

# The Artists of the East India Company

## *Background Notes*

Prof. Geoff Quilley - 13 April 2016



Johan Zoffany, *Colonel Mordaunt's Cock Match*, 1784-8



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The English East India Company was established by royal charter in 1600, giving it a monopoly on trading rights to the seemingly limitless natural resources offered by India and Asia, particularly in lucrative commodities of spices. However, it was not until the eighteenth century that the Company shifted in status from being a wealthy corporation of private maritime traders to the East, to becoming a financial concern of national significance, influencing government policy and being a decisive factor in the national economy. Above all, following the British victories in India during the Seven Years War (1756-63), and the Treaty of Allahabad of 1765, by which the Mughal Emperor granted it the right of *diwani*, or the collection of land tax in Bihar and Bengal, the Company became a territorial power in India rather than just a maritime commercial organization, and established its base at Calcutta, the centre of what would rapidly become British India.

This marked the start of the massive expansion of British settlement in India, from the late eighteenth, and throughout the nineteenth centuries, culminating with India coming under formal crown control from 1858, following the Indian Rebellion. Prior to this date, colonial administration was undertaken through the East India Company, which assumed a complex and controversial dual role, as a commercial company answerable to its shareholders and Board of Directors, and also as the arm of British government across the subcontinent.

The increase of British settlement of India from around 1770 with a population of Company employees and associates, who were enabled to make huge fortunes very rapidly, opened up other commercial opportunities, not least to the growing profession of artists in Britain. Artists both saw the chance to exploit the Company in India as a source of patronage, but were also used by the Company and its individual officers as a means of representing its changing public image, and its encounters and relations with Indian rulers and culture.

Artists such as Tilly Kettle quickly developed a reputation as a clever and resourceful portrait painter, producing images of Company officials in India and local nawabs that negotiated the tricky and delicate relations between established Mughal rule and Company claims to power, presenting it as one of mutual commercial benefit; and depicting figures such as the Nawab of Arcot as both independent ruler and also as ally of the British, on whose credit he was dependent.



Tilly Kettle, *Muhammad Ali Khan, Nawab of Arcot*, 1772-6

Similarly, Johan Zoffany, who worked in India in the 1780s, developed a novel adaptation of the genre of the conversation-piece, to depict the particular character of Anglo-Indian society, and the social relations between British and Indian culture: so that a painting such as *Colonel Mordaunt's Cock Match* becomes a complex allegory of the colonial encounter in the cultural melting-pot of Lucknow.

Other artists focused less on the people in British India, and more on the landscape coming increasingly under British control. William Hodges was the first professional European landscape painter in India, and under the patronage of the first Governor-General, Warren Hastings, made several tours through north-east India, making records of the landscape and monuments of Hindu, Muslim and British India. More than simply topographical records of the landscape, his views provide commentaries on the history of the country through its architectural heritage, so that his view of the tomb of the great sixteenth century Mughal, Emperor Akbar, is seen both as witness to the passing of a once great empire, and also as a homage to Hastings' own governance, which was partly modelled on Akbar's own imperial administration.



William Hodges, engraved John Browne, *A View of the Gate of the Tomb of the Emperor Akbar, at Secundra*, 1786

Hodges' example was quickly followed by Thomas and William Daniell, who made a career from their travels through India, producing albums of prints after drawings made on the spot with the *camera obscura*, and published both in India and Britain. These represented the expanding territories coming under British control throughout the 1790s for a domestic audience, and also painted a positive image of Company commercial growth, through images of its factories and warehouses at Canton, the focus of the Company's ambitions to penetrate the China market.



Thomas Daniell, *The European Factories at Canton*, 1806

The Company's territorial expansion was achieved through military conquest, which was also commemorated in sensational, triumphalist imagery, most notably in the ongoing battles with Tipu Sultan of Mysore throughout the 1790s, including sentimental images of Tipu's sons being taken as hostages by the British.



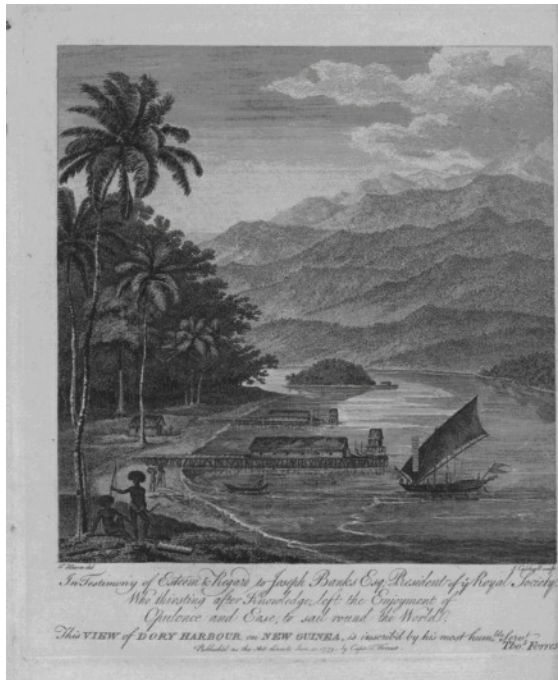
Robert Home, *Lord Cornwallis receiving the Sons of Tipu Sultan as Hostages, 1793-4*

Tipu was finally defeated at the Battle of Seringapatam in 1798, and the trophies from his looted palace brought back to London, such as his notorious mechanical model, *Tipu's Tiger*, which was exhibited in London in the Company's own India Museum.



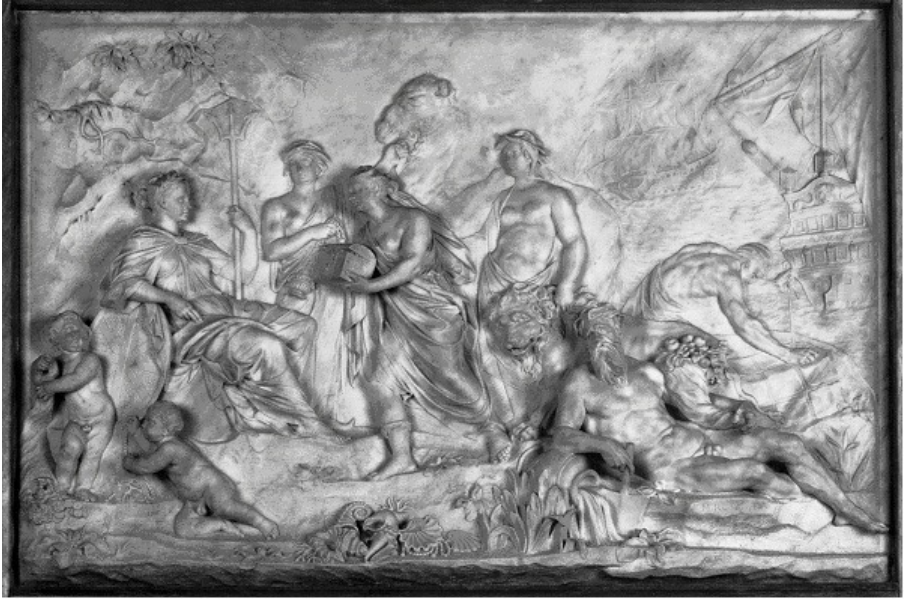
*Tipu's Tiger*, c.1793

The Company's maritime interests also opened up opportunities for marine artists, such as Thomas Luny, producing celebratory images of East Indiamen of growing size and tonnage as the Company's transport of goods and merchandise increased. It also provided opportunities for amateur artists, such as Thomas Forrest, who combined his expertise in navigation with his interest in natural history, to produce accounts of South-East Asian geography with a view to expanding Company bases and shipping routes throughout Indonesia as far south as Papua New Guinea.



Thomas Forrest, *View of Dory Harbour on New Guinea*, 1779

Meanwhile, the rapidly changing and complex character of the Company was represented at home in London through a public profile centred on its commercial headquarters in Leadenhall Street, rebuilt in the 1730s as a modern, efficient, commercial organization of national significance, and representing its activities allegorically through sculpture and paintings epitomized by Rysbrack's chimney-piece depicting the Company as the means to British prosperity.



John Michael Rysbrack, *Britannia receiving the Riches of the East*, c.1730

Artists were therefore involved in a variety of ways with the East India Company over the course of more than a century, at the height of the development of British art. They both represented the cultural encounter with India as British settlement there expanded, but also portrayed the Company as it would have like to be seen, offering a positive image of overseas colonial commerce that was in contrast to the often controversial reputation of Company practice

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