



European Painting and Nepali Painting: Artistic Exchange and Adaptation in the 19th Century

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Abstract

The initiation of Western painting in Nepal began after the Sugauli treaty, notably through the work of Raj Man Singh Chitrakar and a few other artists who depicted birds, animals, monuments, landscapes using Camera Lucida, pencil, ink, and watercolour under the guidance of British Resident Brian Houghton Hodgson. Bhaju Man Chitrakar accompanied Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana to Europe, where he was exposed to European art techniques. Upon his return, he produced realistic portraits of the King, Prime Minister, royal family members, along with hunting scenes and still life in European style. Similarly, Henry Ambrose Oldfield and his wife Margaret created hundreds of paintings portraying Kathmandu Valley's architecture, landscapes, and people. The introduction of photography by Clarence Comyn Tayler, who captured portraits of the royal family, marked a significant shift in Nepal's visual documentation practices. Later, Dirgha Man Chitrakar travelled to England and France, and he used large-format cameras, depicting wall decorations, theatrical backdrops, and oil portraits of royal and Rana families. This qualitative study, based on limited secondary sources, concludes that a few Nepali artists adopted European art styles through exposure to foreign residents and travel abroad. The works of Raj Man Chitrakar and Henry Ambrose Oldfield continue to assist the restoration of Nepal's historical monuments.

Keywords: European art, landscape, monument, photography, portrait.

Raj Man Singh Chitrakar, *Owl*, c. 1824/25, watercolour on paper, National Library Museum, London.

Introduction

Hindu and Buddhist Religious art – both sculpture and paintings – have long been practiced as enduring traditions in Nepal. However, in the early 19th century, Nepali artists were introduced to European artistic traditions through realistic paintings brought by foreign diplomats residing in Kathmandu.

Some Nepali artists began learning pen and ink drawing, and watercolour in techniques in a realistic style. They started depicting secular human figures, birds, animals, natural landscapes, and monuments using European proportions, brushes and pigments, departing from the stylistic conventions of traditional Nepali art. These artists incorporated Western artistic principles such as perspective, three dimensionalities, light and shadow, foreshortening, composition, and rhythm, elements not commonly found in classical Nepali painting.

Over time, Western practices such as oil painting and photography were also introduced in Nepal, along with new tools, media, and concepts. Despite this cultural and artistic exchange, only a few scholars have studied the Nepali artists who adopted European styles through foreign influence. Moreover, these studies have often lacked details on how these artists engaged with Western tools and mediums in practice. Questions remain unanswered: Was the adoption of European styles a matter of artistic choice, or did it result from the influence or even pressure of foreign patrons and political rulers? Was it easier for Nepali

artists to work in Western styles than to uphold the complexity of classical traditions? How were various Western media used to depict local subjects?

This article aims to explore and clarify these questions by analyzing the introduction and adaption of European art in Nepal through foreign influence in the early 19th century.

Research methodology

It is challenging to locate original paintings produced in the early 19th century. Many of these artworks are currently held outside Nepal, and access is often limited to reproductions published in books or digital images available on websites. Documentation from this period is scarce, and primary sources are limited. Consequently, this study relies primarily on secondary sources. The analysis presented in this article is based on the limited documentation that is currently accessible.

Findings

A few artists began depicting human and animal portraits and architectural monuments, using realistic shading and spatial depth, indicating a clear shift toward naturalism. This reflects a shift from symbolic representation and the rigid guidelines of iconometric texts, toward a more observational approach likely influenced by European visual culture.

One of the most significant shifts observed during this time was the

adoption of linear perspective in painting, marking a departure from the traditional flat spatial organization. Slowly artists and art followers were accepted. Thus, in the art history of Nepal, it was the turning point of the Western painting introduced in Nepal these times.

A small number of artists began depicting human and animal portraits and architectural monuments, using realistic shading and spatial depth, and showing a clear shift toward naturalism. This change marked a shift from traditional symbolic styles and strict based on religious texts to a more natural and realistic way of painting, influence by European art. One of the most significant changes during this period was the adoption of linear perspective, which contrasted sharply with the traditionally flat spatial organization found in classical Nepali painting.

Gradually, this new style was accepted and appreciated by both artists and audiences. As such, this period represents a pivotal moment in Nepalese art history, marking the initial introduction and assimilation of Western painting techniques into the local artistic tradition. The earliest Nepali artists expressed the Western concept of drawings and paintings. Among them, Raj Man Singh Chitrakar was the leading artist who was also an assistant artist of Brian Hodgson.

Brian Hodgson, Henry Lawrence, Henry Ambrose Oldfield and his wife Margaret, along with Clarence Comyn Taylor, played a significant role in introducing

and shaping the influence of Western painting traditions during the formative stages of Nepal's encounter with modern visual culture.

Discussion and analysis

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Indian artists were commissioned by the British East India Company to depict the lives, monuments, festivals, crafts, occupations, etc. of various ethnic groups in India. Their work was a mixture of Indian and British styles, known as company painting. At this time, the Sugauli Treaty was signed between Nepal and Britain. After the Sugauli Treaty of Nepal, the British Resident Legation was established in Kathmandu. This new relationship with the British Empire has influenced Nepali art from Western art (Rubia n.d.). Western art began in Nepal after the Sugauli Treaty in 1816 (Shakya 2023).

Edward Gardner was made the first Resident at the Court of Nepal in 1816 after being designated envoy by the British colonial Empire. Brian Hodgson was appointed as an assistant at the Nepalese Residency in 1820. Hodgson was collecting religious manuscripts of Tibetan origin and sending them to Calcutta in 1824 at his own cost. In 1825, Hodgson had begun to pay a hunter to bring him animal trophies from outside the Kathmandu Valley. He could afford to employ more hunters, trappers and local artists to draw some of these same specimens to his specifications. That first artist was initially put to work doing what he did best: drawing and painting

miniatures for religious works such as illustrated manuscripts, wall hangings, and temple decorations according to the set traditions of his associates.

In 1829, Edward Gardener resigned from the service and Hodgson became Acting Resident in Nepal. During this time, he spent significant amounts on the purchase and copying of Buddhist or Sanskrit manuscripts and the preparation of zoological specimens, which he presented to the Asiatic Society and Scientific societies.

He was beginning to be recognized in Europe as a man of unique researcher of language, religion, and zoology of the Himalayan religions. He enjoyed a fine reputation as an ethnologist, religious, scholar, and naturalist (Waterhouse 2005). He went on employing trappers, hunters, draughts men, and artists for researching, and he published ninety-seven papers on birds and mammals; the remaining thirty papers were written in Darjeeling.

After the invention of the camera Lucida, an optical instrument, by William Hyde Wollaston, it facilitated accurate sketching of objects in 1806. Hodgson purchased a camera Lucida in 1812, with a meniscus lens that allowed an image to be projected onto a sheet of paper adjustable to any size.

He had also retained some artists who used to work along with or under Raj Man Singh. Charles Allen declared that either William Hodgson (Hodgson's brother) or some other visitors to Kathmandu during the late 1820s adept

in the tastes and technique passed on his skills to the talented Raj Man Singh. Raj Man learned so well that he became Nepali's first modern artist. He imagined a portrait and the other a reproduction of his painting of the national bird of Nepal.

William Hodgson arrived in Kathmandu in 1827, and he stayed on for a full 12 months. He would have time to read, write or draw until the afternoon and sketching when the weather was fine. His aim in his writings and artwork in Nepal was to create a complete record of the history and culture of the country.

Brian Hodgson's daily life, as described in 1833 to his sister Fanny, "I have three native artists always employed in drawing from nature. I possess a live tiger, a wild sheep, a wild goat, four bears, three civets, and three scores of our beautiful pheasants. A rare menagerie. And my drawings now amount to two thousand. The antiquities of the land afford me much entertainment. I pore over the pictorial, sculptural, and architectural monuments of Buddhism by the light of the ancient books of the sect, and the learned Thebans of your isle appear to gather my gleanings with eagerness. But the past chiefly interests me as it can be made to illustrate the present—the origin, genius, character, and attainments of the people"(Waterhouse 2005). It shows that three Nepali artists were commissioned by Hodgson, but the three artists were unknown.

Between 1833 and 1836, James Prinsep brought out special issues of

Asiatic Research, which included Brian Hodgson's many contributions to Nepal and Himalayan studies. Those issues Asian researchers focused on geography, geology, zoology, ethnography, and anthropology. Artist Raj Man Singh would sketch architectural monuments, drawings of birds, mammals, and people for Brian Hodgson, who would send them to academic circles for reference and reflection (Joshi & Joshi 2005).

Raj Man Singh learned to draw with a pencil, pen and ink rather than sticks of charcoal to work smoothly. Europe-derived watermarked paper rather than a mix of buffalo horn glue and white clay laid on canvas to abandon the single hair brush of the miniaturist for the less fine. He used European paintbrushes and watercolours, along with the camera Lucida, replacing the more limited local palette derived from minerals and plants. He learned to draw and paint to suit the Western eye. He applied to combine the accuracy of detail with the ability to give the picture depth through shading and the use of perspective. It has to be admitted, however, that Raj Man Singh never really learned to draw people with any degree of accuracy.

Harihar Raj Joshi and Indu Joshi mentioned that Raj Man Singh was the first Nepali artist of watercolour painting in Nepal (Joshi & Joshi 2005). Susanne von der Heide (1988) writes, "Artist Raj Man Singh Chitrakar who can be credited as Nepal's first ever landscape and realism artist". In Hodgson collection, the artists are named Rajbir, Tulsimuni Chitrakar, Dhanananda Banda, and Raj

Man. Raj Man Singh made use of the camera Lucida, a device, which allows an accurate tracing to be made of a building, or complex view, whose image is projected through a lens on to a sheet of paper. Special mention can well be made of Rajbir Chitrakar and Parasmani Chitrakar. Both names on the sketch or drawing at the British Library in London look like Tulsimuni, if not minutely gone through (Joshi & Joshi 2005).

Raj Man Singh adapted his traditional two-dimensional Newar style of drawing to hold European tastes for the British patrons in the method of Indian artists from Banaras and Delhi. All of Hodgson art collections are in museums abroad, mostly in the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (Shakya 2023). During his visit to Kathmandu in 1884 -1885 Hodgson lent Cecil Bendall the entire series of fifty architectural drawings made by Raj Man Singh Chitrakar and suggesting Bendall to be carried back to Kathmandu for study and research and even due comparison. The list of drawings, which Hodgson compiled in 1845, indicates that both sets in Paris are work of Bouddha Chitrakar and Raj Man Singh (Joshi & Joshi 2005).

Two linked sets of drawings-thirteen pen and ink outline drawings in the Royal Asiatic Society's Hodgson collection. Several finished watercolours in the British Lawrence collection demonstrate how Hodgson's camera Lucida was employed in the initial stages to set the shape of a picture, which was traced in pencil and the detail and colour added. Some of the paintings and notes were

projected to provide the material for a major illustrated work on the mammals of Nepal which Hodgson first began to study as early as 1831. He was inspired by reading the first edition of *A Century of Birds from the Himalayan Mountains* by John Gould, the curator at the Zoological Society of London.

Raj Man Singh remained in Nepal after Hodgson's departure in 1843. He might have continued to produce some works for Sir Henry Lawrence. At least one other British-trained artist was continuing in Nepal; some of the paintings associated with Sir Henry Lawrence during his residency are ascribed to unnamed artists. Raj Man Singh signed many of his works in the Nagari script. Raj Man Singh, Bhaju Man Chitrakar, Rajbir, Tulsimuni, Dhanananda Bada and other artists helped him with sketching.

Birds have been found among a collection of bird skins from the Himalayas at the Zoological Society of London's museum. Examples of the zoological drawings referred to were available for examination in the Asiatic Society's rooms.

Hodgson ordered two copies to be made of every drawing or painting. The more experienced artist produced the original, which was then copied by his less skilled assistants. Many of these paintings were subsequently lost, more notably those Hodgson sent to the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Library of Fort William College. The Twelve watercolours are preserved in the Lawrence Collection. Brian Hodgson presented his works to

various institutions after his return to England. The production of impressive collections of Hodgson drawings and paintings survive in five major institutions in England and France. The two sets of paintings and six large albums of ornithological drawings and notes of mammals, insects, and reptiles (any of various animals), are collected at the Natural History Museum and the Zoological Society of London.

A portfolio of architectural drawings is given to the Royal Asiatic Society. The best of these is one of two sets of fifty drawings of Nepalese religious architecture by Raj Man Singh. The other set went to the Institute France in 1858. Some of these drawings can also be linked to watercolours in the collection of Henry Ambrose Oldfield now in the British Library. Brian Hodgson called him "my Bauddha citrakar" and asked Raj Man Singh and his family to create illustrations covering many subjects he was interested in. Before leaving, he left Raj Man and his team to work on drawings for his successor, Henry Lawrence, and later for Henry Ambrose Oldfield, the Residency surgeon who lived in Kathmandu from 1850 to 1863 (Choegyal 2020).

In the history of Nepal, when Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana took power; Jung Bahadur Rana decided to visit Great Britain and France with a group of Chitrakar artists so as to encourage the learning of the realistic techniques of portraiture. Bhaju Man Chitrakar was renowned as one of the first artists to learn the application of these techniques

in the art of portraiture by using watercolour in 1850 (Rubia n. d.), Prime Minister Jang Bahadur Rana introduced Bhaju Man Chitrakar to British portrait and oil painting techniques, taking him on his visit to England in 1850.

After coming back, he selected some traditional Chitrakars for wall decorations in large palaces such as Royal family portraits, scenes of royal hunting, and landscapes, and still life in the European style. Nepali art became a first-time event that signaled a turning point in the value placed on Nepalese artists. Abhi Subedi (1995) writes, "Through direct evidence of his emulation of the western paintings cannot be found but from the artist's execution of Queen's portrait and her words of praise for the portrait can be taken as evidence of the fact that he had keen eyes for arts for the portraits. He was inspired to do portraits of the Queen after seeing her portraits at the Royal Palace which means that he brought Western techniques of paintings home. As a very talented artist he must have learnt many things from his European visit. A careful study of the portrait he executed after his return to Nepal from the European visit can show many things in terms of the Western influence in Nepali art". Abhi Subedi (2021) notes that Bhaju Man Chitrakar was influenced by certain aspects of British art, particularly the expressionist use of colour in painting.

His approach to portraiture, along with his use of new techniques and colour application, represented a departure from

the methods traditionally employed by Nepali artists, especially in the realm of portrait painting. On the whole, however, artists had to attempt as best they could copy from western paradigms and to incorporate new techniques and a different conception of color from European pictures to the extent that their differing traditions allowed. A new sense of the concept of art set in in Nepal: namely away from a mythical religiously motivated one towards works of art that served the ends of personal uplift and thus possessed a purely aesthetic character. The artists used new techniques: alongside gouaches, oil painting, and watercolours were found to prefer to use canvas, and hardwoods were imported from Europe for processing. Stylistically, the idolizing, flat character which oriental influences had lent to Indo-Nepalese painting was replaced by motifs conceived in-depth perspective and naturalistic in effect.

Unfortunately, other from a few minor pieces that are credited to Bhaju Man Chitrakar, they are typically unsigned. No more works are available to narrate his artistic achievements. Most of his works are believed to have been lost in a terrible fire in his residence. One of the remaining paintings, the portraits of Jung Bahadur Rana, introduced modern mediums like oil and western concepts in Nepal. This painting is a unique combination of native schools of Rajasthan and Mughal. Henry Ambrose Oldfield took over as the British Residency surgeon in 1850, and they came to Kathmandu as Residency

surgeons seven years after Hodgson's departure and occupied that post for thirteen years. He was a first-class watercolourist whose landscape paintings constitute a hugely valuable record of Nepal in the 1850s and early 1860s. Some artists who joined Hodgson in Darjeeling went back to Kathmandu after his departure and there continued to work their trade under Oldfield. Oldfield produced over 200 hundred drawings and watercolour paintings during his time in Nepal. He is renowned as the only British artist in Nepal at that time. The major part of Oldfield's work is a record in words and an illustration of the Buddhist monuments of Nepal.

The 229 watercolour paintings are now in the archive of the Royal Geographical Society and 28 paintings are in the British Library. In 1855, he produced a series of paintings when he painted buildings, temples, and monuments. He had to correct perspective with a real relish for detail and decay. Oldfield developed an interest in all things in Nepal, spending his time on Buddhism, Nepali history, ethnography and the caste system. He and his wife Margaret were accomplished amateur artists in their own right, their valuable contribution consisting of hundreds of water colours that shed light in meticulous detail on the architecture, landscape and people of the Kathmandu Valley at that time (Choegyal 2020).

Sussane von der Heide (1988) also writes that Oldfield and his wife also painted some brilliant portraits of Kathmandu Valley. Mark Watson, Himalayan

botanical historian writes, "The British Library and Royal Geographical Society hold significant collections of their work, including pictures by Nepali master artist Raj Man Singh Chitrakar who worked closely with them" (Choegyal 2020).

The first known photographs of Nepal were taken by Captain Clarence Comyn Taylor from 1863 to 65. He was a former army officer, who transformed into a political service. He photographed people of the different tribes in Nepal in response to an official British government directive and also took pictures of Jang Bahadur's family and the historic buildings of Kathmandu. He had taken photographs of King Surendra and Prime Minister Jang Bahadur Rana's portraiture. This was a turning point in Nepal between the era of visual records in the form of drawings and paintings and the new medium of the photographic record.

The development of photography as a medium was guided by members of the Chitrakar family, portraits in oils as well as photography. They were working mainly for the ruling Rana dynasty (Onta 1998). Dirgha Man Chitrakar was employed at Singh Durbar. The office was known as *Naksaa Addaa*. It was a government-run huge art studio in Nepal. The office was related to all art such as furnishing and decoration, painting huge background curtains of the personal theatre of the Prime Minister. He was also a court photographer as well as one of the first Nepalese photographers. He used large-format cameras. Prime Minister Chandra Shamsheer appointed

him as a royal painter and court photographer. When the Prime Minister took Dirgha Man Chitrakar on his trips to England and France in 1908, he had the opportunity to paint views of Europe and study European art (Onta 1998).

This study examines the onset of British colonial influence in South Asia by focusing on the role of the East India Company in India and its subsequent impact on neighboring regions, particularly Nepal. The treaty of Sugauli, signed in 1816, marks a significant turning point, as it formalized diplomatic relations between Nepal and the British.

After following the Treaty of Sugauli, Brian Hodgson served as the British Resident in Nepal and played a vital role in cultural landscape. His extensive collection of manuscripts, patronage of local art, and ethnographic studies illustrate a dual motive, scholarly curiosity intertwined with the colonial objective of systematic documentation and control. It demonstrates that Nepali artists adapted and reinterpreted a hybrid artistic style, originating from Company in India, which combined British naturalism with indigenous Indian aesthetics, within their own cultural context, thereby establishing a visual parallel between artistic developments in India and Nepal.

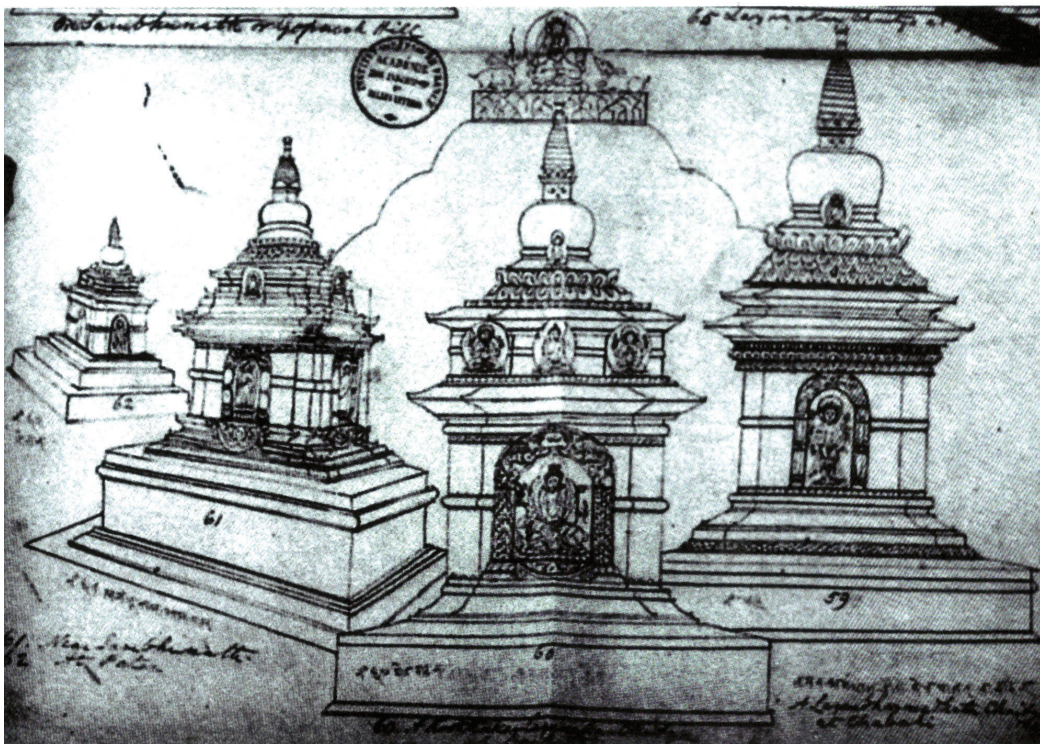
Among the artists employed by Hodgson, Raj Man Singh Chitrakar stands out as a pioneering artist, widely regarded as Nepal's first practitioner of landscape and realist art (Van der Heide, 1988). He departed from the traditional Newar

miniature style, adapting its techniques and visual language to align with Western realist aesthetics. He adopted European principles of perspective and depth, incorporated Western materials such as paper and watercolors, and utilized the camera Lucida, an optical device that facilitated precise sketching. Among Nepali artists, Rajbir, Tulsimuni, Dhanananda, and Bhaju Man Chitrakar represent a generation of artists influenced by European culture.

The arrival of Captain Clarence Comyn Taylor signaled a technological shift from hand-drawn visual documentation to photography, marking a significant advancement in representational practices.

The emergence of Dirgha Man Chitrakar as a royal court photographer and artist during the Rana regime illustrates how traditional artists adeptly adapted new technologies, such as large-format cameras, while continuing to document the ruling elite and the landscapes of Nepal.

Brian Houghton Hodgson, Henry Ambrose Oldfield and his wife Margaret, as well as Clarence Comyn Taylor, were not merely patrons of art, they functioned as collectors, documentarians, and disseminators of visual culture. The majority of the artworks and records they commissioned are now preserved in British and French institutions. This situation raises critical postcolonial questions regarding cultural ownership and heritage: Who holds the rights to Nepal's visual history? Why are



Raj Man Singh Chitrakar, *Buddhist Stupas*, c. 1825, line drawing on paper.

not these significant works available in Nepal? Although many paintings from that period are no available in Nepal, the surviving works of Raj Man Singh Chitrakar and Henry Ambrose Oldfield offer valuable insights into the architecture of the Kathmandu Valley at that time. The accuracy of their depictions has even contributed to guiding recent restoration projects (Dixit 2008).

Conclusion

This study serves as a microcosm of the colonial encounter, highlighting the processes of cultural exchange and technological transformation. It explores how Western artistic techniques were

integrated with local Nepali traditions, contributing to the emergence of a modern visual culture. Artists such as Raj Man Singh Chitrakar were not merely assistants to colonial figures; they were cultural innovators who reinterpreted and transformed traditional practices to create new aesthetic forms.

Raj Man Singh and Henry Ambrose Oldfield collaborated on a series of paintings depicting the Kathmandu Valley, offering valuable visual documentation of its 19th-century architectural landscape. The precision and detail in their works have proven instrumental in contemporary heritage restoration efforts, including the

reconstruction of the shikhara-style temples at Rani Pokhari and Silu Mahadyah near Bhaktapur Durbar Square—structures that had previously been altered under the influence of Mughal temple architecture.

The transformation of Nepali art during this period – from predominantly religious, symbolic, and flat visual forms to naturalistic, perspective-driven representations – is clearly evident. The contributions of early Nepali artists, especially Raj Man Singh and Bhaju Man Chitrakar, were foundational in shaping the trajectory of modern Nepali art, even though much of their work remains undocumented or has been lost within Nepal. Their legacy lives on through collections preserved in European institutions, which continue to serve as vital resources for understanding Nepal's cultural history, biodiversity, and architectural heritage in the 19th century.

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