

The Theatre and Visual Arts: Southeast Asia with Reference to India.

by Jukka Miettinen

One must begin a study of Southeast Asian art with an introduction of Indian art. Indian culture spread out to Southeast Asia, creating the Foundation on which the local cultures developed. Indian theatre and dance have had a decisive influence on the dramatic arts elsewhere in Asia. The grand epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are known almost throughout Asia, and reflections of Indian dance techniques are to be found all over Southeast Asia.

In this series of articles I attempt to chart some parallels between the theatre and the visual arts, and show how knowledge of theatrical conventions is useful in the iconographical interpretation of the visual arts. The previous article expounded on some general parallels between the theatre and the visual arts.

Within the sphere of Indian culture the close relationship between the theatre and the visual arts is very evident, and is by no means a chance occurrence. There are several reasons for this close relationship between the arts. In India all traditional forms of art serve religion. Furthermore, India probably has the most nuanced

aesthetic theories in the world, which consistently cover all forms of art.

RELIGION AND THE ARTS

According to the Indian way of thinking art is basically a religious

sacrifice (yajna). Art is also yoga and a discipline (sadhana). Through the creation of a work of art the artist strives to evoke a state of pure joy (ananda)¹. This point of view naturally sets the requirements of sacral art on all forms of art.



Fig. 1 The Ninth rasa, the Tranquil dancer: Swapnasundari photo: Sakari Viika.

Mr. Jukka Miettinen is a former Associate Expert of the Office of the Regional Adviser for Culture in Asia and the Pacific, Unesco.

As a rule religious art is conservative in character. Sudden changes in style or subject matter are rare. The individuality of the artist is not emphasized. Traditional Indian art faithfully reflects collective beliefs and conceptions of the world and cosmos. Since both the theatre and the visual arts in India are closely connected with religion they form a somewhat coherent tradition, which aids the comparative study of different forms of art.

BHAVA AND RASA

Besides religion it is the aesthetic theory of bhava and rasa that provides the underlying unity to the art forms in India. The theory is complicated and it has developed during several hundred years. In this context it is not feasible to treat it more than superficially².

Bhava means mental state or mood, and rasa could be translated as sentiment. The task of the artist — irrespective of the art form — is to represent the bhava. Rasa is the expression of the bhava as experienced by the spectator. Thus the bhavas produce corresponding rasas.

There are nine rasas. They are:

1. The Erotic (Srngara)
2. The Comic (Hasya)
3. The Pathetic (Karuna)
4. The Furious (Raudra)
5. The Heroic (Vira)
6. The Terrible (Bhayanaka)
7. The Odious (Bibhatsa)
8. The Marvellous (Abhuta)
9. The Tranquil (Santa) (Fig.1)

The ninth rasa was added to the others at a later stage. The rasas can be conveyed by all forms of art.

The bhava-rasa theory is presented in the treatise *Natyasastra*³ (The Art of the Theatre), a work attributed to the legendary sage Bharata, but probably compiled by several authors 100(?) - 500 A.D.

It is 'an enormous theatre directors' or producers' manual, and its thirty-six volumes contain advice on every aspect of the theatre. All the necessary information about stage, props, scenery, costume, music, use of voice, acting and dancing is given.

For our purposes the most interesting aspects of *Natyasastra*, besides the bhava-rasa theory, are the instructions concerning the dance, its movements and symbolic

gestures. All the bodily poses (karna) and hand gestures (mudra, hasta) are described; and they have also been adapted by the visual arts. Thus the dance instructions in the *Natyasastra* form a basis for painters and sculptors when they portray the human body and its movements. The canons of sculpture were recorded in instruction manuals called *silpasastras*.

Although the *Natyasastra* is pri-



Fig. 2 A standing Buddha. The Gupta period, 5th Century, Sarnath. The sculpture depicts the Lord Buddha in the 9th bhava. Indian Museum, Calcutta.

marily a manual for the theatre its influence is strongly reflected in the visual arts. V. Raghavan has written: "Natya, or theatre, is also the mother of other visual arts,..... It is on the states of beings in different moods and the consequent attitudes and poses as seen in natya that comprehension of both sculpture and painting is based, a piece of sculpture or a drawing being but the artist's capture of a moment in the moving sequence of natya. It is to Bharata and his Natyasastra that we have to go for a full appreciation of this conception of natya".⁴

DANCING SCULPTURES

Dance and the theatre were closely connected to the Indian visual arts from the very beginning. A well-known miniature sculpture from the Indus culture period (2500 - 1500 B.C.) depicts a dancing woman and a fragment of a sculpture from the same period depicts a dancing man.

In early Buddhist sculpture there are many figures that have been depicted in dance-poses defined in the Natyasastra. During the Gupta period (320 - 510) the Buddha sculpture attained its perfection. Although sculptures depicting the Buddha seemingly have no connection to dance or the theatre, as regards the iconography: his pacific expression, harmonic pose and symbolic gestures can be explained with the aid of Santa, the ninth rasa (Figs. 1 and 2).

Thousands of examples of medieval Indian sculpture depicting dance have been preserved. Large temple areas are richly covered with ornamental sculptures. The sculptures on the walls frequently depict temple dancers (devadasis) and dancing deities (nrttamurtis) (Fig.3).

Sculpture transmits irreplaceable information about the history of Indian dance and theatre. With the aid of the sculptures it is possible to reconstruct the history of



Fig. 3 Nrttamurti i.e. Dancing God (Vishnu), The Keshava Temple; Somnathpar 13th century A.D.

Indian theatre. Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan has noted that the information contained in the sculptures is so exact that differences of local dance styles are clearly reflected in the temple sculptures of different regions⁵.

THEATRE IN PAINTING

Paintings are less durable than sculptures. Extant early murals do, however, present information about the history of dance and the theatre. The most important paintings in this respect are the Buddhist and Jain murals of western and southern India, and the temple and palace mu-



Fig. 4 Two Kathak dancers. Mogul art, 17th Century. Indian Museum, Calcutta.

rels in Kerala.

The era of the monumental Hindu temples came to an end when Islam spread to India. Miniature painting became an important medium for artistic creativity. The miniatures of the Mogul period often depict scenes from Kathak dances. The poses of the Kathak dances of Islamic India accentuate soft flowing lines, and thus painting, rather than three dimensional sculpture, therefore, is a more appropriate way of depicting the beauty of the Kathak (Fig. 4).

The Hindu miniatures also repeatedly depict scenes from dances. The Ragamala⁶ paintings often show scenes from dances (e.g. Va-



Fig. 5 The Ras Dance, a western Indian Painting on canvas. The Lord Krishna is dancing the mythical Ras circle dance with shepherdesses. A corresponding dance is the central theme in many pilgrimage dramas. Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm.



Fig. 6 Southern Indian Siva Nataraja sculpture. (courtesy : Madras Museum)



Fig. 7 Composite photograph, which combines (two) dance poses representing Siva. (dancer: Swapasundari, photo: Sakari Viika)

santa Ragini) and the deity Krishna is depicted in innumerable miniatures as taking part in a mythical circle dance (Ras) with shepherdesses (Fig. 5).

THE DANCE OF SIVA

The best example of the close relationship between dance and sculpture is the typical sculpture Siva Nataraja, depicting Siva as a divine dancer (Fig. 6). Its iconography utilizes in many ways the dance poses and symbolic gestures of the *Natyasastra*. Moreover, the sculpture has become the emblem of Indian dance and theatre since the sculpture depicts Siva as a destructive and creative, mythical Lord of Dance.

The development of the Siva Nataraja sculpture began in the fifth century A.D. and it attained⁷ its perfection in the southern Indian bronze sculptures of the Chola dynasty (846 - 1173 A.D.). At that time the cire perdue casting technique had been fully developed and the pliable wax made it easy to depict the complicated poses and gestures of the classical dance.

It is extremely interesting to compare a dynamic usually four-handed sculpture with a dancer portraying Lord Siva. Two of the four hands in the sculpture are posed in symbolic gestures and two hands hold attributes: the drum, which represents the pulse of life, and the destructive flame. The multiple hands of the deity emphasize his omnipotence and immanence. The multiple hands also accentuate the impression of movement, and they make it possible to present with gestures and attributes several characteristics of the deity.

The dancer must act within the limits set by human anatomy, but he can, however, utilize movement and time. He can use individual still poses to portray the characteristics of Siva that are depicted in the sculpture. If two dance poses that portray Siva are combined in a composite photograph the result is

the figure of the Siva Nataraja sculpture (Fig. 7).

Basically, the "idea" of Siva is the same in the theatre and in the visual arts. Both forms of art manifest it from their own technical premises. This is a simple but fundamental reason for the close relations between the visual arts and the theatre in India. In both the theatre and the visual arts there is, in the background of the creative process, an unchanging image created by religion and myths — collective imagination or "collective unconscious", as C.G. Jung would call it⁸.

CONCLUSION

The parallels between the theatre and the visual arts in India are extremely clear. There are two reasons for it:

1. Traditional art serves religion and all forms of art are basically sacral art. Thus all forms of art illustrate a common set of themes, and the different forms of art form a uniform tradition.
2. The *Natyasastra* manual defines the fundamentals of Indian aesthetic philosophy. It presents the most central aesthetic theory in India, the theory of bhava and rasa. The *Natyasastra* also presents the basic poses and symbolic hand gestures of classical Indian dance, which were also utilized in the visual arts.

In the traditional art of Southeast Asia the parallels between the theatre and the visual arts are similar to those in India, although basic aesthetic writings similar to the *Natyasastra* do not exist. In Indian the parallelisms have been studied fairly thoroughly. In her treatise "Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts" Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan has charted the phenomena extensively. Her treatise could well serve as a model for similar research in Southeast Asia.

FOOTNOTE

1 Kapila Vatsyayan, *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts*, p.5.

2 For a more detailed description see e.g. G.H. Tarlekar, *Studies in the Natyasastra with Special Reference to the Sanskrit Drama in Performance*, pp. 53-66.

3 Rasa is also a central subject in later aesthetic speculations. It has been treated by Dandini, Lollata, Bhatta Nayaka, Abhinavagupta, Udhata and Anandavardhana, among others. A. Parpola, *Intialaisesta maailman kuvasta ja estetiikkasta*, pp. 197-199.

5 Vatsyayan, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

6 "Ragamala painting is, as its name implies, inspired by the Raga system specular to Indian music. The paintings are, in effect, illustrations of poems which in turn describe or evoke the mood of Raga. Thus three arts are ultimately involved in the production of these paintings—music, poetry and painting itself". Pratapaditya Pal, *Ragamala Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston*, p.7.

7 Vatsyayan, *op. cit.*, p.

8 C.G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. Collected Works Vol. 9.1, pars. 87-100.*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Jung, C.G., "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious", *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, translated by Hull, R.F.C. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1959.
- Pal, Pratapaditya, *Ragamala Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 1967.
- Parpola, Asko, "Intialaisesta maailman kuvasta ja estetiikkasta", *Itämaiden estetiikka*. ed. Kinnunen, Aarne. Porvoo - Helsinki - Juva: WSOY, 1980.
- Raghavan, V. "Sanskrit Drama in Performance", *Sanskrit Drama in Performance*. ed. Baumer, Rachel Van; Brandon, James R., Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1981.
- Tarlekar, G.H., *Studies in the Natyasastra with Special Reference to the Sanskrit Drama in Performance*. Delhi, Patna, Varanasi: Multilal Babarsidass, 1975.
- Vatsyayan, Kapila. *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts*. New Delhi: Sangeet Akademi, 1986.