

Historiography of Art- History and Architecture in Indian Context

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Abstract: This paper explores the evolving narratives of art history and architecture in India by tracing major historiographical trends from ancient to contemporary periods. It examines how interpretations of India's artistic and architectural heritage have been shaped by shifting intellectual, political, and cultural contexts over time. The study critically analyses the interplay between colonial frameworks, indigenous knowledge systems, and global discourses, revealing how these forces have influenced the construction and representation of India's cultural past. By situating art and architecture within broader historical processes, the paper highlights the dynamic relationship between tradition and transformation. It demonstrates how artistic forms and architectural practices have continually negotiated issues of identity, power, and modernity, reflecting both continuity and change. The research also interrogates the role of historiography in redefining meanings attached to monuments, styles, and artistic expressions, showing how narratives of heritage are not static but constantly reinterpreted. Ultimately, the paper argues that Indian art and architecture cannot be understood through a single linear narrative. Instead, they must be viewed as complex, layered phenomena shaped by multiple voices and perspectives, offering deeper insights into the evolving cultural identity of India.

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INTRODUCTION

As we know today, Art history is the study of objects of art in their historical development and stylistic contexts, i.e. genre, design, format, style and the study of art history explores how societies and individuals have used the visual arts to convey the ideas and values that were important to them. This includes the “major” arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture as well as the “minor” arts of ceramics, furniture, and other decorative objects. From the 19th century on study of art history and architecture underwent a process of gradual globalization. Art forms of non-western traditions were studied, especially by archeologists, anthropologists and linguists and the cultural specialists of the relevant regions. At the beginning of the 19th century, Egypt and Mesopotamia, Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians were studied. The end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century

witnessed a rising interest in the countries of the 'East', such as China, Japan and India including the Islamic world.

BEGINNING OF STUDY OF ART- HISTORY IN INDIAN CONTEXT

In world context, the earliest surviving writing on art that can be classified as art history are the passages in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (c. AD 77-79), concerning the development of Greek sculpture and painting. From them it is possible to trace the ideas of Xenokrates of Athens (c. 280 BC), a Greek sculptor who was perhaps the first art historian.

We know that the study of ancient Indian art and architecture emerged as an embryonic quest about two centuries ago. In the late eighteenth and through a major part of the nineteenth century, it grew out of a keen and unrelenting interest in Indian antiquities – as curiosities, as admirable 'handicrafts,' as mysterious 'outrage,' and above all, as 'artefacts' or sources of past histories of a country then colonized by the British. These objectives set the tone for and determined the methods adopted in the study of Indian art history and architecture during the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century. Despite the marked colonial bias, this period is crucial to the formal inception and institutionalization of art history in India. The setting up of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 by William Jones had institutionalized the study of India's past. For Jones, however, the remains of architecture and sculpture were mere "monuments of antiquity and not specimens of art, which seemed to share their origins with the arts of Africa (Lehmann 1967:7-20). At the same time, he lamented the loss of *silpa sastras*, the treatises, which he felt may have contained important information on traditional Indian arts and manufactures. In fact, it was as 'handicraft' or 'manufacture' that Indian art first evoked British interest (Lehmann 1967:7-20). In his own words, "*It is unfortunate, that the Silpa Sastra, or collection of treatises on arts and manufactures, which must have contained a treasure of useful information on dying, painting, and metallurgy, has been so long neglected, that few, if any, traces of it are to be found...*"

Art and architectural remains received some attention as part of the regional surveys undertaken to understand the geography, history, customs, languages, literature, and folklore of a people. Important work emerged from individual initiatives such as those of Colin Mackenzie (1754–1821). Mackenzie was a Scotsman who had joined the East India Company and went on to become the first Surveyor-General of India in 1815. Working with a team of draftsmen and learned Indians or pundits, Mackenzie acquired translations of inscriptions and manuscripts and had detailed maps and drawings of some southern Indian sites prepared. His efforts at documenting the Amaravati stupa and site are of particular art historical significance (Howes 2010). Several traditional Indian scholars played an important part in the colonial project of recovering India's past but were usually assigned subordinate roles. The study of written sources to interpret varied aspects of cultural history, however, remained more or less detached from the object- or monument-centric approach to Indian art and architectural history. Descriptions of ancient and medieval Indian monuments had been part of the travelogues of European travelers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Visual records of India's built heritage and landscape found representation in the paintings of artists such as William Hodges (1744–1787) and the Daniells (1795–1808). Picturesque views of Indian monuments in ruins, or those covered in dense forests of prolonged neglect, were favourite subjects that were painted, published, and displayed at exhibitions in Europe. The 'Picturesque' as a style of visual representation lent itself well to conjure the mystery, beauty, and romance of India's past and to project the contrast of her impoverished present

(Tillotson 2000). The visual had thus become an important tool of analysis for cultural interpretation and historical reconstruction during the British colonial period. Despite the biases and drawbacks, this image centric approach did have its advantages and left a lasting legacy in the scientific documentation of artefacts, archival and museum collections and display, and knowledge dissemination systems in art historical and museum studies.

Thus, historiography of Indian art conceptually, is neither antiquarianism nor archaeological formalism. Sir William Jones who laid the foundation of Indian Orientalism gave vision to judge the merits of paintings in Indian perspective. The great discoverers of Indian art and antiquities such as Fergusson, Alexander Cunningham, J. Burgess, Colin Mackenzie *etc.* cannot be considered as an archaeologist or orientalist, but to be thanked for laying the foundations of historiography and art studies in India.

METHODOLOGICAL STUDY OF INDIAN ARCHITECTURE

Among those who pioneered a methodological study of Indian architecture, James Fergusson (1808–1886) is well-known for his systematic study of Indian architectural history and Alexander Cunningham (1814–1893) is remembered for laying the foundations of Indian archaeology. Both believed in the superiority of Western aesthetics, techniques, and canons, and categorized the material remains of India's past within colonial constructs.

Attempts by some Indian scholars such as Ram Raz (1790–1830) and Rajendralal Mitra (1822–1891) to interpret Indian art history in the context of its specific cultural matrix and to engage with its textual and regional coordinates did not find many takers until much later. Ram Raz was in fact the first to study Indian monuments in relation to indigenous architectural texts and the living tradition of architect-sculptors. His works are recorded in the posthumously published *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus* (Raz 1834; Chandra 1983: 9-11; Singh 2004: 308-312). In this connection Prof. Upinder Singh draws attention to little-known aspects of Cunningham's important contributions to Indian art and architectural history. She focuses on the place accorded to art historical issues in the activities of the Archaeological Survey of India during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Cunningham is better known for his emphasis on excavations, field and archival documentation systems, and for prioritizing inscriptional and numismatic data over the evidence of art and architecture. Yet, for Cunningham the scope of archaeology was very broad, and included many different aspects that could help to illuminate the study of the past (Singh 2004: 308-312). Cunningham documented and wrote about a large corpus of monuments in his capacity as Archaeological Surveyor (1861-1865) and as the first Director- General of the Archaeological Survey of India (1871–1885). Singh's intensely researched work reveals insightful details about subtle shifts in Cunningham's contextual understandings of early Buddhist sculpture and architecture. These can be detected in his observations on the art remains at *Bhilsa Topes*, *Bharhut*, and *Bodhgaya* – all Buddhist sites on the trail of the Chinese traveler, Xuan Zang, whose writings held a special fascination for him.

Distinct in approach from Cunningham, James Fergusson, with a clear focus on architectural history, attempted to understand Indian architecture in a global context and through the comparative method (Chandra 1975: 1-39; Guha-Thakurta 2004: 3-42). By profession he was an indigo cultivator. He is known as a scholar, who did great effort in search of monuments and wrote on Indian architecture and laid a foundation of scientific study of Indian architecture. The method he adopted in writing on Indian architecture was of direct perception in which he studied the monuments without any reference

to the text. He described the Indian architecture as it was directly perceptible to him. In this way he was a true positivist. He gave emphasis on dimensions and measurements and took the recourse of arbitrary classification form without its meaning. He failed to understand the essential unity of sculpture and architectural art—the key point for understanding the significance and beauty of Indian monuments, whether cave temples or structural temples and took architecture in isolation (Srivastava, 2006:179). He was in no way free from prejudices, therefore ignoring all elements of Indianness in Indian monuments, to apply predominantly the principles of western architecture and aesthetic in judging the merit of Indian architecture. This is apparent in his *History of Architecture in All Countries* (1867) and *Historical Enquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art, especially with reference to Architecture* (1849). He documented and attempted to ‘read’ the monument to its last detail, treating it as a ‘fixed’ and hence the most reliable source of cultural interpretation. His focus was on the artistic and technical processes of its making, and on the period and region styles. He did not consult texts and inscriptions, yet he evinced interest in Indian mythology and religion, as is evident in his *Tree and Serpent Worship...* (1868). Fergusson adopted racial (Aryan–non-Aryan) and religious (Buddhist–Hindu–Jain–*Muhammadan*) classifications for art periods and styles, which have had a persistent presence in Indian art historical discourse. He was also convinced of the progressive deterioration of Indian art, the best being represented by ancient Buddhist art. The yardstick for judgment was always ‘Western’ and the cultural context of the monument was in many ways lost to him. Fergusson’s approach was continued by his successors, James Burgess, Henry Cousens, Alexander Rea, A.H. Longhurst, and Percy Brown, to name some of the notable architectural historians (Chandra 1975: 1-39). It may be recalled here that in categorizing Indian art and architecture, Cunningham had adopted a time based classification, terming the periods as ‘Indo-Grecian,’ ‘Indo-Scythian,’ and ‘Indo-Sassanian’ that reflected his prejudice about the derivative nature of Indian art.

As mentioned earlier, the most obvious exclusion in much of the Orientalist writings was the neglect of Indian texts and contexts in interpreting Indian art and architecture. This had resulted in some odd and obviously incorrect speculations about the origins and derivations of Indian architectural forms, such as the ‘origin’ of the Indian temple from the Buddhist stupa (Chandra 1975:16). Among the architectural historians whose methods were more or less in line with those of Fergusson, Henry Cousens, who came in contact with some Gujarati artisans during his field surveys, had demonstrated an interest in understanding the traditional basis of Indian architecture (Burgess and Cousens 1903: 21-28). Unfortunately, he did not pursue this approach further. Babu Rajendralal Mitra (1822– 1891), a nineteenth century Indian scholar educated in the West, whose writings hold a special place in the early decades of Indian art history, was an important tone in the Nationalist understandings of Indian art. His unique position in Indian art historiography forms the subject of *Formative Years of Indian Art History.*” While Rajendralal Mitra contested the supremacy of European scholarship, his training and hence understanding of Indian art were grounded in Western terms of reference and Greco-Roman standards or canons. At the same time, his acute awareness of the regional context of Eastern Indian artistic manifestations, as seen in his works on the antiquities of Orissa and Bodhgaya, helped in underlining the ‘region’ in relation to the ‘nation’ as an important construct in the study of Indian art and architecture. With Krishna Deva, K.R. Srinivasan, M.A. Dhaky, K.V. Soundararajan, S.R. Balasubrahmanyam, S.K. Saraswati, R.D. Banerji, Debala Mitra, Thomas Donaldson, D.R. Das and some others, the study of the history of Indian temple architecture on a regional and chronological basis came of its own. The past five decades or so have been witness to a range of perspectives from which

the Indian temple has been studied by art and architectural historians, moving beyond archaeological reporting, surveys, and documentation. These include the study of new material, formalistic and stylistic analyses, chronological reassessments, ritualistic studies, iconological considerations, issues of patronage and power, artists and artisans, a revaluation of temple aesthetics, and the shaping of regional and cultural identities. With the availability of these writings and the increased access to archival visual sources, there is now far greater scope for the historian of Indian architecture to arrive at methodological frameworks and comparative analytical approaches in the study of architectural form, ornament, semiotics, and other aspects.

The formal logic of the temple, its origins, region and period styles, terminology, typology, and classifications have been most comprehensively detailed in the monumental *Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture* volumes under the editorship of M.A. Dhaky and M.W. Meister. Dhaky's method in addressing the regional and sub-regional basis of architectural style is perhaps seen at its best in his perceptive and incisive analysis of the *Maru-Gurjara* architecture of Western India (Dhaky 1961:114-165). The study of architectural ornament of the Indian temple has not received its due, especially when compared with the enormous literature on the subject in European art history. 'Few art historians have engaged with sociopolitical histories of the temple; this subject is more often detailed by historians, who focus on issues of legitimation and power, and are less inclined to investigate the details of temple art and architecture for purposes of their analyses. Of late, collaborative and interdisciplinary efforts spanning art history, religious studies, anthropology, archaeology, and history have resulted in very welcome directions of research in temple studies.

Thus, we can see that close on the heels of initiatives of Fergusson, Cunningham, Burgess, Cousens, Rea, Marshall, Wheeler, Percy Brown and others, were those of the nationalists and other scholars such as Ram Raz, Rajendralal Mitra, E.B.Havell, A. K.Coomaraswamy, N.K.Bose, Manmohan Ganguly, Hiranand Sastri, D.R Bhandarkar, H.D Sankalia and Stella Kramrisch. Their works reflect a growing concern with indigenous sources and motives in an effort to locate Indian architectural manifestations as a function of the needs, aspirations and culture of the Indian people. The thrust of their researches was thus addressing the origins and meanings of architectural creations in an indigenous context while questioning earlier colonial frameworks and constructs in their analyses. A growing and welcome trend towards indigenous concerns, while retaining the scientific methods and rigours of investigation earlier learnt, was noticeable in Ghosh's approach and that of his successors and colleagues, B. B. Lal, M. N. Deshpande, B. K.Thapar, Debala Mitra, M. S. Nagaraja Rao, J. R Joshi, and M. C. Joshi, as also archaeologists and architectural historians such as H. D. Sankalia, Krishna Deva, K. R. Srinivasan, M. A. Dhaky, K. V. Soundararajan and others.

STUDY OF INDIAN SCULPTURE

Even though Fergusson, Burgess, and other contemporary architectural historians had paid attention to 'form' and 'style' in Indian architecture, Indian sculpture and painting did not gain favour as 'fine art' until the early decades of the twentieth century and were considered useful mainly as visual records of the customs, manners, religious beliefs, and other aspects of India's past. Indian sculpture was viewed through the lens of a classical Western standard epitomized by the Greek arts of antiquity. The lack of 'realism' or 'naturalism,' the absence of a sense of perspective and proportion, the many heads and multiple arms of divinities, animal-headed gods, explicitly sexual scenes on temple walls, and such other representations evoked several derogatory responses to Indian art (Mitter 1977).

Beyond these observations on the general characteristics of Indian art, there was little by way of a systematic stylistic analysis of Indian sculpture. A. Foucher evolved a methodological basis for the stylistic study of Gandhara sculptures, several of which were not inscribed or dated.¹³ It is no surprise that Gandharan art should have been among the first to have received detailed attention. Colonial conviction in the Greco-Roman affiliations of all that was the earliest and best in Indian art was only strengthened by the continued excavations in the 'north-western frontier provinces' during John Marshall's time as Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India. Gandharan art remains excavated at sites such as Taxila served to reaffirm the idea of India's long-standing debt to the culture of the Occident. Foucher employed visual criteria and identified cross-cultural influences systematically, and at times correlated these with other available historical records to arrive at broad categories of classification. Ludwig Bachhofer (*Early Indian Sculpture*, 1929) used his training to analyze the stylistic development of Indian sculpture. Bachhofer provided a rigorous framework of stylistic analysis, which included details of individual forms and overall composition. While he was trained in Western art history, he was also sensitive to the distinctiveness of Indian art. His analysis of Indian sculpture from Bharhut, Sanchi, and Amaravati reveals keen insights, even if one encounters generalizations, such as the attempt to fit the sequence of development in sculpture from Bharhut to Sanchi to Amaravati in accordance with a universal inner logic of stylistic development (P. Chandra 1983: 74-79).

In sum, art historical methods of formalistic and stylistic analyses as well as historical and cultural interpretations of art were attempted but were often well-established in colonial constructs of race and religion or categorized to emphasize the derivative nature of Indian art. Despite the undeniable significance of these pioneering works, and some attempts at interpreting Indian art and architecture on its own terms, several significant issues remained largely unaddressed. The aesthetic appreciation of Indian art, beyond its usefulness as a visual document of Indian history, was also in evidence. To meet these objectives, methodological approaches came to be rooted at first in symbolism, iconography, and iconology. This in turn led to a concerted engagement with texts during the first half of the twentieth century. The search for meaning required an understanding of cultural contexts – myth, religion, literature, the language of gesture and posture, technical treatises, literary texts, and local culture. To the Western mind, this knowledge seemed more remote and difficult to cultivate than to apply the already evolved Western art historical methods to an interpretation of form and style. Even so, the essential 'Indian-ness' of Indian art was also advocated strongly by some European scholars such as E.B. Havell (1861–1934), Heinrich Zimmer (1890–1943), and Stella Kramrisch (1896–1993). Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) was at the forefront of 'Nationalist' responses to 'Orientalist' constructions of Indian art history during the colonial period. He placed the text-image relationship at the centre of his relentless investigations into the roots and rationale of India's artistic past. He sourced Vedic and post-*Vedic* texts, Buddhist and Jaina literature, treatises on art and architecture, varied genres of Indian literary writings, as also a few epigraphic and numismatic sources to marshal evidence towards his objectives. The etymology and semantics of indigenous art and architectural terms interested him as a source for understanding the symbolic and functional basis of the vocabulary of art. He engaged with interrelationships between the creation, form, function, and symbolism of Indian art, harnessing a range of sources – textual and visual – in an attempt to free it from colonial prejudices. A shared substratum of ideas and beliefs in an essentially Asian cultural matrix (Coomaraswamy 1927), and the notion of 'Greater India' found a strong proponent in him.

Some of his writings also follow the comparative method, positing the Orient and the Occident as theoretical binaries in evolving comparative categories for analysis. Coomaraswamy approached the study of traditional Indian architecture from the historical technical as well as from the metaphysical and theoretical viewpoints (Wagoner 1999: 62-67). He correlated textual, epigraphic, and visual sources, in particular the narrative reliefs of early Indian sculpture at Bharhut, Sanchi, and Amaravati to arrive at the earliest available evidence of the beginnings of Indian architecture and to analyze its subsequent development. Two noted Indologists, Stella Kramrisch (1896– 1993) and Heinrich Zimmer (1890–1943), shared with Ananda Coomaraswamy a deep empathy for the origins, meanings, and motivations of Indian art.

When we analyze we find that the clearest exclusion in much of the Orientalist writings was the neglect of Indian texts and contexts in interpreting Indian art and architecture. This had resulted in some odd and obviously incorrect speculations about the origins and derivations of Indian architectural forms.

THE TREND IN HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ART HISTORY

Scholars have, in the recent decades, reviewed earlier colonial constructs and addressed the Indian Art-History from varied perspectives. These include, along with chronological reassessments and the study of new material, investigations pertaining to philosophical and ideological underpinnings, formalistic and stylistic analyses, ritualistic and iconological considerations, sectarian ideologies, issues of patronage and power as well as the shaping of regional and cultural identities. The shifts in emphasis and the emerging directions of development in the writings of notable historians of Indian Art-History during the last six decades or so yield useful clues about more recent methodological concerns in the discipline, particularly when seen in the perspective of earlier advances made in the field.

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