

Temptation and Infestation

James Hall

It is fair to say that the Old Masters, whose pictures in the National Gallery in London have been appropriated and repurposed by Raqib Shaw, will be turning in their graves. One Old Master in particular would have strident views on the matter.

Marcello Venusti's *The Purification of the Temple* (after 1550) is based on drawings supplied by Michelangelo. In a dialogue devised by the Portuguese painter and antiquarian Francisco de Hollanda, *Da Pintura Antigua* (1548, *On Antique Painting*), the famously forthright Michelangelo excoriates all art from northern Europe, which he designates as Flemish painting. Michelangelo was thinking of painters and printmakers like Van Eyck, Hugo van der Goes, Schongauer and Dürer, but his real target is the many Italians who had been influenced by them. He would no doubt have considered Raqib Shaw's scintillating burlesque cornucopias as the *ne plus ultra* of Flemish – Flemish painting with a high fever:

In Flanders they paint for the precise purpose of beguiling the external eye [...]. Their painting is of cloths, masonry, field grasses, shadows of trees, and rivers and bridges, which they call landscapes, and many figures here and many there. And all this, even though it may look well to some eyes, is in truth executed without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without judiciousness of selection or freedom from encumbrance, and, finally, without any substance or vigour [...]. And I do not speak so ill of Flemish painting because it is all bad, but because it aims to do so many things well (any one of which by itself would suffice to make it very great) that it does none well. Only works that are done in Italy can we in effect call true painting.¹

This is a vision of decadent, over-encumbered excess – of endless *horror vacui*. Michelangelo was dismayed that this type of work was so wildly popular – it appealed, he claimed, 'to women, especially the very old or the very young, and likewise to monks and nuns, and to some noblemen who are tone-deaf to true harmony'.² Crucially, Flemish art infringes the laws of decorum: in a discussion of the grotesque style of architectural decoration, Michelangelo is willing to sanction it – but only in the appropriate place; Hollanda immediately glosses his comment, saying that grotesque decoration is better suited than a picture of friars or of a penitent King David to country villas and pleasure houses.

Michelangelo's antithesis – between the stripped down, focussed intensity of Italian art (or rather, of his own art centred on the heroic male nude), and the spectacular prolixity of Flemish art – would be echoed in later binary oppositions such as Neo-Classical and Rococo

¹ Francisco de Hollanda, *On Antique Painting*, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013, Bk 2:1, pp.179–80

² *Ibid.*, p.179

Hendrick van Steenwyck the Younger
Follower of Jan Brueghel the Elder
Croesus and Solon, c.1610
© The National Gallery, London



(including Chinoiserie); Neo-Classical and Pre-Raphaelite; High Renaissance and Baroque; Modernism and Post-Modernism. Raqib Shaw's painting can be construed as a new kind of 'Flemish' art that dramatises its own decadence: its rhinestone-studded exuberance and grotesque miniaturist detail is saturated in a melancholy that emanates from the lone chameleon figure of the artist himself: Shaw's clowning yet skeletal self is reflected in Van Eyck's Arnolfini mirror, now located on the floor at the centre of his reworking of Hendrick van Steenwyck the Younger, *Croesus and Solon* (c.1610). Van Eyck's mirror originally contained a tiny reflection of the Flemish artist. Now it functions as a prop for a graveyard Narcissus.

In Venusti's painting Christ is placed at the centre of a seething arc of traders, whom he chases out. Christ clearly has the measure of them, and is putting them in their place. All the protagonists are dwarfed by the monumental architecture, which is sombrely opulent. The spiralling pillars are based on an antique set incorporated into St Peter's, Rome. In Shaw's version, the church is re-consecrated: the roof and the oculus windows are opened up like the (pagan) Pantheon in Rome. The interior now resembles a Bedouin tent decorated with shiny kaleidoscopic colours. It is populated by acrobatic skeletons, akin to those deployed in the Mexican 'Day of the Dead', and by royally dressed tigers and leopards doing a Bollywood Maenad dance.³ Gold coins pour down from the high cornice and from trays, as nauseating – and dangerous – as the ants that might infest a Dalí painting. The whole ensemble seems to take its cue from the Hindu god Shiva, Lord of the Dance, whose statue (supplied with Shaw's features) supplants the Jewish Menorah found in Venusti's original. They are invaders, ~~immigrants~~, squatters, infesters – but equally re-animators and re-populators.

Shaw's approach to the Old Masters is both very contemporary (i.e. post-modern, post-colonial) and, despite its global cast of protagonists and motifs, very English. The portrait painter and co-founder of the Royal Academy of Arts, Joshua Reynolds, is an unlikely yet illuminating fellow traveller. When Reynolds visited Rome for the first time between 1749 and 1752, initially he was disappointed by the celebrated artworks he saw there, even by Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican, then regarded as *the* model for the Grand Manner in painting. Reynolds claimed he appreciated Raphael's frescoes more after copying them, but in 1751 he painted a camped-up parody of the magisterial *School of Athens* (National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin), where ancient philosophers and mathematicians cogitate and calculate within monumental classical architecture. Reynolds substituted this with busy gothic architecture crowded with feckless English Grand Tourists: his patron, the scholar Joseph Henry, reclines gormlessly on the steps in place of the Cynic philosopher Diogenes, while the pupils of Euclid try to measure a meat pie that is being chewed by a spaniel. In his lectures at the Royal Academy, Reynolds contrasted Raphael's 'chaste' style with 'compendious' styles, and this parody is certainly compendious.⁴ As far as I know, this is the earliest systematic parody of a multi-figure narrative, and it was to be a curtain raiser for the great age of English caricature. Nikolaus Pevsner, in the chapter 'Reynolds and Detachment' in *The Englishness of English Art* (1956), saw this work as a national benchmark, symptomatic of English artists' resistance to and suspicion of the Grand Manner.⁵

3 For Shaw's animals and hybrid creatures see David Lomas, 'Raqib Shaw's Animal Kingdom', *Raqib Shaw*, Manchester Art Gallery, 2013, pp.20–37.

4 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses*, 1778, Scolar Press, Menston 1971, (10 December 1772, 10 December 1776).

5 Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art*, London 1956, p.54. After moving to Rome, the American artist Cy Twombly – perhaps influenced by Pevsner's book – would paint his own parody of the *School of Athens* in 1961 (and again in 1964), causing a scandal when it was exhibited in Rome. The architecture was reduced to a few wobbly pencil lines, while the figures became ecstatic airborne splotches and dribbles, some of which were lipstick-pink. James Hall, 'Twombly and Poussin', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 August.

Raqib Shaw is a sort of perpetually disappointed yet iconoclastically ebullient Grand Tourist who has travelled to Europe all the way from Kashmir.⁶ Having left the predominantly rural Kashmir for London at the age of 19, he initially worked in a shop in Mayfair owned by his family, selling oriental carpets and jewellery. He made art in his spare time, and was accepted onto a course at Central Saint Martins. For what he regards as his 'first proper painting', included in his BA degree show, he hijacked the saucy naked Venus from Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Cupid complaining to Venus* (c.1526–30; National Gallery, London). Cupid complains about being stung by bees after trying to steal a honeycomb, and an inscription spells the meaning out: 'Life's pleasure is mixed with pain'. Shaw (who keeps bees on the roof of his studio) transposed Cranach's Venus from a European temperate landscape to a tropical paradise, omitting Cupid, but arming her with a flail-like rooted shrub, and partially concealing her lower body behind a hydra-like flower – all suggestive of exquisite difficulties to come. Venus' body was painted in pure pink enamel, and given a raised stencil-like outline which makes her seem to float over the acrylic background. It's as if Cranach had been colonised by Gauguin and Gary Hume.⁷ The cloisonné effect of Shaw's recent works, with enamel paint pooled inside honeycomb rims of gold enamel, and quills used to fashion the detail, can be seen as a development from this early work.

In the latest series based on National Gallery paintings, Shaw behaves like a phantom, 'artist in residence' or poltergeist. St Jerome looms large, being the subject of two pictures, both of which depict the saint reading in his study. One is based on the famous picture by Antonello da Messina, the other on a less well known work by the Venetian painter Vincenzo Catena, probably a pupil of Giovanni Bellini. (Both pictures were included in the National Gallery's 2014 exhibition about architectural backgrounds in pictures, *Building the Picture: Architecture in Italian Renaissance*).⁸ In each of Shaw's 'homages', his own features replace St Jerome's. There is a long history of artists substituting their own features for saints, the earliest probably being Taddeo di Bartolo's vast altarpiece *The Assumption and Dormition of the Virgin* (1401), where Taddeo appears in the guise of his name saint St Thaddeus.⁹ Other famous examples include Michelangelo (the flayed skin of St Bartholomew; Nicodemus) and Bernini (St Lawrence; David). Women often had portraits painted in the guise of the penitent Mary Magdalene. Shaw seems to have been drawn to St Jerome for three main reasons: the Saint's work as a translator and commentator; his peripatetic existence between West and East; his asceticism and chastity.

St Jerome (c.347–420) is best known for his pioneering standard translation of the Bible from Hebrew into Latin, which became known as the Vulgate;¹⁰ he also wrote numerous commentaries on the Bible, and translated Biblical commentaries by Origen – who castrated himself out of piety. Shaw effects cultural translations in his works, insofar as the work based on Antonello's picture is given a Japanese make-over, while the Catena features motifs from Kashmir. The architecture becomes a multilingual memory palace: the Japanese motifs are a recollection of what he claims to be his last relationship, with a Japanese woman when he was at Central Saint Martins; the Kashmiri motifs portray the beautiful yet troubled land of

6 For Shaw's background and cultural formation see 'Raqib Shaw in conversation with Kunsthalle Wien' (Gerald Matt and Angela Stief), *Raqib Shaw. Absence of God*, White Cube and Kunsthalle Wien, London and Vienna 2009, pp.105–09

7 At the time, Shaw was taking lessons in still-life drawing from Hume's wife Georgie Hopton.

8 Other pictures featured in this exhibition have also been used by Shaw: Carlo Crivelli *The Annunciation, with Saint Emidius* (1486); Ludovico Mazzolino *Christ and the Woman taken in*

Adultery (probably 1522); Marcello Venusti *The Purification of the Temple* (after 1550). For the online catalogue: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/research/exhibition-catalogues/building-the-picture>

9 James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: a Cultural History*, Thames and Hudson, London 2014, pp.53–55, *et passim*.

10 Modern scholars believe, however, that he often cribbed from Greek translations of the Old Testament. Stefan Rebenich, *Jerome*, Routledge, London 2002.

Jan Gossaert (Jean Gossart)
The Adoration of the Kings, c.1510–15
© The National Gallery, London



his childhood, recently torn apart by religious strife. The profusion and variety of imagery and detail induces a form of Stendahl syndrome in the viewer. Imaginatively, there's a breakdown in border control. The theorist of world literature Rebecca Walkowitz recently coined a term, the 'born-translated', for novels by successful authors such as Kazuo Ishiguro and JM Coetzee, which immediately appear in several translations, and which make encounters with foreign languages central to their narratives.¹¹ Shaw's hybrid paintings posit a Babel of visual languages.¹²

Jerome's asceticism and chastity is a key to understanding Shaw's sensibility as manifest in these pictures (he openly and instantly advertises his chastity).¹³ Jerome went to Syria and retreated to the desert, a favourite site for hermits. There he seems to have spent time studying, writing and mortifying himself whenever prey to sinful thoughts; he returned to Rome to become secretary to the Pope, and surrounded himself with wealthy widows set on a monastic life. He was forced to leave the city when one young widow died after committing to his bespoke penance programme for four months (to make matters worse, he refused to mourn her death), and following allegations he had had an affair with another. Jerome headed east again and spent the rest of his life in a hermit's cell near Bethlehem, writing and reading and giving spiritual guidance to the widows who stayed with him. Artists have depicted him in his 'cell' or in the desert intently reading and writing, accompanied by the lion he miraculously healed; or mortifying himself with a rock; or fighting off temptation, as in Francisco de Zurbarán's *Jerome in the Desert, Tormented by his Memories of the Dancing Girls* (1639) – an episode from his dissolute Roman youth.

Shaw conflates and elaborates all these episodes in his pictures, so Shaw / Jerome is surrounded both by 'momento mori' in the form of dancing and squirming skeletons, and by a full panoply of sensory pleasures – personalised champagne bottles marked RS, gold coins, flowers (some derived from Dutch flower paintings from the age of 'tulipmania', when a bulb could cost the same as a house), and rich fabrics and decor from around the world. He is accompanied by his 13 year-old Jack Russell dog, who follows him everywhere at his studio home (a converted sausage factory in south London), and whom he claims to be the only living thing he loves. Rather than emulate the studious tranquillity of the two Renaissance pictures of Jerome, Shaw shows a full-blown albeit very camped up psychomachia – a battle between the senses and the spirit, for the soul of the 'saintly' artist.

In both pictures, Shaw / Jerome has blue skin. The catalyst for this disconcerting feature seems to be the fact that in Catena's picture Jerome wears blue (and pink), rather than the red which cardinals usually wear; even his cardinal's hat is blue. Catena probably used blue because this was the colour worn by Venetian parish priests in the early 16th century. Shaw also furnishes another chaste alter-ego – the Virgin Mary in his apocalyptic version of Crivelli's *Annunciation* – with blue skin. There is a certain logic here insofar as the Virgin's mantle was traditionally blue, signifying purity. But in Shaw's picture the blue skin gives him a bruised reptilian presence that suggests a sinister frigidity.

11 Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born-Translated: the Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York 2015

12 For Shaw's 'cultural hybridity', Homi K. Bhabha, 'An Art of Exquisite Anxiety', *Absence of God*, White Cube, London 2009, pp.5–11.

13 See, most recently, the interview with Mark Hudson, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 April 2016: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opera/what-to-see/raqib-shaw-opera-captures-the-essence-of-gay-suffering/>

Antonello da Messina
Saint Jerome in his Study, c.1475
© The National Gallery, London



In Shaw's life and art, chastity functions as a catalyst and springboard for the imagination, and for the hallucinatory intensity of his work which makes huge demands on the eye. In many belief systems, both Eastern and Western, there is a correlation between virginity or chastity and enhanced physical, mental and spiritual performance (i.e. Greek athletes, hermits, Sir Galahad, Elizabeth I – 'the Virgin Queen' – Sherlock Holmes and – intermittently – Gandhi). Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Jain monks and nuns take vows of chastity. For St Jerome and his widows, chastity enhanced the ability to contemplate and to see in a visionary or prophetic sense.¹⁴ In the christian monastic tradition 'mystic marriages' with Christ, the Virgin Mary or saints, replaced secular carnal relations. Especially since the 18th century these beliefs have been applied to practitioners of the arts and humanities, mostly but not exclusively male: the artist might experience a 'mystic marriage' with his own artworks, or with the protagonist of their artwork. Desire for, or erotic relations with humans impairs the artist's powers.¹⁵ Balzac believed he sacrificed a novel with each sexual act; Van Gogh advised Émile Bernard: 'if you don't screw too hard, your painting will be all the spunkier for it.'¹⁶ Nietzsche noted that many great philosophers never married, and believed great artists like Raphael were usually chaste (and sober), refusing to expend themselves 'in any casual way'.¹⁷

The fashion for chastity – in theory if not in practice – culminated in the invention of the term 'courtly love' by Gaston Paris in 1883, to describe the medieval knight's supposedly chaste devotion to his feudal lord's wife, and Dante's devotion to the dead Beatrice (Jacques Lacan later called courtly love the 'paradigm of [narcissistic] sublimation')¹⁸. The related terms 'object fetishism' and 'narcissism' were coined, respectively, in 1887 and 1899. The supreme aesthetes, the Goncourt brothers, diagnosed their own frankly lustful collecting of French rococo decorative arts (i.e. a pot supposedly moulded from the breast of Marie Antoinette) as due to man's inability to relate to modern woman.¹⁹ J-K Huysmans, author of the Decadent classic *À rebours*, observed in an essay on Félicien Rops: 'Everyone knows, of course, that continence engenders frightfully libertine thoughts [...] in his waking dreams, [the chaste man] comes to the point of orgiastic delirium'.²⁰ Similar ideas lie behind Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23) or *Large Glass*.

Shaw's bronze sculptures are phantasmagoric monuments to ecstatic chastity. These teetering towers of writhing masked acrobats seem, from afar, to be sado-masochistic reprises of belligerent mannerist bronzes by Giambologna and Francesco Bertos, and their Hellenistic marble forebears such as the Farnese Bull, which features a dog similar to Shaw's.²¹ However, unlike in these naked precursors, the genitals of Shaw's hybrid Dionysian figures are masked too – with protective codpieces cum chastity belts. These acrobatic sculptures, together with many other antique sculptures and a killing field of fragments feature in *Self-Portrait in the Sculpture Studio at Peckham (after Mocetto) II* (2015–16). Shaw stands behind a pilaster, pet dog placidly in arms, staring out ruefully at us with a twinkly left eye – the would-be pure eye at the heart of a multi-sensory storm.

14 Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008

15 Hall, *Self-Portrait*, ch.9: 'Sex and Genius'.

16 c.5 August 1888. <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let655/letter.html>

17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Vintage, New York 1968, nos. 800, 807 & 815

18 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, Routledge, London 2007, pp.148–51 et passim (XI: 'Courtly Love as Anamorphosis', pp.139–54).

19 Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-De-Siecle France*, University of California Press, 1992, pp.17–36

20 J-K Huysmans, *Certains*, Paris 1889, [Westmead England 1970], p.70

21 The largest surviving antique sculpture, it depicts Dirce being tied to a wild bull by three men. For Shaw and Mannerist sculpture, see Carolyn Miner, 'The maniera of Raqib Shaw', *Raqib Shaw*, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris 2015, pp.10–15.