

The Spatial Journey of the Visual Narratives of Assam

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Abstract: This paper presents an overview on the spatial journey of the visual narratives of Assam.

Keywords: spatial journey, visual narratives

1. Introduction

Traditionally we all believe that art imitates life. The painter represents what he or she sees by producing a scene on a canvas and the sculptor does the same with. A photographer or film maker does it even more directly. A writer describes and interprets the art forms in his or her books. Distinguishing characteristics of the visual narrative include: a persuasive story with a point of view, high quality images, still or moving, subject matter with great social, environmental, or spiritual value, an appeal (explicit or implicit) for transformation in attitudes and behaviours.

For someone developing a visual story, the most important thing to ask is 'what is the story you really want to tell?' Answering that can mean working through these questions: what is the issue? what will be the events/moments? If needed, who are the characters? or what is the context?. But some have questioned the one-way nature of visual narrative by arguing that art also changes the way we view the world. Throughout history, it has always been the case that visual narrative has the power to change society, especially when new media are used to express an idea. During the First World War, for example, movie cameras were used for the first time to record trench warfare – when the film was shown in cinemas in Britain, audiences ran out screaming. This led to the government censoring further such use of such a powerful medium. Thus, the art of the visual-narrative is not a new phenomenon. Artists and designers have been using images to tell stories for thousands of years. From cave paintings to computer animations; they have been manipulating visual elements and tailoring techniques to attract our attention; to stimulate our interest; and to entice us into a process of interpretation and story making. Indeed; it is a tradition that has worked its way successfully through time; adapting along the way to meet the advancements of each successive and increasingly visual generation.

The aim of this paper is to explore the spatial journey of the visual-narrative of Assam. The first part of the paper highlights upon the contributions of Srimanta Sankardava the second part

focuses upon the Temple architecture of Assam which also narrates and acts as a storyteller to the viewers. The third part will highlight about the Durga puja festival as a hegemonic discourse via visual language and the fourth part concludes the paper.

A few line from the *Mahabahu Brahmaputra* composed and sung by Bhupen Hazarika says *Xudar kannakubjare pora barobhuyan aahisile Xei bongxote xonkordeu eyaate jonomila.....* does mentioned in his beautiful lyrical about Srimanta Shankardava who was born in Assam. There was a unique religious renaissance in India during the 15th and 16th centuries. It helped dissemination of the Bhakti philosophy and glories of holy company as propounded by the Bhagavatpurana. Alongside was spread of *Namdharma* or faith in supreme one for the ultimate deliverance. A kind of monistic belief was preached to remove confusion from the common men's minds over a pantheon. After his career as a student was over, he assume the title of Bar Bhuyan for the purpose of ruling the Bhuyan territory. At the age of nineteen he wrote a play *Chihnayatra* and staged it by using paintings, percussion, etc. It was in fact, the beginning of modern theatre in east India. Thus, the beginning of a new era in visual narrative was initiated by Shankardava. The year was AD 1468, from the chronological point of view, Sankaradeva was the first man in the theatre world in Assam who used a stage screen. *Chihnayatra* is Sankaradeva's memorable creation. The staging of the play demolished the barriers between the high and the low. Sankaradeva allowed equal latitude for acting to his actors who were drawn from both the so-called upper caste of Brahmins and Kayasthas and the lower stratum of society such as Kamara, Kahar, Sonari, Rajat and Kaivarta. Here we could see the identity and ethnicity of multicultural space through his incitation to encourage all class of people in the society to participate in the religious theatre. Shankardeva introduced the performing arts which is locally know as the *Bhawna* and the theatre presentation of mythological stories revolved around Assamese socio-cultural environment. The *Bhawna* (performing dance) practiced under his preaching is now recognised worldwide. It is interesting to notice that during the *Bhawna* different kinds of mask are worn by the performer and they are to be well appreciated as they are the identity of the indigenous place. The visual as well as performing arts scenario of Assam experienced a revolutionary change during the time

of Shankardava. The xatriya Dance is now recognised as one of the Indian classical dance which was introduced by Shankardeva.

Srimanta Sankaradeva was a poet, writer, lyricist, composer, playwright, actor, singer, instrumentalist and author of a new religion. If all these attainments are overlooked, Sankaradeva will still be remembered for his unforgettable creation 'Namghar'. His contribution in the field of Visual Arts is to be commendable. It is due to his initiation that Assam is now the storehouse of the treasured illuminated manuscripts. Along with the illuminated manuscripts the famous Vrindavani Vastra—the cloth of Vrindavan: a 120 x 60 cubits tapestry depicted the *lilas* of Lord Krishna at Vrindavan through richly woven and embroidered designs on silk. A specimen, believed to be a part of this work, is at Paris. The vastra, commissioned by Chilarai, was woven by twelve master weavers in Barpeta under the supervision of Sankaradeva probably between 1565 and 1568. It was housed in the Madhupur sattras but it disappeared at some point. It is believed this cloth made its way to Tibet and from there to its present place Vrindavani vastra – parts of this work are preserved in London. Shankardava engaged the weavers of Tantikuchi, near Barpeta, to weave a forty-yard long tapestry panel depicting Krishna's early life in Vrindavan. Sankaradeva provided the designs to be woven, chose the various colours of thread to be used, and personally supervised the weaving. It took about a year to complete and, deriving its name from its theme, came to be known as the Vrindavani Vastra.

When Vrindavani Vastra was first unveiled for viewing, people were astounded to see the true-to-life depictions of Krishna's activities in Vrindavana, the exuberant colours and woven captions, and exclaimed that the cloth has come from the heavens and from makers on the earth. Not all the images are Vrindavan-lila scenes. As the images also portrays, the dasavatar, Garuda and other mythical figures woven into the tapestry.

Along with performing art traditional paintings and wood carving of Assam is the reflection of the socio cultural picture. The tradition of painting in Assam can be traced back to several centuries in the past. The gifts presented to Hiuen Tsang and Harshavardhana by Kumar Bhaskara, the king of Kamrupa, included a number of paintings and painted objects, some done on exclusive Assam silk. Assamese literature of the medieval period abounds in references to chitrakars and patuas who were expert painters.. Woodwork is an ancient Assamese craft. Exquisite wood carvings are seen mostly on doors, walls, beams, ceilings and the splendid carved sinhasans used in prayer houses. Decorative panels in the royal Ahom palaces of the past and the 600-year old sattras or vaisnavite monasteries are intricately carved in wood.

Paintings in manuscripts are essentially thematic. They are also products of an 'ethnic time', if I am permitted to use this term, the time with its own socio-political and other dimensions. Because of the thematic nature, titles of these

paintings, unlike the painting of our time, are of special significance. They unequivocally lead the viewers in the right direction of interpretation. They also render the possibility of reconstructing the narratives by contemporary and future viewers.

Pictorial representation in the sense stipulated here does not function as an autonomous system. Nor the aesthetic as a self-sufficient category of experience is applied here. *Hastividyarnava* and *Gita Govinda* are a kind of encyclopedia, the format of which is artistic. It surely has an aesthetic dimension. But, it is not the aesthetic *per se* that constitutes its essence. It is essentially purposive and performs an educational role by transforming the knowledge system regarding fostering and taming elephants, and also, its associated angles in the case of the manuscript *Hastividranava* and the life of lord Krishna in the case of *Gita Govinda* manuscript. In doing so it envisages a perspective for transferring a specialized form of knowledge and knowledge about its associated life-world from one age to another is reflected in such transference. One of the most important aspects of the way of life attained by a cultural group is its activity in development of art. On the whole, art is the result of human activities for expressing their cultural aspirations. Also, cultural heritage of a period is in no way separable from the social conditions of the period.

An interpretative understanding of the folios of the Assamese manuscript with paintings makes it evident that this manuscript is an important landmark in the history of Assamese literature and painting style. The Manuscript acted as a means for conserving and transmitting culture and learning, representing the artistic sensibilities of the people. The Ahom kings patronized and supported a team of clerks and copyists under the supervision of an officer. It also provides important information about the manners and customs of the people at that time. Thereafter, it also reports about the use of colours in a different manner and technique to paint the tuskars. For the first time artists from outside the region of Assam were employed, whose names were Dilbar and Dosai from Delhi to paint the manuscript. Therefore, a totally new style of painting was introduced. The painters added new elements to the paintings, maintaining a strong folk element. In addition, this was for the first time a foreign influence could be traced in this art form—the influence of the Mughal miniatures. About the most remarkable part of the paintings, Basil Gray observes: "Each human, animal and other composition was framed in a kind of architectural niches".

Another remarkable dimension of this manuscript is that the two Muslim artists Dilbar and Dosai; were descendents of Mughal court. The social aspect of that time is mirrored in the illustrations. Such as, the Royal procession Royal recreations are also found depicted in detail which show performances by musicians and dancers dressed in garbs representing different regions of India. Tussle figures of elephant and buffaloes, the movement of the elephants and their relaxation are skilfully painted.

The architectural settings are painted in such a manner that they look like frames through which the faces of the female figures are painted to suggest that they are enjoying the 'outer' world through the windows and at the same time their royal status. The buildings are painted in a way that they appeared to come out of the picture frame. The architecture is suggestive of typical Mughal influence. The folk element was blended with foreign influence for the first time in Assamese folk art. Traditional uses of visual and performing art media in Assam were primarily for entertainment, social religious and persuasive communication. There have been sporadic efforts to involve these media for conveying development messages through mass-media agencies. Even when modern media have penetrated isolated areas, the older forms maintain their validity, particularly when used to influence attitudes, instigate action and promote change. Extensive experience shown that traditional forms of communication can be effective in dispelling the superstitions, archaic perceptions and unscientific that people have inherited as part of traditions and which are difficult to modify if the benefits of change are hard to demonstrate. Along with the other part of India, Assam also has an indigenous visual and performing art and the application of these forms of art can be amalgamated with the contemporary media world. Therefore, the contribution that Srimanta Sankardava made in regard to the visual culture is to be acknowledged it is because of his effort that Assam portrays an unique socio cultural identity.

Temple architecture of Assam also narrates and acts as a storyteller to the viewers. I can say that Culture and history of Assam has been engraved on the temple walls. Ancient Assam was rule by several kingdoms that included the Varmanas, Salstambhas and Kamarupa-Palas. The Ahom and Koch dynasties followed later. Each of these kingdoms has left behind their artistic wizardry that have been immortalised in the form temple sculpture in Assam. However not many of these temples could survive the ravages of time. But certain images have been excavated from different parts of Assam which speak volumes about the ancient sculpture architecture of this Northeast Indian state. Although the temple sculpture of Assam essentially follows the Nagara style of architecture but we can see indigenusness in the design of the sculptures. If compared to the temple architecture of Khajuraho and Orissa there is a difference in terms of the architecture and the conventional factors, but the sculptures of Assam does have a unique character in itself in contexts to the subject matter. Due to a number of secondary sources available in describing Khajuraho and Orissan temple architecture almost the entire world have some kind of knowledge about them but what about the available materials of the temple architecture of Assam, we still have a long way to go. There are a lot of unquoted and undiscovered zone in the study of the sculptures, one such aspect is the erotic sculptures from Madan Kamdava and Pingaleswar temple some few hours from Guwahati. The temple architecture of Assam indeed represents the human

anatomy as well as the life one experience throughout. The temples not only depicted the ichnographically curved God and Goddesses but the entire 'life world'. Assam which was once known as Kamarupa Desa or Pragjyotishapura has been the centre of Shakti worship for centuries. Also held in reverence here have been the Sivaite, Vaishnava and the centres of Sun Worship.

When one mentions about temples of Assam, Kamakhya Temple is worldwide popular, but along with the Kamakhya temple there are many important temples in context to their aesthetic beauty as well as the subject represented on the temple walls. Pingalesvara temple, of Assam may be a lesser know temple when compared to the Kamakhya Temple of Assam. But, this temple can indeed be called the Khajuraho of the East; not because of the style and structure but because of the subject matter which is similar to that of the Khajuraho temple. Pingalesvara temple is situated near Karara north of Guwahati, Assam. Madan Kamdev, another ruined stone temple which is famous for its erotic sculptures, is located within the vicinity of the Pingalesvara temple, and both the temples are unique in itself because they represent and preserve the most authentic documents of the extreme erotic sculptures. Love making and copulating sculptures are shown in their extreme posture.

Ancient Indian architectural treatises state that a temple lacking erotic imagery would be ineffective and maleficent. According to Amrit Kumar Nath published an article on the sculptures of Pingalesvara temple in the newspaper Amrit Bajar Pratika (dated 1971, 12 Jun), "*Sculptural ruins of an ancient temple were discovered at Pingaleswar village about 25 miles from Gauhati, while the foundations of a new temples were being dug last year. While most of the ruins still remain underground due to non-excavation, the few sculptural pieces so far collected throw interesting light on the cultural heritage of ancient Kamarupa. Different erotic figures including those showing union between human and animal figures, mark out the Pingaleswar relics quite distinctly from other relies*"

Most of the architectural pieces contain numerous amorous figures. Erotic figures are generally carved on the panels of the *Śaiva* and *Śāktā* shrines. Sir William Rothenstein suggested that erotic figures were a major part of the Tantric attitude which bears the characteristic of Indian religious philosophy occurring 10th -12th C. A.D. These erotic sculptures have the support of the traditional practices of centuries of temple architecture and have been enjoined by the sacred texts such as *Kāmsōtra*. In this *Pingalesvara* site, there are not only men and women indulged in intercourse but even human beings are depicted enjoying with bestiality. One very unique sculptural relics of this temple shows a women extends her right leg upward and left leg in sitting posture illustrates a scene of masturbation which is unquestionably very rare if judged with that of the erotic sculptures of Khajuraho and Konark. In fact there are number of masturbation scene of men and women curved on the walls and panels of Pingalesvara Temple.

Another interesting part of carved stone renders in the temple shows three different erotic scenes. The first scene indicates that a female human figure engaged in sexual union with an unidentified animal. The right hand of the animal touches the breast of woman. The middle scene presents a huge nude beard man who is sitting in frontal position. On the upper both sides of the beard man depicts a couple of bird sitting on his hand. The last scene represents two beard men in a position indulging in homosexual activity which is a very rare scene is very rare in Indian temple sculptures.

Many esteem scholars like Devangana Desi, Tapati Guha Thakurty, Kramrisch, indeed enlightened the readers about the purpose of depiction of the erotic sculptures in hindu temple architecture and all have indeed pointed out that it was the union of shiva with Shakti. Tapati Guha Thakurty explains that the pleasures and desires of the eye are tamed by the compulsion to explain and understand the erotic objects, in all their visibility get wrapped in a growing density of interpretation. But this process is never complete or final; there is always a spillover from the scholarly to the salacious, from the subject of art and religion to that of sex. Amorous couples including devine images and human being, masturbation figures, homosexuals, bestiality, copulations animals are depicted on the outer walls of the temple, therefore, it is estimated that the stone built temple Piñgaleśvara was a mascot of the power of union, fertility and achieving the divine spiritual power through the process of the union of oneself with god. The erotic statues and representations that cover the outer walls of the temple serve both a magical and an instructional purpose. Through the power of the *yantras*--the magical illustrations created by the placement of the erotic sculptures, the architect made the temple a faithful reflection of the divine. At the same time this metaphors educated the faithful about the fundamental aspects of the Hindu religion, wherein the union of opposites in the sexual act is the perfect image of the creative principle, and erotic enjoyment is a reflection of divine bliss. But, in today's India such definitions are slightly split not only across the political believe but equally across different social and public culture.

The traditional icon of the goddess worshiped during the *Durga Puja* is in line with the iconography delineated in the scriptures. The Gods bestowed their powers to co-create a beautiful goddess with ten arms, each carrying their most lethal weapon. The huge temporary canopies - held by a framework of bamboo poles and draped with colourful fabric - that house the icons are called '*Pandals*'. Modern *Pandals* in Silchar are innovative, artistic and decorative at the same time, offering a visual spectacle for the numerous visitors who go 'pandal-hopping' during the four days of *Durga Puja*.

But along with the traditional process of decorating the splendour of the festival in the contemporary scenario, it is not only in Assam but the entire Eastern zone there is great emphasis given to the *pandal* and its appearance which is much awaited for the public in general. It is a must to mention that in

Silchar a city in Southern Assam of Barak Valley region, exhibits almost more than three hundred *Durga Puja Pandals* every year. It is amazing to see the changing forms of the *Durga Puja Pandals* in Silchar. Modern tradition have come to include the display of decorated *Pandals* and artistically depicted idols of *Durga*. The emphasis of *Pandals* decoration with different themes and titles are of great value in the field of art, because, it showcases the socio religious happenings as well as speaks about India's rich art, architecture and culture followed by current affairs depicted in pictorial form. Therefore, even if some of the masses are not aware of some of the traditions and mannerisms can get the information through such events which were depicted in lucid language of visual importance. Because every burning issue, and the traditional past and present scenario of India, its art and culture are reflected in the art of making goddess *Durga* as well as the *pandal* decorations. The skill of the artisans, the subject matter, and the technique are must to be acknowledged. Silchar can be considered to be a temporary museum for those five days where the art, architecture and socio religious issues are documented and displayed in front of the public. The overall art and crafts is unique because it is not only the involvement of the traditional idol makers, but there is also the involvement of artisans who are hired from neighbouring states and also the participations of art students from the Visual Arts Department of Assam University Silchar. Therefore, there is a blend of tradition as well as contemporary thoughts.

Although the *Pandals* at the present time has overruled the main idols which are worshipped during the *Durga Puja*, as more attentions are paid by the audience towards the glamour and glitter of the decorated *Pandals* but it was mitigated somewhat by the remarkable thematic architectural designs of the *Pandals* which also acted as a medium to educate about the tradition art and culture of different places, and also by the novelty of the theme chosen in their decorations. Among the elements which were added to the beauty of the *Pandals*, the most remarkable was the conceptual subject matters, which were the inspiration of the synthesis of different religions.

The *Pandals* as such become a messenger of art, culture and tradition in Assam and the inspiration that they derived is specially from the neighbouring state of West Bengal and gradually the concept of decoration changed as the condition changed due to 'time' and 'space'. But the change in the flavour brought an immense change and broke away with some of the norms beyond religious periphery. But, the positive side of the adorned *Pandals* can be termed as a new 'media art form' or an 'installation art'.

The *Pandals* also pour over that how through pictorial depiction provides an established knowledge system and how the aesthetics percept is shaped into vision through the pictorial language. Considering the distinctiveness of the decorations it is the only art form which acts like a vehicle of storytelling about different mannerism, culture and art of the past and the contemporary burning socio-political issues. The *Pandals* are

like a visual film for the masses because the theme and the subject matter depicted in the *Pandals* remains everlasting in one's mind after the visit to the different *Pandals* and hub on how the community of the indigenous place, learns and gets information about the customs, beliefs, traditions and art forms. In fact, even an ignorant person achieves knowledge of different mannerism while visiting the *Pandals*.

The nature of the urban spectacle underwent a sea change during the 2000's with priorities shifting from magnitude and wealth to an alternative streamlined aesthetics of art, craftsmanship and design. Yet smallness in scale went hand in hand with a heightened visibility of the new look *Pujas*- a visibility that manifests itself in a spate of promotional posters, advertisements, newspaper and television reports that take us from their conception to the grand finale of judgment and awards.

Every year we see there is an increasing investment of *Puja* Committees, sponsors and the print and television media in building up the atmosphere of a countdown to the *Puja*. The *Puja* have always been about this sense of eager anticipation and waiting. (Thakurta:2015)

Where *Pandals* are concerned, there have been no limits to what could be fabricated by decorator firms with bamboo, cloth, plywood and plaster, fiberglass and thermocol. All kinds of structures, global and local, historical and mythical, ancient and modern could be transplanted on to the most congested part of the city. Although the nations own historical monuments and wide range of world monuments entered the catalogue of these *pandalmakers*.

The festival offers innumerable instances of such a blend of multiple emplacements where time and history can be indiscriminately collapsed and the whole country and the world randomly brought home to local spectators. One hand the taste for the global and the spectacular found its newest attracting in a remark such as the Chota Bheem's world and the other hand the taste for vernacular ethnic elegance echoed across a series of elegantly designed craft and rural art ensembles across the township, each featuring a different local craft forms. Significant is the theme *Pujas*. Also the vernacular cosmopolitan in the vernacular ethic, with its deepening engagement with the many rural and tribal art forms of the nation and the region, the eclectically global set off by a complimentary passion for the intensely local. This is one way where some of the dying local art forms and the disappearing communities of folk artist are being improvisation.

In no other sphere do we find the category of art so widely stretched. The nomenclature and the aspirations that go with it spill across a wide spectrum of activities, particularly its spreading repertoire of theme *Puja*. The definition of art in this sphere seems to inevitably grow out of such a cornucopia of objects, material and designs.

The success behind the creation of the images and pendals depends on three stages 1) the perception of material quality-colour, sounds, gestures of the images etc. Second the

arrangement of such perceptions into pleasing shape and patterns. Third is the arrangement of perceptions which are made to correspond with a previously existing stage of emotional feelings. Thus, the emotional feelings give ways to expression. Expression is used to denote natural emotional reactions, but the very discipline or restrains by which the artist achieves form is itself a mode of expression. Form the though process it can be analyzed into intellectual terms like measure, balance rhythm and harmony.

The growing scale of the contemporary festival finds of course, its most important index in the spending powers and escalating budgets of *Puja* Committees, different proportions of which are invested in designer fees, costs of images and *Pandals*, publicity and promotional campaigns The meaning, values that are created when there is a tradition transformation, such as the changes seen from how the simple ambience of the *Puja Pandals* have now been transformed into a place of artistic flavour. The involvement of professional artists to conceive and design the concept of the *Pandals* and the interaction of the common mass with the artists' concept through the *Puja Pandals* answers to the question about the visual communication. But a drawback of the contemporary *Puja Pandals* is that more emphasis is given to the decorated *Pandals* instead of the main idol of worship? The *Puja Pandals* in Silchar provide the key to the aspiration of the people who brought the traditional, aesthetic and contemporary as well as social issues into applied form and showcased in the different *Pandals* during the *Durga Puja*. What is equally well-known is the awards and the spirit of commercialization and competition that has over the years become the dominant feature of Silchar's contemporary *Durga Puja* scenario. The growing involvement of the corporate sector and the institution of a large range of prizes for the best, biggest and most artistic have come to create a new trend. Also, with the thematic *Puja* different kinds of materials are successfully used as building materials Therefore, the *Durga Puja Pandals* in Silchar provides in its entirety a vibrant space to track the changing face of aesthetic and the most dynamic public visual culture. In addition, the idol makers attempts not to express in plastic form of any one particular model, it is the expression of any ideal which the idol makers can realize sensibly in plastic forms.

The presentation of such Images and Pandals is Silchar are one of the most participative, dynamic and reflects social forms of human behaviour. It has the capacity to trigger reflection, generate empathy, create dialogue and foster new ideas and relationships and offers a powerful and democratic way of expressing, sharing and shaping values also can help us build new capabilities and understand how to imagine and rehearse a different way of being and relating. The visual aspects of this festival sets out the evidence base for the shaping of values and explores the potential of engagement with art and culture to affect our self-acceptance, affiliation, and community feeling, as well as values that are known to affect higher levels of personal, social, and ecological well-being such as: freedom,

creativity, self-respect, equality and unity with nature. They are the frame through which we construct the stories that we tell ourselves and others about what is important. Thus the *Durga Puja Pandals* and Images do act as a story teller of socio cultural and aesthetics perspective.

2. Conclusion

The study can be concluded firstly by saying that subaltern goes parallel to visual art because even when modern media have penetrated isolated areas, the older forms of marginal art maintain their validity, particularly when used to influence attitudes, instigate action and promote change. Extensive experience shown that traditional forms of communication can be effective in dispelling the superstitions, archaic perceptions and unscientific that people have inherited as part of traditions and which are difficult to modify if the benefits of change are hard to demonstrate. Practitioners of the traditional media use a subtle form of persuasion by presenting the required message in locally popular artistic forms. This cannot be rivalled by any other means of communication. Secondly, in the case of visual artists of Assam, they are within the hegemonic discourse in some way or the other, therefore every artist speaks their voice using the hegemonic discourse via visual language. Even if the

modern media have penetrated isolated areas, the older forms of marginal art of Assam maintains their validity, particularly when used to influence attitudes, instigate action and promote change. In contrary, in the case of visual artists of Assam, they are within the hegemonic discourse in some way or the other, therefore every artist speaks their voice using the hegemonic discourse via visual language. The Narratives can be structured in a number of ways, but the classical form is that of the linear narrative – a story with a beginning, middle and end, strong characters and a story arc along which elements of the narrative run. Therefore, the visual language of Assam have within them the following moments: exposition, conflict, culmination and pledge and the visual narratives surround the following dimensions: time, spatiality, the ‘art of dramatic composition’ and personification.

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