

# LETTRÉ DU TOIT DU MONDE



## REPOUSSE IN NEPAL

The art of repoussé in Nepal is one of the glories of the greatest metal-crafting tradition of the Himalayas. Less well known than the art of cire perdue casting practised with virtuoso skill by Nepalese sculptors, the repoussé of the Newars is in fact even more astonishing. In cire perdue, the sculptor works a malleable material, either wax or clay, which will serve as the model for the later product in metal ; in repoussé, on the other hand, the material sculpted is the metal itself, a material difficult to work and unforgiving of mistakes. Great repoussé work when seen today has an air of the miraculous : we wonder at the hand that made it, assured that noone among today's craftsmen could equal the feat.

Repoussé work in Nepal has ancient beginnings. The oldest dated work in this technique, the early 7th century gilt sheath covering the image of CANGU NARAYAN at one of Nepal's holiest VAISHNAVA shrines, is younger than the oldest dated work in cire perdue by only a few generations. The quality of this sheath would lead us to believe that it was the product of an artistic tradition already firmly established, so we can assume that repoussé was practised in Nepal well before the seventh century. From these early beginnings repoussé has been popular in Nepal up until the present day, and it is still being practised in certain ateliers in PATAN, where in the back lanes of several quarters of the city one can still hear the "tap tap tap" of the repoussé worker at his craft.

The term repoussé refers to the continual pounding, molding and shaping of the sheet of metal first from the front and then from the back. Usually the work is laid on a bed of pitch, which provides the right degree of resistance to the punches and chisels used to mold the work from either side. When the general shapes and volumes have been established by pounding out the sheet of metal (usually beginning from the back), the pitch is melted off the work, which is then turned and once again laid on a bed of pitch, at which point the finer details etc, are worked in from the front. This process is repeated as many times as is necessary until the sculpture is completed. Repoussé lends itself in particular to works in medium or low relief, and it is principally in this form that we encounter Nepalese repoussé, both in household images and in architectural decoration. But among the chief glories of repoussé work from Nepal are the extraordinary images executed in this technique entirely in the round. These images often so resemble cire perdue castings that the viewer who is given the chance to handle them is at first amazed by the lightness of the image. The production of such works requires the skill of a virtuoso, for each element of the image must be joined perfectly, and usually copper sheets must be so fashioned that they are jointed in the rear to create a fully three dimensional image.

Whether in low or medium relief or in the round, Nepalese repoussé shares with Nepalese cast work the typically luxurious finish and decorated surface that is characteristic of the Newar metal workers' products. Sometimes the surface is studded with semi-precious stones ; almost always it is gilded.

