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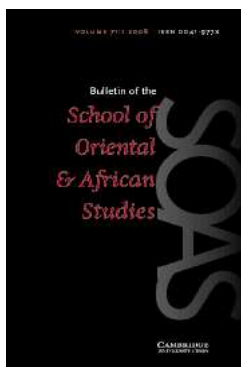
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Ebba Koch: *The Complete Taj Mahal and the Riverfront Gardens of Agra*. 288 pp. London: Thames and Hudson, 2006. £39.95. ISBN 0 500 342091.

Crispin Branfoot

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As previously, these notions are supported by explanatory diagrams and copious photographs.

The volume concludes with a survey of historical panoramas, both painted and photographic, dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These are supplemented by an annotated, present-day record of the city's riverfront, and a selection of topographical maps dating from the Colonial period. An exhaustive index brings this remarkable volume to a close. A more thorough and visually convincing account of the city's sacred space could hardly be imagined. The volume should serve as a benchmark for any future investigation of other sacred cities in India.

George Michell

EBBA KOCH:

The Complete Taj Mahal and the Riverfront Gardens of Agra.

288 pp. London: Thames and Hudson, 2006. £39.95. ISBN 0 500 342091.

For such a well-known and visited monument it seems remarkable that it has taken until 2006 for a dedicated and thorough study of the Taj Mahal in Agra, northern India, to be published. The publication of this lucid examination of the entire building complex in its urban setting marks a major advance in our understanding of one of the world's greatest monuments. No one is better placed to write such a book, for Ebba Koch is well known for her extensive research and publication on the arts of the Mughal dynasty spanning three decades, that include *Mughal Architecture* (Munich, 1991) and *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology* (New Delhi, 2001).

Whilst the focus may be on a single building, this is also a rich and accessible account of the Mughal dynasty and the role of the arts in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Islamic India. The Taj Mahal is often considered to be only a single monument, a domed mausoleum raised on a terrace with four minarets within a formal garden. Koch expands this limited vision to consider not only the whole complex of tomb, garden and bazaar but also its wider urban context within the city of Agra. Striking is the emphasis placed by Koch upon Agra as a riverfront city, the Taj Mahal being only one in a whole series of gardens and garden tombs which, together with the huge and imposing fort, dominated the approach to the city on the river Yamuna. The decline in the river's water level, the neglect of most of the seventeenth-century gardens and the expansion of the city to its present population of 1.2 million has changed the approach to the Taj. By reconstructing the riverine urban environment of Agra, the Taj Mahal is now seen as the most monumental and ideal expression of the idea of the riverfront garden in northern India.

The Mughals' funerary architecture – not only the Taj, but also the imperial mausolea of Shahjahan's predecessors in Lahore, Delhi and Sikandra near Agra – is one of their great contributions to world architecture. Officially completed in 1643, the Taj Mahal was designed as a monumental mausoleum to Mumtaz Mahal, the beloved wife of Shahjahan who died aged 38 in 1631, an earthly replica of her house in the gardens of Paradise. The Taj Mahal also expresses the core principles of Shahjahani architecture, including geometrical planning, symmetry, hierarchy, selective use of naturalism and symbolism. Koch carefully elucidates these principles through close attention to the

monument itself. As she notes, while architecture had long been considered the immediate expression of the ruler in the Islamic world, “Shah Jahan stands out for his consistent use of highly aestheticized form to express his specific state ideology – that centralized authority and hierarchy bring about balance and harmony” (p. 84). The symbolism of the monument is expressed not only through the overall layout and planning but also in the choice of materials, notably red sandstone and white marble, the relief and inlaid floral decoration as expressions of paradise imagery and symbols of Mughal kingship, and the wealth of architectural quranic inscriptions, the largest inscriptional programme in the Islamic world (p. 224). “It is this fusion of the intellectual and the sensuous that has made the Taj Mahal so successful over the centuries, thus achieving the project’s other object, to be an enduring monument to Shah Jahan as emperor and architect” (p. 214).

The core of the book is a compelling analytical tour through the complex, closely examining each building in turn from the entrance gateway through to the cenotaphs to Mumtaz Mahal and Shahjahan beneath the great white marble dome. Often overlooked in discussions of the Taj Mahal are the bazaar and caravanserai to the south of the mausoleum complex in Taj Ganj, a “worldly” counterpart to the funerary and spiritual domain to its north. Now largely obscured by later development, early plans and the reconstructions in this book demonstrate that this section of the complex is essential to the ensemble’s proper understanding. Throughout this section, and indeed the whole book, are a wealth of supporting illustrations. These include numerous new drawings, sections and plans by the architect Richard André Barraud and photographs taken over the past thirty years by Koch, alongside many archival visual sources: paintings or drawings by “Company” artists and early European visitors, and late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs. The vast majority of the photographs are in colour: this is a serious, academic work that does not neglect the importance of good illustrations, something for which Thames and Hudson is to be given credit.

References to a wide range of literary and visual material, both Asian and European, feature throughout the book, but these sources are considered together in the concluding chapter. As Koch correctly notes, “The encounter between the British and the Taj Mahal is one of the most captivating in the history of architectural reception” (p. 237) and she presents a fascinating account of the views of tourists, artists, photographers, surveyors and conservationists on the Taj Mahal from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. The Taj Mahal is one of the World’s great monuments and this exciting, richly illustrated book does it justice. Even if you have seen the Taj Mahal several times, you will want to revisit it with the detailed insights of this book in mind.

Crispin Branfoot

SOONIL HWANG:

Metaphor and Literalism in Buddhism: The Doctrinal History of Nirvana.

(Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism.) xv, 160 pp. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. £60. ISBN 978 0 7546 53691.

This publication essentially represents the author’s DPhil thesis, which he completed at Oxford University under the guidance of Professor