CHAPTER FOUR

TRUTH, REALITY AND THE WORK OF ART

For the traditional Indian artist a work of art is the material concretization of his intuitive vision, the externalized form assumed by his inner experience, the body in which his intuition is made real. Such an externalization may be called mūrti (image) which means in Sanskrit, literally, an embodiment, or citra which in an extended meaning, stands for 'painting', 'picture', but derivatively means an object that happens to be an

1In India works of art may be either the artist's creation, the meditator's aid to contemplation or the craftsman's product. The line of distinction is not between art and craft as such but between works of artistic skill and technically produced objects. The former implies the employment of creative energy and thought, the latter implies reproduction and mechanical application of rules only. Accordingly an icon, or object of practical worth, such as a utensil or article of furniture etc. can be artistic and a painting or sculpture merely technical. The use of the terms, "work of art" and "art object" or "aesthetic object" in the above discussion however refers to those works only which imbibe the artistic quality, and since such objects are to be found more often in works of fine art we shall for convenience, confine the discussion to such objects only.

externalization of what was in the chit or consciousness.

In the case of the poetic and dramatic arts, the work of art goes under the names of nṛtta (pure dance), nṛtya (abhinaya-dance), nāṭya (dance-drama), kāvya (poetry), rāga (musical composition) all of which follow a definite pattern of structure and maintain the strictest rules of aesthetic composition. Any radical deviation from the methods of artistic construction detracts from the art value of the work. This does not mean that deviations from prescribed rules by an artist are never permissible; it implies only that the formal structure of a work of art is as important an aspect as the moment of contemplation in which the artist visualizes the entire work, and that an art object is the lawful manifestation of an inner experience; it is a concrete image.

In the case of sculpture, such images were made by craftsmen-artists for generally two purposes (a) worship, (b) adornment of temples and public places. In the making of cult-images for worship, the primary aim of the craftsman was to adhere to the canonical prescriptions as faithfully as possible rather than to

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3 According to Buddhaghosa, the Buddha is said to have held that a painting (citra which also included sculptures, bronzes and terracottas) was essentially the product of the functioning of the citta (mind, consciousness), "cittam cittenaiva cintitam".
create an aesthetic form. Such images equivalent to yantras or icons, were symbolic in the mathematical sense and were not, generally speaking, aesthetic objects. In non-iconic images however, used for purposes other than that of worship, the primary aim of the artist was to enlist the participation of the spectator in an experience of his created form. These images were constructed in a manner designed to express through their visual imagery the awareness of life as experienced immediately and directly, by the spectator.

The mūrti of aesthetic value, as against the icon (pratimā), possesses foremost a quality of vitality and dynamism which communicates itself not through the symbolism of abstract meanings but through the vivid presentation of its own being. Such an image has the power wholly within itself to compel the response of the spectator in a perception of its own intrinsic aspect. The symbols and allegories employed within its structure merge into the entire composition presenting an

4In the Sukranītisāra Sukracharya states that the laws of image-making are mainly for images used for worship, whereas, the spirit of beauty cannot be confined within any canon. "These, Lakshmi, are not for thee; these laws that I lay down, these analyses of what an image should be, are for those images that are made to order for people who would worship them. Endless are these forms! No ṣastra can define thee! Nothing can appraise thee." (Tr. Mulk Raj Anand, Hindu View of Art, p. 77).
undisrupted whole and do not point to any meaning lying beyond. A mūrti of aesthetic worth whatever may be the purpose for which it was made, is quite distinct from an icon, in as much as it impresses the spectator by the sheer force of its imagery. It is a powerful coherent structure, a unified entity embodying the inner movement of life, the flux and flow as experienced through its breath (prāṇa) and sap (rasa).

According to Indian theory, knowing and experiencing are on three planes of references; they are of objects in their gross aspect (sthūla), of objects on the subtle plane (sūkshma), and of the transcendental spirit lying beyond. The art work does not represent nature's grosser forms but represents objects etc., on the subtle plane of existence. It is the representation of life beyond its surface aspect at the level where the spectator can directly participate with the essence of things. As such the work of art does not imitate nature in her outward aspect representing her forms realistically, but aims at presenting the inner life movement which pervades the whole of nature and which is not evident to the external senses. Yet, even though the work of art is not a copy of nature, the artist draws his data from nature and presents his

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5Stella Kramisch, Indian Sculpture, op. cit., p.
images in the familiar forms he sees around him. Trees, flowers, landscape, animals and human forms are used freely as motifs, but there is no attempt to represent them realistically. This anti-realistic nature of art is likely to suggest that the traditional Indian artist had an idealistic aim, whereby he tried to create forms nearer to his heart's desire. This was not so. The ideal of the Indian artist was not to create a finely proportioned human figure with flawless limbs and features such as the Greek figures of Apollo and Venus, but to convey the experience of an underlying dynamism. He merges human and animal shapes into each other in order to express the essential unity of man and nature.  

The mūrti according to conventional taste may not be pleasing to the eye; its defiance of physiological laws, may suggest even a lack of skill on the part of the artist. But it should be remembered that this

6"All Indian sculpture has an astonishing life-quality. The figures into which the Indian shrines and temples seem to blossom have a kind of vegetable rhythm and luxuriance. The stone has been made to symbolise a tropical exuberance in growth; the animation seems to spring from a force that lies behind the corporeal envelopes, a force that vitalizes the animal and the vegetable world with one and the same life. The woman in the 'Two Lovers' on the Kailasanatha temple at Elura (eighth century) clings to the man like ivy to a tree; and we get this same universal rhythm in the Indian figures with several pairs of arms like the well-known bronze figures of Siva Dancing". Ibid., p. 151.
defiance is deliberate. The Indian artist was required to be a skillful craftsman with full knowledge of his trade. If he distorted the human form it was evidently because he was not interested in the human body as a physiological phenomena, recognizing clearly that the achievement of a perfect physique is the concern of the yogi. "The plastic quality of Indian sculpture is the created visual counterpart to an awareness of the body as a receptacle filled with the breath and the pulsations of life... it captures by its plastic quality the inner sensation of pulsating life, breathing its spirit to the tips of the fingers and into every movement and mien."7

It can indeed be said that the Indian artist fully realized that the essential quality of the artwork lay not in the structural organization of its surface elements or in their formal arrangement according to the principles of proportionate measurement and harmony, but in the creation of an empowered coherent image, successful to the extent to which it communicated an inner movement, an essential and dynamic living quality.

The same conclusion was reached by the later Sanskrit rhetoricians, when they eventually discovered

7Ibid., p. 151.
that the poetic work in its totality was not equivalent to a combination of its words, sounds, metaphors, and literary effects etc. but connoted something over and above it. The earliest theorists analyze the poem as a finished product, seeking to find its essence in the style and manner of its composition. For Bhāmaha and Rudraṭa the foremost exponents of the alamkāra school, the poem was a physical fact capable of being constructed scientifically, in the same way as an engineer constructed a bridge. The only difference between a scientific work and an art work lay according to them, in the ornamentation with which the latter was embellished, this ornamentation (alamkāra) consisting in the arrangement of words, the turn of a phrase, the construction of a metaphor, the use of a simile etc. The art of poetry (including drama and music) became accordingly similar to any scientific study and the poet was considered


9Ibid., p. 4. This earliest school of poetics regarded "poetry as a more or less a mechanical series of verbal devices in which a definite sense must prevail, and which must be diversified by means of prescribed tricks of phrasing, the so called figures of speech to which the name of 'ornament' (alamkāra) is given". Also p. 82 note 2.34.

10Ibid., p. 4.

11Ibid., pp. 4, 23, 82.
to be a discoverer and classifier of literary figures. His artistic ability was judged by his technical ability to manipulate his material. These early aestheticians committed the error of emphasizing the surface quality of the art work to the exclusion of its inner substance.

The riti\textsuperscript{12} school of thought which followed the alamkāra, tried to shift the emphasis from the purely perceptual surface qualities of the poem, to its formal qualities. To this end they compiled elaborate lists pertaining to those principles of artistic form, which could create the finest literary effects. Harmony, balance, melody, and style were studied for their own sake rather than as tools of the literary work. That the art work was an empowered image, pervading over and above the materials of which it was composed, was a fact which eluded them as it eluded their predecessors.

Ānandvardhana' in his theory of dhvani was the first to point to the nature of the poetic work as a

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 83. The term riti means literally style. S.K. De explains how "the history of poetic speculation (alamkāra śāstra) is commonly treated in terms of several 'schools',.... The oldest is called simply the alamkāra school from its preoccupation with the figures. The second of the schools is usually characterized as the riti, from the place of honour it gives to this stylistic idea".
substantial entity, as something other than the aesthetic surface and formal qualities of which it was composed. The materials used to create the literary work were its necessary constituents but in themselves did not constitute it. The poem was something other than the words and sense which composed it. It was a third non-physical entity, so to speak, the value of which lay not in its own physical existence, nor in the accuracy of its propositional statements but in its power to evoke a powerful dynamic effect, which was informed by a living quality.

It should be noted that the problems of art cannot be completely separated from the aesthetic experience. And though an isolated discussion of the type we are engaged in at present, seems to establish the possibility of a discourse about the object in isolation from the creative act and aesthetic response, it is in fact not possible. Unlike their predecessors, the questions raised by the dhvani theorists and by the rasa school of thought regarding the nature of the poetic image, presupposed at every point the observer. What the poem was taken to be depended on the creative act and aesthetic experience; its traits were not analysed in isolation but took into account the observer, his senses and his sensitivity to these
traits. Similarly, the concept of the work of art in the plastic and other arts were formulated in the context of the observers' qualities.

For instance the living quality with which the work of art was said to be imbibed and which made it appear to be an independent, self-sufficient entity was the result of a combination of elements, of which, the spectators' response was an essential aspect.

The question now arises as to what is meant by referring to "life" in a work of art. When reference is made to the "movement" and "life" in a work of art is it suggested that stone images literally breathe, eat, and sleep like living creatures and that poems, or musical compositions move around like human beings?\(^{13}\)

The analogy of the art work to an organic entity is one of similarity only and not of identity. Prāna, the breath of life does not actually course through the limbs of the mūrti; this life carrying agent is only the core of the modelling which creates in effect a quality of life having a direct impact on the spectator. It is to signify this inseparable relation between the aesthetic enjoyment and the object which is enjoyed that the same word rasa is used. The connoisseur is

rasajña or rasika, i.e. one who enjoys rasa. Indeed the
tasting of rasa (rasāsvāda) corresponds to the art of
criticism. ¹⁴

The art object is a living organism only in its
created effect. It does not actually live and breathe
but gives the illusion of life. It does not literally
possess "feeling" as a quality but appears to do so.
This illusion of pulsating vitality created within the
art object is also the result of creative devices employed
by the artist. The principle device is the creation of
an integrated coherent system within which all the
elements are functionally involved. As in natural
systems the varied activities fit into an inter-related
pattern, the distinct processes coinciding and comple­
menting one another harmoniously, so also within the
system of the art object all the individual elements
relate naturally, the whole becoming a functional pattern.

The art object is like a natural organism in as
much as its elements are not independent parts but like
the organs within the body, inter-related centres of
activity, each part involving the other in a necessary
function. This point is exemplified in one of the basic
devices employed by all artists, namely rhythm. Rhythm

¹⁴Ibid., chapter VI.
is not merely the appearance of an event in the periodic succession of time or space; it is primarily an involve-
ment. The close of one event necessitates the other; for instance, the end of a movement in dancing is already the beginning of the next and the resounding end of a drum beat is the take off for the next. Our very heart beat and bodily processes are rhythmic. No living organism is without its system of rhythm and the art work also presents rhythms within its body in order to give the illusion of life and in this sense alone imitates nature, the imitation being of the process and working of nature. The artist sees nature at work and depicts her, according to his feeling and understanding of her mode of operation. This is not a passive transcribing of

15 Susanne Langer, Problems of Art, p. 51. Also Rabindranath Tagore On Art and Aesthetics, Orient Longmans, New Delhi 1961, p. 48. "The world as an art is the play of the supreme person revelling in image-making. Try to find out the ingredients of the image — they elude you, they never reveal to you the eternal secret of appearance. In your effort to capture life as expressed in living tissue, you will find carbon, nitrogen and many other things utterly unlike life, but never life itself.... For art is mâyā, it has no other explanation but that it seems to be what it is.... All that we find in it is the rhythm through which it shows itself. Are rocks and minerals any better? The fundamental distinction of gold from mercury lies merely in the difference of rhythm in their respective atomic constitution.... There you find behind the scene the artist, the magician of rhythm, who imparts an appearance of substance to the unsubstantial."
nature as the eye sees but an active creative process involving the greatest artistic insight.

Where it is said that art made by man is an imitation of divine art, that is, of the art of nature (manushya śilpa devāśilpānam anukṛtih), all that is actually meant is what we have said above. It means that the art of man follows the art of nature, that is, follows natural laws. Chanda or rhythm is this law par excellence.

We have presumed, according to this theory that the art work has an objective status. It might, however, be asked: can it, as the form of a sensuous awareness, make any claim to truth and reality? In what way can it communicate a private feeling, if indeed it does communicate at all?

In answering the question of truth we must first know the sense in which this term is being employed. The art work does not correspond to empirical events or logical truth. While the artist does borrow his materials from the physical world he employs them in a totally unrealistic manner, maintaining an illusory correspondence to the emotional plane. Yet unless the spectator takes the illusion of art to be real in a manner other than that which appears in dreams or free-floating imagination, the theory upon which the present statements are based is invalidated.
In our attempt to define truth, we shall for convenience, refer to the two-fold definition suggested by James K. Feibleman, which is "a truth according to correspondence and coherence, the correspondence between propositions and the objects to which they refer and the coherence or consistency of parts in a whole respectively."\textsuperscript{16}

It is clear that the type of truth that the art object has, is the one which maintains a coherence or consistency of parts in a whole. The work of art is a new entity, consisting of old parts; its validity lies in the selection and reassembling of the recognizable material in a manner in which the elements do not refer directly to themselves but point indirectly to values beyond. The essence of the art work lies in this indirect reference and in its capacity to conjure a new universe of reference, where the material elements do not draw attention to themselves but loose their identity within the larger coherent whole. The external body of the art object acts like a stimulus which creates an illusion transcending its physical being. The work exists in time and space but the illusion it generates transcends the physical categories.

Does this imply then that there are two art works, the vehicle and its appearance? The art object does not refer to something other than itself, as a proposition does to a concept or a symbol to a meaning. The illusion is the art object. The elements transform themselves so to speak before our very eyes. By a sudden change of attitude and an altered mode of perception, we become aware of an imaginal whole which compels attention to itself by usurping the entire consciousness. The experience is similar but not the same as that of Gestalt. For instance, in all dramatic enactment which has not yet come "to life" we see the elements which go into its making, such as the actors, costumes, words, musical and lighting effects, as individual factors drawing attention to themselves independently. A little rearrangement of the material through the employment of well-known creative devices whereby all the factors assume a new contextual relationship, and the work which was a moment ago an ordinary enactment presents itself suddenly to our perception as an artistic piece. The change is due to the suggestive values assumed by the factors in their involvement within the whole.

The truth of an art work then can be said to lie in

1) The coherence of the subtle value in a
new universe of reference.

ii) The consistency with which these values are evoked, by which is meant the creation and use of symbols which issue naturally from the plastic flow of the media which are expressive in themselves and not dependent on conventional or linguistic meaning to make them explicit. In what way it is possible for art works to express without reference to conventional meanings, will be discussed in the following chapter.

In answering the question of reality we must know the sense in which this term can be applied to a work of art. It is clear that a work of art is not a physical substance, existing in real time and space. It does not belong to the solid world of facts exhibiting measurable characteristics as physical objects do.

The question then arises, whether the work of art is real in the transcendental sense? Without going into the controversy of whether we can logically accept the notion of such a transcendent "reality" in some realm "beyond" space and time "outside" the limits of sense-perception and rationality, we can on the basis of our preceding discussion state that if works of art do reveal a metaphysical reality they do so only indirectly. Certainly this type of revelation is not what the artist sets out primarily to achieve. The
term "reality" in connection with works of art can properly be applied only in the sense of being vividly and immediately real. They are real not in as much as they correspond to any observable facts in the world or to any speculative concepts of the "beyond", but to our experience of the inner meaning of life. John Hospers in his analysis of truth and reality in the arts, is close to this concept when he suggests that one of the senses of "real" specially relevant to art, "is the sense in which when we say of a character in a drama that it is real, we mean that it is true-to-life, or when we ascribe 'reality' to a Cezanne canvas, we mean that it is true to our experience of distance or spatial depth or form.... In this sense, to say of a work of art that it is real is to say that it reveals those "essences" which are communicable to us and verifiable in our subsequent experience."17

The Indian conception of "reality" in the context of works of art is also used in the sense of being true to our experience of life, but this conception extends further inasmuch as it is not the experience of life in its grosser outward aspect (sthūla) that is given, but

the revelation of life on the subtler plane (sukshma). The experience of distance, spatial depth or form that is afforded, is not the experience of the visible, tangible transitory dimensions with which we are evidently confronted but of those inner dimensions with which the inner self of the individual finds identity.18

The work of art by affording an intrinsic experience of life, reveals the deeper strata of life, the law and essence of things. The image of the dancing Śiva gives us the feel of a universal rhythm and turbulence, of cosmic creation and destruction. It is the presentation in visual imagery of nature's laws as experienced by every man in the innermost essence of his being.

18"Reality, in all its manifestations, reveals itself in the emotional and imaginative background of our mind. We know it, not because we can think of it, but because we directly feel it. And therefore, even if rejected by the logical mind, it is not banished from our consciousness. As an incident it may be beneficial or injurious, but as revelation its value lies in the fact that it offers us an experience through emotion or imagination; we feel ourselves in a special field of realization.... The reality of my own self is immediate and indubitable to me. Whatever else affects me in a like manner is real for myself, and it inevitably attracts and occupies my attention for its own sake, blends itself with my personality, making it richer and larger and causing it delight.... The consciousness of the real within me seeks for its own corroboration in the touch of the Real outside me." Rabindranath Tagore on Art and Aesthetics, op. cit., p. 43.
It is evident that though we have used the term "illusion" to convey the vivid and intense quality of the art object, it is not an illusion in the sense of being lesser reality than life itself, but in the sense of being greater reality, as it reveals the very life-source. The art object is an illusion in as much as its essential quality lies not in any aspect of its measurable physical structure but in an intangible quality which is something other than the material aspect of the work itself. What is this intangible "otherness" which constitutes so to speak the real work of art.\(^{19}\)

It is not an accidental and subjective phenomena which arises unbidden, due to the private state of the spectator's mind, but a phenomena planned and controlled objectively by the elements of the work itself. The degree of objectivity depends on the combination and organization of the materials of the work. The greater the organization of elements in a work, the greater is its integrity and independence from the spectator's reaction. No doubt, the spectator's state of mind also contributes to the sense of illusion which pervades the art object, and it is mainly due to the spectator's

\(^{19}\) I have borrowed the term "otherness" from Susanne K. Langer, who uses it to convey the idea of the work of art as a dynamic image. Cf. *Feeling and Form*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1967, p. 45.
response that a work of art comes "to life", but this response no matter how sensitive must interact with a potentially artistic object. By potentially artistic, we mean a work that is imbied with the artist’s intuitive vision and is made up of those sensuous elements, which are *composable* according to artistic principles. The point that we are trying to make is that every work of art, apart from the aesthetic reactions it arouses in the spectator, has an independent area of operation, limited by the specialized sense it employs. The "aesthetic surface" of an object as pointed out by David Prall, is something given by nature; so are the basic rules of structure, which spring from the nature of the material, "as the diatonic scale, for instance, stems from the partial tones that lie in any fundamental pitch. The several arts, therefore, are governed by the natural departments of sense, each giving the artist a particular order of elements out of which he may make combinations and designs to the limit of his inventive powers."20 An object according to our definition is potentially artistic when it conforms to the basic rules of structure which spring from the nature of the material and embodies the artists intuition, but has not interacted with the spectator's mind.

20Ibid., p. 55.
The artist's conscious will and intention is the primary and fundamental part of the art work, which in its physical aspect is the external objectification of a fully worked out internal process. The spectator's response brings the work to a culmination; without the spectator's experience the work of art remains a seed which has yet to bear fruit.

The work of art, therefore, is a composite whole. We have seen that it does not have a defineable or measureable location, yet it has positive existence with a truth and reality of its own. This truth and reality is one that transcends the logical and physical order of things, thereby converting an ordinary structure composed of material elements into a dynamic work of art.