

Making History: The Constructions of Johann Zoffany's *Colonel Antoine Polier,  
Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist* (1786-7)

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## ABSTRACT

KATHERINE ARPEN: Making History: The Constructions of Johann Zoffany's *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist* (1786-7)  
(Under the direction of Mary Sheriff)

Following the conquest of North India, the Awadhi capital of Lucknow became the site of significant cultural interaction between Europeans and Indians, with men moving in and among the city's various communities. Johann Zoffany's *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist* (1786-7) presents several such men of European birth in the format of the conversation piece. This paper will treat Zoffany's painting as an assertion of British control that was in many ways at odds with the city's flexible cultural boundaries. In considering its connections to British pictorial traditions and the concerns of the East India Company at the end of the eighteenth century, I aim to uncover the ways in which Zoffany's painting offers the viewer a lens through which to consider the various processes of construction—individual, imperial and artistic—taking place during the early period of British India.

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

In February 1901, just two weeks after the death of Queen Victoria, Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, proposed the construction of Calcutta's Victoria Memorial Hall, a grand commemorative project to honor the Queen-Empress. Envisioning a place "where all classes will learn the lessons of history, and see revived before their eyes the marvels of the past,"<sup>1</sup> Curzon hoped the museum would bring the past to life. The history of British India was to be told not by the words written, the statistics gathered or the battles won, but by the museum's collection of paintings, prints and sculptures.

In one of its galleries currently hangs an impressive work by Johann Zoffany (1733-1810), measuring approximately four feet by six feet, in which the artist depicts himself with three of his European companions in the Awadhi capital of Lucknow (1786-7; figure 1). Splitting the center of the painting are the figures of Antoine Polier (c. 1741-1795) and Claud Martin (1735-1800), who burst forward from the muted blues and grays of the canvas in their redcoats and white breeches. Polier, firmly seated with legs spread, extends his arm to select the day's produce, while Martin shows their friend John Wombwell (1748-1813) a watercolor of his newly completed residence along banks of the River Gomti.

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Thomas Raleigh, ed. *Lord Curzon in India: Being a Selection of his Speeches as Viceroy & Governor-General of India, 1898-1905* (London; New York: Macmillan and Co., 1906), 521.

While historians have long been acquainted with the men depicted in Zoffany's work, little is known about the actual painting, which the Victoria Memorial has given the title *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist*.<sup>2</sup> As a result, much has been speculated in the scholarship, including the original title and date. Having reconstructed an itinerary of Zoffany's travels in India, art historian Mildred Archer suggests that the work was completed sometime between the end of his second stay in Lucknow and the beginning of his third, thus dating it to 1786-7, a date that the Victoria Memorial also proposes.<sup>3</sup> The painting's patronage and provenance are likewise uncertain—it remains unknown if it was a commissioned work or if it was ever in the possession of any of the sitters.<sup>4</sup> The subjects' identities have been confirmed by contemporaneous portraits, resulting in the painting's deployment by scholars primarily as an illustration in the biographies of Polier and Martin.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> While the current title assigned to the work by the Victoria Memorial is *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist*, most sources refer to it as *Colonel Polier and his Friends*. For the purposes of this paper, I will occasionally refer to it as the *Polier* painting, although this titling of the work is not meant to privilege Antoine Polier as the primary subject of interest.

<sup>3</sup> Archer has placed Zoffany in Lucknow during three periods of time: June to November/December 1784; March/April 1785 to November 1786; and July/August 1787 to November 1788. The work was presumably finished before Polier left India for Europe in 1788. Archer suggests the work was completed during Zoffany's third trip to Lucknow, although her reasoning should be regarded with a great deal of skepticism as it assumes that the paintings depicted on the wall are Zoffany's own and are drawn from life. See *India and British Portraiture: 1770-1825* (London: Sotheby Parke Bernet Publications, 1979), 449n. 66.

<sup>4</sup> The extensive inventory of Martin's possession compiled at his death in 1800 does not list a work with a description fitting the *Polier* painting. Unfortunately, inventories of Polier and Wombwell's possessions do not exist. The first recorded owner of the work is Captain Henry Strachey, whose father, Edward Strachey, was the second assistant to the Resident at Lucknow from 1797-1801. Sometime in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Strachey gave the work to Robert Henry Clive, upon whose death it passed to William C. Bridgeman, a member of the British Parliament with maternal ties to Clive. Bridgeman sold the work at auction in 1929 (Christie's 28.6.1929). Mary Webster, *Johan Zoffany: 1733-1810* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1976), 79.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, *A Very Ingenious Man: Claude Martin in Early Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford, 1992), 123-4; and Muzaffar Alam and Seema Alavi, *A European Experience of the Mughal Orient: The I'jaz-i Arsalani (Persian Letters, 1773-1779) of Antoine-Louis Henri Polier* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

While brief discussion of the painting can be found in broad surveys of Zoffany's *oeuvre* or the arts of British India,<sup>6</sup> there has yet to be a considered study of the work in relation to the development of British rule during the period in which these men lived in India. The image has previously been regarded as a portrait of the artist with his friends, a record of the most prominent Europeans in Lucknow, and a possible farewell present to Antoine Polier, who was to leave India in 1788. While the painting may rightfully be probed for its depiction of the sitters, it is equally significant as a portrait of a transitional moment for the British in India as they moved from a merchant enterprise to a global empire. It is a portrait of the men who participated actively in shaping this empire, and of the shaping of these men into colonizers.

Lord Curzon hoped the Victoria Memorial's collection would tell the tales of British India, and Zoffany's image does just that; it tells the story of a group of men fashioning their identities, as well as that of a trading company that was to become the cornerstone of an empire. Nonetheless, one must remember that portraiture, like all painting, is a social and cultural practice that participates in the construction of "an imagined and ideal vision of how subjects could be situated and represented," and must be regarded as such.<sup>7</sup> Equally as valuable for the fictions it purports as the truths it tells, the painting, through the genre of the conversation piece, lays bare the process of construction that accompanies these narratives of colonial power.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Archer, *India and British Portraiture*, 155-7; Hermione de Almeida and George H. Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005.), 140; Lady Victoria Manners and George Charles Williamson, *John Zoffany, R.A.: His Life and Works, 1735-1810* (London; New York: John Lane, 1920), 105; Webster, *Johan Zoffany*, 79-80.

<sup>7</sup> Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 57.

In reading Zoffany's painting as an assertion of British identity and power, I do not wish to close the door on alternate interpretations of the work.<sup>8</sup> The painting, like the men's identities, offers the opportunity for multiple readings, and in doing so reflects the particularly tenuous parameters of colonialism itself in the eighteenth century. By underscoring the role of cultural productions in constructing narratives of power—both real and imagined—I hope to draw out “the ways in which culturally or historically constituted subjects become agents in the active sense—how their actions and modes of being in the world always sustain and sometimes transform the very structures that made them.”<sup>9</sup>

When viewing the work through the particular lens of British power, the painting seems to abound with conspicuous displays of colonial markers: redcoats, servants, manuscripts, an architectural drawing, and picturesque paintings. These objects represent aspects of both the sitters' personal interests and those of the East India Company at the close of the eighteenth century. From the partially obscured folio on the table to the prominent canvas in front of which Zoffany sits, every element in the work speaks to the contemporary colonial situation in North India. And at the center of it all sits the artist, calling attention to the very process of creating the image. In many ways, Zoffany's painting is a work about construction: the main subjects' construction of their own

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<sup>8</sup> For a contrasting characterization of the painting's subjects, see Maya Jasanoff's discussions of Polier and Martin, in which she distances the men from imperial projects of control by drawing out the ways in which many of their cultural practices (namely collecting manuscripts) aligned them with the Indians they lived among in Lucknow. "Collectors of Empire: Objects, Conquests, and Imperial Self-Fashioning" *Past & Present* 184 (Aug. 2004): 109-135; *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750-1850* (New York: Knopf, 2005), Chapters 2 and 3. For a selection of scholarly works that aim to destabilize and challenge traditional conceptions of colonialism as a history of domination, see, for example, the collection of essays in Gyan Prakash, ed. *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner, *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 12.

identities, the construction of the rising British Empire, and the artist's construction of the image. As the site of intersection between these multiple elements, the painting offers an entry into the early colonial period, and the men and methods that shaped it.

## CHAPTER II

### IDENTITIES AND ALLIANCES IN COLONIAL LUCKNOW

When Johann Zoffany reached the North Indian city of Lucknow in the summer of 1784, he entered a world at a crossroads. Situated between the Mughal throne in Delhi and the British-occupied state of Bengal, Lucknow was a place of considerable exchange, with a Persian Shiite ruler, a local population of Hindus and Sunnis, and an assortment of British and continental European mercenaries and East India Company officials. It was a place of cultural cosmopolitanism where communities mixed and mingled, sharing customs and influences. Indians and Europeans patronized each other's arts, ate each other's food, shopped the bazaars side by side, and gathered together for public events such as banquets and cockfights similar to the one depicted in Zoffany's *Colonel Mordaunt's Cock Match*, in which the artist is shown working alongside Martin and Wombwell (1784-6; figures 2, 3).<sup>10</sup>

Much of this activity was due in part to Asaf-ud-Daula (r. 1775-1797), who had been appointed the Nawab of Awadh a decade earlier following the death of his father, Shuja-ud-Daula (r. 1754-1775). As earlier treaties had established British military control in Awadh, the new nawab found himself without the responsibility of maintaining an army, and thus turned his attention to cultural pursuits. Shortly after his succession, Asaf ud-Daula moved the court capital from Faizabad to Lucknow, which had been developing as the province's cultural center during his father's reign. The years that followed were

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<sup>10</sup> For a particularly rich account of the cultural cosmopolitanism of Lucknow, see Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire*, Chapter 2.



marked by a resurgence of the nawabi court, with new building programs implemented by Asaf-ud-Daula and an increase in artistic and literary activity. In this atmosphere of cultural exchange and indefinite boundaries, Polier attended *nautches* (figure 4), Wombwell enjoyed his hookah in local dress (figure 5), and Martin adopted an Indian boy who was raised by his *bibi* (figure 6).<sup>11</sup>

Movement between communities took place on a professional level as well, as many Europeans, including Polier and Martin, simultaneously worked for the British East India Company and Asaf-ud-Daula.<sup>12</sup> Polier and Martin's dual service allowed for this movement, but, like Wombwell, it was ultimately their connection to the Company that permitted them to live and make their fortunes in India. Zoffany has given primacy to this alliance in the painting, depicting the trio of men in their Company uniforms at the center of the canvas. Polier, Martin and Wombwell appear as men lording over a British-controlled Lucknow, rather than men moving between and among the multiple communities of this dynamic city.

Set against the relaxed figures of Zoffany and Wombwell, Polier and Martin cut a striking image with their authoritative postures and distinctive redcoats. They seem the perfect picture of the English officer, yet neither man was born a Briton. Polier was

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<sup>11</sup> On the image of the Polier at the nautch, see Tessa Dean, "The hookah, orientalism, and colonialism in eighteenth-century India: an analysis of Colonel Polier watching a nautch" (MA Thesis, University of North Carolina, 2004). Much recent scholarship has focused on the intermarrying of Europeans and Indian women, including Ghosh, *Sex and the Family* and William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in the Eighteenth-Century India* (New York: Viking, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Employees of the East India Company began residing in Awadh following Shuja-ud-Daula's defeat at the Battle of Buxar. While the first of the resulting treaties between Shuja-ud-Daula and the Company established the stationing of British troops in Awadh at the expense of the nawab, the second furthered the Company's influence through the installation of a British Resident appointed by Governor-General Warren Hastings. On the details of these treaties, see Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, *A Fatal Friendship: The Nawabs, the British, and the City of Lucknow* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4-5. While many Company employees worked exclusively for the Company, mostly in administrative positions associated with the Resident, other men, like Polier and Martin, also worked for the nawab.

raised in Switzerland by French Huguenot refugees, while Martin spent his early years in Lyon, France. The renegotiation of identity displayed in the *Polier* painting was crucial for the two men, who arrived in India as the Anglo-French rivalry was being played out across the subcontinent as well as in Europe and the far-off expanses of North America. As Britain ambitiously extended her reach around the globe, it seemed that on either side of the ocean she could not lose. In wisely aligning themselves with the East India Company, Polier and Martin became participants in this growing British Empire, forsaking national allegiances in order to further their own futures in India.

Despite his French heritage, Polier enlisted in the East India Company in 1757, possibly in imitation of his uncle who was already serving in South India, and was stationed at the British outpost of Madras. Claud Martin arrived in the nearby French port settlement of Pondicherry some years earlier, having enlisted in the *Compagnie des Indes* as a common soldier in the fall of 1751.<sup>13</sup> As British troops closed in on Pondicherry in May 1760, Martin, aware of the *Compagnie des Indes*' impending loss and the growing military force of the East India Company, made a dramatic but shrewd decision to leave his post and offer the British his services as a soldier. British commanding officer Sir Eyre Coote quickly placed Martin and his fellow deserter in charge of the 'Free French Company,' thus beginning his long employment with the East India Company.

With the situation in South India seemingly coming to a close with the fall of Pondicherry, both Martin and Polier headed north to Bengal in 1761, where the Company had been maintaining control since its stunning victory at the Battle of Plassey. As Polier assisted with the construction of Fort William in Calcutta, Martin surveyed the

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<sup>13</sup> Martin moved quickly up the ranks, eventually entering the bodyguard of the French commander-in-chief, Comte de Lally.

surrounding areas of Awadh and Cooch Behar. By 1774, Martin's surveying duties brought him back to Awadh, where Polier had been building a comfortable life for himself since assuming the position of surveyor, engineer and architect to the nawab the previous year. Martin, eager to remain in Lucknow, was deputized into the nawab's service as supervisor of the arsenal, having obtained the necessary recommendation by pressuring personal contacts in the Company.<sup>14</sup> John Wombwell likewise relied on his connections to secure a position in Lucknow and was appointed Company accountant and paymaster of the troops in 1777.

Once in Lucknow, these three men seem to have become fast friends, united in their shared interests in learning India's languages, collecting ancient manuscripts, and occasionally donning forms of local dress. Obviously there was much to be gained by their residence in Awadh; Lucknow was a bustling city under Asaf-ud-Daula, brimming with cultural events and money to be made. Isolated as they were from the British capital of Calcutta, the men found themselves able to engage in the cultural activities and customs of the city, yet the necessity of maintaining strong ties to the Company was paramount.

Although Polier and Martin had been Company employees for over a decade, both men constantly worked to secure their positions, as many officials were reluctant to trust the non-British Europeans that served under them.<sup>15</sup> The numerous Frenchmen

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<sup>14</sup> On Martin's appointment to the arsenal, see Llewellyn-Jones, *A Very Ingenious Man*, 66-71.

<sup>15</sup> These misgivings were certainly not without merit, as French soldiers often shifted allegiances when the opportunity arose. In January 1764, Martin was sent to capture the Nawab of Bengal, who had fled to Awadh seeking protection under Shuja-ud-Daula. On the road to Awadh, Shuja-ud-Daula sent word to one of Martin's French volunteers that better conditions and pay would await anyone who deserted the Company and joined him in Awadh. Half of the battalion mutinied, but Martin returned to camp. He was given command of another company and was rewarded for his loyalty, receiving a promotion from ensign to lieutenant. Llewellyn-Jones, *A Very Ingenious Man*, 29-33.

employed by the nawabs of Awadh throughout the years only heightened this distrust, resulting in the removal of all Europeans from Lucknow except those granted permission by the Governor-General. Polier and Martin's ability to remain in Lucknow despite their continental European birth and occasional bouts of disloyalty<sup>16</sup> was certainly due in large part to their value to the Company, which was in the midst of expanding not only its territorial control, but also its ultimate agenda in India. But this was not all. In addition to making themselves indispensable and building a network of high-powered allies, Polier and Martin had to secure the trust of the Company, to rewrite their identities and reposition themselves as Englishmen. I argue that Zoffany's painting does just that.

Though Wombwell was British-born, and therefore his need to reinforce his position within the Company was seemingly not as critical as the Frenchmen's, his "unconventional" lifestyle in Lucknow perhaps suggests otherwise. Like Polier and Martin, he too would have benefited from an image such as the *Polier* painting, which presents his ultimate allegiance to the British. Additionally, considering the varied composition of the Company's personnel at the time, one might argue that native Britons, finding themselves at times outnumbered by continental Europeans and local mercenaries within the Company's ranks, would have been as concerned with reinforcing their natural Britishness as men like Polier and Martin were with presenting their new British identities within the colonial context.

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<sup>16</sup> Martin was part of the "White Mutiny" of 1766, in which a handful of Company employees drafted a letter in protest of Clive's recent cuts in officers' pay. Clive responded by removing Martin and the other men who signed the letter from service and sending them back to England. Martin never boarded the ship to England and returned to the Company two years later, remaining in good standing until his retirement. Llewellyn-Jones, *A Very Ingenious Man*, 38-41. Polier left the Company in 1775 after he participated, without official permission, in the reclamation of a Mughal fort that had been captured by the Jats in Agra. He worked independently for the Mughal emperor Shah Alam until he was reinstated as a Lieutenant Colonel six years later. Polier remained a Company employee until his return to Switzerland in 1788.

The German-born Zoffany would have likewise profited from such a declaration of Britishness, as much of his patronage in India depended on his ability to maintain relations with high-ranking officials within the Company. Having successfully negotiated the cultural waters of England upon his move from Germany in 1760, Zoffany knew well the role public personas played in achieving professional successes. In depicting himself alongside Polier, Martin and Wombwell in the *Polier* painting, Zoffany aligns himself with these men and the Company they serve, a bond that is played out in the composition of the image.

While a table physically separates Zoffany from the figures of Martin and Wombwell (to the viewer's right) and Polier (to the left), the off-centered canvas on which he works effectively draws the right group inward towards him, joining the four men in a line that gracefully bells in and out as it moves across the painting's center.<sup>17</sup> Linked both visually and in their shared interests and connections to the Company, the men do not simply stand alone as individuals; they form a unit that works to define something larger than themselves: the emerging British Empire. The format of the conversation piece—a pictorial mode that is both familiar to British eyes and primarily concerned with the act of definition—would prove to be a useful vehicle for such an undertaking.

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<sup>17</sup> Archer, *India and British Portraiture*, 156.

### CHAPTER III

#### CONSTRUCTING A COLONIAL CONVERSATION

The conversation piece, the genre to which the *Polier* painting belongs, was well established in England and Zoffany's native Germany when the artist arrived in India with brush in hand.<sup>18</sup> Traditionally, a small group of family members or friends are presented within a private interior, situated among their many possessions and frozen in gestures of conversation (figures 7, 8). In favoring a more casual and seemingly spontaneous scene, the conversation piece works to convince the viewer that the image is a "natural" one, free from the restricted formality of traditional portraits; yet it is deceiving in its informality.

More than simply a portrait of a sitter's likeness, the conversation piece is by its very nature a conscious construction of identity meant to define the sitters through its conspicuous signifiers of status and interests. Gazing upon these still subjects as they bear their markers of identity, we are, as Marcia Pointon suggests, "invited to construct narratives across time."<sup>19</sup> But if the frozen poses of the figures and the assemblage of objects work to define the sitters, constructing identities and narratives as Pointon

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<sup>18</sup> For additional background on the genre's tradition in England, see Ronald Paulson, *Emblem and Expression: Meaning in English Art of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), Chapters 8 and 9; Mario Praz, *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Europe and America* (University Park; London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971); and Sacheverell Sitwell, *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of English Domestic Portraits and their Painters* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1936).

<sup>19</sup> Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1993), 159.

suggests, they also betray the artifice involved in such images; the paintings, like the narratives we build around them, are constructions.

The *Polier* painting is inescapably staged, with its multiple groups of individuals simultaneously engaged in their various pursuits resembling something closer to a theatrical scene than an actual moment in Polier's household.<sup>20</sup> The sheer number of objects and activities gathered together within a single space heightens the artificiality of the scene: a canvas rests on an easel, framed paintings hang on the wall, manuscripts are piled up on the table, fruits are selected from a basket, a watercolor is being unrolled, a monkey reaches for a banana. Yet despite the accumulation of objects and figures in a single frame, each element is carefully positioned to allow for maximum visibility, creating an image that is both visually cluttered and compositionally neat.

Like the assembly of the figures and objects, the painting's overall composition is equally carefully calculated. Unnaturally symmetrical, the image unfolds from the vertical line created by the large oval painting of a waterfall, the figure of Zoffany, and the table that rests between Polier and Martin. This central line splits the image, dividing the canvas into two repeating halves: a pair of figures is separated from a third figure with a small oval painting and a larger rectangular painting overhead.

The prominent redcoats of Polier and Martin are balanced by the banners hanging in the margins, with each dash of red equally distanced from the next. The red banners, along with the white garments of the Indian figures at the extremities additionally contain the image as they bookend the figural groups and the collection of paintings on the wall. The carefully formulated crossing of gazes works similarly to provide balance, creating

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<sup>20</sup> Upon his arrival in England, Zoffany's first major patron was the actor David Garrick, for whom he produced a number of works belonging to sub-genre of the conversation piece in which the setting mimicked that of a theatrical scene. See Manners and William, *John Zoffany, R.A.*, Chapter VII.

two directional axes. The first runs parallel to the picture plane with the figures of Polier, Martin and Wombwell looking out to the edges of the picture, while the lateral servant groups return our attention back towards them along this same axis. Zoffany and two partially obscured servants address the viewer directly from the center of the canvas, creating a second axis that runs perpendicular to the other groups' gazes, bisecting the image as it projects outward from the picture plane.

Such balance and compositional organization results in an image that fails to read as a natural moment despite the genre's objective of presenting a snapshot in the lives of these men. With this adoption of the conversation piece format, we are then presented with two overt constructions: that of the painting and that of the sitters' identities. As the construction of the men's identities is bound up in the careful construction of the painting, the genre simultaneously fashions these men as British and makes apparent the very process by which this fashioning is taking place.

Attention is further drawn to the process of production by the figure of Zoffany, who looks out from the center of the composition with palette in hand. The artist momentarily stops work on a canvas in order to turn and behold the viewer, a device that reinforces the constructed nature of the image through its overt acknowledgment of the act of painting. While this recognition of the viewer by the artist is in keeping with traditions of individual self-portraits (figure 9), Zoffany also depicted himself addressing the viewer in several group portraits, including three works that, like the *Polier* painting, link the artist to the process of creation: *The Life School of the Royal Academy* (1771-2; figure 10), *The Tribuna of the Uffizi* (1772-8; figure 11), and *Colonel Mordaunt's Cock Match*.



Seated among the many Academicians participating in a life drawing session, Zoffany regards the viewer from an isolated vantage point at the left edge of *The Royal Academy*, while *The Tribuna* includes a representation of the artist surrounded by the Uffizi's masterpieces as he peers out from behind Raphael's *Niccolini-Cowper Madonna* (figure 12). In a similar fashion to the *Polier* painting, *Colonel Mordaunt's Cock Match* shows Zoffany turning in his chair to meet the viewer, this time with pencil in hand (figure 3).<sup>21</sup> In these works Zoffany engages the viewer in the role of an active artist, either through association (as in the *Royal Academy* and *The Tribuna*) or through the very act of creation (as in the *Cock Match* and the *Polier* painting). As we look at the artist, who in turns looks to us as he bears a marker of his artistic identity, we become increasingly aware of the truth of the image's production: it has been constructed by this man and in turn presented to us.

That the canvas Zoffany works at in the *Polier* painting is of a nude woman and two ascetics gathered under a banyan tree only heightens this awareness. Completing this populated landscape from the comfort of what appears to be Polier's home, Zoffany is not painting from life, but from the imagination. The painting of the men and that of the banyan scene are thus linked by their shared creator, who has constructed and imagined them. They are neither fully accurate, nor are they entirely false. Certainly the men represented were close friends who shared a mutual interests in the arts and literature of Britain and India; Polier, Martin and Wombwell were indeed employees of the East India Company; and Zoffany had witnessed and recorded the great sight of India's immense

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<sup>21</sup> Four of his paintings of India include self-portraits, but it is only in the works that reference the act of artistic production that he addresses the viewer directly. The other two works, *The Death of the Royal Tyger* and *Hyderbeg on his Mission to Lord Cornwallis*, both depict the artist engaged in the action of the scene without any notice of the viewer.

banyan trees and may have been familiar with the ascetic community. In this sense, the work is not pure fiction. It is the way in which all these elements—the main subjects, the redcoats, the manuscripts, the paintings, the servants—come together in a single, organized moment that is the point of invention.

What did Zoffany achieve in creating this highly composed and legible scene then? The painting first and foremost provides the opportunity to present the “British” identities of these men, but I would argue its achievements are even more ambitious than that. In gathering all these figures and objects together in one space, Zoffany not only defines the subjects as Britons, but also defines the emerging British Empire at large. Four pictorial representations—the manuscripts, the paintings, the references to the land, and the Indian figures—will be addressed to explore how each serves this dual purpose of constructing identities for the painting’s European subjects while simultaneously participating in the construction of the British Empire at the close of the eighteenth century.

## CHAPTER IV INDIVIDUAL AND IMPERIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF BRITISHNESS

### Collecting India

Just to the left of center in Zoffany's painting sits Polier, leaning back on the table with a commanding presence as a servant presents him with a basket of fruits. As he makes his selection with his right hand, picking the best that his Indian estate has to offer, the Colonel rests his left elbow next to another bounty carefully selected by his discriminating eye: his manuscripts (figure 13). The assortment of manuscripts from which Polier has momentarily turned his attention includes two bound books and a portfolio of loose pages, objects coveted by Europeans and Indians alike. By the time Polier returned to Europe after thirty-two years abroad, he had amassed one of the most comprehensive European collections of Indian manuscripts.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps his only rival in this area was Martin, who was likewise an avid collector of manuscripts.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to referring to the process of collecting manuscripts and Indian paintings, the open folio resting on the table signals the men's interest in learning the languages of India. Polier, Martin and Wombwell were the keepers of immense libraries of not only manuscripts and paintings, but also books on India's history, religion and

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<sup>22</sup> Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire*, 86. Polier returned to Switzerland with nearly 600 manuscripts in the form of individual sheets and bound books.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Marie Lafont cites the mention of a list compiled after Martin's death that includes 507 Persian manuscripts, but has been unable to acquire the original document to confirm if Polier's manuscripts in Urdu, Sanskrit, etc. are included. See Lafont, *Indika: Essays in Indo-French Relations* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2000), 106.

literature. Possessing texts in Persian, Sanskrit, Urdu, and Bengali alongside their European favorites, they were in many ways not just collectors of objects, but collectors of languages.<sup>24</sup>

While the study of local languages and ancient texts can be regarded as a cultural practice of these men of the Enlightenment, it was also a primary concern of the Company in their attempt to “understand”, and thus control, India. Bernard Cohn cites 1770 to 1785 as the “formative period during which the British successfully began the program of appropriating Indian languages to serve as a crucial component in their construction of the system of rule.”<sup>25</sup> Following the Battle of Plassey, the British needed to cement alliances with local rulers in the region and gather an Indian army to secure their hold on the newly acquired territories in North India. To do so, knowledge of the local languages was required. Warren Hastings and other Company employees, including Polier and Martin, began to study Persian, believing that it “ought to be studied to perfection, and is requisite to all the civil servants of the Company, as it may also prove of equal use to the Military Officers of all the Presidencies.”<sup>26</sup>

Polier’s position in Awadh brought him in contact with locals, and his personal and official communications in Persian are preserved in *I’jaz-i Arsalani*, a collection of

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<sup>24</sup> On what Bernard Cohn has called “the effect of converting India forms of knowledge [e.g., language] into European objects,” see Chapter 2 of his *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>26</sup> W.H. Hutton, ed., “A Letter of Warren Hastings on the Civil Service of the East India Company,” *English Historical Review* 44 (1929): 635. Quoted in Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, 24.

his letters from the early years of his residence in Awadh.<sup>27</sup> This work and his *Mythologie des Indous* are the most significant records of Polier's life in India, the latter of which includes the details of his quest for the *Vedas*, the most ancient of Hindu texts. While Persian was studied out of necessity in order to interact with local rulers, Sanskrit, the language of the *Vedas*, was considered to be the key to unlocking India's "lost" past.<sup>28</sup>

Fueled by the desire to gain a greater knowledge of India and the ancient histories believed to be located in religious writings such as the *Vedas*, collectors such as Polier, Martin and Wombwell scoured the book bazaars in search of personal copies for translation and study.<sup>29</sup> As voracious collectors of such texts and students of local languages, Polier, Martin and Wombwell were certainly motivated by an Enlightenment curiosity, but their collecting practices also allowed them to participate in the wider construction of British rule in India. Nicholas Dirks, in considering the language projects of Sir William Jones and Nathaniel Halhed, reminds us of "the subtle ways in which the Orientalist project, even at the moment of its most spectacular successes, was always part of the colonial project of rule."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *I'jaz-i Arsalani*, or "the wonders of Arsalan" refers to Polier's Mughal title, *Arsalan Jang* ("lion of the battle"). The work is available in two volumes in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Muzaffar Alam and Seema Alavi have translated the complete text in *A European Experience of the Mughal Orient*.

<sup>28</sup> Knowledge of Sanskrit was equally as vital for the purposes of ruling India, as the Hastings administration believed India ought to be ruled by its own laws, which were available to them in the Sanskrit language. See Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, 25-30.

<sup>29</sup> For more on the book bazaars, see Alam and Alavi, *A European Experience of the Orient*, 36-41.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Dirks, introduction to *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, xiv. The link between the colonial project and Jones' Orientalist interests is not so subtle for Edward Said, who characterizes the latter as "a personal study that was to gather in, to rope off, to domesticate the Orient and thereby turn it into a province of European inquiry... To rule and to learn, then to compare Orient with Occident: these were Jones's goals, which, with an irresistible impulse always to codify, to subdue the infinite variety of the Orient to a 'complete digest' of laws, figures, customs, and works, he is believed to have achieved." *Orientalism*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 78. On Halhed, see Rosane Rocher, *Orientalism, Poetry, and the Millennium: The Checkered Life of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, 1751-1830* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983). For a broader framing of the interconnectedness of culture and power,

In referencing Polier, Martin and Wombwell's shared interest in Indian languages and texts, Zoffany's painting presents these men as members of a growing empire that was equally as driven to obtain pieces of India through the written word. The process of collecting India through traces of its ancient past was crucial to the development of the British Empire not only because it facilitated administrative control within occupied regions, but also because it allowed Britons to place their own development alongside that of their predecessors. As Linda Colley notes, "Indeed, familiarity with the recorded glories of ancient empires could throw into even greater relief the superior virtue and power of Imperial Britain."<sup>31</sup>

Upon procuring a copy of the *Vedas* from the Raja of Jaipur, Polier presented it to the British Museum, considering it to be "as a small token of respect and tribute of respect and admiration from one who though not born a natural subject, yet having spent the best part of his life in the service of this country, is really unacquainted with any other."<sup>32</sup> Writing of the gift, Polier notes the *Vedas*' status as an object of interest to those in India as well as in England:

Since the English by the conquests and situations have become better acquainted with India and its aborigines—the Hindoos—the men of science throughout Europe have been very anxious of learning something certain of these sacred books...<sup>33</sup>

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see the introduction of Dirks, Eley and Ortner, *Culture/Power/History*.

<sup>31</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1992), 168.

<sup>32</sup> Letter to Joseph Banks, Ad. Ms. 5346. Quoted in Alam and Alavi, *A European Experience of the Orient*, 31.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

This exchange—not from one hand in India to another, but from India to England—represents the extent to which the idea of empire had grown. “Knowing India” was no longer just the concern of a group of traders in a far-off world, but also one of the British citizen in England.

If the pile of manuscripts in the *Polier* painting links the men to the Company’s broader colonial agenda of control and the development of the empire, it also ties them to a certain class of British connoisseurs, thus allowing them to further enhance their social standing and reinforce their new British identities by way of their collections. Zoffany was well acquainted with the great collectors of England, having depicted Charles Towneley—one of the most ambitious of such men and a friend of Martin—in the library of his Park Street residence in London (1782; figure 14). Like the subjects of the *Polier* painting, Towneley collected the past in the form of material objects, seen here in his considerable collection of classical sculptures. In a letter written to Towneley upon Zoffany’s departure from India, Martin unites the three men in their shared enthusiasm for studying the ancient past:

Our good friend Zoffany has taken his passage on an Italian Ship the Princess Louisia bound to Livorne, he is to sail by the twentieth of this month, and he will be able to give you a good description of the ancient Arts, Religion, Idols etc. of the Hindoos & others of these parts.<sup>34</sup>

That Martin believed his antiquarian friend in London would find interest in the ancient past of India is not surprising, as contemporary theories advanced by Sir William Jones sought to link the newly “discovered” histories of India to the ancients of the West

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<sup>34</sup> From an unpublished letter, quoted in Mary Webster, “Zoffany’s Painting of Charles Towneley’s Library in Park Street,” *The Burlington Magazine* 106.736 (July 1964): 316n. 3.

that men like Towneley devoted themselves to studying.<sup>35</sup> Polier and Zoffany were both members of the newly founded Asiatic Society of Bengal,<sup>36</sup> an Anglo-Indian adaptation of England's Royal Society before which Jones famously proposed that Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and possibly Persian all "sprung from a common source."<sup>37</sup> Declaring to his fellow members, "we now live among the adorers of those very deities, who were worshipped under different names in old Greece and Italy," Jones went on to remark that it was impossible to "read the *Védānta*...without believing, that Pythagoras and Plato derived their sublime theories from the same fountain with the sages of India."<sup>38</sup> If India had become the new Greece, then Polier, Martin and Wombwell exemplified a new breed of British antiquarians, both participating in and expanding a course of study with firm roots in England through their scholarly studies and collecting practices in India.

The men's collecting interests extended beyond traces of India's ancient past, as they are thought to have purchased paintings from European artists who had made the journey from England in order to record the country's land and peoples. An inventory of Claud Martin's possessions, assembled after his death in 1800, lists 47 works by Zoffany, which amounted to just over ten percent of the total collection of more than 400 pictures.<sup>39</sup> While men like Martin and Polier remained in India for decades and were thus in need of works to fill the walls of the vast residences they constructed, others simply

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<sup>35</sup> On Jones' engagement with Oriental languages, see A.J. Arberry, *Oriental Essays: Portraits of Seven Scholars* (New York, Macmillan, 1960), Chapter 2.

<sup>36</sup> Despite not being a member himself, Martin would have likely been familiar with Jones as well, either through Polier or their shared acquaintance of Warren Hastings.

<sup>37</sup> Sir William Jones, *The works of Sir William Jones. In six volumes*, vol. 1 (London, 1799), *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, Gale Group, 26.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Manners and Williamson, *John Zoffany, R.A.*, 105.



hoped for a souvenir to take with them upon their return to England. Whatever their motives, these collectors wanted to make tangible their experience in India, and visiting artists were eager to meet their demands. As enterprising artists traveled across the subcontinent seemingly recording everything in sight, the European homes of India quickly filled with images of this new, strange and fascinating place in which they lived.

### **Picturing India**

Hanging on the wall in the *Polier* painting is a series of works, strikingly European in their ornate gold frames and use of linear perspective, yet decidedly “Indian” in subject matter. At the center of the image, high above the heads of the main subjects, hangs an oval landscape painting of a white-capped mountain peak and a cascading waterfall, in the foreground of which two Indian men wash elephants in the river (figure 15). The paintings on either side of this central work also include Indian figures set within the landscape, this time in larger numbers: to the left is a *sati* scene, in which musicians and spectators assemble at the water’s edge to witness a widow’s final act atop a funeral pyre (figure 16); to the right is an image of pilgrims descending the ghats to the river, as others gather on the hillside, at the top of which rests a Mughal tomb (figure 17). Beneath these two works is a pair of smaller circular paintings, with a dying Hindu along the river positioned on the left and a skirmish between Muslim and Company soldiers to the right (figures 18, 19). From his central position, Zoffany works on another Indian scene, that of two ascetics and a female nude gathered around an immense banyan tree (figure 20).

The inclusion of paintings within paintings in works such as the *Polier* painting and the *Blair Group* (1786; figure 21) afforded Zoffany the opportunity to display his interest in recording India's physical land and peoples while also highlighting the artistic range of the portraitist.<sup>40</sup> A feature of European art dating back to the Baroque period, the depiction of paintings within paintings had become conventional in eighteenth-century British conversation pieces set indoors (figure 22), and like the other elements of the conversation piece, the depicted paintings are part of the sum that defines the sitters.<sup>41</sup>

While the paintings' presence on the walls of Polier's house seems to suggest that they were part of his own collection, it is uncertain as to whether they are based on originals by Zoffany or if Polier actually owned similar works. Nevertheless, the implication that Polier is the owner of these painted Indian scenes works to fashion him, and by extension Martin and Wombwell with their own collections, as men in the mold of the English collector celebrated in works such as Zoffany's *Tribuna*. Likewise, it aligns them with a certain group of elite Britons abroad who were collecting European artists' images of India's landscapes and inhabitants in great numbers.

The market for such Indian scenes was significant and centered on a repertoire of stock images, including many seen in the paintings hanging in the *Polier* painting: elephants, fakirs, banyan trees, sati rites, the Mughal tomb, the ghats. While these depicted paintings may not be reproductions of actual works, extant works by Zoffany confirm his familiarity with such subjects. In addition to the now lost elephant and fakir

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<sup>40</sup> The painted scenes shown on the wall of Zoffany's 1786 *Blair Group* include a sati, a 'hook swinging' or *charak puja*, and a hillside Indian encampment.

<sup>41</sup> As David Carrier has noted, while the device does occasionally appear in pre-Baroque art, it is not until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that it becomes a common feature of interior scenes. For a brief summary of the development of "quoted pictures," see Carrier, "On the Depiction of Figurative Representational Pictures within Pictures," *Leonardo* 12 (Summer 1979): 197.

paintings in the collection of Martin, a painted a sati scene also exists (c. 1795; figure 23), and sketches from his travels up-country include images of banyan trees, tombs and ghats (1788; figures 24-27). These iconic images were also regular subjects in the works of other British artists who found favor with European patrons in India, including William Hodges, George Chinnery, and Thomas and William Daniell (figures 28-31).

Having brought the conventions of their European training with them to India, such artists approached the recording of this new terrain as they would the countryside of England, resulting in a pictorial Anglicization of the land and its people. While images like those depicted on the wall of the *Polier* painting are not overt declarations of British hegemony (nor do I wish to suggest that this was their intent), the transfer of formal techniques to a foreign and recently colonized country nevertheless had the potential to impact the British understanding of their relationship with this new land.<sup>42</sup> G.H.R. Tillotson, in his considerable study of British landscape painting in India, comments on the effects of this process:

The artist's purpose was to report on India in all its strangeness, but the application of an English aesthetic to Indian scenes served to restrain rather than to reveal their exotic nature...The Indian landscape is tamed as it is made to conform to a set of conventions derived from European art.<sup>43</sup>

Therefore, the paintings adorning the walls of British residents in India—exotic in their subject matter, yet aesthetically familiar and comforting to the eye—presented a land

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<sup>42</sup> Writing of the transfer of European pictorial techniques, G.H.R. Tillotson reminds us that “the picturesque was not developed to provide a means of depicting India; it was a general mode that was transferred to this domain as to many others...we can speak of picturesque images of objects which have Orientalist significance, and we can show how the images might have been understood in that way, but the picturesque itself is not Orientalist.” *The Artificial Empire: The Indian Landscapes of William Hodges* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 103.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 55.

controlled and ordered by the British, one in which they could comfortably stake out their territory.

Writing of the paintings included in the *Blair* portrait, Beth Tobin notes that these “neatly framed packages of interpreted and reproduced India” allow India to be appreciated and incorporated into the sitters’ household, yet “its potential to disrupt and corrupt is contained and not allowed to upset the British order of this domestic space.”<sup>44</sup> Likewise, the Indian scenes hanging on the wall in the *Polier* painting—a woman atop a funeral pyre, a man dying on the banks of a river, a Muslim soldier outnumbered by his opposition, nude fakirs—offer a non-threatening vision of the country and its peoples. Positioned beneath these images with their Company uniforms and authoritative poses, Polier, Martin and Wombwell appear as men capable of possessing—both literally as collectors and figuratively as colonizers—this land that they have made their own.

### **Claiming India**

Splitting the center of the *Polier* painting are the figures of Polier and Martin, their outstretched arms commanding attention as the brilliant red of their coat sleeves breaks the muted blue walls behind them. The diagonally extending arms of Polier and Martin, nearly perfect in their symmetry, form the sides of a triangle that finds its apex in the outstretched arm of the monkey, positioned as if it is stepping out of the canvas on which Zoffany is shown working. Anchoring this triangle are the objects of Polier and Martin’s inspection: to the left, a basket of fruits and vegetables, presumably gathered on the grounds of Polier’s estate; and to the right, a painted scene of Martin’s impressively

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<sup>44</sup> Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 125.

engineered Farhat Bakhsh, which included a basement level intended to flood as a means by which to combat the country's hot climate. Like the painted scenes on the wall of Polier's home, the triangle created by the basket of produce, the monkey, and the watercolor offers an approach to considering the ways in which such men came to understand their relationship to India's land.

The men undoubtedly looked upon India as a rich and fertile land—made most apparent by the bountiful basket of fruits and vegetables—but these rewards required a mastery over the physical terrain and its flora and fauna. The three elements which envelope the central figural group—the produce, the monkey, and the house—present India as a land of resources, entertainment, and profit. But like the paintings depicted above, they also present an India that has been tamed by the subjects of the portrait. The ground has been leveled and built upon; the earth has been tilled and sowed; the monkey is no longer resting high in a banyan tree, but collared and chained. It is an India that has been managed, cultivated, and domesticated by its new residents.

With their assertive and proprietorial poses, Polier and Martin appear as men who are claiming, rather than simply existing alongside, their respective signifiers of the land. As both men owned property in India, Polier and Martin had indeed claimed a bit of the land for themselves; Martin had in fact claimed quite a lot.<sup>45</sup> The basket of fruits and vegetables (products of Polier's estate) and the watercolor of Martin's home are symbolically linked to the men's respective holdings in India, and thus their shared

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<sup>45</sup> Much of Martin's great fortune was made through property holdings in the Lucknow area. Martin's biographer, Rosie Llewelyn-Jones notes that he "owned at least thirteen houses in Lucknow and various pieces of land, including a stretch on the north side of the Gomti opposite the Farhat Baksh, the garden at Barowen and a wooded area...south of the city. As he became wealthier, he began to invest more heavily in property throughout northern India," including Najafgarh, Calcutta, Maneye, Benares, Ghazipur, Entally, Chandernagore and Cawnpore. *A Very Ingenious Man*, 157.

gesture can be read as an assertion of ownership. Rising from his seat and resolutely pointing a finger at the image of his residence along the banks of the river, Martin seemingly declares, “This is mine.” (figure 32).

The resemblance of Martin’s gesture to that of Warren Hastings in Zoffany’s *Warren Hastings and his Wife* (c. 1783-7; figure 33) cannot be overlooked. In this conversation piece, Hastings briefly interrupts a stroll across his Alipore estate in order to take in his property alongside his wife and servant. Staking his claim on the land—literally—by firmly planting his cane on the earth, he signals towards his holdings across the smoothly manicured lawn. If not for the spectacular jackfruit tree in front of which the group stands, one might mistake the setting for England, where works such as this had been in vogue since the mid-eighteenth century.

The garden conversation piece, in which subjects are shown outdoors on their property, was established as a means by which “to celebrate, commemorate, and legitimate a family’s exclusive possession of a landed estate.”<sup>46</sup> The sub-genre was regulated by fairly consistent pictorial conventions in England, often showing the subjects in the foreground, an expansive park in the mid-ground, and the residence in the background. As seen in Arthur Devis’ *Thomas Lister and His Family* (figure 34), the patriarch draws attention to both his property and the actual house by way of an extended arm pointing into the distance. Martin’s gesture functions within this portrait tradition, working to make visible his status by way of the painted image of his imposing residence and grounds. Likewise, Polier’s gesture, while not being as literal of an translation of the garden conversation piece as Martin’s, still maintains the same final effect; in pointing to

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<sup>46</sup> Beth Fowkes Tobin, “The English Garden Conversation Piece in India,” in *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity A. Nussbaum (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 167.

the produce gathered on his estate, Polier both reinforces his claim to and signals the profits of his land.

In adapting the conventions of the garden conversation piece to this indoor setting, the *Polier* painting reinforces the subjects' Britishness by assuming the pictorial traditions so favored with Britons at home and abroad. But the popularity of the genre with British-born Company officials suggests that it also had value to those who were not presented with the task of reaffirming their identity, as Polier and Martin were required to do. With its roots in England, the garden conversation piece allowed Company officials in India to present themselves as landed gentry, but perhaps more significantly in the colonial context, it helped to resolve tensions arising from their residence in a conquered land by presenting landownership in a visual language that was familiar to them.<sup>47</sup>

The naturalizing of the land in this way was crucial to the British, as much was much at stake in Britain's relationship to the physical terrain of India. As accumulations of territorial holdings, empires are dependent on the acquisition of land and the governing body's ability to maintain possession of this land.<sup>48</sup> It was in North India that the British first began the transition from merchants to emperors, a transition that was not brought about by a statewide military occupation but by the ceding of the *diwani* (revenue authority) of Bengal and Bihar to the Company as part of the 1765 Allahabad Treaty. The power to collect land revenues was in many ways the power to rule, and thus this a single

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>48</sup> As surveyors for the Company, both Polier and Martin participated in one of the ways in which such control was sustained: the acquisition of knowledge of the terrain. As Claude Nicolet had remarked, "the ineluctable necessities of conquest and government are to understand (or believe that ones understands) the physical space that one occupies or that one hopes to dominate." *Space, Geography and Politics in the Early Roman Empire*, Jerome Lectures 19 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 2. Quoted in Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1.

act of desperation by the diminishing Mughal emperor Shah Alam cemented the British hold on the area by making the Company the effective rulers of an estimated 20 million inhabitants.<sup>49</sup>

With control of the land, the Company now had to maintain their rule over the land's inhabitants, and as will be discussed, the inclusion of domestic servants in visual representations of British India allowed Company officials to present themselves as doing just that. For the subjects of the *Polier* painting, figuring themselves in relation to the Indians they lived among went beyond working to build a more perfect image of the strong and stable empire Britain hoped to become; it also provided them with a way in which to build a more perfect image of themselves as Britons, something crucial to these culture-crossing men.

### **Mastering India**

At the center of the *Polier* painting, Zoffany, Polier, and the pairing of Martin and Wombwell assume the three points of an inwardly projecting triangle framed by three separate groups of servant figures and set against a backdrop of images of an imagined India. Polier, Martin and Zoffany entered British India as men on the margins—a Swiss Huguenot émigré, French Catholic, and a Bohemian Jew—yet, in Zoffany's painting, they have shifted to the center of the image in a move parallel to their move to the center of colonial Lucknow. Wombwell, though a native Briton, also lived somewhat on the fringes of British India, adopting the lifestyle far from the norm of the traditional Company administrator. In order to reinforce this transition from the periphery to the

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<sup>49</sup> P.J. Marshall, "The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *The Raj: India and the British, 1600-1947*, ed. C.A. Bayly (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 1990), 19.



center of British India, these men needed to position themselves in relation to the Indians they lived among, a process that is elaborated in Zoffany's construction of the scene.

The dramatic, unnatural lighting of the floor highlights the space in which the main (European) figures are positioned, while relegating the Indians to the shaded portions of the floor. In the left half of the canvas, the bunch of bananas that separates Polier and the Indians attending him further divides this group's space into European and non-European zones. Positioned in the blue-gray shadows of the floor, the Indians' bare feet are set apart from Polier's brightly lit white stockings and shiny leather shoes, while their white garments and turbans further contrast them from the main figures dressed in blazing reds and shades of blue. The spatial arrangement of the paintings also works to create a sense of a center and a periphery, as the lateral Indian groups stand beneath two chevroned banners of local production, which literally hang in the margins as they flank the central scene. Perhaps the most removed figures from the composition are the two Indians positioned behind Zoffany's canvas with a monkey, separated from the central space as they fade into the muted wall behind them.

With these the formal boundaries, the work becomes a declaration of a "British Lucknow" in which Company officers are framed by subsidiary Indian figures and European images of the land and its people. The lived experience of eighteenth-century British India, however, was not categorized by such rigid divisions of colonizer and colonized, as it would come to be at the height of the Raj a century later. The fluid boundaries of the actual Lucknow, perhaps one of the most dynamic cities in India in terms of its interaction among cultures, are absent in Zoffany's painting, which instead

works to centralize the main subjects' position while marginalizing the Indian figures present.

While scholarship has shown that such boundaries were not firmly in place during the formative years of British India,<sup>50</sup> the Company's policy shifts in the 1780s reveals a desire for such segregation to be enforced. Much of the fallout resulting from Warren Hastings' 1785 resignation from the position of Governor-General stemmed from his alleged improper reliance on Indian practices and personages, including the nawab of Awadh, in the management of the Company.<sup>51</sup> Believing depravity to be the ultimate result of such interactions, many Britons began to declare publicly their concerns in an effort to bring about "changes in the ideologies of the state and the mentalities in the ruling groups both in England and in India."<sup>52</sup>

Polier, Martin and Wombwell were now at odds with the new agenda of Cornwallis' Company, which sought to distance its employees from the indigenous communities.<sup>53</sup> While they did not altogether give up their hookahs, *pandits* and *bibis*, the three men were still savvy individuals who had time and again revealed a keen awareness of how best to manage their position within the Company. An image such as Zoffany's

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Swati Chattopadhyay on the sharing of social spaces by Europeans and Indians (particularly servants) in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Calcutta; "Blurring Boundaries: The Limits of 'White Town' in Colonial Calcutta," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59.2 (Jun. 2000): 154-179.

<sup>51</sup> For a summary of the charges brought against Hastings in relation to Awadh, see P.J. Marshall, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 109-129.

<sup>52</sup> C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (London: Longman, 1989), 148.

<sup>53</sup> For a broad overview of the official attempts to remove of indigenous influence within the Company, see Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, 136-55. On the tensions resulting from the adoption of local dress by Company employees, see Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, Chapter 5. Beth Fowkes Tobin cogently considers the various ways in which Cornwallis' reform efforts were played out in the visual arts with a discussion of three works by Zoffany in *Picturing Imperial Power*, Chapter 4.

painting, with its clearly demarcated boundaries between Indian and non-Indian, visually reinforces their British identities and quells any doubts as to their allegiances and alliances.

As mainland Britain had long relied on the labors of domestic servants, the painting thus aligned the men with a certain class of Britons at home. Yet, while the figure of the Indian servant populates Zoffany's images of British life abroad (figures 21, 33, 36), the white domestic servant is rarely included in contemporary conversation pieces completed in Britain, an erasure that is particularly notable in light of a 1775 estimate suggesting one in every eight residents of London belonged to this profession.<sup>54</sup> However, the black African servant, most often in the form of a young boy, was a fashionable addition to eighteenth-century images such as Zoffany's *Family of Sir William Young* (1770, figure 35). In this outdoor conversation piece, Sir William's colonial successes are reflected in the figure of the young black servant at left, who becomes a valuable addition to the portrait by virtue of his skin color. Ultimately, such a representation of black labor reinforces the authority of the painting's main subject and the successes of colonialism at large.<sup>55</sup>

The image of the black servant in England, like the Indian figures in the *Polier* painting, thus defines the sitters socially (as belonging to a certain class of Britons that can afford to employ personal servants), but perhaps more importantly in the colonial context, it makes racial distinctions as well. While Polier, Martin and Zoffany entered

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<sup>54</sup> J. Jean Hecht, *The Domestic Servant Class in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), 33-4.

<sup>55</sup> As Tobin notes, while the young boy is comfortably incorporated into the family fold, he makes present the family's social and economic prosperity by "[standing] in for the hundreds of the slaves that the Youngs owned on their several West Indian sugar plantations." *Picturing Imperial Power*, 42.

British India as marginal men on account of the continental European birth, they were also participants in colonialism, and in many ways their status as *white* Europeans was enough to push them in bounds. As the “Englishness” of the Empire became diluted throughout the century in terms of personnel, “Englishness became a performance of non-English and even non-British peoples, a trope of white civilization, maintained through social and theatricalized practices and displays at all levels, that attempted to set itself off from ‘indigenous’ savagery.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, while Zoffany’s painting does not accurately illustrate the men’s lived experience in Lucknow, it nevertheless reinforces the main subjects’ Britishness in its attempt to set in place divisions between colonizers and colonized, white and Indian.

Zoffany constructs similar divisions between the British and Indian subjects in another Indian conversation piece, *The Auriol and Dashwood Families* (1783-7; figure 36), which depicts two families taking afternoon tea outdoors. In a similar fashion to the *Polier* painting, the Indian figures in this image are presented as subsidiary figures, standing behind the Europeans as they pour their tea or prepare a hookah. They are thus able to engage in the action of the scene without threatening the position of the main subjects. As Durba Ghosh notes in her consideration of the *Auriol* portrait, such images “staged a version of European colonial life that represented the exotic presence of India within the painting and yet contained those elements that might undermine Britishness and colonial authority.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed, rather than undermining the main subjects, the presence

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<sup>56</sup> Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 17.

<sup>57</sup> Ghosh, *Sex and the Family*, 60.

of “India” in the form of a colonial servant instead reinforces their position in terms of race and class.

As these examples illustrate, Cornwallis’ move toward the removal of an Indian presence may have been manageable on the administrative and commercial levels of the Company, but a *total* segregation from the indigenous people of India was impossible, as the entire structure of British life in India relied on the service on local household servants and translators.<sup>58</sup> While Zoffany employs various formal devices in order to separate the European and Indian groups of figures in the *Polier* painting, perhaps the most interesting component of the work’s composition is the way in which the Indian figures are positioned in three points that bind the internal triangle formed by Zoffany, Polier, Martin and Wombwell. It is in this enveloping of one group by another that the truest picture of British India is revealed ever so subtly. The colonial world of India was one that was supported—literally in the case of the *Polier* painting—by the service of the indigenous laborer. The core of the painting, in which the most dynamically posed and powerfully assertive figures rest, is enveloped and supported by a mirroring compositional form made up of the various Indians who assisted, served and sustained these men.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> For a concise list of the servants typically employed in a European home in Bengal, see Amin Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon* (London: V&A Publications, 2001), 34. For extended descriptions of particular servant positions with accompanying illustrations by Balthazar Solvyns, see Robert L. Hardgrave, *A Portrait of the Hindus: Balthazar Solvyns & the European Image of India, 1760-1824* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), II.99-II.134.

<sup>59</sup> I am aware that the depiction of Indian figures in Zoffany’s painting allows for an alternate reading in which the agency of colonial servants is addressed, but due to the focus and scope of this project, I have regrettably left these interpretations for another time.

## CHAPTER IV CONCLUSION

In aligning itself with the pictorial traditions of British art and the administrative concerns of the East India Company, the *Polier* painting constructs a picture of Britishness in the midst a relatively insecure period of British control in Awadh. Lucknow was a place in which Europeans' day-to-day affairs were conducted between two worlds: after completing a letter to Warren Hastings, one might call in their *pandit* to record a Persian correspondence to a Mughal associate; an afternoon spent compiling reports for the East India Company might be followed up by an evening feast and dance performance at the nawab's palace; a European painting by Zoffany may have been purchased one day and a commission for a portrait by an Indian artist finalized the next.

For the most part, it seems that the men of the *Polier* painting successfully mediated their multiple roles, comfortably adopting various personas and engaging in processes of self-fashioning. The permissive atmosphere of Lucknow allowed for and encouraged this sort of behavior, but occasionally the men had to stand in one place and declare themselves either a Mughal or an Englishman, both culturally and ideologically. There is not doubt that Polier, Martin and Wombwell led splendid lives in Lucknow. They were men of enlightenment, money and connections residing in the cultural capital of British India. But they arrived in India as Company men, and their futures were linked to the successes of the Company at large and their ability to remain valuable and

committed participants (at least on the surface) in the empire's cause.

The *Polier* painting, with its Company uniforms, European landscapes on the wall, and presence of servants, would have provided an antidote to the locally produced images of Polier, Martin and Wombwell wearing Indian clothing, smoking hookahs or watching dancing-girls. It manages the “transgressive” lifestyles of its subjects by aligning them with the overall concerns of the Company as it attempted to tighten control in North India. In doing so, it simultaneously constructs British identities for both its subjects and the emerging empire. That the image does not reflect the lived reality of life in Lucknow makes the constructed nature of this process all the more apparent and highlights art's ability to write histories—both actual and imagined—of colonial power in India. Power can indeed be obtained, created or reinforced through small moments in the cultural history of a nation. Zoffany's painting thus actively participated in the construction of such narratives at the time of its production and was shaped by them. The *Polier* painting makes Britons of its subjects; it makes an imperial force of a trading company; and it makes “history”.



Figure 1. Johann Zoffany, *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist, Lucknow, c. 1786-7*, oil on canvas, 138 x 183 cm (Calcutta, Victoria Memorial Hall)





Figure 2. Johann Zoffany, *Colonel Mordaunt's Cock Match*, Lucknow, 1784-86, oil on canvas, 106 x 150 cm (London, Tate Gallery)



Figure 3. Johann Zoffany, *Colonel Mordaunt's Cock Match*, detail of figure 2





Figure 4. Unknown Indian artist, *Colonel Antoine Polier watching a nautch*, Lucknow, c. 1780, gouache on paper, 25.5 x 16.5 cm, presumably after a painting by Tilly Kettle, Faizabad, 1772 (London, India Office Library and Records)



Figure 5. Francesco Renaldi, *Boulone, bibi of Colonel Claud Martin, fishing with Martin's adopted son, James Martin*, Lucknow, c. 1794-5, oil on canvas, 61 x 76.2 cm (Lucknow, La Martinière College)





Figure 6. Unknown Indian artist, *John Wombwell*, Lucknow, c. 1785, gouache on paper (Collection of Prince and Princess Sadruddin Aga Khan)





Figure 7. Johann Zoffany, *Lord Willoughby de Broke and his Family*, c. 1766, oil on canvas, 100.5 x 125.5 cm (Los Angeles, The Getty Center)



Figure 8. Johann Zoffany, *The Dutton Family*, c. 1765, oil on canvas, 101.5 x 127 cm (Private Collection)



Figure 9. Johann Zoffany, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1776, oil on panel, 87.5 x 77 cm (Florence, Uffizi Gallery)





Figure 10. Johann Zoffany, *The Royal Academicians*, 1771-2, oil on canvas, 101.1 x 147.5 cm (Windsor, Royal Collection)





Figure 11. Johann Zoffany, *The Tribuna of the Uffizi*, 1772-8, oil on canvas, 123.5 x 155 cm (Windsor, The Royal Collection)

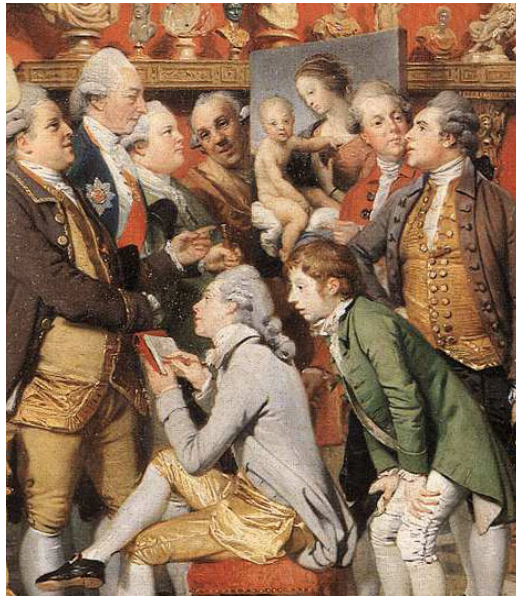


Figure 12. Johann Zoffany, *The Tribuna of the Uffizi*, detail of figure 11





Figure 13. Johann Zoffany, *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist*, detail of figure 1





Figure 14. Johann Zoffany, *Charles Towneley in his Sculpture Gallery*, 1782, oil on canvas, 127 x 102 cm (Burnley, Art Gallery and Museum)





Figure 15. Johann Zoffany, *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist*, detail of figure 1



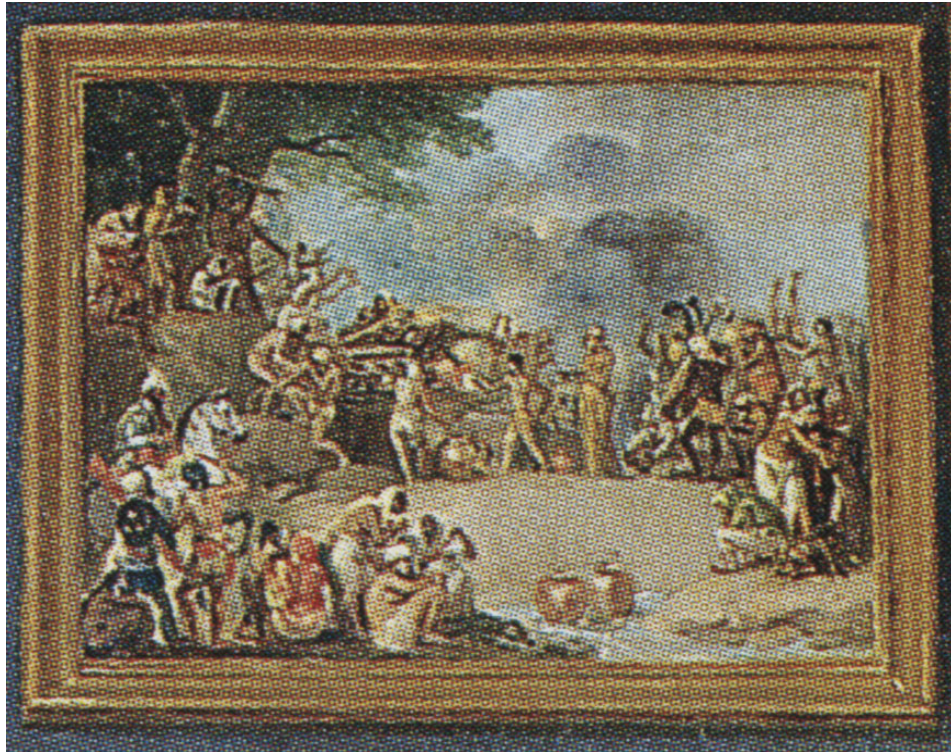


Figure 16. Johann Zoffany, *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist*, detail of figure 1



Figure 17. Johann Zoffany, *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist*, detail of figure 1





Figure 18. Johann Zoffany, *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist*, detail of figure 1



Figure 19. Johann Zoffany, *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist*, detail of figure 1



Figure 20. Johann Zoffany, *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist*, detail of figure 1





Figure 21. Johann Zoffany, *Colonel William Blair with his Family and an Ayah, Cawnpore, 1786*, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 138 cm (Private Collection)





Figure 22. Johann Zoffany, *George, Prince of Wales and Prince Frederick, later Duke of York*, 1765, oil on canvas, 111.8 x 127.9 cm (Windsor, Royal Collection)



Figure 23. Johann Zoffany, *Sacrifice of an Hindoo Widow Upon the Funeral Pyre of Her Husband*, c. 1795, oil on canvas (Private Collection)





Figure 24. Johann Zoffany, *Gnarled tree with women drawing water*, Upper India, 1788, black and white chalk on grey paper, 22.8 x 35 cm (Private Collection)



Figure 25. Johann Zoffany, *A Hindu brought to the Ganges to die*, Ghazipur, 1788, black, red and white chalk on blue-grey paper, 27 x 35 cm (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)



Figure 26. Johann Zoffany, *Riverside scene with the artist sketching*, Upper India, 1788, black and white chalk on grey paper, 27 x 35 cm (Private Collection)



Figure 27. Johann Zoffany, *Public bathing place by a temple*, Kara, 1788, black, red and white chalk on blue-grey paper, 26.8 x 34.3 cm (Private Collection)



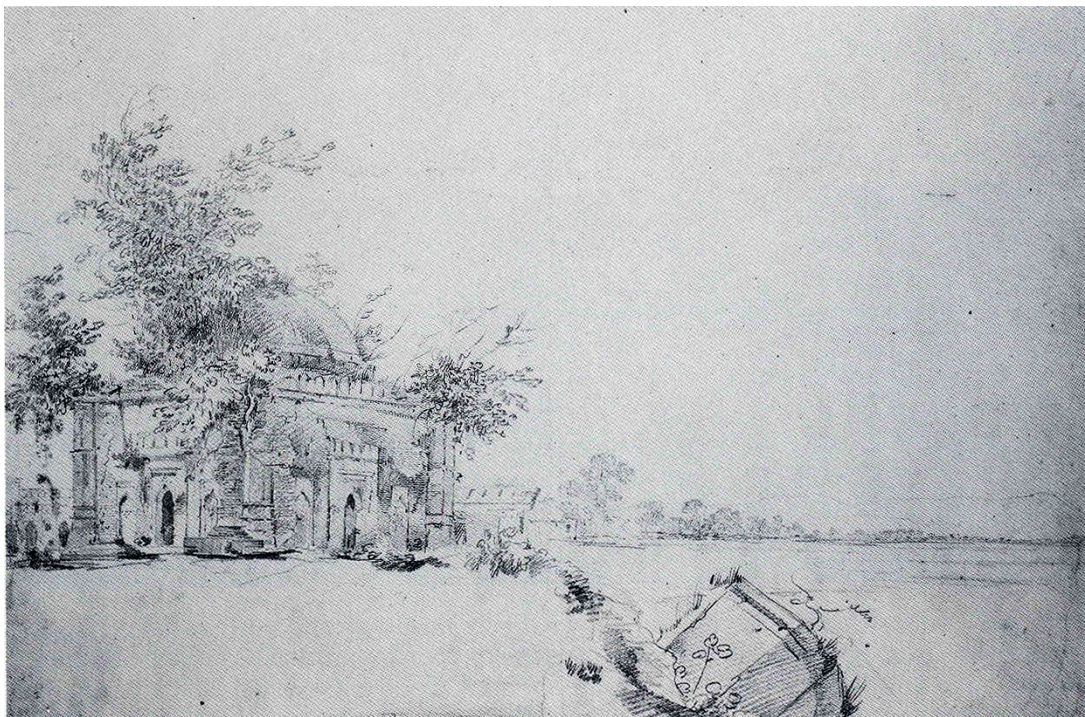


Figure 28. William Hodges, *A Ruined Tomb by the Ganges*, 1781, Pencil Drawing, 47.5 x 72.5 cm (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)



Figure 29. Thomas Daniell, *Waterfall at Papanasam, Tirunelveli*, c. 1792, oil on canvas, 101 x 128 cm (Calcutta, Victoria Memorial Hall)





Figure 30. George Chinnery, *Villagers bathing in a pool*, Calcutta, c. 1820, oil on canvas, 19 x 27.7 cm (Private Collection)



Figure 31. Thomas Daniell, *Banyan Tree with Shiva Shrine near Hardwar, U.P.*, 1821, oil on canvas, 94 x 135 cm (Private Collection)





Figure 32. Johann Zoffany, *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claud Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist*, detail of figure 1



Figure 33. Johann Zoffany, *Warren Hastings and his Wife*, Calcutta, c. 1783-7, oil on canvas, 90.5 x 120.3 cm (Calcutta, Victoria Memorial Hall)





Figure 34. Arthur Devis, *Thomas Lister and His Family*, 1740-1, oil on canvas, 115.1 x 103.8 cm (The Art Institute of Chicago)





Figure 35. Johann Zoffany, *The Family of Sir William Young*, c. 1770, oil on canvas, 114.3 x 167.8 cm (Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery)



Figure 36. Johann Zoffany, *The Auriol and Dashwood Families*, Calcutta, 1783-7, oil on canvas, 142 x 198 cm (Collection of R.H. Dashwood, Esq.)

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