



---

## **Intersections of art and history: Unveiling the significance of artistic narratives in historical discourse**

**Maishy Charan**

Assistant Professor, Post Graduate Department of History, Magadh University, Bodhgaya, Bihar, India

---

### **Abstract**

This paper makes an attempt to understand the methodological principles governing art objects in the disciplines of art history and history. From early antiquarian interest to the institutionalization of the Archaeological Survey of India, art history in India developed as part of the colonial exercise of knowledge production. Thus the earliest writings on Indian art reflected a colonial perspective and many assumptions and opinions continue to colour the writings on Indian art history even today. On the other hand, visual sources continue to remain an underutilized source for history writing. The article has discussed some recent works that have emphasized greater use of visuals for writing histories and the related methodological issues.

**Keywords:** Art history, antiquarianism, Archaeological Survey of India

---

### **Introduction**

One of the central questions that engage the use of images, monuments and visual sources is the differences of approach between historians and art historians. This is essentially rooted in the differing nature of these disciplines; not only their perspective and their mode of enquiry, but the questions they address, also differ. Historians are primarily engaged in studying social processes and situate art remains within this framework of enquiry. For art historians on the other hand, art remains are the central concern and questions, issues, studies are weaved around them. In this article an attempt has been made to study the scope and potential for a meaningful dialogue and co-operation between the two disciplines and methodological tools of analysis developed by them. The beginnings of interest in monuments, objects and art remains of antiquity can be traced to the period of 'antiquarianism' when individuals usually collected them as curios but no serious attempts were made to historicise them. Historians writing in the context of positivism saw written documents as more reliable sources of history while oral histories or visuals were dubbed as 'poor sources.' Francis Haskell's work studies Abbe Bernard de Montfaucon's works produced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that show a deep understanding of the need to use visual sources for history. Haskell's study is especially significant since it throws light on early antiquarian attempts of using art remains meaningfully for history writing. Thus antiquarians' cannot be viewed as mere collectors of curiosities but in fact belonged to that minority that recognised the importance of art remains in understanding the past. Haskell has also pointed to the role antiquarians played in bringing art remains to the notice of historians.

In the Indian context, such antiquarian interests were also deeply connected to the colonial exercise of knowledge production. Early colonial surveyors such as Mackenzie evinced great interest in art remains but we observe European ideas of what characterised 'India' colouring these works, an example being landscape paintings. Partha Mitter has discussed 18<sup>th</sup> century European intellectuals who made significant contribution to studying and interpreting art and their perceptions of Indian art. While their views covered a wide spectrum, a certain characterization of Indian society, religion and art pervaded all their works. German romanticism, theories based on climate, popular in Europe at the time, aided in characterizing Indian art as primitive, steeped in mysticism and even static, while the framework of comparison remained Euro centric.

The long lasting impact of this tradition of historiography can be felt even today, where it is difficult to conceive Indian art in anything but religious terms and the continuing distinction made between 'high' and 'low' art. However these works need to be set in their immediate context of European colonial expansion and the manner in which these discourses bore a close relation to the process of colonization. Parul Pandya Dhar's edited volume shows how colonial works on art fitted in the larger colonial exercise of legitimation. Thus James Fergusson was convinced of the degeneration of Indian art, just as Indian society had degenerated from its glorious ancient past which would be saved by the intervention of the modernising British colonial rule. The colonial exercise of knowledge production brought into being institutions like the Archaeological Survey of India, modern museums and the disciplines of epigraphy, numismatics and archaeology that made Indians rediscover their own past.

This context becomes important for both historians and art historians since colonial knowledge has left an indelible mark on both disciplines. Historians have become conscious of the complex issues in reading colonial historiography and the manner in which it has continued to have an impact on later writings. A parallel development has been a more complex understanding of the discipline itself, its history, locating it in the context in which it became institutionalised. Similarly art historians need to be more self-conscious of the nature of their

discipline and its history. As has been pointed out by Preziosi, art history as an academic discipline is a product of modernity, tied closely to the emergence of the modern nation-state, legitimising its various paradigms. In the Indian context, this modernity is closely linked to the colonial legacy that is most evident in the institutionalisation of museums and the A.S.I. Their organisation, the manner in which they produce and reorganise knowledge continue to bear a colonial stamp and scholars need to be conscious of this problematic nature of their sources and the context in which they are being produced. Similarly the displacement of artefacts from their original location, the practise of conservation and the way these invariably refigure perceptions of objects or monuments also need to be taken into consideration.

Historians on the other hand have ignored visuals for far too long, neglecting a vital and dynamic source for reconstructing the past. A more meaningful use of visuals by historians entails becoming more sensitive to the language of art and here dialogue with art historians becomes essential. In debates regarding historical consciousness, visual narratives provide interesting clues with carvings at Sanchi stupa having depiction of the historical life of Buddha, or depicting events important in Buddhist history such as Asoka's visit to Lumbini. The cultic significance of female and male deities like yakshas and yakshis that do not find mention in canonical literature, is testified by art remains. We can also trace their subsequent relegation to the position of minor deities in the Puranic pantheon by studying temple iconography. Similarly ancient structures were sites of legitimisation of power as can be seen from Cola patronage in temples like the Brihadishvar and could also be sites of contestation as shown by Leslie Orr on her work on the devadasis or temple women.

This omission becomes even more glaring when one reflects on the important role played by monuments, art remains in popular imagination and its perceptions of history. It is interesting to note how sites or monuments take on meanings that are rooted in modern political concerns and become representatives of community identities that in turn shape their histories and narratives in popular understanding. Moreover studying a site or monument in continuity can throw up interesting ideas for the historian and the anthropologist with certain sites showing a long association with the idea of the sacred or the changing meanings that a structure may acquire over time (this has been discussed in Pandya's work). An example of this would be the Delhi-Topra pillar in Firozshah Kotla that has acquired a very different meaning from its original intent with people burning incense and tying threads around it today.

Peter Burke and Dhar's volume reflect greater use of visuals for writing histories and the methodological issues they are raising. We can see a more nuanced understanding of temple architecture and iconography, the use of art remains to shed light on issues of gender, the artists and craftsmen who created these works of art and modes of patronage. However another slightly different perspective (one that is rooted in historians' analytical framework) would be to view all artistic production as part of the larger historical process, a part of the mosaic of human action and an integral part of the range of human activities. For instance, a study of temples must necessitate an understanding of the early medieval India, the specific social formation that saw state formation in several areas, the emergence of a sanskritic model of kingship and the central role of brahmanas and temples in the economy and the polity, or the manner in which resources and labour were mobilised for these construction projects. It is only in following this line of enquiry that fundamental questions such as why monumental temples came up only in early medieval and not before, can be answered. For, as has been pointed out by Preziosi, art cannot simply be viewed as reflecting, representing, being emblematic of the time it was produced in.

## Conclusion

Use of art remains also opens up exciting possibilities of methodological interaction between history, art history, anthropology, archaeology and epigraphy. These used in conjunction with literary sources can give us a more comprehensive understanding of history. Thus an ancient site has to be studied in its totality; its architecture, iconography, decorative motifs, and visual narratives along with the inscriptions it yields, a topographical mapping, recording local traditions and stories related to the site and locating it in the larger context of its time. In such an endeavour a dialogue between historians and art historians becomes desirable since both can enrich each other's disciplines with their respective tools of analysis as has been observed in the interaction between history and anthropology.

## References

1. Burke Peter. *Eyewitnessing: the Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*. London: Reaktion Books, 2001.
2. Dhar, Parul Pandya. *Indian Art History: Changing Perspectives*. New Delhi: DK Printworld and National Museum Institute, 2011.
3. Haskell, Francis. *History And Its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993.
4. Mitter Partha. *Much Maligned Monsters*. Oxford Clarendon Press, 1977.
5. Preziosi, Donald ed. *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
6. Singh, Upinder. "Cults and shrines in early historical Mathura (c.200 B.C.-A.D. 200)." *World Archaeology*,2004:36(3):378-398.