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Pratapaditya Pal, *In Pursuit of the Past. Collecting Old Art in Modern India, circa 1875-1950.*

Bombay, Marg, 2015, 180 p. illustrations, bibl., index.

A review article by Anne Vergati, directeur de recherche, CNRS, Paris

(click on the small image for full screen image with captions.)



Fig. 1

The most recent book of Dr. Pratapaditya Pal, a great connoisseur and specialist of Indian and Himalayan art, is an important contribution to the history of Indian art. While Indian museums are well known to specialists, Indian private collections and collectors are largely unknown to both the specialists and the larger audience.

The book is divided into two parts: I quote the titles given by the author: *The Circle of the East* and *The Circle of the West*. The first part describes the great collectors of Calcutta (now Kolkata) a great cultural and political center where the nationalist aspirations started at the end of 19th century.

The first chapter describes the collections of the Tagore brothers, two great specialists and personalities of Calcutta at the end of 19th century. The next chapter gives a detailed description of the lives and collections of well-known scholars and collectors, including John Woodroffe, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch. The presentation of the scholar collectors is placed in the cultural and historical context of Calcutta. Sir John Woodroffe (1865-1936) had a degree in law from Oxford and his father was Advocate-General of Bengal. He arrived in Calcutta in 1890 and became a Fellow of Calcutta University and was appointed Tagore Law Professor. During his stay in Calcutta he became a friend of the Tagore brothers who played a major role in his discovery and learning of Indian culture. He had a particular interest for tantric texts. Not only was he a scholar of Tantra, but also a practitioner. His book *Principles of Tantra* is well known by Indologists.

The great art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy of Tamil origin by his father, was born in Sri Lanka in 1877 and arrived in Calcutta in 1901; soon after his arrival he started to teach at the University of Calcutta (fig. 2). As with Woodroffe, his contacts with the Tagore brothers contributed to his understanding and appreciation of Indian art. His elegance, his knowledge of Indian languages, and his erudition gave him the possibility to be assimilated in Calcutta society. During his stay in Jaipur, he collected a great number of Rajput miniatures; in 1916 he published the book *Rajput Paintings*. The majority of his collection of paintings was acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston, where he finished his career as curator. (see fig. 3 for a drawing now in the Metropolitan Museum, NY)



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Stella Kramrisch (fig.4, 5) arrived from Vienna to Calcutta in 1922 to complete her studies in Indian art. After a few years she was awarded a chair at the University of Calcutta where she spent thirty years. Dr. Pal gives a detailed description of her personal life and emphasizes her passion for Indian monuments. In 1946 she published a remarkable and groundbreaking book, *The Hindu Temple*. Her publications about Nepalese art helped a large audience to discover the art of Kathmandu Valley. She finished her career at Philadelphia Museum where much of her collection of Tibetan and Nepalese paintings can be found. The comparison between the two great art historians Ananda Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch is of great interest: they both had a great passion for classical Indian art but also for handicrafts, and in Kramrisch's case, for textiles. Coomaraswamy spent more time in research and theory of art while Kramrisch organized a great number of exhibitions of Indian and Himalayan art. She organized the first exhibition of Nepalese art in New York.

The author underlines the great qualities of the collectors of Marwari community, such as the Birla family who founded the Birla Academy of Arts. The main interest among the Marwari community for antiques started in 17th century. Dr. Pal compares the great Marwari collectors of Calcutta with those of the Parsi community of Bombay. One of the great Marwari collectors was Hanuman Prasad Poddar who had a remarkable collection of stone sculptures of Bengal and Bihar from the Pala and Sena periods.

Patna, the capital of Bihar, at the end of 19th century was a warehouse on the river Ganga and the economic and cultural relations with Calcutta University were close. The University in Patna was founded in 1917. Previously the young people used to go for studies to Calcutta. The first great collector was Khuda Bakhsh, jurist and magistrate, in Hyderabad, who was well known for his collection of Persian and Turkish manuscripts. He founded the Khudda Bakhsha Library for Islamic art where rare manuscripts of Moghul period, and Persian manuscripts of Central Asia are kept.

Other collectors mentioned are Percy C. Manuk, well known for his collection of Moghul and Rajput miniatures; R.K.Jalan for his collection of Tibetan paintings (thangka) and Nepalese objects and at last G.P. Kanoria, a great scholar with an important collection of Rajput miniatures as well as Jain sculptures and Buddhist ivory sculptures from Kashmir. The other great collector and scholar is William Archer. His book published in 1973, *Paintings from the Punjab Hills* is to this day an important reference book for the study of Indian miniatures. He finished his career as curator at Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and bought a great part of his collection there.

The last town of the East, Benares, known the sacred town for Hindus, is dominated by the presence of Alice Boner, "Ganga's daughter". She was Swiss, a painter and sculptor and also a poet; she had a great interest for Indian art and dance. For thirty years she lived in Benares near the Ganga river. When she arrived in India in 1934, she started to collect art objects; she had a particular interest in Indian sculpture and portable paintings. Her research resulted in the publication of the book *Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture*, E.J.Brill, 1962, a manual for historians of Indian art.

The second part of the book - *The Circle of the West* - is about the collectors of western India. First, the author describes the town of Lahore, a cultural town where the Museum played an important role for the collectors and scholars at the beginning of 20th century. The English scholar Percy Brown (1872-1955) and the well known archeologist J.P. Vogel spent a long period of time at Lahore. Percy Brown published many articles about Indian paintings and he contributed to the discovery of the art of Nepal with his book *Picturesque Nepal* published in 1912. Among the Indian collectors who are quoted in this chapter is Alma Latif (1875-1959) who is well known for his collection of prehistoric objects of Indus civilization and a wonderful collection of Moghul and Rajasthani paintings. The most important collector who played a great part in the collections of Lahore Museum is Samarendranath Gupta; he was a collector of Pahari paintings and he worked as curator at the Museum of Lahore. The Roerich family from Russia lived for many years in North India in Himachal Pradesh. The son Svetoslav (1904-1993) was a great collector of Indian art particularly of sculpture. The father Nicolas, a painter himself, had a great interest for Tibetan art and had an important collection of Tibetan paintings. Some of the paintings are

displayed at Roerich Museum in New York. The greater part of the collection is now in the Palace Museum in Taipei, while another part is found at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The rest of the collection was dispersed in an auction in London in 1982. The last great collector of Punjab noted in the book was M.S.Randhawa (1909-1988) who had a remarkable collection of Pahari and Kangra miniatures; he worked as a curator at Chandigarh Museum.

The town of Bombay was dominated by the Parsi Tata family; The founder of this dynasty of industrialists was Jamsetji, a great collector of Chinese and Japanese objects, textiles of Kashmir and rare books, and also of Tibetan and Nepalese art. His sons Dorab and Ratan have continued to collect old Indian art but they had also an interest for modern painters, including Ravi Varma (1848-1906) and M. V. Dhurandhar, M. F. Pithwala and P. Bomanji. The Tatas were not the only great Parsi collectors of India. Some of the finest Indian sculptures were collected by two other collectors, S.K. Bhedwar, also of Bombay, and Boman Behram of Bangalore. The Behram collection featured the magnificent bronze Buddha of the Gupta period, now in the Asia Society collection, featured on the cover of Dr. Pal's book (see figs. 1, 6).



Fig. 6

Among the other great collectors of Bombay the author mentions Karl Kandalawala (fig. 7), a lawyer and a great scholar with a particular interest for the Pahari miniatures, and Moti Chandra, a *pandit* of Benares, and director of Prince of Wales Museum.



Fig. 7

Three other towns where big collectors lived are Pune (Poona), Hyderabad and Ahmedabad which boasts the exceptional collection of ancient textiles of the Sarabhai family. Hyderabad located east of Bombay had a great collector Salar Jung III (1889-1949), the former First Minister of the kingdom of Hyderabad. He had an important collection of manuscripts, books and objects such as textile and weapons of the Moghul period. At the end of his life in 1949 his Palace

with his collection became a Museum. Another great Hyderabad collector is Jagdish Mittal (b. 1925) who created with his wife a public trust for their collection, which will eventually become a museum (fig. 7).

The epilogue of the book is a conclusion where the author gives more details concerning the collectors. In the 17th and 18th centuries only the kings, the aristocrats, and Buddhist and Jain monks had the privilege to collect art objects. With the arrival of British and Europeans the collecting of ancient Indian art became a passion and also a pastime for bureaucrats, business people and military personnel. The Parsi community of Bombay, particularly the industrialists Tatas, and the members of the Marwari community of Calcutta played a major role in the world of Indian collectors.

The book is remarkable for the details of the personal lives of collectors and their families. In this book the author shares with us his memories; he met most of the collectors and collaborated with them for different exhibitions and publications. The book is copiously illustrated with photos of the objects from the collections as well as snapshots of many of the collectors.

Dr. Pal closes his narrative with a poetic evocation of the past of Indian antiquity collecting and what it has meant to him:

“I must now close the narrative by declaring how enjoyable this journey back in time has been, to be able to catch even glimpses of the devoted individuals whose pioneering aesthetic adventures in both collecting and scholarship have added so much to the meaning of my own life and to the ‘metaphysical sense of time.’ ”

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