



SPECIAL FEATURE SECTION, Vol 3: 1, 2019

Editor's Note



Dr. Rajasri Mukhopadhyay, Art Historian

Guest Editor, Special Feature Section

Art and Cultural Transmission

Fluid interpretations of the term “translation” have led to its application in many fields of studies in recent times, including Cultural Studies and Art History. George Steiner (*After Babel*, 1975) went so far as to say that the very act of human communication is akin to translation since it involves understanding and decoding what the other is saying. According to him, to pay attention is to translate! *Constructing Culture* (1998) a collection of essays about translation edited by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere defines Culture as an ever changing process that involves dissimilitude and frictions and thus sustained negotiation processes. Viewed in this context, translation is a ‘paradigm of mediation’, not only among languages, but among cultures too. A comparative study

of interculturality and transmission raises aesthetic challenges, bringing into play the distinction between two forms, the extent and nature of borrowing, the motifs and motives of the 'original' and the transcreated. Since the process of transmission manifests itself in a multitude of ways from clear adaptation to mild influence, there are many words that are used to describe the process of translation in Art, like "emulating", "adapting", "mingling" "intermingling" and "recreating. "

The huge canvas of Indian art history that spans several thousand years, has variegated and fascinating examples of adapting art and architectural features from other cultures and civilizations and likewise, indigenous Indian art has been transmitted in other parts of the world to give rise to unique art heritage. For example when Hellenistic style moves beyond the boundaries and is translated in Buddha and Bodhisattva images it gives rise to the school of Gandhara Art (Fig.1), which is contemporary of, but very different from the style of Mathura (Fig.2). Greek motifs like Acanthus (Fig.3) or Palmette (that originated in ancient Egypt, by the way!) or Honeysuckle have been recreated in Gandhara (Fig. 4) and Mauryan pillar capitals (Fig.5). Stone palettes have been unearthed from Gandhara region, of the Indo-Scythian era that combines the Scythian influence as well (Fig. 6). Later in the medieval period Persian influences shaped Indian painting. It is historically well known that Humayun brought two extremely talented painters, Mir Sayyid Ali (born in Tabriz, Persia/Iran) and Khwaja Abdus Samad (born in Shiraz, Persia/Iran) from Tabriz, Persia to his court and they laid the foundation of Mughal painting, by mentoring the artists of the Mughal *Karkhana* or atelier (Fig.7). But even in pre-Mughal times, according to Dr Asok Das "The miniatures and border decorations of the well known 'Kalpasutra' manuscript in the Devasano Pado Bahndar, Ahmedabad, written in c.1475, show daring experimentation by introducing decorative motifs and figural details directly lifted from Persian paintings". A translation of Persian elements can be noticed in dress, textile decoration, landscape, architectural details, in the depiction of elliptical foliage, floating clouds, arabesques, in the use of colours and obviously, in the representations of Shahi- type kings and foreign soldiers with cream coloured skin, Mongoloid face, small eyes, pointed beards and drooping moustache. In later period, there was a vigorous circulation of art between Europe and Mughal India that resulted in Mughal artists adapting themes like Madonna and cherubs (Fig 8). Again, cultural traits from Indian subcontinent

travelled to Southeast Asian kingdoms of present day Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia and Vietnam via the trade, political and cultural contacts. The remarkable monuments of Southeast Asia like Angkor Wat, Borobudur and Prambanan display undeniable Indian seeds of ideation, in both religious and artistic domain. But the local creative elements and thoughts that finally shaped them, made them unique and transcreated.

Some of the above issues are addressed in this special section on Art and Cultural transmission, through four engrossing essays. While the first two are academic papers, the third is an artist's reflection on cultural exchanges and the fourth is a review of an exhibition that showcased how contemporary artists have translated and transcreated iconic Mexican painter Frida Kahlo's work and life in their creations. In the lead essay entitled "**The Many Lives of an Iconic Monument: Angkor Wat in Cross-cultural Imagination**" Parul Pandya Dhar, Associate Professor, University of Delhi writes about the 12th century Khmer monument Angkor Wat, of Cambodia as a multivalent symbol of cross-culturalism. From the time of its making in a pre-modern Asia, through the past nine centuries, Angkor Wat has gained new dimensions in popular, national, and trans-national imaginations. Parul unravels the many layers of meaning that Angkor Wat has come to denote in the changing inter-cultural and trans-national perspectives, especially in the politics of religion and national identity in contemporary Cambodia and India. In the second essay "**Connected Histories - Exhibiting, Collecting and Pedagogy in late 19th Century Calcutta**" Sampurna Chakraborty, Doctoral Fellow at CSSSC, Patuli, Kolkata looks at the connected histories of Indian art and pedagogy in colonial period. She draws our attention to the fact how nomenclatures like 'academic art' or 'fine arts', 'exhibition' and 'collection' is a consequence of cross-cultural but hierarchical exchange, 'that has permanently reshaped the profession of Indian art practice and reconfirmed its global stage towards modernity.' By mapping certain important events, she demonstrates how the western art historical notion of display, organizing art and art pedagogy has been transmitted to India and is still followed within art institutions. Painter-Researcher Amitava Bhattacharya, Former Tagore Research Scholar affiliated to Victoria Memorial Hall, traces the fascinating intra-Asiatic artistic dialogues between Japanese Nihonga painters and Bengal school, mutual understanding of tradition in Shantiniketan and China, about Indonesian painters like Rusli and Affandi visiting India in his reflective piece "**Art Movement in Bengal in the early 20th Century: An intra-Asian Artistic Discourse**". He visited Xu Beihong museum, Beijing

China, Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing, Guangzhou Museum China, Asian Art Archive, Shanghai China, Jakarta Art Council Indonesia, Dewantara museum, Jogjakarta, Indonesia, Affandi museum Jogjakarta Indonesia, Affandi's Art Village, Central Java, Indonesia, Silpakorn University Art Department, Bangkok, Thailand for collecting data and putting together his final report. The concluding essay by Aban Desai, Gallerist and Curator, reviews a recent exhibition "The Painted Face" (at Gallery ArtExposure, Kolkata) which had 13 Indian artists re-creating Frida Kahlo's self portraits in their choice of medium and aesthetic. The oeuvre is truly amazing – ranging from Kalighat pata style interpretation by Bhaskar Chitrakar (Kali-Kahlo series) to ceramic sculpture by Falguni Bhatt translating elements taken from Frida's daily life and wardrobe.
