



Tracing Religious Content in Contemporary Nepali Paintings: A Study of Selected Representative Painters

Jitendra Man Rajbhandari

Abstract

As a channel of expressing religious faith and spirituality, art serves as a bridge between the material and spiritual realms. The practice of blending religious content into art has a long history. Nepal, being a multi-religious country, its arts and architecture are predominantly influenced by Buddhist and Hindu religions. Many contemporary Nepali artists have drawn their artistic inspiration from religious subject matter. Their creative experimentation with religious motifs and elements has given modern Nepali paintings a unique identity. Whether it is a modern rendition of Hindu, Buddhist deities or a recreation of mythical creatures, Nepali painters have left no stone unturned in their artistic exploration with religious content. This research article examines the diverse religious content employed by contemporary Nepali painters in their canvases. It also shows how much our contemporary artists are influenced by religious beliefs and spirituality that they have been brought up with. It reiterates the fact that cultural-religious root serves as the foundation for artistic creation, shaping the content, style, symbolism, and purpose in the art.

Keywords: Contemporary, deities, mythical creatures, religious motifs, spirituality

Introduction

Art has been a conduit of religious faith. As a bridge between the material and spiritual realms, art has been a powerful tool in shaping human perception of divinity and religious faith. Since the very outset of human evolution, Homo sapiens have employed art as

a means of expressing, preserving, and experiencing spirituality besides recording their daily preoccupations (Lewis-Williams 2002). Across different ages, religious content has been an integral element in both Western and Oriental art. The religious motifs have served as a visual language for expressing faith, devotion, and

Shashi Shah, *Rāma Avatāra*, 1992, acrylics on canvas.

theological narratives. Religious motifs elevate art by merging aesthetic beauty with spiritual inquiry. Such motifs often appear in religious texts, art, rituals, and traditions. The history of religious motifs in art can be traced back to early Christian and Byzantine Art. With the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire in the 4th century CE, Christian motifs were frequently applied in Western art (Jensen, 2000). From symbolic icons to grand murals in churches, Christian motifs such as the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus have become major attractions. During the Renaissance, religious themes were further carried on in art and architecture. Michelangelo's *Pietà*, depicting Mary holding the dead body of Jesus, and Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, capturing a famous scene of Jesus' final meal with his disciples, are only a few examples of the application of Christian motifs. However, the 19th and 20th centuries saw a decline in traditional religious art and a rise in symbolic and abstract representations of spirituality (Tarnas 1991). Salvador Dalí's modernist interpretation of the Crucifixion and Marc Chagall's surrealist depiction of biblical themes still serve as powerful tools for storytelling and theological reflection (Murray & Murray 1997). The most influential Indian painter, M.F. Husain's numerous works have also drawn motifs from Hindu, Islamic, and Christian traditions. "Husain was also fascinated with religion and painted different religions in their own light. From Buddhism to Islam, his take on religions and the way he depicted them on canvas was distinct and extraordinary." (Sharma

2024). Thus, the depiction of religious motifs in paintings and sculptures has been a popular trend in the contemporary art scene across the globe.

Religious contents in Oriental art are primarily rooted in Hinduism and Buddhism. Evolved over centuries, religious motifs in Hindu and Buddhist art are the manifestations of spiritual and philosophical musings. Nepal, being a multi-religious country, is no exception to this reality. From Buddhist scriptures to the ritualistic paraphernalia of Hindus in Nepal, the presence of religious art can be observed abundantly. Influenced by the inherent impact of Buddhist and Hindu iconography, many contemporary Nepali artists have been drawing inspiration from these religious motifs for their artistic creations. Their innovative treatment of cultural and religious themes has offered a unique flavor to modern Nepali art. Countless contemporary artworks, created by modern artists in Nepal on religious themes, are evidence of the popularity of religious motifs. This article aims to explore some of Nepal's leading modern painters' works fused with religious motifs. Besides, it also endeavors to study different religious elements employed by these representative Nepali artists and their contribution to making a presence in the global art scenario with a distinct cultural identity.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

- Explore various religious contents employed in contemporary Nepali paintings;

- Trace the significance of religious motifs drawn from the Buddhist and Hindu pantheon; and
- Analyze how these religious elements contribute to making the artwork unique.

Significance of the study

By exploring religious content in contemporary Nepali paintings, this study enhances our understanding of trends and the progression of modern Nepali art. It contributes to identifying one major distinctive trait of contemporary art – the reflection of spirituality and devotion. The study also reveals some visible religious elements in the artworks of some prominent painters of Nepal. Besides, it also shows how our religious beliefs influence our perception of art.

Delimitation of the study

The study primarily focuses on contemporary Nepali paintings. It is based only on the artworks of some representative modern Nepali artists who have been continuously engaged in the pursuit of art. The study does not encompass religious content and motifs commonly practised in Nepali traditional artworks like Thangkas, Paubhas or Mithila arts.

Research methodology

This study is based on qualitative research, utilizing personal interviews, the photos and images of original artworks by a few Nepali artists as

primary sources to explore and analyze the religious content of contemporary Nepali paintings. The secondary sources of this study include published books, journals, online articles, and exhibition catalogues.

Literature review

The interconnection between art and religion has been a favourite academic discourse throughout time. Clive Bell (1914) states, “Art and Religion are two roads by which men escape from circumstance to ecstasy.” Wei (2020) writes, “The influence of religion on art is not only manifested in the art about religious themes and content, but also deeply affects the artist's aesthetic concept. Erika Doss (2023) traces the influences of religion on some important twentieth-century American modern artists, including Joseph Cornell, Mark Tobey, Agnes Pelton, and Andy Warhol. Madan Chitrakar (2021) believes many Nepali artists, too, are fascinated by the cultural roots and religious background they come from. Morgan (2005) highlights the dynamics between religion, visual arts, and media.

Analysis

Modern Nepali art and religion

Over the years, several contemporary artists in Nepal have engaged themselves in the replication of various religious themes. More than representing their cultural identity, modern artists of Nepal have creatively blended traditional motifs with new media and abstract expressions. In the words of art curator Swosti Rajbhandari (2023):

Artistic production in Nepal can be considered a living heritage, where artists draw inspiration from spiritual, philosophical traditions and iconographic sources before giving free rein to their creativity. These artworks, through their intricate detail, evoke a sense of sacred beauty and serve various purposes, including veneration, enhancing spiritual aura, and adding aesthetic value to secular spaces. (p. 16)

One of the most prolific artists in contemporary Nepali art, Kiran Manandhar's more recent works, displayed at his 2022 solo Exhibition entitled 'Samarpan', also testify to what Rajbhandari said. Kiran's untitled series of various deities from Nepali culture evokes both a sense of awe and veneration at the same time. About his works, Mananadhar (2022) says, "I have tried to capture different forms of the gods and goddesses in a painterly language that came spontaneously while I remained in front of canvases."

The sources of religious inspiration for contemporary Nepali painters are mainly Hindu and Buddhist texts and myths. Their artistic creations mostly focus on subjects like Hindu and Buddhist gods and goddesses, *maṇḍalas*, *yantras*, and mythical creatures such as horses and lions.

Modern renditions of Hindu and Buddhist deities

The Hindu and Buddhist deities like Gaṇeśa, Bhairava, Krishna, Śiva, Kālī

and Buddha are the most represented characters in modern Nepali canvas. These deities frequently appear as the protagonists in the paintings of artists of all ages, from veteran artist Batsa Gopal Vaidya to younger art prodigies like Krishna Gopal Shrestha, Mukesh Shrestha, and Sagar Mananadhar.

(a) Lord Gaṇeśa: a popular religious motif

Perhaps the most popular motif amongst the modern artists in Nepal is Gaṇeśa, the most cherished deity in the Hindu pantheon. The son of Śiva and Pārvatī, Gaṇeśa, is worshipped at the beginning of every rite and ritual as the remover of obstacles. The elephant-headed god Gaṇeśa is often depicted with four hands holding a rosary, an axe, and a bowl of *laddoos*, together with his unique vehicle, a shrew. Various artists have attempted to portray him in various stances. About the popularity of the Gaṇeśa motif, eminent artist and art writer, Madan Chitrakar (2013) writes, "The unique, perpetually chubby boyish physical features, the mount and attributes have attracted many artists of all generations since ancient times. In fact, no other religious single subject has remained more popular than the image of the lord."

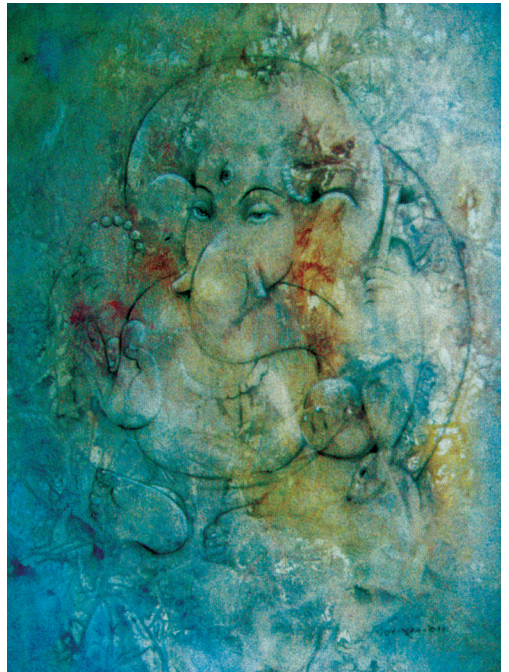
One of the early modern artists to use the Gaṇeśa motif on canvas was the late Uttam Nepali. His painting of Gaṇeśa, painted in 1957, can be taken as an exquisite artwork on this theme. "Here in this work, Lord Gaṇeśa is shown in an unusually merry mood and a pose



Batsa Gopal Vaidya, *Gaṇeśa*, 2022, pastel colour on paper.

of a dance, reminding us of the early work, getting back to the 17th century” (Chitrakar 2021).

In modern times, several Nepali painters have ventured to portray the Gaṇeśa motif in abstract and semi-abstract forms. Batsa Gopal Vaidya is one of these artists who has artfully represented this divine character on canvas. Vaidya’s Gaṇeśa offers a unique fusion of modernity and tradition. His artworks depicting Gaṇeśa in different poses have gained an important niche in this genre for their ability to retain the sacred essence of Nepali religious art. According to art writer Gyanendra Bibas (2021), Vaidya has presented Gaṇeśa in various forms



Govinda Lal Singh Dangol, *Gaṇeśa*, 2008, wash technique on paper.

and postures. Some of his Gaṇeśas are seated inside *maṇḍalas*, while some are seen in the backdrop of the Himalayas, and some others are seen dancing with full adornments. Vaidya also loves to incorporate tantric motifs like trident, conch shell, lotus, fish, the sun, and the moon in his paintings. “Vaidya’s abstract art forms are associated with symbols and images of Nepali culture. His works show the influences of tantric philosophy and Hindu mythologies” (Singh 1976). Certainly, Vaidya’s artworks like *Kālarātri*, *Śristi*, *Navarātri*, and *Garuda* are testimony of this fact.

One more noteworthy modern artist to work on the Gaṇeśa motif is Govinda



Kiran Manandhar, *Untitled*, 2020, acrylics on canvas.

Lal Singh Dangol. Dangol's paintings represent spiritual themes and images in modern attire. About his favourite motif Gaṇeśa, he says, "In terms of painting, God Gaṇeśa is a very broad subject. No matter how much you study it, it never ends. The more you search, the newer facets come forward" (Bibas 2021).

Among the artists who have been using

Gaṇeśa as a motif for their works for a considerable amount of time, Sushma Rajbhandari's name is also worthy of recognition.

(b) Bhairava: the wrathful form of Śiva

Bhairava is considered to be the wrathful manifestation of Śiva. He is venerated



Sagar Manadhar, *Bhairava*, 2022, acrylics on canvas.

in several forms, including Kal Bhairava, Aakash Bhairava, and Shweta Bhairava. Pramila Giri is one of the few daring women artists to introduce modernity to Nepali paintings and sculptures. A well-versed artist in international art forms and trends, Giri has created a series of Bhairava, a deity from the Hindu pantheon that is believed to be a manifestation of Śiva. “Her earlier Bhairava series has an iconic form, visual arrangements as aids to meditation” (Malik 2023). The Bhairava series of paintings employs vibrant shades of red, white, yellow, blue, and black to portray mythical figures of Lod Bhairav. Banshi Shrestha (2019) writes:

The myths or the old scriptures also



Ragini Upadhyaya, *When I became Kali*, 2019, acrylics on canvas.

describe God Bhairava has an ability to change his form to suit the purposes and functions. It is said, there are generally eight various forms or images of Bhairava. And they are represented in red, yellow, black, blue, etc. They are used for different occasions to suit a desired function. For example, black is used for Kaal Bhairava, meaning that God could punish or destroy the evildoers. Blue is used as the symbol of infinity, as the lord of the whole universe. (p.3)

Pramila Giri’s abstract representation of Bhairava is completely different from the traditional form. Her works on this motif are quite symbolic in their purpose of exposing mystical and supernatural

aspects. Hence, they remain an example of a unique religious motif in modern Nepali painting.

Kiran Manandhar's untitled 2020 works on Kāla Bhairava are also a fine example of this motif. In these paintings, the artist has successfully recreated the wrathful mood of the deity in his signature style of abstract form.

More recently, young artists like Sagar Manandhar also seem to be fascinated by this awe-inspiring deity. In his 2022 recreation of Bhairava, Manandhar beautifully captures the essence of this divine deity with bold, dynamic strokes and a palette of vibrant colours. (Nepal Art Council & Bihar Museum 2023)

(c) Kālī and Śiva: The deities of the Hindu pantheon

Some other popular figures in modern Nepali paintings are Kālī and Śiva. Ragini Upadhyay's Kālī series, Kiran Manandhar's Śiva series are some noteworthy artworks of religious interest in modern days.

Goddess Kālī is the embodiment of feminine power and fertility. In Sanskrit, Kālī is the one who is 'black' or who is 'death'. About Ragini's Kālī, K. Hamal (2023) writes:

Her work 'Kālī' is the iconographic figure of 'Kālī,' which has been deviated by creating a self-portrait... The painting depicts the Śiva aspects, who have been represented through *trisula*, and a snake shown in the foreground of the painting. Ragini

has expressed her inner negative energy that came after the loss of her daughter. (p.23)

Likewise, Kiran Manandhar loves to depict Śiva in different forms and postures. "In the meditative posture, Śiva is considered the Adi Yogi, the foremost among the yogis and the first teacher of Yoga.... In the dancing posture, Śiva is shown as the symbol of all movement within the cosmos." (Nepal Art Council & Bihar Museum 2023)

Mythical creatures: horse and lion

Both Hindu and Buddhist literatures are rich in the adventures of mythical characters. These characters are not merely fantastical beings but the embodiments of both positive and negative forces, moral lessons and cosmic forces. The mythical figures and creatures have been an alluring subject for modern Nepali painters. The most predominant mythical creatures in modern Nepali painting are the horse, lion, garuḍa, etc.

(a) The Horse: a symbol of Kalki avatara

While deciphering abstract religious metaphors in modern Nepali paintings, an undisputed name that comes to our mind is Shashi Shah. A pioneer contemporary artist in Nepal, Shashi Shah is one of the prominent artists who blends traditional religious motifs with abstract modernist forms. His paintings are often fused with surrealistic imagery borrowed from Hindu mythology. His *Daśāvatara* (ten incarnations) series



Madan Chitrakar, *The Happy Couple*, 2025, acrylics on canvas.

of paintings depicts ten incarnations of Lord Viṣṇu: Matsya (fish), Kachhyapa (tortoise), Barāha (boar), Narasiṃha (Man-Lion), Bāmana (Dwarf), Parshurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, and Kalki (horse). They are believed to be the saviours of mankind in different cycles of time in the Hindu cosmos. Shashi Shah is a religious person with an optimistic vision.

In the later phase, Shah's overriding motif has been the horse, a symbolic representation of the final *avatāra* of Viṣṇu - the Kalki. His horses represent the *Kaliyuga*—the current era in Hinduism, marked by spiritual decay, chaos, and moral decline. According to Ajit Baral (2001), Shah's horses often seem to be in chaotic situations; yet, the colours suggest that the paintings are

really about the equine power to preserve and reassure. Shah uses the horse as a metaphor for salvation, reflecting the popular Hindu belief that Viṣṇu will descend to the world on a horse to purge humanity from all evils. The horses, in Shah's paintings, are often seen in an age-long battle between good and evil. As a Hindu-inspired imagery, horses in Shah's paintings stand for power, liberty, and spirituality. Moreover, they are the epitome of an epoch, time, and hope.

(b) The Lions: Guardians of divine beings

Mythical lions have always been an indispensable part of Nepalese art and architecture. Over time, these mythical lions have evolved into a quintessential symbol of Nepali identity. (Nepal Art Council 2023).



Mukesh Shrestha, *Purest Form of Love and Emotion: Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa*, 20225, acrylics on canvas.

In his context, Madan Chitrakar's *Mythical Lions* series can be taken as the best example of this theme. Chitrakar says:

It is interesting that lions are not our native animals, yet they serve as important figures in Nepali iconography. A couple of majestic lions are often seen guarding the entrance of temples, palaces, monasteries and even *caityas* scattered around the Kathmandu valley. In Hindu texts, we can find a frequent mention of mythical creatures like *Singhini* and *Byaghrini*. What fascinates me about these celestial guardians is their captivating forms and expressions. I aim to capture their eternal essence and breathe life into their timeless presence with vivid colours in my paintings. (M. Chitrakar, personal communications, July 20, 2025)

The Maṇḍala: a unifying motif of Buddhism and Hinduism

The next common religious motif that remains a powerful artistic and spiritual symbol for contemporary artists in Nepal is the *maṇḍala*. “A *maṇḍala* used in Buddhist faith and a *yantra* used in the esoteric aspect of Hindu faith are both made of diagrams conceived as a visual guide to be used as instruments during the acts of esoteric baptism” (Chitrakar, 2021). *Maṇḍalas* represent the interconnectedness with a central point (*bindu*), surrounded by symmetrical patterns and circles. “In Hinduism and Buddhism, the belief is that by entering the *maṇḍala* and proceeding towards its centre, you are guided through the cosmic process of transforming the universe from one of suffering into one of joy and happiness” (Invaluable, 2018). *Maṇḍala* has been an indispensable theme for traditional *thangka* paintings. However, some contemporary artists like Uttam Nepali, Batsa Gopal Vaidya, Krishna Manandhar and Govinda Lal Singh Dangol, Sharada Man Shrestha have used this theme in their modern renditions.

Conclusion

This brief study critically analyses how contemporary artists are influenced by their religious beliefs and spirituality. Cultural-religious root serves as the foundation for artistic creation. It shapes the content, style, symbolism, and purpose in the art. So it is not unnatural for an artist to get inspired by the religious and spiritual faith in which they were brought up. The contemporary artists of Nepal have been using art not only as a means of

exploring their creativity but also as a vehicle for projecting their devotion. With the religious contents and motifs, they often showcase their deep-rooted affinity to their culture and spirituality. In the present Nepali art scenario, this trend of portraying religious content on canvas is further carried out by the artists of the younger generation, too. Some noteworthy names from this list are Krishna Gopal Shrestha, Mukesh Shrestha, Sangee Shrestha, Sagar Manandhar, Roshan Pradhan, Pradhyumna Shrestha and Roshan Bhandari. However, there are plenty of religious motifs employed in various forms of art still waiting to be explored.

References

- Baral, A. (2001). Horses and temples. *Nepali Times*. Issue # 61. Himal Media.
- Bell, C. (2007). Art (reprint of 1914 ed.). Biblio Bazaar.
- Bibas, G. (2021). *Pratinidhi Nepali Kalakar*. Nepal Academy of Fine Arts.
- Chitrakar, M. (2021). *Nepali Art: Thought and Musings*. Sirjana College of Fine Arts.
- Doss, E.L. (2023). *Spiritual Moderns: Twentieth-century American Artists & religion*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hamal, K. (2023). Archetypes in Ragini Upadhyay's paintings. *Journal of Fine Arts Campus*, 5 (2). 18-26. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jfac.v5i2.67286>
- Invaluable. (2018). What is a Mandala? History, symbolism, and uses. Invaluable. http://www.invaluable.com/blog/what-is-Mandala/?Srsrlid=AfmBoq8WxDnqpz_tfWyx
- Jensen, R.M. (2000). *Understanding early Christian art*. Routledge.
- Lewis-Williams, D. (2002). *The Mind in the cave: Consciousness and the origins of art*. Thames & Hudson.
- Malik, K. (2023). *The harmonisation of conflicts: Through my third eyes*. [exhibition catalogue]. Hans Christie Bjonness.
- Manandhar, K. (2022). *Samarpan*. [Exhibition catalogue]. Siddhartha Art Gallery.
- Morgan, David. (2005). *The sacred gaze: Religious visual culture in theory and practice*. University of California Press.
- Murray, P. & Murray L. (1997). *The penguin dictionary of a and artists*. Penguin Books.
- Nepal Art Council, & Bihar Museum. (2023). Nepal: Where the gods reside [Exhibition Catalogue]. Nepal Art Council.
- Rajbhandari, S. (2023). Curatorial statement. Nepal: Where the gods reside [Exhibition catalogue]. Nepal Art Council.
- Sharma, A. (2024, December 2). Celebrating MF Husain, the legacy of India's first modernist artist. The Times of India. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/the-arts/celebrating-mf-husain-the-legacy-of-indias-first-modernist-articleshow/115898399.cms>
- Shrestha, B. (2019). 'Art creations of Pramila Giri.' *SIRJINĀ: The journal of arts and art education*, 6 (1), 30-35. <https://doi.org/10.3126/sirjana.v6i1.39670>
- Singh, N.B. (1976). *Samasamayik Nepali chitrakalako itihās*. Royal Nepal Academy.
- Tarnas, R. (1991). *The Passion of the Western Mind*. Ballanti Books.
- Wei, G. (2020). 'On the Relationship between Art and Religion.' *Global journal of arts and humanities*. 5:1. DOI:10.28933/global2020-07-1005.