

Asian and african art essay

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Modern art includes many elements from Asian and African art. The works chosen here have elements of modernism in them especially the Seated Couple sculpture whilst the Senju Kannon work depicting Buddha has influenced several artists such as Paul Gauguin and Francis Bacon.

Senju Kannon's The Thousand Armed Bodhisattva of Compassion (circa 1200AD)

Senju Kannon's The Thousand Armed Bodhisattva of Compassion is a seminal work in the history of Japanese art but is also an important milestone for Buddhist thought and religion. The work is colourful and emanates a certain sense of peace and calm which demonstrates the prevalent revival in Japanese art of the late 19th century. The Bodhisattva is also a crucial figure for Buddhism which also attempts to create an oasis of calm and peace but at the same time delves into the deep questions of existentialism which is part and parcel of the whole religious concept. Actually the word bodhisattva means one who is earmarked for enlightenment or one who is bound to become great – the chosen one.

In his seminal work, Japanese Culture Paul Varley also describes several similarly styled paintings which date from the same Heian period.

Varley states that; “ One of the finest achievements of the middle and late Heian period was the evolution of a native style of essentially secular painting that reached its apex in the picture scrolls of the twelfth century” (Varley, p 84). Kannon's bodhisattva is a clear representative of this style. Amongst these one may include ‘ Scene from the Animal Scrolls’ (Varley, p 89) where a vast number of animals populate the painting also in a wild and frenzied attempt to tell their own story. The ‘ Scene from the Genji Scrolls’

on p 88 is also descriptive of the type of painting at the time although this dates from the ninth century AD.

Senju Kannon's work is replete with several themes from the Heian period, especially the way the figure is constructed and how it reaches out to the world. There is a deep spiritual intimacy about the painting (Mason, p 85).

The Heian period was also renowned for its rich cultural associations and was also an important period for Japanese culture and this work by Senju Kannon is representative of that.

Actually a bodhisattva is someone who is still impure and not yet perfect. He is still subject to the normal human emotions such as illness, death, sorrow and even defilement. One can read further on the lives of the Buddha in this state in the Jatakas. The Theravada literature describes a bodhisattva as someone who is on the path to finding liberation. There are also essentially two types of bodhisattvas, the peacebodhisattva who will eventually attain a status of peace and the savakbodhistattva who will attain enlightenment as one of the disciples of the Buddha. Kings of Sri Lanka were actually described as bodhisattvas with several of them being renowned for their compassion and wisdom.

In her seminal text, Penelope Mason describes in exhaustive detail all the aspects of Japanese art which tend to describe how this particular work by Senju Kannon fits into the whole equation. Describing some elements of the Japanese art calligraphy which are strikingly similar to Kannon's emblematic work where she also demonstrates a fastidious understanding of the visual and aesthetic aspects of this progression, (Mason p. 108).

The painting by Senju Kannon dates from the 12th century and has several

intriguing and original aspects to it. There is a myriad of light in it and the vast concentration of the arms spans several levels creating a sense of orgiastic mysticism and also a deep spiritual compassion. One almost observes the arms as reaching out to others to assist and help the humans who are experiencing suffering and are full of anger and pain. The Bodhisattva is elegantly dressed in a red coat and there is also considerable attention to detail where the slippers are concerned as one may see these as being beautiful and also very elegant.

The Heian period was very rich both in aesthetic style as well as in descriptive aspects and this work fits the bill perfectly. The sense of aura and mysticism imbues the painting and there is also an element of empathy with religious portrayals. The symbolism of the Heian period is also heavily present in the painting as it creates a sense of the over bearing monk who with his thousand hands attempts to grasp control all over the country.

There are other bodhisattva styles which can be compared to Kannon's iconic work. Amongst these, one may find the Samanthabadra, which is a sculpture from Mahayana Buddhism in the 15th century and which includes the same concept of arms and multiple limbs. This concept may also be found in other similarly styled works dated from much earlier such as the Ghandhara bodhisattva, which dates from the 2nd and 3rd centuries BC. Although this particular representation of the bodhisattva comes from present day India, the similarities are continually striking.

Seated Couple – Mali early 19th century

The Dogon sculpture is rather low on anatomical details perhaps due to the fact that the sculptor wanted to portray an image which focuses on the bond

between the man and the woman. In fact the way the quiver is portrayed is no incidental manner but is a clear reflection of the man's important role in society as that of the hunter and provider of the family. The same goes for the woman whose child is the symbol of her status in society as the child bearer and rearer. Sexually explicit details which are usually present in African sculpture are here given a miss with only a couple of rather indifferent spots showing the breasts of the woman and these are quite comparable with that of the man at this stage. The elongated legs and the fact that both seem to be wearing shoes is another interesting facet of proceedings which is not normally prevalent when compared to other roles in African sculpture. Here the author seems to be more focused on the amicable and familial relationship between a man and a woman rather than the sexual prolicacy which is not a factor here.

Spirituality is always an important facet in African customs and traditions and this is obviously an important part of any sculpture. However the distinct spiritual message is notably absent from this sculpture which tends to focus on the domestic features rather than the spiritual ones. The caring, almost paternal way in which the man embraces the woman is almost reminiscent of a father-daughter relationship and the man seems to be much older than the woman, at least when facial characteristics are taken into account.

However the earrings and other charms which the woman is wearing also imbue a certain amount of spirituality in accordance with African customs where the charm is an important link between the earth and the spiritually mystic. Again, the fact that the couple is seated imbues a certain amount of mysticism and reflection on what might be. Certainly the facial expressions

which seem to be content raise questions on the direction of the message portrayed by the artist who wishes to imbue a sense of relaxation and serenity to proceedings.

References:

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