

PEOPLE OF BENGAL

Coloured Etchings by F. Baltazard Solvyns

An Encyclopaedic Vision of the People and Customs of Eastern India at the End of the Eighteenth Century

DAG brings to Mumbai for the first time the vast series of etchings by Baltazard Solvyns that he called *Les Hindoûs*

27 April – 29 June 2024 | Special Project Space, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai

In collaboration with Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, *People of Bengal: Coloured Etchings by Baltazard Solvyns*, a DAG exhibition from a complete set of the Paris edition of the artist's Indian etchings, now travels to Mumbai following a successful showing in Delhi in 2021. DAG brings to Mumbai for the first time the vast series of etchings that Solvyns called *Les Hindoûs* in line with the company's long-term vision of making art accessible to the general public, and to bring to India for public display works by foreign artists who practiced in India in the preceding centuries. *Les Hindoûs*, Solvyns's second, enlarged edition that was published by the artist in Paris between 1808 and 1812, a four-volume set and now a rare find, is a documentation of the people and material culture that Solvyns encountered over the decade he lived in Bengal during the 1790s.

Curated by Dr. Giles Tillotson, Senior Vice President, Exhibitions, DAG, the exhibition is accompanied by a book which introduces, illustrates and contextualises this body of work. Among all attempts by foreign artists to present a complete view of India, none is so focused on people as this body of work by François Baltazard Solvyns. Opening on 27 April 2024 at Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, and on view until 29th June 2024, this exhibition is a foreigner's view of India's past – or at least of part of it in the eighteenth century – a great body of work that focuses on Bengal and neighbouring regions, where the artist lived and worked for over a decade starting in 1791. Exploring an extraordinarily detailed and intimate portrait of a people at a given moment in history, *People of Bengal* includes representatives of every profession and every level of Indian society and depicts festivals and sacred rites; shows us animals, birds and insects, trees and crops; records various kinds of boats, carriages and musical instruments that were then in use. Every person and object is seen closely, with an informed and inquisitive eye, and is shown, sometimes with wit, sometimes with a melancholy grandeur. Solvyns appeals to us today precisely because he was a challenging artist, who did not seek to delight us, but to confront us, to engage us in a discussion about the world he shared here for a while.

Ashish Anand, CEO and Managing Director, DAG, notes, "When we first opened Drishyakala in Delhi's Red Fort, we included a complete set of *Oriental Scenery*, 144 aquatints of Indian architecture and landscape, published in London by Thomas and William Daniell between 1795 and 1808. That too was an exercise that involved showing to Indian audiences a view of the country as seen by, and intended for, Western eyes. In the eighteenth century, when Solvyns lived in Calcutta, India's relationship with Europe was not on equal terms; but two hundred years on we can return his gaze with equanimity and ease, to explore not just what his depiction of India tells us about him, but whether we can learn in it anything about ourselves. Solvyns may not always seek to please, but his searching gaze will certainly intrigue us, and may make us look afresh at things we thought we knew only too well." He adds, "F. B. Solvyns was the first artist to cast his eye over a swathe of Indian peoples from the eastern region, moving the artistic visual discourse from that of gods and kings to ordinary citizens of the country. This was a huge change and even if the intent was documentative, centuries later his etchings continue to mesmerise us for the wealth of detail he brought to his image-making, including the habitations, foliage, clothes, means of transportation and other accoutrements that made up their life in the 18th century. The exhibition forms part of DAG's intent to focus also on pre-modern art that laid the foundations of the modern art movement in India."

Tasneem Zakaria Mehta, Managing Trustee & Director, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, states, "Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum is pleased to collaborate with DAG to present *People of Bengal: Coloured Etchings by Baltazard Solvyns*. The Museum houses one of India's largest collections of clay figurines depicting the people and lifestyle of India in the 19th-early 20th century. These were created between 1905 and 1926 by an Indian clay modeller, under the direction of the former curators Cecil Burns (1903-1918) & Ernest Fern (1918-1930) who were also in charge of the Sir JJ School of Art. Solvyns's etchings from *Les Hindous*, which is a part of the Museum's collection of rare books and prints, were an important source of inspiration for some of the figurines. They present the same stance, clothes, facial features, and other accoutrements as the etchings by Solvyns and other European artists who visited India in the 19th century. The exhibition from the collection of DAG presents a unique opportunity to view these important art historical works in the Company School style."

Other European artists in India of his time sought to make their fortunes by painting portraits of wealthy nawabs or powerful East India Company officials; or they made their reputations by depicting India's magnificent buildings and scenery. But Solvyns roamed the back lanes of Calcutta and explored the city's outlying districts to meet people of all kinds and classes. This exhibition, both intimate and encyclopaedic at the same time, rises to the challenge of an artist of his temperament and is an attempt to present the series as an ethnographic as well as a creative exercise. With an aim to engage with audiences from all walks of life, the exhibition aspires to promote an understanding of Indian society and culture in the late 18th century as well as sharing a strong sociological component, thus offering educational content in two fields alongside presenting fine works of art.

About DAG

India's most-respected art company began its journey by choosing to build a formidable collection of works by Indian artists from the nineteenth century onwards. In acquiring artists' studios and estates, it has paid homage to their legacy and created a large pool of artists and artworks that, taken together, tell the story of Indian art. In the three decades since DAG's foundation, the Indian art world has seen far-reaching changes in which the company has played a stellar role. Its iconic exhibitions curated to provide art-historical overviews have brought to the fore important artists neglected through the passage of time while also documenting critical art movements and collectives. New generations of art lovers have been able to reclaim the inheritance of forgotten masters through DAG's pathbreaking curations at its galleries as well as participation in international art fairs, and collaborations with museums and cultural institutions in India and abroad.

At the heart of DAG's programming is an ongoing research curriculum responsible for lending support to art writers and curators; a rigorous publishing calendar with an impressive library of books that document Indian art history; a museums outreach programme focussed at engaging the public; commissioning of videos and films in relation to artists and their work; and engagements with artists, critics and the art community at large. Through these initiatives, DAG remains steadfast in its commitment to foster an appreciation for, and the dissemination and promotion of Indian art.

An important aspect of DAG's collaborative efforts has been to work with institutions and museums, whether through the loan of its works for the purpose of exhibitions or for establishing comprehensive public-private museum exhibitions such as those it had undertaken at Delhi's Red Fort (Drishyakala) or Kolkata's Old Currency Building (Ghare Baire) with Archaeological Survey of India. Set up as museums, these exhibitions ran for periods of three years and two years, respectively, garnering an amazing response from viewers. DAG recently acquired Jamini Roy's studio-cum-house in Kolkata and is in the process of setting up its first single-artist museum dedicated to the National Treasure artist. It has galleries in Mumbai, New Delhi and New York.

Website: dagworld.com | Facebook: [@dagworld](https://www.facebook.com/dagworld) | Instagram: [@dag.world](https://www.instagram.com/dag.world)

About Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum

The Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum is Mumbai's first museum, established in 1857, and is the erstwhile Victoria and Albert Museum, Bombay.

The Museum building and collections underwent a comprehensive, UNESCO-Award winning restoration, spearheaded by the Mumbai Chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), and supported by the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai and the Jammalal Bajaj Foundation. Since it opened to the public in 2008, the Museum has pioneered contemporary art which is presented in the extraordinary 19th-century building, one of the finest in India, in an attempt to rethink the cannon and challenge colonial and enlightenment precepts.

The Museum was built to showcase the city's contemporary art and craftsmanship through a rare collection of fine and decorative arts of India. The Museum's robust exhibition and outreach programme invites artists to engage with these collections and archives and interrogate its founding principles.

Over 85 exhibitions have been presented, which include collaborations with both local and international institutions and organisations. Past exhibitions have showcased contemporary creative practices in design, crafts and textiles, architecture, urbanism, and film and video art. To mark its 150th anniversary in 2022, the Museum brought out a book titled '*Mumbai: A City Through Objects, 101 Stories from the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum*', edited by the Director, Tasneem Zakaria Mehta. The book was co-published with Harper Design, Harper Collins' new design imprint, and has won several awards.

Timings: 10 am to 5:30 pm | Closed all Wednesdays and certain public holidays | Free entry

For more information about the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum, please visit www.bdlmuseum.org

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