

Representation of Birds and Animals in The Temple Art of Konark

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In Konark sculpture, animal figures constitute by far the most common theme of decorations and Coomaraswamy points out. "It is perhaps the animals that are most impressive".¹ "The treatment of animal life is everywhere full of sympathy, kinship and affection, reminiscent of the spirit that inspired the early Buddhist monuments at *Bharhut* and *Sanchi*".² Among the animal figures, the elephants form a very large part of decorations of the temple. As decorative devices they were not a novel feature of Konark. In Orissa, the depiction of elephants goes back to the earlier centuries. The fore part of the elephant at Dhauli, belonging to the third century B.C., is notable alike for its plasticity and its symbolic significance in the context of Buddhism of that period.³ But even though the elephant reliefs at Konark are not an isolated phenomenon, yet they have a special character of their own; the friezes on the *upana* or the two colossal elephants on the northern courtyard have no counterpart in any other temple of Orissa. Of the gigantic pairs in the northern courtyard, one holds a man in its trunk, while another is shown with a man under its body. Both elephants, though not extraordinary in artistic treatment, nevertheless impress us by their dignified bearing and largeness of volume. If placed in a jungle could be confused for real elephants on a moonlit night. The elephant friezes on the *upana*, executed with loving care by many hands, present a charming spectacle.⁴ The realistic treatment of their form shows the meticulous care bestowed on the study of their anatomy. Elephants are carved in a number of poses; they move in processions, carry their masters, trot in the jungle, sit, recline or go to the water to quench their thirst. The whole of the *kheda* operation has been shown. The elephants are shown in a herd in the jungle. The jungle atmosphere is suggested by a lion in a foil or a peacock as in the *upana* below a wheel.

Kalinga was famous for elephants from early times. The Arthashastra of Kautilya⁵ refers to Kalinga as a land where the best type of elephants were to be found. The Raghuvamsa of Kalidasa,⁶ the Rajatarangini of Kalhana,⁷ Sanskrit texts on elephant lore like the Gaja Lakshana⁸ and the Harihara Chaturangam⁹ mention the forests of Kalinga as abounding in elephants. It is therefore not surprising that these majestic animals, so familiar and useful for court display, for war and as a dignified vehicle for transport, should have fascinated the artists who carved them on the temple walls. Moreover, elephants might have had a special significance in the temple of the Sun. According to elephant lore, the eight elephants of the quarters were created out of the shell of the cosmic egg from which the Sun-god was created.¹⁰ Judged against this background, the depiction of elephant reliefs and placing them as guardian animals, were in keeping with the mythology.

The horses are carved in thin friezes in the context of military scenes or in the round. In the latter category are included the chlorite horse of the Sun-god in the northern niche of the main temple, the seven horses drawing the temple car in front of the *Jagamohana* and the two war horses that once served as guardian animals on the south. Of these, the seven horses that once adorned the eastern entrance are in broken fragments, but even in this state of ruin the fragments speak for themselves. In the strenuous task of drawing the gigantic chariot, they are considered by Coomaraswamy to “express a mood of sadness almost as profound as that of the Javanese Mahisamardini”.¹¹

The two war horses, each with a dismounted rider by the side, are now placed on a special platform on the south. The horses as guardian animals are rarely to be seen in other temples of Orissa.¹² At Konark this special feature was, we believe, due to the fact that the horse is specially associated with the Sun-god and his son Revanta.¹³ Leaving apart their religious background, these war horses are characterized by a strength and dynamic vitality which lends them a monumental grandeur. Commenting on one of them, Havell remarks, “Had it by chance been labeled ‘Roman’ or ‘Greek’, this magnificent work of art would now be the pride of some great metropolitan museums in Europe and America.

Among other animals, giraffe, camel, deer, tiger, boar, ram, monkey, bullock, etc. are represented in the context of different scenes. A giraffe is depicted in a panel on the upper *jangha* portion of the *pitha* wall of the temple on the south, and this is probably the solitary example of this alien animal in Indian temple art. How did it get to Orissa? Brought as a curiosity by Arab traders and sold to the king, perhaps the presence of the giraffe is important as evidence of commercial contact with East Africa. The depiction of camels on the Orissan temples is very rare,

the animal being not normally found in this part of India. However, there is one representation of the camel on the *barandi* of the *pitha* wall which contains the giraffe scene; another camel is to be seen on the southern face of the so-called Chayadevi temple, while another can also be noticed on a broken fragment of the Konark Museum. Tigers and boars appear in hunting scenes, while deer are shown in several postures and positions in the scrolls, besides being depicted in the hunting scene. The bulls occur as the vehicles on their backs.

Among the animals of the lesser order, we find lizard, mouse, snake, fish, tortoise and the like. Designs of lizards have been embossed over shields, even miniature replicas of them appear as ornamental clips worn by women in the hair. The mouse appears as the mount of god Ganesha and the snake as an attribute of Siva. The tortoise is depicted as the vehicle of Yamuna and it also appears as a decorative motif on the *barandi* court of the western *pitha* wall of the *Natamandira*. The tortoise probably had a special significance, as it was “one of the earliest and most widely spread totems of the solar race”.¹⁴ The Satapatha Brahmana even says that “This tortoise (Kasyapa) is the same as yonder Sun”.¹⁵ Even in distance Bali, a “temple dedicated to Sun-god is supposed to rest on a tortoise whose head, four legs and tails are shown emerging, as it were from the basement of the building”.¹⁶

Birds

The birds represented on the temple include peacock, pigeon, goose, parrot, crane, etc. In the conventional *kadamba* tree which serves as a background for the “Giraffe scene”, as many as five peacocks are shown perched on its branches, of which a pair facing each other in the corner is carved with warmth of feeling. The parrot was kept as a pet bird by ladies and even a lady going for worship carries a parrot on her shoulder; pigeon and crane are depicted in the roof of the *Jagamohana* on the edges of its cornices. Two birds placed on the roof line of decorative *mandapa*, is a familiar motif at Konark and can be properly appreciated by such descriptions in Sanskrit literature, of which Sivaramamurti draws our attention to one occurring in Magha’s *Sisupalavadha*.¹⁷

In describing the birds special mention should be made of the swan friezes. The *hamsa* being “the noble bird par excellence” is a “favourite decorative in Indian art from the time of Asoka to the Moghul period”.¹⁸ In Hindu religion it is taken to be the vehicle of Brahma and the goddess Saraswati and it is considered to be superior to other birds for its graceful gait, swift movement and virtuous quality. This bird, which formed the theme of classical poetry, fables and fairy tales does not go unmentioned in the epigraphical literature of Orissa.

In the plastic art of Orissa, the goose appears as a decorative motif on the *Anantagumpha* of Khandagiri. Among the temples of Bhubaneswar the bird appears at Mukteswara and Rajarani in an elegant form of carrying string of pearls in the beak, the pattern being popularly known as *mukutalobhi rajahamsa* among the local Sathapathis. Therefore it is not surprising that this motif appears so frequently at Konark. Here on the walls of Konark, rows of geese, admirably carved in a continuous line, looking forward, backward and downward as they move, create a charming spectacle. Such a representation, known as *hamsa kahari* in the local terminology, is seen at its best in the elevated *pitha*-wall of the *Natamandira* on the *baranda*-mouldings which go round the whole building. Many of these geese are, however, like the *makara*, far from their counterparts in nature, being shown with stylized and flowery tails.

Composite Animals

Vyala figures: Composite and curious creatures, the products of fertile imaginations, occur as decorative devices in all ages of Indian art. The term *Vyala* is applied to such imaginative creatures.¹⁹ As V.S. Agarwal points out, “*Vyala* is based on deformity of the normal human and animal form. In its widest sense *Vyala* signifies the Grotesque which is often called *Vikata* in literature”.²⁰ Whatever may be the source of inspiration, the *Vyala* figures became very popular in Indian art.

At Konark, a variety of *Vyala* figures are found on the platform of the temple, as well as on the *Vimana* and the *Jagamohana*. They are also shown on the interior pillars of the *Natamandira*. The Samarangana-sutradhara (11th century A.D.) mentions sixteen kinds of *Vyala*-deer, vulture, parrot, cock, lion, tiger, wolf, ibex, rhinoceros, elephant, boar, horse, buffalo, dog, monkey and donkey forms.²¹ The Aparajita pracha of Bhuvanadeva (12th century A.D.) also mentions 16 types of *Vyalas*. The 16 types mentioned are lion, elephant, horse, man, bull, ram, parrot, boar, buffalo, rat, insect, monkey, gander, cock, peacock and snake forms.²² At Konark a few of these types such as *simha Vyala*, *virka Vyala*, etc. are found. Many of the sculptures depict what seems to be a *gandaki-Vyala*. The figure is very like a lion, but it is provided with leafy horns.

Gaja-Vyalas are seen in large numbers. It is an imaginative combination of lion and the elephant; the body, tail and paws are those of the lion but the face is that of the elephant. It stands on its hind legs, resting one leg on the waist and another leg on the head of a prostrate warrior who has a sword and a shield in his hands. The elephant face carries a man in the trunk which completes the composite pattern. The *nara-Vyala* is a unique product of medieval Orissan art and has not been noticed in other parts of India. In this form, the lion is combined with a human face. It is, as O.C. Ganguly observes, “a predominating human conception with a benign and smiling face, gently

placing one of the paws on the head of the prostrate warrior at the feet, almost in a gesture of benediction, the right hand being posed across the breast almost in an equally amiable gesture of bestowing an *asirvada*".²³ The motif occurs in the upper *jangha* portion of the *pitha*-wall and of the *Jagamohana*.

Gaja-Simha: The lion on a recumbent elephant motif is a very popular theme of decoration in Orissa art and excellent examples of this device are available at Konark. It is believed that the pattern of "the lion vanquishing the elephant" symbolizes "the conquest of spiritual power over worldly power";²⁴ to another scholar it was the "symbol of ignorance conquered by knowledge"²⁵ Benjamin Rowland thinks that these "possibly are allegories of the Sun's (lion's) triumph over the rain (elephant)".²⁶ It is also argued that the motif represents victory of Hinduism over Buddhism, the lion being fancifully taken to be the symbol of the former and the elephant of the latter.²⁷

At Konark various types of the motif are found. In one type the lion is shown over a couchant elephant. The gigantic pair in front of the eastern entrance of the *Natamandira*, is the best example of this type. The lion with open mouth, lolling tongue, flamboyant mane and protruding eyes stands just over the recumbent elephant with lifted paws in an attitude of striking the latter, which in its turn also holds a man in the trunk. The majesty, vigour and strength of the stylized lions and the mood of helplessness of the elephants, are well brought out by the sculptor.

The variety locally known *dopichha gajasimha* shows the ingenuity of the artist in showing two lioness with only one common head. One head serves the purpose for two lions when in the corners they are placed at right angles; below each of them is depicted an elephant to form this composite motif. It occurs in the two corners of the *simhasana* inside the main temple: it is also seen at the *Natamandira* on its second *pitha*.

In another type a change is made in the posture of the lion which stands over the elephant. The stylized lion (*Gandaki-Vyala*) stands on its hind legs over the elephant, placing one leg on the head and the other on the rear part of the latter's body, and fantastically twists its body to look backwards- a pose which may be called the *simhavalokana* attitude- to which the plight of the elephant. Such representations are the most numerous on the walls of the platform on which the *Vimana* and *Jagamohana* have been erected. The last mentioned structures also contain gigantic specimens on their respective *badas*. The motif, though absent on the platform of the *Natamandira*, appeared on the face of its interior pillars. While repeating this motif at many places, the artist makes a charming variation in the pose of the elephant, which looks sideways or upwards or faces the spectator with an innocent expression on its face. This type of motif is locally known as *ulta gaja-viraja-simha*.

In another variety, the lion (*asva-Vyala*) stands over the elephant near the latter's hind part in an attitude of leaping forward into the open air. The two hind legs placed on the elephant convey a sense of stability, while its upper portion is characterized by a vigorous swing which fully justifies its name, *chhida-uda-gaja-simha* (*chhida*- standing, *uda*-flying) in the local terminology. The wonderful balance between the static and flying pose reveals the skill of the sculptor to handle this complicated composition. The rider on the back of the lion holds the bridle in the left hand and the whip in the right. Two representations of this pattern are seen on the walls forming the junction between the *Vimana* and the *Jagamohana*. The motif is not shown elsewhere on the surface of the temple.

The animal sculptures are met with both in early and late temples, but their representations at Konark are the most impressive. The free-standing elephants in the northern courtyard of Konark are distinguished by dignified bearing and largeness of volume. Leaving apart the broken fragments of seven horses that once dragged the mighty chariot of the Sun God, the two war-horses that are still extant, are indeed among the finest representations of animal form. Commenting on one of these, Havell observes, "Had it by chance been labeled 'Roman' or 'Greek', this magnificent work of art would now be the pride of some great metropolitan museum in Europe and America. Here Indian sculptors have shown that they can express with such fire and passion as the greatest European art, the pride of Victory and the glory of triumphant warfare"

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