

Two 20thC creatives meet Theory's hegemony
by Richard D North

1 December, 2024

c4,200 words (including c1000 words of Appendix)

I want to defend two very different 20th Century British artists from the 21st Century's Critical Theory and Colonial Theory, not least as Theory exerts its baleful influence in the art gallery world. This is part of my wider (impossible) ambition to free modern culture - I mean the minds of the under-50s - from the worst of Theory and Postmodernism.¹

This is a 1920s story from London, New Delhi and Lahore, partly as filtered through Chichester's Pallant Gallery show and book on *Glyn Philpot: Flesh and Spirit* (2022).

This piece is a twin to my "19thC creatives meet Theory" and my wider-ranging "Critical Theory, Etc: A push back", on Theory and Identity Politics and more.

Contents

[Background: Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Theory](#)

[Philpot, North, QMDH & Empire Exhibition, c1924](#)

[Philpot, North, Lutyens & New Delhi, c1929](#)

[Lutyens New Delhi Afterlife, 2024](#)

[Appendix #1: Hatt and Klonk on Orientalism and humanism](#)

[Appendix #2: Online research resources](#)

[Appendix #3: 1911 Coronation celebrations, London & India](#)

Background: Edward Said's *Orientalism*

Colonial Theory has one main hero, the fascinating but flawed writer, Edward Said, whose book, *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient* (1978 and 1995), applied Michel Foucault's thinking on hegemonic narratives to explain how Britain thought about and ruled India. (Foucault was himself channelling Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Husserl, and Heidegger, as he considered the histories of madness, imprisonment and homosexuality.) (For more on Theory in all its manifestations: see my matching essay, "Critical Theory, Etc: An interrogation".)

¹ I haven't included Post-colonial Theory only because it is generally premised on being about cultures which are post-colonial, or discussion produced by people who are from cultures which were once colonised. My linked essay about creatives in 19th Century India, as discussed by Pakistani and Indian people, some living in our time, will be labelled as Post-colonial. My logic may be faulty: perhaps all Said's thought ought to be considered to have come from a Post-colonial.)

Colonial Theory asserts that Britain's elite augmented its muscular authority in India by the deployment of beliefs about British racial and cultural superiority over the Indian "Other". This elite narrative achieved hegemony in the imperial mind and legitimised the British Empire's ambition of indoctrinating its subject peoples with the same ideas. In my contrary view, the totality of hegemony never happened. Indeed, like the rest of Critical Theory, Colonial Theory (and its subset, Post-colonial Theory) achieve their effect only if their adherents are taught to ignore the awkward facts of history.

[Back to Contents](#)

Philpot, North & Dolls' House, 1924 and 1925

The artists Glyn Philpot and Stanley Kennedy North (SKN) were amongst the hundreds of well-known creatives (and firms) commissioned by the architect Sir Edwin Lutyens to contribute designs for the Queen Mary's Dolls' House displayed for the summers of 1924 and 1925 at The Empire Exhibition at Wembley (and ever since at Windsor Castle). ²Empire is at the heart of this story. From the Critical Theory point of view, every Briton with any imperial involvement is culpable.

Lutyens was collaborating with a committee in cahoots with Princess Marie Louise, the granddaughter of the late Queen Victoria (the Empress of India). Marie Louise was the instigator of this gift for her childhood friend, Mary, the Queen Consort (whose husband was George V, King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and Emperor of India).

Philpot decorated the ceiling of one of the Dolls' House bedrooms, whilst SKN painted the frieze depicting the King and Queen's 1911 Coronation procession which decorated the room in Windsor Castle in which the Dolls' House was eventually displayed. (SKN made a rocking horse for the Dolls' House, to that might have been seen at the Wembley Empire Exhibition. Also: see Appendix #3 on the 1911 Coronation celebrations in London and India.)

² The Empire Exhibition is famous in our time as the scene of George V's opening it with a triumph over his stuttering. (The movie, *The King's Speech* (2010) recalls the success of the stropky familiarity of a colonial subject of Empire, the Australian Lionel Logue, in liberating the King's tongue. SKN drew the dedicated transport map for the Exhibition and park, including the London Underground connections. SKN also made a rocking horse for the Dolls' House, so may have had a showing at Wembley too.

The Exhibition was a standout feature in what was plainly imperial propaganda. It was part of the narrative - the storyboard and mindset - by which the British Empire aimed to bind its peoples to London's elite manipulations at home and abroad.

Contrary to Colonial Theory's account of how these processes work, The London White Patriarchy didn't have it all their own way. In the 1920s the British imperial ambition was battling against powerful headwinds of socialism at home and nationalism in its dominions overseas. In India's case, late 19th and early 20th Century British policy perhaps only pretended to its stated intention of Indianising government. Anyway, the British moves, whatever their intention, seemed only to fuel Indian nationalism. Thus do hegemonic utterances and policies become their own second-worst worst enemies (after their prime victims, of course).

What we know from these years is that Britain's elite hegemony of narrative and government, if it ever existed, certainly didn't last. Indian Independence and Partition arrived in 1946. That is all that matters to fatally undermine the power of Critical Theory's core assertion about Empire. Elite hegemonies aren't total and don't stick.

In their day, Philpot (and North) uncontroversially and even respectably could have been imperialists or anti-imperialists, or not much bothered either way.

It matters that in the Britain and India of the 1920s neither "conservative" imperialist nor "progressive" anti-imperialist thought was compulsory and curricular (was not hegemonic). Actually, Critical Theory anti-imperialism has now become curricular and all-but compulsory (hegemonic) in what we might call soft-authoritarian Western liberal states. The Theorists educated the educators who now dominate in schools and universities, and have done so for long enough to be powerful in media, publishing, and museum and gallery circles. This is situation won't last, provided independent minds fight back against hegemony. (Actually, such thinkers have only to obey Said's clarion call to slough off "discourses of power, ideological fictions - [William Blake's] mind-forged manacles [which] are all too easily made, applied and guarded. Said is thinking of "Orientalism", but he might just as well have been thinking of Theory.

This issue swam into my view in particular when I saw a 2022 Pallant Gallery show of the artist Glyn Philpot's work, and read the accompanying monograph, *Glyn Philpot: Flesh and Spirit (2022)*. Its account owed a good deal to Critical Theory's Colonial Theory, and also to its views on Gender Theory, Queer Theory, and Race Theory (especially but not only racial stereotyping). I should stress that Critical Theory is a fairly useful account of the power relations it reviews, but it is far too simplistic to serve well as the main prism to view history or the present world.

My critique of the Pallant's view of the Critical Theory view of the Empire and the arts begins by noting that artists in the 1920s would have had no difficulty in finding reasons to be highly suspicious of the British Empire. There was Mary Kingsley's

writing for a start. But very much in the mainstream - as a beacon of hope or a threat - were Ramsay Macdonald's thoughts on these matters.

Macdonald was Prime Minister in 1924 when the Queen's Dolls' House was exhibited at the Empire Exhibition. But his views were available to Philpot and North from well before their Dolls' House days.

The stereotypical, dogmatic Colonial Theory view was and is that Britain's elite somehow choked-off all opinion that was sceptical about Empire. The plain record of events shows this to be nonsense.

Ramsay Macdonald and his wife had visited India several times in the early 1900s and their London home was open to colonial nationalists from several countries. He had been leader of the Labour Party since 1911. Importantly for our story, in 1910 he had published *India Awakening*. It is, as well as being well-informed, a beautiful book and speaks to the powerful effect India made on him as it did on many Europeans who found Indian religious and cultural life almost overwhelmingly impressive. (They were like the late Queen Victoria in having these feelings as we shall see in an [older historical story I pursue elsewhere](#).)

India Awakening's main policy thought is that India must be prepared for self-government. In the book's time it was not remotely a new thought, but would predominate very soon. Recent Viceroys had floated and even promoted it (perhaps sometimes as a feint, or a performative gesture) and more were to come. Since self-government was the obvious precursor to full independence, it was natural to aim to persuade elite and public opinion of the former without scaring people with too much emphasis on the latter.

In the year of Macdonald's book, 1910, a group of well-known creatives - native Britons and native Indians, some of them inter-married - formed the India Society in London. It thrived as a multi-media organiser, with Indian song and dance a feature of touring shows. It was dedicated to promoting India's indigenous arts and crafts, very much along Ruskinite, Arts and Crafts lines.

In June 1924, at the Wembley Empire Exhibition, the India Society organised a conference on Indian Art at the British Empire Exhibition.

Macdonald's book, and the India Society's show, had plenty of time to fructify before our two artists accepted their mildly imperial Dolls' House commissions. *India Awakening* and the India Society were going with the flow of thinking and events.

Nonetheless, there were ironies aplenty.

[Back to Contents](#)

Philpot, North, Lutyens & New Delhi, c1929

It is at least ironic that as Britain prepared tentatively to loosen its grip on India, it built a vast palace for the Viceroy in Delhi, which would be reborn as New Delhi.

The Viceroy's House was the very image of imperial grandeur. But actually, it also took its place more naturally as a seat of modern government. In the context of Lutyens's entire plan for New Delhi, it was an expression of trends in India which were both ancient and modern, rationalist and spiritual. The proof of this is that about 70 years after it was opened, India became fully independent and the building and its wider purlieus were re-purposed as the country's Presidential Palace and seat of administration, which it remains to this day.

The New Delhi project was started in 1911. The grand scheme, as Lutyens intended, had something of the scale of L'Enfant's late 18th Century plan for Washington, DC (which was at once idealistic and totalitarian). Lutyens's wider thinking for Delhi - the city layout but also the bungalow estates in his plan - had a dash of the British late 19th Century Port Sunlight, or the early 20th Century Hampstead Garden City: both had Arts and Crafts in their romances. It also had something about it that wasn't about the Western world at all.

Architectural opinion seems to be that Lutyens had a taste for the formalities of European Renaissance architecture and disparaged the sub-continent's own tastes. It was at the direct bidding of the alien white patriarchy in the form of Viceroy Hardinge (in office, 1910-1916), and against Lutyens's preference for classic Greece and Rome or English Arts and Crafts, that there were elements of Mughal (which is to say, ancient Islamic and Persian) and Buddhist influence throughout the palace. (Hardinge's preference was in line with Anglo-Indian architectural thinking from the late 19th Century. (See Appendix below))

Again, none of this is fully consonant with unreconstructed Critical Theory's Saidism unless one is so adamant as to assume that any imperial concession to "native" culture is merely a deliberate misdirection or feint toward disarming nationalist Indian opinion. (It is, I concede, possible to conceive it as a case of what Theory calls Colonial Ambivalence.)

Philpot, a Lutyens connection (as noted above) and his friend and dependent, the artist Vivian Forbes, contributed to The Viceroy's House. They probably sent in their paintings without visiting India. Stanley Kennedy North, likewise associated with Lutyens (see above) also worked on the Viceroy's House, but in Delhi and in a hands-on way. True to his own artisanal, almost Arts and Crafts, roots he was tasked with unearthing and training local artisans and working out how to produce plasters which could survive the Indian climate. (The plasters did not entirely succeed.)³

³ I think SKN's likeliest thought-leader was WR Lethaby, whom he probably encountered at the Royal College of Art. Lethaby was a medievalist with a powerful

So far so good. I am telling this story because I would like to release the Pallant's Glyn Philpot (and Stanley Kennedy North too), from the charge that they were the British Empire's useful idiots and worse. It is worth quoting at some length the Pallant Gallery's *Glyn Philpot: Flesh and Spirit* (2022). The excerpt nods towards issues in cultural imperialism - Colonial and Post-Colonial Theory - in discussing Philpot's work for Lutyens. In a closely related matter, the Pallant also worries that Philpot gave in to racial stereotyping, which underpins much Theory.

A little background is necessary.

First: The Pallant leans heavily - indeed exclusively - on Critical Theory's Colonial Theory as derived from Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

Second: Lutyens hoped Philpot's offering - it was for the Viceroy's Library - would riff on Michaelangelo's *Creation of Adam* (1508-12) for the Sistine Chapel. Philpot disappointed him by sending in more pagan, mythic sort of figures in a picture entitled *The Creation of Man*. (Forbes delivered an uncontroversial picture, a portrait of William Caxton, as *Inventor of the Printing Press* - and thus one of the great heroes of the Western account of the liberation of mankind.)

Third: Philpot used the African-Caribbean Henry Thomas as the model for his central figure for the Delhi painting, but rendering him as a white European for the final piece.

Here goes, then, with the promised quote and some light exegesis:

“However, this [the third point, above] is *perhaps reflective of hierarchical* thinking relating to Britain, its empire and Christianity in the 1920s and '30s, and the setting of the commission within the home [in New Delhi] of the Viceroy, representative of the King Emperor. Philpot *would thus seem to be the paradigm of 'colonial ambivalence'*, being at once sympathetic with people of colour and yet creating work at the centre of the British colonial enterprise, *corroborating Edward Said's assertion that no European can oppose colonialism or orientalism because they are produced by these discourses and cannot sit outside of them*”. [RDN italics]⁴ In brief, this quote is both speculative and cautious. The “perhaps” and the “reflective” are tentative, not assertive, in talking about Philpot in regard to what is said to be the dominant thinking in “hierarchical” Britain. The remarks go on to say that Philpot “would thus

interest in Modernism, an inclination that was followed by Lutyens in his later career. For more leads on SKN, his Delhi work and Lethaby connection, see Appendix #3

⁴ “Colonial Ambivalence” was coined so far as I can see (we are given no source) by Homi K Bhabha, of Harvard University.

seem to be the paradigm” of “colonial ambivalence.” The last bit is a term popular in Critical Theory’s latter day sub-department, Post-colonial Theory.

The idea is that colonialists at once belittle their subject peoples and - perhaps as a misdirection - also exoticise them. I’ll unpick some of all that below, as briefly as I decently can.

As to the early sentences in this paragraph “corroborating” an assertion of Edward Said’s, I can’t find that line in either editions of his famous *Orientalism*. But see, Hatt and Klunk in Appendix #1.

Had Said made the remark, the best that could be said for it is that it at least honours his view that all white imperialists were hopelessly biased against their dark-skinned subjects.

It needs pointing out that Said’s *Orientalism* was actually quite nuanced, even conflicted (though he doesn’t admit that much). Said wanted to assert the Foucauldian tyranny of cultural discourse whilst declaring Said’s own equal and opposing commitment to humanist personal autonomy of thought. Said’s unthinking followers - our modern institutional leaders in academic and curatorial thought - are much more keen on Said’s obeisance to Foucault than on the lingering but sidelined respect for humanism to be seen in *Orientalism*. The Pallant view certainly reflects the vulgar uses to which Said’s work was put in Critical Theory.ⁱ The Pallant makes, I think, several poor, commonplace and vulgar Critical Theory moves in these remarks, and makes them feebly. Said may have believed that all colonialists believed a particular derogatory narrative about any dark-skinned subject people. (But see Appendix #1, below.) If every part of that proposition was true, then colonialists are in effect what came to be called “essentialist”. And of course, so was Said, since he was being essentialist right back at the colonialists. It is of a piece with Said’s inconsistencies that he is both an essentialist and a denier of essentialism.

My own reading of Said is that he wanted to have his cake and eat it too, but was almost too decent to quite pull it off.

However, Philpot and North were examples of how wrong Said’s assumptions about groupthink were.

In fretting over all this, the Pallant ignores the plain fact that in Philpot’s (and North’s) time European and Anglosphere mainstream thought had very varied views on empire. As discussed above, progressive, leftish white thought was as firmly anti-imperial as its equivalent in the colonies, and that within official circles there was a strong strand of reformism and it was emerging in policy.

It is also a little surprising that anyone, now or in the very early 1930s, would suppose that Indians coming to the Viceroy’s residence would be surprised, or shocked, to see white images. Indeed, Asians might have been more surprised if the Viceroy’s walls

had instead boasted an image of an African-Caribbean presented as some version of an Italian Renaissance image of God.

[Back to Contents](#)

Lutyens New Delhi Afterlife, 2024

Indeed, and here is the funny, excellent and even huggable side of all this. When the nationalists and sectionarlists took over India and divided it, the Viceroy's House was kept as a core government facility as India's Presidential Palace. What's more, Glyn Philpot's and Vivian Forbes's paintings still hang in what is now the president's own library. Indeed, the irony or joy of the love between the two white, "colonialist" painters is affording pleasure to a modern Presidential private secretary as he reflects on their sitting across the room from each other. (See Appendix #2)

[Back to Contents](#)

Appendix #1: Hatt and Klonk on Orientalism and humanism

Michael Hatt & Charlotte Klonk, *Art history: A critical introduction to its methods*, Manchester University Press, 2006 Available at Internet Archive.

This is a vital piece of work. It is a moderate and sensible account of Foucault (and Foucauldianism) and also of Foucault's underpinning of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Hatt and Klonk politely suggest that Said was in a great muddle when he asserted his Foucauldianism but also his contrary belief in humanism and human freedoms (ie, humanity's agency). H&K imply (but do not explicitly say) that the sheer variety of thinking in the "centre" of Empire, and in the colonies, wrecks Said's strongly implied proposition that there was a uniformity (a conformism) in the thinking of either.

Here is an important quote from the Hatt/Klonk work:

"...there is an internal theoretical contradiction in *Orientalism*...Said deploys a Foucauldian method, based on the notion of discourse: that the Other - in this case the Orient - is always a construct. This entails the impossibility of mutual understanding, since one cannot step outside discourse and find the truth about another culture. On the other hand, though, Said ends the book with a humanist wish. Orientalism failed, he says, because it 'failed to identify with human experience' and did not recognise the 'common enterprise of promoting human community.'"

The thinking of Said cited in H&K is on the last page of the 1978 edition of his *Orientalism*. As H&K suggest, it reveals a contradiction in Said's arguments. That is: Said does not believe whole-heartedly in the hegemony of discourse (aka narrative) he derives from Foucault. Said wants to hunt with his Foucauldian determinist discourse hares and with his humanist respect for human agency hounds.

In the case of the Pallant's use of Said's thought, my feeling is that the Pallant reflects H&K's citation of some of Said's words, but does so without noting that Said also directly contradicts them, as H&K point out.

I took a look at the H&K material because Simon Martin's Preface to his *Glyn Philpot, Flesh and Spirit* (2022) cites Michael Hatt's "inspirational" lecturing whilst Martin was at Warwick University.

[Back to Contents](#)

Appendix #2: Online research resources

NB: None of these sources are behind a paywall

Some Viceroys in a sympathetic light

Curzon

<https://www.restoretrust.org.uk/restore-trust-issues/curzon-as-vice-roy-of-india>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Councils_Act_1909

And:

Curzon and Montagu

Edwin Samuel Montagu PC (1879 - 1924), Secretary of State for India between 1917 and 1922. Montagu was a "radical" Liberal. Wiki: "He was primarily responsible for the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms which led to the Government of India Act 1919, committing the British to the eventual evolution of India towards dominion status."

Here, below, is a fascinating piece which shows Curzon to be the author of a vital document, "The Montagu Declaration" of 1917 which appeared to propose the thorough Indianisation of the government of India and was soon to become government policy. This in spite of Curzon's being an out-and-out imperialist. Robin Moore unpicks this story to suggest that WW1 had changed Curzon's mind in favour of giving more power to Indians. But there are subtleties. Moore shows that Curzon (as recently retired Viceroy and Montagu (as Secretary of State for India) had different views on the workings of Indianisation. Curzon in his own words in 1917) did "not dissent from the broad view that [in] some form or other self-government within the British Empire is the goal at which we aim". But the British should insist the policy could only succeed "under British guidance" and on the assumption "that there was no intention to weaken the essential safeguards of British justice and British power".

I think the opposition to "reform" came as much from people who thought it went too far as from people who thought it didn't go far enough. In the upshot, India - and not least many of its nationalists - played a noble role at Britain's side in two world wars and after the second gained independence immediately.

Here's the source from which I draw these thoughts and quotes:
Moore, R. J. (Robin James), *The crisis of Indian unity, 1917-1940*, Clarendon, 1974
Accessed at Internet Archive

And

Moore, Robin J. "Curzon and Indian Reform." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1993, pp. 719-40

Available online at:

Moore, R. J. (1993). Curzon and Indian Reform on JSTOR. *Modern Asian Studies*, 719.

<https://doi.org/312829>

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/312829>

Hardinge

<https://indianculture.gov.in/digital-district-repository/district-repository/understanding-facade-colonial-legislature-morley>

This is an account of the assassination attempt on the life of Charles Hardinge, the Viceroy who implemented the much disputed 1909 Minto-Morley reforms and improved relations between the British Empire and many of the activist nationalists. It speaks well, I think, of the mindsets of Indian nationalism, extreme and moderate; of the political tensions within and between India's two main religions; of the doubts about the intentions of the Minto-Morley reforms, and of their possible real effects.

And:

Nathala Varshith Reddy, "The Delhi conspiracy case of 1912 and the role of British intelligence agencies in solving it", *International Journal of Humanities and Arts* 2024, December 2023

Reddy is a Research Scholar, Department of History, Osmania University, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

Accessed at:

<https://doi.org/10.33545/26647699.2024.v6.i1a.60>

Post-colonial New Delhi

Rashtrapati Bhavan

(The Indian Presidential Palace, formerly The Viceroy's House)

For good material on the present use of Rashtrapati Bhavan (and its library)

<https://www.rashtrapatibhavan.gov.in/library>

And:

“Two paintings and a love story”, by Praveen Siddharth, *Hindustan Times*, 26 July, 2020. (The author was billed as Private Secretary to the President of India at Rashtrapati Bhavan.)

Accessed at:

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/art-and-culture/two-paintings-and-a-love-story/story-RbemBcH1gBSGvD5MB3Mljl.html>

And:

New Delhi Capitol Complex: From Edwin Lutyens & Herbert Baker On To Bimal Patel, by Sarbjit Bahga, *India Architecture News*, 2 November, 2019

<https://worldarchitecture.org/article-links/eehmv/new-delhi-capitol-complex-from-edwin-lutyens-herbert-baker-on-to-bimal-patel.html>

And:

<https://indianculture.gov.in/system/files/paintingimage/Select-Paintings-of-Rashtrapati-Bhavan-21.jpg>

Submitted by Sarbjit Bahga

Appendix #3: 1911 Coronation celebrations in London and India

The 1911 Coronation ceremony in Westminster Abbey included flags of the Dominions and Colonies, and there were Indian troops in the procession between Buckingham Palace and the Abbey (before or after the ceremony, or both). Later that year, Britain’s Indian government staged one of its vast Imperial (or “Delhi”) coronation Durbars (1873, 1877 and 1911) with the last being the first with the Emperor of India - George V - in attendance. These gatherings, viewed cynically, combined the flattering of Indian opinion and the empowerment of Empire.

Colonial troops in London, 1911

Colonial Troops in 1911 Coronation procession

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060000077>

Colonial involvement in the procession:

https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/George_and_Mary's_coronation

[Contents](#)

Ends
