

# WOOD CARVINGS OF NEPAL

THE ART & CRAFT  
OF THE NEWARS





# WOOD CARVINGS OF NEPAL



## 1 HISTORY





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## HISTORY

Wood carvings of Nepal are created by clans of Newars -- the "old people" of Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur --, gracing traditional architecture of Nepal since the 12th century.

The oldest wood craft can be found at Indresvara Mahadeva temple in Panauti dating back to 1396. But it's believed the craft was already applied during the Licchavi period (300-879 AD).





# WOOD CARVINGS OF NEPAL

Heritage sites, which were built during the Malla period (13th to 18th century), bare witness of the beautiful, old wood carvings and can still be admired today thanks to conservation efforts.

And through the involvement of the youth, the Newars are successful in passing the craft to younger generations, making this old tradition live on.

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# WOOD CARVINGS OF NEPAL



## 2 SYMBOLISM



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## SYMBOLISM

The wood carving designs are mostly based on Holy Scriptures and mythical structures of Buddhist or Hindi faith -- sculptures of deities, demons, animals, religious symbols as well as intricate patterns.

Some images also include erotic art, carved into the wooden beams of roof structures. Their real purpose however is unclear.





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The language of the Newars has a rich vocabulary that includes wood carving term, giving each detail of the craft a specific name.

The carving has to be very precise in order for the details and patterns to fit together as the craftsmanship uses neither nails nor glue.

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# WOOD CARVINGS OF NEPAL



## 3 TRADITION

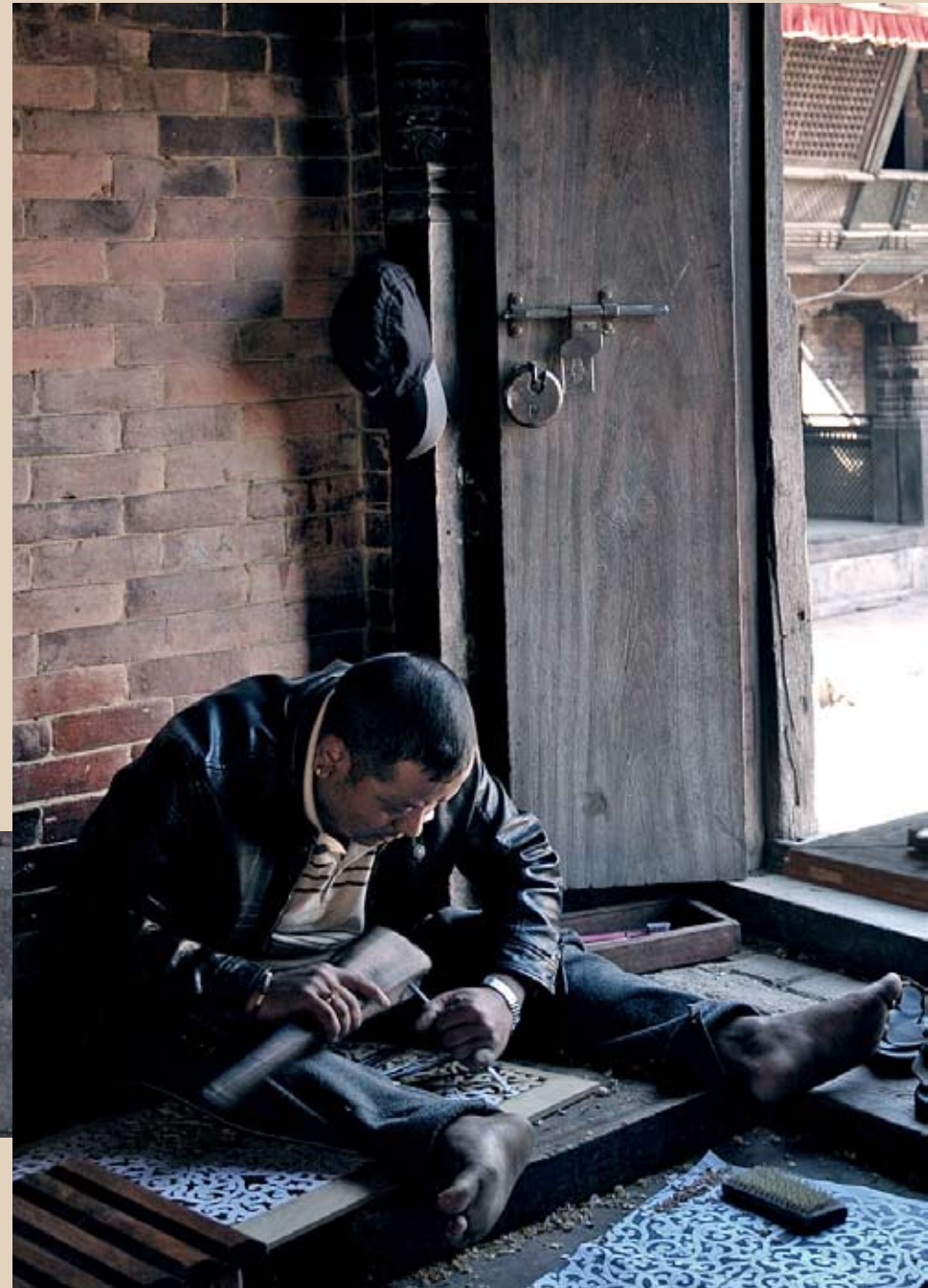


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## TRADITION

The Newari tradition is still very much alive. The craft is passed down in family businesses, taking the younger generation more than 10 years to perfect their carving skills.

Using mostly traditional tools, the process of creating Nepali wood carvings stayed almost unchanged.





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However, most family businesses need to turn to commercial art, creating Newari art inspired furniture and souvenirs for paying customers.

The majority of these products go overseas, making wood carvings one of the biggest export trades of Nepal.

In many of these new items the true symbolism of the ancient Newari art is lost or even mixed with symbols of other Asian cultures.

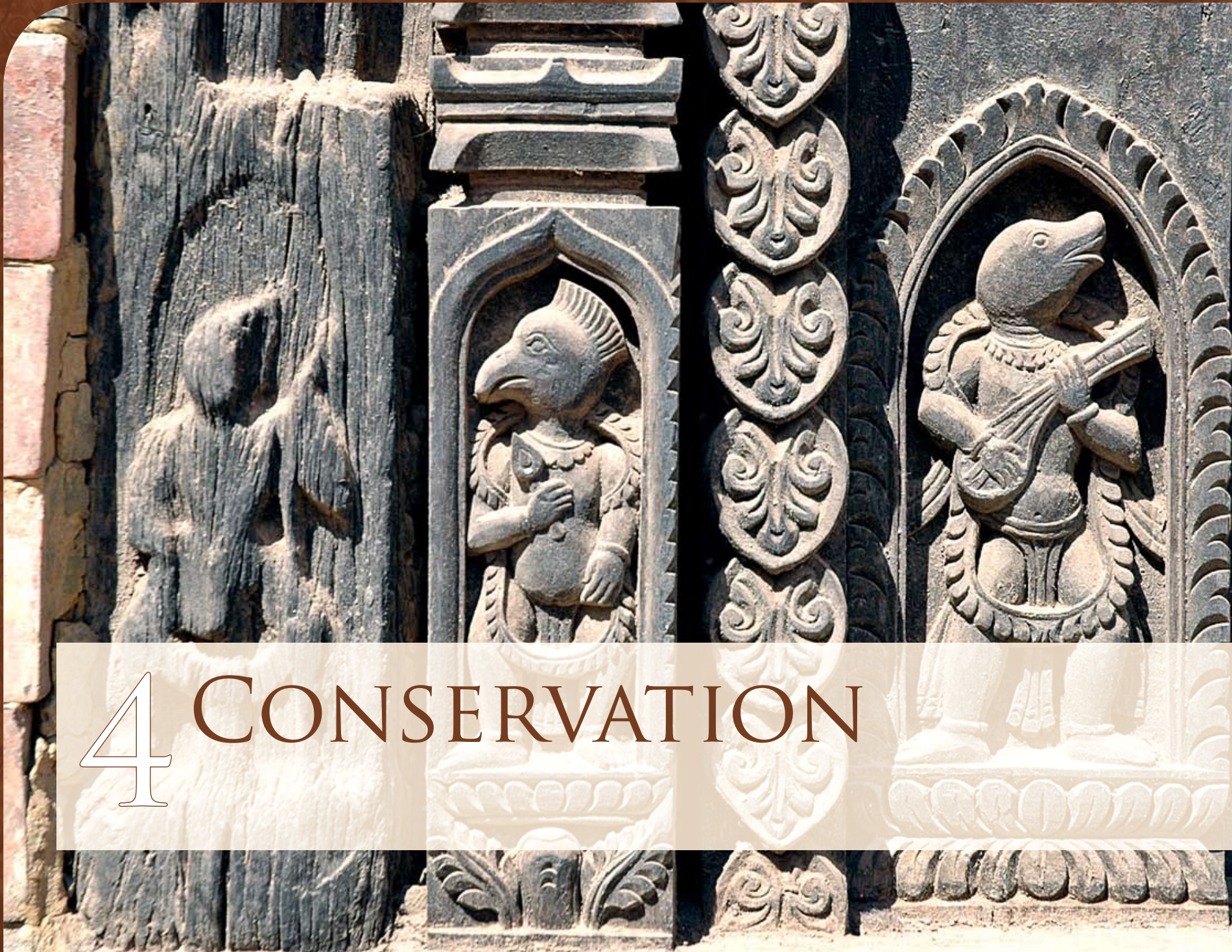
The conservation of old and existing wood carvings is not lucrative enough.

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## 4 CONSERVATION



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## CONSERVATION

The preservation of the ancient wood carvings is labour intensive and expensive. The government of Nepal has hardly the means to tend their

historical sites.

The Durbar Squares in Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur are under constant pressure from the UNESCO to uphold their listing as World Heritage, which they belong to since 1979.





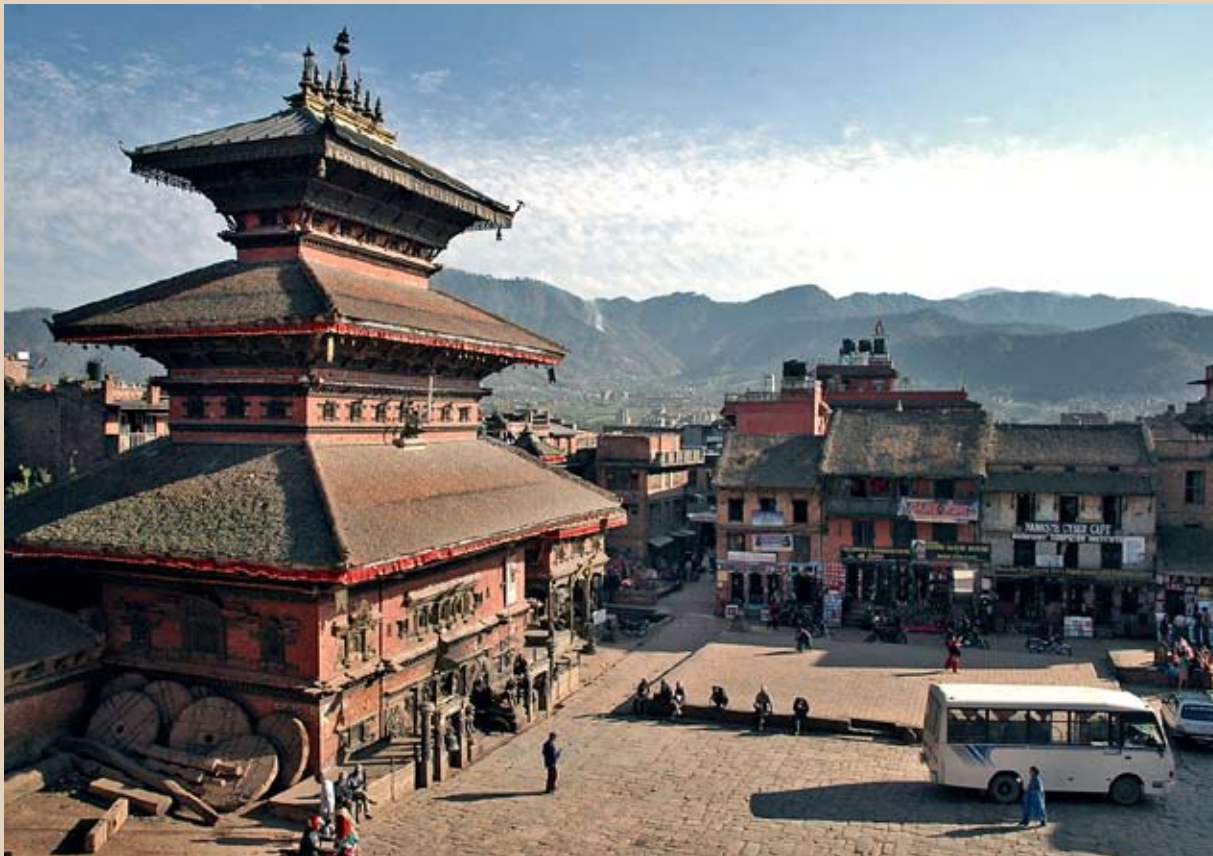
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Bhaktapur however is an example how love for the city and ancient art can turn an old city into a living museum.

After being severely damaged during a 1939 earthquake, the city has been restored and has not only become a

tourist attraction but also a living city where culture and crafts are celebrated.

The preservation efforts make need for a steep entrance fee for visitors (1,100 NRS) but the result make even the cheapest tourists happy.





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The old wood carvings on private buildings are left in the care of the owner, without support from the city or government.

Often the landlord does not have the means or does not know how to preserve the ancient art and it becomes a burden -- and in some cases even a safety hazard -- that is left unattended.





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Wood carvings can also be found in new and modern architecture. The elements are sometimes fully incorporated into the features of the building or appear lost within the architecture.

This preservation of the ancient art can be seen as love to the craft and tradition or as status symbol, displaying that the owner can afford such intricate art.

Time will tell, if their conservation efforts will give the Newari art justice.

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CREDITS



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## CREDITS

All images taken by Peter Urfer as part of the Photo Journalism Project, with the kind support and motorcycle rides thru Kathmandu by Ram.

Thanks also to Arunodaya of Himalayan Wood Carving Masterpieces, Bhaktapur for explaining the creative process.

More images can be seen at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/peter576/sets/72157626111945227/>

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