



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Willcock, Sean (2017) Composing the spectacle: colonial portraiture and the Coronation Durbars of British India, 1877-1911'. *Art History* 40 (1), pp. 132-155. ISSN 0141-6790.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/27502/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

## **Composing the Spectacle:**

### **Colonial Portraiture and the Coronation Durbars of British India, 1877-1911**

*Sean Willcock*

#### **Introduction**

What does it mean for the aesthetics of a political regime to fail?

This is the question posed by the vast 27-foot-long oil painting that Valentine Cameron Prinsep (1838-1904) produced in official commemoration of the spectacular ‘Imperial

Assemblage’ ceremony held in Delhi on 1 January 1877 (*plate*

*1*). On the dais, cloaked in rippling blue velvet with an ermine tippet, is the Viceroy of India, Earl Edward Robert Bulwer-

Lytton, his arm outstretched towards the stolid figure of Major Barnes, who comes bearing the scroll that gave rise to the

fanfare that surrounds them: a proclamation heralding Queen

Victoria’s assumption of a new title, ‘Empress of India,’ or

*Kaisar-i-hind*.<sup>1</sup> The portraits of numerous South Asian rulers

line the surrounding amphitheatre, many taken from studies

produced by Prinsep during his year travelling through the so-

called ‘princely states.’ Such was the size of this unprecedented

imperial group portrait that it occupied an entire wall at the

Royal Academy exhibition of 1880, but perceptions that it did

not fit there either spatially or artistically permeated the reviews.

For one critic, the work ‘suffers terribly from its discordancy with everything in the exhibition, while it ruins the effects of every other picture, not only in its vicinity, but while the glare of its colouring haunts the vitiated eye.’<sup>ii</sup> It seemed to launch an aggressive ocular assault against the show’s visitors: ‘its high colour shrieks at us in other rooms,’ leaving ‘the eye dazzled and the sense confounded.’<sup>iii</sup>

This article argues that the tumultuous chromatics of Prinsep’s *The Imperial Assemblage held at Delhi, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1877* registered as a crisis of imperial governance for Victorian viewers, disrupting the sober visual strategies that had emerged in British portraiture to secure social cohesion. A similar interpretation of the unruly significance of Prinsep’s aesthetic failure at the Royal Academy was offered by a contemporary American critic, who mused on whether the garishness of the artist’s painting was actually a form of Indian retribution against the British for the subcontinent being coerced into financing the production of this work as a ‘gift’ for the new empress. ‘Is it possible,’ asked the *New York Times*, ‘that the inhabitants of India resented this political move, and have begun their stealthy revenge upon England’s Queen by undermining her health with this terrible picture?’<sup>iv</sup> The political antagonisms of the Raj were thus posited, albeit jestingly, as the cause of an injurious visual disharmony in Prinsep’s work.

Droll criticism aside, there was a sense in contemporary British aesthetic discourse that the (dis)unity of a polity could be expressed through the formal properties of the arts. In a recent book on Victorian political imagery, Janice Carlisle has shown how political discourse was often influenced by aesthetic concepts,<sup>v</sup> and that, for famous art critics like John Ruskin, aesthetic properties were imbued with political resonances, with composition being ‘an exhibition, in order of the notes, or colours, or forms, of the advantage of perfect fellowship, discipline, and contentment.’<sup>vi</sup> It follows, then, that compositional *disorder* could imply political disorder, and I suggest that the disorientating colour scheme of Prinsep’s ‘kaleidoscopic combinations’ should indeed be read in such terms.<sup>vii</sup> The painting’s unwieldy grouping of ruling-class figures represented a wider, entangled set of political and aesthetic problematics in British India. It inadvertently signalled the acute antagonisms inherent to the aestheticised power structures of the late-Victorian Raj, gesturing towards the very social fissures that the elaborately controlled spectacle of the Imperial Assemblage had sought to overlay.

Numerous historians have assessed the significance of the Imperial Assemblage and the ‘ornamentalist,’<sup>viii</sup> ‘ritualised,’<sup>ix</sup> and ‘participatory’<sup>x</sup> methods of spectacular colonial governance that it instantiated. The 1877 event was the first of three grand ‘durbars’ that married aspects of Mughal Indian ceremony with

the visual thematics of the High Victorian medieval revival, and which were held in Delhi to formalise the coronations of successive British monarchs as emperors or empresses of India (the latter two taking place in 1903 for Edward VII and in 1911 for George V). These events embodied the imperial structure that had emerged in the aftermath of the 1857 Indian Uprising, termed the ‘Mutiny’ by many Britons at the time but framed as the First War of Indian Independence by a range of contemporary and future observers.<sup>xi</sup> In the tail end of the brutal British counterinsurgency campaign that quelled the 1857 rebellion, power in India had officially been transferred from the English East India Company – whose legitimacy as a governing entity had been lost, and lost violently – to the British Crown. Indian royals were consequently promised some security from future conquest in return for recognising the ‘paramountcy’ of this new British Raj. One of numerous ‘invented traditions’ of the Victorian era, the post-1857 imperial framework saw the establishment not only of an honours system, the Order of the Star of India, but also of elaborate feudal-inspired protocols, whereby maharajas were accorded between nine and twenty-one gun salutes according to their prestige in the eyes of the British.<sup>xii</sup> The Bengal civil servant Robert Taylor was even charged with designing medieval-styled coats-of-arms for the Indian ‘princely’ states, thus binding a congeries of kingdoms together with shared forms of invented imagery.<sup>xiii</sup>

The legitimacy of the Raj was increasingly tied to the success of this carefully managed image-regime. While clearly casting an eye back to feudal forms of statecraft, the spectacles of 1877, 1903 and 1911 also anticipated ‘the mass political rallies of European totalitarianism and the aestheticisation of politics in the modern world.’<sup>xiv</sup> But such a visual turn was not without problems for the British. A recent collection of essays about the role played by photography in these imperial durbars has uncovered myriad elements of Indian resistance or ideological tension within the photographic archive; broadly, the essays locate the intersections between these events and a rising tide of anti-colonial feeling, tracing a narrative in which maharajas symbolically ‘decolonised’ their bodies.<sup>xv</sup> The 1877 Assemblage has thus been cast in relative terms as less visually problematic for the British because less troubled by Indian resistance than the subsequent durbars (perhaps partly because of this it receives by far the least attention in the book). Prinsep’s work is mentioned only in passing, and yet, as I will argue, it is precisely here that the aesthetic fabric of the post-1857 regime of spectacle was first seen to fray.

Born in Calcutta, Prinsep had a family history on the subcontinent, but his training and career took place for the most part in Europe, seeing him active in Pre-Raphaelitism and the Holland Park Circle (even if he was always a peripheral figure within such groups).<sup>xvi</sup> The oil portrait studies, immense history

painting, and published account that Prinsep produced as a result of his year in India have gone virtually unstudied, but they represent one of the most expansive and prestigious commissions ever issued to a painter by the colonial government.<sup>xvii</sup> This article first explores the context for this commission, situating the painting within the matrix of artistic strategies that had historically been mobilised by the British to project an image of their Indian empire as a legitimate political construct undergirded by treaties and diplomatic ties as much as by unilateral conquest. It then examines Prinsep's encounters with Indian royals, theorising portrait sittings as zones of discrepant sovereignties in which coercive colonial demands clashed with the countervailing agency of maharajas, whose qualified acquiescence to imperial diktat is attested to by Prinsep's many abandoned canvases.

The argument can be rehearsed as follows. When, at the Royal Academy Exhibition in 1880, Prinsep's motley assembly of British and Indian figures staged their unruly visual assault on the eyes of critics, an uncomfortable political point was made. The aesthetic discord of the painting flew in the face of the visual grammar that had been established in Victorian Britain to picture stable forms of governance. And with imperial power in India increasingly exercised within, and legible through, the logic of the *spectacle* – whereby the social relationships of the

Raj were mediated by a carefully orchestrated regime of images, a visual turn that can be traced back to the Anglo-Indian ruptures of the 1857 Uprising – aesthetic turbulence of this sort was no small matter. In fact, the representational difficulties that beset Prinsep in his attempt to situate diverse Indian rulers comprehensibly within an overarching framework of imperial sovereignty registered a wider British inability to envision (and perhaps even administer) the multi-racial Raj as a viable political entity.

### **Diplomatic Portraits of Empire**

Two men greet one another with gestures of civility, and in doing so symbolise a historical shift in power relations before a diverse crowd of onlookers, whose witnessing works to ratify the new dynamic. These are the broad thematics of Prinsep's luminous and imposing canvas, now displayed in the State Apartments at St. James's Palace in London, but the basic contours of this diplomatic *mise-en-scène* were laid down over a century before the artist came to paint *The Imperial Assemblage held at Delhi*.

The sublimation of colonialism's violence into tropes of genteel resolution was a core element of the visual narratives which had developed about British power in India in the eighteenth century, when the English East India Company was first starting to flex its imperial muscle in earnest. A prototype

for Viceroy Lytton's forward tilting, open-palmed pose in Prinsep's *The Imperial Assemblage* can be found in the history painting which Francis Hayman (1708-1776) produced in response to the celebrated British victory at Plassey in Bengal in 1757, and was exhibited in London's Vauxhall Gardens during the early 1760s. While the finished, large-scale version of Hayman's painting has since been lost, the National Portrait Gallery holds an oil-on-canvas design (*plate 2*) for the scene that centres on an avuncular British soldier engaging civilly with an Indian commander in the aftermath of battle. On the left is Robert Clive, the man credited with the East India Company's pivotal triumph; on the right is Mir Jafar, an Indian general who had agreed in treaty with Clive to betray the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-daula, by moving troops away from the battlefield in return for the East India Company anointing him, Jafar, as nawab following Siraj-ud-daula's defeat. This coup placed the British in a position of unprecedented control over the new nawab, and paved the way for the extension of colonial influence across the subcontinent. For eighteenth-century audiences, the achievement was framed in terms of Clive's diplomatic, rather than military, skill.

Prinsep's *The Imperial Assemblage at Delhi* was thus situated within a century-old genre of colonial history painting that was predicated on a sort of diplomatic fetishism, with the architecture of empire seen not as a deadly relationship among

warring bodies, but as an abstractly legal relationship among treaties. In Hayman's scene, the kindly pose of Clive works to position imperial warfare as a pretext for manly virtue.<sup>xviii</sup> While the artist makes an allusion to the flesh-and-blood realities of the Battle of Plassey via the inclusion of the corpse of an Indian soldier in the bottom right-hand corner of the painting, this nod to violence is marginalised within a composition that privileges the friendly encounter of Clive and Jafar. The central protagonists mirror one another's civil gestures, and it is from within this locus of Anglo-Indian accord that the British flag is raised over Indian terrain.<sup>xix</sup> Later artists took their cue from Hayman, and the violence of imperialism continued to be put under erasure in eighteenth-century art with reference to supposedly palliative episodes of genial diplomatic encounters.<sup>xx</sup>

This cannot be attributed wholly to bad faith. In a very real sense, it was a complex web of political treaties, rounds of formal and informal negotiation, and circuits of political ceremony that sustained the British presence in India. Significantly, though, Prinsep's scene differs from its eighteenth-century progenitors in that it removes Indian participation from the central action: all maharajas are consigned to the role of passive spectators of British supremacy here. However, while passive acceptance of British power reigns at the level of representational content, the very existence of

Prinsep's populous scene was intended by the British to symbolise a more active Indian embrace of Victoria's imperial status. Unlike previous history paintings of colonial events, this one was ostensibly a gift to the queen from the Indian subjects whose portraits populate the background of the image.

The names of the thirty-eight Indian states that 'subscribed' to the painting are listed on the frame.<sup>xxi</sup> While these included both British- and Indian-run territories, the viceroy had engineered the commission to appear as if it was specifically the Indian rulers who had spontaneously proposed it as a commemorative offering.<sup>xxii</sup> Prior to the Assemblage in Delhi, a circular had been sent round to Indian royalty inviting subscriptions to the painting; and while the response appears to have been muted at best,<sup>xxiii</sup> Lytton nevertheless wrote to the queen claiming that her subjects were very anxious to present her with 'a pictorial record of the event.'<sup>xxiv</sup> The Imperial Assemblage was Lytton's brainchild, and he was therefore especially concerned that his turn to pomp ran smoothly, and that it was perceived as having a harmonising effect on official Anglo-Indian relations. Since the maharajas involved in the Assemblage were due to receive a medallion engraved with Victoria's image during the ceremony itself, the proposed group portrait functioned to imbue the proceedings with a diplomatic sense of reciprocity.

Such coercive artistic exchange was not new. Art – and in particular portraiture – had been active in episodes of diplomacy almost from the inception of Anglo-Indian relations. The sixteenth-century Mughal Emperor Akbar and his successor Jahangir had both received British envoys that used artworks as gifts.<sup>xxv</sup> In the 1760s, the British governor of Madras had arranged for King George III to gift a portrait of himself to the Nawab of Arcot, Muhammad Ali, who in turn sent back his own portrait by Tilly Kettle (1735-1786), an expatriate English artist.<sup>xxvi</sup> In a series of articles on early colonial portraiture, Natasha Eaton has described how the first Governor-General of Bengal, Warren Hastings, tried to conventionalise this practice of exchange in the 1770s and 80s, frequently gifting his own portrait and aggressively pressing European painters on Indian rulers (who, by and large, otherwise showed no enthusiasm for patronising western art).<sup>xxvii</sup>

Those maharajas who were required to ceremoniously receive and then reluctantly gift portraits during the Imperial Assemblage were therefore partaking in a historically resonant act of imperial cultural hegemony. The Mughal-derived *darbar* ceremony that the Imperial Assemblage later appropriated and adapted for British purposes was a ritual of ‘incorporation’ in which the person being admitted into the presence of the ruler was required to offer *nazar* (gold coins) and/or *peshkash* (valuables) in return for *khilats* (specific kinds of clothes that

could also include other signifiers of authority such as animals or jewels). Offering *nazar* or *peshkash* represented an acknowledgement that the ruler was a source of wealth and wellbeing; receiving *khilat* symbolised the incorporation of the recipient into the body of the Indian sovereign, and thus into the body politic.<sup>xxviii</sup> Yet it was the economic value of *nazar*, *peshkash*, and *khilat* that loomed large in the British mind, with such rituals of symbolic exchange being seen merely as opportunities for bribery and extortion.<sup>xxix</sup> The portrait's entry into this Indian custom was used by the British to ensure fiscal probity.<sup>xxx</sup>

The Indian rulers on whom the portrait-gift was first imposed remained conspicuously hostile to the new hybrid practice. On occasion, the portraits that were received were given away contemptuously, and even those that were kept were sometimes hung upside down and allowed to rot.<sup>xxxi</sup> Acts of subversion such as this are unsurprising considering the scale of the usurpation that the portrait-gift had attempted to effect. The entire Mughal framework of reciprocity was being dismantled, with the East India Company expecting Indian rulers to patronise European portraitists only to then gift the resulting work back to the Company. Increasingly, Indian rulers would not even receive a portrait in return. A Mughal ritual of exchange had been transformed into a sort of tribute offered to the colonial British – an asymmetry that was revived in earnest

for the image-based diplomacy of the 1877 Imperial Assemblage.<sup>xxxii</sup>

By the Victorian period, however, there is evidence to suggest that portrait exchange had also gained currency in independent networks of South Asian kingship. During his time in India following the 1857 Uprising, the artist and newspaper correspondent William Simpson (1823-1899) accompanied Viceroy Charles Canning on a tour of the subcontinent that was aimed at consolidating British power through a series of durbars. Simpson had made a name for himself covering the Crimean War for the *Illustrated London News*; he was thus of particular use to the viceroy, who was very keen that the diplomatic ceremonies being staged in India be seen in the pages of that newspaper, presumably to redefine the narrative of British rule following two years in which journalistic accounts had been dominated by violent scenes from the recent rebellion. Palliative diplomatic spectacle was the official order of the day.

According to Simpson, the Indian royals who were visited by the viceroy kept artists in their employ whose ‘principal work is to take portraits, often doing their master’s portrait to send to other rajahs, and doing rajahs and chiefs for their employer’s collection.’ Thus when, in 1860, the Maharajah of Kashmir, Ranbir Singh, was asked by Canning to sit for a portrait with Simpson during one of the viceregal durbars that would soon grace the pages of the *Illustrated London News* (plate 3), the

ruler was able to ambush the British with a reciprocal request, suddenly admitting that he had his own artist in the durbar tent ‘enduring under very strange conditions’ to obtain a likeness of the viceroy: he was ‘concealed...under a kind of sofa, which had been placed as nearly opposite Lord Canning’s seat as it was possible.’<sup>xxxiii</sup> This act of diplomatic subterfuge functioned to incorporate an unwitting viceroy into an image-regime that was organised under the (covert) regal agency of the maharaja; at the same time, it situated within an economy of reciprocal exchange any portrait that the colonial artist Simpson might produce.

The scene of Simpson’s that ended up in the *Illustrated London News* did not admit this reciprocity, but showed the viceroy receiving a Kashmiri shawl from Singh in an act of what the newspaper article termed ‘tribute’ (just one item among the horses, tents, beds, arms, and furs that were reportedly offered to Canning by the maharaja). Yet a certain equality of status was nevertheless enforced in the encounter itself, even if it was denied in the official visual documentation. Essentially, the maharaja’s revelation of his hidden portraitist also served to reveal his awareness that the portrait being requested by the British viceroy was not simply innocent; rather, it was a manoeuvre that was enmeshed in the power plays, variously clandestine and conspicuous, of diplomacy. In the spectacular mode of imperial governance that had come to hold sway in the

aftermath of the Uprising's violence, control over images was an important function of sovereignty – and the maharaja knew it.

It is against this historical backdrop of overlapping British and South Asian circuits of portrait production and exchange that Prinsep's *The Imperial Assemblage in Delhi* should be viewed. The model of image-based diplomacy for which Prinsep was made an ambassador would not have appeared altogether new to Indian rulers at the 1877 Imperial Assemblage, but its particular valences were open to change depending on how those rulers responded to the demands of the portrait sitting. At least some of the Indian rulers would seek to redefine the significance of the imperial proceedings, orchestrating the processes of image production in such a way as to highlight their countervailing sovereign agency.

### **Gaps in the Paint**

Prinsep used watercolour to sketch some of the less powerful maharajas in India, but the majority of Indian rulers sat for full-length oil portraits with the artist in their own kingdoms in the months following the coronation durbar. All of these portraits are of similar dimensions (around 100cm by 80cm, or 39" by 31") and are now held in the Victoria Memorial Museum, Kolkata, having been acquired from the Governing Committee of the Bengal Club in February 1936.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Each figure is shown seated, with the exception of the young son of the Maharaja of

Kashmir (*plate 4*), who stands in profile and can be seen as such behind Lytton in *The Imperial Assemblage Held at Delhi*. In various states of incompleteness, these are unloved canvases in which blank background (*plate 5*), unworked undercoating (*plate 6*), and cracked and fading paint (*plate 7*) attest to a history of tensions, indifference and neglect.

How should we think about such gaps in the paint? It is not sufficient to attribute the abandoned nature of these works to the fact that they were executed as studies for a larger, prioritised history painting. For one thing, Prinsep's portrait of the Maharana of Oodeypore (Udaipur), Sajjan Singh (*plate 8*), goes to the trouble of painting a wallpaper-patterned background that would have been of no use to *The Imperial Assemblage held at Delhi*, implying that the artist at one point had hopes of completing stand-alone representations of these figures. But more than this, the level of finish in the studies does not relate neatly to the prominence of the Indian rulers in the final scene. In the portrait of the young Rana of Dholpur, Nihal Singh (*plate 9*), for example, the shades of cream, highlights of white and strips of gold on his bejewelled clothes have been treated with considerable painterly attention and care in comparison to the flat-toned undercoating on the Maharaja of Mysore, Chamaraja Wodeyar IX (see *plate 5*). Yet in Prinsep's finished scene it is this latter (significantly more politically powerful) figure whose costume is most conspicuous, while the former fades into the

shadows, blocked anyway by the heads of other rulers (*plate 10*).

One thing that the gaps in the paint of these portraits does attest to is the consistently beleaguered conditions in which Prinsep found himself operating in India. In the painter's illustrated narrative of his travels, *Imperial India: An Artist's Journals, Illustrated by numerous sketches taken at the courts of the principal chiefs in India* (1879), an affected tone of bonhomie frequently gives way to moments of anger and anxiety in his attempts to deal with native royalty.<sup>xxxv</sup> He was on the front line of the British campaign to convey India's subordination: it was often left to him to deliver the message that the portrait sittings for which maharajas were paying were a 'gift' to Victoria, and not something which the rulers themselves could one day hope to see the results of. Sittings were consequently fraught and fluid zones in which the dynamic of Anglo-Indian relations was renegotiated and re-performed. The artist was interrogated by subjects such as the Maharaja of Bhurtpore, who 'bothered me a great deal to know what the [colonial] Government are going to give him for sitting, whether he is to have a copy (great Heavens!) of the picture, or an engraving.' It is 'rather hard,' Prinsep complained, 'that I should have to explain to them that they get nothing for their money.'<sup>xxxvi</sup>

It was not only the maharajas whose expectations of treatment were readjusted in these sittings. A key motif of Prinsep's narrative is his sense of pride in his status as an artist coming into conflict with the severely curtailed conditions under which Indian royals permitted him to operate. Lytton had initially thought that Prinsep could gather all of the necessary portraits in the brief time that everyone was on formally *British*-run territory in Delhi for the Assemblage; yet while a number of maharajas – in particular those from the more remote or inaccessible regions of the subcontinent – were sketched or painted by Prinsep in a flurry of activity in those few days, the sheer number of sitters meant that the artist's work sprawled beyond both the durbar and the boundaries of explicitly colonial terrain. So, from the perspective of the Indian royals in whose kingdoms Prinsep found himself over the course of the following year, the portrait sitting functioned as a sort of reinscription of their subordinate status *vis-à-vis* an imperial suzerain. And while Prinsep might have dismissed as 'children' the rulers who viewed him with 'suspicion' on the basis of his role as an 'accredited painter to the Government,' his own hunting-based analogies cast his practice as a site of antagonism.<sup>xxxvii</sup> His mission was 'to track the rajah to his lair, and there "fix" him,'<sup>xxxviii</sup> while his first sitter was described as his 'first victim.'<sup>xxxix</sup>

Still, Prinsep might play the predator, but his reliance on the hospitality and cooperation of Indian rulers opened up a space for maharajas to use portrait sittings to assert countervailing narratives of native sovereignty, taking advantage of the autonomy they enjoyed within their own kingdoms to complicate attempts to take their likeness. Given Prinsep's rather dim and patronising view of the Indian character, it is unsurprising that maharajas appear to have gone out of their way to thwart the artist. Following the sittings, Prinsep was repeatedly required to put touches on his portraits in cramped spaces 'singularly unfit for painting-rooms' ('what room in India is suitable for a studio?' bemoaned the comically beleaguered artist<sup>xl</sup>), and was sometimes even left with nothing other than his own hot travelling tent,<sup>xli</sup> miles from where he was having his sittings ('painting in a tent in this climate with a shining and blazing sun is next to impossible').<sup>xlii</sup> The artist's woeful published narrative of his troubles can in some respects be seen as pre-empting criticism of his final painting by pointing to such difficult conditions of production.

The assault which some maharajas launched against the space of image facture must have been particularly galling for a painter such as Prinsep, whose investment in the notion of the studio as a privileged environment over which he held authorial sway was demonstrated by his inclusion in Frank Dudman's series of photographs of artists in their studios in the 1880s

(*plate 11*). Here, he sits authoritatively in the centre of a capacious and sumptuous room filled with dozens of paintings, his gaze fixed on the viewer and his palette and brushes held in prominent view. Ironically, the artist had commissioned the luxurious room in which we see him here immediately prior to travelling to the decidedly less propitious spaces of India, having agreed to pay the architect Philip Webb up to £850 to make the necessary alterations to his house.<sup>xliii</sup>

Yet Prinsep's authorial privilege was undermined in India even before the rulers consigned him to insulting studio environments. The artist tended not to find willing sitters, and had to negotiate continuously with the hostility or indifference of maharajas towards the mere prospect of a portrait sitting with him. In a typical lamentation, Prinsep complained that 'the Rajah is late again, later than ever[...]. Confound all Rajahs! – Ah! here he comes! I must smile and be happy, with black rage at my heart.'<sup>xliv</sup> On one occasion, the artist was kept waiting for days for a sitting that was ultimately cancelled altogether.<sup>xlv</sup> Prinsep interpreted such tardiness through his pre-conceived and racist notions of Indian ineptitude, claiming that the rulers had 'no more idea of time than sitting hens.'<sup>xlvi</sup> But it is interesting to note that a common motif of Mughal paintings of royalty had once been an hourglass indicating control of time, and thus while Prinsep's European aesthetic conventions meant that signifiers of this sort were unavailable to the maharajas in their

*portraits*, the temporal mastery of an Indian sovereign could nonetheless be asserted through calculated belatedness in regards to the *portrait sittings*.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Gaps in the paint of Prinsep's portraits therefore indexed fissures in Anglo-Indian relations. The state of finish was inextricably tied up with the difficulties that assailed Prinsep in India, with rulers hampering the portrait sitting in order to inscribe the rather supercilious artist's practice with a sense of Indian independence. As a rule, then, the most incomplete portraits stand as testament to the assertion of a disruptive Indian agency. Prinsep's least finished painting was of his 'worst sitter,' the Maharaja of Gwalior, Jayajirao Scindia (*plate 12*), who also happened to be one of the most powerful. Scindia had sided with the British during the Uprising and by all accounts seemed more or less content with his situation under British rule; yet for all that, his deference had its limits. As Prinsep reported after the Imperial Assemblage, '[Scindia] had behaved very badly the day before to the Viceroy, who made him Chancellor of the Empire, an English general, and gave him the title of Sword of the Empire, and twenty-one guns [in salute]; for all which Master Sindia forgot to say "thank you."<sup>xlviii</sup> Scindia's interaction with the British was therefore layered: on the one hand, he was a highly decorated model of militarily useful 'loyalty,' but on another, he rejected the sort of etiquette of respect that the British craved.

Such a rejection was made particularly manifest during Scindia's dealings with Prinsep, which were used by the maharaja to recuperate a sense of his autonomy while going along minimally with British demands. In Delhi during the Assemblage, Prinsep had had an appointment for a sitting with Scindia, but the maharaja never turned up. On another occasion, when the artist *did* manage to secure a sitting, Scindia left after only fifteen minutes, 'whereupon he invited me to Gwalior; and I shall have to go, bad luck to it!'<sup>xlix</sup> In Gwalior, though, the maharaja moved constantly during Prinsep's attempts to paint him, and said explicitly that if the British resident Sir Henry Daly had not personally asked him to do so, he 'wouldn't sit at all[...]*after all what is the use? I don't get anything by it.*'<sup>l</sup> The artist's practice was thus caught between the imperial authority of the resident and the local authority of the maharaja, with the portrait sitting becoming a stage for the latter's ambivalent display of deference to an imperial suzerain.

Prinsep was eventually compelled to end the session when it became 'impossible to keep him [Scindia] any longer,'<sup>li</sup> and even had difficulty acquiring a set of the recalcitrant maharaja's clothes from which to make independent studies (although the artist did ultimately manage to get some via Scindia's son).<sup>lii</sup> This clash over the maharaja's clothing was especially fraught. Previous accounts of the visual culture of the coronation durbars of 1877, 1903 and 1911 have tended to locate anti-colonial

feeling only in the portraits from the latter two events, since by that time Indian assertions of independence were finding visual expression in the attire that sitters were choosing to wear for their (photographic) portraits. As scholars such as Bernard S. Cohn and Joanna Waghorne have shown in depth, Indian dress was a heavily coded, historically resonant aspect of regional kingship.<sup>liii</sup> Yet while extravagantly bejewelled items had once been key to the self-fashioning of South Asian royalty, under the Raj these same items began to signify a lack of modernity to British eyes, and they consequently functioned to shore up imperial claims to supremacy. The British expected traditional dress to be worn at events like the coronation durbars, with the ornate Indian body increasingly functioning as ‘an imperial masquerade, whose assertions of wealth and dynastic privileges flaunted the lineage and traditions of Indian royals on the one hand, while cementing the currency of British imperial rule on the other.’<sup>liv</sup>

Scindia ultimately fell prey to this sartorial snare. His constant thwarting of Prinsep’s attempts to get a decent sitting obliged him in the end to ‘put on his jewels’ and sit instead for his amateur photographer son, Bulwant Singh.<sup>lv</sup> A photograph was therefore offered to the artist in lieu of the physical presence of the maharaja. Notably, by relocating the sitting in the realm of photography, the maharaja arrogated an amount of control over the conditions of his pose, keeping the image-

making event within the family, and mobilising a medium that was emblematic of the very modernity that the British sought to deny him by their stress on traditional dress. He was not the only ruler to do this: Prinsep was repeatedly given photographic portraits when he failed to capture likenesses during the sittings which were rationed to him, with the Maharaja of Jeypore (Jaipur) and the Maharaja of Dhār in particular making a point of their fluency with the practice.

The use of photography to explore alternative aesthetic trajectories for Indian royal identity is made tangible in a carte-de-visite portrait that Scindia had done in the 1870s by the popular colonial photography studio Bourne & Shepherd, in which the maharaja eschewed ornate attire in favour of simple white Maratha dress (*plate 13*). This hints at the growing divergence between the maharajas and the British with regard to the fashioning of kingly authority. The imperial investment in seeing elaborate ‘exotic’ costumes on Indian rulers meant that these costumes only had to be visually denied to the British in order to start disrupting colonial assumptions of rule. Julie Codell has shown that maharajas accordingly ‘decolonised their bodies’ in the 1903 and 1911 durbars by ‘wearing simpler, martial clothes [...] and assuming masculine postures’ in the official photographs.<sup>lvi</sup>

Unlike these later rulers, Scindia did not disrupt the official imagery of the Assemblage with his plain attire, but his

reluctance to be painted on Prinsep's terms meant that a commission based on a crude British notion of portrait-as-gift was reconstituted as a fluid image-making encounter in which an overarching framework of imperial hegemony harboured the countervailing assertion of South Asian sovereignty. Prinsep felt insulted by Scindia, writing that he 'does not know what is due to an artist who has come a hundred miles for a sitting.' Yet the maharaja was obviously not unfamiliar with the procedure: the room in which the sitting occurred was adorned with both Indian- and European-painted portraits of the ruler. Prinsep was unable to attribute Scindia's restless movement to ignorance of etiquette, and was forced instead to appreciate it as an undercurrent of self-asserting agency within the wider framework of feudal subordination that was symbolised by the ruler's acceptance of dressing up, sitting, and gifting. As another maharaja later told the artist, 'It was not sitting Scindia found so unpleasant, it was being obliged to sit.'<sup>lvii</sup> The image-making event itself thus opened up a space for a resistance that is perhaps not immediately apparent at the level of representational content, legible only through the gaps in the surface of the paint – indices of imperial failure to properly mobilise Indian rulers for this exercise in diplomatic spectacle.

## Composing Power

However hard Indian rulers like Scindia might have tried to hijack the significance of the portrait sittings, Prinsep was always going to have the last word. The high finish of the artist's *The Imperial Assemblage* served to paint over those cracks in colonial relations that had been registered by the interstices of the individual portraits. Yet I want to suggest that something of these maharajas' potential unruliness did smuggle itself into the vast and ill-fated rainbow-coloured canvas that Prinsep spent two years working on following his return to England in 1878. At the Royal Academy exhibition in 1880 there was a near-unanimous critical recoiling from a scene that functioned as 'an historical rememberancer [sic]', but which 'as a work of contemporary art...has nothing to commend it.'<sup>lviii</sup> Yet there was also sympathy to Prinsep for having been dealt such a 'thankless task.'<sup>lix</sup> It was noted that the 'tinselled ceremony' of the coronation durbar was itself 'a fiasco artistically,' meaning that there was little scope for 'art-treatment'.<sup>lx</sup> (Certainly, this was how Prinsep saw the matter. His reaction to the ceremony was unequivocal: 'Oh, horror! what have I to paint?') The voices of the art establishment, *The Art Journal* and *The Athenaeum*, were particularly sympathetic to Prinsep's plight. They offered the most (faint) praise – or at least the most tempered criticism – of what was a 'good picture in many

respects,' a critical sensitivity that was possibly due to Prinsep's personal popularity within establishment circles.<sup>lxi</sup>

Such was the size of Prinsep's painting that is difficult to find precedent for it, but judging from the similarity of the figures in the bottom-left corner of the scene and those in Frederic Leighton's *The Syracusan Bride* (plate 14), it seems that Prinsep had his neighbour and friend Leighton's work in mind – a work which was noted for its scale by critics when it was displayed in 1866, but was still only half the size of *The Imperial Assemblage*. Generally speaking, it was classical subject matter of the sort that Leighton's scene addressed that predominated in large paintings: another possible point of comparison for Prinsep's scene was Paolo Veronese's 15 feet-long *The Family of Darius before Alexander* (c.1567), which had been bought for the National Gallery in London in 1857 (but, again, was only around half the size of Prinsep's).<sup>lxii</sup> In terms of scale, then, Prinsep's scene laid claim to an illustrious classical pedigree for Britain's Raj. Yet if such connections were made, they were made silently; mostly, the critics responded to the painting in terms of its role as a group portrait – an 'intractable multitude' of Indian rulers, military men, British governors, wives and daughters.<sup>lxiii</sup> The notion that the congeries of figures did not make aesthetic sense permeated the reviews.

Recalling Ruskin's belief that good composition in the arts was bound up with 'the great laws of Divine government and human polity,' it seems significant that numerous critics located the compositional failings of Prinsep's scene precisely in the constitution of the Anglo-Indian polity that was represented at the Assemblage.<sup>lxiv</sup> Critics believed that 'by marshalling the many-tinted actors in his drama Mr. Prinsep has been compelled by the immutable exigencies of etiquette and precedence to violate a good many laws and ordinances governing the juxtaposition of tones, the distribution of light and shade, and the symmetries of composition.'<sup>lxv</sup> The political makeup of the Raj and its expression at the coronation durbar were therefore viewed as visually problematic.

For the *Illustrated London News*, aesthetic failure was basically inevitable given the political constitution of the subject matter:

how gaudy, under the Indian sun, *must* be this painted open-air pageant of rajahs, maharajahs, and British governors seated in one expansive semicircle (though not nearly so large as it in fact was), dressed in their gorgeous native or European costume, each backed by his banner given by the Queen, and each banner emblazoned with the grotesque and anachronistic heraldry of the British College of Arms.<sup>lxvi</sup>

Such an attack on the heraldry (which was made specially for the Assemblage) appears in numerous reviews and meant that even Britain's attempt to render the 'intractable multitude' visually comprehensible as a political network bound together by shared forms of imagery is seen to offer nothing more than further convolution. In other words, the entire aesthetics of empire – from the clashing variety of luminous costumes expected of the maharajas, to the heraldic backdrops that gave feudal contours to imperial relations, and the artistic status of Prinsep's history painting – all of this was seen to jar or to falter.

In part, such critical recoiling from the aesthetics of *The Imperial Assemblage* can be read as a marker of the ambivalence with which the British approached ostentatious ceremony *per se*. Britain's self-perception as a Protestant country of ascetic values defined against the supposed lavish despotism of Catholicism and the Orient meant that there was a distinct sense of unease about the fanfare-and-trumpets form of imperialism that began to emerge in this period. Tracy Anderson's work on the late-Victorian viceregal portrait has shown that representations of Viceroy Lytton around the time of the Assemblage consequently imbued him with a 'dual body' upon which the spectacular feudal mode of imperial rule existed in tension with more sober-minded civic ideals of progressive colonial governance, something that played out sartorially in an

interplay between (effete) ostentation and (manly) sobriety.<sup>lxvii</sup>

In commemorative photographs of Lytton such as Bourne & Shepherd's *Lord Lytton, Viceroy and Governor-General of India, Grand Master of the Star of India (plate 15)*, for instance, the ostentation of the attire is undercut by 'a sense of discomfort, a metaphorical nakedness of the imperial body beneath this would-be emperor's new clothes.'<sup>lxviii</sup>

Prinsep dramatised contemporary British anxieties over the imperial body becoming feminised due to the exigencies of ornate fashion in India by creating a shared palette of blue between Lytton's wife and daughter, the young Indian prince, and the viceroy himself (*plate 16*). This unmaning of Lytton was seemingly not lost on the reviewers of Prinsep's painting, who singled him out for particular criticism, while praising the masculine bearing of the blood-red figure of Barnes.<sup>lxix</sup> Visually, however, it is not the case that the viceroy's effete portrait fails to properly bear imperial authority where the imposing masculinity of the major succeeds. The gravitas of the entire encounter between these two men is rendered unstable by the pair of languid Indian servants in the bottom left-hand corner of the image, whose poses offer lackadaisical visual echoes of the gestures of both Lytton and Barnes. On the far-left, an outstretched arm draped indolently along the platform undercuts the solemnity of the viceroy's equivalent motion; on the right, the figure offers a slouched approximation of the major's

martial stance. This slippage between mimicry and mockery compromises both poles of imperial self-fashioning: extravagant pomp and staid masculinity both have their efficacy as signifiers of power challenged by these enervated reiterations in subaltern figures.<sup>lxx</sup>

The imperial entity envisioned by Prinsep was therefore politically and aesthetically unstable: the main colonial protagonists strike highly discrepant postures of power in front of a discordantly heterogeneous crowd. In showing British rule personified with such varied sartorial properties in the diversely-attired figures of Lytton and Barnes, Prinsep played on contemporary anxieties over fashions 're-tailoring identities.'<sup>lxxi</sup> But more than this, the lack of formal cohesion among the British ruling classes in India meant that the artist had exploded the visual grammar that had emerged in Victorian art to situate individuals within a politically stable collective. Mass group portraits of political events like this were rare, but the stress that critics placed on the tumultuous polychrome of the myriad sitters' costumes and the staccato iconography of the banners in the background positions *The Imperial Assemblage* in more or less antithetical relation to one of the few comparable paintings of the period.

George Hayter's immense group portrait of 375 Tory and Whig MPs and peers passing the Great Reform Act of 1832, *The House of Commons, 1833* (plate 17), approached similar

compositional difficulties to Prinsep in terms of collating numerous portrait studies of individual political figures into a visually comprehensible unit.<sup>lxxii</sup> Completed in 1843 and bought by the Tory party for the recently established National Portrait Gallery in 1858, Hayter's *The House of Commons* was consequently on public view when Prinsep came to paint his imperial group. Unlike Prinsep's work, however, Hayter's scene had been the subject of significant critical praise.<sup>lxxiii</sup> Rows of monotonously clad men recede into the chamber, framed by the uniformly plain brown panelling of the political architecture. The 'uncompromising sameness' of the 'heavy and dusky' clothes worn by these politicians might have been seen by both Hayter himself and the critic of the *Illustrated London News* as the source of artistic difficulty to be overcome, but the effect of this unvarying sartorial palette is that the partisan nature of these men can be visualised within a unified space.<sup>lxxiv</sup> What Hayter's scene managed to achieve was to situate the political agency of individual people and parties within a cohesive collective framework.

The aesthetics of politics in Victorian Britain were a thoroughly sober affair, in other words, and stood in marked contrast to the vibrancy of Indian attire. Interestingly, the deep brown of Hayter's Commons chamber, which does so much to contain the myriad figures within a coherent political space – and can also be seen performing a similar function in later

paintings of the chamber which was built following the 1843 fire – is a hue that also came to dominate the backdrop of the political portrait.<sup>lxxv</sup> The classical trappings of the sort of *mise-en-scène* associated with the grand manner of portraiture that had been popular in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries increasingly gave way to decontextualised monochromatic spaces in the Victorian era. In the 1840s, Prime Minister Robert Peel's instructions about portraits he had commissioned of his colleagues made clear the importance of modern dress and the absence of adornment.<sup>lxxvi</sup> This austere style was able to mediate between political polarities: when John Everett Millais came to paint William Gladstone (*plate 18*) and Benjamin Disraeli (*plate 19*) in the late 1870s and 1880s, he arranged these political opponents so that, when seen together, they could face one another as rivals. And yet these portraits are so similar in stance, dress and chromatics that such political antagonism takes place under a unifying horizon.<sup>lxxvii</sup> The monochromatic palette was therefore active in visualising adversarial parliamentary politics in terms of a wider cohesive system.

The politically stabilising effects of monochrome should be borne in mind when we read that Prinsep's polychromatic *The Imperial Assemblage* was so 'inartistic' because 'the gorgeous dresses of the Indian chiefs, placed against a

background of gaudy banners', amounted to 'kaleidoscopic combinations' – a metaphor of restless colour that refuses to be fixed, and one which occurs in more than one review.<sup>lxxviii</sup> Note particularly how dresses that are individually 'gorgeous' become offensive when seen as a group. The artistic appeal of lavishly ornamented Indian costumes to the British was well established by the Victorian period, thoroughly enmeshed in the 'picturesque' registers of colonial viewing that had developed in the eighteenth century, when Britons filtered what they saw in India through familiar frames – with the 'picturesque' locating aesthetic pleasure in such things as wildness, irregularity, contrasts, and ruins.<sup>lxxix</sup> The costume of a maharaja was not in itself artistically problematic; indeed, Prinsep even incorporates some of his individual Indian sitters into the sober backdrop prevalent in contemporary metropolitan portraits not just by Millais, but by the likes of G. F. Watts (1817-1904) and James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903). A mode of Indian dress that appeared 'medieval' to the colonial eye was, it seems, easily assimilated into the emerging portrait forms of Victorian modernity.

Yet when seen en masse and as part of an imperial polity, maharajas did begin to mount an aesthetic challenge to the British. To a Victorian audience for whom a staid style of portraiture secured a sense of cohesion among partisan individuals, the riotous colour of the Raj could speak to

dangerous political ferment. An account that sheds some light on the visual difficulties thrown up by the sheer colourful force of India's royal splendour was offered by another colonial artist at another coronation durbar, Mortimer Menpes at Edward VII's official proclamation as emperor in 1903. Menpes gave this description of watching the maharajas enter Delhi:

I feasted my eye on each elephant; I gloated over each magnificent combination and each harmony, the emerald greens, the carmines, the violets, the golds, and the vermilions; and the result was that, before I had passed more than half the glittering throng, my sense of colour was exhausted. I was satiated: I had seen too much. Then I realised that here in India, to avoid the danger of becoming colour-blind, one should nurse one's eyes, not stare and exhaust oneself in colour, but always keep some strength in reserve.<sup>lxxx</sup>

Such enervating ocular effects strikingly recall earlier comments made about Prinsep's painting ('the glare of its colouring haunts the vitiated eye'; 'the eye [is left] dazzled and the sense confounded'). Indeed, if one reads Menpes' 1903 account alongside of the 1880 reviews of *The Imperial Assemblage*, it seems that Prinsep was remarkably successful in reproducing

the violently disorientating visual impact of multiple maharajas on the colonial eye.

Exactly why was the sight of multiple maharajas so confounding for the British? For Menpes, this was partly a problem of representation, as the injurious chromatic overload of maharaja costume confronted him with the limits of his medium. Repeatedly, the artist's account swings from the visual excess of India to the stubborn materiality of painting:

I took out my paint-box and blushed. The folly of it, the absolute futility! Here I was standing before a scene which no artist save Turner should ever have attempted to paint, calmly unfolding a stupid little paint-box and squeezing out tubes of Reeves's water-colour, pigment which, compared with the glowing tones around me, looked like mud.<sup>lxxxix</sup>

In the face of this insufficiency, Menpes grasps around for representational practices that lay outside of the predominate techniques of the western artistic canon, something that might meet the challenge of conveying the 'blaze of colour' before him:

Rembrandt couldn't have painted this scene [...]. Then one felt the value of precious stones to work with, or

something very different from ordinary pigment. It must be painted in the jewel-like, gem-like manner, and bit by bit, facet by facet. To attempt to paint it in flowing watercolour were to reproduce a sunset in silhouette. The crowd was a mosaic, and the people were like living tapestry.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

Those technologies of vision traditionally familiar to the west are thus shown to be moribund in the Indian context. As Saloni Mathur has noted, the imagery that Menpes consequently produced articulated his anxiety about the epistemological status of his medium by adopting points of view that demonstrate ‘a unique self-awareness about the position of the viewer and its implication for knowledge,’ his scenes of the durbar tending to dwell more on the differential perspectives of the crowd than on the spectacle itself.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> No (failed) attempt is made, *a la* Prinsep, to convey the maharajas as a totality. They are glimpsed only in impressionistic flashes of colour.

My readings of Prinsep’s and Menpes’ artistic struggles indicate that, within the framework of colonial aesthetics, the colourful diversity of Indian rulers simply could not be seen as a coherent totality. This artistic failure was something that implicitly destabilised the political structures of the Raj, undergirded as those were at this time by the image-based logic of the spectacle. There is an unspoken aesthetic category that

haunts Menpes' visceral account of the 'blinding colour' of this royal Indian parade. His description of representational breakdown, belief in the injurious affective power of the scene ('like looking at the sun'), and contention that J. M. W Turner 'was the only man to paint this procession of native rulers,' all situates the Indian parade within the sphere of 'the sublime,' a concept that had once been key to British artistic discourse.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Turner's work has been widely recognised for its encapsulation of the effect of boundlessness that eighteenth-century philosophers had attributed to the sublime, the currency of which dealt in ineffable vastness and uncontrollable threat.<sup>lxxxv</sup> With notable exceptions, after around 1850 this aesthetic category had become marginal to mainstream British art; Menpes' relationship to the concept was therefore indirect, but the challenge that the sublime launched – 'to paint the unpaintable' – is clearly at work here for the artist, and frames the procession of Indian royals as a spectacle of power beyond colonial capture or control.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> The political difficulty of composing diverse rulers into a workable political unit is thus sublimated into the aesthetic problematic of the sublime.

## **Conclusion**

The myriad hues of an Indian crowd can be seen to constitute a sublime visual force for the British, one beyond the representational capacities of European aesthetics, and even

coded as injurious to the colonial eye. Although the British actively encouraged maharajas to wear ornate dress, the effect of this was to create scenes that could not be assimilated to the sober visual grammar that worked to picture a viable ruling class in Britain. True, the positioning of maharajas outside of such grammar functioned to deny them a form of political agency that was recognisable to the British (hence their increasing rejection of ostentation, as traced by Julie Codell, over the course of the coronation durbars). So too could talk of Indian rulers appearing as a fragmentary chromatic flux dovetail with imperial claims to legitimacy as a stable overlord pacifying inherently atomised and bellicose Indian kingdoms. At a visual level, however, British rule was not seen as stable or even coherent. The sartorial dislocation between the ostentatious Viceroy Lytton and the sober Major Barnes in Prinsep's painting mirrors the discontinuities between the maharajas, as the aesthetics of British power are split to meet the exigencies of an imperial rule that believed some splendour was necessary to carry authority in India, while at the same time fretting about no-frills manliness. A sense of political stability was necessarily lost in the process of translating the visuals of British power to the Indian context.

There could be no secure spectacle of imperial power for the British. The monochromatic visual idioms that characterised (and stabilised) the domestic political theatre of the age simply had no purchase in a Raj that was heterogeneously colourful,

diversely attired, and multi-racial. The post-1857 regime of spectacle in India therefore failed on its own terms; to the British eye, it was a chaotic and combustible-looking visual construct in which could be glimpsed the very limits of imperial authority over a region that was characterised above all by diversity and difference.

## **Notes**













---

<sup>i</sup> *Kaisar-i-Hind* was a title used to describe Victoria's status that maintained its imperial resonance across numerous languages: the Latin *Caesar*, the Hindi *Qaisar*, and the Urdu *Kaisar*.

<sup>ii</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 1 May 1880.

<sup>iii</sup> *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, 3 May 1880.

<sup>iv</sup> *New York Times*, 3 June 1880.

<sup>v</sup> Janice Carlisle, *Picturing Reform in Victorian Britain*, Cambridge, 2012, 33.

<sup>vi</sup> John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, London, 1857, 245.

<sup>vii</sup> *The Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald*, 18 May 1880.

<sup>viii</sup> See David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*, London 2002.

<sup>ix</sup> See Alan Trevithick, 'Some Structural and Sequential Aspects of the British Imperial Assemblages at Delhi: 1877-1911', *Modern Asian Studies*, 24: 3, July 1990, 561-578.

<sup>x</sup> See Jim Masselos, 'The Great Durbar Crowds: The Participant Audience', *Power and Resistance: The Delhi Coronation Durbars*, New Delhi, 2012, 177-203; and Pramod K. Nayar, 'Empire Communications, Inc.: Nineteenth-Century Imperial Pageantry and the Politics of Display', *Journal of Creative Communications*, 5: 2, July 2010, 75-87.

<sup>xi</sup> See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence, 1857-1859*, Moscow, 1959; and V. D. Savarkar, *The Indian War of Independence: National Rising of 1857*, London, 1909.

<sup>xii</sup> See Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India,' in Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983, 165-210.

---

<sup>xiii</sup> Robert Taylor, *The Princely Armory: Being a Display of the Arms of the Ruling Chiefs of India After Their Banners as Prepared for the Imperial Assemblage Held at Delhi on the First Day of January 1877*, Calcutta, 1877.

<sup>xiv</sup> Julie F. Codell, 'Photography and the Delhi Durbars: 1877, 1903, 1911', in Julie F. Codell (ed.), *Power and Resistance: The Delhi Coronation Durbars* (New Delhi: Mapin Publishing in association with the Alkazi Collection of Photography, 2012)

<sup>xv</sup> See Julie F. Codell, 'Photographic Interventions and Identities: Colonising and Decolonising the Royal Body', in Codell, ed, *Power and Resistance*.

<sup>xvi</sup> See Caroline Dakers, *The Holland Park Circle: Artists and Victorian Society*, New Haven and London, 1999; and Jan Marsh, *The Pre-Raphaelite Circle*, London, 2005.

<sup>xvii</sup> It was thought by Luke Fildes that Prinsep would be knighted for his efforts. Dakers, *The Holland Park Circle*, 207.

<sup>xviii</sup> The violent historical moment is deposited into a visual scheme that locates a classical pedigree for British power, recalling, as Romita Ray has written, Charles Le Brun's well-known scene of Alexander the Great displaying post-conflict magnanimity, *Alexander before the Tent of Darius* (1660-1661). See Romita Ray, 'Baron of Bengal: Robert Clive and the Birth of an Imperial Image,' in Julie Codell, ed, *Transculturation in British Art, 1770-1930*, Aldershot, 2012, 24.

<sup>xix</sup> A fulcrum of civility was a common compositional feature of Britain's imperial self-representations. A hundred years after Francis Hayman's founding scene of British India, Thomas Barker Jones's 1859 painting *The Relief of Lucknow, 1857* (now held in the National Portrait Gallery in London) showed an episode from the Indian Uprising in which the leader of a British relief force, Field-Marshal Sir Colin Campbell, greeted the beleaguered Lieutenant-General Sir James Outram outside of the besieged Residency complex in Lucknow. The men calmly shake hands amid the

---

maelstrom of Anglo-Indian fighting, and the further one pans out from this central display of imperial phlegm, the more chaotic and injurious the scene becomes, as if this gentlemanly gesture possessed apotropaic qualities capable of keeping the surrounding violence at bay.

<sup>xx</sup> For instance, see Benjamin Wilson, *Mir Jafar and his son Miran delivering the Treaty of 1757 to William Watts* (1758); Benjamin West, *Shah 'Alam conveying the grant of the Diwani to Lord Clive* (1774); and Mather Brown, *The Delivery of the Definitive Treaty by the Hostage Princes* (1794).

<sup>xxi</sup> Working clockwise from the top left-hand side of the frame, these are as follows: Rajpootana, Tonk, Kerowlee, Jhallawur, Dholepore, Ulwur, Bhurtpore, Kisengurh, Boondee, Jodhpore, Jeypore, Oudeypore, Tanjore, Bombay, Bengal, Bewal, Bopal, Dorgha Dhar, Duwitta, Bumptur, Rutlum, Jowrah, Chirkaree, Puwna, Chuwterpor, Ajeyurh, Central India, Jkend, Bhawulpore, Indore, Gwalior, Cashmere, Hyderabad, Baroda, Mysore, Rampore, Nabha Sikh.

<sup>xxii</sup> 'Summary of Correspondence Respecting Mr. Prinsep's Picture of the Imperial Assemblage,' IOR DIEK 035/43, 1, India Office Records, British Library.

<sup>xxiii</sup> The notable silence of the Indian rulers in the official summary of correspondences regarding the commission is telling. Lytton first asked political agents to make inquiries about the likelihood of Indian rulers subscribing to the commission. He hoped to be able to write to Victoria about 'the anxiety of the Native Chiefs to be allowed to present Her with a large oil picture,' but, as the report records, he 'does not appear [to have written] as promised.' Ultimately, a circular was sent around stating that 'a desire was expressed on the part of many Chiefs and Princes, to commemorate [the Assemblage] by a painting to be presented to the Queen.' But the author of the report admits to not having actually seen any Indian replies on the matter.

---

See 'Summary of Correspondence Respecting Mr. Prinsep's Picture of the Imperial Assemblage', IOR DIEK 035/43, 2.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Lytton quoted in online catalogue for the Royal Collections.

<http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/407181/the-imperial-assemblage-held-at-delhi-1-january-1877>.

<sup>xxv</sup> Natasha Eaton, 'Between Mimesis and Alterity: Art, Gift and Diplomacy in Colonial India, 1770-1800', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46, 2006, 816-844, 821.

<sup>xxvi</sup> See Natasha Eaton 'The Art of Colonial Despotism: Portraits, Politics, and Empire in South Asia, 1750-1795', *Cultural Critique*, 70, Fall 2008, 63-93.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See Eaton, 'Mimesis and Alterity' and 'The Art of Colonial Despotism'.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Caroline Keen, *Princely India and the British: Political Development and the Operation of Empire*, London, 2012, 176. This sartorial induction into the political system was arguably present in inverted form during the Assemblage, when Lytton presented Indian rulers with the Queen Victoria's medallion – an item to be worn.

<sup>xxix</sup> Eaton, 'Between Mimesis and Alterity,' 819.

<sup>xxx</sup> For Warren Hastings – a man whose ruthless imperial instincts were intertwined with a scholarly love of Indian culture – the portrait was the ideal object to substitute for fiscally destabilising items such as coins and jewels because, according to the sixteenth-century Mughal Emperor Akbar's chronicle the *Ain-i-Akbari*, portraits were already enmeshed in the performance of Indian sovereignty and thus capable of being weighted with the symbolic import necessary for Indian courtly ritual. As Akbar's chronicler, Ab'l Fazl, recorded, 'His Majesty himself sat for his likeness and also ordered to have the likenesses taken of all of the grandees in the realm. An immense album was thus formed; those who had passed away have

---

received new life and those who are still alive have immortality promised them.’ See Eaton, ‘Mimesis and Alterity’.

<sup>xxx</sup> Eaton, ‘Between Mimesis and Alterity,’ 822.

<sup>xxxii</sup> See Eaton, ‘Between Mimesis and Alterity.’

<sup>xxxiii</sup> William Simpson, *Notes and Recollections of My Life*, c.1890, unpublished manuscript, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 11877, 125.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Thank you to Jayanta Sengupta at the Victoria Memorial Museum for this information.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Valentine Cameron Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals, Illustrated by Numerous Sketches Taken at the Courts of the Principal Chiefs in India*, London, 1879.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 85.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 74.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 3.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 30.

<sup>xl</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 284.

<sup>xli</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 234.

<sup>xlii</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 31.

<sup>xliii</sup> Dakers, *The Holland Park Circle*, 207.

<sup>xliv</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 126.

<sup>xlv</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 104.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 126.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Barbara Ramusack, *The New Cambridge History of India: The Indian Princes and their States*, III, Cambridge, 2004, 147.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 32.

<sup>xlix</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 39.

<sup>l</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 66.

<sup>li</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist’s Journals*, 66.

<sup>lii</sup> *Los Angeles Herald*, 26: 116, 24 January 1897, 17.

- 
- <sup>liii</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, 'Cloth, Clothes, and Colonialism', in *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1996; and Joanne Punzo Waghorne, *The Raja's Magic Clothes: Re-Visioning Kingship and Divinity in England's India*, Pennsylvania, 1994.
- <sup>liv</sup> Romita Ray, *Under the Banyan Tree: Relocating the Picturesque in British India*, New Haven and London, 2013, 154.
- <sup>lv</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist's Journals*, 73.
- <sup>lvi</sup> Codell, 'Photographic Interventions and Identities,' 133.
- <sup>lvii</sup> Prinsep, *Imperial India: An Artist's Journals*, 74
- <sup>lviii</sup> *The Newcastle Courant etc.*, 30 April 1880.
- <sup>lix</sup> *The Art Journal*, 6, 1880, 218.
- <sup>lx</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 1 May 1880.
- <sup>lxi</sup> *The Athenaeum*, 1 May 1880, 572.
- <sup>lxii</sup> This scene was suggested to me in the helpful feedback which I received to a paper on Prinsep given at the Paul Mellon Centre on 22 November 2013.
- <sup>lxiii</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 1 May 1880.
- <sup>lxiv</sup> Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, 247.
- <sup>lxv</sup> *The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 3 May 1880.
- <sup>lxvi</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 1 May 1880.
- <sup>lxvii</sup> Tracy Anderson, 'Fashioning the Viceroy: Portraits of Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton (1831–91)', *Visual Culture in Britain* 12: 3, 300.
- <sup>lxviii</sup> Anderson, 'Fashioning the Viceroy,' 293.
- <sup>lxix</sup> Anderson, 'Fashioning the Viceroy,' 302.
- <sup>lxx</sup> For an account of the slippages between mimicry and mockery in colonial discourse, see Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: Ambivalence and Colonial Discourse', *October*, 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis, Spring, 1984, 125-133.

---

<sup>lxxi</sup> See Julie Codell, 'Victorian Portraits: Re-Tailoring Identities,' *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 34: 5, 2012, 493-516.

<sup>lxxii</sup> See Carlisle, *Picturing Reform*, for a detailed analysis of the history of this painting.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Carlisle, *Picturing Reform*, 74.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 27 May 1843. In his introduction to the 1843 exhibition catalogue, Hayter wrote, 'The colour of European costume cannot be considered favourable to an artist; the colours worn are nearly all the same, and, from the material of which they are composed, are less calculated to reflect light than silks or satins. These were some of the unyielding materials of such a work.' Quoted in Richard Ormond, *Early Victorian Portraits*, London, 1973, 527.

<sup>lxxv</sup> See Henry Barraud, *Lionel Nathan de Rothschild introduced in the House of Commons on 26 July 1858 by Lord John Russell and Mr Abel Smith* (1872; oil on canvas, The Rothschild Archive).

<sup>lxxvi</sup> H. C. G. Matthew, 'Portraits of Men: Millais and Victorian Public Life,' in Peter Funnell & Malcolm Warner, eds, *Millais: Portraits*, London, 1999, 143.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> While commissioned separately and thus not intended for display together, these portraits were frequently sold in engraving as a pair. Matthew, 'Portraits of Men,' 155.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> *The Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald*, 18 May 1880.

<sup>lxxix</sup> See 'Imperial Phantoms' in Romita Ray, *Under the Banyan Tree*.

<sup>lxxx</sup> Mortimer Menpes (transcribed by Dorothy Menpes), *The Durbar*, London, 1903, 35.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> Menpes, *The Durbar*, 39.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> Menpes, *The Durbar*, 41-42.

---

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Saloni Mathur, 'The Durbar and the Visual Arts: Revisiting the Picture Archive,' in Codell, ed, *Power and Resistance*, 84-85.

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Menpes, *The Durbar*, 46.

<sup>lxxxv</sup> See Alison Smith, 'The Sublime in Crisis: Landscape Painting after Turner', in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, January 2013, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/alison-smith-the-sublime-in-crisis-landscape-painting-after-turner-r1109220>, accessed 05 October 2013.

<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Christine Riding and Nigel Llewellyn, 'British Art and the Sublime', in Llewellyn and Riding, eds, *The Art of the Sublime*, January 2013. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/christine-riding-and-nigel-llewellyn-british-art-and-the-sublime-r1109418>, accessed 05 October 2013.