

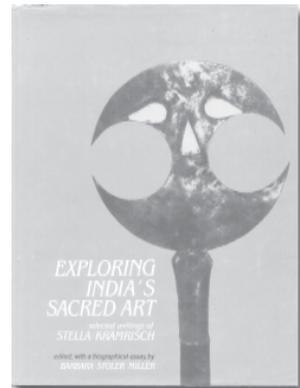
EXPLORING INDIA'S SACRED ART: SELECTED WRITINGS OF STELLA KRAMRISCH

Edited with a biographical essay by Barbara Stoler Miller, New Delhi:
Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, and Delhi: Motilal
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It is rather fitting that a biographical essay crown the selected writings of art historian Stella Kramrisch, whose scholarly and curatorial career in the field of Indian art spanned over half a century. Edited by her student and close associate Barbara Stoler Miller, the collection comprises select essays written between 1919-68 and includes a complete bibliography of her work upto 1981. Miller's detailed biography begins with Kramrisch's fascinating expedition into the world of Hindu and Buddhist art, a journey which was to last a lifetime. We are taken through the various transformatory points in Stella Kramrisch's life and share her personal experience of Indian art and religion, both through textual and field studies, that together shaped her perception and indeed, the content of her academic writing. The fact that the scholar's work is set against the backdrop of a highly intense life-experience makes this publication a special volume. It not only provides the intellectual and psychological climate in the author's life at every significant point of scholarly reference but also allows for a better understanding of the underlying forms and hues.

Stella Kramrisch wrote at a time when the world had gradually begun to look at works of art from India as something more than monstrous objects of heathen idolatry. Her work, as that of her contemporaries Swami Vivekananda, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy and E. B. Havell, attempted to release Indian art from imperialistic biases on the one hand and western aestheticism on the other. The present volume is therefore important in that it brings together Kramrisch's diverse articles, each influential in its own right and time, and now considered foundational for the study of Indian art and culture. The exclusion of her work on *vastupuruṣamaṇḍala*, a complete explanation of which appears in Kramrisch's major book in two vols. *The Hindu Temple* (1946) is perhaps



intentional on the part of the editor. Barbara Stoler Miller's editorial selection and classification disregards chronological concerns: She divides the book into five parts: Patron and Practice, Unknown India, The Subtle Body, Image and Temple, and Theory and Practice of Painting. According to Miller, these themes were outlined by Stella Kramrisch herself and put together thus, sum up her methodology and views on Indian art. Each section tells us how the scholars' viewed art, not with the universal principles of aesthetics as yardstick but on the basis of local, regional, and civilizational contexts as embodied in myth, religion, philosophy and social structure. This is a crucial departure from conventional art history that looks at periodisation and style as primary features of art signification and representation.

Patron and Practice provides the social context for art in the essays like 'Artist, Patron, and Public in India' (1956) and 'Traditions of the Indian Craftsman' (1958). The latter piece is well-known to students of anthropology as it first appeared in the Milton Singer's edited volume, *Traditional India: Structure and Change* (1959). In this essay, Kramrisch not only extends the notion of art in India (*śilpa*) to include craft, but also ritual and the act of creation itself. It is here that Kramrisch speaks of the Indian craftsman as a professional engaged in the disciplined practice of his medium within a community of shared tradition.

The second section 'Unknown India' titled after Kramrisch's exhibition on folk art of the same name, begins with the important article on 'Indian Terracottas' (1939) where she classifies art as 'ageless' and 'timed-variations', is a significant advance in art history thus enabling one to go beyond a strictly chronological, linear approach. The second essay in this section surveys ritual and everyday art of village and tribal India—textiles, narrative paintings, ritual floor and wall diagrams, votive animals, masks and toys—in a style remarkable for the meticulous research that continues to be the model for crafts documentation in India today. Having herself been influenced by B. Malinowski's field research techniques and study of other cultures, Stella Kramrisch was among the first few scholars to recognize the absence of anthropological studies on arts and crafts. She notes in a footnote in the article 'Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village' (1968): 'Outside the work of Verrier Elwin, Ruth Reeves, and W. G. Archer, no local studies have been made. Anthropological publications have given no further attention to tribal and rural art but that of bare reference to its existence and hardly any illustration' (fn. 44:320).

The theme of the third section is 'The Subtle Body' which includes her celebrated essay, 'Image of Mahadeva in the Cave-Temple on Elephanta Island' (1946)

and others on Buddhist sculpture which provide us an insight into her view that classical Indian art represented the complex process of transmutation of a subtle, noncorporeal body into a material body of stone. These essays discuss the philosophic notions of the macrocosm and microcosm, the latent and the manifest, physical and the metaphysical in the context of Kramrisch's explanations of fundamental concepts like *prāṇa*, *urūa*, *uṣṇīṣa* and *bindu* in Indian art. According to her biographer, Kramrisch's near psycho-spiritual experience at Elephanta in the presence of Śiva and an equally personal experience of an *śaiva* initiation under the guidance of a Tantric guru 'deepened her awareness of the relationship between multiple images and cosmic unity' (p.26). It is perhaps this first hand experience of the perception and performance of ritual that led Stella Kramrisch to privilege the moment of creation—what she called 'Divine Principle'—where attributing symbolic meaning and identity to an art object.

Sections four and five deal with the visual and symbolic aspects of religious sculpture and painting in India. Kramrisch's descriptions of *Gupta*, *Pala* and *Sena* and *Candella* sculpture are rich in costume detail even as that draw attention to regional variations as well as the emergence of newer styles within a school over a period of time. The essays shed light on her notion of non-linear time as applied to the study of Indian sculptural art. The idea of a 'preconceived order' in temple images and architecture (images on temple walls in Kramrisch's view are 'not so much meant to be seen as known to be there'), the inseparability of the religious image from the performance of the ritual act, of form from its creation and the temple as the home and the body of God, are central to Stella Kramrisch's vision and explanation of Hindu temple art. The final section consists of two essays on painting. The first deals with an account of the *Viṣṇudharmottara*, a text describing the various branches, methods and ideals of Indian painting. The second is on the theory and practice of painting as applied to the case of Ajanta paintings. Together these last two pieces in the volume are basic lessons on art appreciation for the student of Indian painting in general, and of the Ajanta frescoes in particular. This publication is a comprehensive volume that has brought together the basic concepts of Stella Kramrisch's vision of Indian art and framed it against the backdrop of a life history characterised by passionate intermingling of spirit and form.

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