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Obituary | Mary Shepherd Slusser (1918–2017)

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It would take more than a full-length article to do justice to Mary Slusser's contributions to the field of Nepalese cultural-historical and architectural studies. In this all too brief tribute, I hope to provide the readers with a glimpse of her achievements. Mary modestly described herself as an enthusiast who ached to unravel the past. She first arrived to Nepal in 1965 alongside her husband, who worked in the foreign service and had been appointed there. Mary received her PhD in archaeology from Columbia, and shortly after worked as a research analyst for the U.S. State Department. As an 'unpaid volunteer' for the Smithsonian, her initial charge was to buy \$1000 worth of cultural artifacts, a task that she referred to as "a godsend," for "It established me as a professional with a doctorate that excused me from making cookies and canapés, the usual lot of Embassy wives."¹ Surely, Mary's work was also a means of assuaging her unrelenting curiosity about the fascinating world that she had unknowingly fallen into.

Early on, she realized the merit of scholarly teamwork, and sought the help of many specialists. In doing so, she was able to cultivate a practice of collaboration, and implement a research methodology that combined interdependent disciplines such as art and architecture, cultural history, epigraphy, Sanskrit and classical Newari. Mahesh Raj Pant, the son of the well-known Sanskritist and historian Nayaraja Pant, assisted in these areas, as did I. My own involvement in her work spanned the course of several decades, and resulted in a series of joint articles on Nepalese sculpture and architecture, including several

in the mid 1970s in *Artibus Asiae* on medieval Nepalese culture, architecture, and history.

From her training in anthropology, she was fully aware of the value of historiography, and approached the subject diachronically and synchronically. In our joint investigation of the art and culture of the Kathmandu Valley, we realized that some elements of ancient Nepalese culture had remained intact in various aspects of Newar culture of the Kathmandu valley. Long before she started writing her magnum opus, the two-volume *Nepal Mandala*, she began systematically collecting information from international and local publications, through conversations with Buddhist and Hindu priests in her budding Newari, and wandering yogis heading toward the sacred Himalayan lake, Gosainkunda, Sihlu in Newari.

Mary's most remarkable contribution is perhaps her endeavor to establish a chronology of Nepalese art and architecture that follows available sources as closely as possible. In this herculean undertaking, myself along with renowned art historian Pratapaditya Pal assisted her, particularly when she was working on *Nepal Mandala*. After this tome was published, it was initially criticized for tacking unclearly back and forth between disciplines, sometimes contextualizing the work from the perspective of art history, sometimes unpacking anthropological or architectural insights. These inevitable critics notwithstanding, she was the one who discovered the fact that the annual Newari custom of circumambulating the city in honor of the ancestors was a continuation of



"One of the most beautiful sculptures in all Nepal. It is a lingam bearing the face of Shiva and dates from about the sixth century. Undisturbed and in worship for all those centuries no doubt, it faced Pashupati temple on the opposite river bank. About the 1980's it was severely damaged in an attempted theft."

Mary Slusser, Nepal, October 1971

(Estate of Mary Slusser)

a much earlier practice. This proved to be crucial as it enabled her to more precisely define the ancient borders of various cities and towns in the valley. To name but a few attributable elucidations from this work, the importance of the annual ritual of exhibiting artifacts during the rainy season retreat in Buddhist monasteries of the valley, and the reliability of the traditional chronicles for the investigation of ancient Nepalese sculptures, would not be known if she had not drawn our attention to them.

The Kathmandu valley is deservedly famous for the so-called "pagoda-style" temples. Yet, it was only after Mary's investigation that scholars began to realize the greater significance of secular architecture that ranged from simple rest houses to royal palaces. She also found early wood carvings depicting elegant *salabhanjika*-type female figures² on the struts of the Newar architecture that were unknown to previous scholars, and showed through radio-carbon dating that they were much older than previously presumed.

In addition to the now widely known *Nepal Mandala* (1982), Mary published a number of other influential works, such as *The Antiquity of Nepalese Wood Carving: A Reassessment* (2009), *Art and Culture of Nepal: Selected Papers* (2005), and

Kathmandu: A Collection of Articles. She also wrote prolifically in English, Nepali and Newari, and a full bibliography of her work can be found at:
<<http://www.rebuildkashthamandap.com>>.

Given her serendipitous arrival in Nepal and her initial hesitations, her accomplishments are even more admirable—perhaps only one who has undertaken a similarly ambitious project, with the same spirit and enthusiasm, can understand the gravity and depth of her lifelong passion.³

Gautama V. Vajracharya is a Sanskritist and scholar specializing in the art and culture of South Asia. As a young Newar scholar in Kathmandu, he assisted Mary Slusser when she was writing *Nepal Mandala*. He received a prestigious Rockefeller grant to work as a trainee at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art with Pratapaditya Pal, PhD, Senior Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art, on the first exhibitions of Nepalese art. Vajracharya later earned a Master's degree in Art History from the Claremont Graduate School, California, and a PhD in South Asian language and culture from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He then taught Indian art and culture there for more than two decades. Among his most recent publications is the book *Frog Hymns and Rain Babies: Monsoon Culture and the Art of Ancient South Asia*. He was guest curator for the exhibition *Nepalese Seasons: Rain and Ritual* in 2017 at the Rubin Museum, and author of the related catalogue of the same title.

Endnotes

1. From "Remembrance of things past," a biographical memoir written by Mary Slusser in 2010. Available at: <http://www.asianart.com/articles/maryslusser/index.html>.
2. These traditional carved figures take their name from the Sanskrit *śālabhañjikā*, which means 'breaking a branch of a *sāl* tree (*vatica robusta*)'.
3. I wrote a similar tribute to Mary more than a decade ago (*Orientalism*, April 2005. P. 79).