Francois Balthazar Solvyns: A Flemish Artist in Bengal, 1791-1803

Calcutta in the late eighteenth century was an unlikely place for a Flemish marine artist, born to a prominent Antwerp merchant family. For François Balthazar Solvyns (1760-1824), however, it was to be his home for thirteen years, between 1791 and 1803. The product of his work here, a portrait of the Hindus in a collection of more than 250 etchings, would consume his life. With the commitment of an ethnographer to faithful representation and with the sensibilities of an astutely observant artist, Solvyns combined the informational and the aesthetic in an unrivaled visual account of the people of Bengal.

In portraying the suing or bin, Solvyns also uses the term ‘charity’s’ for instrument, a usage limited to Bengal. There are 36 etchings depicting musical instruments, most representing the first illustration of the instrument and the manner in which it is played.

By Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr.

A young artist in the Austrian Netherlands, Solvyns had been under the patronage of the Hapsburg governors, but political upheaval in 1789 soon left him adrift, and in 1790, he set sail for India to seek his fortune. From the 1760s onwards, India, and Calcutta particularly, had begun to attract European professional artists. By 1791, when Solvyns arrived in Calcutta, a number of painters, of varying talents, had already spent time in Bengal. The most prominent were Tilly Kettle, John Zoffany, William Hodges, and Thomas and William Daniells. Where Kettle and Zoffany largely pursued portraiture in its painting naively and naively, British merchant-officials and Indian princes, Hodges and the Daniells portrayed India in its natural beauty and ‘scenic splendours’. It was for Solvyns to portray Indians, the people of this fabled land in their customs, manners, and dress, in their occupations and festivals.

In his early years in Calcutta, Solvyns worked as something of a journeyman artist and was even employed for a time in decorating coaches and palanquins, but in 1794, he announced his plan for A Collection of Two Hundred and Fifty Coloured Etchings: Descriptive of the Manners, Customs and Dresses of the Hindus. The collection was published in Calcutta in a few copies in 1796, and then in greater numbers in 1799. Divided into twelve parts, the first section, with 66 prints, depicts ‘the Hindostans, with their professions’. The sections following thereafter portray servants, costumes, means of transport (such as carts, palanquins, and boats), modes of smoking, fakirs, musical instruments, and festivals.

The project proved a financial failure. The etchings, by contemporary European standards, were rather crudely done, and they did not appeal to the vogue of the ‘picturesque’. In 1803, Solvyns left India for France and soon redid the etchings for a lavish folio edition of 288 plates, Les Hindous, published in Paris between 1808 and 1814 in four volumes. Even these sumptuous volumes failed commercially, victim to the unpopularity of the Napoleonic wars and to the sheer cost of the publication. When the Kingdom of the Netherlands was formed in 1814, Solvyns returned to his native Antwerp, where William I appointed him Captain of the Port in recognition of his accomplishments as an artist. Solvyns died in 1824.

Solvyns’s life is fascinating in itself, whereas his portrayal of India constitutes a rich visual account of the people of Bengal in the late eighteenth century. The prints proper are of importance in a tradition reaching back to the early seventeenth century, and even earlier than that, with encyclopaedic efforts to represent systematically both the unfamiliar, as in costumes of foreign lands, and the familiar, as in the typologies of peasants, craftsmen, and street vendors. In portraying the Hindus, however, Solvyns is not simply recording ethnographic types. He gives his figures individual character and places them in time and space, with narrative interest, and in doing so, he provides the viewer intimate access. This separates him from purely encyclopaedic interest, as he combines the ethnographic and the aesthetic with artistic purpose. He conveys ‘as information’. As an artist, Solvyns provided a prototype for the genre of ‘Company School’ paintings of occupations, done by Indian artists for the British that became popular in the early nineteenth century. But more significantly from an historical and social perspective, Solvyns’s work, with its accompanying descriptions, constitutes the first ‘ethnographic survey’ of India or more precisely of Bengal. Moreover, with his ordered, hierarchical portrayal of Hindu castes in Bengal, however problematic this may be, Solvyns may well be the first European to provide a systematic ranking of castes. Yet this contribution has never been recognized. Historians and anthropologists have rarely drawn upon Solvyns for an understanding of society in Bengal in the late eighteenth century.