

ART OF INDIA

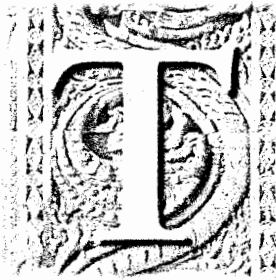
Prehistory to the Present

Frederick M. Asher, editor



INTRODUCTION

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The visual arts in South Asia traditionally have been divided chronologically on the basis of culture or ruling dynasty, and further classified by media, treating sculpture, architecture, and painting separately. Divisions are always useful because they organize objects of study into manageable units. But, at the same time, they can be seriously misleading. For example, dynastic divisions might imply the dispensation of imperial patronage in cases where there was none. Distinguishing the media may work in the West, but in India, structures must be seen as a whole. Temple sculpture, to cite one example, is inextricably linked to the architecture of which it is an inherent part, as are murals that might adorn the walls. Even independent sculptures, added long after the completion of a monument, must be seen as part of the structure for which they were conceived and made. Ignoring this fact reduces them simply to cold objects, devoid of a larger context that includes, in many cases, even a ritual or a social function. Finally, by treating separately the art of India's many religions, one might overlook the shared visual vocabulary of motifs and presume that artists worked exclusively for patrons of a single faith.

Complicated, too, is the term "art", a notion that might imply a strong Western bias in the ways that South Asia's visual culture is viewed and understood. Although the Sanskrit term *lalit kala* is widely used today to denote art, there are some important ways in which much South Asian art needs to be distinguished. If "art" means an object that is admired aesthetically and is given a commercial value commensurate with the desire to own that object, then much of the South Asian material fits uncomfortably in this category. That is certainly the case with most of the religious art which, until modern times, did not have a commercial value once it was installed in the place of worship, although works in pre-modern times may have been appropriated or contested in the course of battles or other disputes that reflected their intrinsic power more than a value determined by a marketplace. Only in modern times, when the Western notion of collecting art has been imposed on South Asia's visual culture, have the works assumed a new significance. As a result, security rather than sanctity has become an issue at many sites, for South Asian works of art now have a value in an international marketplace.

To a large extent, the history of art in many parts of the world has been constructed as a history of individual artists. Although we know the names of some sculptors of ancient India—for example, the fifth-century Mathura artist Dinna, and a number of sculptors from Hoysala times (c. 1006-1346) in Karnataka—as well as the names of several architects, we know almost nothing about the biographies of these artists. That does not diminish their importance as powerful and inventive creators. Rather, the inscriptional records on the works themselves generally give more space to the patron, who is often identified even when the artist is not. The act of patronage certainly was important in earning the benefactor spiritual merit, but it is also likely that it played a role in shaping the work of art. One can easily imagine the negotiation between the patron and the artist that determined the overall form and even the details of the product.

(Opposite page)
*Tomb of Sheikh Salim
Chishti, Fatehpur Sikri*
Courtesy: Frederick M. Asher

Under the Mughals, rather uniquely before modern times, the identity of artists is extensively recorded, and some biographical information is preserved. Inscriptions on paintings, for example, often record the names of the various artists who painted the outline, filled in the colours, and painted the portraits. Even more than in contemporary Persia and the Ottoman Empire, the names of painters as well as architects and calligraphers are recorded; this practice was occasionally adopted by some of the Rajasthani courts and in the Punjab Hills, where something of the artists' genealogy is known and little more about their biography. In more modern times, the artist's identity is consistently recorded as South Asia participates in a global culture whose practices for the arts often follow Western models.

Although there is not an indigenous history of South Asian art, ancient texts have been used to inform modern scholarship in a variety of ways. Thus, in scholars' search to understand the architectural principles of construction for temples or for the layout of cities, specific ancient texts have been consulted. For example, most of the *Puranas* and the *Brihat Samhita* have sections describing the components of temples and their proportions. Subsequent texts known as the *Vastu Shastras*—texts describing the science of building—are devoted exclusively to the subject of architecture, and, more meticulously than earlier texts, these set forth the ideal principles for architectural construction. Similarly, scholars have mined texts such as the *Puranas* and the *agamas* for information on iconography, specifically, the appearance of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain deities. Often, for example, a scholar has turned to such texts in order to determine the identity of an image that is unfamiliar or to determine the specific form of a particular well-known deity. The texts thus have been presumed to be prescriptive, dictating details of form and proportion to the artists and, by extension, depriving artists of their creative drive and imagination. Clearly this is not so. If artists followed the texts as rigidly prescriptive, then it would be hard to explain artistic styles that evolve through time or vary from place to place. It is by no means certain that artists actually followed written texts. Rather, their training was a kind of apprenticeship that involved learning all aspects of the skill required to produce architecture and images and was surely based more on observation and practice than on consultation of texts. Indeed, it very well may be that the texts, which were more likely composed for Brahmins to memorize rather than for artists to read, are based on existing temples and sculptural images, which the composers of such texts felt represented an ideal.

There has been no ancient tradition of art collecting in South Asia—at least none that is documented. Images and paintings adorned temples and other religious monuments, and illustrated books were stored in religious institutions such as the libraries of Buddhist monasteries. But these were regarded as ritual objects rather than as strictly aesthetic ones. That, however, should not be taken to mean that there was no aesthetic sense among the people. Indeed, a system of *rasa*, or taste, has long been applied to the visual arts, just as it has been to the performing arts. As several ancient inscriptions testify that the quality of the visual arts was clearly judged. Finally, there were some pre-modern collections built on the basis of aesthetic considerations. For example, painters working for Mughal emperors produced illustrations that were collected in albums, and palaces or the homes of the wealthy may have been adorned with murals. But to a large extent collections of South Asian art, both public and private, were a result of European colonialism.

The initial European response to South Asian imagery was strongly conditioned by the West's own religious notions and, subsequently, by conceptions of the Enlightenment. Early travellers reacted to sculptures of India's deities as demonic representations, while later interpretations applied more aesthetic and comparative (though often highly patronizing) criteria. When contact with Europe was sustained through colonial occupation, rather than occasional trade, interest in the region's art increased substantially.

Collections were formed and even sent back to Europe as documentary evidence of the culture. Much of this was haphazard—that is, local officials developed collections of images

that could be found in the area of their control—until Sir Alexander Cunningham established the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in 1861 that sought to undertake a comprehensive survey of India's antiquities. It is from this time, in particular, that a notable shift in attitudes began to take place. South Asian art ceased to be regarded simply as religious imagery, on the one hand, and curiosities, on the other. Rather, artworks came to be seen as legitimate objects of scientific enquiry on the part of both Indians and Europeans, while at the same time often retaining their nature as ritual objects.

Sites were explored in depth and the results were published. Buddhist sites, in particular, attracted attention, among them Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh and Bodh Gaya in Bihar. Cunningham's 24-volume *Archaeological Survey of India Reports*, illustrated with lithographs but not photographs, served as a basis for initial consideration of the art, and soon after its completion, the Archaeological Survey of India began to produce annual reports, the first covering the years 1902-03. They were illustrated with photographs and covered a range of topics from exploration and excavation to conservation and epigraphic studies. These reports and others on the exploration of specific sites in South Asia spawned the field of South Asian art history, a parallel to the discipline that sought to understand European art.

Connections were quickly recognized with the visual arts of other areas. Buddhist art in India, of course, was seen as linked to Buddhist material in Southeast Asia, as well as in Tibet and East Asia, and eventually it was recognized as a source for this material. But to Europeans there was a special fascination with the art of Gandhara (in present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan) produced during the Kushan Dynasty (first-third century) because it had a familiar appearance that linked it to ancient Greek or Roman art. Since Europeans often imagined Greece as the font of knowledge for European culture, it was imagined as a source for India as well. This generated a debate of significant consequence regarding the origin of the Buddha image, which until the late first century, had been largely avoided in anthropomorphic form. European scholars, particularly Alfred Foucher, argued for the Gandhara origin of the Buddha image, believing it to have been produced under the influence of Hellenic culture and perhaps even by foreign artists attracted to the Gandhara region. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, historian of Indian art, argued that the image evolved naturally from earlier *yaksha* images and was first produced at Mathura (in present-day Uttar Pradesh). The debate has not been entirely resolved, although it should be extended beyond questions regarding the Buddha image, for anthropomorphic images of major Jain and Hindu divinities also first appeared about the same time.

The debate regarding the origin of the Buddha image is part of a larger concern that has infused the study of South Asian art, one that seeks to identify foreign influence, on the one hand, and pure indigenous form, on the other hand. These, in turn, are parts of larger debates. One side of such a dispute, for example, is based on a colonialist assumption about the receptivity and even necessity of external stimulus to the region's cultural production (as well as to its economy and rule). The opposition champions a quest for forms and societies unsullied by outside influences—as if any society anywhere were totally and continually isolated from contact with neighbours or even distant cultures that serve as trading partners.

Part of this debate has focussed on South Asian art forms that appear suddenly, without apparent precedent. Following the decline of the high Harappan culture about 1900 BCE, there is a long hiatus of nearly 1,500 years without the appearance of sculptural imagery. Then, during the reign of Ashoka (c. 269-232 BCE), huge monolithic pillars bearing his edicts and crowned by naturalistic animal capitals, whose symbolism is sophisticated by all measures, suddenly appear at several sites. The source of these, too, is a matter of significant debate. Similarly, during the fifth century, the first surviving stone temples seem to have been made, again without obvious precedent in South Asia. And the Buddhist or Jain manuscript paintings on palm leaf, first known from the eleventh century, might be yet

another feature of South Asian art that comes without clear antecedent. These attest either to the extraordinary inventiveness of South Asian artists and their patrons or to the richness of the region's many resources—resources that attracted foreigners to settle there and bring the diverse cultures still characteristic of the Indian subcontinent.

The same motivations that led to the creation of the Archaeological Survey of India also stimulated the establishment of museums in South Asia, as well as collections of South Asian art outside of the region. Several British officials, notably Colin MacKenzie and A.M. Broadley, had built collections of antiquities in the course of their duties, and the Asiatic Society in Calcutta served as a repository for a modest collection. The collection of the Asiatic Society was transferred to the Indian Museum when it was established in 1866, and that nucleus was quickly supplemented with works from Bharhut and from Gandhara. Thus was created the first representative pan-Indian collection of antiquities in the extensive South Asian realm then under British rule. Other museums were conceived about the same time, among them the Madras Government Museum established in 1851. Construction on the Prince of Wales Museum building in Bombay commenced in 1905, although the museum opened to the public only in 1922. Still other regional museums were developed, including a network of site museums run by the Archaeological Survey of India and, finally, upon India's independence, the National Museum of India in New Delhi, appropriately located across from the National Archive and serving to house non-verbal documents of the region's heritage; comparable national museums were founded in the capitals of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. All these museums do not simply present works of art but also serve to shape perceptions of national culture and national identity.

Not only in South Asia but in Britain as well, collections representing the colonies were developed. The India Museum at East India House, London, held by far the most comprehensive collection in the country, one that subsequently went to the Victoria and Albert Museum, when it was established in South Kensington. The British Museum acquired a collection of sculptures from eastern India in the middle of the nineteenth century and, subsequently, a large collection of sculptures from Amaravati to serve as the basis of their South Asia collection. And much visual documentation for South Asia, particularly illustrated manuscripts and photographs, is housed in the India Office, now part of the British Library. All these collections, and others abroad, raise issues of ownership and conservation—that is, can one country's museums own the cultural patrimony of another, and, in any event, are the objects satisfactorily conserved in an environment distant from the one in which they were made? The practice of collecting also raises a series of issues regarding the movement and transformation of works of art. These issues include the remodelling of architecture that transforms its original appearance, transportation of works from their original setting, and archaeological excavation that offers hypothetical reconstruction of sites that had long histories and thus no single consistent appearance.

To many, the notion of South Asian art recalls a sense of the traditional and especially of religious art. While it is true that much of what survives from the ancient past is largely religious in function, there are and long have been other forms of South Asian art. Residential architecture—whether whole planned cities such as those of Fatehpur Sikri in Uttar Pradesh and Jaipur in Rajasthan, palaces such as those at Gwalior and Orchha in Madhya Pradesh, or *havelis* and bungalows across the region—all need to be considered as part of South Asian art. So does the contemporary architecture of the region, even if it is simultaneously part of a larger global culture that produces structures such as skyscrapers. And, in a similar sense, the contemporary art of South Asia—both art produced within the region and by the South Asian diaspora that raises poignant issues of identity—must be recognized as a component of South Asia's art history.

In the end, what constitutes the art of South Asia? Just as the separation of categories such as sculpture, architecture, and painting have little significance for the art of the region,

so standard distinctions between fine art and minor arts can more often be misleading than meaningful for South Asia. Although some art forms, including sculpture, architecture, and painting as well as calligraphy, are produced by professional artists, other forms such as textiles and domestic ritual decoration are produced by non-professionals. Yet, even works that too often are described as folk arts, popular arts or crafts—for example, sculptures in clay—are produced by professional artists. All these works, then, need to be considered within the category of South Asian art or visual culture. To this category might be added the very public arts that have an impact on society today as profoundly as religious art once did, such as billboards (hoardings), cinema, and video widely broadcast on television.