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Benay, Erin.

Italy by Way of India: Translating Art and Devotion in the Early Modern World.

Harvey Miller Studies in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art History. Turnhout: Brepols, 2022. Pp. iv, 202 + 120 col. ill. ISBN 978-1-912554-77-5 (hardcover) €100.

Italy by Way of India is a groundbreaking study. It promises to change not only how we approach artistic exchange between colonial India and Europeans but also how we reconceptualize the ways that artworks move through time and space to produce global knowledge. This intellectually bracing book is timely: it contributes to the current debate on how to practise a truly global art history. Marking a firm departure from art historical research on Europe in India by Gauvin Bailey, David Kowal, and José Pereira, Benay offers an approach that decentres Europe. By moving away from the centre and periphery model of Eurocentric interpretations, her book confers agency on indigenous artworks. She takes issue with terms such as “influence” or “hybridity” to offer instead the metaphor of translation, highlighted in the title of the book. Objects, she contends, are “multilingual,” communicating more than one meaning simultaneously. They can “do different things in different places and times” (154, emphasis in original). They are both “pluralistic” and “performative” in the zone of contact between cultures (22). Such an approach calls into question the long-standing classification of art created in colonial India as “Indo-Portuguese.” Benay persuasively argues that this term marginalizes the role of Indian artists, architects, and patrons, obscuring the fact that artworks by Indian artists expressed the agency of indigenous artists, which in turn conditioned the way they were received. The discussion of a wide range of media, materials, artworks, and objects that activated the cult of Saint Thomas across space and time in India and Europe allows Benay to transcend the limitations of previous scholarship, demonstrating how Indian artists created a distinctly Indian Christian art.

The first chapter focuses on monumental crosses, carved archways, architectural supports, and stone baptismal fonts created in India from the pre-colonial era through the seventeenth century for the cult of Saint Thomas, who was martyred in South India and buried in San Thomé, a suburb of the modern-day city of Chennai. The architectural fragments and sculptures discussed in the

chapter have been largely ignored in the scholarship. Benay restores agency to these works—many of them fragments—arguing that they were created through a dynamic pattern of exchange over centuries rather than being mere products of colonial occupation. By expressing indigenous aesthetic values and devotional practices, they communicated to diverse audiences across spatial and cultural boundaries.

Chapter 2 turns to devotional works for churches and the domestic interior. The goal of this chapter is to resist such labels as “hybrid” or “syncretic” and instead to establish that these works are “multilingual.” Rather than viewing Goa as the centre of influence in this narrative, Benay argues that local, indigenous artists in Kerala and Goa were informed by many centuries-old traditions that originated outside of both Goa and Europe. The discussion of small ivories of Christian subjects made by Hindu artists in Goa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is especially compelling. These objects are typically approached as mass-produced items for foreign consumption. Instead, Benay posits that many must have been owned by recently converted Indians since they appear in a number of museum collections in India. To fully understand these objects, she asserts that we must imagine how they functioned for their Indian owners. She suggests that they may have evoked a form of “devotional looking.” In this devotional experience, not only does the devotee look at the deity represented in the ivory but the deity also sees the devotee. As a result of this multisensory experience of the divine—referred to by the Hindu term “darśan”—the devotee merges with the deity. Benay underscores the sensuality of the material itself as important to this process, since the smooth surfaces of the ivory invite the touch and become warm when held.

In chapter 3, “Possessing India,” Benay turns to Italy, to ask how objects from India had an impact on the cultural imagination of Europeans. She is concerned not with texts or images, but with *things*, contending that objects have the potential to create meaning “that is equal or greater in significance” to primary textual sources (97). Focusing on the Medici and their interest in both Saint Thomas and India, the chapter includes an analysis of the Guardaroba Nuova of Cosimo I de’ Medici, which was created during the early 1560s (now known as the Sala delle Carte Geografiche). This room included a depiction of India across three maps, with the site of Saint Thomas’s martyrdom clearly marked—the only geographic label. Objects in the Medici collection that were made of materials from India, or included motifs related to India, or were

manufactured in India are discussed in this chapter. Benay underscores that the sensuous engagement with the materiality of objects made of lapis lazuli, mother of pearl, tortoiseshell, agate, and ivory activated a vicarious experience of travel, bringing India to Italy.

The final chapter, "An Indian Saint in Italy," analyzes the complications that arose due to the coexistence of the cult of Saint Thomas in India and Italy and how art contributed to the Catholic Church's attempt to create a unified understanding of Saint Thomas's legacy. The conclusion brings us right up to the present by examining the practices of Saint Thomas Christians today, which are enmeshed in postcolonial politics. Unusual for an academic study, the text ends with a critique of populist nationalism. Yet such a call to action is entirely appropriate, since at the core of this study is a methodology that invites an understanding of artworks created in the context of a religious pluralism that is threatened by the present government in India. Art historians striving to see the early modern world with new eyes, unencumbered by the lens of Eurocentrism, will welcome this compelling, beautifully written, and well-documented study.

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