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TRANSNATIONAL ASIAN ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

AROUND 1990 I HAD A MEMORABLE CONVERSATION—one of many I was privileged to have—with the late Oleg Grabar. I was seeking guidance about a book I was writing. The timing was fortuitous, because he was writing *The Mediation of Ornament*—by many accounts (including his own) his most powerful book.¹ I brought pictures of Liao (947–1125) Buddha halls, pagodas, and tomb interiors—the subjects of my book—which we spread across the table in his office. I had seen many of the buildings in person and had read primary and secondary sources. My specific purpose was to discuss a theoretical basis for my argument. Grabar spent some time looking at the pictures, asked questions, and commented on the word Liao as only he could. Then he looked me straight in the eyes and said, “For this kind of material, there is no magic bullet. The theory, if there is one, must come from the material itself. It’s up to you to figure out how to accomplish that.”

Twenty years later, in the summer of 2010, we had our last conversation, another memorable moment. It was in a smaller office, for he had retired, but an entire wall of bookshelves was filled with theory books. These books were different from the ones I remembered. “I’ve moved them here,” he said. “I’m planning to get rid of them.” I asked if he still considered *The Mediation of Ornament* his most important work. (The book is known for its engagement with theory, including quotes from many of the books on his shelves that day.) He had struggled with it, he said. It had come at a time of personal struggle in his life, and he certainly had enjoyed writing it, but he had since then returned to more traditional questions in art history.

Most *Ars Orientalis* readers know the name Oleg Grabar. I am among the many who sought his insight for their own research in fields from African history to Japanese Buddhism. I relate the story here because my search for approaches to the study of Asian architecture looms large in my thoughts about the four articles on South Asian architecture in this issue of *Ars Orientalis*, especially since my primary research deals with East Asia.

In the late 1970s and early ’80s, courses in art or architectural history included many of the theoretical studies Grabar cited in *Mediation*. In the 1990s and later, students often were asked to take a fundamental theoretical article and discuss its relevance to an object or building in their own area of expertise. I have read numerous highly successful assignments in which a Chinese object was juxtaposed with a passage from Foucault. There are now exemplary studies focused on transnational or cross-cultural themes that place Asian examples alongside non-Asian ones; *Ars Orientalis* 38 (2008), edited by Matthew Canepa, titled “Theorizing Cross-cultural Interaction among the Ancient and Early Medieval Mediterranean, Near East, and Asia,” is one of the best. Others have been published as the lead article, “Whither Art History,” in the *Art Bulletin*, most recently Cheng-hua Wang’s “A Global Perspective on Eighteenth-Century Chinese Art and Visual Culture.”² Like Wang,

scholars of Asian art regularly turn to Robert Nelson and James Elkins³ and to art historians of China who write about premodern topics in a global context, yet with the footnotes only someone well versed in classical Chinese sources can achieve.⁴

The graduate-student papers and studies mentioned above focus primarily on artifacts such as funerary goods, painting, and other portable objects. So far, the most successful scholarly discourse about premodern Asian architecture—Chinese, Korean, Japanese, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and West Asian (including Ancient Egyptian)—including the four articles in this issue, asks primarily contextual questions. *The Mediation of Ornament* also deals more with objects and architectural decoration than with buildings. Has the field of Asian architecture not yet figured out how to incorporate the theoretical writing that frames the study of Asian objects and European architecture? Do we perhaps not ask the right questions, or do we not ask them in the right way? Or are there overriding criteria that are dictating the only reliable agenda for advancing the study of Asian architecture, even in 2015?

We use the right vocabulary, but we are laden with other words that we cannot shackle. Crispin Branfoot writes about the “language of architecture.” He does not cite Sir John Summerson, but like most architectural historians working in the mid-1960s and beyond, he probably read *The Classical Language of Architecture*. Are that text’s contents so grounded in the work of historians of premodern architecture that the phrase is natural to our discourse? Branfoot knows that when writing about architecture of Tamil Drāvida of the early second millennium CE in India, he is obliged to explain that the *gopura*, a tall pyramidal gateway, derives from *vimāṇa* and the reader also has to know what *kūḍu*, *kūṭa*, *pañjara*, *śāla*, *talā*, *devakoṣṭha*, *adhiṣṭhāna*, *upapīṭha*, *mahākumbhābhiseka*, *bhadra*, *śukanāsa*, *sthāpatis*, *prākāra*, and *kalla upparige* are. Even a reader, such as myself, who has taken a course on Hindu temple architecture and teaches surveys of Asian art, will carefully go through the illustrations, perhaps with a dictionary of Hindu architecture nearby. Unlike the vocabulary used in seminars that focus on the medieval cathedrals of Europe, these terms do not make their way onto GRE tests, and the diacritics needed to render them in English are not all readily available in Microsoft Word. We historians of Asian art and architecture commit some of the terms to memory so we can teach seminars beyond our subfields or at least will know which references we can trust for definitions. Scholars of Asian art are not trained as philologists, but we all have studied the languages of the civilizations whose architecture we investigate—not just the modern languages, so we can ask on-site questions in the manner of anthropologists, but also the classical languages, so that we can read inscriptions and historical documents. Accurate context is crucial. Is this perhaps because our research is read more often by textual scholars of Asian architecture

than by historians of European art who have not stood in front of the buildings we discuss? Any Asian art or architectural historian knows, as do the four authors in this issue, that she must begin her article with the basics: a map that indicates the distance from major cities and topography—criteria long ago abandoned in comparable articles about buildings of Renaissance Europe or the modern world.

Nachiket Chanchani's article is a model study of a site in Asia. He begins with geography and topography; he surveys, reads inscriptions, proposes a chronology, and compares temple architecture of Pandukeshwar to famous contemporary buildings such as the Shore Temple and to major sites of earlier and later times. He uses more than a dozen Sanskrit terms to refer to components of Hindu temple architecture. Style is a key means of understanding Pandukeshwar's architecture, as are ritual or ceremony and the relation between architecture and the ruler. In addition, Chanchani comments on the ambitions of artisans based on this material and offers historiography, in this case a British explorer named Raper who saw between forty-five thousand and fifty thousand pilgrims at the site in 1808. The monuments confirm deeper understandings of India that are not obvious in texts. An article such as Chanchani's incorporates new buildings into the canon of Indian, and perhaps eventually Asian, architecture.

Julia Hegewald focuses on a larger framework, Jaina architecture, a subject for which many fewer examples exist in comparison to Brahmanical construction. Her timeframe is 900 to 1200. Her aim is to demonstrate that the Jaina temple is of a definable type but that regional variation links an individual temple to the style of its locale. Just as Chanchani suggests how to introduce an unknown or little-known building, Hegewald explains how to bring understudied architecture into the mainstream. The vocabulary of Indian temple architecture is an important means of evaluating whether Jaina temples and those of Brahmanism share features. Here, the obligatory background information is especially welcome to the wide readership of Asian art experts, because so little has been published on Jaina architecture. Finally, similar to an anthropologist, the author includes a discussion with a groundskeeper, another standard research tool for architecture scholars that is not as pertinent to those who study objects in collections.

Tamara Sears focuses on the transmission of architectural styles for the purpose of understanding movement across central India, iconography, and religious practice. She begins with the account of the Moroccan Ibn Battuta, whose *Rihla* (*Travels*) spanned the 1320s to 1350s and is a record used with greater and less reliability for the African coast; Turkey; Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia; and Mongolia. Because of the duration and extent of Battuta's journey, his *Rihla* is an ideal vehicle for discussing the transmission of forms and ideology. Sears deals as well with mode, style, and architectural language, terms whose theoretical

basis she admirably identifies through studies of Indian architecture by Meister, Wagoner, Sinha, and others.⁵ Indian architecture, unlike most East and West Asian fields, has scrutinized its material for engagement with theoretical studies in European architectural history and has done it perhaps more successfully than other subfields of Asian architecture, as Sears's paper and the studies behind it demonstrate. Like Chanchani, the author also seeks to understand artisans. Notably, following a section in which mode, style, and language are explained, Sears turns to ornament, a subject that both lends itself to study of transmission of forms across broad areas of the Asian continent and as Grabar's book confirms, to theoretical discussion as well.

Two of the most frequently addressed subjects in scholarly publications about Asian architecture are iconography, and the understanding of religious practices gleaned from it, and style, as a way to confirm fundamental and necessary information, such as the movement of motifs or a date when no inscription or text offers one. These topics, and a third, the introduction of new monuments, are inherent to the success of all four articles here. They mark a distinction between twenty-first-century scholarship on premodern Asian architecture and that of Western traditions. And there are issues that historians of Asian architecture deal with more often than do their colleagues focused on other geographic regions. In India, as these articles demonstrate, new monuments are identified regularly, and they require fundamental reassessment of existing structures through such tools as stylistic analysis. In the twenty-first century, Percy Brown's and John Marshall's seminal research on Indian architecture is no longer an adequate starting point for graduate students,⁶ but study of Asian architecture has been slow to disengage from authors who were colonizers and missionaries. Furthermore, from the post-colonial era to modern times, access to monuments has been directly related to military or political engagement, often in response to the past. In China, which I know best, political turmoil and ideology dictate not just access, but publication.⁷ Political agendas make it impossible for a modern researcher to make Ibn Battuta's journey, much less to set eyes on the structures a fourteenth-century itinerant artisan might have seen.

Architectural historians of Asia thus most often study individual monuments, related monuments at single sites, or monuments of specific periods or regions, and we chart our research according to accessibility. We strive to bring new monuments into our discussion and to find those that have been overlooked, and through them to more deeply understand core monuments. Occasionally a newly studied building is so important it becomes part of the canon; a scholarly article is the best means by which this can happen. We go ever deeper into iconography and ceremony, using contemporary inscriptions and texts, for context is an aspect of Asian archi-

itecture about which we know how to write so successfully. Then our work is read by those who share our interests in the texts behind those rituals. Architectural historians acquire skills of archaeologists, anthropologists, and philologists and travel as widely as possible across Asia because natural and political inaccessibility, the shedding of colonial pasts, and the challenges of languages no longer spoken and religions no longer practiced unite the civilizations whose buildings we seek to illuminate. The transnational aspect of the subjects of our research is that those who study Islamic, South Asian, or East Asian architecture all read a volume like this and introduce its material as well as its methodology into our own research. When a viable theoretical basis for deeper understanding of Asian architecture emerges, it is as likely to be generated by the buildings themselves, as Oleg Grabar believed, as by application of an existing theory.

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NOTES

- 1 The book was based on the Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, presented at the National Gallery in 1989 and published as Bollingen Series 38 by the Princeton University Press in 1992. Professor Grabar told me more than once that he considered it his best book. This was confirmed by his colleagues and students at the memorial session for him at the annual meeting of the College Art Association, Los Angeles, February 2012.
- 2 *Art Bulletin* 96, no. 4 (2014), 379–94.
- 3 The intent in this note and the next is not to single out or eliminate seminal authors and works, but rather to offer a few key examples. See Robert S. Nelson, “The Map of Art History,” *Art Bulletin* 79, no. 1 (1997), 28–40, and James Elkins, “Art History as a Global Discipline,” in *Is Art History Global?* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3–23.
- 4 Those in the Chinese art field who address theoretical issues regularly include Craig Clunas, Jonathan Hay, Martin Powers, Eugene Wang, and Wu Hung.
- 5 See notes 39 and 40 of her article.
- 6 Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture*, 2 vols. (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons and Co., 1942–43). The writings of Sir John Marshall are too voluminous to list but should be known to most readers.
- 7 In a few famous cases—such as Chen Mingda, *Yingxian muta* (Timber pagoda in Ying county) (Beijing: Wenwu Press, 1980), written in the 1950s—publication was postponed, and thereby delayed scholarly advancements for a full generation.