

## **The Foreign and the Local: Hybrid Characters Emerging**

The watercolour presents the Swiss Colonel Antoine Louis-Henri Polier (1741-1795) in an Indian Mughal nobleman's manner, watching a dance performed by three Indian women. They are accompanied by four musicians, sitting on the floor. The watercolour on paper, titled *Swiss Colonel Antoine Polier is entertained* has been painted by an unknown artist in India, Uttar Pradesh, Faizabad or Lakhnau. The painting, 30.8 cm high and 34.3 cm wide, was highly probable modelled on a lost oil painting from the German-English painter Johan Zoffany, presumably between 1782 and 1788.

The scene takes place in the setting of a garden pavilion in the style of Indian architecture. The V-shaped space between him and the dancing women opens up to a garden landscape with a fountain gushing within the arrangement. While two women in the background appear to be coincidental witnesses to the scene, a male servant, carrying a tray, hurries into Polier's direction.

In the picture's foreground, Polier himself is portrayed with a moustache, in white and yellow gold Mughal style clothing. He is lounging on the floor, sitting on some cushions placed on a rug. His gaze is fixed upon the woman dancing right in front of him. He leans back and places his left arm on his bent left knee in a relaxed posture, opening up his body towards the dancers in front of him, who create the focus of the scene. The dancing women, positioned directly in front of Polier, have delicate, feminine features and are beautifully and richly attired. Though dancing, the movements of all three dancing women, and especially of the one woman standing right in front of Polier, oddly appear to be more or less static.<sup>1</sup>

### *Function of the object in the context of its production*

Excluded from the military hierarchies of the British East India Company because of his Swiss, hence foreign, birth, Polier needed to find a different way to social recognition and wealth. His interest in Indian culture, especially Indian manuscripts and miniatures, wove Polier into an elite group of Europeans in India, connecting him with men like Warren Hastings and Sir William Jones. For Polier, collecting and connoisseurship became an alternate way up in India's European and noble society.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ashok Malhotra, *Making British Indian Fictions, 1772-1823* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 163.

<sup>2</sup> Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire. Conquest and Collecting in the East, 1750-1850* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), 71; Malhotra, *Making British Indian Fictions*, 36.

As a collector and patron, he was not only acting out the role of the European *savant*, moreover the role of a Mughal nobleman, too. Collecting and patronizing Indian art was a sport of princes in Mughal India and Polier cemented his status in Lakhnau by indulging in it. From the moment Polier left the Company's service in 1773, he lodged his interests and affection in Mughal India. He worked for Indian rulers and adapted the manner of the Mughal elite's way of life: he started an Indo-Persian family, acquired a title and real estate.<sup>3</sup> By having a watercolour portraying him in a Mughal manner, Polier was able to underline his new status in India and the gentility he had gained through his social investments. The watercolour therefore serves well as a tool for self-fashioning, showing the European *savant* Polier in a Mughal nobleman's place, indulging in a Mughal nobleman's activities: attending a *Nautch*, a certain Indian type of dance.

#### *Provenance and history of Collection in Switzerland*

Northern India c. 1785; Collection William and Mildred Archer; fine art trade London, Christie's, 2005; Museum Rietberg, Zurich, since 2005.

Currently the watercolour is owned by the Museum Rietberg in Zurich. The museum acquired the painting in 2005 from the auction house Christie's, London, former owner of the watercolour. Before that, the watercolour belonged to the collection of William and Mildred Archer, art historians and writers, who themselves have lived in India from 1932-1946. In relation to Polier's letters, one can assume that the watercolour was inspired by a lost oil painting of Johan Zoffany in northern India around 1785.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Personal analysis*

With several European artists spending some years in India, like Johan Zoffany, the so-called *Lucknow style* emerged across the arts.<sup>5</sup> I would like to argue, that the hybridity, that this style exemplifies, resembles very much the hybrid character Polier established during his time in

---

<sup>3</sup> Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire*, 71.

<sup>4</sup> "Sale 7074. Arts of India, Lot 47," Christie's, accessed February 27, 2019, <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot/lucknow-school-circa-1785-possibly-after-a-4572609-details.aspx?from=salesummery&intObjectID=4572609&sid=2da48eba-ecf9-4946-8b54-472b2a37401d>.

<sup>5</sup> Natasha Eaton, "Nostalgia for the Exotic," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 231, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/191072/pdf>, Malhotra, *Making British Indian Fictions*, 36.

India. During Polier's time European artists influenced local Indian painters and vice versa. In a painting like this watercolour, European and Indian elements are fused.<sup>6</sup>

The central perspective in the painting is usually not constructed in Indian miniatures. Three-dimensional space, modelled with shadow, particularly visible in the women's clothing's folds and people's faces, is in general very uncommon in Indian paintings. Both stylistic criteria are more likely to be found in contemporary Western art at that time. The painting's composition is an interesting mixture of Indian and European style. While usually in pictures displaying a Moghul, the nobleman does not touch other people, rather he appears being isolated in his own pictorial space. On the one hand, in Polier's painting, his feet intersect with the dancing woman's clothes. On the other hand, a certain distance between him and the other persons remains. He still seems to be singled out, maybe in an attempt to emphasize his character, while not being in the centre of composition. Other elements, like the pavilion architecture framing the scene at the upper edging, finest brushwork in hairs and clothing's patterns, and gold-coloured parts like Polier's jacket are typical stylistic elements of Indian miniature painting in this watercolour. With the prominently displayed water pipe, placed to Polier's left in the picture's lower right edge, the painting also contains established iconography of Mughal court tradition.<sup>7</sup>

In this painting, Colonel Polier presents himself as a European that has fully adapted the Mughal nobleman's way of life. After having left the Company's service, Polier still was associated with English society in India and studied Indian culture, as well as Indian and Persian script, language and literature from a European's point of view. But on the other hand, he himself became part of Indian and Mughal daily life. He married two Indian women and had three children with them. He transferred into the service of the Mughal Emperor Shah 'Alam II, who granted Polier with real estate and a title, *Arsalan-i Jang*, meaning "Lion of Battle". Polier therefore himself became part of the subject he studied.<sup>8</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The hybridity of his character – being a Western foreigner as well as an Indian local, subject as well as object of his studies – is mirrored in the hybrid character of his portrait. Western stylistic elements are combined with Indian ones, and through this mix a new style with its

---

<sup>6</sup> Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire*, 57; Malhotra, *Making British Indian Fictions*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Malhotra, *Making British Indian Fictions*, 21, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire*, 68.

own characteristics emerges.<sup>9</sup> And Polier himself is a character of a newly emerging kind of people: European *savants* adopting an Indian style of life.<sup>10</sup> While in European countries, those people themselves began to appear exotic and extraordinary, in India, their way of life became part of ordinary daily life for European and Indian people.

---

<sup>9</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts* (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), 108, on the notion of “Hybridity”.

<sup>10</sup> Malhotra, *Making British Indian Fictions*, 254.