Hermann Goetz: Indian Art

Of all great art traditions of mankind that of India is the least known. Nevertheless, the number of monuments which survive today is no smaller than what survives in the Occident, and these again are but a fraction of what was created in the course of thousands of years. Even monuments built before the sixteenth century are wholly incomplete, while from the times before the turn of our millenium only accidental ruins have been preserved for us, preserved by their own durability, by the loneliness of the jungle, by the earth itself from total destruction. And most of it lies still unrevealed beneath the tens of thousands of mounds of rubble which cover the whole country. For refinement of taste and workmanship, richness of form and significance of content, the creations of Indian art, however varied in kind and quality, fairly rival the work of ancient Greece and Rome, Gothic or Renaissance times, ancient Egypt of Babylon, China or Japan. The discovery of Indian art is still of fairly recent date, and a long series of misconceptions, familiar to us from the story of the uncovering of other cultures, has so far stood in the way of its appreciation. All that was accessible to the traveller until late in the nineteenth century were temples and palaces, often of overwhelming proportions but with their mannered style, overloaded decoration and complicated symbolism, no less difficult to understand than a baroque Jesuit church or a late Renaissance or rococo mansion. In addition, much that the foreigner was able to see was everyday merchandise, temples and mosques as boring and tasteless as many of our nineteenth century churches, cheap or meaningless religious art such as we find in great quantities in Europe, and works of art no better than the trash which we, too, sell as souvenirs to tourists. In fact, most of what found its way into our museums, even in the nineteenth century, as Indian — in fact as Asian — "art" can claim no higher valuation. Reproductions in travellers' reports were still worse. Whether Indian originals or — much more often — clumsy amateur drawings, both were "improved" by the copper-plate engravers to the point of being unrecognisable.

It was therefore above all Indo-Islamic art, easily accessible in the principal cities, comparatively simple and without too many symbolic preconditions, which first found recognition in Europe. The Taj Mahal, the monumental tomb of the Mughal Empress Mumtaz-Mahal and her husband the Emperor Shahjahan, although anything but a pure Indian creation, became at an early date a world-famous landmark of Indian art, although certainly the unbelievable quantities of purest white marble and costly inlays of precious stones must impress even the most artistically blind. Mughal painting reached Europe from the seventeenth century onwards in (mostly second-rate) albums and was collected by Rembrandt and Sir Joshua Reynolds.

When India became better known in the nineteenth century, its appreciation was blocked by classical taste in art and religious prejudice. For the majority of Europeans, Indian art was really no more than the expression of a dark and dreadful heathen religion, and even the study of Sanskrit at our universities could do little to change this attitude. Preoccupied as it was in general with a far older religious literature, such study helped as much, or as little, as, say, the study of the Bible or the ancient classics would help to understand the Strasbourg Minster, Rembrandt or Tiepolo. It was only in the middle of the century, when Sir Alexander Cunningham, followed by James Burgess, H. Cousens and others, began to catalogue the Indian monuments systematically; when, later, surviving Indian works of art were no less systematically collected and indexed; when James Fergusson made the first attempt at a classification in his "History of Indian and Eastern Architecture;" when at the end of the nineties the publication of painstaking copies of the Ajanta frescoes under the supervision of J. Griffiths aroused a sensation hardly less than was caused by the excavation of Pompeji, a hundred years earlier; as the Archaeological Survey produced its first good illustrated yearly reports a few years later — only then did true Indian art gradually begin to become known. And after pictures in a Graeco-Roman provincial style — only of minor importance for India — had come to light in Afghanistan, Europe began to take an interest in Indian art. When finally, with the rediscovery of our own mediaeval art, of Baroque and Rococo, one-sided classicism yielded to a broader and more elastic appreciation of art, and when the Islamic world, Further India, China and Japan were discovered by our artists and art collectors, the time was ripe for the comprehension of Indian art.

Nevertheless, there recurred the same misconception of a one-sided religious interpretation which had at first hindered access to Greek, Gothic or ancient Egyptian art. India, a "colonial" country since the most ancient times, with unbelievably varied cultural strata, soon acquired the reputation of being narrowly preoccupied with religion because many ancient customs and examples of bizarre sectarianism were exaggerated by travellers, because religious pictures, easiest to acquire and carry, filled our museums, and because in consequence, our universities also con-