

# ICONS MARKING THE COMMUNAL PERFORMANCE OF BUDDHIST RITUALS

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Fig. 1 Plaque Commemorating the Celebration of the Bhimaratha Old Age Ritual; Kathmandu, Nepal; dated by inscription 1775; copper repoussé; 17½ × 11 1/8 × 3 5/8 in. (44.5 × 28.3 × 9.2 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; Gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin; C2006.66.63 (HAR 700095)

## PLAQUE COMMEMORATING THE BHIMARATHA OLD AGE RITUAL

Kathmandu, Nepal  
November 1775

## SUMMARY

Nepalese icons often commemorate a particular ritual event. This copper image with Buddhist deities memorializes a ceremony to celebrate an elderly couple's age of seventy-seven, during which their sons pulled them through the city on a chariot and a tantric priest performed fire rituals. Scholar of Newar Buddhism Alexander von Rospatt introduces these commemorative icons of Kathmandu, showing how Buddhist ritual and commissioning art is part of everyday life for families and communities.

## COMMEMORATIVE ICONS

Icons in the Nepalese tradition of Kathmandu, mainly scroll paintings, more rarely metal objects such as the plaque described here, commemorate the performance of a particular ritual. Typically, such objects depict the principal deity to whom the ritual is dedicated and the main scenes of the ritual. Particularly prominent is the commemoration and depiction of the *bhimaratha* ritual, as in the gilded-copper plaque here. This ritual is celebrated when the elder has become seven decades, seven years, seven months, and seven days old. Husbands celebrate this ritual with their wives as a couple, irrespective of their spouses' age. However, women, if widowed or unmarried, celebrate this ritual on their own when they themselves reach this age. The elaborate ceremonies include apotropaic rites of appeasement (*shanti*), ensuring that the elder lives beyond the completion of seven "extended" decades as he (or she) enters (by Nepalese counting) the potentially calamitous eighth decade. At the same time, the ceremonies serve to sacralize and venerate the elder alongside his wife, with whom he is celebrated and mounts the bhima chariot (*ratha*) so as to be conveyed around town by his family, just as deities are.<sup>1</sup>

As we learn from the inscription at the bottom of the plaque here, the elders on the chariots are a certain Chintamuni and his wife Ratnalakshmi, coppersmiths from the

quarter of Madu (in Kathmandu). The “old age ritual [Newari: *jyatha jako*] of ascending to heaven [*svargarohana*] [when reaching] seventy-seven years” was performed for them by their “two [sons], Amritamuni and Jayadharmamuni,” on Sunday, November 11, 1775. The horses pulling the chariot—in ritual practice they are represented in wood or drawings on paper—suggest that it is equated with the sun, whom horses pull across the firmament.

The inscription identifies the plaque as a “golden image of the thrice-illustrious Ushnishavijaya the Buddhist deity of longevity. In accordance with her standard iconography, she is portrayed as eight-armed and multifaced, and set in the dome of a stupa. The stupa here is executed in the likeness of the Svayambhu chaitya, because this is the archetypical stupa in the Nepalese tradition. The point is not to represent Svayambhu per se, but to appropriately render Ushnishavijaya, who is propitiated here as part of the *bhimarahta* to prolong the life of the celebrated elders. However, not only is Svayambhu depicted as a backdrop for Ushnishavijaya, but the artist also took great care to render faithfully the details of the chaitya, particularly its crowning superstructure (fig. 2). For this, he clearly drew upon an architectural drawing (or on a shared source) that had been made on the occasion of the chaitya’s renovation some twenty years earlier.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, tied to the mythology of Svayambhu, on the left Manjushri is rendered with his emblematic raised sword and the equally emblematic monkey offering a jackfruit.



Fig. 2 Detail of Plaque Commemorating the Celebration of the Bhimaratha Old Age Ritual, showing finial of the Svayambhu chaitya; Kathmandu, Nepal; dated by inscription 1775; copper repoussé; Rubin Museum of Art; Gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin; C2006.66.63 (HAR 700095). The finial is flanked by the moon and sun, and crowned by the parasol; the central pillar (*yashtri*) protruding through the series of thirteen rings (*chakravali*), has a crystal resting in a depression hollowed out in its upper surface.

## PAINTED SCROLLS COMMEMORATING THE *BHIMARATHA* OLD AGE RITUALS

The performance of the *bhimaratha* is commemorated most often with painted scrolls (*paubha*). Typically, their iconography accords with the plaque here, but is more complex, and the depiction of the ceremony is more detailed. An exquisite example is a painted scroll from 1830 (fig. 3), formerly in the Jucker Collection.<sup>3</sup> Ushnishavijaya is seen in the dome of a chaitya that again resembles Svayambhu. The painter was careful to render the chaitya in its mythological context as resting upon a lotus blossom rising above the waters that once covered the Nepal Valley. The chaitya is flanked by a set of large fearsome (*krodha*) deities encircling and protecting Ushnishavijaya in the center—on the left, the blue Achala and the yellow Takkiraja (fig. 4), and on the right red,

Niladanda and green Mahabala (fig. 5). In addition, the nine planetary deities (*navagraha*) are distributed around the chaitya, at left from the bottom, Aditya, Soma, Mangala, and Budha up to Brihaspati, and at right from the top, Shukra, Sani, Rahu, and Ketu, up to the deity standing for the configuration under which the elder was born (*janman*). They are included because as part of the bhimaratha ritual the celebrants propitiate the planets to ward off their potentially malign influences. Folded into their propitiation, the elders also worship the Five Protector Goddesses (*pancharaksha*), who are depicted here in the socle of the chaitya (fig. 6).



Fig. 3 Painted Scroll of *Bhimaratha Ritual*; Hāku Bāhāh, Kathmandu, Nepal; dated by inscription January 1830; distemper and gold on cloth; 35 × 23 in. (89 × 58.5 cm); Private collection; photograph by Alexander von Rospatt, December 20, 2003, in home of Mischa Jucker, Basel, Switzerland



Fig. 4 Detail of Painted Scroll of *Bhimaratha Ritual*, showing *krodha* and planetary deities to the left of the chaitya; Hāku Bāhāḥ, Kathmandu, Nepal; dated by inscription January 1830; Private collection; photograph by Alexander von Rospatt, December 20, 2003, in home of Mischa Jucker, Basel, Switzerland



Fig. 5 Detail of Painted Scroll of *Bhimaratha Ritual*, showing *krodha* and planetary deities to the right of the chaitya; Hāku Bāhāḥ, Kathmandu, Nepal; dated by inscription January 1830; Private collection; photograph by Alexander von Rospatt, December 20, 2003, in home of Mischa Jucker, Basel, Switzerland



Fig. 6 Detail of Painted Scroll of *Bhimaratha Ritual*, showing the socle of the Svayambhu chaitya with the four-faced and eight-armed protector goddesses known as Pancharakshas; Hāku Bāhāḥ, Kathmandu, Nepal; dated by inscription January 1830; Private collection; photograph by Alexander von Rospatt, December 20, 2003, in home of Mischa Jucker, Basel, Switzerland. The Pancharakshas, from left, are Mahapratisara, Mahamantranusarṇi, Mahasahasrapramardani, Mahishtavati, and Mahamayuri.

In the register below the chaitya and the attending deities are depicted the main scenes of the *bhimaratha* ritual. First the elders are ritually bathed with blessed waters sprinkled by their sons, assisted by the Vajracharya priest, dressed in white with a reddish shawl draped over his left and adorned with the crown characteristically worn by tantric officiants in the Nepalese Buddhist tradition (fig. 7).<sup>4</sup> The celebrants then mount the chariot or palanquin (*ratha-arohana*) or a throne prepared for the occasion, thereby enacting their deification. They are now worshipped by their children and other kin, who pour water from a conch shell onto their feet (*padargha*) and bow to them with their foreheads. Having been worshipped in this manner, the elders are conveyed around town in carts (*ratha*) pulled by family members (fig. 8), just as deities are conveyed around town on the occasion of their annual chariot *yatra*. On the far left of the register, the family priest can be seen performing the fire ritual (*yagnya*) (fig. 9), in which complex tantric rituals are typically embedded in this tradition.



Fig. 7 Detail of Painted Scroll of *Bhimaratha* Ritual, showing ritual bath of the elders administered by their senior sons, assisted by the family priest; Hāku Bāhāh, Kathmandu, Nepal; dated by inscription January 1830; private collection; photograph by Alexander von Rospatt, December 20, 2003, in home of Mischa Jucker, Basel, Switzerland. After having donned new clothes, including head gear, the elders mount the throne prepared for the occasion, so as to be venerated by family members. The priest oversees this rite while ringing a bell with his left hand and reciting incantations.



Fig. 8 Detail of Painted Scroll of *Bhimaratha* Ritual, showing the chariot (*ratha*) with the elders being towed by grandchildren and great-grandchildren; Hāku Bāhāḥ, Kathmandu, Nepal; dated by inscription January 1830; private collection; photograph by Alexander von Rospatt, December 20, 2003, in home of Mischa Jucker, Basel, Switzerland



Fig. 9 Detail of Painted Scroll of *Bhimaratha* Ritual, showing fire ritual; Hāku Bāhāḥ, Kathmandu, Nepal; dated by inscription January 1830; Private collection; photograph by Alexander von Rospatt, December 20, 2003, in home of Mischa Jucker, Basel, Switzerland. Assisted by the patrons of the ritual, the priest casts the offerings arrayed in front of him into the fire as offerings to the worshipped Buddhist deities.



Below these scenes of the *bhimaratha* ceremony, the family members sponsoring this ritual—that is, the sons and grandsons of the celebrants along with their wives, children, and grandchildren, separated according to gender—are depicted as worshipping a tantric (esoteric) deity, maybe a form of Heruka. The elders are not portrayed here because the ritual is performed for them, and hence they are not treated as sponsors who have instigated and sponsored its performance. Just as in the case of the plaque, at the very bottom a commemorative inscription records the date (January 20, 1830) and the names of the celebrated elders and their kin sponsoring the rite. In addition to the uncounted scroll paintings kept and worshipped by the Buddhists of Kathmandu in their homes, a considerable number of such scroll paintings, some of them magnificently executed, dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, survive in art collections around the world.

These icons are not just commemorative objects, but also play an important role in the ceremony they record. That is, alongside the sacralization of the elders they are consecrated in a complex series of tantric rituals so as to imbue them with the presence of Ushnishavijaya and of the other deities depicted. As consecrated icons, they are subsequently kept in a dedicated chamber in the home of the elders, who worship them daily (*nitya puja*) so as to ensure longevity and ensure a good rebirth, ideally in Sukhavati, the heavenly realm of Buddha Amitabha, where they may proceed effortlessly on their path to Buddhahood.

### **ICONS COMMEMORATING OTHER RITUALS**

Such commemorative icons are characteristic of Nepalese Buddhism. Some also record public vow practices (*vrata*) dedicated to Vasudhara, and others record the performance of the so-called *laksha chaitya* ritual devoted to the production of one hundred thousand (*laksha*) miniature clay chaityas, resembling *tsatsas* in the Tibetan tradition. Collectively

performed by a family or local community during the so-called month of virtue (Gunla), which coincides largely with July–August, participants gather each day in the early hours, fasting, to make clay chaityas one inch in height with the help of metal molds. In the process they consecrate the chaityas by inserting a rice grain (or grains) empowered by mantra recitation. Upon the conclusion of the month, all the clay chaityas thus produced are either inserted in the socle of a new chaitya erected at the time, or they are piled up on the riverbank in the shape of a chaitya and worshipped, and then consigned to the waters. Paintings commemorating this ritual typically display a chaitya in the style of Svayambhu with a socle replete with such clay chaityas. One exquisite example records the different steps in the production of the clay chaityas in vignettes distributed around the chaitya in the center, executed in the likeness of Svayambhu placed upon a base made of painted clay chaityas (fig. 10).<sup>5</sup> The top register shows again the Svayambhu chaitya, here flanked by the white and red Lokeshvara of Kathmandu and Bungamati respectively.

The commemorative plaque and painted icons discussed here attest to the important role rituals and artworks play in Nepalese Buddhism. They also demonstrate how performances of complex rituals can become family affairs, bearing out how in this tradition the practice of Buddhism is a collective endeavor undertaken within society, rather than the quest for the liberation pursued by individual practitioners who have renounced their ties with society.



Fig. 10 Painted Scroll of Laksha Chaitya Ritual; Kathmandu, Nepal; dated by inscription January 1808; opaque watercolor on cotton cloth; 38 × 24 in. (96.5 × 61 cm); Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Avery Brundage Collection; B61 D10+; photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alexander von Rospatt, “Negotiating the Passage beyond a Full Span of Life: Old Age Rituals among the Newars,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2014): 104–29.

<sup>2</sup> This drawing (19¾ x 26¾ in., or 50.3 x 68 cm) of the Svayambhu chaitya, which records in all details its measurements after the completion of the extensive rebuilding in 1757, has been published as manuscript C in Bernhard Kölver, *Re-Building a Stūpa: Architectural Drawings of the Svayambhūnāth* (Bonn: VGH Wissenschaftsverlag, 1992). See also Alexander von Rospatt, “The Past Renovations of the Svayambhūcaitya,” in *Light of the Valley: Renewing the Sacred Art and Traditions of Svayambhu*, ed. Tsering Palmo Gellek and Padma Dorje Maitland (Cazadero, CA: Dharma Publishing, 2011), 157–206.

<sup>3</sup> See Hugo E. Kreijger, *Kathmandu Valley Painting: The Jucker Collection* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 82, no. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander von Rospatt, “Vajracharya Crowns and Diadems: Structure, Iconography, and Function,” in *Awaken: A Tibetan Buddhist Journey Toward Enlightenment*, ed. John Henry Rice and Jeffrey S. Durham, Exhibition catalog (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2019), 170–79.

<sup>5</sup> See John Huntington and Dina Bangdel, *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art, Exhibition catalog* (Columbus, OH: Columbus Museum of Art, 2003), 116, cat. no. 20.

## FURTHER READING

Huntington, John C., and Dina Bangdel. 2003. *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*. Exhibition catalog. Columbus, OH: Columbus Museum of Art; Chicago: Serindia.

Kreijger, Hugo E. 1999. *Kathmandu Valley Painting: The Jucker Collection*. Boston: Shambhala.

Rospatt, Alexander von. 2014b. "Negotiating the Passage beyond a Full Span of Life: Old Age Rituals among the Newars." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 37, no. 1, 104–29.

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