INTRODUCTION

As socially and culturally salient entities, objects change in defiance of their material stability. The category to which a thing belongs, the emotion and judgment it prompts, and the narrative it recalls, are all historically refigured.

--Nicholas Thomas, Entangled Objects

We do not explain pictures: we explain remarks about pictures – or rather, we explain pictures only in so far as we have considered them under some verbal description or specification.

--Michael Baxandall, Patterns of Intention

The Great Relief at Mamallapuram, an imposing open-air sculptural panel carved on an outcrop of granite rock, has been described and interpreted by numerous visitors over the past two centuries. When I began this project, I set myself the task of collecting as many ‘scholarly’ English-language accounts of this monument as I could find with the intention of comparing various representations of the artefact. I began the compilation with art history texts and expanded the search outwards and backwards to include related textual representations from earlier periods and contexts. My own frequent and enthusiastic face-to-face encounters with this artefact gave my assignment a theoretical direction; I was looking for representations that best fore-grounded what was surely the most salient, universally accessible feature of this particular work – its compelling visual/material opulence.

It came as a surprise to me at this early stage of my inquiry that the writers of my collection had very different priorities. Some of them were content with outlining the narrative involved, enumerating and naming the figure-forms. Others privileged measurement and ‘scientific’ description of the object. A third group plunged with little preamble into the interpretation controversy. A fourth group puzzled over chronology, patronage and the mystery of the unfinished sections. It appeared as if each of these groups was talking about a different object; and none of these objects resembled ‘my’ object. More
perplexing, a majority of the writers seemed to take the alluring visual and material qualities of the object for granted. What I found most significant about this artwork - the philosophical conundrum posed by objects, ontologically identified with their originary (and now absent) pasts, which continue to impinge on our present by their imposing visual/ material presence - was for these interpreters an incidental means to some other end – historical, scientific, interpretative.

A welcome transformation that my inquiry has undergone over the years has been the abandoning of what now seems to be a theoretically naïve quest for ‘truest’ account – that definitive textual representation which is most in tune with the visual and material ‘essence’ of the object it describes or interprets. However, some of the questions thrown up in the course of the preliminary study have lingered on and generated the primary arguments of this project.

The purpose of this inquiry, very broadly stated, is to examine how the sub-discipline of pre-modern Indian art history frames its objects discursively. My specific interest is to examine how art historians respond to and represent the visual and material qualities of pre-modern Indian sculptural art and how these representations are articulated with the discursive representations of other aspects of the objects’ identity that are considered salient – their historical location, their function in past contexts, artistic intention and agency, the ‘content’ which they were intended to communicate (or obscure), the metaphysics they embodied. My central argument is that while recent art history (especially after the ‘cultural turn’) in India has achieved an unprecedented level of complexity in contextualizing the sculptural artefact within the historical circumstances of its making (in terms of its representational content, ideological affiliations, the social-political and cultural circumstances of production and reception, patronage, and so on), it falters when it has to respond to the work of art as presentation – as a site of a plenitude of visual and material qualities encountered in the present.¹

In other words, Indian art history’s intense and increasingly sophisticated engagement with the historicity of sculptural artefacts and their originary

¹For a useful encapsulation of several features of this recent shift in Indian art history towards the interpretive/critical paradigm, see Shivaji K. Panikkar, Parul Dave Mukherji and Deeptha Achar eds., Towards a New Art History: Studies In Indian Art (D.K. Printworld Ltd., 2003), 47–65.
communicative content appears to have overshadowed art historians’ responses to the powerfully affective visual and material qualities of the works. It is particularly ironic that even as the discipline of art history in India has finally begun to take reflexivity seriously, we have no theoretical frame within which to accommodate these embodied responses to the visual and material attributes of the works that we encounter. It is my contention that this structural failure can be explained at least partially in terms of the historical circumstances within which the discipline evolved in India. In the course of this study, I will attempt to historicize and problematize the relationship between the art historian - the viewing and interpreting subject - and the sculptural artefact/object, with the intention of unearthing the factors that influence Indian art history’s construction and representation of the ‘visuality’ and ‘materiality’ of its primary objects.

Because this is a historiographical study focusing on discursive representations of pre-modern Indian sculptural artefacts, my primary sources are not the artefacts themselves but writings about artefacts. In the four chapters that form the body of this analysis, I identify and differentiate between five distinct forms of discourse (or discursive formations) about sculptural artefacts that are genealogically related to the current discourse of pre-modern Indian art history. In Chapter I, I examine in turn, colonial travel writings of the late 18th and early 19th centuries which framed the ‘wonders’ of the Indian subcontinent using Romantic aesthetic categories and the discourse about Indian ‘antiquities’ of the same period, initiated by the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. In Chapter II, I focus on the colonial archaeological discourse that became dominant between the middle and the last decades of the 19th century and the late 19th and early 20th century discourse of colonialist art history (which I see as linked to the early initiatives to monumentalize and museumize pre-modern Indian artefacts). Chapter III discusses nationalist art history of the first half of the 20th century that constituted a new field of objects – the spiritualized, aestheticized domain of ‘Indian Art’. Chapter IV is in the form of three case

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2 My deployment of the term “discourse” throughout this study is in general conformity with its current usage in poststructuralist theory and cultural studies. An influential text that has shaped my understanding of discourse and discursive formations is Michel Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge*; this influence is most evident in the somewhat “archaeological” trajectory of this project. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Routledge, 2002).
studies; I examine in detail three distinct and well-established approaches to sculptural artefacts in **post-independence Indian art history**, drawing out the continuities and ruptures between these and earlier discourses.

In the first part of each section dealing with a specific discourse formation – I attempt to contextualize the discourse within its historical setting, to define its boundaries, to delineate the ‘field of objects’ constructed by the discourse and the position of sculptural artefacts within that field. This definition and delimitation of different discourses and their objects constitutes a significant theoretical contribution of my project. It emerged out of an extensive survey of primary texts, a few of which are listed in the bibliography. In the second part of each section, I look more closely at a small selection of individual texts that exemplify each discourse under analysis, in order to understand the subject positions made available by the texts and to investigate subject-object relations implicit within the discourse.

It must be emphasized again that my objective is not to correlate the textual representations I study with their referents in the ‘real’ world or to evaluate the truth value of the texts with reference to some *a priori* unchanging reality of the objects they describe and interpret. I am interested in how texts actively *construct* the objects of which they speak, to what category these objects belong within a particular discourse, what their ‘salient features’ are purported to be, what is considered significant and what insignificant in their forms and contexts, and inferentially, what these findings say about the relationship between the documenting/interpreting subjects and their objects.

Throughout this analysis, I keep one eye fixed on how the texts frame the visual and material qualities of the work and on the kind of significance ascribed to these qualities within the larger framework of the representations.

### DISCOURSES AND OBJECTS: SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present inquiry is theory-heavy; it grapples with relatively abstract questions of epistemology, subject-object relations and theories of visuality and materiality. In this sense, it is an anomalous contribution to the discipline
of Indian art history, where, for over half a century, to be rigorous is to be rigorously *empirical*. The theories that form the backbone of the study are an eclectic mix, borrowed from post-structuralism, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, anthropology, material culture studies, phenomenology and visual culture. In the section that follows, I provide an overview of (and abbreviated background for) the core theoretical constructs and associated terminology that underpin this project.

**Diverse Discourses**

In the first two chapters, I examine written discourses about artefacts that were in circulation well before the discipline of art history was established in India. The fact that more than half of this inquiry is devoted to examining writings that fall ‘outside’ the ambit of art history could raise questions about relevance. My reason for venturing beyond disciplinary boundaries is twofold. Firstly, because my intention is to historicize Indian art history’s representational practices, I find it useful to work backwards from the present discourse of art history to a range of non-art historical discourses from the past. The connections I attempt to draw between these earlier texts and the present discourse of art history does not take the form of a linear developmental sequence; colonial travel writing, for example, did *not* eventually ‘develop’ into art historical discourse in some teleological manner. The relationship between the discourses is necessarily tenuous, even discontinuous at times. My logic for juxtaposing these discrete discourses is not because I see them as referring to the same ‘object’ (in fact, I argue that they actually create different objects) but because I see them as involving related *practices* of ‘encounter’, viewing and representation and of negotiating comparable terrains of subject-object relationships. In other words, I see the earlier discourses as being *genealogically* related to present day art history discourse.⁴

¹In an interview published as “Questions of Method,” Foucault speaks of his approach in *Discipline and Punish* as targeted towards analyzing “regimes of practices” rather than “institutions”, “theory” or “ideology”. Regimes of practices have their own ‘specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence and “reason”. To examine them means to analyze “programmes of conduct which have both prescriptive effects” and “codifying effects regarding what is to be known(effects of “veridiction”). “Foucault: Questions of Method” in Kenneth Baynes, James F. Bohman, and Thomas Anthony MacCarthy (eds.), *After Philosophy: End Or Transformation* (MIT Press, 1987), 102–103.
Secondly, the discourse of Indian art history derives its sustenance and coherence from a set of mostly implicit assumptions, expectations and theoretical frameworks that have become so naturalized within the discipline’s structure as to be almost undetectable, especially to an ‘insider’. Take, for example, the methodological procedures of empirical description, formal analysis, stylistic analysis and aesthetic appreciation; between them, these four approaches have been the mainstay of Indian art history’s framing of the visual and material qualities of its primary objects. They have become so seamlessly integrated with a specifically art historical ‘way of seeing’ that it is difficult to imagine how we can talk about visual and material qualities of artworks without recourse to one or the other them. Commonsensical and unproblematic though these approaches may appear to art historians, they are not indispensable to a credible framing of the visual/material qualities of the work. This becomes apparent only when we can achieve a critical distance from the theoretical framework of art history proper, a near impossible feat for me personally, because I have spent the last twenty years absorbing the theories and methods of what in India has been an essentially non-reflexive discipline.

Because there is no Archimedean point ‘above’ the discourse of art history which I can occupy in order to critique the discipline’s epistemological underpinnings objectively, I choose the next best option. By looking at earlier discourses that involved establishing a subject-object relationship with sculptural artefacts, by temporarily occupying the subject-positions afforded by these discourses and by adopting their ‘ways of seeing’, I attempt to expose the contingency and historicity of Indian art history’s theoretical frames and methodological protocols. In his foreword to an early Foucault text, Hubert Dreyfus makes this comment in connection with Foucault’s genealogical histories: “The best way to see that things might be otherwise is to see that they once were and in some areas still are otherwise, and to see well how we developed our present narrow view.”

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Objects, Artefacts, Things

This stepping back from art history’s monopoly on textual representations of sculptural artefacts is a theoretical move that I find necessary as a kind of defamiliarizing exercise. But adopting this strategy also implies that I have to relinquish my privileging of art history’s ontological category for its primary object, that is, the ‘art object’ frame. The inevitability of this comes into sharp focus when we are confronted with other categories for the sculptural artefact, other ways of objectifying it in prior discourses. When travel-writer Maria Graham, for example, describes the aesthetic feelings evoked by an architectural ruin in Mamallapuram, she is not, in fact, framing the artefact itself as ‘a work of art’ (even though this last category features prominently in the Romantic writer’s conceptual horizon). Her object, framed as a picturesque ‘wonder’, is the architectural ruin seamlessly integrated with its natural setting.\(^5\) Similarly, the 19\(^{th}\) century colonial archaeologist categorizes and frames the sculptural artefact as a ‘document of history’, not as a ‘work of art’. Therefore, superimposing today’s category of ‘art object’ on the objects formed by earlier discourses would be tantamount to a category error.

I have found it methodologically enriching to relativize the category of art object and to accept whatever category each discourse imposes on its objects. Hence, a sizeable section of each chapter is devoted to defining and examining the contours of the distinct kind of object that each discourse constructs. I pay special attention to the nomenclature and characterization of the objects, the scope of the ‘field of objects’ in each case, the conceptual ecology that each discourse surrounds its objects with, and the purported ‘salient features’ of the objects so described. For example, the ‘wonders’ of 19\(^{th}\) century travel writing are artefacts framed contiguously with their natural settings; by contrast, the contemporaneous antiquities discourse is careful to abstract its ‘man-made’ objects from their natural and (incidental) human entanglements. It is clear that even when both these discourses are referring to the same ‘thing’, they classify it under distinct ontological categories and objectify it differently. For the purposes of my project, it makes sense to take these categories seriously.

\(^5\)Maria Graham, *Journal of a Residence in India*, 1813.
The distinction between ‘thing’ and ‘object’ features prominently in recent theoretical writings, especially in the fields of material culture studies and critical theory. One influential way of demarcating the boundary between (material) things and objects has been to assert (following Immanuel Kant and later, Martin Heidegger) that things are ‘ontologically innocent’; that is, they have not yet been trapped into a conceptual scheme of the knowing subject as objects inevitably are. Things are unmediated, sometimes opaque and recalcitrant; objects are often transparent, already always mediated by human subjectivity. In his seminal article titled Thing Theory, Bill Brown designates the ‘thing’ as that which lies ‘beyond the grid of intelligibility’, temporalized as both ‘the before and the after of the object’. On the one hand, things are ‘the amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the (ap)perceiving subject, the anterior physicality of the human world emerging...as an after-effect of the mutual constitution of the subject and the object....’ On the other, things can be imagined “as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects-their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems.”

Because my project hinges on recognizing and defining the contours of a multiplicity of objectifications in diverse discourses, I take recourse to a theoretical formulation similar to the ‘thing’ in Brown’s theory. I use the term ‘artefact’ or ‘sculptural artefact’ as a place holder for that entity which is logically prior to its objectification (as ‘antiquities’, or ‘wonders’ or ‘art object’) in the different discourses I examine. I find the term ‘thing’ too general for the purposes of my study; ‘artefact’ is more appropriate in this context, especially because all of these discourses (romantic-travelogue, antiquarian, archaeological, art historical) recognize, even when they do not emphasize, the artefactual nature of the objects they frame.


To elaborate a little, I use the term ‘artefact’ throughout this essay in a specific set of related ways. At the broadest, most conceptual level, the ‘artefact’ haunts my scheme as a theoretical entity that is withdrawn from its specific burden of ‘objecthood’ within a particular discourse; it participates in some of the materiality, unspecifiability and impenetrable excess of Brown’s (and ultimately Heidegger’s) ‘thing’. At a more pragmatic level, the ‘artefact’ is a necessary heuristic device with minimal theoretical baggage, a least common factor of sorts, which allows me to move between different objectifications and frames. (I must stress again that I have no intention of extracting some noumenal ‘artefact-in-itself’ from the analysis). This flexibility is reflected when I use term ‘artefact’ frequently throughout the text, either to emphasize something prior to its ‘objectification’ in relation to the subject or to focus the spotlight on the act of framing itself.

Although this study examines discourses about sculptural artefacts in general, it may be observed that the focus returns in each chapter to a few specific artefacts - the Great Relief at Mamallapuram, Ellora’s Cave 16 and Elephanta’s relief sculptures are leitmotifs throughout the analysis. In following a select group of artefacts through their objectification in different discourses, I indulge in a version of what Arjun Appadurai calls ‘methodological fetishism’. That is, I turn my attention to the sculptural artefacts themselves functioning as objects, to ‘things’ animated by human interactions with them. Nothing highlights the changing nature of subject-object relations better than comparing two accounts of the same artefact generated by different discourses; to put it in Appadurai’s terms, “it is things-in-motion that illuminate their social and human context.”

Subject Positions

“Discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity.” Following Michel Foucault, constructionist theories of meaning and representation hold that not only does discourse systematically produce the objects of which it speaks, it also produces “a place for the subject (the reader or the viewer) from which its particular knowledge and meanings makes most sense... discourses, then, construct subject-positions, from

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9Sara Mills, Discourse (Routledge, 2004), 15.
which alone they make sense [emphasis original].”

Throughout my analysis, I attempt to temporarily occupy the subject positions constructed by each discourse for the reader with the intention of arriving at a critical understanding of the distinctions between the various available subject-object relations across discourse formations. Two limitations of this strategy bear mentioning here. Firstly, it is theoretically impossible for me to completely abandon my own situated understanding of the discourses I examine, to embrace alternative subject-positions constructed in historical and cultural circumstances very different from my own. Moreover, the critical value of such a move is doubtful. Secondly, I base my analysis on the assumption that the subject-positions offered by the discourses I examine are more or less congruent with the subject-positions occupied by the authors of the individual texts themselves. The fact that the texts I investigate are largely what can be considered ‘scholarly’ representations that fall squarely within clearly demarcated discursive boundaries, (and are not primarily works of fiction or rhetoric) justifies, in my opinion, the founding assumption behind this strategy.

The critical potential of this approach, as mentioned earlier, is that it offers a way to ‘disidentify’ myself from the subject position I automatically occupy as a student of Indian art history in the twenty-first century, a subject position already constructed for me by the discipline in which I was trained. By giving me a ringside view of the mechanics of discourses-constructing-subjects, this approach also offers me insights into the limiting ways in which subject-object relations are worked out within the present discourse of art history, and perhaps even some prospect of altering the configuration of the discourse itself in a minor way.

**Why ‘sculptural artefacts’?**

There are three reasons why I choose to focus on discursive objectifications of pre-modern sculptural artefacts, even though I occasionally refer to texts about painting and architecture. The first reason is personal; having studied and taught ‘Indian sculpture’ intensively for two decades, I count on my first-hand familiarity with the large corpus of extant sculptural productions both in

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situ and in museums across the country to anchor my critical understanding of the representations I analyze. There is also the question of affect. I find that my response to the visual and material qualities of sculptural artefacts is more acute than my response to painting or architecture (in isolation from sculpture, that is). Even though we are very far from theorizing ‘affect’ within the discipline of art history, my fascination with the affective force of pre-modern Indian sculpture has been the single most important motivation for seeing this project through.

Secondly, given the sheer volume of writings about pre-modern Indian material artefacts, some thematic limitation becomes necessary. Using ‘sculptural artefacts’ as a thematic division is fairly arbitrary, especially as much extant pre-modern Indian sculpture occurs contiguously with (and is aesthetically inseparable from) the architectural matrix of which it was usually a part. However, because the discipline of art history itself recognizes ‘Indian sculpture’ as a sub-field of inquiry, and because the ultimate target of this inquiry is Indian art history’s formulations, there is a pragmatic (even if somewhat anachronistic) value in projecting the theme backwards to earlier discourses.

The final reason relates to what may be considered intrinsic qualities of sculpture itself. Sculptural artefacts are, by their very nature, sites replete with both visual and haptic/kinesthetic stimuli; there is often a fine tension between their ‘visual presentation’ and their ‘material presence’. Most of the texts I examine cope well with the visual presentation of sculptures, framing it under some verbal description without much difficulty. However, when it comes to the material presence of the artefacts, which calls for a more intimate, haptic response from the viewer, the texts flounder or avoid dealing with that aspect of the artefact altogether. The resistance offered by the compelling material presence of sculpture, its multi-sensorial appeal, a tangible yet elusive quality that defies easy subsumption into any order of discourse, makes sculptural artefacts an exciting choice for a study of subject-object relations.

11I deal with the theoretical implications of this in my concluding chapter.
**Visuality and Materiality**

A compelling reason to investigate textual approaches to sculptural artefacts in their *entirety*, instead of reading descriptions of visual and material qualities in isolation from other factors considered salient (like their historical significance and intended meaning), is that it enables a *contextualized* understanding of how artefacts are ‘framed’ within each discourse. Even though, as phenomena, artefacts are perceived primarily through their visual and material modalities, the relative significance of the visual and the material in relation to the other aspects varies substantially from frame to frame. Each discursive frame achieves a distinctive balance between representations of the physical attributes of its objects and questions of historicity and communicative import; this triad of aspects is so tightly interwoven as to be inseparable. Moreover, it is the frame-taken-as-a-whole that gives the reader an indication of the subject-position she/he is expected to occupy in relation to the objects of the discourse. While it is difficult to *define* this subject position or characterize it in exact terms, it is possible to arrive at an approximation of it inferentially.

One of the key findings of this inquiry is that texts within a specific discourse formation highlight particular aspects of the visual/material, while paying little or no attention to others. It is almost as if certain specific visual and material qualities of artefacts become visible within one discursive frame, only to disappear within another frame. For example, in colonial archaeological accounts, there is a tendency to treat complex sculptural arrays in an atomistic fashion – isolating human figures from animals and decorative motifs (see chapter II). Empirically describing a work within this frame often means enumerating elements from (the viewer’s) left to right, from top to bottom. This discursive frame renders invisible aspects like workmanship, sculptural qualities and the *aesthetic impact* of the work. The sculptural fragment remains irrevocably a fragment; the only material qualities that seem to matter are dimensions, state of preservation and placement (if some kind of archaeological reconstruction is intended). By contrast, in the writings of Stella Kramrisch and some of the post-independence texts I examine, there is a great deal of emphasis on the plastic qualities of individual works – a close-up view that lingers on the
depth of carving, articulation of elements, finish and so on (Chapter III). Sculptural arrays are treated as organic wholes and the description tries to follow the narrative intention of the work. These writers’ descriptions automatically compensate for missing limbs and weatherworn sections of sculpture and the reader is tacitly encouraged to imagine them as they were in their pristine, newly-carved state.

These curious discrepancies in ‘ways of seeing’ are not merely quirks of individual viewing subjects - framing objects in their own way. As will be seen in subsequent sections, the differences in ways of seeing between texts across discourses are exponentially greater than the differences between texts from within the same discourse formation. What I attempt to establish in the chapters that follow is that this differential framing of the visual and the material:

1) Is largely a function of the discourse formation within which a text is embedded. To put it somewhat crudely, the discourse we participate in determines what we see and what we choose not to see.

2) Has ideological implications, which this inquiry attempts to unpack.

Within the bounds of mainstream art historiography, this proposal to link discursive representations of visual and material qualities of artefacts to putative subject positions might be considered an overambitious or dubious project. However, parallels can be found in various forms of discourse analysis, a well-established branch of epistemological inquiry from the 1970’s onwards. As for the insight referred to above – that is, the differential framing of the visual and the material in different discursive representations – this ‘insight’ lends itself to being recast in terms of one of the fundamental theoretical formulations of Visual Culture Studies – the theory of visuality.

One of the most quoted definitions of visuality occurs in Hal Foster’s preface to the 1988 anthology titled Vision and Visuality. In the opening paragraph, Foster differentiates between vision and visuality thus:

Although vision suggests sight as a physical operation, and visuality sight as a social fact, the two are not opposed as nature to

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12 See, for example, Marianne W. Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips, Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method (Sage, 2002).
culture...neither are they identical: here the difference between the terms signals a difference within the visual–between the mechanisms of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determinations—a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein.  

In his contribution to the anthology titled ‘The Gaze in the Expanded Field’, Norman Bryson elaborates on this aspect of visuality as the ‘socialization of vision’:

For human beings collectively to orchestrate their visual experience together it is required that each submit his or her retinal experience to the socially agreed description(s) of an intelligible world. Vision is socialized, and thereafter deviation from this social construction of visual reality can be measured and named, variously, as hallucination, misrecognition, or “visual disturbance.” Between the subject and the world is inserted the entire sum of discourses which make up visuality, that cultural construct, and make visuality different from vision, the notion of unmediated visual experience. Between the retina and the world is inserted a *screen* of signs, a screen consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built into the social arena. 

If one were to reframe the primary areas of investigation of this project in terms of ‘visuality’, the questions would read something like this: How do individual writers ‘view’ what they ‘see’? How do they discursively *construct* the visuality of the objects they study? What ‘historical techniques’ of sight, ‘discursive determinations’ of vision and ‘socially agreed descriptions’ go in to the textual framing of the material and visual attributes of artefacts? Why do these discursive constructions of the ‘visual reality’ of sculptural artefacts differ so markedly from discourse to discourse? What light does this differential construction at the level of visuality throw upon subject-object relationships specific to each discursive formation? Ultimately, what does this tell us about Indian art history’s construction and

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representation of the visuality of its primary objects and the subject positions available within the recent discourse of art history?

Compared to the idea of visuality, the concept of ‘materiality’ has a more complex history and is a fundamental issue across a range of disciplines. For this project, an obvious and interesting field to mine for theories of materiality would be material culture studies. As the late 20th century offspring of archaeology and socio-cultural anthropology, material culture studies concentrates on the interactions between people and things. In his introduction to the definitive 2006 anthology - *Handbook of Material Culture* - Christopher Tilley locates the concept of materiality at the very heart of the inter-discipline of material culture studies:

At present, material culture studies form a diffuse and relatively uncharted interdisciplinary field of study in which a concept of materiality provides both the starting point and the justification. This field of study centres on the idea that materiality is an integral dimension of culture, and that there are dimensions of social existence that cannot be fully understood without it.15

Tilley elaborates on the varied and sometimes contradictory connotations of materiality we encounter as part of common usage – from dictionary definitions to everyday language.

...the very concept of materiality is ... heterogeneous and ambiguous. Attempts at rigorous definition are entangled with deep metaphorical roots and cultural connotations. According to various dictionary definitions materiality can mean substance, something comprised of elements or constituents, of variously composed matter: the tangible, the existing or concrete, the substantial, the worldly and real as opposed to the imaginary, ideal and value-laden aspects of human existence. The concept of materiality is thus typically used to refer to the fleshy, corporeal and physical, as opposed to spiritual, ideal and value-laden aspects of human existence...Furthermore notions of materiality in everyday talk are frequently linked with commonsense ideas about data, facts or

15Christopher Tilley et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Material Culture*, (Sage, 2006), 1.
objective evidence, rather than anything to do with human subjectivity and bias, the mind, ideas or values.\textsuperscript{16}

In material culture terms, materiality is the mutually constitutive relationship between people and things. An important branch of material culture studies looks at the social biography of things – how the uses, functions and significance of things have varied through time, because people’s interactions with them change.\textsuperscript{17} The discipline also debates the ‘agency’ of objects, their capacity to influence human status and actions.\textsuperscript{18}

At the broadest level, I borrow from material culture studies the concept of materiality as an aspect of artefacts that emerges from the interactions between subjects with their objects. Like visuality for visual culture studies, the concept of materiality is not so much about ‘brute matter’ as it is about the ‘historical techniques’ and ‘discursive determinations’ of the (multisensory) perception of material things (see Bryson, above). This broad-based formulation provides the conceptual background for my understanding of materiality. However, my application of the term ‘materiality’ throughout this inquiry has a narrower focus; it deals with three specific and interrelated areas of the subject’s interaction with artefacts.

1. At the level of the artefact itself, the matter or physical material out of which the artefact is made (whether granite, or sandstone or bronze), and the matter or material that surrounds it; these play an important role in determining its material and visual attributes. Following Heidegger, I do not believe that matter is a passive entity awaiting the imposition of Form on it by the human subject. On the contrary, matter or material has its own kind of agency which can on occasion overwhelm ‘form’ itself (which is why I use the term ‘material’ instead of medium). At the level of materiality, I see most artefacts of the pre-modern period as collaborations between the agential potential of the

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 3.
material itself and the agency of the artist. Moreover, materials are already suffused with culture-specific significance, even before they are shaped into artefacts.

2. This leads logically to another realm of materiality – that of facture, the physical making of a work by the artist/artisan and the immediate material circumstances that surround it. Facture is arguably the single most important determinant of the (original) material attributes of artefacts. The concept is foregrounded in David Summers’ “On the Histories of Artifacts”: “Any work of art, taken as a whole, before it is regarded formally, aesthetically, or expressively, may also be regarded indexically, that is, in terms of its own facture, as the result and record of its having been made [emphasis added].” For Summers, the acknowledgement and understanding of facture is not a mere evidentiary supplement, but epistemologically and philosophically central to our understanding of artefacts. Summers rejects the idealism that makes us react to continuous artefactual traditions by asking ‘why people keep imagining things in the same way’. What we should be asking instead is ‘why they keep making things in the way they evidently did (or do). The answers to these questions are very different.” Keeping facture centre-stage is crucial in the context of pre-modern Indian sculptural artefacts whose makers remain, with a few exceptions, anonymous.

3. Finally, at the level of reception, materiality implies the interactions between material objects as sites of multisensory stimuli and embodied subjects (the category includes the makers, users and viewers of artefacts across time). Perception of the material attributes of artefacts is not limited to the visual sense. Haptic sensibilities come into play – ranging from the tactile and the kinaesthetic to the proprioceptive. The idea of embodied perception (absent until recently in art history)

19This insight is influenced by Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology”, in The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays (Garland Pub., 1977), 30–35., in which he implicates four Aristotelian causes in the making of a silver chalice. Echoes of this are found in his more famous essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art”. See Donald Preziosi (ed.), The Art of Art History, 284-295.


21Ibid.
receives its most elaborate treatment in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.²² From poststructuralist and feminist perspectives, bodies are not merely stable natural/biological entities common to the human species; bodies are also historically inscribed and culturally produced.²³ Pierre Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to refer to a system of bodily and conceptual dispositions (culturally inherited, enduring schemes of perception, thought and action) which individuals deploy almost unconsciously to deal with objective conditions that they encounter.²⁴

This relativization of the body and bodily practices complicates the notion of embodied perception considerably. What it adds up to in the context of this study is that when the subject encounters artefacts face-to-face, she is already approaching it with a set of corporeal dispositions that are historically and culturally determined. The process of discursive objectification adds yet another layer of complexity, another system of limitations and possibilities to the representation of the perceived artefact. Materiality, within this framework, becomes the *historically determined, culturally specific discursive objectification of perceived material attributes of artefact*. For the reasons listed above, materiality, like visuality, varies according to subject position and the discursive frame within which the objectification takes place.

It will be noted in the chapters that follow that most of the discourses studied tend to gloss over or to sideline the material attributes of the work in favour of the visual. The discourses themselves are ocularcentric, that is, they privilege ‘seeing’ over other ways of experiencing the objects they frame. Interestingly, each of the discourses is ocularcentric in a slightly different way. One of the tasks of this study is to distinguish between the different ways of privileging the visual over the material – and to unpack the ideological underpinnings in each case. What makes this undertaking somewhat tricky is that unlike visuality, ‘materiality’ is undertheorized in art-

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²²Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge, 2002).
history/ visual culture studies and overdetermined in other contexts. However, theorizing materiality adequately for the purposes of art history and bringing it into some sort of symmetrical relation with visuality (visual culture studies tends to privilege the dematerialized image over the embodied artefact) is beyond the scope of this project. A few starting blocks are set up in the concluding chapter.

**THE STUDY IN CONTEXT**

The present inquiry does not attempt a comprehensive survey or developmental account of discourses about pre-modern artefacts. Instead, what it tries to capture are six distinct ‘moments’ in the discursive representation of sculptural artefacts; the intention is to mark both the breaks and continuities in subject-object relations and in the framing of material and visual qualities across discourses. The first ‘moment’ that this study examines coincides with end of 18th century and the last ‘moment’ covered falls exactly two centuries later, in the 1990’s. While the project emphasizes the diversity of subject positions and framings, it does not presume to have covered all possible position-takings *vis a vis* the artefact.

In the context of Indian art history, studies dealing exclusively with historiography continue to be few and far between. Even scarcer are ones that approach the discipline from a theoretical standpoint, with a view to unearthing epistemological positions and ideological underpinnings; this is the gap in current scholarship that my project attempts to fill. Most historiographical studies of Indian art history are either in the form of surveys of trends (or developmental accounts), or in the form of anthologies where individual scholars contribute site-specific or period-specific historiographies. What follows is a brief overview of significant contributions to the field.

One of the early sources of inspiration for this project was Partha Mitter’s *Much Maligned Monsters*. This 1977 publication, one of the first historiographical texts I read, is a detailed documentation of European reactions to Indian art starting with Marco Polo’s description of South India from the 13th century and ending with the writings of nationalist art
historians. Published one year before Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, this must surely be counted as a pioneering work in the area of postcolonial studies. *Much Maligned Monsters* critically distinguishes changing trends in reactions to Indian ‘art’; this was the first text I encountered that treated texts and discourses as ‘representations,’ at face value, without being zealously prescriptive.  

Pramod Chandra’s *On the Study of Indian Art* (pub. 1983), presented as a series of lectures at the Asia Society, is a brief survey of 19th and 20th century historiography of pre-modern Indian architecture, sculpture and painting. A significant anthology edited by Catherine Asher and Thomas Metcalf, *Perceptions of South Asia’s Visual Past* (1994) emerged out of a seminar at the American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi. The December 1997 issue of the *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, guest edited by Tapati Guha-Thakurta, is themed *Sites of Art History: Canons and Expositions*. It features articles by Guha-Thakurta, Ajay Sinha and Arindam Dutta that are relevant to this study.

Another anthology titled *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art* (pub. 2003), a product of a 2002 seminar at M.S. University in Baroda conducted in honour of Prof. Ratan Parimoo, seeks to question canonical art history in India by ushering in a ‘framework oriented approach’ that investigates cultural phenomena ranging from museums and galleries to a contemporary popular festival. The introductory article titled ‘Towards New Art History’, co-authored by Deepta Achar, Parul Dave Mukherji and Shivaji Panikkar, usefully encapsulates some generational discontents that have surfaced with respect to institutional art history in India, while pointing towards a few emerging trends. Ratan Parimoo’s expansive “From Iconography through Iconology to New Art History”, and articles by Ajay

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Sinha, Kavita Singh, Guha-Thakurta and Rahul Bhattacharya are of particular relevance to my study.\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Indian Art History: Changing Perspectives} (pub 2006) is a more recent contribution to the field of historiography. This anthology is edited by Parul Pandya Dhar and features among others, Parimoo’s essay on Stella Kramrisch, Gautam Sengupta on Rajendralala Mitra, Upinder Singh’s article on 19\textsuperscript{th} century archaeologists and architectural scholars and Dhar’s own covering essay, which surveys the field of Indian art historiography under various thematic heads.\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century} (pub 2008) edited by Vishakha Desai has an article titled “The Shape of Indian Art History” by Frederick Asher which looks at American contributions to the discipline in India.\textsuperscript{31} This essay unearths some of the political implications of American scholars ‘studying India’ from the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century onwards; it makes for an interesting contrast when read alongside Joanna Williams’ 1981 introduction to the \textit{Kaladarshana} anthology, a more serene sketch of scholarly developments titled “Whither the Study of Indian Art?”\textsuperscript{32}

Despite the small numbers of books that deal exclusively with Indian art historiography, historiographical reflexivity in general has been gradually on the rise since the 1980’s. An increasing number of recent scholarly texts on Indian sculpture and architecture critically analyze colonial, nationalist and post-independence contributions to their special areas in their introductory chapters.\textsuperscript{33} Even though these studies do not approach epistemological and ideological issues from the perspective of the discipline as a whole, their localized critiques can be very insightful and clearly demonstrate the writers’ reflexive self-positioning in the context of their specialist field. The writings of

\textsuperscript{29}Shivaji K. Panikkar, Parul Dave Mukherji and Deeptha Achar (eds.), \textit{Towards a New Art History}.


\textsuperscript{31}See Frederick Asher, “The Shape of Indian Art History,” Vishakha N. Desai, ed., \textit{Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century} (Clark Art Institute, 2008), 3-14.


two art historians who influenced my thinking about epistemological structures and subject positions merit special mention in this context.

Gary Tartakov’s *The Durga Temple at Aihole: A Historiographical Study* (Pub. 1997) marks a significant departure from the exclusively empirical, object-centred approach to Indian artefacts that was the distinguishing characteristic of American scholarship of his generation. The entire first half of the book is a critical reading of influential archaeological and historical approaches to the temple from the colonial period onwards. Unearthing the ideological motivations behind these narratives, Tartakov highlights the situated and contingent nature of all representations (including his own), the inescapable influence that prior interpretations have on later ones and the resultant ‘shifting meanings’ of the object.\(^{34}\) Another historiographically astute art historian, Ajay Sinha, introduces ‘Vesara’ to us in terms of the scholarly contestations over this hybrid form of temple architecture that was practiced in mediaeval Karnataka.\(^{35}\) ‘Vesara’ is revealed as an unstable entity, subject to reinterpretation.\(^{36}\) Related to this study, Sinha’s prolonged debate with architectural historian Adam Hardy about methodological approaches to medieval architecture in Karnataka, articulated across several journal exchanges, offers a fascinating insight into how differing ideological positions engender differences in methodological frameworks even within the current (supposedly unitary) discourse of Indian art history.

Guha-Thakurta’s contribution to artefactual historiography in India has exerted a major influence on this project. In her critical interpretations of colonial, nationalist and post-independence texts, the scholar draws out connections between discursive formations and the institutional structures that sustain them in the process of negotiating the complex terrains of empire, nation, region and modernity. *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, (pub 2004) is a compilation of nine significant articles published over three decades; these and other essays originally appeared in various journals and


\(^{36}\)These historiographical formulations are expanded in Sinha’s article, “The Construction of ‘Mule’ in Indian Temple Architecture,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, (December, 1997), 33-62.
The scholar’s approach to discourses and institutions is anchored by rigorous empirical research but deployed within a consistent theoretical framework, a very rare combination in Indian art historiography. Guha-Thakurta’s Foucauldian framing of institutional authority and discursive regimes in 19th and 20th century India, in particular, establishes a precedent for later scholars in the field.

My own engagement with the epistemological and ideological foundations of discourses about artefacts draws on this precedent. The discursive formations that I investigate in the chapters that follow are more or less in accordance with Guha-Thakurta’s scheme, with minor modifications at the level of interpretation and chronology. However, both the investigative trajectory of my project and its thematic focus are very different from her version. To use a directional metaphor, the scholar’s investigative thrust seems to me to be oriented outwards - from disciplines and discourses to institutional practices and structures that sustain them (with some reciprocity, of course). My project, on the other hand, moves inwards – from discursive formations, to a closer reading of texts within each discourse, to the subject-positions implicated therein. Similarly, the larger conceptual themes that Guha-Thakurta engages with include ideological constructs like empire, nation, region and modernity - as they are defined, modified and negotiated within discursive and institutional regimes. My thematic focus is more narrowly ‘art historical’ – I look at discursive constructions of visuality, materiality and related issues of historicity, meaning and agency.