

**Arts of Asia Lecture Series Fall 2015**  
**Asia's Storied Traditions**  
*Sponsored by The Society for Asian Art*

September 11, 2015

**Displaying the Past: Pictorial Depictions of the Buddhist Myths and Legends of the Kathmandu Valley**

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The *Svayambhūpurāṇa* (which is extant in various versions of different length that started to take shape towards the beginning of the fifteenth century) can be viewed as a response to the loss of the Buddhist heartland on the Gangetic plain since the thirteenth century, though it also incorporates materials that presumably predate the disappearance of Buddhism in India proper. These legends render the Kathmandu Valley, the historical Nepal, a sacred Buddhist land, independently from India. The principal device for achieving this is the Svayambhū myth. It relates that in prehistoric times, Nepal was a sacred lake on which the primordial Buddha principle (*dharmadhātu*) manifested (*bhū*) itself spontaneously (*svayam*) in the form of a light or luminous caitya on the pericarp of a lotus blossom. The present day caitya of Svayambhū is believed to be a shrine built over this divine manifestation as a protective cover. (See von Rospatt 2009)

As the most important narrative of the Buddhist tradition of Nepal the *Svayambhūpurāṇa*, or scenes from it, have been depicted numerous times:

- Mural paintings in the tantric shrine of Śāntipur adjacent to the great Svayambhū caitya close to Kathmandu, which were commissioned by King Pratāpa Malla (1624–74 CE). The same king's incursion into the forbidden interiors of Śāntipur in June 1658 are illustrated in an annotated pictorial drawing of this shrine's three-tiered mandalaic structure. (See von Rospatt 2014).
- Scroll (dating from 1635) housed in the Cleveland Museum of Art. (See Slusser 1979).
- Painting from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century of the *Svayambhūpurāṇa* and *Maṇicūḍāvadāna* belonging to the Musée Guimet at Paris. (See Lienhard 2009)
- Scroll (from 1856?) kept in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.
- Painting (19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century?) from Maru Bāhāḥ, a monastery in Kathmandu, capturing the principal scene of the Svayambhū myth, the draining of the lake.

**Select Readings**

Lienhard, Siegfried. 2009. *Svayambhūpurāṇa: Mythe du Népal; suivi du Maṇicūḍāvadāna: légende du prince Maṇicūḍā*. Suilly la Tour: Éditions Findakly.

von Rospatt, Alexander. 2009. "The Sacred Origins of the Svayambhūcaitya and the Nepal Valley: Foreign Speculation and Local Myth." In *Journal of the Nepal Research Centre* 13: 33-91. Kathmandu: Nepal Research Centre.

von Rospatt, Alexander. "The Mural Paintings of the Svayambhūpurāṇa at the Shrine of Śāntipur, and their Origins with Pratāpa Malla." In Benjamin E. Bogin and Andrew Quintman, eds., *New Research in Himalayan Passages in Honor of Hubert Decler*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2014, pp. 45-68.

Slusser, Mary. "Serpents, Sages, and Sorcerers in Cleveland." *Bullet. of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 66.2, 1979, pp. 67-82.