

Frameworks for Considering Cultural Exchange

The Case of India and America

Partha Mitter

Debates on the interface between East and West and the problematic nature of cultural exchanges have taken on fresh urgency today because of the increasing globalization of culture. From film and popular illustration to high-art installations and architecture (Figure 1), American and Asian visual productions are increasingly intertwined. Our period has witnessed an unprecedented proliferation in transcultural conversation, made possible by the late-twentieth-century revolution in communication technology. One of the main anxieties in this era of relentless cultural mixing is this question: are we in danger of becoming a homogeneous mass and losing the cultural diversity that makes humanity so interesting? Just as in the field of bioscience where diversity of species is essential for ecological balance, so too in the cultural arena must we preserve our differences, within our borders and beyond them.¹

Comparable in many ways to the spread of multinational conglomerates, the world market in art has reached enormous proportions, as represented by monster art auctions and biennales, which now welcome artists from outside Europe and America. While the inclusion of artists from regions that were previously considered to be peripheries is commendable, there is a disquieting aspect to it. It is predicated on the uniformity of taste and aims of these mega-institutions and events that reach all the way from the extreme east to the westernmost corner of the globe, say, from Beijing to Dublin. What may appear to be inclusive may actually be the hold of the Western modernist canon, which tends to undermine local voices and practices, destroying the polyphony of expressions. The social Darwinian survival of the fittest in the art canon contains its own inherent predicament.²



1.

Louis I. Kahn, National Assembly Building, view from the west, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Photo by Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World.

These recent developments force us to ask: in what ways can we study cultural encounters and exchanges of the past, and can this ever be a neutral exercise? In this exploratory study I seek to foreground the theoretical underpinnings of cultural interfaces and offer pointers to further conceptual explorations of the American relationship with Asian cultures, taking as my case study the history of interchange between the United States and India.

The period of “tumultuous relationship” between Europe and Asia falls roughly between the late eighteenth century and the present. It lies at the heart of Western colonial expansion, followed by decolonization. This is an era that is characterized by an unequal power relationship between Europe and the rest of the world, traces of whose legacy remain. When considering the East–West transmission of ideas in this period, it is tempting to regard the Westernization of non-Western countries as the inevitable unfolding of Hegelian logic, persuading one to focus on the flow of ideas from Europe to countries like India as the single source of the modern there.

On the other hand, the West’s discovery and use of Asian philosophies and artistic forms is deemed valuable primarily because of their perceived minor role in contributing to the evolution of “Western modernity.” “Even in times characterized by the globalization of culture there still remains an endemic Eurocentrism,” the intellectual historian J. J. Clarke has thoughtfully observed, “a persistent reluctance to accept that the West could ever have borrowed anything of significance from the East, or to see the place of Eastern thought within the Western tradition as

much more than a recent manifestation, evanescent and intellectually lightweight, at best only a trivial part of a wider reaction against the modern world.”³ Behind this reluctance is the power and authority of the European knowledge system that is closely bound up with the prevailing geopolitical configuration. To make the transition from historical determinism to a new way of thinking, I admit, is no easy task. To pull out of this Western bias in cultural analysis, we need to revise afresh our intellectual assumptions with a view to defining the flow of global culture not as a linear process but as multiple criss-crossings of ideas that flow in different directions, including historical and contemporary exchanges between America and Asia, in which a genuine reciprocity is evident.

The superstructure of modern historical scholarship, including art history, rests essentially on Western epistemic foundations, a scholarship that inevitably fell prey to the body of representations created through European expansion from the eighteenth century. Take art history for instance: it claims Kantian disinterested objectivity in evaluating the finer qualities of works of art irrespective of their cultural origins. Yet since the nineteenth century the established tradition of scholarship on Asian art has rested on the implied superiority of the Western artistic canon vis-à-vis all other traditions. In 1977, my work *Much Maligned Monsters* questioned such optimistic formulation of the universal principles of art. Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s dictum on the “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” of Greek art, I argued, had a detrimental effect on art-historical discourse, indirectly contributing to the distortion of Indian and other non-Western art in colonial art history.⁴

The collective, and frequently negative, images of non-Western art were shared in other spheres of knowledge. Edward Said used the term “Orientalism” to describe the “corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”⁵ The analysis of colonial discourse as a discipline produced a rich crop of committed scholarship that made a lasting impact on the academic scene. The relationship between representation, power, and authority studied by post-colonial scholars helped set up the ground rules for the new cultural studies. Though by no means the sole approach to the subject, the importance of post-structuralist deconstruction in these developments cannot be gainsaid.

While one must now acknowledge the racist ideological component of colonial representations, I would nonetheless argue that American encounters with India amounted to something more than an assortment of collective European myths and stereotypes. As I hope to show, encounters between India and the United States

were a product of reciprocity that marked the passage of ideas in both directions. For example, an engaging intellectual tradition in the United States—Transcendentalism—emerged in the nineteenth century owing in part to the American discovery of ancient Indian thought—a striking case study of how cultures flow across national boundaries. Even if the relationship between the United States and colonized India in the nineteenth century was of necessity an asymmetrical one, we cannot dismiss this intellectual discovery on the part of American thinkers simply as a manifestation of the colonial discourse of difference.

I must voice a note of caution, however, in viewing such cultural flows as a form of global interconnectedness, because there is the danger of viewing such relationships in anodyne, celebratory terms as a precursor to present-day multiculturalism. I am acutely aware that such encounters are uneven, and often take place between unequal partners. In addition, just as we have learned that the East is not a monolithic entity, much post-colonial theory has failed to recognize the shifting distinctions that characterize the variety of Western cultures (even in the diverse interior regions of the United States) that interact with Asia. Bearing this in mind, I will seek to highlight the essentially dialectical nature of cultural border crossings, with each culture seeking out those precise elements that resonate with its own preoccupations, in other words, with its own cultural imaginary.

If we are to produce more inflected readings of global encounters in the colonial era, what possible approaches can we adopt? Mary Louise Pratt's notion of contact zones offers us some particularly useful lessons. She defines a contact zone as "as a space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict." Pratt does not discount the role of power in such transactions. In this she is at one with other post-colonial scholars. But what interests me in her approach is that it allows for the possibility of a more productive relationship between cultures as a species of encounter, exchange, and negotiation. This becomes clear in her next passage: "I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination . . . [and their] copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power."⁶

Power naturally has a certain purchase in our study of cross-cultural intellectual exchanges. Yet it does not quite explain the true nature of this cosmopolitan imaginary, namely how ideas cross borders and what happens to them when they begin their afterlives in other cultures. The second idea I wish to introduce in this context is the notion of cosmopolitanism itself, a notion used in multiple ways,

which furnishes us with another related working tool. I introduce cosmopolitanism in the full knowledge of the dangers of using this controversial term. The classic meaning of the cosmopolitan is someone who is able to transcend his parochial locus to become a world citizen. Within the transcultural framework of present globalization, the term offers some useful means of understanding modern population movements and cultural intersections.

The term cosmopolitanism is meant to counter pessimism about the possibility of fruitful cultural exchanges amid the morass of power politics. Its most eloquent champion is the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, who injects a much-needed ethical dimension to the globalization debate. Appiah views cosmopolitan values as the thread that ties human beings together, rejecting identity politics and the “majoritarian” nationalist claims to an exclusivist cultural patrimony. He makes a persuasive case for everyone’s right to share the common human heritage, regardless of race, gender, and orientation, placing his faith in the individual’s ability to overcome narrow parochialism and aspire for world citizenship.⁷ While Appiah’s Aristotelian universalism offers a welcome corrective to the politics of difference, it does not address power and authority that confer visibility and inclusion in the uneven relationship between center and periphery. Craig Calhoun mounts a powerful critique of what he terms the extreme and abstract view of cosmopolitanism as an autonomous entity. Not only does such cosmopolitanism camouflage privilege, he says, it fails to appreciate the importance of solidarity, especially for those who are bereft of power. A more limited and political cosmopolitanism that accommodates difference and hybridity may make a more effective engine of global change.⁸

Taking cosmopolitanism as a working hypothesis, I would like to extend its scope in the global circulation of information. In this context we may take Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of social space a little further and in a somewhat different direction. A novel “social space” that opened up in the wake of the worldwide spread of print capitalism during the colonial era helped to introduce ideas of the Enlightenment to regions outside Europe. Benedict Anderson has argued in connection with the rise of nationalism that print culture created imagined communities whose members had no direct contact with one another but shared a social or intellectual space.⁹ In my 2007 book, *The Triumph of Modernism*, I sought to extend Anderson’s concept of the imagined community to the global level. In the era of European expansion, the transmission of knowledge between center and periphery took place through an imagined community that might be described as a “virtual cosmopolis.” The virtual cosmopolitan in the colonies was able to engage with the printed text emanating from the center and generate new forms of knowledge. These global cultural exchanges were not necessarily dependent upon direct power relations, even

though one cannot deny the uneven relationship of center and periphery.¹⁰ Cosmopolitanism often implies privilege plus freedom of mobility whereas all that the virtual cosmopolitan requires is access to printed material. The concept also gives due recognition to the coexistence and mutual influence of multiple cultures within this informal global network.¹¹

I propose “virtual cosmopolitanism” here to argue that the reception of Western ideas in the peripheries, and in colonized countries in particular, was an active process that centered on the agency of the colonized. What struck me most forcefully while working on this paper is that such global exchanges were by no means unidirectional. Westernization of nineteenth- and twentieth-century India is too well ploughed a field for me to rehearse at any length here. Less systematically explored, however, is the impact of ancient Indian thought on American intellectuals. In fact, the dynamics of the circulation of ideas from outside one’s own culture and its creative uses were no different among American intellectuals than the Indian intelligentsia. Translations of Asian classics and philosophy, particularly into English and French, and their dissemination resulting from advances in print technology, gave Western intellectuals an entry point into the thoughts of the complex cultures of Asia. Raymond Schwab, who celebrated it as an enriching experience, named it the Oriental Renaissance.¹²

To put it in a nutshell, both Indian and American intellectuals were operating in a virtual space that generated a mode of conversation across cultures, leading to the production of new ideas. What theoretical underpinning can we deploy to make sense of these cultural exchanges that are not prejudged by a dependency syndrome? The Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin coins the term “dialogic” to describe a continuous dialogue with other works of literature. The process appropriates the words of others and transforms them according to one’s creative intentions. This intertextual process is dynamic, relational, and engaged in endless redescriptions of one’s own world vision. The concept that Bakhtin applies to literary texts could be a useful tool for our cross-cultural analysis of visual art. The particular merit of the dialogic method is that it allows for the coexistence of different approaches in a relativist way; it does not set up an essentialist hierarchy of ideas and values as in the case of colonial discourse, for instance.¹³ This accords well with the form of hybrid and multifaceted cosmopolitanism discussed above in the sense that the received foreign text, interpreted in the light of one’s own text, sets up a dialogic relationship between the global and the vernacular within a cosmopolitan framework. We automatically imagine the paradigmatic cosmopolitan to be a world tourist or someone who enjoys cosmopolitan values vicariously as a reader of heterogeneous literatures: what they share is an openness to other cultures that they manifest in

their response to plural contexts. Information and communication revolutions enabled intellectuals in the East and the West to discover each other's cultural products, such as art, philosophy, and literature, giving rise to a new global community that was engaged in creating the hybrid multipolar universe of modernity.¹⁴

With these long introductory remarks, whose objective was to open up the discussion of cultural border crossings on a global level, let me now apply some of these ideas to the mutual reactions of Americans and Indians within the intellectual realm that I have characterized as a virtual cosmopolis. My own work since the 1970s has centered on colonial representations, with particular emphasis on the complex relationship between the British Raj and its Indian subjects. Over the years I have probed the role of British colonial administrator-writers in the construction of the discipline of Indian art history, which shaped Western responses to Indian art even as it provided the wherewithal for the transformation of Indian art in the image of colonial modernity. American and Indian cultural exchanges were in many aspects both similar to and different from the Indo-British colonial relationship. In support of this contention, I will retrace here some well-trodden grounds such as American Transcendentalism and discuss the introduction of the International Style in post-independence India. My aim is not to present a detailed survey of Indian and American encounters but to propose some possible avenues that merit more extensive investigations than are possible in this short essay.

Of course, today the economic and political relationships between America and Asia are growing fast within a new post-colonial world order. In the nineteenth century and part of the twentieth, American engagement with India was indirect and intermittent, as the geographical and cultural distance between the two countries was considerable. Unsurprisingly, however, during the imperial meridian in the nineteenth century, the United States could not be immune to the powerful stereotypes of Indian irrationality created by the authoritative European texts on literature, politics, anthropology, and art. One thus comes across comments by Mark Twain and others that owe a great deal to these texts. The Industrial Revolution, which brought unprecedented material comforts to westerners, became an index of cultural superiority; Europeans and Americans could not help but feel superior to the people outside the West, where material comforts were meager and confined to a small minority.

American reactions to India in this period are particularly complex, however, and cannot be dismissed simply as an endorsement of Victorian representations of Indian society. As a former colony, Americans expressed considerable ambivalence toward the British Empire in the nineteenth century. At the same time they were actively engaged in creating an identity independent of the European continent.



2. *Durgaprasad Ghose*, attributed to Sri Ram Pal, ca. 1837. Clay, straw, pigments, cloth, 46 7/8 in. high. Peabody Essex Museum E9937, Salem, MA, possibly given by Durgaprasad Ghose. Photo © Peabody Essex Museum.

As Susan Bean argues, even though Americans shared the British attitude of moral and racial superiority, as an emancipated colony they saw themselves as different from the British in championing liberty and equality, occasionally sympathizing with the plight of the Indians.¹⁵ From the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, certain Boston families maintained close trade relations with their Calcutta opposite numbers. The traders T. A. Neil and Raj Kissen Mitter cultivated a warm friendship. They corresponded in English, and Neil stayed as a guest at the Calcutta residence of his Bengali partner in 1809. The Peabody Essex Museum, in Salem, Massachusetts, contains an impressive collection of life-size clay images of the Bengali magnates sent as gifts to their American trade partners (Figure 2).

Around the same time, the Philadelphians, as a token of appreciation, presented the Bengali shipping magnate Ramdulal Dey

with a portrait of George Washington in the style of Gilbert Stuart, a student of Benjamin West who specialized in portraits of the first president of the United States. The portrait was exhibited at an early art exhibition held in Calcutta in 1874.¹⁶

Americans, I have suggested, were not unaffected by general Victorian representations of Asia and Africa in the nineteenth century. The celebrated explorer Henry Morton Stanley, who reputedly went in search of Dr. Livingstone, shared, for instance, with the British the prevailing notions of race, hierarchy, and evolution.¹⁷ On the other hand, Mark Twain did not profess much sympathy for colonial empires and their racial ideology and strongly disagreed with Rudyard Kipling's view of Britain's civilizing mission in India. Twain's account of India is sympathetic, humorous, and insightful. Even as he admired India's antiquity, there was a conflict in his mind between India's limitless extravagance and the clarity of Western rationality much in a Hegelian vein: "India has two million gods, and worships them all. In religion all other countries are paupers; India is the only millionaire." He further observed that Indians were "the most interesting people in the world—and

the nearest to being incomprehensible. . . . Their character and their history, their customs and their religion, confront you with riddles at every turn—riddles which are a trifle more perplexing after they are explained than they were before.”¹⁸

America’s intense intellectual engagement with India may appear as the revenge of the meek and the fallen during the period of European ascendancy. The phenomenon is, however, more complicated, involving various factors, not least the desire on the part of American intellectuals to free themselves from the limitations of European positivist thought. Here we may pose once again the question I asked at the outset: why does a society or culture become more receptive to ideas from outside, and what does it take from another society that is in consonance with its own values and cultural imperatives? In studies of Westernization in Asia and Africa, it is now common to hold that the acculturation process was not a passive act but a highly selective affair. This principle may also enable us to understand the revolutionary impact of Eastern philosophy on the West. For this application to work, however, we need to view the reception of Indian philosophy among Americans as not totally different from the influence of the Enlightenment on nineteenth-century Indians; they are two sides to the same coin of reception studies.

The wide intellectual interest in Indian philosophy reflected a powerful paradigm shift in the West that led painters Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian and philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Martin Heidegger, for instance, to turn to the East and seek an active dialogue with the thinkers of the Asian continent. It is a striking fact that if the dark reverse side of colonialism was its racism and ideology of difference, its obverse was an active engagement by Europeans with the wealth of Eastern, particularly Indian thought. Why was this so? As Paul Carus, scholar of religion and friend of the American Transcendentalists, put it, “Mankind does not want Buddhism, nor Islam, nor Christianity; mankind wants the truth, and truth is best brought out by a impartial comparison.”¹⁹ This search for a wider spiritual meaning in life intensified in the wake of widespread disillusionment with Enlightenment rationality and industrial materialism of the Victorian age, perhaps nowhere more intense than in America. The key year was 1893. The charismatic Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda won rapturous ovation with his “ecumenical” speech addressing his audience as “sisters and brothers of America” at the World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago.²⁰

Vivekananda’s tumultuous reception was only the culmination of a longer process that had begun in the late eighteenth century with European discovery of Sanskrit literature that inspired the “Oriental Renaissance.” The key texts were Charles Wilkins’s translation of the Bhagavad Gita, H. T. Colebrooke’s edition of the Rig-Veda, and the Bengali savant Rammohun Roy’s translation of the Upanishads. The sublime poetry

of the Bhagavad Gita continued to inspire as late as 1945. Stunned by the awesome power of the atom bomb detonated at Los Alamos, Robert Oppenheimer was moved to quote the epiphany of the god Krishna in the Hindu text: “If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be like the splendor of the mighty one,” and “I am become death; the destroyer of worlds.”²¹

To return to Mark Twain, the novelist’s long meditation on India is at one with the sentiment of the German Romantics: “India had the start of the whole world in the beginning of things. She had the first civilization; she had the first accumulation of material wealth; she was populous with deep thinkers and subtle intellects; she had mines, and woods, and a fruitful soil. It would seem as if she should have kept the lead, and should be to-day not the meek dependent of an alien master, but mistress of the world, and delivering law and command to every tribe and nation in it.”²²

Transcendentalism, most closely associated in the popular imagination with Ralph Waldo Emerson, was one of the most original movements to grow up on the American soil. Despite its indebtedness to the venerable history of European thought, it was determined to assert its originality. Drawing upon the discoveries of Sanskrit texts by Sir William Jones and other Orientalists, the Transcendentalists set in motion a remarkable conversation with Indian philosophy, which enabled them to examine their own faith more critically, each of the intellectual figures associated with Indian thought providing their own interpretations on the subject. One common characteristic of Buddhism, Hinduism, and other ancient Indian religions is their questioning of articles of faith—an approach that dovetailed perfectly with the Transcendentalist search for wider spiritual values and a more critical stance toward mainstream Christianity. As early as 1818, Emerson had turned to Hindu thought after his aunt introduced him to Rammohun Roy’s editions of the ancient Indian metaphysical texts, the Upanishads. This great nineteenth-century intellectual was an inspiration to the Spanish liberals who dedicated the 1812 Constitution to him. Emerson’s interest was to flower into what Walt Whitman called New World Metaphysics, which liberated the Transcendentalists from Christianity. As R. C. Gordon shows, reunion of the soul with Brahman or the Spirit became preferable to the Christian notion of salvation. Yet Emerson did initially approach Hinduism in an uncritical frame of mind, as suggested by his prize poem at Harvard entitled, “Indian Superstition.”²³

Henry David Thoreau’s classic text *Walden* speaks of “the pure Walden water . . . mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.”²⁴ Thoreau’s interest was more in terms of a temperamental affinity with Indian thought, especially its stress on meditation and asceticism. He admired the mystical poem Bhagavad Gita, and he bequeathed 40 volumes of Indian texts to Emerson. Walt Whitman too had amassed ancient Indian material throughout his life, which informed the spirit of his poetry

and explained his engagement with Indian philosophy. The striking line in “Song of Myself” (Canto 51), namely, “I am large, I contain multitudes,” directly paraphrases the Gita. In his masterpiece, *Leaves of Grass*, the great poet undertakes his own “Passage to India.” His ultimate journey on his deathbed sings praises of modern progress while reminding us of the importance of ancient wisdom, expressing the hope that technology will help bring East and West together. Hence his “Passage” becomes more a metaphor for a spiritual journey than a literal trip to India itself.²⁵ The novelist Herman Melville and the psychologist William James belonged to the same intellectual circle. May I remind you of Melville’s comparison of Moby Dick with Vishnu’s Matsya Incarnation?²⁶ Less sympathetic though no less knowledgeable, James’s empiricist bent of mind displayed some ambivalence toward Buddhism and Hinduism. He nonetheless felt the need to recognize other great world systems. On a lower intellectual plane, one may mention Henry Olcott, the co-founder with Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society, which drew inspiration from ancient Indian wisdom.²⁷ One may describe the response to the Bhagavad Gita and other ancient Indian metaphysical works as an informed but critical one that enabled Emerson, Whitman, and Oppenheimer to engage with the texts of other cultures in a dialogic way, not simply reproducing the tenets of the Bhagavad Gita, for instance, but generating new thoughts in consonance with Western modernity.

On a popular level, the lure of India left its mark on American consciousness in a number of different ways that one is only able to touch upon here. One of the offshoots of the growing awareness of ancient Indian texts was the dedication of a mesa in the Grand Canyon to the Hindu god Shiva. India’s alien exoticism offered Hollywood visually enthralling material (Figure 3); the studios in their turn exported this fascination worldwide, not excluding India. The Hollywood Moguls, whose extravagant



3. Poster for *Gunga Din* (RKO Pictures, 1939). From Stephen Rebello and Richard Allen, *Reel Art: Great Posters from the Golden Age of the Silver Screen* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 155.



4. Albert Kahn, *Kapurthala, India*, 1927. From David Okuefuna, *The Wonderful World of Albert Kahn: Colour Photographs from a Lost Age* (London: BBC, 2008), 223.

lifestyle was compared to that of the Grand Mughals of medieval India, created an enduring image of the romantic Orient with their elaborate sets of lush oriental interiors, florid temples, lurid customs, and thronging multitudes of humanity.

Cinema that uses Indian locale to evoke a frisson of otherness continues to be a staple of

Hollywood cinema. It exploits an escapist genre that is perennially popular, to judge by Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. The myth of empire, white superiority, and British civilizing mission—all these resonated with Hollywood, as a spate of films dealing with the British Raj in India bears witness. *The Green Goddess* by the English playwright William Archer was turned into a silent adventure film in 1923, to be remade as a talkie in 1930. Typical ingredients of these adventure films were the stiff upper lip, gallantry, and rationality of the English gentlemen heroes, in contrast to the sadism and vindictiveness of oriental potentates who worshipped bloodthirsty deities like the eponymous goddess in the film. Other movies romancing the British Empire—the *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935), *Gunga Din* (1939), and *Sundown* (1941)—were inspired by Kipling or, in the case of *Clive of India* (1935), by the imperial adventurer Robert Clive, founder of the British Empire.²⁸ At the same time, the cinema has the power to instruct and transmit knowledge in the form of documentary films. The foremost American industrial architect Albert Kahn's mammoth photographic project on global diversity includes the earliest color photographs of the holy city of Benares, and Indianstyle villages as a key example of rural civilization (Figure 4). The foremost quality of Kahn's faithful documentation is that he does not fall for cheap exoticism even as he treats picturesque subjects, such as Benares or the Hindu yogis.

On the heels of this brief consideration of the American discovery of India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I would like to conclude with an examination of the slow encroachment of America in Indian consciousness in a period before more complex Indian responses were set against the background of Cold War politics on the one hand and the global desire to obtain a slice of the American Dream. As Hollywood drew upon

the Indian imaginary, the universal language of American films, epitomized by Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford provided the material for collective fantasy in India. From the early twentieth century, American writers began to feature more prominently in Indian thought as well. Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation movement clearly acknowledged its debt to Thoreau's doctrine of civil disobedience. In the 1950s, Martin Luther King's civil disobedience movement returned the compliment by seeking inspiration in the Mahatma.

Following decolonization, relations between India and America entered a new chapter as the Third World, especially non-aligned India under its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, began playing a more active role in international politics. Indian music, interpreted for the Western audience by the sitar maestro Ravi Shankar, revealed an entirely new world to the Americans, offering fresh creative possibilities to Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and other Minimalists.

With Nehru assuming the mantle of leadership after independence, India embarked on the systematic creation of a modern secular state, symbolized by his vision of town planning that drew upon the experience of continental and American avant-garde masters of design and architecture. Nehru's appreciation of the pioneers of modernist design brought to an end the long colonial chapter in Indian history dominated by British art and architecture. Charles and Ray Eames, celebrated for their radical industrial designs and contribution to the intelligence and communication revolution, were invited in 1958 to advise on the future of small industries faced with rapid industrialization. Their report, produced after investigating rural handicrafts and modern design centers throughout the subcontinent, led to the establishment of the influential National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. The Eames report is infused with ideas of Indian spirituality. The long quotation from the Bhagavad Gita in its preface makes a gesture that takes us back once again to the American discovery of Indian scriptures in the nineteenth century. The Eames husband-and-wife team pay a heartfelt compliment to Indian society. In the face of change, they write, India enjoys a great advantage: she has a tradition and a philosophy familiar with the meaning of creative destruction, which is an advantage in restructuring society. The report's main tenor was to reiterate the values and qualities that Indians held important for a good life.²⁹

Perhaps in no other sphere does one detect a more intense and dialogic Indo-U.S. relationship than in the evolution of modernist architecture in post-colonial India (Figure 5). One witnesses there a complex and symbiotic relationship growing up between Indian architects and the American masters of the International Style, which may be described as one of mutual creative exchanges. The United States was one of the key centers of architectural modernism in the twentieth century, but



5. Joseph Allen Stein, India International Centre, New Delhi, India.
Photo by Partha Mitter.

apart from that American architecture proved to be an especially attractive counterweight to British colonial buildings in a newly independent India. The American architects and designers also readily expressed deep affinities with Indian spirituality. This was part of a larger phenomenon that drew

intellectually adventurous architects to India because of unlimited possibilities, compared by Joseph Allen Stein to the United States of the Jeffersonian era.

Even though Frank Lloyd Wright was never personally involved in building in the subcontinent, and the Swiss-French master Le Corbusier was invited by Nehru to design the new capital of the Punjab and Haryana at Chandigarh, the spirit of Wright's architecture permeated post-colonial India. The earliest traces of Louis Sullivan, Wright, and the Prairie School are to be found in India long before independence in the buildings of Walter Burley Griffin and Antonin Raymond, both of whom had been pupils of Wright. Griffin, who was in India in 1935–37, built extensively in the Muslim city of Lucknow and its environs, drawing inspiration from Indian architecture. Raymond was briefly in India in 1937 in connection with building projects at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry, which was then a French colony. It was during that time that Raymond engaged George Nakashima to design organic furniture, named by him Golconde design after the medieval Indian kingdom. These were indeed pioneering figures who introduced modernist design and architecture to India.

Following the departure of the British in 1947, the pace quickened. Gautam Sarabhai, a member of a leading industrialist family, introduced many of Wright's ideas in Gujarat. Among post-independence architects, Charles Correa trained at MIT, A. P. Kanvinde received his degree at Harvard, and Balkrishna Doshi won a fellowship at the University of Chicago. In that city, Doshi met Louis Kahn, a major figure who was sympathetic to eastern spirituality, using the concept of light as a metaphysical substance in his building designs. At Doshi's behest, he spent over a decade in Ahmedabad, conducting influential seminars and designing the Indian Institute of Management building in the city. His most important work, however, was the National Assembly Building in Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan, considered

a masterpiece of International Modernism (Figure 1). Finally, the man who disseminated Wright's ideas most successfully in India was Joseph Allen Stein, who founded the partnership of Stein, Doshi, and Bhalla in order to disseminate organic architecture. Arguably, Stein's finest achievement was the elegant International Centre in New Delhi (Figure 5), set in a Mughal garden, which sensitively blended his environmental ideals, spirituality, and ethnocentric regionalism. Stein was both perceptive and fortunate in being able to situate the Centre in close proximity to the old Mughal Lodi gardens in a playful juxtaposition of the old and the new.

As these important exponents of modernism were emulated by the rising generation of Indian architects, the American architects themselves aimed at combining formalism with an informed sympathy for ancient Indian thought. It has been said that India profoundly transformed these practitioners of the International Style. There is no more eloquent testimony to this than this passage from an interview given by Stein: "Why do I continue to live and work in India? I think India offers the great possibility of beauty with simplicity. This is a rare and little understood thing in the world today; yet one sees it here in so many different ways."³⁰

There are clearly many more avenues of cultural interchange between India and the United States to explore. What I have tried to do here is to raise questions about a set of fruitful exchanges between these two nations over the last 200 years within the context of some possible conceptual frameworks for studying the West's interaction with Asian cultures. When there is an intellectual engagement with the thoughts of other societies, as was the case with India and America, that encounter becomes an instrument for scrutinizing one's own culture more critically. The diverse personalities studied here express the catholicity of minds capable of embracing the new and seeing the interlinks of global culture, as epitomized by Joseph Allen Stein's "expanding vision of interconnected global relations."³¹

Notes

1. Intercultural exchange is a fast growing but as yet nebulous area. My thanks to the Smithsonian Institution for inviting me to take part in what turned out to be an unusually rewarding symposium. Strikingly I have been invited to several recent conferences dealing with the problem of cultural transfers or migration of ideas and technologies, as for instance, meetings in Berlin on the global Bauhaus, in Heidelberg on *Punch* magazine as a transcultural phenomenon, and in St. Petersburg in Russia on "the global Cézanne effect." I have also been having fruitful conversations with a group of younger scholars, notably Kris Manjapra, who is developing the idea of "crossing borders."

2. Partha Mitter, "Interventions: Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 531–74.

3. John James Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1997), 5.

4. See Partha Mitter, "The Hottentot Venus and Western Man: Reflections on the Construction of Beauty in the West" (London: Routledge, 2000), 40–41, and Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (1977; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) for a discussion of art history and western representations of ancient Indian art.

5. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978), 3.

6. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6, 7. doi:10.4324/9780203163672.
7. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (New York: Norton, 2006), xv.
8. Craig Calhoun, "'Belonging' in the Cosmopolitan Imaginary," *Ethnicities* (Debate) 3, no. 4 (New Delhi: Sage, 2003): 531–68, doi:10.1177/1468796803003004005. James Clifford speaks of "discrepant cosmopolitanism" to explain globalization from below of the powerless and the disadvantaged; see "Mixed Feelings," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheang Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998): 362–65. On hybridity, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) excerpted in C. Harrison and P. Wood, *Art in Theory 1900–2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 1, 112.
9. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
10. See Partha Mitter, *Triumph of Modernism: Indian Artists and the Avant-Garde* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007). On center and periphery as a political concept rather than a geographical one, see Enrico Castelnuovo and Carlo Ginsberg, "Centro e periferia," in *Storia dell'arte italiana, I/1 Materiali e problemi. Questioni e metodi*, a cura di G. Previtali (Turin: Einaudi, 1979): 285–354.
11. See Sheldon Pollock, Homi Bhabha, Carol Breckenridge, and Dipesh Chakrabharty, "Cosmopolitanisms," *Public Culture*, 12, no. 3 (2000), 577–90. doi:10.1215/08992363-12-3-577.
12. Raymond Schwab, *La Renaissance orientale* (Paris: Payot, 1950).
13. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) and Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 2002).
14. I have used Calhoun's ideas of the global community as not inimical to cosmopolitanism. While it is true that ethnic conflicts have emanated from narrow communal allegiances, the notion of community itself need not be confined to single ethnic allegiances. Calhoun writes that "public communication is itself a form of solidarity." Those who are inspired by Eastern ideas are not anti-modern but critical of modernity as in the case of Kandinsky; see Mitter, *Triumph of Modernism*, 34, 35, 117–18.
15. Susan Bean, *Yankee India: American Commercial and Cultural Encounters with India in the Age of Sail 1784–1860* (Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum, 2001), 22.
16. Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 75. The portrait of Washington has since been attributed to William Winstanley, who copied a number of Stuart paintings; it is in the collection of Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA; see Bean, *Yankee India*, 72, no. 30, 75.
17. Brian V. Street, *The Savage in Literature: Representations of 'Primitive' Society in English Fiction 1858–1920* (London: Routledge, 1975); and Victor G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind* (London: The Cresset Library, 1969), 226.
18. Mark Twain, *Following the Equator, and Anti-Imperialist Essays: Mark Twain*, preface Shelley Fisher Fishkin (New York, 1996), 397, 451–52. On Hegel's description of Indian religion, see Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 208–20.
19. Quoted in Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 84.
20. M. L. Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, Part 1 (Delhi, 1983) 81.
21. Robert Oppenheimer quotes from the *Bhagavad Gita* in the television documentary *The Decision to Drop the Bomb*, produced by Fred Freed and broadcast on NBC in 1965; see James A Hijiya, "The Gita of J. Robert Oppenheimer," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 144, no. 2 (June 2000): 123.
22. Mark Twain, *Following the Equator*, 398. On German Romanticism and Indian thought, see Schwab, *Renaissance orientale*.
23. See Partha Mitter, "Rammohun Roy et le nouveau langage du monothéisme," in *L'Impensable polythéisme*, ed. Francis Schmidt (Montreux: Éditions des archives contemporaines, Gordon & Breach Science Publishers, 1988), 258. See Robert C. Gordon, "Emerson's Earliest Interest in India," www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/i_es/i_es_gordo_emerson.htm.

24. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Bantam, 1962), 339.
25. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, eds. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965) 88, 420. The complete version of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1881.
26. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: Norton, 1967), 225. Mention of Vishnu occurs in chapter 55, where Melville discusses the description of the whale in different religions and cultures.
27. On the apparent correspondence between James's psychology and Buddhist psychology in his proposal for a scientific study of religion, see Miranda Shaw, "William James and Yogacara Philosophy: A Comparative Enquiry," *Philosophy East and West* 37, no. 3 (July 1987): 223–44, doi:10.2307/1398517. On the Theosophists, see Bruce F. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived, a History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
28. Jeffrey Richards, "Films and the Empire: Britain in the 1930s," in *Literature and Imperialism*, ed. Bart Moore-Gilbert (London: Roehampton Institute of Higher Education, 1983), 160–61.
29. Charles Eames and Ray Eames, *The Eames Report* (Ahmedabad:, National Institute of Design, 1958).
30. Stephen White, *Building in the Garden: the Architecture of Joseph Allen Stein* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993), 35.
31. Ibid.