Jnanapravaha

JNANAPRAVAHA MUMBAI

QUARTERLY

OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2021

CONTENTS

Director's Note

Our fresh academic year started on a high note in July. A full house registered early for our yearlong Indian Aesthetics (IA) Diploma and Certificate course, causing some disappointment, as we had to close admissions sooner than usual. The same held true for the Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory (ACT) course. The virtual format, forced upon us by the pandemic, has collapsed space and time, with participants Zooming in from Australia, New Zealand, and even California. All our seminars, lecture series and short courses have witnessed similar robust audiences. Moreover, geographies are no longer a constraint for our scholars who now teach across countries and cities, from their offices and homes. However, once normalcy returns – hopefully next year – the problem of balancing both the physical and virtual worlds will pose a challenge.

Meanwhile, ACT in its latest avatar is delving into subjects such as Dalit Aesthetics, Transnational Modernisms and Colonial Landscapes, apart from Urban Form and other artistic praxes, while IA has also been training its lens on Early India Terracotta and Mass Production, Numismatics and Beginnings of Agriculture, and Consolidation of the Empire 7000 BCE onwards, through archaeological sites stretching from Mehrgarh to Rakhigarhi.

Under our Yoga and Tantra rubric, Prof. Gavin Flood navigated the impossibly difficult and dense terrain of Understanding Hindu Tantra through the warp and weft of chronology, and Shaiva philosophy and belief systems. These topics have come under close enquiry only in the last few decades.

The one-of-its-kind course on Painting: The Arts of the Book in South Asia, is underway – the interconnected worlds of Drawing, Style, Buddhist Manuscripts, Rajput Kingdoms, Imperial Mughal Courts and genres such as Portraiture have so far been addressed by specialists who brought illuminating new perspectives to this hoary and fascinating subject.

Lastly, in our newly-minted series, Panoptical Views on Politics, we presented three sessions which unpacked important concepts and 'isms' in political theory. Prof. Michael Freeden delved into the nuances of Liberalism as liberalisms, as a plural and diverse configuration of political ideas and arguments, and how they always had to struggle against competing ideologies. Prof. Cécile Laborde spoke on Secularism, liberal legitimacy and the requirement of minimal secularism through personal liberty, equal inclusion and public justification. Prof. Sunil Khilnani addressed the practical, ethical and existential problems that arise with Nationalism's resurgence, both in authoritarian and democratic states. The last of this series, held in collaboration with Asia Society India Centre, will be on Islamism by Prof. Faisal Devji.

While the next quarter witnesses the completion of both the semester-long courses – ACT and Arts of the Book in South Asia, the new year will bring several unaddressed lectures and seminar series. The topic selected for the annual Islamic Aesthetics 2022 is the Mamluks, an important medieval dynasty with close links to the Indian subcontinent. International specialists will introduce architecture, pottery, glass, manuscripts, bookbinding, metalwork and trade. Multiple/Multipolar Modernisms will be examined through the regions of Euro-America, and

Asia with special focus on India, Japan and Indonesia; Southasian Painting through a series on Eros; and Criticism and Theory through the Aesthetics and Power of Urban Imaginaries. Do look out for these announcements. I hope you enjoy reading this Quarterly as much as we have enjoyed putting it together.

With the festival season having started with the talismanic blessings of Ganapati, we wish you good health, peace and prosperity.

With my warmest wishes,

Rashmi Poddar PhD.
Director

AESTHETICS

A Folio from the Manuscript of Kalpasutra and Kalakacarya Katha: Jaina Tirthankara Enshrined (upper panel), Celestial Dancers (lower panel). c.1475

JPM's Aesthetics offerings include:
(1) an academic yearlong Postgraduate Diploma/Certificate course in Indian Aesthetics, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (2) a quarterly Postgraduate Certificate course in Yoga & Tantra, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (3) a quarterly Postgraduate Certificate course in Southeast Asian Art and Architecture, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (4) a fortnight of public seminars and lectures in Islamic Aesthetics; (5) an ongoing series of public seminars in Buddhist Aesthetics; (6) an ongoing series of public seminars in Southasian Painting; and (7) occasional academic conferences and workshops in these fields.

Indian Aesthetics

The Indian Aesthetics (IA) course has been launched online for the second time this year. The move to this space continues to offer rich dividends despite the lack of physical interaction. By deliberately restricting our final enrolment to around 60 students since last year, we have been able to ensure a collegial atmosphere and a personal approach, especially important during the Q&A which brings each session to a close. Thirty students have been enrolled in the rigorous IA Diploma where each will receive individual attention. It is especially gratifying that some of our participants join us from overseas each week and that the class this year, too, is a cohort of highly accomplished individuals of varied ages, from many fields.

The course evolves continually, and has this year as well, though it uses a roughly chronological framework and aligns itself with *Rasa* theory, especially in its first half. Resting on history, archaeology, architecture, anthropology, literature, philosophy, and theology, the IA course strives to give students a wide view of the development of aesthetics in the

Indian subcontinent over 5,000 years. Some of the new inclusions in the IA course this year are three sessions on early art found in the subcontinent and a seminar on South Indian temple murals.

The Indian Aesthetics course began in mid-July 2021. Our intent in running this course is to risk throwing students into the subject at the deep end. This is achieved through unique foundational lectures by Jnanapravaha's director, Dr. Rashmi Poddar, that not only introduce the concept of classical Indian aesthetics as the bedrock of the first half of the course, but also try to establish an understanding of form, content and meaning in relation to Indian art. The course leans heavily on the visual arts. Dr. Poddar's application of *Rasa* theory, first applied to dramaturgy in Bharata's *Natyashastra*, to the visual field is especially illuminating. Dr. Poddar's sessions are also foundational in another way. They are extensively illustrated and introduce students to the art of the subcontinent, both painting and sculpture, beginning a vital journey which eventually leads to recognition and familiarity with these works. Using these as examples to illustrate the theoretical underpinnings of the lectures, Dr. Poddar connects them to the *Vedas*, *Puranas* and the most prominent philosophical *darshans* that proliferated in the subcontinent through time. The lectures connect ancient and mediaeval texts to 20th-century scholarship in a meaningful manner. Dr. Poddar's sessions were followed by Dr. Veena Londhe's expertly compressed lectures on Sanskrit poetics and *Rasa* theory, familiarising students with the early aesthetic trajectories of the region, and important philosophers of the subcontinent who wrote and commented on this field.

Female figurine with elaborate jewelry similar to Allahdino jewelry hoard

Figurine with Harappan style headdress from Mari, Mesopotamia, 2400 BC

In August, the exciting module on early art in the subcontinent began with an overview of the Harappan civilisation by Dr. Kurush Dalal, whose engaging lecture style had students enthralled. By presenting the civilisation through the lens of current research,

Dr. Dalal showed how economic linkages reveal the connections between the seemingly discrete cities in which archaeologists have found material remains spanning several centuries. The second session of this module broke new ground with Prof. Naman Ahuja's exploration of Sunga terracotta, ivories and other material remains of this time in terms of 'mass production'. The sheer proliferation of terracotta in several cultures of the time reveals that moulds were used creatively to make objects, which were in a sense produced 'mechanically' and in large numbers, but which were nevertheless unique. Dr. Shailendra Bhandare's opening lecture focussed on the political history of the Satavahana kings as revealed through the numismatics of the time. The second lecture of his session focussed less on this political history and more on how the coinage of this period informs and is informed by the other art of the period, reinforcing Prof. Ahuja's assertion that viewing art and objects such as terracotta and numismatics as 'lesser' traditions is a problematic position. The so-called 'high arts' are not the only ones which reveal the past to us.

Dr. Supriya Rai's lectures on the Buddha's life and teachings were presented with images that gave students a glimpse of the most important Buddhist art in the subcontinent. As a scholar-practitioner of Buddhism, Dr. Rai is uniquely positioned to delve deep into the subject. She used both images and stories to flesh out the concepts of Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*, as well as the Noble Truths and the doctrine of dependant origination, which are essential to gain an understanding of Buddhist philosophy. Briefly explicating the concept of *trikaya* or the three bodies, Dr. Rai, in her next session, illustrated aniconic and iconic Buddha images and spoke of the notions of sovereignty and compassion as seen particularly in *Mahayana* Buddhism. The first half of Ms. Swati Chemburkar's session on tantric Buddhism explicated Indo-Tibetan practices of *Vajrayana*, while the second half delved into these subtle body practices through art historical evidence.

Dr. Viraj Shah's comprehensive introduction to Jainism began with a survey of Jain philosophy and art. The scholar used her special interest in Jain caves of the Western Deccan to illustrate her lectures, and discussed the beginnings of Jainism by delving into the stories of the *tirthankara* Rishabhnath. She also connected the concepts of hero and ascetic to the Jain *tirthankaras*, pointing to the *kshatriya* inspiration
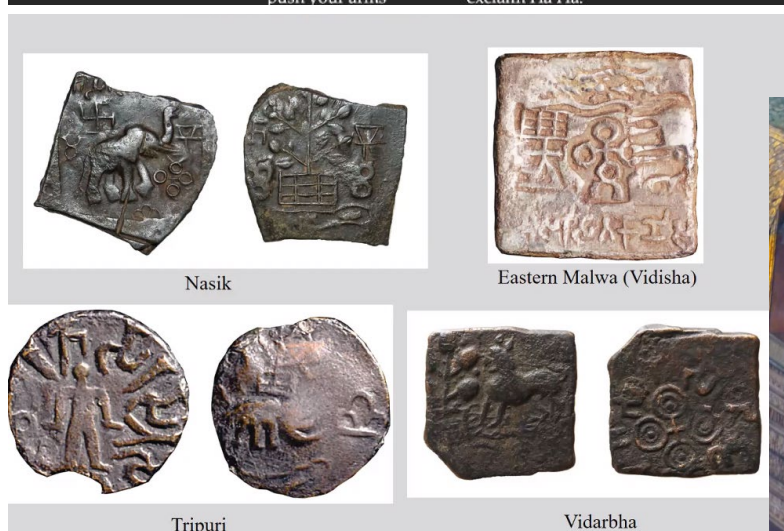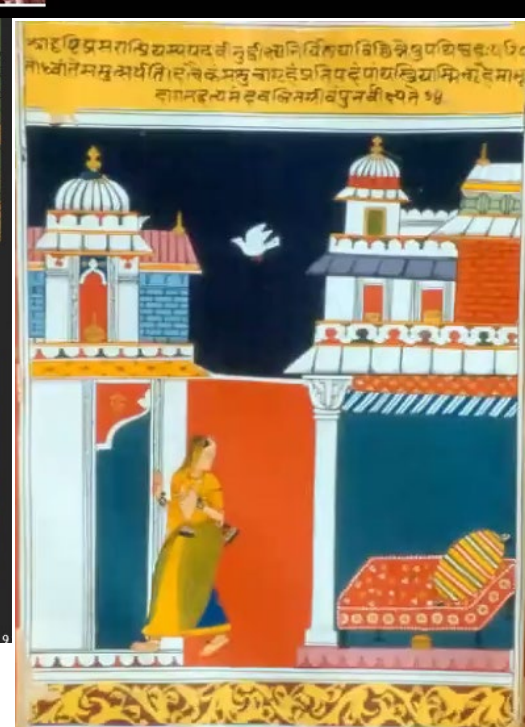
for these ideals. We look forward to Dr. Shah's second session in the next part of the IA course.

It affords all of us at the institution a measure of satisfaction and pride that we have been able to provide curated readings along with synopses, bibliographies and glossaries to IA students which are made available in advance of each lecture on our online learning management portal, JPM Think. The authentic and fairly extensive readings add a great measure of seriousness and depth to the course. Our hope is that most students will make time to read this material and use it to enrich their academic experience. – *J.K.*

Darpanika shringara
Possibly a scene of sundari being dressed by Nanda from Ashvaghosha's play, the Saundarananda on a stupa pillar railing, red sandstone, Kushana period, (Government Museum, Mathura).

1. Expel the stale winds three times from the two side channels and rub the palms

2. Turn your feet outward and alternate turning them to left and right

3. Apply sesame oil to the body and shake

4. Churn the abdomen three times to the left and three times to the right

5. Like throwing rock, fling your left and right arms

6. As if pushing a vajra hold your breath and push your arms

7. Holding the breath, rotate the body and exclaim Ha Ha.

8. Rotate the wrists inwards and outwards

Nasik

Eastern Malwa (Vidisha)

Tripuri

Vidarbha

Yoga & Tantra
PAST PROGRAMMES

Understanding Hindu Tantra

August 3ʳᵈ, 5ᵗʰ, 10ᵗʰ & 12ᵗʰ, 2021, 6:15 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Gavin Flood (Professor of Hindu Studies and Comparative Religion, Oxford University)

A tantric form of the Hindu Goddess Kali. *Folio from a book of Iconography, Nepal, 17ᵗʰ century*

Finally, we were able to welcome Prof. Gavin Flood to deliver a four-day seminar, Introduction to Hindu Tantra, in August 2021. Prof. Flood had been on our wish list for over three years, almost having participated in the Yoga and Tantra Course (Y&T) in 2019. This was a foundational seminar including past participants of Y&T and other courses at Jnanapravaha as well as new participants from across the globe, courtesy the new format of our programming in these times.

Day One set the theme of Hindu Tantra in historical context. The lecture began with a background of the *tantrikas*, the followers of the Tantra*s* in relation to the *vaidikas*, or the followers of the *Vedas*. The meaning of the term 'Tantra' was introduced with Prof. Flood inclined to connect it to the word *'sutra'*, meaning the thread or string that the manuscript was tied together with, coming to mean book or system. Even though the earliest tantric texts date to 5ᵗʰ century of the CE, Tantra found its efflorescence from the 7ᵗʰ-11ᵗʰ centuries CE. The words *'agama'* and 'Tantra' were used interchangeably, especially in relation to some Shaiva tantric texts.

The three areas of *Dharma*, *Vedanta*, and *Samkhya* were discussed as the theological background to the Tantra*s*. The *dharma* of Brahmanical society refers to duty, law, observance in relation to sacrifice (ritual action) to Vedic deities and the *Dharmashastras*, scriptures which are concerned with matters of purity and pollution, and generally ordering all matters of life. These also include the goals of life, initially three in number: *trivarga* (the life-affirming values of *dharma*, *artha and kama*), which later in the 1ˢᵗ millennium CE became *chaturvarga* (including *moksha*). It alludes to a tension between a tendency towards renunciation and the householder way of life that the Tantra*s* seemed to have brought together later on. Tantra*s* are generally considered monotheistic, and the three principal deities: Shiva, Vishnu and Devi find their origin in the *Rig Veda*, Shiva appearing there as Rudra in his earlier form. The 'Tantric Revelation' was considered superior by the *tantrikas* as they believed that the *vaidikas* were inhibited, full of *'shanka'* or doubt, thus their chances for enlightenment were limited. While some *vaidikas* considered the system of Tantra as essentially polluting, thus rejecting it, others came around to accommodating it, and still others embraced it.

The Brahmanical schools of philosophy post 600 CE, particularly the six famous schools of *Samkhya-Yoga*, *Mimamsa-Vedanta*, and *Nyaya-Vaisheshika*, which were systematically codified in the 11ᵗʰ century, excluded the Shaiva systems, even as the commentators of the tantric traditions assumed knowledge about these schools. Prof. Flood took up the school of *Samkhya* in some detail, which

classifies the elements that make up the universe, assuming dualism of self (inner essence with no beginning or end) or *purusha*, and matter or *prakriti*. He pointed out that the understanding of this classification was very important as it was later absorbed into the tantric systems. Here, the self is taken to be trapped in matter and the purpose of life becomes liberation, called *kaivalya* (isolation) in this system, connoting separation of soul from matter. The categories of matter, called *tattvas*, twenty-four in number, evolve and unfold in two ways: subjective and objective. Tied together, they constantly interact with each other, in the sense of a subject having a psychological apparatus that allows for the experiencing of an objective and material world that the self/subject actually inhabits. The Shaiva Tantras added eleven more categories to the twenty-four in their cosmological schema to take the number of *tattvas* to thirty-six.

The second session of the seminar began with a discussion of what makes for a particular tradition to be called tantric. Three factors were mentioned: first, the divinisation of the body; second, the malleability of the deity as substance (*dravya*); and third (intellectually and cosmologically), the Tantras being characterised by the thirty-six *tattvas* (ontic categories/levels of the universe). He next spoke about the traditions, starting with the Higher Path or *Atimarga*, a proto-tantric tradition of ascetics including the well-known *Pashupatas* (*Atimarga* I) and the *Kapalikas* (*Atimarga* III, according to the schema of Alexis Sanderson). The Mantra *Marga* or the Path of Mantras is proper Tantrism as it is initiatory (requiring *diksha* from a guru) to guarantee liberation at death (*videha mukti*). And this path of tantric Shaivism comprised two streams: first, the normative tantric Shaivism which is still practiced in South India, called *Shaiva Siddhanta* (dualistic in nature, where God, soul and the world are eternally distinct entities), and the non-*Saiddhantika* (non-dualistic in nature, where God, world and soul are considered as part of one reality, which is pure consciousness). He further explained the initiation process with the different types of initiates and the rites.

The non-*Saiddhantika* stream comprised the three broader traditions of: *Trika*, after the three Goddesses that make up the tradition (coming out of *Kapalika*, a cremation ground kind of tradition,

made accessible to householders and others by the efforts of theologian and commentator, Abhinavagupta in the 10th/11th centuries, as well as other initiated commentators of the tradition); *Krama* (the Path of the family of forms of Kali); and the Goddess traditions of the *Kula Marga* (the path of the family of Goddesses). The *kula* path is consciously transgressive, breaking taboos of the Vedic religion and going beyond. It was in the minority and considered controversial even at the time, with extreme practices including offerings of sexual fluids, blood, and alcohol to ferocious deities. What was generally encouraged was to have an outer Vedic disposition, causing no outward disturbance in the social order, and internally to have a tantric orientation, a surrender to the Goddess. So also, there were the lay Shaivas practicing *bhakti* from the Shiva *dharmas*, co-existing with initiatory Shaivism practiced within the Mantra *Marga* tradition. Royal patronage helped Shaivism spread from Kashmir to Southeast Asia as the kings believed that through tantric practices were acquired *siddhis* or magical powers that would help them defeat their enemies in battle.

Dr. Gavin Flood speaks during 'Understanding Hindu Tantra'

Prof. Flood refers to *Shaiva Siddhanta* as the core tantric tradition par excellence, patronised and followed by the kings. He pointed out that the tradition began within smaller groups of esoteric ascetic practice which then later developed into an exoteric public state religion with texts dedicated to temple architecture and so on, such as the *Sukshma agama* and *Dipta agama*. The earliest known seed text of the *Shaiva Siddhanta* tradition has elements from as early as the 5th century, the *Nishvasa Tattva Samhita*, meaning the breathing out (of this Tantra) by Shiva. (This text is currently being translated by a

group of scholars, including Prof. Alexis Sanderson, with Dominic Goodall leading the project.) Texts with accompanying theology and ritual practice such as the *Parakhya* and *Kirana* Tantra*s* were written before the 10th century, detailing a structure resting on four feet: doctrine, ritual, yoga, and comportment. (These latter two texts have been translated and edited by Dominic Goodall at the French Institute of Pondicherry). The tradition may have begun as a gnostic and ritual-heavy tradition in Kashmir, but in its spread to South India, especially in Tamil Nadu, it acquired a devotional flavour with the incorporation of *bhakti* poetry (written in Tamil) of the *Nayanmar* saints into the canon, developing an independent life of its own.

He provided an in-depth understanding of the theology of the *Shaiva Siddhanta* tradition, including the three distinct ontological realities of: the soul (*pashu*/beast), God (*pati* who is *nishkala*, formless and beyond knowledge), and the universe (*pasha* or bond). Souls are eternal, bound to matter, and reincarnated over and over again according to their karma. The telos, as it were, of the universe is to then help the souls free themselves of constraining matter. God stands outside matter and acts upon it to evolve it. And then causes the universe to withdraw to its quiescent state. God is worshipped in the form of *Sadashiva* with His five faces, and from His top mouth came out the Tantra*s* of the *Shaiva Siddhanta*. It helped that he asked questions and tried giving answers to those questions as provided by the tradition. Why does God create

the universe? Because it is His nature to do so, and because it enables the liberation of the soul. He has five acts: He creates, maintains, destroys (the lower universe), conceals Himself (why would He do that? Because it's part of His play, His *krida*, sport), and reveals Himself through His grace.

The *Kirana* Tantra asks how he could create the universe if He lacks a body. The explanation given is that He creates the world through *Iccha*, His Will, His *Iccha Shakti*, Power of Will. And it is God who impels the Pure Creation (*Shuddha Sarga*) of the universe with His will and appoints a lower deity, *Ananta*, to create the Impure Creation (*Ashuddha Sarga*) in which we humans live. *Ananta's* body is pure (*shuddhadeha*) and through him are revealed the twenty-eight nominal scriptures of the *Shaiva Siddhanta* tradition.

The third lecture introduced the non-Saiddhantika traditions at some length. Being 'idealistic' traditions, they seem to have no idea of the world outside that of Consciousness. He talked about a hard version of reality where the world is Consciousness and a softer version of reality where the world is a manifestation or emanation of Consciousness: both positions are found here.

The main topic of the day was the *Netra* Tantra or the Tantra of Shiva's Eye. In this text referred to as *Amritesha*, *Mrityunjaya*, *Mrityunjit*, or *Amriteshvarabhairava*, His consort is *Amritalakshmi*, who asks Shiva questions, allowing for the

transmission of this Tantra. Prof. Flood, who's been interested in this text since his student days, spoke of this Tantra as steeped in *kula* ideas and practices even as it is non-transgressive in nature. A text very close to the popular *Svaccchandabhairava* Tantra in the Kashmir valley, the *Netra* Tantra, might have allowed for the entry of *kula marga* into Shaivism. The text comprises 22/24 chapters and its chapters 6, 7, and 8 enlist and describe yoga of the gross (*sthula*), subtle (*sukshma*) and highest (*para*) forms. Chapter 6 alludes to its royal audience through the *netra* mantra that protects (provides a *kavacha*) a *sadhaka* (practitioner) not only from illness but also from the evil eye of the enemy. Prof. Flood quoted Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher, who explains the characteristic difference between a modern and traditional mind in his book, *A Secular Age*, through the concepts of a 'buffered' and 'porous' self. The traditional and premodern mind is porous to supernatural forces that can possess and obstruct daily life, and the mantra*s* provide a buffering which is not available to the modern person because of his/her lack of belief of the influence of these forces in their life. *Netra* Tantra is potentially the earliest known Indic text to have mentioned the *chakra* system. In chapter 7 of the text, a *sadhaka* through *dhyana* or visualisation of the complex channels and *nadi* system pervading his subtle body could achieve a divine body (*divya deha*) bereft of disease / non-old age, and thus be capable of accomplishing immortality. Referencing Bjarne Wernicke-Olesen, who also in the 2019 iteration of the Yoga and Tantra Course had introduced us to his model of what he has called 'Shakta Anthropology' based on the practices of *kula prakriya* and Tantra *prakriya* (as referred to by the commentator of the text, Kshemaraja), with a particular concept of the self, divinised through *amrita* (nectar) and an esoteric power that these practices try to access as mentioned in this chapter. Chapter 8, more gnostic and conceptual in its orientation, reinterprets the eight-fold yoga in terms of filling the schema with differentiated knowledge of Shiva.

The fourth session had Prof. Flood theorising from the contemporary categories of the person and self as they appeared in these traditions. Drawing largely from the *Netra* Tantra but also the Tantra*s* in general, he shared his hierarchical model of the: Permeable Self (self as social actor), Processual Self (self as seeker making a vertical journey of self-development through the body aided by ritual and practice), and – Gnostic Self (identity of the 'indexical I' or the 'relational/everyday I' with the absolute I of Pure Consciousness).

He then elucidated at length the three main positions argued for by the theologians and commentators during the heyday of Tantra from the point of view of *Shaiva Siddhanta* in opposition to Buddhism, and the *Pratyabhijna* School (School of Recognition) of non-dualism represented by Abhinavagupta and his student Kshemaraja. Bhatta Ramakantha (950-1000 AD), the prominent commentator of the *Shaiva Siddhanta* tradition, in opposition to the Buddhists, maintained that the self is permanent, while the flow of objects perceived by this self are impermanent. The Buddhist position being that there is no-self separate from the impermanent mental events. Abhinavagupta agrees to a degree with Ramakantha, but argues for a self that is one being, one shared 'I-ness'. While Kshemaraja makes a persuasive articulation of the non-dualistic gnostic Shaiva/ *Shakta* philosophy by arguing for this self or I-ness to be the Goddess, Bhagavati, *Citi*, Consciousness in the female noun. And in this language of I-ness, she is the 'Nameless One', the *Anakhya*, who manifests Herself as the Sky of Consciousness (*Cid Gagana*).

Ending on a rather universal and particular note, bringing in focus the very nature of human life, *humanum*, Prof. Flood contended that it has been seen in the history of civilisations that our (human) aspiration (as seekers) has been to give our lives a vertical dimension (seeking spiritual transformation) through text and practice toward a sky of consciousness, having a socio-political dimension as the underlying foundational ground. And in the particular tradition of the Goddess seeking the vertical dimension through a divinised body, 'entextualised', coded with a text of tradition written on it through embodied ritual and practice. With the transformation of the Processual Self beyond the everyday conventional world of *dharma*, our freedom in the Sky of Consciousness can be realised, 'recognising' our identity with it. This Sky of Consciousness is the Goddess, *Anakhya*, the thirteenth Kali, the Nameless One, or Pure Consciousness – also our ultimate identity. – **G.S.**

Southasian Painting
PAST PROGRAMMES

Black: The Colour of Knowing

August 18th, 2021, 6:15 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Molly Emma Aitken (Associate Professor in the Art History Department at The Graduate Center, CUNY and the Art Department at CUNY's City College of New York)

Hymns to creation, such as those in the Rig Veda, do not need chromatic allusions when pondering on non-existence, the absence of space, sky, and even of primordial water, bottomlessly deep. The intuitive response is to visualise blackness when engaging with this literature. However, moving centuries away from conceptions of no-thingness, the scholar Dost Muhammad's preface to the Bahram Mirza Album, circa sixteenth-century C. E, presents God's medium of creation not as blinding white or gold, but, through a cross-circuit of imagery, declares that His pens of sunrays and moonbeams produce the black eyelashes of houris and the black tresses of beauties on the canvas of loveliness.

Dost Muhammad's imagery is possible only in a milieu where knowledge is apprehended as black ink on paper but before the advent of this medium engravings and inscriptions were the predominant means of communication. In this context blackness was visually perceived as the shadow of the stone-wrought text against the pillar on which it existed in relief or as the dark indentations of script embedded in tablets. A narrative that entangles the tropes of inscrutability and articulation associated with darkness and crystallised separately in the two poetic references mentioned above is that of a 'Shadow Cave' near present-day Jalalabad that entered Chinese lore around 400 C. E. Tale has it that Shakyamuni Buddha, after subjugating a dragon stayed in the grotto as a shadow visible only from a distance. An eminent Chinese monk-pilgrim created a replica of this cave on Mount Lu and inserted a painted icon inside that was extolled for its qualities of darkness, dimness and obscurity rather than for being a luminous manifestation. The icon existed, but not quite.

After presenting, ahistorically, literary instances that emphasise the persistent tensions established above, tensions that saturate the epistemology of black, Prof. Molly Aitken focused on black's linkages to codification by bringing to attention the history of paper: its arrival from China to Persia, and then by around 1400 C. E. to South Asia. Commensurate with this history is that of how the pigment black emerged to facilitate a powerful emphasis on calligraphic practice and line-drawing in the Persian and South Asian cultural economy. Prof. Aitken detailed carefully the nature of paper's materiality, the techniques by which paper was prepared, sized and burnished to receive black pigment, predominantly lampblack or siyahi in South Asia which was produced by adding a binding agent to soot distilled from burning oil. The calligraphic line was produced by an elegant reed pen and the artist's

Fragment from a drawing of a yogi, Bikaner, after a Mughal model, early 17th century, lampblack on paper, 6 x 8 cm., private collection, previously in the collection of the Usta painters of Bikaner

fine drawing made possible by a tapering squirrel-hair brush.

One necessarily needs to reference artistic practice in the Persian tradition in order to understand its South Asian counterpart in the context of drawings for manuscript painting, carved objects, and architectural projects. This revealed the practice of drawing as a way of honing knowledge through persistent repetition of immediately observed objects and figures or those done from memory in order to ensure the mastery of their final incarnation. Moreover, drawing was an invaluable resource for creating visual typologies and models as well as framing individual units of narrative that would impact the overall compositional paradigms of a finished work. Drawings could take the form of thumbnail sketches on paper or complete compositions carefully inked; the latter in South Asia were referred to as 'siyah qalam'. If the black-line work was animated and mottled by ink washes it was known as 'nim qalam'. In certain cases, the line was modified by subtle shading known as 'pardaz', which, however, did not necessarily adhere to the logic of a single light-source.

Dr. Molly Emma Aitken speaks during 'Black: The Colour of Knowing'

The art historian David Roxburgh has conducted a detailed study of Persian albums composed solely of drawings as design processes between circa 1400– 1450 C. E. in order to understand materials and techniques of drawing and transfer of designs, a draughtsman's repertoire of mark-making, and methods deployed to produce aggregates of units for the final compositions of manuscript painting. What emerges clearly is that drawings were ascribed a creative currency in their own right. Seen as more than 'processual compost' the early Persian tradition of preserving drawings belies the art critic John Berger's observation that drawings as we know them today began to exist when artists

gained a relatively high degree of 'autobiographical freedom' and that in a hieratic, anonymous tradition they are unnecessary; the statement evinces his preponderant sensitization to European artistic practice. That said, however, Prof. Aitken pointed out that the line in the South Asian tradition did not valourise individuality; it was a formal vocabulary rather than a performative gesture. It was the embodiment of hard-earned tradition, transmuted, interiorised, predominantly in black.

Drawing on practices in South Asia, Prof. Aitken devoted a considerable section of her lecture on presenting samples of the cultural lineage of drawing that can be ascribed to a northern Indian dynasty since the 1590's C.E. to the present day– the Ustas of Bikaner who hailed originally from Herat. The collection consists of six hundred extant drawings dispersed from the region since the 1950's C. E. The drawings– whether arabesque designs for the nakkashi manoti architecture unique to the region, sketches of a woman washing and wringing her hair in numerous poses, Durga as Mahisasuramardini, imperial portraits, or diagrams with sections in which names of colours were written in black to enable a neophyte to execute a finished painting on the basis of this model– energetically marry pictorial values and idioms that were associated with Sanskrit and Hindi literature and Hindu and Jain culture as well as the more somber Mughal conventions crystallized by shading, intuitive perspective, extensive studies of nature, and fealty to individual likenesses. An imperial portrait in deep, velvety black from the 1870's C. E. demonstrates that contemporaneous developments in the field of photography were not lost on the practitioners of the region's syncretic art. Drawings were generated profusely through the process of 'nakal' or copying, and transferred onto other sheets of paper by a process termed 'pouncing' that was used by Persian draughtsmen and is described in detail by Roxburgh. Artistic works were not only beholden to the patronage of the ruling dynasty but evince an egalitarian sociability by the fact that prices of several drawings were scrawled on the surface indicating that they were intended for sale amongst the local community. The dissemination of living, evolving traditions occurred more or less invariably in black.

Thus far, black has been portrayed as a medium of rigorous technical, calculative, objective,

analytical modes of apprehension largely by cultural practitioners committed to internalising and transmitting the knowledge of their craft in the interest of sustaining a lineage of artistic production even as traditions necessarily evolve over time. Assuredly, drawings that were created as finished works in their own right were a significant source of sophisticated pleasure and objects of a connoisseurship that entailed appreciation of the mastered line but it was really the manuscript paintings that deployed black to create mood and arouse emotion– particularly those that depicted the torrential monsoon of the Indian subcontinent both in the Rasikapriya and Ragamala genres– that were a particularly special source of aesthesia to their patrons. Such works were catalysts to specific states of mind, to emotions that were subtle culminations of specialist knowledge of aesthetic conventions and modes of making sensual delight. The evolution of these works between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries C. E. witnessed the animated, sanguine nature of synergy between those idioms that drew on Sanskrit and Jain precepts, which Prof. Aitken terms 'classical Indic', and those allied to experiments in studied appearances– idioms archetypically associated with the Rajput and Mughal courts respectively.

The differences are centred around the importance ascribed to the monsoon, and its mode of portrayal, by artists under Rajput and Mughal suzerainty. In *Illustration of chapter 10, verse 24 of Keshavdas' Rasikapriya*, circa 1630 C. E. by the Mewari painter Sahibdin a thunderstorm passes overhead but leaves the glossy brilliance of flowering trees, birds, and architectural elements unsullied even though

the dark green of the ground is pensive. Paan boxes, water pots and wine pitchers are arranged for the pleasure of the protagonists and urge the latter to pay no heed to the weather. The bright colour contrasts and patterns and objects that satiate the senses of the painting's protagonists are elements that evoke sukha in the viewer and are the primary level of representation in the classical Indic tradition. The manuscript is divided into contiguous compartments in which the protagonists are distributed and these internal structures that narrate the story constitute the secondary level of representation. The monsoon belongs to a tertiary level of representation that codes transitory emotions. The sound of thunder is subverted by metaphor and is depicted by a figure playing 'drums of pleasure'. However, the rain is not inconsequential. The art historian B. N. Goswamy postulates that painters used a number of techniques to accentuate the brilliance of their painted visions and demonstrate their mastery and sensitivity. Poets emphasised arousal by what is seen, heard, or smelt and the depiction of a thunderstorm through stylised clouds executed by a technique termed 'puddling' becomes a visual counterpart of the poet's repertoire. The monsoon is a physical repository of transitory aesthetic emotion; mood inheres in it.

However, Ragamala painting provided a fertile meeting point for Rajput and Mughal artists where the monsoon in several Rajput compositions was no longer an 'additive' object that glittered amongst various facets on the painted page to vie for the attention of the rasika, but became, in the wake of Mughal visual preference, an immersive plane of colour that drenched the protagonists who were

no longer divided in compartments for narrative coherence but interacted with each other in a mono-scenic panorama. Darkness saturates the settings of an eighteenth century C. E. Mewar *Sursagar* manuscript to a degree that would have been experienced as unpalatable by many seventeenth century C. E. artists such as Sahibdin and even by connoisseurs. The decorative luminosity signifying sukha for an aesthete trained in the classical idiom is subverted. However, it may be safely posited that no Rajput court artist would portray the monsoon with the intensely somber palette characteristic of the eighteenth-century C. E. Mughal 'Yale Ragamala' series in which a mass of grey terraces, obfuscating clouds and hazy, dark green landscapes merge night with monsoon and seem to set the tone for all musical modes.

While Rajput court painters arrived at a middle ground in terms of their pictorial values and stylistic conventions and the turn towards Mughal aesthetic norms could not indeed be ignored, one notices reverse traffic in the narrative as the cognoscenti of Mughal patrons, by the later seventeenth century C. E., sought to inhabit the experiences of the rasika who exerts a centrifugal force on the orientation of all the varied arts in the corpus of Sanskrit aesthetic theory. During this period, Mughal connoisseurs were becoming sensitised to Indic poetics and were bringing to bear their own acculturated memories and emotions to the experience of rasa. Thus, they could never surrender their predilection towards studied appearances and therefore the monsoon would continue to saturate the precincts

of a Ragamala manuscript page. That said, however, Mughal patrons were keen to experience shringara rasa through the Ragamala genre. However, under their auspices the catalysts of rasa in Indian court painting underwent a transformation and now black and grey tones became emblematic of the palette of passion in eighteenth-century C. E. court painting. After decades of dispersed, unregulated interchange of poetry, songs, and paintings, Persian and Hindi practitioners and patrons condoned the strategy of monochromatic atmospheric immersion and agreed that rasa could inhere in a dominant colour value suffusing a scene. In the genres described above, the 'dominant atmosphere' of collegiality mobilises variations of blackness as an instrument by which Rajput painters and Mughal connoisseurs could inhabit the habits of narration and structures of emotions, indeed the very ontology of their contemporaries. Black blazes the path to the habitat of otherness. It embodies the challenge to look, not for commonality, but for difference, and *then* begin the work of moving towards one another, of living with compromise, a task never aimed at completion.

One can now circle back to the beginning and posit that although black is conceived of as the existence before existence in our collective imagination, the practices of dissemination of knowledge it facilitates as delineated above are, quite literally, only rites of passage. Mastery of hand, astuteness of recollection, the calling to live with otherness, finds no finality. To iterate, black simply marks a journey. – *S.H.*

The Local, The Worldly and The Transcendent: Where are We in Indian Painting?

August 25th, 2021, 6:15 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Molly Emma Aitken (Associate Professor in the Art History Department at The Graduate Center, CUNY & the Art Department at CUNY's City College of New York)

This session covered the basic and broad differences in styles as seen in Southasian paintings in precolonial India – Persian, Classical Indic, Indo-Islamic, Mughal and Rajput. Prof. Aitken demonstrated what the key features of each style meant, through a reading of paintings from manuscripts like the *Vasanta Vilasa, Chandayana, Rasikapriya*, as well as those from the Ragamala series, among many others. In addition,

she also discussed various aspects of style.

Style is not just about identification or classification but is essential for the comprehension of the meaning of a painting. A style is considered a style when there are other styles to compare it with. Style is a coherence of qualities, and therefore, the greater the number of qualities (line, colour, pattern, etc.),

the easier it becomes to identify or delineate a style. When considering styles, one also needs to look at tools that were used to create the work of art, the medium it was painted on, the pigments used, etc.

Bhairava Raga, from an illustrated Ragamala, 1591, Chunar, 26 x 15 cm, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, IS 40-1981.

Style is also about relationships, and the title of the session, 'Where are we?', is not to be understood in the geographical or cartographic sense, but rather by relationships and affiliations. A different style does not have a negative connotation, it is only a marker of identity. Style differences are how different communities of painters and patrons spoke with each other and spoke about each other – it was a very important mode of cultural communication. This also led to both artists and patrons having the choice of a particular style to work with or preference of one over the other.

It is important to emphasise that there is no pure, original style. Jain painting shares characteristics with earlier palm-leaf paintings from Eastern India. As different painting styles began to grow in the 1400s and 1500s, they began to develop their own distinct idiom. It gets a little tricky to identify the provenance of paintings, particularly those of the Persianate style – were they made in Shiraz, for example, or were they painted in the Shirazi style in India?

The *Chandayana*, which is a pre-Mughal manuscript, is an excellent illustration of the way stylistic differences were being handled. The story is made up of many different traditions, and the illustrations reflect the different cultural registers and intellectual traditions the story is based on. Maulana Daud, the author, wrote the text in a dialect of Hindavi, using a Turkic script. While the story is a Sufi Persian one, it is set in India and is about two Hindu lovers. It is a story of mystical love in which the love object, Chanda, is a means to see the beauty of God and to experience God.

The *Chandayana* manuscripts extant today show that the artists who painted them and the patrons who commissioned them were aware of each other's work. While each of the manuscripts have a distinct style, the underlying similarity in composition suggests a lot of conversation and sharing of drawings.

Mughal paintings and Rajput paintings are often pitted against each other, which is way too simplistic since distinctions between the two are too broad and reductive. Early Mughal-period manuscript paintings have a strong affiliation to the Persianate style, but in the later period, develop or transition to an Indo-Islamic style. This is well demonstrated by Abd al-Samad's work for Emperor Akbar, as over time, Mughal culture becomes deeply hybrid, with a keen awareness of both Indic traditions and Persianate traditions. Mughal art was an illustration of how the two traditions intersected and blended together. The Rajput style was patronised by Hindu rulers, and hence the name. Every Rajput court during Mughal times was developing its own style of painting. Though the Rajput courts did their utmost to ensure their styles were nothing like that of the Mughal court, they did follow the Mughal model

of patronising art and painters. One of the spaces where the Mughal and Rajput worlds intersected was in music, due to a shared cultural environment and exchange. The result was the Ragamala series of paintings.

Prof. Aitken stressed the importance of being conscious when referring to a painting style. When a painting is called Persianate, we are acknowledging that the style originated in the Central Asian or Persianate world. Similarly, when a painting is referred to as having a Classical Indic style, it refers to those paintings that illustrate Sanskrit text and poetry. To give another example, the *firangi* or European-style paintings that Mughal artists adopted remained Mughal paintings with a European touch and never became European paintings.

Prof. Aitken cautioned on how referring to a painting style could also lead to one becoming judgemental. While judging is an important part of connoisseurship, it should always be exercised within context. – *S.G.*

The Indic art of the book: Buddhist and Hindu manuscripts from Nepal and Northern India

August 30th, 2021, 6:15 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Jinah Kim (George P. Bickford Professor of Indian and South Asian Art, Harvard University)

Dr. Jinah Kim speaks during 'The Indic art of the book: Buddhist and Hindu manuscripts from Nepal and Northern India'

There was much to take away from Dr. Jinah Kim's fascinating and thought-provoking lecture, where she exposed the audience to a wide array of stunning

Buddhist and Hindu manuscript paintings from the 12th-century-CE Indian subcontinent.

Despite the limited time of the lecture (around two hours), Dr. Kim packed in a wide range of detail in her talk – from the cross-cultural, multi-religious appropriation of the Indic manuscript format, serving as a reminder of shared goals and values, to the intersectional visual strategies of Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu manuscripts. In her lecture, she discussed how the manuscripts become nuanced sites of interplay between text, image and rituals of esoteric Buddhist or even Hindu practice.

Dr. Kim explored the salient characteristics of the Indic book – unique in its pothi format, and its shifting value as a cultural object cutting across social, ritual, intellectual and symbolic boundaries. In her analysis, she explained how the materiality of the *pothi* format, its portability, and the manner of

its reading/viewing were fundamental to its design. The portability of manuscripts enabled them to migrate from vast geographical distances and places, or even within one place – "from a storeroom to a pedestal" – as well as shifted their perceived value as precious religious gifts, powerful cultic objects, or insignias of religious authority.

Collating dispersed folios belonging to a single manuscript that are usually viewed individually, Dr. Kim introduced the audience to the experiential aspects of viewing these manuscripts in possibly an 'original' context in which each painting was prepared and used. Outlining the connection between text and image, she highlighted how the text on the illustrated manuscript invokes a directionality in the manner in which each folio must be handled, since folios in a *pothi*-format manuscript need to be flipped horizontally to offer legibility.

She highlighted how an emic Southasian understanding of the *pothi* format as a *mala* is underscored by a relational seriality where every folio becomes a structural unit of the manuscript. Making a *mala*, she suggests, requires a seriality – in which objects follow one another sequentially without being governed by a rigid hierarchical principle. In doing so, she demonstrated how the present-day audience's experience of viewing them in museum frames that appear to be self-contained inhibits the understanding of how differently they could have been read as a collection by a reader contemporary to their production.

Her observations were insightful and nuanced, linking mnemonic Devices of the rosary and the manuscript together, while showing how individual pages of the manuscript were not just part of the text/book as a whole but were designed visually, through conscious choices where texts and images both in their semantic and visual aspects were read together as a complete composition – either strung together as a *mala* – or asserted a more structural presence mimicking the architectural logic of a temple when the individual folios were turned and read.

Seeing them sequentially, along with the sound images of the scriptures being read aloud, fundamentally modifies the reception of the manuscript, providing an accumulated experience of seeing mental images which probably evoked different layers of meaning and experience to the audience for which they were made. – *P.S.*

Illustrated folios, AsP, Bharat Kala Bhavan, BHU, Varanasi, Laksmanasena 47 year (ca.1216)

Rajput Painting: Concepts and Realities

September 15th, 2021, 6:15 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Daniel Ehnbom (Associate Professor of Art Emeritus, University of Virginia)

Scholarship on Indian manuscript painting has emphasised the difference between two distinct stylistic traditions, one of which flourished at the court of the Mughal Empire and the other at the courts of the various Rajput dynasties in the regions of Western India and Northern Hills, which formed the periphery of the Mughal Empire. Despite the complex historical relationships between the two major traditions, modern scholarship has tended to emphasise their separate identities as distinct, inviolable schools with contrasting stylistic and aesthetic ideals.


Dr. Daniel Ehnbom speaks during 'Rajput Painting: Concepts and Realities'

In his lecture, Prof. Daniel Ehnbom traced the roots of historiography regarding the distinction between the two styles, beginning with Ananda Coomaraswamy, who invented the typology of 'Rajput Style'.

Prof. Ehnbom explained the "genius" of Coomaraswamy's taxonomic classification, which in the course of further research on the subject became an extremely useful tool to ground the nascent field of art historical research on painting. However, he also pointed out the implications of these categories, as Coomaraswamy's distinction between the two types of painting gave the 'schools' characteristics that were essentially based on opposing value systems. Thus, according to Coomaraswamy, Mughal painting was characterised as naturalistic, rational, and political, which was due to the largely 'materialistic' concerns of the Mughal emperors, while contemporary Rajput painting was seen as lyrical, emotional, erotic and spiritual. Prof. Ehnbom highlighted how Coomaraswamy imbued the styles with these opposing value systems, which influenced later historians and continues to influence much of the research today. Over time, this binary stylistic taxonomy based on formal stylistic qualities was entangled and shaped by the Hindu-Muslim communal discourse of modern India, further tearing them apart.

Prof. Ehnbom highlighted how the binary aesthetic categories of 'Mughal' and 'Rajput', though a handy tool to provide an epistemological/taxonomic structure for our understanding, still hinders our understanding of the larger cultural milieu of shared differences. Prof. Ehnbom traced the emergence and interaction of these two painting traditions, beginning with the pre-Mughal and pre-Rajput traditions that preceded the 16th century, and highlighted the common typological forms, visual tropes, and structures shared by both Mughal and Rajput painting. These commonalities highlight the deep-rooted interconnectedness of the styles despite apparent differences and necessitate an examination of why these structures were uniquely adapted by their patrons and what meaning they may have had for them. – *P.S.*
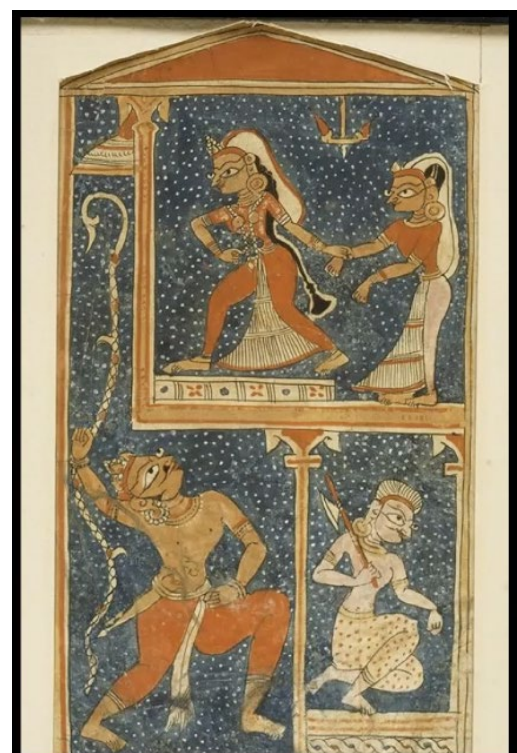
FORTHCOMING PROGRAMMES

Eros in Indian Painting

January 19th, 20th, & 21st, 2022, 6:15 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Molly Emma Aitken (Associate Professor in the Art History Department at The Graduate Center, CUNY & the Art Department at CUNY's City College of New York)

Online Seminar Series | Platform: Zoom

Detail from a page of an illustrated Rasikapriya by Keshavdas, Sahibdin and his workshop, c. 1630, Mewar
Opaque watercolor on paper, Government Museum of Art, Udaipur

These three sessions introduce the preeminent mood in Southasian arts during the Mughal era: erotic love. The theme of eros transcended religion, ethnicity and geographic ties, political affiliation and intellectual heritage to foster and even symbolise social cohesion. Eros was a thematic medium of seeming infinite depth and breadth into which singers, painters and poets could fold myriad layers of intricate meaning for people of spiritual and urbane knowledge to discern. It became a way of thinking about all forms of difference and about the yearning for all forms of cohesion, above all for the yearning to unite with the Divine. Eros triggered the lowest and the highest in the human soul, and in works of art about love, people discovered one another's sensibilities and acumen. Love, beautiful and thrilling, offered the most exalted mood for the expression of creative genius. In the Islamicate world, India was the land of love so that eros was also, arguably, a poetics of longing for life in the subcontinent. This is an art history masterclass, and all three sessions focus on Mughal responses in the visual arts to the love iconography of classical Indian literature and music. The first session introduces Mughal eros through a single remarkable masterpiece: the illustrated 1591 Hindi poetic treatise by Keshavdas, called the *Rasikapriya*, that the master painter Sahibdin prepared with his workshop at Udaipur for the Maharana of Mewar in the 1630s. The second session is about paintings that cast ancient Indian archetypes of female beauty, like the *alasya kanya*, as beloveds in Mughal albums or *muraqqa'*; *muraqqa'* were bound codices of framed painting and calligraphy. The third is about the circa 1760s Bundi/Kota- style 'Boston Ragamala,' so-called because it is at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. With these three topics, we wade into the ocean of *sringara*, the aesthetic mood of eros, in Mughal times.

CRITICISM & THEORY

Apnavi Makanji | Untitled - Significant Other | 2018 | Courtesy: Vadehra Art Gallery

JPM's Criticism & Theory offerings include (1) a Certificate course in Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (2) an ongoing series of public seminars and lectures in Indian Intellectual Traditions; and (3) occasional academic conferences and workshops in these fields.

Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory

Un bar aux Folies Bergère [*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*] (1881-2)
Manet, Edouard

This year, the Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory (ACT) course has been spread out across four months and is taking place online, allowing us to welcome an incredible cohort of 77 students who are participating from across India, as well as from around the world. Although online teaching continues to be challenging and strenuous, the opportunity that it has provided us of being able to bring together a diverse group of students from across the boundaries of discipline, professions, artistic practices and even time zones has been an immensely rewarding experience.

At the moment, we have just about wrapped up the first quarter of the course, which has been devoted to a rigorous introduction to the foundational thinkers and texts of Western philosophical thought on aesthetics. We had the privilege of welcoming back Prof. Arun Iyer of IIT Mumbai, who led us over five weeks through an expansive terrain of thought and debate from Plato to Foucault. It never ceases to be intriguing how deeply relevant and important a thinker like Plato has remained despite the more than two millennia that separate us from his world. Prof. Iyer's careful reading of Plato's *Republic*, the *Ion* and the *Symposium* opened up a rich and provocative discussion around the power art has on society, leading us into a spirited conversation on

the question of censorship. Plato's acknowledgement of an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry also provided the class with a crucial first glimpse into a fundamental debate that continues to rage even in our contemporary world. It was from this provocative juncture that we moved to Aristotle's *Poetics*, a text whose more measured stance allowed further nuance to enter our discussion on the power and purpose of art in society.

With the ancient Greeks acting as our philosophical lighthouses, we proceeded to make a daring leap across both time and space to arrive at Kant's seminal treatise on aesthetics, *The Critique of Judgement*. Never an easy philosopher to grapple with, Kant's claim of the universal validity of aesthetic judgements regardless of their subjective origins initially generated a heated debate, which was further fuelled by his view that judgements of taste are universal because they are essentially disinterested. Prof. Iyer's patient elaboration of Kant's demonstration of how this disinterestedness is in fact key to art's power was important. That we seek to possess or consume objects of pleasure, and we seek to promote moral goodness, but are able to appreciate beauty without feeling the need to put it to 'productive' use, was a critical revelation that definitively steered us into the modern world. Through our session on Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, we moved from Kant's more normative approach into a more descriptive discourse on the role art plays in revealing to us the true nature of freedom. Hegel's notion of the transcendent quality of art that moves beyond the mere description of the drudgeries and dependencies of everyday life into an *ideal* depiction of freedom through both its form as well as its content served as a critical junction to us as we proceeded to the 19th century by way of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*

OLYMPIA AND THE INTRUSIVE REALITY OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER

one way the principle of the body's visibility. If the body of Titian's *Venus* is visible, if she gives herself to our gaze, it is because there is this space, this luminous, discrete, lateral and golden source which surprises her, which surprises her in some ways among her and among us. Here is this nude woman, dreaming of nothing, looking at nothing, and there is this light which, indiscreetly, strikes or caresses her, and us viewers who surprise the game between this light and this nudity.

source indicated, which is assumed by the very lighting of the woman, this luminous source, where is it, if not here, precisely where we are? That is to say, there are not three elements – nudity, lighting and we who surprise the game of nudity and lighting, there is [rather] nudity and us, we who are in the very place of lighting; in other words, it is our gaze which, in opening itself upon the nudity of *Olympia*, illuminates her. It is we who render it visible; our gaze upon the *Olympia* is a lantern, it is that which carries the light; we are responsible for the visibility and for the nudity of *Olympia*. She is nude only for us since it is we who render her nude and we do so because, in looking at her, we illuminate her, since the whole of our gaze and the lighting add up to one and the same thing. Look at a picture and the lighting, it is no more than one and the same thing in a canvas like this one and that is why we are – every viewer finds this – necessarily implicated in this nudity and we are to a certain extent responsible. You see how an aesthetic transformation can, in a case such as this, provoke a moral scandal.

Edouard Manet, *Olympia* (1863)

Titian, *Venere di Urbino* [*Venus of Urbino*] (1538)

and emerged into the 20th-century critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

Nietzsche's conceptualisation of the intellectual dichotomy between the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*, the continual struggle between the realms of order and disorder over human existence and their ultimate amalgamation into the form of the Greek tragedy had a profound influence on our subsequent discussions on the project of modernity. That we cannot have one without the other – an acknowledgement of Hegel's long shadow over Nietzsche's own thinking – also brought us almost full circle, back to Plato's own warnings about the true power of art. As we moved through the 20th century through the eyes of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, both Nietzsche and Hegel remained firm beacons guiding our understanding. While the towering figure of Marx has not yet been tackled in this first month of the course, the deep permeation of his legacy in the work of both Benjamin and Adorno was acknowledged as we confronted the bloody ideological battle between communism and fascism through Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, or rather *Technological Reproducibility* as Prof. Iyer more precisely indicated. The hopeful and even defiant declaration at the end of Benjamin's seminal treatise that the 'aestheticisation of politics' could be effectively defeated by the 'politicisation of art' was somewhat more pragmatically rejected

by Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, whose dialectical framework refused simple opposites. In Prof. Iyer's final lecture for the course, we focussed on Michel Foucault's analysis of the work of the painter Manet, through the notion of his concept of the event and rupture, taking a pointed shift away from both historical as well as purely dialectical analysis.

Dr. Arun Iyer speaks during 'Friedrich Nietzsche'

This rigorous past month has challenged many deeply held and even cherished notions of art, its power and its role in human society, while also sowing the seeds of a more questioning predicament grounded in critical thinking. As we move now over the remaining three months of the course and tackle more specific historical and conceptual questions, we carry both the openness and the complexity of philosophy with us. – *A.T.*

FORTHCOMING PROGRAMMES

Multiple Modernisms: Europe, Asia and Beyond

January 8th, 15th, 22nd, 29th, February 5th, 12th, 19th, & 26th, 2022, 10:30 AM - 12:30 PM IST | Dr. Chaitanya Sambrani (Art Historian and Curator, Australian National University, Canberra)

Online Seminar Series | Platform: Zoom

Gulammohammed Sheikh, Returning Home After Long Absence, 1969-73, oil on canvas, 122 x 122 cm, Coll: Ram and Bharati Sharma, New Delhi

S. Sudjojono, Cap Go Meh, c. 1940, Oil on canvas, 73 x 51 cm
Coll: Galeri Nasional Indonesia (National Gallery of Indonesia), Jakarta

This series of eight seminars will explore histories of modernism in the visual arts over a century-long span starting in the late 1860s. It will present an introduction to modernist trajectories in Euro-American art (primarily France, Germany and USA) in juxtaposition to coeval and contrapuntal developments in three Asian contexts (India, Indonesia and Japan). In doing this, the seminars will interrogate the originary mythologies of modernism including the privileged position usually ascribed to white heterosexual masculinity. Having first introduced the mainstream narrative of the 'heroic quarter' characterised by rapid experimentation and multiple 'isms' in European art, the seminars will consider differential developments in Asian art. The three Asian contexts selected for study will be analysed as instances of deep entanglement with the narrative of Euro-American modernity alongside the concomitant invention of tradition. The impact of colonisation and imperialism on artistic modernity will be discussed together with anti-colonial and nationalist aspirations, and impulses towards decolonial solidarities. Students will be introduced to the careers of significant artists and theorists even as histories of art are explicated in light of political histories.

Euro-American trajectories
- The analytical revolution 1: avant-garde; 'heroic quarter'
- Europe and its others: expressionism and the 'primitive'; surrealism and the 'unconscious'
- After the rain: trans-Atlantic developments post-1945

Asian Modernisms: India, Indonesia, Japan
- Mimicry, agency and improvisation in the 19th century
- Revival, return and reinvention: nationalism and pan-Asianism
- Vernacular and cosmopolitan modernisms
- Oppositions and alternatives to national trajectories
- Politics and narrative: towards the contemporary

Fee structure: – Rs. 10,000 | Student Discount (subject to verification) – Rs. 5,000

Urban Imaginaries: Velocity, Aesthetics, Power

February 1st, 8th, & 15th, 2022, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Christoph Lindner (Professor of Urban Studies and Dean of The Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment, University College London)

Online Seminar Series | Platform: Zoom

Draped, Copenhagen (Photo: Gordon Williams/Unsplash)

Against the backdrop of accelerated living, climate capitalism, and pandemic urbanism, this series of three interrelating seminars explores the generative force of 'urban imaginaries' in transforming spaces, conditions, and communities in contemporary cities. From slow art and green tech to the speed-space of globalisation and the aesthetics of lockdown, the seminars focus in particular on the ways in which urban creativity both critiques and contributes to global trends in city planning, design, and regeneration.

Prof. Lindner, in the first seminar, will speak of the velocity and consider the tensions between fast and slow in visions of sustainable urban futures, in the second seminar he will discuss the aesthetics and address the instrumentalisation of creative practice in urban displacement and dispossession, and in the final seminar he will focus on power and seek to understand some of the forces remaking cities today, particularly under recent pandemic conditions of restricted mobility and social-spatial distancing.

Day 1. Velocity: Speed-Space in the Global City

Day 2. Aesthetics: Arts of Displacement

Day 3. Power: Remaking Cities

Fee structure: – Rs. 3,000 | Student Discount (subject to verification) – Rs. 1,500

Political Philosophy Series

Panoptical Views on Politics *in collaboration with Asia Society India Centre*

Contending liberalisms: Durability, Adaptability and Appropriation in the life of an ideology

July 23rd, 2021, 6:30 - 8:00 PM IST | Dr. Michael Freeden (Emeritus Professor of Politics, University of Oxford)

Dr. Michael Freeden speaks during 'Contending liberalisms: Durability, Adaptability and Appropriation in the life of an ideology'

How does one live a just life? It is one of the most fundamental questions of ethics and therefore of political philosophy, and one that human societies have grappled with across millennia. The difficulty of this problem is underscored by the apparent simplicity of the question, and our unceasing temptation to answer it conclusively, once and for all. Over the centuries, we have tried and failed repeatedly in this endeavour, although every ideology on the battlefield of political thought has claimed to have definitive answers and solutions. The paradox, of course, is that no one ideology can be the silver bullet that comprehensively solves the complex and often contradictory problems of human societies. But through this long and difficult quest, humanity has also come upon certain seemingly unassailable notions that have found resonance across ideologies, namely the tantalisingly abstract yet resoundingly powerful ideals of liberty, freedom, equality and justice.

Although modern discourse has come to place the political espousal of these ideals broadly under the ambit of 'liberalism', the term itself has often proved to be constraining and even unstable against the weight of the expectations that have been thrust upon it. As a philosophy, it has occupied indeterminate worlds, its many versions shifting time and time again across conceptual boundaries, and yet its doctrines have consistently occupied a central place in the evolution of political thought. Harshly judged, readily misunderstood, and easily dismissed, particularly in our contemporary world, liberalism has led an especially challenging public life; yet its enduring legacy has also been its ability to adapt, evolve and encompass the questions that it has faced.

Over a lecture that was as patient as it was precise, Prof. Michael Freeden unpacked liberalism's nebulous place within political theory, all the while being mindful not to completely unravel the necessary complexity that makes this philosophy especially potent. By tracing its established history through a series of milestones, we first witnessed liberalism's movement from a focus on individual rights and freedoms to an acknowledgement of and indeed a recognition of social interdependence as a universal human condition. Occurring as it did within the 19th and early 20th centuries, this shift also placed the project of liberalism alongside wider scientific and anthropological discourses on human evolution and the development of societies, as well as the growing influence of Marxism on political thought. Liberalism's answer to the problem of ensuring just and equitable societies while also balancing state power was to espouse a more nuanced model of positive liberty that placed welfare and individual liberty as twin ends in a delicate balancing act. This balance, however, was fragile and beset with its own internal contradictions, namely within the structure of European imperialism which had claimed liberal values as its impetus to enforce fundamentally unequal, unjust, and unfree systems in its colonies. Prof. Freeden's citation of the theorist J.A. Hobson in the context of the welfare state was especially interesting, considering Hobson is more renowned as a historian of imperialism, further pointing to how these legacies were actively being negotiated within the liberal project.

One of the greatest strengths of liberal philosophy despite its many foundational challenges has been its ability to adapt to changing notions of state power, individual liberty, and the rights of communities. And yet it is also this adaptive ability that has drawn the sharpest criticisms of imprecision and instability. Liberalism's faith in democratic systems as the best

Dr. Michael Freeden and Dr. Rochana Bajpai in conversation during 'Contending liberalisms: Durability, Adaptability and Appropriation in the life of an ideology'

possible mechanism to mitigate state power while allowing individual growth has often proven to be naive, especially as the term 'illiberal democracy' is now proudly espoused as a legitimate doctrine by many world leaders. The growing turn of public focus towards more specific identities, whether cultural, ethnic, or religious, has also been a strong challenge to liberalism's claim to universality, which in a postcolonial context has been especially fraught. But liberalism also does not shy away from its critics, and the many forms the philosophy has been willing to embrace is in many ways a testament to its ability to transform and adapt in the face of complex challenges.

Paradoxically, however, the continual negotiations that liberalism undertakes with politics on the ground has also meant that it is not an easy ideology to understand, and especially to implement. The ultimate success of any political philosophy relies very much on its ability to be simplified and be easily and uncritically understood across a broad spectrum of society. This precisely is one of the central problems of liberalism. In its refusal to appear simple and clever, it has often found itself alienated from the general public and instead been relegated to the high branches of academic discourse. Within the tumultuous world of politics and the reactionary spaces of social media, its inherent complexity is easily discarded while the shells of its ideals are donned by authoritarian state powers and neoliberal market forces, muddying the waters around its true values further. In the ensuing conversation moderated by Dr. Rochana Bajpai, it was precisely the need to keep space for distinctions and nuance while filtering out obvious contradictions that were stressed, channelling, in a way, Rousseau's observation in the *Social Contract*, that it is only when the general will is *fully informed* that a trustworthy political system may emerge.

In his closing remark, Prof. Freeden put forth a profoundly revealing thought on the process humans undertake in *becoming* liberal, a process that is often in marked opposition to our experiences of childhood where authoritarian control in the form of families and communities are the norm we are accustomed to. And so, our striving towards liberal values also reveals us poignantly for who we are – a people who have aspired to equality and freedom yet struggled to truly comprehend what these concepts really mean, and what they ultimately reveal about ourselves. – *A.T.*

Minimal Secularism: A Theory

July 23rd, 2021, 6:30 - 8:00 PM IST | Dr. Cécile Laborde (Professor of Political Theory FBA, Nuffield Chair of Political Theory, University of Oxford)

In early September, the sleepy little town of Pala in central Kerala witnessed a furore when its Bishop made a series of controversial statements during an address to his congregation. In it, he accused local Muslims of carrying out a 'narcotic *jihad*' among Christian girls, luring them away with drugs to convert them. Unsurprisingly, his comments garnered outrage among Muslim organisations as well as the broader public, and the issue quickly became a raging controversy on social media, with opinions from all sides of the political and religious spectrum pouring in. Both the Left government of the state as well as the Congress-led opposition were compelled to respond, and their statements reflected an unsteady and unconvincing balancing act between their stated ideological positions and their more naked political

ambitions towards religious 'vote banks'. The term 'secularism', never too far from the headlines in India, was back in the spotlight as public and political opinion weighed in on Kerala's apparent failure to keep communal elements at bay and uphold secular values on one end, while loud voices clamoured to denounce secularism as an oppressive tool of state power that only pandered to 'certain' minorities on the other end.

This quagmire at the hyperlocal level once again reminded many of us of the very thorny and uncomfortable questions on the place, value and power of secularism in contemporary society, and its relationship to state power within a liberal democratic system. In an especially timely and compelling lecture, Prof. Cécile Laborde probed the intricacies of this relationship by beginning with the question, what kind of secularism is really required in liberal democracy? Tracing its journey through postcolonial India to the contemporary moment, Prof. Laborde categorised the established discourse on Indian secularism into three broad frameworks, namely the *imperfect*, *alternative* and *inappropriate*. While acknowledging that all three configurations were useful in understanding the conceptual and practical evolution of secularism in India, she argued that they still did not provide a comprehensive framework for its normative analysis. And the reasoning for this was that secularism is ultimately not an ethical doctrine but a political principle, and therefore amenable to interpretation based on political intent. Thus, fundamentally, the problem lay with the initial question, which put the onus on finding the 'right' kind of secularism that would work within a liberal democracy.

Drawing from her book *Liberalism's Religion*, and extending its scope to examine the case of post-1947 India, Prof. Laborde argued that we need to flip the initial question, and ask instead, how does the state adequately protect liberal democratic ideals? Her approach to answering this was to first articulate these fairly abstract ideals, and then, "consider how state policy and the legal framework can protect and promote them in relation to the different dimensions that have historically been associated with what we call religion", arguing that such an approach allows for a more nuanced understanding that recognises the interconnected relationships of religion to state power. Considering specifically three ideals, that of *public justification*, *equal inclusion* and *liberty* as the frameworks for measuring secularism, while indicating how these frameworks are not exclusive to religion, Prof. Laborde proposed a radical new approach, that of 'minimal secularism'. To quote, "So, perhaps we don't

actually need 'secularism', we just need to be clear about how to apply liberal democratic ideals to the many elements that make up what we call religion, but that also applies to similar institutions and identities."

Dr. Cécile Laborde speaks during 'Minimal Secularism: A Theory'

Returning with this new analytical framework to the case of India, Prof. Laborde wove a rich tapestry of examples from legal and political history to demonstrate how Indian secularism has, in fact, been expressly rooted within carefully negotiated interpretations of equal inclusion and personal liberty. The nuanced stance of the Constituent Assembly to enshrine equal protection and citizenship rights for all individuals despite religious, caste or community affiliation within the Indian constitution, while also recognising the country's unique situation requiring differentiated support for minority and oppressed groups, made visible the narrow path the constitution adopted between seemingly incongruent views on equality. The question of personal liberty too resulted in a difficult negotiation, with the constitution taking the position that freedom of religion also meant freedom *in* religion, thereby allowing for the courts and the state to intervene in religious affairs and even reform what was deemed incompatible with the ethical doctrine of liberty within religion, especially the rights of women and oppressed castes. Ultimately, however, Prof. Laborde observed that while India's constitutional framework is recognisably in line with the goals of minimal secularism, in practice, the state has often fallen short of its own stated ideals, as notable efforts towards equal inclusion and liberty have either been ineffectual or mistargeted, an infamous example being the Shah Bano case of 1985.

As the lecture concluded, Dr. Ananya Vajpeyi, Prof. Laborde's respondent and moderator of the ensuing discussion, raised an interesting conceptual challenge

Dr. Cécile Laborde and Dr. Ananya Vajpeyi in conversation during 'Minimal Secularism: A Theory'

to its core argument, by questioning whether liberal democratic ideals were not itself on precipitous ground, given that state powers around the world were increasingly rejecting the notion of liberal ideals as being unassailable, universal ideals. A further observation from the audience drew our attention back to the question of religion, pointing out that religions were also universalisms that have long been engaged in direct competition with liberal ideals, with secularism being employed as the tool of liberal democracy to deal with this challenge. In her nuanced responses, Prof. Laborde reflected on the evaluative role that critical theory plays, which is adjacent to but not necessarily situated within broader public and political discourse. While acknowledging the real and growing challenge to liberal democracies across the world, and also that religions have historically occupied the place that liberal ideals claim today, Prof. Laborde stressed that liberal ideals could still not as easily be rendered subjective and therefore dismissible. Ultimately, their power lay in their ability to stand up to public scrutiny and appeal to people across the lines of region, culture, class and even religion. – *A.T.*

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Announcements

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Plate B. Sati returning to her father's house. Illustration to the Bhagavata Purana of 1648 A.D. Mewar school. (Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, Poona).

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