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“Globalizing” Early Modern South Asian Art History

Deepthi Murali

University of Illinois at Chicago

Abstract

This essay looks at the concept of transcultural or global art history and explores the application of it within early modern South Asian art history. It briefly traces current scholarship in the field, defines the transcultural/global analytical method, and discusses some of the crucial points to understand how to make early modern South Art history “globalized” and why it is important to undertake this project.

Introduction

In the last few decades, art historians have become increasingly concerned with de-centering the discipline of art history from its historical origin point, Europe, and to situate it in a format that is more inclusive and “global”. The movement is a significant turning point in the field, one that owes a great deal to the Said-ian critique of Eurocentric scholarship and subsequent strengthening of cross-disciplinary systems such as postcolonial and feminist studies. In art history, it has given rise to sub-fields like the New Art History in UK and the social history of art in the US. Significantly for South Asian art history, historian Thomas Metcalf (1989) pioneered the project of studying British artistic encounters in colonial India, that aimed at “multi-centering” the metropole by bringing to light complex networks that connected visual cultures of metropole and colony. More recently, art historians like Natasha Eaton (2013) have studied art of the Empire outside the metropole, and have forcefully complicated prevalent binaries like metropole-colony, center-periphery, west-east, thus questioning set hierarchies within the discipline. Her work deeply engages with Indian architecture, art, and landscape, while working within the purview of British art history. In such scholarship, we begin to see a turn towards investigating the *globality* of early modern South Asian art history.

What is “Globalizing” Early Modern South Asian Art History?

At its center, the project of “globalizing” art history is a call for inclusivity, and to an extent, a project to unify disciplinary practices and theoretical approaches that will allow more avenues for comprehensive practices of scholarly debates and collaborations (Carrier, 2008; Elkins, 2007; Margolin, 2005). However, the onus of this paper is to insist

that a truly global art history need only be a system of analysis that is inclusive and dialogical in its construction. The insistence is not on a fixed few approaches to studying certain types of artworks; rather, it is in studying artworks through multiple geographical, disciplinary and conceptual lenses.

Art in early modern South Asia was one of the most important nodes of contact between courtly elites and artisanal classes. Not only is it a product of these socio-cultural exchanges (Aitken, 2010), art acted as agents in these interactions (Kauffman and Dossin; 2015). The political volatility of this period and growing trade networks also provided spatiotemporally porous environments through which ideas, technology, artists, and patronage moved creating complex networks. Examples of such artistic fluidity can be seen at local, regional, and transcontinental levels in the Indian subcontinent at this period, and scholars like Catherine Asher, Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Ebba Koch, Sumathi Ramaswamy etc. have explored this with great success. In learning from these scholars, the project of “globalizing” early modern South Asian art history thus involves investigating: (i) art as part of a socio-cultural system; (ii) non-permanence and fluidity of artistic practice including both corporeal and philosophical considerations; and, (iii) innate *transculturality* of early modern South Asian art.

What does “Globalizing” Early Modern South Asian Art History Entail?

In her fascinating study of Bijapuri art and architecture, Deborah Hutton (2004) argues that both Vijayanagara and Bahmani kingdoms were intrinsically multicultural, and 16th century Bijapur inherited this quality from its predecessors. She defines multiculturalism as a process of “intercultural exchange” rather than “the coming together of cultural traditions” (Hutton, 2004; 19). Hutton’s approach avoids the pitfalls of seeing early modern visual cultures as syncretic—instead of studying a particular visual culture as a product of two or more parent cultures, Hutton seeks to tease out the complexities of transcultural processes that produce, and, are in turn, produced by these interactions. Rather than treating art history as instances of cultural production, the method of globalizing art history considers it as a *process*. In this approach, there does not exist an “authentic” prior culture, or unquestioned continuity of traditions. The scholarly analysis is not predicated in digging through stylistic or provenance analysis to find the original or starting point of an idea, understanding fully well that such a point of reference is illusory. “Globalizing” early modern South Asian art history would thus entail changing the overall scholarly outlook from focusing on *instances* of interaction to the *process* of interactions. Terms like multiculturalism, transculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and hybridity become key concepts in such critical analyses.

The Innate Transculturality of Early Modern South Asian Art

For early modern South Asia, roughly 1450-1850, the transcultural approach is ideal. From the rise and fall of many powerful kingdoms, to the re-grouping of smaller chiefdoms and arrival of new political entrants, sociopolitical transactions in the Indian subcontinent in

this period was highly volatile. As the powerful Vijayanagara empire disintegrated in the South, the Mughals were rising in power to become one of the most potent early modern empires in the world. European East India Companies were trying to make inroads into coastal India, while internecine struggles were already part of Rajput, Deccan, and Nayaka kingdoms. In terms of art, these political upheavals signaled movement of ideas and artists on a large scale. These interactions were subject to a wide range of factors including migratory pattern of artists (did a couple of them set out on their own or did a family of artists re-settle); patronage (which artistic styles were in favor at the local court); and technology (availability of raw materials for pigment, popularity of different types of media in each location—murals, sculpture, miniatures etc.). Such movement did not entail unchecked syncretism or erasure of styles; rather, different styles came together in diverse ways to produce complex visual cultures that were truly localized (see Aitken, 2010). I argue that such localized artistic output, in early modern South Asia was intrinsically global—it was informed by cosmopolitan artistic practices and complex social and political transcultural interactions.

‘Global’ and ‘Local’ are Not Contradictory Terms

Indian art history (as with art history in general) has relied on categorizing art based on time period and geographic regions. This assumes that art within a region is bound by its boundaries and therefore “authentic” or “pure”, and that historically, art is bound within a rigid set of traditions that has been continuously upheld, and more problematically, ‘timeless’ (Guha-Thakurta, 2004). Scholarship concerned with global art history has tried to refute these traditional boundaries. Unfortunately, in that attempt, an opposing and contradictory universalizing quality has become part of the global approach. One key factor about globalizing early modern South Asian art history is to understand these challenges. To this end, globalizing art history requires us to challenge notions of the local and global as separate entities and start pursuing the local in the global and vice versa, sometimes referred to as “glocal” (Robertson, 1992; Minnissale, 2007). Simultaneously, as Monica Juneja has pointed out, it is important to study the local and the global as processes of transculturation, which recognizes that through the flow of people, objects, and ideas, art is never truly either local or global. It can be both, and it can offer resistance partly to either (Juneja interview, 2013: <http://trafo.hypotheses.org/567>). Thus, the local and the global are not contradictory terms. They are most effective when studied as separate as well as diffused entities, and this approach is bound to provide considerable scholarly dividends, and will continue to raise complex questions about our understanding of early modern South Asian art as well as aspects of transcultural encounters.

What is the Transcultural/Globalizing Method?

The transcultural method begins with seeing art forms as necessarily made of complex identities. It involves investigating art from more than one perspective. For example,

Dutch burgoman chairs made in South India were used by Europeans in the subcontinent as well as exported to Southeast Asia and Europe. Later, these types of chairs were produced in Southeast Asia and re-exported to India.^[i] They were made of local wood, and in some exceptional cases, veneered with ivory. Many now exist in various museum collections in the world. The study of such furniture requires a multimodal approach that looks at the production of the chair in various regions, their mobility in terms of material, technology, and final product, and their use in various regions around Eurasia. In this method, transculturality is built into the way one approaches the art form itself. The transcultural method initiates scholarship that does not rely on one set of archival sources since studying such diverse interactions and networks requires the use of multiple archives and records that sheds light from production, movement, and consumption standpoints. Thus, the method itself contributes to “globalizing” the nature of art history as a discipline.

Why is “Globalizing” Early Modern South Asian Art History Important?

Whether it is the Mughals or one of the Nayaka kingdoms in the South, art histories of these courts are characterized primarily by their transcultural interactions. It is impossible to talk about Mughal miniatures without discussing its Iranian connections. Many scholars discuss Nayaka art as successors of the Bahmani-Vijayanagara courtly art. Yet, very few scholars have applied transculturality as an analytical “method” in their research. Due to this, there is no systematic understanding of transcultural artistic encounters at the micro-level (Juneja interview, 2013). Understanding transculturality at the local level is key to furthering knowledge of not only art but also the sociopolitical conditions of the regions in which they were made.

Early modern South Asian art is replete with art objects such as the chairs mentioned above that are transcultural at all stages of their “social lives”. Research on art from this period barring certain aspects of popular “high art” such as Mughal miniatures is scant. Some regions of the subcontinent like Malabar and Coorg in the South or Sino-Indian regions to the northeast continue to be neglected. Multiple archives exist with information on early modern art in South Asia as well as in Europe and other countries. These archives, at present, are not accessed or used to their fullest extent possible as well. A globalized approach will ensure that study of early modern South Asian art is diversified in terms of content and concepts.

Concerns

It has to be pointed out that transculturalism or globalism, as it has been applied to contemporary global art history, has proved successful at looking beyond linguistic partitions and nation-state boundaries (Jeffrey and Minnissale, 2007; Juneja, 2013). For South Asia, which is arguably anchored and fraught with such divisions, the transnational focus of the globalizing approach could be unpopular outside academia. Further, such an approach within art history will undoubtedly call into question what we presently know

of political and economic histories of various regions within the subcontinent. Therefore, it runs the risk of being brushed off as revisionist if not thoroughly researched and presented with ample supporting evidence. Politically too, research, that by definition, ignores pre-formed regional, national, or international boundaries can be problematic. Such delineations may also make it harder to access materials and data especially when studying art of border-zones.

Conclusion

Nonetheless, a globalized early modern South Asian art history is an ideal solution to the problem of paucity of scholars and scholarship in the field. With this approach art historians can choose to study art made or used or moved through different regions and time period thus collapsing categories prevalent in the discipline. This allows art historians to work outside their “specializations”, and contributes to increased scholarship on lesser-known regions that may not have dedicated group of scholars working on them. This approach is already reaping dividends in contemporary South Asian art history (see Juneja, Minnissale). The move to globalizing early modern South Asian art history must begin by taking these pioneers as worthy examples.

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Note

^{lii} For more precise discussions, see Jan Veenendaal (1985).

Deepthi Murali is a PhD student, Department of Art History, University of Illinois at Chicago.
