

Translating Cultures

Pictorial and Literary Representation of India
in William Hodges's Paintings and Travel Book

DURING THE YEARS MY WIFE AND I lived in New Zealand we travelled quite often and virtually covered the two islands from north to south, from Cape Rainga to Bluff, and enjoyed the often spectacular scenery of the country. Not only was I impressed by the volcanoes in the centre of the



the North Island and the almost perfectly shaped cone of Mt. Taranaki near New Plymouth, or the glaciers and mountain ranges of the Southern Alps including Mt. Cook, but also by the rolling hills of Northland, the breathtaking views of the large lakes in Southland, the huge basin-like valleys of Central Otago, the intricately shaped Otago Peninsula and the vast outlook over Banks Peninsula. Having experienced these sights, I realized how challenging the New Zealand scenery must have been to the indigenous population and European explorers and settlers and how attractive to artists, poets as well as painters. I began reading about their responses and experiences, made a point of visiting museums and art galleries and became more and more interested in the genre of landscape painting. The range and the variety of thematic and technical approaches chosen to paint the abundant richness of the New Zealand scenery testify to the pleasure a large number of artists had in sketching or painting, on the spot or from memory, the details of a scene that had evoked their aesthetic pleasure and triggered their artistic sensibility and execution.

Among early painters I became particularly fascinated by the English artist William Hodges (1744–1797), who had been commissioned to accompany James Cook on his second voyage on the *Resolution* from 1772 to 1775. Having reached the west coast of the South Island of New Zealand in March 1773, Hodges painted ‘The North Entrance to Dusky Bay’ in May



The North Entrance to Dusky Bay

and was praised by Cook for his “very accurate view both of the North and South entrance as well as several other parts of this Bay”. Besides, Cook held that the painter “hath delineated the face of the country with such judgement as will as once convey a better idea of it than can be expressed by words.”¹ Cook’s appraisal of Hodges’s ‘delineation of the face of the country,’ in other words, his accuracy of observation and representation I shall return to.

What I found of similar if not even greater interest, while having a closer look at Hodges’s career as a landscape painter, was the fact that after his return to England he was commissioned again as a painter, and now by the then Governor-General of India, Warren Hastings, to come to India and work there. He arrived in 1779 and the painter’s visit was to last for six years. In his book *Travels to India During the Years 1780, 1781, 1782, and 1783*, “printed for the author” in London in 1793, and “one of the earliest published travel accounts by a professional artist”;² Hodges presented his

1 Roger Blackley, *Two Centuries of New Zealand Landscape Art*, Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery 1990, 12

2 Beth Fowkes Tobin, “The artist’s ‘I’ in Hodges’s *Travels in India*”, Jeff Quilley and John Bonehill, *William Hodges, 1744–1797: The Art of Exploration*, Catalogue to the Exhibition at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, 5 July–21 November 2004 and the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, 27 January–24 April 2005, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2004, 43–48. Tobin also raises the important question as to “the relationship between aesthetics and colonialism” (43) to which I shall return.

readers with detailed reports on his travels, that took him from Calcutta westward along the Ganges river and via the towns of Patna, Benares, Lucknow and Agra to Gwalior, and back again. Besides and obviously asked to do so by Hodges, the printer also included fourteen plates, engravings of pictures many of which he had painted during his travels and on the spot. After his return and having been appointed a member of the Royal Academy in 1787, he exhibited his paintings between 1785 and 1794, and among them not merely Indian landscapes but also pictures of buildings that he had *converted* from original water colour or aquatints into oil. Hodges earned the reputation not only of being the first English painter of ‘oriental scenes’ but also of being its specialist, since two more books quickly followed *Travels in India*. These were *A Collection of Views in India Drawn on the Spot in the Years 1780, 1781, 1782, and 1783*, and ‘executed in aquatinta, in imitation of the original drawings’, and *Select Views of India Drawn on the Spot, in the Years 1780, 1781, 1782 and 1783 and extended in aqua tinta (London 1785–88)*,³ which contains forty-eight prints. The depth of the English painter’s dedication to a very different culture at the end of the eighteenth century amply recorded here naturally raises the question as to the extent he appropriated India as a European outsider. Can we, especially from the postcolonial perspective, classify him as an early Orientalist who influenced, perhaps even shared in creating the discourse on Orientalism that was to manifest itself more transparently in the nineteenth century? I shall attempt to find an answer by first asking why Hodges had agreed to Hastings’s proposal to visit India, and how he defined the task he had set for himself. Finally, I shall turn to his achievement as the first professional European landscape painter to travel to and document India.

The final pages of *Travels in India* offer an insight into Hodges’s motives. After his return with Cook he had complained of the market in England as lacking in paintings of native scenery, and he must have been glad to receive Hastings’s invitation to come to India, not the least because travelling in India would, as he put it, “add greatly to our stock of knowledge relative to the Eastern continent”.⁴ Here, it is the “picturesque beauty of a place [... represented] as a natural object, or as connected with the history of the country, and the manners of the people”⁵ that challenged

3 Natasha Eaton repeatedly refers to Warren Hastings’s support of Hodges and mentions that he “assisted the painter in finding additional Company [i.e. East India Company] funding for Hodges’s aquatint series *Select Views of India (1785–88)*.” See Natasha Eaton, “Hodges’s Visual Genealogy for Colonial India, 1780–95”, Quilley and Bonehill, *op.cit.*, 35–42; here 36

4 William Hodges, *Travels in India during the Years 1780, 1781, 1782, and 1783*, (London) 1793, 152

5 *Ibid.*, 154

the curious and engaged artist in him to make visible a world to his own countrymen known only through reports and descriptions visitors and travellers had written down or left behind. Now however, accurate visual representations of the country's 'face', of its scenery and its buildings, its art objects and people, would convey a truthful picture to the outside world, "to give a more perfect idea thereof, than could be formed from written descriptions only": a view Cook had earlier concurred with.⁶ At the same time, Hodges was of course aware of the limits of an artist's imagination as a prerequisite for his task, and he cautioned that it must be under the strict guidance of cool judgement, or we shall have fanciful [my emphasis, DR] representations instead of the truth, which, above all, must be the object of such researches.⁷

He certainly possessed 'the perfect knowledge of his art', having been trained in London as a landscape painter in the Grand Style, but at the same time would also rely on his 'cool judgement', or on acutely precise observations of the subjects chosen for his near-naturalistic paintings. Examples from his journey with Cook illustrate his clinging to this goal, for example when painting geological formations and weather conditions, or manufactured objects and detailed architectural features of the many Muslim buildings he came across while travelling in India.⁸ Here, we meet with a representative



View in Pickersgill Harbour, Dusky Bay, New Zealand

of the Age of Reason: cool judgement is required to achieve the true representation of the subjects chosen by the painter — no less than by the researcher — whose goal it must be to find out their 'real and natural character', in short: the truth. But apart from such more general, philosophical considerations, Hodges was also interested in 'the history

6 Francis Pound, *Frames on the Land: Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand*, Auckland: Collins 1983, 60

7 Hodges, *op.cit.*, 152

8 See my Note and reference to: < www.racollection.org.uk>

and progress of the arts in India',⁹ and his *Travels in India* is no less than an attempt to relate his ideas to his paintings and to refer again and again to the history of Muslim architecture in Northern India.

Finally, the eighteenth century artist was simply curious, as he himself repeatedly points out in his book;¹⁰ an aptitude he shared with many of his contemporaries in search of exotic subject matters and parts of the world, the discovery of which, incidentally, would lay the foundation for modern ethnographic and geographic research. There can be no question that the artistic, the philosophical and the scientific approaches and investigatory methods chosen by such curious people were grounded in the history of the Western rationale of reasoning and aesthetic perceptions. Nonetheless, Hodges's writings and paintings testify to a genuine eagerness to acquire knowledge of the unknown. It was not perceived in the sense of Edward Said's thesis on 'Orientalism', claiming that British travel writing, for example, was implicated in "Western nations having created an 'Other'."¹¹ This English traveller's paintings of Indian landscapes and buildings and his writing, I argue, were motivated by discovering India for himself and his countrymen. They were neither meant to create an image of an alien, let alone an exotic country, nor to appropriate it in the way the European colonizing mind would begin doing not much later on in the early nineteenth century. William Dalrymple's novel *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (2000) could be cited here as a story based on historical research in late eighteenth century India, clearly demonstrating that the idea of colonial control and the desire for hegemony had not yet taken possession of curious Englishmen in India.¹²

9 Hodges, *op.cit.*, 63

10 *Ibid.*, 79, 97

11 Jayati Gupta, "The Poetics and Politics of Travel Writing", ed. Somdatta Mandal, *Indian Travel Narratives*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications 2010, 26–36; here 34

12 In his perceptive, convincingly argued and highly informative study, *The Artificial Empire: The Indian Landscapes of William Hodges*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon 2000, Giles Tillotson discusses this aspect in the section "Orientalism and the Visual Arts", 100–116. He does not deny that there is a colonial connection to the images painted by Hodges and his contemporaries but proposes to bear in mind that the colonial connection "of such images [...] involves an appeal to historical incidents or ideas" rather than to the manner of representation. In short, one moves away from the picture plane treating the picture only as a reference to something else. (102) Further, Tillotson stresses the point that the use of the picturesque with its "quest for scenery exhibiting dramatic formal variety" generally, but also in Hodges's paintings, was a response to landscape in Britain and continental Europe and not "exclusive to the colonial domain." (103) He sums up his argument with the remark: "We can speak of picturesque images of objects which have Orientalist significance, and we can show how the images might have been understood in that way, but the picturesque itself is not Orientalist [my emphasis]." (103) It would be a mistake then to take representation for perception, since they are not the same.



Bhimbetka Cave Painting

We know that Indian artists did not paint landscapes at the time since no examples of this exist. Hodges had taken note of the country's art and painting traditions, as his frequent references in *Travels in India* show, and he praised specimens of 'Mussulman [...painting ... in miniature... as] highly beautiful in composition and in delicacy of colour',¹³ but we miss any remark on representations of nature as such. Art historians have suggested that cave paintings dating from 2000 to 1500 B.C. and discovered in 1957 near Bhimbetka, south of Bhopal, contain one or the other feature of nature, which of course does not permit us to speak of landscape art.¹⁴ And this holds true also of the Moghul painting schools established in the sixteenth century where we do come across details of nature, often stylized, illustrating the written word.¹⁵ By comparison, Rajput paintings from the seventeenth century onward resort more frequently to features of nature — flowers, trees and wooded areas, gardens, hills and mountain ranges, brooks and rivers — , and often also display birds and animals.

¹³ Hodges, *op.cit.*, 150

¹⁴ Arguing that the conception (and visual representation) of landscape requires an evolved subjectivity, it has been pointed out that "there is absolutely no trace of landscapes in cave paintings [... because] landscape is where the subject posits itself in relation to nature [...], where consciousness must distance itself from nature." This consciousness had obviously not evolved at the time cave paintings were created. See Rachael Ziade DeLue and James Elkins, ed. *Landscape Theory*, London and New York: Routledge 2008, 107–8.

¹⁵ See J.M. Rogers, *Mughal Miniatures*, London: The British Museum Press 2006, 46

But these are on the one hand embellishments of narratives focusing on single figures or people interacting and on the other, endow the paintings with symbolic meaning; they are “to capture the mood and emotion of the scene portrayed,”¹⁶ but not to represent a landscape per se.¹⁷ Nature serves as a backdrop to court or hunting scenes, or as background in the sense of a *locus amoenus* at a lovers’ tryst, and this holds true even in the works of Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), the first Indian Western-style painter, for example in ‘Shakuntala’ (1870) It was not before the 1920s that K. Venkatappa and others, for example Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), began adopting the landscape genre to some degree and



*Shakuntala Looking Back to Glimpse
Dushyanta*

16 See Roda Ahluwalia, *Rajput Painting: Romantic, Divine and Courtly Art from India*, London: The British Museum Press 2008, 119

17 Roda Ahluwalia’s book offers excellent documentary evidence. Covering the early seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, this collection of illustrations does not contain a single landscape painting that would offer a parallel to the European genre, though it was itself not unknown in India at the time. Among examples, we come across nature made to serve as a backdrop to people or animals, all painted in a near-realistic style (fig. 35 and 36). Besides, there are near-surrealistic (fig. 42) and increasingly, stylized paintings (fig. 62 and 64). Fig. 82 and 103, also stylized, offer in-depth and close to perspective views of nature, with fig. 103 of the late 1770s showing a “lush landscape of undulating hills and forested slopes in muted tones of green.” Still, even when perspective was attempted, it “was never given prominence, the ultimate objective being to interpret narrative gently and with heightened lyricism.” (155) Cf. also the art critic Jacob Wamberg’s *Landscape as World Picture: Tracing Cultural Evolution in Images*. vol. 1, “Early Modernity”, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 2009, where he talks of the “autonomous landscape image [...] as an image whose sole motif is landscape, whose justification is the view across the landscape itself” connects its emergence “with the autonomous concept of art as such” and places it in sixteenth century Europe. (71, 72) Indeed, the idea of art as such, whether in painting, sculpture or music, lay outside the tradition of Indian aesthetics.



Hilly Terrain, Udaka Mandal

for their own, often national-culturally oriented purposes to establish an original and non-Western painting tradition.

I would like to turn now to Hodges's paintings and his views of India as we come to know them in his *Travels in India*. Commenting on "The Pass of Sicri Gully from Bengal, entering in the Province of Bahar", he felt that the "whole scene appeared to me highly picturesque [... and] this view [...] marks the general character of this part of the country."¹⁸ Calling the scene picturesque is of relevance because this term relates to the discourse on landscape and landscape painting discussed in the 1790s, as is documented in Sir

Uvedale Price's (1747–1829) book, *Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1796). Among modern art critics the New Zealand art historian Francis Pound detailed elements composing the picturesque and referred to a ruined building, broken water, an old battered tree, and gypsies or beggars, in short: ragged irregularities.¹⁹ Interestingly, in Hodges's painting we discover a ruined castle on top of a ragged hill suggesting age (and decay). Further, a dense forest at its foot, a single tree that appears out of place at the centre, a group of people dressed in — to the European viewer — unfamiliar clothes, and a lone animal create an impression of sudden variation — to quote Pound — all of which constitute the picturesque quality of this painting. It is a kind of artistic representation that points at Hodges's place in the European landscape painting tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, as much as it directs the European viewer's eyes at a foreign country's landscape, which does not present itself as all that unfamiliar. On the contrary, it possesses

¹⁸ Hodges, *op.cit.*, 23

¹⁹ Pound, *op.cit.*, 25



The Pass of Sicri Gully from Bengal, Entering into the Province of Bahar

a certain familiarity and thus suggests that the painter's conception of the truth of a landscape remains essentially European.

Right behind the solitary tree we discover a house with a gabled roof, certainly an exceptional building considering the prevalence of flat terrace-roofed living-quarters typical of India. It obviously belongs to the village of Gully Sicri that is more clearly foregrounded in another oil painting Hodges must have done after his return to England, and which is based on the original aquatint. This feature — apart from calling up a familiar sight for the painter as well as for his European viewers — confronts us with the idea of a landscape as being an inhabited place, a distinct characteristic of Hodges's paintings generally. His landscapes are not desolate, not merely natural or even untouched, but have been taken possession of by humans. We could even go as far as to argue that it is one of his motifs for landscape painting to document the relationship between nature and mankind, and thus human history and progress as well as decay: a notion very much of the Age of Reason. A notion, furthermore bolstered by the painter's eye for the manufactured object, for example a boat as testimony of man's practical nature, or intricate architectural features of a building as proof of his artistic creativity.²⁰

Yet, to confine Hodges's conception and representation of Indian scenery to the picturesque does not do him justice, as passages in *Travels*

²⁰ See NOTE



A View of the Pass of Sicri Gully

in India illustrate:

After returning to Sicri Gully, I continued my route across the pass of Terriagully, from the top of which a beautiful scene opens itself to the view, namely, the meandering of the river Ganges through the flat country, and glittering through an immense plain, highly cultivated, as far as the extent of the horizon, where the eye is almost at a loss to discriminate the termination of sky and land. (24)

Adding further details of the landscape, the traveller comes to the general conclusion that the

country about Colgong is, I think, the most beautiful I have seen in India. The waving appearance of the land, its fine turf and detached woods, backed by the extensive forests on the hills [...] and its overlooking the Ganges, which has more the appearance of an ocean at this place than of a river, gives the prospect inexpressible grandeur. (25)

Expressing his experience of the land as beautiful and of “inexpressible grandeur”, Hodges falls back on the contemporary discourse on the picturesque, relating it to the beautiful and the sublime. This means that

he sets his aesthetic experience apart from his artistic representation of the Indian scenery: the attentive and sensitive beholder differs from the reflective painter. Furthermore, the eighteenth century traveller and writer does not only respond positively to the scenery of India²¹ (24–28, 70–71), but also to its people (31–34, 60, 88), towns (60, 111), streets (9), houses (9, 125), temples (10), and monuments, like the “‘Taje Mahel’: a work of art [...that] far surpasses any thing I ever beheld.” (124) Besides, Hodges often compares such views and impressions favourably with those experienced in his own country. (25, 26, 28, 33, 134–135) But he is also a discriminating observer of features of India or Indian life less amenable to his taste or judgement. Among them are several attitudes, the conduct of the ‘Mahomedans’ (62), or ‘Mussulmans’ (110) as well as what he calls indecent art objects (11) or customs (79, 93, 103–4, 132). Here the traveller proves the child of his time, as he does of course in his positive estimate of British attitudes and actions in India (. . .). Though he holds that “it is not my business to enter into the question respecting the rights of the government in different countries and those of the governed [because] facts are my object” (48), he does not distance himself from his country’s policy — or rather the East India Company’s: a politico-economic association that after all had paid for his expenses and exploits.

Nonetheless, my understanding of Hodges’s paintings and my reading of his travel account appraise him as belonging to the beginning of British



The Taj Mahal

²¹ All further page references to Hodges, *op.cit.*

colonial expansion and domination in India, a period of political activities I would not readily subsume under the category of a “negative coding of others.”²² Hodges’s positive emotional responses to India (2, 25, 128) do not only confirm this, but his often expressed melancholic mood at the sight of deprivation, neglect, decline or loss of past beauty and human achievements (106, 117, 120–1), and the many paintings of ruined fortresses or tombs also make us encounter a compassionate commentator on the passage of a grander age. Such emotional immersion anticipates the Orientalists’ more prevalent conviction as to India’s glorious past but dismal state of affairs in the nineteenth century.²³ However, this mood also points forward to an emotional state characteristic of the Romantic period and reveals itself here as a subtext to the Age of Reason, to which Hodges had felt himself akin.²⁴

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22 Gupta, *op.cit.*, 31

23 Tobin (see note 12) locates Hodges’s “portraying of Mughal architecture as picturesque ruins” as part of the “ongoing construction of the British Orientalist doctrine of [...quoting Homi Bhabha] ‘India as a primordial fixity [...] that satisfies the self-fulfilling prophecy of Western progress.’” (46) This may be a pertinent interpretation in so far as it limits our attention to the painter’s portraiture of Mughal buildings, but it is certainly not applicable to his total work.

24 It makes one wonder to what extent these landscape paintings relate to the judgement that Caspar David Friedrich’s romantic landscapes “are not so much representations of landscape as of consciousness, or of consciousness as landscape.” See DeLue and Elkins, *op.cit.*, 146

TRANSLATING CULTURES

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NOTE: A number of Hodges's Indian paintings can be seen at <<http://www.racollection.org.uk>> [accessed 14 March 2011]. See also Geoff Quilley and John Bonehill, *William Hodges 1744–1797: The Art of Exploration*, London: National Maritime Museum 2004, DVD; PAL, © Illuminations 2004 <<http://www.illumination.co.uk/Hodges>>

- p. 168** "The North Entrance to Dusky Bay, New Zealand", Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Australia <<http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au>> (used by permission); also in Blackley, *op.cit.*, 12 (see note 1)
- p. 170** "View in Pickersgill Harbour, Dusky Bay, New Zealand", National Maritime Museum, London <http://www.nmm.ac.uk/visit/exhibitions/past/william_hodges> [accessed 5 August 2010]; also in Blackley, *op.cit.*, 14 (see note 1), and John Bonehill, "Hodges and Cook's second voyage", ed. Quilley and Bonehill, *op.cit.*, 83 (see note 2)
- p. 172** "Bhimbetka Cave Painting" (c. 2000–1500 BC) <http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bhimbetka_Cave_Paintings.jpg> Acknowledgement: Flickr upload bot by Ekabhishek (talk) (used by permission)
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