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'INSIDE' THE TRADITION OF THE *ŚILPAŚĀSTRAS*: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF INDIAN TEXTS ON ART

Valdas Jaskūnas

Centre of Oriental Studies, Vilnius University

*The article sets up to discuss the relevance of the tradition of art texts (*śilpaśātras*) to the understanding of Indian art. This tradition has been dealt with for almost two hundred years since the first translation of text fragments from the treatises on Indian architecture by Ram Raz. The recent researches in the field threw a new light upon the aspects of provenance and function of shilpashastric texts, as well as their relationship with the extant works of art. The context-based approach to Indian art, avoiding the mistakes made when the textual and art history studies were carried out simultaneously but very rarely coming into contact and enriching one another, enables us to explore anew the role of these texts within the tradition of Indian art. Nevertheless, the manner in which the conceptual systems of* śilpaśāstras *and the artistic tradition actually interact – how thought and action affect one another – is not a question simple to answer. The main reason for lacking research on this interaction is a rather stylistic approach, which dominates art history and pays too little attention to understanding the idea and provenance of śilpaśāstras. The present research does not look for an unambiguous answer to the question concerning the role of shastric tradition in the overall artistic culture; rather it attempts to frame a preliminary working hypothesis for further investigation with a more coherent gaze at one of most undeservedly neglected spheres of Indian intellectual culture, namely, shilpashastric tradition and the role it played in the intellectual history of India.*

Paradoxically though as to the positive result of the Conference on Shastric Traditions in Indian Art held in 1988 at the University of Heidelber, one of the leading scholars in the field, T. S. Maxwell, referred to the definition of the historical problem of Indian art history as "a relatively new discipline which has not yet reached a maturity or consensus view from which to assess its position adequately in relation to a vast existing corpus of Indian literature including *śilpaśāstra*."[1] The main reason for this ambiguity, as the scholar maintains, is as yet unachieved definition of the relationship between meaning and style, or text and sculpture, and of their forging together into a single instrument for the understanding of historical Indian art. Given that the only descriptive discussion of form and meaning which can be directly relevant to the historical art tradition is contained in historical texts of the same tradition, and

[1] T. S. Maxwell, "Śilpa *versus* Śāstra", in *Shastric Traditions in Indian Arts*, ed. Anna Libera Dallapiccola, vol. 1: Texts, Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH, 1989, 5.

given that a number of such texts exist, one could expect more reliance on them to be evident in stylistic analysis. Nonetheless, the mainstream of Indian art scholarship demonstrates that the core of the discipline remains a detailed study of archaeological evidence using a stylistic approach, and the dependency on the textual sources is still very uncommon. It is stylistic analysts that lead this disciplinary mainstream, and their essentially aesthetic judgements, supported by numismatic and epigraphical sources, characterize the way the subject and the discipline are perceived and taught. As an alternative to the concentration on style, one takes up the topics such as the legitimizing of political power, the cult transformation of iconographical sequences, or the symbolic recording of historical events. But even these theories relating style and chronology, most probably because of dealing with the seemingly abstract and elusive notion of meaning, could hardly be admitted to a central position of the discipline, which continues to see itself as basically archaeological in character.[2]

Translations of the treatises on Indian art are also closely linked with an inclination to "archaeologize" the history of art. Bruno Dagens, the translator of *Māyamāta*, a treatise on Indian architecture, admits that the basic idea of his masters to suggest him as an archaeologist to study that text was that "such a study would allow to know which monument could supposedly have been built according to it". It was much later that the scholar came to the conclusion – though probably a deceptive one – that "the theory of architecture we found in the *Māyamāta* has been extrapolated from already existing monuments. In other terms, this *Vāstuśāstra* has been made according to some monuments and not *vice versa*."[3]

The main questions which arise while investigating theoretical texts on Indian art and architecture (*śilpa* [or *vāstu*] *śāstras*) are as follows: What is their purpose? How are they expected to be used? And finally, what is the benefit of them for us in studying the tradition of Indian art? The more detailed answers than those presented in this paper would require a much more comprehensive study. Therefore the issues discussed below, which pertain to the undeservedly neglected problem of shastric culture of art, are to be treated as preliminary remarks considering the early history of analysis of *śilpaśāstras* within the nationalist agenda and its influence on formation of the methodological framework for investigation of traditional Indian art. To expose the problem in a wider methodological perspective, the artistic tradition of *śilpaśāstras* was juxtaposed to the methodological background applied to other intellectual cultures of India.

Nationalist interpretations of Indian art tradition

Until the beginning of the 19th century the principles of Indian architecture known to the Europeans were almost exclusively based on the accounts of early travellers and on

[2] Ibid., 6–7.

[3] Bruno Dagens, „Iconography in Śaivāgamas: description or prescription?", in *Shastric Traditions in Indian Arts*, 1:151.

observations of existing buildings made by the archaeologists. While very little was known about the aesthetic manuals, *śilpaśāstras*, in formal studies these buldings were approached using European methods of studying works of architecture. It was only in 1834 with the *Essays on the Architecture of the Hindus* by Ram Raz (Rama Raja), which included translations of aesthetic manuals on architecture, that the Europeans got access to the knowledge of Indian aesthetics. The greater part of the *Essay* was based on the aesthetic manual called *Mānasāra*; other texts used by Ram Raz were *Māyamāta*, *Kāśyapa*, *Vaikhānasa*, and *Āgastya*, which were mainly concerned with sculpture.[4]

The question that arises immediately is: What caused a gap of almost one hundred years that passed since the Ram Raz's compilation till the first complete translation into a Western language, namely *Citrasūtra* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*? One cause which really mattered was the authenticity of the extant texts, which was already pointed out by Ram Raz as the dichotomy that existed between the closely guarded world of high knowledge of the Brahmin authorities and the working world of 'the lower order' of artisans and craftsmen, where a practical knowledge of methods and canons was passed from generation to generation. According to Ram Raz, caught in a deadlock of communication between the two groups, the original aesthetic theories and manuscripts were lost and vastly distorted over time.[5] Such a distortion of textual tradition of *śilpaśāstras*, pointed out by Ram Raz, was directly associated with the descriptive character of the accessible *śilpaśāstras*, which strongly debased their role in the ongoing polemics on the antiquity of Indian civilization. In this vein, studies in art tradition closely followed the development of the overall literary scholarship which, as Sheldon Pollock argues, on the one hand pursued the ideology of antiquity according to which the more archaic a text the purer it was thought to be, and the more recent the more derivative and even mongrel; on the other hand, it was religion that became and has remained virtually the single lens through which to view all texts and practices in the subcontinent.[6] Thus, despite the crucial role of the textual tradition which was called upon in the second half of the 19th century, the *śilpaśāstras* did not pass the test of supposed authenticity even in art studies.

One has to admit that the gap of time under discussion, though exhaustively studied from the point of view of colonial education on art, is still lacking a more thorough research on the attitudes towards the genuine shilpashastric tradition. As a remarkable landmark for the interpretative strategy applied in the first translations of *śilpaśāstras* can serve the speculations on the principles of Indian art pertaining to the nationalist era. It seems natural that to prove the continuity of art tradition in India meant constructing a model of artistic activity

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[4] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The making of a new 'Indian' art. Artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, 118. On the issues discussed in Ram Raz's *Essays* see Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters. History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, 180–187.

[5] Guha-Thakurta, *The making of a new 'Indian' art*, 118.

[6] Sheldon Pollock, "Introduction", in *Literary Cultures in History. Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock, New Delhi, 2004, 4f.

based on abstract theoretical principles. In the words of Tapati Guha-Thakurta, the stress on 'tradition', within the vocabulary of art criticism, was backed by the parallel trend of reinterpretation of past history and the formulation of a body of traditional canons for the appreciation of Indian art. The polemics about what constituted 'genuine' Indian art sought sanction in tradition, therefore, the approach to the latter was highly conditioned by a search for authenticity and uniqueness.[7]

In Bengal, which in the very beginning of the 20th century was the main centre of nationalist movement, it was polemical articles written by the writer and painter Abanindranath Tagore that incited the idea of the uniqueness of Indian art. These writings in Bengali, edited in the journals or in the form of brochures and booklets, were much more widely distributed and called for a bigger response than those of the E. B. Havell, an authoritative art administrator and historian.

The interpretation of the Indian art tradition that Abanindranath provided was brimming with the Orientalist ideas. As an attempt to provide a balance for understanding Indian art, which paid little attention to the principles laid down in the shastric texts, in two articles of 1913–1914 Abanindranath set out to provide an 'authentic' textual base in tradition to notions of a special 'Indian' mode of perception and representation. The first of these articles, "Mūrti",[8] drawing on two Sanskrit texts, Śukrācarya's *Śukranītisāra* and *Pratimālakṣaṇa*, a chapter in Varāhamihira's *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, outlined the norms for the specifically Indian conceptualization of the anatomy and creation of images of deities. Insofar as the polemics concerning the principles of anatomy in Indian sculpture, directly related to the prominent theory of Greek influence, and the 'Gandhara-bias' in Indian art history were addressed, Ordhendra Coomar Gangooly's foreword highlighted sharply the polemical intent of Abanindranath's work. The Indian artist, he explained, was called on to devise certain conventions of anatomy, suggestive of a higher and superior being 'beyond the form of things'.[9] For the purpose of defining the patterns of suggestivity and therefore searching the *śilpaśāstras* for a set of conventions for the creation of 'the aesthetically ideal figure' in Indian tradition, Abanindranath was probing quite specifically the question of form. The methodology he pursued incorporated also literary devices, such as similes and metaphors, within a pictorial image.[10]

The free speculations on the affinity of different arts rendered a liberal drawing on various Sanskrit textual sources in articulating the aesthetic views of traditions in India. In the later essay, 'Sadrishya',[11] he argued that a picture, like a language, relied heavily on rhetoric and figures of speech to capture the right image and mood. To prove the process of 'Form'

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[7] Guha-Thakurta, *The making of a new 'Indian' art*, 196.

[8] The English translation by Sukumar Ray later appeared in a separate booklet *Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy* (Calcutta, 1914).

[9] O. C. Gangooly, "Foreword", in *Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy*, i.

[10] Guha-Thakurta, *The making of a new 'Indian' art*, 204.

[11] The English version of the article, entitled "Likeness", was published in the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, November 1961.

transcending itself and reaching 'the region of Thought', Abanindranath freely used references to Kālidāsa, a master of similes and analogies in the Sanskrit literary tradition.

The broadening of the theoretical base of visual arts with introduction of speculation on literary formal figures is particularly characteristic of the ideas laid down in the artist's article "Shadanga or Six Limbs of Painting" (1914), where he reconstructed a theory of painting out of a single stanza picked out of Yashodhara's commentary on Vātsyāyana's *Kāmasūtra* (I.3).[12] As underlined in the foreword by O. C. Gangooly, in the absence of any clear aesthetic canons for painting in *śilpaśāstras*, there was a need to search the *alaṃkāraśāstras,* so far applied mainly to dramaturgy and poetics, for a set of conventions that were equally applicable to the plastic arts of painting and sculpture.[13]

The reconstruction of traditional Indian aesthetics done by Abanindranath undoubtedly fully followed the Romantic theories of art and artistic creation. Even in dealing with Indian textual tradition he called upon an unrestricted flight of spirit as characteristic of an artist and irrationality genuine to the work of art:

> [...] Let us not forget that it is the artist and his creations that come first and and then the lawgiver and his codes of art. Art is not for the justification of the silpa-sastra, but the sastra is for the elucidation of Art. It is the concrete form which is evolved first, and then comes its analysis and its commentaries, its standards and its proportions – codified in the form of sastras.[14]

And further:

> If we approach our sacred art-treatises in the spirit of scholarly criticism, we find them bristling all over with unyielding restrictions, and we are only too apt to overlook the abundant, though less obvious, relaxation which our sages provided for, in order to safeguard the continuity and perpetuation of our art *sevya-sevaka-bhaveshu pratimalakshmanam smritam*. Images should conform to prescribed types when they are to be contemplated in the spirit of worship. Does that not imply that the artist is to adhere to sastric formulae only when producing images intended for worship and that he is free, in all other cases, to follow his own art instinct?[15]

Based on speculations on ancient Sanskrit treatises, the ideas of Abanindranath nevertheless acquired an Indian pedigree and succeeded in providing a text-based background for the national art. With this regard, one characteristic feature of Abanindranath's and his followers' textual analysis deserves a special emphasis because of its relevance to the strategies of translations of the first shilpashastric texts. What is meant under this,

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[12] Śloka goes as follows: Rūpabheda-pramānāni-bhāva-lāvanyayojanam-sādriśyam-varṇikābhaṅga.

[13] Guha-Thakurta, *The making of a new 'Indian' art*, 205.

[14] Abanindranath Tagore, "Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy", quoted from John F. Mosteller, "The Study of Indian Iconometry in Historical Perspective", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108, 1 (1988): 108.

[15] Ibid.

characteristic is the application of the act of interpretation as a radical strategy for conserving the text 'as it is'. This view was certainly related to the idea of the sanctity of the text, though, as Parul Dave Mukherji explicitely demonstrates while arguing the various translations of the *Citrasūtra* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, following different purposes this sanctity was constantly altered via the process of interpretation through a well-defined ideological framework, especially under nationalist reworking of the text.[16]

'The Theory of Practice or the Practice of Theory?'

Putting into question the two main aspects of the shastric paradigm defined by Sheldon Pollock, in the field of art studies comes from questioning the conformity of extant art pieces to the regulations laid down in the technical treatises on art and architecture. Pollock is acute in pointing out that the understanding of the relationship of *śāstra* ("theory") to *prayoga* ("practical activity") in Sanskrit culture is diametrically opposed to that usually found in the West. Theory is held always and necessarily to precede and govern practice; there is no dialectical interaction between them.[17] It may seem that sometimes studies of a particular art object and the texts that describe the latter contradict this statement[18], but most probably it rather proves the shift in shastric culture from the descriptive to the normative discourse. Seemingly that was a unique cultural phenomenon in the premodern world, reflected in a thorough transformation of "models of" human activity into "models for", whereby texts that initially had shaped themselves to the reality so as to make it ordered (which is very much characteristic of *vedāṅgas*) end by asserting the authority to shape reality to themselves.[19]

It is this tendency, expressed in the shastric "models for" human activity, that led to disappointment in the early research of Indian art and architecture, which was mostly confined to solving iconographical questions rather than dealing with aesthetics. The disenchantment was briefly summarized by D. D. Kosambi: "The traditional Sanskrit books on architecture and iconography are contradicted by the speciments actually found".[20] As Maxwell points out, this attitude does not invalide the status of *śilpaśāstra*; on the contrary, it gives us a chance to rethink the way the textual culture of *śilpaśāstra* operates. It must be

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[16] *The Citrasūtra of the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, ed. and trans. Parul Dave Mukherji, Kalāmūlaśāstra Series 32, Delhi, 2001, xxxivff.

[17] Sheldon Pollock, "The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory in Indian Intellectual History", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104, 3 (1985): 499.

[18] Cf. Adalbert J. Gail, "Iconography or icononomy? Sanskrit texts on Indian art", in *Shastric Traditions in Indian Arts*, 1:113: "In general, the relation of art production and shastric injunction may tentatively be formulated like this: the shastra resp. sūtra is not the beginning, it starts when the arts are already in existence. The texts are onfluenced by this environment".

[19] C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, 1973, 92f.; quoted from Pollock, "The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory", 504.

[20] D. D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India*, London, 1965, 198; quoted from Maxwell, "Śilpa *versus* Śāstra", 10.

unlikely that the portions of *śilpa*, which almost certainly were compilations of iconographical texts gathered from various areas, though cast in a shastric form, were ever used as on-site instruction manuals as expected by early researcher such as Gopinatha Rao and others. Their purpose was rather confined to the preservation of what had to be remembered of former traditions and to discussing such issues as aesthetic theory.[21]

The tradition of textual legitimation helps to assesss critically the ideas of "canonical texts of Indian art" represented by the scholars probably influenced – consciously or not – by the essentialistic approaches to national culture. Explorations of the shastric tradition rather tend to support the view that none of the arts in India is legitimized by a single canon or an authoritative text. In this relation, Sheldon Pollock notes that the complete transmission of a *śāstra* may take place, not through any intermediaries, but directly from God to the author.[22] For example, the earlier extant *śāstra* on drama, Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, describes how the art of dramaturgy was transmitted to the authos by Brahmā as a fifth *veda*.[23] The idea of an authoritative transmission is also clearly expressed in the later texts of historical origins. The *Śilpa prakāśa* of Rāmacandra Kaulācāra, a treatise dated back to the 12th century, though written by an historical person, also attributes the authorship of all the *śilpaśāstras* to mythical Viśvakarman, and openly admits his knowledge being restricted to explaining "with knowledge and without hesitation" the Vāḍabhī temple in some particular form.[24]. This shows that the "creation" of knowledge is treated as an exceptionally divine activity. Moreover, knowledge is by and large viewed as permanently fixed in its dimensions: knowledge, along with the practices that depend on it, does not change or grow, but is set in a given corpus of texts that are continually made available to human beings in whole or in part. The efforts of intermediary transmission are confined with better and more clear explanation of the antecendent. That is the reason why all Indian learning, accordingly, perceives itself and actually presents itself largely as a commentary on the primordial *śāstras*.[25] To put it in other words – and following the Maxwell's arguments, – "what is "shastric" in Indian tradition is not in fact the textual record but the human transmission of that which at any particular time is considered to be true tradition: authority stems from a person who best embodies and exemplifies the current social perception of cultural convention".[26] Such practice was exerted at most of sculptural centres, though the textbooks or manuals that could have been referred to are not the texts that have come down to us as *śilpaśāstras*.

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[21] Maxwell, "Śilpa *versus* Śāstra", 10.
[22] Pollock, "The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory", 514.
[23] *NŚ* 1.1–24.
[24] ŚP 2.788–790. See Alice Boner, Sadāśiva Rath Śarma (eds.), *Śilpa prakāśa. Medieval Orissan Sanskrit Text on Temple Architecture by Rāmacandra Kaulācāra*, Leiden, 1966, 128.
[25] Pollock, "The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory", 515.
[26] Maxwell, "Śilpa *versus* Śāstra", 14.

Landmarks for further investigation

The history of research on and interpretation of *śilpaśāstra* enables us to understand that an integral approach to Indian art culture expressed in a non-dialectical relation between textual theory and practical activity will be achieved only when the objectives, provenance and historical particularities of shastric tradition are taken into account. Presently, the dominant attitude to art theory as to a digest of experimentally validated "canonical" principles applied to Indian intellectual culture rises more questions than gives answers. This understanding has been derived mainly from archaeology as a set of methodologies to investigate the past which supplied knowledge based on excavated material. The latter was systematized also by applying abstract stylistic categories. Scholars, who witnessed the constantly increasing number and diversity of unearthed art objects, were expecting to find the principles underlying this stylistic variety in the traditional Indian texts on art. When these efforts ended in failure due to different reasons (one of them pertained to a deficient access to the *śilpaśāstras*), the principles of artistic activity were not rarely discovered through the appeal to the *alaṃkāraśāstras* and later projected to art and architecture. Therefore, in prospect, the research on Indian *śilpaśāstra* should proceed in presenting a more detailed assessment of the idea of *śāstra* as pertaining to art activity in India, which would also contribute to a critical inspection of the concept of art theory in Western aesthetics.

ŚILPAŚĀSTRŲ TRADICIJOS 'VIDUJE': ĮŽANGINĖS PASTABOS APIE INDIJOS MENINIŲ TEKSTŲ TYRINĖJIMŲ ISTORIJĄ

Valdas Jaskūnas

S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje apžvelgiama kone du šimtmečius Indijos meno tyrinėjimų istorijoje nuolat keliama meno teorijos tekstų (*śilpaśāstrų*) svarbos indų meno pažinimui problema. Pastarųjų dešimtmečių tyrinėjimai atskleidė daugybę naujų šilpaśāstrų kilmės, funkcijos ir santykio su egzistuojančiais meno paminklais aspektų. Kontekstualus požiūris į Indijos meną, vengiant klaidų, padarytų, kai tekstualinės ir meno istorijos studijos plėtojosi lygia greta, tačiau retai susiliesdamos ir praturtindamos viena kitą, leidžia naujai suvokti šių tekstų reikšmę Indijos meninei tradicijai. Vis dėlto konceptualių šilpaśāstrų sistemų ir gyvos meninės tradicijos santykio, t. y. kaip mąstymas ir veiksmas veikia vienas kitą, problema iki šiol Indijos meninės kultūros tyrinėjimuose lieka atvira. Pagrindinė tokių tyrinėjimų trūkumo priežastimi veikiausiai reikėtų laikyti tai, jog meno istorijos studijose iki šiol vyraujantis stilistinis požiūris pernelyg mažai teikė dėmesio meno šāstrų idėjos ir prigimties suvokimui. Šiame straipsnyje nesiekiama pateikti vienareikšmio atsakymo į klausimą apie šāstrų vietą ir vaidmenį meninėje kultūroje; tai veikiau pastangos suformuluoti darbinę hipotezę, kuri ateityje leistų nuosekliau pažvelgti į vieną labiausiai nepelnytai pamirštų Indijos intelektinės kultūros sričių – vaizduojamojo meno tekstų sistemą ir jos vietą Indijos intelektinėje istorijoje.

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