

## The Alloy Kings: Metal Crafts in Nepal

*A story told by Ian Alsop to Padma Dorje Maitland*

The history of metal crafts in Nepal goes back to at least the sixth century.<sup>1</sup> The earliest pieces were made of copper, not because copper was readily available, but because it was the best material for gilding. The process of gilding in Nepal also quite ancient, practiced today much as it was centuries ago, using the traditional method of gold-mercury gilding.<sup>2</sup>

In recent times, artistic traditions have experienced a veritable renaissance. After a waning of sponsorship starting in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the craft traditions have seen a new advent of sponsorship because of the new tourist industry and the Tibetan Diaspora. In the 1970's a new group of artists emerged. Most of them did not learn casting from their fathers, but had to learn it through new and untraditional ways. Rather than simply falling along hereditary lines, artists today choose to enter into metal workshops where they are taught the skills and techniques of the craft to together with the rich artist traditions that the workshop practices. Today's artists have built upon the works of their predecessors bringing the crafts in the valley to even greater heights. They are excited and enthusiastic about their work, avidly researching ancient statues and artwork, and pushing each other to produce better and better works of art.

The Shakya families of the Kathmandu have traditionally been the primary metal craft artisans and gold smiths. While metal work - even the *sunar* (gold) class - is traditionally considered a rather low caste in Nepal and India, the Shakya clans actually comprise a rather high class within the Newar community of Kathmandu. They form a part of the religious hierarchy within their communities. Fittingly, their artisanship is primarily focused on the production of ritual objects and the making of sacred art. Instead of considering them as metal workers, they might even be thought of as those charged with the responsible for 'god-making' and the objects and symbols for religious worship. The two major centers of art production today are Oku Bahal and Na Bahal in Patna. In the Nepalese



context, within the Kathmandu valley, the main patrons of the artist workshops were rich traders and merchants, the king and royal court, but perhaps the biggest sponsors where the Tibetans.

In Tibet the Newar artisans were referred to as *ligyal* or 'alloy kings.' But we might take that another way, as bearers of the king of alloys: gold. It was only the Newars who had the tradition of gold-mercury gilding and cold gold painting.<sup>3</sup> While Tibet did not sponsor all of the arts coming from Nepal, it definitely sponsored some of the best. The Tibetans were demanding patrons who paid well. The Newar artists dominated the entire Himalayan region. Perhaps one of the most famous Newari artist to have worked in Tibet was Arniko. Originally called to Tibet by Sakya Pandita, he was later installed in Beijing as the head of the Imperial Casting Workshop.<sup>4</sup>

It is striking to note that, given the vast amount of statues within Tibet, no Tibetan metal casters have emerged in recent times. This suggests that most of the metal work within Tibet was done by foreigners and most notably by the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley.



*above: Small gajur (spire) that adorns the toran of one of the nine shrines around the Stupa.*

*opposite: Pieces from the old patahs before being repaired.*



The Newar communities practice three main metal craft traditions: Metal repoussé, lost wax casting, and gilding. As you are working with the metal directly, repoussé is considered to be much more difficult than casting. It creates a very fine and delicate piece of art that is much lighter than a cast version of the same piece. Nepal is perhaps the only place in the world where repoussé is still widely practiced. It makes sense for larger pieces because it requires less material. That being said, both casting and repoussé work are used somewhat interchangeably in Kathmandu.

The one condition that repoussé is ideally suited for is as an architectural element such as the shrines and spire at Svayambhu. It can be highly embellished and then laid over the structure of a stupa giving a beautiful covering of intricate details all gilt with gold. During the Svayambhu Renovation casting was used to create the statues seated in the torans above each shrine at Svayambhu while pretty much everything else has been done in repoussé.

Renovations present a unique opportunity to nurture the artistic traditions of the valley. Traditional conservation theories would suggest that missing and damaged pieces should never be replaced, and only supported enough to preserve the existing works of art. But in a place like Nepal, where the ancient monuments are living centers that embody the continuity of the local traditions, a restoration provides the opportunity for the new generation of artists to challenge themselves to reach the heights of their craft tradition, mingling their work with the historic works before them. It is a way to not only to renovate a site, but also to maintain and vitalize the artistic traditions necessary to maintain it. Too often the artisans of Nepal send their best pieces abroad. The renovation of a temple structure in Nepal is therefore a wonderful opportunity for an artist to install his work on a sacred monument within the valley; a place where he can come and see his own work displayed. As artists add their own works to the symbolic and ancient forms of their monuments, they can show with pride the



work that they did, keeping both their traditions and their crafts alive, at home, in Nepal.

*1. This has been established on the basis of a Buddha statue now in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art.*

*2. It was not until the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, when a shift in the ruling powers of the country resulted in a lack of funding for the traditional crafts, that artisans started casting statues in brass, a cheaper option that does not require gilding.*

*3. Another variation of gilding, where a layer of gold is painted onto a statue.*

*4. Another interesting story is when King Trisong Detsen's wife came from Nepal. We can understand it as a much larger partnership.*