

## Compte rendu

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*The Artists of Nathadwara: The Practice of Painting in Rajasthan*. By Tryna Lyons. (Mapin: Indian University Press, 2004. Pp 360, photos, ISBN 0-25334-417-4)

par Anne-Marie Gaston

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Pinson's memoir records the cultural synthesis that reigned in Alaska during the period between the end of the gold rush and the massive development attendant on the Second World War. As such it reflects the experiences of a group that has received little attention from historians, ethnologists and folklorists, and is now increasingly disappearing. The hybrid culture that produced Elizabeth Pinson is passing, as she herself recognises, and her memoir thus stands as one of their few memorials. Although many Alaskans have native ancestors, few now share Pinson's experience of their traditional culture.

*Alaska's Daughter* thus stands as both a firsthand record of important events and opinions in Arctic exploration and life, and an insight into Alaskan culture in the early twentieth century. It provides enough context for even novices in Arctic and Alaskan history and ethnography to follow events, and is written in an engaging and pleasant style that reflects Pinson's early experience in journalism at her residential school. Academics will find little new in the historical background, but should find her firsthand accounts of historical events useful and the cultural perspective that emerges from *Alaska's Daughter* interesting.

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***The Artists of Nathadwara: The Practice of Painting in Rajasthan.*** By Tryna Lyons. (Mapin: Indian University Press, 2004. Pp 360, photos, ISBN 0-25334-417-4)

The town of Nathadwara is in the state of Rajasthan, forty-five kilometres west of Udaipur, on the road to Jodhpur and Ajmer. The surrounding land is largely rocky uplands, part of the Aravalli range of hills, and cut by a few narrow, fertile valleys. The town owes its existence almost entirely to its temples and the resulting traffic of pilgrims. The temples in turn owe their attraction mainly to the presence of one particular deity, Shri Nathji, who is the presiding deity of the main temple in Nathadwara. The temples (1670-1672) were built by the Vallabha *sampraday* sect, after the image of Shri Nathji was transported from Braj, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where the sect was originally founded two hundred years earlier.

The image of Shri Nathji is a manifestation of Krishna when he raised Mount Govardhana to save the villagers from the wrath of Indra the storm god. The image is made of black stone and is about four feet (1.2m) tall. Shri Nathji receives his subjects and imparts divine grace during *darshan*, held at eight specified times each day. This is the main form of congregational worship for the Vallabha sampraday. Devotees come and make personal contact with Shri Nathji and perform tasks for him (*seva*), or give donations of cash or kind that can be used for his daily routine. Pilgrims purchase paintings of Shri Nathji as well those that record his worship and the many festivals in Nathadwara. The production of these paintings is the main source of revenue for the group of hereditary painters who form the subject of this book.

Shri Nathji is revered as a king and he has a huge household of servants who attend to his needs. Priests, cooks, musicians and painters all accompanied the image when it left Braj and many of their descendants are still found in Nathadwara. This book discusses the work and lives of one group of painters known as Adi Gaurs, who accompanied the image from Braj, and another group, the Jangir, who came later. There is no intermarriage between the two groups. The Adi Gaurs consider themselves to be socially and ritually superior, as they accompanied the image from Braj and were therefore first in Nathadwara.

Decoration (*sringar*) is central to the worship of Shri Nathji, so for that reason painters have always been important to record the ritual and celebrations both inside and outside the temple. These traditional painters retained sketchbooks for several generations and they are still used to teach the younger artists. They provide a pictorial account of the evolution of the artistic tradition of individual families and record the variety of subjects pursued by many of the painters. The discovery of these sketchbooks, guarded by families as their real wealth, helps us to learn how their tradition of painting was passed on. A unique feature of this book is to present photographs of these sketchbooks.

Painters were often commissioned to paint the events in the temple but were not allowed to sketch while within the temple compound. It was therefore essential that they train their memory to record detail. The worship of Shri Nathji is very visual. Beautiful dresses and large painted backdrops (*picchavi*) are hung behind the image. Each season and time of day has its own rules for decorating the image, the food to be served and music to be played. It was and still is the task of the

traditional artists to record in paintings the events surrounding the worship of Shri Nathji. Their subjects included the regular worship as well as special festivals. As well, they record the visits to Nathadwara of other images worshipped by the *sampraday*: all are marked with colour and pomp. Many of these events were, and are still commissioned to be recorded in paintings by these traditional artists.

One aspect of the book that is of exceptional interest is the involvement of women in the artistic activities of their families. The fact that women were also painters, and often very good ones, reveals that these family ateliers involved the whole family. Until Dr. Lyon's research, the painter families denied that women painted. It probably helped that, as a woman, she was able to gain their confidence. Because her research extended over many years, allowing her to establish an excellent rapport with the families, she was eventually allowed to see the work by women of these families. Surprisingly the work often was kept under the carpet in the main living area. It is notable that women who were very good would often sign their husband's name. While the work of many of the women was mainly to do postcard size painting of Shri Nathaji dressed for various seasons, her research also reveals women's paintings of high artistic calibre on a variety of themes.

The hereditary genealogists of North India provided a great deal of material for the author and helped her unearth the history of these families. The sheer amount of work and enthusiasm to carry out such a study and the attention to detail makes this book an important source for those who are interested in the actual artists and what they produced. The fact that in India there are still many living traditions makes the country exceptional. With the publication of this book, another gem has been unearthed.

The Nathadwara painter community had two main feudal patrons for their art: the Tilkayat of the Shri Nathji haveli and the Maharana of Mewar. The artists also worked for other rulers and the book includes some excellent examples of their work from the palaces at Dungarpur and Jhalawar, the temples of the sect in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, and many pictures in private collections. The quality of the photographs, all taken by the author, is excellent and they present much, as yet unpublished material, including some of the sketches from the artists' notebooks. Dr. Lyons' intrepid search for the work of the Nathadwara artists has led her to many palaces and temples where once again she gives us excellent photographs of the work of these painters whose lives centred around Nathadwara.

This book will be of interest to researchers of any hereditary artistic tradition. Lyons spent a great deal of time with the artists and their families and writes with empathy and realism about the life of the painters. From my own experience of working with the musicians of Nathadwara, I can appreciate both the rewards and the difficulties of this approach. I thoroughly recommend this beautifully produced book to anyone interested in the development and practise of Indian painting as well as the lives of the painters.

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***The Cultured Chimpanzee: Reflections on Cultural Primatology.*** By William McGrew (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp xi + 248, table of contents, preface, references, index, black/white photographs, ISBN 0-521-53543-3, pbk)

As *Homo sapiens*' closest living relative, chimpanzees can provide insight into how human behavioral diversity developed. This book raises awareness of the range of primate behaviour and that individual learning, genetics and environmental variables are inadequate to explain such diversity within species. The author argues that if we accept that culture explains this diversity then social sciences should allow primates into the "Culture Club" from which they have previously been excluded. In order to build his case, the author begins with constructing an operational definition of culture, outlines methodology (and biases) in various disciplines that study behaviour, provides evidence (or lack thereof) from several species and finally indicates what improvements are necessary in theory and data collection for the field of cultural primatology to advance as a discipline.

The introduction sets the stage for the reader to entertain the possibility that primates may have culture. It tackles the premise that, by virtue of the fact that humans have many unique behavioral and cognitive traits, we are the only species with culture. Since humans are the only species that uses language and verbal reports are often used to collect information on culture, this characteristic excludes other species. However, the issue of language appears to be a surmountable stumbling block, for although primates lack language they do behave and the