

ASIAN ART

THE NEWSPAPER FOR COLLECTORS, DEALERS, MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES • MAY 2020 • £5.00/US\$10/€10

KHMER ARTEFACTS RETURN TO CAMBODIA

The US Embassy in Phnom Penh, including the Public Affairs Section and Homeland Security Investigations, in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, has facilitated the return of two Cambodian statues from the US following their seizure in 2005 and 2017.

In early April, the statues arrived in Phnom Penh and are now in the National Museum. The repatriation of the statues is part of the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2018 between the Government of the United States of America and the Royal Government of Cambodia concerning 'the Imposition of Import Restrictions on Categories of Archaeological Material of Cambodia'. The two sculptures are an early 10th-century grey sandstone Khmer torso of an unidentified deity, seized in 2005, and a sandstone sculpture of Shiva and Uma, also dating to the 10th century.

In the more than 20 years since, the World Monument Fund (WMF) has focused on four key areas at Angkor

Archaeological Park: the Churning of the Sea of Milk Gallery within Angkor Wat, the temple's most prominent bas-relief; Phnom Bakheng, Angkor's oldest temple and the place where tourists flock to admire the view at sunset; Preah Khan, an outstanding example of a large linear temple complex in a jungle setting; and Ta Som, a relatively smaller complex that is rich in architectural and sculptural detail. Last summer the WMF reached a milestone when it completed a decade-long US\$4.8m conservation effort on the eastern side of Phnom Bakheng – the 9th/early 10th-century state temple of the first Khmer capital. Increased tourism and visitor traffic have taken a heavy toll on the site, prompting the WMF to seek a solution to the problem. Devotional shrines erected on the various levels had become destabilised because of a gradual change in the pitch at the ground level of the various terraces.

After beginning the project in 2004, the WMF continued its work in 2008 to stabilise and restore the site by deconstructing all of the terraces and



Phnom Bakheng, one of the World Monuments Funds projects at Angkor, Cambodia

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to see the
conservation
in action



re-pitching them so that the water flowed in a less harmful direction. The next challenge is to start the restoration of the western half of Phnom Bakheng, which could take eight years including the research and planning phase, Ackerman says.

The conservation work is important because of its historic and cultural value, but it also represents a great symbol of the rebirth of the country after a dark period and contributes significantly to the national economy and Cambodians, who work as

engineers, architects, archaeologists, conservators, guides, and guards on the projects, deriving income from the conservation, training, education, and tourism activities, which take place every day, for the benefit of the community and visitors.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

Last month, 13 April, 2020, officially marked the 150th anniversary of the founding of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Though the doors are temporarily closed, the museum will have special programming available on its digital channels. continue MetLiveArts programming, and other events. *Making The Met, 1870-2020*, the cornerstone show of our anniversary year, will premiere as a virtual exhibition on Google. The Met website is also a rich repository of past programming and From the Vaults, showing videos, has a Asian selection, including *Water Stone* (1987) by Isamu Noguchi and its installation in the galleries

➔ Watch Isamu Noguchi

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA

The museum has announced *Together In Art*, a new online social project providing meaningful encounters with art through an open platform of imagination, inspiration and creativity during the temporary closure of the gallery.

Featuring new commissions, pocket exhibitions, artist projects, innovative performances, talks, interviews, virtual visits to artists' studios, behind-the-scenes tours, inspiring art making workshops and activities for children and adults, and more, the project brings together the diverse and vibrant voices of artists, performers, staff, community partners and the gallery's audience and affirms the power of art to connect people in difficult times.

Delivering surprises and fresh developments on a daily basis, the programme explores the riches of the gallery's collection and brings to life current

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ANDRE KNEIB

by Olivia Sand

Even today, as globalisation has brought the art world closer together than ever, certain areas have so far been less popular. Such is the case for calligraphy and even more so for the art of ancient calligraphy. If in China, and other Asian countries, it is common to grow up with a basic knowledge and appreciation of calligraphy, its history and study often remains a sanctuary of an initiated group.

Very few Western scholars can be considered experts in Chinese painting and calligraphy and even fewer people, whether Chinese or from abroad, can claim to have revolutionised the field of calligraphy. However, such is the case with André Kneib (b 1952), born and based in France, who besides defending and promoting Chinese calligraphy as a scholar, a teacher, and curator has himself, as an artist, contributed to adding an unexpected yet retrospectively essential element to calligraphy: colour.

In conversation, he recounts his extraordinary journey which began long before it was easy and fashionable to travel to China.



André Kneib
© Courtesy André Kneib

Asian Art Newspaper: In the 1970s China was a mainly closed country, how does a university student in France get to become one of the authorities in Chinese calligraphy?
André Kneib: As a young student, I went to Paris to study Chinese. I was interested in foreign languages and at home I had a small booklet *Teach Yourself Chinese* that I had

found in my uncle's library. I loved all the characters. During my last year at school, I had an excellent philosophy teacher, who indicated that at university level there was actually a school where I could study the Chinese language. That is how it all started. I began learning Chinese, speaking, reading, and writing the language. I had an

interest in writing Chinese which I studied with great care. In Paris, one of my professors told me that in China there was something called 'calligraphy'. I immediately started looking into it, and before I knew it, I was involved in a regular curriculum, graduating, continuing with a master's degree and followed by a PhD. The subject of calligraphy intrigued me. What was it? What was it about? One of my professors who had heard of my interest in calligraphy, recommended that I go to Musée Cernuschi in Paris where Lee Ungno, a great Korean master (1904, Seoul-1989, Paris), was giving calligraphy lessons. I went and I was able to learn the basics with him.

AAN: The subject was quite unusual at the time, so it must have been difficult finding teachers in the West with the knowledge to guide you in calligraphy?
AK: One needs to remember that in the Western world, even today, there are not many experts in Chinese calligraphy. There are five or six at the most, like Jean-Marie Simonet in Belgium, Lothar Ledderose in Germany, Jean-François Billeter in Switzerland and Stephen Goldberg in the US, and of course, the situation was much worse when I started out.

AAN: Although you are from France, you are acknowledged in Asia as an artist and a connoisseur of calligraphy in your own right.
AK: In China, wherever you go, whatever the province, and whoever

is actively involved in calligraphy, they all know me. The same goes for Taiwan. As for Japan, I completed a residency at the Villa Kujoyama in Kyoto and while I was there, a Buddhist monk who lived in Nagahama approached me. He came to see me in Kyoto, saying that rumour had it that there was a Frenchman staying at the villa who was working with calligraphy. He explained that they were in the process of renovating their temple, asking if I was interested in being associated with the renovation process. When I went to see the temple with him, he suggested I complete a work involving the *fusuma* (sliding doors), separating the sanctuary from the congregation. Initially, I did not understand what he was looking for, whether it was *sutras*, proverbs or whether he had something completely different in mind. He wanted a site-specific piece for the temple. As he was about to travel over the next few weeks, he recommended that in the meantime, I stay in the temple in order to get a feeling for the place and the space. It was a unique experience as every morning some elderly ladies came and brought me my meals and some fruit. Overnight, however, I was alone in the space, giving me ample time to think about what I wanted to do. I subsequently submitted my proposal depicting eight times the character 'heart', which was approved by the various instances.

What was surprising was how in a country where there are thousands of people practising calligraphy, they had come to me for that project. Perhaps it was because that specific monk had a lot of contact with Europe – and specifically France. To



Star Dust IX, acrylic on board, 24 x 32 cm © Courtesy André Kneib

me, it was an incredible honour to be asked to complete the project. One of my Chinese friends even went as far as to tell me that now that I had completed this project, I could stop all together. Indeed, it is similar as if in the West, I had completed the windows of a church. That was a very important moment in my life.

AAN: What was the situation with European institutions with regard to calligraphy, when you were a student?
AK: In Europe, people started to get interested in calligraphy after World War II. There were not many people following the subject closely, even though there were specialists like the people I mentioned above. It was very slow in the beginning. Incidentally, one of the main reasons the subject had been relatively ignored was that within the great

In 1979, I was sent to Nanjing University to study, knowing nothing about China

American and European institutions there was very little calligraphy. People showed little interest and for a long time calligraphy was considered difficult, hermetic, and complicated. The institutions also had enough to keep themselves busy with ceramics, bronzes, jades, etc., items which also required a great deal of care. In addition, the patrons of these institutions were themselves mainly interested in bronzes and ceramics, and then only in painting.

They moved ahead in these areas while leaving calligraphy behind, mainly because there was not much around and also because it was difficult.

AAN: With little expertise on which to rely, and the institutions not truly devoted to calligraphy and painting, it seems you were compelled to go to the source, to Asia.

AK: Absolutely. I had started off with Lee Ungno in Paris with the basic idea of understanding what calligraphy meant. Then, in the course of my masters with François Cheng, my teacher recommended that I go to Taiwan to develop my knowledge of the subject I had chosen to write about: 'A few elements for the study of Chinese calligraphy'. Once I had finished writing my thesis, my professors encouraged me to continue, as I still had the desire to understand calligraphy, its meaning, and wanted to know everything about and around it.

Léon Vandermeersch, one of the great still-living sinologists, suggested I apply for a scholarship in China and simply go there to study. Having this scholarship meant that all French students were dispatched nationwide in China to various cities. So there I was in 1979, knowing nothing about China and being sent to Nanjing University. Strangely enough, the university did not quite know what to do with me. They did not have anyone at hand to teach me so week after week I went to museums and explored the city. I started meeting young Chinese people of my age and one day I met a fellow by the name of Liu Dan (b 1953), a great painter, and we became friends. We got together every now and then until he told me

about a friend of his who was also employed by Nanjing University who could perhaps help me. Although at the time it was not easy to visit people at their home, Liu Dan took me to meet the person who was to become my calligraphy teacher: Ding Hao (1941-2012).

AAN: It must have been difficult gaining your teacher's trust and convince him of your motivation and your interest towards a subject as hard as calligraphy.

AK: As we met, Ding Hao first wanted to see what I had completed so far. He looked at my thesis and carefully studied the bibliography. I showed him some of my works, exercises, and somehow we got along and he agreed to help me move forward. Ding Hao had encountered a great deal of problems during the Cultural Revolution and at the university, officially, he was in charge of the library's ancient books. Ding Hao did not have the best relationship with the university officials and therefore, in the beginning, the university officials were not that much in favour of him teaching me. However, one day, Ding Hao had resolved all the paperwork and was officially designated to teach me calligraphy.

AAN: Calligraphy is such a broad subject, it must have been difficult to know where to begin?

AK: As we started off, he indicated that if I truly wanted to understand calligraphy, I needed to be able to read and understand Chinese ancient texts on calligraphy (the calligraphy treatises). I had heard about them, but back then, there were no translations available.

Continued on page 4

NEWS IN BRIEF

exhibitions via filmed walkthroughs and curator commentary, as well as the stories of the people and activities behind the scenes.

➤ **Further information**

MEIJI JINGU FOREST FESTIVAL OF ART

In 2020, Meiji Shrine will celebrate its centennial. To help celebrate, the Brooklyn-based Japanese artist Tomokazu Matsuyama has taken a monumental stainless steel sculpture to Tokyo as part of the Meiji Jingu Forest Festival of Art.

Curated by Art Powers Japan, the festival of arts and culture celebrates the 100th anniversary of the Meiji Shrine, one of the most historical Shinto shrines in Japan dedicated to the deified spirits of Emperor Meiji and his wife, Empress Shoken.

The festival is a celebration of art and culture set in the forests surrounding Meiji Shrine. With exhibitions, events and much more, the festival will focus on the deep relationship between Japanese art and culture, and the natural world.

Scheduled for a year, it finishes in March 2021, at the Meiji Shrine (Inner & Outer) and other venues.

The Meiji Shrine is dedicated to the deified spirits of Emperor Meiji and Empress Shoken, and is made up of the solemn inner gardens, the outer gardens which hold the Meiji Memorial Picture Gallery, and the Meiji Kinnenkan.

The dense forest that surrounds the shrine was planted by hand with around one hundred thousand trees

brought from across Japan. It covers an area of 700,000 sq. metres, and has grown into a rich and luxuriant forest, much loved by the people of Japan.

Work on the Meiji Jingu Forest began in 1915 – a grand plan to create an 'eternal forest'. Messages came from across the country that people wished to donate trees, from Sakhalin in the north and Taiwan in the south. And from beyond Japan, trees arrived from Manchuria in northern China, and Korea. More than 110,000 youths helped to plant them, and so a forest was born in the heart of Yoyogi.

➤ **Further information**

HUMBOLDT FORUM, BERLIN

In April, a fire broke out at the Humboldt Forum in the new museum complex, which is situated within the former Prussian royal palace and is currently in a state of major reconstruction. The flames were rapidly fuelled by the building materials and two melting cookers for bitumen. Despite its size and ferocity, the fire seems to have caused limited damage to the €600 (£526 million) project.

The museum's opening had already been delayed by a year to autumn 2020, due to numerous technical issues and mass protesting. Berlin's non-European ethnological collections and Asian art collections will be housed in the new complex, as well as a permanent exhibition on the city's history, temporary exhibitions and a university-run

Humboldt Laboratory.

Reconstruction of the palace has itself been controversial, as it meant tearing down the "Palace of the Republic" that stood on the same spot until 2008.

JAMEEL PRIZE, LONDON

The Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London and Art Jameel have reconfigured the criteria and application process for the biennial Jameel Prize. The first themed edition in its decade-long history, Jameel Prize 6 focuses on 'contemporary design inspired by Islamic tradition', and introduces an open call for submissions to supplement the existing nomination process.

The international prize was established in 2009 by the V&A and Art Jameel to highlight practitioners in fine art, design, and architecture whose projects are influenced by Islamic visual culture. The narrowed disciplinary focus of the sixth edition is intended to enable 'increased exposure for fashion, product, graphic and craft designers'. The theme was chosen after curatorial teams concluded that 'despite the deep craft traditions and recent growth of the Middle Eastern and Asian design scenes—contemporary design inspired by Islamic tradition is yet to have its due spotlight'.

The prize will be further diversified through an open-call system. Designers of any age and background with work that, per the

application guidelines, demonstrates 'a clear link to the history, culture, art, craft, or design practice of the Islamic world that inspires new ways of thinking about contemporary design or Islamic culture are invited'. Entry free. Applications via the open call and nominations deadline is 31 May, 2020.

➤ **Further information**

RIJKSMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM

As so many of us are working from home at the moment, the Rijksmuseum has uploaded a selection of Asian videos to Rijksstudio. To view, download and share high-resolution images of the nearly 700,000 objects in the Rijksmuseum collection, for free.

➤ **View here**

Also curators from the museum discuss objects in the collection, including a pair of Japanese screens by Head of Asian Arts Menno Fitski and Chinese month cups by Curatorial assistant Denise Campbell.

➤ **Watch Japanese screens**
➤ **Watch Chinese month cups**

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER

This month, for the first time, the newspaper will only be available as a digital interactive edition, as our printer is temporarily closed due to the Coronavirus situation and UK government health and safety advice. Our June/Summer Quarter will be a print, as well a digital issue.

➤ **Further information**



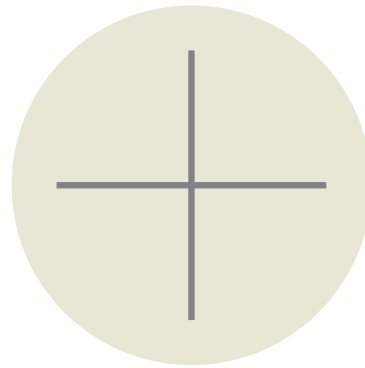
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Basically, I needed to start from the very beginning, studying the first texts to see how it became an established art. Subsequently, Ding Hao picked the first important text and used it to teach me about the history of calligraphy. Reading this text was extremely difficult, as it was written in classical Chinese. One day, he said we should find someone else for the proper calligraphy practice classes as I needed a lot of guidance. Once a week, I would meet with this other teacher and do nothing else other than work with paper, ink, and brush. So we finally had it all set up – the practice of calligraphy and the history, together with the theory of calligraphy (using the various treatises as well as the theoretical discourse).

AAN: Did you think you would become a scholar of Chinese calligraphy?
AK: At the time, I saw myself continuing my studies towards a PhD, in order to possibly teach at a later date. The other option was to do some research in the field by translating and writing about ancient calligraphy, all the more so as nothing had been done in that field in the West and there were no translations in modern Chinese. I kept wondering why there were versions of writings by Confucius in contemporary Chinese, but nothing in terms of calligraphy. The answer was quite simple: Chinese people interested in the field of ancient calligraphy had a good enough level of classical Chinese that they could easily understand it.

However, there came a moment when I became a little tired of the whole thing, especially the practising part. Ding Hao immediately said that if I was not willing to pursue practising calligraphy, he would stop his part, too, as it would not lead to anything. I remember, it was around Christmas time and he simply declared we would stop. In the meantime, I should take the opportunity of the upcoming holiday to travel through China and think about things and we would discuss and assess the situation in the new year. I did not know what to think, and one evening in my university dorm, I literally threw

Colour appeared when I was still in Nanjing, the night I let go of all constraints

The Blue Heart 蓝心 (2014), acrylic on paper mounted on a scroll, 40 x 130 cm. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston © Courtesy André Kneib



Blue Dusk 蓝夕 (1995), acrylic on paper, 43 x 80 cm © Courtesy André Kneib

myself into calligraphy, but not at all as an exercise, but open-hearted, giving it a free run. This created a breakthrough and that night I must have completed close to 50 pieces. I surprised myself. A few days later, I showed my work to Ding Hao and to my calligraphy teacher. Both of them were stunned. Ding Hao encouraged me to continue what I had just begun – and to do nothing else.

AAN: That one evening had a huge impact. What happened next?
AK: Ding Hao then came up with the idea of organising an exhibition on the university campus. Nanjing University is a very big university with thousands of students going through the campus every day. As I was continuing my endeavours in the field of calligraphy, I became a minor celebrity on campus and the news also then spread to the town. Aware that my work sparked some interest, Ding Hao decided to stage another exhibition, but this time in a public space in town. There is a famous monument located in the centre of town, the Drum Tower, with a ground floor space used as an

exhibition space. Ding Hao put a lot of effort into organising that exhibition and as we were now at another level, the university needed to notify the French embassy in Beijing to ask their position. The French embassy was all in favour of the project, sending their cultural attaché to attend the opening. Not only did the cultural attaché come from Beijing, but he also brought two correspondents from the French dailies, *Le Monde*. Once back in Beijing, one correspondent wrote a two-page article on the exhibition. Following that exhibition and its review, one thing led to another and the French embassy in Beijing was determined to stage its own exhibition of my work.

AAN: Without knowing it, you slowly also became an artist.
AK: While this new artistic life was taking shape, it was still my intention to continue working on my PhD. My previous exhibition had created a certain buzz, but some people were very critical about a foreigner working in Chinese calligraphy. As I had already been in Nanjing for two years, I was wondering whether I could extend my stay. However, as I was making a little bit too much 'noise' in Nanjing, the authorities indicated that an extension of another year would not be possible. In the meantime, I went to Beijing to stage an exhibition in the embassy. At the opening, the French ambassador invited his circle of friends which included a Chinese writer, then also Vice-Minister of Culture. During the opening, he enquired about my stay in Nanjing. When he found out that I could not extend my stay, he summoned me to come see him the next day at the ministry before I went back to Nanjing. Upon my arrival back at the train station in Nanjing, an official welcoming committee from the university was waiting for me, with the announcement that I could stay longer in Nanjing. I then spent one more year there. After that, I was hoping to get a position at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, which I did quite quickly. Starting 1982-1983, I was in Beijing with the Central Academy, which was then still located in the centre of

town, and the university put me in touch with a teacher with whom I could finish my thesis. In the capital, I had my own network through the embassies. Almost every week, through word of mouth, I had people coming to see me in my room at the Central Academy, willing to buy one of my pieces, although I was not at all planning on becoming a full-time artist! I ended up spending another two years in Beijing with several exhibitions organised. So I found myself being an artist although it was initially not my intention!

AAN: You seemed to face two different reactions: those who were appalled that a Westerner was reinterpreting traditional Chinese calligraphy, and those who were thrilled that the tradition was reinvented, even if it was by a Westerner. Is that correct?
AK: Yes, exactly. The ones in favour of my work kept telling me to ignore all negative feedback. They even went as far as to say that if my work was the centre of controversy in newspapers and discussions, it was an excellent sign! They strongly encouraged me to continue. When you are young, you just move forward. In addition, the context was extremely favourable as it was the beginning of the 'open door' policy. Strangely enough, some young people, although not critical, tried to convince me that what I was doing was outdated, that only old people would be interested in calligraphy. At the time at the Central Academy, there was not even a calligraphy department! When they had to choose, students usually only wanted to learn more about Western art and not be bothered with Chinese classical art.

AAN: Your main contribution is that you brought colour into Chinese calligraphy. It seems logical retrospectively, but was it seen as a very big step at the time?
AK: Retrospectively, the colour appeared while I was still in Nanjing – on that night when I was highly productive and let go of all constraints. I had the clear feeling that within calligraphy, it all belonged to me now. After all, I had studied for years and years how to perform the various strokes (rods, hooks). It is the same with a language, you reach a point where you are in charge, where the language belongs to you. I started thinking about colour very early on, aware of the fact that, in China, there were other approaches like monochrome painting where colour was also present. However, I kept wondering why there was a certain taboo when it came to colour. For the Chinese, within ink, there are nine tones ranging from very clear to extremely dark. They call it colour, but I come from Europe, so colour to me is life and I could not understand why there was this barrier, this filter, when it came to colour. In China, calligraphy written in red is very rarely found and it really does not go beyond that. When thinking about it now, I started doing something that I had not found in Chinese calligraphy, so I decided to do it myself. Needless to say, I was very happy with the result.

AAN: Did you get positive reactions for bringing colour into calligraphy?
AK: Yes. Within the negative reactions people were saying that by adding colour I was stepping out of the myth of calligraphy, doing something totally different. I let them say whatever they wanted: to

me, it was calligraphy, even if that meant having a different approach to the traditionalists.

AA : In the meantime, has your approach been copied?
AK: A little bit, although I am not aware of everything that is going on. When speaking with Western artists, who have no connection whatsoever with calligraphy, I have the impression that my work also allows Westerners to open up towards calligraphy. Then, they can go deeper and look at the history, for example. I am happy that my work is also helpful in giving calligraphy more access and more visibility in the West.

AAN: The ramifications of Chinese calligraphy seem endless, encompassing so many other fields.
AK: The Chinese are the first to emphasise this and I completely agree: you cannot fully appreciate and understand traditional Chinese painting without referring to calligraphy. The reading of traditional Chinese painting is not accurate, if one has not had an initiation in calligraphy. In China, in Chinese art history classes, it is a must as they consider painting as the 'child' of calligraphy. Calligraphy is the mother of it all and it is not unusual to have Chinese painters use their calligraphy brushes when painting. A proper knowledge of calligraphy and everything it implies allows a true understanding and appreciation of Chinese traditional painting.

We need to be aware that calligraphy (and I am not referring to writing) has been around in China for approximately 2,100 to 2,200 years, whereas for Chinese painting we need to wait another 1,000 years, until approximately the 9th century. Another important thing about calligraphy is that it has been a continuous history that has not known any interruptions. The most accurate definition of Chinese calligraphy I have come across is the one by Pierre Ryckmans (1935-2014), who devoted his entire life to studying the history of China's culture, painting and painting treatises, translating, and commenting on some of them. In 2000, in one of his articles, he described calligraphy the following way: 'Chinese calligraphy is the conscious and deliberate use of writing, for purposes that go beyond communication'. Today, for whoever is interested in calligraphy, there is a broad bibliography, and a lot of new avenues have been opened thanks to the access offered by the internet.

AAN: It took a while until the young generation of Chinese artists rediscovered Chinese calligraphy and even decided to include some of its features in their own work. How do you view the quality of this calligraphy?
AK: It is a very interesting subject. Chinese contemporary painting – and I am referring to contemporary painting in China at large from the end of the 20th to the early 21st century, is part of today's art history, but 90 per cent of it is of very poor quality. A bubble was created when all these artists who invaded the art market, exhibitions, and museums, and I have to say that most of it is really not good, even though there are some exceptions, like Liu Dan or some others. Liu Dan had the right terminology for that type of art: 'Bad Western Art Made in China'.

AAN: Westerners are facing a dilemma as good calligraphy does not need to



André Kneib's installation in the Buddhist Temple of Konpogi in Nagahama, Japan © Courtesy André Kneib



Lightening 闪电 (2005), ink and acrylic on paper, 36 80 cm © Courtesy André Kneib

fulfil certain criteria. How does a Westerner know what is good from what is just average?
AK: It is tragic, but the responsibility for this catastrophe goes to the West, including the buyers and the collectors who have started to add 'zeros' to the prices and produced this generation of people who basically could not care less about art. However, I believe we are now getting back to a more normal situation. In China, there are almost one and a half billion people and I am convinced there are definitely more than six or seven virtuoso artists among them who, because of the international context, have been overlooked. In the West, all too often, the decision-makers within museums, galleries, and publications, are people who often know little about China and put all these artists on a pedestal. Today, in China, there are fabulous things happening that are slowly getting more exposure.

Some painters are inspired by Western art and by traditional art, with a true vocation to create and reflect. They are the ones who will amaze us and, probably within a generation, we will understand that what we saw in the early part of this century had no specific interest and no artistic authenticity.

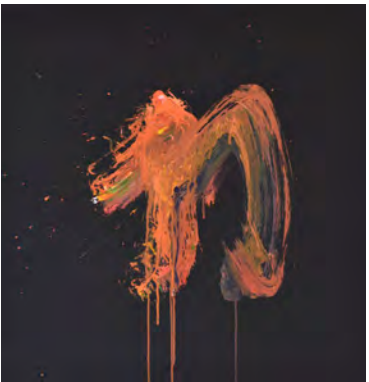
AAN: Some of today's artists are trying to bring Western and Chinese cultures together, although it is not a new trend.
AK: Historically, one of the most interesting cases in Chinese painting is the one of Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit, who went to China in the 18th century, and learned Chinese painting. He was at the Qianlong Emperor's court and when you look at his paintings, you immediately realise that no Chinese artist could have completed these pieces. The same goes for a Westerner. What Castiglione completed is just amazing with an in-depth knowledge of both cultures. Neither did he want to create something 'Chinese-like', or anything 'Western-like'. He was just there and came up with these pieces of unique quality which hold an important place in Chinese art history today.

AAN: Of course, for people who are not initiated, they have no way to find out whether what they see has any artistic value.
AK: Experts like Stephen Goldberg will save us because they know both worlds and they know what they are talking about, and where it is all going. My guess is that within a generation, there will be many such experts. Then, we will no longer have this ambiguous situation we are experiencing right now.

AAN: In addition, most of the time, people do not know or understand what is written on the pieces.
AK: Neither do the Chinese! There is a sub-category in Chinese calligraphy called cursive script. It is often illegible! This is why within the calligraphy exhibitions, the curators add a printed version of the text, so people can manage to decipher something. However, the semantic interpretation of a calligraphy piece, understanding what it is actually about, is secondary. Within the appreciation of the aesthetics of calligraphy, its semantic content is there of course, but it comes second. What comes first is the visual quality of the stroke, of the sign, etc. Of course, when one does not know, one needs to get it explained or when it is a very famous piece, Chinese people know it and somehow recognise it.



The Turquoise Heart 绿松心 (2015), acrylic on paper, 34.5 x 48.5 cm © Courtesy André Kneib



Bamboo (2017), acrylic on canvas 85 x 85 cm © Courtesy André Kneib

traditionally. The scrolls are put into jars, on shelves and, for example, you will see 'old Mr Li' exchanging a piece with 'old Mr Wang'. Then, the pieces are brought out and if both are enthusiastic about it, it is not unusual to have one of them taking out brush and ink and add a few characters onto them. That is why some of these works are overloaded with annotations, called colophons. The Chinese have a tendency to use painting and calligraphy the way we use books, or photo albums: you take them out when you want to tell a story or show something. In that respect, the Chinese term used to appreciate painting is quite self-explanatory: *du hua*, literally meaning to read painting. One reads it. Of course, you will also find some commissions for lobbies of large banks and hotels. However, painting in the noble sense as well as calligraphy is something that needs to be 'manipulated', with an exchange of ideas of views that needs to take place.

AAN: In your work, you tend to focus on one single character. Why?
AK: One of the reasons why I love one single character is because one character is not just one word. It is much more than just one character: for example, the character 'heart' means many different things and can have more than dozens of meanings. To me, looking at and manipulating a Chinese character is already something very poetic. You go from one character to another and you see what it encompasses. Another character I like a lot is the one for 'bamboo'. In China, bamboo has a different status to other plants. I can appreciate all the semantic vigour contained within each Chinese character and it brings me a certain intensity during creation, and while looking at it. I like simple things, like rocks, grass, stars, birds, for example.

AAN: Besides its aesthetic aspect where, according to you, lies the purpose of calligraphy?
AK: Basically, calligraphy is not made to decorate a living room, even

and also to capitalise on it. When there is a masterpiece coming up for sale (if it is not a fake), it is the wealthy Chinese who invest in it.

AAN: Where does that leave the Chinese contemporary art market?
AK: In general, Chinese people do not buy that much contemporary art. One of the reasons being, that they consider some of these young artists being, let us say, Warhol emulators, they would rather own an authentic Warhol lithograph than a work by a Chinese artist who is trying to mimic Western artists. Today, the situation is better than what it used to be. In the past decades, the West created these stars overnight from scratch. Some of these careers were artificially built and according to me, they were not justified. This phenomenon is, however, also visible with some Western artists. It may sound old-fashioned, but in my opinion, with regards to an art work, there needs to be an emotion that reveals itself somehow. It is like a musical or a poetic or a culinary experience: something is happening when listening, reading or tasting exquisite food for your ears, your soul, your eyes or your mouth. For art, it can be more complicated, because we sometimes do not have the training or the culture, but I am convinced that history will sort things out and make its selection.

AAN: To end our conversation, what are your upcoming projects and how do you see the evolution of calligraphy?
AK: I will continue doing what I have been doing for the past 40 years, because it is part of my life. I am not making calligraphy to make exhibitions: I seize the opportunities when I think it is enriching. I guess I will complete calligraphy until my very last day, because I live with it.

- If you would like to read more on the artist's life, André Kneib and the Art of Chinese Calligraphy by Stephen J Goldberg, Editions Méroé, Paris, 2018



Fig 1: Portrait of Wang Shimin, late 17th century, by Gu Jianlong (1606-1687), ink and colour on silk, Qing dynasty (1644-1911), 35.24 x 119.7cm. Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton

CAPTIVE BEAUTIES

Depictions of Women in Late Imperial China

by Coco Banks

Women of all social statuses in imperial China were mostly confined to restricted, highly circumscribed lives. Their worth was often contingent on their beauty and appearance, and their ability to participate in different social environments was usually regulated by the men in their lives as well as by patriarchal Confucian principles.

However, there were exceptions to this rule. Late imperial Chinese painting often featured women as subjects, and while these paintings typically portrayed them inhabiting their status as men's subordinates or as beautiful yet wordless figures, others explored the nuanced reality of gender roles in China, exposing women's inner emotions and personalities and the communities they created for themselves. An exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia), entitled *Captive Beauties: Depictions of Women in Late Imperial China*, explores these concepts through paintings of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. Curated by Mia's Chinese Art curator Liu Yang, these works, all from Mia's significant collection of exquisite Chinese paintings, illustrate the varying positions women occupied in imperial China – from courtesans and entertainers to women of the imperial court.

Some paintings depict women literally hidden from view. *Portrait of Wang Shimin* (Fig 1) by Gu Jianlong portrays the highly respected Qing painter and literatus Wang Shimin in the very centre of the painting, relaxing in the main hall of his living chambers, dominating the painting and commanding reverence. Interestingly, he is far from the only person in his portrait. Women occupy several of the other rooms in



Fig 4: Scholarly Pursuits (detail), late 17th/ mid 18th century, unknown artist, ink and colour on silk, Qing dynasty (1644-1911), 30.96 x 466.25 cm. Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton

his chambers: there are women in the upper right of the painting, one hidden behind a screen, others in the kitchen preparing refreshments. Another woman, presumably a nanny, is to the left of the main hall taking care of a child. This was typical for the family of a scholar-official – the male figure acts as the central focus, while women performed the duties necessary to keep the household functioning. The architectural elements of this painting create an interesting spatial separation between the male and female figures, which acts as a visual gender boundary.

Other paintings treat this gender boundary with more subtlety, allowing women to take more ownership within the scene. One of the paintings in the exhibition, entitled *Beauty in Winter* by Gao Qiwei (Fig 2), is a rare example of a

These paintings illustrate the varying positions women occupied in imperial China

man and a woman occupying almost equal status in relation to one another. A husband and wife are engaged in intimate conversation before a stove on which a pot of wine is warming. There is obvious affection between the two figures as they gaze at one another in this cosy scene. The wife commands an equal amount of space and visual attention to her husband, and rather than being physically separate, they are depicted close together, blurring the boundary between the separate societal roles of men and women. This concept, called *ju an qi mei*, indicates mutual respect and harmony between spouses. Both are dressed in elaborate wintertime clothing, creating visual similarity between the two and further pushing the viewer to see the painting as a portrait of two individual people, rather than a portrait of a man and

his subordinate wife, as in the aforementioned Wang Shimin painting. Interestingly, a painting that only portrays women can still speak to the varied nature of gender boundaries within imperial Chinese society. One such work is called *Lady at Dressing Table*, painted by Wang Qiao (Fig 3). An aristocratic woman, with the help of her maid, arranges her hair in the mirror. The objects in her bedroom give us hints about her social status: the books and scrolls stacked on top of her canopy, the ornate furniture, the bronze vessel full of scrolls and a fly whisk, and her luxurious silk garments all characterise her as a woman of culture, beauty, and wealth. There is an absence of men, but a noticeable presence of typically masculine, scholarly objects. Because this woman is highly educated and



Fig 2: Beauty in Winter, 17th/18th century, by Gao Qiwei (1660-1734), ink and colour on paper, Qing dynasty (1644-1911), 157.16 x 90.01 cm. Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton



Fig 3: Lady at Dressing Table, 1657, by Wang Qiao (active 1657-1680), ink and colour on silk, Qing dynasty (1644-1911), 99.7 x 57.9 cm. Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton

wealthy, she has access to literati accoutrement and can participate in these activities that are often assumed to have been solely male pastimes. This painting allows a glimpse into the private life of a woman, imbuing her with a sense of individuality that is not contingent on the presence of a male figure. However, this woman probably did not spend a lot of time out in public, as elite women were almost exclusively confined to their chambers during late imperial China. Her wealth and status do not free her from patriarchal control and societal restrictions.

In the rare instances that elite women were permitted to appear in public, they were often acting as entertainment – performing music or dancing to please scholarly male patrons and nobles. A painting entitled *Scholarly Pursuits* (Fig 4) portrays such a scene: male scholars are gathered in groups sipping wine and relaxing on ornate furniture surrounded by lush greenery. In one scene, a group of women are performing music on instruments while dressed in beautiful, flowing garments. In contrast to the scene depicted in *Lady at Dressing Table*, these women are not occupying the painting as individuals, but as decorative entities meant for consumption by male audiences. The screen next to the group of musicians is decorated with a floral motif, creating a visual comparison between women and flowers – both acting as objects of beauty, meant to be looked at and appreciated for entertainment and visual pleasure.

These paintings, and the several others included in the exhibition, leave the viewer with a sense that perhaps gender roles in imperial China were not black-and-white. While women were certainly objectified and their lives highly regulated by patriarchal social norms, the exhibition reveals their shifting, nuanced reality hidden below the surface. Throughout the exhibition, women are seen occupying different spaces and inhabiting different societal roles; their relationships with men are not static, but complex and varied.

● Please note that while this exhibition is scheduled to stay on view until July 19, 2020, Mia is closed until further notice due to concerns surrounding the Coronavirus emergency.

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Raja with beautiful female musicians, India, Rajasthan, Jodhpur, around 1750, gift of Danielle Porret Collection, Museum Rietberg Zurich



Two princely lovers, Muhammad Faqirullah Khan, India, probably Lucknow, late Mughal era, 1760-1770, purchased with means of Balthasar and Nanni Reinhart, Museum Rietberg Zurich

with scenes from the epics, legends, other religious stories, as well as depicting the historical traditions from India. However, there was one over-riding subject common to all the paintings – life at court – scenes from the villages being of only marginal interest. It was not only the rulers and their functions that were the main subject matter, but also the day to day life of the court – the recording of religious events, ceremonies, and pastimes – all aspects of a prince's life were portrayed. This is particularly true with the Mughal court and, as a result, this stylised iconography filtered through to the Hindu principalities and was adopted and adapted in the reproduction of their own local court styles.

These other schools of painting included the princely Hindu courts of Rajasthan – the Mewar, Marwar, Kangra and Kulu schools. A particularly rich school of painting came from Guler, part of the group known as Pahari paintings – the name given to Rajput paintings, made in Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir states of India. These paintings developed and flourished during the period of 17th to 19th century, executed mainly in miniature form. They can be divided into two distinct categories on the basis of their geographical range, Basohli and Kulu Style and the Guler and Kangra Style. Pahari style-paintings, in general, were widely influenced by works produced at the Rajput courts, in response to the family relations of the Pahari Rajas with royal courts in Rajasthan. Also developing from the 16th to 19th centuries was the Deccan School, which flourished in Golconda, Tanjor, Hyderabad and Bijapur.

All schools of painting focused on the court – and their rulers – with this deliberately staged panorama of the everyday life of the princes and their followers which unfold in single pictures, or in series. Depending on the epoch and region, the characteristics and the type of presentation differ. Certain symbols of power, such as weapons, horses, elephants or birds of prey, as well as such subject matter as scenes in the women's quarters, falcon hunting or pleasure gardens, seem to have been popular conventions for the representation of court life in every epoch and in all regions.

In addition to individual portraits, it was important to show the princes performing their daily functions at court. The prince's higher social position is easily recognisable, compared to their entourage, this can be seen in the attitude of the courtiers and their stance, their



Ganesha and Saraswati at the court of Raja Parichit of Datia, frontispiece from an unknown series, workshop at the court of Datia in Bundelkhand (now in Madhya Pradesh near Gwalior), 1800-1825, purchased with means of Eberhard and Barbara Fischer, Museum Rietberg Zurich



Pair of lovers, India, Rajasthan, probably Kishangarh, 18th century, Museum Rietberg Zurich



Young prince reading, Ascribed to Shiru, India, Mughal era, Akbar period, around 1600, Museum Rietberg Zurich

clothing and in the composition of the pictures.

The meticulously painted princes and their courtiers thereby becomes a means of emphasising the persona of the ruler and his power even more clearly. Popular subject matters in the paintings include special secular or religious duties, court receptions, audiences (durbars), conversations with other princes, and other 'princely pursuits'.

These scenes show the different phases and customs of court protocol, both in the details of the clothes and ornaments of the figures, as well as in their gestures, such as in the rituals of hospitality, for example, the presentation of betel nut to a guest.

The princes were also portrayed as art lovers and aesthetes, often surrounded by beautiful women and enjoying themselves in luxurious palace rooms, summer pavilions, or pleasure gardens. Such representations contributed to the image of a both powerful and cultivated ruler, who was knowledgeable about art and literature – and who sometimes wrote poetry himself. Knowledge of art, dance and music were all part of high status in life and, indeed, considered part of the necessary attributes of a ruler. Numerous princes were also generous patrons, such as the Mughal emperors Akbar (1542-1605), Jahangir (1569-1627) and Shahjahan (1592-1666), as were the princes of smaller principalities, such as Sansar Chand of Kangra (circa 1765 -1823), who proved to be a great patron of the arts.

domain, the court ladies also took part in these expeditions.

Rulers and princes were not only patrons of the arts, but also promoters and followers of certain religious traditions – keen defenders of the faith. From childhood they were taught by scholars and spiritual teachers and were often instructed in religious and philosophical questions. Religious festivals and acts were part of everyday life at the court and Hindu princes, in particular, liked to be portrayed as worshippers of a particular deity, or even shown as exemplary devotees. These images

not only reflect the religious attitude and dedication of the princes, but also serve to justify and consolidate their power – a direct mandate from above. In certain cases, it illustrated the ruler's wish to transfer the characteristics of a deity to their own personality to promote adoration and give a perception of strength.

In addition to religious acts and small ceremonies, major festivals such as *Holi* (the festival of spring/colours), were also recorded. The depiction of such major occasions allowed the painters to celebrate, and show off to the world, the splendour and wealth of a court. The more personal important celebrations in the life of a ruler, such as weddings and wedding processions, were also important, magnificent motifs in the repertoire of the court painters to use

in the promotion of the magnificence of the prince, his life, and his court.

Although many princesses, prince consorts and even concubines were politically influential, the women in the prince's entourage were mainly recorded in the execution of everyday activities. In addition to their appearance in the depiction of court receptions and other events, the personal dramas and love stories that existed in the female apartments were also hinted at. Making music, looking at pictures, reading, having fun in the palace gardens, bringing up children – all these everyday activities of women were popular painting subjects, without being of specific individuals. Often a woman's facial features are stylised and do not reveal any individual personality – objectified and were mainly used as ancillary subjects to glorify the main subject of the painting, usually a god, prince, or king.

In addition to the typical scenes of princes visiting the women's quarters, the painters often portrayed women entertaining themselves, or their ruler, giving the viewer of the image a rare insight into an area usually inaccessible to the outside world.

Love was also a favourite topic for many artists. Fine examples of the theme are illustrated in scenes from manuscripts based on the life of Krishna. In these paintings romance was greatly celebrated, where women were portrayed as *gopis* (cow girls), as well as numerous depictions of Krishna's beloved consort Radha.

In this genre of paintings, the longing for love was a central theme in the artist's portrayal of the women's world. The miniatures are strongly inspired by the literature found at court. Series of paintings often play with the popular topic of longing and the separation or reunification of a pair of lovers. This subject matter is omnipresent in court poetry and courtly literature of the time. In these images, moods and feelings were created through the choice of colour, details of the chosen location and their facial expressions.

Through all these paintings of princes, lovers, warriors and hunters – as well as the formal depiction of court life – the onlooker can still view and connect to this vanished world of a courtly life. Somewhere to escape, to imagine, and wonder.

● Museum Rietberg had planned an exhibition of Mughal painting over the Spring, but like most institutions world-wide, has had to temporarily close due to Coronavirus. We hope that the exhibition will be rescheduled and will be able to open as soon as the current situation improves.



Reception at the court of the Mughal emperor Shahjahan, fragment from a Padshahnama album, Imperial Mughal workshop, possibly a work by the painter Bishandas, India, Delhi, Mughal era, Shahjahan period, around 1640, gift of Volkart Foundation, Winterthur, Museum Rietberg Zurich



Raja Medini Pal of Basohli, Folio from a series of princely portraits, Master at the court of Mankot, possibly Meju, India, Pahari region, Mankot, around 1730, bequest of Alice Boner Collection, Museum Rietberg Zurich

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, Indian painting was almost exclusively art made for the courts and aristocratic circles. Accordingly, in the portraits of the princes and emperors, the principal patrons of the painters, it was important to relate to the public, and the wider world, the magnificence and the power of these rulers and the command they had over their world. They were not only depicted surrounded by the great splendour of the court in the performance of their duties, but also as individuals in portraits which included the princely attributes and accessories that indicate their status, or characterised their personality. Initially, reality played a secondary role in the representation of these rulers – as the paintings were mainly used for public self-aggrandisement. Status was more important than an individual's character. Although some rulers can be recognised by certain features and facial features, the focus was firmly on the depiction of power.

In the late 16th century, when the Mughal court was recorded in the *Akbarname*, the official chronicle of Akbar's reign (r 1556-1605), the court historian Abu'l Fazl bin Mubarak praised the excellence of the court artists at painting likenesses of the royal family and courtiers.

This was possibly from the influence of Western art that had first been seen in the 1570s, during Emperor Akbar's military campaigns in Gujarat forcing their contact with the Portuguese settlement in Goa and the port of Surat. In 1575, Akbar had sent a deputation to Goa to discover more about the foreigners on his doorstep. This interaction and intrigue with Western art and its concepts continued throughout the Mughal period and under Jahangir the artists increasingly produced naturalistic portraits of the emperor and the court with great detail paid to the depiction of dress and jewellery.

This exhibition, created by the Rietberg, takes a close look at six different areas of court iconography using around 60 paintings from the museum's collection to provide a glimpse of the luxurious life of the princes and courtiers of the period.

The miniatures were painted by the dedicated painters' workshops set up to serve the imperial court, as well as commissioned from other workshops in the other numerous princely courts that existed at that time. These miniatures, in the form of albums, series, or as single leaves, were specifically designed for their princely and aristocratic patrons. The subject matter was wide-ranging,



Winter month: an aristocratic couple playing a game of chess, folio from a Barahmasa series, India, Pahari region, 1820–1830, gift of Horst Metzger Collection, Museum Rietberg Zurich

VIDEO LINKS AND FEATURES AND FROM OUR ARCHIVE

- Exploring the use of colour in Mughal paintings, linked to the Getty exhibition *Rembrandt and the Inspiration of India*, from 2018
- We covered *Rembrandt and the Inspiration of India* in Asian Art Newspaper April 2018 issue
- *Mughal India, Art, Culture and Empire*, at the British Library from 2012, looks at the lives of the Mughal emperors, including the Life of Babur – and their interests, including pastimes, arts and science, and religion
- And for a longer contemplation of Mughal art (an hour), watch a lecture in the Sunday at the Met series, relating to *Wonder of the Age: Master Painters of India, 1100-1900*, the 2012 exhibition at the museum



CLICK HERE to watch a video on the use of colour in Mughal paintings



CLICK HERE to read our April 2018 review of the Getty exhibition



CLICK HERE to watch a video of the 2012 British Library exhibition



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TANTRA

This British Museum exhibition that was scheduled to open in late April has been postponed until the museum can safely reopen again to the public. However, the exhibition can still be explored online.

The radical philosophy that transformed the religious, cultural and political landscape of India and beyond will be explored in a landmark new exhibition at the British Museum that charts the rise and spread of *Tantra*, a set of beliefs and rituals that first emerged in India around AD 500. The exhibition will explore Tantra's transformation of Hinduism and Buddhism, along with its links to the Indian fight for independence and the rise of 1960s counter-culture in the West and its connected philosophy, which originated in medieval India.

Concentrating on the power of divine feminine energy, Tantra inspired the dramatic rise of goddess worship in medieval India and continues to influence contemporary feminist thought and artistic practice. The Sanskrit word *tantra* derives from the verbal root *tan*, meaning 'to weave', or 'compose', and refers to a type of instructional text, often written as a dialogue between a god and a goddess.

From its inception to the present day, Tantra has challenged political and sexual norms around the world. Elements of Tantric philosophy can be found across Asia's diverse cultures, but it remains largely unknown – or misrepresented – in the West. This exhibition features important objects from India, Nepal, Tibet, Japan, as well as the UK, from the 7th century to the present day to explore this complex esoteric traditions.

It is the first major exhibition organised in the UK that focuses on the history of Tantra and its global impact, as well as the first time the British Museum – which houses one of the biggest and most comprehensive collections of Tantric material in the world – will explore this subject through an exhibition. Over 100 objects will be on show, including masterpieces of sculpture, painting, prints and ritual objects, with around one third on loan to the museum from important collections from the UK and internationally.

Tantra's impact is evident across Asia's diverse cultural and religious traditions, but it remains largely unknown – or misrepresented – in the West. Little is known beyond its association to sex and yoga. The exhibition will demonstrate that from its inception, Tantra has challenged political, sexual and gender norms around the world, and that it has always been linked to successive waves of revolutionary thought.

Tantra is a philosophy rooted



Raktayamari in union with Vajravetali, Tibet, 1500s-1600s © The Trustees of the British Museum



Chakrasamvara, Eastern India, 1100s © The Trustees of the British Museum

in sacred instructional texts, *Tantras*, which are often written in the form of a conversation between a god and goddess. On show will be four examples of some of the earliest surviving Tantras in the world, on loan from Cambridge University Library in the UK. Made in Nepal around the 12th century, these texts outline a variety of rituals for invoking one of the many all-powerful Tantric deities, including through visualisations (imaginatively identifying with a deity) and

yoga. Tantras often also described rituals that transgressed existing social and religious boundaries, such as sexual rites and engagement with intoxicants and the traditionally taboo. Such rituals affirmed all aspects of existence as sacred, including the body and the sensual, in order to achieve liberation and generate power. One example in the exhibition describes the benefits of actively engaging in sexual activity with a partner in order to ultimately transcend desire itself: 'By passion the world is bound; by



Kali striding over Shiva, probably Krishnanagar, Bengal, 1890s © The Trustees of the British Museum

passion too it is released'.

The majority of the Tantras and Tantra-related texts focus on the most effective ritual practices (*sadbhanas*) for achieving spiritual enlightenment alongside worldly and supernatural powers. These rituals, which guide the practitioner in sacralising the body, are considered highly dangerous if carried out incorrectly and therefore require initiation and guidance from a Tantric teacher, or *guru*. Tantra did not constitute an independent religion but was rather a movement that infiltrated and transformed South Asia's mainstream religious traditions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. Part of the success of Tantra lay in its ritual transgression of the orthodox codes of conduct prescribed by these dominant traditions.

Tantra presented an alternative *dharm*a ('path of action', or 'duty') to the prevalent Hindu one at the time. Hinduism itself is made up of a vast range of different beliefs, practices and scriptures. Many of its traditions emerged out of the divinely revealed *Vedas* (literally 'knowledge'; a body of texts composed circa 1,500–500 BC) and its later sacred Vedic texts including the *Puranas* ('old', or 'ancient', composed from around

AD 300). The Vedas include liturgical hymns and guidance for Brahmins (priests) on how to deliver them ritually, including through fire offerings to gods (*boma*). Only Brahmins had the authority to use the Vedas in rituals, hence the oft-used scholarly term 'Brahmanical' to describe orthodox Hinduism.

The Puranas were dedicated to the devotional worship and mythologising of deities, especially the gods Vishnu (preserver of the universe), Shiva (destroyer of the universe) and Shakti, also referred to as Mahadevi, or Great Goddess (the universe's all-pervasive force). The rise of Tantra coincided with the rise of three major traditions within Hinduism, each revering one of these deities as the supreme manifestation of the divine: Vaishnavism (centring on Vishnu); Shaivism (centring on Shiva); and Shaktism (centring on Shakti). Tantric teachings first arose among nonconformist devotees of Shiva and Shakti.

By the 7th century, Buddhism had drawn on and creatively adapted Tantric ideas. This Tantric tradition, known as the *Vajrayana* ('Thunderbolt Vehicle') in Buddhist circles, retained the core philosophical teachings of Gautama Buddha and the Mahayana path, but promised

infinitely more powerful, practical methods for attaining the same goal – that of enlightenment. While the Hindu Tantras were understood as the original teachings of Shiva and Shakti and were often framed as dialogues between the deities, the Buddhist Tantras had their own equivalent divine narrators.

Tantra quickly spread across the subcontinent and became a mainstream, pan-Indian movement by about the 9th–10th centuries, transforming and 'Tantrifying' Hinduism and Buddhism. Tantric forms of Buddhism would go on to spread across South, Southeast, East and Central Asia via travelling pilgrims, monks, teachers and merchants.

The exhibition will particularly explore Tantra's radical challenge to gender norms. The Tantric



Chamunda dancing on a corpse, Madhya Pradesh, Central India, 800s © The Trustees of the British Museum



CLICK HERE to find out what goes into conserving a sacred *thangka*

Ramprasad Sen and the goddess Kali, signed P Chakraborty, Bengal, India, 20th century © The Trustees of the British Museum

worldview sees all material reality as animated by Shakti – unlimited, divine feminine power. This inspired the dramatic rise of goddess worship in India and confronted traditional gender roles. Goddesses and female Tantric practitioners will be featured prominently in the exhibition, ranging from a 9th-century sandstone temple relief from Madhya Pradesh depicting the ferocious goddess Chamunda dancing on a corpse, to an 18th-century courtly painting showing female gurus offering Tantric initiation. These depictions transcended conventional images of womanhood as passive and docile.

A number of contemporary works by female artists will also be on display, highlighting the ongoing relevance of Tantra's impact on gender. These works harness Tantric goddesses through the bodies of real women, including Sutapa Biswas' mixed media work *Housewives with Steak-Knives* (1985), which evokes the Tantric goddess Kali in a modern feminist form.

On a more recent note, Tantra also became a tool of revolution during the fight for India's independence in the late 19th century. Indian revolutionaries in Bengal harnessed Tantra for its insurgent potential during colonial rule, reimagining goddesses such



Painting of the goddess Narodakini, Tibet, 1700-1900 © The Trustees of the British Museum



CLICK HERE to watch an exhibition curator Imma Ramos explains What is Tantra?

Tantra quickly spread across the subcontinents and became a pan-Indian movement

during this time will be on show, as well as paintings, photographs and sculptures illustrating Tantra's enduring influence in art and popular culture to the present day.

More information can be found in two blogs posted on the museum's website, where you can explore the ideas brought up by the exhibition until the physical exhibition can open later in the year. One blog is concerned with the conservation of a religious painting to be shown in the exhibition. In summer 2019, a Tibetan *thangka* arrived at the museum's Hiramaya Studio (for East Asian paintings). It was in poor condition, with light-damaged silk borders and flaking paint, so it needed to be treated by conservators before it could be displayed safely in the upcoming exhibition, you can read this in full on the link.

A second blog looks at the meaning of tantra, presented by



Sutapa Biswas, *Housewives with Steak-Knives*, 1985. Medium: oil, acrylics, pencil, collage, white tape on paper on canvas. Dimensions: 245 x 222 cm © Sutapa Biswas. All rights reserved, DACS 2019



A woman visiting two Nath yoginis, North India, Mughal, about 1750 © The Trustees of the British Museum

exhibition curator Imma Ramos, where she explains how this radical South Asian philosophy has been opening up new ways of seeing the world for 1,500 years (link).

In 2016, the British Museum loaned objects to the Wellcome Collection's *Tibet's Secret Temple: Body, Mind and Meditation in Tantric Buddhism*, you can watch via the link.

For further information, The British Museum's collection database records items under the 'Tibet' heading (objects from Nepal, Ladakh and related Himalayan areas are also frequently located on this database as also are many Sino-Tibetan sculptures). These items consist of paintings (mostly *thangkas*, but also prints and a few contemporary paintings), sculptures, ritual equipment, textiles (including costume), masks, musical instruments, vessels, weapons, jewellery, woodwork and photographs. The collection continues to be added to, through fieldwork in the Himalayan regions of the subcontinent, through gift and through purchase.

There is an emphasis in the acquisition date for much of the collection around the years 1890-1950. This is the period when the British in India were in close contact with the Himalayan zone and with Tibet proper – both through the exercise of arms and of trade. Early names associated with the collections include Sir Alexander Cunningham (founder of the Archaeological Survey of India) and L A Waddell. The great 19th-century polymathic collector within the British Museum, Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks acquired and donated many Tibetan objects to the collections up to his death in 1897. The years immediately following the Youngusband Expedition in 1903/04 resulted in large numbers of Tibet-related artefacts entering the national collections.

Following this, the official British presence at Lhasa and Gyantse, as well as at Gangtok in Sikkim, ensured that interesting Tibetan objects reached the national collections (often following the retirement of the officers involved). Well-known names of this category include Bell, Sherring and Richardson. There is no published catalogue of the entire collection but highlights are visible on the museum's website, search Tibet under the Collections tab.

● A catalogue accompanies the exhibition, *Tantra Enlightenment to Revolution* by Imma Ramos, to be published on 30 June 2020, ISBN 978-0500480625, £35



Temple pendants (muchley), late 19th/early 20th century, Katawaz Basin, Afghanistan. Promised gift of Barbara and David Kipper



Armet (tada), with a temple tower (shikara) finial, early 20th century, Odisha, India. Promised gift of Barbara and David Kipper



Geometric snake earrings (pambadam), early 20th century, Velallar, Tamil Nadu, India. Promised gift of Barbara and David Kipper

South Asian Nomadic Jewellery

The wide range of vegetal, geometric, and animal motifs that tribal and nomadic jewellers used when creating silver and gold objects reflects the diverse functions and varied origins of these artworks. This focused exhibition, comprising promised works from the collection of Barbara and David Kipper, represents a sampling of the collection, from ornate headdresses to simple stud earrings, lending insight into their cultural legacy and history.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, cattle-herding nomads from tribes as geographically and culturally diverse as the Ersari and Kuchi of Afghanistan, the Balti of Pakistan, and the Rabari and Ahir of India moved seasonally across Central and South Asia in search of fresh pastures. Although they carried few belongings, these travellers developed a material legacy of adornment practices embodied in the textiles and finely crafted jewellery they wore and bartered, practices that continued as they settled into village settlements over time.

These adornments were made by artists of tremendous skill using a range of traditional techniques still practised today, including sand casting, lost-wax casting, stamping, engraving, enamel inlay, and the careful twisting and soldering of wire. In their original contexts, such objects served as expressions of tribal affiliation, personal wealth, spiritual beliefs, and cultural heritage. They



Vellars worshipping lingam, snake stones and Ganesha, from the book *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, by Edgar Thurston and K Rangachari, first published in 1909,

functioned as capital and currency for men as well as women, protected skin from sunburn and insect bites, and stimulated vital pressure points (*marmas*), to enhance fertility and relieve pain and act as talismans.

The pair of temple pendants (*muchley*) in the exhibition, from Katawaz, were mainly worn suspended from a woman's hair, and were designed to rest on or next to the ears, as they would be too heavy to hang from the ear lobes.

Ribbons were often pulled through the loops to distribute the weight of these earrings over the head and combined with other jewellery. The

Tribal jewellery requires tremendous skill with many techniques still used today, inherited from past masters

Katawaz basin, east of Kandahar, is located along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. As Madhuvanti Ghose in the book *Vanishing Beauty: Asian Jewelry and Ritual Objects from the Barbara and David Kipper Collection* states, these forms have survived and endured practically unchanged over centuries. However, in the course of nomadic peoples' migration, designs were copied, old jewels were sold and new ones commissioned. These designs travelled with the migrants and were often adapted *en route*. This means that much jewellery of this type is difficult to tie to a specific region, or community, and hard to specifically attribute to a particular community – this is especially true for pieces from the areas along both sides of the India-Pakistan and Pakistan-Afghanistan borders. However, broad aesthetic influences from the region have been manifold throughout the long and dynamic history of these ancient lands, now called Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

From the tribal areas of India, three objects show the diversity of design in this type of jewellery. The *pambadam* earrings from Tamil Nadu are only found amongst the Vellalar. This abstract type of personal adornment has long fascinated and intrigued historians and collectors. They consist of cubes and spheres of varying sizes fabricated from sheet gold and assembled into a stylised form of a coiled snake, with a flared, pointed,



Anklets (todo) with floral design, early 20th century, Maldhari, Gujarat, India. Promised gift of Barbara and David Kipper

tapering hood and flat gold dots representing the spots of the hood. Deeply imbued with snake symbolism – fertility, life, and eternity – these earrings are worn exclusively by the women of this agricultural community. The Vellalars are an ancient group who were once part of a larger and more influential land-owning community in Tamil Nadu. Their caste was particularly strong during the Chola dynasty (300 BC to AD 1279), providing courtiers and administration to the Chola kings. Worshipping of snakes is a common part of Hindu devotion and there are still many snake temples throughout Tamil Nadu and other regions of South India.

From Odisha (formerly Orissa), in the northeast of India, is an armet

that uses a Hindu temple motif – a temple tower – as its centrepiece. The *shikara*, ('ancient temple tower') mimics a typical architectural detail found in the temples of the region and is a common design element used in these types of armlets. The word means 'mountain peak' in Sanskrit and refers to the tower on top of the chamber that houses the most significant deity in the temple.

There is also a striking pair of early 20th-century anklets (*todo*) from Gujarat in the Kipper Collection, which are on show in the exhibition, and made by one of the many diverse tribes that live in the state. These intricate and heavily worked silver anklets were made by the Maldharis, a community of semi-nomadic

herdsmen, historically known as the dairymen of the region. Traditional jewellery still remains an integral part of traditional village dress for both men and women in the community.

In recent decades, loss of land due to population growth and industrialisation has had a significant impact on traditions of adornment around the world. And, as rapid urbanisation continues, preserving and understanding the diverse visual legacies of South Asia's nomadic cultures remain urgent areas of study and scholarship.

● The museum is temporarily closed. Adornment: Jewelry of South Asia's Nomadic Cultures is scheduled to run until 9 January, 2021, Art Institute of Chicago, artic.edu

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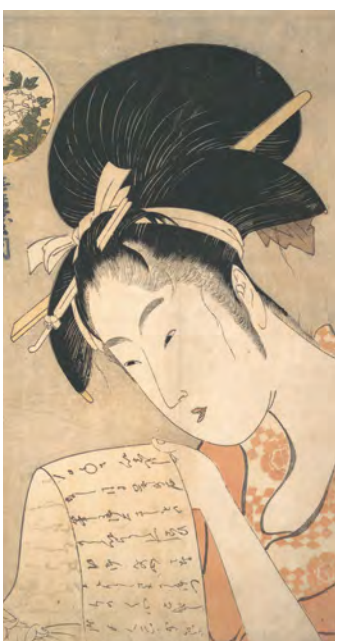
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Felt, Eastern
Caucasus,
Daghestan,
20th century,
Marshall and
Marilyn R Wolf
Collection

From TIMBUKTU to TIBET



Saddle bag, Shahsavan, Iran, 19th century,
Bruce and Olive Baganz



Double-bag (front),
Bakhtiari tribe, Iran,
19th or 20th century,
James C Morel,
New York



In our new pages, *From the Archives*, we look back and update articles published in past issues of the newspaper. Many articles deserve another airing – a chance to either reread and remember, or to discover new subjects and new destinations to explore when our world moves back to more normal times.

Timbuktu to Tibet: Rugs and Textiles of the Hajji Babas was on view in The Textile Museum in its old location in Washington DC in 2008/2009. The museum is now part of the George Washington University Museum. *Splendor from Timbuktu to Tibet: Exotic Rugs and Textiles from New York Collections* was held at the New-York Historical Society in 2008.



Multiple-niche rug, Western China, Xinjiang Province, 19th century,
Marshall and Marilyn R Wolf Collection

This exhibition took visitors on a journey through North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and beyond in *Timbuktu to Tibet: Rugs and Textiles of the Hajji Babas*, an exhibition that examined the central role that rugs and textiles play in diverse cultures around the world. Through the display of 90 Oriental carpets and other woven objects, explored the context in which they were created and used within cultures on several continents.

With textiles, people around the world express their diverse traditions, lifestyles, fashions and technologies, all while addressing fundamental physical, aesthetic and spiritual needs. Textiles serve as clothing, provide shelter and accompany rituals. Through material, colour, pattern, design and other facets, textiles reveal an individual's wealth, social status, occupation, and religious and ethnic associations, as well as a culture's values, codes and social order. Timbuktu to Tibet

Saddle cover,
Azerbaijan,
19th century,
Judy Brick
Freedman

illuminates these encoded messages and explores the varying functions of carpets and textiles. By examining the practical uses and complex iconography of the rugs and textiles on view, the exhibition offers visitors a deeper look into the lives, beliefs and events that shape cultures around the world.

One of the determining factors in how textiles have been made, decorated and used, from Africa to East Asia, is whether they originate in nomadic or settled cultures. The textiles produced by these two types of societies differ greatly in their aesthetic, technical and functional qualities; because of their continuous interaction, however, nomadic and settled people have shaped each other's textile traditions.

In the section 'Nomadic Textiles: Caravans and Animal Covers' the exhibition looked at the design and use of saddle bags and covers. In nomadic societies, textiles facilitated life on the

move and provided a medium for artistic expression. They were made for personal use, solely by women, and only sold in times of extreme hardship. Beyond their practical role as furnishings and other items for everyday living, textiles were used as decoration on animals and in tents during special occasions such as weddings, religious ceremonies and when hosting guests. Traditional designs were passed down by memory from grandmother to mother to daughter, with little change over five or more centuries. Many familiar motifs have now-forgotten origins, such as the illustrated hooked motif rendered in a variety of colour combinations on a 19th-century bag woven by women of the Shahsavan tribe in northwestern Iran. This motif was common to several Iranian and Turkic weaving communities of West and Central Asia. Its origin has never been satisfactorily explained, but the ease with which it was memorised



Ikat panel, Central Asia, Uzbekistan,
19th century, Bruce Westcott



Bridal veil, Central Asia, Tajikistan, 18th or 19th century,
Bruce and Olive Baganz Collection.
All images: Don Tuttle Photography

ensured its continued use with little change over 500 years. Also illustrated is an elaborately embroidered saddle cover, fashioned to adorn a horse that started life belonging to Azerbaijani nomads in the 1800s.

Another section 'Urban Objects: Luxury Goods for the Fashion Leader', explored the role of textiles in more urban communities. Textiles with the most intricate designs, complex weave structures, and expensive silk and metal yarns were produced by people living in settled societies who had greater financial and human resources. For centuries, the wealthy urban elite and ruling families provided the assets to sustain highly specialised and skilled craftsmen, from designers to weavers, who worked on major textile projects. Settled societies also had adequate time and financial means to pursue sericulture, or silk cultivation, and to grow cotton, both of which produce important materials for weaving.

In traditional Islamic urban societies, the fashion leader was the king, shah, sultan or local ruler who, according to the ideals of the time, would maintain an artistic establishment employing poets, artists, musicians and a great variety of skilled craftsmen. These craftsmen produced items of the highest quality, such as weapons, furnishings, clothing and animal trappings for the court's use. These courtly styles were closely followed by people while also keeping an eye on their children. Textiles made within these communities tended to have strong primary colours and bold designs. Their patterns often emulated the sophisticated urban originals but in execution retained the simple beauty and style of a distinct local character.

At another end of the spectrum were textiles produced in rural communities, as explored in

Rugs and textiles play
a central role in
diverse cultures
around the world



Wall hanging, Turkey or Syria,
19th century, Gail Martin



East Caucasian rug, Caucasus, 19th century,
from the Collection of William Fern



Carpet fragment, Safavid,
Iran, 16th century.
Marshall and Marilyn R Wolf Collection



Textile, Turkey, Istanbul, Ottoman,
16th century, The Textile Museum,
acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1952



Embroidered
cover, Central
Asia,
Uzbekistan,
18th or 19th
century,
Marshall and
Marilyn R Wolf
Collection

CLICK HERE
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Baba for free

CLICK HERE
to find out
more about
Hajji Baba Club

its founding, the HBC has met monthly for education, entertainment and fellowship. Members often bring interesting rugs and textiles to meetings so that others can enjoy them and offer their views.

The Hajji Baba Club draws its name from the hero of a 19th-century English novel, *Hajji Baba of Isfahan*, the first in his Hajji Baba series. The author, James Justinian Morier (1782-1849), was a British diplomat and author noted for his novels about the Qajar dynasty in Iran, most famously for the Hajji Baba series. The book, in several editions, is still available for purchase on book websites, or can be read using the link published in this article.

To see a selection of the installation views from The Textile Museum and The New-York Historical Society exhibitions – and find out more about the Hajji Baba Club – visit hajjibaba.org, or use the link to the left.

It is true of all large museum and archival collections that items occasionally go astray, are misplaced, or can simply be forgotten in the recesses of seldom-visited storage facilities. For it is also true that the gifts and legacies bestowed upon many of the 'Great Institutions' often far exceed the resources at their disposal for the cataloguing, research and promotion of their holdings. But although it may be frustrating to imagine the great masses of interesting material languishing unseen on dusty shelves around the world, these circumstances do set the stage for some moments of great drama in the art world when they take the form of sudden and unexpected rediscovery.

Such is the story behind of a collection of several hundred beautifully realised glass-plate photographs that were taken in Burma in the 1890s and which came to light in the collection of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) in London nearly a century later. Donated to the Society in 1937, these photographs were largely forgotten until they happened to catch the eye of Joanna Wright, the then curator of photographs at the RGS, during some routine conservation work. Later when the British Museum curator Richard Blurton began researching images for an exhibition of Burmese lacquer work to be held in London in 2000 for the British Museum, these photos were eventually identified as having been taken by Max and Bertha Ferrars, authors of a large volume of work which they titled simply *Burma* and which was published in London in 1900.

The Ferrars' photographs in the RGS collection are extremely wide-ranging and comprehensive in their subject matter, dealing with virtually all aspects of everyday life in Burma as it existed at the end of the 19th century. In that respect they relate perfectly with the Ferrars' book, in which it appears they set out to document, illustrate and explain all that they could about Burma and the Burmese people. Organised in chapters dealing with childhood, adolescence, manhood and occupation, trades and professions, alien races, politics, and 'pageants and frolics', this volume represents the impressive sum total of their understanding of and opinions on Burmese life. As such, it provides a fascinating addition to the photographic record of early modern Burma as well as to our understanding of the late-Victorian impression of and reaction to it.

Perhaps this is why some of the most compelling images in the collection are those that combine elements of social documentation with a sense of the intensely interested, amazed, and at times even slightly shocked gaze of the eye behind the camera. The numerous images of nursing mothers in the 'childhood' chapter, for example, combine both a sense of the commonplace (from the Burmese point of view) and the earthy or vulgar (from the European), which is made explicit in the accompanying text where it states that 'a curious feature of Burman society is the promiscuous suckling of infants in the circle of relatives and friends'.

This tension between the photographed and the photographer comes through in several other scenes that must have been exotic to Victorian eyes, such as of snake performances and ritual tattooing, and is an important contributor to the particular quality and power of



Traditional Burmese Tattooing, circa 1890s, by Max and Bertha Ferrars, Royal Geographical Society, London

UNEARTHING THE FERRARS ARCHIVE

At the Royal Geographical Society

the resulting photographs.

While this capacity to document both their subject and their creator makes some of the Ferrars photographs impressive social documents, there are others whose value is more purely aesthetic, whose combinations of line and contrasts make them simply and unquestionably beautiful. Such is true of scenes such as *Laungzat Sailing Upstream*, where all the upward movement of the scene is concentrated on the left side of the picture frame in small group of trees and the great curve of the sails, contrasting well with the open emptiness of the water that fills the right side of the photograph. And it is also true of 'ethnographic' scenes of human activity as well, such as the *Yatbe (Buddhist Recluse) Meditating*, where the eye is drawn up a stepped path to the quietly but persistently central human figure, the folds of whose robes echo the shapes of the landscape around him.

These scenes were not overtly orchestrated in studio settings as was so common in much ethnographic photography of the period, and as a result they possess a strong sense of honesty and liveliness. Yet the long exposure times and the bulky equipment that were an unavoidable

component of late 19th-century photography required that, to a certain degree, these scenes had to be prepared and the subjects asked to pose. This comes through in an innate sense of drama – of staging – that makes early photographs such as these so different from the 'snapshot' photography that our technology is capable of today. In images like the Ferrars', we feel not that a single, random, split second has been captured, but that time itself slowed down and stopped at just the right moment for the photograph to be taken.



Two Burman ladies in tamein (traditional wrapped skirts), circa 1890s, by Max and Bertha Ferrars, Royal Geographical Society, London

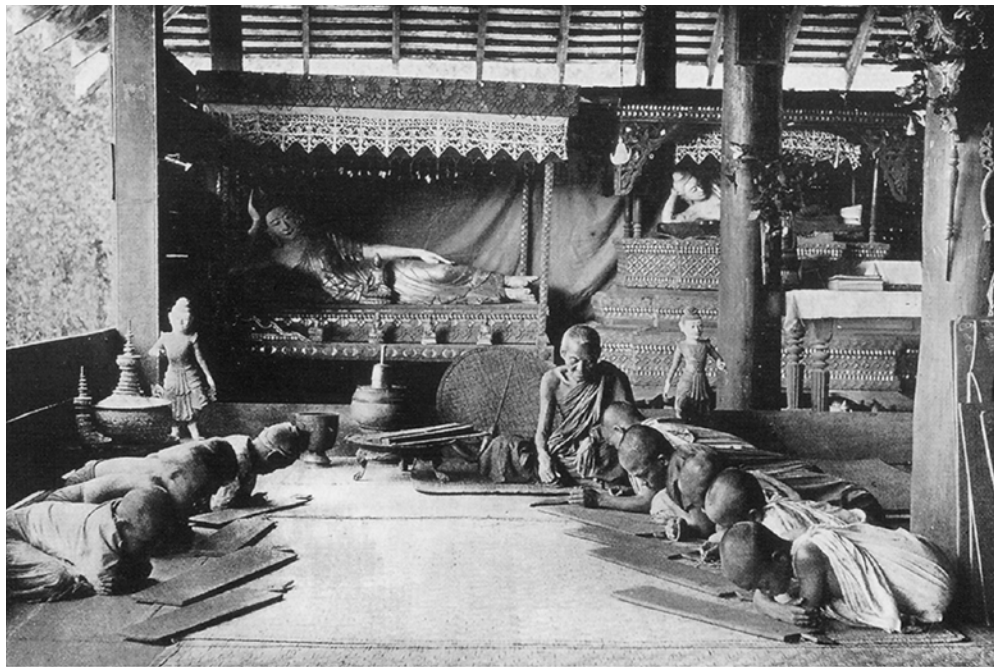
Burmese Chess Players, circa 1890s, by Max and Bertha Ferrars, Royal Geographical Society, London



Burmans carrying water, circa 1890s, by Max and Bertha Ferrars, Royal Geographical Society, London



CLICK HERE for a description of all the photographs



Boys with monk studying at the monastery school, circa 1890s, by Max and Bertha Ferrars, Royal Geographical Society, London

Considering how closely the text in the Ferrars' book matches the photographs in the RGS collection, it is surprising to find that in most cases the RGS photographs of Burma actually do not appear in the book. There are a total of 467 photos in the Society's Ferrars' archive while the book contains 455. While in many cases the images are extremely similar, there are usually slight hand and head gestures or shadows that serve to distinguish between them. Based on these subtle differences, the mostly likely explanation would seem to be that the Ferrars took more than one photograph of each subject that they wanted to include in their volume and that the images in the RGS are in fact the 'rejects'.

This leads us to what is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the Ferrars photo archive and its rediscovery, namely how little is known about Max and Bertha Ferrars and their work, and the gentle allure of mystery that surrounds what we do know. For if the photographs in the collection of the RGS are the 'rejects' from the Ferrars' book, where are the negatives that were eventually used in that volume? Or why, for that matter, did the Ferrars travel to Burma in the first place? As we know that Max Ferrars did not retire from the British Colonial Services in India until 1896 and that, according to the list of illustrations in *Burma*, all the photographs used in the book were developed in the mid-1890s.

Max Henry Ferrars (1846-1933) was a British colonial officer, author, photographer and university lecturer, mainly active in British India and Burma, and later in Freiburg, Germany. He served for nearly 30 years in the Imperial East India Forestry Service and other public

offices in Burma, including as a Director of Public Instruction in the British Colonial Service.

In 1896, the Ferrars returned to Europe and took up residence in the university town of Freiburg, on the outskirts of the Black Forest, in southern Germany. He joined the advisory committee of the city's Museum for Natural Science and Ethnology (at the time called Museum für Natur- und Völkerkunde), offering his knowledge of Burmese culture and donating his collection of photographs, thereby becoming one of the museum's first major sponsors. The Ferrars' collection still constitutes the key part of the museum's holdings on the culture of Burma, featuring over 100 items, among them a large group of traditional and rare Burmese marionettes, pieces of Burmese lacquerware and parts of the wooden door of a Buddhist monastery.

The RGS records that the collection was donated in 1937 by Mrs M McTaggart through V C Scott O'Connor, but little is known for certain regarding the relationship between these two people and the Ferrars. It seems likely that Mrs McTaggart was the wife of the Ferrars' son Peter McTaggart, but this simply raises the problem of why their son used a different surname. Why, for that matter, does the list of illustrations for 'Burma' refer to Bertha Ferrars as the 'Late Mrs L.W. Lewis'?

Photographs of Burma, two albums containing 467 prints by Max and Bertha Ferrars, 1890s, are available for viewing at the Royal Geographical Society in London. Information of Max Ferrars can be found, in German, on Freiburg Museum's website



CLICK HERE to download a free pdf of the original book, Burma by Max and Bertha Ferrars

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AGE OLD CITIES

A Virtual Journey to the Devastated Sites of Mosul, Aleppo, and Palmyra

Beyond the stones, this heritage is a common good, and safeguarding it is the responsibility of all – Jack Lang, president of the Arab World Institute

The Sackler is continuing its programme of using the most recent scientific techniques and computer technology to explore the aspects of historic objects, more deeply and in this case, historic sites. The subject of this exhibition is destruction – the massive demolition meted out by Islamic radicals on three ancient cities in Iraq and Syria: Mosul, Palmyra, and Aleppo.

The destruction of human faces in art and religious structures by Muslim extremists in the cultures of others is nothing new, as these destructive acts paralleled the

expansion of Islam. In recent memory is the destruction in 2001 of the 3rd-century monumental Buddhas at Bamiyan, blown up after the Taliban government declared them idols. Sometimes entire buildings were destroyed, such as the ongoing controversy of a sacred location in northern India – the ancient temple of Ram Janmabhoomi (Rama's birthplace) – destroyed by the Mughals, who built a mosque, which in turn was destroyed, and now a Hindu temple dominates the site.

The aggressive acts of one faith against another are not restricted to the Middle East, for they occurred in Rome against Christians, in the New World by the Spanish against the native cultures, in Europe by the Spanish Inquisition and the British in

India, as well as other Western countries in other parts of Asia.

This daring exhibition has been created to remind us of the stark facts that cultural barbarism in the name of religion, by ISIS and all other radical Islamic groups, has never really disappeared from the human spectrum. By including personal testimonies, it underscores the importance of place and humanity in the preservation of historical and architectural memory, not to mention human life and condition.

The exhibition is divided into three areas, one for each city in which there are several floor-to-ceiling screens onto which are projected computer-generated 3-D images. These are based on photographs of buildings in their present, semi-ruined

state. The staff at the Sackler have superimposed a linear reconstruction of the destroyed section so the visitor can see an image of what the building originally looked like.

It is one thing to see news images of destroyed structures, and even though one is shocked by these, nothing brings home the impact of the amount of actual loss like these reconstructions in 3-D. To drive the point home even further, the projected images, at the beginning, are the buildings in their present state, which gradually change from destroyed to a progressive 3-D reconstruction.

To contextualise the sites, visitors will also see projections of historical photographs of the structures.



3-D reconstruction of Palmyra, Syria

As mentioned, the exhibition offers more than a visual of potential reconstruction of mostly destroyed sites as it introduces visitors to the people who still live in the cities. Several videos throughout the exhibition feature interviews with residents, as well as archaeologists and curators who work at great personal risk to protect and preserve these sites. Other videos explore unique parts of the cities such as the *souks* (markets) of Aleppo, or the tomb of the Three Brothers in Palmyra (an underground burial chamber) that was

turned into an ISIS base of operations. This is a physical cry for peace, starting with the Middle East. Some may think it is a hopeless case unless there are changes within several cultural perceptions, yet one can take a grain of hope in the old adage: 'What the mind can conceive, man can achieve'.

Martin Barnes Lorber
● The National Museum of Asian Art in Washington DC is temporarily closed. Check the museum's website for details of reopening and events that can be viewed on asia.si.edu

SUCH A MORNING

& THE SOVEREIGN FOREST

Since making a name for himself in the world of contemporary art, Amar Kanwar (b 1964, India) has continued to explore the possibilities of film and video. Over the past two decades, he has addressed numerous issues which have been the source of misunderstandings, injustice and violence. *The Sovereign Forest* is a multi-media installation documenting the appropriation of land in the state of Odisha, in Eastern India. Such problems are not new in India, however, it seems that lately, there has been more severe re-appropriating not only of land, but also of natural resources. The fact that Odisha is largely a tribal state reinforces the theme of feeling of helplessness of the local inhabitants.

Such a Morning (2017) brings the feature-length film installation that was previously presented at *documenta 14* to Dubai. The dialogue-free film lets the viewer dive into the life of the



Amar Kanwar, Installation view, The Sovereign Forest, documenta 13, Kassel, 2012, Photo: Henrik Stromberg

leading character, a former university professor, who retires to live in an abandoned train carriage. We follow him as he retreats into a world of his own, leading us to question what it truly means to live in the present moment.

● Ishara Art Foundation, Dubai, until 20 May, ishara.org, and NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, Abu Dhabi, until 30 May



CLICK HERE Listen to the artist talk about The Sovereign Forest



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ALONG THE MIN RIVER

The Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) presents a voyage into 19th-century China through John Thomson's rare album *Foochow and the River Min*. More than 40 landscapes, city views, and portrait studies will be on view, captured by Thomson as he travelled in Fujian province in Southeast China from 1870 to 1871. These prints are complemented by a selection of photographs by the contemporary artist Luo Dan, who was inspired by Thomson to undertake his own journey in southwestern China in 2010.

From 1870 to 1871, the Scottish photographer John Thomson, having started a few years earlier in a studio in Hong Kong, decided to make a photographic record of the area of some 160 miles up the River Min to document the area in and around the city of Fuzhou (Foochow), already a residence of a large foreign population. Foochow sat at the juncture where the River Min served as a tributary to the mighty Yangtze.

This region is a beautiful part of China with its soaring peaks and plunging gorges of incredible depth. Within two years Thomson had gathered together some 80 images for the album, which was sold by subscription to foreign residents of Fuzhou, missionaries, merchants and government officials who were anxious to share their Chinese world back home. Only 46 copies of the album were originally published, but fewer than 10 survive today, two of which are owned by the Peabody Essex.



Hired Laborers (1870-1871) by John Thomson, carbon print, gift of the Estate of Mrs Anthony Rives © Peabody Essex Museum. Photo: Ken Sawyer



His travelogue faithfully covered the remarkable landscape of the region, views of the burgeoning town of Fuchow/Fuzhou and, most importantly, residents of the region. These residents were depicted either as small groups or as singles, half-swallowed in a landscape.

The wet-collodion process he used to create his negative was complicated. He set up a large camera, prepared his negatives on the spot by dipping his plates into light-sensitive chemicals and exposing the plates within five minutes. The exposed negatives were printed using the carbon process which gives them a magical, slightly purplish, otherworldly feel. However, old techniques are not necessarily *passé*, and the renowned contemporary artist, Luo Dan, travelled to the remote Nu River Valley in southwestern China, inspired by Thomson's journey, where he used Thomson's wet-collodion process of some 150 years earlier. The result is *A Lasting Memento*, 10 images that pay homage to Thomson's groundbreaking, photographic genius.

Martin Barnes Lorber

● Peabody Essex Museum is temporarily closed, updates can be found on pem.org. However, you can see a slide show of Thomson's album and an installation view of the exhibition in the link on the right.



CLICK HERE to see more images and an installation view of the exhibition



Sheela Gowda, Installation view at Lenbachhaus, 2020, Photo: Lenbachhaus. Photo: Simone Gänshheimer © Sheela Gowda

SHEELA GOWDA

It Matters



CLICK HERE To download a pdf of the exhibition guide



CLICK HERE To watch a video as the artist explains the thoughts behind her work

In 2019, Sheela Gowda (b 1957, India) won the Maria Lassnig Award, which included a solo exhibition of her work at the Lehnbachhaus in Munich, the artist's first in a museum institution in Germany. The exhibition focuses primarily on the artist's installations that have become her signature works after the artist had been dissatisfied with the medium of oil painting which was the basis of her work until 1992. Relying mostly on found material in her native India, Sheela Gowda shines a spotlight on various issues affecting her country: economic trends, architectural developments, social and spiritual practices, and how they affect the middleclass. The various installations provide a good overview of the artist's approach as she does not shy away from using as basic and common material as human hair, cow dung, plumbing pipes, jute and tar drums that truly echo the message Sheela Gowda wants to get across.

Olivia Sand

● It Matters is temporarily closed, but scheduled to reopen in May and run at Lenbachhaus, Munich until 26 July, more details on lenbachhaus.de



Cao Fei at the opening of her exhibition Blueprints, at the Serpentine Gallery in March 2020



CLICK HERE To download a pdf of the exhibition guide



CLICK HERE To watch a video about the exhibition and artist

CAO FEI

Blueprints

Born in 1978 in Guangzhou, Cao Fei is one of the most innovative young Chinese artists to have emerged on the international scene. Currently living in Beijing, she mixes social commentary, popular aesthetics, references to Surrealism, and documentary conventions in her films and installations. Her works reflect on the rapid and chaotic changes that are occurring in Chinese society today.

Cao Fei's first major institutional show in the UK, *Blueprints*, features work from 2006–2020 and includes the premiere of her first virtual reality work, *The Eternal Wave*, produced in collaboration with Acute Art, and the UK premiere of new film *Nova*. At the centre of Cao Fei's exhibition is an impulse for world-building, imagining and constructing new universes for her

characters that traverse past, present and future time frames. This mode of magical thinking leads to the creation of spaces that are both real and fictional, physical and virtual, a series of blueprints that take us beyond a singular, everyday reality.

This is the third time that the artist has participated in the galleries' artistic programme; the first was as part of *China Power Station: Part 1*, an offsite Serpentine exhibition at Battersea Power Station in 2006, where the artist presented her film *Whose Utopia*, and then in 2008, with the installation of *RMB City* in the Serpentine Gallery foyer.

● Serpentine Gallery, Kensington Gardens, London, serpentinegalleries.org. The exhibition is temporarily closed, however you can download a pdf of the exhibition guide



The Mending Project, 2009–present, mixed media interactive installation, table, chairs, threads, fabric items. Installation view Lee Mingwei and His Relations, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2015. Courtesy: Taipei Fine Arts Museum

LI, GIFTS, AND RITUALS

This exhibition marks the first European mid-career retrospective of the Taiwanese artist Lee Mingwei (b 1964). Known as an installation and performance artist, this exhibition re-stages some essential pieces of his career with a new addition, *Our Peaceable Kingdom*, especially commissioned for the Gropius Bau in Berlin.

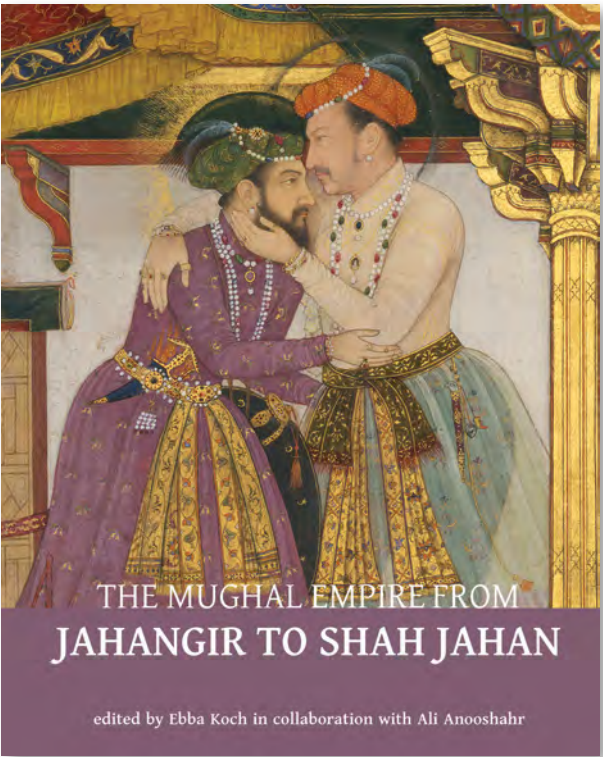
The exhibition is mainly built around the Confucian concept of *Li*, which includes rituals, gifts, and can be seen as a means of behaviour. Further to this idea, 'Gifts and Rituals' show how art can also be seen as a way to transform our existence through the various encounters we make through the course of our lives.

The performances and installations are mainly a result of Lee Mingwei's personal experiences that have constantly been at the centre of his practice. Based on the participation of the audience, the exhibition shows that all

these experiences are found in the traditions of gift-giving and the rituals of receiving. Such is, for example, the case for the performance *The Sleeping Project* that Lee Mingwei originally staged while representing Taiwan during the 2003 Venice Biennale – following a train ride in Europe many years ago that led to a broad conversation with a fellow passenger from Poland, he was moved by the depth of the discussion with a complete stranger. Lee was questioning whether an art institution could also be the place for such a connection, inviting a member of the audience to stay with him for the night.

Olivia Sand

● Sadly, as with most museums around the world, we cannot visit the exhibition at present. Lee Mingwei's projects can be seen on his website, leemingwei.com
● The exhibition is scheduled to run until June, at Gropius Bau, Berlin, gropiusbau.de



An absolute pleasure to read. This volume of essays will have a huge impact on the field of Mughal studies, our understanding of Shah Jahan's reign, the early 17th century and the quality of Early Modernity...what was once a neglected area will probably be one of the most illuminated.

Sunil Kumar, Professor and Head, Department of History, Delhi University

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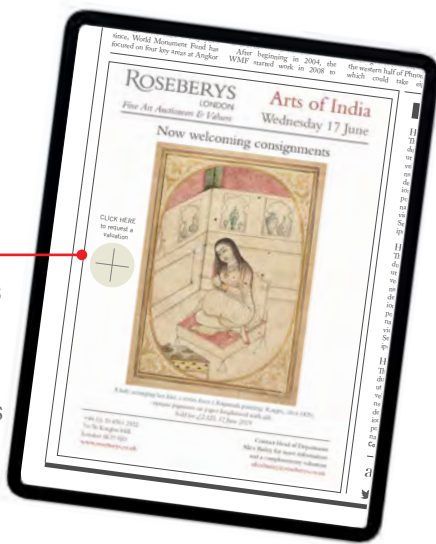
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Islamic Arts Diary

by Lucien de Guise

HAMMERING OUT THE TRUTH

Times have to be hard for Islamic coins to get star billing. The stories they tell are as fascinating as any, and yet they never receive much attention. They tend not to have any portraiture or the fun stuff from Greek, Roman, or medieval European coinage, but they are a mine of information and calligraphy. Being small, they do have the advantage of working better on-screen than in an exhibition space.

At the moment they are part of an online exhibition at the University of Richmond Museums; that is Richmond, Virginia – home to a marvellous collection and an open-minded attitude to the eastern Mediterranean. Before the latest health scare, the Muslim end of the Mediterranean was considered by the popular press to be a combination of disaster zones: mass migration, terrorism and political instability. In centuries past this was the cradle of countless civilisations, many of which can only be remembered through their coins.

Coinage has been the only survivor of many cultures. Buildings can be built over or destroyed either on purpose or by accident. Money, on the other hand, has been traded and hoarded. Both ways it has often survived into the 21st century,



Two Dirhems depicting a five-petalled flower with the Shahada in its centre, from the reign of Mahmud Ghazan, Khan of the Ilkhanate (1295-1304), silver. Gift of Dr and Mrs Chris Theodotou University of Richmond Museums. Photo: Taylor Dabney



Gros depicting Pierre I de Lusignan (1358-1369), King of Cyprus, seated holding sword and orb, silver, 4.64 grams. Gift of Dr and Mrs Chris Theodotou University of Richmond Museums. Photo: Taylor Dabney

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images

CLICK HERE
to watch the
curator, Mike
Laposata,
discuss this
exhibition

giving additional insights into antiquity especially.

The focus of this exhibition is the Middle Ages. *A Pound of Whatever Silver He Pleases: History and Economy in the late Medieval Eastern Mediterranean from the Lora Robins Gallery Coin Collection* is about coinage at a time when it was more than mere currency. It was about power as much as profit. This was a world of interconnectedness, even in Western Europe. Much more so in the eastern Mediterranean. The exhibition combines history and numismatics to understand an important region at a crucial time – the 14th and 15th centuries. Anyone worried about being presented with unlimited numbers of tiny objects should be consoled that there are

only 53 coins in the show, each one with a big story to tell.

The conquest of Constantinople in 1204 by Christian warriors of the Fourth Crusade marks the opening date of this study. It was a low point in many ways, but it did consolidate the influence of Western Europe in the region. Less than a century later, the Latin presence in the East was just about finished through the Mamluk capture of Acre and the loss of the Crusader States in 1291.

Despite these setbacks, the West was still very involved in the economy of the eastern Mediterranean, as the coinage of the time makes clear. The slow collapse of the Byzantine Empire, from the fall of Constantinople to its recapture in 1261, was the backdrop

to this period. Growing Turkish power in the region was another factor. While these decisive events can be traced in other areas of study, the coinage of the Byzantine Empire provides invaluable information on the profound impact of these calamities on the empire.

For Muslim power, this was a period of invasions. The entrance of the Mongols onto the political stage, as well as the decline and destruction of traditionally powerful political entities during these two centuries, marks a dramatic shift in the power structure of the Middle East. These changes are also apparent in the coinage of the period.

Coinage is often the most neglected factor in the history of a place, despite its ability to shed light

on the past. Coinage informs us on issues of politics and the economy because of its role in trade, power projection and art. Tracing the changes of this region through its coinage offers a fresh look at the history of the eastern Mediterranean as well as its aesthetics. Just in case anyone might be wondering about the very long exhibition title, it is taken from a quote by the Victorian historian Hubert Hall: 'But in these things the money-changer is watchful so that he may buy a pound of whatever silver he pleases according to what returns a better profit to himself rather than to what will redound to the profit of the king'.

● The exhibition continues online until the end of next year

DUBAI JAMBOREE

Bringing things more up to date is an exhibition in Dubai. The Lawrie Shabibi gallery has an excellent virtual tour of *Upsurge: Waves, Colour and Illusion*. It is a multi-practice, multi-generational, jamboree comprising Mohamed Melehi (b 1936, Morocco), Mona Saudi (b 1945, Jordan), Hamra Abbas (b 1976, Kuwait), Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim (b 1962, UAE), Shaikha Al Mazrou (b 1988, UAE) and Vivien Zhang (b 1990, China).

The exhibition examines notions of perception within abstract art: how form, colour and contrast affect the visual experience to give illusions of depth or dynamism based on our psychological predisposition.

Different starting points lead each to converge on Op art. This term, coined in 1964 by *Time* magazine, describes a form of abstract art that uses optical illusions. Pioneers included Victor Vasarely and Francis Picabia, although the term is more usually linked to later names such as Josef Albers and Bridget Riley.

For Moroccan modernist Mohamed Melehi, his point of departure was the hard-edge



Mother / Earth (1969) by Mona Saudi, crafted four years after her first sculpture, which had the same name. Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation

abstraction with which he came into contact in New York at the beginning of the 1960s. Melehi's early rectilinear works later morphed into his now-familiar waves. The motif of the wave is, for Melehi, all about movement and change.

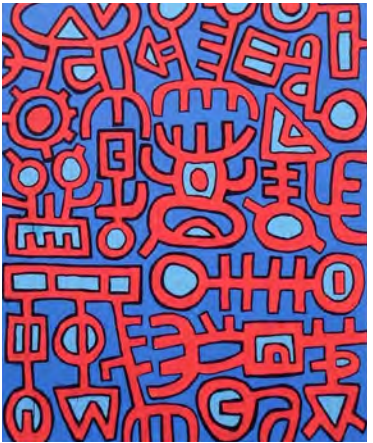
Waves also feature in much of Mona Saudi's work. Working between Beirut and Amman for more than 50 years, Saudi is perhaps the only sculptor from the region to work almost entirely in stone. For Saudi, the wave motif is grounded in nature and the history of the region, its undulations reminiscent of both water and desert.

Upsurge also presents new paintings by Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, populated by the same figures and hieroglyphs seen in his large-scale murals, alongside sculptures re-creating these same characters in the round. Abstract, anthropomorphic, humorous, animated and a little mischievous, these figures inhabit every surface and every shape.

Marble is the medium of choice for Hamra Abbas' *Construction Drawings* (2019), re-creations in black granite and white marble of the complex line drawings that she used

to make her tri-coloured Plexiglas light boxes, which exclude their three primary colours and instead focus solely on their outlines. Colour and line provide both perspective and depth to the works of Shaikha Al Mazrou. Her brightly coloured geometric metal sculptures play with positive and negative tension and illusions of colour and material.

From outside the region is Vivien Zhang, who re-creates the sensations of a digital world. Her motifs are about the layered, endlessly repeated, structured yet semi-random aesthetic that crowds our screens and our lives. Freed from their original interpretations, they generate open networks and 'alternative landscapes' for an imagined generation of third-culture inhabitants, whilst simultaneously flipping in appearance between flatness and depth. The exhibition really could not be more different from old coins and photographs.



7 Untitled (2019) by Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim is one of the six artists in the 'Upsurge' exhibition in Dubai

CAPTURING THE SUBCONTINENT

Another art form of historical importance that was only taken seriously in recent decades is photography. Prints from the pioneering years are highly sought after, even more so when they show the great sites of Asia. Prahlad Bubbar has just produced an exhibition catalogue with works by two of the most eminent practitioners in this field. Linnaeus Tripe and Dr John Murray were both Britons working in the Indian Subcontinent in the mid-19th century. Both were concerned about India's heritage and how to preserve it, as well as being absorbed in the aesthetics of the new art that they were practising.

In the catalogue, it is Murray's work that concentrates on some of the most significant Islamic monuments of the Subcontinent. He was a medical doctor who became Principal of the Medical School in Agra. As a hobby he used photography to capture Mughal monuments and landscapes in and around Agra, Delhi and Fatehpur Sikri. His commitment was compounded by a desire to test and

master technical aspects of this recently invented medium. He favoured the technique of the Calotype, with large waxed paper negatives to produce expressive and stark prints.

Murray's main influence was the idealised romanticism of the Picturesque, a movement characteristic of earlier British painting that found particular expression in India through the paintings of William Hodges and Thomas and William Daniell. Murray often returned to the same subjects in his photographs, creating images of monuments from different points of view to document in detail all the different architectural features of the buildings. This process was also a way for him to experiment with the possibilities of photography. These are captivating images that exploit the monumentality of buildings and the atmospheric use of light. They are also somewhat larger than might be expected. The prints in this exhibition are around 45 centimetres wide.

● Linnaeus Tripe and Dr John Murray: Important Photographs of India at Prahlad Bubbar Gallery, London.



The Taj Mahal. Agra by Dr John Murray, India, circa 1850, albumen print from a waxed paper negative, 38.4 x 43.2 cm. Courtesy Prahlad Bubbar, London

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The Seed (2007) by Mona Saudi, in marble. Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and Mona Saudi

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