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Researching Exhibitions of South Asian Women Artists in Britain in the 1980s

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"Exciting a Wider Interest in the Art of India": The 1931 Burlington Fine Arts Club Exhibition

Article by **Brinda Kumar**
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Abstract
This article focuses on the largely understudied *Art of India* exhibition held at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in London in 1931, which was hailed at the time as the first event of its kind in the West. Featuring over three hundred objects, including many major works of art from important collections, as well as the recently discovered objects from the Indus Valley Civilization, the BFAC exhibition has nevertheless featured at most as a footnote in accounts of Indian art and its exhibition histories. Recuperating this early exhibitionary attempt at an historical survey of Indian art through archival material, its catalogue, and contemporary coverage reveals the exhibition's entanglements with art-historical and cultural concerns of the day, and its more enduring impact on narratives and debates about the contours of an emerging canon for Indian art. This article is accompanied by two downloadable resources: a complete copy of the *Art of India* catalogue (fig. 1), and a PDF compiled by the author that attempts to visually reassemble the exhibition through images of works in the (originally unillustrated) catalogue (fig. 2).

Even though it was hailed at the time as the first event of its kind in the West, and included several major works of art, the *Art of India* exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1931 has been eclipsed by the better-known *Exhibition of Art from India and Pakistan* staged at the Royal Academy of Arts, in Burlington House, in 1947–1948. In the annals of Indian art, the well-recognized and manifold significance of the latter exhibition is attributable in part to the fact that it marked the recent independence of two new nations and fêted their artistic heritage.[1] Nevertheless, repositioning the more modest 1931 exhibition in historical accounts of Indian art of this period, as well as in accounts of exhibitions of Indian art in Great Britain is instructive for understanding the importance and contributions of this largely overlooked early exhibitionary attempt at an historical survey of Indian art. Considering the paucity of subsequent awareness, or an appreciation of its contemporary significance notwithstanding, a closer examination of the exhibition reveals its important entanglements with prevailing art-historical debates and cultural priorities. In revisiting the exhibition by tracing its development through archival material, its catalogue, and contemporary coverage in newspaper and magazine articles, one can better

understand its form, impact, and limitations. The exhibition foregrounded collecting and connoisseurship, and its selective inclusions and omissions privileged narrative strands that would find echoes in the 1947 exhibition and beyond. Moreover, collections included in the exhibition would go on to find prominence in shaping narratives of Indian art in museum settings in Britain, India, and America, while the absence of the work of living artists points to the unease in reconciling the pre-modern and the modern in the emerging story of Indian art.

The Burlington Fine Arts Club (henceforth BFAC) was a private gentlemen's club for art collectors, founded in 1866. Its name was chosen as its original premises on Piccadilly stood opposite Burlington House, which the Royal Academy had recently occupied. In 1870, the club moved to a new location at 17 Savile Row. The club was formed with "the purpose of bringing together amateurs, collectors, and persons interested in the Fine Arts; and for the exhibiting and comparing the acquisitions made from time to time by the Members."[2] As Stacey J. Pierson has pointed out, in a recent study focused on the club and its history, the mounting of special exhibitions set apart the BFAC from other clubs of the day.[3] The exhibition of works of "past ages" were privileged, while the work of living artists were permitted in exceptional circumstances. Although the BFAC was a private club, access to the exhibitions it organized was apparently generously granted.[4] The BFAC was also known for publishing catalogues that accompanied such special exhibitions, often with introductory remarks from scholars in the field. While the primary focus of the BFAC remained European, the club had exhibited non-Western art from time to time. These included exhibitions of Japanese prints in 1888, the faience of Persia and the nearer East in 1907, early Chinese porcelain and pottery from 1910, and an exhibition of objects of Indigenous American art in 1920. The exhibition of the *Art of India* was thus arguably in keeping with established practice, and arose out of prevailing interest within the club—fourteen of the forty-seven lenders to the exhibition were members of the BFAC.

The *Art of India* exhibition was proposed and accepted as the summer exhibition for 1931 by the BFAC's general committee in July 1930, and an exhibition subcommittee was convened for its organization. Chaired by Archibald G.B. Russell of the BFAC, the committee included both club members and non-members: Lord Lytton, and the Marquess of Zetland, both former governors of Bengal; Laurence Binyon of the British Museum; Sir Atul Chandra Chatterjee, then high commissioner for India in Great Britain; Sir William Rothenstein, principal of the Royal College of Art; and Kenneth de Burgh Codrington. Of the committee, most men were (or had been) members of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) and many were also members of the India Society.[5] While their proximity to the colonial administration in India would be a practical advantage in securing several loans,[6] the close relationship between the India Society and the BFAC would ultimately land the exhibition in the midst of a broader controversy.

The *Art of India* exhibition opened at the BFAC premises on Savile Row on 11 May 1931 and closed on 1 August later that same year. During that period, it received 1,462 visitors, exclusive of members of the club. The exhibition was accompanied by a seventy-two-page catalogue featuring prefatory remarks by Archibald G.B. Russell and two introductions—one on Indian painting by Laurence Binyon and the other on Indian sculpture by Kenneth de Burgh Codrington. Both Binyon and Codrington also loaned works to the exhibition and were key figures in the India Society and discussions about Indian art at the time. These short essays were followed by a catalogue featuring details of all 333 objects in the exhibition, arranged in order of their display within the exhibition rooms at the BFAC.

Figure 1

Burlington Fine Arts Club, Catalogue of an exhibition of the art of India, London: Privately printed, 1931. Exhibition catalogue. Texts by Archibald G.B. Russell, Laurence Binyon, and K. De B. Codrington. Digital Facsimile courtesy of the Courtauld Institute of Art, department of Digital Media

In his preface, Russell observed,

> *The prestige of Indian Art has suffered, both in this country and generally in the Western world, from a want of knowledge of its finest achievements. It should be clear from the examples shown on the present occasion that it is an art rich in masterpieces of a marked individuality of character.*[7]

He added that the exhibition was aimed at:

> *exciting a wider interest in the Art of India by the display of a comparatively small number of objects … The objects chosen are principally from the sphere of sculpture and painting, since it was felt that in these arts the genius of India has most completely expressed itself.*[8]

While acknowledging that this was not a comprehensive artistic account, the emphasis on "masterpieces" in the "fine art" genres of painting and sculpture did nevertheless peg the nodal points around which a canon could and would be woven. The privileging of the fine art categories in museum collections, and in subsequent exhibitions, would further establish those canonical frameworks. From the early twentieth century, nationalist Indian art historians had sought to delineate the two main categories of fine arts (in contrast to a relegation to the decorative or industrial arts) for Indian art as painting—broadly meaning the individual manuscript folio—or sculpture—referring mostly to figural architectural fragments—in a bid to demonstrate parity with and intelligibility within the categories of Western art, and in Western institutions.[9]

In his essay on Indian painting, Binyon opened with the caveat,

> *An exhibition like the present can illustrate but partially and imperfectly the achievements of India in painting, since the great frescoes of the Buddhist period surpass in scope and grandeur all the later pictorial art, and these are necessarily unrepresented.*[10]

Binyon then breezed through a well-worn narrative of rises and falls; beginning with the rise of the great lyrical naturalism of Buddhist fresco painting at Ajanta and Bagh, through the decline of Buddhism itself. Hindu and Jain paintings were dismissed as being ruled by hieratic convention and "The art had fallen into a state, if not of atrophy, of somnolence, from which it could only be roused by some external stimulus."[11] The literary and artistic traditions from Persia were identified as responsible for this resurgence of artistic activity, which in turn gave rise to the Mughal school. The predominance of Mughal painting in the exhibition, coupled with the fact that by the 1930s there had been a fair amount of scholarship on the subject, saw Binyon most at ease in positively addressing this painting tradition.[12] On reaching the eighteenth century, however, he was once again on shaky ground. Although Binyon at one point suggested

that the sight of Persian miniatures in the possession of their patrons might have stimulated Rajput painters to evolve new modes of representations,[13] he quickly retrenched into an absolute distinction from Mughal painting.[14] He resorted to description that excessively evoked "emotion"[15] and escapism, which he equated with a feminization. He abruptly concluded the essay (and the story of Indian painting) with a dismissive account of Kangra painting from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.[16] Having established at the outset that Indian painting could never again reach the great heights of ancient India, Binyon did not find it necessary to bring the story forward to the twentieth century, when then contemporary artists from both the Bengal and Bombay schools had looked to the paintings at Ajanta and engaged with those traditions. Although some of these twentieth-century artists had been included in earlier exhibitions in London such as the Festival of Empire exhibition in 1910, they were *not* included in the BFAC exhibition (a controversial point at the time), and in Binyon's account even Kalighat paintings which *were* included in the exhibition did not apparently merit being addressed.

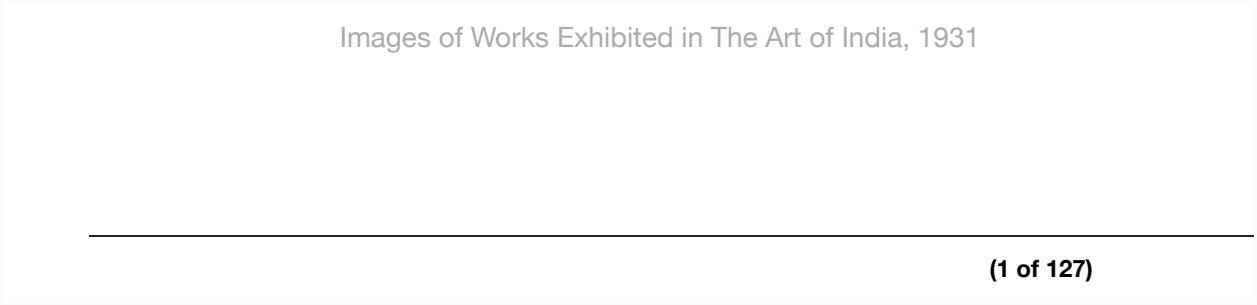

Figure 2

Images of works exhibited, The Art of India, held at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, London, in 1931. Images sourced by Brinda Kumar, with image files obtained by Maisoon Rehani. Note: Images with an asterisk (*) indicate a tentative attribution. Design by Tom Powell, 2019

Kenneth de Burgh Codrington's essay on Indian sculpture sketched out the progression of Indian artistic production in three dimensions beginning with the Mauryan archaeological remains, although he noted that they didn't have "anything in common with Indian sculpture proper".[17] That, he identified as truly beginning with the sculptural reliefs on the stupa railings at Bharhut and Sanchi from the second–first century BC, of which there was an example included in the exhibition (Cat. 318). Moving through the Kushan period and the sculptural traditions at Amaravati, he concluded with the development of Hindu sculpture in medieval India, favouring formal analysis over any iconographic interpretation, noting that: "The iconographical theory of the late medieval period has been allowed too much weight in the criticism of the sculptures themselves."[18] Codrington took the approach of identifying a succession of major dynasties that provided patronage, and brought the story to the eighth century, after which he said "the history of Northern and Southern India is not so closely knit together, the appearance of the Muhammadan being the disturbing factor…",[19] once again invoking the familiar narrative of iconoclasm and inevitable decline. Situating Codrington's text, one can glean his scepticism of methods increasingly used by younger scholars of the day such as the Austrian art historian Stella Kramrisch, and when two years later Kramrisch published her first book titled *Indian Sculpture* (1933), Codrington gave it a lukewarm review.[20] It is perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, that even though fifteen pieces from Kramrisch's collection were exhibited in the BFAC exhibition—by far the most sculptures from any single collection—Codrington did not refer to

them at all.[21] (Kramrisch's large collection of Indian sculpture would later be exhibited at and subsequently bought by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the 1950s).

While the narrative frameworks of the essays delimited the arc of Indian art in particular ways, the catalogue reveals that the actual works included in the exhibition extended beyond the chronological posts marked by the authors, with historical works being privileged for the most part. Chief among these was the inclusion of objects from the recent excavations at the Indus Valley sites of Harappa and Mohenjodaro that were loaned by the government of India, and it was the first time that these works were being seen outside of India. The government of India additionally loaned a few important pieces from the Indian Museum and the Sarnath Museum as well, while other regional government museums and princely states also loaned works. The secretary of state for India,[22] and the King of England were also lenders (Cat. 65). These sources are a further testament to the standing of the exhibition, which in turn was largely an extension of the prestige of its organizing members and advisory committee, and their influence with the powerful and influential colonial administration.

The exhibition was also significant in bringing together pieces from important private collections. Most prominent among these was that of Alfred Chester Beatty who by this period was also a leading collector of manuscripts including several important imperial Mughal paintings. A member of the BFAC, Beatty had been invited to serve on the exhibition committee, but on account of his travels to Egypt had to decline. Nevertheless, he instructed his librarian that: "We want to help make the exhibition a success; loan them anything they want."[23] Chester Beatty is identified in the catalogue as having loaned a total of forty-nine works, mainly several important Mughal paintings, including all nineteen folios from the Minto album—a mid-seventeenth-century muraqqa made for the Mughal emperors Jehangir and Shah Jahan. Most of the private collections represented at the BFAC exhibition would eventually find their way into museums: Chester Beatty's would be deposited in his eponymous library in Dublin, several works would find their way into the collections of the V&A, and a few in India as well. Three women also loaned works to the exhibition, including most prominently Stella Kramrisch. Other lenders included Ajit Ghose, a Calcutta-based collector from whose collections works would also feature prominently in the 1947 exhibition, and many of his pieces would end up in the National Museum in New Delhi too. The jewel of Ghose's collection was the recently discovered Akbari period Mughal manuscript the *Tarikh-i-Alfi*,[24] from which four folios were exhibited at the BFAC exhibition. Although he had initially been reluctant to sell individual folios from the manuscript piecemeal, by 1931 his views had altered and Ghose sold four different folios to the Freer Gallery in Washington DC,[25] while on the conclusion of the BFAC exhibition leaves from the manuscript were bought by the Cleveland Museum of Art (Cat. 258), the Art Institute of Chicago (Cat. 264), and the British Museum.[26] Finally, the ten Kalighat paintings exhibited came from the collection of the Bengal school artist Mukul Dey, then principal of the Government School of Art, Calcutta. Dey had been an early champion of Kalighat painting, having written about them in *Rupam* in 1926, and would introduce W.G. Archer—who was then an ICS officer, but would go on to become a leading scholar of Indian painting—to Kalighat art and artists. Dey's collection of Kalighat paintings was acquired by Archer in the 1930s, and in turn also ended up in the V&A (Cats 307 to 316).

While the catalogue was not illustrated, it meticulously listed all 333 works in the exhibition, sometimes with precise titles that have endured or that make the work easily identifiable, but in other instances specific works are harder to discern from their given titles alone or even when seen in conjunction with each lender. Although the lenders for individual works were identified

in the catalogue, the ultimate fate of some collections and works are more challenging to track. Therefore, the task of attempting to visually reassemble the exhibition through its catalogue in the illustrations accompanying this essay has entailed puzzling out the identity of specific objects through strategies including tracing their eventual depository locations and matching catalogue descriptions and dimensions with objects, linking accession numbers (especially in the case of the Indus Valley Civilization objects), and tracking references mentioned in the catalogue as well, cumulatively yielding a list of firmly identifiable and more speculatively identifiable objects. While this compilation of images of works in the catalogue thus remains partial and open-ended (and indeed it is hoped that emendations and additions to the visual list may continue in the future), this strategy nevertheless provides a supplementary tool towards achieving a fuller understanding of the scope of the exhibition, especially in the absence of photographs or descriptions of its installation. The BFAC catalogue did however indicate the locations in the club where the works were exhibited—in the main gallery, on the staircase, and in the writing room, suggesting that the volume was also meant to be used as an in-gallery guide to the objects on display.

The main part of the *Art of India* exhibition was in its grand gallery, which had been in place since the establishment of the BFAC at its permanent residence in Savile Row. Pierson has pointed out, that from the few images of inside the club, "the design of the space was traditional and very much reflective of the period room phenomenon that was gaining pace at the time the building was opened."[27] (fig. 3 and fig. 4) She adds that:

> *the Gallery was designed as a luxurious domestic interior and for the ordinary exhibitions, the space was a suitable and conventional backdrop for a range of objects that usually included furniture, pictures, and various works of art. For the special exhibitions, however, display cases were used which presented objects in a museum style … Such displays were curated and arranged systematically, bringing the museum into the Club both visually and conceptually.*[28]

Current images of the club premises on Savile Row indicate extensive renovations have replaced its early twentieth-century interiors and, unfortunately, I have thus far not found any illustrations or photographs of the inside of the *Art of India* exhibition, and the few contemporary accounts of the exhibition do not make particular mention of its display beyond the presence of cases in which the Mohenjodaro objects were featured. Such lacunae in the archival record serve to underscore the challenges in recuperating the histories of an ephemeral format such as the temporary exhibition, especially those on a more intimate scale. In the case of the BFAC, this eclipsing of its exhibitionary legacy is not a little paradoxical given the editorial from the *Burlington Magazine* that ruefully marked the dissolution of the club in 1951, noting in its closing statement that: "The Club has left its permanent mark on the history of exhibitions, and indirectly on the history of criticism."[29]

Figure 3

Interior of the Burlington Fine Arts Club, 17 Savile Row, 1921, photograph. Historic England (BL25311/001). Digital image courtesy of Historic England / Photograph Henry Bedford Lemere. All rights reserved.

Figure 4

Interior of the Burlington Fine Arts Club, 17 Savile Row, 1921, photograph. Historic England (BL25311/002). Digital image courtesy of Historic England / Photograph Henry Bedford Lemere. All rights reserved.

The *Art of India* catalogue, however, did indicate broadly that the exhibits were either upon or against walls or in cases while others were exhibited on the floor in the middle of the room. The catalogue was intended to be a directional and instructional guide in the space and listed the works in order (in the likely absence of individual object labels). A close reading of the volume reveals that while in fact the essays laid out a historic progression of art, the actual display itself was quite different, freely mixing works in different mediums, subjects, and from different eras. For example, the catalogue indicates that Mughal and Rajput paintings, architectural fragments, Buddhist Gupta sculpture from Sarnath, objects from Mohenjodaro, South Indian bronzes, North Indian jewellery, Kushan sculpture, Indo-Bactrian coins, sculptural figures and friezes from medieval temples, playing cards, Pala bronzes, and Jain manuscripts all kept company with one another in the exhibition's main gallery. This indifference to chronology pervaded the catalogue entries (in many, a date or era was omitted entirely) and the display, such that the visitor presumably saw millennia-old seals from Mohenjodaro, seventeenth-century Mughal paintings, and fourth-century Gandharan sculpture in quick succession (Cat. nos 41–66). At other times, sculpture and painting were more rhythmically alternated (Cat. nos. 157–173), presumably for visual interest, although a thematic connection is hard to determine, resulting in the visitor being lurched back and forth between centuries.

It seems that the approach taken by the organizers was akin to that of the recently concluded and much lauded *International Exhibition of Persian Art* at the Royal Academy at Burlington House in 1931 (and to which the BFAC had coincidentally loaned some of its display cases).[30] In his analysis of that display Barry D. Wood has observed,

> *Given the amazing range and variety of the artworks they had been able to procure, the organizers of the Persian Exhibition could have assembled the definitive "guided tour" of the history of Persian art. Yet what is striking about the descriptions and reviews of the show is how lightly the historical factor seems to have weighed as an organizational principle. Rather than a chronologically arranged exhibition designed to educate the view*

about the development of the arts in Persia, the wealth of artistic treasures on display was conceived as a decorative extravaganza that would bowl viewers over from the moment they set foot in the building.[31] *(fig. 5 and fig. 6).*

Discerning the display through the description in the catalogue, it would seem that the *Art of India* exhibition very much took a similar approach to the arrangement of the objects in the BFAC's spaces. The influence of the Persian exhibition on that of Indian art at the BFAC is noted by Pierson, "Possibly because of the prominence of the Royal Academy exhibition, the Club unusually decided to offer lectures to members about their own exhibition of Indian art around the same time."[32] These lectures were given by catalogue authors Binyon and Codrington, but were apparently not well attended.[33]

Figure 5

Gallery IV, the *International Exhibition of Persian Art* at the Royal Academy of Arts, 1931, colour transparency, 20.3 × 25.4 cm. Royal Academy of Arts (10/4764). Digital image courtesy of Royal Academy of Arts. All rights reserved.

Figure 6

Gallery III, the *International Exhibition of Persian Art*, at the Royal Academy of Arts, 1931, colour transparency, 20.3 × 25.4 cm. Royal Academy of Arts (10/4759). Digital image courtesy of Royal Academy of Arts. All rights reserved.

Outside of the membership of the club, a young Trenchard Cox (who would become the director of the V&A in the 1950s), also noted a connection between the two exhibitions. Writing a "Letter from London" for *Parnassus*, Cox observed:

Another important exhibition in London was that held by the Burlington Fine Arts Club of the Art of India, which achieved a certain popular attention since it followed closely on the heels of the exhibition of the Art of Persia. Although in no way as spectacular as its Persian precedent, this small exhibition was able to raise the level in this country of the prestige of Indian Art.[34]

The importance and success of the Royal Academy (Burlington House) exhibitions of the *Art of Persia* and the *Art of China* (that would take place in 1935) would be invoked when the need for a similarly grand exhibition for the art of India was being advocated.[35]

Impact and Controversy

In her research, Pierson has acknowledged that: "What is more difficult to assess is the general impact of the Club's exhibitions, both at the time of display and subsequently," adding that:

[t]he Club's India exhibition has received very little attention in the literature of the display of Indian art in Britain. It is often dismissed for either not including monumental sculptures … or for being "small" and not introducing "an overall portrait of Indian art".[36]

While the organizers pre-emptively acknowledged these limitations, largely for practical reasons of space,[37] and although the archival records *are* scant, there is nevertheless scope to determine certain shorter-term and longer-term effects of the 1931 *Art of India* exhibition. Contemporary press coverage can provide clues, and looking back at subsequent exhibitions that focused on India can indicate any formative impact the BFAC exhibition may have had.

Press coverage of the day nearly unanimously noted the ninety-nine Indus Valley objects as one of the highlights of the exhibition.[38] This was a truly unique aspect of the exhibition, and generated broader interest beyond the membership of the club alone,[39] spurred by the potential of this recent discovery to yield new insights into the history of India and establish new roots for the history of Indian art.[40] That the number of objects from the Indus Valley Civilization displayed in the 1947 exhibition dwindled to just forty-five was perhaps in some ways a response to the unmet promise in the intervening years of establishing significant links between the Indus Valley Civilizations and the subsequent great periods of Indian art. Even so, some of the works exhibited at the BFAC would go on to become icons such as the bronze dancing girl (Cat. 146) and the figure of the "priest king" (Cat. 114). Later, many of the Indus Valley objects would end up divided between collections in India and Pakistan, following the partition of the country in 1947, with some objects—such as necklaces (Cat. nos 30 and 33)—being quite literally split in two.[41] A similar fate would befall the works from the Central Museum in Lahore that in 1931 were lent by the Punjab government of undivided India to the BFAC exhibition.

In an unanticipated turn of events, however, it was the exhibition's exclusion of the works of living Indian artists that would prove controversial. The fact that the BFAC exhibition took place against the backdrop of a bitter rivalry between the then ascendant Bombay and Bengal schools of painting, and that neither of these contemporary art movements were included in the exhibition, or even addressed by Binyon in his essay, caused an outcry among the art establishment in India, particularly in Bombay. Partha Mitter has addressed the competition between the Bombay and Bengal schools in attaining supremacy in the 1920s and 1930s in representing modern Indian art.[42] This played out in the arena of both exhibitions of their work, but also in the garnering of lucrative commissions such as mural paintings for public buildings. At the same time as the BFAC exhibition, the murals for the interior of India House were also being completed by a set of young Bengal school artists in London. Gladstone Solomon and his Bombay School of Art faction were much chagrined by this decision, for although the Bombay school artists had secured the commission of the murals for the Imperial Secretariat in Delhi a few years earlier, they suspected favouritism towards the Bengal school on the part of the India Society, in leading to the commission being granted to their rivals. In a series of searing articles published in *The Times of India*, they lambasted individual BFAC members and the India Society for exercising inordinate influence in determining which aspects of Indian art would be highlighted in London. The BFAC exhibition became entangled in this public outcry against the India Society, for although the two organizations were separate, they clearly had cordial relations.[43] The Bombay press picked up on this intimacy and pre-emptively declared its wariness of the BFAC exhibition, noting the overlapping of members of the exhibition committee and the India Society and adding that:

The matter has now become clearer: the India Society has constituted itself as the only gateway of Indian Art into England—and a pretty narrow entrance at that. We are not in the

> *least surprised then to learn further that all modern Indian Art is excluded from this representation of "The Art of India." Presumably modern Indian Art will be sufficiently illustrated for the British public by Sir William Rothenstein's Bengal Class of Indian Mural Paintings now busily at work upon India House…*[44]

The chairman of the India Society defensively pushed back against the charge that Bombay had been overlooked, or that the society had been responsible for any mural commissions, and finally refuted any connection the society had to the BFAC exhibition.[45] Nevertheless, the connection was hard to shake, and beyond the controversy surrounding the India House murals, the absence of modern Indian artists from a proposed "Central Museum of Asiatic Art in London" then also being discussed by the India Society was also heavily criticized. The scope of the BFAC exhibition became caught up in the swelling outrage and well after the exhibition's conclusion newspaper articles continued to fulminate against the deficiency of the exhibition in reckoning with modern Indian art.[46] Members of the India Society who had played a role in the BFAC exhibition were accused in the press of inscribing a narrative privileging artists from Bengal as representing the continuance of tradition in modern India,[47] and foolishly overlooking Bombay.[48] Mitter has pointed out that a truce would finally be achieved only when the India Society organized the large exhibition *Modern Indian Art* at the new Burlington Galleries in 1934, when a comprehensive survey of all prevailing art movements in India would be attempted, with Gladstone Solomon as part of the organizing committee championing the cause of the Bombay school.

Conclusion and Aftermath

A closer examination of the BFAC exhibition reveals that it in fact had greater significance than has been fully appreciated. Its relative obscurity may stem from a number of reasons: that it was a temporary loan exhibition and many works were subsequently dispersed and lodged in different public or still-private collections; that the unillustrated catalogue had a limited print run aimed mostly towards the members and lenders; that there wasn't any (known) photography of the exhibition; and that it was organized by and held in a private club, which would itself would close in 1951.[49] Nevertheless, it is undeniable that it *was* an early attempt to present the material range and historical span of Indian art in an exhibitionary format. In spite of its somewhat delimited format, the exhibition ended up being part of a discourse on the visibility of modern Indian art, which did have a knock-on effect on subsequent exhibitions. While the display seems to have presented work as a visual cornucopia aimed at suggesting a more general sense of cultural richness, the catalogue presented the narrative arcs for Indian painting and sculpture with deep historic roots and aesthetic highlights—the masterpieces that were its focus—and in so doing demonstrated the maturity of a canonical framework. Indeed, the BFAC exhibition highlighted the urgent need for a more substantial exhibitionary reckoning with the long history and foundational character of Indian art. It laid out the possibility of what could be articulated on a more extensive scale and pointed to the potential realization of such an exhibition at the Royal Academy. Finally, the BFAC exhibition reflected the prevailing biases of art-historical writing and collecting practices of the preceding two decades, in which there was a predisposition towards historical works and a discomfiture with considering the then contemporary Indian practice as part of that continuum, with the Bengal school being the only *occasional* exception. It was this omission that elicited critique from living artists who sought to be recognized as the latest exponents with connections to a deep tradition of Indian art. This criticism doubtless confirmed the India Society's decision not just to mount a dedicated exhibition to modern Indian

art in 1934, but also made inevitable the inclusion of artists from the twentieth century when the much-anticipated survey exhibition, *Art of India and Pakistan,* finally took place at the Royal Academy in 1947.

While the 1947 exhibition had sixty-eight pieces under a section titled "Modern Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture", it would be a motley selection, ranging from a mix of paintings from the Bengal and Bombay schools, with a few works by Amrita Sher-Gil, to a random figuring of the new modernists and progressives.[50] Overall, the visual narrative was disjointed, and unlike the pre-modern works, which carried explanatory notes in the catalogue entries, the modern works were limited to caption details alone, and in a manner reminiscent of Laurence Binyon's elision of the subject in his 1931 essay on Indian painting, were not addressed in Basil Grey's catalogue text either. By the 1940s, the rivalries between the Bengal and Bombay schools that had dominated the theatre of Indian art in the 1920s and 1930s had cooled in vitriol, and were overtaken by the work of new generation of artists with different agendas. When the 1947 Burlington House exhibition travelled to Delhi and there became a foundation for the National Museum, the appendage of the modern was dispensed with altogether. As Tapati Guha-Thakurta notes on the matter of its exclusion,

> *Such an absence was easily naturalized in the event (as it is even in my discussion), as attention focused predominantly on celebrated notions of history and heritage that halted the narrative of India's achievements well before the modern age. So at the scene of the 1948 exhibition in New Delhi, viewers found themselves fully in the grip of an art historical past that effectively dislodged the present in staking its singular civilizational claims over the nation's art.*[51]

The modern would find a home elsewhere, in a separate but dedicated institution soon thereafter. Looking back, therefore, at the 1931 exhibition in the light of its much larger and better-known successor one can discern how it was an important precursor that established certain conceptual contours and cultural priorities for a reckoning with a survey of Indian art, while at the same time surfacing points of tension—in particular the evolving place of the modern, in relation to the art of the past—that arise when contending with art-historical canons in an exhibitionary space.

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About the author

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Footnotes

1. Kavita Singh, "The Museum Is National", *India International Centre Quarterly* 29, no. 3/4 (2002): 176–196.
2. Burlington Fine Arts Club Rules and Regulations, I, 1866, NAL archives, 200.b.110.
3. The BFAC was in existence until 1951 and active until 1940. During that time, they mounted over 110 formal exhibitions, with numerous other informal ones. For further information on the history of the BFAC see Stacey J. Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions, and the Shaping of Art History in London: The Burlington Fine Arts Club* (London: Routledge, 2017).
4. An early exhibition of the portraits and drawings of D.G. Rossetti attracted over 12,000 visitors, excluding members of the club. Although the Rossetti exhibition took place during the heyday of the club in the decades preceding the First World War, nevertheless, the Egyptian exhibition of 1921, organized in collaboration with the Egypt Exploration Society, also attracted figures of about 4,000 visitors.
5. The India Society was founded in 1910 by a number of private individuals in London in order to draw attention to the art traditions of India. Founding members included E.B. Havell and William Rothenstein, and would go on to include members in South Asia and America, including Rabindranath Tagore and Ananda Coomaraswamy. The society also brought out its own journal, *Indian Art and Letters* from 1925.
6. "The committee should add to their number someone who would lend weight to any applications made to or through the India Office." *Burlington Fine Arts Club: General Committee Minute Books, Vol: 1930–1951*, National Art Library (Great Britain). MSL/1952/1317-1322. (not paginated) Entry: July 1st, 1930. "Mr. Chester Beatty regrets that he is unable to join the Committee of the Art of India which had co-opted the High Commissioner for India the Marquess of Zetland and the Earl of Lytton". *Burlington Fine Arts Club: General Committee Minute Books, Vol: 1930–1951*. Entry: October 7th, 1930.
7. Archibald G.B. Russell, "Prefatory Note", *Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Art of India* (London: Privately printed for the Burlington Fine Arts Club, 1931), 7.
8. Russell, "Prefatory Note", 8.
9. "[T]he two "fine art" genres constituted here for India—sculpture and painting—are artificial categories. Both are literally composed of shards wrenched out of other, embedding, cultural phenomena that are crucial to their understanding or appreciation. Instead of viewing the objects *in situ*, Indian art history presents the architectural fragment as sculpture, and the detached manuscript folio as painting, in an approximation of a western model of these arts. For the nationalist art historians who fought for the entry of Indian artefacts into the enclave of fine arts, the strategy seems to have been the positing of an Indian tradition equivalent to the western." Shivaji K. Panikkar, Parul D. Mukherji, and Deeptha Achar (eds), *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art: (essays Presented in Honour of Prof. Ratan Parimoo)* (New Delhi: D.K. printworld, 2003), 352.
10. Laurence Binyon, "Indian Painting", *Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Art of India*, 9.
11. Binyon, "Indian Painting", 10.
12. Binyon's book co-authored with Thomas Arnold, *The Court Painters of the Grand Moguls* (1921) was often referenced through the BFAC exhibition catalogue.

13. "It is probable that the sight of Persian miniatures in the possession of their patrons stimulated Rajput painters and moved them to cast off the stiff conventions and formal gestures of tradition." Binyon, "Indian Painting", 12.
14. "The typical drawing of the Rajput school, however, owes nothing essential to Persian example; at the same time it has quite different aims from the typical Mogul painting." Binyon, "Indian Painting", 12.
15. "The Rajput painters, on the other hand, are inspired rather by emotional themes. They are interested in the things in life and nature which kindle emotion, and in the pictorial expression of that emotion." Binyon, "Indian Painting", 12.
16. "The Kangra paintings and drawings have a delightful freshness and joyous grace. In the later work of this school the sweetness cloys. The designs become enervated by continual repetition. But at their best the Kangra drawings have a special kind of feminine charm, unmatched elsewhere in art." Binyon, "Indian Painting",13.
17. Kenneth de Burgh Codrington, "Indian Sculpture", *Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Art of India*, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Art of India* (London: Privately printed for the Burlington Fine Arts Club, 1931), 15.
18. Codrington, "Indian Sculpture", 17–18.
19. Codrington, "Indian Sculpture", 15.
20. In his review for the *Burlington Magazine*, Kenneth de Burgh Codrington took issue with Kramrisch's approach on several counts, from her reliance on archaeology to trace the development of form, her choice of examples, to her grounding her interpretations in Indian philosophy as the basis for an aesthetics that was distinct from that of the West. He could not accept such a premise, as is evident in the exasperated tone of his review where he takes issue with Kramrisch's emphasis on abstract ideas and philosophy. Codrington further suggested that methodologically, Kramrisch's metaphysical framework could not contribute to art history: "It may be pointed out, both with regard to such a philosophy and western modernism, that there is a tendency on the part of such critics to substitute a rather indefinite appreciation of the artist's state of mind, for a definite appreciation of the works of art in question. It is, after all, the business of art-criticism to discuss works of art." See Kenneth de Burgh Codrington, "Review of: Indian Sculpture by St. Kramrisch", *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 64, no. 375 (1 June 1934), 292.
21. Furthermore, Codrington who was responsible for the organization of the Burlington House Exhibition of 1947 chose to only exhibit three works from the Kramrisch collection at that later exhibition.
22. These were primarily works from the Johnson collection housed in the British Library.
23. Hyder Abbas, "'We Want Quality and Condition' The Formation of Chester Beatty's South Asian Manuscripts and Miniatures Collection", in Allysa B. Peyton and Katherine A. Paul (eds), *Arts of South Asia: Cultures of Collecting* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2019), 113.
24. *History of a Thousand Years* was written for the Mughal Emperor Akbar in circa 1582–1588 and was likely illustrated just after circa 1588.
25. In 1930, Ajit Ghose had travelled to America, where he had visited the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Freer Gallery in Washington DC. He had been sufficiently impressed with the state of museums in America, that he was moved to speak on "The Need for Museums of Art in India" at the All India Oriental Conference in Patna in December 1930, and subsequently published the lecture in

special issue of the journal *Roopa Lekha*. By 1931, however, Ghose changed his mind, and that same year he offered four other folios to John Ellerton Lodge, director of the Freer Gallery of Art.

26. In the following decades, other folios would enter museum and private collections in India and abroad including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The San Diego Museum of Art and also the National Museum in Delhi.
27. Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions, and the Shaping of Art History in London*, 22.
28. Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions, and the Shaping of Art History in London*, 26.
29. "Editorial: The Burlington Fine Arts Club", *The Burlington Magazine* 94, no. 589 (April 1952), 97–99.
30. BFAC Minute Book entries from May 1931, shortly after the Royal Academy exhibition had concluded, note the making of a claim to the Persian Art Committee for damages to cases loaned to them, and the subsequent remittance received for the same. *Burlington Fine Arts Club: General Committee Minute Books, Vol: 1930–1951*, Entries: 5 May 1931 and 28 May 1931.
31. Barry D. Wood, "'A Great Symphony of Pure Form': The 1931 International Exhibition of Persian Art and Its Influence", *Ars Orientalis* 30, Exhibiting the Middle East: Collections and Perceptions of Islamic Art (2000), 116.
32. Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions, and the Shaping of Art History in London*, 150.
33. "During the course of the Exhibition the Committee arranged for Mr. Laurence Binyon to lecture on Indian Painting and Mr. K de B Codrington to lecture on Indian Sculpture and they regret that more members did not avail themselves of the opportunity to attend two such excellent lectures." *Burlington Fine Arts Club: general meeting minute books, 1866 Apr. 27–1951 Feb. 7*. by Burlington Fine Arts Club, National Art Library (Great Britain). MSL/1952/1323-1324. (not paginated) Entry: 31 May 1932.
34. Trenchard Cox "A Letter from London", *Parnassus* 3, no. 6 (October 1931): 12–14.
35. "Considerable interest has been aroused in London artistic circles by the reference made by Sir Samuel Hoare in his speech to the Asia Society on July 7 to project the holding of the Indian Art Exhibition at Burlington House on the lines of those which already successfully represent the art of Persia, Italy and other countries … Shortly after the closing of the Persian exhibition, the India Society approached the Royal Academy on this matter and found that the authorities showed interest and were ready to examine the possibilities of organizing a retrospective exhibition of Indian Art under their auspices…" from "Indian Art Exhibition at Burlington House: Encouraging Replies from India", *The Times of India* (1861–current), 23 July 1932; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Times of India*, 4.
36. Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions, and the Shaping of Art History in London*, 29.
37. "A comprehensive survey of Indian culture, if on grounds of space alone, could not be attempted … Selection was further limited by the fact that the artistic riches of the country are still largely unexplored. The question of size and weight, especially in the case of sculpture, was also a determining factor." See Russell, "Prefatory Note", 8.
38. "Of special interest are the objects in cases, lent by the Government of India, which were found at Mohenjodaro and Harappa, in the valley of the Indus. They are of uncertain date—1500 b.c. has been suggested—and represent a new type of art. Included among them are a number of seals in steatite, most beautifully carved intaglio with figures of men and animals and inscriptions in an unknown language, and two male heads (Nos. 104 and 105) of a facial type that cannot be related to anything else in Indian art." See "Art Exhibitions: The Art of

India", *The Times* (London, England), Friday, 15 May 1931; 14. "The loans from the Museum and Collections controlled by the Government of India include a series of the objects recently excavated in the Indus Valley, which stand in close relationship with the Sumerian culture and date from the 4th millennium b.c. The discovery of these objects opened a new chapter in the history of Indian art and their importance can scarcely be exaggerated. None of them have previously been seen outside India. The opportunity of studying them will accordingly be welcomed by students and lovers of art." See "The Art of India: Burlington Arts Club Exhibition", *The Times of India (1861–current)*; April 10, 1931; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Times of India, 5.

39. The 31 July issue of the journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) noted: "By invitation of the Burlington Fine Arts Club a Special Meeting was held on 9th June to view the exhibition of Indian Art at their house in Savile Row. Our Fellow, Mr. Codrington, who had been entrusted with a large share of the organizing of the exhibition, was present to answer questions and help in the discussion of knotty points, and the meeting proved to be not only very pleasant but also of much value to those interested in the art of India and, especially, its archaeology. The Indian Government had generously lent a considerable number of objects from the famous excavations of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, including examples of all the most significant of them, the privilege of examining which, comfortably and at leisure, was much appreciated." See "Loan Exhibition of Indian Art", *Man* 31 (July 1931) Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 136.
40. "The civilization of which they are the outcome is one of which until lately the existence had hardly been suspected, and it is likely that we are still only upon the threshold of discovery in this direction. A new light may well be shed upon the history of art which may prove to have an influence extending even to the Mediterranean." Russell, "Prefatory Note", 8.
41. One necklace (Cat. 33) was the focus of a recent BBC podcast "The Necklace That Divided Two Nations" as part of its "Museum of Lost Objects" programme https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p058gg29.
42. See especially "Contesting Nationalism: The New Delhi and India House Murals", in Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922–1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).
43. "Permission was given to the India Society to meet in the Club gallery on Wednesday, May 13th at 5 o'clock" – *Burlington Fine Arts Club: General Committee Minute Books, Vol: 1930–1951*, Entry: 5th of May 1931.
44. And continuing, "But even the long-suffering Bengal reader, who with some little acquaintance with the methods of the India Society expects nothing for Bombay from that quarter, will be induced to boggle at this rehash of old masters and archaeology—even though Sir William Rothenstein's Moghul paintings, which must now be getting a little shop-soiled, are to be once again paraded before the wondering British public, and though Calcutta connoisseurs, Dr. Stella Kramrisch, and Mr. Ajit Ghose, are generously reinforcing Bengal in London." See "The India Society Again", *The Times of India (1861–current)*; 1 April, 5.
45. "As regards the exhibition of Indian art which has been organised by the Burlington Fine Arts Club, to which one of the articles refers, we may point out that the India Society has no connection with this exhibition." Francis Younghusband, "The India Society: No Lack of Interest in Bombay School", *The Times of India (1861–current)*, 20 May 1931, 8.
46. The attacks continued, and by October that year, the Bombay Society still seemed to be smarting, sarcastically noting as yet another article in *The Times of India* that the Society was

"innocent of the recent Exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Clube of "The Art of India"—with the Indian artists left out!" "The Great Illusion", *The Times of India (1861–current)*; 2 October 1931, 6.

47. Finally in response to an exhibition of Indian art at the British Museum, largely drawn from the museum's own collections, later that year, the attacks became personal once more, "This is the second Exhibition of Indian Art in London this year. Its predecessor was the notorious 'Art of India' Exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club; and it is said that the main credit for both is due to Mr. Lawrence Binyon … Certainly one seems to detect the Binyon touch in some of the Press descriptions of this exhibition. 'There are also fine examples of stone reliefs from Gandhara and statues of the Mathura school, which with Mukul Bey's [Dey's] excellent copies of the magnificent paintings in the Bagh and Ayanta [Ajanta?] caves, illustrate the creative power and extraordinary vitality of the Hellenistic formula at the service of Buddhist inspiration in the course of the first few centuries A.D.' So the latest criticism brackets Ajanta Painting with Gandhara Sculpture, and both with the Hellenistic formula! But let not the Havellites in our midst despair. The inevitable consolation prize still goes to Bengal of course —last but by no means least in the series of India's historic schools of painting. We are told that 'New lide began to quicken Indian tradition, and the Schools of Rajputana, Kangra, Himalaya and those allied with them produced Art purely Indian in feeling, lyrical in mood, idyllic in theme, exquisite in colour, fluid in line, and musical in motive.' And what is known as the Calcutta School carries on the old tradition thus revived. So 'the wheel has come full circle' once again as it always does. But it really seems a pity that when the Calcutta School can so easily annex Rajputana and the Himalayas, it should have omitted to exhibit Bombay among its captives in the London Press." See "Indian Art for the R.T.C.", *The Times of India*, 28 October 1931.
48. Bombay artists were still smarting the following year when they chided Codrington for not having engaged with contemporary artists on his visit to Bombay, noting: "But we may assure Mr. Codrington, with an affability equal to his own, that his ignoring the most important movement in art which the British Empire has seen since the Pre-Raphaelite movement in England when he was in India and the opportunity lay before him, was a faux pas which his reply entirely fails to justify." See "Mr. Codrington's Reply, *The Times of India*, Oct 11, 1932".
49. "At a special general meeting of the Burlington Fine Arts Club, held at the National Gallery on February 7, 1951, under the Chairmanship of Lord Ilchester, it was reluctantly decided that the Club must go into voluntary liquidation." "Editorial: The Burlington Fine Arts Club", *The Burlington Magazine* 94, no. 589 (April 1952), 97–99.
50. Zainul Abedin, K.H. Ara, Nandalal Bose, N.S. Bendre, Dhanraj Bhagat, M.A. Chughtai, K.K. Hebbar, S.H. Raza, Jamini Roy, D.P. Roy Chowdhury, Amrita Shergil, Abanindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore, and Rabindranath Tagore, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 343.
51. Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 176.

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