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Visualizing the Divine

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The Lakṣacaitya Paubhāḥ in the Asian Art Museum

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The Lakṣacaitya Paubhāḥ in the Asian Art Museum serves as a depiction of nearly the whole of exoteric Newar Buddhism. The purpose of the 1808 *paubhāḥ* (painting) is to commemorate a *lakṣaciatya* rite, in which 100,000 small, clay stupas are made by devotees. These stupas are placed in a pyramidal pile, atop which sits a single larger and more substantial *caitya* (stupa). This temporary stupa of stupas then receives offerings and devotions.

The painting in the AAM depicts a stupa of stupas topped by the famed Svayambhū *mahācaitya*, rather than a temporary, clay stupa. For *lakṣacaitya paubhāḥ*'s produced in the centuries prior to one in San Francisco this pile of stupas with a central deity tended to exhaust the iconography of the paintings.¹ Not so for the AAM's painting. Fortunately, we may use this image as an index to much of the contemporary Newar Buddhist tradition.

The painting in San Francisco is surrounded by several images signaling fundamental aspects of popular/exoteric Newar Buddhism.² On either side of the towers flanking the Svayambhū *mahācaitya* are two manifestations of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara: the white Jamaldyaḥ (aka Seto Macchindranath) and

¹ See Namgyal-Lama, Kunsang. "Lakṣacaitya Paubhās. Pictorial Representations of a Newar Buddhist Ritual Performance." *Études Mongoles et Sibériennes, Centrasiatiques et Tibétaines* 55 (2024): 1–57. <https://journals.openedition.org/emscat/6487>. Accessed April 4, 2025.

² Much of Newar Buddhism is highly esoteric and secret due to its tantric pedigree. A minority of Newar Buddhists participate in this secret form, with the vast majority of the faithful following a religion exemplified in the painting in the AAM. For how the esoteric aspects of the religion were received by biased European scholars, starting around the time of the painting in consideration's composition, see Grimes, Samuel M. "Why Is Newar Buddhism Largely Ignored in Buddhist Studies? Protestantism, the Narrative of Decline." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 93, no. 1 (January 2025): 1–22.

the red Bungadyaḥ (aka Rato Macchindranath).¹ Akṣobhya sits atop the pinnacle of the *mahācaitya* to represent all five of the *pañcabuddhāḥ*. He is flanked by two male protector deities, who are themselves flanked by two of the *pañcarakṣā*, a grouping of five protector goddesses. The other three are located at the base of the

painting. These two bodhisattvas, five buddhas and five protector goddesses exhaust nearly the whole of Newar devotional objects.

Interspersed around the painting are images of Newar ritual activity. We see depictions of gathering the clay for the *lakṣacaitya* rite, preparation, and finally placement of the stupas. *Vajrācāryas* (Newar Buddhist priests) are shown performing fire rituals for devoted patrons. Scattered about the *vajrācārya* at the bottom of the painting are the accoutrements for his ritual performance, which still form the core of a Newar Buddhist *purohit* (ritualist) leading his *jajmāns* (ritual clients).

¹ For a detailed study of these deities, see Locke, John K. *Karunamaya: The Cult of Avalokitesvara-Matsyendranath in the Valley of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Sahayogi Prakashan for Research Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, 1980.