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Le Culte de l'Arbre dans l'Inde ancienne.

BY ODETTE VIENNOT

(Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1954.) Vol. LIX of the Annals of the Guimet Museum. Pp. 289, 16 plates.

The "Tree" in the literature and plastic art of India is an enormous subject which would surely have discouraged anyone who lacked the author's wide erudition. When source material in the original is not available, Mme. Viennot turns to the best available translations; her knowledge of Sanskrit insures careful verification and full understanding of the admirable texts cited. The written document complements and clarifies the illustrative material.

An archeologist first of all, the author excels in the analysis of art objects. Now a good description requires a long apprenticeship and qualities hardly suspected by the non-specialist. Appropriate terminology is a necessary, but not a

sufficient, condition. The object must be made real and visible without recourse to fantasy: description must be neither drily hermetic nor effusively lyrical. Descriptive ability springs from "reading" ability; an archeological object is deciphered like hieroglyphic or cuneiform writing, which requires a key. Finally, through comparative analysis involving typical motifs and details, the object, fully realized, takes its place in the history of civilization, here filling in a gap, there suggesting a possible relationship. Mme. Viennot has read widely in both texts and objects; a "museum hand," she knows the feel of archeological objects. Like her master, Przyluski, she calls upon other dis-

ciplines in seeking to extend the horizons of archeology. And what school could have better taught her the interpretation of symbols?

These qualities are striking even in the introduction, where the author describes the oldest and already numerous representations of the tree in the pre-Aryan civilization of the Indus; she then traces the themes as presented on Mesopotamian and Cretan seals.

Two plans were possible—chronological or thematic. The author chose the first, simpler and apparently more logical. An inevitable disadvantage are the repetitions which, interrupting the development, threaten the book's unity. Comparisons of Vedism, Brahmanism, and Buddhism are neither as frequent nor as fully developed as one might wish. The most important, if not the most fully developed, subjects of the first section are the tree of the world and its substitute, the sacrificial stake, in Vedic sacrifice. They are treated a bit summarily. Odette Viennot finds nothing to add to the work of Mircea Eliade on the axis of the world; when she leaves her own field, archeology, she seems to lack assurance. She does not attach great importance to the inverted position of the sacred fig-tree, commented on by René Guénon: "The root is up because it represents the origin and the branches are down because they represent the development of the manifestation; the figure of the tree is upside down because the analogy, here as everywhere else, should be inversely applied."¹ Com-

parison with the ash-tree (not the oak) Yggdrasil is not so evident. Each indeed figures as a tree of the world, but they operate on different levels of human thought.

Later Brahmanism furnishes hardly any new elements. A tendency toward anthropomorphism is noted in Buddhism. Much more at home in this second part, visibly attracted by the human side of Buddhism, the author traces the tree in the biography and iconography of Buddha. The delighted reader follows the author from the gesture of Maya, still one of the magic fecundity rites, to the final Illumination, where the tree of Bodhi opens up a metaphysical universe. These pages are marked by a knowledge of schools and styles even more sure than in the preceding chapters. Mme. Viennot summarizes very subtly the evolution of themes: "Everything makes it appear as though a theme had to attain a certain maturity . . . before it is endowed with symbolic meaning. . . . Later, being as it were drained of its deep significance by the very use to which it is put, it is in turn rejected in favor of another" (p. 155). The book unfortunately ends abruptly; the reader is left to provide a conclusion. With rigorous scientific probity but excessive reserve, Odette Viennot bows too often to judgments which she considers to carry more authority than her own. We would like to see more of the author in a book resulting from such a long, patient effort.

The choice of texts is excellent, the documentation exhaustive. This very abundance somewhat affects the clarity of the exposition. Certain of the texts

1. *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedānta* (London, Luzac, 1945); *L'Homme et son Devenir selon le Védānta* (Paris, Bossard, 1925), p. 68, n. 1.

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need a whole volume of commentary in themselves and judicious pruning would have cut the material down to more manageable size. The author might then, however, have been accused of tampering too freely with the landscape. Wishing to treat every aspect of her subject, she naturally had to present an abridged version which does not fully exploit its riches. We find ourselves somewhat disappointed in that our desire for fuller development, clear-cut conclusions, and the personal theories of the author remains unfulfilled.

This uneasiness probably stems from the title, for the book does not really deal with a "cult." "Representations of the tree" would summarize its contents better, but Odette Viennot may have wished to avoid too narrow a title, such as *Le Trône et son Symbolisme* by Jeannine Auboyer, another disciple of Przyluski. Relatively more limited and thence easier to handle, that work² also marks an effort to escape the bounds of pure archaeology. Plastic and religious representations balance each other harmoniously in Mlle. Auboyer's book. A strong personality, she also draws on texts and expresses herself more fully, although her *Throne*, remarkable as it may seem, might have been brought even more clearly into focus. Throne and Tree join as part of the sacred microcosm of which they are "the essential components" (pp. 57, 59).

The very idea of Odette Viennot's book may have been inspired by Przyluski's the *Grande Déesse*.³ The

Tree and the Goddess-Mother are originally united in the common notion of fecundity. Przyluski sees in the most ancient figurations of the tree a substitute for the Great Mother; this thesis is adopted by his pupil. Although some of his points are open to question, Przyluski is fully in command of his subject. He traces the growth-decadence curve of the Goddess-Mother: fecundity "at first unisexual is then shared between the two sexes" (p. 160), the male wins out, the Great God supplants the Great Goddess. Oversimplifying in the extreme, we would say that Przyluski took the archeological object as his point of departure but went beyond it, and that in spite of everything Jeannine Auboyer is more archeologist than ethnologist. As for Odette Viennot, she has remained even closer to, and retained a very fine sense of, the object itself.

Far from failing to recognize their interdependence, Odette Viennot followed plastic better than religious evolution, but in India more than anywhere else she necessarily encountered almost insurmountable difficulties. We see the tree both in its primitive representations and transposed into the highest realm of philosophical speculation, both of these in several religious systems. Thus we are constantly called upon to shift our point of view, the various levels are not sufficiently differentiated, there is a lack of perspective. Vegetalist and metaphysical interpretations operate side by side. By what stages did the avatar figure progress from the Great Goddess to the Tree of Knowledge filling the universe? How did the two birds which

2. *Le Trône et son Symbolisme dans l'Inde ancienne* (Paris, Presses Universitaires, 1949).

3. Paris, Payot, 1950.

began as acolytes of the Great Mother become the symbol of Action and Knowledge? Finally, desiccated by philosophical commentaries, the tree becomes a mere figure of rhetoric, and a necessarily limited repertory of symbols brings the same images to the minds of both Christian and Brahman theologians.

Such a work, to be well done, called for the erudition of not only an archeologist, but also that of an ethnologist, a linguist, a religious historian, a philosopher, even a theologian. While it is healthy, even indispensable, to break down the barriers between disciplines,

strong specialization remains the first condition of all serious work. Only a few exceptional minds, Przyłuski, Granel, Dumézil among them, have succeeded in mastering several of these disciplines and achieving a real synthesis. They have blazed new trails. It is a pleasure to note that they have produced some disciples. While the effort of Odette Viennot may have surpassed her strength, it is nevertheless of great value. Her book provides the ethnologist as well as the archeologist with both a precious documentary source and material for much fruitful reflection.