BOOK REVIEWS


The three volumes study entitled “Erzählende Wandmalereien (Narrative Wall-paintings)” by Dieter Schlingloff is without doubt one of the most important publications in the study of Indian art history to appear in many years. One assumes from the general heading “Ajanta. Handbuch der Malereien (Handbook of Paintings) I”, that these volumes constitute the first part of a series. What the other parts may be is nowhere indicated.

This three volume work provides an exhaustive and detailed documentation of all recordable narrative wall paintings at the time Schlingoff conducted his investigation in the Buddhist caves in Ajanta without these years being reported. As these are the earliest and most extensive paintings to have survived within the Indian cultural sphere their detailed documentation and identification provides an indispensable reference tool for anyone interested in both Indian or Buddhist art.

The documentation, however, extends far beyond the narrative paintings. Vol. II Supplement contains exhaustive annotated bibliographies of the primary and secondary literary sources (II: 159–308). Not noted in the table of contents, but essential for the user are the “Preliminary Remarks” and list of contents to the Bibliography (II: 156–158).

The text which contains Schlingloff’s identification and interpretation of the Ajanta paintings is contained in Vol. I Interpretation. This discussion is organized chronologically and thematically. A visual concordance to the placement of the different narrative themes within the caves is provided through diagrams of each cave (I: 6–8), as well as a concordance to the plates listed in Vol. III Plates (to this reviewer a somewhat misleading title since plates as such are found throughout the other two volumes as well).
Due to the enormous detail and cross-referencing in the critical apparatus and in the commentaries the reader is well advised to begin, as Schlingloff intended, with his “Preliminary Remarks on the Formal Aspects” (here he refers to the present study, not the formal aspects of the paintings). This provides an explanation of the structure of the book, abbreviations used, and de facto Schlingloff’s methodology, and basic assumptions, e.g., concerning the development of Buddhist narrative painting in India and Central Asia (I: 14). The “Preliminary Remarks” are in English, in contrast to the rest of the text which is in German. Alas, for the non-German reader—“the Preliminary Remarks” do not constitute a summary of the subsequent discussion but rather allow the author to briefly introduce wide ranging topics arising from a life of reflection on and study of Indian sacred literature and art. These “Preliminary Remarks” assist the reader in understanding the broader cultural and religious setting in which the narrative paintings were created.

“Preliminary Remarks” are also found in Vol. II Supplement, although not listed in the table of contents. In the introduction the second section, “Index of Pictorial Elements” (II: 106–155) Schlingloff draws attention to the formal mechanisms by which the Ajanta artists structured their narrative. The astonishingly detailed cross-referencing of these motifs within the paintings of Ajanta as well as other Buddhist narrative art in India and Central Asia supports Schlingloff’s working proposition that there was an intensive interrelationship of Buddhist narrative visual and literary themes in ancient India.

The comparative material is presented in “Parallels in Reliefs and Paintings” (II: 1, 4–105). The documentation of the relief sculptures and paintings, as also the narrative paintings from Ajanta, are presented in exceedingly fine and detailed drawings. This technique has its critics. However one must admit that the drawings permit narrative images, that are invariably clear and therefore legible. Also an enormous amount of detail (e.g., Sanchi torana panel in II: 5) can be presented in a very small space. Having spent many years following Schlingloff’s studies on the basis of these drawings, it is my impression that they are accurate and fully acceptable as documentation for the purposes that Schlingloff uses them. That is, he would never attempt to conduct a stylistic analysis of the paintings on the basis of these drawings. Volume II is completed by an author’s index, also not mentioned in the table of contents.

An excellent defense of Schlingloff’s use of line drawings as primary documentation (in contrast to photos) are the visual summaries of the wall paintings contained in Vol. III Plates. In this volume a drawing of each wall containing legible narrative paintings is presented together with a floor