ISABELLA NARDI. *The Theory of Citrasūtras in Indian Painting. A critical re-evaluation of their uses and interpretations*, Royal Asiatic Society Books, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, xviii + 190 pp. ISBN 0-415-39195-4 (Hardback), £80.00

It is hard to find a more contentious issue in the history of Indian art than the controversy about the regulative nature of texts on arts and the usual practice of addressing to those texts by the artists themselves. It is natural that contradictions on this issue foreground the research by Isabella Nardi, which primarily focuses on the theory of Indian painting and modes of its application in practice by contemporary traditional painters throughout India. To escape the pitfalls of the apparent unambiguity of linkages between texts and theory, Nardi largely draws on the history of research of Indian painting, which highlights a set of preconceptions uncritically adapted by earlier authors. As a consequence, this historical overview identifies the aim of examining the validity of these preconceptions on the basis of interpreting the main concepts of Indian painting as met in various treatises on painting, termed

citrasūtras, on the grounds of looking for their application in contemporary practice. Such a methodological stance, on the one hand, contributes fundamentally in positing the controversy of relevance of theory in practice on a more firm ground than comparative stylistic analysis so far has been able to provide, yet on the other hand, it calls for reconsidering some limits of judging textual evidence predominantly on the basis of practical applicability.

The core of the book consists of a critical comparative analysis of the concepts of Indian painting, namely the concept of painting and its origins (ch. 2), system of measurement and proportions (ch. 3–4), stances and postures (ch. 5), iconography (ch. 6), technical instruments and preparation for painting (ch. 7), and aesthetic theory of *rasa* (ch. 8). Nardi uses a great number of texts on painting, ranging from the *Citralakṣaṇa* of Nagnajit to the possibly 19th century compilation *Śukranīti* to present the variety of attitudes towards these concepts, although without the most demanded effort to historicize these concepts. Such a position is tenable if we admit the essentialist character of these concepts that vary solely or predominantly in technical application rather than cultural conception, but an attempt to compare traditional knowledge with actual practice would be more consistent in treating the 'dynamic system' of the texts on painting within a historical milieu.

Pursuing the aim of drawing together the various concepts expounded in a diverse range of texts, Nardi calls for contextual rather than word-by-word interpretation of the *citrasūtras*, which comes from the demand 'to shift our focus away from the unattainable ambition to explain every single line of a text to appreciate its arguments' (p. 10). Conclusions at the end of each part emphasize the point that texts are not to be considered as guides but rather represent an authoritative view from which an artist can develop his ideas and skills. To put it in Nardi's words, 'texts are about ideas rather than fixed rules' (p. 156), and 'we should understand the theory as a way of conceiving Indian art, a way of reasoning' (p. 157). The theoretical approach to the texts as dynamic, organic structures that even consist of contradictory interpretations as a result of constant interaction with the actual practice of painting is assuredly a prospective one and deserves keen attention from the part of both historians of art and textual analysts. In argumentation, however, this view to some extent tends to indirectly simulate the source behind the texts under discussion, namely, the highly preferable commentary tradition. Further, Nardi distinguishes between texts and artist, but the fundamental question as to what agency stands behind the texts as its writer and for what purpose the texts on painting have been written remain undiscussed.

Truly, everybody familiar with texts on art or architecture would admit that to come to some relatively defined conclusion while drawing solely on texts is far from being a simple task due to various reasons, namely, inconsistency of language, inextricability of terminology and its references, and insufficient knowledge of the cultural milieu

that produced a text, to name just a few. It is the commentary tradition that is usually addressed for this purpose no matter which field of intellectual knowledge is concerned. Unfortunately, the commentaries on both *śilpa* and *vāstu* texts are an almost non-existent subject of indological research, but even scarce knowledge on the subject does not attract Nardi's attention. The widely shared attitude towards the non-Sanskrit texts—most of the commentaries are definitely written in vernacular languages—as not pertaining to shastric knowledge is an untenable excuse actually issuing from social contestation between the Brahmans as reproducers of shastric knowledge and the artists. Thus I eagerly share the opinion of Nardi that 'normative preference' stands for major reasons of underestimating the texts on painting and sculpture, although in my opinion to address the actual commentaries, both in written and oral form, of the existent *śilpa* works would have contributed fundamentally to methodology of Nardi's research.

Nardi's critical attitude when she questions preconceptions about the *citrasūtras* being the prescriptive 'manuals' containing the secrets of Indian art possible to 'unlock' by precise translation is hugely persuasive. However, tough focusing on the dialectics of text versus practical application prevents the author from adequately discerning the suppositions that have been keeping preconceptions such as 'prescriptive manuals' functional for years. It is almost evident that these conceptualizations had a very supportive argument that has been constantly exposed by the socio-anthropologists and that is boldly presented in the citation of Sharma Sastry when he argues that disbelief in following the rules set by the shastras comes from the fact the very followers were 'Dravidian Sudras' (p. 14). It is hard to overhear in this argument the repercussions of the hegemonic claims of the brahmanical shastric tradition that proposes the preconditions for the discussions on the correlation of art texts and practice. It can be seen that, in the mainstream of art history research, even questioning to what scale the practice of art follows the theory lacks secure ground and in principal interferes in the discussion about the hegemony of the brahmanical intellectual tradition. This might be the reasons why texts and practices were inclined to be detached in art history speculation, which in turn precluded a more vivid discussion about the subject. I would therefore suggest that the viewpoints of Sastry and other authors authors by no means refers to the 'fallacy of believing that texts could ever necessarily be considered as complete guides by painters' (p. 14) as Nardi would think. On the contrary, those views were acknowledged to such an extent that the discussion of the social milieu in which the tradition was transmitted was almost eliminated from scholarly discussions and revived only in the socio-anthropological agenda on castes as seen in the works of researchers such as Jan Brouwer and Samuel K. Parker.

Furthermore, one of the central concerns throughout the book is to examine the relevance of the practical value of the texts after actual practice. It is one of the

most intriguing methodological approaches Isabella Nardi develops in her book. Yet, it shows no claims to historically posit the development of a particular concept or technical device among the different texts but rather intends to dissipate the prevalent viewing of the texts on painting as lacking relationship with, if not to say ignoring, practice. The main reason precluding Nardi from wider historical interpretations in this direction is probably that the arguments of a series of scholars whose idea of considering texts as related to a particular period or school has proved unsatisfactory (p. 135). She tends to see texts as a result of compilation over generations, yet some recent studies on the texts and history of practices show that some texts on Indian art, among them the Citrasūtra of the *Viṣṇudharmottara purāṇa*, can be safely dated to a particular period and even linked to the particular practices of it (see, for example, Ronald Inden, 'Imperial Purāṇas: Kashmir as Vaiṣṇava Center of the World', in *Querying the Medieval. Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, 2000), and thus the attempts to historically specify the texts is by no means to consider texts as merely 'prescriptive guides' for the painters or sculptors.

In spite of these reservations about Nardi's methodologies of comparison between the texts and actual practices, her attempt to consider texts as providing a variety of options for the artist according to his competence and skills is admittedly very instructive and leads to critical reflection of the provenance and methods of theorizing the discourse of painting. *The Theory of Citrasūtras in Indian Painting* is a comprehensive book on Sanskrit *citrasūtras* with an exhaustive exploration of diverse topics discussed and an attempt to question the normative theory of painting on the basis of its practice as exemplified by contemporary traditional painters from diverse regions in India. The book is therefore highly recommended to students of Indian art, both as a guide to technical knowledge and as a penetrating study of the history of critical studies of Indian painting.

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