

Editorial

# Introduction to the Special Issue: Seeing and Reading: Art and Literature in Pre-Modern Indian Religions

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Relationships between text and image in pre-modern South Asia<sup>1</sup> have been both ignored and exploited throughout the history of western scholarship. In an attempt to identify and understand the meaning of visual material that is usually a fragmentary fraction of what survives from more than three thousand years of effusive production, scholars often turn first to written sources for explanations, though they are rarely accessible in contemporaneous forms. One response to the difficulty in making clear and direct connections between visual art and written text has been to consider one or the other in isolation. Philologists, epigraphers, and religious studies specialists often read, translate, and interpret texts without reference to the visual documents with which they are combined. Many nineteenth-century pioneers in the field published thousands of inscriptions and textual translations divorced from any discussion of the sculptures, murals, or temples on which they were written, while the paintings in manuscripts were similarly ignored. The other impulse has been to find a textual excerpt to explain a work of visual art, as though the image were an illustration based on a written source. Rarely, however, is such an approach justifiable in pre-modern South Asia; it remains an assumption that is not easily borne out in practice. There are multiple variants of undated textual material, and evidence for contemporaneity and regional currency of a certain text at a site is often scant or unknown. As a result, art historians and museum curators have analyzed the form and physical characteristics of paintings, sculpture, architecture, and textiles as though the artists were equally unaware of religious literature that may have informed or shaped their creations. Paintings are all too frequently culled, pulled, or cut out from text pages to be displayed as individual works of fine art. The contributions of the textual scholars and the historians of art are all valuable, but when both groups come together to share their knowledge of the material in their respective areas of expertise—the combination of which is too vast for one person to grasp—new insights and wonderful relationships emerge. This volume aims to celebrate the collaboration of seeing and reading, of cognizing both visual and textual sources without privileging one over the other as a primary document.

As co-editors, one a professor of religious studies fluent in several historical and regional Indian languages and the other a museum curator trained in the history of Indian art, we have experienced the satisfaction of combining a broad knowledge of texts with art historical viewpoints and curatorial access to objects. We invited scholars from both art historical and religious studies backgrounds to contribute articles on new research that actively engages both fields in a variety of ways.

Monica Zin deals specifically with narrative relief sculpture of the early centuries CE. Instead of positing a definitive text that the scenes duly portray, she foregrounds the agency of the artists in selecting imagery that communicates their message or purpose, whether or

<sup>1</sup> “Pre-modern” is here construed as the millennia prior to the establishment of British economic colonialism of the late 1700s onward, when western concepts of illustration and canonical texts changed models of artistic praxis in South Asia. South Asia here includes the current nations of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

not we are able to discern that purpose today. Her paper underscores the importance of recognizing early South Asian narrative art not as derivations from a text or copies of a prototype but as compositions made from elements purposefully selected from a range of sources, both textual and visual, foreign and indigenous.

Synthesizing material from the fourth to tenth century, Charlotte Schmid explains the role of North Indian images of cow herding communities, as integrated with early Tamil literary tropes, in the development of the persona of Kṛṣṇa as butter thief, cowherder, and lover. For the first time, the culturally distinct secular literature from South India and non-narrative visual cues in art, which were made to establish the environment for the exploits of Kṛṣṇa as infant and child, join Sanskrit texts as influential sources for the story of Kṛṣṇa that gained prevalence throughout the entire subcontinent by the seventh century.

A fresh perspective on the story of Rāma in painting and sculpture is provided by art historian and poet Subhashini Kaligotla. Though it has long been recognized that countless retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have been created for centuries, speech-based or text-based iterations have been privileged over visual renditions. Kaligotla introduces a way of viewing visual depictions to identify emphases that reveal the concerns of artists in creating emotional responses in their viewers. Instead of relegating *Rāmāyaṇa* paintings or architectural reliefs to the status of pictures that merely convey the story as known from a text, Kaligotla shows that they can function as windows into the concerns of the time and place when they were made. Images appear to have generated emotive responses sometimes indiscernible in the written or oral literature. She notes the importance of what we can learn from instances when visual imagery diverges from the story as known from texts.

A scholar of Buddhist literature, Sonam Kachru also contends with the issue of intended reception of images and the emotional and sensory reactions that works of art were made to elicit by analyzing little-known textual passages containing discussions of visual images. He has evaluated examples of written descriptions about how practitioners were to experience images and shown that their uses changed over time.

Reed O'Mara analyzes a previously unpublished painted folio in a manuscript of the iconic Buddhist text of the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*. She describes the artist's creativity in depicting Prajñāpāramitā simultaneously manifest as goddess, manuscript, and textual content. She suggests that the golden color selected for the goddess's skin identifies her as the personification of the palm-leaf manuscript itself, whose leaves stood in for golden tablets. In this way, the artist has emphasized the concept that seeing the image of the goddess or worshipping the physical manuscript generates the same religious merit as reading the text, thus establishing a parity between seeing and reading.

The associations and meanings attributed to colors in a wide array of literary contexts have been painstakingly gleaned by our co-editor Phyllis Granoff. Drawing references and descriptions from different genres of texts written for diverse religious groups, she has identified the significances of individual colors over the course of more than a millennium of practice throughout India and Sri Lanka. Her analysis evokes visual worlds that no longer survive in the early material record. There emerge glimmers of previously unrecognized codes of color that would have been immediately obvious to contemporaneous viewers but have been lost on art historians who lack access to many texts written in South Asian languages.

Colors are also considered in Sylvia Houghteling's paper on the poetic language associated with fugitive textile dyes. She marries studies of literature with discussions of materiality to reveal how writers were inspired by textiles. Historical authors used dyed textiles and their inherent changeability of color as potent metaphors for the fleeting quality of emotions and philosophical notions of impermanence.

Sanskrit texts made their way to Nepal, where many manuscripts survive that find no extant Indian correlate. Co-editor Sonya Rhie Mace has turned a light onto one such manuscript of the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*, whose paintings on its widely dispersed palm-leaf

folios were thought to be painted by Nepalese artists without reference to the content of the Sanskrit text. Her paper brings forward little-known compositions that reveal an awareness of the text on the part of the artists and new evidence for multidirectional networks of visual imagery across the Himalayas.

Examining material farther afield, in Bagan, Myanmar (Burma), Lilian Handlin sets forward fresh interpretations of murals dating from the thirteenth to eighteenth century. She explores the way the Burmese artists and patrons received Pāli Buddhist texts and used the imagery as tools for social change. The function and interpretation of images shifted according to historical conditions, even though the subject matter remained the same. Osmund Bopearachchi focuses his analysis of the paintings in Bagan on a specific episode. He highlights how artists in Bagan creatively elided material from the Pāli canon for visual effect. Both Handlin and Bopearachchi show that even when specific canonical Pāli texts are known to be the source for Buddhist narrative paintings, artists and societies manipulated visual images for purposes unrelated to the texts themselves.

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to issues of text and image, often confined to a theme, such as Buddhism, temple architecture, manuscripts, or a specific site. The ambitious scope of papers in this volume does not attempt to be all-inclusive. Rather, these papers present multiple ways that the relationships between text and image in pre-modern South Asia should be nuanced and approached with a broad sensitivity to the perspectives of authors, artists, audiences, patrons, and societies. We assembled these essays with a view to conveying the range of complexities and challenging the impulse to privilege the written word as a primary basis for interpreting visual images. Working collaboratively to access and assess texts and images more holistically, new knowledge and ideas are sure to arise with an expanded conception of their mutual importance.

We wish to thank the team of editors at MDPI who are committed to the efficient production of high-quality, peer-reviewed open access academic journals. The ability to swiftly publish new research papers with unlimited numbers of high-resolution color images, as we find in our Special Issue of *Religions*, is nothing short of revolutionary. We also are delighted that this print publication has been produced to complement the e-journal. Our gratitude is also extended to the many outside readers who provided helpful assessments and improvements on every piece in this wide-ranging Special Issue.

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