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NEPAL, KATHMANDU VALLEY
Late 15th-early 16th century

*Architectural strut with figures beneath
a flowering Sal Tree*

Wood, probably Sal (*shorea robusta*)
Height: 166 cm (65 3/8 in.)
The above date has been corroborated by
Carbon14 analysis.

Provenance

Private Collection, USA, since the early 1980s.

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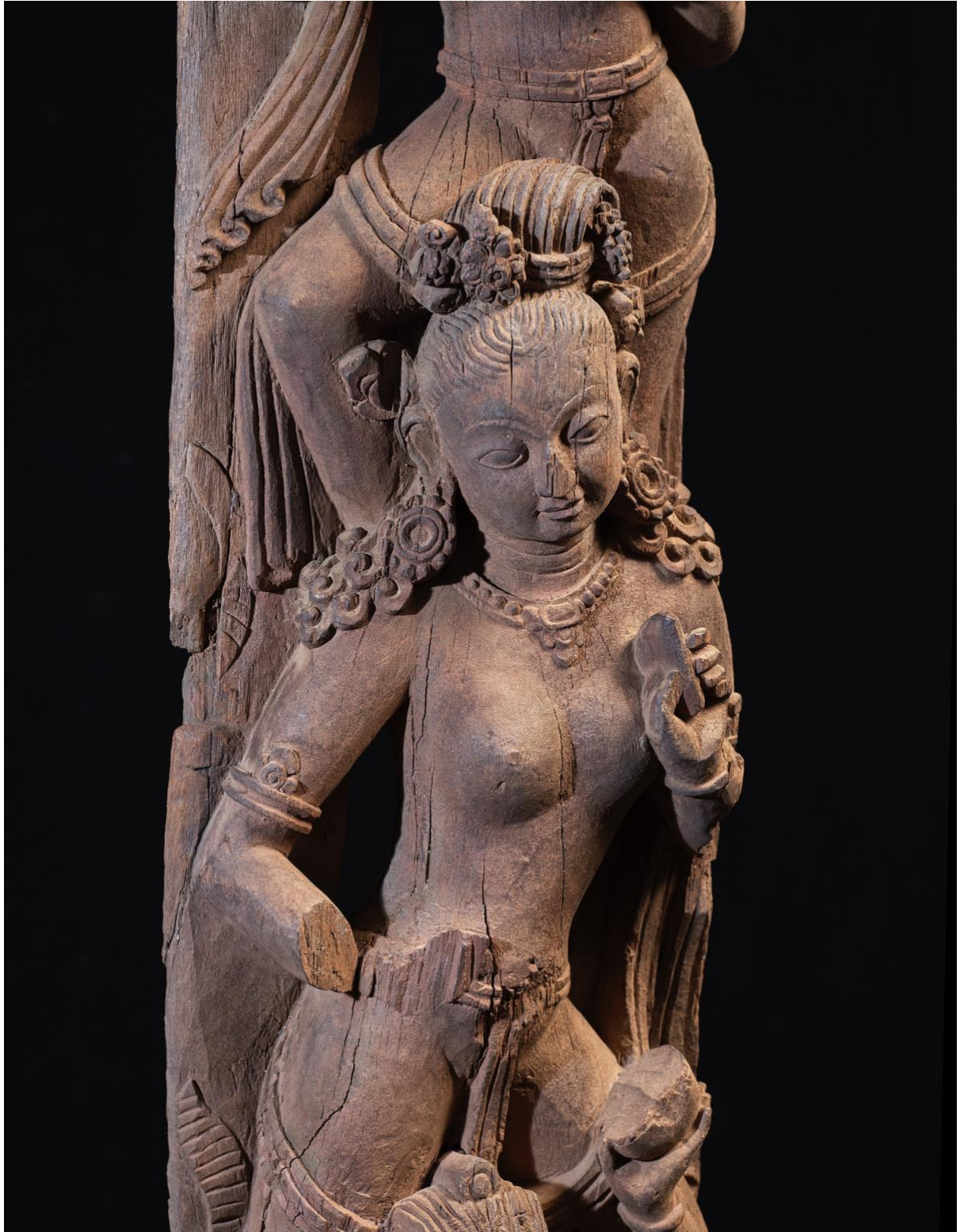


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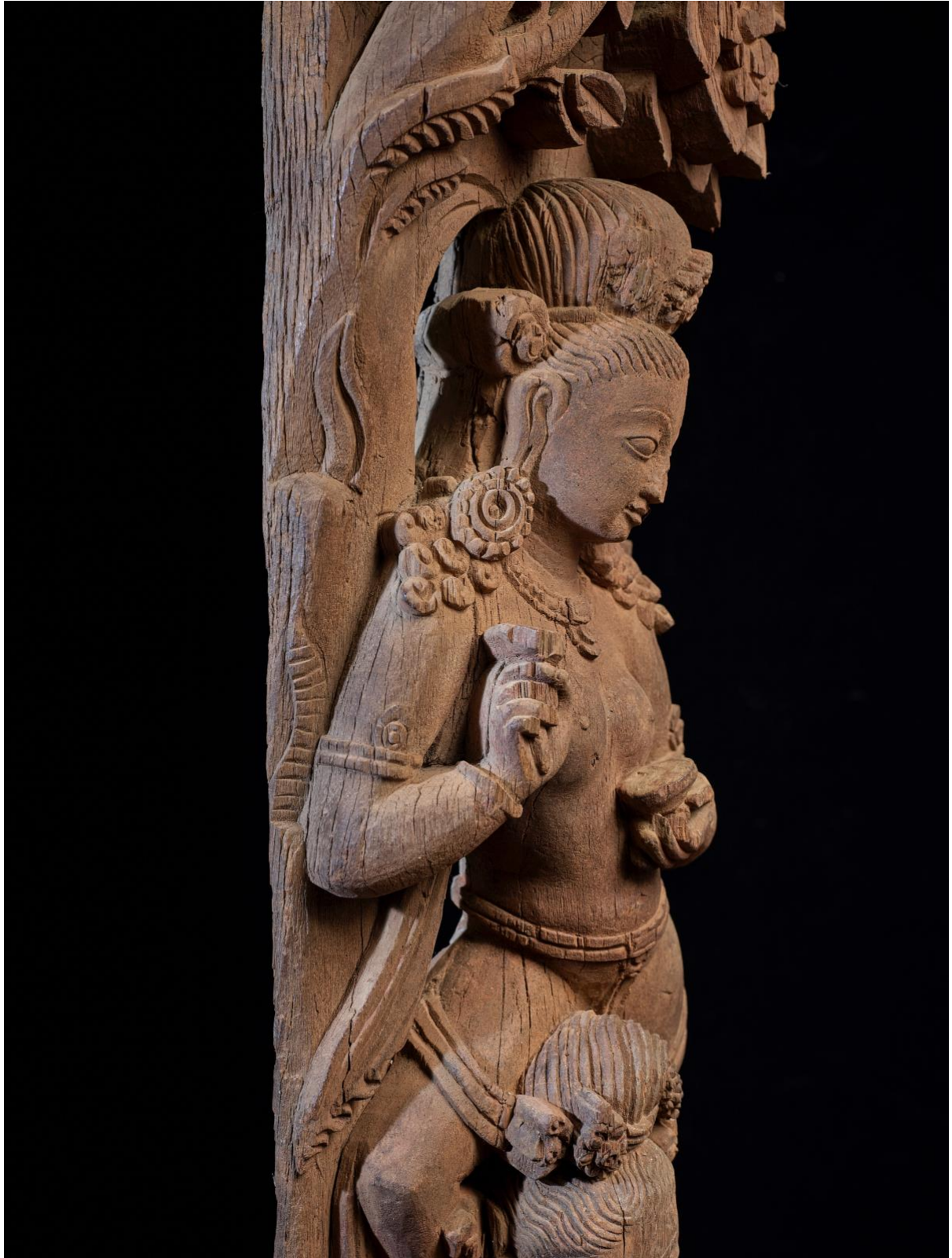


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Throughout South Asia, since the earliest temple architecture was created, the images of auspicious gods and goddesses were included. Their sacred energy radiates around the building, sanctifying the place and encouraging a god to enter and to listen to the prayers and entreaties of their devotees. In India stone was the most prestigious building material, but in the Kathmandu Valley, the Newar inhabitants have a tradition of brick and wood architecture, often adorned with repousse gilded copper.

The figurative struts supporting the overhanging roofs of temples were carved in wood, usually that of the Sal Tree (*shorea robusta*). This tree has its own spiritual status as Mayadevi, the mother of the Buddha, used a branch of an obliging Sal Tree to support herself when she gave birth. More broadly, the tree's name inspires the concept of the *shalabhanjika*, a goddess whose presence in a tree causes it to flower and bear fruit. The Kathmandu Valley is home to Buddhists and Hindus, living alongside one another. The imagery contained in this strut alludes to both faiths; it may be that it comes from a secular building, used by adherents of both, or it may simply reflect the tolerance inherent in Newar society.

In the Kathmandu Valley, struts such this are known as *Tunah*. This strut is exceptional in terms of its length and in the number of figures included in its composition. A similar strut in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York show important losses. In the present strut, there are four vertically arranged figures, three of whom are placed above an inscription that is believed to name a river, perhaps one whose waters fed the forest of Sal Trees from which this strut was sourced. It includes the trunk, foliage and flowers of a Sal Tree, beneath whose branches dance two serene and lively goddesses. Below them, a more spiritually inclined male deity offers namaskaramudra (respectful greeting), perhaps welcoming the devotee into the sanctuary of the temple.

The figure beneath the inscription could be Shiva's angry form, Bhairava, who is extremely popular in the Kathmandu Valley, or possibly the protective Buddhist deity Mahakala, who resembles him as the depiction of the Sal Tree in the composition, may indicate an origin for the strut in a Buddhist establishment. On the other hand, the proximity of the two communities over the centuries has led to a constant sharing of artistic forms and symbols.

The exceptional length of the strut indicates that it came from a large, and thus important, building. It closely resembles two other examples that are illustrated in Mary Shephard Slusser's seminal study of Nepalese wood sculptures, published in 2010. It is most likely that the strut was painted when first put in place on the temple but no trace of pigments remains to indicate the appearance.

Unlike their Indian equivalent, the two goddesses are slender in form; this is typical of Nepalese female imagery, but in this case the sculptor aimed to create an additional impression of youthful exuberance, which seems to be a feature of the struts of the 15th/16th century and of other sculptures of the period. Earlier depiction of the *shalabhanjika*, in both India and Nepal, present a wistful, enigmatic character, focussed on the task of encouraging her tree to flower or bear fruit. This pair, having achieved that, are free to focus on their ritual dance. Their simple dresses are in a style seen over hundreds of years, but this pair have fashionable hair styles with curls that cascade on to their shoulders. Both wear large circular earplugs and otherwise restrained jewellery.

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The seated, four-armed Shiva seated beneath the dancing goddesses offers a contrast in demeanour, but is no less benign. His pose is relaxed and slightly asymmetrical, with his legs folded, one foot just projecting over the inscribed panel on which he sits. All these details maintain a tradition of attractive, relaxed imagery over several centuries. His calm presence encourages the viewer to look down towards the figure of Bhairava or Mahakala below, who is intent on his role within the on-going ritual. Bhairava or Mahakala is unusually benign, echoing the bonhomie of his companions; he seems to express more of his protective nature than his anger. A charming detail can be seen in the snake tied as a *yajnopavita*, who observes his hands, impressed by his ritual performance. At first sight, this figure's earplugs are of a similar design to those of the figures above, but careful scrutiny reveals them to be coiled snakes. He stands against a turbulent background, but one senses that his ritual is one that will calm storms, hence the promise of trouble-free existence contained in the three upper figures.

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Fig. 1. *Temple Strut with a Tree Goddess (Shalabhanjika)*, Nepal (Kathmandu Valley), late 8th to 10th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York