ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE AS SYMBOLIC FORM

STELLA KRAMRISCH'S WRITINGS ON THE AJANTA PAINTINGS

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ABSTRACT

In her 1937 publication, *A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan*, Stella Kramrisch offered a transcultural analysis of the early Buddhist wall paintings at the caves of Ajanta. Kramrisch described a unique technique of "reversed" or "forthcoming" perspective in the paintings. This article proposes that her work can be seen as an oblique critique of Erwin Panofsky's influential *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1924/1927). Kramrisch also connected her analysis of perspective to the avant-garde of early 20th-century art and the work of cubist painters. This article concludes by situating Kramrisch's claims about the Ajanta paintings within the context of more recent scholarship on Buddhist painting and the environment in South Asia.

KEYWORDS

Stella Kramrisch; Ajanta; Perspective; Buddhist painting; Erwin Panofsky.

In the years after Erwin Panofsky presented his landmark lecture, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1924), another scholar, a tiny woman living in a Kolkata apartment who went to bed with a gun beneath her pillow, wrote a history of perspective from the opposite direction. The scholar was Stella Kramrisch, who published *A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan* in 1937. The book ranged across two millennia, but it was the sections devoted to the early Buddhist wall paintings of the Ajanta caves in the Deccan plateau that contained Kramrisch's most striking and significant claims. Kramrisch described a unique perspectival technique used at Ajanta that not only rivaled European Renaissance perspective in sophistication but anticipated the avant-garde of early 20th-century art and the work of cubist painters. "All other types of painting obey two possibilities", Kramrisch wrote. "They treat the ground as surface and exist within its two dimensions or they create, in one way or another, an illusion of leading into depth [...] The painting of the Ajanta type is not conceived in terms of depth. It comes forward [...] It does not lead away, but it comes forth."[1]

This article focuses on Kramrisch's writings on the Ajanta paintings during a period of over forty years to explore how the transcultural approach she took to understanding perspectival systems shaped her art historical scholarship. When Kramrisch published *A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan*, she had been living in India for fifteen years.[2] Although Kramrisch was teaching in Kolkata, she also sustained in the book a dialogue with European art historical scholarship that she had been introduced to during her doctoral work in Vienna.[3] Kramrisch's academic training had combined a study of European traditions with readings in Sanskrit and an engagement with Islamic and South Asian art. Her dissertation focused on the early Buddhist monuments of Sanchi and Bharhut, although she did not have access to the actual stone sculptures until traveling to Kolkata and instead based her conclusions on photographs taken by a friend of her advisor.[4] Even after relocating to

[1] Stella Kramrisch, *A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan*, London 1937, 3. I am grateful to many who have offered feedback and constructive advice on this article: Tamara Sears (in whose graduate seminar I began this research), Sarah Turner, Deborah Sutton, Darielle Mason, Matthew Vollgraff, Jo Ziebritzki, and the two anonymous reviewers of the article. Any mistakes are my own.

[2] Barbara Stoler Miller, Stella Kramrisch. A Biographical Essay, in: ead. (ed.), *Exploring India's Sacred Art. Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, Philadelphia 1983, 3–33, here 11.

[3] For Kramrisch's relationship to German-language art historiography, see Ratan Parimoo, Stella Kramrisch's Approach to Art History, in: Parul Pandya Dhar (ed.), *Indian Art History. Changing Perspectives*, New Delhi 2011, 69–88. See also Sarah Victoria Turner, 'Alive and Significant'. 'Aspects of Indian Art', Stella Kramrisch and Dora Gordine in South Kensington c. 1940, in: *Wasafiri* 27/2, 2012, 40–51.

[4] Miller, Stella Kramrisch. A Biographical Essay, 7. The source for the photographs was Victor Goloubew. For details of Kramrisch's education, see also Darielle Mason, Interwoven in the Pattern of Time. Stella Kramrisch and Kanthas, in: *Kantha. The Embroidered Quilts*

India, Kramrisch maintained connections to Britain and Europe. The India Society, the London-based publisher of *A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan*, was a nexus of British and European publications on South Asian art.[5]

By the time Kramrisch published her book on Indian painting in the Deccan, the Ajanta caves were well known to scholars throughout Asia, Europe, and the United States. The rock-cut caves at the Buddhist site of Ajanta were constructed in various phases ranging from 200 BCE to 650 CE. First publicized in Europe in the 1820s after their "discovery" by British Army officials in 1819 (they were only "unknown" outside of India), the paintings on the walls of Ajanta became a subject of great interest to British imperial officials as South Asia's earliest examples of monumental painting.[6]

Kramrisch first began formulating her ideas on perspective and Ajanta not in the context of her other studies of early Buddhist art, but in her writings on 20th-century painting, and particularly her early articles on the fluid, linear style of the artist Sunayani Devi and the work of the cubist painter, Gaganendranath Tagore.[7] Kramrisch encountered Gaganendranath Tagore's experimental cubist paintings in Kolkata in 1922 [Fig. 1].[8] After an exhibition of Tagore's work, Kramrisch wrote an article entitled "An Indian Cubist" for the Indian art journal, *Rupam*. She concluded her article by rooting cubism's origins in the Ajanta paintings: "Cubism was a 'discovery' of the West. The roots of it however lie in the East. 'Backgrounds' in Ajanta, many objects represented in Bharhut and Sanchi, the architecture in Rajput paintings are visualized in [a] cubist way."[9]

of Bengal from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection and the Stella Kramrisch Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (exh. cat. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art), ed. by Darielle Mason, Philadelphia 2010, 158–159.

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In 1915, the India Society London had commissioned color reproductions after copies of the Ajanta wall paintings in a project organized by Lady Christiania Herringham and completed by Nandalal Bose, who later became a major painter of the Bengal School. Kramrisch also cites the illustrations in this volume in A Survey of Indian Painting, 206, fn. 70. See Christiania Jane Powell Herringham and A. H. Fox Strangways, *Ajanta Frescoes. Being Reproductions in Colour and Monochrome of Frescoes in Some of the Caves at Ajanta after Copies Taken in the Years 1909–1911 by Lady Herringham and Her Assistants*, London/New York 1915.

6
Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters. A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, Chicago 1992, 106; Divia Patel, Copying Ajanta. A Rediscovery of Some Nineteenth-Century Paintings, in: *South Asian Studies* 23, 2007, 39–62.

7
Stella Kramrisch, Sunayani Devi, in: *Der Cicerone* 17, 1925, 87–93.

8
On modernist art in Kolkata, see Sria Chatterjee, Writing a Transcultural Modern. Calcutta, 1922, in: Regina Bittner and Kathrin Rhomberg (eds.), *The Bauhaus in Calcutta. An Encounter of the Cosmopolitan Avant-Garde*, Berlin 2013, 101–108; Martin Beattie, Problems of Translation. Lyonel Feininger and Gaganendranath Tagore at the Fourteenth Annual Indian Society of Oriental Art Exhibition, Kolkata, India, in: Martha Langford (ed.), *Narratives Unfolding. National Art Histories in an Unfinished World*, Montreal 2017, 81–99; Julia Madeleine Trouilloud, The Reception of Modern European Art in Calcutta. A Complex Negotiation (1910s–1940s), in: *Artl@s Bulletin* 6/2, 2017, 97–111.

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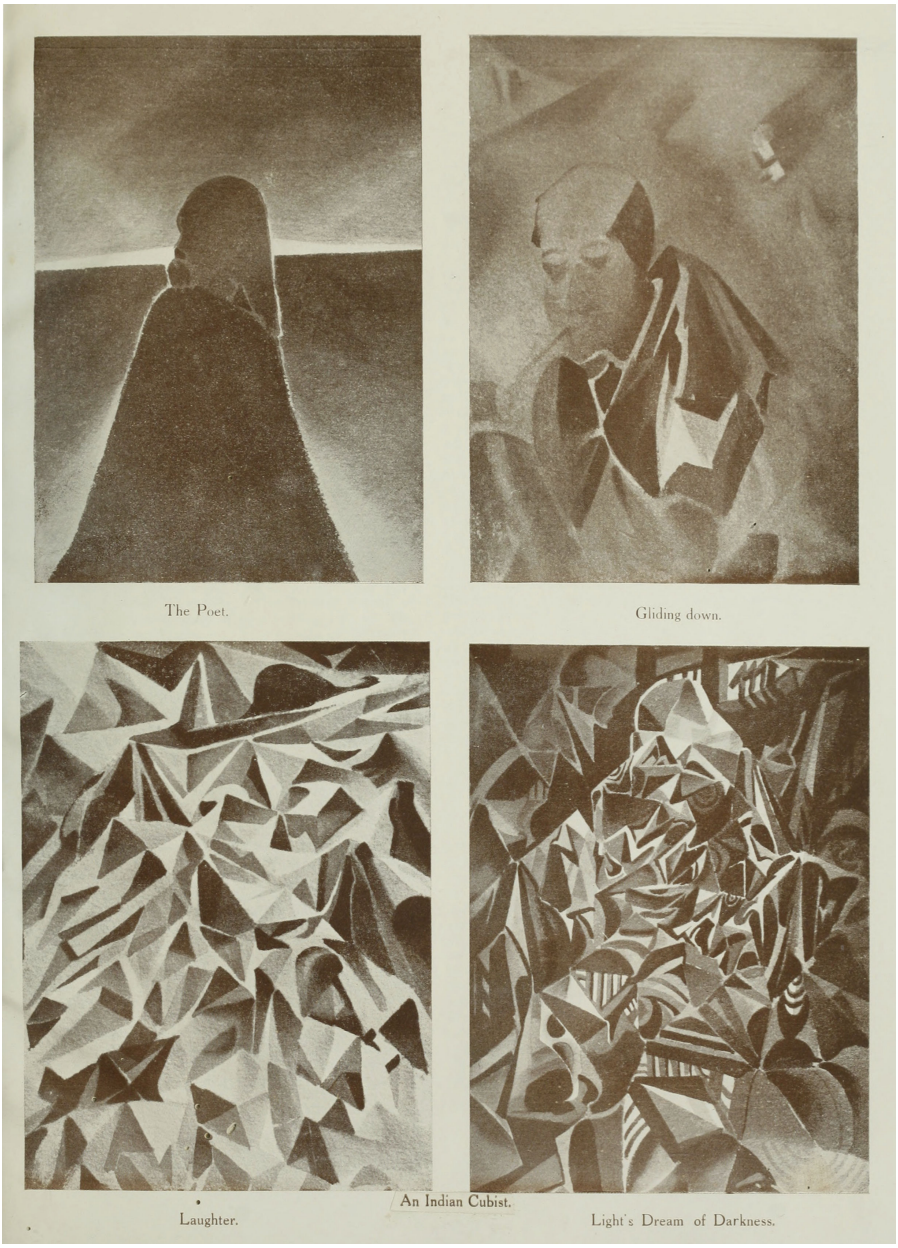
Stella Kramrisch, An Indian Cubist, in: *Rupam* 11, 1922, 107–109, here 108.



[Fig. 1]
Paintings by Gaganendranath Tagore, illustrations in: Stella Kramrisch, An Indian Cubist, 107–109, here 109.

After describing the "static order" of European cubism, she writes of Gaganendranath Tagore's work, "Our artist introduced cubism in India, and at once cubism shows another aspect. It is not the static and crystallic, but the animate and dynamic which crystallize into cubes, cones, etc. Here the cubes do not build up a systematic structure, but they express the radiating, turbulent, hovering or pacified forces of inner experience."[10] As can be seen in her early work, Kramrisch interpreted cubist painting comparatively and transculturally, praising the "animate and dynamic" nature of Tagore's cubism in opposition to the "static and crystallic" European cubist paintings. Moreover, she focuses on what can seem like a formal quality in Tagore's work (its "radiating, turbulent" arrangement of cubistic forms) to connect it not only to the much earlier artistic practices of Ajanta, but also to the metaphysical "pacified forces of inner experience".

Present-day scholars have wrestled with the legacy that Kramrisch bequeathed in her voluminous and lyrical writings. As Michael Meister wrote retrospectively of Kramrisch's contributions to the field, "it is her vision that we recognize and struggle to prove".[11] While the connections that she drew between Buddhist paintings of the 2nd century and the art of the 20th century may have been tenuous, they also represent an important endeavor to move beyond an art historical model that led even specialists in Asian art to view their objects of study through a Euro-American paradigm. The paintings at Ajanta allowed Kramrisch to craft alternative art historical genealogies.

In this context, I contend that Kramrisch's arguments about systems of perspective in South Asian painting can also be understood to articulate an oblique critique of the art historian Erwin Panofsky's influential 1924 lecture and then essay, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* [*Die Perspektive als symbolische Form*], which first appeared in published form in 1927. In this work, Panofsky analyzed the development of illusionistic painting in European art that culminated with the introduction of single-point perspective during the Italian Renaissance. In its mimetic capabilities and its enduring strength as western art's most powerful visual "construction", single-point perspective presented for a scholar like Kramrisch one of the greatest obstructions to an affirmative history of South Asian painting. Kramrisch took up this challenge, positioning the techni-

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Ibid., 109.

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Michael Meister, Review of Stella Kramrisch, The Hindu Temple, New Delhi, 1976, in: *Art Bulletin* 62/1, 1980, 180–182, here 182. See also Parimoo, Stella Kramrisch's Approach to Art History, 69–88; Rajesh Singh, The Writings of Stella Kramrisch with Reference to Indian Art History. The Issues of Object, Method and Language within the Grand Narrative, in: *East and West* 53, 2003, 127–148; Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories. Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India*, New York 2004, 255–262 and 359–360; Turner, 'Alive and Significant', 40–51; Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism. India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922–1947*, London 2007, 15 and 40; Beattie, Problems of Translation; Trouilloud, The Reception of Modern European Art in Calcutta; and most recently, Christopher S. Wood, 1940–1950, in: *A History of Art History*, Princeton, NJ 2019, 347–360.

ques used in the Ajanta paintings in opposition to what is known variously as Albertian, single-point, optical, or linear perspective. As she wrote later in her career in 1958, the Ajanta paintings were "organised in a perspective which is directed toward the beholder instead of leading away from him, as is the case with optical perspective in Western painting from the Renaissance on".[12]

Furthermore, Kramrisch's writings on Ajanta hold up a revelatory mirror to scholarship on the historiography of European perspectival painting. Studies of Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* published by Michael Ann Holly (1984), Christopher Wood (1991), W. J. T. Mitchell (1994), Hubert Damisch (1995), and James Elkins (1996) reexamined the ground laid by Panofsky, exposing his writings on perspective to the scrutiny of post-structuralist analysis and re-inserting the idea of a historically contingent viewer.[13] Yet Panofsky's evolutionary narrative has received less critique for eliding much of non-European art, given that it situates "Eastern", Byzantine art as a beginning point, and culminates with Italian art as the site of discovery.

Kramrisch created in her account of Ajanta an alternative narrative contemporaneously with that of Panofsky. She and Panofsky both read the work of the neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer, demonstrating how divergently, and yet how complementarily, two scholars could read the same texts in the context of radically different art objects. Kramrisch wove into her writings the broader philosophical concerns of the 1920s and 1930s, meditating on experience and perception, and the phenomenology of painting. Although she does not make reference to their work, her ideas about perspective overlap with the writings of early 20th-century German and Russian scholars such as Oskar Wulff and Pavel Florensky who explored the idea of "reverse perspective" or "inverse perspective" in the context of Byzantine and then later cubist painting.[14] Whether through chance encounters or parallel thinking, Kramrisch adopted the concepts of force, dynamism, and stereometry that reverberate within the manifestos of the European modernist avant-gardes and applied them to Buddhist painting made more than a millen-

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Stella Kramrisch, Wall and Image in Indian Art, in: *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 102/1, 1958, 7–13, here 13.

13
Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Ithaca, NY 1985; Christopher S. Wood, Introduction, in: Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, transl. Christopher S. Wood, New York 1991, 7–26; W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago 1994, 17–19; Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, transl. John Goodman, Cambridge, MA 1995; James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective*, Ithaca, NY 1996.

14
Clemena Antonova, On the Problem of "Reverse Perspective". Definitions East and West, in: *Leonardo* 43/5, 2010, 464–469. Antonova also notes that Pavel Florensky's own writings on "reverse perspective" in Byzantine art followed directly after he published on Analytical Cubism in the context of Pablo Picasso's early works in the Shchukin Collection, Moscow, following a similar trajectory as Kramrisch, ibid., 467. My thanks to Matthew Vollgraff for this suggestion.

nium before.[15] In this way, Kramrisch reached toward what Hubert Damisch, writing of Panofsky, identifies as a partially fulfilled task: she "demonstrates, makes tangible, how art was able, in its own way, to serve as both site and instrument of an intellectual project".[16] Her excavation of Ajanta's perspectival system is much more than an exercise in visual analysis: Kramrisch proposed, in the early years of the 20th century, that art outside of Europe could be a "site", and an "instrument", of a groundbreaking artistic endeavor.

I. The Paintings of Ajanta

In her 1937 *Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan*, Kramrisch devotes the first third of the volume to the paintings at Ajanta, and then turns to the paintings at the later, nearby rock-cut cave site of Ellora, where the "forthcoming" perspective is less prominent. The final section of the book provides an overview of the paintings made for the Islamicate sultanates of the Deccan, extending from the 15th into the 19th century. In this final section, Kramrisch brings together an impressive corpus of Deccani manuscript painting and compares these works on paper to contemporaneous wall paintings from the period as well. She argues that the later paintings of the Deccan, based in a Persianate style, exhibit a "flat" perspective in which "the entire panel is one surface".[17] Despite devoting nearly half of the book to the "rigour of outline and surface" that she found in later painting, Kramrisch rarely returned to this material in her subsequent scholarship.[18] By contrast, her interest in the Ajanta paintings' "forthcoming" direction of perspective endured and became an analytic that Kramrisch also went on to apply to sculpture and architecture. Moreover, Kramrisch had transcultural motivations for describing this unique perspectival system: she argued that the "forthcoming" perspective was rare, almost unique to South Asia, and constituted an alternative to European perspectival systems. As Kramrisch wrote in the introduction to *A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan*, the "forthcoming" perspectival system was "relatively the least exploited in painting outside India".[19]

When Stella Kramrisch began writing on the perspectival systems found at Ajanta, the general scholarly consensus about the value of these early Buddhist paintings was thick with Victorian

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For the formulation of these terms in the writings of the Russian Suprematist Kasimir Malevich, see Miroslav Lamac and Jiri Padrta, The Idea of Suprematism, in: *Kasimir Malewitsch zum 100. Geburtstag*, Cologne 1978, 134–180.

16
Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 14.

17
Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 4 and 123.

18
Ibid., 172.

19
Ibid., 4.

sentimentality. The top British officials involved in Indian art education praised the paintings for their feeling and expressive power, which the scholars likened to the paintings of Italian masters. They did this, perhaps, partly to elevate the significance of ancient art found in British colonial territories within broader European art historical studies. John Griffiths, principal of the J.J. School of Art in Bombay, who had initiated the extensive project of copying the Ajanta frescoes in the mid-19th century, extolled the feeling of the painting of the wife of Nanda in Cave 16 known as the "Dying Princess" [Fig. 2], writing that, "for pathos and sentiment and the unmistakable way of telling its story this picture, I consider, cannot be surpassed in the history of Art. The Florentine could have put better drawing, and the Venetian better colour, but neither could have thrown greater expression into it."[20] E. B. Havell, then the principal of the Calcutta School of Art, wrote of the painting that he called the "Mother and Child before Buddha" that it was, "in its exquisite sentiment comparable with the wonderful Madonnas of Giovanni Bellini" [Fig. 3].[21] Laurence Binyon of the British Museum praised the monumental figural painting of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara [Fig. 4]: "this figure should be famous among the great creations of art, as nobly expressive and as pregnant with mysterious meaning as the colossal forms of Michelangelo".[22] The scholar and curator, Vincent Smith, was much more skeptical of comparisons that held the Ajanta paintings alongside European art. Before quoting Griffiths extensively, Smith writes that the "Dying Princess" was "deservedly praised by [Griffiths] in glowing language, endorsed by Dr. [James] Burgess and Mr. [James] Fergusson". Yet Smith wrote disparagingly that the Ajanta paintings did not merit praise "when compared with the world's masterpieces – no Indian art work does – but they are entitled to a respectable place among the second or third class".[23] Kramrisch's predecessors had analyzed the paintings according to criteria developed for European art and ranked them according to the prejudices of the day.

Moreover, while these European art historians looked to the sensuousness of the bodies and the religious content of the figural compositions, Kramrisch saw rocks. Throughout her long career, Kramrisch developed a rich language to describe the painted, cubic forms that recur throughout the backgrounds of the narrative wall paintings at Ajanta. She saw these rocks as the key to the

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Cited in Mitter, Much Maligned Monsters, 268.

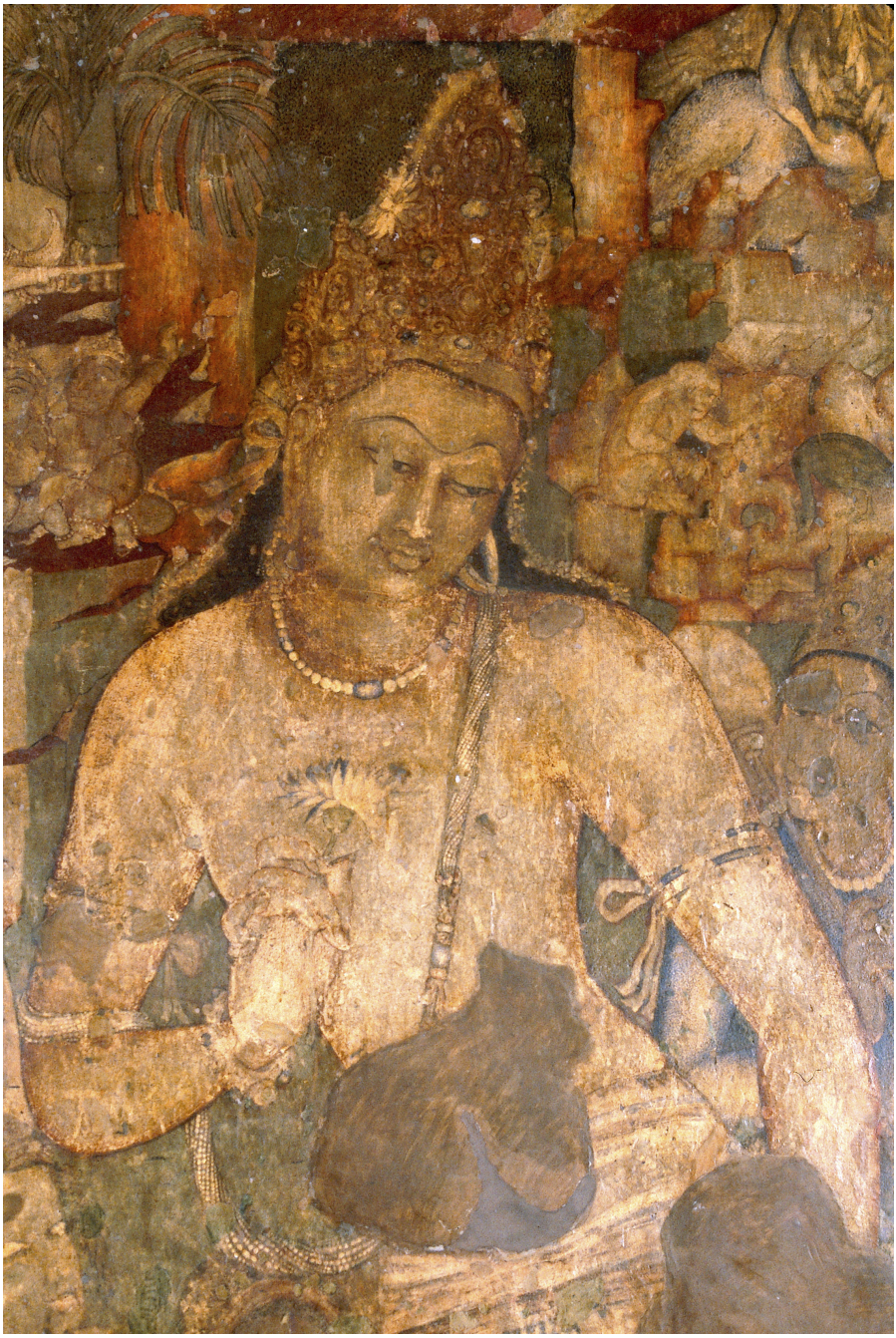
21
E. B. Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, London 1908, 164–165.

22
Laurence Binyon, *The Art of Asia*, London 1916, 7. For a sampling of such praise given to the Ajanta paintings in the early 20th century, see the popular guidebook, Kanaiyalal H. Vakil, *At Ajanta*, Bombay 1929, 29 and 36–37.

23
Vincent A. Smith, *A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon. From the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, Oxford 1911, 173, cited in Mitter, Much Maligned Monsters, 268.

[Fig. 2]
Portion of a mural painting, ca. 462–480 CE, mineral pigments on plaster, Cave 16, Ajanta, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India, (Photograph, Walter Spink, 1968), AIIS Accession No. 061512, Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies.

[Fig. 3]
Mural Painting of the Buddha, ca. 462–480 CE, mineral pigments on plaster, Cave 17, Ajanta, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India (Photograph, 1978), Courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Libraries, the Mary Binney Wheeler Image Collection.



[Fig. 4]
Mural painting depicting Bodhisattva Padmapani, ca. 462–480 CE, mineral pigments on plaster, Cave 1, Ajanta, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India, image: Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections.

perspectival system at Ajanta, pushing forward into the Ajanta paintings and hurtling into the figural scenes.

Kramrisch's contemporaries had noted these rock forms but did not investigate them further. Alfred Foucher called the rocks "crooked forms symbolizing a mountain" in his 1900 study of Buddhist iconography.[24] Unlike Foucher, Kramrisch largely avoided the iconographic decoding of the narrative scenes that engrossed her colleagues at the time, often only providing brief identifications for the story or figures in a scene.[25]

Kramrisch also resisted descriptions of the rock forms that saw them as derivative or aligned them with so-called "primitive art". Josef Strzygowski, Kramrisch's dissertation advisor from Vienna, wrote a specially commissioned article for Calcutta's *Indian Society of Oriental Art Journal* in 1933 that acknowledged the Ajanta rock forms as the "cubes and blocks" of the non-naturalistic landscape. In this text, which Kramrisch translated into English, Strzygowski avoided giving Indian artists credit for the projecting forms, writing that they "must have been imported into India". He continued, "this type of landscape built up with '*Formlinge*' ['form-things'] [...] found its way from Iran into all directions, into the mosaics of the Mediterranean and into eastern Asiatic art of the type of Tamamushi-shrine".[26] Kramrisch's account of these "cubes and blocks" differs from Strzygowski's. She never makes this argument for the diffusion of rock forms from Iran into India or their export out of it, although Strzygowski's proposed connection between rock forms in India and Mediterranean mosaics further links Kramrisch's work to the contemporaneous German and Russian studies of Byzantine art and perspective.

When Kramrisch translated Strzygowski's text from German into English, she also transformed the meaning of his use of the word "*Formlinge*" with such facility that it is almost unnoticeable. Using parenthetical notes in her translation, she explains the word, "*Formlinge*", meaning "form-thing", by glossing it as "i.e. cubical devices". When Kramrisch translated "*Formlinge*" into "cubical devices", she was also revising Strzygowski's understanding of the rock forms. The term "*Formlinge*" is a combination of the English "form" and a German suffix that suggests something indeterminate. The ethnographer and archaeologist, Leo Frobenius, a contemporary of Strzygowski, first used the term to describe motifs on San rock art in Zimbabwe that were suggestive of organic forms such as trees, but not definitive as to what was being represented. Accord-

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Foucher described "formes biscornues symbolisent une montagne". Alfred Foucher, *Étude sur L'iconographie Bouddhique de L'Inde*, Paris 1900, 35.

25
See, for example, Alfred Foucher, Lettre d'Ajantā, in: *Journal Asiatique* 17, 1921, 201–245.

26
Josef Strzygowski, India's Position in the Art of Asia, transl. Stella Kramrisch, in: *Indian Society of Oriental Art Journal* 1, 1933, 7–17, here 11. In Box 7, Folder 14, Stella Kramrisch Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.

ing to Siyakha Mguni, a *formling* is a "thing or object with a 'form' or 'shape' that is difficult to specify".[27] By providing her own translation, Kramrisch shifted the rock forms from the somewhat vague "form-things" to the intentional "cubical devices".

The rocks that Foucher, Strzygowski, and Kramrisch saw were not naturalistic forms. As Kramrisch described them, they were "prismatic shapes" that "show three surfaces, front, side and bottom simultaneously of the single boulders, in contrasting colours and with a shading which gives volume towards the edges" [Fig. 5].[28] Her interest in the rocks of the Ajanta paintings may have emerged out of her engagement with the three-dimensional medium of sculpture. Kramrisch's previous publications on sculpture, and particularly on the sculptural reliefs at the early Buddhist sites of Sanchi and Bharhut, had emphasized the linear, two-dimensional features of the shallow relief sculptures with particular attention to the facial expressions, bodily postures, and the interconnectedness of the figural forms. Characteristic of this focus is her first published article, "The Representation of Nature in Early Buddhist Sculpture (Bharhut–Sanchi)" which appeared in *Rupam* in 1921.[29] In this article, Kramrisch also emphasized the artist's interest in clarity of meaning, writing that the "conscious purpose of the artist is clear representation", and "to narrate, to tell exactly".[30] By the 1930s, her focus had shifted from narration to form, from "clear representation" to strategies for capturing space and volume in painting and sculpture.

While Kramrisch briefly mentioned renderings of three-dimensional structures in this earlier work, by the time of her 1933 volume on *Indian Sculpture*, Kramrisch included this theme in her opening chapter, entitled "Functional Devices of Inter-Relatedness" which addressed the "Visualization of the Third Dimension". She writes that the "conquest of the third dimension is one of the foremost tasks of every art tradition in the making". As she sets out to explain the rendering of the third dimension in *Indian Sculpture*, she establishes a contrast with European art:

> the system accepted by early classical Indian sculpture is not less systematical in its own way than that of the Italian

27
Siyakha Mguni, *Continuity and Change in San Belief and Ritual. Some Aspects of the Enigmatic 'Formling' and Tree Motifs from Matopo Hills Rock Art, Zimbabwe*, MA Diss., University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2002, 10. On the similarities in the "global projects" of Strzygowski and Frobenius, see Rémi Labrusse, Anthropological Delirium. Josef Strzygowski Confronts Alois Riegl, transl. John Goodman, in: *Art in Translation* 6, 2014, 59–75, here 68.

28
Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 7.

29
Stella Kramrisch, The Representation of Nature in Early Buddhist Sculpture (Bharhut–Sanchi), in: *Rupam* 8, 1921, reproduced in: Stoler Miller (ed.), Exploring India's Sacred Art, 123–129.

30
Ibid., 128.

[Fig. 5]
Mural painting of rock forms, shrine antechamber, ca. 462–480 CE, mineral pigments on plaster, Cave 2, Ajanta, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India, photo by Sylvia Houghteling.

> Renaissance. But where the one endeavours to be optically correct, the other undertakes to be functionally consistent [...] [The devices in Indian sculpture] consist of a serviceable stock in trade, and have nothing to do with any optical perspective, be it a bird's-eye view or any other.[31]

According to Kramrisch, the "noticeable conventions" for depicting space included stacking figures above each other (instead of suggesting that one is behind another) and adjusting size of figures based upon their relative importance.

When Kramrisch turns to describe how important objects are made visible in early Indian relief structure, she identifies a stereometric approach to the rendering of the third dimension:

> The third dimension, according to Western perspective, has to be inferred, and cannot be seen as such, if rendered in relief; for then one surface only, i.e. the one parallel to the ground of the relief can be shown entire. The early Indian craftsman, according to the demands of the scene and its visibility or knowability, will tilt into the relief any surface on the top and at the sides of the vertical surface, to show the whole cube or prism of each single volume or object. So it comes about that altars of the Buddha, for instance, which are centres of worship, show the whole of the top surface almost as well as the front surface [...] The same is true of houses, where the two sides as well as the gabled roof make a compact stereometrical shape. This method, however, is carried out with utmost rigour in the rendering of rocks, specially [sic] in paintings (Ajanta, cave ix). There the hill is imagined as an array of several boulders, and each of them is abstractly transformed into a prism, of which three sides at a time are delineated, in contrasting colours as far as possible, so that extensiveness may be punctiliously demonstrated.[32]

Whereas European sculptors, according to Kramrisch, would render solely the surface parallel to the ground plane of a relief, the "early Indian craftsman" would splay the cube open, depicting not only the sides parallel to the ground plane, but also those perpendicular to it. To illustrate this point, she draws upon a photograph of the Bharhut relief sculptures held in the Indian Museum in Kolkata, in which one can see a platform, decorated with flowers, that has been tilted to face the viewer [Fig. 6]. As Kramrisch writes, the visual result does not conform to mimetic or mathematical naturalism, but it captures the "extensiveness" and the energy of what she called these "stereometrical" forms.

31
Stella Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture*, Calcutta/London 1933, 19.

32
Ibid., 21.

[Fig. 6]
Relief carving on vedika railing, ca. 125–73 BCE, sandstone, Bharhut Stupa, Madhya Pradesh, Sunga period, Indian Museum, Kolkata, image: Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections.

In a mathematical sense, stereometry refers to the study of three-dimensional shapes and volumes in space. Stereometry is separate from planimetry, which is the study of two-dimensional planes. In the first decades of the 20th century, the distinction between stereometry and planimetry was taken up by artists of the European avant-garde, particularly those interested in abstract, materialist forms of painting. Stella Kramrisch would have come into contact with European avant-garde experiments with planimetry and stereometry in 1922, when the Bauhaus famously sent an exhibition of pedagogical models and artworks to be exhibited in Kolkata.[33] Christina Lodder and Martin Hammer note that in German and Russian-language texts of the period, artists made a distinction between the renderings allowed by stereometry and planimetry: while stereometry was thought to deal with "the study of bodies and spatial figures generally", planimetry was defined as "devoted exclusively to figures lying on a plane".[34]

In order to evoke this sense of spatial figures, a stereometric drawing employs different techniques from those used in recessional perspective to depict figures lying on a plane. When a cube is drawn in recessional perspective, the front face of the cube is flush with the picture plane and the lines suggesting the sides of the cube recede into space in convergent orthogonal lines leading towards an unseen vanishing point. In a stereometric drawing, the lines suggesting the sides of the cube do not converge, but instead run parallel, as they do in real space. The prismatic forms that Kramrisch identified in Bharhut sculpture and the Ajanta paintings are rendered in this parallel perspective; their sides do not converge towards an unseen vanishing point.

The visual play of the prismatic forms at Ajanta, Kramrisch would go on to write in 1937, cannot be found in any textual instructions for artists. They are not "described in any of the known texts on painting [...] They are, however, essential requisites."[35] The essential quality of the rocks was that they brought force and energy to the paintings. In the same way that 20th-century abstract painters identified a charge and a dynamism behind their non-objective

33
On the Bauhaus in Kolkata, see Chatterjee, Writing a Transcultural Modern; Mitter, The Triumph of Modernism; and R. Siva Kumar, *Santiniketan. The Making of a Contextual Modernism*, New Delhi 1997.

34
Martin Hammer and Christina Lodder, *Constructing Modernity. The Art & Career of Naum Gabo*, New Haven, CT 2000, 51. A central premise of Naum Gabo's "constructions" was that stereometry was a description not of the mass occupied by a volume, but of the space. Kramrisch too was interested in the interplay between space and volume, writing in a footnote: "Space is form and – as space penetrates into form, form is space." Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 5, fn. 3.

35
Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 8. Despite Kramrisch's comments, in a study of South Asian texts on painting from the first millennium CE, Isabella Nardi has found that "proportion" as well as "loss" and "gain" (which she glosses as "foreshortening") were important principles in early medieval texts on the principles of painting. Isabella Nardi, *The Theory of Citrasūtras in Indian Painting. A Critical Re-Evaluation of Their Uses and Interpretations*, London/New York 2006, 24–27.

works, Kramrisch too identified a propelling force of "becoming" in the abstract rocks. "Their stereometry proceeds from points which have to be imagined *behind* the painting itself, where they lie hidden like the germs of things to come. Their stereometry is charged with the spell which shows their form in the making."[36] The rocks were not merely a substructure for narrative; they were themselves the "essential requisites" because encased within them was the metaphysical meaning of the caves.

Kramrisch's writings on the rocks are a synthesis between this kind of vague spiritualism and the most rigorous language of avant-garde abstraction. She allied the stereometric rendering of the rock forms at Ajanta with technology and modernity, attributing to the forms "the energy of a train shown in a cinema with the ever growing engine coming larger and larger towards the spectator".[37] These gestures toward early cinema were not uncommon. In the same period, art historian Heinrich Zimmer employed similar language to describe Indian sculpture:

> This piece of sculpture is more like a motion picture than a painting. The notion that there is nothing static, nothing abiding, but only the flow of a relentless process with everything originating, growing, decaying, vanishing – this wholly dynamic view of life, of the individual and of the universe, is one of the fundamental conceptions [...] of later Hinduism.[38]

While Kramrisch drew upon metaphors from the cinema, she was also detailing a kind of escape from what Henri Bergson called in 1911 the "contrivance" of cinematography. In Kramrisch's understanding, the Ajanta paintings did not create an illusion, or artificial reconstruction of what Henri Bergson called "becoming".[39] According to Kramrisch, the beholder sees the actual process of becoming at the Ajanta caves:

> These paintings do not give an illusion on a flat surface, of the three dimensional conditions of concrete appearance or reality. The art precipitated from a reality teeming with

36
Kramisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 8.

37
Ibid., 7. Among the Lumière brothers' first short films from 1895 was one depicting a train pulling into a station. I thank Jo Ziebritzki for this reference.

38
Quoted in Adam Hardy, *The Temple Architecture of India*, Hoboken, NJ 2007, 38.

39
In the cinema, Bergson faulted the film "apparatus" with erasing the "inner becoming of things". The moving picture blurred the distinctions between different moments in time, creating seams between discrete photographs, allowing viewers to "place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially", Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, transl. Arthur Mitchell, Lanham, MD 1983, 306. What was lost in cinema was the "infinite multiplicity of becomings" that, in real experience, "passes before our eyes", ibid., 304. I am grateful to Ayla Lepine for pointing out this connection to me.

> possibilities of manifestation of which some are shown as they proceed from within it.[40]

Instead of distancing the viewer from experience, the cave spaces that held the Ajanta paintings made experience richer, denser, and more alive.

II. The Meaning of the Rocks

In *A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan*, Kramrisch illustrated her commentary on the rock formations with a black-and-white reproduction of a 19th-century oil study of Cave 10 at Ajanta made by the students of John Griffiths [Fig. 7].[41] Yet Kramrisch's writings on Ajanta were predicated on her actually being there, corporeally experiencing the space of the caves. As she wrote in a footnote to *A Survey of Indian Painting*, "The notes on which the present study is based were taken on the spot during repeated visits".[42] Likewise, in the image captions and the footnotes of the text, she tries to mitigate the distance between her readership in Europe or elsewhere and the actual spaces of the caves by visually describing what the copied oil paintings or photographs can tell us. In the caption to each black-and-white image that appears in *A Survey of Indian Painting*, Kramrisch provides the actual paint colors that existed on the murals. In a footnote to Griffiths's oil painting, for instance, she notes that many of the rocks that exist in the Ajanta cave painting have been left blank in the copy.[43] Kramrisch's commentary also suggests her unusual position as a European-trained scholar based in Kolkata who was able to make "repeated visits" to Ajanta. Her extra notations demonstrate both how difficult it was to convey the paintings in fullness in her published work, and also how vital the experiential, spatial understanding of the paintings was to her arguments about perspective.

The painting in Cave 10 of Ajanta that Kramrisch reproduces dates to the earliest period of excavation and decoration, from approximately 100 BCE to 150 CE.[44] Positioned flat on the right

40
Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 11.

41
The image Kramrisch produces is a painted copy made by John Griffiths and seven students in the late 19th century. It is currently held in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Early copies such as this one are often the most complete records of paintings, which have been subject to damage over the last century. On the history of the copying of the Ajanta paintings, see Patel, Copying Ajanta, 39–62.

42
Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 206, fn. 76.

43
Ibid., 206, fn. 73.

44
Walter Spink, The Earliest Caves (c. 100 BCE to c. 150 CE), in: id., *Ajanta. History and Development. Volume 4: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture – Year by Year*, Boston/Leiden 2009, 1–5.

[Fig. 7]
John Griffiths and students from the Bombay School of Art, *Copy of mural painting of the Chaddanta Jātaka from Cave 1, Ajanta*, ca. 1872–1885, oil on canvas © The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, IS.19-1885.

wall of the barrel-vaulted hall, the *Chaddanta Jātaka* tells the story of a queen, Subhadda, who summons a group of hunters to her court and commissions one hunter, Sonuttara, to kill the elephant king, a large, white, six-tusked elephant. In her previous life, the queen was the elephant wife of the six-tusked elephant and she became jealous of his attention to others. In this *jātaka*, a story of the Buddha's previous lives, the six-tusked elephant is an animal incarnation of the Buddha.[45]

The scene that Kramrisch reproduced in her book depicts the hunter catching a glimpse of the six-tusked elephant for the first time. The hunter, who in the textual narrative has climbed atop a hill, can be seen holding a sack over his shoulder and is looking out from a grotto-like space of projecting rock forms. His body and face are rendered in three-quarter-length view and the rocks that push by his head open out in the direction of his gaze. The frontal face, one side, as well as the bottom face of the rocks can be seen. The positioning of the hunter's head alongside these prismatic forms creates the illusion that the rocks extend in front of him, stopping only when they hit the surface of the picture plane. In her formal descriptions, Kramrisch notes that the projecting rocks can overshadow the human figures. "The groups [of figures]", she wrote in 1937, "taken as a whole are freed from the forward direction for they dwell in and are supported by it."[46] In her 1954 work, *The Art of India*, Kramrisch wrote that the various figures press forward, "as if discharged from a cornucopia behind the painted wall [... and] seem to penetrate it and to halt inside the painting, which is filled with their plastically rounded volumes".[47] The most aggressive forward movement in the painting occurs with the rocks, while both the hunter and the conversing figures behind him have been "halted inside the painting".

Seen in this painted representation, the rock shapes in the *Chaddanta* mural painting could be a technical feature, meant only to divide space. They could also be interpreted as purely mimetic, intended to represent actual rocks in a mountainous landscape. In the text of the *jātaka*, for instance, the hunter is said to have gained his first view of the elephant from the top of the "Golden Cliff".[48] It seems significant, however, that the scene in which the hunter first views the six-tusked elephant is one that propels his actions forward, leading to his slaughter of the Buddha. The rocks on either side seem to press into that futurity, creating stillness around the

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Dieter Schlingloff, *Guide to the Ajanta Paintings*, New Delhi 1999, 26–27; Robert Alexander Neil, *The Jātaka. Or, Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, New Delhi 1990, 20–31.

46
Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 16.

47
Stella Kramrisch, *The Art of India. Traditions of Indian Sculpture, Painting and Architecture*, London 1954, 47.

48
Neil, The Jātaka, 27.

hunter. The prismatic shapes visually anticipate and perhaps even implicate the beholder in the urgency and moral gravity of what is to come.

The paintings of Cave 10 represent Ajanta's earliest phase and they contain the most bulbous rock formations. In the caves from Ajanta's later period in the 5th century, the rock formations have become geometric and boxy. Contrasting colors have been added to highlight the sharp, rectilinear edges of these rocks. In paintings of the same *Chaddanta* scene in Cave 17 (which Walter Spink dates to a rapid period of decoration in ca. 469–471), the curving forms of the elephants fracture into jutting geometric shapes painted in the upper right in yellow, white, and dark green [Fig. 8].[49] These shapes are less naturalistic and more linear; unlike those painted in Cave 10, which could still be read as literal rocks, these forms disrupt the narrative space of the paintings and press forward into the space of the hall.

In her writing, Kramrisch emphasized that the visual rhythm of the "forthcoming" paintings rather than the narrative continuity of the story, is even more apparent when the space is experienced three dimensionally. Kramrisch described the various scenes as coming forward in an outward direction

> up to the point where the one instant or scene of a story is strung together with the next in a sequence in which time has no share. Although many stories are painted, their course is not visualized. Such moments and scenes which endure in their importance throughout the story are laid out and are linked rhythmically.[50]

In her account of the narrative elements of the paintings, Kramrisch celebrated the seeming incongruity between depicted scenes, an interest also of scholars that have come after her. Vidya Dehejia has written of the Simhala mural on the wall of Cave 17: "The action moves in crisscross fashion, and no specific pattern emerges from a close study of the painted wall. In fact, one is confronted with a complete network of movement in space and time."[51] Dehejia introduces the term "narrative networks" to describe the interlacing of events and places that occurs across the mural walls. Like Dehejia after her, Kramrisch attended to the visual connections between scenes, the rhythmic linking by which "one instant or scene of a story is strung together". Kramrisch departs from the idea that narratives should be linear (for these are sequences "in which time has

[49] On the dating of Cave 17, see Walter Spink, 469–471. King Upendragupta's caves 17, 19, 20, 29, in: id., Ajanta. History and Development, 45–46.

[50] Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 7.

[51] Vidya Dehejia, On Modes of Visual Narration in Early Buddhist Art, in: *Art Bulletin* 72/3, 1990, 374–392, here 388.

[Fig. 8]
Mural painting of the Chaddanta Jātaka, ca. 462–480 CE, mineral pigments on plaster, Cave 17, Ajanta, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India, photo by John C. Huntington, Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.

no share"), and reminds us to look at the borders between, as much as at the internal content, for an understanding of the scenes. The laws of time and space have been suspended in these cave spaces; the point of the paintings is not to tell a straightforward narrative, but to enclose the viewer in a meditative state.

The "projecting forms" at Ajanta press into the viewer, creating an immersive environment. Kramrisch wrote, "The same composition sometimes extends from wall to wall at an angle of ninety degrees and includes the enclosed space as its setting [...] It creates an interior space, immersed in which the beholder lives the myth."[52] Because the cave spaces are covered fully in paintings and rock-cut sculpture, there is no room for escape. The experience of viewing the paintings is both physical and psychological, both visual and spiritual. Unlike the single paintings with which Kramrisch illustrates the scenes, the caves completely envelop the beholder.

III. Perspective as Symbolic Form in South Asian and European Art

In 1937, Kramrisch returned to Europe to deliver a series of lectures at the Courtauld Institute of Art, the same year that she published *A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan*. Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Cassirer had recently fled to London after the rise of Nazism in Germany and, according to Barbara Stoler Miller, Kramrisch was influenced by their work, although she was "more impressed by Cassirer's *Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen*".[53] In her continuing writings on Ajanta, Kramrisch seems to be reaching past her art historical colleagues towards the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, the scholar whose work inspired the title of Panofsky's essay.

Erwin Panofsky's essay, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (delivered as a lecture in German in 1924 for the Warburg Library for the Science of Culture in Hamburg and published in 1927), transformed what had been relatively atomized debates about perspective within the fields of optics, Gestalt psychology, mathematics, and art history into a semi-philosophical question, introduced within the interdisciplinary atmosphere of the Warburg Library. In Panofsky's telling, the development in 15th-century Italian painting of a mathematically organized linear perspective represented much more than a new artistic trick; he interpreted this perspective device, using what he called Ernst Cassirer's "felicitous" term, as a "symbolic form", imbued with "spiritual meaning". "This is why it is essential", Panofsky wrote, "to ask of artistic periods and regions not only

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Kramrisch, The Art of India, 46.

53
Barbara Stoler Miller writes, "Stella had studied Kant's theories of knowledge and judgment while she was a student in Gymnasium; she thus had a basis for understanding Cassirer's language and mode of analysis. She found his critical approach to the study of culture relevant to her own work on the complex symbolism of the Hindu temple". Miller, Stella Kramrisch. A Biographical Essay, 17–18. I have not found evidence of any direct discussion between Kramrisch, Panofsky, and Cassirer.

whether they have perspective, but also which perspective they have."[54] Panofsky's essay increased the significance of perspectival systems within broader art historical studies, bringing with it an emphasis on the developments in 15th-century Europe and the period's systemization of linear perspective.

Panofsky narrated the development of single-point perspective as a construct, but also as a release of painting from the spatial dictates of architecture and sculpture. Whereas Kramrisch viewed painting as the outermost manifestation of an essentially architectural principle of "forthcoming", "projecting itself through the walls of the temple and expressing itself on and beyond the walls as buttresses and images",[55] Panofsky described Renaissance perspective as developing from the "emancipation of plastic bodies" from architecture.[56] The dual emancipation of sculpture from architecture, and painting from the plastic space of sculpture, Panofsky argued, made way for a revolutionary coherence between painted figures and their spatial surroundings. It made "their field of activity into a veritable stage" that the viewer beheld from afar.[57] Practically, the way to achieve this was through the use of single-point perspective, a mathematically consistent rendering of space in which three-dimensionality and spatial distance is suggested by the recession of shapes and figures in accordance with orthogonal lines, all of which meet at a single vanishing point.

Panofsky's narrative culminated with the 15th-century's systemization of linear perspective, or what he called "an objectification of the subjective".[58] Panofsky concluded that, "perspective seals off religious art from the realm of the magical", by "mathematically fully rationalizing an image of space".[59] Single-point perspective made it possible for a painter "to construct an unambiguous and consistent spatial structure" as a representation of visual perception.[60]

Kramrisch's analysis of the Ajanta paintings departed from Panofsky's perspective "sealed off from the subjective". By doing so, Kramrisch was also connecting her writing to the work of another one of her professors, Max Dvořák, whose lectures she

54
Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form, 41.

55
Kramrisch, Wall and Image in Indian Art, 7.

56
Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form, 53.

57
Ibid.

58
Ibid., 66.

59
Ibid., 72.

60
Ibid., 63.

attended in 1916–1917.[61] In a way that would seem to have shaped Kramrisch's later studies, Dvořák gave his sustained attention to epochs, such as the early Christian and Mannerist periods, when philosophy and religious sentiment were marked by a spiritual fervor that eschewed rationalism and orderly representation. He developed not only historical explanatory tools, but an appreciative narrative of these periods whose art had been denigrated as decadent and disorderly in comparison with the aesthetic norms of Classical and Renaissance painting and sculpture. Through Dvořák, Kramrisch may have gained a sensitivity to art historical moments when, in Dvořák's words, "Man opens roofs and vaults and replaces their heavy materiality with boundless space and optical visions".[62]

Kramrisch identified a specific alternative to Panofsky's linear perspective using spiritual language like that of Dvořák. If we perceive space "in a direction that does not lead away from us, but points back towards ourselves", she wrote, we become "stage and spectator of the world as we see and live it. There is nothing to lead us away into a distance outside ourselves and there is no room for nostalgia or perspective."[63] In melding "stage and spectator", Kramrisch denied the passivity of the spectator, and the "veritable stage" on which Panofsky's figures performed, allowing for the viewer's active participation in the scene. As she wrote with emphasis in an undated notebook, "Whereas the classical western painters make him [the observer] view the picture from 'in front of it'", in Indian painting, particularly at Ajanta, "the observer *moves* in this pictorial world".[64]

Kramrisch made these claims in a climate that lauded rationalism "sealed off from the realm of the magical". Kramrisch's contemporary, Ludwig Bachhofer, regarded deviance from mathematical, recessional perspective as a failure of skill on the part of the artist, attributed to technical inferiority, rather than elective artistic decisions. Bachhofer, a German émigré scholar of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian art and a professor at the University of Chicago, published a review of Kramrisch's *A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan* in *The Art Bulletin* in 1939. In it, he contested Kramrisch's claim that the rendering of rocks and figures at Ajanta constituted

61
Kramrisch is documented as having enrolled in Dvořák's lectures "Über das Verhältnis der Kunst im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert. Zu den geistigen Strömungen" in the winter semester of 1916/1917, see Archive Information System of the University of Vienna, *Nationale der Studentinnen der Philosophischen Fakultät Wintersemester 1916/17 Buchstaben J–M*, Phil. Nat. 42 Frauen, f. 79 (November 26, 2024). I thank Jo Ziebritzki and Matthew Vollgraff for this reference.

62
Quoted in Mitchell Schwarzer, Cosmopolitan Difference in Max Dvořák's Art Historiography, in: *The Art Bulletin* 74/4, 2014, 669–678, here 675.

63
Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 5.

64
Stella Kramrisch, undated notebook, Box 37, Folder 1: South and Deccan Art and Architecture, Indus Valley Civilization, Stella Kramrisch Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.

"a peculiar conception of space", arguing instead that the paintings revealed the "plasticity" of Indian art and the fact that "The Hindu [...] is a born sculptor, and his painting is actually plastic art realized in another medium". The Ajanta rocks did reveal the "forthcoming" qualities that Kramrisch ascribed to them but "Indian painting [...] stops short of a real apprehension of space [...] the utmost the Indian could bring himself to present in this respect was a small group of figures within a closed room which he conceived as a sort of hollow body with definite boundaries".[65]

Bachhofer provides a revealing foil for Kramrisch. Bachhofer was a student of Heinrich Wölfflin at the University of Basel in Switzerland and completed his doctoral studies with a dissertation on Japanese woodcuts in 1921. Bachhofer struggled to integrate Wölfflin's famous stylistic dichotomies into his subsequent study of Chinese painting. Eventually, in a 1931 article entitled "Representation of Space in Chinese Painting during the First Thousand Years of the Christian Era", Bachhofer turned to Erwin Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* as a template for how to articulate the progression of spatial representations in Chinese painting. As Lillian Lan-ying Tseng has demonstrated, Bachhofer was faithful to Panofsky's model of the "sequential development of perspective".[66] His account began with the earliest forms of perspective in ancient Chinese painting and ended with the 8th-century Buddhist paintings at Dunhuang where orthogonal lines are present but do not ultimately converge at a single vanishing point. Bachhofer argued that even in the great paintings of Dunhuang, this "fourth stage which was so important in the Western painting is missing".[67] Bachhofer's insistence on a stylistic progression made him locate something as missing in the Dunhuang paintings, whereas Kramrisch describes the earlier Ajanta paintings as works with a plenitude of artistic merit.

In more recent years, scholars of Chinese Buddhist art have departed from Bachhofer's formulations and have proposed that the variety of perspectival forms present in medieval Buddhist painting embodies part of a robust artistic and intellectual process of plan-

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Ludwig Bachhofer, Review of Stella Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan, in: *The Art Bulletin* 21/1, 1939, 93–94, here 93. At times, it is surprising how an astute scholar like Bachhofer dismisses the substance of Kramrisch's approach. Kramrisch readily admitted that the painters have created "a small group of figures within a closed room", but her interpretation returns the intentionality to the painter. The painter has created what Kramrisch calls "houses [that] open like magical boxes" in which "no lids are required, for the contents exactly fill the place of their performance, and terrace or balcony, pavilion or hermitage fit the charged space as the glass walls of an aquarium hold the water within it with the fish, gravel and plants". Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 11.

66
Lillian Lan-ying Tseng, Traditional Chinese Painting through the Modern European Eye. The Case of Ludwig Bachhofer, in: *Tradition and Modernity. Comparative Perspectives*, Beijing 2007, 508–533, here 519.

67
Quoted in Tseng, Traditional Chinese Painting, 527.

ning.[68] Multiple forms of perspective, as Eugene Wang has argued, can bridge the pictorial universe of the paintings with the viewer's world.[69] These scholars have connected disruptions of smooth perspectival space to a particular spiritual or philosophical approach.

Indeed, it was the metaphorical relationship between the formal composition of the art object's recession into depth (its "perspective" or *Anschauung*) and the artist's view of the world, a Kantian term that also could be translated as "perspective" or *Weltanschauung*, that made it possible for Panofsky to examine optical perspective as a form of philosophical inquiry.[70] For Panofsky, Albertian perspective was not just a newfangled artist's tool in the Renaissance, but a prescient articulation of a rationalist ethos that would come to dominate the humanist philosophy of the period. It was, Panofsky wrote, "nothing other than a concrete expression of a contemporary advance in epistemology or natural philosophy".[71]

Kramrisch too adopted the language of "perspective" as a viewpoint and as a worldview. In an article she published in German in *Artibus Asiae* in 1940, Kramrisch argued that even the varied floral, figural and geometric patterns that adorn the ceilings of the Ajanta caves – some of them rendered two-dimensionally, and some using illusionistic techniques to suggest three-dimensionality – were potential evidence of differing philosophical "views", or *Anschauungen*, held by the painters who decorated the ceilings.[72] For Kramrisch, the "views" of the painters were revealed not in their decision to render smooth mathematical space but in the variation in a relief pattern or the disruption caused by a set of protruding rocks.

Kramrisch's work also captures the intrinsically relativistic and constructivist concept inherent to Ernst Cassirer's symbolic forms. Cassirer, a neo-Kantian philosopher whose work spanned aesthetics, science, and language, proposed the idea of symbolic forms as a way to synthesize the development of scientific thought with the creation of cultural meanings. Inspired by the publication of

68
Sarah Fraser has shown that extant preparatory sketches provide a way of understanding the lived practices of early wall painters at Dunhuang and their "cognitive mapping" of "larger, complex tableaux". See ead., *Performing the Visual. The Practice of Buddhist Wall Painting in China and Central Asia, 618–960*, Stanford, CA 2004, 70.

69
Eugene Y. Wang argues that the artists of the Dunhuang paintings intentionally deployed two different forms of perspective: bird-eye's perspective as well as what Wang calls "mirror" perspective, a view of a shallow, recessional space where one is metaphysically meant to see the Buddha image as one sees oneself in a mirror. See id., *Shaping the Lotus Sutra. Buddhist Visual Culture in Medieval China*, Seattle 2005, 292.

70
"Perspective", Christopher Wood writes, "encourages a strange kind of identification of the art-object and the world-object. It is perspective, after all, that makes possible the metaphor of a *Weltanschauung*, a worldview, in the first place." Wood, Introduction, 13.

71
Panofsky, Perspective as Symbolic Form, 65.

72
Stella Kramrisch, Einige Typen indischer Deckenmalerei, in: *Artibus Asiae* 8/1, 1940, 5–15.

Albert Einstein's *Theory of Relativity*, Cassirer came to view both science and culture as relativist forms of understanding, constantly evolving in a developmental process. Cassirer's work, particularly as it related to language in his first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923), traced a dynamic path of development from the most intuitive, expressive forms of language to the representative functions of natural language.[73] These developing symbolic forms can be seen to aid in the process, in the dynamic and constitutive act, of giving meaning to space and time.

If the symbolic form of linear perspective is constitutive of our knowledge it is because it helps us to understand three dimensions. It communicates that what in reality are parallel lines have been transformed into orthogonal lines that converge at a single point.[74] Yet this relationship is never explicitly clarified by Panofsky; the use that Panofsky makes of the philosophy of symbolic forms is limited to the single sentence in which he introduces Cassirer's "felicitous term". Panofsky uses "symbolic form" to suggest that perspective grew out of the human process of attaching "spiritual meaning" to a "concrete material sign". For him, linear perspective as a "material sign" solves the question of how to represent space, positing an end to a process and a final agreement on a perspectival system that would endure for five hundred years.

Kramrisch embraces Cassirer's thought in her account of projecting rocks in a more elastic way. Kramrisch's writing shares with Cassirer's account of the development of the symbolic form of language an interest in spatial metaphors that are not unlike Kramrisch's description of the projecting forms at Ajanta. Cassirer argues for spatial relations as the most fundamental concepts of linguistic creation, positing that certain ideas only became available to the "linguistic consciousness" when they were "projected into space and there analogically reproduced".[75] Cassirer conceives of the "symbolic form" of language as something that initially moved outwards from the mind and into the real spaces of experience. From there, Cassirer writes "we see how language draws as it were a sensuous-spiritual circle round the speaker, designating the center of the circle as 'I'".[76] The world is not separated out from consciousness, as in Panofsky's perspective, but is instead projected from the subjective center. The idea of a sensuous-spiritual circle that the speaker draws round himself echoes the visual outpourings of the

73
Michael Friedman, Ernst Cassirer, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2023, ed. by Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (November 26, 2024).

74
See Allister Neher, How Perspective Could Be a Symbolic Form, in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63/4, 2005, 359–373.

75
Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, transl. Ralph Manheim, New Haven, CT 1955, 200.

76
Ibid., 215.

Ajanta painters who turn around their visions from their minds and paint them to project out of the walls of the caves. This process was dynamic and changing; for Kramrisch, the rock-like forms at Ajanta were constantly in motion, "travelling inside and along each of their prisms layer by layer and in as many directions as will lead forward".[77] Likewise, language development, Cassirer writes, "should be regarded as a form not of being but of movement, not as static but as dynamic [...] in this oscillating movement do we find the special character of all linguistic form as creative form".[78]

With regard to perspective, or the *Weltanschauung*, Cassirer writes that,

> each particular language [...] never simply expressed the objects perceived in themselves, but that this choice was eminently determined by a whole spiritual attitude, by the orientation of man's subjective view of objects. For the word is not a copy of the object as such but reflects the soul's image of the object.[79]

This is a narration of language that cannot be "sealed off from the subjective", as Panofsky had written of perspective. Symbolic forms unite the subjective, the human-centered, the "soul's image" in them.

For Kramrisch, the relationship between worldview and perspectival system was similarly grounded in the experience of the artist, the person putting forth the "soul's image" into the world. She wrote that when the painter set about to paint a scene from the Buddha's former life, it was not a mimetic representation of anything from the world, but rather a projection from the artist's mind:

> The painter thinks in pictures and when he paints them, he shifts their stage from within his consciousness on to the other side of the limits of his body. He turns the figures around [...] so that they confront him. They have come out from his mind to be seen by his eye [...] The wall paintings at Ajanta show the internal space of consciousness and its contents [...] This taking place of form, its progression from the storehouse of the mind into visibility, is painted in Ajanta in a direction which leads from within the picture outward.[80]

77
Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 8.

78
Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, 269.

79
Ibid., 284.

80
Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 6.

She noted in 1937 that the rock formations she analyzed were "not described in any of the known texts on painting", but instead attributed the ultimate source of images to the painter's "storehouse of the mind".[81] For Kramrisch, the idea of a painter "turning around" images to face them was part of her metaphysical concept of the artist or artisan.

Kramrisch regarded the rock-like forms and the sensuous figures at Ajanta as an outgrowth of a Buddhist artist's meditative mind. Yet despite the broad-reaching nature of much of her work, she did not seek to bind this "forthcoming" perspective in painting with a single, synthetic worldview. While she traced the formal qualities of "forthcoming" throughout millennia of South Asia art, she also seemed to have recognized the site-specificity of the Ajanta paintings. Many years later, in her notes on E. H. Gombrich's *A Sense of Order* (1979), Kramrisch was still considering the relationship between worldview and artistic style. She wrote of the "permanent recurrence of *alternatives*: absorption in or withdrawal from the world". In a side note she included oppositional pairs: abstraction vs. empathy; "geometrism" vs. expressionism. She was not quite satisfied with this formulation because she then wrote: "[...] but in a *traditional* art?? [cf. *Ajanta* as against western India Rajput ptg]".[82] Kramrisch seems to have been experimenting with the idea of slotting Ajanta paintings and Rajput art into these oppositional pairs, whether that meant aligning Ajanta with abstraction and withdrawal, and the much later Rajput art with expression and absorption, or some other combination. In the midst of reading Gombrich's psychologically inspired account of ornament, Kramrisch was still turning over these connections forty years after she wrote *A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan*. She never fully closed off the possibilities for meaning that a form of perspective could take.

IV. The Ajanta Paintings in Their Place and Time

At the time Kramrisch wrote her book on painting, she emphasized the artist's role in painting the walls, but she did not engage with the Buddhist institutional foundations of the Ajanta site or with its ongoing use after the creation of the paintings. Many of the cave sites that bear painted images of "forthcoming" perspective occur on the walls of *vihāras*, assembly halls surrounded by monks' cells. Recent scholarship has recovered extant instructions for the decoration of *vihāras* and evidence for their ritual use, information that might speculatively aid in contextualizing the visual structures that

81
Scholars have since disputed the connection between the Ajanta caves and the *Yogācāra* school of Buddhism, which uses the terminology of the "storehouse of the mind". See Joanna Williams, Review of Sheila L. Weiner, Ajantā. Its Place in Buddhist Art, Berkeley, CA 1977, in: *The Art Bulletin* 62/1, 1980, 177–180.

82
Stella Kramrisch, notes on E. H. Gombrich's *The Sense of Order* (1979), Box 7, Folder 15: Writings and Research, Stella Kramrisch Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.

Kramrisch identified in the paintings at Ajanta. The 5th-century Buddhist practices at the Ajanta caves were in concordance with the precepts of Mahāyāna Buddhism and with the lived experiences of early Buddhist life. Gregory Schopen has gathered evidence for the importance of aesthetics to various monastic communities during the period of Ajanta's active use. These early accounts stressed the visual beauty of the cave sites with particular attention to lush gardens and painted interiors. Schopen translates and reproduces what he calls a "stereotypic" account of the ideal painted *vihāra*. The description derives from the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*, a set of monastic codes, religious teachings and commentaries that were likely known within the Ajanta monastic community.[83] Schopen analyzes the account describing the paintings in the *vihāra* as "stealing (or 'carrying away', or 'captivating') the heart and eye, a veritable stairway to heaven".[84] This description employs the language of transcendence through perception (thus the "stealing of the eye") as part of the idealized experience of the monastic site. The metaphor used for the experience of art in the *vihāra* is evocative of how European observers would describe landscapes rendered with perspectival recession. Yet the painted scenes at Ajanta, as Kramrisch would assert, do not provide "staircases" that lead off into infinity; they build outward toward the beholder, forging a bridge between the illusory space of the painted vignettes and the interior of the *vihāra*.

Moreover, the architectural program of a *vihāra* hall, in which monastic cells encircled the assembly space, meant that each wall was also known to have a room behind it. It seems possible that those in the central pavilion space could have imagined the presence of meditating monks behind the walls. A prescription for painting a *vihāra* derives from the same Mahāyāna text of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* and suggests that the presence of these cells behind the walls might have informed the layout of the paintings:

> On the outer door, you should represent a yaksa holding a staff; [in] the vestibule, the Great Miracle and the Wheel [of Existence] in five divisions; in the pavilion, a cycle of *jātaka* stories [...] in the bathhouse and steam-room, sufferings from the *Deva-Sūtra* or the different hells; in the infirmary, the Tathāgata giving treatment; in the toilet, a horrible cemetery; on cell doors, draw a skeleton and skull.[85]

83
The *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* is one of the few texts, besides the *jātakas*, that Richard S. Cohen argues was known to the Ajanta monastic community. Id., *Setting the Three Jewels. The Complex Culture of Buddhism at the Ajanta Caves*, Ph.D. diss., The University of Michigan, 1995, 123.

84
Gregory Schopen, The Buddhist "Monastery" and the Indian Garden. Aesthetics, Assimilation and the Siting of Indian Monastic Establishments, in: *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 126/4, 2006, 487–505, here 492.

85
Cited in Cohen, Setting the Three Jewels, 125.

The iconographic instructions for the functional spaces (bathhouse, toilet, infirmary, and living cells) acknowledge the bodily needs of living monks, but also emphasize the insignificance of bodily existence. The "skeleton and skull" recommended for cell doors serves, as in Christian iconography, as a *momento mori*, asserting the transience of human life.[86] Similarly, the *jātaka* stories provide moral lessons from the Buddha's former lives for contemplation. Kramrisch's writings focus on the artist, but it could have been the monk whose meditating mind was understood as bodying forth in the projecting forms from behind the wall in the monk's quarters.[87]

More broadly, the paintings, with their "forthcoming" perspective, likely aided devotees in experiencing the sight of the Buddha (*Buddhadarśan*). In her work on the Buddhist cave structures of the Deccan, Pia Brancaccio has discussed an increasing emphasis in Mahāyāna Buddhism on vision and on a devotee having both a physical and a mental "transcendental" experience of viewing the Buddha form.[88] The cave sites with the large-scale wall paintings also held large-scale sculptural representations of the Buddha, cut from the rock of the caves, that were at times flanked by two or more Bodhisattvas. The visitor to the *vihāra* site would first encounter the painted *jātaka* scenes with their rock formations, which, as Kramrisch has shown us, retain a sculptural sense of modeling in their plasticity and energetic projection. Moving deeper into the inner sanctum of the *vihāra*, the visitor would then encounter the actual rock-cut sculptural works.[89]

In a brief passage in *A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan*, Kramrisch suggests that the first painted rock forms that the visitors encounter have a different meaning than those depicted in scenes situated close to the Buddha image. She seems to align the painted rocks' abounding energy with the earthly drama of the *jātaka* scenes, whereas the rocks' energy serves to highlight the far different presence of the monumental painted Bodhisattvas Padmapani and Vajrapani that flank the stone Buddha image in Ajanta's Cave 1 [see Fig. 4]. In the painted image of the Bodhisattva Padmapani, among the best-known from Ajanta, the rock forms press into the

86
Elizabeth Lyons, Heather Peters, and Gregory L. Possehl, *Buddhism. History and Diversity of a Great Tradition* (exh. cat. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology, 1985), 38.

87
This is another interesting connection with early 20th-century German and Russian theories of "reverse perspective" in Byzantine art, where the "reverse perspective" was interpreted by some as representing the view from those existing inside of the depicted space. See Antonova, On the Problem of "Reverse Perspective", 465.

88
Pia Brancaccio, *The Buddhist Caves at Aurangabad. Transformations in Art and Religion*, Leiden 2011, 98.

89
Stephen Teiser has argued in the context of Cave 17 at Ajanta that the ritual movement from the entry door of the cave to the shrine with the Buddha sculpture at the opposite end traces out a path to transcendence. Stephen F. Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel. Paintings of Rebirth in Medieval Buddhist Temples*, Seattle 2006, 83–101.

viewer's space alongside the smooth, serene figure of the Bodhisattva. As Kramrisch described it, "the crystalline rock cubes flame and consume their own shapes. A fierce combustion of crystalline definition still urges ahead while it has already reached its limits." The rocks here have pushed forward to their full extent, and the Bodhisattva form, "falls back upon itself and halts. Lowered eyelids screen the return of life gone out in its plenitude and come home."[90] The rocks cannot express the very different energy of the Bodhisattva, which has calmed the "fierce combustion" implied by the rocks and "come home".

This idea of a landscape reverberating around a center of spiritual stillness relates to another possible interpretation for the rock shapes that may have held significance for those traversing or inhabiting the craggy Deccan landscape surrounding Ajanta. Kramrisch herself notes that the Deccan plateau was full of unusual geological forms, although further east of Ajanta. She writes:

> To some extent such formations, bare boulders of stone, are peculiar to the country in several places in the Deccan, around Hyderabad for instance where stray rocks, barren and massive, are cleft of a sudden by the growth of one or the other tree with glossy leaves. In Ajanta itself the hills are mild and wooded. They are not exposed, except by the craftsmen who excavated the caves.[91]

In this brief aside, Kramrisch suggests an environmental context for the paintings of cubistic rocks, whether in a boulder of Hyderabad suddenly split by a growing tree, or a craftsman who witnesses the rocks "exposed" by the excavation of the caves.

The paintings could also be seen as representing more dramatic ritual events of the earth fracturing. Eugene Ciurtin has drawn attention to the centrality of earthquakes within early South Asian Buddhist texts, particularly in the context of the Buddha's meditations, and notes that visual representations of seismological activity have been long overlooked. Ciurtin writes:

> An indisputable contrast of extreme stillness and tremendous quaking may be found not only in such canonical and postcanonical texts, but also in visual representations. No scholar, it appears, ever started to investigate potential depictions of earthquakes in Buddhist art starting from a philological, historical, or doctrinal inquiry [...]. Commenting upon figurative representations of topical episodes in the Buddha's biography, recent scholars sometimes decide to 'leave aside the earthquakes, which were not easy to render

90
Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 55.

91
Ibid., 41–42.

> figuratively'. (M. Spagnoli 2005 [2007] 338). However, the tradition we study, as well as the traditions of our studies, recommend a somewhat different attitude.[92]

As part of a larger project to reintegrate studies of architecture and the environment, Tamara Sears has taken up the question of earthquakes in early Buddhist painting and sculpture. Sears notes that although actual earthquakes were not common in the Deccan, and more characteristic of the northern regions surrounding the Himalayas, the *Viśvantara jātaka* stories that are depicted in Cave 17 of Ajanta describe the "shuddering" of the earth.[93] Cave 17 at Ajanta contains some of the most pronounced paintings of Kramrisch's projecting rocks, suggesting perhaps that these were painted as a response to texts describing the experience of earthquakes.

V. Perspective and Cubism

In the moment when Kramrisch first addressed Ajanta, form in the process of fracturing was not only a metaphysical, or even geological, idea. Her writing emerged in the decades of war, scientific disruption, and modernist turmoil in the realm of the arts. Kramrisch visited Ajanta in the wake of World War I, in the era after Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, the birth of modern physics, and of Cézanne and Picasso's disavowal of the picture plane. In this period, Rabindranath Tagore wrote of an escape from a world "broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls".[94] This had the effect, in the fields of structural linguistics and artistic theory, of laying bare how much hard construction had gone into the seeming stability of these forms up until their present moment. In the 1920s and 1930s, the challenge and problem of building anew after the shattering of form could even be seen as a geopolitical-aesthetic problem.

Hubert Damisch writes that it was "not a matter of chance" that "studies of perspective enjoyed their greatest vogue at a moment in which it might have seemed that modern art had definitely turned away from it".[95] While Panofsky barely mentioned modern art in his *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, he acknowledged in other texts what Damisch calls "the rupture effected in the pictorial order by

92
Eugene Ciurtin, The Buddha's Earthquakes (I). On Water. Earthquakes and Seaquakes in Buddhist Cosmology and Meditation, with an Appendix on Buddhist Art, in: *Studia Asiatica* 10, 2009, 59–123, here 88.

93
Tamara Sears, *Human Places and Cosmic Spaces. Ecological Engagements in Early Medieval India*, paper delivered at the conference, Buddhist Geoaesthetics, Brown University, Providence, RI, May 3–4, 2019.

94
Rabindranath Tagore, Where the Mind Is Without Fear (Poem 35), in: id., *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)*, London 1913, 27–28. The poem is more hopeful; against reality, it imagines at the end a "heaven of freedom" where his country will "awake".

95
Damisch, The Origin of Perspective, 23.

Cézanne" and the later cubists.[96] In his introduction to *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Panofsky wrote of perspectival construction that it "formalizes a conception of space which, in spite of all changes, underlies all postmedieval art up to, say, the Demoiselles d'Avignon by Picasso (1907), just as it underlies all postmedieval physics up to Einstein's 'Theory of Relativity' (1905)".[97]

While Panofsky regarded Picasso's work as a rupture, Kramrisch wrote in her notes that the perspective of "forthcoming", with its projection of geometric forms, shared with analytical cubism its origins in the "breaking up of the mountain into rocks, prisms and cubes".[98] Her words could be taken literally, in the case of the rock-cut caves at Ajanta, or the earthquakes shattering the stillness in Buddhist texts. And yet, figuratively, they serve as a powerful description for how cubistic paintings depart from the strict order of linear perspective. The "world-mountain" was an enduring concept for Kramrisch, representing the unity of all forms. In *A Survey of Indian Painting in the Deccan*, she writes how at Ajanta, "with palaces and rocks, the slopes of the world-mountain are covered".[99] The temple, she would later argue, was an embodiment of this world-mountain.[100] Yet she could countenance, even celebrate, in the paintings at Ajanta and in the cubist works, its fracturing into "rocks, prisms and cubes".

This may be where Kramrisch ultimately departs from Panofsky. While cubism marked the end of a dominant perspectival paradigm for him that coincided with the end of a positivist scientific worldview, for Kramrisch, there was continuity in the very fact of shattering dynamism. Perspective as a cubistic, "breaking of the mountain" was, for Kramrisch, part of the same process of organic "forthcoming" seen in the temple structure. For Kramrisch, the "breaking up of the mountain" was not an ending of perspectival reign, nor was it a shattering of world order. It was a means of pictorially representing "the radiating, turbulent, hovering or pacified forces of inner experience" and in describing this projecting perspective, Kramrisch put forth a continuous view of an art that envisions the process of becoming and dynamically searches for new languages of symbolic form.

96
Ibid.

97
Quoted in ibid., 22–23.

98
Stella Kramrisch, undated notes, Box 37, Folder 1: South and Deccan Art and Architecture, Indus Valley Civilization, Stella Kramrisch Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.

99
Kramrisch, A Survey of Indian Painting, 12.

100
Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, vol. 1, Calcutta 1946, 222.

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