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Narrative Visions and Visual Narratives in Indian Buddhism, edited by Naomi Appleton. Equinox, 2022. 292pp. Hb. £75, ISBN-13: 9781800501300; Pb. £28.95, ISBN-13: 9781800501317; ebook £28.95, ISBN-13: 9781800501324.

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The Buddhist temples of India and are filled with figures, events, drama, and fabulous creatures. As Naomi Appleton, editor of this welcome collection of essays on Buddhist art and story, says, "India is overflowing with stories" (3). Indian Buddhism is enacted, dramatized, organized and celebrated through its living pool of narratives, themselves often highly visual and even cinematic in their telling. If you walk around a temple or a stupa depicting these, often with the Buddha or the Bodhisatt(v)a as the centre, you see them. To be in the presence of these is to be in the midst of what is, in essence, a Buddhist text. Conversely, listening to a story, or reading it, is often a visual experience of presence: the experience just unfolds differently. What these two modes share is the capacity, in highly differentiated ways, to appeal to our senses of seeing, hearing and experiencing events in the sensory world—as a means of doing something else. Their often stated intention is to transform: to allow the Triple Gem to be realized, "each one for themselves."

This book explores the multitudinous ways that narrative and vision work together to elicit change in the viewer or listener. Appleton's introduction opens, aptly, with a scene from a *jātaka* depicted at Bharhut: *Vidhura-jātaka*, where various key events, some of which in time become emblematic of that story, are arranged in a circle. We gain a sense of the whole story in the aesthetic appreciation of one moment, as it is presented to us as a complicated whole. She briefly explains Vidya Dehejia's explanation of the various ways Indian arts address stories in real time, through various kinds of depictions, from the monoscenic to, as in Bharhut roundels, the synoptic, where scenes are arranged as if occurring in one moment. Summarizing with commendable precision the main features of the articles in the work, Appleton draws upon recurring themes, with helpful pointers to the various papers that address them. Her summary pinpoints one of the main problems: lack of real living evidence as to how they were used and understood at the time of composition. We have to piece that together from fragments of evidence and current practice in temples. She argues that whatever else we can ascertain, they were not just descriptive. This volume demonstrates, in manifold ways, many other functions: the emotional, the demonstration of the laws of karma, the expression of the otherwise indefinable, and encouragement for generosity and kindliness. In some, self-referential imagery, such as the Buddha teaching,

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suggests the audience are engaged in the art as a potential participant, in dramas that are still to this day regarded in some Buddhisms as in some indefinable way "present," perhaps even somewhat outside time.

Part 1

The three chapters of "Visual Narratives" are all by art historians, who place representations within a textual, cultural and geographical context that may need deciphering, but is highly significant for their reception. The challenges of understanding the role and function of the art where corroborative information is slight can be great. Their radically different articles all need and deploy the techniques and methods of several disciplines to illustrate their points. This part reveals how deeply aesthetics are influenced by and affect context and applicability.

Flavia Zaghet gives a thorough, yet concisely summarized, chronological analysis of the Sanchi Stūpa, reassessing its history, dating and its artistic achievement. Key environmental factors, such as a developments in water exchange and management, influence choice of content, as artists reflect the wishes of donor monks and nuns who supported control of these areas. The article also addresses the "spotlight," monoscenic method of depiction, offering new narrative understanding of Sanchi's art. Zaghet, like others in this volume, stresses that we should not see a difference in story interpretation as necessarily "wrong" or a deviation from the text: many other factors may be involved, such as lost recensions, which may render artistic representation more, rather than less authentic.

Madhulika Reddy explores manifestations of *avagamanaśakti*, "the capacity to lead [the audience] to comprehension." Examining Ajanta paintings, she emphasizes the relationship between text and visual embodiment as one of communication, not emulation or single authority, also demonstrating the presence of diverse contributory oral traditions. Her close study reveals how the paintings enact Indian aesthetics, focusing on the visual and the sensory in its discussion of the way *darśana*, the seeing of the Bodhisattva, elicits *prasāda*, trust, in the viewer. Visual and oral/aural are not at odds, but work together, as she demonstrates for instance through close reading of the *Vidhura-jātaka*, where the intensity of *gāthā*s evoking the Bodhisattva's power finds eloquent visual expression. Like other papers in this volume, her study shows how technique, often involving the foreground depiction of the Bodhisattva and the Buddha, or the direction of the eye to a seated, teaching figure, allows the viewer to engage in a close relationship with a presence that seems to step outside the boundaries between painting and viewer. The pre-enlightenment scene shows the Buddha-to-be physically isolated as he routs Māra and his jostling armies, in ugly states of agitation. He, however, is the "bestower of peace. Subtly visible on his face are two contrasting qualities: he is at once dispassionate and compassionate towards all beings. A veil of sadness, soft and diffused, marks the countenance of the Buddha-to-be" (79–80). Through the vocabulary of Sanskrit aesthetics, Reddy finds depths in visual representation that dissolve any sense of visual/narrative split. The medium of painting allows an expression that transcends such barriers: the *śāntarasa*, the taste of enlightenment, is realized.

Monika Zin takes another scene of paintings, the somewhat mysterious depictions in Kucha caves in the old Silk Road region in Xinjiang, China. She focuses on sermon scenes and, through impressively painstaking detective work, finds in them a sophisticated language of iconography, *mudrā* and visual signal that indicates, through close comparison with comparables within the manifold depictions in closely aligned sites and depictions, which discourse is being portrayed. Self-referentiality is involved: the texts are being delivered to the viewer as well. "Telegraphic" vocabulary not only translates a specific text into visual form, but also creates a pictorial language that allows the murals to relate to one another. She stresses the considerable work that will be crucial for these understandings to develop further: some damaged paintings of the later period appear to reference Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya, suggestive of a later Mahāyāna movement, but more research on fragments and related iconography is needed.

Part 2

"Narrative Networks" focuses on story clusters, differing accounts of the same figure story, or depiction, and the relationships between viewer, art and narrative. It opens with Sonya Rhie Mace's study of the many depictions of the devoted nun, Utpalavarṇā, at Kaushambi. Mace, interestingly, detects networks of stories that suggest other sources as well as the traditional: texts become not sources of explanation but contributors, ways of helping understanding meaning and quite distinctive usages. A particular excellence of this article is the careful examination of physical and regional context. Mace exhibits skilful understanding of the part that positioning, within both the site and a specific locality, make to any one "moment" in a particular arrangement of temple art.

I often wonder if many *jātaka*s depicting elephants are selected precisely because their generous curves offer such an artistic gift: flapping ears in twelfth-century Bagan murals spill over into other pictures; reassuringly solid elephants tread in timeless processions along Sinhala friezes, while elephants emblematize Vessantara's great generosity around graceful temple door handles, window-insets, and even place-mats, throughout Thailand. Appleton and Chris Clark clearly share this enjoyment. They comb through stories throughout Asia and India, alongside art, to examine manifestations of the ever-popular "Six-Tusked Elephant" story (*Chaddanta-jātaka*). They show how richly narratives and depictions diverge into multiple species and sub-species within both; artists draw on iconography and themes from what Ramanujan famously described as a "pool of signifiers." The story involved is heart-breaking, in all versions, as Chaddanta, the Bodhisatt(v)a, offers his tusks and lets himself be killed to satisfy an aggrieved queen. Visual representations often foreground his compassionate generosity: attributes echo one those in other temples. Through this diversity, Appleton and Clark problematize the very notion of "parallels" and "versions", suggesting that privileging verbal narrative over visual is fruitless: clusters and sub-clusters of tropes imitate and react with one another, thus acquiring their own visual life and form as the story metamorphoses in different places.

John S. Strong steps back to investigate historical reception and understandings in responses to different depictions of events in the life of the Buddha. What is the role of context and interpretation? His reflections, kin to those preoccupying literary production and reception now, raise the question as to ways we can speak of artistic intention, when reception may have changed so profoundly over centuries, overlayed by new cultural viewpoints. An ancient story describes the parricide King Ajātaśatru, a devout follower of the Buddha, fainting at seeing a picture of his teacher's deathbed. Rather as with funerals now, the experience allows recollection of the great events of the Buddha's life and, finally impermanence. Ming depictions of the life of the Buddha are appraised and understood, occasionally surprisingly well, by two seventeenth-century Portuguese. Seventeenth-century Westerners visit the "other" Adam's Peak at Mulgirigala, and confusion arises as they see in the Buddha figure and its environs all kinds of Biblical allusions. Strong fascinatingly delves into this range of response, from a grieving devotee, to biased strangers, to the hopelessly misled, to highlight context, emotional engagement and potential 'mis'-apprehensions as ever-present factors in assessments of spiritual art.

Part 3

The third part, "Narrative Visions," primarily examines the visual in narrative, and ways image can be evoked within text to "illustrate," embody, and invoke. It shows how sensory oral literature can be, and the many perspectives made possible, of experiences of time, the body, and one's relationship to the world, by hearing the words and allowing their meaning to be absorbed. David Fiordalis examines visions of the Buddha's supernatural power in stories associated with the *Avadānaśataka*, demonstrating ways text and visual image work in time to suggest creative tension between worldly and spiritual domains. His argument suggests an imaginative conflation is possible: within the parameters of both media, the Buddha can be both universal monarch and Buddha, and indeed in the Kaṇhani story turns himself into a great king to demonstrate his capacity to do so, in order to dissuade one proud king from attachment to worldly power. Natalie Gummer's discussion shows how skilful plays of imagery permit an encounter with the Buddha as a presence. She focuses on the *Vimālakīrtinirdeśa*, and the nourishment of the Buddha's presence. Metaphors of eating, digestion and consumption are deployed to communicate the way that the teaching is absorbed. Listeners to the text, who come to see Buddhas and Buddha-fields, are transformed, "cooked" into future Buddhas themselves. She examines the work's practice guidelines carefully, finding that the text is designed to elicit the responses it describes. Jonathan Walters' article offers a suitable and revealing conclusion by stressing all senses, as they are portrayed in both early *Suttanipāta* poetry and later *Apadāna* verses. His comparative analysis shows a shift from early, austere wariness to the exuberantly sensuous experiences of "multi-sensory" palaces, offerings and heavens: "multi-sensory narrative emerges as a method, a new approach to both worship and narrative in which the senses are the means, rather than the primary obstacle to religious progress" (284).

This sentence sums up the themes of the book, devoted though it may be primarily to sight and hearing. The standard of technical discussion, literary allusion, and background information throughout is uniformly high, as are the very different scholarly perspectives. It is beautifully illustrated, with high-quality photographs and diagrams, scrupulously explained. The articles well edited and skilfully curated: I was impressed with the frequency with which the authors cited each other, occasionally with differing viewpoints. I personally liked moments where the sense that visual and oral modes were at odds were dispersed. As many articles demonstrate, auspicious visions in oral literature and descriptive imagery find natural counterparts in depictions; narrative appeal is, conversely, a particularly striking feature of Indic and Asian art, in both content and structure.

The book has one curious absence, in no direct allusion to recollections that must, at some level, lie behind most and probably all of these productions and narratives, *Buddhānussati*, *Dhammānussati*, *Saṅghānussati*. These, along with the next three according to Buddhaghosa's method, the recollection of ethical conduct (*sīla*), generosity (*cāga*), and the deities (*devas*), are still core to Theriya/Theravāda Buddhist practice and historically would also have been so in all early Buddhisms (Vism 197–228). They would have constituted an underlying presence in art and narrative from Bharhut to Kucha, a region where the *Yogalehrbuch*, probably dated around the fifth century CE, places considerable emphasis on the *anussatis* as part of its repertoire of visualization practices. These *samatha* practices are undertaken in solitude or collectively, often with ritual chant. Mahāyāna texts and art express these recollections differently, but variations would also have presumably operated. Indeed Gummer and Walter, notably, do stress related *pūjas*, while Reddy addresses *darśana*, in their discussions of text and picture. It might have been useful to have some explicit reference to such practices, particularly the recollections, in the introduction. Despite our ignorance of particulars, one imagines they informed, as they do now, the funding, building, painting, and most ritual observances in and around sites involved. Some, such as Sanchi, Bharhut, and even Ajanta, are still places of pilgrimage as much as venues of artistic and archaeological interest. Modern collective walking circumambulations at *stūpas* and temples involve chanting the *Itipiso gāthā*, with jātaka depictions then part of a moving, peripheral awareness of auspiciousness. This suggests earlier practices despite a possible lack of documentary attestation. Upatissa advocates recollecting jātakas as a helpful way of practising *Buddhānussati* (Nyanatusita 2021, 394–395). Many depictions, like texts, are alive now for many Buddhists, however partial their knowledge; it seems likely that ritual now echoes the ancient, despite our lack of information.

Devotion, nonetheless, is stressed throughout by most, perhaps particularly by Gummer, Mace, Reddy, and Walters, with an awareness that brings the intent of the artefacts and narratives concerned to the foreground. Many scenes embody some sense of all these recollections: the sangha, the Buddha, by implication the teaching, are all suggested in overt discourse scenes and the *parinibbāna* (Zin, Strong). A constant theme is the capacity of these evocations to transform. To be in their presence, whether visual, heard, or now read, is, potentially, to feel the presence

of the Triple Gem. Pictures tell stories; the power of image may be found in narrative. But establishing historical context, iconography, and linguistic and visual reference points is crucial to understanding these works fully. Some depictions are not intended primarily to be viewed, but are lovingly executed in hidden places, efficacious by their simple presence: they just have to be there, powerful for being unseen. All kinds of possibilities are explored, in various ways.

The book will prompt many reflections. The multiple lenses through which the art and narrative are viewed, and the care with which each context has been investigated, feel creatively helpful. My thoughts concerned the curious way that the international community sees Western European religious art as "ours," whereas Indian and Asian art is still felt to be peculiar to a particular religion or culture: "theirs." We do not often stress that Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* or Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* are artefacts that merge the visual and narrative within the specific conventions of one religious category, though it is useful sometimes to see them that way. Rather, even the most rationalist scholars state freely that they offer profoundly human intimations of the spiritual and the ineffable interacting with the material world. This kind of language, taken for granted in Western cultural discourse, is rarely used for Buddhist Asian art and text, where fluency in expressing feeling and affective response amidst the analytic and technical is often oddly absent. So, I liked the ease of emotional expression sometimes evident in this book's discussions. As the authors demonstrate, the extraordinary distillation of human weaknesses and aspiration captured in both art and narrative offers universal ways of feeling our place within the sensory world and glimpses of areas of experience beyond the senses: where are our eyes directed? How is a picture placed? How is the viewer or listener invited in? Where the sites are still places of pilgrimage and meaning, a sense of chemistry between the visual and narrative is vivid now: awesomely majestic *stūpa*s and temples feel intimate, opening vistas peopled with story, pace and interest; small emblematic jātaka depictions are rhythmically paced, their very number implying vast temporal perspectives. Recurrent imagery and formulae in recited texts creates a familiarity that makes stories seem "seen." We sometimes need considerable background information and clues to appreciate these depths and allusiveness, but these works also "lead onwards" (*opanayiko*), as do great works of Buddhist literature, in different ways.

This book gives many routes to open out our perception of this interplay. I think and hope it will help scholars and readers from any area of Buddhist studies to feel that alongside some very context-specific ritual and practice contexts, these are our art and stories, and can be assessed on human grounds as well as Buddhist. I recommend this collection to all Buddhist scholars and anyone interested in the sites, pictures and texts involved.

Bibliography

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