



A typical key-sketched of a *bilampu* about the wedding of a princess, late 19th century circa.
Collection: Madan Chitrakar, Kathmandu

‘Bilampau’: A Heritage – Long Forgotten

Madan Chitrakar

Abstract

Unlike some other forms in Nepali Painting, an earlier form known as ‘Bilampau’ remains unknown, relatively. This sense of apathy is regardless of the fact that this genre also boasts many unique features that deserves further academic explorations and need attract deeper discussions. To highlight its importance and explain the diversities, a few select representative examples are chosen to argue.

As an earliest example, two painted wood-covers of sacred manuscripts dated 12th century are proffered, how early efforts were made to make a visual story in early medieval times. This is followed by a famous visual story based on Buddhist beliefs for telling Buddhist stories: and now, how it has been reduced to an annual display or as a mere ritual. A visual story of Lord Krishna remains yet one more example. It is created and based on Hindu epic Mahabharata. But the most unique and startling example cited herein has a very unique character. It is created as a visual travel guide or a suggestive map to a prospective pilgrim or a traveler. At present, this exquisite work is in the collection of a museum abroad.

Keywords: bilampau, paubha, painting

To a lay art lover, unlike more familiar terms in Nepali Art like a Paubha or Thangka, the term ‘Bilampau’ may sound little weird and unfamiliar. This is because it has not been equally popular and obviously not been able to attract more discussions, in equal terms. This is strange; and in spite of the fact that this art form too, has yielded some exquisite works of art. Some examples shall be discussed here later. To be sure, the unique examples found in this facet of Nepali Art boast no less a significant role

in enriching of the art, albeit smaller in number.

Over the centuries, since the hoary times when unknown early forms of painting may have had appeared first, in the art of painting in Nepal had manifested in many forms and formats. Aside from certain likelihood of simplistic tribal forms first, the art for sure, had evolved in multiple formats over the centuries – from the earliest dated manuscript illuminations or covers to public art in

walls – called murals, and later to more philosophic and complex forms – painted in cloth, known as Paubha Art. But what had remained unique – regardless of the changing times and the forms, was a shared common spirit – behind all the art. A work of art of painting whatsoever form, essentially then meant imagining of a chosen deity or later or a geometrical diagram where chosen deities are invoked and assembled; all within a confined diagram. In short, a work of painting for centuries essentially constituted or served as an instrument of worship and for a collective spiritual need.

And regardless of all the diversities in forms and formats found in the evolution, however, nothing proved more iconic than the famed ‘Paubha’ Art. Painted in cloth and hung vertically, Paubha emerged as the most popular form in Nepali Art – in the Newar tradition.

Surely however, we are not here to discuss it except that an art form known as ‘Bilampau’ – lesser known than a Paubha, also has had come with many close similarities in features as of a Paubha. Like a Paubha, Bilampau is also an art – painted in cloth and had appeared almost simultaneously: and also has diverse subject matter. Efforts shall be made to see the notable peculiarities of the tradition – how it evolved its style and the contents. Also, it’s expected to study its supposed early rise to the time – when its popularity relatively declined.

Bilampau

A safest way to describe or define a ‘Bilampau’, historically, it is as an interesting offshoot of the well known mainstream art – the Paubha tradition.

For, the core idea behind both the forms appears to have been envisioned almost simultaneously in the early first millennium; and both, for the spiritual needs of the day. Secondly, both the forms seemed evolved as a physical object – to be a portable work of art, easy to be carried from a place to another – according to a desired need. However, some notable features and characters set the two apart – leading to independent identities, in the narratives of Art, here.

Although, like a Paubha, Bilampau is also a painting in cloth, as said earlier; but unlike the earlier, it presents a continual set of imageries – in a row, depicting mostly divine characters. And unlike the earlier, however it’s a long scroll – usually oblong and hung or scrolled horizontally, while in display. According to Anne Vergati (2004), a Bilampau usually measures between 2-3 metres; the assessment may have been as a result of the examples available to her. But, the diversity found in the measurements of Bilampaus suggest during the medieval times, a Bilampau apparently, is commissioned with the measurement of a particular space in mind. That is, the space available in a designated wall – to hang the desired painting. Both the length and the width are also determined by the space available. Precisely for the reason, the number of registers in a Bilampau, are also determined or designed. While some are in a single panel or a register, others are having as many – with four registers or more.

Motives and the usage

The most striking uniqueness of a Bilampau is the motive; and the purpose of usage. It essentially evolved as a

narrative visual to tell a story in pictures. While a Paubha quintessentially stands as an integral part of religious paraphernalia – an instrument to worship, Bilampau is never considered so. There has never been any evidence of a Bilampau, being used for this purpose. It's always meant to be on display – to explain visually. While on display, it's there, to remind or to explain an episode of story-telling: the sequence of events – more vivid and with more clarity. Or Bilampau would always seek to lead the audience to a new imaginative world – as being told in the story.

No wonder, this form of art or the genre is mostly described by the writers as 'narrative scroll'. Like in the Paubha tradition, the creation of Bilampau is well guided by the earlier sketch-books – known as 'Thyaa-Saphu' or folded book. Many such master sketch-books have been found which contain detailed instructions – on the art. It clearly presents or describes visually how each event or episode is to be chosen and how it is to be presented serially. The instructions include rudimentary sketches of the elements or the subject with added

words on choice of colors, in some cases. In other words, it very much resembles like an earlier form or a precursor of present day comic books.

As according to the sketch guide provided, as said above, a Bilampau, almost always begins with a figure of a story teller appearing first. In case if a story is from the beliefs of Hinduism, Lord Ganesha is presented as the story teller. Herein a rough draft of an image Lord Ganesha is seen narrating the story of life of Lord Krishna. In the subsequent images, there are the important sequels from his life story. Similarly, a drawing of Lord Buddha is found as the story teller – and the audience is described as the heavenly bodies – gods. He is seen here telling the story of King Vissantara – story from the previous life of the Lord himself. Usually the popular themes for Buddhist art are the scenes from Buddha's previous lives – known as 'Jataka tales': or the life story of the Lord Buddha himself. Both these examples are found in the earlier sketch-books – maintained by the established 'Chitrakar' families – the traditional painters, of Newar society. Many families may still



Lord Ganesha is seen first in a life-story of Lord Krishna – from a medieval sketch-book, 18th century.



Lord Buddha as the story-teller – from a medieval sketch-book, early 18th century.

have inherited such sketch-books from their unknown ancestors.

In many instances of the Bilampaus found however, the unwritten norms are not always being followed or observed obediently. The visual of actual story is found straight with the depiction of an earliest memorable event – as found in the story. It's usually a marriage scene or the birth of an important character of the story; then followed by the later sequence of events or episodes.

Understandably the art of story-telling has hoary origins as old or as early as the human civilization. And no one knows for sure, when men learnt to tell a story in pictures, or with the help of visuals. More so, if the purpose is to tell a story with didactic purpose or as a reminder of important episode, or preach the morals found in a story.

The Early Forms

In Nepali Art, one of the earliest evidences of a pictorial story is found on the life of Lord Buddha – dating 11th century. But when seen in the wider contexts of this idea in the Indian sub-continent, it takes us back to much earlier times – as early as the 2nd century BCE. Attributed to this period, scenes from the Jataka tales – stories from the Buddha's previous lives, are found in the stone relief carvings in the in the early Buddhist Stupas in Bharhut and Sanchi in India.

Back to Bilampau, to discuss its notable features and the peculiarities, select few interesting works are chosen to contextualize here. Modest efforts will be made to discuss each in chronological order. As said earlier, one of the earliest examples of a narrative visual in Nepal



Stone-carved relief, 2nd century BCE, Bharhut, India. Here Queen Maya Devi, the mother of Gautama Buddha, dreams her son entered her womb as a white elephant.

dates back to the 12th century; but it is not in a scroll form that has been described earlier. Instead it is painted on wood as the two covers of Buddhist manuscripts known as Prajnaparamita. Here in the two covers, are the illustrative scenes from the life of Sakyamuni Buddha. This is unlike in India, when such stories are found in palm-leaf pages. Here, the illustrations depict twelve episodes, unlike the eight principal episodes in India, with six memorable events from the life of Lord Buddha on each cover. On the first cover, the nativity of Buddha – birth of the Lord followed by the disturbances created by the evil spirit Mara during the Lord's meditation under the Bodhi tree. And it is followed by a scene of his enlightenment, first sermon in the deer park at Sarnath. And the two last events depict the Lord being protected from a storm by the



Scenes from the life-story of Lord Buddha – painted on wood, 12th century.

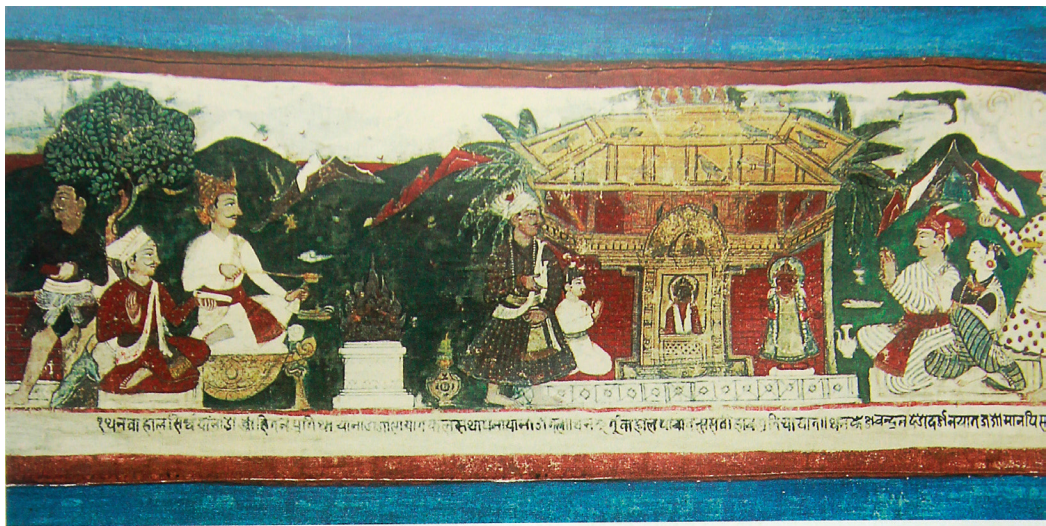
serpent Mucchalinda and a monkey with offerings to the Lord. Similarly, in the second cover, one would note the successive events of his preaching and is concluded by an image of his demise – known as ‘Parinirvana – departure to his heavenly abode’. And it concludes the entire life story of Lord Buddha.

Here, each image represents an independent event and complete by itself – complete with elaborate background of tree and other decorative foliage; and is followed by imagery of successive episodes – separated by decorative columns. Regardless of its relatively diminutive dimension, however, it suggests by then, an idea to narrate a story visually had well taken roots in Nepali art milieu – revealing unmistakable stylistic influences from the Pala School. Regardless of all, the core idea behind the art unmistakably is to narrate a story.

One of the well known and popular examples of Bilampau tradition is a long scroll – from a Buddhist Vihar known as Itumbahal and Paravarta Mahavihara in Sanskrit, located in the old part of Kathmandu. This exquisite work is dated early 18th century. Believed to be a copy work from an original from

much earlier work, this scroll narrates a locally evolved Buddhist tale. And it leads to a speculation that the tradition could be traced to much earlier times, for sure. The scroll as per the long inherited tradition is displayed every year – through the entire length of one side of the Vihar – the monastery, during a holy month *Gunla* – according to Buddhist calendar (usually falling between July-August). Presented in a single register, the narrative visual is read – viewed left to right. Each picture of an event is separated by trees or floral barrier – following the tradition of the 11th century manuscripts, as described earlier. The visual narrates a harrowing tale of a local king – likely a chieftain who had to face many personal ordeals, in addition to solve a public menace created by an evil genie ‘*Gurimapa*’. Because of its interesting story plot and the stylistic presentation, the scroll, had had come to stay as one of the iconic examples of the tradition in Newar Painting.

According to the evidences available, many of the earlier Bilampaus had had been created or commissioned to be meant for display in the designated walls in the confines of Buddhist Vihars. And it explains the dimension longer



Details from a famous Bilampau of Itumbahal, Kathmandu.

length of the paintings, and this is where, most likely, tales of Buddha's life or the stories of his earlier life were being narrated quite often, by the learned head of the particular Vihar. In the later years, apparently, the tradition of such

story-telling may have lost or waned its popularity considerably; the display of Bilampau, was reduced to only during the holy Buddhist month – as an annual event or as a part of the ritual.

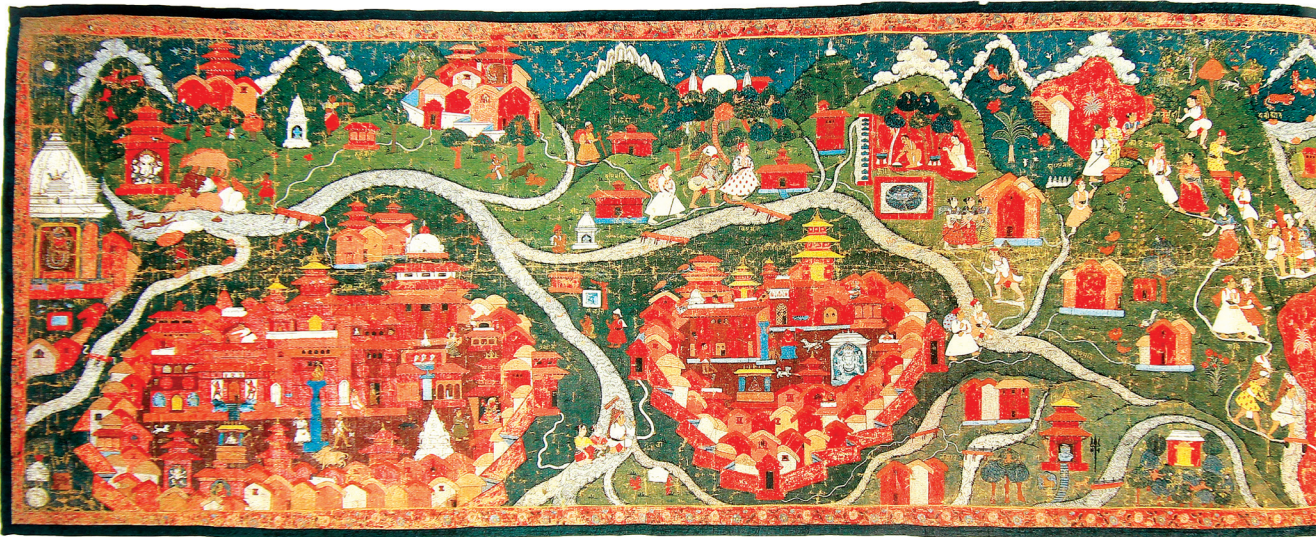


Life-story of Lord Krishna, early 19th century.
Collection: Madan Chitrakar, Kathmandu

But in later times, obviously, Nepal witnessed the phenomenal rise of Shaivite beliefs during the 16th and 19th century. The tradition of story-telling had taken visibly a new turn to narrating popular tales from Hinduism – and now, more in public spaces like in raised platforms known as ‘Dabalis’ or in public inns known as ‘Falechaa.’ Here the Bilampaus were found more useful tool – before a lay group of public crowd. The art was customized as a backdrop of the story-teller; so it explained the story with more clarity to the public. And it resulted in the diverse customized dimension of the later Bilampaus.

An example cited here has a visual story from the life of Lord Krishna – a popular

protagonist in the tales associated with Hindu beliefs. The peculiarity of this example is that this work has an unusual dimension – most likely customized to a certain designated wall. And it is unusual, also because the narrative story presents four registers – with a large centerpiece image of Lord Krishna with his beloved Radha. This is so unlike of the earlier examples, found. And this work is created considerably in later times – late 19th century – evidenced by the stylistic presentation with heavy influences from the Rajput School and the liberal presence of neo-classical buildings as the background material. More so, the attire and the headgear, obviously suggest it belongs certainly to a post Malla period of Nepali history.



A general view of Kathmandu city – details from the scroll in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts, USA.

But one of the most unique examples found in the diversity of contents and subject matter found in the tradition of Bilampau art is from a collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts. Titled ‘Pilgrimage to Gosainkunda’ – this unusually a long work is dated 1775.⁵ This is immediately after the fall of the Mallas. The longer dimension suggests this work is also measured to a certain length – from a particular site where the virtues (Punya) earned by making a pilgrimage to Gosainkunda, which is explained or narrated by a learned pundit. And the visual is begun with a figure of a temple pagoda where Lord Ganesha is seen enshrined – in the sanctum Santorum. Designed as a visual travel guide, instead of an event of a story, here the story is begun by the beginning of a journey. Herein the start is made from ancient city of Lalitpur. The next stop of the journey is the

medieval city of Kathmandu. Both the places are identified with the respective known monuments and the architectural skylines. And both the cities are seen protected by the defensive ramparts all around. Over the years today, such defensive walls do not exist. Most likely, they had been demolished later to the ground by the conquering rulers.

Aside from its unique and an unlikely subject matter from the usual, this work serves to represent a topographical map – how a pilgrimage is begun and completed. The starting is shown made at the city of Lalitpur, and followed by subsequent stops in Kathmandu first and then to Nuwakot – finally to the holy destination. The pilgrimage is complete with a holy dip in the sacred lake of Gosainkunda in the north-west of the capital valley.

By every account, in view with the



Ganesha – details from the scroll in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Arts, USA.

diversity in contents and the style of presentations, the tradition of Bilampau art stands as one of the unique examples and an important part of Newar art heritage. Unfortunately today, desired amount of discussions and detailed research works are yet to be made.

References

- Pal, P. (2004). *Himalayas: An Aesthetic Adventure*. University of California Press: USA.
- Fisher, Robert E. (1993). *Buddhist Art & Architecture*. London: UK.
- Vajracharya, Gautam V. (2004). 'Meet the Genies from Kathmandu', P. Pal, ed. *Nepal Old Images*. Mumbai: New Insights
- Vergatti, Anne. (2004). 'A Newar Pilgrimage to the Lake of Gosaikunda'. P. Pal, ed. *Nepal Old Images*. Mumbai: New Insights.