

François Balthazar Solvyns:

A Flemish Artist in Bengal, 1791-1803

Research >
South Asia

Calcutta in the late eighteenth century was an unlikely place for a Flemish marine artist, born to a prominent Antwerp merchant family. For François Balthazar Solvyns (1760-1824), however, it was to be his home for thirteen years, between 1791 and 1803. The product of his work there, a portrait of the Hindus in a collection of more than 250 etchings, would consume his life. With the commitment of an ethnographer to faithful representation and with the sensibilities of an astutely observant artist, Solvyns combined the informational and the aesthetic in an unrivaled visual account of the people of Bengal.

In portraying the *vina* or *bin*, Solvyns also uses the term 'Kuplyans' for instrument, a usage limited to Bengal. There are 36 etchings depicting musical instruments, most representing the first illustration of the instrument and the manner in which it is played.



Collection of Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr.

By Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr.

As a young artist in the Austrian Netherlands, Solvyns had been under the patronage of the Hapsburg governors, but political upheaval in 1789 soon left him adrift, and in 1790, he set sail for India to seek his fortune. From the 1760s onwards, India, and Calcutta particularly, had begun to attract European professional artists. By 1791, when Solvyns arrived in Calcutta, a number of painters, of varying talents, had already spent time in Bengal. The most prominent were Tilly Kettle, John Zoffany, William Hodges, and Thomas and William Daniells. Where Kettle and Zoffany largely pursued portraiture in painting *nabobs* and *nawabs*, British merchant-officials and Indian princes, Hodges and the Daniells portrayed India in its natural beauty and 'scenic splendors'. It

was for Solvyns to portray *Indians*, the people of this fabled land in their customs, manners, and dress, in their occupations and festivals.

In his early years in Calcutta, Solvyns worked as something of a journeyman artist and was even employed for a time in decorating coaches and palanquins, but in 1794, he announced his plan for *A Collection of Two Hundred and Fifty Coloured Etchings: Descriptive of the Manners, Customs and Dresses of the Hindoos*. The collection was published in Calcutta in a few copies in 1796, and then in greater numbers in 1799. Divided into twelve parts, the first section, with 66 prints, depicts 'the Hindoo Casts, with their professions'. The sections following thereafter portray servants, costumes, means of transport (such as carts, palanquins, and boats), modes of smoking, fakirs, musical instruments, and festivals.

The project proved a financial failure. The etchings, by contemporary European standards, were rather crudely done, and they did not appeal to the vogue of the 'picturesque'. In 1803, Solvyns left India for France and soon redid the etchings for a lavish folio edition of 288 plates, *Les Hindoûs*, published in Paris between 1808 and 1812 in four volumes. Even these sumptuous volumes failed commercially, victim to the unrest of the Napoleonic wars and to the sheer cost of the publication. When the Kingdom of the Netherlands was formed in 1814, Solvyns returned to his native Antwerp, where William I appointed him Captain of the Port in recognition of his accomplishments as an artist. Solvyns died in 1824.

Solvyns's life is fascinating in itself, whereas his portrayal of India constitutes a rich visual account of the people of Bengal in the late eighteenth century. The prints proper are of importance in a tradition reaching back to the early seventeenth century, and even earlier than that, with encyclopaedic efforts to represent systematically both the unfamiliar, as in costumes of foreign lands, and the familiar, as in the typologies of peasants, craftsmen, and street vendors. In portraying the Hindus, however, Solvyns is not simply recording ethnographic types. He gives his figures individual character and places them in time and space, with narrative interest, and in doing so, he provides the viewer intimate access. This separates him from purely encyclopaedic interest, as he combines the ethnographic and the aesthetic with artistic purpose. He conveys 'art as information'.

As an artist, Solvyns provided a prototype for the genre of 'Company School' paintings of occupations, done by Indian artists for the British that became popular in the early nineteenth century. But more significantly from an historical and social perspective, Solvyns's work, with its accompanying descriptions, constitutes the first 'ethnographic survey' of India or more precisely of Bengal. Moreover, with his ordered, hierarchical portrayal of Hindu castes in Bengal, however problematic this may be, Solvyns may well be the first European to provide a systematic ranking of castes. Yet this contribution has never been recognized. Historians and anthropologists have rarely drawn upon Solvyns for an understanding of society in Bengal in the late eighteenth century.



The 'Byde' (Vaidya), Physician, beside a funerary post erected in the performance of the *sraddha*, the ceremony, held several days after the cremation, that releases the soul of the deceased.

I first encountered Solvyns's work in the summer of 1966 in San Francisco, when a friend told me of some individual etchings he had seen in a shop that specialized in Indian miniatures. I was immediately attracted to them, as here was an artist genuinely interested in the people of India. It was only later that I was able to identify Solvyns as the artist, and there was little information available about him. Solvyns continued to hold a special interest for me, myself being a university professor specializing on India, in what he reveals of India two hundred years ago.

In most of the etchings, Solvyns's portrayal of his subject is its first visual representation, and the etchings and Solvyns's accompanying text thus provide an enormously rich - and untapped - resource for our understanding of Indian society. In the late 1980s, I proposed to my colleague Stephen Slawek, sitarist and ethno-musicologist, that we use Solvyns's 36 etchings portraying musical instruments for a long article for the journal *Asian Music*. This effort began what has become 'the Solvyns project'. We later revised the article for publication as a book, *Musical Instruments of North India: Eighteenth Century Portraits by Baltazard Solvyns* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997). ('Baltazard' is the alternative spelling of his name that Solvyns used for the title page of *Les Hindoûs*.) The music book and its companion *Boats of Bengal* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001) reproduce etchings from the Paris edition in small format, with black and white prints. Each print is accompanied by Solvyns's descriptive text and by my detailed commentary on the subject portrayed. The two small books are 'spin-offs' of the larger project, *A Portrait of the Hindus: Baltazard Solvyns & the European Image of India 1760-1824* (forthcoming), that will reproduce all the Solvyns etchings in color, with Solvyns's text and my commentary for each, together with chapters on Solvyns's life and work. In the course of my research, I have also written several articles on Solvyns - on his portrayal of Calcutta's 'Black Town', on his two etchings of Sikhs, and on his representation of *suttee*. The articles are online, together with further information on the Solvyns Project, at the following website: <http://inic.utexas.edu/asnic/cas/SolvynsProject.html>. <

Professor Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. is the Temple Professor Emeritus of the Humanities in Government and Asian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

E-mail: rlh@uts.cc.utexas.edu



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'Shoho-Gomon. A Woman Leaping into the Fire to the Corpse of her Husband', from Solvyns, *Les Hindoûs*, Vol. II (Paris: 1810).

Bengal Studies