INTRODUCTION

PORTRAITURE, A PROBLEMATIC ISSUE

There is something fatal about a portrait. It has a life of its own.

Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

Portraiture is one of the most explored fields in art history: numerous books, papers and even exhibitions have been devoted to it. However this topic remains difficult to grasp, and partly elusive. The first reason is that it is not really an artistic ‘genre’, as is, for instance, landscape painting—or, it would be more exact to say that it is not always (or, necessarily) an artistic genre. Being the representation of real persons (often deemed as ‘sitters’), it is a special kind of image, dealing with a lot of conventions, some purely ‘artistic’, others much more ‘social’ and ‘historical’. As a matter of fact, portraiture is very much the product of the society which leads to its creation—and, as such, it has also a lot to reveal about this society. Its artistic, or even its aesthetic, appreciation is only one of the ways it should be looked at—and sometimes this is the less important, compared to other considerations (social, economic, political, etc.).

In the history of Western art, the importance of portraiture is widely acknowledged but, even there, global and conceptual studies are rather rare (and most of them have been attempted recently)\(^1\)—probably because it seems relevant to study it in a specific context whereas a general definition appears to be problematic. However, very often, it is said—or at least implied—that portraiture is an invention of the West and that its existence in other civilizations is debatable. This is the case with Indian art, before the Mughal period. In other words, it is often argued that portraiture is virtually non-existent in pre-sixteenth

\(^1\) Even if the existence of portraiture in Far Eastern art has not been denied in the same way as for South Asian art (especially for Japan), comprehensive studies were also lacking till the publishing of Dietrich Seckel’s three volumes on the subject: Das Porträt in Ostasien—Band 1: Einführung und Teil I: Porträt-Typen (Heidelberg: Universitätverlag C. Winter, 1997), Band 3: Porträt-Funktionen (1999), Band 2, Teil II: Porträt-Gestaltung (2005).
century art and that its appearance is due to an impulse from outside (Persia and Europe). Of course, before that time, some statues were known to represent real persons and therefore correspond more or less to what is (or should be) a portrait: this is the case of the famous Kanishka from Mathura, the bronze group of Kṛṣṇadevarāya and his queens from Tirupati, or, farther in Southeast Asia, the various statues of the Khmer king Jayavarman VII. But these were almost always considered as strange exceptions.

In the more recent decades, specialised studies, dealing with a specific period and/or region or, even, milieu, have deeply increased our knowledge of Indian art and in the course of these books and papers, a lot of images have emerged which are labelled ‘portraits’, in a way or another. Portraiture, thus, does not seem any more to be an exception or a peculiarity. Because the topic is now much less neglected, it is probably time to propose a more conceptual and broad approach of portraiture in early India. Of course, by tempting such an approach I do not pretend to write a general history of portraiture in India, nor to cover all the aspects of the problem. But my purpose is to show that:

1. In early India portraits were numerous and often played an important role in the development of art and imagery;
2. The practice is ancient and central to the Indian civilization; foreign influences may naturally have occurred but they do not explain the whole phenomenon;
3. Portraiture is a general term behind which lay very different kinds of images, according to their shape, their nature and their purpose;
4. There is a specificity of portraiture in India, as compared with other civilizations.

It is then my hope that this book can help raise further questions, useful for more specialised studies. In the following pages, I will try to address some general questions such as the identification of portraits, the issue of likeness, the origin of portraiture, its functions and its relation to cults, etc., by mixing the analysis of some selected images with the studies of written sources. As will be apparent, the reading of inscriptions or more literary texts is of vital importance not only for identifying portraits but also to understand the way such images were perceived and used.

Besides, even if this book will mainly focus on South Asia before the rise of the Mughal rule, I will sometimes allow myself some incur-