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IN THE VICTORIA MEMORIAL**

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## **TRAVERSING PAST AND PRESENT IN THE VICTORIA MEMORIAL**

### **I**

The walls are peeling and cracking; even the roof has begun to leak. To prevent further damage, all the paintings from the upper galleries have been removed from the walls, pending the repair of the building. The paintings themselves (the ones which have been brought down and the innumerable ones which lay in store) are undergoing systematic restoration under a project begun by the Calcutta Tercentenary Trust (CTT) over five years ago. For some time now, this has been the state of affairs inside Calcutta's Victoria Memorial, Curzon's proud memorial to the 'Empress of India', one of the most flamboyant edifices of empire.

This most imperial of monuments has become over time an integral feature of the city's topography. The post-Independence fervour of felling Calcutta's imperial statuary took only a minor toll, with a misshapen figure of the revolutionary sage Aurobindo replacing Victoria's majestic bulk at the outer gate. While the replacement stands huddled in its awkwardness, other imposing statues of the Queen Empress and the 'Rex Imperator' (King Edward VII) hold their own on their grand pedestals and arches on either side of the monument, as do the figures of the Governors General and Viceroys across the spacious grounds. Willam Emerson's white marble memorial - an ostentatious example of the colonial 'Indo-Saracenic' style. "Britain's answer," it is said, "to the Taj Mahal" - still dazzles the eye. Its daytime splendour is now matched by its flood-lit opulence at night, the flood-lighting marking the occasion of the three-hundredth

birthday of the first city of the Indian empire.

Yet for all the outer pomp and glitter, the insides of the Victoria Memorial have a very different story to tell: a story of slow-gathering rot and decadence, of imperial legacies grown old and mouldy, of India's national indifference to the fate of its valuable holdings. The spectre of surface grandeur and internal decay stands like a parable of the empire and the colony that stumbled to independence under its tutelage. In particular, the tale of the Victoria Memorial becomes symptomatic of the tale of Calcutta: a city which witnessed some of the grandest moments of empire, whose problems nonetheless continuously threatened to explode beneath the veneer.

Curzon had erected this Memorial in the 'high noon' of the British empire in India, to bolster imperial confidence and self-esteem against the 'rising tide of national feeling'. It was a sweeping gesture of self-representation. The memorial was to house the first comprehensive period museum on British India, placing on display a collection of paintings and sculptures, engravings and busts, weapons, documents and other memorabilia of the Raj, that would serve in Curzon's words as "a standing record of our wonderful history". The memorial to the Queen was conflated, as intended, into a memorial to the Raj itself. In that role and meaning, the structure still stands firm. Over the years, it has held its ground as an unabashed symbol of imperial glory and Raj nostalgia, even as the collection inside perished.

Today, the issue of its inner rot and negligence stands foregrounded and publicised: a cause for international concern and initiatives. However, it is precisely in these fissures within the imperial edifice that a new project of power and control has lodged itself. We confront it in the form of a new Western presence that now permeates the space of the

We confront it, particularly, in the way restoration and conservation (embodying both the will and the skill to stem the damage) have become the preserve of a group of experts whose authority and interest emanates from the ex-imperial centre. A restoration unit, possibly one of the earliest in the country, has been in existence in the Victoria Memorial since the time of its first Curator Secretary. But neither the quality nor the quantity of the work it undertook was seen to be adequate. It required the formation in London in 1989 of the Calcutta Tercentenary Trust (composed exclusively of British founder members) to fully effect the restoration project.

When Curzon had proposed the idea of the Memorial, the Indian aristocracy had responded generously with funds and display items: in fact, the cost of the construction was borne entirely by subscriptions raised in India. Eighty years on, the Calcutta Tercentenary Trust also managed to draw in the support and participation of prominent Indians: among them, the then Indian Deputy High Commissioner in London, Salman Haidar, the head of INTACH in India, and the then Governor of West Bengal, Professor Nurul Hasan. As the project has proceeded, the English restorers have drawn on local expertise and trained a local team to work with them. The success of the exercise, it is acknowledged, is closely dependent on local knowledge. Techniques and solutions for the restoration of oil paintings have had to constantly adapt to the specificity of the material used and climatic conditions here; they have always had to make room for the distinct histories of these paintings in their settings.

Calcutta as a location has repeatedly intervened in shaping the science and the art of restoration. Yet London has remained the locus of command: the centre of drive and action to conserve a heritage that India has clearly proved incapable

of caring for. The staging of the drive and the action has, in a way, allowed London to effectively displace Calcutta: it has meant lifting the monument and its collections out of the immediate site and context. For the main thrust of the project has been to resurrect the collections, less as Curzon's memorial to the Raj, more as a memorial to late 18th/early 19th century British art in India, of which a more complete holding exists here than anywhere else.

## II

These observations are meant in no way to disparage the ethics or the aesthetics of the painstaking work undertaken by the restorers of the Calcutta Tercentenary Trust. Nor do they question the validity and timeliness of their intervention in the Victoria Memorial. Scientificity of method, competence and order hold their high grounds, starkly set off by the local history of callousness and mismanagement. My point, however, is to foreground the issues of proprietorship and control that are embedded in the body of such a project, structuring its aspiration and self-perception. To understand the changed forms Western authority assumes becomes specially pertinent in an institutional and architectural site like the Memorial. The bygone, faded colonial presence has been replaced, in the last few years, by a new dynamised British presence, which consciously purges itself of its colonial past to speak the more neutral language of conservation and care. My point is also to pose the centrality of the new presence within the old premises - to argue that the meaning and positioning of the entire museum stands altered by it. It is, therefore, imperative that any current study on the history and collections of the monument engages in parallel with the restoration phenomenon that has cut into and recast this history. For our access to the art

works are now routed through the ongoing processes of restoration and conservation, and the new hierarchies and grids they have brought into play.

One of the problems I wish to explore here revolves around the central act of turning back - of returning the monument and its collections, the selection of exhibits and the structure of display, to a presumed 'original' state. It concerns the various ways in which the past gets interpolated, acted upon, and reinvented, both in the historian's exercise of turning back and in the restorer's exercise of scraping, filling-in, and teasing out a picture's 'original' forms and tones. The historian's mental reconstructive act, I suggest, is no less implicated in the problem than the restorer's physical activity on the body of the object. If anything, one is closely premised on the other. What the restorer does is 'return' an oil painting to its constitutive material ingredients (canvas, board, pigments, oil, varnish, etc.). That process itself lays down the new authenticating base for art history, whereby the dissected object is reassembled into a whole and the whole reimbued with meaning and value. Historical and aesthetic understanding stand sentinel both at the beginning and the end of the act of restoration. The materiality of its intervention - the marks it leaves on the actual body of the historical object - is transmuted and relayed on to the metaphorical body of historical knowledge. It is this theme which I will play out in the rest of the essay, as I will attempt viewing select portions of the old collection through the filtered lenses of the current setting.

Let us take, for example, the theme of portraiture and the primary problems one faces with the selection and isolation of material. Which portraits were to be picked out and prioritised out of the large mass which existed within the memorial? Did the large life-size oil portraits, or the ones painted by

wellknown artists like Johann Zoffany or Tilly Kettle automatically lend themselves for selection over the rest? Was the importance of the person portrayed, or the intrinsic artistic merit of the painting (however significant or insignificant the sitter) to be the deciding yardstick? On what grounds were individual portraits (the single painted figure or face) to be singled out and separated from the vast complementary array of marble busts and statues, group compositions (where the patron would appear among friends, compatriots, 'native' *bibis* and servants), Oriental and *darbar* scenes, and 'history' paintings which existed in the same space? For clearly, the portraits functioned in close tandem with all these other images of the British in India - even with the depictions of ruins and landscapes - as visual registers of imperial power. And a monument like the Victoria Memorial, in setting up a memorial to the British empire in India, deliberately brought all these different genres together in a single assorted body of display.

In confronting these questions, I had, on the one hand, the leads and directions provided by the Calcutta Tercentenary Trust's restoration work, and, on the other hand, a copy of the first *Illustrated Catalogue of the Exhibits*<sup>1</sup> published within a few years of the opening of the museum. One defined the subject for me within the kind of art-historical framework that is germane to modern museum practice. The other served as my point of access to quite a different conception of galleries and displays - to what could be posited as the initial Curzonian scheme of collection and arrangement of the exhibits as a composite representation of empire. My sense of the subject had to locate itself in the interstices of the two approaches, separated in time, yet now closely overlapping as the later remoulds the former.



### III

The restoration programme has been operating with certain authorised criteria, by which paintings are selected both for the extent of their physical deterioration, and for their intrinsic value in art and history. The criteria of restoration, along with those of preventive conservation (relating to matters of temperature, humidity, and exposure to light required by different media and material of artworks) have come to generate their own artistic canon and patterns of display in the Victoria Memorial.<sup>2</sup> Working to retrieve from ruin and obscurity some of the best of 18th century British art that is available here, the restorers have set a clear order of precedence. Firstly, oil paintings large and small (of all mediums, the one in greatest need of restorative care) have been picked out against the engravings, drawings, statues, documents, furniture or costumes that complemented them in the same exhibition space. Secondly, the 'originals' (paintings attributable to specific artists as their authentic work) have been set apart from the vast number of 'copies' (made of works existing elsewhere) through which Curzon had attempted to fill in all the main gaps in designing a gallery of great personages. Thirdly, the focus on oils and the search for originals have inevitably centred attention on the acknowledged 'masters' of British painting in India and their select corpus of paintings.

Where landscapes are concerned, the limelight has been on the works of Thomas and William Daniell, with the restorers discovering and bringing to light here the single largest collection of original oils by this famous travelling uncle-nephew duo. Curzon had made a special effort towards acquiring the oil paintings of the Daniells from various collections and having them shipped across to Calcutta to assemble a Daniell Room in

the Memorial. Paintings, most of which had been painted later in London and exhibited in the Royal Academy salons – paintings which had left the country more than a century ago or had always stayed away – were proudly 'returned' by Curzon to their founding site, to grace his imperial edifice in Calcutta.

Today, through the sheer enterprise and efficacy of their work on these massive oils, the restorers of the Calcutta Tercentenary Trust have, in a way, reestablished England's claims over the Daniells as an integral part of their art history. Not that there is any talk of taking back the Daniells. The claims are played out purely at the level of offering new, authenticated knowledges. Retaining the works where they have been for so many year's, but dragging them all out of storage and neglect, working deep into the body of each painting to make it 'as good as new', the restorers have brought a range of new authoritative insights to bear on this panorama of Daniell landscapes, reaffirming their value in art and in colonial history.

For instance, in the process of cleaning, paintings have been rid of large areas of re-painting or over-painting by later artists (clearly a common practice with painters well into the 20th century), and judgements of aesthetic merit and historical authenticity deployed to recover the 'original' touch of the master against the later trespassers. The artist and his original thus gets refurbished, digging through layers of competing claims within the body of a single picture. In the process of such fine and intricate investigations, it is claimed that those rare Daniell oils which were painted on site can probably be sifted out (for the immediacy of their atmospheric effects and credibility of details) from the ones painted later in London from sketches. False ascriptions of painters to paintings have been corrected, and often new traces of authorship uncovered.

The same, penetrating, discerning eye can be seen at work

among the portraits that are being privileged through restoration, separating out from the mass of anonymous copies a set of original identifiable works by the prime practitioners of the genre in early colonial India. We are reintroduced to some choice pieces by Johann Zoffany, the most prominent of British portrait painters to visit India, whose studies—say of Warren Hastings and Mrs. Hastings—are exemplary of the power, pomp and poise exuded by imperial portraiture. (Plates 1, 2) We also rediscover some long-stored away portraits by Tilly Kettle, one of the earliest British painters to visit India, specially known for the favours and commissions he secured from the Nawabs of Arcot and Awadh. And we come across a set of portraits by Thomas Hickey of the sons of Tipu Sultan, (Plates 3, 4) set off by some celebrated images of British 'history' painting in India that found a favourite motif in the defeat and death of Tipu. Cleaned and restored, the static, wooden faces of Tipu's sons stand even more starkly contrasted by the high drama orchestrated in Henry Singleton's painting of the discovery of the body of Tipu Sultan, or the imperious stance of Cornwallis receiving Tipu's sons as hostage in a painting by Mather Brown. Tipu's sons, remain for the viewer, a set of blank faces in blank backdrops; it is these other paintings (once hanging in the same gallery, now stacked in the same studio) which supply the larger narrative within which we explain the anonymous passivity of these faces.

Among the main revelations of the Tercentenary project are two large studies by Tilly Kettle, one of Nawab Shuja-ud-aulah of Oudh and his sons with General Barker (Plate 5), the other of the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam reviewing the East India Company's troops at Allahabad. If one stands as a compelling instance of illusionist portraiture, radiating the central presence of the Nawab in an arched architectural frame, the

other provides a curious case of a 'likeness' of the emperor constructed out of a miniature painting and juxtaposed on a composition put together in England, with the figure's of Nawab Shuja-ud-daulah and General Barker added on to historicise the scene. Both paintings had been loaned to the memorial from the Burdwan Maharaja's collection. Brought to light now after years of storage, these Tilly Kettle studies almost rival in size and splendour the Museum's other magnum painting: Vassili Verestchagin's painting of the state procession of the Prince of Wales into Jaipur in 1876.<sup>3</sup>

Another rediscovered Tilly Kettle is a seated full-figure portrait of Chief Justice Elijah Impey, in his judicial robes. Presented to the Memorial in 1928, this stands in for another Tilly Kettle portrait of Impey (mentioned in the 1925 *Catalogue*) which hung in the Calcutta High Court and was lent for display by the Justices, which moved after 1947 to the Dacca High Court where it was destroyed. A painting is thus made to reveal, not just its internal history, but also traces of other works that once inhabited the same space.

The course of restoration has also brought to the fore some elaborate narrative compositions of Zoffany, surrounding his famous portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Hastings: portraits which now gleam with a renewed lustre. (Plates 1, 2) In one of these, Zoffany himself appears in his studio in Lucknow, alongside his sitters, Colonel Antoine Polier, Claude Martin and J. Wombwell Antony. (Plate 6) The piece serves as a wonderful example of the way layers of meanings and narratives can be culled out of a single composition. It plays itself out variously - as a social document on the places and forms of socialisation of Englishmen in India; as an ethnographic tableau of native servants in attendance on their masters; and also as an art historical conundrum, laying out tantalising clues about several 'Indian'

paintings of Zoffany, most of which remain untraced. Bit by bit, the painting stages for us the world of these Englishmen in Lucknow, their daily routine, their conviviality, their artistic tastes and talents. Most significantly, it offers us a rare glimpse into Zoffany's alternative practice of painting 'Indian' scenes and sceneries (mountains and falls, banyan trees and *fakirs*): a practice he increasingly indulged in during the later years of his stay, often at the cost of his work of commissioned portraiture. As the artist gazes out directly at us from the 'darkened centre of the group, the portrait painter appears here to silently assert a private artistic space and circuit for himself.

Zoffany's passion for 'Oriental' scenes comes through in another painting from his early days in Lucknow: an evocative oil sketch, where musicians, nautch-girls and servants carrying lamps provide the setting to a moon-lit meeting between Warren Hastings, Nawab Asaf-ud-daulah and Prince Jawan Bakht, son of Emperor Shah Alam. (Plate 7) Once again, this retrieved piece becomes a clue to an absent finished painting, one that may never have materialised or has long since disappeared. The shift from portraiture to the dramatic, romantic ambience of such 'Oriental' compositions is most strikingly evident in another recently restored Zoffany painting, depicting the retinue of Haider Beg Khan on a mission to Lord Cornwallis. (Plate 8)

Conceived in retrospect after the artist's return to London, painted for a home public that relished such 'exotic' historical scenes from India, the picture deftly negotiates the authentic and the imaginary. Its historicity lies in the actual record of such a procession of Haider Beg Khan which left Lucknow for Calcutta in October 1787, which was probably accompanied in part by the artist (as he appears in horseback on the lower right hand corner). It lies also in marking out an identifiable authentic setting for the scene in Patna, signified by Hastings' famous

Gola (granary) in the distance. Like the Gola, blown out of proportion, the entire concocted scene has only a tenuous base in the real. The tiny innocuous figure of Haider Beg becomes marginal in the central image of the elephant's rage and the ensuing panic and mayhem.

Restoration has revealed, in vibrant detail, the artist's vignettes of 'native life' in the foreground - a double line of figures running helter skelter - providing fresh proof of his fascination with 'Indian India'. As with so many others, this painting too becomes laden with hidden references and allusions to other lost and little-known 'Oriental' scenes painted by Zoffany, such as, for instance, a scene of 'Sati'. We see how the investigations of restoration and art history work closely together to locate the single painting within an expanding chain, while underpinning the specificity of its own history and formation. The case of this particular painting is specially instructive. The process of cleaning made us pry not only to its multiple narratives and rich crop of detail, but also to an underlayer of the painter's corrections and changes. Traces of a raised trunk stand detected beneath the now lowered trunk of the elephant encircling its *mahout*. This is where restoration becomes tantamount to an assail on the painting's privacy: it breaks into its camouflages and closures, throws open the hidden story of the way it came into being. Such interventions show how all efforts to return a painting to its 'original' (i.e. final, finished state) and to recapture the 'truth' of the artist's intention dissolve in the face of a set of inbuilt counter-challenges to any such pristine notions of 'originality' and 'truth' in a picture. For it is only through dissecting the whole - through turning the 'original' (the product and the intention) into itself - that restoration opens up the horizons and possibilities in art history.



Plate 1



Plate 2





Plate 3

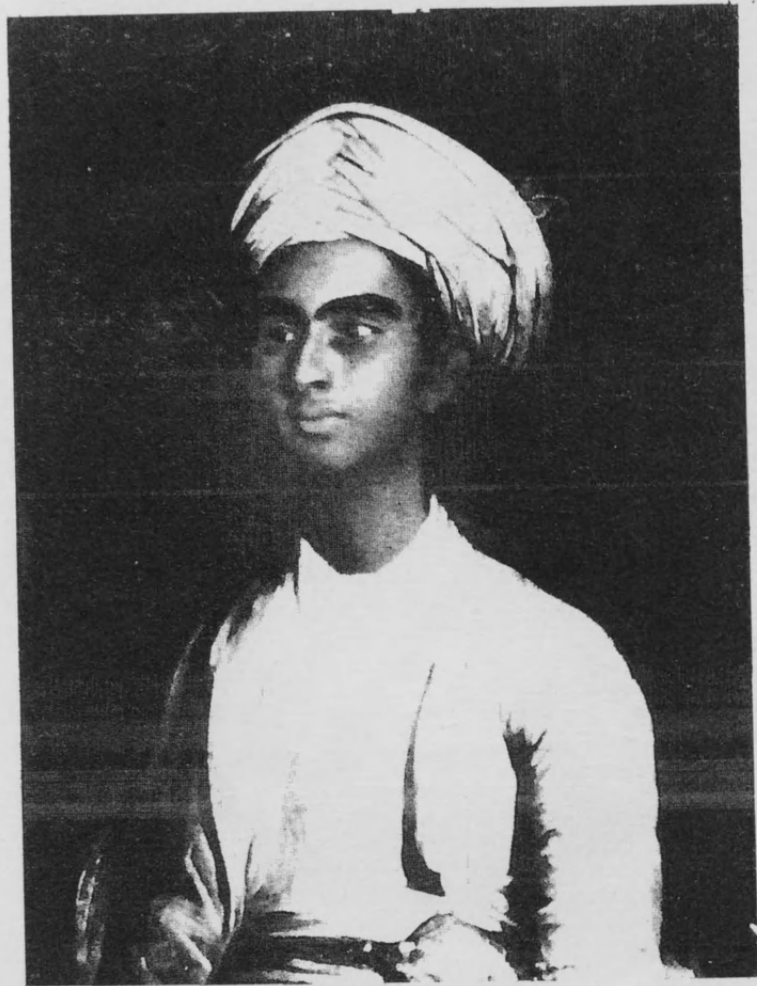


Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6

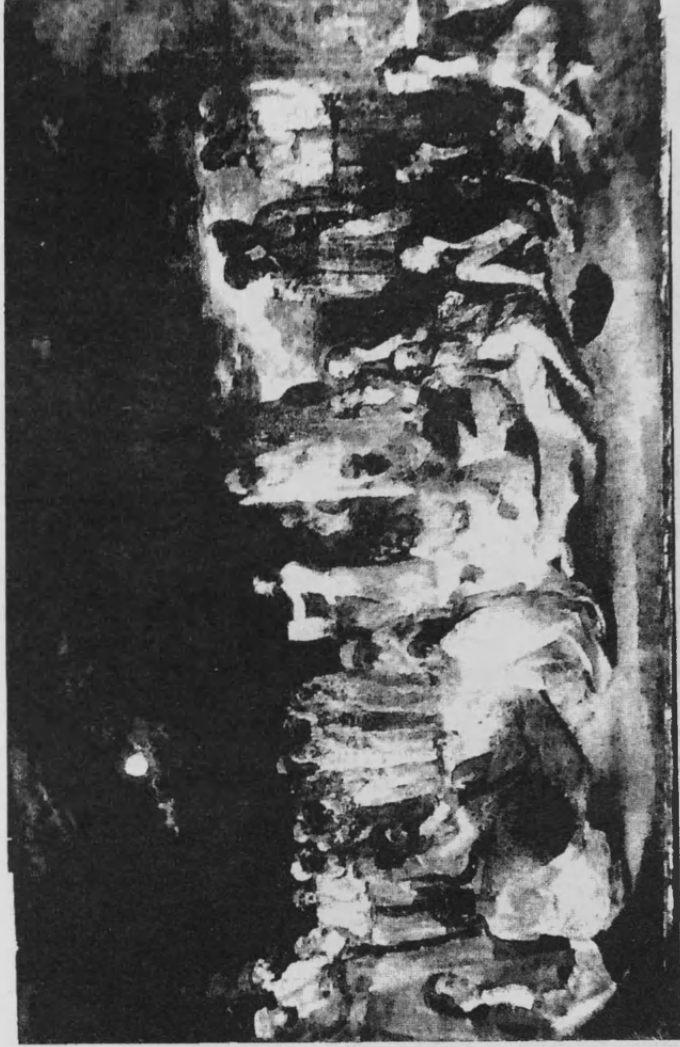


Plate 7



Plate 8

Today these restored paintings in the Victoria Memorial engage us via an archive of knowledge made available by a book like Mildred Archer's *India and British Portraiture*.<sup>4</sup> The book stands forth as the authority in the field. The biographies it narrates – for each portraitist, each painting and their social milieux – find new points of anchorage in the rematerialised body of the paintings. The book endows us with that critical historical eye with which we can read more and more meanings into these Tilly Kettles and Zoffanies, while the paintings themselves function as a corroboration of the scholar's text. Mildred Archer's book and the restored canon of artworks in the Victoria Memorial bolster each other through a powerful system of mutual citation. That system frames the 'present' – the new, updated, art-historical present – that we encounter in the Victoria Memorial.

#### IV

Now, what about the 'past' to which these paintings once belonged, from which they are now selectively disengaged to be recast as historical 'works of art' ? To invoke a 'past' here is not to call for the unravelling of separate authentic histories of particular paintings. For, clearly, each painting here had other distant, discrete pasts, before their collective conglomeration within the display site of the building. It is only that specific locatable past – of their accumulation and arrangement within Curzon's newly-erected imperial museum – that I would like to briefly interpolate with our present context for viewing these images.<sup>5</sup>

Portraits and sculpted busts were strewn throughout the exhibition space of the Memorial . A hall specially designated as a Portrait Gallery stood (and still stands) to the left of the

main entrance hall, facing the Royal Gallery on the right, with its commanding line-up of images of royalty and Viceroys. There was, however, little that could be singled out in this gallery that was distinctive to the art or genre of imperial portraiture. Neither the eminence of the portraitists nor of the personalities portrayed appears, now, to justify the special nomenclature of the gallery. The room was dominated by the scene of the state entry of Lord and Lady Curzon on the occasion of the Coronation Durbar of 1903: a painting commissioned by the Government of India from a certain R. T. Mackenzie and presented to the Memorial. Like Mackenzie, a host of other little known names crop up as painters and copiers of portraits. Many of the portraits, like those of Bishop Reginald Heber, Lord Metcalfe or Lord William Bentinck, were copies of originals that hung in All Soul's College, Oxford, or the Oriental Club in London; some, like those of Major-General Stringer-Lawrence or John Zephaniah Holwell, were copies of Reynolds originals. Portraits by some accredited names in the field - Thomas Hickey, Robert Home or W. Muir White - mixed and mingled within this motley group. So did a random selection of Indian personalities - ranging from Muhammad Ali, Nawab of the Carnatic, to Dwarakanath Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen - amidst this gallery of British Governors General, Admirals and Commanders. One lone portrait by an early Indian painter - the portrait of David Ochterlony by Jewan Ram - also featured in this jumble.

It seems impossible to decipher any conscious pattern behind this assemblage of portraits. The dilemma only increases as we move from the pictures on the wall to the display of manuscripts in show cases in the same room. Rare Persian manuscripts (copies of the *Diwan-i-Hafiz* and the *Diwan-i-Amir Khusrau*, the *Akbar-namah* and the *Shah-*



namah, or the *Sirral Asrar*, Dara Shikoh's translation of the Upanishads), which drag us back to the Mughal past, are interspersed with the notebooks and letters of Tipu Sultan, and with a range of European surveys, sketches and prints made in India (James Rennell's 'Surveys in Bengal', Colesworthy Grant's lithographs of Calcutta's 'Public Characters', Balthazar Solvyn's studies of 'The Costumes of Hindustan', etc.). Looking closer and closer into the amalgam, we begin to trace one kind of order: that imposed by a central mediating authority. It is the European in India, as collector, translator, scholar, artist or surveyor, who provides an elusive structural unity to such a display. A close reading of the catalogue entries of the exhibits further foregrounds the Western appropriative presence: it shows many of the Persian manuscripts to have come from the court of Murshidabad, one of the first and most effective sites of the colonial displacement of indigenous authority.

Yet, whether it be pictures or documents, our laborious attempts to read a pattern and meaning into the congregation of exhibits dissolve before a constant sense of the random and the contingent. The displays seem to continuously confound the logic of historical/art historical ordering that we instinctively seek. In the mixed and assorted nature of the assemblage, we confront the paradox of an imperial ideology that projected order, system and completeness but remained caught in the hybridity of its representations. The ideologies of empire in India, while they functioned centrally through modern cultural institutions (the museum and gallery being among these), could never reproduce these in their presumed maturity of form. This would be true of most of the modern disciplines and practices in the way they took shape within a colonial setting. Nowhere does the problem and paradox emerge so starkly than in such an ostentatiously ceremonial site as Curzon's

Victoria Memorial and in the curious congregation of exhibits within its halls.

Not that there was no planning behind the gathering of exhibits or no concern with the public impact of the display. Well before the Memorial was completed, the items intended for its galleries were placed on long display in the halls of the Indian Museum of Calcutta. The public was being treated over the period from 1907 to 1912 to a preview of the promised grand spectacle. And catalogues were meticulously prepared for each separate category of exhibits: pictures, sculptures, documents, coins and armoury.<sup>6</sup> Yet this amalgam, like the mode of display, stubbornly resists the art historical orders and priorities we associate with the institution of the museum, with which the current restoration programme has proceeded. The empire generated its own representational field: a mixed, unstructured field, akin more to the private collections amassed in *zamindari* households than to the taxonomies of periods, schools and genres of modern museums. The point of origin – the source of loans and donations – for much of the Victoria Memorial exhibits were these private collections of the country. So, we find that the display that was put up more easily refers back to these than it refers forward to the disciplinary form of a history or art museum.

I take my cue from the *Catalogue* that was printed in 1908 of the *Pictures destined for the Victoria Memorial (then) being exhibited in the Indian Museum, Calcutta*. As in most private collections, here, too, what featured under the general heading of 'Pictures' were masses of engravings and oil paintings, usually copies of originals existing elsewhere. The reference to and simulation of an absent 'original' served mainly as a tactical device to enhance the status of the image. For, whether an 'original' or a 'copy', it was the oil painting which prevailed

as a reigning art form in its own right, as did the range of genres it covered – portraits, 'history' and *darbar* scenes, landscapes and 'Oriental views'. There was nothing intrinsic to its technique and form that marked out the 'original' Tilly Kettle portraits of Warren Hastings and Elijah Impey or even the later Ravi Varma portrait of Dewan Madhav Rao from the plethora of 'copies'.

The engravings, covering much the same subjects as the oils, acted as an essential appendage to the latter. Always displayed separately in adjoining annexes and corridors, they were intended to multiply and replicate – to surround and saturate the viewer, while leading him back to the singular aura of the oils. Photographs constituted another privileged pictorial category in this assemblage. Moving back and forth between the oils and the engravings, the viewer encountered here in 'real life' the regalia of the Coronation Durbar, the breathtaking Calcutta panoramas, and also sets of Photographic Portraits (courtesy, Bourne and Shepherd) of India's Governors-General and Viceroys from Clive to Minto. As a pointed contrast to the photographs, existed the other final category of 'Oriental pictures', consisting primarily of miniature paintings from the Mughal to the 19th century provincial courts, providing an ornate exotic foil to the main body of representations centered around the oils.

The question remains : in what ways do we return the newly restored Tilly Kettle or Johann Zoffany paintings to this mixed jumble? Tapping the 1925 *Catalogue*, drawing our memory back to the galleries as they existed till a few years ago, we could reinsert them within the grand Daniell Room or the Hastings Room of the upper floor, where Zoffany's paintings of "The Embassy of Haider Beg" and "Lord Cornwallis receiving Tipu's sons as hostage" engaged with the Daniell views of "Oriental Scenery", or where Zoffany's celebrated portraits of Mr. and

Mrs. Hastings hung amidst masses of engravings of the Governor-General and (by a strange conflation) of the battle of Seringapatam. But in doing so, we remain acutely conscious of the singular status of these paintings in this melange, both then and now – to be highlighted in the *Catalogue*, to be immediately sought out in the gallery, to be favoured by the restorer's care and expertise. In a sense, to throw these 'works of art' back into the curious mix is to drain them of their value. Today, the paintings themselves seem to resist this as firmly as the old display arrangements resist our search for a discernible order and system.

This brings me back to the key issue I had earlier raised: namely, the weight of the present intervention within the premises of the Memorial. Not only does the restoration phenomenon propose to sharply alter the identity of the institution. It has also inscribed itself into our perceptions of the monument's past, closely structuring the process by which we selectively clock back and access it. That past had, in any case, become quite distant and remote. The Victoria Memorial has always had a sepulchral quality to it: in its outer appearance as much as in its inner ambience and lay-out. For the Calcuttan, it has prevailed for many years now as a memorial to a dead Raj, whose memories like its representations have long lost their edge.

Over the 1950s and 1960s, the move to nationalise the institution – to install within it a portrait gallery of Indian 'National Leaders' ( I note, purely as an addition, not as a replacement or transformation ) – only added to its fossilised status. In more recent times, there have been occasional attempts to consciously intercept that status, to organise new galleries and exhibitions and introduce new historical meanings to the collections. The formation of the new, imaginatively

conceived, Calcutta Gallery is the best product of these attempts.<sup>7</sup> But its existence also bears out the intermittent and haphazard nature of such interceptions within the body of the monument. Today, as we move from the studio of the restorers, through a series of emptied galleries, downstairs, we encounter not just the surprise of the Calcutta Gallery, but also the old Royal and Portrait Galleries in their unchanged state and a grand Durbar Hall, now converted into a storage room. There is an unresolved tension echoing throughout these halls, pitting the new against the old, modern ideas and expertise against a long history of ineptitude and neglect. In traversing back and forth between the Memorial's past and present, we are left suspended in a kind of twilight zone – between a past that is no more fully realisable and a present that is yet to fulfill itself.

### Notes And References

- <sup>1</sup> The Victoria Memorial, Calcutta, *Illustrated Catalogue of the Exhibits* (Calcutta, 1925).
- <sup>2</sup> The eventual plan of the CTT team working on the Victoria Memorial is to arrange the restored oils in the main refurbished galleries, and conserve the works on paper (drawings, water-colours, engravings, miniature paintings, etc.), which are more vulnerable to light and humidity than the oils, in the special conditions of a study collection, keeping only select facsimiles to be viewed in the galleries.
- <sup>3</sup> This vast oil, measuring 500 x 700 cms., presented by the Maharaja of Jaipur through Curzon to the Memorial, held (and still holds) its pride of place in the Royal Gallery.
- <sup>4</sup> Mildred Archer, *India and British Portraiture, 1770-1825*

(Delhi, Karachi, London: Oxford University Press, 1979). This book provides the main, most frequently cited, reference for the paintings and artists in the new detailed catalogue of the Victoria Memorial's portraits and conversation pieces being written by Charles Greig. And it has provided me with much of the detail of my reading of the restored paintings of Zoffany.

<sup>5</sup> I have used the *Illustrated Catalogue* of 1925 as my main source for reconstructing the collections and the modes of display as they existed in the newly-erected Memorial. Much of this remained unchanged till a few years ago, and many of the downstairs galleries still retain their old format.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *Catalogue of Pictures Destined for the Victoria Memorial Hall, now being exhibited in the Indian Museum, Calcutta* (Calcutta, 1908). Similar displays were arranged and complete catalogues prepared of the collections of busts and sculptures, documents and weapons.

<sup>7</sup> The Calcutta Gallery was opened in 1992 under the curator, Dr. Hiren Chakravarty, on the occasion of the institution's celebration of the tercentenary of the city. It was a part of a joint package that included the mega-projects of the nocturnal illumination of the Memorial, and the organisation of the first Son-et-Lumiere programme on British rule and the national movement during the winter months in the lawns of the Memorial. The Gallery has been, by far, the most worthwhile and lasting of these ventures. It is, as advertised in the brochure, "India's First City Gallery", and sets new international standards of design, display and narration within such a museum.

### **List of Illustrations**

- Plate 1 : Johann Zoffany, Mr. and Mrs. Warren Hastings, oil, c. 1784-1787, 119.5 x 90 cms.
- Plate 2 : Johann Zoffany, Portrait of Mrs. Hastings, oil, c. 1783, 205 x 152 cms.
- Plate 3 : Thomas Hickey, Portrait of Muiz-ud-din, Tipu Sultan's third son, oil based on a drawing at the Dharia Daulat Summer palace at Seringapatam, inscribed and dated, Vellore, 27th February 1801, 73.5 x 61 cms.
- Plate 4 : Thomas Hickey, Portrait of Shukur Ullah, Tipu Sultan's seventh son, oil based on a drawing at the Dharia Daulat Summer Place at Seringapatam, inscribed and dated, Seringapatam, January 1801, 73.5 x 61 cms.
- Plate 5 : Tilly Kettle, Shuja-ud-daulah, Nawab of Oudh and his four sons, standing with General Barker and military officers, oil, signed and dated 1772, 305 x 259 cms.
- Plate 6 : Johann Zoffany, Colonel Antoine Polier, Claude Martin and J. Wombwell at the artist's studio in Lucknow, oil, c. 1787, 137 x 183.5 cms.
- Plate 7 : Johann Zoffany, Warren Hastings' meeting with Prince Jawan Bakht, son of Emperor Shah Alam at Lucknow, oil sketch, 1784, 60 x 75 cms.
- Plate 8 : Johann Zoffany, The Embassy of Haider Beg Khan on his mission to Lord Cornwallis, oil, c. 1795, 99 x 125.7 cms.

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