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Across the Indian Ocean: Visual Culture as Object of Desire

Rick Asher
University of Minnesota
President of The National Comitee
for the History of Art,
United States of America

I see three ways to think about World Art History. One builds on the comparative basis of the discipline, but instead of looking at forms to define individual styles or the styles of cultural time periods, as Wolfflin did, it would look, rather, across national and cultural narratives. It would be, in other words, a spatial, rather than chronological, art history. The second, which will be the basis of my comments today, looks at the dynamic interaction among cultures to discover the diverse ways in which the visual travels. And finally – though I know no scholar who practices this form of World Art History – it could be an examination of the globally diverse approaches to the visual. Generally we can say that whether one scholar looks at the art of the Renaissance in Italy or I look at the art of a particular period in India, we use most of the same methodological and theoretical tools, all of them grounded in the Euro-American foundation of the discipline. That doesn't have to be, however. I could look at the Indian material from perspectives dictated in traditional Indian approaches to the visual, and, at an extreme, I could apply those approaches to works from the Italian Renaissance.[1]

Here I look at the results of several ways in which India has responded to the larger world in which it is situated and, in turn, some ways in which the world has responded to India's visual culture.

I would argue that long before the modern capitalist age, India was part of a world system. It was not the world system that Wallerstein conceives^F, one based in the modern capitalism of colonialist Europe. Rather, India was intimately connected by the Indian Ocean to an area extending from east Africa to the South China Sea and, in some cases, even beyond, that is, to the Mediterranean. The examples I cite allow us to think about *why* artists borrowed ideas from distant places and why consumers – not always the exceedingly wealthy who commissioned specific works of art – sought, and still seek, works from cultures centered far away. So I'll examine some categories – not rigid ones and in many cases overlapping categories – of cross-cultural movement of the visual: Appropriation of the Other, pilgrimage, trade in luxury goods, war, colonialism, and diasporas.

My first example seeks to understand why some third-century BCE Indian monuments use motifs unambiguously borrowed from the Mediterranean,

1 See the arguments of James Elkins, *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History*. Hong Kong: Hong Kon University Press, 2010. Also see Jennifer Purtle's Foreword to this book.

that is, appropriated from the Other. At that time, during the reign of one of India's most famous premodern rulers, the emperor Ashoka (c. 262-239 BCE), pillars were erected at the site of Buddhist monasteries. They were tall monolithic shafts crowned with an animal on a plinth and intended to carry the emperor's edicts, essentially the laws he sought to promulgate across an empire vastly greater than the modern Republic of India, an empire extending from Afghanistan in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the east. In the case of several pillar capitals, such as one from the site of Rampurva, the pedestal is decorated with distinctively Mediterranean motifs, here the palmette and acanthus. But why? Writers in the 19th century understood this in colonialist terms. They asserted that India was too impoverished artistically to develop an independent visual vocabulary and turned to Greece, the most compelling source of inspiration. The understanding of India as impoverished in diverse ways justified Britain's colonial authority. That is, if India had so little imagination, so little creativity, so little initiative, there was an obvious and urgent need for an authority to intervene, in this case the British crown. True, during an extraordinarily long period of time, from about 1900 BCE to the time these pillars and their capitals were erected in the third century BCE, not a single work of Indian art survives. Thus it is not altogether unreasonable to look beyond India for the source of these pillars.

The explanation, however, is not India's dependency on foreign sources. Rather, we might look toward a model from the adjacent Persian Empire. In an inscription from Susa, the Achaemenid king Darius the Great, proclaims with pride the source of his building materials. His fine cedar timber came from Lebanon, his gold from Lydia, and his ivory from India, his brick workers were Babylonians, and the artists who adorned the walls came from Egypt[F.] In other words, Darius had such power and influence, to say nothing of wealth, that he could commandeer the very best materials and workers available anywhere in the civilized world. And that, I would argue, set the model for Ashoka, who could make a visual claim to authority by the use of foreign designs on at least some of his capitals. Since the symbolism of the pillars as well as the animal motifs on the capital suggest universality, implying the universality of Ashoka's authority and the laws promulgated on the pillars, these appropriated Mediterranean motifs were but one other way to express clearly and powerfully the extent of his authority.

A similar discourse surrounded the understanding of Buddhist sculpture from the region of Gandhara, a region corresponding with much of modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. Buddhist images from this region dating between the first and third centuries are widely recognized as indebted to Greek and Roman models. To quote Alfred Foucher, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, "Your European eyes have…no need of the help of any Indianist, in order to appreciate…the hand of an artist from some Greek studio". And he adds, "… It will doubtless seem to you proved that this figure of Buddha, which, smiling at us from the depths of the Far East, represents for us the culmination of what is exotic, nevertheless came from a Hellenistic studio"[F.] What Foucher was suggesting, as others of his time did as well, is that India was dependent on the West for things inventive. But there are far less colonialist ways of understand-

ing the appearance of these earliest Buddha images. Prior to the first century, the Buddha was not rendered in anthropomorphic form. Thus when a change in Buddhism developed about the first century, one that required depictions of the Buddha in human form, artists and their patrons had to turn to older models. In north central India, there had been a long tradition of sculptural renderings of human figures, though not of the Buddha. These easily could serve as models for representations of the Buddha. In the northwest, however, that is, the region of Gandhara, there were no such models, indeed no earlier sculptural tradition at all. But Buddhism was a faith that was especially attractive to merchants, as pilgrims' inscriptions make clear. Among these merchants were surely ones who engaged in long-distance trade, across the Hellinistic kingdoms of West Asia and as far as Greece and Rome. For them to bring in sculptors from areas to the west would not be an especially radical act, nor would it be an acknowledgement of incompetence at home. Rather, as with trade itself, which transports desirable commodities, people move over great distances, and for sculptors to travel and relocate at the behest of a merchant community would be anything but surprising.

A sense of power in appropriating the styles and motifs, even the specific imagery, of distant places, is made especially clear by several Mughal paintings, ones mostly dating to the late sixteenth and early 17th centuries. In some cases, for example, those of the artist Basawan, I am quite sure his use of Christian imagery was intended both for his own delight and to please patrons who had considerable curiosity about the styles and ideas of visitors from Europe. But other cases clearly were intended to serve as expressions of power. For example, power is surely suggested by a painting showing the Indian Mughal emperor Jahangir, who ruled from 1605 to 1627, embracing his Persian Safavid rival, Shah Abbas. It is hardly an even embrace, for Jahangir towers over his rival and stands on the back of a lion whose body extends well into the Persian emperor's territory. But to my point, Shah Abbas is rendered not in the Mughal style but rather in the style of Safavid Persia. In other words, the artist has appropriated Shah Abbas via his image into a Mughal context, as if not just incorporating him – quite literally – into a Mughal painting but bringing him into the Mughal court, which he never visited, and bringing him in an entirely subservient position.

Much the same may be said for another painting, also depicting the Mughal emperor Jahangir. Relegated to the lower left corner is James I of England. Jahangir, on the other hand, controlling time as the hour-glass serves as his throne, is vastly larger than the English king he could only imagine, the ruler of a small island a great distance from the powerful Mughal empire. More important to Jahangir, it would seem, was the Sufi saint with whom he is visually engaged. Jahangir did, however, seek luxury goods from the English in exchange for trading rights that Sir Thomas Roe sought to negotiate with the emperor. Jahangir wrote King James, "For confirmation of our love and friendship, I desire your Majesty to command your merchants to bring in their ships of all sorts of rarities and rich goods fit for my palace; and that you be pleased to send me your royal letters by every opportunity, that I may rejoice in your health and prosperous affairs; that our friendship may be interchanged and eternal"[AF.]

Somewhat different from the appropriation of styles and motifs is the trade in luxury goods, a significant factor in the creation of networks involving the visual much as it was in the creation of modern capitalist colonialism. While India imported such goods as olive oil and wine, it exported spices, silk and ivory products. So much, in fact, traveled from India to Rome that Pliny the Elder complained that Roman fondness for Indian pepper drained the Empire of fifty million *sesterces*, about a ninth of the cost of supporting the entire Roman army. But finished Indian ivory products were highly prized luxury goods. The ruins of Pompeii, for example, yielded a beautifully carved female figurine that is clearly of Indian origin, one that probably served as a mirror handle. Other ivory works were positioned to be sent to Rome or some other distant and sophisticated center of consumption. These were ones – several dozens of them – discovered by French archaeologists at the site of Begram[^F,] today the site of the major U.S. airbase in Afghanistan, one that threatens the integrity of the archaeological site.

People traveled with the goods, of course, creating networks of traders across the Indian Ocean and along overland routes such as the so-called Silk Route extending from China to India and onward to Rome. The maritime and overland routes also facilitated the travel of pilgrims, primarily Buddhist pilgrims – some traveling enormous distances – to fulfill the Buddha's admonition to visit the places intimately associated with his life. The written accounts of several Chinese Buddhist pilgrims remain, best known among them the accounts of Faxian, who made pilgrimage to India in the fifth century, and Xuanzang, who made pilgrimage to Indian in the seventh century[^F.] Here, however, I am not especially concerned with the account of what they saw in India but rather what they took back to China. Manuscripts, some of them perhaps illustrated, were their primary cargo, for each of the pilgrims traveled at least in part to study sacred texts and bring them back to China. They also brought back both drawings of the major Buddhist deities and Indian-made images. That was especially important because China did not have a tradition of figural sculpture and so had to rely on models from India, the homeland of Buddhism, for religious images. It thus does not surprise me that the earliest Chinese images, such as this one in the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, so closely resemble Indian Buddhist images that only the details reveal the hand of a Chinese artist.

Yet another way that art transcends cultural boundaries is war and the plunder or looting perpetrated by invading armies. India is the source of the English word "looting". It comes from Hindi, *lutna*, to take, to plunder. Taking the gods of a vanquished power was not only a way in ancient India of expressing power in victory but also of both humiliating the defeated kingdom and diminishing the power and protection that the gods provided them. Despite the common discourse today that attributes almost all the theft and desecration to raids by Afghan Muslims, the truth is that there had been a history of such theft and desecration long before any Muslim ever set foot on Indian soil. For example, the Lakshmana temple at Khajuraho, consecrated in 954, celebrates the victory of the Chandella king Yashovarman over the Pratihara king Devapala. The image enshrined in the temple is claimed in the long dedicatory inscription to be one of the spoils of that battle. And the Chola dynasty monarch, Rajendra, who ruled

from 1012-1045, managed to take a number of images of deities from kingdoms he vanquished, among them a powerful image of a door guardian taken from the adjacent Chalukya kingdom. To the modern mind, thinking of present-day nation-states, the movement of these sculptures may seem like domestic travel. These were, however, rival kingdoms, and the subjects then spoke distinct languages, as they still do today.

Indian images did, however, reach well beyond India both as objects of loot and, only somewhat more benignly, as part of the colonialist enterprise. Afghan dynasties destroyed Indian temples, most notably the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni, who sacked the Somnath temple in 1024 as well as a number of other sites, returning with loot of considerable value. And in turn when Afghan dynasties conquered north India, they brought with them a whole new visual vocabulary, the structures of Islam – notably mosques and tombs – which they planted prominently on the landscape of their principal cities. Almost surely using Indian artists, who incorporated motifs of long-standing familiarity in the new structures, the designers of these buildings created structures that were as much hybrid in appearance as the Buddhist sculptures of Gandhara had been a millennium earlier.

Colonialism generated a form of looting, one that, however, may seem somewhat more genteel than the military incursions that earlier had brought Islam to the subcontinent or the earlier violent battles among kingdoms. Instead of destroying temples to access their riches, as the Afghan military had done, the British colonial authorities developed collections of Indian sculptures that they took from temples, but did so under the guise of scientific study and collection. Some of the collections remained in India, where they served as the basis for newly established museums such as the Imperial Museum in Calcutta; they also served as the basis for scientific papers delivered at the Asiatic Society in Calcutta and the Royal Asiatic Society in London, imposing Enlightenment enquiry on these works that had been removed from their context, treating them as if they were scientific specimens. Others among the collections were removed to the metropole, that is, to London, where they were displayed at international expositions and then formed the basis of the newly conceived Encyclopaedic Art Museum, notably the British Museum. But they, like textiles that were imported to Britain, were copied or, perhaps more accurately, incorporated into the visual environment of Britain itself, as was architecture from the colonies.

Finally I should say a few words about diasporas as a means of fabricating a world art. From the third millennium BC, we have evidence of an Indian diaspora. Distinctively Indian objects of that time were found at Mesopotamian sites[^F.] The diaspora, in other words, is documented by visual evidence, not written evidence. Trade is almost surely the basis for that diaspora, as it was for subsequent ones, for example, the one that in 1271 constructed a distinctively Indian temple at Quanzhou in China, the city Marco Polo called Zayton, a temple that must have served the religious needs of an Indian diaspora community there[^F.] And, of course, Indians continue to migrate, among them about 1,500 persons of Indian origin in Brazil. They bring with them not only religion and languages, including Portuguese still spoken by many in Goa, but also visual

reminders of home, most notably the calendar prints that have been popular and easily transportable objects for some 80 years. The works produced by the Bombay press established by Raja Ravi Varma was instrumental in popularizing prints and providing easily transportable visual material carried by Indians as they move around the globe, for example, a print of the goddess Saraswati on the homepage of a Hindu temple here in Rio[^F]. And that, of course, generates the question: How do we categorize this temple? Must we see it as Indian, or, since it is located in Brazil, might we recognize it as one product of the diverse population of the country and understand it as Brazilian?

As I conclude, I perhaps should ask whether the Indian examples I've cited here constitute a component of world art history. Should we, rather, distinguish between world art and world art history? In one case we study the dynamics, that is, the processes, that lead to shared or borrowed or traded visual works or their motifs. But we might want to distinguish between this, on one hand, world art, and on the other the very practice of art history. As we who designate ourselves art historians generally conceive our practice, it is a Euro-American one, a discipline that has been developed and shaped by scholars writing from the West. But is that the only way to approach the visual? Certainly in India, as in many other parts of the world, there are aesthetic and historical practices that represent quite different approaches to the visual. So my concluding question: Do we admit those practices to the discipline of art history, or do they constitute something so entirely different that we must, in the end, acknowledge art history as a Western discipline wherever it may be practiced?