



Figure 1: Three *Behar Amateur Lithographic Scrapbooks*, published on the Behar Amateur Lithographic Press, Patna, between ca. 1828 and ca. 1830. Of various sizes, internal compositions, and artists, but predominantly the work of Sir Charles D'Oyly (1781–1845). Yale Center for British Art: T 448.5 (Folio A); Folio A 2011 110 Copy 1; Folio A 2011 110 Copy 2.

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Art and Sociability in Colonial India: The *Behar Amateur Lithographic Scrapbooks*

Abstract This chapter examines a series of lithographic scrapbooks, published between 1828 and 1830 by the *Behar School of Athens*—an amateur art society founded in the Indian city of Patna. The majority of prints in these albums were produced by the society's president, Sir Charles D'Oyly (1781–1845). However, they also contain works signed by two local Indian artists: Jairam Das and Seodial. This chapter explores how the inclusion of these artists conformed with a discourse of “improvement” adopted by the *Athenians*, but contradicted the persistent denial of colonial civil society by both British MPs and East India Company officials. In exploring this contradiction, it argues that art is not only produced in “contact zones,” but has the potential to instantiate them.

Keywords East India Company, Amateurism, Lithography, Sir Charles D'Oyly, Colonial Sociability

Between 1828 and 1830, a remarkable series of lithographic albums were published on a private press in the city of Patna—the provincial capital of Bihar, and an important center for opium and indigo production in the East India Company's Bengal Presidency. Time and circumstance have scattered these albums across the globe (►**Circulation**): They now lie in the storage rooms of Indian museums; in the British Library's former India Office Collections; in the Yale Center for British Art; and, I suspect, in more private collections than those that I have so far been able to discover.¹ While uniformly entitled the *Behar Amateur Lithographic Scrapbook*, each album contains an idiosyncratic assortment of around thirty lithographs depicting Orientalist fantasies of India. Ancient mosques and temples crumble under the tangled canopy of banyan trees (see Fig. 2); portraits of proud, jewel-bedecked *Rajas* are bound beside coy 'native beauties'; age-worn boats meander down the lush banks of the river *Ganga*. One print captures a tiger hunt roaming through the dense Indian jungle, rifles bristling from the safety of an elephant's *howdah*; in another, the evening shadows lengthen over a pastoral scene of Bihari villagers, mud huts, and Gilpin-esque cattle.

These romanticized scenes were published by the Behar School of Athens, an amateur art society founded in Patna on July 1, 1824, "for the promotion of the Arts [...] and merriment of all descriptions" (*Proceedings* ca. 1824–1826, 1). The lithographs were produced on a private press established in the house of the society's president and Patna's Opium Agent, Sir Charles D'Oyly (1781–1845), and are predominantly his work and that of his wife Elizabeth, with a number of contributions by the society's vice president Christopher Webb Smith.² A voluminous manuscript detailing the various activities of the society, entitled *The Proceedings of the Behar School of Athens*, reveals that the Athenians took their foundational claim to "promote the arts" remarkably seriously. The members cultivated an explicitly professionalized self-image, emulating the successful strategies that metropolitan art institutions had used to raise artistic standards in Britain. The manuscript includes extensive details about the society's impressive

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- 1 I have been able to trace several editions in the BL: five manuscripts with little provenance (X445/1; X445/2; W35/3; X445/3; and a manuscript entitled *Selection from the Early Experiments of the Bahar Amateur Lithographic Press*); several albums associated with James Munro Macnabb, husband of Lady D'Oyly's cousin Jane Mary (X1168 A&B; X1169; W6938; and P.2481, a large manuscript with assorted prints); a collection associated with Lady D'Oyly (W.35); and a large manuscript entitled *Indian Scraps* with several prints associated with the Behar Lithographic Press (X.294). For these, see Losty 1989. A loose collection of prints is also in the BL collection (P1819-1822). I have additionally located several albums in collections around the world: one in a private collection in England; another in a private collection in Patna; several editions at the Yale Center for British Art; a version in Patna Museum, Patna; and a copy in the Victoria Memorial, Kolkata.
 - 2 No monograph has been devoted to D'Oyly, despite his talents being recognized in several biographical articles. See Losty 1989. Crucially, no scholar has comprehensively engaged with the most important resource related to the artist, the 339-page *Proceedings of the Behar School of Athens* (ca. 1824–1826).



Figure 2: Sir Charles D'Oyly: *Near Hadjepore*, printed c.1828–1830, lithographic print, published in: *The Behar Amateur Lithographic Scrapbook*, (Patna: Behar Amateur Lithographic Press, c.1828–1830).

collection of “Old Master” paintings, often stressing how such collections allowed Anglo-Indians to copy from “masterpieces” (►**Masterpiece**) and therefore practice the pedagogic methods traditionally taught in European art schools. It also mythologized the professional artist George Chinnery (1774–1852), the society’s patron, who in several panegyrics was framed as the “Sir Joshua of the East,” capable of raising the standard of Anglo-Indian painting in the same way that Sir Joshua Reynolds had raised the standard of Britain’s own national school through its institutionalization at the Royal Academy (*Proceedings* ca. 1824–1826, 255).

Comparing themselves to metropolitan institutions lent credibility to the Athenians’ claims to “call forth dormant abilities” (*Proceedings* ca. 1824–1826, 69), but it also aggrandized their dilettantism in the same way that discourses about “improvement” had legitimized the social value of metropolitan institutions—through the idea that a nation’s “school of art” (►**Nation**) reflected its prestige and power, alongside determining the morality or “politeness” of its public. In light of this, I think we should understand the *Scrapbooks* as an attempt to physically manifest the Athenians’ claims to have pioneered “the extension of intuitive talent and the cultivation of the Art in the East” (*Proceedings* ca. 1824–1826, 18). By distributing the albums, the Athenians publicly demonstrated the “polite and useful” talents they had fostered in Patna, thereby casting their activities as both beneficial to Anglo-Indian civil society, and, more abstractly, as a reflection of “national prestige.”

If this was the case, however, then the “improvement” discourse adopted by the Athenians contradicted one of the fundamental ideologies legitimizing British colonialism. For, officially, a public was never supposed to develop in Company India, even less a sense of nationhood. Still wary about the loss of the Thirteen Colonies, both MPs and the Company’s Court of Directors were well aware that any acknowledgement of a public or civil society in India meant tacitly accepting claims for greater civil liberties, such as constitutional rule or political representation. Such claims were anathema, and instead the peculiar authoritarianism of British rule in

India was underwritten by the conceit of “enlightened despotism”—widely considered a necessary evil for governing India’s “barbarous or semi-barbarous” inhabitants (Mill 1856, 322–323). Art’s ability to “civilize” society in India, potentially even to cultivate “civilized” Indians, compromised the supposed necessity of the East India Company’s unrepresentative, “despotic” rule.

This ideological disjuncture might not have been so stark if the society’s ambitions had been strictly limited to white, British officials, but the *Scrapbooks* show that this was not the case. Several of the prints bear signatures written in the Persian *Nasta’liq* script, revealing the names of two local Indian artists: Jairam Das, and his elder brother Seodial (see Fig. 3). The fact that both of these artists were included as signed contributors like any of the other “official” Athenians seems remarkable during a period in which Indian artists were widely believed incapable of drawing *ad naturam*. If the *Scrapbooks* were intended to manifest the Athenians’ foundational ambition to “cultivate the arts of the East”—indexically exhibiting the polite and useful skills that they had fostered amongst Patna’s local public—then they clearly demonstrated that local Indians like Jairam Das and Seodial could be incorporated within this “politer” society. Crucially, as the ability to naturalistically depict the countryside became increasingly associated with British “national character,” such prejudices became highly politicized. British politics, like British landscape painting, was seen to imitate “natural principles.” Unable to draw from nature, Indians were accordingly demeaned as lacking the aptitude for “rational” politics.³ Yet D’Oyly had explicitly challenged these racist stereotypes in the *Proceedings*, writing as a fictionalized visitor to his house in Patna, who, upon meeting Jairam Das and Seodial, reported:

Of the talents of these young men I had frequently heard; the eldest as a copyist of miniatures, and the youngest of taking original likenesses. Of the truth of the imitative limner’s proficiency, I made no doubt, but I confess, I did not so entirely give credence to the assurances of the younger brother, but, in one moment, he showed me the folly of unbelief, for he held in his hand an unfinished miniature of a young lady [...] whose lovely face was portrayed with so much life & spirit that I immediately exclaimed “upon my soul, that is excellent” (*Proceedings* ca. 1824–1826, 44).

Seen in relation to the political valences of naturalism during this period, D’Oyly’s presentation of Jairam Das—the youngest Indian artist—as an imaginative or creative agent, working freely from nature and unfettered from the servitude of copying other images, appears undeniably political. Indeed, after seeing his portrait miniature, D’Oyly’s character even

3 The infamous culmination of these stereotypes can be found in John Ruskin’s “Two Paths” lecture, published in Ruskin 1859.



Figure 3: Jairam Das: *Portrait of an Indian Man*, c.1828–1830, lithographic print, published in: *The Behar Amateur Lithographic Scrapbook*, (Patna: Behar Amateur Lithographic Press, c.1828–1830).

calls him “my new-made native friend” (*Proceedings* ca. 1824–1826, 44). “Improved” through art—potentially even “politically rational”—Jairam Das seems to have been given an ambiguous place within the sociability of the Behar School of Athens, and this sociability is materialized and publicized in the physical contents of the *Scrapbooks*.

Crucially, historians have defined the 1820s as a distinct “moment” of Liberal reform in India, a period in which the rights and nature of an Anglo-Indian public became an increasingly pressing concern (Bayly 2012). Notably, D’Oyly enjoyed personal connections to several important “reformers.” He had been close friends with the Radical journalist James

Silk Buckingham (1786–1855), whose portrait hung in his drawing room at Patna. Buckingham had reviewed D'Oyly's artistic publications in his *Oriental Herald*, recommending them to a "public" of "the tasteful and liberal among our Countrymen in the East" (Buckingham 1826, 316). Through his second wife, D'Oyly was related to the Liberal-leaning Governor-General Francis Rawdon-Hastings (1754–1826) who, as a series of scrapbooks and watercolor albums in the British Library reveal, was himself part of a wide social network with whom D'Oyly and the Athenians exchanged drawings, which included Colonel James Young—a friend of the Bengali reformer Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) and a notable Radical in his own right.⁴ If the Athenians' *Scrapbooks* thus publically asserted their institutional efficacy in "civilizing" a public in India, then it is possible that this public would have been conceived in the same way as these political reformers conceived it: as uniting Europeans and "civilized" Indians (like Jairam Das) into a cohesive social body able to self-determine, which deserved, and potentially even gained parliamentary representation in Britain. This is not to say, of course, that the Athenians were not involved in the colonization and economic exploitation of the subcontinent—they were. But I want to suggest that the *Scrapbooks* reveal the way individuals living "on the spot" in India could use art and the discourses associated with it to put forward a unique view of the country's future, one in which an Anglo-Indian civil society that challenged the logic of "enlightened despotism" could achieve—to quote a letter that D'Oyly sent to his godfather Warren Hastings—"an independence of spirit" (D'Oyly 1813).

To conclude this analysis on a broader theoretical point, I think that the *Behar Amateur Lithographic Scrapbooks* demonstrate two things about "transculturation" and the capacity of art historians to escape the analytical frame of the nation-state. The first is that art is not only produced in "contact zones" (Pratt 1991) but has the potential to *instantiate* them. Art objects formed the material basis for a number of social practices and affected these practices through their affordances: the specificities of their facture, genre conventions, or modes of reception. The collaborative *Scrapbooks* should therefore be understood as the material ground for a social practice through which colonized and colonizing individuals engaged with each other, generating the conceptual space in which ideas about who should be enfranchised within colonial civil society could be put into question. Secondly, I think it is only in reconstructing individuals' lives and lost social practices at the level of personal experience like this that we can add texture and nuance to the "big narratives" a transnational art history should strive to answer. In the instance sketched here, a remarkable archive demonstrates that a network of individuals living in North India responded to their unusual lives in the "contact zone" by adopting metropolitan discourses that actually challenged domestic conceptions of

4 These scrapbooks and watercolor albums include: WD 4043; Add. Or. 4302-6; WD 4402; WD 4401; P2984; P2481.

“national” sovereignty. The *Scrapbooks*, therefore, provide a counterpoint to various scholarly accounts of nineteenth-century art’s implication in the rise and consolidation of the nation-state, alongside a useful historical precedent for studying the current rise of transnational corporations or multi-state actors developing alternative forms of cultural sovereignty. As the issue of “regaining” sovereignty recently became one of the cruxes of the United Kingdom’s EU membership referendum, it is worth remembering that objects like the *Scrapbooks* reveal how the idea of national sovereignty was contested even as the British Nation-State crystalized into a recognizably modern form.

Figures

Fig. 1–3: Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

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