

## The *kīrtimukha* in Ancient Indian Art and its Association with the ‘grotesque’

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**Abstract:** In this paper is an attempt, through the lens of visual-rhetoric, towards understanding the origin of the *kīrtimukha* in ancient Indian art, its iconographic evolution and how this motif functions symbolically at manifold levels- from the ontological (as an essential quality of art, as a negation of the material vulnerability of a religious object or monument, as metaphor for the infinite) to the contextual (to serve a particular myth) and the apotropaic- through a plain visualisation of horror. It is in this evolution of purpose, that it came to be associated with the grotesque.

**Keywords:** *Kīrtimukha*, ‘grotesque’ in Indian art, evolution of *kīrtimukha* motif, ‘mythomorphism’.

The *kīrtimukha* motif has its parallels from art all over the world- like the Gorgon head in ancient Greece and the Ouroboros in ancient Egypt and Greece or the *kāla* motif in Southeast Asian art. *Kīrtimukha* has been commonly translated as ‘face of glory’. *Kīrti* when literally translated stands for glory or reputation while *mukha* for face. There can be three interpretations of the meaning of *kīrtimukha*, based on three very differential meanings of the word *kīrti* in both Sanskrit and Pali. These are- *kīrti* meaning fame, glory and achievement (in Chāndogyopaniṣad, in Pali literature, like in the Dīgha Nikāya, it has been described that when a great being like the Shakyamuni travels in this world or in the other world, it is his *kīrti* that goes forth before he even physically arrives etc.), *kīrti* meaning sound or atmosphere (Mahabharata 1.178) and *kīrti* meaning a tangible engagement with the material world (often in a sarcastic sense as in some modern Indian languages), or specifically, meaning a Buddhist cave, a work completed or embarked and in progression (as found in Kanheri inscription). Also, what we understand today by the word *kīrtimukha* may be entirely different from its earlier connotations. If *kīrti* signified a Buddhist cave the word *kīrtimukha* might have suggested the opening or entrance to such a cave, and as such we find the word being used in an entirely different manner- “The hollowed out *maṇḍapa* of the interior was given the literal designation of *kīrti* and the initial opening with which the cutting commenced and which served a very real function in the execution stage was naturally called *kīrtimukha*. The ancient terms for our modern *caitya*-window must have been *kīrtimukha*” (Agrawala 1965). A *kīrti* can also be represented through a free-standing pillar- a *kīrtistambha*- a pillar associated with *kīrti*, which are often found in front of *kīrti* excavations, as we find in Kanheri, Karla etc. On a similar note, *kīrtana* can refer to a temple or a shrine.



Fig. 1. Temple pillar with stylised lion-capital motif, Gupta period 5th C.E., Temple 17, Sanchi. (Photo by author, 2018).

There has been varied opinions in scholarship regarding the origin of this motif. Till now, the main myth that has been interpreted to explain the *kīrtimukha* motif is that from the Paṇḍya Purāṇa concerning a certain demon Jalandhara, who engages in a battle with Siva and succumbs to a curse in the disguise of a boon whereby he perpetually eats his own organs. These myths were put forward as possible explanation for the *kīrtimukha* motif in Indian art history, mostly in the twentieth century, in the likes of Indologists such as Heinrich Zimmer (Zimmer 1942). The *kīrtimukha* motif has also been associated with the story of Rahu, and we also have depictions of *kīrtimukha* as Rāhu, swallowing the moon or *kīrtimukha* with a crescent moon on its head, as found in Nepali Newari paintings (Fig. 14). But this does not explain the occurrence of the motif in non-Śaivite, Jain and Buddhist art and architecture. Other scholars like F.D.K. Bosch interpreted that the *kīrtimukha* alongside the *makara* motif evolved from stylised representations of the *kalpalatā* or the foliage motif. The subject of the origin and the evolution of the *kīrtimukha* motif received little specialised treatment from later scholars of Indian art history and Sanskritists alike. V.S. Agrawala dealt with the *kīrtimukha* or the *pañchavaktra* motif briefly in a section on Gupta art in his book 1965 book *Studies in Indian Art*, where he mostly traces its origin in parallel with the emergence of the lion motif, to different myths, especially Vedic and Śaivite. The word *pañchavaktra* perhaps referred to, in ancient texts, what we mean by the *kīrtimukha* today. Since *kīrti* can be used to mean certain atmospheric qualities, as has been earlier noted, it will be enlightening to study the evolution of the *kīrtimukha* motif from this perspective. The meaning fame or glory does not seem to have any specific attributions to the iconography of *kīrtimukha*.



Fig. 2. Relief outside Udaygiri Cave No. 4 (Vina Cave), 5th C.E., Udaygiri, Madhya Pradesh. (Photo by author, 2018).



Fig 3 & 4. Relief at Sanchi Stupa 2, c. 115-200 B.C.E. (Photo by author, 2018)

The grotesque on the other hand, is a theme of manifold complexities in Indian art. In Indian iconography, we start noticing the *kīrtimukha* as we understand it today, from the Gupta period when it was employed in a large scale in the construction and decoration of temples. By studying the evolution of this motif in Indian iconography- from the depictions of birds and mythic animals in Sanchi stupa 2<sup>1</sup>, and the Sanchi *toranas*, its relation with the lion capital motifs and the serpentine motif to its profuse use in sculptures and in temple architecture, its parallel development with the *makara torana* and ultimately how it came to be associated with and depicted as Garuda can be better understood. The *kīrtimukha* then, is a very generic term; which independently and in compound motifs, finds expression throughout the pre-modern artistic landscape of South Asia.



Fig. 5. Relief on torana, Gateway (backside) Stupa 3, Sanchi, c. 50 B.C.E. (Photo by author, 2018).



Fig. 6. Relief with lion motif, Western Gate, Stupa 1, Sanchi, 1st B.C.E. (Photo by author, 2018).

On the other hand, the history of the grotesque in South Asian art is complicated one. It has been not been studied as an independent or subsidiary theme within the broader context of a work of art; often taking its talismanic implications for granted. The study of the 'grotesque' as such has been fundamentally skewed since the beginning of the study of South Asian art, owing to its association with something 'inferior' or as a typical quality of South Asian art as stereotyped by colonial explorers and archaeologists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Such an approach stymied the study of the 'grotesque' in Indian art for its art historical, philosophical or cultural paradigms. Subsequently, with the coming of the 'native surveyor'/the 'native scholar' and later the generations of historians and archaeologists of

South Asian art in the twentieth century, even who, systematically overlooked this qualitative and thematic aspect, in order to project a more rational image of Indian art and heritage. The idea of lifting Indian/ South Asian at par with the history and heritage of the West and positing it as an

aesthetic and philosophical counterpart and corollary of the West came at the cost of a huge lacunae in South Asian art history today, whereby we are kept in darkness today, of several of its important epistemological foundations, which remained on the margins of history, like that of the *kīrtimukha* motif. The development of the grotesque and that of the *kīrtimukha* South Asian Art has a common history, to the extent that the *kīrtimukha* became representative of the element of grotesque in pre-modern South Asian art.



Fig. 7. Torana, South Gate, Stupa 1, Sanchi, 1st B.C.E. (Photo by author, 2018).

Fig. 8. Lion capital pillar, c. 300 B.C.E., Sanchi Archaeological Museum, Accession no. 2868. (Photo by author, 2018).

The trajectory of the development of the *kīrtimukha* and that of the grotesque in South Asian art can be categorised as: i) zoomorphic: the earliest depictions at Stupa 2 at Sanchi (Figs. 3 & 4), followed by standalone Mauryan lion capitals (Fig 8), followed by the lion motifs in the Sanchi *toranas* (Fig. 6), followed by the larger lion capitals in the *toranas* (Fig. 7), followed by lion capital motifs in temple pillar of Temple 17 at Sanchi (Fig. 1) and the lion-motifs at the entrance of Udaygiri cave no. 4 in Udaygiri, Madhya Pradesh (Fig 2), followed by the parallel development of the *makara* motif ii) phytomorphic: the earliest depiction at Stupa 2 of Sanchi, (in combination with zoomorphic motif- Figs. 3 & 4), followed by the relief on the backside of the *torana* in Stupa 3 at Sanchi (Fig. 5). iii) anthropomorphic: one of the earliest developments in the evolution of the *kīrtimukha* into a more anthropomorphic form can be witnessed in an exquisitely carved fragment of a terracotta motif from the northwestern region of Gāndhāra, now at the Musée Guimet in Paris (Fig. 9) iv) mythomorphic: the earliest examples being the manuscript paintings and different kinds of talismanic artefacts of Tibet and Nepal (Figs. 14, 15, 16), and the transition into which can be observed in the development of the *kīrtimukha* in the Pāla period in eastern India: in its sculptures (Fig. 13) and miniature manuscript paintings.



Fig. 9. Anthropomorphic grotesque/ *kīrtimukha*. c. 200 B.C.E. Gandhāra, Musée Guimet, Paris. Image courtesy: Musée Guimet. (Accession no. not available)

On a close study of Figs. 1-9, many important observations can be made on the early history of the evolution of the grotesque/ *kīrtimukha* in South Asian art. In Figs. 1 & 2, we can find probably one of the earliest depictions of the independent leogryph motif in South Asian art. While in Fig. 2, we find a singular leogryph motif, in Fig. 1, executed at a latter date in the same century, there are three lions: the central figure presented frontally while the other two are depicted in their whole bodies laterally. In Fig. 3, the leogryph motif is further elaborated in order to enhance the lively, playfulness of the animals. Fig. 4, can be seen as a combination of the phytomorphic and the zoomorphic motif: in which, a bird of prey is depicted with a vegetal/ serpentine<sup>ii</sup> motif firmly grasped by its beaks. The exact reason behind the portrayal of such images on the outside walls of a Buddhist stupa are not exactly not known. However it remains beyond doubt that these motifs were already popular in the visual vocabulary of the masses at the time when the Stupa 2 at Sanchi was built around 115-200 B.C.E. A common visual vocabulary which everyone could relate to, irrespective of the faith one adhered to, became a major vehicle for visual communication between monastic establishments and the common people in the early-historic period. This is the reason that these precursors of the elabor

ate South Asian 'grotesque' and their different compositional elements later become adopted by all major religious iconographic systems in the subcontinent. This particular relief in Fig. 4 is also an early example of the development of iconographic type in which a primarily serpentine motif is seen vanquished by an avian counterpart. This later gets appropriated and translated by the motif of a *garuda* devouring a snake, or a flying anthro-avian figure in compositional conjunction with one or more than one serpents, as can be seen in the seventeenth century painting from Tibet (Fig. 14): which is a common iconographic element of Tibetan and Nepali paintings executed from the fifteenth century onwards. Fig. 5 is a unique example of the representation of the 'grotesque' in early South Asian art. This huge panel, elaborately carved on both sides is part of the bottom architrave of the only gateway of the Stupa 3 at Sanchi. Executed in around 50 B.C.E., the relief panel shows a continuous linear vegetal motif, also known as *kalpalatā*, meaning a wish-fulfilling magical vegetation, which emerges from the mouths of pot-bellied dwarfs. The central dwarf holds the *kalpalatā* with his two hands, while there are flying dwarfs who too emanate their own *kalpalatā*, or can be read as devouring them. The dwarfs who are represented both at the origin and telos, may stand for natural elements and nature itself<sup>iii</sup>. Fig. 6 is a representation of the lion motif but in a kind of variation: with a palmette motif at the bottom on which stand three lions, resting only on their dorsal paws and amplifying motion and aggression. Two of them are depicted laterally while the central figure is shown frontally. The impact of Greco-Buddhist art of the northwest and Gāndhāra on the development of Buddhist iconography

and visual vocabulary in the early historic period in the far reaches of the subcontinent, can be verified by the presence of different foreign-influenced motifs and compositional strategies, as is found throughout in the second phase of artistic activity at the site of Sanchi. The ‘grotesque’ in South Asian art did not develop in isolation from the arts of the rest of the world.



Fig 10: Torana fragments with kīrtimukha, c. 10th C.E. Vidisha District Museum, Madhya Pradesh.



Fig 11: Torana fragments with kīrtimukha, c. 12th-13th C.E., Beejamandal Archaeological Site, Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh.



Fig. 12: Torana fragment with *kīrtimukha*, c. 12th-13th C.E. Beejamandal Archaeological Site, Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh. (Photo by author, 2018).

Fig. 7 which shows the south gate of Stupa 1 at Sanchi, executed around the 1st B.C.E. shows two false lion capitals adorning the *torana*. This became a popular motif, already popularised by the Mauryan pillars from around 300 B.C.E (Fig. 8.) and was depicted profusely in the art of this period. It becomes imperative that the lion-motif became important in the representation of pan-geographical and pan-directional authority. The notion of the four directions, in a slight departure from the *pañchavaktra* motif. But the idea of the pervasion of *kīrti*, and its' attributes atmospheric quantification which is rather an indexicality in the overall landscape of iconographic communication, remains dominant.



Fig. 13. Fragment of stele with *kīrtimukha*, northern Bengal, Pāla period, Coochbehar Palace Museum. (Photo by author, 2016).



Fig. 9 is a representation of an anthropomorphic grotesque, executed c. 200 B.C.E. in the northwestern region of Gāndhara. Since it is a fragment of an artefact, it cannot be ascertained whether it was part of a larger relief or stele. On closer examination, with pointed ears, this can be categorised as a combination of the zoomorphic and anthropomorphic form. Showing typical features of Greco-Buddhist art like curled hair and moustaches, a large expressive set of eyes and a life-like facial representation in altorilievo, this particular image is an example of the grotesque depicted in a way, which would remain rare in South Asian art at its time.



Fig 14: Thangka painting of Siddhalakṣmīdevī held by Mahākāla depicting *kīrtimukha* on top with crescent moon, Ground mineral pigment on cotton, Tibet, c. seventeenth century, Rubin Museum of Art (accession number not available). Image courtesy: Rubin Museum of Art.

As observed earlier, often a combination of the first three i.e., the phytomorphic, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic can be found in the representation of a *kīrtimukha* or the ‘grotesque’. The region of Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh, earlier known as Bhelsa district, astoundingly rich in artefacts have remains of such types of grotesque and *kīrtimukha* motifs, now detached from their original location and purpose- these are either fragments of stele or of temple lintels and gateways (Figs. 10-12). In Fig. 10, two heads are represented, from whose mouths originate vegetal motifs in two opposite directions. This can be studied in light of the pot-bellied dwarfs in Fig. 5. Executed around the tenth and eleventh C.E., this shows the iconographic evolution of this type, its continued importance and its amalgamation into regional or specific religious iconographic vocabulary. Figs. 11 & 12 are even later examples from the same region in central India, executed around the 12th and 13th C.E. which show a combination of the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic *kīrtimukha*, and also shows a lot of variation in the depiction of facial features, as well as the fact that the vegetal motif is here replaced by two *makaras* emerging from their

mouths in opposite directions. The central figures in Figs. 11 and 12 can be seen as absorbed into the overall design motif of the panel, so much so that it cannot be properly distinguished whether they are zoomorphic or anthropomorphic or a combination of the two. This variation in the depiction of the *kīrtimukha* is highly prevalent from the tenth C.E. in north, central and western India. These kind of *kīrtimukha* can be found *in situ* within their original compositional panels at different temple sites spread throughout central India, associated with the rule of the Chandelas and the Gurjara-Pratiharas, executed between the eighth and thirteenth centuries.

In eastern India and Bangladesh, on the other hand, in the art works produced between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, either within the region of the political power of the Pāla dynasty or other local dynasties, one is able to witness the formalistic transition (which arises from the transformation of the *kīrtimukha* into a 'mythomorphic' entity, which finds full expression in Tibetan and Nepali art (Figs. 14-16) of the later centuries. Fig 13 is an image of a grandly carved stele from the region of Varendrī in northern Bengal, executed during the Pāla period between the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It is evident that it was part of a much larger sculpture. Such kind of elaborately decorated steles are a common feature of Pāla period Buddhist art in eastern India, where they accompany many important Buddhist deities like Avalokiteśvara and Tārā as well as popular Bhramanical deities like Viṣṇu and Umāliṅgamūrti images and also in the sculptures of regional cultic deities like the different snake goddesses. In the Pāla period, the *kīrtimukha* is often depicted as an open mouth, at times accompanied by emanating vegetal motifs which are carved in bas-relief as compared to the dominant overarching *kīrtimukha* at the top. On the development and extent of popularity of the *kīrtimukha* motif and on how this motif was not reserved not for the art of any particular religion, but pervaded as it already has established itself: as an element of design; Gouriswar Bhattacharya's 2008 article throws much light on this hitherto lesser understood motif in the Pāla period arts of eastern India. This large open mouth has also been termed as *grāsa*, a term which is quite apt and can be used particularly for the description of the *kīrtimukha* as found in images from eastern India. The *grāsa*, a term underlying mythomorphism in itself<sup>v</sup>, is an important formal vehicle for the complete mythomorphic evolution of the *kīrtimukha*. Fig. 14 is a magnificent Tibetan painting from the seventeenth century depicting the goddess Siddhalakṣmīdevī held by Mahākāladeva. Siddhalakṣmīdevī is a Bhramanical deity, a wrathful manifestation of *devī*, who was popularly worshipped during the rule of the Mallas in the Kathmandu valley of Nepal between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. In this image the evolution of the *kīrtimukha* stems from the earliest depictions of vanquishing a serpent by an avian creature as seen in Stupa 2 at Sanchi (Fig. 4). However, through this evolution, it has now become an iconographic type: depicting a winged *kīrtimukha* with crescent moon accompanied by serpents on both sides, which can no longer be classified into our three categories of formal expression of zoomorphic, phytomorphic or anthropomorphic. This demands for a new category, in which the mythical attributes of the development of an iconographic type semantically outweighs its idiomatic attributes, i.e., 'mythomorphic'. While the idiomatic attributes of design, composition and iconographic evolution are contextual and specific to its period of conception, the mythic attributes of folklore, popular worship and formation of common vocabulary cannot be limited to a particular context or geographical region. By the seventeenth century, when this exquisite *thangka* painting in Fig. 14 was executed, there has not only been a thorough transformation in religious landscape in the subcontinent, which has been denoted by centuries of assimilation, syncretism and appropriation through mythological contexts, iconography and in every formal paradigm of South Asian art. As such, the denotation of the 'grotesque' had become a representation which required this critical transformation in order to withstand the forces of appropriation, making it formally stand out

from the rest- an array of several iconographic variations, and in order to retain the idea behind its conception- that of being a part of the visual vocabulary of effective communication with the masses (now in seventeenth century Tibet). Figs. 15 and 16 are examples of two anthropomorphic grotesque/ *kīrtimukha* figures, depicted with round eyes, a pair of hands, raised accentuated eyebrows and protruding teeth. Both of them were executed in gilt metal in the nineteenth century in Tibet and were used for apotropaic purposes.

The anthropomorphic grotesque has been present in Indian art from its very beginning. This is largely due to the fact that nature itself has been anthropomorphically depicted since the earliest examples of Indian art. Similarly, the phytomorphic and zoomorphic forms also co-existed as suitable vehicles for representation of the ‘grotesque’ or of representing the values that would illustrate itself as the *kīrtimukha* motif later. Albeit from its origins in regional narratives, folklores and visual commonality across sects and sets, it slowly became an important category in itself. From the leogryph and the *pañchavaktra* motif to its gradual appropriation as a fundamental element of design in pre-modern South Asian art has been a long journey.



(L - R) Fig. 15 & Fig 16: *Kīrtimukha*, gilt metal, c. 19th C.E., Tibet, private collection. Image courtesy: [www.himalayanart.org](http://www.himalayanart.org)

It can be also concluded from this study that the ‘apotropaic’ works at two different levels in South Asian art, especially in the context of the development of the *kīrtimukha* and the ‘grotesque’: firstly, that of *performing* the utilitarian function of talismanic repulsion of negative and evil forces of the mundane world; and secondly, that of representing the force that withstands temporality. By understanding the trajectory of the development of the *kīrtimukha* motif conceptually as well as formally, the larger question is thrown at us: that of the importance of the ‘grotesque’ in the development of Indian aesthetics and how, even after facing scholarly disfavour during a large part of the twentieth century, it remains under-investigated at various levels. Since the *kīrtimukha* / ‘grotesque’ occupies such a seminal and originary significance in the episteme of South Asian arts and artistic conception and in the ontology of South Asian aesthetic perception, a close look at the regional specific developments of the *kīrtimukha*/ ‘grotesque’, alongside a study of its preceding, contemporary and succeeding similar visuality and evolution of visual vocabulary from world art history, can be fairly demanded.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Which included a number of depictions with foreign influences- the griffin, the Anguipede, the Bactrian camel, the centaur etc. Foreign inspirations behind the evolution of the lion-capital motif also haven't been ruled out.

<sup>ii</sup> The difference between the serpentine motif and the vegetal motif is often not well demarcated in early-historic South Asian art. Though foliage pattern can be easily distinguished, the linear vegetal motif remains elusive; the evolution of the *kalpalatā* demands to be studied in tandem with this kind of linear vegetal motif, which also shows remarkable variations through the length and breadth of the subcontinent, from at least as early as the 300 B.C.E.

<sup>iii</sup> *Yakṣas* and *yakṣiṇīs* form an important rupture in the imagination of nature in pre-modern South Asian art.

<sup>iv</sup> Owing to its association with the more personified planetary entities Rāhu and Ketu, the only two liminal shadow deities in the conceptual and iconographic imagination of the *navagraha*.

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