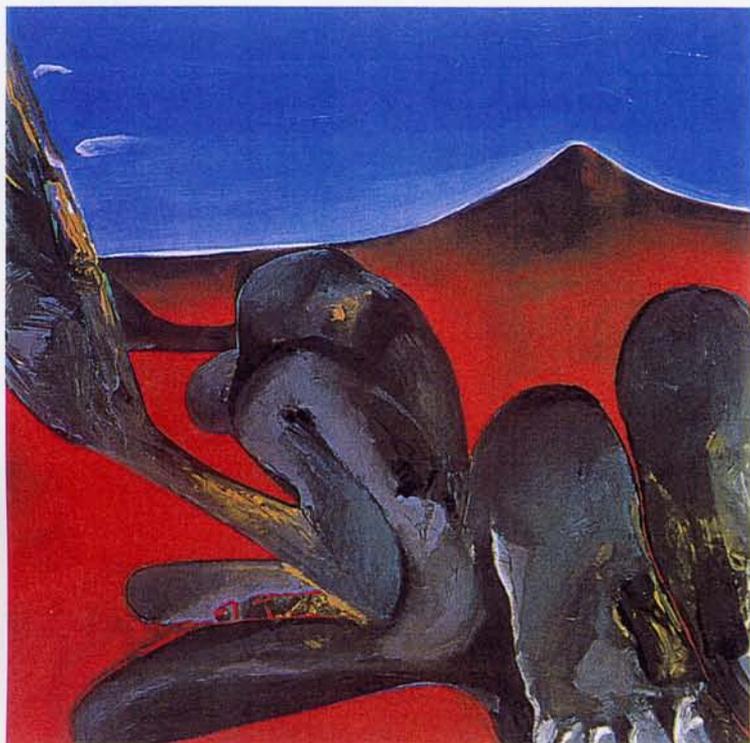


# Facing East: American Artists' Encounters with India

Filtered through Europe, or received directly, the Indian influence on American art has been substantial and abiding. **Sundaram Tagore** chronicles the varied ways in which this influence has worked.



*Bringing the subcontinent into mainstream western art.*  
Francesco Clemente. Sound and Shadow (X). Oil on wood. 1992-93.  
15 inches x 16 inches. Photo courtesy Anthony D'offay Gallery, London.

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The notion of western ideas finding acceptance in India, and having influence in the east has always been acknowledged. In recent decades, however, more and more western writers and artists have been switched on to the philosophical and cultural ideals of the east. The implications of this cross-fertilisation of ideas for the future are enormous and complex. From now on, understanding art history will necessitate comparative cultural understanding. Although mass communication has made the interchange of ideas a simple process, understanding how specific ideas or techniques have been transformed in the borrowing process is a fascinating yet challenging area of study.

The history of American art has a century-old tradition of interaction with India, even though that history has yet to be written. However, that legacy cannot be evaluated without discussing European art, since the American artistic genealogy and modernism have to be traced back to Europe. Although it is generally acknowledged that the Impressionists were the first to look to the east by borrowing from Japanese Ukiyo-e prints, the relationship between western artists and eastern ideas stretches as far back as the Baroque period when Rembrandt used Mughal miniature paintings as models. Later, it was the writers and thinkers of the Enlightenment who drank deeply of eastern philosophical ideals, and were profoundly affected by their readings of Upanishadic literature. These thinkers then indirectly affected western artists of the period.

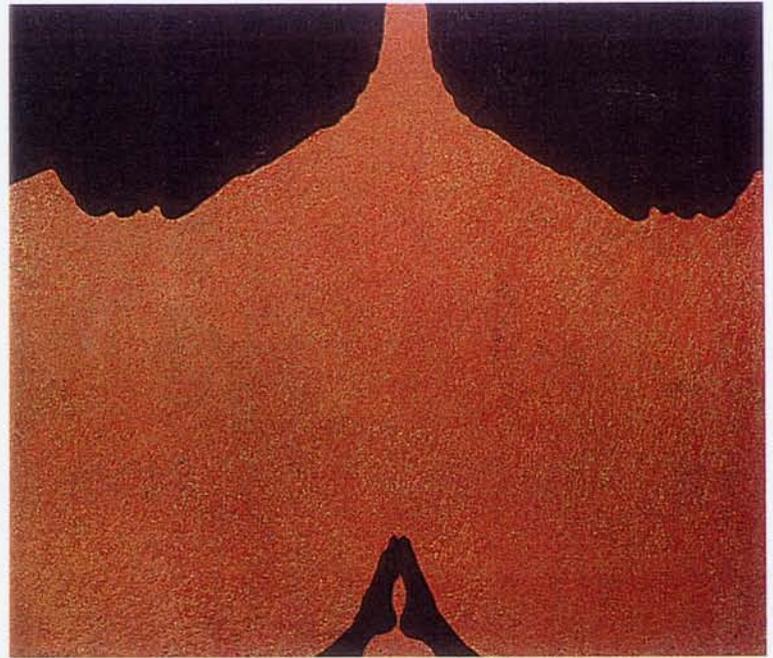
Paul Gauguin, for example, in his search for an artistic tradition unconstricted by the Renaissance notion of illusionistically based images was profoundly influenced by Buddhist sculpture, examples of which he saw in a Paris exposition before departing for Tahiti. When the artist Maurice Denis in 1890 uttered his famous dictum that "whether it is a nude or anything else... any painting is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order," he was describing the very basis of traditional Indian art, created not on the principle of three-dimensional perspective, but inspired by religious motivation. Denis's statement that art "is first and foremost a means of expression, a creation of our minds for which nature merely supplies the pretext," was boldly new for European artists used to salon art.

The American cultural relationship with India began in

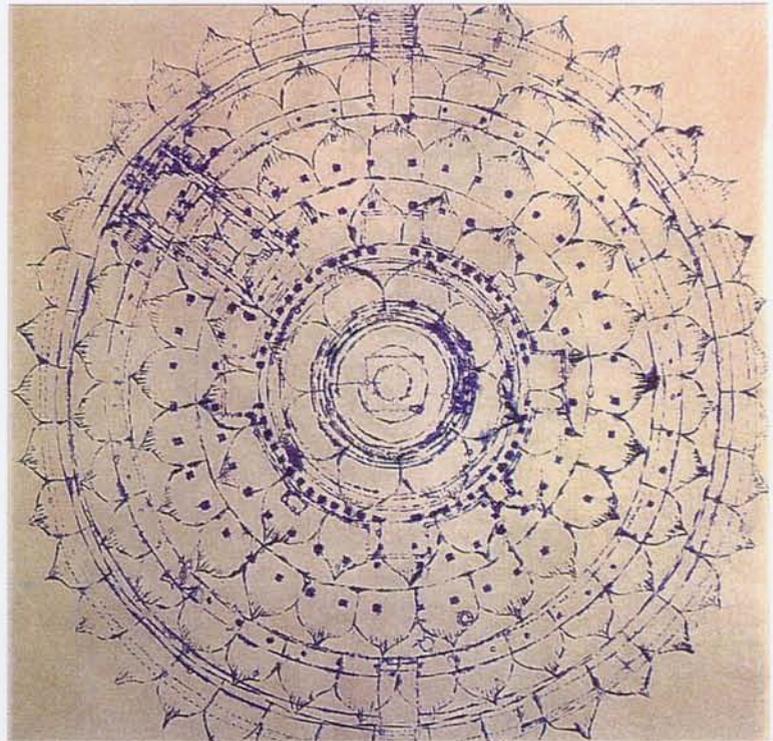
the nineteenth century, in the period of Emerson and Thoreau who were greatly influenced by Indian philosophical writings. At the turn of the century, during the colonial period, the American painters Lord Edwin Weeks and Lockwood de Forest used India as subject matter in their works. De Forest went further to create business links with the Hutheesingh family in Ahmedabad, importing Indian artefacts to America. The architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who was an avid collector of Asian art, had long discussions with Rabindranath Tagore at his Taliesin East studio about India in 1919. Wright then remarked about their commonality of views to a reporter of *Life* magazine. His compatriot and rival, the architect Walter Burly Griffin, designed many buildings in India and finally died in Lucknow in the 1930s.

Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and other European artists gained access to Indian philosophy through Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society and Rudolph Steiner. The Theosophical Society, headquartered in Madras, had strong links with the De Stijl movement which then left its impact on American arts. Through their connections with the Theosophical Society, the European masters learned to give visible forms to abstract ideas. The debt American Abstract Expressionists owe to these early modern masters is well known. Both Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, although they did not have any direct links with India or the East, possessed a strong affinity for Eastern ideas about art. Rothko's work reminds one of a yogic distillation process and stilling of the continuous activity of the mind with his abstract, hovering, Zen-like rectangular forms. Jackson Pollock, on the other hand, was introduced to Indian philosophical ideas through the Jungian psychologist, Dr. Joseph Henderson. The ideas he absorbed appear in his *Moon Woman* with Shiva's third eye centrally placed on the forehead painted in the forties. During the summer of 1952 at the famous Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which would produce a whole generation of American artistic aristocrats, thinkers like John Cage, dancers like Merce Cunningham and Jean Erdman, artists like Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns, and conceptualists Robert Whitman and Robert Rauschenberg were being exposed to many new ideas and lectures such as 'Philosophical Foundations of India' given by Nataraj Vashi.

The Sarabhai family played a pivotal role in this cultural interchange, particularly Gira and Vikram Sarabhai who were friends with the Buddhist John Cage and other American cultural intellectuals. Many famous American artists were introduced to India at their invitation to visit the subcontinent. Alexander Calder and Jean Erdman, the first American dancer to visit India, along with her husband, the mythologist guru Joseph Campbell, met each other in India. It was in the 1950s that the renowned American sculptor Isamu Noguchi spent time in Santiniketan. Later, in the sixties and seventies, Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and his photographer-son, Christopher Rauschenberg, all travelled to India. Some of these artists were invited to India to infuse new ideas and energy into the culture, and in the process, they themselves



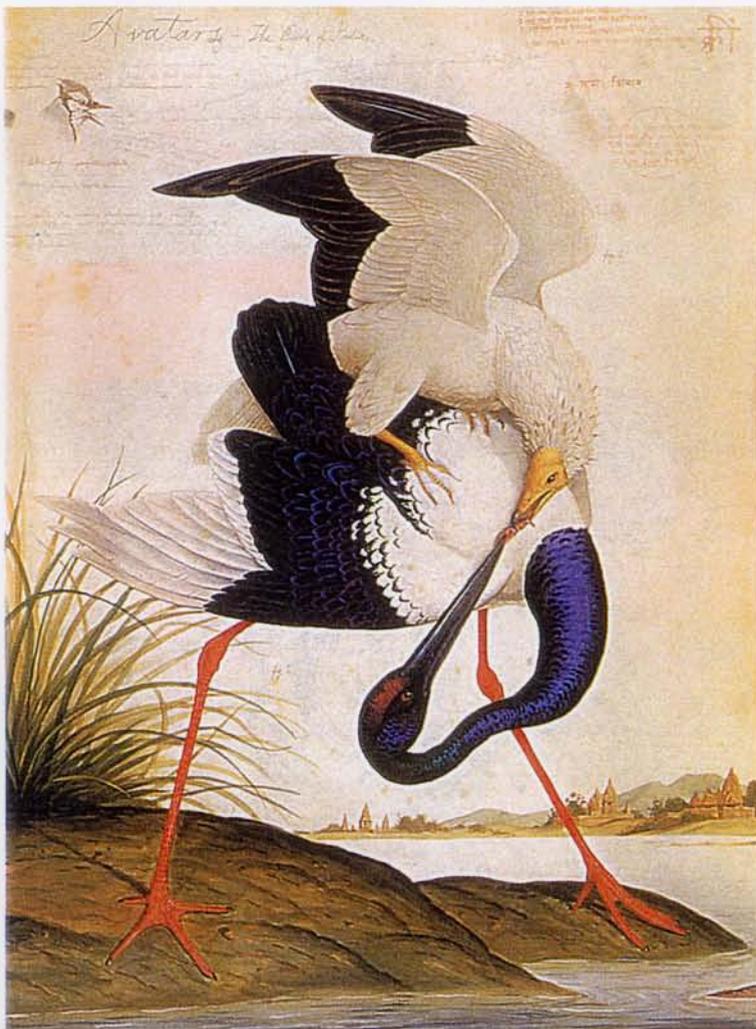
*Painting Indian themes.*  
Lee Waisler. Satya. Mixed media on canvas. 1998. 5 ft x 4 ft.



*Buddhist imagery, contemplation and retrospection.*  
Arlene Shechet. Anuradhapura in a Lotus Field. Mind Field Series.  
Handmade abaca paper. 1997. 30 inches x 30 inches.



Arlene Shechet. *In the Studio*. Hydrolcal, acrylic paint, steel, concrete. Dimensions variable. 1997.



Struggle shown through the world of fauna. Walton Ford. *Avatars - The Birds of India*. Watercolour, gouache and pencil on paper. 1996. 40 inches x 59.75 inches. Picture courtesy Paul Casmin Gallery.

were affected. For some, it had direct implications in their creative output. For others, it changed their outlook toward the world. Christopher Rauschenberg has written about his travels passing "through a strange and wonderful landscape". His father, Robert Rauschenberg, created an extraordinary collaboration among the workers of the Sarabhai mills during this trip. It was in India that Robert Rauschenberg produced a new group of multiple sculptures called *Bones and Unions*, a remarkable core of work that defied the traditional designation of three-dimensional sculpture, oscillating between two and three-dimensional shapes. To paraphrase Rauschenberg's artistic experience in India, he had seen the poorest of the poor in the most beautiful gold sari.

Although prior to the 1960s, general interest in India was cursory, this began to change during the Vietnam war, when Indian philosophy along with Zen Buddhism, began to attract the attention of young Americans interested in an alternative life-style. It was a period in American history when large numbers of people began to travel to India. Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, based on the life of Buddha, became the rage at American universities. The American Minimalist movement was also a product of this time. The Minimalist artist Donald Judd recognised the positive nature of space, obviously influenced by eastern literature. "Material, space, and colour are the main aspects of visual art. Everyone knows that there is material that can be picked up and sold, but no one sees space and colour. Two of the main aspects of art are invisible".

In the 1970s, the American sculptor Joel Shapiro was stationed in Coonoor, in south India, as a Peace Corps volunteer. It was here that he developed some of the ideas of his minimalist-figurative sculptural forms that have a certain affinity with the Chola figures of the Shiva Nataraja image in its heightened, twisted position. Shapiro's work at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., in particular, has a strong affinity with the Chola forms. This work naturally embodies the destroyer-creator idea of Shiva which is relevant in the context of the Jewish tragedy.

Also in the seventies, Ajit Mukherjee's book on Tantra art had an impact on several well-known Americans. However, it was figures like Francesco Clemente, Luigi Ontani and the late Alighiero Boetti, all originally from Italy, who brought the subcontinent into the mainstream western art world's consciousness through their art. Clemente, who is considered American but lives in New York, Naples and Madras, and Ontani have repeatedly returned to India for the last 20 years. Ontani's self portraits as Krishna with street children are seductively beautiful. Clemente's references to Indian culture tend to be aesthetically resolved as seen in his *Sound and Shadow* with its radically foreshortened view of a praying figure in the midst of an Indian desert.

The American artist Mark Tobey, who had worked with Chinese artists in Seattle, said in the sixties, "I have often thought that if the West Coast had been as open to aesthetic influences from Asia, as the East Coast to Europe, what a rich nation we would be". What Tobey wished for in the sixties is in the process of becoming a reality today. American

artist Pat Steir, although probably more influenced by Zen ideas of art, is in love with Indian art and culture and visits the country often. Steir, in her *Waterfall* forms, reconciles an Abstract Expressionist language to Chinese landscape painting, simultaneously straddling abstraction and figuration. The coloured *Waterfalls* are reminiscent of the pure colours of the Indian miniature tradition.

The Californian artist Lee Waisler came to know both the renowned Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti and the indophile artist Beatrice Wood, a lover of Marcel Duchamp, who inspired the character of Rose in the mainstream American film *Titanic*. Through them, Waisler became cognisant of Indian culture and lived in India producing a series of provocative paintings dealing with Indian themes.

Among younger artists of the eighties and nineties, figures such as Arlene Schechet, Walton Ford, Izhar Patkin, Attila Lucacs, Ilan Averbach, and Marcus Leatherdale have been widening the east-west dialogue in painting, sculpture and photography.

While Schechet's works on skin-like white and blue paper deal with Buddhist imagery and contemplation and retrospection, Walton Ford resorts to make a political statement about east-west confrontation and reconciliation. His message is couched in a struggle shown through the world of fauna. He travelled through India with his family recording and noting the culture for over half a year, obviously visually stimulated by the country.

Izhar Patkin, another thinking artist, is an Indophile and has produced many forms inspired by eastern themes. An enormous Shiva-Nataraja-like form at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York was a powerful presentation of sheer aesthetic impact. Attila Lucacs, a Canadian painter living in New York, has explored the Indian miniature tradition and presents himself as an actor in his artistic theatre. His art is cross-cultural and autobiographical and simultaneously enticing in its rich colours and forms. Ilan Averbach, a sculptor, recently produced a series of works in a Calcutta foundry reminiscent of the buffalo-skin water-container that one sees being carried around Indian streets on backs of water-bearers. This has both colonial associations as well as makes a sheer contemporary formal aesthetic statement. Photographer Marcus Leatherdale lives part of the time in the ancient city of Varanasi. His photographs of *sadhus*, *pahelwans* and Indian society women capture India in its holistic sense. His subjects, always propped against a canvas set-up, recall portraits from Victorian-era studios. These photographs have no colonial suggestion, however, but have a powerful formal aspect. These artists possess a postcolonial view of India, and they are not afraid to deal with sensitive issues. It is only with an outsider's eye that one can see the plethora of interesting and unusual forms that exist in ordinary Indian life.

Indo-American discourse in the form of an aesthetic interchange provides an additional and a new area for cultural historians interested in studying the two societies. Although exploration in this area of study is new, as increasing numbers of artists continue to visit and respond to the ancient culture, a fertile ground for study is developing.



*Recalling portraits from Victorian-era studios.  
Marcus Leatherdale. Gitanjali – Delhi.  
Sepia toned silver print. 15 inches x 13 inches.*



*A strange and wonderful landscape.  
Photo taken by Christopher Rauschenberg in India in 1975.  
Pictures courtesy the author.*