Book Reviews

Saloni Mathur, *India by Design – Colonial History and Cultural Display*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2007, hardback, £35.00, paper £11.95, pp 219.

Two very different Indian exhibitions frame London's 2009 museum calendar -— the *Indian Highway*, described by its host, the Serpentine Gallery, as a timely presentation of the pioneering work being made in India today and the Victoria and Albert Museum's *Maharaja: the Splendour or India's Royal Courts*. The latter which runs to 2010 is described in the Museum's marketing literature as 'exploring the extraordinary culture of princely India …within a broader historical context of princely life and ideals, patronage, court culture and alliances'.

Maharaja–seems likely to reflect precisely the "predicament of culture" – a term so aptly coined by James Clifford – which lies at the heart of Saloni Mathur's excellent book, *India by Design*.— As Mathur would argue, 'culture and its representations remain in important ways rooted in the assumptions of the colonial modern in spite of the complex processes in the twentieth century of political independence and decolonization. The representational dilemmas of two decades ago – for example the problem identified as Raj Nostalgia in exhibitions and other cultural texts – appear to be reworked rather than resolved in the present global cultural landscape.'– *Indian Highway*, meanwhile, attempting perhaps too much in too small a space, reflected related dilemmas. The inclusion of exiled artist M. F. Husain was a deliberate challenge to religious-political conservatism, but was little discussed other than in relation to the need for additional security. The work of several artists attracted that familiar critical trope – the charge of belated mimesis, and the instruction to return to what can only be called "essential tradition":– 'Indian artists should be allowed to fully emerge themselves, because many seem dangerously in thrall to Western art and not mindful enough of their own culture. There are exceptions, with the savviest and best Indian artists realizing that it's better to utilize those materials and ideas that are most familiar to them – to make work their way, or the highway." (Ossian Ward, *Time Out* www.timeout.com/lonond/art/event/124789/indian-highway.html)

Ironically, while contact with India and its art and culture continues to grow exponentially, there is still insufficient focused, critical and perceptive analysis of these encounters, or of the institutional structures which frame them.–Mathur's book is, however, a striking contribution, which is already playing a leading role in this debate. As she argues, the combined and continuing fascination with contemporary Indian art, with Indian design, with Indian craft and tradition, can only be fully understood in the context of the complex of meanings generated by 150 years of popular encounter of Indian cultures with the West. The point of departure of Mathur's analysis is, appropriately, the Great Exhibition of 1851, where the Indian display transformed an eclectic inventory of over 15,000 objects into a drama of Britain's imperial power – praised for the educational value of the raw materials' display, for the creativity and ingenuity of its art and manufactures, and for the exotic excitement of the loans from India's royal princes. But the primary focus of her work is the 1880s, the apparent heyday of Britain's Indian empire, when Victorian industrial consumption was both creating the economies of desire and was yet beset by growing insecurities about rapid social change and fraught with only partially hidden tensions. The method adopted by Mathur is central to her argument. Challenging both the concept of cultural transmission from metropolis to colony or its reverse, and rejecting the conventional account of the "influence of Indian styles" on the West, the book focuses on the international arena of colonial visual forms–and their cosmopolitan circuits of exhibition and

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display, but it does so in a way that differs significantly from earlier studies of these arenas. Mathur *moves* (her emphasis) with her subjects from India to Britain and back, from context to context and through the range of temporal and spatial formations that map colonial relationships, emphasizing a series of social dramas and controversies that reflect both colonial preoccupations and tensions. The result is a memorable and lively account which vividly demonstrates, indeed enacts,– her key arguments.

Looking both backward to influences from the earlier colonial period and forward to the nationalist and post-colonial periods, the moment of "high empire" is the primary concern of each of the five core chapters of the book. A key leitmotif of the volume is the painting *A Peep at the Train*, by the Austrian artist Rudolph Swoboda, commissioned by Queen Victoria and exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in the early 1890s. The painting depicts in the foreground an old man and group of children positioned around a wooden fence, with a fragment of railway line in the foreground left corner.- The image not only reflects the contemporary anthropological interest in the physical landscape of the Indian village (despite being ethnographically inaccurate) but is also of interest because of its 'peep' at the preoccupations of the European imaginary, colonial knowledge and the controversies that it serves to predict.– It thus exposes several convergent strands of signification regarding "traditional India" at the end of the nineteenth century, at the heart of which is a focus on the Indian craftsman – the "cult of the craftsman"– as Mathur defines it. The craftsman is the focus of the first chapter which explores a promotional exhibition by Liberty, the London department store,of "living village artisans" which brought Indian villagers to perform their craft traditions for audiences in Battersea Park in the winter of 1885. The exhibition was a failure. The "performers", deceived by the agent, were inadequately provided for and humiliated; they found Indian and British champions and entered into dispute with Liberty's. Mathur situates the debacle within the larger historical background of concern with the importation of British textiles into India and the appropriation of the image of the Indian craftsman into nationalist discourse, demonstrating how the nexus of relationships between modernity and the craftsman which have remained a significant part of independent India's contemporary cultural debate was over-determined by particular rhetorical and material effects of the colonial economy.

The second chapter flows from this, with an account of the ethnological display of native artisans at the Colonial and Indian exhibition of 1886 (the artisans were a group of marginal Indian men, prisoners from Agra jail, and a homeless Punjabi agriculturalist from India in London). Demonstrating the internal tensions within the social management of the exhibition and the conflict between imperial and subaltern interests, she focuses on the case of Tulsi Ram, one of the "ethnological exhibits" who was in fact a destitute Indian who had found his way to London to seek justice from Queen Victoria for his land dispute in the Punjab. Through Tulsi Ram's sad battle with imperial bureaucracy and the mechanisms of social control in the London of the time, the exhibited subjects of the exhibition regain a subjectivity – a perspective that challenges their containment as ethnic objects.

Queen Victoria, who received several of the exhibited artisans (although not Tulsi Ram) at Windsor, subsequently commissioned Swoboda to produce their portraits, some of the studies for which were reused in *A Peep at the Train*. From this starting point, Mathur investigates the practices of painting both of India and within India in the period, highlighting the discrepancies between European and Indian painters- that occurred with the institutionalization of oil painting in the subcontinent in the late nineteenth century. Her account of the contrast between Swoboda's Indian career and that of the pre-eminent painter of the period, Raja Ravi Varma provides an insight into asymmetries built into the history of oil painting and the representational dilemmas that persist today.

Building then on themes of mobility, agency and the display of the colonized body and the representational portrait, Mathur turns to a less familiar medium – that of the colonial postcard - the object of an unusual collecting craze throughout Europe at the turn of the twentieth century.— She offers a feminist reading of this visual form, which both carried commodified female images and was largely consumed and collected by European women. In so doing, she argues for a new reading of women's different relationships to the colonial public sphere.

The final chapter returns from the sphere of domestic consumption to the more familiar territory of the museum world,– archaeology and the themes of acquisition, ownership, belonging and return, with a case of Buddhist relics excavated in Sanchi in the late nineteenth century which were returned to India by– the Victoria and Albert Museum in the 1950s. Here Mathur argues that the value of the relics has been produced and sustained through the acts of social exchange that have characterized their "life" since their excavation, including their return to India, while also reflecting on the complexity of issues of cultural property in post-partition South Asia.

Mathur's book sits at the convergence of discussions in art history, anthropology, museum studies and post-colonial criticism, dislodging, as she herself states, 'a stock of popular images of traditional India from the epistemic structures in which they are embedded and through which they have acquired their representational strength'. Such an approach could not have developed without the groundbreaking contributions of Edward Said, the perceptions of India's subaltern historians, the work of anthropologists Carol Breckenridge on transnational cultural flows and Arjun Appadurai on the social life of things, or the insights of social art historian,– T. J. Clark. But Mathur's work bears a particular and striking imprint which is all her own. The title of *India by Design* is deliberately polysemic, suggesting both political context and contrivance and the significance of the aesthetic production however defined. The book is a major contribution to our understanding of both colonial and contemporary Indian culture, confronting as it does both the enduring legacy and the powerful visual basis of our modern paradigms for cultural difference.

Courtauld Institute of Art **Deborah Swallow**

Pieter ter Keurs (ed.), *Colonial Collections Revisited*, Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2007, paper €36, pp. x + 269.

The question of what followed the planting of European flags in non-Europeans lands is central to any understanding of the processes, contexts and consequences of imperial history. Of course, this question is inextricably linked to the issues of when, why and by whom each individual flag of empire was planted. Indeed, there is much evidence and an increasing body of scholarship to suggest that certain features of imperialism and colonialism, such as the introduction of Christianity by European missionaries, preceded formal political control. This collection of essays, edited by Pieter ter Keurs of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde (National Museum of Ethnology) in Leiden, explores a particular aspect of this theme of European encounters with non-European peoples and places. Using the example of the Dutch East Indies, it sets out to interrogate how collecting objects from colonial territories (and, by extension, their display and study) reflects and impacts upon relationships between European colonizers and the non-European colonized. Put another way, taken together the essays raise the intriguing question of how soon collectors followed those colonial flags, and whether our understanding of what it means to 'collect' or to be a 'collector' is sufficient in this particular context.

As ter Keurs points out in his introduction, the subject of 'colonial collecting' is laden with contradictions. Indeed, the constituent words of the phrase bring together two of the most contingent terms in museological discourse and practice. There has been much work done on the historical context and legacy of events like colonial exhibitions. In the world of Anglophone scholarship, one thinks of the work of people like Jeffrey Auerbach, Paul Greenhalgh and Richard Altick. Yet, research on how the actual collections themselves were compiled, how objects were collected and selected, and what happened to them afterwards still requires detailed consideration. These essays do not pretend to provide answers to the broader issues of how museums deal with the colonial legacy of collecting or, indeed, the collecting legacy of colonialism. In fact, this book is more focused than its title suggests. The essays are the result of a conference held in Amsterdam in March 2006 on the topic of 'Collecting Cultural Heritage in Indonesia: Ethics, Science and Politics'. This event was, in turn, the product of a joint project launched in January 2004 between the National Museum of Indonesia in Jakarta and the Dutch Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde. The aims of the project were manifold, and the present

publication represents only one strand of a much larger collaborative endeavour. Two exhibitions and associated catalogues also resulted from the project, indicating the fruitfulness both of the subject and the partnership that enabled its examination. Facing the challenges of dealing with such history, this approach might provide a suitable model around which museums in other countries can explore the legacy of their collections, as well as reconnect parts of these collections with institutions and audiences across the globe.

The act of collecting, as well as the nature of relationship between collector and local population, took many forms. In the context of the Dutch encounter with today's Indonesia, military coercion undoubtedly played a part. Harm Stevens reminds us that the boxes of ethnographic objects collected by G. C. E. van Daalen in Aceh in 1904 are irrevocably linked to the military operations carried out by the Dutch colonial authorities in the region. Frequently, and as other contributions to the publication detail, the people doing the collecting were simultaneously acting as both ethnographers and soldiers. The hundreds of objects now housed in places like the Wereldmuseum (World Museum) in Rotterdam and the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde clearly point to the fact that pioneers of colonial expansion and ethnographical discovery were often one and the same. An appreciation of that connection, brought to light over the course of this project, can and must inform the interpretation of museum collections. Yet, it is also worth emphasizing the contradictions. The entangled nature of the subject is emphasised, for example, by the fact that while large amounts of material were brought together through military coercion, the colonial moment also provided possibilities for indigenous people in terms of the selling and commissioning of objects for European collections. The possibilities, interactions and connections opened up by the globalising nature of colonialism require careful, nuanced and informed understanding and interpretation.

There is much that needs to be considered in relation to how such relationships, and the study and display of objects associated with it, had an impact on museums and societies in Europe. This is developed in the essay by Margaret Wiener where she explores the 'magical life of *kris*' royal Indonesian daggers (p. 46). She describes how interpretations, derived in part from the act and context of colonial collecting, have accreted around certain objects and continue to influence their interpretation and display. This example reminds us, of course, that collecting results in both display and study, and that the history of collecting is closely linked to the history of display. While there are fleeting references to this topic throughout the book, further and more widespread investigation of the history of the bifurcated results of collecting is long overdue. Another theme touched on here but worthy of further consideration is the image of the collector as explorer (and vice versa, of course). The silence of the archive and the absence in records, combined with the bravado of published texts, has undoubtedly skewed our understanding of the role of individuals in amassing objects and information. The artistic travels of W. O. J. Nieuwenkamp,detailed in Francine Brinkgreve and David Stuart-Fox's essay, are analogous to the work of people like Thomas Baines in British colonies, who painted and sold images of these spaces in order to finance further travels and explorations. The representation of colonial spaces is inextricably connected to their exploration by Europeans and their compartmentalisation for European 'consumption'.

The lack of any other contextual essay apart from Brian Durrans's contribution is possibly due to the focused nature of the conference and the project in general. It signals, however, an important lacuna in the treatment of the subject. In her essay, Pauline Schleurer explores the role of the Batavian Society for the Arts and Society, which was founded in 1778 and proudly claims to be the 'first learned society in Asia' (p. 84). It was founded six years (rather than eight, as essay the claims) before the Asiatic Society of Bengal (which was established as the 'Asiatick Society'). Yet, the analogies, comparisons and contrasts between these two institutional approaches to European collecting in Asia are left unexplored. While the parameters of this particular project may have precluded such an examination, the investigation of the heterogeneous nature of European encounters with Asian societies, which continue to have ramifications for collecting and display, needs further consideration.

There are a few minor stylistic quibbles, such as an annoying inconsistency in the notation style. Having said that, most of the essayists have included useful lists of further reading. Perhaps the book's most important contribution, however, is in serving to remind us that 'collections' say a lot about the types of 'contact' between cultures. For example, as Ruth

Barnes points out, the Tradescants' collection of material is an example of an early European museum but it is also a reminder of evidence of early contact (p. 203, n. 2). Museum collections provide physical, material proof of the existence of that contact, and a reminder of the power of objects and their display to recall important historical events.

National Maritime Museum, Greenwich **John McAleer**

Rhiannon Mason, *Museums, Nations, Identities: Wales and its National Museums*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007, hardback £45.00, pp.300, figs 27.

Mason's book on Welsh Museums delivers value for money. It would be difficult to squeeze more text into 300 pages, and the demands of book production have led to omitting a list of figures and even a half-title page. And it covers a great deal, with five chapters after a 60-page introduction to set the context, on the politics of the particular exemplar of national identity used here, that of the 'state-less nation' of Wales. These chapters examine first the concepts of nations and their national museums, followed by a detailed history of the creation of the National Museum of Wales in the 1920s. The Museum of Welsh Life, which has had several changes of name but is perhaps best known as St Fagans, is the subject of Chapter 3, the art collections of chapter 4 and the conservation of the industrial and maritime heritage of Chapter 5. I should have liked to see a further chapter on the relationship between natural history collections and the nation, but the gap between natural heritage and cultural heritage is difficult to bridge. Regrettably the admirable quality of the English has not been matched by the quality of the copy-editing, which is particularly unfortunate for a university press dealing with museology, whose professionals have an entirely laudable concern for detail and precision. There are missing words on many pages.

The discussion on nations, nationhood, on the distinctions between civic nations and ethnic nations is a concise and well ordered summary of much recent, and not so recent, work. Now that National Museums are free to the public, there is clearly a significant value to the public in having the designation. This is not without problems of course. At St Fagans free entry into the museum, which is largely green space, has turned the museum into the local park, used for playing football, or having picnics. This itself can cause differences of view within the staff. And not all national museums are free; those that exist in the English provinces charge for entry, e.g. the branch of the National Maritime Museum in Falmouth, so the Welsh visitor can be thankful for the status of their museum.

Mason examines in some detail, and with real understanding, the various roles that National Museums have been expected to play, using her case study of Wales to illuminate other cases in a particularly valuable way. As a geographer the comparison with the National Parks is an obvious one to make, but the history here is different. The Park concept, originating in the USA, assumed that the ownership was vested in the nation state. Even though this is not the case in the British national parks, they have not much regarded themselves as representing the nation; Dartmoor National Park Authority tries to look after Dartmoor in the interests of the nation, but does not expect to be promoting any particularly British version of conservation, or of landscape. As for the Welsh national parks, it is even unclear which nation is intended. So the 'enlistment' of the national museums in the campaigns to promote national identity is not a simple and inevitable consequence of their nomenclature. Similarly the presumption that museums should reflect their local area (whether that is a city, county or nation) is again not inevitable. Indeed, in a pre-television age, the point of the museum visit was often to see the rest of the world. This obsession with advertising your own patch is now even spreading to the zoo world. Some major zoos now have collections devoted to the wildlife of the local area; shall we shortly see all 'alien species' being repatriated?

The problem of a Welsh art identity is particularly fraught. Almost by definition art has long been an activity centred on the metropolis, and that means London, not Cardiff. Painting in the provinces, and perhaps landscape painting in general, can be seen as a reaction against metropolitan dominance, in the same way as the interest in folk music and dance. Dictionaries of artists, and literature devoted to the art of a part of the country, traditionally took place of birth

as the critical factor, even though in the majority of cases the most successful artists, (and writers and composers) made their living in the capital. Inevitably, therefore, much of the art which depicts Wales will be by English artists on tour. Certainly the great peaks of popularity in Welsh landscapes, the 1800s (largely based on the Snowdonian mountains) and the 1850s (centred on the rivers especially Llangollen and Bettws y Coed) were largely by visitors, although the great rise in the late twentieth century was more locally based, notably with Kyffin Williams. Indeed the iconic view of the 1800s, of Dolbadern Castle, was largely a substitute for the inability to get to the Alpine castles and lakes (especially Chillon) during the Napoleonic Wars. No wonder galleries have difficulty in dealing with heritage that is, and was always intended to be, saleable and portable.

This is not a book where the visitor plays an active role. A great deal of research into museums has worked almost exclusively with a data set derived from interviews with visitors, and indeed with non-visitors, both local and tourist, and from many of the groups comprising the supposed target audience. Mason has largely eschewed such material, in favour of document-based research. This has the welcome advantage of a degree of certainty of the findings, but it is at the cost that we never really discover what the people of Wales (other than their political and journalistic representatives) think of the national aspirations of their museums. That may be a particular problem with the other ethnic groups within Wales, which of course includes many English.

Mason, in her conclusions, clearly does not feel that her work is 'the last word' in the field of nationalism and museums, even within Wales. Yet I rather hope it will be. While reading the book I was confronted with a newspaper report of a vicious assault in Edinburgh, racially aggravated as it was specifically because of the victim's English accent. Having been involved in several Scottish universities, I am also aware of the considerable numbers of Scottish academics working within many disciplines, the fruit of whose labours is to re-emphasize the differences between Scottish and English cultures. They would all, I am sure, be horrified by the assault in Edinburgh; yet to what extent will their own work be misused to bolster and give authority to the prejudices of those prepared to use violence? At the least such work may do nothing to eradicate the nationalistic climate of opinion where such attacks become thinkable. Mason's book on Welsh museums and nationality is a very balanced and scholarly account of the problems and the issues. Those who take the trouble to read it in detail ought not to be inflamed in any prejudices they might hold. But perhaps it is time for academics to stop following the political obsession with national identity (in England at least as much as in Wales) and move on. Museums, even national museums, have other purposes also.

Peter Howard