



RAQIB SHAW BALLADS OF EAST AND WEST

CONNECTING CULTURES

Raqib Shaw's Ballads of East and West

I always felt that in a strange way I am the reversal of Kipling; the “Colonizee” and the Colonized exchanging places and perspectives.

—Raqib Shaw

Raqib Shaw's exhibition takes its cue from Rudyard Kipling's 1887 “The Ballad of East and West.” The so-called Poet of Empire is characterized as proclaiming of the East and West that “Never the Twain Shall Meet,” yet Shaw is inspired by the next lines of Kipling's ballad, which propose the opposite: when like-minded souls meet, “there is neither East nor West” even if “they come from the ends of the earth!” Shaw creates a resounding affirmation that this “meeting” can be forged in art with remarkable results.

Based in London, Shaw was born in Calcutta (now Kolkata), India, and grew up in Kashmir, encircled by the Himalayas. As disputed territory claimed by both India and Pakistan, the heady beauty of the valley has been marred by a history of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies that peaked in the 1990s and continue today. Examined in this light, it is unsurprising that Shaw's artwork should seethe with conflict. In this exhibition of paintings, we see hybrid man-beasts in landscapes of unnerving beauty—and violence. Within each fantastical scenario is a portrait of the artist, his pensive demeanor seeming to concentrate the sorrow of the world even as he is surrounded by reminders of his lost homeland ([cover](#)).

References to Kashmir's beauty and trauma abound in Shaw's works. In *Self Portrait in the Study at Peckham (After Vincenzo Catena) Kashmir Version* ([fig. 1](#)), he reimagines Catena's *Saint Jerome in his*



Study. Catena's study is spare, uncluttered, while Shaw's looks remarkably like the interior of one of Kashmir's famous houseboats, with its richly carved cedarwood panels and intricately patterned carpets. Through a set of windows, we spy the snowy Himalayas and Dal Lake, a tiny boat floating on its calm cerulean waters. But the serene scene is offset by another: a pair of half-opened yellow shutters reveal Kashmir's ancient Sufi Dastgeer Sahib shrine in flames. The blue-painted Shaw at the center of the image is sunk in melancholy, as if in mourning for a vanished past.

The only sculpture in *Ballads of East and West* also alludes to Kashmir as a site of past and present conflict. *Small Adam* (2011) comprises a jewel-encrusted lobster ravaging (or ravishing?) a replica of Shaw's blood-spattered body attached to the head of a screaming bird. The deadly crustacean is coated in black diamonds and sapphires. Shaw has said that these gems symbolize the rape of Kashmir. Famous for its midnight-blue sapphires, the valley has been exploited by covetous invaders for centuries. Like many of his works, the sculpture references John Milton's seventeenth-century epic poem *Paradise Lost*, a reimagining of the biblical story of the Garden of Eden. Just as Adam was turned from paradise, so Shaw is in exile from the verdant valley, whose lush gardens once earned it the epithet "Paradise on Earth." *Small Adam* could signify the trauma both at the heart of (pro)creation and at the core of diasporic Shaw's "exilic" art.

But if Kashmir now represents a trampled Eden, a paradise lost, in Shaw's work it has another significance too: as a meeting point between cultures and creeds, a site of hope because once upon a time (to quote Kipling) "neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth" mattered in the valley. Kashmir's syncretic history—where goods, ideas, and people from the East and

West converged along the fabled Silk Road—cast a strong spell over the artist’s childhood. Shaw’s Kashmir was a land where South Asia’s religions—Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam—met and often merged as they do in the artist’s works. He remembers: “I grew up in Srinagar in a Muslim family and went to a Christian school where we would say the Lord’s Prayer every day . . . an elderly retired professor taught me all about Kashmiri Shaivism . . . It was good!”¹

As a young man, Shaw became familiar with the aesthetic production of the region as he worked for his family enterprise selling jewelry, antiques, textiles, and carpets. In *Self Portrait in the Study at Peckham (A Reverie after Antonello da Messina’s Saint Jerome) II* (2013–15), Christian motifs from Messina’s painting combine with allusions to Asian mysticism, Japanese ethics, and ancient symbolic textiles. Unlike Messina’s Saint Jerome, Shaw is garbed in an *uchikake* kimono, a style of ceremonial dress worn by ladies of the Samurai elite. *Bushido*, the code of the Samurai, eschews sensual distractions in favor of courage, honor, and self-discipline. Thus, Shaw’s kimono-clad figure fuses Bushido with the abstinence of Saint Jerome and Shaw’s habitual “Sufi-like” seclusion in his studio. This painting is one of two self-portraits in this exhibition that references Saint Jerome. Perhaps Shaw’s affiliation with the scholar-saint is connected to his work as a translator—akin to the cross-cultural translations inherent in the artist’s work—as well as his nomadic lifestyle traversing East and West.²

At the heart of Shaw’s *Ballads* is *The Retrospective 2002–2022* (fig. 2), a painting that revels in the complexities of cultural translation. Embedded within are sixty miniature versions of Shaw’s own paintings and sculptures, taking the viewer on a journey through the artist’s opulent oeuvre, from the simplified *All Those Summer Nights* to the ornate *Paradise Lost*.



Figure 2

If *The Retrospective* encapsulates Shaw's output, it also signposts its cross-cultural inspirations. It encompasses Shaw's own hybrid works, even as it quotes another's: Giovanni Panini's *Picture Gallery with Views of Modern Rome* (1757). Commissioned by the Count of Stainville, a French ambassador, to commemorate his sojourn in Rome, the "original" artwork presents Panini's landscape paintings hung on the walls of an imposing (if invented) gallery. Containing paintings within a painting, it shows off Panini's skills, proclaiming his right (by virtue of his technical virtuosity) to be hailed as the heir to Rome's classical legacy. By referencing Panini's imagined retrospective, Shaw's version celebrates his own career in a similar vein, staking his claim to a seminal spot in "the canon" of art.

Yet Shaw's canon is deliberately eccentric; it subverts the boundaries between East and West even as it topples distinctions between art and ornament. Japanese aesthetics, Mughal artifacts, Islamic textiles, and Indo-Persian architecture converge with citations from Renaissance Masters. Draped in his signature kimono or Jamawar shawl, the artist often impersonates figures from European masterpieces—think of Shaw as Saint Jerome or the Virgin Mary or of Mr. C (his beloved, recently deceased, dog) as the Christ Child. Moreover, Shaw's technique is as varied as his subject matter. Using porcupine quills and fine needles to apply paint within delicate gilt lines, every motif is outlined in embossed gold in a manner similar to the cloisonné method used in antique East Asian pottery to decorate metalwork and ceramics. Shaw took fifteen years to forge his own take on this traditional process, commingling elements from European painting with Asian aesthetics as he did so.

This exhibition concentrates on paintings made after Shaw's discovery of the paint mixer, which allowed him to concoct his own colors in his studio. Once he was able to conjure any shade, Shaw



Figure 3

decided to pit his skills against those of his heroes. He returned to London's National Gallery, the place he visited when he first came to London on family business and that moved him so profoundly that he decided to become an artist. This time, he was looking for a painterly challenge which would put his technical dexterity to the test. He found it in Carlo Crivelli's *The Annunciation with Saint Emidius* (fig. 3). For Shaw, this painting combines various "painting challenges: stone, fabric, sky, feather, fur, wood." If Crivelli's *Annunciation* boasts a scintillating profusion of contrasting colors, textiles and architectural detailing, Shaw's version of it—dubbed *The Annunciation - After Carlo Crivelli* (fig. 4)—rivals its source. Devised from enamel and rhinestones on birchwood, Shaw's dizzying juxtaposition of textures and themes holds us spellbound. Fine-veined marbled pillars vie for our attention with Kashmiri carpets, gold coins, embroidered silk, embossed velvet, and glimpses of a dreamy peach-stained aquamarine sky. Our gaze moves from preening centaurs to brocade-



Figure 4

clad hyena-men. In the midst of the divine chaos is the artist himself: swapping places with Crivelli's Virgin Mary, a sapphire-hued Shaw with a golden halo is pierced by a shaft of golden light. His blue visage is reminiscent of the color associated with the Virgin's robes in Medieval altarpieces, but it also links him to a Hindu deity: Krishna, the blue-black god of love.

And so, Shaw's *Ballads*, marrying East with West, will travel across the United States, serving as a cultural ambassador to new audiences. The Frist Art Museum is well known for the diversity of its programming; over the years, its exhibitions have featured art, textiles, artifacts, and other media telling tales of history and mythology from around the world, themes that are concentrated in Shaw's practice. It is fitting then, that Shaw's cross-continental tour, comprising his most important paintings from the last decade, should begin its voyage here.

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Notes

1. A form of nondualist Hinduism associated with Kashmir, which believes in the mystical unity between man and God.
2. Saint Jerome translated the Bible from Ancient Greek into Latin between ca. 383 and 404 CE, eventually checking the Old Testament against the Hebrew version. This fourth century Latin Bible is known as the Vulgate.

Image Credits

Cover: Raqib Shaw. *La Tempesta (after Giorgione)* (detail), 2019–21. Acrylic liner and enamel on birchwood; 53 7/8 x 42 7/8 in. Private collection. © Raqib Shaw. Photo © White Cube (Theo Christelis). Courtesy of the artist and White Cube

Fig. 1: Raqib Shaw. *Self Portrait in the Study at Peckham (After Vincenzo Catena) Kashmir Version* (detail), 2015–16. Acrylic liner and enamel on birchwood; 48 x 72 in. Private collection. © Raqib Shaw. Photo © Raqib Shaw (Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd). Courtesy of the artist and White Cube

Fig. 2: Raqib Shaw. *The Retrospective 2002–2022*, 2015–22. Acrylic liner, enamel, and rhinestones on aluminum; 84 1/4 x 107 in. Private collection, London. © Raqib Shaw. Photo © White Cube (Todd-White Art Photography). Courtesy of the artist and White Cube

Fig. 3: Carlo Crivelli. *The Annunciation with Saint Emidius*, 1486. Egg and oil on canvas; 81 1/2 x 57 3/4 in. National Gallery, London, UK. Photo: Bridgeman Images

Fig. 4: Raqib Shaw. *The Annunciation - After Carlo Crivelli*, 2013–14. Acrylic liner, enamel, and rhinestones on birchwood; 81 3/8 x 57 5/8 in. Private collection © Raqib Shaw. Photo © Raqib Shaw (Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd). Courtesy of the artist and White Cube

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Raqib Shaw: Ballads of East and West is organized by the Frist Art Museum and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, with guest curator Dr. Zehra Jumabhoj, lecturer in the history of art, University of Bristol, UK.

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