THE INDIAN TASTE

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"With Indian and Chinese Subjects, greater Liberties may be taken, because Luxuriance of Fancy recommends their Productions more than Propriety, for in them is often seen a Butterfly supporting an Elephant, or Things equally absurd; yet from their . . . airy Disposition seldom fail to please." (From the preface of The Lady's Amusement, London, 1760)

Eastern art, for widely varying reasons, has always fascinated the West. "Luxuriance of Fancy" and "airy Disposition" sum up rather well its appeal to the Europe of the later Renaissance. The Museum's current exhibition of prints and drawings, East Meets West, illustrates many facets of this appeal, including the familiar chinoiserie and also an often neglected phenomenon which might be called "indoiserie." The Indian taste, a fashionable fad which spanned four centuries and claimed such diverse devotees as Queen Elizabeth and P. T. Barnum, merits a closer look. While Indian elements influenced the decorative arts of the Continent, they enjoyed a unique development in England, and our story can be limited to that, with a brief look at its American sequel.

England was not the first European trading nation to feel the influence of the flood of oriental imports that resulted from the great voyages of the Renaissance. Nonetheless oriental lacquer work and porcelain were prized objects in court circles by Queen Elizabeth's day, and Linschoten's Voyage to the East Indies, full of praise of the "fayrest workmanshippe" of Eastern objects, was translated into English in 1598. In 1600 the English East India Company was founded, and the game was on in earnest.

The rich Indian taste became a favorite indulgence of the Restoration court, and by the end of the century English designers were being sent to India to insure that the objects for export would appeal to the home trade. London had its East India shops, and various fashionable houses boasted rooms furnished with oriental curiosities. Popular knowledge of geography was pleasantly vague, and, since many imports came to England from China and Japan via India, the term "Indian" became more or less generic for all things Eastern.

The first major printed reflection of the craze


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was Stalker's *Treatise of Japanning* (1688), for "japanning" remained the favored term for the actual process of lacquering objects. And, though the author in his preface praises Japan as "Nature's Darling and the Favourite of the Gods," he goes on to say "our Design is only to imitate the true genuine Indian work."

The plates actually show as much Chinese as Japanese influence, and include "A Pagod Worskip in ye Indies."

The influence of the "taste" in the seventeenth century was limited to decorative objects, fabrics, furniture, and the like. It was not until the eighteenth century, the real heyday of orientalizing attitudes, that it got out of doors, developed into a "style," and made its mark on architecture and even the landscape. The Palladian tradition was still strong in England, and during the first half of the century British architects tried to atone for the brief interlude of homemade baroque under Wren by an even stricter adherence to the rules. The rules, however, were under attack from many quarters. The most telling (if unintentional) wound came from archeology, which was proving what architects had long suspected and feared, namely that the whole elaborate structure of renaissance architectural theory had very little basis in antique fact. Thus it was that by mid-century the oriental styles were ready to leave the drawing room and assume briefly a more important role.

For a time the "Chinese manner" led the field (though it faced competition from the two other alternatives to the classic, the resuscitated Gothic and a somewhat tempered French rococo). In 1754 Chippendale, in his *Cabinetmaker's Director*, concludes in favor of the Chinese:

"As it admits of the greatest variety, I think it the most useful of any other." And indeed it was variety they were seeking, variety and freedom from rules which had become increasingly meaningless. This emerges clearly in William and John Halfpenny's preface to *Rural Architecture in the Chinese Taste* (1752). "The art of designing architecture is not confined to any particular taste or country... There is nothing more... advantageous to the Public in general than Invention and Variety." Thrown in for good measure among the "new designs" is a light-hearted little pastiche called an "Indian Temple," which is at best only vaguely Indian. For while the general characteristics of Chinese architecture were well known and the Gothic ever present, proper data for the Indian style was still lacking.

Then in Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Discourse to the Academy* of 1786 we find the following: "Whatever building brings to our remembrance ancient customs and manners is sure to give... delight. The barbaric splendour of those Asiatic buildings which are now publishing by a member of this Academy, may furnish an architect... with hints of composition and general effect, which would not otherwise have occurred." The Asi-

atic buildings he is referring to are those in William Hodges' Select Views of India, Drawn on the Spot, 1780-1783.

With the rise of British political fortunes came the revelation of artistic wonders in inner India. A number of British artists made the posh voyage (Port Out—Starboard Home) to this dream world of wealth and rajahs. The painter John Zoffany went out in 1783 and wrote of the Taj Mahal: "It wanted nothing but a dome of glass of sufficient magnitude to cover and protect it." Many of his vivid paintings of Indian subjects were translated into prints and were extremely popular in England.

Indeed prints were a major factor in the spread of this new purely Indian "Indian taste." Many of them were aquatints, then a quite new and exciting medium, in which it was possible to reproduce the quality of water color with what seemed incredible fidelity. They were frequently colored by hand in assembly-line methods, and the impact in their time must have been rather similar to that of color photography in our own. Most of them were simply topographical—more or less accurate reportage of native scenes. But the facts they dealt with were totally novel and wondrous.

Colebrook's Twelve Views of Mysore soon followed Hodges, and then, most important, the work of William and Thomas Daniell. Uncle and nephew, they traveled up and down India from 1785 to 1795, making a vast number of paintings and drawings of the land, its people, and its buildings. They returned to London in 1795 with an accumulation of work and started immediately on their Oriental Scenery, six handsome folio volumes of colored aquatints, published over the next thirteen years. The plates
are full of accurately observed detail, for, like Canaletto, whose work they undoubtedly knew, they used the camera obscura for speed and accuracy in "tracing" their views. The over-all vision, however, remains that of romantic painters, some poetry and stagecraft being sensible in virtually all of the scenes.

These books, their many other prints, and the paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy, had a cumulative effect that was extraordinary. J. M. W. Turner said that, in their views, "the East was as clearly reflected as the moon in a lake." By 1800 Thomas Daniell had designed an Indian temple, "after the chastest models of Indian architecture" and dedicated "to the Genii of India," which Sir John Osborne built on his estate, Melchet. William Daniell promptly made an aquatint of it, which, with the exception of a certain unavoidable English flavor about the landscape, could be a plate from *Oriental Scenery*.

The next step in the spread of the taste was a vital one. In 1803 the Prince of Wales engaged William Porden to build new stables and a rotunda behind his modest classic villa at Brighton. The Indian style was selected and the design based in part on Daniell's prints of buildings in Agra and Delhi. Royal recognition and approbation were now achieved for the style and its future must have looked very bright to its converts.

From Brighton the scene moves to the unlikely setting of Gloucestershire, where about 1805 the retired nabob Sir Charles Cockerell set about creating Sezincote, an oriental hideaway for his second wife. He assembled an ideal team for the purpose: his brother, Samuel Pepys Cockerell, architect and surveyor to the East India House, Humphrey Repton, the famous landscape gardener, and Thomas Daniell, whom he had known in India. They created an extraordinary ensemble, including, besides the large
“An Hindoo Temple Erected in Melchet Park.” Aquatint by William Daniell of the temple his uncle Thomas Daniell designed for the estate of Sir John Osborne. Published in London in 1802. Whittelsey Fund, 1957

“manner” house, Indian fountains, Buddhas, cows, purdah windows, and the more routine temple, bridge, and pool. Daniell was responsible for the garden buildings and monuments and for the arrangement of the bamboo and other rare imported tropical plants. The design for the main house “of course devolved to the brother,” and was loosely based on the Mausoleum of Hyder Aly Khan at Laulbaug, first published in England in Colebrook’s Mysore, and then again by the Daniells. It is amusing to note that it was adapted to a basically Palladian symmetrical plan with outlying wings and that with a few exceptions the interiors were purely Georgian.

Humphrey Repton came away so elated that he was moved to write in 1806: “We are on the eve of some great change in landscape gardening and Architecture, as a consequence of our having lately become better acquainted with Scenery and Buildings in the interior provinces of India.” This from a man who had some ten years earlier proclaimed: “True taste, in every art, consists more in adapting tried expedients . . . than in inordinate thirst after novelty.”

As luck would have it, while Repton was in this missionary frame of mind, he was called to Brighton and commanded by the Prince to give his opinion on the most appropriate style for the remodeling and enlarging of the Pavilion. There could be only one answer. In the gardens he found Porden’s now completed stables, and his experience at Sezincote had proved that “the detail of Hindu Architecture is as beautiful in reality as it appears in the drawings, and does not shrink from the pure Gothic in richness of effect.”

The result was the Magna Charta of the style, Designs for the Pavillon at Brighton, a large volume with aquatint plates published in 1808. In the text, which makes very lively and amusing reading, he presents an elaborate argument (full of rather odd bits of reasoning) for the adoption of
Freedom and variety are again the main goal and principal justification for the proposed change of style. Repton complains bitterly of the total disagreement among the classical writers on the correct measurements and proportions, and about the limitations of the classical orders in general. In contrast to all this: “In India the same forms are applied to buildings of very different sizes, and therefore in adapting Hindu Architecture to the purposes of European houses, we have only to satisfy the eye of the painter with pleasing forms of beauty.”

The plates make this one of the most visually delightful architectural books of all times. Repton used an ingenious device he called “slides” to illustrate the various vistas as they were and as they should be (the forerunner of the “before and after” photographs in our modern decorating magazines). But, alas, his sunny visions were never to experience the realities of the English climate, for though the Prince accepted the designs, they were abandoned in the chill of a passing economy drive and never executed in this form.

Repton was zealous and influential, but none of his contemporaries was as enthusiastic as he. More typical was Edward Aiken, who, accepting the taste and duly acknowledging his debt to the Daniells, included several Indian schemes in his Designs for Villas (1808). He says in the introduction that though it is a style of considerable elegance, he is “far from putting it in comparison with Grecian architecture, but should propose it as a rival to the Gothic style, as it is equally capable of forming an agreeable variety, and gratifying the passion for novelty.” Or Robert Lugar, who found it “by no means unsuitable for an English villa; . . . it shews the taste, genius, and skill, of a distant people, of whom we have heard much and know but little.” He presents in his Architectural Sketches (1808) a design for such a villa, “well adapted to the conveniences
Humphrey Repton's proposed design for the main façade of Brighton, aquatint from “Designs for the Pavillon”

of an English nobleman or gentleman,” that is derived with astonishingly little alteration from a plate of the Oriental Scenery.

The vogue was not limited to architecture; all things Indian were of interest during the early decades of the century. Things as diverse as fabrics, fountains, playing cards, and shop fronts were designed “in the taste.” In 1813 Hindu jugglers were all the rage, and ten years later an Indian Museum opened in Pall Mall. In 1825 the author of People with Tails in Farther India earnestly concluded that, in view of so much evidence, the fact could not be denied.

When times and spirits improved and the Prince, by then Regent, again turned to Brighton, the commission went not to Repton but to the new royal favorite, John Nash. Nash based his designs on those of his predecessor but added considerable embellishment of his own, with extremely controversial results. Various Moorish details were salted on to the exterior while the interiors were predominantly Chinese with occasional notes of Indian, Gothic, and Empire. By the time it was finished in 1824, the Regent, now George IV, had rather tired of it all, and though Victoria later spent some time there, she could hardly have felt altogether at home. It no doubt became more a source of embarrassment than pleasure to the newly proper royal family and eventually passed into the hands of the Brighton Corporation. ( Appropriately or inappropriately, as one will have it, it was used to house wounded Indian troops during the First World War.) But pure or impure, loved or hated, it remains the grandest and most extravagant three-dimensional product of the Indian taste.

The taste always had its opponents and once it got into architecture it was frequently subjected to the scathing attacks of staunch defenders of the classic tradition. James Malton in 1798 deplored the lack of “discrimination” in architecture: “The rude ornaments of Indostan supersede those of Greece, and the returned
Nabob, heated in his pursuit of wealth, imagines he imports the chaleur of the East with its riches.” Porden’s design for the Brighton stable was attacked as “monstrous and absurd. . . . It would form an admirable scene (with the addition of a few more monsters) for the raree shew.” And of course the barbs leveled at the Pavilion would fill a book or two.

Still the style fulfilled the desire for variety and the picturesque, and as long as the associations it evoked for most people were those of distance and romance it had its role to play. However the application of the new moral criteria of the nineteenth century soon made for a very different set of associations. Brown, in his Domestic Architecture (1842), after praising the rare beauty of the Taj Mahal, suddenly sobers and says: “But after all, how poor, how mean, are the associations connected with it! It is the monument . . . of a proud voluptuous . . . sensu-
alist, for such was Sha-jehan.” Under this kind of fire it was bound to die away and leave the field to the two giants—the Gothic, with its laudable associations of Christianity and national past, and the classic, now strengthened by a more complete knowledge of Greek antiquity.

So the Orient retreated indoors again, where it enjoyed a limited vogue in the minor arts throughout the century. By 1881 these had degenerated to such an extent that a critic of the Indian display at the Paris Exposition complained: “Native chiefs and princes, in many instances despising their own arts, had literal copies executed in solid silver of the latest Birmingham imitations of Indian pattern tea pots, paperweights and centerpieces.” As the century went on, some Indian decorative motives were blended with Persian and Turkish, and the whole thing ended in the corner, so to speak. And this would be the end of the story were it not for an American postscript.

American fashions tended to follow the British, with a predictable time lag, until the mid-nineteenth century, and we too had our Indian interlude. In 1825 a reporter for the Boston Monthly Magazine, covering the cornerstone-laying of the Bunker Hill Monument, found the city so crowded that he was forced to hire a room in a private house. When he woke the next morning he thought himself “transported to the
banks of the Ganges. . . . Every article of furniture was of Hindoo character.” He soon found that no “Pythagorean metempsychosis” had taken place; he had simply stayed in the house of a gentleman who, having lived in the East Indies, had furnished his rooms “after the oriental fashion.”

In this country too the Indian taste escaped the parlor and was reflected in architectural theory and practice. A little book, simply called Architecture, by Hezekiah Howe, published in 1831 in New Haven, is mainly a hymn praising the wonders and delights of Indian architecture. (In tune with his time the author feels compelled to inject a word of pity for the “enslaved, degraded” people who built these marvels.) The exotics naturally appealed to the exuberance and sense of adventure of nineteenth-century America, and the craze may have resulted in more actual building here than in England. But it came to us later, and we were less archeologically inclined and once further removed from the source than England. Consequently in practice the Indian tended to merge with the styles of the nearer East, and the melange went under the general term “oriental.”

The architect Alexander Jackson Davis, whose career spanned most of the century and virtually all its styles, built several oriental villas and left other designs in the manner. Happily we know that he too relied on the Daniells for inspiration, for, among the small group of miscellaneous prints which the Metropolitan Museum acquired with the Davis collection of drawings and diaries, was the aquatint of Sultan Purveiz’s Mausoleum illustrated on page 211. Its influence is apparent in an unexecuted project for a school building. Typically, the imitation is less literal, and the purpose more practical, than the work of his earlier English counterparts.

More usual perhaps was influence from the English reflections of India: P. T. Barnum’s villa “Iranistan” was modeled on the Brighton Pavilion (where Barnum had been so graciously received by Victoria), and the New York Crystal Palace, built at 42 Street and Fifth Avenue in 1853, was reminiscent in part of William Porden’s stables.

Modern criticism is frequently no kinder to the whole phenomenon than some contemporaries were. This is particularly true of the camp which persists in regarding the demise of the classic tradition as a case of murder instead of facing the simple fact that it was a very natural death. In such post mortems the Indian is treated, with the other exotics and Gothic, as an accessory to a crime, rather than in its true role—that of a symptom of illness. To take this frequently vehement and mistaken attitude is to miss the point of these buildings; they should be enjoyed for what they are: passing fancies of the confused rich. They have a certain innate good humor which the layman is quick to recognize, and poor indeed is the locale without a “folly” of one breed or another (it would be hard to imagine Brighton without the Pavilion). Such critics also choose to ignore that there is very nearly as much whim and whimsy about a Palladian villa in Kent as an Indian one in Gloucestershire.

For our own time, when distance, with its attendant glamour, has been reduced to an almost meaningless dimension, they all may seem doubly unreal. But the game is at least as old as Hadrian and his villa, and as new as a whole Turkish town near Miami dating from the 1920’s. And dream buildings, romantic buildings will appear again, so let the purists beware—Saturnian summerhouses or Venustian villas may be in the offing.