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Title	<i>Repainting Ajanta: the global impact of the Frescoes and their copies</i>
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Contributor I'm going to talk mainly about some published material that's in the collections at Oxford, in the Bodleian Collections at Oxford. Specifically four rare publications from the early 20th Century which we can see also represent Indian traces on the cultural landscape of Oxford or at least on the landscape of the Bodleian.

In addition to that, they point to something with a much wider ranging significance, namely, the neglected influence of Indian art and literature on the development of modernism in the west and also in East Asia as well.

We might call this less of an Indian trace and more of an Indian foundation especially in the case of western modernism. So to get to business, first we have a deluxe folio that reproduces some copies in watercolour of probably the most famous historical Buddhist paintings of all – The Ajanta Frescoes. These copies were organised by Lady Christiana Herringham and executed with the help of a team of students sent from Calcutta by the important early modernist painter Abanindranath Tagore and we'll talk more about that relationship later.

Okay the team sent by Abanindranath included Nandalal Bose who maintained a long relationship with the Ajanta Frescoes and became one of the world's great high modernists in the Post World War I period.

The copies were completed mainly during the winter of 1910 to 11 and they were published in 1915 by a combination of the India Societies of Calcutta and London.

Secondly we have some earlier copies of the Frescoes that were done by John Griffiths of the Bombay School of Art in the 1870s and 1880s. We'll be looking at some of the differences between the styles of the two sets of copies and one earlier set as well.

After that we have a collection of photographs also of the Ajanta Caves also taken between 1910 and 1911 by one Victor [[Golobev 0:02:19]] a Russian aristocrat who was photographing for Art Asiatica and didn't actually publish the photographs until after World War I due to war time problems with publications in Paris.

Okay finally we have a printed booklet containing three poems by the Anglo Sinhalese

author and art critic, Ananda K [[Kumaraswamy 0:02:43]] who will, whose name we'll hear a lot during the talk. With a 1920 wood cut by the sculptor Eric Gill that is very clearly inspired by the Frescoes and I would direct you to the display in the Proscholium to have a closer look at those wood cut and the poem itself which I'll recite at the end.

So, how to connect these objects and what inference to draw out of the connections? For the benefit of members of the audience who are less familiar with art history it's useful to start with a little bit of background to the Ajanta Frescoes themselves and also to mention the previous attempts to copy them which were all doomed to disaster of one kind or another.

Now the Ajanta Caves are not really caves at all. This is an engraving from the second attempt to copy the Frescoes, John Griffiths' attempt in the 1870s and 80s. They're actually a complex of Buddhist meeting rooms and meditation halls carved from the living rock between the 2nd Century BCE and the 6th Century CE. They were painted, probably by artists who were also ordained members of the monastic community, okay. Mainly with scenes from the Jatakas which for those that don't know are picturesque narratives of Gautama Buddha's previous incarnations. These were probably used as teaching aids by the other monks.

Now it's this idea of a working community of artists, artists with a similar religious background all working in the cause of a religion and producing religious artefacts that really inspires Eric Gill. It's one of the things that really drives Eric Gill's enthusiasm for Indian art in general. And we'll talk a bit more about his Indian inspired sculptures and wood cuts later on.

Because of the various invasions and political upheavals that characterised the history of the north and the west of India between the 11th and 13th Centuries. The Ajanta complex itself was lost to memory for hundreds of years and it came back to light really again in 1819 when the hunting party chanced upon it while lost.

One of the best early descriptions is by Sir Wilmot Herringham, the husband of Christiana. And this was written on their initial visit to the caves in 1906 and it was published alongside the copies of the Frescoes in 1915. I will read it out so you can form a picture in your minds alongside the black and white image we have.

"The caves..." He says "...are cut in the wide concave sweep of precipitous hill side so that the entrance of the first faces the black mouth of the last at a distance of some 500 yards. Between the columns of many of the temples are hung great nests of wild bees which must be carefully humoured to prevent dangerous hostilities.

And in the deep recesses, gibbering bats crawl sliding along the rock cornices unaware that the concentrated stench of their centuries of occupation is their most formidable defence against man's intrusion. In the rains, the river becomes a mighty torrent but in winter it dwindles to a stream with a few pools in it. Green parrots fly across it in the sunshine, monkeys, boars and the occasionally panther haunt it. It is a wild and beautiful place."

Now the bats mentioned quite emphatically there by Sir Wilmot had already caused some damage to the Frescoes. And by the middle of the 19th Century the unfortunate European habit of wanting to take home pieces of other cultures' architecture and art had contributed further to their destruction. Major Gill who started the first series of copies actually lists some of the depredations by tourists to the Ajanta Frescoes before he arrived there. Including particularly chipping off faces from sculptures and taking them home in pockets, okay.

So the – really the destruction was continuing at pace. And Robert Gill who was also a Major in the Madras Army was sent to restore and copy the paintings for posterity in the mid 19th Century. His efforts at conservation were well intentioned but they damaged the Frescoes further.

I quote from an 1873 Memorandum wherein he defends his actions to the Secretary of State for India. I quote, “When I made my copies of the paintings...” He says “...the whole of them were carefully cleaned, washed and varnished.” Unquote. And well his *modus operandi* was much lamented actually by Lady Herringham when she arrived at the site. She was an experienced restorer of Italian Frescoes herself and she wrote in the *Burlington Magazine* after her visit the following, I quote, “This varnish is now dirty or yellow and has seriously spoilt the pictures.”

Now Gill’s copies of the Frescoes were more successful though they must be seen in many ways as interpretations rather than copies. In them he seems to battle against Indian conventions by introducing volumetric shading, vanishing point perspective into scenes where the original artist had preferred striking areas of block colour and schematic treatments of architecture.

Of course he was also working in oil paint bringing his efforts close in many ways to Van Gough’s attempts to imitate Japanese Wood Block Printing in this very different medium, yes, rather sloppy attempts. In other words Gill’s copies constituted an attempt to alter India aesthetics to suit a provincial European taste.

Because in Europe at the time Indian art was not even considered art. If you look at old maps of the layout of the British Museum it was carefully separated from the fine art galleries containing Greek and Roman exhibits and put into an ethnographic display where it was labelled ‘As of interest only to those hoping to understand Indian religions’. Okay. This approach was not continued by Herringham’s expedition and we will see the differences in just a moment.

Working on very large canvases it took Major Gill 18 years to produce 27 facsimiles in oil. The results were exhibited at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London where they were unfortunately incinerated in the Great Fire that broke out in 1866. Now an uncannily similar fate awaited the second set of copies created in the 1870s and 1880s by John Griffiths. He was a teacher of academic painting, yes, following the European style of academic painting, particularly the Royal Academy Syllabus. From the Bombay School of Art and a team of his students. And they were lucky really at this point to be able to make copies at all.

Griffiths’ superior at the school one G W Terry was another victim of that European tendency to want to take things home with him. And he’d proposed actually scraping the entire Frescoes from the walls of the caves and sending them to the British Museum where, and I quote from his Memorandum to the Governor of Bombay he said, quote “All the antiquarian and artistic world would see them.” Unquote. So there’s this idea that they would have to be at the British Museum to actually be seen, okay.

Fortunately the Governor was not prepared to fund such a half baked plan and Griffiths’ copies proceeded in a similar fashion to those of his predecessor Gill. Including the tendency to Europeanise the motives by introducing illusionistic techniques such *chiaroscuro* into the paintings. There’s a lot more rounding, there’s a lot more depth defying really that we can see in the Gill, sorry in the Griffiths’ versions.

Okay well these paintings were put on display in South Kensington in 1885 and by a

weird process of synchronicity they also burnt to a cinder in an accidental fire broke out in a bakery next door to the South Kensington Museum quickly spread into the Indian section and destroyed all but about four of the paintings, okay. You can see two of the small number of surviving canvases at the V&A where they've been included in the new Buddhism display by my friend Divia Patel. So two canvases actually by Griffiths are there.

So this third set of copies by Lady Herringham, by Lady Herringham's team rather came about as a result of we might call an Indian Renaissance that swept not only India itself but reached from Tokyo on one side of the Eurasian land mass to London on the other end. And it had immensely important implications for the character of global modernism not just modernism in India.

Two of the most important agents for this renaissance on the western end were the painter and author William Rothenstein and Ananda Kumaraswamy himself. Kumaraswamy had come back to England and come to London in 1906 with a concrete and clearly stated intention to improve the European understanding of Asian art by concentrating on artists rather than academics, curators and archaeologists. In a speech he gave to the Orientalists Conference actually in Denmark actually in 1908 he makes the point very strongly, he says, you know, artists are not the ones who are capable of misunderstanding Asian art, it's archaeologists and curators who we have to worry about in the way that the narrative that they're proposing.

He found a ready ear in Will Rothenstein and the two were responsible for introducing Jacob Epstein and Eric Gill, the two most progressive sculptors in London at the time to Buddhist, Jane and Hindu carving as early as 1907. Epstein went ahead in fact and based London's first ever modernist sculptures, I'm talking about the 1908 carvings for the British Medical Association on the Strand directly on iconography and aesthetics drawn from exactly such Indian works, okay. I mean these are a set of sculptures that really begin most academic surveys of modernist sculpture in Europe or in England at least and they are really directly based on Indian carving in terms of iconography and aesthetics both.

Gill whose work is also at the very roots of modernism in London would later say the following of Kumaraswamy and his tutelage. And this is a quote from one of Eric Gill's publications. "I dare not confess myself his disciple that would only embarrass him. It is absurd to say that he has influenced me that would imply that his influence has borne fruit, may it be so."

So you can see that this Indian Renaissance was really fundamental to the character of modernism in the west as well as in India itself. Now Kumaraswamy was also instrumental in arranging for Lady Herringham to mount a full scale expedition to copy the Frescoes as well as in securing the assistance of a team of artists chosen by Abanindranath Tagore. As we will see this factor was mainly what ensured that the copies were not Europeanised as the earlier ones had been.

Kumaraswamy also arranged for Will Rothenstein to meet Tagore in Calcutta after going to Ajanta along with Lady Herringham to look at the Frescoes. Now this visit of Rothenstein's in 1910 to 11 was very important for the continued progress of the Indian Renaissance as it was taking place in London. Before going to Ajanta, Rothenstein used the opportunity of staying in Bombay to visit the later carved rock temples at Gharapuri on the Island of Elephanta. The visit to this and other sculpture sites on route confirmed his feeling that the techniques and aesthetics of Indian work offered European sculptures a way out of the provincial deadlock of European academic sculpture. And he's really writing to Epstein and Gill constantly and in great excitement throughout this period.

In one uncatalogued letter from the Tate Archive which has never been published before he says to Gill and Epstein the following, "I doubt you have ever conceived what rock sculpture is that it should've existed in India centuries ago in order to inspire you both..." This is Gill and Epstein, "...was quite obviously preordained and foreseen. I really think you had better come here if only for a month. It seems to me the one place, the one place a sculpture should come to." You'll notice he didn't mention Athens, Rome or Florence in that sentence, really.

Rothenstein himself did not immediately take to the Ajanta Frescoes but this mainly seems to have been due to their unfamiliarity aesthetically. After a longer exposure to him he wrote the following to his wife. And I quote from a letter, "Grow on you they certainly do and the more one looks the more one can see of them." Now at this time Viktor Golobev also arrived at the caves after Rothenstein in pursuit of his desire to bring the Frescoes to a French speaking audience via photography. And Rothenstein makes the amused comment to his wife, that "Golobev carries around a full medical kit constantly in panic of an accident or infection." Okay, we should remember they're in – at this point a very remote part of the country, yes.

Now the fact that the painted copies made by the 1909 to 10 expedition were not Europeanised the way the earlier two sets had been was largely due to the fact that the copyists from the Calcutta School had already broken with academic tradition, okay. This is a revolution that had already occurred in Calcutta and it was kind of being brought to the copies of the Ajanta Frescoes by the Calcutta students.

The Vice Principal at the School, Abanindranath Tagore, had been experimenting with historical styles of Indian art such as Moghul and Rajput miniature painting in an attempt to revitalise contemporary art in the city. While the School's former Principal, E B Havell had sold the School's European paintings in order to invest in further Indian works for the students to study rather than the European works that they had previously been able to draw upon.

In terms of the style that's being proposed by the students this is one of the copies by Nandalal Bose actually. But Lady Herringham as... herself as a member of the Indian Society and as a friend of Kumaraswamy seems to have encountered few problems, few problems in adapting to the new styles. But Rothenstein, Will Rothenstein arriving from London doubtless held back by his academic training found experimentation with Indian conventions very challenging indeed.

And I think Abanindranath anticipated this resistance to the new aesthetics actually in Rothenstein. When he wrote to Rothenstein to invite him to the School at Calcutta after his trip to Ajanta he says the following and I'm going to quote from Abanindranath's letter. "Many members of our Arts Society are really anxious to meet you and get your advice regarding the working of this art movement of ours." And Abanindranath has underlined very heavily the words 'working of this art movement', okay.

So the inference is not too hard to read. Abanindranath is interested in Rothenstein as an organiser, as a social networker, as a facilitator of publications. And emphatically not Rothenstein as a teacher of technique or art style. However, Rothenstein's sketches and paintings from the 1910 to 11 trip do show evidence of attempts at experimentation based on historical Indian styles. After leaving Ajanta he made his way to Benares where he attempted a painting of a crowd scene similar to the ones he had seen at the caves.

He describes this in one of his letters as, I quote "A procession of Pilgrims, Monks and aesthetics." Now he called this painting 'Morning at Benares' it's now lost unfortunately. And we only have bad quality reproductions actually. But it comes out looking more like a work by Corro

or Pesaro and Rothenstein was deeply disappointed in himself really for not being able to pull in these influences that interested him from the Frescoes.

He said he wrote to his wife and I quote from a letter, “I work with the regularity of a clock but what I’ve done I know nothing about.” When he left Benares he added the following lines, “I felt sad as I was rode up the stream for the last time. I saw all the things I should’ve painted and I felt how little I had used the privilege of being in such a place.”

Abanindranath himself had already assisted the influence of the Frescoes in reaching eastwards towards Tokyo. The great Japanese Kakuzō Okakura made an important visit to the Tagor’s home just after the turn of the Century as [[Pathameter 0:22:32]] has described in his definitive account, I direct you towards that. He subsequently invited two of his students the young artists Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunsho who made their own trip to Ajanta a year before Lady Herringham’s first visit. Carrying their impressions back to Japan when they returned.

Now the great modernist painter Mukul Dey a later student of Abanindranath’s visited Taikan in Tokyo in 1916 and he was able to observe the influence of the Ajanta Frescoes in action. And I quote from an essay of his about the meeting. He describes seeing a painting “Of the beautiful girls of life size with flower hair dressing of the type of the Ajanta Cave paintings.” And he further notes also that Taikan’s technique by 1916 “Resembled that which was employed on our ancient wall paintings of Ajanta, Bagh and other places. For his own part Okakura continued to see Ajanta as forming the roots not only of the Indian painterly tradition but also of those of China, South East Asia and Japan itself as well. And this provided key leverage really in terms of art history for his theories of Pan Asianism.

Bringing the influence of Ajanta to the other side of the map and I mean the East Coast of the USA fell to Kumaraswamy himself and his poem ‘New England Woods’ which you can see on display in the cabinet outside was first published in the New York Magazine, The Modern School, in August 1919. And then it was repainted in a special edition on Eric Gill’s hand operated printing press the following year. I mean Gill was already getting into the monastic way okay.

And it, I mean the poem and Gill’s illustration are really both attempts to express not only the aesthetics but also the ethics and the approach to an artistic community of Buddhist Ajanta, but using forms familiar in the west. So there’s a kind of transfer of form really into a western form but keeping the ethics and the aesthetics of the Indian originals.

So this little book is really a quintessentially transcultural object, yes. I will end with a reading of a part of the poem which might well have used one of the actual Ajanta Frescoes as its illustration.

‘Between the stems a white fawn flits unclad, unhidden, fearless, gay. She seems to say to me “Be still. He only finds who does not seek.” My breasts and feet are fair and fine but not more fragrant than a flower. Do not desire me more than these as you love trees or clouds love me for you may come or stray away. But I, like these, move on forever. I am not changed by love or hate.’

Thank you.

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