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THE ACT OF DRAWING AS CULTURAL TRANSLATION: MODERN DEPICTIONS OF AN AJANTA'S DANCER

Y es que el dibujo no es sólo un conjunto de trazos sobre un papel, sino un proceso de descubrimiento e indagación de la realidad objetiva y, al mismo tiempo, del propio desarrollarse del pensamiento y la creatividad del artista. Es el dibujo ese signo que traduce o tantea de forma inmediata la imaginación, y el dibujante es como el poeta de Shakespeare que busca para esas formas «desconocidas» «un albergue y un nombre».¹

Carmen Bernárdez Sanchís

¹ Bernárdez Sanchís, Carmen (1991-92). La línea sabia: apuntes sobre algunos momentos de la historia del dibujo. *Anales de Historia del Arte*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 3, 96. Carmen Bernárdez Sanchís, *in memoriam*.

Introduction

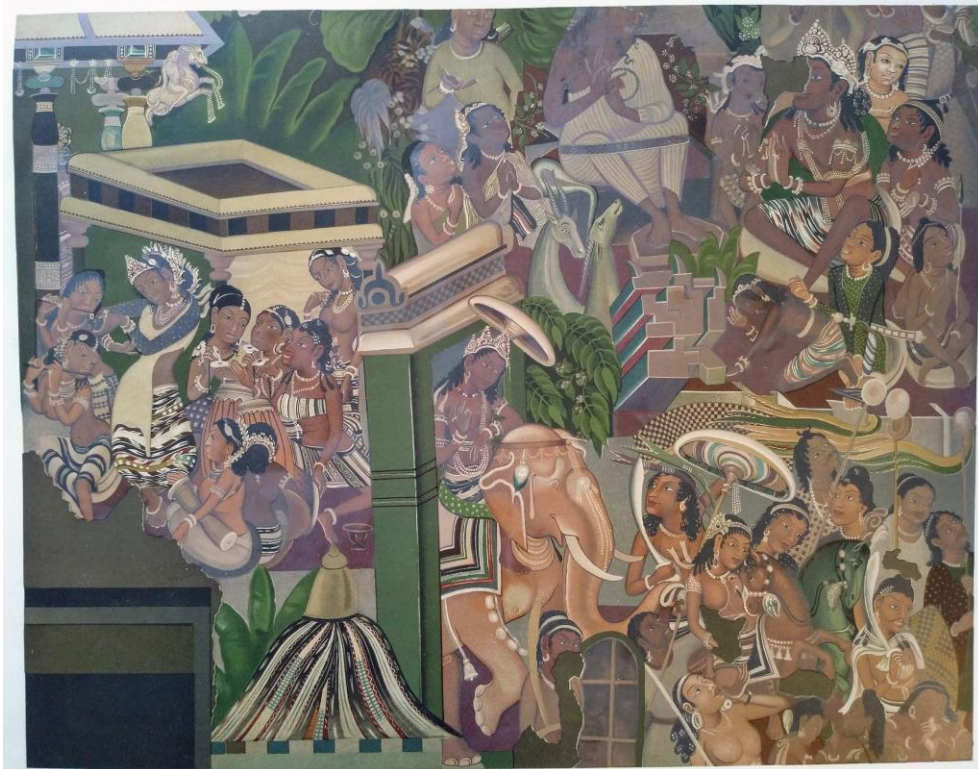


[Fig. 1.] Wall painting at Cave I, Ajanta, 100 BC – 480 AD, India.

A secluded wall painting in the first of the Buddhist caves at Ajanta (India) depicts a *jātaka* tale in which the figure of a dancer appears surrounded by musicians playing various instruments (Fig. 1). The Ajanta murals became famous, being reproduced and diffused since the caves' rediscovery by English colonizers in 1819. The first known reproduction of the dancer's scene is an oil painting (1850-1854) made by the English army officer and draughtsman Robert Gill², which was later replicated in a full color lithographic plate in John Griffiths' book *The Paintings in the Buddhist Cave-Temples of Ajanta* (1896) (Fig. 2). The dancer's figure was also portrayed by the Bengali artist Samarendranath Gupta (1887-1964) and appears today as an illustration in his book *Les*

² Robert Gill, *Copy of painting inside the caves of Ajanta (cave 1)*, oil on canvas, c. 1856, Victoria & Albert Museum.
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O115444/copy-of-painting-inside-the-oil-painting-gill-robert/> [Accessed 15 November 2016]

Mains dans les Fresques d'Ajanta (Fig. 3). Meanwhile, the German artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) discovered the dancer's motif reproduced in Griffiths' book and translated it into two different drawings (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). These examples show the processes of transfer of an image from the Buddhist wall paintings of Ajanta across different techniques and media, epochs and contexts, within the transregional network of actors that dominated cultural exchanges during the colonial era.



[Fig. 2.] Plate 6 in John Griffiths, *The paintings in the Buddhist Cave-temples of Ajanta, Khandesh, India*. Vol. 1 *Pictorial Subjects*, 1896. Chromolithographic reproduction of Robert Gill, *Copy of painting inside the caves of Ajanta (cave 1)*, oil on canvas, 1856. (Bibliothek des Museums für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Photo: Sol Izquierdo)



Fragment d'une grande composition : « une représentation devant le prince Sidharta » (qui devient le Bouddha, plus tard).

[Fig. 3.] Samarendranath Gupta, Illustration of the book *Les mains dans les fresques d'Ajanta*, 1922, page 24.



[Fig. 4.] Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Tanzende Königin Sivali und Musikerinnen*, 1911, pencil on paper, 28,1 x 23,2 cm, Brücke-Museum, Inv.Nr. 2/13 (Brücke-Museum, Photo: Roman März).



[Fig. 5.] Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Two Flutists and Dancer*, 1910, pencil and ink on paper, 26 x 33,6 cm. (Gordon, Kirchner in Dresden, Fig. 56).

Both Samarendranath Gupta and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner used drawing to embody the newly discovered dancer's image of the Buddhist wall painting. They depicted details such as the hands' positions by marking them with clear and fine contours – like in Gupta's illustration – or drawing several figures playing their instruments with rapid strokes – as in Kirchner's. As Carmen Bernárdez writes, the act of drawing implies “a

process of discovery and inquiry”³ that reflects the artist’s creativity, as well as their own personal and distinct historical contexts. Thus, these two examples drawn by Indian and German artists embody the different gazes that perceive the Buddhist murals and their pictorial translations made in Kolkata and Dresden.

This paper examines the concept of cultural translation and models how it could be used to analyze processes of transcultural interaction. It also discusses the repercussions of using cultural translation as a methodological tool. This is exemplified through the case study of the reception of the Ajanta paintings in Indian and German modern art during the early 1900s. Through an interdisciplinary and transcultural approach to the case study, traditional Western categories of the historical discourses are challenged. Accordingly, the paper deals first with the formulation of the concept of translation, starting from Walter Benjamin’s critique to its use for the study of history and culture from the postcolonial perspective of Dipesh Chakrabarty. At this point, I echo the warnings of Doris Bachmann-Medick and Mieke Bal regarding the necessity of methodologically reflecting on how to apply this concept in the humanities and particularly within intercultural encounters. After a theoretical introduction to the concept of cultural translation, I focus on the aforementioned depictions of the Ajanta’s dancer by Gupta and Kirchner and briefly analyze their processes of reception, examining concisely the configuration of the dancer’s drawings in relation to the artists’ ideals and experiences. In this analysis, the concept of cultural translation serves to illuminate a transmedial, translocal and chained processes of transcription and re-codification of images in relationship with the modern artistic contexts of Kolkata and Dresden.

³ Bernárdez Sanchís, *La línea sabia*, 96.

REVOLVING AROUND THE CONCEPT OF TRANSLATION

From Benjamin to Chakrabarty

Etymologically, the word “translation” refers to the act of moving or carrying something across from one place or situation to another. It also evokes the acts of transferring and transforming, as well as interpreting or recreating.⁴ The concept of translation has crossed disciplinary boundaries of literature and linguistic studies to the field of cultural studies, developing as an analytical tool that sheds light on how artifacts and artworks result from cultural interactions.

A pioneering essay dealing with the concept of translation is *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (1923), in which Walter Benjamin confers a new task to the translator, i.e. being responsible for the continuity of the artwork’s existence (*Fortleben*). It means that, the survival of the artwork’s essence (*Wesen*) depends on its translations, as well as the interpretation of new meanings by the future generations. In his essay, Benjamin wrote:

Ist doch die Übersetzung später als das Original und bezeichnet sie doch bei den bedeutenden Werken, die da ihre erwählten Übersetzer niemals im Zeitalter ihrer Entstehung finden, das Stadium ihres Fortlebens. In völlig unmetaphorischer Sachlichkeit ist der Gedanke vom Leben und Fortleben der Kunstwerke zu erfassen.⁵

⁴ Buden, Boris, et. al. (2009). Cultural translation: An introduction to the problem, and Responses, *Translation Studies*, 2:2, 196. Di Paola, Modesta (2018). Traducción visual. Epistemología de la traducción en las artes visuales. *Boletín de Arte*, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 18, 2.

⁵ Benjamin, Walter (1972). *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*. In: *Gesammelte Schriften Bd. I V/1*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 10-11. See an English translation: “For a translation

Therefore, translation acquires a new function, and the once traditional notion of “original as superior” is challenged by translation’s capacity to produce new meanings, as Benjamin states:

Die wahre Übersetzung ist durchscheinend, sie versteckt nicht das Original, steht ihm nicht im Licht, sondern läßt die reine Sprache, wie verstärkt durch ihr eigenes Medium, nur um so voller aufs Original fallen.⁶

Authors dealing with the concept of translation, such as Boris Buden, consider that Benjamin undermined the notion of original and, consequently, scrapped the whole binarism of traditional translation theory.⁷ From a postcolonial perspective, Homi Bhabha coined in *The Location of Culture* (1994) the concept of cultural translation in order to criticize the essentialist notion that cultural identities belonged to a unique original. Bhabha paraphrased a famous Benjamin’s quote with these words:

unlike the original where fruit and skin form a certain unity, in the act of translation the content or subject matter is made disjunct, overwhelmed and alienated by the form of signification, like a royal robe with ample folds.⁸

comes later that the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity.” Benjamin, Walter (2002). *The Task of the Translator*. In: *Selected Writings. Volume 1: 1913-1926*. (ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings), Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 254.

⁶ Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, 18. See an English translation: “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully.” Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*, 260.

⁷ Buden, *Cultural translation*, 200.

⁸ Bhabha, Homi (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 227. See also Benjamin’s quote: Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, 15.

Thus, the concept of cultural translation appeared through a radical criticism of the traditional notion of translation as articulated first by Walter Benjamin.⁹ This new deconstructionist approach, challenges the idea of the uniqueness and originality of cultural formations, conceiving identities as a cultural construction, or as Buden notes, “there are no origins at all, but only their traces, only their ‘copies’”.¹⁰

Through this perspective, Dipesh Chakrabarty, who belongs to the Subaltern Studies Group, examines the history of India using cultural translation as a guiding research concept. In his book *Provincializing Europe* (2000), Chakrabarty exposes how abstract ideas cannot be completely pure or universal, since they were formulated within a geographical and historical context, and are closely bound to pre-existent singular and local histories.¹¹

Chakrabarty asks for “models of cross-cultural and cross-categorical translations that do not take a universal middle term for granted”.¹² This translation model avoids, besides Eurocentric universalism, the relativist position (which emerged within postmodernist discourse) that uses “indigenous terms” for research, although they are seen as untranslatable and incommensurable.¹³ As Chakrabarty explains, the translation process consists of exchanges of local codes, a phenomenon that does not follow a Newtonian scientific model, according to which,

⁹ Buden, Cultural translation, 200.

¹⁰ Ibid., 198.

¹¹ Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2000). *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. New Jersey: University of Princeton Press, 19-20.

¹² Ibid., 83.

¹³ Ibid., 116. Cf. Fernández Gómez, Rosa (2012). Moving Horizons: From comparative to transcultural aesthetics. In: Fernández del Campo, Eva and Rivière Ríos, Henar (ed.). *The Ark of Babel. Artistic Theory and Practice in a Transcultural Perspective*. Madrid: Abada, 65-77.

for example, H₂O expresses better the properties of the substance water than the word “water” or “*pani*,” in Hindi.¹⁴ Translation does not lead to neutralization, limitation or elimination of differences, therefore the untranslatable remains visible.¹⁵ All this makes translation an important lens to view the complexity of the circulation of objects and ideas in which the colonial history of India was involved.

The scholar of literature and cultural studies Doris Bachmann-Medick, who has focused on the concept of translation (*Übersetzungskonzept*), also refers to the untranslatability that characterizes the process of cultural translation and underlines how it can lead to a heightened awareness of differences (*Differenzbewusstsein*). As she explains, translation draws attention to “concrete transfer processes, but also to differences, breaks and untranslatability in the global circulation of theories, concepts and categories”.¹⁶

In her book *Cultural Turns*, Bachmann-Medick explains how this new concept of cultural translation emerged from the so-called “Translational Turn” that took place when the philological conception of translation was transformed and used to the study of culture (*Kulturwissenschaften*). Cultural translation goes beyond the limits of the text and can be applied to different objects of study, in this case to drawing or painting processes. Consequently, the text-related categories of translation, such as the binary equivalence between source and secondary production, have been replaced by the new central category of cultural translation.

¹⁴ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 85.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 86. Vid. also: *Ibid.*, 17-18.

¹⁶ Bachmann-Medick, Doris (2011). Transnationale Kulturwissenschaften: Ein Übersetzungskonzept. In: Dietrich, René (ed.). *Lost or Found in Translation? Interkulturelle/Internationale Perspektiven der Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 54. (My own translation from the original in German language.)

According to Bachmann-Medick, some concepts considered by cultural translation are cultural representation, transformation, otherness/alterity, displacement, cultural difference and power.¹⁷

The “Translational Turn” implies also a re-conceptualization of “culture as translation”, being intrinsically enmeshed. Hence, culture is defined as the result of translation processes.¹⁸ Therefore, culture can no longer be understood in accordance with the Enlightenment idea as being rooted in a pre-existing unit, but rather as “an impure, blended, ‘hybrid’ stratification of meaning and experience”¹⁹, making it the product of cultural encounters. That is how cultural translation arises as a concept to study intercultural connections, while also shedding light on the differences between them. As an analytical tool, it opposes ideas of identity based on essentializing reductions or on dichotomies stemming from the European tradition, challenging thus conventional categories of Western knowledge.

Cultural Translation: A “Travelling Concept” for the Study of Culture

The conception of culture as an entanglement of processes of cultural translation has epistemological and methodological repercussions for the development of a broad field within cultural and historical studies. The issue now is in finding a path that connects the theoretical concept of cultural translation with practical research on cultural phenomena.

¹⁷ Bachmann-Medick, Doris (2016). *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 176.

¹⁸ Ibid.,182.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Doris Bachmann-Medick supports a methodological turn – indeed the Translational Turn itself – in which transcultural comparison must be drawn beyond universal references, and the interconnections within the “entangled histories” grasped beyond one-way hegemonic transfers.²⁰ Following this assertion, she underlines the idea that cultural translation should imply both “cross-cultural” and “cross-categorical” dimensions, using the same terms formulated by Chakrabarty.²¹ To conclude, Bachmann-Medick warns about the risk that the term cultural translation could become a simple metaphor instead of being used as an analytical tool for the investigation of individual translation processes.²² In this way, she proclaims the necessity of clearly delineating the processes of cultural translation and locating them within actual cases of cultural interaction, especially if power dynamics of Orientalism and colonialism are present.²³ Bachmann-Medick’s request asks thus for methodological repercussions and raises the question of how to integrate this new concept of cultural translation with an object of research.

An illuminating solution to this issue is Mieke Bal’s theory elaborated in the book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (2002), in which she defends that an interdisciplinary humanistic study must search within the “concepts” for a methodological basis. According to Bal, concepts travel, insofar as they move between disciplines and scholars, and transform throughout historical epochs and

²⁰ Ibid., 189-192.

²¹ Ibid., 192 and 197. Vid. also Bachmann-Medick, *Transnationale Kulturwissenschaften*, 61-66.

²² Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, 195.

²³ Bachmann-Medick, *Transnationale Kulturwissenschaften*, 57.

geographies,²⁴ as seen beforehand with the concept of translation from Benjamin to Chakrabarty. Concepts mutate and are flexible, so they serve to generate a methodology that is neither rigid nor paralyzing, but creative and rigorous.²⁵ To achieve that, we should avoid using concepts as simple labels or mere metaphors.²⁶ Instead, they should be “kept under scrutiny through a confrontation with, not application to, the cultural objects being examined” says Bal.²⁷ This confrontation also can transform the concepts, since they acquire new connotations in relation to the specific cultural objects analyzed, thus prompting new reflections and avoiding the dogmatism of traditional disciplines.²⁸ As she finally states, “the role of the concept is *to focus the interest*”, they shed light on the objects and, moreover, they implicate us, since they function against neutrality and disinterestedness.²⁹ Thus Mieke Bal proposes the use of concepts as epistemological tools for an interdisciplinary cultural analysis.

²⁴ Bal, Mieke (2002). *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

IN DIALOGUE WITH AJANTA

Translation in the Visual Arts: The Reception of the Ajanta Paintings

In confronting the concept of cultural translation with modern versions of the Ajanta paintings, I depart from various depictions of the dancer's image, mainly focusing on the previously mentioned drawings, finished in parallel around 1910 by the Bengali artist Samarendranath Gupta (Fig. 3) and the German artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). However, the emphasis lies on the reception and on the act of drawing as cultural translation, with special attention to the configuration and creative process of the images rather than the resulting artworks.

To recount the history of the parallel reception of the Ajanta paintings in India and Germany during the twentieth century, we must go back to the previous history of the archeological site. The Ajanta caves date to between the first century BC and the sixth century AD. They were excavated in the cliff of a curve gorge of the river Waghora in the current Indian state of Maharashtra. The caves form a Buddhist monastery and shrine complex that preserves a myriad of sculptures and one of the oldest Buddhist murals extant in India (Fig. 6).³⁰ In 1819, the caves were rediscovered by an English officer during a hunting expedition. Hence, English colonizers made the first archeological accounts and the earliest pictorial copies of the murals, which were then transmitted to India and Europe.³¹

³⁰ Vid. Fernández del Campo, Eva (2007). *Las pinturas de Ajanta. Teatro de la naturaleza en la India clásica*. Madrid: Abada, and Behl, Benoy K. (2005). *The Ajanta Caves: Ancient Paintings of Buddhist India*. London: Thames & Hudson.

³¹ Patel, Divia (2007). Copying Ajanta: A Rediscovery of Some Nineteenth-Century Paintings. *South Asian Studies* 23:1, 39-62.



[Fig. 6.] Entrance of some rock-cut caves at Ajanta, 2011, India. (Photo: Sol Izquierdo).

Almost a hundred years after its rediscovery, young Indian and German artists worked in parallel on modernist pieces inspired by Ajanta paintings. During the winters between 1909 and 1911, a group of students from the Calcutta School of Art – among them Abanindranath Tagore’s pupils, the artists Samarendranath Gupta and Nandalal Bose – visited the Ajanta caves as part of the English painter Christiana Herringham’s expedition to copy the murals.³² Around the year of 1910, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, together with his *Brücke* colleagues, completed several artworks inspired by the Ajanta paintings, of which he had seen reproductions in a publication in the library of the *Völkerkundemuseum* in Dresden.³³

³² Guha-Thakurta, Tapati (1992). *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal. 1850-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 278, and Mitter, Partha (1994). *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922. Occidental Orientations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 305.

³³ Lloyd, Jill (1991). *German Expressionism. Primitivism and Modernity*. New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 21-34, and Strzoda, Hanna (2006). *Die Ateliers Ernst*

The concept of cultural translation serves to focus on the transfer of images from the cave paintings to the modern versions with different artistic and technical languages as well as on the negotiation of their meanings in each of both cultural contexts. In this way, the reception of the Ajanta paintings in modern art arises as a paradigmatic case study for analysis through the concept of cultural translation, since it consists of a creative process embedded in a transcultural exchange. Moreover, with regard to the concept of translation, the drawings after Ajanta can be considered not as mere copies through a binary vision but a recreation, or even, following Benjamin, as a form of surviving or continuing the artwork. In turn, by confronting the concept of translation with the modern versions of Ajanta, the concept of translation acquires at once new connotations, since it is associated with the act of drawing and therefore with its power for pictorial and semantic transposition.

Translating Ajanta to Modern Art: Depictions of a Dancer

Tracing the history of the reception of the Ajanta paintings in German and Indian art is difficult because of the scant and uneven historiography. Nevertheless, there is enough evidence to reconstruct the role of the common source – the Ajanta paintings – and its connection with the two contexts – Kolkata and Dresden –, outlining thus their entangled histories.

The Dancer's Depiction by Samarendranath Gupta and the Context of Cultural Nationalism in Kolkata

Ludwig Kirchners: eine Studie zur Rezeption „primitiver“ europäischer und außereuropäischer Kulturen. Petersberg: Imhof Verlag, 98-99.

Samarendranath Gupta's depiction of the dancer from the cave I (Fig. 1) was conceived during his stay at Ajanta between 1909 and 1911, when he travelled to the caves together with other students from the Calcutta School of Art to assist Christiana Herringham in her copying project.³⁴ The final image (Fig. 3) currently appears as an illustration in his booklet *The Hands in the Ajanta Frescoes* that probably was published originally in Kolkata around 1915 and of which nowadays we only have a French edition from 1922.³⁵

This portrait of the dancer is accompanied by a text describing the positions and expressions of her arms, hands and fingers, and her posture within the whole scene. Gupta defines the posture as *tri-bhanga*, a type of flexion in zigzag, codified previously by his master Abanindranath Tagore in the text *Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy* (1913).³⁶ This essay presents the anatomical canons for Indian devotional images, based fundamentally on the Sanskrit art treatise *śilpa śāstra* together with formal references from the Ajanta paintings.³⁷ Tagore's treatise was illustrated by his pupils Nandalal Bose and K. Venkattapa (Fig. 7) with drawings from their expedition to Ajanta,³⁸ because he regarded the murals as an artistic model as he wrote:

The hands and feet have a traditional resemblance to the lotus or the young leaves of plants and nowhere has the striking

³⁴ Guha-Thakurta, *Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 278.

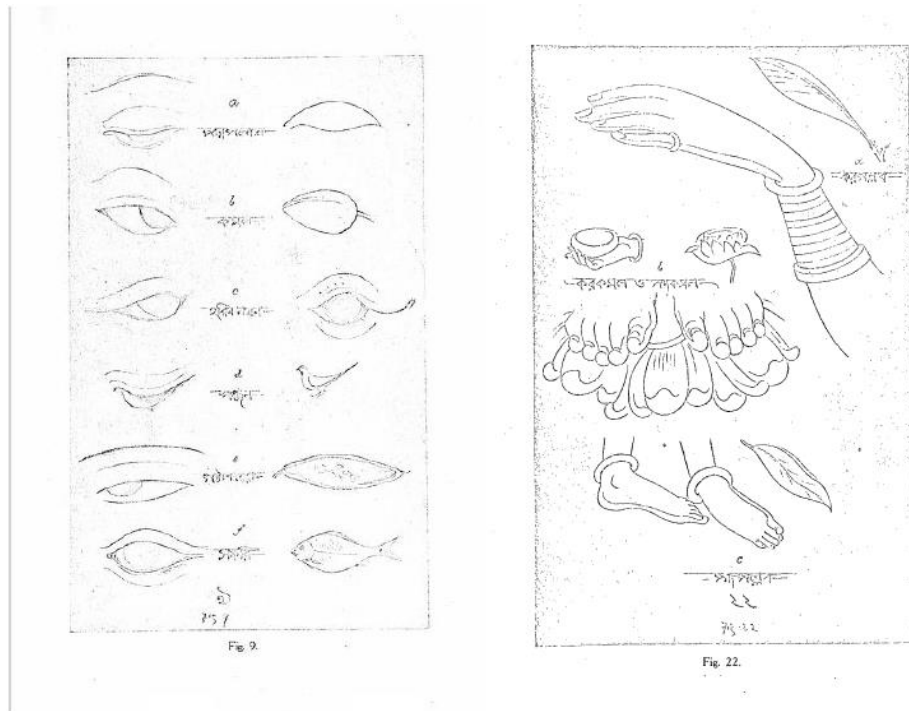
³⁵ Gupta, Samarendranath (1922). *Les mains dans les fresques d'Ajanta*. Translated by Andrée Karpelès. Paris: Éditions Bossard, 24.

³⁶ Tagore, Abanindranath (1914). *Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy*. Kolkata: Indian Society of Oriental Art, 13-15.

³⁷ Guha-Thakurta, *Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 203-204; Fenández del Campo, Eva (2013). *Cánones del Arte Indio*. Madrid: Abada, and Román Aliste, Sergio (2015). *Dimensiones artísticas de la pedagogía en Śāntiniketan. Un proyecto internacional en el medio rural bengalí (1901-1951)*. (PhD diss. Universidad Complutense de Madrid), 401-408.

³⁸ Tagore, *Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy*, i.

appropriateness of this been better demonstrated than in the cave-paintings of Ajanta.³⁹



[Fig. 7.] Nanadlal Bose und K. Venkatappa, Illustrations of *Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy* by Abanindranath Tagore, 1913-1914, Fig. 9 and Fig. 22.

In the same way, Nandalal Bose's essay on "Artistic Anatomy" gives examples of modern Indian artists' concern with Indian traditional depictions of the body as opposed to the European academic norms. Bose differentiates between Western and Eastern anatomical conceptions:

European artists get their anatomical knowledge by dissection of the body. It is by careful observation of physical form and

³⁹ Ibid., 13.

movement that artists in the Orient acquire all the knowledge that they have.⁴⁰

Indian art was therefore predominantly a “Suggestive Art”⁴¹, not realistic and absent of optical illusion, as was the norm in Western naturalist art. It was meant to be spiritual and symbolic, and to depict anatomy by hinting at poetic associations between anatomical elements and natural forms, as we can observe in the illustrations of *Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy* (Fig. 7).

Moreover, as also expressed previously in Abanidranath Tagore’s essay, Ajanta was a *topos* in Bengali literature since the beginning of the century. Already in 1907, the Bengali author O. C. Gangoly proclaimed Ajanta’s value as an “ideal” that should guide contemporary Indian art. He defended his nationalist perspective with these impassioned words:

No doubt we feel proud that the art of Ajanta is in no way inferior to that of Greece. But Ajanta is not only significant for its past, it is invaluable as a future ideal. Ajanta could help us to create superior art....⁴²

These ideas of Ajanta as a paradigm for a new Indian art developed within a panorama of cultural nationalism in Bengal, being in tune with the *Swadeshi* independence movement.⁴³ Furthermore, the Buddhist sanctuary of Ajanta was regarded as the fountainhead of Pan-Asiatic art

⁴⁰ Bose, Nandalal (1956). *Artistic Anatomy*. In: *On Art*. Madras: Kalakshetra Publications, 36. Published first in Bengali as an article in the 1940s in *Silpa-Kātha*, by Visva-Bharati publishing Department, Kolkata.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴² O. C. Gangoly, ‘Ajantā Guhāi Dui Din’, *Prabāsi*, Yr. 8, 4, 1315, 455. Quoted by Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922*, 353.

⁴³ Vid. Guha-Thakurta, *Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art*, and Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922*.

and spirituality, since Buddhism was understood as the uniting factor of a Pan-Asian identity.⁴⁴ The *Bengal School* of painting, headed by Abanindranath Tagore, followed these ideals and committed to the project of recovering the traditions and creating a newly proclaimed 'Indian style' of painting.⁴⁵

Thus, in his drawing of the dancer, Samarendranath Gupta translated a scene from the Ajanta murals in relationship with the shared aim of Indian modern artists to capture the transcendental and traditional component of these Buddhist paintings. He focused particularly on the depiction of the dancer's anatomy, by drawing her hands and her posture as they had been typified by his mentor Abanindranath Tagore. All of this was involved in the cultural nationalist aim to formulate an alternative art based on Indian tradition that challenged the Western academic norms introduced in Kolkata by the English colonial regime.

⁴⁴ In the introduction of Kakuzō Okakura's *The Ideals of the East* (1904) written by Sister Nivedita, she describes India, in accord with Okakura's elucidation, as the birthplace of the Pan-Asian civilization, since the transference of Buddhism to China and Japan had as consequence the spread of art and philosophy, which constituted the spiritual essence of the Eastern cultures. Nivedita, Introduction. In: Okakura, Kakuzō (2005). *The Ideals of the East: The Spirit of Japanese Art*. New York: Dover Publications Inc. Mineola, X. See also Guha-Thakurta, *Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 171.

⁴⁵ Guha-Thakurta, *Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 226-262.

Two Drawings of the Dancer by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and the Reception of Indian Art in Dresden



[Fig. 8.] Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Vier Tänzerinnen*, 1911, lithograph, Brücke-Museum, Karl und Emy Schmidt-Rottluff Stiftung, Inv.Nr. F 121 (Brücke-Museum, Photo: Roman März).

Kirchner's two drawings of the Ajanta dancer (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) were based on Robert Gill's oil-painting copy of the mural, which had been published in Griffiths book (Fig. 2) and which Kirchner found at the *Völkerkundemuseum* in Dresden.⁴⁶ The double drawing of the same subject denotes Kirchner's curiosity about this feminine figure and its

⁴⁶ Donald E. Gordon was the first identifying Griffiths' book as the source of Kirchner's drawings. Gordon, Donald E. (1966). Kirchner in Dresden. *The Art Bulletin*, Sep. 1, 48, 3; Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 21-34, and Strzoda, *Die Ateliers Ernst Ludwig Kirchners*, 98-99. See also Kirchner's letter: Kirchner, *Brief an Nele, ohne Datum* (1919-1920), in Kirchner, Ernst Ludwig (1961). *Briefe an Nele und Henry van de Velde*. München: Piper Verlag, 20.

sensual dancing movement. Kirchner, in contrast to Samarendranath, was attracted to the physicality and sensuality of the mural paintings. His drawings after Ajanta depict exclusively feminine figures, most of them nude and showing exaggerated sexual features, such as voluptuous hips and breasts.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, Kirchner's source of 'Indian' images and dances was not restricted to the museum's artworks. Two postcards signed by Kirchner and his friend Erich Heckel testify that the artists visited a show by an Indian dancer at the *Flora Variété* in Dresden in 1911.⁴⁸ In the same year, Kirchner completed more works depicting dance performances (Fig. 8) and Indian or 'Oriental' dancers: a lithograph titled *Indian Dancer*⁴⁹ and the oil painting *Indian Dancer in Yellow Skirt* (Fig. 9).⁵⁰ Moreover, he expressed his enthusiasm for the postures of 'Oriental' dancers and his interest in the drawing process of the movements of their hands and feet years later in a letter to Nele Van der Velde (1921):

I have seen such beautiful Javanese dancers before and understand your enthusiasm. This is the most beautiful way to

⁴⁷ Vid. Moeller, Magdalena M. (2000). *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Die Faszination des Exotischen, mit erstmals veröffentlichten Werken*. München: Ketterer Kunst, 3-45. This publication reproduces a series of drawings of Ajanta finished by Kirchner around 1910.

⁴⁸ "A postcard dated 6 May 1911 to Heckel's dancer girlfriend Sidi from 'Ernst and Erich', records 'Chinese and then an Indian dancer', in *Flora Variété* in Dresden." Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 91.

⁴⁹ Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Indian Dancer*, 1911, lithography, DL 173. Dube, Annemarie and Wolf-Dieter (1967). *E. L. Kirchner. Das Graphische Werk*. München: Prestel Verlag.

⁵⁰ Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 91-94. Regarding the topic of the reception of 'Oriental' and 'Indian' dances in the avant-garde art in France, see also: López Arnáiz, Irene (2018). *La impronta de las danzas «indias» en Francia. El encuentro de las artes plásticas y escénicas, entre el exotismo y la modernidad (1838-1939)*. (PhD diss. Universidad Complutense de Madrid).

draw hands and feet when the enthusiasm for the man helps.
That's the way it must be.⁵¹

In his works, Kirchner aimed to achieve an spontaneous, “immediate and unadulterated” (*unmittelbar und unverfälscht*)⁵² reproduction of the body and its corporeality exempt of moral restrictions and with a quest for vitality and freedom. In one of his drawings of the Ajanta's dancer (Fig. 4), Kirchner, in addition to delineating the figures' postures, wrote the name of the colors as they were visible in Griffiths' lithographs (*grün-gelb, grün...*), translating them into words and making transparent his creative process and media as in the “real” translation evoked by Benjamin.⁵³ With the following words, Kirchner expressed his aspiration to reach and replicate the forms from Ajanta within his own drawings:

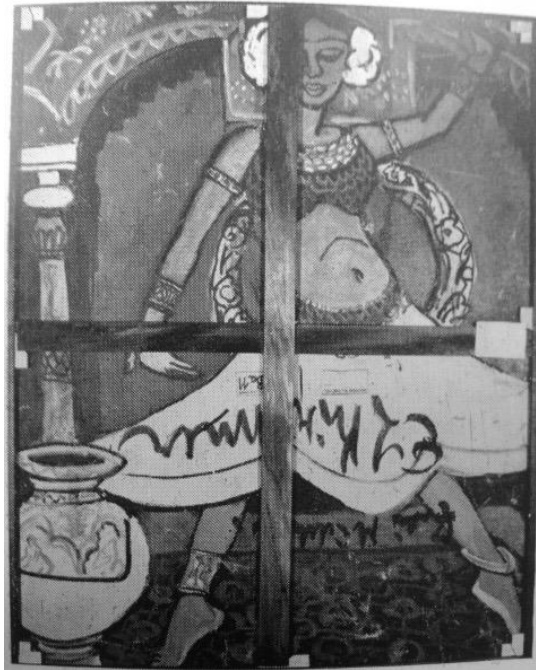
I found by chance Griffith's Indian murals in the library in Dresden. These works made me almost helpless with delight. I never thought I could achieve this extraordinary uniqueness of depiction; all my previous attempts seemed hollow and uneasy. I

⁵¹ Kirchner, *Brief an Nele*, Frauenkirche, 20. Febr. 1921, in: Kirchner, *Briefe an Nele und Henry van de Velde*, 40. Vid. original: “Ich habe früher solche sehr schöne javanische Tänzer gesehen und begreife Ihre Begeisterung. Das ist der allerschönste Weg um Hände und Füße zu zeichnen, wenn die Begeisterung für den Mann dazu hilft. So muß es sein.” The letter is also quoted by H. Strzoda: Strzoda, *Ateliers Ernst Ludwig Kirchners*, 305.

⁵² *Programm der Künstlergruppe Brücke*, 1906. In: Moeller, Magdalena M. (2007). *Dokumente der Künstlergruppe Brücke*. München: Brücke-Archiv, Hirmer Verlag, 40.

⁵³ See footnote 6 in this text.

drew a lot from those paintings to gain my own style and started to paint big pictures, 150 x 200 cm. 1905.⁵⁴



[Fig. 9.] Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Indian Dancer in Yellow Skirt*, 1911, oil on canvas, reverse. (Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 431, Fig. 189v.).

It is likely that Kirchner here refers to the big oil painting *Frauen im Bade* from 1911 (Fig. 10), whose creative process is tracked across different sketches directly taken from Griffiths' book on Ajanta and evidence his

⁵⁴ Vid. original: "Durch Zufall fand ich Griffith [sic.] Indische Wandmalereien in Dresden in der Bibliothek. Diese Werke machten mich fast hilflos von Entzücken. Diese unerhörte Einmaligkeit der Darstellung bei monumentaler Ruhe der Form glaubte ich nie erreichen zu können, alle meine Versuche kamen mir hohl und unruhig vor. Ich zeichnete vieles an den Bildern ab, um nur einen eigenen Stil zu gewinnen und fing an, große Bilder zu malen, 150 x 200 cm. 1905." Kirchner, Ernst Ludwig (1925/1926), *Die Arbeit E. L. Kirchners*. In: Kornfeld, Eberhard W. (1979) *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Nachzeichnung seines Lebens. Katalog der Sammlung von Werken von Ernst Ludwig Kirchner im Kirchner-Haus Davos*. Bern: Kornfeld, 333.

search for artistic expression departing from this model.⁵⁵ However, the water into which the five bathers sink their feet does not appear in the Indian mural. Certainly, its origin goes back to the artists' summer stay of 1911, which Kirchner, together with other members of *Die Brücke*, spent at the lakes at Moritzburg, a region near Dresden.⁵⁶ Again, Kirchner translated into painting an image from Ajanta combined with his experience bathing nude in the lakes.



[Fig. 10.] Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Frauen im Bade*, 1911, oil on canvas, 150,5 x 200 cm, Brücke-Museum, Inv.Nr. 14/68 (Brücke-Museum, Photo: Roman März)

⁵⁵ Gordon, Kirchner in Dresden, 359 and Fig. 63. The drawing *Fünf Badende Frauen* (Kirchnerarchiv, Galerie Henze & Ketterer, Bern) is a sketch of the oil painting *Frauen im Bade* (Brücke-Museum, Berlin) and is based on the plate 31 of Griffiths' book.

⁵⁶ Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 125.

In fact, Kirchner's two depictions of the dancer's figure are rehearsals, attempts to capture their bodies through drawings, as he said in the letter. In this case, Kirchner translated the forms from Ajanta combined with the experience of the dancers' performances he had seen in Dresden. Kirchner's encounter with the Ajanta paintings took place within the context of the European reception of non-Western artifacts as determined by colonial relations. The paintings were therefore regarded under the Orientalist gaze as mysterious and sensual⁵⁷, and understood in conjunction with the contemporary spectacles of exotic dances and other romanticized preconceptions about the East. In their modern translations, they served as a model to revitalize the artistic expression against old Western norms.

Drawing as Translating Ajanta and the Survival of an Artwork

The focus of this paper lies on the role played by the Ajanta paintings in the Indian and German contexts as an input, model, or source of inspiration for the formulation of a local artistic expression, tracing thus an entangled history between Western and Eastern modernisms. In both contexts, Ajanta worked as a paradigm for anti-hegemonic art that subverted the conventions of Western academy and society. The analysis through the concept of cultural translation sheds light on the different understandings of the Ajanta paintings and the disparities between the resulting artworks. Although the source of inspiration was the same – the Ajanta paintings –, the artworks produced, as well as their aesthetic and socio-political implications were vastly different.

⁵⁷ Murti, Kamakshi P (2001). *India: The Seductive and Seduced "other" of German Orientalism*. Westport: Greenwood, 16.

Various processes can be distinguished within the reception of the Ajanta paintings in the modern art in Kolkata and Dresden, namely a transfer process of images from the mural paintings in the caves to the drawings on paper made by Gupta and Kirchner. In this transfer, the image of the dancer was carried across different media. On one side, carried from a cave mural in Ajanta to oil painting copies made by the English, reproduced later in lithographs in a book and then drawn with pencil and ink by Kirchner at the museum, and, on the other, copied directly *in situ* by Gupta and later printed in a publication in various editions and translations. This process is inserted within an international network of actors and institutions that connected colonial India with the British metropolis and the rest of Europe and drove the travel of the Ajanta's images between times and geographies.

Taking into account the network of institutions involved in the reception in Germany, where the Ajanta paintings were only known throughout reproductions of the copies finished in oil paintings by the English painters Robert Gill and John Griffiths, it is relevant to consider that these copying projects were set within the formal context of the Archeological Survey of India, which, founded in 1861, had started a systematic documentation of the monuments of India in order to create a guide of the Empire's wealth.⁵⁸ This is how Griffiths' volume of lithographic plates arrived at the *Völkerkundemuseum* in Dresden, where it was found by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Therefore, his perception of the paintings was determined by the vision of other non-Western artifacts and artworks that had arrived at the museum through the colonial routes and were observed under an Orientalist gaze.

⁵⁸ Patel, Copying Ajanta, 54.

Alongside the interest to collect and exhibit colonial goods, a debate about Indian art started in England. Even though, as Partha Mitter asserts, knowledge of Indian art was still characterized by a general ignorance and “hardly any aesthetic appreciation”⁵⁹ at the end of the nineteenth century, pioneering art historians started to reflect about its qualities. They regarded Indian art beyond a traditional view that considered classical art as the paradigm of perfection against which every form of non-Western art was judged.⁶⁰ The most relevant art historians in this context were Ernest Binfield Havell and Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, who, present in Kolkata, initiated a movement against the colonial academy that used to teach Indian young artists following classic art models. They also collaborated to promote the new journey to Ajanta led by the English copyist Christiana Herringham. This new expedition of 1909-1911, in which Samarendranath Gupta and Nandalal Bose took part, provided a different vision of Ajanta to the young Bengali artists, since they were searching for the traditional roots of Indian art.⁶¹

Modern artists in Kolkata and Dresden culturally translated the dancer's image by means of the act of drawing in relation to cultural and political ideals, personal experiences and aesthetic interests. In this process of translation, the act of drawing is thus revealed as the main medium. The artists explored a new object by means of drawing it, subjecting the murals to scrutiny as an anatomic drawing.⁶² The act of drawing as a translation process emphasizes its role as a vehicle of meaning and

⁵⁹ Mitter, Partha (1977). *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 255.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁶¹ Guha-Thakurta, *Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 278, and Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922*, 304.

⁶² Bernárdez Sanchís, *La línea sabia*, 103.

therefore also its dialectical assignment. Accordingly, drawing and translating have to be understood as dialectical actions, through which the artists started a conversation with the Ajanta paintings, negotiating new forms and meanings. Thus, the tasks of the artist and of the translator are similar and related to the survival of the artwork as conceived by Walter Benjamin⁶³ in his essay and suggested also by Nandalal Bose with regard to the Ajanta paintings, stating:

Suppose that all the marvellous works of art at Ajanta and Ellora are destroyed, suppose also that only a single artist has had the luck to look at them: they would live, in essence, in the enraptured heart of that single artist and inspire him to create for them a new body and a new lease of life.⁶⁴

With this assertion, Nandalal Bose, similarly to Benjamin, affirms that the artwork's essence survives through their translations, that is, by means of creations realized by new artists' generations.

Conclusion

The act of translation, in its moving and transforming manner, becomes responsible for an artwork's continuity and regeneration according to Benjamin, who consequently breaks with the traditional and binary notion of the original. In using this new concept of translation for the study of history and culture – as Chakrabarty did, the Western Enlightenment's notion of culture as rooted in a pre-existing unique origin is subverted by an idea of culture as a product of the entanglement of translation processes. Thereby, cultural translation arises as a concept

⁶³ Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, 10-11.

⁶⁴ Bose, *Art as Sādhana*, in *On Art*. Madras: Kalakshetra Publications, 10.

to analyze cultural interactions. As an epistemological tool, it must go beyond its simple application as a mere metaphor or as a label. As Doris Bachmann-Medick and Mieke Bal propose, cultural translation must be confronted and be verifiable within localizable phenomena instead.

Under this theoretical framework, the reception of the Ajanta paintings in the modern art centers of Kolkata and Dresden reveals a paradigmatic case, since it consists of a transcultural process in which transfers between local centers take place under the context of unequal colonial power relations. In this way, the concept of cultural translation sheds light to this translocal exchange and focuses on how the images from Ajanta were transferred by means of diverse actors and media, perceived through different politically determined perspectives, re-imagined and translated into drawings in relation to each artists' proper local cultural experiences.

By means of the technique of drawing, the images from Ajanta were culturally translated in combination with the artists' particular ideas. In India, the Ajanta paintings were understood as an artistic model and became part of the nationalist project to recover Indian traditions, which meant rejecting the naturalism imposed by the colonial academy. Gupta's dancer was depicted thus following his master's anatomical treatise, aiming to configure a canonical image of a new 'Indian' style of painting. Meanwhile in Germany, non-Western art that had arrived through colonial routes, served as a source of inspiration for the expressionist artists that sought to revitalize the art and to subvert bourgeois Western norms. Therefore, Kirchner tried to express spontaneity and authenticity both through his energetic lines and the dancer's figure. In both cases, the figures from Ajanta functioned as model for an anti-hegemonic

modern art that subverted Western cultural impositions in both local centers.

By drawing, the artists started a conversation with the pictorial source of Ajanta, which transformed the act of drawing as well as translating into dialectical acts. In this manner, not only does the concept of translation serve as an analytical tool to interpret processes of transfer but it also opens a hermeneutic horizon by confronting this concept with the case of Ajanta.

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