

BOOK REVIEWS

HERMIONE DE ALMEIDA and GEORGE H. GILPIN. *Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India*, British Art and Visual Culture Since 1750: New Readings Series, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005, pp. xv+336. ISBN 0-7546-3681-X (hb), £75.00

Studies on British Indian art, although not abounding in a diversity of thematic research and conceptual frameworks, have recently been almost unthinkable as dissociated from the discourse on colonial studies. Probably last but not least among common expectations is simply an attempt to contribute to this field by gently reshaping the landscape of themes or narratives without introducing any strikingly new theoretical or methodological perspective. The book by Hermione de Almeida and George H. Gilpin can be ascribed to the latter group of contributions, the chief value of which is not only coverage of an early colonial period of British India which still lacks conceptual interpretations of culture in transition but also stylistic improvement of a particular academic field—the visual culture of early colonial British India.

Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India thematically is a story of early British India and its chroniclers—the military and imperial age between the 1770s and the 1830s that generated the prospects of India and articulated British interest in this colony. Moreover, it is a fascinating and arresting story that invites one to read the visual narrative as a huge historical canvas or a novel. A literary approach to visual culture predominates in this book; methodologically it is not at all innovative and rather dates back to the heyday of descriptive art history, but since the ‘visual romance’ of Britain with India is greatly invested with colonial propaganda abounding in stylistic niceties, the literary description of things visual proves to be relevant.

Introducing the early colonial approach to India as a miscellany of contesting themes and narratives, Part One sets out to explore the prospect of India that has been given substance by diverse and sometimes even conflicting visual, tangible and literary evidence—James Wales’ drawings of the vistas at Elephanta, Edward Moors’ records of the cave-temples, and literary imagery derived from early translations of Sanskrit sources. The authors record how primary-source-based exploration of travellers’ and Orientalists’ reflections were perpetuated as a vast figural archive of Indian culture and religion that was later successfully explored by syncretic mythologists and comparative religion and culture scholars.

From the imagery of India perceived from the outside, Part Two turns to the Oriental fantasies that quite frequently found their place in the everyday life of British colonial administrators. From the portraits of Tilly Kettle, the first professional painter in the East India Company, to the items of natural history drawn by James Forbes, the authors explore paintings depicting both actual and imagined scenes: compositions, attitudes of an outsider, minute ethnographical details in costume and accoutrement, fanciful landscapes or their backgrounds. All this disaccords astonishingly with the extraordinary world of India that was experienced by the British in India yet not intended to be displayed to the English public. Although later these fantasised and fantastic prospects of India were modified, and frequently denied, they served to generate the imperial visual regime that operated through 'official fiction'.

The institutional legitimisation of the prospect of India by exhibiting practices, particularly exhibitions held by the Royal Academy yearly since 1769 that displayed a visual image of British India through portraits, paintings of scenery, and historical paintings, is discussed in Part Three. The authors rightly state that these exhibitions were an inspiration to the young painters who choose to visit India instead of Italy for the search of inspiration and not least financial bounty (p. 105). This change of orientation had enormous cultural and intellectual effect; the Romantic prospect of India came to be transferred to England, where it soon displaced the neo-classical idea of an 'ancient world' or ideal of Greece and Rome with a new visual agenda for the construction of the British empire. The authors argue that it was the idea of sublimity played upon picturesque landscapes—the genre of painting that was very soon divested from British or continental landscapes, where it originated, and attributed to those of India—that contributed to generating the visual image of British empire that needed to soften 'the Barbarick splendour' of India that was attained by intentionally using her cultural artefacts out of context, as a form of garden curious in landscape paintings (p. 131). Notwithstanding factual inconsistency, the idea of picturesque in landscape paintings helped to summon the significant prospect of India—the visual structure invested with familiar cultural values—that also encapsulated the imperial zeal for civilisational endeavours.

Part Four focuses on the visual rendering of the military campaign against the Kingdom of Mysore that resulted in four Anglo-Mysore wars and ended with the storming of the citadel of Tipu Sultan—Serengapatam. The visual narratives of the two small princes, sons of Tipu Sultan, being brought to the British as hostages to end the Third Anglo-Mysore War, the final siege and storming of the Fort of Serengapatam, and many closely related events—all these are taken as illustrations of imperial visions of Britain in India. The victorious vision of the possessions of

empire are strengthened by other two genres of paintings, namely those of the Indian hill-forts that followed panoramas of heroic movement and portraits of powerful governor-generals. These three genres contribute in rendering the full picture of imperial entitlement and wide-ranging but firm control in India. In this enterprise of imperial possession, to quote the authors, the hill-forts were considered as having a distinctive symbolical meaning as 'the signs and markers of the absolute expression of British dominion and British knowledge of India. They were the towers from which Britain viewed her vast colony of India and maintained military surveillance and hegemonic control over its inhabitants' (p. 178).

Part Five sets out to trace the transition period in British colonial establishment from the department of Warren Hastings as governor-general of British India in 1785 and its implications on the prospect of India. Starting with the minute analysis of the 'Views of Calcutta', 12 engravings in aquatint of Calcutta executed by Thomas Daniell with the assistance of his nephew William during their first years in India, through the six-volume grand project, *Oriental Scenery*, laboured over from the time of their return to England in 1794 to 1808, the aquatints of landscapes and antiquities, to singular scenes of India dated to 1808—all these picturesque views of this painter of architecture trace the changing landscape and material culture of British India invested with the newly apparent landmarks of British power. The evolving imperial prospect of India in Thomas Daniell's works is discussed by emphasising the ideal of authoritative accuracy that grounded colonial visual culture of the period. It is rightly argued that what was mostly praised over and above any artistic merit or vision in Thomas Daniell's pictures is the authoritative accuracy which was acquired by use of technical aids like camera obscura and perambulator (p. 190). Aimed at the accuracy and reliability of ideologically significant scenes, the information 'taken' by Thomas and William Daniell provides a good idea about an ever-expanding British empire depicted in landscapes—real, imagined, coveted or acquired.

The imperial attitude to India is extensively explored in Part Six. Exemplified by the human curiosities of Captain Charles Gold's aquatint drawings, the authors argue that the tendency toward exhibiting freaks of India that 'had no story, no language, and no perspective beyond their visible show' 'fitted the new requirement of a form of ethno-historiography that would serve to justify imperialism, drawing curious attention to the people of India but not to the country and culture that was being appropriated at full speed' (pp. 215, 223). The disuse of the Romantic Indian prospect within the themes of the natural evolution of history traced in the writings of imperial theorists and visual imagery was soon, with the new India Act in 1813, strengthened by the attitudes of Anglican missions entering the scene. Popular imagination was fuelled by the scenes of the satis, dancing girls or prostitutes in the appeal of rampant

sexuality seen as moral degeneracy and the root cause of religious, cultural and social primitivism in India (p. 233).

Other 'contributions to anthologized views of India' in support of empire in the 1820s and the 1830s comprised the vistas of the mountainous territories just acquired by the British as featured in the aquatints of James Baillie Fraser and savage forms and natural landscapes as depicted by many other painters who ranged from official tour artists to amateur painters (Henry Salt, James Moffat, Robert Melville Grindlay, Charles D'Oyly, etc.). These topographic visions carried both political sanction and popular appeal—'process employed by British theorists of empire and colonial administrators to first neutralize the inhabitants, culture, and landscape of the Indian subcontinent and then return these to an original primitivity' (p. 253).

Part Seven concludes the visualised story of early British India with the elegies to an Indian renaissance. The focus of this chapter is on the political criticism in satiric allegories of two distinct periods of British governance—William Blake's satire on empire and the ideology of empire in the 1790s and 1800s and allegories in paint of the consequences of war by J.M.W. Turner. These paintings stand as an allegorical history and ironic commentary on the progress of Britain's empire abroad (p. 293). The romantic prospect of India is crowned by George Chinnery's view of India—'[a] prospect that is in shadow, diffused, crumbling, or about to be obscured—and one that is fast disappearing from the English artistic imagination' (p. 301).

To sum up, it should be noted that by telling the story of the inspiration of the Indian renaissance in the art and culture of Romantic Britain de Almeida and Gilpin argue 'that empire followed art' in the sense that 'the popular British perception of the last century that India was both paradigm and synecdoche of the empire was long preceded by the visual brightness and dynamic images of the Romantic artistic encounter with the subcontinent' (p. viii). The argument generally rests on the conception of visual and conceptual prospects of India as truth, although the authors in the course of the book repeatedly elaborate on the ways and methods those vistas were constructed even though the methodology of these visual constructs is confined to telling the stories behind the images.

Notwithstanding reservations concerning methodological originality, the book is an intriguing and lucidly written visual story of British rule in India from the Ccompany of 'free-wheeling English colonial traders' to the blossom of British Indian empire. This highly attractive and persuasive description delves into the depths of the picturesqueness of style, both literary and visual, that strengthened the Romantic prospect of India invested from the beginning with British hegemonic interests.