EPILOGUE

The principal point that emerges from the foregoing investigation is that Viṣṇuism, although not as widely prevalent as Śivaism or Buddhism, was of considerable antiquity and popularity in Nepal. Patronised especially by kings in the early period, it appealed, particularly with its wealth of heroic myths, to the imagination of powerful monarchs like Mānadeva; and this heroic quality of its mythology is reflected in the early Vaiṣṇava art in the country. Continued political and social relations with India resulted in the importation into the country of prevalent styles of art, particularly from the Gangetic plains, but the Nepali artists were more concerned with the assimilation of such styles rather than imitation.

The sources of Nepali art in the Indian styles are yet to be definitely determined but at least as far as Vaiṣṇava art is concerned the schools that exerted the strongest influences were Mathura and other centres of Viṣṇuism in the north and the west. Certainly the Mathura region must have been palpably the richest source with its early Vaiṣṇava associations. Many of the iconic types that we have examined so far clearly reveal the intimate knowledge of the Nepali artists of the art of Mathura and of the contiguous regions. One of these must have been Kanauj, particularly during its days of glory under the Maukharis with whom the Licchavi king Jayadeva II had marital relations.

From the Gupta period, especially due to the patronage extended by the Gupta emperors as well as Prabhāvatīgupta’s marriage into the Vākāṭaka family, Viṣṇuism spread extensively in central and western India, judging if only by artistic remains. Some relation between these areas and Nepal is attested by certain iconic types that appear to have been particularly popular in Nepal and may have been borrowed from important Vaiṣṇava shrines of the
west. In this light the expression in the Nepālamahātmya section of the Skandapurāṇa that Janārdana as Buddha came to Nepal from Saurashtra may gain some significance. It is generally claimed that during the Pāla period the art of Nepal was influenced particularly by the styles that were developed in the ateliers of Bihar and Bengal, but it is surprising that not one stele is found in the valley which is modelled after a typical eastern Indian image of Viṣṇu (Fig. 110). The sculpture, now in the Nepal museum, was recovered from Simraongarh in the Nepali terai. It is of course a fairly good example of Sena art, and one may presume that other such sculptures must have found their way into the valley. Yet it is strange, that except for a solitary example in Deo Patan (Fig. 30), nowhere in the valley is there an icon in any way similar to that from Simraongarh. As a matter of fact the Deo Patan example is really of a different tradition despite the presence of Śrī and Bhūdevī. The only possible explanation seems that during this period also the Nepali Vaiṣṇavas continued to turn to the west, perhaps Rajasthan and Gujarāt, rather than to the east for their spiritual sustenance.

After the twelfth century, under the Mallas and the Shāhīs, there was a closer relationship with the south and with eastern India. Jayadeva’s Gitagovinda and later Caitanya’s reorientation of the cult of bhakti gave a fresh impetus to Viṣṇuism in the east, while Śrī Rāmānuja and his successors played a considerable role in popularising the sect in the south. We have seen that both literature and art attest the renewed popularity of the cult in Nepal, and it was now that the didactic literature of the Vaiṣṇavas began to be translated into Newari. While this literature still awaits a scholarly investigation, there can be little doubt that it helped considerably in popularising the myths and stories, particularly related to Kṛṣṇa, with the masses. Then, with the arrival of paintings from India of the Rajput style, there also grew a demand for similar paintings in Nepal. It was now easier for the Newari artist, who probably knew no Sanskrit, to illustrate these themes either as illuminations of manuscripts or on scrolls, aided by the visual models provided by miniatures and illuminated manuscripts from India.

A significant factor for the proliferation of the cult was the
growth of tāntrism and the reorientation of Viṣṇuism due to the Sahajiyā ideology of the Buddhists. Later Viṣṇuism is permeated by tāntrism to a much greater degree than is commonly admitted, and many of the concepts and iconic types that are no longer known in India are fortunately preserved in Nepal. This tāntric basis also contributed considerably in bringing together the various cults, both orthodox and heterodox, and so the religious history of Nepal is characterized by the remarkable phenomenon of spontaneous syncretism. The similarity in tāntric rituals and rites must have aided this attitude to a great extent. The most tangible evidence of this may be seen in the scenes of homa painted below the paintings (Fig. 16). Identical scenes are also rendered below Buddhist paintings and the priest in the one case represents a purohita and in the other a vajrācārya. But the functions they perform are essentially similar which is also evident if one compares the rituals prescribed in a Buddhist priest’s manual and those in that of Hindu priest. So in Nepal we find that the Baudhas, the Śaivas or the Vaiṣṇavas quite liberally frequent one another’s shrines and offer worship. This attitude is also reflected in the art in the sense that the artists often employed motifs and types to portray different divinities or mythologies without any sectarian reservation.

This investigation of Vaiṣṇava art and religion is by no means exhaustive and it is hoped that further research will bring to light many new iconic types as well as throw more light on many of the images discussed here. Although both for their religion and their art the Nepalis were always dependent on India, it would be a mistake to presume that they were mere imitators. Rather the study of Nepali art is important to the art-historian precisely because it demonstrates the remarkable capacity of the artists for assimilation. Exposed constantly to influences from India, the Nepali artist has displayed his truly artistic aptitude and inventive genius in absorbing what was essential and then giving form to his ideas following his own aesthetic intent. We have time and again seen how a Vaiṣṇava icon or a particular motif was modified by him according to his needs and norms. This is why despite the origin
of the styles in India we cannot cite any examples from India where forms such as those seen in the Varāha image (Fig. 5) or the stupendous sculpture of Kāliyadāmana (Fig. 51) could have originated. Isolated though they were in their mountain-girt valley, the artists of Nepal must have realized fully that artistic creativity is an experience where complete isolation leads to the inevitable stagnation of art. Their southern windows were therefore always open.