

# Women's Intellectual and Material Culture

Rosemary Raza, Kate Smith, and Victoria Dickenson  
Moderator: Toolika Gupta



November 3, 2020  
9:00AM (EDT)

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The Gwillim Project, which centres around the unpublished correspondence and artwork of two sisters who lived in Madras at the beginning of the nineteenth century, brings together an international network of scholars from diverse fields in order to explore the collections from multiple perspectives. In this panel, moderated by Toolika Gupta, Rosemary Raza explores the sisters' correspondence in the context of British women's writing on India. Kate Smith draws parallels with the work of Sarah Elizabeth Amherst. And Victoria Dickenson discusses the work of managing a household and its material culture.

**Toolika Gupta** is the Director of the Indian Institute of Crafts and Design, Jaipur.

**Kate Smith** is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in Eighteenth-Century History at the University of Birmingham, UK.

**Rosemary Raza** is a former diplomat. She researches and writes on the Indian subcontinent, particularly on art and the work and lives of women writers

**Victoria Dickenson** is Adjunct Professor, Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill Library and former director of the McCord Museum

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## **Rosemary Raza, The intellectual and cultural world of Elizabeth Gwillim and Mary Symonds**

This paper seeks to situate the sisters Elizabeth and Mary in the wider context of the world in which they lived. They were both talented artists, keen observers of the Indian scene, and fluent letter writers. How did they fit into the role which evolved for women in the 18th century, and were they exceptional? How did their interests and work compare with those of contemporary women?

## **Kate Smith, 'When we had arrived & settled ourselves'**

Through their presence in a variety of different cultural sites, from the household to the marketplace or riverside, British women encountered and engaged in colonial life on the Indian subcontinent. To respond to and reflect on such engagements, they utilised a range of cultural practices. Such productions have created an 'alternative' historical record of empire, which is slowly being unearthed in public and private collections. These sources reveal that British women actively recorded their roles in and responses to Britain's imperial project on the Indian subcontinent. By looking to writings and paintings, as well as object acquisitions and displays, we can see how alongside reflecting women's responses, such cultural productions also played a role in shaping broader conceptions of Britain's imperial project and the social, cultural, political and economic worlds of the Indian subcontinent. In this paper, I consider the cultural practices of one individual, Sarah Elizabeth Amherst, to demonstrate the contested and ambiguous nature of the cultural productions she created.

## **Victoria Dickenson, Lady Gwillim's China: 'my plateau & figures are just to their taste'**

While Elizabeth Gwillim preferred to fill her days in Madras with botany and painting, she could not avoid the responsibility of managing a large and socially prominent household. Mary Symonds asserted she did the daily house keeping, but Elizabeth ensured that they had furnishings appropriate to their status. She was particularly pleased with her dinnerware, which allowed her to set a fine table. Not only did Lady Gwillim appreciate English china, she also had an eye for local productions. Elizabeth Gwillim's letters allow us also to appreciate domestic material culture, in particular the dishes and pots fundamental to any household, European or Indian



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