

Mary Slusser

Remembrance of things past

by Mary Shepherd Slusser

(1918 - 2017)

August 16, 2017

text and first and last photos below © the author



Nepal October 1971

"One of the most beautiful sculptures in all Nepal. It is a lingam bearing the face of Shiva and dates from about the sixth century. Undisturbed and in worship for all those centuries no doubt, it faced Pashupati temple on the opposite river bank. About the 1980's it was severely damaged in an attempted theft."

-Mary Slusser

Introduction

A lawyer recently told me that for institutional beneficiaries of my Estate I should write something about my life since often they like to know a little about the donor. Since there already exists on file in the Library of Congress an oral history recorded by the Society of Women Geographers, additional information seemed unwarranted, but the lawyer's advice raised a storm of far more intimate, near century-long memories that will not be stilled until I set them down as I do here.

Early Beginnings - Parentage

My parents were English. My mother was born in London in 1883, the twin daughter of a then-renowned Harley Street surgeon, Aurelius St. John Hadwen. Baptized Ethel Mary, she was raised as a gentlewoman, reasonably well-educated with a bit of French and proficient in the fine arts. She played piano, painted and drew, embroidered and crocheted, and was an accomplished seamstress. She was attractive and petite, kind, friendly, outgoing, talkative, and optimistic.

I know nothing certain of my father's beginnings beyond his birth in London, August 19, 1880. Unlike my mother, George Percy Shepherd was not forthcoming and I never asked about his past. But by way of my mother it appears that he was the offspring of the son of an upper-class English family and their seduced housemaid. Forced to marry, together with the child they were shipped overseas in disgrace. In exile, the couple bore two more children, my Aunt Laura and my Uncle Harry. The exiled black sheep, my paternal grandfather Shepherd, later perished in a heroic attempt to control a runaway horse and carriage, leaving the three children fatherless and my grandmother a widow.

Where the exiled couple settled is not known but points to the United States, specifically to the village of Fenton in Lower Michigan that became my home town. It appears that it was there, as I always understood, that the heroic death of my grandfather took place and it is there as far back as I can remember where my grandmother, aunt and uncle all lived. It is also possible that the exiled family first settled in Canada, as would be expected of Englishmen, and only later emigrated to Michigan. That my father considered the United States his native land is evident from a nostalgic diary entry written on July Fourth, 1918 when living in Canada. "Wish I was in the States today. Wonder if I'll ever see home and the States again."

I know nothing of my father's youth but think it was most likely spent in Fenton. He left school after completing the sixth grade, most likely forced to become the family breadwinner after his father's death. A clue is provided by his continuing care of his widowed mother throughout my own childhood. According to my mother, it was he who provided the house she lived in. How he earned his living as boy and young man I do not know but at least for a time, as I once learned from him, he was a lumberjack in what I think was Upper Michigan. From later evidence he must also have labored at times in a machine shop.

My father steps out of the shadows only as a grown man then working in Canada when he became the suitor of my widowed mother.

Around 1902-03, my mother married Russell Hamilton who was an officer in the British Merchant Navy. In London between long sea voyages to Africa, India, Australia and the Far East he fathered a son, Oliver, in 1906, and in Canada in 1911, a daughter, Gladys. They would become my half-brother and sister. At length, Russell contracted tuberculosis and in 1909 the navy sent him, along with his family, to Canada to recover. He did not recover but died there in a sanitarium about 1913, leaving my mother a widow far from home with two small children to support. How she managed I do not know but perhaps as a dressmaker. She moved often and on one postcard, she is addressed as "Mrs. Hamilton, Dressmaker." In these circumstances a bread-winning suitor must have been very welcome.

Still among my belongings are a number of *billets doux*, "billydoos," as my mother called them, love notes penned by my father on picture postcards during his courtship. They are brief, some are signed in Scotch "*ye ken whae frae*" (you know who from), and they were persuasive. Ethel Mary Hamilton accepted George Percy Shepherd and they married in late December 1915. Their first child, my sister Dorothy, was born the next year. They were then living near Toronto in the little Erie Canal town of Welland, Ontario where I was born two years later, in November 1918.



Welland, Ontario

The birth coincided both with the protracted armistice negotiations that closed the First World War and with the devastating flu pandemic that then swept the region. In late August of the following year, before I was a year old, they moved to the United States.

THE FARM: 1919 — ca. 1925

I do not know exactly what motivated my parents to cross the border in 1919 and take up life in the United States. Evidently there were several reasons, not least, one was to escape the bitter Canadian winters — the one of 1918 recorded as the worst in 75 years. Following unending days of battling below zero blizzards to get to work, my father proclaimed in the January 25 entry of his 1918 diary “[I] bet I won’t do it next year if I can help it. This country is not

what it's cracked up to be." This reads like an immigrant's yearning for the warmer clime of his homeland in Lower Michigan. The primary reason to move, however, must have been to find a better life.

My father had unsuccessfully sought to better it that year through frequent moves from one unheated machine shop to another. But in each he found only the same grinding, ten- to fourteen-hour long, six-day, poorly-paid work week. By contrast, a joyous summer hobby as a successful Victory gardener must have seemed like paradise. For this restless man, full time work as a farmer must have beckoned. It's possible, too, that he was among — or feared to be among — the many men out of work as the war-time machinist jobs came to an end. The 1919 diary which might have clarified the exact reasons for the move was destroyed decades later with all others, mysteriously the 1918 diary excepted.

Be that as it may, by late August 1919 the Shepherd family — with children and step children now six — was soon settled on a farm a couple of miles east of Fenton. It consisted of twenty acres of flat land cleared from second-growth woods that still surrounded it on three sides. On the fourth side at some distance away lay the childless Adam Miller farm, like ours a cleared square in the surrounding forest. A little farther up the dirt road lay the prosperous-looking Nichols' farm. In the opposite direction, about a mile away at the corner of the Fenton road, lived the McCombs. And somewhere in between, in the woods beside our farm, lived Billy Potter, a squatter. He was not often seen but occasionally dropped by to bum a meal. One of my earliest memories is of Billy in our kitchen downing a whole fried egg as the yolk ran down his bearded chin

When purchased, the farm did not come with a house so I suppose until one could be built the family of six squeezed into my grandmother's house in town. Built from the Sears and Roebuck mail-order catalog my parents chose an austere, two-story, pre-fabricated cube, had it assembled, and soon moved in, probably when I was two. My mother aptly named it Forest View Farm and hung her decorative, hand-painted sign from the porch eaves to proclaim it. In the 1980s, when I returned to Fenton for my high school class reunion, the sign hung on the farmhouse still.

Beyond his experience in the Canadian Victory Garden, I do not know what my father knew about farming, what he farmed, or how he supported his family. There was no barn and the only outbuildings were a slatted corn crib and an outhouse. I don't remember it but there must have been some sort of shelter for our buggy and Bill, the horse, who drew it. We did not raise milk cows or, besides chickens, any other domestic animals. We may have rented out some of the acreage for pasturage because, as I vividly remember, I was once cornered there by a raging bull but saved by my brother Oliver who drove it off with a pitchfork. By horse and wagon, hay was harvested from that same field but since we had no cattle and no barn for storage it likely was for sale.

Looking back, I think we must have lived pretty close to the edge and, like pioneers, in part dependent on our land and in part on the land around us. We had a vegetable garden but how extensive I do not remember. It must have been quite large since my mother canned a lot for the winter. We grew watermelons and musk melons (cantaloupe) and there were strawberries and some berry bushes. I don't remember my father hunting but my mother owned a 410 shotgun and supplied the table with squirrel and rabbit from the surrounding woods. From them too, we gathered sacksful of hazel, hickory, and black walnuts which we cracked by the living room stove in winter. The woods also supplied various kinds of mushrooms and we tapped the sugar maple trees for their sweet juice. To become maple syrup it was then boiled down on the kitchen stove in a huge, ovoid copper washtub. Staples such as tea, coffee, canned milk, margarine, flour, and sugar must have been bought from Mr. Whitman, the sole Fenton grocer. We did not buy bread, it was baked at home, and our toilet paper was free, an old Sears catalog which hung in the outhouse.

We must have been largely self-sufficient in treating our aches and pains. Infections were plastered with a poultice made of a lump of bread soaked in boiling water. Once, while harvesting our hay, one of the men was bitten by a rattlesnake and came to the house for help. The only remedy at hand, which proved effective, was the kitchen shears with which my mother cut out the poisonous bite.

In extremis there was Dr. Hoskins, a family doctor in Fenton, but for us that was far away. When I was three I got pneumonia and needed more than home doctoring. I don't know how Dr. Hoskins was contacted. We had no phone though the Millers did but perhaps my parents hitched up old Bill and took me to town. Or, as doctors did then, perhaps he came to the farm. He instructed my mother to smear a decongestant salve over my chest. When this brought no relief he prescribed a stronger replacement salve but neglected to tell my mother to first remove the other one. Together, I am told, the two salves burned me so badly that as my mother changed the dressings she could see my chest bones. I think my first memory is of sitting in her lap while she tended me.



St Jude Episcopal Church, Fenton, MI

Like pioneers, we did not roam far from home. We were far from the A. J. Phillips Public Library in Fenton but must have owned a few books from which my mother read to us on winter evenings.

Our social life was largely the Sunday horse and buggy trip to the Episcopal church in Fenton and for the children the walk to and from our one-room school in town.

If we visited my grandmother or aunt and uncle in town I don't remember it. At least once Uncle Harry visited us, for a vivid memory is of the naked sparrow nestlings he threw down as he cleared their nests from the eaves. The only visiting with the neighbors that I remember is once in the nearby Adam Miller's parlor; it was there that I saw my first stereopticon. By peeking through cracks in Mr. Miller's barn door I also saw my first motor car, a Ford Model T I suppose.

Among a host of memories I carry from the farm one stands out as a day of terror. One morning my mother and I went out to feed the chickens pecking about in the back yard. There we were confronted by a large black dog winding up a killing spree among the frantic flock. He did not seem to fear us and with one of our precious chickens dangling from his jaws, defiantly faced us. To save her flock, my mother's instant response was to shoot the dog dead. Deeply frightened by what she'd done and unsure of the

protocol among farmers in such a situation, she opted to prevent discovery. With the help of my young brother she hurriedly stuffed the dead dog in a sack and hid it in the outhouse. Yet, regardless of consequences, at the end of this terrible day when the owner came by in search of his lost dog my mother boldly confessed the crime. The terror we felt only subsided when the owner said my mother had done the right thing and took the offending killer's body away.

A more pleasant and major memory of my early years at Forest View Farm, is the arrival of a huge, brass-bound steamer trunk from England. I do not know the year it came but it may have followed the breakup of my mother's ancestral home after the death of her surgeon father, a date also unknown. One by one, out of that trunk, came all of Asia in the bric-a-brac that must have filled the London house and decorated ours from then on. There were a pair of

black lacquer plaques inlaid with exotic Japanese figures in ivory, a brass bowl with Indian repoussé figures, a manydrawered small wooden cabinet with intricate inlay, a hippopotamus tusk, a metal plate embossed with Chinese figures, a large ebony-wood elephant bearing a mahout seated before a crowned Indian nabob sheltered under a parasol, a pair of brightly-painted, bronze Indian torch bearers, a tiger skin complete with head, an ivory chess set, miniature painted ceramic figures from China, and more and more. There were also about a half dozen teapots, one of silver, another of Chinese porcelain, a third from Japan, one of burnt sienna colored clay, and others from English kilns. How much of this treasure had been acquired during Russell Hamilton's travels I do not know but likely everything from the Far East and more — things the Hamiltons were forced to leave behind when they were sent off to Canada. I always suspected that my mother's most cherished objects, the ebony elephant and the pair of torchbearers that were always paired with it were gifts to Dr. Hadwen from grateful patients newly returned from the Raj. Whatever their history, these exotic objects, along with numerous foreign postcards we children played with on rainy days, were our familiars and almost certainly fundamental in shaping our futures.

CITY INTERLUDE ca. 1925-26

Apparently the hunter-gatherer economy we seemed to follow on the farm was not sufficient to sustain us. My father found work as a tool and die maker for the Chevrolet motor company in Flint, Michigan, an industrial town sixteen miles north of Fenton. We sold the farm and moved there. I do not know the year or how old I was. Family lore had it that I was five when we left the farm but this cannot be correct because I was already a first grader and walking to school. I vividly remember the ABC cards the teacher held up before us. I must have been at least seven which would date the move to about 1925. Oddly, I remember nothing at all about the packing and leaving, only our arrival. Supper that night was cold canned beans eaten while sitting on or at the fateful steamer trunk from London.

We did not stay long in Flint although my father continued to work there the rest of his life. Propelled by an unexpected event, the family was soon resettled a few miles from the farm in the familiar town of Fenton. Crushed by his inability to care for his family in the fashion he aspired to, my father was not a cheerful man. Standing for long hours at a lathe designing and making tools for Chevrolet left him afterward with little time or energy for play or lovemaking. At length the disparity in temperament led to a period of friction during which my sister and I were packed off to the care of my grandmother in Fenton. By that time the older step children were pretty much on their own. After what seems like a long time with grandma, we were reintegrated as a family of four and moved into a rented house in Fenton. And there we stayed.

FENTON YEARS: ca. 1926 —1942

Fenton was a small town with a then population of about 3,000. Like other little towns in Lower Michigan, it was laid out in a grid pattern bisected by a single commercial main street, ours named Leroy after the town's founder. Leroy Street was anchored at the south end by a Greek-owned candy store and a barbershop ministered by Aunt Laura's taciturn husband, Uncle George.

At the north end was the Fenton Hotel across from the Grand Trunk Railway depot and a large granary that stood by the tracks.



Fenton Hotel



Grand Trunk Railway depot



Granary

They crossed Leroy Street and the passing trains tied up traffic several times a day. Just south of the tracks came Mr. Whitman's grocery store and the nearby Pellett's Dry Goods where we bought our shoes, Easter bonnets, and the cloth with which to make at home almost everything else we wore.



Pellett's Dry Goods

There was a feed store, hardware, butcher, movie, restaurant, library, and the Italian Joe's ice-cream parlor. A few steps away, on a side street, was an ordinary house used as a resting place and comfort stop favored by the farmers' wives on Saturday market day. We did not go to school during our brief stay in Flint — it may have been summer. But from grandma's we walked to Fenton High School, a single big, red brick building not far away.



Fenton, MI (High School) (1906) contributed by Paul Petosky

Fenton High School

I don't know what grades my sister Dorothy and I were placed in or whether my step-brother or sister were enrolled. In fact, their early history is so murky it is now impossible to reconstruct. That they were part of the farm family is attested by memories and a photo of the six of us posing on the farmhouse front porch. Regrettably, my father's growing jealousy of another man's children he was obliged to support with little means must have made them feel unwelcome and during the Flint interlude and after as teenagers they drifted away. Around my ninth birthday, when Oliver was eighteen, he left for California and we were only reunited when I traveled there after World War II. My sister Gladys, whom I came to deeply love, drifted in and out of our home until eventually she too left for California.

At Fenton High School my sister Dorothy preceded me by a year. She was a studious all-A scholar who early on was

determined to go to college. From age 14 she worked summers to help finance that dream.

I don't remember much about elementary school except that I could not grasp arithmetic, that Roman numerals baffled me, and that I spent endless hours trying to master to my teacher's satisfaction the Palmer Method of cursive writing. I excelled in reading and in the fourth grade my teacher had me tutoring classmates who lagged behind. In and out of school I was an avid reader and profited from the A. J. Phillips public library.

At school, Latin was the only foreign language taught and since everyone I knew spoke English I could not understand why we had to learn it.

In junior high school I was not a bad student but it came second to having fun. My report card was speckled with many a B and C. Unlike my sister, I had no academic goal, and spent my free time in the vast outdoor playground that Fenton occupied. During summer vacation I swam in one of the many lakes — Silver Lake, Mud Lake, Long Lake, Lake Fenton and more — that surrounded the town. With a 22 rifle in hand, acquired I know not how, I ranged through the surrounding woods in all weathers but did not hunt. At home I tended my pet rabbits and guinea pigs, certain snakes that had caught my fancy, and doctored an occasional wounded bird. In summer I played daylong tennis on the well-kept clay court that the generous town lawyer, Mr. McNeil, made available to all. In winter I sledged down the glacial moraines and skated on the frozen mill pond. In short, it was an idyllic life for a tomboy which I was.

By junior high school I was also part of a small, elite “gang,” consisting of the most popular football players in my class and their girlfriend classmates.

I graduated in 1936 in the top ten per cent of my class, no great honor since classes were small and ours, I think, had only about sixty students. My sister graduated the previous year as second from the top of her class.



A.J. Phillips Library
(now the Fenton Museum)

Throughout my school years in Fenton my family, as on the farm, continued to live somewhat on the edge. We were never in need for basics, as far as I can recall, but it was hard to make ends meet. The only time I ever heard harsh words at home were my father's when he scolded my tearful mother over Mr. Whitman's monthly grocery bills which he considered unnecessarily excessive. Even in this Spartan household, however, we did have luxuries though we could not afford them and they were often temporary. My father was never able to accept the fact that he could not provide for those he loved in a manner he wanted to. As children our Christmas tree was half hidden by the presents he went into debt for. He so wanted my mother to have a piano he would buy one on time but then could not make the payments and after a month or so it would be repossessed. Although it is surely an exaggerated memory it seems to me there was a constant parade of pianos arriving and departing from our house. In the same way we sometimes had a car and then suddenly none. My mother was an accomplished seamstress and made our dresses — mine at least with underpants to match — and in their teens my sisters, also accomplished, made their own clothes. At length to help out, my mother opened The Blue Belle Sewing Shop and hung her hand-painted sign on the porch to advertise it. Her earnings are what we lived on during the 1930s depression when my father was laid off at Chevrolet.

In these economic conditions when my sister graduated in 1935 there was obviously no parental financial aid for college. Nonetheless, she managed to enroll at the University of Michigan on her several years' savings from her summer vacation work as a housekeeper. Ann Arbor lay only about forty miles from Fenton and for in-state students the tuition fee was \$55 per semester, still a huge sum when you didn't have it.

I was not studious nor motivated to attend college. After I graduated in 1936 I went to work as a clerk in the Fenton lumber company where my boss taught me how to figure board feet and I at last understood the need for arithmetic. My sister's urgings to follow her example finally took hold and I followed her to the university the next year, 1937. I had some savings, received a \$25 scholarship, and applied for aid through the National Youth Administration. It paid a dollar an hour for various jobs performed throughout the campus. One of the many I had was measuring tiny pickled fish to determine their mean size. I also waited table in my dormitory to earn my board and keep.

My first two years in college were very difficult for other reasons than lack of money. For one thing as a Freshman I discovered how little I had profited from what Fenton High School offered. I was astonished at how much other classmates knew that I did not. Moreover, too busy playing, I had never really learned to study. When despite plenty of A grades in some subjects in others I seemed to be failing, I quit. After working as a house keeper in Ann Arbor for a semester, I went back to school. But something had changed. Somehow, I now knew how to study and became a first-rate student. It was about this time that I met my future husband, Robert Slusser. He ran the dishwasher to which as a waitress I delivered the dirty dishes. In June 1942, as my steady boyfriend, he received his MBA and me my bachelor's degree. He got professional work and I spent the summer waiting table at a lodge in the Isles of Shoals, an

island retreat a few miles from Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The two previous summers I had done the same in Yellowstone National Park.

In the fall of 1942, beckoned by my sister Dorothy, as a country bumpkin in a homemade dress I left Fenton by way of the Grand Trunk Railway for New York City.

NEW YORK CITY 1942 — 1950

My sister Dorothy had preceded me to New York by a year and though working full time had enrolled at the Institute of Fine Arts, a part of New York University. At that time the Institute profited by the presence of exceptionally fine European professors like Alfred Salmony, for example, refugees from war-torn Europe. As a part-time graduate student, I enrolled there too. At the same time, I held various jobs, often two at a time, as a secretary or waitress. Eventually I got a secretarial job in the anthropology department of the American Museum of Natural History. Here, too, were some European refugee scholars. Several of the permanent staff members taught at Columbia University not far away in upper Manhattan. Inspired by them, I enrolled at Columbia as a graduate student in anthropology although I had to continue working. Meanwhile, my husband-to-be enlisted as an officer in the US Navy, In early 1944 while training to be a navy combat pilot he talked me into marrying him as my contribution to the war effort. I left New York and joined him at his base in Texas. After an all too short honeymoon, he left for Hawaii, not as a pilot but as an education officer. I returned to New York and resumed studying at Columbia. In 1947, taking advantage of the GI Bill, my husband enrolled at Tufts University in Massachusetts.

There he would prepare for a diplomatic career in the foreign service of the Department of State. Again, I joined him and while juggling a part time job studied at Harvard. Eventually I had the credits transferred to Columbia. In the fall of that year, we moved to Washington, my husband to the World Bank and I to write my PhD thesis at home. It was granted in 1950 and I went to work in the State Department as a Research Analyst.

FOREIGN SERVICE 1954 — 1980

In 1954, my husband received his first overseas appointment; it was to Vietnam as an economics adviser for US Aid, a part of the Department of State. So began our peripatetic life, moving every couple of years or so to one Third World country after another. In each, we encountered new cultures and usually a new language.

In Vietnam, where we stayed three years, I continued on contract my work for the State Department but now as a field anthropologist. I focused on Laos and Cambodia which together with Vietnam had been French Indochina. In those two countries, I could travel freely and did. In Saigon, with no advance notice, I would be granted space on a US plane bound for Vientiane, the Laotian capital. With no time to pack, I was lucky if I arrived with a toothbrush. From there I often hitched a ride on one of the French-piloted, singleengine Beavers that served the mountainous hinterland. The US agency CARE used them to distribute food packages to remote villages otherwise unreachable. For no charge, the generous agent would squeeze me in among the packages. After landing in an improbable hayfield, while the distribution took place, I wandered, observed, and made notes as I pleased. Occasionally we would be grounded by as much as a week or two, unable to take off because of the "*brume sèche*," a thick haze of smoke from the slash and burn agricultural technique favored by the mountain tribes. I did not mind the delay, somehow made do, and reaped a wealth of information I would otherwise have missed. I was young enough to think it was a romantic adventure to sleep on the ground under a star-lit sky in the midst of a junglesurrounded community of strangers. I wrote my reports on Laos and Cambodia at our next post, Belgrade, Yugoslavia.

Posted there in 1957, we stayed five years, long enough to become fluent in Serbian and immersed in the history and culture of the region. We had a little twoseat Karman Ghia that valiantly carried us over a network of Improbable dirt roads. We stood in awe before exquisite Byzantine churches and gazed at the medieval wall paintings within. We wandered alone through Roman ruins and on the Dalmatian coast marveled at a Roman emperor's seaside palace ruin. It was invested now by other ruins, the remains of medieval squatters who had once appropriated the abandoned palace. For us the country was a paradise we never wanted to leave. Nevertheless, in 1962 a new posting sent us to Guinea on the coast of West Africa. Along with the Karman-Ghia we traveled there on a freighter that eventually deposited us in Conakry, Guinea's capital. We had no assigned housing and had to bunk for a time with an accommodating bachelor. Newly independent, the Guinean economy was in shambles and there was little food in the markets. There was no US commissary and food had to be ordered from abroad. It took three months until our order came. While waiting, we subsisted on tuna creamed with Campbell's mushroom soup our bachelor companion lent us from his stores. We served it on toast, a locally made French baguette from which we first picked out the weevils baked in it. Eventually we were given our own house, received our own food order, and set about living in a new place.

Our house was a newly evacuated French villa by the seaside. It was unscreened, had an a/c in the bedroom that rarely worked, and we were often without water. The water was piped down a lane from the main road a mile away. It ran through a plastic pipe buried a few inches underground. To reach us, it first passed through an African village where all too frequently someone slit it to serve their own needs. Though we offered them access to our outdoor

spigot, we could not gain their friendship and they continued to favor the slitpipe source.

Guinea was not an easy place to live and work. We made the best of it and as my husband's time and work permitted, roamed the country far and wide. In truth, there was not much to see. What we did see, I recorded in a series of AAA-like "triptiks" for the benefit of others of the community who were less venturesome. That I didn't kill or injure someone by one particular triptik is a miracle.

It so happened that we had a hippopotamus tusk in my home where my mother affirmed that hippos were harmless though rhinos were not. When we heard that hippos gathered to bathe at a certain river, we organized an overnight to enjoy the spectacle. We slept in the open on the sloping, rocky shore and as night fell, the hippos began to assemble to bathe and sport in the stream. Because of the slope, our camp was above them a little way but easily accessible to them. After the engaging, close-quarter show, and long after the cheery triptik that followed I learned something new. Eventually I inherited the family hippopotamus tusk. Not being sure of the identification, I took it to the Smithsonian to find out. Along with the ID came the astounding news that not only rhinos were dangerous but hippos equally so. That they had not left the water and trampled us to death, said the Smithsonian biologist, was a miracle.

Such adventures notwithstanding, when our tour ended after two and a half unrewarding years, we were relieved to leave for a new post.

Our next destination was Morocco, a beautiful North African country with art, architecture, and enticing bazaars, all the things we had lacked in impoverished Guinea. Just two weeks before departure though, Morocco was snatched away and we were sent instead to Nepal, a tiny country in the Himalayas.

In 1962, with no time to prepare, we arrived clueless. We were driven to our quarters through the heart of the capital city, Kathmandu. There I saw for the first time an assembly of dazzling, multi-roofed "pagodas," such as would engage me for the rest of my life. As I was to learn, I had landed in a Hindu kingdom that until 1950 had been closed to the West. Time stood still, even in the capital, Kathmandu. There were few cars and a single stop light. Children still defecated in the city streets and their elders, more discreetly, in the shadowed alleys. The city's medieval character remained intact.

The Smithsonian had asked me to make a small collection of Nepalese artifacts and provided the funds to do so. It was a godsend. It established me as a professional with a doctorate that excused me from making cookies and canapés, the usual lot of Embassy wives.

I set about the collecting, began to learn a new language and a new alphabet, and to learn what I could of the history and culture. There was little in English or even, as I was to learn later, in the local languages. The Nepalese interests did not lie in that direction. I prowled the streets where at every turn stood some gilt-roofed shrine or a stone statue, centuries old, priceless, unmolested, and still in active worship. I made discoveries, and as in Guinea, wrote triptiks for the American community. In our huge LandRover, unsuitable to these surroundings, I ranged throughout the Kathmandu Valley nonstop and filled notebooks with my findings.

By the end of our two-year tour, I thought I knew enough to write a guide to this little known country. Back in Washington, the Smithsonian gave me a contract to do so. I withdrew from it when we were sent back to Nepal for a second tour. Now, I could think in different terms. I decided to write a cultural study of the Kathmandu Valley. Armed with time and a generous Rockefeller grant, I began. The two-year tour became three and after it ended, became five when I stayed on alone to complete my research. Written in Washington and finished in 1978, the manuscript became *Nepal Mandala*, published by Princeton University in 1982.

During the long publishing period, I joined my husband in Tunisia, our last assignment before his retirement in 1980.

Guinea excepted, Tunisia was another wonderful adventure we felt guilty being paid for. Although it was a Muslim country, it was a secular one with a strong French imprint left by the former colonizers. There were also reminders of other colonizers who had preceded them, Carthagians and Romans, for example. We drove over finely engineered Roman roads and bridges, strolled through their ruined towns, and marveled at the mosaics that floored their villas. The best preserved were underground, protected there from the scorching African sun. The contemporary Berber population followed suit, excavating a huge pit at the bottom of which radiated cool and habitable caves. Like all good things, at length this magical interlude came to an end and we returned to Washington.

At loose ends, I returned to Nepal for a few months' study, then busied myself with a job at the original African art museum on Capitol Hill. In 1989, thanks to a post-doctoral fellowship, I landed at the Freer and Sackler museums of Asian art. Although it was a two year fellowship, the then director, Milo Beach, asked me to stay on as a useful but unpaid Research Associate and I did and at the time of this writing - June, 2017 I am still there.



Bhaktapur Darbar Square
Mary Slusser 1970/1971

The author would like to thank Peter Maye and John George, dear friends and neighbors, for finding the

historical photos and formatting the text into this article.

The following text I received from Mary upon my request in 2010. It is part of the exhibition at the Taragaon Museum. It was also made available on the occasion of the KVPT memorial lunch on September 3, 2017 in Kathmandu.

Niels Gutschow, Chief Advisor
Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust

Mary Slusser, born in November 1918, holds a doctorate in anthropology and archaeology from Columbia University. She first came to Nepal in 1965 and was the first western scholar with an interest in architectural typology and architectural details. Her articles, published in *Artibus Asiae* 1972-79 were milestones in the discovery of Newar art and architecture. *Nepal Mandala – A cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley* (two vols., 1982) finally made the stunning cultural richness of the Valley accessible to the western reader. Slusser left Nepal in 1972 but has repeatedly returned there, the last time in 2008, as a research associate of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington. In 2010 she published *The Antiquity of Nepalese Wood Carving . A Reassessment*.

Dear Niels,

I thought the paragraph I sent earlier (above) would satisfy your request for something for the Taragaon archive, but, wow! now I see that you essentially will only be content with my life history, Mary Slusser's unpublished autobiography, so to speak. So here goes. I begin with the paragraph I had sent previously so that you have a single document.

"I came to Nepal by chance. As an employee of the US aid mission (USAID, then called USOM), my husband, an economist, was involved in the economic development of Third World countries. In 1965 he was assigned to Morocco. Two weeks before our scheduled departure he was suddenly reassigned to Nepal. We unpacked the snorkeling gear and replaced it with boots, boarded a propeller plane in Delhi, and after a bumpy four hours landed at Gauchar, still the cow pasture airport, in early November. The USOM offices were in Kalimati and in pre-Ring Road days to get there we were driven through the heart of Kathmandu. Because of the sudden Morocco-Nepal switch we were clueless about the country into which we had come. I was not prepared for the Darbar Square temples and the

immense impression they made upon me. A window of our USOM quarters looked out over Svayambhu, which in those days of clear skies and low buildings, loomed on the horizon. Those monuments, the temples and the stupa, were the initial catalyst for my subsequent involvement with the culture, history, and art of an incredible place like no other on the face of the earth. And so began a love affair that has endured for almost half a century. Now in my 91st year the wonder of Nepal stirs me still.

You ask about my background for my work in Nepal. In my luggage were three valuable tools: a doctorate, a mandate from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington to collect some Nepalese ethnographic objects, and a fifteen-year acquaintanceship with foreign living. The PhD was in anthropology, archaeology, and fine arts. The Smithsonian aspect was as an unpaid volunteer to buy a thousand dollars worth of ethnographic objects. To the then American ambassador's wife, a much-feared stickler for protocol and the wives' servitude to the embassy, the PhD and the Smithsonian connection made me a "professional." I was excused from cookie making. I was free to explore this cultural wonderland.

From the USOM compound I walked the cobbled paths through uninterrupted rice paddies to Kirtipur and Svayambhu and by foot crossed the Vishnumati to the Kathmandu Darbar Square. Soon I went further afield, driving our four-wheel jeep to the four corners of the Kathmandu Valley and beyond. Each day I saw a little more and learned a little more. I took photographs and began to jot down my discoveries in a notebook that soon swelled to many notebooks. As I had done in previous postings in Yugoslavia and Africa, I shared my enthusiasm by writing for the US community 2- and 3-page guides to some of the cultural monuments. Beyond the guides I had no further writing ambitions.

These ambitions changed radically when following my husband's two-year tour of duty he was reassigned to Nepal. This gave me time for more serious academic work and to that end I applied for, and was granted, a fellowship. It provided the funding for assistance with the reading of Sanskrit inscriptions and the preparation of maps, plans, and architectural drawings that I would need for a book. Thus entered Mahesh Raj Pant, Gautam Vajracharya, and Wolfgang Korn, the young assistants you asked about. In the previous years I had gotten to know Mahesh Raj and Gautam through my subscription to *Purnima*, the Nepali-language journal published by Samsodhana-mandala, a group of history-oriented scholars to which they belonged. The young German architect Wolfgang Korn I met through my collaboration in the protective inventory of the Kathmandu Valley overseen by Carl Pruscha. It was Gautam and Mahesh Raj who opened the doors to the all-important Licchavi inscriptions in the Sanskrit that baffled me and acquainted me with far more Nepali-language sources than I had found by myself. I have always been grateful for their immense contributions to my work. Both young men, as you know, had never been out of the Kathmandu Valley and never heard of the Vikings, for example, but they both went on to become PhDs in foreign lands.

You further asked how it was that as a non-architect I wrote “the important essay about the Dattatreya and later Indreshvara Mahadeva.” Essentially, I wrote them because, as you observe, before my arrival in Nepal in 1965 almost nothing was known about Nepalese architecture. Architecture was supposed to be the final volume of Pratapaditya Pal’s trilogy on the art of Nepal published 1974-1978 but there wasn’t enough solid information to justify it. Nor was there in the 1980s when I had to decline the request of E. J. Brill, his publisher, to complete the trilogy. So though I had no architectural pretensions there was so much to be said about Dattatreya, Indreshvara Mahadeva, and Kasthamandapa that it just seemed natural to write an essay on these neglected monuments to signal their cultural importance.

With respect to the question you asked about my preservation efforts, what can I say? In my view I did the right thing in taking Nepalese paintings out of a country where they were disintegrating from lack of care to a country where at great cost they would be restored professionally and housed in the protected environment of a US museum of art. In one case I helped preserve whole a banner painting (*bilampau*) already out of the country and on the art market that was about to be cut into pieces for sale of its individual figures. It was professionally restored and may be seen in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts to testify to the splendid art of Nepal. In the nationalistic view common to many countries, the Nepalese argue that better to let the paintings rot than to leave Nepalese soil. So the question is, which of us is right? As you well know, to protect objects abroad or leave them unprotected in their country of origin is an international issue that so far seems insoluble. It concerns me deeply and I have written about it in the *Asianart.com* article you mentioned, in “More on ‘Turning a Blind Eye,’ *Orientalism* 36:4 (May 2005), pp. 71-74, and elsewhere.

You ask how I came to take up the problem of the age of Nepalese wood carving and your question is easily answered. Beginning with my first encounter I have been intrigued by Nepalese wood carving, viewing it as an art not just a craft. Further, the more familiar I became with the material I sensed that some of it was far older than generally thought. My eyes told me (as did your own, if you recall) that the exquisite Sasunani reliefs, for example, were carved long before the thirteenth-century guess date. As I have written in the new book, the idea to ascertain the dates of these reliefs and other wooden objects came to me in 2004 when a friend told me about a Nepalese wooden sculpture that had been dated to the sixth or seventh century. If so, I reasoned, there must be more. What better way to spend some of my savings than to find out. So began the almost two-dozen radiocarbon tests that illustrate the antiquity of wood carving in Nepal and help to establish it as an art on a par with the paintings, metallurgical, and lithic arts.”

Washington, 19 February 2010

BIBLIOGRAPHY

2016. "On the Loss of Cultural Heritage in Quake-Ravaged Nepal," *Asian Art* <http://www.asianart.com/articles/heritage>, July 4, 2016
2009. *The Antiquity of Nepalese Wood Carving: A Reassessment*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
2009. "Seeing, Rather than Looking, at Nepalese Art," *Asian Art* <http://www.asianart.com/articles>, December 18, 2009.
2006. "Goddess or God? A Case of Stolen Identity," *Orientalism* 37:4 (May 2006), pp. 55-59.
2006. "The Lhasa gTsug ladkhang ("Jokhang"), Further Observations on the Ancient Wood Carvings," *Asian Art* <http://www.asianart.com/articles/jokhang>
2005. "More on Turning a Blind Eye," *Orientalism* 36:4 (May 2005), pp. 73-74.
2005. *Art and Culture of Nepal: Selected Papers*. Kathmandu: Mandala Publications.
2005. "Steaming Down the Mekong," *Asian Art* <http://www.asianart.com/articles/mekong>
2004. "Richesse et diversité de la sculpture Népalaise," in *Dossiers d'Archéologie*, no. 293, May 2004, pp. 46-57.
2003. "Conservation Notes on Some Nepalese Paintings," *Asian Art* <http://www.asianart.com/articles/paubhas>
2003. "Treasures Beyond the Golden Door," in Gotz Hagmiiller, *Patan Museum, The Transformation of a Royal Palace in Nepal* (London: Serindia Publications, 2003), pp. 103-05.
2003. "Traditional Metal Crafts of Nepal," in Gotz Hagmiiller, *Patan Museum, The Transformation of a Royal Palace in Nepal* (London: Serindia Publications, 2003), pp. 118-21.
2002. "The Exhibition Galleries," *Patan Museum Guide*, (Lalitpur, Nepal: The Museum, 2002).

2001. "Nepalese Unfired Clay Sculpture: A Case Study," *Oriental Art* 32:7 (September 2001), pp. 71-80.

2001. "Kuber Singh Shakya: A Master Craftsman of Nepal," *Asian Art* <http://www.asianart.com/articles/kubersing/index.html>, April 19, 2001.

1999. Co-author Lila Bishop, "Another Luri, A Newly Discovered Cave Chorten in Mustang," *Oriental Art* 30:2 (February 1999), pp. 18-27.

1999. Co-authors Nutan Sharma and James A. Giambrone, "Metamorphosis: Sheet Metal to red Image in Nepal," *Artibus Asiae* vol. 58, nos. 3/4, pp. 21-51

1999. Contributor to Vidya Dehejia, *Devi, The Great Goddess* (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery).

1998. Review of Niels Gutschow, *The Nepalese Caitya: 1500 Years of Buddhist Votive Architecture in the Kathmandu Valley, with drawings by Bijay Basukala and an essay by David Gellner*, Lumbini International Research Institute Monograph Series 1, Stuttgart/London, Edition Axel Menges, 1997. 593 illustrations (drawings, plans, photographs), 328 pp. In *Artibus Asiae* 58:1/2, pp 154-158.

1997. Review of Masahide Mori and Yoshiko Mori, trans. Rolf W. Giebel, *The Devimahatmya Paintings Preserved at the National Archives, Kathmandu*, Bibliotheca Codicum Asiaticorum 9, Tokyo, The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for Unesco, The Toyo Bunko, 1995, in *Artibus Asiae* 57:3/4 (1997), pp. 363~364.

1997. "The Museum Behind the Golden Door," *Oriental Art* 28:10 (November 1997), pp. 53-56.

1996. "Dry-Lacquer or Clay? Preliminary Notes on a Neglected Nepalese Sculptural Medium," *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1 (January 1966), pp. 11-33.

1996. "Vishnu and the Kings of Nepal," *Asian Art and Culture*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Fall 1996) pp. 8-29.

1996. "The Purandi Hoard: Eleventh-century Metalwork from Nepal," *Artibus Asiae*, vol. LVI, no. 1/2 (1996), pp. 95-143.

1996. Review of Raimund O.A. Becker-Ritterspach, *Water Conduits in the Kathmandu Valley*, New Delhi, 1995 in *Artibus Asiae*, vol. LVI, 1/2, pp. 177-181.

1996. "The Art of East Asian Lacquer Sculpture," *Orientalism*, vol. 27, no. 1 (January 1996), 16-30.
1996. "Paubha: Nepalese Painting on Cloth 1200-1600," *The Dictionary of Art* (London, Macmillan).
1996. "Nepalese Architecture A.D. 300-1200," in *The Dictionary of Art* (London, Macmillan).
1996. "The Art of Nepalese Woodcaving," *The Dictionary of Art* (London, Macmillan).
1996. "Preliminary Notes on an India-import Scroll from Nepal," 431-444, in Lienhard, Siegfried, ed., *Change and Continuity, Studies in the Nepalese Culture of the Kathmandu Valley* (Alessandria: Edizioni Dell'Orso, 1996).
1995. "Mustang: An Exhibition of Paintings and Photographs in Nepal," *Asian Art* (<http://webart.com/asianart/mustang>).
1993. "The 'Spice Goddesses:' Notes on a Tibetan Painting," *Archives of Asian Art*, vol. XLVI, pp. 53-62
1992. "A Document on Himalayan Painting," *Artibus Asiae* vol. 52, nos. 1/2 (1992), pp. 119-130.
1990. "An India-import Devi Mahisasura-Mardini Scroll from Nepal," *South Asian Studies* 6, pp. 43-69.
- 1988a. "Religious Syncretism in Nepal: Art and Belief," in *The Countries of South Asia: Boundaries, Extensions and Interrelations, Proceedings of the South Asia Seminar, University of Pennsylvania 1982-1983* 111, pp. 63-67.
- 1988b. "Bodhgaya and Nepal," in *Bodhgaya, Site of Enlightenment*, ed. J. Leoshko, Marg Publications, Bombay, pp. 126-142.
- 1987 "The Cultural Aspects of Newar Painting," *Heritage of the Kathmandu Valley, Proceedings of an International Conference in Liibeck, June 1985*, eds. N. Gutschow and A. Michaels, *Nepalica* vol. 4, pp. 1-15.
- 1985a. "On a Sixteenth-century Pictorial Pilgrim's Guide from Nepal," *Archives of Asian Art*, vol. 38, pp. 6-36.
- 1985b. "The Nepalese Collections [of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art]," *Arts of Asia* (Nov-Dec), pp. 90-101.
- 1982a. *Nepal Mandala, A Cultural History of the Kathmandu Valley*, 2 vols. Princeton University Press.

1982b. "More on the Nepali Cultural Heritage," *The Rising Nepal*, Kathmandu, June 4.

1980. "Nepalese Caityas as Mirrors of Medieval Architecture," in *The StIzoa, its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*, eds. A. Dallapiccola and S. Zengel-Avé Lallemand, Wiesbaden.

1979a. "Indresvara Mahadeva: A Thirteenth-century Nepalese Shrine," *Artibus Asiae* vol. 41, nos. 2/3, pp. 185-225.

1979b. "Serpents, Sages, and Sorcerers in Cleveland," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, vol. lxvi, no. 2 (February), pp. 67-82.

1975-6. "On the Antiquity of Nepalese Metalcraft," *Archives of Asian Art*, vol. 29 (1975-1976), pp. 80-95.

1975. "The Saugal-tol Temple: Further Notes on the Shrine and its Sculptures," *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, vol.2, no. 1 (February), pp. 39-45.

1974. "Jogini of the Sword, A Visit to Her Shrine," *Vasudha*, vol 15, no. 2 (April-May), pp. 20-27.

1974. "The Wooden Sculptures of Nepal," *Arts of Asia*, vol. 4, no. 5 (September-October), pp. 51-57.

1972. "Nepali Sculptures - New Discoveries," in *Aspects of Indian Art*, ed. P. Pal, Leiden, pp. 93-104.

1972. *Kathmandu: A Collection of Articles* (Reprinted from the AWON Bulletin), Tribhuvan University Press, Nepal.

1970. "An Introduction to the Languages and Scripts of the Kathmandu Valley," *Nepal Review*, vol. 2, no. 10, pp. 459-462.

1969. "Itum-bahal: A Famous Vihara of Kathmandu," *Swatantra-visva*, vol. 7, no. 7, pp. 38-42.

Jointly with G. Vajracharya

1974a. "A Newly Discovered Garuda Image, Kathmandu, Nepal," *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 292-294.

1974b. "Two Medieval Nepalese Buildings: An Architectural and Cultural Study," *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 169-218.

1973a. "Some Nepalese Stone Sculptures: A Reappraisal Within Their Cultural and Historical Context," *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 35, nos. 1/2, pp. 79-138.

1973b. "Some Nepalese Stone Sculptures: Further Notes," *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 269-270.

1972. "Early Nepalese Sculptures," *Illustrated London News*, vol. 260, no. 6893 (December), pp. 68-73.

Jointly with M. Fuller

1987. Co-author Manuela Fuller "Culture in Microcosm: The Nepali Inkwell," *Arts of Asia*, (July-August), vol. 17, no. 4, pp.78-87.



FREER | SACKLER

Mary Slusser
Research Associate

After receiving a doctorate in anthropology from Columbia University in New York City, Mary Slusser spent many years living and working abroad. She has spent many years exploring the region of the Himalayas, including seven years in Nepal. In 1982 her *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*, appeared, and has since stood as the most complete single work on the cultural history of the Nepal valley.

Her most recent book, *The Antiquity of Nepalese Woodcarving* (2010), drastically revised our perception of the marvelous wooden sculpture of the Kathmandu Valley.

Mary Slusser's work on the history of the art and culture of Nepal is marked by a series of discoveries and critical reassessments that have advanced our comprehension of this extraordinarily rich culture and art in a revolutionary way; they include groundbreaking work on Nepalese metalcraft, stone sculpture, architecture and painting. Now a research associate at the Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, she continues her studies into the art and culture of the Himalayas.

[Articles by Mary S. Slusser](#)

[asianart.com](#) | [articles](#)