Until recently, two large graphic portfolios containing 65 watercolours, each of respectable size, were part of the many unrecovered treasures of the St Gallen ethnographic collections. Their delicately and impressively painted motifs of the Orient, or more specifically, images of India, reflected the romantic style of the time, but the painters’ names, the dates of creation and their origins were at first a mystery.

Roland Steffan

A picturesque journey through India 1786-1794

The watercolour collection

Pure coincidence and close scrutiny of the images helped in identifying details. Whilst comparing each of the paintings, it became apparent that there were three distinctly different artistic signatures. Further and more in-depth research brought to light that most of the paintings in the portfolios were by Thomas and William Daniell – uncle (1749-1840) and nephew (1769-1837). Others included paintings of the West Indian rock sanctuaries by the Daniells’ mutual friend James Wales (1747-1795) and two South Indian vedutas by a younger contemporary, Henry Salt (1780-1827). It was now possible to attribute the paintings to the last two decades of the eighteenth century, and up to 1804. Unfortunately, it has still been impossible to locate the collector and donor of these valuable watercolours; acquisition dates and the ways in which they became part of the St. Gallen collection, are also unknowns. It is, however, a known fact that both Thomas and William Daniell strictly refused to part with their numerous pencil drawings, washes and watercolours, as they used these as masters for their oil paintings and aquatint prints. Thomas Daniell’s collection was only sold off gradually after his death in 1840.

The images of this St. Gallen collection were first shown in the exhibition Malerische Reise durch Indien 1786-1794 (Painters’ journey through India 1786-1794) in 1990. Despite being veiled in mystery, the unidentified collector determined the character of the exhibition in 1990 through his penchant for particular subjects. He (or she) collected only watercolours that were masters for the 144 aquatint prints of the six-volume Oriental Scenery, the opus that had a lasting influence on the image of India in Europe. As the collection shows, impressive images of historic Hindu and Muslim monuments seem to have appealed to him. There are only four landscape paintings, and they happen to be amongst the most beautiful of all the images in the collection. The collection allows for the observer to follow the almost forgotten meanderings of the English painters through India.

India and the arts in the eighteenth century

Thomas Daniell and William Daniell were amongst the first English painters who had enjoyed an education in classical landscape painting, and they had a flair for the Romantic. They travelled through the vast country from 1786 to 1794, partly because of India’s particular situation at that time. The East India Company had come to India as a trading company and stayed there until well into the eighteenth century. Administrators and trade adventurers had built forts and established themselves as tradesmen in India by the end of the eighteenth century. England’s rise as a trade power went alongside the downfall of the Mogul Empire. As a result, England had not only attained land, but also political powers on the semi-continent. It was thus a time of colonial takeover, but also a time of discovery of the masses of people flocking towards the water, made holy to Hindus and the many porticos offer protection and accommodation to the pilgrims. The panorama, and the masses of people flocking towards the water, made an impression on the Daniells. Thomas Daniell allowed his artistic freedom to balance the panorama by changing the heroic style. The light shines into the inner sections of the place of worship.

The observatory at Delhi (image 2) was built in 1724, during the reign of Mughul Muhammad Shâh. He was an avid scholar of astronomy and became the creator of 5 observatories in his realm. The Daniells were highly impressed by the ‘uniqueness’ of the geometrical and cubic structural dimensions of the observatory. The watercolour shows the Bhurat-Samrât-Yantra and Misra-Yantra instruments.

The Qutb-Minâr (image 1) was a visible symbol of Islam victory and stood and mutilated. Foundation 1990. Translation and adaptation by Anke Schürer-Ries.

Due to the fact that the painters had to rely on their Indian counterparts for the exact naming and interpretation of the painted objects, and the fact that learning the talents of the English, many of the captions are faulty. They tried their very best to identify the objects directly at the sites and then stated the Hindi, Sanskrit, Arabic or Persian names of places and people in a passably scientific manner, complemented by the more well-known English versions, which were rather misunderstood and mutilated.

The Qutb-Minâr (image 1) was a visible symbol of Islam victory over the ‘non-believers’ in North India. The foundations of the tower were laid down by Qutb al Din Aibak in 1199, a former slave who became the founder of the first Muslim dynasty in Delhi. The watercolour was the first image of the Qutb-Minâr and the only image that shows the tower in its original state with the marble replacements of the top two stories, which had been added in 1368 after it had been hit by lightning. The observatory at Delhi (image 2) was built in 1724, during the reign of Mughul Muhammad Shâh. He was an avid scholar of astronomy and became the creator of 5 observatories in his realm. The Daniells were highly impressed by the ‘uniqueness’ of the geometrical and cubic structural dimensions of the observatory. The watercolour shows the Bhurat-Samrât-Yantra and Misra-Yantra instruments.

The waterfall (image 3) near Courtallam (Kuttralam) is holy to Hindus and the many porticos offer protection and accommodation to the pilgrims. The panorama, and the masses of people flocking towards the water, made an impression on the Daniells. Thomas Daniell allowed his artistic freedom to balance the panorama by changing the heroic style. The light shines into the inner sections of the place of worship.


The Newsletter | No.61 | Autumn 2012
Watercolours by Thomas and William Daniell

2 (above): The observatory in Delhi. Watercolour over pencil and ink (24 February 1789).

3 (right): The waterfall at Courtallam (Kuttralam), in the Thanjavur District. Watercolour over pencil (July 1792).