

Assessing a field: Indian art history in the twenty-first century

Review of:

Parul Pandya Dhar (ed.), *Indian Art History: Changing Perspectives*, New Delhi: D. K. Printworld and National Museum Institute, 2011, 279 pp., 70 b&w illus., ISBN 812460597-1

My colleagues often wonder why historians of South Asian art remain concerned with the sub-continent's recent colonial history rather than focusing on art that might be considered 'old and beautiful'. In reply, I point out that the modern field of art history in South Asia (as elsewhere in Asia), was born through a colonial encounter.¹ It seems logical then, that the historiography of Indian, or more particularly, South Asian art history, should be immersed in post-colonial perspectives. If nationalism was born through its connections to colonialism in South Asia, this was, to famously quote Partha Chatterjee, a 'fragmented' experience.² Yet, these 'fragments' were bound together through re-evaluations of traditions in a shared trajectory towards the modern. A nation had to have a history, and colonial modernity was an overwhelming determinant in directing the concerns and subjects of nationalist historians. This broad scholarly path has been mapped within South Asian art history in recent years by Tapati Guha-Thakurta.³ Historians of South Asian art, especially those who analyze the pre-colonial past, must both address as well as move beyond this colonial legacy.

In keeping with this trend, *Indian Art History* is a significant addition to the literature in the field. Individual contributions are derived from papers delivered at a seminar, 'A Historiography of Indian Art: Emergent Methodological Concerns,' held at the National Museum Institute of History of Art, Conservation and Museology at New Delhi in September 19-21, 2006. Fifteen essays, including a substantial introductory overview by the editor, explore shifts in scholarly methods and preoccupations. The topics covered range from critical overviews of art historical methods and knowledge-making, to reassessments of approaches to particular regions, sites and sub-fields.

The introduction is an ambitious undertaking, beginning with an exploration of early colonial efforts based in travel and exploration. The author (and editor of the volume), evaluates the late-eighteenth century Orientalist enterprise in terms of a colonial desire to understand the culture of an emergent empire. She follows this with an exploration of nineteenth-century archaeological efforts and documentation exercises by Alexander

¹ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation (1860-1945)*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008; Edwards explores a similar trajectory through colonial and nationalist times for the modern nation of Cambodia and its most famous monument, Angkor Wat; Vishaka Desai ed., *Asian Art History in the Twenty-first Century*, Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2008. In this collection of essays, art historians describe the modern birth of Asian art history in various regions of Asia and through multiple encounters with modernity.

² Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-colonial Histories*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.

³ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Cunningham, James Fergusson and James Burgess. Values attached to a canon based in on-site surveys were anchored to nineteenth century nostalgias for a pre-industrial past that lived, for its creators, in a timeless India. Studies based in texts and contexts such as those proposed by the Bengali archaeologist Rajendralal Mitra, received inadequate attention, as did parallel efforts in philology and history. As a result, South Asian history remained centred, till recently, on formal analyses and comparisons mired in categories and periods constructed in the nineteenth century. The author follows these observations with a closer view of various sub-fields (archaeology, painting, Jain art) and methods (social contexts, the roles of artists and patrons), and acknowledges the continued relevance of contemporary concerns in shaping our understanding of the past. Pandya Dhar also provides summaries for the chapters that are to follow. For the most part, she successfully ties together a disparate set of essays that nevertheless provide the reader with an impressive overview of the complex and diverse nature of Indian art history.

Chapters two through five give the reader a more detailed picture of the history of the field. Kapila Vatsyayan's essay ('The Discipline of Art History') begins with a focus on the relationship between a 'western' or global history of art and its Indian iteration. Vatsyayan points out that the art historian must pay attention to the creative process that was shaped through indigenous aesthetic theories and metaphysical concepts and argues for a multi-layered approach that includes, but also moves beyond concerns of form, chronology or social context. Upinder Singh ('Archaeologists and Architectural Scholars in Nineteenth Century India') writes about the history of archaeology in the nineteenth century through the work and experiences of one its most prominent practitioners, Alexander Cunningham. Cunningham's contextual approach set him apart from his competitors, Fergusson and Burgess. Colonial scholars, both British and Indian, worked in a global arena where racial and cultural differences were viewed within comparative frames and had direct bearing on the reception of scholarship. Singh draws our attention to the debates between Fergusson and Mitra over the nature and extent of foreign influence on Indian art and emphasizes the politically and racially charged environment in which these debates were conducted.

Gautam Sengupta ('Rajendralal Mitra and the Formative Years of Indian Art History') focuses on the work of the Bengali archaeologist Rajendralal Mitra and analyzes his oeuvre in the context of the academic, social and political environment in which it was produced. Nationalist prerogatives and a desire to claim indigenous origins for the material culture of a glorious Indian past underlay Mitra's innovative combination of on-site investigations and textual sources, an approach lacking in the work of many of his British contemporaries. Sengupta incisively points to the inherent ambivalence of Mitra's stance towards the physical vestiges of an Indian past, caught as he was between the overwhelming hegemony of nineteenth century racial and cultural biases and a nationalist desire for a splendid history.⁴ Ratan Parimoo ('Stella Kramrisch's Approach to Indian Art History') examines the work of Viennese art historian Stella Kramrisch and its roots within the German tradition. Kramrisch made a case for appreciating Indian art on its own terms and

⁴ Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. If the term 'Aryan' was a colonial construct, it was readily adopted by Indian nationalists seeking a desirable place in a global arena of comparisons.

emphasized its 'naturalism.' However, racial theories and the propensities and activities of the 'Indo-Aryans' were inescapable elements in her analysis, as well as that of her contemporaries. To some extent, these are rubrics that still pervade the field.

Chapters six through eight are devoted to explorations of social contexts and the nature of Indian art. More specifically, S. Settar ('Early Indian Artists [c. 300 BCE – 200 CE]') and R. N. Misra ('Ancient Indian Artists') examine the roles and social mix of artists, artisans and patrons. Through studies of inscriptions, sculpture and texts from the Mauryan and Kushana periods, Settar provides us with scholarly models to examine patronage and the artist's place within multi-ethnic and multi-cultural empires. He further speculates about migration and organizational patterns among scribes and artists in these periods through detailed analyses of inscriptions and scripts. R.N. Misra is concerned with the professional organization of artists and artisans and concludes that hierarchy within communities of artisans remained an overall organizational system, with the *sutradhar* (master-mason) occupying a place beyond that of the rank and file mason. He also provides evidence of the artistic ego expressed through inscriptions, somewhat dismantling notions of the anonymous Indian artist and artisan.⁵ He concedes though, that the distinction between artist and artisan was always relatively blurred within the Indian context.

Seema Bawa ('Gender in Early Indian Art') examines the role of gender as a constituent element within both Indian art as well as its interpretations. Nudity and sensual depictions within ancient and medieval Indian art were derided within colonial interpretations such as those by Fergusson. Nationalist historians, on the other hand, used such depictions to emphasize the positive role of the feminine and females in general. Bawa argues instead for a nuanced reading of gendered representation with due reference to the textual archive. She further suggests that gender itself is a necessary lens for a deeper understanding of Indian art.

Authors of chapters nine through thirteen are concerned with the historiography of specific sites and sub-fields. Mandira Sharma ('Disquisitions on the Paintings of Ajanta') and M. K. Dhavalikar ('Text and Context') trace historiographies of particular iconic sites, namely the paintings and inscriptions within the caves of Ajanta and the terracotta art of the Indus Valley Civilization. Parul Pandya Dhar ('Understanding 'Jaina Art' of Karnataka'), Christian Luczanits ('Approaches to Historic Indian and Indo-Tibetan Sculpture') and Ursula Weeks ('Rethinking the Historiography of Imperial Mughal Painting and its Encounters with Europe') pay close attention to the evolution of approaches and changing contexts within three sub-fields of Indian art history. In keeping with the larger theme of the volume, each author traces the colonial roots of this scholarship and its transformation through nationalist and post-nationalist moments.

In Chapter fourteen, Himanshu Prabha Ray ('Questioning Art History') examines the shifting landscape of religious identities in determining the nature of art and artistic patronage. He further suggests that religious art should be viewed through its social and political context, with greater cognizance of the aims and objectives of its creators rather than

⁵ John Guy, *Wonder of the Age: Master Painters of India, 1100- 1900*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011. In this exhibition and accompanying catalogue, Guy draws the viewer's attention to the personality and identity of the Indian artist.

focusing on its place within chronologies, sequences, and other modern constructs. In Chapter fifteen, a 'Photo Essay,' Joachim K. Bautze offers a view of the Red Fort at Delhi through the eyes of a British subject who remained billeted within, during the revolt of 1857. The source for this information is a diary and a set of contemporary photographs that emphasize its life as a besieged site. Another set of photographs of the Red Fort at Agra, also taken at the same time, offer a sharp contrast to the present identity of the sites as national and indeed world heritage.⁶ Bautze reminds the reader of the ever changing filters through which artefacts from the past are examined and experienced.

If *Indian Art History* has a fault, it is that the editor seeks to accomplish too much within these pages. Some of the contributions also read more in the manner of conference papers than essays. Concluding paragraphs at the end of each essay would help the reader make connections that the editor valiantly pulls together. In that regard, this volume is a pioneering effort at tying together various strands of scholarship and each essay is rooted in exhaustive source material. At the same time, and throughout the volume, the reader is conscious of the colonial legacy of the field that sometimes buries the fresh insights offered by art historians of pre-colonial periods. Perhaps it is time to recognize the value of post-colonial perspectives and then put them away in their place. It is time to re-examine Indian art on its own terms.

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⁶ Santhi Kavuri-Bauer, *Monumental Matters: The Power, Subjectivity, and Space of India's Mughal Architecture*, Raleigh-Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Kavuri-Bauer takes a close look at the ways in which Mughal architecture has been represented and appropriated through colonial, nationalist and contemporary narratives.