

An Exploration of Patterns in World History Through Arts ca. 1100 to ca. 1300

Report on the 1976 Institute in Cross-Cultural Studies
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Several generations ago, a dramatic and intriguing coincidence began to be observed by art historians: the greatest abbeys and cathedrals of the medieval West belonged in time alongside the largest and most lavish temples of medieval Hindu India, the climactic monument of Khmer arts at Angkor Wat, the last great epoch of Buddhist temple-building, and striking new types of Muslim mosques and tomb-shrines. An era so full of impressive and famous monuments seemed an appropriate choice of theme for the first of what are proposed to be annual institutes in cross-cultural studies of given epochs in world history, using as documentation arts and artifacts considered in terms of their social function. (A second Institute, on the epoch 600-400 B.C. universally, will be held 4 July–17 August 1977, and a third, for 1978, is in the planning stage.) The 1976 Institute was conducted by means of formal course lectures (carrying both undergraduate and graduate credit, depending on assignments), a series of public lectures, and co-ordinating seminars.

Introductory lectures and co-ordinating seminars given by Alan Gowans, chairman of the Department of History in Art of the University of Victoria, set out a theory of social function in historic arts universally, as a basis for cross-cultural study of history through the arts. His contention — understanding historic arts and artifacts in terms of their social functions (what they originally *did*: what their makers intended them for) rather than in terms of how *we* see them (aesthetically, as museum objects, important for their forms, etc.) — makes it possible to read them as

historical documents which reveal the thought and life of their makers in a truly objective way. No longer are they links in some chain of aesthetic progress leading from caveman to Picasso or whomever; no longer, therefore, is the emphasis on those differences from one era to another by which “progress” is made evident. Studying historic arts in historic terms involves structuring history along horizontal lines — comparing arts contemporaneous with each other all across the world. It emphasizes what they have in common. As a result, given the vast quantities of new data about past arts in Africa, Asia, and America which have become available over the last twenty or thirty years, all sorts of hitherto unsuspected similarities in basic principles and presuppositions are being revealed. These were very apparent in the specialized presentations, even though only a few participants had an opportunity to hear others.

John Rosenfield, chairman of the Department of Fine Arts at Harvard University, identified five qualities as peculiar to and characteristic of Japanese arts of the Kamakura period: “realism, loss of restraint, sentimentality, easy comprehensibility, and revival of earlier forms.” They resulted from and responded to, he said, an upsurge of popular religious emotion, a demand for participation in religion by the masses, as never before. He illustrated these qualities by specific reference to architecture and sculpture of the Todai-ji in Nara, the greatest Buddhist temple in Japan, as rebuilt by Shunjobo Chogen between 1181 and 1203. Professor Rosenfield’s almost month-to-month account of how Chogen made the Todai-ji a

national shrine by enlisting popular religious enthusiasm, recalled the corresponding age of Crusades and popular religious enthusiasms associated with cathedral-building in the West.

Siri Gunasinghe, professor of Buddhist and Greater Indian art history at the University of Victoria, maintained that Indian culture as we know it today descends not so much from Vedic or Gupta cultures, as from medieval Hindu culture. The prime agent in its formation was a new demand for popular participation in religion. Popular religious enthusiasm generated the characteristically dynamic, even violent qualities of medieval Hindu arts (so similar to characteristic qualities of arts in Kamakura Japan), and that dramatic shift in Hindu concepts of architecture from mimetic forms carved out of living rock to free-standing architecture proper, which culminates in the thirteenth-century Surya temple at Konarak and the Chola temples of South India with their great shikharas and gopuras, centres of social and economic life as never before in India (but recalling that function of cathedrals and parish churches in the contemporary West).

Anthony Welch, professor of Islamic arts at the University of Victoria, likewise identified some distinctive characteristics of Muslim arts ca. 1000–ca. 1300 as responses to popular religious enthusiasms. He cited, for example, the dramatic increase in figural arts, previously less favoured in Islam, not only in numbers but also in variety of themes; a mosque architecture which “instead of horizontal emphasis and the repetition of dark forests of columns of similar height” (e.g., the Alhambra at Cordova of the ninth century) began emphasizing “vaulted height and the dramatic interplay of light and space” (Sultan Qala’n complex, Cairo, 1284–85); portals, façades, domes, and minarets elaborately ornamented by inscriptions which “served to affect masses of people (both by their meanings, and by their presence).” Popular religious enthusiasm also generated new architectural types like madrassas (for co-ordinating and codifying knowledge in defense of the Faith) and pilgrimage shrines to saints.

Norris K. Smith, chairman of the Department of Art and Archaeology at Washington University in St.

Louis, emphasized in his public lecture the ethical aspects of art in general, and how architecture especially should be concerned with visual metaphors of patterns of human relatedness which made possible the endurance of the city, state, and society. In his course lectures Professor Smith, following in part Otto von Simson’s lead, undertook to demonstrate that the Gothic style was invented to advance a political and ecclesiastical policy formulated, in all likelihood, by the Abbot Suger, working in collaboration with Louis VI and with bishops of the Royal Domain, that would restore the pre-eminence of the episcopate in the church, that would strengthen the hand of the king against the separatist tendencies of the aristocracy, that would reaffirm the sacred and priestly nature of the kingship, and that would win the favour of the rebellious burghers. The new policy called for “a new image.” Its form was the Gothic cathedral.

In single public lectures, Richard Stanley-Baker of the University of Victoria described some of the complexities of Sung painting in China, and Charles R. Wicke of the University of Oklahoma presented some aspects of Maya/Toltec monuments in Yucatan. Emphasizing the highly speculative nature of his remarks, Professor Wicke suggested that monuments like the Caracol, Castillo, and Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza offered many parallelisms with contemporaneous architecture elsewhere in the world: encyclopædic imagery, a militantly crusading religious spirit, a consciously different artistic style.

In a summary seminar, the co-ordinator, Alan Gowans, proposed a series of common characteristics of the era universally, worthy of far more extensive investigation: an upsurge of popular religious enthusiasm manifested in distinctive styles and building types; a new emphasis upon Hellfire imagery; and its corollary, Heaven lavishly imaged in earthly complexes of architecture, sculpture, painting — a kind of stick-and-carrot persuasion towards polities directed by supremacy of “spiritual” (ecclesiastical) over “worldly” (secular) powers.

A fuller account of the 1976 Institute proceedings will be found in a forthcoming issue of *SAECULUM: Jahrbuch für Universalgeschichte*, Freiburg-im-Breisgau.

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