THE BRITAIN-NEPAL SOCIETY

Journal

Number 41

2017

Printed by HARTS Business Solutions T: 01799 510101
www.hartsdirect.co.uk

DEVELOPING ASPECTS ON NEPALESE PAUBHĀ PAINTING: THE PICTURESQUE CASE OF RAJ MAN SINGH CITRAKAR

By
Andrea de la Rubia Gómez-Moran,
adlrubia@hotmail.com, adelarub@ucm.es
TRAMA. Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

(Paubha paintings are mainly representations of Bhuddist gods and mandalas with some Hindu paintings as practised by the Citrakars (caste of painters). This paper looks at the influences of traditional art and more modern artistic developments. The author is currently studying for a PhD in Nepali art and its relevance to more recent politics. Ed.)

The definition of Nepal as a kind of 'Shangri-La' began to evolve shortly after the Anglo-Nepalese war of 1814-1816 that took place on the southern borders of Nepal and East Indian Company areas of influence in Oudh and parts of Kumaon and Garwhal that had been the annexed by the expansionist Nepal Durbar. Fighting took place in the Terai and the jungle-clad Siwalik hills. This led in time to the establishment of the first British hill stations along the range, of the middle hills such as Darjeeling, as well as the British Residency in Kathmandu. Since those times coincided with a period in which portrayal of landscape was highly appreciated by western society, the works of those foreign poets and painters who started to represent Nepal and the Himalayas, were very much influenced by the picturesque trend which appeared on the scene as a useful means to define the chromatic effects, luminous changes and narration of a romantic style of landscape painting. Such idea was defined in the late 18th century by Willian Gilpin as "something in between the beautiful and the sublime", thus the enchanting way to represent the roughness, or the uncannyness, of either a landscape or an architectural scene[1].

Nevertheless, the picturesque concept applied to the Himalayas sheer landscape corresponded to a later interpretation, in accordance with Ruskin´s manual *Modern Painters*. Here the author combined the picturesque idealism with a more critical and aesthetic appreciation of the environment. The concept of landscape painting was thought up to be something to be felt rather than seen; hence this imagery introduced a new approach to the representation of the Himalayas, more in accordance with the Shangri-La point of view[2]. Consequently, British painters started to introduce additional elements such as romantic pastoral scenes, as well as transforming the mountains' roughness into vaporous formations, diverting the Himalayas into dynamic spectacles frozen in time. Therefore, dense layers of white clouds concealed the sheer scenario and blocked the viewers' sight, whose only alternative was to imagine what could be behind those mystical mists[3].

[1] *William Gilpin, Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape (London: R. Blamire, 1972).*
[2] *John Ruskin, Modern painters (Boston: Dana Estes, 1990).*
[3] *Romita Ray, "Misty Mediations: Spectral Imaginings and the Himalayan Picturesque," Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 3, no. 11 (2012), http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn12/ray-spectral-imaginings-and-the-himalayan-pictures*

After World War I the resentment against modern societies, industrialism and progress, increasingly popularized the Himalayas as a retreat to solitude and reconnection with nature. Travellers would abandon the safeness of distant observation and picturesque depictions, for a more adventurous and closer approximation. It was in this context when adventurous figures, such as Lama Govinda or Alexandra David- Neel, diverted popular thought through their exotic novels and accounts of their illuminating experiences in the Himalayas. Walking into the mist they intended to discover what was really behind it, but subconsciously their views were conditioned by determining spiritual and oriental thoughts. For instance, Lama Govinda describes his journey as "dream-like" where "…rain, fog, and clouds transformed the virgin forest, the rocks and mountains, gorges and precipices into a world of uncannily changing, fantastic forms, which appeared and dissolved with such suddenness that one began to doubt their reality as well as one's own"[4]. Particularly after Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay's conquest of Mount Everest in 1953, rushes of expeditions followed up along with film crews and photographers. The 'highest mountains of the world' started to be featured in western books and films while imaginative tales on Asian mysteries were increasingly demanded by western society. One of the earliest and more famous was *Lost Horizon,* written by by James Hilton in 1933[5], where for the first time the idea of Shangri-La was conceived in a lost enchanting city in the middle of the Himalayas, and whose imagery would later be adopted as part of Kathmandu's international symbolism[6]. It was due to the increasing foreign demands on the Himalaya´s exotic culture that Nepalese *Citrakar* artists, located in tourist areas such as Thamel, found a new promoter in the tourism industry and consequently started the massive production of mountaineering kitsch oil and acrylic paintings, while apparently trying to follow the picturesque parameters established by the British landscapists in the previous century[7]. In such a way, while controlled European images of the Himalayas were produced transforming the landscape into a sort of souvenir, Nepal framed her own definition as an oriental Shangri-La re-absorbing eastern exotic views for her own commercial interests in a gradual process of international possession of the Himalayan Range[8].

Market at Swayambhunath., 2015, Kathmandu.(Author)

[4] Anagarika Govinda, The way of the White Clouds (London: Overlook Books, 2005), p. 42.
[5] Hilton, James. Lost Horizon. United Kingdom: Macmillan, 1933.
[6] William Gilpin, Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape (London: R. Blamire, 1972), pp. 14-16
[7] In Calinescu´s words, the Kitsch as a false imitation is an "aesthetical way of lying" according to the middle-classes ideas of beauty as something that can be sold and purchased. Matei Calinescu, Cinco caras de la modernidad. Modernismo, vanguardia, decadencia, kitsch, postmodernismo. Trans. María Teresa Beguiristain (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 222-236.
[8] Sandeep Banerjee, "Not Altogether Unpicturesque: Samuel Bourne and the Landscaping of the Victorian Himalaya," Victorian Literature and Culture 42, (2014): p. 362.

Initially, western realistic concepts, techniques and picturesque ideals were introduced in the *Citrakars'* creative mind-set through the British presence in Kathmandu, due to their collaboration as illustrators for the scientific studies on flora, fauna and cultures of the Himalaya pursued by the Residents through the first part of the 19th and into the 20th century. Such custom had already started years before in British India with the 'Company Painters', local artists, who worked with the British East India Company for similar studies[9]. Within the Himalayan area, an early example of such creative collaboration is the case of Dr Francis Buchanan-Hamilton (1762-1829), who spent a year in the Kathmandu Valley between 1802-1803' as a pioneer in botanical research. He was assisted by an unknown artist from Bengal[10]. Later the British East India Company Resident, Edward Gardner (1784-1861), started a collection of Himalayan plants along with a small team of assistants from India, even creating a garden of native trees and shrubs. But it was not until the 1820´s when Brian Houghton Hodgson (1799-1894) initially appeared in Kathmandu as Assistant Resident[11], when the Valley´s Citrakar painters would start working for the British researchers. Indeed Hodgson, who by 1833 had become Resident, would employ a local staff of ten to twenty of various tongues and races for his studies on Nepalese zoology, ornithology, language, religion and Buddhist culture. Among these he counted on a group of Citrakars trained by him in western techniques. To gain accuracy of their depictions of animal and bird species, plants, tribal ethnicities and Buddhist monuments, Hodgson even provided them with a *Camera Lucida* in order to facilitate their comprehension especially for their architectural drawings.

Since most of Hodgson´s illustrations are unsigned these artists remain unknown. Nevertheless, within the context of Nepalese traditional art, the process of making a religious object is considered an act of devotion and a means to obliterate the ego; the art work is never signed by the painter[12]. The anonymous character of the maker of a piece is something common because the merit of creation is never granted to the painter, but instead to the patron or priest who visualizes the work. The sculpture or painting is usually done as a religious way of gaining spiritual merit and the holy favour of the divinity represented, thus Nepalese traditional art should not be seen as a mere aesthetical purpose, but instead a creative collaboration between the guru who created the work in his imagination and the painter who materializes it. In such context, the *Citrakar* is conceived as a mere instrument who produces the work, even having to go through a series of purifying rituals before pursuing the holy task of depicting the divine being. When extrapolating this context to contemporary times, it could be

[9] Marika Sardar. "Company Painting in Nineteenth-Century India," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. Met Museum (blog), October, 2004, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cpin/hd_cpin.htm

[10] His drawings recorded more than a hundred species of Nepali plants and published in 1825 in Prodromus Florae Nepalensis. Mark F. Watson, "Dr. Francis Buchanan-Hamilton: Pioneer for Nepalese Biodiversity," The Britain-Nepal Society Journal, no. 37 (2013): 31-37.

[11] William.W. Hunter, Life of Brian Houghton Hodgson (London: John Murray, 1896), p. 244.

[12] Staneshwar Timalsina, "Time and Space in Tantric Art." In Nepal. Old Images, New Insights, 2004, ed. Pratapaditya Pal, 21-35 (Mumbai: Mara Publications).

stated that while in ancient times the artists or patrons used to be high-class members of the Royal Family, nobles, merchants or even Tibetan monks, now the merit of creation is seemingly attached to Brian Hodgson himself.
In spite of this, a clear step forward towards the introduction of western ideas regarding the figure of the artist, thus an increasing acknowledgement of the Citrakar as such, is taken when among Hodgson´s paintings some works appear signed in *Nāgarī* script by the well-renowned Raj Man Singh Citrakar. The reason behind why, amongst all Hodgson´s painters, the only one allowed to sign his works was Raj Man Singh, remains a mystery. Apparently, once Hodgson left Kathmandu in 1843 Raj Man Singh Citrakar kept on working for the British Residency being employed by Sir Henry Lawrence until 1846, before following Hodgson to Darjeeling[13]. In addition, there seems to be further recognition in Tursmoney Citrakar, whose signature appears in a single painting located in the Natural History Museum of London. Such a challenging attitude, up to that point, unthinkable within Nepal´s strict social system, was possibly a consequence of Hodgson´s open admiration for the superb accuracy and skill of his Citrakar painters[14]:
"… are they not wondrous work for a Nipalese? I have some more now executing which I dare any artist in Europe to excel and they are rigidly correct in their minutest detail"[15].
Nevertheless, it has to be highlighted that their outstanding capability of drawing with such minuteness, was also a result of

Chandra maṇḍala, late 14th-15th century. (The Metropolitan Museum, New York.)

the *Citrakars'* own background as *paubhā* painters. When analyzing the aesthetical aspects of a *paubhā* while comparing them with those of Raj Man Singh Citrakar's realistic depictions, or even with the contemporary paintings representative of the Himalayan landscapes as souvenirs, the similarities between both traditional and actual style of painting is much closer than it seems at first sight.

The *paubhā,* cotton painting in Newari, appears in Nepal in the 14th century as a portable way to represent Buddhist divinities or *maṇḍalas* exported through the Himalayan passes towards Tibet. Mainly Buddhist, these paintings consist

[13] J. P. Losty, "The architectural monuments of Buddhism," in The Origins of Himalayan Studies: Brian Houghton Hodgson in Nepal and Darjeeling. Ed. David. M. Waterhouse, 77-111 (Royal Asiatic Society Books: Routledge, 2004), p. 99.
[14] Diana Wooldrige, "Painting Nepal: Dr. Henry Ambrose Oldfield and Raj Man Singh," The Britain-Nepal Society Journal, no. 38 (2014): 19.

[15] David. M. Waterhouse, The Origins of Himalayan Studies: Brian Houghton Hodgson in Nepal and Darjeeling (Royal Asiatic Society Books: Routledge, 2004), pp. 137, 138

of figurative representations of the divine . The *paubhā* was done with the commitment to serve as a tool in the self-divinizing tantric ritual; hence every one of its aesthetical aspects is always created following certain rules. On the process of creation, the Citrakar must be extremely precise in following such norms, written on manuscripts and verbal descriptions, through which the divinities' attributes and attitudes are faithfully indicated[16]. One of the most important aspects in traditional art is the theory of rasa, which consists of enhancing of feelings through the aesthetics of the art work. The first Indian texts that spoke about rasa were the Śilpa-śāstras and the purāṇas. Dating from the 7th century, the Visnudharnottara purāṇa constitutes an early analysis of the visual arts in its Citrasutra section, which states that every work of art has to represent particular rasas to evoke particular feelings in the spectator during the ritualistic practice. The rasas are visually represented through colours, facial gestures and postures. Accordingly, the Citrasutra states that every artist should have an adequate knowledge of dance or drama, being such expressions of common features between visual and performing arts.

Citrakar, Raj Man Singh. A group of Newar types, 1843. [17]

One of paubhā´s main characteristics is the brilliance of its colours and lack of shadowy scenarios, since there should not be dark areas in the divine world of illumination. Maybe due to such idea, Raj Man Singh Citrakar seems to have real difficulties in the implementation of shadows or dull colours in his colourful paintings.

In addition, the artist seems to have difficulties in understanding the realistic theories of proportion, as sometimes he seems to apply differing sizes to the figures according to his will and not to the concept of perspective. In Nepalese traditional aesthetics the theory of proportions classifies the figures into different kinds according to their status, with precise instructions of proportions applied to each of them. Indeed, the principal deity would always be depicted in a larger size while Kings and donors would be depicted in sizes according to their status[18].

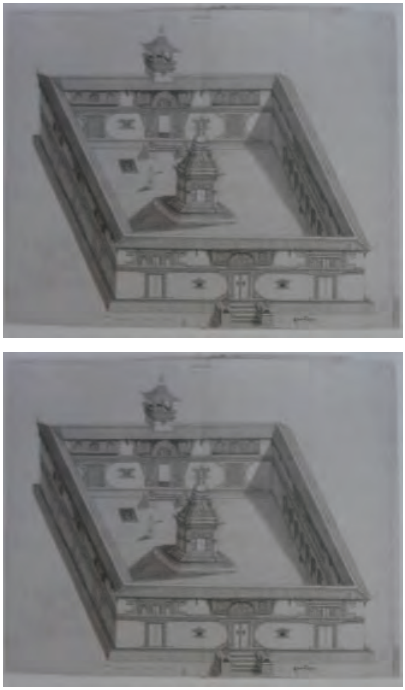
Concepts of perspective are somehow applied in these two vihāras, painted by Raj Man Singh at different times. In the first one, painted in 1825, we see the further end of the building painted significantly wider than the nearest one; while on the second, painted in 1830´s, even if perspective seems to be slightly better resolved, the further end is still wider than the entrance[19]. It is likely that the artist followed here the Nepalese custom of painting the Divinity in a larger size, as it is in this area where the holy shrine is located.

[16] *Pratapaditya Pal, Art of Nepal: a catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum Art Collection (California: Los Angeles County Museum, 1985).*

[17] *Charles Allen, The Prisoner of Kathmandu. Brian Hodgson in Nepal 1820-43 (Great Britain: Haus Publishing, 2015).*

[18] Pal, *Art of Nepal, 34.*

[19] Waterhouse, *The Origins of Himalayan Studies, pp. 90-97.*

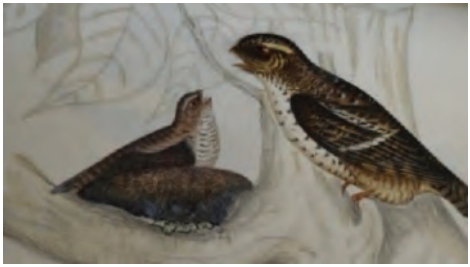


Citrakar, Raj Man Singh Vihāras 1825 & 1830. [20]

The sense of perspective may also be applied through drawings of leaves or temples on a third plain, but nevertheless its plain sense is clearly perceptible to the eye. Hence, even if Raj Man Singh´s paintings represent a clear process of hybridization towards realistic landscape forms, his environments are still conditioned by the Rajput style. Landscape elements started to appear in paubhā paintings as background towards the end of the Malla period, when tibeto-chinese environments appeared as decorations. As the *Citrasutra* indicates:

"…the sky should be shown colourless and full of birds, celestial dome with stars. Earth should be shown with forest regions and watery regions with their traits. A mountain should be shown with assemblages of rocks, peaks, minerals, trees, birds and beasts of prey. Water is to be represented with innumerable fish and tortoises, with lotus-eyed aquatic animals and with other qualities natural to water." [21]

The Nepalese mountain kitsch paintings seem to be following Raj Man Singh Citrakar´s colourful parameters rather than the shadowy picturesque ones. Regarding



Citrakar, Raj Man Singh. Hodgson collection. (Zoological Society of London.)

the application of clouds and mists, these paintings of the Himalayas do so but in a slightly different way, as instead of concealing the Himalayas they enhance them while emphasizing their divine aura. In these souvenirs, perspectives are simply applied through the depiction of some objects on the first plain, such as trees or porters. But as well as the god always being emphasized in *paubhā* painting, here the holy mountain is powerfully brought to the front through the use of snow white colour.

To conclude it could be said that the West's contribution to the development of Nepalese painting aesthetics is to be analysed through the building of Nepal as Shangri-La and the introduction of new techniques, such as oil or acrylic painting. But, as it has been demonstrated, when

[20] Waterhouse, *The Origins of Himalayan Studies.*

[21] Pal, *Art of Nepal, p. 87.*

thinking about these contemporary works from the aesthetical point of view, the parameters of *paubhā* painting are necessary as a basis. Therefore, both Raj Man Singh Citrakar´s paintings and the kitsch Nepalese landscapes are to be considered as developments, not breaks, with the traditional aesthetics growing towards secular representations, although the divine sense is always implicit in them.

References:

Allen, Charles. *The Prisoner of Kathmandu. Brian Hodgson in Nepal* 1820-43. Great Britain: Haus Publishing, 2015.

Banerjee, Sandeep. "Not Altogether Unpicturesque: Samuel Bourne and the Landscaping of the Victorian Himalaya." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 42 (2014): pp 351-368.

Bishop, Peter. *The Sacred Myth of Shangri-La. Tibet, Travel Writting and Western Creation of Sacred Landscape*. New Delhi: Adarsh Enterprises, 2000.

Calinescu, Matei. *Cinco caras de la modernidad. Modernismo, vanguardia, decadencia, kitsch, postmodernismo.* Translated by María Teresa Beguiristain. Durham: Duke University Press, 1987.

Gilpin, William. *Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape.* London: R. Blamire, 1972.

Govinda, Anagarika. *The way of the White Clouds*. London: Overlook Books, 2005.

Hilton, James. *Lost Horizon*. United Kingdom: Macmillan, 1933.

Hunter, William.W. *Life of Brian Houghton Hodgson*. London. John Murray, 1896.

Losty, J. P. "The architectural monuments of Buddhism." *In The Origins of Himalayan Studies: Brian Houghton Hodgson in Nepal and Darjeeling.* Edited by David. M. Waterhouse, 77-111. Royal Asiatic Society Books: Routledge, 2004.

Pal, Pratapaditya. *Art of Nepal: a catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum Art Collection.* California: Los Angeles County Museum, 1985.

Ray, Romita. "Misty Mediations: Spectral Imaginings and the Himalayan Picturesque." *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 3, no. 11 (2012), http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn12/ray-spectral-imaginings-and-the-himalayan-picturesque

Ruskin, John. *Modern painters*. Boston: Dana Estes, 1990.

Timalsina, Staneshwar. "Time and Space in Tantric Art." In *Nepal. Old Images, New Insights,* 2004, edited by Pratapaditya Pal, 21-35. Mumbai: Mara Publications.

Waterhouse, David. M. *The Origins of Himalayan Studies: Brian Houghton Hodgson in Nepal and Darjeeling.* Royal Asiatic Society Books: Routledge, 2004.

Watson, Mark F. "Dr. Francis Buchanan-Hamilton: Pioneer for Nepalese Biodiversity." *The Britain-Nepal Society Journal,* no. 37 (2013): 31-37.

Wooldrige, Diana. "Painting Nepal: Dr. Henry Ambrose Oldfield and Raj Man Singh." *The Britain-Nepal Society Journal,* no. 38 (2014): 17-25.