CHAPTER IV: POST-INDEPENDENCE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SCULPTURE

THREE CASE STUDIES

Introduction

Indian art history in the post-Independence era has been a complex negotiation between the colonial and nationalist epistemological legacies on the one hand, and new approaches that were developed within the discipline in India and periodic influences from Western art history on the other hand. A survey of post-Independence discourses about Indian sculpture is well beyond the scope of the present inquiry. As my intention is not to render a developmental account of the discipline but to focus on ‘moments’ in the discursive objectification of sculptural artefacts, I choose three significant contributions to the study of Indian sculpture published in the 1980’s and 1990’s as my case studies. Each of these texts is an original contribution to the field, and each approaches its primary objects from a different methodological angle.

One of the objectives of this chapter is to tease out the epistemological residues of the colonial-nationalist frames that persist within these recent objectifications of the sculptural artefact. Further, through a close reading of these three texts, I attempt to demonstrate that even within the recent mainstream discourse of Indian art history, there exists the possibility of different subject-object relations and of distinct ways of framing the materiality and visuality of pre-modern sculpture. These differences are not merely a function of disparate methodological approaches to the object. I suggest that they cut deeper, operating at a structural level, and even result in the creation of different kinds of object under the apparently unitary, self-evident umbrella term – (pre-modern) ‘Indian art’.
Joanna Williams’ The Art of Gupta India: Empire and Province (published in 1983) is a sophisticated example of stylistic analysis applied to pre-modern Indian sculpture in the post-Independence era. The text focuses on establishing a sequence for the historical development of Gupta sculpture on the basis of style; however, Gupta iconography, patronage and the larger social, religious and cultural contexts form an important part of its narrative. In her introduction, Williams justifies this approach: “…the discussion weaves between style and iconography, in tribute to the belief that the most distinctive accomplishment of a work of art is the way in which its form and content are most clearly inseparable.”

**Gupta Sculpture as ‘Art’**

From the outset, Williams explicitly frames her objects as ‘work of art’. She reveals that her selection of specific works is guided primarily by their ‘aesthetic character’.

Since definitions of ‘art’ and artistic quality are relative to the period and culture in which they originate, what yardstick does Williams use for selecting her art objects? Here we encounter an interesting ambiguity. On the one hand, the scholar generates a seminal hypothesis; according to her, Gupta carvings seem to be “…designed primarily as works of art, composed deliberately (if with varying success) as aesthetic objects. For both earlier and later periods of sculpture, this is not a rule.” On the other hand, Williams indicates a few of her own criteria, which seem to conform broadly to a modern western, even modernist, characterization of a work of art. She emphasizes the ‘strongly intellectual flavour’ of Gupta art, the unity of form and content, and the balance between ‘a certain representational credibility’ and ‘abstracting tendencies’.

In a subsequent chapter, Williams speculates that the relatively ‘less restrictive character of caste’ during the Gupta period might explain the ‘free and intellectual’

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 3.
character of Gupta art.\(^5\) Disappointingly, the author stops short of what might have been a complete picture of her theoretical position on the artistic value of these objects and her criteria for their selection.

These shreds of definition are, of course, too vague to indicate why a given work has been included. For that, a catalogue of specifics would be necessary, which would at this point be both tedious and inconclusive….Only in the discussion of the actual works can their inclusion be justified.\(^6\)

Lacking a complete definition, Williams’ justification for the selection of her objects seems to me to be caught up in a circular logic. Are we to assume that the ‘aesthetic character’ of the objects is self-evident or is Williams’ argument based on some implicit notion of a universal aesthetics common to both the Gupta period and the 20\(^{th}\) century? In a 1988 article titled “Criticizing and Evaluating the Visual Arts in India: A Preliminary Example”, Williams makes this issue her central concern, examining the alternative criteria of practicing Orissa citrakaras for evaluating the artistic quality of pata citras.\(^7\) However, in The Art of Gupta India, this problem appears to be unresolved.

**Stylistic Analysis and Formal Analysis: Some Preliminary Definitions**

Whitney Davis’ definition of stylistic analysis is succinct. “Stylistic analysis aims to attribute an artifact to its historical origins on the basis of its sensuous configuration, and in particular to assign it to the set or sequence of artifacts in which it was made….\(^8\) Both formal analysis and stylistic analysis take the ‘sensuous configuration’ – the perceptible visual and material qualities - of the object as their starting point. There are considerable overlaps between formal analysis and stylistic analysis, especially in the context of Indian art historiography; for this reason, we often club them together as formal-stylistic analysis. However the orientation

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\(^{5}\)Ibid., 28. This remark compels comparisons with the formulations of colonialists like Birdwood and Fergusson on the one hand, and Coomaraswamy’s distinction between “free and servile” arts on the other.

\(^{6}\)Ibid., 4.


and function of stylistic analysis differ from those of formal analysis in many significant ways, some of which are worth distinguishing here.

Formal analysis usually characterizes the artwork as we see it today. The building blocks of the standard modernist variant of formal analysis include the abstract 'elements and principles of art'– line, colour, texture, shape, space, rhythm, balance, ratio and proportion, unity, etc. Indian art historiography, particularly the historiography of pre-modern sculpture and architecture generated a unique manifestation of formalist analysis which I will term ‘the metaphysics of form’ (see section II, below). By contrast, stylistic analysis is a historicizing operation at a fundamental level. Even if it characterizes its objects in terms of ‘formalist’ criteria, it does so with the intention of locating the object within its historical context, as part of a sequence or series of similar looking objects. As a consequence, stylistic analysis is premised entirely on comparisons of more or less similar objects whereas the object of formal analysis can stand alone.9

A core aspect of stylistic analysis’ primarily historicizing trajectory is the question of causes. Both formal and stylistic analyses are premised on the theoretical assumption that the visual and material qualities of an artwork derive in large part from the action of ‘making’ the work. For stylistic analysis the cause or reason why an art work looks the way it does, is paramount, whereas for formal analysis, it need not be. In other words, the founding assumption, the very raison d’être, of stylistic analysis is that art works share certain stylistic qualities because of their origin in the same historical context. “By and large, objects made by groups look more or less alike because, in order to articulate certain purposes, some persons are taught or trained in similar techniques to make similar objects....”10 By implication, stylistic analysis, if it is to move beyond mere classification and taxonomy (a logical ‘nominative’ operation that formal analysis can handle), has to contextualize

9The theoretical minimum number of objects required for stylistic analysis is three – two similar objects and a third dissimilar object, like a ‘control’ in a scientific experiment, in relation or contrast to which a notion of ‘style’ can be developed.

its developmental account of style in a historical context, peopled with historical agents.11

Stylistic change in the Gupta Context

In *The Art of Gupta India*, Williams’ ‘overall program is to delimit a style in its own terms and to consider the relation between this style and a putative empire’.12 Like many of the most competent stylistic studies of the post-independence phase, Williams’ analysis seeks to contextualize Gupta art within the political, intellectual and religious circumstances of its originary time-space, to relate art works ‘to factors outside the realm of art that may explain or correlate with their particular nature.’ The scholar plots Gupta sculptural style on a three-dimensional grid of ‘time, place and social level’. Using a striking ‘fabric’ or carpet analogy – she likens chronology to the warp of art history, place to its woof and social level to the pile.13 The ‘patterns’ that emerge as a result of weaving these together, ‘the proper concern of the art historian’, seem to stand for Williams’ notion of style.14

Reconstructing Williams’ process schematically from her text, we see that the scholar abstracts a selection of ‘aesthetic objects’ from a large corpus of available artefactual production from the Gupta period. Paying close attention to provenance and plausible or confirmed dates, she creates developmental sequences for each sub-region based primarily on formal similarities and variations, and secondarily on iconographic details. Using narrative, she reintegrates individual works and clusters with what is known about Gupta history – the political, socio-cultural, religious and intellectual tendencies and changes during this period. We detect something of a two-way flow; the ‘realm of art’ both illuminates, and is illuminated by, the larger Gupta ethos.15

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13Ibid., 5-6. Significantly, Stella Kramrisch is the first Indian art historian to theorize ‘social level’ in terms of ‘timed and timeless’ variations in her “Indian Terracottas”, Barbara Stoler Miller ed., *Exploring India’s Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, (ICNCA and Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 1983). Occasionally Kramrisch intergrates this theory with her stylistic analysis of Indian sculpture, for example, in “Pala and Sena Sculpture,” ibid., 207 and in “Figural Sculpture of the Gupta Period,” ibid., 184.
15Ibid., 7.
**Morphology vs. Style**

This process appears superficially similar to colonialist art history. James Fergusson, in his *History of Architecture in India and the East*, writes of major ‘styles’ in the history of Indian architecture – for example – the ‘Dravidian’ and ‘Indo-Saracenic’ style. Both Fergusson and Williams formulate their notions of style by comparing a selection of configured characteristics they identify in the objects they examine. An attentive reading of the former’s texts, however, suggests that ‘stylistic analysis’ is actually an exercise in morphology and gross anatomy, a listing of formal similarities and differences guiding a correct taxonomy. For Fergusson, as for colonialist archaeology in general, the epistemological paradigm applied to artefacts is more natural history than art history; he writes of ‘three styles into which Hindu architecture *naturally* divides itself [emphasis added].’ This approach, viewed in the context of his statements elsewhere about Indian architectural forms being handed down traditionally, and its principles being ‘practiced mechanically’, leads us to presume that the concept of Indian architectural ‘styles’ in Fergusson’s text had little to do with artistic intention, expressiveness and *choice* on the part of its creators. As has been mentioned in the earlier chapter, *agency* is what is crucially missing from colonialist accounts of Indian art. What we are left with is a reified sense of ‘style’ as morphology, inferred from artefactual specimens. Stylistic analysis in the colonialist context has a primarily ‘nominative’ function, to use Berel Lang’s formulation; naming, taxonomy and classification.

Stylistic analysis serves an additional role in Fergusson’s architectural history; an overtly ideological one. Whereas the ‘style’ of colonialist archaeological writings (in its crude avatar as gross anatomy/morphology) equipped artefacts with little more than a label and a place within a chronological-classificatory system, in Fergusson’s *architectural history*, style is summoned up as confirmatory evidence for the Victorian theory of race, and the imperialist teleology of decline. Style, posing as hindsight ‘discovery’

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17James Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (J. Murray, 1876), 386.
18Ibid., 35.
19Lang, “Style as Instrument, Style as Person,” 715–739.
of objective attributes in artefacts, is shot through with a kind of teleological
determinism.

By contrast, Williams’ analysis of Gupta style is much subtler and more open-
ended. First of all, even though The Art of Gupta India presents a
developmental account of Gupta art within a fixed time frame, its narrative is
far from unilinear. The sources of Gupta style are shown to be multiple and
its dissolution, neither abrupt nor final. The author breaks up the monolith of
‘Gupta style’ and traces its trajectory through its numerous substyles. The
’substyles’ Williams formulates are clearly based on provenance; however,
they are characterized throughout her text not as pre-determined stylistic
formulae, but as creative solutions to certain formal and representational
challenges.20

**Style as an Expressive element**

Secondly, Williams occasionally jeopardizes the generic imperatives of brevity
and narrative flow by pausing before specific works to remark on their
expressive qualities.21 As a consequence, the sculptures are represented not
only as members of a stylistic cluster but also as individual art works in their
own right. In many passages, the narration seems to oscillate between the
temptation to linger over the expressive features of individual works and the
compulsion to subsume individual objects within the larger development of
style - as a way of moving the narrative forward. An excerpt, which is a
description of a standing Buddha image from Mathura, will serve to clarify
this distinction:

...The feet are spaced far apart...which would suggest a date around
the middle of the fifth century. The proportions are consistently
elongated, and by comparison the previous example seems squat.
The robe falls in more complex and graceful curves on the left
shoulder. On the well-preserved halo...rays are replaced by a large
lotus, a band of wildly ebullient foliage gives rise to fantastic birds,
and vegetative forms have taken over all but the outer margin.

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20 The centrality of provenance to stylistic analysis is emphasized by Williams throughout The Art of Gupta India and also by her contemporary, Susan Huntington. See Susan L. Huntington, The “Pādua-Sena” Schools of Sculpture (Brill Archive, 1984), 5.

Apparently the earlier significance of the halo suggesting light has given way to chthonic and biological forces. In formal terms, this rich array of bands—originally heightened by paint, of which touches survive—like the sinuous lines of drapery sets off the austerity of the face.22

Partly because of these moments of arrested attention to elaborate on the expressive qualities of individual works, and partly because of Williams’ nuanced consideration of sub-styles within the Gupta corpus, the ‘plot’ of her narrative meanders across artistic choices and solutions. Overall, these features mitigate the teleological, deterministic aura that permeates many colonialist accounts.

**Style vs. ‘accidents’ of history**

Williams’ stylistic analysis also eschews a parallel problem which is a feature of nationalist accounts of style, a problem with a radically different ideological origin and manifestation. By dismissing stylistic variations as ‘accidents’ of art, as products of ‘human idiosyncracy’ [sic], and by concentrating his attention on ideal ‘types’, Coomaraswamy valorizes the inertia of tradition over the complexity and diversity of artistic solutions that are an unmistakable characteristic of any period of pre-modern Indian art.23 Even Kramrisch, with her unsurpassed sensitivity to the formal nuances of Indian sculpture, rationalizes this diversity away by invoking such concepts as ‘permanent qualities’ or ‘ethnical factors’.24 According to the Idealist theory of Indian art, style (to borrow Lang’s phrase) ‘plays the outside to content’s inside’.25 In this formulation, iconographic content and metaphysical significance together form the ‘essence’ of the work, while style remains somewhat redundant, an ‘accidental predicate’.26

An important aspect of a number of formal/stylistic studies produced in the 1980’s and 1990’s is their avoidance of the nationalist valorizing of content/symbolic significance over the form/style of the artwork. The ‘unity of form and content’ is the new thematic that runs through both stylistic and

22Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, 64, describing the image on plate 64.
25Lang, “Style as Instrument, Style as Person,” 721.
26Ibid.
iconographical studies produced during this period. Some authors like Williams are explicitly state this; others (like Sara Schastok and Frederick Asher) demonstrate it by combining both approaches within a single text.\(^{27}\)

What this implies at a theoretical level is that there is a subtle change in the status of the artwork - an entente between the artwork’s status as a historical object (the colonialist contribution) and its status as a vehicle of meaning (the nationalist legacy) is finally achieved. In methodological terms, this has consequences for both stylistic analysis (see below) and for iconographical interpretation (Section III).

**Motifs as the Unit of Style**

A comparison between Kramrisch’s article “Figural Sculpture of the Gupta Period” and Williams’ *The Art of Gupta India* yields interesting insights into how the relationship between subject and ‘art’ object transforms in the writings of two art historians separated by span of about fifty years.\(^{28}\) Kramrisch is wildly eclectic in her choice of formal-stylistic ‘markers’ that distinguish one period or sculptural group from the next. She derives stylistic characteristics from sources ranging from traditional formalist criteria like line and composition, to motifs; from metaphysical concepts like ‘yoga breath’, to inferences about processes and techniques; from gestures, postures and facial expressions to very subjective characterizations of sculptural expressiveness. Reading her sometimes difficult prose, one gets the impression that her opulent descriptions of the ‘formal’ characteristics of Gupta art far exceed the basic requirement of establishing a stylistic sequence for the objects in question.

An excerpt from her description of the Sarnath Buddha images of the 5th century is given below:

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\(^{28}\)Kramrisch, “Figural Sculpture of the Gupta Period,” in Miller ed., *Exploring India’s Sacred Art*, 181–203. In her article on Gupta sculpture, Kramrisch, like Williams, combines her keen observation of motifs, formal qualities and expressive elements of Gupta sculpture with available historical information to arrive at a developmental account of the Gupta style “at various centres of art”. Mathura, Sarnath, Gadhwa and Gupta sculpture from central Indian and the Eastern and Western “schools” are Kramrisch’s equivalents of Williams’ “workshops”.

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The sculptural treatment of the Buddha figure in fifth-century Sarnath, which then influenced Mathura, not only places the image within its own space, but concentrates its divine presence by the close layering of the anterior plane, which is formed by the hands, and the posterior plane, formed by the back of the stele. Enclosed within a space created by its own surface, the Buddha image of the Gupta age represents a departure from the compact mass of its Kusana prototype. Layered in planes, the Buddhist icon of the Gupta period is given its classical proportions in the relation between planes and modeled corporeality.  

Like Williams, Kramrisch dwells on the expressive aspects of select works. But unlike Williams, the Austrian art historian is not circumspect about incorporating into her analysis, a plethora of intangible attributes like ‘rhythmic flux of form’ and startling conclusions such as locating the Gadhwa style within a ‘world of emotionally mature humanism’. 

Certain aspects of Kramrisch’s approach to Gupta sculpture find echoes in Williams’ writing. In her introduction, Williams indicates that, in ‘dealing with sculpture, it is essential to consider characteristics that are not easily quantified, for instance the way the human body moves’. As demonstrated in the earlier chapter, such an approach was the hallmark of Kramrisch’s formal analysis of figurative sculpture. Describing a transitional seated Buddha from Mathura, Williams concludes with the very Kramrisch-like statement that “…despite this catalogue of new motifs and elements, the image is still fundamentally akin to the earliest Kushan works in its direct, emotionally affecting warmth.” 

Interestingly, these subjective interventions, so commonplace in Kramrisch’s writings, occupy a less prominent position in Williams’ text. The Art of Gupta India engages in less purely ‘formalist’ analysis, indulges in fewer sweeping generalizations and has a less flamboyant prose style than “Figural Sculpture

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30 Ibid., 189, 198.
31 Williams, The Art of Gupta India, 6.
32 Ibid., 12.
of the Gupta Period”.

Williams relinquishes Kramrisch’s broad-based formalist framing for a more modest close-up analysis of motifs, a methodology she acknowledges that she adopts from French scholars of South and South East Asian art like Odette Viennot. Though most stylistic analyses published in the 1980’s and 1990’s make liberal use of motif analysis, only a few use the development of motifs as primary ‘evidence’ for stylistic variation.

Absolutely central to The Art of Gupta India, the motif functions as an objective correlate (and micro-unit?) of that elusive concept – ‘style’. To quote Williams, ‘...elements are isolated and placed in a convincing sequence of development in their own terms on the supposition that it is more objective to deal systematically with the parts than with the complex whole.’

This atomistic approach to style and stylistic change in Gupta sculpture, via motif analysis, is reminiscent of old style connoisseurship and of the methodology of colonialist archaeology (see Chapter II), which drew its strength from a similar reduction, subjecting the dissected ‘components’ of Indian architecture-sculpture to its myopic, measuring gaze. Why does Williams, who repeatedly highlights the unity of form and content of Gupta sculpture, premise her entire stylistic sequencing not on ‘artistic wholes’ as it were, but on a more manageable unit, the motif?

It is undeniable that analyse de motif is successful as a method; it is a reliable tool for establishing a temporal sequence for complex undated art objects, a relative chronology. This is particularly poignant in the case of pre-modern Indian art, where researchers are forced to do ‘art history without names’. However, when the motif takes on the role of primary stylistic marker in an analysis, it brings into question the status of the ‘art object’ being analyzed and its relationship with the art historian/subject. If style inheres within the motif, and the comparison of motif-level changes is all that is needed to trace the development of a style, then what happens to

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33Williams’ text is the product of a period when formalist approaches to art had declined in popularity and contextualist approaches to language, cultures and art were ascendant in frontline academic institutions of Western Europe and North America.

34Williams, The Art of Gupta India, 6.

35Williams’ motif here corresponds to that “mythical beast”, Berel Lang’s “styleme”, the “single and generic atom of style” which, he surmises, may be considered the “least or common denominator” of style. Lang, “Looking for the Styleme,” 408.
the concept of the ‘art work’ as an aesthetic and expressive whole? Consider the following excerpt, in which Williams compares an early Gupta Buddha with a contemporaneous Dipamkara image:

A second seated Buddha, now in the Cleveland Museum, might be considered earlier because the raised left hand allows a full swag of drapery to descend with zig-zag hem in the Kushan manner... Moreover, the body is more slender, notably in the legs, than the previous Dipamkara. The drapery, although remaining symmetrical in its disposition, falls in more gracefully tapered parabolas than on any work seen so far, and points toward the next period.36

Here, clearly, the state of development of motifs has evidentiary value; but how do these details modify the expressiveness of the ‘whole’ art work or our aesthetic response to it? This crucial link between style and aesthetics is poorly forged for the most part in Art of Gupta India; the promise of the introduction (that the discussion of artworks will reveal their aesthetic value) is not fulfilled. In the busywork of establishing a chronology via motifs, what gets sidelined is a sense of style as an expressive/affective aspect of the art works, individually and as groups.

In the context of much pre-modern Indian art, a field which offers art historians no direct access to prevailing artistic practices, intentions or aesthetics, researchers are forced to arrive at characterizations of style inferentially, depending entirely on their visual perception of the objects and on memory. It follows from this that ‘style’ cannot be unproblematically construed as an array of objective attributes that inheres within the artwork, as part of its sensuous configuration from the very beginning (as texts like The Art of Gupta India would lead us to believe). Even if it is successful as a method, there is something disturbingly positivist about using a ‘diagnostic’ unit like the motif to guide stylistic sequencing. One way of avoiding the positivist trap while continuing to be rigorously empirical, is to route stylistic analysis through ‘facture’, a concept that David Summers develops in many of his theoretical writings.37 When we frame artifacts as products of ‘facture’,

36Williams, The Art of Gupta India, 32.
we view them ‘as indexes of all the purposeful processes of their making.’

Grounding style in facture is analogous to locating an artwork within its originary context; it becomes possible to attend to the details while keeping the ‘artistic whole’ firmly within sight. Both stylistic continuities and stylistic changes become fully animated with intentionality and it becomes more difficult for the researcher to reify style into units like the motif.

However, this does not necessarily imply that the art historian will miraculously gain access to the workings of the mind of the sculptor, rendering the logic of stylistic change transparent. What will become obvious is the somewhat anachronistic ‘constructedness’ of our stylistic patterns and categories - style as an articulation of patterns that emerge at the locus of encounter between the art historian subject and the art object and stylistic analysis as a discursive framing of these patterns. To appropriate and distort a phrase from Svetlana Alpers, style will reveal itself to be what we make it.

**Style and Agency**

The notion of ‘agency’, as related to the concept of style, is absent from both colonialist and nationalist narratives, though for different ideological reasons. Colonialist archaeology/art history, with its predilection for the natural history paradigm, had a political stake in mitigating or denying the ‘agency’ of Indian craftsmen in various ways. On the other side of the fence, Coomaraswamy made a spiritual virtue of the anonymity of the ‘Indian Craftsman’ - an Ideal entity blissfully liberated from the fetters of individualism; for several decades after, no Indian art historian questioned this position.

By contrast, Williams clearly recognizes the operation of artistic choices and the agency of Gupta sculptors in her description of stylistic change. (‘Agency’, as I understand it, is a superset which includes the special subset - ‘facture’)

She allows for “the possibility of deviations from general tendencies, not only by virtue of regional developments..., but also by virtue of the will of the artist and the peculiar demands of the particular work of art—its physical properties, its content, and its integrity in terms of design. Thus the development of motifs does not follow immutable rules, but rather represents

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38Summers, “‘Form,’ Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description,” 397.
possibilities, realized in specific cases by human choice.” She ascribes the inception of the characteristically Gupta style of sculpture under Chandragupta II to an ‘underlying impulse’ – a ‘new emphasis upon the visual unity of the object’. Speculating that this ‘quest for plastic harmony’ “was perhaps understood by the artist himself less in aesthetic terms than in religious ones”, she attributes the change (at a formal level) to a collaboration between art activity and patronage of that time. The Govindnagar Buddha image (A.D. 434/5), one of the few works of this period that identifies its maker, Dinna, by name – occupies pride of place on the frontispiece of her book.

Dinna’s Buddha is clearly an exception. The anonymity of the artist being the rule during this period of Indian art, and the creation of these works being largely collective undertakings, Williams makes no attempt to single out the ‘hands’ of individual artists of this period. She rarely uses ‘artist’ in the singular as do Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch, to denote an idealist subject, a putative placeholder standing in for a period, a region, a nation or an entire world-view. Instead, Williams locates artistic agency very squarely at the level of the ‘workshop’ which she treats throughout the text as a historical, not a theoretical or ideal, entity. In The Art of Gupta India, Mathura plays a pivotal role as the fountainhead, both of religious/cultural developments and of artistic styles and experiments that spread to, and are modified by, workshops in other locations. The sculptural style emanating from workshops of Mathura form an important reference point (though not a norm) for Gupta substyles analysed throughout the text. Interestingly, the ‘workshop’ or ‘guild’ becomes a widely accepted locus of ‘style’ (more often ‘substyle’ and ‘idiom’), mediating between larger regional tendencies and individual artists, in several of the stylistic analyses published in the 1980’s and 1990’s. In the Western context, the idea of ‘style’ has, for centuries, been associated with the idea of the individual; a concept inextricably bound up with ‘deep

40 Ibid., 61.
41 For example, in Asher, The Art of Eastern India; Schastok, The Śāmalājī Sculptures and 6th Century Art in Western India; Huntington, The “Pāala-Sena” Schools of Sculpture; Sinha, Imagining Architects.
values of selfhood and authenticity.\textsuperscript{42} An entire professional field developed around the linking of style to the individual artist – connoisseurship. In texts like The Art of Gupta India that deal with pre-modern Indian art, we encounter a modified version of the concept of style, style manqué, that is forced to function without the ‘individual artist’ as its theoretical anchor and ultimate objective. Given the fact that the very definition of an ‘artwork as indivisible whole’ is founded on the theory of ‘artist as individual’, what is the status of an artefact that is (irrevocably) the product of multiple anonymous agents? Could this mismatch (between the Western notion of style and the circumstances surrounding Indian artworks) explain why so many superbly wrought pre-modern art-works never make it to autonomous ‘art’ status and are known only under a collective identity – as tokens of a type or members of a series?

\textbf{Style, Materiality and the Present}

In an essay on style included in the 2003 edition of Critical Terms for Art History, Jas Elsner makes as interesting point that, despite its empirical method, style art history is fundamentally idealistic.

The key assumption is that what matters about a work of art and what stylistic analysis may reveal is its origin and its moment of creation. Style rarely has any truck with the afterlife of objects, their messy history in the real world as they are bashed about, adapted, reused, and altered. The stylistic ethos affirms an almost romantic idealism about the pristine and creative beginnings of the work of art....When the morphology of objects has revealed a grouping, this does not take us to reception, for instance, but to an initial creation, whether cast in the guise of the artist or the originating location or the date of making.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{42}David Summers “Style,” in Donald Preziosi, The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology (Oxford University Press, 1998), 145. Summers traces the word style back to “stilus”, meaning pen in Latin. The notion of style originally related to personal style in rhetoric, bearing the fundamentally material imprint of its author. According to Summers, this root-concept of a personal style is expanded metaphorically to give us “Baroque style”, and so on.

Stylistic analyses like *The Art of Gupta India* are directed towards forging a strong, primary link between artworks and their political and socio-cultural contexts of origin. However, the strength of this link is also its weakness in another sphere; style art history is so centered around the historical contextualization of artworks that it effectively *seals its objects away in their originary time-space*, locating them out of our reach in the present. The fascinating but problematic persistence of the material artefact in our midst today, and the art historian’s/reader’s relationship with the object, is ‘out of the frame’ within this discourse. In an essay titled “The Shape of Indian Art History” Frederick Asher makes the following observation about his generation of American researchers who studied Indian art between the 1960’s and 1980’s, a group which included Williams:

> When art historians were studying the material manifestations of the past as if they had no present day lives, our scholarship was safe. It, like our material, lived in a world long gone, a world that we fabricated by allowing these objects to represent the past, and only the past....The methods were safe, for scholars largely sought to develop an even more robust taxonomy for Indian art.”

The admirably close attention that stylistic analysis pays towards the material and visual qualities of the work - the focus on formal attributes, expressive elements and aesthetic properties – all this is oriented towards fixing the object firmly within its originary context. As a consequence, the artefacts revert to their 19th century status of being historical objects first and last, even though we now call them ‘artworks’ and fully acknowledge agency, intention, context and function. Stylistic analysis has no investment in the ‘afterlife’ of its objects, how they were subsequently viewed, used or misused and appropriated. It also refuses to confront them as *our contemporaries*, fully present material objects that populate our world, fascinating loci of strangeness and otherness that refuse easy appropriation or domestication.

Style art history’s dread of anachronism entails a reluctance to let the present contaminate the past; for those of us caught up in today’s post-structuralist ethos, this indicates a lack of reflexivity. Paradoxically, it might

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just be this deficiency that accounts for its success in reconstructing obscured contexts, armed primarily with empirical rigour and epistemological optimism.

SECTION II: BONER, BERKSON AND THE METAPHYSICS OF FORM

Through the 1970’s into the 1990’s, a range of formalist approaches to pre-modern Indian art (sculpture and architecture) flourished alongside, and separately from, the contextualist stylistic analyses that were discussed in the previous section. The practitioners of this mode came from different disciplinary and geographical locations and followed widely different research protocols and methodologies. A few of these formalists, a culturally influential group, drew inspiration from metaphysically-oriented writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch to create a uniquely Indian historiographical tradition that I will refer to as Metaphysical formalism. Metaphysical Formalism differs in several significant ways from the various formalist approaches to art common in the modern West – crucially, it draws on transcendental conceptions of form and meaning found in early Indian philosophical texts to explain and interpret artistic phenomena.

Alice Boner’s *Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture: Cave Temple Period*, published in 1962 but conceived many years earlier, is a pioneering instance of the deployment of structural or compositional principles (parallel to the architectural ones used by Kramrisch in *Hindu Temple*) in the analysis of pre-modern Indian sculpture. Repeating the case study format, I begin this section with a preliminary analysis of Boner’s text as an early example of a purely formalist analysis of Indian sculpture. My second case study is Carmel Berkson’s *The Life of Form in Indian Sculpture*, published in 2000. Berkson’s book draws heavily on the works of Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch and on Boner’s approach.

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45 Alice Boner, Kapila Vatsyayan and Carmel Berkson are all Padma awardees. It is not coincidental that all three have links to the IGNCA.

46 Interestingly, both Boner and Berkson were sculptors trained in the Western modernist ethos before they turned to the research and analysis of Indian sculpture.
A disclaimer is called for at this point. Unlike stylistic analysis, post-independence formalist analyses in Indian art historiography are based on different epistemologies and follow different methodologies. It is a tricky task to extrapolate from particular texts to the larger paradigm because we find neither a uniformity of method nor a single well-defined theoretical position that would automatically imply common ground. Without straining to ‘unify’ them, I attempt to tease out certain regularities in the formalist texts that I analyze which, as I hope to demonstrate, mark the contours of a distinctive frame for pre-modern Indian art.

**Formalist Art History and its Indian adaptations**

The concept of ‘form’ has an interesting and chequered history in Western philosophical traditions, extending from Plato and Aristotle, through Kant to modernist aesthetic theories. The twin meanings of the noun ‘form’ – its quotidian usage to denote contour, shape or shaped volume and its more philosophical connotations that link it to Idea (Ideal Form) are interwoven and creatively conflated in several instances throughout its two millennium history. However, it was during the late 19th century and early 20th century that specialized *formalist art history* and *formalist criticism* developed as legitimate, autonomous theoretical approaches to artworks. David Summers traces the roots of modern-day formalist art history to the idealist metaphysics of 19th century scholars, mainly from Germany and Austria.\(^47\) Formalism, associated in the 19th century with a range of functions and concepts from connoisseurship to *Kunstwollen*, became the reigning theoretical paradigm in the first half of the 20th century, closely linked with modernism in the visual arts. Whitney Davis makes a critical distinction between what he calls ‘historical formalism’ of the 19th century, a paradigm that we associate with Heinrich Wolfflin and Alois Reigl, and the ‘High Formalism’ of the 20th century, as propagated by Clive Bell, Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg.\(^48\) With the waning of High Modernism in the painting and sculpture of the West in the 1960’s, the dominance of high formalist

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\(^47\)Summers, “‘Form,’ Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description."

approaches to art ended; formalism lingers on in the margins, however, as an art historical method or technique but not as a critical paradigm.\textsuperscript{49}

Stella Kramrisch and Ludwig Bachhofer were probably the first art historians to apply European historical formalism (in Davis’ sense) to the study of pre-modern Indian art. It was Ananda Coomaraswamy, however, who gave the concept of ‘Form’ the expansive metaphysical scope that it was to assume in the formalist texts of the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{50} Coomaraswamy’s ‘traditional philosophy’ version of form was actually a synthesis of the Platonic notion of Form and Indian metaphysical constructs drawn from the Vedas, Upanishads and Buddhist texts. “Form” in the traditional philosophy, according to the scholar, “does not mean tangible shape, but is synonymous with idea and even with soul; the soul, for example, is called the form of the body.”\textsuperscript{51} Though Coomaraswamy repeatedly denounced formalist abstraction in his trenchant critiques of modernist art of his period, I think his metaphysical conception of Form would not have had ready acceptance if not for the anti-mimetic trajectory of modernism that was already gaining ground in the West.

In retrospect, there can be little doubt that this expanded metaphysical notion of form was a valuable asset for Idealist art history. ‘Form’ (or ‘higher ‘intelligible form’) effectively supplants mimesis as the true objective of art. Measured by the formalist yardstick, pre-modern Indian art fares as well as, if not better than, 500 years of the Western representational tradition and the artistic criteria of realism, naturalism and verisimilitude are rendered inconsequential. The formalist approach also makes it possible to transcend the art-craft divide in the Indian context and to accommodate the diversity of artistic production found across the sub-continent. Finally, the metaphysical interpretation of form, while being ‘authentically’ Indian, in that it can be

\textsuperscript{49}Summers, “‘Form,’ Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description,” 372–373.


shown to originate in Indian philosophical traditions, is also amenable to conflation, whenever necessary, with modernist formalism.\textsuperscript{52}

**The Metaphysics of Form in Alice Boner’s *Principles***

Alice Boner’s *Principles of Form* is the first analysis of Indian sculpture based entirely on the metaphysics of form. Inspired by Kramrisch’s *Hindu Temple* and Coomaraswamy’s writings on the architectural symbolism of the dome and the ‘Kandarya Mahadeo’ temple, Boner applies abstract metaphysical principles to the study of Brahmanical Cave temple sculpture created between the 6\textsuperscript{th} and 9\textsuperscript{th} centuries Western and Southern India. Examining a selection of sculptural reliefs from Badami, Mamallapuram and Ellora individually, Boner deploys what she calls ‘visual intuition’ to unearth the compositional principles that underlie these complex manifestations. “The distinctive character of the Indian form-language, which most authors have taken for granted as a basis, the substratum, the very point of departure for their analytical studies, is here the main object of investigation.”\textsuperscript{53}

Boner’s hypothesis is that ‘beneath’ the opulent profusion of detail in Indian sculptural forms, a geometrical and abstract compositional grid can be discovered, that controls and organizes the disposition of elements. The basic geometrical forms controlling the composition are the circle with its central ‘bindu’, multiple diameters, and chords connecting the points where these diameters intersect with the circumference. Each relief panel under analysis is characterized by its specific combination of diameters and chords. The second part of Boner’s text is profusely illustrated with photographs of prominent relief panels, organized by subject matter; each regular black and white photograph is followed by two ‘diagrams’ featuring geometrical grids superimposed on the images.

Ironically, ‘superimposition’ would be a misnomer for Boner’s grids if one were to accept her explanation about their relation with the sculptural reliefs. Boner denies that the grids are projections of a 20\textsuperscript{th} century formalist sensibility; she claims, instead, to have stumbled upon the logic of composition that dictated the form of the reliefs at the point of their creation.

\textsuperscript{52}The pioneers of Indian modernism in the early 20th century – Jamini Roy, Nandanlal Bose, and others, exploited this space for conflation creatively.

In other words, she claims what Davis calls an ‘objective’ status for her grids. According to Davis, we can “say that formalism becomes objective...when it identifies the formality that was subjectively constituted and recognized as the sensuous aspect of configuration by the people who constructed the artifact.”

Why do we not have more actual evidence of these compositional grids, in the form of written documents or vestiges of preliminary drawings? Boner invokes the ‘veil of secrecy’ argument, supposedly engineered by artists for protecting ‘the ultimate and most treasured principles of their art from profanation’.

Assuming it were true that Boner’s reconstruction of compositional grids approximates what was used by sculptors of Ellora and Mamallapuram as a technical guide to composition, what we have is an interesting ringside view of how the sculptures were originally conceived, standardized and harmonized with each other. Differences in how the grid was configured across tokens of a type (for example, various Yuddha-Narasimha reliefs) would give us a key to stylistic differences, differential aesthetics even. However, these are not directions that Boner finds worth pursuing.

Not content with giving them the status of technical devices, the scholar reads an elaborate, multi-layered ‘metaphysical’ reference into the compositional grids that govern the compositions of relief sculptures. Supporting her explanation with a strange synthesis of the Platonic theory of Form, and various non-specifiable Indian metaphysical and philosophical formulations, couched in the disconcerting language of early 20th century Vitalism, Boner writes:

In its metaphysical essence, form constitutes a definite mode of cosmic operation. It arises from certain movements of the Life-force that animates all matter, and by a process of expansion and

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54 Davis, “Subjectivity and Objectivity in High and Historical Formalism,” 13–14.
55 A partial exception seems to be Silpa-Prakasa, a controversial text from Orissa, which Alice Boner helped translate and publish. Boner also refers to the Vastu-Sutra Upanishad; Boner, Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture, 4.
56 Boner, Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture, 4.
57 Somewhat irrelevently to this discussion, Boner’s grids appear to me to be arbitrary. The placement of the diagonal diameters and chords in particular, emerges as markedly random. 58 Boner, Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture, 10. Why the grids are not simply technical devices is not properly justified here; the reader is forced to take that leap of faith along with the author.
growth, or of condensation and contraction, causes it to crystallize into certain shapes. ...Different movements, obeying different urges and impulses of the cosmic Life-force create different forms. Thus lines, forms and colours are not accidental, but are direct manifestations of these inner forces, and therefore present a perfect analogy to spiritual reality, their ultimate Cause...Form, as the precipitation of the universal creative impulse and its visible image, is man’s most essential and vital experience, because it brings him into direct, intimate contact with these creative forces and nourishes his subconscious as well as his conscious mind with images and impressions of the surrounding world.” 59

“As a human mode of expression,” Boner continues in a Platonic vein, “form is a reflection of the cosmic world of forms....” 60 In a subsequent passage, she points to the “elementary and obvious truth that the particular form-language of any art is conditioned by the cosmic psychological and metaphysical conceptions that lie at its base.” Boner’s formulations on the metaphysical implications of the circle and its centre, space-divisions, time-divisions and their integration within the sculptures are too elaborate to explain in any detail. However, a few observations on the theoretical implications of her brand of formalism are relevant to this study.

The Autonomy of Form

Boner echoes Coomaraswamy’s views on Indian art and symbolism on a number of counts. She shares the idealist conviction about the timeless continuity of Indian traditions, the spiritual essence of Indian art and the inability of contemporary viewers to understand ‘traditional art’. 61 She reiterates Coomaraswamy’s justification for the anonymity of the Indian artist, replicates the idealist construct of the Indian Artist responding to his ‘inner vision’ and avoids all reference to sculpture as ‘facture’, learnt and taught at the workshop, to sculpture as a historically specific material

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59Ibid., 12.
60Ibid.
61Ibid., 11.
practice responsive to medium, technique and technology. There is no attempt made to contextualize style historically.

What marks Boner’s text as a departure from the earlier writings is the primacy given to form, even if her attenuated definition of form is confined to the so-called principles of composition. The principles are likened to the abstract ‘subtle body’ of figuration, to the ‘skeleton’ that ‘determines the structure and relationship of all forms.’ The metaphor she consistently uses is one of depth vs. surface; ‘inner’ compositional principles lie ‘below’ the “picturesque surface” of the sculptures, giving the viewer access to ‘a deeper and more real understanding’ of Indian sculpture. Unlike Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch, Boner treats form as a more or less autonomous aspect of the art work, giving it priority over imagery and symbolism. “Forms and lines have function, character and expression in themselves, quite independently from what they actually represent in the image.” Forms act directly on “our subconscious form-sensitivity”; their ‘objective connotations” are secondary.

The first section of each of Boner’s case studies of relief panels is a synoptic account of the mythological reference and iconographical details. The second part analyses individual elements of the depiction (a knee, a sword, a pedestal etc) in terms of their placement on the gridlines (‘space’ and ‘time’ divisions). In the final section of each case study titled ‘Integration and Interpretation’, Boner integrates the expressive aspects of form with iconography to arrive at a kind of exegesis; here form (framed narrowly as principles of composition) is viewed as the primary vehicle of expressiveness in sculpture; form-language animates figuration and imagery.

**Principles of Composition: A Critique**

Reading Boner’s *Principles of Composition* in the 21st century is a peculiar experience; the work comes across as being a-historical, simultaneously over-ambitious and constricted in scope, essentialist, dogmatic and quaint. However, it is undeniable that the text blunders into hitherto unexplored areas in the context of pre-modern Indian sculpture. For example, Boner’s
approach may be the first systematic attempt in India to account for the affective impact of sculptures in terms of expressiveness of forms, even if the author defines form narrowly and two-dimensionally in terms of her formulaic principles of composition. By uncoupling the form of the work from its representational aspect, its ‘legible’ import, Boner allows the reader to confront the ‘sensuous configuration’ of the artwork attentively, without guilt. This approach entails a fairly close viewing of sculptures as individual entities (not as ‘tokens of an iconographic type’ or ‘members of a stylistic series’), and a direct and sustained experience of their material and visual qualities. An interesting implication of this uncoupling is that the ‘artist’, at least in theory, acquires a domain of independent and creative operation. Iconography and meaning may be pre-determined by sacerdotal prescriptions but form is the sculptor’s personal domain of expertise. Boner does not develop this line of reasoning for obvious reasons; if anything, her Principles of Composition imposes a largely pre-fabricated formula on an a-historical Ideal artist-figure. There are other problems associated with Boner’s approach, a few of which are relevant to this study.

**Principles of Composition: Metaphysics or Facture?**

The validity of Boner’s claim to have ‘discovered’ the original compositional grids that controlled depictions in relief sculpture has been questioned in the earlier part of this analysis. On this somewhat unstable foundation, she erects a multi-layered edifice of motley metaphysical associations to buttress her compositional grids – the Tantric Bindu, the three Gunas, the five Elements, the eight Chakras, the Vedic fire-altar and Vedic sacrifices, the Buddhist stupa, the Hindu temple, the Nadis, yantras, mandalas, and so on.\(^6\) Instead of adding credibility to her hypothesis of compositional principles, this overload of explanatory factors renders it precarious. As repositories of metaphysical significance, Boner’s principles of composition are irredeemably overdetermined.

In an article titled “Representation in India’s Sacred Images: Objective vs. Metaphysical Reference”, V.K. Chari critiques Boner’s conflation of yantras and pratimas (figurative images). According to Chari, “…the yantra as an icon and object of meditation is quite separate from the image figuration, and the

\(^6\)See Alice, Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture, especially 18-34.
content of the meditation on it is also different. Therefore to say either that the image is a yantra or that the yantra is conceptually prior to the plastic rendering of the deity would be patently false, judging from textual evidence, for this would be to ignore the concrete, mythological content of the image and to miss the whole point of image-making. Boner’s enthusiastic promotion of the equivalence of yantras, mandalas and her compositional grids amounts to a serious category error, and this costs her theory some credibility.

Chari also questions Boner’s suggestion that the compositional grid generates figuration; his reading of the fifth chapter of the Vastu-Sutra Upanishad (which is also a major textual source for Boner’s theory) clearly indicates that the geometrical grid follows the artist’s mental conception of the form and feeling of the deity to be depicted. Chari concludes that “the expressiveness of the images, which Boner attributes to abstract figures, is derived from their underlying themes and from their gestures, from their 'form-content' rather than from their 'form-disposition'. The scope of the compositional grid – assuming it did guide figuration – is limited to it being a technical device; and as a technical device, it points us to facture rather than to metaphysics.

The Life of Form in Indian Sculpture

Carmel Berkson’s 2000 publication, The Life of Form in Indian Sculpture brings together a number of ideas developed in her earlier studies of pre-modern Indian sculpture. While the book bears the unmistakable stamp of the idealist paradigm - Coomaraswamy, Kramrisch and Boner being the major influences - Berkson’s contribution to the analysis of form is distinctive and original. As a trained sculptor and photographer who spent decades fine-tuning her responses to pre-modern Indian sculpture via the camera lens, the

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68 For example, in Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture, 59., Boner claims that “the effectiveness of a representation depends much more on the basic composition than on gestures and facial expressions of single figures.”

69 Chari, “Representation...” 67-68.

author’s original insights merit serious analysis. In the section that follows, I focus on two aspects of Berkson’s writing that go beyond idealist constructs and advance a new way of framing and writing about the art work. The first is her uniquely tactile, kinesthetic response to sculptured environments. The second is her practical understanding of facture and process. These sensitivities combine to give Berkson’s analysis of sculptural form an almost phenomenological slant that is unprecedented in Indian art historiography.

In her introductory chapters, Berkson rehearses many of the familiar formulations of the idealist paradigm – the ‘disintegrations’ of contemporary life, the need for the revival of ‘cosmocentric’ concern, the involvement of ancient artists with the ‘universal will’ and so on.\(^\text{71}\) Her characterization of the ‘Indian sculptor’ is similarly idealized. Living ‘in close and confident harmony’ with nature, yet shunning mimesis, the archetypal artist’s “primary purpose was to seek escape from phenomenal existence”.\(^\text{72}\) However, Berkson introduces an interesting complication into what would otherwise be a repetition of the idealist position. She drives an epistemological wedge between the subject matter or content of the artwork and its form. Through the length of the book, she sustains this distinction and focuses on form. Whenever she draws connections between the formal qualities of a sculpture and its representational aspects, the explanation usually involves the expressive register and viewer psychology. Unlike Boner, Berkson avoids reducing complex manifestations to a single geometric formula and then reading metaphysical meanings into this apparently generative ‘inner principle’.

**Form in Berkson’s Text.**

Berkson’s book, as its title suggests, is influenced by Henri Focillon’s 1934 classic *The Life of Forms in Art*.\(^\text{73}\) The most obvious aspects of this influence are found in her vitalist animating (even fetishising) of lines, textures, space, volume, masses which she treats as independent entities with an organic life of their own. For example, in a passage describing the qualities of space and


\(^{72}\) Ibid., 23.

masses within the lithic temple, Berkson writes, in a strikingly Focillonian manner:

Lesser or greater densities of space and mass create varying effects. Space provides escape routes for pent up energies of mass when compression is exclusively from within, as masses are agitated and forcefully extended outward. Solids will penetrate and dispossess surrounding space, giving it shape. Then space may be invaded or even shattered, as masses are turbulenty launched into space.\(^74\)

Berkson’s objects are markedly more three-dimensional than Boner’s sculptural panels; the latter’s text seemed to demand that the reader acquire x-ray vision that would penetrate through the ‘overlay’ of volumes, masses and figuration to reach the two-dimensional skeletal ‘essence’ of sculptural reliefs. Although, following Boner, she does introduce the panjara in the initial chapters, for Berkson “the authentic work of sculpture can never be reduced to a mere reliance on a grid….Indian sculptural art achieved supreme heights even when all traces of the geometric linear grid had been entirely eliminated.”\(^75\)

*The Life of Form in Indian Sculpture* combines two approaches to the art object which seem to me to contradict each other. On the one hand, Berkson evolves a set of overlapping and somewhat confusing typologies for formal variations found in sculpture. Starting with an analysis of basic geometric/volumetric shapes like the plank, the block and the cylinder that frame or virtually ‘contain’ the sculptures, the author examines relief and free-standing sculptures from various angles – in terms of ‘fields of force’, in terms of how dual or multiple figures relate to each other, in terms of how they ‘rupture’ the surface panjara, and so on. These categories seem to me to be highly idiosyncratic and lacking clarity; they obscure the works themselves have a stultifying effect on the text. On the other hand, some of Berkson’s descriptions of individual works, when positioned outside the panjara of her typologies, bring the formal dynamics of the artworks to vibrant life.

\(^74\)Berkson, *The Life Of Form In Indian Sculpture*, 110.
\(^75\)Ibid., 35.
In *Life of Form*, in fact, a few sculptures transcend the third dimension to become quasi-‘events’ that happen in the reader/viewer’s space-time. Berkson’s description of Elephanta’s dancing Siva is illustrative:

In terms of economy of expression and contained, yet explosive force, this is one of India’s great contributions to the history of sculpture... The interactivity of volumes in dominantly lateral oppositions with simultaneous contrasting movement back to rock matrix, stabilized by axis, coordinates into a profound and unique complex structure.

There are new alignments of cylindrical shapes for the first time ruptured from reliance on the planar vertical/horizontal grid. True three-dimensionality, joined with the mother rock, has been introduced. But there is more, much more, to this great work. The dense anatomical parts are now disposed along counterpositioned diagonals with vectors in extreme opposition so that tension is intense. One behind the other, the stout shapes are recessed into a deeply excavated background. At the same time, the vertical axis indraws, contains, and fixes the burst of explosive force. The furious dance is, in fact, quiescent. Since concentrated energy is ultimately retained in the primary mass, efferent forces do not dominate...  

Berkson’s prose is somewhat turgid; it also seems, at first reading, to be indecipherably abstract. However, when we juxtapose the text with her superlative photographs (which I consider a very vital part of her *theoretical* contribution), the abstraction immediately resolves into recognizable forms and force fields. The inevitable linearity of verbal description is no longer oppressive; it provides the reader with a road-map for scanning the object and hints at how the visual and material configuration ‘works’. Berkson’s description epitomizes what Michael Baxandall refers to as the ‘ostensive’ nature of art critical language where ‘concepts and object reciprocally

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76Ibid., 248.
77This back-and-forth between text and image is even more clearly demonstrated in Berkson’s pictorial and textual contributions to Berkson and Doniger, *Elephanta*.  

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sharpen each other’. Ostensive description, according to Baxandall, depends both on the speaker [or the writer in this case] and the hearers [or reader] “supplying precision to it by reciprocal reference between the word and the object.”

Baxandall characterizes these descriptions as ‘alarmingly mobile and fragile’, yet ‘excitingly flexible and alive’. This mobility and aliveness is palpable in some of Berkson’s descriptions, even if we don’t subscribe to her vitalist interpretations of the ‘life of forms’. This vitality seems to be the function of the fact that the encounter with sculptural environments, for Berkson, is not just a visual ‘reading’ but an embodied, relational, kinesthetic experience. In her own words “… [t]he statue will be animated only when the spectator is in direct contact with it. As s/he enters into the act of seeing and making mental observations, a process is set in motion, and then only are force events revealed to be inherent in the perceived field…. “Only is a kinesthetic identification with the statue itself will the spectator recognize that what s/he sees is the counterpart of her or his own personal feelings.”

**Subject Positions:**

In her introductory chapter, Berkson gestures towards a few familiar subject positions *vis a vis* the sculptures. She refers to ‘scholars’ (presumably within the realist paradigm) who study style, chronology, iconography, etc; the tourist or student; interpreters interested in the metaphysical dimension of the sculptures, the devotee ‘who must get in touch with the icon for life-survival purposes’ and the artist/sculptor (always male) who communicates through forms with the devotee. Berkson herself clearly identifies with the ‘metaphysically’- oriented interpreters and at times with the sculptor and the devotee.

The devotee, Berkson’s ‘ideal’ viewer, is linked to the sculptural configuration through a bond of ‘spiritual and temporal’ necessity; the author interprets this bond as being primarily emotional and psychic. She frames her interpretation in terms of a peculiarly hybrid formulation, Jungian psychology

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79 Ibid., 10.
80 Berkson, *The Life Of Form In Indian Sculpture*, 265.
81 Ibid., 24.
combined with Indian metaphysics. Therefore, for the devotee, “what is primarily operative is the fundamental human impulse for structuring and constellating the unconscious which, if left unattended, is perpetually causing havoc and turbulence. S/he seeks a palpable imagery to control these psychic predispositions, to connect with what is constant and fixed....”82 The artist, similarly moved by his own ‘unconscious urgings’, directs ‘the will towards structure’ and ‘manipulates’ forms to create meaning.83 Meanings, for Berkson, “are intrinsic in and are to be intuited in the life of forms, for which only the artist can be responsible [italics mine].” The devotee intuits meanings from these forms, meanings which exist ‘quite apart from content’.84 Both the artist and the devotee “are in the identical frame of mind, which is grounded in the collective unconscious, both are in search of the external recognizable counterpart for the internally generated ordering stimuli.”85 The art object, as Berkson frames it, appears to be an emanation or concretization of the Jungian archetype. Though she bemoans the fact that contemporary Indian artists have turned away from their roots, for Berkson the modernist artist and photographer, art retains an inalienable universality rooted in psychic wholeness.

Agency, Facture and Inferential Criticism.

Despite her idealist tendency to essentialize the so-called unified ‘frame of mind’ of the artist, patron, devotee and priest, Berkson makes a very significant break with that paradigm in acknowledging the autonomy of the artist. She goes so far as to conceptualize an interesting tension between the artist and the codifier/canonical expert.86 This is partly a function of Berkson’s epistemology; the author consistently separates formal qualities from representational attributes throughout the text and concentrates on the expressive nature of form, instead of trying to affect a dubious compromise between form and representational content via metaphysics as Boner does. Ultimately, “…meanings are intrinsic in and are to be intuited in the life of

82Ibid., 17.
84Ibid., 30.
85Ibid., 31.
86Ibid., 26–27.

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forms, for which only the artist can be responsible; the key to what is inherent in form cannot be sought for in associated texts."\textsuperscript{87}

Another aspect contributing to the autonomy of Berkson’s artist is her \textit{romantic} framing of artistic activity which is fundamental to all her writing, to her very approach to pre-modern Indian art. She writes of the artist’s ‘creative delirium’, and the ‘compulsions of the artists towards experimentation and change’\textsuperscript{88} While acknowledging the ‘genius’ behind what she considers great works of art, Berkson writes, “…we postulate an ideal person; genius/architect/sculptor as archetypal maker, whose mind and unconscious ordering process and whose hands and tools are in direct contact with the intangibles – the meaningful, the beautiful and the universal.”\textsuperscript{89}

A distinctive characteristic of \textit{Life of Forms} is Berkson’s unusually strong identification with the \textit{makers} of the art works she studies. Her location as a practicing sculptor and her romantic, universalist framing of art practice makes this subject-position tenable. For example, \textit{Life of Forms} is dedicated ‘to the ancient architects, sculptors and the unskilled labourers – women and men.’ In her 1992 publication \textit{Ellora, Concept and Style}, Berkson appends a photo-documentation of ‘contemporary techniques of rock excavation’, at Halebidu.\textsuperscript{90} This attempt to include a practice-oriented, sculptor’s eye view of Indian sculpture is unprecedented, as far as I know, in the historiography of Indian art.\textsuperscript{91} For example, the following description of the carving process adds a completely new dimension to our perception of pre-modern sculpture:

To begin the journey into the three-dimensional, at first the carving proceeds with slow and rhythmic strokes for the removal of excess stone from the front and two sides, to eliminate the two front corners. At every minute step along the way, analysis and measure will determine which of the hundreds of points on the surface

\textsuperscript{87}Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{88}Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{89}Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{90}Berkson, \texti{Ellora}, 355–356. Berkson concludes that an excavation of the magnitude of Ellora would have involved the effort of thousands of skilled and unskilled workers, working in a highly coordinated manner to execute a carefully conceived design. This makes an interesting comparison with Fergusson’s dismissal of the effort as minor compared to structural construction. (See Chapter II).
\textsuperscript{91}Even J. Mosteller’s article titled “Texts and Craftsmen at Work,” in Michael W. Meister, \textit{Making Things in South Asia: The Role of Artist and Craftsman} (Dept. of South Asia Regional Studies, 1988) is really an outside observer’s view.
should remain uncarved, where to open spaces, which oblique planes to break into, and how to carve the body parts in the round. They are first carved in gross geometrical shapes and then into more naturalistic abstractions.  

This close-up consideration and understanding of process is conspicuously absent in most texts dealing with Indian art. A combination of factors, I think, have accumulated to perpetuate this absence; the natural history paradigm of colonialist archaeology, overlaid with the imperialist refusal to allow natives agency and finally, the nationalist dematerialization of the artwork and idealization of art processes. It is in this context that David Summers’ concept of ‘facture’ (see previous section on style) and Michael Baxandall’s description of ‘inferential criticism’ in his Patterns of Intention become significant for Indian art historiography.

In his chapter on intentional visual interest, Baxandall attempts to draw out theoretical connections between accounts of intention and the reconstruction of the art-making process. Of the three kinds of words used to describe or point to art works (effect words, comparative words and cause words), it is words inferential about cause, according to Baxandall, that are the most robust and satisfying kind of demonstration of the art work’s unique qualities and the artist’s intention. He calls this inferential criticism. His own discursive framing of Pablo Picasso’s Portrait of Kahnweiler, for example, examines the artist’s performance as the development of a solution to a specific problem (the general charge plus the specific brief.)

The sense of a dimension of process, of re-formulation and discovery and response to contingency going on as the painter is actually disposing his pigments, is often important to our enjoyment of the picture and also to our understanding of how styles historically evolve and change.  

Berkson’s description of the Hoysala Sivagajasamhara at Halebid is an outstanding example of inferential criticism applied to Indian sculpture; it demonstrates that close attention to formal problems and their solutions can pay dividends even if one has very little information about the artists and the

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92Berkson, The Life Of Form In Indian Sculpture, 262.
93Baxandall, Patterns of Intention, 62–63.
circumstances of their art practice. For this reason, I include here an almost complete quotation:

At Hoysalesvara Temple, Halebid, cacophonous pandemonium might well have been the effect of such an abundant conglomeration of entirely disparate accessory forms, forced into crowded and crammed ambiguous association within a barely adequate space. Not one of the multiple forms is alike. In fact they are as dissimilar as possible; they differ from one another in size, with no obvious grid pattern and plane level placement.

How is it then that there is a complex order rather than disordered confusion in this consummate creation? Although this dependence is hardly obvious, primary reliance is once again on the median axis. Weights are evenly distributed on both of its sides, so that a fine balance subliminally dominates the obfuscations. At first it may appear that the interacting forms would be permitted no escape because the perimeter of the elephant’s skin is an absolute surround, pressing the elements inwards. But it soon becomes evident that there is just enough space on its inner side – a mini concavity – to free the forms from choked enfoldment...

Siva’s gaze, his lowest arms, his right leg and Nandi’s slant are all directed towards open space. Even while every twist and turn creates opposing centrifugal/centripetal expansions and implosions and this amount of compression and concentrated power has rarely been equaled, the final effect is of \textit{lasya}, because the median line, the dominance of Siva’s \textit{tribhanga} position and the protective oval of the skin of the elephant are the underlying infrastructure supporting and converging with small accessory volumes. Perpetual mobility results from this rhythmic interplay.\footnote{Berkson, \textit{The Life Of Form In Indian Sculpture}, 349–350. See also Berkson’s photograph of the sculpture – (plate facing pg 349).}

\textbf{The Metaphysics of Form: An Assessment}

In a seminal article titled “Form,” Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description”, David Summers speculates about the consequences (for art history) of doing away with formal analysis altogether.
Formal analysis, the author cautions us, “remains the way in which "the work of art itself" is talked about, and if it is simply abandoned, then the history of art is placed in the paradoxical position of being unable to speak in significant ways about the objects of its peculiar concern, which is not even to mention the problems of fashioning histories of these objects.” Summers’ subsequent book, his magnum opus, *Real Spaces*, can be considered and extended resolution of this dilemma; a ‘post-formalist’ approach to art history.

Whitney Davis makes an interesting critical point about formalism as an art historical method. Formalism, like stylistic analysis and iconography, starts ‘from the visible evidence of apparent configuration.’ But unlike the other two, formalism tends to ‘end with its starting point - to generate a closed and circular confirmation of the formalist’s own observations, relating how the artifact appears to him or her to be shaped and colored, rather than an account of the formality produced by makers and perhaps recognized by observers in the past.’ For this reason, formalism lacks what Davis insightfully terms the *traction* of attribution (which is the premise of stylistic analysis) and *traction* offered by the translation of figuration (iconography’s domain). Ultimately, formalism ‘attends to itself in sensation,’ rather than grappling with the complexities of the objective correlates of sensation.

In the case of Indian formalist analysis, the ‘traction’ is often afforded by a single overarching principle or master narrative which usually takes the shape of a metaphysical formulation such as ‘the temple is a monument of manifestation’ or ‘the unity of compositional principles underlies the diversity of manifestations’. This kind of formulation, which can claim for itself an ancient Indian philosophical pedigree, takes the form of a totalizing theory that explains (or explains away) a tremendous diversity of artefactual productions, their contexts and correlations. Also, because of its authentically ‘Indian’ genealogy, the formulation sometimes makes confident claims to being ‘objective’ (in Davis’ sense), of being a reasonably accurate representation of what was actually going on in the Mind of the ‘Indian Artist’

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95Summers, “‘Form,’ Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description,” 372–373.
96Summers, *Real Spaces*.
97Davis, “Subjectivity and Objectivity in High and Historical Formalism,” 10–11.
who conceived and executed the art work. In the section that follows, I isolate three important reasons why I find a metaphysically-inflected formalism problematic; it is a-historical, it refuses to fully acknowledge the human dimension of artefactual production and finally, it can become prescriptive instead of being analytic.

In Life of Form in Indian Sculpture, for example, Berkson is dismissive of stylistic evolution following a chronological sequence, asserting (in a rather essentialist fashion) that chronology ‘has never been an Indian concern.’ Like many formalists, Focillon included, she maintains that ‘artistic evolution develops independently of conceptual thought.’ For Berkson, artists ‘do not live in the identical time period’, ‘in how they think about their work.’ The idealist underpinnings of Berkson’s text show through in her framing of Indian sculpture as evolving, in some essential way, independently of the sculptors’ material circumstances and their social and ideological contexts.

This problem (of being a-historical) is compounded by the dominance of the totalizing theory – a theory which has a tremendous capacity to level out variations and ignore anomalies. (Fergusson’s teleology of decline was a crude ‘colonialist’ version of precisely such a theory.) Consider Boner’s compositional principles, for example. The compulsion to resolve sculptural reliefs into their compositional principles can become obsessive; ruining our interest in other compellingly visual or material aspects – the response of the surfaces to changing light, for example, or serendipitous chisel marks that have not been smoothed over in an undercut section. The latter, especially, offers to lead us tantalizingly closer to the ‘hand’ of the unknown sculptor whereas the hypothetical compositional grid can only point us to some missing silpa text, or to Boner’s own book. By accounting for all formal variations in logical rather than historical or contextual terms, formalist master narratives are irrevocably deterministic; they cancel out the unpredictability of stylistic trajectories, are oblivious to the significance of

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98Berkson, The Life Of Form In Indian Sculpture, 23–26; Also, see the introductory chapter in Adam Hardy, Indian Temple Architecture: Form and Transformation: the Karnāṭaka Drāvida Tradition, 7th to 13th Centuries (Abhinav Publications, 1995) Hardy’s approach is critiqued by Ajay Sinha in his article titled “The ‘Subjectivist Turn’ in Indian Temple Architecture” in Panikkar et al. eds., Towards a New Art History – Studies in Indian Art.

99Berkson, The Life Of Form In Indian Sculpture, 19, 111, 226.

100Ibid., 63.

101Ibid., 19.
anomalies and ultimately, they minimize the role of human agency in artefactual production. Historical agents are reduced to being instruments of some inexorable ‘higher’ principle.

In an article titled “On Formalism and Pictorial Organization”, Richard Wollheim distinguishes between what he terms ‘Normative Formalism’ and ‘Analytic Formalism’.

Normative (or regulative) Formalism is a theory about how paintings should be. It holds that they ought to be organized in a certain way if they are to be of value, and that this organization is what we need to take account of, and is all that we need to take account of, in coming to assess or evaluate them. Analytic (or constitutive) Formalism is a theory about how paintings essentially are. It holds that necessarily they are organized in a certain way, and that this organization is what we need to take account of, and all that we need to take account of, in coming to understand them. Sometimes ... Analytic Formalism has temporal limits set to it. So we are told, and asked to make sense of it, that what it says holds true, and holds true necessarily, of, and solely of, paintings made in certain periods, or between certain dates, or by certain painters.\[102\]

Going by Wollheim’s definitions, both Boner’s and Berkson’s texts are Analytic Formalist writings because they analyze historically specific phenomena and (apparently) inductively arrive at the major organizational principles. However, it is easy to see where Boner’s text crosses the boundary and becomes a Normative Formalist text. The reader is saddled with the supposed universality of the grid, and with the enormous metaphysical baggage it carries. To view the Mamallapuram Mahishamardini, for example, without acknowledging its underlying ‘Principles of Composition’, would be tantamount to sacrilege. There are similarly coercive elements in Berkson’s text as well (her value judgments about subject positions, for example) but they are less conspicuous. To use a spatial analogy, the crux of the problem with metaphysical formalism (the Indian version) seems to be that it generates a closed, holistic system that one can only enter unconditionally.

To question either the ‘higher’ principles or their universal applicability automatically disqualifies one from participating in the system.

**SECTION III: ICONOLOGY IN DESAI’S THE RELIGIOUS IMAGERY OF KHAJURAO**

Both stylistic and formalist studies prioritize the visual and material qualities of the work of art. A close and sustained scrutiny of the surfaces and structures that constitute the material form of the artwork forms a vital part of every formal or stylistic analysis, no matter how elaborately the study contextualizes the work or derives logical patterns/metaphysical significance from it. In contrast to this kind of detailed looking, studies that focus on the ‘content’ of art works use the sensuous configuration of the artwork only as a point of departure. Till recently at least, interpretations of content in the Indian art context largely excluded considerations of formal or expressive aspects of art works; they fell in line with Erwin Panofsky’s definition of iconographical analysis: “Iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form [italics added].”

The relationship between the art object and the interpreting subject appears to change in a subtle way when the art historian frames the object as a repository or vehicle of meaning, rather than as a trace of ancient workmanship or as a unique array of formal or expressive qualities. The ‘meaningful’ artefact is located within an entirely different ecology; its connections with history, with the agents responsible for its creation, with its original and subsequent viewers, all these are so distinctive that we seem to be dealing with an altogether different object from that of formal/stylistic analysis. In an attempt to map these modified connections, and to understand what is at stake when art historians frame artworks primarily as vehicles of meaning, I take up a final case study - Devangana Desai’s *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho* – as an example of a site-specific iconological

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Desai’s text, published in 1994, is interesting for many reasons; it stands at the crossroads of old fashioned iconography and iconology, combines formulations of the idealist-metaphysical school with a broadly cultural history perspective, and contains the seeds of a reception-oriented approach to pre-modern art works, though it does not fulfill this promise.

**Background**

In the earlier chapters, I have suggested that the ‘meaning’ or significance attributed to an artefact within different epistemological frames does not have to coincide with its originally ‘intended’ meaning, that is, its original function or the message it was meant to communicate. Within the antiquities and colonialist archaeological frames, for example, the intricacies of the ‘intended’ communicative content of an unmistakably narrative work like the Great Relief at Mamallapuram are less important than its significance as a vital material trace of a lost historical period. The primary anxiety is to give it a date and a dynastic label; to the extent that an understanding of the original ‘content’ would help date it and attribute it to a certain dynasty, a particular ruler, the ‘correct’ interpretation of the story is important.

The situation changed dramatically in the first decades of the 20th century, when a selection of these artefacts attained the exalted status of Art. As I understand it, the point at which we elevate an artefact to the status of an art work is the point at which we are obliged to take seriously its intended meanings, the content it embodies. The unity-of-form-and-content argument, fundamental to the modern definition of art, precludes the possibility of simply bypassing the subject matter and content of the artwork. This aspect of an art work’s significance was well understood by nationalist art historians; the newly apotheosized pre-modern Indian Art was defined, above all other considerations, as a vehicle of the most philosophically profound content. The new custodians of Indian art, who eventually usurped the colonialist prerogative to speak on its behalf, were also the major interpreters of this content; the ‘meaning’, ‘symbolism’ and ‘Idea’ of Indian art were on the ascendant in this new regime.

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During the pre-independence period, the new interpretive field was monopolized by historians, archaeologists and Sanskritists of Indian origin, with a small but important foreign representation. This is not surprising, given that the interpretation of content during this era usually implied finding textual correspondences for iconic forms, images and narratives. Some of the most definitive iconographical studies were undertaken by Indian scholars writing outside the nationalist-idealistic frame. T.A. Gopinatha Rao’s four part Elements of Hindu Iconography (pub 1914), Benoytosh Bhattacharyya’s The Indian Buddhist Iconography (pub 1924) and J.N. Banerjea’s The Development of Hindu Iconography (pub 1941) – all thoroughly researched works, copiously illustrated, comprehensive in scope, meticulously referenced – continue to function as ‘field guides’ for the Indian art history student to this day. These studies represent the empirical strand of iconographical studies, with its focus on documentation and textual correspondences. However, at a theoretical level, the interpretation of ‘symbolism’ initiated by the idealist–metaphysical school of Coomaraswamy, Kramrisch and others continues to influence the way we think about the connections between art works as material objects, and their intended content.

In his article “The Interpretation of Symbols”, Coomaraswamy asserts that traditional art is inherently symbolic; symbolic meanings are the ‘final cause’, the very raison d’etre, of forms. “When meanings, which are also raisons d’être, have been forgotten, it is indispensable that those who can remember them, and can demonstrate by reference to chapter and verse the validity of their “memory,” should re-read meanings into forms from which the meaning has been ignorantly “read out,” whether recently or long ago.”

Coomaraswamy rejects the ‘modern’ approach to art works, which is a response to aesthetic surfaces; to approach traditional works, the art historian has to perform the difficult task of shedding the modern mindset and entering wholeheartedly into the ‘mentality’ of the makers of the traditional work.

The graduate, whose eyes have been closed and heart hardened by a course of university instruction in the Fine Arts or Literature is

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105Coomaraswamy, “The Interpretation of Symbols,” in What Is Civilization?: And Other Essays (Lindisfarne Pr, 1989), 133.
actually debarred from the complete understanding of a work of art. If a given form has for him a merely decorative and aesthetic value, it is far easier and far more comfortable for him to assume that it never had any other than a sensational value, than it would be for him to undertake the self-denying task of entering into and consenting to the mentality in which the form was first conceived. 106

In his famous essay titled “The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline”, Erwin Panofsky makes an uncannily resonant statement. However, for the German scholar, the ‘entering’ into the alternative mentality is followed by a renewed appreciation of the ‘aesthetic’ attributes of the works. Unlike Coomaraswamy, Panofsky includes the formal and aesthetic qualities of a work as part of its intention, even though he gives content priority in his own analysis. I paraphrase the entire passage here not only because it resembles and differs from Coomaraswamy’s formulation in several noteworthy respects but also because it encompasses all the stages of Panofsky’s programme for the interpretation of an art work, from the pre-iconographical recognition of formal and expressive aspects to iconological synthesis.

The art historian, according to Panofsky, realizes that his ‘cultural equipment’ is not ‘in harmony’ with that of a people in another land and of a different period. He learns to make ‘adjustments by learning as he possibly can of the circumstances under which the objects of his studies were created.’ This gradual recreation of the originary context includes analysis of the work itself, its form, medium and condition, attribution and authorship, comparing it with other works of its class, trying to ‘objectively’ appraise it by the aesthetic standards of its period, identification of subject matter and influences, correlating the art work with literary texts of its times, and locating it within a history of iconographic ‘types’. The art historian, Panofsky continues, “will do his best to familiarize himself with the social, religious and philosophical attitudes of other periods and countries, in order to correct his own subjective feeling for content. But when he does all this, his aesthetic

106 Ibid., 130.
perception as such will change accordingly, and will more and more adapt itself to the original ‘intention’ of the works.” 107

**Iconography and Iconology**

Writing in the 1930’s, Panofsky proposed his three levels of meaning interpretation which he termed pre-iconographical description (which deals with primary or natural subject matter and responds to both factual and expressional clues), iconography (which is the discovery of secondary or conventional subject matter) and finally iconology (which involves the unearthing of intrinsic meaning or content). 108 Half a century later, Devangana Desai defines *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho* as an *iconological* study ‘concerned with the meaning and context of images’. 109 How does Desai’s definition of ‘iconology’ relate to Panofsky’s? And what marks it as different from earlier interpretive works about pre-modern Indian sculpture?

An overwhelming number of interpretations of pre-modern Indian images are *iconographical*; that is, they are primarily involved in interpreting the artefact in terms of its conventional or traditional meanings, correlating the material configuration with stories, allegories and symbols used in written texts or other sources. (I use the term ‘images’ interchangeably with ‘art works’ in this section, to include all categories of representational sculpture and to connote iconology’s tendency to treat its object more as a representation of an ‘idea’ and to ignore the *non-representational* components of its visual and material qualities.) Gopinatha Rao’s *Elements of Indian Iconography* is a classic example of an iconographic text, tracing the textual sources of conventional iconic ‘types’. Kramrisch’s famous work on Elephanta is more difficult to place; its major trajectory is, after all, the uncovering of the ‘basic principles’ or ‘intrinsic meanings’ that unite Saiva philosophy with its material manifestation in the cave. 110 However, it is my contention that Coomaraswamy’s and Kramrisch’s interpretive writings on specific Indian

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icons are not ‘iconological’ in the Panofskian sense because they lack a crucial characteristic of iconological synthesis. They lack the historical dimension, that distinguishing characteristic of Panofskian iconology that grounds the meaning of the art work in a historically specific time-space. This ‘grounding’ or historical contextualization marks the art work as a reflection of the specific socio-cultural circumstances and the ideological ethos within which it originated.  

Going by these criteria, Desai’s study of Khajuraho’s religious imagery is incontrovertibly iconological. The scholar focuses on three temples; the Chausath Yogini, the Lakshmana temple and the Kandariya Mahadeva temple. Basing her chronology for these temples on Krishna Deva’s dates, she interprets the abundant architectural sculpture in terms of the social, political and religious ethos that prevailed in this region between the 10th and 12th centuries. Desai’s major contribution is linking the individual sculptures and their configurative sequences to specific cult formations and practices that thrived in this region of Central India during the 10th to 12th centuries. Refuting the popular catch-all Kaula-Kapalika cult hypothesis, she constructs a layered account of cultic development, tensions and reconciliations in 10th-12th century central India, with an interesting emphasis on the rapprochement between Tantric vamacara and the Brahmanical mainstream. Desai relates the Chausath Yogini temple to the Yogini-Kaula cult; she posits, however, that yogini worship had a wider popular base, including some of the area’s Jaina population. The Lakshmana Temple was affiliated to Pancaratra Vaisnavism, according to Desai, and the Kandariya Mahadeva, to a form of Saiva Siddhanta; both these systems were, at that moment in their history, in the process of reconciling Brahmanical and Tantric cultic practices.

It is possible to map the conceptual ‘ecology’ of artworks as they are objectified in Desai’s text. The author builds her study on a base of hundreds of individual sculptures with confirmed iconographic identities. Interestingly, it is not the identification of individual icons, but her interpretation of their

111See Padma Kaimal’s criticism of Coomaraswamy’s a-historical interpretation of Nataraja iconography in Padma Kaimal, “Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon,” The Art Bulletin 81, no. 3 (September 1, 1999), 390-419
112Desai’s primary source for chronology seems to be Krishna Deva, Temples of Khajurahovols 1 and 2 (Archaeological Survey of India, 1990).
placement within the total sculptural/architectural scheme of the temple, that Desai’s emphasizes as the key to her iconological study, its basic analytic unit. The patterns and hierarchies that emerge from the configuration of the sculptural scheme appear to encode, to a surprising extent, the details and nuances of cultic practices and their interaction with political power during this period. The ‘well-integrated’ sculpture-architecture system within each temple, then, forms the inner circle of the network of connections that Desai constructs. Inscriptions found on the monuments in Khajuraho and neighbouring regions are next in proximity. They are followed by literary sources. Desai examines a few prominent Pancaratra and Saiva Siddhanta texts, Puranas (particularly the Siva and Agni Puranas) and contemporaneous Vastu Sastras from neighbouring Malwa and Gujarat (as substitutes for the ‘missing’ Visva Karma Sastra of this region.) Finally, Desai refers to Sanskrit literary works produced for the central Indian courts during this period, drawing our attention to the widespread use of linguistic devices such as *slesha* (puns) and *sandhya-bhasha* (double entendre). The allegorical play, *Prabodhachandrodaya*, written by Krishna Misra to celebrate the victory of Chandella king Kirtivarman, is examined in for its significance for the Lakshmana temple.113

Somewhat at a tangent, Desai introduces a few metaphysical covering theories in the manner of the idealist-metaphysical school. For example, in her introduction, Desai mentions the possible relevance of Kramrisch’s metaphysical concept of the ‘temple as a monument of manifestation’ and the graded manifestations of Siva.114 In her epilogue, she introduces another concept with respect to Saiva Siddhanta ritual – the ‘cosmological principles of emission and reabsorption’.115 Curiously, these metaphysical constructs, unanchored by historical particularization, float around like insoluble coagulates in an otherwise homogenously contextualist account.

**Desai’s Interpretation of Erotic Imagery: A Critique**

An important agenda of Desai’s text seems to be to disperse some of the disproportionate interest that the erotic imagery of Khajuraho has always attracted. The very title phrase *Religious Imagery* impresses us with the

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114 Ibid., 6–8.
115 Ibid., 199.
stern and serious intent of the book; the author follows this up in the preface with the statement that "we must note that the erotic figures form only a small part of the vast sculptural scheme of the Khajuraho."

Within the body of the text, Desai sustains her effort to defuse the charge accumulated by the erotic sculptures in the popular imagination. Though by her own admission, the ‘erotic motif’ can be found scattered across various high-visibility sculptured surfaces of the temples in Khajuraho – the door jambs, narathara, vedibandha, jangha, shikhara niches and so on – Desai focuses our attention on the scenes of copulation on the kapili walls. This is an interesting tactic; it allows the author to narrow the focus of her complex explanation, which cannot be expanded to accommodate all the occurrences of erotic figures in Khajuraho.

To summarize Desai’s position on the erotic figures: 1) The figures’ placement on the kapili walls of sandhara temples, which architecturally speaking, marks the transition between the mandapa and the garbha griha and cosmoligically speaking, the phenomenal and transcendental world, has a magico-defensive function. The erotic scene protects the juncture, which is supposed to be one of the most vulnerable parts of the temple. 2) It gives ‘delight to the people’. [This is an aspect that Desai passes over rapidly; she does mention that to take these scenes literally would mean joining the ranks of the ‘mudhas’ - from the point of view of the Tantric texts]. 3) The erotic imagery had a parallel in the high literary culture of the period; the images were visual equivalents (or translations) of a larger cultural convention of literary puns and double entendres. It follows that they are to be interpreted in terms of metaphors and symbols, and not taken literally. 4) Erotic scenes have Tantric significance – in case of the copulatory scenes on the kapili walls of the Visvanatha and Kandariya Mahadeva temples, Desai suspects that the configuration might conceal a yantra such as the Kamakala Yantra, possibly a secret component of the temple ritual. 5) At the ‘highest’ level, the erotic scene “embodies through sandhya-bhasha some yogic-philosophical concept”.

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116 Ibid., xxvi.
117 Ibid., 181, 190–197.
118 Ibid., 196–197.
Desai’s layered interpretation of the erotic scenes on the Khajuraho temple walls appears to me to be another case of overdetermination. It should be noted that she does not leave the option of choosing between explanatory theories to the reader. My charge of overdetermination would also collapse if the author had shifted the burden of interpretation to reception rather than intention. However she retains all five explanations and stacks them up on the side of intention.

**Agency and the Materiality of the Art work**

The Khajuraho temples, for Desai “represent a creative moment in Indian art when artistic talent combined with religious aspirations to produce a meaningful form.” 119 Throughout the text, the scholar construes agency as jointly exercised by the royal or wealthy patrons, the sutradharas or chief architects (like Chhichchha) and the royal gurus or acaryas.120 Desai makes frequent references to ‘the architect’ in the singular, sometimes using this term interchangeably with sutradhara. In the chapter on Kandariya Mahadeva, she repeatedly uses the curious term ‘artist-priest’, which she glosses in the epilogue as ‘sthapaka’.121 Desai is of the opinion that “the intricately structured iconic themes of the Khajuraho temples suggest the role of the acharya in guiding the sutradhara. Both of them together have designed these marvellous temples expressing profound concepts through the non-discursive language of art.”122 Not surprisingly, Desai dedicates her book to “the acharyas, sutradharas and patrons of Kharjuravahaka”; this makes for an interesting contrast with Berkson’s dedication, to the physical makers of art works, not to the ideologues (see previous section).

Devangana Desai’s interpretation of Khajuraho imagery retains a core of idealism which contradicts the materialist orientation of the contextualist and cultural history aspects of the work. This is manifests at several levels. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, there are a few a-historical metaphysical formulations scattered around the text to ambush the unsuspecting reader; they are starkly incompatible with the historical and cultural contextualization that is the theoretical mainstay of the book. Secondly, the entire cultural

119 Ibid., 5.
120 Ibid., 11, 17, 42, 47, 149, 202, 208.
121 Ibid., 149, 208.
122 Ibid., 208.
context of The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho is reconstructed from the intellectual and political history perspective. Sanskrit religious texts, vastu and literary texts and royal inscriptions are virtually the only secondary documents Desai uses. Even allowing for the fact that the culture of 10th century Kharjuravahaka was dominated by the temples and a highly sophisticated Sanskritic culture, there is no real attempt to read between the lines or against the grain to reconstruct a more down-to-earth social or economic history, which is a distinctive characteristic of Desai’s earlier work. Finally, Desai’s iconological interpretation (like Panofsky’s and Coomaraswamy’s) frames the artwork exclusively as the crystallization of an idea, completely sidelining its other aspects as a material entity, a product of ancient facture, a strange and striking ‘presence’ in our midst. What we see through the scholar’s frame are meaningful ‘images’, vehicles of content, somewhat dematerialized, their exuberant material and visual presence reined in by a rigorously contextualizing, intellectually sober interpretation. The penultimate paragraph of her epilogue is revealing; it exposes Desai’s acute embarrassment at the irrepressible materiality, the sensual ‘excess’ of the sculptural figuration, an excess that resists all scholarly attempts as suppression. “Khajuraho’s art is sophisticated and ideational. Though apparently it may look frivolous and sensual, actually it is serious and profound....”

Like many scholars of Indian art history writing in the 1990’s, Desai is tapping simultaneously into two diametrically opposed traditions, both of which have a tendency to dematerialize the art object. The first is the logocentric metaphysical-idealist school of the nationalists which continues to be our most important theoretical precedent for the interpretation of content in pre-modern Indian art. The second, ironically, is a fashionable branch of poststructuralist theory that, ever after the linguistic turn frames artworks as ‘texts’, ‘signs’, ‘representations’, ‘images’,– as anything except material entities that also present with certain non-representational attributes that are resistant to easy interpretation. To go back to a vital thesis of Hans-Ulrich

Gumbrecht’s book, the ‘meaning effects’ generated by most iconographical/iconological analyses are so compelling that they tend to overwhelm the “presence effects” of the artwork.125

**The history and post-history of the art work**

Like Joanna Williams’ *Art of Gupta India*, Desai’s *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho* is an attempt to contextualize artworks within a political and socio-cultural ethos of a particular location in history. Like Williams, Desai is meticulously historicist; two extensive chapters deal exclusively with the historical background, political and cultic, against which the artistic expressions of Khajuraho may be viewed.126 Most of the primary texts that the scholar refers to in connection with Khajuraho’s imagery are from Central India and from 8th to 12th centuries – fulfilling what Georges Didi-Huberman terms the ideal of *euchronistic consonance*.127 Another instance of Desai’s scrupulous historical method is revealed in her rejection of Shobitha Punja’s ‘Marriage of Siva’ hypothesis. Desai rejects this theory primarily on the grounds that there is no mention of this local popular tradition in the inscriptions or literary texts of the Chandella period.

Desai successfully demonstrates that the imagery of Khajuraho reflects the socio-cultural, political and cultic ethos of its originary time space. However, like a majority of Indian iconographical/iconological studies produces till the 1990’s, Desai’s study tends to treat ‘meaning’ as intrinsic property of the artwork. Reconstructing (somewhat reductively) her schema for the meaning-making process at Khajuraho, we have acaryas who put together an iconographic design based on Pancaratra/Saiva Siddhanta metaphysical concepts, *Puranic* lore, *Vastu* traditions and some inputs from the world of Sanskrit literary culture of the period. *Sutraddraras* and sculptors translate the design into visual form and encapsulate it in material form through their sculptural schemes. Thus artistic intention (both at the level of design and execution) locks meaning into the artwork; this meaning is potentially available to any interpreter armed with the right combination of keys.

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As semiotics and other constructivist approaches interpretation have demonstrated, meaning is not something that is an objective property of the artwork; meaning is more like an event that happens whenever a viewing subject encounters the art work. As a consequence, in the real world, an artwork always exceeds and sometimes subverts its intended meaning. So, in order to understand an artwork’s position within a meaning producing network one needs to go beyond merely interpreting it in terms of this text or that myth. No study that purports to contextualize a work of art historically can afford to see it as merely ‘reflecting’ the ethos of its time or the intention of its makers; this would result in marooning the work within an idealist ivory tower. This is especially true for large-scale artistic programmes like the Khajuraho temples. Once they enter the social context, artworks become agents in their own right, influencing the ethos as much as they are influenced by it. Because Desai’s account is completely preoccupied with intention and design, it skips the other half of the story – reception. How were the images received by the public of that period? What rituals and performances animated the temple spaces? When viewed from the perspective of reception, the erotic imagery refuses to succumb to scholarly sublimation. We are forced to ask blatantly anachronistic questions such as - in what respects did 10th century horizons of ‘propriety’ and ‘decency’ differ from ours? Instead of facing these sometimes philistine but vital issues that ‘animate’ the past as well as the present of the sculptures, Desai’s study tends to surround the site in an impenetrable historicity, and an unimpeachable metaphysics.  

An interesting contrast is posed by Padma Kaimal’s article “Playful Ambiguity and Political Authority in the Large Relief at Māmallapuram,” published in 1994. Kaimal advances a theory that the relief was intended to be read both as Gangavataraṇa and as Kiratarjuneya in addition to encoding other meanings. She speculates that the sculptors of the relief deliberately coded

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certain representational elements ambiguously to elicit a complex response from their viewers – ‘a deciphering game’. Although Kaimal cites literary parallels similar to Desai’s - Bharavi’s *Kiratarjuniyam*, and the plays *Bhagavaddajuka* and *Mattavilasa* – to demonstrate the usage of *dhvani* and Sanskrit double entendres, and folk humour (in the case of the latter two) – textual references form a minor part of her interpretation. Even as she emphasizes the relief’s multivalence as a product of deliberate artistic intention, Kaimal takes the vital leap across the communication divide and conjectures different kinds of *reception*, from viewers ‘already integrated into Pallava culture’ to sea-faring traders from distant lands.

Unlike Desai, Kaimal pays attention to some striking formal and expressive aspects of the works, its visual and material qualities.

Viewers drawn to this relief by its address to the sea and its monumental scale are then urged to study the composition at some length, moving to the left and right repeatedly and perhaps interacting with other members of the large crowds that probably assembled before this broad frieze. A deep pit in front of the relief establishes a distance of some ten meters between the audience and the carved surface, delaying a bit longer the viewer’s recognition of figures presented…The figures accommodate both the moving viewer and the large crowds by projecting prominently and at a consistent angle from the rock face. Figural proportions are not distorted, that is, in order to privilege a single viewing angle…. The public work of art emerges as a very ‘sociable’ presence in Kaimal’s text, with *its own form of agency*. The meanings it generates are not to be found in some esoteric text but are actively negotiated by viewers interacting in the inter-subjective space it gathers around itself. The relief’s visual and material qualities play a vital role in this communication, not because they conform to some ‘higher’ formal principles but because of their sheer material presence, dominating the viewer’s space – the remarkable scale, the clarity and

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130 Ibid., 1.
131 Ibid., 12,20.
132 Ibid., 3.
complexity of figuration, the (inferred) virtuosity of the carvers of hard granite and the undeniable attractiveness of the work.

Finally, Kaimal releases the relief from its epistemologically constructed bondage to its originary context (a 200-year sentence, in the context of my analysis) to let it infiltrate the present. She writes (not dismissively as Coomaraswamy would) about modern viewers of the relief who, though they have lost much of the original viewing context, continue to mill around the relief, responding to the lure of its configurative richness, its ‘encoded ambiguities’ and its humour. This approach is furthered by Richard Davis in his *Lives of Indian Images* which combines the insights of reader-response criticism and material culture studies to follow the ‘post-history’ of a selection of Indian artefacts. There is some debate on whether the post-history of an artwork should be considered a part of its analysis and interpretation within art history; some writers argue that this approach is more anthropological than art-historical. The answer to this will depend, I presume, on whether individual art historians recognize a few fundamental modifications in how we frame a work of art:

1) Formal characteristics are not fully ‘objective’ properties of the work but emerge from our physical interaction with them.

2) Likewise, the meaning of an artwork is not somehow mysteriously encapsulated in its material form, like a ‘soul’ within a body. Meanings are partly ‘intentional’, but intended meanings are modified and new meanings generated every time viewers encounter the work and attempt to interpret it.

3) Works of art often physically outlive their original contexts of creation and reception; if we accept that the two major aspects of the artwork we study – their form and meaning – are not completely bonded to their originary contexts, it follows that each of their subsequent ‘lives’ are as important as their historical one.

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133 Ibid., 21.
135 For a discussion of this issue, see “Sweetmeats or Corpses? Art History and Ethnohistory,” Michael W. Meister Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics, No. 27 (Spring, 1995), 118-132.