

India in Art in Ireland

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Foreword

I first visited India in 1984, and Pakistan slightly later, visits that were to alter the subsequent course of my personal and professional lives in ways that I could never have imagined then. It is, therefore, both an honor and a pleasure to write a few words of introduction to this volume, a pioneering exploration of artistic interrelations between Ireland and South Asia. Part of the impetus for such a long-overdue volume is provided by the cultural and demographic changes that have occurred in Ireland over the past few decades. However, the explorations of artistic interconnections presented here remind us that mobility between Ireland, India, and other regions of South Asia is not a recent phenomenon.

The conditions of modernity have facilitated the movement of human populations to a much greater degree than in previous eras, but the presence of South Asians in Ireland and the Irish in South Asia can be documented as part of an interconnected history that spans at least three centuries. This longer history of cultural encounter and exchange is exemplified by the character of Dean Mahomet, an Indian surgeon who landed in Cork in 1784 and, marrying Jane Daly, a local woman, entered the ranks of the Anglo-Protestant gentry. Eventually, Dean Mahomet left for England, where he had a long and erratic career as an entrepreneur before committing his life-story to writing.¹

A remarkable cultural broker, Dean Mahomet was only one among a number of Indian merchants, sailors, servants, and travelers who passed through Ireland in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At least one of these, Mirza Abu Talib Khan Isfahani, a Muslim from Lucknow, encountered Dean Mahomet in Cork during his travels between 1799 and 1803, and wrote about the meeting.² So intense were the maritime connections between the south-west of Ireland and the subcontinent that the historian Christopher Bayly has suggested that nineteenth-century Cork "may have had a more direct personal contact with India than any other place in the British Isles."³ Such crossings and entanglements were largely the product of the common experience of British colonialism. Many of the landed gentry among whom Dean Mahomet moved held lands in Ireland while serving the East India Company in India; Dean Mahomet himself had served in the East India Company's Bengal army along with Captain Godfrey Evan Baker, in whose company he journeyed to Cork.

If Dean Mahomet's presence in Ireland reflects the westward move of ambitious Indians, there was no shortage of Irishmen seeking their fortune in the opposite direction.

As the headquarters of the East India Company, eighteenth-century Bengal was a hub for English and Irish resident in India, the infamous Nabobs, along with their mistresses or bibis, wives and children. Something of the resulting intersections between empire and domesticity is captured in the shimmering intimacy of Thomas Hickey's 1787 painting, *Portrait of a Bibi* in the National Gallery of Ireland, the product of Hickey's sojourn in India between 1784 and 1791, when a large number of Western artists sought patrons in India.⁴ In her analysis of Hickey's painting in this volume, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby calls attention to what is not visualized within it, including the "aggregate identities" of children born to Indian mothers residing with Europeans. Grimaldo Grigsby suggests that the emotional wrench occasioned by the common practice of removing such children from their mothers and sending them to be educated in the metropole was displaced onto popular images of the south Indian ruler Tipu Sultan handing over two of his sons as hostages to Lord Cornwallis, the British Governor General of the East India Company, in 1792–1793; the subject was drawn by Thomas Hickey in preparation for a series of history paintings that he never realized. During Cornwallis's tenure in India steps were taken to legislate against Indians and those of mixed race holding governmental or military office, followed later by legislation forbidding officials of the East India Company from appearing in Indian dress, the beginning of the end for the complex world of crossings and mixings that are evoked in the work of Hickey and his contemporaries.⁵

The career of Cornwallis is typical of the imbricated biographies and histories through which Ireland and India were connected within the structures of empire. Having defeated Tipu in 1792, Lord Cornwallis oversaw the Act of Union between Ireland and England seven years later as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. The Union opened further opportunities for Irishmen seeking their fortunes in the Indies. These were both the "Orientals" of Europe and the foot soldiers of empire, a doubling that reflects the ambiguous status of Ireland as Britain's only European colony and that is mirrored in the ambivalence with which these Irish were often regarded in India. Consequently, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century "Ireland was presented as both like India and not like India," comparable to, but distinct from, India.⁶ The currency of this comparison in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political rhetoric is typified by the maiden speech to the House of Commons by Henry Villiers Stuart (1803–1874) whose Mughalesque fantasy gateway to the family estate, Dromana House in County Waterford, is discussed in this volume by Kathleen James-Chakraborty.

A rare example of full-blown Irish architectural Orientalism in the nineteenth century, the Dromana gateway may have been intended to "bring India home" following the lead of numerous artists and architects operating in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and of some Irish novelists writing during the same period.⁷ However, just as such comparisons between India and Ireland were often framed within the context of appropriate forms of colonial administration – and were, therefore, ultimately about appropriate modalities of British power – so the relationship between the Dromana Gate and Indian architecture may have been mediated via a metropolitan English vogue for Indianizing architecture. This is exemplified by the Indo-Saracenic-style Royal Pavilion built for the prince regent, the future George IV, in Brighton in 1823, which may

have inspired the Dromana fantasy. The vogue for Mughalizing architecture in the colonial metropole coincided with a period when the Mughal empire was in irreversible political decline, subject to the constant predations of the East India Company in the decades before the British Crown assumed direct rule from the East India Company in the wake of the Mutiny or Great Rebellion in 1858.

After the imposition of colonial rule in India, the British Army and colonial administration continued to provide employment for large numbers of Irishmen. European subalterns in the service of the British Empire, Irishmen in the armies of the Raj after 1858 often rose to high position within the colonial administration. They were often involved in attempts to suppress a burgeoning Indian nationalism and sometimes in the colonial atrocities through which this was enacted. Conversely, members of the Connaught Rangers serving in India mutinied in 1920 in response to the atrocities committed in Ireland by the Black and Tans during the War of Independence. As this suggests, the entanglements between Ireland and India also fostered modes of self-awareness, resistance, and even alliance and political exchange essential to the liberation of both regions; the commonalities continued after independence when both countries faced the predicament of identifying a national language.

The relationships between Irish and Indian nationalism have been well documented, especially for the period following World War I, when Irish nationalism provided inspiration for Indian anti-colonial movements; in Bengal, for example, the writings of Pádraig Pearse and Michael Collins circulated in translation.⁸ Conversely, British experience of suppressing nationalist opposition in Ireland often provided methods of coercion that were implemented in India, further crystallizing the connections between both realms. In a speech delivered in New York in 1920, Eamon de Valera (d. 1973) wrote of the common cause of Irish, Egyptian and Indian nationalists and the need for revolutionary action against empire; as president of the Executive Council of the Free State, de Valera met several times with the Bengali nationalist (and later fascist collaborator) Subhas Chandra Bose during his visit to Ireland in 1936.⁹ Less well known is the fact that the idea of a common bond between Irish and Indian nationalism was sufficiently current as early as 1883 for a suggestion to be floated that the Indian Nationalist (and later MP) Dadabhai Naorji should stand for election as an Irish Home Rule candidate, a suggestion rejected by Charles Stewart Parnell.¹⁰

For all its well-documented exploitative brutality in both Ireland and the Indian subcontinent, there is little doubt that the British Empire, like many of its contemporaries and predecessors, fostered what Antonio Gramsci has termed "imperial cosmopolitanism."¹¹ This was manifest in the support given to cultural endeavors considered integral to the project of empire. One practical consequence of the role played by Irishmen in colonial service was, for example, the need for an appropriate education to enable efficient service in India. The near contemporary foundation of Trinity College Dublin in 1593 and the granting of a charter to the East India Company in 1600 were unrelated events, but as the hold of the East India Company on South Asia grew in the following centuries, Trinity College was invested as a major center for the training of an imperial bureaucracy. After 1855, when appointments in the Indian civil service and army were opened to public competition, Trinity College was endowed with chairs in Arabic,

Persian, Hindustani, and Sanskrit.¹² It educated a number of distinguished Orientalists, including Vincent Arthur Smith (d. 1920), Irish by birth and well known to historians of South Asian art as the author of *A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, published in Oxford in 1911.¹³ The presence of such scholars in Ireland was not without consequences for national artistic developments. In the 1880s, for example, around the time that he was composing his most Indian poem, *Anashuya and Vijaya* (admittedly not one of his greatest), William Butler Yeats was meeting with leading Orientalists, including Mir Awlad Ali, a Persian poet who occupied the Chair of Arabic, Persian and Hindustani at TCD.¹⁴

Ultimately, the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921 was to have a significant impact on continued access to such Eastern cultural forms. One consequence of the triumph of nationalism and the embrace of an ethos of self-sufficiency was a palpable turning away from forms of cultural cosmopolitanism that had been intimately associated with colonialism. Although Eastern languages continued to be taught in Irish universities, the range available narrowed with the demise of empire, which diminished their perceived utility.¹⁵

In the decades following independence, the desire to materialize the nationalist rhetoric of an emergent Free State also had a profound effect on the visibility of South Asia and other regions of the former British Empire within Irish museum collections. These included some excellent examples of Indian sculpture and Islamic art, an inheritance from private bequests made by ex-colonial officials settled in Ireland, and a legacy of the networked relationship between the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Dublin Museum of Science and Art, and the Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art. After the independence of the south in 1921, when the Museum of Science and Art became the National Museum of Ireland, this meant a *de facto* division of spoils that ensured the continued presence of Indian and Islamic materials among the collections of the newly minted National Museum. But not necessarily their continued visibility. Most disappeared into storage, or were otherwise marginalized, a legacy of colonialism that had no role to play within the cultural politics of the nation state.

It was only in recent decades that attention began to turn once again to the Indian and Oriental holdings in Irish collections: in 1975, for example, the National Museum of Ireland published a small booklet outlining its collection of Indian materials.¹⁶ The more contemporary reappearance and reinstallation of some of this material might be seen as a barometer of a growing confidence and openness, a coming of age directly related to Ireland's increasing role on the global stage, internal demographic shifts and their cultural ramifications.

It is perhaps in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin that these developments and their significance at both the national and international level are most clearly apparent. The presence of this extraordinary treasure in Ireland is due to the American-born Beatty (d. 1968) leaving his personal collection as a bequest to the nation. Beatty acquired much of his fortune from his investment in African mines,¹⁷ a reminder that the jewel-like Indian and Islamic paintings contained in the collection represent the transmutation of subaltern African labor into a corpus of medieval and early modern manuscripts that were themselves, in many cases, products of the economic surplus generated by the labor

of Indian peasants. Although Chester Beatty never visited the Indian subcontinent, the art of the region is one of the great strengths of the collection.

As Darielle Mason's incisive comparison of Beatty's collecting habits with those of the great Moravian-born scholar and collector of Indian Art, Stella Kramrisch (d. 1993) suggests, the Beatty collection is marked by a number of idiosyncrasies and lacunae. The element of contingency that this personal factor introduces into the collection and its ability to offer comprehensive representation of South Asian artistic traditions is, however, true of any museum collection, including national collections. For all their aspirations to comprehensive coverage, these often reflect the interests and tastes of curators who acquire art objects through bequests similarly marked by contingency, and via the inevitable vagaries of the art market. In the context of Irish museum history, the *de facto* transformation of Chester Beatty's personal collection into a national museum, and a "cultural portal" after its move to Dublin Castle in 1999, was a watershed event, one that coincided with a period of great demographic, economic and social change in Ireland. Whereas before 1999 the Chester Beatty Collection was unknown to most Irish citizens and largely the preserve of foreign scholars often engaged in rather arcane pursuits, it is now acknowledged as a world-class collection and resource accessible to scholars and visitors alike. Despite this, and in spite of various cultural, diplomatic and economic ties between Ireland and South Asia, the establishment of a permanent university position teaching either South Asian or Islamic art in Ireland remains an unfulfilled aspiration.

In straddling the inevitable tensions between idiosyncratic collecting practices, shifting narratives of national identity, and the demands of an increasingly globalized viewing public, the Chester Beatty Library is perhaps exemplary of current attempts to negotiate between ideals of nation and internationalism that are frequently seen as irreconcilable. It is often said that art we see in museums should be a mirror of social inclusiveness. In this sense, the South Asian and Islamic art held in the Chester Beatty Library has an important role to play in reflecting the increasing diversity and heterogeneity of Irish populations, albeit within a state in which, since 2004, birth itself is no longer a guarantee of citizenship.

However, the art held in such collections is not simply a useful instrument for reflecting the way we are, or how and who we imagine ourselves to be, but also a resource for challenging our expectations by providing the opportunity to experience the frisson of the unknown or unfamiliar, whether an Indian bibi, Mughal courtier, or the European inhabitants of eighteenth-century Bengal. For this Irishman at least, the challenge posed by the experience of such artworks was life transforming. Two of the works discussed in this volume, Thomas Hickey's *Portrait of a Bibi* in the National Gallery of Ireland, and Harry Clarke's stained glass windows, *The Eve of St. Agnes* in the Hugh Lane Gallery, stand out having made a particular impression. To an adolescent visitor to the National Gallery of Art, *Portrait of a Bibi* always seemed somewhat out of place among the serried ranks of Georgian gentleman; that the subject was, unlike most of these grandees, unnamed only added to the enigmatic qualities of the painting, magnetic in its seeming mystery, a beacon of light among the many powdered wigs

Equally, a particular spell was cast by the dream world of Harry Clarke's magical windows, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, commissioned in 1923 by the biscuit baron Harold Jacob, their tiny details etched with acid on the surface of the jewel-like glass. The windows have been housed in the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin (another extraordinary artistic bequest to the nation) since 1978. In this volume, Arindam Dutta's essay on the *Eve of St. Agnes* takes the mesmeric visuality of the windows and their Orientalizing imagery as the point of departure for a wide-ranging meditation on the presence of Orientalism and its exoticizing tendencies within an array of literary and visual production that might broadly be identified as anti-colonialist or nationalist. The endeavor brings us back to the doubling of colonized and colonizer, Oriental and Orientalizing through which the ties between Ireland and India have been constituted historically. As Dutta demonstrates, in both India and Ireland metropolitan intellectuals, whether artists or literati, were obliged to constantly constitute the traditions that they sought to mobilize in and as modernity. Tradition was not a given, it was a work in progress, continuously (re)invested and (re)infused with heterogeneous elements drawn from outside the world of the metropolitan bourgeoisie, mostly obviously the folk imagery and mythologies seen as lying outside the time of both colonialism and modernity. Seen in this light, the eclectic or heterogeneous imagery of Clarke's crystalline fairy kingdom appears as much more than a gesture of enchantment that revivifies and revives the imagery of pre-existing pasts, whether Celtic or Oriental. Instead, in Dutta's reading, Clarke's windows emblemize the paradoxical re-enchantment associated with the deployment of tradition in modernity by figures as diverse as Clarke, William Butler Yeats and his fellow Nobel Laureate, the Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore (d. 1941). As often noted, both were linked not only by their connected biographies, but by a common interest in the mystical currents of theosophy, another arena rich in interchanges between India and Ireland, and the nationalist cultures of both.

On a more anecdotal and prosaic note, for those Dubliners familiar with the *Eve of St. Agnes*, the windows inevitably appeared as pendants to the more familiar Orientalizing windows by Harry Clarke in Bewley's Oriental Cafe in Grafton Street (1927). Clarke's windows transformed this temple for the consumption of Eastern beverages into a space of "commercial cosmopolitanism," infusing the space with a quality that Dutta sees as essential to the modernizing edge of the Celtic Revival in general. A natural haunt for several generations of Dubliners, it was in the charmed ambience of Bewley's that grandmothers, aspiring novelists, poets, student radicals, priests, politicians, and working people all rubbed shoulders under the enchanted light of Clarke's windows. This intersection between consumption and Orientalism in one of Dublin's most iconic spaces of sociability would undoubtedly have met the approval of Dean Mahomet, the eighteenth-century immigrant to Cork who was among the first Indian visitors to commit his experiences in Ireland to paper. Ever alert to a business opportunity, after moving to England, Mahomet opened the Hindostanee Coffee House in London in 1810. Like its later Dublin relatives, the Hindostanee Coffee House served the London citizenry with beverages and light fare in an Oriental ambience conjured by appropriate furniture and painted Indian scenes.¹⁸

Finbarr Barry Flood

Notes

- 1 Michael H. Fisher, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet: An Eighteenth-Century Journey through India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
- 2 Charles Stewart, ed., *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa and Europe in the Years 1799–1803* (London: Broxbourne, 1814. Reprinted Delhi: Idarah Adabiyat, 1972), 124–5.
- 3 Christopher Bayly, "Ireland, India and the Empire: 1780–1914," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 10 (2000), 389. For an overview see Narinder Kapur, *The Irish Raj: Illustrated Stories about Irish in India and Indians in Ireland* (Dublin: Greystone Books, 1997).
- 4 Sir William Foster, "British Artists in India, 1760–1820," *The Nineteenth Volume of the Walpole Society* (1930–31), 1–88.
- 5 Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 117, 120, 136.
- 6 Julia Wright, *Ireland, India and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and E.A. Bond, ed., *Speeches of the Manager and Counsel in the Trial of Warren Hastings*, vol. 1 (London, 1859), 373.
- 7 Finbarr B. Flood, "Correct Delineations and Promiscuous Outlines: Envisioning India at the Trial of Warren Hastings," *Art History* (29/1, 2006), 47–78.
- 8 Michael Silvestri, "'The Sinn Féin of India': Irish Nationalism and the Policing of Revolutionary Terrorism in Bengal," *Journal of British Studies* 39.4 (2000), esp. 459–86, 466. For an excellent survey of these connections see Kate O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1919–64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).
- 9 Eamon de Valera, *India and Ireland* (New York: Friends of Freedom for India, 1920); O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire*.
- 10 H.V. Brasted, "Irish Nationalism and the British Empire in the Late Nineteenth Century," in Oliver MacDonagh, W.F. Mandle and Pauric Travers, eds, *Irish Culture and Nationalism, 1750–1950* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 95.
- 11 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. 1, ed. Joseph A. Buttigeig (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 30, 230.
- 12 M. Mansoor, "Oriental Studies in Ireland," *Hermathena* 62 (1943), 40–60, esp. 49ff. See also, Scott B. Cook, "The Irish Raj: Social Origins and Careers of Irishmen in the Indian Civil Service, 1855–1914," *Journal of Social History* 20.3 (1987), 507–29.
- 13 Mansoor, "Oriental Studies," 56 (where Smith's art historical work goes unmentioned); Barry Crosbie, *Irish Imperial Networks: Migration, Social Communication and Exchange in Nineteenth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 223.
- 14 Joseph Lennon, *Irish Orientalism: A Literary and Intellectual History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 192, 256.
- 15 In 1935, Sanskrit was still listed among the languages taught at TCD: *The Dublin University Calendar* (1935), 296–7. Remnants of Irish Orientalism continued to flourish into more recent times; as late as the 1980s, I had the great fortune to be able to take one year of informal classes in the classical Indian language of Sanskrit at TCD.
- 16 J. Teahan, *Guide to Indian Exhibition* (Dublin: National Museum of Ireland, 1975).
- 17 John Phillips, "Alfred Chester Beatty: Mining Engineer, Financier, and Entrepreneur, 1898–1950," in Raymond E. Dumett, ed., *Mining Tycoons in the Age of Empire, 1870–1945: Entrepreneurship, High Finance, Politics and Territorial Expansion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 215–38.
- 18 On the "global" ramifications of such intersections between Orientalism and coffee see Nebahat Avcioğlu and Finbarr Barry Flood, "Globalizing Cultures: Art and Mobility in the Eighteenth Century," *Ars Orientalis* 39 (2011), 7–38.

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