

Representations of Nepal in the nineteenth century: The paintings of Dr Henry Ambrose Oldfield

Background Notes

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Durbar Square Patan, H.A. Oldfield



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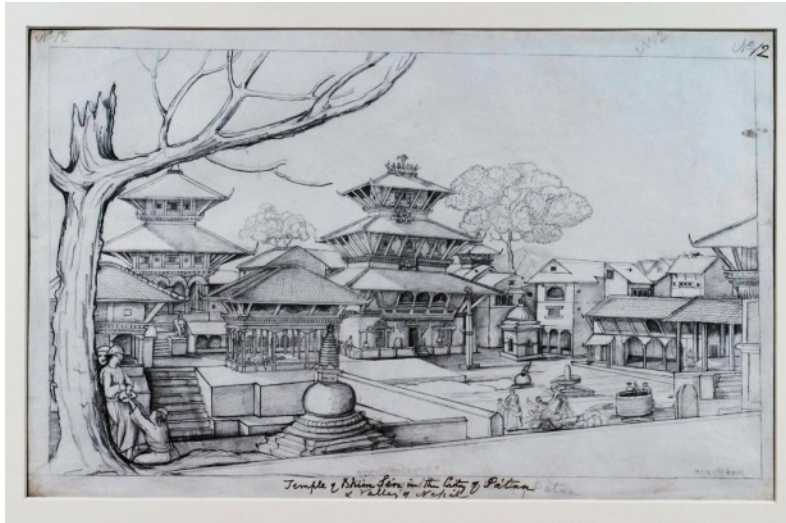
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The Temple of Gihyeshwari at Pashipatinath, H.A. Oldfield, 1852-60

Henry Ambrose Oldfield (1822-71) was a British Army Medical Officer, posted to Kathmandu as Surgeon to the British Residency in Nepal in 1850. He was an amateur water colourist, with a deep interest in art and antiquities encouraged by his brother Edmund, a British Museum Keeper and friend of John Ruskin. In his early postings in India he started to produce watercolour landscapes, following the picturesque landscape tradition established by Thomas and William Daniell. During his time in Nepal he produced over 200 hundred drawings and watercolour paintings, which are now held by the British Library and the Royal Geographical Society. At the same time he wrote detailed accounts of the geography, history, religion and architecture of the country, later published as *“Sketches from Nepal”* in 1880. This talk will explore the significance of Oldfield’s paintings in the cultural history of Nepal, examining their place in the context of British colonial culture, and exploring the inter-action between British and Nepalese art in the mid-nineteenth century.

Unlike India, Nepal was never governed as a British colony and had a small isolated British community focused on the British Government Resident, established in 1814 by treaty with the reigning Nepalese monarchy. This created cultural and political relationships that were very different to that in British India. Moreover the predominant Buddhist culture in Nepal had an intellectual and moral appeal for Oldfield and other British residents, particularly the first Resident Brian Houghton Hodgson, and this fostered a more dispassionate and sympathetic approach to the culture and religion of the country. Hodgson had a scholarly interest in collecting information about all aspects of Nepal– its natural history, culture, peoples and religion - and trained Nepalese artists to produce drawings to record this, notably Raj Man Singh who learnt Western techniques, becoming known as the first Nepalese water colour artist.



Temple of Bhimsen, Patan, 1841, Raj Man Singh



Koklass Pheasant, Raj Man Singh

Oldfield's post provided a house with adjacent hospital on the outskirts of Kathmandu, but with no onerous duties, giving him time to explore and record the historic palaces and landscapes of Nepal. For the first six years he lived alone, spending his spare time walking, drawing and hunting, and building close relations with the local Nepalese rulers. In 1856 he returned to England and married Margaret Alicia Prescot, daughter of a Cheshire clergyman. They travelled back to Nepal together. Margaret took over Oldfield's correspondence with his family because his sight was by then deteriorating, and was also herself a competent amateur water colourist. She organised and mounted his drawings and paintings, and also in her words "finished" a dozen of his sketches.



The Residency Surgeon's house and family, Margaret Oldfield

Oldfield's main aim as an artist was to illustrate his writings on the religion and culture of Nepal, following the example of his predecessor at the Residency Brian Hodgson. He wanted to record what he saw as a declining culture whose monuments were at risk, following the antiquarian values of his brother Edmund. His drawings were the subject of correspondence with John Ruskin, close friend of Edmund, who greatly admired his skill in architectural drawing and offered advice on landscape techniques.



*Buddhist temple called 'Dundeo' near Pasupati,
H.A. Oldfield*



*Shrine of the 3rd Celestial Buddha,
Ratnasambhava, H.A. Oldfield*

Comparison of Oldfield's paintings and drawings with the work of Raj Man Singh shows significant parallels. Raj Man Singh had left Nepal in 1845, following Hodgson to Darjeeling, and continuing to produce illustrations for him. Oldfield was aware of Raj Man Singh and his collection included work by the Nepalese artist. He carried on Brian Hodgson's practice of employing local artists to copy and finish his work, including the use of colour wash and in some cases adding figures in the foreground. It is arguable that he developed a style in depicting mountains derived from the Nepalese painters, perhaps because of his own difficulties in landscape drawing. Oldfield's painting of the source of the river at Gossainkind is actually entitled by him – "based on a sketch by Raj Man Singh".



View of Gossainkind Lakes, based on a sketch by
Raj Man Singh, H.A. Oldfield

Oldfield's significance is his unique position as the only British artist on any scale in nineteenth century Nepal. One important factor establishing Oldfield's reputation in modern day Nepal is the accuracy and quality of his architectural drawing which has great value as historical evidence to inform our understanding of Nepal's cities in the past. An example of this is the Dharahara Tower, built in 1832 by Bhimsen Thapa, the Prime Minister, and known as 'Bhimsen's Folly'.



Bhimsen's Tower, Henry Oldfield

Oldfield's painting shows the original tower with a wide gash down the side, which is presumed to have been the result of a major earthquake in the 1840s. Since then the tower was rebuilt following a further earthquake in 1934, and was destroyed again in the earthquake of 2014. Other paintings by Oldfield have been used to inform modern restoration projects in the Kathmandu valley. Oldfield's contribution to the visual recording of Nepalese cultural monuments was particularly important because of the precise window of time when he was painting before the advent of photography. The first known photographs of Nepal were taken in 1863, the year that Oldfield and his family left Kathmandu, by Captain Clarence Comyn Taylor.

Oldfield's work had a limited impact in his time. The earliest published example of Oldfield's work was in 1855, in the *Illustrated London News* which published an article on Nepal, four illustrations in the form of engravings by Oldfield. His posting in Nepal was ended in 1866 and his death in 1871, following three and a half years of illness which left him paralysed, suggests that he had very little time after his return from India in 1866 to do any further work on his writings and pictures. His brother Edmund eventually organised the publication of Henry's work in a two volume book entitled *Sketches from Nepal* in 1880, but this had a limited circulation. However, he was rediscovered in the 1970's, with the publication in Kathmandu in 1975 of *Views of Nepal, 1851-1864*, a collection of coloured prints of paintings by Oldfield and his wife. In parallel there has been a significant revival of Raj Man Singh's reputation as a pioneer in the development of art in Nepal. This has been led by some of the Nepalese cultural community in the Chitrakar family tradition of the artist caste who have produced two commemorative books, describing him as "the first Nepali pioneer artist of water colour paintings", and recently celebrated with a commemorative stamp issue in Nepal.

This all suggests that at this particular place and time in British imperial history, a distinctive style emerged by a process of reciprocal influences in the work of Oldfield and Nepalese artists, resulting from the unique circumstances of Oldfield's situation and his artistic interests. This process has been described as "transculturation" - the cultural assumptions that Europeans brought to places and those they took away from those places, were transformed and reshaped by this colonial encounter.