

THE INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL
Of **THE ARTS** In Society

Volume 6, Issue 6

Depicting Artist and Viewer: Performed Aesthetics in Kālidāsa's "Śakuntalā"

Ellwood H. Wiggins, Jr., Centre College, KY, USA

Abstract: The influential Sanskrit aesthetic works of Abhinavagupta present an elaborate and compelling system of artistic interpretation. His treatises appeared several centuries after Kālidāsa, the classical Sanskrit playwright, wrote his AbhijnanaŚakuntalām, to which they often turn for supporting examples of their theories. Discussions of Sanskrit Drama regularly use the terms and categories of the great aesthetician in analyzing plays of the earlier periods, including Śakuntalā. The play itself, however, is remarkably replete with instances of ekphrasis and musical performance that have an impact within the social world on stage. Visual art and songs appear at pivotal moments in the drama, and play significant roles in shaping both the plot and character development. The leading motivation for this paper is the thought that, instead of imposing the terms and categories of later thinkers on Kālidāsa, one could well deduce elements of Kālidāsa's own poetology and aesthetic principles by examining his treatment of art in this play. The text's language and dramatic situations provide rich fodder for discussions on various aspects of aesthetic investigation. This paper teases out the drama's textual and performative stances, which are not always in agreement with one another, on debates that animate both Kālidāsa's work and more contemporary speculation about art. The essay is an exploration of the aesthetic principles implicit in the actions of art in society depicted in Kālidāsa's drama.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Sanskrit Drama, Social Functions of Art, Word and Image

QUITE RIGHTLY, THE reception of Kālidāsa's plays among Western scholars over the past century (and among Indian scholars for the past millennium) has been mediated by the Sanskrit aesthetic tradition that began with the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (c. 200 BCE-200 CE) and culminated in Abhinavagupta's great commentaries of the eleventh century. These texts precisely describe both the technical tools of trade a poet employs to elicit certain responses and the psychological effects these responses entail. Poetry consists in the power of suggestion (*dhvani*), which in turn produces in its audience an experience of relishing or taste (*rasa*) that is not emotional but transcendental (*alaukika*).¹ Although Abhinavagupta entitled his most famous treatise on poetics *Locana* ("The Eye"), his intricate system of aesthetic philosophy largely ignores the *visual arts*. As we shall see, however, Kālidāsa—the playwright whom Abhinava cites most often—constantly sets paintings and ekphrastic passages into the very foundational structures of his works. While the theoretician of Sanskrit poetics discounts the visual arts in favor of literature, the Sanskrit poet relies heavily on depictions of art to achieve poetic effects. Hence, instead of viewing the play

¹ For a thorough introduction to Indian aesthetic theory, see the excellent translation and commentary in *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, trans. Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). Both Ānanda and Abhinava are drawing on the much older *Nāṭyaśāstra*, an ancient manual on dramaturgy, which first introduced the idea of *rasa* as the purpose of the dramatic arts.

through the finely honed lens of the great Indian aestheticians,² this essay attempts to deduce a theory of artistic action from Kālidāsa's play itself. It focuses on a central scene in his *Śakuntalā* in which an artwork is brought on stage to interact with its artist before an audience of other characters. The resulting observations contend first that, in contrast to teachings of Indian poetics, the visual arts play a fundamental role in any aesthetic effect. Second, they do so by directly contradicting the prescriptive rules handed down in contemporary Indian manuals on the visual arts. Though the scope of the reflections might thus seem to be limited to relatively arcane issues of Classical Indian aesthetics, they lead directly to suggestive speculations about the possible source of the paradox posed by the theorist's antipathy to the visual templates on which the practitioner clearly depends. The question of the linguistic or visual primacy of the *image* is a central problem of current aesthetic debates,³ and it turns out that Kālidāsa's play offers cogent ground for reflection on precisely this point.

Usually when scholars introduce Kālidāsa's work to a Western audience of non-Indologists, they lead off with Goethe's enthusiastic verses on *Śakuntalā* or William Jones' oft-repeated praise of Kālidāsa as the 'Shakespeare of India.' We will let these barest intimations suffice, however, as a testimony to the dramatist's enduring legacy. His most famous play, *Abhijñāna Śakuntalām* ("The Recognition of Śakuntalā"), is a lyric production of song and verse in Sanskrit and Dramatic Prakrits, whose performance involves music and dance. It reinvents a story from the *Mahābhārata*⁴ in which a powerful king happens upon a beautiful maiden in a bucolic hermitage, seduces her, and then refuses to acknowledge her as his wife when she shows up at his court several years later with their son in tow. In the epic poem, Śakuntalā gives the royal dead-beat dad a tongue-lashing full of righteous recrimination until he finally repents and embraces them into his family. Kālidāsa's play, however, adds significant complexities to this plot, with the result that the king is no longer nominally at fault for 'forgetting' his young bride, who is whisked off to heaven to await a touching reunion with her repentant husband only after he has proved himself worthy of her love.⁵

Among other differences between the epic and the drama, the play constantly weaves reflections—both implicit and explicit—on the relation between art and nature into its words and actions. While these passages underscore the central importance of artifice, the dialogue consistently reminds us of how the best art is more natural than artificial. The King Duḥṣanta already hints at this conclusion when he gushes about "Śakuntalā, that exquisite ornament of the hermitage," to his friend Madhavya.

² For insightful readings in this vein, see most notably Edwin Gerow and Barbara Stowe Miller in their respective essays in *Theater of Memory: The Plays of Kālidāsa*, ed. Barbara Stowe Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 3–41; 42–63.

³ To name only one recent contribution to this ongoing discussion, see Boris Groys, "The Border between Word and Image," in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28/2 (March 2011): 94–108.

⁴ The *Mahābhārata* is a long, discursive Sanskrit epic poem composed between 400 B.C. and 400 A.D. If Kālidāsa is India's Shakespeare, then the *Mahābhārata* is its *Iliad*. The Śakuntalā episode can be found in Book I (7) 62–69. See Buitenen's authoritative English edition: *The Mahābhārata: I. The Book of the Beginning*, trans. and ed. J.A.B. van Buitenen (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973) 155–171.

⁵ For a recent assessment of Kālidāsa's reshaping of the epic story, see Kamal S. Srivastava, *The Work of Kalidasa and its Depiction in Indian Art* (Varanasi: Sangeeta Prakashan, 2005) 71–95. Though promisingly titled, the book offers surprisingly little critical exploration of the relationship between Kālidāsa and the visual arts.

Contemplating Brahma's imaging power ineffable
 and her beauty, she flashes on my eye,
 a jewel among women
 of another order of Creation, extraordinary;
 as if the mighty Creator gathering
 rarest elements of beauty,
 pictured perfection first,
 then quickened it with the Breath of life.

(II.10)⁶

These verses epitomize various strands of Indian thinking about art and nature. The ultimate artist is the Creator himself, who takes up elements of nature, casts them into an image already formed in his mind, and then animates them with *prāna* (breath). This model of artistic creation has, of course, interesting implications for mortals who would like to imitate it. The prospective artist, working after the pattern set by Brahma, gathers a collection of natural elements, like a maid picking wildflowers, and arranges them according to some preformed mental picture⁷ into a constellation more pleasing and meaningful to herself and others.

It would be easy to imagine that Hindu religious teachers might discourage such an enterprise. All the orthodox Indian schools of philosophy agree in proclaiming our true selves to be observers of the theatre of nature (*prakṛti*), even if they are at odds as to what level of reality should be granted the primordial nature. We would do well to sit back and enjoy (or eschew, depending on the denominational bent of the teacher) the projected sport that makes up the world around us. Why complicate matters and become unnecessarily involved in the alien, illusory, or non-essential (as the Sāṅkhya, Advaita or Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta schools, respectively, would have it) show by creating projections and artworks of our own? And yet this kind of involvement is exactly what Śakuntalā's guardian, Kanva—a wise sage and ascetic, well-versed in all of the orthodox Hindu schools—advocates to the handmaidens. He demands that they use art to adorn Śakuntalā's physical loveliness with the natural objects of beauty he has procured for them. As they puzzle over how to go about such a project, Anasūyā wonders, “Śakuntalā, my friend, how can we adorn you? We are not used to handling such fine ornaments.” Then, upon reflection, she comes up with an idea: “Drawing from our knowledge of paintings, we shall place these jewels on you as they should be” (IV.7). This advice, along with the King's strophe, may well give us a hint as to how Kanva would answer his more austere Yogin and Vedāntan critics. Though an artist takes his raw materials from nature, he does not turn first to *prakṛti* for ideas of composition. Anasūyā draws from her *knowledge of paintings*: there is some aesthetic principle of arrangement not to be found in the primordial matter (*pradhāna*), whether it be senseless (as the Sāṅkhyans would have it) or illusory (as the Vedāntins maintain). This principle is modeled for us by

⁶ Kālidāsa, *The Loom of Time: A Selection of his Plays and Poems*, trans. Chandra Rajan (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1989). All citations from *Śakuntalā* will be from this translation, unless otherwise noted, and will be marked parenthetically in the text by act and stanza.

⁷ Brahma here ‘*pictured* perfection first’ before ‘quickening it with the breath of life.’ This phrasing already introduces the unacknowledged primacy of the *visual* in all aesthetic practice, since breath (*prāna*) is intimately tied up with language in Indian thinking. As we shall see, however, this order of things will be complicated by the action of artistic production in the play.

Brahma, who “pictured perfection first” before he fashioned the natural elements into Śakuntalā’s lovely physical form. The artist with his craft is *intelligent*; he shapes words, colors, or sounds into a relation alive with the power and purpose of *prāna*. The “knowledge of painting” to which Anasūyā resorts is the element of Brahman, the aspect of spirit (*puruṣa*), which makes her distinct from (or in the language of the Vedāntins: more meaningfully unified with) the *prakṛti* around her. Before we jump too quickly towards the end and meaning of art, though, let us tease out a bit further how Kālidāsa’s play shows us what this “knowledge of painting” may entail. Let us explore more concretely the technique of the artist before touching upon her effects.

Technique: Artist as Arranger

The obvious place to look for any kind of principles of painting is the episode in Act VI in which the King has his portrait of Śakuntalā brought to him in his pleasure garden. This scene of ekphrasis is unique in that it not only paints us a detailed description of an artwork in verse while providing insight into the reaction of various characters to it, but it also includes an evaluation by the artist himself about the progress of his work and his plans for continuing it. While the arts play a pivotal role in the plots of Kālidāsa’s other plays, this is the only scene in his corpus where we are treated to so explicit a view of the artist or his work. In *Mālavikāgnimitra*, though the King’s love for the queen’s maid Mālavikā is inspired by seeing a painted depiction of her—a portrait thus setting in motion all the various machinations of the entire play—the audience is never allowed to see either the picture or the king’s reaction to it. Instead we hear of the episode second-hand as one maid reports it to another (in a kind of messenger’s report from the frontlines of aesthetic agency). In *Vikramorvaśīya*, too, the central plot-determining scene in which Urvaśi flubs a line in a play put on for the gods, thus earning her the fateful curse from the play’s director (none other than Bharata, the legendary creator of drama himself), is described rather than enacted. In what would seem to be a most inviting opportunity for the ultimate meta-theatrical ‘play within a play,’ Kālisāsa prefers, like the Greeks with violence, to keep artistic production and consumption offstage.

In his third and final play, however, Kālidāsa flaunts this self-imposed convention as the audience observes an artwork and its creator interact. The conceit of a Painter-king may well have been not all too far-fetched. The *Kamasutra* specifies that every educated ‘man-about-town’ should have in his house “A lute, hanging from an ivory tusk; a board to draw or paint on, and a box of pencils.”⁸ Stella Kramrisch elaborates:

When Indian painting reached its moment of perfection ... in the middle of the first millennium of this era,⁹ it was expected that a cultured citizen would practice painting and keep at hand, ready for use, an assortment of brushes and paints. Moments of creativity and aesthetic delight were to be anticipated and experienced. A connoisseur contemplating a painting could lose himself in it; he could transcend his personal con-

⁸ Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra*, trans. Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 17.

⁹ [I.e., the probable time period of Kālidāsa, whose dates scholars narrow down anywhere from the second through the sixth century CE, but who is conjectured by many to have enjoyed the favor of the great Gupta patron of the arts, Chandragupta II, who ruled from 376–415.—E.W.]

cerns and experience a delight—if for moments only—not of this world (*alaulika*) but akin in its intensity to the yogic state of *samādhi* (self-transcendancy).¹⁰

Before we judge how accurate this passage is in describing Duṣṣanta’s reaction to his artwork, however, let us observe more closely the features and techniques he calls to our attention. Only after gaining some idea of the “knowledge of painting” to which Anasūyā alludes can we begin to conjecture as to what end this science might serve.

When the painting is brought to him, the King admires his own handiwork. “Just look,” he says,

A pair of long expansive eyes, graceful curves of tendril-like eyebrows
the lower lip bathed in the radiance of smiles bright as moonbeams
the luscious upper glowing rose-hued with the sheen of jujube-berries.
(VI.15)

Whereas Duṣṣanta’s compliments to her beauty in person had concentrated on her likeness to the natural surroundings of the forest, he introduces a new element in his appraisal of Śakuntalā’s painted image. Spatial concerns and the importance of light dominate this discussion (space: long, expansive eyes, graceful curves; light: bathed in radiance, bright as moonbeams, glowing rose-hued sheen). Madhavya is able to guess which of the three women in the painting represents Śakuntalā because of similar elements of linearity and lighting (she is the one around whom ask leaves *glisten*; whose figure is defined by *arms drooping* in a peculiar manner; with *long braids* of hair that also *hang loose*—VI.17). Light and line reveal the central subject of the painting to the viewer. A concern with spatial balance is further evidenced in the King’s project for continuing the painting. He plans to add three major elements to the landscape: the bordering *line* of a stream; a *circling* framework of foothills; and, presumably more in the foreground, a tree shading a doe rubbing her left eye against the horn of an antelope (VI.19). All of this attention to the spatial elements (line, encircling frame, etc), light, and shade point to the role of artist as arranger. Meaning is conveyed not in the mere mirroring of nature, but in its deliberate arrangement into a relational composition. The artist must not just depict objects worthy of viewers’ attention, but she must also guide the trajectory of their gaze along careful paths that heighten their awareness of the objects’ posited significance. Kālidāsa the poet uses a very similar technique as Duṣṣanta the painter. Each act sets up parallel sequences of action and development that become meaningful as they force us to consider scenes and episodes from different Acts in conjunction with one another.¹¹ The poet, too, is principally an arranger.

The King, however, still has a few tricks of trade to teach us from his painting before we begin generalizing into other art forms. The details of landscape he plans to add, for instance, are not merely significant for the compositional work they do. The feminine stream flowing through the foothills of the lusty Himalaya; the pairs of geese cavorting on its banks; the doe gently fondling the strong antelope: all these images are emblematic of happy love. They make the drooping figure of poor, spurned Śakuntalā all the more pitiful in contrast to the

¹⁰ Stella Kramrisch, *Painted Delight: Indian Paintings from Philadelphia Collections* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986) xi.

¹¹ We will examine a prime example of this technique shortly, when the image of the bee in the painting points to other appearances of the same insect throughout the drama.

sensual success of the world around her. Nature acts according to law and propriety; only the artifice of man is liable to corruption, and in this case the artist himself feels keenly the guilt of his sin. The King mentions the clothes of bark hanging out to dry on the branches of the tree as another detail he plans to include. These represent the chaste, unfettered life of the hermitage that Duḥṣanta forced Śakuntalā to forsake. The fact that the garb of austerity is made of the skin of trees, and that it hangs in branches shading the love-play of deer emphasizes the unity of religious life with nature. All these elements of the painting are illustrative of art's symbolic power. In addition to its functions to reflect and arrange nature, art can make its literal subjects meaningfully represent ideas, people and other objects.

The final detail the King shares about his painting brings us back to the notion of art as decoration, but of course now we have a much richer sense of what true adornment entails than when we began with art as mere frills. “And there is something else I have forgotten I had planned to put in—Śakuntalā's ornaments”:

The Śīrīṣi blossom nestling at her ear,
its filaments hanging down her cheek; lying snug
between her breasts, a necklace of lotus-fibre
soft as autumnal moonbeams.

(VI.20)

Here we are struck by the fact that Duḥṣanta relies on simple flowers rather than any gem-laid golden jewelry to bedeck his beauty. Nature again is adorning nature—even where both adornment and adorned are representations—and the active agency of the artist is only that of arrangement. This office, though, is carefully discharged by the Painter-king, as the lines of the flower's filaments, hanging elegantly down from Śakuntalā's ear, fashion a frame along with the encircling fibers of the lotus necklace to draw the viewer's attention to her face, which the stanza from VI.15 indicates to be the central feature of the work. We have already learned that aśoka leaves glisten around her figure, and Duḥṣanta adds to this light from above by presenting her with a necklace shining “soft as autumnal moonbeams.” Thus Śakuntalā's face is subtly surrounded by both the elegant tendrils of flowering plants and the gentle illumination of reflected light. Through framing and through pointing, the compositional tools of line and light serve to direct the viewers' attention to the parts of the artwork meant to affect them most.

The planned additions also add other levels of meaning to the portrait. The audience will remember the song sung by the actress in the prologue to the play. At the behest of the director she was to sing in praise of summer, and the lyrics of her song extol the same Śīrīṣi flower that adorns Śakuntalā's ear:

Exquisite are Śīrṣi blossoms—
 see how they sway—
 crested with delicate filaments—
 kissed, lightly, lightly
 by murmurous bees—
 lovely women—
 exulting in their youth—
 place the blossoms
 tenderly—
 as ornaments over their ears—
 (Prologue, 4)

We cannot help but hear the strains of this song again as the King tells of the Śīrṣi blossom “nestling at Śakuntalā’s ear.” Kālidāsa must have hung the mention of this flower on his heroine at this point in his ekphrastic narrative as tenderly and significantly as Duṣanta would have placed the lotus between the breasts of his beloved. Immediately upon hearing of the ornaments with which the King plans to adorn Śakuntalā, Madhavya notices “that bastard, the honey-looter, that rogue of a bee, coveting the lotus of her face” (VI.20). This remark inaugurates the at once comic and pitiable scene where Duṣanta fails to distinguish between art and reality as he tries to fend off the insect from his spurned wife. The bee is also present in the Actress’s song to the summer, where it amorously kisses the Śīrṣi flower. So the King at one level seems to be chasing away Śakuntalā’s lover: seems to want to protect her from himself. This murmuring bee has made significant appearances at several auspicious moments throughout the play, however, and Kālidāsa’s carefully wrought arrangement forces us to juxtapose all of them along with their various roles of agency. We can hardly forget that it was the serendipitous arrival of a bee in Act I that occasioned the King’s heroic introduction to Śakuntalā in the first place. In this episode Duṣanta is at first jealous of the bee,

hovering close to her ear
 as if eager to whisper a secret,
 sneaking in to taste her ripe lower lip
 —the quintessence of love’s delight—
 (I.23)

Meanwhile Śakuntalā flails about, pleading for someone to save her “from this villain who keeps harassing me.” The King now in Act VI seems at another level to be intent on changing the past: he wants to replay the sweet scenes of their courtship and insure that they turn out happily. He rants desperately at the imagined insect:

If you dare to bite my love’s lower lip, like a bimba fruit,
 and alluring as fresh sprouts of a young tree—that lip
 I drank so tenderly celebrating love’s raptures,
 I’ll have you shut up, O bee, in the heart of a lotus.
 (VI.22)

Now at yet a third level, the bee must remind us of the song we heard towards the beginning of Act V, in which one of Duḥṣanta's once-favored wives rebukes him for his fickleness. She does so with the sweet conceit of a bee ever roaming to a fresh flower as it grows tired of making love to the one that presently catches its fancy.

O you honey-pilfering bee!
 greedy as ever for fresh honey,
 once you lovingly kissed
 the mango's fresh spray of flowers—
 is she then forgotten so soon?
 You are content now merely to stay
 within the full-blown lotus.

(V.8)

In light of this song, the king flapping wildly at the imagined insect might even be seen as trying to banish its fickle nature from his character. It is thus, at least, that the immortal voyeur, Mishrakeshi, interprets the portrait scene as she views it along with the audience.

The foremost task of both poets and painters, then, is to arrange the elements of their works (whether in word or in color) into patterns that capture and guide the attention of viewers. It may seem that the tasks would diverge greatly for the two diverse media of word and image. And indeed the compositional nature of a painter's use of line and light appears fundamentally different from the sequencing aspect of a poet's arrangements (anticipating Lessing's division of the art forms into painting, whose domain is space, and poetry, which depicts actions in time). On the surface, Duḥṣanta's manipulation of light and shade is hard to square with the skillful symmetry of parallel and disjunctive events in the concentric ripples of Kālidāsa's acts.¹² But the painter's reliance on symbolic valence in a visual dialogue and the poet's option of juxtaposing images in varied contexts begins to break down the sharp distinctions between the two skills.

Effect: Viewer as Transcendent

The artist, then, is an arranger of adornment, which works not decoratively but deictically. One could go on at great length about the various manifestations of the bee in the play and show the many intricate ways in which even this single instance of Kālidāsa's juxtaposition of scenes and tropes sets them in intelligent dialogue with one another. We should leave off our admiration for the artist's technical skill in fulfilling his role as arranger, however, and move on to examine what effect his final product might have on us. Toward what, exactly, do the art forms presented in the play point us? We can observe several instances of art's action in the *Śakuntalā* and look to where they guide our attention. Besides the ekphrastic moment of the painting we have been viewing through Kālidāsa's words for quite some time now, three songs in the play are equally revealing in the reactions they elicit from characters.

We have already listened to the actress's song from the prologue in light of some of its reverberations in the larger body of the play. Let us now turn back to see what sort of response

¹² For excellent analyses of the structural parallelisms in *Śakuntalā*, see W.J. Johnson, *The Recognition of Śakuntalā* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) x-xiv; and Edwin Gerow, "Plot Structure and the Development of *Rasa* in the *Śakuntalā*," in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 99/4 (1979): 559–72; 100/3 (1980): 267–82.

it engendered in its hearers. “Beautifully sung, dear lady,” calls the director as the last notes of her voice die out, “Aha—just look around you; the audience is still, as if drawn in a picture—spellbound, caught in the web of beauty woven by your singing.” Good art draws viewers into itself; it casts out nets that haul listeners on board. This spell of enchantment crosses the artificial boundaries of artistic genres: the *music* of the actress transforms her audience into a *picture*. Just as ekphrasis in poetry allows us to hear the shapes and beauty of the visual arts, so too can paintings and sculptures tell stories. The plastic and lyrical powers of music are equally well established. In a theatrical production like the one at hand, all of the divisions of art work together to transport audiences even more firmly into the settings, moods, and characters paraded before them.

After praising her song, the director asks the actress what play they should put on tonight. She has to remind him that he has already announced to everyone the production of *Abhijnanaśakuntalam*. He readily admits his mistake: “Indeed, my memory failed me for an instant; because,

I was carried far, far away, lured
by your impassioned song, compelling
even as the King Duḥṣanta here,
was, by the fleet, fleeing antelope.

(Prologue, 5)

This model of the double effects of art on its audience, first to draw them into its reflected world, and then to play tricks on their memories of the actual world, will play itself out again in the other instances of art appreciated on stage during the drama. Barbara Stoler Miller emphasizes this aspect of art’s efficacy when she writes about “Kālisāsa’s Aesthetic of Memory:”

The actress’ singing, like the beautiful movements of the magical antelope, or the art of poetry, makes the audience ‘forget’ the everyday world (*laukika*) and enter the fantastic (*alaukika*) realm of imagination that is latent within them. The entire play is a reenactment of this idea. The mind of the poet, the hero, and the audience is symbolized here by the director, who holds together the various strands of the theater so that the *rasa* of the play can be realized and savoured.¹³

This description of the effect of the actress’s song could apply equally to the power displayed by the painting on the king, where both wistful and guilty moments from Duḥṣanta’s past coalesced in the image of the bee, which led him to ‘enter the fantastic realm of the imagination.’ Most of Miller’s persuasive argument about the transformative function of memory in Sanskrit poetry, in fact, could easily be used to describe the efficacy of painting on its viewer/creator.¹⁴

¹³ Miller, *Theater of Memory*, 38–39.

¹⁴ In an elegant and persuasive essay, Robert Goodwin has explored the role of art in general in *Śakuntalā*. He comes to similar conclusions about the play’s complex and ambiguous depiction of art’s efficacy, but he does not follow up on the specific nature of visual art and its relation to music, dance, and poetry. Robert E. Goodwin, “Aesthetic and Erotic Entrancement in the *Śakuntalā*,” in *The Playworld of Sanskrit Drama* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998) 25–65.

We have also already caught a glimpse of the third instance of performative art consciously demonstrated at work in the drama. Towards the beginning of Act 5, Queen Hamsavati sings her extended metaphor about the fickle bee from offstage. The King, who has shushed everyone at court in order better to hear the strains of her singing, immediately recognizes the symbolism of her lyric. His first response at this intellectual level is to smile. He instructs Madhavya to “go to Queen Hamsavati and tell her that I have taken to heart the reproof she has conveyed so subtly.” Once his bachelor pal has departed with the message, however, the song continues to work on him at a deeper and less easily verbalized level. “That song I just heard... a restless, yearning sadness steals into my heart” (V.8). Though the King is able to figure out the clever conceit in all of its literal and symbolic valences (in fact in all the aspects of authorial intent), he is at a loss to explain the feelings it (surely unintentionally) stirs up in his heart.

When a sadness ineffable falls
suddenly like a shadow over the heart
—even while one is wrapped in happiness—
the mind trills spontaneous, unknown to itself,
to an intimation from the past
quickenened by some fleeting loveliness
or, haunting sounds of exquisite music heard:
lasting impressions of love’s remembrance
live on in us from former lives, perhaps,
clinging like fragrance to our migrant soul.

(V.9)

We have seen art absorb its spectators so completely in the prologue that they forget what they are up to, but here it succeeds instead in reminding the King on some unconscious level of something very important that he has forgotten. The “fleeting loveliness” of a poem or song can set in motion feelings that lead one to realizations that pure inference and the operation of the unaided reason could never have reached. This is the function that the Advaita Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara, for instance, ascribes to the poetry of the Vedas. They remind us of our truest Self, obscured by the world of *māyā*.

The songs and lyrics in the play thus manage to point attentive listeners toward an experience of transcendence that, rather than distancing them from the world of illusion altogether, make them more attuned to the signatures of Brahma surrounding them—in this case duty (*dharma*) and love (*kāma*). It remains to examine the action of the visual arts now as well. Kramrish, after corroborating the *Kamasutra*’s evidence that cultured, well-to-do men should be conversant with the visual arts and literature, goes on to describe how they were meant to make use of their artistic knowledge:

Moments of creativity and aesthetic delight were to be anticipated and experienced. A connoisseur contemplating a painting could lose himself in it; he could transcend his personal concerns and experience a delight—if for moments only—not of this world (*alaukika*) but akin in its intensity to the yogic state of *samādhi* (self-transcendence).¹⁵

¹⁵ Kramrish, xi.

This description reflects the theory of the *bhakti* movement in Indian art, and perfectly captures Duṣanta's engagement with his own painting. The experience of transcendence aimed at by Indian artists from the third and fourth centuries BCE on, however, was exclusively dedicated to religious motifs. "According to bhakti doctrine, devotees enter into a personal relationship with a chosen deity who is imagined visually."¹⁶ The theory attributes great power to the image of a god:

from the *Sukranīṣāra* (one of the mediaeval Indian treatises on art): "By no other means [than *bhakti* for a deity], not even by the direct or immediate vision of an actual object, is it possible to be so absorbed in contemplation as by this meditation in the making of images."¹⁷

But all of the contemporary treatises on art (the various *śilpa-śāstras*) agree that *only* a god or semi-divine hero should ever be depicted. Heinrich Zimmer enumerates the only four things that could become valid subjects of an artwork: a quality; an event or action; a class, kind or species; and an individual. But then he hastens to add the caveat:

However, according to the Hindu view, an "individual" is never of the human realm: no king, brāhman, man, or woman is looked upon as an individual or as susceptible of being represented as such. The term refers to the various individual manifestations of the gods; ... "An "individual" is a god bearing the characteristic weapons and ornaments of one or another of his manifestations, never a man or woman."¹⁸

In choosing the human individual Śakuntalā as the subject of his painting, Duṣanta is breaking with one of the most fundamental precepts of Indian art.

Zimmer's account also elaborates on the methods of the Indian painters by quoting from another of the art manuals:

from the *Mānasa Śilpaśāstra*: "[The artist] *must work, moreover, in solitude or with another artist present; never before a layman.*" There is to be, in other words, no *bohème*—no exhibitionism of the creative process. The attitude of the artist fashioning images is to be the same as that of the devotee (*bhakta*) invoking and contemplating the forms of the same gods in daily worship.¹⁹

The artwork, furthermore, "was never to be employed as a vehicle for self-expression."²⁰ Duṣanta explicitly violates tradition in his method as well as in his subject matter. In choosing to share the unfinished painting and his thoughts on the continuing creative process with his layman friend Madhavya (not to mention with the entire audience of the play), the King breaks yet another rule. But though he brashly flouts all the venerable precepts of artistic theory by depicting an individual, making an exhibition of the creative process, and most

¹⁶ George Michell, *Hindi Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000) 15.

¹⁷ Cited in: Heinrich Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia*, completed and ed. by Joseph Campbell, Vol I: Text (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) 321.

¹⁸ Zimmer, 324. And indeed, in all of the examples of Indian paintings that have survived from the third century A.D. to the 19th, I have so far been unable to locate a single instance of portraiture of a historical personage.

¹⁹ Zimmer, 320, emphasis mine.

²⁰ Zimmer, 321.

pointedly by making his artwork a ‘vehicle of self-expression,’ Duḥṣanta nevertheless (or perhaps for this precise reason) manages to achieve the *alaukika* experience described by Kramrisch. Let us take another look at what happens to the King before his painting.

When we explored some of the technical aspects of art revealed in the garden scene of Act VI above, we already began to touch upon the King’s reaction to his portrait as we followed him into his rage at the painted bee. Duḥṣanta’s pitiable descent into the scene he himself has put on canvas is, of course, an extreme case of art’s tendency to entrap viewers in its “web of beauty,” as modeled for us in the Prologue. Instead of being transported “far, far away,” however, the King is carried deep, deep within himself. He experiences the painting’s power over him on the several levels enumerated above. He tries simultaneously to protect Śakuntalā from the evil of his repudiation, to relive the happy days of their fresh love while averting mistakes of the past, and to change the aspects of his character that might have led to his sin. The results of these imaginary excursions, however, need not all be illusory. Duḥṣanta’s apparent madness as he slips into the world of his creation proves to be more mentally healing than insane. Shortly after he returns from his artistic trip, he is confronted with the case of the man who dies (nearly) childless, and the compassion inspired by this encounter with a fellow creature of the real world in conjunction with the soul-searching catharsis of his confrontation with art lead directly to his swooning. Both are equally necessary to make him worthy of the visit from Indra’s charioteer, which follows directly thereupon and which eventually leads to his reunion with Śakuntalā.²¹

The function of art as developed in the play thus appears to carry great weight. Far from being confined to the aesthetics of decorative frills, both the visual arts and poetry play a central role in the psychological health and in the ethical education of the drama’s characters. If we recall again the parallels the King himself delineated between Brahma as creator and *puruṣa* as artist, we may even be drawn to regard the study of aesthetics as one of the most important enterprises in which humans can engage. Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, then, is one of the rare cases where a work of art encourages us to give more serious study to aesthetic theory, like that of Abhinavagupta, rather than the other way around. Enjoying the taste of Kālidāsa’s drama whets our appetite to explore the techniques and ramifications of *rasa*.

This invitation to theory is made all the more urgent by the actual physical conditions of the play’s staging before an audience in Classical India. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is very specific in its descriptions of performance strategies, and we therefore are very fortunate to know with great detail about the modes of acting, dancing, and presentation in Sanskrit theatre. Important in our context is the extreme *lack* of scenery and other visual aids in productions of Sanskrit drama.²² The stage of Classical India was largely bare, much like that of Early Modern England—but *unlike* the Elizabethan theatre, it did not rely chiefly on the power of words

²¹ Were Duḥṣanta’s breaks with artistic doctrine necessary for him to undergo this transformative experience? Would he have found the same *alaukika* redemption had he painted—instead of his individual, personal love Śakuntalā—for instance, the famous heroine Radha separated from her lover Kṛṣṇa, a motif repeatedly used to convey ‘love in separation’? Was the semi-divine Madhavya’s presence during the creative process necessary to the workings of its effect (instead of just being a dramatic device to make the King’s experience visible to an audience)? I suspect that the answer to these questions lies in the juxtaposition of the artistic experience (the *sahrdaya* of the King with *his individual self as artist*) with the scene of compassion (*sahrdaya* of the King with the unknown other).

²² See N. P. Unni, ed., *Nāṭyaśāstra: Text with Introduction, English Translation, and Indices* (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1998), esp. Chapter XXIII “Costumes and Make-Up,” Vol 3, 627–636.

to transport audiences into the intended setting. In addition to language, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* gives explicit instructions on the many elaborate dance-like movements that should accompany the various activities represented in a play. There are specific gestures and foot-sequences for everything from chariot-riding to falling in love—even for flying through the sky.²³ Many objects for which we would simply see stage props today were represented by this code of mime and dance.²⁴ Under these conditions, it is impossible to know whether, when the king calls for his painting in the garden, a physical board would have been brought on-stage—much less whether any supposed canvas would actually have been painted to show the picture Duḥṣanta describes. It is entirely possible that the artwork that provides the king with his transformative, redemptive experience was non-existent on stage except as a construct of an actor’s movements and words. The location of the portrait in a blind-spot of our otherwise remarkably exact knowledge of the play’s staging is emblematic of the relation between language and visuality in the drama’s aesthetics. We can no longer parade visualization as the basis for discursive poetry, nor, vice-versa, proclaim the word in its symbolism to underlie the representative function of art. It is unclear, to speak with Duḥṣanta’s formula from Act II, to know whether Brahma’s *picture* of form is primary or the animating *breath* of language. Instead, it is the frame of an *image* (as distinct from a picture) that functions as the organizing principle in our approach to both art and poetry.²⁵

This point is nicely illustrated by a note that Tarlekar brings up as an aside in his study of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. He mentions a sculpture from a temple at Nalanda which shows a man beneath a banana tree who holds “something like a board” in his left hand and “something like a pen or a brush” in his right. Tarlekar repeats twice that the panel “is suggested to be depicting a scene from Śāk. Act VI.” He then goes on to disprove the suggestion by recalling the plot detail from the play that prevented the paintbrush from being delivered to the king in the garden.²⁶ Tarlekar assumes that the word is necessarily prior to the picture, hence his difficulty in reading a sculpture that does not follow the details of the drama to the letter as a depiction of the scene at all. In fact, we cannot know what the artist intended with the “stick-like thing” in the man’s hand: a sculptor’s remembered image of the scene could easily have contained a paintbrush despite the textual evidence to the contrary.²⁷ The indeterminacy of the source of this sculpture, like our ignorance about the presence of the physical painting on Kālidāsa’s stage, is an apt way of showing how language is not (simply) the structural basis for art, nor the visual (simply) the root of all poetry. Instead, as the king implies of Brahma’s natural artistry, the image is an organizing principle that presupposes both the *form* provided by sight and the *life* provided by language.

²³ For a good description of these movements, see David Gitomer, “The Theater in Kālidāsa’s Art,” in Miller, *Theater of Memory*, 63–84. “By this convention the stage becomes a totally fluid space in which divisions are established by dialogue and movement. [...] The author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* understands that setting is entirely a thing of the imagination.” (74).

²⁴ When watering the plants in the first Act, for example, Śakuntalā would not have carried an actual watering-can.

²⁵ For an instructive exposition on these issues in the context of Western art and literature, see Rüdiger Campe, “Lovers’ Daydreams: The Moment of the Image in Lessing’s Laokoon,” in *Intermedien. Zur kulturellen und artistischen Übertragung*, ed. Alexandra Klein hues, Barbara Naumann, and Edgar Pankow (Zürich: Chronos, 2010) 149–166.

²⁶ G. H. Tarlekar, *Studies in the Nāṭyaśāstra: With Special Reference to the Sanskrit Drama in Performance* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975) 286.

²⁷ It is unlikely that a temple artist would have checked his imagination against a manuscript of the play!

About the Author

Dr. Ellwood H. Wiggins, Jr.

Dr. Ellwood H. Wiggins, Jr. is a Visiting Assistant Professor of German and Humanities at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. He wrote a dissertation on dramatic recognition from Homer to Heiner Müller at Yale University. His work focuses on practices and theories of performance as well as the reception of antiquity, Shakespeare, and Asian thought. In addition to his doctorate in German from Yale, he holds an MA in Eastern Classics from St. John's College in Santa Fe, NM.

**THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
THE ARTS IN SOCIETY**

VOLUME 6, ISSUE 6, 2012



**C O M M O N
G R O U N D**

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE ARTS IN SOCIETY
<http://www.arts-journal.com>

First published in 2012 in Champaign, Illinois, USA
by Common Ground Publishing LLC
www.CommonGroundPublishing.com

ISSN: 1833-1866

© 2012 (individual papers), the author(s)
© 2012 (selection and editorial matter) Common Ground

All rights reserved. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the applicable copyright legislation, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher. For permissions and other inquiries, please contact [<cg-support@commongroundpublishing.com>](mailto:cg-support@commongroundpublishing.com).

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE ARTS IN SOCIETY is peer-reviewed, supported by rigorous processes of criterion-referenced article ranking and qualitative commentary, ensuring that only intellectual work of the greatest substance and highest significance is published.

Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGPublisher multichannel typesetting system
<http://www.commongroundpublishing.com/software/>