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Rethinking Visual Narratives from Asia: Intercultural and Comparative Perspective ed. by Alexander Green (review)

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Visual imagery, in their diversity and dynamism, invigorate the Asian cultural landscape. They are featured on cave surfaces, temple walls, scrolls and manuscripts, and are intrinsic to ritual processes. What is the nature of information that is pictorially embedded in these media, how is it encoded, what does it signify over time and what responses do they aspire to elicit from their audiences are some of the questions that are explored in the collection of 15 noteworthy essays (including the “Keynote Address” and “Concluding Remarks”) in this volume. Apart from art history, the essays encompass a wide span of disciplines including anthropology, archeology, performance studies, material culture and critical theory, and examine a diverse range of media that compose visual narratives such as painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry and ritual practice. Julia Murray’s keynote essay begins with a brief summary of the developments on the study of visual narration, noting that apart from text, pictorial images had the power to provoke responses in the audience, (re)create events and moments for them, and draw them into an imaginary experience. Moreover, changing socio-political contexts, mores and audience reception can modify and reframe both content and composition of illustrations, as Murray demonstrates through her examination of the production and circulation of the Chinese text *The Emperor’s Mirror*, not only in China

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but also in other parts of Asia and Europe. Murray's questions surrounding issues of viewership, local influences on imported texts and images, and the influence of formal elements in the constitution and reception of visual narratives set the thematic stage for the subsequent essays.

One of the dominant themes explored in the essays is the relationship between text and image. In visual compositions that are drawn from textual sources, carefully executed illustrations could evoke the cultural memory of a well-known text without it being actually present, while layered visual techniques could recall a mosaic of meanings embedded within the text (Shane McCausland). At other times, text and image are set in intriguing juxtapositions, for example, in Su Renshan's scrolls, where calligraphy has an insistent presence, crowding the visual field or assuming figural forms themselves. Like written text, visual metaphors in a travelogue not only ruminate about external visitations and psychological explorations but also probe acts of self-representation (Catherine Stuer). Figural motifs could act as mnemonic triggers, folding out a story or poem in the imagination of the audience (Sarah Thompson). In the *Beyan-i Manzil*, the audience is drawn into the text: illustrations that are about human activities do not depict humans but paradoxically create spaces for the viewers to insert themselves into the imagery. While the illustrations are based on textual information, the artist also uses perspectival techniques inspired by model-building and details to depict directionality, composing not only a travelogue but arguably an immersive experience for the audience to move through those sites (Yonca Kösebay Erkan). Visual narratives can be powerful tools deployed to critique socio-political conditions, as Yeewan Koon's analysis of Su Renshan's works demonstrate. Subversive narratives composed by the artist are infused into familiar stories and motifs that act almost as bait for the audience. Renshan's narratives assume additional potency, because the vocabulary he used was established by the very authority that he critiques. Visual imagery can also depict emblematic snapshots from a literary text as Dore Levy notes. Images that accompany text, as in the 15th-century Chinese hand scroll, portray emotional moments rather than describe an event. These visual "allusions", as Levy terms them, are not necessarily spatially or temporarily linear even if they are thematically connected.

Well aware of the power of images to entertain, instruct, propagandise and compel reverence, visual material was put to use in a wide variety of contexts. Several essays in this volume deal with visual imagery comprising of religious content, and given that politics and religion frequently shared a symbiotic relationship in premodern Asia, the imagery often reflects the complexities of this connection. Images promoting the accumulation of merit and religious

acts (donations to temples) are dominant in 11th-century Buddhist imagery in Pagan, a time when rulers encouraged the rise of Theravada Buddhism (Charlotte Galloway). In other instances, as Sonya Lee suggests, there was a suppression of select religious imagery in order to project the supremacy of a political figure instead. Images also had the power to coax appropriate behavior required of their audience in places of worship (Alexandra Green). When such designs are combined with a strong political agenda (as in 17th–19th century Thailand), they gain added potency.

The links between visual imagery and performance is another theme explored in some essays. Mary Beth Heston argues that elements of contemporary performance traditions and aesthetic appreciation appear to be coded into the murals of the Mattanceri palace in Kerala. The layered, polyvalent imagery was painted on the walls of the king's chamber, targeting a discerning audience in whose minds the broader aesthetic tapestry that was referenced would spring to life. In the remarkable reenactment of the Vessantara Jataka in Thailand and Laos, not only is the scroll at the centre of the celebration itself considered an embodiment of Vessantara, but the performance of the celebration also effects a physical transformation of the village (Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate). The scope of the story is expanded through the ritual process, offering opportunities to its participants to improve their soteriological goals. In this case, the narrative goes beyond provoking a reaction from its audience, allowing them to recreate, re-perform and indeed, ingest the narrative over and over again.

The format on which visual imagery is presented significantly influences content, form and reception. Scrolls, books, cards and manuscripts enable a more personal relationship between content and audience than an architectural medium. For example, the depiction of an emotional vignette (p. 35, Levy) or a contemplative moment (p. 42, McCausland) on a hand scroll draws the viewer to the intimacy of the sentiment with an element of immediacy. Lee argues that the format of caves influenced the content and presentation of the narrative, noting that the movement of the viewer within the cave activated the meanings in the images, emphasising particular theological tenets. Dominik Bonatz demonstrates how palaces, terraces and temples were adorned with carvings that projected curated ideas of kingship, power and authority to their audiences. Crowding images on temple walls that flood the audience's visual field would enhance their phenomenological effect (Galloway). Unveiling the logic behind seemingly disconnected images spread over a complex architectural form presents a different challenge. Mary-Louise Totton adopts a stimulating approach to this puzzle with regard to the *Ramayana* and *Kresnayana* reliefs on the Prambanan temple complex. Applying scientific

theory to the humanities can be precarious; however, Totton's attentive use of network analysis to uncover the linkages between images in the Prambanan temple, their multidimensional meanings, and how those linkages and combinations could activate ritual processes is noteworthy.

To varying degrees, all of the essays explore how visual information would have been received by its audience. Indeed, the patrons and artists relied on an intended effect, whether it was to elicit an empathetic moment, to instruct, caution, dissent, entertain and amaze, or to activate a ritual process for the faithful. The reception of visual material, particularly those produced in the premodern period, is not always easy to discern. For example, how an audience reacted to written or visual information in the Angkor period is exceptionally difficult to ascertain because of the limited nature of source material. It is therefore highly commendable that the essays have both meticulously and imaginatively explored that dimension while still being empirically grounded, for it enriches and furthers our understanding of the multiple reasons that engender image-making. The concluding essay by Greg Thomas, in addition to summing up the themes of the preceding essays and underscoring the importance of embodied engagement with narrative meaning, also notes some of the differences between European and Asian visual narrative traditions, for example, the lack of "single-scene action painting" in Asian art and the absence of text in Western paintings.

The essays through their analyses demonstrate how visual and written material reflected local socio-political practices and beliefs despite broader similarities across regions. Although not the main focus, the additional emphasis on localisation is noteworthy. To some extent, the essays also highlight the significance of the materiality of art and architecture in image figuration and audience response. Religious art in premodern Asia was often a reflection of the contemporaneous political context, as the articles reveal. This relationship is conspicuous when sculpture, painting and architecture come together. Palaces, temples and caves are more than canvasses for featuring images, because image and medium are indivisible from each other. Physically imposing forms could exert the sheer force of their materiality onto the imaginary of the audience. Thus, it could be argued that the form of architecture crucially informs the iconology of images. How does this particular nexus of architecture (i.e. materiality), politics and religion influence visual narration? Although most of the essays in this volume do not explore this dimension in sufficient detail, they nevertheless provide a springboard for future scholarship on visual imagery. The socio-historical factors that condition the composition of visual material, encoding layered narratives into diverse media and audience responses over time, are characteristics of art from premodern

times to the contemporary, as these essays demonstrate. Additionally, the examples analysed by the authors indicate that the constituent elements of those works, both the abstract and the material, often had blurred boundaries and that they engendered a haptic experience for their audience. These perspectives are instrumental in understanding the multidimensionality of visual narratives. Therefore, this volume is a much-needed, substantial contribution to the field of art in general and one that will advance scholarship on the complexities of Asian art.

BIOGRAPHY

Soumya James is an independent art historian based in New Haven, Connecticut, USA. She received her PhD from the Department of History of Art and Visual Studies at Cornell University. She studies ancient Southeast Asian and South Indian art, with a focus on Cambodia. Her areas of interest include the relationship between landscape and built form, the representation of the feminine in visual and textual sources, gender and sexuality, and the art historical connections between premodern South India and Southeast Asia.