

Vegetal Aesthetics in the Anthropocene

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In a ca. 1618 painting attributed to the artist Bishandas (active ca. 1590–1640), we see the Mughal emperor Jahangir seated on an opulent throne alongside the Safavid emperor Shah ‘Abbas I (fig. 1). Surrounded by an array of luxury objects from across the world—an European automaton of Diana with a stag, Chinese porcelain, an Italian ewer, a Venetian wineglass, Iranian gold vessels—the two sovereigns are in deep conversation.¹ But alongside treasured commodities that index the global circulation of precious objects are rare fruits in the foreground. Although Bishandas had painted a fictitious encounter between the two emperors—Jahangir and Shah ‘Abbas had, in fact, never met—the oranges, lemons, apples, a pineapple, bananas, and mangoes in the painting suggest that uncommon fruits from South Asia, Central Asia, and South America were as valued as Chinese porcelain, European vessels, and Iranian gold in the Mughal court. The emperor Jahangir, for instance, not only cultivated pineapples in Agra with plants obtained from the Portuguese but described the South American fruit as “extremely good-smelling and tasting” in his imperial memoirs.²

As we now know, the global circulation of fruits that Bishandas’ painting annotates was part and parcel of what the historian Alfred W. Crosby described as the Columbian Exchange, that is, the circulation of plants, animals, and pathogens across the Americas, West Africa, and Eurasia in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries.³ The biocultural effects of this “exchange” was devastating; innumerable species became extinct in a relatively short amount of time, diseases such as measles, smallpox, and influenza decimated large sections of indigenous populations, and new plants radically transformed natural habitats across the world. The Anthropocene—the age of human-induced climate change—was thus inaugurated. Although scholars have suggested that James Watt’s design of the steam engine in 1784 initiated the Anthropocene as the period in which human activity has become the dominant force on the environment, ecological imperialism propelled by European colonization in Africa, Asia, and the Americas from the 1500s can be seen as an equally devastating “origin story” of our current geological epoch.⁴

Alongside largescale human-induced environmental change, the Columbian Exchange also led to the development of new visual practices. The intersections between early modern European natural history and global bioprospecting, for instance, generated vast archives of drawings and illustrations of the flora and fauna of colonies for metropolitan audiences. The German-born naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian’s *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium*, a 1705 book on the natural worlds of Dutch Suriname, is a case in point. Merian’s ca. 1701 watercolor of the *Jasminum grandiflorum*—a species that had been introduced in the northeastern Atlantic coast



fig 1. Bishandas (attrib.), Jahangir entertains Shah 'Abbas, from the St. Petersburg Album, ca. 1618. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Collection: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Purchase — Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1942.16a. Photo Credit: © Freer Gallery of Art

of South America from South Asia—published as plate 46 in the *Metamorphosis* was characteristic of visual practices that were unequivocally positioned within a web linking global trade, travel, image cultures, and colonialism (fig. 2).⁵ Much has been written on the role of European botanical imagery such as these in transforming “nature into object by decontextualizing select creatures and items—that is, by removing them from their habitats, environments, and settings.”⁶ In Merian’s drawing, the jasmine is indeed presented against a blank background that deliberately effaces context, that is, the landscape, to underscore the function of the plant as a commodity or specimen in the service of Europe’s “big science and big business.”⁷

Yet, an engagement with the natural world solely through a top-down paradigm that focuses on colonial mediations in ordering, managing, and mastering plant ecologies runs the risk of relegating dissonant practices that countered Europe’s objectification of natural worlds through institutionalized bio-imperialism. Let us return to the pineapple and mangoes in Bishandas’ ca. 1618 painting. The distinctions between representations of the South American fruit in Asia and in Europe is worth emphasizing here. As historians have noted, the growing popularity of the pineapple in Europe as a medicinal plant in the early modern period went hand in hand with attempts to cultivate the plant in temperate climates.⁸ The biopolitics of transplanting the South American plant in European gardens is perhaps best illustrated in the Dutch artist Theodorus Netscher’s 1720 painting of a pineapple in the merchant Matthew Decker’s garden in Richmond, Surrey (fig. 3). Functioning as a specimen of South America’s natural resources, Netscher’s oil painting of the pineapple visually elucidates Europe’s bio-imperialistic claim over the Americas.⁹

The plant, however, had a very different career in South Asia. In Mughal India, the pineapple was not embedded within the discourses of ecological imperialism that marked Europe’s interest in the Americas. Instead, Bishandas’ painting was indicative of an increasing awareness of the Americas outside of the logic of eco-colonial domination. Along with cultivating pineapples, Jahangir



fig 2. Maria Sybilla Merian, *Jasminum grandiflorum*, ca. 1701–05. Watercolor, touched with bodycolor, and with pen and grey ink, on vellum. Collection: British Museum, London SL,5275.46. Photo Credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0



fig 3. Theodorus Netscher, *Pineapple Grown in Sir Matthew Decker’s Garden at Richmond, Surrey*, 1720. Oil on canvas. Collection: The Fitzwilliam Museum, 357. Photo Credit: © The Fitzwilliam Museum, CC BY-NC-ND

had also acquired a North American turkey in 1612, which the court artist Mansur had painted (fig. 4).¹⁰ But unlike Netscher's oil painting that annotated British colonial expansionism, the biocultural effects of the Columbian Exchange in India were rooted in a very different conceptual register—a vegetal aesthetics that was epistemically unlike the pictorial cultures generated by European seaborne colonialism. Although the Mughals enthusiastically acquired objects, plants, and animals from diverse parts of the world, they were a “sea-conscious” empire as opposed to a seaborne one.¹¹ As a result, we need to go beyond the totalizing aesthetic arrangements of European expansionism to comprehend the uncommon fruits from South Asia, Central Asia, and South America in Bishandas' painting of Jahangir entertaining Shah 'Abbas. Although imaginary, the scene, we could contend, offers a history of the global circulation of fruits and plants that takes us beyond extractive economies reinforced by spectatorial regimes of seeing and ordering the natural world.

Rooted in the contemporary, *Dissonant Matter*, too, offers an imaginative history of plant ecologies that endure beyond European botany and global bioprospecting. Here we have a phenomenologically grounded account of the global circulation of fruits and plants that foregrounds the relationship between humans and the environment. As neocolonial pharmaceutical, biotech, and agricultural corporations raid indigenous bioknowledge in the guise of modern science and medicine while patenting and trademarking such knowledge with impunity, the works in the exhibition make it amply visible that the objectification of nature through institutionalized bio-imperialism is not the only way to envisage the human species' relationship with the natural world. Mangoes—allegedly the king of fruits—loom large in Asma Kazmi's works. If Jahangir had described mangoes as his “favorite” fruit in his memoirs, Kazmi traces another history of the global consumption of the fruit through the movement of migrant laborers across the Indian Ocean.¹² At the same time, the leaf of the mango plant transmutes into Indian yellow pigment—the luminous color that animated the palette of British artists such as JMW Turner via cow urine—in Kazmi's sculpture and drawings.¹³ In process, the materiality of paint and traces of plant-life merge into each other to generate a vegetal aesthetics of the much-coveted Indian yellow that short-circuits Europe's imperial conceit.

We know that visual representations of the mango reached Europe as early as 1678 with Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakenstein's *Hortus Indicus Malabaricus*, a twelve-volume treatise on south Indian plants (fig. 5).¹⁴ Like Maria Sibylla Merian's careful documentation of the flora

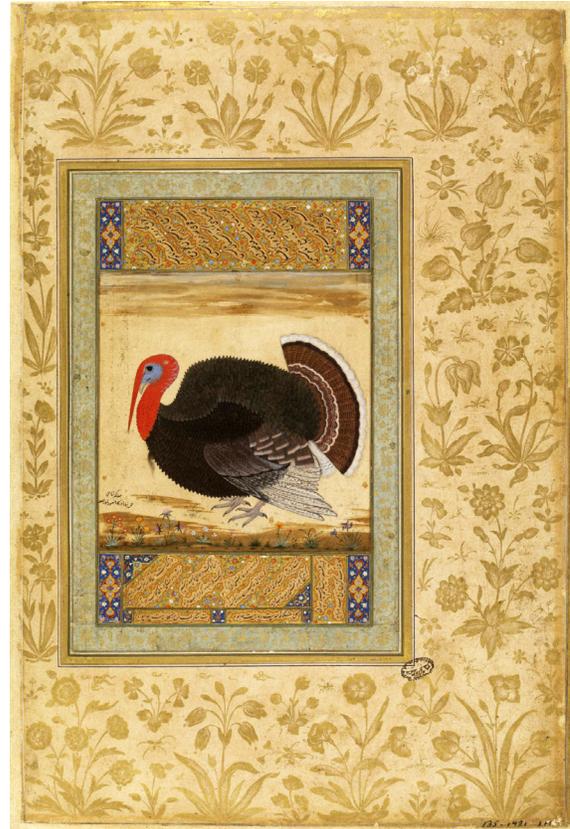


fig 4. Mansur, Turkey cock, ca. 1612. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Collection: Victoria and Albert Museum, IM.135-1921. Photo Credit: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



fig 5. Artist not known, *Mangifera indica*, Hand colored line engraving published in Hendrik Adriaan van Rheedee tot Drakenstein, *Hortus Indicus Malabaricus, continens regni Malabarici apud Indos celeberrimi omnis generis plantas rariores, Latinis, Malabaricis, Arabicis, & Bramanum characteribus nominibusque expressas*, Vol. IV (Amsterdam, 1683), Pars 4. Tab. 1. Collection: Wellcome Library, London no. 15752i. Photo Credit: © Wellcome Library, CC BY 4.0

and fauna of Suriname in *Metamorphosis*, Drakenstein's multi-volume book offered European audiences a comprehensive account of south Indian bioresources. In both instances, plants were presented as an isolated botanical specimen against a blank background. But, for our purposes, it is important to note that Drakenstein had employed local artists to complete his colossal project on south Indian naturalia. The role of these "unknown" artists as intercultural agents who operated within, but also beyond, the domain of European botany's global knowledge networks complicates overdetermined histories that perceive early modern plant imagery solely as a form of top-down environmental governance.

Following the routes of such colonial networks, the mango also reached Barbados by the 1740s, Mexico in the 1770s, Jamaica in the 1780s, and the United States in the 1830s.¹⁵ Guillermo Galindo plays with this history of the global circulation and colonization of bio-resources in his works. In the early modern period, figures such as Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakenstein and Maria Sibylla Merian had invented new techniques of knowing and archiving the natural

worlds of Europe's colonies by emphasizing the role of the visual in lavishly illustrated natural history books. Galindo, however, generates a different graphic archive to reconsider the history of imperial bioscience where nonhuman agents take on a far more central role than that has been accounted for in history. The mutant as a product of colonial violence emerges as a leit-motif in Galindo's work, looping in the past and the present to foreground other voices speaking from beyond the smoke screen of European botany's universalist hubris.

To close, then, with other voices that speak of mangoes—a South Asian fruit—in the Americas, I turn to Regie Cabico, a Filipino-American poet and spoken word artist. Underscoring the role of fruits as biomatter that link diasporic worlds with worlds left behind, Cabico writes in *Mango Poem*:

[...] We, a family of five, left the Philippines for
California dodging
U.S. Customs with the forbidden fruit.
Thinking, who'd deprive mother of her mangos.
Head down, my father denied that we had perishable
foods and waved passports in the still air,
motioning for us
to proceed towards the terminal.
Behind a long line of travelers,
my sisters surrounded mother
like shoji screens as she hid the newspaper-covered
fruit between her legs. Mangos slept
in the hammock of her skirt, a brilliant batik
billowing from the motion
of airline caddies pushing suitcases
on metal carts.

We walked around mother like mini-airplanes,
forming a crucifix, where she was the center.
On the plane, as we crossed time zones, mom unwrapped
her ripe mangos, the one from the tree lola planted
before she gave birth to my mother, [...] ¹⁶

About The Author

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- ¹ For the career and oeuvre of Bishandas, see Asok K. Das, “Bishandas,” in *Masters of Indian Painting*, Vol. I, ed. Milo Beach, Eberhard Fischer, and B. N. Goswamy (Zurich: Artibus Asiae, 2011), 259–78. The circulation of objects that this painting highlights is discussed in Sharon Littlefield, *The Object in the Gift: Embassies of Jahangir and Shah Abbas* (PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999), 100–1, among others.
- ² Nuruddin Muhammad Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, translated, edited, and annotated by Wheeler M. Thackston as *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1999), 24.
- ³ Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972).
- ⁴ While there has been some debate regarding the precise beginning of the Anthropocene, it is now accepted that James Watt’s design of the steam engine was the crucial tipping point. This argument was first made by the Nobel-laureate chemist Paul J. Crutzen and a marine science specialist Eugene F. Stoermer. For a critical analysis, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 197–222. For European colonization as one of the “origin stories” of the Anthropocene, see Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).
- ⁵ Maria Sibylla Merian, *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium. Ofte Verandering der Surinaamsche Insecten* (Amsterdam: G. Valck, 1705). See Tomomi Kinukawa, “Natural History as Entrepreneurship: Maria Sibylla Merian’s Correspondence with J.G. Volkamer II and James Petiver,” *Archives of Natural History* 38.2 (2011): 313–27 for Merian’s commercial interests.
- ⁶ Janice Neri, *The Insect and the Image: Visualizing Nature in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1700* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 14. Also see Beth F. Tobin, *Colonizing Nature: The Tropics in British Arts and Letters, 1760–1820* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) and Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions & Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
- ⁷ Laurelyn Whitt, *Science, Colonialism, and Indigenous People: The Cultural Politics of Law and Knowledge* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 93.
- ⁸ See, for instance, Gary Y. Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
- ⁹ For this history, see Lia Markey, *Imagining the Americas in Medici Florence* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), among others.

- ¹⁰ For more on Mughal interest in the Americas, see Sugata Ray, “From New Spain to Mughal India: Rethinking Early Modern Animal Studies with a Turkey, ca. 1612,” in *Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective*, ed. Karl Kusserow (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).
- ¹¹ Manya Rathore “‘Floating Political Rhetoric’ in the Indian Ocean: Situating the Portuguese in the Mughal Foreign Politics,” in *The Indian Ocean in the Making of Early Modern India*, ed. Pius Malekandathil (New Delhi: Manohar, 2016), 250.
- ¹² Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 24.
- ¹³ For the history of the pigment, see Jordanna Bailkin, “Indian Yellow: Making and Breaking the Imperial Palette,” *Journal of Material Culture* 10.2 (2005): 197–214.
- ¹⁴ Hendrik Adriaan van Rheede tot Drakenstein, *Hortus Indicus Malabaricus, continens regni Malabarici apud Indos celeberrimi omnis generis plantas rariores, Latinis, Malabaricis, Arabicis, & Bramanum characteribus nominibusque expressas* (Amsterdam: Someren et van Dyck, 1678–1703).
- ¹⁵ For this history, see Richard E. Litz, ed. *Mango: Botany, Production and Uses* (Cambridge, UK: CAB International, 1997).
- ¹⁶ Regie Cabico, “Mango Poem,” *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art* 29 (1997–98): 118–19.