

Report: Fifteenth Symposium of the American Council for Southern Asian Art (ACSAA)

September 22-25, 2011, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, <http://acsaa.us>

The biennial symposium of the American Council for Southern Asian Art is the premier venue for scholarly exchange regarding the art, architecture, and visual culture of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Himalayan region. Out of a rich group of over 90 submissions, 38 papers were selected, covering the geographical breadth of ACSAA and including material from the archaeological to the contemporary. Scholars of South, Southeast, and Himalayan Asia often share concerns related to ritual practice, historical cultural flows, and historiography. In concert with colleagues who focus on other regions, ACSAA scholars have long been addressing issues of the active, mobile art object, cross-cultural flows of information, asymmetrical power relations, the intersection of religious and courtly patronage, and the epistemological impact of colonialism and globalization.

ACSAA symposia are collegial affairs. In lieu of concurrent sessions, the symposium meets as a whole for all papers. This practice, as well as inclusive meals and receptions, serves to promote intellectual exchange. ACSAA's conferences rely on a shared history dating to the organization's founding in 1965 and its first symposium, also held in Minneapolis, in 1981. ACSAA XV began with a panel of established South Asianists and closed with a panel of PhD candidates—apt bookends for a weekend of stimulating debate and exchange.

The transfer of architectural knowledge and the machinations of stylistic, historical, political, religious, and mercantile factors in the construction of cities, towns, and individual buildings emerged in the opening panel, with a discussion of new research on the syncretic decoration of temple structures from northern Pakistan (Meister). This theme continued with a panel on Friday, including papers on the temple structure and style moving from central India to the foothills of the Himalayas (Chanchani), a new river-driven map of the relations between temple towns in medieval Madhya Pradesh (Sears), the spread of Tamil temple forms to China via merchant networks (Lee), and the continued use of key elements of Gujarati Jain architecture in new temples in the diaspora (Hegewald).

Transmission of knowledge emerged in several other papers that traced connections between Javanese and Vietnamese sculpture (B. Kim), examined the stylistic roots of the Emerald Buddha in Thailand to Sinhalese and Burmese influence (Rod-ari), situated pre-Angkorian sculptural modes on particular geographic nodes in Cambodia (Lavy), and explored a bifurcation in the stylistic sources for modern and contemporary Indonesian mosques (Ku).

Mobility served as a theme for several papers, with some scholars focusing on mobile objects by examining the trade for and use of Deccani carpets in Japanese diplomatic, mercantile, and ritual Shinto contexts (Yamada), or exploring the role of copies and connections between Bhagavata Purana manuscripts across time and space (Poddar). Others presented new research relating to the mobility and communication among artists and patrons, demonstrating the fluidity of political and artistic relationships among painting workshops in Mughal and Rajasthani courts (Stronge, Aitken), and investigating the movement of those who contributed to the excavations at Ajanta and elsewhere in central South Asia (Spink).

The relation of text and image and the importance of narrative emerged in several papers, including ongoing research regarding the imaging of ritual practice in Buddhist reliefs (S. Huntington), analyses of Borobudur's program of *jataka* relief sculptures (Levin), illustrated Deccani manuscript inscriptions in multiple languages indicating the possibility of multiple patrons and audiences (Weinstein), the multi-layered iconic and narrative paintings of Jain manuscript traditions (Del Bonta), and the interweaving of romantic poetry with personal photography in an early photographic album (Carotenuto). Moving beyond text to symbol, careful microscopic examination of marks on early coins revealed new nuances that help to fill in our understanding of South Asian art in the pre-Mauryan period (J. Huntington).

Scholars also focused on particular media, or, more precisely, on the question of whether new media like photography or film transformed artistic frameworks. Papers situated photographic albums within an older context of *muraqqa* (album) patronage (Patel), connected early filmmaking with the network of photo studios in major Indian cities (Goldsmith), and examined the interstices and conjunctions between painting and photography by unpacking the diverse practices associated with painted photographs (Dewan). Others highlighted the multi-media output of artists traditionally considered painters, bringing new research on art film of the 1960s to bear on analyses of Tyeb Mehta's oeuvre (Citron), and thinking through the multi-layered collaborative poetic installation art Nilima Sheikh has pursued in relation to gender, memory, and partition (Khullar).

The production of knowledge about Southern Asian visual culture anchored several papers, most particularly a panel examining the place, or lack thereof, of post-1947 visual culture in galleries, museums, and university curricula (Bean, Brown, Jain). This theme emerged as well in a detailed analysis of regnal portraiture in the Metropolitan Museum's *The House of Bijapur* (Hutton), a discussion of the impact of Alfred Foucher on our understanding of early Buddhist sculpture (J. Kim), an engagement with a set of history paintings and their relation to the formation of Siamese national identity (Hall), and a close reading of the journal MARG's early ideological battles against architectural revivalism (Singh). The engagements of these papers were joined by discussion of vernacular political visual culture, in the context of regional tribal politics in Bastar (Hacker), the story of Sonabai, a self-taught artist (Huyler), and in the production of royal identity through a combination of vernacular and colonial architectural forms in Keralan palaces (Heston).

Sunday's closing panel comprised three PhD candidates who presented new work on territoriality, urban space, patronage, sacred landscape, and imperial processional mapping (Khera, Ray, Sharma). Historian Sumathi Ramaswamy served as discussant for this final panel and closed the symposium with an interdisciplinary call for more research that asks difficult questions of geography, history, and the creative energies at work on and in urban spaces and places.

Regionally focused conferences draw together a diverse group of scholars; at times, one worries that perhaps the disciplinary, methodological, geographic, and temporal divergences will be too great for the discussion to come together. Instead of divergence, this wide-ranging biennial meeting produces a dynamism within which 20th century painting scholars can keep up with new archaeological research, and those examining narrative sculpture in Java can engage with colleagues tracing the movement of carpets across Asia.