

Centre for Historical Studies
Aspects of Indian Art and Architecture

M21409

Optional lecture course

4 credits

This course is meant as a general survey course for students specializing in ancient Indian history and covers the entire Indian sub-continent over a long time period from c. 3rd century BCE to c. 1300 CE. Developments across regions will be focused upon thematically, in terms of the historical contexts identified through an understanding of the social formations current at that point of time. Issues related to the theoretical, social and cultural dimensions of the production of art and architecture in early historical and early medieval India will be explored. At the same time, there will be a discussion around particular sites and monuments, through an examination of the differences in form and style across regions, within and beyond a time period.

Theme One: What constitutes art and how do we define it? Do art and architecture perform functions and have a role to play in society? Are contemporary notions of art being transposed to the past? Issues related to beauty, functionality, spirituality and aesthetics will be taken up for discussion through the writings of Kant, Hegel, Plekhanov, Berger, Wolff and Bourdieu. Benjamin's fundamental argument about the art object in the age of technological reproduction, and Foucault's examination of space from the outside rather than within monuments provide new interpretations of the art object and of landscapes respectively. In this context, the role and importance of the museum as a site for cataloguing and preserving art, and projecting certain defined notions that have a bearing on the study of art and architecture will also be focused upon. The importance of space and landscape in the study of art and architecture had found expression in early twentieth century writings on India. Here, the pioneering contribution of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch who raised seminal questions in relation to the frame within which Indian – and indeed Oriental art – needed to be studied, will be examined.

Theme Two: Prescriptive texts and the making of early Indian art and architecture. Was the ‘science’ of art and architecture developed as a concomitant of the artistic and architectural developments in early India? The *Mānasāra*, *Mayamata*, *Śilpa Sāstras*, *Vāstu Śāstras*, *Purāṇas* and *Āgamas* in Sanskrit and the Pāli *Vinaya* and Sanskrit *Dharaṇi* literature will be some of the texts discussed. What were the constituents of space, form and meaning in these texts for different architectural requirements? Also, the discipline of iconometry and its significance for the study of art will be discussed. The non-prescriptive literary sources such as the *Sangam* sources, the Sanskrit epics and court literature will be taken up for study.

Theme Three: Different types of architecture – domestic (dwellings), public institutional (step-wells, rest-houses, hospitals) and religious institutional (temples, *stūpas/ caitya-vihāra*, *maṭhas*) will be focused upon. The possibility of utilizing the ethno-archaeological method for recovering the former two types will be considered. We will critically study the prescriptive emphasis and the regional spread of the third type. Secondly, what were the materials and methods used in the process of construction? Can we see movement of ideas, styles, decorative material, etc. in particular contexts? This would indicate the expansion of trading networks, patronage structures and religious traditions. Also, questions of urban and rural spaces in the pre-modern period as providing room for different architectural landscapes will be discussed. The focus will be on the material sources at particular monument sites such as Sanchi, Amaravati, Ajanta, Ellora, Khajuraho, Tanjavur, Mamallapuram, Sravana Belagola, Bhubaneswar and Mount Abu. (There may be other sites added or dropped from this list depending on the newer literature available.)

Theme four: The social production of art and architecture will be discussed, where the focus will be on the communities who carry these traditions from generation to generation. The textual descriptions of the craftsmen and artisans, their exalted mythology over a period of time, and their status within the *jāti* hierarchies will be discussed. Also, the question of artistic creativity and innovation and local cultural traditions as well as interactions across locality and region, and the development of regional traditions of art and architecture will be touched upon. The second part of this theme will focus on the issue of patronage of art and architecture, a very important area

of research in recent times. Questions related to how patronage was constituted, what were the patterns across regions and religious traditions, and what accounted for individual patronage vis-à-vis community patronage, will be discussed.

Theme five: Are physical structures imbued with philosophical, social and cultural meaning? Is this meaning given or static? How do we understand the different structures that emerge over a long period of time within a monument or when a monument no longer has a living significance for the people in its vicinity? Are symbols remnants of the primitive mentality, or do they also evolve over time? How do we understand ornamentation? Finally, is there an Indian art and architecture?

The emphasis in this course will be to introduce students to, and allow them to critically evaluate, the more *avant-garde* theories and interpretations of art and architecture that have largely stemmed from cultural theory perspectives, as well as the discussions on aesthetics, space and form that have emanated from Sanskrit and other Indian sources. Our effort will be on locating material developments and the cultural labeling that develops within particular historical contexts, to explain why for instance the erotic art of the early medieval period is seen as reflecting feudal attitudes and ways of life.

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