

CHAPTER 1

Appreciation of Vijayanagara Sculpture

Things occurred here [at Vijayanagara], not in human, but in fantastic, super-human dimensions. This is the place for heroic deeds. . . .¹

Until the mid 1980s, art historians dealt with Vijayanagara art very superficially, mainly because of the comparatively late period in which it developed. A further cause was the relative inaccessibility of Vijayanagara until the end of the 1980s. Very few scholars were adventurous enough to risk the journey to obtain a first-hand experience of the site. Among them were, in the first half of this century, R.N. Saletore, Alice Boner, whose extraordinarily perceptive diary entries show how deeply impressed she was with the site and its monuments, and Herrman Goetz. Eventually, R.N. Saletore was the only one who espoused the cause of Vijayanagara art. He was the only one among over the thirty-odd contributors to the legendary *Vijayanagara Sexcentenary Commemoration Volume* of 1936 who visited the site repeatedly. In 1982, he published a substantial book *Vijayanagara Art*, based on the material of his much earlier doctoral dissertation. In this study he attempted to set Vijayanagara art in the context of south Indian artistic development.

Apart from visiting the site, the only other way scholars could familiarise themselves with Vijayanagara art was through its ubiquitous presence in southern India. This, however, was perhaps another cause for neglect. The majority of art historians felt that the Vijayanagara additions to pre-existing monuments were, in a certain sense, vandalism. They were confronted with a new style which they did not know in its entirety, and with which they could come to terms, only by comparison with the classic Chola style or the seventeenth-century Nayaka style. But Vijayanagara sculpture was more than a mere 'degradation of the later Cola style'.²

In order to re-assess Vijayanagara's place in

the development of art in south India, it is necessary to begin with a brief review of what has been written on this subject in the leading books on Indian Art.

A. Early Opinions

In 1866 James Fergusson and P. Meadows Taylor published *Architecture in Dharwar and Mysore*, the first major work on the monuments of this area, in which Fergusson commented on some photographs depicting sacred and secular buildings at Vijayanagara. It is not known if Fergusson ever visited the site. The pictures, taken in the late 1850s and early 1860s made such an impact on him, that 'in all his subsequent major writings Vijayanagara was never omitted'.³ Thus Vijayanagara was given a place in the history of Indian architecture.

Later, in his monumental *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (1876), Fergusson devoted a whole section of the chapter on the Dravidian Style to Vijayanagara, describing in detail the Vithala temple, which he dated to 1513:

It is wholly in granite, and carved with a boldness and expression of power nowhere surpassed in the buildings of its class. As will be observed, it has all the peculiarities of the Dravidian style: the bold cornice of double flexure, the detached shafts, the Vyalis, the richly carved stylobate, etc. . . .⁴

He concluded that the stylistic innovations appearing for the first time in its architecture 'would inevitably have led in a short time to the new style of the Nâyyak dynasty'.⁵ However, apart from mentioning the 'boldness and expression of power' of the carvings and the vyalis, he did not comment further on sculpture. This is understandable as the available photographs were probably of architecture rather than of details of sculpture.

The date of the monument was given as 1513,

as there are no inscriptions in the Vithala temple complex prior to 1513. Recent scholarship, however, questions that date.⁶

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, in his *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, first published in 1927, briefly reviewed the major monuments at Vijayanagara. The first to be mentioned is the Vithala temple, followed by the Kadalekalu Ganesha, the Anantashayana temple near Hospet, and the Hazara Rama temple. The last of these, according to Coomaraswamy, 'probably Kṛṣṇa Deva Rāya's private chapel, is contemporary with and similar to the Viṭṭhalasvāmin, and equally typical of the period. The outer enclosure walls in both cases are covered with reliefs.'⁷ The Mahanavami platform, called 'Dasara Dibba' is cursorily mentioned as being the best example of a basement decorated with friezes.⁸ The chief characteristics of the style are summed up thus:

... The full evolution of the pendent lotus-bracket takes place; the monolithic columns unite to the main straight-sided shaft a number of slender cylindrical 'columnettes' with bulbous capitals...; the roll cornice is doubly curved, the corners having upward pointing projections, the under side repeating the details of wooden construction.

The pillar caryatides, whether rearing lions or *yālis* (*gaja-simhas*) are products of a wild phantasy; at the end of the sixteenth century rearing horses are also found, provided with fighting riders and groups of soldiers below...; but these are more specially a feature of the Madura style. Enclosing walls and basements are decorated with continuous reliefs representing epic and festival themes.⁹

Coomaraswamy's choice of religious monuments for discussion leads us to suspect that he may never have visited Vijayanagara, but worked from a very limited choice of photographs. Some of these were obviously mislabelled, as is evident from the mention of carvings on the enclosure wall around the Vithala temple, which is in fact plain. The date of the Vithala temple is given as 1513, as by Fergusson. In spite of inevitable inaccuracies, it is remarkable that the importance of Vijayanagara architecture and the salient features of its mature style were clearly recognized and highlighted in what is a broad survey of Asian art from India to the Far East and Indonesia.

A serious attempt at putting the architecture and art of the site in a wider context was made by Percy Brown. In his *Indian Architecture (Buddhist and Hindu)*, first published in 1942, he stated that:

a change came over the spirit as well as the substance of architecture in southern India, when, after the somewhat temperate productions of the Pandyas, the country gradually became enriched with buildings in a style showing that the people had been aroused to a life of greater fulness, and one which moved them to express with marked freedom and fluency their aesthetic aspirations.¹⁰

This new impetus came from the Vijayanagara rulers, who were instrumental in inspiring this change in architecture as well as in sculpture. Brown commented:

It is a record in stone of a range of ideals, sensations, emotions, prodigalities, abnormalities, of forms and formlessness, and even eccentricities, that only a super-imaginative mind could conceive, and only an inspired artist could reproduce.¹¹

The obvious parallel in Western art was according to him Baroque art which 'is expressive in a degree of the same political and social conditions'.¹²

Brown had great admiration for the works of the mature and late Vijayanagara style. Characteristically, only two temples attracted his attention at Vijayanagara: the first was the Vithala as being the most lavishly ornamented, in a certain sense a forerunner of the full-fledged southern temple of the seventeenth century.¹³

The second was the Ramachandra (Hazara Rama) temple which Brown attributed to Krishnadevaraya, and, following Coomaraswamy, to 1513.¹⁴ His attention was riveted on the exquisite stonework, on the careful elaboration of the walls in the typical Dravidian pattern of niche and pilaster, and he concluded that:

There are not many buildings... of the period in which this very appropriate scheme of mural relief and decoration has been more skilfully applied and disposed than on the temple of Hazara Rama.¹⁵

Brown was obviously fascinated by the Dravidian element influencing the architecture and decoration of the Ramachandra temple, and by its subsequent elaboration and transformation which led to the 'mature' Vijayanagara style.

He did not, however, attempt to study other monuments at the capital, although he was aware of the peculiarity of the terrain on which the capital was built, and hypothesised the fascinating theory that the rugged landscape of the site might have had some influence on the style 'towards the invention of strange creatures

such as chimera and other fabulous forms with which the style abounds'.¹⁶

The dramatic difference in workmanship between the carvings in granite and those in schist did not pass unnoticed, and led Brown to postulate the existence of two separate schools of sculpture. The first was 'graphically conceived but crudely and almost childishly fashioned' while the second was 'sharply cut and skilfully modelled . . .'.¹⁷

This discrepancy in the quality of the carvings is one of the most striking features of the sculpture of Vijayanagara. Brown comments both on carvings in schist and granite, but fails to describe the wide variations in the quality of the work executed in granite, unlike the carvings in schist which generally display a high standard of craftsmanship. However, the occasional fine piece in granite can be found among the ordinary or inferior work. As this totally different approach to sculpture could not pass unnoticed, scholars subsequently attempted to explain it in different ways.

In Benjamin Rowland's *The Art and Architecture of India*, first published in 1953, Vijayanagara is briefly mentioned.¹⁸ The Vithala temple is the only monument discussed. The focus of the description, however, is not the temple complex, but rather the piers of the mahamandapa.

It appears that Rowland was not interested in assessing Vijayanagara architecture or sculpture in their own right, but saw them only as precursors of seventeenth century developments in Tamil Nadu. The Vithala temple was the ideal illustration of this point. Sculpture was mentioned only with respect to the piers and composite pillars which played a determinant role in the aesthetics of mature Vijayanagara and, more so, in later Nayaka monuments.

The situation changed dramatically in the early 1980s with the publications of the first specific articles on the site,¹⁹ and, the book *Splendours of the Vijayanagara Empire, Hampi*. Now the subject of Vijayanagara could no longer be treated in vague terms, and in John and Susan Huntington's exhaustive *The Art of Ancient India*, 1985,²⁰ a full chapter is devoted to architecture, sculpture and painting at Vijayanagara. This too lacks discussion of the early monuments at the site: the focus is the Vithala temple, which is described in great detail. The Ramachandra

temple with its sculptural friezes, the Ugra Narasimha (Lakshmi-Narasimha monolith) and the Kadalekalu Ganesha are briefly mentioned among the most notable works of sculpture. The Huntingtons concluded this chapter with the following statement:

Recent excavations at Vijayanagar continue to reveal the impressiveness of Vijayanagar culture and promise to assure Vijayanagar period art its rightful place among the most impressive and dominant artistic traditions of south Asia.²¹

In 1986 James C. Harle published the next general survey of the art of India, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*. Vijayanagara architecture is treated in detail and given its due as the origin of Nayaka architectural style:

the Nayaka [style], however, is largely based upon the Vijayanagara style, whose emergence, spread, and eventual dominance during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Tamilnadu and large areas of Karnataka, and instant recognizability of its most typical structure, the mandapa, is one of the most remarkable phenomena in the history of Indian art and architecture.²²

Harle maintained that Vijayanagara art is:

a Dravida style, which had persisted throughout the still largely Hindu south and, with a few unimportant exceptions, remained the style of all temples at the capital.²³

There follows a discussion of the mandapa pillars, of the monolithic piers, of the rearing animals, a general evaluation of the Dravida style and of the Vijayanagara contribution to it. 'The Dravida style is extremely conservative, and Vijayanagara's contributions consist only of some degradation of the later Cola style and a few changes in detail. . .'.²⁴

The last paragraphs of Harle's chapter are devoted to Vijayanagara and Nayaka sculpture, which according to him, 'show a tradition in decline, reliant on a rigid and uninspired translation of the prescriptions, including proportionate measurements, of the *sāstras*'.²⁵

Three conclusions can be drawn from this brief survey: their authors were in general concerned with architecture; they restricted their considerations mainly to sixteenth-century monuments; and, with few exceptions, Vijayanagara art was evaluated less in its own right, than as an anticipation of the later Nayaka art. This explains the preoccupation of the majority of the writers with intricately carved piers and pillars, curved eaves and rearing animals. All these elements, further developed

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in Nayaka art, were invented in sixteenth-century Vijayanagara.

Very few of these scholars could have actually visited the site; they must perforce have worked from woodcuts or photographs, giving them a very limited spectrum of the actual monuments and sculptures. This would account for some of the rather biased views on Vijayanagara art.

There were, nevertheless, exceptions like Brown, who was one of the first to sense that something new had been created at the capital.²⁶ However it was not until several decades later that his insights were confirmed by the most recent study by George Michell, *Architecture and Art of Southern India, Vijayanagara and the Successor States* (1995). This survey directs scholars to a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the seminal importance of the art of the capital, both in its local development and in its subsequent influence throughout the region.

B. The Vijayanagara Sculptural Style

Commenting on the difference in workmanship between the carvings in granite and those in schist, Brown postulated the existence of two separate 'schools'.²⁷ Subsequently, two famous scholars, both of whom were familiar with the site, tried to resolve the problem of style: Saletore and Goetz.

Saletore in his *Vijayanagara Art* is one of the few scholars who tackled the complicated problem of the sources of Vijayanagara sculpture.²⁸ He begins with a criticism of Goetz's:

The indigenous sculpture of Vijayanagara developed from the style of the funeral *stelas* (*vīrakkaḷ* and *satikkaḷ*) and snake stones of western Chalukyan times. Their representation is naïve, in flat stripes, without fore-shortening or perspective but immensely vital. Under Kṛṣṇa Deva Rāya it became an integral part of official art.²⁹

According to Saletore, Goetz's theory that Vijayanagara sculpture has its roots in the carving on the memorial stones has no foundation, because, according to him, there is no sculpture worthy of the name on the *vīrakal* and the *satikal*; moreover there was no need for Vijayanagara artists to draw artistic inspiration 'from such poor specimens', as they had ample opportunity to follow the artistic standards set by the schools which preceded the establishment of Vijayanagara.³⁰ Saletore then proceeds to refute the

theory of a possible origin of Vijayanagara sculptural art in the western Chalukya stela concluding that:

As the Vijayanagara craftsmen had . . . acquired their ideas from various schools of art which had prevailed before them, there is no valid reason why they should in the execution of their sculpture, which formed but an element of their temple architecture, have depended or preferred western Chalukyan stela sculpture instead of any of the numerous styles often much better than that style.³¹

The attitude of Goetz regarding the naïve quality of the carvings, disposed in flat bands and devoid of foreshortening or perspective, is also criticised by Saletore on the grounds that panels by their very nature 'offered little scope for any foreshortening or perspective'.³²

Goetz's claim that 'under Kṛṣṇa Deva Rāya sculpture became integral to official art', is also refuted by Saletore for the simple reason that 'no distinction worth the same can be made of official and non-official art at any period of Indian art'.³³

Unfortunately, Saletore does not develop his analysis of the nature of Vijayanagara sculpture, except to say that: 'The sculpture of the Vijayanagara school was new yet, like its architecture, composite'³⁴ and for the criticism of Goetz's statements.

As aptly noted by Saletore, many different aesthetic traditions coalesced in the formation of the 'Vijayanagara style': the Deccan, the Tamil and, most important of all, the local 'folk' responsible for the earliest sculptures at the site. While the influence from the Deccan, especially important for the architectural development, lost ground comparatively early, the Tamil tradition became dominant in the formation of the mature 'Vijayanagara style' architecture and sculpture.

The initial impact on scholars was the 'naïve quality' or 'crudeness' of the some of the works, qualities which they immediately connected with folk art; hence the style of Vijayanagara sculpture was defined as 'folkish'. It should be emphasized that, in spite of Saletore's criticism, Goetz's proposition that Vijayanagara sculpture 'developed from the style of the funeral *stelas*' cannot be completely dismissed as absurd.³⁵

For example in spite of their limited iconographic repertory, the carvings on the memorial stones are of extreme importance for

the reliefs on the older parts of the Mahanavami platform. Firstly, because of the material and carving technique: memorial stones are carved in granite, in an expressionistic but technically unsophisticated style. Second, it is men and not deities who are celebrated in the memorials. 'Both in style and purpose, these commemorative folk monuments are far removed from temple art.'³⁶

The artists responsible for the royal carvings on the Mahanavami platform looked for inspiration to the heroic scenes on the memorials, developing the small-scale reliefs on the slabs into monumental art. However, this reference to folk tradition was not repeated in the schist carvings of the sixteenth century which follow the style of contemporary temple sculpture.

The royal theme, although ever-present in the sculpture at the capital, was never treated again so prominently as on the Mahanavami platform. This explains why the folk art element, generally reserved for the celebration of the heroic deeds of the warriors and the ruler, disappeared from the monuments at Vijayanagara. This change, which gradually took place in the first half of the fifteenth century, may be due to various reasons. By the mid-fifteenth century there is a substantial alteration in the rendering of the 'royal figure'. The strong influence of the Rama cult and the resulting homology between the king and the divine hero Rama causes the king to be no longer the 'folk' hero, but a god. The 'royal figure' is hence fashioned like a divine image in temple art.

Ideological and artistic changes notwithstanding, a number of memorial stones and images carved on boulders or on sheet rock continued to be sculpted in the traditional, forceful style typical of the 'folk' sculpture. The 'folk' style and sophisticated 'temple' style both co-existed at Vijayanagara, serving different purposes. The one celebrated heroes and godlings; the other gods and their attendants, human and divine. In conclusion, both Goetz and Saletore were absolutely correct in their observations.

Another possible reason why Vijayanagara sculpture was ignored by the scholarly world is that, unlike the work produced under preceding dynasties, which generally had a very high level

of workmanship, sculpture at the capital never achieved such a high quality, except for individual pieces. This lack of excellence is due partly to the material. The locally quarried granite has a flaky texture, preventing the rendering of detail. Sculptors were perfectly capable of careful modelling and sensitive rendering of dress, jewellery, headgear and hairstyles, as is amply demonstrated in the vestiges of stuccowork on vimanas, parapets and gopuras, as well as by carvings in schist. Unfortunately, the bulk of sculpture at the capital is on granite slabs, not necessarily of high quality.

In spite of the rather poor quality granite with which the artists were working, there is an astonishing variety in scale. Monumental carvings like the Lakshmi-Narasimha monolith or the gigantic linga near the Krishna temple contrast with minute, delicate friezes, such as the ones depicting horsemen and traders on the plinth of the mahamandapa of the Vithala temple, or the Vasantotsava scenes beneath the wheels of the stone chariot in the same complex. Scale notwithstanding, Vijayanagara sculpture is always full of vigour and expression. These qualities have probably baffled art historians who were not prepared for such an expressionistic sculptural style, dubbing it as 'crude'. Yet, in such a dramatic natural setting where, in the words of Boner, 'the rebellious and the arrogant shape the landscape and architecture', sculpture had to be forceful.³⁷

Although the workmanship may be 'crude', the imagination of the artists is unrivalled. New themes, patterns and iconographic formulas appeared here for the first time in Indian art; new icons were created and everyday life came to the fore. This artistic movement had a vital regenerating power, thereby creating a new aesthetic which determined the direction of subsequent artistic activity. Boner, the sculptress, was greatly moved: 'I have seen works of art in India, but nowhere monuments which are filled so intensively with such a spirit of the present.'³⁸

There is yet another factor to be considered, namely the unusually large sculptural output in the relatively brief time in which Vijayanagara was capital of the empire. In little over two centuries over half a dozen major temples were built and refurbished, and new pillared halls and corridors added. There were, moreover,

non-religious structures decorated with sculptures, such as numerous palaces and halls with elaborately carved basements. It should not be forgotten that the capital was, so to speak, an experimental ground for the artists. It was here that different artistic traditions were eventually mingled and transformed according to a newly created aesthetic, which emerged at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The mature 'Vijayanagara' sculptural style found its

characteristic personality with flamboyant creations, especially the transformation of architectural piers in dramatic sculpted compositions out of which emerged human figures and mythical beasts. This new artistic idiom was in due course disseminated throughout the whole Vijayanagara empire and eventually developed into the Nayaka sculptural style of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

NOTES

1. G. Boner, L. Soni, J. Soni, *Alice Boner Diaries—India 1934-67*, p. 262.
2. See note 24.
3. G. Michell, 'A never forgotten city', in *Vijayanagara City and Empire*, ed. by A.L. Dallapiccola in collaboration with S. Zingel-Avé Lallemand, Vol. I, p. 198.
4. J. Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, Vol. I, p. 401.
5. *Ibid.*
6. G. Michell, *Architecture and Art of Southern India, Vijayanagara and the Successor States*, p. 39.
7. A.K. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, p. 123.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
9. *Ibid.*
10. P. Brown, *Indian Architecture (Buddhist and Hindu)*, p. 91.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-3.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.* p. 92.
17. *Ibid.*
18. B. Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*, pp. 180-1.
19. John M. Fritz and G. Michell, 'The Vijayanagara Documentation and Research Project: A Progress Report', in *South Asian Archaeology 1981*, ed. by B. Allchin, pp. 295-304.
20. J. Huntington and S. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India*, pp. 573-86.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 586.
22. J.C. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, p. 328.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 329.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 333-5.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 337.
26. See note 10.
27. P. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
28. R. N. Saletore, *Vijayanagara Art*, pp. 130ff.
29. Saletore, *op. cit.*, p. 130, quoting from H. Goetz, *India: 5000 Years of Indian Art*, p. 186.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
35. *Ibid.*
36. G. Michell, 'Folk tradition in a Monumental Setting', in *Dimensions in Indian Art*, ed. by Lokesh Chandra and J. Jain, p. 289.
37. G. Boner, L. Soni, J. Soni, *op. cit.*, p. 256.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 261.