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A Review of *Splendours of the Subcontinent: A Prince's Tour of India 1875-76*

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A Review of *Splendours of the Subcontinent: A Prince's Tour of India 1875-76*

Beth Hunt

Splendours of the Subcontinent: A Prince's Tour of India 1875-76 [exhibition], 11 March 2017 – 18 June 2017, Cartwright Gallery, Bradford.

According to Annette Weiner, 'the object acts as a vehicle for bringing past time into the present so that the histories [...] become an intimate part of [...] identity'.¹ Therefore the museum exhibition, a heterotopic site 'capable of juxtaposing in a single space several real spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' emerges as the optimal site not simply for foregrounding through objects historical narratives we might hitherto have been unaware of but also for informing and misinforming our sense of self through these objects' curation and display.² The curator's intention may clash with the viewer's interpretation or preceding knowledge, but ultimately it is the curator who has the power to inform identity through the narrative they choose to tell about the objects on display.

The 'Splendours of the Subcontinent' re-emerged into the light (albeit dimmed for their preservation) of the Cartwright Gallery in Bradford in the midst of the nostalgic and neo-Imperialist rhetoric that accompanied Brexit and the sudden interest in postcolonial matters from popular media. This atmosphere represents a curatorial conundrum: deploy the objects in order to highlight histories that challenge Imperial nostalgia and empower postcolonial communities or make them recite reductive narratives designed to comfort a specific assumed (white) audience.

The story of the 'Splendours' (a term that I do not employ uncritically) begins in November 1875 when Crown Prince Albert, the eldest son of Queen Victoria, arrived in Bombay to begin a four-month tour of what was then British India.³ The trip had been planned by the Prince's concerned parents who felt that he 'was less academically inclined than his younger brothers' and 'that travel, coupled with intensive tuition, would encourage the Prince to take an avid interest in the wider world'.⁴ Initially, gifts

¹ Annette Weiner, 'Inalienable Wealth', *American Ethnologist*, 12.2 (1985), 210–227 (p. 210).

² Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias' trans. by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 22–27 (p. 26).

³ Now India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Bhutan.

⁴ Kajal Meghani and Caroline de Guitaut, *Splendours of the Subcontinent: A Prince's Royal Tour of India 1875-6* (London: Royal Collection Enterprises Limited, 2017), p.10.

were not to be exchanged on the trip, but this being quite out of keeping with the traditions of Indian courts and British/Indian relations (during the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century gifts were essential to the business relationships of the East India Company), it was eventually allowed that gifts of ‘curiosities, ancient arms, and specimens of local manufacture’ would be appropriate presents for the prince’s reception.⁵

‘Curiosities’ was the British analogy for the ‘explosively beautiful visual productions of India’ as Jonathan Jones notes in his article ‘Fugitive Pieces’.⁶ To describe them as art would have been to admit that India and Indian people were capable of creating art, and therefore possibly unworthy candidates for colonial rule which was premised on their inferiority. Instead, they were given the exoticising pseudonym ‘Curiosities’. The Prince was then to reciprocate with gifts that projected the supposed valour, intellect and innate masculinity of the British Empire including ‘commemorative medals made by Phillips Brothers, swords made by Wilkinson Sword Company, and sporting firearms from Purdey and Sons’.⁷ During his tour the Prince accrued one of only two known sets of painted pangolin-scale armour, an array of opulent weapons including a gentlemanly walking stick with a gun concealed inside and an ‘enamelled gold and jewel encrusted inkstand in the form of a barge with oars, an anchor, flagpole and mast’.⁸ All of these items were on display at the Cartwright Gallery, along with dioramas of exquisite Indian architecture and silk scrolls recording the speeches given by local dignitaries during the Prince’s visits to each region.

The Splendours were initially exhibited at the India Museum in South Kensington (curiosities ‘entered the [India] museum in huge quantities and spectacular quality’ in the nineteenth century) and then in Bethnal Green before embarking on their own tour of the UK and Europe as Prince Albert ‘enjoyed travelling and collecting objects from tours, and, like his father, he developed a taste for displaying these souvenirs’.⁹ Two million people across the UK came to see the exhibition of the dazzling collection. It

⁵ ‘Exchanging Gifts’, <<https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/themes/exhibitions/splendours-of-the-subcontinent/bradford-art-galleries-museums/exchanging-gifts#/>> [Accessed: 19 May 2017].

⁶ Jonathan Jones, ‘Fugitive Pieces’, *Guardian*, 23 September 2003, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2003/sep/25/heritage.art>> [Accessed 19 May 2017].

⁷ ‘Exchanging Gifts’.

⁸ ‘Indian – Peacock barge inkstand’, <<https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/11444/peacock-barge-inkstand>> [Accessed: 19 May 2017].

⁹ Jones, ‘Fugitive Pieces’; Meghani and De Guitaut, p. 10.

therefore undoubtedly played a crucial role in the process of ‘the production of [India] as a transparent and legible space’ for those who had never been there, a process dubbed ‘Scripting’ by Derek Gregory.¹⁰ The language in which India became legible through the exhibition of these objects was one of exquisite, exotic riches. Articulating India ‘as a rare object: the “jewel in the crown”’ was particularly necessary at this moment as a distraction from the events of the 1857 Sepoy revolt and the assassination of Richard Bourke, Viceroy of India in 1872.¹¹ On their return from that tour of Europe, the Splendours were consigned to the archive of the Royal Collection, never to be exhibited together again until now.

Through didactic panels and the volunteer-led tour that I joined on my visit, the exhibition in Bradford briefly touches on the different methods used in crafting some of the Splendours (Jaipuri enamelling, for example) and the fact that the exhibition represents the best craftsmanship from all the regions (now nations) that the Prince visited. The exhibition as a whole was organised according to what might be called the objects’ ‘themes’ (weapons, jewellery, scriptures etc.) as opposed to their provenance, effectively decontextualising them and alienating them from their origins. In a city like Bradford that is home to a large South East Asian population, this represents something of a missed opportunity to read this archive ‘against the grain’ of the circumstances they were first exhibited in and to present a collection of Asian crafts, as opposed to relics of the British Empire.¹² Instead, the conservative curatorial conditions of the exhibition mean that the Splendours (and arguably the Subcontinent as a whole) continue to be scripted as ‘Curiosities’.

Furthermore, in the midst of multiple debates about the return of objects ‘acquired’ by former Empires and currently languishing in European museums (for example, the Benin bronzes in the British Museum and the ‘Baba Marzoug’ in Brest, France), the exhibition of these bejewelled, bedazzling gifts devoid of any description or allusion to colonial atrocities committed in Asia appears intransigent, even aggressive. Lest we forget, the exchange of gifts only appears ‘voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily’: the conditions under which these gifts were given were not entirely

¹⁰ Derek Gregory, ‘Scripting Egypt: Orientalism & the Cultures of Travel’, in *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, ed. by James S. Duncan (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 114–150 (p. 115).

¹¹ Jones, ‘Fugitive Pieces’.

¹² Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form’, in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. by Carolyn Hamilton, (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2002), pp. 83–102 (p.91).

uncoercive.¹³ The impression of ahistorical, even pro-Imperial sentiments is compounded by the fact that the exhibition proudly identifies itself as part of the ‘2017 UK-India Year of Culture’ which claims to be ‘celebrating the long-standing relationship and vibrant cultural history between the UK and India’.¹⁴ This name and phrase grossly gloss over the less ‘vibrant’ chapters in the history of India’s relationship with Britain including Rudyard Kipling’s ‘The White Man’s Burden’, the Bengal famine of 1770 and Thomas Babington Macauley’s ‘Minute on Education’.¹⁵

Gifts were an essential aspect of British colonial power: Nicholas Thomas writes that ‘the fundamental principle [of the gift] is that the giver acquires some sort of superiority over the receiver. A relationship of indebtedness is therefore established’.¹⁶ As previously noted, the Splendours were recuperated by the British as mere ‘curiosities’ and used to promote the idea of a glorious Empire through their display, which simultaneously obscured the humanity of colonised people. These beautiful objects do not tell an altogether beautiful story, and the curatorial decision of the Cartwright Gallery to obscure this ugliness is, to me at least, fundamentally troubling.

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¹³ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), p.3.

¹⁴ ‘Splendours of the Subcontinent’, <<https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/themes/exhibitions/splendours-of-the-subcontinent/bradford-art-galleries-museums>> [Accessed 19 May 2017].

¹⁵ Thomas Babington Macaulay, ‘Minute by the Hon’ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835’ in *Bureau of Education: Selections from Educational Records, Part I (1781-1839)*, ed. by Henry Sharp (Delhi: National Archives of India, 1965), pp. 107–17, <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html> [Accessed 19 May 2017].

¹⁶ Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 14.