



## A Sociological Analysis of Contemporary Nepali Paintings

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### Abstract

*This article investigates the social underpinnings of modern Nepali paintings, and it conducts a sociological analysis of these artworks. Nepali paintings have a rich tradition of conveying religious myths and cultural interpretations, and this heritage continues to exert a significant influence on contemporary Nepali art. The advent of modern painting in Nepal is relatively recent, emerging after the 1930s. Most of the early modern Nepali artists were influenced by realism, impressionism, post-impressionism, expressionism, symbolism, abstract art etc. and played a crucial role in expressing cultural identity and addressing contemporary societal issues. Art, in this context, is a socially constructed medium that fosters interaction among individuals. The sociology of art encompasses the examination of how art is created, distributed, and consumed within a societal context. It explores the intricate relationship between art and the cultural and social milieu in which it exists. While not traditionally a recognized subfield of sociology, the sociological analysis of art gained prominence in the 1960s. In this study, qualitative methods and purposive sampling techniques were employed to analyze three major art exhibitions: the Online Art Exhibition in 2021, the Himalayan Art Exhibition, and the National Art Exhibition organized by the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts. The analysis of these exhibitions' paintings revealed a blend of themes, encompassing traditional culture and contemporary social issues. These themes are inherently shaped by society and the preferences of the public. This demonstrates that art evolves in reaction to social and political ideologies and remains intricately linked to the society in which it originates.*

**Keywords:** consumption, globalization, ideology, modernization, urbanization

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## Introduction

This article delves into a sociological analysis of representative Nepali paintings, with a particular emphasis on three significant art exhibitions: the 2021 Online Art Exhibition, the Himalayan Art Exhibition, and the National Art Exhibition organized by the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts in 2023. The exploration commences by drawing upon theoretical perspectives introduced by prominent sociologists concerning the realm of arts and paintings. Central to this sociological examination are key theories such as symbolic interactionism and Pierre Bourdieu's cultural perspective. Symbolic interactionism conceptualizes art as a collaborative outcome of social processes, while Bourdieu associates art with cultural tastes, preferences, and social class. Additionally, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, rooted in Marxism, interprets art as a product of capitalism influenced by the upper classes. Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) contend that modern art perpetuates capitalism and contributes to a "false consciousness."

Building on this theoretical foundation, the article incorporates perspectives from scholars like Becker, who accentuates the social dynamics of art production and consumption, and Eagleton, who views art as responsive to social and political ideologies. Greenfeld (1992) highlights art's role in constructing national identities, and Luhmann (2000) views art as a self-sustaining social system rooted in communication. Globalization's impact on art through transnational flows of art, artists, and audiences is explored, expanding the traditional boundaries of art (Appadurai, 1996; Lee, 2012). As art becomes a socioeconomic phenomenon and a catalyst for globalization, this article aims to establish connections between these sociological theories and the contemporary paintings of Nepal.

Furthermore, the article delves into the historical roots of Nepali paintings, tracing a cultural legacy spanning over a millennium. Initially rooted in wall paintings with a strong religious inclination, this tradition is prominently displayed in the murals adorning temples and palaces, as well as in depictions of religious scriptures. Evidence from the Middle era of Malla periods after 1138 highlights the enduring legacy of Nepali painting. While religious influences dominated the early tradition, a shift towards contemporary Nepali paintings emerged around 1930, influenced by the Western world. Recognizing the evolving trajectory of Nepali painting becomes crucial, with a notable emphasis on contemporary expressions, viewed through the lens of sociological analysis.

The article then investigates the engagement of Nepali artists in addressing social themes, shedding light on the diverse perspectives shaping the artistic landscape. In Nepal, contemporary paintings actively reflect societal issues such as gender inequality, economic disparities, environmental challenges, and political transformations. The focus of this inquiry is on the social commitment evident in paintings showcased at three prominent art exhibitions, employing qualitative research methods to unveil the active advocacy for social causes. Consequently, this research contributes to a deeper understanding

of the interconnectedness between paintings and society in Nepal, fostering cultural conservation, catalyzing social transformation, and advancing cultural diplomacy. In doing so, it enriches the broader discourse on the role of art in contemporary society.

## Statement of the Problem

The problem this study addresses is how modern Nepali paintings are influenced by both traditional culture and contemporary social issues. While Nepali art has a long history of depicting religious myths and cultural stories, modern painting in Nepal is relatively new, emerging after the 1930s. Early modern Nepali artists were influenced by global art movements like realism and impressionism, which shaped their work. However, there is a lack of understanding about how these modern paintings reflect societal changes and issues. The study aims to explore how art is shaped by society and political ideas, and how it, in turn, influences cultural identity and public opinion in Nepal.

## Methodology

This article employs a qualitative and analytical research design to explore the representation of present-day Nepali society through contemporary paintings. The research utilizes both primary and secondary data collection methods. In the realm of primary data acquisition, the study focuses on specific paintings showcased in various exhibitions. These include online displays that emerged post the 2021 COVID-19 pandemic, the anticipated Himalayan art exhibition in 2023, and the recent art exhibition organized by the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts. These exhibitions feature contemporary paintings of Nepal, offering a unique opportunity to examine how the artworks reflect the current societal landscape. For secondary data, the research involves a comprehensive examination of literature, including books and published articles related to the field of paintings in Nepal. Additionally, interviews are conducted with renowned Nepali artists who serve as key informants, providing valuable insights and perspectives on the subject. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the analytical and interpretative method of analysis is employed to delve into the nuanced aspects of the paintings and understand the underlying narratives that contribute to the portrayal of Nepali society.

## Review of Sociology of Art

Painting serves as a form of visual art through which individuals convey their emotions using brushes and various mediums such as paper, walls, canvas, wood, glass, and more. These artistic creations encompass diverse styles, including naturalistic, representational, abstract, narrative, symbolic, and emotive, reflecting a rich historical heritage and societal significance. The earliest known painting, dating back more than 40,000 years, was discovered in Indonesia within a cave, depicting a scene of pig hunting (Burkitt, 1985). Cave paintings have also been uncovered in various regions worldwide, including France,

Spain, China, India, Mexico, and many others, illustrating humanity's early utilization of painting to express their activities and experiences. This underscores the profound connection between people and the art of painting throughout history.

The sociology of art involves the study of art's creation, distribution, and consumption within a societal framework. It explores how art is influenced by and, in turn, influences the cultural and social context in which it exists. While it was not traditionally a recognized subfield of sociology for many years, the examination of art from a sociological perspective began to gain prominence in the 1960s. However, Gerog Simmel firstly explained the impact of modernization and urbanization in the creation of art (Simmel, 1902). The recent societal developments have led to a shift in individual interests towards greater interconnectedness. This shift has also influenced the form of art, transitioning it from a subjective to an objective expression. The modernization and urbanization depersonalized the art as it changed system of politics, economics and society.

Major two sociological theories delve into the analysis of art. The first is symbolic interactionism, which views art as a collaborative outcome resulting from social processes. The second is the cultural perspective offered by Pierre Bourdieu. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), art serves as an expression of the commonplace experiences within specific realms of meaning. Essentially, it is a historical symbol system used to depict the everyday social constructs that are shaped through shared interactions among individuals. Moreover, Pierre Bourdieu argues that the art including paintings shows cultural tastes and preferences of people and also it is connected to social class and power. Further, the consumption of art asserts the social position of people (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 267). Those in the upper social strata, possessing substantial economic capital but relatively little cultural capital, tend to favor pragmatic artworks like Raphael's paintings. Conversely, individuals in the middle class, who possess more cultural capital than economic capital, often gravitate towards impressionist art, such as Van Gogh's paintings.

The Frankfurt School of critical theory has put forth an additional sociological perspective regarding the creation and consumption of art. This critical theory school is rooted in the Marxist perspective on the production relationships. Marx delves into the concept that art is a product of capitalism and is influenced by the upper classes that control the means of production (Marx and Engels, 1848). Additionally, critical theory goes beyond economic determinants and scrutinizes the creation and consumption of art, focusing on how it can lead to the development of a misleading awareness or "false consciousness" perpetuated by influential groups. Adorno and Horkheimer assert that modern art emerges by rejecting traditional aesthetic forms and conventional notions of beauty (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972). They view art as an integral component of the cultural industry, serving to sustain



capitalism. In Paulantaz's view, art functions as an ideological apparatus employed by the state to maintain its existence and promote a distorted consciousness (Paulantaz, 1975).

For Becker, the art is related to social dynamics of production and consumption. It art comprises a network of people who collaborate and interact to create, produce, and appreciate art (Becker, 1982). In a different perspective, Terry Eagleton contends that art emerges in reaction to social and political ideologies and remains intertwined with the society of its origin (Eagleton, 1990). Art exhibits a strong connection to the prevailing power structures, rooted more in the realm of consent than coercion, as it involves individuals accepting and deriving sensory enjoyment from the established norms of the state and bourgeois society. Greenfeld assumes that the art plays a significant role in constructing national identities by uniting people's observation (Greenfeld, 1992). The art plays role in communicating realities and unfolds the events in sequential order. It is rooted in creation of perception and social system for enhancing consciousness. Art is linked to system and incorporated social hierarchy in expression (Luhmann, 2000). At first it was servant of religion and later it presents affairs of states in a condensed form and then the market. Thus, art is itself a social system and functions through communication of social events. It is a self-sustaining system with awareness of society and it regards as its underlying foundation.

Globalization has impact on art through transnational flows of art, artists and audiences (Appadurai, 1996). It has expanded the realm of art, moving beyond its traditional historical conceptions and iconography to encompass a broad spectrum of elements, including movement, migration, boundaries, and diverse populations (Lee, 2012). Art has become a socioeconomic phenomenon and a vehicle that facilitates the globalization process. It serves as both an entity and a catalyst for globalization. Contemporary artists like Takashi Murakami and Thomas Hirschhorn are notable figures whose work is intricately connected to the globalizing forces of our time.

Nepali paintings have not been thoroughly examined from a sociological perspective, prompting inquiries into the extent to which they reflect societal dynamics. An essential aspect of this analysis involves tracing the historical evolution of Nepali paintings and establishing the link between the rulers' interests and the broader populace. Sociological literature on art serves as a valuable tool for comprehending the sociological aspects of Nepali paintings and their connection to society. Examining the creation, distribution, and consumption of paintings within a societal framework is crucial. The impact of modernization and urbanization on Nepali paintings remains unstudied, highlighting the need for research in this area. To gain a comprehensive understanding of Nepali painting, it is imperative to explore the social processes involved in its production, contributing to its social construction. The depiction of cultural tastes, preferences, and its connection to social class and power is also of significance. Furthermore, the examination of art

consumption becomes pivotal in asserting the social position of individuals and social strata, particularly those possessing substantial economic capital but limited cultural capital. The role of Nepali painting in constructing national identities by unifying people's observations has not been adequately studied. As a sociologist, connecting sociological theories of art to the creation of Nepali paintings and their links to social issues is a meaningful avenue for exploration.

## Historical Sketch of Nepali Paintings

Examining the history of Nepali painting is essential for understanding contemporary art, as it offers insights into the diverse phases of Nepali artistic expression and its relationship with society. It appears that Nepali painting history has largely centered on religious motifs and the patronage of rulers. Nepali painting boasts a rich and extensive history that spans millennia, positioning Nepal as an enduring hub of artistic ingenuity. Although tangible evidence of ancient Nepali paintings is limited, the earliest documented artworks in Nepal trace back to the middle ages. Particularly noteworthy is the Prajnaparamita text from AD 1015, believed to have been composed during the co-regency of Bhojadev and Rudradeva, signifying a pivotal early artistic achievement (Munankarmi, 2022). Additional literary works, such as the Prajnaparamita Granthgata from AD 1028 during Lakshmikamdev's reign and the AD 1054 biography of Buddha within the Prajnaparamita Granthgata, authored during Bhaskaradeva's rule, provide further insight into the profound intertwining of Nepal's literary and artistic legacy. Numerous texts from the 11th century, including a textbook crafted under Shivdev III's administration in AD 1071, Prajnaparamita textbooks, the Mar Vidhya textbook, and the Prajnaparamita Granthachitra of 1117, collectively contribute to Nepal's ancient artistic tapestry.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, under the rule of Indradev, the credit for the creation of Paramartha Namasangiti is assigned to the Shakya monk Ratnagupta (Munankarmi, 2022). This era witnessed significant literary developments with the emergence of pivotal texts like Prajnaparamita Granthachitra in 1138 and Prajnaparamita Granthachitra in 1158. Associated with the reigns of Indradev, Rudradeva, and Abhay Malla, the compositions Gandavyuha and Viswantar Jataka further exemplify the intellectual and artistic advancements of this period. A remarkable highlight is the Prajnaparamita of Ashtasarhasika from 1225, renowned for its 12 manuscripts inscribed on blue paper and crafted with exceptional skill in 1250. The reign of Jayarjuna Malla saw the creation of the Prajnaparamita Granthachitra in 1367, while in the 1400s, during the era of Jyoti Malla, the cover painting became a testament to the remarkable quality of Nepali literature. This analytical overview underscores the interplay of historical rulers, religious figures, and artistic achievements, providing insight into the flourishing cultural and intellectual landscape of Nepal during these periods.

The ancient tradition of Nepali painting, evident in temple murals and religious scriptures, reflects a rich cultural heritage. Despite historical expectations of murals in royal offerings like those of the Shakyas, Kirats, Kailasakut, Mangriha, and Lichchavi, no remnants of such murals have survived (Amatya, 1966, p. 37). However, enduring masterpieces like the eleventh-century Bodhisattva slab near Kathmandu's Tundal Devi temple, and paintings of Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani from the tenth century, attest to the art's longevity (Bangdel, 1977). This historical overview highlights the absence of preserved murals on ancient royal offerings and celebrates enduring masterpieces. The National Archives house ancient Nepali manuscripts with illustrations dating back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Notably, the Taleju Bhawani temple in Bhaktapur boasts venerable murals, some from the Malla period depicting scenes like Sati and dancing Vishnu (Pal, 1978, p. 7). Other Malla-era sites such as Vasantpur Palace and Kumari Ghar in Kathmandu showcase works like Jayaprakash Malla's Matsendranath and depictions of Bhimsen and Ganesha. The mural tradition continued under the Shah dynasty and Ranas, with scenes from Hindu epics and Prithvi Narayan Shah's portraits (Pal, 1978, p. 7). Even Jung Bahadur Rana's post-British visit murals in the Mudra Museum depict Prithvi Narayan Shah in Mughal attire, illustrating the enduring influence of artistic exchange. The existence of Nepali paintings serves as evidence that ancient rulers actively safeguarded and encouraged the art form in Nepal.

Paubha paintings, a unique Nepali art form, have a complex historical narrative regarding their origin. While some scholars argue for indigenous roots, Bangdel (1977, p. 19) suggests that Nepal adopted Tibetan practices of inscribing religious content on cloth. This adoption gained traction due to China's demand for Buddhist-themed Nepali paintings, leading to their commercial production, which persists today. Notable ancient Paubha examples include the 13th-century 'Amitabh' Paubhachitra at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, alongside significant pieces like the 'Ratnasambhava' and 'Vishnumandal.' Historical records document Paubha evolution, with creations like the 'Vasundhara Mandala Paubha' and 'Vasundhara Paubha' during Jayarjuna Malla's reign (1367). Jayasthiti Malla's era (1375-1400) saw the production of the 'Lakschaitya Paubha,' followed by 'Lakschaitya Paubha' (1416) and 'Lokeshwar' and 'Chandramandala Paubha' (1426) during Jyoti Malla's rule. Nepali Paubha paintings showcase religious tolerance by integrating Hindu and Buddhist traditions, alongside depictions of natural scenes. Tantric influences emerged in the 16th century, ensuring the continuity of carving images of deities. This overview highlights the diverse origins, influences, and evolving characteristics of Nepali Paubha paintings across historical periods.

Mithila painting, deeply rooted in the ancient Mithila civilization spanning Nepal's Janakpur to Bihar in India, holds a culturally significant place in Nepali art (Bimal, 2005). Known for vibrant wall paintings using natural pigments, it serves as a medium

for conveying mythological and spiritual themes within societal contexts. Dating back centuries, it chronicles Maithili life and religious customs, reflecting Mithila society dynamically. Official acknowledgment of Mithila painting as an art form occurred in 1934, highlighting its rich history. While historical documentation in Nepal is limited, ongoing efforts prioritize preservation and documentation to safeguard this unique tradition (Bhattarai, 2017). Balancing preservation and commercialization is essential to sustain this cultural legacy, providing both economic opportunities for artists and wider appreciation of Mithila painting globally.

Contemporary Nepali painting emerged circa 1850, undergoing a significant transformation with the adoption of oil paint, a notable evolution in the art form (Singh, 1977). This period embraced diverse themes such as portraits, monument/memorial sculptures, spatial distinctions, still life, and various forms of illustration. Influenced by Western Realism, artists like Bhajuman Chitrakar gained recognition for their depictions, while collaborations like Raj Man Singh Chitrakar's with British resident Brian Houghton Hodgson documented ethnic groups (Chitrakar, 2004). The second pivotal phase around 1930 saw the establishment of art institutions, with artists like Chandramansingh Maskey and Tej Bahadur Chitrakar contributing to Nepal's burgeoning art scene after receiving formal education abroad (Malla, 2020). The introduction of various art movements marked the third phase, including impressionism, abstract, cubism, expressionism, and surrealism, reflecting a diverse array of modern art styles (Sharma, 2014). Sculptures also embraced semi-abstract and abstract forms, contributing to the expanding spectrum of artistic expression. By 2003, a shift towards post-modern art ushered in a departure from traditional modern art, introducing experimentation and innovation (Upreti, 2010). However, despite these transformations, a comprehensive sociological study of contemporary Nepali painting remains unexplored. Such a study could examine socio-cultural influences, the role of artists in shaping identity and cultural narratives, and the evolving relationship between traditional and contemporary elements within Nepali painting.

## **Social Realities in Nepali Paintings**

Nepali art has a rich historical tradition, with strong ties to ruling authorities, as evidenced by historical records. However, contemporary Nepali art has embraced the profound changes in society, including political transformations, the promotion of gender and ethnic diversity, and global interconnectedness. Chandraman Singh Maskey, an artist who was influenced from modern art of Europe, created works that depicted Nepali culture and political events. Similarly, Kiran Manandhar, known for his abstract paintings, drew inspiration from social and political happenings in Nepal. In the Matina series, Kiran Manandhar has captured the essence of women by portraying love, affection, and intimacy. Recognizing women as symbols of love, he acknowledges their integral role in every man's success, attributing it to the supportive hands of mothers, dedicated wives,



and caring sisters. By incorporating these expressions of love into his artwork, Manandhar not only celebrates the emotional connections but also directs attention to certain societal issues within his paintings. According to symbolic interactionism, these paintings depict social processes and convey the ordinary expressions of everyday social activities that emerge from the collective interactions of individuals (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

One of Manandhar's artworks vividly portrayed the political events of 2006, featuring armed conflicts, bloodshed, rifles, and messages of freedom, emancipation, and resistance against oppression. It illustrates that Nepali paintings are inevitably entangled with the political and social issues surrounding them. This aligns with Terry Eagleton's analysis, which argues that art emerges in response to social and political ideologies and remains closely intertwined with the society from which it originates (Eagleton, 1990). Additionally, he crafted pieces that depicted the earthquakes in both Nepal and Turkey, illustrating that even self-proclaimed abstract artists could not escape the influence of societal events. It depicts that Nepali paintings are influenced by the social issues of transnationalism, serving as an example of the impact of globalization. This influence has expanded the scope of art beyond its traditional historical concepts and iconography to encompass a wide range of elements, including natural calamities and environmental issues (Appadurai, 1996; Lee, 2012). Art has emerged as a socioeconomic phenomenon and a driving force behind the globalization process. Despite the predominantly abstract nature of Manandhar's paintings, his work still revolves around conveying realities, elucidating events, and shaping perceptions, as indicated by Greenfield (2000).



*People's Movement of 2006 by Kiran Manandhar*

*Source: Photo by Keshab Raj Silwal*



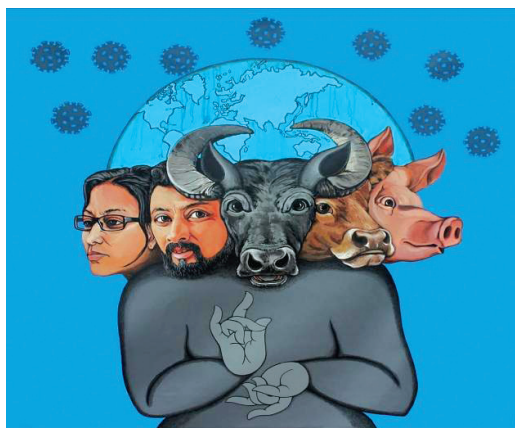
*Turkey Earthquake by Kiran Manandhar*

*Source: <https://www.insidehimalayas.com/re-imagining-reality-with-kiran-manandhar/>*

In 2020, the outbreak of the coronavirus led to lockdown measures even in Nepal, preventing people from going outside. The virus claimed the lives of thousands, leaving a profound impact on social interactions, communication, and the economy. Nepali artists



were not immune to its influence, and they responded by organizing an online art exhibition to portray the pandemic's effects on human life and societal relationships. Nineteen artists conveyed their impressions of the hardships faced by society through their artwork. For instance, Asha Dangol's piece "New Avatar" explored the connection between humans and animals. Prithvi Shrestha's art "A Game" featured individuals wearing masks, reflecting the new life of human beings. Ranju Yadav's paintings intertwined the experience of pregnancy during lockdown with the traditional Mithila style. A common theme in all these artworks is the attempt to illustrate the impact of the coronavirus on individuals and society at large. As articulated by Berger and Luckmann (1966), these paintings function as the expression of everyday experiences and challenges within particular spheres of significance. Essentially, they serve as a symbol system employed to represent the social constructs of daily life shaped through collective interactions among individuals. Thus, these artworks demonstrate the influence of society on the artists' creative expressions.



Asha Dangol's 'New Avatar'  
Source: [www.mona.com.np](http://www.mona.com.np)



Prithvi Shrestha's 'A Game'  
Source: [www.mona.com.np](http://www.mona.com.np)

The Himalayan Art Exhibition organized in July, 2020 in Art council involving new and experienced artists. This exhibition featured a diverse range of social themes depicted through paintings, with a fresh take on mythological narratives. Renowned artist Roshan Pradhan is recognized for his meticulous and impactful approach to reinterpreting myths. He skillfully reimagines these ancient stories, infusing them with contemporary relevance. In his latest work, he presents a striking depiction of the fierce deity Bhairav atop an anthropomorphic turtle, offering a narrative that connects the mythological with the present day, leaving room for multiple interpretations. Erina Tamrakar's artwork is dedicated to celebrating the strength of women. Often utilizing a blend of red and black hues, she depicts a third eye on the foreheads of women as a symbol of their empowerment. Her work delves into themes of women's societal roles, oppression, and liberation.

These paintings, akin to the shift seen among female artists in the mid-to-late twentieth century, reflect a departure in artistic approach, serving as a medium for expressing

resistance against women's oppression, as noted by Qiu (2022). Concurrently, global movements advocating feminism and the rights of sexual minorities have undergone extensive and continuous development worldwide. Praveen Shrestha's paintings, crafted using cool green tones, present a unique amalgamation of trees, houses, and temples seamlessly integrated into a lifelike environment alongside a flowing river. This artistic endeavor employs contrasting colors to captivate the viewer, offering a fresh perspective on societal dynamics within the scene. This painting reflects the contemporary challenge of human connection with the natural environment. It resonates with Lee's assertions (2012) that modern art is transcending traditional historical notions and symbols to embrace a wide array of issues, including those confronting society today.



*Painting of Erina Tamrakar*

Source: [www.eartsnepal.com](http://www.eartsnepal.com) /Himalayan Art Camp



*Painting of Kailash Shrestha*

Source: [www.artsy.net](http://www.artsy.net)

Kailash K. Shrestha is recognized for his art that frequently engages with political and social issues, and this time he has created a striking, albeit elongated, image devoid of the human body. This unconventional approach is characteristic of his artistic series, where clothing alone serves as a symbol of a modern-day politician's identity. However, the figure depicted, seemingly adorned with garlands and food, is hollow on the inside, symbolizing an absence of true humanity. This artwork provides a sharp commentary on contemporary political scenarios and cleverly parodies the situation, making it a truly remarkable piece.

Nepali paintings appear to be influenced by critical theory, which critiques the false consciousness generated by traditional aesthetic forms and conventional ideals of beauty, as well as the shortcomings of capitalism (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972). Nepali paintings are exploring new styles to portray society and innovative modes of expression. Mukesh Shrestha's art takes on a translucent, gentle, and captivating quality as he intricately adorns Buddhist deities with a multitude of textures. His skillful use of light yellow, white, and green hues in these traditional and elegant depictions adds to their

allure. When these timeless images are reimagined with a contemporary twist, they offer a fresh experience to the viewer, and the infusion of innovation and originality lends a new dimension to the work, enhancing its appeal. The other artworks in the exhibition also remain deeply rooted in social, political, and economic themes, reflecting the artists' commitment to addressing these critical subjects.



*Uddhav Raj Rimal's painting "Dance of Contradiction,"*  
Source: Nepal Academy of Fine Arts/National Exhibition of Fine Arts- 2023



*Laxman Mandal's Mithila Painting*  
Source: Nepal Academy of Fine Arts/National Exhibition of Fine Arts- 2023

At the National Art Exhibition organized by the Nepal Fine Arts Academy in July 2023, a diverse array of artworks showcasing traditional folk art, life philosophies, cultural elements, social lifestyles, conflicts, oppression, and political themes were on display. The exhibition featured 695 distinct pieces encompassing contemporary art, handicrafts, folk art, replacement art, Thangka, and Paubha art. Notable works included Uddhav Raj Rimal's painting "Dance of Contradiction," comprising three sets with unique expressions, symbolizing the celebration of the present era according to the artist. Artist Tara Man Bhomjan's "Seventh Karmapa" artwork depicted a Tibetan landscape as its backdrop, with Guru Karmapa delivering Dharma teachings. Krishna Gopal Shrestha, another artist, introduced a new archetype in Nepali art, infusing cultural elements and religious texts into his work. Additionally, a Mithila painting vividly portrayed the daily life of Mithali women, capturing their involvement in agricultural and household activities. Lastly, a painting ingeniously combined Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" with elements of Newari women and culture, reflecting the influence of both traditional surroundings and contemporary society on Nepali art. These paintings reflect a reward system intertwined with popular culture, offering material incentives for artists and appealing to broader audiences (Crane, 1976). The growing influence of market forces and financial considerations encourages the creation of artworks that captivate viewers (Cook, 2000).

Nepali artists acknowledge that following Jung Bahadur Rana's visit to Britain; Western influence began to infiltrate Nepali painting, ushering in the era of modern theories. Despite this, an ongoing discourse revolves around the definition of Nepali identity. Artists have strived to incorporate traditional elements into contemporary art, as seen in Lainsingh Bangdel's innovative Muna Madan series. Shashi Vikram Shah captures the essence of Nepali society through his portrayal of horses. The period following the political changes of 1990 and 2006 witnessed a shift in Nepali paintings, with depictions of various communities like Madhes and Tamang reflecting the impact of political and social changes. Artists like Sanjaya Rai<sup>2</sup> underscore the pursuit of a new, distinctly Nepali identity in contemporary paintings, one that emanates the essence of Nepali soil. Nepali paintings are assimilating the cultural preferences and tastes of diverse backgrounds, including those of the lower class, thereby generating greater cultural capital, as outlined by Bourdieu (1979).

Throughout history, painting has functioned as a language, serving as a reflection of the society of its time. While earlier paintings were closely tied to power, contemporary artworks explore themes such as human suffering, poverty, women's experiences, gender inequality, and discrimination. Artist Keshab Raj Khanal<sup>3</sup>, for example, aims to capture the joy of rural society by connecting it to nature in his paintings. Senior artist Naradmani Hartamchhali<sup>4</sup> assigns specific meanings to colors, explaining that red, blue, black, and white convey distinct messages. Some paintings delve into societal change, engaging in progressive art that intertwines with human reproduction, the universe, and class struggle. Hartamchhali depicts the mood of people, the ongoing interplay between light and dark, and the inherent desire for change.

## Conclusion

Nepali painting, rooted in social themes, serves as a vehicle for artistic expression on issues like social diversity, problems, and gender concerns. Historically, these art forms originated under the patronage of rulers who utilized local materials and colors to portray religious myths. As discussed by Simmel (1902), contemporary Nepali paintings engage with political, social, and economic transformations, scrutinizing the impact of modernization and urbanization on artistic creation. Displayed in exhibitions like the Online Art Exhibition, Himalayan Art Exhibition, and National Art Exhibition organized by the Nepal Fine Arts Academy, these paintings encompass a diverse range of expressions consumed by the public. They can be broadly categorized into three main types: those rooted in traditional myths, a fusion of traditional elements with contemporary themes,

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2. Interview conducted on October 30, 2023

3. Interview conducted on November 16, 2023

4. Interview conducted on October 30, 2023



and a focus on cultural and everyday life aspects rather than overtly political subjects. Nepali paintings have evolved, incorporating global issues into their narratives, reflecting recognition of the interconnectedness of the world.

Contemporary Nepali paintings have broadened beyond the limited interests of rulers. While religious paintings remain dominant and popular among the common people, providing a local flavor to Nepali arts, contemporary artworks also touch upon some social issues, albeit to a limited extent. The folk art tradition of Mithila paintings enjoys popularity among local communities and warrants protection at the state level. Furthermore, Contemporary paintings are evolving towards collaborative outcomes, driven by social processes and the expression of everyday experiences within specific realms of significance. They utilize symbolic systems to portray the social constructs shaped through shared interactions among individuals (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Beyond merely generating traditional arts, these paintings also contribute to alter conventional notions of beauty and introducing new aesthetics (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972).

In accordance with Bourdieu's discourse (1979), contemporary Nepali paintings create not only economic capital but also cultural capital, tailored to align with consumer preferences and market demands. Initially exclusive to the upper class, these artworks have expanded their audience to include the middle class. However, challenges persist in terms of accessibility for the lower class and laborers. Significantly, these artworks hold a central role in the cultural industry, contributing to the perpetuation of capitalist structures. Similar to Paulantaz's analysis (1975), Nepali paintings transcend mere artistic expression, acting as ideological tools for the state to maintain influence and foster a somewhat distorted consciousness, but not necessarily incorporate broad social change. Moreover, they emerge slowly in response to social and political ideologies, deeply intertwined with the society of their origin (Eagleton, 1990). Simultaneously, Nepali paintings are influenced by modernization and globalization, experiencing transnational flows of art and audiences (Appadurai, 1996). This impact has broadened the scope of art, transcending traditional historical conceptions and iconography to encompass a wide range of elements, including movement, migration, boundaries, and diverse populations (Lee, 2012).

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