The Art of Konark and The Notion of Representation

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The commentary of Arrell, Langer, Kramrisch and Heinrich Zimmer is alluded to in an attempt to come to grips with the notion of representation in Hindu stone reliefs, such as those of the temple at Konark in the state of Orissa. It is argued that the reliefs depict or represent sexual acts is misguided and constitutes a fundamental misunderstanding not only of Hindu culture in general, but of the notion of representation in an aesthetic context.

In the thirteenth century master builders in what is today the Indian state of Orissa constructed an edifice known to Westerners as the "Temple of the Sun" at the site of Konark.[1] More so than perhaps most temple sites in India, the work at Konark became celebrated early on for what have long been regarded as its "erotic" carvings. Much of the exterior of the temple site, particularly in its most visible portions, is covered with rockwork of couples in various poses, many of them positions of sexual intercourse.

Although almost all of the art of South Asia may be said to be opaque to those from other traditions, since it is clear that much of the work rests on mythological and other factors within the culture, carvings such as those at Konark may present a particular difficulty, especially if seen in the sorts of art historical terms that have commonly been used to describe Indian works in the past.[2] It is too easy simply to assert that the outside carvings at the Temple of the Sun do not depict sexual acts, since their "meaning" is metaphorical. They do, in fact, depict such acts—at least on one level—and this is one reason that the British and other early visitors were so struck by the temple. As Benjamin Rowland notes, the temple was designated by the British the "Black Pagoda:"

> Returning to the subject of the sculpture, we must be aware of the fact that the Black Pagoda has achieved a great deal of notoriety through the frankly obscene nature of most of the carving.... This carving might be described as a literal illustration of the erotic recipes of the Kama Sutra.... This endless round of dalliance is a kind of sculptural apotheosis of the relations between men and women.[3]

It would be facile to say simply that the depiction of sexual acts at Konark is one that has its utmost importance mythologically, or from some religious standpoint. Although it is clear from most of what we know about the Hindu tradition that this is the case, it is also obvious that, in the way in which the word "depicts" is ordinarily used, the carving does

indeed depict human beings engaged in sexual acts, or the various poses would not have been found so shocking.

Perhaps one of the most helpful ways in which we can address the issues involved in Konark (and other sites like it, such as some of the temple work at Khajuraho) is to admit from the outset that at least two sorts of things are going on simultaneously: one is, in the way Eurocentrically-trained art historians normally employ the term, "depiction," and the other is—at least insofar as religious studies scholars are concerned—the creation of a series of statements about the importance of sexuality a an aspect of worship. But to attempt to make this sort of clarification also begs the question. If a site is from the outset labeled religious, or a place of worship, and if the scenes carved on it are never intended by the carver/sculptor to represent actual human being, can we then say that depiction is involved? This question, with all its difficulty, is similar to the art/craft distinction that has traditionally dogged attempts at dealing with, for example, work from Western Africa. It is admitted from the outset that much of what might be found in, for example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York under the label "African" was never intended as art in the Western sense, because the vast majority of objects had a utilitarian purpose within their cultures. Does this then mean that we cannot label them "art?" All of these issues are related, and require further elucidation.

I

The mythological importance of stonework such as that at Konark has been the subject of extensive commentary in the work of scholars on India and South Asia in general. Perhaps chief among the scholars whose work is cited in this regard is Heinrich Zimmer, at least insofar as his writings appear in popular translation by Joseph Campbell. In a section of *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* titled "Shiva-Shakti," Zimmer comments on the importance of the erotic duo as commonly found at sites in India:

> There are many ways of representing the differentiation of the Absolute into antagonistic yet co-operative pairs of opposites. Among the oldest and most usual of these is that based on the duality of the sexes.... A splendid example of the God and Goddess in erotic play appears in a Bengalese relief representing Shiva with his consort.... For the sake of the universe and its creatures, the Absolute has apparently unfolded into this duality....[4]

This sort of commentary leaves the reader with the sensation that it would be a mistake to attribute anything like Western representation too much of the relief-work to be found on temples and at temple sites. After all, it can be argued, if the best interpretation of the erotic play is that it is a manifestation of the unfolding of the Absolute, how can a more standard notion of representation and/or depiction, as normally used in European art circles, be employed?

One take on the notion of representation by a philosopher attempting to deal with similar issues is to be found in Douglas Arrell's "What Goodman Should Have Said About Representation."[5] Although Arrell's main purpose here is to construct an argument against views propounded by Goodman in his *Languages of Art*, much of what Arrell has to say is

relevant to the set of aesthetic conundra we are examining here. Arrell is against what he terms Goodman's "denotative" concept of representation, and, to be fair, he also claims that it is inconsistent with a great deal of the rest of the work Goodman develops. More importantly, he argues that representation does indeed depend on some perceived similarity or resemblance (it does not make sense to think that it is purely arbitrary, or purely denotative), but similarity and resemblance, according to Arrell, are the products of context. Thus Arrell writes:

> Whether or not a symbol represents an object depends upon whether it is perceived in a context in which the properties shared by symbol and referent are noticed or not.... If representation depends upon our noticing the properties shared between symbol and referent, representation still depends upon the prior sharing of those properties, and is not purely arbitrary.[6]

Now we have a tool that might be of some use in discussing the stonework of Konark. Europeans lack the cultural context of the Shiva-shakti devotion, and are unlikely (without previous acquaintance or training) to be able to make any inferences with respect to representation and tantric worship. This, of course, would have been even more true of the original British visits to the site in the late 18th and early 19th centuries than it is today. Many Hindus, however, are more likely—especially those with greater Vedic training—to interpret what has been termed the eroticism of the statuary in highly nonerotic terms. In both cases, the context for interpretation and for the belief in shared similarities is provided by the previous learning and acquaintance of the individual, and is more or less independent of whatever went on at the time the stonework was created. It is this sort of argument that Arrell tries to reinforce when he cites Goodman, at another point, as having said that with respect to "...baggage at an airport check-in station [...] the spectator may notice shape, size, color...the passenger [...] destination and worship."[7]

Here we go some way toward elucidating the puzzle of the "depictions" at Konark. But we are still left with at least a couple of conceptual questions: Is there such a thing as acultural, or acontextual representation? And, if so, what might that be?

II

If one were to try to make the case that some representations would hold across context, and across cultures, several other troublesome notions intrude themselves. When social scientists strive to articulate universals—or something approaching universals—of the human experience, they often reach for those experiences that, because they are biologically part of human existence, can be found in every human culture. Every human culture, without exception, will have at least some minimal ceremonies surrounding death, for example, or childbirth. Thus we can hypothesize that representations that might be the most recognizable, for lack of a better term, across cultures and contexts would be representations that were most universal in content, and, perhaps more importantly, more naturalistic in style—that is, the style of the representation must be such that it would readily be recognizable to almost any adult, developmentally-able human.

There are, of course, few such representations. And what would count as "natuaralistic" here also begs the question, although it is perhaps no more question-begging (and, indeed, even less so) than some other constructs we have examined. But the reliefs at Konark again are problematic on this score, and although this sort of conceptualization may be of some help, it runs up against a set of limits very quickly. As mentioned at an earlier point, it is agreed by all and sundry that the reliefs do portray or depict sexual intercourse in a natuaralized way—it is precisely because they are recognizable on this score that British visitors, far removed culturally from the context of the original relief-work, were readily able to grasp the images. But the mere fact that images or representations might be recognizable cross-culturally or acontextually does not mean that, on a finer-tuned philosophical analysis (such as that employed by Arrell) their "depictions" or "representations" are reducible to that contextual element. This is the core of the matter.

III

In her work on symbolism, now perhaps not as frequently cited as it ought to be, Susanne Langer has brought to bear a number of concepts that may be useful to us. In short, even if we are dealing with sense-impressions and sense images—such as we might hypothesize a viewer would be able to take away from Konark immediately, and later again upon reflection—we are not necessarily dealing with material that fails to be susceptible to more than one interpretation. This is because, as Langer writes, "...even the subjective record of sense experience... is not a direct copy of actual experience."[8] More to the point, and with slightly more argument, Langer says:

> In short, images have all the characteristics of symbols. If they were weak sense-experiences, they would confuse the order of nature for us. Our salvation lies in that we do not normally take them for bona fide sensations, but attend to them only in their capacity of *meaning* things, being *images* of things—symbols whereby those things are conceived....[9]

Here we have the apparatus that, combined with our previous analysis, may allow us to achieve some work. If images themselves are already subject to a level of interpretation, which is Langer's main point, then the contextual tradition in which the images occur (something emphasized by Arrell) is all-important in unpacking them. Thus the shakti tradition is of overwhelming importance in the examination of the carvings at Konark, even if it is not immediately apparent. The carvings could not have been made without the tradition—there would have been no motivation to create them. So although the nineteenth century British viewer may have been shocked at what he or she took to be the free depiction of the erotic, presumably even such a visitor, fresh from the West, would have understood on some level that the carvings had "another" meaning. (This is especially the case since it would have been evident to anyone that a temple constitutes a religious site.) *A fortiori* then, for the Hindu viewer, who already understands the tradition and can readily bring it to bear on the viewing of the carvings. In a sense, we have the resolution of our puzzle with respect to the representation or depiction of the carvings: it can have, primarily,

no other interpretation than a religious one, and one that is couched in the larger Sanskrit-derived metaphysical tradition from which it springs. Other stands on what the carvings represent are of secondary or tertiary interest because they fail to speak to the original motivations of the craftsmen or to the background in which the craftsmen worked.

Just how potent that tradition is comes to mind when we read works such as Stella Kramrisch's *The Presence of Shiva*, a monumental compendium of Shaivite myth and interpretation.[10] Part of the difficulty with the notion of myth is that to the Western mind it tends to conjure up specifics: an actual tale, a recounting, a set of images associated with a story. But the Shaivite presence in Hindu culture is so enormous that it cannot, readily, be divorced from the entirety of the culture. Because of this, it forms a backdrop—or even a medium—against which or in which the culture finds itself, and without which the culture does not cohere. Thus the Indian viewer of the stone reliefs sees not only an image of the shakti fusion, but perhaps something more. Some of Kramrisch's commentary provides for us the flavor of what transpires:

> Throughout his two marriages, to Sati and to Parvati, Siva the Lord of Yoga did not engender a child in the womb of the great Goddess. Though his frightful potency on one occasion persisted in the lap of Parvati for a thousand years of the gods, and made him oblivious of the world and his obligation to it, he remained self-contained and did not shed his seed.... Siva and Parvati have been celebrated in art and poetry, forming as they do the most accessible aspect of the Great God, which he offered in his play.... Both aspects, the ascetic and the erotic, were united....[11]

What we have here, clearly, is no mere myth but, as was stated earlier, a worldview, and one that, properly articulated, sees the divine erotic as an aspect of yoga and of the eternal. Viewed in this light, the contention that the Hindu viewer has a response to the reliefs at Konark that is completely different from the response of the European visitor is an understatement.

IV

Our analysis of the representational content of the work at Konark is, as has been said, not unrelated to a number of other problems that occur in the examination of art criticism of non-European cultures. But sites such as Konark are especially fruitful sources for discussion and debate, since the large body of commentary on them and their worldwide renown help us to focus on what precisely drives much of the content of aesthetic and art historical commentary on the cultures of Asia, Africa and in some instances Latin America.

These problems would not be as worthy of examination as they are were it not for the fact, obvious from what we have said here, that the voices of authority in art history, particularly as it appears in an academic or university setting, are overwhelmingly Eurocentric, and more crucially, reflect the employment of European categorizations.[12] Thus the student is immediately under the way of a set of views that may be not only at variance with, but antithetical to the very spirit of the cultures in question. Although there is no paucity of commentary on Hinduism and the Hindu worldview in general, much of

that commentary is poorly reflected in some of the major art historical sources commonly used for criticism, such the work of Benjamin Rowland.

The naïve, uneducated Westerner may well be puzzled by what she or he takes as exemplars of Hinduism, such as figures of Ganesh, and multi-armed deities. But however we may be tempted to ridicule the naïve viewer, who is puzzled by what appears to be, in the case of Ganesh, the worship of an elephant, not far removed from this sort of simplistic view is one that asks us to take other depictions at face value, but in an art historical or aesthetic sense that is derived almost entirely from the type of conceptual apparatus used to describe, for example, work of Renaissance. When we think of artists whose work might be deemed to be mannerist, we think of Parmigianino and some of his contemporaries. To attempt to apply this label to work Hindu artists and craftsmen, from virtually any period, is to err in a profound way.

British viewers were shocked by what they took to be the eroticism of Konark, but in most of the more sophisticated uses that we have for terms such as "representation" and "depiction," the works are not about sex or sexual gratification. Filling in the blanks on what it is that the works are about, as we say colloquially, gives us refreshing pause in our examination of the works of Asian cultures.

Notes and References

[1] One of the best available descriptions readily available to Westerners of this temple and its importance to the art tradition of India is to be found in Benjamin Rowland's *The Art and Architecture of India*, Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1967.

[2] In a recent piece I have attempted to address questions surrounding the relevance of Eurocentric art commentary to the art of India *(Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Winter 2001).

[3] Rowland, *op.cit.*, p. 174.

[4] Zimmer, Heinrich, *Myths and Symbols of Indian Art and Civilization,* New York: Pantheon Books, 1963, p. 137.

[5] Arrell Douglas, "What Goodman Should Have Said About Representation," *in Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* Vol. XLVI, No. 1, Fall 1987, pp. 41-49.

[6] Arrell, "What Goodman," in *op. cit.*, pp.42-43.

[7] Arrell is quoting another work of Goodman's that he takes to be a better explanation of Goodman's overall position, *Problems and Projects.*

[8] Sussane K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 144.

[9] Langer, in *New Key,* pp. 144-45.

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

[11] Kramrisch, *Siva*, pp. 431-32.

[12] An examination of a similar problem is found in "Mannerism and Naturalism in Hindu Miniatures," in *Journal of Aesthetic Education,* Winter 2001.

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