Jahangir’s Paintings

During the first British embassy to the court of Jahangir, a series of paintings were offered to the Mughal Emperor by Thomas Roe and the East India Company (EIC). While in some ways this was a standard part of diplomatic protocol, and a normal procedure for those separated by distance, the paintings provided by Roe and the company reveal much about the strategies they employed at the Mughal court.

Recent historiography of Roe’s time in India has revised the classic interpretation of the embassy as an early, if faltering or misguided, sign of incipient empire (Cohn 1996;Singh 1996). The revisionist historiography has had two strands: the practical reconsideration of Roe’s two masters, the Crown and the Company (as well as his own ambitions); and a theoretical revaluation of the nature of the exchanges and power struggles which is more alert to the strategies employed by both Roe and the Mughal court, and the effects of the resultant clash of the ideological, representational and power structures of the European and Asian worlds.

The first strand requires a vigilant awareness of the fact Roe ‘juggled two competing claims on his time and energy in India’ (Games 2008: 158). Understanding the limitations that each role placed on the other has helped to explain not just the success or failure of Roe’s embassy, to but to reconceptualise what is meant by ‘success’ in this context, when a diplomatic success came at significant economic cost, and supplicating for commercial privilege reducing the pomp and dignity of the ambassadorial state.

Alison Games places Roe in a historical context as one of the ‘cosmopolitans’ helping to push forward English expansion. As part of this, she views his embassy as a carefully balanced exercise in which the need to maintain a dignified position as the proxy of the sovereign alternated with the need to ‘creepe and sue’, in Roe’s words (Foster 1899: 358), for the commercial needs of the Company. Roe, she argues, spent his embassy in a state of ‘constant vigilance from a gauntlet of what he viewed as petty assaults and gratuitous offences’ (Games 2008: 156). Jealously guarded privileges ensured Roe’s status at court, and were, in Games’s reading, his only recourse against his distance from the ‘financial networks, patronage, employers, supplies, information, [and] military support’ of England (Games 2008: 159).

Rupali Mishra, likewise, has recently argued that Roe served not two, but three masters, seeing a conflict between what ‘he hoped to gain for himself, for James, and for the East India Company in the 1610s’ (2014: 8). As Games does, Mishra stresses the difficulties in squaring the need for royal and national honour and the commercial requirements of the Company who were, after all, paying his wages and supplying his gifts, though Mishra does nuance this slightly by noting the ways in which these aims might interlock. Moreover, by a study of Roe’s correspondence, Mishra notes the way in which his self-presentation differs according to whether Roe is serving the Crown or Company, as well as some less guarded moments in which Roe seems to reveal his desire ‘to serve time abroad and return to a better—and more regularly paid—position in England’ (2014: 13). These letters requesting patronage were, Mishra argues, part of a wider system of information exchange: Roe’s desire for usable information stems not from an ambition to better inform the Company, but to ensure that he has a vendible commodity to translate to influence and patronage on his return home. His observations of the governmental systems, culture and society of India are, therefore, born out of a desire for advancement in England, not India.

More significantly, scholars have increasingly stressed that these meetings were what Miles Ogborn (2007: 32) calls ‘attempts at exchange, shaped by the interests and understandings of each side, and moments when either party might seek to dominate the encounter, in words or deeds.’ Ogborn’s consideration of the ‘writing that travels’ brought by Roe to India is a useful model for the paintings given to the emperor; perhaps even more than writing, these existed as material signs which were valuable as objects to be interpreted; in the processes of gifting and explanation, we can see a struggle for domination in the different interpretations given to these material artefacts by Jahangir and the Company’s servants.

 Richmond Barbour has also seen the embassy as a clash of interpretative systems, in this case that of representation. He argues that Roe’s embassy was in fact a series of challenges met by theatrical self-representation, ranging from his initial arrival with huge ceremony at a beach near Surat to the difficulties of presenting himself well at the Moghul court. This highly self-conscious attempt at portraying himself as a dignified ambassador was, Barbour argues, a response to his weakness and unimportance at the court of the Emperor: ‘The discursive hegemony that he strives to sustain – a frame in which many critics have seen intimations of empire – he cultivates in compensation for his relative impotence at the scene of negotiation’ (2003: 147).

Like Barbour, Sanjay Subrahmanyam has argued that Roe’s journal and other written records (official letters and commissions) are important not as an authoritative archive of India, but as a deliberate attempt at self-fashioning, an attempt, however small, to control the encounters and representational contests at the court of Jahangir. Subrahmanyam(2012) sees the embassy of Roe as a moment of conflict, albeit a contained conflict; not one in which the signs of two cultures are made intelligible to each other, but one in which they are in competition. Yet they do not have to be, as the journals of other travellers to India testify; his analysis of the journals of Mutribi Samarqandi, from Persia, and the European Jesuits at the court of Jahangir, demonstrates the potential for positive engagement and cross-cultural interaction at the Mughal court.

Though Roe does observe some of the culture of the Mughal empire, for Subrahmanyam he can never quite get past his initial prejudices and preconceived beliefs about the nature of the power structures in India:

Here then is a key to understanding Roe's presentation of the Mughal to the English reader, an understanding which I would contend is far less subtle than that of the Spanish and Portuguese Jesuits at the Mughal court, and far more apt to drift towards the topoi of Oriental Despotism: absence of laws, arbitrary royal power and a penchant for blood-lust, absence of private property. (2002: 77)

Roe, in this reading, does not write the journal in order to learn, but to present his largely irrelevant embassy as a success, and to confirm European ideas of Oriental despotism.

Without wishing to fundamentally challenge these two modes of interpreting Roe’s embassy, in this chapter I would like to nuance both, by considering the deployment of the particular material goods of paintings. Paintings were, I argue, used by Roe both to unite the two disparate goals of his embassy; they were an economically viable way of offering the gifts required by the court, as well as serving a diplomatic and cultural purpose. Roe (and the Company more generally) place importance on the gifting of paintings precisely because they represent a way of generating surplus value, as one of the few types of goods which are more valuable in India than in Europe. Moreover, Roe uses paintings as a way of inserting himself into the complex power and representational networks of Jahangir’s court; more precisely, they are attempts to impose a representational or symbolic order onto India which is favourable to the goals of the company, and by extension the English state. As Lisa Jardine and Jerry Brotton have pointed out with reference to similar material exchanges with the Ottoman Empire, presenting goods like paintings and carpets which could be made to signify in particular ways ‘showed an astute understanding of the shared imperial and iconographic preoccupations of the courts’ (2000: 120). Though this strategy may well have had some early success, Roe soon lost his ability to control the interpretation of paintings, opening the gifts from a one-way imposition to a moment of exchange containing the sort of power dynamics outlined by Ogborn and Barbour.

A close examination of the moments of gifting, and the reaction to them, on both sides, can thus help us see the power struggles and ideological representations involved in early cross-cultural encounters in India more clearly. Moreover, these gifts reveal themselves to be a series of individual moments of interaction; rather than a continuum from weak beginnings to imperial masters, the gifting of paintings demonstrates the variety, and variability, of political strategies and positionings employed by the Company and its servants. Considering these moments precisely as a series of moments (instead of a grander strategy, or a teleologically inflected first step to mastery and empire) shows us something of the contingencies of early encounters, and the variety of strategies employed (with varied success) to meet them.

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Members of the East India Company who arrived in India before Roe soon discovered that paintings were useful gifts, and potentially even a valuable commodity. The company tried a range of gifts for the Emperor and other local potentates, as Thomas Mitford records:

Mr. Edwardes delivered our King's Majesty's letter with these presents, viz. our King's Majesty's picture, the Queen's and Lady Elizabeth’s, the rich cloak, the rich case of strong waters, one great black glass set in an ebony frame, and a case of knives (Foster 1896-1902: III:85).

Though this is, in many ways, a fairly standard list of gifts, the paintings stand out not simply as being the first listed, but as objects of representation, perhaps even ‘representation in its pure form’, as Foucault (2001: 18) puts it in his discussion of *Las Meninas*, also, of course, a ‘King’s Majesty’s picture’. That is, the other gifts offered to Jahangir derive their value from their status as curiosities, but the curiosity they arouse is limited, largely, to the object itself, though the power of the mirror to speak to a world where the Emperor is the ‘master of all originals and replicas’(Barbour 2003: 175), to reflect back the face of power upon itself, should not go unnoticed. Paintings, however, have value in two ways (and, as we will see, the servants of the EIC were well aware of this distinction). The object itself may be valued for its workmanship, or the skill of the painter. Perhaps a greater value, though, comes from the paintings’ potential to exist as signs, to point beyond themselves to ideas of political and social organisation or cultural practice. They can, in short, present something, even just a glimpse, of the ideology of the gifting party; I will argue it is in this role that the company deploys them as presents, though the complexity of the networks of signs they open out ultimately weakens the direct political strategy of gift-giving.

Unlike many of the English (or European) products which were brought to India but found to be not vendible, paintings seem to have aroused much interest in the local population. The EIC merchant William Edwards, based in Surat, wrote to the company that

pictures of all sorts are much requested for presents but not for sale, but those on boards will be defaced by the heat of the weather, as these now sent, in warping and splitting, but for their workmanship are much esteemed; (Foster 1896-1902: III:16)

Edwards had himself been involved in giving paintings as diplomatic gifts, though not without some scandal. Asaph Chan, a nobleman and minister of the Emperor, had taken one of the paintings Edwards proposed to present to Jahangir as his own gift, meaning that Edwards had to present one of his own collection, by all accounts an inferior specimen. Nonetheless, regardless of the workmanship, his attempts to ingratiate himself with Jahangir were doomed, since ‘the title of a merchant is of them much despised’(Foster 1896-1902: III:18). Still, the value of paintings was recognised through this incident, and Edwards requests more pictures later in the same letter:

Among other pictures, if you send any, it would do well to appoint a dozen of those small creased pictures which show, some two faces or persons, and some three, according as you stand to look upon them. They were esteemed in England when they first were devised, but since are little regarded. They are cheap there and would be much esteemed here, for having never been seen in these parts. […] The fight of '88 and our Saviour's passion would do well (Foster 1896-1902: III:19).

Edwards has grasped the novelty value of European paintings, or rather the particular style of the triptych, which he claims will be useful precisely because they have ‘never been seen in these parts’. He does grasp that there is surplus value to the paintings in India, but only seems to conceptualise this in economic terms: it is fortunate that they are out of fashion in England because that makes them cheap. The floating opposites of ‘cheap there’ and ‘much esteemed here’ does suggest a link between the economic and the fashionable (that is, exchanges between economic and non-economic value), but Edwards does not develop that thought any further. Similarly, the suggested subjects (the Armada and the Crucifixion) point towards an awareness that English or European culture and history can be exoticised and commodified in the East, though here, too, Edwards does not develop the point.

 The same commodification of European history can be seen in Edwards’ contemporary in Surat, the chief factor Thomas Kerridge. In a letter just a few weeks after Edwards’, Kerridge offers a fuller consideration of the policy of offering pictures as gifts:

The Mogoll's picture drawn in England is nothing like him; so will serve for no use at all. The rest of the pictures brought up hither, most of them are given for presents and the rest reserved for like uses. Divers have been earnest to buy of them, but none have been sold ; wherefore if five or six dozen were appointed for that purpose I think they would sell. They may be of several sizes and being well wrought, those of France, Germany, Flanders, etc., are fittest for that purpose ; for they esteem not of the ladies' pictures according to their value, except only for the rarity of the workmanship ; so a few extraordinary of them for presents will suffice. The rest may be of different fictions of feigned gods, histories, gardens, banquets and the like, with some two or three hundred pictures, which are cheaper. Black hair or brown is most esteemed here, agreeing with their complexions (Foster 1896-1902: III:67-68).

On the surface, this is simply a ‘shopping list’ from Kerridge back to the Company, a simple piece of information exchange which updates their preconceptions about Indian or Mughal desires. However, Kerridge cannot escape either the materiality or the significance of the pictures, and so his almost forcedly neutral and polished account cannot fully obscure the troubling and difficult questions raised by the process of artistic gift-giving.

 On an economic level, Kerridge acknowledges the need for the Company to bend itself to the realities of the market as it is in India; we may read ‘agreeing with their complexions’ not just as a statement of anthropological fact, but a tacit acknowledgement that it is necessary for the Company’s goods to accord with the desires of the Indian population. That is, Kerridge cannot *create* a market for European artwork, but can only recommend appropriate supplies of art to meet more or less pre-existing demand.

Perhaps most interesting is Kerridge’s concept of ‘value’. Although Kerridge is a touch vague, the ‘value’ of the portraits of the ladies is clearly not based on their purchase price, or (as Kerridge seems to mean) the social rank of the ladies, but on the ‘rarity’ of the workmanship – presumably either an especially high quality work, or one exhibiting new and unusual forms of representation. Conversely, in the case of the ‘Mogoll’s picture’, the value (the ‘use’) is entirely reliant upon the accuracy of the representation. There is, then, a disjunction in types of value, one at the level of the object (workmanship), one at the level of the sign (representation). Yet Kerridge states that only a ‘few’ of the first sort are required – as with the other presents, the curiosity value of objects is limited. Instead, he seeks increasingly symbolic paintings (‘fictions’, ‘feigned gods’ and the like) for ‘the rest’, revealing something of his understanding of the importance of paintings-as-symbols to the company’s diplomatic activity in Asia.

Though we might, with a wry smile, imagine the company attempting to commission a painting of Jahangir ‘drawn in England’, in fact the representational problem they encountered was not one of distance, but time. The painting was in fact a painting of Tamburlaine, supposedly the origin of the Mughal emperors. Thomas Aldworthe, the chief factor at Surat, wrote to Kerridge in 1614 regarding William Edward’s mission to Jahangir. He noted that ‘[Edwards] brings one picture that we think will content [Jahangir] above all, which is the picture of Tamburlaine, from whence he derives himself’ (Foster 1896-1902: II:138). Sadly, the painting looked nothing like Jahangir, or his father, and so it was rejected. Curiously, the Jesuits had tried a similar gambit:

Mukarrib Khan sent me a picture, stating that the Portuguese believed it to be the portrait of Tímúr […] If this had been true, in my opinion there could not have been a more valuable curiosity in my possession; but as it bore no resemblance to his royal descendants, I was not at all satisfied of the truth of the statement (Jahángir 2013: 320).

Jahangir’s refutation of the painting’s accuracy depends on the immutability of his own lineage: to accept a painting of an ancestor which looks nothing like the current ruler is to put all the iconography of the emperors into question, undermining their claims to an unbroken lineage back to Tamburlaine.

The picture, however ill-received, was clearly meant as flattery to Jahangir. What does it mean for the Company to attempt to transmute the Tamburlaine of the European imagination into a honoured and celebrated ancestor? The key image of Tamburlaine for the English was Marlowe’s eponymous play, first presented in 1590, which went through a number of reprints in the decades that followed. Marlowe’s Tamburlaine is a cruel and iconoclastic ruler who, by the end of the play, feels able to threaten the security of Heaven itself: ‘Jove, viewing me in arms, looks pale and wan, / Fearing my power should pull him from his throne’ (Marlowe 1966: V.i).Of course, an alternative reading of Tamburlaine as a powerful and triumphant ruler was also available to early modern English audiences (Levin 1984); indeed, much of the early part of Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* stresses the valour and military brilliance of the Scythian shepherd), and presumably it is this referent the company is trying to activate in its gift. If so, the picture of the ‘Great Mogull’ becomes, rather than a coded insult, an attempt to sublimate the ambiguous morality of the ‘European’ Tamburlaine to the glory of the ‘Asian’ Timur, founder of the Mughal dynasty; in effect, the painting acknowledges that western ideas, rather than being imposed on the natives, must bend to accommodate the ideological structure of their hosts.

 The questions raised by Kerridge’s request thus lead to one larger question: how far are images of England and Englishness valuable at all? Kerridge’s request seems to reflect a reality in which the English must subordinate themselves to Oriental desires, systems of representation, and, by extension, agency.

However, in the same letter, Kerridge asks the Company to send

some courtlike pictures, as the running at tilt, the King and nobility spectators, the King sitting in Parliament, and suchlike will be graceful and give content, being done curiously, that his own people may come short in imitation, of whom he hath and some skilful (Foster 1896-1902: III:68).

Kerridge’s request shows even more clearly than Edwards’ that these paintings ought to be particular representations of Englishness. Yet, since Kerridge has seemingly acknowledged the impossibility of forcing Englishness onto the Indian mass market, we must speculate that these pictures were for quite another purpose entirely, as political gifts rather than objects for sale. Like the paintings for sale, there is a nod to the value of the workmanship in the request for them to be ‘done curiously’, but the specificity of the settings is suggestive. Perhaps they were designed to implicitly counter the splendour of the Mughal court, where these pictures of the English court might serve as markers of European power and organisation.

The internal wars of Europe gestured towards directly in the armada painting, as well as the religious wars obliquely referenced by the crucifixion, can be transmuted in India to a unified show of European power and splendour. As Anthony Milton has demonstrated (Milton 1994: 113), Protestant self-representation often came with a rhetoric of conciliation, in which the goal (however unlikely) of re-uniting the Protestant churches surmounted national or even regional politics: ‘Domestic problems might dwindle when placed in an international context and in the midst of a suitably irenical atmosphere.’ We can perhaps see something of this goal of unification in India, where a painting of a European war is designed to show not division (except in a latent anti-Catholicism), but a triumphant, powerful and divinely supported Protestantism.

The presence of Parliament offers a slight rebuke, perhaps, to the Mughal court, with its focus on the absolute will of the emperor. Indeed, as Joan-Pau Rubiés has shown, ‘European concerns about the nature of monarchy were actually affected by observation of non-European cultures’ (Rubiés 2005: 112), so it should be no surprise to see reflections upon constitutional matters within the gifts offered by the Company. Kerridge’s choice of subject, demonstrating the performative yet collaborative nature of English kingship, offers an alternative constitutional model, with sovereignty rooted in overlapping and interlinked legal polities, domestic and international (Halliday 2010;Withington 2010;Benton and Ross 2013).

However, the political motivation behind the choice of subject may very well have been not Jahangir but the European competitors at his court. Kerridge had written in an earlier report of the Jesuits strategy of denigrating the political system of England in order to gain favour with Jahangir:

Those Jesuits […] shame not to say, we are a people rebelled subjects to their king, and make us and the Hollanders as one, they allege further our country and prince of no respect nor force, having only one city wherein a few merchants, and that our king hath no hand in this business, which they instanced upon an answer made by Paul Canning to the king at the delivery of the present: The king demanded of him from whom the letter was sent, he answered the letter was from his king and the present from the merchants which the Jesuits, noting his haughtiness to mislike, they furthered his disesteeming thereof, saying, our king sent him nothing, it was the merchants only through desire of traffic (Foster 1896-1902: I:280).

The presentation of Parliament makes much more sense as a response to this Portuguese strategy. It is a commonplace that early modern European rulers developed spectacular displays as a strategy of power; The painting would, presumably, be of this tradition, placing a stress on the wealth and power of the King (and state) by showing this ritual occasion – the symbolism of the King, with all the trappings of royalty, addressing a respectful collection of his subjects, would be the perfect rejoinder to any renewal of Jesuit claims (now that a statesman was present at court) of a weak king presiding over a poor and fractured state. Moreover, as Timon Screech (2005: 64-65) has shown, EIC factors in Japan also presented pictures of James I in Parliament, with particular reference to the gunpowder plot, as a way to distance themselves from the Jesuits and disparage the Dutch.

The company’s strategy therefore becomes one of political triangulation, using the interpretative capacities of the Emperor as a check on Portuguese power. Of course, for this strategy to be effective, Jahangir must be able both to interpret the political message behind the painting, and compare it to the verbal reports of the Jesuits at his court. This requires a certain symbolic sophistication, not least in Jahangir’s presumed ability to interpret and finesse representations of a form of power alien to him.

 For both of these Company men, it is clear that the material value of the paintings is far surpassed by their use-value in India. In part this is because they offer an exotic view to Jahangir, who was, as contemporary reports attests, curious about civilisations outside of India. But their choice of scenes reveals that these pictures are to be viewed not as exclusively material objects, but as signs that can, potentially, be deployed and manipulated.

 The submissive gesture of present-offering thus becomes an opportunity for the rituals of the Mughal court to be appropriated to English semiotics, a chance to demonstrate either English superiority (political and/or technical), or the ability to understand and thus categorise the Mughal court, even if that understanding involved a recognition that the English need to submit themselves to Mughal power. Such a categorisation was an established part of the toolkit of travel writers – organising and taxonomising the Other was one way in which those writers ‘performed rhetorically the processes of decontextualisation whereby Europeans extracted objects from their New World environments and gave them new values that were desirable and meaningful to European audiences’ (Wisecup 2013: 265). Wisecup usefully complicates this description by noting the ways in which the objects described by Europeans could never be fully separated from their context; nonetheless, the attempts to place Mughal art appreciation in direct relation to hair or skin colour clearly fits with the desire to classify the world, even as it reveals the accommodation and mutability required of the Europeans in Asia.

Though I largely concur with Subrahmanyam’s readings of the embassy as an implicit conflict, I hope to reconsider a little his formulation of the relationship between power and knowledge:

we might say that the problem we are dealing with here is not one where knowledge is shaped by actual power (for the English had very little power in India, whether at the time of Roe or that of Norris); rather, it is of a will to power where a form of political ethnography, in which various political systems are compared and ranked, has become the standard framework for the ambassadorial account (2002: 95).

To draw a distinction between ‘actual’ power and the ‘will to power’ (presumably the difference between a martial presence and the dream of empire), Subrahamanyam relegates knowledge to being an outcropping, or function of power, whereby different types of power produce different forms of knowledge; the desire to impose a new form of government on India naturally leads to an interest in the existing political economy, and how it compares to the European model.

 Though this does help us understand some of Roe’s goals at the Mughal court, it cannot fully explain the motivation to give pictures as gifts – what purpose would they serve in this economy of power? It is only by understanding paintings as a site of conflict over representation – that is, knowledge which produces power – that the Company’s (and Roe’s) strategies can be fully understood:

[T]here is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (Foucault 1979: 27).

That is, there is also an inherent inversion of Subrahmanyam’s formulation of the ethnographic will-to-power, in which knowledge creates and modifies power structures. In this Foucauldian sense, the gifting of paintings becomes an attempt to circumvent political realities. The Company attempts to impose, through these objects, a system of understanding which can be deployed to produce new knowledge without the need for physical power to support or create it: it is, in effect, a form of ‘soft power’ through the art of resemblances. This was not, as we have seen, the case in every gift, nor was it always (or ever) successful. Nonetheless, it is apparent in these early gifts that thought has been given to the symbolic knowledge contained in art, and its effects on the power relations at the Mughal court, whether direct Anglo-Indian relations or a competitive triangulation in which European diplomats jostle for favour. This is not to say, of course, that the strategy is the same in every gift; in fact, the series of paintings suggests something of the way in which strategies of European accommodation, and fantasies of power, have been adapted by negotiation with locals.

In what remains of this chapter, I will follow these Company men in assuming that a picture has the capacity to represent far more than is on its surface. The practice of gifting these objects interrupts the unity of the sign; in their existence between two owners, two cultures, two modes of interpretation, the gift-paintings become loose signifiers, pointing to a whole range of potential signifieds. The ultimate meaning of these objects, and the right to arbitrate that meaning, remains open to question and challenge. Moreover, those contests and challenges make visible the usually elided systems of representation on which the paintings are based, or in which they might take part: the semiotic questions they leave unanswered call attention to the *purpose* of representation, the validity of representative and interpretative systems, and the cultural contests inherent in the transmission of one representative model into, or onto, another.

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With this culture of pictures as presents in mind, then, let us turn to the embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to Jahangir (1615-18). Roe’s embassy has been well-covered, of course, by scholars across a wide range of disciplines: despite the fact that other merchants (including Edwards and Kerridge) had presented themselves to Jahangir, Roe’s status as the first official ambassador gives the cross-cultural interaction more weight and prominence in cultural and historical studies. Though I, too, will prioritise the exchanges between Roe and Jahangir, I want to stress the importance of the corporate setting and commercial interests in Roe’s behaviour; his gifting of paintings comes, at least in part, from the Company’s own wishes (and funding), as their minutes report: ‘[I]t is thought he should not have power to make presents without advice […] Roe is not to intermeddle with their business and merchandise’(*CSPC* Oct. 7-14, 1614).

As such, through the gifting of paintings we can see him try to reconcile commercial and diplomatic aims by making one object serve both needs. However, because he is an explicitly cultural liaison, in a way that merchants are not, the gifting of paintings also offers an opportunity for a conflict between types of representations, in which Roe first attempts to write English norms on to the Mughal court, and eventually is reduced to fighting a rearguard battle against the imposition of a ‘Mughal’ reading by Jahangir.

 Roe and Jahangir spoke directly on the matter of paintings on a few occasions. In fact, Jahangir considered himself something of a connoisseur of artworks, noting in his memoirs that

I am very fond of pictures, and have such discrimination in judging them, that I can tell the name of the artist, whether living or dead. If there were similar portraits finished by several artists, I could point out the painter of each. Even if one portrait were finished by several painters, I could mention the names of those who had drawn the different portions of that single picture. In fact, I could declare without fail by whom the brow and by whom the eye-lashes were drawn, or if any one had touched up the portrait after it was drawn by the first painter (Jahángir 2013: 360).

Notably, Jahangir’s expertise extends only to the manner of construction of the painting, not the aesthetic qualities or meaning. There is, in fact, nothing here to suggest Jahangir’s skill as an *interpreter* of meaning, since his focus is exclusively on the skills of the painters; or, more accurately, his own skills in identifying the origin of the painting, or parts of the painting. Aesthetic considerations are secondary to identification; indeed, the only sense of the picture-as-representation comes in the assumption that he will be looking at a ‘portrait’, rather than any other kind of scene or image.

Moreover, in accordance with Jahangir’s own estimation of his skills, Roe notes that he required many ‘judgements’ of them, suggesting a shared appreciation of the skill of the artists put before the emperor. On one occasion Jahangir presented Roe with a selection of miniatures, copied from an English model, and challenged him to discern which was the original, and which the copies.

that I was by candle-light troubled to discerne which was which, I confesse, beyond all expectation: yet I shewed mine owne, and the differences, which were in arte apparant, but not to be judged by a common eye. But for that at first sight I knew it not, he was very merry and joyfull, and craked like a Northerne man: I gave him way and content, praising his mans art. Now, saith he, what say you? I replyed, I saw his Majestie needed no Picture from our Countrey (Roe 1625: 547).

Roe notes some amazement at the skill of the Mughal artists, despite adding the caveats of poor lighting and subtle differences in quality. Here again the focus falls on workmanship, and duplication, not the creation of representations. Nonetheless, even with an acceptance of Mughal skill, Roe’s admission that no further English gifts are required is a strange one; it is made more strange by the fact that Roe offers (once his offer of money has been refused) a gift for the painter from his house, perhaps ‘a good Sword, a Pistall, a Picture’ (Roe 1625: 547). It may be that English workmanship cannot fully eclipse Mughal efforts at duplication, but Roe’s insistence on offering an English painting from his collection suggests that the symbolic value of paintings remains current.

This sort of test seems to have been common practice with Jahangir; Subrahmanyam (2002: 82) notes a similarly constructed scene in which Jahangir shows copies of Persian works to Mutribi, who carefully corrects some of the details:

the significance of the incident lies in the fact that while Mutribi is concerned to show the meticulous nature of Mughal portraiture and the confidence that was vested in him as a judge of its quality, Roe's is a grudging acceptance of the painter's skills, framed as a story in which the skills that are brought to the fore are his own, for he tells the reader he does not have a 'common eye'.

Here, too, Roe subtly emphasises his own skills while revealing those of the Other, since though Jahangir’s requests for his ‘judgements’ flatter the ambassador, they also demonstrate the emperor’s curiosity about, and understanding of, artistic techniques. That ‘Mughal artists deftly and selectively coopted European subjects as well as stylistic conventions and pictorial realism’ has been made clear in recent scholarship, from Bailey and others (Bailey 1998: 25;Keller 2013: 344-347). Nor was this a one-way process since, as Subrahmanyam (2012: 180) has recently demonstrated, from the middle of the seventeenth century ‘vastly greater numbers of Indian paintings began to arrive in Europe, mainly in the Netherlands.’ Curiosity developed into artistic experimentation on both sides of the Indo-European exchange.

Yet Jahangir was capable, perhaps even more capable than Roe, of manipulating the representative schema of a picture. In his journal, Roe recalls an occasion on which he was forced to open a cargo of presents in the presence of the emperor:

Then next he demanded whose the Pictures were. I answered, sent to me to use on occasions, and dispose as my businesse required: so hee called for them, and caused them to be opened, examined me of the women, and other little questions, requiring many judgements of them (Roe 1625: 564).

Jahangir examines all the pictures closely, including a discussion with Roe about the women featured in them, which perhaps suggests Kerridge was right to assign ‘value’ based on the social status of the sitter of a portrait; although, of course, this examination reveals that is not an inherent value of the painting, but one that requires an additional explanation to make manifest.

However, once Roe and Jahangir are discussing a scene, rather than a portrait, any sense of shared judgement, or mutual artistic techniques, soon dissipates:

of the third Picture of *Venus* and a Satyre: he commanded my Interpreter not to tell me what he said: But asked his Lords what they conceived should be the interpretation or morall of that, he shewed the Satyres hornes, his skinne which was swart, and pointed to many particulars: every man replyed according to his fancie; but in the end hee concluded they were all deceived: and seeing they could judge no better, hee would keepe his conceit to himselfe, iterating his command to conceale this passage from me: But bade him aske me what it meant: I answered, an Invention of the Painter to shew his arte, which was Poeticall, but the interpretation was New to mee that had not seene it. Then he called Master *Terry*, to give his judgement, who replying, hee knew not. The King demanded why hee brought vp to him an inuention wherein hee was ignorant (Roe 1625: 564).

Roe refuses to offer an interpretation, but attempts to move into the territory that Jahangir claims to occupy in his memoirs; refusing interpretation for a consideration of artistic skill. It is curious that Terry, too, fails to offer an interpretation – and that Jahangir is surprised by this, wondering why the English have presented a painting they cannot explain.

This moment is a triumph of what Greenblatt calls ‘improvisation’, ‘the ability both to capitalize on the unseen, and to transform given materials into one’s own scenario’ (1980: 227). Indeed, what could be more improvisational than deciphering an unseen painting to gain political-cultural advantage? This, though, is not a Greenblattian imposition of a cultural system onto an external culture (specifically a European mode onto a non-European world), but rather improvisation as contest between two well-developed ideological and semiotic systems.

Although both men claim in their writings to be skilled at interpreting paintings, this moment seems to be about the ability to impose a meaning rather than discern one (Roe, after all, is as capable as Jahangir at producing the anti-Oriental reading, since he later surmises what Jahangir meant). Faced by a non-European with the capacity to improvise, Roe retreats, and resorts to stereotypical warnings about untrustworthiness:

This I repeate for instruction, to warne the company and him that shall succeed me to be very wary what they send, may be subiect to ill Interpretation: for in that point this King and people are very pregnant and scrupulous, full of jealousie and trickes, for that notwithstanding the King conceited himselfe, yet by the passages I will deliver my opinion of this conceit, which (knowing, I had never seene the Picture, and by Ignorance was guiltlesse) hee would not presse hard upon me. But, I suppose, he understood the Morall to be a scorne of *Asiatiques* whom the naked Satyre represented, and was of the same complexion and not unlike; who being held by *Venus* a white woman by the Nose, it seemed that shee led him Captive. Yet he revealed no discontent, but rould them up, and told me he would accept him also as a Present (Roe 1625: 565).

As ever, we must be cautious about the actual truth of Roe’s words – the idea that Jahangir takes ‘no discontent’ seems unlikely, even based on Roe’s own relation of the scene. But at the heart of that relation is the emperor’s unwillingness to be led, and Roe’s won powerlessness to lead – he is literally unable to offer any interpretation of the painting, and so Jahangir is left to ‘conceit himself’, that is, develop his own interpretation.

Perhaps we can see, behind the stereotypes, a fear of the Other who is as skilled as the Europeans, able to easily insert himself into European systems and in doing so reveal them as systems, as things which can be exploited, and turned back against the visitors to the court. Roe’s comments suggest a failure of European agency, unable to perform power as they do in Europe, and unable to enforce a representative or interpretative schema on the new locations in which they find themselves. Jahangir’s challenge to the projected fantasy of European power produces no satisfactory answer from Roe, whose base denial and attempts to move the discussion to a more neutral territory of artistic skill are clearly unsuccessful.

These gifts of paintings show us the moves that the Company’s agents were making towards translatability, whether that came in the form of imposing European ideals, or, more frequently, as accommodation to Indian markets and desires. But this is not to suggest that these were first steps on a smooth path to mutual understanding; rather, they show us the *process* of intercultural translation, with its difficulties, missteps and misunderstandings. The range of strategies involved in the gifting of paintings reveals the difficulty of constructing a single idea of ‘Englishness’ or ‘Europeanness’ in India, and the ways in which the East India Company was forced to adopt its self-presentation in the face of an Indian market it could neither control nor predict.

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