BRITISH ART AND THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

Geoff Quilley

British Art and the East India Company

WORLDS OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

ISSN 1752-5667

This series offers high-quality studies of the East India Company, drawn from across a broad chronological, geographical and thematic range. The rich history of the Company has long been of interest to those who engage in the study of Britain's commercial, imperial, maritime and military past, but in rcent years it has also attracted considerable attention from those who explore art, cultural and social themes within an historical context. The series will thus provide a forum for scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, and for those whose have interests in the history of Britain (London and the regions), India, China, Indonesia, as well as the seas and oceans.

The editors welcome submissions from both established scholars and those beginning their career; monographs are particularly encouraged but volumes of essays will also be considered. All submissions will receive rapid, informed attention. They should be sent in the first instance to:

Professor H. V. Bowen, Department of History and Classics, Swansea University, Swansea SA2 8PP

Previously published titles
are listed at the back of this volume

BRITISH ART AND THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

Geoff Quilley

THE BOYDELL PRESS

First published 2020
The Boydell Press, Woodbridge

ISBN 978-1-78744-543-7

The Boydell Press is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620–2731, USA
website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

This publication is printed on acid-free paper

Cover image: George Chinnery, On Dent's Veranda, c.1842, oil on canvas, 43.2 x 63.5 cm, Private Collection.
Cover design: www.stay-creative.co.uk

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

Chapter 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The initial research for this book was enabled by a Senior Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust: I am very grateful to the Trust for their sponsorship, and also for their understanding when personal circumstances held up progress on the project. I am also indebted to the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art for the award of a Publication Grant towards the cost of illustrations, and to the Research Committee in the School of History, Art History and Philosophy at Sussex for granting research leave to complete the writing, and also for financial support.

Many people have contributed to the shaping of the book in one way or another: I am grateful to staff and colleagues at Royal Museums Greenwich, the V&A, and the British Library in particular; to colleagues and students at various institutions and conferences where parts of the book have been tested out, notably the University of York; University of Edinburgh; Courtauld Institute; King's College London; Tate; Birkbeck; Universidade Nova de Lisboa; and above all, to colleagues and students at Sussex. Certain individuals have gone out of their way to provide support, information and advice: I should like to thank Patrick Conner, Lindsey McCormick, Glenys Lonsdale and John Wonnacott in particular. Over many years I have benefited from the knowledge, insight, criticism and friendship of many scholars who have in different ways been fundamental to my thinking about the issues addressed in this book, and I should like to acknowledge these individuals here: in no particular order of priority, Tim Barringer, Felix Driver, Natasha Eaton, John Bonehill, Michael Rosenthal, Emily Mann, Sarah Thomas, Romita Ray. Tim Barringer and Felix Driver also read the draft manuscript and provided invaluable feedback, as did also the anonymous reader for Boydell Press: I am deeply indebted to all of them for their generous and constructive criticism. I am also grateful to the series editor, Huw Bowen, and Peter Sowden at Boydell Press for their support and patience in seeing the book through to completion.

Shorter versions or sections of Chapters 2 and 4 have been previously published as 'Signs of Commerce: The East India Company and the Patronage of Eighteenth-Century British Maritime Art', in *The Worlds of the East India Company 1600–1834*, ed. Huw Bowen, Margarette Lincoln and Nigel Rigby (Boydell and Brewer, 2002), pp. 183–99, and '"A Proper Set of Views": The British East India Company and the Eighteenth-Century Visualization of South-East Asia', in *East India Companies and the Natural World*, ed. Anna Winterbottom, Vinita Damodaran and Alan Lester (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 167–92.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: CORPORATE PATRONAGE AND COMPANY ARTISTS

One of the most reproduced British art works of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries made in connection with the East India Company, at the height of its commercial and military power across Britain and Asia, is Spiridione Roma's allegory *Britannia receiving the Riches of the East*, painted for East India House in Leadenhall Street in the City of London in 1778 (Fig. 1.1).[1] The painting, originally made for the Revenue Committee Room of East India House, is a frequent recourse for historians of the Company to illustrate it as a modernizing corporation, aware of the need for an image of itself to be projected into the public and commercial spheres of late eighteenth-century London; and also as a visual summation of the place of the Company trade within an increasingly global political economy.[2] It is an overworked and, in this context, an over-exposed image. From the perspective of traditional art history, based on values of connoisseurship, quality and canonical status, the recurrent turn to Roma's painting is curious: it is by a virtually unknown artist, and is clumsily executed. Yet, from a purely historical perspective, within the context of the history of empire, trade and the East India Company, it is an extraordinarily rich and salient image. It thus points to an issue that is at the heart of what I want to explore in this book: how to bridge the gulf that has traditionally persisted between the discipline of art history and those of imperial, economic and maritime history. Despite an overriding concern with commercialization and consumption, particularly in eighteenth-century British art and cultural studies over the last four decades, this has never properly been directed at considering the interconnections between the world of art and the world of commerce as represented by the leading mercantile trading organization of the early modern era: the East India Company. Although British art's concern with India has been the focus of extensive scholarly interest, going back to the pioneering work of Sir William Foster and, particularly, Mildred Archer, whose documentation of British artists working in India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries laid the foundation for everything

1 Inscribed: 'S Roma. 1778'; commissioned by the East India Company, 1778.

2 Recently, for example, Nick Robins, *The Corporation That Changed the World: How the East India Company Shaped the Modern Multinational* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), pp. 1–5.

1.1 Spiridione Roma, *Britannia receiving the Riches of the East*, 1778, oil on canvas, 228 x 305 cm, British Library © The British Library Board Foster 245

that has followed in the field, this has been under the broader purview of British-Indian cultural relations generally, rather than scrutinizing the Company specifically.[3] With regard to the common ground of commerce between British art and the East India Company, it has been generally assumed that these worlds existed in parallel but never really intersected. The purpose of this book, therefore, is to challenge this assumption by examining the exchanges between British art and the East India Company, and the influence of the Company and its commercial ideologies and practices upon the shaping of British art and subsequent art history.

Roma's painting is instructive about this disciplinary fissure in several respects, the first of which is to do with historiography: it was produced at a moment of pivotal shift in the Company's history, from it being a primarily maritime trading organization, shipping textiles, spices, tea and other luxury commodities for the consumer market of the western world, to becoming an increasingly territorial and governmental power over rapidly expanding areas of north-eastern, central and southern India. It is also one of relatively few examples of direct corporate Company patronage for painting, coming almost half a century after the previous major Company commission, George Lambert and Samuel Scott's series of views of Company factories or bases (Fig. 1.2), made alongside Michael Rysbrack's marble chimney-piece (Fig. 1.3) – to which Roma's ceiling painting undoubtedly makes reference – as part of a decorative scheme for the Court Room of the newly-built East India House in about 1730. Roma's painting was placed in an equally important location within the Company's headquarters, on the ceiling of the Revenue Committee Room, where its allegorical relation to the material processes of making money through the rapid expansion of global commercial empire would be most acutely and powerfully understood. In this regard, moreover, it alludes to the Company's growing reputation at the time as 'the scandal of empire', beset by accusations of corruption, directed particularly at its military and commercial leader, Robert Clive, who had enriched himself massively through his campaigns and deals establishing Company power across Bengal, above all through his 'coup' of 1757, which installed Mir Jafar as puppet ruler and delivered to the Company '£4 million of Bengal revenues and presents'.[4] Against a

3 Sir William Foster, 'British Artists in India', *The Volume of the Walpole Society* 19 (1930–1), pp. 1–88. Mildred Archer's work in this regard is vast: most importantly, *India and British Portraiture* (London and New York: Sotheby Parke Bernet and Oxford University Press, 1979); *Natural History Drawings in the India Office Library* (London: HMSO, 1962); *The India Office Collection of Paintings and Sculpture* (London: The British Library, 1986); *British Drawings in the India Office Library*, 2 vols (London: HMSO, 1969); *Company Drawings in the India Office Library* (London: HMSO, 1972); *Early Views of India: The Picturesque Journeys of Thomas and William Daniell 1786–1794* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980); and with Ronald Lightbown, *India Observed: India as Viewed by British Artists, 1760–1860* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1982).

4 C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire: The New Cambridge History of India*, vol. 2, part 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 50. On Clive's corruption,

1.2 George Lambert and Samuel Scott, *Fort William, Calcutta*, c.1731, oil on canvas, 78.5 x 117 cm, British Library

1.3 John Michael Rysbrack, *Britannia receiving the Riches of the East*, chimney-piece for the Directors' Court Room, East India House, c.1730, marble, 102.9 x 167.6 cm, London, Foreign and Commonwealth Office © The British Library Board Foster 8

series of major scandals in the 1760s and 1770s, including, besides the issue of Clive's personal emoluments, the horror of the Bengal famine, the Company's dubious dealings with the nawab of Arcot, and growing accusations against the Governor-General Warren Hastings, most vocally from Edmund Burke, Roma's painting stood 'to deflect the metropolitan glare of bad publicity'.[5]

The scale and public notoriety of the accusations of Company corruption at this time were epitomized in the Company's dealings with Muhammad Ali Khan, who was installed by the British as the nawab of Arcot and the Carnatic in return for his support of Company campaigns in southern India out of Madras. Through a culture of debt dependency, brought about by bribery, extortion and other forms of corruption, particularly centred around presents of diamonds and other jewels, numerous Madras-based Company officials, notably George Pigot and Paul Benfield, had amassed enormous fortunes at the nawab's expense. Borrowing to finance his debts to the Company and its individuals, the nawab was caught in a net of Company influence, in which his only route to securing his position of power was through uncontrollable liabilities to stave off his creditors, who themselves were profiting handsomely from his spiralling indebtedness. As Nicholas Dirks has archly summarized:

> Company servants vied with each other for the privilege of lending money to the nawab at usurious rates of interest. Becoming one of the nawab's creditors afforded the possibility of receiving lavish presents to substitute for regular payments – which were themselves often made, at least in principle, as the offer of rights to collect revenue directly from villages or regions nominally under nawabi control. Under the system of 'tax farming,' this meant that any revenue collected over the contracted amount, by whatever means, would be profit. When combined with presents of diamonds and gold, this profit constituted a far better return on investment than the most lucrative private trade in Bengal or the most favourable East India Company stock on the home exchange, even when (especially when) the debts were not fully repaid. Meanwhile, the nawab would borrow more money to pay for additional presents, and save himself the uncertainty, and the expense of maintaining and administering an elaborate revenue collection system of his own. Indeed, the dependence of Company servants on the wealth and perquisites of local politics gave the nawab a new kind of political power, as he managed circuits of redistribution and entitlement that made him as indispensable as he was bankrupt.[6]

By the time Tilly Kettle painted his sumptuous portrait of the nawab, therefore, in the early 1770s (Fig. 1.4), the excessive display of pearls and diamonds in which he is swathed for the picture had come to embody his significance

---

see Nicholas Dirks, *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 40–61.

5 Natasha Eaton, *Mimesis across Empires: Artworks and Networks in India 1765–1860* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 44.

6 Dirks, *Scandal of Empire*, pp. 62–3.

1.4 Tilly Kettle, *Muhammad Ali Khan, Nawab of Arcot*, 1772–5, oil on paper laid on canvas, 239 x 148 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum IM.124-1911 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

as no more than a financial value; and the portrait stands as a form of bond, visualizing his subjectivity as both the pawn of, and in pawn to, the Company: merely the sum of the presents he was yet able to make, a human banknote. He was certainly of value to Kettle, who was paid 1,000 guineas for this portrait by Warren Hastings.[7]

If this was scandalous enough in the colonial context of southern India, it was made worse through the impact on metropolitan politics. For, the nawab also paid officials such as Pigot to represent his interests in England, so that in the years between 1763 and 1792, 'at least a dozen Englishmen actually sat in Parliament with seats bought with nawabi money'.[8] It was also widely assumed that, given the scale of involvement with the nawab by individuals associated with the Company, should the former ever go bankrupt, his debts would be paid off by the latter. It was this impact of corrupt nabobery upon English domestic politics, and the consequent drain upon public finances to pay off the claims of the 'Arcot interest' against the inherited debts of the nawab, that caused Edmund Burke to fulminate against Company officials who had used their corrupt Indian fortunes made via the nawab of Arcot to buy their way into property and power on returning to England. This, for Burke, was the real threat of British imperial involvement in India via the commercial interests of the East India Company, that the domestic political system was being increasingly 'managed upon Indian principles, and for an Indian interest', meaning not the interests of Indians themselves, but of the British in India:

> This was the golden cup of abominations; this was the chalice of the fornications of rapine, usury, and oppression, which was held out by the gorgeous eastern harlot; which so many of the people, so many of the nobles of this land, had drained to the very dregs.[9]

Against such a fraught historical backdrop, Roma's ceiling painting has assumed, somewhat paradoxically, something of the status of an iconic representation, but at the same time has been taken to stand single-handedly for almost the whole of the Company's interest in, and sponsorship of, the visual arts. Its representation of the inter-cultural dynamic concentrated in the Company's growing presence in India visualizes this in terms of the provision of apparently unlimited material wealth proffered on a massive platter by an exotic and alluring young India to a superior figure of Britannia, who is clearly senior both in position and in years (already South Asia is conceived as a 'developing world' in comparison to the mature west), and who helps herself to an extravagant string of pearls (of an allure precisely similar to those of the

7 Archer, *India and British Portraiture*, pp. 69–71; https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O136746/muhammad-ali-khan-nawab-of-painting-kettle-tilly/

8 Dirks, *Scandal of Empire*, p. 64.

9 Edmund Burke, 'Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts', made 28 February 1785, cited in Dirks, *Scandal of Empire*, p. 79.

nawab of Arcot in Kettle's portrait) from the overflowing bounty before her. To the right, Mercury points with his *caduceus* to emphasize both the one-way direction of the transaction, and the course of an East Indiaman in full sail in the distance, shipping Asia's riches across the ocean. Confusingly elided with the large porcelain jar held by the personification of China below her, the figure of India – or more specifically Calcutta, according to a contemporary description – offers herself to the viewer in the same terms of desire and desirability, her naked breasts accented by bejewelled arm-bands. A contemporary account in the *Gentleman's Magazine* emphasized approvingly the way the painting epitomized the Company's profitable expansion of commerce across South-East Asia, to the benefit of the nation. Its detailed account provides a reading of the painting as a complete allegory of the Company, from its early history up to its modern dominance of the various countries of Asia, with Britannia presiding over all and both signifying 'the firmness and stability of the empire', and also acting as 'guardian and protectress of the Company'. The merger of the old and new Companies that took place at the beginning of the eighteenth century 'is expressed by two children embracing each other, and one of them placed sitting on the upper part of the rock, to show the firm basis on which the present Company stands; on the other part of the rock the child climbing up towards the summit is intended to express the prospect of the Company's continuance'. Meanwhile, the genius of the Ganges pours his 'whole stream' towards Britannia, and the 'various provinces' of Asia, 'under the Conduct of Mercury, the god of merchandise', are shown 'eagerly pressing to deposit their different produce and manufactures before the throne of Britannia'. Calcutta leads the way, with her basket of 'pearls and other rich jewels', followed by China, with 'jars of porcelain and chests of tea'; Madras and Bombay, symbolized by 'a corded bale'; Bengal, 'denoted by an elephant, palm-trees and a camel'; and Persia behind, bringing 'silks, drugs, and other effects'. Finally, the Company ship in the distance is 'laden with the treasure of the East, an emblem of that commerce from which both Britain and the Company derive great and singular advantages'.[10]

This contemporary reading of the painting, undoubtedly a commonplace and orthodox one, understands it as showing the Company at the centre of the wider imperial sphere, and accruing 'great and singular advantages' to both itself as a merchant corporation and to the nation at large. It also indicates how Roma's picture has assumed an iconic status as metonymically standing for the Company's involvement with the eighteenth-century art world, since its rarity as a Company commission, together with its efficiency in visualizing the Company's public face, seems to say all that needs to be said about that involvement. Ironically, as a consequence, it has been assumed until recently that art and visual culture were marginal or incidental to the Company's

10 *Gentleman's Magazine: And Historical Chronicle* 48 (1778), pp. 628–9.

overriding interests in financial gain.[11] Again, this has been directed at Roma's ceiling painting: first, on account of its poor quality, demonstrated in its heavy-handed drawing, its awkward use of perspective, leaden figures and clumsy composition, which suggest the commission was not one made for aesthetic refinement.[12] Second, because of Roma's own obscurity as an artist: why did the Company not appoint an academician such as Benjamin West, or some other renowned exponent of history painting, or a leading specialist in ceiling painting such as Biagio Rebecca? The appointment of Roma suggests a mystification of the Company's artistic patronage, that it was based on reasons other than artistic ones, a view supported by the acerbic comment of Roma's contemporary, Edward Edwards, that Roma, whose 'chief abilities and employment consisted in cleaning pictures', had, 'by some interest … obtained a commission to paint a ceiling at the East India House, a work too feeble to confer any credit either on the artist or his employers'.[13] Another account remarked that the work was obtained 'by the patronage of his friend Mr. Wheeler'.[14] In other words, Roma gained the commission through his connections rather than artistic merit: and the connections that counted here were not within the Royal Academy and the growing art world around St Martin's Lane and The Strand, but within the Company and the City of London. This in itself suggests that we need to look elsewhere than through the usual art-historical perspectives of style, influence, aesthetic value and so on, to understand what was at stake in the commissioning and production of the ceiling painting; but also to divorce it from a purely economic historical context in order to account for it as a material artefact of visual culture, as I shall go on to outline below. Yet, for the reasons already cited, Roma's ceiling painting for East India House has been taken to typify a general lack of interest in art on the part of the Company.

11 This supposition has now undergone serious revision, most recently in John McAleer, *Picturing India: People, Places and the World of the East India Company* (London: British Library Publishing, 2017). This in itself follows on from a growing body of art-historical research in which the Company features importantly in terms of its impact on British art and visual culture. Among the most important recent contributions to the field are: Hermione De Almeida and George Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005); Romita Ray, *Under the Banyan Tree: Relocating the Picturesque in British India* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013); Eaton, *Mimesis across Empires*; Margot Finn and Kate Smith (eds), *The East India Company at Home, 1757–1857* (London: UCL Press, 2018).

12 See, for example, Brian Allen, 'From Plassey to Seringapatam: India and British History Painting', in C. A. Bayly (ed.), *The Raj: India and the British 1600–1947* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 1990), p. 27.

13 Edward Edwards, *Anecdotes of Painters Who Have Resided or Been Born in England; With Critical Remarks on Their Productions* (London: Printed by Luke Hansard & Sons, for Leigh and Sotheby, W. J. and J. Richardson, R. Faulder, T. Payne, and J. White, 1808), p. 118.

14 *The Gentleman's Magazine: And Historical Chronicle* 59:2 (1789), p. 702.

In certain respects, this appears entirely justified, but I would contend again that this assumption derives from the artificial separation of art history from imperial history. The Company, it might be argued, as a corporation had little direct influence over the practice and patronage of the visual arts, but treated them pragmatically, as it needed to, to serve its larger commercial purposes. However, this seemingly blithe approach to the world of art was itself significant, and offers alternative readings of the character and development of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British art. For, as with almost every aspect of its business, the Company promoted private patronage and investment as the principal vehicle of commercial growth, and its highly sophisticated organizational structure facilitated private trade on behalf of the greater good of the Company and its strategic concerns, blurring the lines between private, corporate, and ultimately state interests.[15] As P. J. Marshall has pithily summarized, the deepening involvement of Britain in India through the Company over the course of the eighteenth century:

> had what might be called both a public and a private side to it. The public side was the concern of the East India Company and to some extent of the British government who increasingly intervened in the Company's affairs towards the end of the century. The great bulk of trade between Britain and Bengal passed through the hands of the East India Company. The battles which led to conquest were fought by the armies of the East India Company with some assistance from the forces of the crown, and the first experiments in constructing a British administration for Bengal were made in the name of the Company by its officials with spasmodic supervision by the national government. The pursuit of their own advantage by individual British subjects in Bengal, some of them employed by the East India Company, some not in its service, constituted the private side.[16]

And this fundamental approach applied across every area of activity, whether to portrait painting in the Indian princely courts, or to the supply of opium to Canton. This public-private ambivalence was, moreover, one that underscored the world of art as well. As art historians have long pointed out, the advocacy of history painting as the highest form of art in academic theory, most influentially propounded by Sir Joshua Reynolds in his *Discourses*, was based on its public value in treating subjects of moral and philosophical instruction that would be of universal interest. Yet this theoretical elevation of history painting was confronted by a reality whereby there was little or no market for the genre: the most commercially viable genre of art was portraiture, the

15 See H. V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756–1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

16 P. J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes: The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 1.

representation of individuals for fundamentally private interest.[17] The best that Reynolds could propose, through a convoluted logic, was that the individual artist's pursuit of beauty, 'an idea that subsists only in the mind', might 'raise the thoughts, and extend the views of the spectator' so that 'its effects may extend themselves imperceptibly into publick benefits' – and, not least, also justify the existence of the very public institution of the Royal Academy.[18] Such an attempt to reconcile private practice and taste with 'public benefits' parallels the convoluted and frequently contradictory discourse surrounding the Company as a private trading organization that also brought 'great and singular advantages' to the public in general, and more problematically exercised governmental authority over increasing regions of India. My argument, then, is that in treating visual and other culture with a similar sort of 'public-private' attitude, as with every other aspect of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British life, the Company had an extraordinarily far-reaching effect on artistic production in the period, and arguably even up to the present day. As I discuss in detail in the chapters below: from enabling the patronage of marine painting, to sponsoring travel accounts and albums of prints, such as those by Thomas and William Daniell or William Hodges, to supporting pictorial studies of Indian life and customs or geographical researches, to more broadly incentivizing artistic opportunism, whether professional or amateur, to accumulating vast quantities of the material fabric and production of South-East Asia in the India Museum, it was through these channels of indirect patronage, the enabling and promotion of private initiatives that would supposedly produce public benefits and, in Warren Hastings's phrase, be 'useful to the state', that the Company exercised its influence on artistic production and, equally importantly, on artistic attitudes. Considered in this light, I want to claim in the following pages, perhaps counter-intuitively, that the East India Company, far from being disconnected from the visual arts, can be seen as possibly the single most important influence on their production, formation and development in Britain during the period from around 1760 to 1840. This, of course, would be entirely consistent with the massive sway the Company held over political, economic, social and cultural life in these years, and which has been the subject of much recent research.[19]

17 There is an abundance of scholarship on this issue, too large to list here: for an excellent overview, see John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997; 2013), pp. 232–58. For a detailed discussion on the implications of the ambiguous place of art in relation to commerce and the public and private spheres, see John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: 'The Body of the Public'* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986).

18 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 'Discourse IX', p. 171.

19 In particular, the Leverhulme Trust-funded project 'The East India Company at Home, 1757–1857', based at the University of Warwick (2011–12) and University College London (2012–14): http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/home/.

Indeed, the Company's appropriation of state power in India, and its ambiguous, Janus-faced status as 'a state in the disguise of a merchant', as Edmund Burke derided it, has led to it being identified neither as solely a trading company nor a quasi-governmental authority, but as a hybrid fusion of the two – a 'Company-state' – understood as a 'body politic on its own terms, neither tethered to supposedly broader national histories nor as an imitation, extension, or reflection of the nation state, which was itself still in formation'.[20] Stemming from its early modern incarnation as a corporation, this distinctive characterization of the Company allows its assumption of territorial power following the Battle of Plassey in 1757 to be seen not so much as a break from its former function, or as the creation of a new form of Company power, but as a continuation and expansion of its corporate structure. While the dual aspect of the Company between merchant and state has always been a central concern in its historiography since Macaulay at least, other historians have also recently begun to see this not so much as a contradiction but as the presiding character of the organization, and therefore to understand its exercise of government over India after 1765 not as a rupture, as previous historians have argued, but business as usual; and to see the Company's increasing subjection to state control following financial crises in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries less as a divestment of its power and more as a consolidation of the fusion of the Company-state.[21] At the centre of this continuity was the complex nature of the Company's monopoly, granting it sole trading rights to the east, which was the backbone of its charter from its foundation in 1600 and was maintained almost uninterrupted throughout the majority of its two-and-a-half-century existence. With the accession of William and Mary to the throne after 1688, a new rival Company was established in 1698 with royal backing, as part of a deregulation of English commerce with India. But this only lasted until 1709 when, close on the heels of the 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland, the old and new Companies merged into

[20] Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 3, also citing Edmund Burke, *The Works of The Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, vol. 7: *Speeches on the Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1870), p. 23.

[21] Jon Wilson, *India Conquered: Britain's Raj and the Chaos of Empire* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2016). The historiography of the East India Company is too extensive to be cited at length here, but key texts that have taken the Company's grant of the *diwani* in 1765 as a sea change in its nature and purpose, and its history thereafter as being increasingly overtaken by the state, and which have also been influential to my own understanding, are: Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*; P. J. Marshall, *Bengal – The British Bridgehead: Eastern India, 1740–1828* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); P. J. Marshall, *Problems of Empire: Britain and India 1757–1813* (London and New York: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1968); Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*; Bayly (ed.), *The Raj*; C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World* (London: Longman, 1989); Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History, 1600–1857* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Bowen, *The Business of Empire*.

the single corporation of the United Company of Merchants Trading into the East Indies; and its monopoly on trade to the east was re-established. Its trading privileges were jealously protected by the Company, despite growing opposition from advocates of free trade and writers on commercial philosophy such as Adam Smith, who argued that monopolies in themselves were inimical to the commercial health and growth of the nation at large; and who were joined, after 1765, by a growing number of politicians, most notably Edmund Burke, horrified at the actuality of, and potential for, corruption and the conflict of monopolistic trade with the Company's developing responsibilities for the government of India. Conventionally, the Regulating Act of 1773, the India Acts of 1784, and the Charter Acts of 1793 and 1813 have been seen (and were certainly seen by the Company at the time) as increasing interventions into the running of its affairs as an independent enterprise, and subjecting it to ever-greater state control through the gradual dismantling of its monopoly. This culminated with the Charter Act of 1833, by which the Company lost its commercial functions and ceased trading as a corporate organization, and its political and administrative power in India was brought under overall authority of the British government's Board of Control. Yet, Jon Wilson argues, this can be taken not so much as the absorption of the Company into the state, as the other way round, as the merger of the state into Company commercial and political precepts and ideology, in establishing 'an enlightened and paternal despotism' in the British government of India: 'The Charter Act of 1833 marked the transformation of the idioms of power which had ruled the Company since the 1690s into a new idea of imperial authority.'[22] However we understand the complex history of the Company, what needs to be stressed here is the thorough intersection between the Company and the British state, underscored by their both identifying themselves with the principles and practices of commerce: arguably, the government acts to regulate the Company, which followed financial crashes and bail-outs, were a recognition of the indissoluble commercial interdependence between the Company and the state, insofar as the Company relied on the state to maintain its commercial operation, and the state economy was so dependent on Company commerce that it was deemed too big to fail.[23]

If we accept the idea of the 'Company-state', it follows that there must be a similarly constitutive relation with the cultural sphere, not least the visual arts, given their inseparable intersection with commerce and the idea of the commercial nation: it was, after all, David Hume argued in a celebrated 1752 essay, commercial luxury that facilitated 'refinement in the arts'.[24] However,

22 Macaulay, cited in Wilson, *India Conquered*, p. 212.
23 Robins, *The Corporation That Changed the World*.
24 David Hume, 'Of Refinement in the Arts', in David Hume, *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

here again Roma's painting is instructive about the disciplinary fissure between history and art history. For, despite the overriding concern with commerce and commercial ideology in histories of British art of this period, there has been no major art-historical consideration of the East India Company as the leading proponent and exponent of such ideology and what this might mean in terms of its impact on artistic production. This can be explained to an extent by the historiography in this regard, which is worth pausing to consider. The art-historical agenda in relation to the East India Company was set by the enormous and imposing contribution of the historian of British India Sir William Foster and the pioneering art historian Mildred Archer. Foster's important intervention, 'British Artists in India', published through the Walpole Society in 1931, set the template for most of the art-historical scholarship that was to follow, notably Archer's magisterial research. Following a brief introductory essay outlining the attractions of India for eighteenth-century artists – 'the hope that in the land of the pagoda-tree Fortune might prove kinder than in the overcrowded markets at home' – and its growing disappointment as a source of artistic bounty, Foster's book takes the form of an alphabetical list of artists (professional only) who worked in India between 1760 and 1820, together with their known works: the detailed accounts being based on his unrivalled familiarity with the archival records of the India Office, of which he was Superintendent of Records.[25] And this is where the value of his book mainly lies, in its scrupulous archival research. Nonetheless, in terms of method and scope it hardly bears comparison with the kinds of art-historical scholarship being produced during the same period by German émigrés such as Aby Warburg, Erwin Panofsky or Rudolf Wittkower, which focused on issues of iconography, symbolic meaning and cultural context. Nor is it comparable with the more Anglocentric art history of Clive Bell or Roger Fry, elaborating complex methodologies for the study of art deriving from connoisseurial preoccupations with style, form and aesthetics; nor even with a Morellian concern with forensic methods of attribution. Foster's approach instead is a highly materialistic one, that of somebody steeped in the world of written records, files, ledgers and archives, and the verifiability of documentary evidence. As a senior servant of the India Office, this is hardly surprising, and both Foster and Archer after him advertise their professional connection with the imperial administration of India (in Archer's case through her husband, W. G. Archer, who was an official of the Indian Civil Service) as a positive advantage in providing them with privileged access and insight into its visual and verbal record. In her major survey *India and British Portraiture 1770–1825*, a book that follows the same gazetteer format as Foster's 'British Artists in India', though published almost half a century later, albeit on a vastly expanded scale, Archer sees her connection with India through her husband's position as a direct conduit to the early years

25 Foster, 'British Artists', p. 1.

of British colonial administration, which allows her to 'emphasise and, where necessary, explain the essential "Indian-ness" of what is portrayed'.[26] Being posted in Bihar, they were in the area, dominated by the Ganges, through which artists such as Hodges and Zoffany travelled on their tours inland. They lived in bungalows of a type largely unchanged since the eighteenth century and daily life was broadly analogous:

> In considering, for example, the day's menu, I would sustain a role not so very different from that of Colonel Polier interviewing his gardener and cook … Zoffany's strolling musicians intruding on the Impey family in Calcutta were also paralleled in our own experience and even elephants were at times our mode of transport.[27]

It is both the immersion in a variety of lived experience of India, but equally importantly its apparently uninterrupted *connectedness* with colonial India and the Raj, to which Archer attributes her ability to render the pictures discussed in her book 'more intelligible' and to 'have enhanced their significance both as social documents and as art'.[28] Like Foster, however, her study is also immersed in the records of the India Office. And similarly, she also deals only with professional artists, sees the lure of India for artists as 'a land rich with gold and jewels' that is displaced by an actuality of 'dissolving vistas', and the golden age of British art in India as precisely that invoked by her reference to Zoffany and Colonel Polier, terminating her book with the departure of George Chinnery from Calcutta to the China coast in 1825.[29]

Written in 1978, in emulation of her illustrious forebear at the India Office, and bypassing such world-changing events as the Indian Rebellion, Independence and Partition, Archer's appeal to colonial India has more than an air of post-imperial nostalgia. Both she and Foster position their own scholarship within a long tradition of British involvement with India going back to the era of Company rule; and their work in that sense can be classed as itself a product of empire: it is certainly not a critique of imperial power.[30] And this has been a dominant and influential strain in art-historical writing on British India: even a book and exhibition as recent as the 2008 *Indian Life and Landscape by Western Artists*, shown at the V&A and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai, positions itself in the same lineage, acknowledging that the subject of British artists associated with India 'has long been recognised as an

26 Archer, *India and British Portraiture*, p. 10.
27 Archer, *India and British Portraiture*, pp. 10–11.
28 Archer, *India and British Portraiture*, p. 11.
29 Archer, *India and British Portraiture*, pp. 40–1.
30 Tim Barringer, Geoff Quilley and Douglas Fordham, 'Introduction', in Barringer, Quilley and Fordham (eds), *Art and the British Empire* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 9.

important episode in the history of British Art'.[31] Despite its claim to treat the subject against 'a background of art historical development especially in the British Isles, and an historical outline mainly of the English East India Company in India', these are related as parallel histories rather than integrated ones, whereby the Company is treated in conventional art-historical terms as being largely insignificant in its patronage of art: even following Scott's and Lambert's series of paintings and Rysbrack's chimney-piece for East India House, states the catalogue, 'only about seven more oil paintings and another nine sculptures were commissioned by the Directors', though 'a number of oil paintings and sculptures' were given or bequeathed to the Company before 1858.[32] Once again, the high point of British art in India is given as up to 1825, even though the bulk of the exhibition, in providing a vehicle for displaying the extensive but lesser-known collections of works on paper in the V&A by figures such as Charlotte Canning, William Carpenter and William Simpson, is devoted to the later Victorian era. And there is no place in this art-historical account for Roma's East India House ceiling painting.

Other more recent scholarship has taken an oppositional stance, from a postcolonial perspective influenced by the rise of subaltern studies and developments in economic and imperial history in particular, concerned to interrogate and challenge an imperialist and hegemonic history by investigating the impact of British occupation on Indian politics and economy, its communities and environments. So scholars such as Hermione De Almeida and George Gilpin, Natasha Eaton and Romita Ray see British art and India less as a top-down colonialist viewpoint and more as a set of exchanges in which empire and British administration is India is contingent, fluid and shifting, and under a constant process of revision in the face of the encounter with Indian culture and history, and perhaps most importantly with an Indian empire that was at least as extensive, wealthy and powerful as any of the western imperial nations; whereby British and European culture was responsive to, and substantially changed by, its increasing exposure to the culture of South-East Asia, in what De Almeida and Gilpin have termed an 'Indian Renaissance', coinciding with what has been regarded in conventional art-historical periodization as the Romantic era.[33] Nonetheless, even though the East India Company figures importantly in these accounts, their focus is on the cultural exchanges between Britain and India generally rather than on the instrumentality of the Company in providing a political, intellectual

31 Pauline Rohatgi and Graham Parlett assisted by Shirley Imray and Pheroza Godrej, *Indian Life and Landscape by Western Artists: Paintings and Drawings from the Victoria & Albert Museum 17th to the Early 20th Century* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum and Mumbai: Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, 2008), ix.

32 Rohatgi and Parlett, *Indian Life and Landscape*, p. 47.

33 De Almeida and Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance*; Eaton, *Mimesis across Empires*; Ray, *Under the Banyan Tree*.

and ideological framework for the production of art and the ways in which it could assume meaning. A major intervention in this regard has been *The East India Company at Home* project, led by Margot Finn, which through a series of detailed case studies has investigated the influence of the Company on the 'Englishness of the English country house': in tracing both the purchase of country houses by Company officials or 'nabobs', and the transfer into them of the material culture and tastes of South-East Asia, the project 'sought to locate local and regional identities into a more productive dialogue with global and cosmopolitan histories of material culture'.[34] It is, however, embedded firmly within the history of material culture and the object, and the history of the country house: its significance for my purposes here, though, is that it sees the Company as firmly and indissolubly embedded in the world of culture. And in this sense, it offers a complementary counterpart to the recent historical scholarship on the Company, which sees it as 'a form of state and sovereign' enjoying 'a unique position occupying the space between England and Asia, serving as the commercial, political, and diplomatic intermediary between the two'.[35] *The East India Company at Home* demonstrates just how much the Company was also the *cultural* intermediary.

The absence, therefore, of the Company from art-historical accounts of art and commerce in the eighteenth century is a curious omission, and once noticed, an increasingly gaping one. For, when viewed, as it were, through the lens of the East India Company, the commercial foundation, both economic and ideological, of British art becomes apparent in ways that open up new understandings of the relation between the practical and theoretical aspects of trade, and their relation in turn to the making and consumption of visual culture. It impresses, furthermore, the inseparability of the visual arts of this period from the broader contexts of commercial, maritime empire, and what a false dichotomy is involved in attempting to understand British art divorced from the imperial framework. Recent scholarship has cast the Royal Academy itself as an imperial institution.[36] Yet it was in the City, with its single most important trading institution by far being the East India Company, and along the corresponding reaches of the Thames below London Bridge that the commercial empire was practically realized: financed, insured, accounted for, laden and shipped, to vast profit and occasional loss. Artists have often been understood to be aloof from the material world of commerce, or, like Thomas Gainsborough, to have viewed the need to produce work to make a living as a necessary evil, which the higher ends of art should disdain. Alternatively, artistic culture has been seen to operate according to commercial ideology,

34 Finn and Smith (eds), *The East India Company at Home*, pp. 4, 19.
35 Stern, *Company-State*, pp. 13–14.
36 Douglas Fordham, *British Art and the Seven Years War: Allegiance and Autonomy* (Philadelphia and Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), pp. 233–50.

which determined the shape and character of artistic discourse; whereby art and artists were acted upon, but seem to have had little agency to direct the commercial environment in which they found themselves. Again, these are substantially sound perspectives, but there is a risk in treating artists as somehow detached from the material world of commerce, of assuming an anachronistic modernist or post-Marxian view of art's relation to economy. Marx himself, of course, was famously scathing of the East India Company and in no doubt about its corrupt foundations as a 'Company of English merchant adventurers, who conquered India to make money out of it', and its baleful legacy, stating bluntly, 'that the misery inflicted by the British on Hindostan is of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindostan had to suffer before'; which, in 'causing a social revolution in Hindostan … actuated only by the vilest interests', would result in 'a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia'.[37] Most problematic of all for Marx was the merging of government and commerce in the institution of the Company, going back to 1688, which was 'fostered by the same force by which the liberal interests and a liberal dynasty have at all times and in all countries met and combined, by the force of corruption'; and it was this 'union' that was the key to how 'the Indian question' became 'an English question, and a ministerial question'.[38] At the height of its power, in other words, the East India Company permeated every aspect of social, political and cultural life in Britain and its empire.

Taking the Company as the filter for analysing the visual arts, therefore, in the decades preceding Marx's seminal publications allows us to disturb any tacit assumptions about art's relation to commerce in this period, and to explore how artists and visual culture could be fully invested – literally and figuratively – in the messy complexities and contradictions of the material world of commerce and its attendant ideologies. It also enables us to envisage a genealogy of British art deriving not solely from the Royal Academy but also from competing interests in the City, as an identifiable historical thread of what might be termed 'corporate' art – a visual culture produced and marketed in association with commercial corporations or institutions – that in turn allows insight (as I outline in the concluding chapter) into how and why the East India Company and empire have been marginal issues within British art history: for the simple reason that so much of the artistic production connected with commercial empire was made for, and deposited in, either private individual or corporate collections or else institutions not recognised as part of an art establishment – repositories such as the National Maritime Museum, the Natural History Museum, the Royal Geographical Society, even

37 Karl Marx, 'The Government of India', written 5 July 1853, published in the *New-York Daily Tribune*, 20 July 1853; 'The British Rule in India', written 10 June 1853, published in the *New-York Daily Tribune*, 25 June 1853.

38 Karl Marx, 'The East India Company – Its History and Results', written 24 June 1853, published in the *New-York Daily Tribune*, 11 July 1853.