



Animated scene and exquisite detail: 'The South Gate of the Lalbagh,' Dhaka, 1787, oil on canvas, 66 x 76 cm, by Zohann Zoffany, COLLECTION: CHARLES GREIG, UK



Hauntingly beautiful: 'Nagaphon Ghat,' Narinda, Dhaka, 1787, oil on canvas, 66 x 76 cm, by Zohann Zoffany, COLLECTION: CHARLES GREIG, UK

# THE DHAKA MASTERPIECE PAINTINGS

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My friend Charles Greig is a distinguished British Art historian and scholar. He was born in 1955 of aristocratic British and Anglo-Indian parentage. His father James Greig was the 5th Baron of Eccles, Berwickshire, in Scotland.

Charles's mother was named Pamela Stock. Her father Thomas Stock, was a British officer in the prestigious Indian Civil Service (ICS), who saw long years of service in Burma under the Raj. Pamela's mother Enid, came from the Purnea Hayes family, one of the most remarkable Anglo-Indian zamindar families in colonial India. They lived in the Palmer House and were direct descendants of the legendary General William Palmer Sr., and his Mughal wife Faiz Baksh (see William Dalrymple's 'White Mughals') through their youngest son Charles Palmer who built the Palmer House in 1811.

Charles Greig grew up in colonial Africa, but attended school and university in England. After graduation, he joined the fine art auctioneers, Christies in London. Since 1984 he has worked as an independent art consultant and scholar specialising in particular on paintings of the Indian subcontinent by 18th and 19th century European and Company School artists. In 1985, he partnered with Giles Eyre, another period Art specialist, who was also a close friend of the notable Archer's, John and Mildred.

Charles has been responsible for the formation of a number of impressive private collections both in Britain and India. One such important collection includes that of Daylesford House, Gloucestershire, England - the house formerly owned by the Governor-General of British India, Warren Hastings. In the 1990s he acted as the art-historical advisor to the Calcutta Tercentenary Trust. In 2003, he assisted with the retrospective exhibition of one of the foremost British landscape painter, William Hodges (1744-1797) in London and at the prestigious Yale Centre for British Art, USA. During the last few years he has been seriously researching the works of Johann Zoffany (1733-1810) done in colonial India and in the West. A major exhibition of Zoffany opened at the Yale Centre for British Art, USA, in October 2011 and, then moved on to The Royal Academy in London, UK in March, 2012. For the first time ever, two paintings done in Dhaka in 1787 by Zoffany were given pride of place at the London exhibit, displayed side by side as pendants with Dhaka, Bangladesh prominently mentioned because of the initiative of Charles Greig. To date, these two extraordinary Zoffany's are the earliest known paintings of Dhaka done by a European artist. This recent 'discovery' created a sensation in the Art circles in the West and, needless to say, has already enhanced the esthetic value and the market price of the paintings manifold.

Charles Greig, a frequent traveller to India let me know that he would be stopping over at Dhaka for four days on his way to India, at the end of January, 2012. He was very eager to see for himself the two historical edifices in Dhaka painted in 1787 by Johann Zoffany,



Languorous elegance: Unfinished portrait of William Palmer's family, 1785, oil on canvas, attributed to Arthur William Devis by Charles Greig, COLLECTION: THE BRITISH LIBRARY, UK



The 17-room Palmer House - now the Purnea College in Bihar, today. The building is still in a fairly pristine condition

the Lalbagh South Gate and Colombo Sahib's mausoleum at Narinda cemetery. The Dhaka paintings are termed as landscapes by art academics. The 'Nagaphon Ghat' was first identified by Charles in 2011, based on a comparison of the figures in the painting with other figures in various Indian paintings by Zoffany, the figure representations being identical. Secondly, by comparing the moonlight in this painting with the delineation of the moonlight and sky in another Zoffany painting 'The Last Supper' in St. John's Church, Calcutta and thirdly, by the brushwork and technical brilliance of the painting. Zoffany's figures are characterised by a muscular energy combined with a certain formality and detachment. In his

exceptional 'conversation' pieces done in Lucknow, each figure is precisely and minutely delineated. He excelled in the rendering of the texture of cloth and his palette is highly individual. The only other British artists endowed with such masterly artistic calibre to have visited India were Hodges and Devis, but then their styles are completely different.

The Zoffany painting of the moonlight scene with Colombo Sahib's tomb has a title which simply reads as 'Nagaphon Ghat'. Around the fire of the funeral pyre are grouped Nagas or ascetics and it is presumed that what Zoffany painted there was both a funeral and the celebration of the Nagara Panchami festival. Both the Dhaka paintings

reflect Zoffany's keen interest in antiquity and the narrative of everyday life - he was very much a man of enlightenment in India at that time!

At the opening of the Zoffany exhibition (at Yale, USA, Oct. 2011) the 'Nagaphon Ghat' was regarded by many of those attending as one of the most beautiful paintings ever. It is truly mesmerising to behold a work of such superb quality. Likewise, the 'The South Gate of the Lalbagh,' too, is a work of the highest quality. The animated scene and the figures are as masterly as is the depiction of the minute architectural details of the ruined gate. Today, Charles is the proud possessor of these two remarkable Zoffany's. He had the Lalbagh painting restored in December 2011. He said that it looks magnificent after the cleaning and now has an identical new frame to exactly match the Narinda one. Both paintings measure the same and were probably meant to be pendants, that is to say, as a match, parallel, companion or counterpart, to be hung and displayed side by side, as they do now in Charles's house in the UK. The paintings beautifully complement each other.

There was a sale at Sotheby's in London in the first week of December 2011, which included 'The South Gate of the Lalbagh' painting, catalogued by them wrongly as by

confused by Western art experts as a view somewhere in upper India. Dhaka or East Bengal never remotely entered anyone's imagination. Charles saw images of the Lalbagh South gate and Colombo Sahib's tomb in the Nagaphon Ghat, in vintage photographs made public by the British Library, UK. It is surprising that the Lalbagh painting was in the market for so many years without any scholars recognising it as an important work by one of the greatest painters from Europe ever to visit the Indian subcontinent. Indar Pasricha Fine Arts of London held the painting for quite a while. It was incorrectly attributed to Robert Home and wrongly dated as of 1799. Although Indar Pasricha, an Indo-British Art dealer has been in business in London since 1978, his expertise lies primarily in Modern Art by contemporary Indian painters, in Indian miniatures and in assorted Indian artifacts. He is certainly not an authority on 18th and 19th century paintings done in India by European artists, which is today considered as a rather specialised subject. Consequently, his clients are mostly wealthy resident Indians in Britain.

We are indebted to Charles Greig. He should be remembered by us for his identification, research and attribution of the two spectacular Zoffany paintings - 'The South Gate of the Lalbagh' and 'Nagaphon Ghat'



243 years later : A pensive Charles Greig reads from the epitaph of his ancestor, Capt. Thomas Borthwick, at the Narinda cemetery, who died in Dhaka in 1769

Robert Home. Charles Greig went to see the painting and examined it in detail. With his research expertise he was certain that he had discovered a Zoffany. Compared to Zoffany, Home was less skilled as a painter, who was never capable of such brilliant handling of paint or such sensitivity in the delineation of Indian figures. Surprisingly enough, this extraordinary painting which was offered for sale twice in New York failed to sell there. It also failed to get a buyer later on in the London sale. Charles bought it after the sale and started his research. The curator of the Zoffany exhibition and all the other art experts now agree unanimously with Charles that it is beyond doubt by Zoffany. Likewise, the Narinda painting was also long

done in Dhaka in 1787. That these paintings were actually works of Zoffany was conclusively confirmed only in December of 2011. At the three month long exhibition, 'Zohann Zoffany: Society Observed,' at the Royal Academy in London, UK, from 10 March-10 June in 2012, thousands of people have filed past these two beautiful paintings with Dhaka, Bangladesh, prominently mentioned against them. Charles Greig helped 'brand' us internationally, especially to those in the rarefied 'inner circle' of the Western art world. Just imagine the Public Relations value of it all for Bangladesh!

The writer is the founder of Bangladesh Forum for Heritage Studies