Envisioning journeys through Asia

By transforming personal journeys and distant places into familiar routes and iconic destinations, images depicting travel reveal and shape ideas about beauty, culture and foreign lands. Featuring more than 100 works created over five centuries, the objects exhibited in The Traveler’s Eye are by travelers, artists, photographers and scholars who recorded actual journeys, as well as imagined voyages, to and across Asia. Curated by seven experts, the objects range from masterpieces of Asian art to quirky souvenirs – woodblock prints, ink paintings and art photography, to archaeological drawings, vintage postcards and diaries.

The Traveler’s Eye: Scenes of Asia
The Smithsonian’s Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

“Whether they were collected as mementos, or whether they provided virtual experiences for those who remained at home, each has an extraordinary immediacy […] Encountering these works invites our visitors […] to think about how they might record and remember their own journeys,” says organizing curator Debra Diamond. “The exhibition’s four galleries span a range of journeys to and within Asia during the early 20th century. Western adventurers, archaeologists, and scholars were already traversing the globe to conduct research and explore foreign lands, but the advent of commercial travel brought not only celebrity status to a new generation of explorers after all, but were in fact commissioned by wealthy Japanese merchants as symbols of good fortune. (fig.1)

The second gallery features five rare Chinese scrolls and paintings, each portraying commercial travel on land and water in Ming and Qing Dynasty China. Neither artists nor patrons (members of the political and business elite) were interested in documenting the hardships or actual circumstances of any particular journey. Rather, these slice-of-life images of anonymous characters capture some of the noteworthy sights and scenes a traveler might encounter along the way. The images buzz with human activity, such as outdoor meals at mountain rest stops and boatmen grappling with narrow river passes, yet simultaneously convey the benevolent rule of an enlightened sovereign and the fundamental ideals of a harmonious society. (fig.2)

The Traveler’s Eye begins with a magnificent pair of 18th-century Japanese folding screens, lovely gilded and almost 11 feet wide, depicting Nembutsu (“southern barbarians”; in this case Portuguese seafarers) in a Japanese harbor beneath swirling gold clouds. Created at a time when the Japanese were contending with an influx of European merchants and missionaries, and wanting no part in the ongoing colonization elsewhere in the world, the screens have traditionally been interpreted as scenes of cultural encounters with exotic foreigners. However, the images are rich in visual clues that suggest that the screens weren’t created for Westerners after all, but were in fact commissioned by wealthy Japanese merchants as symbols of good fortune. (fig.3)

The third gallery presents the work by artist Raghubir Singh (1942–1999). Singh maintained a lifelong interest in his country’s vast and vibrant landscape as a means of capturing the changing complexity of modern India. He traveled frequently to photograph the ebbs and flows of daily life in bustling cities, along trunk roads, and across mountains and deserts. Sublime images of the mighty Ganges River contrast sharply with saturated, dense compositions framed by India’s iconic Ambassador cars.

The exhibition concludes in the fourth gallery with records of journeys to and in Asia during the early 20th century. Western adventurers, archaeologists, and scholars were already traversing the globe to conduct research and explore foreign lands, but the advent of commercial travel brought not only celebrity status to a new generation of explorers after all, but were in fact commissioned by wealthy Japanese merchants as symbols of good fortune. (fig.1)

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