III. Okzident(i)alismen in der Kunst der Moderne und Gegenwart

Company Painting as Hybrid Style

On Europeanism in Indian Art

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Traditional Indian creative expressions were always celebrated as epoch-making immemorial craftsmanship. For centuries, Indian craftsmen handed their artistic skills and knowledge down from generation to generation in order to sustain these artistic practices. As human beings, they were always keen to explore their experiences of their surroundings and to document them in visual form for posterity. These pictographic representations also coalesced into a discrete identity of their own, often without intentionally doing so.

Subsequently, mythology and religious themes came to dominate traditional Indian arts. However, the unique feature of this style was the sense of documentation and naturalism that took center stage of the creative process, overshadowing these conventional themes. The creative quest also documented contemporary endeavors and milieus of community living and lifestyle, giving rise to an indigenous art form. This form of art then became a collective creative expression of an (often) nomadic community of native artists in colonial India: the Company painters.

»Company painting«, also referred to by many scholars as the »Company style tradition of India«, and commonly known locally as the »*Kampani kalam*«,[1] is a fascinating phenomenon connected with grander traditional royal court painting and the British Academist interest in the rural cultural context of the Indian subcontinent. This tradition is ostensibly quite old and has strong ties with the onset of colonial rule in India. It is safe to say that the *Kampani kalam* is not a singular artistic style. Rather, it is a collective term covering an assortment of hybrid Indian styles that emerged because of European (chiefly British) influence on local artists in India during the heydays of the British Raj, namely the early eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Given this discourse, the Company painting style can also be considered a strong example of Occidentalism in South Asia.

1 The word *kalam*, meaning »style«, also means »school« as in the »British School«. It originated when the artists of the Mughal court migrated to various parts of India (especially in Lucknow, Patna etc.) in search of employment, where they created new styles (Gupta 2012: 112).

Imagine, you are a European, visiting a British military officer's bungalow in nineteenth-century Calcutta[2] on a hot summer's day. You might be invited to see his collection of exotic hunting trophies and the curious objects he has collected during his stay in the continent. And while you are seeing them, a native artist might happen to call in. Your host introduces the man as a »traditional court painter«, who comes by from time to time to work on Sahib's[3] commissions. The artist asks you if you want to see his paintings, and the host escorts you to his family porch, where the aged »artist« is by now waiting for you in the scorching heat. He sits on the ground, opens his sack, and goes about unfurling his painted images, one by one. He wants to show all of his best works to the Sahib and his guest. The picaresque paintings are varied illustrations depicting native people in curious local costumes, strange animals, and birds that can only be found in this part of the world.

As the host tells his story, he rapturously starts narrating the details of these images, the outlandish people and bizarre animals that the country has to offer, just about matching with the pace of the picture presentation. The oral narration and the presentation last for about fifteen minutes, and all this time, the artist has shied away from uttering a single word. The images are painted in vibrant and intense colors with a hint of European Academic structure, while figures are efficaciously drawn in a sharp black outline. Soon you decide to acquire one for your family living in Europe, the one that depicts piebald Indian birds. So, you ask your host to inquire about the price as he can speak the local dialect fluently. The verbal bartering begins, and despite your ignorance of the local dialect, you quickly realize that the artist is being deprived of his actual worth. The host tells you that the artist is demanding a »huge sum«, because you are new to this land. Ultimately, the artist is forced to yield on the price, and you acquire the painting for a ludicrously small sum. You thank the host and perceive that he enjoys the status of a cultured civilian within the society. He conceitedly states that although European art is far superior, these local artists are doing a fine job of recording the exotic beauty of the Indian subcontinent, much like the British artists, and at a very cheap price too. He further adds that the Bengal Presidency[4] in particular is filled with many such talented Company painters.

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2 Popularly known as the »city of joy«, »Calcutta« was formally rechristened as »Kolkata« on January 1st, 2001. However, in this article, I shall use the old name »Calcutta« due to its clear association with India's colonial history.

3 This is a native Indian term, literally meaning »master« in Urdu and Hindi, but it is frequently used to refer to the white/European colonial gentleman. For the European lady, the term *Mem-Sahib* is used. The term is still in use in India, primarily by rural villagers, who often shorten it to *Saab*. In Bengali, a similar term, *Saheb*, is used, which has the same meaning.

4 The Bengal Presidency, later reorganized as the Bengal Province, was once the biggest region of the British Raj after the end of the Mughal empire in Bengal. The capital city (housing the British Indian administration) of this province was in Calcutta. During the

Company painters, however, had not always existed in such a precarious state. In fact, they originated from a long line of royal court painters from the Mughal courts of medieval India. Initially, they were all trained to carry on the traditional painting skills of their predecessors, whose hereditary profession was lost due to the fall of the Mughal court.[5] In fact, a few of them mainly learned to paint in a distinctive style known to many as »Mughal Miniature painting«.[6] It was only during the early eighteenth century that these artists were coerced into relinquishing their traditional painting style and espousing some skill in Western painting in order to sell their art to the colonial rulers in order to survive. Their unique paintings have become rather curious art objects.

In this article, I shall discuss the origin of this style by taking a brief look into the process by which the artists came to be recognized as Company painters. Then I shall examine the major themes and discourse of the painted images, which can be generally categorized into a number of sub-themes such as figurative works, foliage, and scenic paintings. I aim to identify a shift of artistic genre caused by two

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early part of the empire, Bengal's British Governor-General was concomitantly the Viceroy of India.

5 Noted Bengali artist and art scholar Manindra Bhushan Gupta wrote that with the death of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, the era of Mughal Miniature Painting rapidly started coming to an end. By the mid-eighteenth century, many of these unemployed Mughal court artists had migrated to the newly emerging royal court of Lucknow and Hyderabad. From Hyderabad, they migrated again to Mysore and Tanjore in southern India. There was even one group that migrated to Patna and gave birth to the famous »*Patna kalam*« (Gupta 2012: 111f.). In Patna, beside East India Company officers, their patrons were visiting (European) travelers and missionaries, plus local elites (Rekha 2011: 997).

6 »Mughal Miniature Painting«, also »Mughal Court Painting« or simply »Mughal Painting« was an intricate painting style that emerged in South Asia under the patronage of the Mughal Empire of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, hence its name. The paintings were created mainly as manuscript illustrations before evolving into distinct individual paintings. This unique painting style was substantially influenced by Persian art, especially in the form of the delicate calligraphic lines of the *Nastaliq* script. Yet, the Mughal painting style was a remarkable fusion of both Persian and Indian art, with strong Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain influences. Despite having a strong Islamic connection, the subject matter of these paintings was frequently earthly in nature and encompassed a vast range of themes, including scenes from the royal court, imperial hunting adventures, and epic wars. Mitter (2001) notes that the paintings expressed a lively engagement with the external world, which can be loosely termed »Realism«. Typically, a series of paintings were commissioned by the royal court to form part of an album, becoming a key medium for narrating the stories of the mighty Mughal royals. True to their name, the paintings were relatively small in size but were created with an incredible level of detail. Expert artists spent days achieving astonishingly intricate details, often utilizing brushes made of a single (animal) hair. These paintings were then carefully decorated with opulent borders and flawless calligraphic lines (cf. Craven 1976; Kossak 1997; Mitter 2001).

primary visual artistic influences, i.e., the fusion of Indian-style painting (mainly the Mughal Miniature tradition) with Western Academic painting technique to create a principally collective visual-art practice.

Alongside this, I shall also focus on the development of the Company school, its major European patrons, and a few of its key artists. Thus, this paper will contribute to the dialogue on the aesthetics and authenticity of the Company school as well as Western patronage and the culture of consuming indigenous visual art objects in pre-modern India. Finally, with reference to the next generation of artists of the Indo-European style, I shall identify a possible conclusion to this hybrid artistic style.

Origin of Company painting

During the onset of the British East India Company rule in India in the early eighteenth century, several English officers of the Company arrived in various parts of the subcontinent. As they settled down in India, they stumbled upon its vibrant ethnic culture and lifestyle. These Company officials gradually began commissioning and purchasing paintings by local artists to capture the imageries of their surroundings to collect or send back home. Apart from their individual interest in commissioning native artists, the botanical explorations that accompanied British colonialism in India often yielded many outstanding foliage studies done by Indian artists for prominent European botanists like James Kerr and William Roxburgh.[7] Consequently, they increasingly became the unanticipated patrons of indigenous art. They wanted the local painters to portray India but in a style of their liking – Western Academic realism.[8] For many, the motivation that encouraged the Western collectors to turn towards the local artists was purely the inability to acquire original artwork by a European artist, often due to its high price or restricted availability. Consequently,

7 Scottish botanist James Kerr employed skilled artists like Bhawani Das and started sending botanical illustrations made by Indian artists to Edinburgh as early as 1773 (Dalrymple 2019: 15). Another notable example is British botanist William Roxburgh, who was the Superintendent of the Botanical Garden in Calcutta. Roxburgh commissioned a large collection of paintings by local artists of plants cultivated in the garden and of wild species that he had personally collected (Rix 2013: 304f.).

8 Historian Jeffrey Auerbach noted that it was essentially the goal of improving the image of Imperial Britain by the then Viceroy of India (from 1899 to 1905), Lord Curzon, that caused Anglo-Indian scholars to start paying attention to British art in India. It was actually Viceroy Curzon's fancy for India's history and his interest in improving the British image in India that strongly inspired British officials, the Anglo-Indian community, and pro-British Indians to start collecting artworks from British artists who had visited the Indian subcontinent from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century (Auerbach 1999: 574f.).

the native artists employing (and in some cases even directly copying) the British art style gave birth to an innovative synthetic style.

Nevertheless, recent scholarship avoids using the term »Company school« because it is too vague, or because the artist-patron association encoded in it is too uncomfortably connected with race (cf. Howes 2014). It was a unique Indo-European style that emerged as a way of producing art that would satisfy the European clients who found the exclusively indigenous styles less appealing than their Western counterparts. The original purpose of these paintings was documentation, rather than either creating visual delights or preaching religious sermons. However, several Company paintings never originated in commissions from European patrons. Instead, local artists smartly anticipated what would appeal to their Western clients, and many a time even created artworks suitable for the European market (cf. ibid.). Yet, the British-commissioned Indian art was labelled by scholars as disappointing, and the British imperialists, unlike the Mughal rulers, failed to inspire any creativity among the local artists (cf. Auerbach 1999). In later years, the Company painters would produce art for affluent local rulers and other Indian patrons, much like their foreign clients. So, as per its core definition, Company painting was the result of two factors – firstly the unique style, and secondly the significant patronage.

When we talk about Company paintings, the most practical way of categorizing them is undoubtedly through their visual style. However, to do so is to rely on the most subjective element to distinguish one art form from another. Scholars conventionally categorize Company school images based on their distinctive visual panache, i.e., the style in which the artist painted. As per this perspective, the painting style that emerged from each of the centers is discernible by its form, which was cultivated out of and typically (with some exceptions) heavily shaped by pre-colonial artistic practices. Artworks produced by northern Indian artists can be easily separated from the ones created in southern India. For example, while the Delhi Company painters were inclined to use ivory as the base of their art, Tanjore artists chiefly painted on solid wooden planks.[9] This was the result of the traditional artists becoming the core painters of this new style in order to satisfy their foreign patrons. The Tanjore artists inspired the establishment of the Company school of Madras. In the case of Calcutta and Patna, it was painters from the Mughal court of Delhi who migrated and started this new trade. In this article, I shall discuss images that were produced by artists located in both northern and southern India.

9 Wood, due to the ample availability of high-quality woods in that area that provided longevity to the artworks, was always used in traditional Tanjore paintings. The polished wooden planks, specially created for paintings, were called *Palagai Padam* in the local language, *Palagai* meaning »wooden plank« and *Padam* meaning »picture«.

Early era and development

Although the story of Company school painting is innately connected with Mughal Miniature Painting and British officers, and despite Calcutta being the capital of British India, it was not the city of joy where it all started. In fact, the Madras[10] Presidency was the location of its first emergence. Furthermore, it is also fascinating to note that it was the traditional Tanjore painters[11] that were assigned to this first-ever experiment with producing a local art style in a Western manner. It was simply termed »Company painting« as they were all commissioned by the British East India Company officers. Once affluent under the patronage of the South Indian Hindu kings, the unemployed Tanjore painters were looking for commissions. Soon they were identified by the high-ranking British officers to make colorful paintings to document the natives and their curious costumes. These British clients might have been impressed by the skills they demonstrated in the modish Tanjore paintings of Hindu gods, which were frequently visible on the streets and temples of South India. They wanted realistic portrayals of the lifestyles of the locals, which were far different from anything they had experienced back home in Europe. These new paintings became fantastic pieces of art objects. As a consequence of this experiment, the typical features of Tanjore art were integrated into these new types of paintings. They, too, were very densely composed, with a rich textural painted surface and, notably, vibrant use of colors – characteristics that were about to change the course of visual art in India.

After Madras, the new indigenous art form started to be dispersed in other centers in the eastern, western, and northern parts of India. Prominent Indian cities like Calcutta, Murshidabad, Benares, Patna, Agra, Delhi, and Lucknow soon became the customary hub of Company painters. It is curious to note that the cities where this new style flourished were all administrative city-centers of India. These cities

10 The Madras Presidency was another major administrative sector for the British rulers in India. The capital city of »Madras«, also known by the same name, was renamed »Chennai« from 2000 onwards. During the latter half of British rule, the city of Madras became one of the four main metropolitan cities that housed the administrative controls.

11 »Tanjore« or »Thanjavore painting« is one of the most prevalent art styles of traditional southern Indian art. It is named after the city of Thanjavur (»Tanjore«) of Tamil Nadu and originated during the sixteenth century under the patronage of the mighty Cholas kings. Later, it was also nurtured by other ruling dynasties like the Maratha princes, Nayakas, and Rajus Clan of Tanjore from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, until the arrival of the British. As a primarily Hindu traditional form of art, popular themes of Tanjore painting focus on various Hindu deities, and in few cases, Hindu religious monks and saints. Another characteristic is that the artist always painted the main figure at the center of the composition. Besides this, they were also well known for their dense composition, the textural richness of the painted surface, and the avid use of vibrant colors – the features that distinguish them from the other Indian Art forms.

provided rich opportunity for both the artists and patrons to discover each other. On the other hand, Indian provinces like the Punjab Hills, Rajasthan, and Hyderabad failed to spawn a Company school style, despite having their own indigenous traditional art forms, because they lacked the European patrons that were necessary for it.

Technique and themes

It is this ease of movement between the two diverse artistic traditions of the East and the West that made the Company school artworks distinctive from their sources of inspiration. Art historian Toby Falk in his work on the *Fraser Album*[12] writes how Indian artists received Western influence through their patron:

> »Indian artists who were employed by the British to paint such portraits as these were not used to painting this type of picture. Their tradition was to paint in the Indian manner, using pigments akin to gouache instead of watercolour. Their compositions were also different, but under James' guidance figures were grouped successfully along European lines.« (Falk 1988: 32)

The Company school artists embraced Western Academic art tenets by amending their time-honored methods purely to satisfy the British demand for realism in art, which required that features such as perspective, an intimate representation of visual reality, volume and shading be integrated into the paintings. The new fashion was so influential that the artists even started using pencil for initial drawings, and the frequent use of sepia wash tints on European papers became common, much like their Western counterparts. Art historian Marika Sardar noted that, in terms of medium, Company school paintings could be characterized by their avid use of watercolors instead of conventional gouache and, in terms of technique, by their addition of linear perspective and shading (Sardar 2004: n.p.). This phenomenon applied across all the various regional Company schools of India. Although more or fewer deviations can be seen in Company paintings in different city centers, the fundamental watercolor techniques, including supple tones, transparent textures, sepia tone, and the use of broad brush strokes, were widespread. For example, the artists from Patna (Patan Kalam) rarely applied »penciling« to outline the figures before using the brush; furthermore, they were proficient in using a technique known as *Kajli*

12 The *Fraser Album* is a celebrated album of paintings commissioned by British civil servant William Fraser. It is considered one of the finest examples of Company paintings. It was created between 1815 and 1819, during which time his elder brother, artist James Baillie Fraser, had a deep influence on the creation of this album. Noted painters like Ghulam Ali Khan and his family contributed to the Fraser Album (cf. Falk 1988: 27–37).

Seahi (literally ›Lampblack Ink‹), whereby the figures are painted by brush straightaway (Rekha 2011: 1002). Traditionally trained artists from Tanjore and the Mughal court deviated from their traditional painting medium and techniques to produce new artworks in almost British watercolor fashion. While their earlier training inevitably came in handy, it was observing the real European artworks up close, certainly through interactions with their British consumers, that influenced this new trend. Thus, fascinatingly, in terms of their aesthetic, they can be easily described as the real descendants of the various Indian picturesque scenes produced by Western artists like Thomas and William Daniell (cf. Sardar 2004).

Like the British painters, Company painters also preferred paper over other supports. Nonetheless, in exceptional cases, and often at the particular request of their Western clients, various other supports were also used as the base of their art. These included mica, ivory, wooden plank, and on rare occasion silk and marble. A second reason behind the popularity of paper as a support was the primary necessity of making illustrations for collectible albums. These albums or portfolios were called *muraqqa*, and they were in popular demand among British collectors. Another prominent feature of the albums was the calligraphic inscriptions on the images and the cover page. These inscriptions were usually written in Urdu or Persian and were specially done by Muslim artists, often at the request of the collector. They included a colloquial description of the album, the artist, details of the painted images, and in some cases the details of the collection.

Apparently, the earlier forms of Company paintings followed a square or rectangular format in a single-page painting with a single composition, often a single image of a native person or local character, dressed in their usual costume. Several painted illustrations often belonged to one series, assembled in an album mode. The gradual unfurling of the album, along with the meagre written details of the contents, all packed into one album meant for an enthralled but often unseen audience[13], was admittedly a brand-new experience[14] for this novel type of artist, particularly in the pre-modern era in India.

The themes and subject matters played a critical part in the creation of the Company school, making the style unique and distinct from all of its Indian predecessors, including the Mughal Miniature paintings. The leitmotifs are vivacious, and they

13 Often such painted albums were ordered by British clients for their family back home in England. It was a way of sharing the local people, animals, and scenery with the people who have never visited this »strange land«.

14 In traditional practice, the relationship between artist and the Mughal patrons was much closer. Throughout their existence, they were associated with the royal court, whereas in this new trend, the artist was frequently meeting new clients. The subject matter was the other element that was quite new for the artists. Instead of the usual glimmering extravagant royal court dalliances, they were asked to paint insignificant subjects like native people or local flora and fauna.

also add an immense sense of sarcasm to the images. The paintings probably borrowed the point of view of the British client on the local characters. The subjects also varied with the region and with the skillful alterations done by the local artists of that area. The themes of the Company paintings in Delhi included the marvelous Mughal architecture and grand monuments. In Madras, Company painters preferred to create images of the local people of different castes, their costumes, and unfamiliar (to the Europeans) trades. This difference was mostly due to the whims and fancies of the British officers stationed in these areas. In Calcutta, as per orders from two of the most popular British patrons, namely Lady Impey and Lord Wellesley, local artists produced excellent illustrations of local birds and animals. Lord Wellesley also ordered copies of various flower and foliage paintings from the great Botanical Garden at Calcutta. Besides these popular themes, Company painters also painted Indian sceneries, views of the rustic countryside, and the local Indian festivals. By the mid-eighteenth century, like other indigenous art forms, the Company school had created a significant niche and achieved a degree of maturity. More mature artworks would soon be produced by talented painters like Shaikh Muhammad Amir of Karraya, who would create remarkable artworks like *A Syce Holding Two Carriage Horses* in 1845.

In terms of expression, the Lucknow-style Company paintings are closer to the visuality of the regional Mughal stylishness[15] of the Lucknow court. The subject matter was often very curious and presumably associated with the two types of motivation discussed earlier. The four selective examples given in the following pages are from parts of the same folio album comprised of fifty-three paintings depicting various local occupations.[16] While the first one shows a Muslim woman, kneeling on a cot and worshiping (fig. 1), the second specimen depicts a (most probably Hindu) woman with flowers, possibly celebrating the Vasant Panchami festival (fig. 2). Both are an honest depiction of devout women in these two major religions, Hinduism and Islam. As many of the collectors were foreigners of a different faith, it is unsurprising that they were curious about the domestic lifestyle of the natives. Moreover, as the two major religions were dominating South Asia at that time, it is also understandable that along with the local professions, the Sahib also wanted to record the modes of worshipping in that society. However, it is fascinating to see that the artist (or artists), probably Muslim, fluent in writing Urdu, were painting people, sages, and even women from other faiths.

The remaining images of the album demonstrate prevalent occupations, including religious and professional, as well as some glimpses of the local lifestyle during the late eighteenth century. The third image, representing a boy and a girl of rank

15 Gupta argued that the new style that was established in Hyderabad and Lucknow was somewhat different from the traditional Mughal art (Gupta 2012: 112).

16 These paintings are currently in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

with their tutor (fig. 3), is different, as it has three figures captured in a single composition. The image is probably a scene from the inside of a noble Muslim family household, with two children (probably from the same family) being tutored by their religious or linguistic teacher. While the girl in the picture is paying attention to the teacher, the boy is coyly looking toward the artist (or, ultimately, the audience).

However, at the end of this album, there are a few exciting illustrations of both Hindu ascetics and Muslim holy men. The fourth image illustrates a Hindu ascetic seated beside a fire (fig. 4). The balanced images of people from both religious sects of India confer a secular outlook onto this album. This was rare, but not completely unnatural due to the patronage of the European Sahib who commissioned the works.

Fig. 1 Unknown Lucknow artist, A Muslim woman, kneeling on a cot, worshiping. *From an album of paintings containing fifty-three drawings depicting occupations at Lucknow, watercolor, 22.5 x 15 cm, ca. 1815–1820 (complete).*

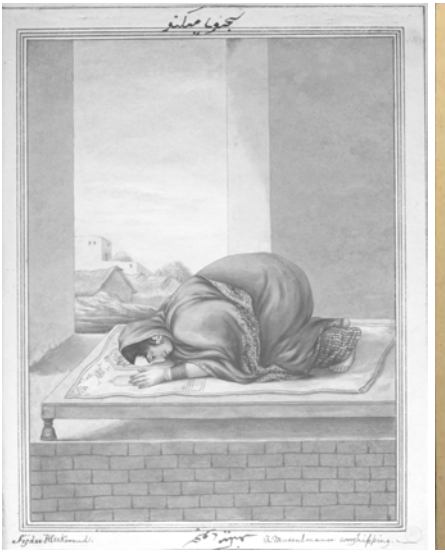

Fig. 2 Unknown Lucknow artist, A woman with flowers possibly celebrating the Vasant Panchimi festival. *From an album of paintings containing fifty-three drawings depicting occupations at Lucknow, watercolor, 22.5 cm x 15 cm, ca. 1815–1820 (complete).*

All the images of this album were painted on paper in watercolor and all of them were the same size to fit in the folio. The illustrations were created by unidentified

artists, and even the patron who originally ordered the commission is also unknown. Nonetheless, observing this fantastic illustration album provides us with valuable information on their societal and political context. Furthermore, these images resonate with the pictorial depictions of people and themes that the patron might have encountered personally, or perhaps the pictures were how they familiarized themselves with Indian culture. Even so, overall, the depicted images were multifarious in nature, containing an honest look at the social professionals of that era, besides being vibrant.

Fig. 3 Unknown Lucknow artist, A boy and girl of rank with their tutor. *From an album of paintings containing fifty-three drawings depicting occupations at Lucknow, watercolor, 22.5 cm x 15 cm, ca. 1815–1820 (complete).*

Fig. 4 Unknown Lucknow artist, An ascetic seated beside a fire. *From an album of paintings containing fifty-three drawings depicting occupations at Lucknow, watercolor, 22.5 cm x 15 cm, ca. 1815–1820 (complete).*

A close observation of the paintings conversely shows something unique. The voyeuristic and sarcastic point of view of the foreign client, who viewed the whole spectacle with much astonishment and surprise, was a central feature of most early Company artworks. The presence of the omnipotent British client is often overshadowed by the perspective of the native artist. However, later Company paintings tended to cater to more extensive subject matters, ranging from natural sceneries

to the flora and fauna of this subcontinent that gripped the popular imagination of the foreigners.

Major collectors

Some exciting scholarly work has been done on the patronage of Company paintings, and one of the most significant among them was published by Jennifer Howes. She argued that the European patrons' passion for Company art was inspired by two separate motivations, »collecting« and »information gathering« (Howes 2014: 372). However, it can also be interpreted as an overlap of »European individual« and »British official« within each of these major collectors. A more profound study of their collections may reveal how gathering Company paintings often fitted in with the individual purposes of these collectors. In this section, I shall briefly discuss three major collectors of the Company school, all of whom, curiously, were connected with the British East India Company.

The first motive, »collecting«, perfectly aligns with the collector as an »European individual«. The spirit of »collecting« artefacts from an unknown foreign land was very much instinctive, where the collector »collects« for his/her own personal collection or for sharing with his/her family and friends, much as he/she would »collect« skins of exotic animals.[17] This concern for the personal collection was indeed a leisure pursuit or can even be considered a »hobby«. The subsequent motive was »informative material collection«, which was undoubtedly linked with »colonial intentions«. The agenda behind this particular type of collection was to assemble materials, especially artworks that could elucidate aspects that were part of a larger colonial record-keeping scheme that eventually came to be associated with the British collector's career in the subcontinent. Following this argument, two of the three major European collectors studied in this paper (purposefully chosen to underline the difference between the two different kinds of collectors and to identify the stylistic and thematic variations) can be considered in order to understand whether the clients

17 Many of the British officials were also inclined towards hunting the exotic animals of the Indian subcontinent. The main reason for this (often useless) extensive hunting of wild animals was passing the time with a somewhat exciting adventure. The proud hunters collected the skins (and often used taxidermy processes) to display them in their homes back in Europe, much the same way they would display the Company paintings. A vital source of information, *The Sportsman's Book for India*, was one of the early books published on the legacy of British hunters in India and their adventures. It was edited by Frederick George Aflalo and published in 1904. A large section of the book depicts real stories with detailed descriptions written by British hunters (most of whom were high ranking colonial officials) of hunting Indian animals like gazelle, elephants, tigers, lions, Asian rhino, wild buffalo etc.

were hobby collecting as an »European individual« or for »informative material collection«.

The first instance is a fascinating British couple from eighteenth-century Calcutta, whose »collecting habit« changed the course of how colonial Indian art was understood. In 1774, a newly appointed British judge named Sir Elijah Impey came to Calcutta to serve as the first British Chief Judge of the Supreme Court of Judicature[18] at Fort William. He served in the same post until 1783, during which time the Bengal presidency was a thriving transcultural hub with the city of Calcutta as its capital. He was a proper eighteenth-century British gentleman with a strong education, intelligence, and a broad spectrum of inquisitiveness. Through this new role, which brought him into direct contact with both high and low society life in Calcutta, Sir Impey became very curious to understand the native people and their culture, an understanding that might eventually help to strengthen British rule in the country. He even hired a local *Munshi* (»overseer«) in order to learn Urdu and Bengali (Dalrymple 2019a: 15). Nevertheless, he was not alone in this quest, and his young wife, Mary Impey, also accompanied him to Calcutta. As a Western-educated woman, Mary started a new project to satisfy their shared ardent interest in the flora and fauna of India. In 1775, soon after settling into her new Calcutta home, she established a mini private zoo by collecting exotic Indian animals and birds.

However, she was not satisfied with the menagerie alone. The couple, especially Mary, wanted to study them carefully and scientifically and gather as much information as possible on them. Following this passion, in 1777, the couple hired three Indian artists to carry out this aspect of their collecting. However, it was not uncommon for British officials to employ Indian artists to paint local subject-matters. Noted British historian Dalrymple wrote that one Scottish nurseryman called James Kerr sent many botanical drawings by Indian artists back to Scotland as early as 1773 (ibid.).

The artists came from the neighboring city of Patna, were all trained in the Mughal court painting tradition, and had worked for the Nawabs of Patna and Murshidabad[19] in Bengal. Among them, the most senior was a Muslim painter named Shaykh Zayn-al-Din, while the other two were the Hindu artists Bhawani Das and Ram Das. Soon, they mastered the use of Western-style watercolor techniques on imported British watermarked paper and started adopting the foliage and plants

18 The British colonial rule established the Supreme Court of Judicature as a tool for controlling the law and order of this newly colonized land at Fort William in Calcutta in 1774. As such, it abolished the previous model of the Mayor's Court of Calcutta and became the highest court of law of the British Raj from 1774 until 1862.

19 In the mid-eighteenth century, Murshidabad provided an attractive income where the artists experimented with various subjects and themes (Rekha 2011: 999).

as their models, much like Western artists. Their intricate observations and meticulous paintings of native animals and plants greatly impressed their patrons. The accuracy of their art, which could be traced back to Mughal art, combined with the British technique and theme, would soon become famous as what we call »Company painting«. Shaykh Zayn-al-Din was one of the most accomplished artists among them. Dalrymple described him as follows:

> »Zain ud-Din's best works reveal a superb synthesis between a coldly scientific European natural history specimen illustration, warmed with a profoundly Indian sensibility and vital feeling for nature.« (Dalrymple 2019b: n.p.)

From 1777 to 1782, the Impey couple ordered several folios containing multiple illustrations of Indian animals, birds, plants, and flowers. The paintings belonged to a special series and stand out mainly due to their larger size and the avid use of English watermarked paper, which was unprecedented among local Company school examples of that era. Altogether, 326 works were created through this commission. These formed the core of their collection. When the Impeys returned in 1783, the paintings were also transported back to the United Kingdom, and in 1810 they were sold at Phillips in London (White 2014: n.p.).

Considering the fact that at the time of the onset of colonial rule in India, the Impeys had more than ample opportunities to collect pre-existing Indian paintings in Eastern India, it is strange that they only chose to commission new paintings instead of collecting older ones. Perhaps it was an intentional decision designed to help them maintain their status within Calcutta's high society. The collection, undoubtedly a unique example of artworks, certainly stands as an example of »hobby collecting« as an »European individual« rather than for »informative material collection«.[20]

The final patron to be considered here was an important British colonial administrative ruler, The 1st Marquess of Wellesley, who was the Governor-General of India and was based in the country from 1798 to 1805. Somewhat different to the Impeys, Wellesley had an illustrious career and was one of the most crucial British politicians and colonist administrators of Britain's colonial regime.[21] Nevertheless, besides his role as an imperialist, he is also lauded by the historians for his attempts to reform

20 The paintings (fig. 1–4) reproduced in this study are among the paintings commissioned by the Impeys.

21 His other name was Richard Colley Wellesley, but he was more famously known as The 1st Marquess of Wellesley (he also held the title of The 2nd Earl of Mornington). His contributions to strengthening British rule in the Indian subcontinent will undoubtedly be remembered in history. His long list of administrative and militaristic achievements includes the crushing of French dominance in southern India, forming a subsidiary alliance with several native kingdoms, especially with the Nizam of Hyderabad, and the annihilation of Tipu Sultan followed by the capture of his kingdom Seringapatam on 4

Indian society, especially via the establishment of the Fort William College, specifically to train newly appointed civilians to work in the recently established Office of the Governors-General (Metcalf/Metcalf 2006: 60). The college, up to its early dissolution in 1854, became the cornerstone of historical changes in Bengali society that would later be known as the Bengali Renaissance.

Aside from his administrative career in India, Lord Wellesley will be remembered for his fantastic collection of Company art. Like the Impeys and many other Western collectors of the time, Lord Wellesley also had an avid interest in learning about the people and nature of the land in which he was stationed. So much so that Wellesley, being a patron, also supported the formation of a new institution to promote the Natural History of India in Calcutta.[22] The newly founded Royal Botanical Garden[23] of Calcutta in particular fascinated him, along with the native animals and birds. However, the number of paintings commissioned by Wellesley was much larger than the Impeys and can undeniably be labeled one of the most extensive collections of Company paintings by a single collector of that era. Up to his retirement, Lord Wellesley collected approximately 2,660 artworks belonging to this style (Lynch 1988: 182). He commissioned a significant number of inimitable albums filled with illustrations of natural history and plant samples, and also collected objects. By using these paintings to document the numerous details of different indigenous plant species, he helped to pave the path for the later commercialization of Indian flora. The albums today are popularly known as the *Wellesley Albums*. A large part of his collection is held by the India Office Library, London, the British Museum, and the British Library in England.

Like the Impeys, Marquess Wellesley was stationed in one province throughout his tenure as Governor-General, and he ordered artworks that might have echoed the native art of that area.

The two separate instances of British patronage discussed here existed during the early period of the Company school, when it was still blooming into a prevalent style. The core similarity between the Impeys and Wellesley was that

May 1799, for which he is often labelled as one of the most daring imperialists ever assigned the duty of Governor-General of India (Lynch 1988: 180).

22 The institute was formed in 1804 under the direction of his staff-surgeon, Dr. Francis Buchanan, in the nearby Barrackpur area, in the suburbs of Calcutta, which unfortunately did not survive after Wellesley's departure from India in 1805 (Lynch 1988: 182).

23 Although there were several previous private attempts to identify new indigenous plants to cultivate for commercial value, a proper Botanical Garden was established in 1786, soon after the Impeys left India. An employee of the British East India Company, Colonel Robert Kyd, founded the Botanical Gardens of Calcutta in 1786. This was the period when the Company was attempting to forge robust trade links in the Indian subcontinent. At the time, there was a need to identify new plants of commercial value. For more details, see Thomas 2016.

they both hired Company artists to commission paintings as British collectors. Furthermore, both the Impeys and Wellesley believed that creating such paintings was a pastime amusement that helped them to understand India. They (Sir Impey and Lord Wellesley)[24] are remembered in Indian history as two infamous colonial administrators, and their contribution to making the Company school into reality is conveniently ignored. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that without their patronage, the charismatic short-lived Company style would not have been possible. Several other European collectors followed their example and enriched this style – the list includes prominent personalities such as Governor-General Lord Moira Hastings, General Charles »Hindoo« Stuart, Colonel Thomas Alexander Cobbe, Major James Nathanial Rind, Lord Valentia, staff-surgeon Dr. Francis Buchanan, British physician Dr. John Fleming, Major General Claude Martin, British civil servant William Fraser, travel-writer Fanny Parkes and many more. The encounter between the native Indian art and Western patronage was made possible by these interested collectors.

Notable artists

If the history of the Company school were ever written, only a handful of names could be listed, as a large number of the artists remained anonymous. However, there would be a few who would be remembered for their outstanding works. In this section, I shall discuss two notable Company school artists as illustrations. The discussion will proceed in sequential order, starting with Bhawani Das, one member of a trio of remarkable painters from the eighteenth century, before moving on to Shaikh Muhammad Amir, a painter of the nineteenth century. Both artists originated from the Bengal Presidency but belonged to two different timelines and were also of different religions.

In the late eighteenth century, Bhawani Das, a Patna-based Hindu painter, arrived in Calcutta, along with two other painters.[25] They came to Calcutta on the invitation of Chief Justice Sir Elijah Impey and Lady Impey.[26] Between 1777 and 1782, the

24 Lord Wellesley is infamously remembered for much plundering, most notoriously for the destruction and looting of Tipu Sultan's palace. He also robbed the famous sculpture *Tipoo's Tiger* from the palace in 1799 and sent it as a gift to the Directors of the East India Company. Currently it is held in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (Lynch 1988: 180f.)

25 Probably Shaikh Zain ud-Din and Ram Das. After building a small zoo of unique Indian animals, in the mid-1770s, the Impeys brought this artist trio to paint their private menagerie (Dalrymple 2019a: 15).

26 Dalrymple notes that Bhawani Das and Ram Das started working for the Impeys two years after Shaikh Zain ud-Din, around 1779. Bhawani Das had previously been commissioned

trio worked for the Impeys and produced remarkable paintings of native animals, birds, and plants. The aesthetic finesse and accuracy of their painting and their traditional methods, which resulted from their early training in Mughal traditional art, appealed to their Western collectors. Although the star among them was arguably Shaikh Zain ud-Din, whom many scholars defined as the »master painter«, Bhawani Das also ranked among the top artists of this style, known to paint in a somewhat more realistic manner. He was a master of both botanical and zoological subjects. Like the other two painters, Das was proficient in writing Persian, and he used to sign all of his paintings by writing his full name in Persian. It is only in recent years that his artworks from the Impey album have been auctioned at astonishing prices,[27] driving public attention to this almost forgotten artist of the colonial era.

The painting *A branch of a mango tree (›Mangifera Indica‹) bearing unripe fruits* (fig. 5) is one of the best examples of the art of Das. The painting is sophisticated and meticulous in its depiction of the twig with growing limbs, the wavey young leaves, and a densely sprouted bunch of unripe mangoes. A white background appears behind the branch to give more contrast to the central image. Upon first encountering this foliage shown in delicate feature against the unembellished British paper it might appear to the viewer to be a British botanical drawing. Yet, the signs of the painter's initial training in the intricately detailed, brightly colorful, and decorative painting style of the Mughal Miniature art shine through. The mango, which is famously considered the best Indian fruit, was intentionally selected for this image. Painted in 1780, this painting is part of the album commissioned by the Impeys and dedicated to Indian flora and fauna.[28] Like the other works of this album, the medium of this painting is watercolor on paper, with a dimension of 65.5 cm by 45.5 cm. It was inscribed in English with »In the Collection of Lady Impey at Calcutta« on the lower left side of the painting. Beneath that line, »Painted by« appears in English and the artist's name »Bhawani Das« was written in Persian.

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by another European patron, botanist James Kerr before the Impeys (Dalrymple 2019a: 66).

27 His most famous artwork, perhaps the most famous of all Company school paintings, was the *Great Indian Fruit Bat*, which was painted as part of a folio commissioned by the Impeys between 1777 and 1782. The *Great Indian Fruit Bat* by Bhawani Das, as per Dalrymple, could pass as a remarkably skilled English natural history painting (ibid.: 15). This painting, long regarded as one of the best artworks of that era, was sold for £458,500 by the auctioneers Bonhams (cf. Sonwalkar 2014).

28 The album was initially commissioned by Sir Elijah and Lady Impey in 1780. It contained 63 other images of animal, bird, and plant paintings and was given to the Linnaean Society, London. The collection then sold at Sotheby's, London, in 1963, and this painting was bought by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, after being auctioned by the Maggs Brothers Ltd, London, for £33 in 1963. For further information, see the Victoria and Albert Museum London under https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O16890/a-branch-of-a-mango-painting-bhawani-das/ [Accessed 8 January 2022].

The foliage is shown in considerable detail, with a bunch of immature fruits and leaves naturalistically captured. This work is closely related to a few other foliage paintings created by the same artist. The beautiful use of the green color, and the thin lines and use of tones like the European artists[29] reflect some of the key characteristics of the Company school. The painting can certainly be seen as an artwork that combines the best of both worlds within its small frame.

The final artist to be discussed here is Shaikh Muhammad Amir of Karraya.[30] Amir was from a different era and worked in Calcutta about half a century after Bhawani Das. During this time, this seemingly tranquil colonial city was rapidly becoming a bustling megapolis and a lucrative center for freelance Indian artists keen to work for the affluent Western patrons. From the latter half of the eighteenth century onwards, sundry European inhabitants started moving away from the already crowded city center to the delightful new outskirts of Calcutta. This also created more opportunities for native artists to find sufficient art commissions.

29 British professional artists started arriving in India in the second half of the eighteenth century to paint and sell their art to the native kings and princes, as well as the British officers and their wives (Mildred 1967: 864f.). With them, they brought a rich influence of British art to India and impacted the next generation of Indian art, namely the Company school. Dalrymple notes that Lady Impey used to show examples of European Natural History paintings to the native artists working for her, including conceivably popular and highly accomplished eighteenth-century paintings of flower subjects (Dalrymple 2019a: 42). These Western artworks clearly had a profound impression on the Indian artists. Nevertheless, the painting *A branch of a mango tree (›Mangifera Indica‹) bearing unripe fruits* bears an uncanny resemblance to the prevalent British foliage painting style of that era. For example, a foliage study titled *Alyxia spicata* as a part of *Banks' Florilegium* by British artist John Frederick Miller (1759–1796) bears a close resemblance to this piece. This painting by Miller was produced between 1768 and 1771, during his trip with Captain Cook's first voyage to the South Seas and Australia. Although they were not produced in India, it is also fascinating to note the handling of the medium, closeness of drawing, and color shade among these two artworks produced during the same era. The paintings are currently in the collection of The Natural History Museum, London. Another artist, who contributed to this folio, Sydney Parkinson (1745–1771), also produced a similar painting, *Fagraea berteriana*, (1768–1771) which can also be seen as an example with similar features. It is also interesting to note that in the year when Das was painting this art piece, few European artists were stationed in Calcutta, and the list includes celebrated artists like Tilly Kettle (Foster 1930–1931: 56f.).

30 »Karraya« or »Kareya« is a locality in the southern part of Calcutta. During the British era, it was known as a native »black town« situated in the suburban areas of Calcutta, next to the colonial »white hamlet« where most Western patrons were located.

Fig. 5 Bhawani Das, A branch of a mango tree (›Mangifera Indica‹) bearing unripe fruits, *Calcutta, watercolor on paper, 65.5 cm x 45.5 cm, ca. 1780 (complete). Made for Sir Elijah and Lady Impey of Calcutta.*

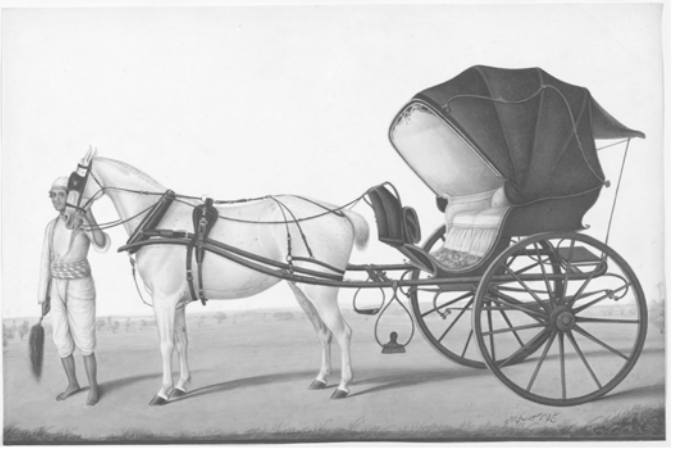
There is scanty information available on the early life of Amir, except that he was a native Muslim artist, highly trained in traditional Mughal art in Murshidabad or Patna. He moved from there to Calcutta in search of employment, much like his predecessors, perhaps due to the diminishing influence of the Nawabi. He is known to have signed all his artworks, identifying himself as a *mussavir* (›expert painter‹ in Persian) who is »based in Karraya«. Amir was active between the eighteen-thirties and eighteen-forties.

It became a prevalent fashion among European patrons of that era, especially British officials, to commission images that captured visual documentation of their extravagant material possessions in this colonial land. This included their lavish lifestyle, luxurious residence, exotic animal possessions, and of course, colonial lacqueys. Amir was perfectly suited to this demand and became the top Company painter of that time. An avid onlooker of the lifestyle of the British households, his art exhibited precise skill in its attention to intricate detail. Amir strongly adopted

Western art techniques such as perspective, foreshortening, and shading within his art. This provided them with an innate naturalistic essence, making him exceptional among other native painters of his time. Scholars like Dalrymple considered Amir the »foremost« among other Company artists of that era (Dalrymple 2017: 17). Within a short span, Amir's popularity attracted a wide range of patrons, even well-known personalities, such as the British travel-writer Fanny Parkes, who commissioned four of his illustrations for her celebrated book *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* published in London in 1850. Amir's popularity was because of his ability not only to paint like the British artists but also to portray subjects with an enchanting naturalism. His honest observations represented the objects in both a decorous and a poetic manner.

One of his most captivating compositions, *A groom with a horse and carriage* (1845), was painted with opaque watercolor on paper. The painting belongs to a set of two illustrations commissioned for an (unknown) European client of Calcutta, showing his household, attendants, and domestic animals. In this painting, the artist painted a *syce* (›groom‹), proportionally flanked by a horse and carriage. All three subjects, two living beings and one non-living object, most probably belonged to the British client who commissioned this work. Half of the groom's face, as well as a large part of the painting, is covered by the enormous horse. The painting, especially the horse and the use of color tone, bears curious likenesses to paintings created by one of the greatest British animal painters of the eighteenth century, George Stubbs. Moreover, Stubbs lived and worked about half a century before Amir, almost in the same timeline as of Bhawani Das and Shaikh Zain ud-Din. Though there is no substantial evidence that Amir was exposed to the works of Stubbs, if he ever were, it would be no surprise to fathom the astonishing nearness of their visions. Dalrymple asserts that the anatomical accuracy of his horse paintings can even stand in comparison with Stubbs, but that Amir's paintings have an »indefinable Indian warmth«, a »Mughal« employment of both »heart and head« in his paintings (Dalrymple 2019a: 17). Unlike his other similar works, such as *A Syce Holding Two Carriage Horses*, painted in the same year, the groom is not directly facing the audience, nor given the central position. In contrast, the groom's face wears a forced smile while looking towards the artist. He is standing barefoot, dressed in the traditional attire of an attendant while holding a flywhisk in his right hand. This can be quickly identified as a subtle mark of the groom's fear in the presence of the dominant colonial master. Several of Amir's illustrations capture this type of distinction between the colonizer and the colonized, where the master, often invisible, can only be identified by his material (and often human) possessions. Meanwhile, the natives in the paintings can be recognized by their isolated humanity, often flanked by exotic pets or dead objects.

Fig. 6 Shaikh Muhammad Amir, A groom with a horse and carriage, *Calcutta, ca. 1845, opaque watercolor on paper, 29 cm x 45 cm.*



Over two centuries of European patronization by affluent and influential collectors enabled local artists like Shaikh Zain ud-Din and Ram Das to produce amazing artworks depicting exotic Indian creatures. Other Company artists like Bhawani Das, Rungiah, Manu Lall, and Chuni Lall concentrated more on producing paintings of foliage, highlighting Indian flora in their work. Shaikh Muhammad Amir, on the other hand, created a niche for himself by depicting European households, pets, prized possessions, and native attendants, while the artists Sita Ram, Sewak Ram, and Ghulam Ali Khan were recognized for their delicate paintings of the Indian scenery with free brushwork and splendid use of color. Even though they were created for European clients and executed in Indo-European techniques and materials, the artworks expressed Indian social and natural history in a manner that was distinct from their Western patrons. So much so that many of the artworks, especially the paintings of Amir, can be seen as conveying a silent utterance of defiance.

However, right from the beginning and until recently, identifying Company art has been focused on the collectors, not the artists. As the persistent colonization continued, the Company painters went to some extent into obscurity *en masse*. Consequently, only a few artists can be identified, with numerous painters hidden behind the cloak of anonymity. The sudden skyrocketing popularity of Company art among modern collectors, especially the Impey albums or the Wellesley collection, which have sold for a fortune, is meaningless whilst many others are still languishing in near obscurity.

Unsurprisingly, but sadly, due to the process of Western patronage, most of the artworks of these great painters are not located within India. They are currently in numerous private collections and museums in Western countries, including the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the British Library, the Peabody Essex Museum, the Ashmolean Museum of Oxford University, and the Smithsonian Institution.

Decline

The Company painters existed for some two centuries, and they primarily operated in various exceptional styles. The Company school attained its peak by the early nineteenth century, when the production of various local centers significantly increased, leading to many new artists joining the trade only to produce and sell cheaper derivative copied art. As the paper argued earlier, these artists typically came from a long line of traditional indigenous art styles, which they adjusted to this new form in order to satisfy the requirements of their Western collectors. How they adjusted their art also varied enormously in order to fit in with the whims of the client's schema. This practice was often very damaging to the art itself, and later it became one of the reasons for its decline. Distinguished British art historian E. B. Havell[31] observed that by the beginning of the twentieth century, Company painters had decreased greatly in number, with only a few remaining in the northern part of India, especially in Delhi and Agra (Havell 1908: 234). Nonetheless, there were two other prominent reasons for the sudden decline of the Company school. The first was the onset of British art schools in India and the second was the development of photographic science.

Western Academism in visual art was introduced by the colonial masters in India in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. The motivation was relatively simple – it was not the urge to educate the local subjects in the nuances of British art, but rather to turn them into skilled artisans trained in British Academic techniques. Like

31 Prof. Ernest Binfield Havell (1861–1934) was one of the most significant and influential Western authorities on Indian art. Havell initially joined the Madras School of Art, which was the first British art school in India, in 1884, and worked for a decade as the Superintendent. Later, he moved to Calcutta to serve as the legendary Principal of the Government School of Art from 1896 to 1905. During his tenure, he worked along with acclaimed Indian artist Abanindranath Tagore to introduce a new style of visual art and art education grounded on oriental traditions instead of British philosophies. This new style led to the establishment of the »Bengal School of Art« movement. Havell also wrote extensively on Indian art and architecture. His seminal work *Indian Sculpture and Painting* was published in 1908.

a true colonizer, in the early days of British rule, there was a need for them to thoroughly comprehend the social and cultural nuances of the colonized nation and its people, and to serve this requirement, they set up several establishments such as the Archaeological Survey of India, the Indian Museum, the Asiatic Society etc. To support these institutes, they required expert artisans who could proficiently sketch the objects collected in surveys and excavations for appropriate documentation. Moreover, the British understood that it would be more viable and economical to train locals rather than appointing European professionals. This necessity gave birth to the first set of industrial art-schools[32] for native students, founded in conurbations like Madras, Calcutta, Bombay, and Lahore (Tomory 2013: 280). The schools soon overshadowed the training in the earlier Indian traditional schools of art with their new modern art-education methods. Within a short period, they fundamentally altered the public appreciation of visual art in this subcontinent. So much so that one of the staunchest critics of Westernization of Indian culture, Havell, wrote:

> »The curse of our false classicism, so utterly inconsistent with the true spirit of ancient culture, now hangs heavy upon the national art of India, and the educated Indian, trained in the sordid and squalid atmosphere of Indian universities, became completely out of touch with his own national artistic thought, and attributes to Indian art the defects which should properly be ascribed to his own lack of artistic development.« (Havell 1908: 232)

He even blamed it on the changed lifestyle of the Indian public and their fascination with »European portrait-painters«, which did not elevate public taste, and the spread of the notion that Indian art was inferior (Havell 1908: 232f.). Some local wealthy patrons even went a step further, expressing their desire to refine the indigenous art by sending the young Indian artists to Europe or Indian Art Academies for better edification. Consequently, such »enlightened« artists would become the means by which their glorious artistic traditions would be deracinated.

However, it was the invention of the camera and the rapid growth of photographic establishments in India that put the last nail in the coffin of the already waning Company painting style. More and more photography studios opened in important Indian cities, challenging the very existence of both indigenous art and Western realistic paintings. With an increasing number of Indian Art School-educated

32 Calcutta's Government School of Art was one of the leading art academies among these newly established art schools. It was later renamed the Government College of Art & Crafts, and even today, it continues its inherently colonial legacy. As a matter of fact, I completed my undergraduate study in Western-style painting from the same institution. I have previously broadly discussed this art college and early Indian art education in one of my earlier published works (Bhowmik 2015: 1428–1444).

artists[33] joining the newly established trade, a few of the Company artists also joined the more financially rewarding trade of photography.

Conclusion

Over the past few decades, Indian colonial history has gradually attracted more and more scholars. Promisingly, Indian visual art, and especially the art of the colonial period, is also gathering interest. In recent times, three high-profile exhibitions on the Company school have been held in the USA and the UK. It seems that this Indo-European hybrid style has finally started receiving the consideration it merits. However, despite Britain having an enormous collection, the first magisterial exhibition on Company paintings, entitled *Company School Painting in India (ca. 1770–1850)*, exhibited the most extensive collection in the USA at the renowned Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2017. The second and largest exhibition was curated by William Dalrymple. It was named *Forgotten Masters: Indian Painting For The East India Company* and was displayed at the Wallace Collection in London in 2019. The exhibition showcased many essential works, including the Impey albums and the Wellesley collection. The third exhibition, entitled *In Good Company*, was held in 2020 by the Bonhams in London, displaying their vast collection of this style.

During its short life span of about two centuries, the Company school was undoubtedly one of the most curious indigenous hybrid styles of art that widely integrated Europeanism into Indian Art. The quintessence of the visual art of the Indian subcontinent is, to a certain extent, divergent from the philosophies of European art. Even while venturing into Western-style realism, the art continues to be permeated with a sense of idealism. Havell perfectly described this thus:

> »Nature, to the European, is always an obvious reality which must be studied, exploited, and analysed so that the exact composition of every organic and inorganic element in it may be ascertained and explained […] Realism to the Indian artist has a different meaning from what we attach to it; for Indian

33 The list includes doyens of Indian art and cinema, such as: father of Indian Cinema Dhundiraj Phalke, India's first filmmaker Hiralal Sen, eminent Bengali author Sukumar Ray, photographer to the Viceroy of India Lala Deen Dayal, painter Shripad Damodar Satwalekar, celebrity photographer David Mordecai and finally the first Indian woman photojournalist Homai Vyarawalla. Many of them, like Phalke, Satwalekar, and Vyarawalla, were products of the Sir J. J. School of Art, Bombay, a prominent British art education institute in India. On the other hand, Sukumar Ray belonged to the illustrious Ray family of Calcutta, and the father of the great filmmaker Satyajit Ray was trained at the School of Photoengraving and Lithography, London, and was considered the forerunner of photography and lithography in the country.

philosophy regards all we see Nature as transitory, illusive phenomena, and declares that the only reality is the Divine Essence, or Spirit.« (Havell 1908: 23f.)

The art of the Company school is a challenging subject to delineate within the short space of this contribution. Not only was it shaped by highly varied native Indian styles of art, but it was also further affected by profoundly penetrating socio-economic factors. Although it was produced over a comparatively long and complicated period of Indian history, Occidentalism can act as a convenient label to examine the range of ways in which this art style developed and how it responded to colonialism and modernity. As part of the colonial history, these images articulated an Indian observation of their surroundings, one that was also linked with instructive dictations by European patrons, but often without eliminating their traditional signature. As we have discussed, the Company school resists stringent classification. For this reason, it was ignored by Indian art scholars for an extended period of time. It is no surprise that most of the scholarly methods attempt to distinguish it from the common aesthetical perspective, or simply overlook it.

Some of these paintings can be seen as an enhanced imagination of actual Indian flora-fauna, people, and culture. In comparison, others were an attempt to recreate Indian nature under the influence of the Western mind. However, the visual hybridity of the Company school merits proper consideration, together with a contemporary study on Indian art history, particularly if one wants to comprehend how the unique »Indianness« survived and was re-invented under colonial rule. Furthermore, as colonialism in the subcontinent succeeded in influencing it, the varied local art styles of the Company school can be perceived together as confirmation of this hybridity. But then again, defining all Company paintings as expressions of this process may be taking it too far. Instead, we can state that some of the paintings are a unique blending of the two different art philosophies of the East and the West, albeit an often unintentional one, wherein their greatness lies.

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