

VALDAS JASKŪNAS. *Vizualiosios tapatybės. Indijos meno recepcija Vakaruose* [Visual Identities: Reception of Indian Art in the West], Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2005, pp. 209. ISBN 9986-638-70-4 (HC)

Present monograph about Indian art summarizes the longtime work of Valdas Jaskūnas, who made his academic degree in this field. As the author says in his thesis,

⁷ Б.И. Кузнецов, *Древний Иран и Тибет. История религии Бон*, Санкт-Петербург: Евразия, 1998.

“The historical outline of the modes of Indian art reception in the West since the Antiquity to the beginning of the 20th century helps to distinguish the main hermeneutic models and to discuss the motives of their establishment. It is this methodological approach that enables us to understand the way by which certain Indian images and symbols became the integral part of Western culture while the models of understanding Indian culture served for the substantiation of Western cultural identity” (Valdas Jaskūnas, *Reception of Indian Art in the West. Comparative Analysis of the Orientalist Paradigms*, Summary of the dissertation, Vilnius Academy of Fine Art, Vilnius, 2003, p. 22).

The answer may be found in a new book, which consists of preface, introduction, five main chapters, conclusion and additional lists of literature, names and summary in English. There are illustrations, which add to the text as well. The book has been written in Lithuanian, its language is rather compact, informative and saturated with special terms.

In a long historical retrospection many parallels with Indian music and other arts could be found because of the integral *svabhāva* of Indian culture and way of life. “Nowadays visual culture is steadily increasing its prevalence and already successfully rivals culture of text, which used to dominate in the history of Western civilization for long period”; so does “significance of the image-production for the development of cross-cultural dialogue” (p. 221). To this respect the most important chapter is the last one, entitled “Nationalist narratives of Indian art.” It is most interesting and actual of all the rest, and it vividly illustrates the well-known phenomenon, when at the every historical cross-point of political, social, cultural and civilizational changes, art shows the first signs of the new thought. Artists, painters, architects and others make an advance guard of the society marching progressively towards new forms of life’s expression and beauty.

To begin with the first chapter, “The Images of India in Ancient Greece and the Middle Ages,” we can see that author investigates Eastern monsters and marvels in an euhemeristic Western context and makes the conclusion, that though Indian monsters represents barbaric culture, they nevertheless had made an influence to the formation of the Greeks’ self-communion. On the other side, in the Middle Ages monsters were reduced to the ethical aspect of an orthodox Christian doctrine and served as evil pictures and symbols of alien culture. That way Eastern art helped to establish European cultural identity.

The second part of the book, named “From Cosmologies to the Ethnography,” deals with the Renaissance image of India. Christian demonology in literature was still the main source to study Indian culture, but polymorphic nature of the time—Italian Humanism vs Catholicism,—opened the gate to instrumentalize the reception of Indian culture as very keen to ancient Egypt heritage. Strange and curious images of elephants, rhinoceroses, parrots, peacocks, and exotic plants and so on became an important origin

to express ideas and widen the imagination of westerners. The savant gives a picture of the activities of missionaries and ethnologists, who saw Brahmans as Pythagorists, and tried to make a classification of foreign (Eastern) cultures and religions. But an attempt to know Hinduism was still too superficial. Only Abraham Rogerius collected iconographic samples of Hindu sculpture, architecture, and his work was “the first authentic witnessing of Hindu culture in the West” (p. 76).

The third chapter, “In Search of Origins of Culture,” explains how two models of thought—Radical Enlightenment and Counterreformation—made the new leap in comparative sciences oscillating between notion, that there must be some syncretism in basic world religions’ principles and consequently in arts and literature, and denial of Egyptian influence on Western civilization. Eurocentric worldview was based on positivistic ideology and became the universal scheme of European superiority (p. 83). On the other hand, comparative studies showed that ancient Indian, Egyptian and Greek art forms, icons of gods were very similar. Here special role played erotic symbolism. Thus interest in Indian art studies filled the emptiness of Western culture and “have been serving as the particular simulacra attempted to confirm or to deny Eastern influences on Western civilization” (p. 84).

According to Edward W. Said, Orientalism as a discourse is not only linguistic or anthropological cognition of Eastern cultures, but it always represents the political, i.e., colonial power behind it. Jaskūnas makes the right statement, that “Orientalism in the research of pictorial arts has been studied the least” (p. 124). In a fourth part “Orientalism in Literature and Art” author fills the gap showing how the Orientalist discourse formed new image of India in Europe, using idiosyncrasy of literature as a methodological interpretative strategy to epitomize Western cultural hegemony. This tendency is expressed very well in collection of South Asian texts, F. Max Mueller’s “Sacred Books of the East” (p. 132). The administrative structures imposed on Indian villages by British government were tools of effective ruling. The decorative arts and ornamental design were considered as best expression of Indian soul and creativity. But, says the author, colonial practice of England mostly manifested ideas of romantic German thinkers and indologists, like well-known orientalists Friedrich Majer, Friedrich von Dalberg and others. Thus in 18th and 19th centuries’ reception of Indian art was mostly a “philological construct” (p. 143).

Later the idea of “bad” Orientalism has undergone serious changes in India while constructing the new project of modern India, called spiritual Renaissance. Here some attempts were done in order to describe “Indianness” of art from the aesthetic point of view (Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, Ernest Binfield Havell). Painters like Raja Ravi Varma were harshly criticized, the others, like Abanindranath Tagore, started real national school of arts and were praised by national ideologists. The author argues, that in spite of activities of “Great India” movement, which was cultural defense against Western proselytism, the nationalist theory “consistently used the same concepts of

colonial discourse of Orientalism” while creating doctrine and narrative of “exclusive Indian national art” (p. 209). Why, there is nothing wrong with reconstruction of native ideals, for example, spiritual value of Advaita Vedanta. Indian civilization has always been able to assimilate and renovate, even modernise imposed or borrowed ideas. The progress India has made in the 20th century gives an impression that mild nature of Hinduism can solve the problem of national *ahaṅkāra*, to do it better than cold Western secularism or aggressive Islamic fanaticism. More research should be done to eliminate the lacking gap in a field of reception of Indian art in the 20th century with regard to new postcolonial studies inspired by E.W. Said. Nevertheless, the present work is very important and fruitful contribution into Lithuanian indology and is highly recommended to the students and broad specter of intellectuals, who are interested in non-eurocentric cultural perspective.

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