

The Arts of Amarna And India :

A Study in Representation

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The problem of representation cuts across many of the boundaries that we normally think of as demarcating important areas in aesthetics. If painting is involved, it is perhaps habitual to first think of representation as a conceptually difficult area in terms of twentieth-century art versus the portraiture of an earlier period, or in terms of the California neo-realism of the 1970's versus the abstract expressionism of the 1940's and 50's.

Thinking of representation in this particular way, however, may prevent our seeing other sorts of difficulties with this notion, particularly as applied to art of the Third World. In a recent review of Carroll's work on horror, Levinson has noted the interesting use Carroll makes of the Paradox of Fiction.¹ As Levinson notes,

The familiar paradox of fiction is cast with specific reference to movie horror monsters, in which we, as movie goers in possession of our sense, don't believe, and our ostensible fear and revulsion toward them, in the absence of behavioral inclinations of the sort such emotions appear to require.²

I would like to suggest that there is a similar paradox at work with respect to at least some aspects of representation. One hesitates to allude to it as "the paradox of representation", since it affects only a small portion of that which ordinarily might be thought to be representational, and since representation is itself a troublesome notion. Nevertheless, even a cursory look at many areas of Third World art and the traditional art of the ancients familiarizes us with the crux of the dilemma: how can we make sense of the notion of representation when what is allegedly represented is either a mythological entity, or an entity about whom we know so little historically that the notice of accurate representation is moot? I will suggest here, uncontroversially perhaps, that representation is best thought of as a continuum, with the representational art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or even of the post-Renaissance period in general, not on a par with purportedly representational art of an earlier period.

But this merely highlights the other respect in which this conundrum mirrors the paradox that Levinson sets out for us in his discussion of Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror*. The question is not only-or even not importantly--

whether some piece of art is representational. The question is now we can "believe in" so to speak, the intrinsically representational properties of a piece the referent of which we are not familiar with. Intriguingly enough, this particular set of problems may not reach its zenith for the mythological figure; clearly, the most serious level of difficulty accrues to the portrayal of an historical figure about whom we know little.

In the following I will contrast the art, both painted and sculpted, of two differing periods and cultures. As exemplary of the difficulties posed by representative art portraying historical figures about whom little is known, I will use examples from the Tell el-Amarna site in Egypt, geographic locale of the court of Akhenaton, the revolutionary Egyptian Pharaoh who succeeded Amenhotep III. Since one of Akhenaton's daughters married Tutankhamen, we know more about this general period than about many others in the pre-Christian era. I will offset the class of philosophical problems posed by such art with those derivable from art depicting figures purely mythological. For the latter I will utilize a set of examples taken from the Hindu art of India, much of it rock relief of the first millennium A.D. by contrasting these two sorts of artifacts, we have sufficient paradigmatic material to work on the peculiar paradoxes or puzzles generated by the representation of that with which we are unacquainted.

The notion of representation, at its most fundamental level, would seem to be related to the notion of likeness or mimesis. A representation of something, at least on one view, is supposed to be recognizable lines, slashes and patches of color, we have more and more difficulty in coming to grips with the notion of likeness. We may assume that the artist entitles a work "Mme. Meursan" not because the painting bears any relationship to the actual appearance of said person (in our hypothetical case), but because Mme. Meursan evokes in the artist some set of emotions to which he or she is giving vent, and so forth.

Now the representational art of much of the ancients presents us with a somewhat different problem. We are presented with work which obviously depicts human figures, and in many cases we are told which figures, or are given enough subsidiary information that, because of costumes, ornaments, placing and so forth, we can guess which figures. But how can we know that anything such as a likeness of the actual figure has been obtained? And if the sculpture, relief, frieze or painting is far enough away from what would count as a likeness on a sort of God's-eye view of representation, then what prevents our labeling the work nonrepresentational, fictitious, mythological and the like? These questions might not be perplexing were it not for the fact that we do frequently find

ourselves in the position of being told that a certain work of art is a likeness of an important figure from a given historical period.

At Tell el-Amarna and Karnak, sites in Egypt for the court of Akhenaton, the Pharaoh whose worship of Aton is widely regarded as the first for mutated monotheism, numerous reliefs and statues depict the King as a somewhat physically unusual figure. Because of the enormous amount of literature on ancient Egypt, the importance of Egyptology as one of the first "Orientalist" disciplines, and the unique role of Akhenaton in religious history, a large commentary on the appearance of the King and members of his family has grown up, with the interesting corollary that depictions of him seem to have been taken as more-or-less accurate. Sir Alan Gardiner, one of the foremost British Egyptologists of this century, writes:

A son of more unlikely an appearance than A menophis IV IA menhotep IV [A menhotep IV, Akhenaton's name before he changed it to signify his new worship] could hardly have been born to altogether normal parents. Though his earliest monuments do not present his features and figure as markedly different from those of any earlier Egyptian prince, the representations of only a few years later provide us with frankly hideous portraits the general fidelity of which cannot be doubted. The elongated head slopes forward from a long thin neck; the face is narrow....³

On wonders about the move from "...the general fidelity of which cannot be doubted" to the description following, and yet Gardiner's commentary is standard along these lines.

Now at this point it would seem to be important to note that there are philosophical problems surrounding the notion of representation *simpliciter* that do not necessarily help in the case I am making here. Although I have treated the notion of representation as if it were straightforwardly related to the concept of resemblance, not all philosophers have been willing to make such an assertion. Some interpretations of Goodman's work, for example, have sought to emphasize how Goodman attempts to divorce the two notions⁴. And if an art form focuses too much on "resemblance", as it were, there is some hesitation about attributing to it the power of representationality. Robert Wicks, in his essay "Photography as a Representational Art", summarizes one position on photography in this way:

For example, Roger Scruton asserts... not that photography fails to be an art, but that photography's mechanical nature prevents it from being an art of representation...

According to Scruton, an aesthetic interest in representation is impossible with regard to an ideal photograph. Since an ideal photograph perfectly reproduces an object's visual appearance, and merely duplicates what we see with the naked eye, he believes that an ideal photograph cannot say anything about its subject.⁵

Wicks goes on to counter this line of argument, but it is clear that, according to some, too great a resemblance between an object and a work of art precludes the notion of representation because it obviates the possibility of the kind of layered interpretation which we think of as being significant in art. By the same token, as we have seen, if there is so little resemblance that recognition is not possible, the notion of representation begins to break down.

But these problems are not primarily what is troubling us here. What is troubling us, I am arguing, is that in many cases it is understood from the outset, particularly with historical figures, that there is some notion of resemblance involved in representation, and the question then is--how much? To return to Gardiner's commentary on Akhenaton, he seems to take it for granted that the representations of the Pharaoh are, in fact close likenesses, and it seems to be comparatively unproblematic for him--or for other Egyptologists--that, save for a death mask (in itself problematic) we do not really know what Akhenaton looked like.⁶

II

Insofar as Akhenaton is concerned, we might want to say that part of the difficulty with which we are grappling is just an instance of the general difficulty with work on the ancient cultures writ small, as it were. The contretemps surrounding our notions of reconstructing the past have been shoved under the rubric of philosophy of archaeology, and much work has already been done on this general problem.⁷ But what is particularly peculiar about the Egyptian Pharaohs, for example, and what lends credence to the notion that we are explicating a "paradox of representation" analogous to Carroll's paradox of fiction, is that some of the likenesses or representations are deemed to be better, from the standpoint of resemblance, than others. Not only, then, do we have a situation in which it is assumed that the representations bear a physical resemblance to the Pharaoh, but it is also assumed that one or more can serve as a standard against which the others--representationally--can be judged. Flinders Petrie writes of "...need[ing]... correct images for his [Akhenaton's] *ka*..."⁸ Gardiner writes, comparing one set of *stelae* to another, that the "...appearance of all these persons is as different from what can be seen in the rest of the tomb as can well be

imagined.⁹ Here images of Akhenaton, and indeed his family, are squared off against images constructed prior to the religious revolution.

Now part of the difficulty here is that, if one were not enamored of the notion of resemblance, and if one took a stand similar to Scruton's as articulated by Wicks, one could get out of all of this by tossing the notion of representation back to the symbolic. Here resemblance no longer counts; as Dickie has noted

...a work of art is by definition an iconic symbol of human feeling....¹⁰

But, as I have claimed, the standard commentary on the ancients does in fact assert that resemblance is at work here. So the conundrum so far is twofold: (1) *contra* theorists like Scruton and Goodman, there does seem, intuitively, to be some relationship between the concepts of resemblance and representation; (2) given that some degree of resemblance does indeed adhere to the notion of representation (even if we cannot precisely articulate its range), in our problematic cases of Akhenaton and his family some standard of representation is taken as being paradigmatic without our being able to specify adequately the conditions under which it should be so taken.

Some light may be shed on this puzzling duo of difficult areas by considering the notion of convention with regard to the representation of ethnic types, emotional states, etc., in the arts. Here the notion of standard becomes clearer. In discussing, for example, various stage Ophelias, Charney and Charney note :

No external sign of madness is more familiar and more often repeated than that of a woman with her hair down, virtually an emblem of madness on the Elizabethan stage. Ophelia, for example, who merely enters 'distracted' in the Folio stage direction... in the 'Bad' Quarto of 1603 comes on stage 'playing a lute, and her hair down singing...

We are grateful to the bad quarts for giving us stage directions that seem to record contemporary stage business, directions that are missing in the more formal texts... Instead of being 'put up', her hair has been let down'¹¹.

Granted that this is a case of representation of a concept, so to speak, instead of a person, we have to ask how it is that a concept came to be so highly marked, as it were. It is, of course, an empirical matter—emotionally distraught persons simply behaved in a certain way in Elizabethan and Renaissance times, and note made of this, over a long period, resulted in a certain convention with regard to the representation of this derangement.

The parallel case with Akhenaton would have to entail that empirical evidence about his appearance crept into the representations in such a way that certain features of them became standard. But the cases are not really parallel, of course- that is the difficulty. The feature that are appreciated in the case of "female distraction" are general features; in the case of Akhenaton, they are not. What would be necessary in the case of Akhenaton-and what we do not have-is some standard which we could be sure would serve. Failing, of course, a photograph, we would need perhaps more than one life mask, or detailed written accounts from his contemporaries, and so on. Flinders Petrie and Gardiner seem to suppose that we have such knowledge; we do not. The paradox of representation leaves us with figures of Akhenaton which might be much closer to the portrayals of mythological entities than we are inclined to think.

III

If it could be argued that there were a paradox of representation with regard to the mythological, it might run along these lines. Given that we have accepted some degree of relationship between resemblance and representation, how can one make sense of the notion of representation of a mythological entity? How can one make sense of the notion of representation with regard to something that does not exist?

The paradox, if paradox there be, is particularly pointed when we remember that we have just finished making the point that a core puzzle for the historical figures was the seeming acceptance of a notion of standard. Still one more citation in this regard-this one taken from the catalog of the widely-cited MOMA "High and Low"- reminds us of this point.

The history of caricature and modern painting and sculpture is a story of evolutionary transformation: a sophisticated and fully developed art form which had previously been allowed to do only one thing [represent] was made to do another, and a new kind of social institution grew up around that newly-altered form.¹²

So it would seem that the mythological presents us with a nearly insurmountable difficulty, since it does not have the sort of visual history to back it up which the object of caricature has. But I argue that the situation is the other way around. The case of the factious is more analogous to the case of a concept, like the Elizabethan concept of madness. Here the build-up of associations is what saves the situation. The connotational aspects are the standard.

In the art of India, Shiva Nataraja- Shiva in his guise as Lord of the Dance is a common, perhaps too-frequently-rendered, figure. Naive village beliefs

about *avatars* and incarnations aside, there is, so to speak, no Shiva. And yet the build-up of semantic intention (I leave philosophy of language aside here) surrounding his name is such that we do have a normative measure of what is constitutive of Shiva's appearance. Precisely because Shiva is mythological, we can come to greater antecedent agreement about a portrayal of Shiva than we can about the Tell el-Amarna figures.

Here is Ananda Coomaraswamy on Shiva Nataraja:

Among the greatest of the names of Shiva is Nataraja, Lord of Dancers or King of Actors. The Cosmos is His theater, there are many different steps in his repertory. He Himself is actor and audience.... How many various dances of Shiva are known to his worshippers I cannot say.

No doubt the root idea behind all of these dances is more-or-less one and the same, the manifestation of primal rhythmic energy.¹³

He is usually depicted holding a trident, and with a crescent moon in his hair.¹⁴ He sometimes is depicted as a halved figure with his consort the goddess Parvati in one of her various manifestations as his other half. The figure is so highly stylized and so utterly conventionalized that he is instantly recognizable to someone from the subcontinent. Benjamin Powland, one of the leading figures in Asian art history of the earlier part of this century, writes of the stone relief "Descent of the Ganges" at Mahabalipuram near Madras:

The greatest achievement of the Pallava sculptors was the carving of an enormous granite boulder on the seashore with a representation of the Descent of the Ganges [from the head of Shiva] from the Himalayas... We have here a perfect illustration of the dualism persistent in Indian art between an intensive naturalism and the conception of divine forms according to the principles of an appropriately abstract canon of proportions....¹⁵

So the notion of representation turns out to be complex in ways that are difficult to elucidate. An alembicated account of the notion reveals that, if one can buy the non-Goodmanian assertion that resemblance and representation do indeed have some conceptual relationship, representations of actual figures for whom we have no standard (a photograph or detailed written account) are actually more difficult analytically than representations of contemporary figures or mythological figures. The intuitive routing of our concept of representation to the notion of resemblance renders opaque any account, for example, of what a representation of Akhenaton amounts to.

Still one more example helps us come to grips with my point about the intention adhering to the notion of the mythological figure. In their sumptuous *5000 Years of the Art of India*,¹⁶ Bussagli and Sivaramanurti show figure after figure which, if not virtually indistinguishable to the Western eye, demonstrate little noticeable difference. On p.206 of the text, for instance, we are shown a bronze from medieval Eastern India which looks very much like the bronzes of Vishnu or any one of innumerable other Hindu deities. Yet we are told, authoritatively, that this is a depiction of the pre-Vedic god Surya. One is able to make this distinction, according to the text, because, among other reasons, he is surrounded by " ...blooming lotuses [which] symbolize the rising sun."¹⁷ We are more certain, epistemically, of the mythological referent of the statue than we are of the reliability of the representations of Akhenaton, and yet there is no uncertainty about the actual existence of the iconoclastic Pharaoh.

IV

In this paper I have attempted to make the somewhat recondite argument that representation is a continuum, and that like many such continua, its ends, so to speak, have more in common than either end has with its middle. If the notions of representation and resemblance are conceptually related, as many want to claim, then the difficulties that we have with historical figures from very early periods are of a completely different degree than the difficulties that we have with either more contemporary figures or with fictitious figures. In a way, the apparent difficulties mirror some of the initial commentary made in philosophy of language on classical versus causal theories of reference. The classical theory asks us to accept that we determine the referent via the encrusted semantic intention associated with a given name. The problem, as Kripke and others pointed out, is that we cannot be absolutely certain that the propositions generated by the semantic build-up are actually true of the referent in question.¹⁸ We want to believe that they are true, but they may not be. The very fact that they may potentially be disconfirmed shakes our notion of what it is that is constitutive of the notion of reference.

The parallel with the problematic introduced by the portraiture of Akhenaton is quite striking. Akhenaton and Shiva do not have the same ontological status. Precisely because Akhenaton was once a human being who walked the face of the earth as we do today, it should, in principle, be possible to obtain a close account of his appearance, if only one had adequate evidence. Because one never knows what evidence might accrue, and epistemological conundrum is constructed whenever, *sans* the evidence, we attempt to take one relief, one depiction, one statue as definitive.

What the Hindu tradition refers to as "Shiva" is according to Ja Heinrich Zimmer and Joseph Campbell, a sophisticated projection of our awareness of our mortality, the passage of time, and the cyclical nature of perishable things. And yet the depiction of this mythological entity, who like Brentano's unicorn has intentional inexistence, is one surer footing epistemically and is conventionalized in the same way that the Renaissance madwoman is conventionalized. Stonewall Jackson and Andy Warhol, like Akhenaton, are not fictional entities. Because they lived during the era of photography (and, in Jackson's case, of a tradition of meticulous written description) representation of them does not present us with the same sorts of conceptual difficulties. I can recognize Stonewall Jackson portrait at Virginia Military Institute or Washington and Lee University not only because I have seen his photograph but because voluminous commentary on the Civil War has provided me with other referential criteria.

At the opening of this paper I commented on Levinson's application of the notion of paradox to Carroll's work on horror, and noted that a similar sort of paradox might be thought to adhere to representation. I will close by citing still one more analogy. In his recent book on visual form, Robert Sowers writes of the relationship between primary colors on a color wheel and primary modalities, such as painting, sculpture and architecture in the visual arts.¹⁹ His point is that one rarely obtains the purely sculptural, the purely architectural, and so forth. The space-articulating capacities of the Taj Mahal are viewed in another way when the intricate Islamic tile composition of much of the walls is viewed at close range. So, I conclude, should we think about the notion of representation. The portions of the spectrum here are similar to those on a color wheel, and similar to the articulated modalities of the visual arts. Although the pure case is rare and perhaps nonexistent thinking about the various forms and modes taken by representation helps us illuminate important areas in aesthetics and the visual arts.

Notes and References

1. Levinson, Jerrold, Easy Review of *The Philosophy of Horror*, by Noel Carroll, in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol.49, No.3, Summer 1991, pp.253-258.
2. *Ibid.*, p.255.
3. Gadiner, Sir Alan, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.
4. R.A. Goodrich, writing in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, (Goodman on Representation and Resemblance", Vol. 28, No.1. Winter 1988) has tried to show how Goodman was wrong to attempt to create such a divorce in the first place. As he puts it "To set the scene for our critical examination, we shall briefly summarize the general thrust of Goodman's larger argument which ties the concept of representation to symbol and reference at the expense of representation." Most commentators see at least some relationship between resemblance and representation, even if the relationship is not straightforward.

5. Wicks, Robert. "Photography as Representational Art". in *British Journal of Aesthetics*. Vol. 29. No.1. Winter 1989.
6. Flinders Petrie. W.M., *Tell el-Amarna*. Warminster, England. Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1974. p.18.
7. Alison Wylie has done some noteworthy work in this regard.
8. Flinders Petrie. *loc. cit.*
9. Gardiner. in *op. cit.*, p.219.
10. Dickie, George. *Aesthetics; An Introduction*. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971. p.79.
11. Charney, Maurice and Hanna Charney. "The Language of Madwomen in Shakespeare and his Fellow Dramatist". in *Signs*. Vol. 3. No. 2. Winter 1977. pp. 452-453.
12. High and Low: the Catalog". New York: MOMA. 1990. Varmedoe and Gopnik, text editors. p. 101.
13. Coomarswamy, Ananda. *The Dance of Shiva*, New York : Noonday Press, 1957, p.66.
14. This image is so familiar that is the subject of various Indian oleo prints, widely available not only abroad, but here in the United States. A particularly well-known one, dear to the counterculture, is from the Eden Shop in Kathmandu, Nepal (also a Hindu nation in part) and was reprinted frequently in the 1970's.
15. Rowland, Benjamin. *The Art and Architecture of India*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1967. pp. 183-184.
16. Bussagli, Mario and Calembus Sivaramamurti. *5000 Years of the Art of India*, New York: Harry Abrams, 1972.
17. This is plate no.239 in the collection.
18. Kripke, Saul. "Naming and Necessity", in Gilbert Harman and Donald Davidson, eds., *Semantics of Natural Language*, Dordrecht: Reidel, pp. 262-293.
19. Sowers, Robert. *Rethinking Visual Form*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991.