

BUDDHISTIC ART

When I saw Indian gods and temple ornaments for the first time I remember feeling, like others, a sense of dislike. They gave me little pleasure on the æsthetic side and as for their religious significance, the words of an old hymn, "The heathen in his blindness, bows down to stocks and stones," rang in my ears every time I looked at them. This it must be frankly acknowledged was the outcome of ignorance and want of sympathy common to all but a very few. It is only of recent years that the general public has had opportunities of knowing anything about Buddhism, either from its historical, archæological or artistic aspect. During the last thirty years, however, a great deal of interest has been felt in the subject, and when Sir Edwin Arnold wrote his beautiful poem, "The Light of Asia," he opened the gates, as it were, to what had been a close preserve. Since then exploration has proceeded with vigour, and collectors from all lands have been busy,—books have been written and photography has faithfully and vividly exhibited to larger audiences the skill, the patience, the fervour of a race of craftsmen, who wrought unceasingly for a full thousand years, and who then, as many years ago, ceased its activities. Of even greater value as a help to the inquiring mind are the museums, affording as they do, ready facilities and intelligently arranged collections for easy reference. In this connection one can only think with admiration of what has been done in the Royal Museum at Berlin in bringing together a classified series of original sculptures and casts of ancient Indian origin and it is devoutly to be hoped that other museums will follow its good example. With all they can do, however, only an imperfect idea of what this art has achieved, will be formed. Wonderful as are the gateways of the Sanchi Tope in Bhopae and the rock-hewn temples of Ellora and Elephanta and Ajunta, and marvelous as are the temples of Mt. Abu and Amaravati and Barhut they were surpassed by the Indian artist emigrants who found refuge in Java after the disaster to their religion in Khatiawar. There, high up on a stony ridge, stands to this day the most magnificent monument of Buddhist art in the whole of Asia.

It is built in seven stories; around five of them are sculptured galleries or pilgrims' procession paths. The entire building is encrusted with sculptures which if placed side by side would extend

nearly three miles. These are not rough and coarse carvings, very far from it: symbolism in exquisite detail is everywhere. The whole scheme was sublime, the idea being for pilgrims to visualize in sculptured form and ordered sequence the complete history and philosophy of the Buddhist faith; an open book for the most ignorant to understand at a glance, telling in plastic art the whole life story and message of Gautama.

How many generations or even hundreds of years were consumed in such a stupendous task, who knows? This makes it all the more marvelous, as it could hardly have been all designed by one man. Yet the continuity in style suggests that however long the work may have taken one original design had been adhered to. Could this be proved, he who thus created this astounding thing might well be acclaimed as the greatest designer who ever lived. There is, too, an evident joyousness throughout the work itself, telling assuredly that patient, lifelong tasks of succeeding generations were the fruits of willing devotion and not of enforced labor.

This indeed is the keynote to an art which developed centuries before the birth of Christ and continued in varied forms of expression for seven or eight centuries after, for just as there were great men of zeal like the Emperor Asoka to encourage art, so must there have been thousands of small men but of great zeal too, determined to give all the energy of their lives to a training and practice for the service and glory of the Master. To those who do not know the rudiments of Buddhistic history it should be recalled that in the thirteenth century A. D. India was to a great extent conquered and overrun by the Mahomedan, Timun, under whose orders the destruction and mutilation of shrines and images were carried on with a venom similar to that of the Puritans in England, three hundred years later. They may have flattered themselves that they were original, when with gunpowder and sledge hammers they ruined delicate stone traceries and made havoc of the effigies of knights and ladies and of the blessed Lord himself, but they were not. Even as then all semblance of a truly religious art was killed in England, so in India did Buddhist art receive its death stroke and from that time till the present it has only survived in the form of smaller objects for temple use.

It is not possible to be exact as to when such objects were first made. Perhaps, when the great works of antiquity were created, a race of metal workers and craftsmen in ivory and other materials

also developed, whose traditions were and still are carried on in Nepal. To the skill and genius of the Wewaris, the artisan class of this country is perhaps due the credit of nearly all the fine work that comes from Tibet.

It is usual to speak of Tibetan work and workmanship—but there has, in truth, been very little of that, though some knowledge of painting and metal work has been acquired by the monks with the help and tuition of Chinese and Nepalese artists. There must have been some extraordinarily talented men among these in bygone days, and Mr. W. T. Heely, an English official in the Indian Civil Service, has made a most interesting translation from an old history of Buddhism written in 1608 by a Tibetan lama named Târanâth, extracts from which are well worth reading.

He says, "In former days human masters who were endowed with miraculous powers produced astonishing works of art. It is expressly stated in the 'Vinaya-agama' and other works that the wall-paintings of those masters were such as to deceive by the likeness to the actual things depicted. For some centuries after the departure of the Teacher, many such masters flourished. After they had ceased to flourish, many masters appeared who were gods in human form: these erected the eight wonderful chaityas of Magadha—the Mahâbodhi, Manjusridund-hubh-îshvara, etc. (the relic-shrines marking the chief sacred places of Buddhism) and many other objects.

"In the time of King Asoka, Yaksha artisans (a race of demi-gods or supernatural beings) erected the chaityas of the eight great places, the inner enclosure of the Vajrâsana.

"In the time of Nâgârjuna many works were performed by Nâga artisans. Thus the works of the Yakshas and Nâgas for many years deceived by their reality. When, in process of time, all this ceased to be, it seemed as if the knowledge of art had vanished from among men. Then for a long course of years appeared many artistic efforts, brought to light by the striving of individual genius, but no fixed school or succession of artists.

"Later, in the time of Buddhapaksha (the identity of this monarch is uncertain) the sculpture and painting of the artist Bimbasâra were especially wonderful, and resembled those early works of the gods. The number of his followers was exceedingly great, and, as he was born in Magadha, the artists of his school were called Madhyadesha artists. In the time of King Shîla there lived

an especially skilful delineator of the gods born in Marwâr, named Shringadhara: he left behind him paintings and other masterpieces like those produced by the Yakshas. Those who followed his lead were called the Old Western school.

"In the time of kings Devapâla and Shrîmant Sharmapâla there lived in Varendra (Northern Bengal) an exceedingly skilful artist named Dhîmân, whose son was Bitpâlo; both of these produced many works in cast-metal, as well as sculptures and paintings which resembled the works of the Nâgas. The father and son gave rise to distinct schools; as the son lived in Bengal, the cast images of the gods produced by their followers were usually called gods of the Eastern style, whatever might be the birthplace of their actual designers. In painting, the followers of the father were called the Eastern school; those of the son, as they were most numerous in Magadha, were called followers of the Madhyadesha school of painting. So in Nepal the earlier schools of art resembled the Old Western school; but in the course of time a peculiar Nepalese school was formed which in painting and casting resembled rather the Eastern types; the latest artists have no special character.

"In Kashmir, too, there were in former times followers of the Old Western school of Madhyadesha; later on, a certain Hasurâya founded a new school of painting and sculpture, which is called the Kashmir school.

"Wherever Buddhism prevailed, skilful religious artists were found, while wherever the Mlechchas (Muhammadans) ruled they disappeared. Where, again, the Tirthya doctrines (orthodox Hinduism) prevailed, unskilful artists came to the front. Although in Pakam (Burma) and the southern countries the making of images is still going on, no specimens of their works appear to have reached Tibet. In the south three artists have had many followers: Jaya, Parojaya and Vijaya."

This shows clearly that there was probably never a time when art in its many forms, but especially in painting and symbolism was not of the most serious importance to professors of the Buddhist faith. The lament that even in his day this art was already on the downward path and that the conquering Moguls had been the cause, is of especial interest as being penned so long ago in far away Tibet.

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