

Historical Assessment of Floral and Faunal Representation of Ancient Indian Sculpture

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Abstract

The Sculptural art of India occupies the foremost place in the history of world art. The artist in India had attained a high degree of excellence at a very early period and specimens produced by him are truly marvels of human industry and skill. One finds in them an intensity of feeling, a revelation of the powers of the unseen which is not approached in the art elsewhere in the world. The success of artistic production depends on the intensity of the artist's realization of his beauty and his ability to interpret his experience to others.

Keywords: Sculpture, Animal figures, Maurya, Rhythm, Flora, Fauna

Introduction:

The feeling of art was dictated by man's devotional approach to such experience. This was the higher purpose of A art; higher only in the sense that its theme was of a sublime world, not that art was in any way the preserve of the select few only, and inaccessible to the masses of people, or deliberately kept back from them.

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It was realized that art had a mission and a purpose which must be expressed through forms whose appeal was irresistible and meaning unmistakable. Such language was devised in the form of symbols which played such an important part in Indian art. The symbols sometimes occupy the centre of the picture in the form of the images of divine beings, saints and seers who themselves typify certain great ideas accepted as truth through ages by a devout humanity. The symbols also served the purpose of decoration, adornment and space filling. Even here, they have their values and are linked to a predominant common purpose, namely expression of ideas through an aesthetic medium, with a charm that enhances their appeal and in a manner that contributes to the enrichment of the outer forms of life in relation to the inner growth of the mind.

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I

The earliest sculptures come from Indus valley. The human and animal figures excavated in that region show a high degree of finish and excellence and disclose an advance stage of development of art in the third millennium B.C. The people of *Indus Valley* had developed a lithic industry of making stone statuary. The highlight is the bearded head and bust of a male figure wearing a scarp with a *tre-foil*

decoration originally filled with red paste. The *tre-foil* pattern had an international background being found in *Mesopotemia*, *Egypt* and *Crete* where it is associated with a religious character which makes it probable that the Mohenjo-daro bust was intended to portray a deity or perhaps a priest.

The *Harappa* modelers also showed a considerable skill in modeling animal figures in the round in faience and metal and their innate plastic sense is evidenced in the bronze figure of a *Buffalo* and the faience model of a *monkey* both from *Mohenzo-daro*. A discussion of *Harappa* art must remain incomplete without a reference to the numerous seal engravings which are the most characteristic among the objects of the *Harappa* civilization. The most characteristic design consists of figures of animals. Some of these animals are evidently imaginary, such as *unicorns*, and *chimeras*. The noble series of *bulls*, *buffalos* and *bisons* represent forceful and monumental compositions. Not only are they faithful renderings of the physical forms of the animals, but also do have they constituted the most successful studies of their nature and character. In the representation of the humped *bull* the noble dignity of the animal is evident in its mighty body surging with pent-up energy. The spirited attitude of the *buffalo*, with the head raised powerful horns. The same bold draughtmanship is also manifest in the arched shape of the *bison*. In every instance the muscles seem to ripple under the skin in the most naturalistic manner. A bronze chariot drawn by two *oxen* along with the charioteer, and bronze figure of *elephant* a *buffalo*, a *rhinoceros*, copper dog and bird figures are preserved.

In the *Prasada* was built on a solid foundation or basement (*Vaththu*). In this connection some architectural elements are to be noted, e.g. pillar (*Stambha*), *Sanghata* (capitals of pillars with pairs of animals and human beings as *Hayasanghata*, *Gaja-Sanghata*, *Nara Sanghata* etc.) *Gopansi* refers literally *bull's*

nose, (a caitya window like motif on the outside of the walls where rafters were placed). A roof-apartment (*Simha-Panjara*, *Lion-cage*) is clear in some of the sculptures. The whole building was decorated with many kinds of figures and motifs, e.g. *Ihamiga* (fabulous animals), *bulls* (*Vsabha*), *horse* (*Turaga*), *deer* (*Ruru*), *Sarabha* (lion like figures), *Crocodile* (*Magara*), *birds* (*Vihaga*), *serpents* or *dragons* (*Valaga*), *elephant* (*Kunjara*), *wild creepers* (*Vanalaya*) and *lotus-creepers* (*Paumalaya*).

Polished ring stones about 40 in number found at several ancient sites are the main items for floral and faunal representation of the *pre-Mauriyan* age. A circular sand stone plaque from *Mathura*, showing an eight-petalled *lotus* in the centre from which four stalks shoot out in the four directions and bend in various foliated patterns, showing the terminal or pericarp eight female figures, in dancing hand poses. The female figures alternate with the design resembling the '*muchuknda*' flower. A ring-stone from *Mathura* (diameter 3.5", Mathura Museum No.2471) showing in the centre a full blown *lotus* flower without spreading tendrils, of which the first band depicts four animals in the four intermediate directions, viz., a *lion* an *antelope*, a *bull* and a *stag*, and the outer band showing four flowery motifs above the four animals, and in the four cardinal points four female figures are depicted. Fragment of a ring stone from *Kosam*, showing outer and inner bands of *rosette-followers* (now in the *Allahabad Museum*). One ring-stone from *Rajghat*, (in *Bharat Kata Bhavan*), shown three Mother-Goddess alternating with three *linga* symbols flanked by two *cobras* and an outer band of trapezoid design. A fragment of ring stone *Rajghat* showing on the inside head and bust of the Mother Goddess with the upper portion of a *palm tree*. Another fragment from *Rajghat* showing in the inner band four Mother-Goddess alternating with *Palm-trees*, three of whom are seen and

in the outer band a series of *lizards* or *crocodiles* (*Makara*) of whom there were originally eight, five being still preserved. Ring stones from *Rajghat* (Now in Lucknow Museum) showing – (a) Mother-Goddess with hare on right and moon symbol below, and *deer* on left with a taurine symbol in front of him; (b) *Palm tree* with a *bird* on right and an animal on left with symbol of moon and sun clearly; (c) Mother-Goddess with a *Sarasa* like bird on right, the figure on left effaced; (d) *Palm tree* of which only the lower most portion of circular railing is now left; (e) Mother-Goddess, the full figure with splay feet and stiff straight arms, and turbaned head, being preserved flanked by two animals. The left being a horse; (f) *Palm tree* in railing with a bird on right and *horse* on left. A cylinder seal from *Kosam* engraved with bird and animal figures in chequered pattern. A cylindrical seal from *Rajghat* showing a bull with a crib similar to that on the *Indus Valley* seals. A stone from *Patna* city found in sewer excavations showing a fifteen petalled *lotus flower* in the centre encircled by a beautiful garland of 18 taurins in small size, a motif well known in early art. A ring stone from *Patna* city showing three concentric bands, the first showing 21 petals, the second 12 animals and birds including a *horse*, a *lion*, an *elephant*, a *rhinoceros* moving in a file, and the third a design like pencils of light. Recently three more ring stones from the *Allahabad* museum, have been published, showing in the outer band a row of *Makara* figures and in the inner a row of *lions*. The meanings of the ring-stones are clear in the context of Indian religious beliefs of worshipping the Mother cult with its attendants.

II

The coming of the *Mauryas* represents a definite landmark in Indian history. The new outlook, political, intellectual and psychological, proved to be of immense significance for the development of the formative arts of the country.

Strength and Majesty were the hall-mark of Mauryan Institution and they are seen at best in monuments of *Mauryan art*. A clear idea of the form and composition may be drawn from *Lauriya – Nandangarh* in *North Bihar*. The highly polished tall and well proportioned columns standing free in space and cut out of gray sandstone. The shaft always plain and smooth, circular in section and slightly tapering upwards without any base and invariably chiseled out of one piece of stone. The capital having the shape and appearance of a gently arched bell (commonly known as the ‘persipolitan bell’¹) formed of *lotus*-petals, joined with the shaft by a copper bolt of cylindrical shape. The surface of gently arched bell shaped capital is decorated with highly stylized longitudinal *lotus petals* with sharp and thin ridges in the middle and wide and roundest border moulding. The real aesthetic significance of beauty arched and elegantly ribbed floral bell of the Mauryan capital lies in its gentle curve. In form, shape and appearance the *Mauryan* bell which along with the *Achaemenian* may have originally been derived from stylized *lotus* design and which may have been common art in both Indian and *Iranian* art heritage. The *Lauriya-Nandangarh* capital consists of a sajjant *lion*, a round abacus decorated with pecking *geese* pattern and an inverted *lotus* below. The lower most portions are covered with overflowing re-curved and stylized petals. The figure of the *lion* expressed much more vigorous and intense attitude in this monument. The details of the nerves and the veins are more sharply defined, yet the whole figure is marked by a good deal of stylizing.

The *lion* figure of the *Bakhira* capital is clumsy and crude in style. The animal is uncomfortably place on its abacus. The feeling for linear rhythm is evident in the flowing line gliding downwards from the top of the head. The facial expression is quaint and primitive and the entire attitude lacks dignity. The abacus, the inverted lotus and the standing shaft all point to an inferior workman who had not

the ability to integrate all the three elements of the pillar with the capital. We miss here the essential majesty which is associated with the *Mauryan* pillars.

The *Sankissa elephant* capital, *Rampurva bull* capital, The *Rampurva lion* capital figures are well executed and displays all those qualities that are associated with the master-pieces of *Mauryan* sculpture. An *elephant* carved in the rock at *Dhauli*, near *Bhuvaneshvara*, may recognize a note and feeling different from those manifested in the animal figures surmounting the pillar capitals. It represents a fine delineation of bulky volume and living flesh, natural to that animal, along with a dignified movement and linear rhythm that have no parallel. At *Kalasi* (U.P.) over the edicts, appears the engraving of an *elephant* leveled as *gajatame*, which is also characterized by the same kind of rhythm. Aesthetically, the *Dhauli elephant* is superior to the animal figures on the capitals, though it may be less advanced tectonically. The only sculpture of capital group that nearly approaches it in artistic conception and experience is the *bull* on the *Rampurva* capital which also, like it, exhibits a remarkable plastic sense for form and volume along with a quite dynamism, in strong contrast to the stylized presentation and tradition, unburdened by anything extraneous, were at work in these remarkable animal studies.

The animals forming the crowning members of the capitals of the pillars are not particularly associated with Buddhism alone. *Lion* either single or in group of four, appears on the majority of the capitals, *elephant* on the *Sankissa*, *bull* at *Rampurva* and in a group of four at *Salempur* and *horse* at *Rummindei*,² these four are also represented round the abacus of the quadric-partite capital at *Sarnath*. Some scholars try to find a specific Buddhist association of these animals: *lion* means the 'lion of the Sakyacian' (*Sakyasimha*); *elephant* is associated with the legend of the conception of the *Buddha*; *horse* with that of the 'Great Renunciation'; *bull* to

denote the Buddha who was often addressed as *muni-purigava* or as *Sakya-purigava*. These animals are sacred to *Brahmanism* and to a certain extent, to *Jainism* also. The *Lauriya Araraj* column, which in all probability, was crowned by the figure of *Garuda*³, may be regarded to have a distinct *Brahmanical* association. The view of *Agrawala*⁴ seems to be more convincing. He identifies the *lion*, the *elephant*, the *bull* and the *horse* as the four 'noble' animals (*maha ajaneya pasu*) held sacred in Indian tradition for a longtime past and for a longtime after. The view of *Benjamin Rowland*⁵ trying to explain these animals as heraldic devices derived from the west. *Bloch* was the view that they stand for the four gods, *Indra*, *Siva*, *Surya* and perhaps *Durga*, whose *vahanas* they are and consequently they are meant to indicate the subordination of these gods to *Buddha* and his law. It may be said at the outset that the *Sarnath* capital is the product of a supreme religious symbolism in which each part is a conscious conception in the aggregate. To a certain extent, every form in the entire capital of Sarnath Pillar is Indian in spirit and breathes, so to say; the tender sympathy for the animal kind which was inculcated by the doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-violence) preached by the Master and propagated by *Asoka*. The next constituent part comprising the decoration on the abacus falls in line with the ideal of serving the masses through *Dharma*⁶. The four animals and the four chakra taken together give a complete picture of the *Anotapota* or *Manasarovara* lake which was a cosmological concept accepted both by the *Brahmanical* and *Buddhist* traditions. The long *lotus* leaves covering the outlet side of the Vase, standing independently, the Indian pillars produce an independent effect, simple and harmonious in design, with a feeling of vigor and dignity that remind "fresh and elemental strength."⁷

III

Unlike Maurya court art, the art of the time of the *Sungas* is born of India's own seed with deep and intimate ethnic and local roots. *Sunga* naturalism on the other hand does not ignore the outer aspect of things but links it in an inherent connectedness with a pre-existent situation. This view of the visible world gives to *Sunga* art its lively and fluid character, a quality that is ever present in Indian plastic art. The tradition of building monumental *Stupa* realized in great splendor seen as at *Bharhut*, *Sanct* and the art of carving transferred from wooden to lithic medium in established convention. The two stupas are closely inter-related not only by their massive architecture but by the exhaustive documentation of religious ideas and art forms and especially the traditional folk cults and various floral and faunal motifs depicted and epic scale.

The two tall pillars of each gateway (*toranadvara*) are ornamented by a full medallion in the middle, and by a half medallion at top and bottom, all of which described as *Padma*, *nilotpala*, *pundarika* and other synonyms of the *lotus* flower or its compositions of *petals*, *buds*, *sepals* and *leaves*. On some pillars the flowers bear *elephants*, *winged horses*, *monkeys*, *peacocks* while *parrots* and *squirrels* hang from the branches and nibble the fruits. A historical scene showing the visit of *Ajatsatru* to *Buddha*, *Nagraja Etapatra* kneeling at the foot of the *Bodhitree* visit of kind *Prasenjit* of *Kosala* to the shrine of the *Dharma Chakra*, worship of the *Asvatha* and *Banyan* trees of *Goutama* and *Kasyapa Buddhas* respectively by wild *elephants*, etc. The *lotus* flowers with buds and leaves and creepers play an important part in the decoration of a *Stupa*. One of the most important features of *Stupa* of *Bharhut* is the presence of meandering creepers showing ornaments and textiles and other objects of food and drink from the *Kalpavrksa* trees or creepers in the *Uttarkuru* countries.

Wines bottled in jars of *jack-fruit* form, technically known as *panasa* and also *mango* shaped pendent containers for the lac-dye to paint the feet of young ladies. The main theme of the composition is the flowing linear rhythm of the plant, the creeper and vegetation, and it is not without reason that *Coomaraswamy* describes such reliefs as belonging to the '*plant style*'⁸. *Winged lions*, and *leogriff* (*Singhavyala*) formed part of wide canvas of motifs common to India and Western Asia⁹. The architrave of the Eastern gateway shows a royal retinue and a king and queen descending from an *elephant* and afterwards doing worship at the Tree¹⁰. A female figure with slightly bending on a *Sala tree* or as shown holding the branch of an *Asika tree* with her left hand and standing in a graceful attitude named *Salabhanjika* found both *Stupa-I* and *Stupa-II* of *Sanci*. *Salabhanjikas* have variously been called *Vrksikas*¹¹ (the personified female tree), *Asoka dohada* (the flowering of Asika tree), *Sura Sundari* (a celestial dancer) *Uddalaka puspa bhanjika* (romantic girl plucking flowers) etc. It is one of the several forms of *Yaksi*. *Kramrisch* collectively describes this art as representing the school of *Madhyadesa*.¹² In this context it would be useful to refer to an inscription on the west gateway which describes the reliefs to be the works of the ivory-carvers of *Vidisa*¹³.

The most popular rock-cut cave in Western India is *Karle* and *Kanheri*. The chaitya window decorated with *lion-faced Kirtimukhas*. In the *Ajanta* cave and also *Kanhere* we found the use of *Kirtimukha*¹⁴ motif carved on lintels of doorway or friezes of buildings. The reigns of the imperial *Kusanas* like *Kaniska*, *Huviska* and *Vasudeva* form the Golden Age of the Indian sculpture. In the *Kusana* age *Mathura* became a great centre of art activities, where Nature is freely represented and partakes in a real manner of the joys and emotions of human beings. Certain groups

of *Mathura* sculptures dealing with foreign elements, which Tentatively described as representing '*Herakles with the Nemen Lion*', the motif it appears has been derived from Greek classical source. *Benjamin Rowland* recognizes in it the wholly "Indian feeling of fleshy warmth and fullness"¹⁵. In the early *Kusana Buddha* and *Bodhisattva* type of *Mathura* the seat is never a *lotus* but always a *lion throne (simhasana)* without miniature figure, while in the case of standing figures there is often a seated *lion* between the feet; the gestures and features are expressive of enormous energy, rather than of repose or sweetness, nor is there any suggestion of intended grace. The *lion* between the legs indicates the portrayed is that of *Sakyasimha*,¹⁶ or '*the Lion of the Sakya people*', i.e. the historical Goutama Buddha. The representation of fauna in the *NagarjunaKonda* sculptures is two classes, namely the real and of the mythical animals (*ihamrgas* or *Vyalas*).¹⁷ The later are in a limited variety, and include *lion* with horn, beaked or with wings and the *lion* and *makara* type. The real animals comprises with *lion, elephant, horse, bull, buffalo, cow, monkey, boar, dog, goat, ram, rat, lamb, jackle, antelope, spotted deer, hare, reptiles like snake* birds like *parrot, peacock, crow, dove,* and aquatic animals such as *fish, duck, etc.*

IV

The *Gupta* period witnessed a heightening of the aesthetic consciousness leading to the fulfillment and culmination of the earlier trends and tendencies. The classical concept in Indian sculptures reaches its supreme expression in what is described as the golden age of the *Guptas*. At *Bharhut* and *Sanci* the human figure appears in the composition as a part of nature. With the growing importance of human figure nature recedes into the background but in so doing it leaves behind it unending and undulating rhythm in the human form. Even if nature is practically eliminated from

the composition during this period, it is interesting to notice that the volumes and curves found in nature supply the norms for the representation of the various parts of human body to be coordinated in a form that is at once naturalistic and aesthetically ideal. The *flower*, the *leaf* or the trunk of a *tree*, a *bird* or an animal constitutes the criteria on the similitude of which the various parts of the body are enjoined to be rendered. According to Indian view of art a superior uniformity and grace of form may be recognized in the animal and vegetable worlds than among the human beings.

So, from the above discussion we may realize that sculpture was the favoured medium of artistic expression on the Indian sub continent, where nature has been an integral part of it. The flora and fauna representation in ancient Indian sculpture convey the message of conservation of nature and it also supported by the ancient scriptural text, the *Ishaupanishad* over 2000 years ago. The representation of flora and fauna in art reflects the Indian mind of nature worship.

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