

Ali Dubin

Thesis Proposal

Department of Art History, CAS

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1. Title:

Mending the Strife between Earth and World: A Heideggerian Reading of Central Indian Painting

2. Abstract:

Martin Heidegger asserts that there exists a disconnect between the earth, the physical environment, and the world, a community's way of being. Modern society is unable to accept its contingency upon the earth and thus creates greater strife between earth and world. The Greeks, however, had perfected a system for situating their world within the earth by centering their society around the temple, an embodiment of the divine deeply connected to natural phenomena. This thesis proposes that a similar achievement can be attributed to Indian society by examining *ragamala* paintings in light of their divine and earthly connotations, and the ways in which these connotations interrelate in specific paintings.

3. Description of the Project:

My thesis will examine the applicability of Heidegger's aesthetic theory to the tradition of Indian *ragamala* painting. Heidegger's theories address the idea that art can allow people better to relate themselves and their worlds to the earth. He believed that all rational knowledge is predicated on a fundamental knowing that can't be systematized. Since we kill art when we try

to systematize it, art is sometimes capable of expressing this intrinsic “knowing” (Clark, 2002). Society has a responsibility to foster healthy individuals by creating a nexus for their world which encourages the expression of this knowledge which cannot be rationalized. When art and its expressive capabilities are the core of a world, it can help people to live with their contingency upon the earth. Only by accepting this contingency of the world upon the earth, and thus the constructed nature and createdness of the world, can a society come to terms with its own impermanence and destructibility. Accepting the destructibility of the world was crucial to Heidegger as he felt that modern society was living in a deluded world oblivious to its own fallibility, thus rendering individuals incapable of properly coping with the inevitability of death and the irresistible force of nature.

For these reasons, Heidegger greatly admired the Greeks, who he felt exemplified the best way a society could acclimate its members to the contingency of their world. The Greek world was centered around the temple, with most daily activities from prayer to commerce taking place in and around the temple structure. The temple was more than just the center of daily life however; it was also the house of the gods and the embodiment of the divine. As such, it related to the earth at large through Greek mythology, which is deeply connected to natural phenomena. Each god or goddess reigns over a realm of nature and must be appeased and worshipped to keep that realm in check. The Greeks confronted their vulnerability to the forces of nature every day through the connection between their religion and nature. Furthermore, the Greek temple as a structure was deeply connected to the earth. To see this, one must only look to a squat, Doric temple, such as the Temple of Hera, which lies low in a valley and seems to be an extension of the ground itself (*Origin of the Work of Art*). Its sturdy rock columns embrace and

reflect the strength of the rock upon which it sits, and thus align it with both the stability and unpredictability of the earth.

I argue that this same phenomenon occurred in Indian society and can be observed by studying Rajput *ragamala* painting from the height of the Rajput clans' reign in the 16th century. As a group of warrior clans, the Rajputs lived with the knowledge of their vulnerability in battle. Due to the environment in which they lived, which was dependent upon the potentially deadly yet also life-sustaining monsoons rains, they also had to come to terms with their vulnerability to nature. This intrinsic knowing and understanding of their human condition was expressed through the art they made; devotional *ragamala* paintings which were bound into vast manuscripts. To understand how these thousands of images reflect the mend between earth and world, it is helpful to first isolate one such manuscript, such as the *Megha Raga* (Cummins 2006).

The *Megha Raga* depicts the god Krishna dancing in the monsoon rains with his lover Radha. There are two distinct and yet closely linked forces at work here; the divine world of Krishna, and the natural world of the monsoon. The depiction of Krishna reinforces the necessity of worshipping the god to ensure good fortune. Hindu deities have a close tie to the human world in the form of direct divine intervention in times of need. For example, Krishna can be called upon to deliver or quell the monsoon rains, though he can also intervene on behalf of all manner of natural disasters and illnesses. The folio also reminds the viewer that the monsoon is a double edged sword; vital to life in the arid region of central India, and yet also deadly in an area susceptible to flash flooding due to its aridity. By dancing in the rain, and celebrating its arrival, Krishna and Radha embrace the season and remind the viewer to do so as well. They are

celebrating their dependence upon these seasonal storms in a way that accepts the fragility of their world in relation to the earth which delivers them.

The phenomenon of integrating a healthy world view, as laid out by Heidegger, does not stop with the *Megha Raga*'s fairly literal integration of world and earth. This is where it is necessary to look to other *ragamala* paintings, as there exist many different modes of *ragamalas*. Much of Indian aesthetics is based on *rasa*, an elusive notion relating to the essence or flavor of a work that, when properly experienced by a connoisseur of Indian art, can lead to a state of spiritual bliss and heightened delight (Goswamy 1986). In order to fully appreciate Indian art and aesthetics it is necessary to delve into realm of *rasa* as this allows a better understanding of how the art functioned in its original context and how it was perceived by its audience. Since *rasa* is a largely individual experience, yet can be experienced only with the help of others (artists, performers, etc) I postulate that there further exists a connection between the *rasa* experience and the experience of *Da-sein* of which Heidegger writes. *Da-sein* is similarly a largely individual experience, as it is the world which one inhabits; all of the features of the world to which one is attuned, yet does not consciously recognize on a regular basis (Clark 2002). Yet like *rasa*, it can only be truly experienced through the co-existence of others in their *Da-sein* and the ways in which ones own world interacts with that of others. *Da-sein* is exposed for the constructed state is truly is when conflicting or differing *Da-seins* collide in the daily interactions of individuals.

4. Previous Work:

Heidegger himself has written many important and influential works to which I will refer, including *Being and Time* and *Poetry and The Origin of the Work of Art and Language*. I

will also consult Timothy Clark's book entitled *Martin Heidegger* which gives general overviews and insightful interpretations of most of Heidegger's major theories.

To gain better understanding of Rajput painting and Indian aesthetics I will consult the reference and catalogue entitled *Indian Painting from Cave Temples to the Colonial Period* by Joan Cummins and *The Essence of Indian Art* by B.N. Goswamy. The first is a catalogue of the Boston MFA's collection of Indian art, as well as a general overview of many themes surrounding the genre, whereas the second delves deeply into the intricacies of Indian aesthetics, especially the appreciation of *rasa*. Damien Keown's *Buddhism; A Very Short Introduction* will be an important reference for matters concerning the actual practices of the Buddhist religion as much of Indian aesthetics draws from the religion, in addition to Hinduism. I will also be consulting *The Book of Tea* by Okakura Kakuzo, a book on the effects of tea culture in Japan, which has been argued to have influenced Heidegger's theory of *Da-sein*.

5. Significance:

Heidegger is a prominent philosopher whose theories have been influential in various disciplines beyond the field of philosophy. However, his theories are typically applied solely in the Western context, especially within art history (as he himself focuses on the Greeks and the Romantic poets). Applying his theories to the Eastern world is important for a more inclusive and complete history of art, as well as for the fostering of greater cultural understanding within a discipline that was highly Eurocentric for centuries. Modern society at large is at odds with the earth, trying to assert dominance and potentially doing irreparable harm in the process. Looking at other societies that have flourished in the past while being more in tune with the relation of their world to the earth is a learning experience from which modern society can certainly benefit.

6. Proposed Methodology:

This project will be an expansion of a final paper I wrote for a Methods and Theories class I took with Professor Anthony Grudin, my primary advisor. In this paper I explored the *Megha Raga* in terms of Heidegger's theory of earth and world. In my thesis, however, I will be looking more fully at the writings of Heidegger, exploring other theories of his, most importantly Da-sein, to see how these in turn can be read in relation to Indian *ragamala* painting as a genre and culture. This research will also more heavily draw upon an Indian painting class I took with my second advisor, Professor John Seyller, using the knowledge gained there as an entryway into the world of Indian aesthetics and the interface between Indian art, religion and culture. The world of Indian aesthetics is very complex, so it will be interesting to explore the ways in which this highly developed and yet organic (at least to the connoisseur) system fits into Heidegger's system of intrinsic knowing.

I plan to move through this project by focusing on Heidegger's theories on aesthetics and the ways in which art relates to Da-sein. I will select folios from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts collection of Indian painting, as it is the work I have studied previously, to illustrate the ways in which the Heideggerian theories are applicable to the genre. After moving through each theory and folio, I will synthesize what I have found to gain insight into overarching connections between the theories of Heidegger, and by extension the western mode of philosophical thought, and *ragamala* painting, and therefore the cultural tradition of India. Readings on Hinduism and Buddhism will supplement my research throughout my thesis, as both have had great impacts on the traditions Indian painting and aesthetics, in addition to the obvious cultural influences.

7. References:

Clark, Timothy. *Martin Heidegger* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002)

Cummins, Joan. Indian Painting from Cave Temples to the Colonial Period (Boston: MFA Publications, 2006)

Goswamy, B. N. *Essence of Indian Art*. San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1986.

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Okakura, Kakuzō. *The Book of Tea*. Rutland, VT: C.E. Tuttle, 1956.

Wicks, Robert. "Hegel's aesthetics: an overview," *Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. Frederick Beiser (Cambridge University Press, 2006)