“Paris-Delhi-Bombay...”
CENTRE POMPIDOU, PARIS
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More than two centuries after the collapse of the French East India Company, France is still trying to get to know India. Indeed, the former relationship between the two countries has largely been forgotten, overshadowed by the British domination of South Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But this year, two exhibitions in Paris brought this particular intercultural encounter to center stage. The Musée Guimet’s “Lucknow,” based on an exhibition originally presented at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, shed light on the French scholars, soldiers, and traders who commissioned and collected art in eighteenth-century north India when East India Company officials first traveled to the subcontinent. Meanwhile, at the Centre Pompidou, “Paris-Delhi-Bombay...,” a blockbuster exhibition of forty-eight contemporary artists curated by Sophie Duplaix and Fabrice Bousteau, aimed to bring Indian and French artists into dialogue as they explore Indian society today.

Despite its contemporary focus, the Pompidou show left the viewer wondering whether French perceptions of India have changed since the eighteenth-century moment examined in “Lucknow.” The structural and conceptual center of the show, a circular space with extensive explanatory text, time lines, Bollywood film clips, Indian television advertisements, and interviews with village artisans, proffered six themes that the organizers deemed essential for approaching, categorizing, and understanding India: “Religion,” “Politics,” “Identity,” “Home,” “Craft Production,” and “Urban Development and the Environment.” The remainder of the exhibition’s galleries radiated from this central point, each direction ostensibly leading to works that reflect on one of the themes. Though some viewers might have found this elaborate introduction useful, entering the central space was somewhat akin to wading through a cobbled-together Wikipedia entry. Besides treating India in reductive terms, the framing mechanism ran the risk of constraining the art objects, many of which speak across these themes or move beyond them completely.

A case in point is Subodh Gupta’s room-size Ali Baba, 2011, one of the first major pieces one encountered. Alluding to the treasure trove in “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” the installation features gleaming, stainless-steel Indian tableware, cooking implements, and food-storage containers arranged in painstakingly neat piles and rows. They hung from the ceiling, spanned the breadth of all four walls, and covered a series of shelves placed in the center of the space. The work successfully effected the aestheticization of everyday household objects for which Gupta has become known, instilling in them new value and meaning by analogizing Indian domestic life to mythic booty. But in being relegated to the “Home” section, Ali Baba lost much of its nuance, particularly Gupta’s reflection on his own personal history in relation to familiar, quotidian objects. In its effort to decode, the exhibition ignored much of the import and complexity of this work and others.

The show’s organizational apparatus was troubling in other ways, too. One upshot of the explanatory section was that India was positioned as other, a “mystery” waiting to be explored by the French and explained by Indians. In this regard, the curators’ choice of works by French artists versus those by Indian artists affirmed old binaries of center and periphery. Many of the French invited to participate—including Stéphane Calais, Alain Declercq, and Cyprien Gaillard—presented works that either referred to India in oblique ways or studiously avoided any references at all. Yet when selecting Indian artists for the show, a premium appeared to have been placed on works that carry clearly discernible, decodable markers of the subcontinent.

Take, for example, Ravinder Reddy’s monumental golden sculptural head Tara, 2004, which quite literally served as the public face of the exhibition. With her nose ring, lotus earrings, and facial features reminiscent of Hindu sculpture, Tara was quickly and easily read as stereotype. Other works by Indian artists reinvented but still referred to Indian objects—works such as Sunil Gawde’s Virtually Untouchable – III, 2007, a group of ritual flower garlands composed of painted red razor blades, and Sakshi Gupta’s Freedom Is Everything, 2007, an Indian “carpet” constructed of automobile parts. While both artists upended audience expectations by introducing unconventional materials, these works still evoked objects—fragrant flower garlands, patterned carpets—that are associated not just with India but with an exotic India.

By contrast, works by the seventeen French artists, the majority of whom traveled to India specifically to create works for the show, were largely free from such iconography. Jean-Michel Othoniel and the composer Mauro Lanza collaborated on an installation that Othoniel conceived of while visiting a glassmakers’ village in India. In the gallery, the viewer beheld a carillon formed by variously hued, brightly colored glass bells and chimes suspended from three metal posts and a series of undulating metal rods simultaneously, speakers broadcast a recording of a musical composition being played on the sculpture-cum-instrument. Through these abstractions, Othoniel produced a work that moves beyond document or symbol in favor of material and sensory explorations.

Overall, Indian artists were cast in the role of cultural translators, while French artists were free to treat India as their muse. Some pieces, however, successfully avoided this impasse. For instance, in his animated film 1943, 2011, the graphic novelist Sarnath Banerjee poetically intertwined a historical commentary on the Bengal famine of 1943 with a personal memoir of his childhood. Works like this, which privileged an Indian artist’s specific voice, were among the strongest in the exhibition. Yet these moments were few, and one ultimately wondered whether “Paris-Delhi-Bombay...,” rather than placing Indian and French artists in dialogue, risked positing unbridgeable cultural differences between them.

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