

Revue Histoire de l'Art, No. 82: Asia and the West. Other Forms of Orientalism?

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Asia and the West. Other Forms of Orientalism?

A call for submissions for issue no. 82 of the periodical *Histoire de l'art*.

Issue coordinated by Judith Delfiner, Edith Parlier-Renault and Julie Ramos

Accounts of relations between the West and Asia are numerous and can be found in all periods, from Antiquity to the present day. The Indianist Sylvain Lévi and the archeologist Alfred Fouche, who produced the founding studies of the Indo-Greek art of Gandhâra, were among the first to reveal how old exchanges with Buddhism were. In the field of art history, examination of these accounts was simultaneously made easier and restricted by their absorption into the larger phenomenon of "Orientalism." This very general term is problematic because it applies to a scholarly discipline that emerged in the 18th century and tended to include everything relating to the knowledge of "Asia" in Europe, and it was given a particular perspective following the policy implemented by the English and French colonizers in around 1800. Research undertaken in the 1980s shed light principally on the West's invention of the "other". Bringing together the contributions of the linguistic and cultural turns and post-colonial studies, in the wake of the work of Edward Said, it subsequently saw relations with Asia as part of the construction of a meta-discourse on the East that was specific to the creation of empires.

This direction in research had a positive but also limiting impact on study of the arts. One of the consequences, in France at least, was the greater attention paid to the representations of Islam as an "Orient," as testified by the large number of texts on the pictorial Orientalism of traveling painters in the 19th century. In comparison, the Western appropriation of antiquities and texts from South Asia and the Far East in iconographies, practices and theories, and later in art historical writing, have up until now, with the exception of Japonisme, been studied relatively little. And conversely, the role of artistic works and practices in the knowledge of, and even construction of, Asiatic "religions" and thought (Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism) deserves to be explored in greater depth.

Another aspect of Said's Orientalism is the way the arts have been considered as various discourses on the other. Can the use of Asia in images, visual inventions and conceptual tools in the renewal of Western art practices and theories be reduced entirely to a hegemonic appropriation? In her study of German Orientalism, Suzanne L. Marchand draws our attention to the risk: "When scholars take up the subject of 'orientalism,' they seem to forget that many of

those they lump together as 'Europeans' did not inhabit this identity exclusively, or without discomfort." Hence it is possible to envisage that Western works and artistic practices bearing witness to an encounter with Asia call into question conceptions and discourses on Western art at least as much as they support them. With this in mind, exploring relations between the Asia and the West is not intended to reinforce the identity of two monolithic blocks that clash with each other but rather to analyze the way in which these exchanges contribute to the active and shifting construction of such entities.

The postcolonial studies initiated by researchers of Indian origin beginning in the 1990s are in keeping with this approach. In his book *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha develops the notion of "interstitial passage" and invites us to re-examine questions of identity and national belonging by defining "places of culture" and focusing on the construction of eclectic and hybrid identities.

In the history of these circulations, certain sometimes anonymous figures have played a key role. This applies to the intermediaries, translators, compilers and teachers who, in their individual ways, ensured that Asian religions were transmitted and disseminated. Comparative literature specialist Claudine Le Blanc suggests seeing the "reading" of Indian translations as an "experience of defamiliarization as well as familiarization of the distant." The idea, formulated by Raymond Schwab in a pioneering work, of an "Oriental Renaissance" stemming from the discovery of Asian sources (whose effects on German Romantic literature and French literature have been examined by René Gerard and Jean Biès) was also the result of a disorientation, a subversion even, of the Western aesthetic. It should be recognized that literature and philosophy specialists (Roger-Pol Droit and his work on Buddhism in the Western imagination come to mind) seem to be in advance of art historians when it comes to examining these issues. For beyond the identification of borrowings and the comparison of motifs that recent historiography often restricts itself to, it is important to look at the ways in which the question of the historicity or the anhistoricity of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism have contributed to, even by disrupting it, the creation of a supposedly Western modernity, in particular by placing the role of myth, religion and ritual at the heart of the processes of development and reception of Western artistic practices.

This issue with its trans-historical theme presents an opportunity to bring together archeologists, historians of the image and art historians in studies centered on the following themes:

1. Asiatic religions and forms of spirituality: the coming together of religions and mythologies in Western and Asian art, the question of forms of East/West syncretism in Western and Eastern works and theories of art.
2. The different ways of understanding Asiatic religions according to whether they are direct (shifts) and/or indirect, whether via written or oral forms of dissemination. Particular attention will be paid to the role played by works of art and people who acted as intermediaries.
3. The reception and appropriation of these traditions by Western artists (phenomena of transformation, hybridization, construction, or even invention). The "reinvention" of these traditions by Asiatic artists beginning in the 19th century.
4. Above and beyond the East/West confrontation: case studies for which the notion of cultural area is no longer relevant, bearing witness to a decentering of creation (Sanjay Subrahmanyam's concepts of global or "connected" history, Reiko Tomii "international contemporaneity").

Young researchers who are interested are invited to send a one-page synopsis before September

25, with a title and a two- or three-line presentation of the author, to the following email address: revuerefachistoiredelart@gmail.com.

Reference:

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