Archives and India

When invited to view the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) Archives online, I was drawn to the ROM’s Sports et divertissements because of the mix of fashion and music. Each spread in this publication was a pairing of an illustration, shown above, with a musical score, shown below. When I visited the ROM Archives in person, I was met by Brendan, the ROM’s Head Librarian and Archivist. He walked me to the table where the historical, nearly 100-year old publication, had been carefully placed for my review. As he lifted the box lid to reveal the treasure inside, he said, “This is the original multimedia platform.” He told me this publication, that includes prose, musical scores and illustrations, was pulled together in 1914 but put on hold, due to the war, and not published until 1923 (Edwards). As I approached these printed art and fashion plates from France, my mind diverted back to India because whenever I have thought or talked about the turn of the 20th century it has been within the context of my family history. In this moment, as I was about to embark on observing something from France, my thoughts turned to where my Muslim and Hindu ancestors were at the time this publication was being created in France.

The year Erik Satie completed the musical score and Charles Martin completed his initial illustrations for Sports et divertissements was 1914 (Davis, “Modernity À La Mode”). This same year, my paternal great-grandfather, Sir Maharajah Kishen Pershad, was in between his two terms as Prime Minister of Hyderabad. One term ended in 1912 (Green) and the second term would begin in 1927 (Luther). In these years he maintained his deori (palatial residence) and continued to serve his community and grow his family with three Hindu and four Muslim wives. My paternal grandmother was born, of a Muslim wife, Ghousia Begum, in 1918.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, fashion plates were a popular way of disseminating the latest fashions to society. By the late 19th century they were becoming boring and all the same “into a dull brand of repetitive draftsmanship” (Davis, “Modernity À La Mode” 444). Enter Lucien Vogel, who was an established and respected publisher through his involvement with many popular publications of the time including Gazette du Bon Ton and French Vogue (Davis, Classic Chic: Music, Fashion, and Modernism 65) Vogel commissioned Erik Satie, a contemporary and avant-garde composer, to create a musical score to accompany Charles Martin’s illustrations. This publication, a multimedia platform, had great potential as a marketing tool for department stores. However, the war intervened and the publication was put on hold for more than a decade before being published in 1923. As I approached these printed art and fashion plates from France, my mind diverted back to India because whenever I have thought or talked about the turn of the 20th century it has been within the context of my family history. In this moment, as I was about to embark on observing something from France, my thoughts turned to where my Muslim and Hindu ancestors were at the time this publication was being created in France.

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composer (Myers) in his own right, to compose a series of twenty musical pieces that represent the “pastimes of contemporary Parisian society” (Davis, Classic Chic 65). These pastimes included but were not limited to, golfing, picnicking, dancing, tennis, and hunting. Charles Martin, who had done illustrations for the Gazette du Bon Ton was commissioned to illustrate these pastimes.

**Parisienne blague and Urdu poetry**

Satie’s scores were unique. Not only was the musical style new, they included witticisms, irony, a “mix of acute observation and playful teasing” (Davis, Classic Chic 109) known at the time as *ton de blague*. Considered “masterpieces of wit and ironic observation, [they] reveal[ed] his genius perhaps more convincingly than any other of his works” (Myers 87). Also notable was Satie’s own calligraphy on the musical score. This was an art he studied while “pouring over old Gothic manuscripts” (Myers 90). After an unsuccessful attempt to commission the writing of these pieces to another composer, Vogel turned to Satie with an offer, much less than what he was willing to pay. Satie was offended by the amount, complaining it was too much. He believed it was wrong to make money out of his music. After some negotiation, a humble amount was agreed upon and Satie began composing the twenty pieces, getting paid in intervals once a few were completed and delivered to Vogel, for fear to spending his money unwisely if he received it all at once (Myers).

**La Chasse. The Hunt. Lyrics (translated)**

Do you hear the rabbit singing?
What a voice!
The nightingale is in its burrow.
The owl is suckling her young.
The wild boar is going to get married.
As for me, I am shooting down nuts with my gun. (Myers 89)

Consider these lyrics. Is Satie making a mockery of the Paris elite, as they venture out on a hunt, suggesting that owl’s suckle and boars marry and that the only thing guns are useful for are gathering nuts? Is Satie suggesting that the Paris elite are squirrels, perhaps “squirrelling away” their wealth for their own pleasure? The irony and wit can be interpreted many ways. YouTube has an array of performances of *Sports et divertissements* each one very different from the other. My favourite is this piece by two young performers who, in my opinion, exude a playfulness that the
While Satie was perhaps making fun of the Parisienne elite, the Maharajah in India spent his days in his own artful pursuit as “a poet of distinction” (Ronken and Rajan 126). Writing under the pen name Shad he wrote volumes of poetry in the early 20th century. He had other artistic pursuits including music, painting, photography and like Satie, calligraphy. The Maharajah also did not have a problem parting with money. He was known to literally “throw money on the poor” (Ronken and Rajan 124) while travelling in his local community, Hyderabad, or across the nation to Delhi. This is one of Shad's poems, translated from Urdu, penned upon the death of a late sovereign:

But when without you came the time to live,
Ah, what a plight my weeping eye were in!
Before you went, life had so much to give.
Yet still continues this sad world to spin.

(Ronken and Rajan 106)

**Feminism and Foreseeing Fashion**

Just as *Sports et divertissements* was completed, World War I began and publication of this multi-media presentation of music, prose, visual art and fashion was postponed. Vogel turned his attention back to the publication after the war and although Satie’s scores remained the same, Martin redrew the illustrations to keep up with the fashions and the changing status of women. Both had changed quite dramatically between 1914 and 1923, the year of publication. In the book titled *Paris Fashions: The Art Deco Style of the 1920s*, the author, Ginsburg says “the war ... provided yet further confirmation too, of a woman’s right to equality of status as well as the opportunity either to work or to enjoy herself” (12) and that “the ideal new woman [had become] a friend and an equal rather than a passive dependant” (12). In this post-war multi-media publication, Martin’s updated art “illuminates the changing position of women” (Davis, “Modernity À La Mode 448). The revised illustrations show shorter hemlines, fuller skirts and are drawn in the cubist style (Davis, *Classic Chic*). Shown at the top of this post is the La Chasse (The Hunt) illustration. The woman is placed in the centre, in a victorious stance holding her hunting prize in hand with the rifle confidently rested on her shoulder. This particular dress silhouette reflects Lanvin’s 1920s *Robe de Style* “inspired by mid-nineteenth century fashion” (Ginsburg 34) rather than the Poiret designs Martin often illustrated in *Gazette du Bon Ton* (Davis, *Classic Chic*). The hunting outfit, illustrated here also looks very much like Dior’s New Look that will be introduced 25 years into the future.
At this time, in the Maharajah's court, as family history is told, there was no such revolution in women's attire. Female family members continued to observe *pardah* (covering their entire body with a loose fitting robe-like garment) while in public. In fact, there is a popular story shared in my family from 1934 when recounting the marriage of the Maharajah's daughter, Sayeedunisa Begum, to my grandfather, Barbar Mirza. My grandmother arrived, a new bride, to her husband's home in *pardah* with 11 servants accompanying her. My grandfather immediately sent eight servants back to the Maharajah's *deori* and promptly dumped my grandmother's *pardah* in a bucket of water so she would be unable to wear it. Grandfather was very secular, and a pioneer of civil aviation in India, but that's an entirely different blog post. Changes in women's fashion occurred as women fought for their rights in the West, in particular in the United States (Hillman). It seems the evolving role of women in Indian society is markedly different than the evolving role of women in Western societies. Although women in India did not experience liberation in the same way, India did elect a female head of state in 1966, something the United Kingdom did not do until 1979, Canada did not do until 1993, and the United States has not done into the 21st century. Indira Ghandi led the country in two separate terms, totalling 17 years of service, until her assassination in 1984 (Malik and Vajpeyi).

The Hunt as Cultural Capital

Cultural capital can be embodied and become an integral part of how a person behaves and presents oneself to the world (Bourdieu). This is especially true for the elite and ruling classes. The cultural currency at the turn of the 20th century in France was innovative and avant-garde with exciting explorations by artists engaging in all forms of art. *Sports et divertissements* is a perfect reflection of this vibrancy, with its colourful illustrations, witty lyrics, and innovative scores of music (Davis, Classic Chic). We don't know if Satie was mocking the privileged class with his lyrics but what is clear is this publication summarized what was considered the currency of cultural capital at the turn of the century in France by literally illustrating how the French elite can "present oneself to the world."

Hunting, long a pastime of the upper class, carried with it a lot of cultural capital, in France, in Britain and by extension, in India where the hunt had been influenced by the British. For instance, hounds would be imported from Britain at the start of hunting season (Hunt). The final prize in India, however, was much more exotic and ferocious animals. Any participation in a hunt, whether for birds or tigers meant that one's standing in society was established as part of the upper class. Going on a hunt meant that one's behaviours and sartorial choices were aligned with high society and in this, an individual found capital or the means to keep in the company of the elite and benefit from these relationships. These benefits could be monetary or having access to the right people who can move one's agenda forward or help maintain a lifestyle (Bourdieu). At the turn of the 20th century, this pursuit of cultural capital was as present in India, as it was in France.

Hyderabad was one of the independent Princely States that had not been colonized by the British. It had its own king (*Nizam*) and government. The British Queen appointed a Viceroy to Hyderabad and my family mingled with the British until India's independence in 1947. This mingling included elaborate dinners at the Maharajah's *deori* banquet hall and hunting excursions. Below left, a photo showing Indians and Brits gathered for an elaborate breakfast before the hunt (Ronken and Rajan). Women, in my family, who had a passion for the hunt and, by extension, were sharpshooters, would join the men. The picture to the right is taken in my ancestor's home in Hyderabad, India showcasing the skin of a tiger hunted down by a family member on one of these hunts.
exploration of Satie’s work introduced me to a witty and charming, beautiful and exquisite representation of the elite lifestyle in France and provided a gateway to recall my family’s history. What I discovered on this journey is, although the cultures in France and India were quite different, cultural capital, in all its forms: music, prose, poetry, fashion, and hunting was valued in the same way, proving that cultural capital transcends cultures and borders.

Discussion Question:

In this post-colonial era, do our varied countries and cultures value the same cultural capital? If so, what is causing that? Is it a new type of “colonialism” that has us value cultural capital the same way? If we do not value cultural capital the same way, then why?

REFERENCES


About romana.mirza
The modest fashion industry is burgeoning with no slow-down in sight. Objective research, analysis and reporting are needed to understand and support this industry and its growth. My scholarly research is in #modestfashion and #fashiondiversity. I hope to expand on the limited information available on Modest Fashion and fashion diversity so that the market scope and potential for Modest Fashion can be realized. Follow my research at http://www.romanamirza.com/.