

Jos Gommans, *The Unseen World, The Netherlands and India from 1550*. (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2018). 265 p. ISBN 978946004374.

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Jos Gommans' *The Unseen World* is part of the Country Series published by the Rijksmuseum. The intent of the series is to explore the shared history of the Netherlands and other countries through objects in the Rijksmuseum collection. In *The Unseen World*, Gommans explores the connections between the Netherlands and India. The timeframe of the book is during the respective 'golden ages', of both countries, roughly from 1550 to 1700. It should be noted that when Gommans refers to India, he usually means the Mughal Empire. This period was also the last pre-enlightenment heyday of a shared magical view of the world. Gommans argues that both the Netherlands and India were part of a cultural continuum which emerged from Hellenistic philosophy marked by Neoplatonism. This view entails the idea that anything that is visible conceals a higher divine entity or 'unseen world'. In the Dutch Republic, the golden age gave rise to a new ruling class of regents, in the Mughal Empire the elite of the society were the service nobility who were members of the travelling Mughal court. These members of society were the most important consumers of the goods that figure as illustrations in this book, which are well integrated with text and are a good insight into the interesting collection of the Rijksmuseum.

The *Unseen World* consists of three sections. The focus of the first section is the VOC in India. Unfortunately the Indian perspective of this interaction is neglected in this chapter. Jos Gommans attributes this neglect to a lack of Indian sources about their contact with the Dutch. This chapter features cosmopolitan figures who worked for the VOC, such as the colourful Daniel Havart who translated Persian literary works to serve as a guide to civilized court behaviour for VOC servants. These notable figures make for excellent reading and they display the point of the book very well, namely to reveal an interaction of cultures. However, by focusing on these elite cosmopolitan figures, the chapter obscures the dark side of the VOC's presence in South Asia. Besides peaceful exchange of ideas and goods, the interaction was defined by the facilitation of slave trade on a massive scale and near constant conflict and warfare, carried out by the same elites described in this chapter.

The second section discusses how both regions dealt with the process of globalization. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, discoveries of new sea routes created awareness that the world was larger and older than the Indians and Dutch ever thought. This chapter focuses on how these new realizations impacted both regions' worldviews and how they correlated the old with the new. Interestingly,

Gommans argues that in both countries the process of globalization was coped with through similar instruments, for example by writing new world histories. Both regions resembled each other in their use of these instruments. The second chapter does a better job than the first of shining light on both perspectives of the interaction and ties in better with the final chapter.

The third chapter is arguably the most important chapter as it focuses on Neoplatonism. Specifically, Gommans attempts to show how this common 'cultural underflow' is revealed in the arts in both the Republic and India. Gommans argues for the Neoplatonist meaning in paintings in both India and the Dutch Republic, notably in the art of the painters Rembrandt, Kesu Das and Willem Schellinks. After a brief analysis of their paintings, Gommans concludes that the emblematic representations of reality found in all their paintings was a result of centuries-long entanglement of Neoplatonic ideas. The chapter ends with a discussion on how In Europe, the enlightenment meant an end of the prevalence of the Neoplatonist worldview: A clear distinction between god and Nature was made. In the same period, Neoplatonism in India waned in influence because dogmatic religious circles increasingly resisted Neoplatonic notions of a higher inner truth that lay beneath all religions.

The idea that the concept of Neoplatonism is a shared cultural underflow in both regions is an attractive idea. However, as Gommans himself underlines, the people that partook in the consumption of the material discussed in this book were all elites. The proponents of this shared cultural background were therefore but a small section of both societies. How much then, does it truly say about cultural exchange between these two countries? Furthermore, the fact that Neoplatonist ideas were found in art and goods is very strongly argued in this book but without any examples of the artists and consumers labelling themselves Platonists. It is unclear whether or not they and the consumers of art thought of themselves as partakers in a Neoplatonist culture that was shared in both countries. With the use of the Rijksmuseum material, Gommans succeeds very well in portraying the connection of the elites of both regions, but how important these connections were for the general populace of both countries and the sometimes violent and conflicting nature of the connections remain underdescribed.

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