

Towards a truly global art history

Review of:

20th Century Indian Art: Modern, Post-Independence, Contemporary
by Partha Mitter, Parul Dave Mukherji, Rakhee Balaram, London: Thames
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It is difficult to imagine two countries further apart than India and Brazil. One is situated notionally in the East and geographically in the northern hemisphere; the other, by the same criteria, lies arguably in the West and mostly in the southern hemisphere. One is densely populated, to a large extent by peoples who have lived in the region for millennia; the other is more sparsely populated, predominantly by descendants of migrations, free or forced, over the past few centuries. The former, despite its long and complex history, has been a modern nation-state for only 75 years; the latter, despite its supposed historical recentness, just celebrated two hundred years of independence. The list of differences goes on: languages and religions; dress, music, cuisine; mores of kinship and sexuality; relationships of gender, class and race. The finer points could be debated endlessly. Perhaps the most relevant one, for the purposes of art history, is that India is regarded in Europe as an ancient culture, with a rich artistic tradition of its own making, whereas Brazil is viewed by the same Eurocentric gaze as a new and derivative culture, primarily shaped by settler colonialism and subsequent modernization. The two nations occupy very distant reaches of the art historical imagination, and it is unusual to see them considered together in the pages of a historiographical journal.

The comparison is meant to foreground the incongruity of asking a specialist in the history of Brazilian culture to review a book on Indian art. Let me address the interested reader directly, in first person, to say that I probably know less about Indian art than you do. Having said that, after reading *20th Century Indian Art: Modern, Post-Independence, Contemporary*, I know considerably more than before. If this were a dustjacket endorsement or a book review website, I could report in all sincerity that the volume is a lively introduction to a complex topic, accessible to the general reader and filled with information and analysis, clearly the product of a great deal of scholarly erudition. All of that is true, but none of it conveys the accomplishment of this book in advancing the agenda of so-called *global art history*. Given the reviewer's lack of expertise on the topic of Indian art, the present text will focus on the challenges of the latter task.

One great merit of *20th Century Indian Art* is that it affords new perspectives on some of the most intractable problems of studying the history of art in non-European contexts. A profusion of issues Latin Americanists are used to thinking

about from the vantage point of the region's relationship to Europe and the United States – hybridity and syncretism, primitivism and folk art, nationalism and regional identities, authenticity and derivativeness, belatedness and modernization – here resurface in novel configurations, with unfamiliar names and events that resonate in oddly recognizable ways. From my outsider position, the experience of reading the book was like looking into a distorted mirror, and I frequently had to rouse myself from the exercise of positing deceptive equivalences. A few examples might make my meaning clearer. To what extent can the appropriation of indigenous motifs by Latin American modernists be approximated to the efforts of Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose? Does the equation between Amrita Sher-Gil and Frida Kahlo – long ago established by Geeta Kapur – as divergent women artists vexed with representing otherness within a male-dominated modernism, still make sense considering the refinement of feminist, queer and decolonial art histories over the past decades? If so, could it be usefully extended to Anita Malfatti or Amelia Peláez or Georgette Chen? Why do some works by Akbar Padamsee, Shanti Dave or M.F. Husain, painted at a time of sparse cultural contacts between the two regions, prompt formal comparison with counterparts in Latin America? How deep are these thematic and stylistic parallels? In vastly different contexts, do coincidences of form imply similarity of meaning?

In the second chapter of the book, Partha Mitter sums up the central question embedded in such cross-cultural comparisons: “How can we interpret these seeming parallels, given that their historic experiences were essentially dissimilar, their formal concerns and visual languages so very different?” (p.51). Significantly, the question crops up in a passage discussing the contradictions of primitivism as a mode of anti-colonial resistance in India and comparing it to the German experience. Mitter points out that, in Europe too, primitivism functioned as a critique of modernity and a challenge to urban industrial capitalism. That fact leads him to speculate on plausible links between the writings of Leo Tolstoy, Wilhelm Hausenstein, Carl Einstein and the communitarian ideals of Rabindranath Tagore or the indigenism of Jamini Roy. Such an understanding of artistic primitivism as “a complex phenomenon” (p.48) diverges from the dismissal of it as mere colonialist fantasy and dovetails with recent scholarly re-examinations of the concept.¹ The simple exercise of considering primitivism from a viewpoint other than that of the North Atlantic adds a further layer of meaning and problematizes the relegation of the term.

The historiography of art most often interprets formal coincidences between the art of so-called peripheral cultures, not in direct communication with each other, as proof of their respective indebtedness to a common centre. That is particularly true for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during which artists from all over the world flocked to the same training grounds and exhibitionary circuits.

¹ See, among others, Samuel J. Spinner, *Jewish Primitivism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021, 1-12; Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017, xi-xvii; Ruth B. Phillips, ‘Aesthetic primitivism revisited: The global diaspora of “primitive art” and the rise of Indigenous modernisms’, *Journal of Art Historiography*, 12 (2015), 5-10; Nicola Gess, ed., *Literarischer Primitivismus*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013, 1-10.

Cosmopolitan capitals such as Paris, London and New York have come under sustained scrutiny as sites of artistic exchange, particularly their academies and schools, salons and exhibitions, movements and networks of sociability. The opportunities they afforded attracted intense immigration and, in turn, led to the formation of new kinds of audiences, spawning what Raymond Williams defined as “metropolitan perceptions”.² Key among these were ideas of *modern art* and the *avant-garde*, terms that came into use in their current acceptation between the 1880s and 1910s, in direct temporal correlation with the age of European high imperialism. Contrary to the long-held assumption that metropolitan networks operated in a single direction – radiating outwards from imperial capitals towards their subjected colonies – there can be little doubt that the margins also contributed to shaping the centre.³ An important and widely recognized example is the *Négritude* movement, but it is far from being an anomaly.

The preponderance of cultural transfer and artistic exchange tends to be underrated by a historiography of art still largely circumscribed by national boundaries. Evidence of such processes abounds in *20th Century Indian Art*, and it makes the book worth reading even by historians whose interest in Indian art is negligible. A few examples: the surprising contribution of William Morris (via E.B. Havell) to Indian nationalism; the cross-fertilization of expressionism around the 1922 Bauhaus exhibition in Calcutta; the strategic role played by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy in getting the photographs of Alfred Stieglitz into US museums; the extended presence of Nicholas Roerich in India and its import for ideas of Russian spirituality; the presence of German-speaking exiles during the Second World War and their cultural legacy after independence. Among many others, these instances of contact between East and West belie the notion that the art of India exists in a state of esoteric alterity.

Even before the onset of mass media, air travel and telecommunications, border crossings and transcultural dialogue are the art-historical rule, rather than the exception. The prominence achieved by the Bengal School of Painting in London, Paris and Berlin, in the 1910s and 1920s is an interesting case in point. More unusual is the career of Fanindranath Bose in Scotland, where he took part in the New Sculpture movement and was made an associate of the Royal Scottish Academy. After the Second World War, the exodus to Paris and London of Akbar Padamsee, S.H. Raza and F.N. Souza is more widely known. Artists did not just follow the well-worn routes of imperial power, however. Satish Gujral’s period in Mexico, from 1952 to 1954, is a fascinating example of a new type of dialogue from which Europe was pointedly excluded. Working directly with David Alfaro Siqueiros, and in contact with Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Frida Kahlo and Rufino Tamayo, Gujral provides a link with the politically engaged modernism of the revolutionary muralists. His paintings on the partition of India represent an

² Raymond Williams, ‘Metropolitan perceptions and the emergence of modernism’ (1985), in: *The Politics of Modernism*, London: Verso, 1989, 37-48.

³ Harri Veivo, ‘Introduction: de quoi ‘avant-garde’ est-il le nom?’, in: Harri Veivo, ed., *Transferts, appropriations et fonctions de l’avant-garde dans l’Europe intermédiaire et du nord*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2012, 13-15.

instance of artistic dialogue with Latin America at a time when ideas of non-alignment and the Third World were in their infancy.

Looking at art history from an Indian perspective shifts the meanings of a range of concepts and phenomena. Like primitivism, already mentioned, *Orientalism* is another term that resonates in unexpected ways when examined from the East, rather than the West. The impact of Pan-Asian currents is epitomized by the presence of Okakura Kakuzo and Xu Beihong in India during the first half of the twentieth century. In both cases, their main interlocutor on the Indian side was Rabindranath Tagore. The 1913 Nobel laureate in literature emerges from the pages of *20th Century Indian Art* as a gigantic figure of global art history. Poet, playwright, painter, composer, philosopher, social reformer and educationist, he certainly deserves to be better known and more widely read by an insufficiently appreciative art historical canon. If nothing else, his tireless networking and travels place him within the top tier of individuals who influenced ideas of modernism not only in his native Bengal but in Europe, the USA and further afield. Even in Brazil, a place seemingly distant from his preoccupations, Tagore's impact has recently begun to be reassessed.⁴

Although Rabindranath Tagore did pass through Brazil briefly – twice, in fact, in 1924 and 1925, on his way to and from Chile – his influence there was processed mostly through translations of his works as well as the reception of his public image. Tagore, in the 1920s, was an international celebrity and, as such, figured prominently in newspapers and magazines all over the world. He was as much subject as object of what Partha Mitter has labelled the “virtual cosmopolis” – that hybrid city of the imagination made possible by the dissemination of words and images on a planetary scale.⁵ The extent of transfers and exchanges between cultural spheres that had little or no contact with each other – via books, periodicals, graphic arts, photography and cinema – has been underestimated by traditional models of art historical reception, which tend to set greater store by personal associations between artists and personalities. It is indeed crucial to know that Tagore's visit to Germany in 1921 precipitated the encounter that brought the works of Wassily Kandinsky together with those of Gaganedranath Tagore in 1922.⁶ It is equally important to appreciate that the Theosophical undercurrents of the spiritual in art, informing both their oeuvres, had been flowing for decades between Europe and India.⁷

⁴ Marcus Wolff, 'O Tagore de Cecília Meireles e outros Tagores', *Contexto*, 31 (2017), 483-504; Eliana Lourenço de Lima Reis, Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida & Carlos Alberto Gohn, eds., 'Literatura e cultura indianas: a herança de Tagore e a contemporaneidade' (dossiê), *Aletria: Revista de Estudos de Literatura*, 21/2 (2011).

⁵ Partha Mitter, 'Decentering modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery', *The Art Bulletin*, 40 (2008), 542.

⁶ Regina Bittner & Kathrin Rhomberg, eds., *The Bauhaus in Calcutta: an Encounter of Cosmopolitan Avant-Gardes*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013.

⁷ David Weir, 'Theosophy and Modernism: a Shared but Secret History', in: Tim Rudbøg & Erik Reenberg Sand, eds., *Imagining the East: the Early Theosophical Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 205-228.

The emergence of a virtual space in which images could be exchanged with historically unprecedented facility is not a novel phenomenon of the internet age. It was palpably on the rise during the latter half of the nineteenth century, from the invention of the lithographic rotary printing press, in the 1840s, to the development of commercially viable processes of halftone reproduction in the 1880s and 1890s.⁸ By the early twentieth century, printing photographs in newspapers, magazines and books was straightforward and affordable. Given the importance of illustrated books and periodicals for the study of art history, the worldwide dissemination of printed images is a topic of utmost relevance for fleshing out global transfers of styles and forms. *20th Century Indian Art* devotes welcome attention to the development of photography – from the photographic societies of the colonial era to artist photography in contemporary Indian art. The place of photographs in forging a new visual culture is duly considered in essays by Rahaab Allana and Shukla Sawant. The book also engages with printmaking and graphic arts, when practiced by fine artists, moving seamlessly between media and techniques. There is little reference, however, to design or commercial graphics. That is a telling omission when considering an all-important question in any non-European context: what exactly do we mean by art?

The conception of *art* as an autonomous means of individual expression, developed in Europe since the Renaissance, tends to be taken for granted in Western art history. The narrative of artistic progress through masters and schools, periods and styles, comes down to the present at least from Vasari, bearing the whole weight of methodological refinement from Winckelmann onwards. As James Clifford famously noted, however, such a conception is premised on a distinction between art and culture that sits uncomfortably with anthropological evaluations of why humans produce material artifacts and how modern society has chosen to collect them.⁹ When speaking of art in the context of India, or any society where traditional forms of cultural production coexist with modern ones, where exactly does one draw the line between art and other manifestations of material culture? That burning question is informed in *20th Century Indian Art* by the contributions of Naman P. Ahuja, Ashrafi S. Bagat, Annapurna Garimella and Jyotindra Jain, all dealing to differing extents with the art versus craft divide. Problematizing the distinctions between art and craft, folk and indigenous, popular and vernacular, would seem to be one of the most formidable – and most pressing – tasks for making valid comparisons across cultural contexts.¹⁰

⁸ See, among others, Rachel A. Mustalish, 'The Development of Photomechanical Printing Processes in the Late 19th Century', *Topics in Photographic Preservation*, 7 (1997), 73-87.

⁹ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988, 215-251.

¹⁰ See, among others, Regina Bittner & Renée Padt, eds., *Craft Becomes Modern: the Bauhaus in the Making*, Bielefeld: Kerber, 2017; Laura Fischer, "'Aboriginal Mass Culture': a Critical History", *Visual Studies*, 29/3 (2014), 232-248; Sascha Bru, Laurence van Nuijs, Benedikt Hjartarson, Peter Nicholls, Tania Ørum, Hubert van den Berg, eds., *Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and High and Low Culture*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012; Carolyn Dean, 'The Trouble with (the Term) Art', *Art Journal*, 65/2 (2006), 24-33.

20th Century Indian Art manages to account for the many strands and the diversity of experiences encompassed under the label 'Indian art' by interspersing its 46 main chapters with over a hundred shorter contributions, presented as boxes focusing on a particular artist or theme. Besides the three editors, the book is authored by an additional 85 contributors, ensuring a plurality of voices. Whether or not it is representative of the state of Indian art history today – a point I am poorly equipped to judge – it is successful in giving the reader a sense of the diversity of positions and approaches through which the field can be addressed. So much more could be written about this book, particularly by a specialist in the field. There are some controversial choices. Subsuming Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka into the category of *regional modernisms* is understandable, given the complex history of the subcontinent, but it begs the question of how far the modern nation-state can function as a valid art historical category. From my own standpoint as a historian specializing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is frustrating that the editors chose to attribute so much more space – a good two thirds of the book – to the latter half of the twentieth century, even spilling over into the twenty-first. As seems to be increasingly the case elsewhere with art historical study of the twentieth century, more recent events are given pride of place over what came before.

What *20th Century Indian Art* makes abundantly clear is the urgency of pushing art history more radically and profoundly towards the study of transculturation. Only when mutual transfers and exchanges are accorded the same weight as genealogy and influence will we begin to break down the hierarchies that relegate the so-called periphery to a position of dependence on what is presumed, a priori, to be the centre. Itineracy instead of dislocation; adaptation instead of appropriation; concurrence instead of precedence; plurality instead of deviation: these should be the terms of debate. Only when art historians can look at the discipline from a multiplicity of cultural and geographical perspectives will it be possible to establish a truly global art history. We need more books like this for other countries and regions. If Thames & Hudson could be persuaded to produce similar volumes for Brazil, China, Russia, and so on (or, alternatively, regional categories like Eastern Europe, Latin America, West Africa), the opportunities for recognizing similarities in the distorting mirror of difference would likely open avenues for decades of study and research. Correlating art histories worldwide, rather than expounding upon the global from the vantage point of Europe and the USA, is the necessary next step to decolonizing art history.

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