Cracow Indological Studies
Vol. XXIV, No. 2 (2022), pp. v–x
https://doi.org/10.12797/CIS.24.2022.02.00

Introduction
Reading images

In an ideal but boring world, visual representation of a scene or a personage would come accompanied by a write-up telling us exactly what is being depicted and how one should understand it. However, such a direct relationship between visual arts and written word is extremely rare. Indeed, some South Indian temples are decorated with murals where every scene carries a few lines of text informing us about the names of the depicted personages, or the location where the events are taking place, and we find similar arrangements in certain miniature paintings. At times, we come across manuscripts combining text and illustration in an almost equal measure. But even then, the text rarely provides enough information to fully comprehend what we see on the accompanying visuals. As modern appreciators of ancient art, we often lack a deep enough knowledge of certain events, personages, local stories, or conventions of representation that a contemporary viewer would essentially possess. What, then, can one say of the even more numerous cases where the visual representation is not accompanied by an explanatory text of any kind, where narratives and sculptures are both fragmentary, or where the objects in focus have been removed from their original locations and contexts? It often seems that making sense of visual arts in India resembles an act of putting together a giant puzzle from which a mischievous monkey had removed a number of key pieces.

Each of the eight essays in the present volume of *Cracow Indological Studies* addresses this topic in a different way. The range of the study material, most of it presented here for the first time, is impressive: from paintings illustrating a well-known narrative, through isolated sculptures whose context is no longer clear to us, to monuments and water structures evoked in poems and local stories, and magic creatures known from mythology. But if there is one recurring idea knitting together all the contributions, it is the keen awareness that in order to understand the bigger picture, it is crucial to combine different fields of expertise. Word and image, architecture and history, temple and landscape—none of those came into being in isolation and hence should be 'read' as a part of a bigger whole. Only then do the pieces of the puzzle fit together and one manages to arrive at a better understanding of Indian art and its scattered artefacts.

The first contribution, by **John Brockington**, examines the relationship between visual and literary narratives of the *Rāmāyaṇa* on the basis of miniature paintings and sculptures which, in the majority of the cases, are not provided with textual explanations. The focus is on the behind-the-scenes reasons for the artistic choices and their evolution over the ages. It is well-known that certain episodes from the epic found favour with the visual artists while others were under-represented or even omitted. In the last case, the reason might have been the impossibility of depicting certain themes. A good example here is the story of Ahalyā who turns invisible following a curse. Other discrepancies between the image and the (canonical) text could have arisen from the political agendas of the patrons who commissioned the work of art or be the result of an ever-increasing popularity of the vernacular adaptations at variance with the 'classical version.'

In the second article, **Gérard Colas, Usha Colas-Chauhan** and **Francis Richard** present a remarkable set of miniature paintings where text and image occur together, but their relationship is far from being straightforward. *Indien 745* is an 18th-century album, preserved at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and contains 137 paintings depicting Hindu gods and temples, each depiction accompanied by a caption

in old French. This particular combination of word and image sheds light on the milieu in which the manuscript was conceived and supplies us with a rare glimpse into the relationship between the Indian painter, the informant whose task was to provide explanations relating to the images, and the Western commentator who wrote them down. The article stresses the importance of captions and discusses how their significance extends far beyond providing merely the name of what is being represented. Applied by a different hand and often postdating the accompanying visual representation, these captions are carriers of manifold information and, in themselves, important elements in the life story of an artefact.

Reconstructing the 'biography of an object' comes to play an important role also in the subsequent contribution, by **Muntazir Ali, Marijn van Putten, Alison Ohta, Sebnem Koser Akcapar** and **Michael Willis**. The starting point here is an early copy of the Qur'ān preserved in the India Office Collection at the British Library. The manuscript belongs to a little-known group of the early hand-written Qur'āns that found their way to India. With its date of *circa* 9th century, it can be counted among the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts preserved in India proper. After introducing the manuscript, the authors' main focus is on the seals—themselves amalgams of word and image—and the notations found on the final folio. The translation and interpretation of those help to flesh out the history of manuscript's ownership, beginning in the Mughal period when the manuscript arrived in India, and ending at the moment when it was presented, in 1853, to the Library of the East India House in London by Lord Dalhousie. Additional clues as to the history of the manuscript are provided by the colophon as well as by the ornamental borders added later. Together, they constitute a step towards a better understanding of the role played by the early manuscripts of the Qur'ān in India, their social and religious functions, their circulation, and the meanings attached to their use and possession.

How to identify a scene whose literary basis is unknown and for which there is no other visual representation to compare it with? In her study of the hitherto unstudied early relief sculpture from Mathura,

now in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, **Monika Zin** explores differences between the visual language and the language of literature, setting out novel methods of interpretation. The article stresses the futility of the search for a one-to-one correlation between image and text—a fact well-known to the (better-informed) students of ancient Indian art. As noted in the first contribution to this volume, some themes simply do not lend themselves to visual depiction. Certain narrative components such as the passage of time or, indeed, invisibility, are therefore often replaced with what *can* be represented. Further, the arrangement of scenes rarely follows the principles employed today making it difficult to link the scenes with literary narratives. Finally, certain personages might assume a different symbolic meaning in the visual and performing arts on the one hand and in a literary text on the other, as clearly demonstrated by the enigmatic male figure—with its characteristic hair style—occupying the centre of the Mathura relief. Instead of searching for a perfect match, we should thus, as the ancient viewers before us, search for common patterns in the seemingly unrelated visual and literary sources, and by doing so, learn to recognize the conventions of representation employed by the artists.

In Bihar, the period between the 7th and the 12th century witnessed the visual languages of Buddhism and Brahmanism influence each other and intertwine. A good example of this are the hog-headed goddesses which are found in both religious milieus though equipped in each with different functions and meanings. The article by **Claudine Bautze-Picron** follows the development of the iconography of the hog-headed *mātṛ* Vārāhī as she migrates from the Brahmanical to the Buddhist context. Special attention is given to the city of Gaya, a sacred centre for both the Śaivas and the Vaiṣṇavas; a place where rituals for the dead were performed and whose specific religious environment could have influenced certain features in the iconography of the goddess.

All pieces of the puzzle that is the study of ancient India come together in the next article, by **Charlotte Schmid,** which explores the history and the iconographic-architectural programme of the early, lesser-known site of Tiruvellarai, in the vicinity of Tiruchirrapalli.

Information gleaned from the architectural remains, landscape formation, sculptures, inscriptions and Tamil devotional poetry is combined to provide us with a more complete picture of the sacred site. A special attention is given to the monumental *svastika*-shaped well and its sculptural programme. The well displays some of the earliest known sculpted representations of Krishna's deeds indigenous to the Tamil tradition, such as his fight with the *baka*-bird or the dancing with pots of butter. The link between the Tiruvellarai sculptures or inscriptions, and the Tamil Bhakti corpus is remarkable, with some literary passages appearing to have been inspired directly by the studied sculptures. Furthermore, as in the multi-devotional city of Gaya in Bihar discussed in the previous article, Tiruvellarai, although today a predominantly Vaiṣṇava site, contains archaeological remains of the Vaiṣṇava, the Śaiva and the 'local' orientations, giving us an opportunity to study the interaction between various religious traditions over the centuries.

Religious landscape and water bodies come to play a crucial role in the next contribution, by **Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz**. Using as a starting point the passages from the hitherto not translated *Śrīraṅgamāhātmya*, the author sets to investigate nine temple ponds described in the text and located in the vicinity of the famous Raṅganātha temple in Srirangam. Thanks to the passages of the *māhātmya*, providing their most characteristic features, the nine ponds—a group of water structures that hitherto escaped closer attention by the scholars—are identified, enabling us to map the religious landscape centered on the Raṅganātha temple. In addition to demonstrating seminal role played by local narratives in the understanding of a sacred site, the article reflects on the importance of water and water structures, whose religious significance has often been overlooked, and on the broader relationship between nature and culture.

In the final article of this volume, **Ewa Dębicka-Borek** and **Lidia Sudyka** analyze the artistic programme of the Vīrabhadra temple in Keladi, Karnataka. Funded by the Ikkeri Nayakas, the temple stands out for the high number of hybrid creatures depicted on its walls, including Narasiṃha, Gaṇḍabheruṇḍa and an unidentified composite being

unique to the Keladi temple. Composite creatures are traditionally seen as powerful entities, possessing various magical qualities, and therefore dangerous. It is proposed that their conspicuous presence in the temple could allude to the political ambitions of the Nayakas and serve as an instrument for the display of regal power. At the same time, their liminal nature might have reflected the turbulent socio-political circumstances of the Ikkeri Nayakas in the period in which the temple was constructed: the period of transition from a vassal state to an independent kingdom.

Anna A. Ślączka
(Curator of South Asian Art, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands)
a.slaczka@rijksmuseum.nl