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The Hush of Centuries

By Kapil Bisht

Novel and exemplary, the Patan Museum is a beacon that illumines the cultural heritage surrounding it.

The stairs leading up to the first gallery of the Patan Museum are as likely to hold your attention as any object on display. Aesthetics alone, however, are not the reason for it. It is the strange angle at which the stairwell's railings are inclined. The design, we are told, is Tibetan, and one used widely in their sacred buildings, including the holiest of them all, Lhasa's Jokhang Temple. A stairwell in a Nepali museum inspired by Tibetan design is 'meant to be a subtle homage to the artistic and religious relations between the two countries, as amply shown by the Buddhist galleries to which the stairs lead'.



(Keshav Narayan Chowk is one of the precious heritages for Patan Museum, restarted after 15 years of hard work.)

Having a stairwell reminiscent of the Jokhang is also appropriate if the history of the location is considered. For the Patan Durbar (Palace), inside which the museum is housed, stands on an ancient site once occupied by a monastery. The monastery was relocated nearby as the palace expanded into the sacred site.



(Shiva Parvati Statue is one of the oldest found in the museum. It is among other 1500 objects that remains preserved by the museum.)

Although the events that take place in Patan Durbar today are of a secular nature, with book launches and literary activities being regular affairs, there is one annual occurrence that celebrates its religious heritage. This ritual usually begins in late July or early August, during the sacred Newari month of Gunla. For the entire period, a copper vessel with an idol of the Akshobya Buddha immersed in water is placed at the main entrance to the museum. People come and worship the figure, an act of piety that commemorates the sanctity of this ancient site.

Restoration and Transformation

Between the Patan Durbar's spiritual past and its artistic present lies the intermediate period of a thousand years, during which it was the residence of the kings of Patan. But after the Kathmandu Valley fell to Prithivi Narayan Shah's army, the palace drifted into oblivion. Not much is known about this period in its history. It was only under disastrous circumstances that the palace next came to the fore of public consciousness. The powerful earthquake of 1934 that wrought havoc on the valley razed the entire eastern section of the palace to the ground. Degutale, the emblematic temple of the Patan Durbar Square, was reduced to a huge pile of rubble. Although efforts were made to stay true to the palace's original design, some features had to be altered due to lack of time and building material. Originality was limited to features such as carved windows, roof struts, and doors that had been salvaged from the rubble. Part of the palace was turned into a public school in 1950. In the 1970s a small museum was established in the Patan Durbar.



(The back courtyard now serves as the venue for many cultural events including book launches, concerts and art exhibitions.)

In the late 1970s, Eduard Sekler, an Austrian architectural historian at Harvard University, enchanted by Patan Durbar's beauty and perhaps alarmed by the derelict state of the eponymous palace, persuaded his government to contribute to the preservation efforts in Nepal. Sekler's proposal was to restore one of the palace's several courtyards.

He also recommended that the Keshav Narayan Chowk, the northernmost courtyard of the palace, needed to be rebuilt most urgently. In 1982 the Austrian and Nepalese governments launched a project to restore and renovate Keshav Narayan Chowk, with the Austrian government providing the funds.



(The manuscripts is in Ranjana Script)

From 1985 onwards, the project was headed by another Austrian architect, Götz Hagmüller. He provided not only his technical skills to the project but a vision that would give the restored building not just a new face but a new purpose and life. He proposed remodelling the building to function as a museum. “The idea for building a museum wasn’t a far-fetched one,” says Götz Hagmüller. “It kind of rendered itself.”

The idea for the museum wasn’t far-fetched because there was no need to go far to fetch artifacts needed to start a museum. There were already some 1,500 objects in the palace—a collection of mostly stolen objects that had been recovered and stored by the authorities. Paradoxically, having such a large collection at hand was also a problem: not everything could be displayed. Choosing from a collection in which every object was as rare and special as the other was a tough task.

Mary Slusser, the renowned scholar and authority on Nepali art, took on that task. Not wanting the museum to be another exhibition of randomly selected relics, she decided to focus on their cultural side. The idea was to have thematic sections in the museum. Objects were chosen to fit into the different themes, which became the museum’s nine galleries. Slusser finally settled for 200 artifacts from the collection to fill these display rooms. She had devised this selection criterion, which was unique for Nepal, so that the museum would be an ‘interpretive center for the vast outdoor museum surrounding it – the Kathmandu Valley itself – where many similar objects remain within their cultural context’. Hagmüller echoed this philosophy in his book *Patan Museum: The Transformation of a Royal Palace in Nepal*, writing that it ‘was designed to explain the spiritual, social and geographic context of these treasures within the living culture found just beyond the museum’s own walls’. In 1997, after 15 years of meticulous work, the Keshav Narayan Chowk was restored, and King Birendra Bikram Shah inaugurated the Patan Museum.

A Different Script

The Patan Museum also broke from tradition in its institutional and financial setup. In a country where the government allocates funds for the museum's upkeep, it generates its own budget. The museum, although officially under the jurisdiction of the Department of Archaeology, is semi-autonomous. It was Hagmüller who urged the Department of Archaeology to try this novel system. "The idea was inspired from what was happening back home in Austria, where government-controlled museums were being slowly handed over to boards," he says. "And they were making money."

Patan Museum's Board comprises of the Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, the Director General of the Department of Archaeology, the Chief of Lalitpur Sub-Metropolitan City Council, the museum's executive director, and three experts on culture and art. The board can make decisions regarding planning, revenue generation, and pricing of tickets—the first instance of such powers being devolved to a cultural institution in Nepal.

Museum visits have never been a traditionally popular habit with the Nepalese, so the administration has devised other ways to generate revenue. One of these is rentable space. Two studios on the top floor of the north wing of the back courtyard are available for artists and scholars. The back courtyard itself and two galleries are also available on rent. These places, however, can only be rented during the day. Two gift shops selling books on culture, history and art of Nepal and the Himalayas, posters and postcards, and souvenirs supplement the museum's income.

Perhaps the best product of the need to make the museum self-sustaining is the outdoor café. It gives epicures and seekers of calm as much reason to visit the premises as any connoisseur of art, architecture, or culture. Sitting in the midst of a restored garden, it is a pocket of tranquility. When restoration began, the garden behind the museum was just a mound of rubble from the 1934 earthquake. Two hundred tractor loads of debris had to be carried out before work could be started. The design of the café exquisite walls was seemingly buried deep in Hagmüller's mind; it came out in the form of an abstract fusion of Devanagari and Tibetan scripts. Well, sort of. "It came out looking vaguely like a combination of those scripts, but in truth there isn't anything of the scripts in it," confesses Hagmüller.



(The museum is home to many metal scriptures like these.)

The Patan Museum has prospered in its autonomy. Since its opening, around 40,000 visitors pass through its Golden Avalokiteshvara, a Buddhist bodhisattva, as the patron deity of the city. This religious harmony is depicted on the Lun Jhyah, or Golden Window, which is directly above the main entrance to the museum. The image shows an assembly of Hindu gods surrounding the central figure of Avalokiteshvara.

The Divine Couple

The next three galleries contain items related to the Hindu gods Shiva, Vishnu, and Krishna, in that order. At the entrance to the gallery on Shiva is a stone relief of the deity and his consort, the goddess Parvati. Its original resting place was a shrine in Dhulikhel, from where it was stolen and smuggled out of Nepal. For years its whereabouts remained unknown. In 1985, the Museum für Indische Kunst (Museum of Indian Art) in Berlin bought the sculpture from a German art dealer. In 2000, Lain Singh Bangdel, the Nepali artist and art historian and author of *Stolen Images of Nepal* (1989), identified the Shiva-Parvati sculpture in the Museum of Indian Art as the one stolen from Dhulikhel. After private and official inquiries, the Berlin museum returned the image to Nepal. It has rested in the Patan Museum ever since. Perhaps it

was this home-coming that moved a Nepali visitor to write in the guest book, 'It feels like the gods have returned'.

Vishnu is the theme of the next gallery. The standout object here is the composite image of the god and his consort, Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth. This section is followed by an exhibition on Krishna. A large watercolor painting on a cloth dating back to the 17th century is on display here. This painting is a depiction of Krishnalila, the name given to the collection of tales of the god's exploits in his human incarnation. Between the rows of images, running in fine lettering, are devotional songs. The hymns, 31 in total, are credited to Siddi Narsimha Malla, the ruler of Patan from 1619-1661. Written in old Newari, they are the second-oldest such text to be translated, the oldest being the Gopala Chronicles. Also on display near the painting is the throne of the Malla Kings, which was gifted to King Srinivasa Malla by the local craftsmen in 1666 A.D. Srinivasa started the practice of displaying the throne and the painting at the Krishna Temple on the full moon day of Jestha (May-June). Just like the kings centuries ago, the museum lends the objects to the public on that day.



(Patan Museum has also exhibits of various sculpture making processions)

Glimpses of the Past

By breaking the sequence of rooms and taking a flight of stairs to the floor above the Krishna Gallery, you arrive at Gallery H. It is a collection of watercolor paintings by Henry Ambrose Oldfield. The illustrations are mostly of places in Patan.

Oldfield's paintings were made in the 1850s and 60s, when he was a surgeon at the British Residency in Kathmandu. The gallery also has black-and-white photographs by Dr. Kurt Boeck, taken well over a century ago.

Most of the paintings and photographs are of places or structures unrecognizably changed or completely lost, surviving only in old tales today. It is in this gallery that the world outside the museum comes alive once again, stoking memory and rousing the local visitor's curiosity. Lakhe says this gallery is a favorite among Nepalese visitors, especially locals of Patan. "Locals are

fascinated by old scenes of the places they know. They can see what their neighborhood looked like, how it has changed.” A generation has grown up in Patan that has no access to the Patan of their fathers’ or grandfathers’ time. For such locals, who have grown up in concrete houses with modern designs, even the museum’s architecture – carved wooden doors, roof brackets, tiled roofs – is a source of fascination. “They get to see the architecture of 300 years ago,” says Lakhe. “The museum gives them a sense of their heritage along with a sense of loss, a yearning for the past.”

Buddhism is an integral part of Patan’s heritage, and an entire gallery, entitled ‘Buddhas, Saints, and Caityas,’ is based on this aspect of the city. The features, shapes, and iconography of stupas are described here. This insight into the stupas and caityas becomes more relevant in the light of the fact that Patan alone has around 150 Buddhist monasteries, most of which have such structures in their premises.



(The museum is divided into many sections according to the religion and cults. Above Photo "Gallery H" Historic Views)

The gallery also contains stellar sculptures of Padmashambhava and the goddess Tara. The caption for one sculpture contains a surprising fact about the origin of the title ‘Guru of Uryen,’ an appellation given to Padmashambhava. The word ‘Uryen’ is an old name for the Swat Valley of Pakistan, from where Guru Rinpoche hailed. Apparently, the Swat Valley, now a place ravaged by violence, was once a Buddhist region.

On Metals & Mystic Disciplines

The gallery on the metallurgical arts is a homage to the metalsmiths of Patan, long renowned as masters of metal work. Patan’s fame as a city of master metalsmiths is also reflected in the artifacts of the museum, which are mostly of metal and the work of local crafters. The gallery

describes two arts of which the Newars of Patan are considered masters. The first is repoussé, which the Newar craftsmen call 'tho- or thvajya,' meaning 'hammering work'. The other is the 'lost wax' process, 'thajya' in Newari.

This gallery aptly captures the aim of the place, part of which is to steer away from the stereotypical Nepali museum. Door annually. Last year, that number rose to 66,347. Compared to other museums worldwide, the figures are hardly astronomical, but half of the total annual visitors are foreigners. This means that 5% of all tourists that come to Nepal visit the museum. Hagemüller, who has seen his share of museums, believes that this particular statistic is presumably unmatched by any in the world.

Knowing Your Gods

Climbing the wooden stairs, you arrive at an area illuminated by natural light entering through a bay window. On the wall are large, elaborately carved wooden struts (tunala in Nepali) that once supported the pagoda roofs of temples. These date back to the 17th century. Carved on them are faces and bodies of mythological creatures, gods and goddess and their entourage. One exceptional strut carries the image of a half-human, horned couple. There are dominating figures as well as a multitude of tiny ones, the latter often only recognizable by referring to the succinct texts on the wall beside them.

The first gallery, Gallery A, imparts information on the themes and objects on display in the rooms that follow. "This section of the museum is intended to familiarize the layman with the gods and goddesses of Hinduism and Buddhism," explains Suresh Man Lakhe, the museum officer. Gallery A is a collection of small sculptures, mostly metal, of gods and goddesses belonging to the Hindu and Buddhist pantheon. Accompanying texts elucidate aspects of the images such as sitting and hand postures, unique physical attributes, physiognomy, props—traits that can help identify the deities.

More than that, Gallery A is about Patan's remarkable religious amalgamation. Displaying Hindu and Buddhist deities side by side in the museum is replicating the co-existence of Hinduism and Buddhism, even their overlapping, in Patan as well as the Kathmandu Valley. The kings of Patan adopted this union long ago. Although Hindus, they had accepted "Museums can be more than about old objects," says Lakhe. "It can be about themes. This idea of a museum as a repository of desultorily exhibited ancient objects is something many of us Nepalese can't get past. Often I am asked where the king's bed is. That's what the Nepali visitors come to see. I have to explain to them that wood 300 years old doesn't survive." He stopped, trying to find the best way to put his idea across. I asked him if he meant that cultural heritage is something more intangible than a royal bed. He agreed. The core of culture is, Lakhe had meant to say, something intangible yet enduring, like the faith that makes people still come to the museum's door more than a thousand years after the monastery that was once there has ceased to exist.

When it comes to things esoteric, nothing on display comes close to the content of Gallery M. The room is dimly lit; almost all of the light is directed on the glass case in the middle. In here is a tantric manuscript. A single human figure with colorful symbols is drawn on it. Notes cram the margins. The combination of poor lighting (an attempt at creating a suitable ambience?), ancient script, colorful diagrams, and parched paper combine with the claustrophobic

atmosphere of the tiny room to amplify the object's allure. It is not hard to picture a tantric master sitting in a room similar to this, using the manuscript to teach a tyro.

That is what makes the Patan Museum special: its power to conjure the contexts of the artifacts. Images form in the head of objects being hammered into shape, thrust into furnaces, chiseled and carved, sitting snugly in the semi-darkness of shrines, or being used in ancient rituals as old as memory. In the ambience of the museum, which the architect and writer Usha Ramaswamy described as the 'the hush of centuries,' objects become windows into the larger whole of which they are a part.

The Patan Museum seems to be the one that the New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable had in mind when she said: When a museum and its contents come together as an integrated esthetic whole, something special happens. The art is enlarged and exalted, and the viewer's rewards and responses are increased. Creating that synthesis of art and setting is the challenge that still faces architects and directors. It is the secret of a great museum.

The museum itself is a kind of a big staircase, albeit a spiral one that takes us deeper into Patan's – and the Kathmandu Valley's – culture. But each step into that depth, however, takes us nearer to a kind of light, the "supernatural light" that the architect Niels Gutschow says with which the Newars have illuminated their cities. When we return to the world outside, our eyes take less time to catch and appreciate that supernatural light, lingering in little shrines, big temples, and empty courtyards. We catch that light's reflection in the rheumy eyes of an old man who stops dead in his track as he hears the faint tinkle of a temple bell amidst the kerfuffle of traffic, turns to face the temple, folds his hand in reverence, and bows his head.

The quote the starts in the beginning of this article is from the museum's explanatory text. Other quotes are from Gotz Hagmuller's Patan Museum: The Transformation of Royal Palace in Nepal (Serindia Publications, 2002). The other source on which the writer relied for insights into the restoration of the museum and other related topics was Patan Museum Guide (Patan Museum, 2002). The writer is grateful to Gotz Hagmuller, Devendra Nath Tiwari and Suresh Man Lakhe.

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