The Feminist Uses of Art

"'It Is Surprising That There Are Any Happy Wives': The *Art Interchange*, 1878–1886" by Mary W. Blanchard, in *Journal of Women's History* (Fall 1996), Indiana Univ. Press, Journals Division, 601 N. Morton St., Bloomington, Ind. 47404–3797.

A century ago, American women searching for ways to enlarge women's "sphere" found an important vehicle in the Aesthetic Movement. Inspired by English thinkers John Ruskin and William Morris, the movement became a craze in the United States during the 1870s and '80s, writes Blanchard, an Associate Fellow at the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis. Its message that the pursuit of art and beauty is the pre-eminent goal in life held out the possibility that ordinary household arts such as painting, sewing, and handicrafts might be pathways to a larger world.

One of the new magazines that spread the movement's ideas was *Art Interchange*. Launched in 1878 by Candace Wheeler, a textile designer and founder of the New York Society of Decorative Art, the fortnightly eventually claimed an audience of 20,000, mostly middle-class women. The editors dedicated themselves to the "promotion of the polite Arts in America," but Blanchard says that "the ideal female of the *Interchange* was a woman who besieged authority and confinement as she sought her own spiritual salvation through art." Even in acting as a tastemaker at home, a woman could assert her aesthetic sense. The magazine attacked the clergy, misogyny, and at times marriage and motherhood. One contributor wrote in 1881 that "they who give the world a true philosophy, a grand poem, a beautiful painting or statue . . . have lived to holier purpose than they whose children are of the flesh alone."

Interchange encouraged all manner of aesthetic pursuits, at one point offering advice to aspiring manicurists, in effect "redefining the female body as an aesthetic *objet d'art* to ornament," says Blanchard—and showing how the movement used art to escape domesticity. Helping women to find commercial outlets for their "fancy work" was also a part of the magazine's mission.

The art that *Interchange* published in its own pages—much of it patterns for home art, embroidery, or china painting—likewise challenged the image of the chaste and submissive Victorian woman. The women often appeared alone and in frontal portraits—devices usually reserved for men. Many were undressed, and many images evoked female sensuality. In one painting, a reclining female nude is served wine by a male satyr; in another (see illustration), Juno symbolically asserts her authority over a collared peacock.

Art Interchange generally steered clear of overt politics, Blanchard says, but in its emphasis on female self-fulfillment, it prefigured much of modern feminist politics.

A Blinkered Passage to India

"Midnight's Grandchildren" by Pankaj Mishra, in *Prospect* (Apr. 1997), 4 Bedford Sq., London WC1B 3RA.

Salman Rushdie's brashly ambitious *Midnight's Children* (1981) put the Anglo-Indian novel on the map. His virtuoso venture in magical realism, about the narrator's growing up in Bombay—and India's "growing up" after independence in 1947—won Britain's prestigious Booker Prize and inspired a rash of imitators, who came and went. More recently, distinctive novelists such as Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, and Robinton Mistry have achieved critical or commercial success. Today, says Mishra, a writer based in New Delhi, Anglo-Indian fiction appears on the verge of becoming a literary phenomenon rivaling the Latin American fiction boom of the 1980s.

But Western audiences are getting a narrow

view of Indian writing, Mishra says. "What in the West is taken as representative of Indian fiction as a whole is in fact a very small sample of the rich fare available in India itself." India has 16 official languages, and vigorous literary cultures exist in more than half of them. "The names of O. V. Vijayan, U. R. Ananthmurthy, and Paul Zacharia may mean nothing to readers of Indian fiction in the West, but in India they have more readers than Rushdie. And books in Malayalam outsell books in English by as much as 10 times." Vikram Seth enjoyed success with *A Suitable Boy* (1993), which "skate[s] merrily over the surfaces of its subject," describing "the shallowness of the North Indian provincial elite." Meanwhile, the name of Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, "the great chronicler of North Indian life in Hindi," remains unknown in the West.

The Indian authors writing in English are in a very different situation from that of the Latin American stars of the 1980s. Authors such as Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa wrote their fiction in Spanish, originally with a Spanish-speaking readership in mind; only later did they address international audiences. In India, English "remains the language of power and privilege," Mishra notes. But because the audience for books in English is small, their authors "are almost forced to address a global readership." Many of these writers, including Seth, Chandra, and Mistry, choose to live abroad. This "makes for a certain kind of cosmopolitanism," Mishra observes, but "it also leads to a sameness of vision: a slickly exilic version of India, suffused with nostalgia, interwoven with myth, and often weighed down with a kind of intellectual simplicity foreign readers are rarely equipped to notice."

OTHER NATIONS

Mandela's South Africa

A Survey of Recent Articles

Three years after the 1994 elections that marked an official end to apartheid and brought Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) to power in South Africa, euphoria has given way to worries about crime, unemployment, and other problems. South Africans, writes columnist Anthony Lewis in the *New York Times Magazine* (Mar. 23, 1997), are wondering whether Mandela, "the Great Reconciler," is also a great president.

Crime is rampant. There were 18,893 murders in 1995—which translates into a homicide rate nine times higher than the U.S. rate. Car thefts now equal nearly half the number of automobiles sold. "When one links that to the evidence that police rings are organizing car thefts, that many of the stolen cars are exported, and that 30 percent of all goods landed at Durban's port are disappearing," notes John Chettle, a Washington lawyer who formerly directed the South Africa Foundation for North and South America, "it suggests very extensive corruption among police, customs, harbor authority, and other officials." This, he adds in the *National Interest* (Spring 1997), "may be the most serious remnant of the moral corruption of apartheid, and if it is not defeated soon the consequences could be profound." The crime and corruption, he points out, are encouraging the notion that South Africa is turning into another lawless African state with an incompetent government—and are also prompting some young professionals to leave the country.

"The apartheid system did create conditions for crime: oppressive racial discrimination, deliberate denial of decent education to blacks, miserable housing and economic policies that left millions jobless," Lewis points out. "But [Mandela] was right that the responsibility is his government's now, and its performance so far has to be judged a failure."

Nevertheless, Chettle maintains that "fears of the Africanization of South Africa are almost certainly ill-founded. The truth is that, despite its problems, South Africa is becoming a stable state, not yet akin to the social democratic states of Europe, but one with a high degree of agreement among its elites as to its political, economic, and social foundations."

It was fortunate in a way, Chettle observes, that democracy in South Africa arrived only after the statist ideologies that had sus-