



Fig. 1: Amar Chitrankar, After the Worship, oil on canvas, 1999

Newar Cultural Life in the Paintings of Third- and Fourth-Generation Chitrakar Artists: An Ethnographic Art Study

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Abstract

This paper examines the paintings of third- and fourth-generation Chitrakar artists of the Kathmandu Valley from an ethnographic art perspective. The Chitrakars, the hereditary painter caste of the Newar community, have long used painting not only as an aesthetic medium but also as a visual archive of Newar festivals, rituals, occupations, architecture, and everyday life. This study analyses selected works by ten artists: Amar Chitrakar, Manohar Man Pun, Gyan Bahadur Chitrakar, Dil Bahadur Chitrakar, and Surya Bahadur Chitrakar from the third generation; and Madan Chitrakar, Sarada Chitrakar, Prem Man Chitrakar, Lok Chitrakar, and Ramesh Chitrakar from the fourth generation. Employing a qualitative methodology that combines visual analysis with ethnographic interpretation, the paper explores how artistic representation functions as cultural documentation. The findings demonstrate that both generations meticulously recorded Newar social and ritual life, while their artistic practices evolved from realist representation toward diverse modernist expressions. The paper concludes that Chitrakar paintings constitute an important repository of cultural knowledge, collective memory, and community identity, particularly at a time when the traditional hereditary practice of Newar painting is in decline. This study contributes to Nepali art history by highlighting the enduring ethnographic and cultural significance of Newar visual heritage.

Keywords: Chitrakar, Newar art, ethnographic art, cultural heritage, Nepali painting

Introduction

The Chitrakar community occupies a central position in the visual culture of the Kathmandu Valley. The word ‘*Chitrakar*’ means ‘picture maker’. It refers to a caste-based group within the Newar community that has practiced painting as a hereditary profession (Pal: 1985). In *Nepāl bhāsā*, this caste is called ‘*Pum*’ By the beginning of the twentieth century, the painters gradually adopted the Nepali name ‘Chitrakar’ (Chitrakar, 2004). For centuries, the Chitrakars produced *paubhā* paintings, temple murals, royal portraits, and ceremonial artworks under systems of religious and royal patronage.

The Chitrakars remain connected to living ritual practices. They are often called upon by state agencies to repaint sacred images before major celebrations such as *Indrajātrā*. They also produce ritual art on earthenware and paper, depicting sacred figures such as *salāhpāḥ*, Lakṣmī, and Karkat-Nāga, so that devotional art remains economically accessible to the public. However, this tradition is now under threat. Mass machine-printed posters and card-sized pictures of deities are less expensive and more popular. Only about ten families now paint in the traditional style, which is known for its vivid palette of plant-based paints. Many young Chitrakars have entered other professions or have left Nepal for jobs and education.

The hereditary organization of the painting profession has both negative and positive sides. The historian and culture expert Satya Mohan Joshi observed that the caste system was created based on discrimination, but it also created expertise in each sector. This expertise allows the distinct painting style of the Chitrakars to continue and flourish over the centuries. Joshi suggested that passing

these skills to people from different castes and backgrounds could be one way to save the tradition. In fact, some fourth-generation artists have already moved in this direction by training students from outside the community.

Against this background, the paintings of the Chitrakar artists gain a special documentary value. Ethnographic approaches to art examine artworks not only as aesthetic objects but also as cultural documents. Such documents provide insight into the values, beliefs, social practices, and collective experiences of particular communities (Morphy & Perkins 2006). From this perspective, paintings may be understood as visual records of rituals, occupations, festivals, social relationships, and everyday life. The present paper applies this perspective to the works of the third and fourth generations of Chitrakar artists, who worked from the middle of the twentieth century to the present day.

The third generation of Chitrakar artists worked during the middle decades of the twentieth century. This generation includes Amar Chitrakar, Manohar Man Pun, Gyan Bahadur Chitrakar, Dil Bahadur Chitrakar, and Surya Bahadur Chitrakar. These artists absorbed the Western realism that Tej Bahadur Chitrakar had introduced into Nepali painting, and they applied it to local subjects (Chitrakar: 2004; Mishra: 2008). The fourth generation includes Madan Chitrakar, Sharada Chitrakar, Prem Man Chitrakar, Lok Chitrakar, and Ramesh Chitrakar. This generation worked in a period of institutional art education, public exhibitions, and international exposure. Their styles range from careful realism to *paubhā* painting and geometric abstraction. Despite these stylistic differences, both generations remained deeply engaged with Newar cultural life. This shared engagement is the subject of the present paper.

Statement of the Problem

Most existing studies of Nepali painting have focused either on individual artists or on broad stylistic histories (Bangdel, 1996; Mishra, 2008; Sharma 2014). Their primary concern has been the evolution of artistic styles, particularly the introduction of Western realism during the Rana period and the development of modernism after the 1950s. Far less attention has been paid to the cultural and ethnographic content of the paintings themselves.

The Chitrakar artists produced detailed visual representations of Newar festivals, rituals, marriage ceremonies, temple architecture, marketplaces, traditional occupations, and everyday life. Collectively, these works constitute a rich visual archive documenting Newar society over more than a century of profound social and cultural transformation. Despite their documentary value, this archive has rarely been examined systematically as a source of ethnographic evidence.

Another significant gap in the literature is the absence of intergenerational analysis within the same hereditary painter lineage. This paper addresses that gap by examining the paintings of the third and fourth generation Chitrakar artists. It asks how their artworks preserve and communicate Newar cultural life, and how this documentary and ethnographic function has endured even as artistic techniques, themes, and aesthetic styles have evolved.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on close observation and comparative visual analysis of selected paintings by third- and fourth-generation Chitrakar artists. Five artists were selected from each generation on the basis of their historical significance and the availability of

representative works. From each artist, five paintings were chosen for detailed analysis, resulting in a corpus of fifty artworks.

The visual analysis examines both the formal and cultural dimensions of the paintings. Formal analysis considers composition, color, line, brushwork, spatial organization, and perspective, while cultural analysis focuses on the representation of Newar rituals, festivals, costumes, architecture, religious objects, occupations, and everyday social life. Rather than treating these paintings solely as aesthetic objects, the study interprets them as visual documents of cultural experience.

The research is further informed by ethnographic art and visual anthropology, which regard artworks as expressions of cultural knowledge, social memory, and collective identity (Morphy & Perkins 2006). This ethnographic perspective is integrated with formal visual analysis to understand how artistic practice preserves and communicates Newar cultural traditions.

Supporting data were collected from artist interviews, artists' statements, exhibition catalogues, archival collections, and published scholarship on Nepali art history (Pal, 1985; Mishra, 2008; Chitrakar, 2012). The scope of the study is confined to painting and does not include sculpture, traditional crafts, or other visual art forms.

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology. The primary method is close observation and comparative visual analysis of selected artworks. Five artists were selected from each generation on the basis of the availability of artworks and their historical significance. Five representative artworks by each artist were examined. The analysis considers formal elements such as composition, color, line, brushwork, and perspective. It also considers the cultural

content of the works, including the rituals, objects, costumes, buildings, and activities that they depict.

The study also draws upon insights from ethnographic art perspectives and visual anthropology (Morphy & Perkins: 2006). Ethnographic approaches view artworks as visual expressions of cultural knowledge, social memory, and community identity. In this paper, ethnographic interpretation is combined with formal analysis. Supporting information was gathered from interviews, artist statements, exhibition catalogues, archival materials, and existing scholarship on Nepali art history (Chitrakar: 2012; Mishra: 2008; Pal: 1985). The study is limited to painting and does not extend to sculpture, craft, or other art forms.

Analysis

The analysis is organized under six themes. These themes are festivals and rituals, urban space and architecture, everyday labor and social life, portraiture and court culture, and sacred iconography and cultural memory in modern forms.

Festivals and Rituals as Visual Records

Many Chitrakar paintings document Newar festivals and domestic rituals with great accuracy. Manohar Man Pun devoted much of his career to such subjects. His painting '*Bhāitikā*' (Fig. 2) depicts the ritual bond between brothers and sisters. Each figure is absorbed in a specific ritual action. Some figures handle flowers, others hold the ceremonial *tikā* tray called *kvataḥ*, and others manage the ceremonial threads called *jaṃḥkā*, which are worn during *Bhāitikā*.

These carefully observed details ground the painting in lived cultural practice. His painting '*Welcoming Bride*' (Fig. 3) records the jewelry of a Newar bride, including the



Fig. 2: Manohar Man Pun, *Bhāitikā*, 1967, oil on canvas



Fig. 3: Manohar Man Pun, *Welcoming Bride*

headpiece called *luṃsvām* and the necklaces called *bhimpumā* and *tāyo*. The painting also shows ritual objects such as *tvāḥdevā* and the *kalāśa*.

Other artists of the third generation similarly recorded rituals. Amar Chitrakar's '*After the Worship*' (Fig. 1) shows a woman immediately after a religious worship. She holds a traditional *sukundā* in her right hand and a *pujābhah* in her left. The surrounding pillars, doors, and the figure of Gaṇeśa complete the devotional setting. Dil Bahadur Chitrakar's '*Hāthā Dyah*' (Fig. 4) depicts a ritual observed during the *Indrajātrā* festival, in which alcohol flows from the mouth of the deity as a divine blessing.

In the fourth generation, Sharada Chitrakar continued this documentary interest. Her



Fig. 4: Dil Bahadur Chitrakar, *Hāthā Dyah*, 1959, watercolour

painting '*Seto-Matsyendranātha*' (Fig. 5) captures the chariot festival at Ason. A tall chariot with a flowing red flag stands at the center, surrounded by a dense crowd of devotees. These works preserve the appearance, objects, and collective emotion of Newar festivals for future generations.

From an ethnographic perspective, these festival paintings do more than describe events. They record the material culture of Newar rituals, including specific vessels, ornaments, garments, and offerings. They also record the social organization of the rituals, such as the roles of women in *Bhāitika* and the collective participation of the community in chariot processions. Even when the artists used expressive styles, the ritual details remained accurate. Manohar

Man Pun rendered his figures in exaggerated proportions to convey emotional intensity, yet the *tika* tray called *kvatah*, the ceremonial threads called *jajamka*, and the ritual gestures in his *Bhāitika* are ethnographically correct. Style and documentation therefore worked together, not against each other.

Urban Space and Architecture

The Chitrakar artists also documented the built environment of the Kathmandu Valley. Manohar Man Pun's '*Ghantaghar*' (Fig. 6) renders the clock tower and its surroundings in earthy tones of brown, yellow ochre, and burnt sienna. His '*Basantapur Durbar Square*' (Fig. 8) records temple struts, panels, wooden doors, and ornamental gateways in careful watercolor details.

Gyan Bahadur Chitrakar's '*The Old Narayanhiti Palace*' (Fig. 10), with its pillars, stairways, domes, and verandahs, and his other work '*Patan*' (Fig. 9) depict details of the architecture, like wooden struts, pagoda-style temples, and windows around urban spaces.

In the fourth generation, Sharada Chitrakar's '*Samkatā*' (Figure 7) renders a temple in a nearly monochromatic palette of browns. The doors, windows, and wooden supports called *tunāh* (strut) are shown with precision, and guardian figures flank the entrance.

Ramesh Chitrakar continued this tradition. His painting '*Patan Durbar Square*' (Fig. 11) shows temples with accurate proportion and perspective. Architectural details such as *tunāh* (wooden struts), decorative arches, carved doors and windows, hanging bells, and spires reflect both technical precision and deep cultural knowledge. These paintings have documentary importance because many of the depicted monuments have been damaged by earthquakes and urbanization. The paintings preserve the visual memory of

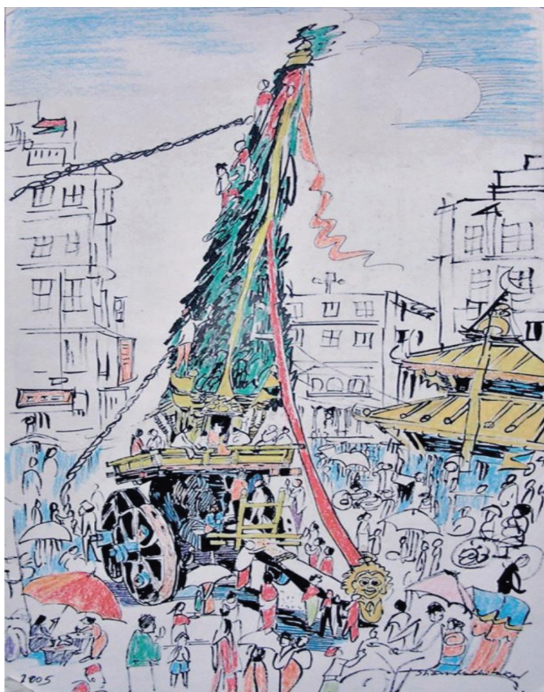


Fig. 5: Sharada Chitrakar, *Seto-Matsyendranātha*, 2005



Fig. 6: Manohar Man Pun, *Ghantaghar*, 1978

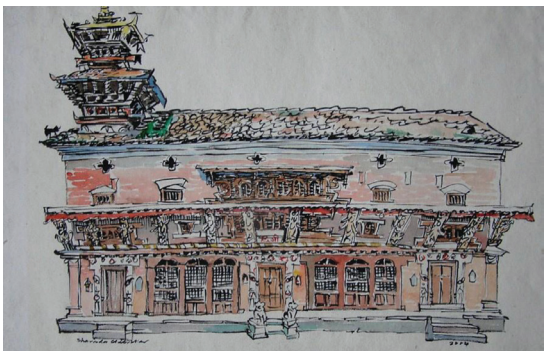


Fig. 7: Sharada Chitrakar, *Samkatā*, 2004



Fig. 8: Manohar Man Pun, *Kathmandu Durbar Square*



Fig. 9: Gyan Bahadur Chitrakar, *The Old Narayanhiiti Palace*



Fig. 10: Gyan Bahadur Chitrakar, *Patan*



Fig. 11: Ramesh Chitrakar, *Patan Durbar Square*, 2017

Newar architectural heritage as it appeared in the twentieth century.

Everyday Labor and Social Life

A third group of works records ordinary occupations and social life. Gyan Bahadur Chitrakar's '*Jyāpu Carrying Kharpan*' (Fig. 12) shows a *jyāpu* (farmer) carrying a *khaḥmū* or *kharpan* filled with green vegetables through a narrow alley. The figure occupies a dominant position in the composition, which gives dignity to everyday labor.



Fig. 12: Gyan Bahadur Chitrakar, *Jyāpu Carrying Kharpan*

Dil Bahadur Chitrakar's '*Harvesting Time*' (Fig. 13) depicts women engaged in rice cultivation. The elongated and rhythmic figures emphasize cooperation and cultural harmony in agrarian life.

Surya Bahadur Chitrakar's '*A Local Potter Shapes a Vessel*' (Fig. 14) presents a potter absorbed in his craft, painted in the traditional paubhāh format against a plain background.

Sharada Chitrakar's '*In Front of Door*' (Fig. 15) captures a woman at a temple entrance in a natural and fleeting moment, while her landscape '*Bungamati*' (Fig. 16) records the relationship between village houses, terraced fields, and temples. Together, these works form a visual record of Newar occupations, dress, and social spaces.

These paintings of labour carry social meaning. The women farmers in the rice

fields and the potter at his wheel represent occupational groups within the Newar society. By placing such figures at the center of the canvas, the artists gave visual dignity to working people. This choice reflects the influence of the European Realist movement, which turned attention toward workers and peasants (Gombrich 1995). At the same time, the choice reflects the artist's own position within a caste of artisans. Dil Bahadur Chitrakar even refused royal commissions to paint common people in their lived realities. His decision shows that the ethnographic content of these works was often a matter of conscious commitment rather than accident.

Portraiture and the Record of Court Culture

Royal portraiture forms another part of this visual archive. Amar Chitrakar's life-size



Fig. 13: Dil Bahadur Chitrakar, *Harvesting Time*, 1984

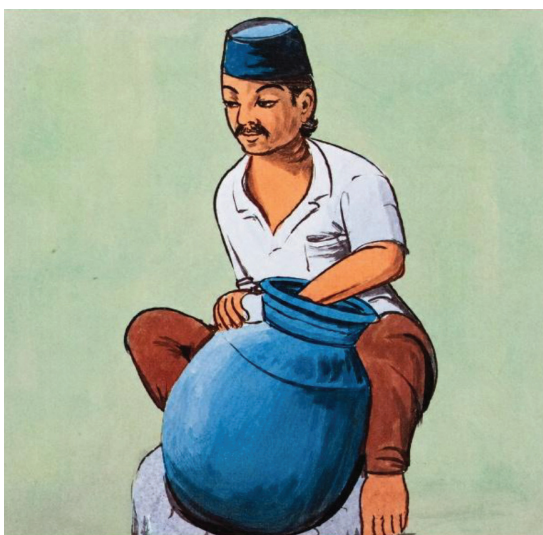


Fig. 14: Surya Bahadur Chitrakar, *A Local Potter Shapes a Vessel*

portrait 'King Prithvi Narayan Shah' (Fig. 17), now housed in the National Museum, Chhauni, records the crown, costume, jewelry, and regalia of the Shah monarchy in naturalistic detail. His 'Portrait of Queen Aishwarya' (Fig. 18) preserves the aesthetic ideals of the Panchayat era, when such portraits were displayed in the government offices across the country.

Gyan Bahadur Chitrakar's portrait of 'King Mahendra Delivering a Speech' (Fig. 19) on the 'New Education System' connects individual likeness with specific historical moments of national reform. His large

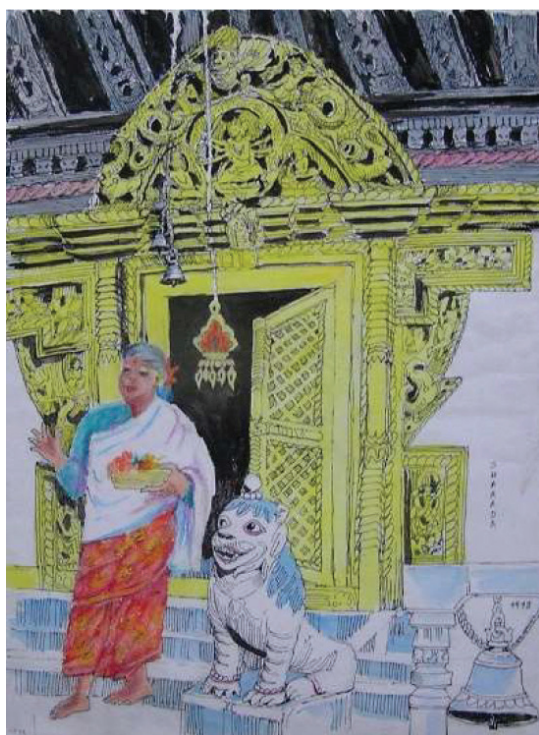


Fig. 15: Sharada Chitrakar, *In Front of Door*, 1998

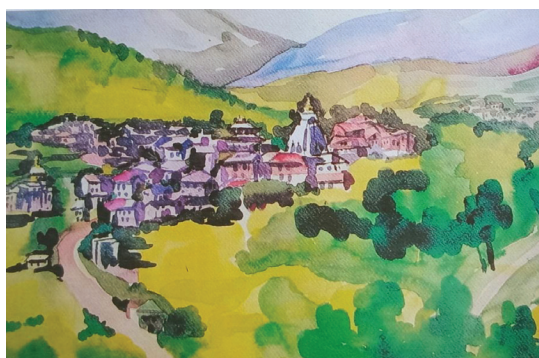


Fig. 16: Sharada Chitrakar, *Bungamati*, 2003

hunting scene (Fig. 20) at Hanuman Dhoka documents the royal hunting expeditions of the period, with troops, attendants, elephants, and elites arranged in a dense jungle setting.

These works record the ceremonial dress, medals, postures, and staged spectacles of the Nepali court. After the end of the monarchy, such paintings became historical documents

of a political culture that no longer exists. They show how the Chitrakar artists served as visual chroniclers of the state as well as of the community.

Sacred Iconography and the Continuity of Paubhāh

Several Chitrakar artists preserved the sacred iconography of the Newar community. Surya Bahadur Chitrakar of the third generation merged *paubhā* format with Western realism. In ‘*The Buddha Arrives at Lumbini*’ (Fig. 21), describes Brahmā sweeping the ground before the Buddha; Saraśvatī spreading a carpet; Kubera throwing about money and wealth; Vāyu flying his banner; Agni burying incense; Varuna making streams of water flow; Mahādeva beating his drum; Nārāyana blowing his conch; Yama taking his staff and clearing the way; Indra holding an umbrella over the Buddha; crowds of monks fanning him; heaven showering flowers. The Buddha arrives with feelings of joy.

His images of goddess Lakṣmī (Fig. 22) are widely reproduced during the festival of Tihar. In these images, Lakṣmī holds traditional Newar ritual objects such as the *jvālānhyakan* and the *sinhamoo*, and Kuber offers pouring out gems from a red sack. Such works connect Hindu mythological imagery with Newar cultural elements.

In the fourth generation, Prem Man Chitrakar and Lok Chitrakar carry on the *paubhā* tradition. Prem Man Chitrakar painted deities such as both Hindu and Buddhist deities. His artworks on Dīpaṅkara Buddha (Fig. 23) reflect the integration of traditional iconography with modern observation. The painting serves both sacred iconography and devotional *paubhāh*. He also founded the Traditional Artists Association in 1992-1993 and trained artists from different backgrounds, which expanded *paubhā* painting beyond hereditary family systems.



Fig. 17: Amar Chitrakar, Portrait of King Prithvi Narayan Shah, 1960



Fig. 18: Amar Chitrakar, Portrait of Queen Aishwarya



Fig. 19: Gyan Bahadur Chitrakar; King Mahendra Delivering a Speech



Fig. 20: Gyan Bahadur Chitrakar; Hunting



Fig. 21: Surya Bahadur Chitrakar, The Buddha arrives at Lumbini.



Fig. 22: Surya Bahadur Chitrakar, Goddess Lakshmi

Lok Chitrakar works with traditional mineral pigments such as lapis and malachite. His paintings, such as ‘*Sahasrabhuja Lokeśvara*’ (Fig. 24), function both as artworks and as sacred objects, because consecrated *paubhās* are regarded as embodiments of divine presence. The Chitrakar artists have always served both Hindu and Buddhist communities, as seen in objects such as *Aṣṭamaṅgala* strips placed at household entrances. This cross-religious service reflects the historical role of the caste-based artisan families of the Valley.

Cultural Reminiscence in Modern Forms

Even the most experimental artists of the fourth generation remained connected to



Figure 23: Prem Man Chitrakar, *Dīpaṅkara Buddha*



Figure 24: Lok Chitrakar, *Sahasrabhuja Lokeśvara*

Newar cultural memory. Madan Chitrakar moved toward geometric abstraction, yet his subjects often come from Newar visual culture. His painting *'The Happy Couple'* (Fig. 25) presents the mythical lions that guard the entrances of temples, palaces, monasteries, and chaityas across the Kathmandu Valley. His work *'The Untold'* (Fig. 26) combines a sculpted human head with painted motifs, and a red and white thread tied around the neck of the head refers to ritual practice and cultural identity.

Ramesh Chitrakar's *'Path to Devotion'* (Fig. 27) presents a woman walking toward a temple in a semi-abstract golden atmosphere, which transforms an everyday act of worship into an image of spiritual journey. These works show that modernist form and ethnographic content can exist together. The artists reinterpret cultural symbols instead of abandoning them.

Taken together, the six themes reveal a continuous documentary thread across the two generations. The third generation recorded Newar life mainly through the lens of Western realism, which they had inherited from Tej Bahadur Chitrakar. The fourth generation continued this record through a wider range of styles. Watercolor observation, paubhāh iconography, and geometric abstraction all served the same underlying purpose of cultural expression. The paintings therefore support the view of ethnographic art scholars that visual expression and social life cannot be separated (Morphy & Perkins 2006). Each generation painted the world of the Newar community as it knew that world, and each generation left behind a layer of visual evidence for the next.

Conclusion

This study has examined the paintings of third- and fourth-generation Chitrakar



Fig. 25: *Madan Chitrakar, The Happy Couple*

artists from an ethnographic art perspective. The analysis shows that these paintings function as visual records of Newar cultural life. They document festivals such as Bhaitikā, Indraajātrā, Tihar, and the Seto-Matsyendranātha chariot procession. They record ritual objects, bridal ornaments, temple architecture, market streets, agricultural labor, and sacred iconography. The third generation produced these records mainly through Western realism, while the fourth generation continued the same documentary engagement through more diverse styles, including watercolor observation, paubhāh painting, and modernist abstraction.

The study concludes that the ethnographic value of the Chitrakar paintings complements their aesthetic value. The works preserve cultural knowledge, social memory, and

community identity at a time when the hereditary painting tradition itself is declining. As machine-printed images replace hand-painted ritual art and as younger Chitrakars leave the profession, these paintings become an increasingly important archive of Newar heritage. The study therefore suggests that

museums, scholars, and cultural institutions should document and preserve these artworks systematically. Future research may extend this ethnographic approach to other artist communities of Nepal and to other art forms of the Newar tradition.

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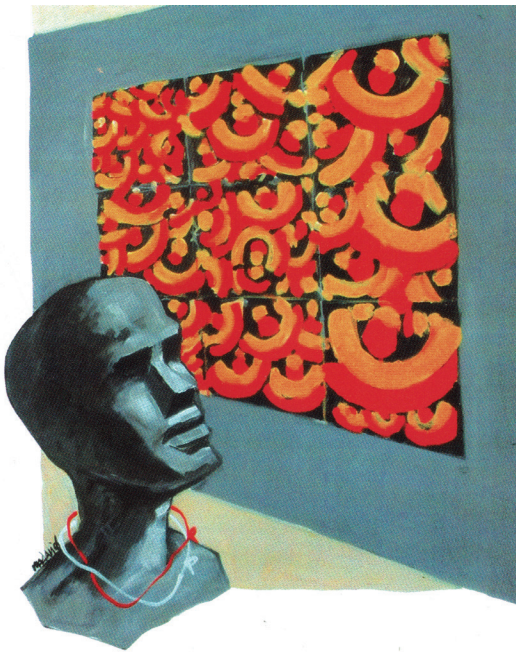


Fig. 26: Madan Chitrakar, *Untold*, 2006

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