

Ernst Gombrich and Western Representations of the Sacred Art of India

Partha Mitter

It is indeed an honour for me to address you tonight at the University of Vienna, the very university that nurtured my teacher and mentor, Ernst Gombrich. He enrolled at the University to research under the quiet, meditative scholar Julius von Schlosser, thereby becoming part of the famous Vienna School of Art History. One of the ideas that influenced Gombrich in his later life was the belief that art history was a science rather than a pastime for amateurs.¹ Gombrich belonged to a long line of Central European art historians who had created the discipline of *Kunstwissenschaft*, the scientific study of art – the Swiss Germans, Burckhardt and Wölfflin, then Kugler, Schnaase, Riegl, Panofsky, Wittkower – to name some of the most prominent.

Tonight's lecture allows me to pay a tribute to my teacher. My association with Ernst Gombrich was to last for some forty years, from 1965 to the year of his death in 2001. With kindness, Gombrich often introduced me to people as a former student and a friend. Indeed I have been privileged to have been called one of his twelve apostles, perhaps unkindly and with a touch of irony, but nonetheless I feel a great honour, because Gombrich had very few direct doctoral students. The important thing for me was that he didn't believe in exercising rigid control over his students. With a twinkle in his eye he would tell me – you see in those days we were not meant to question the professor. The professor would say – what, you agree with me – you do not agree, you obey!

What I always expected of a teacher is to offer students sufficient independence to work through intellectual problems, and Gombrich was sensitive enough to give me that freedom. My exciting sessions with him consisted of his throwing questions at me to think about. Ernst Gombrich was a liberal humanist in the best sense of the term, while my own work always had a more political orientation. But I owe a profound debt to him in being able to question everything, even one's most cherished beliefs.

The substance of tonight's lecture is the history of western representations of ancient Indian art, which forms the core of my first work, *Much Maligned Monsters: History of Western Representations of Indian Art* (1977). It aimed at exploring the interpretations and misinterpretations of Indian art by western scholars who often saw monsters where artists had intended gods.² As I hope to show, Ernst Gombrich directly influenced the work in quite unexpected ways. Of course, one

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¹ D. Eribon, *E. H Gombrich: A Lifelong Interest*, London: Thames & Hudson 1993, tr. of *Ce que l'image nous dit*, Paris: Editions Adam Biro 1991, 37-39, 104.

² Mitter, P. *Much Maligned Monsters: History of Western Representations of Indian Art*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1977; University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992 (paperback).

may say, in the final analysis, his specialism was western art and culture. However, in this talk I want to argue that although Gombrich was renowned as a great scholar of the Renaissance, with his path-breaking *début* on Giulio Romano and Mannerism, his contribution to cultural theory has in fact had a far greater and wider, though nowadays less recognized, impact.³ I would suggest that his classic, *Art and Illusion*, laid the foundations of the new discipline that may be described as the history of representations. This discipline has had a great impact not only on art but also on literature and a variety of disciplines, and above all, on post-modern and post-colonial theory. Let me quote an important passage from Murray Krieger, a Professor of English in the US, and by no means an uncritical admirer of Gombrich. Krieger wrote in 1984, 'It is difficult to overestimate the impact...which Gombrich's discussion of visual representation made on...an entire generation of thinking about art – and even more – on literary art...theory and criticism. *Art and Illusion* radically undermined the terms which had controlled discussions on how art represented 'reality'...I believe he must, then, be seen as responsible for some of the most provocative turns that art theory, literary theory, and aesthetics have taken in the last two decades.'⁴

As early as 1954, Gombrich exploded the myth of the innocent eye, invoking the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf's idea that language didn't name pre-existing objects or ideas so much as it articulated the world of experience. Gombrich then drew the momentous conclusion on artistic style that art originated in the human mind rather than in the visual world itself, so that all representations were recognizable by their particular style. Thus not only did he establish once and for all the idea that art was cultural and not natural. His notion that language limited our world of experience, not vice versa, anticipated semiotics and post-modern studies by several decades.⁵

To return to the central question: what is the connection between E. H. Gombrich and Indian sacred art? None, at the first glance. After all, as we have seen, his specialism was western art and culture. And yet as the lecture will seek to establish, there is indeed a close connection. First of all, to be slightly autobiographical, that connection is myself. I came from India as a student at the University of London to read history when I first heard Professor Gombrich's riveting lecture on Hegel.⁶ I then met him and also read his book, *Art and Illusion*, and I was deeply impressed and quietly excited. However, my first serious encounter with him was quite a singular occasion. This was when I met him as a potential doctoral student at the Warburg Institute. He posed the question more to himself than to me I think: why does he as a European with a classical background

³ E. H. Gombrich, *Giulio Romano als Architekt*. Dissertation University of Vienna, 1933. Eribon, *Ernst Gombrich*, 40-42.

⁴ Krieger, M. 'The Ambiguities of Representation and Illusion: An E. H. Gombrich Retrospective', *Critical Inquiry*, 11 (2), 1984, 181-2.

⁵ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, London: Phaidon Press, 1960, 250-52, 78. B. L. Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*, ed. J. B. Carroll, Cambridge Mass. M.I.T. Press, 1956. Gombrich in fact read Whorf in conjunction with Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson's critical view of the Whorfian thesis of linguistic relativism (see note to p.78).

⁶ This crystallised as the 1967 Philip Maurice Deneke Lecture, *In Search of Cultural History*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.

find the many-armed and many-headed gods and the rich decorations of ancient Indian art so hard to come to terms with? His failure to engage with art from outside Europe in *The Story of Art* has been widely noticed and often enough condemned by the present generation of art historians.⁷ But I think this is too simple a reading of Gombrich. As a complicated thinker, he himself agonized over this. He thus set me the task of trying to answer this cultural predicament: why are Hindu sculptures so difficult for the westerners? With this initial impetus, I began to explore this enormous question, which took me along a route Gombrich hadn't quite expected. Coming from Austria, which had no African or Asian colonies, he perhaps had no direct knowledge of colonial representations, that I was to elaborate in *Much Maligned Monsters*, and which was soon to be coined by Edward Said in his pithy phrase, *Orientalism*.⁸ To put it in a nutshell, coming from a country that had been colonized for nearly two centuries, my own perspective was essentially critical of colonial representations of the colonized. Although my answer provided in *Much Maligned Monsters* took him by surprise, he had the imagination and intelligence to appreciate its message. This I found deeply moving.

Anyway, my search for a theoretical answer to the question as to why Hindu sculptures disturbed, puzzled and fascinated Europeans, took me back to Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, which I had known since my undergraduate days. His particular explanation of the role of mindsets or initial schema in our representations of the visible world proved to be fecund for my studies of western interpretations of Indian art. The theoretical framework to *Much Maligned Monsters* is the notion of schema and correction and the formation of stereotypes, as we shall see. Gombrich had posed the question: why do different cultures and different ages represent the visible world in strikingly different ways? His Kantian explanation centered on the notion of the schema. The artist started not with his impression of the visible world but with a mental image of it, which he constantly modified in the light of his observations. What I found particularly useful was Gombrich's notion of stereotypes, which were formed when the mental image bore little relationship to the actual object.⁹

⁷ Gombrich belonged to the long tradition of Austro-German historians of world art who had inherited both Johann-Christoph Gatterer's universal history and Hegel's progressivist universal framework. However, I daresay that while using it, early on he began to think critically of this tradition that was to flower into *Art and Illusion*. Not only his formulation of art as a cultural construct but also his explanation of artistic styles, such as Baroque and Rococo, as springing from Vasarian prejudice rather than being a product of scientific observation, struck at the very roots of the notion of the objectivity of artistic taste. See 'Norm and Form: The Stylistic Categories of Art History and their Origins in Renaissance Ideals', in *Norm and Form: studies in the art of the renaissance*, London, 1966, 81-98, on the formation of classical taste and its influence on art history. Gombrich often asserted the perfection of the classical ideal as represented by Raphael and other Renaissance artists and yet in his theoretical work he sought to undermine the very intellectual foundations of a universalist canon of art history. He was one of the most effective art historians to use the scientific researches in visual neurology but at the same time he strongly rejected biological determinism. It is this tension between his own subjectivity and his radical conceptual framework that gives his work that sharp intellectual edge. See also Christopher S. Wood, 'Art History Reviewed VI: E. H. Gombrich's 'Art and Illusion: a Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation'', 1960, *The Burlington Magazine*, CLI, December 2009, 836-839.

⁸ E. W. Said, *Orientalism*, London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

⁹ Gombrich, 'Truth and the Stereotype', *Art and Illusion*, part 1, section II, 55-78.

With this long introduction I now take up the central topic of tonight's lecture. The playful title, *Much Maligned Monsters*, was chosen to remind readers that the core of western reaction to Indian art rests on a very specific case: the existence of multiple armed and headed Hindu deities. My contention is that the many-armed Hindu gods were monstrous precisely because they challenged the western concept of rationality. I can do no better than to quote two great 19th-century thinkers, Friedrich Hegel and John Ruskin on this. The German philosopher put his own gloss on the monstrous gods:

The most obvious way in which Hindoo art endeavours to mitigate this disunion [between extreme abstractions in Indian thought and its gross manifestations] is...by the *measureless* extension of its images. Particular shapes are drawn out into colossal and grotesque proportions in order that they may, as forms of sense, attain to universality. This is the cause of all that extravagant exaggeration of size, not merely in the case of spatial dimension, but also of measurelessness of time dimensions, or the reduplication of particular determinations, as in figures with many heads, arms, and so on, by means of which this art strains to compass the breadth and universality of the significance it assumes.¹⁰

The English critic Ruskin on the other hand explains monstrosity as the absence of interest in nature in Indian art:

It is quite true that the art of India is delicate and refined. But it has one curious character distinguishing it from all other art of equal merit in design – *it never represent a natural fact*. It either forms its compositions out of meaningless fragments of colour and flowings of line; or if it represents any living creature, it represents that creature under some distorted and monstrous form. To all facts and forms of nature it wilfully and resolutely opposes itself; it will not draw a man, but an eight-armed monster; it will not draw a flower, but only a spiral or a zigzag.¹¹

One may interject that both Hegel and Ruskin reflected the western idea that an image with more than two arms or one head was *contra naturam* or unnatural and therefore contrary to what is rational. True of course. But the question is not as simple as that. The fascinating point is, such ideas did not originate in the 19th century but went right back to the Middle Ages in the West. Therefore, to understand western reactions to Indian art, we need to go back to the beginning of European explorations of the non-western world. Let me take the very first real European encounter with India since antiquity. Marco Polo, who lived many years in China, recorded Indian religious customs during his brief visit to the subcontinent, which was a refreshing change from earlier garbled stories that

¹⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, , *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (Werke 10), English translation by P. B. Osmaston, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, II, London 1920, 53 ff., quoted in *Much Maligned Monsters*, 214.

¹¹ Ruskin, J. 'Lecture 1, 'Conventional Art', *The Two Paths*, in E. T. Cook & A. Wedderburn, eds. *The Works of John Ruskin*, XVI, London 1905, 265 ff., quoted in *Much Maligned Monsters*, 245.

circulated in the Middle Ages. He also helped arouse European curiosity about the manners and customs of the peoples of Asia. However, one passage in Polo deserves our close attention. It describes the idolatrous practice on the Coromandel Coast of South India:

They have certain abbeys in which there are gods and goddesses to whom young girls are consecrated...And when the nuns of a convent desire to make a feast to their god they send for the consecrated maidens who dance and sing before the idol with great festivity.¹²

We do not know if Polo actually saw the Indian *devadasis* or temple dancers, or he simply repeated what he had gained from hearsay. This passage however provided a great medieval illuminator, the Maître de Boucicaut, with inspiration for an exotic painting on the subject. The painting, *Danse des servantes ou esclaves des dieux* occurs in the famous 14th-century manuscript *Le Livre des merveilles*, a prize possession of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. [sadly when I was researching at the BN, I wasn't allowed to handle the painting as it was a national treasure and only given a facsimile to work from] Now had the caption not given us the information, surely it would have been impossible to recognize it as a painting of Indian temple dancers dancing before a Hindu deity. There is hardly any resemblance between these blond nuns and the *devadasis*, and the statue placed on classical columns bears little relation to a Hindu goddess. In the Middle Ages, all pagan gods were placed on classical columns as a shorthand for pagan or non-Christian, in other words, Greco-Roman gods.

So what's going on here? This is where I return to my own reading of a celebrated passage in Gombrich. In *Art and Illusion* he points to a curious phenomenon. In Herman Schedel's *Liber Cronicarum*, popularly known as the *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493), the illustrator Michael Wolgemut, Dürer's teacher, sought to represent different cities such Damascus, Mantua and Milan. Unless we are prepared to accept that all these culturally diverse cities looked the same, the phenomenon needs some explanation. I found from my research that all these cities were in fact replicas of Nuremberg, the city that Wolgemut knew intimately because he lived there. [Fig. 1] What he does here is to select from his storehouse of stereotypes an appropriate cliché for a city and apply it to all these cities unfamiliar to himself as much as to his readers. Gombrich names this the adapted stereotype, which made sense to the medieval reader when captions such as Damascus and Mantua were added!¹³

This medieval tendency of using a pre-existing schema also applied to the case of the Boucicaut Master that we just saw. It is an extreme expression of a universal principle. Whenever we attempt to understand something unfamiliar we go from the known to the unknown. The human mind can only process external information by classifying it under a known category, such as here, the Christian nuns representing Indian *devadasis*. In the field of art, a pre-existing schema serves as a starting point, which may be adapted in the light of the actual subject.

¹² Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 4.

¹³ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 60.

However, when that starting-point is too far removed from the motif itself, as in the case of the dancing nuns of Coromandel, the stereotyped image bears little relation to reality. It is unconvincing for us today simply because we have better access to facts. Boucicaut followed Marco Polo's text faithfully but could not translate the literary description into a visual image convincingly, as he had no first-hand knowledge of India. Thus the incongruity of the Indian nuns dancing before an Indian idol hits us today with some force.



Figure 1 Stereotype of a Medieval City based on the city of Nuremberg in *Liber Cronicarum*, from *Der Bilderschmuck der Frühdrucke Von Albert Schramm* (Leipzig 1934), page 432, (Tafel 172), Anton Koberger, Nürnberg 1493, Warburg Institute London.

Boucicaut's nuns were an exception for the period. Far more widespread were the stereotypes of monsters that fill the pages of travels accounts and masquerade as Indian gods. In fact, the roots of such ideas are to be found in the medieval period, and in the Greco-Roman tradition it had inherited from antiquity. In the Middle Ages, India had been reduced to a fabulous name, where earthly paradise was located and where lived monsters described lovingly by the Greeks and faithfully compiled by the Roman encyclopaedist Pliny the Elder. Stories of monopods, cynoccephali, martikhora and many-armed creatures formed the collective fantasy of the educated. Rudolf Wittkower's path-breaking essay, 'The Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters', establishes that many of these monsters were of Indian origin. He comments that Greeks 'rationalized [their instinctive] fears in another, non-religious form by the invention of monstrous races and animals which they imagined to live at a great distance in the East, above all in

India'.¹⁴

Pliny's monsters were anomalous creatures but utterly harmless. The situation changed around circa 1000 CE when fearsome images of monsters and demons were conjured up during the terrifying days of the first Millennium, which collapsed conceptions of hell, demonology and Antichrist of the Apocalypse. By the late Middle Ages an elaborate and in many ways frightening imagery of demons and of hell had grown up, that brought together elements from diverse sources. The classical monsters and the Christian demons converged at some stage in medieval history. The meeting of the classical and the Christian tradition was made easier by St. Augustine himself. He asserted that pagan gods were mortal just like other creatures and subject to the same Divine Will which they were powerless to transgress. In short, 'classical monsters and gods, Biblical demons and Hindu gods were all indiscriminately lumped together with congenital malformations under the all-embracing class of monsters...In this twilight region it is difficult to say with certainty where the line was drawn between the world of facts and that of the imagination.'¹⁵ Significantly, the *Nuremberg Chronicle* includes among its monsters an anomalous multiple-armed creature, which was really a garbled version of a Hindu god. I haven't got the time to explain fully here the reasons for this but I hope you will consult my book.¹⁶

The representation of Hindu gods as monsters had an amazing persistence. When the first travellers arrived in India in the 14th and 15th centuries, they preferred to trust what they had read in Pliny rather than the actual deities they encountered. This clash of classical and Indian taste is important of course. But perhaps even more important is the religious dimension to early western responses to Indian art. First, the Indian art that the travellers encountered was naturally profoundly religious, namely, Hindu temple sculpture and architecture. Secondly, early European interest in Hindu sacred art is not surprising at all, given the fact that this was the age of faith in the West. Scepticism and scientific rationality that we have come to take for granted is only as old as the 20th century.

The reaction to Hindu gods demonstrate the clash of two major faiths, Christianity and Hinduism: one a religion of the book that believed in unity, uniformity and suppression of dissent; the other a form of pluralism that embraced a bewildering variety of views and beliefs accumulated over millennia. From the moment early explorers set foot on the Indian soil, after a long and hazardous land or sea journey, they were faced with the problem of making sense of that vast theatre of idolatry that was India. For, if, as the early Church Fathers had admonished, and the Bible confirmed, that monotheism was God's precious gift to Adam, how was it that he had left such a teeming population of pagans in the dire abyss of idolatry? Idolatry fascinated as well as perplexed the first visitors.¹⁷

¹⁴ R. Wittkower, 'Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 5, 1942, 159-197.

¹⁵ *Much Maligned Monsters*, 10.

¹⁶ *Much Maligned Monsters*, 9.

¹⁷ Schmidt, F. 'Introduction: les polythéismes: dégénérescence ou progrès?', in *L'Impensable polythéisme: Etudes d'historiographie religieuse*, ed. Francis Schmidt (éditions des archives contemporaines, Paris 1988) 13-91, on the debate on polytheism from Patristic literature to the end of the Middle Ages that influenced European thought until the modern times.

Early reports, which contributed to the growing image of the Hindus, their religion and their religious art, were at once, fragmented, discrete and disparate, and yet so sensational that they were extensively published in a number of European languages, widely read and endlessly discussed by the erudite. The full extent of idolatry, perpetrated by pagans the world over, only slowly dawned among the literati in the West. Initially, travellers felt confident (with some justification) that Indians had been converted to Christianity by St Thomas, and would prove to be valuable allies against the Moors, who were threatening western Christendom. There is the classic story of cultural misunderstanding connected with the Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama's arrival in Calicut in South India in 1498. I quote it here:

In Calicut, they took us to a large church built of hewn stone. Inside the chapel was a small image which they said represented our lady. Major da Gama and we said prayers, the priests sprinkled water and white earth. Many saints were painted on the walls.¹⁸

One of the undoubted gains of the early European travellers was their first-hand experience of India and its people. Yet they couldn't help recalling constantly the medieval legends they knew. Of the Brahmins, for instance, the naked philosophers or gymnosophists, demonstrating in their simple lives all the traits of the Christian saint and philosopher. The legend was confirmed by the medieval text, *Alexander Romance*, which described how the Brahmins had taught the brash young emperor the folly of hubris and worldly riches in a typical Indian fashion that has continued to hold westerners in its grip.¹⁹

For the early travellers, the subcontinent was a virtual *terra incognita*. Hence one can appreciate the enormous problems they faced. From the outset, there was a persistent attempt to fit the new material on Indian idolatry into the familiar mould of Biblical and Patristic literature - the accommodation of the unfamiliar into a familiar mindset. Naturally, they took as their guide the memorable passages in Pliny or *Alexander Romance*. The intrepid English compiler of voyages, Reverend Samuel Purchas, for instance, devotes long chapters of a weighty volume to travellers to the East from the ancient times to his own period, paying close attention to paganism around the world.²⁰

Western perceptions of alien religions, more than any other aspect of culture, take us to the very heart of the problem of translating concepts and values of one system into another very different one. When we engage in the act of translating,

¹⁸ Velho, A. *A journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama 1497-1499*, translated and edited by E. G. Ravenstein (Madras 1995) 52-4. On Gama in the 16th-century Portuguese historian, Fernão Lopes do Castanheda, see Pedro de Azevedo, ed. *História do descobrimento e conquista da Índia pelos portugueses*, 3rd ed. (Imprensa da Universidade, Coimbra 1928).

¹⁹ D. J. A. Ross, *Alexander Historiatus*, Warburg Institute Surveys, London 1963. J. Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, 145-182.

²⁰ S. Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrimage, or relations of the world and the religions observed in all ages and places discovered...*, London, 1613. See also M. T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964, 171, 215-218, 235-238, and *passim*.

we are in fact searching for equivalents that may make sense. But the problem was that Christianity and Hinduism represented two very different world-views, what Husserl calls, two different ways of bracketing respective experiences.²¹ From their perspective, European travellers faced a central problem of faith: were the Hindus monotheistic or polytheistic? I must tell you that this is not the sort of question that engages the Hindus. The binary opposition between monotheism and polytheism - if God isn't one then he must be many - only makes sense in the West. In a monotheistic religion, God's divinity is absolute, and he is necessarily the Other, and in sum, what humans are not. Thus monotheism, to be meaningful, must have polytheism as its binary opposite. The Indian religious universe is very different in its relativism. It's peopled with living beings, hierarchically ordered, and joined in a unifying chain of reincarnation. From this perspective, the supreme deity in Hinduism is transcendental but at the same time god can relate to the devotee on a human level. Divinity in Hinduism can be on a number of levels, that ultimately reaches the godhead.

The problem of accommodating idolatry arose initially in connection with the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, as I mentioned. The question posed was: how did the error of idolatry arise in view of God's gift of monotheism to mankind? Europeans were influenced by the prevailing views about the pagans: a) Christianity, the most ancient religion, taught monotheism to the pagans; b) the pagans let this knowledge lapse; c) pagan cults were caricatures of the holy sacrament and d) the higher forms of paganism prefigured the arrival of the evangelists, as in the case of Greek philosophers like Plato or Indian Brahmins who were seen to prefigure Christ in their moral principles.²²

Given this framework, European visitors to India set about recovering the 'monotheism' concealed behind the garbled forms of Hindu polytheism. In so doing, they became aware of the syncretistic tendency of Hinduism to reconcile and unify different belief systems. One of the best-known visitors to India was the Italian gentleman traveller, Ludovico di Varthema, in the 16th century. He concluded from his visit that even though the Hindus had received the revelation, they nonetheless persisted in worshipping many false gods. According to him, the Indians acknowledged one god, who created heaven and earth. But the Indians also held that, as god didn't want to take on the task of judging, he sent his spirit, which is the devil, to dispense justice. Having established the ultimate terms of Hindu monotheism to his satisfaction, Varthema devoted most of his attention to the demon worship of Calicut, based, as he claimed, on observation. Here is the famous passage:

In the midst of the chapel of the king of Calicut sits a devil made of metal on a seat in the flame of fire; he has four horns, four teeth and wears a triple crown like that worn by the Pope, and most terrible eyes. The said devil holds a soul in his mouth with the right hand, and with the other seizes a soul by the waist.²³ [Fig 2]

²¹ Husserl quoted in E. D. Hirsh, *Aims of Interpretation*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1976.

²² Schmidt, *L'Impensable polythéisme*, debates on the origin of idolatry, 19-21.

²³ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 19.



Fig. 2 The Deumo of Calicut, engraving by Georg Breu in Ludovico di Barthema (Varthema), *Die Ritterlich vn Lobwirdig Rayss* (Augsburg 1515), London British Library. From P. Mitter, "European Responses to the Sacred Art of India", in *Enlightening the British*, edited by R.G.W. Anderson et al (The British Museum Press, London 2003) page 125, figure 42.

This was no Hindu god, but a conflation of different images of Anti-Christ in the Middle Ages. If, as Varthema claims, he had visited the chapel of the king of Calicut, why did he use medieval stereotypes to describe a Hindu god? We know that he wished to translate a strange and unfamiliar image into a language understood by his contemporaries. Yet, at this time knowledge about Hindu religion and iconography was rudimentary. Thus Varthema was forced to fall back upon his inherited values. His values in turn were determined by his Christian background, which considered all non-Christian religions as devil-inspired. The fact that Varthema was describing something familiar was grasped at once by his German illustrator, Georg Breu, who used several different traditions for this engraving. The towering figure of Satan devouring sinners, while his attendant creatures torture the damned, reminds us of the fresco by Francesco Traini at the Campo Santo in Pisa. The triple crown alludes to Popes in hell; the most notable one is in Dante. The reference to three crowns, four teeth and four horns plays on numbers, reminding us of the dragon of the Apocalypse. The dragon, of course, represented the pagan empires of the east.

Varthema set the tradition of demon worship in India, a tradition that was to haunt western imagination until the 17th century. The Dutchman, J. H. van Linschoten, who stayed briefly in India at the end of the 16th century, was associated with the Inquisition in Goa. Linschoten conceded that the Hindus acknowledged one god, but that this knowledge was perverted by devil worship, a perversion engineered by Satan himself. Finally, Linschoten offered the prayer that God grant the Hindus enlightenment, because 'they are like us in all other respects, made after god's image and He will release them from Satan's bondage'.²⁴ Predictably, for his description of the Hindu gods, he turned to Varthema's celebrated devil of Calicut. Varthema's description was also used by Linschoten's

²⁴ A. C. Burnell, *The Voyage of J. H. van Linschoten*, I, London, 1885, 289; Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 21-22.

engraver, Baptista à Doetechum, who placed this monster in the actual setting of the temple at Elephanta. This image gives a panoramic view of two non-Christian faiths, Hinduism and Islam. The artist places a garbled version of a Muslim mosque on the right side of the image, while he shows on the left the rock-cut temple of Elephanta with Varthema's Deumo presiding over the scene. The English traveller Sir Thomas Herbert thought it appropriate to illustrate Hinduism and he duly used the stereotype made popular by Varthema. The other image of an Indian monster god is enshrined in Sebastian Münster's famous *Cosmographia Universalis*.²⁵

The 17th century marks a turning point that paved the way towards a more objective study of Hinduism and the discipline of comparative religion. This is anticipated in a very different tradition that used a classical framework to explain Hinduism. The circle of humanists that included Rubens, Girolamo Aleandro, the mythographer Lorenzo Pignoria and the French collector, Nicholas Charles Fabri de Peiresc, were foremost intellectuals and collectors of exotica, who expressed a genuine curiosity about other religions. In 1615, Pignoria republished Vincenzo Cartari's standard work, *Images of the Gods*, in which he included a Hindu god, this time not a monster, but based on authentic sources.²⁶ Interestingly, Pignoria traced the origins of the Hindu god Ganesha in Egyptian idolatry. In fact, his circle had the ambition of formulating a universal theory of religion by a comparative study of paganism, which traced all religions back to ancient Egypt. This Ganesha was a composite image, based on two sources; the information for which was sent by the Jesuits in Goa between 1553 and 1560. One source was about the elephant-headed Hindu god. The other was the four-headed Śiva in the rock-cut temple of Elephanta, whose three heads are visible from the front, while the fourth one is at the back but not visible to the beholder. It was possibly the most famous Indian image in the West since the 16th century. Frances Yates had demonstrated the abiding interest of the Renaissance in *Ex Oriente Lux* (the light from the East): in Egyptian hieroglyphs, Chaldean astrology and Indian gymnosophists - these examples of pagan wisdom prefiguring Christ's revelation. Humanist attitudes suggest their deep ambivalence towards the idolatry condemned by the Church.²⁷

The changing cultural climate, that also affected men of the cloth, eventually brought to an end monster stereotypes. The famous tract, *A Display of Two Foreign Sects in the Indies*, by the English chaplain Henry Lord, dated 1630, was composed to refute the pernicious vanity of the Hindus and Zoroastrians of India. Significantly, Lord undertook a systematic refutation of Catholicism as well. He calls Hinduism a 'counterfeit religion' that dares to break the law of the dread majesty of heaven. How could a religion, that denied God's revelation, hold such high moral principles? He felt that he had demonstrated to everyone's satisfaction that Hindu vegetarianism and abstinence from alcohol were neither necessary nor logical. Moreover, he was convinced that these ideas were derived from the Greek philosopher, Pythagoras, and therefore were not as old as the Old Testament.

²⁵ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 23, 27.

²⁶ Cartari, V. *Le vere e nove imagini degli dei degli antichi*, Part II, Padua 1615, pl. XXVIII.

²⁷ F. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964.

Indeed they were parodies of the Mosaic Law, a view that continued the theological debate that had commenced in the Middle Ages.²⁸

Leaving aside the rhetoric, one notices in Henry Lord the changes in the reporting of other religions. Dismissing Purchas's massive work as merely based on hearsay, Lord proceeds to give a description of Hinduism based on firsthand experience and Sanskrit texts, the *śāstras*, although the data itself is still viewed through the scriptural lens, many of the Hindu myths seemingly confirming the sanctity of the Old Testament. Thus God created the world, but to combat evil, he created the three gods, Brahmā, Vishnu and Śiva, who were charged respectively with creating, preserving and destroying evil - an interpretation that sought to reconcile these gods with the Christian Trinity.

By the time we reach the year 1651, we encounter an event that was to have a profound effect on the western world view and the Other. That year Abraham Rogerius's posthumous work, *The Open Door to the Mysteries of Hinduism*, made its appearance, and was greeted by scholars with enthusiasm. Although the Dutch pastor didn't live to see the triumphant reception of his work, he would have had every reason to feel satisfied. Nothing perhaps expresses better the elation of having at last cracked the 'secret code' of pagan mysteries than Rogerius' title, *The Open Door*. A spirit of scientific enquiry informs the text, which is a painstaking investigation of Hindu doctrines and practices, and includes the translation of a major Sanskrit text by Padmanava, a Brahmin convert to Christianity. The title page itself finally sheds the monster stereotype of Varthema, offering a general view of Hinduism, though the actual drawing is rather poor.²⁹

The publishing trend continued with the appearance in 1672 of Philip Baldaeus' *A True and Exact Description of the most celebrated coasts of Malabar and Coromandel*, containing a full and sober account of Hinduism. Baldaeus claims his work to be superior to previous authors in its reliability and there is no doubt about the quality of the text. What's in question is his authorship. There is evidence that that text was by the Jesuit Jacopo Fenicio, who had meticulously interviewed Brahmins for his sources. This text was in the possession of the Dutch artist, Philip Angel, who had illustrated it with actual Indian paintings. Angel then presented it to the governor of Batavia as he sought the ruler's favour. As tutor to the governor's son, Baldaeus had access to it, and he took quiet possession of it, subsequently publishing it in his own name. Here are two examples from the work - an Indian miniature in Angel's text of the famous battle between Rāma and Rāvana in the epic, *Rāmāyana*, and the Dutch illustrator of Baldaeus reworking the Indian original.³⁰

I would like to end by going back a few years to 1667, and to the most ambitious work on idolatry, *China Illustrata*, written by Athanasius Kircher. He was the papal librarian and possibly the greatest polymath in history. Kircher belonged to Pignoria's circle of comparative mythologists, who traced the origin of religion back to Egypt. Kircher's brand of cultural diffusionism, with its mixture of encyclopedic learning and superhuman industry, with a slight lack of

²⁸ H. Lord, *A Display of Two Forraigne Sects in the East Indies*, (London, 1630, A3 and 50-51.

²⁹ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 51-55.

³⁰ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 57-59.

commonsense, has often been ridiculed. But his importance lies in being one of the first to try and make sense of non-Christian religions instead of dismissing them as forces of darkness. India fascinated Kircher and he had a long section on it, including an early though garbled account of the importance of Buddhism in Asia. His German compatriot, father Heinrich Roth, supplied him with texts and images from India. Kircher provides among others an illustration to the cosmological myth from Book 10 of the oldest Hindu religious text, the *Rig Veda*. The myth describes how the four great castes emerged from the different parts of the body of the creator god, Brahmā.³¹

With Rogerius, Baldaeus and Kircher we reach the end of this long period from the end of the Middle Ages to the threshold of change that took place in the 18th century, when at last the monster stereotype was discarded and Hindu gods began to receive back their own true forms. The incidental details also became more convincing but it was still another eighty years before archaeological researches of the British Empire would disseminate faithful images of Hindu gods, and accurate studies of Indian antiquities. But that did not necessarily lead to a greater understanding of Hindu sculpture and architecture, which has continued to pose problems of appreciation for the western art historian. One may say that even with greater knowledge, the stereotypes of Indian monster gods remained vestigially. But that is a story that I shall leave for another day. After completing my doctorate with Ernst Gombrich, I moved on to the topic of modernity, art and national identity in India, but we continued to be close friends. What has remained with me all these years is his dictum: it is far better to ask questions, even wrong ones, than to settle for a final answer.

Partha Mitter - D.Lit. (honoris causa), Courtauld Institute London: Emeritus Professor University of Sussex. British Academy Research Readership; fellowships: Clare Hall Cambridge; Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton; Getty Research Institute; Clark Art Institute (Williamstown, Mass.). Recent Publications: *The Triumph of Modernism: India's artists and the avant-garde 1922-1947*, London: Reaktion Books, 2007; 'Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery', *Art Bulletin*, XC (1), 2008, 531-574 (Intervention series: pages refer to my lead essay and four responses). 'Post-Colonial Monsters: A Conversation with Partha Mitter', in A. Mittman & P. Dendle, eds. *Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, London: Ashgate, 2012.

parthamitter@btinternet.com

³¹ Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 55-57.