SOME CONCLUSIONS

The pre-modern sculptural artefact – the theoretical focus of this historiographical study – has been shown to undergo diverse discursive objectifications in the last two centuries. Adopting a version of Arjun Appadurai’s ‘methodological fetishism’ and following the ‘lives’ of these artefacts through a selection of discourses has enabled a closer look at the processes of objectification that the artefacts have endured; and this includes their framing within the current mainstream discourse of art history. The study has attempted to demonstrate what this process of (re-)objectification entails. Each of the discourses under analysis subsumes the artefact within its own particular ‘domain of objects’, recasting the object within a special physical and conceptual ecology, re-negotiating subject—object relations, reframing the object’s ‘salient features’. Of central significance to this inquiry is how the ‘visuality’ and ‘materiality’ of the artefact have been refigured within each discursive formation.

To summarize the findings of this project; the Romantic travelogue of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries embeds sculptural artefacts within their larger architectural matrix which is, in turn, amalgamated seamlessly into its immediate natural surroundings. Artefacts-in-landscape are objectified as ‘wonders’ and framed as ‘sublime’, ‘beautiful’ or ‘picturesque’ in keeping with Romantic conventions. The Romantic traveller confronts the ‘otherness’ of her objects, without trying to domesticate their strangeness by subjecting them to one or the other regime of rationalization. Subject-object relations within this discourse can be understood as a fascinating negotiation between proximity and distance, between objectivity and immersion. Of all the discourses studied here, the Romantic travelogue is perhaps most alive to the material presence of its objects – and this feature makes the discourse worthy of a closer look in the context of today’s art history. However, at least three characteristics of the Romantic framing make it incompatible with the objectives of the modern discipline. Although it is keenly aware of the historicity of its objects (the idea of the ‘ruin’, for example), Romantic discourse prefers to fetishise this aspect rather than to investigate it. Consequently, it is content to attribute its own philosophical meanings to
these ‘wonders’; it evinces little interest in their historically intended meanings. Finally, at an ontological level, the artefact-in-landscape is more an ‘object stimulating aesthetic contemplation’ than a ‘work of art’ per se.

Contemporaneously, the antiquities discourse is careful to abstract man-made artefacts from their natural surroundings, in keeping with its epistemological mandate of separating ‘all that is performed by Man’ from ‘all that is produced by Nature’. As the cultural counterparts of natural ‘curiosities’, these objects are further classified into categories such as ‘objects of utility’, products of the ‘mechanical arts’, ‘fine arts’ and ‘antiquities’. Pre-modern sculptural artefacts are objectified within this brand new domain of objects - ‘antiquities’, a domain which also encompasses manuscripts, inscriptions, coins, architecture and so on. The primary value given to antiquities is a historical one – they are to serve as a precious reserve that will eventually illuminate the history of the subcontinent. Till the 1830’s, literary antiquities (texts, manuscripts, inscriptions and coins) were the paradigmatic objects within the antiquities discourse, a discourse propelled almost entirely by philological research. ‘Visual’ antiquities such as sculptural artefacts, by contrast, were treated to a certain ambivalence, because the colonial establishment had no means of directly extracting ‘history’ from these objects. They were subjected to a regime of (non-standardized) measurement and attenuated empirical description. Lacking chronological landmarks, researchers were free to speculate on their historical or anthropological relevance.

The antiquities researcher, unlike the Romantic traveler, situates himself ‘outside’ (and usually ‘above’) the frame – surveying his objects from a position of detachment. The object itself is de-aestheticized, its visual and material qualities reduced to objective attributes, with mainly evidentiary status. I have tried to demonstrate that a few historical and epistemological constraints prevented this discourse from completely reifying the domain of antiquities, and from turning the ‘objectivity’ of the antiquities researcher into the aggressive ‘objectivism’ of the colonial archaeologist. In the antiquities discourse, the ‘domain of objects’ itself is a largely conceptual field, not yet resolved into the itemized list of material entities (slotted on a dateline and classified into types) that we encounter in the colonial archaeological
discourse. Woven into the antiquities discourse is the philosophical notion of ‘Universal history’ and an open-ended humanist approach to historical inquiries, not yet congealed into an instrumentalist attitude towards the colonized nation. Most importantly, this discourse never loses sight of the artefactual origin of antiquities.

In many ways a logical extension of the antiquities discourse, colonial archaeology came into its own close on the heels of the disenfranchisement of the literary preoccupations of the Asiatic Society philologists. Within the archaeological frame, textual sources were treated with suspicion, as were the maulvis and pandits who helped interpret them. Unlike the garrulous literary text, the archaeological object rarely ‘speaks for itself’ – it is obediently reticent, passively awaiting the scientific process of classifying and chronologizing which turns it into a ‘document of history’. History itself, in the mid-19th century, shed its philosophical and anthropological trappings to become a positivist enterprise – basically political history, signposted with chronological landmarks. Colonial archaeology represses the artefactual origins of the archaeological object and subjects it to a forensic analytic regime borrowed from natural history. The reifying and objectivist gaze of the colonial archaeologist, distills the visual attributes of the object into pure ‘evidence’ – evidence that can be ‘contained’ within the colonial archive, in the form of measurements, dry descriptions and illustrations. Ironically, in the midst of all this increasingly systematic documentation, the actual material preservation of artefacts is in jeopardy.

Conservation initiatives became a reality only after the Revolt, coinciding with the institutionalization and professionalization of archaeology, the establishment of the first Imperial museum in India and the legalization of the Imperial state’s physical claim on archaeological objects. Museumized and monumentalized, a selection of the erstwhile ‘documents of history’ are re-objectified by the Imperial state, and harnessed to the service of the British Raj’s new rhetoric of display. These monuments and musealia undergo a singularization and re-aestheticization that they were denied as members of the archaeological archive, and are charged with the new responsibility of proclaiming Imperial power, ‘impartiality’ and ‘benevolence’. Their visuality and materiality, acknowledged once again, is now programmatically mediated
by the official colonialist version of history. This, along with the aesthetics of *arrested decay*, implies that they are emptied of their originally intended and subsequent meanings and contexts and unavailable for any appropriations other than the officially sanctioned historical one. The display of these artefacts in Indian museums and their monumentalization *in situ* creates an interesting split in subject positions *vis a vis* the object. On the one hand, the Imperial state stands in a position of authority ‘above’ these objects, as the munificent proprietor and knowledgeable mediator of the artefactual ‘Other’. Colonialist art history supplies the script for this performance. On the other hand, native subjects are expected to stand ‘below’ the objects, quiescent and grateful recipients of the performance staged for their benefit, whose educational thrust was to enable them to confront their own artefactual heritage without resorting to ‘irrational’ claims and ungoverned imaginings. The failure of this strategy of mediation haunts us to this day.

Nationalist art history endeavoured to de-reify pre-modern artefacts by removing the ‘archaeological’ bias that attended their objectification, with a view to restoring their relevance to the people of the nation. Re-objectified as *Art*, sculptural artefacts occupy centre-stage in the nationalist account and the discourse gestures towards re-casting them within an *indigenous* aesthetic frame. What this indigenous aesthetic was, however, is never clearly spelt out or theorized in a way that makes it directly applicable to an understanding of the objects’ phenomenal attributes. This is a puzzling lacuna in Indian art history and theory, one that has not been filled even today. One possible explanation is the pervasive nature of the influence of Ananda Coomaraswamy, whose ideas virtually dictated the agenda for art historical research for several decades in the twentieth century. Coomaraswamy’s writings are characterized by an ambivalent relationship with aesthetics and a peculiar refusal to engage with the visuality and materiality of the art objects he *interprets* in great detail. By focusing on the iconographical and metaphysical *content* rather than on the form or aesthetics of the objects it studied, the nationalist discourse sought to establish pre-modern Indian art on par with, or even above the ‘intellectual’ artistic productions of the West.

In the idealist formulations of the nationalist discourse, Indian art is de-materialized. It loses its moorings in the historical, cultural and material
circumstances that surround artistic production and floats free into a rarefied realm of metaphysical Ideals. The origin of art objects in facture is de-emphasized because the Indian Artist within this discourse is an Ideal entity with little or no agency. He is merely channel through which metaphysical Ideas are given a material manifestation. Individual art objects are transformed into illustrations of Ideal archetypes; their unique visual and material manifestations are dismissed as ‘accidents’ of history. Thus at one level, the objects are de-historicized. At another, their ontological association with the past is further cemented because the past itself is idealized and erected as a paradigm for the dystopic present. The colonialist splitting of subject positions mentioned previously, is perpetuated in the nationalist discourse, with one important difference. The knowledgeable nationalist art historian, who speaks on behalf of Indian Art interpreting it (apparently) for the nation, positions himself on the same side of the colonial divide as the people of the nation - the beneficiaries of this education. In my opinion, the nationalist discourse on Indian Art was aimed as much for a Western audience as for the people of the nation (if not more). It is also possible to argue that the objectivism of colonial archaeology finds an echo in Coomaraswamy’s approach to Indian art. This claim is not as implausible as it sounds because Coomaraswamy’s philosophy bears the unmistakable stamp of Platonic metaphysical objectivism.

In the final section of this inquiry, I suggested that post-independence art history in India continues to grapple with the epistemological legacies of colonial and nationalist discourses even as it breaks new empirical ground. Despite the overall development of historiographical awareness, clearly evident in the art history texts published from the 1980’s onwards, residues of nationalist and colonialist epistemologies continue to haunt the discipline at a structural level, sometimes even co-existing within a single text. For example, despite her theoretical sophistication and methodological rigour, Joanna Williams’ recourse to the motif as the repository of style in Art of Gupta India betrays the lasting influence of the objectivism of colonial archaeology, with its atomistic approach to morphology.

Moreover, the recent mainstream discipline of Indian art history is not a homogenous entity – it is characterized by noticeably different subject
positions and consequently, different kinds of art historical object. For example, Carmel Berkson’s objectification of the sculptural artefact in her *Life of Form in Indian Sculpture* differs from Devangana Desai’s framing of her primary objects in *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho*; this difference is not merely a function of distinct methodologies or approaches to the ‘same object’. To cast the distinction in terms of Hans Gumbrecht’s formulation, Desai’s primary objects are defined almost entirely in terms of their ‘official’ meanings and ‘meaning effects’ (and are entirely tied up with their originary historical context). Berkson, on the other hand, acknowledges the material *presence* of her objects, separating this from the ‘authorized’ content of the sculptural artefact, which she relegates to a secondary position in the reception and understanding of her objects.

These discrepancies in subject-object relations (and the differential framing of the visuality and materiality of artworks) in recent art historical discourse need not be construed as a weakness of the discipline of Indian art history; in fact, it is possible to argue that this diversity is actually a sign of the robustness of the discipline. However, it cannot be denied that this occupying of different subject positions and objectifying of Indian art in different ways can no longer be adopted as ‘default’ operations, involuntary perpetuations of colonial and nationalist framings. One of the primary intentions of this enquiry has been to *problematize* and *historicize* recent Indian art history’s framing of its objects; to scrutinize its epistemologies at a theoretical level. By demonstrating that subject-objects relations within the today’s mainstream art history discourse are diverse, contingent and to a large extent, historically formed, (as is its construction of the visuality and materiality of its objects), I hope to have diminished the notion that mainstream Indian art history has somehow ‘arrived’. Our political, economic and cultural contexts have changed and will continue to change our subject positions and consequently, our objects. Both these are actually highly contradiction-ridden locations (under the serene, apparently homogenous facade of the discipline in India) which I feel ought to be contested and theorized more rigorously.

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Looking to the Future:

There is some comfort in knowing that are many possible futures in store for the discipline. If I were to choose among them, I would opt for an Indian art history that:

1. Is reflexive and historiographically aware.
2. Is critically interested not only in the originary contexts and entanglements of its primary objects but also in subsequent ones (including the present contexts of reception and use).
3. Is more engaged with theorizing and re-constructing agency, artistic intention and *facture* in a nuanced way (a serious lacuna in the field of pre-modern Indian art).
4. Is as involved in framing the *materiality* of its primary objects as with their *visuality*.
5. Is in possession of a theoretical frame that can deal with art works not merely as representations with ‘meaning effects’ but of artworks as *presentations* – as sites replete with ‘presence effects’.
6. Takes reception seriously and engages with ‘embodied’ viewing and *affect* at a theoretical level; develops a vocabulary evolved enough to deal with the haptic, kinaesthetic, proprioceptive aspects of our response to sculpture and architecture, in particular.

Does **New Art History** in India fit the bill? After it was first officially heralded in the volume *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art* (pub 2003), new art history in India has developed in several interesting directions. The sheer diversity of emerging trends precludes the possibility of consolidating the changes under some thematically organized historiographical description and is far beyond the scope of this essay. However, it is possible to identify some common ground shared by a number of recent ‘new art history’ texts. I examine a few of these commonalities that are relevant to my project.

As mentioned in the introduction, historiographical awareness is a distinguishing feature of much new art history writing in India. However, our multiple and disparate historiographical legacies need to be framed more
theoretically in my opinion, in terms of epistemology and theoretical structures. Only when this kind of approach is combined with the (more popular) ideology critique will the discipline in India be able to exorcise some of the more tenacious and elusive spectres of colonial and nationalist frames. Another feature of new art historical texts is that they are increasingly reflexive; the critical/interpretivist underpinnings of much recent writing reveals awareness about the partial and provisional nature of art historical interpretation, its entanglements with the present, with the ideological and material contexts of the interpreting subject.

A pervasive problem associated with new art history in India needs to be evaluated critically; this is its tendency to frame art objects almost exclusively as ‘texts’ or ‘representations’, to be interpreted in terms of the political, economic and ideological stakes present in their originary contexts – their patrons, artists and audiences. That such contextualization exponentially enriches our understanding of, and engagement with, the pre-modern artwork cannot be denied. However, the exclusive focus on this approach has lead to the eclipse of certain equally important (non-representational) aspects of the work – specifically, what might be termed its ‘presentational’ specificity and value. Justifiably suspicious of both formalist approaches to Indian art and of various received aesthetic framings, many of the latest, most interesting art historical writings simply turn away from dealing with the material and visual qualities of art altogether to focus on matters of interpretation and contextualization. This programmatic blindness to the visual/material ‘presence’ of art objects is a characteristic of several recent writings.

Are codified aesthetics (Indian/Western) and formalist approaches (Kant-inspired/modernist/metaphysical) actually *indispensable* to the discipline’s framing and representing of visual and material qualities of works of art? Can art historians not look beyond textbook theories of aesthetics and formal and stylistic analysis (most of them incompatible with new art history’s constructivist/critical theory orientation) for newer ways of framing these attributes? Recent art historical writing has acquired much sophistication in reflexively contextualizing and interpreting artworks, ‘reading’ them as mediating and mediated representations, unearthing the political, social,
economic and ideological structures that underlie the production and reception of art, often animating artworks with unprecedented levels of contemporary relevance. Why can this theoretical sophistication and reflexivity not be extended to the discipline’s framing of the material and visual qualities of artworks as well? If we are willing to accept, for example, that the meaning of an pre-modern work of art is not simply ‘discovered’ by today’s art historian but at least partially ‘produced’ in the encounter between the object and the contemporary subject, why is the same insight not applied to the contemporary subject’s encounter with the visual/material attributes of the work?

As the present inquiry has demonstrated, a significant (even defining) feature of the visual and material attributes of sculptural artefacts is that they are not as universally accessible or self-evident as they are generally made out to be. The ways in which we represent them in our (inherited) discourses determine, to a large extent, what aspects of their visual/material attributes we are open to and what aspects elude us. Just as art historians’ ‘reading’ of art objects as ‘representations’ is not a value-neutral operation valid across temporal and geographical contexts, their framing of the visuality and materiality of art objects are historically and culturally specific constructs, partly pre-determined by discursive and disciplinary structures to which the art historian conforms and by her/his subject position. Reframing the visuality and materiality of our primary objects then, entails more than merely ‘looking’ at works of art with a ‘fresh pair of eyes’. The radically mediated nature of visuality and materiality renders this a much more complicated operation. To use a metaphor, the most we can do in this direction is to exchange our old frames (or lenses) for new ones - better calibrated to suit our specific contextual and disciplinary requirements.

**New Frames for Old**

In this last section, I make a brief mention of possible disciplinary and theoretical sources for alternative frames that my ideal version of Indian art history could adapt to its own purposes, in order to overcome some of the chronic deficiencies that I have highlighted in the course of the present inquiry. This is with specific reference to the discipline’s problematic and unreflexive framing of the visuality and more specifically, the materiality of
its primary objects, its obsession with the originary contexts of art production and concomitant reluctance to consider the post-histories of art works, its awkwardness with the theoretical issues of agency, artistic intention and facture and finally, its relative neglect of the issue of reception and obliviousness to embodied, culturally situated viewing. What follows is a sketchy gathering of insights from a wide range of fields, disciplines and areas of inquiry that could be modified for art historical uses. While I realize that not all of these insights are compatible with each other, I make no attempt to resolve their incompatibilities and to consolidate them here.

Visual Culture Studies, Indian art history’s disciplinary neighbour for over a decade, is grounded in epistemological and ideological premises that give it a distinct advantage over art history when it comes to theorizing visual reception and spectatorship, the cultural mediation of visual experience, subject-object relations, the ‘social construction of vision’ and so on. As the borders between art history and Visual Culture become increasingly porous, Visual Culture has contributed considerably towards shaking art history’s inherent conservatism, broadening and democratizing its field of objects, revolutionizing art historical methodologies and injecting the older discipline with stronger doses of reflexivity and ideological awareness. Unlike art history, Visual Culture is not weighted down by historicism and hobbled by the ‘time-tested’ philosophical constructs of aesthetics and formalism. So is the interdiscipline Visual Culture the panacea for all of art history’s ills mentioned earlier?

In their introduction to Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations, Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey propose ‘a history of images’ as a corrective to the history of art, which they problematize for its naturalized assumptions about the validity of aesthetic value. The history of images then, would focus on the cultural meaning of the works both in their originary as well as in their subsequent contexts, including on our own reception of these images. This proposal appears to resolve three of Indian art history’s problems at once – the ideologically problematic issue of aesthetics/cultural value, art history’s overwhelming historicism, and its resistance to theorizing reception. The flipside of this is that the proposed history of images (and Visual Culture Studies in general) also exacerbates three other problems that
have firm roots within art history. 1) By privileging the ‘disembodied image’ over the ‘embodied artefact’, Visual Culture elevates vision over other sensory modalities and ways of apprehending the world. As a result, the complex materiality of the object, its material being, is reified and reduced to the status of the ‘image’. Our mode of apprehending the ‘image’ is thus (by definition) ocularcentric – the tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive aspects of our response to the material object are not recognized. 2) Visual Culture’s tendency to level all art works to the status of ‘representation’ implies a neglect of medium specificity. A poem is no different from a painting when they are both to be read as ‘texts’. ‘Meaning effects’ once again overwhelm ‘presence effects’ and there is no space for accommodating the very specific material qualities of artefacts, and affect. 3) Finally, because of this neglect of materiality and because of Visual Culture’s reception-biased treatment of images, agency, artistic intention and facture are sidelined even more severely.

In her response to the Visual Culture Questionnaire published in the journal October, Carol Armstrong makes two very significant remarks. She characterizes the material dimension of cultural objects as irreducibly particular, as a potential site of resistance and recalcitrance, “a pocket of occlusion within the smooth functioning of systems of domination…a glitch in the great worldwide web of images and representations.” Her second point has a phenomenological slant, inspired by Heidegger – the subsumption of material objects within the textual model constitutes a discrediting of ‘the particular intelligence involved in material facture’.²

Phenomenology as a field of philosophical enquiry has evolved remarkably sophisticated approaches to the materiality and presence of phenomenal things and our embodied interactions with them. The primacy given to direct experience within phenomenology might appear quaint and somewhat naive in the context of contemporary theory. However, it could be just the sort of naivete that historians of pre-modern Indian art might critically embrace – a broad-spectrum antidote to both our persistent inherited frames and to contemporary theory’s cynical attitude to the possibility of unmediated

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experience. In the course of researching this thesis, I discovered my personal affinity for a small group of phenomenology-inspired art historians and theorists – a group that includes Georges Didi-Huberman, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Hans Belting and David Summers. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* and his unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible* have important insights to offer about the corporeal core of our perception of the world; their potential as sources for a theory of materiality, and for theorizing our tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive responses to artefacts, needs to be explored. Martin Heidegger’s remarkable and difficult writings on material, facture and technology, on things and objecthood, have been sources of inspiration for this project. Examining the potential of phenomenology’s insights to rework some of Indian art history’s formulations is a project for the immediate future.

As mentioned earlier, some of the recent formulations of anthropology and material culture studies have had a significant influence in the conceptualizing of this study. The material culture approach to artefacts as *agents* could be combined with theories of reception, to give us a more materiality-driven understanding of artworks that outlast their originary contexts. In *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell develops an *anthropological* theory of art which positions art works as social agents functioning within social networks which have a performative, interventionist function not restricted to passively encoding a society’s views about the world.⁢ Alfred Gell’s radical theory distances itself both from the formalist-aesthetic modes as well as the semiotic approaches to art. It points instead to the technical virtuosity showcased by the work as the source of the artwork’s power, its continuing persuasion and ‘enchantment’.

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