

## ***The Gilded Buddha: The Traditional Art of the Newar Metal Casters in Nepal***

by Alex R. Furger, with a contribution by Ratna Jyoti Shakya. Basel and Frankfurt: Librum Publishers & Editors. 2017, 328 pp., ISBN 978-3-906897-05-9, CHF 85, £ 75, USD 90.

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For a reader or scholar interested in Nepal's traditional metal craft, this field of study is still rarely investigated, bar a few exceptions. Alex R. Furger's seminal work *The Gilded Buddha* provides a comprehensive study of all aspects of traditional metal crafts in the Newar community. Furger, a well-established archæologist, was head of the Roman archæological site Augusta Raurica. In this book, he meticulously examines each and every step of metal craft production, starting from the lost-wax technique of casting to painting and adding inlays to the finished products. This excellently produced book builds on earlier works and archives, and Furger enriches it with extensive field research he carried out in Patan.

The book comprises five parts, preceded by the Acknowledgements, the Preface and an Introduction. In the Preface, the author discusses the function of Buddhist images: that it lies not in worship but in facilitating meditation. Given this function, artists lend importance to the traditional iconography. Furger argues that the city of Patan is practically the only place where the lofty art form of casting Buddhist images in metal is still flourishing. For the author, this city and its Oku Bahal quarter has been the focus of field research since 2013. In the Introduction, the author takes a brief look at the situation of artists and at the supply of raw materials in historic times compared with today. He mentions, albeit only briefly, some historical reports from the medieval period regarding the exchange of artistic knowledge between India, Nepal, Tibet and China.

Part One of the book covers the technical aspects of the production of metal statues. It begins with an explanation of the division of labour and points out the fact that outsourcing to non-Newars has surged

in recent years and that the traditionally secretive Shakya trade is now more and more dependent on cross-caste people. The book then describes the different stages in production including wax modelling, clay-mould making, lost-wax casting and the later phase of 'cold works', such as trimming, chasing, grinding and polishing. It conveys to the reader how failure and disappointment are sometimes part and parcel of metal casting and how artists still perform toxic processes with no proper protection.

Part Two deals with the historical and social background of Newar metal casting and its artists. Furger argues that the Newar metal casting tradition has not been handed down only orally since a number of historical textual sources containing instructions about it do exist. To support this, he briefly discusses some ancient and medieval Indian textual sources such as Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, *Citralakṣaṇa*, *Pratimālakṣaṇa* that deal with metal casting, proportions, consecration rituals, alchemy, iconography, and arts and crafts. He also mentions works by Pema Karpo and Jīvarāma, and two relatively recent sketchbooks. However, these are more in keeping with the Lamaistic art tradition. Here, it would also be appropriate to mention texts such as the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*<sup>1</sup> and *Sādhanaṃālā*,<sup>2</sup> which are still popular among Newar Buddhist artists seeking to understand Vajrayana deities' iconography and rituals.

This part also contains a section written by Ratna Jyoti Shakya who reports that the revival of traditional lost-wax casting in recent decades can be attributed to the arrival of Tibetans and the advent of tourism. The boom in tourism and the growing demand for Nepalese metal statues have led to such a steep increase in prices that most local people can no longer afford them. As an insider, R.J. Shakya distinguishes between three different qualities of metal statues of deities that are produced in Patan, namely 'temple quality', 'private devotion quality', and 'tourist quality'.

In Part Three of the book, Furger focuses on other forms of Nepalese metalwork. Here he describes the stages in sand casting, and casting household utensils and bells. He pays particular attention to the

1 For editions of the *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, see Bhattacharya (1949) and Lee (2004). For its English translation together with the Tibetan text, see Lokesh Chandra et al. (2015).

2 For an edition of the *Sādhanaṃālā*, see Bhattacharya (1968).

production of bells, which also uses the lost-wax casting method. A large section of this part of the book is dedicated to chased copperware and brassware that are produced using hammering and soldering techniques. He documents the work of Tamrakars who specialise in producing copper household and ritual objects. The repoussé technique of hammering is also closely examined.

Part Four investigates the source and supply of materials required for metalwork. It examines different types of alloys used in Nepal and India, and gives their metal analyses. This part also informs us of price trends for the most important metals such as copper, brass, zinc, silver and gold over the last half century. In addition, it covers the preparation of different types of clay required for moulding, the preparation of local crucibles, the supply of industrial crucibles and the sources of modelling materials such as beeswax.

Part Five presents a summary and lists metal analyses.

*The Gilded Buddha* serves as a unique and comprehensive study of Nepalese metalwork, especially the lost-wax casting technique. It presents a detailed overview of the existing typology of metal crafts in Nepal. The book mentions some thirty Nepalese artists as sources of information, together with their pictures, thus spotlighting them and highlighting their specialities. Nevertheless, the reader might have expected to learn more about knowledge transfer and the teacher-disciple relationship.

Enriched with plenty of illustrations and photographs, both old and new, and of an impressive quality, this book also serves to document the process of manufacturing, the tools used, the different techniques, the quality of products and the sources of materials. In describing the processes and materials, the book uses a great deal of Sanskrit and Newari terminology, which is useful for further studies. A greater effort to harmonise the spelling of this terminology and names would render the writing more effective.

All in all, for a reader interested in traditional Nepalese metal craft, this book could be regarded as an exemplary reference work.

## References

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