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Ervin Baktay, the art historian

Claudine Bautze-Picron

A personal relationship with India

Baktay's relationship with India had deep emotional roots. When he was still attending secondary school, Baktay fell under the spell of Indian culture while reading Kālidāsa's *Śākuntala*, which he later explained as a "kind of 'déjà-vu' experience, coming ... from a previous birth".¹ Following this deep-rooted impulse he taught himself by reading and translating Indian literature.² He travelled widely in India from 1926 to 1929, followed in the tracks of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös and spent some days in Kashmir with Sir Aurel Stein in 1927.³ Through this journey Baktay not only gained first-hand knowledge of the art of the Subcontinent, but also immersed himself in the culture of the country – which partly explains his very sensitive appreciation of this art, due also to his own artistic inclination.

Through the marriage of his sister with Umrao Singh Sher-Gil Majithia, his relationship to India had become even closer. Amrita Sher-Gil, who was born in 1913 from this union, spent the first years of her life in Budapest before accompanying her parents to India in 1921. During his Indian sojourn, Baktay, himself trained as a painter, noted his niece's skill and encouraged her; heeding his advice her parents would eventually take her for a long stay in Paris where she was to learn painting⁴ before becoming the painter known to all of us.

The Art of India ("Die Kunst Indiens")

Baktay's publications written in Hungarian remain practically unknown to the Western world. However, he wrote papers bearing on art history in English, and the German translation of his *opus magnum* initially published in Hungarian in 1958 was issued in 1963 and reviewed over the following years in various journals. All the attention paid to or interest taken in this publication remained, unfortunately, limited to these reviews or brief references.

Considering the political situation of the time, and the harsh censorship coming down on any publication produced on the other side of the Wall, one may wonder at the freedom of mind which Ervin Baktay succeeded in preserving in his art historical publications. His approach was distant from the expected Marxist angle on (art) history; in fact his intention was to offer a presentation and interpretation of Indian art,⁵ and his reflections can be compared to the response to Indian art shown by contemporary authors like Stella Kramrisch (born in 1896)⁶ or Heinrich Zimmer (born in 1890) while, and with a similar freedom of mind, papers and books written by German scholars Heinz Mode and Herbert and Ingeborg Plaeschke, all three from Halle, or Regina Hickmann in Berlin, reflect a more strict historical approach to the material and a precise study of the artistic forms.

From a letter dated May 2nd 1961 which he addressed to the publishers of the German version of his book,⁷ it is evident that Baktay had come in for harsh criticisms from them in relation to

¹ Bethlenfalvy 1990, p. 4; see also Bethlenfalvy 1980, pp. 32-35 & 5.

² Ibidem, pp. 7-14.

³ Ibidem, pp. 25-29.

⁴ Amrita Sher-Gil 2006, pp. 155-156.

⁵ 'Meine Absicht ist die Darlegung und Interpretierung der Kunst Indiens' (1963, p. 9).

⁶ Stoler Miller 1983, p. 4 mentions only that she was born "at the end of the nineteenth century"; the real date is given in the Dictionary of Art Historians (<http://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/kramrischs.htm>), retrieved August 22nd 2012.

⁷ I am thankful to Béla Kerényi for making this letter available to me.

some aspects of his perception of Indian culture (see below). He makes it very clear, however, that his writings are based on a forty-year in-depth study of Indian culture and a long sojourn in India where he enjoyed close contact with scholars. Through his first-hand experience of India and the knowledge he accumulated, he was at the same time able offer insightful comments and an overall view of the artistic development. As he mentioned in his letter, this profound experience differentiates his work from that of scholars who are content to collect data or list pieces of information, forgetting to relate these data or information in a wider historical frame and forgetting that these data were not nature- but man-made.

As a matter of fact, his book is not dedicated exclusively to the study of artistic forms but considers art in a much wider cultural and historical context. His personal experience of the country is, moreover, reflected deeply in his writings, the author having had a profound sense of empathy for Indian culture.⁸ Unlike H. Zimmer, who made three unsuccessful attempts to tour to the subcontinent,⁹ Baktay seems to have been blessed in his Indian experience, his arrival there being marked by an encounter entailing and odd synchronicity which Zimmer or Jung would not have disavowed, being welcomed – so he must have felt – by a sadhu who twice his path crossed on the very first days following his arrival in Mumbai.¹⁰

Baktay considered that Indians had a profound perception of the limitless human nature relating to earth and heaven, i.e. to the entire universe, and concluded that this intimate relationship deeply influenced their art. His understanding of what he called ‘Gestirnsymbolik’ or ‘symbolism of celestial bodies’ was far more comprehensive than what is commonly taken to be ‘astrology’, as he explained at length in his letter to the German publisher of his book.¹¹ He clearly explained how the Hindu pantheon and mythology are deeply rooted in astrological concepts and in the innermost connection which Indians had with their natural environment.¹² Baktay was conversant with the writings of Stella Kramrisch and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and his holistic approach to the understanding and perception of Indian culture – whose artistic production evolved not rising above but remaining deeply rooted in the world of nature – found profound echo in the essays of Coomaraswamy.

Baktay did not, however, deny the importance of historical events which he summarized throughout his book as forming a frame to the artistic development. But he also knew that he had to be extremely cautious, knowing what low esteem ‘astrology’ in the general sense of the word enjoyed in Communist society – one of his works dealing with the topic having come in for strict censorship, being only republished after 1989.¹³ Nevertheless, and although he was careful not to bring in explicitly words like “Astrologie” or “Sterndeutung”, identifying astrology as a major factor forming the backbone to the Indian perception of life drew harsh criticisms from the German editors, including Heinz Kucharski (1919-2000),¹⁴ who seems to have ‘cleaned’ the translation of such interpretations.¹⁵

⁸ Bethlenfalvy, pp. 15-29.

⁹ Maya Rauch (Zimmer’s daughter) in Case 1994, pp. 19-20. For a short biography of Zimmer, see Stache-Rosen 1990, pp. 216-218.

¹⁰ Bethlenfalvy, pp. 20-21.

¹¹ “Das altindische Weltbild [wurzelte] wirklich in Gestirnsymbolismus” (page 2 of this letter).

¹² See pp. 34-35 of his 1963 publication.

¹³ In this book published in 1942, Baktay made a presentation of astrological systems and beliefs around the world (Bethlenfalvy 1990, pp. 38-39).

¹⁴ Heinz Kucharski, curator at the Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig, was “unofficial collaborator” or “inoffizieller Mitarbeiter” (IM) of the State Security (Staatssicherheit or Stasi) (http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinz_Kucharski, retrieved August 22nd 2012). See also Nold 1994, passim.

¹⁵ It is worth quoting Baktay: “Obwohl ich Herrn Kucharski erklart habe, dass ich mit einer gewissen Umgestaltung jener Teile einverstanden sei, und ihn bat, die unumgehendlich wichtigen Aenderungen vornehmen zu wollen, möchte ich meine These hier klar begründen, da ich überzeugt bin, dass ihre vollstaendige Unterdrückung den ursprünglichen Wert meines Buches bedeutend verringern würde.“

His open-mindedness and fascination for the Indian subcontinent also led him not to confine his interest to pre-Islamic art, recognizing the authentically Indian nature of Islamic monuments erected on Indian soil, and it was probably out of intellectual honesty that he decided not to include in his survey the artistic production of South-East Asian countries, not having travelled in these regions. His book is a well thought out publication, written nearly thirty years after his stay in the Subcontinent, where he had ample opportunity for first-hand experience of the Indian aesthetic sensibility and the country's manifold culture; it was written after he had been appointed curator of the Indian section of the Ferenc Hopp Museum and devoted various papers to parts of the collection preserved therein, and indeed after he had been invited by the Indian Government to spend six months in the country in 1956/57, visiting monuments and museums.¹⁶ This impressive volume rounds off a series of writings on more modest scale devoted to the presentation of the Indian multifaceted culture to the Hungarian public and, being published in German, unlike most of Baktay's earlier publications, it also reached a wider public. This book also marks the culmination of Baktay's career as Indian art historian, following the publication of papers dedicated to 'recent acquisitions' in the Museum in 1951, the 'stone sculpture' in 1953, the miniatures in 1954, and the sculpture from Nepal in 1956.

Baktay was trained as a painter, and was thus able to see Indian art with a more sensitive eye than any purely art-historian with purely intellectual training can ever do. And he was a great art historian; he had an in-depth knowledge of Indian culture, of its mythology; he also had a deep perception of the inner nature of Indian art and formulated his descriptions and analysis with a very pleasant and elegant style. One might contradict some of his identifications,¹⁷ and can also be tempted to 'correct' some of the dates which he attributed to the monuments— but we must not forget that research in the field of Indian art history has made huge strides ahead since Baktay's time —, and one might also question the transcriptions of Indian terms,¹⁸ but Baktay's contribution does not lie in iconographic studies; rather, it lies in the ability to reach out beyond the elements allowing for identification. Baktay could 'read' a monument or a sculpture with the eyes of an artist; he could decipher the source of their attractiveness in their forms, lines, and volumes. He could also uphold and explain the 'Indian' nature of this art and write clear concise descriptions of the objects, as can be seen in his various papers containing a catalogue of the sculptures and paintings in the Ferenc Hopp Museum, where he acted as curator after 1946.¹⁹

The comprehensive but precise survey he wrote deserves to be read anew, maybe updating the system of transcription,²⁰ revising some dates or identifications but, on the whole, it remains a book elegantly written and a persuasive homage to the beauty and profundity of Indian art. And in the field of South Asian art history, which has partly given way to excessive speculation in recent years lacking grounding knowledge or essential first-hand experience of the material, it reminds us that the production of art history, although an intellectual labour, also derives from of a personal emotional relationship between the author and the objects which he or she studies. Writing art history means painstaking study of the objects in their forms and historical and cultural or religious context, and not projecting them in ready-made (fashionable) theoretical stereotypes, as is all too often the case nowadays.

¹⁶ Baktay 1963, p. 10.

¹⁷ Reference here is to the Balarāma wrongly identified as a Nāginī (1953, fig. 2 & p. 138) or the so-called 'Viṣṇu' head in the Ferenc Hopp Museum, where Baktay followed the identification initially suggested by Zoltán Takáts (Baktay 1953, pp. 143-144 and footnote 7; reproduced pl. IX or in Baktay 1963, pl. 219). However, in the description given in the 1953 article, he expressed doubts as to this identification, rather suggesting this to be the head of a Buddhist character, i.e. Mañjuśrī – identification which is most probably correct.

¹⁸ See, for instance, the dates attributed to Ajanta in his 1953 article (p. 142). In his review of Baktay's book, Eugeniusz Sluszkiewicz lists all the transcription errors which he found there, but actually lays the blame on the Publisher (1968, pp. 147-151).

¹⁹ Bethlenfalvy 1990, p. 41.

²⁰ See note 17 above.

Annex: reviews of “Die Kunst Indiens”

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