

# Picturing life in British India

## LACMA exhibit traces evolution of imperialist thought

By Hunter Drohojowska

It is difficult for an Indian to write about his imperial overlords and how they saw us," says Dr. Pratapaditya Pal. "One has to be fair and unbiased, which is not easy."

Despite such difficulties, Pal, senior curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art at the L.A. County Museum of Art, along with Vidya Deheja, adjunct associate professor of art history at Columbia University, has organized a fascinating exhibition, "From Merchants to Emperors: British Artists and India, 1757-1930." The show focuses on the art produced by British, and some native, artists living in India and, in the process, traces the evolution of imperialist thought. The briskly paced catalog written by the two curators is remarkably compelling and includes material not included in the show.

All of the works were selected from the collection of Paul Walter and were shown last summer at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York as part of the Festival of India. Walter, who also collects Indian terra-cotta sculpture and Indian miniatures, began buying in this underappreciated field a decade ago. Pal calls him an "eclectic collector" who "likes to buy before something becomes fashionable." Pal believes the work has increased in value tenfold since Walter began collecting. (Walter's eclecticism extends to photography, contemporary art, furniture and Whistler prints.)

Pal and Deheja both were raised in British India and saw their nation achieve its independence from colonial rule in 1947. Ambivalence toward the subject of their study was inevitable, but any resentment is restrained in their writings. Instead, they have focused on the absurdities and contradictions that suffused the Englishman's daily life in 19th-century India.

For example, the British pretensions to socially correct behavior in an inhospitable climate and content included fancy-dress balls, wearing layered wool uniforms, drinking heavily and dining three times a day on eight-course meals with three or four types of meat — a country where the Hindus and Moslems have a religious aversion to eating beef or pork.

These customs, which seemed so strange to the Indians, have provided comic fare in literature, film and TV miniseries. Here, however, the British are lampooned by mostly anonymous caricaturists in a series of astute cartoons. In a pen and ink drawing dated circa 1800, one of the newly arrived Englishmen complains of the heat but is consoled by a Bengali soldier who says, "Come, come, don't abuse a country where you can get drunk for three farthings."

Most of the British artists came to India in the mid-18th century to seek their fame and fortune. They wanted portrait commissions, not the assignment of making troublesome political observations. At a time when England was losing her American colonies, there was a newfound enthusiasm for pictures of an ever-expanding empire. India's exotic reputation had whetted the English appetite for prints and drawings of the landscape, the people and the imperial victories.

Curiously, when the British first came to India, there was not such condescension toward the natives. Warren Hastings, the first governor-general of British India, considered to be an enlightened leader, had his portrait done in Indian costume in 1790 by an unknown Indian artist. Yet, by the mid-19th century, no leader would even conceive of such connection to the natives.

The schism between the nationalities began, according to Pal, with the arrival of British women seeking husbands after 1775, so the men could not mix as easily with Indians and their customs, nor take Indian mistresses. An anonymous color lithograph from 1800, "A Sale of English Beauties in the East Indies," shows the young ladies being pinched and inspected like live-stock, the rejects being sent through a door marked "unsaleable goods."

As the British solidified their power and became more imperialistic, they developed a master-servant relationship with the Indians, even calling them such insulting names as "nigger" and "pig." "They became newly conscious of their superiority, the white man's burden which (Rudyard) Kipling eulogized," explains Pal. This culminated in the 1857 mutiny by Indian soldiers, after which the East India Company was dissolved and Queen Victoria, who had never visited the continent, was named Empress of India in 1877.

British artists recorded mainly the life of their upper-class countrymen. Indians are usually depicted in subservient positions, such as the one servant in a color lithograph of "The Tent Club at Tiffen" (1861) by Percy Carpenter. Despite such predilections, the artists also made ethnographic and topographical studies that survived as valuable documents, virtually the only visual records of the costumes, customs and landscape of India between the 18th and 20th centuries.

Pal explains the historical importance of this work. "They recorded the country in incredible detail, influenced by an English tradition they had inherited." For example, a scene of the holy city of Banaras (Varanasi) may be rendered in a picturesque style reminiscent of a 19th-century

landscape painting, but "at least you know what the place looked like," says Pal. "Indians never did such topographical studies. Indian art always shunned the objective, what Western artists consider naturalism. Indians thought the purpose of art was not to imitate nature but to re-create it on their own terms."

"Banaras is the most important of Indian cities," Pal adds, "and in 2,000 years before the British came, I cannot give you a single example of what the country looked like."

The Indian countryside, its temples, mosques, ruins, banyan trees, vast rivers and brilliant light, were captured in the 18th century by such artists as William Hodges and Johann Zoffany, and in the 19th century by the uncle and nephew team of Thomas and William Daniell and by George Chinnery. The exhibition includes studies by amateur artists such as Charles D'Oyly, many of whom captured less artistically structured views of India.

The mutiny of 1857 began the decline of British artistic expression in India, and those who continued sought a greater measure of realism. William Simpson, for instance, rendered watercolors of the famine in 1866. Edward Lear, known for his nonsense poetry and limericks, visited India from 1873 to 1875 and traveled widely, documenting the land. The advent of photography, however, soon eliminated the need for the British



Dr. Pratapaditya Pal, senior curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art at the L.A. County Museum of Art, is co-organizer of the exhibit "From Merchants to Emperors: British Artists and India, 1757-1930," now at LACMA through Jan. 4.

artists.

In the exhibition, photographs are placed next to sketches of the same scene to demonstrate the graphic power of the new medium. Capt. Willoughby Hooper's horrifying pictures of the Madras famine of 1877 along with anonymously taken portraits of maharajas and courtesans found their way back to England. They served as a frank indictment of the corruption and despair produced by imperialism. Such pictures mark the beginnings of photojournalism's power to alter public opinion.

Although most of the artists in the exhibition are British, Pal included works by Indian artists to demonstrate the subliminal West-

ern influence. The most astonishing is a narrative series by an unknown street artist. A young girl is seduced and drugged by her guru, with her mother's permission, while the husband is out of town. When the husband returns and finds out, he beheads his young wife and the guru is jailed. This was a true story, published in all the newspapers, according to Pal. "These were done for a British, not an Indian, collector," he explains. "A contemporary social event of this sort would not have been portrayed by Indians without the influence of the British."

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.