Minority Traditions, Ideal Beauty, and Eroticism

The three artistic traditions outlined in the first part of this chapter illustrate how the dominant canon was radically modified in response to religion, culture, and environment. Their peripheral position may have contributed to their relative neglect among scholars. The chronology in each case is specific to that region since each follows its own historical trajectory.

The Hoysalas of the Deccan (eleventh to fourteenth centuries CE)

The mixed (Vesara) temple styles of the Deccan were a reflection of their exposure to northern ideas. Among them, the Hoysala temples are arresting in their exquisitely carved grey-green steatite exteriors, their towers of modest height, and their star-patterned ground plans. During the ascendancy of the Hoysala empire in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, kings, queens, the court, merchants, lower officials, and the affluent Vaishnava community were all active patrons. Vishnuvardhana (c.1108–42), who was converted to Vaishnavism by the saint Ramanuja, built a fine Vishnu temple after defeating the Colas. However, out of over a thousand temples, royal involvement has been identified in only 35.

Partly because of its late period, Hoysala art offers us information about the social position and aspirations of Indian artists nowhere else. Although Hoysala sculptors worked collectively as members of guilds, the profusion of signed sculptures in Hoysala temples raises important questions about artistic individualism. The topos of artistic rivalry, a reflection of higher social aspirations, is suggested by inscriptions in which artists boast about their work and about surpassing other artists. The work of Mallitamma, a leading sculptor, is so well documented that we have a clear idea of the style and quality of his output within the constraints of local guild conventions. His was a curious case, for he was not the most talented sculptor, but he was celebrated for having participated in all the major projects of the time, identifying every single work produced by himself over 60 years in all the regions.

Why did Hoysala artists sign their works? First, the name, Mallitamma for instance, was probably that of the workshop master
Temple to the Sun, Martand, Kashmir, eight century CE.

This temple was conceived on a vast scale, with eight small shrines surrounding the main sanctuary. The sanctuary, which rests on a high platform, is approached through a low double gateway. The entrance is preceded by a pillared hall, flanked in turn by double shrines on either side. The pitched roof of the temple is characterized by the richly ornamented columns, and pillars continued the Gandharan-Bactrian heritage.

Even though Hinduism gained prominence by the eighth century, Kashmir, the site of the fourth Buddhist council, continued to be a centre of Buddhist activity until its conversion to Islam in 1258 CE. Politically and culturally its finest period was the eighth-century reign of Lalitaditya Muktapida. His lavish patronage, funded by military expeditions into northern India, was recounted by the great twelfth-century historian Kalhana. Lalitaditya not only built impressive monuments such as the massive caitya at Parshapura, but, according to Kalhana, he erected the 'wonderful shrine of Martanda, with its massive walls of stone within a lofty enclosure' [47].

By Lalitaditya's time, Kashmir had become a stronghold of Tantric practices. Tantric Buddhism produced angry deities, such as Vajrapani, representing the mysterious powers of transcendent knowledge. Hindu Tantric systems, the Saiva Siddhanta, and the Vaishnava Pancaratra cults also flourished here. The Pancaratra tradition produced the four-faced Vishnu Vaikuntha image characteristic of Kashmir [48]. Both the Buddhists and the Hindus of Kashmir commissioned bronze, including colossal ones, during Lalitaditya's reign.

Kerala (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries CE)
Kerala, on the south-west coast of India, was renowned for its overseas trade with East and South-East Asia and with the West. The heavy pitched roofs of Keralan temples can give the impression of Chinese architecture. This, along with the fact that Keralans had trade contacts with China, has led scholars to suggest a Chinese influence on its art and architecture, but this is doubtful. It can be argued that the roofs had a protective function in a region known for its torrential rains. What is clear is that Keralan art shows contacts with Tamilnadu and Karnataka. The temples usually consist of several buildings within a walled enclosure. The main shrine, the srikovil, can be square, rectangular, apsidal, or circular. While the base is often of stone in the
southern tradition, the superstructure is of wood or brick, covered with a tiled roof. Temples are sometimes double-roofed, as is the case at Vettikkavala. The Dravida tradition is evident in the walls of the Siva temple at Ponameri with its rows of pilastered niches for elevations. A particularly distinctive type in Kerala is the circular temple. The Vyakkanathan temple to the syncretic Hari-Hara (Vishnu-Siva) at Trichur, although founded in the eleventh century, was rebuilt many times.[49]

In Kerala wooden sculpture is preferred to stone. The paintings on the outside and inside walls of the srikovilis are full of vitality and power, notably in the Padmanabhaswami temple at Padmanabhapura and later ones in the Mattancheri Palace in Cochin. The Vishnu from the palace shows the Keralan style at its most vivid.[50]

**Jain art and architecture (thirteenth to sixteenth centuries CE)**

The patronage of Jain merchants rivalled that of royalty. These powerful urban merchants often acted as bankers to monarchs. Like the Buddhists, they embraced an anti-Brahmanical faith. Jainism was founded by the Ksatriya Mahavira (c.599–527 BCE), the last of the 24 Jain saints, who were named jina (conqueror) for having broken the chain of karma. Once an important force in the subcontinent, today Jains are mainly confined to Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Karnataka. The sect steadfastly maintains its belief in the sanctity of life through vegetarianism, while its strict moral code includes the denial of sensual pleasures. Paradoxically, this very austere religion was embraced by a community renowned for its influence.[51]

![Vyakkanathan temple to Hari-Hara (Vishnu-Siva), Trichur, eleventh century CE.](image)

Unlike Buddhists, Jains adopted the Hindu temple form but put it to different usage. Rather than being the dwelling of a deity, it was the temporal representation of the heavenly hall where the 24 Jain 'conquerors' assembled. Although the Jains erected sumptuous temples at Khajuraho, their most striking temples are of white marble and belong to the Solanki period in Gujarat–Rajasthan (750–1290 CE), when they became kingsmakers.[52] The finest examples are from the Jain temple city on Mount Abu in Rajasthan, sanctified by its association with the Jain teacher, Mahavira. Exquisite carvings in these near-translucent white marble temples appear inside, their plain exterior a protection against Turko-Afghan attacks.[53] Apart from temples, other striking structures unique to the area are the complexes of stepwells elaborately decorated with sacred sculptures.[54]

Images of Jain saints resemble the Buddha, except that they are totally naked, the only completely nude male figures in Indian art, as for instance the colossal image of Bahubali at Sravana Belgola in Karnataka. The Jains adopted several Hindu gods, more as aids to meditation than as objects of worship: Saravati, the goddess of learning, and Ambika, the Tantric deity, are the most popular. In the later period, Jains specialized in sacred topographical paintings (see below for Jain painting).
Notions of beauty

There are two central issues to be addressed here: the canon of beauty and the role of the erotic in ancient Indian art. Few aspects of non-European art have posed greater problems for the Western art historian, raised on the universalist canon. Confronting very different standards of beauty in Indian art, the art historian's response has often been to claim that Indian religious art is not concerned with 'caric' beauty as such but with 'higher' spirituality. In fact, this is belied by numerous religious hymns which graphically describe the physical beauty of the goddesses. Apart from the fact that the western canon, which purports to be universal, is culturally determined, the interesting question is not what Indian art shares with Western art, but in what ways it is a unique tradition with its own cultural rules. The aesthetics that art historians take to be ancient Indian is actually that of a male high culture that influenced art and literature and streamlined diversity by ignoring marginal traditions. Likewise, it has been the classical canon that has been dominant in the West and that has had such a profound influence on art criticism.

Ideals of beauty

Classical and Indian aesthetics share certain ideas, which, for instance, Far Eastern art does not. In ancient India, as in Greece, the idealized human body was the measure of all things, inspiring, above all, architectural proportions. Both societies imagined gods to be the bearers of sexuality, beauty, grace, and power. But whereas the Greek gods were utterly human, the many-armed Siva Nataraja inhabited a very different world of thought, at once human and transcendental (see chapter 3). So what were their respective ideals? The Greeks extolled athleticism, the young Kouroso embodying the divine ideal. Even the nude goddess Aphrodite, a latecomer to the scene, turned to the male figure for inspiration. However, if Greece was more homoerotic in its ideal, it was female sexuality that was obsessively celebrated in Indian literature and art. Part of the reason may lie in the different religious outlooks of these two essentially male-dominated societies. But neither in Greece nor in India did women have a decisive say in aesthetic matters, as they were largely confined to the home. One of the interesting aspects of Indian culture is that women are represented both as an object of the gaze and as part of the sacred—so are feminist critiques applicable here, since women are central to sacred art as the focus of sexuality and auspiciousness? It is interesting that the opulent Venus Natus was a threatening form of sexuality in the West. Ancient Indian poets such as Kalidasa delighted in describing such
nubile beauties: ‘Slim, youthful, with the eyes of a frightened doe, fine
teeth and red lips like the bimba fruit, slim waisted, deep-navelled,
slowed down by the weight of the hips and bent by her full breasts, she
is the best of her gender created by god’ [52]. This voluptuous ideal
underwent substantial modification, however, in different parts of
India, especially in the south.

The contrast between the western classical and the Indian ideal is
perhaps best demonstrated in their notions of bisexuality. In the
classical hermaphrodite, the sexual differences were blended in a
‘unisex’ image. In the Siva Ardhanarishvara image, on the other hand,
the male/female difference was in fact emphasized by partitioning the
figure into two halves, with the characteristics of each gender
meticulously highlighted [53].

Erotic art
In the case of the erotic sculptures in Hindu temples, art historical
interpretations reveal a basis in Christian thinking on sexuality. Faced
with public displays of private acts, including oral sex, group sex, and
bestiality, above all in a temple, scholars felt obliged to search for their
‘hidden’ meaning. This is because such images could not be reconciled
with an essentially modern, western outlook. But this search for
meaning stems from our assumption that sex is a ‘natural’ act, whereas
no human activity could be more culturally conditioned. To answer
libertarians, for instance, who admire Hindu erotic art as an expression
of a ‘natural’ society, ancient Indians were no more liberated than we
are. It is simply that their notions of ‘decency’ differed from ours. So
instead of starting with our views of what is ‘sexually’ acceptable, we
need to rediscover the specific normative boundaries of ancient Indian
civilization, and the boundaries between the sacred and the profane.
For, even phallic cults such as that of the Siva linga were never taken
totally literally by Indians, who responded to them on multiple levels
of meaning [54].

The obsessively erotic art of Khajuraho and Konarak gave these sites
their notoriety in colonial and modern times. Yet, what is
forgotten is that loving couples first appeared as early as the first
century BCE in Buddhist monuments at Bhoja and Beda. Couples
routinely adorned temple doorways from the Gupta period onwards
[54]. However, sexual scenes began to proliferate only from the tenth
century, as Hindu art and architecture reached their peak. Earlier
interpretations, that erotic sculptures were allegories of higher spiritual
ideas, were simply transposing Christian interpretations onto
Hinduism. It is not that a cult like that of Radha-Krsna did not
represent love allegorically; it is simply that sacred coitus on temple
walls cannot be explained allegorically. The view that it was a product
of social decadence simply endorsed colonial prejudice against
Hinduism. Some of these sculptures had a clear protective function.
Links between fertility, sexuality, and the auspicious are strong in
Hindu society. A study of the dancers at the temple of Jagannatha at
Puri, one of the most sacred sites of Hinduism, shows convincingly
their ‘auspicious’ sexual role within the religious context. According
to a recent work, erotic figures in Khajuraho are placed at meeting
points of buildings as a protective device, playing on a visual pun
between juncture and copulation. Another work claims that they
celebrate the marriage of Siva and Parvati. This hypothesis cannot, however, apply to the majority of these sculptures.\textsuperscript{65}

A serious contender in this respect is the esoteric Tantric creed, which rivalled Bhakti in its powerful hold on Indian society, irrespective of whether one was a Buddhist or a Hindu, or even a Jain. Tantrics sought to gain spiritual fulfilment by acquiring power through social transgressions, including ritual sex. However, apart from some clearly identified Tantric images—symbolic images such as the yantra and sri cakra—many of the erotic sculptures in temples are too general to be representations of precise Tantric rituals. Perhaps one should abandon the search for a grand theory and interpret these erotic scenes in the contexts in which they occur.

There are, however, interesting connections between Tantra and sacred eroticism. Brahmanism faced two major challenges from within the Hindu religion: Bhakti and Tantra. Bhakti offered direct access to God without the intervention of Vedic rituals. The rival to Bhakti was Tantra, which developed a set of esoteric rituals including sexual practices, which were at once a parody of and a challenge to Brahmanical rites. Tantrics broke social taboos though pānca maṅgas (the use of five prohibited substances and acts), in which the participants ritually denied caste distinctions.\textsuperscript{66} Tantric beliefs were widespread in India from Kashmir down to Tamilnadu, though they were ignored in the colonial period, especially by European orientalists, who preferred the more intellectual Upanishadic philosophy, the exception being Sir John Woodroffe.\textsuperscript{67}

It is no accident that women played a dominant role in the Tantric Kaula Kapalika cults. Yoginis or female ascetic-sorceresses were feared because of their association with Tantric practices. Yogini temples became widespread in north India from the tenth century CE. They had a distinct circular structure open to the sky, possibly suggesting a spatial translation of the yogini cakra (ritual circle) or the female vulva. The temples to 64 yoginis in Orissa contained mostly animal-faced yogini figures, arranged in a circle in niches and facing a Siva shrine in the centre. The exceptions were the royal temple of 81 yoginis belonging to the Kalacuri dynasty in Bheraghat and Khajuraho's rectangular 64-yogini temple.\textsuperscript{68}

The mother cult
Prehistoric north-west India was part of a large swathe extending from the Indus valley to Asia Minor where a matriarchal religion of sexual cults and sacred prostitution was practised. The Great Mother, the pregnant goddess of fertility, was worshipped throughout the world in her sheltering, protecting, and nourishing character.\textsuperscript{69} This cult was suppressed by the Aryans, who brought their own male-centred pantheon to India in 1800 BCE. Even though recent research has shown
that Vedic rituals contained sexual allusions, the general Vedic dislike of sexual cults is revealed in their contempt for the phallic gods of the non-Aryans.\[29\]

The mother cult continued at folk level in the worship of small terracotta figurines. However, her influence can be seen on the margins of temple art, in the decorative ‘monsters’, makara, kirttimukha, and vyala (the last a rampant leonine monster), described as different masks of the pre-Aryan goddess.\[30\] The feminine principle re-emerged with explosive force early in the first millennium in connection with the rise of the Siva-Sakti cult, which might have been prefigured in the Indus civilization. It is quite remarkable that while women had an inferior status in Hindu society, on the level of belief they played a dominant role. The supremacy of the Goddess is expounded in different myths. In the myth of Durga, the gods, when they felt powerless against the Buffalo Demon, relinquished their weapons to her in a symbolic castration. The Great Goddess is paradoxically a virgin mother. Her companions are the horrific seven mothers (saptamatrikas), central to Tantric thought.\[31\]

Neumann describes the mother as the ‘Freudian’ unconscious, but there could be a more subversive role for the Goddess: challenging Aryan, male rationality. The Goddess is the mother who nourishes, but is terrifying if her anger is aroused. Nothing expresses the antithesis of the male construct of rationality better than the elemental figure of Kali, the dread goddess. When she goes on the rampage, she literally lets her hair down, her ‘unbound’ hair signifying cosmic chaos, as she becomes unstoppable in her pure nakedness.\[32\] Married women in India are admonished to tie their hair, for loose hair is a sign of inauspiciousness, in other words a threat to the social order. Finally, in the symbolic opposition between the right and the left in the collective thinking of many cultures, the right hand represents maleness, speech, intellect, and, above all, the sacred. Conversely, the left (sinistra in Latin) stands for the sinister, night, death, the clithonic, the profane, and threatening aspects of sexuality. In Sanskrit too, sama means not only means left but also a woman, and finally the Goddess. It makes perfect sense that the Kaula Kapalika Tantric practice is described as left-handed in relation to established rituals.\[33\] In short, it is in these subversive aspects of Indian thought that we may seek to uncover the ‘enigma’ of Hindu erotic art.