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International Reception of Mithila Paintings and Heroization: Constructing Women (Painters) Figures in Véquaud's Writings

Many thanks for this invitation to present my work. Because I have to be short, I'll concentrate on Véquaud's writings.

Mithila Painting, is an umbrella term for ritual and art forms practiced in northern Bihar and Nepalese Terai. Mithila art is derived from ritual wall painting. Transferred on paper during the sixties to be commodified, it undergoes determinant changes as the recognition of the individual identity of the artist. The paintings are redefined in new settings, to fit into the economical and ideological needs of outsiders.

How do Westerners interpret Mithila painting? Do their narratives bear witness of the Western indophile *Zeitgeist* of the sixties?

This paper pertains to the international reception of Mithila Paintings, specifically through the interpretations put forward by Yves Véquaud. It deals with first, a presentation of the International appreciation of Mithila paintings. Then, I will focus on Véquaud's cultural network, and next the bohemian and countercultural dimensions in his writings. Finally, I will discuss his heroization of Maithil women painters.

1. A brief account of the international reception of Mithila Painting

Two natural catastrophes have been instrumental in the discovery of this art by outsiders. In 1934 during the Nepal-Bihar earthquake, William Archer, Officer in Madhubani, proceeded to document it. It opens the first phase of the Western reception.

His writings as his article "Maithil Painting" are underpinned by dominant movements in the Post-War Anglophone world: universal aesthetics, based on psychoanalyze surrealism and an organic vision of art. Since this article, the ritual and formal aspects has been set in unchanging tradition based on a stylistic distribution per castes and linked to a collective, anonymous and feminine practice. Archer works out a Eurocentric aesthetics, through Western criteria stemming from colonialism and vanguards as artistic universality.

The second natural catastrophe is the drought in 1966 during which the Indian government provides income-generating opportunities by giving women paper and colors. Mithila paintings, including the godna art, are then presented to an urban art world as a traditional art.

Simultaneously, the sixties "counter-culture" renews orientalist visions of a South Asian universe presumed to be spiritual, pantheist and sensorial; this utopia allows to draw alternative models. On the heels of the sixties' indophily appears a favourable moment - or

kairos - in the reception of Maithil works with international mediators: Erika Moser Schmitt in Germany, Tokio Hasegawa in Japan, Raymond and Naomi Owens in the USA and Véquaud in France. The writings of the latter mingled an aptitude to capture the “air du temps” with a real interest in India. Even the memoirs of Archer and his spouse, Mildred, match this aesthetic emotion.

2. Véquaud’s cultural network between France and India

Writer, translator, film director and curator, Véquaud is today mostly known for his essays on Mithila paintings. Even though controversial, his writings are recognized for their artistic value.

In 1970, Véquaud discovered the Mithila paintings in New-Delhi, thanks to the museologist Ratna Fabri, a close relation of Pupul Jayakar. At that time, Indira Gandhi invited Maithil painters to New-Delhi to decorate her residence, some hotels and embassies. Véquaud remained in India for two years and met painters in Mithila. In 1973, Edouard Boubat accompanied him there. His photographs were to illustrate Véquaud’s books. The same year, the article of Véquaud on Mithila paintings attracted the attention of the French Minister of Cultural Affairs, André Malraux¹, who just discovered them thanks to Indira Gandhi. From then on, Malraux supported the work of Véquaud. The latter gathered a collection of paintings, exhibited in France and abroad.

In 1989 he participated in the exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*. While in charge of relations with Maithil painters, Véquaud was instrumental in bringing Baua Devi to Paris as an artist-in-residence. The discovery of the paintings by Véquaud is linked to his influential cultural network between India and France. In the early sixties, he made use with a similar dexterity of social and symbolic network when he became passionate about bullfighting and met in Spain, Jean Cocteau, Orson Welles and Ernest Hemingway. His ability to build networks in Spain as in India indicates his interpersonal skills, with an adherence to the counter-culture.

3. Véquaud : juxtaposing counter-cultural Bohemia and Maithil village communitarian utopia

Indian Enchantment through the prism of counterculture

In a letter to the director of the journal NRF, Véquaud ponders: “Do you know that I am hippie? Some French people, have referred to me as such out : Yes, the French hippie with a beard ! But what is a hippie?”²

As early as 1964 in San Francisco, some groups were called hippies. They live on the margins of the dominant way of life, refuse work as it is imposed, practice non-violence, free love, and spontaneous creation. They build a “counter-culture”, a concept formed by Theodor Roszak³ : they dream of being “on the road” rather than “on the job”. This notion encompasses their anti-establishment dimension counter to the “bourgeois” ideals. Some of them, in the wake of the *Beat Generation*, experiment “extraordinary” perceptions. It matches with a quest for holistic experiences.

From his first writings, Véquaude’s anti-institutional temperament matched the mood of the counter-culture. He developed a neo-tantric interpretation of Mithila painting, in line with the hippie craze for oriental esotericism, which extols hedonism. So, Véquaude describes Mithila Painting as the acme of tantric practices which embodies an ideal religion combining spirituality with sensuality and artistic ambition.

He made use of a socio-symbolic network to highlight his collection and yet adhered to the counter-culture. This paradox can be explained by the Bohemia as described by Bourdieu or Heinich⁴.

Véquaude and Bohemia : the Invention of an Artistic Aristocracy ?

If Véquaude was able to accumulate cultural and artistic capital, his economic one remained very fragile. In Paris, he lived in a small studio, on the opposite landing of his mother’s one. He maintained with her an intense relationship. She managed a shop, not very profitable. But she achieved to finance his trips to India. The women painters could embody an idealized mother figure.

Véquaude defied the petty bourgeois way of life, from which he originated, to seize the liberality of manners, presumed associated with aristocracy and the upper-class, while experiencing precariousness.

So, Véquaude’s writings, semi-autobiographical, revived a myth of bohemia, inseparable from a vocational art definition, whose singularity regime reinforces the figure of the marginal hero.

Véquaude evolved in an economic world turned upside down. Bohemia allows him to artistically reinterpret aristocracy. He also invests – be it only as ideal - a new nobility, that of Maithil artists. He confesses a preference for the entertaining “bucolic walks which lead him to (...) huts with walls covered with frescoes” to “the very civil company of the Maharajah of Dharbanga”⁵.

The Maithil village as communitarian utopia

His writings on India are characterized by a “creative bubbling”⁶: a hedonistic way of life, exalting emotion. It leads to a feeling that anything is possible.

Thus, Véquaud expressed a canonical form of the counter-culture, instrumental in his heroization of painters: the back-to-the-land-movement in communitarian utopias within the Maithil village. This fantasy model shares the suspension of dominant norms like *phalansterie*, monachisms or communes, involving : widened household, collective care of children, egalitarian rotation of domestic tasks. Gender, patriarchy and family are redefined.

He notes that, “men often do nothing else than keeping their lastborns on the knees”⁷. In West, one can count on the fingers of one hand the painting women who shine through their art. Here three hundred women make marvels”⁸. According to him, “in India the example is not rare of societies where women are more powerful than in ours”⁹. In *The Art of Mithila*, he reiterated these projective presumptions, which reveal an evolution in gender. This village utopia serves his quest of alternative prophecies.

It renews an epitomized unchanging tradition opposed to mass and technocratic society. The rise of “information age” is accompanied by a nostalgia for older ways of making things. As the romantic critics of Victorian age praised Indian craftsmanship, Véquaud attributes the perfection of Maithil art to a timeless village. Folk art is misunderstood as homogenous, stable and rural. He champions a return to a pre-industrial, holistic community. From his standpoint, the preserved culture of Mithila embodies the culture of India. His utopia expresses a romantic nostalgia for the *Heimat* embodied in an elsewhere, through which arise a lost Eden. He attempts to re-enchant the world. So does he by heroizing the women painters.

4. Constructing Woman Painters Figures

Like the messianic figures of sadhus or other ascetics, the Maithil women painters are presented as charismatic figures, between holiness and genius. Sita Devi “appears to him as a saint”, withdrawn from the world, “in a refuge of inner peace and trust”. He depicts also Shanti Devi as a “holy woman”¹⁰. From his standpoint, “to paint better than her neighbor is to be devout, as it were to become priestess”¹¹. The talent of the painters presumed to create only when in a yogic state, is compared with that of an exorcist.

The women painters would so be transformed into prophetic figures of legend, incarnation of holiness. In his conception, the women painters swing between an ideal of devout humility and religious immortality.

He describes Sita Devi as the one who “knew all the honours” and yet remained “humble and loving”. From his standpoint, the artistic success of painters involves both the personalization

of means, as well as the depersonalization of the ends of the success, namely the creation of objects crystallizing values recognized beyond the author. It was traditionally reserved for heroes and saints.

Véquaude's admiration assumed an almost devotional character. He set up his exhibitions with a nearly sacerdotal diligence. His hermeneutics of the works is almost theological. The art of Mithila is described as a (wedding) liturgy ; the paintbrush becomes the tool of prayer¹². The biographies of the painters appear as a "golden legend"¹³. Maithil art became the sphere onto which he projected the expectations traditionally assumed by the religion. It is no longer the instrument, but the object of the sacralization. Sanctified with the admiration of Véquaude, the painters match the informal religiosity of the author.

In *The Art of Mithila*, Véquaude chose to guarantee all of the painters the "same anonymous glory"¹⁴. He nevertheless bought, collected, and probably sold works. He promoted their publishing and their filmic reproduction. So he intervened in their transformations, while celebrating their anonymous and timeless nature.

He attempts to challenge the Western art history as a model for global art history ; that is, according to Partha Mitter, a history with a universalist canon based on linear progress. Yet Véquaude's interpretations are not devoid of primitivist schemas. Instead of maligned monsters so frequent in European accounts, he put forward heroized artists within an alternative Eden. Within these representations of otherness lies self-identification.

His narratives reflect a male Western style for representing the painters. They bore less relation to Maithil painters than to a crisis (in Western) self-representation. Since the end of the 1990s, such essentialized interpretations are deconstructed through gender and cultural studies. These views expound Véquaude's and Archer's analyses as a hegemonic discourse formed by masculine canons : according to it, the omnipresent nature reveals a fertility symbolic, linked to universe of the painters who, with their pictorial vocabulary, write the body.

This reversal of perception juxtaposes a fusion of styles which prevails with the rise of a generation of painters who mix aesthetic and symbolic elements to situate themselves in a third space between cultures. Mithila paintings are perceived as syncretic. Transnational flows contribute to their renewal. The appearance of men painters tends to redefine gender categories even if patriarchy isn't called into question. Yet, beyond the writings of Véquaude, couldn't Mithila Painters tomorrow contribute to "undoing gender"?

¹ In 1969, Indira Gandhi invites Maithil painters as Sita Devi and Baua Devi. In 1970, some painters perform mural frescos in hotels (hotel Akbar), embassies, and import-export agencies. It attracts the attention of a cosmopolitan audience and allows the painters to get orders from the embassies of France, Brazil, and USA.

² Arland/Véquaud, Véquaud to Arland, March 9, 1971.

³ Roszak 1970.

⁴ Bourdieu 1992 and Heinich 1996.

⁵ Véquaud 1989b: 138.

⁶ Pagis 2014: 109.

⁷ Véquaud 1973: 85.

⁸ *Idem.*

⁹ *Idem.*

¹⁰ Véquaud 1989b: 62.

¹¹ Véquaud 1976a: 75.

¹² Véquaud 1973: 84.

¹³ Heinich 1996: 99.

¹⁴ Véquaud 1976 a: 34.