

April 15, 2024

*Peer Review of dr. Agnieszka Staszczyk's academic achievements as part of the proceedings for granting Doctor Habilitatus degree.*

I am pleased to accept the invitation from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków to review Dr. Agnieszka Staszczyk's scientific achievements and activity as part of the proceedings for granting the Doctor Habilitatus degree. Having completed the review of her work, I offer my highest recommendation for Dr. Staszczyk's professional contributions to the field of Indian art. I believe they constitute a sufficient basis for admitting her to the further stages of the Doctor Habilitatus degree proceedings. Below I explain how and why I arrived at this favorable conclusion.

Dr. Staszczyk's cv contains ample evidence of sustained scholarship and its dissemination in recent years (the post-doctoral period), most notably through a valuable single-authored monograph on an important topic, several book chapters and journal articles, as well as active participation at national and international scientific conferences. Covering both ancient and contemporary periods and multiple media (sculpture and architecture), the range of Dr. Staszczyk's scholarship is quite impressive and widely accessible because she has published both in English and Polish. Her interpretations are solid and grounded in a thorough understanding of primary sources and secondary literature. Taken together, the publications make a sizeable, fresh contribution to Indian art history, a field that has been very slow to adopt new methodologies, engage with theory, or speak to broader audiences across disciplinary boundaries.

My review is necessarily limited to Dr. Staszczyk's English-language publications and given my expertise in the art of early historic India, specifically Mathura and Gandhara, I have focused on the recent monograph, *Abundance and Fertility. Representations Associated with Child Protection in the Visual Culture of Ancient India* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2023). Two recent journal articles on goat-headed deities (2020) and the *abhaya* gesture (2022) are well-researched and make important contributions to the study of religious iconography, though my review does not address them separately from the monograph because they are incorporated in it. An earlier book chapter on Vaisnava pillars (2012) and an article on the magic weapon (2014) demonstrate Dr. Staszczyk's command over her initial area of specialization: Hindu iconography.

Her newest work focuses on the everyday practical functions of 6 types of spirit deities (as she refers to them in her 2023 monograph) that gained popularity during a seminal period (1<sup>st</sup> three centuries CE) of artistic production in the well-known Mathura region in northern India. The book rightly draws attention to the non-sectarian nature of these deities and their importance to people of all social classes. This is indicated by their representations on a large number of stone and terracotta free standing figures and plaques that are rarely inscribed. While these figures have been published and analyzed individually or in small groups in various museum catalogues

and articles, there is great value in publishing them all together *for the first time* in a monograph focused on highlighting their cultural meanings. Dr. Staszczuk's book stands out methodologically, as it takes readers well beyond old questions of sectarian identities or the issue of origins.

A hallmark of her scholarship is the *equal and thorough* attention paid to visual analysis and textual sources. Unlike traditional Indological studies of iconography that use textual sources to explain the meaning of artworks, her monograph gives primacy to visual analysis and uses original religious and medical literature to understand the cultural context of images. She also examines visual evidence on coins and draws on archaeological findings. In this way, the book is distinct in its approach from recent art historical accounts on Mathura (Doris Srinivasan's 1999 monograph titled *Many Arms, Heads, Arms, and Eyes* with its focus on text-image correlation, and Sonya Rhi Quintanilla's stylistic analysis, *History of Early Stone Sculpture at Mathura*, 2007) as well as Seema Bawa's 2013 historical analysis of gender and sexuality in ancient India.

This is one of the few monographs (if not the only one I know) that draws on critical theory to frame an art historical discussion of sculptures produced in early historic India. Dr. Staszczuk's thesis on the practical function and importance of the sculptures of spirit deities draws on H. Belting's anthropological interpretation of art, R. Kasperowicz's theory of symbols in religious imagery and their effect on viewers, Freedberg's classic study on the emotional power of images, and R. Firth's theory of private and public symbols. This is not only an original approach but also makes the work interesting for a broad audience of scholars and students of both western and Indian art, religion, and philosophy, as well as specialists in critical theory.

The application of evolutionary psychology and theories of cognition to understand the meanings of visual representations of spirit deities also makes the book unique (for Indian art history) and appealing to non-specialists. The main argument is that images of spirit deities fulfilled basic biological and psychological needs of people, primarily mothers and children, by securing safe pregnancies and healthy fetal development. This is well-founded and aligns with recent interpretations of some of these figures by D. Srinivasan (2020). Furthermore, by focusing on issues of contemporary, universal interest (maternal and reproductive health), the book connects ancient subjects to contemporary audiences. This could potentially benefit the field of ancient Indian art history by updating it and making it relevant to future generations of scholars.

Dr. Staszczuk is, however, appropriately cautious while drawing on modern ethnographic studies of practices related to motherhood and childcare in India. She is also careful not to read contemporary feminist concerns into her analysis of ancient images. Rather, her interpretations of the female figures of spirit deities as positive symbols of reproductive power are based on a close visual analysis of gestures, postures, scale, jewelry, body parts, and other minute details on the sculptures. This is supported by an exhaustive multi-disciplinary literature review covering a vast time frame, starting from Vedic to post-Kushan Gupta periods, which she presents in chapters 1 and 2 as well as in each of the sub-sections in Chapter 3. The sheer volume of literature available on goddesses makes this a daunting task and Dr. Staszczuk should be commended for the breadth of disciplines she draws on. Throughout the book, she provides a

clear discussion of the sources and interpretations she relied on and agreed with. The works by R. Mann and David Gordon White fall in this category.

Conversely, in several instances, the book challenges the interpretations both of established Indologists, such as Doris Srinivasan, and of younger historians such as Seema Bawa. The section on the spirit deity Ekanamsa, and the discussion of Hariti and *yakshas* are good examples of this, though the book could include even more independent analysis. Two other publications with rather different approaches to the topics included in Dr. Staszczyk's book came out during the pandemic and just before the global lockdown and perhaps well after the bulk of the book manuscript was completed. These are Doris Srinivasan's 2020 article, titled "Dangerous Devis: Bad Mothers (Matrakas) and Child Snatchers (Balagrahas)," published in *Artibus Asiae* and my article on animal headed deities (2019, *Proceedings of the European Association of South Asian Archaeology*). This would only point to how timely and relevant the subject of Dr. Staszczyk's research is.

Additionally, the up-to-date bibliography and detailed footnotes in the book represent both Euro-American and Indian scholarship and should be of great help to students in multiple disciplines. The book ends with sound conclusions that raise many valuable questions for future research. One of these would be why images of spirit deities became so popular solely in Mathura during this particular historical moment? Overall, Dr. Staszczyk has written a thought provoking, carefully researched, and methodologically innovative first book that is sure to serve as an excellent reference source for all those who may be interested in researching the early Indian iconography of goddesses as well as broader topics of motherhood and childbirth.

In conclusion, the depth and quality of Dr. Staszczyk's research and her interdisciplinary methodology leave no doubt that she will continue to make a serious impact on our field. Her work is accessible, original, and has been published in reputable specialist venues. Moreover, the range of her research suggests that she will be a capable supervisor of independent student work. She has a bright scholarly career ahead of her and I am eager to read more of her excellent research on Mathura and other early historic sites. My close reading of her English language publications and a perusal of her cv indicate that Dr. Staszczyk's academic achievements constitute a sufficient basis for admitting her to the further stages of the Doctor Habilitatus degree proceedings.

Please do not hesitate to e-mail me at [cbasu@stlawu.edu](mailto:cbasu@stlawu.edu) should you have any questions regarding my review or if you need additional clarifications.

Sincerely,



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