

The 'Image' in a Sculpture

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As we come across a sculpture we see only the outward appearance of the character represented in the form. For the identification of the character it is needed that we have a penetrative eye to read the dormant character lying within the form of the sculpture. This looking deep into the form is what is known as *rūpabheda* or the entering into the form or *rūpa*, as mentioned as the first item of the six limbs of art (*ṣaḍaṅga*) in the *Jayamaṅgalā* Commentary of Yaśodharā on the *Kāmasūtra* of Vātsyāyana¹. Many scholars have interpreted *rūpabheda* as meaning the differentiation of form. But this is not correct. The *bheda* actually means penetrating through the form, as is the case in the arrow penetrating into something after it has been shot from the bow. *Bheda* is derived from the verb *bhid*, meaning entering deep into something by piercing it through. In other words, *rūpabheda* in the case of the identification of a sculpture refers to the total comprehension, i.e. the in and out of a form.

The above discussion is pertinent in the case of a well known sculpture for its proper identification. The sculpture concerned is represented in various publications with the respective author's identification of the image in the sculpture². It is the representation of a beautiful young lady in the standing form with a slight rhythmic stance. The figure is lavishly decorated with the relevant garments and ornaments. The most distinctive characteristics are the hair-do or the coiffure of a sophisticated form referred to in the texts as *ramya-kabarī*. Also important is the attributes of the two hands of the figure. They show the lady holding something like a book or a stone slab or a sheet of paper with her left hand and with the right hand she holds a pen or a stylus or a lithic pestle, but slightly raised as if in the act of writing or doing some work.

The above is the graphic description of the appearance of the represented form (Fig.1) but the identification of the 'image' or the character represented in the sculpture is a matter of speculation. Scholars mostly have identified this as the representation of a young lady writing a love letter, and it has been ascribed to the Chandella school of sculpture of c. 11th cent. CE³. However, it may not be as simple as a representation of that type of a character.

Writing a letter, whether it is love letter or otherwise, is not done in the standing posture. That is the major difficulty in accepting the above mentioned identification straight away. Had it been so, we could perhaps take this representation as of a woman writing a letter to the husband who has been away from home. In that case the character could have been the *Proṣitabhartṛkā* type of *nāyikā* (the leading character of dramatic content). Also, it could have been a form of the *Patrālekṣā* type of *nāyikā* which is often referred to in Indian literature of romantic disposition.

Not only the standing posture goes against the possibility of the figure being in the act of writing, but also the nature of the attributes in the two hands raises doubts of several kinds. What the lady holds in her left hand seems to be thicker than a writing pad or a sheet of paper for writing. It is possible that the lady holds actually a book or a lithic slab for may be painting or making sketches with scratches. Similarly, the supposed pen or the stylus in the right hand has also a peculiar shape unlikely of that of a pen. We will come to the possible identification of this item later below.

If the items concerned are the book and the pen, the figure can be identified as that of Sarasvatī, the goddess of learning. It has already been pointed out that the



Fig.1 : Nāyikā, Khajuraho, Chandella, 11th century CE

goddess Sarasvatī is worshipped sometimes in a well known image-form showing the goddess holding a book in the left hand and the right hand showing the pen slightly raised as if in the act of writing (*uddallekhanī pustakasṛh*)⁴ but here also there are two difficulties. One that the figure does not bear the conventional appearance of a cult image, more so because of a slightly rhythmic or dancing pose which does not fit in the concept of the image of the goddess receiving worship from the devotees. The second problem remains the same as mentioned above, viz. the shape of the so called pen is not suitable for such a beautiful sculpture with finery of execution. Presumably this identification has also to be ruled out.

One more possibility can be considered. If we accept that the lady is holding a lithic slab (*paṭṭa*) and the so called stylus or pen as a lithic pestle (*śilā*), then we can perhaps interpret that the lady is shown as powdering or smashing things placed on the *paṭṭa* with the *śilā*, as is done for making fine spices by means of the *śilāpaṭṭa* known in the vernacular languages. Why this possibility is considered should be explained with some details. Dr. R. N. Misra floated the theory that the word *śilpa* comes from the concept of the verb *pīsa* meaning powdering something to finery. According to him, this is the origin of the concept of *śilpa* or fine arts⁵. Later it has been pointed out by some other scholars that there is no need to go back to the verb *pīsa* for the understanding of the concept of *śilpa*. Even philologically this phenomenon of finery contained in the word *śilpa* can be deduced in the following way:

The phenomenon of powdering spices in the *śilāpaṭṭa* is poetically known as *śilālāpa* (meaning the dialogue or *ālāpa* of the *śilā* or the pestle with the *paṭṭa*). From *śilālāpa* comes the form *śilāpa* which further develops into *śilapa* or *śilpa*⁶. This interpretation fits well with the concept of the goddess Sarasvatī, who is known to be the repository of all forms of learning, including the arts. However, here also we need to explain how is it that the figure is shown in the standing posture which is difficult to maintain if it is the powdering of anything to finery on a lithic slab and pestle. We will explain this below.

Writing, painting or anything of the type cannot be performed in the standing pose and that too in a rhythmic dancing stance. The figure can be explained by visualizing it as a representation of a sequence in a dance-drama (*nṛtya-nāṭya*) involving the above mentioned activities. In other words, it means that the representation is not of an activity of the type but of a visual indication of the performance of the activity concerned. It is possible that the lady is shown in the figure as writing a love letter to her lover, to her husband who is away from home, as envisaged in the case of the *patralekhā* or *proṣitabhartṛkā* type of *nāyikā* mentioned above. Presumably it represents a sequence of a dance-drama performance. It is possible that the theme of the relevant dance-drama was concerned with the lover lady writing a reply letter to her lover who had sent earlier messages through the clouds as envisaged in the celebrated *kāvya* of Kālidāsa entitled the *Meghadūtam*. The sculpture concerned hails from Khajuraho which was an important center of dance-drama performance by the so

called *devadāsīs*. In that case the image in this sculpture is of a highly sophisticated *devadāsī* enacting (*abhinaya*) the role of replying to the cloud-messages (*meghadūta*) coming from the lover who is away from home.

Although all the above mentioned interpretations are of speculative nature, this is how the image in a sculpture needs to be discovered with speculative possibilities of any type. As we had started this essay by saying that the appearance is not always the image lying dormant within a sculptural form. In the celebrated Buddhist text entitled the *Lalitavistara* has been observed that optical perception is not always the real image (*rūpasamkrānti na hi cakṣuṣi*). Also, there is a very significant statement in another Buddhist text, namely, the *Advaya Vajrasaṅgraha*, which repeatedly emphasizes the fact that *rūpe na vidyate rūpam*⁷, meaning that the appearance is not the real image. It should be appreciated that the appearance presents the factual reality, but the counter-factual reality remains out of the site. The seeing beyond sight is the *sine qua non* of the understanding of the Truth. The quest for which is the constant concern of the artist as well as of the viewer.

Endnotes

1. Most of the scholars starting from Abanindranatha Tagore through Niharranjan Ray and subsequently in the Books on the technique of Mural Painting written by Jayanta Chakravarti and Asoke Bhattacharya the word *rūpabheda* has been interpreted as the differentiation of forms. But this interpretation seems to be simplistic because there is an item called *Sādṛśya* within the six limbs of painting and this item takes care of the differentiation of forms in order to discover the similarities or similitude between forms. Hence we have interpreted *rūpabheda* as the penetration into the form in order to discover the character within the formal appearance.
2. 'In the Indian Museum, Calcutta, there is a unique piece of medieval sculpture showing a girl fully absorbed in writing a letter to her lover. The stylistic features of Orissan and Central Indian art are so beautifully merged in this piece that some ascribe it to Bhuvaneshvar and some to Khajuraho'. M.L. Varadapande, *Woman in Indian Sculpture*, New Delhi, 2006, fig.42; H. Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformation*, New York, 1955, Vol.2, fig.345; C. Sivaramamurti, *The Art of India*, New York, 1977, fig.38; K.M. Munshi, *Saga of Indian Sculpture*, Bombay, 1958, pl.17.
3. See note no.2 for the details.
4. Tirthankar Bhattacharya, 'The Rapine connection of the Goddess of Learning', *Jñāna-Pravāha Research Journal No.XVII - 2013-2014*, Varanasi, 2014.
5. This was expressed by Dr. R.N. Misra in one of the discussion session in a seminar on Indian art at Calcutta. Later he included this explanation in his write-up on *śilpa* in the *Kalakośa* published by the Indra Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi.
6. This philological possibility has been mooted by Dr. D.C. Bhattacharyya in his forthcoming book entitled *Aesthetics of Tantric Buddhist Art* (shortly due for publication).
7. Both these significant textual references to the meaning of the form have been discussed in details in the forthcoming book by Dr. D.C. Bhattacharyya, as mentioned in note no.6.