

Khajuraho: Indian Art History and Canon Formation

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Indian art history and its commentary has long been fraught with disputes over the appropriateness of Western terminology. On the one hand, it is manifestly clear that much of the language of European art history has little to do with the actual stonework or carvings of Hindu temples and reliefs. On the other, it is also clear that without at least some sort of standard commentary, it is virtually impossible for the Westerner to make sense of what she sees, and thus the import of the work is lost and the work itself un- or underappreciated.

Much of what is in print with respect to the art of India more or less recognizes the existence of this conundrum, as the reader is warned again and again that the "Indian sculptor" does not have the same goals as his European counterpart, and so forth.¹ But it is accurate to say that, without some tools of standard argument, it is difficult to place much Hindu work and comprehension of such work is, of course, one of the aims of Asian art history.

Commentary has already been given by a number of writers on the uses of terms such as "mannerist," "naturalist," "portraiture," and the like with respect to the art of India.² But the current concern over canon formation yields still another sort of question for the art historian addressing South Asian work: if there is such a thing as an Indian canon, how was it formed? What are the differences, if any, between the sorts of social and political forces at work in say, canon formation of the nineteenth century European continent, and that of the Hindu renaissance? In this paper I will argue that the notion of a canon is itself one of the troubled and problematic European art historical inventions that renders criticism of Indian artwork so difficult.

I

The temples at Khajuraho, along with a few other sites in India, such as Konarak and Mahabalipuram, have long been regarded as exemplars of the finest in Indian stonework. Charles Fabri notes, "The most ecstatic examples of Baroque flamboyant art, paeans in praise of the lush and delectable beauty of this world, sprung up in the kingdom of the Chandelas, now Madhya Pradesh, in and around Khajuraho."³ Benjamin Rowland, long the chief critic of the art and architecture of India, has this to say about the temple cluster:

It could well be said that the culmination of the Indo-Aryan genius in architecture was attained in the extraordinary group of temples erected at Khajuraho in central India. These magnificent shrines were dedications of the Chandella Rajput sovereigns....In general, it could be said that the enormous effectiveness of the shrines at Khajuraho depends on their beauty of proportion and contour....⁴

It is obvious that the canonical overview of the art of South Asia, India in particular,

is due to the work of the Europeans who first gazed at the temples, and who wrote the first accounts of what they had seen. But to say so much begs the question of what it was that those visitors brought to their viewing, and what categories they employed in their construction of “better” or “genius.” Most of the viewers were, of course, British—thus there is an extensive English-language commentary on Hindu culture and the arts in general beginning in the late eighteenth century.⁵

In a recent work on the various construals that gave rise to modernism, Janet Wolff has gone to some length to detail how categories of exclusion—the female, the Jew—led to a concentric view of the modern as ultimately non-figurative, dynamic, abstract, and canonically articulated by Bell and Fry.⁶ I want to argue here that a similar process was at work in the canonical formation of the Indian artworld, but with the added twist that what the Europeans saw in the temples and wall sites of India was largely a vision of the their own invention.

Wolff notes that the making of an art historical canon involves the “construction” of “orthodoxies”; this much also describes the status of various sites in the art history of India.⁷ But if European or American art history is relatively easy to categorize and dismantle, art or craft of other cultures presents us with a paradox. In many cases, such work had a purpose within the culture, a purpose that to us might appear sacred or even utilitarian. How does a work—whatever its original purpose—move from this sort of conceptualization to the status of “art”? And what is it about a work or site that might push it in that direction?

For much of the work that has received canonical status in India, it appears that at least two motives were immediately present. Temple sites seem initially to have impressed Europeans because of sheer size; we are constantly told that Khajuraho or Konarak are filled with massive temples, the construction of which—like the pyramids—must have involved untold tens of thousands of hours of human labor. But so much is easy to say, and many sites that have comparatively impressive temples and rock cut stonework are not placed on a par with each other. The second obvious motivation, and one that also recurs in the literature on the subject, might best be described, oddly, as shock value. The two sites just mentioned, along with Ajanta, Ellora and Elephanta, are among those most frequently spoken of in art of India circles. But the latter three are to some extent distinguished by cave painting, and thus are not filled with the same sort of work as Khajuraho, or Konarak. What is it that stands out for these particular sites? Overwhelmingly, it is the “erotic” quality of their stonecarvings. Fabri notes of Khajuraho that “the cold calculation that makes pornography is totally absent”; Anand says that we must remember that we are seeing carvings that have to do with the “outcome of the cosmic union.”⁸ In either case, the fact that the disclaimers are entered signals to us perhaps more than we wanted to know.

II

Once the Europeans had taken notice of Khajuraho, another series of intellectual moves came into play. It must have been clear that the site was remarkable—to British eyes—not only for the subject matter ensconced in the carvings, but also for a variety of

other reasons, many of which obviously had to do with style and, for lack of a better word, craftsmanship. Tersely, the white visitors to the site needed a framework under which to conceptualize what they saw, and the emergence of a place in the soon-to-be developed art historical canon could not have been far behind.

It appears that one of the first categories employed by those who saw Khajuraho (and Konarak) had to do with form and line. It was evident to any onlooker that the curvilinearity achieved in stonework was remarkable; it perhaps had little or no parallel in European artwork. "Fluidity of line," then, became one of the catchphrases to describe the facades of the temples at Khajuraho; the line in question, of course, was not unrelated to what we have already described as shock value, since much of the most remarkable carving is in the "erotic" work. With respect to the temples themselves, Rowland refers to the "vibrant texture of their surface ornamentation."⁹ He also notes that the "celestial maidens possess a great vitality expressed in their tortuous movements...the roundness and the softness of the breasts and belly are emphasized...."¹⁰ Kramrisch, another authority, writes that "Subordinated to their monumental context, the images are exposed in the freedom of their movements."¹¹

Even the naïve reader might be moved to reflect that it appears to be no accident that Clive Bell and Roger Fry, writing in Great Britain in the early part of the twentieth century, expressed the belief that form was the predominant hallmark of art. The British had by that time, through the process of colonization, long been exposed to a variety of sculptures and craft in which form might be said to be the predominant motif. But the importance of line and form was not, of course, unknown or unexpressed even when Khajuraho was first seen. Thus the first steps toward the creation of an art historical canon for India appear to emerge from the twin instances of shock effect and the desire to categorize it. That this was the case for Khajuraho and similar sites would be difficult to deny. As we have said, there is little that surprises in the employment of European art historical concepts to address the work of India; after all, these were the only tools at hand. But what is surprising is the extent to which these categories were employed—Rowland, among others, writes frequently of "the Baroque," and of "mannerism."¹² Other parallels seem to have been created simply because it was much easier to use them while writing than to try to think of new rubrics and new forms of conceptualization.

One obvious lacuna in much of the writing has to do with the mythographical work itself. Whether the site is Khajuraho, a cave, or whether the object in question is a miniature, a certain depth of reporting with respect to Hindu constructs would seem to have been necessary. This "depth", sadly, is precisely what is missing from so much of what has been done. Kramrisch herself gives us an example of what such commentary would be like in her work *The Presence of Siva*, where she writes about the notion of the "androgynous god."

Sati is the Great Goddess. As Sati she acted the part she had to play in the myth of Siva; she issued from and represented the Great Goddess, who had returned into Siva. The Great Goddess, an idea, would be eternally in Siva, while as image she would be Sati, whom Siva would love as his wife.¹³

Admittedly, one cannot expect this level of sophistication with regard to Hindu constructs in much art historical commentary, but a good deal of the criticism is fairly far away from having a grasp of the relevant mythology and worldview. In any case, mythographical or not, the original art historical criticism proceeded apace, and the upshot was the creation of a canon of Hindu carvings, miniatures and stonework, much of which wound up either in Great Britain itself, or in the colonial museums established by the British.

III

In her study of the formation of the canonical works of modernism, and of the notion of the “modern” itself, Janet Wolff repeatedly uses the notion of exclusion to help explain how the canon was established. This notion is crucial to us because it helps explain—surprisingly, one might think—the formation of similar canons for other cultures. Despite the fact that one might naively believe that somewhat different processes were at work, there is abundant reason to think that the art historical canon of the-works of India developed, as a whole, in much the same way.

Because the Europeans initially understood so little of what they saw, shock value was of great importance in delineating the objects, sites, and places that were to later become of paramount importance. Although translations from Sanskrit proceeded apace during the nineteenth century (and hence helped the better educated obtain some kind of grasp of what they were viewing), a site such as Khajuraho had an immediate stunning effect on the viewer for its sheer size, the nature of its depictions, and because at least some of its carvings could be placed under certain common Eurocentric aesthetic rubrics, such as “vital,” “flowing,” or “exhibiting plasticity.”

Once a site or temple had been mentioned in enough sources by enough visitors, it became part of the group of objects and places routinely mentioned by later authorities such as Rowland and Kramrisch.¹⁴ The authorities give us some kind of a feel for how the process occurred simply by way of recitation of facts: Fabri, in a sense, notes size and scope, insofar as Khajuraho is concerned. He writes that “It is often suggested that they [the temples] were all built, all the reputed eighty-five of them within a short period. One authority actually claimed that all were built within a hundred years.”¹⁵ Anand alludes to size and a sort of sheer stunning quality when he notes that the temples had been “carved out in great profusion,” and that they represent the “triumph of sculpture over architecture.”¹⁶ Rowland, while noting contour, calls the group “extraordinary,” again an at least implicit allusion to scale and size.¹⁷

Having struck a sufficient number of observers, and not readily excludable on the basis of small size, depiction of the mundane, or ordinariness of stonework, this temple site rapidly became a demarcator of the canon, and, indeed, a paradigm of cultural achievement. Rowland calls the site the “culmination” of a certain sort of cultural genius; Anand says that it represents one of the “highest and most intense moments of the Mediaeval Hindu Renaissance.”¹⁸

The constant use of superlatives in the description of the site, and Anand’s evocation

of the “Mediaeval Hindu Renaissance” might almost be enough to make the observer forget that this commentary is based on sheerly colonial observations and category construction. What is termed the medieval Hindu Renaissance is a category put together by Western observers. Its overt parallel to the Western Renaissance is, of course, deliberate. What is most poignant however, is that while the processes of art historical categorization of the European Renaissance—reliance on patronage, association with aristocrats, debt to a certain school—might be transparent to many an art history student, the process with respect to the art of India is no less forceful, and considerably less transparent.

In an odd series of moves, many of the comments made by the art historians in the process of canonization reflect some of the original processes at work in the European objects or sites with which the Indian sites are inevitably compared. We know, for example, that cathedrals in the European tradition were constructed through various sorts of patronage, and the acts and benefits associated with them strongly influenced how they were perceived as works of architecture and as “statements” within the tradition. Citing Rowland one more time, he says with respect to Khajuraho that:

Seen from the exterior, the temples of Khajuraho impress the beholder with the same grandeur of unified design that we recognize in a Gothic cathedral, whether or not we are acquainted with its iconographic significance.¹⁹

Although it is by no means clear which Gothic cathedral Rowland has in mind, whichever one he does use as an exemplar in this context is itself part of the art historical process under examination here—it is just that that process might be more obvious.

IV

In *AngloModern*, her work on the formation of modernism as an art historical construct, Janet Wolff cites the work of Kathleen McEnery, a comparatively unknown American artist of the ‘20’s and ‘30’s whose work is now in the process of being “rediscovered.” It is part of Wolff’s point that McEnery’s work might have received more attention at the time, had she not been female, working in the realist tradition, and somewhat geographically isolated. With respect to McEnery and the categorization of her work, Wolff writes:

In the end, one could conclude that the categories themselves are unhelpful. But from the point of view of the central theme of this book, namely the marginalization of nonmodernist work, Kathleen McEnery would have been firmly situated by the dominant narrative of twentieth-century art on the side of the secondary, the retro-grade, the inferior—in other words, the realist tradition.²⁰

Although it is not so obvious how the categorization procedures for Indian sites worked, one can draw at least one conclusion from what is available on Khajuraho: sites that did not impress for sheer size, spectacularly deviant (in European eyes) topics sculpted, or number of temples on the site probably were marginalized during the formation of the art historical canon for this tradition. Although plasticity of carving in the stonework is frequently mentioned in the case of Khajuraho, it is almost always mentioned in close

proximity to the topics depicted. Thus, to recapitulate, a combination of factors in the case of Hindu stonework frequently creates the overall effect: Rowland says that the temples are “Gothic,” but also mentions “iconographic significance.” He seems to denigrate the importance of the latter, and yet it is clear from his comments and the comments of others that it can scarcely be denigrated. Even misunderstood or barely understood iconographic significance is powerfully important, and it would be difficult to argue that being faced with incomprehensible carving—especially of a “startling” type—did not work in the favor of the temple site in question, at least insofar as first impressions are concerned.

The art history of India has been the purview of comparatively few commentators—the chief names are perhaps Kramrisch, Rowland, Coomaraswamy and a few others. Although the latter is from the subcontinent, most of the authorities on this work, as it is usually taught in colleges and universities, are not. Build-up over a period of time drives the criticism on the art of India; the process of canon formation here is at least a couple of hundred years old. We know the names of the major sites, and visitors to India, if they have an interest in the arts, can readily rattle them off. But more important, at least in our postcolonial view, is how that list was compiled. A few European observers were stunned, at a certain point in time, by what they saw. The results of their surprise on a few occasions have been translated into what is now regarded as a strongly-set canon of the Art of India.

Notes

¹One of the most easily available plate books on Khajuraho, published and with commentary by Mulk Raj Anand, takes pains to note that the “Indian sculptor” is not particularly interested in “objective reality.” (Mulk Raj Anand, *Khajuraho*, Bombay: Marg Publications, 1968, p. 25.)

²“Naturalism and Mannerism in Indian Art,” in *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Spring 2001.

³Chalres Fabri, “The Fulfillment of the Baroque in Khajuraho,” in ed. Anand, pp. 6-12. This citation p. 8.

⁴Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*, Baltimore: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1967, p. 175.

⁵For an account of some early responses to India, see *Worlds of Knowing*, New York: Routledge, 2001, Chs. 2-3.

⁶Janet Wolff, *AngloModern: Painting and Modernity in Britain and the United States*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸Fabri in ed. Anand, p. 12; Anand in ed. Anand, p. 4.

⁹Rowland, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹¹Stella Kramrisch, “Reflections on the House and Body of Gods,” in ed. Anand, pp. 17-20; this citation p. 19.

¹²See fn. 2.

¹³Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Siva*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 203.

¹⁴One might think it remarkable that the number of frequently mentioned objects is really quite small, numbering perhaps only in the high dozens. But when one thinks of how these objects came to be mentioned, and the processes by which other sites and/or objects must have been excluded, the smallness of the number is not so surprising.

¹⁵Fabri, "Fulfillment," in ed. Anand, p. 8.

¹⁶Anand, "Homage to Khajuraho," in ed. Anand, pp. 1, 2.

¹⁷Rowland, *Art*, p. 175.

¹⁸Rowland, *ibid.*; Anand in ed. Anand, p. 1.

¹⁹Rowland, *Art*, p. 176.

²⁰Wolff, in *Anglo*, p. 66.

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