

From Text to Image: Idealized Forms in the *Citrasutra*

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the figural description, which classifies the figures according to the text *Chitrasūtra*, a third part of Vishnudarmottarapurana, which deals with the painting and can be considered the earliest Indian subcontinent theoretical canon for the painting. Hence, the mentioned rules can still be seen in the art productions made in the Indian subcontinent. To introduce the text briefly, Hindu Sanskrit literature in the Upapuranas style includes the Vishnudharmottara Purana. (Hazra, Rajendra Chandra, 1962, P.272) Chapters 35–43 of the third Khanda are the *Chitrasūtra*, which are the subject of the book's greatest fame. This section of the book, which is frequently referenced, is from the Gupta era of Indian history. (Nardi, Isabella, 2007) One of the first comprehensive Sanskrit treatises on Indian painting is known to exist. (Mukherji, Parul Dave, ed. 2001 pp. xxii–xxxii.) Accordingly, this paper focuses on an overview of the Citrasutra in 3rd Khanda.

Over the years, a large body of commentary literature in Hinduism has been produced in response to this aphoristic book on painting. Stella Kramrisch, C Sivaramamurti, Parul Dave Mukherji, and Isabella Nardi have all or part of this treatise into English. The *Chitrasūtra*, originally composed in Sanskrit, has been translated into English and accompanied by scholarly commentary. Nevertheless, visual images produced in the Indian subcontinent have not been extensively examined in relation to this text. A critical engagement with these images alongside the canonical treatise is significant, as the text articulates the rules and principles of image-making as well as the conceptual foundations of visual representation. This research examines how *Chitrasūtra* influenced the selected visual images from India and Sri Lanka.

Research Question

How do the ideological and formal rules for image-making in the *Chitrasūtra* influence the visual representations of the pre-modern Indian subcontinent, given that this text was written to guide painters and sculptors?

Methodology

Stella Kramrisch, C Sivaramamurti, Parul Dave Mukherji, and Isabella Nardi are the translators and commentators of *Chitrasūtra* partially or completely. Through analyzing those texts, the approach towards canon is understood and selected. Since Kramrisch's translation is selective and foundational, and Isabella Nardi's work is selective and analytical, the translation by Parul Dave-Mukherji is used for this research, as it provides a complete text with critical commentary. This study examines visual images through iconographic and formal analysis. To categorize the rules of visual representation, a textual analysis of the canonical text is conducted, allowing for the application of relevant principles to appropriate visual examples. Given that visual representation in the Indian subcontinent differs significantly from Western traditions through its reliance on the idealized prescriptions of the canon, a selective corpus of artworks has been chosen for analysis in relation to these canonical guidelines.

Results

According to the *Chitrasūtra*'s canons, the forms of humans and Gods should be created in an idealized manner, following the formal descriptions and prescribed characteristics, including measurements, shape, color, and auspicious marks of the limbs and figures, as mentioned for each type. Sculptures and murals from the pre-modern Indian subcontinent were widely produced with reference to the *Chitrasūtra*, particularly in the religious arts of Hinduism and Buddhism. The aesthetic philosophy is derived from the *Chitrasūtra*; however, its influence is evident in hybrid forms. The relationship between text and image can be analyzed, yet the images often go beyond the text when the context demands adaptation or transformation.

Discussion

In the Brahmanical hierarchical system, figures such as deities, kings, nobles, and even distinctions of gender are portrayed according to their status. Beauty is not presented realistically but is shaped by this hierarchy, with each level idealized in a specific way. Physical form and aesthetic appeal are expressed through stylized representations in visual art, reflecting these ideals. This tradition's idealized depiction of beauty and the body shares similarities with Western classical representations of the human form, to some extent.

The *Chitrasūtra* delineates the features of figures in terms of their formal structure, metaphorical attributes, and idealized qualities. As a first step, these figures can be analyzed based on their prescribed measurements and classifications of human types.

Chapter 35 in the *Chitrasūtra* describes the following five categories of men: Hamsa, Bhadra, Malavya, Euchaka, and Sasaka should be understood. It has been

said in the text that they are all equal in height and width, and their sizes can all be determined. (Mukherji, Parul Dave, ed. 2001 pp. 5) Each limb's measures are also given in detail. Accordingly, an artist should infer the measurements of each type of man. Chapter 37 describes the measurement and the characteristics of women that should be created. According to the measurements of the various limbs and their components, Markandeya stated that there are five different varieties of men, just as there are five different types of women. (Mukherji, Parul Dave, ed. 2001, pp. 45) Therefore, the role of women even in the visual world has come secondary to men.

For instance, the text prescribes that each woman should be positioned close to her male counterpart, with her height proportionately reaching his shoulders when standing at his side. A woman should have a waist that is two angulas smaller than that of a man. On the other hand, the hip should be widened by the addition of four angulas. One should make the breasts attractive and in proportion to the size of the chest. (Mukherji, Parul Dave, ed. 2001 pp. 45) According to the ancient images, this measurement in which the women portraying shorter than men has been practiced, thus there are numerous sculptures and paintings demonstrating this rule. For instance, the Kalyana Sundar murti image (*Figure 1*) is narrated in the Ellora cave, in which the Parvati image is carved out a little above the shoulder of Shiv. Hence, the carving has centralized the image of Shiv, a male God, thus the woman figure comes secondary to the man. One can clearly notice the variation of both figures in terms of the measurements and characteristics.



Figure 1: Kalyana Sundar Murti (Shiv and Parvati), Ellora cave, (6th to 12th century)

Secondly, the figures are characterized using metaphorical descriptions. For example, A Hamsa is marked by serpent-like arms, moon-white skin, sweet eyes, a lovely face, a nice waist, and swan-like motions. A Bhadra has a lofty, lotus-colored head, elephant-like gait, a hairy forehead, and tapering round arms. A Malavya is dark

like the kidney bean, with a narrow waist, arms reaching the knees, broad shoulders, wide jaws, and an elephant-like big nose. A Ruchaka bears a conch-like neck, autumn-white skin, high soul, strength, and intelligence. A Sasaka is intelligent, reddish-dark, slightly variegated, with big cheeks and lovely eyes. (Kramrisch, Stella, 1928, p.38)

Thirdly, in addition to bodily attributes, monarchs are described as bearing three auspicious, delicately curved lines on the hands, resembling hare scratches. Hair is regarded as equally significant, characterized as auspicious, fine, naturally lustrous, deep blue like sapphire, and marked by an inherent undulation. Traditional classifications of hair are identified as *Kuntala* (loose), *Daksinatvarta* (rightward curled), *Taranga* (wavy), *Simhakesara* (mane-like), *Vardhara* (parted), and *Jatatasara* (matted). These typologies have been consistently represented in Indian visual culture, particularly in murals and sculptural traditions. (Mukherji, Parul Dave, ed. 2001 pp. 47) Consequently, these types of hair have been depicted in various Indian images both in murals and sculptures (*Figure 2, 3*).



Figure 2: Vardhara (parted), Ajanta, Map Academy.

Figure 3: Jatatasara or Simhakesara, Rudra Shiv, Hindu website.

According to the *Chitrāsūtra*, all sovereign rulers should be gifted with webbed hands and feet, and all monarchs should be given the mahapurusha markings. And between their eyebrows, a circle of hair should be drawn auspiciously. (Mukherji, Parul Dave, ed. 2001 pp. 45) The connecting of both eyebrows is one of the characteristics of a king or ruler, interestingly in Ajanta cave murals, the depiction of Boddhisatva Buddha has been depicted with these aspects. (*Figure 4*) The Boddhisatva stage of Buddha narrates the king's characteristics, thus the auspicious aspects of the ruler have been signified prominently. Even though the *Chitrāsūtra* is a part of Vishnu Darmottara Purana, a Hindu text, these rules might be practiced commonly by the ancient artists devoid of the religious barrier because of the prevailing art tradition. According to Stella Kramrisch, the chapters of the *Vishnudharmottara* that address painting were probably composed in the seventh century, coinciding with the final phase

of the Ajanta murals. (Kramrisch, Stella, 1928, pg.5) Although the text belongs to the Vaishnava tradition, it seems to have either influenced Buddhist murals—particularly the Ajanta murals—or been influenced by them, depending on whether it was written before or after the murals.

When gazing at the ground in meditation, the eye takes on the appearance of a bow. In this instance, women and lovers should have eyes painted in the shape of a fish's abdomen. (Mukherji, Parul Dave, ed. 2001 pp. 49) An example from the Ajanta mural, in which a Royal couple, particularly the woman's eyes are depicted in bow-eyes, the eye shape can be considered as a part of the narration to emote the *rasa* and the meaning which is intended. It might be signified by the erotic marker through these eyes. (*Figure 5*)



Figure 4: linked eyebrows, Padmapani, Ajanta mural, Wikimedia.



Figure 5: bow-eye, Royal couple, Ajanta mural, eSamskriti.

Eventually, the features of the God are also defined. Chapter 38 defines only their eyebrows and eyelashes should have hair; the rest of their bodies should be completely hairless. Heavenly residents have eyes and faces that are always smiling, and they appear to be sixteen-year-olds young. (Mukherji, Parul Dave, ed. 2001 pp. 59) Beautiful execution is also required for the linen scarves that the gods wear around their upper bodies. the color of the halo-circle should resemble the color of the deity, and it should be drawn around their heads in accordance with the size of their heads. (figure-9) All limbs and decoration of the body are provided with the specific characteristics, and these aspects are ideally structured by the concept of beauty.

Conclusion

The text, *Chitrasūtra* defines the characteristics of the figures consisting of Gods and humans, on the other hand, the fault or the images which are against the measurements lead to evil, hence, the form of evil is conceptualized. It has been clear that the shape of eyes and their position whether they opened, closed, or how much opened matter in order to emote the intended narration behind the figure according to the *Chitrasūtra*, and in a certain level, the figures are transformed from the rule of sastra as the Buddhist images. Meanwhile, the figural tradition that emerged from the Indian subcontinent shared the canonical source of *Chitrasūtra* can be identified through the artworks, and due to the multiple circumstances, the transformation of the images is held. The characteristics of the figures are not simple formal features, but the conceptual details of the figures as per the Sastra text.

Future research on the *Chitrasūtra* may be directed toward examining visual representations produced in reference to the text, with particular attention to the material, cultural, and textual contexts of muralists and sculptors. Such an approach would help to clarify and ensure the relationship between canonical prescriptions and their visual manifestations.

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