Mario Bussagli: A 'Westerner's Reflections' on Indian Art

Jitamanyu Das

Abstract

Indian Art is a much-studied subject, and its history has evoked considerable evaluations throughout the modern era. However, most studies on Indian Art often see it in isolation, limiting it to its geographical, aesthetic, religious, and cultural settings. This has proved to be detrimental in gauging the true reach of Indian Art and Aesthetics as well as in studying its influences through trade and the spread of religion in the last few centuries.

It is in this regard that the studies of Indian Art by Mario Bussagli, an Italian Professor of Art, become extremely important. Bussagli explores Indian Art, not in isolation but rather in its connections with art and aesthetics across Asia and even Europe. This approach towards Indian Art and Aesthetics is significant for a few key reasons. First and foremost, it underlines the importance of Indian Art as a significant aesthetic force which developed over the centuries to form a cultural consciousness of its own. At the same time, it also challenges the conception that Indian Art owed much to aesthetic and cultural influences from outside. Finally, by freeing Indian Art from the notion of Western subjugation, Bussagli initiated a discussion on the 'connected history' in art and India's place in it.

In this essay I attempt to look at and provide an analysis of Bussagli's views on Indian Art and examine critically the grounds of studying Indian Art in order to understand the true significance of Indian cultural influence in history. At the same time, I offer an analysis of an Italian scholar's views which provide a contrast with the established tradition of studies of Indian Art and Aesthetics, dominated mainly by Anglophone voices.

Keywords: Indian Art, Italy, Orient, Occident, Art History.

The name Mario Bussagli is unfamiliar to most, if not entirely unknown, even in the world of art and its study. He was an Italian scholar of Indian and Central Asian art and aesthetics, and held the first university chair on this incredibly rare subject in Italy. Starting from 1957, he worked at the Institute (originally Department) of Oriental Studies of the Faculty of Literature of Rome (*Istituto di Studi Orientali della Facoltà di Lettere di Roma*) till 31st October 1987, a year before he died in 1988 [14th August].

It has often been suggested that Bussagli was guided by Giuseppe Tucci, the renowned Italian Orientalist and founder of IsMEO (*Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente*), to secure this position and offer his brilliance to the world of academia.³ However, to do so is a disservice to the knowledge and contribution of Bussagli and his interests in Oriental art. Luciano Petech, Chair of History of Eastern Asia at the University of Rome, in his memorial piece on Bussagli, also argues that the latter moved away from the philosophy of Tucci and carved his own position out.⁴

A clear difference between the two can be understood when Bussagli's views on Oriental art are compared with Tucci's, a summary of which can be found recorded in the latter's self-evaluation lecture 'Fifty Years of Study of Oriental Art,' which he delivered at the *Istituto Nazionale d' Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte* in Rome in 1954 and which was later published in *East and West.*⁵ Tucci noted apparent cultural differences between the various Oriental art forms and contributed only a little to tracing similarities or exchanges in the development of the forms in their nascent stages. Bussagli focused on particular examples (apart from the overall forms and histories) to show how minute developments in art took place because of cultural movements in ancient and medieval history. Bussagli's studies also dealt with this theme frequently, with an emphasis on acknowledging aesthetic movements irrespective of physical distances and politico-cultural borders.

Primarily a scholar of ancient and medieval art, Bussagli initially focused on re-drawing cultural maps emphasising aesthetic exchanges without borders. His approach anticipated a kind of 'connected history'—a term which gained prominence much later in the postcolonial approach to Early Modern history popularised by Sanjay Subrahmanyam—within the different cultural spaces of Central and South Asia.⁶

Bussagli's approach to Oriental art forms was holistic, as it looked at the different aspects of the works and studied the significance of forms and meanings. Bussagli's efforts to recognise the transmission of art were not restricted to examining the negative implications or the documented transmissions, an approach employed by Partha Mitter in his *Much Maligned Monsters* (1977).

The difference between the approaches of Mitter and Bussagli can be summed up in simple terms. Mitter draws on the written and recorded history of transmission to show how 'Indian art' was represented in the West and remains restricted mainly to the narratives of European travellers in his opening chapter. On the other hand, Bussagli seldom ventured into the written transmission that proved definite cultural exchanges but almost exclusively focused on visible Oriental motifs in European art (and vice-versa). At the same time, Bussagli also focused on the exchanges within the Orient and how certain forms came to possess unique features influenced by styles that belonged to a different geopolitical region. It is possible to question Bussagli's idea of global cultural exchanges in art and enquire why the pre-Renaissance artistic influences of the Orient on the West have not been recognised by the latter. However, we find a possible answer to this question from Maurizio Taddei, a noted Italian archaeologist, Orientalist and Indologist, who, in his preface to Ancient Rome and India (1994), suggests that the archaeologists working in the Mediterranean countries were not familiar with 'Indian art' and thus missed possible influences from the Orient.¹⁰

Bussagli sought to eliminate the Western audience's unfamiliarity with Oriental art in his own way—by writing about it in a simple manner for the West. A prolific writer, Bussagli's approaches in his vast corpus of critical studies on Oriental art can, therefore, be divided into two major categories:

- 1) Study of Indian and Central Asian art and aesthetics
- 2) Establishing artistic and cultural connections between the Orient and the Occident

Bussagli's desire to present the art of India and Central Asia to an Italian audience drove his initial interest when he was an active part of IsMEO. However, at the same time, he was aware of the previous attempts at the exoticisation of the presentation of Oriental art. As a result, Bussagli himself published an essay explaining the complexity of approaching Indian art titled 'Universal Value of Indian Aesthetics: Reflections of a Westerner.' He clearly cautioned against a superficial perception of its exotic character and recommended a proper evaluation through 'a deeper and more thorough appreciation' in order 'to seize their symbolical

significance and mystical inspiration.' Furthermore, he was equally aware of the complexities of simplifying Indian art for a Western audience. For the West, understanding Indian art always proved difficult since classical Indian art was often abstract and metaphysical—attempting to portray the divine and sacred in a visual form. However, more importantly, the Western pre-Modern visual tradition relied on the realist representation of artistic subjects—a position antithetical to the aesthetic presentations in Indian art—which further complicated the understanding of Indian art.

For Indian art, the production of individual works was explained as part of 'a ritual' to create and imbue the desired image with the intended specific 'sacred value.' However, this process of creation was not merely bound to a singular religious belief system. Instead, Bussagli claimed that in the history of Indian art, 'orthodoxy evolves and is transformed by the force of artistic creativity,' enabling a reciprocal relationship between philosophy, religion and art. 16

Probably Bussagli's most important assertion was that over time Indian art 'attained a degree of unity which it has never lost.' Therefore, he underlined the synthesis evident in Indian art as a result of cultural assimilations and influences over centuries, outlining it in the following paragraph overtly:

Sumerian art, that of Achaemenian Persia, the Hellenism of Alexander, the Iranian influences of the Parthian or Sassanian domination, even the formation of a Greco Roman-Buddhist school in North-West India, or the so-called Dravidian-Alexandrian synthesis which, during the Roman period, can be noted in the monuments of the South, all these did not modify the local genius. Nor was it modified by the first Islamic influences which reached India later on, giving origin to new artistic currents of very high value, which in no way excluded typically Indian works. ¹⁸

Thus, it is clear that Indian art provided a space for the assimilation of various aesthetic traditions, which co-existed and influenced each other. The Classical Indian artistic traditions were influenced by the Buddhist, Kushana, and Gupta traditions when they emerged, as did Jainism and Sikhism. The South Indian Pallava, Chola, Chera, Pandya, and Chalukya art also significantly influenced the creation of the Indian aesthetic tradition. Most importantly, Hellenistic-Roman influences in the form of a

hybrid in Gandhara and Central Asia and later Islamic artistic traditions—Persian and Turkic—equally became parts of Indian art. For Bussagli, the constant assimilation of different forms and the pluralistic identity of Indian art defined its nature.

However, Bussagli grew impatient due to the lack of a 'systematic work' that could consolidate Indian art into a historical framework rather than for an 'enquirer to cull here and there, from different texts, the material on which to base his theoretical generalizations.' To provide a solution to this problem and present a comprehensive review of Indian art, Bussagli embarked on a seminal work: 5000 Years of the Art of India (1971), produced in collaboration with Calembus Sivaramamurti. Sivaramamurti was the Director of the National Museum of New Delhi. He was instrumental in defining the heritage of art in the Indian subcontinent and drawing a clear map of how Indian art developed through the ages. In addition, he devoted his life to studying various forms and particular regional styles of what is (and could be) collectively identified under Indian art. Bussagli acquired his aid in his grand project to capture the essence of Indian art in its totality.

Bussagli's contribution forms an essential part of this joint venture. In particular, his lengthy introduction to the book covers the purpose of the book and reveals Bussagli's views on the subject quite clearly. Bussagli constantly stressed the metaphysical aspect of Indian art, a more profound meaning embedded beyond the apparent visual iconographical symbolism, either cultural or religious, as the primary hindrance faced by the West in understanding and appreciating Indian artworks.

The book contextualises the history of Indian art from its inception. It traces the developments and presents the features of Indian art from specific periods and belonging to different schools within a framework that emphasises a sense of continuity. The work also defines what constitutes Indian art as Bussagli looks at the issues faced in creating such a framework and strongly criticises Western modernism and British colonial dominance for the denigration of Indian 'artistic ability.'²²

For Bussagli, this Indianness of art neither functioned on the basis of exclusion nor by restricting itself to any particular cultural identity; it was rather an assimilation of different forms emerging out of various belief

systems into a singular amalgamation of styles.²³ He realised that in Indian art, distinctive signs were adopted and assigned to represent particular aspects of visual art.²⁴ Therefore, his work became an opportunity to interpret individual artistic expressions to the extent he could conceive by tying them to a tradition.²⁵ The conclusion of the book written by Bussagli has the sole concern of refuting the limiting view imposed on the Islamic school and the previous traditions of Indian art in order to show Indian art as a product of a 'consistent civilization where merely the approaches differed towards the subject matter in art.²⁶

Curiously, Bussagli also had a possible solution for the revival of Indian art, which he explained in relation to the problems. He placed his hope of a revival on two different outcomes: 'fresh, lively sources of inspiration' to replace the old, or the 'more likely alternative' of 'new, vital and world-acceptable aspects that can be translated' of the centuries-old Indian artistic traditions and its embedded values.

Bussagli's stylistic approach towards Indian artworks analysed not only their individual qualities but also how they contributed to the geographical art forms that they originated from. In this regard, Bussagli constantly drew upon the similarities that existed within various forms. If the chapter division of 5000 Years of the Art of India is analysed, we find a curious difference between the approaches of Bussagli and Sivaramamurti. While Sivaramamurti focused on the individual art forms and delved into their developments, Bussagli's approach tends to look at the overall connectedness of Indian art, evident through chapters like 'The Art of Gandhara,' 'Indian Influence in Central Asia,' 'Indian Influence in Southeast Asia,' and 'Muslim Art in India, and the Indo-Islamic School' that he solely wrote.²⁹

His remark from Chapter 5, 'The Art of Gandhara,' makes it clear that he did not see any of the art forms in isolation but as interrelated in the Oriental space contributing to the overall development of aesthetics: 'The art of Gandhara was not, however, an isolated occurrence. Though it stands out as a distinct phenomenon, clearer and more complex than others of the kind, it formed part of an uninterrupted stream extending from Egypt to the Western borders of the Chinese territory proper,' an idea that he repeated in the opening line of his later chapter 'Indian Influence in Central Asia.' ³⁰

The long history of Gandhara and Central Asian art forms also allowed them to adapt 'forms, images stylistic details and decorative motifs from Classical Western art to exotic subjects' that were local—creating a unique synthesis.³¹ This interconnected history of Indian art helped Bussagli explain that it was the Indian peninsula that had a crucial aesthetic impact on Oriental art forms, with its most notable spread taking place in Central Asia, among other places.³²

Along with his primary objective of presenting Indian and Central Asian art and aesthetics to his readers, Bussagli also looked at the politics of transmission of art and aesthetics between regions, especially between East and West. This transformative aspect of Bussagli's work can be first witnessed in a significant way in his contribution to the Oriental section of *Enciclopedia Universale dell'Arte* (Venice-Rome, 1958). His approach was seen as an attempt to free Oriental art from its traditionally imposed subjection under Western art.³³

Although other previous studies had a similar approach, an overall disregard for identifying Oriental motifs in Western art was still prevalent. This attitude can be attributed to the politics of Orientalism and how Western academia in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries sought to undermine (or completely eliminate) the Orient's importance in the West's art and culture.

The transformation led to the phase where Bussagli acknowledged through his works the artistic and cultural connections between Orient and Occident as demonstrated by shared or mutually available iconographies. His works attempted to establish that mercantile relationships and even ecclesiastical encounters between different spaces from the West and the East across centuries had given rise to a host of shared motifs which artists commonly employed both in the East and in the West. To explain how the integration of artistic styles affected each other, Rowland quotes Bussagli's instance of Central Asian art's formation out of the assimilation of 'the aesthetic sensibilities of Asia and the Hellenistic Roman world and Byzantium, the Middle Ages and of Islam.' Although these motifs frequently carried different symbolism and were seen and interpreted differently depending on their cultural placements, their origins were often found to belong to a particular

region and time.

This effort to show an ongoing history of artistic exchanges between the Orient and the Occident culminated and was explored in considerable detail in his art dossier *La via dell'arte tra Oriente e Occident: Due millenni di storia* (1986).³⁵ Although this work was brief, a particular geographical and chronological arrangement was adhered to in order to showcase the transmission properly and draw attention towards the continuation of the tradition of exchange.

It is important to mention that Bussagli's success in this approach underlining the cultural exchanges between the Orient and the Occident relied on examining individual works of art from the two sides, placed next to each other and analysed together. However, Bussagli was aware that there could be no single template and explanation to determine the aesthetic exchanges and their purpose.

But to assume that Bussagli's approach was flawless would be a blatant fallacy and a glorification of the figure. For Bussagli, it was often challenging to identify the progression of artistic styles and classify their separate existence, as different stylistic developments existed side by side rather than following a discernible linear historical progression. This, in turn, led to an oversimplification in his approach at times. Rowland argues that Bussagli was at fault for assuming the existence of forms which were merely a fusion or hybrid born out of several individual forms. ³⁶

Nonetheless, Bussagli's appreciation of art was not built upon following the established conventions set by art historians, as he utilised new innovations and interpretations in the field.³⁷ Furthermore, his outlook remained inclusive against the exclusionist and culturally segregated views propagated while looking at art forms developing in Central and South Asia, spaces which were the converging points for multiple cultures during the last few centuries. Clearly, Bussagli's approach is vital as a counter to the negative cultural associations added to the rise (and spread) of Islam in Asia, especially from the perspective of an art historian. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in Benjamin Rowland Jr.'s English review article of Bussagli's *Painting of Central Asia* (1963), in which he remarks: 'the mortifying hand of Islam that has caused so many cultures to wither forever.'³⁸

It is crucial to conclude by asserting that Mario Bussagli's approach towards art was not in the manner that Joan-Pau Rubiés strongly critiques in his *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance*.³⁹ Instead, Bussagli's analysis is primarily dependent on the argument that developments in art resulted from cultural transactions through mercantile and religious exchanges. Therefore, the developments were seen as artistic progress or variety by Bussagli and not merely explained as negative or pejorative symbolism carried through specific motifs that were stylistically or thematically attributable to the Orient. He prepared a comprehensive thesis on 'connections between Central Asia, Islam, and China' that contributed to the art forms of these spaces in the ancient and medieval periods and, in turn, were further transmitted to the Occident through trade.⁴⁰

Bussagli's outlook and how he approached artistic exchanges between the spaces divided into Orient and Occident mirrors the position or comes very close to the views held by his contemporary Indian art historian Rafique Ali Jairazbhoy. Jairazbhoy, in his book *Oriental Influences in Western Art* (1965), makes a comprehensive case for the art historian to look at the unconventional thesis of artistic exchanges between the East and the West and particular cultural motifs belonging to the Orient influencing and shaping the currents of Western art. Jairazbhoy undertook a thematic approach to pinpoint the transmission of Oriental iconography to the West and its subsequent adoption.

Yet, much like Bussagli, Jairazbhoy's incredible academic contribution is hardly acknowledged in the present day. The reality is that even if it has been proclaimed that scholarship 'is an international affair,' both Italian and Indian research on art have suffered from a lack of acknowledgement and proper inclusion due to their non-anglocentric nature. ⁴¹ It is undoubtedly our failure to realise the importance of novel research by Bussagli and Jairazbhoy that points towards the greater geographical spread and universalism of forms and styles of art.

In this regard, the difficulty in understanding 'intentions, values, means and manners of expression that characterise Indian art' by the West, which has plagued the appreciation and study of Indian art, should be seen. ⁴² This has resulted in the isolation of Oriental art into smaller subsections, like

Indian art, often incorrectly to fit preconceived Western assessments about national cultures and their unique art forms. Moreover, this Western approach and the rise of a 'proto-ethnic' interest in collecting examples of exotic Indian art, seen as 'mirabilia,' in the West from the second half of the sixteenth century equally contributed t o the determination of such specific interpretations as well as incorrect assumptions. This further moved Indian art away from satisfactorily assessing the earlier mutual cultural exchanges between Orient and Occident and contextualising Indian art within it.⁴³

The brilliance of Bussagli lies in the fact that he did not attempt to systematise the history of cultural transactions between the Orient and the Occident to develop an overarching framework but focused instead on individual instances and their significance in the relationship between East and West. In doing so, he integrated his approaches to the works in an 'organic structure' which did not perceive them in isolation but situated them in proper historical and cultural context to understand their aesthetic and commercial value. Bussagli's contribution to the discourse of studying art acknowledges the wide varieties of Oriental art with a clear understanding of the religious and aesthetic bases that shaped them, which he wanted to share with his readers through his works. Thus, studying the approaches suggested by Bussagli, particularly on Indian art, is of utmost importance.

Endnotes:

- The Editors, 'Mario Bussagli: Siena, 23rd September 1917 Frosinone, 14th August 1988, 'East and West 38.1/4:317.
- ² Luciano Petech, 'Mario Bussagli (1917-1988),' *Rivista degli studi orientali* 62.1/4(1988): 139-141, 139.
- Editors, 'Mario Bussagli: Siena, 23rd September 1917 Frosinone, 14th August 1988,' 317.
- ⁴ Petech, 'Mario Bussagli (1917-1988),' 139.
- ⁵ Giuseppe Tucci, 'Fifty Years of Study of Oriental Art,' *East and West* 5.2 (1954): 73-85.
- Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,' Beyond Binary Histories: Re-

imagining Eurasia to c.1830, ed. Victor Lieberman (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 289–316. The term 'Connected History' and its true global nature as well as its use is analysed in detail in Caroline Douki and Philippe Minard, 'Histoire globale, histoires connectées: un changement d'échelle historiographique? Introduction,' Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine 54-4.5 (2007): 7-21. https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_RHMC_545_0007—global-history-connected-histories.htm. Accessed: 14 September 2022.

- Editors, 'Mario Bussagli: Siena, 23rd September 1917 Frosinone, 14th August 1988,' 317.
- Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (1977; New ed. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- ⁹ Mitter, Much Maligned Monsters, pp. 1-75.
- Maurizio Taddei, 'Preface,' *Ancient Rome and India* ed. Rosa Maria Cimino (New Delhi: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, Rome & Italian Embassy Cultural Centre, New Delhi, 1994), p. XIV.
- Editors, 'Mario Bussagli: Siena, 23rd September 1917 Frosinone, 14th August 1988,' p. 317.
- ¹² Mario Bussagli, 'Universal Value of Indian Aesthetics: Reflection of a Westerner.' *East and West* 6.4 (1956): 299-315.
- ¹³ Bussagli, Universal Value of Indian Aesthetics, 299.
- Mario Bussagli, *La via dell'arte tra Oriente e Occident: Due millenni di storia* (Florence: Giunti Editore, 1986), 25.
- ¹⁵ Bussagli, Universal Value of Indian Aesthetics, 299.
- ¹⁶ Bussagli, Universal Value of Indian Aesthetics, 302.
- ¹⁷ Bussagli, Universal Value of Indian Aesthetics, 307.
- ¹⁸ Bussagli, Universal Value of Indian Aesthetics, 307.
- ¹⁹ Bussagli, Universal Value of Indian Aesthetics, 308.
- Mario Bussagli, and Calembus Sivaramamurti, 5000 Years of the Art of India (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc.; Bombay: The Tulsi Shah Enterprises, 1971).
- Bussagli and Sivaramamurti, 5000 Years of the Art of India, pp. 7-42.
- Bussagli and Sivaramamurti, 5000 Years of the Art of India, pp. 37, 40.
- ²³ Bussagli and Sivaramamurti, 5000 Years of the Art of India, pp. 32-37.
- Bussagli, 'Universal Value of Indian Aesthetics: Reflection of a Westerner.' 300.

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- ²⁵ Petech, 'Mario Bussagli (1917-1988),' 140.
- ²⁶ Bussagli and Sivaramamurti, 5000 Years of the Art of India, p. 311.
- Bussagli and Sivaramamurti, 5000 Years of the Art of India, p. 40.
- ²⁸ Bussagli and Sivaramamurti, 5000 Years of the Art of India, p. 40.
- ²⁹ Bussagli and Sivaramamurti, 5000 Years of the Art of India, Contents page.
- Bussagli and Sivaramamurti, 5000 Years of the Art of India, pp. 78, 141.
- Bussagli and Sivaramamurti, 5000 Years of the Art of India, p. 78.
- ³² Bussagli and Sivaramamurti, 5000 Years of the Art of India, pp. 141-142.
- Editors, 'Mario Bussagli: Siena, 23rd September 1917 Frosinone, 14th August 1988,' 317.
- Benjamin Rowland Jr., 'Art Along The Silk Roads: A Reappraisal of Central Asian Art,' *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 25, 249.
- ³⁵ Bussagli, *La via dell'arte tra Oriente e Occident*.
- Rowland Jr., 'Art Along The Silk Roads: A Reappraisal of Central Asian Art,' 250.
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- ³⁸ Rowland Jr., Art Along The Silk Roads, 249.
- Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India Through European Eyes*, 1250-1625 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 40.
- Haskins, 'Reviewed Work(s): L'Influsso Classico ed Iranico sull'Arte dell'Asia Centrale, 'p. 212.
- Haskins, 'Reviewed Work(s): L'Influsso Classico ed Iranico sull'Arte dell'Asia Centrale, 'p. 211.
- ⁴² Bussagli, *La via dell'arte tra Oriente e Occident*, pp. 23, 25.
- Bussagli, *La via dell'arte tra Oriente e Occident*, p. 30.
- 44 Petech, 'Mario Bussagli (1917-1988),' 140.
- ⁴⁵ Petech, 'Mario Bussagli (1917-1988),' 140.