

The Art of Rabindra Shakya and Maureen Drdak:
An Appreciation

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Although many of today's Nepalese painters are profoundly influenced in style, subject matter, and iconography by the traditional *paubhā*, banner paintings on cloth, none appear to have drawn likewise from sister traditions. That this is an unfortunate omission is amply illustrated by the astonishing paintings presented here. They represent the fecund collaboration of a North American painter, Maureen Drdak, with a Nepalese master of the art of repoussé, Rabindra Shakya, an inspired coupling apparently without antecedents.

Translated "pushed again," repoussé has been described as an "art of the cognoscenti," those who recognize that the deceptively simple technique of hammering malleable metal into three-dimensional form is in fact one of the most difficult — surprisingly, perhaps, far more difficult than the complex art of casting. It is an exacting technique dependent wholly on the human hand, a modest set of hand tools, and the experience and skills of years of training and practice. Indeed, its difficulty explains why in our mechanized age worldwide practitioners are few. Nepal is almost the last bastion of an otherwise dying art.

From existing examples and literary references it is known that the "pushing again" and gilding of copper has been practiced in Nepal since at least the seventh century of the Common Era. Over the long years since then, father to son, the skills of these masters have been transmitted to their descendents. None is more famous than the family of Rudra Raj Shakya of Mahabuddha, Ukubahah, Patan, father of Rabindra whose work is featured in this exhibition both as traditional practitioner and as teacher and collaborator. As scion of Rudra Raj he is a direct descendent of Kuber Singh Shakya (ca. 1881 –1937), prolific artist and artisan, famous throughout Nepal and all the neighboring Buddhist countries (see "Kuber Singh Shakya: A Master Craftsman from Nepal," *Asianart.com*). One of these countries is Bhutan where another of Kuber Singh's great grandsons, Raj Kumar, is currently creating an enormous image of Padmasambhava in gilt copper repoussé. Unlike his grandfather's Bhutanese commission, a giant image to be enshrined, Raj Kumar's colossus will itself house the shrine. This reversal of function — not icon within the *gompa* but *gompa* within the icon — is revolutionary. It would be utterly impossible to achieve without the sure hand of one of the Shakya masters of Ukubahah, Patan.

One need not travel to Bhutan, Tibet, Sikkim, or Ladakh to see the Shakya's work however. Though unsigned, as the traditional anonymity of artists dictates, their works are everywhere in Nepal, most notably in the Kathmandu Valley, as architectural adjuncts to the temples and as icons within them. Further, Rabindra is exhibiting here a half-dozen of his recent works, splendid objects that merit close attention. As a supplement to this exhibition focused on repoussé, a visit to the Patan Museum is recommended. Through a series of models, Raj Kumar Shakya demonstrates all the stages of the technique in Gallery G.

It is not surprising, then, that the American painter, Maureen Drdak, should turn to Nepal and the Shakya family to realize her inspiration to incorporate repoussé in her contemporary compositions. It is fortunate that Rabindra Shakya did not view this revolutionary use of his art with the skepticism that so many of us did and willingly accepted Drdak as student and collaborator. Together they have shown us that there is nothing mutually exclusive between contemporary and traditional art, and even different arts, and that a meaningful dialogue is not only possible but fruitful. It is to be hoped that contemporary Nepalese artists will take note of this accomplishment and themselves search for ways to nurture further dialogue between their traditional arts and contemporary forms of expression.