

ART IN INDIA

(Written for "The Listener" by ARUNA YESHWANT GUPTA)

NOTHING much lasts in India if it is not profitable. The permanent arts in India centre round clothing and food. Many kinds of beautiful and useful cloth—woollen, silken, cotton—have been manufactured in India through the ages. Indian brass, copper, and silver trays, dishes, lamps, kitchen utensils, and articles for ceremonial use, have the beauty of utility. They are quite correct for the purposes for which they are made. They are not made for ornament but for use: the metal of which they are made is at any time saleable, and represents real money stored in the house—not paper money in a bank. Even the gold and silver ornaments worn by women and children are not primarily for decoration. They are made of pure silver or gold, not carat metal; this is a very old and well-tried method of storing real wealth, for bullion gold and silver can always be pawned or sold.

The "Mysterious East"

Benares brass, and Kashmiri filigree are not much used in ordinary Indian homes. They are useful mainly for selling to foreigners who want something Indian, as a souvenir. When an Indian wants a novelty, he buys European articles, and uses them in unexpected ways, just as our tourists and officials buy "oriental" articles, and clutter up their houses with mementos of the "mysterious East."

My first awful error (that I know of) was buying in Dadar market, Bombay, a couple of smooth, round, black earthenware pots (not water-jars). I thought them both useful and ornamental. My husband told the servant to take them away and break them at once. They are used by very low-caste people for cooking. They are used by everyone else for certain funeral ceremonies, and they are not at all auspicious!

One important difference between New Zealand and modern India is, that Europeans came here to live, and that this country is therefore a British colony. But, Europeans do not now settle with their families in India, as they have always done in Africa. There is no British colony in India. There has been a military and commercial domination, called an empire. British influence in all fields has therefore a basis of cash and credit. It will naturally fade out, leaving very few traces, when British control of Indian trade comes to an end.

The "unchanging East" of Kipling's verses is a poetic fallacy. India is now, and has always been, a land of kaleidoscopic changes. In this 20th Century the pieces are shifting rapidly, but quite in accordance with precedent and the rules of life.

Home-Grown for Preference

It is said, with some justice, and a wealth of examples, that various arts, in various eras, have been brought into India, from abroad, usually by foreigners. They have had a vogue among Indians, and have then faded into oblivion. Ethnologists, and archaeologists and philologists dig them up and give them

an airing and admiration again. But the peoples of India, by and large, have never cared for any importations, and still do not, at heart. It all slides off, like water off a duck's back, as the various fashions and ruling classes have their day and are set aside by and for new ones.

Painting and sculpture are taught, learned, paid for, in India, for severely practical reasons. Commercial art is the thing, nowadays. The J.J. School of Art, in Bombay, has an ever-increasing roll of students, of both sexes and all communities, from all over India. No matter what branch of Art they study, they certainly mean to get a living by it; they would never bother about Art for Art's sake.

Sculpture, modelling, and casting in bronze, is quite a good line if you can get a job in a museum, in the Natural History section, or if your family have relations in State service. The States frequently commission memorial busts, and pay pretty well, all things considered.

Painting is divided, in Bombay School of Art language, into Modern and Oriental. Both styles have been introduced by Europeans, who profess to have a great admiration for the paintings at Ajanta, and the carvings at Ellora and Elephanta, or Gharapuri. During these war years, there were many voluptuous renderings, or caricatures, of these cave paintings and sculptures (all of women, as heavy-shouldered as cows in full profit) done by shrewd young Muslim artists, and snapped up by less shrewd young European soldiers and kindred birds-of-passage. There is much doubt as to whether the originals of these were done by Indians. It is believed, on good grounds, that these striking murals were done by foreigners from the West, using Indian models and subjects. Much the same sort of thing is happening nowadays. The best "Indian" pictures of scenery, people, and mystical subjects are made by enthusiastic westerners and are dutifully copied by Indian artists, as being fashionable, and profitable.

Pictures at an Exhibition

Every exhibition of paintings in Bombay offers the same kinds of work, in set patterns. There are always luscious renderings of Krishna and the Milk-maids, of the Temptation of Buddha, or Shiva Papvati in either Ajanta or Rajput style.

It might be a good idea to impose a heavy tax on all artists who offer such pictures and on all tourists who buy them. A flood of pseudo-mystical stuff comes from Shantiniketan, the Tagore academy in Bengal. It is turned out, as from a factory, according to well-tried recipes.

And let us not forget the Modernists. These are, perhaps, school of art graduates who are too weak in drawing to be able to make Ajanta, or Rajput or even European academic pictures. They smear oil-paint on canvas, and succeed by calling their daubs "Famine," "Mother India," "Village Workers." About the only people in India who exhibit scenery along with their politics or theosophy are visiting Europeans, women artists who have been to Kashmir, refugees

from Germany (who have genuine ability) and Italian prisoners-of-war. Their work has a measure of success based on sympathy and esteem.

In cold truth, there has not been a great artist born in India or visiting India, within the memory of man.

Box-Office Art

It all seems such a waste of time and materials. Few Europeans or Indian publishing houses ever buy pictures made in India, by Indians, to reproduce for book illustration, or for framing. First, they can be done better, in Europe, for Europeans. Secondly, in India there is a very profitable picture business which uses old blocks of horrible paintings and drawings by Ravi Varman and even earlier craftsmen. These give the populace exactly what the said populace will spend its annas on—i.e., what both publisher and general public find profitable.

Ravi Varman was a Thampi from Travancore, in good Queen Victoria's reign of peace, prosperity, and progress. He was well-educated, a prince, and shrewd. He painted dozens of scenes about the gods, goddesses, and heroes of the Ramayana. Because he much admired the fair women of the Deccan, and the heavily-moustached Maratha war lords who were almost legendary patriotic heroes, in his youth, Ravi Varman painted the greatest of the gods and goddesses looking and dressing just like the best people of Maharashtra, of his day. He was a prince, and his pictures were all bought and put into an art gallery in Trivandrum. Those pictures and their descendants, are really what the Indian people like and buy. That has been their taste in art, for thousands of years. Scenery be hanged! Show them good likenesses of their grandfathers, complete to the collar stud; that is real, recognisable—profitable.

Let There be Likeness!

To me, it has been painfully funny to see a well educated, England-returned Indian being shown a collection of good photographs or paintings. He will hold a fine scenic picture or photograph upside down, or sideways, while expressing admiration. He will look at portraits, in which the lighting effects are admirable, and enquire "Who is that?" "Who is she?" If he happens to know the person in the picture, he will endeavour to be critical, and say, very authoritatively—"Oh, you have lost the likeness! The nose and eye are like enough, but the ear and chin are out of drawing."

A good photographer is one who shows every stud-button. Since many families like to have large-as-life pictures of their dear departed, they will take ancient group photographs, worn and spotted, to have a new portrait made of grandfather. His face is about the



"The permanent arts in India centre round clothing and food"—two Bengali women photographed by Cecil Beaton

size of a battered threepenny bit in the original. They gaze with disfavour at the enlargement, carefully worked up to humanity by drawing and charcoal powder, and say, "No! you have lost the likeness!" One Indian photographer and artist of my acquaintance has developed the habit of ending the argument by tearing up his enlargement and dropping the pieces at his customer's feet. The shock of seeing this wasteful proceeding silences our art critic! He is then charged rather more for a new copy, much like the old, and accepts it, without remarks.

It is typical of this "utility" attitude, that any one who sees a picture, will ask, "But can you sell it?" And that a certain elderly lady, being shown a lovely flowering plant, specially imported for a millionaire's garden, enquired, with real interest, "But can you cook it?" (Many tree-flowers are cooked as vegetables by thrifty Indian housewives).

School of Art graduates, plus diploma and gold medal, either go in for commercial art, or teach drawing. They give it up entirely if it does not pay. I know two who are now Government firemen! One quite successful Bombay artist is a very shrewd fellow. He has collected pictures from all sources, for years. He has Japanese, German (but no Italian), English, French, and American exemplars. He cannot read English, and is not worried by any nonsense about Schools of Thought. He keeps his copies secret; he makes his own adaptations, by mimicry, and a good eye for line and colour effects. He is also a keen follower of the vogue of the year. So, he does what the wealthy Parsis, Guzeratis, and visiting Europeans are admiring at the moment and is as little aware of art history, tendencies, and literature as the babe unborn. He is a prize-man; he is petted; he has a swelled head; he sells his pictures, and has a Bank Account! I am, in fact, quite fond of him. But I have been annoyed at his patronising tone, as the years have rolled by and the commissions, sales, and prizes have rolled in. For he knows and knows that I know, that this is clever—but not quite Art.