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Manifestation of The Human Form in Iconography in Ancient Indian Art

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Abstract

Excavations from Indus Valley civilization marked beginning of the beautiful art of sculpture and planned architecture of ancient India. Torso found here resemble the treatment practiced in ancient West. However, with the rise of imperial Mauryan dynasty art started to culminate in its highest form that is relevant in the stupas and the rock cut caves. At this time Buddhism also influenced the common people hence it inspired popular art also. Before image worship was followed, the installation of Yaksha figure and there was practice of creating artworks that were free of any religious stress was prevalent. In India, the fundamental thought was humanistic. These Bas-relief carvings bring before our eyes the varied life of ancient India. Flower, fruit and foliage as well as men and animals are represented with the persuasion of the deep kinship uniting all living being.

Key words

Ancient Indian Art, Human form in Indian Art, Humanism in Indian Art, Popular theme of Indian Art, Human concept in Indian Iconography.

Introduction

Antiquity of Indian Art dates back to great ancient civilization that cradled in the Valley of Indus River. Findings of archeological excavations from the site include artworks from Harappa, the two-incomplete torso, possibly one in gray stone is of a male dancing figure with twisted figure and other in red limestone which is most sophisticated Harappan image (Roy, C Carven) nearly five thousand years old. They appear strikingly familiar to the European sensibility. Irwin, John appreciates that the general features and the quality of modelling of these found torso are far closer to Hellenic sculpture of more than a thousand years later, than to anything found at pre historic sites in other parts of the world. This was the historical beginning of the Indian art, which comprised beautiful realistic icons as torso. Although Indian concept of representation carries the idea of conveying abstract in art, it is always represented through Form. Therefore, the iconography also reveals the same representational appeal throughout ages in all art forms.

There are descriptions in texts about practice of the art of painting in Ancient India, as Binoy Kumar Sarkar mentions the references of Painting as the accomplishment of the literary women. He further describes, the box of paints, canvas, pencil, tapestry, and picture frames are referred in Charudatta, Raghuvamsha, Utter Ram Charita and Kadambree. All these reference apply to paintings of ordinary and of daily subjects. He mentions that In Vasavdatta, Patiliputra is described as a city adorned with the noticeable statues decorating white washed houses. This paper attempts to study the development and material presentation of Ancient Indian Iconography.

Indian art had a beautiful tradition of ancient Imperial architecture and sculpture that began from Mauryan age. It continued and culminated in Shung and then through later dynasties. Ashok was first emperor who donated rock cut caves of Barabar to aajeevak Buddhist monks (Tomory, Edith). It was the beginning of rock cut cave architecture with beautiful pillars and exquisitely carved sculptures. The Buddhist tradition continued with rock cut caves of western India, Karle, Bhaja, Kanheri, Nasik, Ajanta then with Jain and Hindu traditions in Elephanta, Ellora Udaigiri, Khandagiri and so on. Sculpture and Architecture developed simultaneously as inseparable components (Tomory, Edith). John Irwin describes three phases of the development of Indian figure sculpture in historic times as - the Buddhist sculpture of the second and first BC, then the period of creation of iconography in, about the second century AD and finally the era of the figure sculptures of mediaeval art between the 7th and 14th centuries.

The Buddhist sculpture of the second and first centuries B C the first of these three stages is distinguished for the bas-relief carvings and the railings and gateways of the great Buddhist stupas or relic shrines at Bharhut and Sanchi. It is to be noticed that during this period, European Sculptors were showing great interest in human form. The contemporary Greek craftsmen and their Roman imitator however were concerned primarily with the human form in isolation from all surroundings.

They were preoccupied with the anatomic unity of the atomic body, the play of the muscles and the functions of the joints as observes Irwin, John.

Where as in India, the fundamental thought was humanistic, although with a different expression of humanism. Here the sculptor attached his own human existence as an integral part of nature. His traditional belief in reincarnation persuaded him that in an earlier life he was born an animal and that in future life he might revert to animal form. This idea aroused in him the sense of the unity of all the life, and the expression of that sense is the dominant characteristic of Buddhist sculpture. These Bas-relief carvings bring before our eyes the varied life of ancient India. Flower, fruit and foliage as well as men and animals are represented with the persuasion of the deep kinship uniting all living being (Irwin, John). The philosophical concepts about art practice no doubt had emphasis on works of arts in India. It has been accepted that everything that India has to offer to the world proceeds from the genius of her philosophers. At the same time, popular perception will be more profitable to understand notion of common people in Indian Art and culture along with literary and philosophical theories while studying the monumental art. It is an approach nit through the metaphysical speculations of the Vedic philosophers, but through the understanding of the way of life of the ordinary people, the people who tilled the soil and sowed the crop, and every evening gathered round the village well (Irwin, John). People expressed their joys and aspirations in terms that were foreign to the abstract speculations of priestly India.

Above all the Indian sculpture was popular in Inspiration. The significance of the Buddhist element in the early Indian Art is precisely that Buddhism emerged as a revolt or protest against priest craft and the completely priestly way of life. Soon it had wide acceptance by common people and spread wide in India, preaching the idea of human equality and unity and calling on the individual, irrespective of cast or convention, to seek perfection in his own way. This inspired the intense feeling for nature that is reflected in the Bharhut and Sanchi reliefs. In scenes where animals as well as human beings bring flowers and other offerings in homage to the symbol of the Buddha, In the procession headed by gaily caparisoned elephants and horses, in the ponds teaming with lotuses, water fowl and fish, with here and there a buffalo cooing itself in the water (Irwin, John). Everywhere the treatment is full of sympathy, kinship and affection. For its period, the theme is unique in the history of art.

The early Indian art is free from any restrain by priests. There is nothing hieratic in expression, nor is there anything that demands the vague word spiritual. All living things are rendered with acute consciousness of, and delight in, their real existence, reflecting an attitude to life, in which any dualism between spirit and matter or between the mystic and the sensual is inconvincible. In seeking its mass support against struggle Brahmanism, the Buddhist movement prepared for a way for release of popular forces, which were eventually to transform its original character. From being a monastic order, it became a popular religion with a cult, incorporating the belief, and modes of worship characteristic of the traditional cults of the soil. The Yakshas, Yakshis, angas and other gods and goddesses are carved on the Vedika and Toran-dwar at Bharhut and Sanchi are the age old fertility spirits of village India. Their conception owes little to hieratic canons. They are gods of a human world. Whose power one feels does not extend beyond the shadows of the trees to which they cling, and which are their abode. The sculpture was intended to be purely monumental. The Buddha himself never appeared in human form, but was represented by symbols such as footprints or a vacant throne. Although Yaksha worship was already prevalent in the land from Mathura to Orissa, Varanasi to Vidisha, Patiliputra to Shurparak in folk culture. These deities were of Colossal size and were installed under open sky. They were carved in round but they were intended for worshipping and looking from front. Almost every village was supposed to have one such Yaksha Idol and worship place. Later these Yaksha figures were followed for sculpting idols of Gods because of their anatomical perfection and massive influence. These Yaksha figures were carved necessarily on Toran-dwars of Stupa on four directions as Lokpals and Dicipala, as Gods of protection (Vasudev Sharan Agrawal).

The image worship in India originated in ancient times although the cause of its initiation unknown. In spite of the popular convention of yaksha worship scholars believed that the followers of Buddha, in adoration started worshipping him in the form of image on his apotheosis after death. T A Gopinath Rao, in Introduction to Elements of Hindu iconography with citations from ancient Sanskrit texts suggests that it becomes evident that that the image worship was probably not unknown even to the Vedic Indian and it seems likely that he was occasionally worshipping his gods in the form of images, and continued to do so afterwards also. Such is the evidence as to image worship to be found in early Sanskrit literature.

The worship of the Indian image began later, about the second century AD. Its appearance coincided with fundamental changes in Indian religious outlook. At this time, the people were disillusioned by conditions of increasing exploitation. They had lost faith in their secular faiths. In place of the early humanism, there arose a widespread aspiration for a transcendent faith, a faith that would deliver them from miseries of their early existence and promised universal mercy and redemption. Buddha was formerly regarded as an ordinary human being preaching an ethical doctrine, but now his followers elevated him to divine status as a Savior. These changes were reflected by the popular desire for the image in worship, and in sculpture, they resulted in Indian iconography.

The primary problem the sculptor had to solve for his new work was how to standardize an image. In portraying the Buddha this involved special difficulties, such as representing the skull- protuberance or ushanisha- the distinguishing mark with which the Buddha was said to have been born. However, by the sixth century A D most of these difficulties were solved. And we reached what is known as the classical period in Indian Art. The magnificent Buddha Images were carved in the round belong to this period. They are distinguished by an element of a refinement or clear definition, admirably suited for the subtle pose and gesture evolved by the iconographical convention (Agrawal, Vasudeva Sharan). The famous piece of sculpture known as the Sanchi torso in collection with Victoria and Albert Museum is one of the great masterpieces of this period. It is significant that the heretical religious movements like Buddhism and Jainism that originally represent a revolt against priest craft themselves became institutional religions under hieratic domination; the main reason for these changes was an indirect one. It was decline in India's foreign Trade. With the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West and the disintegration of the Han Dynasty in China, Indian trade had been compelled to turn inwards. That meant the establishment of a relatively static, semi feudal social order. Rights over land became the main source of power and influence, and social relations crystalized into cast divisions, based on craft occupations (Irwin, John).

These changes also inspired mediaeval Indian art, and the traditions of iconography were conventionalized taking guidelines from literary sources and were characterized by a new intellectual discipline. The great rock cut temples at Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta, Badami belong to this period. Roughly, between the sixth and eighth centuries AD. In the restful unchanging half-light of these rock cut temples, we find perfectly represented that rich symbolization of natural form and motifs which is perhaps the most outstanding single feature of mediaeval Indian sculpture. The climax of the rock cutting traditions reached at Ellora in the carving of the eighth century Kailās temple. Here a new vitality is asserted in the treatment of the human form. The sculptors try to create the effect of movement and cut their figure in deep relief in order to achieve this end. This art is drawn directly from nature and firmly based in the sensuous fullness of life, but it is never naturalistic in the narrow imitative sense. There is no intended feeling of flesh, but only of stone. And the animation that seems to spring from these sculptured figures does not come from any mere linear dexterity but from energies revealed in the rock itself- and the play of light upon it. The sculpture at this time is noticeable for its iconographical convention and is astonishing for its life quality. It is also obvious that the rules of iconography were of the utmost importance to the mediaeval Indian sculpture, no less than to his contemporary in Europe (Sarkar, Binoy Kumar). The significant fact is that they were important not as conventional imperatives imposed from without, but as living symbols in a community culture. Sculpture and architecture are one and indivisible in Indian art. The sculpture serves an integral function in the design of the temple. The numerous carved figures that appear to clamber, often in expression, on its outside walls are there for definite architectural purpose. There apparent mobility serves as a foil to the static or symmetrical elements in the design. It makes possible that interplay between the mobile and the static, which is the characteristic feature of Indian temple architecture. The figures of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses are apparent as projection of the human personality (Sarkar, Binoy Kumar). Bas-reliefs of warrior kings on coins, and paintings of men and women on the walls of their houses palaces and art galleries establish the dictum that anything can be theme of art. Secular art was an integral part of common life. The joy of life in all its manifestations is the one grand theme of all Hindu art. The sculptors and painters of India never created with the notions of conveying typically Hindu message in them. Rather it is imperative that how far and in what manner artist have achieved his ends as artist i.e. as manipulator of forms and colours. Interpretations of life, or criticism of life.

Conclusion

In India, the artistic tradition is too well founded in the sum of experience of human life. Therefore, to learn to understand the Indian art is to learn to understand the colour music and laughter of village life of India. The inspiration of Hindu painters and sculptors is very different from that of the westerners. The image and pictures are to be born of an ultra-meditative consciousness to achieve sat, chit, ananda. They also are apparent to be religious or mythological in theme. The thought, the characteristic that makes the figures of the Hindu Buddha's and Shaivas more idealistic is same as that western artist dealt with abstract humanity, ideals or airy nothings for instance gazing sculptures of Polykleitus. Indian art nowhere has a sculptured image, bas-relief, or coloured drawing photographic. Art as such is bound to be interpretive or rather originative. In addition, saints and divinities are not the exclusive themes of artwork in India. Hindu art flourished in still life, social genre, natural, plant and animal studies as well. Physical beauty was never a taboo in Hindu art psychology than in the western. The dignity of the flesh has left its stamp on Indian creations in stone and bronze.

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