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**Compte-rendu de: VINCENT LEFÈVRE, Portraiture
in Early India, Between Transience and Eternity**

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► **To cite this version:**

Claudine Bautze-Picron. Compte-rendu de: VINCENT LEFÈVRE, Portraiture in Early India, Between Transience and Eternity. *Journal of Hindu Studies*, 2013, 6 (1), pp.82-97. 10.1093/jhs/hit01 . hal-00878638

HAL Id: hal-00878638

<https://hal.science/hal-00878638>

Submitted on 30 Oct 2013

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VINCENT LEFÈVRE, *Portraiture in Early India, Between Transience and Eternity*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011 (Handbook of Oriental Studies, Section 2, South Asia, ISSN 0169-9377, 25) ISBN 978-90-04-20735-6, xxii-219 pp., 58 figures black & white, bibliography, index, € 99, \$ 135.

As recalled by V. LEFÈVRE (p. xi), his interest in portraiture developed from an initial study on art sponsorship in South India which led to a survey of portraiture in literary, epigraphic, and artistic sources. The publication under review emerged from this survey but it is neither a comprehensive history of portraiture in South Asia nor a systematically presented handbook on the topic. It constitutes, rather, an attempt to answer various basic questions which had arisen in the course of the author's initial and subsequent researches. As a result, the book may strike the reader more as a collection of essays dealing with questions which were sparked off by various aspects concerning the very existence and nature of portrayal in South Asia before the flourishing of portraiture at the courts of the Muslim and Rajput rulers (pp. 21-22).

The initial interest of the author in the portraiture of sponsors and rulers in South India also gives rise to detailed analysis in various parts of the book (mainly chapters 2 and 5), but one of the major contributions offered by this publication is the comprehensive survey of Sanskrit literary and epigraphic sources dealing with portraits, recording their existence and use, or referring to the making of a 'human' image. In these chapters, LEFÈVRE has some interesting observations to make on the classification of portrayals (as being royal, allegorical, or commemorative, for instance), the definition of a portrait, or portraiture as illustrated in the art of South India, which is a topic that has already received great attention on the part of scholars like PADMA KAIMAL or CRISPIN BRANFOOT in the last few years – but it should be noted that his contribution on various other aspects of the subject does not show the same soundness.

As mentioned above, although this is a volume in the 'Handbook of Oriental Studies' it does not cover systematically all the artistic evidence on the topic in South Asia (even when limited to the time span the author chose to study). It is indeed regrettable that whole sections of portrayals of donors or devotees are simply not dealt with or only superficially evoked; suffice it to recall the striking presence of such images, often depicted in large groups, in the Buddhist caves of Ajanta, Ghatotkacha or Aurangabad in the 5th and 6th centuries, for instance. The portrayal of monks and lay people in Gandhara is ignored. The images of donors at the bottom of (mainly Buddhist) images in Eastern India are only given a rapid glance (pp. 36-37), while the tradition of having portraits of monks painted on cloth, which would blossom in the Himalaya, is altogether ignored although of Indian origin.

Devotees are depicted in the lower part of Buddhist sculpted slabs in Pagan, but is it they who sponsored the production of the images as mentioned by the author (p. 37) in relation to images from the Nagayon (and as a matter of fact his remark might also apply to the sculptures in the Ananda and the Kubyauk-nge)? Or do they belong to the scene which is depicted and which refers to an event in the life of the Buddha or of one of the Buddhas of the past? Or are 'historical' characters pertaining to the Buddha story and 'historical' characters belonging to the period when the image was created simultaneously represented side by side or even superimposed on each other? This ambiguity of image is a well-known feature of Indian culture which goes through

literature and art (pp. 41-46), and which, as noted by V. LEFÈVRE, would find its way into different countries of Southeast Asia.

The author devotes extensive discussion to the numerous tall ‘yakṣa’ images which are generally dated to the last centuries B.C., giving more space to the two tall male images found in Patna and now preserved in the Indian Museum, but here again – as in a number of other examples – he does not take into consideration the fact that F. ASHER and W. SPINK ascribed these two images to a much later date, placing them in the Kuṣāṇa period (FREDERICK ASHER and WALTER SPINK, *Mauya Figural Sculpture Reconsidered*, *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 19, 1989, pp. 1-25, particularly pp. 3-4), a date also suggested by them for the Didarganj chowry-bearer (ibidem, pp. 2-3). It is actually rather surprising not to encounter this famous female chowrie-bearer in the corpus of sculptures studied by LEFÈVRE (although he mentions SPOONER’s paper of 1919 on the topic in the bibliography, but nowhere in the text). Also the author fails to deal with the iconography of these images: any attributes they may show are either ignored or mentioned en passant (chowry, money-purse, child, etc), leaving room for doubt about some of his assumptions (see GRITLI VON MITTERWALLNER, *Yakṣas of Ancient Mathurā*, *Mathurā, The Cultural Heritage*, ed. Doris Meth Srinivasan, New Delhi: Manohar, 1989, pp. 368-382).

We may regret the vagueness of some references without precise reference to pages or even titles: for instance p. 90 (mentioning CHARLES MALAMOUD’s writings without referring to an earlier citation p. 75 note 36); p. 91 (quoting the *Raghuvamśa*); p. 126 note 19; or p. 137 note 53. And though the bibliography fills twenty pages, many titles quoted therein do not appear in the text or the footnotes – for instance, publications by F.R. ASHER, R.D. BANERJI, A. BAREAU, A.K. COOMARASWAMY, S.L. HUNTINGTON, or the present reviewer. Altogether, the outcome of this survey is unfortunately not always precise or even correct (for instance, p. 126 note 20: the information related to the discovery of the two large images made in Patna by FRANCIS BUCHANAN in 1812 is to be read in K.P. JAYASWAL’s paper of 1919, p. 88 and not, as noted by LEFÈVRE, in CUNNINGHAM’s report of 1882).

Vagueness often characterizes comments made by the author; for instance, referring to the Kaniṣka image from Mathura p. 32, he considers the dress worn by the ruler as ‘unlikely’, being merely an ‘imitation... of an artifact related to the Iranian tradition’. This might be true (clearly the ruler does not wear a South Asian costume), but as demonstrated by G. VERARDI in an earlier paper, the artist did not blindly copy a foreign model, but imbued it with values anchored in the Indian understanding of kingship – which is manifested through the ornamentation of the club held by the king (The Kuṣāṇa Emperors as *Cakravartins*, *Dynastic Art and Cults in India and central Asia: History of a Theory, Clarifications, and Refutations*, With a note by ALESSANDRO GROSSATO, *East and West*, vol. 33, 1983, pp. 225-294, specially p. 259). Similarly, and probably because the author chose to deal with highly diversified documentation, he had to rely on second-hand sources without verifying them for comments relating to material which is not always central to but, rather, marginal to his argumentation. We read for instance on p. 5 about the “‘defiance’ against portraiture” which would be a characteristic of the Victorian age; let us simply mention that Queen Victoria herself ‘enthusiastically collected portraits of her friends and kept albums of them’ or that a set of CDVs (cartes de visite) of the royal family was printed sixty thousand times in 1860 to be sold not only in Great Britain but also in the colonies and the USA (WILLIAM C. DARRAH, *Cartes de Visite in Nineteenth Century Photography*, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: W.C. Darrah,

Publisher, 1981, p. 6). To return to India, the date given for the couples flanking the entrances to the *caityagr̥ha* at Karle, i.e. the 1st c. B.C. (fig. 31) is far from evident: the surface of the volumes and the lines of the movements of the bodies can in fact be compared to late 1st or even 2nd century A.D. sculptures from Mathura or Andhra Pradesh (for instance see WALTER SPINK, “On the Development of Early Buddhist Art in India”, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 40/2, 1958, pp. 95-104, in particular p. 96). The identification of these couples as ‘donors’ (p. 81) is made without any sound evidence – a criticism which the author himself tends to make (p. 4) of the same earlier ‘assumption [made] without elaborating any further’ by JAMES BURGESS.

Some remarks on the illustrations: Maldah, where the Garuḍa reproduced in fig. 8 was discovered, is not located in Bangladesh but in the State of West Bengal (India). Figs 45 & 46 illustrate two male torsos found in Mora and both dated ‘second-third century’ in their respective legends. However, on pp. 144-145 where he discusses them, the author – as already done by earlier scholars – relates them to the ‘famous Mora Well inscription’ dated from ‘the first third of the first century A.D.’ The panel reproduced in fig. 47 was found at Vemavaram; it depicts Mandhāta, the Bodhisattva, ruler *cakravartin* in *jātaka* 258 and not simply a “king ... labelled ‘Cakravartin’” (p. 157).

One may go on discussing endlessly the nature of portrayal in South Asia before the arrival of Islam and the subsequent artistic development in the Islamic and Rajput courts, but it is evident that the very first images carved in stone or produced in wood or terracotta have a human appearance. Does this warrant ‘identifying’ them as portraits, i.e. as images of characters that actually lived? While studying the literary sources, the author mentions that ‘likeness’ is a possibility but no prerequisite for recognizing an image as a portrait; but what is a ‘real likeness’ (p. 53)? We will never know what such-and-such historical character looked like; the elements by which the characters might find themselves reflected in the image or recognized by their contemporaries are items which mark their social position, e.g. the crown or turban (both having specific forms which vary from period to period or from court to court), the jewellery, the weapons, etc. as also observed by the author, pp. 80-82. Indian aesthetic values differ deeply from those which characterize Western art, and physical likeness (as we understand it in the West) was never a preference of Indian artists – whoever is depicted. This probably facilitated shifting between different levels of apprehending the image as an image of god or human being; from the Western point of view, one might consider the physical body to be ‘idealized’; again, however, there is no idealisation of the body, but a different perception of how a human body should be illustrated. To summarize, one must be grateful to V. LEFÈVRE for having devoted a publication to the topic of portraiture ‘in early India’. It opens new, at times provocative, perspectives and raises many questions. As a matter of fact, much work remains to be done; discussion should be undertaken focusing on the different settings where representation of a human being is inserted. Systematic survey of all the ‘historical’ characters depicted should be undertaken (Aśoka is prominent by his absence here, although he was already depicted in reliefs at the great *stūpa* of Sanchi). More care should also be taken over the chronology of the images and one may wonder whether a more precise relationship can be drawn between the forms taken by the portrayal of human characters, but also possibly extending to the representation of animals.