



## TRACING TRANSITIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEPALI PAINTINGS

*Yam Prasad Sharma*

*Lalit Kala Campus, TU, Kathmandu*

*Corresponding author: [yamprasadsharma@gmail.com](mailto:yamprasadsharma@gmail.com)*

Received date: 1 Feb. 2023- Accepted date: 25 Nov. 2023

### ABSTRACT

This article traces the transitions on the process of the development of Nepali paintings. From early period to present time, many trends of paintings have appeared, disappeared and modified. The evolution and connection of these trends, techniques and forms have been presented chronologically. The genres of Nepali paintings like manuscript illumination, *paubha*, *patachitra*, portrait, landscape, expressive works and abstract arts use different techniques and forms to explore different contents. Shift from two dimensional form to three dimensional form, mysticism to realism, religious to secular, realistic to expressive, expressive to abstract, and objective to subjective are the major transitions in the history of Nepali paintings. The article compares and contrasts various trends and techniques of the paintings. This research is qualitative, for the conclusion has been drawn based on the interpretation of artworks, and the interpretation of the paintings can be multiple depending on the viewers' perspective.

**Keywords:** Nepali painting, manuscript illumination, *paubha*, *patchitra*, objective, subjective

### INTRODUCTION

*Prajnaparamita* manuscript illustrations (dated 1015) are the earliest Nepali painting ever found (Aran, 1978). Other illuminated manuscripts are *Shivadharmā*, *Vishnudharam*, *Pancharaksha*, *Gandavyūya*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and *Devibhagavata* texts. Manuscripts are the handwritten texts, and these manuscripts have been illuminated with pictures and decorative patterns. These early artworks are referential. They represent the subject matters of the Hindu and Buddhist myths (Brown, 1912). Religious paintings are also found in the form of *paubha*, *patchitra*

and mural. *Paubhas* are traditional Nepali paintings having divinity at the center of the composition surrounded by subsidiary deities. *Patchitras* are narrative scroll painting telling mythical stories in visual form. The characters and events from the myths have been presented in horizontal bands (Sharma, 2020). The artworks show influence of traditional iconography. These early paintings are symbolic and mystical (Dwivedi, 1982). The images stand for the ideas and concepts beyond visuals. The figures and visual narrations are magical and supernatural.

The anthropomorphic visuals in the traditional Nepali paintings attempt to teach the moral lessons to the viewers and readers. The divine figures are created in the image of man having both benign and malevolent nature like kindness and anger (Pal, 1970). The youthful divine figures present the vibrant sap of life (Ray, 1973). Serpentine and flexible figures and luminous texture make the figures lively.

Amita Ray (1967) states about these religious compositions: "The symbols of art here voice the same truth as philosophy and myth" (p.10). Early Nepali arts have always aimed at achieving a synthesis of the dualities of life. Ray (1967) further adds: "Worldliness and spirituality are complementary not antagonistic in Nepali thought. In the same way, perhaps life and art, the religious and secular, even Buddhism and Brahmanism are not separate entities (p.11). These early paintings are worshipped as icons of divinity. Brown (1912) writes: "Nepalese artist either elevates the observer by the transcendental nature of his celestial conceptions, or terrorizes him into docility by his suggestions of purgatory (p.130). The artworks inspire awe and veneration more than pleasure (Pal, 1975). Thus, they are worshipped rather than admired (Sharma, 2017). *Prajnaparamita*, *Paramartha Namasangiti*, *Karandavyuha*, *Dharanisamgraha*, *Gandavyuha* and *Pancaraksa* are some of the illuminated Buddhist manuscripts (Uprety, 1992). *Visnudharma*, *Shiva Purana*, *Devimahatmya*, *Bhagavata Mahapurana*, and the *Ramayana* are some illuminated Hindu manuscripts. *Visnudharma* manuscript (11 century) presents ten incarnations of lord Vishnu like fish, tortoise, boar and *Narasimha* (half man, half lion). The god looks like animals but behaves like a human being (Pal, 1985). This is the anthropomorphic character of these paintings. The animals have the human attributes.

*Paubhas* are painted on rectangular clothe and worshipped as icon of divinity (Regmi, 1965). These artworks have sacred subject matters. Due to their flexible medium, *paubhas* can be hung on the wall or carried

or stored rolling them (Sharma 2009). In the *paubha* paintings, figure of principle deity resides at the centre, and subsidiary gods and goddesses are around the central figure (Pal, 1978). The figures, images and symbols are presented with symmetry, balance and visual order to create aesthetic effect.

Some *paubhas* are found in the form of *mandala*. *Mandala* has a well-ordered geometric structure, and it is also used as an instrument for concentration and meditation (Shakya, 2000). The visuals in the periphery lead the viewers toward the principle deity at the center of the *mandala*. Kramrisch (1964) remarks that *mandalas* are the "ritual aids on the way toward the center of the cosmos and self" (p.44). Cosmos and self are supposed to coincide in the image of main divinity of the visual composition. In *Vishnumandala* (dated 1420), four-armed figure of lord Vishnu with Laxmi is on the lotus flower at the centre of the *mandala* (Sharma, 2014). *Navadurga Mandala*, *Kalacakra Mandala*, *Chandra Mandala* and *Surya Mandala* have similar structures to some extent.

*Patchitra* narrates the events from myths in the visual form. Narrative paintings on a large horizontal band tell the story. The length of the narrative subject matter determines the length of the painting. Murals are painted on the walls of temples and palaces (Pandey, 2046). The paintings on the walls of the Hanumandhoka palace present the narrative scenes from *Devimahatmya*. The visuals are about the battle between goddess Durga and buffalo demon. The images of ocean, mountain, clouds, and snowy peaks create a sort of landscape in the background of the painting.

The landscapes and portraits of the rulers created during the Rana rule are different from symbolic, mystical and didactic religious paintings. These are the subject matters of worldly objects and events. Realistic portraits emphasized the fine representations of real human figures (Pandey, 1968). The portraits of royal family and aristocrats appeared without much religious imagery in the visuals. Well finished form, detailed delineation, smooth gradation of colors and the appropriate use of light, shade, proportion and perspective make the painting realistic. Western media like canvas and oil colors and realistic techniques influenced the portrait painting in the Rana rule. Rana rulers like Jung Bahadur and Chandra Sumshere visited Europe and got their portraits made by western artists (Singh, 1976, p.35). Nepali artists like Bhajuman Chitrakar and Dirghaman Chitrakar accompanied the rulers in the foreign land. The exposure of rulers and artists to western art forms fascinated them. As a result, the Ranis

made these artists paint their own portraits in western style. Later, Tej Bahadur Chitrakar and Chandraman Maskey got academic training in the British India. Pal (1978) remarks that the paintings of the Rana rule were "rendered entirely in the European tradition" (p.132). Along with portraits, some landscapes and scenes of hunting of wild animals were painted using realistic style to decorate the walls of their palaces and theatre.

Western influence in Nepali art became more intensive after the end of autocratic Rana rule in 1950s and 60s (Singh, 1976). In the democratic atmosphere, the cross-flow of artists increased. Many contemporary Nepali artists like Lain Singh Bangdel, Laxman Shrestha, Pramila Giri, Dipak Simkhada and Urmila Upadhyay went to western cities for art training (Sharma, 2019). While returning, they brought western techniques of painting from the art movements like impressionism, expressionism, cubism, surrealism and abstractionism (Sharma, 2018). Impressionists captured the artist's impression of the scene in a particular moment using fragmented lines, colors, dots, dabs and patches. Expressionists distorted images and colors to express inner emotions. Cubists simplified the forms using only geometric shapes like square, rectangle, triangle, circle and cylinder. Surrealists juxtaposed the contrary images as in dream. The free association of images and symbols makes the works shocking. Abstractionists disconnected art form from external objects or recognizable content (Subedi, 1992). Contemporary Nepali artists also shared these western techniques of art and created plural and open-ended compositions.

## **METHODS AND MATERIALS**

This research is qualitative, for it is based on interpretation of artworks, and the interpretation of paintings may be different depending on the viewers, time and context. Secondary sources like books on art history and journal articles have been used for background of the study and historical survey. Nepali paintings are primary sources. After viewing and analyzing the paintings from different periods, transitions have been traced in the sequence and trends of artworks. Art galleries, museums and art studios are visited to collect primary data. Thesis statement has been derived on the basis of interpretation of works. This is a comparative study, for it takes different trends, techniques, forms and media from the history of Nepali art and traces the points of departure from the early trends and techniques. Classification of Nepali paintings in various ways, and seeing transitions and differences among these types reveals the conceptual

framework of this study. The classification includes the types of artworks like manuscript illumination, *paubha*, *patchitra*, mural, portrait, landscape, figurative composition, abstract composition, religious painting, secular painting, traditional work and modern work. These art forms appear in different phases of art history, and certain elements contribute for transitions. In some cases, transitions in art are connected to transitions in political and social changes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Transitions in Terms of Form, Content and Media

The shift from objective representation to subjective expression, homemade colors to oil colors, and religious contents to secular subject matters are the major transitions in the history of Nepali paintings. Many transitions exist in the history of Nepali paintings in terms of their technique, form, content, media and material. The study of manuscript illuminations, *paubha*, *mandala* and *patchitra* depicts formal transitions. The study of early paintings and the paintings of the Rana rule shows the transitions in contents along with form and media. There is the transition of techniques in realistic art and contemporary paintings. Despite the similarities in subject matters, manuscripts are on paper but *paubhas* are painted on clothe in more organized manner. *Paubhas* have linear forms whereas *mandalas* have geometric structure. *Paubhas* and *mandalas* focus on particular divine figure whereas *patchitras* narrate the mythical stories in visual forms. Traditional paintings are religious whereas most of the contemporary paintings are secular. Similarly, traditional paintings have aerial perspective and flat colors but the paintings of the Rana rule have linear perspective and three dimensional forms with light and shade. Early arts have closed form with defined center whereas contemporary forms are open-ended with the possibility of multiple interpretations. Realistic arts objectively represent the external world but expressionist, cubist and surrealist art forms present the reality in distorted mode. Abstract art goes a step further and disconnects itself from recognizable external reality. As time goes ahead, the transitions appear in the history of Nepali arts.

*Prajnaparamita* manuscript (dated 1054) presents scenes from Buddha's life. The visuals include Buddha's nativity, his meditation under the tree, devil's temptation, the miracle of the snake, offering honey to Buddha by a monkey, his visit to mother after nirvana, taming the mad

elephant and *mahaparinirvana* (the final departure from this world). The paintings narrate the life of Buddha in visual form.

In the visual composition, figure of Buddha emerges from Maya Devi, immediately walks seven steps and stands on the lotus flower. This scene is magical and mystical, for the newborn baby takes seven steps. This symbolizes the divinity of the figure. In the next scene, a monkey offers honey to meditating Buddha and jumps into a well. Instead of drowning, it is flown to the heaven by a cloud due to its kindness to Buddha. Thus, this visual composition is didactic. In the picture of Buddha's nativity, Brahma offers grains to the Buddha and Indra gifts him a fish. The scene suggests the religions harmony in Buddhism and Hinduism.

*Paubha* paintings were developed after manuscript illuminations. Manuscripts illustrations are on paper whereas the *paubhas* are on clothe. This is the transition in medium. Manuscript paintings are miniature in size but *paubhas* are in large scale. *Pabubhas* and *mandalas* have central divinity and carefully organized compositions but the pictures on the pages of manuscripts lack such organic organization. This is the transition in organization. In terms of aesthetic elements, *paubhas* are more developed than manuscript paintings. *Paubhas* are in square shape, and have principal divinity at the center whereas *patchitras* narrate the myths on long horizontal band. The transition is in subject matter and shape.

*Nritesvara paubha* (dated 1659) suggests the union of sacred and profane concepts. Figure of lord Shiva is in erotic union with his Shakti. Simultaneously, they are in rhythmic dance along with the union. Many cohesive images reinforce the principal motif of the union. The figure of Shiva's head is in the form of *Shivalinga*. The top of the Shiva shrine looks like an erect phallus. The images of lotus and *vajra* in the hands of couple have erotic connotations, for *vajra* symbolizes *purusa* or male principle and lotus symbolizes *prakriti* or female principle.

Toward the end of the Malla period, there was gradual shift from religious contents to secular subject matters of the traditional paintings. Landscapes and portraits were included in *paubha* paintings. The secular elements take more and more space and ultimately the paintings become free from religious connotations with the beginning of the rule of Shah Kings. The portraits of the royalty stand independently. This trend was further developed in the Rana rule and it reached the climax. Traditional paintings have aerial perspective and two dimensional colors whereas the

portraits and landscapes of the Rana rule are realistic due to the appropriate application of linear perspective, proportion, light and shade.

Traditional arts are magical and symbolic whereas the paintings of the Rana period are objective and realistic. The early artworks refer to the myths whereas the portraits and landscapes are the objective representations of real people and places. Homemade colors were replaced with oil colors. The arts moved toward the court of the Ranas and the king's palace from religious and cultural communities. The paintings are no longer didactic but the representations of the aristocrat's life to satisfy their own interest. Social responsibility through art is replaced with the eulogy and flatter of the personal glory. The autocratic politics is reflected in the artworks. Art is used to satisfy the dictators. In this period, the art of portrait painting reaches to the climax.

The artworks of the Rana period were influenced by western realistic techniques and media like oil color and canvas. This is the reflection of contemporary politics, for the Rana rulers were subdued by the British India. The crumbling of native Nepali culture began in this period in distinct manner. It is even visible in architecture, fashion and manner of the characters of that time.

Next transition in Nepali painting is clearly seen in the 1960s with the flooding in of the western techniques of impressionism, expressionism, cubism, dadaism, abstractionism and surrealism (Hegewald 1996). The fall of the Rana rule and the beginning of democracy in 1950 opened the border for all. As a result, the cross flow of artists and people became more intensive. Then, more western influences entered the country. The trend begun in the Rana period was further developed. The creation of traditional arts declined and the techniques of creation are on the verge of extinction. Most of the Nepali artists follow the western techniques and forms, for they think they are modern and we are primitive. This is a sense of self humiliation and guilt. Imitating them, we became like them, we appeared like them but actually we are not them. This is only pretention and drama. Thus, we are nowhere. The state of art is reflected in food, fashion, culture and education as well.

Packaged junk foods and sugary drinks replaced the fresh foods from farm paving the way for life threatening diseases. National industries were sold or made invalid to facilitate the import so that the country would become dependent on others. National entrepreneurs were discouraged and

humiliated in the name of open market. Our education system has produced such individuals that desert their home and farm, and see their future in serving the foreign land. There is a sort of pride, boast and glorious feeling in service. The national politics lacks confidence on itself as the artists do not have faith on themselves (Sharma 2021). The figure does not emerge but it is carved taking the assistance of the outsider. The figure sustains with the help of others. This is the significant transition in Nepali art and life that has led to the dissolution of the self. The existence depends on the grace of others. Nepali paintings in present time have been highly influenced by western techniques and forms. It is difficult to trace the identity of these artworks. There is a chain of transitions in the history of Nepali art but the impact of these transitions is yet to be studied in detail. The destination of this development is yet to be identified.

## CONCLUSION

The history of Nepali paintings has many transitions in terms of form, technique, content and media. The chain of transitions can be seen in artworks like manuscript illumination, *paubha*, *patchitra*, portrait, landscape and contemporary artworks. *Paubha* paintings depart from manuscript illuminations, for they are larger and focused on central divinity with more organized composition. *Patchitras* break away from *paubhas* to narrate mythical stories in long horizontal band. Portrait paintings in the period of the Rana rule discard the religious contents in flat forms and follow the western realistic technique to present secular subject matters. The mysticism of myth was replaced by referential figures of the external world. After 1960s, there is intensive western influence in painting making the works more expressive, abstract and open-ended. In some cases, the transition in art has been the analogy of transition in life, politics and contemporary society.

## REFERENCES

- Aran, L. (1978). *The art of Nepal: A guide to the masterpieces of sculptures, painting and woodcarving*. Sahayogi.
- Brown, P. (1912). *Picturesque Nepal*. Adam and Charles Black.
- Dwivedi, P. K. (1982). *Miniature paintings of national museum Kathmandu*. Kathmandu: National Museum.
- Hegewald, J. A. B. (1996). Our studio is nature'-The work of the New Art Circle in Nepal. *Journal of the Nepal Research Centre*. 10, 95-101.



- Kramrisch, S. (1964). *The Art of Nepal*. New York: Asia House Gallery.
- Pal, P. (1970). *Vaisnava iconology in Nepal: A study in art and religion*. The Asiatic Society.
- Pal, P. (1975). *Nepal: Where the Gods are Young*. Asia House Gallery.
- Pal, P. (1978). *The arts of Nepal part II*. Tuta Sub Aegide Allas.
- Pal, P. (1985). *Arts of Nepal: A Catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Collection*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Wilshire Boulevard and California UP.
- Pandey, R. K. (2046 B.S.). Identification of the Nepalese art. *Kalakriti* 25 (14), 29-41.
- Pandey, R. N. (1968). *A brief survey of the Nepalese art forms*. Department of Culture.
- Ray, A. (1967). A note on the character of the plastic art of Nepal." *Journal of the Tribhuvan University*, 3(2), 10-15.
- Ray, A. (1973). *Arts of Nepal*. Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1973.
- Regmi, D. R. (1965). *Medieval Nepal*. Foroma K. L. Mukhopadhyay.
- Shakya, M. B. (2000). *Sacred art of Nepal: Nepalese Paubha painting, past and present*. Handicraft Association of Nepal.
- Sharma, Y. P. (2009). Contemporary Nepali paintings: Hybridity and negotiation. Diss. Tribhuvan U. <https://elibrary.tucl.edu.np/handle/123456789/5965>
- Sharma, Y. P. (2014). *Nepali painting: A critical analysis*. Nepal Academy of Fine Arts.
- Sharma, Y. P. (2017). Didactic visual narrations in Nepali manuscript illuminations. *SIRJANĀ—A Journal on Arts and Art Education*, 4(1), 146-154. <https://doi.org/10.3126/sirjana.v6i1.39676>
- Sharma, Y. P. (2018). Contemporary Nepali arts: Ambivalence and in-between-ness. *SIRJANĀ—A Journal on Arts and Art Education*, 5(1): 64-73. <https://doi.org/10.3126/sirjana.v5i1.39745>
- Sharma, Y. P. (2019). Dynamics of contemporary Nepali paintings. *SIRJANĀ—A Journal on Arts and Art Education*, 6(1), 78-87. <https://doi.org/10.3126/sirjana.v6i1.39676>
- Sharma, Y. P. (2020). Tracing the traditional contents and forms in contemporary Nepali paintings. *Molung Educational Frontier*, 10 (special), 169-180. <https://doi.org/10.3126/mef.v10i1.34040>

- Sharma, Y. P. (2021). Contemporary Nepali arts: Some shocking trends. *Journal of Fine Arts Campus*, 3(1), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jfac.v3i1.42488>
- Singh, N. B. (1976). *Samasamaik Nepali chitralakako itihās*. Royal Nepal Academy.
- Subedi, A. (1995). Nepali art: Nepali utopia. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 22(2), 113-130.
- Uprety, P. (1992). Medieval Buddhist art in Nepal: Penetration of Pal influences in the Himalayas. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 19 (2), 167-175.