

# **Art, Myths and Visual Culture of South Asia**

**Edited by  
Piotr Balcerowicz**  
in collaboration with  
**Jerzy Malinowski**



**MANOHAR**

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## Preface

The volume presents a collection of papers linked by a common theme which incorporates various aspects of art, religion, myths, symbols, literature and visual culture of the region of South Asia, but in certain aspects goes beyond the geographical boundaries and reaches out to South-East Asia.

The collection offers an entirely new material which explores a range of important motives and themes concerned with the art and visual culture of the region of South Asia, and partially with South-East Asia. They comprise various aspects of South Asian art, including sculpture, painting and decorative art, related to religious practice, mythology and cult, politics and power as well as the history and spread of artistic and mythological motives from South Asia to other parts of the world.

Monika Zin ('The Parable of 'The Man in the Well'. Its Travels and its Pictorial Traditions from Amaravati to Today') investigates a fascinating journey which an Indian Buddhist motif, primarily known from the sites of Nāgārjunakoṇḍā and Amarāvati, made to various parts of Asia and Europe and analyses how the parable was represented in various pictorial traditions. Her meticulous examination unveils a fascinating nexus of narrative, mythological, artistic and historical layers and themes which lie behind the Parable of 'The Man in the Well' and its numerous versions in Europe and Asia.

In her study of the textual and archaeological evidence for temple consecration rituals in the Hindu tradition of South and South-East Asia, Anna Ślaczka ('Temple Consecration Rituals in the Hindu Tradition of South and South-East Asia: A Study of the Textual and Archaeological Evidence') demonstrates how consecration ritual practice spread from South Asia to the regions of South East Asia, how it was reflected in artefacts, and how important it is to correlate archaeological findings with textual evidence of Sanskrit treatises. A research which closely combines and expertise in textual sources and sound knowledge of archaeology can certainly lead to a better understanding of culture and art, and yield important and revealing results.

Two papers delve on the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and its reflection in Sri Lankan art, architecture and painting. Interestingly, the spread of Buddhism and its later development, especially in confrontation with external colonial forces, was closely linked to political power, attempts to win it or preserve it, and to the personage of the king. Both studies come up with ample evidence of how politics and royal power reshaped and determined further development of religious mythical 'history' of Buddhism on the island, the topography of the places of pilgrimage, historical myths, the interpretation of the history, the contents and style of paintings and murals. In the first study, Silke K. Yasmin Fischer ('The Spread of Buddhism from India to Sri Lanka: Its Visual Representation') examines how the Buddhist legend of the monk Mahinda arriving to Sri Lanka and bringing Buddhism to the island is revitalised and utilised in concrete political and historical circumstances which eventually introduce a new tradition and shape the way the beginnings of Buddhism in Sri Lanka are perceived, interpreted and disseminated by the Sri Lankan Buddhists themselves. An important instrument in the process and a reflection of it is, of course, pictorial tradition, which incorporates various media ranging from temple narrative paintings to modern state school textbooks. Asoka de Zoysa's detailed analysis of a selection of images from Buddhist temples of the Kandyan Era ('Reading images and interpreting the context: Differentiating Between Iconography and Iconology According to Erwin Panofsky's Three Phase Analysis') pursues the problem of the junction of religion, politics and art, and of how political programme influenced the topography of religious pilgrimages sites, architecture and temple paintings, resulting in rewriting history reflected both in text and painting. On the theoretical level, the author takes recourse to the methodology developed by Erwin Panofsky and the distinction of iconography and iconology. In short, his study unveils facts and events hidden behind the surface of painted murals.

Valdas Jaskūnas' paper ('Building Visual Order in Kashmir. Analysis of Architectural Structures as Described in the *Viṣṇu-dharmōttara-purāṇa*') shifts the focus from the southernmost part to the north of the Indian Peninsula. He analyses some passages devoted to architecture and temple models in the *Viṣṇu-dharmōttara-purāṇa* and compares them to the actual structures found in Kashmir. Of particular interest is the model of the *sarvato-bhadra* type of temple which is related to the iconographical program of Pāñcarātra Viṣṇuism. In his analysis, the material devoted to architecture found in the *Viṣṇu-dharmōttara-purāṇa* proves to be a conscious attempt to establish a new visual order, which echoes the ascendance of

Viṣṇuism and its domination over Buddhism in the region. As it usually happens, previous architectonic tradition or topography of sacred sites is not obliterated, but is rather creatively adopted by the new religious tradition and political elites in order to gain legitimacy and buttress their control and influence.

Barbara Grabowska ('Acts of Master Viśvakarman in Bengali Poems') takes up a theme of how art, artistic endeavour and artisanship were conceived in myth and literature. To illustrate the process, she analyses the motif of Viśvakarman, the mythical divine artisan, and his artistic undertakings the way they were depicted in Bengali religious tradition and poems.

An image of quite a homogenous material culture and art, especially with respect to terracotta art, in the Gangetic Valley of the golden ages of the Gupta period emerges from the paper of Samir Kumar Mukherjee ('Terracotta Art in the Gangetic Valley under the Guptas'), who inspects a range of terracotta figurines found at various archaeological sites in the Gangetic valley. The quality and workmanship of the terracotta objects, finer than in previous periods, reflects a general improvement in economic and social conditions during the reign of the Guptas. Mukherjee's findings reveal a close link between the themes displayed in the terracotta figurines and various aspects of social life and mythology.

In pursuing the imperative to study of art in itself, David Smith's paper ('Facial Expression in the Erotic Art of Khajurāho. A Preliminary Investigation') offers a new take on temple sculptures of Khajurāho, whereby he slightly diverges from traditional historians' approach to the erotic art of Khajurāho. He discusses the erotic sculpture of Khajurāho in terms that are somewhat parallel to the type of study which is the norm in Western art history. Smith analyses the expressive contents of the sculptures, with the emphasis on facial expression, and scrutinises the range of emotions expressed and images conjured up by the sculptor, searching for interpretative underpinnings of and artistic practice behind the sculptural forms, thereby disclosing the individualism and originality of the artists.

The team of M. Singh, R.S. Trambake, D.A. Gupta ('Chemical Conservation of Hīnayāna Paintings of the 2nd BCE, Cave No. 10, Ajanta') brings in a very practical dimension, vital to the survival of art and artefacts which art historians examine, namely the problems of restoration and conservation of ancient paintings and murals. They focus on chemical conservation of Hīnayāna paintings of the 2nd BCE of Cave No. 10, Ajantā, briefly presenting the history of the murals, their discovery and subsequent problems related to their preservation. Various conservation techniques of the past proved ultimately unsuccessful, but even latest methods of preser-

vation of the paintings may prove futile when confronted with a large number of visitors, which in itself poses a serious threat to invaluable pieces of art in art collections and monuments all over the world.

Piotr Balcerowicz's study ('The Body and the Cosmos in Jaina Mythology and Art') investigates the roots, history and subsequent development of the image of 'the cosmic man' (*loka-puruṣa*) featuring in Jaina art and cosmology, the relation of the cosmic man to Mount Meru and to the concept of liberation.

The present volume has been inspired by and is, in a sense, a follow-up of an International Conference on Art and Visual Culture of India, which was held on 18–19 April, 2008, in Warsaw, Poland. It was the first conference devoted strictly to the Art of South Asia, and attracted scholars from Poland and abroad, including Great Britain, Holland, Austria and Lithuania. Some of these presentations are included here. The conference was organised by (1) the Polish Society of Oriental Art (now the Polish Institute of World Art Studies), represented by Jerzy Malinowski, Dorota Kamińska and Agnieszka Staszczuk of the Section of Oriental Art, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, and by (2) Piotr Balcerowicz (no affiliation), with active participations of the members of the Department of South Asia, Faculty of Oriental Studies, the University of Warsaw. The program of the conference comprised the history of architecture, sculpture, painting and decorative art from antiquity to modern times, as well as the iconography, mythology and symbolism of South Asia. The proceedings of the Conference were subsequently published in Polish as *Sztuka i kultura wizualna Indii* [*Art and Visual Culture of India*], edited by Piotr Balcerowicz and Jerzy Malinowski, Wydawnictwo DiG, Warszawa 2010 (171 pp., 127 photos, A4).

The tradition of the study of South Asia and South Asian art in Poland goes back to the beginnings of the nineteenth century and commences with the research and activities of such historians as, for instance, Joachim Lelewel (1786–1861), the author of *The History of Ancient India* (Cracow, 1820), and Orientalists such as Szymon Żukowski (1782–1834), Józef Kowalewski (1801–1878), Józef Sękowski (1800–1858), Leonard Chodźko (1800–1871), Haji Seraja Szapszał (Haji Seraya Shapshal, 1873–1961), a hakham and leader of the Karaim community of Eupatoria and Troki, or Indologists, primarily Stanisław Schayer (1899–1941), the founder of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Warsaw. First Polish explorers, it seems, ventured to various parts of South Asia during the Renaissance. We know just of a handful of names, including Poznań-born Kaspar (c. 1450–c. 1510), Paweł Palczewski (or Palczowski; died c. 1609), the author of (lost) *Topography*, and Erazm Kretkowski



(1508–1558), the envoy of Sigismund II Augustus to India. When Vasco da Gama reached India for the first time, Kaspar, referred to by the Portuguese as Gaspar da Gama or Gaspar da India, was already there for a number of years serving as a secret service agent at the court of the sultan of Bījāpur, Yusuf Ādil Shāh (1459–1511), whom the Portuguese knew as Adil Khan or Hídalcāo. The first reliable account about India preserved in Polish language is a letter of Gdańsk-born Krzysztof Pawłowski (died 1603) written in Goa and posted on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1596 to his friends in Cracow (*Perygrynacja do Indyi ... w roku 1596 / Peregrinations to India ... in 1569*), first published in 1915 and later redacted by Stefan Stasiak ('Les Indes Portugaises à la fin du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle d'après la Relation du voyage fait à Goa en 1596, par Christophe Pawłowski, gentilhomme polonais', *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 3/4 (1925–27)). Pawłowski describes his journey to India from Gdańsk via Lisabon in rather unsophisticated language. There is still another travel account by Maksymilian Wikliński (*Les voyages de Joseph Maximilien Cajetan Baron de Wiklinski aux Iles de France, aux Indes en Perse et dans les pays de proche Orient 1768-1781*, Port-Louis 2004), who visited India twice. These and similar accounts were collected and described by Eugeniusz Słuszkiewicz ('India as seen by Polish travellers up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century', *Indo-Asian Culture* 9,4 (1961) 385–403, and 'India as seen by Polish travellers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century', *Indo-Asian Culture* 10,3 (1962) 336–339).

The study of South Asian art requires not only expert knowledge of an art historian, but also sound philological proficiency and cultural competence of an Indologist. This calls for a close cooperation of specialists in both fields, and the present volume is a good exemplification of this vital principle.

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Piotr Balcerowicz  
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