

BOOK REVIEWS

Louis Renou

The Art of India through the Ages

BY STELLA KRAMRISCH

(London: The Phaidon Press, 1954.) Pp. 281.

India: Paintings from Ajanta Caves

(New York Graphic Society, by arrangement with UNESCO, 1954.)

Publications on the art of India, which have appeared with infrequent regularity until recent years, are becoming noticeably more numerous and more thorough in regard to both research and photographic techniques. It is no longer possible to see in the artistic flowering of the subcontinent a mere temporary break in the tradition of the baroque and the ugly, as if all the spiritual values of India could find plastic expression only on the foreign soil of Angkor or Boroboudour. Thus the album *Inde: Images divines* (Paris: Arthaud, 1954), recently published by P. Rambach and Vitold de Golish re-

vealed, to all but specialists at any rate, "nine centuries (5th to 13th) of Hindu art misunderstood," in an admirable series of photographs.

In the field of research the school most active today is that grouped around Philippe Stern, concerning itself especially with the evolution of motifs—a study singularly fruitful both for the inner significance of the works and for problems of relative chronology, interaction, and sources. One of the most recent works of this school is that published by Mrs. Benisti, *Le médaillon lotiforme dans la sculpture indienne* (Paris, Publications du Musée Guimet, 1952),

while Mrs. Hallade has begun a study with a grouping in terms of themes and motifs, the basic materials of artistic production (*Arts de l'Asie ancienne*, vol. 1, *L'Inde*, Paris, Guimet, 1954).

Recent full-scale studies are not lacking. Unquestionably heading the list is H. Zimmer's posthumous *Art of India: Its Mythology and Transformations* (New York, The Bollingen Series, 1955, 2 vols.). As in the author's other works of which this is an extension in a new perspective, myth and symbolic speculation form the central core; one recognizes the penetrating insight of a master whose lessons, although a bit too insistently sustained, are nevertheless endlessly suggestive.

A general work following the development of India beyond the frontiers of Hindustan is B. Rowland's *The Art and Architecture of India* (London, Penguin Series, 1953). This is a volume rich in well-chosen and well-documented illustrations, the text of which, however, is not up to the level of the most recent research on several essential points.

More satisfying in this regard, though less didactic, is the work of Stella Kramrisch, who has already given us a distinguished monograph on the Hindu temple (Calcutta, 1946, 2 vols.). *The Art of India* is remarkable first for the quality and the choice of its 190 plates, all carefully described and placed. These illustrations, often of little-known subjects, help the reader to grasp the complexity of art forms here pictured from their beginnings (as yet hardly Indian, it is true) at Mohenjo-Daro, to the graceful figurines of the 17th century and the miniatures of the

18th. The interesting introduction entitled "Traditions of Indian Art" is less concerned with conveying historical information, for which we do not lack manuals, than with establishing what the author considers the permanent conditions of artistic expansion. Mrs. Kramrisch emphasizes the primacy of religious forces, she sees in art a sort of projection of metaphysics. This leads her to underscore the predominance of a total art whose essential aspect is in architecture, that is, the temple. "In the fullness of its development, [the temple] establishes in spatial terms the intellectual and actual approach to the Supreme Principle of which the deity is the symbol. The statue is the manifestation of the deity through a concrete work of art, the building is its body and its dwelling. Images are given shape by sculpture and painting, whose interrelation expresses in line, proportion, and color, the love of the Absolute to which gods and myths owe their existence." Further: "The work of art is the body and the dwelling in which are revealed the Formless, the Beyond-form, the Point of Deliverance, and the Source of all Form." Statues and sanctuaries are stages on the road, the plastic world is one of the innumerable approaches to the supra-human condition.

The thirty-two reproductions of the Ajanta frescoes form a sumptuous album inaugurating a series of documents on the great works of art. I do not know whether the colors convey the impression of the original (or rather the impression they would make if seen in normal light); they may be closer to what these wall paintings were before

Book Reviews

time had taken its toll. In either case the impression is stunning. As Madanjeet Singh reminds us in his brief introduction, Ajanta corresponds in Asia to the Italian frescoes in western art; its mark is felt in central Asia and even further east. The most flourishing era seems to have been the fifth century, but certain works are clearly anterior to this, and the "digging" of the underground temple which houses them may have begun as early as the second century B.C.

The principal theme is of course the history of the former lives of Buddha. A concrete and familiar humanity is spread before us in the form of hagiographical fables, with a sort of spiritual patronage conferred by the presence of

the Bodhisattvas, symbols of wisdom and compassion. The great human themes are used, dominated by the idea of the precariousness of human existence.

Explanations accompanying each plate would have been in order; once the emotive shock is over, intelligibility is limited for those who don't know the legends of the old *Jātakas*. The detailed telling of these legends, with discussion of the probable age of each fresco and of the social and religious environment which conditioned them may be found in the final volume of G. Yazdabi's *Ajanta* (Hyderabad, 1933-1955, I-IV); this great work constitutes a true summit in the field.