

Alternative modernity: re-imagining Asia and Africa

The Maharaja of Baroda (Western India), Sayajirao Gaekwad III (1875-1939), was an active art collector, and lender to colonial exhibitions. His collecting practices represented high artists, artisans and institutional projects, which in turn articulated ideas of a highly original, alternative modernism. This modern art project subsequently also shaped ideas of nation-building. As a research fellow at IAS, I set about to expand our understanding of princely India's stellar contribution to discourses of modernization and nationalism through art collecting.

Priya Maholay-Jaradi

BARBARA RAMUSACK'S work¹ helped me realise how the story of princely India in these discourses was underplayed; her emphasis on augmentation of archival research gave me the added confidence to carry the Baroda story further with data laboriously collected from provincial archives. Alongside this academic work, I tasked myself to explore Leiden on foot, see its many museums and experience the European summer in this 'quaint university town', a picture impressed upon me by Wikipedia and Lonely Planet. The first batch of materials in my hand, even before Ramusack's book, was a folder handed out by the accommodation office – emergency numbers, manuals and the Leiden city guide were part of it. I spotted and short-listed *Fetish Modernity (FM)* an exhibition showing at the Museum Volkenkunde as a must-do. From here began my journey to position 'alternative modernity' along the twinned axes of colonial India/Asia (through my post-doctoral work) and contemporary Europe (through the exhibition).

An evolving provenance

This article summarises my two trajectories: on the one hand I profile my protagonist, a Maharaja of colonial India, representing the idea of a peripheral modernity by becoming an active lender to colonial exhibitions across Europe; on the other, the article reviews *FM* to assess a post-colonial situation in which European museums are engaging with a re-imagining of their colonial-ethnographic collections to appreciate the fact that Europe was never the sole centre for modernism. Modern conditions existed in Asia and Africa too; moreover, these peripheral geographies absorbed and/or countered Eurocentric modernism in their own creative ways.

So in effect, both the Maharaja of Baroda and the curators of *FM* map locations of modernity outside Europe and bring forth a diverse range of modern objects on the international trail of exhibitions. Sayajirao, for his part, expanded his private collecting practice such that it shaped the course of institutional projects in Baroda State. The Maharaja actively collaborated with the society portraitist, Raja Ravi Varma, to produce India's own home-grown variety of history painting, which was appraised as a new national art. All the same, Baroda's workshops and polytechnics included artisans in new mechanized processes of production. Furthermore, Sayajirao's loans to exhibitions consisted of high art specimens such as Varma's works, alongside handicrafts from far afield in Baroda State, as well as new workshop products such as furniture and lacquerware. This practice reflects the Maharaja's commitment to showcase Baroda/India not so much as a pavilion of traditional art, but as a constantly evolving provenance; a provenance that represented experiment and modernization in its art and craft production. Several works from the Baroda pavilion were donated to museums, sold to private clients and even acquired by European institutions, such as ethnographic museums. As was the obsession then to classify these objects, the acquisitions were quickly designated as the 'oriental', 'colonial', 'exotic' and 'decorative'. The Maharaja's aspiration towards the 'modern' and 'national' was missed altogether, and with that the original context of production was also lost.

Re-imagining the collections

Today, as the relevance of these acquisitions is questioned, and ethnographic museums, seen as mere colonial projects, fall victim to budget-cuts in the European Union, twelve curators across the continent have come together in a moment of "introspection", informs Laura Van Broekhoven, curator at the Museum Volkenkunde and co-curator of the travelling exhibition, *FM*. *FM* re-imagines its collections in new configurations. Every object and artwork is liberated from its conventional category and taxonomy to be viewed afresh, thereby allowing multiple, alternative readings. *FM* also searches the original meaning and modes of consumption of objects while charting changes in their physical form. The accompanying catalogue offers expanded discussions on select exhibits such as the Wahgi shields of the people of Papua New Guinea. New shields produced in the money-economy of the 1970s redeploy logos and text from Western advertisements. The usage of the words 'Cambridge Cup' signifies the sponsorship of rugby matches by Cambridge cigarettes; the rival Wahgi clans that engage in warfare become analogous to the competing rugby teams.²

In stark contrast to this appropriation of western culture, *FM* addresses the long-standing tension created by the 'borrowing' of indigenous design by European practitioners. Italian architect Matteo Thun's striking orange 'designer' stool offers ample scope to reflect on the emulation of stools produced for the past 300 years by the Asante people in Ghana. If, as Wilhelm Ostberg tells us, Matteo Thun's permission is required to reproduce the stool's picture in the catalogue, does Thun not need to acquire consent from the Asante?³ Or do indigenous designs not merit copyrighting and patenting? Partha Mitter explains the same phenomenon in the high arts as the Picasso-Manque syndrome: Picasso's usage of African sources was an inspired discovery of ethnographic art; whereas Gaganendranath Tagore's usage of cubist principles was derivative and compromising.⁴

If *FM* is to be read in conjunction with these contemporary writings on art history, it is clear that the western construct of modernity has not only denied the non-west its innovative moments, but has instead rectified its own industrial experiments on the strength of superior African and Asian (art)works. To redress this hitherto inverse relationship between modernity and the non-west, *FM* includes plural voices, locations, moments and materials. Its video loops record interpretations of community members on what modernity means to them. Likewise, contemporary practitioners are invited to comment on the discourse of modernity through their artworks.

Breaking from convention

While I had made my way to the Museum Volkenkunde to see *FM*, my friend came to see *A House filled with Indonesia*, showing in the adjacent gallery. The latter exhibition showed objects from the 1000-strong personal collection of Frits Liefkes, curator at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

After a walk through this display, which had a neat one-way circumambulatory path, my friend complained about the "hard-to-navigate" nature of *FM* and its texts. Indeed this fetish with A-Z routes and A-Z text panels, has for long groomed museum-going audiences. To break away from the conventional layout of exhibitions is a risqué choice, but in the case of *FM* – with its unconventional, multi-media display – it complements this open-ended exhibition that pushes its viewers to make alternative assessments of given objects and cultures. My friend thought *FM* should have occupied a specially designated floor in the museum to allow time for a complete re-orientation on the part of the visitor; however, I saw a meaningful contrast in its juxtaposition with Liefkes' collection. Perhaps I was over-reading into this arrangement: the European collector Liefkes visited Indonesia only once in his lifetime; he bought artefacts from auctions and the European art market. Considering he was a curator, he may have researched enough about the field and the original locations of his collectibles, yet the rigour of fieldwork per se was missing in his career. Liefkes in some ways paints a perfect picture of the collector who builds a worthy collection, but is always removed from the original context of his objects. At the same time Liefkes held the view that the world outside his mansion had little clue about art and exhibitions. And next door, *FM* was silently urging a revisit to search for original contexts

of objects, their creators and ideas; most importantly, *FM* treated its audience as knowing-enough to be able to interpret. Together, these exhibitions made a compelling narrative of the lacuna in art history and museums and some of the aspirations which seek to fill these gaps.

Added to the aspirations of the twelve curators is my own, to augment research on alternative modernities through art history (read my predilection for collection studies). If curatorial projects such as *Fetish Modernity* are allowed to grow, issues of decolonization, Asian-African modernities, Europe-Asia-Africa dialogues would become realities in the post-colony. The efforts launched by the protagonist of my thesis, Maharaja Sayajirao, to reveal peripheral modernities as simultaneous to European modernities would finally bear fruit. And finally, the fact that this exhibition leads up to the establishment of INEM (International Network of Ethnography Museums) means that the re-imagining of plural modernities will not die with the dismantling of this exhibition.

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Fetish Modernity is a travelling exhibition, supported by the Culture Programme of the European Union, as a part of the project 'Ethnography Museums and World Cultures RIME'. *FM* has travelled over three years to Tervuren, Madrid, Prague, Vienna, Leiden and will show until March 2014 at the Etnografiska Museet in Stockholm (www.varldskulturmuseerna.se/etnografiskamuseet). It is accompanied by a copiously illustrated book, which can be ordered for free from the Museum Volkenkunde, or one of the other participating museums.

Notes

- Ramusack, B. 2004. *The New Cambridge History of India: The Indian Princes and Their States*, Volume III.6, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- O'Hanlon, M. 2011. 'Consuming Shields', in Bouttiaux, A.M. & A. Seiderer (eds.) 2011. *Fetish Modernity*, Belgium: RIME Partners & Royal Museum for Central Africa, pp.141-145
- Ostberg, W. 2011. 'Asante Goes Italian: Global Inspiration or Appropriation of Intellectual Property', *ibid.*, p.139
- Mitter, P. 2008. 'Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery', *The Art Bulletin*, 90(4): 531-548, pp.534-537.

Above: This stool was designed by the Italian designer Matteo Thun. He was clearly inspired by the wooden stools made by the Asante in Ghana. So, is this stool Italian or Ghanaian?

Below left: In the south of Ghana coffins are custom made according to the wishes of the deceased; the designs often refer to his or her profession or social status. Although a relatively new practice of perhaps 100 years, it is already regarded as an established tradition. This particular coffin, in the form of a mobile phone, was made specially for this exhibition and will not be put underground (Ghana).

Below right: A native Papua man in Mount Hagen wears a CD as nose decoration (Papua New Guinea).

