

# EDITORIAL

## STELLA KRAMRISCH AND THE TRANSCULTURATION OF ART HISTORY

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A rapidly developing field today, transcultural art history emerged in the early 2000s as a critical response to the discipline's entrenched methodological nationalism.<sup>1</sup> By foregrounding the circulation and multidirectional exchanges of artists, materials, and ideas throughout various regions of the world, it challenges both the nation-state framework and essentializing approaches to culture.<sup>2</sup> Yet while the transcultural history of art has sparked considerable interest and debate in recent years, the transculturation of art history as a discipline remains relatively unexamined. This special issue follows the transcontinental intellectual career of a single individual in order to probe the epistemologies, methods, and networks that shaped art history into a transcultural field.

A renowned historian and curator of South Asian art, the Moravian-born Stella Kramrisch (1896–1993) is typically remembered as one of the founders of Indian art history, and of art history in India. During the seventy years of her productive career, she was an exile in unsettled times, at once an insider and outsider. She worked across continents and institutions, including the University

### 1

The work on this special issue began with a [workshop](#) on the *Photographic Exhibition of Indian Art* (1940, Warburg Institute) and a round-table discussion on Kramrisch as curator conducted on February 10, 2022 at the Warburg Institute, University of London. We thank Sria Chatterjee, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Eckhardt Marchand, Darielle Mason, Partha Mitter, Bill Sherman, Deborah Swallow, Paul Taylor, Sarah Victoria Turner, and the members of the *Bilderfahrzeuge* project, in particular Johannes von Müller, for numerous insightful discussions, which not only enriched the workshop but also extended well beyond it. In curating contributions for this special issue, we also reached out to participants of the 2012 conference *Divine Artefacts. Stella Kramrisch and Art History in the Twentieth Century* convened by Deborah Sutton, Deborah Swallow, and Sarah Victoria Turner. Several of the updated papers of the 2012 conference have been included in this issue. We are grateful to the two anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive comments on this issue. Lastly, we extend special thanks to Sria Chatterjee for her invaluable expertise and support, particularly during the early stages of editorial work on this issue.

### 2

See especially Monica Juneja, *Can Art History Be Made Global? Meditations from the Periphery*, Berlin/Boston 2023; Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, London/Cambridge, MA 2005; Kavita Singh, Colonial, International, Global. Connecting and Disconnecting Art Histories, in: *Art in Translation* 9/1, 2015, 1–14.

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of Vienna, the art school Kala Bhavana in Santiniketan, and Calcutta University during the British Raj and into Independence. She also worked at the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes in London, and the University of Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the US. While her work moved between ancient, folk and modern art, and between the sacred and avant-garde, her biography intersected with declining European empires, anticolonial Indian nationalism, and American geopolitical cultural strategy during the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> Kramrisch's trajectory also reflects the developing connections between art history and South Asian studies, as well as shifts in academic disciplines and departmental politics. Her life and work thus provide a compelling lens through which to reconsider how today's increasingly polycentric art history has been shaped by migration, mobility, the translocation of objects, and processes of translation.

This special issue adopts a multi-sited and interdisciplinary approach to capture the complexity of Kramrisch's itinerant career, which bridged diverse intellectual and cultural traditions. By spotlighting pivotal moments in Kramrisch's transcontinental journey, the contributions not only offer new perspectives on her work but also raise broader methodological and epistemological questions about the discipline of art history itself, especially in the wake of its 'global turn'. In this editorial, we will map out these connections by way of three themes. First, we situate Kramrisch's early work on Indian art within the historical development of 'world' and 'Oriental' art history in the early twentieth century. Second, we examine her distinctive mode of weaving together different social and temporal categories, and bringing ancient, folk and modern art into conversation with one another. Finally, we analyze how photography and collecting informed her work and contributed to a transcultural narrative of Indian art history.

## I. From Orientalism to South Asian Art History

Around 1900, European art historians began to turn their attention to the arts of the so-called 'Orient', spurred by both the increasing influx of artistically crafted objects from Asia and the Near East,

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For biographical information see Darielle Mason, *Interwoven in the Pattern of Time*. Stella Kramrisch and Kanthas, in: *Kantha. The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (exh. cat. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art), ed. by Darielle Mason, Philadelphia 2010, 158–168; 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. For various aspects of Kramrisch's work see Michael Meister (ed.), *Making Things in South Asia. The Role of Artist and Craftsman*, Philadelphia 1988; Michael Meister, *Display as Structure and Revelation. On Seeing the Shiva Exhibition*, in: *Studies in Visual Communication* 7/4, 1981, 84–98; Kris K. Manjapra, Stella Kramrisch and the Bauhaus in Calcutta, in: R. Siva Kumar (ed.), *The Last Harvest. Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Hidden Meadows Ocean Township, NJ 2011, 34–39; Regina Bittner and Kathrin Rhomberg (eds.), *The Bauhaus in Calcutta. An Encounter of Cosmopolitan Avant-Gardes*, Ostfildern 2013; Dossier Stella Kramrisch in: *Regards Croisés* 11, 2021; Christian Kravagna, *Transmodern. An Art History of Contact, 1920–1960*, transl. by Jennifer Taylor, Manchester 2022; Juneja, *Can Art History Be Made Global?*; Jo Ziebritzki, *Stella Kramrisch. Kunsthistorikerin zwischen Europa und Indien, Ein Beitrag zur Depatriachalisierung der Kunstgeschichte*, Marburg 2021.

and the proliferation of Orientalist images and objects produced in Europe. While Oriental studies had long been established in fields like philology, philosophy, and archaeology, it was not until the turn of the century that this scholarship began to converge with art history, which had traditionally focused on Mediterranean Europe.<sup>4</sup> This burgeoning interest in Orientalism was deeply entangled with imperial politics in Britain, France, Germany, and Austria (to name only some of the key actors). In the context of research on South Asia's material culture, figures such as archaeologist Alexander Cunningham, historian Vincent Smith, and scholar-educators like Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Ernest B. Havell helped lay the groundwork for art historical interest in Indian painting, sculpture, and architecture.

Thus by the early twentieth century, when Stella Kramrisch began her studies of Indian art at the art historical institute led by Josef Strzygowski in Vienna, British authorities had become increasingly interested in Indian archaeological remains and artifacts, which they viewed as the bearers of traditions and world-views.<sup>5</sup> These artifacts, in particular Hindu temple architecture, became contested symbols in the ideological battle between imperial Orientalists, such as James Fergusson, and Indian nationalists, such as Rajendralal Mitra, who debated whether they were signs of “decadence” (Fergusson) or “grandeur” (Mitra).<sup>6</sup> The long-standing debate over whether Indian material culture should be considered fine art came to a head in 1910 at the Royal Society of Arts in London. Havell and his supporters argued that Indian objects deserved recognition as fine art, while the colonial administrator George C. M. Birdwood notoriously dismissed a Buddha statue as no better than “boiled suet pudding”.<sup>7</sup> The lack of consensus in this debate prompted Indian art advocates to establish the India Society, a sister organization to the earlier Indian Society of Oriental Art

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On this disciplinary landscape in the German-speaking context see Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire. Religion, Race, and Scholarship*, Cambridge 2009.

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Saloni Mathur, *India by Design. Colonial History and Cultural Display*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2007, 5.

6

See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories. Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India, Part II: Regional Frames*, Delhi 2004, 85–174. For the dispute between Fergusson and Mitra, see 103–108.

7

Ernest B. Havell, Art Administration in India, in: *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 58/2985, February 4, 1910, 274–298, here 287. The Buddhist sculpture in question originated not from India itself but from Borobudur in Java. As Marieke Bloembergen notes, both the supporters and the detractors of “Indian art” uncritically built on the nationalist conception of a Greater India, which cast the arts and cultures of Southeast Asia as outposts of India's cultural influence. See Marieke Bloembergen, *The Politics of ‘Greater India’, a Moral Geography. Moveable Antiquities and Charmed Knowledge Networks between Indonesia, India, and the West*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 63/1, 2021, 170–211, here 196.

in Calcutta, furthering the recognition of Indian art within both academic and public spheres in the capital of imperial Britain.<sup>8</sup>

In continental Europe as well, the scholarly promotion of non-Western art often faced fierce resistance. Prominent Orientalists of the early twentieth century reacted with hostility to aesthetically appreciative approaches to Asian art. In 1911, for instance, the young art historian Karl With approached Albert Grünwedel, curator of the Indian collection at Berlin's Ethnological Museum, to discuss the prospect of studying Indian art. Grünwedel's widely read 1898 book *Buddhistische Kunst* had argued that India lacked any genuine artistic tradition beyond the Buddha sculptures of Gandhara. In his biography, With recounts that after he had informed Grünwedel about his intended course of study, the senior Orientalist irascibly "jumped up from behind his desk, shouted at me that he would throw me out if I would ever again dare to speak of Hindu sculptures as works of art".<sup>9</sup> In fact, With found Strzygowski's art historical institute in Vienna to be one of the few places where he could pursue his research, eventually defending his dissertation on Indian sculpture in 1918.

Kramrisch was uniquely positioned within these imperial and cosmopolitan discourses.<sup>10</sup> She began her academic career with a dissertation on early Buddhist temple sculpture, after having studied art history with Strzygowski and Max Dvořák at the University of Vienna.<sup>11</sup> Strzygowski, the occupant of the first chair for "non-European art history", had sparked heated controversy with his 1901 book *Orient oder Rom*, which argued that the Near East and Central Asia had exerted a far greater impact on European and early Christian art than Greece or Rome.<sup>12</sup> Still a justly contested figure today, owing to his odious racial framework of history, Strzygowski undeniably broadened the scope of art historical studies well

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The India Society, founded in 1910, sought to promote the appreciation of Indian art by exhibiting visual materials such as Ananda Coomaraswamy's line drawings and Christina Herringham's reproductions of the Ajanta cave paintings. See Sarah Victoria Turner, Crafting Connections. The India Society and the Formation of an Imperial Artistic Network in Early Twentieth-Century Britain, in: Susheila Nasta (ed.), *India in Britain. South Asian Networks and Connections 1858–1950*, New York 2013, 96–114.

9

Karl With, *Autobiography of Ideas. Memoirs of an Extraordinary Art Scholar*, ed. Roland Jäger, Berlin 1997, 60.

10

On different visions of cosmopolitanism in art see Charlotte Ashby, Grace Brockington, Daniel Laqua, and Sarah Victoria Turner (eds.), *Imagined Cosmopolis. Internationalism and Cultural Exchange, 1870s–1920s*, Oxford/Bern/Berlin/Brussels/New York/Vienna 2019.

11

Stella Kramrisch, *Untersuchungen zum Wesen der frühbuddhistischen Bildneri Indiens*, PhD dissertation, Vienna University, 1919.

12

Josef Strzygowski, *Orient oder Rom. Beitrag zur Geschichte der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst*, Leipzig 1901. See Suzanne Marchand, *Appreciating the Art of Others. Joseph Strzygowski and the Austrian Origins of Non-Western Art History*, in: Magdalena Dgłosz and Pieter O. Scholz (eds.), *Von Biala nach Wien. Josef Strzygowski und die Kulturwissenschaften*, Vienna 2015, 256–285.



beyond the Mediterranean, encouraging his doctoral students to work on Persian, Islamic, Indian and Chinese arts, among others.<sup>13</sup> The books and visual material held at his art historical institute made it an unparalleled resource and center for pioneering research [Fig. 1]. However, although Strzygowski and his school have retrospectively been considered key proponents of ‘world art history’, most of his students dealt with more circumscribed cultural-historical units, such as (in Kramrisch’s case) Indian art and architecture.<sup>14</sup>

This, then, was the intellectual environment in which Kramrisch began studying Indian art. During the height of European Orientalism, in the midst of World War I, Indian art was taken seriously as a subject of aesthetic and historical inquiry at Strzygowski’s institute. Yet even in Vienna, very few scholars shared Kramrisch’s deep appreciation for Indian painting, sculpture, and architecture. Moreover, her gender and Jewish background posed significant barriers to her career in German-speaking academia. Austrian universities did not employ women for paid positions at the time, and increasing antisemitism further limited her opportunities.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, Kramrisch found her first academic appointment neither in Austria nor in England – where her expertise in Indian art was valued for its relevance to the British colonial mission – but rather in India itself, at an anticolonial university founded by the poet Rabindranath Tagore.

During a fellowship in Oxford following her 1919 dissertation, Tagore met Kramrisch and invited her to teach at Kala Bhavana, the art school of Visva-Bharati University, his newly founded educational institution in Santiniketan, a village north of Kolkata.<sup>16</sup>

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Without naming Strzygowski directly, Kramrisch criticized similar approaches that make art “serve as an indicator of racial predestinations”. Stella Kramrisch, *The Study of Indian Art*, in: *Calcutta Review*, 3rd series, 49, October 1933, 60–65, here 64. Nevertheless, as editor of the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, she continued to publish essays by Strzygowski into the late 1930s, at a point when his racialist approach to art history was difficult to ignore. See Josef Strzygowski, *India’s Position in the Art of Asia*, in: *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 1, 1933, 7–18; id., *Three Northern Currents in the Art of the Chinese People*, in: *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 5, 1937, 42–59; id., *Vergleichende Kunstforschung*, in: *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 6, 1938, 106–117. Kramrisch was hardly alone in her loyalty to her *Doktorvater*, who, despite his obsession with proving the ‘Nordic’ and ‘Aryan’ origins of Eurasian art and architecture, had also mentored and promoted numerous students of Jewish descent at his Vienna institute. See Michael Young, *Jewish Students in Strzygowski’s Vienna Institute and the Study of Jewish Art. A Forgotten Chapter in the History of the Vienna School*, in: *Journal of Art Historiography* 29, supp. 2, 2023, 1–26.

14

See Georg Vasold, *The Revaluation of Art History. An Unfinished Project by Josef Strzygowski and His School*, in: Pauline Bachmann, Melanie Klein, Tomoko Mamine, and Georg Vasold (eds.), *Art/Histories in Transcultural Dynamics. Narratives, Concepts, and Practices at Work, 20th and 21st Centuries*, Munich 2017, 119–138; Juneja, *Can Art History Be Made Global?*, 41–78, esp. 64–70; Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 387–426; Jo Ziebritzki, *The International Spread of Asian and Islamic Art Histories. An Intersectional Approach to Trajectories of the Vienna School (c. 1920–1970)*, in: *Journal of Art Historiography* 29, supp. 1, 2023, 1–24.

15

See K. Lee Chichester and Brigitte Sölch, *Einleitung & Editorische Notiz*, in: eaed. (eds.), *Kunsthistorikerinnen 1910–1980. Theorien, Methoden, Kritiken*, Berlin 2021, 9–37.

16

Strzygowski was also invited, but never followed through on his planned visit.



Tagore welcomed the knowledge of the whole world to Visva-Bharati, facilitating transcultural dialogue and exchanges by inviting numerous international scholars to teach at his university.<sup>17</sup> During her first year as lecturer, Kramrisch taught primarily European art history and critiqued the work of students and colleagues. As her former student, the artist Binodebehari Mukherjee wrote retrospectively, Kramrisch “opened a new vista for Indian artists by explaining to them from the point of modernism, experiments made in various media and form in Indian art”.<sup>18</sup> This focus on form was shared by the principal of the art school, Indian modernist painter Nandalal Bose.<sup>19</sup> Kramrisch’s lectures, which were made compulsory for students and staff alike, may even have helped Tagore – also a painter in his own right – to find his style.<sup>20</sup> One canvas by Tagore, now in the Kramrisch collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, portrays an elongated oval face with a sly expression and a bob hairstyle, set against a vivid red background. Although Tagore’s painting has no title, it is not unlikely that the sitter was Kramrisch herself [Fig. 2].

In Kramrisch’s writings from the early 1920s, she argued that experiments with form, rather than the replication of Orientalist imagery or Western models, would allow modern Indian artists to build a bridge between pre-colonial and present times. When Indian artists suppressed their “individual and national temperament” in favor of European techniques, styles, and motifs, the result was an “aesthetic catastrophe”, as it is phrased in an anonymously published article that can be attributed to Kramrisch. Rather, she emphasized the need to master foreign styles in order to go beyond them, noting that the “moment the outside influence is absorbed and made part of one’s own mental equipment – it ceases to be an influence – because it ceases to dominate on the mind or sterilise it – it has become an enriching factor, a fertilizing medium”.<sup>21</sup> Her

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Rabindranath Tagore, Aims and Objects, in: Ranajit Ray (ed.), *Visva-Bharati and Its Institutions*, n.p.; Rabindranath Tagore, *Visva-Bharati*, in: *Visva-Bharati* (ed.), *Santiniketan 1901–1905*, Calcutta 1951, 13–16. On Tagore’s pan-Asian cosmopolitanism see Partha Mitter, Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin in Calcutta. The Creation of a Regional Asian Avant-garde Art, in: Burcu Dogramaci, Mareike Hetschold, Laura Karp Lugo, Rachel Lee, and Helene Roth (eds.), *Arrival Cities. Migrating Artists and New Metropolitan Topographies in the 20th Century*, Leuven 2020, 147–157.

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Cited in Mason, *Interwoven in the Pattern of Time*, 160.

19

R. Siva Kumar, Binodebehari Mukherjee. Life, Context, Work, in: *Binodebehari Mukherjee (1904–1980), Centenary Retrospective* (exh. cat. New Delhi, National Gallery of Modern Art), ed. by Gulammohammed Sheikh and R. Siva Kumar, New Delhi 2007, 64–133, here 74.

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Samir Sengupta (ed.), *Rabindrasutrey Bideshira [Foreigners in Relation to Rabindranath]*, Kolkata 2013, 289–292.

21

Anon. [Stella Kramrisch], European Influence on Modern Indian Art, in: *Rupam* 11, July 1922, 109–110, here 109. On this anonymously published article see Christian Kravagna, Über das Geistige in der Kunstgeschichte. Stella Kramrisch in der transkulturellen Moderne, in: *Regards Croisés* 11, *Dossier Stella Kramrisch*, 2021, 69–81. See also Stella Kramrisch,



[Fig. 2]  
Rabindranath Tagore, *Untitled (Head of a Woman)*, ca. 1934–1940, 39.1 × 23.3 cm. Gift of  
Stella Kramrisch, 1966, Philadelphia Museum of Art.



advocacy for aesthetic autonomy by way of formal experimentation would have a profound impact on a generation of modern Indian artists.<sup>22</sup> Although her teaching and art criticism was still modeled on Western educational schemes, Kramrisch decisively shifted the emphasis from naturalistic representation to the “expressive” qualities of painting, thereby offering – or imposing – a distinctly modernist perspective.

Kramrisch’s intellectual production was embedded within a dense web of contacts and discursive negotiations that placed her at the heart of modern artistic and intellectual circles like the Indian Society of Oriental Art, founded by Abanindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore in 1907 [Fig. 3]. The society helped realize exhibitions such as the 1922 *Exhibition of Continental Paintings and Graphic Arts*, in which Kramrisch played an instigating role.<sup>23</sup> This comparative exhibition – which displayed works on paper by modern European artists, most notably from the Bauhaus in Dessau, under the same roof as work by the Bengal School – was neither a simple case of “artistic transmission” from West to East, nor “a straightforward cultural dialogue with the other”, as Sria Chatterjee has observed.<sup>24</sup> On the contrary, the exhibition came to be seen as a proving ground for multiple modernities in which transcultural sensibilities were forged from the clash of cosmopolitan universalism and nationalist particularism.

Kramrisch’s involvement in the so-called *Bauhaus in Calcutta* exhibition marked a defining phase of her transcultural career. For rather than ascribing any kind of priority to the Western avant-garde, she instead emphasized what European modernism owed to the arts of Asia.<sup>25</sup> Debating modern Indian art with the sociologist Benoy Kumar Sarkar in the pages of *Rupam* (the journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art), Kramrisch reiterated the standpoint of nationalist self-understanding:

To know her own necessity of significant form should be the first endeavor of artistic young India. Then there will be no danger or merit in accepting or rejecting French space-con-

The Contact of Indian Art with the Art of Other Civilisations, in: *Calcutta Review*, 3rd series, 6, 1923, 514–530.

22

Ramkinkar Baij. *A Retrospective, 1906–1980* (exh. cat. New Delhi, National Gallery of Modern Art), ed. by R. Siva Kumar, New Delhi 2012, 118.

23

Manjapra, Stella Kramrisch and the Bauhaus in Calcutta, 34–39; Bittner and Rhomberg, *The Bauhaus in Calcutta*.

24

Sria Chatterjee, *Writing a Transcultural Modern*. Calcutta, 1922, in: Bittner and Rhomberg, *The Bauhaus in Calcutta*, 101–107, here 101.

25

See Kris Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement. German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire*, Cambridge, MA 2014, 249. It is indicative of her commitment to Indian modernism that Kramrisch was among the first critics to discuss the work of Gaganendranath Tagore: see Stella Kramrisch, *An Indian Cubist*, in: *Rupam* 11, 1922, 107–109.



[Fig. 3]  
Unknown photographer, members of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, including Stella Kramrisch, ca. 1933. Stella Kramrisch Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives.

ception, Russian colorism and Chinese line and the like, for imitation is impossible where personality is at work.<sup>26</sup>

The very same aesthetic and political cause of autonomy that inspired Indian modern art also shaped Kramrisch's historiography of India's ancient sacred art, founded on the construct of a timeless essence of Hindu and Buddhist art. Conversely, she also situated Indian modernist painting within a continuous tradition of craft, virtuosity, and a shared anti-naturalistic visual language – an approach that built on the ideas of figures like Havell, Coomaraswamy, John Ruskin, and the Tagores.

Just a year after joining Visva-Bharati's art school, Stella Kramrisch left to become a lecturer at Calcutta University. From the early 1920s until 1950, she would spend nearly three decades there pursuing her lifelong interest in Indian temple sculpture and architecture, both in museums and in the field.<sup>27</sup> In addition, Kramrisch avidly collected ancient, folk and modern artworks, gaining access to rare manuscripts and sculptures despite the modest means available to her.<sup>28</sup> Her dedication to temple research culminated in her two-volume magnum opus *The Hindu Temple* (1946), which interpreted the symbolic meaning of Hindu temples in relation to their sites, proportions, and materials. Unlike earlier studies that focused on historical or regional variations, Kramrisch's book on the Hindu temple aimed to uncover how these temples embodied divine presence through adherence to a continuous symbolic tradition spanning thousands of years.<sup>29</sup> As she explained in later writings, the temple "is the house of the divine presence and is its very body".<sup>30</sup> Although not anthropomorphized as in sculptures or paintings, divinity was described as being manifested already in the temple's architectural features, such as the buttresses on its outer walls. Her

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Stella Kramrisch, *The Aesthetics of Young India. A Rejoinder*, in: *Rupam* 10, 1922, 66–67, here 67.

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Her research during this period led to milestone publications like *Indian Sculpture*, Calcutta 1933; *A Survey of Painting in the Deccan*, London 1937. Although her exact travel routes remain unclear, it is well-established that she traveled extensively. Stoler Miller, Stella Kramrisch, 10, 14–15; Sengupta, Rabindrasutrey Bideshira, 292; Chhotelal Bharany, *Recollections*, in: *A Passionate Eye. Textiles, Paintings and Sculptures from the Bharany Collections* (exh. cat. New Delhi, National Museum), ed. by Giles Tillotson, Mumbai 2014, 38–83, here 50.

28

Letter from Stella Kramrisch to Fritz Saxl, December 28, 1937, Warburg Institute Archive, GC Stella Kramrisch; Bharany, *Recollections*, 50.

29

Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, with photographs by Raymond Burnier, 2 vols., Calcutta 1946, here vol. 1, 6.

30

Stella Kramrisch, *Wall and Image in Indian Art*, in: *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 102/1, February 17, 1958, 7–13, here 7.



pioneering research on temple walls laid the foundation for future scholarship, notably pursued by Michael Meister.<sup>31</sup>

Female scholars were an anomaly in the colonial order, but Kramrisch stood apart from her contemporaries in other ways as well.<sup>32</sup> She was the only major figure in Indian art history with a PhD in the discipline, a qualification that made her especially attractive to Calcutta University, whose Vice-Chancellor Asutosh Mookerjee preferred scholars with German, rather than British, education.<sup>33</sup> As an Austrian and a white woman living in colonial India, she was a European distanced from the colonial establishment.<sup>34</sup> Independent and self-sufficient, she lived alone – first single, then married, but always leading a solitary lifestyle.<sup>35</sup>

## II. Ancient, Folk, and Modern

The fields of world and ‘Oriental’ art history were marked by tensions between universalism and particularism, often mapping onto imperial and anti-imperial positions. Kramrisch’s focus on what she saw as the distinctly ‘Indian’ put her in the latter camp, rejecting the imperial tendency to generalize Asia or the ‘Orient’ under a single umbrella. “Can Western historical methods be applied to Indian history?”, she asked in 1933. “Do not the Indian facts demand an order and approaches which fit the facts? Are they to be passed through foreign meshes and measured according to foreign standards. [...] The Indian possibility carries a measure and destiny of its own.”<sup>36</sup> Rather than adopting overtly nationalist rhetoric, Kramrisch sublimated the pursuit of political and cultural autonomy into a focus on spirituality and the sacred. As Christopher Wood notes, she was part of a European Indophilic tradition (situated somewhere between idealism and esotericism), which believed that the true

<sup>31</sup>

See for example: Michael W. Meister, *Fragments from a Divine Cosmology. Unfolding Forms on India’s Temple Walls*, in: *Gods, Guardians, and Lovers. Temple Sculpture from North India A.D. 700–1200* (exh. cat. New York, Asia Society Galleries), ed. by Vishakha N. Desai and Darielle Mason, New York/Ahmedabad 1993, 94–115.

<sup>32</sup>

In the context of the British Raj, the only white women who interacted with Indian men were usually either missionary wives or sex workers. See Indira Sen, *Between Power and ‘Purdah’. The White Woman in British India, 1858–1900*, in: *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 34/3, 1997, 355–376, here 362–368.

<sup>33</sup>

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy was a geologist by training; Vincent Smith, Alexander Cunningham, and T. A. Gopinatha Rao were archaeologists; Ernest B. Havell an arts administrator; Abanindranath Tagore and Alice Boner artists. See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art. Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920*, Cambridge 1992; Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism. India’s Artists and the Avant-Garde 1922–1947*, London 2007.

<sup>34</sup>

Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art*, 8, 148.

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Bharany, *Recollections*, 51.

<sup>36</sup>

Kramrisch, *The Study of Indian Art*, 62.

purpose of art lay in connecting with the suprasensory realm.<sup>37</sup> Hence, although she was not directly involved in India's independence movement, her search for an Indian 'essence' resonated profoundly with the goals of Indian nationalism – as did her exclusion of South Asia's Islamic heritage, such as Mughal miniature painting, from this 'Indian essence'.<sup>38</sup>

Alongside her research on ancient temple sculpture, Kramrisch assiduously collected and researched works conventionally designated as folk art. In her article *Timing the Timeless. Stella Kramrisch's "Unknown India"*, Darielle Mason reconstructs Kramrisch's lifelong interest in folk art as a scholar, collector, and curator. Her dedication to Indian folk art culminated in the exhibition *Unknown India*, which opened in 1968 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Mason's detailed reconstruction of the exhibition reveals how Kramrisch used the categories of ritual and tribal art to convey an unbroken continuity of tradition. These ambivalent concepts enlarged art history's scope to include domains such as textiles and terracottas, highlighting art practices traditionally preserved by women. Kramrisch's collaboration with Indian anthropologist Haku Shah, who accompanied the traveling exhibition to San Francisco and St. Louis, further enriched its innovative and genre-defying approach.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, *Unknown India* deliberately elided conflicts of caste, class, religious and regional differences, succumbing to what Kavita Singh has called the "allure of primordialism".<sup>40</sup> The exhibition idealized lower-caste groups and indigenous "tribals" as bearers of a timeless purity and unique connection to India's origins – the 'Indian essence'. As Kris Manjapra has noted, Kramrisch had long maintained that the best Indian artists "were those who were most in touch with the primitive and unself-conscious Indian traditions".<sup>41</sup> Already in 1923, she argued that the "simple craftsman, the child, the woman – all who are in fact not fully awake to the new age – possess still the synthetic vision, so distinctive of Indian art. Indian children, and Indian women too, are spontaneous in their

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Christopher S. Wood, *A History of Art History*, Princeton, NJ/Oxford 2019, 350–351.

38

This omission is evident in her writings and her lack of interest in a second photographic exhibition on Islamic art in collaboration with the Warburg Institute; see Jo Ziebritzki, Matthew Vollgraft and Sarah Victoria Turner, Archival Dossier. The Photographic Exhibition of Indian Art at the Warburg, in: *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual. Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte und visuellen Kultur* 5/4, 2024, Fig. 13.

39

For an informed critique of the exhibition program of *Unknown India* see Katherine Hacker: Displaying a Tribal Imaginary. Known and Unknown India, in: *Museum Anthropology* 23/3, 2000, 5–25.

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Singh, *Colonial, International, Global*, 7.

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Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement*, 250.

artistic expressions.”<sup>42</sup> Far from the specular distancing typical of European anthropology at the time, however, Kramrisch’s primitivism was instead inflected by the modern nationalist imagination of a Hindu past, as championed by intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore and Gurusaday Dutt.<sup>43</sup>

In her discussions of modern, folk and ancient Indian art, Kramrisch mobilized a variety of concepts to thematize and theorize the relation between artists, their environment, divine powers, and the work of art. Her meticulous search for precise terminology led her to introduce influential concepts, such as the originally Christian term “transubstantiation” (in *Indian Sculpture*, 1933), “time-bound” vs. “changeless” (in *Indian Terracottas*, 1939), and the interaction between the “great tradition” and the “little tradition” (in *Unknown India*, 1968). These terms significantly enriched the vocabulary for discussing Indian sculpture and painting, despite critics’ and colleagues’ occasional protests against Kramrisch’s evocative and sometimes poetic language.<sup>44</sup>

Straddling both the aesthetic and religious registers, the concept of ‘abstraction’ provided a particularly productive medium for Kramrisch’s mediation between East and West, ancient and avant-garde. As Sylvia Houghteling’s essay *Another Perspective as Symbolic Form. Stella Kramrisch’s Writings on the Ajanta Paintings* explores, Kramrisch’s interpretations of the murals at the Ajanta caves drew as much upon Buddhist theology as they did on the modern aesthetics of cubism (more indebted to Gaganendranath Tagore in this case than to European Cubists). Her writings on Ajanta particularly emphasize the spiritual significance of the paintings’ non-figural components. Thus, the cuboid rock formations in the murals’ background were read not as mimetic representations of a real mountain but rather as dynamic forces that project forward and, through the technique of reverse perspective, immerse the viewer in the painting’s nonlinear narrative.

Houghteling illuminates how Kramrisch’s highly original reading of the murals’ reverse perspective enacted a subtle critique of Erwin Panofsky’s prominent 1925 account of the rise of linear perspective and the modern ‘worldview’. Whereas Panofsky saw art as progressing towards a mathematically consistent mode of objective representation, Kramrisch found in Ajanta a more dynamic and

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Stella Kramrisch, The Present Movement of Art, East and West, in: *Visva Bharati Quarterly* 1, October 1923, 221–225, here 225, as cited in Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement*, 250.

43

On Dutt’s role in ennobling and romanticizing Indian folk art traditions see Katherine Hacker, In Search of ‘Living Traditions’. Gurusaday Dutt, Zainul Abedin, and the Institutional Life of Kanthas, in: Mason, Kantha, 59–79. On primitivism as a transcultural concept in art history, see Juneja, *Can Art History Be Made Global?*, 181–200.

44

Ratan Parimoo, Stella Kramrisch. She Sculpts with Words, in: id., *Essays in New Art History*, New Delhi 2000, 377–380, here 378. Compare the critical reviews of her books enumerated in 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* 53/1–4, 2003, 127–148.

interactive form of perspectival vision, in which the viewer becomes at once the stage and the spectator. Her emphasis on the suspension of linear time and her modernist affirmation of visual fragmentation and rupture dramatically contrasted with Panofsky's notion of linear perspective as a medium of rational mastery over self and world and the attendant "objectification of the subjective".<sup>45</sup> Instead, the "radical energy" and "shattering dynamism" of the proto-cubist rocks at Ajanta suggested "another perspective as symbolic form", one that was based upon inner experience rather than scientific detachment. In this way, as Houghteling shows, Kramrisch's complex synthesis of avant-garde abstraction and Buddhist devotional cosmologies generated insights that continue to resonate in contemporary studies of the Ajanta murals.

Another key concept in Kramrisch's transcultural vocabulary is that of 'naturalism'. In a masterful reading of Kramrisch's translation of the earliest printed philosophical treatise on Indian painting, the *Citrasūtra*, Parul Dave Mukherji shows in her article *Stella Kramrisch, Sanskrit Texts and the Transcultural Project of Indic 'Naturalism'* how Kramrisch in the late 1920s struggled to navigate and translate Sanskrit concepts for 'naturalism'. Drawing on her own critical translation of the *Citrasūtra* and building on a more comprehensive body of original manuscripts than Kramrisch had at her disposal, Mukherji explores how Kramrisch creatively filled in the gaps in a partly corrupted source text. In so doing, this critical reading of Kramrisch's revealing mistranslations reconstructs how her "cultural unconscious" shaped her own reception of the text, and ultimately conditioned her understanding of Indian naturalism in terms of the Sanskrit concept of *dṛṣṭa* (roughly translated, "the visible"). Naturalism was, at the time, a politically loaded category: Western art historians had traditionally cited 'non-Western' cultures' putative lack of realistic naturalism as evidence of their artistic, and thus cultural, inferiority. Kramrisch's resignification of naturalism based on the *Citrasūtra* bridged European discourses with a close reading of ancient Sanskrit texts, producing historical evidence for Indian painting's unique standards – essentially different from European art-making, yet equal in technical prowess and philosophical refinement.

### III. Photography, Collecting, and Exhibiting

Kramrisch translated between cultures not only through concepts, but also through exhibitions and visual media, primarily photography. As Frederick Bohrer and others have argued, photography's ability to scale artistic forms and facilitate comparisons between geographically dispersed objects was crucial to the development of

<sup>45</sup>

Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, transl. Christopher S. Wood, New York 1997, 66.

art history as a discipline.<sup>46</sup> The medium was likewise central to Kramrisch's transcultural practice as both a scholar and a curator. Her use of black-and-white photographs in books and exhibitions in particular aligned with her anti-positivistic emphasis on the immediate subjective experience of Indian art and architecture.<sup>47</sup> By recreating intimate, in-situ encounters, photographs allowed her to convey the perceptual experience of viewing original Indian sculptures or temples to European, and later American, audiences. Even before her first visit to the Indian subcontinent, she had familiarized herself with Buddhist temple sculpture through photographs. At Strzygowski's institute in Vienna, the young art historian had access to Europe's most extensive university collection of books, lantern slides, and photographs of Asian art [Fig. 1]. Her 1919 dissertation on early Buddhist temples in India was exclusively based on visual documentation, including Alexander Cunningham's photographs of Mahabodhi and Bharhut, as well as Victor Goloubew's photos of the Sanchi stupa complex taken in 1910–1911.<sup>48</sup> Throughout the 1920s, she continued to rely on Goloubew's images where she was unable to study the temples in situ [Fig. 4].

In 1940, a year after Britain entered World War II and seven years before Indian independence, Kramrisch organized the *Photographic Exhibition of Indian Art* at the Warburg Institute, a research library run by German-Jewish émigrés who had fled Nazi Germany. The *Photographic Exhibition of Indian Art* was composed primarily of around 250 black-and-white photographs, arranged to form a visual essay on thirty-five panels, a format that followed the Warburg Institute's 'house style' for photographic exhibitions [Fig. 5].<sup>49</sup> Kramrisch sourced the images from both the Warburg's photographic archive and her private collection, which also included the expressive images captured by the camera of the Swiss photographer Raymond Burnier. Marked by sharp contrasts and vivid, close-up details, Burnier's photos brought the sculptures to

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Frederick Bohrer, *Photographic Perspectives. Photography and the Institutional Formation of Art History*, in: Elizabeth Mansfield (ed.), *Art History and Its Institutions*, New York 2002, 246–259.

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While black-and-white photography was generally viewed as objective and distanced, Kramrisch valued it for its capacity to produce more expressive, dramatic images. See Monika Wagner, *Kunstgeschichte in Schwarz-Weiß. Visuelle Argumente bei Panofsky und Warburg*, in: ead. and Helmuth Lethen (eds.), *Schwarz-Weiß als Evidenz*, Frankfurt/New York 2015, 126–144.

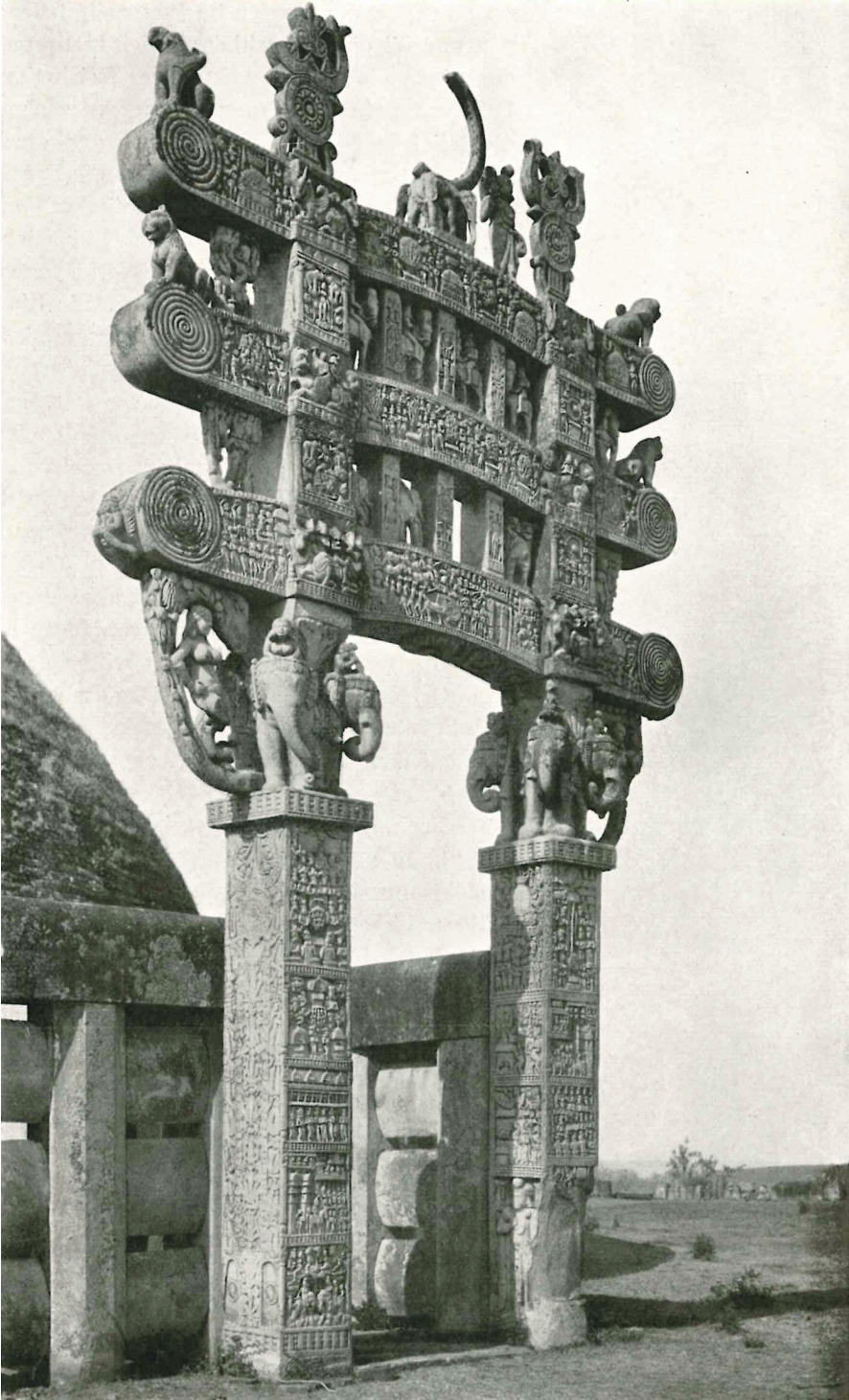
48

Kramrisch, *Untersuchungen zum Wesen der frühbuddhistischen Bildnerei Indiens*. Goloubew's photographs of Sanchi are now housed at the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* in Paris.

49

Under Fritz Saxl's directorship, the Warburg Institute developed a series of successful photographic exhibitions throughout the 1930s. Of these, the Indian art exhibition was the most popular, touring multiple cultural venues in Britain. See Joanne W. Anderson, Mick Finch, and Johannes von Müller (eds.), *Image Journeys. The Warburg Institute and a British Art History*, Passau 2019.





[Fig. 4]

Victor Goloubew, Northern gate of the Great Stupa in Sanchi (ca. 1910–1911), in: Stella Kramrisch, *Die indische Kunst*, in: Curt Glaser (ed.), *Die aussereuropäische Kunst* (Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte 6), Leipzig 1929, 231–368, here fig. 256.



[Fig. 5]  
Unknown photographer, exhibition shot of the *Photographic Exhibition of Indian Art*, Warburg Institute 1940. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Libraries and Archives.



life and helped to close the geographical and cultural gap between Indian artworks and Western viewers [Fig. 6].<sup>50</sup>

This special issue is supplemented by an *Archival Dossier* on the exhibition, compiled by the editors in collaboration with Sarah Victoria Turner. The dossier reconstructs the scholarly aims of the 1940 photographic exhibition as well as its public impact, showing how Kramrisch combined the cultural power of photography with her deep commitment to exploring Indian spirituality. The exhibition marked a noteworthy convergence of conflicting imperial and nationalist agendas, holding undoubtable appeal for British colonial circles while simultaneously pushing for an authentic understanding of ‘Indianness’. In his review of the exhibition, Herbert Read poignantly decried Britain’s ignorance towards the cultural heritage of its colonies, adding that the “neglect of our cultural values which is characteristic of our whole colonial administration has been mitigated by the enterprise of private bodies” such as those responsible for the exhibition: the India Society, the Warburg Institute, and Kramrisch herself.<sup>51</sup> The *Photographic Exhibition of Indian Art* drew large crowds and received enthusiastic critical attention during its time in London, after which it went on to tour museums and schools across the UK for several years. Its success prompted Fritz Saxl, director of the Warburg Institute, to declare that Kramrisch had done “more for Indian art in this country than anybody has done for a long time”.<sup>52</sup> Francis Younghusband of the India Society, for his part, even praised the exhibition as a contribution to the war effort.<sup>53</sup>

However, not all responses were positive. The Punjabi author and journalist Iqbal Singh criticized the exhibition for what he saw as a lack of historical precision. He argued that Kramrisch’s ‘mystical’ approach and reliance on photographs wrenched Indian art from its historical and cultural context, focusing excessively on abstract religious and metaphysical themes at the expense of aesthetic and technical details.<sup>54</sup> Singh’s critique touched on methodological questions that Kramrisch herself had considered; however, her implementation of evocative photography to invite contemplation was rather part of what Manjapra has described as Kramrisch’s

<sup>50</sup>

Sarah Victoria Turner, *Alive and Significant*, in: *Wasafiri* 27/2, 2012, 40–51, here 45.

<sup>51</sup>

Herbert Read, *Indian Art*, in: *The Listener* 24/619, November 21, 1940, 729–730. It is unknown whether the India Society also contributed to the 1940 exhibition from its own image collection, since only fragments of the society’s archive have survived.

<sup>52</sup>

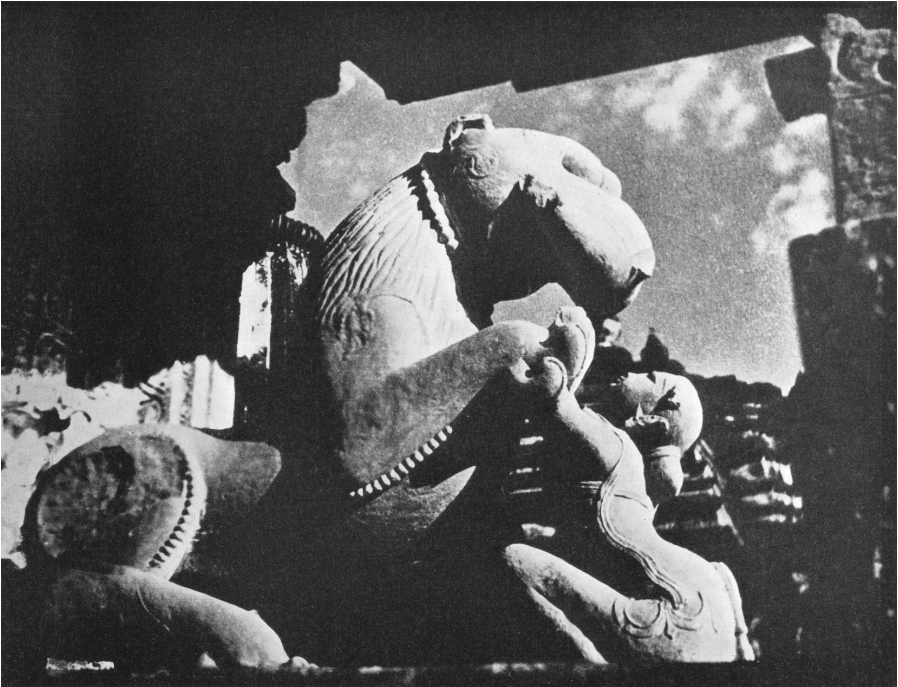
Letter from Fritz Saxl to Stella Kramrisch, March 14, 1944, Warburg Institute Archive, GC Stella Kramrisch. On Kramrisch’s working relationship with Saxl and the Warburg Institute, see Deborah Sutton, *Ruling Devotion. The Hindu Temple in the British Imperial Imagination*, Albany, NY 2024, 210–221.

<sup>53</sup>

Turner, *Alive and Significant*, 50.

<sup>54</sup>

*Ibid.*, 46.



[Fig. 6]

Raymond Burnier, *Sardula at the entrance to the temple, Khajuraho, c. A.D. 1000*, from the *Photographic Exhibition of Indian Art* at the Warburg Institute (1940), in: *Indian Arts and Letters* 14/2, 1940, Plate 3.

“expressionist wish to retrieve and reexperience a cultural world”, an impulse distinctly opposed to more conventional historicist scholarship on Indian art (including some of her own German-language publications).<sup>55</sup> Her use of photography was rather part of a deliberate effort to merge historical analysis with immediate subjective experience and spiritual reflection.<sup>56</sup>

After the 1940 exhibition, and even after the proliferation of color photography, Kramrisch continued to use evocative black-and-white photographs in exhibitions. In *Unknown India* from 1968, for instance, she employed photography expressly to evoke atmosphere and provide visual context [Fig. 7]. In contrast to the photographic exhibition of 1940, *Unknown India* mainly showed original artworks. However, as Mason notes in her article in this issue, several large monochrome photographs by the American artist Harry Holtzman were mounted on the walls behind exhibits. Acting as both backdrops for the artworks and significant visual elements in their own right, these photographs brought additional cultural and environmental references into the exhibition halls in Philadelphia. The photographs by Holtzman and Burnier, selected by Kramrisch for her exhibitions and publications, were intended to establish a visual language that avoided replicating Orientalist tropes by alluding to expressionist art and white-cube aesthetics.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond photography, Kramrisch’s relationship to Indian art was perhaps most closely connected to her practice as a collector, as Brinda Kumar illustrates in her article *From Field to Museum. Placing Kramrisch and Her Collection in Postwar United States* in this issue. When the Austrian art historian first arrived in Santiniketan, she was captivated by ancient temples, folk art, and modern Indian painting, and began collecting almost immediately. Her first acquisition – a landscape painting by a student of Kala Bhavana – came only after a delicate negotiation, requiring her to spend her last rupees.<sup>58</sup> Unlike other prominent collectors such as the Tagores or Coomaraswamy, Kramrisch did not have access to family wealth. Instead, she carefully budgeted her modest salary, often paying for her acquisitions in installments.<sup>59</sup> Despite these financial constraints, her collection flourished, driven by her passion and near-obsessive dedication.

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Manjapa, *Age of Entanglement*, 256. For a premier example of her historicist scholarship see Stella Kramrisch, *Die indische Kunst*, in: Curt Glaser (ed.), *Die aussereuropäische Kunst* (Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte 6), Leipzig 1929, 231–368.

56

Kramrisch, *The Study of Indian Art*, 60–65.

57

For an analysis of key characteristics of Orientalist imagery see Mathur, *India by Design*.

58

Martin Kämpchen, *Rabindranath Tagore and Germany. A Documentation*, Calcutta 1991, 101.

59

Bharany, *Recollections*, 50.



[Fig. 7]  
Unknown photographer, exhibition shot of *Unknown India*, 1968, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Libraries and Archives.

Though Kramrisch collected both folk art and modern painting, she was most dedicated to sculptural fragments from ancient temples. Kumar details how Kramrisch amassed a remarkable collection of these stone sculptures and fragments at a time when most collectors were more interested in paintings. Although she was a tremendously private collector who preferred to remain anonymous, her collection of works of Indian sculpture quickly gained recognition among experts. By 1950, her assemblage of Indian sculptures had become internationally sought after, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art's interest in her collection eventually facilitated her move to the United States. This interest stemmed not only from the appraisal of a priceless collection, but also from US foreign policy objectives in the Cold War. Kumar's article deftly traces the transnational networks and negotiations that led not only to the relocation of Kramrisch's collection but also to her own eventual settlement in Philadelphia, where she would spend four decades teaching and curating.

Kramrisch's move to Philadelphia marked both the final stage in her personal journey and a turning point for the discipline of art history. The Cold War era brought strategic academic shifts in the United States, with research institutions embracing area studies as a dominant framework for government-funded studies of key global regions. Her private collection enhanced the prestige of the Philadelphia Museum of Art's South Asian collection, while also solidifying the University of Pennsylvania as a hub for South Asian studies. In the United States, Kramrisch thus oversaw the last in a series of attempts to make art history global: from Strzygowski's institute in postwar Vienna, Kala Bhavana and Calcutta University under the British rule, to the Courtauld and Warburg Institutes in wartime London. Each of these settings contributed to the development of a transcultural perspective in art history, but it was her tenure in Philadelphia that aligns most closely with the contemporary trajectory of the field.

As art history became increasingly shaped by North American priorities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the limitations of the area studies model became more apparent. While it emphasized connections between regions rather than focusing on individual nations, the area studies framework struggled to address broader global trends and transcultural dynamics that drive artistic creation and reception worldwide. Kramrisch's life and legacy tie together these diverse strands of art history's development. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, a transcultural approach to the historiography of art can provide powerful insights into the global interactions among states, institutions, individuals, media, and collections – forces that continue to shape the artworld today, just as they did a century ago.

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