

Eternal Visions and Contemporary Forms

NEWAR REPOUSSÉ INSPIRES A NEW MATERIAL SYNTHESIS



TEXT & PHOTOS : MAUREEN DRDAK

Today the traditional material arts of Nepal are universally celebrated for their beauty, technical mastery, and spiritual relevance. This is especially true following the wake of the 2015 earthquake when surviving Newar master artisans were recognized as indispensable for the rebuilding and repair of Nepal's temples and related art, and re-established their critical importance as custodians of Nepal's patrimony. Today these master artisans share the spaces of cultural production and with a dynamic Nepali contemporary arts

scene, one which freely references both East and Western paradigms and concerns. Yet, in my experience, this conversation concerns itself primarily with issues of concept, social relevance and politically informed criticism, often overlooking the protean potential for contemporary application inherent in the material aspects of traditional practices, and how deeper study of these techniques might benefit the contemporary artist. Warranted, the technical disciplines of these traditional arts present the demands of long apprenticeships—the maddening dedication alone is

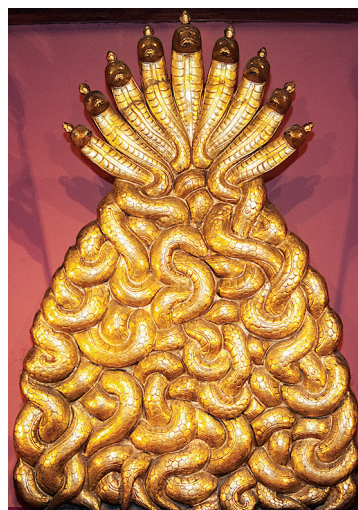
sufficient to deter contemporary artists from consideration of the potential of these practices for applications in their own work by their own hand. And though commissioning traditional artisans is always a possibility, here considerations of cost act as a deterrent. To the extent this is true, it is also lamentable, as the living soul of any culture can most immediately and viscerally be experienced through its unique cultural approach and interpretation of material culture.

Among these endangered art practices of Nepal, Newar repoussé metalwork (thwojya-majya) deservedly holds a special place. Repoussé, as it is called in the West, is the art of producing three dimensional form from sheet metal through the use of anvils, hammers and chisels. No less than Nepal arts scholar Dr. Mary Slusser describes Newar repoussé as an “art of the cognoscenti,”¹ alluding to the uniquely challenging and formidable aspects of this material practice. Existence of the global practice of repoussé dates from the third millennium B.C.—in Nepal evidence of the earliest work is generally dated from the 11th century. Repoussé experienced periodic bursts of flowering in the West, but is rarely practiced today. Though its tools and techniques are disarmingly simple, one is quickly apprised of the level of skill and talent required to raise the Beautiful Form. The unfortunate evidence of the elite technical demands of repoussé is today's ever-dwindling numbers of practitioners—of even middling stature. The sole remaining epicenter of its contemporary practice lies within the city of Patan in Nepal's Katmandu Valley, and its most celebrated practitioners are undeniably the grandsons of Nepal's historic master, the Newar Kuber Singh Shakya of Okubahal in Patan.



When in 2005 I first beheld the opulent forms of repoussé that grace the high architecture of the Valley, they immediately evoked associations with painting, an impression that remains with me today; the passing of the light over their sumptuous surfaces reveals opulent patinas, highlighting the golden tissues of what was once heavy fire-gilding. It was this sensorial illusion, together with my astonishment at the transformative ferocity of modernity on Nepal's culture and environment, which led to my envisioned synthesis of repoussé and contemporary painting and The Prakriti Project, my 2011-2012 Fulbright work in Nepal. Realizing I would need to apprentice myself to a master, my subsequent research inexorably led me to the home of Rudra Raj Shakya and his three sons, Raj Kumar, Rabindra and Rajendra.

To connoisseurs of Newar metalwork, the family of Rudra Raj Shakya of Okubahal needs little introduction. Yet at the time of my first visit to Rabindra's atelier in 2009, it was my curious experience that a significant number within Nepal's cultural community were still largely unaware of the historic significance and venerable legacy of this family—and its protean capabilities. Today the family's eminence and reputation precedes it, amplified as it is by their recent achievement of their repoussé colossus of the Buddhist saint Padmasambhava in Bhutan. Spearheaded by Raj Kumar Shakya, who designed and directed its creation, this achievement arguably rivals that of the American Statue of Liberty. Following the completion of this project in 2014, two new larger ateliers have been added to the



original family atelier in Imodol, which is now operated by Rabindra as Image Atelier; they are the On Metal Atelier, operated by Raj Kumar, and Creative Atelier, operated by Rajendra. The three Shakya brothers maintain a growing international clientele, and though each atelier has its specialty, they collaborate as commissions necessitate, making them today's undisputed premier force in this elite material practice, and a national living treasure for Nepal.

As my Fulbright work in The Prakriti Project evidenced the potential of repoussé for dynamic new expressive applications, it also illuminated these master practitioners. As a result of Nepal's historic seclusion the unique traditions and practices of this elite art have been available for study by foreigners for less than seventy years.

The lineage of my guru Rabindra Shakya includes artists and scholars patronized and decorated by the Malla and Shah Kings, commissioned by Buddhist leaders, and traceable back to Abhaya Raj Shakya, founder of the Mahabouddha Temple in 1564; members of my teacher's family still serve as priests to this temple. As scions of the famed repoussé master Kuber Singh Shakya the family continues the legacy of their illustrious ancestry; their creation of the repoussé colossus of Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rimpoche, in remote Takela, Bhutan is undoubtedly the family's greatest achievement to date. With a total height of one hundred fifty seven feet, the copper colossus itself measures one hundred and fifteen feet in height, it easily hold with comparison to Frederic Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty. The project was designed and directed by Raj Kumar Shakya, eldest of the three brothers, with the entire family's participation. Surmounting formidable logistical challenges and made entirely without the aid of computer input, it was completed and consecrated in 2014. Yet in the face of continued success, Raj Kumar Shakya expresses concern for the future of the practice; the demanding nature of repoussé, the diminished interest of the younger generation in this practice; growing Western influences and social change are all challenges to its survival. By Rabindra's recollection, their family atelier has seen only four foreign



students; I am the only one (and only woman) to have extended my study and successfully attained technical proficiency.

Artists carry within us our society's assumed priorities and cultural expectations. We may hesitate in our departure from these expectations—especially if our path travels into the territory of other cultures and issues of cultural appropriation may arise, leading to further hesitation—but we are impelled to expand our imaginative vision. Ways of knowing, seeing and making are universal in their variability, and are in perpetual dialogue. This has historically always been the case, and today this conversation is truly

global. And while we must honor our cultural references, we paradoxically preserve them through extending their reach, and in the process, ensure their relevance for the future. My envisaged union of repoussé and painting was inspired by the flickering light-play on the undulating forms, eroding gilding, and changing patination of the magnificent toranas of the Kathmandu Valley. The opulent layered tissues of gold, reds, greens, browns, and blacks on worn metal surfaces, created by the hand of elemental forces and the passage of time, spoke powerfully to me of the surface abrasion techniques I employ in my painting. I experience the plasticity of copper sheet as seductive; in its substance and

weight, its malleable response to fire and manual force, it feels alive in the hands of the artist. Under the blows of the hammer its voice steadily rises ever higher until it almost cries out to be softened by the annealing fire. It swiftly changes color, darkening in response to the air around it, yet after annealing and its acid bath it throws off blackened fire scale shroud, and reveals itself newly born as softly pink as an infant's skin. The repetition of this process—necessitated many times during the formation of each copper element—becomes a metaphor for the life cycle itself. I work the metal in the biomorphic, or auricular, style; its treatment of form is indeterminate, suggestive of natural forms. The process of allowing the unforeseen to emerge alongside the intended form and immersing yourself in its investigation is one of the most profound pleasures of my work.

Dr. Mary Slusser, distinguished scholar of Nepali art, described my work with Rabindra Shakya as a “fecund collaboration” and “an inspired coupling apparently without antecedents”². Describing my resulting work as “astonishing paintings”, she writes appreciatively of my study with Rabindra, expressing her hope that further creative dialogue will be pursued between contemporary and traditional arts. I've been privileged to study with Rabindra Shakya, and to work alongside the artisans of his atelier. I've come to intimately experience and know firsthand the immense dedication to practice and devotion to technique that is required of any artist aspiring to practice repoussé. When deeply engaged in working the metal, the spirit of these artists is always with me. ■

¹ Slusser, Dr. Mary. “The Art of Rabindra Shakya and Maureen Drdak: An Appreciation”, The Prakriti Project: Eternal Visions—Contemporary Forms, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited, Kathmandu, Nepal, February 2012.

² Slusser, Dr. Mary. “The Art of Rabindra Shakya and Maureen Drdak: An Appreciation”, The Prakriti Project: Eternal Visions—Contemporary Forms, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited, Kathmandu, Nepal, February 2012.