

THE MAURYA TRADITION AND
EUROCENTRIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Lines of analysis from Wolff, Rowland and others are used to make the argument that what is constitutive of Mauryan work is largely in the eye of the beholder. The Mauryan is contrasted with the Gandharan, and the power of art historical categorization is alluded to.

The Maurya period, in the early centuries before CE, is commonly regarded as the first classic period in the art of India.¹ From Pataliputra to other venues of the work of this era, a style is said to have emerged that has a great deal to do with what transpired in India later. It is said that this style contains specific classical elements—elements that will be repeated. In investigating these claims, we come to grips with much of South Asian art history.

We often think, particularly in terms of the cultures of developing areas, of one sort of style—or the instantiation of work in one period—as being the demarcator of everything that follows it. In India, the Maurya period, followed by the Gupta, is often held to be the platform on which much of the work (including some work not in India itself) of South Asia rests. But when we make such claims we must ask ourselves precisely what is meant. Who decides what counts as classic, particularly for cultures that were first visited by Europeans as recently as two or three centuries ago? What counts as canonical, and how is this decided?

This beginning period in what will later be termed the history of India is characterized largely as having to do with the reign of Ashoka, and the intricately carved pillars and walls of various buildings in the city complex that he created. Because of his scholarly and peaceful nature, Ashoka himself has become a figure of story and tale. Of him, Benjamin Rowland writes:

The history of his conversion to the Dharma is probably part truth, part legend: how...he was so overcome with horror at the countless windrows of the slain that littered the battlefield of his Orissa campaign, that he then and there determined to renounce all further bloodshed to dedicate himself and his reign to the Law and Peace of Buddha.²

Thus this period is associated with a reign dedicated to peace, and is, in any case, the first extended period of rule over a large swath of the subcontinent of which we have record.

It is important to begin with a discussion of Pataliputra, the classic site for this reign. Much of what is characteristic of the ruins of Pataliputra, for example, will be taken to be exemplary of Indian art, and this theme will be repeated over and over. This last assertion will prove to be a bone of contention, because the notion that something will become paradigmatic for the art of India is not only subject to debate due to size and geography, but is also related to how it was that the canon was formed in the first place. Interestingly enough, much that is within the realm of commentary by an art historian such as Rowland also has a great deal to do with what Ashoka imported; part of what is being said about his reign is that he used Persian and other elements, some Hellenistic, to make his points.³

In other words, the Maurya period is associated with the establishment of several elements that will recur again and again—Buddhist worship in India will use these elements, and they will later show up in other places. But, as Rowland remarks of a set of cells set aside for Buddhist worship in a cave and later kept as a shrine, “The architectural carving of the façade of this shrine is completely Indian. It is an imitation in relief sculpture in stone...of a free-standing structure in wood and thatch...”⁴

A number of lines of argument, which we will revisit later, have been adduced by commentators on the art of India in general and the construction of canon formation—it appears that, when the British and other colonials first passed through the region, much of what was deemed important or canonical to them had to do with scope, shape and size. The ruins of Mahabalipuram, for example, were sufficiently large and impressive (massive carvings in rock) that they made an overwhelming impression, and were quickly deemed normative. The site at Konarak, sometimes termed the Temple of the Sun and later the “Black Pagoda,” was enormous in scope, difficult to walk around, and contained carvings that, on first appearance, were heavily erotic.⁵ Thus it is fair to hypothesize that part of what has made the Mauryan tradition the staple of commentary that it has become has to do with the size of the ruins involved, and the emotional force that they had on first-time visitors. It is also the case that, whatever else may be said, parts of what were seen later became “Indian,” in the sense, as Rowland mentions, that they forwarded notions of indigenous architecture and modes

of construction. Thus the Emperor Ashoka, renowned for his interest in Buddhism and his intense promulgation of it, became associated with a site and style that themselves later became part of the canon.

These questions are important—indeed, crucial—because the Eurocentrism inherent in much of the critique (a point made by various commentators) militates against the notion that impartiality was involved in picking exemplary sites. What has been deemed characteristic of the Maurya style, in general, is anything that has to do with Gautama Buddha and his doctrines—and here we can allude not only to the stupas (the largest of which is found at Sarnath), but the memorial columns that also indicate Ashoka's wishes, and some other few configurations. The stupas themselves are a remarkable feat, for their size and their unusual roundness, obviously the product of much thought, make them stand out. It is also the case that upon further examination, the grounds surrounding the stupas are characteristically placed out in the form of mandalas, and so the notion of worship extends beyond the actual structure itself. Rowland has this to say about the stonework:

Little or nothing survives of Ashoka's Buddhist foundations beyond the ruins of a stupa at Piprawa in Nepal and the core of the Great Stupa at Sanchi, but monuments of another type survive to testify to his zeal for the Dharma. These stone memorials, erected as part of Ashoka's imperialist programme of spreading Buddhism throughout his empire and using the Law as a unifying force of government, consisted of great pillars or lats, some more than fifty feet in height....⁶

Finally, and to reiterate, another important feature of what will become the Maurya fashion is the carefully laid out groundplan for Pataliputra itself. It is crucial to note that much of this plan, and the stonework involved, shows hallmarks of the Persian civilization extant at the time, but as commentators have asserted, another characteristic of Indian art is the borrowing that often takes place, especially before roughly 1000 AD. The palace itself had a number of elements that might be deemed to

have been borrowed, but since they represent Ashoka's attempt to expand Buddhism, they become very important for Indian culture in general.

From the grounds of Pataliputra, then, to the Sarnath gateway or gopura, what remains from Ashoka's endeavors is, as we have said, the subject of much written work and a general sense that the product was foundational in South Asia. As Rowland notes, "Even in the group of Maurya sculpture classified as popular or Indian, there are certain unmistakable connexions with the art of Iran."⁷ Yet the moves made to establish work in India itself, whatever their origin, ultimately become standardized.

How work does in fact achieve the status of the canonical is in itself a subject of much debate, and, although a great deal that has been said on this is from a more contemporary period, it bears repeating insofar as any artwork from developing nations is concerned. The situation is further complicated in the case of the Maurya period, since so much of what is characteristic of the work of the era, as we have noted, actually has its origins—somewhat unsurprisingly—in Persia or elsewhere. But whatever the overview attempted by those at that time, this period is one that is always given pride of place in art historical works about India, and it is a hallmark of the culture. Although we might be tempted to say that other work—especially from the Gupta period, or work that is internationally iconographic, such as the Shiva Nataraj—has more to do with actual construction on the continent itself, the Maurya period precedes these eras and thus has a crucial significance. It therefore behooves an inquirer to try to establish what some of the desiderata of canon formation actually entail. Fortunately, there is no shortage of recent work that attempts to address these issues.

II

Theorizing recently about the constructions that gave rise to modernism, the critic Janet Wolff has attempted to delineate how notions of exclusion developed a concept of the modern as ultimately non-figurative, dynamic, and abstract, spelled out by Bell and Fry.⁸ We can hypothesize that some parallel process was at work in the formation of the Indian artworld—nevertheless with the caveat that what the Europeans

saw in the temples and wall sites of India was very much a vision of their own invention.

Wolff is concerned to make the point that establishing any sort of art historical canon has to do with constructing "orthodoxies"; we can say the same about the promulgation of status for sites in India.⁹ Although we might be inclined to say that the art history of much of Europe or even America can be spelled out, the artwork of other cultures presents us with a paradox. We have to remember that such work often had a given purpose, be it religious or utilitarian. We might inquire how a work moves from a given frame to the categorization of art--and we might also ask what it is about a work or site that might push it in that direction. Where the Maurya period is concerned, the irony is that it has a great deal to do with Ashoka, tales of his power and the strength of his Buddhist overview; many scholars of religious studies argue that Hinduism did not achieve the cohesion that it later had until after the rise of Buddhism, and there is a sense in which the Vedic frame that we have for India today did not come about until after the Maurya period. This gives the work of that era a certain status. Thus much that is "canonical" about Mauryan work has to do with its significance as an episode in history.

Again, assisting us in coming to grips with the concept of the "modern," which is also a powerful category in art historical terms, Janet Wolff cites the work of Kathleen McEney, a woman artist of the 1920's whose oeuvre, according to some, is now in the process of being revived or rediscovered. Wolff is trying to make the claim that McEney's work might have received more attention at the time had she not been working in the realist tradition and been female.¹⁰ The vagaries of colonialist approaches toward art and craft in any non-European area can be enormous, but not only do size and placement have a great deal to do with significance, the site of importance religious ritual (particularly if written down) is also relevant. The Buddhist tradition is the defining element for the Maurya.

Although it is somewhat off to the side from categorization with respect to things Ashokan, it is also worth remarking that, in the canon formation of India that began during the era of British colonialism, one tradition that did not enter the canon in any

significant way is that of Dravidian India. Today tourists visit the temples of Vijayanagar, but they are often told that these temples, although interesting, are not of the same caliber as those of the North. Why it is that work from the South was repeatedly ignored has a great deal to do with the lack of power of the Southern cultures, their lack of reliance on the Sanskrit tradition, and the extent to which they were cut off from many of the currents of Indian history, including that of the Moguls. All of the foregoing merely underscores—and indeed provides food for thought—with respect to how the art historical canonization process got under way.

To further the line of argument with respect to the Dravidian cultures, it is also the case that, historically speaking, there has been a tendency to categorize them as the products of the actual indigenous who were in South Asia before the arrival of the “Aryan” people.¹¹ According to some, the very parts of the Hindu tradition that are most at variance with other worldviews are actually offshoots of the Dravidian cultures. Because of this, anything smacking of the South tends to come up short in an evaluation of things Indian. When we attempt, then, to construct an overview of how the art historical canon of South Asia emerged, one of the facets with which we must deal is the exclusion of much of the Dravidian-derived work from that canon and from the art historical record in general. This process parallels that about which Janet Wolff writes—when she says that much of what was “modern” was initially excluded, she is demarcating a similar sequence of events, and we can hypothesize that that process is a common one in canon formation.

The Mauryan tradition, then, appears to be an amalgamation of various strands of Ashoka-related work, much of it in the form of pillars, worship sites, cave dwellings, and so forth. Although we have comparatively little left from the tradition, what we do have is now considered to be crucial to the notion of the art of India. As we have seen, if it can be shown that a piece of stonework or some other artifact has an inscription that indicates at least some relationship to the spread of Buddhism, then that particular artifact becomes “Mauryan,” and it too becomes an important part of the iconography of early India. In this way, the process of canon-formation in this instance replicates much else that is going on across the planet—there is comparatively little variance here.

One final example that is relevant to the concept of canon formation has to do, again, with the Konarak temple. Although its size and overall groundplan greatly impressed visitors from Britain and Europe, the friezes—with their depictions of Siva and Parvati-like figures in a number of poses—had an opposite effect. Thus, although the temple passed into the realm of the canonical, it brought with it a notion of something almost like pornography, which the British seemed to want to insist was part of Hindu culture. Commentators such as Zimmer and Joseph Campbell well understood the metaphysical import of the carvings, but not everyone was willing to try to learn.¹² Because of this, a streak of anti-Hinduism began to run throughout much of the commentary on India, and the misunderstandings caused by a failure to grasp the notion of cosmic duality, which is at the heart of much of Shaivite worship in any case, did more damage than the mention of any temple structure could have done good.

Although little having to do with the Mauryan work can be considered as controversial, there is no question that the replication of certain forces of British and European commentary with respect to almost any of the work in South Asia is at play. Thus it is not at all accurate to try to imagine that canons are established without advertence to political and social power structures, or that canons can be thought of as relatively pristine categories that sprang from simple observation. There is a great deal more at work, and the example of the Mauryan tradition is simply one case wherein much work that was not, in any case, South Asian came to be considered canonical. In the next section we will examine a similar case, that of Gandhara.

III

Just as we are tempted to say that much about the Maurya is only moderately related to any real assessment of India and Indian art, a similar set of circumstances surrounds the Gandhara school. This work, coming much later, is deemed by almost all to be the offshoot of work that had been originally done on the Greek peninsula, and that had found its way to South Asia through travelers and trade. Replicas of the Buddha done in the Gandhara tradition show him with features very much affected by

Greco-Roman styles; it is a hallmark of this tradition that what is done in it often looks, initially, as if it had not been done in South Asia.

Although it is unclear why this became the art historical issue that it did, much of the Gandhara school was originally described as a “fusion”—but Benjamin Rowland, for one, holds that no genuine fusion took place. What might more properly be said is that the figures from this period simply seem, to the observer, to be figures in the Greek tradition.¹³ Nevertheless, it would not be accurate to say that a Buddha done in this tradition has nothing to do with work in India as traditionally conceived. A better take on the situation would indicate that several things are going on at once.

But despite the obvious difficulties with categorization for anything “Gandhara,” this school or venue has also earned a place in the canon, and is now regularly referred to in the art history of India. The fact that it is the subject of museum exhibits and other sorts of placings of artifacts indicates how important it has become.

We could argue that what any commentator has in mind as an ideal at which the work of Gandhara aims is a version of the notion of pluralism—a sort of incorporation of various elements. Although it would seem that we can pick those elements out, we cannot easily pick them out to the extent that typifies the Gandhara school. Even if we can find no examples of genuine fusion, however, one of the facts that we are left with—given the prominence of the Gandhara school and its frequent citation in the literature—is that styles that are obviously syncretistic and that have little to do with Indian culture as it is ordinarily construed can themselves become canonical. Indeed, we might be tempted to say that both the Maurya and Gandhara share this trait—and in the case of the Maurya work, its sheer earliness has a great deal to do with its place in the canon.

That Eurocentric commentary might be tempted to look on anything that smacks of the early European period as worth more than some other tropes seems a bit of an understatement. But when we examine the Gandhara school, for instance, it is difficult to avoid the notion that much of what is going on here has a great deal to do with European hegemony. It might be objected that we could not expect more from art historical commentary—after all, the argument would go, how could we expect those

coming from European societies (particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) to be culturally sensitive, or to engage in criticism in a way that showed more awareness of the surrounding cultures? But this argument does have at least one or two cogent responses. For one thing, some of the commentary written in this period—and the British, in particular, had much commentary on India—is done with respect to the Vedas and sets out notions of culturally relevant material in a way that is at least more cognizant of what is going on on the subcontinent. For another, it can also be objected, and quite rightly, that it is this same period that shows the rise in interest in Hinduism in the European world, a rise that later resulted in much movement for the Vedanta school.¹⁴

But whatever the state of affairs with respect to the general Eurocentrism of commentary during this period, there is no question that the hegemonic overview seemed to affect art historical commentary more perhaps than any other. It is for these reasons that a good deal of what is written about any site in South Asia—be it Konarak, Khajuraho or any of the Gandharan or Mauryan artifacts—seems to want to pit such a site against something on the European continent. (Rowland, for instance, compares the miniature “The Hour of Cowdust” to Renaissance work.)¹⁵ With the European always as the standard, it is virtually impossible to see the South Asian work as it is, and—as indicated before—it also means that anything smacking of the non-European (especially size) seems to have an overwhelming influence on what is admitted to the canon.

Thus the work of Gandhara, like the Maurya, is deemed to be canonical largely because of a group of characteristics that it possesses that are something off to the side of what might ordinarily be thought to be worthy of art historical commentary. In the case of the Mauryan work, this has to do with the history of the work, and its ties to Buddhism. In the case of the Gandhara, it has to do with distinguishable features that themselves are of Greco-Roman origin, and that give the pieces a certain “look”. (In fact, it might be remarked that some might find the look objectionable—but apparently this does not make any difference.) In both cases, the works are taken as canonical because of European points of view.

In addition to all of the foregoing, we may also remark upon the point that the canon tends to replicate itself. In other words, whatever forms the basis of the canonical tends to recur over and over—even if its recurrence means simply that it is “found” somewhere by those who have already demarcated the characteristics. It goes without saying, of course, that that finding is spurred on by a desire to encounter another instance of the canonical in something like the same form. In other words, as is the case (according to some) with the sciences, the evidence tends to be found precisely because one is already looking for it. In the case of Mauryan work, anything that vaguely has to do with Buddhism from that period becomes “Mauryan,” and anything that—as Rowland remarks—replicates the structure of, for example, a traditional village dwelling becomes something that is somehow classically Indian because some of its features are recognizable as bearing some relation to Indian village life. This process repeats itself over time, and then becomes written down, passed on and canonized to such a degree that art historians are, in general, unaware of the way in which the process got started in the first place.

In the case of Mauryan work, there is no question that one might want to make the argument that Ashoka unified a great deal of territory and thus left a stamp. What that stamp actually amounts to, one would want to claim, remains to be seen. But over a period of time, so much from that era is placed under the rubric “Mauryan” that it becomes very difficult to actually indicate an awareness of how it is that the rubric came to be used in the first place. In other words, one would like to see some self-awareness here—a quality that seems to be lacking.

IV

I have been arguing that when we demarcate the Mauryan period as one of India’s canonical eras, we are working with an overview that, even more so than most, is a construction. We may be tempted to think that no alternative views are available, but this is not the case. What we term the Maurya tends to be anything from a vaguely defined era that has anything to do with Buddhism, or where any sort of carving is

visible. As Janet Wolff has argued in her work on the construction of art categories, much is simply done by exclusion.

In addition, I have noted that at least one other school from India's past, the Gandhara, seems to have proceeded along similar lines. In beginning analyses of the Gandhara, commentators claimed to be struck by what they regarded as the "fusion" between the Greco-Roman aspects of the work and its fundamental Asian base. But on closer examination, many critics noted that there is very little genuine fusion—much of the work is simply standing depictions that have a torso more consistent with previous work in South Asia, and other features that do, indeed, seem to possess Greco-Roman characteristics. Just as there are a number of pieces that are shoved under this rubric, so the work of the Maurya period is fluid and exhibits a variety of characteristics, many of which are difficult to discern.

Wolff and others are concerned to try to articulate the notion that work categorization often proceeds by exclusion because they want to make the case that there is a build-up of work, with some pieces taken as exemplary and thus having pride of place.¹⁶

But the real story with respect to art historical categorization, particularly insofar as the developing world is concerned, has to do with the power of those who are in a position to engage in the description—and, as it happens, these are almost always European societies whose early visitors were persons of wealth and privilege and who took a look at the works with a certain sort of eye. As has been mentioned, many of the sites in India became canonical largely because of size—the sheer massiveness of the sites had a great deal to do with later categorizations, as did features of the site that Europeans found unusually offensive or startling for some other reason. But a number of other "schools" became known as such for reasons as disparate as alleged or purported fusion (the Gandhara), and historical proximity to the growth of certain religious structures—the Mauryan.

In the end, art historical categorization for South Asia has taken on such a hallowed status that it seems to be sacrilege to criticize any portion of the conceptualizing that underlies most of it. If we open a book or see a video, we are

told that certain schools or sites represent important demarcators in the history of stonework, or that portions of Vedic worship have become associated with certain sites, and so forth. There may be much empirical and anecdotal evidence to confirm these claims, but the power of repetition is paramount here. It is for these reasons—aside from sheer interest in the colonial, now driving a number of lines of endeavor in the humanities—that it behooves us, as investigators into art history, to examine the conceptualization patterns underlying some of the prominent schools and pieces of work. To fail to recognize the power of art historical categorization is to do art history a great disservice.

1. Benjamin Rowland, of The Art and Architecture of India, Baltimore: Penguin, 1967.

2. Ibid., pp. 37-38.

3. Ibid., pp. 40-41. Interestingly enough, this is also similar to the Gandhara school.

4. Ibid., p. 40.

5. For work on the mythological importance of these and other sites, see Stella Kramrisch, The Presence of Siva, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

6. Rowland, Art, p. 41.

7. Ibid., p. 46.

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

9. Ibid., p. 6.

10. Ibid., passim.

11. Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, A History of India., New York: Routledge, 2010.

12. See Heinrich Zimmer, Myth and Symbol in Indian Art and Architecture, trans. Joseph Campbell, New York: Grove, 1967.

13. Rowland, Art, p. 80.

14. For commentary on this and related matters, see Ninian Smart, World Philosophies, New York: Routledge, 1999.

15. Rowland, passim.

16. Wolff, AngloModern, passim.