



The Paintings
of
Johan Zoffany (1733 – 1810)
in the collection of
Victoria Memorial Hall
Kolkata

An e-catalogue curated by
Shri Gholam Nabi, former Senior Technical Assistant



JOHAN ZOFFANY

A portrait Painter Par Excellence

It is very daunting task to write about a genius like Johan Zoffany (1733-1810), whose forte was portrait painting, especially group or conversation pieces. After having imbibed the masters of European painting in Rome, he came to England to showcase his talent. Some of his acquaintances got him access into the Royal Court. He was entrusted with the task of painting the Royal family. Thus he earned a lot of money, and also the wrath of the Royalty by including friends and commoners in the Royal pictures. Misfortune struck him and he remained idle for three years.

His pecuniary conditions forced him to look for greener pastures elsewhere. Through friends he had heard about the fabled riches of India. He took no time in leaving for Calcutta in 1783, hoping to "roll in gold dust".

His flair for portrait painting was at its peak when he came to Calcutta. He was already 50 years old and a restless soul. Within two weeks, the Calcutta society began to sit before him. But before coming to Calcutta he had briefly stayed in Madras where he did a portrait of the diplomat and colonial governor Lord Macartney, among others. Calcutta then was just waiting to be mesmerised by the magic of Zoffany. He held in thrall the likes of the Chief Justice, the Governor General and many other members of Calcutta's social elite. He also accompanied the Governor-General Warren Hastings to Lucknow, where he made a very large amount of money by painting the Nawabs and their courtiers, and other individuals. Three years later, he again came back to Calcutta and thereafter left for England at the beginning of 1798. He died on 11 November 1810, aged 87 years.

One can view several of his paintings, all included in this e-catalogue, in the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata.

Gholam Nabi

*Former Senior Technical Assistant
Victoria Memorial Hall*

Foreword by the Secretary and Curator

It is a great privilege and honour for the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, to launch this e-catalogue of the seven paintings of Johan Zoffany that the VMH proudly possesses as part of its collection of European paintings on eighteenth and nineteenth-century India. The e-catalogue was the brainchild of Shri Gholam Nabi, former Head of the Documentation Unit in the VMH, who retired in 2016, but who kept up his connection with this e-catalogue project through the last two years. The catalogue which now goes up on our website is thus a tribute to the persistence of Shri Nabi, as well as to the scholarly work that has been done on Zoffany by two outstanding historians of modern Bengal and India – the late Nisith Ranjan Ray, former Secretary and Curator of the VMH, and the late Barun De, who just prior to his death in 2013 was a Tagore National Fellow in the VMH. Their texts on Zoffany appear at the beginning of this catalogue. I hope people will like this new endeavour on the part of the VMH, and this will pave the way for further e-publications of a similar nature.

*Jayanta Sengupta
Secretary and Curator
12 November 2018*

Johan Zoffany

Zoffany's paintings are among the most valued pictorial collections of the Victoria Memorial. One of the earliest Royal Academicians, he was obliged to leave England, as Kathleen Blechynden infers, owing to 'the ill-feeling he had roused against himself through his injudicious indulgence in the habit of introducing the portraits of his friend and acquaintances into his pictures without the permission of the original and often in unflattering guise'. Unlike the Daniells who followed him to India, Zoffany was more interested in portraits of leading personalities of his time in Calcutta and North India than in landscapes and the picturesque qualities of the Indian scenes. It was quest of much-publicised wealth of India rather than ill-feeling to which Blechynden refers which seems to have influenced Zoffany's decision to undertake his journey of India at considerable risk. He had heard from William Hodges who had visited this company earlier 'many tales of rich fees and generous commission'. According to the contemporary testimony of Paul Sandby, R.A. Zoffany decided to leave for India 'anticipating to roll in gold dust'.

It was not an easy job. The court minutes reveal that Zoffany was permitted to proceed to India, but not in any of the Company's ships. Foster is correct in his conjecture the prohibition was against his going as a passenger. He evaded it by signing as a midshipman in the Lord McCartney, an Indian shipman of 755 tons under the command of Captain William Hall which was making her first voyage to the coast and Bay. The vessel left the Downs on January 17, sailed for Portsmouth on March 11, and reached Calcutta on September 13, all in the year 1783. On arrival at the destination Zoffany became a deserter for there is an entry against him on the ship's log (I.O. Log 415A) as follows: 'Run at Calcutta on September 17, 1783 and his desertion.'



Self Portrait of Johan Zoffany

A deed dated 15 June 1784 reveals that Zoffany took up his residence in Calcutta in a new house erected by Thomas Lyon. His stay could not have been long for there is evidence that he accompanied Warren Hastings to Lucknow in March 1784. But during his short stay in Calcutta the artist seems to have painted a good number of portraits. While in Lucknow, Zoffany did his trade fairly well on commission by the Nawab, the Court and individuals like Colonel Claud Martin. He also paid brief visits to Cawnpore and Agra. He returned to Calcutta three years later in April 1787 and here, as before, his brush yielded a fair crop. At the commencement of 1798 he left for England, where for the next few years he kept himself engaged in his favourite pursuit, depicting among others, scenes and personalities of India to which he had longed to return in 1799. He died on November 11, 1810, aged 87 years.

Nisith R. Ray
Secretary & Curator
Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata

Johan Zoffany was born in Germany, near Frankfurt on the 13th of March, 1733. He was raised there and in 1750, he began training in Rome, where he remained until 1757. He spent another three years in Germany, arriving in England in 1760. At first, he worked as a drapery painter but was later patronised by David Garrick for whom he made theatrical conversation pieces. In the 1760's he made several paintings for the royal family and earned their favour. After the Royal Academy had been founded, he was nominated by the King as a founder member, in 1769. At Queen Charlotte's bidding, he went to Florence to make a painting of the Tribuna which housed the prized pieces among the Medici collection. He was to make copies of the works of art in the room and also paint some of the visitors and travelers who visited the room. Zoffany, however, took too much time over the project. He also offended the royal family by painting among the spectators any random visitors to the Tribuna, among whom few were noble and only one was Italian. Following this, Zoffany went out of fashion in London and was unable to re-attain his former status.

This first made him think of coming to India. He was further informed by his friend, William Hodges, of the help he had received from Warren Hastings and of the patronage that could be received at the court at Oudh. Rumours of the wealth of Calcutta and the presence there of his friend, Anthony Angelo Tremamondo, who had a large number of useful acquaintances, may have further spurred Zoffany to apply to India as a painter. This he did, and despite his 50 years and a Company ruling against his traveling on any Company ships, Zoffany boarded an East Indiaman, the Lord Macartney, on the 8th of March 1783, as a "midshipman". The ship stopped at Madras on the 23rd of July and did not sail until the 26th of August. Zoffany did not waste any time in getting down to work and in the period of his stay there he painted portraits of several Europeans including one of Lord Macartney, the Governor of Madras. In addition, he made some sketches in the neighbourhood of Madras, especially of the coast. On the 15th of September, 1783, the logs for the ship said that the 'midshipman' had deserted the ship at Calcutta. Hodges was also getting back to Calcutta at about the same time and though he was to leave in November, it would have given Zoffany an Hodges enough time to exchange information and also for Hodges to put Zoffany in touch with Warren Hastings.

Zoffany seems to have settled down quite quickly, taking up a newly constructed house and beginning on commissions within less than a fortnight of his arrival in time, painting Lady Chambers, the wife of the High Court Judge, Sir John and Lady D'Oyly as well as the Chief Justice, Elijah Impey and the Governor-General, Warren Hastings. A letter of recommendation from Macartney must also have made it easier for Zoffany to get around. He also painted some conversation pieces and some more portraits during this period, including those of Elijah Impey and Marian Hastings. Zoffany was now well respected and doing well for himself.

In early 1784, Hastings was about to depart for Lucknow, the capital of Oudh. He probably encouraged Zoffany to also come to Oudh, where a fortune could be made by an artist.

Zoffany was tied up in several commissions at the time and was not able to accompany Hastings when he left on the 21st of February. He finally left in May and arrived in Lucknow on the 3rd of June, 1784.

After Shuja-ud-Daula's death and Asaf-ud-Daula's ascension to the throne, Oudh had become a protectorate of the Company. While there had earlier been restrictions on the British on living in Oudh, these no longer applied and a British community thrived in Lucknow, made up both of several officers and soldiers of the East India Company. Zoffany arrived in Lucknow to a court of rich ministers and an even richer and more luxuriant Nawab. At this time, Lucknow was also being visited by Prince Jawan Bakht, the eldest son of the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam, who had come to request British help in freeing his father from Maratha captivity. On the day following his arrival itself, Zoffany was taken by Hastings to begin on a portrait of the Prince. He also made a painting of the Jawan Bakht, Hastings and Asaf-ud-Daula in meeting. He is also known to have made portraits of Asaf-ud-Daula and his minister, Hasan Reza Khan. His most famous paintings from this period, however, is the one entitled Colonel Mordaunt's Cock Match. Knowing that Hastings was soon to leave for England, Zoffany hastened to Calcutta to settle his accounts and bid farewell to him. He then almost promptly returned to Lucknow in March-April, 1785. He appears to have made a large number of paintings there for Claud Martin, not only of Europeans but also, interestingly, a number of sketches and paintings of Indian subjects both the natives and the landscape. Colonel Polier also provided Zoffany with several commissions. One of his most well-known paintings is one that he had commissioned - it is called Colonel Polier with his friends, Claud Martin, John Wombwell and the artist. It shows a normal day at Polier's house. Polier is on the left of the painting shown giving instructions to his cook about the preparation of some fruits and vegetables. On the other side Martin is showing Wombwell a picture of his house which he has probably painted himself. In the background is a pet monkey and two servants. Slightly off-centre and to the right is the artist himself, sitting at an easel at which he is working. They are surrounded by Zoffany's works all around them, all of which depict Indian subjects.

In September 1786, Zoffany decided to visit Delhi and Agra. He was accompanied by John Wombwell, and made stops along the way at Najafgarh and Kanpur. Reports would indicate that he was deeply impressed with the Jama Masjid and the Taj Mahal. He returned to Lucknow by about November of the year, and began to prepare to return to Calcutta. Although he never was paid by Asaf-ud-Daula and his ministers for the work executed for them, Polier, Martin and other friends had made large enough payments that he was not too greatly affected by this. He left for Calcutta in about the middle of November and on the way encountered the party of Haider Beg Khan, a minister of Asaf-ud-Daula, on their way also to Calcutta, to meet and negotiate with Lord Cornwallis. It is on this event that his painting, The Embassy of Haider Beg to Lord Cornwallis, is based. It must have provided Zoffany with an ideal opportunity to execute the kind of paintings that he seems to have liked best - a variety of characters in a scene which involved a great deal of movement and drama.

In Calcutta, he was asked to make an altar-piece depicting The Last Supper for the newly constructed St. John's Church. This was to prove to be a powerful (if a little "insipid") painting which was subject to criticism due to the inclusion of details (such as) and the incorporation among Christ and his disciples of public faces that would have been familiar to the citizens of Calcutta. However, there was a shortage of funds and Zoffany could not be paid, a circumstance that he was thankful for, since he could now make a present of it. In the following period, he executed paintings of several other members of Calcutta society and also continued to work on some of Hastings' commissions which were yet to be despatched to him. But in July or August 1787, he left for Lucknow and was probably there in September. Although this last stay in Lucknow was quite a long stay (from September 1787 to November 1788), Zoffany does not seem to have executed any major paintings in this time. He was also unable to extract any payment from Asaf-ud-Daula or his friends and ministers for whom he had executed paintings. He, however, was engaged in the making of certain chalk sketches and made some even on the way down to Calcutta, by river, which he did with Claud Martin. In December, Zoffany was back in Calcutta, winding up his affairs. On the 23rd of January, 1789, Zoffany began his journey back to England. His health was "much impaired", according to a letter sent by Gavin Hamilton to Ozias Humphry. Zoffany arrived back in England in August, 1789. He was financially stable by this point and was able to lead an easier lifestyle than before. He is known to have worked on two more well-known paintings, one of tiger hunt, of which he made smaller copies (of which one is in the Victoria Memorial), and another one entitled The Embassy of Hyder Beg to Calcutta. Besides these, Zoffany also worked on several other paintings, also with Indian themes. Although Zoffany was still well respected, public interest in India had waned. However, he continued to exhibit at the Royal Academy. The Nawab's non-payment of his debts still bothered him and he decided to go back to India, also to get away from his family for some time. He was granted permission to go back to India on the 2nd of March, 1798, but at the last moment he decided to abandon his plan.

Johan Zoffany lived out the rest of his life in England. He died on 11th November, 1810, leaving behind a large number of sketches, drawings and Indian curiosities as well as a substantial amount of notes and correspondence which was destroyed in 1832.

Text: **Barun De**
Assisted by Neilabh Sinha



The Embassy of Hyder Beg to Lord Cornwallis in 1787
Oil on Canvas

This painting commemorates the diplomatic mission of the Chief Minister of Awadh, Hyder Beg Khan to Lord Cornwallis, who had recently taken up his appointment as Governor General in Calcutta. Zoffany probably accompanied the procession which left Lucknow for Calcutta in 1787, giving the painting elements of historic authenticity although it was painted after his return to London. The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1796.



Warren Hastings with his wife Marian in their Garden at Alipore
Oil on Canvas

Warren Hastings Governor General of Bengal 1774 – 1785, Commissioned Zoffany to prepare several portraits. In contrast to the exuberant portrait of Marian Hastings, this intimate conversation place is tinged with Sadness, as Hastings beloved wife was soon to leave for Europe.

C 1311 / R 1432

Circa 1784-87



Lord Cornwallis Receiving the Son of Tipu Sultan
Oil on Canvas

This picture depicts an incident in Lord Cornwallis's successful campaign against Tipu Sultan in 1792. Only one of the princes is here depicted. The figure in the litter is probably intended for the head Vakil, Gholam Ali Beg, who was lame. The Artist was in England at the time, and consequently the picture can only have been painted from hearsay. It is not mentioned in Dr. Williamson's book on Zoffany, but is accepted by him as authentic. Purchased, through Lord Curzon, 1992.



Mrs. Hastings
Oil on Canvas

A showy full-length picture of Mrs. Hastings (the former wife of German portrait painter, Baron Imhoff), clad in a long flowing green silk, seated in a sofa on which the left elbow rests, a book in her right hand, face expressive of a sense of wisdom and depth of feeling, eyes so delimited as to "make the spectator feel her living presence". On the right on a stand is seated a dog, on the left an aerial perspective is introduced. The drapery is flamboyant but attractive.

C 1310 / R 1433

Circa 1784-85



The Tiger Hunt
Oil on Canvas

The Fluid landscape and vibrant composition reveals yet another of Zoffany's Styles. Some foreground figures were painted out and converted into rock and boulders by the artist. The water gilded frame is an English neo-classical style of the late eighteenth Century.

R 1974

Circa 1795



Colonel Polier, Claude Martin and John Wombwell with the Artist
Oil on Canvas

Nawab Asafuddaulah employed many Europeans for the rebuilding of Lucknow, including, Colonel Antioe Polier, a Swiss Engineer and architect to the court. Major Gen. Claude Martin was patron of art and education in Lucknow, and John Wombwell was Assay Master for the East India Company. While the sitters are shown relaxing amidst Poliers Collection of Piantings, Zoffany placed himself working at this easel in the centre of the painting.

R 2066

Circa 1786-87



Warren Hastings meeting the Nawab of Oudh at Lucknow in 1784
Oil on Canvas

The painting concerns an interesting event relating to the last years of Warren Hastings in India. In March 1784 he visited Lucknow and stayed there till August. He was accompanied by David Anderson (Political Agent), William Palmer (Military Secretary), Samuel Toone (Commander of body guard), Stephen Sullivan (Personal Assistant), Jonathan Scott (a learned orientalist author of *A Translation of Ferishta's History of the Deccan*), Dr. Balfour (Surgeon at Chunar) and Johan Zoffany. Most of the days Hastings lived in a tent alongside, that of the Nawab. The subject of the painting is a meeting between Prince Jawan Bakht, heir apparent to the Empire and the Governor General. The Prince, a refugee from Delhi, penniless and abandoned, arrived at Lucknow in May 1784. Hastings took pity on the Shahzada whom he described as "an illustrious youth – the relic of the most illustrious line of the Eastern World". He took Zoffany to paint him.