

Antiquity Of Manuscript Painting In Nepal

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Nepal is a small country in the map of Asia, but is very rich in art and culture. Like many parts of the world, this country was also inhabited by pre-historic people, as proved by Paleolithic and Neolithic tools found in and around the Kathmandu Valley and various other places in the country. The finding of a polished stone axe datable to Neolithic age in Kathmandu Valley proves the above mentioned fact.¹ In the periphery of Kathmandu Valley and many regions at far distance, like Nawalparasi, Palpa, Chitwan, Dang and Bardiya² in the western part and Kavre, Dolakha, Morang, Jhapa and Sankhuasabha in the Eastern part of the country, the archaeologists have discovered many pre-historic tools. Since all the tools so far reported are surface findings, we are not in a position to write anything with authenticity until a proper scientific exploration and excavation is done. It has become a challenge to the scholars to date them. This applies even in Lichchhavi Period when we try to study the art works of that period.

The earliest historical documents of Kathmandu

Valley which has come to light dates only from 185 AD. The pedestal caption inscription identifying the statue of king Jaya Varma is the earliest finding so far known up to the present date. There is a big gap of 279 years between the above mentioned finding and the Changu Narayan pillar inscription of Manadeva 1st dated 464 AD. No scientific historical document has come to light, which fills the gap of these 279 years.

Though, there is no any evidence of art and architectural form belonging prior to the Christian Era has come to light but the artistic activities of the period can not be denied. Chronicles are the main sources to study the ancient Nepalese history and they have described in detail about Gopals, Mahishapalas, and Kiratas who ruled Kathmandu Valley long before the beginning of the Christian era. Gopal Raj Vamsavali provides the name and their reign of aforesaid dynasties³. We have no any authentic evidences to prove the rule of Gopals and Mahishapalas but the Kiratas, who ruled over Nepal has been proved by several indirect evidences. The

1. Mary S. Slusser- Nepal Mandala- A Cultural Study of Kathmandu Valley, Newjersey, Princeton, 1983, page 8
2. N.R. Banarjee- 'Discovery of the Remains of Pre-historic Man in Nepal', Ancient Nepal, No. 6, 1969, Department of Archaeology, page 8a.
3. Dhana Bajra Bajracharya and K.P. Malla- The Gopal Raj Vamsavali, Kathmandu, Nepal Research Center, 1985, pp. 25-31.

use of several non-Sanskrit words, in Lichchhavi inscriptions⁴ and the high appreciation of Nepalese blankets in Kautilya's Arthashastra,⁵ indicate the rule of Kiratas in Nepal prior to the Christian era. The mound 'Patuko Don' located near Kwa-bahal Patan, now surmounted by a peepal tree considered to be the ruins of the palace of king Patuko, the Kirata ruler⁶. According to Dhooswan Sayami in the two temples, Siddhilaxmi and Umamaheswara of Patan the Kirata family members celebrate their Diwali Puja every year⁷.

Apart from the above mentioned facts, in the Amsuvarma's inscription of Hanumandhoks, the word 'Kirata' appears in connection to a ruined palace.⁸ Wright Vamasavali also states that the area as the last abode of Kiratas, attacked by the Somavamsi Rajputs from the west, left Gokarna Darbar and transferred to a distance of four Kosh [a kosh is roughly two miles] to the south of Sankhamul where they built another palace.⁹ The findings in future or scientific studies [i.e. excavation and exploration] might be able to answer this properly, then the history of Nepalese art and architecture would start at least few centuries prior to the said period. The fact of flourishing state of Nepalese blankets, mention of non Sanskrit words in Lichchhavi inscriptions, practice of Diwali Puja by the Kiratas in two temples at Patan hint us to forward a hypothesis that the art of painting was existed during the then period. The Kiratas even today use various colors to decorate their houses. Their houses are mostly white-washed or painted in two colors. They use mostly white color for the upper part and red for the lower about one quarter of the

wall. They use lime or local white clay known as Kamero for white and red clay for red color in the rural areas or might use any other synthetic paints as used in the modern houses in the urban areas.

A detail study of the Lichchhavi inscriptions provides us several valuable information regarding the art of painting and drawing. The engravings of several deities, animals and other religious symbols, like conch, disc, fish, lotus flower, bull, sivalingas, kalasha, dharmachakra, with or without a pair of deer etc. the upper parts of the stele can be regarded as the first evidence of the practice of painting or drawing¹⁰. The fifth century Chabahil inscription states that the Chaitya, which was made with great efforts, was beautified by different kinds of paintings depicting the stories of KinnariJataka¹¹. It seems that the paintings referred in the inscriptions were executed in a Vihara next to the Chaitya known as Charumati vihara at present. The walls of this Vihara probably were decorated with various paintings, following the tradition like that of Ajanta paintings of Ancient India. The tradition of cleaning and whitewashing practice for the Chaityas continues even today.

Several names of Viharas, appeared in the Lichchhavi inscriptions like Gum vihara, Kharjurika vihara, Shivadeva vihara, Na vihara etc. must have been decorated with colorful paintings. Though it has not been proved by any scientific evidence, but when we see the tradition today that all the existing Viharas and Shakta temples of Kathmandu valley and outside could trace its antiquity up to the time of the Lichchhavis. The cultural and trade relation between Nepal and India since the time immemorial certainly

4. Dhanabajra Bajracharya-Lichchhavikalka Abhilekh, Kathmandu, Nepal-ra Asiali Adhyayan Sansthan, 2030, pp. 13, 91, 122, 123, 145, 187, 191, 336 etc.
5. Translator, Kesev Raj Aryal—Kautilyako Arthashastra—Royal Nepal Academy, 2024
6. Dhooswan Sayami-The Lotus and The Flame, Kathmandu, Department of information, 1972, pp. 81-83 ibid, page 83.
7. ibid, page 83
8. 'vivida sakunta pasu...ngakrita...kiratavarsadhara...lichhavarajakaritam puratanairbrittibhattairupe chitam.' Op. cit, ft. no. 4 page 374.
9. Wright Vamasavali
10. Jagadish Chandra Regmi-Lichchhavi Sanskriti, Kathmandu, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 2026, pp. 448-449.
11. 'kinnarijatakakirna nana chitrabirajitam'-op. cit, ft. no. 4, page2

has influenced the art and culture of Nepal, and also the two countries could be the best examples of artist influx to each-other. The trade relation has always been an unwitting vehicle for transporting the religious and artistic ideas to the neighboring countries.

Apart from the above mentioned facts, there are thousands of exquisitely carved miniature stone chaityas of Lichchhavi period, scattered in and around the Kathmandu Valley, in the periphery of several viharas, domestic courtyards, near the fountains and waysides decorated with ornamentation like dentils and foliage¹² could be the best examples of Lichchhavi paintings, arts and crafts. Mary S. Slusser believes that the painted representations were probably on the cloth banners, manuscripts and certainly on the walls during the then period.¹³ Lichhavi King Narendra Dev at the last stage of his life bequeathed his crown and copy of Pragma paramita for his two daughters¹⁴.

The Lichhavi palace, the Kailaskut Bhavan was highly appreciated by the Chinese traveler Wang-huen-tshe. The palace of Ansuvarma and its description by the traveler could be its best example. As per his account, it was highly decorated and painted.¹⁵

It is a known and proven fact that the Lichhavi rulers and the aristocrats of the society always encouraged the artists towards this field, so that the art and architecture of ancient Nepal became very famous in the history of Nepal. In Nepal the Lichhavi rulers like Manadeva, Ansuvarma and Narendra Deva made their own palaces with different names as proved by the Lichchhavi inscriptions. No one can imagine those palaces without attractive decorations. Huien-tsang, another Chinese traveler had made a description of Kailaskut Bhavan as the wonderful palace. The temples, viharas and palaces of that

period must have been decorated with different kinds of paintings.

Nepalese society has always followed its tradition and religious beliefs since the beginning. Various religious schools were developed in Nepal simultaneously so that all the schools like that of Saivism, Vaisnavism, Saktism and Buddhism flourished at the same time with their own religious beliefs, rituals and arts. The above mentioned evidences provide us some hint on the art of painting of ancient Nepal. The art objects produced by ancient artists that were delineated in a perishable material like clothes, palm-leaves cannot be preserved for a long period. The same is true for the wall painting because they are bound to disappear along with the collapse of the building. This is our misfortune that our highly skilled ancestors dispersed their feelings in such perishable materials or we are to be blamed for not being able to preserve that. In future we might be able to explore by any scientific means, the artistic genius of our ancestors. The art and artifacts of medieval period, which we have inherited so far, leads us to believe on the above statement.

So far as concerned to the Nepalese manuscript paintings of ancient Nepal, not even a single evidence has come to light up to this day. It was Silvain Levi, who for the first time had brought to light the fact, that king Narendra Deva gave a copy of pragma paramita to his two daughters and that manuscript might have been painted as the practice of later period, as the author of these lines has mentioned above. Pratapaditya Pal opines that the earliest palm leaf manuscript in Nepal is as old as the seventh century AD but he has not provided any document of the same¹⁶. Lain Singh Bangdel states that though the examples of Nepalese manuscript illustrations have been found since 11th century AD but some of the

12. Op. cit, ft. no. 1, page 38-39

13. *ibid.*, page 280

14. Sylvain Levi- 'Nepal,' *Ancient Nepal*, no. 61-64, Dec. 1980-July 1981, Department of Archaeology, page 24.

15. Hari Ram Joshi- *The Pages of the Forgotten Past*, Joshi Research Center, Lalitpur, 1998, page 134

16. Pratapaditya Pal- *The Arts of Nepal*, Netherland, Leiden/Koln, E.J. Brill, 1978, page 36

paintings of Tun-Huang mentioned by sir Aurel Stein dated 9th-10th century might have the productions of Nepalese artist, but this has to be studied properly in order to draw a conclusion like this¹⁷. We know nothing of certainty of Lichchhavi manuscript paintings beyond documentary references but we can be optimistic that one-day, in future the scholars will bring them to light. Most of the scholars believe that the illuminated manuscript and the painted book covers of Nepal are found beyond the 11th century AD. Several kings of this period are mentioned both in the colophons of manuscripts, as well as the traditional chronicle, as having built or renovated temples and viharas. Since the religion has become the principal motivation factor for artistic creation, there seems no doubt that the artists and craftsmen continued to depict their beliefs in various materials. Among these materials, palm leaves and papers were regarded as the common materials for manuscript writings and illustrations. The earliest illustrated manuscript of Nepal so far have been found represent both the religious schools, Hinduism and Buddhism which are written in rectangular shaped palm-leaves preserved with wooden book covers whether the manuscripts are Hindu or Buddhist. They were written in the same style of writing and in the same basic style of painting. In comparison with the Buddhist manuscript illuminations, fewer Hindu manuscripts were illustrated and mostly the representations were confined to the wooden book covers during the early three-four hundred years of early medieval period that is eleventh to fourteenth century AD. The majority, so far are on wood covers but there might be equal numbers as most of the manuscripts are in private collection and not easily available to the scholars.

Manabajra Bajracharya has mentioned a manuscript painting; Astasahasrika Pragyanparamita

of NS 40, during the reign of Shankaradeva as the earliest example of manuscript painting in Nepal,¹⁸ but the painting of this manuscript seems controversial. The author will discuss about it in the concerning chapter.

The earliest surviving manuscript illumination of Nepal, so far has been found is the illustration of Astasahasrika Pragyanparamita of 1015 AD. [N.S. 135] Preserved in Cambridge University Library¹⁹. the manuscript was written at the Hlam Vihara, a monastery that has not been identified till the date. After this date we find several manuscript illuminations of both schools.

So far as concerned to the earliest illuminations of Hindu pantheon, there are two wooden book covers of Vishnudharmottara dated 1047 [N.S. 167], preserved in Bir Library Kathmandu, where ten avatars of Vishnu are delineated, including some elegant female figures engaged in adoring Vishnu²⁰. There are several examples of manuscript paintings onward this date. After fourteenth century, the pauva or scroll painting appeared in a mass scale but the practice of illuminating the manuscript continued in a small scale. This practice developed for religions as well as trade concern.

Thus, the practice of painting in various materials has developed in Nepalese society since the ancient period. Most of the ancient paintings are not available to us as they were painted or carved in a perishable material. Our wonderful medieval representations [examples] are compelling us to be sure as they prove the aforesaid statements, because the highly advanced fine art of our society could not flourished within a very short period. Definitely it took a long time to reach at that state of maturity and to be praised by the art lovers and art historians from all over the world.

17. Lain Singh Bangdel-Prachin Nepali Chittrakala, Kathmandu, Royal Nepal Academy, 2034, page 9

18. Manabajra Bajracharya—Nepalko Madhyakalin Kala—Department of Information, Kathmandu.

19. op. cit, -ft.no.20, page 39

20. ibid, page 55