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**THE REALM
OF POETICS**

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rooted in human perception.**

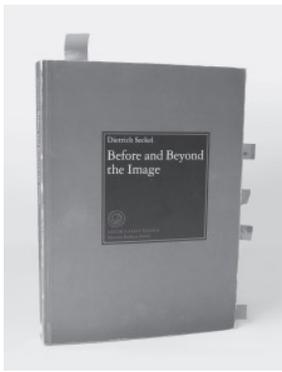
**Satyendra Pakhalé's
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Tiziana Proietti

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Our minds are constantly in search of easily graspable images. From babyhood, we look at the world and begin discerning, simplifying, categorizing and typifying shapes to build the structure of our knowledge through experience. Indeed, our brain's main task is to gain knowledge of the surrounding world. However, the matter of perception is far from simple, and the brain's task is not an easy one. It has to transform external, unlimited information, which is complex and extremely differentiated, and make it accessible to our limited sensorial and cognitive abilities. In doing so, it searches for the relevant generic features of a given, perceived object, and stores the information gained.

The brain is constantly seeking the essence. While perceiving, we are in search of universal common denominators, constancies, enduring forms, or constant elements that are the constituent parts of uncountable forms, and that our mind can process, associate and even expand upon. We are selective in our way of perceiving, and we leave aside any information not related to those universal, essential features meant to summon up the object of perception in the vast realm of analogies activated by our mind. Indeed, thinking through analogies is like breathing: humans do not need to rationalize it. This aptitude, which we can define as 'analogical thinking', is deeply rooted in human perception.

Instinctive Perception

Shapes are captured and crystallized by our brain just before being confined in any object specificity, leaving them floating in the realm of analogies. When art acts like the brain, the object produced resonates powerfully with instinctive human perception by favouring the analogical thinking that is the ground for an act of self-identification: an empathic relationship brought into being between observer and object. Human memories, broadest needs and sensorial aptitudes are projected upon the object by activating the vast realm of poetic forms, so appropriately defined by Philip Rawson in his analysis of Indian sculpture as 'poetic analogies'. Indeed, in Indian sculpture 'the different realms of life and thought are represented and summarized'.

A Dietrich Seckel, *Before and Beyond the Image* (1976), argues that the 'most crucial spiritual insights lie beyond the power of human imagination to describe or depict; the visual arts can allude to them only obliquely, through omission or the use of non-iconic figures'. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

1 Philip Rawson, *Indian Sculpture*, London: Studio Vista, UK, 1996, p. 34.

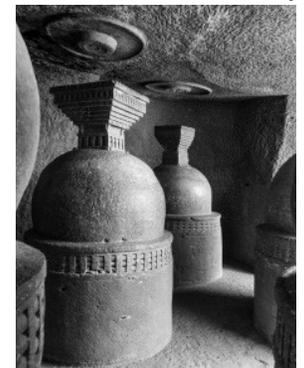
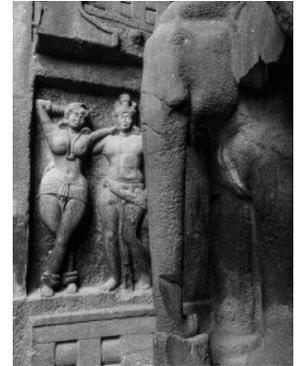
Rawson elaborates: ‘The “meaning” of forms is thus seen to reside in their suggestions of similar forms seen and remembered from other contexts. And if the forms in question are not merely the strict geometrical forms of analysis, but consist each of a subtle combination of geometrical classes which refer directly back to particular referents in real experience they will have a ‘poetic significance’, quite distinct from the prose sense of straightforward analysis and far more powerful in its emotional effects’.²

From antiquity, sensorial existence was the cornerstone of the Indian art tradition. Artists searched for forms and images to convey the enigma of human sensorial perception. Simple primal forms were used, resulting in abstraction, archaism and plasticity. The well-known sense of suavity belonging to the great tradition of Indian secular art, which dates back to the reign of Ashoka from 270 to 232 BCE,³ comes from the morphological properties of objects as connected to the sensorial qualities they embody and convey.

The Tone of Existence

Looking at the earliest rock-cut architecture and sculpture from India, still standing in World Heritage sites like Ajanta, Bhaje, Karle and Sanchi, it is easy to note how the primary means of expression comes from irreducible units that cannot be broken down further into equally essential and concise units. As Rawson points out, by using only pointed and flat chisels and the method of strip-cutting, or ‘cutting the stone in a series of facets, each of which runs like a continuous band from top to bottom of the figure, and corresponds to one outline of the silhouette’, sculptors, in a highly sophisticated manner, delved into the very essence of each unit of form. This ability to catch the essence of things, or what we might call the ‘tone of existence’, comes from the Indian mind that ‘was captivated by its vision of the immense, the infinite ground of Being’.⁴

All the sculpture techniques used by Indian sculptors emphasized the roundness and even the thickness of volumes, inviting spectators to experience and look at objects from the inside, rather than from the outside. The meaningful inner structure, manipulated and conveyed by sculptural methods and techniques, at the same time strictly rational and purely expressive, is the real raw material of Indian secular art. The geometry of convexities and the mathematics of pointed lines running around the rounded volumes are shaped to produce impressive sensorial objects.



b Rock-cut architecture at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Ajanta. Here: cell no. 9, view of stupa, 1st cent. CE. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

c The couple at Karla, Maharashtra, is the oldest surviving example of rock-cut Buddhist architecture, dating from ca. 160 BCE. The carving represents the egalitarian traditions in the Buddhist era when new social energies, entrepreneurial roles and cultural innovations burst forth in India. Courtesy: Kevin Standage, UK.

d A group of 22 rock-cut cells in Bhaja. Earliest example of a chaitya on an ancient trade route running from the Arabian Sea eastward into the Deccan Plateau (the division between North India and South India), 2nd BCE. Courtesy: Kevin Standage, UK.

² Philip Rawson, ‘The Methods of Indian Sculpture’, in *Oriental Arts*, 1957, p. 142.

³ The Indian secular art referred to in this passage belongs to the period from around the 2nd century BCE (Before Common Era) to the 5th century CE (Common Era).

⁴ Philip Rawson, *Indian Sculpture*, London: Studio Vista, 1996, p. 60.

Poetic Analogies

The aptitude for projecting the image of our functions upon the outside world and reading external reality on our own terms is ancient and profound. It is the primal way of interpreting the world through an act of self-identification. It is a way of humanizing the world through ‘poetic analogies’.

Satyendra Pakhalé’s objects similarly open up the realm of poetic analogy by reflecting larger imaginative entities beyond themselves. The Fish Chair (2005)❶, or the B.M. Horse (2000)❷, Black-White Swan (2012)❸ and Panther (2002)❹ offer a continuous invitation to self-identification by allowing the mind to think analogically and matching the acquired knowledge with memory and imagination. The meaning of each Pakhalé object does not lie in the object itself, but in our experience of it, or better yet in the ‘reception’ charged with emotional and sensorial values and the ability to animate the inanimate. The perceived object becomes simultaneously a carrier of emotions, functions and analogies, triggering all the human senses, including the ‘sense of mind’.

A Step Beyond All Forms

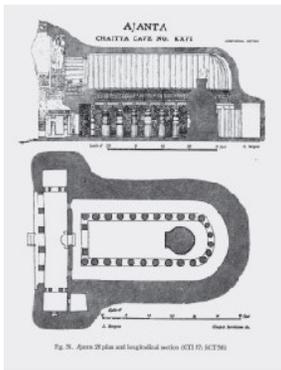
The convexly curved forms of Pakhalé’s body of work are designed, progressively refined and controlled to expand the realm of analogies to evoke unlimited images that arouse meanings rather than representing anything. As in the earliest secular Buddhist sculpture, the convexity of shape becomes the container of a sense of being to be interpreted and expanded in the act of perceiving.

The common denominators and unbreakable units that animate Pakhalé’s design come from patiently and sensitively working beyond the boundaries of form. Indeed, he is aware that, to use Dietrich Seckel’s words, ‘the more abstract a visual sign is, the truer and more effective it is. An image fulfills its purpose all the more if it reaches the boundary of all form, and allows the step into the realm beyond all form [...] Beyond all images, even the most sublime ones, there is always one more step’.⁵

Self-Expressiveness of Forms

Pakhalé is constantly pursuing that ‘one more step’ – by pushing the limits of the representative character of symbols and making them capable of opening the broadest field of self-identification

⁵ Dietrich Seckel, *Before and Beyond the Image. Aniconic Symbolism in Buddhist Art*, London: Paul Holberton Publishing, UK, 2008, pp. 56–57.



E Walter M. Spink, Ajanta 26 plan and longitudinal Section of a Chaitya from Ajanta: *History and Development, Volume Four, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture Year by Year*, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, NL, 2009. Courtesy: Brill Publishers, NL.

F A group of 30 rock-cut cells in Ajanta. Example of a chaitya with a vaulted horseshoe ceiling, 2nd BCE. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

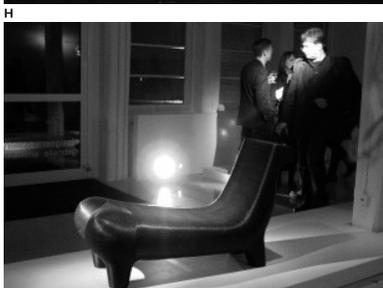
G Torana Gate Sanchi, life in Uruvelā. A sculptural detail depicting scene of everyday village life, where women pound rice, winnow it, crush spices, roll out dough, fetch water from the river in which water buffaloes laze and empty seat that serves as a marker for the presence of the Buddha. A remarkable feature of these oldest surviving examples of narrative art from India. By depicting Buddha with only aniconic symbols, this phenomenon can hardly be explained as the result of general absence of images. The artistic creation of the Buddha image begins with the non-image – seemingly paradox, but quite in keeping with the teachings of the enlightened Buddha. Sanchi architectural complex is one of the important architectural specimens by the emperor Ashoka – India’s founding father, he espoused non-violence and the utterly novel concept of conquest by moral force alone, establishing a welfare state in 2nd century BCE. Courtesy: ASI Archaeological Survey of India.

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in the vast, human, pluralistic ways of being and expression. Indeed, analogical thinking is rooted in the act of associating and bringing into being a scenario that may change according to the lines of association followed. This means that the final form, or units of form, may have a symbolic value without being confined to specific figures. This is the power of representing the essence of forms, as experienced so strongly in Pakhalé's designs, in their natural state of openness, captured just before they are confined to a specific symbol that does not need to be associated with any specific meaning.

Any attempt to capture the specific meanings of symbols in Pakhalé's design objects is useless. Effectively, it is not necessary that symbols symbolize something. No explicit or implicit shared knowledge allows the precise and unique interpretation of symbols. In Pakhalé's projects, symbols are the objects of special knowledge, sometimes easily accessible, sometimes reserved to experts, sometimes forgotten today, although it existed in the past. This multiplicity of achievable interpretations results from the absence of a code. These copious symbolic associations converge in multi-sensorial objects that show their own compelling 'self-expressiveness'.

H Fish Chair Viola at *Satyendra Pakhalé: Design at Fairchild*, Fairchild Tropical Botanical Gardens, Miami, USA, 2014. Courtesy: Celia D. Luna, USA.

I B.M. Chaise Longue at *Satyendra Pakhalé: OriginS*, solo exhibition at ammann // gallery, Cologne, DE, 2008. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

J Panther at *Satyendra Pakhalé: From Projects to Products*, solo exhibition, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, NL, 2002. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

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