



**Steven J. Rosen and Kaisori Bellach, *Avatar Art: Neo-Vedic Paintings Celebrating Life***

Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2016. 224 pages.  
Paperback, \$15.95, ISBN: 978-91-7149-801-4.

When I first encountered the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in the late 1960s, I was intrigued by their exotic appeal: the saffron dress, shaved heads, sandalwood *tilaks*, sweet scented incense, sandals, barrel drums and cymbals, etc. These certainly attracted others as well, but what has not really been discussed in any great detail in the sociological literature on conversion to ISKCON is the role that the movement's colorful art played in attracting people into its fold. Indeed, the paintings reproduced in virtually all official ISKCON publications draw on the indigenous Indian tradition of chromolithographs and poster art, documented by scholars such as Christopher PINNEY (2004) and Kajri JAIN (2007). However, virtually nothing has been written about ISKCON art until the book under review was published. It is therefore a unique document worth consulting for anyone interested in this Hindu devotional tradition in the diaspora.

Two longtime members of ISKCON are the authors of the book. As such, it represents a particular point of view, but it also provides a wealth of information for the

non-initiated reader. It is not very clear to me if the book is intended for other ISKCON members or non-members, but the very brief introduction written by Rosen states at the outset that the book is “art as yoga and yoga as art” (8), by which he means viewing the paintings is a devotional act that is supposed to transport the physical viewer into the realm of spirit, as it does to the artist as well. Rosen proceeds to map out briefly the concept of *bhakti* (devotional) art, before his very short discussion of western spiritual art. He then delves into the development of spiritual art in India. From here on, we notice the emic (insider) perspective emerging, as Rosen solely emphasizes the importance of Vishnu in the origins of Hindu iconography before focusing specifically on the Krishna incarnation of Vishnu, who is so central to ISKCON theology.

These brief sections are written from a subjective perspective, without any standard documentation of sources, and will most certainly be contested by art historians and archaeologists. Nonetheless, Rosen then moves on to the arrival of ISKCON’s founder in the west, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who wanted his translations of Vaishnavite texts “beautified” (18) with transcendental paintings. He thus discusses an early follower named Jadurani Devi, who graduated from an art school. She was one of the first to study with Prabhupada, when he gave her some Indian prints of Radha and Krishna, Sri Chaitanya, and Vishnu to reproduce. Once proficient in the art form and its philosophical background, she started training others at their New York headquarters. Soon thereafter, Prabhupada trained another woman named Govinda Dasi, who began painting at the San Francisco temple. In the late 1960s, the ISKCON Press set up shop in Boston, then moved to Brooklyn in the 1970s, and finally achieved maturity in Los Angeles. As a result, there are now a number of artists thriving as permanent members of the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust.

The book under review contains paintings by 26 painters from across the world, all of whom are members of ISKCON. The book is divided into three sections: “Avatars, Devas, Sages, and Demons,” “The Life of Krishna,” and “Sri Chaitanya.” The format in each section is the same. First, there is a very brief written introduction to the section, followed by a one-page discussion on the left page and the corresponding painting on the right. The written sections are interpretations of the paintings, often including stories about the images included in any given painting. Unfortunately, the stories are retold, with no references to the textual sources from which they are culled.

*Avatar Art* is not an academic publication by any means, but it does serve as a primary document for anyone interested in learning more about the role that art plays in ISKCON. The images are also a feast for the eyes. It is thus unfortunate that the authors (editors, really) chose a 5½” x 8” format for the book. A larger “coffee table” type format would have been better to display the paintings, which are really the highlight of this book. Perhaps the authors wished to provide a compact pocket book that could easily be carried around by the book’s owners. I would also have liked more information on the artists themselves: who are they, how did they come to ISKCON, what is their artistic background, etc.? The intention of the volume thus becomes quite clear. It is intended to highlight Krishna and the Vaishnavite mythology that surrounds him, which is not a bad thing. Yet I would have appreciated at least some semblance of scholarly rigor to balance out this attractive publication that is produced on high-quality glossy paper for the viewer’s delight

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Frank J. Korom  
*Boston University*