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Another Past, Another Context: Exhibiting Indian Art Abroad

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Pure aesthetic experience [*rasa*] is theirs in whom the knowledge of ideal beauty is innate; it is known intuitively, in intellectual ecstasy without accompaniment of ideation, at the highest level of conscious being; born of one mother with the vision of God, its life is as it were a flash of blinding light of transmudane origin, impossible to analyze, and yet in the image of our very being.

VISWANATHA KAVIRAJA

A work of art elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. This fact, I think, is the explanation of that feeling of exquisite intelligibility and clarity we have in the presence of an object that is experienced with aesthetic intensity. It explains also the religious feeling that accompanies intense aesthetic perception. We are, as it were, introduced into a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences. We are carried out beyond ourselves to find ourselves.

JOHN DEWEY

The two exhibitions upon the intimate experience of which I draw here (*Rasa: les neuf visages de l'art Indien*, Grand Palais, Paris, 1986; *Essence of Indian Art*, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, 1986)¹ began with the first visit of a group of French colleagues to India in 1983. The holding of the Festival of India in France had been negotiated and

announced. Quite naturally, a major exhibition of Indian art was to figure prominently in it, but till then no real thought had been given to its theme or range. Things were wide open, and we were going to speak of various possibilities. In the course of discussions, when the subject of the exhibition of art at the Grand Palais came up, my French colleagues stated that they were interested in an exhibition that would not be just an expansion of the fine exhibition of Indian art that had been held at the Petit Palais a few years back,² nor a show that simply presented "masterpieces" of Indian art. They were interested in an exhibition that *said* something. They had a highly sophisticated museumgoing public that was not as easily appeased as audiences "elsewhere," one of them stated with a Gallic twinkle.³ I responded quickly by asking them if they would be interested in an exhibition that **approached Indian art through *rasa***. The idea and even the word were unfamiliar to them, but there was a sudden spark of interest. I explained, in the broadest possible manner, how ***rasa* (roughly, "aesthetic delight") was related to art in the Indian tradition; conversely, how art was understood in the context of *rasa***. If one could take this approach to Indian art, it might become more accessible, I argued. An animated discussion ensued, at the end of which the mood was one of agreement and enthusiasm. Accessibility seemed to be the key word. We were vaguely aware that this was something of a dark plunge, for **nothing** along these lines had been essayed before in the area of the visual arts, **even in India**. Despite the hazard that such an approach involved, **though**, there was lurking excitement. We agreed to discuss and explore this idea further.

In the months that followed we all had our share of doubt and uncertainty. The French sent two bright young curators to work with me and to acquaint themselves with the collections that I was going to draw upon (and, I suspect, with the workings of my mind). They were legitimately unsure of how well the idea of *rasa* was going to come across to French audiences through objects. On my part, I was grappling with the concept and working out **ways to present meaningfully what was, from the French viewpoint, an alien art and an alien conceptual framework**. There was obvious appeal in the idea, but equally obvious pitfalls and difficulties. Not everything in Indian art could be approached from this angle; one might not be able to locate enough objects of high quality in each category of *rasa*; there was also the fear that because of the **unfamiliarity of the concept, the exhibition might become too wordy and the concept might eventually come to overshadow the art**. I thought of falling back upon alternative more con-

servative approaches: it was possible to present a selection of great paintings and sculptures as high points in Indian culture, but that had been done all too often before. It would also be possible to explore a given period in depth through objects, but to an audience generally unfamiliar with the history of Indian art, or even of India, that might mean very little; in any case there was a general wish that the exhibition should cover a wide range of Indian art, establishing its antiquity as much as its breadth. One could take a sharply defined category of great works, such as Chola bronzes, Mughal paintings, or Gupta stone sculptures, but then that would leave out so much else. From the past of India it was not easy to take an individual artist and present his oeuvre, for identifying the work of a single artist from a tradition that is for the most part emphatically anonymous presents almost insuperable difficulties.

Compared to all these possibilities, relating art to the experience of art appeared to be a far more attractive idea. Through the concept of *rasa*, it might be possible to provide to the non-Indian general viewer an entrée into Indian art, for the nine *rasas* were central to the context of Indian art. It might be unfashionable to speak of *rasa* now, but it was an experience that the Indian viewer traditionally always associated with art. In presenting art objects with reference to the emotions they aroused or heightened in the viewer's mind, one would be using categories that were appropriate to the art.

Rasa is a key to Indian art, and deserves to be better understood. It is easily the most important of terms in the Indian theory of art. The first reasoned treatment of it is found in Bharata Muni's *Natyasastra*,⁴ which is dateable to the early centuries of the Christian era and deals primarily with the arts of the theater. The term has been used most often in the context of the arts of performance—theater, dance, and music—even though it is mentioned specifically in other texts⁵ as extending to all the arts, and literary theorists have always adverted to it. Among the most refined discussions of the theory of *rasa* are those by rhetoricians of the medieval period.

In the most general of ways, the average listener, viewer, or reader in India has often seen art as being intimately connected with *rasa*, indeed even as being valid only to the extent that it leads to a *rasa* experience (art being inherently "a well-spring of delight, whatever may have been the occasion of its appearance"⁶). The idea of *rasa* is something that the average viewer or listener feels at home with, even if its subtleties, and the discussions that have centered on it for several centuries, are often beyond his or her ken.

At the physical level the word *rasa* means sap or juice, extract, fluid. It signifies, in its secondary sense, the nonmaterial essence of a thing, the best or finest part of it—like perfume, which comes from matter but is not easy to describe or comprehend. In its subtlest sense, however, *rasa* denotes taste, flavor, relish; but also a state of heightened delight that can be experienced only by the spirit (*ananda*). When one experiences a work of art, the experience is likened to the tasting of a flavor, the taster being the *rasika* and the work of art the *rasavanta*. In the singular, *rasa* is used in the absolute sense, "with reference to the interior act of tasting flavour unparticularised."⁷ In the plural, the word is used relatively with reference to the various, usually eight or nine,⁸ emotional conditions that may constitute the burden of a given work and that the listener or viewer can experience. These conditions, or sentiments, are the erotic (*shringara*), the comic (*hasya*), the pathetic (*karuna*), the furious (*raudra*), the heroic (*vira*), the terrible (*bhayanaka*), the odious (*bibhatsa*), the marvelous (*adbhuta*), and the quiescent (*shanta*).

The notion is that *rasa*, or aesthetic delight, is a unity, but comes within the reach of the viewer through the medium of one of these sentiments. At the same time, *rasa* being essentially an experience, it does not inhere in the art object; it belongs exclusively to the viewer or listener, who alone can experience it. How *rasa* arises and is "tasted" has been the subject of a sustained, refined debate among scholars and theoreticians for close to fifteen hundred years. But, broadly, the process is conceived thus: each *rasa* has its counterpart in what is called a *bhava*, a dominant feeling or mood. Thus, the erotic sentiment, the *rasa* called *shringara*, has *rati* (love) as its corresponding *bhava*; the comic sentiment has *hasa* (mirth or playfulness) as its *bhava*, and so on. *Bhava* belongs to the work, and can be consciously aimed at by its maker or performer. How this *bhava* (enduring psychological state) comes into being in its own turn has been described in fine, eloquent words by past theorists. For a specific *bhava* to rise to the surface in a work or performance, the mood is carefully built up with the use of appropriately chosen *vibhavas* (determinants), essentially "the physical stimulants to aesthetic reproduction, particularly the theme and its parts, the indications of time and place and other apparatus of representation—the whole factibile."⁹ Another input is that of *anubhavas*, or appropriate consequents, consisting of gestures and movements in consonance with the mood of the work. There are then the complementary (transient) emotional states (*vyabhichari bhavas*), especially relevant to the arts of theater and dance and comprising a

Bhava is to contribute to art in the choices in comp, subject, etc... by the creator

wide range of emotions, from agitation to fright to envy and indecision. It is these determinants, consequents, and complementary emotional states that work on the mind of the viewer or listener, "churning his or her heart." From this churning a dominant emotional state, a *bhava* that is durable, emerges.

But then suddenly something else happens: **the *bhava* transmutes itself into *rasa***, which the viewer or listener experiences. This does not happen uniformly every time. There are many preconditions that the texts speak of: the viewer must be cultured or sensitive enough; the work or performance must be alive with *bhava*; the moment must be right; the heart must be capable of receiving; and so on. But if these and other conditions are present, wonderful things happen: a spark leaps from the performance to the viewer, suffusing his or her entire being. *Bhava* turns into *rasa*. The experience can be overpowering, for it comes often like a flash of lightning, catching the viewer unprepared for the moment, and leaving him or her deeply moved. This is the moment when, as later writers put it, "magical flowers would blossom" in the viewer's awareness: *rasa* is tasted.¹⁰ The experience cannot be consciously worked toward; the moment comes unpredictably; but when it comes, it does so with blinding swiftness, yielding the same inscrutable delight that the seeker experiences upon coming face to face with the unknowable.

It is clearly stated that the same viewer may have the *rasa* experience from viewing an object or performance at one time and not have it at another; the intensity one viewer experiences may be different from another's. There are many imponderables and many factors intervene, but the experience is real, and can be intense. It is stated again and again that the experience belongs to the viewer; the work of art is a vehicle. In the fine skein of this theory many strands of thought come together. Coomaraswamy puts it with his usual succinctness:

★ The conception of the work of art as determined outwardly to use and inwardly to a delight of the reason; the view of its operation as not intelligibly causal, but by way of a destruction of the mental and effective barriers behind which the natural manifestation of the spirit is concealed; the necessity that the soul should be already prepared for this emancipation by an inborn or acquired sensibility; the requirement of self-identification with the ultimate theme, on the part of both artist and spectator, as prerequisite to visualization in the first instance and reproduction in the second; finally, the conception of ideal beauty as unconditioned by natural affections, indivisible, supersensual, and indistinguishable from the gnosis of God—all these

characteristics of the theory demonstrate its logical connection with the predominant trends of Indian thought, and its natural place in the whole body of Indian philosophy.¹¹

Much of this sounds esoteric and mysterious, and one cannot be sure how much the intellectual operations behind *rasa* and *bhava* were understood by the average Indian viewer of the past. But there seems to be little doubt that art and *rasa* were very closely connected in the Indian mind. It was not easy to think of one without the other. I have cited elsewhere my encounter with that great connoisseur of the arts of India, the late Rai Krishnadasa of Benares, to whom I once took a small inquiry of mine concerning the date and the style of a painting. Rai Krishnadasa heard my questions out with his usual grace and patience, but then he leaned back on the comfortable round bolster of his simple divan and said softly: "These questions I will now leave to you eager historians of art. All that I want, at this stage of my life"—he was past seventy years of age then and in frail health—"is to taste *rasa*." Nobody knew better than Rai Krishnadasa the answers to the questions I had taken to him at that time, but somehow he had moved on to, or back toward, what in his eyes was the real meaning or purpose of art.

To get back to the exhibition: Quite obviously, presenting Indian art through the concept of *rasa* had its limitations. It ran the risk of being dismissed as old-fashioned (even though it had never been attempted before!) or viewed more charitably as quaint. It was clear at any rate that not all art in India could be brought within the compass of *rasa*. It was easy to think of whole areas of Indian art that would be difficult to relate to *rasa* in the conventional sense: there is a substantial part of art that is simply genre, related to daily life, observation that describes and records without direct reference to *rasa*. Many other significant areas springing from Islamic or mixed sources—Mughal and Deccani painting, for instance—could be described as showing no awareness of *rasa*. Portraiture would be left out almost as a matter of course. Even much religious art, with its iconic representations or narrative episodes, would not be included unless the traditional nine *rasas* were to be expanded to include the *rasa* of devotion (*bhakti*), as some writers did.¹² But all this notwithstanding, somehow *rasa* is—was—real, and integrally related to art in the Indian mind. It informed art as a whole; it was the golden thread that shot through it. To approach art through it, then, might not only bring the non-Indian viewer closer to a major segment of Indian art but—a greater gain—

closer to the Indian mind. This became the governing consideration when, casting doubts and hesitation aside, I chose finally to stay with *rasa* as the pivot of the exhibition.

This decision taken, I chose, from a very large number of Indian collections both public and private, such works as spoke to me in a clear voice. These I then ordered into nine sections, each corresponding to the *rasa* the works might evoke in the viewer. In determining the order of the works within the ambit of each *rasa*, with clear intent I mixed sculptures with paintings in the show, placing a sixth-century piece in stone next to an eighteenth-century miniature on paper, and so on. There was careful avoidance of any chronological framework. From this exhibition, no viewer could possibly have gained any idea of the historical development of Indian art, or become involved in the kinds of art-historical questions that so many exhibitions lead to. There was just the barest information concerning date or approximate date, place or approximate place, and school, subschool, or idiom in the catalogue entries, and virtually no discussion of these. The intention was to invite the viewer to ignore these issues, or at least postpone their consideration for the moment, and to lead him or her to view art *qua* art, to sense what the work of art was capable of saying to the viewer, placed as he or she was in a different time and place, or to ruminate on what it might have said in its original context to the Indian viewer of yesterday.

The subject matter of most Indian art being alien not only to the non-Indian viewer, but—sad to say—even to the majority of Indian viewers of today, it was necessary to state briefly in the catalogue entries the elements in each work that could be seen as determinants and consequents, or that brought out transitory or durable emotional states, as enunciated in the classical *rasa* theory (though the emphasis remained on pointing out these elements without being didactic). I was all too aware that I was offering in this exhibition a strictly personal point of view: another scholar, a different viewer, was apt to respond to a particular work quite differently, or perhaps not at all. When I heard from Indian colleagues later that had it been left to them, they would have placed a given work not in the category in which I had placed it but in another, I was not in the least surprised. As the theory of *rasa* says, we take back from a work of art what we bring to it. Hearts melt differently, and the theory states that we respond to works of art according to our own energies (*utsaha*) or capabilities (*pratibha*). As Coomaraswamy says, "He who would bring back the wealth of the Indies, must take the wealth of the Indies with him."¹³

Even though *rasa* was the word used for each section of the exhibition, it was its counterpart, *bhava*, that I was intent on pointing out in different works, at least as I saw them. Evidently, there was no expectation that each work of art would lead to a *rasa* experience, or that each "flower" that is *bhava* would necessarily turn into the "fruit" that is *rasa*, as the theorists state. If each work of art were to lead to a *rasa* experience, visiting the exhibition would have left one emotionally exhausted, thoroughly drained. This was not the intention, nor, I am sure, was this the result. All that I believed the exhibition might yield to the common viewer was an awareness of the elements that made Indian art what it was, along with a generalized sense of delight—perhaps even an intense experience—when confronted with one of the nearly three hundred works that made up this exhibition. None of this may have come to pass; in any case, I am not quite sure of how it all worked with a non-Indian audience for whom not only the objects but their contexts were unfamiliar. But judging from reactions in both Paris and San Francisco, I gather that two things did result: many a viewer got some insights into the art of India; and, through this approach, many came close enough to it to be able to feel the texture of the Indian mind.

The need to bring the viewer close to a work of art was, in my view, especially great when it came to Indian miniatures. The small scale on which these exquisite paintings were made (the average miniature is eight by ten inches) and the original context in which they were viewed (each was meant to be viewed by one person at a time, holding it in the hand at a short distance from the eyes, like a book) present inherent difficulties in the matter of presentation in a museum or exhibition setting. The average viewer takes very little from a miniature on view, for very little can be seen in it when it is displayed against a wall, an unnatural distance intervening between it and the viewer. For this reason, while presenting the paintings in the catalogue, I found it necessary to draw attention repeatedly to what I regarded as significant detail: the entwined tree and creeper, the craned neck of a bird looking up at a heroine, lightning darting through clouds while lovers embraced each other in golden pavilions, the tilt of the head, the disposition of the hands, and so on. But should the viewer fail to concentrate on taking in details like these, introduced with such loving care by the painter, the intended mood would not rise to the surface of the viewer's mind. Hence the insistent pointing out of these details in the catalogue entries.

When the exhibition was mounted in Paris it was unfortunately not possible to explore the aspect of the *rasa* theory that states that

each *rasa* has an equivalent color.¹⁴ However, when the exhibition traveled to San Francisco, the display was quite different from what it had been at the Grand Palais in Paris: the walls of the different galleries, each devoted to a different *rasa*, were painted in the color equivalent of that *rasa*, the color having been picked in strict reference to classical theory.¹⁵ The device worked admirably; there was palpable heightening of effect, and of feeling.

Several other ideas were tried out, but here I would like to draw attention to only two of them. We in India are aware that in painting, works were often conceived in a series, being either related to a text or visualized as belonging to a set. Exhibitions by their nature tend to ignore this fact, and of necessity present miniatures as isolated leaves, thus tearing them from their context and doing some violence to the original intent of the painter. In the show in Paris, we tried to approximate the original intention and context by designing three different polygonal tables with nine sides each in which paintings were displayed so that nine persons could sit around a table and view the works. The display was attached to a timer, so that each painting moved from one seated viewer to the next till all nine works in the series had been viewed. This seemed to work well in what came to be termed "the connoisseur's corner." But, regrettably, exigencies of space did not allow this device to be installed in San Francisco.

The second idea could never be tried out at all. I had wanted to round off the exhibition with a large, acoustically dead room, to which only one viewer at a time would be admitted. In the center of this room only one major sculpture from the quiescent category, such as the Buddha in meditation, would be on view.¹⁶ The intention was that in this room, a viewer might come face to face with a work of art in a hushed, soundless setting, in subdued light, all the while hearing nothing else but the beating of his or her own heart. But considerations of expense and technical difficulties dictated otherwise. Had this idea been realized, it is possible that the viewer might have ended a visit to the exhibition on a note that would have resonated for a very long time.

NOTES

1. In 1983, the exhibition that was being discussed was meant only to figure in the Festival of India in Paris. It was decided at a much later stage that the Paris exhibition would travel to San Francisco in the fall of 1986. The cata-

logues of the two exhibitions, both written by me, vary somewhat from each other.

2. Apart from the 1960 exhibition *Tresors de l'art de l'Inde*, the Petit Palais saw another exhibition of Indian art in 1978—*Inde: Cinq mille ans d'art*.

3. It is to be remembered that arrangements for the exhibitions connected with the Festival of India on the East Coast of the United States had already been made final by this time.

4. Bharata Muni's *Natyasastra*, perhaps the most comprehensive treatise of its kind on the arts of India, is variously dated by different authors. An English translation by Manmohan Ghosh is available under the title *Natyasastra* (Calcutta: Manisha Granthalaya, 1967).

5. Most early texts on painting, sculpture, or literature contain passages on *rasa* and its applicability to the various arts, although the treatment varies in length and detail. Thus, the celebrated *Vishnudharmottara* (part 3, trans. Stella Kramrisch [Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1928]) has a whole chapter on *rasa*. Viswanatha Kaviraja's fourteenth-century *Sahitya-Darpana* (trans. J. R. Ballantyne and Pramada-Dasa Mitra [Calcutta: C. R. Lewis, Baptist Mission Press, 1875]) speaks of *rasa* at considerable length in relationship to literature.

6. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (New York: Dover, 1956).

7. *Ibid.*, 48.

8. The *Natyasastra* mentions only eight *rasas*, but the ninth, *shanta*, was added by later theoreticians and is so widely accepted that one is wholly used to the phrase *nava-rasa* (nine *rasas*) in all the arts.

9. Coomaraswamy, *Transformation of Nature*, 52.

10. Among the first expositions of Bharata Muni's *rasa* theory is that by the great eleventh-century Kashmir scholar Abhinavagupta. It is he who speaks of these "magical flowers." See *Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta*, ed. Raniero Gnoli (Rome: Istituto italiano per il medio ed estremo oriente, 1956).

11. Coomaraswamy, *Transformation of Nature*, 55.

12. Medieval writers very often plead for *bhakti* being added to the traditional list of *rasas*. Others argue the case of a *rasa* called *vatsalya* (parental affection), and so on.

13. This is one of those beautiful, aphoristic statements of Coomaraswamy that have been the cause of much comment by his critics.