Packaging the Naked Buddhas
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Framing the Study

In 2012, the October Gallery in London opened an exhibition called *Visions of the Divine*, largely “devoted to the exquisite paintings of the little-known community of Newar artists of Nepal’s Kathmandu Valley.” Drawn from the collection of UK-based artist Robert Beer, the show highlighted contemporary masterworks of Hindu and Buddhist paintings by twenty-five traditional artists from Nepal. A longtime collector of Nepalese paintings since the early 1970s, Beer had worked with these traditional artists in their early years, when few had regular foreign patrons. In our conversations, Beer said that he could no longer afford the prices set by these artists, as local Nepalese collectors were now willing to pay significantly more than regular foreign clientele like himself. Conversely, he questioned why no major museums in the West were buying such works for their permanent collections, or were even willing to exhibit these contemporary paintings, despite their extraordinary aesthetic quality. The discussions then inevitably moved to the mass production of tourist paintings in the Kathmandu Valley and their market consumption.

This brief anecdote is instructive in that it highlights the issues of contemporary artistic production in Nepal, and the negotiations between tradition and modernity, and by definition, between art/craft and commodification. Tradition inherently suggests a temporality separate from and preceding modernity, and thus implies a homogeneity of premodern cultures. Similarly, craft reinforces the notion of a cultural continuity and links with the past, yet it precludes the notion of artistic innovation. These conceptions
perpetuate the binaries of the premodern/modern and stasis/change paradigms that are central to representations of Himalayan art in the West. Although Western museum collections and exhibitions have historically acknowledged the artistic genius of Nepalese craftsmen and the influence of Nepalese aesthetics on the arts of Tibet, China, and Mongolia, academic literature has been largely silent on the contemporary manifestation of traditional art, because of its dubious association with tourist production and the commodification of cultural products.

Tourist art, as a visual narrative of cross-cultural encounters and imaginings, is the unique phenomenon that intersects the worlds of image creators and consumer tourists. Tourist art is principally a souvenir, an object representative of the cultural “other” that is meant to embody the indigenous culture, and it encapsulates the tourist experience of mobility and individual memories of place, time, and events. It is the possession of this “authentic ethnic” that offers an imagined bridge providing access to the world of difference. Hence, the object becomes inherently loaded with meaning, as constructed by both sides, the producer and the consumer. This manipulation and re-definition of traditional/authentic is therefore a symbiotic construction, as these imaginations manifest in continuously evolving innovations in design, iconography and frames of meaning.

Art historical scholarship has generally dismissed tourist art as a subject of serious study, deeming these works as derivative, inauthentic, and crudely commercial. They are often considered artistically inferior and lacking significant aesthetic, historical, or cultural value compared to those works of art produced for their original purpose and created for the consumption of the cultural producers themselves. As a manipulated commodity solely aimed at a market economy, tourist art inherently embeds the contested binaries of authenticity/inauthenticity, originality/commodification, art/craft, and the mass production of cultural artifacts. In *Unpacking Culture*, Phillips and Steiner remark on the “surprising silence about processes of commoditization in standard art histories and ethnographies” and state that “neither the speed and acuity with which indigenous artists responded to changes in taste and market nor the dialogic nature of their creative activities has been recognized. Rather, both art historians and anthropologists have resoundingly rejected most commodified objects as spurious” (Phillips and Steiner, 1999).

With the frameworks proposed by Nelson Graburn’s seminal work, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World* and others, discourses in tourism studies have yielded a rich body of scholarship particularly on the traditional arts of colonized nations in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Two broad paradigms related to tourist art are of significance to this study: first, the development of “ethnic arts” and handcraft as commodified products, resulting in artistic innovation and influences resulting from the interactions between tourists and producers. Thus, tourist art consciously participates in a particular production of ethnic identity. Second, artistic innovation and the fluidity of change accommodate touristic expectations, whether imagined or constructed. In this context, the essential link between producer (artist) and consumer (tourist) is the intermediary/middleman as retailer, whose direct communications with consumers plays a major role in both the production and reception of the objects by consumer tourists. Particularly salient to this study is Noel Salazar’s concept of “tourism imaginaries,” as similar narratives are manifested in the cultural construction of Nepal’s tourist art:

Stories, images, and desires, running the gamut from essentialized, mythologized, and exoticized imaginaries of otherness to more realistic frames of reference...

Marketers eagerly rely on them to represent and sell dreams of the world’s limitless
destinations, activities, types of accommodation, and peoples to discover and experience—a paradisiacal environment, a vanished Eden, where the local landscape and population are to be consumed through observation, embodied sensation, and imagination (Salazar, 2012: 865–66).

South Asian and Himalayan art history have relatively limited scholarship on this visual expression of cultural representation, although more recent studies have discussed aspects of the commercialization and commodification of tourist products in Nepal from sociocultural perspectives. At present, the production of “curios” and souvenir goods for export and tourism is the third-largest revenue generator in Nepal (24.4%, compared with the world average of 16.6%), with approximately 800,000 tourists visiting Nepal each year.

This paper explores tourist art in the Kathmandu Valley as narratives of cultural imaginings—specifically considering how innovations in tourist art construct the identity and meaning of the cultural other, through a tripartite system of production, marketing and popular consumption of traditional arts, with the actors in this discourse being the artist, middleman, and tourist. Specifically, I examine the production and consumption of tourist paintings, and consider iconographic and stylistic hybridization in response to tourist tastes. In the context of Nepal, this phenomenon must be seen as a deliberately conscious process of self-representation on the part of the producers that is fueled by Western imaginings of the exotic other, yet at the same time constructs a self-conscious collective identity on the global market. Hence, this study considers how traditional artists imagine themselves fulfilling the expectations of the tourists, by categorically representing the perceived aesthetic tastes of the Other, based on specific global identity constructions. This intercultural imagining then becomes critical to the marketing of the commodities, as it underscores the ways in which these new iconographies are interpreted and reinforced as signifiers of the “authentic.”

My interest in the phenomenon of tourist art was initially sparked during field research in Nepal in the early 1990s, as one could hardly escape the overwhelming presence of tourist art shops and curio vendors in the major tourist areas in the Kathmandu Valley. These were specifically around Thamel, often described as the ‘tourist ghetto’ and Boudha, the haven for dharma-seekers and tourists interested in Tibetan Buddhism. Over the years, I have seen a significant boom in the commercialization of tourist paintings throughout the Kathmandu Valley, with fifty to sixty shops in the Thamel, Baudha, and Darbar Square areas, as well as small thangka painting “schools” now located in the tourist cities of Bhaktapur and Patan. The growth of the commercial market has meant that new subjects, styles, and iconographic hybridity have been introduced into these painting. Furthermore, the rise of e-market and internet galleries during the tourism industry slump (2000–2003) resulted in an extensive array of paintings being sold on the web by major retail stores in the Kathmandu Valley. The analysis presented here is based on my ongoing field research in Nepal since 2006, through a specific focus on artists and middlemen/retailers. My research methods are broadly interdisciplinary, including art historical examination of iconographic and stylistic variants of traditional paintings, combined with ethnographic approaches. Interviews were conducted with artists (both independent artists and in workshop contexts) as well as middlemen, shop owners, and retailers who interact directly with consumer tourists. Observations of interactions by retailers with consumers, as well as auto-ethnographic methods of buying artworks from retailers were also employed.
In Search of Shangrila: the “Discovery” of Nepal and Tourist Art

The East/West and modern/traditional binaries are inherently at play in contextualizing the rise of touristic representations in Nepal. Two historic factors are significant to consider here: one, that the commodification of traditional arts in Nepal is relatively new, coming after the opening of its doors to the outside world in 1951 and accompanying the formal growth of the tourism industry. Second, with the rise of the Shah dynasty in the late 18th century, a decrease in royal and lay patronage of religious works of art caused a decline in traditional arts. Historically, the Valley had been the artistic nucleus for fine arts, and the Newars were the legitimate inheritors of rich religious practices of Hinduism and Tantric Buddhism. The master craftsmen acquired a reputation as world-class painters and exceptional sculptors, unparalleled in their metal craftsmanship and iconographic knowledge of religious imagery. Belonging to the indigenous ethnic group of the Newars, these artists developed a distinctive style of traditional scroll painting called paubha, characterized by an exquisitely refined style, intricate decorative surface treatments of vine-scroll motifs, balanced by an elegant delicateness in facial features and figural proportions. What is generally referred to as “Nepalese” art is largely the creative genius of the Newar masters, and their artistic idioms have historically influenced Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian sculpture and painting traditions.

1845–1951 were important political years for Nepal, which witnessed radical shifts in the arts with the development of secular modernism. Although the British never colonized Nepal, the Rana clan became Nepal’s elite neo-colonizers. This was also a period when Nepal remained shut out from the rest of the world, although it became a British protectorate from 1815. The Rana’s deep mistrust of colonial encroachment resulted in a policy of strict isolationism until 1951, and all foreigners were barred from entering Nepal except by special permission. Interestingly, their interest in European realism and courtly arts mirrored the aesthetics of the British Raj, and ushered a new phase of secular arts into the history of Nepalese art. During this time, neoclassical palaces were built, with massive fluted columns in the grand halls, replete with Baroque furniture and Venetian crystal chandeliers that reflected the Anglophilic extravagances afforded by the Ranas. Secular court paintings complemented this new interest in European aesthetics, with an emphasis on large-scale realist portraits of the Rana and Shah elite, marking a distinct break from the traditional aesthetics of the Newar paubha painting of the Valley.

It is in this political climate in the mid-1930s that we see a cultural Renaissance in the indigenous Newar arts of the Kathmandu Valley. In the 1930–40s, the Newar artist Anandamuni Shakya (1903–44) introduced a radically new style of religious art, marking this shift in artistic innovation specifically in the medium, composition and style of Newar paubha or scroll paintings. His best-known painting of Padmapani Lokeshvara, the original of which is now lost, depicts the bodhisattva against a compositional backdrop inspired by Botticelli’s Birth of Venus, and reveals an admixture of European aesthetics and painterly techniques, a deep interest in realism, and a hybrid style of Newar paubha aesthetics (ill. 1).
ILL. 1 – Anandamuni Shakya (1903-44), Padmapani Lokesvara

His distinctive style includes a black-and-white tonality and three-dimensionality suggestive of photorealism, windswept drapery, exquisitely detailed surface design, as well as Sino-Tibetan influences in the form of dragons and peonies, as seen in his later black-and-white Padmapani (ill. 2).
This fluidity of composition and form sharply contrasts with traditional painting methods involving strict iconometric guidelines, which would have dictated the precise and correct execution of religious imagery, as seen in these historical sketches. Contemporary Newar paubha artists have moved away from the formal iconometric grids that still continue to be used by their Tibetan counterparts.

Anandamuni’s legacy of this new “Newar” artistic renaissance in this hybrid of styles—Newar, Tibetan, and Chinese aesthetics—continued with his son, Siddhimuni Shakya (1933–2001), who mastered this “black-and-white” technique. Siddhimuni took the Newar style and added a contemporary twist characterized by dramatic backdrops of dragons, landscape elements and floral motifs indicating a Sino-Tibetan influence, likely the result of having Tibetan patrons. The exquisite brushwork, the graceful elegance of the figures, and his careful detailing of elaborate surface designs, particularly the halo, became hallmarks of the contemporary Newar paubha style. It is worth noting that Anandamuni’s artistic genius resulted in the rise of an internal audience, and his the patrons were both Newars of the Kathmandu Valley as well as Tibetan Buddhists. I would argue that this growth of an internal audience challenges Bentor’s statements in the early 1990s about the Newars’ cultural deterioration: “They [Newars] belong to a culture which has been in a slow decline during recent centuries, although not without recent recovery...This decline is not primarily due to the conditions of the ‘modern era,’ but to a process that has continued for a few centuries” (Bentor, 1993: 129). Recent political events in Nepal, including the democratic movement and the rise of ethnic federalism, have affected the conscious revitalization of Newar cultural and aesthetic heritage in the last decade, as well as the robust local patronage of Newar paubha paintings.
The revival of traditional painting must also be placed in the context of the rise of new tourist consumer patronage in the late 1950s. The history of the tourist industry in Nepal is relatively new, growing specifically after the opening of its doors to the outside world in the mid-20th century. With Tibet still closed to the West, and at the time of the anti-authoritarian counterculture among Western youth of the 1960s, Nepal became a utopia for tourists, hippies and backpackers in search of mythical Shangrila, continuing the Orientalist construction of the Himalayas as the pristine utopia of the exotic Other (Brauen, 2004). In the Kathmandu Valley, early Western tourists discovered a pristine medieval kingdom, a picture-perfect spiritual haven like that imagined in James Hilton’s Lost Horizon. Following this arrival of dharma seekers and Hippies, the 1960s and 70s marked the beginning of Nepal’s full-scale dialogue with Western culture, when the Nepalese quickly learned about the economic value that Westerners would give to traditional artifacts, particularly those that were old, used and ordinarily thrown away (Liechty, 2005: 20–21). Two landmark exhibitions in the 1960s brought Nepalese art to the attention of Western museums and collectors. In 1963, The Art of Nepal, curated by Stella Kramrisch at the Asia House Gallery, was the first exhibition of Nepalese art for an American audience, with loans from the Government of Nepal. The exhibition catalogue is the first scholarly art historical publication on the Nepalese arts, resulting from museum acquisitions and serious art historical research on this newly opened nation. In 1966, Musée Guimet in Paris organized another landmark exhibition with over seventy objects from Nepalese Museums. It was the first time Nepalese art was introduced to Europe. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the establishment of the government-supported Handicraft Association of traditional arts (painting, sculpture) had led to strategic and systematic production of cultural artifacts for tourist consumers, whose interest and numbers were growing.

In this context, rather than Hindu art, it was largely Buddhist religious art and related ritual materials from Nepal that became framed as “curio and souvenir” art for tourist consumption in an increasingly global consumer market, even though until 2008 Nepal’s national identity was touted as the “only surviving Hindu” kingdom. I focus this study specifically on Buddhist paintings made for the tourist market as it is the most visible market commodity, with significant variation in quality, price and production, although it must be kept in mind that Buddhist metal sculpture makes up the highest percent of all handicraft exports. For the average Western tourist, Buddhist art was synonymous with “Tibetan” Buddhist art, regardless of the origins of the producers. As noted in Bentor’s study, to underscore the authenticity of the objects, the majority of paintings continue to be sold as “Tibetan thangkha” paintings, and in the initial introductions that most retailers present to the average tourist (including on their websites), they often claim that the thangkhas are painted by “monks living in monasteries” or by exiled Tibetans living in the Kathmandu Valley (Bentor, 1993: 118). Buddhist thangkha paintings are in fact produced for the tourist market by artists of the Newar and Tamang ethnic communities in Nepal. These are sold in tourist shops as “authentic”, locally produced Tibetan paintings, and the bulk of them are exported to Tibet, China, and Europe as Tibetan products. Here I use the popular tourist term thangkha for the general Tibetan Buddhist style of painting, and will distinguish it from paubha painting, which specifically represents a distinctive “Newar” style. It is this demand for the imagined “authentic” Buddhist art that has given rise to new iconographies and non-traditional artistic styles that are increasingly becoming the standard for tourist art.
Tourist Art Triad: Producer, Intermediary, Consumer

Historically, Newar artists were key contributors to the development of the “Newar style” Tibetan painting tradition, also known as the Balri (bal bris) style, from the 13th to the 15th century. As itinerant artists, Newar painters are renowned for their expertise and mastery of diverse influences, skilfully meeting patron demands for a particular style. As early as the seventh century, they were commissioned for works in the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, as well as in China and Mongolia. With the growth of their external audience, and in order to cater to popular demand for the “authentic exotic” of tourist art, the production of traditional painting shifted from artists who were knowledgeable about style and iconography, to those who could produce these works cheaply, and simply copy an earlier style. This means that art-making no longer remained confined to the painter castes of Chitrakars or the Buddhist caste of the Vajracharyas and Shakayas. Opening it up to other Newar caste groups such as Shresthas, Joshi, Baidya, Maharjan, Dangol, Sinkhuwal, Hyauju as well as non-Newar castes, the younger generation interested in traditional painting took up this new vocation, which they considered a potentially lucrative profession because of the burgeoning demands of the tourist market. Whereas traditional caste-based artists were trained in a guild system of master-apprentice relationships, traditional painting as a formal subject of study was introduced in the fine arts curriculum after the 1970s, thus allowing a somewhat open access to a field that was fairly conservative. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, many local artists were being hired by dealer-middleman, and were being paid modestly, based on the bulk numbers of paintings they produced. Many of the leading Newar traditional artists that I interviewed, including Gyankar Bajracharya, Uday Charan Shrestha, Deepak Joshi, Lok Chitrakar and Mukti Thapa, recalled the days when they struggled as young traditional artists, going from shop to shop to sell their works at prices that depended on the whim of the shop-owners. They all worked for dealer-middlemen at one time or another, and their paintings were based entirely on the specific demands of the tourist market. The artists creating these paintings rarely interacted directly with the tourists, and their works were cheap, quickly drawn, without much knowledge of iconographic accuracy. In the early 1980s and 1990s, as interest in Tibetan-style paintings increased and demand for them grew, retailers and middlemen began to hire Tamang painters mainly from the Kavre Palanchok, Sindupalchowk, and Dhading districts, which border on the Kathmandu Valley and lie on the trade-route to Tibet. As Nyingma Buddhist practitioners, Tamang artists historically carried out their indigenous occupation as painters for local patrons. Their knowledge of general Tibetan Buddhist iconography and familiarity with the thangkha painting technique and Tibetan painting styles made middlemen consider them more advantageous than Newar artists, and they were (and are) willing to work cheaply in a guild system. It was convenient that the Tamang artists’ last names were “Lama”, synonymous with the Tibetan term for a monk. At the height of the tourist market in the 1990s, well-established tourist shops had their own workshops. For the sales of their works, traditional artists, both Newar and Tamang, largely depend on the middleman-dealer, who dictates the price of their works and the subjects that should be painted. These intermediary middlemen determine artistic production based on their perception of the tastes of consumer tourists. How popular genres and subjects are identified as
“tourist bestsellers” appears to be fairly subjective, based on middlemen’s input, which leads to the creation of a multiplicity of hybrid styles and new iconographies.

The patterns of tourist art production and the complexity of interactions between producer and consumer can be clearly articulated through a tripartite system: artist, middleman, and tourist. Of the three agents, it is the middleman who time and again determines the creation and reception of the object in question. As Graburn succinctly observes: “It is, of course, the middleman who imposes the specific predicament on the artists. When the artists and the consumers are culturally, geographically, and temporally far apart, the mediating agent assumes greater importance. It is he or she who not only transmits the physical art object from the producer to the consumer but who also controls the important flow of information about the object’s origin, age, meaning, and producer” (Graburn, 1999: 349). In the context of tourist art production of the Kathmandu Valley, this is critically true. Several middlemen agents, who own the larger shops in Darbar Marg, Thamel and Boudha, have their own artists’ workshops, hiring as many as 200 to 300 artists during peak business times. These are mass-produced works. The artists create the paintings in a factory-like guild system with multiple artists working on the same painting. The master-artist is asked to create a certain genre/category of paintings based on the interests of the tourist clients, and the quality of painting dictates the price, and there have to be paintings in all price ranges. It is precisely these middlemen who dictate the creation of what Graburn calls “hybrid arts” as opposed to “pure traditional” arts, resulting in new iconographic forms and stylistic trends within the tourist market. This puts artists at a distinct disadvantage in negotiating the artistic characteristics that affect the value of their work, because Western art value judgements continue to determine the distinction between a tourist souvenir or curio and the higher-status and more prestigious “fine arts” (Burt, 2013: 194). Yet I would suggest that it is ultimately the “packaging” of these works, and the narrative meanings constructed to explain these hybrid creations to the consumer tourist that create the aura of “authentic ethnic”. For these reasons, the artist remains removed from any interactions with the consumer, although he/she continues to imagine the tastes of the tourist filtered through the middleman’s perspective. In the context of Nepal, the artist’s anonymity is to the middleman’s advantage, and has therefore become the norm. Retailers and middlemen are often reluctant to reveal the identity of the artists, except in the case where a knowledgeable consumer comes to ask for the work of a particular well-established traditional artist. For instance, when I was conducting research on tourist art in the 1990s, some well-informed tourists were familiar with a few paubha and thangkha artists, such as Prem Man Chitrakar or Mukti Thapa, whose works were more accessible to the consumer. Yet I was aware of many instances of Prem Man’s characteristic style being copied by another artist and sold as the master’s original, or a few finishing strokes added by the master-artist would authenticate the work as an “original.” Time and again, middlemen would refer to the producers as “my artists,” and even when I asked the names of these master artists, they dismissed the question saying it was not relevant to the production of thangkas, as the paintings were made in a guild/workshop context, rather than exclusively by the hand of a single master-artist. Even today, this predicament of artistic autonomy remains in the hands of the dealers, in that the middlemen maintain direct connections with the consumers, circumscribing any connection with artists. The artist continues to be excluded from this tripartite framework of producer, middleman and consumer, although that paradigm is slowly
shifting, with high-end clients contacting the artists directly, weakening the exclusive hold of the middleman retailer.

A case in point is the 2011 exhibition Jewels of Newar Art, showcasing the works of thirty-two traditional Newar artists, including renowned paubha artists as well as up-and-coming artists of the younger generation (Bangdel, 2011). One of the key findings in that research was the discovery that traditional Newar artists working in contemporary contexts could skillfully switch techniques and styles, producing works that were distinctively of the high-quality Tibetan style or distinctively characteristic of Newar paubha painting. After the exhibition, several middlemen/retailers stated that the revelation of the names of traditional artists had affected their business, because now consumers, especially knowledgeable buyers, could contact the artist directly, without the mediation of the retail agent. Some of these middlemen now see themselves as both “collectors” and “promoters” of Newar/Tibetan art, adding further complexity to their role in the production of art. Furthermore, the pricing of works and the commissioning of paintings were no longer in the hands of the middleman, but were directly determined between the artist and consumer. Nonetheless, this is a relatively small, albeit affluent, clientele, and the most general tourists do not fall into this category of the informed buyer. What follows are the production quality categories that apply to paintings for the general tourist.

**Constructing Authenticity: Artistic Innovation and Hybrid Styles**

My research indicates that both artists and middlemen appear to use two broad categories to assess the quality and production of tourist art in terms of aesthetics and value. The first category can be defined as artworks that are iconographically correct, adhering to the religious parameters of iconometric schemas, based on textual sources, such as specific sadhanas (visualizations) or iconographic texts. Here, the subject and function of the objects adhere closely to their original conception as religious objects, to be placed in a shrine, given to the monastery as an offering, or presented to the knowledgeable buyer as evidence of cultural continuities of the past. Both style and correct iconography are elements required for authenticity, and these categories of painting are viewed as “authentic” traditional painting, inherently embodying a fluid Newar or Tibetan Buddhist cultural identity, based on the variations in style. In this case, the particular artist’s technique or style will be apparent, and if the artist is well-known or an up-and-coming artist, the names are also signed. While local patrons and knowledgeable clients often buy these originals, tourist copies of these paintings freely circulate on the tourist market. The second is a more fluid classification, which I call “hybrid” tourist art, defined by consistent departures from tradition, with form and intent specifically catering to the perceived demands of the tourist consumer. The producer-agents distinguish the quality hierarchy, based on the economics of production: high quality, medium quality, and low quality, with each quality determining the price of the work.

In the first category are several well-established traditional artists in the Kathmandu Valley who have had a notable influence on the aesthetics and iconography of tourist art production, and today produce many of the high-quality “authentic” paintings, catering...
to knowledgeable clients (tourists and natives) who often identify the artist by name. Copies of these artists’ works are freely reproduced on the tourist market. However, their patrons also include native consumers who commission paintings as aesthetic works rather than in their intended religious contexts (Alsop, 2011). Although these artists once all relied on the demands of the middleman-dealer, now they are well-established and generally either work on commissions for specific clients or produce works for sale in exclusive retail stores catering to high-end East Asian tourists, especially Chinese tourists. Lok Chitrakar (b. 1961) is a self-taught artist from the Newar caste of painters and is among the best known of the traditional artists. He is one of the few traditional artists training the younger generation in his studio at the Simrik Atelier in Patan. He is known for the traditional use of mineral pigment and for his distinctive style: his paintings contain an amalgamation of Newar, Tibetan, and Chinese stylistic elements. The Chintamani Lokeshvara painting typifies this hybridity of styles, especially in the ornate motifs on the borders—which become a marker of “Newar” stylistic vocabulary.

ILL. 3 – Lok Chitrakar, Cintamani Lokeshvara

Lok has a virtuosic familiarity with diverse styles, including Japanese Buddhist styles and the iconography of the Shingon tradition, such as the dual mandalas of the Garbhadhatu and Vajradhatu practices. There have been commissions from private Japanese clients and by monasteries in Japan, for instance, his current work of 108 forms of Lokeshvara at the Kanzoin Mandala Museum in Tokyo. He makes a distinction between high-quality “museum quality” works and others for the ordinary “modern” houses of Newar patrons. As the leading paubha artist and having very high-priced works, he does not need the middleman-agent to serve as an intermediary between himself and his clients. His
original works are rarely found being sold in a regular shop, under the aegis of a middleman, but many tourist paintings directly copy his original paintings and his distinctive hybrid style.

Retail agents report that as a genre, reproductions of important Tibetan and Newar historical paintings are popular among tourists, who either have already seen the original works of art, or wish to sell them as traditional copies of high-end “authentic” work. These paintings are easily found in local tourist shops, although quality and price vary dramatically. Working in traditional styles similar to both the Newar paubha and Tibetan thangka painting traditions, Mukti Singh Thapa is known for his revival of traditional painting styles and techniques, especially his use of ground mineral pigments. Born in 1957 in Bandipur, about 150 km west of Kathmandu, Thapa came to the Kathmandu Valley in the early 1970s, and began working meticulously at mastering the early “Indo-Newar” painting styles of the 13th–15th centuries. In fact, Lok Chitrakar worked under his tutelage as a young artist and acquired the techniques of painting in mineral pigments from Thapa. The elaborate background of the vine scroll motifs and minutely detailed patterning of the surface details in the embellishment of garments are distinctive features of Mukti Thapa’s style, as seen in the Panjara Mahakala.

ILL. 4 – Mukti Thapa, Panjara Mahakala

Mukti’s carefully executed copies of well-known paintings in Western collections meet the highest aesthetic standards, and his paintings are large-scale relative to the originals. In his selection of subjects, however, he was initially directed by two American expatriate dealers living in Nepal who understood the demands of Western clients. While Thapa’s works adhere to the iconographic correctness of the traditional works, subtle stylistic and
compositional elements found in the paintings attest to the originality of his artistic practice, and suggest that these works are not mere copies, but represent an evolution of traditional painting in the contemporary context, blending the continuities of the past with innovations of the present. Interestingly, Thapa’s painting of Vairochana was recently part of the exhibition “Contemporary Tibetan Art: From the Collection of Shelley & Donald Rubin” at the Oglethorpe University Museum of Art in Atlanta. As with Lok Chitrakar, Thapa’s selection of historical paintings is extensively reproduced cheaply on the tourist market, as seen in the many variations of the famous Green Tara painting from the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Three additional artists—Uday Charan Shrestha, Devendra Sinkhuwal and Sukha Raj Tamang—may be included here to illustrate the diversity of painting practices, as they work simultaneously for the middlemen-retailers and as independent artists. Devendra Sinkhuwal (b. 1978) is a self-taught artist from the city of Bhaktapur, and has pursued traditional painting for the past eighteen years. His style is distinguished by his sepia/black and white paintings, executed with extraordinary stylistic precision and artistry. This innovation of the monochromatic palette was introduced in the mid-1930s by Anandamuni Shakya, and further refined by his son Siddhimuni Shakya, as mentioned earlier. Emulated by several other artists for the tourist market, Sinkhuwal’s paintings are sold as distinctively Newar innovations with high artistic merit. His painting of Vajrasattvadhatu Lokeshvara, one of the 108 forms of the bodhisattva of compassion, departs dramatically in its compositional elements from the formal iconic conventions of traditional painting.

ILL. 5 – Devendra Sinkhuwal, Vajrasattva

PRIVATE COLLECTION
PHOTO BY DINA BANDEL
Here the artist has framed the figure in an elaborate Newar-style throne-back that has a spectacular semi-circular arch *(torana)* with a *kirtimukha* and *makara*, adding realistic details to the three-dimensional modeling of the figures.

Sukha Raj Tamang (b. 1986), born in Ramechap district in Janakpur, received a formal arts degree in painting from the Fine Arts Campus in Kathmandu. As an artist of the younger generation of Tamang painters, he is today one of the most versatile. He has mastered both the Newar *paubha* and Tibetan *thangka* painting styles and can produce works with equal virtuosity within these aesthetics, as depicted in his Green Tara.

ILL. 6 – Sukraraj Tamang, *Green Tara*

Sukharaj continues to provide his works directly to middlemen/intermediaries, although he does not work exclusively for one dealer. Robert Beer (b. 1947)—an Oxford-based artist who has studied Tibetan *thangka* painting for more than forty years and is best known as the author and illustrator of *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*—has had a major influence on Sukharaj and other younger artists of the Kathmandu Valley. Beer was a regular patron of Nepalese artists before the tourist market boom, and helped them develop their skills to gear them towards an audience of Buddhist practitioners and connoisseurs.\(^{13}\) However, new compositions are often direct results of the tourist market.

One of the most influential of the contemporary Newar artists is Uday Charan Shrestha (b. 1965), whose work represents a radical departure from traditional forms, and whose stylistic and iconographic innovations are celebrated but also criticized as “too modern” and therefore “non-traditional.” These innovations include the use of oils, a departure from flat linear forms, towards three-dimensional, realistic figures, dynamic compositions and a bold dramatic palette. Yet his career began in the tourist market,
where he remembers selling his works to dealers for less than two hundred rupees, based on their demands for either traditional paubha or thankga-style paintings for tourist consumers. In his most celebrated work from 1993, Annapurna, the Earth Goddess of Bounty and Nourishment, is depicted as a youthful, sensual figure, radiant in her multi-armed form.

ILL. 7 – Uday Charan Shrestha, Kumari

Western techniques are visible in the emphasis on realism, three-dimensionality, as well as the body proportions and unconventional palette. The striking intensity of the gaze and the almost portrait-like realism of the face mark the artist’s signature style. However, he localizes his subjects, making visual references to distinctive Newar religious practices. Annapurna is an important goddess in the Newar Tantric tradition, where she is worshipped in her aniconic form as a vase of plenty. In his composition, Uday references these aspects with the temple and vase, behind the goddess. This development of a distinctively contemporary Newar style devoid of any Tibetan stylistic elements signaled the rise of new patronage, mainly consisting of Nepalese clients, specifically from the Newar community. Tourist stores throughout Kathmandu have copies of his original compositions, including the well-known painting of the flying Akasha Yogini and Vajrayogini. His realism, celebrated by the Nepalese community as a distinctive revival of the Newar style, received harsh criticism from a foreign scholar: “The depiction of this deity would be considered in unthinkably poor taste in premodern Nepal. Such mutations are triggered by the needs of the tourist industry, in which output increases while profit margins and overall levels of knowledge decrease. Hence the requirement for cheap (uninformed) differentiation, to generate new ‘product lines’ and revenues.”

As Uday is
quick to point out to his critics: “My training is in traditional painting. I’ve never claimed to be a pure thangka painter and I don’t want to be one either. I study and try my level best to paint according to the iconography.” Uday Charan told me that he carefully refers to original sadhanas, or visualizations to capture the essence of the deity, despite his innovations in composition and realism. His representation invokes the visualization of the goddess, as the sadhana of Tantric Dashamavidya is inscribed below the painting:

In the middle of the ocean is a pavilion of jewels with an altar inside it. On it is a lion throne on which the goddess Bagalamukhi is seated. Her complexion is brilliant yellow, perfectly yellow, and she wears a yellow dress, yellow ornaments, and a yellow garland. I call to mind she who holds the tongue of the enemy in her left hand and a raised club in her right hand. She has assumed a serious mood and is maddened with intoxication. Her brilliance reflects the luminous golden hue of her body. She has four arms and three eyes and is seated on a lotus. On her forehead is the crescent moon, which is yellow in color. She wears yellow clothes, has high, firm breasts, and wears golden earrings (Kinsley, 1998: 193).

**Characterizing “Tourist” Art**

While the above discussion indicates a consumer market of both “intermediate” and “internal” audiences, there is growing interest in high-end, high-quality works. These are exclusively exported to the Chinese art market, which includes practitioners, collectors and dealers of paubha art. The typical tourist art intended for “external audiences” consists of mass-produced commodified paintings made in workshop settings, with multiple artists working on each series. These “hybrid” paintings are either sold in retail stores or end up in the thriving internet market on the web. There is great inconsistency in quality and draftsmanship due to the qualifications and training of the artists, many of whom are paid nominal fees based on the number of painting they are able to complete. Pricing obviously depends on quality, and it caters to all of the economic levels of tourist consumers. Since the 2000s, a large number of “thangka schools” have opened around the Valley, primarily attended by Tamang and Newar painters, and almost all large shops include a small workshop where tourists can see artists at work. Overall, this category of painting is characterized by significant iconographic and stylistic hybridity—often based on the direct feedback artists receive from middleman sellers, who talk to the artists about the perceived specific aesthetic tastes of the tourist consumer. In this genre, many paintings are distinctive iconographic variations, or even products of pure creative invention—what I call “artistic license.” One such new iconographic innovation that is now extremely popular as a genre of painting is called the “God of Everest”, and is considered a major bestseller among trekkers and mountaineers, especially during the climbing season.
The Great Earth Mother Chomolongma holds a lotus and skullcup, riding a tiger, while Padmasambhava, as the top center figure, gives the painting iconographic validity. Yet it is the description that is often the selling narrative: “Everest God Thangka represents the God of Mount Everest. Every climber worships and prays for a safe journey before conquering Mt. Everest. The God of Everest protects and takes care of all the climbers of Mount Everest. Therefore every climber prays and fulfills the rituals to the Everest God before making their trip to Mount Everest.” Similarly, hybridity of style and iconography vary, with no uniform consistency whatsoever, as seen in the popular versions of the stylized standing White Tara (ill. 9), unconventional interpretations of Vajrayogini, or wildly creative compositions of wrathful deities.
The sharpest disjuncture created by artistic license is found in the plethora of mandala paintings, whose iconographic forms are practically useless, if considered in light of their original function as meditation aides that follow iconographic prescriptions, because these works are purely fantastical, disregarding any iconometric or iconographic protocol. As the highest-selling items among tourists, they are generically called Buddha Mandala (ill. 10), and they preserve the overall concentric circle and the square design of the mandala palace.
Their descriptive labels provide them with authenticity: “Tibetan/Newari Circle of Enlightenment, these are hand painted by a local Buddhist artist monk on a handmade mixture of linen and paper, and are of exquisite quality.”

On closer inspection, the actual images depicted are crudely drawn: naked Buddha-like figures with little iconographic merit. Yet this category of mandala painting makes up more than 60% of tourist production, and it is also this genre of work that is specifically exported to Tibet, where they are sold as locally produced “authentic” Tibetan works. These series of images are all examples of thangka produced in Nepal for the Tibetan tourist market. Surprisingly, many of the Buddha mandala paintings show a consistent iconographic program, if one may call it that: with the life of Shakyamuni in the lower foreground, the Buddhas and wrathful deities depicted in the top sections, and the Mandala palace at the center. On closer inspection, the details almost always betray the cruder hand of an apprentice in a workshop context—where Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are characteristically depicted as tiny, naked figures. These mandalas may vary in color, style and iconographic format. In addition to the brightly colored Buddha mandalas, the black-on-gold mandalas are extremely popular tourist items. They are in a schema format known as nagthang (“black painting”), traditionally only intended for the representation of wrathful Tantric deities (ill. 11-13).
ILL. 11 – Tourist painting: “Buddha Mandala”

COMPOSITION IS OFTEN CALLED “NIRVANA MANDALAS,” 2008

PHOTO BY DINA BANGDEL
ILL. 12 – Tourist painting: “Buddha Mandala”

COMPOSITION IS OFTEN REFERRED TO AS “FIVE BUDDHA MANDALAS,” 2013
PHOTO BY DINA BANGDEL
The question that I consider critical is: how are these paintings packaged and sold to the consumer as “authentic”? Scholarship in tourist studies has indicated that narratives and meanings that are constructed to sell tourist art will often be based on the cultural origins of the tourist, with nationality as a key identifier of cultural characteristics, including specific aesthetic preferences. Similarly, in the context of the tourist art of Nepal, the middleman agents categorize the tourist consumer in this manner: nationality/ethnicity, knowledge and economic levels are the criteria that determine how the works are packaged to appropriately conform to the consumer’s aesthetic tastes. In Nepal, I was astounded by the acuity and perception that middlemen displayed in constructing the “Other”, and their consumers consistently met their expectations.

This point can be illustrated by my own personal account of the time when I took a group of twenty-five alumni from a private US university to Nepal. Two-weeks of intense academic orientation had preceded the trip, and most visitors were familiar of the basic iconography and symbolism of Buddhist art. During the process of shopping for souvenir paintings, I specifically instructed the shopkeepers not to focus on explaining popular tourist thangkas, but to instead show them high-quality “authentic” traditional paintings in terms of style or iconography. Interestingly, more than two-thirds of the group, despite being instructed on the “iconographic correctness and stylistic merits” of the works, opted instead for “typical tourist” paintings. For them, the choice of object was dictated by immediate connections to recognizable works with the preferred color palette, as well as the elaborate explanation offered for each work of art, regardless of iconographic accuracy. This supports Graburn’s idea of what successful tourist art must
be: “it must be (a) cheap, (b) portable, (c) understandable”. In this case, it was the narrative packaging by the artist and middleman that generated authenticity and met the tourists’ anticipated expectations. In other words, the stories about the work and its production connect the two worlds. Tourist art therefore constructs a visual language that encodes meaning for both the producer and the consumer.

Cultural Imaginings: Constructing Tourist Taste

For the agents, the success of tourist paintings as “exotic souvenirs” lies precisely in the multiplicity of hybrid styles and iconographic variations able to accommodate the varied tastes, economic capacity and interest of consumer tourists. For instance, paintings depicting the same subject can be purchased as a souvenir for $10, $100, $1000 or $10,000 in the same shop. In my research, the most interesting interaction between the middleman and tourist was the construction of aesthetics for the “cultural other”, in his or her quest for the perfect souvenir. I would argue that in the consumption of tourist paintings, the specific tastes and aesthetic preferences of the tourist “other” were primarily constructed through an imagined cultural identity, based primarily on nationality/ethnicity. To construct this identity, the middleman invariably greets tourists by asking them where they are from, and shows a selection of paintings based on imagined aesthetic cultural preferences. The narrative of authenticity is crucial in this interaction, as the object signified the locus of the cultural imagining—whether through iconographic correctness, the exclusive production of work by “monk-craftsmen”, or innovations and signed works by the “most famous artist”, or an explanation of Buddhist philosophy though the symbolism present in the work. They ask if the painting is for “meditation” or for a souvenir. Even in instances where the shops have artists painting in situ, it is still the agent who mediates as the “voice” of the artists, tying authenticity to the “handmade” quality. Here we must remember that the meaning-making role of the mediating agent is significant, as Graburn has observed: “It is he or she who not only transmits the physical art object from the producer to the consumer but who also controls the important flow of information about the object’s origin, age, meaning, and producers...This includes the important information about the status of the artifact as commodity or treasure.” (Graburn, 1999: 349). Here are some broad observations made during my study:

- Buddhist “Dharma” practitioners of all nationalities, or those who have some knowledge and interest in Buddhism, were generally seen to prefer paintings of individual Buddhist deities. Iconographic correctness was essential, and authenticity was emphasized as “painted by monks in the monasteries, as part of meditation.” These would include tourists from East Asia (China, Japan and Korea), Europe and the United States. There was a general preference for single iconic Buddhist deities, such as Shakyamuni, Amitabha, Bhaisajayaguru, pacific deities such as the Bodhisattva of compassion and wisdom, (Padmapani, Manjusri), and female deities of compassion, particularly Tara, to be used for meditation or placed in a home shrine. Specific wrathful deities like Vajrapani, Mahakala or Vajrabhairava, as single figures and iconographically correct paintings, were selected by clients who had received Tantric empowerment, or had an interest in, and knowledge of, Buddhism. Retailers often had scholarly publications on Newar Tibetan Buddhist art available in their stores to substantiate the authenticity of the painting styles.
• The use of “poster color” versus mineral pigments was another marker of authenticity, as historically paubha paintings used mineral pigments. Some middlemen sold watercolor “poster” colors as authentic paubha paintings to rationalize a high price.

• The variations in style and color palette were attributed to specific aesthetic tastes—the East Asian and European tourists tended to prefer gold-on-black or gold-on-gold, including the more recent innovations of the “black-and-white” monochromatic palette. German and Italian tourists preferred more muted and subtle tones in geometric and abstract mandalas, like the Kalachakra. The “Buddha Mandalas” also had specific consumer preferences: “Americans especially like the Buddha Mandalas in bright colors, where overall composition is very detailed, filled with many deities. We usually tell them how long it would take to make each of these figures by hand” (Fig. 10). Americans also appreciate the mandalas in black-and-gold, and regardless of the quality of the painting, the sellers invariably emphasized the “careful detailing”, explaining the meticulous nature of the craft and the many hours the ‘monk-artists” had spent carefully working on these details (Figs 11–13).

• Many of the middlemen mentioned that Israeli tourists are the most frugal, as explained by one shopkeeper: “They have spent all their money trekking, and when they come back to Kathmandu, they want to buy good paintings, but cheap. Very hard to bargain with them, so we have small mandalas for $20–$50 for their pocket.” Almost all of the middlemen that I interviewed mentioned that German tourists are the most discerning, and in the words of one agent: “We have to be careful about the iconography and explanation of these works. They are quite knowledgeable.” Their palette preference, however, was for darker muted colors, without much extraneous detail.

• Since 2010, Chinese tourists have been the top consumers by far, with 124,000 visitors in 2013. Export wholesalers and retail shops report that 90% of their sales have gone to the Chinese market in the last two years. The preferences of Chinese tourists include figural thanka paintings of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas such as Sakyamuni, Green and White Tara, Sadaksari Lokesvara, Manjusri, and Jambhala. Higher-end Chinese tourists often prefer the Newar paubha style to the typical tourist paintings, as these are more expensive and more distinctive in style. They bargain hard, and can be repeat customers, often commissioning paintings or ordering in bulk online. These would be the customers categorized as the “novelty-seeking” tourists (Littrell et al., 1994). Since 2013, Chinese buyers have dominated the tourist painting market.

28 With this fluid identity construction embedded in the object, how can scholars of visual culture better understand the nuances of contested designations and definitions of tourist art, if they are signifiers of cultural imaginings? The threefold cultural interplay—between producers, agents and consumers—symbiotically meets their expectations and allows for an ever-changing construction of the other. This triadic discourse negotiates not only tourist perceptions of the native culture in question—as being exotic, ethnic, and authentic—but also equally questions, from the perspective of the image producer, how distinctive aesthetic genres can cater to an equally arbitrary construction of what is perceived as the “Other’s” cultural preferences and tastes. For tourist art in this case, the object’s original religious and ritual function is no longer of consequence.

29 I would argue that dismantling the binaries of tourist paintings in Nepal—as art/artifact, fine art/mass-produced, tradition/innovation, authenticity/hybridization—makes it possible to see these contemporary expressions of traditional art as dynamic signifiers of cultural imaginings. In this new context, it is about the creation of meaning, and therefore the object becomes a tangible symbol of cultural embeddedness. Through
negotiations of iconography and style, a new hybrid visual language is constructed. To situate this phenomenon historically, one might ask: is this cultural exchange dramatically different from the historical contexts of 15th–17th centuries, from the point of view of patron/artist dynamics? For artists of the Kathmandu Valley, hybridity of style or iconography is perhaps not a new phenomenon. As itinerants, Newar artists historically catered to the aesthetic tastes of their international patrons—Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian patrons. So what is different about this contemporary mode of production and consumption? How does this discourse of tourist art lead to a specific type of cultural self-consciousness, as new meanings and constructs become reified in these visual expressions? I would suggest that discourse on traditional art in this contemporary context produces a cultural self-consciousness among producers, as new meanings and constructs become reified in these visual expressions. I would argue that the production and consumption of this modern expression of tourist art, and also of Buddhist content, gives rise to a distinctive type of self-identity and self-representation among the native population as well, and therefore to a touristic production of cultural identity. Interestingly, it is these commodified Buddhist cultural objects that are invariably displayed in the modern homes of the urban elite in Nepal. Certainly among the middle-class diaspora, these objects serve as visible signifiers of a Nepalese cultural and national identity—despite the fact that only about 15% of Nepal’s 30 million inhabitants are Buddhists, with the Newars themselves constituting 5.6% of the population. From the anonymity of the mass-produced works by Tamang “monks,” to the Newar artists painting in the traditional paubha style, tourist art as a category must be framed within outside the nostalgia of an enduring, unchanging craft. Many artists today, skillfully adapting to the demands of patrons, are painfully aware that they are not mere copyists of a glorious past, but to some extent, the tourist market has allowed them to see themselves as “real” artists, rather than simply copyists of traditional modes of painting. What I have seen increasingly over the past several years is a distinct emphasis on creative innovation among traditional artists, as well as hybrid styles of tourist art catering to both an internal audience within the local Nepalese population, and an external audience of tourists from around the world. Perhaps we could say that the artists, mediated through the middleman-agent, very consciously provide the tourist consumer with the object’s embedded narratives, or what I call the “packaging” of the artworks, which continues to be framed within the discourse of authenticity and constructed imaginings.

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Ateliers d'anthropologie, 43 | 2016

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NOTES

4. From 1960-1980s, the center of tourist activity in the Kathmandu Valley was in Jhochen (popularly referred to as “Freak Street”), near the historical royal palace in Kathmandu Durbar Square. Since the late 1980s, the two major tourist locales have shifted to Thamel in the heart of Kathmandu, and more recently to Baudha, the epicenter of the Tibetan Buddhist community in the Valley.
5. Parts of my early research were presented at the South Asia conference at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2006: “Imagining Self and the Other: The Iconography of Tourist Art in Nepal.” 35th Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
7. Newar painting is often referred to as paubha painting, and derives its name from the Sanskrit term pata, meaning “cloth painting.” The two categories of painting styles exist in tourist art, following art historical differentiation: (1) paubha painting and (2) thangkha paintings. Paubha is associated with the purely “Newar/Nepalese” idiom of painting and style, with brilliant scroll-motifs in the red background and exquisite detailing of figures. On the other hand, thangkha refers to the Tibetan style of painting, which is derived from an amalgamation of Indian, Nepalese, and Chinese elements.
8. Chitrakar are the traditional caste-group of painters, while Vajracharyas and Shakyas belonging to the Buddhist caste groups, are known for their skills in metalwork, paintings, and craftsmanship in gold and silver.
9. These areas cater to different tourist clienteles, with Darbar Marg attracting high-end tourists with shops selling antiques and high-end paintings. Thamel, on the other hand, was a haven for the mid-range and budget tourist, with tourist shops that cater to any economic background and wide range of tastes. Boudha is the heart of the Tibetan diaspora community in the northeastern part of the Valley.
10. The 2016 exhibition of Samundra Man Singh Shrestha, commissioned by the collector/dealer Purna Man Shakya further illustrates the role of the dealer/collector in the commodification of Newar paubha painting (Bangdel 2016).
11. Uday Charan Shrestha’s paintings are excellent examples of this phenomenon, in which his composition and stylistic innovations are repeated copied to the point that it becomes the normative iconography for the younger generation. For example, prints of his original paintings are sold in Amazon.com. Similarly, another well-known traditional artist, Samundraman Shrestha’s paintings are found in numerous iterations as popular copies for the tourist market. See Bangdel 2016.
12. In the last five years, dealers/retailers have targeted their market for Buddhist artifacts (metal sculpture and painting) exclusively to Chinese tourists.
14. Tantric scholar from Australia Ian Sinclair, writing under the name of “jinajik” (jinajik.com).
ABSTRACTS

This article explores the phenomenon of tourist art in Nepal, as narratives of cultural imaginings, specifically as constructions of identity and meaning through the commodification of “ethnic” art. This demand for the imagined “authentic” has given rise to new iconographies and non-traditional styles that are increasingly becoming the standard for tourist paintings. This paper argues that tourist imaginings offer an alternative space for artistic creativity and innovation. I consider how traditional artists see themselves meeting the expectations of tourists, by constructing categories of the aesthetic tastes of the “other,” based on specific national identities in a global context. This imagining then becomes critical to the marketing/packaging of the commodities as it underscores how these new iconographies are interpreted and sold as continuities of the traditional works of art. As a tourist commodity, these cultural productions, their negotiations with local reception and global consumption provide alternative frameworks to contextualize paradoxical definitions of authenticity, tradition, and innovation.

Cet article s’intéresse au phénomène de l’art touristique comme une production de récits d’imaginaire culturel, et plus particulièrement une construction d’identité et de sens au travers de la marchandisation de l’art « ethnique ». Cette quête d’une « authenticité » imaginée a donné naissance à une nouvelle iconographie et à des styles non traditionnels devenus des standards des peintures pour touristes. Cet article défend l’idée que l’imaginaire touristique est un espace alternatif propice à la créativité et à l’innovation artistique. Il montre comment les artistes traditionnels répondent aux attentes des touristes, catégorisant le goût des autres à partir d’identités nationales construites dans un contexte de globalisation. Cet imaginaire est essentiel dans les processus de marchandisation et de « packaging » de ces biens en permettant à ces nouvelles iconographies d’être vendues et interprétées en continuité avec les œuvres d’art traditionnel. Ces productions culturelles et, en tant que produits pour touristes, leur négociation entre échanges locaux et consommation mondialisée, offrent un cadre contextualisé de réflexion sur les définitions paradoxales de l’authenticité, de la tradition et de l’innovation.

INDEX

**Keywords:** Nepal, Newar art, tourist art, authenticity, imaginaries

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AUTHOR

**DINA BANGDEL**

Associate Professor and Director of Art History, Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar
dbangdel@vcu.edu