

## The Traditional Arts of South Asia

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# Past Practice, Living Traditions

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How can a historical and theoretical understanding of traditional South Asian arts inform contemporary artistic and architectural projects both within and beyond South Asia? How can an understanding of contemporary practices and design issues inform the study of art and material culture of the past? And, how have changing conceptions of art and craft influenced the study, understanding, and practice of South Asian traditional arts?

By Crispin Branfoot

The conference on ‘The traditional arts of South Asia: past practice, living traditions’<sup>1</sup> aimed to address these questions and assess the role of the traditional arts of South Asia, both as a way to understand the past and its current practice. These very issues are central to the activities of De Montfort University’s research centre PRASADA (Practice, Research and Advancement in South Asian Design and Architecture).<sup>2</sup> The speakers came from a variety of disciplines, and included both academics and practising artists and architects. The eleven presentations focused on a variety of media and contexts – including architecture, sculpture, painting, and textiles – from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and India.

Abigail McGowan (University of Pennsylvania) and Robin Jones (Southampton Institute) both addressed the colonial foundations of our knowledge and interpretation of South Asian traditional arts. In ‘Indian crafts in colonial display and policy 1880–1920’, Abigail McGowan argued that in comparison with the preceding decades, a recognition of artisans as creative individuals emerged in the

1880s in response to both the Arts and Crafts movement in Europe and growing nationalist claims concerning the destruction of Indian industries under colonial rule. This led to the idea that craft should be considered a specific art form, which had a decisive impact on contemporary crafts, policies, and interventions, but also shaped the way we perceive Indian crafts today.

In his paper, ‘British interventions in the traditional crafts of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) c. 1850–1930’, Robin Jones examined the British reappraisal of the material culture of Kandy in the late nineteenth century, including attitudes towards local arts, crafts, and architecture, in response to the rediscovery of Sri Lanka’s ancient cities. From the 1850s to the 1930s the colonial government and missionary societies established industrial schools, for the local population that effected traditional arts. This influence has been examined, not least through Ananda Coomaraswamy’s early twentieth-century writings.

Jyotindra Jain (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi) and Sharada Srinivasan (National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore) explored the impact of colonialism and modernity on the production and reception of

Hindu images. In ‘The Hindu icon: between the cultic and the exhibitory space’, Jyotindra Jain examined mass-produced Hindu imagery of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With the shift to mass-production and the use of print technology, a new generation of printed images of Hindu deities and mythological characters came into being.

Using new techniques, these printed pictures displayed an amalgamation of a whole range of pictorial elements, including the idioms of the colonial art schools, traditional fresco and manuscript painting, European prints, photography, Western and regional Indian theatre, and contemporary cinema. This fundamentally changed depictions of Hindu imagery and went alongside the rise of new exhibitory contexts, from the consecrated, sacred space of the Hindu shrine to the living rooms, restaurants, shops, trucks, and taxis of modern times.

In her paper ‘From temple to mantelpiece: changing paradigms in the art and craft of South Indian metal icons’, Sharada Srinivasan explored the ways in which current artistic practices help inform our understanding of past images and their production. South Indian metal images have also undergone various paradigm shifts, from objects of ritual veneration and processional worship to mantelpiece curios in the marketplace. These transformations are now shaping prevalent artistic trends.

Southern India remained the focus of both Anna Dallapiccola (PRASADA) and Samuel K. Parker (University of Washington, Tacoma). In ‘A contemporary pantheon: popular religious imagery in South India’, Anna Dallapiccola discussed the traditional temple arts of late twentieth-century Tamil Nadu. She demonstrated how modern imagery and aesthetics, such as those discussed by Jyotindra Jain, are influencing brick and plaster sculptures and temple murals, adding a wealth of new

elements to age-revered forms.

Dr Parker examined the construction, during the last century, of a granite Hindu temple, of the sort popularly associated in Tamil Nadu with claims to royal sovereignty, by the leaders of the Nadar community in Aruppukottai. It was designed to give, literally, ‘hard’ evidence for the Nadar’s contested identity as a royal caste allegedly dispossessed of its true status. As such it emphasizes the contemporary importance of temple architecture and patronage as a means of expressing social and political identity.

Eiluned Edwards (PRASADA) and Ismail Mohammad Khatri (Dhamadka village, Kachchh) discussed the textiles of Kachchh in Gujarat. Ismail Mohammad Khatri, a ninth generation textile craftsman from the village of Dhamadka, gave an account of block-printing textiles from his perspective. His presentation of the Khatri community’s regional history in Sindh and western India, including a range of material produced for the Hindu and Muslim herding communities of Kachchh, was complemented by a practical demonstration of the complicated process of making *ajrakh*, a block-printed cloth that is printed on one or both sides with natural dyes.

Eiluned Edwards discussed the resist-dyed and block-printed textiles produced by the Khatri for many castes in the region. Encoded in these textiles are a host of details about a person’s caste, religious affiliation, gender, age, marital status, and economic standing. She examined the changes in the, essentially, local markets for these textiles and the emergence of new markets for the Khatri textiles as a result of post-independence industrialization, changes in traditional caste occupations and patterns of consumption, and advances in textile technology.

The architects Adam Hardy (PRASADA), Kamil Khan Mumtaz (Anjuman-I-Mimaran, Lahore), and Nimish Patel, together with Parul Zaveri (Abhikram, Ahmedabad), focussed on traditional

architecture. Hardy’s paper ‘Approaching design through history and history through design’ used examples from Indian temple architecture to demonstrate that the study of architecture from a design perspective can lead to an understanding of the processes of its creation. Such an approach to architectural history is the basis for understanding the transformations of architectural traditions. It was argued that if these various traditions can be deduced, they could subsequently be learned and brought into practice. This might then lead to an architecture that draws from tradition in a more profound way than is the case with past revivals and historicisms. Similar approaches were expressed in the remaining two papers. Kamil Khan Mumtaz’s background as a Western-trained architect practising in Pakistan, with a keen interest in traditional architecture, discussed two current projects for a mosque and a tomb in Pakistan. Nimish Patel and Parul Zaveri similarly discussed the characteristics of traditional architecture and the creative process, and how this understanding can be used in contemporary architectural practice and conservation, as illustrated by their work on a number of projects in Gujarat and Rajasthan.

At the start of the twenty-first century we are in the position of being able to better assess the legacies of colonialism and twentieth-century modernity in the representation and appropriation in present-day practice of the traditional arts of South Asia. This will lead to a greater appreciation of the vitality and variety of the region’s traditional arts, both past and present. <

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### Note >

- 1 Conference held at De Montfort University, Leicester, United Kingdom.
- 2 For PRASADA, please refer to [www.lsa.dmu.ac.uk/Research/prasada.html](http://www.lsa.dmu.ac.uk/Research/prasada.html)