

review in depth

Medieval craftsmanship in stone

R. N. Misra

Sculpture Masterpieces from Orissa: Style and Iconography

by K. S. Behera and Thomas Donaldson

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The post-Gupta phase of Indian art, termed as 'medieval', has generally been represented as a phase of decline in the quality of sculpture, both in form and imagery. This perception partially flows from valorization of the antiquity factor, which constitutes the 'ancient' as qualitatively superior to the periods that followed. In that order, the early phase of Indian sculpture, roughly between the post-Mauryan times and the end of the Gupta period (c. 550 AD) is underscored as a period of innovation: when iconographies were creatively evolved, forms perfected, and classicism prevailed ubiquitously. These conclusions make sense eminently but problems arise when, in comparison, medieval Indian art is perceived as imitative, stereotyped, and bereft of purity of style or evocative imagery. Suffice it to say that such a circumscribed connoisseurship has often inhibited a proper appreciation of 'medieval' sculptures or the aesthetic ideals they evince in respect of their different form-language, compositional structure and integrated vision.

The book under review is, therefore, remarkable, for it concentrates primarily on medieval sculptures from the modern state of Orissa. This region serves the inquiry eminently because of the richness of its materials on that period of art. Medieval art has much to offer in the context of Orissa as well as of other regions in the Indian sub-continent. As for Orissa, its context is particularly relevant as it is generally held that temple architecture, along with its figural embellishment, arrived here in full maturity with its genesis or antecedents not convincingly identified or demarcated. But the chronological proximity of Orissan art with the post-Gupta phase in the neighbouring regions need not be in doubt. These factors as well as the compactness of Orissan monuments as a group substantially facilitate addressing issues regarding the post-Gupta Orissan art, and this has been comprehensively attempted in this book. The authors of the book are fairly conversant with the history of Orissa and its art tradition. In fact,

Behera's two volume study on Konark (1993) is amongst the most recent works on the subject and substantial in content. Similarly, Donaldson's *Hindu Temple Art of Orissa* (1985-87; in three volumes) remains the most comprehensive narrative on the subject till date. It is, therefore, fitting that these two scholars should be collaborating to produce a work which offers an authentic record of major themes and styles of the post-Gupta sculptures of Orissa.

Temple Sculpture

The narrative inherits substantially from the scholars' previous writings and covers temple sculptures from around the seventh to the thirteenth centuries, although developments till the fifteenth century occur sporadically in the text. The themes largely represent religious art, and the images of deities of Jain, Buddhist and Hindu pantheons have been discussed, both in respect of iconography and elements of style. The division of sculptures according to the major sectarian groups and their sub-sects allows an analytical survey of these figures, even as it accommodates variations and incongruities in stylistic progression across the wider expanse of the region and within the given chronology. The two chapters on 'History' and 'Religion' at the beginning are useful in foregrounding art activity against these essential backdrops. Historical episodes and their religious underpinnings have on occasion been specifically contextualised, even outside these two chapters, in particular depictions. For instance, in the case of a relief at Konark (p. 86) depicting a marriage celebration, with the ruling chief disguised as a divinity. The punning on words intended here synchronizes the divine with the regal, and suggests a sanctified temporality where kingship assumes a divine legitimacy.

The work under review is fundamentally different from canon-based studies on Orissan art of which there is no dearth. Many canonical texts have been brought to light in Orissa and their relevance in interpreting

art, iconography and architecture of the region is not in doubt. These texts, discovered and edited by N. K. Bose (1932), Alice Boner and her associates (1966-1982), and Bettina Baumar and Rajendra Prasad Das (1994), represent a separate genre of study, having much to offer in terms of matching particular monuments and their statuary both at the conceptual and technical levels. They also offer a significant account of varying forms and types of sculpture and the artisan's visions of creativity. In some cases, such as that of the *Vastusutra Upanishad* (ed. Alice Boner, rep. 1994), the canonical text works out figural compositions in alliance with their aesthetic imagery through a series of prescribed artisanal modes and devices which produced images out of their compositional diagrams. This and other such texts have added a new dimension to the theoretical content and historiography of Orissan art. These have also facilitated the firm identification of particular temple types and their basic compositional character. Such a correspondence between conceptual form and its material counterpart has been appropriately explained in the cases of the Varahi temple at Chaurasi and the Rajarani-Rajeshwari temple of Bhubaneswar, thanks to the identification based on particular Shilpa texts.

The book under review bears no resemblance with such concerns and is quite different in its genre and design. It formulates typological sets of figural compositions to trace their stylistic development through their chronological stages in succession. In the process, particular images, with or without a sectarian affiliation, come into discussion. The discussion covers their iconographic peculiarities, nomenclature and stylistic features as they matured from time to time and place to place. Particular themes are consolidated along with relevant commentary on their stylistic evolution. The selection of figures as 'masterpieces' is incidental and meant largely to illustrate the general narrative. The details often indicate that the salience of images on a monument depended on their occurrence according to a consciously articulated programme, in which placements often invested on particular figures the value of location. This helped in validating the distribution pattern or a programme of figure work over the body of a temple. As the monuments developed and expanded morphologically, sideways or vertically, new

iconographic types were accommodated, especially in the positions of the figure work, and this rendered the programme of figural distribution more detailed and complex.

The narrative also takes care of sculptures in terms of their evolution, style and iconography. Some 208 figures have been illustrated of which three are in polychrome. Explanatory notes (pp.105-140) describe them with further details. Brahmanical iconography encompasses a fairly pervasive pantheon consisting of cult deities, secondary deities and their primary as well as emanatory forms. These different forms have been typologically listed and discussed according to the varieties encountered in them. Iconographic descriptions cover a wide spectrum, dealing with what is called the pancha-devata, e.g., Shiva, Vishnu, Surya, Devi and Ganesh, and many more types within the first four of these categories. Related descriptions form the bulk of the book (pp. 65-98), but Jain and Buddhist images have also been independently covered in two different sections (pp. 43-52). The material on Buddhist images is particularly informative and significant in its coverage of both major and secondary deities. Lalitgiri and Ratnagiri have long been known as centres of Tantric Buddhism in Orissa and the sculptures discussed or illustrated in the book indicate the impact of Buddhism on the region, including Tantric Buddhism which appears to be more widespread than has been made out so far. The Buddhist statuary reproduced in the work is fairly representative and remarkable. This is especially true of the images of the Bodhisattvas Maitreya, Rakta Lokeshvara, Manjushri, and Manjuvara (Plates 29-32).

Secular Motifs

The book has a short chapter on secular motifs in Orissan art. It includes erotic images besides those of royal personages, warriors, and panels depicting groups of disciples with their teachers. These depictions present an interesting variety and offer glimpses of the mundane affairs of a cross-section of the contemporary society. They also reflect the efforts of the artist to selectively juxtapose the divine with the mundane. 'Secularised Imagery' is interpreted by the authors with reference to depictions representing the 'replacement of Brahmanical divinities by secular motifs' or in terms of the 'sanctification of secular motifs in the iconographic programme'