

Splendours of the Subcontinent: Four centuries of South Asian Paintings and Manuscripts

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Some 70 years after the British left India it is timely to look back at how the kings and queens of the United Kingdom came to amass one of the largest private collections of South Asian art in the world. Two conjoined exhibitions currently showing at the Queen's Gallery do just that. *Eastern Encounters: Four Centuries of Paintings and Manuscripts from the Indian Sub-Continent* is the larger of the two displays, featuring works from Mughal rule in the early 17th century down to the last years of the Raj in the 1930s. Then, inset within the main exhibition, is *A Prince's Tour of India, 1875–6*, which shows off all the gifts given to Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales, during his traverse of the Indian subcontinent, one of several visits to India made by British royals between 1869 and 1921. Some items will be familiar, especially those from the permanent displays of Buckingham Palace and Osborne House, whilst the *Padshahnama*, the illustrated history of the early years of the reign of Shah Jahan (1628–58) was given a very extensive airing in 1997, to mark the 50th anniversary of Indian independence. However, this is the first time so many artefacts from the Royal Collections have been assembled together to tell a story about the long relationship between the British monarchy and South Asia.

Emily Hannam, who curated the main exhibition, denies that the show is an exercise in 'imperial nostalgia'. She emphasises instead how many of the treasures were gifts sent from Indian rulers to their British counterparts, or were brought back from India by colonial officials who doubled up as collectors and passed on curios to the court at home. In this way the exhibition offers new insights into understanding the culture of royalty in both east and west, and demonstrates how royal patronage developed and popularised particular crafts and techniques. 'Soft power' – art as diplomacy – is much in evidence. Loot, lucre and other trappings of conquest, are largely excluded. Only two of the exhibits, we are told, were 'trophies of ... military conquest'.⁽¹⁾ Actually, there is plenty of booty in the royal collections and armouries but it is not included here. There is cannon and chainmail captured during the Sikh wars, crowns and thrones taken from displaced monarchs and of course, the Koh-i-noor diamond, pillaged from Lahore in 1849, and now part of the crown jewels in the Tower of London. In fact, there are probably sufficient royal spoils from India for an alternative exhibition. On its own terms, however, *Splendours of the Subcontinent* succeeds in bringing to life and interpreting how the visual arts were incorporated into the rituals of royal exchange from the Stuarts through to the House of Windsor.

Scholars have long been interested in the anthropology of the gift, decoding how the act of giving – whether

it be charity or riches – is invested with a range of meanings, often implying a closer relationship between the giver and the receiver. Gifts signify relations of power across a wide spectrum, from dominance, to supplication, to equality, and on to obeisance and dependence. Who sent gifts to whom, what value they had, and how they were received reveals much about how power at all levels is mediated by non-monetary exchange. As this exhibition reveals, this way of thinking about ‘presents’ is as relevant to the study of royalty as it is to other branches of history.

In the early 17th century, when contact commenced between the British and the rulers of India, the all-conquering Mughal emperors called the shots. One of the first images in this exhibition describes how Charles I was compelled to send a tribute to Shah Jahan as an apology for the activity of English pirates in the Indian Ocean. Arriving from a Britain ravaged by religious strife and civil war, the merchant adventurers of the East India Company who turned up in Delhi at the courts of Jahangir and Shah Jahan, had little to exchange as they sought imperial protection. Miniature portraits hardly matched the ornamental weaponry and jewellery expected at such meetings. Then, as the commercial hegemony of the East India Company grew, and the Hanoverian monarchy stabilised, the British got into their stride as accomplished practitioners of the *realpolitik* of gift diplomacy. During the 18th century the Company negotiated its way into the Indian interior, using arms and cash, but also paving the way with gifts from the king: swords, cannon, textiles, scientific instruments and, ironically, teapots. In return, as guarantees of their friendship, Indian royals sent back exquisite golden manuscript books of Persian verse, calligraphy and drawings; delicate and intimate watercolour portraits of Mughal rulers; architectural plans of their palaces; and chronicles of their reigns, the most spectacular being the *Padshahnama*, rightly displayed as a centrepiece to this part of the exhibition.⁽²⁾ With its detailed depictions of battles and sieges, dynastic ceremonies, and royal hunting, the *Padshahnama* celebrates Mughal power at its zenith, a window into a royal realm, more Versailles than Windsor.

Not that the occupants of Windsor saw all of these gifts as intended. As the catalogue to *Splendours of the Subcontinent* details, these presents were often snapped up by the East India Company, jealous of its hold on India, and reluctant to share any largesse with the Crown. Lord Teignmouth, Governor-General of Bengal in the 1790s, was unusually diligent in passing on royal gifts to their proper destination. Many of the items on display from the Mughal court at Lucknow in Awadh, including the *Padshahnama*, came from him. Treasures such as these not only signaled and cemented royal alliances, they also marked defeat and conquest. Another notable haul displayed here is from the palace of Tipu Sultan, taken following the British defeat of the Muslim ruler of Mysore who allied with the French during the Maratha wars at the turn of the 18th century. From his library came a 17th-century Quran, and other relics of a reign which fascinated George III in particular. Similarly, after the Indian rebellion of 1857–8, a series of illustrated manuscripts depicting life at the court of Wajid Ali Shah, the last King of Awadh, were ransacked from the library of the Kaiserbagh Palace in Lucknow and given to Queen Victoria.

By then the government of India had transferred from the East India Company to the Crown. According to Emily Hannam, as Queen and then as Queen-Empress, Victoria, showed ‘outward reluctance’ at resuming the conventions of gift diplomacy with the princes of India.⁽³⁾ There were some early exchanges: for example, portraits passed to and from Ranjit Singh, the Sikh ruler, shortly after Victoria came to the throne, and an annual tribute of Kashmir carpets and shawls was sent by the Maharaja of Jammu from 1846. Thereafter, so the story goes here, with *force majeure* on their side, the British did not need to work quite so hard at cajoling and appeasing Indian princes through gift diplomacy. If anything, gifts to the monarch now looked more like bribes, an attempt to curry favour, and were frowned upon. Instead, with the Imperial Assemblage of 1 January 1877, the British revived another Moghul tradition, the grand *darbar*, whereby the princes of India brought gifts to the Queen’s representative, the Viceroy, as a sign of their fealty and allegiance. Arguably, Queen Victoria was fonder of the old traditions than is suggested here. It was she who insisted on the annual Kashmir tribute, a tone of the Maharaja of Jammu’s goodwill in upholding the Treaty of Amritsar. In 1870, Queen Victoria’s second son, Prince Alfred (the Duke of Edinburgh) brought home for her from Jammu an elaborate shawl detailing the Maharaja’s territory, that had taken over 300 men three years to embroider.⁽⁴⁾ Queen Victoria also swept aside protocol to exchange gifts in the form of books with Shah Jahan, the Muslim Begum of Bhopal. The exhibition features the volumes sent from Bhopal – a history

of the state in Urdu, and an account of her pilgrimage to Mecca – but no mention is made of the reciprocal gifts despatched by the Queen, namely, copies of her Highland journals and a memoir of Prince Albert, her deceased consort.(5)

From the smaller exhibition, *A Prince's Tour of India, 1875–6*, there is also an array of evidence to suggest that gift diplomacy remained a vital part of the culture of the Raj, long after the balance of power tipped decisively over to the British. Kajal Meghani, who curated this section, identifies the purpose of the Prince of Wales' journey around India as 'educational', part of his preparation for rule.(6) That was partly the rationale of course. Many of the exhibits reveal the topography of British India, and the impact of colonialism: a silver and gold opium box from Ratlam; ornate addresses printed on silk and contained in gold or sandalwood caskets to mark the opening of bridges and hospitals; and an astrolabe and a sundial presented by the Maharaja of Jaipur (well-known for his patronage of the sciences and for his enthusiasm for photography). Especially in the south of India and in Ceylon, the Prince received gifts attesting to the vitality of Hindu kingship: for example, sandalwood and ivory caskets and cabinets depicting deities and reproducing temple designs. All India was on show for the Prince. When he returned to Britain, as the catalogue describes, the opulent mementoes of his trip went on display, first in London and then around the country and on to Denmark. As in the aftermath of the 1851 Exhibition of All Nations, when the wares and produce of India had gripped the public imagination, Indian design now enjoyed a mini-craze in Britain with entrepreneurial firms bringing out silver dinnerware that copied the engraved gifts brought home by the Prince.

At the same time, India was not only a grand tour, finishing off the Prince's apprenticeship. He was on view as well. And he wasn't above a little direct diplomacy of his own. In western India, the Prince diverted from his itinerary to travel to Baroda in order to give his royal stamp of approval (a snuff box and a gold watch, amongst other items) to the new boy prince recently installed there. In return the Gaekwar of Baroda gave the Prince a silver tea-service, decorated with Hindu deities.(7) In this way, the prince was on royal duty, being unveiled as the heir to the throne, a sure sign that the Queen's dynastic line was as enduring as any to be found in India. So many of the gifts received during his tour shown here were royal markers, signs of Indian courts recognising and approving the heir to the throne, through reciprocal acts of exchange. Perfume bottles, sprinklers and *paan* boxes were all an integral part of the intimate ceremony of the *darbar*, where *attar* (rose petal extract) and *paan* (betel-leaf) were taken by the Prince and his host to seal the mutual exchange of gifts and the alliance that they represented. Here the exhibition needed to go beyond the existing descriptions of the provenance for these items, available on the Royal Collections website, and look further into their function. Describing them simply as 'courtly objects' misses out on their purpose. The Prince was given a huge variety of ornamental weaponry, but some possessed special significance. In Ceylon he was presented with the sword of the ex-Kandyan king, captured in 1815. In Alwar, he received a steel and gold sword containing an inscription invoking 'Zulfiqar' the legendary sword given by the Prophet to his son-in-law. These were more than gifts, they were status symbols, indicating the new bonds being forged between the Crown and Indian rulers.

Rejoining the main exhibition, we now come to the apotheosis of Queen Victoria in India. Collected together in a mock Indo-Saracenic book-case are various vernacular book tributes to the Queen, mainly from around the time of her two jubilees in 1887 and 1897. The prolific Sourindro Mohun Tagore leads the way with his Sanskrit and Bengali verses, some set to music, some celebrating how the Queen had seen off Mughal rule. There is a Telugu biography written by a missionary, and some of the Indian editions of the Queen's own Highland journals, the Maharaja of Benares being one of those translators who ensured that her writings became available in India. Most intriguing of all is the Gujarati biography of the Queen written by Ichharam Surayam Desai, a nationalist journalist who was a fierce critic of the British government in India, but nonetheless revered Victoria as an exemplary widow.

And so into the 20th century and to one of the real revelations of this exhibition: Queen Mary, the consort to King-Emperor George V. Although there are only a few relevant exhibits, Queen Mary's interest in India comes over clearly. She was both a collector and a patron. We are shown a series of excerpts from an

illustrated *Bhagavata*, one of the Hindu epics, made by Pahari (Nepalese) painters and acquired by the Queen. There is also a watercolour portrait of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, picked up by Queen Mary in Amritsar, probably during the 1905–6 tour, later the scene of the terrible massacre by British troops of Sikh pilgrims in April 1919. We see some of the Bengali art in which she took an interest: Abanindranath Tagore's *Queen Tissarakshita* (1911), and we are told about her support in 1930 for the murals being prepared for India House in London by a group of Bengali artists. More might have been included here. Although much of Queen Mary's Indian collecting and her archive ended up in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and in the library of the Royal Commonwealth Society, now at Cambridge, there are some real gems tucked away in the Royal Collections. It would have been good to see them as well. Notably, there is a silver model of a Hindu temple given by the city of Madras on the occasion of Mary's wedding in 1893 (RCIN 59102). Also very striking is the ivory three-leaf screen presented by the Maharaja of Kapurthala to mark George V's silver jubilee in 1935 (RCIN 33972). Above all, I missed not being able to get up close to the group of painted ivory figures depicting the court of Begum Sumru of Sardhana (RCIN 11976), the female ruler of a small state in northern India who converted to Catholicism.⁽⁸⁾ This Begum features elsewhere in the exhibition – there is a portrait of her included in one of the albums handed over to George III by Lord Teignmouth. But surely she is deserving of more attention as an object of the royal gaze.

Some such quibbles aside this is a remarkable exhibition. The British royal family emerge as agents of empire, rather than passive beneficiaries, and the place of royal ritual in the making and breaking of the Raj is revealed through its rich and complex material culture.

Notes

1. Emily Hannam, *Eastern Encounters: Four Centuries of Paintings and Manuscripts from the Indian Sub-continent* (London, 2018) pp. 10, 12.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For a full analysis, see: Milo Cleveland Beach and Ebba Koch, *King of the World: The Padshahnama an Imperial Mughal Manuscript from the Royal Library, Windsor Castle* (London, 1997).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Eastern Encounters*, p. 38.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. The shawl is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (ROYAL 743).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See my *Empress: Queen Victoria and India* (London & New Haven, CT, 2018), pp. 144, 199–200. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Kajal Meghani, *Splendours of the Subcontinent: A Prince's Tour of India, 1875–6* (London, 2017), p. 10.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Not in the Royal Collections, but see: Ajay Sinha, 'Baroda as provenance', in *Baroda: A Cosmopolitan Provenance*, ed. Priya Maholay-Jaradi (Mumbai, 2015), p. 27.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See Julia Key, *Farzana: the Woman Who Saved an Empire* (London, 2014).[Back to \(8\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/299680>