FOREWORD

I am honoured that Stella Kramrisch should have called upon me to write a foreword to this little great work, the first flowering of fresh and intense perceptions of Indian art. For thousands of students of Indian art, this is seminal work couched in a condensed language where in each sentence pulsates with an inner breath like the art it describes. For many like me, it was this work along with the early writing of Coomaraswamy which turned the direction of our life and its academic pursuits from Western to Indian art. Those trained in the discipline of Western art history had few tools of perception and all criterion of evaluating Indian art through those norms clearly failed. If Coomaraswamy pointed at the world view which lay behind and governed the artistic creation, Stella Kramrisch was easily the first pioneer to lay bare the principles underlying its language of form and style. She was not defending this art like Havell nor was she only philosophising on its spiritual values or moving from the ideas to the image. She began with the artistic form and began to analyse it through the very tools which the artist had employed in its creation, namely the sense perceptions which play such an important crucial role in Indian aesthetic theory and practice.

This little book is great because in clear lucid terms Stella demolished the application of criterion appropriate for other traditions: she almost jumps into her subject with the agility of a dancer and then moves in and out of periods, regions, styles and materials. Portions of the book whether relating to classical sculpture or medieval art have become
mantras—aphorism on Indian art which are repeated and quoted often without the experience, which lies behind the language and at other times provide the window through which the vast complex landscape of Indian art can be viewed. A few quotes from the books would be in order.

In the context of the classical sculpture, the following has to be the text of all critical writing:

‘Indus art had shown the tree, the animal and the human figure by the side of one another, or else interpenetrating each other. Indus art had pronounced this, but it had not completely expressed it in the medium of creative form. This the flowing linear rhythm of classical art facilitates. It divests the appearance of each type of isolation, it approximates the one to the other, by making the limbs of human figures not too different from the branches of trees, etc. Every part and all the figures are permeated by one and the same vitality, and this is carried from form to form by an inner rhythm that constitutes together with the bodies through which it passes, the plasticity of Indian sculpture.

An inner pliability bends and models the form. The paradox of the solid material (stone, etc.) and the fluid aspect of its artistic transformation make the high tension and complexity of Indian sculpture. This may be called plastic. As an essential quality of classical Indian art it is not confined to sculpture and painting which are never merely decorative or ornamental. Their adaptations to a given surface and its equilibrium are by-products of the slighter kind in Indian art.’

Again speaking of the visualization of the Third Dimension of Indian art, Stella’s statement is as profound as perceptive.

‘The conquest of the third dimension is one of the foremost tasks of every art tradition in the making. Each will
solve it according to its susceptibilities. The system accepted by early classical Indian sculpture is not less systematic in its own way than that of the Italian Renaissance. But where the one endeavours to be optically correct, the other undertakes to be functionally consistent.'

Above all her statement on the Indian attitude towards symbols has stood the test of time and has laid the foundation of much writing on the subject over for four decades.

'Indian plastic sense is averse to the symbol, which is the substitute for a reality. The un-formed clamours for form, for this is the way in which it shows its reality. Symbols are ready-made and block the approach of the unformed towards form. They stand in the way of creation. If in ancient Indian sculpture, of the Indus civilisation and in the Mauryan age, animal or plant were represented in lieu of the corresponding divinity, they were meant to be vāhanas, i.e. vehicles of the divinity, and not abstracts or parts of its appearance, such as footprints or hair relics, or of its presence, such as the seat of the walk (caṅkrama), in the case of the Buddha. They were truly vāhanas, of which the artistic treatment in the Indus art 'conveyed' divinity. The sacred tree, along amongst the symbols for the Buddha, has maintained some of these earlier qualities'.

The discussion of medieval Indian art opened up a new trend of exploration of a period which had been dismissed as decadent unworthy of serious consideration. She was the first to point at the specifically medieval factor and the transubstantiation of nature into art. She pertinently comes to the conclusion, 'that ancient, classical and medieval, when taken in the direction of the arrow of time, denote the reactions of India, the motherland, with its creative soil, to the people it nourishes. While the foreigners of various origins in the course of time were
adopted by the country, they grew into her ways and certified their Indian birthright by the indelible impress the country gave to their art. They were not iconoclasts, like most of the Muslim invaders. But what they found in India was alien to them; yet not wholly so, for already classical sculpture had integrated much that had not been aboriginal. A prolonged stay, from generation to generation, in the country, and mingling with it, compelled them to yield to its influences.

This provokes a partly new measure in some of the provinces of medieval Indian sculpture as well as painting. To overlook it and to estimate this medieval phenomenon as a downward movement of the prior, i.e. the classical Indian complex form, would be like interpreting the early Christian art of Europe merely as a decay of classical Graeco-Roman traditions.

Logically she concludes by drawing attention to the plastic and essential qualities of Indian sculpture in the following words:

'The notion of sculpture, i.e. of giving form by detached movements to a hard and unyielding material, is valid for European art. In India, on the contrary, marble or wood appear as if kneaded in a continuity, as if the hand were never separated from the mass and were never losing touch with the material. While the vision, i.e. the object contemplated, is before the mind of the craftsman, his hand records his experience of that object and the rules laid down for its visualisation. There is something fluid in his rendering; a peculiar perpetual balance of up and down that does not admit any halt, any accent, any emphasis. A ceaseless and seemingly effortless gliding rounds off all corners.

Technically, too, Indian plastic sense evolved in its own manner. Such distinctions as low relief, high relief,
and sculpture in the round, do not exist. The self-same continuity of modelling that applies to the surface also applies to depth. Not only may low and high relief occur side by side at the same age in one and the same monument; they are possibilities afforded by the three-dimensional material, and used to the full extent in one and the same composition. Thus from top to bottom, in the direction of depth, a gradation of modelled surfaces takes place. It has a measure of its own, which is not a cut and dried rule, but varies in connection with and is dependent upon the other factors of the composition. The adaptability of the graded relief goes so far that sculpture fully carved in the round, i.e. detached from the ground where resorted to, is the ultimate—or if seen from the other side, the a priori—possibility of plastic form; it is not too frequently made use of.

For half a century Stella Kramrisch has pursued, developed, relieved and elaborated upon these first perceptions. Most systematically articulated presenting a theoretical base was the Hindu Temple.—The introduction to the Art of India and Indian sculpture in the collection of Pennsylvania were the direct successors of this first book on Indian sculpture. In the latter work, specific objects and regional genres were delineated upon. The logical culmination of both Indian sculpture and Hindu Temple can be seen in the Presence of Siva and the introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition: ‘Manifestation of Siva’. But throughout the vast body of her work and the range of themes, materials and periods, there is a Stella eye of perception, her sense of touch, taste and hearing and above all her own moulding of the critical apparatus of art analysis through an inner breath or prāṇa. In ‘Indian sculpture’ this essence is obvious but restrained and under great control: in later works, as
was to be expected, she can with admirable swiftness move from idea to idea, perception to perception in torrent of words and allusion which leave the reader breathless and breathless as when he is before a colossal piece of stone chiselled every inch with the sure and impatient hand of the sculptor.

No wonder that the teaching and writing of Stella has brought forth students who have followed one or two but not all the multifacetedness of her concerns in Indian art. While her metaphysical heights have tempted many only to view Indian art from the point of metaphysics, others have carried forward the tradition of looking at three dimensional form as mass and volume unrelated to its thematic and symbolic significance. Indeed it is all these together, along with the first pre-requisite of establishing chronologies and identifications which constitute the basis of a critical framework of Indian art history. 'Indian sculpture' is exemplary for this approach and despite the lapse of time, it has not been excelled and will remain a scintillating piece of writing providing a framework for any in-depth study of Indian sculpture. Its value will not be dated as it is not, because it transcends narrow concerns. For this and other reasons, she and the publishers must be thanked most profusely for reprinting the volume.

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