

Culture



Partha MITTER, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992 (with a new Preface); 351 pages. \$17.95 (paper)

Michael M. Ames

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The strength of this ethnography lies in the manner in which it moves between and seeks to link past and present, political economy and culture, public interaction and individual belief, not to mention ethnographic description and theoretically informed analysis. Trigger is careful to identify and include himself as a temporary subject within the community and the relationships he seeks to understand. Nevertheless, he strives throughout the book to provide assessments which make telling use of his negotiated access to the 'Blackfella' domain without reducing either the principals or the practices of the other domain to rhetorical cyphers. In the end Trigger concludes that a simple notion of hegemony does not suffice to summarize the complexly intertwined nature of resistance and accommodation within Aboriginal-White relations in this remote mission settlement. His analysis also demonstrates how an ethnographic study of the processes of everyday life might elucidate cultures of resistance and the dynamics of tutelage in settings far removed from Doomadgee.

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By Michael M. Ames
University of British Columbia

How a society comes to terms with itself in the process of coming to terms with others has never been better documented than in the case of Western civilization. Inspired by a proselytizing religion, imperialism, rationalism, and the spirit of capitalism, Westerners for centuries ventured forth into the unknown, and over the centuries gradually if reluctantly discovered themselves. Mitter's discussion of how European interpretations of the art and architecture of India reflected changing European intellectual fashions, and therefore necessarily failed to properly understand those alien arts, adds significantly to this process of self-discovery.

In his Preface to this paperback edition (the book was first published in 1977), Mitter locates his own work within the currently fashionable post-modern critique of the monolithic claims of Western scholarship. "As I see it," he announces (p. xiii), "my own contribution has been not only to trace misrepresentations of Hindu art throughout history but, more importantly, to challenge the validity of applying Western classical norms for appreciating ancient Indian art." Following a meticulously documented and richly illustrated accounting of a succession of distorted views from the thirteenth century to the beginnings of the twentieth, each carefully connected to its historic antecedents and prevailing intellectual tradition, the author concludes (p. 286) that he has attempted "to draw aside the veil of misinterpretations so that the Indian gods may reveal their true beauty to us."

Is then the history of Western social thought mostly a succession of more or less ethnocentric and historically specific points of view, as Mitter suggests, or is there some evolutionary development, away from gross ignorance and distortions if not towards some form of truth? Mitter is reluctant to admit to the latter possibility. Even the more insightful works of his most recent examples, E.B. Havell (publishing in 1908 and 1911) and Ananda Coomaraswamy (1908, 1920, 1934), who benefited from a massing of knowledge about Indian art inconceivable before, could not transcend their European-inspired biases.

There are two problems with Mitter's critique. First, contrary to the relativism he asserts, he also documents a definite trend over the centuries towards increasingly accurate descriptions of Indian art, promoted by the growing influence of positivism, particularly on archaeology and art history. Second, it is naive to think that drawing aside the veil of Western interpretation will allow one to see truth unadorned. All interpretations are in terms of conceptual schemes, Mitter's included. We cannot choose to be without them. We can only choose between them. Those that make explicit both their biases and their preference for empiricism may be the ones to select. While Mitter does a masterful job of deconstructing Western perceptions of Indian art, he is silent about his own perspective. It is thus that the postmodern rejection of the possibility of grand narratives may itself become the new grand narrative.