



The Raj

India and
the British 1600-1947

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The Indian Picturesque: Images of India in British Landscape Painting, 1780–1880

G. H. R. TILLOTSON

The representation of India in British landscape painting is a unique artistic achievement: at no other time has one country been so extensively and minutely observed by artists from another – despite various other fashions for antique and exotic lands. And yet this artistic episode lasted in strength for only a century. The East India Company had begun trading operations as early as 1600, but it was only after the full establishment of an English landscape school in the mid-eighteenth century that India was first visited by a professional landscape painter: William Hodges arrived in 1780. By that time, the expansion of the Company's activities in India, and the increased number of permanent British residents there, had created both a market for pictures within India and an interest in that country at home. In the ensuing decades, the number of British artists visiting or taking up residence in India was never large, but it remained steady.

That succession effectively came to an end with the departure of Edward Lear in 1875. The reason usually given for the demise of landscape painting in India is the rise in popularity of photography as a method of depicting and conveying information on the country. Another factor may have been the increasing lure of other areas, such as the Near East, which were closer to hand but less well known. The demise was not of course definitive: after 1875, India was visited by artists of the calibre of Mortimer Menpes, and more recently by artists such as John Nankivell. But in spite of these individuals, a continuity of tradition had ended.

Until that tradition began, the British public had no visual idea of India. Some earlier depictions existed, but were known to be fanciful. The supply of large numbers of detailed depictions of India by artists who had been there therefore became a powerful force in shaping British perceptions of India's physical aspects. But the painters themselves were not naïve recording instruments. They were creative artists, and they took with them to India their training and a well-defined aesthetic. They also took certain expectations about what they would find, and although a traveller's expectations may be overturned, they generally determine what he looks for. Through much of the century in question, English landscape painting was dominated by that complex aesthetic known as the Picturesque. Indeed the very inception of a full-bodied English landscape tradition was itself a part of the wider process of the formulation of the Picturesque, so that this aesthetic was bound to prove a profound and durable influence. Among its many effects was that it coloured how English artists and their audiences saw India.

The idea of the Picturesque began to acquire its distinctive form in the mid-eighteenth century. Originally, it was a vogue for looking at the natural landscape in a manner informed by principles derived from paintings, notably from the works of such seventeenth-century masters as Claude Lorrain, Salvator Rosa and Gaspard Poussin. The influence of Dutch painters such as Jacob van Ruisdael offered some adjustment to these principles. Later, through the writings of Richard Payne Knight, Uvedale Price and Humphry Repton, this vision was directed towards a new style of landscape gardening; and, having thus found its way on to the country estate, it subsequently exerted a powerful influence on British architecture. But however widely it was applied, the idea always entailed an appeal to pictorial values; and so it could be turned back on the art of landscape painting itself. And this was done explicitly by William Gilpin and Alexander Cozens in the 1780s.

What the Picturesque required of the artist in practice was, first, that his painted landscape should be generally harmonious and coherently composed, including a good depth of field, preferably divisible into three grounds. It was to be, in other words, frankly artificial. In addition, the classically approved but now ridiculed 'smoothness' was rejected in favour of a certain 'roughness', which offered a greater variety of form and line. There was a preference for abrupt shapes such as irregular hills and buildings. There was also a strong predilection for intricate detail, especially in the foreground, which could be littered with stones or plants or broken statuary. The work should contain some reference to man's presence in the landscape: a wandering traveller or toiling peasant, perhaps; or a ruin that was both picturesquely irregular in itself and a reminder of man's transience. This kind of treatment had begun to appear in British landscape painting by the middle of the century as a result of direct and individual stylistic influences, such as that of Ruisdael on Thomas Gainsborough, and that of Claude on Richard Wilson, his greatest British imitator. But from the 1780s onwards the essentials of the Picturesque were analysed and propagated in the writings of the aesthetic theorists, and by this means became common currency among all who were engaged in, or even talked about, painting.¹

From the start, travel was an important element. As a sensibility, the Picturesque encouraged the aesthete to travel in search of landscapes to admire; while as a painterly method, it sent the artist in search of new subject-matter. Initially, both routes led to the wilder parts of the British Isles, including the Lake District. But soon, mass travel to such accessible places jaded the appetite, and the field of discovery was broadened to include continental Europe, especially such dramatic regions as the Alps. Thus foreign topography became part of the stock-in-trade of the Picturesque. The extension of Picturesque travel to India (as to other parts of the colonial East, and even China) was an easy step; it required no change in principle or inspiration, merely a widening of the ambit.

The first professional British landscape painter to visit India was Wilson's pupil, William Hodges. He arrived in Madras in February 1780, but as the war with Haidar Ali prevented him from travelling in the interior of the country, he moved on to Calcutta the following year. From there, he made three tours westwards; starting each time along the River Ganges and visiting towns of historical and architectural interest, he reached as far as Agra on his

Fig. 20 The Taj Mahal, William Hodges, 1783; grey wash with pen and grey ink over pencil (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)

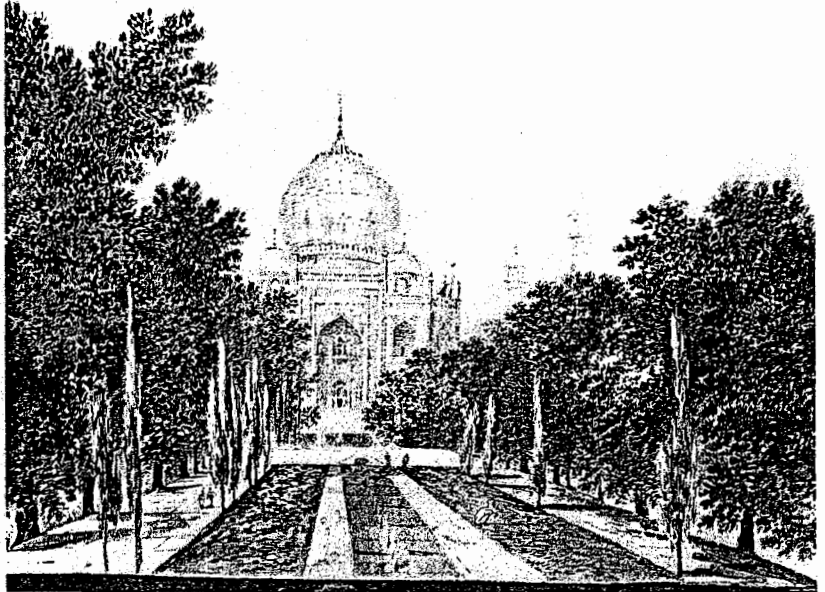
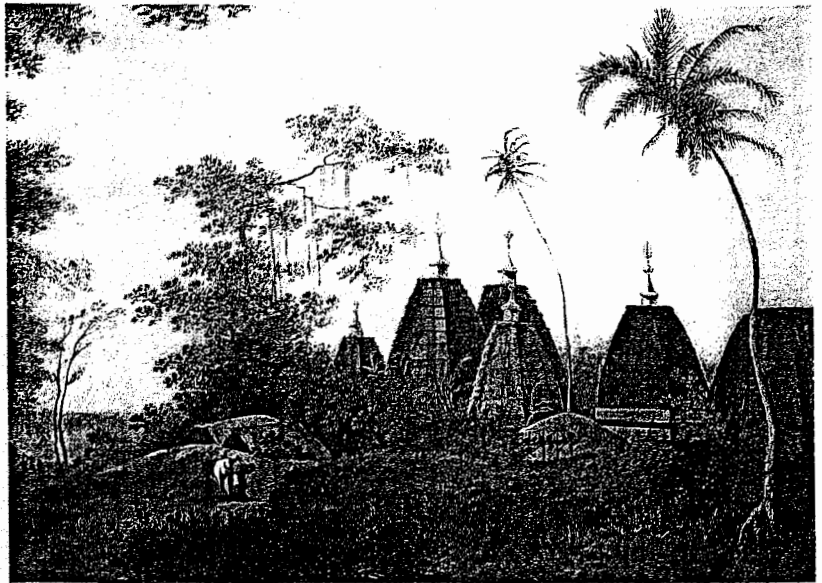


Fig. 21 The Pagodas at Deogur, William Hodges, c. 1787; oil on canvas (Private Collection)



third and most extensive tour (Figs 20 and 21). He finally returned home from Calcutta in September 1783. He had visited Benares on his second tour in August 1781. His depiction of part of the city (no.246) bears many of the hallmarks of the Picturesque treatment, notably in the varied and irregular outline formed by the buildings, further enlivened by tufted trees; in the sense of movement created by small, scattered details, such as the figures and boats at the *ghats*; and in the broken stabs of colour.

Earlier in his career, Hodges had accompanied Captain Cook's second expedition to the South Seas (1772-5). This experience exposed him to landscapes of a kind entirely unfamiliar to the eyes of European painters, and to the company of men who looked at atmospheric effects in an acute, objective manner. It has often been argued that Hodges consequently discarded the classical formulae of his training in favour of a more impressionistic style; and that he later approached the Indian landscape with the same frank observation.² While some of his sketches made in the South Seas are indeed strikingly immediate, this assessment is not generally borne out by his finished oils, least of all those of Indian subjects. Most, like no. 246, display a treatment that is firmly rooted in the new English tradition. Some time after Wilson's death, Hodges wrote an article on his former master, praising 'the classical turn of thinking in his works, and the broad, bold and manly execution of them'.³ Just these qualities characterize Hodges's own work and – as his remark makes clear – they were part of an artistic inheritance.

Hodges was in fact preceded by the curious figure of Francis Swain Ward, who is not generally counted a professional painter of India since he travelled there in the service of the Madras army. It was only when he resigned his commission and returned to England in 1764 that he resumed his earlier career as an artist, producing several canvases of Indian subjects. Ten of these, including *A Choultry* (no. 245), he presented to the Company in 1773, perhaps as an inducement to allow him to rejoin the service in that year and return to India. The picture shows a travellers' shelter of a type once common in southern India, set in an idealized landscape.

The most famous British landscape painters to visit India were undoubtedly Thomas Daniell and his nephew William. They landed at Calcutta early in 1786, and in the course of the next seven and a half years travelled extensively in the subcontinent. Their first long tour took them westwards along the Ganges and through neighbouring regions, in the footsteps of Hodges. This itinerary was dictated partly by the convenience of starting in areas under British control, and partly by the Daniells' determination to emulate Hodges. Eventually they penetrated a good deal further, reaching Delhi and pressing on into the Himalayan foothills, where they became the first Europeans to visit Srinagar in Garhwal. It was on their way back on this tour that they stopped (as Hodges had seven years before) at Sasaram in Bihar, to visit the majestic tomb of the Emperor Sher Shah Sur (no. 249). Their last stopping place before returning to Calcutta at the end of 1791 was the ancient deserted city of Gaur in Bengal (no. 248).

Among the friends made by the Daniells – whose hospitality they enjoyed at provincial stations – was Samuel Davis, a Company servant and amateur draughtsman. Though at this period stationed at Bhagalpur, Davis had earlier accompanied the embassy of Captain Samuel Turner to Tibet in 1783. In the event, Davis was refused entry into Tibet itself, and so spent his time instead recording the landscape and architecture of Bhutan (no. 247).

After a tour in the south in 1792 – visiting temples and the hill-forts that had featured in the recent war against Tipu Sultan – the Daniells visited Bombay. There they met the artist James Wales, who was engaged in making an extensive survey of the rock-cut temples of the region. The Daniells joined him in his explorations for a while, before beginning their long voyage home

Fig. 22 The Composition Piece, a capriccio of Indian architecture, Thomas Daniell, 1799; oil on canvas (Private Collection)

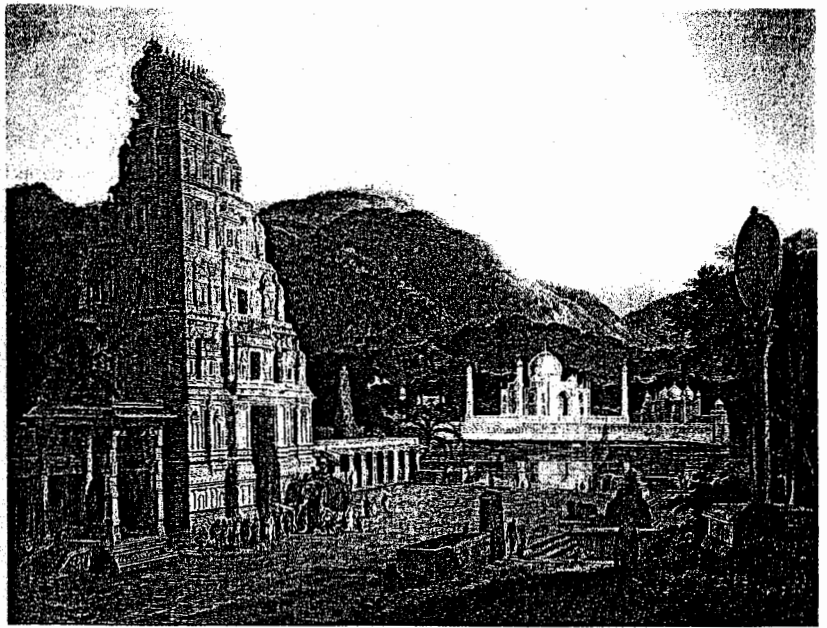
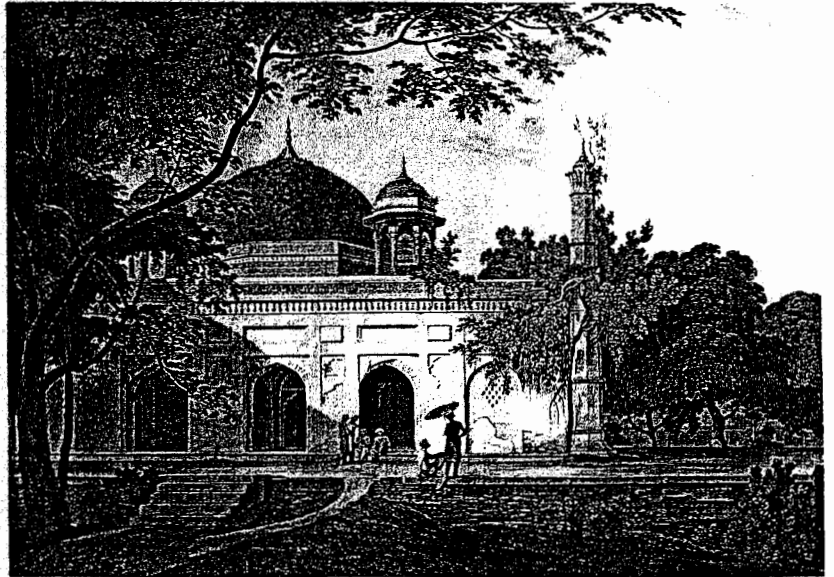


Fig. 23 Mausoleum of Nawaub Asoph Khan, Rajemahal, Thomas and William Daniell; aquatint from *Oriental Scenery*, volume III, 1803



in the autumn of 1793. After Wales's premature death in 1795, they used his sketches to produce a series of aquatint views of the temples of Ellora, published in 1803 (no.250).

The attraction of these temples for Wales and the Daniells was not just their strange and exotic aspects, nor only their Arcadian setting. As is evident from the aquatints, the artists had a serious archaeological interest too. The plates were intended to appeal to the scholarly as well as the aesthetic impulses of connoisseurs, to offer them a thorough and exact source-book on early Hindu architecture. The same spirit pervades most of the Daniells' work. Their numerous oils and the magnificent aquatints of the six volumes of *Oriental Scenery* (published after their return home, between 1795 and 1808) constitute a detailed record of many aspects of Indian architectural history

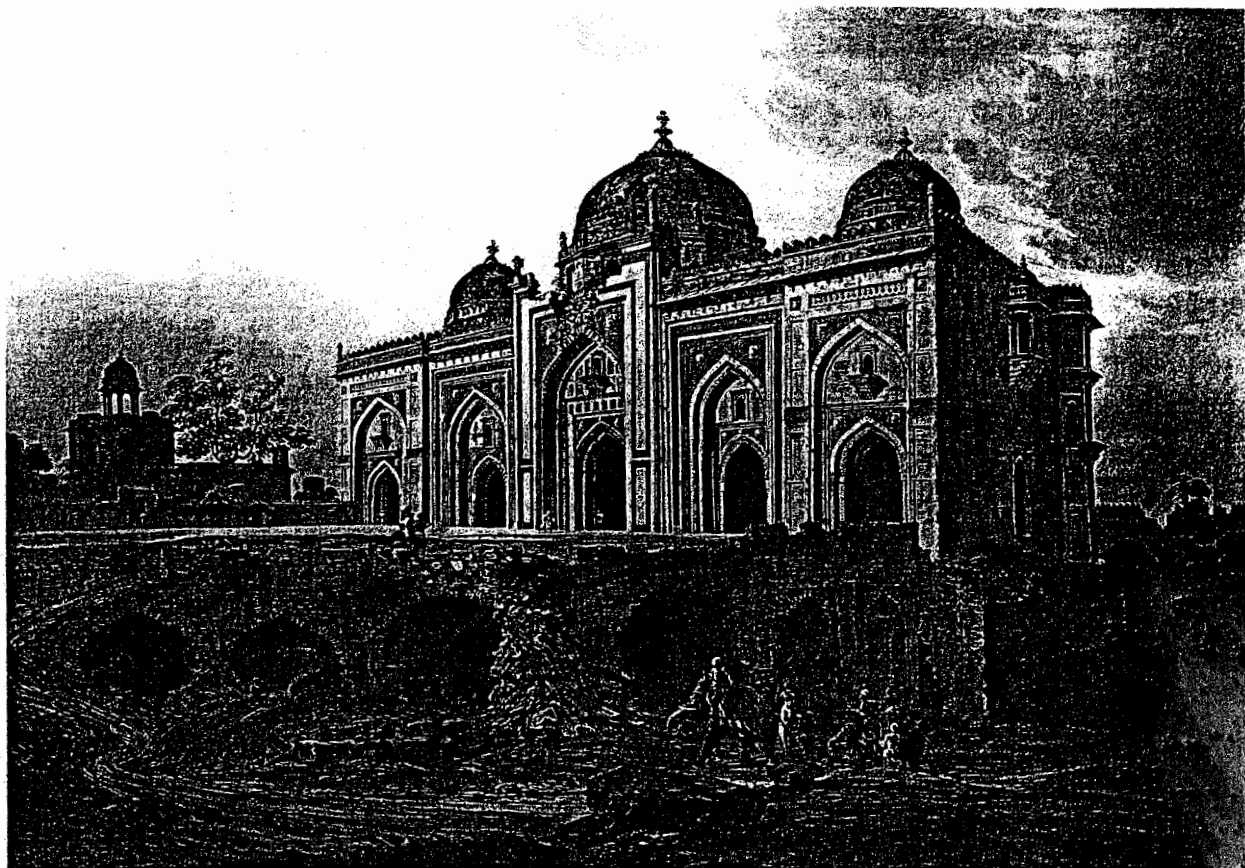


Fig. 24 The Kila Kona Masjid in the Purana Qila, Delhi, Robert Smith, c. 1823; oil on canvas (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)

In spite of the British influence, these Indian works were unaffected by the Picturesque and show a different interpretation of the architecture.

James Baillie Fraser was a Calcutta businessman, though his greater gifts lay in art. In 1815 he accompanied his brother on a tour of the Himalayan foothills, and subsequently published twenty aquatints of *Views in the Himala Mountains* (no. 255). Like Davis's views of Bhutan, these prints revealed a lesser-known margin of India at a time when it had become a focus for British political and commercial ambitions. Like Salt's, Fraser's aquatints follow the pattern established by the Daniells, indicating the force of their stylistic influence. The publication of such views as prints ensured that they reached a wider audience. But another advantage of the aquatint was that this medium had long been thought especially suitable for the Picturesque landscape, as it was capable of imitating in print the effects of watercolour. It was used in this manner in England by many artists, including Paul Sandby and Philip de Loutherbourg; and it became even more popular following the dramatic improvements in the technique made by the Daniells. By about 1830, however, great volumes of aquatints were no longer produced, and their place was taken by more modest illustrated travel books, using lithography, a less spectacular but simpler form of reproduction.⁸

While Salt and Fraser were sustaining the intellectual ambitions and gran-

diose schemes of an earlier age, some other artists were looking at previously unnoticed aspects of Indian scenery, aspects that were less dramatic but also less relentlessly inspiring, more amenable and pleasant. The dominant figure among them was George Chinnery, who worked in India between 1802 and 1825, when he departed for Macao (see no.265). Much of his work was portraiture – a more lucrative pursuit – but his real love was for landscape.

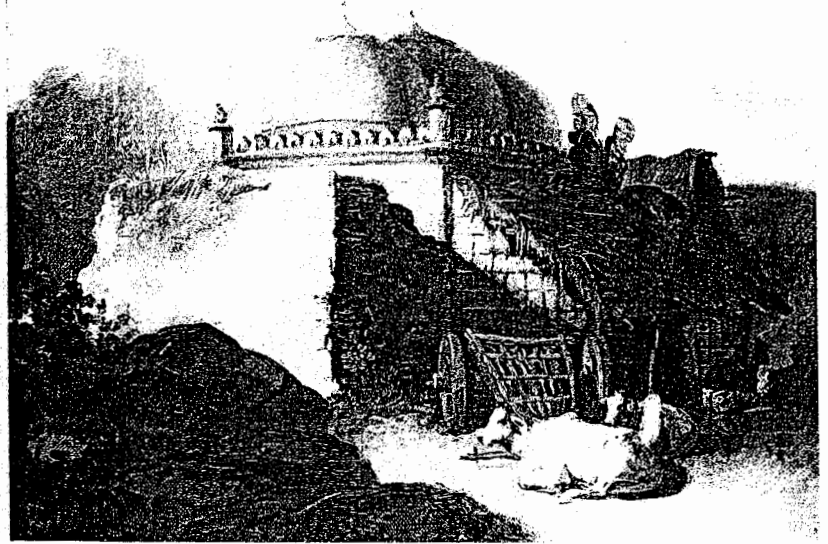


Fig. 25 Hut by a Ruined Mosque in Bengal, George Chinnery, c. 1810; oil on canvas (Private Collection)

He spent the years 1808 to 1812 based in Dacca, exploring the Bengali countryside and producing vast quantities of drawings of the rivers and their craft, and villages with their huts and cattle (Fig. 25 and no.252).

Chinnery's host in Dacca was the Collector, Sir Charles D'Oyly, a prolific amateur artist. D'Oyly learned a great deal from his guest, and from this period onwards produced numerous small works, in a range of media, evidently influenced by Chinnery's style (no.253). Another pupil of Chinnery's, in Calcutta, was William Prinsep, a member of a large family of businessmen and amateur artists. He too produced views of village life in a style greatly indebted to Chinnery (no.254). Such works show to what extent an artist could be made to see India through another's eyes. It is often observed that British artists in India were never much influenced by indigenous artistic traditions; indeed their style was rarely greatly affected even by the Indian landscape itself (in contrast to that of European artists working in other parts of the East).⁹ Works such as these are the extreme case, being not merely guided but dominated by a vision borrowed from another artist, so that reality intrudes only at second hand.

It is perhaps not surprising that imitation characterizes the work of amateurs – which both these pictures are. In fact, the majority of British views of India were made by amateurs; not professional visitors like Hodges or

Salt, but men and women who were resident there for another purpose and filled their leisure hours with drawing. For many the ability to draw was a socially desirable skill, while for engineers like Smith it was acquired in the process of training.

The professional minority, however, were always dominant, and the third quarter of the nineteenth century saw three such visitors, all working chiefly in watercolour. This medium had always been thought suitable for picturesque topography, but it was now the major medium. Aquatint had been priced out of fashion, and under the impact of Romanticism and then the Pre-Raphaelites, oil painting had moved on to other concerns.

William Carpenter travelled in India between 1850 and 1857, especially in the west and north, dividing his attention equally between people and scenery (no. 259). William Simpson, who had established his reputation with his views of the Crimea, was sent to India in the wake of the Mutiny of 1857, by the publishers Day & Son, with the intention of producing another great book of views of a region made topical by conflict. The venture failed as the publishers went bankrupt; but between 1859 and 1862, Simpson travelled widely in the country. He concentrated in fact not on scenes connected with the Mutiny, but on subjects with inherent picturesque appeal, and there were none more appealing than the palaces of Rajasthan (no. 260). Edward Lear was one of the finest English watercolourists, in whose work the standard (and by now rather overworked) formulae of the Picturesque were converted into a highly individual style (Fig. 26). Yet in some ways, his work in India (which he visited between 1873 and 1875) shows how little had changed. Like Hodges a century before him, he was attracted to Benares as the principal Hindu city, and his vision of it was not radically different (no. 261).

Though properly a manner of looking at – and representing – landscape, the Picturesque could be applied also in certain senses to people. This involved simply the representation of people, not as they were, but again in a manner tinged by an aesthetic based in a tradition of European art. And this occurred in India.

One of the earliest artists to set about the systematic portrayal of the Indian population was the Belgian Baltazard Solvyns. Inspired by the vogue in Europe for books illustrating the traditional costumes of various countries, Solvyns began in 1794 to produce a set of two hundred and fifty coloured etchings depicting the manners and customs of the Hindus, doing the printing himself from his own drawings (no. 262). In its intention to inform, this project is akin to the architectural studies of the same period by Hodges and the Daniells. But commercially it was not a success. Solvyns's plates were judged to be so faithful to their subjects as to be insufficiently picturesque: he had evidently got the balance wrong in meeting the conflicting demands of his time. But the idea behind his work proved enormously influential; especially on Company painters, and albums depicting types of Indians classified by caste or trade were made in large numbers in the early nineteenth century.

Some of the later works of William Daniell, produced after he and his uncle had completed the volumes of *Oriental Scenery*, also focus on India's people. In those drawings that were engraved as illustrations for the *Oriental*

Annual in the 1830s, and in some of his oils (no.203), we see a somewhat sentimentalized view of Indian women; they have become exotic beauties, not unlike the idealized odalisques of the Orientalist painters. A little later, Emily Eden published her *Portraits of the Princes and People of India* (1844). Eden had accompanied her brother, Lord Auckland, while he was Governor-General (from 1835 to 1842) and this position had given her privileged access to India's royal courts. But it is doubtful whether the Sikh princes would have recognized themselves as the epicene creatures of her plates (no.264).

It might be felt that in depictions of India's people – even more than those of landscape and architecture – the Picturesque treatment is a disturbing misrepresentation, a simple falsehood. It has been argued that this process was wilful, that representations of India by British artists consistently sanitized the subject, showing India as the British wanted to see it; and a recent school of thought links such preferences to Britain's status as an imperial power.¹⁰ Certainly some British art in India (such as George Atkinson's work on the Mutiny) served a clear propagandist purpose. But whether all British artists were deploying the Picturesque in order to contribute to a wider political intention is more doubtful. Where such an intention is not explicit, it must be assumed (by those who suppose it to exist) to have been subconscious, making the theory conveniently untestable.

What is clear is that the idea of the Picturesque, having arisen from discussions about European landscape in the mid-eighteenth century, cannot itself be identified as a part of the imperialist project. Furthermore, it was so fundamental a part of the English landscape tradition that to most artists it was not a consciously adopted instrument but an inescapable artistic vision. Consequently, while it is certainly true that the pictures discussed here show India as Britons wanted to see it, their preferences were inspired primarily by an aesthetic habit. And to the persistence of that habit these pictures are a remarkable testimony.

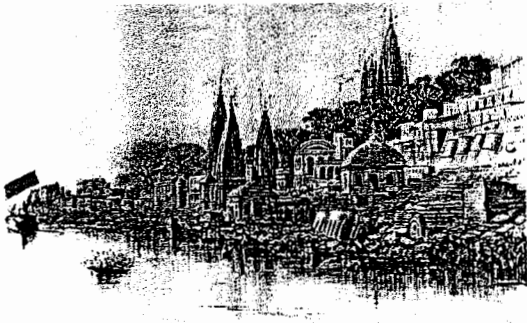


Fig. 26 A View of Benares, Edward Lear, 1873; watercolour on paper (India Office Library and Records; no. 261)

NOTES

1. Specific reference to painting is made in the works of Gilpin (published from 1782) and Cozens 1785. See also Knight 1794; Price 1794; and Repton 1795. For discussion of the Picturesque among Jane Austen's characters, see Hussey 1927, pp. 1, 231.
2. See for example Archer 1967, p. 869; Stuebe 1979, pp. 2, 18–20, 45–6, 84–5; Smith 1985, pp. 56–8, 76.
3. (Hodges) 1790, p. 404. The anonymous article is generally attributed to Hodges, for example by Stuebe 1979, p. 6.
4. Daniell 1810, Preface.
5. Hodges 1794, pp. iii–iv, 47, 65; see Hastings's introduction to Wilkins's translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* (1785).
6. Daniell comments on Hodges in his journal, published in Hardie and Clayton 1932 – see pp. 43, 46, 64; Valentia 1809, vol. 1, pp. 89, 356; Lear, in Murphy (ed.) 1953, p. 46.
7. See especially Archer 1968.
8. Such as R. M. Grindlay's *Scenery, Costumes and Architecture*, 1830.
9. See Mary Anne Stevens 1984, p. 15, on changes in the technique of European artists in the near East; and Sweetman 1988, p. 135, on Islamic influences in the work of J. F. Lewis.
10. See for example Pal and Dehejia 1986, p. 16.