

An Appetite for Love and Devotion in Celestial Landscapes

By **HOLLAND COTTER** SEPT. 22, 2006

BOSTON, Sept. 18 - God, love, death and dessert are the menu in "Domains of Wonder: Selected Masterworks of Indian Painting" at the Museum of Fine Arts here, a meal of avid moods and intense sensations. With the first bite your palate is soothed; with the next you break a sweat; by the end you float on a sugar high.

Indian artists have spoken of art in gustatory terms for centuries, through an aesthetics based on the concept of "rasa," meaning the emotional taste or savor -- sad, erotic, surly -- evoked by art. If you are evolved enough to discern its presence and qualities, you are called a rasika, a connoisseur, an aesthetic gourmet. And this exhibition of 126 miniature paintings from the Edwin Binney III collection at the San Diego Museum of Art could make instant epicures of us all.

As to the order of courses, God is the appetizer, in the form of an early-15th-century Jain devotional mandala done in opaque watercolor on cloth. In effect the image is a flattened aerial map of a highly congested celestial city of apartment blocks and pocket parks, with a Jain savior-deity presiding at its center. A temple floats over his head. Monkeys leap about. And here and there the figures of other green-skinned saviors pop up like olives in a tossed salad.

India itself is sometimes envisioned as a spiritual geography, a grand chart of pilgrimage sites and empyreal encampments. By this view, wherever you go, you are both on earth and in heaven, and sacred and profane are constantly mingling, nowhere more intimately than in the realm of love.

If anything can be called a staple of the traditional South Asian aesthetic diet, love is it. And like most staples, it can be prepared in infinitely subtle ways. Love Divine finds its most popular hero in the blue-skinned, amorous but elusive god Krishna, famous for dating dozens of milkmaids at once and two-timing them in so deft a way that none of them seems to notice, or care.

We see this juggling act in progress in a much-published 16th-century Rajasthani miniature called "The Sports of Love." On a balmy autumn night he and a dozen or so of his lovers are swimming in a banyan-lined river that bubbles and swirls across the painting like a long pile carpet. Everyone is smiling, even the cows on shore. The joke here is that each of the women thinks Krishna has eyes for her alone.

Religiously speaking, and the line between devotion and everyday life is a fine one in Indian art, the story is really about Krishna as God and his late-night playmates as souls seeking salvation. Naturally, it was useful for artists to keep this in mind. It let them get away with a lot, which is part of what makes Indian art the spicy, complicated cuisine it is.

If "The Sports of Love" is a breezy romp, scenes between Krishna and Radha, his one true love, show barely suppressed passion on the boil, with the two mutually addicted lovers prowling the forest in search of each other, as nature itself succumbs to their heat. Trees twist together; rocky outcroppings look as tender and flushed as flesh.

Many paintings show earthly lovers experiencing comparable emotions: in one a woman rages with longing for an absent mate; in another a near-nude ruler submits to an eroticized rubdown from a squad of masseurs. When it comes to love, gods and humans are ravenous in the same way.

Certain ardent souls strive to move beyond that hunger, or shift its direction. The meditating dervish, probably a Muslim Sufi, in a painting from the Deccani court at Bijapur is one. Swathed in a multicolored cloak, his figure is almost featureless, as smooth as a mango, or like an embryo in a womb, and although his eyes are open, his gaze is directed inward, away from the world.

There is much in the world, including in art, to want to turn away from. If Indian painting shows little interest in the sort of tragic subjects that are at the heart of Western Christian art, death itself is still ever present. Often it is packaged in Hollywood gross-out style. A Mughal painting of Krishna bifurcating the body of a demon with his discus is a masterpiece of special-effects blood and gore.

But scenes showing the death of animals can be moving and disturbing. The Mughals, and the Rajput painters influenced by them, were expert at painting animals, from a raging elephant to a timorous deer to a Himalayan pheasant likely bound for the cooking pot. They more or less had to be, as hunting was the sport of the kings who were their patrons. In one 18th-century picture, an artist named Jiva of Udaipur paints a single tiger in 15 different versions to create a time-lapse record of the animal's slaughter at the hands of imperial attendants.

It is possible to take such pictures in the spirit of action-adventure fiction, battles of good and evil, and so on. But at a certain point in looking at any art, you are likely to find ideology, always there in the background, bleeding through aesthetics. And once that happens, you may never look at that art with pleasure again. Hunt painting is an example. It is flatly about power: I can live, and you cannot. Whether in the hands of a Jiva or a Delacroix, the genre is revolting.

After such red-meat fare, a dessert course comes as a comfort, and the show is rich in the sweets department, with spun-sugar landscapes and trees laden with bonbon-like flowers and midget bananas. (The word sugar is derived from the Sanskrit sarkar.) In a portrait of Sultan Abul Hasan of Golconda, the ruler, smiling benignly in his plus-size gold robes, looks like nothing so much as a mound of foil-wrapped sorbet.

Nor is there any skimping on postprandial entertainment. A Mughal painting titled "Demons in a Wild Landcape" introduces an entire troupe of Purple (and mauve and puce and green) People Eaters, who seem ferocious only in their mania for keeping their caves and grottoes tidy. Another picture offers a herd of pink-skinned creatures with leonine bodies, elephant heads and impossibly tiny aphid wings. Pure confection, they bring the meal to a pixilated close.

Or almost to a close. Woodman Taylor, the new assistant curator of South Asian and Islamic art at the Museum of Fine Arts, has supplemented the San Diego show with a small display from Boston's Indian collection, one of the oldest and finest in the United States. A single fragment from the fifth-century Buddhist cave murals at Ajanta extends the five-century span of "Domains of Wonder" deep into the past. A 2005 painting by the artist Shahzia **Sikander**, a recent Boston acquisition, brings it into the present.

Ms. **Sikander**, born in Pakistan, now based in New York, studied miniature painting techniques in Lahore. And in a sense, her painting "Pathology of

"Suspension No. 6," a big-bang explosion of bodies, flowers and calligraphic characters against a pink sky, is a summing up of the themes in the Binney paintings. It is also a radical reworking of those themes, a distillation and a ripening of them. You can say the same of much of the new work being made in South Asia today and by artists of South Asian descent elsewhere. Richly hybrid, it defines a new kind of rasa, and is a substantial meal on its own.

"Domains of Wonder" continues through Nov. 26 at the Museum of Fine Arts, 465 Huntington Avenue, Boston; (617) 267-9300 or mfa.org. It travels to the Dallas Museum and the Cincinnati Art Museum.

The TimesMachine article viewer is included with your New York Times subscription.

We are continually improving the quality of our text archives. Please send feedback, error reports, and suggestions to archive_feedback@nytimes.com.

A version of this review appears in print on September 22, 2006, on Page E00027 of the National edition with the headline: ART REVIEW; An Appetite for Love and Devotion in Celestial Landscapes.

© 2019 The New York Times Company