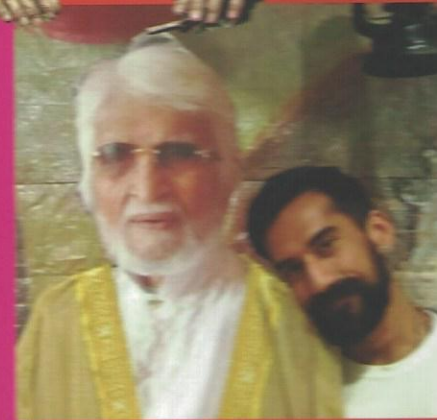
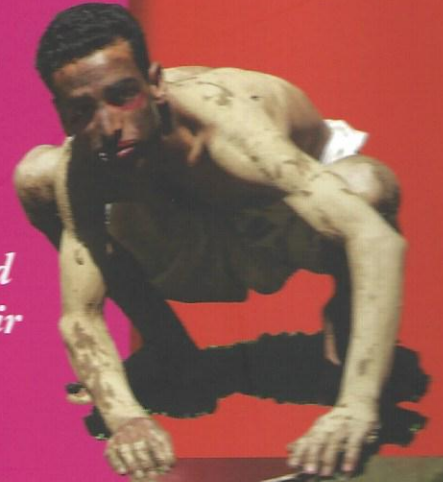


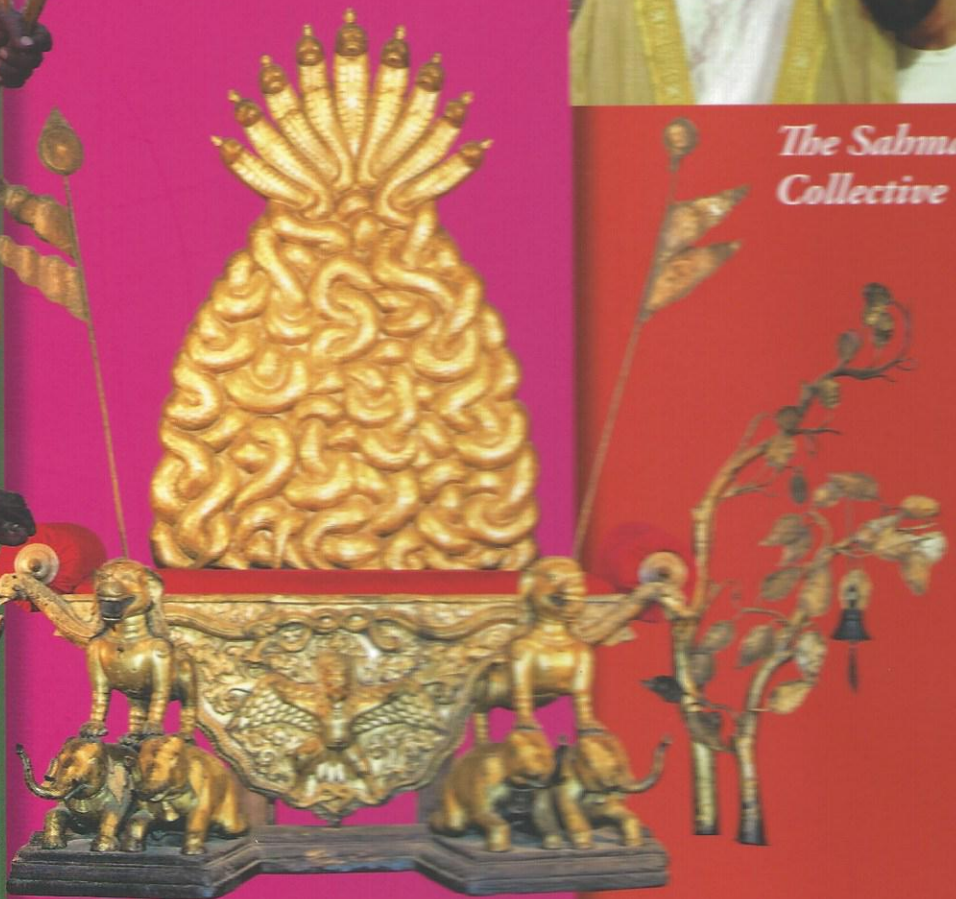


*Safeguarding Performance:
The Case for Chhau*

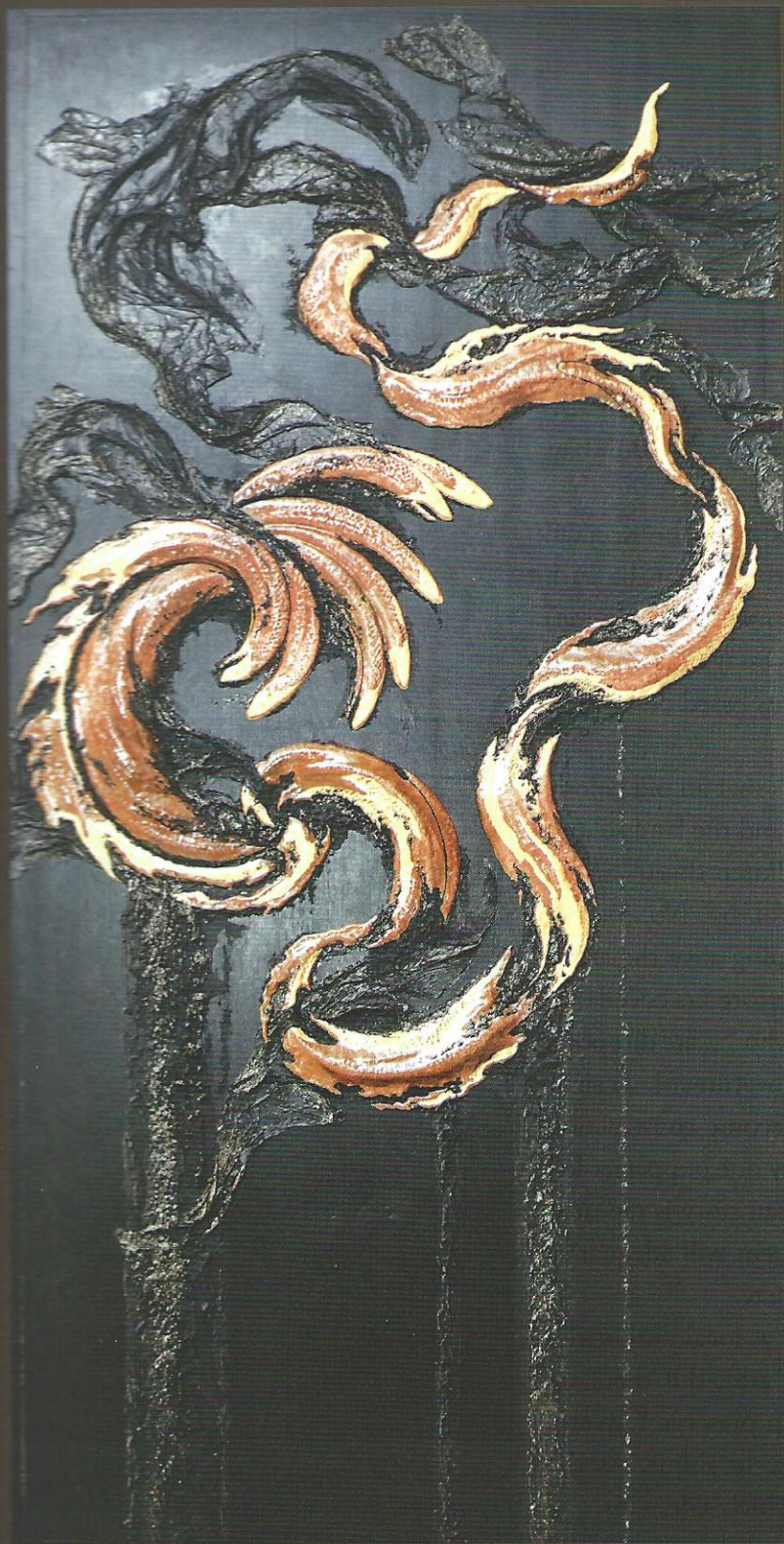
*The Bhand
in Kashmir*



*The Sabmat
Collective*



Nepal's Protectors: The Nagas



● *Maureen Drdak*

The Nagas: Prakriti's Protectors

What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions?
... Only one answer seems possible – significant form.

– Clive Bell, *Art*, 1914

Flying over the north Indian plains, the great Gangetic river system spreads out before me; I will shortly be landing in the lap of the gods – the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. Like a watchful deity I gaze upon the earthscape below, and from these rarefied heights the interrelationship of heaven and earth surpasses poetic and mythic analogies. It is a sublime, awe-inducing view and Bell's words ring profoundly true. The winding forms of the waters below clearly establish their arterial function as carriers of the lifeblood of the planet; they induce spontaneous associations with the human body and its vascular system. In their riverine meandering the waters also conjure up the lithe form of the snake and I enter into an ancient human process of sensorial association which leads to a universal symbolic communion of forms. Reflecting upon these riverine serpents beneath me, my mind flies ahead to my final destination and the purpose of my journey. I am returning to Nepal as a Fulbright scholar to pursue advanced study with my guru, repousse master Rabindra Shakya, and to create a definitive artwork demonstrative of my new synthesis of repousse and contemporary painting – *The Prakriti Project*. My vehicle – my vahana – for my project will be the Holy Serpent of Asia, the Naga, the sentinel deity of the Kathmandu Valley – protector of its waters and bestower of its rains, the guardian of its environment.

1 and 2

The Flying Nagas Diptych
by Maureen Drdak, 2012.
Gilded copper repousse,
crushed stone and black
plastic bags; each image
183 x 91.5 cm.

As I watch, the rivers simultaneously veer abruptly north towards the source of their waters: the Himalayan summits. Approaching Nepal one experiences its topography as a living metaphor, its contours tracing a stairway to heaven. The cloudscapes at high altitude present transcendent equivalents of their terrestrial counterparts – plains, rivers, plateaus and mountains – their ethereal forms engendered by the unceasing climatic conversation between heaven and earth. The Naga is believed to mitigate this celestial dialogue; yet, approaching these cloud-cloaked alpine leviathans, that conversation appears turbulent, intimating trouble. The Holy Serpent is increasingly restless. Climatologists, noting this growing volatility at this third-fastest site of global warming, have christened the Himalaya – the Third Pole. Kathmandu indeed, in the words of writer Namita Gokhale, “...is the eye of the storm in a powerful cycle of change”.¹

When Pollution Comes, the Nagas Leave

My first encounter with the Naga was through wandering the streets of Kathmandu, where the inspired devotion of artists ensures its perpetual reincarnation in metal, stone, wood and pigment. Its form engendered within me an internal flood of associations, the intensity of my reaction compounded by the paradox of apprehending this creature – the object of general revulsion in Western culture – as an embodiment of divinity. Though quite conversant with the diverse cultural iconology of the serpent, encountering it as a living, physical god was spellbinding. The Naga immediately took hold and held me fast.

Likewise, though still strongly tethered to the divine, Nepal struggles to maintain equilibrium; the ferocious speed of the country’s physical transformation beggars the imagination, severely punishing its environment in the process. Modernity has scorched many vestiges and values of Nepal’s old order; alternatively, it could be said to have settled like a thick dust, easily brushed aside, revealing an older dreaming world. In this oscillating culturescape, the mind, loosened from the categorical imperatives of the modern world, drifts freely – as such, the cultural landscape of the valley still remains a powerful matrix for aesthetic creativity. I found myself wondering what singular aesthetic “form” might possibly contain this kaleidoscopic world.

Clive Bell’s words speak about this ability of form to evoke an “aesthetic emotion” within the viewer – the flow of sensorial responses and correlated associations that are immediately induced when the viewer beholds a sensorial phenomenon – and form’s protean potential for generating psychological and cross-cultural insights. The most potent forms become universal symbols. Though the more elaborate aspects of symbolic meanings are often unknown or forgotten by contemporary viewers, art importantly still functions primarily as a reservoir for this psychological content; the capacity of the most effective of these signifiers to deeply resonate with the viewer remains undiminished by time.

Serpent symbolism is of great antiquity, universal in its distribution, and of profound complexity; its identification with the dualities of life and death fuel a vast range of associations and polarities too extensive to adequately address within this article. Its longevity derives from its capacity to synthesize oppositional forces, thus



3

Throne of the Patan
kings, gilded copper
repousse, 1666.

equating it with harmonizing principles – it is a powerful bridge-builder. Intimately identified with India and Vedic culture where it is known by its Sanskrit name, Naga, its presence permeates all countries in Southeast Asia influenced by Vedic culture, and beyond. It flashes through the heavens in its incarnation as the dragon of eastern Asia, and in Thailand, its shimmering form cascades down palace rooftops. In all these countries, Naga lore is intimately bound with water culture and the great cycle of being. As the guardian of hidden knowledge and its associated riches, its dynamic form acts as a catalyst for generating associative awareness of the interstices of the natural world within which we exist, that vast web of life within which we are but one participant – but one whose actions have many consequences for the planet. The Naga's undulating form unites heaven and earth, its loftiest heights and its secretive depths. In today's world of overreach and fragmentation, it is this inherent identification with integration and balance that speaks most powerfully to the contemporary mind.



e of the Patan
Ananta-Shesha
support.

The Naga is the living protector deity of Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. The Valley's intimate association with water nourishes its culture and its art, and the Naga's form elegantly yet dynamically winds itself protectively throughout the Valley's material and spiritual culture. Geology confirms this region was indeed once a vast and ancient lake, and tradition tells of how the Bodhisatva Manjushri drained that immense lake through a stroke of his flaming Wisdom Sword. He preserved its powerful residents, the Naga Rajas, or Serpent Kings, installing them in permanent residences throughout the Valley, securing forever their protection of the land through its waters and rains. Perhaps the most glittering expression of their protective guardianship is the Royal Throne of Patan, in which the immense mass of a gilded repousse Naga rises up to support the monarch who rules beneath its gaze, as it once sheltered the meditating Prince Siddhartha, the imminent Buddha.

Nagas are intimately associated with one of the Valley's most unique expressions of civic culture: its beautiful water tanks are known as hitis or dharas. The undulating Naga forms surround their walls, coil around entrances, and rise upwards from the waters themselves. Yet, these exquisite structures whose underground springs once nourished people and culture, strangled by unrestrained development, lie increasingly abandoned by their caretakers; they are one of the most tragic examples of Nepal's dislocation of cultural memory.

In reflecting upon issues of dislocation, when we consider that the meaning of *symbol* comes from the Greek "to bring together", we must likewise consider that its complement is *diabolic*, "to tear apart". The form and meaning of the Naga is a powerful inducement to reflect on the impoverishment resulting from the contemporary estrangement of humankind from the natural world, and its assumptions of nature as commodity and resource to be mastered and exploited. Detachment from appreciation of the spiritual qualities of the natural world becomes diabolic – divorce between purusha (man) and prakriti (nature) ultimately debases both. Growing social and environmental imbalance, the misuse of technologies and distorted values of commodification of culture are symptomatic of the loss of a true sense of self and one's place within the cosmos. Cultural dislocation and disconnection have a severe and lasting impact on the environment. The growing devaluation of cultural traditions that impacted the land, which so often accompanies modernity, along with the loss of understanding of their underlying meanings, exposes the environment to attitudes of commodification and exploitation. Today that natural order has been displaced by the accretions of materialism and mimetic desire. Perhaps most eloquently descriptive of this greater dislocation of self is the continued predation visited upon Nepal's iconic patrimony, where the gods are literally carried off from this "developing" country, to service the spiritual deficit of "developed" ones. As Jurgen Schtick has noted in *The Gods Are Leaving the Country*, "The ironic and pernicious practice of antiquity theft – the images of the gods – speaks most eloquently to the hollowing out of spiritual cores – in both the societies of the buyer and seller."

The happiness of the Nagas equates with harmony and order within the natural and societal spheres, as does their displeasure when that order is disturbed. Thus, though life-giving through their emanations, Nagas are also a chthonic power, whose

beneficent qualities are complemented by their capacity to punish – afflictions, floods and droughts result from their displeasure and pain. The Nagas’ displeasure and withdrawal was interpreted as a rendering of judgement upon the prevailing political order and its leaders. The Nagas punitively address human delusions and abuses of the natural world. This intimate association with physical, spiritual and environmental balance provides a salient point for reflection on contemporary attitudes toward profligate appropriation and misuse of ever-diminishing resources, and the costs for future generations.

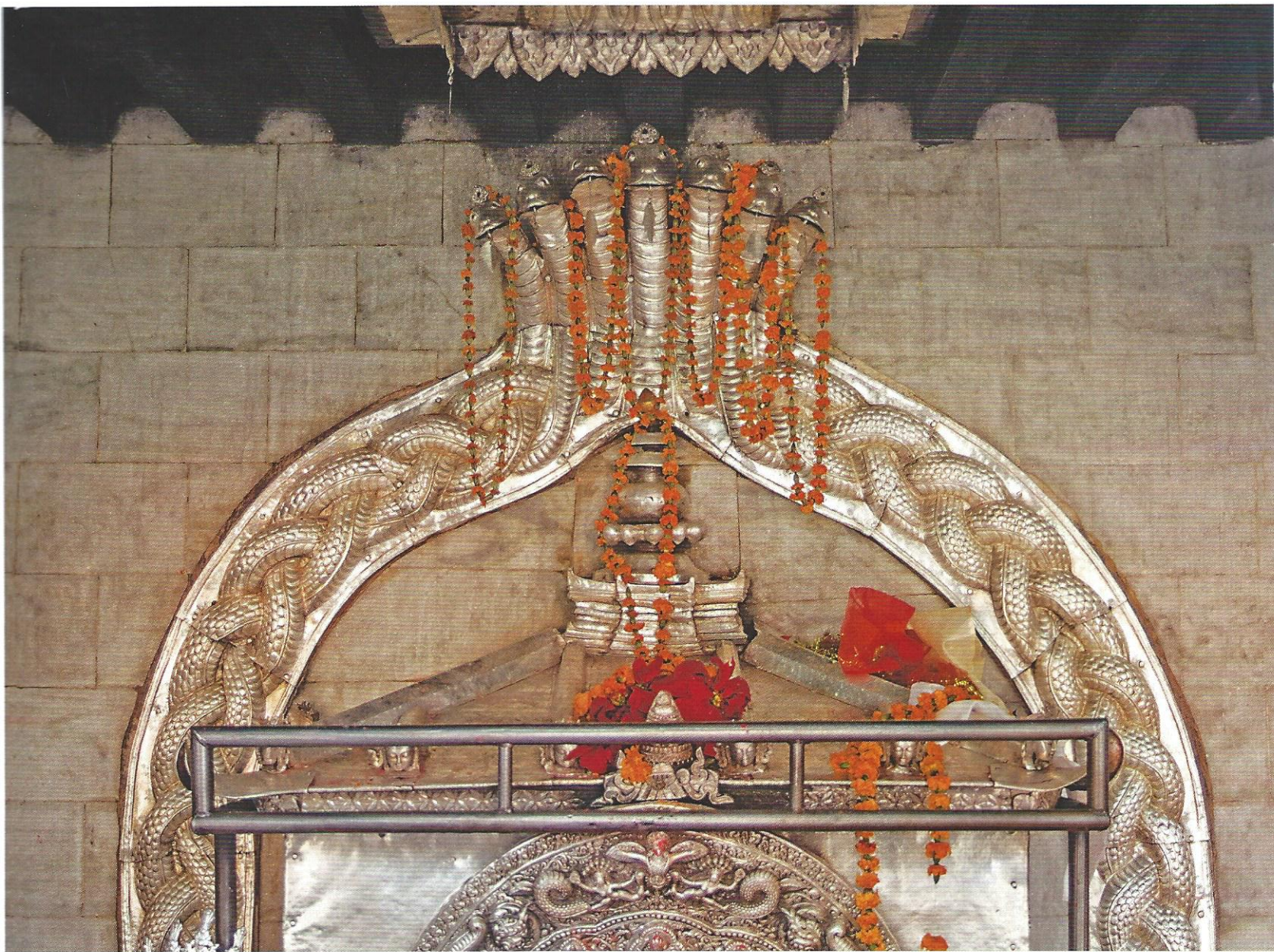
“The Flying Nagas”

Ordinary people are attracted by colours,
Women are charmed by ornamentation,
Connoisseurs prefer the brushwork,
But the masters admire the line.

– *Vishnudharmottarapurana*, 4th–7th century CE

For an artist, the form of the Naga is creative catalyst par-excellence; it possesses a dynamic aesthetic with immense expressive range, and speaks to *regeneration* and *synthesis*. As a “living line” it intimates continuity of process, drawing the eye along, and beckoning the mind to follow. It conveys with the greatest economy those features most valued in classic Vedic aesthetics – expressive line and expansive form. Its form articulates its many moods – dynamic expansion and contraction, strength and vulnerability, now languid and supine, now rigid and erect – and its ability to penetrate hidden, secret places strongly sexualizes its associations. Its growth habits reference the qualities of prana (life-breath) itself; alternately swelling and contracting, it sloughs off its former shroud, and emerges reborn. Its regenerative cycle provides the contemplative mind with an elegant metaphor for the positive negotiation of time, change and growth, and offers potent points of entry into deeper conceptual thought about our spiritual, physical and creative worlds. It was the Naga that brought me to my teacher.

Nepal remains one of the rare places in the world in which an artist can study with a master of venerable lineage, surrounded by a greater world of profound and sublime physical beauty. Patan, or Lalitpur – City of Beauty, is celebrated for the virtuosity of its artists,² and is the home of the family of my guru, Master Rabindra Shakya. Rabindra-ji’s family line of scholars and artists, honoured by the Malla and Shah kings of Nepal, dates from the 17th century; his venerable ancestor was Pandit Abhaya Raj Shakya, founder of the Mahabuddha Temple in 1564. Grandson of the historical master Kuber Singh Shakya,³ Rabindra-ji is a master of both diminutive and monumental repousse.⁴ Repousse is an ancient technique. While the West has had its master-practitioners – most notably Benvenuto Cellini – it is an increasingly rare practice; the Kathmandu Valley remains its last bastion, and Patan remains the epicentre of its practice. The Newars of the Kathmandu Valley are the celebrated



5
Silver repousse
Naga shrine, Patan
Museum, Malla
period.

masters of this 1,500-year-old art form, and its unique traditions and practices have been available for study by foreigners for less than 60 years. Its technical challenges far surpass those of lost-wax casting, earning it its description as an “art of the cognoscenti”. As its French name suggests, repousse is a metalworking technique in which sheet metal is repeatedly “pushed again”, to create three-dimensional form; magnificent expressions of this glittering art grace temples and palaces throughout Nepal.

It is the “painterly” property of repousse that inspired *The Prakriti Project*. The Sanskrit word “prakriti” signifies both physical matter and the primal creative force that shapes it, and speaks with conceptual elegance to *The Prakriti Project*; its significance lies in its creation of a genuinely new art form resulting from the merging of specific materials (repousse and painting), cross-cultural traditions and artistic practices. The Naga’s intrinsic aesthetic properties, its profound wealth of symbolic associations, its unique significance for Nepali culture and its intimate association with environmental equilibrium, identified it as the vahana for my creative vision – for *The Prakriti Project*. The point of departure for this monumental work is a small study employing my

new synthesis of repousse and painting, *The Flying Naga*, now in the collection of Berthe and John G. Ford. In my Fulbright work, the ancient form of the Naga would use more advanced techniques of repousse, and to realize this vision I needed to advance my study with my guruji, repousse master Rabindra Shakya. Conceptual work and painting were undertaken at my studio within the Patan Museum as Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Center Artist-in-Residence. My study of repousse aesthetically and physically situated me within the Newar world and the Valley's culture; metalwork was done in the Shakya atelier, a physically demanding yet highly contemplative world in which the traditional forms are continually "reborn" and both artist and material bend to serve the divine.

The Flying Nagas Diptych is the culmination of my work for *The Prakriti Project*; it is a monumental work, with overall dimensions of 183 by 183 centimetres. Climate change and environmental degradation, reflective of resources and relationships abused and debased by man's overreach, are visualized in this work; the imagistic fulcrum that supports and integrates these elements is the sacred imagery of the Naga. The writhing and twisting forms of the great serpents, executed in gilded copper repousse, rise upward, attempting to flee the fouled and heated earth, while black plastic bags, the bane of Kathmandu Valley, swirl ominously about them, entangling and impeding their flight – a creative use of this recent and especially pernicious material pollutant that pervades the Valley. Cascading from the Nagas' torn bodies are black torrents of crushed stone, symbolic of the fouled waters. Their gilded skin streams in tatters, referencing the erosion of indigenous cultural values that once sustained them and the earth. Their suffering is that of the environment – choked, mute and breathless.

In writing on *The Prakriti Project*, Dr Mary Slusser, distinguished scholar of Nepali art, described my work with Guru Rabindra Shakya as a "fecund collaboration" and "an inspired coupling apparently without antecedents". Referring to *The Flying Nagas Diptych* as "astonishing paintings", she writes appreciatively of my study with Rabindra-ji, and expresses her hope that further creative dialogue will be pursued between contemporary and traditional arts. I would add to that my hope that *The Flying Nagas Diptych* will also speak to the unique relevance and agency of cultural symbols for addressing contemporary challenges and inspiring change.

One additional note: on the night preceding the installation of *The Flying Nagas Diptych* at Siddhartha Gallery in early February 2012, a torrential rain descended and continued into the following day. This was the only rain since the end of the preceding monsoon. I had been advised by a local priest that should such an unlikely event occur, it would signify the blessings of the Nagas; I like to think that, indeed, they smiled upon my efforts.

The Naga as Catalyst for Contemporary Cultural and Environmental Renewal

The Question of Questions for mankind – the problem which underlies all the others, and is more deeply interesting than any other – is the ascertainment of the place which man occupies in nature and of his relations to the universe of things.

– H. Thomas Henry Huxley, *Man's Place in Nature*

The symbolic systems of different spiritual paradigms reveal significant cultural differences regarding man's custodial responsibility to the earth and its resources. In reflecting upon the significance of the Naga for diverse cultures in the past, we would do well to consider its message for the present. In ages past the physical and psychological intimacy of humanity's relationship with the natural world was of a depth and quality incomprehensible to the contemporary mind. When Nepalis of years past went to their dharas and hitis to draw water, images of the Naga would remind them of their place in the flow of water, nature and time, of the critical importance of water for their survival and, hence, its deserved sanctity. Confronting the gathering and unknown forces of climate change, we are now forced to reassess the wisdom of our hubristic rejection of that deeper vision, one which honoured our dependence upon and reverence owed to that greater web of being. As images from space have confirmed, this is the only earth we are likely to have – at least for the foreseeable future.

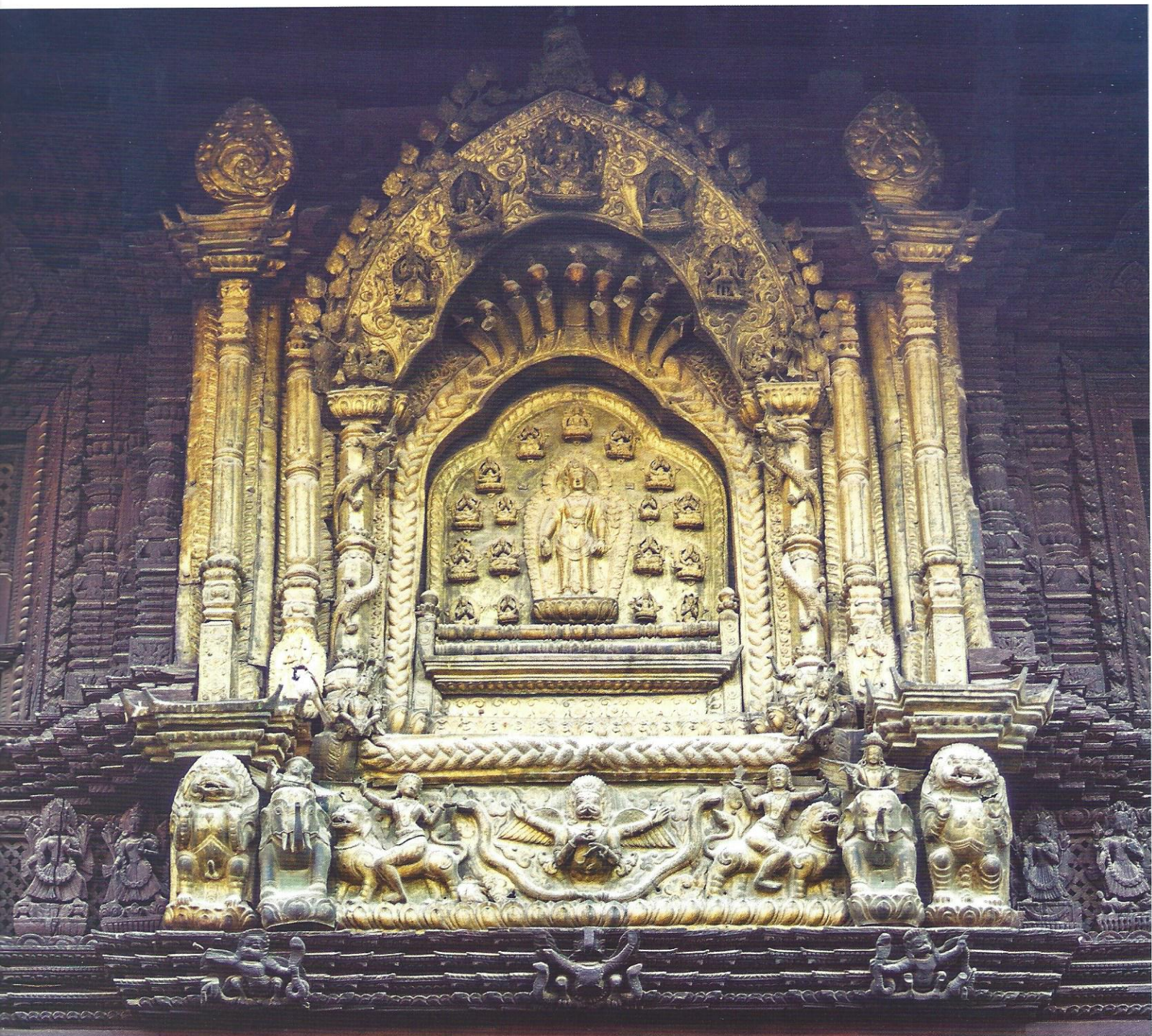
Symbolic systems function as visual reminders of communal values and responsibilities. As representative of the environment, the Naga can offer us a collective and contemplative point of departure for generating ecological activism and redress of environmental degradation, especially within those cultures for which it remains a *living* energy. Communities must reawaken within themselves knowledge of the values that these cultural symbols embody and advocate for their energetic realization in the public space.

Moving between the realms of gods, men and the underworld, Nagas image the circulation of universal energies; they speak to perpetual integration of the many in the greater whole. Diverse traditions tell of serpents' capacity to change form (often assuming human appearance), and portray them as the devoted followers of both gods and men, pursuing the good of universal order. Self-sacrifice is not unknown to the Naga; diverse cultural traditions present a Promethean aspect to the serpent's dispensation of knowledge to man, for which the Naga often bore the burden of punishment. In this respect the serpent of the Ancient Near Eastern world had much in common with Asia's reverence for the Naga; both the Rod of Asclepius and the Nehushtan, or the Brazen Serpent of Moses, testify to innumerable cross-cultural associations of the serpent with healing, regeneration and secret knowledge. The little-known but powerful Sarpabali (snake sacrifice) ritual performed annually outside of Kathmandu speaks to the tremendous powers of life and death, and the permeable membrane that is their domain; the Sarpabali is a sacrifice to, by and of the serpents,

6

Patan Museum door
with gilded copper
repousse torana.





7
The Golden Window
or Lunjhah, entrance to
Mani Keshav Narayan
Chowk (now the Patan
Museum), 1693.

and offers intriguing comparisons with the Nehushtan's symbolic prefiguring of Christ's crucifixion.

The Naga is that rarest of contemporary phenomena: a living nature deity intimately associated with the health and care of the natural world. Today, spiritual and cultural prohibitions on environmental exploitation are increasingly ignored in the face of perceived need, profit and pleasure. With the receding fear of divine retribution, our delusional sense of "entitlement" grows unabated. The Naga stands as a continual reminder of the sacral nature of the waters and of the human responsibilities towards their appreciation and care – and of the price to be paid for their abuse. It is believed the Nagas have a capacity to absorb pollution, but if abused, will withdraw leaving

drought and disease in their wake; reflecting upon the potential consequences of abuse of water resources within the Valley, this belief cannot be viewed solely as poetic metaphor. Indeed, considering the tragic condition of Nepal's sacred rivers, it raises salient questions about modernity's values and their impact on cultures for which the sacral value of water is primary for cultural identity.

Symbolic systems are bridges meant to carry two-way traffic; they are invaluable frameworks to be studied in this age of growing multiculturalism for their cross-cultural perspectives and their connective revelations. Especially in times of cultural dislocation, symbolic systems can powerfully instruct as well as inspire. Communities can be reinvigorated by a reintroduction and deeper understanding of their rich meaning. Carl Jung was the first psychologist to recognize the importance of symbolic systems in collective cultural psychology; in the East, the great polymath Ananda K. Coomaraswamy devoted his life to their study. Contemporary artists live in extraordinary times. The ability of symbolic forms to traverse great distances of time, space, history and culture provides us with a powerful potential language for conceptually meaningful cross-cultural bridging. Through them we may explore with renewed immediacy those associations and values that transcend localities, and emphasize our shared humanity. With the technological ability to increasingly customize our life experience, modifying our personal experiences into ever more fragmented worlds, this ancient communion of forms offers us renewed possibilities for meaningful communication and inspired living. Let us invite our inner Naga, the Serpent Kundalini, to arise and empower the liberation of our minds, to expand our vision and benefit the larger life of creation.

NOTES

- 1 As quoted by Rabi Thapa in "NWEs: A Season to Write", *HIMAL Southasian*, August 2010, <http://himalmag.com/component/content/article/270-.html>.
- 2 Patan is the birthplace of the legendary Arniko, the 13th-century genius who was critical to establishing Himalayan Buddhist art as an international style; the favourite of Kublai Khan, his life-sized statue stands in Beijing, the only statue of a foreigner in China.
- 3 See Mary Shepherd Slusser and James Giambone, "Kuber Singh Shakya: A Master Craftsman from Nepal", April 19, 2001, <http://www.asianart.com/articles/kubersingh/index.html>.
- 4 Rabindra-ji's brother Raj Kumar, is currently in Bhutan, where he is creating a 35-metre repousse colossus of Padmasambhava; upon its completion in 2013 it will stand in height second only to the Statue of Liberty, New York.

FIGURE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All photographs courtesy Nischal Oli, 2012.