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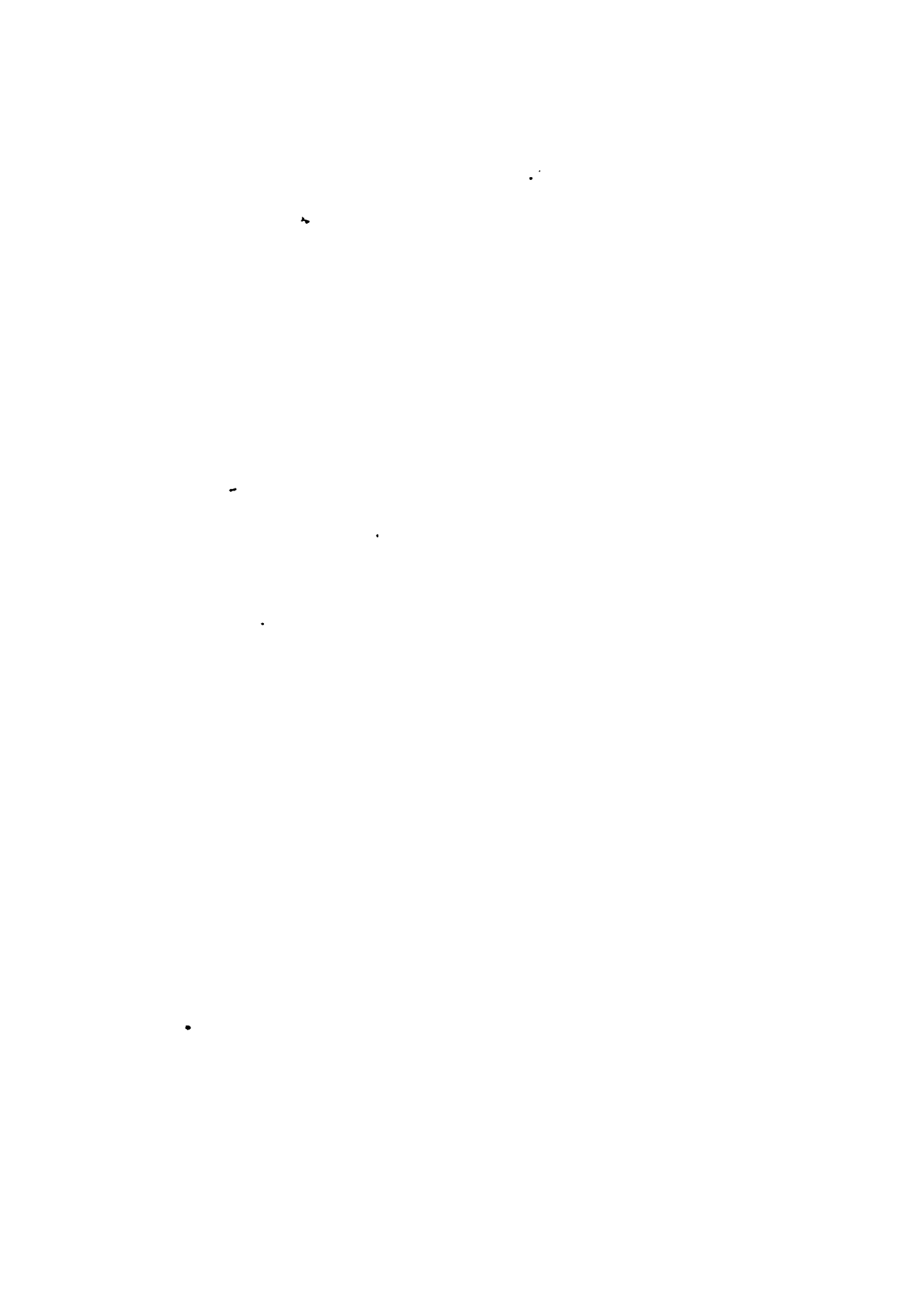


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EXAMPLES OF
INDIAN SCULPTURE

At the British Museum





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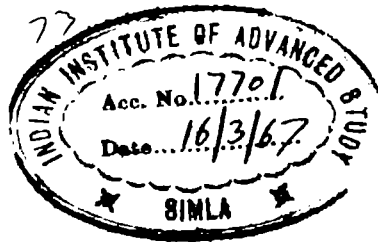
At the British Museum

Twelve Collotype Plates selected by Laurence Binyon
With an Introduction by William Rothenstein
and a Foreword by Sir Hercules Read



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FOREWORD

THE British Museum has always possessed a limited series of Indian religious sculptures, which accrued in a casual way, and during the first half of the last century were doubtless treated as merely exotic and eccentric manifestations of oriental religious fervour. Students of eastern beliefs, of whom there were not a few, had at that time no thought of regarding them as worthy of being placed on a plane that would bring them into comparison with the corresponding western productions. Nevertheless, the publication of Moor's *Hindu Pantheon* in 1810, in which the rude little bazaar images of the Hindu gods were translated by the skill of the artist Daniell into charming and artistic illustrations, shows that even at that time there was a considerable demand for information about the Indian gods.

During the past twenty or thirty years the students of art both in England and abroad have made a new departure; numerous books, handsomely illustrated, have appeared on the many aspects of Indian and similar pantheons, as a response to the public demand for knowledge on such matters. In these as a rule great stress is laid upon the artistic qualities of the images, and in some cases claims have been made that they are artistically on even a higher plane than the classical productions of Greece and Rome. Without discussing the propriety of this claim, one is forced to admit that the mere enthusiasm that produced it has had one good result, inasmuch as the critics who might have been silent had the statement been milder, felt themselves compelled to devote some little study to an art so highly lauded. There the matter may be said to stand at present, but the demand for further knowledge of ancient Indian art would seem to be spreading.

Whatever may have been the originating cause of this change of heart, it is at any rate interesting to note that its beginnings were

seen at about the same time as the India Office decided to hand over its museum to the British and South Kensington Museums in order that they might be more readily accessible to the public. This transfer took place in 1880, when it was eventually decided that the archaeological portion of the old India Museum should be handed to the British Museum for custody and exhibition, while the modern productions, representing industrial art, were assigned to South Kensington. In this way the British Museum became possessed of a vast and important assemblage of ancient Indian art which had to be received and set out in the galleries vacated, or to be vacated, by the natural history collections. It was a formidable task for two individuals to face, for at that time the department consisted only of Sir Wollaston Franks and myself, neither of us pretending to any special knowledge of Indian art or religions. A very difficult unit was the series of slabs from the railing of the Amaravati tope, which Franks ingeniously arranged on the main staircase of the Museum; not perhaps an ideal spot, but they are at any rate well seen. But we were greatly indebted to many good friends familiar with Indian matters, who gave us unstinted help. Such were James Fergusson, Dr. James Burgess, Sir George Birdwood, and Sir Alexander Cunningham, some of them familiar with the history of the India Office collections, a point of importance, and all full of knowledge of Indian archaeology and religions. Without their generous assistance our task might well have seemed hopeless, and would in any case have taken a longer time in the doing. So important a collection in such a centre as the British Museum naturally attracted many gifts, while it became a duty to fill gaps by purchase, and after forty years the collection can claim to be worthy of its setting.

The present modest album is only a small selection from this great series, but at least it helps to provide the student with a glimpse into a huge treasure chamber rich in illustration of India's past in religion and in art.

HERCULES READ.

July, 1923.

LIST OF PLATES

Plate I. FIGURE OF A YAKSHINĪ ; from an arch in the railing of the great Stūpa at Sanchi.

Stone : 25·5 × 18·7 in.

Presented by Mrs. Tucker, 1842.

1842. 12-10.

Plate II. HEAD OF BUDDHA : from Boro-Budur, Java.

Stone : height, 13·5 in.

From the Stamford Raffles Collection. Presented by the executor of Lady Raffles, 1859.

1859. 12-28. 176. (Buddhist Room, wall-case 52.)

Plate III. BASE OF A COLUMN, with eight figures between pillars, probably Gopiyas. Gupta period, VI cent.

Stone : height, 43 in.

Plate IV. SARASVATĪ PLAYING ON THE VINA. Mathura. Circa X cent.

Reddish stone : 26 × 13 in.

From the Collection of General Charles Stuart, of Bengal.

Acquired in 1830 by Mr. J. Bridge. Presented by the daughters of Mr. Bridge, 1872.

1872. 7-I. 55. (Wall-case 31.)

Plate V. A PAIR OF FIGURES, apparently cut out from a temple wall ; perhaps representing Damayanti. Possibly from Mathura. V-VII cent.

Pale stone : (a) 25 × 6·7 in.

(b) 24·5 × 6·7 in.

Bridge Collection, presented 1872.

1872. 7-I. 92, 93. (Wall-case 32.)

Plate VI. SARASVATĪ, treated as protector of 6th Tirthankara.
Nagari inscription on base. Rajputana (?). XI or
XII cent.

White marble : 26 × 14 in.

Bridge Collection, presented 1872.

1872. 7-1. 84. (Wall-case 24.)

Plate VII. ŚIVA WITH DURGĀ, attendants and worshippers.

Bihar School. Circa XII cent.

Steatite : 72.5 × 47 in.

Bridge Collection, presented 1872.

1872. 7-1. 70.

Plate VIII. DETAIL OF THE LAST SUBJECT.

Plate IX. PATTINI DEVI. Found near Trincomali, Ceylon.

Gilt bronze : height, 57 in.

Presented by Sir Robert Brownrigg, G.C.B., 1830.

Plate X. PATTINI DEVI (OR PĀRVĪTĪ ?), seated ; without pedestal.

Ceylon, perhaps XV cent.

Bronze, with traces of gilding : height, 7 in.

From the Hugh Nevill Collection. Purchased from Ralph
Nevill, Esq., 1898.

1898. 7-2. 142. (Wall-case 51.)

Plate XI. AVALOKITESVARA ; WITH AMITĀBHA IN HEAD-DRESS. (Śiva
in a beneficent form.) IX cent.

Bronze : height, 5.7 in.

From the Hugh Nevill Collection. Purchased from Ralph
Nevill, Esq., 1898.

1898. 7-2. 133. (Wall-cases 51, 52.)

Plate XII. NANDĪ, THE BULL OF ŚIVA. Southern India.

Granite : height, 34.5 in. ; length, 39 in.

Purchased 1923.

1923. 3-6. 1.

The India Society is indebted to the Trustees of the British
Museum for permission to produce these plates, and to Mr. T. A. Joyce
and Mr. H. J. Braunholtz for their very generous help in the preparing
of this volume, and for supplying the description of the plates.

INDIAN SCULPTURE

AT THE

BRITISH MUSEUM

DURING the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when communication between Europe and the East was being established, we scarcely expect to find enthusiasm for Eastern art. Indeed, there was then little understanding for many aspects of European art which now seem admirable to us. But it is none the less singular, in view of our intimate relations with India, that we should have had to await the coming of the Japanese print before realizing the existence of fine art in the Far East. For the applied arts there has always been quick appreciation. It is true that Fergusson showed a fine enthusiasm for Indian architecture, and made valuable researches towards a true understanding of its character, while Burgess and Griffiths did similar spade-work for the paintings at Ajanta and elsewhere. But interest in Indian sculpture seems to have been generally limited to the Eurasian carvings of the Gandhara school. A strong bias existed against certain elements of true Indian carving—the many-armed figures of Durgā, the three-headed form of Brahmā, the elephant-headed Ganesha. In addition the subject-matter of some of the sculpture seemed monstrous and indecent. Amongst Indians themselves this prejudice is not unknown to-day.

It is now generally recognized that the dignity and beauty of ancient sculpture do not depend on the comeliness so happily expressed in many of the Greek figures in bronze or marble. We have rid ourselves of many prejudices, and are aware that great art has flourished in every civilization, not in that of Greece alone.

Nevertheless, the number of supreme conceptions in the history of art is smaller, perhaps, than most people imagine. Of these the world owes at least three to the genius of India.

The first, the plastic interpretation of *samādhi*, or religious absorption, is familiar through its countless repetitions in all Buddhist lands. This concrete crystallization of a spiritual mood was developed into a form so perfect and inevitable, that it remains, after more than 2,000 years, one of the most inspiring and satisfying symbols created by man.

But art has never been concerned with one aspect of reality alone. The illuminating presentation of the Buddhist ideal of renunciation of all things that hamper the human spirit was only one of the achievements of the Indian mind. Interpretations of the dynamic elements of the Universe were sought for and perfected. The gigantic forces that shaped the worlds out of chaos, the terror of the lightning, the ordered courses of the stars through the heavens, the cycle of the returning years were expressed, at the time of the Brahmanical revival, through forms of extraordinary power and grandeur. In a flash of intuition the perception of the eternal cosmic harmony was shown in the image of Śiva as the Divine Dancer.

It was not in the form of Śiva alone that this conception of unceasing movement was communicated. It is symbolized in the innumerable swaying *apsara* figures, loaded with jewelled ornaments, broad-hipped, narrow-waisted, powerful and graceful as panthers, which enrich the Hindu temples.

There is a third conception—the interpretation in material form of a moment midway between movement and tranquillity, a pause of ecstasy and illumination, perfected by the genius of Southern India. These three consummate plastic inventions, with their many symbolic accretions, fertilized Buddhist art throughout the Far East. The Buddhist sculptors of Burma, Ceylon, Java, Cambodia, Angkor, and, later, through China, the Japanese artists, borrowed from the exuberant iconography of India the poses, gestures and appropriate symbols for every image and group of figures they carved. Yet accepted authorities on Indian artistic history have denied fine art to India!

It is true that in adopting the Indian motives they stamped them in each case with the rooted character of their own art; but the

pregnant germ of continuing life which the original creator unconsciously projects into his work at moments of passionate fusion with his subject remains, radium-like, within it. No sculpture has been produced in the countries inspired by the Buddha's teaching superior in power and grandeur to the original conceptions of the Indian genius. An intense impression of majesty and awe is conveyed by the figures of Śiva, of Pārvatī, and of Narasimha in the rock carvings at Ellora. Round the great Trimūrti, hidden deep within the caves of Elephanta, hangs the solemn mystery of the night, enlarging and simplifying the shrouded world. No Chinese artist has reached greater perfection of poise and form than the Naṭarāja bronzes or the ecstatic figures of Sundara Murti Svāmī achieve.¹

An impulse towards a high finish of workmanship lies deep within the conscience of every artist. It is relinquished only when he finds it incompatible with the vigorous life he feels impelled to give his creations. The power of perfecting form without dulling its sensitiveness or impairing its strength is a mystery which baffles and eludes the modern artist. The Indian sculptor could, to an unusual degree, use traditional canons of proportion and gesture, and reconcile these with a daemonic energy. At his most exalted moments he seemed to precipitate his forms into the womb of Nature herself, so impressed are his figures with the marks of her own creative perfection.

The earliest example of Indian carving in the British Museum is the Yakshinī figure from Sanchi, (Plate I). Indian philosophy was ever preoccupied with the unity of all life. The happy pantheism which is expressed in this dryad-like figure, a little heavier and less actively alert than the sister carving still at Sanchi,² is by no means uncommon in early Indian Buddhist art. The richly ornamented base of a column (Plate III), belonging to the later Gupta period, provides a beautiful example of cosmic rhythm interpreted by means of dancing figures. Another example of this symbolic rendering of a philosophical conception appears in the sweeping bevy of figures round the images of Śiva and Durgā (Plates VII and VIII). The treatment of the God and Goddess, as is frequent in the Bihar

¹ Cp. A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Memoirs of the Colombo Museum*, edited by Joseph Pearson. Also 'Sculptures Civaïtes de l'Inde', par Auguste Rodin, Ananda Coomaraswamy, E. B. Havell, et Victor Goloubeff (*Ars Asiatica*, Vol. III).

² Cp. A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Visvakarma*, Plate 67.

school, is over-conventionalized and uninteresting. The attendant *apsara* figures, sounding their music through space as they move, conceived with remarkable swiftness and harmony of design, are, on the other hand, brilliantly carved.

The relations between Indian art, philosophy, and the theories of hieratic canon associated with Indian sculpture, cannot be touched on here. Suffice it to say that the religious stories and moral lessons which the Indian artist was employed to advertise did not interfere with his freedom to pursue his own standards of perfection. Nor has the imposition of a traditional subject-matter prevented him from recording, with admirable observation and completeness, the social life of his own time. Throughout history, both sculptor and painter seem to have succeeded in creating the most satisfying aesthetic forms precisely at the periods when their services were in the greatest request for purposes of propaganda among priestly and royal patrons. Nothing could be more exquisite than the bronzes (Plates X and XI) of which the hieratic poses were repeated century after century: and the carver of the figures from Mathura (Plate V) employed to illustrate some well-known story, is clearly fascinated by the immense ear-rings worn by his women-folk—and by the women themselves. This use of jewelled ornament is one of the most original features of Indian sculpture and painting, enriching, and giving a peculiar roundness and radiance to the nude form. A study might well be made on this enchanting aspect of the Indian fancy. The variety and splendour of invention shown in the jewellery in the cave-paintings at Ajanta alone is astonishing. Perhaps the best example we have in England of the exquisite use to which jewelled ornaments may be put in sculpture is the Gupta torso in the Victoria and Albert Museum;¹ another is the beautiful Sarasvatī figure here reproduced (Plate VI).

Many of the fragments of Indian carving in Europe have been brought over more as curiosities than as works of art; nor has either of our great museums aimed at a systematic representation of Indian sculpture. Thus works of a high order are uncommon. A notable addition, recently made to the British Museum, is the *nandi* (Plate XII). This granite carving of the bull sacred to Śiva is a notable

¹ See Eleven plates, representing works of Indian sculpture, chiefly in English collections, with text by E. B. Havell and others, published by the India Society.

example of the profound understanding of animal form and the innate sympathy with animal psychology which distinguishes Eastern artists. Nowhere has the delight in animal life been more richly recorded in sculpture and in painting than in India, from the earliest known times up to the threshold of our own day. Some of the noblest and most impressive works of art created in India are representations of animals. In the Jātaka stories the Buddha himself takes the shape of an elephant, and in the popular mind the elephant has become the symbol of Indian life.

The head of the Buddha from Boro-Budur (Plate II) cannot correctly be described as a specimen of Indian sculpture. To the writer its features lack the breadth and precision of form so striking in the best Indian carvings. But the Great Temple at Boro-Budur contains many hundreds of figures, showing more than one influence and greater or less skill in execution.

The long use of traditional forms undoubtedly encouraged much systematized carving both in North and South India. The exteriors of many temples are altogether covered with stone figures. When we remember that Aurangzeb alone is reported to have destroyed several thousand temples, we can scarcely expect individual workmanship throughout this forest-like profusion. Over-ornamented many of the temples appear to European eyes. It must be borne in mind, however, that the Indian landscape is, in large part, bare and monotonous. The group of temples with their tanks and flights of steps serves as a richly embroidered border on a vast and plain garment. The noble gilt bronze from Trincomali is an example of the treasures contained within the temple buildings. It is well that these treasures should remain, jealously guarded, where they were inspired and perfected. The acquisitive and plethoric appetite of Europe and America, eager for unearned increment and careless of the living legacy which it has the right and the duty to enjoy, has been one of the least pleasing outcomes of Western culture. But India has herself been too indifferent to the value of her great inheritance. It is a duty to her civilization, of which fate has made us partner-custodians, to show that the most precious jewels in India's crown are other than emeralds and diamonds.

Full homage has been paid to India's epic poetry ; equal homage

is due to her plastic art. We have unique opportunities of making this art known to European students of Eastern culture, without robbing India of her artistic treasures. Casts at least of some of the masterpieces of Sanchi and Sarnath, Mathura, Elephanta and Ellora, Mamallapuram, Konarak, Kapila and Khajuraho, should be available in this country, through the good offices of the Indian archaeological survey.

Some thirty years ago two French artists, the painter Degas and Rodin the modeller, first drew the writer's attention to a new conception of form and movement shown in some casts of Hindu sculpture. I have little doubt that if casts of some of the great figures mentioned above could be studied here in conjunction with the original pieces preserved in the British Museum and South Kensington, at length a more just and generous tribute would be paid to the Indian plastic genius.

WILLIAM ROTHENSTEIN.











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