

Vision of India: A Case Study of the works of Selected Foreign Artists on India (1750- 1850)

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Abstract:

India is symbolized by the diversity of its art and culture from epochs. Visitors from other countries have been attracted to its culture, religious beliefs, artistic beauty and philosophy. Foreign artists have been coming to India from early period. Being impressed by different aspects of India they portrayed the country after making a mental picture through artistic observation. India is a land of mountains, hills, rocks, soils and various climates for some artists and for some, it is full of religious thoughts and beliefs, rich in social life, customs and traditions that encouraged and motivated the minds and hearts of foreign artists to paint India. Filtered through the connoisseur's lens, India emerged as an exotic and mysterious land from the paintings of the ghats of Banaras, dancing girls in princely courts, colorful costumes, portraits of rulers and their courtiers, different native occupations and the local flora and fauna. Thus, this paper is an attempt to evaluate the works of some of the selected foreign artists who worked on the landscapes in India. It also tries to highlight the background of that period through the study of paintings and theoretical writings of some of the eminent art- critics.

Keywords: Foreign artists, Paintings, Indian art, landscape

Introduction

India has a long and continuous history whose major phases have given this land newer forms of art and expression. It is the amalgamation of the most diverse traditional and modern cultural movements which are the symbol of the vibrant art and culture of this country. Indian life has been profoundly presented through the medium of painting which is the foremost form of expressions from a very early period. There have been several movements in Indian art as early historic period, Indus Valley Civilization, Medieval phase, Company period and contemporary times. India is the only country with several religions with diverse beliefs and practices, worldviews, ethics, rituals, ceremonies and many more. It is this diversity and richness which make foreigners enamored of India.

For centuries foreign painters have been coming to India. There is no clear cut evidence of the arrival of foreign painters in India, but based on a few writings it is believed that the foreign artists have been coming to this land since the time of Moghuls. A Portuguese artist monk by

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name Jerome Xavier appeared to have worked during the Akbar's reign (around 1595). Many European travelers visited India during the 16th and 17th centuries seeking better trade opportunities. Until that point of time painters were commissioned only by the kings. Eventually, the artists began painting independently for themselves without any obligation either to the kings or other patrons. Some artists were immensely influenced by India and its culture. While some returned home after their work and a few eventually settled and made India their home. This study highlights the achievement of the three selected landscapists namely, Thomas Daniell, William Hodges and Robert Home who worked in India between 1750 and 1850s.

The material for the study has been collected from secondary surveys. The secondary sources are the books, journals, magazines, some authentic online sources and websites and catalogues of exhibition shows of artists. Art historians, Mildred and W.G. Archer's views and ideas are also significant in this context to consider and evaluate the impact of Indian environment on non-Indian artists with regard to these paintings.

Literature Review

Considerable number of commentaries of some selected foreign artists and researches, who worked here from 1750-1850, has been found regarding the vision of India. Some of them have made in depth research with special references to scenes of India and foreign travellers and artists who worked in India.

Archer & Archer, (1955) found that in India painting was the style of picture-making as practiced by the British. They produced three different kinds of paintings, namely, large scale historical scenes with serious limitations in oil media, miniature on ivory and lastly, the most common type of water color drawings intended either as ends in themselves or as studies for the subsequent engravings, aquatints, or lithographs. Archer, (1978) describes the portrayal of India by the British artists during their residence in India. She reveals that a large number of British artists came and were stunned by the Indian customs, such as the burning of widows on the funeral pyres of their husband, life of the villagers and artisans, sporting activities like tiger hunting and journey on elephant and joyful life style of Indian people. Shellim, (1979) found in his study and explained excursion of Thomas Daniell in India who made a special reputation as British landscape artist. After going back home from India, he produced aquatints of Indian scenes and also executed numerous commissions in oil and exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy. Archer and Lightbown, (1982) point out that Indian vision were seen by official British artists in between 1760 and 1860. This period has been divided into three phases by the authors after an observation of the paintings and India's influence on the Englishmen. In the first phase spanning the period from 1760 to 1810 India was discovered in a picturesque manner. In the second phase covering the period between 1810 and 1825 India has been depicted in an illustrious way in depth and manner and lastly in the period stretching over 1825 and 1860 India was observed in a study of exhibition of imperial paintings on India produced by Mughal artists including the Iranians. Bautze, (1998) found in his study that there was an interaction between the West and India in the cultural sphere which resulted in many paintings.

Foreign Artists encounter in India

Foreign artists were lured to India since the Gupta period and close western contacts with India date back to the same period. Relations with Greeks and Romans continued to exist until the 17th

century (Bautze, 1998). Ever since the first European reached India, they have been intrigued and fascinated by the Indian scenery and wanted to paint the new subjects. They had encounters with Indians to record and understand India. Iranians who came to India during the Moghul rule were known as Mughal artists. Prominent among them are Mir Sayyed, Abd-us- Samad, Aka riza and Abul Hassan. (Beach, 1978)

A prominent Portuguese monk artist Jerome Xavier worked during Akbar's reign in 1595. Early organized movements of Europeans landing on the Indian shores occurred in the 17th century, with the Dutch and British Companies attempting to gain the maximum control of mercantile privilege in India. In the economic struggles that followed the British East India Company gained supremacy in the mid-18th century over the fellow European companies gradually. The company, as it was called, along with the British crown, gradually became the imperial overloads of India, assuming economic, political and territorial control resulting in an invariant change of the social political landscape that was transformed into a township.

Between 1770 and 1825, about 30 British portrait painters trained in oil painting and 28 miniaturists in search of commissions travelled to India. Among the earliest European artists who visited India were James Forbes, William Hodges, Tilly Kettle, Johann Zoffany, William and Thomas Daniells, Emily Eden and many other artists. From around 1760 until the mid-19th century, these itinerant artists-travelers toured India working for local patrons making paintings and prints of monuments, landscapes and portraits. These artists worked primarily with oil colors and in print making used western techniques with an emphasis on western perceptions of perspective. These European artists recorded the new townships in prints and paintings that explored the vast panorama, the numerous historical edifices and monuments and the many communities that inhabited the land.

Landscape Style in Painting

Landscape painting is a form of art in which natural scenery such as forests, rivers, mountain capes, hills, valleys, and trees are depicted in wider perspective. These elements play an important role in the background in providing composition for different figures and architectural sites. As it is stated by Edward Munch, "Nature is not only all that is visible to the eye... it also includes the inner pictures of the soul." There is a mention of the elaborate instructions on six seasons which are used in landscape paintings in the Indian manuscript *Vishnu Dharmottara Purana*, of 5th or 6th century (Chaitanya, 1982). The two English Romanticist landscape artists namely, Joseph Mallard William Turner and John Constable have elevated landscape painting to a prominence rivaling history painting. In the 19th century, there was an art movement called 'Impressionism' initiated by Paris-based landscape painters. During 1870s and 1880s, these painters became prominent with independent exhibitions. Some eminent impressionist landscape artists are Paul Cezanne, Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet, Camille Pissarro, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, Berthe Morisot and many more. During the 18th and 19th centuries, there were so many foreign landscape artists who painted not only Indian scenery, but also Indian architectural sites like forts, palaces, temples, mosques. They also depicted village scenes.

The present paper highlights the works of three major foreign landscape artists who worked in India and depicted Indian sites. They are William Hodges, Thomas Daniell and Robert Home whose work covers the period between 1750 and 1850.

William Hodges (1744- 1797)

William Hodges was the first British professional landscape artist who was pleased to visit India. He came with a highly individual vision and style of painting which he had developed while he was the official artist on Captain Cook's second voyage to Pacific from 1772 to 1775. During this voyage, Hodges was suddenly jerked into observing nature in a completely different manner with Captain Cook and these experiences honed and enriched his vision. After coming back to England the oils he worked up for the admiralty bore little relationship to his earlier style and manner of painting. The whole of his future work was to be influenced by those experiences (Archer & Lightbown, 1982). After ending his contract with the admiralty and following the death of his wife in 1777, he decided to visit India again.



Fig. 1 The Ghats of Benares, 1787

Source: <http://artuk.org/discover/artists/hodges-william-1744-1797>

After this his arrival in India at Fort St. George early in 1780 he was fascinated by the scene of the clear blue cloudless sky, the polished white buildings, the bright sandy beach and the dark green sea. It was completely a new combination for an Englishmen. His first year was disappointing and he could not explore anything because of his poor health. In February 1781 he moved from Calcutta to travel more widely and during this period he made his tour upcountry and saw many ruined monuments of mosques and tombs and in other words a very different India from what he had imagined. During 1783, he made a long expedition upcountry to join Major Brown who was heading a diplomatic embassy in the court of the Mughal emperor. Hodges was now able to see the great Mughal monuments at Agra and produced a magnificent painting of Taj Mahal. After this tour he had left India in November 1783.

Although handicapped by his poor health, he nevertheless made a large number of drawings of the countryside and the monuments of Bengal and upper India. Some he worked up into oils for his British patrons in India, others were to be used for further oil and engravings on his return to England. He exhibited twenty five oils of India at the Royal Academy between 1785 and 1794 and also engraved forty-eight aquatints from his account of drawings for his *Select Views in India* published in two volumes. His architectural subjects depicted many little known Muslim tombs and mosques, Hindu temples, forts and palaces in Upper India which made a deep impression on him. In 1786, he published a perspicacious treatise on architecture notable for the value it gives to forms other than classical. With the impressionistic style Hodges conveyed the towering bulk of many Indian monuments by exaggerated proportion and foreshortened perspective.

Hodges produced an oil painting entitled 'The Ghats of Benares' (Fig.1) which is a highly romantic representation of the Ghats with its emphasis on light and atmosphere. The dark silhouetted background throws into relief the Ghats which are illuminated by Sunlight catching the eye of the viewer. Thus the subject is effectively focused upon and highlighted. In the foreground a boat is depicted in the river 'Holy Ganga' and in background Ghats are depicted with

a temple. It is a charming composition with cloudy weather and dark trees depicted as full of delight. What stands out is the use of light and shadow by the artist. Vibrant color scheme has been used and it is made in a deep dimension. Space is well utilized and simply ties up the viewers in a desirable area. It differs greatly from the other paintings of Benaras (now Varanasi) made for Hastings.

Another painting 'The Taj Mahal' (Fig.2) is one of the wonderful creations of Hodges. This painting is depicted from across the river Yamuna, with the river in the foreground reflecting the image of Taj Mahal and with some green trees in the background. A warm color



Fig .2 the Taj Mahal, 1780

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki>

scheme has been used with the Taj Mahal resplendent in the Sun light as if it has been bathed in it. Hodges had painted the monument as he had visualized. This glorious composition has been depicted in a perfect perspective.

Thomas Daniell R. A. (1749-1840)

Thomas Daniell was one of the greatest of English artists and travelers. He worked in India between 1785 and 1793. He came to India with his nephew William Daniell and both painted with the patronage available to them in an age of travel and adventure. The old world was wide-eyed with wonder at the strong new land and people. Daniell made his excursion to India via China and Ceylon due to the patronage of Captain James Cook in one of his three greatest voyages of discovery with official artists. Despite the special position of painters in the social structure of Europe and India at that period, Daniell had to convince the



Fig. 3 Ruined Tomb Probably Near Gaur, Bengal, 1791

directors of East India Company, in essence a trading concern, that he had talent and enterprise and was in a position to support himself by his own labor and hence was unlikely to become a burden upon the Company's resources. Daniell has a special position in the hierarchy of British landscape painters in 1781 (Shelliem, Maurice 1979).

On the arrival of Daniell in Calcutta (now Kolkata) where he was warmly welcomed and treated as friend by the small British community, Thomas with his nephew at once set about making drawings for a series of twelve aquatints titled 'View of Calcutta'. After completing this project they decided to make a long tour upcountry from Calcutta. They knew that journeys of this kind were possible since William Hodges had preceded them and had already produced his 'Select Views'. Hodges had a great interest in Indian architecture. Thomas decided to emulate his (Hodges) visit to many of the same spots and make even more faithful records of the Indian monuments. Regarding this he wrote to Ozias Humphry on the 7th November, 1788 assuring him of the best from his account.

During the travel, Thomas produced many of the magnificent scenes of India. While returning to Calcutta from Bhagalpur he stopped at Gaur, formally on the bank of Ganga, where ruined tombs were gradually disappointing under the encroaching forest. In the south wall of Gaur was a fine central gate. Thomas was fascinated with the charm of climate and the scene which he depicted in the painting titled *Ruined Tomb Probably near Gaur*. (Fig.3) Combination of bright and dull color has been used in the painting and this colour contrast makes the appearance of sunlight much brighter and more effective. There is apparently inadvertent contrast set up by the artist between life and death through the images of the tomb and the human figures on the edge of the pond. The woman's figure holds in one hand a pot with water, the traditional symbols of life. Accurate use of perspective configures the spatial dimension between the objects depicted.



Fig. 4 Hindu Temples at Brindaban, UP, 1797

Source: <http://artuk.org/discover/artists/daniell-thomas-17491840>

Another painting produced by Thomas in oil on canvas is titled *Hindu Temples at Brindavan* (Fig.4) in 1797 after had left India. In the foreground, the river Jamuna and its ghats are depicted and in the background, behind the verdurous trees, the temple spires in red stone are portrayed. Vibrant and varied color scheme is used for its authentic definition. Through this painting Thomas showed his skill for landscaping the monuments of India more faithfully with deep spirituality. He presented this painting at the time of his election to the Royal Academy as his diploma work.

Robert Home (1752-1834)

Robert Home arrived in India in January, 1791 and stayed here until he died. His flair for simplifying the subjects and welding them into robust compelling wholes enabled him to treat with success historic occasions. On arriving Home obtained a few small commissions such as designing the scenery for the local theatre of Madras and this was the start of his journey of depiction in India. By the end of March or early April, 1792, Home was in a position to plan future projects and he was suggested by John Sharp to work up his landscape sketches of the Mysore countryside. This idea appealed to Home and he produced many drawings and twenty-nine out

of them were engraved and published as *'Select Views in Mysore, the country of Tippoo Sultan'* in February, 1994. He revived his own landscape painting and four large oils paintings after his paintings were looted (Archer, Mildred 1978). All the four paintings are as much studies of Indian life as of monuments and antiquities; the serenity of each composition reflecting how Home was one with India and the Indian he had already become.

'A South Indian Temple' (Fig.5) could be the painting of any temple anywhere in Madras (now Chennai). It was painted by Home in 1793. It is a vivid representation of any South Indian temple. The temple spire is depicted on the left behind a huge compound wall with the figurines of the musicians and dancers carved on it. While half the spire is bright the other half is dark showing the play of darkness and light. It indicates that the time is twilight and Sun was setting. This contrast of light and dark is also shown in the depiction of the clouds. There two stone canopies depicted outside the temple wall which is a common sight in South India. To catch a glimpse of life around the temple Home depicts human figures engaged in different activities. While a small time vendor next the temple wall is haggling over the price with the customers, a group of labourers are lifting a huge box on their shoulders close to the temple wall. While some are busy chatting, in the distance are portrayed men carrying a palanquin. Through this depiction Home is able to bring out both the spiritual and secular life woven round the temple in South India. Use of muscular combination of exciting colors makes up a fresh scene with a sharp impact of light and shade. The whole painting has a strong simplicity and a dignified unity which were later to prove Home's true forte.



Fig. 5 A South Indian Temple, Madras, 1793
Source: <http://www.gac.culture.gov.uk/work.aspx?obj=17791>

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper is a brief focus on the history of the artistic voyage of some selected foreign artists who worked on landscapes in India. The paintings of these artists reflect the scenery of that period. They had been so dexterous in portraying the landscapes and the cultural life of India that these paintings look like photographic representations. This can be seen in the paintings of William Hodges, Thomas Daniell and Robert Home. The one thing that is common in these artists is that they have recreated the architectural splendor of the sites in their portrayal of the landscapes. Between 18th and 19th centuries, the Colonial period, the Company style (*Kompany Kalam* in Hindi) dominated and the Indian artists too who worked under the European patrons both the British East India Company and the other non- Indian Companies. As a result the 'Indo- European style', a hybrid style, has emerged which is a combination of European style and the traditional Indian Rajput and Mughal styles of painting. The travellers who came to India seeking better trade opportunities, some of whom were artists, had painted India in a realistic manner. Madras, Calcutta, Delhi, Patna, Lucknow, Maratha court of Tanjavur

were the main settlements of the British. Portraits, landscapes and views of Indian people and their occupations, their differences in caste and costumes were the main topics for the Europeans. They also painted architectural sites in landscapes such as forts, The Taj, temples, village-cottages and many more in a very detailed and frontal style. They have mostly used “transparency in texture, modeling in broad strokes with soft tones in watercolor”. Ultimately, it may be said that foreigners who had visited India were highly attracted to Indian life which has forced them to stay and paint in India. The author of this paper has highlighted only a very small period though a large number of foreigners have been coming since the Moghul times, being fascinated by the beauty and culture of India. What fascinated most of these foreigners is the exuberance and richness of Indian life and the architectural splendor of its monuments. Besides these features what informs their vision of India is the spiritual aura that surrounds Indian life which these artists tried to capture in paintings like “Ghats of Banaras” and “A South-Indian Temple”.

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