

# DIVINE KINGSHIP IN NEPAL MANDALA

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Fig. 1 Vishnu Riding on Garuda; Nepal; dated 1004; gilt-copper repoussé; 16 1/2 × 11 5/8 × 3 3/8 in. (41.9 × 29.5 × 8.6 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Zimmerman Family Collection, Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace, Jeffrey B. Soref and Natalie Soref Gifts, 2012; 2012.463; CC0 – Creative Commons(CC0 1.0)

## VISHNU RIDING ON GARUDA

Nepal  
dated 1004

## SUMMARY

Buddhism and Hinduism have flourished side by side in the Kathmandu Valley. Art historian Kerry Lucinda Brown examines this gilt-copper depiction of the Hindu god Vishnu riding the winged Garuda, which was created as a cover for a stone sculpture. Such images allowed Nepalese kings to identify themselves with the Hindu gods as symbols of divine kingship and ritual authority, and Buddhists in Tibet would replicate these symbolic compositions for centuries to come.

For the inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, Buddhism and Hinduism have been practiced side by side since the earliest periods of recorded history. Adherents of both faiths patronized temples and monastic complexes, in addition to erecting sculptures across the valley as statements of religious devotion. These works gave physical form to the gods believed to inhabit the area, constituting the region referred to as Nepal Mandala, the historical name for the confederation of Newar kingdoms that ruled the valley. According to Buddhist belief systems, sculptures serve as public statements of religious devotion, while also generating significant spiritual merit (punya) for the patron. Archaeological evidence suggests that Buddhist and Hindu visual culture was well established in the region by the start of the Licchavi period (ca. 300–ca. 879 CE). Indeed, the surviving material remains from this period attest to active veneration of the primary Hindu gods, including Shiva, Vishnu, and the Goddess, with strong visual parallels with Indian kingdoms to the south. Whereas the power of the Licchavi rulers waned during the Transitional or Thakuri period (ca. 878 to ca. 1200), Newar artistic developments flourished. Inspired by stylistic traditions from northern India, most notably from the Gupta and Pala Empires, artistic production in the Kathmandu Valley thrived.

## VISHNU RIDING ON GARUDA

Dated to 1004 CE, Vishnu Riding on Garuda is one of the finest examples of Newar repoussé from the eleventh century. Vishnu, an important Hindu god associated with preservation and cosmic order, emerged as an important deity in the Kathmandu Valley by the fifth century. Vishnu's mythological narratives and iconographic features derive from Sanskrit Vedic texts and great Indian epics like the *Mahabharata*, which describe his heroic actions and divine powers. Made of gilt-copper repoussé, this piece was originally fabricated as a covering for a separate stone or metal sculpture of Vishnu seated on his half-man, half-bird mount (*vahana*), Garuda. However, with the original sculpture lost, the covering has become an image in its own right. This particular form is also known as Garudasana Vishnu. An inscription at the bottom of the piece (fig. 2) reads, "In the year 1004 . . . in the Jichchodgesu district of the Nepal Mandala, the devout Sri Lipa gave (this) covering [*kosa*] to Garudadhaja."<sup>1</sup> The title Garudadhaja is a reference to Vishnu Garudadhvaja (One Whose Banner is Garuda), a form of Vishnu riding on the back of Garuda, who literally becomes a throne for the god (*Garudasana*).<sup>2</sup> Historically, this title is significant because the Gupta rulers of northern India, who were contemporaries of the Licchavi kings, used this symbol as their dynastic emblem. Similarly, the Licchavi rulers of Nepal Mandala patronized numerous monuments and temples dedicated to Vishnu during their reign, demonstrating shared notions of divine kingship and ritual authority that endured through later generations. Thus, Vishnu Riding on Garuda provides an opportunity to understand how individuals in the eleventh century asserted their religious beliefs through the continued adornment of earlier sculpted works. Further, Vishnu Riding on Garuda allows us to contextualize the larger cultural significance of divine kingship and cosmic order in Nepal Mandala, a notion with lasting significance into the Malla period (ca. 1200–1769) and Shah dynasty (1769–2008).



Fig. 2 Inscription on the base of Vishnu Riding on Garuda; Nepal; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Zimmerman Family Collection, Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace, Jeffrey B. Soref and Natalie Soref Gifts, 2012; 2012.463; CC0 – Creative Commons (CC0 1.0)

## VISHNU RIDING ON GARUDA

Vishnu and Garuda are the primary focus of this visual narrative. The vertical arrangement of forms, with Vishnu seated astride Garuda, expresses the vital supporting role Garuda plays in assisting Vishnu as he fulfills his dharmic duties. Garuda's outstretched arms are unwavering in their power. Vishnu's feet rest directly on Garuda's wings. They support Vishnu and his two wives, Bhū Devi and Lakshmi, shown tucked between Vishnu and the spirals of Garuda's wings on each side of the piece. These two goddesses, portrayed with their hands pressed together in a gesture of reverence (*anjali mudra*), are associated with the earth and abundance, reiterating Vishnu's duty to maintain order to support the cultivation of material and spiritual wealth. Vishnu has four arms and wears an elaborate crown, with his head surrounded by a flaming halo of a style typical for this period (fig. 3). His upper arms are associated with power and protection. The discus (*chakra*), grasped in his upper right hand, and



the mace (gada), held in his upper left hand, are powerful weapons that reaffirm Vishnu's divine power and ritual authority. More pacific in nature, his lower hands hold a conch shell (shankha) in his left and a lotus seed (padma) in his right, both in a gesture of bestowal, with attributes associated with creation and spiritual transformation.

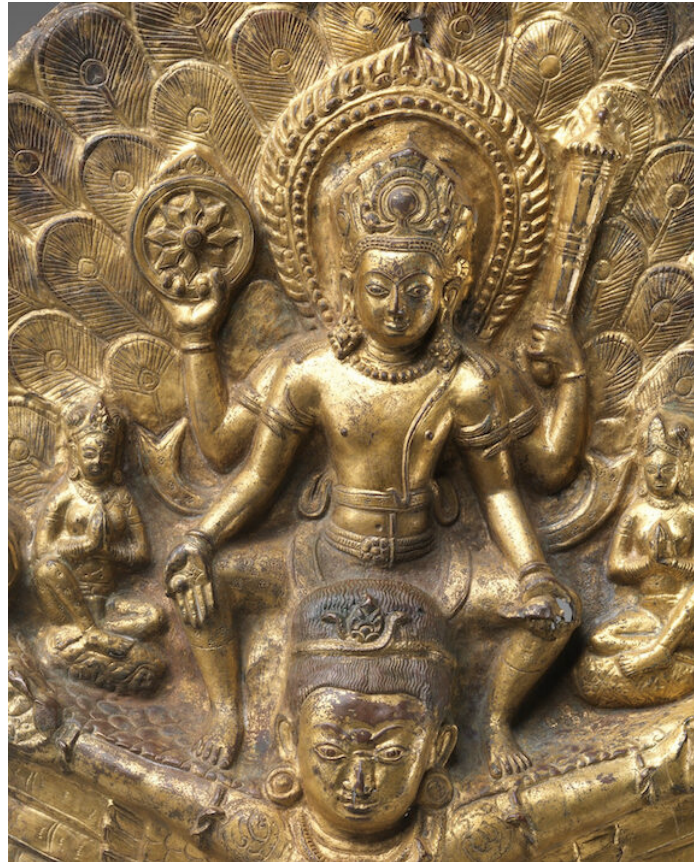


Fig. 3 Vishnu, detail from Vishnu Riding on Garuda; Nepal; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Zimmerman Family Collection, Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace, Jeffrey B. Soref and Natalie Soref Gifts, 2012; 2012.463; CC0 – Creative Commons (CC0 1.0)

The importance of Vishnu to the rulers of Nepal is attested by the continued patronage of religious buildings, monuments, and sites dedicated to Vishnu and his incarnations (*avatars*).<sup>3</sup> One of the oldest surviving sites dedicated to Vishnu in Nepal Mandala is the hilltop temple complex of Changyu Narayan, located on the eastern edge of the Kathmandu Valley. An inscription installed at the site by King Manadeva (r. 464–506

CE) dated to 464 describes the revered position of kings within Newar society and, more importantly, the parallels established between the living ruler and the celestial divine embodied by Vishnu.<sup>4</sup> The site contains several sculptures of Vishnu, including a circa seventh–eighth-century carving of Garudasana Vishnu (fig. 4). A similar sculpture would have likely served as the original image for the repoussé piece currently under discussion. This composition remained quite popular during the Licchavi and Transitional or Thakuri periods and continued to appear during the Malla period and Shah dynasty.



Fig. 4 Garudasana Vishnu; Changyu Narayan Temple; Nepal; ca. 7th–8th century; stone; photograph by John C. Huntington, courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art



While he serves as the seat for the gods above him, Garuda is in fact the largest figure in the composition. Presented crouching, with his talons tucked tightly below his body, Garuda wears snake (naga) jewelry, attesting to his control over snakes and the bodies of water they control.<sup>5</sup> His outstretched arms reveal multiple layers of feathers, with swirled details chased into his chest that weave together his human and avian features. Garuda's plumage extends across the lower register, with his tail feathers rising behind the divine triad, framing them in an elaborate peacock plumage. The stacking of deities to convey a visual hierarchy is a popular compositional device used in Nepalese art to establish relationships between personas. Vishnu Riding on Garuda reiterates the importance of the Hindu god Vishnu and his divine mount, Garuda, to serve and protect the inhabitants of the kingdom.

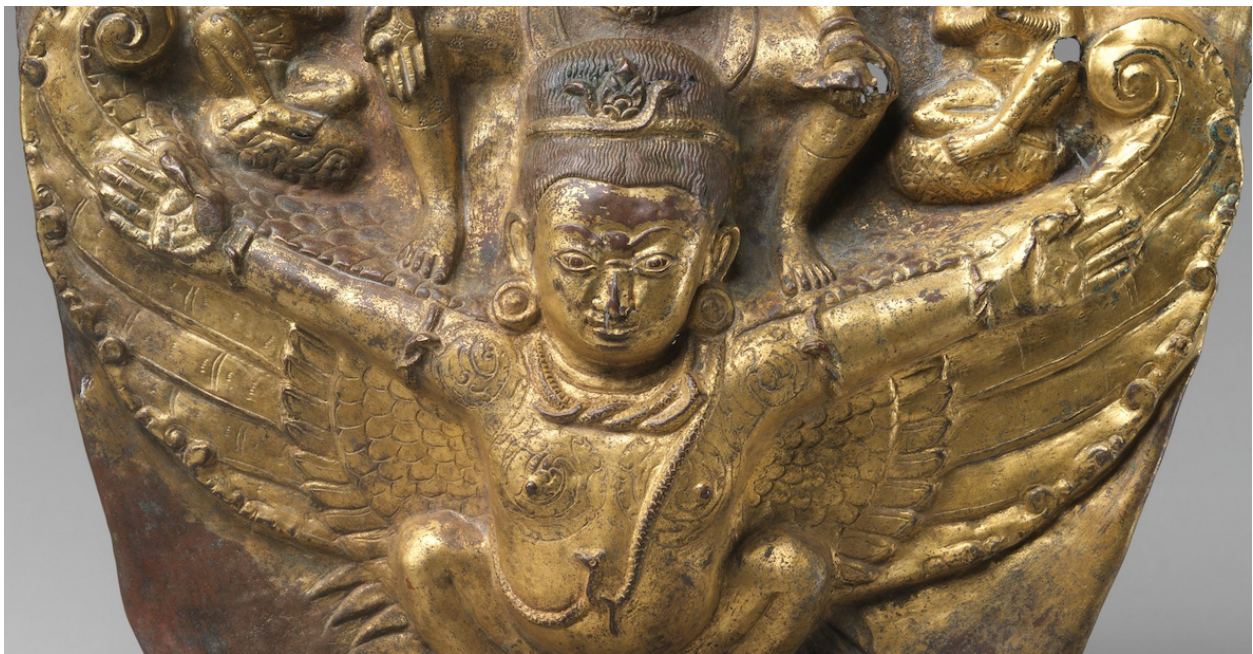


Fig. 5 Garuda, detail from Vishnu Riding on Garuda; Nepal; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Zimmerman Family Collection, Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace, Jeffrey B. Soref and Natalie Soref Gifts, 2012; 2012.463; CC0 – Creative Common (CC0 1.0)

By the Malla period and continuing into the Shah dynasty, the kings of Nepal, considered living incarnations of Vishnu, incorporated Garuda imagery into their thrones. A fantastic example is seen in the throne given to King Srinivas Malla in 1666

(fig. 6). The gilt-copper throne is attached to a wood frame. Two elements emerge from the base of the throne, each featuring a pair of elephants surmounted by a lion, with a large image of Garuda in the base between them (fig. 7). Here, the use of visual devices clearly conflates the kings of Nepal with the Hindu god Vishnu. When seated on the throne, the king assumes the same position as Vishnu from Vishnu Riding on Garuda and similar Garudasana Vishnu forms. The composition displays a clear understanding of the connection between Vishnu, Garuda, and the kings of Nepal Mandala.



Fig. 6 Throne of the Patan Kings; Patan, Nepal; 1666; gilt copper, wood, modern upholstery; 74 × 57 ½ × 57 ½ in. (188 × 146 × 146 cm); Patan Museum; photograph © Kerry Lucinda Brown



Fig. 7 Garuda below the seat, detail from Throne of the Patan Kings; Patan, Nepal; Patan Museum; photograph © Kerry Lucinda Brown

Similarly, the appearance of this visual format in later Tibetan works attests to the cross-cultural exchange in the region. For example, in the Hariharahari Lokeshvara painting presented to the Qianlong emperor (r. 1735–1796) by the Sixth Panchen Lama, the Nepalese stacked composition is utilized with a Buddhist deity in a Tibetan context.<sup>6</sup> Again, we see how vertical hierarchies establish relationships and reaffirm cultural dominance. With this example, Buddhism asserts its authority over Hinduism: bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara sits on the shoulders of Vishnu, who in turn sits on Garuda, who stands on the back of a snow lion, yet the interdependent relationship cannot be overlooked.<sup>7</sup>



## REPOUSSÉ AS OFFERINGS TO THE GODS

Repoussé has a rich history in the Kathmandu Valley, and Newar artisans were prized for their metalworking capabilities throughout the Himalayas and Inner Asia. The technique requires the delicate handling of metal sheets that are hammered from the reverse side to create a three-dimensional relief on the front. Within Newar religious traditions, clay, wood, and stone deities may be covered with repoussé fittings as adornments. The metal sheath can serve as a complete dress, armor, or ornaments applied to the deity.<sup>8</sup>

With Vishnu Riding on Garuda, the metal sheath once covered an older sculpture that would have served as the base for the repoussé. No doubt the importance of Vishnu and Garuda to the ritual and cultural heritage of Nepal Mandala was on the mind of the devout Sri Lipa in the eleventh century when they commissioned the copper repoussé covering. Covers such as these were offered to the deity as a gift (*dana*) to cultivate spiritual merit for the donor. In addition to protecting the original carving, these metal covers further beautified and ornamented the image. The new layer of repoussé became a way for the donor to connect their merit to the living history of the original sculpture. It activated the form, renewing the deity for a new generation of patrons. When the devout Sri Lipa gave this new covering to Garudadhvaja, they were attesting to the importance and value that this deity had for the community. The new layer of repoussé acknowledges the power of the sacred image for those who worship in its presence.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.,

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/78185>.

<sup>2</sup> Gautama V. Vajracharya, “Kirtimukha, The Serpentine Motif, and Garuda: The Story of a Lion That Turned into a Big Bird,” *Artibus Asiae* 74, no. 2 (2014): 311–36.

<sup>3</sup> Pratapaditya Pal, “Cosmic Forms of Hindu Divinities in Nepal,” in *Nepal: Old Images, New Insights*. Pal, Pratapaditya, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2004), 47–50.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Riccardi, “The Inscription of King Mānadeva at Changu Narayan,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 4 (1989): 611, 616–17.

<sup>5</sup> Adalbert J. Gail, “Nagas of Kathmandu Valley, with Special Reference to the Lichchhavi Period,” in *Nepal: Old Images, New Insights*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2004), 37–45.

<sup>6</sup> Zhang Yajing, “An Iconographical Study of Hariharivāhanodbhavalokeśvara (Hariharahari Guanyin) Image,” *Palace Museum Journal* 1 (2014): 25.

<sup>7</sup> Zhang Yajing, “An Iconographical Study of Hariharivāhanodbhavalokeśvara (Hariharahari Guanyin) Image,” *Palace Museum Journal* 1 (2014): 25.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Shepherd Slusser, Nutan Sharma, and James A. Giambrone, “Metamorphosis: Sheet Metal to Sacred Image in Nepal,” *Artibus Asiae* 58, no. 3–4 (1999): 221.

## FURTHER READING

Slusser, Mary Shepherd. 1996. “Lord Vishnu and the Kings of Nepal.” *Asian Art & Culture: The Himalayas* 9, no. 3, 9–29.

Slusser, Mary Shepherd, Nutan Sharma, and James A. Giambrone. 1999.

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## CITATION

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<https://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/vishnu-riding-on-garuda/>.

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