
Buried in this ill-organised and clunkily written book is some new and interesting knowledge, which deserves better presentation. In summary, the author has looked at collections of silk fabrics from the Indian sub-continent formed in nineteenth-century Britain – notably at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester and the V&A Museum, London – and explored their historical meanings in the light of, or rather in opposition to, the ideas expounded by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. The collections were formed to assist design education (the art schools of Manchester, Macclesfield and Bradford are used as ‘case studies’) and in response to both French dominance in silk textile manufacture and the threat to Indian sericulture posed by China and Japan.

The main focus however is on the endeavours of Thomas Wardle (Leek silk manufacturer and friend of William Morris) to assist, improve and promote Indian yarn exports, which folds into a survey of Indian silk’s representation at international exhibitions in the 1870s and ’80s and its role in the Arts & Crafts movement, here seen in terms of two firms, Liberty’s and Morris & Co – both supplied by Wardle – and Elizabeth Wardle’s Leek Embroidery Society.

The various elements of this analysis are haphazardly ordered, so that the book’s origin in the textile collections is lost in ‘Preface and Acknowledgements’ and the theoretical underpinning placed in the concluding ‘Legacies’. It is also partly contradictory, since the author’s main assertion that British attitudes held Indian materials and crafts in high esteem is not reconciled with by repeated allusions to their economic decline, despite western valorisation and despite Wardle’s two great successes. One was a new process to get ‘tasar’ or ‘wild’ silk (presumably the thread that the Morrices knew as ‘tussore’) to take colour, either through dyeing or printing; the second was in creating, in collaboration with German manufacturers, a new fabric from waste silk known as ‘sealcloth’ which was perfect for raincapes (so the ‘sealskin’ coats of the 1870s were not what I thought).

*Silk and Empire* has many more fascinating sidelights, including
an account of the founding of Manchester’s art museum by Charles Cogland Horsfall, one of Morris’s correspondents, in 1884, and Liberty’s erection the following year of an ‘Indian village’ in Battersea, complete with forty-five skilled craftsmen. In shining her torch on Wardle, Brenda King consciously dims the light on Morris’s significance, seeing him as less innovative and radical than some design historians have claimed. But many silken threads connect him to people and events in her story. One would especially like to think about possible socio-political conversations following Wardle’s 1885 visit to Bengal and his subsequent interventions in Kashmiri silk culture, in collaboration with John Lockwood Kipling and Nilamar Mukerji, the region’s Chief Justice. ‘Empire’ is indeed a more complex affair than the simple business of economic exploitation of periphery by metropole, but the official promotion of Indian silk was surely also about British global dominance in relation to other European powers and the developing markets in the East, including China.

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