

# *The Relevance of Śilpaśāstra : an Introduction*

*Prof. Bettina Bäumer*

In recent years the Śilpaśāstras have received more attention than ever before, and even more recently Vāstuvidyā has become a fashion and is being commercialized and exported. The title of this two-day seminar is limited to Śilpaśāstra, although *śilpa* and *vāstu* are closely related and sometimes even synonyms. But in spite of the term “relevance”, we do not intend to discuss here secular architecture and the usefulness of Vāstuśāstra for modern architects. This may be a subject in itself, which has to be dealt with critically and from various angles.

We want to limit our considerations to *śilpa* and the relevance of *śāstra* to *śilpa*. We have to place our attempt in the context of the word and discussions, seminars and publications, which have already dealt with this topic in depth. Here in Jñāna Pravāha we had a seminar on Śilpaśāstra only three years before, in 2000, and I would not like to repeat what was said at that occasion. One of the most important seminars held on this subject was titled “Shastric Traditions in Indian Arts”, and it took place at the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg in 1986 (published under the same title in 1989). Some of the fundamental reflections on *śilpa* and *śāstra* contained in this volume have to be taken into account if we do not want to repeat what has been discussed earlier, and rather proceed further in our study and reflection.

Apart from defining what we understand by '*śilpa*' (which some of the papers will do according to their context), we should also comment on the word “relevance”.

In India today we find a gap between three sections of art : ancient art which is a subject for art historians and which is based on a rich literature in Sanskrit as well as regional languages, on the one hand, modern art on the other, and living traditional art which may be termed as *śilpa*, is the third. This latter is mostly assumed to be merely repetitive and not creative, and to follow vaguely the prescriptions of the Śilpaśāstras. One could go into the history of this gap, but this is not my purpose here. I want to focus on a possible or necessary relationship between these three sections, and thus on the relevance of what is sometimes despisively called “tradition”, to artistic expression.

After a long period of neglect for the relevant *śāstras*, art historians and indologists have at last discovered the importance of these texts in order to decipher and interpret the ancient and medieval and even later art, be it temple architecture, sculpture, painting, or any other art form<sup>1</sup>. Instead of interpreting these historical art forms with foreign categories, it was found necessary to see them in the light of a rich literary and theoretical literature, and of an Indian aesthetics. This has given a new impetus to the study of the Śilpa/Vāstuśāstras in the last few decades<sup>2</sup>.

On the other hand there is a reawakening of interest in the traditional Indian arts and sciences (*kalā, śāstra or vidyā*), partly motivated by a kind of revivalism. This also represents a healthy reaction to a one-sided western education in the fields of science and technology. But we may observe that when it comes to applying the ancient Indian wisdom in our modern situation, only the superficial elements are adopted, and the same science is used in the context of our commercialized and consumerist society. We may quote only the examples of Vāstuvidyā as propagated for modern architecture, and of Āyurveda, to complement the bad effects of modern (western) medicine. In this case there is no real insight into the deeper and fundamental principles governing these ancient sciences, but only a utilitarian approach. Because any deeper study of Vāstuvidyā or Āyurveda would require a complete revolution of the prevalent systems, and first of all of our understanding of human life.

By 'relevance' we therefore do not mean a return to the past, but a discovery of the insights and principles embodied in these texts, which are not bound by their historical context, important as it may be to study that context.

The term 'Śilpaśāstra' also has to be defined. We obviously do not want to limit it to the technical manuals of art, be it temple architecture, iconography, painting or other art forms. Starting from some Vedic references, it is in the Āgamas/Samhitās, Śaiva, Pāñcarātra, Vaikhānasa etc. and in the Purāṇas that we find a rich material on *śilpa/vāstu*, though not always in technical details such as the relevant Śāstras. Not only that, even in Sanskrit literature we find important clues to the works of art 'Śilpaśāstra' is thus not limited to a class of texts, but includes any text dealing with the creation, the background, the principles and the meaning of art.

In order to discover the relevance of texts, which we may generously include under the title Śilpaśāstra, we need a proper method of reading and interpreting them, which means also removing misconceptions. Both, the texts and the artistic forms to which they refer, are not to be taken at their face value. They are only the visible part of a much larger, invisible ice-berg, what Thomas Maxwell calls "participation in a unified culture", which includes a "passive burden of assumed or inherited knowledge" and the "chaotic background of archetypes" (Śilpa versus Śāstra", in : *Shastric Traditions.*, p. 1). Śilpaśāstra is neither a fixation of a creative process, nor a canonical limitation of artistic expression, as it is often understood. It is also not a verbal rationalization of art, but it rather offers a wider and deeper frame of understanding any traditional art. We could say that the *śāstra* is a commentary on the art-form, and the art-form is a commentary on the *śāstra*. There is a mutuality which is not a one-to-one relationship, but which emphasizes different dimensions of the same reality, as for instance the image of a deity.

If it is clear that the *śāstras* are or can be relevant for art today, traditional or modern.

When we come to modern Indian art, any reference to Śilpaśāstras appears to be revivalist or outdated. The modern Indian artist wants to be Indian, but not bound by tradition. The motifs may be Indian, and even Tantric, but there is no connection with (traditional) Indian aesthetics or principles of art. The reason for this detachment from traditional principles may be found in the (wrong) conception that the *śāstras* are limiting creative freedom, that they prescribe rules which are binding, and that their subject-matter is traditionally religious. I would like to submit that in any *śāstra* one has to distinguish the basic principles from their application to a particular art-form. The particular art-form, as for example a sculpture in the context of a temple, may be bound to a religious and historical context, but not the principles underlying its form and aesthetics. We would do well to study these *śāstras* in order to discover their universal principles which can well be applied to modern art.

The Indian arts are in the privileged position to have inherited a rich literature on theory and aesthetics, and it would be a great pity if the modern artist would reject all this for the sake of a detached modernity.

But what is it that these *śāstras* can teach us today? I can only give some examples.

But before doing so some of the general principles of the Śilpaśāstras should be understood. These are either explicitly stated or implicitly present.

Traditional art in any culture and level of society is first of all based on cosmic laws. It is based on the understanding that the human being is not isolated (as in a modern and distorted western world-view), but that it is related to the cosmic and also divine forces connecting all these realms. The cosmic forces find expression in the forms of the universe which are never arbitrary. Modern technology may try to subdue and even change these cosmic laws, leading thus to an uprooting of the human psyche, and modern European art partly reflects this alienation.

The power and attraction of an art that is rooted in cosmic-and-divine-laws is very different, because it helps the onlooker to be himself rooted and thus centered. This art has been described as leading to a “culture of the Self” (*ātmasaṁskṛti*) by the Vedas, and “culture” (*saṁskṛti*) is here to be understood in the sense of a purification (*saṁskāra*) which reveals the true Self (*ātman*). And in traditional aesthetic theory, in India as well as in Greece, art has a purifying effect, and at the same time an effect of universalisation (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*, in Nāṭyaśāstra and Abhinava Bhāratī).

What does this mean in relation to form, which is after all the instrument of the artist? All the deep reflections on *rūpa* which we find in the Indian tradition, not only in the Śilpaśāstras, should be taken seriously by the artist whether traditional or modern. To give an example : In sculpture, as well as in painting, there is an underlying composition<sup>3</sup>, whether conscious or unconscious. If it is conscious, in the context of traditional sculpture, the central point (*bindu* or *marma*) will be fixed with

the recitation of *mantras* (cf. *Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad* II, 3-4). Whether it is a central point or a central field, this represents the origin of creation, *Brahman* (therefore *brahmakṣetra*). Around this center point a circle is drawn :

Sūtra : In the beginning is a circle. The circle is the All (universe).

The breath of life (*prāṇa*) is (contained) in its form, even as the mind is in Man. The circle is Time, according to the *Vāsturveda*. The movement of the circle is restricted (by its circumference), like the fluctuation of the mind. The support of the circle is the immortal, the *bindu* is its firm position (station) like the *ātman* (in man). Starting from the *bindu*, by connecting it with another point arises the circumference (enclosure) surrounding it. He who knows this is the supreme Lord, the Overseer, Union (*yoga*), he is intelligence (*kratu*), he is truth (*Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad*, II. 6. )<sup>4</sup>.

The traditional artist is conscious of the life-principle (*prāṇa*) inherent in a point and a line :

Sūtra : Straight lines are as rays of light.

By the line they (the *sthāpakas*) divide the circle, as the creators by their action divide the world. From these (lines) in this way all the parts of the image become visibly manifest, for the sake of the whole image in accordance with the myths of the country, and the harmony of the limbs arises. (*Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad*, II. 9.).

Point circle, straight line, all these basic forms are part of a cosmic-and-human organism, and hence the central point becomes the navel, the very origin of life :

Sūtra : The creation of the image starts from the navel.

All limbs should be determined to achieve harmony, according to Brahmā's design. As is the realization of *Brahman* (*brahmavidyā*), such is the knowledge of form (*rūpaprajñā*). with this knowledge the artists manifest *Brahman* indirectly in the creation of form, enjoying it as a very ancient wisdom. Setting the limbs along the proper lines is praised like the knowledge of *Brahman* (*brahmavidyā*). The *sthāpakas* who know this are honoured as wise, (and also) he who knows this. By this knowledge the *sthāpakas* become knowers of form. Those who are wise, these experts attain the realization of *Brahman* in the work of Art. As in the creation of the world arise the five great elements, similarly with the circle as support *Śilpakāśyapa* and other priests of art conceived and disposed the features of beings and elements (*Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad*, II. 10.).

The basic forms are not only related to the body, but to the cosmic elements, because they are in the order of the original creation :

Sūtra : Following the order of Prajāpati the circle represents light (*tejas*) while the square indicates water.

Sūtra : Two diagonals are drawn in the nature of wind.

Sūtra : The *sthāpakas* trace the *karnīkakṣetra* (rhombus) as the earth.

Sūtra : The *bindu* obtained in the center is the life-breath of the earth.

Sūtra : Fire in the form of a triangle is known even in the (non-Vedic) world.

Sūtra : The inverted triangle is water (Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad, II. Sūtra: 11-16).

The language of the Śilpaśāstras may sound mythological to our modern ears, but we have to understand that it is a language expressing some fundamental insights.

In the **Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad** they are called “essential forms (*tattvarūpāṇi*) which follow the principle of form (*rūpatattva*, II. 20 Comm.). No art can afford to ignore these principles. In the context of sacred art, a perfect form leads to a meditative state, to a state of harmony (we may add : both, in the artist as well as in the onlooker):

Sūtra : Vertical lines have the nature of fire, horizontal lines have the nature of water, diagonal lines have the nature of wind (*māruta*).

With the different lines the differences of characters (of images) arise. That form shines forth as determined by the lines and the form becomes perfect (*surūpa*). By depending on the essential lines (*tattvarekhā*), the soul of form becomes manifest, and also that of the represented image. As by sacrificial offerings rain is produced, thus by a harmonious form the mood of meditation is induced. As from rain food is produced, thus from meditation arises absorption (in the divinity). By absorption men become divinised. As from food the life (-breath) arises, thus from the state of absorption they experience union with that (the object of meditation). The mind becomes steady. For them there is no return to further births. For this purpose *śilpīs* create images in this world. The lines in the images are like sacrificial offerings (Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad, II. 22 with comm..).

These few examples from a single text, the **Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad**, may suffice to show that the reflection on form, on art and aesthetics by the ancients can be an inspiration even for modern art not in an artificial way of reconstruction, but in an effort to draw creative insights which can be transformed and give life to artistic creation. Rediscovering the true function of art in the Indian tradition means also to find our place in the cosmos, to connect ourselves with the divine, and to lead to a self-discovery : *ātmasaṁskṛti*, according to the Veda.

I may again sum up some of the important contributions which a study of the Śilpaśāstras may provide us :

1. A better understanding and more contextual interpretation of ancient and medieval art;
2. A consistent terminology to describe the monuments and works of art, not borrowed from another context in India or outside;
3. A philosophy and aesthetics of form *rūpa* which can also lead to an enriching dialogue between traditional and modern art;

4. A re-orientation for both, the traditional *śilpī* who has mostly lost contact with the *śāstra*, and the modern artist, who is often without any point of reference;
5. And most important, a rediscovery of the ultimate *prayojana* of both. *śāstra* and *śilpa*, which according to the texts, should lead to *siddhi* and *mukti*. *Siddhi* means here the power of accomplishment and perfection in any field, not the yogic *siddhis*, and *mukti* can also be understood in a wider sense, as liberation from the restrictions and burdens of daily life, to be transported in another realm, which is ultimately the meaning of any real art.

Thus, to conclude, the **Śilpa Prakāśa** proclaims :

Of all the *śāstras*, the Śilpaśāstra taught by Viśvakarman is the highest. Building an excellent temple gives liberation and bestows all *siddhis*. (II. 809).

## References

1. cf. the effort of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts to bring out a Series of such texts under the title Kalāmulaśāstra. Cf. also the important publication : *Shastrie Traditions in Indian Arts*, ed. by A.L. Dallapiccola, Stuttgart, 1989.
2. cf. The pioneering work of Alice Boner, e.g. *Śilpa Prakāśa, Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad*, and *Śilparatnakośa*, and tr. by B. Bäumer and R.P. Das.
3. cf. Alice Boner, *Principles of Composition*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, Netherland, 1962.
4. *Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad : The Essence of form in Sacred Art*, ed. and tr. by Alice Boner, S.R. Sarma, Bettina Bäumer, Delhi (Motilal Banarsidass), 4<sup>th</sup> revised ed. 2000.

\* \* \*