



Apsara-figures/reliefs in Angkor Wat (Temple): Female Presence and Feminine Companionship in Art

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Abstract:

The Apsaras in Hindu Mythology are powerful women in terms of talent, beauty, and their abilities to test men's and sages' self-control. They constitute one of the most repeated and represented artistic figures in Angkor Wat. This article explores selected Apsara figures/reliefs in terms of "body language," gestures, ornamental and floral/botanical motifs and establishes how the masculine and the feminine aspects of the temple are in harmony. The paper also tries to establish the significance of the "Khmer" Apsara art by arguing how the artists liberally showed the tender interactions between women/female figures. The methodology used in the article is the observation of the positions of figures, in connection/relation with each other. The figures and the ornaments are given attention. The article provides appreciation for the figures in terms of gender, rhythm, and aesthetics.

Keywords: Angkor Wat, Sculpture, Hindu Mythology, Apsaras, Companionship, Femininity, Postures, Ornamentation

Introduction

According to Luke Kurtis, nearly eighteen hundred Apsara figures, wearing ornate headdresses and/or unique hair styles and featuring decorated garments grace the walls and corners of Angkor Wat (225), the construction of which is attributed to Suryavarman II who dedicated the structure to the preserver-deity Vishnu (Vittorio Roveda 1, 1–261). The Apsaras have been subjects of art and imagination through centuries. Their roles and activities project an ambivalent nature in terms of sexuality. Minoru Hara notes that as per Hindu mythology the violence on the "battle-field" shifts to the enchantments of the "svayamvara-sabhā" for the Apsaras, who nominate the deceased male warriors as their companions; thus, the male-dominated space changes to the space for female decisive action (140, 135–153). Hara observes that masculine motivation for self-sacrifice in war was influenced by the thought of the sky-bound transportation of the "hero[es]" made possible by the Apsaras (141, 135–153). Therefore, the connections between the Apsaras and the heterosexual male figures constitute an oscillation between attraction and apprehension (on the part of men). As briefly hinted above, this paper comprises of the discussion of the composition of the selected Apsara-figures/reliefs in Angkor Wat, their groupings and the beauty of the female companionship emanating from their presence. To evaluate artistic flavor and gendered consciousness emitted by these figures, the paper reflects on the female/feminine natures of these mythic figures in Hindu mythology. The paper also traces the significance of the gendered coordination between the male and the female presences in the grid of power in the Angkor Wat temple. Devdutt Pattanaik notes that the Apsaras are gifted women; as per Hindu mythology, the "senses" of sight, sound, taste, speech, and hearing are gratified by "the 64 ways" and each of these means had been practiced efficiently by the talented Apsaras (72, 1–142). Thus, the Apsaras excel in art as well as in the art of enticement; their presences rejuvenate the "male principle." Paul Cravath observes that the "Churning of the Sea [of Milk]" (quoted in Cravath 185) involves the male energies to merge with the female energies through the binaries of celestial as well as terrestrial registers (Cravath 185,



179–203). Cravath explains that the “Khmer” architects wished to imitate the “Churning” legend architectonically by erecting Angkor Wat as the “ancestral mountain” in which they showcased the agencies of the “Asuras” as well as of the Gods; the artists also wished to infuse the “energy” of fructification by harvesting the dance-“power” of the hundreds of Apsara-figures (Cravath 185, 179–203; see also Ray and Patnaik 152, 149–156).

There is another aspect in the importance of Apsaras in Angkor Wat connected with the relationships Lord Krishna had in Indian legends, which is relevant in the sense that Krishna as an incarnation of Vishnu is also linked with the “Vaishnava” ethos emulated in Angkor Wat (Maxwell and Poncar, *Of Gods, Kings, and Men: The Reliefs of Angkor Wat* 6–171). Harsha V. Dehejia has noted the feminine resonance with Krishna in the “Vaishnava” beliefs: Krishna is supposed to have entertained the “Gopis” by replicating himself, pairing with each of them (Dehejia 15–22). Pattanaik notes that the Bhagavata Purana further specifies that in order to be impartial to the “16,108 women” Krishna married, “16,108” identical manifestations of Krishna appeared and led conjugal life in “16,108 places” built in Dwarka (Pattanaik 26, 1–142). Likewise, in the Angkor Wat temple resonating with male energy, the presences of the Apsara-figures in plenty constitute a balance between strength and tenderness, between power and desire, and between aggression and grace. The Apsaras in Angkor Wat epitomize feminine companionship and complement the masculine prowess of the gods, which is contextualized surrounding the omniscience of Vishnu and his connection with the other gods (see Thomas S. Maxwell and Jaroslav Poncar, *Of Gods, Kings, and Men: The Reliefs of Angkor Wat*; see also Ray and Patnaik 152, 149–156).

Literature Review

Angkor Wat’s artists, aware of the Apsaras’ identity and demeanor, seemed to have been influenced equally by the Apsaras’ artistic talents. It seems that the artists working for Angkor Wat discovered a happy association with the Apsaras (mythic women who are artists themselves [see Pattanaik 72, 1–142]); thus, the artists derived creative joy in depicting the Apsaras in blissful female companionship and/or in the act of self-decoration. Robert L. Brown notes that the complex designs of “coiffures” and “jewelry” sustain the viewers’ delights in the Apsara-figures and the figures’ sensual aura seems to have been intensified by the “headdresses” crafted with laborious detail (Brown 8, 7–10). Brown further notes that two kinds of “headdresses” have been noticed: (i) a possible “internal wire” or “lacquer” might have been used to sustain the “rope” containing the knot of hair, and (ii) the second structure is more elaborate: cone-shaped structures, “three or five” in number, may top the headdress protecting the hair (Brown 8, 7–10). Aeaknaree Kaewvisit, Thanasit Chantaree, Kittisan Sriraksa, and Preechawut Apirating note that the “Khmer” art’s decorative patterns were imitated from “coconut flowers,” palm’s ears, rice’s ears (especially the designing of the “hair pins” used by the apsaras) (695, 687–701). Craft and organic motif are thus blended to accentuate the beauty of the Apsaras. The resulting figures feature a mysterious amalgamation of sensuousness and sharpness, as if the Apsaras are enmeshed with the “pastoral” and the woods and their sudden presences fill the viewers with mesmerism and delight. It needs to be noted that one should not instantly infer the orientation/preference of the artist from the choices of the subjects pursued by her/him alone. When we ponder on the depiction of so many Apsara figures lost in self-reflection and/or being so self-aware in the acts of beautification, we may feel inclined to think of the (male) artists (in the context of the “Khmer” artists working in Angkor Wat) having a predominant “heteronormative” interest in the feminine. However, that interest also involves a softness/tenderness in the masculine mindset of the “Khmer” artists working painstakingly on stone and depicting women-to-women intimacy on the walls of Angkor

Wat. Though the masculine ethos of war and struggle between the gods and the demons get their prominent depiction on the walls of Angkor Wat (see Ray and Patnaik 152, 149–156), the artists have balanced them with the tenderness and delicate beauties of the Apsaras, bringing the traits of the sexes to an aesthetic equilibrium in Angkor Wat.

Analysis

In this article, the discussion of the Apsara-figures/reliefs involves the observations made on the single and group figures of Apsaras and their postures. Following K. M. [Krishna Murari] Srivastava's information (77, 31–81), the scope of this article includes the studies of:

- (i) Single Apsara-figure/relief,
- (ii) Two Apsara-figures/reliefs,
- (iii) Four and more Apsara-figures in groups.

In this section, examples of the above three in images are given, along with discussion in terms of posture, postures, and companionship.



Figure 1. Dressing Apsara holding a mirror. Photo by Anirban Ray.

In Figure 1, a single standing Apsara-figure is adjusting her “hairpin” in her elaborate crown while she holds a mirror in her right hand (for information on headdresses, see Kaewvisit, Chantaree, Sriraksa, and Apirating 695, 687–701). A woman with a mirror in her hand communicates self-consciousness surrounding her beauty. The Apsara's ease is reflected in the act of self-decoration and in the moment of self-introspection concerning her image, as reflected in her composed face. Her garment is visible with details; the folds/parts (of garment) on her right waist and left waist hang from the broad waist-ornament, complementing her feminine beauty. The Apsara seems to break the structured layout of the floral motifs in the background; it seems as if she has materialized into a life from a tightly-knit ornamental background. Srivastava makes a very important observation that the beauty of the Angkor-Apsaras lies in the odd (but elegant) mixture of plants and/or flowers and metal; the organic seems to blend with the inorganic as the metal is given an organic feel and botanical patterns have been given material-like structures (78, 31–81).



Figure 2. Apsara-“dyad.” For convenient identification, the Apsara-figures in Figure 2 are numbered as first and second from the left side to the right side of the image.

Photo by Anirban Ray.

In Figure 2, the second Apsara gracefully touches the arm of the first Apsara, forming a unique feminine bond. They hold flowers/stalks/branches in their other hands (the first Apsara holds it in her right hand; the second Apsara holds it in her left hand). The second Apsara seems to be urging her companion’s attention to focus on a sight on their left side while they are walking/standing. It also seems that the first Apsara, in the pace of walking, has been stopped by the second Apsara, who seems to have taken a halted pose. The right fold/part of the garment worn by the second Apsara makes contact with the left fold/part of the garment worn by the first Apsara. The positioning of the garments seems to augment the closeness of the female friendship between the two.



Figure 3. Two Apsara-figures holding branches/stalks/flowers and touching their individual waist-ornaments. For convenient identification, the Apsara-figures in Figure 3 are numbered as first and second from the left side to the right side of the image. Photo by Anirban Ray.

In Figure 3, the “Khmer” Angkor-artists have shown a fine balance between the two Apsaras. The balance of arms (the left arm of the first Apsara and the right arm of the second Apsara) constitutes a reflection to each other. The garments gain attention in Figure 3: the left fold/part of the garment worn by the first Apsara gently hangs over her left wrist. The same type of fold is being hung higher by the second Apsara; in her case, the fold is hung from her left elbow, her left hand being turned upwards. The two appear to be companions, yet they seem to showcase themselves to the viewers, so they stand independently side by side, carrying their individual garments.



Figure 4. “Dyad” of Apsaras.

For convenient identification, the Apsara-figures in Figure 4 are numbered as first and second from the left side to the right side of the image. Photo by Anirban Ray.

Here again an intimate connection between the two members of the Apsara-“dyad” can be seen: in this “dyad,” the second Apsara touches the left arm of the first Apsara (the second Apsara’s right palm cups the left armpit of the first Apsara). The first Apsara tends to respond to the touch of the second Apsara through her (the first Apsara’s) titled head towards her companion (the second Apsara). Uday Dokras informs us that vegetation provides the abodes for the Apsaras; figs and banyan are the trees chosen by them as habitats (Dokras 12, 1–18). Thus, “Khmer” art is aesthetically appropriate in placing the Apsaras in the midst of vegetative decoration/patterns.



Figure 5. Group of five Apsara-figures. For convenient identification the Apsara-figures in Figure 5 are numbered as first, second, third, fourth, and fifth from the left side to the right side of the image. Photo by Anirban Ray.

In Figure 5, a group of five Apsaras can be seen and they seem to walk; the direction of apparent walking of these figures seems to be rightward, as seen from the direction of their feet. The decorations of their headdresses are quite similarly patterned. If the rightward movement is inferred from the positions of the feet, then it can be assumed that the fourth and the fifth Apsaras in Figure 5 possibly lead the group. The postures of the fourth and the fifth Apsaras are identical: their right hands touch their waist-ornaments. Their left hands hold the flowers/stalks/branches that waver backward behind their shoulders and necks. The first, the second, and the third Apsaras can be considered as a sub-group since there is a bodily connection between them. The second Apsara seems to be the one getting the most attention in the group. The first Apsara places her left hand on the second Apsara's right shoulder; the second Apsara follows the same pattern by placing her left hand on the right shoulder of the third Apsara. The first Apsara adjusts the fold of cloth upon the waist-ornament, while the third Apsara adjusts a part of her headdress with her left hand, while with her right hand she holds the left fold of cloth on the waist of the second Apsara. This is an intimate moment between two women and the message of the nature of this intimacy is mysterious, the enigma amplified by the hint of smile on the third Apsara's face. Her smile seems to be more pronounced than the smile of the second Apsara. The second Apsara seems to display shyness and her right hand does not show much grip on the ornament below her navel. It seems that the second Apsara resembles an initiate or a younger member incorporated into the female/feminine space by her peers, especially by the third Apsara, while the first Apsara, having a calmer facial expression, provides the second Apsara with a feminine and sisterly companionship.



Figure 6. Group of four Apsara-figures. For convenient identification, the Apsara-figures in Figure 6 are numbered as first, second, third, and fourth from the left side to the right side of the image.

Photo by Anirban Ray.

In Figure 6, there are four Apsaras; the locks of hair of the two Apsaras in the middle (the second Apsara and the third Apsara) are more prominent. The third Apsara has one pointed ornament that sets her apart from the other three Apsaras, but the lack of material ornamentation on the head is balanced by the long curl of hair that rises and falls above her head on her right. The third Apsara also holds a part of her cloth in her right hand (raised upward), and her right arm is held by the second Apsara. The group is unique because the Apsara-figures in the middle display hairstyles while the Apsaras on the left and on the right corners (the first and the fourth Apsaras) bear headdresses featuring cone-shaped structures (for discussion of Apsara-headdress, see Brown 8, 7–10).

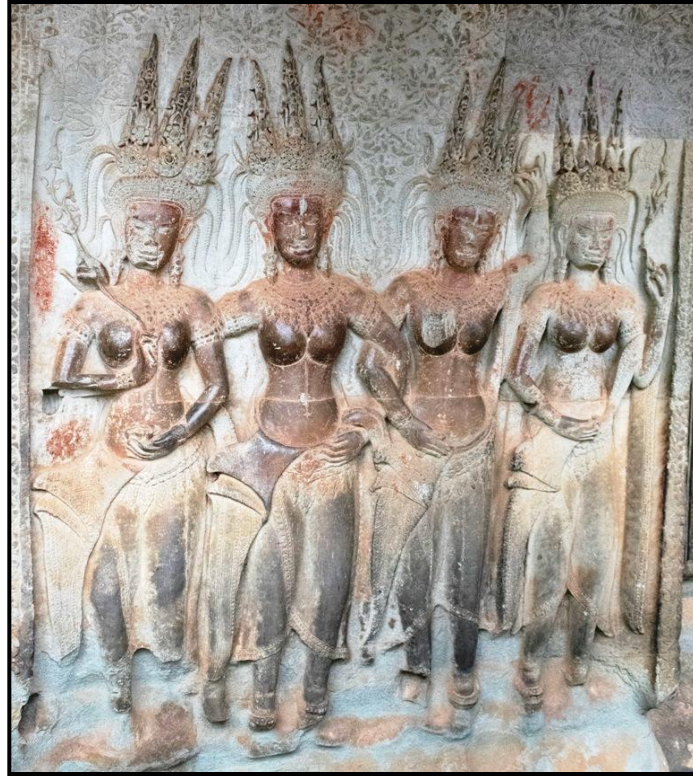


Figure 7. Group of four Apsara-figures. For convenient identification, the Apsara-figures in Figure 7 are numbered as first, second, third, and fourth from the left side to the right side of the image.

Photo by Anirban Ray

In Figure 7, we see four Apsaras again. The second Apsara seems to be the most self-conscious in the group. The left arm of the second Apsara is intertwined with the right arm of the third Apsara. The second Apsara also places her right hand behind the first Apsara (on the right of the second Apsara) and her (the second Apsara's) affinity with the latter (the first Apsara) is shown through a flower stalk/branch held/touched by both. Dynamicity can therefore be attributed to the second Apsara; she seems to be the one keeping this particular group of four Apsaras in a close harmony. Apart from their individual physical beauty, the mutual interactions between the Apsara-figures/reliefs seen in the discussion communicate the warmth and beauty of solidarity of sisterhood and women-women friendships. Manish Kumar and Anwasha Mondal note that the friendship between females involve more "spontan[eous]" communications, attempts to understand each other, and assistance shared between each other; often these involve interaction in the "personal level" (1527–1528, 1518–1531). Between two "female friends" "shar[ing]" and "reveal[ing]" of secrets are noticed, and an intense "emotional attachment" are present (Kumar and Mondal 1527–1528, 1518–1531). The comfort amidst women in perceiving each other might have been noted by the "Khmer" (Angkor) artists as well; as seen in the images discussed in this article, the closeness between the Apsaras is noticed in terms of bodily contact as well as occasional contact with the dresses.

**Conclusion**

Comparing the images incorporated and discussed in this paper, the following points may be summed up:

- (i). Individual facial expression of each Apsara-figure remains open to multiple interpretations; however, the overall representation of each Apsara-figure communicates feminine gracefulness.
- (ii). The headdress, jewelry and costume of the Apsara-figures together constitute a message of intricate beauty. The postures and gestures are important in terms of understanding the femininities and womanly temperaments of the Apsaras. The Apsara-figures make contact with their headdresses and costumes (Srivastava 79, 31–81) to connote coyness and rhythm; these imply simultaneous invitation and escape in their self-presentation.
- (iii). The “Khmer” (Angkor) artists have blended botanical (organic) harmonies with the architectonic (material) intricacies through the additions of the Apsaras-figures (Srivastava 78, 31–81). Thus, their presences on the walls, besides openings, and near the floor project designs resembling embroidery. The temple's walls resemble clothes woven with vegetal and metallic decorations, augmented with repetitive as well as individually unique motifs/figures of Apsaras.
- (iv). The Apsara-sculptures provide the feminine balance to the overall masculine presence felt throughout the temple, in terms of war and power (see Maxwell and Poncar, *Of Gods, Kings, and Men: The Reliefs of Angkor Wat* 6–171). Like the spontaneous and crucial appearances of the Apsaras before the gods, the sages, and the men of rank in Hindu mythology, the elaborate narrative layouts of Angkor Wat are punctuated by the presences of the Apsaras. The Apsara-figures/reliefs seem to temporarily halt a visitor's pace of movement and inspire them to comprehend the Apsaras' graceful postures, reminding the visitors of their mythical counterparts (the Apsaras of mythology) amidst idyllic landscapes.

The “Khmer” (Angkor) art reflected on the grace of the Apsaras as perceived in the Indian subcontinent and found fruition in the decoration of the temple by placements of the figures in specific points, either in singular status or in clusters or as a repeated motif. The gracefulness of the “Khmer” (Angkor) Apsaras, along with their displays of companionship celebrates women-women bonding; in terms of depictions of this mutual female rapport Angkor Wat is a unique and an unparalleled site/space. The evaluation of the temple, its enormous corpus of reliefs, and elaborate layout should also keep a separate register for the perception of the individual and/or group-figures of the Apsaras. When done so, the depictions of the feminine energies can be observed and the appreciation of the female same-gendered bonding can be valued. This article thus urges the readers to perceive the Apsara-figures in Angkor Wat as epitomes of women-beauties opening up to each other, offering liberating feminine companionship and experience.

Note:

In the past I used to write and post my thoughts and observations on the “wall” of my Facebook account on topics like femininities, masculinities, the gendered traits of men and women, with references to women's and men's individual thoughts on art, bodies, beauty, emotions, and friendships/relationships. Simultaneously, I have continued sharing my thoughts on the differences between women's perceptions and men's perceptions in classes in Presidency University with references to texts, arts, and films. Some of the ideas in this paper on mutual female companionship and women's mutual interaction in terms of beautification and dressing are based on and developed from my past observations, my posts on Facebook, and discussions in classes. These have been modified with newer materials in this current paper.

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