Pratapaditya Pal and Vidya Dehejia

From Merchants to Emperors

British Artists and India 1757 – 1930

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FROM MERCHANTS TO EMPERORS

BRITISH ARTISTS AND INDIA · 1757–1930

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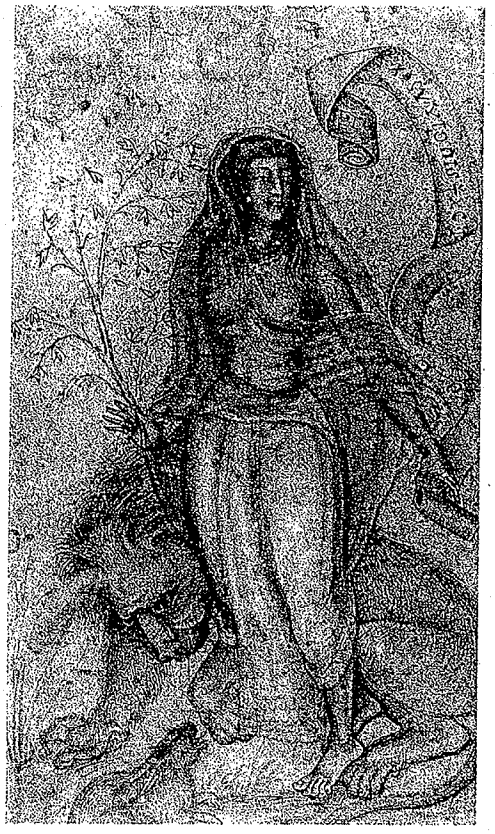
4. Native Artists and Exotic Art

> Today, Company painting must be regarded from two distinct angles–Indian and British. In terms of Indian painting, it is the last original contribution by Indian artists before the modern deluge. Its use of water-colour as a technique, its adoption of Western-style perspective, its cult of realism and its concentration on the common people as prime subjects for painting broke sharply with prevailing conventions. In this respect, it is a clear precursor of modern trends and the first step towards the Westernization of style which is now a commonplace of contemporary Indian art. For the British, its appeal is more sentimental. It's a panorama of the India in which their ancestors found delight, comfort, and fulfillment; it evokes nostalgia for a charmed era.
>
> MILDRED ARCHER–1972[1]

I

THERE are probably very few Britons or Indians who are familiar with the works of the Company school. Nevertheless, this school, which developed in the last quarter of the eighteenth century as a result of the interaction between British art and Indian artists, "is the last original contribution by the Indian artists before the modern deluge."[2] The term Company school usually refers to paintings that were done by Indians, generally for British patrons, in a hybrid Indo-British or Indo-European style in various parts of the country between 1775 and 1900.

Indian artists had been introduced to European art almost two centuries before they were exposed to the works of the first British artists in Lucknow. Artists at the court of the Mogul emperor Akbar, and at the courts of the contemporary rulers of Bijapur and Golconda, knew European religious art as it had been brought by missionaries and merchants in the sixteenth century. European prints were copied with admirable precision by many of the Mogul artists to increase their own skill in drawing, as well as to display their technical virtuosity for their appreciative masters. The marvelous



154. Attributed to Basawan. *Allegorical Picture of Fortitude.* c. 1600. Watercolor and gold. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Nasli M. Heeramaneck Collection.

watercolor of Fortitude may well have been done by the greatest of Mogul masters, Basawan, for either Akbar or his aesthete son Jahangir (fig. 154). When Sir Thomas Roe, the British ambassador, visited the imperial court between 1615 and 1619, he was astute enough to present Jahangir with an English miniature. So impressed was the emperor that he ordered his artists to make copies, and was delighted when the ambassador could not distinguish the copies from the original.

Indian artists were highly selective in borrowing from the European works available to them. They adopted elements of landscape designs by introducing distant views of towns and hills and winding roads almost like stage props. They manipulated their brushstrokes to create volume and employed overlapping forms to suggest depth. The hazy blue they used for hills and fields effectively imparted a sense of space to their pictures. Generally, however, even the great Mogul artists seem to have been unable or uninterested in mastering the techniques involved in showing accurate perspective. The Mogul artists did possess a keen sense of naturalism which served their descendants well when they were employed by British patrons.

Eighteenth-century British patrons were consistently critical of Indian artists for their inability to master the rules of perspective. While ungrudgingly admiring the native artists' extraordinary ability to copy faithfully and to render details with both finesse and patience, they invariably remarked about their lack of understanding of space. Michael Symes, who had been sent to Burma in 1795, regretted that his Indian draftsman, "though skilful in copying figures and making botanical drawings, was unacquainted with landscape painting and perspective."[3] Decades later, when Valentine Prinsep was sent to India by Queen Victoria to record the historical occasion of the Proclamation Durbar, he, too, noted how deficient the Indian artist was in the serious matter of perspective:

> Today I have received visits from the artists of Delhi: they are three in number, and each appears to have an *atelier* of pupils. The best is one Ismael Khan. Their manual dexterity is most surprising. Of course, what they do is entirely traditional. They work from photographs, and never by any chance from nature. Ismael then showed me what his father had done before photographing came into vogue, and really a portrait of Sir C. Napier was wonderfully like, though without an atom of *chic*, or artistic rendering. I pointed out to the old man certain faults—and glaring ones—of perspective, and he has promised to do me a view of the Golden Temple without any faults.[4]

The portrait of Sir Charles Metcalfe (resident in Delhi, 1811–14) done by an unknown Delhi artist circa 1830 is typical of the type Prinsep

probably saw (fig. 155). It is certainly a tolerable likeness; the three-quarter view of the face, instead of the invariable profile preferred by the Mogul artists, as well as the naturalistic pose, are due largely to British influences.

II

By the 1750s, the Moguls in Delhi were only nominal emperors and enjoyed neither the power nor the wealth for which their forebearers have remained legendary. Inevitably, painters from the capital had moved out to the provinces where local nawabs and maharajas had set up courts that only paid lip service to the emperor in Delhi. The most important of such provincial courts was that of Oudh, with its capital first at Faizabad and then at Lucknow. While the nawabs embraced European culture, they remained generous patrons of Indian artists, many of whom had probably migrated from Delhi and Agra. Those in Lucknow

155. Anonymous (Delhi). *Portrait of Sir Charles Metcalfe.* c. 1830–40. Watercolor. Walter Collection.

156. Anonymous (Lucknow). *Portrait of a Lady* (presumably after a painting by Tilly Kettle). c. 1780. Watercolor. Walter Collection.

were probably among the first to be exposed to British art. The majority of British artists, beginning with Tilly Kettle, went to Oudh at the end of the eighteenth century seeking their fortunes. Kettle was in Faizabad from 1772 to 1773, and Zoffany visited Lucknow between 1783 and 1789. Ozias Humphry, Charles Smith, the Daniells, Francesco Renaldi, George Place, Robert Home, and George Beechy were there as well. Home and Beechy were even court artists. Thus, Lucknow was continuously occupied by British artists from 1772 almost until 1857.

The Indian artists of Lucknow, therefore, directly observed British artists at work for at least two or three generations; they had to copy their paintings for almost as long, as many of the European patrons, such as Martin Gentil and Polier, wanted smaller versions for their

own collections. Kettle's paintings appear to have been especially popular, though copies of other artists' works also exist. A large number were probably destroyed during the Mutiny. Figure 156 is a typical example of an Indian copy of a British painting, in this case one by Kettle. The identity of neither the subject nor the artist is known, but Kettle's characteristic style is evident in the background, the statuesque posture of the figure, and the treatment of her voluminous dress.

Among the most fascinating of such copies is a gouache done around 1815 by an unknown artist (fig. 157). A formal portrait, one of several that Kettle did of Nawab Shuja-ud-daula and his ten sons, it includes a self-portrait of the artist painting this very picture. From the way the artist has turned his head toward the viewer, it would seem as if he were following the instructions of a photographer. Even though the original is lost, there is no doubt about the "Indianness" of the copy. Wonderfully adroit at rendering details of architecture, jewelry, and dresses, the artist was not as skillful when it came to faces, which are almost expressionless. Very likely, also, the artist did not succeed in capturing the nuances of light and shade, or of the subtle tones of color. However, Kettle's paintings were oils, whereas this, as well as the majority of copies, was done in gouache; hence, the significant differences in texture which make the copies easily distinguishable.

In 1872, B. H. Baden-Powell, a civil servant and admirer of Indian handicrafts, made the following comments about Indian artists he observed while on duty in the Punjab:

> [He] has an instinctive appreciation of colour, and, though without any knowledge of the principles which should regulate its use, is often more happy in his combinations than the educated workman of Europe. His colour is often exaggerated, but it is always warm, and rich and fearless. The native artist is also patient: for weeks and months he will work at his design, painfully elaborating the most minute details; no time is considered too long, no labour too intense to secure perfection in imitation or delicacy in execution. The greatest failing in native artists is their ignorance of perspective and drawing, and it is fortunate that this want is the most easily supplied.[5]

An anonymous artist's portrait of an unknown but beautiful Englishwoman, done around 1800 in the Kangra Valley which was then part of the Punjab, certainly lives up to Powell's appraisal (fig. 158). The work is not much larger than the miniatures on ivory by a talented British miniaturist like John Smart, and no less elegant. The oval frame is very likely copied from a miniature, and although the Kangra artist has selected a profile view in the customary manner, he has vividly captured the lady's delicate features and the tonality of her pale, white skin, almost as if he were copying an ivory. It is the kind of miniature that could easily have been, in the words of Sir Charles D'Oyly:

> . . . chief to absent lovers dear, who gaze
> Hours, days, and years, on imitative charms,
> Press the cold ivory to their hearts, and raise
> The image of their lost one to their arms.[6]

The ability of an Indian artist to master the Western techniques of realistic portraiture depended not only upon his own innate talent, but his opportunity to learn directly either from a British artist or from repeated copying of European works. The artist responsible for a stately and symbolic portrait of Nawab Ghazi-ud-din Haidar of Oudh was eminently successful in this (fig. 159). The rich use of shading in the nawab's garments and face, shown in three-quarter profile, reveals the artist's complete assimilation of European techniques. The details of the garments and ornaments are not as painstakingly rendered as was the practice in Mogul painting, but are suggested by more impressionistic brushstrokes. The cherubic angels holding the parasol above are obviously European, but the docile tiger and complacent goat in the foreground are symbols drawn from the Mogul artist's own repertoire. Their peaceful coexistence signifies the unflinching authority of the monarch in his kingdom.

It is very likely that the artist responsible for this watercolor was either copying a portrait by Robert Home, or had been trained by the Brit-

157. Anonymous (Lucknow). *Tilly Kettle Painting a Portrait of Shuja-ud-daula, Nawab of Oudh, with Ten Sons* after a painting by Tilly Kettle (1772). c. 1815. Gouache. By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

ish artist. Home was the court artist of Oudh for thirteen years beginning in August 1814. Ghazi-ud-din loved to have his own portrait drawn for presentation to visiting dignitaries, and this may have been intended for that purpose. The monarch's crown was designed by Robert Home after Ghazi-ud-din was formally crowned King of Oudh in 1819. In a durbar scene painted by Home at about the time this watercolor was done, the monarch is shown wearing the same robe and crown.[7] The date given at the bottom of the anonymous work may have some bearing on the precise dating of Home's formal portraits.

A less formal Lucknow portrait done around 1850 better demonstrates the degree of synthesis of the two pictorial traditions achieved by the Indian artists (fig. 160). The inscription identifies the figure as Mirza Bidar Bakht Sandhar Khan, who is shown seated on a couch with a lady, probably his *begum*. Both have their own hookahs and are being fanned by an attendant. The lady seems to be more comfortable than the male whose posture is somewhat awkward. Interestingly, the artist has drawn the three faces in three different views—frontal, three-quarters, and full profile—almost as if he were eager to demonstrate his skill in this regard. He has successfully captured the character of his sitters. The background of pillars, lamps, looped curtains, and a view of the garden beyond is clearly derived from British painting. If the lady is indeed the gentleman's *begum*, then this must be regarded as a rare portrait of an upper-class Indian couple, for most such women would not have sat for even an Indian artist at that time.

III

THE British patrons of the Indian artists included the East India Company as well as individuals. The earliest examples of Company painting appear to have been produced in the south where Tanjore was the principal center; others included Madras, Trichinopoly, and

158. Anonymous (Kangra). *Portrait of an Englishwoman.* c. 1800. Watercolor and gold. Walter Collection.

Pudukkottai. In the north and east, the artists found patronage in most important British settlements like Calcutta, Patna, and Benares, but also in Murshidabad and Lucknow, as well as in places like Cuttack and Chapra. Artists in Delhi and Agra, and in the Punjab, adopted the style early in the nineteenth century. Western Indian artists appear to have been slow in accepting the new trends, for most Company school paintings in that region were done after 1850. Although regional differences are discernible, especially between the north and the south, due largely to ethnic distinctions as well as various local styles, most Company paintings reflect a stylistic unity that can be attributed both to the uniform taste of the patrons as well as the subject matter.

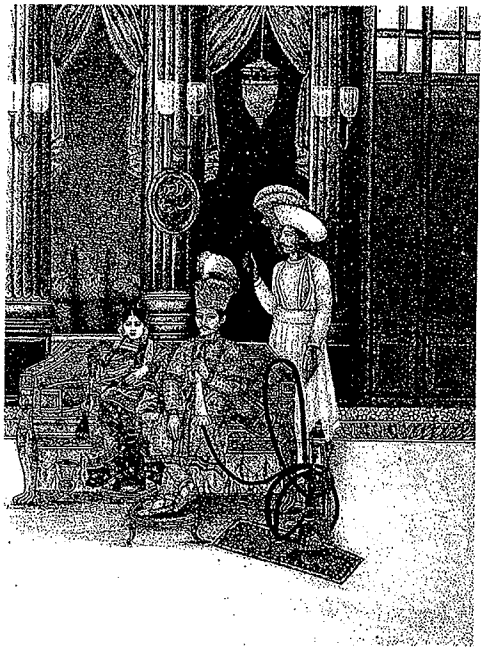
Most paintings, whether in the north or south, depict trades and crafts, flora and fauna, festivals and deities, costumes and conveyances—all subjects of ethnographic interest. The earlier pictures clearly reflect the British curiosity about India, paralleling in many ways the works of a Forbes or an Eden, who recorded the various ethnic groups. Although much of the material is of great ethnographic significance, especially as India is changing rapidly today and many of the trades and crafts have been abandoned, the products of the more gifted artists are aesthetically appealing as well. The unknown artist of Malabar, on the southwestern coast, who painted a series of watercolors of ethnographic interest, was obviously a very talented draftsman (fig. 161). He had mastered European techniques—especially the rich use of shading to suggest volume and mood—so well that he seems to have also acquired a classical conceptualization in the execution of the figures. This artist seems to have been exceptionally gifted in comparison to others who concentrated on similar subjects.

159. Anonymous (Lucknow). *Nawab Ghazi-uddin Haidar of Oudh.* 1820. Pencil and watercolor. Collection of Edwin Binney, 3rd.

Indian artists were employed to record both historic occasions and the domestic lives of their patrons. The events that were usually recorded were visits to native courts by British dignitaries, scenes of entertainment, and ceremonial processions with British participants. The anonymous watercolor in figure 162 shows Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, King of Oudh (r. 1847–56), embracing the governor-general Lord Hardinge who visited the state in 1847. Such pictures usually depict banquet or durbar scenes, but this one shows the two rulers in an atypical embrace. The Indian artist gave his monarch prominence and emphasized the somewhat stiff, formal postures of the British officers.

After 1857, when India was no longer mysterious and photography had become commonplace, interest in ethnographic subjects seems to have been replaced by a more personal desire to record one's own environment, such as one's bungalows and servants. Not surprisingly, Indian artists were not encouraged to do portraits

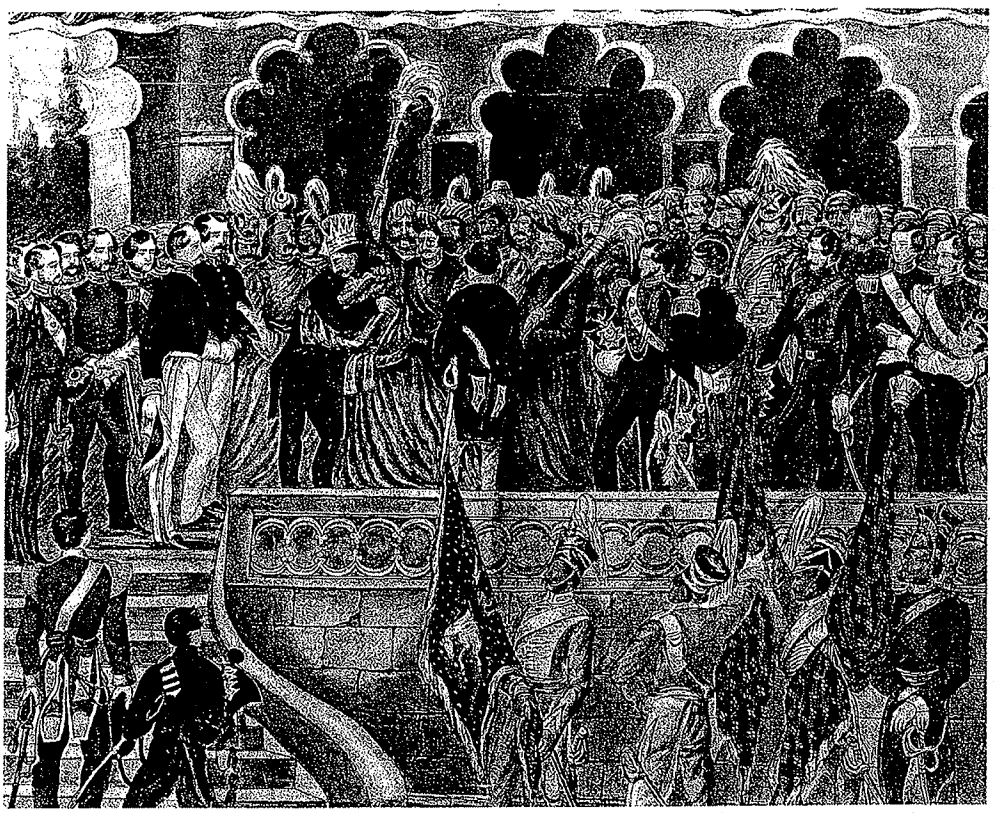
161. Anonymous (Malabar). *Coconut Seller and Woman Vendor.* c. 1820. Watercolor. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Edwin Binney, 3rd.



160. Anonymous (Lucknow). *Mirza Bidar Bakht Sandhar Khan and Wife.* c. 1850. Watercolor. Collection of Edwin Binney, 3rd.

or landscapes. In drawing monuments and copying designs of buildings, however, their skill was unquestionable, as evidenced by the exquisitely detailed rendering of the interior of the mausoleum of Itimad-ud-daula in Agra by an unknown artist (colorplate 11). No one could fault this artist for his draftsmanship or his skill in "perspective." Such depictions of the monuments of Delhi and Agra were very likely done for visitors to these places.

Although the Company itself was not interested in art for art's sake, it did employ Indian artists to help its officers make maps and prepare architectural drawings. Official surveys and missions often needed draftsmen and the Indian artists recruited were trained by the officers in Western methods. Drawings for the buildings raised by the British were also often prepared by Indian draftsmen. As Mildred Archer has noted, Markham Kittoe is still remembered in Benares "for the way in which he trained Benares painters to help him with designs for the new Sanskrit College and for his record of local monuments and sculpture."[8]

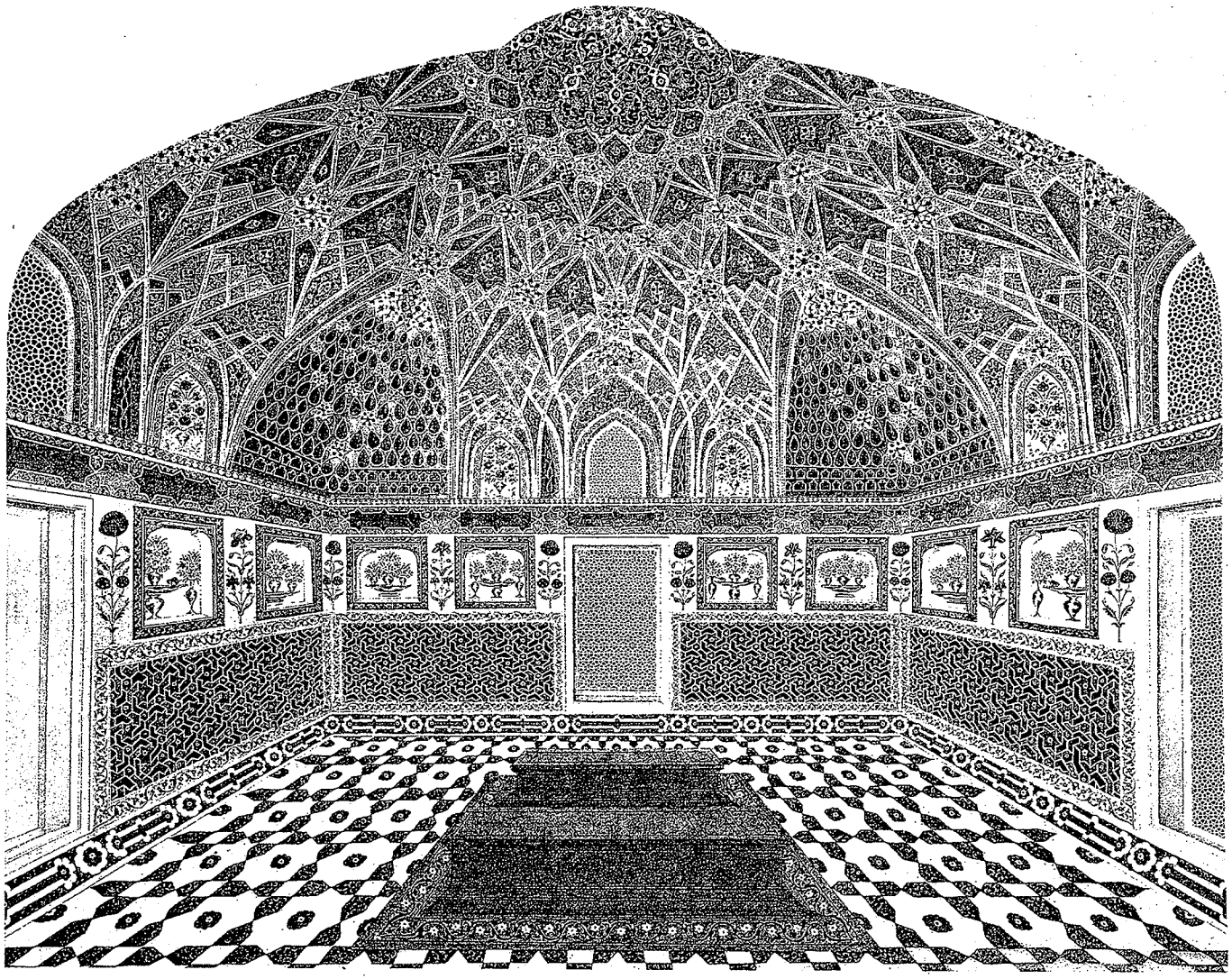


162. Anonymous (Lucknow). *Nawab Wajid Ali Shah Embracing Lord Hardinge.* 1847. Watercolor. Reproduced by permission of the India Office Library and Records (British Library).

Indian artists were also employed by such Company institutions as the Sibpur Botanical Garden near Calcutta and the Barrackpore Menagerie, a favorite of Wellesley. An ardent enthusiast of natural history, Wellesley established the menagerie and aviary between 1800 and 1804, and had the Company hire Indian artists to draw and describe the wildlife.

The British appear to have been primarily interested in pictures accurately depicting the trades and crafts, as well as the processions and festivals, which they probably took home as "photographs" of their days in India. Most could not afford works by professional British artists, who were few in number anyway, and had no access to the works of amateur artists as these were generally not sold. Aquatints and engravings by British artists were available, but in limited quantities and subjects. And, owning a series of engravings of the castes and customs of the Hindus by a British artist was not quite the same as retaining or commissioning a competent Indian artist to do a series of pictures according to the owner's precise needs. Moreover, Indian artists must have been relatively inexpensive. We do not know what they were paid, but an individual could not have received much more than a hundred rupees a year, which is the sum the Company paid an artist who accompanied Francis Buchanan on his statistical survey of the Bengal Presidency in the early 1800s. It is also known that there were talented freelance artists like Muhammad Amir of Karraya who went from door to door seeking work.

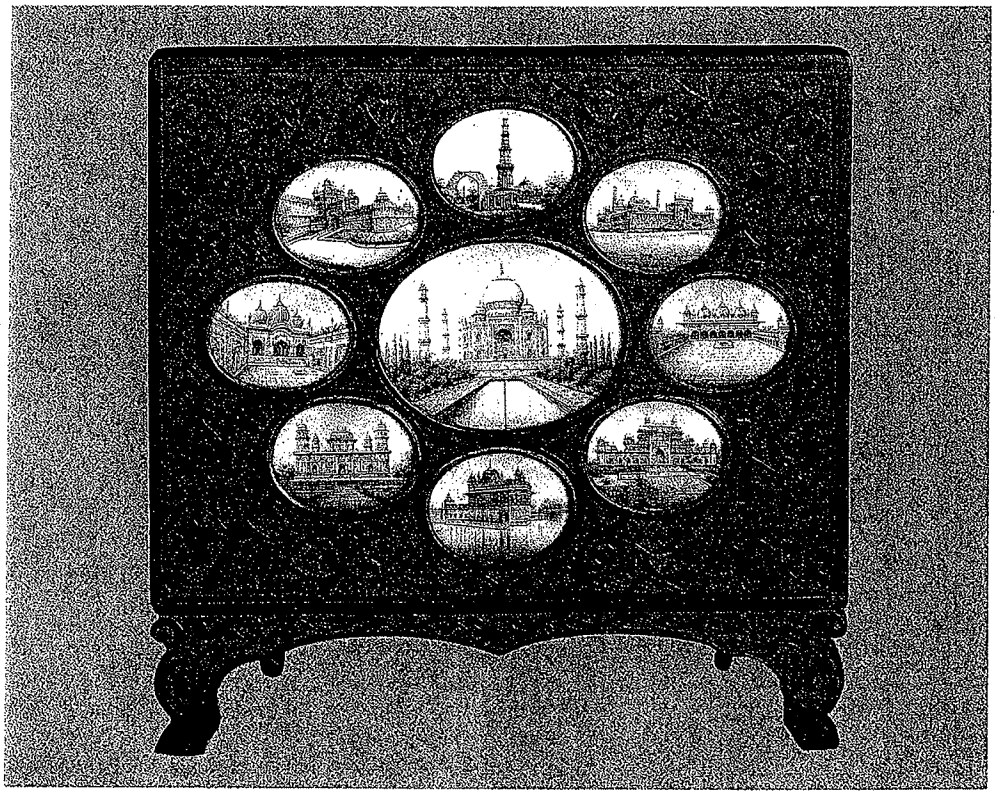
Many of the so-called ethnographic or human interest pictures are fairly straightforward



COLORPLATE II.
Anonymous (Agra). *Interior of the Tomb of Itimad-ud-daula*. c. 1830.
Watercolor heightened with gold. Walter Collection.

representations such as the picture of tumblers in figure 164 by a competent south Indian artist, circa 1850. Their quality probably depended very much upon how discriminating the patron was or how much he was willing to pay. When Valentine Prinsep criticized the Delhi artist Ismael Khan's work, the old man defended himself by saying, "These are done for the *sahibs* who do not understand. I know they are wrong, but what does it matter? No one cares."? There must have been a general state of apathy in India, especially in Delhi, toward traditional arts and crafts in the 1870s. Indian patrons had disappeared from the scene, and even the maharajas and nawabs were abandoning their interest in Indian art and were mimicking their imperial overlords by building new Western-style palaces and decorating them with English furnishings, pictures, and objets d'art. Ismael Khan was stating the truth when he said that all sahibs were not necessarily connoisseurs. The majority of Company school pictures, especially of the trades and professions, are indeed devoid of great artistic merit or ingenuity.

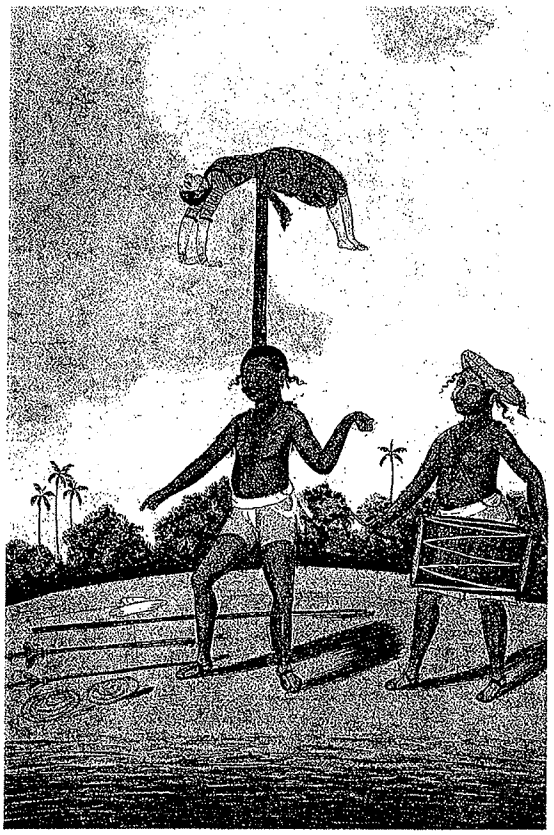
Apart from watercolors on paper, the Company artists painted on both ivory and mica, which became rather popular around 1850. Among the most popular subjects were the Mogul emperors and empresses and the monuments of Delhi and Agra on miniature oval ivories mounted on carved wooden frames. A less conventional subject is the beautifully painted nude on ivory (fig. 165). Two paintings on mica, one of the Moslem festival known as the Mohurrum, and the other of the more bi-



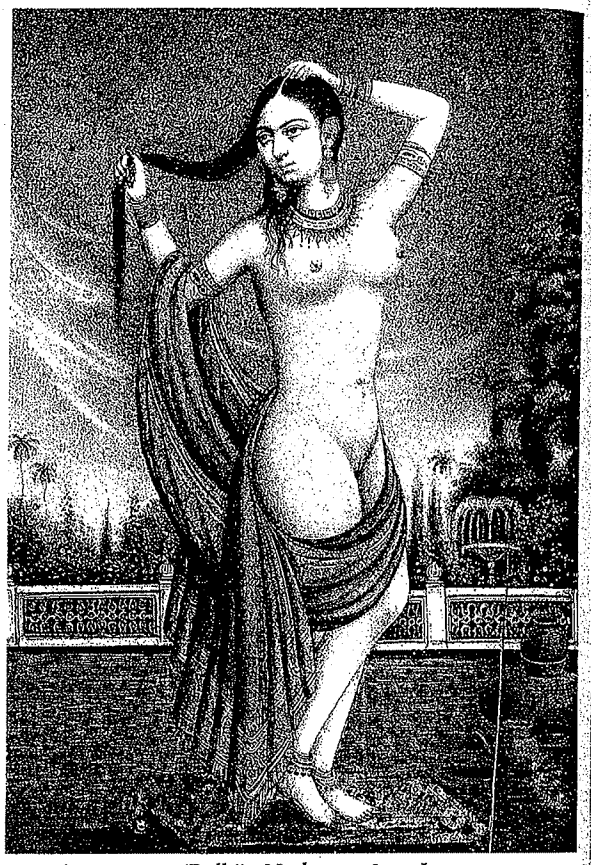
163. Anonymous. *Principal Monuments of India, including the Taj Mahal.* 19th century. Oil on ivory, mounted on ebony frame. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Albert G. Wassenich.

zarre Hindu festival of Charak (hook-swinging) that simultaneously revolted and intrigued the British, are characteristic examples of the type of festival pictures that the British patrons took back home (figs. 166, 167). Sewak Ram of Patna was a much sought after painter of processions and festivals and many of his pictures belonged to the first Earl of Minto, governor-general from 1807 to 1813. His version of the Mohurrum, when contrasted with the more commercial painting on mica, reveals how the same subject can become a visual delight in the hands of a gifted artist (fig. 168).

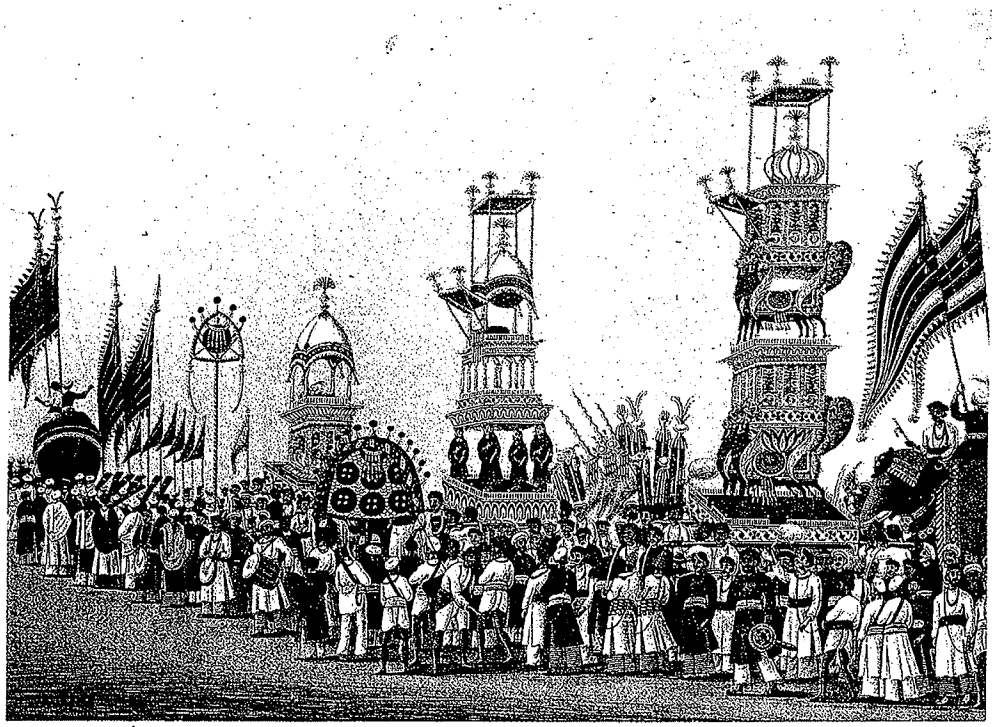
Undoubtedly, the *tour de force* among Company genre paintings are the recently dispersed pictures from what has come to be known as the Fraser Album. Colorplate 12 and figure 169 from this album show a recruit for the famous Skinner's Horse, a local set of troopers, and a group of six Afghans. The younger brother of the amateur artist James Ballie Fraser, William Fraser (1784–assassinated 1835), who presumably commissioned the album, had an interesting career in India, working with such notable personalities as Sir David Ochterlony, Monstuart Elphinstone, and the colorful Colonel James Skinner, the son of a Scottish officer and a Rajput woman. He was a close friend of Skinner, whom he accompanied on a journey to the Himalayas along with an artist generally identified as Ghulam 'Ali Khan, although this is uncertain.



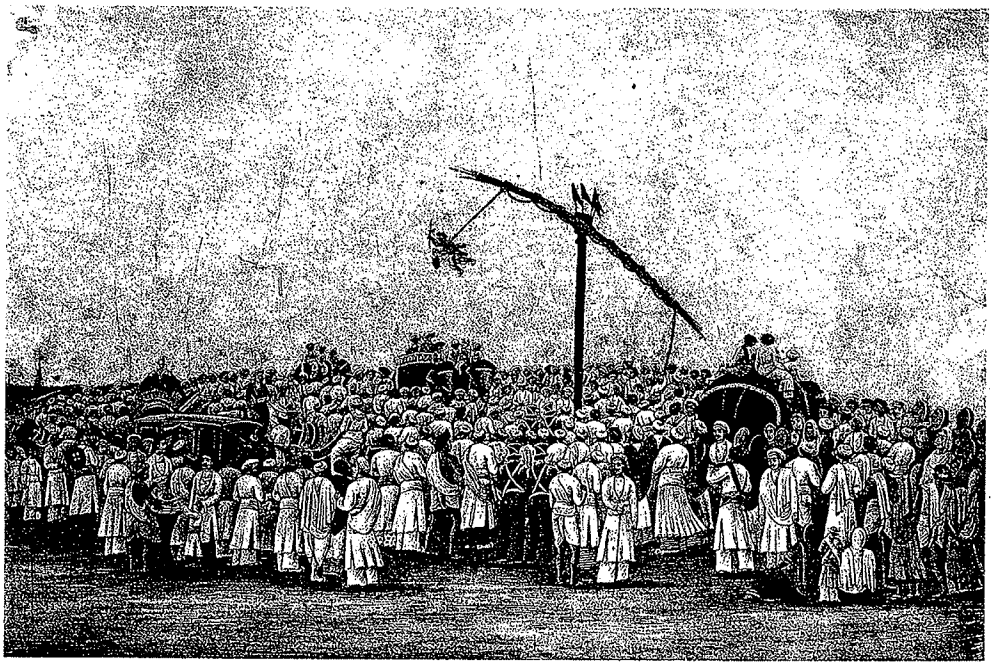
164. Anonymous (South India). *Tumblers*. c. 1850. Watercolor. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



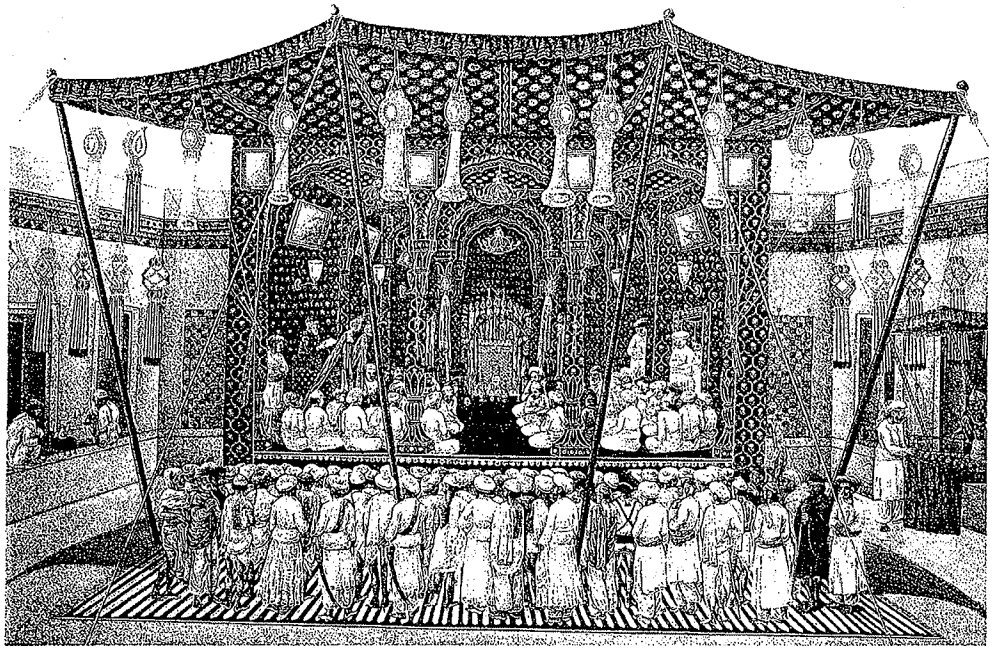
165. Anonymous (Delhi). *Nude*. c. 1830. Ivory. Walter Collection.



166. Anonymous (Patna). *Mohurrum*. c. 1820. Mica. Walter Collection.



167. Anonymous (Patna). *Hook-Swinging* (Charak). c. 1820. Mica. Walter Collection.



168. Sewak Ram. *Mohurrum*. Before 1819. Watercolor and gold. Walter Collection.

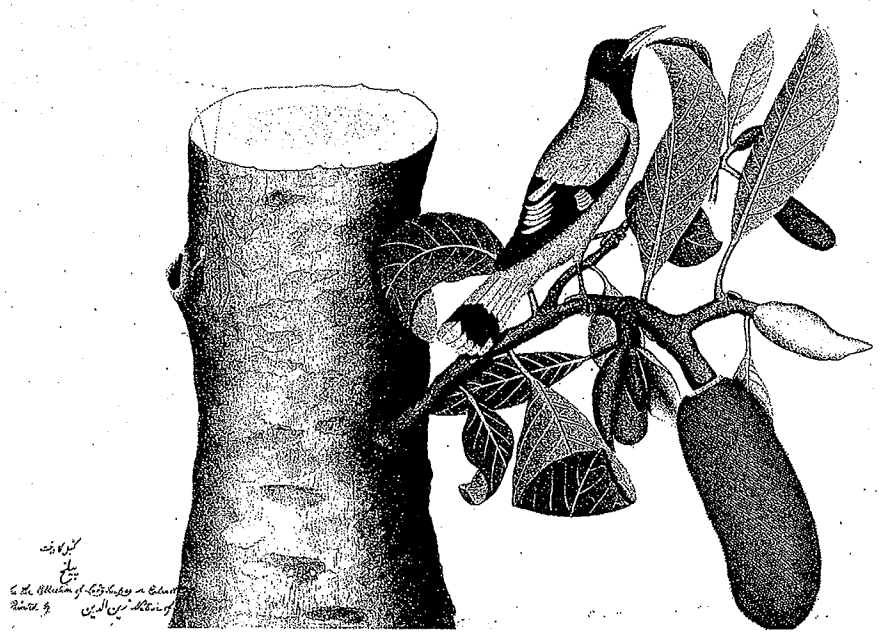
169. Anonymous (Delhi). *Six Afghans*. c. 1820–30. Watercolor. Walter Collection.

170. Ghulam 'Ali Khan. *Harem Scene.* c. 1820. Watercolor. Collection of Edwin Binney, 3rd.

Ghulam 'Ali Khan was *the* genius among all artists who worked for the Company. In modifying his style for his British patrons, he had sacrificed nothing of his innate sense of color, faultless draftsmanship, complete understanding of human anatomy, and empathy for his sitters. Like the Fraser album pictures, Ghulam 'Ali Khan's harem scene is characterized by technical virtuosity and effortless elegance (fig. 170). If, indeed, this is a harem scene, rather than a group of nautch girls, it is an extremely rare representation. It is unlikely that Ghulam 'Ali Khan had such an intimate glimpse of the *zenana*, but there is little doubt these portraits are drawn from life.

IV

THE first Briton to employ Indian artists to record natural history subjects appears to have been Mary, the wife of Sir Elijah Impey, the first chief justice of the Supreme Court of Calcutta. She maintained a menagerie in Calcutta and loved Indian birds and animals. Three artists, all natives of Patna, worked for her on a series of nature studies which numbered 200 by the time the Impeys returned to England in 1783. The principal artist was Shaikh Zayn-al-din; the other two were Bhawanidas and Ramdas. These three artists from Patna had moved to Calcutta in search of patronage which indicates how the Indian artists moved about from one British



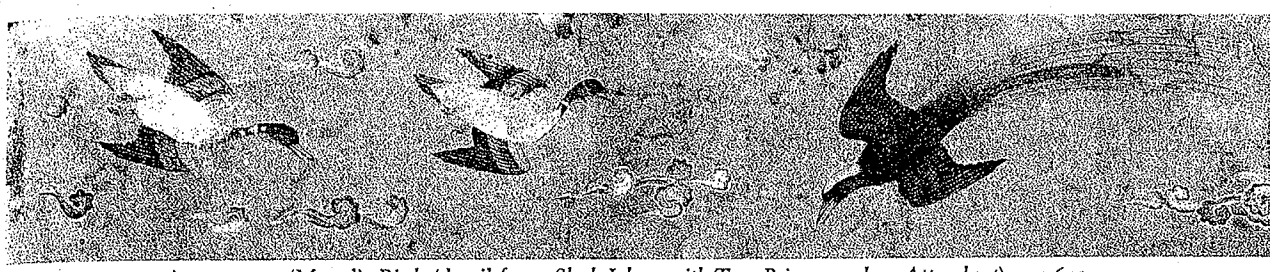
171. Shaikh Zayn-al-din. *Lady Impey's Bird.* 1778. Watercolor. Walter Collection.

settlement to another, just as the professional British artists did in the same period.

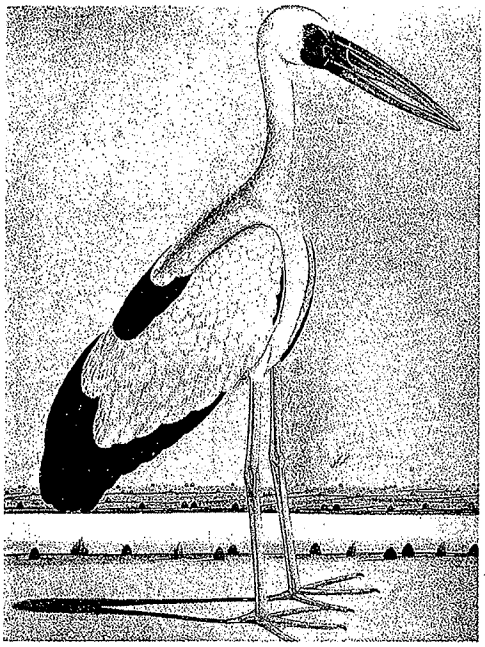
Shaikh Zayn-al-din and his colleagues were part of a long tradition; some of their ancestors had worked for the Mogul emperor Jahangir, drawing his animals, birds, and plants from life. The genre continued to appeal to later patrons of Mogul painting as well, and some of the finest surviving paintings were done for the hapless prince Dara Shikoh and are now in the India Office Library in London.[10] The later Indian artists may have had finer technical skills or perhaps a more acute sense of realism gained through consulting such works as Edward's *A Natural History of Birds* (1745–51) or Latham's *A General Synopsis of Birds* (1781–1802), but this was already a firmly established art form in their culture.

Although the best known, Lady Impey was not the only British admirer of Indian flora and fauna. While the three artists from Patna were working for her, an unknown artist in Lucknow produced a monumental and wonderfully perceptive picture of a stork (fig. 173). Note how the artist has not neglected to add the shadow cast by the bird. Figure 174 is a charming picture of two views of an insect done around 1820 by Seetu Ram, although it is not known exactly where he worked and for whom. The heightened sense of realism or naturalism acquired by Indian artists working for British patrons is evident in a wonderful depiction of a *Horse and Groom* by a noted Calcutta painter, Shaikh Muhammad Amir of Karraya from around 1845 (fig. 175). A comparison with a fine rendering of a horse by one of his forbears clearly demonstrates how easily Muhammad Amir had adapted to the tastes of the new masters. Not only had he completely mastered the techniques of foreshortening and shading to make his representation more naturalistic, he had studied the animal's anatomy and reproduced it as accurately—and attractively—as any Victorian English horse painter.

Shaikh Zayn-al-din also drew plants and again his Mogul inheritance served him well. As with animals and birds, many botanical pictures were by Indian artists trained by British patrons. The tradition seems to have begun with William Rosburgh (1751–1815), who initiated



172. Anonymous (Mogul). *Birds* (detail from *Shah Jehan with Two Princes and an Attendant*). c. 1640. Watercolor. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection.



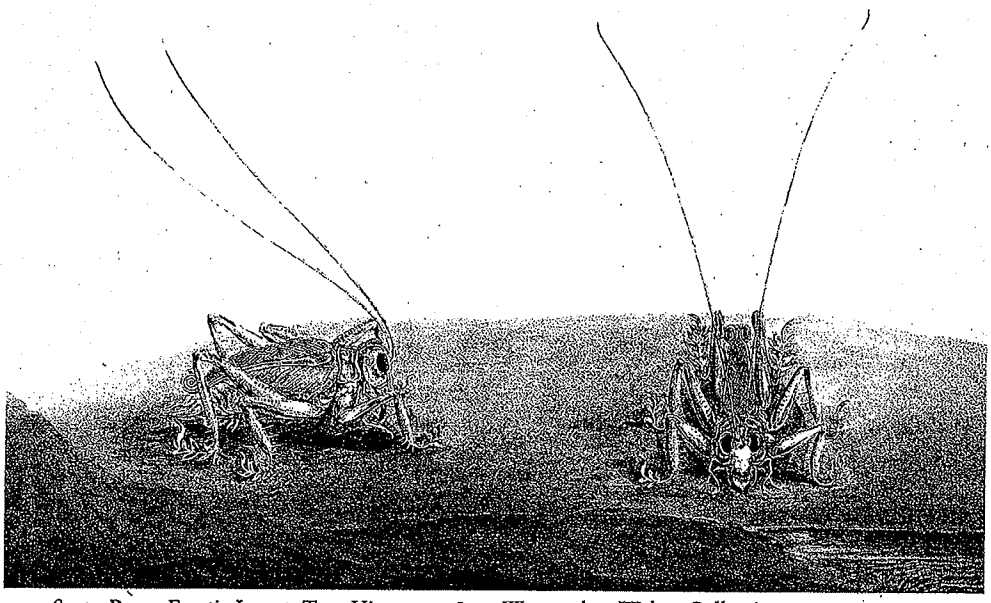
173. Anonymous (Lucknow). *The Stork*. 1780. Watercolor. Walter Collection.

Indian artists in Madras between 1789 and 1793 in making botanical studies. Rosburgh was the Company botanist in Madras. Some three hundred drawings were made by unknown native artists under his direction and were engraved by various English artists for the *Plants of the Coast of Coromandel*, published between 1795 and 1820.

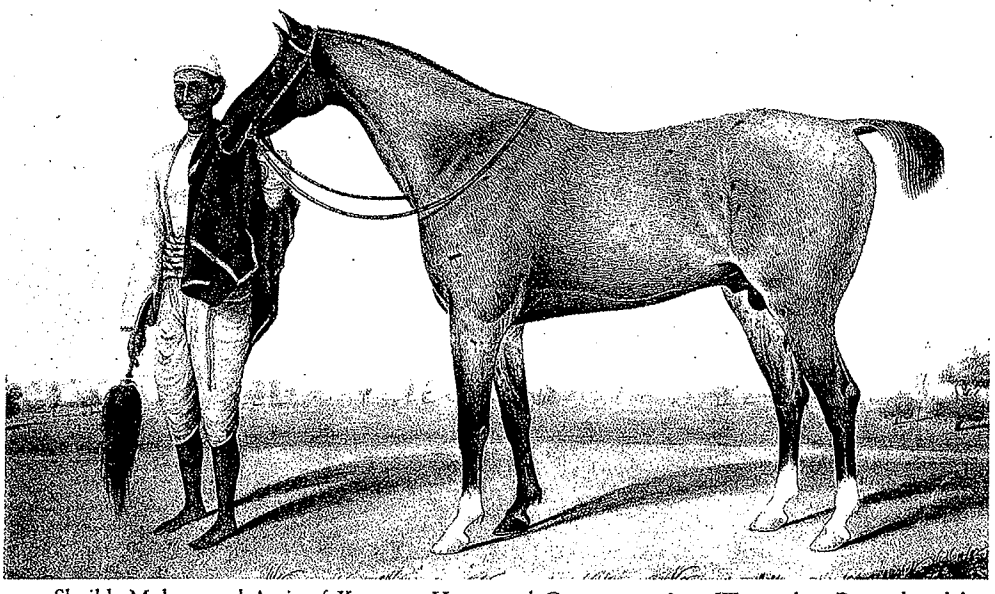
Although much of the material was produced for scientific purposes, it is of artistic merit as well. The paintings are as vibrant and fresh as nature's originals. The same delicacy, sparkling colors, and exquisite finish that characterize the finest Mogul flower paintings were now combined with a keener sense of observation in the name of greater scientific accuracy to produce series after series of botanical paintings that were among the crowning achievements of the Company school. An unknown artist's meticulously accurate but sensuous study of the lotus, the most admired and sacred of the Indian flowers, was one of the many beautiful botanical studies done for the Marquis of Wellesley (fig. 177). Equally skillful, observant, and imaginative was the south Indian artist Rungia Raju, who was retained for two years by M. E. Grant Duff, governor of Madras between 1881 and 1886, to prepare three botanical albums.

V

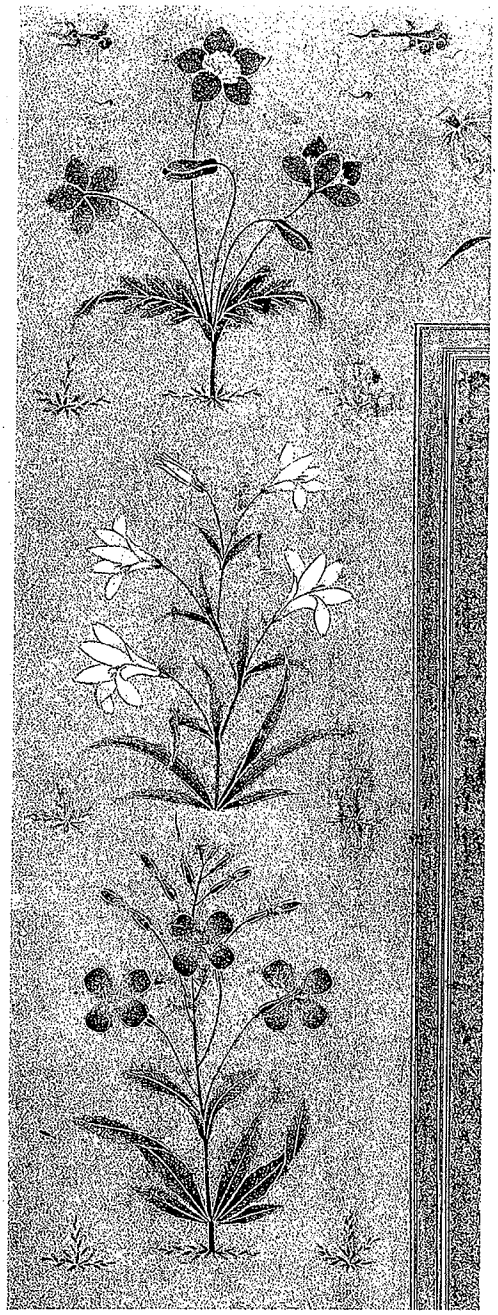
WHILE Ghulam 'Ali Khan and Shaikh Muhammad Amir of Karraya were painting in a sophisticated manner that successfully combined Western techniques with Indian vision, a completely different style was developed in Calcutta that has come to be known as the Kalighat school. It is so named because the school originated around the well-known temple of Kali in south Calcutta, although Kalighat-style paintings may have been done in other parts of the city as well. The principal patrons of Kalighat paintings were not the British, but Indian pilgrims who flocked to the temple every day. Nevertheless, the British did collect them and took them back to Britain, as is known from the large extant number of them there and the



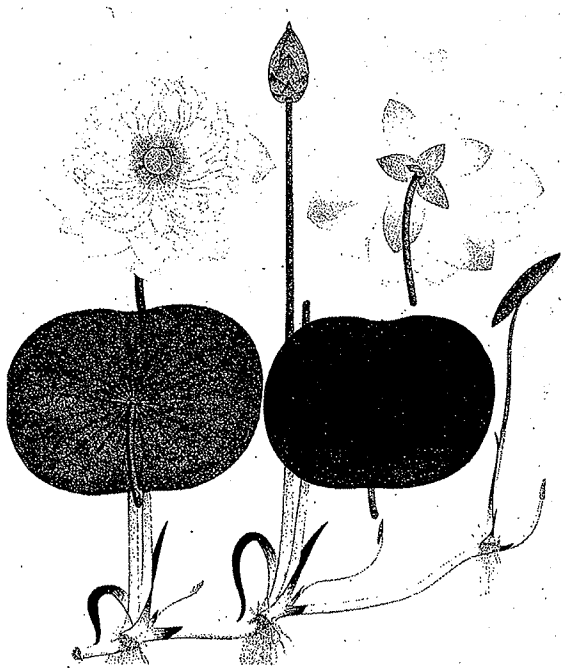
174. Seetu Ram. *Exotic Insect: Two Views*. c. 1820. Watercolor. Walter Collection.



175. Shaikh Muhammad Amir of Karraya. *Horse and Groom*. c. 1845. Watercolor. Reproduced by permission of the India Office Library and Records (British Library).



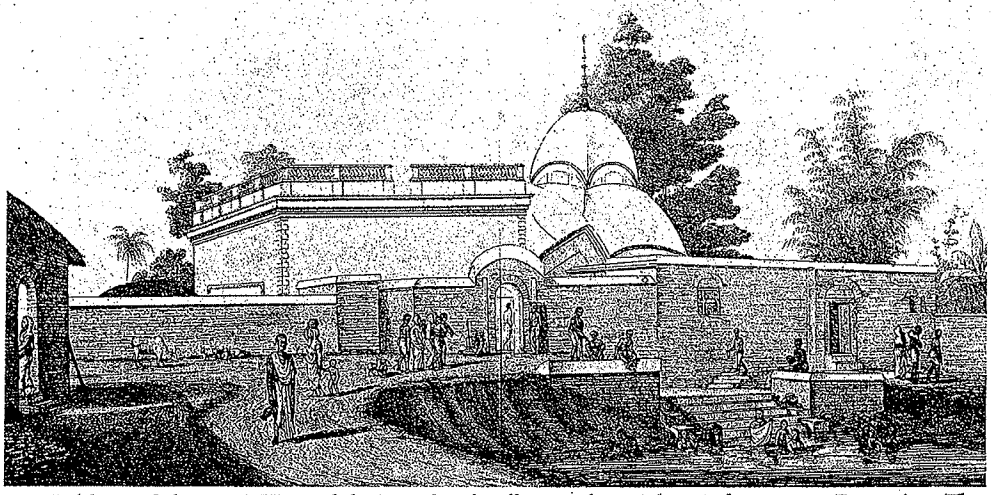
176. Anonymous. *Border with flower studies* (detail from an album assembled for Shah Jehan). 1640–50. Ink, watercolor, and gold. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection.



177. Anonymous (Shibpur). *White Lotus*. c. 1800. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University. Gift of Eric Schroder.

frequent notations in English on the works themselves.

One of the first Europeans who recorded his reactions to Kalighat painting was Egron Lundgren, who had come to India in 1858 to report on the Mutiny. While in Calcutta, he visited a Kali temple to watch the Hindus celebrate the new year and noticed small pictures of gods on sale beneath the trees. "I bought some of these works of art painted with gaudy, bright colours and silver on thin, fine hemp paper."[11] He seems to have found similar paintings in other parts of Calcutta and even visited an artist who showed him more pictures of Hindu mythological subjects: Ganesh, Krishna, and Siva, "hunting gazelles in verdigris-green forests where golden-yellow tigers lurked with silver claws and navy blue tails." Lundgren was mystified by the complex iconography and found the compositions strange, but admired the works nonetheless. Another artist who collected Kalighat paintings



178. Balthazar Solvyns. *A View of the Pagoda of Calleegaut* from *The Hindoos*. 1807. Engraving. The Thomas John Willis Collection.

was J. Lockwood Kipling, who was the principal of Lahore's art school for many years. (His collection was later given to the Victoria & Albert Museum in London by his son Rudyard.) While Kipling may have collected the pictures for aesthetic reasons, most British probably bought them as souvenirs. A large number were bought by missionaries and taken back to Britain to demonstrate how uncivilized the natives were, how grotesque their gods were, and how imperative it was to spread Christianity.

Of all the gods, Kali struck the British as the most gruesome and remained a formidable presence in their imagination. Human sacrifices at Kali temples in Calcutta and elsewhere in Bengal were common, and she was the patron goddess not only of the city but also of the infamous thugs who were a menace to the British and the natives alike until they were suppressed. Almost every Anglo-Indian who kept a journal had something to say about Kali, and although the British artists do not appear to have been too preoccupied with her, Kalighat pictures of the goddess were acquired by many Anglo-Indians during their sojourn in Calcutta. Many probably visited the temple, and so powerful was her cult, that it is even believed that British merchants and others secretly sent offerings to the goddess for special favors. The Kali temple at Bow Bazar is commonly known as "Firingi Kali" because Indian Christians and Eurasians visited it until recent times, especially during pox and cholera epidemics, the word *firingi* being generally used for Europeans.

A slightly amusing but vivid description of a visit to the Kali temple in Kalighat was included by G. O. Trevelyan in his wry account of his trip to India, published in 1866. He visited the temple on a festival day, and as he proceeded with the crowds, the whole affair reminded him of what a Dionysian festival must have been like in ancient Greece:

> During a few minutes I could not believe my eyes; for I seemed to have been transported in a moment over more than twenty centuries, to the Athens of Cratinus and Aristophanes. If it had not been for the colour of the faces around, I should have believed myself to be on the main road to Eleusis in the full tide of one of the Dionysiac festivals. . . . All was headlong licence and drunken frenzy.[12]

When he arrived near the temple, he found it impossible to go any further but as he noted:

> Not even religious madness, not even the inspiration of bang and toddy, could overcome the habitual respect paid to a white face and a pith helmet. A couple of policemen cleared a passage for me to within a few feet of the sacred image. It appeared to be a rude block, ornamented with huge glass beads; but I dare say the Palladium, which fell from heaven was not a very elaborate device. . . .

By the time he returned home, "what with the jostling, the hubbub, and stench," Trevelyan was less enthusiastic about the whole experience and penned the following verse in Latin:

> Dea, magna domina Tolli, Calie dea domina
> Procul a meo sit omnis tuus ore, precor, odor!
> Alios age hinc olentes. Alios age putridos.[13]

VI

ALTHOUGH the artists of Kalighat, known as *patuas*, had been painting for over a hundred years beginning in the early years of the nineteenth century, it was not until the 1920s, when the school was on the verge of extinction, that anyone took notice of its prodigious output. In 1926, Ajit Ghose, a prominent Indian collector and critic in Calcutta, wrote:

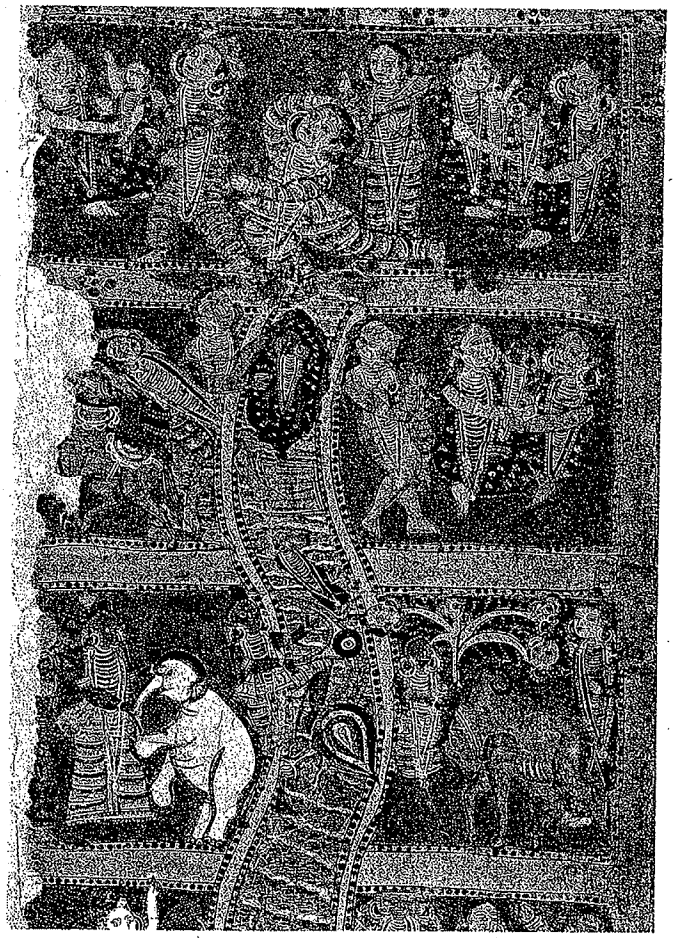
> There is an exquisite freshness and spontaneity of conception and execution in these old brush drawings. They are not drawn with the meticulous perfection which gives such distinction to Mughal portraiture. They have not the studied elegance and striving-after effect of the charmingly sensitive later drawings of the Kangra school with which they are contemporary. But there is a boldness and vigour in the brush line which may be compared to Chinese calligraphy. The drawing is made with one long sweep of the brush in which not the faintest suspicion of even a momentary indecision, not the slightest tremor can be detected.[14]

Ghose went on to compare the Kalighat pictures with certain modern trends and felt that some of them "anticipated by a century or more cubism and impressionism."

William Archer, a member of the Indian Civil Service who came to India in the 1930s, was the first European scholar to write seriously about

179. Anonymous (Kalighat). *Kali.* c. 1890. Watercolor. Walter Collection.

180. Anonymous (Kalighat). *The Mohunt and the Seduced Girl Tête-à-Tête.* c. 1875. Watercolor with silver. Walter Collection.



181. Anonymous (Bengal). *Section of a Krishnalila Scroll.* c. 1800. Gouache, watercolor, and ink. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection.

Kalighat pictures. He found the Kalighat pictures to have "seemingly antedated some of the more audacious inventions of the modern epoch," and further commented:

> With their bounding lines and bold rhythms, they were obviously close to the ancient murals of Ajanta and Bagh, while the same qualities of line and rhythm, linked with powerful colour, displayed a surprising affinity with modern art. The work of Fernand Leger was a particularly striking analogy, for here were the same bold simplifications, the same robust tubular forms.[15]

The Kalighat school combined British and Indian traditions to produce a style that was radically different from that of the Company school. As Knizkova has suggested, the Indian antecedents must be sought in the earlier folk styles prevalent in Bengal itself.[16] The village *patuas* had been painting scrolls of mythological subjects long before the Kalighat school came into existence; figure 181 is a typical example. While such paintings, usually done on cloth, frequently did not survive in the climate of Bengal, the style can be observed clearly in the more durable terracotta reliefs in temples going back at least to the seventeenth century.[17] As for the influence of British art, the most important contribution was probably the technique of watercolor and the use of paper, which was cheap and readily available.

The abandonment of traditional careful and meticulous workmanship was probably due to economic reasons. These pictures had to be produced in bulk for no more than a few pennies, and hence the less time it took, the better. The practice of shading the contours and leaving the background blank, again probably dictated by economic necessity, was very likely adopted from Company school studies of crafts and professions. The interest in nonreligious themes probably reflects the taste of the Bengali *babu* and may have been inspired by British preferences. The average, illiterate pilgrims who came to the temple from all over India, and perhaps even from Calcutta, would have wanted to buy subjects of traditional interest such as mythologies and images of deities. But the urbane, educated native of the city would have preferred contemporary themes of more social relevance. Thus, the repertoire of the Kalighat artists was considerably expanded beyond the conventional subjects. Some motifs appear to have been lifted out of illustrations of books on Anglo-Indian life published with some frequency in the first half of the nineteenth century. Others, again following British tastes, depicted natural history subjects but pigeons, crows, muskrats, cats, freshwater prawns, carp (*rui*), and catfish were particularly Bengali subjects.

Subjects that were sexually oriented, such as courtesans or contemporary scandal, essentially catered to the tastes of the nineteenth-century Calcutta *babus*. The Kalighat artists frequently satirized this group to satisfy the needs of the growing educated middle class who enjoyed ridiculing the idle rich (much as the middle class of Georgian England savored the cartoons and caricatures that brutally exposed the social pretensions and moral depravity of the English upper classes). While it is true that this social consciousness on the part of the humble artists of Kalighat was an indirect result of the British presence in India, it is somewhat remarkable that it was confined almost exclusively to Calcutta.

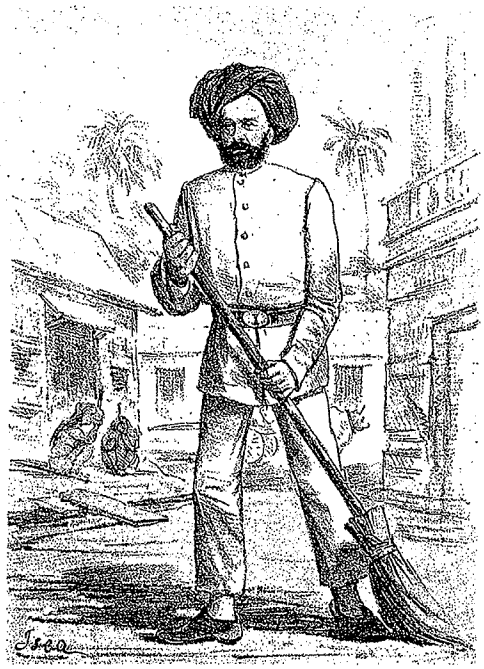
VII

BOTH caricature and satire are found in the history of Indian art. The repertoire, however, was limited, and almost no attempt was made to mirror in art the social norms and practices, as was done in contemporary Sanskrit literature. Known as *bhan*, the satirist played an important role both in society in general and in the courts in particular, both before and during the British period. Conscious efforts to introduce social satire in art, however, must be attributed to the British fondness for caricatures which were widespread in England in the late eighteenth century. In India, too, British-style caricature and satire were popular in the Anglo-Indian community. Sir Charles D'Oyly was a gifted artist whose depictions of Anglo-Indian life are often mildly satirical, and he wrote a great deal of poetry that is delightfully so. Atkinson's *Curry and Rice* was another example of caustic humor at the cost of the Anglo-Indian. After the appearance of *Punch* in England, an *Indian Punch* was also published in the 1860s, and an Indian version of the French *Charivari* began publication in 1875. The preface to the inaugural album read:

> With this number we commence a series of coloured cartoons intended to form a "Charivari Album" in a style of art never before attempted in India. In a comic paper the cartoons must be, to a certain extent, caricatures, but we hope to always present such a likeness of the original that our Album may be worth preserving as a gallery of "Men whom India has known." We shall studiously avoid, both in the pictures and in the letter-press, anything that could give offense or be construed into remarks of a personally offensive nature, whilst we hope that both our artist and biographer will be able to "hold the mirror up to nature" in a manner to enable our readers to form a just estimate of the peculiarities and characteristics of their subjects.[18]

182. Anonymous (Kalighat). *The Mohunt Forcing the Seduced Girl to Drink Some Liquor.* c. 1875. Watercolor with silver. Walter Collection.

One wonders how the Honorable Stuart S.

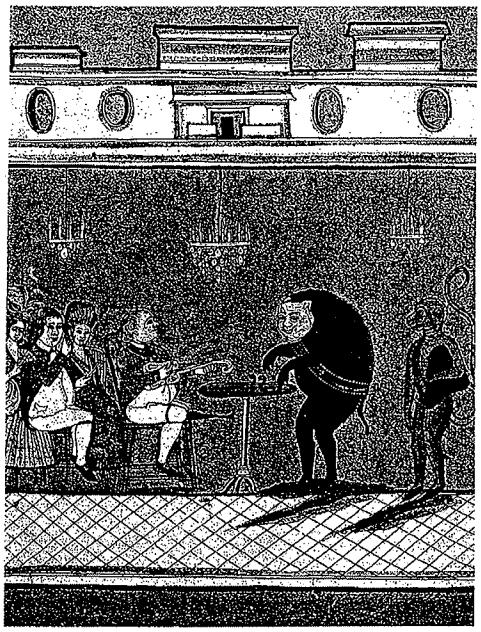


183. *"Misdirected Energy"—The Hon'ble Stuart S. Hogg, Chairman of the Calcutta Municipality* from the *Indian Charivari Album.* 1875. Lithograph. Walter Collection.

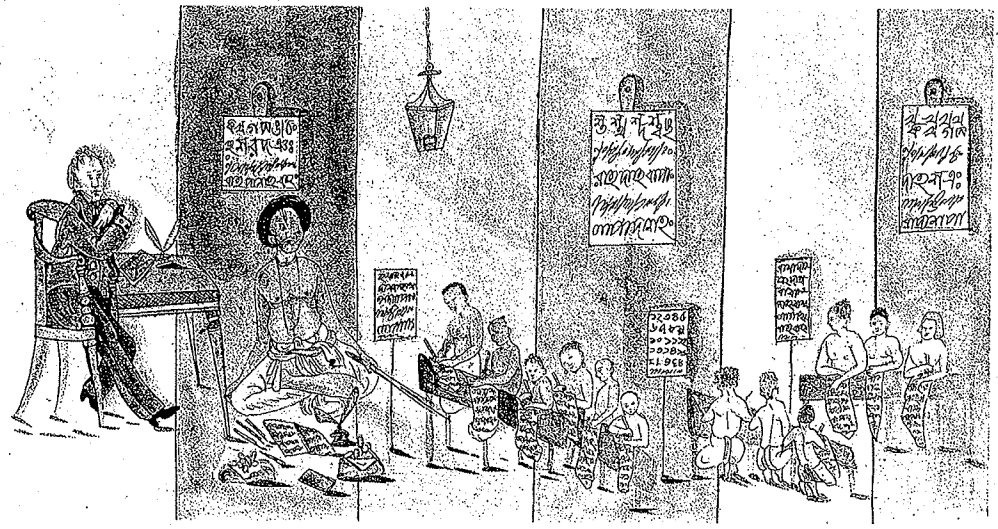
Hogg, Chairman of the Calcutta Municipality, reacted upon seeing himself depicted as a sweeper under the caption "misdirected energy" (fig. 183).

Artists of the Company school were introduced to the art of caricature by their British patrons long before the appearance of the Charivari Album. A small anonymous watercolor shows Sir John Burgoyne as a ridiculous bear (fig. 184). Burgoyne was the commander of the Twenty-third Light Dragoons, and Macartney was the governor of Madras (1781–85). The one-legged fiddler is General Stuart and behind him are Admiral Hughes and Mrs. Charles Oakeley, whose scandalous affair that rocked Madras society was no doubt the inspiration behind the caricature. Another contemporary satirical work is an album prepared by an unknown Company artist for a Mr. Adams of the Bengal Civil Service in Calcutta in 1826. Containing 417 folios, each embellished with a rapidly drawn sketch, the album is a remarkably amusing document of Anglo-Indian life and interests. Figure 185 shows the inside of a native school with a pundit seated on the ground teaching Bengali to his students. The exact function of the Englishman seated at the table is not known; he may well represent an inspector. The artist was probably literate as is evident from the Bengali letters and numerals correctly written on the boards hanging from the walls.

Following this tradition, Kalighat artists also indulged in a good deal of graphic satire, mostly about the *babus* and the hypocrisy of the temple priests. A stock motif of the Kalighat artists was a cat holding a fish in its mouth which symbolized the ascetic's hypocritical attitude toward sensual pleasures. The message was also conveyed more directly in a picture of a Vaishnava, whose duplicity was often ridiculed in Bengali literature, at a woman's breast (fig. 186).

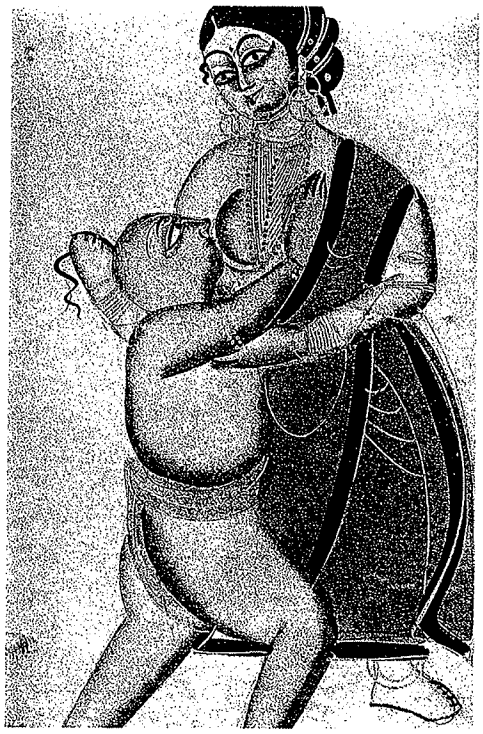


184. Anonymous (South India). *Caricature of General Stuart, the British Governor, Madras.* c. 1783. Watercolor. Collection of Edwin Binney, 3rd.



185. Anonymous (Calcutta?). *A School in Calcutta.* c. 1825. Watercolor. Private Collection.

This desire to expose the hypocrisy of the priests and holy men was also no doubt the primary motive behind the popularity of a sensational murder trial of the day. Known as the Tarakeswar Murder, it took place in 1873 and involved both a Brahman family and the *mahant*, or head priest, of the well-known Saiva temple at Tarakeswar in the Hooghly district. The Brahman was Nabin Chandra Banerjee, whose young wife Elokeshi was seduced by the *mahant* of the temple. It appears that the girl's family was privy to the intrigue and even encouraged her to continue the affair and to deceive her husband. On a visit to the village where the girl lived with her parents, Nabin decided to bring his wife to Calcutta where he worked. He had heard of the allegations about his wife's liaison with the *mahant*, but loved her so much he ignored her indiscretions. At this point the *mahant*, who had fallen in love with Elokeshi, complicated matters by attempting to prevent her departure with her husband. This, of course, infuriated Nabin who picked up a fish knife and almost decapitated Elokeshi. Despite public sympathy for Nabin, he was convicted of murder and the *mahant* was incarcerated on the



186. Anonymous (Kalighat). *A Vaishnava Priest at a Woman's Breast.* c. 1875. Watercolor. Private Collection.

187. Anonymous (Kalighat). *Murder of Elokeshi by Nabin.* c. 1875. Watercolor with silver. Walter Collection.

charge of adultery. In 1878, however, when Edward VII visited India as Prince of Wales, Nabin was released under a general amnesty granted in honor of the royal visit.

Kalighat artists were quick to capitalize on the trial. So many versions of the Tarakeswar murder have survived that it is obvious they sold as fast as they were sketched. The demand for pictures of the episode was so great that prints were also made by other artists in the city who did not belong to the Kalighat school.

VIII

ALTHOUGH woodblock printing on fabric was known in India since ancient times, the technique of reproducing pictures on paper by the processes of metal plate engraving, woodcutting, and lithography was introduced into India by the British. It was a logical development following the arrival of the printing press, which had been introduced on the west coast as early as 1556 but did not reach the other end of the country until about 1777. Woodcutting, however, was used as early as 1723 in Tranquebar in the south for the title page of *Biblica Damulica*, a Tamil translation of the Bible. By the close of the eighteenth century, Indian craftsmen, working for the European presses in Serampore and Calcutta, appear to have become not only expert in engraving type fonts, but also ornamental designs used to embellish books. The early engravers employed by the presses were drawn mostly from the traditional craftsmen who worked in metal. Early in the nineteeenth century, however, Brahmans became active both in printing and book publishing, and by midcentury, when schools of art were established, caste does not appear to have been a barrier; several Brahmans are listed among the most famous engravers of the day.

Several European printmakers and engravers worked in Calcutta in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Among them were Richard Brittridge, Caleb Garlend, John Alefounder, John Brown, Aaron Upjohn, James Moffat, Samuel Davis, Francis Domieux, and Joseph Shepherd. Although some of the British artists and printers claimed that they worked entirely by themselves, this was not the case. In their *Twelve Views of Calcutta* (1786–88), Thomas Daniell states that the going was rough as he himself had to be "Painter, Engraver, Coppersmith, Printer, and Printer's Devil."[19] Yet we learn from William Baillie, writing from Calcutta in 1793, that "The native artists tho' totally incapable of taking advice themselves, can copy extremely well. All Daniells' [views of Calcutta] were stained principally by natives."[20] Another example of collaboration involved Charles Wilkins, who worked with Joseph Shepherd casting type for the Bengali characters for *A Grammar of the Bengali Language* (1778) with the assistance of Panchanan Karmakar, who became a leading engraver of the period. Other well-known books of prints produced in India were William Baillie's *Twelve Views of Calcutta and Fort William* (1794) and *Eight Views of Gour and Rajmahal* (1798), and Robert

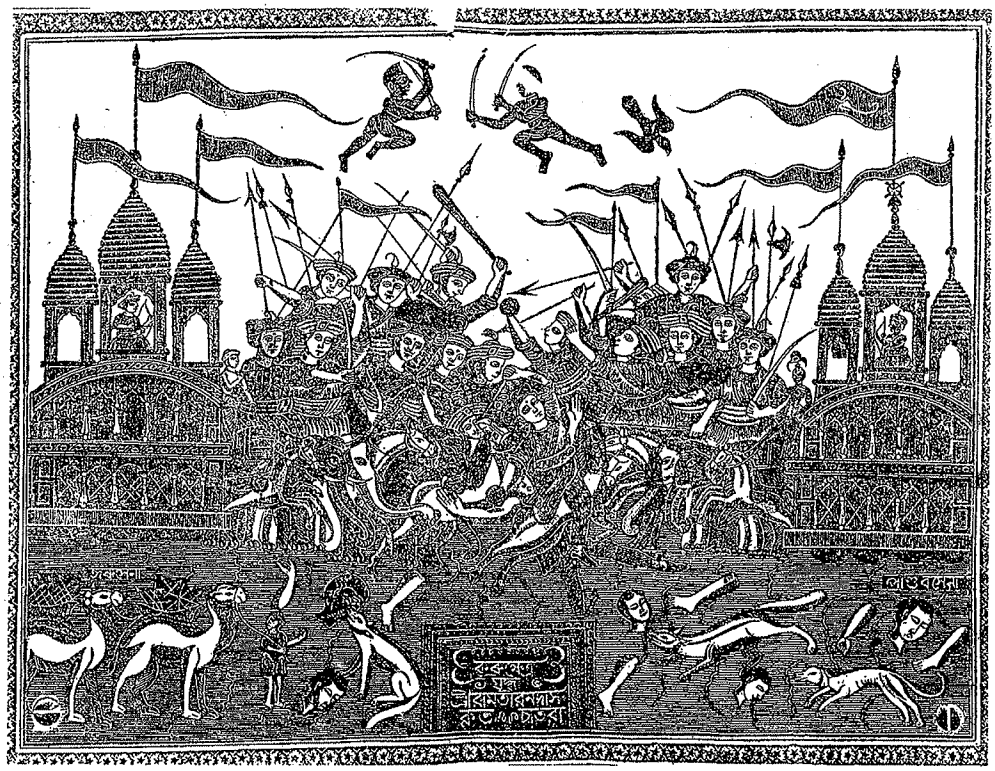
COLORPLATE 12.
Anonymous (Delhi). *Trooper of Skinner's Horse*. c. 1820–30. Watercolor.
Walter Collection.

Mabon's *Twenty Sketches Illustrative of Oriental Manners and Customs* (1797).

There is some disagreement among scholars about whether the early engravers of Calcutta were actually trained by Europeans. Those who had the opportunity to work with the Daniells, or Solvyns, or later in Patna with Sir Charles D'Oyly who had set up a printing shop of his own, must have learned something of the techniques involved. Generally, however, woodcuts, whether done as book illustrations or as individual prints, show very little awareness of British art (fig. 188). The complete lack of perspective, emphasis upon linearity, two-dimensionality, absence of shading, and the hierarchical importance given the figures are all features that were borrowed from earlier traditional styles, not from British art. Unlike the Kalighat artists, the early Indian engravers were not inventive but continued in their traditional flat, decorative style. The illustration from a *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic, differs little from the slightly earlier pictures of similar battle scenes in classical Rajput paintings (fig. 189). The women in these prints are dressed not in the local fashion, but wear the skirtlike *ghagras*, the mode encountered in Rajput paintings. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the repertoire was expanded considerably to cater to the secular tastes of the *babus*. The engravers borrowed heavily from the Kalighat school, taking the most popular themes of the Calcutta dandy and his courtesan, satire and scandal.

By the 1850s, woodcutting was on the wane in India with the growing popularity of lithography. The exact date of the introduction of lithography in Calcutta is uncertain. However, it was probably by one of two French artists, Belros and de Savignac, both of whom were

188. Anonymous (Calcutta). *The Merchant Srimanta Sees a Vision of the Goddess*. c. 1850. Woodcut. Collection of Edwin Binney, 3rd.



189. Ramtaran Das. *Battle Scene* from the epic *Mahabharata*. c. 1850. Woodcut. Courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

using lithography by 1822 as reported in the *Calcutta Journal* of that year, or I. N. Hind, Superintendent of the Government Press. In any event, by 1850 a number of lithographic presses were flourishing in Calcutta, all of them owned by Europeans. The Royal Lithographic Press, the first art studio owned by an Indian, was not established until the 1860s. It was run by four artists, all of whom had been trained at the School of Industrial Art.

The effects of the Industrial Revolution in Britain had been disastrous for the Indian economy in general and for the village industries in particular. Rather than impose tariffs to protect Indian manufacturing, the government adopted the questionable policy of establishing art colleges "to maintain, restore, and improve the application of oriental art to industry and manufacture," as well as to "modify existing designs in the light of British taste so as to make them more suitable for export."[21] The first school was founded in Madras in 1850, the second in Calcutta in 1854, and another in Bombay in 1857. The prospectus of the Madras school declared its objective was to "improve the taste of the native people as regards beauty of form and finish in the articles in daily use among them."[22] Artists from Europe were brought to head the newly founded establishments. John Griffiths and Lockwood Kipling went to India in 1865; the former became director of the Bombay school and the latter the first principal of the Mayo School of Arts founded in Lahore in 1875. Among the early teachers at the Calcutta School were the Italian O. Gilhardi and the Englishman Charles Palmer. In 1869, E. B. Havell took over the Calcutta School after having briefly run the one in Madras.

190. Anonymous (Calcutta Art Studio). *Savitri Pleading with Yama, the God of Death, for the Life of her Dead Husband.* 1883. Lithograph. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The results of these efforts were discouraging. In 1877, Valentine Prinsep visited Jaipur's art school and wrote, "Of all the feeble institutions here, it is the feeblest. The [drawing] master is an Indian; the things turned out, so many nightmares: large copies of photographs of the Prince of Wales, Lord Northbrook and other Governors-General, with the ghastly stare such things have when done by beginners; drawings done from nature without an atom of art: in fact, a perfect artistic Bedlam."[23] In Madras, when the students were shown Old Master nudes, the school authorities were shocked to discover that, "far from displaying a coldly academic interest, the students regarded them as 'naked English ladies' kindly provided for their delectation by an understanding government."[24] It was extremely difficult for the graduates of these schools to find work; those that did became professional portraitists, lithographers, illustrators, ornamental designers, draftsmen, and photographers.

A few enterprising students from the Calcutta School formed the Calcutta Art Studio and produced rather colorful lithographs of religious subjects that were bought by native and British patrons. Figure 190 shows a typical Art Studio lithograph from the scrapbook *Fifteen Hindu Mythological Pictures.* In 1883, the scrapbook sold for ten rupees. The artist had certainly mastered European technique, but his style is lacking in creativity.

The schools did succeed in breaking down certain social barriers and taboos. Students were admitted from all castes; aspiring artists from Brahman families sat in the same classes as students from the craftsmen castes.

The Indian artist who became famous in the

latter half of the nineteenth century was not a product of any of the art schools, but was the maharaja of Travancore. Ravi Varma (d. 1905) was a self-taught painter but was strongly influenced by European art. He painted in oil and had to reproduce his works in oleograph due to their great demand. In his portraiture, he was certainly influenced by the European painter Theodore Jenson. Ravi Varma's style was very much like that of contemporary Calcutta lithographers; perhaps a touch more sophisticated and subtle, but both, in the words of W. G. Archer, "paralleled British art in its most banal form." As Havell was to write later:

> The art which truly reflects . . . the teaching of Anglo-Indian art-schools is exhibited in the paintings of the late Ravi Varma, who is the fashionable artist of modern India for those Indians who do not ignore Indian art altogether. Though not trained in a school of art, all his methods have been based on the academic nostrums of Anglo-Indian schools, fine art societies, and art critics. It is difficult to understand whether the popularity his works have gained is to be attributed more to the common realistic trickery which he has borrowed from European painters or to his choice of Indian subjects. But certain it is that his pictures invariably manifest a most painful lack of the poetic faculty in illustrating the most imaginative poetry and allegory; and this cardinal sin is not atoned for by any kind of technical distinction in the execution.[25]

Havell's criticism of the kind of painting inspired by the "academic nostrums of Anglo-Indian schools" may sound rather harsh, but the simple acquisition of "realistic trickery" without "poetic faculty" was not enough to create original and exciting art. The Mogul painters who worked for the British, or the Kalighat artists, were well aware of this, which is why their works are still admired today. By being critical of the state of art in India when he arrived, and by bemoaning its lack of "Indianness," Havell became the apostle of a revivalist movement. The emergence of the new trend under the direction of Havell and Abanindra Nath Tagore, a graduate of the Calcutta Art School and leader of the contemporary art movement, was an offshoot of the growth of Indian nationalism around the beginning of the twentieth century. The reaction was against British art and modes of perception, but their techniques would remain.