

Entangled Visualities: Celestial Beings in Early Twentieth Century Architecture of the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal

Katharina Weiler

Abstract This article investigates the adaptation of sculptural stucco design in the form of angels into the early twentieth century architectural program of the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. The twentieth century spirits in neoclassical Newar architecture are a transcultural, hybrid outcome engendered by artistic and architectural exchanges. Nepalese celestial beings are symbolic of the Newar builders', plasterers', and residents' willingness to accept alien artistic and stylistic forms and appropriate them. The focus of this article shall thus be on the interplay of local artistic forms and philosophies and a neoclassical form vocabulary that was hitherto unknown. The text examines how certain examples of artistic appropriation and transformation are evident in depictions of these winged celestial beings.

The Newar Neoclassical

The winged spirit is a universal image that travelled on a long route until finally reaching Nepal. The following investigation focuses on winged spirits that were modelled in stucco. The adaptation of sculptural stucco design in the form of angels into the architectural program of the Kathmandu Valley is closely connected with the advent of neoclassical architectural forms that were eminently “conquering” the world outside Europe from the eighteenth until the beginning of the twentieth century. Transcultural negotiation processes in Nepal between ever-evolving local architecture (Gutschow 2011) and conventional architectural styles from the Mughals in India, and from Europe, were already evident in the first half of the nineteenth century when, for example, Mughal-style columns and arches, and neoclassical pilasters heralded a hybrid Nepalese temple and palace architecture. Consequently, the numerous

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K. Weiler (✉)

Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context,” Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany

Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, Karlsruhe, Germany

e-mail: weiler@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de

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whitewashed palaces of the Ranas who ruled Nepal from the middle of the nineteenth until the middle of the twentieth century were characteristic of a Westernised architectural language which mimicked the neoclassical architecture of Europe and British India. It was supposed to demonstrate and legitimatise Nepalese political power to the British in India. Finally, the new architectural style was absorbed by the Newars, the people of the Kathmandu Valley. Their residences, for example in the larger cities of Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur, adapted and transformed neoclassical elements. Fully plastered or partly decorated with stucco, many houses built in the first half of the twentieth century—the majority of them after a devastating earthquake in 1934—superseded the red-toned brick façades and today still give the cities their *genius loci* (Weiler 2010, 2011).

The unique building style of both the palaces and Newar neoclassical houses came to be locally known as *Rana Style*. The Ranas and Newars were clearly attracted by universal themes that were first appropriated for the palaces and, later, the vernacular architecture. The appropriation of neoclassical patterns such as Corinthian columns, fancy keystones, cartouches, festoons, mascarons, lion masks, and angelic figurines (Weiler 2010, 165–205), for both the palace and vernacular architecture, may be regarded as paradigmatic of a trend that affected significant parts of Asia during the nineteenth century, whereas the translation of such forms was in accordance with the Newar locality.

Re-imagining the Divine

Early twentieth century façades are regarded here as transcultural contact zones that negotiate different symbols, offering the opportunity for the rereading of signs. One should be aware of the iconography evident in Nepalese art and architecture in order to understand the adoption and translation of the angel motif in the local sculptural design.¹ Instead of suggesting the artistic process of altering the existing form vocabulary as a result of the imitation of European ornamentation in a Nepalese context, the examination of ancient local themes points to Buddhist and Hindu mythology that also contains a repertoire of celestial beings such as *kinnaras* and *kinnarīs*, *gandharvas*, *apsaras* and *vidyādharas*, and *vidyādhārīs*. All of these beings are renowned for their dance, song, and poetry. As Niels Gutschow demonstrates in his contribution to this volume, aerial spirits in the repertoire of Nepalese Licchavi architecture (sixth to eighth centuries) reveal close parallels to the Indian architecture of the Gupta period.

In Buddhist and Hindu mythology, a *kinnara* is a celestial musician, half-human and half-bird, that was originally depicted with a human figure and a horse's head (Liebert 1976, 137). *Kinnarīs*, the female counterparts of *kinnaras*, were depicted as half-horse, half-woman creatures in Southeast Asian mythology and art (Ibid.). In Nepal, since Licchavi times (300–850 CE), their heads, torsos, and arms were most often depicted as those of a woman with wings, a tail, and the feet of a bird. Some

¹ See also Weiler (2010, 184–197).

Nepalese carvings, however, depict *kinnarīs* with the body of a bird and a horse's head, for example at the Indrēśvara Temple (1294) in Panauti (see Niels Gutschow's contribution). The word *kinnara* is literally translated as "what sort of man?" (Liebert 1976, 137). Gautama V. Vajracharya, a Sanskritist from Kathmandu with a keen interest in South Asian art, states that, in illustrated Newar texts, a *kinnara* is identified as *jalamānuṣa* ("aquatic man") (Vajracharya 2009, 12). Due to its association with water, the author assumes that the literal meaning of the word indicates the *kinnara*'s original designation. Regarding the water aspect, the depictions of *kinnarīs* and *apsaras* show close parallels. Together with *gandharvas*, semi-divine beings, and musicians of the gods (Liebert 1976, 89), *kinnarīs* form a celestial choir in Kubera's paradise (Stutley and Stutley 1977, 147).

As celestial nymphs who dwell in Indra's paradise (Skt. *svarga*), *apsaras* have at all times been part of Hindu and Buddhist drama, literary art, music and dance, painting, sculpture, and architecture. In the Rigveda, the oldest text of the Veda which was recorded about 1200 BCE, *apsaras* are mentioned as the fellows of *gandharvas*, the personification of sunlight. The first depictions of *apsaras* date back to the Rigveda. The Sanskrit word for *apsara* is *apsarasa*, being a constituent of the words *apah* ("water") and *sarasah* ("reservoir of water"). In the Rigveda, the term *apsara* was attached to clouds. In the epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, composed before 400 BCE, as well as in the Puranas, the *apsaras* are described as clouds. The Ramayana in particular identifies them as both clouds and water, and personifies them as dancing damsels of the heaven (Banerjee 1982, 12). Buddhism adopted the *apsara* nymphs and, in the Mahavastu that tells the legendary life of Buddha, depicts them holding garlands of flowers and jewels (Banerjee 1982, 11).

As "bearers of wisdom" (Liebert 1976, 336), *vidyādhariīs* possess magical knowledge. In ancient and medieval Indian art, the motifs of the ethereal, garland-bearing *vidyādharas* and their female counterparts, *vidyādhariīs*, were often depicted as couples next to the principal deity. As shown in Gutschow's survey, they were favoured in Nepal in Licchavi and Malla architecture, where they embellished carvings in timber and stone, for example ancient Buddhist votive structures (Skt. *stūpa*/Nep. *caitya*) and Buddhist monasteries (Nep. *bāhā/bahī*). These mythical beings' attributes include jewels (Skt. *ratna*) and forest garlands (Skt. *vanamālā*) made of flowers, which are worn on the body or carried in one hand, symbolising victory. Sometimes they also carry swords representing the wisdom (Skt. *vidyā*) which cuts through ignorance (Skt. *a-vidyā*).

In ancient architecture in India and Nepal, celestial spirits, birds, animals and aquatic monsters (Skt. *makara*) are often characterised by a foliated lotus-scroll tail or emerging from a so-called foliage motif that is described in a Sanskrit text as *meghapatra* ("cloud foliage") and known to the Newars as *lapva*, "amniotic water" (Vajracharya 2009, 12). Vajracharya provides an elaborate investigation of the foliage motif and its association with foliate creatures and celestial water (Vajracharya 2003, 44).

In other cases, wingless figures are presented against cloud patterns resembling foliage, and their bent leg postures and floating scarves suggest that they are airborne (Vajracharya 2003, 46). The crest of the cloud may be identified as foliage (Skt. *patra*), due to its resemblance to the turn and twist of the lotus foliage motif.

Ultimately, in South and Southeast Asian art, the foliage motif is not only employed in the representation of clouds, but also in the depiction of terrestrial water.

Niels Gutschow shows that, evidently, the iconography of ethereal spirits in Nepal has changed in the course of the last 1,500 years. Newar artists reworked motifs, for example by altering the beings' posture and attire, or by adding wings to the figures. In a way, such artistic processes of appropriation and transformation show parallels to the examples in Mughal architecture discussed by Ebba Koch in her investigation of angel depictions in the Mughal emperor Jahangir's wall paintings in the Lahore Fort (Koch 2001, 12–37).

The development from wingless to winged celestial beings in Newar paintings may be assumed to have started in the second half of the seventeenth century, when the then Malla kings of Nepal maintained connections with the Mughal court. At that time, winged figures were found in Nepalese paintings for the first time, for example on the covers of Nepalese manuscripts and on *paubhās*,—e.g. *maṇḍalas*²—painted on cloth to commemorate particular religious rites and celebrations, or to depict episodes and sacred scenes with local deities.

In his book *The Arts of Nepal* (1978), Pratapaditya Pal, who has done pioneering research on Himalayan art since the early 1960s, describes a scene on the cover of an unknown manuscript (1681–84) depicting King Śrīnivāsa Malla and Visvanatha Upadhyaya, as follows:

Against a flat red background two persons are shown facing each other; one is a Brahman who kneels on a rug and holds a manuscript which he seems to offer to a god distinguished by an aureole; the second figure seated on a lion throne also offers a lotus flower to the deity. His left hand clasps a *katar*, a type of dagger popular in Mughal India. A winged apsara riding on a cloud upholds the parasol of sovereignty above his head, thereby further emphasizing his royal status.³

Since the deity is Rāto Machendranāth, the patron of the Newar city of Patan, Pal identifies the regal person as King Śrīnivāsa Malla of Patan who, despite being a Hindu, was a devout worshipper of the Buddhist deity.

With respect to *paubhā* paintings, which were generally stored in a temple, one example (containing mineral pigments on cotton cloth, 165.9 × 128.6 cm) depicts a shrine of Viṣṇu and is dated to 1681 [LA County Museum, Los Angeles, (Museum Acquisition Fund, M.73.2.2)].⁴ The main deity inside the shrine is surrounded by several other divinities. The winged tutelary figures flying towards the temple, offering up garlands and dressed in “Mughal-Rajput attire” (Pal 1978, 127)—long robes with pleated skirts and *kurtī*-like jackets—are closely associated with architecture and its pictorial programs.

The Mughal Emperor Humayun (1508–1556) hired Iranian artists and craftsmen for his paintings and book illustrations. Mughal court painting in India was thus

² *Maṇḍala*: lit. “circle”; spiritual image, or ideal model of the universe.

³ King Srinivasamalla and Visvanatha Upadhyaya, 1681–84, Private Collection, see also Pal (1978, 127–128), and Fig. 191.

⁴ Shrine of Viṣṇu, 1681, LA County Museum of Art, see also Pal (1978, Fig. 116).



Fig. 1 Bhaktapur, Icha. Apron of a late nineteenth-century window decorated with flying beings with garlands. The beings wear helmets or turbans with pinnate plumes and are dressed in long robes with pleated skirts and *kurti*-like, tight-fitting jackets that open in the front. Their foreheads are adorned by tiny marks. A lotus design decorates the bottom corners. Photo by Katharina Weiler, November 2006

dominated by the accepted artistic standards of the Iranian court from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards. During the reign of the Mughal king and great builder Akbar (1542–1605), painters were not recruited from Iran alone; Indian artists trained in local styles were also present in the imperial workshops as exemplified by Milo Cleveland Beach in *Mughal and Rajput Painting* (1992). During the time of Akbar and his successors, the Mughal painters further enriched their corpus of signs and symbols as a result of their contact with Renaissance art. Symbols and motifs such as cupids, angels, orbs, and terrestrial globes were imitated in royal paintings.

Pratapaditya Pal finds reason to believe that the Nepali artists became aware of the “Mughal-Rajput paintings” (Pal 1978, 101) during the rule of King Pratāpa Malla (1641–1674), sometime around 1650, when they started “borrowing significantly from Rajput paintings” while creating “a distinctive style of their own” (Pal 1978, 144). Finally, the multiple identities of the winged female figures in seventeenth century Nepalese paintings and architecture emerged as a result of their multipolar genesis. Instead of drawing from the Indian repertoire of European-style, yet mughalised *putti*-like angel figures created under the Mughal rulers, the Newar craftsmen of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries based the depiction of their half-divinities closely on Persian winged spirits (*paris*) wearing Mughal-style fashion.

In the middle of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, winged, garland-holding figures were frequently found on reliefs in Nepalese architecture,



Fig. 2 Bhaktapur, Gāhḥiti. An apron is adorned by a pair of flying figures with winged arms and bent legs. The figures wear crowns and shoes, and bear garlands. Foliage resembling lotus leaves furl in front of the figures, partly covering them, suggesting that they are airborne. Photo by Katharina Weiler, October 2007

mostly on the cantilevers of capitals, wooden spandrels, apron planks, or tympana (Skt. *torṇa*), and appeared mainly in the context of religious architecture. They began to appear in residential buildings, however, during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century (Fig. 1).

While, depending on the context, their antecedents may have offered up garlands or carried offerings of fruit, fly whisks, instruments, or parasols of sovereignty, winged beings in late nineteenth-century carvings carried only a garland. It is also questionable whether the garlands are devotional articles since no deity is present. Yet these figures were depicted in the same style as the celestial beings of Newar paintings and temple architecture of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries—either with stretched legs, wearing long robes with pleated skirts and *kurtīs* that opened in the front, or with a bent leg posture (Fig. 2).

The fashion reveals close parallels to the “Iranian angel type” or “Solomonic angel” as Ebba Koch describes the *paris* found in seventeenth century Indian paintings and architecture (Koch 2001). These Mughal angels were clearly assimilated into the Nepalese pictorial program. Nepalese Mughal-style winged figures in turn prepared the ground for the European-style stucco angels found in the architecture of the Kathmandu Valley from the late nineteenth century onwards.

Winged Spirits at Rana Palaces

A range of depictions of celestial beings from late nineteenth and early twentieth century architecture of the Kathmandu Valley can still be found today and testify to the interplay of local artistic forms and philosophies, and a “neoclassical” form vocabulary that was hitherto unknown to the architectural canon. The example of winged celestial beings raises the question of how certain ways of artistic appropriation and transformation are reflected in Nepalese building sculpture.

It was not before the late nineteenth century that winged nymph-like figures with garlands in a European style occasionally appeared at Rana palaces in Nepal and were thus exhibited outside of their traditional architectural context on Buddhist votive structures (*stūpas/caityas*), blind windows, spandrels, late nineteenth century apron planks, and tympana (*torāṇa*). They were moulded in stucco for the first time, instead of being carved in stone or wood.

On the gable of the grand palace Ananda Niketan in Patan (Fig. 3), erected by Bir Shamsher Rana for his wife and son, Ananda, in 1892, a pair of winged, female figures is depicted Nike-like, in a victorious pose. Even though their depiction is obviously based on European neoclassical décor and in the style of the Greek goddess Nike, the personification of victory, they are set in an unmistakably Nepalese context with the use of a stucco *śrī yantra*. A *śrī yantra* is a geometric figure composed of nine interlocking triangles that are interlaced in such a way as to form 43 smaller triangles in a web symbolic of the entire cosmos.



Fig. 3 Ananda Niketan, Patan (1892). On the gable of the grand palace erected by Bir Shamsher Rana for his wife and son, Ananda, a pair of winged, female figures is depicted, Nike-like, in a Greek style and victorious pose. Seemingly marching in Empire-style dress, they flaunt flambeaux in one hand and hold flower garlands in the other. They are unmistakably set in a Nepalese context by presenting a stucco *śrī yantra*. Photo by Katharina Weiler, November 2007

Another example of pairs of flying, garland-holding stucco angels is found inside the Darbar hall of the former palace Agni Bhawan (1894) (Fig. 4) of Juddha Shamsher's son, Agni Shamsher, in Kathmandu. The interior decoration is characterised by a joyful medley of Newar, Mughal, and European designs. Pairs of celestial figurines with bird-like wings dwell in the spandrels of the Darbār hall. Drapery encircles the spirits' otherwise nude bodies. In keeping with local style, they have black hair and wear necklaces, their arms and ankles are adorned with bangles, and a *tika* marks their foreheads. The ethereal beings seem to hover above stylised mountains and "Chinese" clouds.

Such stylised, puffy clouds may have evolved from the "pronged clouds," an ancient cloud that resembles "typical conventions of Chinese landscapes" (Slusser 2005, 394), as Niels Gutschow describes in this volume. Ingeborg Luschey-Schmeisser traces the evolution of Chinese-type cloud formations (compare also Chari Pradel's description of the moulded brick from Dengxian, Henban Province, China) to the thirteenth to fourteenth century—the time of the Il Khanate (1256–1336), a Mongol *khanate* established in Persia and considered a part of the Mongol Empire (Luschey-Schmeisser 1978, 126). The puffy, yet pronged, whirling cloud type was continuously painted in Persian art during the fourteenth century Timurid dynasty and is a decorative element in the art of the Safavids (compare Fig. 5 in the chapter "Solomonic Angels in a Mughal Sky: The Wall Paintings of the Kala Burj at the Lahore Fort Revisited and Their Reception in Later South Asian and Qajar Art"), a Persian dynasty from 1501 to 1722 (Luschey-Schmeisser 1978, 53). Consequently, it was incorporated into the miniature paintings and architecture of the Mughals, with their strong ties to Persian art. Such stylised clouds are also found, for instance, in the tile decoration of the Kala Burj of the Lahore Fort (Koch 2001, 33). The cloud motif may have reached Nepal either via Mughal art from India, or the Tibetan art in which it was also a common feature but, most probably, Newar artists adopted the motif both in India and Tibet, and incorporated it into their pictorial repertoire. Regarding the extant sketchbooks and painted scrolls of Newar artists, there is reason to believe that the Chinese cloud type had been established in Nepalese paintings by the early fifteenth century, at the latest.⁵

⁵ Chinese clouds are depicted on leaf 10 of a sketchbook presented by John C. Huntington in his account on *Nevar Artist Jīvarāma's Sketchbook* (2006). The sketchbook is of unique value since it contains a colophon that provides information about the date (1435 CE) and historical circumstances of its creation in Tibet and the name of the artist. *Nevar Artist Jīvarāma's Sketchbook*, 24 × 12.5 cm (each folio), ink and water-based pigment on paper, Thyasaphu format (with 39 leaves remaining from an unknown number): "In Nevari Samvat 555 (CE 1435) on the second day of the dark half of Vaiśākha [April–May], Jīvarāma personally wrote this, [and] after [he] heard [instructions] from Chon bhota made the whole book himself. After having come from *Prati cittam* [towards the West; perhaps a place name], where he heard [instructions] from Lālā Chunva [a Newar phonetic rendering of a Tibetan name ending in "the younger"]. Giving the book special importance, he brought it back to [his own] *vihāra*. After working in Nyar Dva [Tibetan place name?], he then brought it back. This was made personally by Jīvarāma." See Huntington (2006, 76).



Fig. 4 Agni Bhawan, Kathmandu (1894). Interior decoration of the former palace of Juddha Shamsher's son, Agni Shamsher. Pairs of flying, garland-holding stucco figures with bird-like wings decorate the spandrels inside the Darbār Hall. The figures seem to hover above stylised mountains and whirling clouds. Drapery waves around the spirits' otherwise nude bodies. According to the local style, they have black hair and wear necklaces, their arms and ankles adorned with bangles, and a *tika* marks their foreheads. Photo by Katharina Weiler, December 2007

Celestial Figures of the Newar Neoclassical Style

Despite these examples that show celestial beings in the context of late-nineteenth-century Nepalese palace architecture, the ethereal, angel-like motif was rarely incorporated into the exterior and interior decoration of Rana palaces. The sculptural design of winged spirits is particularly found in the residential architecture of Kathmandu and Patan, where it was borrowed from the neoclassical architectural repertoire and appropriated by Newar plasterers for the local requirements of their



Fig. 5 Patan, Saugah (ca. 1935). A pair of winged spirits with bent legs holds a garland above the central window on the first floor of a Shakya house. The figures present a cartouche labelled *Śrī trīratna saugala tola sā na tranabbe* (93), or “Blessed three jewels Saugah locality number 93,” hinting at the original house owner’s affiliation to a Buddhist house priest, Vajrācārya. The cartouche thus provides information about the location of the house. Flower garlands are frequently found hanging from window lintels of Newar houses. Photo by Katharina Weiler, November 2006

modern house façades. Most of all, the winged stucco figurines enjoyed great popularity in the 1940s, in the course of the great rebuilding of Newar cities after the earthquake of 1934. These are prominent examples of the negotiation processes between the local iconography and Western décor, and are important features of the Newar neoclassical style.

Above all, the fact that celestial figures are presented as winged, often holding garlands, and in couples, clearly locates the motif in both the local mythological, artistic traditions and the neoclassical repertoire. Similar to the spirits depicted in the royal context, fairy-like beings present ornate cartouches above first-floor windows of Newar houses (Fig. 5). Winged figures are also arranged as garland-bearing couples framing windows (Figs. 6 and 7). Angel busts may appear above window lintels, where they form a triangle that replaces the pediment (Figs. 8 and 14), or be squeezed between acanthus leaves on the composite capitals of neoclassical pilasters (Fig. 10).



Fig. 6 Buddhanilkanta. An angel replaces a keystone. Black-haired winged figures with bent legs on the wall frame the window and hold drapery in a neoclassical manner. Photo by Katharina Weiler, November 2007



Fig. 7 Bhaktapur, Kvāchē (1940s). A pair of figures with foliated wings frames the windows on the first floor of a house. Dressed in *saris* and wearing crown-like caps, they hold flower garlands. Their feet are visible and are positioned one upon the other. Photo by Katharina Weiler, October 2007



Fig. 8 Patan, Mahāpal (after 1934). A female angel holding a flower garland is cleverly incorporated into the triangular pediment above the central window on the first floor of a residential building. Her wings resemble those of birds. Photo by Katharina Weiler, November 2006

The depiction of angels in early twentieth-century Newar architecture reflects the enhancement of motifs that had been familiar to Nepalese iconography. This way, angels were first adopted and then incorporated into a new cultural context. The representation of equivocal celestial beings that resulted in this transformation implies the artisans' awareness of the motivic similarities between the angels propagated by neoclassical décor and the celestial beings inherent in their own pantheon.

Deities of the Gaze: Scantly Clad Angels and Aspects of Eroticism

In the early twentieth century Kathmandu Valley, the motif of celestial beings was reworked in an urban context characterised by Buddhist and Hindu religious activities, though not without stamping them with a certain kind of “Newariness.” The figures' hair is often painted black, reminiscent of the hair color typical of the local people. In some cases (Figs. 4 and 9), the figures are adorned with jewelry (for example bangles) and, in a few instances, a tiny mark (*tika*) which decorates the forehead. Full-bosomed and scantily clad, the early-twentieth-century Newar stucco spirits are characteristically moulded so as to accentuate their femininity.

A group of angel busts with uncovered breasts (Figs. 9, 10, 11 and 13) is presented with a clearly erotic air like the fabulous, benevolent maidens that represent nature spirits (Skt. *yakṣiṇī*) that frequent fields and forests, haunt sacred trees, and which are in fact found as figural carvings on ancient Nepalese roof struts. A *yakṣiṇī*, portrayed in a particular pose as a tree goddess (Skt. *vrkṣadevatā*) “gathering fruit or flowers from the tree, or trees, under which she stands in a distinctive cross-legged pose (*pādavastika*) upon a dwarfed being, a *yakṣa*, her male counterpart” (Slusser 2010, 16), bears a special Sanskrit name, *śālabhañjikā*, meaning “one who breaks the branch of a *śāla* tree.”⁶ The most refined depictions of *śālabhañjikās* survive on struts in the north wing of the Buddhist monastery Ukubāhā in Patan (Fig. 12), five of which have recently been dated to the late seventh or ninth century CE (carved between 690 and 890)⁷—the time of the Licchavis, kings of Nepal—and identified as being among the oldest extant woodcarvings of Nepal. Mary Shepherd Slusser, who has concentrated her attention on these figures, describes them as follows:

⁶ Mary Shepherd Slusser states: “In the *śālabhañjikā* tradition, literary and sculptural, the tree whose branches the maiden bends is not confined to the *śāla*, and she does not break the branch but bends it within reach of its fruits or flowers.” See Slusser (2010, 16). For the tree as a symbol for fertility see *ibid*, 134.

⁷ Although only one Ukubāhā strut was tested, Mary Shepherd Slusser, the initiator of the radiocarbon dating feels secure in dating the other four the same because they are so stylistically like the test object and were probably made by the same person, see Slusser (2009).



Fig. 9 Dhulikel (probably before 1934). Capital with the bust of a female, nude, winged spirit with black hair. The figurine holds a flower and a garland, its ends shaped in the form of stylised lotus leaves. She wears a fan-shaped necklace and her forehead is adorned by a *ṭika*. Stylised lotus leaves also decorate the capital's edges, where acanthus leaves would otherwise embellish composite capitals. In Nepalese iconography, the foliage motif is often associated with foliate creatures and celestial water. Photo by Katharina Weiler, October 2006

It is clear that the Ukubāhāḥ master carpenter wished these bodies to be admired. That their alluring breasts and svelte limbs [shall] not be hidden, ornaments are few and clothing is the narrowest of shoulder scarves and the most gossamer of skirts. Gossamer, indeed, but worn seductively low on the hips, secured by a richly jewelled belt, and confected of the finest of fabrics patterned in the most attractive of ways (Slusser 2009).

The narrow shoulder scarf leaves the torso bare. As with the traditionally stylised female forms of the *yakṣiṇīs* who are, however, “not bona fide deities who must be represented in accordance with exact rules” (Slusser 2009), the creation of the



Fig. 10 Patan, Saugah (ca. 1935). Stucco angels with bare breasts, Victorian hairstyles, and bird-like wings are squeezed between decorative acanthus leaves on the capitals of pilasters that frame the façade of a Newar house. Photo by Katharina Weiler, November 2006

modern half-nude female angels was probably a conscious aim of the artists to amalgamate the physical form with the spiritual and cosmic world by depicting the female body as an object of the gaze. In the words of Slusser, who dedicated a book to *The Antiquity of Nepalese Wood Carving* (Slusser 2010) the “supple, willowy bodies of these voluptuous young women...invite comparison with physically desirable living counterparts and are the very embodiment of fertility” (2010, 88). Slusser notices the idealisation of the female body—that is also evident in neoclassical angelic figures (Fig. 13)—since all of these figures “flaunt appealingly youthful breasts that spring from high on the chest and range from large, heavy globes to hemispheres of modest size. . . .”

The imagery of the lightly dressed feminine figure is a common canonical motif of Indian and Nepalese art. The depiction of the female body in diaphanous and revealing garments was an inalienable feature of the iconography of both Buddhist



Fig. 11 Patan, Nakabahī (ca. 1940). The centre of a symmetrical cartouche above the central window on the first floor of a house is adorned with a fairy-like angel with bird's wings, standing cross-legged. The posture is reminiscent of the classical bearing of *yakṣiṇīs* on wooden roof struts. The angelic figure wears a wrap garment that covers her left breast, leaving her right breast bare, in a way eliciting associations with depictions of the Greek goddess Nike. In her left hand, she holds a small cloth. Photo by Katharina Weiler, October 2006

and Hindu goddesses; they remained fully within the realm of the aesthetic (Guha-Thakurta 2004, 237). These familiar characteristics of Newar religious art were reworked in the early twentieth century angels of the Kathmandu Valley. This modelling and remodelling of ethereal or angelic semi-nudes in the early twentieth century architecture of the Kathmandu Valley amounts to the same aesthetic propagated by traditional Nepalese and Indian art forms.

Fig. 12 Ukubāhā, Patan.
 On Strut 1, a *yakṣiṇī* with alluring breasts is depicted as a goddess of the Buddhist sacred grove (Skt. *śālabhañjikā*) with crossed legs (Skt. *pādavastika*), grasping a tree branch with her extended arm, and standing on a dwarfed being, a *yakṣa*. The strut was analysed through radiocarbon testing to between 690 and 890 CE. Source: Slusser (2010, 40, Fig. 31). Photo by Stanislaw Klimek





Fig. 13 Patan, Tyāgaḥ (after 1934). A nude, Art-Nouveau style female angel with black, Victorian corkscrew curls, jewelry, and an acanthus corset embellishes the façade of a house in Patan’s outskirts, between two windows of the first floor. This figure with bird’s wings is located on the central, vertical axis. Photo by Katharina Weiler, November 2006

Negotiating the Local and the Global

The hybrid twentieth-century spirits in neoclassical Newar architecture are the result of artistic and architectural transcultural exchanges. These figures can be regarded as negotiators between different cultural modes, having lost their defined role as “either” intermediaries between the almighty power of a Christian or Islamic pantheon and humans “or” celestial beings mainly associated with rain and fertility in Hinduism and Buddhism. Newars, when asked about the term for the stucco fairies and winged beings on their early twentieth century houses, generally identify them today as being *apsaras* or *paris* and décor to the façade. It is difficult to find any definite answer to the question of whether their presence initially communicated any religious meaning. However, when depicted on a house’s most prominent part, the façade, ethereal early-twentieth-century figures qualified as highly decorative elements, through which a house owner, whether a domestic priest (Nep. *purohit*), a Buddhist priest (Vajrācārya), or a butcher (Kasai), could present himself as modern. The figures are representatives of a neoclassical architectural language



Fig. 14 Khokana, Nepal. An aging Newar looks out the first-floor window of his early twentieth-century house. Above him, a female angel figure is depicted with outspread wings and the puffed-sleeved blouse that became a popular feature of higher class women’s wear in the early twentieth century. Photo by Niels Gutschow, 2007

that was “spoken” on a global scale, however in different “vernaculars”—in this case, the Nepalese neoclassical style of architecture. The figures of the Newar neoclassical canon could be dressed in contemporary “Western”-style fashion (Fig. 14) and have elaborate hairstyles, like the female Rana elite who dressed in modern attire. They are thus evidence of certain vogues that eminently conquered the world outside Europe from the eighteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, and showed the transformation of the motif of celestial beings from rather standardised versions, dressed in Mughal costumes and found on architecture until the nineteenth century, to canonical yet individualised images.

Despite this “Westernization,” the figures refer to their locality, the Kathmandu Valley, in a bewildering range of artistic expressions. Above all, Nepalese celestial beings are symbolic of the Newar builders’, plasterers’, and residents’ empathy for and acceptance of alien artistic and stylistic forms, as well as their desire to make them their own.

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