HINDU ART

HINDU ART:

ITS HUMANISM AND MODERNISM

An introductory essay

by

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PREFACE

"THE Giottos of Hindu art," I wrote in an article on "Oriental Culture in Modern Pedagogics" in *School and Society* (April 14, 1917), "would be well known 'great masters' to the students of early Renaissance painting, and the post-impressionists and futurists of Eur-America would be found to have as their comrades in new ventures and experiments the Hindu painters of the modern nationalist school."

Such was the message also of my talks at the Pen and Brush Club, Columbia University, the Civic Club, and other institutions in the United States, the outcome of which is this little book. Parts of it have appeared in the *Journal of Race Development,* and in the *Modern Review* (Calcutta).

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SECTION I

ART-CRITICISM IN SHAKOONTALA

In Kalidasa's play, *Shakoontala* (fifth century A. C.), we have among the *dramatis personae* Anasuya, a damsel of the hermitage, who is skilled in painting. Besides, a considerable portion of Act VI, Sc. ii is a study in art criticism. It introduces us to some of the themes of the Hindu painters, their methods of execution, and the æsthetic taste of the spectators.

King Doosyanta has through inadvertence dismissed his wife Shakoon-

tala from the palace. He soon perceives his mistake and becomes love-sick. A picture of Shakoontala is then painted. The king hopes to derive some relief from this likeness.

"(*Enter a maid with a tablet.*)

MAID. Your Majesty, here is the picture of our lady.

(*She produces the tablet.*)

KING (*gazing at it*). It is a beautiful picture. See!

A graceful arch of brows above great eyes;
Lips bathed in darting, smiling light that flies
Reflected from white teeth; a mouth as red
As red karkandhu-fruit; love's brightness shed
O'er all her face in bursts of liquid charm—
The picture speaks, with living beauty warm.

CLOWN (*looking at it*). The sketch is

full of sweet meaning. My eyes seem to stumble over its uneven surface. What more can I say? I expect to see it come to life, and I feel like speaking to it.

MISHRAKESHI. The king is a clever painter. I seem to see the dear girl before me.

KING. My friend,

What in the picture is not fair,
Is badly done;
Yet something of her beauty there,
I feel, is won.

. . . . . .

(*Sighing.*)

I treated her with scorn and loathing ever;
Now o'er her pictured charms my heart will burst.

. . . . . .

CLOWN. There are three figures in the picture, and they are all beautiful. Which one is the lady Shakoontala?

. . . . . .

KING. Which one do you think?

CLOWN (*observing closely*). I think it

is this one, leaning against the creeper which she has just sprinkled. Her face is hot and the flowers are dropping from her hair; for the ribbon is loosened. Her arms droop like weary branches; she has loosened her girdle, and she seems a little fatigued. This, I think, is the lady Shakoontala; the others are her friends.

KING. You are good at guessing. Besides, here are proofs of my love.

See where discolorations faint
Of loving handling tell;
And here the swelling of the paint
Shows where my sad tears fell.

CHATOORIKA. I have not finished the background. Go, get the brushes.

. . . . . .

CLOWN. What are you going to add?

MISHRAKESHI. Surely, every spot that the dear girl loved.

KING. Listen, my friend.

The stream of Malini, and on its sands
The swan-pairs resting; holy foot-hill lands

Of great Himalaya's sacred ranges, where
The yaks are seen; and under trees that bear
Bark hermit-dresses on their branches high,
A doe that on the buck's horn rubs her eye.

. . . . . .

And another ornament that Shakoontala loved I have forgotten to paint.

. . . . . .

The siris-blossom, fastened o'er her ear,
Whose stamens brush her cheek;
The lotus-chain like autumn moonlight soft
Upon her bosom meek.

CLOWN. But why does she cover her face with fingers lovely as the pink water-lily? She seems frightened. (*He looks more closely.*) I see. Here is a bold, bad bee. He steals honey, and so he flies to her lotus-face.

. . . . . .

KING. Sting that dear lip, O bee, with cruel power,

And you shall be imprisoned in a flower.

CLOWN. Well, he doesn't seem afraid of your dreadful punishment. . . .

KING. Will he not go, though I warn him?

. . . . . .

CLOWN (*aloud*). It is only a picture, man."

(Ryder's version.)

There is no touch of pessimism, idealism, or subjectivism in all these remarks and suggestions. A modern lover examining the photo or oil painting of his darling could not be more realistic.

Does this conversation open up to us a society of ascetics or *yogins* waiting for Divine illumination to evolve *shilpa* (art) out of the neo-Platonic meditation or the Hindu *dhyana?* Or does it make the India of the fifth century a cognate of the modern world in

its matter-of-fact sober grasp of the realities of flesh and blood?

It is really a specimen of Hindu positivism that Kalidasa, the Shakespeare of Hindu literature, has furnished in this bit of discussion in pictorial art. We feel how profound humanists the Hindu audiences were in their outlook, how non-mystical in their views and criticisms in regard to *chitra-lakshana* (*i. e.,* "marks" of a painting).

SECTION II

COMPARATIVE ART-HISTORY

AND yet European and American scholars as well as their Asian paraphrasers have tried to discover and demonstrate an Oriental pessimism in the arts and crafts of the Hindus. It is generally held that the inspiration of Hindu painters and sculptors is totally different from that of the Westerns. The images and pictures executed by the artists of India are believed to have been the products of *Yoga,* of an ultra-meditative consciousness. They are said to reveal a much too subjective or idealistic temperament. Further, they are all alleged to be religious or mythological in theme.

Comparative art-history would indicate, however, that Hindu plastic art or drawing has not been the handmaid of theology to a far greater extent than the classical and medieval works of Europe. Is it not Greek mythology that we see embodied in the sculptures of Phidias? Similarly are not the Catholic and Russian paintings mere aids to the popularization of the Bible stories? Indeed, art has long been more or less "illustrative" of history, legends, traditions, and myths both in the East and the West.

We do not know much of the Greek paintings. But we know the legends in the drawings on the Greek vases of the fifth century B. C. In one the serpent is being strangled by Heracles, almost as if the hydra Kaliya is being quelled by Krishna; in another Theseus

is fighting the Amazons; and in a third Gorgon is pursuing Perseus or Kadmos killing the dragon. What else are the themes of the medieval Purana-painters? And Hindus whose infancy is nurtured on the stories and paintings of the *Ramayana* will easily remember familiar scenes in the colored *terra cottas* of Hellas which portray, for instance, a Paris in the act of leading away Helen, or the parting of Hector and Andromache.

It may be confidently asserted, besides, that the spiritual atmosphere of Gothic cathedrals of the thirteenth century with their soul-inspiring sculptures in alabaster and bronze has not been surpassed in the architecture of the East. The pillars at Chartres with *bas* reliefs of images and flowers could be bodily transported to the best relig-

ious edifices of Hindustan. The elongated Virgin at the Paris Notre Dame is almost as conventionalized as a Korean Kwannon. The representation of virtues and vices on the portal of the Savior at the Amiens Cathedral suggests the moralizing in woodwork on the walls of Nikko in Japan. And scenes from the Passion on the tympanum at Strassburg or from the Last Judgment on the tympanum of the north door in the Cathedral at Paris are oriented to the same psychological background as the *bas* reliefs depicting incidents in the holy career of Buddha with which the Stoopas (mounds) of Central India make us familiar, or of the Dalai Lama on the surface of the marble pagoda at Peking.

Further, it may be asked, can any Classicist rationally declare that the

Greek Apollos are not the creations of subjective, the so-called *yogic* or meditative experience? In what respects are the figures of the Hindu Buddhas and Shivas more idealistic? Polykleitos, for instance, dealt with abstract humanity, ideals, or "airy nothings" in the same sense as the artists of the Goopta period (A. C. 300–600) or Dhiman and Vitapala of the Pala period (780–1175) in India. Nowhere has a sculptured image, *bas* relief, or colored drawing been completely "photographic." Art as such is bound to be interpretative or rather originative; and identification of the artist's self with his theme is the *sine qua non* of all creative *élan,* in science as in art.

We have to recognize, moreover, that saints and divinities are not the exclusive themes of art work in India.

Hindu art has flourished in still life, social (*genre*), natural, plant, and animal studies as well. The avoidance of the nude in early Christian art has its replica in the East. Physical beauty was not more often a taboo in Hindu art-psychology than in the Western. The dignity of the flesh has left its stamp on India's water colors, gouache paintings, and stone and bronze.

Even the figures of the Hindu gods and goddesses are to be perceived as projections of the human personality. The medieval Rajput paintings of the Radha-Krishna cycle and the Shiva-Doorga cycle can have but one secular appeal to all mankind. Accordingly we are not surprised to find in Dhananjaya the medieval dramaturgist's *Dasha-roopa* the dictum that anything and everything can

be the theme of art (IV, 90, Haas's transl.).

Lastly, can one forget that the conditions of life that produced the Byzantine and Italian masterpieces were almost similar to the *milieu* (economic and socio-religious) including court patronage and guild control, under which flourished the celebrated Ajanta painters and Bharhut sculptors? For in the Middle Ages in Asia as in Europe the church or the temple was the school, the art-gallery, and the museum; the priests and monks were painters, poets, calligraphists and pedagogues; and the Scriptures constituted the whole encyclopædia. And if today it is possible for the Western mind to appreciate Fra Angelico, Massaccio, and Giotto, it cannot honestly ignore the great masters of the Hindu styles,

especially in view of the fact that the works of the Oriental medievals are not more "imperfect" in technique according to modern ideas than those of their Occidental fellow-artists.

The fundamental identity of artistic inspiration between the East and the West, allowing for the differences in schools and epochs in each, is incidentally borne out by coincidences in social life for which art work is responsible. Thus, the interior, nave and aisles of the Buddhist cave temples do not impress an observer with any feelings different from those evoked by the early Christian churches and Norman Cathedrals. The towers and contours of the twelfth century Romanesque Cathedral at Ely and the sixteenth century Gothic structure at Orleans have the *ensemble* of the *gopoorams* of

Southern India. And the Gothic tapestries representing the hunting scenes of a Duke of Burgundy suggest at the very first sight the aspects of medieval Hindu castles and the figures and headdresses of the Indo-Saracenic Moghul styles.

It may sometimes be difficult for a non-Hindu fully to appreciate the images and paintings of India because their conventions and *motifs* are so peculiarly Hindu. Exactly the same difficulty arises with regard to Western art. Who but a Christian can find inspiration in a *Last Supper* or a *Holy Family* or a *God dividing light from darkness?* For that matter, even the *Aeneid* would be unintelligible to the modern Eur-American lovers of poetry unless they made it a point to study Roman history. Nay, a well-educated

Jew may naturally fail to respond to the sentiments in the *Divine Comedy* or Signorelli's *Scenes from Dante.*

But the difficulties of appreciation by foreigners do not make an art-work necessarily "local" or racial. It may still be universal in its appeal and thoroughly humanistic. There are hardly any people who in modern times can enter into the spirit of the *Ka* statues which stand by the sarcophagi in the cave tombs of the Pharaohs. And yet how essentially akin to modern mankind were the Egyptians if we can depend on the evidences of their letters! A *Ka* is described in one of the inscriptions thus: "He was an exceptional man; wise, learned, displaying true moderation of mind, distinguishing the wise man from the fool; a father to the unfortunate, a mother to the motherless,

the terror of the cruel, the protector of the disinherited, the defender of the oppressed, the husband of the widow, the refuge of the orphan." There is no gap in fundamental humanity between the men and women of to-day and the race that could write such an epitaph, in spite of the fact that many of its conventions and usages seem entirely meaningless.

The student of foreign literature has specially to qualify himself in order that he may understand the unfamiliar idioms of its language and the peculiar turns of expression. No other qualification is demanded in modern men and women for an appreciation of the old and distant carvings, statuettes and drawings. The chief *desideratum* is really an honest patience with the ra-

cial modes and paraphernalia of foreign art.

With this elementary preparation the Occidental connoisseur should be able to say about Hindu sculptures and paintings what Max Weber writes about all antiques in his essay on "Tradition and Now": "Whether we have changed or not, I believe, in spite of all the manifestos to the contrary, in whatever tongue they be written or spoken, that the antiques will live as long as the sun shines, as long as there is mother and child, as long as there are seasons and climes, as long as there is life and death, sorrow and joy." (*Essays on Art.*)

SECTION III

HUMANISM IN HINDU ART

IN *Shookra-neeti,* a Hindu sociological treatise, we read a few injunctions against the construction of human images. We are told that "the images of gods, even if deformed, are for the good of men. But the images of men, even if well formed, are never for human good." Shookra's generally recognized dictum seems to be that "the images of gods yield happiness to men, and lead to heaven; but those of men lead away from heaven and yield grief." (Ch. IV, Sec. iv, lines 154–158, Sarkar's transl.)

Verses of a similar import from *shilpa-shastras* (treatises on arts and

crafts) may be used as texts by those who want to prove the wholly non-secular character of Hindu art. But such art critics would commit the same fallacy as those psychologists who formulate the race-ideal of the entire Hindu population of all ages on the strength of a few sayings of Shakya the Buddha and other moralists. In spite of Shookra, Hindus have had sculptures of human beings in the streets and public places, *bas* reliefs of warrior-kings on coins, and paintings of men and women on the walls of their houses, palaces, and art galleries. Secular art was an integral part of their common life. Imagery and similes from the worldly paintings and sculptures are some of the stock-in-trade embellishments of every literary work, *e. g.,* poetry, fiction, drama, in India.

In Soobandhu's prose romance, *Vasavadatta* (sixth century A. C.), there is a description of the Vindhya mountain. One of the objects mentioned is the lion "with his sinewy frame, now rising high behind and now before." And the author is at once led to think of the scene as a possible theme of painting. Thus,

"His ears erect, in sudden onslaught skilled,
His mane astart, and jaws all hideous,
His stiffened tail high-waving in the breeze—
No artist could portray this awful beast
What time he croucheth on the mighty brow
Of some great elephant, shrill trumpeting
Adown the lonely dells of Vindhya's mount."

(Gray's version.)

Painting was an accomplishment of the literary women. The box of

paints, canvas, pencil, tapestry, and picture-frames are referred to in *Charudatta, Clay Cart, Raghu-vamsha, Oottara-rama-charita* and *Kadambaree.* All these references apply to mundane paintings. In *Vasavadatta,* again, Patalipootra (Patna) is described as a city of which the conspicuous objects are the statues, which adorn the white-washed houses.

It is almost a convention with the heroes and heroines of Hindu literature to speak of the faces of their beloved as "pictures fixed on the walls of the heart." This conceit occurs even in Krishnamishra's morality-play, *Prabodha-chandrodaya* (eleventh century).

In Soobandhu's romance the heroine Vasavadatta is seen by Kandarpaketu in a dream. She "was a picture, as it

were, on the wall of life." And when he awoke he "embraced the sky, and with outstretched arms cried to his beloved, as if she were painted in the heavens, graven on his eyes, and carven on his heart." Kandarpaketu goes to sleep "looking on that most dear one as if limned by the pencil of fancy on the tablet of his heart."

Similarly Vasavadatta thinks of Kandarpaketu "as if he were carven on her heart . . . as if he were engraved there, inlaid, riveted." She exclaims to one of her maidens: "Trace in a picture the thief of my thoughts." And, "over and over thinking thus, as if he were painted on the quarters and sub-quarters (of the sky), as if he were engraved on the cloud, as if he were reflected in her eye, she painted him in a picture as if he had been seen before."

The joy of life in all its manifestations is the one grand theme of all Hindu art. It is futile to approach the sculptors and painters of India with the notion of finding a typically Hindu message in them. The proper method should be to watch how far and in what manner the artist has achieved his ends as artist; *i. e.,* as manipulator of forms and colors. Interpretation of life, or "criticism of life" may be postulated of every great worker in ink, bronze, or clay, whether in the East or in the West. The only test of a masterpiece, however, is ultimately furnished by the questions: "Is it consistent in itself? Does this handiwork of man add to the known types of the universe? Has it extended the bounds of Creation?"

Human ideals are the same all the world over. One piece of art in India

may be superior to another in Europe, and *vice versa.* But this superiority is not necessarily a superiority in art-ideal or race-genius. It has to be credited to the individual gifts of the master in workmanship, or perhaps to the group psychology of a creative epoch. There is but one standard for all art (*shilpa*), but one world-measure for all human energy (*shakti*). And since neither the Eastern nor the Western evolution can be summed up in single shibboleths, types, or schools, it would be absurd to try to appraise Indian experience solely in terms of the æsthetics that found one of its most powerful expressions in the art-theory of the Young Germany represented by Cornelius, Overbeck, Schiller and others (*cf.* Schiller's *Use of the Chorus*).

SECTION IV

HINDU TECHNIQUE IN POST-IMPRESSIONISM

"MODERN" is the term that seems to have been monopolized by the artists who claim Cêzanne as their inspirer. And yet in this modernism Old India's paintings and sculptures have been a stimulating force.

The plastic art-creations at Bharhut and the frescoes at Ajanta constitute in stone and color, as we have indicated, the poetry of the whole gamut of human emotions from "the ape and tiger" to the "god-in-man." The encyclopædic humanism of Hindu art is indeed comparable only to the compre-

hensive secularism in the painted *bas* reliefs of Egyptian hill-caves and the stately *Kakemonos* of the Chinese masters. While the message of the artists and craftsmen of India is thus universal as the man of flesh and blood, they developed certain peculiarities in the technique and mode of expression which "he that runs may read."

The most prominent characteristic of Hindu sculptures and paintings is what may be called the "dance-form." We see the figures, *e. g.,* Shiva, the prince of dancers, or Krishna, the flute-player, in action, doing something, in the supple movement of limbs. Lines of graceful motion, the play of geometric contours, the ripple of forms, the flowing rhythm of bends and joints in space would arrest the eye of every observer of the bronzes, water-colors, and gou-

ache works in India. Another characteristic that cannot fail to be noticed is the elimination of details, the suppression of minuter individualities, on the one hand, and, on the other, the occasional elongation of limbs, the exaggeration of features, etc. All this is brought about by the conscious improvising of a new "artistic anatomy" out of the natural anatomy known to the exact science of *Ayurveda* (medicine). In the swollen breasts, narrowed waists, bulky hips, etc., of Late Minoan or Cretan (*c.* 1500 B. C.) works which bridged the gulf between the Pharaonic and the primitive Hellenic arts we can see the analogues or replicas of some of the Hindu conventions.

Leaving aside other characteristics, *e. g.,* the absence of perspective, the grouping of color-masses, the free *lais-*

sez faire treatment of sentiments, and so forth, one can easily pick up the Hindu elements from the Cêzannesque paintings and Rodin's sculptures and drawings.

Let us listen first to Rodin lecturing on the beauties of *Venus of Melos:*

"In the synthesis of the work of art the arms, the legs, count only when they meet in accordance with the planes that associate them in a same effect; and it is thus in nature, who cares not for our analytical description. The great artists proceed as nature composes and not as anatomy decrees. They never sculpture any muscle, any nerve, any bone, for itself; it is the whole at which they aim and which they express." (Dudley's transl., p. 15.) It is this theorizing that virtually underlies Hindu art work.

Similarly Vincent Van Gogh (1830–1890), the Dutch painter, who, if not in execution like Cêzanne, has, at least in ideal, pioneered the new art movement of to-day, seems almost to have given the theory of Hindu art from the side of painting. Says he:

"I should despair if my figures were correct; . . . I think Michaelangelo's figures magnificent, even though the legs are certainly too long and the hips and the pelvis bones a little too broad. . . . It is my most fervent desire to know how one can achieve such deviations from reality, such inaccuracies and such transfigurations, that come about by chance. Well, if you like, they are lies, but they are more valuable than the real values." (*The Letters of a Post-Impressionist,* transl. from the German by A. M. Ludovici, p. 23.)

Rodin was charged with the crime of being an "innovator" in art, for he introduced movement and action in statuary. His *St. Jean Baptiste* (1880) is a specimen in point, as also the interlaced figures like the *Hand of God* holding man and woman in embrace, *Cupid and Psyche, Triton and Nereid,* etc. In regard to this "new technique," the representation of activity, we are told by Van Gogh that the "ancients did not feel this need." "To render the peasant form at work is," as he reiterates, "the peculiar feature, the very heart of modern art, and that is something which was done neither by the Renaissance painters nor the Dutch masters, nor by the Greeks." (*The Letters,* 22, 24.)

It is thus clear why the theory and practice that seek movement in art-

forms, appreciate an "incorrect" anatomy, and look upon arbitrary proportions not as distortions but rather as "restorations," should find an affinity with the work of the Hindu masters. And the psychology of this post-impressionist art-*credo* is perfectly natural, because like the previous pre-Raphaelitism and the still earlier romanticism, the new art movement is essentially a revolt. It is a reaction against the Academicians' rule of thumb. It is born of a Bolshevistic discontent with the things that be, and of a desire to search for truth and beauty from far and old.

This latest revolution against the *status quo* of art was brought about when Gauguin, the French master, conceived "the truth that the modern European and his like all over the globe,

could not and *must* not, be the type of the future. Any thing rather than that! Even black men and women were better than that—cannibals, idolators, savages, anything!" (Ludovici's introduction to *The Letters,* p. xii).

Such being their article of faith, contemporary artists have been seized by *Wanderlust.* To-day they draw their inspiration from the Mexicans, Mayans, and other American-Indians, from the Negro art of the Congo regions, from Karnak and Nineveh, from the Tanagras of Greece and the "primitives" of Italy. And they roll their eyes from "China to Peru." Consequently the Buddhist, Shaiva, Vaishnava, Moghul, and Rajput art of the Hindus could not but have been requisitioned to enlarge the list of the new Ossians and Percy's *Reliques* as whet-

ters of the futuristic imagination in the Western World.

And the creative art endeavors of Young India's futurists are neither mere calls for "Back to the Past" nor harangues inciting to "Down with the West," as superficial observers or professional spiritualitarians would seem to read in the literary proclamations of the school. These are but the initial surgings of a dynamic *shakti* (energy) that had been pent up for a century and a half,—in its *sadhana* (effort) toward achieving the assimilation of this cosmic neo-eclecticism of the modern world; so that a synthetic stage of cultural *sva-raj* (self-determination) may ultimately evolve, on which Asia will be enabled, as of old, freely to move and to strive, to un-make and to make, —boldly to borrow and to lend as an in-

dependent unit in the *bourse* of spiritual exchange,—unhampered to struggle, to experiment, to live.