Representing Partition: **India and Pakistan**

Selected essays to accompany the exhibition at Wolfson College Cambridge, 14 October to 9 December 2017

'Indian Art from Pakistan' - Nationalism and the Royal Academy's Indian Art exhibition of 1947-8
Gemma Sharpe

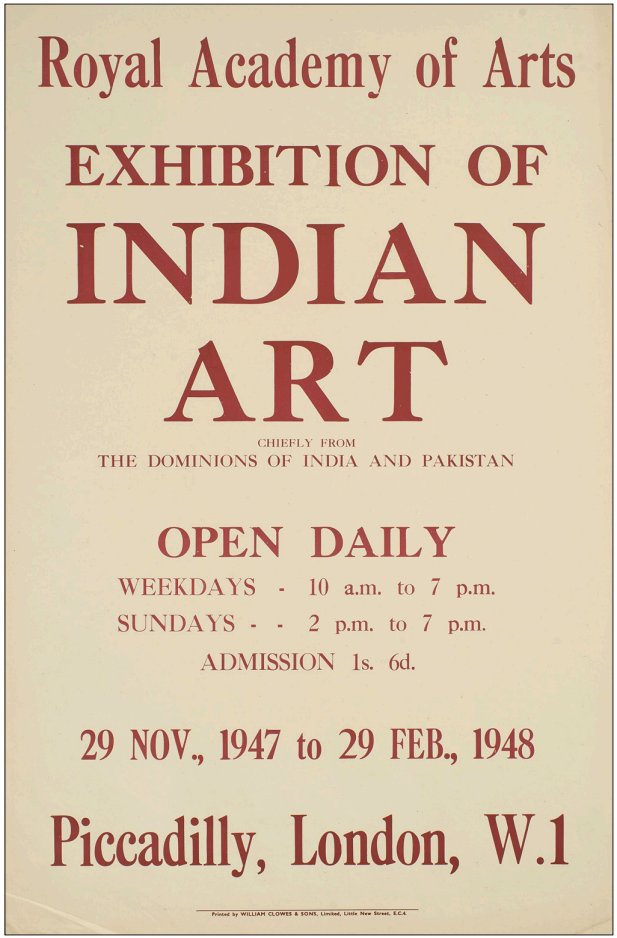
In his final dispatch to Viceroy Louis Mountbatten before the Partition of India in August 1947, Secretary of State for India, William Hare 5th Earl of Listowel thanked Mountbatten for what then seemed like a successful management of decolonisation. His last order of business was a blockbuster exhibition of Indian art soon to open at the Royal Academy in London. Would Mountbatten, Hare asked, feel justified in asking whether Pakistan's founder and Governor General in waiting, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, would object to the exhibition retaining its original title and not including Pakistan as now seemed necessary.[1] He attached a letter from the Royal Academy lamenting that "the addition of Pakistan to the title would present some difficulty, particularly for the lettering space and simple effect of the posters and sign board."[2] Mindful of diplomatic fallout, Mountbatten urged the Royal Academy not to omit Pakistan from the title. Muhammad Ali Jinnah made it a condition of being an Honorary President of the show[3].

A survey of nearly five thousand years of Indian art, the exhibition followed popular displays of Persian and Chinese art held at the Royal Academy in 1931 and 1935. Delayed by World War II, planning began in the spring of 1945 with the securing of financial guarantees from the British and Indian Governments and logistical assistance from an Indian Committee and India Offices in London and New Delhi. So that the exhibition did not become a source of rivalry or prestige-building for any particular institution, its organizing committee was made up of scholars from the British Museum, the Royal India Society, the Royal Academy, and Victoria and Albert Museum, which offered its Director Leigh Ashton as Committee chair. While the Chinese and Persian exhibitions had been spectacles of internationalist diplomacy, Government collaboration was downplayed for the India show. Despite collaboration from an eminent committee of artists and scholars in India, the organizers in London were emphatic that the show was not what India and later Pakistan wished to represent of themselves but rather what they had "judged to be most representative of their art."[4] India's supposed ignorance of its own culture was frequently cited as a rationale for the project. It was only when the Government of India intervened in the early stages of the exhibition's organisation to suggest that a modern art section was necessary to demonstrate that India was not a "static country living upon the glories of its past without any contemporary art,"[5] that the timeline closed with the year 1947. Until then the exhibition was planned to conclude with a room of British Artists in India and the year 1858, when Crown replaced East India Company rule and India became an official part of the British Empire.

This unchecked paternalism was shattered by the events of August 1947. Returning custody of Indian cultural representation to sovereign India, decolonization also cut national borders through the exhibition's carefully honed

narrative of Indian art. The Academy's bewildered response to Partition is revealed in the sequence of title changes that the exhibition subsequently went through. The Academy's preferred title following the creation of Pakistan is found on the promotional poster of issue in Hare's dispatch. The project's original title of "EXHIBITION OF INDIAN ART" dominates the poster, under which is the flimsy subtitle, "Chiefly from the Dominions of India and Pakistan," which represents the smallest lines of text on the poster excepting the name of the printer. Bizarrely, the poster signifies India twice such that the art of Pakistan remains, at least for now… Indian.

On a series of souvenir booklets printed to guide visitors through the exhibition, this repetition of India is dropped and the show is titled, "Exhibition of Art chiefly from the Dominions of India and Pakistan." Green binding and (almost) saffron lettering on the covers of the booklets honour Pakistan and India's new flags. The exhibition's final title, "The Art of India and Pakistan," does away with the language of decolonial transition and is found on hefty commemorative catalogues first published in 1949. Thanks offered to the Governments of India and Pakistan for their interest and collaboration in the catalogue Preface publically overlooks the fact that the Royal Academy was in late 1949 only just concluding a repatriation battle with both countries over where to return various objects sent to London for the show.[6]



From its conception, the exhibition had sought to challenge then-popular trivialisations of Indian art as either commodity or fetish; on the one hand as merely decorative handicraft that had inspired among others William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement, and on the other as the outcome of a strange and foreign culture "imbued with unfamiliar and uncongenial associations and beliefs."[7] Downplaying craft and archeological artifacts and emphasising court painting and classical religious sculpture, the exhibition would demonstrate that Indian artworks could be worthy of the status of "fine art" and judged as "masterpieces" on aesthetic terms. It therefore represented a belated rebuttal to scholar Sir George Birdwood's infamous 1910 Royal Society of Arts lecture in which he proclaimed that India had no "fine art" as such, and referred to a Javanese Buddha in the Society's collection as "nothing more than an uninspired brazen image" and no better than a boiled suet pudding as a "symbol of passionate purity and serenity of soul."[8] Birdwood's lecture was cited in the introductory passage of the exhibition booklet along with key adversaries in the subsequent debate: Sir William Rothstein, Ananda Coomaraswamy and EB Havell.[9]

With its emphasis on Indian art as fine art and noting of such figures, the exhibition embodied the sentiments of a generation of anti-colonial scholars who repelled the Victorian prejudices of figures such as Birdwood along with an epistemology of Indian art that had developed over the nineteenth century which privileged schools and periods that developed in greater proximity to Europe and European influence. This scale of judgment thus elevated Greek-influenced Buddhist sculptures from Gandhara over objects representing more "indigenous" influences, such as the Mathura or Gupta styles of sculpture, for example, or that celebrated Persianate and monotheistic Mughal miniature paintings over and above works from Pahari and Rajput schools.[10] Despite the exhibition's obvious paternalism, it curatorially inverted this value scale, thus aligning with scholars such as Coomaraswamy and Havell, aforementioned. It also reflected their discriminations in adopting a centrifugal model of purity and intrusion for Indian art. Catalogues and publicity texts prickle with the presence of Muslim "invaders" of India despite the Muslim Mughal Empire filling more than three rooms of the exhibition's fifteen, and an essay on Indian sculpture in the commemorative catalogue describes the Punjab province that had been recently divided by Partition as a "gateway" between Indian and Persian culture. Even the mysterious origins of the 2500-1900BCE Indus Valley are problematized in terms of their belonging or otherness to a continuous canon of "Indian art."[11] When, in February 1948, the exhibition closed and its bulk returned to India, the newly installed Government placed an adapted version of it on display in New Delhi's Government House before its redistribution to lenders around the country. Sympathetic to an Indian nationalist historiography, the exhibition was readymade for the occasion, which lived on as the basis of India's National Museum opening a year later in 1949.[12] Ritualising the unity in diversity of India's vast regional and historical culture, as Kavita Singh describes, like the

exhibition, the National Museum continues to elevate more indigenous phases of Indian art over those more clearly subject to external influence.[13]

While links between the Royal Academy exhibition and Indian nation building have been widely discussed, the exhibition's relationship to the new state of Pakistan has gained less attention. Pakistan was carved from the Muslim majority provinces on India's East and Western flanks in August 1947 as a solution to the "problem" of Muslim political representation in a decolonised India. As Ayesha Jalal describes, the new country's official history was a "conjuring" of civilizational teleology that affirmed Islamic statehood as the inevitable destiny of its land, a narrative that largely excluded East Pakistan, which gained independence as Bangladesh in 1971 after a bloody civil war.[14] Across textbooks, museum displays and even UNESCO magazines Pakistan's historiography celebrates the Indus Valley Civilization as a cradle of democracy, before leaping ahead to the Graeco-Buddhist Gandhara civilization established by fabled strongman Alexander the Great in 330BCE, and that finally locates Pakistan's Islamic becoming in the eighth century arrival of Arab general Muhammad Bin Qasim to Sindh and the later Mughal Empire founded by Emperor Babur in 1526.[15] Composing this narrative in the round, Pakistan's National Museum opened in Karachi in 1950 under the supervision of Mortimer Wheeler. Ex-Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, Wheeler had been part of the Royal Academy's Exhibition Committee in India and adjudicator of its repatriation dispute. Advisor to the newly formed Pakistan Archaeological Department and author of the volume 5000 Years of Art in Pakistan published in 1950 to legitimize Pakistan's narrative of antiquity, Wheeler was a fascinated witness to India and Pakistan's separation, describing it as a "new and peculiarly bizarre political experiment", breaking apart the "exceptionally tidy" Indian subcontinent; and that this, "living contest of ideology versus geography on so vast a scale is enthralling and significant drama to any humanist… a ring-side seat was a privilege of a memorable kind." [16]

Situated on the periphery of the Royal Academy's concentric representation of Indian art, the official history of Pakistan that Wheeler, among others, helped to construct, looked not for a pure origin but rather towards an axis of influence that turned away from India and towards Islam's geographical center in the Arab Middle East. While based on material fact, this streamlining of history was primed by nationalist ambivalences and European scholarly prejudices that had formed over generations of art history and archaeology and that saw in the art and culture of the Subcontinent distinctions and incommensurability, rather than diverse strategies of appropriation and intelligent synthesis. These prejudices and ambivalences found their way into the Royal Academy exhibition, and what is perhaps most surprising about the Academy's response to the unfolding of Partition was that it was surprised.

Notes

1. Listowel to Mountbatten, August 9th, 1947. "Weekly Correspondence between Earl Listowel and Lord Mountbatten," British Library, MSS EUR C357, William Francis Hare Papers (1943-1947), India Office Records and Private Papers.

2. "Copy Of Letter From The Royal Academy Of Arts Date 7th August 1947" (Walter Lamb to S. D. Listowel), ibid.

3. M. Ahmad (Office of High Commissioner for Pakistan) to Walter Lamb, September 22nd 1947. RAA/SEC/24/33/4, Royal Academy of Arts.

4. Basil Gray, "The Art of India and Pakistan," *RSA Journal* 96, no. 4758 (1947): 76. The delegation to India was made up of Basil Gray, Kenneth de Burgh Codrington and Richard Winstedt. For a discussion of the Chinese exhibition see Ilaria Scaglia, "The Aesthetics of Internationalism: Culture and Politics on Display at the 1935–1936 International Exhibition of Chinese Art," *Journal of World History* 26, no. 1 (March 7, 2016): 105–37.

5. G. S. Bozman (Secretary to the Government of India) to Sir Walter Lamb (Secretary, Royal Academy of Arts), May 16th, 1946. RAA/SEC/24/22/4, Royal Academy.

6. *Annual Report from the Council of the Royal Academy to the General Assembly of Academicians and Associates for the Year 1949* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1950), 10.

7. H. G. Rawlinson, "Introduction," *Exhibition of Art Chiefly from the Dominions of India and Pakistan, 2400 B.C. to 1947 A.D.*, Second Edition (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1947), ix.

8. For discussion see Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 269–86.

9. H. G. Rawlinson, "Introduction," *Exhibition of Art Chiefly from the Dominions of India and Pakistan, 2400 B.C. to 1947 A.D.*, Second Edition (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1947), ix.

10. Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 258–59. See also Molly Emma Aitken, *The Intelligence of Tradition in Rajput Court Painting* (Yale University Press, 2010), 35–45.

11. Kenneth, *Exhibition of Art Chiefly from the Dominions of India and Pakistan, 2400 B.C. to 1947 A.D.*, 8, 9.

12. Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India* (Columbia University Press, 2004), 201–4.

13. "The result is that one could walk right through the National Museum and be only dimly aware of the fact that the Mughals had been in India." Kavita Singh, 'The Museum is National' in Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh, eds., *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia*, 1 edition (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2015), 117. For a nuanced account on the place of Mughal painting in the exhibition and Indian art history before and after 1947 see Devika Singh, "Indian Nationalist Art History and the Writing and Exhibiting of Mughal Art, 1910-48," *Art History* 36, no. 5 (November 2013): 1042–69.

14. Ayesha Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 73–89.

15. See also Manan Ahmed Asif, "Quarantined Histories: Sindh and the Question of Historiography in Colonial India- Part I," *History Compass* 15, no. 8 (August 1, 2017): 1-8.

16. Mortimer Wheeler, *Still Digging*, [1st American ed.] edition (E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1956), 220.

Related Events at Wolfson College

10 October 2017
Locating South Asia: Institutional Representation of a Region
Panel Discussion

13/14 October 2017
The History of Lahore and the Preservation of its Historic Buildings
Symposium organised by the Ancient India & Iran Trust, in association with the Centre of South Asian Studies

21 and 28 October 2017
Taste of India
Art Workshops for children aged 5-12 years with NNEdPro and Urszula Sobanda

11 November 2017
A Seven Decade Spice Trail from South Asia
Panel Discussion
Wolfson Fine Arts and NNEdPro Global event

13 November 2017
Study Afternoon for teachers and students
In association with Art History in Schools

28 November 2017
The Boy and The Brothers: The story of a young Londoner in the service of higher powers
Talk by Shezad Dawood
Wolfson Humanities Society and Wolfson Fine Arts

For further information and booking details go to
www.wolfson.cam.ac.uk/fine-arts

WOLFSON COLLEGE
University of Cambridge

india UNBOXED.

ART HISTORY in schools

Supported by the
PAUL MELLON CENTRE *for Studies in British Art*