Classical Art Research Centre, University of Oxford

Classical Art and Ancient India

Generously supported by the Bagri Foundation, this colloquium builds on the success of CARC's past Gandhara Connections workshops. It is also the first event under our new #AncientArtConnections initiative.

Tuesday 21st – Wednesday 22nd March 2023

This hybrid workshop will be held online using Zoom and in person at the Ioannou Centre, 66 St Giles', Oxford OX1 3LU (details and instructions will be provided to those who have booked a place). It will also be recorded and made available on the CARC webpages (www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/Home).

Abstracts

DAY ONE

William Dalrymple
Title to be confirmed

Prof Richard Stoneman (University of Exeter)
Greeks and the Art of India: Philosophy through Art

This paper considers the history of pre-Gandhara Buddhist art in India. The earliest European scholars to study the art of Sanchi, Ajanta and other sites (in the 1870s) were sure that the artists were influenced by Greeks who had newly arrived in the sub-continent. Since that time the question has been hotly debated and many scholars, especially in India, have argued against any western influence at all. I argue here for the likelihood of Greek involvement in the emergence of the art of Sanchi, Ajanta and Mathura.

In doing so I consider other evidence of the Greek presence in north-west India. While influence of Greek literature on Indian epics or theatre is rated as unlikely, a more interesting interaction arises in the case of philosophy. There is not a little evidence of Greek interest in Buddhist philosophy. The quest

of King Menander, the protagonist of *The Questions of King Milinda*, is familiar, and may be genuine. In recent years a number of scholars have argued for influence of Buddhist philosophy on Pyrrho, the originator of Greek Scepticism. I offer some thoughts in support of this view, particularly as regards likely Buddhist influence on Pyrrho's teacher Anaxarchus: both men travelled with Alexander and had the opportunity to learn about Buddhism.

If they could do it, then Greek artists in India were also in a position to understand something of Buddhism, whether they produced the art of Sanchi or merely taught Indian pupils. Cultural influence ran both ways simultaneously. But how can philosophical concepts be conveyed through art? I discuss both 'metonymic' representations of Buddhist ideas, such as the presence of a deer to indicate the Sermon in the Deer Park, or the use of the Wheel of Dharma to represent no-self, and narrative presentations such as the illustration of Jataka stories in sculpture and painting, which can illustrate such themes as desire and suffering as well as the ten Perfections. This may bear out the suspicion that there is truth on both sides of the controversy about Indian art of the last centuries BCE: the technique is Greek while the content is Indian.

Prof Upinder Singh (Ashoka University, Sonipat)

Yavanas in Early Indian inscriptions

This paper examines the references to Yavanas in early Indian inscriptions during the post-Maurya period, c. 200 BCE to 300 CE, by situating the epigraphic evidence within its larger archaeological and historical contexts. Between c. 200 BCE and 300 CE, waves of invaders – Bactrian Greeks, Scythians, Parthians and Kuṣāṇas – crossed the Hindu Kush and established their political control over various parts of north-western, northern and western India. Indo-Greek rule in Gandhāra and parts of the Punjab extended from c. 200 BCE to the early 1st century CE. The period of invasions coincided with a significant expansion of trade between India and the Mediterranean, reflected in classical accounts as well as in numismatic and archaeological evidence. The presence and impact of various 'outsiders' was significant enough for Brāhmaṇa *dharma* experts to seek to explain within the framework of the normative *varṇa* order, invoking the theory of *varṇa-saṁkara* (the mixture of *varṇa*s) to explain the origins of these *mlecchas* (barbarians). During this period, Yavanas appear in inscriptions as political envoys (Besnagar pillar inscription of Heliodorus); as political adversaries (Hathigumpha inscription of Khāravela, Nashik inscription of Gautamī Balaśrī); patrons of religious establishments (at Sanchi, Nashik, Junnar and Karla); administrative officers (Junagadh inscription of Rudradāman); and as part of an idealized cosmopolitan Buddhist world (at Nagarjunakonda). The discussion of epigraphic references to Yavanas during c. 200 BCE-300 CE opens up larger issues related to political ideology and practice, history and memory, trade and religious patronage, and ethnic and social identity.

Dr Sunil Gupta (Indian Archaeological Society, New Delhi)

Beyond Gandhara: Syncretic Arts of the Early Indian Ocean World (1st century BCE – 3rd century CE)

The ancient land of Gandhara, spread across the valleys of north western Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, connected Central Asia and China to the Indian Ocean world during the BCE – CE transition, receiving commercial traffic from the Mediterranean and India through land routes as well as the warm water ports of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. The sculptural art of Gandhara, incorporating Greco-Roman and Indic elements is an exquisite

manifestation of cultural mingling at the crossroads of trade. This study takes the view that the interactivity of international trade, polity, religion and culture which produced the syncretic art of Gandhara, is also to be witnessed in specific centres of maritime exchange in the Indian Ocean world in broadly the same period when Gandhara flourished. This study does not take an overly art-historical view but attempts to turn the proposition around (Gupta 2008), exploring the eclectic 'contexts' which created syncretic art (such as in Gandhara) or facilitated absorption of external attributes in rooted art styles (Hadhramaut in south Arabia and Nagarjunakonda in peninsula India). The broader purpose is to uncover the cosmopolitanism which characterized the Indian Ocean world in the BCE – CE transition, of which syncretism in art at convergent hubs of commerce was a powerful expression.

Reference

Gupta, Sunil 2008. *Early Sculptural Art in the Indian Coastlands*. New Delhi: DK Printworld.

Dr Serena Autiero (Ruhr-Universität Bochum)

Small Figurines Shaping the Ancient Global World

This paper aims to widen the historical understanding of the impact of global connections on ancient societies through a bottom-up approach. From a specific class of material objects – small figurines – this research then embraces the theoretical, so that the many aspects of ancient globalization can be analyzed (cultural, ideological, social, political, religious, economic).

Starting from an overview of small figurines with transcultural elements (in terracotta and metal) identified at different ends of the Western Indian Ocean (WIO), as well as of those relocated foreign figurines known so far, I will highlight the importance of a shared figurative culture at the time of early historic globalization.

Finds from Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula, for example, are fundamental to understand the western outreach of Indian culture in the frame of ancient globalization, and contributes to a new comprehension of cultural exchange in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) network. The role of India in the WIO network has been indeed affected by a Rome-centric bias. This bias consequently also affected the study of the Roman world; research on transcultural visual culture in the context of ancient globalization makes clear that adoption of foreign elements in local productions happened in several areas of the Indian Ocean world, so we cannot exclude – out of a presumed Roman supremacy (interpretative bias) – that the same phenomenon happened in Roman territories.

Case studies from India, Egypt, Southern Arabia will contribute to dismantling the outdated idea of 'artistic influence' in the light of a new transcultural approach, thus providing the framework to look anew at the role of India in the ancient interconnected world.

DAY TWO

Dr Jeremy Simmons (University of Maryland)

Coining Koine – Reading Numismatic Images in Context of Global Exchange

A miasma of mimesis plagues the study of artistic exchange across the Indian Ocean world of the early centuries CE. Active innovators and passive imitators give rise to zero-sum dynamics of 'influence', 'imitation', or 'barbarization'. Such views not only discount the agency and skill sets possessed by artists throughout the wider ancient world, but also overlook how transculturality operates—how so-called 'superficial' similarities of a stylistic *koine* can communicate both "globally" and "locally," looking both to the past and unfolding present. In this paper, I offer a corrective to these understandings by investigating aesthetic engagements with Roman imperial *denarii* and *aurei* once they arrived in the Indian subcontinent through long-distance exchange. After some brief comments on genuine Roman coins and their long lives in India, I turn to the production of imitative Roman coins and the consideration of their formal composition when designing coins minted in the name of dynasts ruling in India. Roman coins were not just a form of money in circulation, but also miniature objects produced in great numbers, valued for aspects of their materiality and their engaging images—elements which warranted replication to meet a wide range of demands and tastes. What we see on the surface is actually something more profound: dialogues within an increasingly interconnected ancient world.

Dr Mandira Sharma (New Delhi)

The Navagraha (the Nine Planets) in Indian Art and their Graeco-Roman Connections

The *navagrahas* (the nine Indian planets) are among the most worshipped divinities in Indian religions, particularly, in Hinduism. Following the ancient tradition, the *navagrahas* continue to be sought after and placated in modern-day Hindu religious practices with their presence in artistic renderings and as an essential component of the *jyotiṣa* (astrology). The origins and development of the *navagrahas* expressed in Indian visual representation and texts are often believed to be influenced by or are seen as an importation from the Graeco-Roman culture. Against this background, a broad overview of the Indian *navagrahas* and the planetary deities in the Graeco-Roman tradition and their connection with each other is drawn here as visualized in mythology and art traditions. The paper explores the overlaps and differences as reflected in the two cultures. Related to this is the question of Greek astronomical and astrological texts, based on which scholars suggest a strong Greek influence on the conceptualization of the planetary deities in India. The paper will reflect on the problems that are found in the existing theories taking into cognizance the recent criticism that revaluates some fundamental aspects of the texts such as authorship, date, and content.

Dr Elizabeth Rosen Stone (New York)

Reflections of Roman Art in Southern India: Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda

The Buddhist art of Southern India is influenced by classical art. Magnificent Buddhist monuments were built with Roman gold acquired through trade with the west. A study of these gold coins act as an intermediary to a study of Roman monuments, and introduces new gestures, postures, and new iconographies to south Indian art. Other forms of Roman art are rare in India. A classical bronze of Poseidon was excavated at Brahmapuri in India, and we must assume that this was a sampling of what existed.

We will look at the art from two places: Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda are currently the two largest sites of Buddhist art in southern India. The artisans of Amaravati during the first century CE discovered the use of perspective. I will demonstrate that they adapted an unusual technique of stone carving after seeing paintings from Pompeii and tried to adapt the images to stone. Nagarjunakonda, a third century site, dispenses with perspective and introduces crowded compositions reminiscent of late Roman sarcophagi. In fact, the parts of the stupas are in the form of a Roman sarcophagus. Traditionally, both Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda use symbols to represent the Buddha. An image of an emperor riding a horse is transformed into the form of the Buddha on a horse. This is part of the process by which Nagarjunakonda gradually abandoned its aniconic imagery, and in its latest phases of construction, included traditional Buddhist images into its repertory.

Prof Monika Zin (Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Leipzig)

About Ivory and Theatre – The Exchange between Āndhradeśa and the West

The way to clarify the question of contacts of ancient Āndhradeśa with the West is to reveal the origin of the luxury ivory objects discovered in Begram, but also in Sirkap, Tillya Tepe or Dalverzin Tepe. Since these objects were found in the North and show obvious western influences, they are often associated with Bactria, or – since they generally do not resemble the stone art from Gandhara at all – with Mathura, that is the southern part of the Kuṣāṇa Empire. Decades ago, however, Elizabeth R. Stone pointed out their obvious resemblance to Andhra art. Recent Andhra research, especially after the discovery of Kanaganahalli, has largely confirmed this classification. The association of the ivory objects with the territories of the Satavahana Empire defines the latter as an independent 'global player' of the time, as such objects obviously had their buyers not only north of the subcontinent but also in the West. This is evidenced not only by the famous 'statuetta indiana' from Pompeii, but also by finds such as ivory combs from Dibba al-hisin (Emirat al-Sharjah).

Contrary to previous assumption, it can be easily proved that the influences from the West did not come to Andhra via Gandhara but directly, i.e. via the Erythraean Sea. The presence of Roman culture in Āndhradeśa and Indian culture in e.g. Berenike is of course well known, but how far was this exchange of a reciprocal nature? The paper will present an attempt to explain a rare Roman iconography as an adaptation of the Indian depiction of a jester.