

Example of essay on culture

[Environment](#), [Animals](#)



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South Asian Visual Art in the Context of Cultural Literacy

In the modern world of rapid processes of scientific and cultural development our life seems to be a competitive and stressful rat race. But it doesn't matter how difficult and unpredictable our life is, when we have something that helps us to run away from our problems and everyday routine. It helps us to find a place where we can feel nirvana and harmony. Furthermore, this mysterious thing is still be a part of everybody's life and surrounding. It is art – the reflection of human understanding of the world.

“ The visual plays a central role in South Asian culture, high and low, modern and traditional.” (southasia. stanford. edu) It is like a bridge between the two worlds: the world of deities and the world of humans. Images of gods, sculptures, temples, places of worship, etc. are ways to attract divine benevolence and mercy. So the purpose of this essay is vividly clear: to realize the necessity of understanding of South Asian visual art in order to acknowledge the conceptual meaning of the symbolism of art that is a

reflection of beliefs and moral convictions of the civilization.

This information is a way to get acquainted with the culture of South Asia “ which includes the land that makes up the modern-day nations of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka” (www. ushistory. org), and the Tibetan highlands. So, the targeted audience is not only the students who are eager to enrich their knowledge of South Asian culture, but the students who want to understand the different ideas and beliefs about the mechanisms of the Universe deeper.

In this paper I will observe the visual art of Nepal and India as the biggest cultural and art centers of South Asia, and as “ the birthplace of two other major religions that arose during the sixth and fifth centuries B. C.” (Vidya Dehejia). The information will be considered in the context of history, symbolism, human beliefs, and religion. Such a scrupulosity will help me to analyze the factors that have caused the prevalence of visual art among other kinds of art.

The image of Buddha in the religious and symbolic contexts

First of all I want to admit that religion played an immense role in the development and preservation of visual art that include not only images but sculptures, sacral buildings and pantheons as well. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism – three prevailing religions – require some kind of tokens to worship. As a foregone result, images as well as sculptures of deities and gods were created for sacral purposes. Pantheons were built in order to attract divine kindness and benevolence of gods.

The Valley of Kathmandu, which is one of the greatest sings of existence of ancient civilization, is a reflection of flourishing of Buddhism and Hinduism.

The religions can be retraced with the help of thousands of images and monuments that are located there. “ These monuments were defined by the outstanding cultural traditions of the Newars, manifested in their unique urban settlements, buildings and structures” (whc. unesco. org). The works reveal very important detail that the Buddhist Art “ revolves around the concept of five celestial Buddhas” (Madan Chitrakar, 25).

Buddhas are manifested in the form of stupas. They have some details in common. Sitting in the full-blown lotus in the state of meditation, crossing legs “ with the soles of the feet turned upwards” (Madan Chitrakar, 28-29), having their hair knotted and their eyes half-closed serve as an example of such detail. Besides, each Buddha has his own distinctive features – posture and particular direction.

Moreover, there is a deep symbolism in the works. Although visual art was strictly canonized, these details and factors were used in order to show the transcendence of the divinities. Although deities were portrayed as ideal anthropomorphic human beings in the smallest details of gestures and expressions, they were regarded as creatures with the complexion different from the complexion of living beings.

The meaning of colors is significant as well. Vajra Satva is the supreme of five other Buddhas. Buddha Vairochana is believed to be the first emanation of the supreme and he has a white complexion. The color of his skin means ideal knowledge and purity. The second celestial Buddha Lord 'Akshobhya' has blue skin that is a vivid embodiment of consciousness. The complexion of Lord 'Ratna Sambhava', who is the third Buddha, is yellow. His yellow skin is a symbol of sensation. The fourth Buddha – Lord 'Amitabh' – is red-

skinned. The color of his skin symbolize the stamina and the vital strength. And the fifth Buddha Lord 'Amog Siddhi' has green complexion that embody the culture of conformation.

“ In Indian art, worshipers recognize images of an individual deity or spiritual being by the particular attributes he or she holds, and by the deity’s pose, gestures, color, and adornment. Certain symbols are common in the iconography of all three religions.” (Steven M. Kossak and Edith W. Watts, 25) The most prevailing symbols in the visual art are the Lotus, the Wheel, adornment, the halo, poses and expressions, colors, and features that are vested to the certain deity or god.

The image of crocodile in the light of history

The history of paintings and images usually is long enough to have several different versions of its origin. The oldest pictures were found in caves. Some historians claim that discovered paintings of animals had been painted in order to attract the powers of nature. Because the only source of food for ancient people was nature in that time. The most frequently found paintings were pictures of bulls and crocodiles.

Others suppose that people depicted animals in the caves in order to embellish the gray atmosphere of cave walls that surrounded them. It might be the first tries to create something astonishing. Maybe the time when a person wanted to make his or her surrounding more beautiful was the birth of visual art. Who knows?

Subsequently, with the flow of time usual pictures of animals began to transform into extraordinary creatures that appeared in the myths. Artistic images of phoenixes, unicorns, flying dragons were inspired by the images of

real animals that were common in the area. As it was mentioned before, crocodile was one of the most frequently depicted animals. And the appearance of the animal was influenced by the tendency of that time as well.

For example, the usual form of the crocodile was turned into the mythical creature with the head of a crocodile and the body of a bird. This creature was “ described as 'Graaha or Makar or Hiti-Manga' in local Newari dialect” (Madan Chitrakar, 72) and it was associated with the giver of holy water as far as water was an essential part of the sacred acts as well as rituals in the process of worship.

Although a lot of sculptures are located in the Valley of Kathmandu – the center of Nepali traditions, crocodile has never been a natural habitant of the Valley. So we can come to a conclusion that artists who created the sculptures of the animal had been inspired by the earlier examples of depiction of crocodile.

As for portraying the animal in the paintings, this tradition appeared in the medieval times and still continue up to now. Usually crocodile is depicted in its extraordinary and diverse images. The Nepali painting that has been made to order of Tibetan client serves as one of examples. Two Tibetan monks are painted on the foreground of the picture and “ two diminutive Makars are found flanking outside the halos on the holy men” (Madan Chitrakar, 74). Crocodile as well as heads of other strong animals as lion or elephant usually was depicted in order to show the extra energy of a particular deity, god or goddess.

The 'Surya' cult in the context of history and religion

In the period of time when people lived in the caves they were absolutely depended on nature. They felt totally defenseless and unprotected against unknown and uncontrollable forces of nature. Heat or frost, floods or droughts, hurricanes and earthquakes, and hundreds of other terrifying natural disasters could brought not only injuries and traumas, they could brought death. People saw the only way to protect themselves. If they could not take the forces of nature under control, they decided to worship it.

The beginning of religious cult started with choosing the force of nature to worship. In different areas worshiped different phenomenons: Fire, Wind, Sun, Storm. The choice was usually caused by the climate of the territory where people lived. As people from the North could not feel the cruelty and ferocity of hot climate as, for instance, people from South, deification of the Sun was absolutely well-founded. People began to worship the Sun in order to protect themselves from the possible damage that could be caused.

In the South Asia the Sun was personified in the physical form of sun god 'Surya'. In Hindu iconography the Lord is described standing on the lotus or the sun-flower in full-bloom. Besides, 'Surya' is accompanied by three or two loyal attendants of the Lord. The number of attendants depends on the time when the information appeared. Earlier texts provide the description where there are two female divine attendant and one male. The information from later texts is a little bit different, “ the Lord is flanked by Danda and Pingala only” (Madan Chitrakar, 8).

There are a great amount of images of 'Surya' carved in the green stone. Another astonishing example of the Sun worship is the Valley of Kathmandu

where a loads of carved stone images of 'Surya' are preserved. They all are almost similar with some distinctive features.

Conclusion

The culture of South Asia is preserved in many places and nearly every thing, image, icon, temple, pantheon, or place of sacral acts have a very rich historical background and historic context. These attributes of worship can be observed in the light of symbolism, religion and system of beliefs that can disclose a great deal of important details. As visual art is one of the most wide-spread kinds of art, it is extremely useful to know the history of its origin as well as meaning.

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