

THE EARLIEST DATED NEWAR ARTIST'S SKETCHBOOK

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Fig. 1 Jivarama (act. 15th century); pages from a sketchbook in a folding book (*thyasaphu*) format, with Lords of the Horse deities and Tibetan teachers portraits; upper two folios, four of the eight “Lords of the Horse” deities; bottom folio, heads of Tibetan teachers, including Marpa and Milarepa, bottom left corner; Tibet (and Nepal?); 1435; ink and colors on paper, 39 leaves of an unknown number; each folio 5 × 9½ in. (12.5 × 24 cm); Suresh Neotia Collection, Jnana-Pravaha Centre Museum, Varanasi, no. 102

JIVARAMA’S SKETCHBOOK

Tibet (and Nepal?)

1435

SUMMARY

Sketchbooks reveal many insights about artists, their techniques, and working environments. Art historians Ian Alsop and Elena Pakhoutova examine the sketchbook of the Newar artist Jivarama, who traveled to Tibet in the fifteenth century and worked for Tibetan patrons. He drew subjects new to him following Chinese and Tibetan conventions and inscribed the drawings in Newar and Tibetan languages. With an inscribed date, Jivarama's freehand drawings are a useful reference for Nepalese painting and a testament to the close relationship between Nepalese and Tibetan artistic traditions

This The itinerant Newar artist Jivarama made this accordion-like book with sketched drawings. Sometime in the first half of the fifteenth century, he left his home in the Kathmandu Valley and ventured north to Tibet to ply his trade as a painter of religious icons. Like many artists throughout the world, he used a sketchbook to copy models and practice his drawing. Nowadays, in the West, artists use bound albums for sketches, but in fifteenth-century Nepal and until quite recently, artists often used a folding book (*thyasaphu*) to record their sketches. Jivarama included a dated notation written in Newari in elegant characters to a page in the middle of the book. This inscription is difficult to fully interpret and has long puzzled scholars; the following version draws from three published translations:

On the twelfth day of the dark fortnight of Vaisakha, in the year 555 [April–May 1435]: Jivarama himself went [to Tibet], and after consultations with *Gaya Chona* [*Bhota*], made this whole book himself. When further questions arose, he asked Lalacunava; then he returned [home] with it and continued work at *Nyaradvam*. [The book] was made according to Jivarama's idea.¹

The date likely identifies when the inscription was added to the book to record the circumstances of its production. It does not state when Jivarama set off on his trip or

finished the book. It simply marks the date of the inscription, as an unusual brief statement (colophon), about the book.

The colophon inscription leaves questions about the identity of mentioned personages and places, but we can still learn a lot from the book about Jivarama and the religious and artistic context at the time in Tibet.²

SEEING THE LARGER PICTURE

Sketchbooks are important to the study of art history because of what they reveal about artists, their techniques, and their working environments. Most religious art from the Himalayas originates from anonymous creators, yet this sketchbook gives us a name and a date related to the book's drawings.

Short captions to some images in both Tibetan and Newar script suggest that the artist collaborated with Tibetans, probably his patrons or fellow artists. The Tibetan labels, written in Tibetan cursive script, were likely added by a Tibetan collaborator, while Jivarama added labels in Newar script. Not all the images are labeled; perhaps Jivarama left those he was familiar with unmarked. His selection of images shows what he was seeing and learning to create—he recorded subjects not well known to him as material for his future work.

DRAWINGS OF NEW SUBJECTS

The figures represented in the sketchbook fall into several categories. Two sets of related images take up several pages of the book. One set comprises figures from the retinue of Jambhala, or Vaishravana, a god of wealth. This includes four of the eight mounted Lords of the Horse deities found on the first two pages (fig. 1) and the Four Guardian Kings of the four directions on the following four pages (fig. 2). Jivarama's drawings show his mastery of picturing these kings or generals, traditionally depicted

in Tibetan painting according to Chinese pictorial conventions, unfamiliar in his native Nepal. These protective figures are often painted on the entry walls framing Tibetan monasteries' portals and as outer figures for sets of arhat paintings.



Fig. 2 Jivarama (act. 15th century); Three Guardian Kings, pages from a sketchbook in a folding book (*thyasaphu*) format; Tibet (and Nepal?); 1435; ink and colors on paper, 39 leaves of an unknown number; each folio 5 × 9½ in. (12.5 × 24 cm); Suresh Neotia Collection, Jnana-Pravaha Centre Museum, Varanasi, no. 102

The sixteen arhats, or the awakened disciples of the Buddha, form another set of images common in Tibetan painting but relatively unknown in the Newar Buddhist context of the Kathmandu Valley. Jivarama first depicted the arhats in his sketchbook as a series of heads, annotated in Newar script but stating their Tibetan rather than Sanskrit names, which indicates he relied on Tibetan sources for identification. He portrayed them again, as full figures (fig. 3), later in the sketchbook, identified by labels in Newar script and Tibetan. Jivarama had confidently assimilated the distinct Chinese pictorial conventions adopted in the Tibetan tradition—complete compositions that include seats, attendants of each arhat, and washes of color.



Fig. 3 Jivarama (act. 15th century); Arhats, pages from a sketchbook in a folding book (*thyasaphu*) format; Tibet (and Nepal?); 1435; ink and colors on paper, 39 leaves of an unknown number; each folio 5 × 9½ in. (12.5 × 24 cm); Suresh Neotia Collection, Jnana-Pravaha Centre Museum, Varanasi, no. 102

TIBETAN BUDDHIST TEACHER PORTRAITS

Perhaps the most intriguing drawings in the sketchbook are portrayals of the heads of various Tibetan teachers. Jivarama's focus on depictions of lineage masters is significant, as such portraits are very important in Tibetan thangkas but not in Newar

paintings commissioned for Newar Buddhists.³ This furthers the evidence that Jivarama was working for Tibetan patrons.

Most of the images in this four-page section depict teachers of the Kagyu tradition, leading some researchers to believe that Jivarama's patron and the monastery where he worked belonged to this tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.⁴ The heads are masterpieces of idiosyncratic detail and emphasize specific physiognomy or distinctive features. There are often several views of the same teacher (lama). For instance, Jivarama made two portrayals of the great poet-yogi Milarepa next to his teacher Marpa (fig. 4). While Marpa looks similar in both portrayals, with a pleasant, well-defined face in three-quarter profile and long flowing hair, the portraits of Milarepa vary. In one depiction he looks to the right and appears younger, while in the other he looks straight on with concentration wrinkling his features. The artist confidently drew each head with great expression. Notably, the short captions in Newar script follow the Tibetan spelling, suggesting that whoever wrote the captions transcribed them from Tibetan, with Milarepa's name written as Mi-la-ras-pa. Another featured portrait is Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyelpo (1110–1170), a famous teacher of the Taklung branch of the Kagyu tradition.⁵ Tibetan portrayals of this master often depict him in a three-quarter view facing right, with a shadow-beard (fig. 5), as seen in the earlier paintings (figs. 1 and 2).⁶ In this sketch he is also drawn with a shadow-beard and facing right in three-quarter profile view (see fig. 1 lower page, second row, second from left). Jivarama likely sketched from existing examples, and the importance of these subjects may have inspired him to draw them more than once.



Fig. 4 Jivarama (act. 15th century); details of Tibetan teacher portraits, pages from a sketchbook in a folding book (*thyasaphu*) format; Tibet (and Nepal?); Suresh Neotia Collection, Jnana-Pravaha Centre Museum, Varanasi, no. 102



Fig. 5 Detail of Two Indian and Four Tibetan Masters; central Tibet; early 13th century; pigments on cloth; Rubin Museum of Art; C2006.42.4 (HAR 89141)

DRAWING TECHNIQUES AND VISUAL CONVENTIONS

There is a difference between the drawing styles and techniques of Tibetan and Newar artists. In the Tibetan tradition, student painters study proportions and ratios laid out in grids (*tiktse*).⁷ This system ensures that the deities, important figures, and symbolic forms are rendered with correct proportions in religious paintings. Students copy these prescribed iconometric conventions in sketchbooks to learn how to accurately draw the figures and then can draw them from memory. One especially authoritative iconometry handbook provides an example of standard Tibetan proportions, as in a page showing Vajravarahi (fig. 6), an important goddess in Nepalese and Tibetan Buddhism.⁸ Newar artists usually drew freehand: this more relaxed technique, seen in two small, quick sketches of tantric goddesses (*dakini*) in Jivarama's sketchbook (fig. 7), is evident in most Newar sketchbooks, which may occasionally include a simple grid. Artists from both traditions relied on textual descriptions for the rules of proportions.



Fig. 6 Lhodrak Kuyé Norbu Gyatso (act. 17th century); Drawing of Vajravarahi; ca. 1687; ink on paper; 15¾ × 15¾ in. (40 × 40 cm); Tibetan Autonomous Regional Archives (TARA), Lhasa; photograph courtesy Brill Publishers

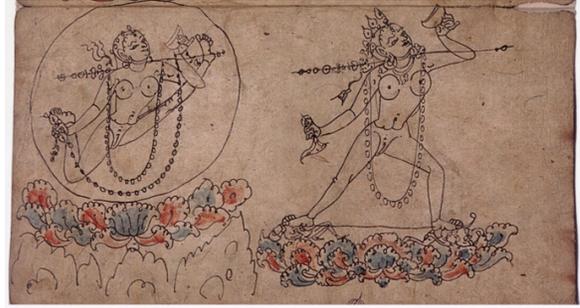


Fig. 7 Jivarama (act. 15th century); Dakinis, detail of a page from a sketchbook in a folding book (*thyasaphu*) format; Tibet (and Nepal?); 1435; ink and colors on paper, 39 leaves of an unknown number; each folio 5 × 9½ in. (12.5 × 24 cm); Suresh Neotia Collection, Jnana-Pravaha Centre Museum, Varanasi, no. 102

Jivarama's sketchbook is exceptional among Nepalese sketchbooks. It does not include many of the important standard figures of the shared Tibetan and Nepalese iconography. This absence implies that Jivarama was an experienced senior artist and had no need to reproduce images of the deities he already knew how to depict. He did include a two-page colored representation of Buddha Vajradhara, an important icon in both the Newar and Tibetan traditions (fig. 8). That sketch, however, presents the deity dressed in voluminous robes not found in Nepalese depictions, and, like the sketches of the arhats, the guardian kings, and Lords of the Horse, it shows Jivarama practicing the Chinese pictorial conventions he saw in Tibet. Among the most striking images in the sketchbook are the black and red sketches of floral patterns and mythological creatures (figs. 9 and 10)—designs that decorated the thrones of deities in Newar and Tibetan painting. Extraordinarily dense, complex, and exuberant, these drawings embody the essence and virtuosity of Newar creativity.



Fig. 8 Jivarama (act. 15th century); Buddha Vajradhara, pages from a sketchbook in a folding book (*thyasaphu*) format; Tibet (and Nepal?); Suresh Neotia Collection, Jnana-Pravaha Centre Museum, Varanasi, no. 102



Fig. 9 Jivarama (act. 15th century); Sketches of Floral Patterns and Mythological Creatures, pages from a sketchbook in a folding book (*thyasaphu*) format; Tibet (and Nepal?); 1435; ink and colors on paper, 39 leaves of an unknown number; each folio 5 × 9½ in. (12.5 × 24 cm); Suresh Neotia Collection, Jnana-Pravaha Centre Museum, Varanasi, no. 102



Fig. 10 Jivarama (act. 15th century); Sketches of Floral Patterns and Mythological Creatures, pages from a sketchbook in a folding book (*thyasaphu*) format; Tibet (and Nepal?); 1435; ink and colors on paper, 39 leaves of an unknown number; each folio 5 × 9½ in. (12.5 × 24 cm); Suresh Neotia Collection, Jnana-Pravaha Centre Museum, Varanasi, no. 102

ATTRIBUTIONS

Jivarama's sketchbook is widely acknowledged as the finest and the earliest dated example of Newar draftsmanship in a book of this kind. The remarkable quality and the securely dated inscription has inspired scholars to connect Jivarama with well-known but unsigned masterpieces. In a comprehensive essay on one of the finest known paintings of the deity Chakrasamvara (fig. 11), Dina Bangdel assigned the painting to a Newar artist and suggested that Jivarama may have created this work for a Tibetan patron.⁹ In an essay she wrote with John Huntington, they positively attributed a spectacular painting of the god Ganapati to Jivarama (fig. 12), relying on similarities between the sketchbook and the painting, and correlating the sketchbook's date with the dates of the patron who commissioned the painting of Ganapati.¹⁰ This is a

tantalizing but theoretical possibility absent Jivarama's name in the extensive inscriptions on the painting's front and reverse.



Fig. 11 The Buddhist Deities Chakrasamvara and Vajravarahi; Tibet (by a Newar artist); ca. 15th century; mineral pigments and traces of gold on cotton cloth; 54 × 45 in. (137.16 × 114.3 cm); Los Angeles County Museum of Art, from the Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, Museum Associates Purchase; M.70.1.3; photograph © Museum Associates/LACMA, www.lacma.org



Fig. 12 Dancing Ganapati; central Tibet; ca. mid-15th century; distemper on linen; 26¾ × 23¼ in. (68 × 59 cm); Private collection

The sketchbook remains among the most interesting material objects of artistic practice that demonstrates close cultural connections between the art of Nepal and Tibet, Newar artists and Tibetan patrons, and their close collaboration, which continues today.

FOOTNOTES

¹ This composite translation of the inscription draws from: 1) John Lowry, “A Fifteenth Century Sketchbook (Preliminary Study),” in *Essais sur l’Art du Tibet*, ed. Ariane Macdonald and Yoshiko Imaeda (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1977), 83, translation by Gautama Vajracharya; 2) John Huntington and Dina Bangdel, *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*, Exhibition catalog (Columbus, OH: Columbus Museum of Art, 2003), 496, translation by Kashinath Tamot; and 3) John Huntington, “Nevar Artist Jīvarāma’s Sketchbook,” in *Indian Art Treasures: Suresh Neotia Collection*, ed. R.C. Sharma, Kamal Giri, and Anjan Chakraverty (New Delhi: Mosaic Books, 2006), 76, translation by Kashinath Tamot. Italics added to emphasize proper names that appear to be Tibetan, recorded phonetically. Given the unknown spelling, the names are uncertain.

² This was a turbulent time in Tibet. From 1434 to 1435 Rinpungpa rulers overpowered the dynasty of Pakmodru in Tsang, central Tibet.

³ On portraits in thangkas, see David P. Jackson, *The Nepalese Legacy in Tibetan Painting: Early Beri to Ngor*, Exhibition catalog, Masterworks of Tibetan Painting Series 2 (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2010), 23

https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/nepalese_legacy_96.

⁴ John Huntington and Dina Bangdel, *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*, Exhibition catalog (Columbus, OH: Columbus Museum of Art, 2003), 136.

⁵ Noted here in Tibetan as ’gro mgon phag mo gru. The note in Newar script reads *doṅona*, which could be read as a phoneticized shorthand for “dro gon [la] na [ma].”

⁶ See Rubin Museum objects C2005.16.38 (HAR 65461); C2002.24.3 (HAR 65119). On the Tibetan portrayals, see Jane Casey Singer, “Early Portrait Painting in Tibet,” in *Function and Meaning in Buddhist Art*, ed. K.R. Kooij (Groningen: E. Forsten, 1995), 81–99.

⁷ See Christoph Cüppers, Leonard Kuijp, and Ulrich Pagel, “Handbook of Tibetan Iconometry: A Guide to the Arts of the 17th Century,” in *Introduction in Chinese by Döbjes Tsering Gyal*. *Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library* 16/4 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

⁸ Christoph Cüppers, Leonard Kuijp, and Ulrich Pagel, “Handbook of Tibetan Iconometry: A Guide to the Arts of the 17th Century,” in *Introduction in Chinese by Döbjes Tsering Gyal*. *Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library* 16/4 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pl. 70.

⁹ John Huntington and Dina Bangdel, *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*, Exhibition catalog (Columbus, OH: Columbus Museum of Art, 2003), 268.

¹⁰ John Huntington and Dina Bangdel, *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*, Exhibition catalog (Columbus, OH: Columbus Museum of Art, 2003), 495–97. Jane Casey Singer suggests that a highly skilled Tibetan artist may have created the painting. See Steven M. Kossak and Jane Casey Singer, *Sacred Visions: Early Paintings from Central Tibet*, Exhibition catalog (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), pl. 49, as well as <https://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/svision/i49.html>.

FURTHER READING

Jackson, David. P. 2010. *The Nepalese Legacy in Tibetan Painting*. Masterworks of Tibetan Painting Series 2. Exhibition catalog. New York: Rubin Museum of Art.
https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/nepalese_legacy_96.

Huntington, John. 2006. "Nevar Artist Jīvarāma's Sketchbook." In *Indian Art Treasures: Suresh Neotia Collection*, edited by R. C. Sharma, Kamal Giri, and Anjan Chakraverty, 76–85. New Delhi: Mosaic Books.

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