
'ALL THAT IS RARE, CHARACTERISTIC OR BEAUTIFUL'

**Design and the Defense of Tradition in Colonial India,
1851–1903**

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Abstract

In the 1880s and 1890s, British officials worried that traditional Indian design was disappearing in the face of rapid westernization. But their idea of what constituted 'traditional' design was itself new, forged first at international exhibitions and then in the context of Indian artisanal and consumer experimentation with novel combinations of foreign styles and objects. Indeed, it was the latter which prompted British art officials in India to call for a return to tradition. But traditionalism in design was not just in reaction to Indian cosmopolitan tendencies; it tried to achieve its own, slightly different cosmopolitanism by Indianizing western forms with the application of pure Indian ornament. I argue that it was in the intersection of these competing visions – Indian and British, metropolitan and colonial – of how to use and fill homes with new goods that a new definition of Indian traditional design emerged in this period.

Key Words ◆ consumption ◆ cosmopolitanism ◆ crafts ◆ design ◆ tradition

In January of 1903, Viceroy of India Lord Curzon opened an exhibition in Delhi of Indian artwares as part of the festivities associated with the coronation durbar of Edward VII. The product of more than a year's work on the part of officials active across the subcontinent, it was what Curzon called 'an Exhibition of all that is rare, characteristic or beautiful in Indian

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Art' (*Indian Review*, 1903: 50). That claim at inclusivity was, of course, misleading. To start with, the event focused not on fine arts but on crafts, in keeping with Orientalist assumptions that Indians were only capable of applied arts. Even more narrowly, Curzon further excluded those crafts with foreign influences – influences he thought were threatening the future of Indian art.

Curzon had stipulated that the art on display in Delhi in 1903 be 'only the work that represented India's trade, traditions, instincts, and beliefs of the people' (*Indian Review*, 1903: 50). In this article, I trace the late 19th-century emergence of the idea that certain things *could* properly represent the 'traditions, instincts, and beliefs of the people'. To be sure, the regional specialties on display in Delhi had been famous for years: Punjabi wood carving, Benares brocades, Jaipuri brasswork and Kashmiri embroideries had centuries-old traditions in the subcontinent. But before the 19th century, they had not come together as representing a single, coherent category of 'Indian design', defined by national characteristics. To adapt Sudipta Kaviraj's terms (1994), the fuzzy categories of local products came together in the late 19th century into a bounded entity of national design.

To determine what happened to create a single category called Indian design I identify two stages of change. The concept first emerges in conjunction with the Great Exhibition of 1851, where European observers identified key skills – specifically, a sophisticated use of color and ornament – as essential to Indian design. This initial articulation of Indian design was largely confined to Europe: expressed primarily at European exhibitions, it was oriented towards extracting lessons from Indian objects in order to improve European design. But the eventual survival of the idea did not rely only on metropolitan roots; nor was it solely the product of European art criticism. Rather, Indian design emerged out of the colonial context, representing intersecting trends from both the metropole and the colony (Sinha, 1995), including British aesthetics but also the reorganization of Indian artisanal production, the penetration of western manufactured goods into Indian markets, emerging ideas of nationalist economics, and changing consumer desires both in India and in Britain. It is here that I turn to the second stage of change, by which emerging developments in artisanal production and consumption within India – as seen through examples from western India in particular – prompted the full development of the idea of Indian design. By the 1880s, a wave of stylistic changes made distinctively 'Indian' designs only one among many options in the subcontinent. These alternatives prompted new attempts in India to perpetuate the traditional in design. Curzon's decision to showcase the best of Indian arts in 1903 emerged largely out of these trends.

This emphasis on traditional design was, at heart, an aesthetic

project built on perpetuating enduring Orientalist visions of India as the exotic, luxurious Other to a more rationalist, industrializing Europe. But design traditionalism also had other aims which fit less snugly into a neat understanding of India as non-Europe. For, just as design advocates argued that Indian things should look distinctively Indian and Other, they also urged that those things fit into homes newly reimagined around western bourgeois ideas of domesticity. Design advocates might want Indian homes to be filled with Indian textiles, wood carvings and metalwork, but those same homes were to offer those styles in forms suitable to a westernized understanding of private space in the form of table linens, sideboards, and tea services. The insistence on difference, then, was confined to ornament: in materials, forms and use Indian things were to follow the West. Produced by the ambivalent cultural politics of imperialism, that duality draws attention to the specific contours of upper-class consumption emerging in western India in this period. Building on Breckenridge et al.'s (2002) focus on the local roots of cosmopolitanisms around the world, I explore how the vernacularization of design in this period operated not in opposition to but in conjunction with cosmopolitan identities.

INDIAN DESIGN IN FORMATION: LONDON, 1851

The first expression of a singular idea of Indian design emerges in 1851 at the Great Exhibition in London. The importance of the 1851 exhibition is well established (Auerbach, 1999): here I want only to sketch out the ideas about Indian design which emerged there. The first of what was to be a long series of international exhibitions, the Great Exhibition brought together the world's products in competitive national displays. In the vast glass exhibition hall, the India Courts occupied a central spot, as befitting India's status as the jewel in the British imperial crown. Composed of 'such specimens of the products and manufactures of that country as may tend to illustrate its resources' (*Official Descriptive Catalogue*, 1851: 858), the Court included mineral and vegetable specimens, agricultural tools and simple machinery, sumptuous jewelry, plain and patterned fabrics of all descriptions, and weaponry from across the subcontinent. Never before had such a range of things from the subcontinent been assembled into a single display in Europe. Indeed, as Carol Breckenridge (1989) points out, the Great Exhibition provided a new, putatively comprehensive vision of Indian goods to many whose only earlier access to Indian things would have been through limited collections or written accounts.

The densely packed goods comprising the Indian displays won rich praise, particularly on design grounds. Men at the forefront of the emerging design movement in Britain wrote glowing reviews of the

Indian exhibits. One of the most influential artists writing about the Exhibition, Owen Jones, called the opportunity of studying the Indian goods, 'a boon to the whole of Europe' and noted that all the artists he knew shared his opinion that 'the Indian and Tunisian articles were the most perfect in design of any that appeared in the Exhibition' (quoted in Royle, 1852: 401). The committee entrusted with the task of purchasing goods from the Crystal Palace for English schools of design echoed Jones' view. In a letter to the East India Company, the committee reported that the Indian Court contained 'beyond any other department of the Exhibition, objects of the highest instructional value to students in design' (quoted in Royle, 1852: 399–400).

One of the most striking things about the warm praise bestowed on the Indian exhibits is the unitary terms in which it was expressed. Virtually every commentator treated all the manufactured goods in the Indian Court as part of a singular aesthetic field, bound by common artistic principles. In a lecture to the Society of Arts, for instance, India Office official John Forbes Royle called attention to 'the beauty and variety of patterns' of the whole range of Indian goods. He argued that that beauty was visible

as well in the carved or engraved, as in the painted, printed, woven, or embroidered works . . . [T]his we see, whether we examine a production of Dacca, or one from Delhi, Benares, or Ahmedabad, Rajpootana, or Hyderabad, from Madras or from Mooltan, Cashmere or Khyrpoor, and whether in a common chintz or in a fabric of silk, or one enriched with silver or gold, or with imitations of gems. (Royle, 1852: 391)

Whatever the media represented, or from whatever part of the subcontinent they had been sent, to Royle all were equally Indian in design.

What held this category of 'Indian goods' together, on design grounds? In 1851, critics focused on two main elements: color and ornament. Writing for the exhibition's *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue*, Royle argued that, 'Indian patterns . . . please multitudes of admirers, due no doubt, in a great measure, to the command which the natives of India have of colours, and the admirable taste with which they harmonise complicated patterns' (1851: 936). Color and pattern were closely related. It was not just that Indian textiles and lacquer work featured vibrant hues: their colors were combined skillfully, with proper balance between foreground and background, and pleasing arrangements of ornamental detail. As the influential architect, Matthew Digby Wyatt put it, the 'especial value' of the Indian goods on exhibit at the Great Exhibition in 1851 'consisted in the admirable illustrations they furnish of the possibility of obtaining repose and quiet beauty by the right employment of the most brilliant colouring when broken up into minute and properly contrasted forms, and arranged for flat surfaces' (1870: 553).

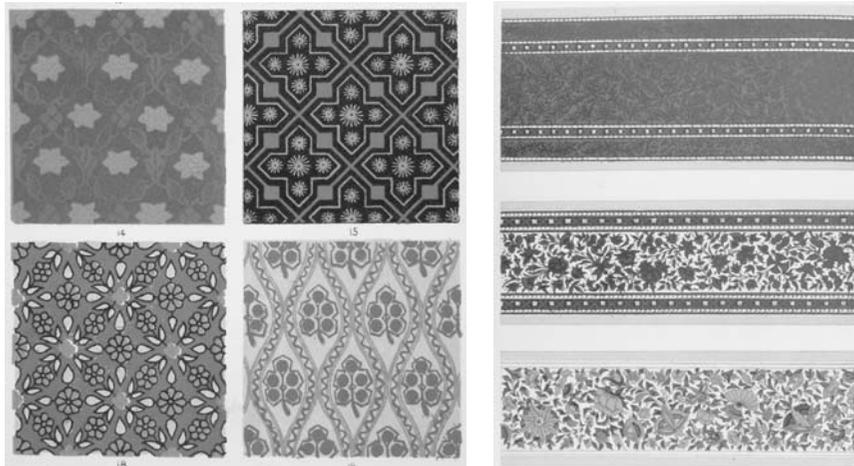
The degree of enthusiasm critics showed for Indian decorative abilities is all the more interesting in comparison to their relative lack of interest in Indian handling of form. The shape of lacquered boxes or the sweeping lines of an enameled vase did not interest Jones or Digby Wyatt. Rather, the crucial contribution of Indian designs – and thus, in part, what made those designs ‘essentially’ Indian – was the decoration on the boxes and vases. This focus on ornamentation is revealed in two separate printed attempts to summarize the design principles on view at the Great Exhibition. In both Digby Wyatt’s two volume set, *The Industrial Arts of the Nineteenth Century* (1851–1853) and Jones’ influential book, *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856) Indian examples rarely appear in full form. Instead, the ornamentation on small sections of objects appear as lessons on patterning and color harmony, with no information on the context in which the examples might have appeared (Figures 1 and 2). Indeed, for many critics, form seemed not to matter at all to the ‘Indian’ nature of an object. Blackwood furniture from Bombay, for instance, excited much admiration at the 1851 Exhibition for its distinctively Indian designs. This, even though the forms of that furniture – including dining tables and divans – were clearly derived from Europe. In the movement of Indian goods into a global marketplace, then, ornament was considered separately from form, pattern from use.

FIGURE 1 (left) Illustrations of Indian ornament from Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856): plate LI.

Courtesy of the Anne and Jerome Fischer Fine Arts Library, University of Pennsylvania Library, gift of George C. Mason

FIGURE 2 (right) Indian border designs from Matthew Digby Wyatt, *The Industrial Arts of the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 1 (1851): plate II.

Courtesy of the Anne and Jerome Fischer Fine Arts Library, University of Pennsylvania Library



This new British appreciation for Indian things at the 1851 exhibition came at a moment of perceived crisis in British design. For all the British technical and industrial achievements on view at the Crystal Palace in 1851, critics ranked British exhibits far behind the French and Italian displays in aesthetic terms. In the race for industrial supremacy, it seemed British manufacturers had forgotten the need to make things both cheap *and* beautiful; critics called, then, for a return to the basic principles of good design. It was here that the Indian sections attracted such attention. For it was hoped that Indian things could provide new design direction; as the *Times* saw it, the value of the Indian exhibits 'can hardly be overrated. By their suggestiveness the vulgarities in art-manufactures, not only of England but of Christendom, may be corrected' (quoted in Royle, 1852: 398).

British attention specifically on Indian ornamentation, then, was preeminently strategic. Critics identified color harmony and judicious use of ornament as the distinctive contributions of Indian design, offering the most important lessons to British industry. Obviously not all the many thousands of items on view in the India Courts of 1851 presented equally good examples of those achievements. Unembellished objects, which were striking in form but not ornamentation, for instance, received comparatively little attention. Similarly, the design 'suggestiveness' the *Times* referred to would not come from temple lamps depicting Hindu deities or from stylized representations of unfamiliar animals. Overt religious iconography or exotic Indian fauna were simply too alien to be easily assimilated into British design. Overall, inspiration was to come from the essentially secular and detachable basic design principles of color harmony and decorative balance.

THE CHANGING CONTEXT FOR DESIGN IN INDIA: ARTISANAL AND CONSUMER TRENDS IN WESTERN INDIA

The vision of 'Indian art', rooted in particular skills in color and ornament, which emerged from the Great Exhibition enjoyed a long life after 1851. Indeed, given their express similarity in goals and display techniques (Hoffenberg, 2001), it is perhaps not surprising that subsequent international exhibitions presented comparable ideas of what constituted 'Indian design'. The 1851 Exhibition set the standard for those later events, establishing not only shared classificatory systems but also common competitive goals, providing regular opportunities for countries to make claims about national achievements, character, progress, and taste. Within those later international exhibitions, the Indian Courts steadily increased in size and expense as organizers strained to present encyclopedic visions of the subcontinent. Their

exhibits, however, continued to present a selective view of India and Indian things, emphasizing in particular those objects offering distinctively 'Indian' designs. Thus, stalls at the Glasgow and Paris exhibitions of 1888 and 1889, for instance, literally overflowed with gorgeously colored enameled trays and lush fabrics in intricate patterns (Figure 3).

For all the similarities, the grounds of this selectivity had shifted from 1851. Displays in the 1880s continued to privilege decoration over plainness, varied colors over the monochromatic; now, however, organizers also tried to exclude European ornamentation. This represented a refinement on previous understandings of what actually constituted Indian design. In addition to the earlier, positive definition of Indian design – as characterized by a distinctive use of color and ornament – exhibition organizers now added a new negative definition as well – Indian things were recognizably *not* European. That new criteria emerged in the subcontinent. Indian artisans in this period were experimenting with more global styles, drawing on a range of European sources. In response to those changes, European art officials sought to preserve the essential, exotic difference of Indian goods in visual terms. Breckenridge (1989), Greenhalgh (1988) and others have argued that

FIGURE 3 Exhibit stall in the Indian Serai, Paris Universal Exhibition, 1889. Reproduced from the *Journal of Indian Arts and Industries* (1889).

Courtesy of the Museum Library, University of Pennsylvania



international exhibitions presented a reality imagined by their colonial rulers. But it is important to remember that exhibitions did so within a set of possibilities conditioned in part by the colonies. In this case, the demand for purity in Indian design visible at exhibitions abroad reflected colonial imperatives and realities as much as it did metropolitan ones. It is useful, then, to shift the focus from international exhibitions to the subcontinent, where a different set of conditions made possible the survival and growth of 'Indian design'.

The movement for Indian design within the subcontinent emerged, not in exhibitions, but in the workshops and bazaars where artisanal goods were made and sold. For it was changes in those settings which made European art officials worry that Indian design would disappear altogether. A brief description of some of these changes in the wood and silver industries in late 19th-century western India suggests the varied influences on traditional designs. In earlier times western India had been known for its finely carved wooden house fronts, gracing wealthy residences from Bombay up through mainland Gujarat. Yet by the end of the 19th century, upper and middle-class Indian consumers favored simpler styles in wood, due both to the high costs of carving and the influence of European building forms. Indeed, in 1881 American designer Lockwood de Forest found no artisans in Bombay capable of doing the old style of ornamented wood construction (de Forest, 1919: 1118–9). Within Indian homes the use of wood was also changing. In place of the swings, string cots and storage chests used in earlier times, demand increasingly favored European-style armchairs, sofas, four-poster beds, and sideboards, all of which fit new ideas of the proper use of domestic space. Some of those new things did come decorated in self-described 'Indian' styles, produced in Bombay or Ahmedabad. But much of it took on not just European forms but European decorative details as well, with several Bombay furniture workshops in particular specializing in Chippendale and Queen Anne styles (Wales, 1902: 7–8).

The silver industry of western India was undergoing a similar metamorphosis in the late 19th century, marked by the expansion of production and the proliferation of new designs. As demand for Indian silver products grew at home and abroad, new workshops sprang up, including some operated directly by London retailers (Wynard, 1999: 22, 66). These workshops produced goods that were generally European in form, but Indian in decoration. In the princely state of Kutch, for instance, products included cigar cases, egg stands and coffee services ornamented in the distinctively Kutchi style (see Figures 4 and 5) with complicated scrollwork patterns interspersed with animals and birds (Government of Bombay, 1880: 122). But even within Indian ornamentation, design was changing rapidly. By 1900, Bombay had emerged as the leading center for silver production, drawing skilled silverworkers from all over India. As



FIGURE 4 (left) British style Kutchi silver racing cup. Reproduced from Rivett-Carnac (1901): plate 65.

Courtesy of the Museum Library, University of Pennsylvania



FIGURE 5 (right) Kutchi silver cup. Reproduced from Rivett-Carnac (1901): plate 66.

Courtesy of the Museum Library, University of Pennsylvania

those artisans began working side by side, they developed a hybrid style, combining European forms with decorative patterns amalgamated from Kutch, Bangalore, Burma, Srinagar and elsewhere (Wynard, 1999: 22–3).

By the end of the 19th century, then, the types of goods being made were changing, often dramatically. As suggested, this reflected not just new conditions of production, but also new consumer demands. In elite circles, one dominant influence on tastes was British patronage – both public and private – of European styles. Apart from architectural interest in embellishing official buildings with Indian ornamental detail (Metcalf, 1989), as Nupur Chaudhuri (1992) has pointed out, the British in India otherwise rejected Indian influences in consumption, insisting on European styles, materials and conveniences. Taking this exclusivity to heart, many elite Indians also adopted western styles. As Begum Shaista Ikramullah, daughter of a government medical officer in North India, remembered it, growing up in the early 1900s her parents

felt it was their incumbent duty to prove to Englishmen that they could emulate them to perfection . . . Our house, therefore, was furnished to look exactly like an English house. In the drawing room there were heavy sofas . . . lace curtains, gleaming brass and silver . . . and knickknacks displayed in cabinets. The dining room had a fairly massive sideboard . . . displaying a lot of heavy silver. (Quoted in Evenson, 1989: 79)

Among elite and not-so-elite consumers, though, influences were various. In clothing, for instance, young well-to-do Parsi women in Bombay wore both dresses made to the latest styles from Paris and fine Chinese silk saris embroidered with elaborate borders particular to the Parsi community. In a more middle range, women of the better-off agricultural classes around Poona began to supplement their traditional cottons with fine silk saris from the nearby town of Yeola – saris formerly only worn by Poona brahmins (Joshi, 1936: 53). Even among the poorest classes change came in multiple forms, with women replacing handlooms with Indian and British mill cloth, either produced in traditional patterns or made up in brighter tints and altogether new designs. In choosing Chinese or Yeola silks or mill cottons, consumers drew inspiration not from western sources, but from much more local categories of value and desire associated with texture, color, caste and class. As should be clear, such inspiration did not always move in any single direction. Just as young Parsi women might wear saris for family weddings and frocks for visits to their friends, so too Maratha women might wear Yeola silks to some ceremonies and more traditional weaves to others. As Emma Tarlo (1996) has argued, Indians deployed clothing styles strategically, adapting their dress to suit a range of needs, from British norms of respectability in the public world of courts and offices, to nationalist demands for Indian-made cloth, ritual prescriptions for fine unstitched cloth in temples or particular headgear in mosques, or domestic ideas of comfort and suitability at home. Such a diversity of styles was in many ways the natural product of colonial modernity, in which the same officials charged with modernizing the colony sought to limit disruptions to traditional societies, even while colonial subjects negotiated change on their own terms. With those countervailing tendencies to balance, eclecticism was the order of the day.

That eclecticism operated in the juxtaposition of dissimilar objects as well as the combination of different styles. Interesting data on such combinations are available through descriptions of household furnishings given in a series of government reports on the religious communities of Gujarat prepared for the 1899 district gazetteers. The report on Gujarati Muslims, for instance, found that rich Muslim homes combined a range of furnishings, including rugs and cushions for sitting on the floor, European-style easy chairs, traditional brass and copper vessels, 'a table with clocks, musical-boxes and other ornaments, and against one of the walls a glass-doored cabinet with articles of European glass or china ware and other nicknacks' (Government of Bombay, 1899: 81). Although the report offers only hints of the styles of these goods, it is likely that they drew from various design sources. The easy chairs and glass cabinet could either have been European originals or exact Indian copies. Just as easily, however, they could have combined stylistic

elements, since Indian artisans at the time were drawing on different regional design traditions as well as on widely circulating foreign design books for furniture, carpets, jewelry and other goods (Burns, 1909: 632).

As with clothing, the 1899 report hardly suggests wholesale westernization. The cushions, rugs, and brassware of earlier periods of Indian furnishings were still there, just redeployed around new items of furniture within new decorative strategies. Thus rugs for sitting on the floor appeared next to European easy chairs, while the family's brass vessels stood alongside European china. The resulting arrangement conforms in some ways to Victorian domestic decorating ideals, with plentiful furniture and the proliferation of non-functional knick-knacks set out in self-conscious display. But it does so in very local ways, combining decorative strategies particular to Gujarat as a region and elite Muslims as a social group. Wealthy families across western India, for instance, lined the walls of their public rooms with brassware as a traditional sign of wealth, while elite Muslims in particular would have strictly regulated the participation of women in such spaces. Overall, the rooms described in the 1899 report reflect complementary desires, demonstrating commitment to local cultural ideals on the one hand, while at the same time marking knowledge of the wider world and all it had to offer. As such, the report provides an example of a very local cosmopolitanism, expressing global ideas in local terms (Breckenridge et al., 2002).

DESIGN TRADITIONALISM IN CHANGING TIMES

Whether in production or consumption, British art officials within India bemoaned all of these changes. Self-appointed art experts did not embrace new design influences or throw their weight behind artisanal initiatives. Instead, they did all they could to stop the clock and reinstate traditional designs. Indeed, growing European influences prompted a range of efforts designed for, as an 1883 conference of art school principals in Calcutta put it, 'the prevention of degradation' in India's traditional designs.¹

Some of these efforts targeted consumers. In a 1901 article in the *Journal of Indian Arts and Industries*, for instance, Colonel H.R. Rivett-Carnac presented two contrasting examples of Kutchi-made silver: one (Figure 4), in the form of a British racing cup, illustrated the evils 'which may with advantage be avoided' of European design influence; the other (Figure 5), more indigenous in its design sources, revealed 'a much happier adaptation, the details . . . being excellent in design and finish' (1901: 37). In presenting those paired opposites in the midst of an article which advised shoppers on how and where to find Indian metalwork, Rivett-Carnac clearly hoped to teach consumers to reject hybrid styles in favor of purely native designs.

Other efforts reached out to both consumers and artisans. In organizing the 1883 Jaipur Art and Industrial Exhibition, Jaipur's Resident Surgeon Thomas Holbein Hendley had two complementary objectives. First, displays of excellent regional manufactures in traditional styles would provide concrete examples to consumers of all that could be done within Indian design. Second and just as importantly, however, negative examples of things 'which show what should have been avoided, and what mischief has already been done by the contact between Oriental and European art' would sound a warning note to artisans tempted to stray into foreign styles (1884: v). The problem, as Hendley saw it, was that Indian artisans would not or could not learn those lessons. In a speech to fellow European museum and art school officials at an 1894 conference in Lahore, Hendley clearly spoke to a shared sense of frustration at the willingness of Indian artisans to stray outside their tradition. Calling upon the experience of his fellow officials, he argued,

You know how difficult it is to get the artist to keep in the straight path of Oriental design; how, if your backs are turned for a moment, some objectionable European feature, good enough in its proper place, but wholly unsuitable and barbarous when applied to Oriental art, is introduced. It requires your constant vigilance to defeat this tendency. (*Proceedings of the Art Conference*, 1894: 12)

Indian artisans had proven themselves unable to resist the siren call of European influence on their own: it was time for Europeans to intervene to keep Indians true to indigenous designs.

To keep Indian artisans to this 'straight path', some officials tried yet another way of intervening in crafts: reorganizing craft production under direct European oversight. Based at government museums, schools of art, jails and some private craft factories, these craft enthusiasts created working spaces where artisans only produced authentically Indian things. By 1900, inmates at the Yeravada jail in Pune, for instance, no longer wove Persian or European carpet designs. Instead, they specialized in reproductions of historic carpets from the Deccan (Twigg, 1907). The Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company (AWCC), established by American designer Lockwood de Forest in 1881, similarly insisted on indigenous styles. Reacting to the growing popularity of European styles in wood, de Forest had founded the AWCC in association with the prominent Hutheesing family of Ahmedabad in order to return local woodworkers to the best of Indian design decorating things like benches, mantles, sideboards and paneling (Figure 6).²

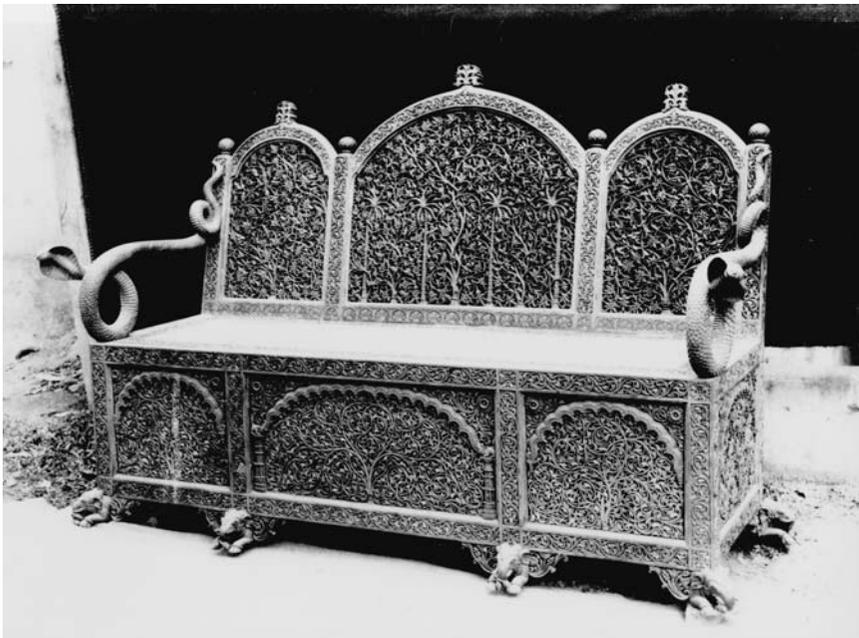
As an American involved in crafts in a purely private capacity, de Forest was something of an exception to an otherwise close link between these art experts and colonial power. Respected members of the colonial service, men like Rivett-Carnac, Hendley and the director of the Yeravada

jail investigated and intervened in traditional crafts at the express request of government. The various schools of art which sprang up in the major cities of British and princely India in the latter half of the 19th century provided the most important platforms for such activity: influential art principals included Lockwood Kipling in Lahore, E.B. Havell in Calcutta, and John Griffiths and Cecil Burns in Bombay. Others worked through new governmental departments of industries formed in the early 1900s, including E.C. Buck for the Government of India, and Alfred Chatterton for the Madras Presidency. Still others pursued design interests as a sideline to their official duties: Thomas Holbein Hendley, for instance, regularly supplemented his medical responsibilities as Resident Surgeon with studies of the traditional arts of Rajasthan, helping to organize both the crafts displays in the Jaipur Museum, and the 1883 Jaipur exhibition.

The source of these men's power lay not just in their official positions within the British administration in India; it was also rooted in race and ideology. For all that de Forest did not hold any official posting within the British system, in the colonial context his whiteness gave him some automatic degree of authority over local practices of artisanship and design. The definition of Indian design, in the 19th century at least,

FIGURE 6 Teak bench made at the Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company, late 19th century.

Courtesy of Umung Hutheesing, Hutheesing Design Company, Ahmedabad



was a largely white affair; Europeans and the occasional American led efforts to separate Indian design off from other aesthetic traditions. To be sure, Indians did write occasionally for the premier government design publication, the *Journal of Indian Arts and Industries*, and did have some influence, as Peter Hoffenberg (2001) has pointed out, within art schools, museums and exhibition organizing committees. But they wrote more about techniques than designs, and they operated as junior members of staff managing arrangements rather than setting aesthetic judgments, holding positions as assistants and head clerks under European leadership. In emphasizing the subordinate role Indians played in definitions of design, I depart from Hoffenberg's argument that Indians were partners in the exhibitionary project. Although Indians were indeed heavily involved in exhibitions, that involvement had limits particularly in the question of design, where Europeans generated their own definitions of tradition and then – as the quotation given earlier from Hendley suggests – tried to discipline unruly Indian subjects into conformity.

Although men like de Forest, Hendley, Havell and Buck did not share uniform ideas about Indian crafts, together they helped to articulate official concerns about traditional design, launching a range of initiatives in the 1880s and 1890s aimed at redirecting change in artisanal industries into more acceptable channels. Why make the effort, when all the trends were against them? Links to the Arts and Crafts Movement provided one impulse, since men like William Morris and C.R. Ashcroft looked to contemporary Indian artisans as well as European medieval guilds to define the crafts ideal for which they were striving. For the many art officials in India influenced by Arts and Crafts writings, it was then imperative to keep Indian artisans in purely Indian lines as a resource and example for crafts around the world. But the specific cultural politics of late 19th-century colonial India itself created its own push for traditional design. Culturally, conservative British society in India in the 1880s and 1890s felt increasingly threatened by Indian elites adopting western dress and education, mastering the English language and legal system, and attempting to claim more central roles in colonial administration and society. With Indians challenging the borders between white and native society, attempts to return Indians to properly Indian styles of consumption helped to restore the rule of 'colonial difference' (Metcalf, 1995) – at least visually.

Politically, the situation was even more pressing. By the late 1870s emerging economic critiques of colonialism made what people were buying and why charged topics in Indian politics. It was in this period, particularly in western India, that men like M.G. Ranade, R.C. Dutt, and G.V. Joshi began to articulate the ways in which the British had actively prevented the economic development of India under colonial rule

(Chandra, 1966). The British had always claimed that they brought prosperity to India, pulling a recalcitrant native society forward into the modern age. Indian economists and political figures now argued that, not only had India failed to prosper under British rule, it had actually sunk into poverty (Dutt, 1906) thanks to the 'deindustrialization' of the subcontinent – a process by which the British had destroyed India's traditional artisanal industries while failing to build modern ones. As an unnamed author in the Gujarati journal *Buddhiprakash* put it in an article in 1893, under colonial rule foreign imports had sounded 'a death-knell for our native handicrafts, our wealth is drained out to other countries, and people are being reduced to poverty and idleness' ('Kala Kaushalya', 1893: 20).

In this charged political landscape, design offered a way to try to reshape the debate. Rather than admit that colonial economics had hurt crafts, design advocates argued that the real problem was aesthetic: everything would be fine if Indians had remained true to their own design traditions in a modernizing world. For Cecil Burns, the principal of the Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy School of Art in Bombay in the early 1900s, Indian artisans had lost their market share 'not in consequence of the action of hostile tariffs, but by reason of their lack of capacity to adapt themselves to altered demands and changed conditions'. Making his case in a 1909 lecture to the Royal Society of Arts in London he argued that 'the economic salvation of the craftsmen of India will never be brought about' until they were 'trained to understand the principles upon which their ancestors built up their designs, and apply those principles' (1909: 637). As compared to Ranade or Dutt, Burns offered a very different interpretation of both the nature and causes of decline in Indian crafts. For Burns, India's subordination to a colonial economic system did not hurt Indian artisans: their own failing skills did. By reshaping a growing debate about the economics of crafts under British rule into one about aesthetics he offered a way to pin responsibility for change solely on native society.

RETHINKING TRADITIONALISM ABROAD

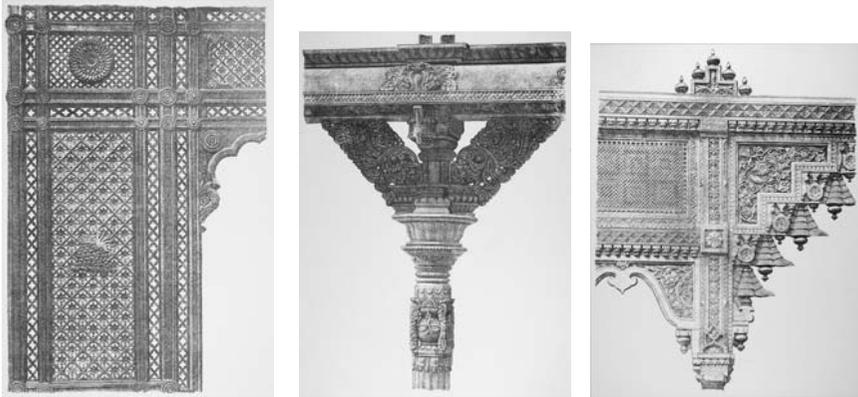
Neither the efforts to fight off design changes nor the politics motivating such interventions were visible in exhibitions abroad. Overseas exhibitions in the late 19th century continued to represent Indian art industries as always, already traditional in design, carefully weeding out evidence of changing styles or consumer desires. With all the transformations under way in India, one could see the insistence on traditional design as a statement of imperial power, of metropolitan organizers imposing their own vision on the subcontinent in spite of myriad colonial alternatives. It is equally possible, however, to reverse

the direction of influence, to see the formulaic traditionalism at events like the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London as a reaction to new cultural and political conditions within India (Burton, 1998). Rather than asserting power, the 1886 exhibition seems more like a defensive attempt by beleaguered British officials to shore up Indian design just at the moment when the object to be defended had already begun to slip away.

It was not that international exhibition organizers were unaware of the changes under way. Often those responsible for exhibition collecting efforts were the same people who complained the most loudly about new designs intruding on traditional industries. Sir George Birdwood, for instance, was both the India Office in London's guiding light on Indian art industries at exhibitions from the 1860s into the 1890s and one of the first to sound the alarm about the pernicious influence of foreign designs on Indian manufactures (Birdwood, 1880). Indeed, from at least the 1870s onwards, exhibition organizers quite explicitly tried to exclude new designs from their collections. In making his request that the Indian Government prepare a complete set of native jewelry for the 1872 exhibition in London, for instance, London-based exhibition committee secretary Henry Y.D. Scott (1871) demanded that no Delhi jewelry imitating European design be sent. Instead, he wanted only jewelry 'of purely native character . . . which will serve to illustrate the Classes of traditional ornament'. To illustrate his request – and perhaps also to define what he meant by 'purely native character' in jewelry – he had photographs of appropriate styles prepared in London, which were available upon application. Nor did exclusion end there. Thus, the committee charged with preparing the Bombay Presidency's submissions for the 1873 Vienna exhibition, for instance, argued that one of their goals was to

give a tone of unity, a fixed principle, to the whole exhibition, which it seems to us, it does not yet partake of, & would select such objects only as represented truly the arts, art manufactures, & produce of the Country, rejecting all spurious articles either imitations of European styles or European reproductions claiming to be Indian.³

Over time, organizers extended their insistence on native design to the very walls of the Indian Courts at international exhibitions. At the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London, for instance, intricately carved screens separated out regional artware displays in the Indian section (Figures 7, 8 and 9). Commissioned directly by the British exhibition committee and prepared by workmen from each region, the screens were intended to demonstrate the different varieties of patterns in use around the subcontinent (Cundall, 1886: 21). The imposing gateway to the Indian Court at the same event showcased the same skills on an even larger scale, with its artisans instructed to use 'as great a variety of patterns' as possible, with the ornament to be 'purely Indian' (Hendley,



FIGURES 7, 8 AND 9 Carved wooden screens made for the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London, representing the wood skills of (respectively from left to right) Bombay, Madras and the Punjab. Reproduced from the *Journal of Indian Arts and Industries*, August 1886 (Madras and Punjab) and October 1886 (Bombay).

Courtesy of the Museum Library, University of Pennsylvania

1886: 11–2). So successful was the effect that Indian Courts from the Paris Exhibition of 1889 onwards featured similarly carved arches and screens (see Figure 3). Such screens ensured pride of place to the lessons of Indian design and provided yet another way of framing goods from different regions and in diverse media within a common 'tone of unity'.

As Indian exhibits expanded in size and scope over the 19th century, then, organizers increasingly took it upon themselves to refine and police the category of 'Indian design'. By guarding against European intrusions during the collecting process, as well as by using exhibition buildings themselves to demonstrate 'purely Indian' design, such officials focused attention on elements which distinguished Indian from European design. That need to continually mark India as the cultural Other of Europe in visual terms was, again, in reaction to changes in production and consumption in India. Building on similar design purity efforts within the subcontinent, design efforts abroad helped to create the category of Indian design, not only defining certain skills as essentially Indian, but also marking Indian design off as fundamentally different from all others.

DESIGN AND POWER: ORNAMENT AND MATERIALITY

Efforts to define Indian design as a category grew all the more strident as they failed to create Indian design in practice. Indeed, the need for

strict control both at overseas exhibitions and in Indian schools and markets points directly to the real *failure* of British official dominance in design terms. Had British art officials successfully imposed their design values on Indian artisans and consumers, there would have been no need for the Jaipur exhibition, or for efforts at the Yeravada jail and the AWCC to return Indian artisans to indigenous designs, let alone for photographs sent out from London to illustrate what 'traditional' meant in jewelry. European art officials tried to promulgate certain ideas of authenticity in design, and tried to shape consumption around those ideas. But, in the end, they were unsuccessful: artisans and consumers continually strayed into foreign styles and hybrid uses.

Part of the reason for that failure was, of course, that efforts remained limited. International exhibitions were temporary affairs, based around relatively small collections assembled quickly every few years. For their part, art schools, museums and craft factories reached small numbers, in part due to their limited budgets – a source of constant complaint for British art officials. Such financial constraints point not only to the many demands made on colonial budgets but also to the real ambivalence of colonial cultural politics. For there was never a single design vision for the Raj. In architecture, for instance, many official buildings in the late 19th century celebrated the Indo-Saracenic style but others from earlier years continued to proclaim Classical or Gothic ideals. Similarly, Curzon may have staged the 1903 Delhi Durbar Exhibition in order to promote indigenous arts. But he did not redecorate Government House in Calcutta in traditionally designed furniture, nor did he personally give up western clothes for Indian ones; for Curzon, Indian design was for Indian, not British, use. Thus, for all the attention in certain circles, aesthetic Indianism was never the only policy – official or unofficial – of the Raj. With the British sending decidedly mixed signals on aesthetic fronts, it is hardly surprising that those favoring Indian styles met with such limited success.

That cultural ambivalence was visible within the traditionalist design movement itself. Indeed, for all their talk about the evils of European influences on Indian crafts, British art officials only really objected to those influences in the realm of ornament, not form.⁴ The same Bombay committee which was so insistent on keeping articles in 'European styles' out of their submissions to the 1873 Vienna exhibition was perfectly willing to send to the same event embroidered tablecloths and inlaid glove boxes – items whose forms were directly taken from western models.⁵ For European art officials, dining tables, china cabinets, glove boxes, or tea services were necessary for modern, civilized life; what was desirable was that those things looked Indian. As J.N. Fraser put it in his observations of the 1903 exhibition, 'The present changes of dress and furniture among the upper classes of Indians are to a large

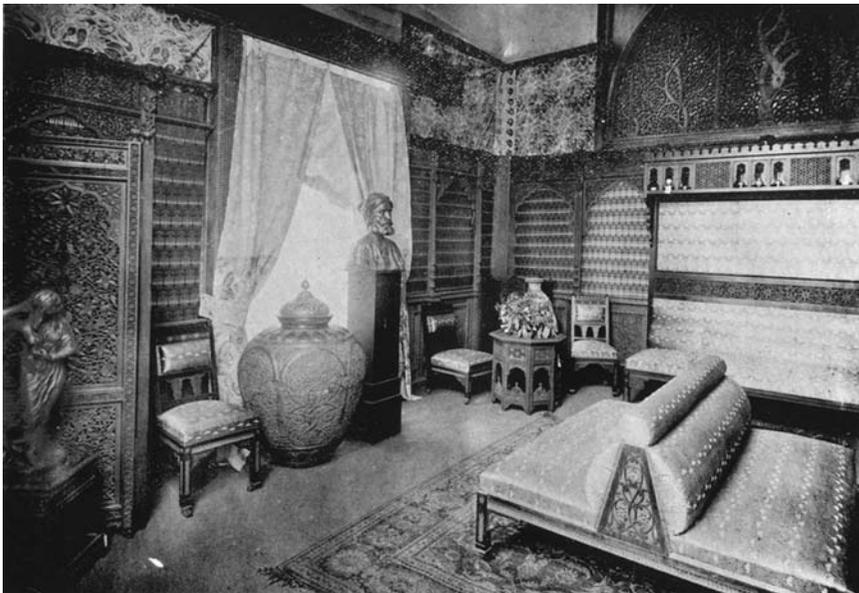
extent legitimate and necessary, and have come to stay. What is wanted is that Indian artisans should seek to supply these new wants' (1903: 73).

Returning to the Delhi Durbar, Curzon's 1903 exhibition set out to prove that Indian artisans could do just that. Featured prominently at the exhibition was a series of small model living rooms, designed, as exhibition organizer George Watt (1903: 4) put it, 'for the purpose of exemplifying the adaptability of the various better known styles of Indian Art, to modern household furnishing and architectural decoration'. In the prize-winning Bombay room, for instance, several profusely carved couches covered in local fabrics shared space with a large tufted carpet, decorative pottery urns, a wooden standing screen, and a sculpture of an Indian woman (Figure 10). Here, essentially 'Indian' ornament provided the key to reconciling demands for more, and more modern goods, while still holding onto an idea of Indian cultural difference.

The focus on ornament in the design movements in late 19th-century India differs from that at the 1851 exhibition. In the latter, Indian ornamentation appealed for its utility to British industry: Indian clothing or Hindu iconography may have been inappropriate to British uses, but Indian use of color and ornament could provide design inspiration. By the end of the 19th century, on the other hand, ornament drew attention

FIGURE 10 The Bombay Room at the 1903 Delhi Durbar Exhibition. Reproduced from George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi* (1903).

Courtesy of Van Pelt Library University of Pennsylvania



not for what it could offer British designers, but for what it appeared to offer Indian consumers. In the context of the rapid spread of western goods and styles, British art officials hoped that Indian decoration would solve a whole host of problems – reaffirming racial distance, reviving Indian industries, and reducing fear of social disruption based in artisanal unemployment. It could also hope to resolve the contradictions between the similarities promised by the civilizing project and the differences promised by Orientalism. With similarity in form and difference in ornament, transnational ideals of domesticity would at least look distinctively Indian. In this view, ornament stood apart from the shape an object took, the use made of it, or how it was integrated into the private space of a home.

That focus on ornament not only narrowed the scope of design interest, it perhaps also limited its appeal. For the design movement never did manage to elicit wide public support among Indians. Indian critics complained about both the problems the design movement set out to solve and its proposed solutions. Yes, they agreed, Indian design was gorgeous, representing one of the singular achievements of Indian civilization. But the pressing needs of the day were economic and political, not aesthetic. On the production end, it was not that artisans needed to follow the straight path of Indian design: they needed to explore new techniques of production, get access to new kinds of credit, and take advantage of economies of scale. In a 1904 article, the industrially-minded Madras journal, *The Indian Review*, counseled readers to realize the inevitability of those new developments:

However much the lovers of ancient Indian art may deplore the change now coming on over the life and thought of the Indian people and the gradual extinction consequently of ancient arts, there is no denying the fact that that change will be for the better from the economical point of view. People no longer look upon their ancient arts and industries as a means of livelihood . . . They look for salvation only in the adoption of Western methods of manufacture. (*Indian Review*, 1904: 34)

Nor were consumers more sympathetic to an indigenous emphasis. Indians had protested against regulations demanding that they appear in full native dress in law courts and wear native turbans rather than hats in government offices (Cohn, 1989: 336; Tarlo, 1996: 42). In the private space of the home, outside the purview of those regulations, they felt free to make their own choices about what types of new things to adopt.

Advocates of native design did indeed help to draw attention to the problem of crafts, but not necessarily in the way that they wanted. The heyday of the design movement was the 1880s and 1890s: even then design initiatives received only limited popular and governmental

support. By the time Curzon organized the Delhi Durbar exhibition in 1903, however, even that meager investment was drying up. In the 1900s attention shifted to efforts aimed at educating artisans, reorganizing production, and building markets – all of which elicited better funding and greater public interest. The focus on ornament had been an attempt to limit the nature of conversations over those industries, insisting the pressing issue was design, not the materials or technologies used in crafts, or the economic or social status of the people who made them. Once the conversation was opened, however, it was difficult to keep those blinders on. As critics like Ranade, Dutt and others rightly noted, design could not save crafts, because design was not all there was to crafts. Crafts were not the purely visual things that design purists sometimes seemed to want them to be: they were material embodiments of production relations, social networks, and consumer desires.

Indeed, by the time Curzon launched his exhibition of crafts as art – focusing on the visual appeal of Indian traditional designs – public attention had shifted to wider questions about the social, economic, political and cultural space of crafts as a set of products made by certain kinds of producers. Lockwood de Forest discovered this wider reality to his disappointment with his furniture workshops in Ahmedabad. Founded, as mentioned earlier, to revive the best in traditional designs, de Forest's workshops flourished in the 1880s and 1890s, thanks to strong demand in the United States. By the early 1900s, however, times had changed: with Americans losing interest in Indian things, supplies of teak drying up, and the price of labor escalating out of reach, the firm finally had to close shop in 1915. De Forest's traditionalist design vision had remained strong throughout; in the end, however, that was not enough to sustain production in the face of other constraints.⁶

CONCLUSION

Starting with the Great Exhibition of 1851, initial official interest in Indian crafts focused on design; by the 1880s that interest took the form of official efforts to redirect artisans into traditional design. Such efforts also, however, aimed to inculcate new ideals of consumption among elite Indian subjects. Through museums and publications, exhibitions and emporia, officials tried to teach Indian elites to surround themselves with the necessary comforts for a private life lived according to the western bourgeois ideas of domesticity. What the design traditionalists hoped was that those comforts to be chosen would reconcile the opposing demands of colonial difference and bourgeois similarity. By adhering to a national style when it came to ornament, but rising above nationalism to selectively appropriate other styles when it came to forms, consumers would affirm their national *and* cosmopolitan identities.

Efforts to define and then promote the traditional in design offer a telling example of the imperial production of the nation through culture: by 1903 metropolitan and colonial efforts alike had helped make Indian design an essential component of the panoply of characteristics that made up Indian culture and thus the Indian nation. Those efforts also suggest, however, that it makes little sense to conceptualize the consumption changes of late 19th century India through what Sheldon Pollock (2002: 46) terms 'the dichotomies of modernizing cosmopolitanism and vernacular traditionalism'. For traditionalism in design in this period was itself cosmopolitan; it was precisely because Indian things were moving farther in the world and facing new competition from global goods that art officials came to articulate what was and was not Indian in design. Indeed, late 19th-century official emphasis on traditional design emerged out of contrasting attempts to define cosmopolitan consumption, or what Breckenridge et al. (2002: 11) call 'ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home'. For their part, artisans and consumers combined different styles and diverse types of objects, retaining some familiar things for new purposes and adopting some new things for old ends. British art officials, on the other hand, chose to combine new and old differently, favoring 'pure' Indian ornamentation applied to western forms. It was in the intersection of those two approaches, that 'traditional' Indian design itself was constituted by cosmopolitan forces.

Notes

1. Government of India resolution, quoted in John Griffiths to K.M. Chatfield, Director of Public Instruction, 22 June 1883. Maharashtra State Archives (hereafter MSA): Educational Department 1883: v. 21, c. #706: 187.
2. Lockwood de Forest to M.D.C. Crawford, 30 October 1918. Reel 2731: Correspondence 1858-1931, pp. 821-826. Lockwood de Forest Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
3. George Wilkins Terry, Acting Superintendent, J.J. School of Art, and E.W. Ravenscroft, Secretary to the Government of Bombay, General Department (hereafter GD), to Chief Secretary to Government, GD, Bombay, 30 July 1872. MSA: GD 1872: v. 24, c. #588: 73.
4. This separation of form from content is a familiar theme in Indian visual culture in the late 19th century. For interesting parallels in painting see Tapati Guha-Thakurta (1992); for architecture, see Metcalf (1989).
5. C.R. Ovans, Joint Secretary of the Central Committee for the International Exhibition of 1871, to Members of the General Committee, Bombay, 18 May 1871. MSA: GD 1871: v. 21, c. #8: 134.
6. See the Lockwood de Forest Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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