American Sculptor's Romance with Nepal
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Artist Begins Democracy Memorial Honoring Nepalese Womanhood

Say the word Nepal and a gleam comes into the eyes of American sculptor Stephen C. Lowe. Although he lives in Staten Island, New York, his heart is in that picturesque hilly country tucked into the lap of the Himalayas "There's not a moment when what I'm doing is not involved in some way with India or Nepal," a lanky Lowe shares. What animates the vegetarian craftsman most right now is his plan for a Nepal national monument, a tribute to their people's hard-fought struggle for democracy. Lowe feels that this will be the first monument to democracy in South East Asia, the cradle of ancient civilizations. He says, "I hope its presence will proclaim to the world that Nepal is entering the next I millennium as an equal partner in the growing league of nations that seek a better world for all of us."

Lowe has already designed the monument on paper and the engineering plans are being processed. The design is traditional, a blending of art and architectural forms indigenous to Nepal. He visualizes the monument being erected at a high elevation, visible from a distance because it will be illuminated by 108 oil lamps as well as electric floodlights. He says, "This landscaped artistic 'shrine' will be a modern pilgrimage site, to be touched by the mind and the heart." The visual essence of the memorial is an 8-foot-high 'eternal flame' surrounded by 5 gilt-copper archways. For ecological reasons Lowe may replace the bio-gas flame with a replica of sheet metal, like the one held by the Statue of Liberty. Along the archways will be 108 oil lamps as a constant tribute to the ones who sacrificed their lives for democracy. Lowe describes his concept: "The archways are to be lighted on special anniversaries and traditional festivals only. They connect to form a five-point star canopy - a unifying symbol taken from the Nepal Congress flag. Between the archways' base will be five 6-foot-high bronze figures of young

women, called 'Pancha Kanyas,' dressed in traditional and contemporary clothes, who not only fulfill a spiritual guardian role but also convey concepts of universal sister/brotherhood." He says he chose women figures exclusively to dramatically immortalize the fact that it was significantly women who spearheaded the democracy movement, as well as to honor Nepalese womanhood. "Each figure holds symbolic objects," he explains "such as doves, lotuses, books and tools. The carved bas-relief stone base will depict several historic events which led to the people's movement in April 1990."

The Nepal National Monument would take two to three years to complete, Lowe estimates. Projected cost is $150,000. Although the new government will be preoccupied with its own democratic reorganization, Lowe expects it will help with site procurement, material donations and transportation needs. A marble quarry has already agreed to donate all the marble for the top and the base, and the steel is being donated by individuals in India. He hopes the project will be financed through foreign participation from international corporate grant programs and private donations. A committee to support the project has been formed and Ganesh Man Singh, one of the leaders of the democratic movement, has accepted the committee's honorary chairmanship. Already the Nepal Jaycees have offered to fund-raise. Lowe relates his project has received praise from both individuals and appointed government officials in Nepal and the US, but adds he intends to request direct support from the new Nepal government.

According to Lowe, there are just 1,500 Nepalese in the US, although Britain has over 50,000. This February the Nepalese community in New York celebrated Democracy Day. Lowe has the support of the America-Nepal Friendship. So, Besides serving as an everlasting tribute to the heroes who died for democracy, Lowe feels the movement will also highlight another unsung hero: the Nepalese artisan. "These artists are some of the finest in Asia. If they were in a country like Japan, they would be honored as national living treasures. I have seen the great struggle Nepalese artists undergo in their lack of basic tools and adequate outlets for their skills. One of the goals of this project would be to provide traditional artists with the means to help themselves through a series of workshops which would distribute and instruct on the use of hand and power tools not available locally. He already conducted two such workshops in 1982 and 1987. "I also intend to encourage more women to study what was traditionally a father-to-son field. Such breaking from the gender mold has lately been achieved by several female art professors and students at the university level."

Considering the ups and downs of democracy in so many countries, is it too

premature to build such a monument? Says Lowe, "I think now's the time, for this monument could be a visual rallying point, and impetus to keep democracy alive."

As a child, he traveled extensively in Asia with his father who was a career Army officer. After receiving a BFA in painting from the School of Visual Arts in New York, Lowe lived in Nepal, learning the intricacies of the traditional arts of woodcarving and bronze casting. In the US, he has had many exhibitions and his photography of Nepal's art traditions was published in Newsweek, the New York Times and GEO.

From 1986-89 he founded an art gallery, Tradition 3 Thousand, to promote the work of Asian artists. He has worked with the Mahatma Gandhi International Foundation which commissioned him to create several life-size statues of Mahatma Gandhi. One statue was unveiled in 1988 at the Ferry Terminal in San Francisco, and another in Honolulu in 1990. His sculpted busts of Gandhi were also presented to Presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. The effigy of Ravana at the annual Asian Indian Deepavali Festival in New York is also his creation.

Despite his love of Nepal and Asia, Lowe is often questioned about his qualifications for creating the Nepalese monument without his work appearing mere "superficial emulation." "I explain, he responds, "that I feel an affinity with Nepal's traditional artists that both embraces yet terminates differences. Also these types of an - woodcarving and bronze casting - are quite universal."

But in Asia, craftsmanship is never divorced from the greater circumference of life and spiritual presence of mind of the artist. Lowe easily attunes to this Asian, decidedly non-Western art frequency, philosophizing: "Consider those etchings of religious passages, poems and other images on a tiny shaft of rice. If you view it as a great accomplishment of deft micro-craftsmanship, then the point of its creation is clearly missed. The point is the larger goal of mindfulness in the act itself. Nepal still has retained its relationship of artists to society, of artists' truth to materials and of the creative act kept in harmony with all spheres of life."

Carving the Spirit of Nepal:

Left: Sculptor Stephen Lowe. Above: Goddess Durga, a section of a much larger work by him. Below: sketch of the planned memorial to the new democratic Nepal. Five 6' high virgin girls in traditional and Contemporary dress and 4 copper arches surround an eternal flame. One hundred and eight lamps circle the granite base.

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