



TEMPLE LAMP OF NEPAL  
METAL COLLECTION OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM,  
PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC

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Hanging lamp. Cast brass<sup>2</sup>. (See photo no. 1)  
Nepal, 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century. H. 32.5 cm, ground 26 × 26 cm.  
Chain made of parts in shape of *vajras*. Cast brass.  
Modern manufacture.  
L. 76 cm  
Acquisition: Bought from Ludmila Formanová, 1996.  
Inv. No. A 25 613.  
Foto by Jiří Vaněk.  
Unpublished.

### Introduction

Many of the Náprstek Museum collections originating from Nepal serve a religious function as do the objects of the other museums that care for the Nepalese collections<sup>3</sup>. The presented hanging lamp belonged certainly to a temple equipment and served its purpose somewhere in Nepal at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It may have graced both Hindu or Buddhist temple to which it was dedicated by a donor.

Buddhism was probably introduced to Nepal from India in time of the king Asoka (3<sup>rd</sup> century B. C.). Northen and Eastern India, especially Bihar, was a permanent source of inspiration for the Nepalese artists. The monks from Nepal regularly visited the Indian monastries practicing the *vajrayana* rites and the same attention was payed to the Nepalese monastries by the Indian monks. Hindu god Vishnu, mainly one of his incarnation Krishna, has got the popularity in Nepal since the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the Indian dynasty from Mithila (a part of the present state Bihar in Northen India) was introduced to Nepal. Due to the isolation of the country the religious development was relatively harmonious. People have worshiped both Hindu and Buddhist deities considering only one aspect of

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Pal, P., 1985, p. 23

their nature and it was how powerful they were. The artistic depiction of both images has common features so that the Hindu and Buddhist style is discernible. Both pantheons have not only the common features, a specific religious syncretism is seen also in e.g. depictions of the main Hindu deities, Vishnu and Shiva, who are closely connected, so that *linga* as a symbol of Shiva can be found on the Vishnu images and pictures as well.

## Variety of lamps

The temple lamps have been playing an important role in rituals of a temple that is frequently the centre of all religious and cultural activities. Using of lamps has except its utilitarian purposes also deep symbolic meaning. Light not only illuminates, it clears or dispels darkness, as well. Lighting the dark temple interior has been a constant requirement until the present days. Although the traditional oil lamps of everyday use very replaced by electricity, various lamps for ritual purposes have been still in extensive use in many Asian countries including Nepal. From the beginning the temples were the inspiring centres to produce lamps in variety of designs. Donation of the temple lamp symbolizes the devotion to the god. In India, for example, lamps belong to a frequent donation to the temple. But the most common are small ritual lamps for the god's oblation.

## Typology

In Nepal we can find the variety of lamps both standing and hanging. This variety of shapes and forms give an opportunity to the craftsmen to express their imagination and skillness. We can find there many lamps of the Indian prototypes because there are only few other countries besides India that have had such a wealth of imagery and symbolism built around the lamps. The lamp indicates the deity to which the lamp was meant for, e.g. Naga Kumbha Deepa is a Vaishnava lamp which is highly in vogue in Nepal. It is in shape of a pot having a lid and handle coiled with a motif of a serpent. Ganesha lamps belong to the frequent type of lamps, especially of the standing variety. The tip of the wick is to peep out of the mouth of the mouse, the mount of the God Ganesha. Also architecture from every corner of India was represented in the lamp tradition of the country. This kind of lamps, either standing or hanging, was frequently encountered in Nepal temples, both Hindu and Buddhist. The chain lamps were fashioned in many varieties. These lamps were generally meant to be hung in the temples each having bowls in the middle to light a wick. Some of these lamps take the shape of famous temples in miniature. The most common pattern is pyramidal temple that consist of several parts as in case of the presented lamp from the Náprstek Museum's collection.

## Description

The composition of the lamp is architectonic and symmetrical (see photo no.1). Three floors building of a gradual shape with the square ground-plan raises up above the double-tiered receding base. Its rim is decorated with *peepul* like leaves of various sizes and shapes hanging like tassels along the periphery. Some of them are perforated. Two leaves are missed. Some of the leaves seem to be executed more recently. The tiers are decorated with the open-work design, the lower one with circles and the upper one with triangles. In the middle of each side of the upper tier an oval bowl for oil is attached. It is presided by Narasinha, an *avatar* of the God Vishnu, tearing apart the demon king Hiranyakasipu (see photo no. 2). The rim of the bowl is serrated and decorated on either side of the God with a little leaf and the lotus bud.

Four corners of the temple are guarded by four winged mythical beasts in jumping position. Two of them look like rams and other two like griffins with one horn in the middle of their foreheads (see photos nos 3 and 4). The temple itself consists of a row of columns with cusped arches on the first and second platform. There are five arches on each side of the rectangular plan on the first platform and three arches on the second platform. The columns enclose an inner space in the middle of which there is a square sanctuary with an arch on each side. The same structure is situated on the floor above on the second platform the corners of which are decorated with three stylized birds of unspecified character (see photo no. 5). The fourth one is missed. Second and third platforms are surrounded by eight little pillared pavilion like structures situated around the central shrine in the way that three of them are seen from either side of the temple. Each of the pavilions is crowned by a vase like spires. Two of them are broken. Four corners of the third platform are guarded by cobras with raised hoods (see photo no. 6). Superstructure of the temple of cone shape with four windows on each side is crowned by a vase like peak situated on the lotus base. It reminds the vase of immortality, one of the Buddhist auspicious symbols. It is sheltered by the cusped arch decorated with two snakes raising their hoods that writhe along the periphery (see photo no. 7). The traces of a burned fat, probably *ghee*, are seen not only on the pots for oil but on many places of the surface. It witnesses for the intensive usage of the lamp.



Photo 1. Temple hanging lamp, the whole overview



Photo 2. Detail. God Vishnu as Narasinha.



Photo 3. Detail. Winged mythical beast.

## Iconography

Vishnu in the form of Narasinha, half man and half lion, one of the most popular *avatar* of Vishnu god tearing the demon Hiranyakasipu, is the main depiction of the presented lamp. It reminds the Hindu mythological story about the demon who captured the world and could be killed neither by a god nor by a human being. Vishnu is an ancient Vedic Sun deity associated with lively vigours and prosperity. On higher level it represents spiritual knowledge and enlightenment. These qualities associate him with another god Agni, the master of fire, who represents the power of light and spiritual enlightenment as well. He is frequently depicted as a ram rider because the ram is considered his vehicle. The ram also represents the god Agni at the presented lamp. He is not depicted but in case of lamp Agni himself is the flame on the sacrificial altar. He on one side devours demons who endanger the ritual and on the other side he invites gods to take part in the sacrifice. He is considered a mediator between gods and mortals because he understands both earthly and heavenly orders. The temple is a place of communication between both worlds. Winged animals, e.g. rams, are known from the early Nepali paintings<sup>4</sup>. Winged griffins usually had got leonine bodies but their heads were composites of various creatures. The function of these combined creatures of menacing forms was to create a powerful structure that was to guard the devotees from evil forces. They strengthen the function of god Agni as mentioned above. The depicted birds do remind neither popular birds like peacock, parrot or *hamsa* (goose or swan) nor Garuda, mythical bird that carry Vishnu on his back. But generally the birds can symbolize the freedom of spirit and they inhabit the celestial tree fulfilling all wishes. *Nagas* (snakes) six of which are depicted on various parts of the lamp (see above) symbolize

<sup>4</sup> Pal, P., 1985, p. 202



Photo 4. Detail. Winged mythical beast.



Photo 5. Detail. A bird

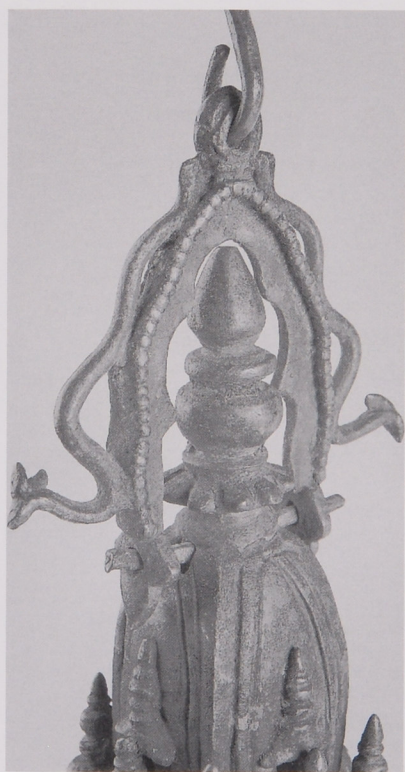


Photo 6. Detail. Cobras with raised hoods.



Photo 7. Detail. The superstructure of the shrine.

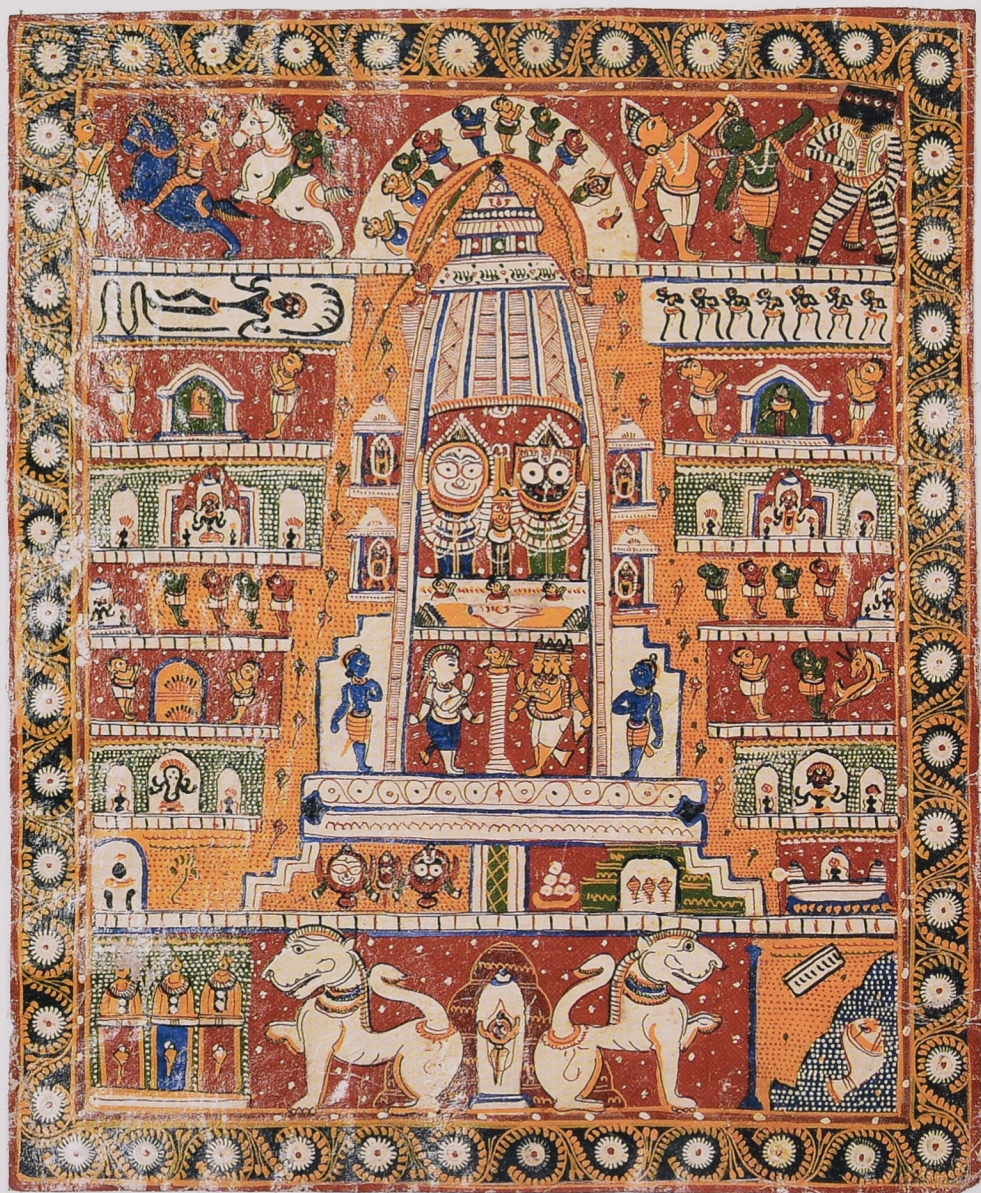


Photo 8. Jagannatha's Temple at Puri. Painting on canvas. India, Orissa, Puri, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 42.5 x 52 cm. Inv. No. A 5 381. Foto Jiří Vaněk.

fertility and good fortune. Five pilared arches on the first platform of the temple seems to be ready to accomodate five deities as depicted on Nepalese paintings<sup>5</sup>. Eight pavilions might serve as a dwelling for eight Dikpalas or the guardians of the eight directions who are survivals of the ancient Vedic gods. All depicted motifs were selected for their symbolic significance to strenghten the ritual connecting upper and nether regions.

### Technology.

The brass lamp was cast in parts. Copper with its 58.90% prevails in the alloy. The amount of zinc higher then 30% (see the Table below) represents the casting processing the elemental zinc, not the ore. Other elements of the alloy are represented in traces. The chain was cast also in parts in shape of *vajra*. It is evident at first sight that the alloy is brass. It was attached to the lamp later on. The style of the chain makes the modern manufacture and the casting in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century likely.

Table:	Fe	Ni	Cu	Zn	Pb	Sn	Sb
	1.18	0.59	58.90	37.00	1.95	0.1	0.23

### Conclusion

The presented temple lamp is conceived as a typical Nepalese miniature temple of a gradual shape. It is a copy of a temple design popular in Nepal. This forms can be seen in both brick and stone in many religious structure all over Nepal.<sup>6</sup> It's style relates to the architecture depicted on folk paintings from Puri, Orrisa in Eastern India untill present days (see photo no. 8).<sup>7</sup> This area, including Bihar, as mentioned above, was a permanent source of inspiration for Nepalese artisans. This temple lamp with its sophisticated architectural structure represents a piece of aesthetic sensibility and craftsman's skillness.

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<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., p. 223

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit., p. 229