the 'Phrulnang or Jokhang temple was built by Princess Bhrikuti, Nepalese wife of Srong btsan gampo.³

The Manikabum mentions that Nepalese artists, commissioned by King Srong btsan gampo, produced the statue of eleven-faced Avalokiteshvara together with statues of Bhrikuti, Arya Tara, Marici, Sarasvati, Hayagriva and many others in Jokhang Temple of Lhasa. For example Srong btsan gampo commissioned the celebrated Nepalese craftsmen Khre-ba to have eleven images of Avalokiteshvara made which were to be same sizes as the king himself. The chronicle of the Fifth Dalai Lama also refers to the presence of Nepalese artists in Tibet at the time of the early kings. Many skillful artists were called from Nepal to Tibet where they developed unique artistic tradition⁴.

According to Sir Aurel Stein, Nepalese artist painted part of a fresco of the caves at Dunhuang. If Stein's judgement is correct, then its date can be assigned to 775-825 A.D.

² The story is related in detail in Muktalatavadana of Ksemendra's Avadanakalpalata edited by P.L.Vaidya, Mithila Institute, Darbhanga, 1959

³ G.Tucci on "Trans-Himalaya" translated from French by James Hogarth, London, Barrie and Jenkins, 1973.

⁴ L.Dagyab, Tibetan Religious Art, Wiesbaden 1977, pt.1, p.36

During the time of Tri-Ralpacan, (806-838) the art of painting in Nepalese style was introduced into Tibet. While constructing the Buddhist monastery "Tashi Gephel", he employed many Nepalese artists for painting in their Nepali style. Thus, on account of these artisans, the art of painting in Nepali style thrived in Central and upper Tibet.

Another trend of Nepalese style Of Painting became prominent during the time of Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) in China. Most were commissioned by the Sa-skyapa school of Tibetan Buddhism. While there are traces of Bengal-style painting in the murals of Zhwa-lu monastery, the majority of 13th century paintings found in Sa-skyapa monasteries are in Nepalese style.

In 1260. Kublaikhan, the great ruler of China and suzerain of the Mongol states and Tibet, asked his spiritual preceptor, lama 'Phags-pas (1235-1280), to erect a golden Pagoda in Tibet. He extended invitations to over one hundred Newar artists. The King of Nepal, Jaya Bhima Malla (1258-71) managed to gather only eighty of them.

Arniko, although only seventeen years of age, was chosen to lead the expedition. Arniko was accomplished draughtsman, painter, modeler, and metal caster. The erection of Golden Pagoda was accomplished under his direction in the year 1262. After its completion he was invited to visit Beijing to construct a White Pagoda. He manufactured several images and created paintings and developed a unique system of art blending Newar and Chinese styles.

Arniko introduced Nepalese artistic styles into Chinese culture. Some of his outstanding paintings and sculptures are:

1. Portraits of Emperor Kublaikhan and empress Chabi
(Preserved National Palace Museum, Taipei)
2. Painting of Green Tara: Now preserved in the Cleveland Museum of Art, USA
3. Mahakala sculpture: Dated 1292
Partially polychrome and gilded lithographic limestone 47 x 285 cm L. Fournier donation with usufruct
MA 5181 now in Musee Guimet, Paris
4. Lacquer Bodhisattva
5. Image of Manjusri (1305). Preserved in National Palace Museum, Taipei

The tradition of Arniko lasted for a long time among Buddhist sculptors in China and is still upheld in the introduction to an 18 century iconometric treatise, the *Zaoxiang Duliang Jinjie*, by the Mongolian scholar mGon-po skyabs (1690-1750)

III. Newars a prolific mandala Makers:

In the 15th century, the Tibetan Master Anandabhadra, Kun-dga-zangpo, founder of Ngor monastery, invited Nepalese artists to embellish Ngor's chapels. In 1429 A.D., Nepalese artists decorated the chapels of Ngor Monastery with mandalas, patas, and portraits of the Sa-skyapa school.

It is said that the entire series of Vajravali mandala at E Vam chos ldan gyi khrod were painted by skilled Nepalese artists.

Dr. P.Pal writes,

" Monasteries of the sakyapa religious order in Tibet seemed especially partial to Nepali craftsmen. After the twelfth century, when most of the Buddhist monasteries in India were destroyed, Nepal filled the vacuum for a time for the Tibetans"⁵

IV. The sMan-bris school of art

After the fall of Bengal following the Islamic incursions of the 13th century, most monasteries in Bengal and Bihar were abandoned. Thereafter, Buddhist art was no longer produced in these regions. A survey of Buddhist Paubha paintings of the Malla period until the seventh century reveals only slight Indian influences.

According to A.W. Macdonald and Anne Vergati Stahl, the Bal-bris movement developed in south Tibet, in the area around Gyantse, in the 14th and 15th centuries. Bal-bris means "Nepalese drawing".

Manla Dhondup (b.1440) began to live in Tsang in southern Tibet. There he met a Nepali artist named "Dopa Tashi" who was expert in Nepalese style. He studied under the guidance of Nepali artist with great enthusiasm. After studying, although he kept the proportion of image, portrait and stupa as before, made a slight change in the standard of proportions in various designs, religious motifs, colors and compositions, and developed a new pigmentative style in Tibet. Since then the art, which was known as Manri became popular in Tibet. Manla became his major disciple and learned the Nepalese style of art from Dopa Tashi Gyalpo.⁶

Later, the sMan-gsar, mKhan-bris, and sgar-bris styles of art were developed successively. Although these schools vary from each other in style, all of them principally follow the iconometric canons. Nepalese artists have been popular with the Tibetans over the centuries, and were used extensively as late as 1447, as documented in Gedun drub's construction of Tashi Lhunpo monastery.

Although in early stages Tibetan thangka paintings were highly influenced by the Nepalese style, a marked difference between the two styles began to appear after the sixteenth century.

⁵ P.Pal, 1985, pp.38

⁶ Dr. Sanjib Kumar Das in *Tara, An Exhibition of Rare Thangkas*, Central Institute of Buddhist studies, Leh, Ladakh 2003

In any discussion of Newar painting, we cannot overlook the impact of Indian styles, especially Rajput and Moghul, from the seventeenth century onwards. There are several examples of newar paubha paintings especially long scroll paintings, in which Indian influences are evident. A Paubha painting is sacred art and is extremely difficult to appreciate without a proper understanding of the religious symbolism they employ.

Nepal developed a new Newari style. A great variety of tantric Buddhist images rarely depicted in Indian art were preserved in Newar art. The Paubha created in these centuries provide ample examples of the Newar style of painting.



Earliest Newar Paubha painting (13th century)preserved in Los Angeles county Museum,USA

The impact of Newar art was extended not only to Tibet but also to China. A group of Thankas bear Chinese Inscriptions of the Ming period corresponding to the following dates: 1474, 1477, 1478, 1479, and 1513. These paintings and related xylographs, dating from 1410 and 1426, have been studied and illustrated by Lowry who points out many uniquely Newar stylistic features.⁷

E.F.Lo Bue claims that Newar influence on Chinese sculpture and painting was not limited to the Yuan period (1271-1368), but continued during the Ming period, not only under the Yongle emperor, but also under his successor, as is demonstrated by the dates in the inscriptions mentioned above.

Newar artist worked in Tibet and brought back to Nepal several paintings which had been executed in Tibetan monasteries. Today in Nepal there are several examples of Newar paubha paintings which were executed in Tibet. The Newar paubha paintings were influenced by Tibetan style from the seventeenth century onwards. ie. Tibeto-Nepaly style developed.

An enlarged pantheon enabled the Newar artist to paint freely, drawing on imagery from meditation manuals such as the *Sadhanamala* and *sadhanasamuccaya*.

⁷ M.B.Shakya in *Sacred Art of Nepal*,pp.7 and also in Lo Bue's *The Newar Artist of Kathmandu Valley* p.266.



Newar paubha paintings preserved in Musee Guimet,Paris

It is hard to differentiate between Newar Paubhas and Tibetan thangka with regard to the poses of the deities, floral motifs, and the tantric divinities. Michael Hutt remarks: "Nepalese artists became heavily involved in the ornaments of temples and monasteries in Tibet, and Tibetan paintings from ninth to seventeenth centuries are almost wholly Nepali in style."

V.Classification of the paubhas:

Nepalese Paintings can be classified into five types⁸:

1. Illustrated manuscript Paintings
2. Paubha paintings
3. Narrative scroll Paintings
4. Mural or Wall Paintings

⁸ For greater details, see *Sacred Art of Nepal*, pp.9-24

5. Miniature Paintings

Here we are interested to describe only the Paubha paintings.

Newar paintings, called " paubha' in Newari and " pata" in Sanskrit, are usually rectangular in shape and are prepared from cotton woven specially to fit the dimensions required for each painting. Unlike the Tibetan thanka, the Newar Paubha is most uniform in size. Tibetans may craft huge thangkhas for ceremonial display, as seen in Tashilhunpo monastery or Jokhang Temple or in Paro Bhutan.

With regard to subject matter, paubhas usually portray figures of important divinities, mandalas of divinities and monuments surrounded by various figures. These paintings are mostly created for religious purposes. They were used as aids to meditation. In the early days of paubha paintings, both the patrons and artists were motivated by spiritual concerns. Newar Buddhists commissioned paubha paintings in order to earn merit, and they were displayed on special occasions. The paintings were hung on private altars, in temples and monasteries. For instance, a large Paubha, dedicated to Manjuvajra⁹ is displayed on the walls of Hiranyavarna Mahavihara during the month of July - August every year.



Painting depicting the Buddha's visit to Lumbini

⁹ For the painting reproduction see *Sacred Art of Nepal*, plate No.17

It is difficult to determine when and where Paubha painting originated, owing to the lack of early paubha paintings in Nepal. Most early Thangka paintings from Tibet appear to have been strongly influenced by the Nepalese styles. So far we do not have any Nepalese Paubha paintings dating from earlier than the 13th century. Most ancient paubha paintings are now preserved not in Nepal but in American and European museums. The paintings of Ratnasambha buddha in Los Angeles County Museum is believed to be one of the earliest Nepalese paubha paintings. The Paubha paintings are not limited to Buddhist subjects; there are also a few paintings based on Hindu themes.

Now a day, since Tibetan thangka painting has become very popular in the world market; when people speak of thangka, Tibetan Thangkas are what they have in mind. The casual visitors know nothing about Newar painting and its characteristic features, and about the uniqueness of these early Newar paintings. Knowing the importance and features of Newar painting paubha painting has become essential for these Nepalese artists wishing to preserve Newar Painting as a separate style.

VI. Some essential features of Newar paubha paintings.

1. One of the special features of Newar paubha is that the central figure occupies an ornate frame, an elaborate arch or a *torana dvara*, formed by the head of a garuda or a Tsepun or *Kirtimukha*, a mythical creature of Nepal, holding snakes.
2. The painted surface is divided into sections. In the larger upper part, the main deities and their acolytes as depicted, while the lower part is usually smaller in size, and filled with depictions of sponsors or donors. Also, women are graphically separated from men, each appearing on opposite sides of the central divinity or sacrificial fire. This grouping by gender is characteristic feature of Nepalese paintings.
3. Profuse use of red color in a softer tone
4. Moghul and Rajput influences only after 17th century.

Contents or Themes of the paubha paintings

The subject matter of the paubha paintings can be roughly divided into seven categories:¹⁰

1. Buddha's life and his previous lives
2. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas
3. Meditational deities
4. Dakas and Dakinis

¹⁰ For greater details see *Sacred art of Nepal*, pp.51-56

5. Mandalas and stupas

6. Illustration of the Dharma

1. Buddha's life and His previous lives:

The historical Buddha has been a favorite theme in the art of Theravada and Mahayana traditions since ancient times. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition the Buddha's twelve principal deeds are frequently depicted.

They are 1. Buddha in Tushita heaven 2. Buddha's descent to the world

3. Entry into the womb 4. Birth of Buddha in Lumbini 5. Bodhisattva Siddhartha's skills in sports and knowledge 6. Four signs of renunciation 7. Great departure 8. Six years of meditation 9. Going to Bodhi mandapa 10. Attainment of Perfect enlightenment 11. First Dharma cakrapravartan at Sarnath and 12. Great Parinirvana.

Besides, there are works of art in Buddha's previous lives such as Prince Vishvantara and his generosity, Prince Mahasattva and his sacrifice of flesh and blood to five tigers and so forth.

2. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

The paubhas of the various Buddhas other than Shakyamuni Buddha, as well as gurus, Bodhisattvas, and Arhats, fall in this category. All the Buddhas may be regarded as gurus, in the Vajrayana. However, special importance is placed upon the five transcendental Buddhas who represent the five Wisdoms. Each of these Five Buddhas embodies the primordial purity of these five defilements which obscure our mind. These forms of Buddhas are in fact metaphorical expressions of non-dual wisdom and skill in Means. They are sambhogakaya Buddhas and can perform ceaseless activity for the benefit of all sentient beings.

3. Istadevata or meditational deities

Istadevata means "meditational deity" in the Buddhist context. While the word *istadevata* is frequently used to represent the personal deity in Hinduism as well, for Hindus the deity is someone who is god and master, the one into whom one dissolves one's lesser self; whereas in Buddhism, the *istadevatas* are a tangible form of one's own mind, a form that may be visualized or meditated on. Using the meditative techniques of the developing stage and complete stage one proceeds to the realization of the nature of the mind. In this collection Cakrasamvara belongs to this group.

4. Dakas and Dakinis

Dakas and Dakinis act as supports for the practitioner of Vajrayana Buddhism. They represent inner refuge in the Tantric Buddhist tradition. They wear bone ornaments, some are in dancing posture and some are naked. These dakinis and dakas may travel through space, helping the

practitioner by eliminating obstacles and by guiding them along the path to Enlightenment. They are also able to grant the eight mundane siddhis to all devoted practitioners.

5. Dharmapalas

Dharmapalas are divinities who help and protect the Buddha dharma from degeneration. They also act as defenders of Buddha's doctrine. They are in general wrathful in appearance and their purpose is to strike terror into potential sinners. In Nepal Mahakala is considered to be a great wrathful dharmapala. Their wrathfulness is directed towards to self-grasping attitude of the general mass.

6. Mandalas and stupa

A mandala is that which bears an essence- the essence of the great bliss of enlightened consciousness. In normal practice, the mandala is depicted as an archi-tectonic entity founded on an elevated platform, usually in the shape of square. it has four doorways and four archways, each adorned with garlands, chains, and vajra threads, and outlined by multicolored paths. For the purpose of ritual, it should be drawn with powdered colours, which are ideally made from the five gems, though acceptable substitutes include the five grains or powdered bricks and charcoal from the cremation grounds.

7. Illustrations of the Dharma

Illustrations of the dharma are pictorial expressions of dharma teachings. The wheel of life is a common subject in this genre. It depicts the totality of the Buddhist teachings, which include the twelve linked causes constituting dependent origination, the six realms of existence, the three poisons i.e namely lust, hatred and delusion) and the path to enlightenment.

Conclusion:

We have described very briefly essential features of Nepalese paubha paintings with some historical background and its relation with Tibetan Thangka painting. We have stated elsewhere that Nepalese paubha paintings existed long before the appearance of the Tibetan Thangka painting.

The purpose of this article is to present a history of Nepalese art and its meaning. Paubha painting was a sacred art and its production was itself a form of religious sadhana. because of its sacred character those paintings were placed in the monasteries and temples where profound respects were paid them as objects of devotion and meditation.

But in modern times these practices have been almost forgotten. As a result, artists began to create works of art of inferior quality. In the name of creativity some artists began to introduce even pornographic material into this sacred art in the name of glamour and creativity and innovation.

In my opinion, the beauty of Nepalese art lies in the canonical depiction of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, deities, mandalas and so forth handed down through generation. Most of the beautiful paubhas and other artifact of Nepal are seen and preserved in the Western Museum. They value these works of art in high esteem and feel themselves very proud in possessing them. It is imperative for us to preserve and keep the glorious artistic tradition of past intact in the years to come as well.