

Western influence in nepali modern artJyoti Prakash BK¹¹Assembly Member, Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, Kathmandu, NepalCorresponding Author, Jyoti Prakash BK, artistjyotiprakash@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Modern Nepali painting exhibits a noticeable shift from the earlier referential form to more personal and expressive styles. The impact of the Western art styles of Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism has had a profound effect on the evolution of Nepali paintings. Nevertheless, the impact of these Western artistic styles has not superseded the indigenous practices. Rather, they have contributed to the formation of a mixed artistic style incorporating both indigenous cultural motifs and modern techniques. In this paper, the impact of Western artistic styles on contemporary Nepali painting will be discussed, considering its cultural uniqueness. Through qualitative visual comparison, it will be established that the impact of Western art practices has contributed to enhancing artistic creativity among Nepali painters.

KEYWORDS

Contemporary Nepali paintings, Nepali Modern art, Western influence

INTRODUCTION

During its early days, the art produced in Nepal was mystic, symbolical, didactic, and narrative, surpassing the confines of realistic representation. Its essence was profoundly embedded within the religious and spiritual aspects of life. The main theme revolved around such topics as divinities, divine powers, and the supernatural. The works featured imaginary, symbolic images that focused more on metaphysics than reality. Such works had a didactic element and carried moral and spiritual messages while pointing towards ideal values rather than copying external reality. Therefore, not only were these pieces aesthetically appealing but also helped in promoting religion and morality.

The emergence of Western influence upon the development of Nepali art started in the nineteenth century, especially during the Rana era. It entailed introducing Western realism, which consisted of perspective, shading, and three-dimensional representation. Furthermore, the art became secular. With the passing of time, Nepali artists incorporated western art from the twentieth century into their traditional practices, thus creating a unique blend of the two. As a result of intercultural exchange, hybridity occurred as the process involving adaptation, negotiation, and appropriation took place (Sharma, 2014, p. 5).

In the early times, until the mid-twentieth century, there existed two types of Nepali paintings that had been used for the purpose of depicting religious and non-religious or worldly scenes. The religious paintings had characters or events of Hindu and Buddhist mythology, and their purposes were religious. The second type of Nepali paintings were realist and included portraits, landscapes, still life, etc. Both kinds of Nepali paintings could be regarded as referential (Chitrakar, 2005, p. 21).

The adoption of Western approaches to art in Nepal dates back to the time when Nepal's Prime Minister, Janga Bahadur, visited Britain along with Bhajuman, the artist who joined Jung Bahadur's British mission. On the occasion of his visit to Europe, the painter came across realistic art and was later inspired by its principles, applying them once he returned to Nepal. This is how contemporary tendency was set at the beginning of Nepali contemporary art. But unlike some other countries where Westernization fully dominated national styles of painting, Western art played just an inspiring role in Nepal. Today Nepali painters have experimented with their traditions, creating a unique fusion and thus enriching the field with diversity. In this way, Western influence has emerged as a significant driving force in the development of contemporary Nepali painting, providing artists with new perspectives and contributing significantly to connecting them to the global artistic dialogue.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study uses qualitative research methodology in examining the complex interplay of the effects of Western influence in modern Nepali painting. This entails the use of formal visual analysis of artistic elements in terms of styles, forms, composition. The artistic elements are analyzed to adaptation and reinterpretation of Western art techniques.

Adoption of Western techniques in Nepali modern paintings

Following the middle twentieth century, Nepali art witnessed considerable changes in terms of its form and meaning because of greater contact with Western artistic movements and methods. Following the fall of Rana autocracy in the late 1950s, Nepali artists came across numerous forms of artistic expressions such as modernism, cubism, surrealism, abstraction, abstract expressionism, pop art, installation, and performance art.

As a result of these varied forms of influence, artists were able to break free from representational constraints to allow more room for experimentation, creativity, and subjectivity. On the other hand, traditional culture had continued to exert its influence, thus leading to an engaging interplay between the indigenous and Western forms of art (Sharma, 2014, pp. 5–8).

However, Nepalese art has actively taken part in the process of development of global arts by experimenting with modern approaches in both painting and sculpting. The diversity in style, form, and techniques is indicative of a more open attitude towards innovations and creativity within the art world.

Since 1950, after the Rana autocracy ended, there were numerous outside influences on the Nepalese culture, including in the field of visual arts. As a result, there was an increased interest among many Nepali artists in receiving formal training and education in arts abroad. Artists such as Lain Singh Bangdel, Laxman Shrestha, and Urmila Upadhyay received their education in Paris, whereas others like Pramila Giri and Dipak Simkhada had obtained it in America.

On their return to Nepal, the artists brought with them many artistic methods of the West, such as Impressionism, Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism. In addition to this, some other artists who were educated in India like Uttam Nepali, Ramananda Joshi, and Shashi Shah have also made significant contributions to

introducing western art to Nepal. It should be remembered that the transfer of knowledge often takes place indirectly, for the education system in India at that time was already influenced by colonial powers before the year 1947. Thus, the introduction of western art in Nepal needs to be seen from a regional perspective.

One can distinguish the stages of transformation in Nepalese painting according to certain historical periods, when there was growing influence from the outside, as well as the development of local painting traditions. In the first period, one can identify the introduction of some concepts from Western art, such as light and shadow, as well as perspective. The latter was achieved due to the work of the British Resident Brian Houghton Hodgson and his cooperation with local painters.

An example of the first period in the context of transformation of Nepalese painting can be Raj Man Singh Chitrakar, who worked as a painter in the first half of the nineteenth century. Working together with Hodgson, he created many drawings devoted to Buddhist monuments in the Kathmandu valley and natural history themes. These paintings were unique in terms of their style, since there was no focus on traditional conventions but rather emphasis on realistic features (Chitrakar, 2012, p. 88).

Simultaneously, the painter Maularam was one of the few artists who facilitated the sharing of artistic styles between different regions by traveling to Kangra. Inspired by the Pahari style of painting, he introduced the Garhwali Kalam style and became famous in various regions, such as Nepal and Himachal. In addition to his artistic practices, he also painted portraits of various historical personalities in their courts, including Ran Bahadur Shah, Girvan Yuddha Bikram Shah, Rajendra Bikram Shah, and Bhimsen Thapa. The stylistic features that resemble Mughal art seen in Nepali art paintings, especially those championed by painters like Chandraman Maskey, can be said to be an extension of the influences of Maularam in Nepal (Bhaukaji, 1996 AD, p. 5).

After the change in political and cultural contexts post-1950, there were significant exchanges between the art traditions of Nepal and the West. In response to these changes, Nepali artists have been practicing their craft through imitation of Western styles, rejection of them for indigenous methods, or selective appropriation. Each of these responses signifies how the traditional arts of Nepal are dealing with modernity.

Sanjeev Uprety notes that artistic reactions to Western modernity among non-Western communities may be categorized into three major types: imitation, rejection, and selective appropriation. He points out that while artists might copy Western methods wholesale, they can also reject them completely in favor of indigenous methods. However, according to him, a third type of reaction has emerged where artists borrow from both sources and create hybrid cultures in music, literature, and visual arts (Uprety, 2007, p. 22).

Nepali painting is marked by the emergence of unique expressions through the incorporation of local themes with Western methods. According to Abhi Subedi, the purpose of contemporary Nepali paintings does not always have to be an exact portrayal of social

happenings or realities but instead reflects the personal reactions to social values, traditions, and experiences) of artists. He adds that the elements of abstraction, colors, and compositions play a more prominent role than the actual depictions since they are used as tools for expression. (Subedi, 2005, p. 124).

The artworks created by Uttam Nepali can be regarded as a prime example of the integration of Western painting styles with indigenous cultural subject matter. He uses abstract Expressionism techniques, while being focused on the spiritual and cultural aspects of his work. At times, his painting may also be inspired by Indian artwork, thus revealing a complex mechanism of the transfer of artistic influences. Rhythmic lines, colorful palette, and varied symbols give expression to the spiritual experience and inner emotions of the author. According to the catalog of one of his exhibitions, Uttam Nepali views religiosity as a key factor in his work, emphasizing that he obtains his inspiration from God, which serves as a source of creativity.

It was during the 1970s and 1980s when Western artistic techniques began to take firm roots in Nepal's artistic culture. Some prominent artists made their contributions to the development of this process. Among the most notable artists include Krishna Manandhar, Indra Pradhan, Batsa Gopal Vaidya, Shashi Shah, Manuj Babu Mishra, Shyam Lal Shrestha, Shankar Raj Singh Suwal, Urmila Upadhyay, Raj Manandhar, Madan Chitrakar, Govinda Dangol, Durga Baral, Shashikala Tiwari, and Pramila Giri. Most of these artists underwent formal education at overseas art academies, where they were introduced to different western schools of thought and techniques. After coming back to Nepal, they applied these techniques into their own works, thus helping to spread modern techniques within the field of Nepalese art. Through their combined efforts, they helped pave the way for further development within the field of Nepali art painting.

The SKIB-71 artists group comprised four Nepalese painters who returned from Sir J.J. School of Art, Bombay, India, making a substantial contribution to the progress of modern art in Nepal. The acronym SKIB is an abbreviation made of the initials of the four artists' surnames — Shashi Shah, Krishna Manandhar, Indra Pradhan, and Batsa Gopal Vaidya. Andre Alexander notes about their paintings that:

"Each artist is a pioneer in contemporary Nepalese art, acting as a guide to young artists and encouraging them to take risks visually. These artists include Shashi Shah the Surrealist, Krishna Manandhar the Abstract Painter, Indra Pradhan the Fine Line Painter, and Batsa Gopal Vaidya the Symbolist. All these artists share one common denominator in that they follow traditions and influences as the key element in their works. They strive to conserve their art tradition in exploring modern canvas using old images and colors." (Alexander, 1992, p. 28)

Shashi Shah uses surrealist methods in his painting to depict Hindu mythologies. Mostly, Shashi's paintings, the horse symbolizes Kalki Avatar, the tenth manifestation of Lord Vishnu during the age of Kali Yuga. Vishnu will descend as Kalki to liberate the world from demons once evil forces prevail in society and throughout the earth. The influence of surrealism can also be clearly seen in this painting by artist Shashi Shah.



Figure 1: Samudra Manthan, Shashi Bikram Shah, 2018, Acrylic on Canvas

In this painting (Figure 1) related to the Eastern mythology of the Samundramanathan, artist Shashi Shah can be seen combining highly imaginative and multi-figured images. The Kalpavriksha in the middle of the painting is felt to represent the triangular concept of life, death, and consciousness. Along with the Kalpavriksha, characters like Airavat and Mohini are also depicted in a surrealist style. Artist Shashi Shah presents himself as the main villain in this painting, clearly showing the web of selfishness within people.

Manuj Babu Mishra's artworks satirize social evils and corruption, using expressionist techniques. He depicts tortured human figures suffering from battle, poverty, rape, genocide, and murder, with distorted images of missiles, serpents, and figures to express inner feelings and emotions. Mishra's paintings critique those who create tragic situations. Abhi Subedi writes:

In each canvas, he introduces ideas directly related to the depicted catastrophe. The dramatic relationship between modern war machinery and helpless anthropomorphic forms is based on humanism. His subject matter is humanism, its catastrophe, thwarted hopes, and bleak future. His art overtly represents these themes to foreground the predicament of humanity under the shadow of war. Mostly, Surrealistic effects are playing in Manuj Babu's modern paintings (Subedi, 1992, p. 125).

Mishra's works combine technological and spiritual images, using expressionist techniques to show fragmentation and confusion, integrating foreign influences into contemporary Nepali paintings.



Figure 2: *Beloved*, Manuj Babu Mishra, Acrylic on Canvas

It would not be an exaggeration to say that this painting (Figure 2) is a work influenced by contemporary hyper-realism by artist Manuj Babu Mishra. The main subject of this painting seems to be influenced by the world-famous painting Mona Lisa. The artist himself can also be seen in another main role in this area. In this area, there is a scene where artist Manuj Babu accepts the famous Western painting Mona Lisa as his wife, marries her in a grand manner according to Eastern culture, and dresses his beloved in a Doli while playing the Naumati instrument and goes home. The scene where the artist himself presents himself as a fierce and monstrous sister-in-law, Monalisa, and spreads an umbrella over the bride, Monalisa, is imaginary. The graceful Monalisa, dressed in Nepali Hindu wedding attire, and the fierce character Manuj Babu, who is trying to show that he is a brave Nepali by tying a Khukuri around his waist, can be felt as if the shimmer of hyper-realism is shining in this picture.

Kiran Manandhar's works reformulate Hindu myths, often incorporating mandalas and themes of meditation. Abhi Subedi describes the significance of mandalas in Manandhar's art, noting:

"To him, Mandala is everything the solidity, surface, sky, earth, confluence of mind and universe, a consciousness symbolized by the vulva and the movement of energy to and from it. They have a psychological dimension. They create an atmosphere of the mind through brush strokes and distribution of colors, not in tonal merger but in terms of each distributed over the entire surface, a technique used by Kiran Manandhar in nearly all of his paintings to create linear effects of both the visible and invisible lines. The total effect is a sense of movement" (Subedi, 2000, p. 7).

Contemporary Nepali paintings are characterized by their expressiveness, focusing on the artists' subjective feelings rather than objective representations of the external world. These artworks often transform real-world images to reflect internal emotions and feelings. Manuj

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Babu Mishra, a renowned modern Nepali artist, notes that contemporary Nepali paintings represent the powerful emotions of the artist's mind (Mishra, 2045, p. 22).

The metamorphosis of images, symbols, and colors plays a much bigger role in contemporary paintings than just representation. These elements represent the feelings and experiences of the artist and do not rely on subject matters and themes but on form and technique in most cases. In this way, the colors, lines, and shapes become autonomous parts of the artwork.

The contemporary paintings of Nepali artists incorporate elements of Hindu and Buddhist mythology along with the culture of the western art tradition. According to Julia Hegewald (1996), there is a constant development in the styles of the artists as they attempt to improve their artwork in the 21st century. They want to preserve Nepali culture in their artworks (Hegewald, 1996, p. 100).

Lain Singh Bangdel, who was one of the prominent modern artists from Nepal, used western techniques to paint rural life, cultural elements, and nature. Bangdel used different kinds of western styles in his artwork. The figurative style he created was sad and lonely in accordance with the Blue Period of Pablo Picasso's cubist works (Singh, 1976, p. 232). According to Sharma (2014), the paintings of Lain Singh Bangdel were inspired by the artists such as Gauguin, van Gogh, over time, Bangdel freed himself from these influences to develop a distinct artistic identity.

Bangdel cleverly mixes local themes with western styles. According to Subedi, he is an essential link between western art aesthetics and eastern views of life, creation, and beauty (Subedi, 1992, p. 16). The painting by Bangdel gives voices to common people and seeks to write the history of these people through visual representation.



Figure 3: *Muna-Madan*, Lain Singh Bangdel, 1955, Gouache on Canvas

In the painting (Figure 3) titled *Muna Madan* by senior painter Lainsingh Bagdel, the simplification of the figure seems to reflect more of an expression than a realistic human body, while the use of colors also seems to reflect sadness and tragic emotions. Looking at the style or presentation of this painting, it can be assumed that it was influenced by post-modern

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expressionism. The blue, brown, and gray colors are used to simply convey the emotional state of the characters. Artist Lain Singh has delicately rendered the texture of the brushwork in this painting.

Modern Nepalese artists have used techniques of modern art like impressionism, cubism, expressionism, surrealism, and abstract expressionism in their paintings (Malla, 2006, p. 16). Yet, they have attempted to portray their own culture and society and the people in a more natural manner. According to Manuj Babu Mishra, there are many tendencies that have developed in Nepalese modern art:

There are some artists who are attempting to express national identity through their work. Then there are others who want to adopt prevailing tendencies and produce their own artworks. But in any case, Nepalese modern art is characterized by new and rejuvenated efforts to capture strong emotions (Mishra, 2045, p. 22).

The incorporation of the Himalayas and Nepali culture in paintings creates a native identity (Pandey, 2046, p. 39). Contemporary Nepali artists blend personal feelings with Western art forms, reflecting a continuous evolution as noted by Julia Hegewald, who states that Nepali art is constantly changing and progressing with the times (Hegewald, 1996, p. 100).

Some art critics have highlighted the problems faced by contemporary Nepali art. Narayan Bahadur Singh states that contemporary Nepali artists have adopted Western art forms that are already considered old within Western art (Singh, 1976, p. 214). He argues that Nepali artists should free themselves from Western influences to develop their own distinct expression.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Nepali paintings present a complex interplay of Western techniques with native subject matters. Artists use western techniques as tools to express personal feelings and to argue in social issues, integrating native cultural images and social themes. The artworks depict a dynamic and evolving artistic reflection of Nepal, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities presented by the fusion of Western influences.

Western influence has played a significant and transformative role in the development of contemporary Nepali painting. The influence of movements such as cubism, surrealism and abstract expressionism has broadened the creative horizons of Nepali artists, inspiring them to go beyond traditional styles and themes. However, contemporary Nepali painters have not simply imitated Western styles but have skillfully combined them with their own original traditions, cultural symbols, and local stories. This combination has created a unique artistic identity that reflects both global influence and local identity. Therefore, Western influence has not diminished the originality of Nepali painting but has enriched it and enabled it to express changing social realities. Contemporary Nepali artists have borrowed Western art forms styles and subject matters using them for different purposes, including exploring themes of religious harmony and integrating narratives from Hindu and Buddhist myths. Contemporary Nepali paintings often feature both figurative and abstract shapes.

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