ERIN BENAY, *ITALY BY WAY OF INDIA. TRANSLATING ART AND DEVOTION IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD*

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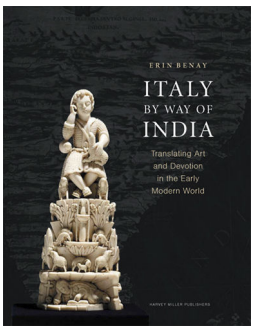

Reviewed by
Urte Krass

Erin Benay (just like the reviewer) first studied Italian art of the early modern period and then dared to broaden her horizons to India. The author now presents a book that bridges the gap between the two. The figure whose story allows her to take this step is the apostle St. Thomas. Benay has previously dealt with his representation in Italian painting, and I strongly suspect that during her study of the iconography of Doubting Thomas in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century art, she realized that the Indian history of the apostle's veneration and visualization was largely unexplored. The present book brings together for the first time the two Thomases: the one whose body is said to have been in Italy, in Ortona, since the thirteenth century, and the one who did missionary work in southern India in the first century, who is venerated there to this day by the so-called Thomas Christians, and whose place of death, as well as the location of his relics, is in Mylapore on the Coromandel Coast.

The book is an eye opener. For even though the history of the Thomas Christians is well known and researched (above all, Ines G. Županov and István Perczel have published fundamental studies), no investigation has yet been undertaken to bring their existence

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into connection with the veneration of St. Thomas in Europe and specifically in Italy. The author seems to have turned the kaleidoscope – which for a very long time had produced a certain pattern – just a little further, so that all the colorful plates and set pieces could produce a completely new picture. Erin Benay deals explicitly and in depth with the visual and material culture of the Indian Thomas Christians. In doing so, one of her greatest achievements is to destabilize Goa as a center of Christian art in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is remarkable that we Western art historians, while studying the entanglements between continents and cultures in the early modern period, have long worked (in the wake of Dipesh Chakrabarty) to provincialize Europe and decentralize Rome (or, respectively, Lisbon or Madrid), but at the same time, our research has re-established other centers: thus, art historians who deal with artifacts and objects from the Portuguese Estádo da India usually put the focus on Goa as the capital of the Portuguese colonial empire – an empire that consisted of loosely connected ports and fortifications along the coasts between East Africa and East and Southeast Asia. While Goa was indeed a main hub for the movement of goods and objects of all kinds, Erin Benay emphatically reminds us that Christian faith and art are rooted in the land itself, not in Goa, but on the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, the regions where Thomas Christians were located. Christian faith and art did not first arrive in India with the Portuguese in 1498 but had existed there for many centuries, probably since the middle of the first century, when the apostle Thomas began his missionary work on the subcontinent. We have known this for a long time, but the consistency with which the author now makes this fact strong and reconstructs its slow percolation in Italy from Pliny to Rubens is impressive.

In her introduction, Benay outlines the mechanisms of translation and mistranslation of what "India" meant to Europeans at different times. Although the relics of St. Thomas were believed to be kept in Italy since the thirteenth century, Ortona has never been a famous pilgrimage site. On the contrary, it was soon known that the venerated body of the apostle was buried in India. Travelers since the thirteenth century wrote about it, Marco Polo being the earliest of them. Looking at the Indian cult of St. Thomas leads the author to question art historical paradigms that assume that Christian art was produced in India primarily for export to Europe. The fact that Goa served as the capital of the Estádo da India from 1530, was the seat of the archbishop, and was a place where many Christian churches were newly built in the sixteenth century has led to a better documentation of Christian art there and subsequently to the phenomenon that this Goan art and architecture has been much more intensively researched than other types of Christian art production in India. Erin Benay, however, is concerned specifically with the "indigenous Christian art in India" that has managed to preserve its own pluralistic identity through the incorporation of "Hindu motifs and ideology" (p. 22), even after centuries of domination by the newly arrived Roman Catholic Christians.

In the first chapter ("Saint Thomas and the Making of Christianity in Southern India"), Benay demonstrates the conflation in various objects of local and canonical traditions associated with St. Thomas. The churches of the Thomas Christians in Kerala differ from churches in Goa, integrating more Hindu architectural and decorative elements like elaborate gateways, stone lamps, flagpoles of different materials, palms, lotuses, elephants, and the crocodile-like *makaras* into their exterior and interior design. Murals as well as wood and stone sculptures such as monumental granite crosses all attest to a longstanding permeability of this art and church decoration in relation to the visual and material cultures found in and around Hindu temples. This first chapter concisely tells the complex story of the Thomas Christians, and in all brevity, the author succeeds very well in introducing the peculiarities of their art.

The transition to the second chapter ("Indian Christian Art in the Age of Colonialism") is somewhat abrupt, because now the focus shifts to artworks whose origins are mostly assumed to be in Goa.[1] These so-called "rockeries" are carved from ivory and show the Christ Child as the Good Shepherd sitting on a rock that is interspersed with caves inhabited by various biblical figures as well as tame and wild animals. It is not clear, however, if and how these objects, according to Benay, are supposed to be related to the art of the Thomas Christians. The Author does not make use of the fundamental text by Alberto Saviello who has related important Mylapore sites to the artifacts.[2] Specifically, he has convincingly associated the spring emerging at *Monte pequeno* with the spring in the ivory rockeries. Had this thesis been made fruitful, it would have provided a chance to connect these artifacts no longer only with Goa, but to try to argue for a connection to the Indian Thomas Christians and their holy places and iconographies. Saviello's two-part article would have also provided an excellent basis for placing the objects within the context of a pluralistic environment, even including two different Christian cults. Furthermore, Benay's subchapter on "Devotional Objects for Domestic Use" lacks reference to the thesis first formulated by Marsha Gail Olson that these sculptures, which could be assembled and disassembled, were most probably used publicly for didactic purposes during sermons and missionary teaching. Benay's reference to Indian antecedents for the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ivory carvings is actually a step forward

1
Even though researchers are no longer so certain of this. It has been pointed out that in the 1680s, ivory rockeries were delivered from Diu to Goa. See Maria Cristina Osswald, God Bless Port Cities! The Ivory Sculpture of the Good Shepherd between East and West, in: Cátia A. P. Antunes and Amélia Polónia (eds.), *Seaports in the First Global Age. Portuguese Agents, Networks and Interactions (1500–1800)*, Porto 2017, 351–368, here 354, as well as Alberto Saviello, Transzendenz in transkultureller Perspektive. Die indo-portugiesischen Elfenbeinfiguren des "Guten Hirten", Part II, in: *Indo-Asiatische Zeitschrift* 17, 2013, 57–70, here 57.

2
Alberto Saviello, Transzendenz in transkultureller Perspektive. Die indo-portugiesischen Elfenbeinfiguren des "Guten Hirten", Part I, in: *Indo-Asiatische Zeitschrift* 16, 2012, 59–73, here 66; id., Transzendenz in transkultureller Perspektive, Part II.

in the study of these objects: she points to comparable productions in Kashmir, Orissa, and in the Nayak dynasty in Madurai, which for two centuries from 1529 onwards reigned most of what today is Tamil Nadu. While Kashmir is not entirely convincing as a possible precursor because it is too far away in time (900 years) and space, the Orissa and the Nayak parallels make sense. The remainder of this second chapter is again concerned with works associated with the Thomas Christians, namely baptismal fonts made by sculptors who also and simultaneously produced works of art for Hindu temples and monuments, which is why these objects are "in fact more aesthetically Indian than they are European" (p. 64). Benay then convincingly relates a group of "indigenized" Christian liturgical vessels, namely monstrances and chalices with bells, to the Hindu practice of *darśan* – the auspicious sight of an image of a deity – which includes the use of a gong or a bell. It would have been interesting to know where Benay suspects is the place of origin of these goldsmithing works. Were they made in Goa, or were there also goldsmiths among the communities of Thomas Christians? And are the vessels made of Japanese silver or is it already silver from Potosì in Spanish Peru, which began its global success story in the middle of the sixteenth century? Broadening the view to the possibility of global material entanglements through raw material flows would have provided another chance to highlight the particularities of the different kinds of Christian art in India: the wooden and stone artworks of the Thomas Christians described were all made from local materials. If the ivory and goldsmithing work associated with Goa was made with foreign materials (ivory from Africa, silver from Japan or Spanish Peru), then a hypothesis could perhaps be formulated that the art of the Thomas Christians was permeable both iconographically and stylistically, but not in terms of the material used.

The third chapter ("Possessing India") turns the gaze back towards Europe and to the gradual acquisition of knowledge about India. Benay first looks at the travel accounts that were accessible to an Italian readership in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and whose authors situate the Thomas Christians correctly on both coasts of South India and report also the existence of the apostle's tomb on the Coromandel Coast. Knowledge of the existence of this Christian pilgrimage site at Mylapore soon mingled in the imaginations of Italian collectors and scholars with knowledge of the trade routes running through the same regions. Objects, goods, and other items from India (spices, animals, gems, and plants, as well as ivory sculptures from Goa, tortoiseshell boxes from Gujarat, or silk-and-cotton colchas from Bengal) came to Italy and some of these imported goods ended up in collections. Benay asks to what extent these things were able to alter Europeans' cultural imagination in ways that differed from the previously known texts. She postulates a shift from the textual to a material construction of knowledge about Indian customs, flora, fauna, and geography. The generation of knowledge through things, according to Benay, corresponded to

"more experiential modes of faith" as propagated by Ignatius of Loyola or Carlo Borromeo, among others (p. 120). Benay then looks at where such things from India were kept at the Medici court in Florence: the *Guardaroba Nova* set up in the 1560s by Cosimo I de' Medici and the *Studiolo* of Francesco I de' Medici, which was completed around 1570. In the former, things were contextualized by maps on the cabinet doors that opened to the objects; in the latter, narrative paintings visualized and, in some ways, made tangible the Indian origin of the objects presumably kept behind them – Benay picks out the case of diamond mining in India as painted by Maso da San Friano. According to the author, it was the Medici who, through accumulating things from India, did "important epistemological work" (p. 98) by placing tangible analogies in the form of things alongside the previously existing textual collections of knowledge and, moreover, by inserting the apostle's tomb into the idea of India. That the objects themselves, not just their recipients, generated meaning remains a beautiful, but very vague idea that cannot be verified. Thus, instead of trying to make thing theory fruitful for the topic, the author could have engaged more with the individual objects, described them in more detail, taken more seriously the materials and techniques used in each case.[3] To understand the *studiolo*, or at least the wall with the diamond mining painting, a consideration of the entire wall and the inclusion of the ceiling iconographies would have been helpful.[4] Furthermore, it is not clear on what criteria Benay based her selection of objects from the Medici collections (tortoiseshell box, lapis lazuli pitcher, textile *kalamkari* hanging, ivory sculptures of the Christ Child and the Virgin Mary). A paragraph on the general character of the Medici collection of Indian objects would have helped orient the reader. The Medici collections themselves remain strangely pale after reading this chapter, probably because the author's focus is to trace the inscription of knowledge of the Indian Thomas Christians in the dazzling luxury objects.

The fourth chapter ("An Indian Saint in Italy") develops again a depth and a pull. It is about the attempts of sixteenth-century Europeans/Italians to reconcile the two competing Thomas traditions. All through the sixteenth century, even after the Portuguese had long rediscovered the site of the apostle's martyrdom in Mylapore and informed the world of it, texts continued to be published in Rome confirming the presence of the relics in Ortona. Only towards the end of the sixteenth century were books published that fixed the knowledge of St. Thomas's presence in India permanently, correcting the misconception that Thomas's relics were to be found

3
For the tortoiseshell boxes, Hugo Miguel Crespo, *Jewels from the India Run* (exh. cat. Museu do Oriente, Lisbon), ed. by Maria Manuela d'Oliveira Martins, Lisbon 2015, 63–72, has added new insights about the material used, the production, and the local context.

4
Also helpful would have been recourse to Kim Siebenhüner, *Die Spur der Juwelen. Materielle Kultur und transkontinentale Verbindungen zwischen Indien und Europa in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Cologne 2018.

in Italy and adding numerous details to the narrative of the saint's martyrdom in India. Traveling people and traveling objects ultimately ensured the demise of the Italian St. Thomas pilgrimage site. In Europe, Thomas continued to be known primarily for his incredulity. Images of the Doubting Thomas who places his finger in Christ's side wound were widespread in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries while other scenes of his *vita* were surprisingly rarely depicted. Benay discusses two Italian paintings of the mid-sixteenth century which show the apostle's death in India by the lance of a Brahmin. In both examples, the martyrdom takes place among Roman classical architecture. Only Peter Paul Rubens in 1638 imagines 'Indian' architecture for the scene and integrates an Indonesian *kris* idol into his composition.

In the book's conclusion, Benay looks ahead to the period of British and French colonial dominance in India, in which knowledge of the apostle's burial place in India was more widely disseminated, and to the present time and the strategies of both the Roman and Thomas Christian churches to cherish their faith. Indian Thomas Christians still practice their Malayali rites in the language of Kerala – that is, Malayalam – despite centuries of being controlled and curtailed by Portugal and Rome. Loss of the language through translation would have entailed the loss of identity and indigenous culture, as the Syro-Malabar Church has clearly stated. Furthermore, especially at a time when non-Hindu religions are being suppressed in India, the author argues, it is more important than ever to point to the agency of the Thomas Christians in their encounters with Portuguese rulers and merchants, Jesuits, and other extended arms of the Roman Church. Benay's attentive attitude is evident in her closing remarks, and, as can be seen from her internet presence, she is also an active representative of a political and publicly engaged art history.

This important book could have developed even greater radiance if the illustration apparatus had been considered with greater care. Benay brings new photographs into play and thus expands our visual archive of the art of St. Thomas Christians. However, most of these pictures are printed extremely small. Thankfully, the author provides in few but important cases sketches she made herself of archways and bases whose iconographies cannot be deciphered in the photos. Nevertheless, one wonders, for example, where the silver sea creatures (*makaras*) and the skirted warriors that the author describes are to be found in the monstrances in Fig. 57.[5]

Finally, I would like to add the observation that it seems important at times to think about the progression of time, meaning to keep in mind that conditions in the areas studied have evolved and sometimes changed significantly over time. Around 1600 at the latest, and thus one hundred years after the arrival of the Portuguese in India, the fronts of "European Christians" and freshly converted

[5] Errors and confusion related to several figures (e.g., Figs. 72 and 79) are also apparent.

Indians no longer existed in such clear distinction. The Brahmin caste had managed to rise within the Catholic clerical structure, and it was they who stood in the pulpits at the bottom of which carved hybrid creatures such as *nagas* animated the audience to constant acts of translations (and reverse translations).[6] The binary model Benay brings to bear, and in which "Christian patrons and missionaries" meet "Indian artists and converts" (p. 89), soon evolved and complicated. The conclusion that can perhaps be formulated at this point, therefore, is that everything is still even more complicated than assumed. We can always turn the kaleidoscope a little further, and the picture will change again.

The book accomplishes a great deal: Erin Benay introduces for the first time the visual and material culture of the St. Thomas Christians into our thinking of an entangled early modern art history. In the process, she analyzes previously rarely if ever looked-at wall paintings, altar frames, wooden church ceilings, granite monumental crosses, goldsmith liturgical objects, and painted alms boxes. And in analyzing the artworks of both the Thomas Christians and the "newly arrived" Christians based in the "center" of Goa, the author always considers the agency of the local artists and refrains from accepting, as is often the case, that indigenous iconographies and stylistic elements are merely incidental byproducts or decorative fillers of Christian artworks. With equal emphasis the author contrasts the much-invoked Jesuit practice of accommodation with the agency of *Indian* Christian art. The book stimulates new thinking about the concept of "Indo-Portuguese art" and it is highly desirable that some of the topics touched upon by Erin Benay now be dealt with in more depth and perhaps even in dialogue with art historians specialized in the different subfields of the material and visual culture of South India during the period under review.[7]

6
Ines G. Županov, The Pulpit Trap. Possession and Personhood in Colonial Goa, in: *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 65/66, 2014/2015, 298–315, here 306.

7
Gerhard Wolf, Kunstgeschichte, aber wo? Florentiner Perspektiven auf das Projekt einer Global Art History II, in: *Kritische Berichte* 40, 2012, 60–68, here 61, calls for attempts at a "dialogische Kunstgeschichte im Singular wie im Plural [...], die sowohl die Subdisziplinen inkl. der europäischen ins Gespräch bringt als auch die methodologischen Implikationen und Potentiale eines solchen Gesprächs in Form von Fallstudien und einem geteilten Umgang mit Objekten diskutiert". If I see it correctly, there has been regrettably little response to this call so far.