
Mary Shepherd Slusser, author of one of the major surveys of Nepalese art and culture (Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley, c.1982), has now reexamined Nepalese woodcarving after carbon dating evidence demonstrated that works thought to date from the thirteenth century or much later were in fact carved as early as the sixth century.

The author focuses on artifacts from Buddhist monasteries in the Kathmandu Valley, where most extant early woodcarvings originate. The largest portion of her study concerns carved figural struts (roof brackets), an important element of Newar-style architecture. Relief carvings on temple facades or monastery courts and other wooden architectural elements are also discussed. Two Avalokiteśvara sculptures are identified as the oldest surviving Nepalese woodcarvings. Radiocarbon test results revise the dating of many Nepalese sculptural and architectural works and attest to the reuse of ancient struts and other architectural elements in newer or reconstructed buildings. Carbon dating evidence prompts Slusser to reexamine stylistics and iconographical details and allows her to group wooden artifacts into a chronology that is comparable to Nepalese stone carving, metalwork, or painting. The author also reviews the Indian antecedents of several motifs on figural struts.

In this highly illustrated work, the 215 illustrations include color and black and white photographs, both historical and more recent documentation (many full page), detailed drawings, and one site plan. The author organizes her study spatially, allowing readers to compare works located in proximity to each other. Unfortunately, maps and city plans are not provided; readers will need to consult other sources for cartographic information.

Profuse citations, additional sources, an index, a glossary, and three appendices complete the study. One appendix consists of the author’s descriptive catalogue of pre-fourteenth-century figural struts. This descriptive documentation is a welcomed feature that contains a wealth of detail and the author’s incisive observations. Other appendices feature a compendium of radiocarbon test results, and an essay by Paul Jett titled "A Consideration of the Validity of the Radiocarbon-Dating Results.” This last essay allows readers to understand why the ‘old-wood problem’ is not a significant issue with the objects in this study.

Frequent mention of works illustrated in other sources assumes that readers will be serious students and other scholars. This book is highly recommended for academic and research libraries supporting research and study in art and architectural history, South Asian and Himalayan cultural studies, Buddhist and Hindu iconography, or Indology.

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