

# Indian Art Treasures

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VARANASI

MOAIC BOOKS



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First Published in 2006 by Mosaic Books

In association with Fotomedia

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Mosaic Books

B-17, Lajpat Nagar Part 2

New Delhi 110 024, India

Cover: Kṛṣṇa kills Kuvalayāpīḍa, Early Rajput

Frontispiece: Sūrya, c. 10<sup>th</sup> century

Designed by Pranab Dutta, Great Latitude

Printed in India by Thomson Press

ISBN 81-902776-3-4



# CONTENTS

Foreword	4
Preface	6
The Contributors	7
My Opening to the Realm of Art	8

## CATALOGUE

Sculpture	11
Terracotta	49
Painting	71
Copperplate, Coins, Metalware	205
Textiles	225

## Nevar Artist Jīvarāma's Sketchbook

Nepal (made in Tibet)

Dated Nevar Samvat 555 (CE 1435)

24 x 12.5 cm (each folio)

Ink and water-based pigment on paper

Thyasaphu format, with 39 leaves remaining from an unknown number

This sketchbook is in the *thyasaphu* (folding book) format that was commonly used in Nepal for texts, sketchbooks, and other types of manuscripts. Among the thousands of surviving *thyasaphu* texts, this example's importance is virtually impossible to overestimate. Not only is it an artist's sketchbook of the highest artistic quality, but it contains a colophon that provides vital information about the date of its creation, the artist who made it, and the historical circumstances under which it was made.

The colophon of this sketchbook is located in the upper portion of leaf 23 under an image of Vajradhara that spans the two preceding leaves. Written in *Bhujimo* script, a Nevar cursive variation of the *kuṭila/rañjanā* syllabary of Eastern India and the Kathmandu Valley, the inscription provides the following information:

In Nevari Samvat 555 (CE 1435) on the second day of the dark half of *Vaiśākha* [April-May], Jīvarāma personally wrote this, [and] after [he] heard [instructions] from Chon bhota made the whole book himself. After having come from *Prati cittam* [towards the west; perhaps a place name], where he heard [instructions] from Lālā Chunva [a Newar phonetic rendering of a Tibetan name ending in "the younger"]. Giving the book special importance, he brought it back to [his own] *vihāra*. After working in Nyar Dva [Tibetan place name?], he then brought it back. This was made personally by Jīvarāma<sup>1</sup>.

The manuscript has 39 leaves. The first two show four figures that are normally part of a set of eight, suggesting that there may once have been leaves that preceded the current beginning. The end of the set of 39 leaves turns over neatly to the reverse side, suggesting that there may not have been additional leaves at the end. Typical of such manuscripts, the artist, identified as Jīvarāma in the colophon, worked consistently down one side, and when he reached the last page simply flipped over and started on the next leaf, leaving one blank as a protective cover. Thus, the manuscript could be read in much the same manner as a palm leaf *pustaka*, folding the top leaf away in order to examine the next pair of leaves.

The majority of illustrations appear on the front side of the manuscript, with only seven of the reverse pages illustrated. Illustrations on the leaves on the front of manuscript are described below:

Leaves 1 and 2 show two figures each, representing four of the eight *yakṣa* generals in the *maṇḍala* of Pīta Jambhala (rNam-sras ser-can), the *dharmapāla* of prosperity. Each figure is identified by two inscriptions, one in Nepal *Bhāṣā* and *Bhujimo* script and the other in Tibetan language and the *Dbus med* cursive script. At the top left is Pañcika (INga-rtsen) and at the top right is Kubera (Ku be ra). Below them are Bijakuṇḍalin (Pitaci Kuṇḍalī [sic] in the Tibetan inscription) on the left and Mañibhadra (Nor-bu bzang) on the right. Jīvarāma apparently did not know the Sanskrit for this figure and simply transliterated the Tibetan into *Bhujimo* as 'Nupujambu'. These figures are portrayed in a very dynamic manner that is essentially Chinese. Shown as generals, the figures are dressed in Chinese military armour in a tradition that started with the Tang dynasty in which protectors and guardians are represented as Chinese warlords.

Each *yakṣa* rides a stocky Steppe pony and carries a mongoose disgorging jewels in his left hand. The mongoose

is a symbol of recovering the treasures that the *nāgas* have sequestered in the netherworld. In the Buddhist context, the gems are always the Buddhist Dharma, although in the lay context Jambhala was seen simply as a god of wealth.

Leaf 3 shows portraits of some of the members of the Kagyu lineage. Most of the Tibetan *dBus med* names are too small to read in the photographs and because the *Bhujimo* names are phonetic transliterations of Tibetan they do not mean much. Only Mārpā lopā (for Mārpā Lotsabā) at the lower left and his disciple Mī lā rā sā pā immediately to his right are clear and obvious.

Leaf 4 shows the faces of the sixteen Chinese-style *arhats* (Ch. *louhan*) plus Faxian Mahāyāna and Dharmatala, in the typical Chinese grouping. The group is numbered right to left 1-7 in the first row; 8-14 in the middle row and 15-18 in the third row. In every case, the *Bhujimo* is a phonetic rendering of the Tibetan pronunciation of the *arhat's* name. The names are provided in the table below.

LEAF	ALSO ON	SANSKRIT	TIBETAN
1	32 L	Rāhula	sGra-gcan-'jin
2	32 R	Cuṇḍapanthaka	Lam-gran-bstan
3	31 L	Piṇḍolabhāradhvāja	Bha-ra dhva-va (or) bSod-snyon-len
4	31 R	Panthaka	Lam-bstan
5	33 L	Nāgasena	kLu'i-ste
6	33 R	Gopāla	sBed-byed
7	34 L	Abheda	Mi-phyed-pa
8	34 R	Aṅgaja	Yan-lag-'byung
9	35 L	Ajita	Ma-pham-pa
10	35 R	Vanavāsīn	Nags-na-gnas
11	36 L	Kālīka	Dus-ldan
12	36 R	Vajriputra	Do-rje-ma'i- bu
13	37 L	Bhadra	bZang-po
14	37 R	Kanakavatsa	gSer-be'u
15	38 L	Kanakabhadrādhvāja	Bha-radhva-dza gSer-can
16	38 R	Bakula	Ba-ku-la
17	39 L	Faxian Mahāyāna	Ha shang
18	39 R	Dharmatala	Dar-ma-ta-la

The consistency of Jīvarāma's ability to convey the physiognomy of specific individuals is demonstrated here repeatedly in the sketchbook. In particular, it will be seen in the second set of *arhats* at the end of the front side (leaves 31-39).

Leaf 5 shows another portion of the Kagyu lineage of the Kagyu sect, from Saraha to Milarepa. At the top right is a female face simply entitled '*Jo[Yo]gini*'. To her left is Saraha, Tilo[pa], (Tilopa lined out), Naro[pa], Mārpā, and, at the far left, Milaraspa. From right to left across the bottom are Lanutavajra, (Padmavajra lined out), Amoghavajra, and Padmavajra. These teachers are all drawn in the Indian *mahāsiddha* manner and may be assumed to be either Indian or Nevar teachers. The last three teachers on the page are clearly Tibetans with their characteristic pointed teacher's hats. Their names are uncertain because they are written in *Bhujimo* but as phonetically-rendered Tibetan.

Leaf 6 shows additional Tibetan teachers, several of whom appeared in leaf 3 as well. This time only the *Bhujimo* names are presented.

Leaf 7 contains an inhabited vine scroll motif that shows off the master artist at his best. The rhythm, vibrancy and exquisite

1



2



3





detailing of the motif is a truly extraordinary representation of a vine scroll. In finished paintings, every detail is carefully controlled. This representation truly is a sketch with quickly drawn lines and freely fashioned details, yet when Jivarāma applied the red ground the brush was so carefully controlled that the red does not cover any of the black lines. The subjects in the vine are two offering goddesses and three of the seven jewels of the *cakravartin* (the elephant, the horse, and the *dharma*cakra). At the top is a sword upright on a lotus.

Leaf 8 is a wonderful representation of the type of textile design that occurs on the cushions and bolsters of major images. Designs of this type occur in the bronzes of eastern India, where they are sometimes inlaid. Related designs are also known in the bronzes of Kashmir.

Leaves 9-10 contain details of many different elements. Across the top of leaf 9 is a vine scroll of a type that occurs in the garments of painted wooden images of Avalokiteśvara, Tārā and Bhṛkuṭī images from 15<sup>th</sup> century Nepal. The sections of overlapping plates are the designs for the armour of the Four Great Kings (see below). The birds inhabit the Buddhist paradises and sing the Dharma with their songs. On leaf 10 are clouds shown in the Chinese manner, the rain of treasures again in the Chinese manner, and two more versions of armour plate.

Leaves 11-20 are an iconographic sequence related to the Cakrasamvara cycle meditations. These figures are not

identified by inscription. However, they are well enough known to be identified by their iconographic characteristics. Leaf 11 contains rudimentary drawings of Mahākāla on the left and Sri (dPal-ldan-lha-mo) on the right. The two serve as preliminary benefactors for the rest of the sequence. Leaf 12 has the Mahāsiddha Naropā and an unidentified teacher in Tibetan-style robes. Beginning with leaf 13, the next eight Mahāsiddhis inhabit the charnel fields around the Cakrasamvara *maṇḍala*. Leaf 13 has Ghantapa and Indrabhūti (king of Uḍḍiyāna); leaf 14 has Virūpa and Saraha; leaf 15 has Dombipa on a lion (although it is usually shown as a tiger); leaf 16 has Kukkuripa with his dog; leaf 17 has a most unusual bull-headed Mahāsiddha and Tilopa; leaf 18 has an unidentified figure and Ghantapa again. Following that group, two of the most important teachers of the Cakrasamvara tradition are shown, Maitripāda and Naropā on leaf 19. Beneath each of them on leaf 20 are Maitri *Ḍākinī* (Ākāśa *Yoginī*) and Naro *Ḍākinī* (Vajra *Yoginī*). These *yoginīs* are special visions of the two teachers and are widely taught in both Nevar Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism.

Leaves 21 and 22 show a single composition that spans both pages. The subject is one of the most lavish and visually rich visions of the Ādi Buddha Vajradhara in all of Buddhist art. The Ādi Buddha may appear in two forms, the totally unadorned (naked) non-dual Samantabhadra/Samantabhadri



and, as here, as Vajradhara (who may be with or without a *prajñā*). Vajradhara displays a crossed-arm position indicating non-duality, and holds the *vajra* in his right hand and the *ghaṇṭā* in the left. The *vajra* symbolizes the male and *ghaṇṭā* the female.

The image combines several notions of the Dharma body (*Dharmakāya*) of the Buddha as manifested by the Bliss body (*Sambhogakāya*) of the Buddha. In early explanations of the Dharma body, perhaps dating from the turn of the Christian era, Śākyamuni appeared in the Akaniṣṭha paradise in his Vairocana robes. By the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century, Vairocana appears as a bejewelled and elaborately robed Buddha residing in Akaniṣṭha. At some later time, Vairocana was transcended by the notion of an Ādi Buddha, a primordial Buddha body demonstrating the Dharma body. However, because the Dharma body is unknowable and non-corporeal, the Bliss body is conceived as demonstrating the Dharma body. Jīvarāma seems to have known of all of these traditions of the Dharma body and consciously combined them into the magnificent and lavish image. The crown that the figure wears is the Meru *Jaṭā* adorned with gems representing the five Jina Buddhas and their respective Buddha Prajñās. Such a crown is commonly worn in exactly this manner by Nevar priests when they realize their identity with Vajrasattva and Vajradhara.

Leaves 23-24 contain representations of Chinese style dragons that became very popular in Nevar decorative art.

In this context, they represent lightning. The kLu (dragon) in Tibetan iconography is a manifestation of water, paralleling the meaning of *nāgas* in India and the dragon (*long*) in China.

Leaves 25-26 illustrate two halves of preceptor's chairs in the Chinese Ming dynasty style. Jīvarāma may have been sketching this material for future reference. The inscription refers to the dragon on the previous page, stating this is what it looked like when the dragon (perhaps as lightning?) settled on a temple.

Leaves 27-30 contain wonderful drawings of the four great guardian kings (*caturmahārāja*) rendered in the Chinese Ming dynasty style. Known as the *lokapālas*, the four guardian kings, among their various appellations, these beings live on the fourth terrace at half the height of Mount Meru, where they control the denizens of the spirit world for the benefit of humankind. These include *yakṣas*, *gandharvas*, *nāgas*, and the like. But their presence also serves another purpose in Buddhist iconography – for they define the purity of the sacred space that is the summit of the Mount Meru system, Akaniṣṭha paradise. This reifies the five certainties of Buddhism: (1) the place of the teachings is always Akaniṣṭha paradise; (2) the teacher is always Vairocana; (3) the peers are always tenth-stage Bodhisattvas; (4) the teachings are always from the great Vehicle (Mahāyāna) and (5) the time is always the eternal continuum. Because all Tāntric Buddhist practice is imagined (*bhavana*), representations of the persona of the symbol system serve to reify the

16



17



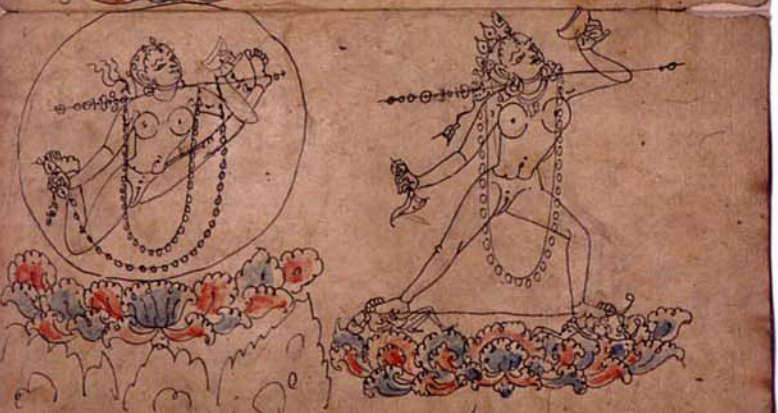
18



19



20



21



22



23



24



25



visualizations. The depiction of the *lokapālas* as great generals of the Tang army underscores their power and prestige.

The first of the kings (leaf 27) is Vaiśravaṇa (*Dhvaja rāja* in Nevar Buddhist Sanskrit), the guardian of the north. The second of the kings (leaf 28) is Virūpākṣa (*Caitya rāja* in Nevar Buddhist Sanskrit), the guardian of the west. The third of the kings (leaf 29) is Virūdhaka (*Khaḍgarāja* in Nevar Buddhist Sanskrit), the guardian of the south. The fourth of the kings (leaf 30) is Dhṛtatarāṣṭra (*Viṇā rāja* in Nevar Buddhist Sanskrit), the guardian of the east.

The power, vitality and detail of these drawings is a clear expression of Jīvarāma's great skill and mastery of what was for him a foreign technique – that of Chinese painting. It is notable that the Indic prince typology of the *caturmahārājas* in Nevar Buddhism began to give way to the Chinese warlord convention in about the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It would be fascinating to know whether Jīvarāma's masterful images generated this transition.

Leaves 31-39 contain full pictorial versions of the sixteen *lohas* (*arhats*) and the two *dharma* supporters, Fa-hsien (Mahāyāna) and Dharmataḷa, rendered in the Chinese-style. This group is a much more detailed study of the iconography of the *arhats* and their attendants, compared with the sketches on leaf 4, which placed greater emphasis on the physiognomy of the heads. It is important to note that the *arhats* on the leaves are a bit out of order, as may be checked in the table.

As far as I am aware, the *arhat* tradition was never adopted in Nevar Buddhism, in contrast to its popularity in China, Korea and Japan. The *arhats* occur in several *maṇḍalas* of the *Sarvadurgatiparsodana* tradition, which is known but not widely practised among Nevar Buddhists. In Tibet, the *arhats* appear as attendants of major Buddhist deities. The most important of these is Śākyamuni, who can be shown with the sixteen *arhats*, the two religious supporters, the four *mahārājas*, and the two best [disciples]. The two best disciples are Mahamogalyāyana and Śāriputra, who also appear, interestingly, in many Bahals in the Kathmandu Valley. This set of *arhats* by Jīvarāma is remarkable for the vigour of the rendering and the iconographic accuracy following the Tibetan and Chinese traditions. Quickly and freely sketched, the depictions capture the essence of the Sino-Tibetan tradition of imagery.

#### LEAVES ON THE REVERSE SIDE OF THE MANUSCRIPT:

Seven sequential leaves on the reverse bear illustrations. In relation to the illustrations on the front, these are upside-down in the manner typical of the *thyasaphu* format, thus enabling the user of the book to simply reverse directions when the end of one side is reached. Viewing the back with the illustrations right side up, the uppermost of these (on the reverse of leaf 36) shows a vine scroll with the eight offering goddesses contained within. The six leaves below this (corresponding to leaves 35-30) represent throne-back designs, including motifs such as the *makara* and foliate elements. These seven leaves must be considered among the most luxuriant draftsmanship in the world.

The vine scroll on the back of leaf 36 is similar to that on leaf 7, although somewhat less carefully done. Jīvarāma's meticulousness and care are overwhelming, and his execution demonstrates a grace and fluidity seldom seen in Nevar painting.

The next two designs are a bit hard to separate. The first, a half throne back, starts at the back of leaf 30 and moves up toward the back of leaf 35. Reading up from the reverse of leaf 30 is an elaborate throne back. At the lower left is a part of the *vyālaka* consisting of the forelegs of a lion whose hindquarters turn into a vast convoluted spiralling motif. Above that is a



31



32



33



34



35



36



*sārdūla*, a composite creature ridden by a small male figure. Angled up slightly from right to left is the architectural throne back on which is an exuberant *makara*. Roiling water disgorges from his mouth, providing prosperity and fecundity for the world. The *makara*'s tail is maelstrom of turbidity of descending waters. Out of the waters grows a lotus on which a horned bird perches, again with a tail that forms vast circular convolutes of descending water. At the right of the *makara* is a *hamsa* on a lotus, whose tail feathers also form vast swirls that imply the descent of the waters. Above the horned bird, on the backs of leaves 35 and 34, is a *nāgarāja*. Together, these forms indicate fecundity, prosperity and well-being for all humanity.

The second-throne back can be understood by inverting the section by 180 degrees and starting at leaf 35 with an amorous *kinnara* couple. Beyond the lyrical romanticism of the amorous couple (rarely depicted in Nevar art), the male's tail expands into a luxurious foliate spiral of descending waters. Out of those waters grows a lotus on which a horned bird rests. The bird has yet another swirling foliate tail of descending water. To the left of the *kinnara* is a horned [horse?] headed bird with cloven hooves and the same kind of foliated descending water tail. On yet another lotus appearing over the horned bird is another bird whose tail again evolves into a complex spiral.

The skill of the artist Jīvarāma is demonstrated throughout the sketchbook by his virtuosity with line and his ability to

capture the essence of a variety of artistic styles. His renderings of the Chinese *lohanas* (leaves 31-39), for example, show Jīvarāma's dexterity with line in capturing the physiognomies, garments, and poses of these individuals. The throne-back details illustrated on the reverse of leaves 35-30 are drawn with astonishing precision. Drawn with what the Nevars call an "iron hand", the lines are executed with mastery and sureness that reveal that Jīvarāma was an artist of extraordinary skill.

An interesting feature of this sketchbook is the addition of colour to some of the designs and compositions. The colour for the *lohanas* (leaves 31-39) is added in a washlike watercolour, probably deriving from the Chinese tradition. Since typical Nevar painting uses opaque colour, Jīvarāma's use of this method suggests that he may have been using Chinese materials at the same time that he was mastering Chinese designs. The gradations of these washes, with the artist using deeper and more transparent washes of colour, further suggest his experimentation with Chinese artistic techniques. The specific purpose of this sketchbook must have been for Jīvarāma to record iconography and artistic styles that he encountered while in Tibet. Since Tibetan art by the 15<sup>th</sup> century date of Jīvarāma's visit had been greatly influenced by Chinese art of the Yuan and Ming dynasties, Jīvarāma was exposed to both the Tibetan and Chinese artistic traditions.

A manuscript such as this is a vital document of Buddhist



R-1



R-2



R-3



R-4



R-5



R-6



R-7



history and the transmission of Buddhist ideas and artistic forms throughout Asia. Jivarāma, the Nevar artist, travelled to Tibet, where he encountered works of art in the Tibetan and Chinese styles. Capturing some of these works in his sketches, the artist then returned home to Nepal, where, we can assume, he put what he had learned to use in his later works of art.

1. Translation courtesy of Kashinath Tamot of Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu.

JH