Eurocentric Commentary and the Gupta Period

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Important work from the Gupta period in India is examined with an eye toward the Eurocentric slant of much extant commentary. It is argued that notions such as the development of a "Renaissance" fail to do justice to the motivating factors behind the work. Work by Rowland and Kramrisch is cited, and the Buddha statuary of the Gupta era is subjected to particular analysis.

Most of the available criticism on the art of India focuses on the Gupta period as a high point in Indian art. The various known sculptures of the Buddha and similar figures become, themselves, exemplars of a tradition, and the work of the Gupta period is frequently contrasted with other styles that are thought to be more derivative, such as the Gandhara.[1] Among commentators whose work on India is at all well-known, this era stands out, especially for the formality of line of its many Buddha sculptures, some of which have become among the most renowned pieces of the art of India available in museums around the world.

But what is remarkable about a great deal of the tradition of the art of India, and what continues even in a contemporaneous vein, is an attempt to try to articulate the various styles of regions and time periods in terms of Western art history. We are often told, for example, that the Mughal miniatures bear comparison with Mannerist pieces; in commentary on the Gandhara school, even though it is clear that Western influence is to be found, it is the Western, or Greek influence that predominates in criticism.[2] It will be the argument of this paper that, more so perhaps than a number of other styles associated with South Asia, Gupta art has been subjected to an overabundance of Eurocentric commentary. The emphasis on clarity of line and stylistic features more typical of High Renaissance statuary prevents us from seeing key features of the work, and reinforces the notion—all too common in criticism of the art work of developing nations—that the given cultural style has not reached a high point of development unless it can favorably be compared to European work.

I

The notion of a tradition—and the concomitant notion of its reaching some sort of apex—would not be so important were it not the case that art commentary tends to focus on this construct across cultures. If the Gupta period may be thought of as the high point of Indian art, it is crucial to try to demarcate the trajectory that does, indeed, lead up to it. Rowland notes, for example, that:

> [T]he steatite seals [at the site of Mohenjo-Daro] reveal the most consummate and delicate perfection of craftsmanship…. The seals provide…evidence for our reconstruction of the Mohenjo-Daro religion and its relationship with the ancient Near East and the concepts of modern Hinduism.[3]

This tradition, which might be thought (on some construals) to begin at Mohenjo-Daro, passes through a number of alterations—including early stupa configurations, and so forth—and reaches a climax with the Gupta, according to the official tale. But if there is already an inherent Eurocentrism in the notion of a "tradition," that centering must be regarded as increasing exponentially when it is noted that the very features of the Gupta period work that yield the notion of classicism are themselves features that are built around tropes and takes on European art that were developed during the growth of European art criticism of the twentieth century.

Although a wide variety of pieces of sculpture, architecture and temple construction demarcate the Gupta style, it is probably best known in the West for the development of a sort of Buddha-statuary that is itself often regarded as the culmination of artistic representations of the Buddha. Gone are some of the Greco-Roman influences of the Gandhara style; characteristic of the stylization of the Gupta period is a stark simplicity. Rowland writes, of the Mathura Buddha:

> In the Mathura Buddhas the rather hard conventionalization of the late Gandhara drapery formula has been reworked into a rhythmic pattern quite apart from its descriptive function; that is, the repetition of the loops of the string-like drapery provides a kind of relief to the static columnar mass of the body…. The conception of the actual form of the Buddha is entirely Indian…. Together with the commanding height of the figures, [this quality] conveys a feeling of awesome dignity and power.[4]

Categorizing Gupta work as defined by a "mastery in execution" and the development of "Late Antique convention," the commentary developed in this hallmark text on the art of South Asia seems to see Indian art as moving on a parallel track to that of the European pre-Renaissance and Renaissance work. Both, according to the tale, begin with a sort of crude prototype, and both move through various stages before achieving a mastery of line and simplicity of style. But part of the difficulty is that it is manifestly obvious that Indian work is non-representational in the European sense; whatever it is that the Indian artist is after (if we may term the craftsman an "artist"), representational art is probably not part of the goal. Rather, a heightened sense of the

importance of myth pervades the culture, and in that sense whatever is achieved in the stonework speaks to different origins.

II

The importance of line and form in European commentary on the art of India (and, indeed, on the art work of many regions around the world) is directly traceable, at least in part, to the work of Clive Bell and other such thinkers. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the commentary on much of the work of India seemed to focus on its spectacular size and supposedly erotic themes. Both Khajuraho and Konarak, for example, were singled out by the British at an early point for these very sorts of reasons. (As Rowland says of Khajuraho, the "celestial maidens possess a great vitality expressed in their tortuous movements…the roundness and the softness of the breasts and belly are emphasized….")[5] But the emphasis on line and proportion that seems to signal to the critic that the Gupta period is a "Golden Age" can only properly get off the ground when it has been decided that line is of paramount importance in the realm of aesthetic appreciation.

Clive Bell, in his well-known Art, has the following to say about what might demarcate the aesthetically crucial:

> What, then, is the conclusion of the whole matter? No more than this, I think. The contemplation of pure form leads to a state of extraordinary exaltation and complete detachment from the concerns of life: of so much, speaking for myself, I am sure. It is tempting to suppose that the emotion which exalts has been transmitted through the forms….If this be so, the transmitted emotion, whatever it may be, must be of such a kind that it can be expressed in any sort of form—in pictures, sculptures, buildings, pots, textiles, &c., &c.[6]

Now it begins to be a great deal more clear why the Gupta period is considered to be the high point of much of the art of India. The very "loops of the string-like drapery" and "columnar mass" of the body of the Buddha in the Mathura piece speak overwhelmingly to form; in addition, if one were inclined to think the work of the Gandhara period too derivative (and it has frequently been so labeled), the same cannot be said of the Gupta work, since much of the Greco-Roman influence is completely absent. As Bell remarks, we can consider the Gupta Buddhas and other such pieces to involve the "contemplation of pure form"—here the form is of such overwhelming importance that there is a very real and genuine sense in which it does not matter whether the figure in question is of the Buddha or some Hindu deity or even something else. Representation for a moment takes a back seat to this notion, and in so doing, other Eurocentric concerns get the upper hand. One could almost make the argument that the British needed something like the Gupta period to be able to make the sorts of claims about the work of

South Asia that they would have liked to make.

Benjamin Rowland notes, of a statue of a Bodhisattva from this epoch, that "[t]he radiant face, softly modelled in gently fusing abstract planes, has that air of half-sensuous, half-spiritual introspection…."[7]

If one were to go about the business of examining the art of India from the standpoint of some work in the Hindu canon, however, one might find a different set of concerns brought to the fore. Kathleen Higgins, in a recent article on *rasa* and its application to general aesthetic matters, notes:

> The Indian tradition analyzes the psychology of aesthetic breakthroughs and situates them in the broader context of human aspirations…. Indian investigation of breakthroughs both within and beyond aesthetics challenges Western philosophy….[8]

In other words, if rasa is related to some conception of aesthetic enjoyment, as Higgins claims, it provides a completely different way of examining art, above and beyond the notion of aesthetic distancing (to which analysis of form is, obviously, closely linked). This in itself might be very helpful for the scrutinizing of art work and even craft from a number of traditions but, oddly—or not so oddly—it does not describe the way in which the artwork of the Gupta period has generally been examined in the European artworld.

In any case, one thing that may be said about the Gupta work most frequently subjected to examination (such as the various Buddhas) is that they do, indeed, exhibit a concern for purity of line. But even without advertence to the notion of rasa, one might want to make the claim that a better explanation for the concern with line has to do with elements of the mythography of the Indian tradition itself.

It may prove helpful, in establishing our thesis about work of the Gupta period, to compare it with the now fairly well-known Gandhara work. Gandhara sculpture is significantly different from most of what a Westerner is likely to think of as "Indian." This particular work owes its provenance to the first through fifth century period in what is today Afghanistan, Pakistan and India—because a number of individuals affiliated with the Roman empire were present in the region during that period, stonework began to exhibit traits of the then regnant Greco-Roman style. A number of portrayals of the Buddha are prominent among the pieces of that period, and they are about as far removed from the Gupta work as one could possibly imagine; the Gandhara work shows hair and facial elements that are decidedly from an area outside of South Asia.

One might naively think that such work would be of more interest to European scholars; after all, it shows influence from what will later become Europe. But the syncretism of the Gandhara school is widely viewed as a corruption—what makes the Gupta work so enticing is that it is "pure," and yet by the same token, as we have seen, the standards for that purity invoke quintessentially Eurocentric constructs. The final

irony might be thought to revolve around the fact that work that actually is European, at least to some extent, is held in lesser regard than work that—by European standards—represents an uncontaminated Indian take on Indian themes. But, as has been argued here, the clear line and "abstract planes" of the Gupta work show that the notion of a cultural trajectory culminating in a certain phase is very much in play in any analysis of the Gupta period.

III

In his analysis of the importance of Gupta work, Rowland begins his chapter with the following summative statement:

> Although often referred to as the Indian Renaissance, the Gupta period is not properly speaking a rebirth, except in the political sense as a reappearance of a unified rule…. Seldom in the history of peoples do we find a period in which the national genius is so fully and typically expressed in all the arts as in Gupta India. Here was florescence and fulfillment after a long period of gradual development, a like sophistication and complete assurance in expression in music, literature, the drama and the plastic arts. The Gupta period may well be described as 'classic'…[9]

It is not only the advertence to the notion of a "Renaissance" that helps us to focus on the particularly European scope of Rowland's analysis, but the very sense of a "fulfillment" after a period of "gradual development." Because of the varying history and status of peoples within the South Asian region, it is much more difficult to make out any of these notions than it would be in a demarcated area of Europe, for instance France. In the latter case, where we can make the claim that a gradual development persisted among a group of ethnically related peoples over the course of a thousand years, it is not off the mark to try to speak of a culmination or fulfillment.

But the tensions between the Dravidian areas and the Aryan invasion alone make it difficult to try to form a notion of a coherent picture of India, and in the arts this becomes a greater problem. It is tempting for the European critic to think in terms of important constructs of the Western tradition, such as representation, clean design, and balance of color and line. But there is little reason to believe that any of these European art desiderata had much influence in the area that is today India, or that they would have been valued by those who are now called "Indians." Rather, it is clear that what is of overwhelming importance in the art of South Asia is a mythographic worldview, portions of which can be deemed to be representational only insofar as they might depict an idealized version of a god or demiurge. Some of what is at stake has little to do with representation in anything like the traditional sense—that is why early European visitors were so alarmed by what appeared to them to be multiple-armed deities. For example, anything having to do with Shiva has a great deal more to do with an attempt

to convey the power of Shiva than with standard representation. Stella Kramrisch, in her well-known *The Presence of Shiva,* writes:

> Siva should be thought of in a fourfold manner, and perceived as the cause of existence, existence itself, the cause of liberation, and release. As the cause of existence, Siva had prepared the seed of existence for the Lord of Generation, and was born as existence from the Lord of Generation…. Siva was a yogi holding within himself the power of life, the power of creativity.[10]

We might think that this excision better conveys some of what is at stake in the numerous dancing Shivas (admittedly not part of the Gupta tradition) often found in Western museums. Since Shiva is completely a mythological construction, any elements of representation are attenuated at best.

Although it might not seem relevant, Rhoda Kellogg, in her influential analysis of children's artwork around the globe, notes that "Many theories about art are based on ounces of experience, and some theories seem to me to be based on virtually no experience. Words in these theories are used to obscure perceptions rather than to present verifiable ideas."[11] It would not be accurate to say that commentary on the Gupta period is based on no experience, but the "obscuring" of perception of which Kellogg writes in a different context occurs in the classical commentary on Gupta work (and other work of India) at least partially because the visual experiences of approaching the work have been interpreted almost entirely from a European point of view. Even when commentators were familiar with some of the classical commentary of the Hindu tradition, it did not seem to dampen their enthusiasm for thinking in terms of moves from Giotto to Raphael to Parmigianino, when there is little in the work of any portion of the Indian tradition that would give the observer the notion that a comparatively straight line trajectory is involved in the continuum represented by the work.

There is no question that a great deal of the Gupta statuary found in museums represents an achievement of line that stands out, and there is also no argument to be given against the notion that the work is, at bottom, a product of forces on the subcontinent, unlike some of the other work that might be subject to analysis. But the driving spirit behind the work has a great deal more to do with notions of generation, power and creativity (as Kramrisch has noted) than with form and balance in the Western sense. To appreciate the art of India, we must begin to enter into the spirit in which it was created. This, unfortunately, some commentators have failed to do.

Notes and References

1. Perhaps the best example of art historical commentary on the work of South Asia remains Benjamin Rowland's *The Art and Architecture of India*, Baltimore: Penguin Books Ltd., 1967.

[2]. The Mughal miniature "The Hour of Cowdust" is compared by Rowland to a number of works of the Renaissance, despite the fact that the figures are clearly not representationl in the same sense. (Rowland, *Art,* pp. 210-211.)

[3]. Rowland, *Art*, p. 16.

[4]. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

[5]. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

[6]. Clive Bell, *Art*, New York: Frederick A. Stokes & Co., 1913, pp. 68-9.

[7]. Rowland, *Art,* p. 142.

[8]. Kathleen Higgins, "An Alchemy of Emotion: *Rasa* and Aesthetic Breakthroughs,"in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 65, No. 1, Summer 2007, pp. 43-54. This citation p. 43.

[9]. Rowland, *Art,* pp. 129-130.

[10]. Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Shiva,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 457.

[11]. Rhoda Kellogg, *Analyzing Children's Art,* Palo Alto: National Press Books, 1970, p. 226.

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