



Appropriating the Mona Lisa in the Contemporary Nepali Paintings

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Abstract

There is no boundary in creating, or recreating new work whether in art, literature, music, film, drama, or any medium. The practice of artists using original objects or images in their artworks with changes of the original ones is considered appropriation in art, or appropriate art. This paper focuses on the appropriation of the Mona Lisa in the contemporary Nepali paintings.

The Mona Lisa, the most sought after work of art, was created by Leonardo Da Vinci during c. 1503-1506 is presently housed in the Louvre Museum, Paris. There are several examples of Vinci's art turned into appropriate art by artists from around the world. In 1919, Marchel Duchamp appropriated adding a moustache and beard with a pencil in a postcard reproduction of the Mona Lisa. Moreover, this appropriation of the Mona Lisa can be seen in Nepali artists' paintings as well. It can be seen in the works of the eminent artist Manuj Babu Mishra to the up-and-coming artists like Laxman Bajra Lama and many others.

While making conscious and unconscious dialogues with the Mona Lisa, Nepali contemporary artists seem to be apparently driven by traditional myths, icons, motifs, and religions. Here, ten of the appropriate arts of the Mona Lisa, created by contemporary Nepali artists will be discussed.

Keywords: appropriation art, the Mona Lisa, mysterious, transformation, re-contextualize

Image I: **Leonardo da Vinci**, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503- 1506, Oil on panel, 77 cm x 53 cm, Louvre, Paris.

Introduction

Questions could be raised – Why the *Mona Lisa* (Image I) is so famous? How do people connect themselves to the *Mona Lisa*? Why do the artists want to be acclaimed for recreating the *Mona Lisa*?

The word ‘imitation’ implies that a copy is not a real thing. It may also imply that the copy is inferior in value (Sheppard 1987). While appropriating earlier artworks, artists deliberately copy images to make them their possession in their works. They are not stealing or plagiarizing; nor they are making these images their very own. This artistic approach does stir up controversy because some people view appropriation as unoriginal or theft. This is why, it is important to understand why artists choose to appropriate artworks of earlier artists.

Appropriation art has continued to be disregarded over time, and its absence has resulted in a contemporary understanding of appropriation art as narrowly concerned with image-as-sign, to the exclusion of the linguistic (and other) signs also appearing within an artwork’s frame.

In contemporary Nepali art, artists use both traditional art forms and western art forms in general. Likewise, in appropriate art, artists combine both the qualities of native and western styles such as the use of images of deities and concepts of myths. Western techniques and approaches are appropriated in a contemporary form. Application of

cultural appropriation enhances the aesthetic value of the art.

It is obvious that great artworks evoke the feeling and thoughts. Moreover, artists have all the right to express themselves in their artworks and appropriation is one of such ways where artists express themselves.

Due to globalization artists from one corner of the world can get acquainted with various art forms from around the world. It is not surprising to see the mix and match in their artworks creating a unique form of art. Anthony McGrew defines globalization:

Globalization refers to the multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that transcends the nation-states. Nowadays, goods, capital, people, knowledge, images, communications, crime, pollutants, drugs, fashions, and beliefs are all readily flow across territorial boundaries.

In such a context, re-contextualization helps the artist comment on the original meaning of the image and the viewer's association with either the original image or the real thing.

In addition, globalization generates cultural encounters, contradictions and contestations, and creates tension between homogeneity and heterogeneity. Globalization “unites and separates, creates similarity and difference” in many aspects of reality and creates the problem of identity. Out of these cultural encounters and contradictions, every individual is compelled to redefine and

reconstruct one's particular space.

Appropriation can be traced back to the cubist collages and constructions of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque made from 1912 on, in which real objects such as newspapers were included to represent themselves. The practice was developed much further in the 'ready-made' created by the French artist Marcel Duchamp in 1915. The most notorious of these was 'Fountain', a men's urinal signed, titled, and presented on a pedestal. Later, surrealism also made extensive use of appropriation in collages and objects such as Salvador Dali's 'Lobster Telephone', Dadaists and pop artist like Andy Warhol's 'Thirty are better than one'. In the late 1950s, appropriated images and objects appeared extensively in the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg in Pop Art.

Another sort of content appropriation can be identified. This form of appropriation is related to style appropriation but only basic motifs are appropriated. This sort of appropriation may be called motif appropriation. It occurs when artists are influenced by the exotic culture without creating works in the same style.

Bajracharya (2011: 66) states in "Adapting to our interpretations":

Art also represents the psychological continuum of an artist which comes in his/her surroundings; be it cultural phenomena, political incidents and so on. If some portion of his/her social experience slides in through metaphors (visibly), or in concept

(invisibly), then that in itself is the originality.

Artwork can provide new perspectives on objects that enhance our understanding. Creation is always anew if we borrow others' art in creating a new piece of art. Only one fact what remains there is a big challenge using other's images which artists have to face.

Interpretation and discussion

Many people around the world appreciate the well-known *Mona Lisa*. Yet, viewers who see a close-up of this art are likely to be let down by the modest, sombre depiction of a regular woman. She is modestly attired in dark clothes, a transparent veil and no jewelry. Her smile and gaze have been discussed extensively, but viewers may still be confused.

Along with the mysteries of her identity and enigmatic look, the reason for the work's popularity is one of its many conundrums.

In the context of the contemporary Nepali art, we can get appropriation of the *Mona Lisa* by Manuj Babu Mishra, Asha Dangol, Manish Lal Shrestha, Sunil Sigdel, Shreejan Rajbhandari, Laxman Bazra Lama, Rasana Bajracharya and many other artists.

Five hundred years later since the famous artwork was completed, Habart Foundation, New Delhi in association with Genesis Art Gallery, Kolkata launched an initiative to discover the mystery of the *Mona Lisa*, and has

makde an effort to understand it in the present-day context and in contemporary art language. Twelve artists from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Italy and the US interpreted the famous *Mona Lisa* in their individualistic styles. An art exhibition was mounted of all the works in 2006 (<http://habiartfoundation.org/hello-monalisa.aspx>). Manuj Babu Mishra and Shreejan Rajbhandari's *Mona Lisa* represented Nepal in that exhibition.

In addition, a mural appropriated as Mona Lisa can be seen at a Thakali Restaurant in Kathmandu and also in commercial purpose design in t-shirts too. As said earlier, many appropriation artists are keen to deny the notion of originality.

Some interpretations of Mona Lisa in Nepali paintings

Manuj Babu Mishra

Manuj Babu Mishra is known for his remarkable trademark style. In his pictorial compositions, usually, his own face is seen in distorted forms, often accompanied by horns, tridents and rockets amidst tumultuous multi-coloured multi-colored clouds swirling over transgenic animals' forms. He imbued each of his symbols with meaning. He painted several versions of Mona Lisa in his unique concepts. He interprets the original iconic Mona Lisa in his own artistic way to create something new. In this version titled *Mona Lisa and Manuj Babu* (Image II), there is a Mona Lisa in red Nepali bridal attires, ornated with traditional jewelery.

“He painted his wife Ramola as Mona Lisa, still young and dressed in bridal red with him as the ageing lover by her side. Manuj Babu chose to paint his wife as a young woman because of Mona Lisa's agelessness” (Thapa, 2019). The artist's left hand is on her shoulder and his right hand is holding a bouquet but he himself in the self-portrait is in devil form with horns and elongated ears. In addition, the background shows a Nepali rustic landscape with hills and mountains. The artist tried to show the glow of her Mona Lisa with a mysterious smile. He seems to express his desire to love Mona Lisa and make her his bride. Traditional images are used in contemporary art forms so as to make them exotic and unique. The focus here is on imagination and the artist's obsession with self-reflection, particularly in terms of erotic feelings.

Manuj Babu Mishra's another work titled *Mona Lisa with Wings* (Image III) appropriates the image of the *Mona Lisa*. This painting portrays the political situation of Nepal. A cheerful man is flying a kite. A woman, over Nepal's map is portrayed as a symbol of *Nepal Āmā* (mother). The map is full of fruits which indicates abundance of agriculture. The winged mother desires to fly, but controlled by someone else. Amidst a green landscape, there is a city with temples. The city is surrounded by hills and mountains. Bright cloud symbolizes the hope of light. The innocent looking Mona Lisa with a *tika* on her forehead pinpoints the political scenario of Nepal. Mishra was a celebrated polymath. Most

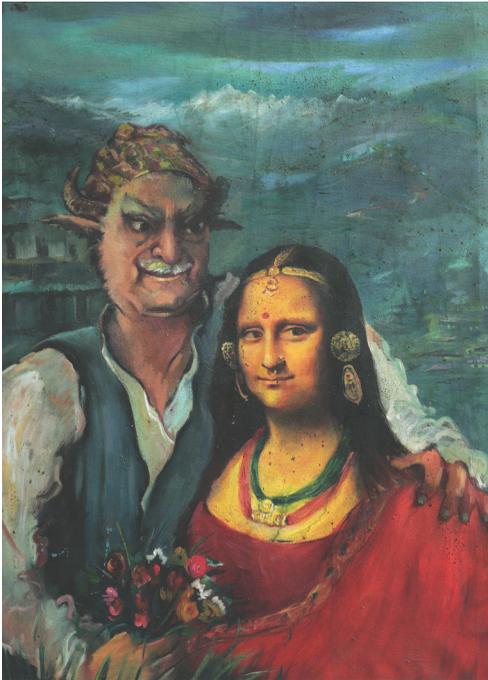


Image II: **Manuj Babu Mishra**, *Mona Lisa and Manuj Babu Mishra*, 2006, Oil on canvas, 120 cm x 90 cm.

© Prithivi Bahadur Pandé, Kathmandu

of the male characters in his works are modelled from his likeness; vividly reflecting his inner emotional turmoil. Mishra's works offer the viewers a glimpse into the sinister, godless world of his imagination but also an extreme recluse who shunned the limelight.

Sunil Sigdel

Nelson Goodman put it in *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), "The arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding."

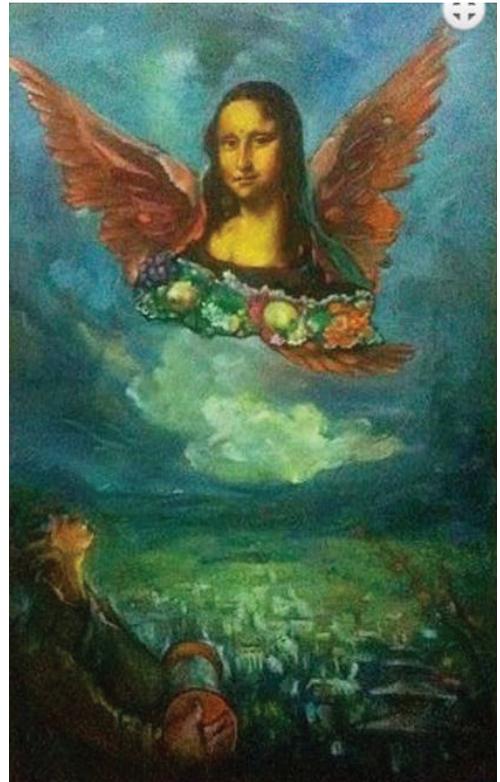


Image III: **Manuj Babu Mishra**, *Mona Lisa with Wings*, 2006, Oil on canvas.

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Nepali artists have experimented the Mona Lisa with the *paubha* style, an earlier tradition of art of Nepal. Sunil Sigdel's *Metamorphosis of Silence* (Image IV) is a glaring example in this context. His work shares some aspects of the Mona Lisa. She is dressed in the Florentine fashion of her day. The artist fuses the reason of science with the imagination of art. There is no watertight boundary between art and science, reason and imagination, and masculine and feminine experiences. That's why he fused the Mona Lisa and Tara. Tara is



Image IV: **Sunil Sigdel**, *Metamorphosis of Silence*, 180 cm x 120 cm, Acrylics on canvas
© Ganges Art Gallery, Delhi, India.

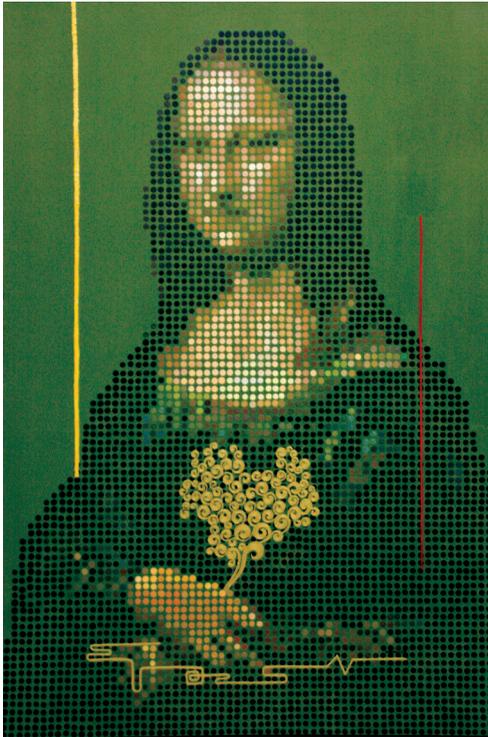


Image V: **Manish Lal Shrestha**, *My God! See, Mona Lisa is holding a flower of heart*, 2011, Acrylics on canvas, 182 cm x 122 cm.

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holding the stem of an utpasla between her ring finger and thumb in her left hand in the *abhaya mudrā*. The long red silk scarf is flowing downward. Also, there are five images of white Taras in the backdrop. According to the artist, he respectively fused both quiet and honourable figures with compassion and salvation to create a new creation.

Manish Lal Shrestha

Manish Lal Shrestha's *My God! See, Mona Lisa is holding a flower of heart* (Image V) is seen looking through the Nepali traditional *ākhijhyāla* (lattice

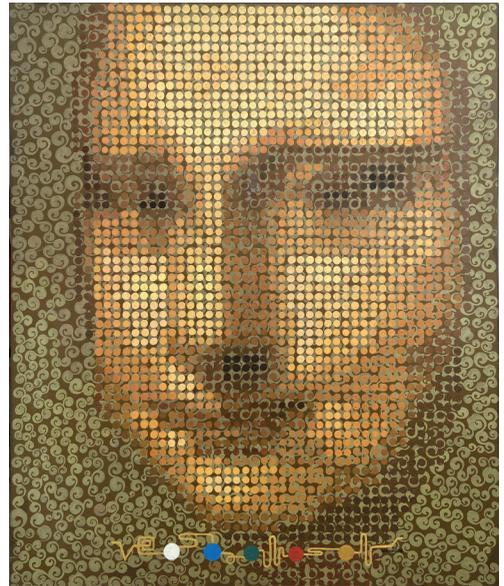


Image VI: **Manish Lal Shrestha**, *Mona Lisa in Pop Art*, 2011, Acrylics on canvas, 120 cm x 100 cm.

window). It is a diagrammatic coalition of content and form including circles, lines and color. The entire composition is dominated by dots that collaborate with harmony making a unique form. The artist has tributed this painting to man-made history. This version of the *Mona Lisa* is created in several circular shapes and a heartbeat line, drawn with a golden tint. Traditional decorative patterns in the negative space of composition; and gradation of dots and color are remarkably the unique style of the artist. The character represents a fusion of the global culture between traditional and modern psychology.

The another version by Manish Lal is titled – *Mona Lisa in Pop Culture* (Image VI). The artist has applied the



Image VII: **Asha Dangol**, *Erinalisa*, 2013, 156 cm X114 cm, Acrylics on canvas.

circular forms as in the previous one, albeit a close-up portrait covers the whole composition. In both of the works, purpose of the artist seems to connect his heart with the *Mona Lisa*.

Asha Dangol

Asha Dangol's *Erinalisa* (Image VII) is a very interesting painting. The artist appropriates the *Mona Lisa* as his wife. The *Erinalisa* is gazing to the viewers with a sense of pride. There are four people riding motorbikes on four sides of the portrait. The rider is the artist himself. The *Mona Lisa* is hanging in a thick frame on a wall or space (?). The work indicates attachment between art and the artist. This art is an experimental approach to art.

Ishan Pariyar

Ishan Pariyar, in his *Mona Lisa in Boat*, (Image VIII) appropriates motifs of the ethnic Newar community. The couple, resting in a boat, are dressed in the Newar attire. The boy is playing a flute and the girl is sitting with her right arm resting intimately on the boy's shoulder. Ishan himself hails from Pokhara, so he painted Fewa Taal of Pokhara. Two boats are seen in the background.

Sharma states (Sharma 2018: 70):

“The artwork integrates native socio-cultural images like typical Nepali cottages and human figures in Nepali dresses. To present these elements, the western technique has been used from the in-between space. The borrowing images have been re-contextualized. Contemporary Nepali arts represent both the cultural self and the cultural other by integrating different forms of art”.

The artist blends the cultural appropriation with the classic *Mona Lisa* to express his concealed desire. A viewer can feel the aesthetic pleasure in Pariyar's creation.

Laxman Bazra Lama

Laxman Bajra Lama represents the younger generation of the contemporary Nepali artists. His *Mona Lisa is a lie!* (Image IX) is a satire to liars and relevant parties. The artist has presented *Mona Lisa* with a long nose and an apple in a subjective approach with a bright yellow background. He claims that a single



Image VIII: **Ishan Pariyar**, *Mona Lisa in Boat*, Acrylics on canvas, 91 cm x 122 cm.
 © Kiran Gautam, Kathmandu

portrait of the Mona Lisa dominated Leonardo da Vinci's other paintings. Likewise, the company of an apple company dominates the other company. This is an example that shows that under a big tree, not even grass can sustain. According to the artist, "This painting is a satire to the world of brands that doesn't worth for what they are, may or may not be, but the value we are giving to each brand, maybe or do worth for. We are living in the lies of a liar society." He has used the Mona Lisa as a metaphor to express his feelings.

Shreejan Rajbhandari

We can see the western influences in Shreejan Rajbhandari's painting too, but symbolically he represents images of the country and local culture. There are cheerful feelings in Rajbhandari's painting. He has developed the mysterious Mona Lisa and an effort to understand it in the contemporary Nepali language. There are two Mona Lisas and an elderly Newar woman spinning wool in *charkhā* (spinning wheel) seated cross-legged on the floor. Interestingly there is a painting of the Mona Lisa



Image IX: **Laxman Bajra Lama**, *Mona Lisa is a lie!*, 2021, Acrylics on canvas, 76 cm X 61 cm.

hanging on the wall. This painting is composed in triangular composition and symbolically the triangle shows downward as the female on Mona Lisa and old woman. Artists have interpreted the famous Mona Lisa in their individualistic with direct reflection of society.

Conclusion

Appropriation Art comes in many different shapes, sizes, and mediums. We see this when looking at how one image like the Mona Lisa can be taken from an oil painting, appropriated as a television cartoon, a postcard, a silk screen print, or a piece of assemblage art, and so on. This repeated appropriation of the image of the Mona Lisa encourages a dialogic network. The Mona Lisa's

continued existence in this appropriation piece re- distinguishes the iconic image itself. The artist shows confident lines and mature selection and application of colours. The boldness and powerful artworks of Nepali artists show the connection between rural, urban and global culture. Artists have explored consciously and subconsciously their own associations with emotions with the Mona Lisa between image, text and their meaning in contemporary Nepali art practice. There are stories of joy, emotion, politics, culture, society and rituals in appropriating the Mona Lisa in the contemporary Nepali painting.

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Image X: **Shreejan Rajbhandari**, *Hello, Mona Lisa!*, Oil on canvas, 74 cm x 100 cm.
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