

Art and Image

Marika Sardar, Ben Cartwright, Saraphina Masters, Hana Nikčević
Moderator: Jennifer Garland



November 17, 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The Gwillim Project, which centres around the unpublished correspondence and artwork of two sisters who lived in Madras at the beginning of the nineteenth century, brings together an international network of scholars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, curated by Jennifer Garland, Ben Cartwright takes a close look at Mary Symonds' Madras Album, Marika Sardar places the sisters' art in the context of Indian painting traditions and Saraphina Masters and Hana Nikčević draw out the distinctive features of the bird paintings by Elizabeth Gwillim and the street scenes by Mary Symonds.

Jennifer Garland is Assistant Head Librarian, Rare Books and Special Collections at McGill University

Dr. Ben Cartwright is the Collection Curator at The South Asia Collection Museum, Norwich, UK.
Dr Ben Cartwright's work on The Gwillim Project is supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art

Dr Marika Sardar is Curator at the Aga Khan Museum, having previously worked at the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar, the San Diego Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Saraphina Masters earned her Bachelor's degree in Art History and Classical Studies from Smith College. For her graduate thesis at McGill, she focused on the history paintings of Angelica Kauffman in 1770s England. Her experience with this time period and the work of female artists now informs her work for the Gwillim Project.

Hana Nikčević is an art history MA student at McGill researching articulations of ecological loss in contemporary art. Her interest in humans' historical interactions with and representations of nature led her to the Gwillim Project.

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Abstracts

Ben Cartwright

An introduction to the *Madras and Environs Album*, a collection of seventy-eight watercolour paintings by a circle of artists, including Mary Symonds and Elizabeth Gwillim. The *Madras Album* provides a unique view on Mary and Elizabeth's life in southern India – the people, places, wildlife, plants and hobbies that engaged them. The watercolours include street scenes and country retreats, including the tragic *Mr Webb's Cotton Farm House at Pummel – where Lady G died*. There is also a glimpse into the interior worlds of the sisters: for example, *Sir HG's Bedroom*, *The Miss Symonds' drawing room*, and *An English Nursery in India*. This presentation will explore how the painters of the *Madras Album* might have been influenced by paintings and prints from India at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and in particular, the rich melting pot of art in the south.

Saraphina Masters and Hana Nikčević

Saraphina's talk will briefly detail her process in the conceptualization and creation of a style guide for Elizabeth Gwillim's watercolour paintings of birds held in the Blacker-Wood Collection at the McGill Library, as well as an examination of three relevant artists for comparison. Background features and a unique depiction of feathers, as well as artistic predecessors inform her perspective on Gwillim as well as broader questions for the future path of her research. Hana's presentation takes up four watercolours by Mary Symonds; unique in the Madras Album (South Asia Collection, Norwich), these four street scenes depict rows of various Indian individuals engaging in an assortment of everyday activities. One of these rows is cut out, and Symonds's correspondence with her sister reveals that she intended to cut out and assemble multiple such illustrations into a three-dimensional representation of a crowded street in Madras. Symonds's intent corresponds with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British fascination with optical devices; here, her potential influences are explored.

Marika Sardar, Traditions of Natural History Painting In India

While the natural history drawings and paintings made by Elizabeth Gwillim and Mary Symonds can be understood within the frameworks of European illustrations for scientific study and European systems for classifying animals and plants, there is also an Indian context for their work. Indian painters had for centuries been producing nature studies and there were longstanding conventions for describing and cataloguing the natural world in Persian-, Arabic- and Sanskrit-language sources. A study of this aspect of Indian painting and investigation opens possibilities for identifying an Indian contribution to the emerging fields of botany and zoology in Madras and the related production of scientific paintings of flora and fauna there by European and Indian artists in the eighteenth to early nineteenth century.