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Monika Zin
zin@saw-leipzig.de
(Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities
Universität Leipzig, Leipzig, Germany)

About Visual Language, Drunken Women, Jesters and Escaping the World

ABSTRACT: Visual communication employs language different than literature. The economy of viewing calls for elements of representation familiar to the viewer, which, when shown in a recurring order, become comprehensible. For us, recognising these elements is often difficult as they can be entirely absent from the literary text. The person of the jester, whose appearance corresponds to the *vidūṣaka* of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, is found frequently in narrative scenes depicted through visual means. His presence often indicates that another figure in the picture is about to withdraw from worldly life. The jester then expresses utter disapproval of his master's decision. The viewer is able to recognise the meaning of the scene because the jester is shown also in erotic and humorous scenes, perhaps representative of the sensual atmosphere of theatre life, or related to the *nāyaka* and the *vidūṣaka* of the *Kāmasūtra*.

KEYWORDS: Mathura, Andhra, Ajanta, *vidūṣaka*, courtesan, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Mṛcchakaṭikā*, *Kāmasūtra*

In the narrative art of South Asia, the correlation between the narrative and its visual depiction often turns out to be very difficult to understand, if only for the simple reason that not everything can be depicted,

especially the passage of time. In order to do justice to the task, artists have developed other methods than those we are familiar with in modern times. Their most fundamental achievement concerns the arrangement of the scenes. This topic is far too complex to be discussed here in detail, but it should at least be mentioned that this arrangement often does not follow the principles common today—scenes arranged in a linear way like comic strips—instead, the episodes of a story are arranged not chronologically but according to the location.[1] Furthermore, the design of the individual scenes deviates considerably from modern conventions in that several episodes can be presented in one pictorial unit. For today's viewers, some of the most difficult to read are the paintings of Kucha which continue the Indian tradition and can even show events from two births of one person in a single picture (Zin 2022: 103–113). Preconditions for the successful application of such sophisticated techniques are the viewer's familiarity with these methods of representation and the recognisability of the core elements of the depiction. If these preconditions are met, the artist can avail himself of an 'economic,' space-saving method of representation and only 'suggest' one episode within the other. Popular renditions of the episodes from the *parinirvāṇa* cycle provide excellent examples; here, depictions of different episodes which, according to the narrative, happened before and after Buddha's death, some of them not even at the site of the *parinirvāṇa*, in Kuśinagara, are grouped around figure of the reclining Buddha. Some reliefs from Gandhara seem at first glance to be completely devoid of logic. They show the last convert, Subhadra—easily recognisable by the tripod he carries and covered head—who was instructed by the Buddha and died before him, as arriving when the Buddha is already in the coffin (Zin 2018: 146–147). Clearly, each viewer knew these stories very well and the mere allusion to an episode by including recognisable iconography was enough to bring it to his or her memory. In this case,

[1] Cf. Schlingloff 1981, Engl. translation in Schlingloff 1987b: 227–280; Chin. Shilinluofu (Schlingloff) 2013; Dehejia 1990 and 1997; summary of Schlingloff's and Dehejia's research in Zin 2019.

Subhadra may even stand for the monk Mahākāśyapa of whom legend states that he arrived at Kuśinagara only after the Buddha had been placed in the coffin. Mahākāśyapa, on the other hand, is often shown approaching the feet of the Buddha lying on his deathbed—an event that did not take place in that form according to legend. Again, the depiction is only an allusion to Mahākāśyapa's veneration of the feet that the Buddha's corpse extends to him from the coffin.

It should be noted here, however, that such a merging of meanings is only possible using very widely known images and well-tested conventions of representation, otherwise they would become incomprehensible; to ensure a level of comprehensibility certain conventions must remain unchanged. This means, for example, that after self-ordination, i.e. shortly after leaving the hometown, Kapilavastu, the future Buddha already looks like the Buddha and only the presence or absence of the monks indicates which stage of his life he is in—before or after the first sermon. In general, it can be unequivocally stated that the methods of showing these narrative contents may be governed neither by arbitrary choices nor *ad hoc* inventions because in both cases the results could easily turn out to be utterly incomprehensible; it is only the modern viewers' lack of knowledge about the methods of representation that makes the depictions appear inconsistent.

However, the methods of 'illustrating' the narratives often go far beyond the established and repeated norms and provide information about the creativity of the artists able to present the subtleties of the stories to the viewer. When, for example, a relief depicting the story of Śyāma in Sanchi I[2] displays on the roof of the ascetic's hut a monkey which, unnoticed, steals the fruits laid out there to dry, this can already be understood as part of the narrative—it hints at the fact that Śyāma's parents are blind and cannot survive in the forest without his help. Such creativity of the artists was obviously at work in the extremely complex paintings of Ajanta; the artists did not slavishly adhere to

[2] Sanchi I, western gate; cf. Schlingloff 2000/2013, no. 32: 149; illus. *ibid*. Vol. 2: 26 [1] (drawing) references to publications, Vol. 1: 147.

the word of the narrative there but rather employed artistic licence to devise the best possible way to illustrate a story. A good example of this is a scene from the narrative of the conversion of Nanda, which is illustrated in Ajanta according to Aśvaghoṣa's version of *Saundarananda* (Schlingloff 2000/2013, no. 73). One scene—often labelled 'the dying princess'[3] according to Yazdani's standard publication—shows Nanda's wife Sundarī fainting after being shown the crown of her husband, who has remained in the monastery. Aśvaghoṣa writes that after being told about her husband's decision she ran about in a screaming fit. Both acts of 'telling' and 'screaming' are visually non-representable; the artists, therefore, have deliberately replaced them with what can be represented: the presenting of the crown and the fainting fit, which are not mentioned in the text at all (Schlingloff 2000/2013, Vol. 1: 423).[4] It may sometimes be necessary for the modern scholar to consider the challenges of achieving such visual representability as a reason for discrepancies between text and image instead of merely referring to an oral tradition unknown to us.

But how well are we able today to read this pictorial language and recognise the contents described in literature in what is depicted? In the essay at hand, an attempt will be made to interpret a scene whose literary basis is unknown and for which there is no comparative representation. In attempting to interpret the scene, one must therefore rely exclusively on an analysis of its composition and possible comparisons for its individual components.

[3] Ajanta, Cave XVI, left side wall, illus. among others in Yazdani 1930–1955, Vol. 3, pl. 52; cf. Schlingloff 2000/2013, no. 73 (8), drawing in Vol. 1: 418; references to further publications on pp. 419–420.

[4] Reference should be made here to an unpublished master's thesis *Untersuchungen zur schöpferischen Kreativität der Maler von Ajanta* [Investigations into the inventive creativity of the Ajanta painters] by Mercedes Tortorici (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich 2016), analysing paintings based on Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā*, the literary content of which was altered by artists to achieve pictorial representability.

Fig. 1a–b

The relief to be analysed (Fig. 1a–b)[5] comes from Mathura and may be dated to the 2nd or 3rd century CE. According to the label in Rijksmuseum, where the relief is being hosted, it is a fragment of a doorpost; preserved are a figurative scene and the uppermost part, i.e. the architectural framing, of another scene below. It seems extremely likely that the narrative content of the extant scene was continued below and/or above in one or more panels. As is common in similar reliefs from Mathura, the scene is framed on both sides by columns and underneath by a design in the form of a fence or railing; those are not part of the depicted content. Most probably above the extant scene there was an architectural element similar to or even identical with the *caitya* windows seen on the lowermost register of the fragment. The small, barred window in the back wall, on the other hand, belongs to the content depicted. It indicates that the entire scene is set inside a building.

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[5] Fig. 1a–b: Mathura, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, no. Brukleen VVAK, AK-MAK-1187; photograph © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam; all drawings by the present author.

The surviving figurative scene shows six persons, two seated and four standing. Five persons are female and only the seated person on the right (from the viewer's point of view) is a man. The relief is reasonably well preserved, but some areas are smudged; two faces—that of the seated woman and the woman on the right—were, maybe deliberately, damaged.

On the left side, a woman is sitting on a throne and behind her are three attendants, indicative of her high status. Her hands rest on her knees; obviously she is not speaking, just observing the action. The line of sight of all four women is directed towards the man sitting on a stool in the right half of the scene, perhaps even more precisely: towards his head. The face of the woman standing in the middle of the group of three contributes a lot to the characterisation of the mood and an understanding of the meaning of the scene: She presses one hand to her mouth in a universal gesture that can hardly express anything other than bewilderment at what she sees. What the women see is indeed quite strange. A fifth woman standing behind the man holds an object in her right hand which she has obviously just used to strike him over the head. The woman's anklets are pulled up and her left hand grasps the belt—apparently to muffle its clang. The woman probably crept up quietly and attacked the man by surprise. The state of preservation of the relief does not allow us to discern the object in the woman's hand. On the man's head, one bulge is clearly visible, running in an S-shape across his face and a second one above his ear. Are these bulges perhaps intended to show that the woman is pouring a liquid onto the man's head, or are they an integral part of his head?

Who could this man be, surrounded as it is by all these women, i.e., obviously shown in the women's quarters? He is dressed plainly; folds from the wraparound garment he wears are visible on his chest; the fabric is wrapped around his left shoulder and falls down his back. The man wears no jewellery and no headgear. The clothing may be plain, but his seat is similar in height to the throne of the woman. The way he behaves—holding a bowl with his left hand and reaching into a container with the right while rising slightly from his seat and looking brazenly at the woman—seems to

show that he is no stranger to the women's chamber. Thus, the man is no person of low status, but cannot be of particularly high status either, since a woman—obviously the lady-in-waiting of the seated one—dares to hit him over the head. Mention must also be made of a subtle hint built into the composition by the artist: In the complete scene—which we can easily reconstruct by adding to the top of the relief a border with three *caitya* arches similar to that of the scene below—the geometric centre of the relief would be located exactly on the man's right elbow, with the diagonal of the image running through the woman's forearm striking the man's head and his forearm reaching into the container. This element of the picture undoubtedly is of major significance.

The artist has shown enough to enable us to draw conclusions about the identity of the male and the nature of the scene depicted. The man must be a court jester (Zin 1998; 2003, no. 26 "Narren" [Jesters]; 2015; 2016). Enough examples have survived to prove that the jester, apart from the king, is the only male person surrounded exclusively by women (Fig. 2a–b).[6] The jester is easily recognisable by his characteristic appearance: His head is shaven, the hairline, however, clearly visible,

Fig. 2a–b

[6] Fig. 2a–b: Amaravati, upper part of a pillar with a depiction of the Campaka narrative, The British Museum, no. 17; photograph © The Trustees of The British Museum; for a representation of the entire pillar cf. among others Knox 1992, no. 14: 65.

Fig. 4a–b

so that it often looks like a cap and apparently was sometimes understood and depicted as such. Tufts of hair appear on the bald head. In art, in Andhra and Mathura (see Fig. 3 in the coloured insert),[7] the tufts take the form of long strands; in Gupta and post-Gupta times, they are more ball-shaped and sometimes decorated with flowers (Fig. 4a–b).[8] In Gandhara, both types are found (Arlt/Hiyama 2018): those with three

[7] Fig. 3: Mathura, detail from a pillar with depiction of a *yakṣiṇī*, Mathura Archaeological Museum, no. J. 4; photograph © Monika Zin; illus. Vogel 1930, pl. 18; Zin 2015, fig. 2; 2016, fig. 20a–b (entire pillar).

[8] Fig. 4a–b: Ajanta, Cave II, Hārītī chapel, right side wall; photograph © Ajanta Archives of the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Research Centre "Buddhist Murals of Kucha on the Northern Silk Road" / Andreas Stellmacher; for the representation of the entire wall cf. among others Yazdani 1930–1955, Vol. 2, pl. 33b; drawing in Zin 2003: 244, references to further publications on p. 243, fn. 61.

long strands of hair,[9] and those with ball-shaped pompoms. What characterises this person very often—but not always—is the curved stick which he can also use to strike (Fig. 5),[10] and the attributes of a Brahmin, such as the Brahmanical thread across the left shoulder or a rosary (it is perhaps the *yogapaṭṭa* in our Fig. 2, usually used by the ascetics, also an allusion, or rather a joke, to his Brahmanical status?). Moreover, his identity as a jester is often underlined by the fact that he stands with his legs crossed—as if dancing—or that someone holds him on a leash. The appearance of the jester in art closely follows the description of the *vidūṣaka* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*;[11] here it is stated that the *vidūṣaka* carries a curved stick (*kuṭila* or *kuṭilaka*), that he is bald apart from the *kākapada* (literary: crow's foot) on his head—*vidūṣakasya khalataiḥ syāt kākapadam eva vā* (*Nāṭyaśāstra* XXIII,151). In this regard, the representations in Andhra and Mathura come closest to the literary description since the three hair strands indeed look like the foot of a bird. That he is a Brahmin is attested by all the plays in which he appears, yet he can be clouted by a servant girl—this indeed is part of the plot in Act IV of Kālidāsa's *Mālavikāgnimitra* (ed. p. 46).

It has been pointed out (Shulman 1985: 153–180) that the *vidūṣaka* does not show traits of a typical fool since he does not try to be funny and amuse the king. The jesters in the reliefs do not seem to be any different. They do not amuse anyone, but it is rather the situation as a whole that creates the comic effect, like when a woman hits him on the head (see Fig. 1 and 10).

As stated elsewhere—in "The one who was against the *pavvajjā*" (Zin 2015)—the person of the jester often appears in narrative

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[9] Arlt and Hiyama provide a beautiful example (fig. 5), a stucco head housed in The British Museum, no. OA 1865.4–12.1, illus. in Zwalf 1996, Vol. pl. XV.

[10] Fig. 5 in the coloured insert: Amaravati, detail from an unidentified scene on a frieze, Chennai, Government Museum, no. 105; photograph © Wojtek Oczkowski; for representation of the entire scene among others Stern/Bénisti 1961, pl. 45a; Stone 1994, figs 69–70.

[11] Especially *Nāṭyaśāsara* XII, 143–144; XXIII, 151 and 179–180; quotations in Zin 2016: 381–382.

representations from Andhra and Ajanta in one particular context: he is a means to express a feature of the person depicted next to him, namely, this person's mind is set on renunciation (*pavvajjā* / *supravrajyā* / *nikkhama* / *abhiniṣkramaṇa*) and living as a monk in search of enlightenment. The persons in question are still shown in worldly clothes and wearing jewellery; in order to illustrate that they are aspiring ascetics, the jester, shown together with them, sometimes—as in a painting on the veranda of Ajanta XVII[12]—unmistakably expresses, through a defensive gesture of one arm while clutching the bowl of sweets with the other, that he does not like his master's decision at all. The painting in this case employs a means that is of purely visual nature. I am not aware of the figure of the jester being mentioned anywhere in literature in such a context. The evidence for this application of the jester as an indication of escaping the world comes surprisingly from Kucha; in paintings here, the jester is characterised by a cap with pompoms (Arlt, Hiyama 2015; Hiyama, Arlt 2016) and is frequently depicted: In Kizil Cave 110, where the episodes of the Buddha legend are represented in 60 chronologically arranged pictures, we suddenly encounter the jester in the scene of the first meditation under the *jambu* tree (Wang forthcoming, picture 54). There are reasons to believe that the paintings of Kucha were closely related to and influenced by theatrical performances; it is very likely that the verses of the texts were sung, perhaps also acted out (Pinault 2000). The person of the jester in Kucha may be understood as related to the theatrical *vidūṣaka*. Was it the same in South Asia?

Let us turn to a group of sculptures from Mathura, which are very often said to be renditions of the theatre play *Mṛcchakaṭikā*. These are discussed in detail by Stadtner (1996) and Bawa (2013, chapter 5). The sculptures include a masterpiece of Mathura art, the double-sided

[12] Ajanta, Cave XVII, veranda, left rear wall, narrative of Udāyin, illus. among others in Yazdani 1930–1955, Vol. 3, pl. 66; cf. Schlingloff 2000/2013, no. 69, cf. *ibid*. Vol. 1: 400 for drawing and references to further publications; illus. photograph and drawing in Zin 1998, fig. 3, pl. 1; 2015, figs 4–5; 2016, fig. 3.

carving now in the National Museum (Fig. 6a–b).[13] This particular sculpture was excavated in a Buddhist sanctuary; a relief that repeats the same scene has been discovered in a Jaina temple.[14]

The object is a pedestal for a bowl; how such bowls were used in the temples has not been yet explained (cf. Bawa 2013: 284–284). One side of the pedestal (Fig. 6a) shows a kneeling woman with loosened hair and displaced hair ornament; the woman must be supported by two persons, a young man gripping her shoulder and a girl upon whom the woman leans. The jug held by the girl makes it abundantly clear that the woman is severely intoxicated. The other side of the sculpture (Fig. 6b) shows a woman, characterised by the umbrella bearer as a person of rank, moving to the right in a strangely bent pose, holding a shawl (?) above her head and with anklets raised up to her knees. On the left half of the relief stand two men, although little can be seen of the one standing at the back; his head is broken off, his hands clasp the shoulders of the man standing in front.

As already mentioned, both scenes are repeated several times, all depictions are very similar in composition and their grouping of figures, including some that served as almost identical double-sided pedestals for bowls. Among the examples given by Stadtner and Bawa, however, there are also some with variations, as they show scenes with a woman at her toilet or fine-looking standing ladies on one side of the pedestal. There are also related depictions, including another person helping a drunken woman (see Fig. 9 in the coloured insert).

Inspired by their similarity to the double-sided bowl pedestal depicting a naked corpulent male individual, often called 'Silenus,'[15] who is held by two persons, while at his side stands a cupbearer

[13] Fig. 6a-b in the coloured insert: Mathura, excavated 1938 in Maholi, New Delhi, National Museum, no. 2806; © photographs Wojtek Oczkowski; illus. Stadtner 1996, fig. 1a–b; Bawa 2013, figs 5.5–5.7.

[14] Illus. among others in Stadtner 1996, fig. 6; Bawa 2013, fig. 5.12, fragment of a door jamb, discovered in Kankali Tila, Mathura Archaeological Museum, no. 371.

[15] Illus. among others in Stadtner 1996, fig. 7; Bawa 2013, fig. 5.18; drawing in Zin 2003: 293, fig. 3, with references to further publications.

with a goblet, the depictions of the drunken woman have also been understood as bacchanalian. As such they were compared with scenes in Gandhara (Carter 1968). However, Calambur Sivaramamurti (1961: 36–37; repeated 1979: 9–11) provided an interpretation that has become widely accepted; he argued that the sculptures depict scenes from Act I of the *Mṛcchakaṭikā*, a play by Śūdraka about the noble courtesan Vasantasenā. According to Sivaramamurti, the scene (our Fig. 6b) shows Vasantasenā fleeing in the darkness while being pursuit by the villain, Śakāra; in order not to be caught, she covers her strongly scented head and removes (shown in the relief as pulling them up) her anklets—a detail which is addressed in the play. Śakāra is accompanied in the scene by two friends, only one of whom is shown. Sivaramamurti interprets the men on the left as Śakāra—who is a coward—hiding behind his friend. Stadtner (1996: 41), however, claims that rather another scene from the play is shown here, where Śakāra grasps his friend in the dark, thinking that he is Vasantasenā. The other side of the sculpture with the drunken woman was understood in the bacchanalian context as a *yakṣiṇī* or a drunken courtesan; in the context of the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* it has been either taken to represent the fainting Vasantasenā in a scene from the later part of the play when she was left almost murdered in the park and a Buddhist monk helped her get up, or as the climax of the play when Vasantasenā is overwhelmed by the events after her lover was first sentenced to death but saved afterwards; at this point she attains the status of a respectable woman and is allowed to marry him (Stadtner 1996: 44).

That the *Mṛcchakaṭikā*, dated by scholars to the 5th century, and also its prototype, the *Daridracārudatta*, from the Trivandrum Sanskrit Plays attributed to Bhāsa (4th century),[16] can hardly be dated back to the period when the Mathura reliefs were produced, does not mean that the reliefs do not reproduce narrative material later included in these plays. It is, indeed, possible that an even earlier version of the theatre

[16] For overview of the research concerning the dating of both dramas and their relations to each other compare Esposito 2005: 2–4, 11–30.

play existed.[17] It would also be quite conceivable that the reliefs show, for example, Vasantasenā fainting, or Śakāra hiding behind the friend, although nothing of the sort appears in the theatrical embroideries—as said above, art must use a language different from literature. But do the reliefs actually show the narrative in question?

It is highly unlikely that the reliefs show a woman fainting, as there are enough examples of a drunken person being depicted in exactly this way,[18] most notably the 'Silenus' mentioned above (cf. fn. 15). But this is a *yakṣa*, Kubera, sitting on a pile of coins (cf. Zin 2003: 292–293, for further examples), an auspicious genius of abundance. Apart from the obviously conscious decision to depict a drunken person there are no similarities between both images. A woman not capable to stand on her feet, with dishevelled hair and her jewellery out of place, was not regarded as appealing in the Buddhist context. One needs only to recall women sleeping embracing their musical instruments as described in the Buddha legend: They evoke the vision of the cemetery and become the reason for the Bodhisatva to renounce worldly life.[19] A boisterous bacchanalian mood is not to be observed in scenes like the one in the Maholi sculpture (Fig. 6a). The girl at the side of the woman sinking to the ground clearly has a very troubled face and the woman at the top right is not putting on make-up, as it was explained—make-up box or mirror are

[17] For convincing arguments that both plays, the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* and the *Daridracārudatta,* are adaptations of a still earlier prototype cf. Esposito 2005: 28–29.

[18] Apart from the Mathura objects she discusses, Bawa lists similar representations in Nasik III and on ivories excavated in Begram; to these can be added the reliefs in Aurangabad III, cf. Natacha Euloge, *Die Höhle III von Aurangabad: Untersuchungen zum Bildprogramm eines buddhistischen Höhlenklosters aus dem 5. Jh. n. Chr.* [The Cave III of Aurangabad: Investigations into the Pictorial Programme of a Buddhist Cave Monastery from the 5th Century CE], unpublished Master thesis, Freie Universität, Berlin 2012.

[19] For the literary sources of the episode and an overview of the pictorial representations cf. Schlingloff 2000/2013, no. 64 (24), Vol. 1: 360–365; Vol. 2: 70–71 with drawings of several representations. See also Schlingloff 1987a: 114 for the narrative of the renunciation of Yaśa from which the episode of the life of the Buddha has been adopted.

not depicted–she is more probably pointing her finger at her mouth or nose. Perhaps this suggests that a bad smell is exuded by the drunk?

If we disregard the bacchanalian explanation for this side of the sculpture and also put aside the interpretation as a scene from the *Mṛcchakaṭikā*—the noble courtesan Vasantasenā is of course nowhere described as a drunkard—what does the other side of the sculpted pedestal (Fig. 6b) actually show? There is a lady of rank who does not know how to behave, she holds a shawl over her contorted body, her anklets are out of place, she is standing on legs bent at the knees. Is this the same drunk woman from the other side of the sculpture? The woman in the depiction is not being pursued by anyone. The man on the left is not looking at her at all. His beautiful, calm face is the opposite of the rest of the image. The man's left arm is akimbo, the right hand on his chest. The hands are clenched into fists, perhaps suggesting determination but otherwise impossible to interpret. However, since this posture is repeated in all depictions of the scene, it seems to have a distinct meaning.

The details discussed above are already sufficient to call into question the interpretation of the scene as an illustration of the *Mṛcchakaṭikā*, but another element matches this interpretation even less. This concerns the man standing on the left edge. His head is unfortunately preserved in only one example (Fig. 7).[20] In this one extant specimen, however, the clearly visible strands of hair of the *kākapada* make his identification easy: he is the jester. Another characteristic of the Brahman—as mentioned above, the *vidūṣaka* is one—the Brahmanical thread across the left shoulder may be seen in three examples; quite precisely in the sculpture from Maholi (Fig. 6) when viewed from the left side. The man in front is not wearing the thread.

[20] Fig. 7 in the coloured insert: Mathura, formerly private collection (the sculpture is today part of the collection of the Museo d'Arte Orientale in Turin), published in Stadtner 1996, figs 4a–b; photograph © Donald Stadtner. Even if it does not affect the appearance of the upper part of the head, it should be noted here that the lower part of the face is badly damaged and has been reconstructed with fill material. In its present state, the hole in the face is, after the removal of the filler, much larger.

As already discussed, the jester is represented several times in Buddhist art as bemoaning or trying to avert his master's or mistress' decision to leave the worldly life. Perhaps this is also the context he is shown in here. A painting from Ajanta XVI comes to mind (Fig. 8):[21] in it, a jester—clearly recognisable from the tufts of hair on his head—attacks a man from behind. The man is a barber who is about to shear Nanda's head to prepare him for ordination. Just as the jester in Ajanta wants to stop the barber, perhaps the jester in Mathura reliefs wants to stop the man in front of him from giving up his worldly life? As Bawa (2013: 290, 294) has already suggested, the sculptures may have served as a warning against a dissolute life. Bawa, however, bases the interpretation of the scenes on the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* (or rather its earlier version), which seems rather unlikely to me. Buddhist writings include some earlier narratives that correspond with the context depicted in sculptures—tales of the shamefulness of drinking alcohol, actors, or of the objectionable courtesans[22]—but none of the narratives really fit the depictions.[23] But perhaps the compositions, which in most cases are

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[21] Fig. 8 in the coloured insert: Ajanta, Cave XVI, left side wall, illus. among others in Yazdani 1930–1955, Vol. 3, pl. 54; cf. Schlingloff 2000/2013, no. 73 (7), drawing in Vol. 1: 418; references to publications: 419–420; the middle fragment has been removed from the wall and is today in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, no. 21.1286 (Coomaraswamy 1922); photograph © Ajanta Archives of the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Research Centre "Buddhist Murals of Kucha on the Northern Silk Road"/ Andreas Stellmacher; photograph of the fragment in Boston by Isabell Johne; digital reconstruction by the present author.

[22] Bawa 2013: 290–291 refers to some narratives from the former lives of the nuns in the *Therīgāthā*; one should still mention the direct warning against drinking alcohol which is addressed in several places like in the *Jātaka* 512, *Kumbhajātaka* or Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā* (no. 17, transl. in Khoroche 1986: 110–114; this narrative in which Indra participates is presented in Ajanta, cf. Schlingloff 2000/2013, no. 62) or a narrative from the Haribhaṭṭa's *Jātakamālā* (no. 29, transl. in Khoroche 2017: 192–197) in which the Bodhisatva is reborn as the actress Nirupamā who, through her chastity, frees the actor in love with her from the desire to drink.

[23] Perhaps it is worth mentioning here that Jaina literature contains further stories about the originally respected and wealthy merchant Cārudatta who falls in love with a courtesan and loses his entire fortune to her (Esposito 2005: 10); this narrative

large-sized, do not show a particular story. As mentioned earlier, two of the depictions were clearly found in temple contexts, one Buddhist and one Jaina. If the reliefs indeed represent a particular narrative, we should rather expect it to be a narrative about leaving of the worldly life.

As stated at the beginning, the figure of the jester, or the theatrical *vidūṣaka*, is part of the visual language often employed to express the fact that his master is about to give up worldly life, a sacred act the jester tries to prevent. The question should be asked why it was so. It seems to me that the person, easily recognisable by his highly visible iconography, is representative of the worldly life, or perhaps rather of a disreputable lifestyle. It is not for nothing that he is shown in Bhuvaneshwar with his genitals exposed, standing among a group of musicians,[24] or in Sanghol—because it is him with the strands of hair—with a bold grin, while helping a drunk woman up (Fig. 9, in the coloured insert).[25]

The jester here may be regarded as representative of the sensual atmosphere of theatre life. Was this sensual atmosphere always understood as disreputable? We should not try to interpret the entire art of ancient India as exclusively focussed on redemption. One might think, for instance, of erotic depictions (Fig. 10a–b)[26] on an early Mathura pillar covered in bas-relief. The panel above shows a lively scene with many women, a man in a turban (on the left) and a jester (on the right), clearly identifiable by his stick with multiple crooks. The jester seems to be holding a water bottle, an attribute of

is rendered in works like the *Vāsudevahiṇḍī*, *Harivaṃśapurāṇa* or *Bṛhatkathākośa*; in the Hindu *Bṛhatkathāślokasaṃgraha* the name of the merchant is Sānudāsa (cf. *ibid*.: fn. 14).

24 Illus. Donaldson 1985–1987, Vol. 1, fig. 78; Zin 2016, fig. 12.

25 Fig. 9 in the coloured insert: Sanghol, Sanghol Archaeological Museum, photograph © Seema Bawa; illus. Bawa 2013, fig. 5.10.

26 Fig. 10a–b: so-called “Kāmaloka pillar,” Mathura Archaeological Museum, no. 00.I ii; for illustrations of entire face of the pillar and several details cf. Quintanilla 2007, figs 46–50, for description and interpretations cf. *ibid*.: 55–59; photograph © Monika Zin.

Fig. 10a–b

the Brahmins (of whom the theatrical *vidūṣaka* is one). That the scene is to be understood as amusing, is shown by the fact that the *vidūṣaka* is hit on the head with an object by a woman while she holds him by the belt with the other hand.

This detail brings us back to the first image (Fig. 1); as discussed above, it shows a man in the women's chambers reaching into a container while being hit in the head by a woman. Whether the bulges on his head are the strands of the jester's hairdo will probably never be verified, but there is so much in the scene that is consistent with the character of the jester and other scenes he is present in that it seems fairly safe to assign the picture to the same category. Of course, in works of art, we tend to associate the stories illustrated in narrative representations with uplifting religious writings, but sometimes we get a hint that the ancient Indian was no less *homo ludens* than we are. That the jester, or the theatrical *vidūṣaka*, could have been understood as

being "against the *pavvajjā*" has as a prerequisite that the viewer knew him from a secular—and for some perhaps even offensive—context. Without this knowledge, the pictorial language between the artist and the viewer could not function. The viewer might have known the jester well from the theatre, from performances based on Sanskrit dramas preserved through the ages, but also from the popular stage. Several depictions of the jester discussed above certainly predate most of the plays known today. They predate the *Kāmasūtra,* too. The relief in our Fig. 10 may quite safely be dated early[27]—the jester in a humorous situation inside a building, which might be a brothel, is there, on the side of his master—very similar to how he would appear on stage. That the *Kāmasūtra* (3rd century CE) knows the *vidūṣaka* and is calling the partners of the erotic affair by theatrical names: *nāyaka* (actor) and *nāyikā* (actress)—who is a courtesan (Gautam 2014 and 2016)—appears thus to go back to a quite old tradition. This last conclusion is perhaps the most important in this essay—which is a contribution to a volume dealing with the correlation between literary narratives and their visual depictions—since it shows the magnitude of the reciprocal relations and inevitable points to the necessity to include depictions in art and their sublime pictorial language in the analysis of literary works.

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[27] Quintanilla (cf. fn. above) dates it even to the 1st c. BCE.

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Fig. 3. Mathura, Mathura Archaeological Museum, no. J. 4;
photograph © Monika Zin

Fig. 5. Amaravati, Chennai, Government Museum, no. 105;
photograph © Wojtek Oczkowski

Fig. 6a-b. Mathura, Maholi, New Delhi, National Museum, no. 2806;
© photographs Wojtek Oczkowski

Fig. 7. Mathura, formerly private collection (the sculpture is today part of the collection of the Museo d'Arte Orientale in Turin); photograph © Donald Stadtner

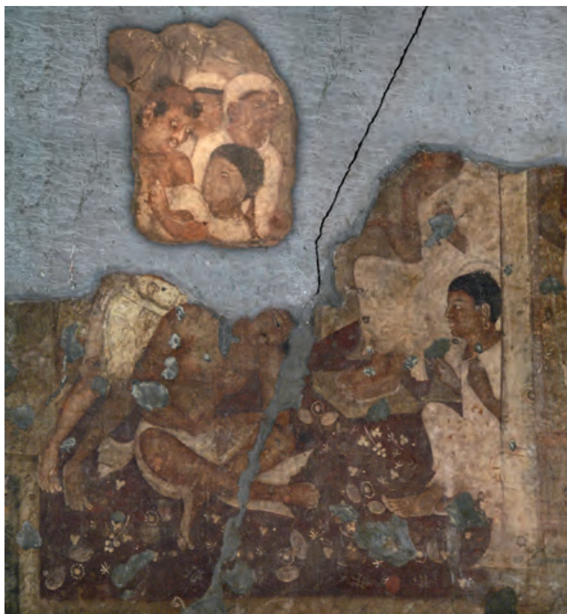

Fig. 8. Ajanta, Cave XVI, left side wall; photograph © Ajanta Archives of the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Research Centre "Buddhist Murals of Kucha on the Northern Silk Road"/ Andreas Stellmacher; photograph of the fragment in Boston by Isabell Johne; reconstruction Monika Zin

Fig. 9. Sanghol, Sanghol Archaeological Museum, photograph © Seema Bawa