

Nepalese Seasons



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Foreword

While the Rubin Museum of Art's collection represents the vast region of the Himalayas, we concentrate primarily on the art and culture of Tibet. With *Nepalese Seasons: Rain and Ritual* we are delighted to enrich our discussion of the region, engaging Gautama Vajracharya, a leading scholar of South Asian art and culture, to illuminate the art of Nepal's Kathmandu Valley from the seventh century to the nineteenth century. Although our Nepalese collection constitutes a relatively small percentage of our overall holdings, the objects are important from an art historical perspective and, simply put, beautiful.

As Vajracharya explains, the story behind Nepalese art is much older than the histories of Hinduism and Buddhism, and so these two dominant religions of the region alone cannot tell the full, rich story of Nepalese art and culture. He contends that we need to reach far back into antiquity, into pre-Buddhist and pre-Hindu times, to begin to understand the art and culture of the Newars, the native inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley.

There has also been a tendency to study and exhibit the art of Nepal in relation to that of Tibet. Of course, such an approach is acceptable as both regions are located along the Himalayan mountain range. However, little attention has been given to the fact that the ecology of Nepal is much closer to that of South Asia than to that of Tibet. The extreme height of the Himalayas prevents the heavy monsoon rains of South Asia from traveling to Tibet, leading to great differences between Nepalese and Tibetan ecology. The southern slope of the Himalayan

mountain range, where Nepal is located, is fresh and green, particularly during the rainy season, while its northern slope, home to Tibet, remains dry.

These points, as well as many others made by Vajracharya in the coming pages, have led him to a new understanding of Nepalese devotional art, one that connects it to the region's seasons, agricultural cycle, and accompanying ritual calendar. This innovative approach to art that has already been well studied from many other religious and art-historical angles offers us an entirely new lens through which we can view this aspect of our collection.

In commissioning new collections-based research, which results in books such as this one and the accompanying year-long exhibition, the Rubin Museum is excited to share this groundbreaking research with you. As with many of our projects, it undergirds our mission to engage leading scholars of South Asian art and culture to use our collection as a vehicle for making this information accessible to those seeking a deeper appreciation of the art of the Himalayas, be they experts or newcomers or anyone in-between.

Patrick Sears
Executive Director
Rubin Museum of Art

Acknowledgments

This monograph is written for the open inquiring minds of scholars and art lovers alike. Shifting gears from the esoteric to the accessible is, however, a difficult task. I would not have been able to take courage to do so or achieve any degree of success without the encouragement and help that I received from so many important people.

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to Patrick Sears, Executive Director of the Rubin Museum of Art, and Jan Van Alphen, former Director of Exhibitions, Collections, and Research at the Museum, both of whom trusted me and invited me to join the Museum as a guest curator not only for organizing an exhibition of Nepalese art but also writing this accompanying catalog. Without their help and encouragement, I would not have been able to take the responsibility and complete the job successfully.

I take pleasure in thanking Christian Luczanits, former Senior Curator, for giving me useful suggestions in initial discussions regarding the exhibition and catalog and Elena Pakhoutova, Curator of Himalayan Art, for assisting me in many different ways in the process of organizing the exhibition and reading the catalog critically. I am also indebted to Helen Abbott, Publisher, for producing this catalog, with the assistance of Jessica Baker and Nicole Meily. The catalog was elegantly edited by Neil Liebman and Laura Wein, and beautifully designed by Joseph Cho and Stefanie Lew of Binocular, New York. John Monaco, Head of Exhibition Design, deserves thanks for arranging the exhibition so effectively. I am equally grateful to Michelle Bennett,

Head of Collections Management, and especially to Zachary Harper, Collections Preparator/Art Storage Manager, for showing the entire Nepalese art collection in the Museum object by object every time I visited the Museum for three years. Although I cannot name each one, the entire staff of the Museum is to be commended for its professionalism and its enthusiasm for this project.

No words can express my debt to my great guru Nayaraj Panta and my uncle Dhanavajra Vajracharya for teaching me Sanskrit and epigraphy and their usefulness for the investigation of Indian and Nepalese history. I should never forget my indebtedness to Pratapaditya Pal, at the time Senior Curator of South and Southeast Asian Art at the Los Angeles County Museum Art, for enkindling my desire to learn art history while assisting him at the museum.

Last but not least, I would like express my gratefulness to Michael Witzel, Wales Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard University, not only for writing a stimulating foreword for this monograph but also for being my inspiration throughout my investigation of the monsoon culture in Vedic literature and its significance in detecting the pre-Buddhist and pre-Hindu components in South Asian culture.

I would like to dedicate this book to Neil, my six-year-old grandson.

Gautama V. Vajracharya
Madison, Wisconsin
October 23, 2015

Introduction

My premise for this catalog and related exhibition is that Nepalese art and culture can be better understood by focusing on how they relate to geographic location and the weather rather than through the conventional approach of analyzing the influence of the dominant religions in the region, Hinduism and Buddhism. The story behind Nepalese art is much older than this sectarian history, and so depending entirely on explanations based on these religions may create more confusion than clarity.

An Outline of Nepalese History

The following outline should help the reader situate the discussion of Newar culture and the stylistic development of Nepalese art provided in the rest of the catalog. I have divided the political history of Nepal into three periods:

- Ancient Period (ca. 200–ca. 879)
 - Early Licchavis (ca. 200–ca. 460)
 - Late Licchavis (ca. 460–879)
- Medieval Period (879–1769)
 - Transitional (ca. 879–1200)
 - Early Mallas (ca. 1200–1382)
 - Late Mallas (1382–1769)
- Modern Period (1769–Present day)
 - Shahas (1769–2008)
 - Ranas (1846–1951)
 - Democratic Government (1951–Present day)

The art and culture that prevailed after the nineteenth century are beyond the scope of this exhibition catalog.

The Newars and Their Antiquity

The Newars, the native inhabitants

of the Kathmandu Valley, deserve much credit for their contribution to the artistic tradition of Nepal. The isolated geographic location of the Kathmandu Valley and the conservative nature of the Newars help to explain how the tradition relates to the classical period of South Asia (3rd century BCE–13th century CE) as well as to elucidate lesser-known pre-Hindu and pre-Buddhist components of the artistic and cultural heritage of the valley. My recent investigation indicates that the significance of Nepalese art is almost always related to this pre-Hindu and pre-Buddhist antiquity and that knowledge of this period is essential to understanding the continuity and change in the history of art and culture of the people of this region.

Celebration of the Equinox

The Newars are faithful to their ancient customs, particularly those that are celebrated during seasonal festivals.

While Newars may be aware of the original significance of the customs, their primary concern is with keeping their ancestral traditions (*aju aji pinigu jya*, grandfather and grandmother's work) alive. A perfect example is the festival of Bisket Jatra, which takes place around April 15. The main festival is held in Bhaktapur, one of the three cities of the valley. The celebration consists of erecting a wooden pole and celebrating the Vikrama-era New Year (fig. 1). It is also held on a smaller scale in Hadigaun, an ancient town located about a half mile west of Pashupatinath Temple.

The festival is designated in medieval Newari-language documents as the *bisika* or *biseka* festival. *Bisika* is equivalent to *visuvat*, the Sanskrit word for equinox, which is mentioned in a Newari statement explaining the word as a particular day of the year when night and day are equally divided.¹ The relationship of the festival to the vernal equinox had, however, already been forgotten by the early medieval period. Later the Newars began to relate the significance of the festival to a story of a snake (Newari, *bi*).² In modern times the vernal equinox takes place around March 21, but due to the gradual precession of equinoxes, it is possible that at the time the Vikrama era began, it took place around April 15.³ Thus the fact that the Newars continue to celebrate the equinox at this date indicates that they give more importance to continuity with the distant past than to the meaning of the festival.⁴

Ancestor Worship

As in most parts of South Asia, the art and culture of the Kathmandu Valley were influenced by the seasons, notably the monsoon season and its relationship to agriculture. The monsoon is a phenomenon of South Asia extending from the southern slope of the Himalayas to the southern tip of India. The monsoon-nourished culture that flourished in this vast region is beyond any sectarian boundary, but as a result of being reinterpreted as one based on Hindu or Buddhist beliefs, the original significance of the art related



to agrarian concepts often becomes blurred or lost. Fortunately, with some effort, we are still able to discern many of these concepts in Newar culture. For instance, during the autumnal festival in the Kathmandu Valley, Hatha Dya, the weather-related atmospheric god represented by a large mask attached to a jar of alcohol, is honored for providing the monsoon rain needed for a successful harvest (cat. 44). Sometime during the ancient period of Nepalese history (ca. 200–879), people began to worship him as Indra Aju, Indra the grandfather. Indra was originally an Indo-Iranian solar god responsible for melting snow and ice in spring; later he was worshipped in India as a rain-maker. The Newars did not have the concept of god before they came in contact with Sanskrit-speaking people and their literature. They worshipped their ancestors as supernatural beings; hence

they joined the name Indra with *aju*, ancestor/grandfather, forming Indra *aju*, grandfather Indra. The popularity of this ancestor god in the Kathmandu Valley is attested by the multitude of his images found all over the region (figs. 3, 39, and 40; cats. 45 and 50). In some examples the crown of the Newar god Hatha Dya is adorned with a small head of Indra, recognizable by his horizontal third eye (fig. 2).

During the medieval period (ca. 879–1769) of Nepalese history, Indra's popularity was overshadowed by the cult of Bhairava, the wrathful incarnation of the Hindu god Shiva. As a result, Hatha Dya has been worshipped as Akasha Bhairava (Sky Bhairava), and his mask is now decorated with Shiva's iconographic features such as the third eye and serpent necklace. Despite such efforts to incorporate the Newar deity into the cult of Bhairava, both Hindu

and Buddhist Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, even now, worship him as their ancestor *aju* and connect him to the legend of a mythical ancestor, Elam or Yelam, a nomenclature derived from *ailam* or *alam*, archaic Newari words for sky. In this way the initial significance of Hatha Dya as the ancestor and sky god responsible for monsoon rain is kept alive. The Newars annually celebrate the autumnal festival of this bacchanalian spirit without much concern for his sectarian identity. The priests of the most popular shrine of Hatha Dya (also known as Sveta, or White Bhairava), in Kathmandu's Durbar Square, are Buddhist. The priests of Hatha Dya, or Aju Dy, of Indrachok are Maharjans, Newar farmers. We may find such cross-religious attitudes of the Newars curious if we do not understand their non-Hindu, non-Buddhist origin. But this does not bother Hindu Newars at all. In fact the iconographical identity of the atmospheric god as Bhairava is one of the many examples of reinterpretations of preexisting concepts presented as if they are original. Thus we need to approach the Newar art and culture of the valley diachronically whenever possible, but without ignoring important information obtained through synchronic investigation.

Newars and Monsoon Culture
Although commonly known as Newars, the people of the valley identify themselves as Nevas. They are almost certainly the Nipas described in ancient Sanskrit literature as the people

FIG.1 Bisket Jatra,
Celebration of New Year
on the day of Equinox,
Bhaktapur

residing at the foothill of the mountain. (Sanskrit *pa* regularly turns into Newari *va* as exemplified by *dyava*: Sanskrit, *dipa*, an oil lamp). Despite the fact that high-caste Newars identify themselves as Hindu or Buddhist, many other Newars, including the farmers known as Maharjan or Jyapu, are indifferent to a Hindu-Buddhist dichotomy. As we see throughout our observation of Nepalese art and its deep cultural roots, these ancient people, over the course of time, adopted Hindu-Buddhist culture but never entirely abandoned their pre-Hindu, pre-Buddhist beliefs.

The Kathmandu Valley sits at the southern slope of the Himalayas. The enchanting beauty of this green valley is greatly enhanced by the glittering snowcapped mountains on the northern horizon. It does not snow in the valley, and seasonal rains, mainly the monsoonal showers, are the primary source of water for agriculture here.

According to popular legend, the valley, which is situated at an elevation of approximately 4,600 feet, was a lake

above the clouds. It became inhabitable only after the Buddhist god Manjushri drained the water of the lake, obliterating the Chobhar Hill in the southern section of the valley with his flaming sword. Dark-colored fertile soil that can be found several feet deep in many places in the valley and a rich vocabulary for fish and other aquatic creatures in the ancient Newari language, completely forgotten in modern Newari, suggest that the legend is based on reality and that a large part of the valley was indeed a lake.

The Newars migrated here from the north long before the documented history of Nepal began to appear around the third century CE. Their earlier homeland is now the modern town of Nuwakot, located around ninety miles northeast of the valley on the bank of the Trishuli River (Newari, Sihlukhu). This town is known to the authors of Tibetan literature as Bal-po rdzon, meaning “the village or the fort of the Newars.” This Tibetan nomenclature is in harmony with the original Newari name of the region. According to the label inscription at the bottom of the symbolic representation of the village in a maplike scroll painting in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Newari name for the village is Neva Kot, meaning Newar village (fig. 4). Because the Newari and Tibetan nomenclature correspond, we can safely surmise that the modern name Nuwakot is actually the derivation of Neva Kot.⁵

Although the Trishuli River of Nuwakot does not flow through the



valley, the river still plays an important role in its legend and culture. Traditionally the Newars believed that the river descends from the heavens in the form of rain, as is shown in the Philadelphia scroll painting. The pre-Vedic concept of the rain-river is still prevalent among the Newars. A nineteenth-century Newari hymn tells us that the Ganges descends from the heavens in the form of monsoonal rain with the sound of thunder and lightning.⁶ Although the hymn describes the heavenly river as being accompanied by Hindu deities, it does not associate the descent of the river with the popular Hindu story of Shiva and Prince Bhagiratha.

Throughout the ancient history of South Asia, this fertile, warm valley remained more or less hidden, not only because it is encircled by high mountains but also because it was isolated by the dense malaria-ridden jungle lying between the Indian plain and the Siwalik mountain range. The political, cultural, and artistic life of the valley remained unknown to the rest of the South Asia even in the Mughal period. Consequently the kings of

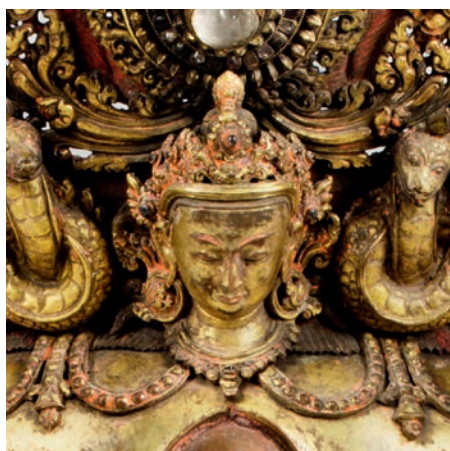


FIG. 2 Detail of small head of Indra on the crown of Hatha Dya. Face of Bhairava. Malla Dynasty (1200–1769); c. 16th century. Mercury-gilded copper alloy with rock crystal, paint, foil,

and glass decoration; 28¼ × 29¼ × 14¾ inches (71.8 × 74.3 × 37.5 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Purchased with the Stella Kramrisch Fund, 1998-77-1

FIG. 3 Hatha Dya, Aju Dya, Indrachok, Kathmandu

Chapter 1 Clouds, Rivers, and Rain

she does not wear a blouse. This shows the artist's adherence to conventionalism because in the valley Rajput-style tops (*choli*) were already common when representing female divinities in art (cat. 45). The clarity in execution and the creation of volume with confident sweep indicate that this is the work of an accomplished artist.

CAT. 12

Against the background of swirling cloud foliage, an elephant moving from left to right in lofty strides is the subject of this repoussé, which is a broken part of a larger work originally displayed on the wall of a temple or the back of a throne. The elephant's body is shown in full profile, whereas its head is in three-quarter profile, allowing both of its eyes to be visible but not its left ear flap. The movement of the elephant is successfully captured, showing one leg that is momentarily lifted from the ground. The front left leg is partially hidden by the gigantic trunk. The elephant's ear flap and the carpet on its back are decorated with foliage that bears close similarity to the cloud foliage in the background. The tail of the creature is also designed like the foliage.

As noted by A. K. Coomaraswamy, Sanskrit authors describe cloud patterns as elephants and vice versa.³⁰ The Ayurvedic text on the well-being of elephants called *Hastyayurveda* describes that when cloud elephants first descended from heaven to earth, the king and his subjects could not tell whether they were creatures or

cloudscapes. Their large, puffy bodies were as dark as rain clouds, and they were still dripping water. This description is artistically rendered in the present work showing the cloud as foliage. It was believed that the rain cloud is a flowering blue lotus vine; when the rain god shakes it, rain flowers drop to the ground. The Sanskrit word for rain-drop is *meghapuspa* (cloud flower) or *dharankura* (rain blossom). Such rain blossoms are depicted here in front of the elephant near its trunk and behind it immediately below its tail.

The atmospheric nature of the elephant can be recognized easily in that a cloud elephant floats — its feet do not touch the ground. This is a widespread notion vividly expressed in other South Asian artistic tradition as well. For instance, a nineteenth-century Rajput painting from Mewar depicts a prince seated in the *howdah* on the back of a huge elephant participating in a procession. The foot soldiers' feet land on the ground but not the elephant's. In a label inscription the animal is identified as Badala Sanagar, cloud ornament.³¹

CAT. 13

This is the tympanum of a door to a Newar temple. The entrances of temples and palaces in the Kathmandu Valley are almost always decorated with such tympanums. The tympanum is also frequently represented in manuscript illuminations and *thangka* paintings, known to Newars as *paubah*. This motif in Nepalese art has become a hallmark of the artistic tradition of the country.



For some reason art historians call the tympanum a *torana*. In eighteenth-century label inscriptions found in unpublished illustrated Newari texts, the word *torana* is used to identify the entire structure of a door, rather than a tympanum. It is actually a Sanskrit architectural word for a gateway (fig. 30). Characteristically the apex of the tympanum is occupied either by a masklike face called *kirtimukha*, face of glory (as in the present example), or by Garuda, the snake-eating mythical bird. Early versions of tympanum are seen above the so-called empty niches of ancient monolithic stupas. In these monuments we expect to see *kirtimukha* rather than Garuda. The mythical bird began to appear only in the medieval period.

Although in later periods Garuda became more popular than *kirtimukha*, the latter continued to appear, as this nineteenth-century tympanum exemplifies. All the components of *torana*

FIG. 30 Golden Gate of Patan Royal Palace



12 | Cloud Elephant

Nepal or Tibet
18th century
Copper alloy, repoussé
14 × 15½ × 4 in.
(35.6 × 39.4 × 10.2 cm)

Collection of Shelley and
Donald Rubin, P1999.33.6
(HAR 700055)



13 | Upper Section of a *Torana*

Nepal
Dated 1810
Copper alloy, repoussé
32 × 49¾ × 5½ in.
(81.3 × 126.4 × 14.3 cm)

Rubin Museum of Art
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