‘Preserving Tradition; Embracing Innovation: Exploring Contemporary Paubha and Its Journey to the West.’

by

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Preserving Tradition; Embracing Innovation: Exploring Contemporary Paubha and Its Journey to the West

Paubha (pau- painting, bha- cotton canvas), this ancient tradition of art has deep religious and spiritual meaning for both practitioners and viewers. It often depicts themes from Buddhism and Hinduism in detail, serving as a tool for contemplation and spiritual growth. Additionally, paubha is vital for preserving Nepal’s cultural and religious heritage. Many artists are driven by a commitment to protect its authenticity and spiritual significance rather than pursuing it for commercial gain. However, the future of Paubha painting encounters substantial challenges. Some Paubha artists believes that Modernization, changing artistic preferences, and the difficulty of passing on the intricate skills needed for Paubha have sparked worries about its continuity. Presently, there are fewer practitioners than in earlier generations, emphasizing the need for our joint efforts to guarantee the legacy of this beloved tradition.

Paubha isn’t just about looking pretty. They’re more like tools for understanding oneself better and connecting with something spiritual. When painters create paubha, they follow spiritual rules and consider it a solemn duty. In the past, these paintings were so revered that only initiated individuals could see them. Paubha acts as a link between the artist and deep spiritual bliss.

Among Newar Buddhists, there’s a belief that Paubha originally depicted Buddhist themes. Over time, though, Hindu influences crept in, especially with the rise of Tantrayana or Vajrayana. This led to a mix of Buddhist and Hindu imagery in paubha paintings, showcasing various spiritual traditions. This tradition, unique to Nepal, spread its influence on Tibet through
the travels of wandering monks who shared Buddhist teachings through visual storytelling. This exchange likely inspired the creation of Thangka paintings, designed for easy transport and unrolling during religious narratives. Consequently, among Newar Buddhist priests and artisans, there’s a strong belief that Paubha paintings served as the prototype for thangkas.

The traditional process of making paubha.

Paubha paintings typically assume a uniform rectangular shape, meticulously crafted on specially woven cotton cloth tailored to precise dimensions. The canvas, made of cotton cloth, is first treated with buffalo skin glue. Subsequently, the surface is carefully rubbed with stone to achieve a smooth texture, essential for the intricate painting process that follows. This labor-intensive process demands great skill and patience from the artists, who adhere to traditional laws dictating the depiction of specific iconographic elements such as heads, hands, leg positions, and hand positions. Dating back to the 3rd century A.D, the Manjusrimulkalpa treaty outlines the traditional painting process, beginning with the ceremonial weaving of cloth by a pure virgin and overseen by an officiant, known as Sadhaka or Acharya. Pure colors are emphasized, and the painting commences on an auspicious day, with the artist invoking Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to attain a tranquil state of mind. The paints are made from minerals, plant and sometimes twenty-four karat gold is used. Vajracharya priests historically served as authorities on ritual and iconographic knowledge, passing their wisdom to other caste groups, particularly the Chitrakars, who became renowned painters. Today, a diverse range of artisans continues the paubha tradition under the guidance of Vajracharyas, ensuring its preservation and evolution. Notably, Paubha paintings are characterized by their flat style, adding to their distinctive aesthetic appeal and cultural significance.
Cultural appropriation vs Cultural Exchange

Central to the discourse surrounding contemporary Paubha art is the question of cultural appropriation versus cultural exchange. Some argue that exposure to Paubha art enriches Western artistic practices, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and appreciation. However, critics caution against the commodification and misrepresentation of Paubha, highlighting the risk of eroding its cultural significance and diminishing the voices of indigenous artists.

Another contentious issue revolves around the tension between preserving Paubha's traditional heritage and embracing innovation. While some argue for strict adherence to traditional techniques and motifs, others advocate for experimentation and adaptation to contemporary contexts. A notable exemplar in this discourse is Mr. Udaya Charan Shrestha, whose artwork beautifully intertwines tradition with innovation within the realm of Paubha tradition. His paintings serve as a pristine demonstration of blending tradition and innovation in Paubha, as he skillfully merges deities and paubha motifs with techniques reminiscent of Renaissance oil painting. His work stands as a testament to the harmonious coexistence of heritage and contemporary expression in the artistic landscape. Inspired by luminaries like him, I embarked on my own artistic journey, delving into the possibilities of reconciling tradition with something new. Honoring Paubha’s rich history, I aim to expand my artistic boundaries, weaving a story that respects the past while also embracing the future.

Challenges and opportunities in Introducing Paubha to the West

Introducing Paubha art to western audiences presents a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities. The endeavors are met with hurdles such as cultural barrier, where
unfamiliarity with Nepali traditions may hinder understanding of the rich symbolism inherent in Paubha compositions. Additionally, the divergence in aesthetic preferences between Western and paubha art styles poses a challenge in captivating the interest of viewers accustomed to different artistic traditions. However, amidst these challenges lie promising opportunities. The introduction of Paubha art offers a platform for cultural exchange and dialogue, fostering greater understanding and appreciation of Nepali heritage and spirituality among Western audiences. Its intricate details, vibrant colors, and spiritual themes provide a unique aesthetic appeal that may resonate with those seeking distinctive and meaningful artistic experiences in the West.

Moreover, the focus of my thesis show is dedicated to provide a spiritual experience not only to those well versed in Paubha and Nepalese’s culture but also to individual of various backgrounds, aiming to transcend cultural boundaries and foster a universal connection through art.

**Celebrity culture as a kind of religion**

In his analysis, Pete Ward draws a striking parallel between contemporary society’s reverence for celebrities and ancient practices of idolizing divine figure. He writes “Our culture builds temples to celebrities the way Romans did for divine emperors, ancestors, and household gods. We are a de facto polytheistic society…In celebrity culture, the object is to get as close as possible to the celebrity. Relics of celebrities are coveted as magical talismans. Those who can touch the celebrity or own a relic of the celebrity hope for a transference of celebrity power. They hope for magic.”
Building upon this observation, one of my works incorporates celebrity figure ‘Billie Eilish’ into Paubha inspired paintings. This choice not only bridges cultural divides but also challenges viewers to reconsider notions of worship and reverence in a modern context.

**My focus**

This thesis focuses on introducing this ancient form of Nepali art Paubha to western audiences while preserving its cultural authenticity. The paper examines the historical background of Paubha, its aesthetic characteristic, and the challenges and opportunities in its adaptation to come. Through this research, I aim to explore the sincere intersections of Paubha, contemporary creative expression using found materials like wood and the spiritual underpinnings of Tantric philosophy. The rich tapestry of Tantric philosophy encompasses symbolism, dynamic and expressive forms, rituals, as well as influences from scriptures and texts, providing a visual language for practitioners to contemplate and deepen their understanding of spiritual concepts.

**The role of thesis show**

For my thesis show, which includes the construction of a temple space to evoke spiritual ambience, this section explores the significance of my artistic endeavor. The temple space serves as a platform for featuring contemporary Paubha paintings in a context that honors its traditional roots and invites viewers to experience its spiritual resonance through paintings, 2d animation, and installation.
In my show, I’ve reimagined traditional Paubha by focusing on close-up views of the eyes of eight deities in 22x24- inch oil paintings, deviating from the conventional full-body representations. These intense gazes, exuding a captivating energy, demand the viewer’s attention and create a powerful visual narrative. Adding depth to the exhibition, I’ve crafted a ceremonial umbrella, with a Gajur, the golden spire that represents the head of God while also digitally painting the Side of the Umbrella in Photoshop, blending traditional craftsmanship with digital innovation. This convergence of 2D and 3D elements creates an immersive experience within the temple-like space of the exhibition, inviting viewers to engage with the artworks on multiple sensory levels.

Paubha are made within specific rules and materials in a very traditional way. In my work practice, I experiment with traditional Paubha elements but I’m using western materials such as oil paint, digital media. Even though I am using contemporary material, I still follow a ritual. This ritual is done before any of my paintings; I begin by thanking the higher energies that have given me this privilege to create and asking for the blessing of the deity I want to paint on my canvas.

Adaptation stands as the cornerstone in the preservation of Paubha, as it has been for many other cultural treasures throughout history. Just as civilizations have thrived by embracing change, Paubha art flourishes through adaptation. A compelling example lies in the evolution of traditional Japanese woodblock prints, known as Ukiyo-e. These prints initially depicted scenes of urban life and entertainment but adapted over time to include themes from literature, history, and even Western influences, ensuring their relevance and endurance. Similarly, the Renaissance period saw the revitalization of European art through the fusion of classical techniques with newfound perspectives, leading to groundbreaking works by artists such as Leonardo da Vinci.
and Michelangelo. In essence, by embracing adaptation, Paubha not only maintains its cultural significance but also opens new avenues for artistic expression and appreciation, ensuring its preservation for generations to come.

Darsan 2024, Oil Painting, Fabric, Brass utensil, Gold Lead, Found object
Dyo Chatra 2024, Closer view of Installation, Umbrella, Fabric, Canvas, Wood, Gold Leaf.

Darsan 2024, Closer view of Installation, Fabric, wood, beads, Brass utensils
Bhairab 2024, Oil Painting on canvas
Majipa Lakhe, 2024, Oil on canvas
Saptalochani, 2023, Oil on wood
Mahadev 2024, Oil on wood
Love and Wisdom, 2022, Oil and Gold leaf on wood
Contemporary Goddess, 2024, Oil and gold leaf on canvas
Bibliography
