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Liza Oliver, *Art, Trade, and Imperialism in Early Modern French India*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019. 260 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. €99.00 (hb). ISBN 978-9-4637-2851-5.

Review by Elizabeth Cross, Georgetown University.

Liza Oliver's exciting new book, *Art, Trade, and Imperialism in Early Modern French India*, brings an art historian's perspective to a growing field of French imperial history. In art history as in political and economic history, Oliver acknowledges that the French presence in India has long been neglected, in part due to the challenges presented by thinking through the very nature of French imperial contact with the Indian subcontinent. The early modern French presence in India resembles neither the later British imperial hegemony of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so often invoked in South Asian studies, nor the ruthlessness of French imperial conquest in other parts of the world. Drawing on Sanjay Subrahmanyam's observations about the nature of Indo-European exchange in the early modern period, Oliver seeks to investigate the modalities of artistic production in what Subrahmanyam calls an "age of contained conflict" (p. 29). By reading diverse forms of material culture and artistic production as an archive--from textiles to scientific illustrations to architecture--Oliver produces an interlocking series of compelling arguments about the multidirectional and synthetic nature of "Franco-Indic aesthetic entanglements" (p. 31).

The book's strongest and most compelling contribution appears in chapter 1, in which Oliver convincingly argues for the weakness of orientalism as a conceptual category. Edward Said's *Orientalism* posited that early modern and modern Europeans intentionally constructed an abstracted eastern other for the purposes of facilitating Western political, intellectual, and cultural domination over the non-West.[1] Although much of the material culture that Oliver describes--works of art depicting aspects of Indian life for European consumers--could be identified roughly as orientalist, she does not see in these material productions "a politically motivated discourse of othering to reify the binaries of East and West" (p. 62), but rather simple, artistic exoticism. Abstractions, generalizations, and "geographic imprecision" (p. 61) could equally be a result of the complicated realities of Indian Ocean trading routes that obscured the true geographical origins of goods.[2] As Oliver demonstrates, Chinese goods (including the lacquered screens known as Coromandels) frequently came to France via ports in India, meaning that the coveted styles of *le goût chinois* were often mistaken for Indian aesthetics, rather than Chinese (p. 63). *Banyans*--a Japanese word for a *robe de chambre* generally made of Indian cloth--were associated with the culture of the Armenian traders who brought them to France; and *siamoises* (another term for an Indian textile) obtained their French nomenclature because of their

association with the Siamese ambassadors presented at Versailles in 1686 (pp. 86-87, 68). In other words, Oliver argues, Western abstractions about the East were often engendered by the complexity of the commercial and cultural circumstances by which these styles became known to French consumers—and in these circumstances, authority about taste and prestige lay principally in the hands of Asian intermediaries.

Chapter 1 articulates this intervention clearly through a focus on textiles, particularly those known as *kalamkaris*. Although this term was never adopted in either French or English commercial usages, it referred to the types of painted cotton textiles known in Europe as *toiles peintes*, calicoes, or *indiennes* (p. 39), whose popularity frequently made them the subject of bans and restrictions about their consumption. Oliver sees in their stylistic adaptation for European markets not “the destruction of a South Asian aesthetic system . . . [but] a synthesis of classical, rococo, and Coromandel aesthetics” (p. 52). The mania for *kalamkaris* in Europe, she argues, emerged because of a European understanding of their role as markers of economic and political prestige in Asian societies. She concludes this thread with familiar arguments about the widespread contraband traffic in Indian textiles in Europe, as well as arguments about their importance in the Atlantic slave trade, in which European traders once again found themselves beholden to the specific tastes and expectations of the African consumers who purchased them.[3] However, Oliver is at her best in this chapter in offering new readings of famous French portraits featuring Indian textiles in unexpected ways, showing how *kalamkaris* and plain white muslins were depicted in the wardrobes of Madame de Pompadour (pp. 72-73) and Marie-Antoinette (in the controversial 1783 Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun portrait), and in scenes depicting the sartorial choices of free women of color of the Caribbean (pp. 84-85). The use of textiles that served as status markers in the Indian Ocean world could strikingly transcend class and race in the Atlantic world.

Chapter 2 applies her argument about aesthetic synthesis to the question of knowledge transmission, specifically as it related to the gathering, acquisition, and printing of botanical texts and images. For Oliver, images of plants—alongside the contents of the texts for which they were produced—illustrate how “the knowledge Europeans acquired of Indian botany was premised on [Indian] aesthetic choices, medicinal practices, and relationship[s] to the natural world” (p. 98). Through the first half of the eighteenth century, she argues that one finds visual and textual evidence of the “mutual intelligibility” (p. 100) of European and South Asian systems of learning and knowledge categorization, a dynamic she traces back to the works of early Portuguese and Dutch scholars. The *Jardin de Lorixa* (ca. 1695-1725) by Nicolas l’Empereur shows clear visual and intellectual legacies of these early works, not only because it makes use of Ayurvedic natural epistemologies, but also because the scientific images produced in the text clearly derived from the techniques and styles of local *kalamkari* painters. Later works by British scholars such as William Roxburgh, on the other hand, ruthlessly imposed “the visual and textual conventions of European science” (p. 125). In other words, the cultural, scientific, and visual syntheses of early European botanical work in India were challenged and erased by increasingly statist, authoritarian British practices at the start of the nineteenth century. To Oliver, this represents not only a reification of the boundaries between the artistic and the scientific, but also the disenfranchisement of “South Asians as agents in defining the value of their own medical and botanical traditions” (p. 148). This is a point that merited further discussion. Oliver might have illuminated how these changes in artistic and epistemological practices reflect upon broader arguments—by the late Christopher Bayly, among others—about the transformation of British imperial rule in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[4]

The last two chapters pivot towards the theme of “shifting cultural and social relations between South Indians and the French” (p. 159). Chapter 3 largely focuses on Ananda Ranga Pillai, *dubash* to the powerful French Governor Joseph-François Dupleix. Oliver places textual accounts, including Ranga Pillai’s well-studied *Diary*, alongside analyses of the material culture he and his family left behind in portraiture and architecture. Ranga Pillai came from a storied Hindu family long involved in French political and commercial ventures, whose faith rendered its members targets for zealous Jesuit missionaries, as evinced by the Nayiniyappa affair recently studied by Danna Agmon.<sup>[5]</sup> By examining portraits of Ranga Pillai and other family members, Oliver shows how they sought to visually project their Hindu identity, their economic status as merchants, and their political authority under both French and Indian political auspices. Members of the family were frequently painted with traditional symbols of South Asian political power, and Ranga Pillai even invented a faux royal lineage for himself so as to claim traditional, local authority separate from Dupleix’s favor. Through these elaborate forms of visual and rhetorical claims-making, Ranga Pillai sought to “synthesize French and South Indian understandings of power” (p. 175), as evidenced by the very architectural style of his home. In merging elements of French neoclassicism with a traditional South Asian layout, Oliver sees his home as representative of the symbiosis and mutual reinforcement, rather than opposition, of Ranga Pillai’s own authority and French authority.

The final, rather fractured chapter 4 describes both the destruction and the reification of this symbiotic relationship in the mid-eighteenth century. Echoing Agmon’s arguments, Oliver points to tensions between “commercialism and evangelism” (p. 186) in the imperial project as she examines the rise in “Jesuit iconoclasm of Hindu religious imagery” (p. 185). These attacks against Hindu practices, imagery, and temples in Pondicherry reached their apex under Dupleix’s governorship; Ananda Ranga Pillai himself kept accounts of Jesuit desecrations of temples and the defacement of Hindu statuary. This account of Jesuit iconoclasm coexists uneasily in this chapter alongside a discussion of the practice of gift exchange between French military elites and Indian princes with whom they sought to cultivate military alliances. In this section, Oliver reinscribes European actions fully into “indigenous structures and circuits of exchange [employed] to gain diplomatic footholds in the region” (p. 216), showing how—in a manner that anticipated later British efforts to do the same—receiving concessions and noble titles that placed French authorities under Mughal power became in turn a method of “supplant[ing] it” (p. 212).

The Epilogue ends on a highly ambiguous note, returning to the theme of the first chapter—textiles—by discussing how reclaiming the production of textiles from European and American industrialists became a key attribute of later Indian nationalist politics. But it does little in the way of trying to bring together the discrete arguments and threads pursued in the four preceding chapters. The book is often reticent as to how these stories about visual representations and material culture mapped onto the evolution of, and conflict among, imperial ideologies, metropolitan projects, and local realities. Oliver’s reliance on problematic ideological categories like “mercantilism” or “liberalism” throughout do little to clarify the matter. But perhaps the greatest ambiguity in the book is the question of what, if anything, of the repertoire of practices she describes was specifically French. While she leaves hanging a tantalizing thread about how imperial contexts and rivalries mattered to the creation of the idea of the French “nation” (pp. 210-12), Oliver acknowledges that most of the practices described here just as easily applied to other early modern Europeans who also largely left intact “local practices of governance and distributions of power” (p. 175), preferring to coopt local elites as intermediaries rather than challenge their authority outright. In other words, Oliver’s analysis often speaks less to

phenomena specific to French India itself, than to a repertoire of cultural-political practices shared among all Europeans in early modern India—practices that Oliver rightly shows were highly influenced (if not outright dictated) by the local norms into which these European officials were trying to embed themselves. Perhaps in reminding scholars of these convergences, Oliver's most significant contribution here is to implicitly call for comparative work and scholarly synthesis of a very different genre.

## NOTES

[1] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

[2] Such as in the geographically imprecise definition of “India” offered in Louis de Jaucourt, “L’Inde,” in Denis Diderot and Jean d’Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, 8:660–62 (Paris: Briasson, 1753).

[3] On these themes of prohibition and the role of Indian textiles in the slave trade, a highly selective recent bibliography would include Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Felicia Gottmann, *Global Trade, Smuggling, and the Making of Economic Liberalism: Asian Textiles in France, 1680–1760* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and Anne Ruderman, “Intra-European Trade in Atlantic Africa and the African Atlantic,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 77 (2020): 211–44.

[4] C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London: Longman, 1989).

[5] Danna Agmon, *A Colonial Affair: Commerce, Conversion, and Scandal in French India* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

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