

Nepal's National Pride: The Chhauni Museum

Where else in the world can you see some of the most important religious stone sculptures of the land, a room full of “breathtaking bronzes”, a collection of priceless Paubha scroll paintings, a world class collection of ancient Asian firearms, swords and khukuris, and several leather cannons captured during the 1788 war between Nepal and Tibet? Nepal’s National Museum at the Chhauni has all this, and more.

Nepal’s National Museum is located a short walk south of Swayambhunath temple, and directly across Museum Road from the Nepal Army’s more modern Military Museum. There, at the end of a long white wall, you’ll find the ticket booth and the old museum’s main entrance gate. Chhauni means ‘Parade Ground’, and it was there in 1928 AD that this intriguing museum was first established. At first it was called the ‘Chhauni Silkhana’ and the original displays, mostly armaments, were housed in an historic old palace constructed decades earlier by Bhimsen Thapa (1775-1839). Thapa was Nepal’s second prime minister under the Shah kings, and is considered a great national hero of the country.

The original name, ‘Chhauni Silkhana’, literally meant ‘the stone house of arms and ammunitions’. For the first decade it was closed to the public and shown only to dignitaries, foreign scholars and other guests of the prime minister. The collection of armaments and other ancient items served the Ranas as a show-piece. In 1938, Prime Minister Juddha Shamsher J.B. Rana opened it to the public, and had a second building constructed for an art museum, which he named after himself: the ‘Juddha Jatiya Kalashala’. In 1967 the whole complex was given its current name, ‘Rastriya Sangrahalaya’, the National Museum of Nepal.

Today, the museum comprises three buildings: the ‘Juddha Jatiya Kalashala’ (also called the Hall of Sculpture’), the Buddhist Art Gallery (constructed with Japanese assistance and opened in 1997) and the original Historical Museum Building (Bhimsen’s palace).

The Hall of Sculpture

The National Museum's Hall of Sculpture, the Juddha Jatiya Kalashala, houses some of the most important religious stone sculptures of the land, a room full of what has been described as "breathtaking bronzes" and a large collection of Paubha (thanka) scroll paintings.

Some of the sculptural artifacts on display rival those found in many more famous and well-funded museums elsewhere in Asia. One of them is a life size statue of King Jayavarman, dating to 185 AD. The inscription at the base makes it the oldest positively dated sculpture in the land, and one of the most important historical objects ever unearthed in Nepal.

In recent studies of Nepalese sculpture we learn more about both the royal and the religious legacy in stone found in the Kathmandu Valley. One art historian has described the valley "an enormous open museum" where thousands of icons of gods and goddesses, and a few statues of kings like Jayavarman, are scattered about. Unfortunately, many of Nepal's precious art works have been stolen and sold to museums and private collectors elsewhere around the world, lost to the Nepalese citizenry. It is therefore important that the sculptures and other priceless objects housed at the National Museum be kept safe.

The Jayavarman statue is an exceptional piece. It was discovered in May 1992 in four broken pieces lying face-down about three feet underground by workers digging a trench for the foundation of a house in Maligaon, on the east side of Kathmandu city. The likeness of the ancient monarch is carved out of a pale sandstone common to the valley, but in the ancient Mathura-Kushan style common to North India. The inscription on the statue's pedestal is in the ancient Kushana-Brahmi script dating it to Samvat 107, corresponding to 185 AD. Thus, it provides scholars with the earliest epigraphical documentation of royal rule in the valley. There is some debate, however, about what to call the period in which King Jayavarman ruled. The late Nepalese art historian, Lain Singh Bangdel, called his time the Varma Period, though some other scholars have considered the statue to be, perhaps, an

early manifestation of the more well known Licchavi Period. The Licchavis Kings ruled from approximately 300 to 600 AD. Regardless, this particular statue merits a special place in the history of Nepal.

In the same hall, there are many other stone sculptures, a number of interesting terracotta pieces, a collection of exquisite bronzes, and various other masterpieces of religious and secular art and symbolism, some dating from the 2nd to 4th centuries and others dating all the way to the modern era. Among the sculptures, look for the exquisite Uma Maheshvara (Parvati and Shiva) dating to the 17th century. That particular piece was stolen from a shrine in Dhulikhel, but when it showed up in a museum in Berlin, Germany and its provenance was determined, the curator ceremoniously returned it to Nepal. There is also the sculpture of a dancing Ganesh, another of a fat-bellied Brahma, and scores more of various other gods and goddesses.

The Buddhist Art Gallery

This gallery was established with the assistance of the government of Japan, and was inaugurated by Prince Akishino of Japan in February 1997. It houses special displays in galleries marked Southwestern Terai, Northern Himalayan, and Kathmandu Valley, plus a corridor gallery, a special display of mandala art, and a lounge area. The purpose of this large gallery is to provide visitors a glimpse of the Buddhist art of Nepal, its origins and its various manifestations. The significance of the southwestern Terai gallery is that that was where the Buddha was born, at Lumbini, and was raised, at nearby Kapilvastu, in his father's palace.

One of the most remarkable sculptures in the Buddhist Art Gallery depicts the Nativity of Buddha in the 6th century BC. The sculpture itself dates to the 8th century AD. The displays throughout the Buddhist Art Gallery are well prepared for easy viewing, and have special signage in both Nepali and English informing visitors of the history and significance of each object or period in art history, or the definition of such terms as Mandala, Buddha and Bodhisatva. There are many pictures showing how some of the most famous art pieces

were crafted. Thus, this large gallery serves the public well as a learning center about the origins and development of Buddhism in Nepal.

The Historical Museum Building

The oldest building in the museum complex is the historical palace of Bhimsen Thapa. It houses a Natural Science Gallery, an Historical Gallery, a Philatelic Gallery and a Numismatics Museum. The armaments display is extraordinary, with many old weapons such as swords, khukuris, shields and battle armor dating back several centuries, as well as leather cannons captured from the Tibetans during the first Nepal-Tibet War (1792), and a variety of relics dating to Kathmandu's Great Earthquake of 1934. The natural science displays are equally interesting (though somewhat worn looking) of birds and wild animals from the jungle. The coin and stamp collections are of special interest to collectors. There is even a display showing what the typical rural mail runner used to wear, up until a few decades ago, including a turban and his spear and bell to both scare off wild animals and protect himself from attack.

In addition, there is an interesting Doll Gallery, with a collection of dolls from all over the world. These were presented to the female royalty over the years from heads of state and their wives internationally.

Nepal's National Museum is located at Chhauni on Museum Road, a 10-15 minute walk from Syambhunath Temple, and about a 25 minute walk (nearly 3km) west of Hanuman Dhoka. The entrance is directly across from the Nepal Army Military Museum, easily identified by two shiny brass cannons at the main gate.

The National Museum is open to the public daily except Tuesdays and government holidays: Summer 10:30am-4:30pm, Winter 10:30am-3:30pm, Mondays 10:30am-2:30pm. Entrance fees vary: Nepalese five rupees, foreigners 50. School children free on Thursdays and Fridays. There is an additional small charge for cameras.

According to museum staff, the past year has seen approximately 115,000 Nepalese visitors (not counting school children) and 15,000 foreigners. The Chhauni museum is a popular place to visit.

*Readers can learn more about early sculptures of the Kathmandu Valley (some of which are on display at the National Museum) online at www.asianart.com/articles/jaya/index.html, as well as in the books *Early Sculptures of Nepal* (1982), and *Stolen Images of Nepal* (1989) by Lain Singh Bangdel, and in the chapter on art history in *Against the Current: The Life of Lain Singh Bangdel—Writer, Painter and Art Historian of Nepal* (2004) by Don Messerschmidt. *Visits to the Patan and Bhaktapur Museums are also recommended.**

Follow Us