International Journal of Academic Research and Development
ISSN: 2455-4197
Impact Factor: RJIF 5.22
www.academicjournal.in
Volume 3; Issue 6; November 2018; Page No. 222-227

Indian art, artists, and its historical perspective

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Abstract
The study of ancient and medieval Indian art and architecture emerged as a nascent pursuit about two centuries ago.[1] In the late eighteenth and through a major part of the nineteenth century, it grew out of a keen and unrelenting interest in Indian antiquities – as curiosities, as admirable 'handicrafts,' as mysterious 'monstrosities,' and above all, as 'artefacts' or sources of past histories of a country then colonized by the British.[2] These objectives set the tone for and determined the methods adopted in the study of Indian archaeology and art history during the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century. Despite the marked colonial bias, this period is crucial to the formal inception and institution-alization of art history in India.

Keywords: archaeology, architecture, painting, sculpture, image, Indian art

Introduction

The visual had thus become an important tool of analysis for cultural interpretation and historical reconstruction during the British colonial period. Despite the biases and drawbacks, this image-centric approach did have its advantages and left a lasting legacy in the scientific documentation of artefacts, archival and museum collections and display, and knowledge dissemination systems in art historical and museum studies. Yet, this was also the period that witnessed the apathetic loss of India's material heritage and the mass exodus of art remains from India into the hands of private collectors and museums abroad.

The shared genesis of the modern disciplines of archaeology and art history in nineteenth century India and the circumstances and motivations that determined the early framework of Indian art history are discussed in this Volume by Upinder Singh and Gautam Sengupta. In her contribution, "Archaeologists and Architectural Scholars in Nineteenth Century India," Singh draws attention to little-known aspects of Cunningham's important contributions to Indian art and architectural history. In doing so, she also focuses on the place accorded to art historical issues in the activities of the Archaeological Survey of India during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Cunningham is better known for his emphasis on excavations, field and archival documentation systems, and for prioritizing inscriptional and numismatic data over the evidence of art and architecture. Yet, for Cunningham the scope of archaeology was very broad, and included many different aspects that could help to illuminate the study of the past.9 He documented and wrote about a large corpus of monuments in his capacity as Archaeological Surveyor (1861-1865) and as the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (1871–1885). Singh's intensely researched work reveals insightful details about subtle shifts in Cunningham's contextual understandings of early Buddhist sculpture and architecture. These can be detected in his observations on the art remains at Bhilsa Topes, Bharhut, and Bodhgaya all Buddhist sites on the trail of the Chinese traveller, Xuan Zang, whose writings held a special fascination for him. The gradual emergence of disciplinary boundaries between archaeology and architectural history in an atmosphere of conflicting interests, ideologies, political motivations and priorities, and the academic debates that were symptomatic of the larger preoccupations of the period are revisited and candidly analysed by Singh.

Even though Fergusson, Burgess, and other contemporary architectural historians had paid attention to 'form' and 'style' in Indian architecture, Indian sculpture and painting did not gain favour as 'fine art' until the early decades of the twentieth century and were considered useful mainly as visual records of the ('debased') customs, manners, religious beliefs, and other aspects of India's past. Indian sculpture was viewed through the lens of a classical Western standard epitomized by the Greek arts of antiquity. The lack of 'realism' or 'naturalism,' the absence of a sense of perspective and proportion, the many heads and multiple arms of divinities, animal-headed gods, explicitly sexual scenes on temple walls, and such other representations evoked several derogatory responses to Indian art (Mitter 1977). While figural sculpture was severely criticized, abstract patterns and architectural ornament were rated highly as representing the finest traditions in handicrafts, meant to be carefully documented and emulated in British industrial design and manufacture.

The Search for 'Origins' and 'Meaning'

The nationalist response to colonial prejudices translated as a quest for researching the origins, rationale, 'inner meaning,' and above all, the 'Indian-ness' of Indian art. The aesthetic appreciation of Indian art, beyond its usefulness as a visual document of Indian history, was also in evidence. To meet these objectives, methodological approaches came to be rooted at first in symbolism, iconography, and iconology. This in turn led to a concerted engagement with texts during the first half of the twentieth century. The search for meaning

required an understanding of cultural contexts – myth, religion, literature, the language of gesture and posture, technical treatises, literary texts, and local culture. To the Western mind, this knowledge seemed more remote and difficult to cultivate than to apply the already evolved Western art historical methods to an interpretation of form and style. Even so, the essential 'Indian-ness' of Indian art was also advocated strongly by some European scholars such as E.B. Havell (1861–1934), Heinrich Zimmer (1890–1943), and Stella Kramrisch (1896–1993) [15].

Coomaraswamy approached the study of traditional Indian architecture from the historical-technical as well as from the metaphysical and theoretical viewpoints (Wagoner 1999). He correlated textual, epigraphic, and visual sources, in particular the narrative reliefs of early Indian sculpture at Bharhut, Sanchi, and Amaravati to arrive at the earliest available evidence of the beginnings of Indian architecture and to analyze its subsequent development (Meister ed. 1992). Equally or even more so, he was concerned with the metaphysical, religious, and symbolic underpinnings of Indian art and architecture (Meister ed. 1995). His relentless search for the non-derivative or 'original' nature of Indian art is typified in the debate on the Indian origin of the Buddha image, where he also establishes its development from early Indian yakña prototypes, as a counterpoint to Foucher's thesis that accorded an exclusive Gandharan (and hence Greco-Roman) derivation to the Buddha image (Coomaraswamy 1927b).

Text-image studies in architecture

The regional and cultural contexts of architecture, its origins, forms, function, and significance, and the methodology of relating the empirical evidence of monuments to texts, inscriptions, and the living tradition of architects and sculptors, gained momentum in the second and third quarters of the twentieth century. In delayed pursuance of Ram Raz's early initiatives, more regional architectural texts were uncovered and scholars like Manmohan Ganguli, N.K. Bose, P.K. Acharya, and N.V. Mallaya took up the task of interpreting texts, often in association with local traditional practitioners.19 The realization that European terminology was inadequate for explaining the specific character and nuances of Indian architecture led Manmohan Ganguli (1912) to correlate local architectural terms used by Orissan artisans with extant monuments. N.K. Bose (1932) also focused on Orissan architecture in relation to its regional textual tradition (Bhubanapradépa) and the living tradition of artisans.

Canons of Indian Painting

Perhaps no other Indian text on art has warranted and received as much scholarly attention from art historians as the Citrasütra of the Viñëudharmottara Puräëa [24] (c. sixth-seventh century CE) – the Näöyaçästra having been a subject of as much if not greater enquiry, but mainly among aestheticians and performing art historians. This disjuncture is in itself telling – an issue to which we shall return shortly.

The earliest edition of the Citrasütra was published in 1912 and the earliest art historical interpretations of key concepts and canons given in the third khaëòa of the Citrasütra were by S. Kramrisch (1924) and A. Coomaraswamy (1932, 1956). The creative process in ancient Indian art was understood by Coomaraswamy as the visualization of form through meditative internalization (yoga) and its subsequent realization by the artist in accordance with aesthetic and iconometric injunctions. It was in this light that he explained specific cultural connotations of the canons of Indian art as given in the Citrasütra and interpreted artistic criteria such as sädåçya ('similitude'), pramäëa (proportion), rüpabhedäù (differentiations or typologies of form), varëikäbhaìga (colour-differentiation), bhäva (emotional disposition), and lävaëya yojanam (gracefulness in composition) the six limbs of traditional Indian painting (ñaòaìga) to explicate a theory of Indian art. Kramrisch had discussed these artistic criteria with greater detailing of pictorial modes and conventions; Priyabala Shah (1958), a Sanskritist, took the understanding of the text much further in terms of textual criticism, by adding and interpreting on the basis of six additional manuscripts. C. Sivaramamurti (1978) brought to the interpretation of the text, the totality of his understanding of the Indian artistic tradition, particularly of classical Sanskrit literature and contemporaneous painting traditions. Parul Dave Mukherji (1998) included two additional manuscripts and re-examined the textual interpretations of her predecessors, against the backdrop of her readings of the colonial, nationalist, and post-colonial interventions in the interpretation of this ancient text, by looking at key terms such as sädåçya, satya, and anukåti and their bearing on the issue of 'naturalism' in Indian art. Such re-assessments, in so far as these are based on a re-examination of primary source materials and in the light of newly discovered manuscripts, are pertinent and part of a continuous process of knowledge generation in academic discourse. In the same vein, future scholarship expectedly will continue to decode current motivations and add fresher interpretations, thereby further enriching our understanding of the past. Perhaps of even greater consequence are some fundamental issues which arise in relation to the interpretation of key terms and concepts in art.

Interdependence of the arts in text and practice

The Kalämülaçästra and the Kalätattvakoça series of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in New Delhi, under the general editorship of Kapila Vatsyayan, has been focusing systematically on the implications and meanings of key concepts and terms in traditional Indian visual and performing arts as found in a range of texts – from the Brähmaëas and Çrauta Sütras, through the Puräëic and Upaniñadic literature, to the specific art treatises and their translation into a vocabulary for the arts. One may also mention here the contribution made by the tomes on Concepts of Space (1991) and Concepts of Time (1996) edited by Kapila Vatsyayan. Her continued emphasis on the inter-dependence of the ancient Indian art forms finds elucidation in this Volume through her essay, "The Discipline of Art History: Its Multidimensional Nature." Among other art historians of note, B.N. Goswamy (1986) has approached the moods and sentiments depicted in Indian miniature painting in relation to the rasa-theory and näyikä-bhedas (types of heroines) of the aesthetic and poetic traditions. Some other obvious areas where the visual and performance modes correspond directly are the Rägamälä paintings and Indian

music; and the karaëas (cadences of movement) depicted in Indian dance and sculpture. Beyond these obvious correspondences, there are subtler inter-relations between ritual practices, narratives, music, dance, theatre, sculpture, architecture, and painting. Relatively very few studies have focused on these aspects thus far.

Art and Society

Social dimensions of Indian art

The over-arching emphasis on the abstract, conceptual, and aesthetic basis of Indian art had to find a balance in understanding the more humanistic and social forces at work in determining its means, methods, and motivations. Colonial misrepresentations of Indian art had for long been critiqued by Nationalists who rose in its defence and in doing so, reiterated the 'other-worldliness' of Indian art, often to the exclusion of more practical and earthy concerns. Niharranjan Ray's important contributions to the study of early Indian art (Ray 1945) favoured the sociological method as a corrective, though he also believed that the processes of art could not always be explained by the socio-economic forces at work [25]. In An Approach to Indian Art (1974), he emphasized the need to move away from a perspective that constantly felt the need to defend Indian art forms on the basis of their religious and metaphysical content. Ray's focus was on establishing for Indian art a firm humanistic, artistic, and social basis. As regards the sources for art interpretation, he advocated an approach that needed to remain anchored to archaeology (Ray 1945: vii-viii) and questioned the skewed reliance on certain kinds of textual sources to the exclusion of other texts [26].

Ancient and Medieval Indian Artists

Identity, Organization, Patronage

Migrations, and Connoisseurship

The social context of art and the role of the artist, patron, and public had not completely eludded the attentions of earlier writers such as Coomaraswamy (1909) or Kramrisch (1956), although it can be said to have received summary treatment from them. Coomaraswamy's early writings on the Indian craftsman (1909) were largely ethnographic in nature, based on living craft traditions as practised in pre-colonial and pre-industrial India and Sri Lanka. His chief motivation for doing so was the immediate threat to traditional systems of craft education, patronage, and sustenance patterns, caused by colonial interventions. He categorized the craftsman as the village artisan, the urban artisan who was a member of a guild, and those artisans who were in service of a king, chieftain, or religious institution. In trying to understand the means and motivations of the pre-colonial craftsman, he also included stray textual and inscriptional references to craft-guilds and craft-education in ancient India. Four and a half decades later, Kramrisch (1956) discussed the ancient Indian artist in a brief paper. Her sources included some references from the ancient and medieval art treatises and a couple of medieval northern Indian inscriptions. Through these, she commented upon the artist and patron in ancient and medieval Indian societies – their systems of remuneration, skill versus inherited vocation, and their class or caste basis. Issues of artistic judgement and aspiration were treated at the metaphysical and psychological levels through references to a few Çästric and Vedic passages. The issue of the anonymity versus identity of the ancient Indian artist was discussed briefly but given an 'other-worldly' explanation.

Studies in Indian temple architecture

Form, style, meaning, patronage, ritual, ornament

The Architectural Survey of Temples was established within the Archaeological Survey in 1955-56, with Krishna Deva in charge of North India and K.R. Srinivasan responsible for South India. The objectives of the Architectural Survey of Temples were to fine tune the earlier efforts [Figs. 1.7 and 1.8] with regard to "the evolution and regional characterizations" of temples through "extensive fieldwork and intensive examination of the data collected therefrom." In order to "avoid duplication of work" and the setting up of a separate organization for "iconographic survey," the original scope of the project was enlarged to include the study of iconography [32].

The formal logic of the temple, its origins, region and period styles, terminology, typology, and classifications have been most comprehensively detailed in the monumental Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture (EITA) volumes under the editorship of M.A. Dhaky and M.W. Meister [33]. Dhaky's method in addressing the regional and sub-regional basis of architectural style is perhaps seen at its best in his perceptive and incisive analysis of the Maru-Gurjara architecture of Western India (Dhaky 1961, 1975). His acute attention to visual detail, intimate familiarity with an overwhelming range of monuments, easy acquaintance with the textual tradition, and a critical, scientific analysis of empirical data is in full evidence here. The complex processes of the emergence of the 'Maru-Gurjara' style of Western Indian architecture from its antecedents – the 'Mahä-Maru' and 'Mahä-Gurjara' sub-styles have been detailed by him. For throwing light on the regional particularities within the Gupta-dominated 'Empire' and 'Province(s),' Joanna G. William's research on the art and architecture of northern India during the period of Gupta dominance merits special mention (Williams 1982). Some scholars have now discussed the role of polity in determining artistic choice (Cohen 1997) [34]. In another context, peregrinations of artists and its impact on architectural style has also been established (Settar 1992: 83-143). All these have an important bearing on evolving frameworks to interpret the constituents and determinants of style in Indian architecture.

Studies in Indian Painting and Sculpture

Style, Connoisseurship, Iconography, Narrative, Representation, and Spectatorship

Studies in Indian painting had remained focused initially on the paintings of Ajanta and Mughal paintings [39]. The earliest interest in Mughal paintings was with reference to 'European influence.' Ajanta paintings evoked interest for their aesthetic qualities, narrative content, and modes of narration. The diversity of paintings belonging to other styles and regions, notably the South Indian mural paintings and manuscript traditions, Rajasthani and Pahari miniatures, paintings of the Western and Eastern Indian manuscript traditions, and Ladakhi paintings received attention relatively late. Coomaraswamy (1916) had earlier discussed the non-Mughal

traditions of northern Indian miniature painting under the head ''Rajput'' Painting. While Kramrisch was the first to write on the fragmentary remains of mural paintings at Badami in the Deccan, C. Sivaramamurti (1968) provided a comprehensive analysis of the early medieval and medieval mural painting tradition of southern India. Moti Chandra and Karl Khandalavala (Khandalavala and Chandra 1969), Pramod Chandra (1976), Anand Krishna (1973), and B.N. Goswamy (1992) have contributed immensely to studies in the style, connoisseur-ship, and context of non-Mughal traditions of Northern Indian miniature paintings. Further approaches to the study of Indian paintings – as visual sources of socio-cultural histories and religious and imperial ideologies (Koch 2001), and studies concerned with the means and motivations of the paintings, have followed.

The regional focus in Indian art history

Critical shifts in the objectives and approaches of scholars engaged in region-based art histories are discussed in my paper, "Understanding 'Jaina Art' of Karnataka: Shifting Perspectives," in this Volume. The choice of a regional focus and 'Jaina art' seeks to underscore the significance of area-specific studies and the importance of regional language sources and other local contexts in art historical research, while also highlighting the larger framework within which these need to be located.

Interpretations of Narrative Art

Detailed and nuanced readings of narrative modes in Indian painting and sculpture were pursued only in the later decades of the twentieth century. Ratan Parimoo has analyzed specific jätaka narratives in Ajanta paintings from semiological and stylistic perspectives by evolving comparative frameworks with narrations in literary texts and with renditions in early Indian sculpture, such as at Bharhut and Amaravati (Parimoo 1991). Dieter Schlingloff (1987) and Vidya Dehejia (1997) have furthered our understanding of narrative modes, the former with a greater focus on Ajanta paintings and the latter in the context of narrative sculptures and paintings of the Indian Buddhist tradition. Dehejia proposes seven types of narrative modes noticed in ancient Indian Buddhist art (sculpture and paintings) based on the devices and pictorial conventions employed by the artist to express a single or multiple point(s) of interest in a Buddhist narrative, and the ways in which spatial and temporal constructs are understood and delineated in a given composition. Such an investigation is a pioneering effort that greatly enhances scholarship on the visual narratives of India. Just as significant are the writings of John and Susan Huntington on iconic and narrative Buddhist art [46].

The Past in the Present

Understanding the formal and contextual details of an object or art form at the time of its production, albeit through the filter of the present, continues to be of fundamental importance to the historian of art. At the same time, the construction of newer meanings and contexts for an ancient or medieval icon, object, or monument, and changes in its reception over time are valid lines of inquiry which have begun to engage the art historian of today, opening relatively new vistas of research at the cross-roads of art history, anthropology, sociology, and related fields of knowledge. One may cite as an example, The Lives of Indian Images, by Richard Davis (1999). Not restricting himself either to original intent and understandings (such as for a religious icon belonging to a temple), or to meanings generated in varied current locations (eg, a museum or an international art market), Davis has also explored the mediations in the 'intermediate' life of the image between 'then' and 'now' (such as the complex issues involved in the politics of 'appropriations' and 'return' of religious (art) objects in medieval India). Between its function as a religious icon, its appropriation as a symbol of power, its 'return,' 're-establish-ment,' or 'repatriation' as a symbol of cultural identity, and its commoditization in an art market – the interest in the image as 'art' from the ancient to the modern times, perhaps also needs to be re-addressed by the art historian. A related area of enquiry is the changing role of museums and museum related sites in relation to religious and political identities (Guha-Thakurta 2004; Mathur and Singh 2007).

Archaeology, history, and art history
Reviewing inter-relationships

Pre-historic art has remained marginalized from mainstream Indian art historical discourse since the time of its 'discovery' in the last decades of the nineteenth century and even after V.S. Wakankar's spectacular find of the pre-historic rock paintings at Bhimbetka in 1957. However, pre-historic Indian rock art has had a presence in South Asian archaeological research (eg., Bednarik 2002), refreshingly so with an increasing emphasis on a contextual study of the content, site, location, and ethno-archaeological aspects concerning the paintings (Boivin 2004). However, art historical interpretations of the rock paintings remain limited, barring a few writings (Erwin Neumayer 1983, 1993). Similar is the treatment of Harappan art and architecture [Fig. 1.9], with newer and inter-disciplinary approaches emerging largely from outside mainstream art history writings (Clark 2003). A plausible explanation lies in the difficulty faced by the art historian in arriving at a continuous narrative of Indian art from the pre- and proto-historic periods to the art of the historic period. Also, the absence of associated written records renders interpretation difficult, unlike the art history of the historical period. The difficult question of what constitutes the object-domain of 'art' versus 'craft' and other aspects of material culture further complicates the issue. M.K. Dhavalikar proposes correctives to arrive at anchored and less speculative understandings of the motives and meanings of proto-historic art in his paper, "Text and Context: Harappan Art in Archaeological Perspective." His surmise is that Harappan art can be viewed in the light of more recent advances made in archaeological method and theory, which emphasize cultural processes and a contextual approach to the interpretation of archaeological materials. Dhavalikar goes on to demonstrate the usefulness of some of these approaches in interpreting select examples of Harappan art and architecture, such as 'Çäkambharé,' 'Paçupati seal,' and mythological motifs on Cemetery-H pottery ('peacock-and-human' motif) [51].

Conclusion

The issues, methods, and trends discussed in this introductory essay, and those detailed in the various scholarly contributions to this Volume, are selective and representative. The concerns addressed here relate to various stages of artistic creation, representation, and reception, and to arange of themes belonging to the ancient and medieval periods. These include key art historical concerns of form, style, connoisseurship, iconography, patronage, artists, gender and other social contexts, display, representation, reception, and other readings of art and architecture. Even as the object-domain of art history continually expands and its basic assumptions are re-examined, Indian art history is poised to keep pace with global trends.[54] Yet at all times, the art historian's 'eye' for visual detail and empathy for art continue to be of prime importance. There still remain a staggering range of themes, fundamen-tal issues, key concepts, and theoretical and methodological formulations, which await the focused attentions of the historian of Indian art. Indian art historical practice may perhaps best be viewed as an ever-evolving continuum of issues, perspectives, and methods, and not so much as a dichotomy between ''new,'' and by implication, ''old'' art history.

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