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RĀJPUT RELIEFS—I

NOTWITHSTANDING a vast amount of publications on Rājput miniature painting, the phenomenon of Rājput art as such has hitherto been hardly explored. It is limited neither to pictorial art nor to the Rājput states. The same style characteristics can be traced in contemporaneous Rājput architecture, sculpture and industrial art, and, with certain local differences, all over India, from Bengal to Mahārāshtra and the Carnatic. For it represents the living undercurrent of popular taste and sentiment, through a whole millennium repressed by an imposed 'sacred' art tradition. In this respect medieval India and Europe reveal the same situation: the cultural heritage of the preceding high civilization reverently handed on by a church likewise taken over, with the assent of a new barbarian ruling class, and serving first as the medium for educating the barbarians, but gradually turning into an incubus which smothered original creativeness, until at last it was transformed or set aside. In Europe this heritage was the Roman Empire and its echo in the medieval empire 'restored' by Charlemagne, the Roman Catholic church, Latin language and literature, and Carolingian-Romanesque art; in India Gupta civilization, the theology and cult of brahmanical Hinduism, late Sanskrit language and literature, and the art based on the injunctions of the Śilpa-Śāstras. But as in medieval Europe there had been a popular undercurrent first infiltrating, then transforming and at last superseding this imposed tradition, so also in India a similar process can be traced in connexion with every great social reshuffle, first in the 7th and 8th centuries, then in the 11th century, until in the 16th century the new trends achieved an upper-hand. This final victory had been rendered possible by the Muslim invasion which utterly destroyed the Hindu upperclass culture of Northern India and badly damaged it in the South. Though restored, when the Hindu states recovered from the 15th century onwards, the tradition of the courts and temples had in the meantime become so out of tune with real life, that it survived merely as an antiquarian fashion like our classicistic or neo-medieval buildings and sculptures, or like the Latin of our universities (until the end of the 19th century).

There were several reasons why the Rājput states became the most important centres of the folk art now emerging. During the invasions which in the 5th-8th centuries brought Gupta civilization to an end, western North India and parts of Central India, even Bihār and Orissā had been resettled with barbarians, partly frontier Indians (from Gandhāra and the Panjāb),

partly even foreigners. How far the Rājput royal houses, claiming descent from the heroes of the classical epics, really are of old kshatriya stock, is a controversial question; in any case their pedigrees are open to serious doubts. But that their subjects had been rude barbarians, is testified by ancient writers, e.g., Hiuen Tsang or Bilhana. Thus already during the Middle Ages a considerable portion even of the landed aristocracy had only a smattering of the refined traditional Hindu culture of the courts. When the Muslim conquest inaugurated some centuries of utter anarchy, this latter completely disappeared and could never be really restored by the scholars and artists summoned, in the 15th and 16th centuries, from eastern and southern India. Thus folk art and poetry became the roots of another Rājput civilization developing at the courts and aristocratic mansions, and in the temples dedicated to the popular cult of god Krishna. Even then Rājput civilization might not have become so flourishing, if the Rājput states surviving in the little accessible mountains of Central India, the Aravallis and the Himālaya, and especially in the Thar Desert, had not been subjected by the Mughal emperors and treated as most valuable vassals. Though the best Rājput troops were sacrificed in foolhardy battles and sieges, the princes brought home immense treasures from their posts as Mughal generals and governors, and thus could afford an intensive encouragement of the arts.

Rājput art has various sources. Its architecture represents a synthesis of revived medieval and somewhat archaic Indo-Islamic features. Its sculpture combines Irānian, Central Asian, medieval Hindu and even Central Indian tribal elements. Its painting emerged from a fusion of the Jaina miniature style with inspirations from folk sculpture and medieval temple statuary, and finally Indo-Islamic models of the most varying type. Its decorative art has taken over Sāsānian, 'Abbāsīd, Saljuq, and Indo-Islamic motives by the side of South Indian imports, and at last the Mughal crafts tradition. Whatever the origin of all these elements, however, they have been melted into a very uniform and characteristic style of its own, different from all other aspects of Indian art. Its basic characteristics are those of a young, vigorous and still unsophisticated race, simplicity, generalized observation, intensive self-expression, heroic ideals, romantic sentiments and mystic religiosity. Rājput architecture, though in its principles not differing from that of the Indian Muslims, prefers asymmetrical grouping, trabeate construction and figural decoration. Rājput sculpture is rarely in the round (except part of the cult images), accentuates sweeping outlines and vast, simple

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Rajput Reliefs, I.

Oriental Art Magazine, London,
N.S. X, 3, pp. 163-168, Autumn 1941.

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