COSMIC LANDSCAPES

After a mini-season of talks on art and literature last year at the Raul Speek Gallery in Solva, July sees the start of a new programme – this time accompanied by food and wine. Highlights include Ian McDonald's talk on Indian art and architecture, **IndianAsia***, on Wednesday 8 July; and* **Circling the Square***, on the traditional architecture of Japan on Wednesday 5 August.*

(see www.raulspeek.co.uk or 00 44 (0)1437 721907 for more details)

' "Angkor lies abandoned in the jungle" '

Image © Ian McDonald

'All roads in Asia lead from India'

Ananda Coomaraswamy,
Sri Lankan art historian
and philosopher

In the British Museum's 2009 summer exhibition, 'Garden & Cosmos: The Royal Paintings of Jodhpur', an 18th-century Rajasthani painting depicts a north Indian landscape reeling under the impact of the monsoon. In *Rama and Lakshmana Wait Out the Monsoon Rain*, the eponymous hero of the great Indian epic, the *Ramayana*, and his brother perch on a hillside seemingly made of peacock-blue petal-like rocks. Below them, elephants, tigers and deer cavort ecstatically in a downpour that covers the landscape in a series of white stair-rods, eerily reminiscent of those deployed in Hiroshige's near-contemporary prints of the rain-drenched bridges and rivers of Edo -period Japan.

These fantastical north-Indian paintings, released from the mighty Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur and never before seen in Europe, are a testament to the profound influence of landscape on the art of India, and, through its extraordinary cultural reach, most of southeast Asia. In the art of staunchly non-Hindu Thailand, Rama reappears – this time resplendent in flamed-topped Siamese-royal headgear – to vanquish his foes all over again in a Thai epic known, rather familiarly, as the *Ramakien*. In Bangkok's Grand Palace, the walls of the Wat Phra Kaew temple are adorned with gold-flecked murals of the lush landscapes of ancient Ceylon, home of Rama's foe, the demon-king Ravana, through which the Hindu hero-god storms with his army of monkey-helpers.

Rama in his chariot, Bangkok, Thailand

That the fiercely independent-minded Thais should be connected so closely to Indian and Sri Lankan culture (no less than nine of their monarchs have been named 'Rama') should come as no surprise when one realises that their land was once the westernmost province of the huge Khmer Empire, which contained perhaps the greatest ever export of Indian

IAN McDONALD *artist*

Jagganath Temple, India Image © Ian McDonald

Kamakura Shrine, Japan Image © Ian McDonald

temple culture. The monumental Khmer temple of Angkor Wat, the largest stone building ever constructed, is a three-dimensional diagram of the five cosmic mountains of the Hindu universe, surrounded by its seven bountiful seas in the form of a vast sequence of artificial lakes.

In its approximation of sacred landscape, Angkor Wat far exceeds even the breathtaking temple towers (known as *shikharas*) of its parent culture on the Indian subcontinent, such as the soaring Temple of Jagganath at Puri on India's eastern Orissa coast, surmounted by the wheel and flag of the god Vishnu and visible far out to sea; and the Meenakshi Temple deep in the southern Tamil heartlands, whose fantastically carved, towering gatehouses sprout winking red lights to ward off passing aircraft bound for Madurai airport. Angkor Wat retains such a hold on the Khmer national consciousness that its profile even features on the Cambodian flag – surely a visual conceit to rival the Welsh dragon in a field otherwise dominated by repetitive stripes of various national colours, accompanied by the occasional indentikit star!

I was reminded of Angkor on reading Raul Speek's piece on Landscape in the previous edition of ART*icle*. Speek mentioned the ancient Incas' drive to reflect the landscape around them in their superbly executed masonry constructions. Here, surely, was a counterpart to the temple-mountains I had encountered in India? Furthermore, this reverence for the landscape would seem to be shared, up until the modern era at least, by all Asian, as well as Meso-American, cultures – no matter how urban they might become. In fine-art terms, Japanese respect for their sacred peak *Fuji-san* ensured that its distinctive cone was often included in the background of woodblock prints of the new eastern capital from the 17th century onwards – as if the 100km-distant Mt Fuji were merely at the end of a Tokyo side street. And, although they cannot compete with India's soaring *shikaras* in blending landscape directly into architecture, it should not be forgotten that the Japanese attachment to their often preciously scant landscape is such that the oversailing roofs and sturdy timbers of Shinto shrines originated in the simple wooden forms of storehouses for rice: that most essential product of the Asian landscape – and of those teeming monsoons themselves.