Part III

Colonial Art and Architecture
(1757–1947)
The British Raj: Westernization and Nationalism

Profound changes took place in art and architecture during the colonial era. The introduction of European academic naturalism transformed all aspects of Indian art from working practices to the relationship between artists and their patrons. Despite the fascination Mughal and Rajput courts felt for European naturalism, its systematic introduction would not have been possible without an ambitious policy of dissemination devised by the Raj.

In 1757, a minor incident in Bengal was to change the course of world history. The Honourable East India Company gained control of the province after defeating the reigning Mughal viceroy. In less than a century, the modest English colony was transformed into a world empire. Unprecedented material prosperity emanating from the Industrial Revolution, scientific achievements, and the ideology of progress all contributed to a sense of cultural superiority that became the hallmark of the British empire. A traditional society such as India was no match for such an explosion of power and overflow of resources. However, as the nineteenth century progressed, the language of nationhood, a legacy of European Enlightenment, was internalized by the Indian intelligentsia to fashion their own weapon of resistance. The period is characterized by a dialectic between colonialism and nationalism and the construction of cultural difference in a rapid globalization of culture.

One of the most powerful impacts of the British Raj was on artistic taste. Victorian illusionistic art and the notion of artistic progress took firm roots in India, giving rise to new genres such as oil portraits, naturalistic landscapes, and academic nudes. Artistic individualism began to be prized by artists and patrons as art schools, art societies, and exhibitions provided the network for promoting academic art. At the turn of the nineteenth century, however, as the nationalist movement gathered force, it led artists to reassess the relationship between the western canon, hitherto taken to be universally valid, and pre-colonial taste that was being eroded with the rise of illusionistic art. In the 1920s, the advent of international modernism in India
The East India Company

In the fifteenth century the Portuguese set up fortified settlements in the East Indies in order to control the spice trade, followed by the Dutch, the French, and finally the English, who founded their East India Company in London in 1600. The decline of the Mogul empire, political instability, and victory in Bengal in 1757 gave the Company control over the north-eastern region of India, thus laying the foundations of the British Raj. By this time spices had been replaced by Indian textiles as the chief export. Gradually the British gained control over the subcontinent, introducing English education, law and order, and justice. The Industrial Revolution in Britain, which provided great resources, transformed the small trading outpost into a vast empire, eventually covering a large portion of the globe. In India modernization was facilitated by the introduction of print technology, the telegraphs, and the railways. However, the Rebellion of 1857 convinced the British Parliament that the empire was too large for the Company to maintain effective control, leading to the assumption of power by the state and the declaration of Victoria as Queen Empress of India.

Confused these issues further as primitivism and indigenism came to be closely identified in the new nationalistic ideology of art.

Indian art of the Raj

The first sign of change was the loss of courtly patronage in India with the fall of the Indian powers in the late eighteenth century. This forced artists to compromise their work with inferior material and craftsmanship. However, not all such art was of low quality. Artists in Patna in Bihar and Murshidabad in West Bengal developed a clean, linear style that formed a bridge between earlier courtly art and later East India Company paintings.

The East India Company employed artists for its wide-ranging economic surveys and documentation of natural history. British residents commissioned paintings of Indian flora and fauna from Indian artists who were trained in western techniques such as perspective, chiaroscuro, and the picturesque idiom popularized by the landscape artists Thomas and William Daniell. The new rulers also engaged artists to produce ethnographic subjects, especially castes and professions, which enjoyed popularity during the Enlightenment. Among Company artists, Shaikh Mohammad Amir of Karray in demand for his elegant renderings of residences, carriages, domestic servants, pets, and other aspects of British life in Calcutta.

The rise of Calcutta as a rapidly expanding urban centre drew village scroll painters (pattu) to the city. Although their 'pen-and-wash' paintings, sold at the pilgrimage centre of Kalighat, did not interest the British or the Bengali elite, they were the first truly popular urban art in India. Sensing the growing demand, Kalighat pattu artists organized their production on a large scale with the assistance of female labour. A more revolutionary development was the introduction of the techniques of mechanical reproduction. The woodblock and metal printmakers appropriated Kalighat imagery and pledged their trade in close proximity to the vernacular printing presses that were springing up in Calcutta at the time, which by the end of the nineteenth century had become a staple of popular consumption, the most famous being the Calcutta Art Studio.

As traditional art declined, the Indian rulers as well as the leading Indian elite turned to collecting western art and sitting for portraits by European artists. The Marble Palace in Calcutta, for instance, boasts an astonishing milieu of Victorian art. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the taste of the elite, and to some extent the underclass, had become thoroughly Victorian. Yet a formal control of art education was not envisaged by the Raj until the 1850s. In 1854, the East India Company embarked on a project of improving Indian taste as part of its moral amelioration. Art schools and art societies, two key Victorian institutions, became the instrument for disseminating academic art, while the westernization project was overseen by the Director of Public Instruction. Initially art schools were set up in the three main colonial cities, Calcutta, Mumbai (Bombay), and Madras, to train artisans. Vigorous campaigns by Henry Cole, William Morris, George Birdwood, and other influential figures to save the Indian decorative arts had compelled the Raj to address their plight. Accepting that the Indian artisan had little to learn from the West in matters of taste, the...
government argued that he needed instruction in naturalist drawing to compete in the modern world. A uniform syllabus, based on that of the School of Industrial Arts at South Kensington, London, was devised for all the art schools. Unfortunately, artisans could not afford to attend school, nor did they take to academic art. The schools were subsequently flooded with boys from the English-literate social strata, as they inexorably turned into fine art institutions. Portrait painting was the most subscribed course, given that portraits had become a vogue among the Indian gentry.\(^4\)

The profession of the artist
The advent of academic art was accompanied by a social revolution in India. In contrast to the earlier humble position of court artists, the colonial artists enjoyed the elevated status of independent gentlemen, in part because they now hailed from the elite. The growth of art exhibitions, art journalism, and the rise of an art-conscious public changed the public's perception of art and the artist. However, while gaining freedom, they faced an uncertain economic future. Art societies, originally founded by British residents, became with the admission of Indians an instrument of Raj patronage. As an official put it, "if a zeal and a genuine love of art were widely diffused among our wealthier Indian fellow subjects, a hugely favourable, lucrative and useful career would be opened to hundreds and hundreds of aspiring young men".\(^2\)

When Indian artists began showing at exhibitions organised by art societies, they were at first placed in the category of 'native artists'. But this segregation broke down under the influx of Indian participants. By the end of the century, a number of Indian women also took part in exhibitions. The careers of early salon artists such as Pestonji Bomanji, Manchershaw Pithawalla, and Annada Bagchi were launched at these shows. Among the subjects exhibited, landscapes were a novelty for Indian artists. Even though landscapes were mentioned in ancient literature, and Mughal paintings contained background landscapes, the objective study of natural scenery was a colonial phenomenon initially influenced by the English Picturesque movement [112].\(^1\)

Gentleman artists
The most celebrated academic artist was Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), the first of the gentleman artists nourished by the Romantic image of
the artist as an uncompromising individualist. A member of the royal family of Travancore, Varma learned by watching European painters at work at the court. He entered the 'low' profession of painting against his family's objections, rising to be a fashionable portrait painter, prized as much by the Raj as by the Indian aristocracy. He exhibited widely and organized his studio with business-like efficiency, engaging agents for securing commissions and travelling the length and breadth of the country fulfilling them.

However, Varma's lasting fame rests on his history paintings, adapting Victorian salon art to bring to life ancient Indian epics and literary classics. The new canon of beauty—a mixture of Kerala and Guercino—created by him was greeted by the Indian nationalists as

113 Raja Ravi Varma
Sita Varanasi, c 1850s.

The leading academic painter turned his history paintings into mass-produced lithographs, thereby appealing to all Indians, from the most excitable to the humblest. Even today, one comes across his voluptuous women reincarnated in cheap calendars and 'Bollywood' films (Bombay film studios gained this epithet for their popularity in the Third World).

endorse their own literary 'inventions' of the past. Though Varma scrutinized black and white reproductions of Victorian art for inspiration, in the final analysis his paintings conjure up the atmosphere of Indian princely courts familiar to the artist [113].

The Bengal School

Ravi Varma died a national celebrity in 1906. However, in a curious twist of fate, almost immediately after his death Varma's works were denounced as hybrid, undignified, and above all 'unspiritual'. Such a change of opinion resulted from the upsurge in nationalist sentiment in the second half of the nineteenth century, which fed on the potent myth of India's spirituality. The circle of cultural nationalists in Bengal led by the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) (better known simply as Tagore) reasserted their faith in Indian civilization, dismissed by colonial westernizers at the opening of the century. They discovered the Theosophists and other European enemies of Victorian materialism to be soulmates. This alliance between Indian and European critics of progress spearheaded debates on Indian identity—debates that closely mirrored developments in nationalist politics.

To this set belonged the English art teacher Ernest Binfield Havell, an influential figure in the creation of nationalist art in India. In 1896, Havell came to head the art school in Calcutta, determined to direct the Indian youth towards their own heritage. A trenchant critic of Renaissance naturalism, Havell proclaimed that India's spirituality was reflected in its art, because India had repudiated such a materialist conception of art. The emerging indigenous (svadeshi) ideology of art demanded the creation of a style that would be in accord with Indian national aspirations. Varma's imagining of the past was spurned by Havell and the nationalists precisely because it was 'tainted' with academic naturalism. Havell's first step in countering academic training at the art school was to acquire a fine collection of Mughal paintings for the benefit of the students; but when he introduced an Indian mode of teaching, his students went on strike. The nationalist press accused Havell of trying to deprive Bengalis of western art education, so deeply had western taste penetrated the province.

In the midst of general hostility, Havell found an ally in the young artist Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), a nephew of the poet. The Tagores had been in the forefront of a cultural renaissance in Calcutta. Abanindranath had a liberal education at home, with freedom to develop his creative potential. Although he received instruction in academic art from an English art teacher, he found it to be incompatible with his own temperament. His search for an 'indigenous' style eventually led to his paintings on the divine lovers, Radha and Krishna, which introduced to the Bengali audience an alternative, emancipated ideal of feminine beauty. Used to the buxom
women of Ravi Varma, they were quite startled and vaguely dissatisfied. Although Abanindranath was already alienated from western art when he met Havell, it was Havell who introduced him to the delicate skills of the Mughal masters. *The Last Moments of Shab Jahan*, Abanindranath’s first major work painted in a consciously Mughal manner, was an exercise in nationalist historicism. Yet ironically it was saturated with the melancholy spirit of Victorian art, its sombre mood coloured by the loss of the artist’s little daughter. This tentative exercise in the Mughal idiom failed to satisfy him, for he felt that the work lacked feeling (bhava), the quality he wanted to capture in art.

Abanindranath’s search for a more appropriate style coincided with his meeting with Kakuozu Okakura Tenshin around 1900. The Japanese art critic had arrived in Calcutta to forge a pan-Asian alliance with the intellectual circle led by Tagore. In the late nineteenth century, the ‘open door’ policy had imposed westernization on a prostrate Japan. European academic art, which arrived in Japan as part of the westernization process, ousted indigenous art from popular esteem. The challenge to western values came at the turn of the century, from the cultural movement led by Okakura. The Japanese thinker, who recognized India as the ultimate source of the ancient Buddhist art of Japan, shared with Tagore an unsuavering faith in the common destiny of Asia. One of the tenets of pan-Asianism was the contrast between Asian spirituality and European materialism, a romantic worldview in search of the roots of indigenous traditions and a form of cultural resistance to European colonialism. Western stereotypes such as ‘the Oriental mind’ were appropriated by pan-Asians as a powerful focus for Asian resistance.

Okakura’s traditional (nihonga) art movement was realized in art by his pupils, Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso. He arranged for them to work in Calcutta with Abanindranath, where they studied Indian art. Under Taikan’s influence Abanindranath discarded the strong colours and hard outlines of Mughal painting in favour of the light brush strokes and delicate lines of Japanese art. With his wash technique Abanindranath produced atmospheric works in the spirit of Far Eastern art, some of which appeared in the art journal *The Studio* in 1905 and in Okakura’s influential periodical, *Kokka*, in 1908.

A few months prior to the nationalist unrest of 1905, Havell had brought Abanindranath to the Calcutta Art School to ‘Indianize’ art teaching with a select group of students who would rediscover ‘the lost language of Indian art’ [114]. Abanindranath, who led the Bengal School, the first art movement in India, aimed to create an ‘oriental art’ by assimilating different Asian cultures. The target of the Bengal School was academic art, which was branded as a colonial hybrid lacking ‘authenticity’, the prime example being Ravi Varma’s work. Some influential figures in Bengal and academic artists refused, however, to dismiss all academic art out of hand as being inimical to Indian cultural aspirations. An acrimonious battle of styles raged for years, throwing up writing of great vivacity.
Muslim nationalism in art

By 1914, not only were the orientalists able to shake off opposition at home, they also won recognition abroad, with exhibitions in Paris and London in 1914, in Berlin in 1923, and again in London in 1924. At the last London exhibition, an English critic extolled the 'Indian artists' mission to the world'. The Germans, whose romantic attachment to India and their defeat in the First World War made them more sympathetic to the movement, described it as a powerful cultural struggle for redemption. An important aspect of the Bengal School was the merging of individual differences of style within a common vocabulary. But apart from the blend of Mughal and Far Eastern art, what held the movement together was the nationalist subject matter. Stories relating the past glories of the nation, themes excuding noble sentiments, and deep pathos were preferred. The vehicles for such noble themes were stooping emaciated figures, dripping with an aura of acute spirituality. An oppressive sense of loss was conveyed in these historicist works, a lamentation for the nation degenerating under a foreign yoke.

The swadeshi ideology of art, a reflection of militant Hindu nationalism, tended to privilege Hindu culture as the kernel of the Indian nation, thereby disinheritting other communities. Such developments created a feeling of unease among the Muslims. Abdur Rehman Chughtai (1897–1975), an outstanding Muslim painter from Lahore, represents the awakening of Muslim political and cultural identity in India partly in response to Hindu cultural nationalism [115].

By the 1920s, academic art was in retreat in India. A new generation of artists in Calcutta tried to regroup under Hemen Mazumder, a painter of academic nudes, and Atul Bose, a fine draughtsman, while a group of landscape painters in Bombay continued to offer a challenge to the orientalists. However, both the westernizers and the orientalists were overtaken by events. Pan-Asianism was on the wane, as the differences among Asian intellectuals became irreconcilable. In 1921, Mahatma Gandhi launched his mass non-cooperation movement against the British empire, when political activism made any artistic contribution to nationalism rather problematic. But most of all the Bengal School was dealt a crushing blow by Cubism and other European avant-garde movements, which began to infiltrate Indian culture through books and journals.

Colonial architecture in India

Colonial architecture profoundly altered the topography of urban India, though less so in rural India. The first signs of colonial transformation of Indian architecture are seen in the European architecture of successive Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French, and British settlements.

Religious architecture

The earliest Christian churches were built not by the colonizers but by Indian Christians in South India in the first few centuries after Christ (a little later the Jews built synagogues in India). Today, very little remains of these early endeavours. In the seventeenth century, the Portuguese invited the dreaded Inquisition and the Jesuits to Goa for the consolidation of Christianity in the subcontinent. They also erected spectacular churches in the Mannerist and Baroque styles prevalent in the Iberian peninsula. The churches in Goa were a blend of vastu-shastra and Vignola, a tradition that is yet to be studied properly. The sixteenth-century Italian architect Jacopo Vignola's modular building system, imported by the Portuguese to India, was easily comprehended by the Indians, used to their own modular, the vastu-purusa-mandala [see 22]. Furthermore, Indian designers must have felt at home with the rich drama of the Baroque church, its decorative impulse akin to the spirit of the Hindu temple [116].

Secular architecture

Fortified settlements based on Renaissance central planning were some of the major secular structures introduced by the Portuguese in India. The English fortifications of the East India Company
introduced the advanced plans of the French engineer Vauban, who turned city walls into artillery platforms and angled them mathematically to cover all lines of fire. Despite queries raised by architectural historians, Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras were not centrally planned cities. Unlike the Royal Ordinance of 1757 issued to the Spanish colonies, the British trading company was suspicious of any central planning that involved unnecessary expense. The streets were fairly regularly laid out. Modest churches and hospitals catered respectively to the spiritual and bodily needs of the European population. The paramount consideration was defence, while the governor's residence served as a symbol of authority. The building style used the Tuscan order, as prevailed in contemporary Britain. The port cities employed a sizeable Indian artisan population, which meant that the Indian and European communities were segregated in Black and White Towns. While the Company was suspicious of ostentation, private residents felt free to indulge their taste for opulence.

With the victory over the Mughal governor Siraj-ud-Daula at Plassey in 1757 the British were able to venture out of the fortified port cities into the Indian countryside for the first time and gradually imposed their control over it. Interactions between Indian and western cultures produced architecture of great variety, ingenuity, and occasionally elegance, especially domestic architecture. Judged against the dominant western canon, Indo-British buildings were viewed as the 'unhappy bastards' of the colonial encounter. However, if one can renounce metropolitan standards and view them as products of a different context and experience, they repay careful study. Many of the imposing public buildings were constructed by East India Company engineers with the help of Indian builders. The inspiration was often European architectural texts, and there was always a time lag of around 20 years between the rise of a style in Britain and its introduction into India.

After 1757, Fort William in Calcutta was redesigned as a massive fortification with the latest devices, but it lost its strategic importance as threats from rival colonial powers and Indian rulers in the subcontinent faded, leaving the British in almost total control. A renewed sense of insecurity, which surfaced during the Uprising of 1857, encouraged yet another conception of defence. Exclusive settlements inhabited by European civil and military officials, the cantonments, came into existence outside Indian towns. Within the cantonment, the army barracks were placed behind the open parade ground that could be used to train cannons at the enemy. These precautions were taken against a sudden insurrection by the native population.

Indian Neoclassical architecture
The first public building of symbolic importance, the Neoclassical Government House in Calcutta, was modelled on the British stately home Kenilworth Hall in Derbyshire. The architecture of the colonial cities was motivated by the need to project an awe-inspiring image of the Raj. These buildings were also wish-fulfilments of colonial 'nabobs', who sought to recreate English stately homes in India. The Neoclassical style of these lavish residences was modified by the exigencies of climate and landscape, most notably in the use of shutters for windows. The sparkling white mansions (the chawans or quicklime white gave them the sheen) on the waterfronts of Calcutta and Madras were much admired by visiting Europeans. Viewed from the Hooghly, Calcutta has the appearance of a city of palaces. A row of large superb buildings ... produce a remarkable striking effect'. The Indian 'merchant princes' of Calcutta, trading partners of the Company, followed suit with their impressive residences. What does not feature in books on colonial architecture is the fashion for Neoclassical architecture among urban Indians. The imposing Palladian mansion in Calcutta, the Marble Palace, is one example of the syncretic imagination lavished on this type of 'hybrid' domestic building. Many of these are being demolished to make room for high-rise buildings in response to the population explosion in Calcutta. But perhaps the most original contribution to colonial culture was the domestic bungalow, derived from the rustic Bengali hut, a cool, low-slung, single-storied, high-ceilinged residence perfectly adapted to the tropical climate.
Muslim forms were combined in many of the palaces of the Indian nobility, in which 'the two races remained distinct with the Hindu firmly subordinated.' This was to underline the fact that only Raj paternalism was able to keep the peace in a land that 'lacked' cultural or national cohesion. During the Victorian era, revolutionary amenities such as the railways placed the Raj on a new footing in India, as exemplified by the sumptuous railway station in Mumbai [118].

The first Indian ruler to commission a Neoclassical building was Mir Jafar, the puppet ruler of Bengal, who was placed on the throne by the English after Plassey. He engaged the East India Company engineer Duncan Macleod in 1825 to build the substantial palace in Murradabad, inspired by Government House in Calcutta. European architecture was also adopted by the nawabs (rulers) of Lucknow. But they were 'blackmailed' ... into creating European buildings, often to the direct advantage of the Company, who subsequently used them for their own purposes'. And even their alliance with the East India Company did not spare the nawabs from destruction.

In the early nineteenth century, classical architecture was used to celebrate an empire held to be as enduring as that of Rome. This confidence was shaken by the Uprising of 1857, after which, abandoning aggressive anglicization, the Indian Raj turned to the notion of 'timeless India', to be sheltered from the onslaught of western progress. Instead of reform and change, tradition and order became the dominant motto. Refashioning itself as the heir to the Mughal empire, the Raj opted for the Indo-Saracenic style of architecture, especially for the palaces of the Indian nobility [117]. Ironically, as more and more Indian rulers were brought within the imperial fold after 1857, they increasingly succumbed to a western lifestyle, collecting European art objects and sitting for academic portraits. Hindu and
Plan of New Delhi.

As the administrative and ceremonial capital of the Raj, New Delhi sought to learn from other western capitals around the world. Its symmetrical geometry is dominated by the wide central axis used for grand processions, which starts from the viceroy's residence and then makes its way past the secretariat buildings and the circular council chamber. The planners wished to maintain an axial symmetry that revealed a series of views as one moved around the city.

The triumphalist ideology of the empire was expressed in official architecture such as the Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta, conceived by the viceroy, Lord Curzon, as a fitting memorial to the queen. It is a classical edifice of white marble, with some Indian details. The swansong of imperial architecture was the new capital in Delhi, announced in 1911 to coincide with Edward VII's visit to India [119]. The removal of the Indian government from the colonial capital of Calcutta to Delhi, considered the heart of the indigenous empire, was a symbolic appeasement of the nationalists. It also enabled the Raj to extricate itself from the hotbed of seditious politics. To the pro-Indian officials, the choice of Indian, possibly Mughal, architecture would have narrowed the gulf between the Raj and its Indian subjects. But this was not to be. The appointment of Edwin Lutyens as the chief architect made the choice of a Neoclassical style for Delhi inevitable [120]. However, the imagination of his collaborator, Herbert Baker, was fired by the romance of empire as a partnership between the ruler and the ruled. He considerably diluted Lutyens' classicism in the Secretariat buildings designed by him. It was also largely because of Baker that nationalist artists were commissioned to decorate his buildings with murals celebrating Indian culture, first in New Delhi and later in India House in London. It was ironic that, from the inception of New Delhi in 1911 to its actual completion in 1932, the political situation in India had reached such a crisis point that the capital remained the hollow seat of an empire in its final decades.