Indian Art Treasures

Suresh Neotia Collection

Jñāna-Pravāha
Centre for Cultural Studies & Research
VARANASI

Mosaic Books
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
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 kutia/ranjanā 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 Vaisakha [April-May], Jivarāma personally wrote this, [and] after [he] heard [instructions] from Chon bhota made the whole book himself. After having come from Prati cittaṃ [towards the west; perhaps a place name], where he heard [instructions] from Lālā Chunva [a Nevar phonetic rendering of a Tibetan name ending in “the younger”]. Giving the book special importance, he brought it back to [his own] viharā. After working in Nyar Dva [Tibetan place name?], he then brought it back. This was made personally by Jivarāma.

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 Jivarāma 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 mandala of Pita Jambhala (rNam-sras ser-can), the dharmapala of prosperity. Each figure is identified by two inscriptions, one in Nepal Bhasā and Bhujimo script and the other in Tibetan language and the Dbus med cursive script. At the top left is Pañcika (Nga-rtsen) and at the top right is Kubera (Ku be ra). Below them are Bijukundalin (Ptaci Kundali [sic] in the Tibetan inscription) on the left and Manimbhadra (Nor-bu bzang) on the right. Jivarāma 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 Steppen 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 Lotsābā) at the lower left and his disciple Mlā rā sā pā immediately to his right are clear and obvious.

Leaf 4 shows the faces of the sixteen Chinese-style arhats (Ch. luohan) 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEAF</th>
<th>ALSO ON</th>
<th>SANSKRIT</th>
<th>TIBETAN</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>32 L</td>
<td>Rāhula</td>
<td>sGra-gea-’jin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>32 R</td>
<td>Cundapartha</td>
<td>Lam-gran-bstan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>31 L</td>
<td>Pandolhabharadhvaja</td>
<td>Bha-ra dbva’va (or) bSod-snyon-len</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>31 R</td>
<td>Panthaka</td>
<td>Lam-bstan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Nāgaseya</td>
<td>Kla’s-te</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>33 R</td>
<td>Gopāla</td>
<td>sBed-byed</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>34 L</td>
<td>Abheda</td>
<td>Mi-phye-pa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>34 R</td>
<td>Anjaja</td>
<td>Yan-lug’byung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>35 L</td>
<td>Ajita</td>
<td>Ma-pham-pa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>35 R</td>
<td>Vanavāsin</td>
<td>Nga-n-gras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>36 L</td>
<td>Kālika</td>
<td>Dus-ltan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>36 R</td>
<td>Vajriputra</td>
<td>Do-rje-ma’i-bu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>37 L</td>
<td>Bhadra</td>
<td>bZang-po</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>37 R</td>
<td>Kanakavāsa</td>
<td>gSer-be’u</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>38 L</td>
<td>Kanakabhadhradhva</td>
<td>Bha-radnya-dza gSer-can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>38 R</td>
<td>Bakula</td>
<td>Ba-ku-la</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>39 L</td>
<td>Faxian Mahāyāna</td>
<td>Ha shang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>39 R</td>
<td>Dharmatala</td>
<td>Dar-ma-ta’la</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The consistency of Jivarāma’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 ‘JoYo/gijin’. To her left is Saraha, Tilopa [pa], (Tilopa lined out), Naropa [pa], Mārpā, and, at the far left, Milaraspa. From right to left across the bottom are Lanutavajra, (Padmavajra lined out), Amogahavajra, 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
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 Jivārāma 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 cakra varins (the elephant, the horse, and the dharmakāra). 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 Bhrkuti images from 15th 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 Śrī (dPal-lDan-lHa-mo) on the right. The two serve as preliminary benefactors for the rest of the sequence.

Leaf 12 has the Mahāsiddha Naropa and an unidentified teacher in Tibetan-style robes. Beginning with leaf 13, the next eight Mahāsiddhis inhabit the central fields around the Cakrasamvara mandala. Leaf 13 has Ghantapa and Indrabhūti (king of Uddiyāna); 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 Naropa on leaf 19. Beneath each of them on leaf 20 are Maitri Dākini (Akaśa Yogini) and Naro Dākini (Vajra Yogini). These yoginis are special visions of the two teachers and are widely taught in both Nēvar 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 ghanṭā in the left. The vajra symbolizes the male and ghanṭā 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, Sākyamuni appeared in the Akanīṣṭha paradise in his Vairocana robes. By the 4th or 5th century, Vairocana appears as a bejewelled and elaborately robed Buddha residing in Akanīṣṭha. 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. Jivarāma 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 Jatā 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. Jivarāma 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 (caturmahārṣīja) 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 yaksas, 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, Akanīṣṭha paradise. This reifies the five certainties of Buddhism: (1) the place of the teachings is always Akanīṣṭha 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 Tantric Buddhist practice is imagined (bhāvanā), representations of the persona of the symbol system serve to reify the
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 Vaiśravana (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 (Khadgarāja in Nevar Buddhist Sanskrit), the guardian of the south. The fourth of the kings (leaf 30) is Dhṛtārāṣṭra (Vinā rāja in Nevar Buddhist Sanskrit), the guardian of the east.

The power, vitality and detail of these drawings is a clear expression of Jivārāma’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 catumahārājas in Nevar Buddhism began to give way to the Chinese warlord convention in about the 15th century. It would be fascinating to know whether Jivārāma’s masterful images generated this transition.

Leaves 31-39 contain full pictorial versions of the sixteen lohans (arhats) and the two dharma supporters, Fa-hsien (Mahāyāna) and Dharmatāla, 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 mandalas of the Sarvadurgāgatiparsodana 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 Mahamogalāyāna and Sāriputra, who also appear, interestingly, in many Bahals in the Kadhmandu Valley. This set of arhats by Jivārāma 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 hyasaphu 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. Jivārāma’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
śārdūla, 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. Rolling water disgorges from its mouth, providing prosperity and fecundity for the world. The makara’s tail is a mastrum 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 harsa 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 nāgarūja. 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 Jivarāma 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 lohans (leaves 31-39), for example, show Jivarāma’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 Jivarāma 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 lohans (leaves 31-39) is added in a washlike watercolour, probably deriving from the Chinese tradition. Since typical Nevar painting uses opaque colour, Jivarāma’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 Jivarāma to record iconography and artistic styles that he encountered while in Tibet. Since Tibetan art by the 15th century date of Jivarāma’s visit had been greatly influenced by Chinese art of the Yuan and Ming dynasties, Jivarāma was exposed to both the Tibetan and Chinese artistic traditions.

A manuscript such as this is a vital document of Buddhist
history and the transmission of Buddhist ideas and artistic forms throughout Asia. Jivārāma, the Nēvar 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