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The Indian Potter Gurcharan Singh: Exchanges with Japan and the Korean Peninsula, Asian Solidarity, and the Poetics of the Lotus and the Swan¹

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Abstract: This paper traces the career of the Indian potter Gurcharan Singh (1896–1995), who studied ceramics in Japan from 1919 and forged a transnational, pan-Asian practice through his exchanges with Japan and the Korean Peninsula. Situating Singh at the crossroads of three lineages—William Morris’s revival of handicraft, George Birdwood’s colonial reading of Indian craft as an extension of an “Aryan” Graeco-Egyptian palmette tradition, and Okakura Kakuzō’s assertion that “Asia is one”—it shows how Singh neither simply followed nor wholly rejected any of them. Arriving in Japan shortly after the Amritsar massacre of 1919, Singh entered the circle of Yanagi Sōetsu, Bernard Leach, Tomimoto Kenkichi, and Hamada Shōji, joined the Tokyo lodge of the Theosophical Society, and travelled to colonial Korea in the summer of 1920, where Asakawa Takumi guided him and where he felt a colonial kinship between Koreans and Indians. Re-reading the lotus of Ajanta not as Birdwood’s Aryan palmette but as a pan-Asian symbol diffused from India across East Asia, Singh carved it into his own wares as a quiet rebuttal of colonial art history. The twin symbols of the lotus and the swan—both emblems of purity preserved amid the mud of colonialism and partition—run through his art and thought, culminating in the revival of “Delhi Blue” pottery and works such as the “Three-Symbol Jar,” and offering a still-resonant critique of narrow nationalism.

1. Introduction: The Lineage of Birdwood, Okakura, and Morris

Ever since William Morris in Britain called for a revival of handicraft against the mass-produced goods of mechanized industry, Asia has frequently been regarded—or rediscovered—as a utopia of pre-industrial art and craft. Yet this entailed a serious dilemma: how to protect and preserve indigenous craft from the civilizing and modernizing forces emanating from Britain, the very source of the so-called Industrial Revolution.

In the case of India, once Britain had established a stable political and economic dominion, another conflict with modernization came into focus. George Birdwood, the Anglo-Indian official responsible for introducing and promoting Indian art and craft at the international expositions held between 1857 and 1901, lamented and denounced the rapid deterioration of craftwork that had come under the influence of

¹The following discussion integrates and partly overlaps with two earlier studies: “Indo no tōgeika Gurucharan Shin” [The Indian Potter Gurcharan Singh], *Mingei*, no. 747 (2015); and “An Irish Theosophist’s Pan-Asianism or Fant-asia? James Cousins and Gurcharan Singh,” in Hans Martin Krämer and Julian Strube (eds.), *Theosophy across Boundaries: Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Modern Esoteric Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).

British models and education. At the 1878 Paris Exposition, for instance, Birdwood turned his attention to ceramics in the handbook for the Indian section and condemned Wilkins Terry of the Bombay School of Art—known for the revival of Sind pottery—and his Indian pupils, on the grounds that their work was an abominable chimera mixing British, Chinese, and Japanese elements. His strong warning was endorsed by an open letter from influential figures in the art world, including William Morris. Two years later, in 1880, he repeated the same severe criticism in *The Industrial Arts of India*, one of the South Kensington Museum's art handbooks: glazed Bombay pottery decorated in a Sind style of the kind seen on Chinese or Japanese jam and pickle jars was, he held, a violation of every artistic and historical congruity in art.

Birdwood's judgment rested on a Victorian ideology that placed the fine arts at the apex of a hierarchy. He declared, for example, that sculpture and painting as fine arts do not exist in India. Moreover, Birdwood argued that the Indian lotus motif derived from the Greek palmette—a pattern of slender, fan-like leaves resembling the palm. He maintained that, through the eastward migration of the Aryans, this motif had been transmitted to Egypt and India and there rendered as the lotus. This belief in an “Aryan connection,” which interpreted even the Indian lotus said to derive from the Ajanta cave murals as a transformation of a Graeco-Egyptian palmette, contained within it a desire to legitimize British rule by treating India as, in effect, of the same culture and stock.

Lockwood Kipling, father of Rudyard Kipling, and John Griffiths, a South Kensington graduate who had been engaged in teaching indigenous Indian art from 1865, modified this policy in order to restrain Western elements. Griffiths began teaching the Ajanta cave murals as decoration, and one of his pupils produced a vase inspired by their lotus motif. A photograph of the blue vase held by the Victoria and Albert Museum, reproduced in Partha Mitter's *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, shows—unlike the natural lotus floating on water—flowers adapted among tall grasses. This indicates how seriously Birdwood's criticism had taken effect, for the design most likely followed his doctrine that the Indian lotus motif derived from the ancient Egyptian or Greek palmette or anthemion.

Against this, a great change was spreading from Asia at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1901 Okakura Kakuzō (Tenshin) travelled to India and, on the basis of that experience and those exchanges, published *The Ideals of the East* (1903) with John Murray. The book opens with its much-quoted line, “Asia is one.” Okakura emphasized the spiritual elements common to Asia, which he held would heal the serious rupture between art and craft, and he presented Japan as the exemplar of that unity, declaring it a “museum of Asiatic civilization” (p.7). He argued, for example, that the Buddhist art depicted in the Ajanta caves had been transmitted through China and Korea to Hōryū-ji in Japan. Thus, in his words, it became “our mission” “not only to return to our own past ideals, but also to feel and revivify the dormant life of the old Asiatic unity” (p.223).

In the preface to *The Ideals of the East*, the Irish-born Nivedita (Margaret Noble) regarded Okakura as “the William Morris of his country” (xi). Just as Morris had presented the Middle Ages as the embodiment of craftsmanship, Okakura presented

Asia “not as the congeries of geographical fragments that we imagined, but as a united living organism, each part dependent on all the others, the whole breathing a single complex life” (xx). E. B. Havell praised the spirituality of Indian art in his *The Ideals of Indian Art* (1911), and Ananda Coomaraswamy appraised Indian craftwork in his *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (1913).

At the intersection of these intellectual currents stood the protagonist of this paper, Gurcharan Singh. The Ajanta lotus that Birdwood had interpreted as an “Aryan palmette,” Singh reinterpreted as a pan-Asian symbol, inscribing it into his work as a mark of a solidarity that had spread from India to East Asia. This paper follows how this Indian potter—born in 1896 in present-day Pakistan and living until 1995—established, through his exchanges with Japan and the Korean Peninsula, a practice of border-crossing Asian ceramics. In doing so, it shows how the two symbols of the lotus and the swan came to form the central axis running through his art and thought.

2. Singh’s Life History and the Circumstances of His Coming to Japan (1896–1919)

Gurcharan Singh was born in 1896—seven years younger than Yanagi Sōetsu—and died in 1995. Born into a Sikh family, he was a native of the city of Gujranwala in present-day Pakistan. Singh studied geology at the Prince of Wales College and graduated with honours in 1918. The college bore the name of the British Crown Prince, having been founded to commemorate the visit to India in 1905 of the prince who would later become George V. Singh’s teacher in geology was Professor D. N. Wadia. Though still in his early twenties, having only just taken his degree at Baroda College in India, Wadia soon distinguished himself; he is known for later succeeding, at the request of the Atomic Energy Commission in 1948, in discovering uranium and thereby laying the foundations for nuclear power generation and, by extension, for the development of nuclear weapons. Had Singh continued to study geology, he would surely have walked an entirely different path. He chose instead to put his geological knowledge to use in ceramics. When the established and celebrated Singh published his only book, *Pottery in India* (1979), the culmination of his knowledge and technique, he cited one of Wadia’s works—doubtless in gratitude to the teacher who had passed away a decade earlier.

After graduating, Singh trained in tile-making and the like in Delhi, on the introduction of Ram Singh Kabuli, a friend of his father who ran a pottery business there. His master was a man named Abdullah, of Pashtun descent, said to have come from Persia to India around the tenth century. It was after roughly a year of such training that, with Ram Singh Kabuli’s support, Singh came to Japan to study ceramics in earnest.

Singh came to Japan in the summer of 1919. Although specialized schools run by the British had already been operating in India since the latter half of the nineteenth century, he apparently wished to acquire more industrial techniques in Japan. By his own account in *Pottery in India*, he came to Japan in the summer of 1919, entered the ceramics department of the Tokyo Higher Technical School (now Institute of

Science Tokyo), and completed the course in two years. The Delhi Blue Pottery Trust holds Singh's graduation album of 1921, which confirms that this was indeed the ceramics department of the Tokyo Higher Technical School. Records of the institution's successor likewise confirm that a student named "G. C. Singh" was enrolled in the special course of the ceramics department between 1920 and 1921.

In India at the time, ceramics occupied a low status close to that of disposable ware. Singh became a pioneer among Indian ceramic artists and a figure who would establish a culture of using handmade ceramics in daily life—akin to the Arts and Crafts movement and the Mingei (folk-craft) movement. The turning point was his study abroad in Japan. Considering the timing of his arrival, one important context comes into view. Since Singh came to Japan in the summer of 1919, this was immediately after the Amritsar incident of 13 April that same year—the infamous event in which Indian citizens protesting the draconian Rowlatt Act were fired upon at a Sikh holy site. After the incident, the momentum of the independence movement rose in India. It is therefore intelligible, in terms of timing, to suppose that Singh deliberately came to study ceramics not in Britain but at the Tokyo Higher Technical School in Japan because he wished to make a genuine domestic product rather than the semi-Westernized souvenir-like wares that flattered Britain. No source explicitly states whether he chose Japan because of its flourishing ceramics industry, or shunned Britain because of the bloodshed at the Sikh holy site of Amritsar; but this background cannot be left out of account.

3. The Formation of a Human Network in Japan (1919–1920)

The turning point came when, in Tokyo, he went to hear the singing of Yanagi Kaneko, which was well regarded among his friends. Kaneko probably gave a solo recital, sponsored by the *Shirakaba* coterie, on 9 October 1919; thereafter, in April 1920, she and her husband jointly distributed a "Prospectus for a Concert" to raise funds for the establishment of the "Korean Folk Art Museum," gave a concert tour of Korea in May, and toured domestic performances in Japan as well, displaying the prospectus. It is therefore entirely conceivable that Singh came to know Yanagi Sōetsu at the October recital and was thereby drawn to the Korean Peninsula and its ceramics. In this way Singh came to know her husband Yanagi Sōetsu and, further, Leach, Hamada Shōji, and Tomimoto Kenkichi and their works. Because this is an anecdote recorded as hearsay in *Pottery and the Legacy of Sardar Gurcharan Singh* (1998)—a book published with the full cooperation of those concerned through interviews and the provision of materials—it lacks documentary corroboration, yet the circumstantial evidence makes it more than plausible.

Around 1919 Singh also became acquainted with Antonin Raymond, the celebrated Czech architect and Theosophist. Probably through Raymond's introduction, Singh met the Irish poet James H. Cousins and subsequently joined as one of the first members of the Tokyo lodge of the Theosophical Society. Cousins, invited by the poet Noguchi Yonejirō, taught English literature at Keiō University in Tokyo from 1919 to 1920. During his brief stay of ten months, Cousins encountered, and recorded, a fascinating network of artists struggling to harmonize East and West. His diary-like travelogue *New Japan* (1923) shows that the inspiration originally

came from a small “Indo-Japo-Chinese vase by Gurcharn (sic) Singh.” When he met Bernard Leach through the poet E. E. Speight, he found himself in agreement with this pioneer of British studio pottery in their criticism of the blind imitation of tradition, because the root of tradition lies within. Probably through Speight’s or Leach’s introduction, Cousins also met Yanagi Sōetsu, Leach’s lifelong friend and the founder of the Mingei movement. Yet the figure who most impressed Cousins may well have been the Indian potter Gurcharan Singh.

The pan-Asianist and ultranationalist Kokuryūkai (Black Dragon Society) published an English-language magazine, the *Asian Review*, from 1920 to 1921, propagating the necessity of the political unification of Asia on the basis of cultural unity. The magazine supported the Indian independence movement and broadly welcomed many articles on Indian culture. Coomaraswamy contributed a short article on his first impressions when he visited Japan on a lecture tour in 1920. Cousins, too, who was promoting the independence of a distinctively Indian painting, contributed several articles from India. One of his articles, “The Cultural Unity of Asia,” begins from the “Asia is one” of Okakura’s *The Ideals of the East*. While Cousins fully agreed with this idea, he presented India—rather than Japan—as the secret key to unifying Asia, and indeed East and West.

It was rumored that Cousins’s all-too-early return home was due to his open involvement with the *Asian Review* and his sympathy for the Indian people. The wary British authorities secretly investigated the revolutionary movement for Indian independence, including the Theosophists in Japan, and then pressed the Japanese authorities to repatriate this “radical” to India without delay. Ironically, it was on his journey home in March 1920 that he came to feel the cultural unity of Asia for himself. Guided by Singh, he went to see the murals of Hōryū-ji in Nara, where—exactly as Okakura had pointed out—he conceived of the integration of the Indian model at Ajanta, the strength of China and Korea, and the delicacy of Japan. He further confirmed that the same tradition still lived within Singh. From a photograph of Leach-style pottery (Figure 1), Cousins discerned “the cultural unity of Asia in the shape of a vase, Chinese in model, Japanese in substance, Indian in craftsmanship” (p. 322).

In parallel with this network-building, the political surveillance surrounding Singh was also intensifying. In the India of the time, with the independence movement gaining momentum, British agents were dispatched from India to spy out the relations between the Indian community in Tokyo and the Japanese pan-Asianists. Foremost among them was H. P. Shastri. With his rich learning and high linguistic ability, Shastri made contact with people who were to be watched, such as Ōkawa Shūmei and Rash Behari Bose, and continued to send detailed reports to the British Embassy. According to Shastri’s reports, he was especially on bad terms with an Indian named Hariharnath Thulal Atal. Atal, who had taken up the post of lecturer in Hindustani at the Tokyo School of Foreign Languages, was a friend of Gurcharan Singh. Their association can be glimpsed from a photograph taken of H. S. Govinda Rao (left) together with Atal (right) and Singh (Figure 2).

Atal committed suicide in June 1921. According to reports in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* and elsewhere, this was because he had been pressed—by the British

government and, it seems, by certain fellow Indians drawn into that same system of surveillance—to provide information and to inform on others. Atal wrote in his suicide note the names of those who had forced such betrayal upon him, greatly shaking the Indian community in Tokyo, since the pressure had come from within their own ranks as much as from the colonial authorities. This surveillant gaze was directed at Singh as well. Around 1921, when Singh was making pottery at a kiln in Seto, he was reported on—as a man “currently under observation of his conduct” and under the heading “Concerning the Residence of an Indian”—in a report dated 11 November 1921 from the Governor of Aichi Prefecture to the Home Minister and the Superintendent-General of the Metropolitan Police. Indians at the time were often regarded as persons requiring caution, and this, contrary to Cousins’s innocent pan-Asianism, would inevitably cast a shadow over Singh’s work as well.

That said, owing in part to his broad network of Japanese friends, Singh himself seems not to have come under any serious suspicion from the authorities. He became intimate with Yanagi and deepened his exchanges with Tomimoto Kenkichi and Hamada Shōji as well. In *The Illustrated Letters of Tomimoto Kenkichi* (2007), for example, there is a letter—written about a year after Yanagi’s letter, on the night of 16 November 1921, from the village of Andō in Nara to Leach—on which Singh added a joint inscription alongside the Yanagis and the Tomimotos (p. 130). Around the straw-stack design that Tomimoto had drawn, Yanagi wrote that it was a most delightful evening, talking of Leach as though he were there with them, and Singh wrote that, together with Yanagi and Tomimoto, it was as if Leach too were with them, and that he was reminded with fondness of all sorts of things from those days.

4. The Journey to the Korean Peninsula and Colonial Solidarity (Summer 1920)

In the summer of 1920, Gurcharan Singh visited the Korean Peninsula for the first time and was utterly captivated by it. In a letter to Leach dated 31 October 1920, Yanagi reported as follows:

Singh has become one of my nice friends. He comes to [see me at] Abiko very often & I see him in Tokyo frequently. He had a good journey to Korea in this summer. (Yanagi Sōetsu zenshū, vol. 21, part 1, p. 639).

As Yanagi wrote in “His Journey to Korea” (1920), Singh, following Bernard Leach, also went “to meet the Korea of art.” Urged by Yanagi, he went to Korea in the summer to see its ceramics. For this journey, Yanagi seems to have introduced Singh to Asakawa Takumi, who had long resided in Korea and devoted himself to preserving and studying its ceramics and crafts. Kaesong (now in North Korea, close to the Demilitarized Zone), where ceramics dating from the Goryeo period could readily be seen, had drawn many people. Singh too visited the Korean Peninsula as one such person and toured various places under Asakawa Takumi’s guidance.

An investigation of the letters addressed to Leach held by the Crafts Study Centre (CSC) on the outskirts of London turned up several letters from a man named Gurcharan Singh. One of them, dated 25 August 1920, vividly records the deep feeling of this journey:

Dear Leach

I came here to stay for a week, three weeks have already passed and I don't want to leave this place. I am staying in a Korean inn, the beautiful furniture, ondol, pillows and food, indeed everything I have begun to love. How shall I tear myself from these? Koreans resemble so much Indians in dress, custom and art that I have begun to love it next to my motherland.

I have made some collection of the old pottery and other old things which I would very much like you to see.

I visited also Kongo San, Diamond mountain, its grotesque peaks, strong, silent and sublime beauty made me cry when I was leaving it. Same was the case when I stood before the cave hermitage of Sei Kutsuan.

Certain Congressmen have come to visit Keijo for a day. Owing to some tension they (Govt.) have put much police in the city. Shops are closed and the city looks gloomy. As yet there has been no serious trouble, but it is very sad.

Compliments from Mr. Asagawa [sic]. You are always present in my thoughts.

I wish to tell you many things just as a child would tell his adventures to his elder brother. Well some day—I hope you have started your great work. How do you find it? May He give you all success, and always crown you with laurels.

Give my best wishes to Mrs. Leach and love to children.

Tokio is rather lonely. I shall be in Tokio next month when the school reopens.

Yours very sincerely, G. C. Singh

The “Sei Kutsuan” in the letter refers to Seokguram. Singh was deeply moved by Seokguram as well, and it may be supposed that he, too, experienced for himself the continuity of Buddhist art reaching from India to Japan. Yanagi likewise, in his essay “On the Sculpture of Sekibutsu-ji” (1919)—written when he visited Seokguram in Gyeongju in 1916—emphasized that Seokguram was a nodal point of a “golden age of the East” that originated in Indian Buddhist art and ran through Silla, Tang, and the Japan of the Asuka period. Here, too, Singh and Yanagi seem to have shared something of Okakura's vision—though refracted through the concrete experience of Seokguram itself, rather than as an abstract slogan.

In “His Journey to Korea,” Yanagi describes an Indian friend named “S” who went to see a white jar with a lotus motif and was photographed together with a Mr. “A.” The following is a passage that Yanagi, in “His Journey to Korea,” quoted as a letter from Singh:

Yesterday evening, on your [Yanagi's] advice, I went to see that astonishing Joseon-dynasty jar at Mr. A.'s. It is truly a representative masterpiece of the lonely, grand, beautiful art of Korea. We took a photograph of it. It is an utterly rare work. It set my heart trembling and led me to the very depths of Korean religion. My heart is so full of all manner of things that I can write nothing more than this (Yanagi Sōetsu zenshū, vol. 6, p. 73).

The photograph Singh took here is very likely to be the one Asakawa later gave him (Figure 3). Singh further said that he had “begun to feel love for everything,” including “the people of Korea,” so much so that when he died he “would wish to

be buried on a quiet hill, here among these people”; and he wrote that when he returned to Japan he wished to have “endless talks about Korea” with Yanagi.

Among the documentary materials donated to the Delhi Blue Pottery Trust there remains a photograph—probably in Asakawa Takumi’s own hand—inscribed in Japanese, “Presented to elder brother Singh. 31 August 1920. Takumi” (Figure 3). It was taken at the Iwata Photographic Studio in the “Keijō” (Seoul) of the time, and, given the dating, Singh probably left the Korean Peninsula around this period and received it from Asakawa as a parting gift.

Among the photographs formerly owned by Singh is one taken in Kaesong, which conveys not only the beauty of the scenery but probably also the sorrow of parting from the Korean friends with whom he had travelled the peninsula. According to Singh’s letter, he had met “Mr. Asagawa [sic]” and, loving Korea “next to his motherland,” wished to extend his stay. Yanagi, too, in his above-quoted letter to Leach, reported on his friendship with Singh, who had a good journey in Korea this summer. According to Yanagi, Singh “loved Korea & was loved by the Koreans very deeply,” and “saw most of the Koreans whom I saw in this Spring, so we have had much talk about them & also of ‘the Korean Questions’.”

“Coreans resemble so much Indians in dress, custom and art,” Singh wrote to Leach. The expression is restrained—doubtless out of regard for the censorship—but it is not hard to imagine the sympathy of one who came from a colony himself. There, despite the difference between British and Japanese dominions, there must have been a point of communion between them as fellow members of peoples whose countries had been taken from them and whose independence movements were on the verge of being crushed.

What the phrase “the Korean question” points to is surely the independence movement on the Korean Peninsula that began on 1 March 1919. In Korea, Japan’s suppression of this movement carried a similar weight to the Amritsar massacre in India, in that both have come to be seen as turning points in anti-colonial mobilization as independence movements intensified under the post-Versailles principle of national self-determination. Yanagi was, needless to say, critical of its being treated as a “so-called disturbance” to be suppressed. This is clear from “Thinking of the Koreans,” which he wrote “on seeing that there was no one to defend the unfortunate Korean people in public.” There Yanagi cites the question of “a certain Korean”—“Does Japan give us education for our sake, or does it educate us for Japan’s sake? Which is it?”—and asks whether there is any Japanese who can assert that it is the former.

Concerning this “Korean question,” Yanagi recorded the following dialogue with “a certain Indian” in “On Education in Korea” (1923) (Yanagi Sōetsu zenshū, vol. 6, p. 233). According to that Indian, the British government had established excellent universities in India but, by withholding opportunities for ordinary education, allowed only a small wealthy minority to receive higher education. To this Yanagi replied that, just the opposite of India, on the Korean Peninsula ordinary education was pursued zealously but higher schools were not permitted. Whereupon the Indian, indignant, replied: “In either case the conqueror does as he pleases.

Somewhere or other they want to keep the conquered foolish.” There is, of course, no proof that this Indian was Singh; but although it is not explicitly stated, since Singh returned to India in the spring of 1922, it is highly likely, from both the timing and the content, that the two exchanged such an argument.

Meanwhile, Asakawa Takumi and his elder brother Asakawa Noritaka played important roles in the re-evaluation of Korean art. During their residence in Korea from 1914 onward, the Asakawa brothers were deeply moved by Korean art, and were especially captivated by the white porcelain that had been forgotten and neglected even among Koreans themselves, in the history of traditional ceramics. Thanks to donations from readers and supporters, their efforts in this direction bore fruit in the Korean Folk Art Museum, which opened in 1924. In issue no. 3 of *Shirakaba* (1921), where most of the donation figures are in single digits, one finds the name “Singh (India),” who donated one hundred yen—virtually the highest amount for an individual. This may have been not only out of respect for Yanagi and for ceramics, but also out of Singh’s grief and indignation at a state of affairs in which they sought “to keep the conquered foolish.”

5. Theosophy, Kabir, and the Symbol of the Swan

Such a yearning for a humanity that transcends borders was by no means unrelated to the Versailles order that gave birth to the League of Nations. Europe, which had styled itself the representative of civilization and of humankind, greatly lost its prestige by bringing about the mass slaughter and destruction of the First World War. For this reason—or rather, all the more so, even while withholding self-government from the colonies—the need and the momentum to think about the fraternity of humankind and the harmony of Eastern and Western civilizations rose ever higher. One of the bodies of thought that laid the groundwork for this was precisely the Theosophical Society, of which Singh too was a member.

The Theosophical Society was born in 1875, centred on Madame Blavatsky. The esoteric teachings she claimed to have studied in Tibet, and their accompanying writings, were criticized as forgeries from the time of their announcement; yet the movement to build a fraternal community on the basis that the religions and mystical philosophies of East and West coincide at their root exerted a great influence. Because it especially valued Buddhism and had its headquarters in India, it came to have close connections with the anti-British and self-government movements there. Even Gandhi records in his *Autobiography* (1929) that, when he went to study in London at the end of the nineteenth century, his participation in its meetings opened his eyes to an Indian culture he had hitherto ignored.

Theosophy took a keen interest in pan-Asian culture and art, and it was perhaps only natural that Singh—who was to become a bridge between India and East Asia—should be drawn to it. As noted above, Singh joined the Tokyo lodge of the Theosophical Society around 1920 through his acquaintance with Cousins, who—alongside his teaching post at Keiō—energetically devoted himself to propagating Theosophy. Partly because he was Irish, Cousins’s antipathy toward Britain was so strong that he even took up the post of editorial adviser to the *Asian Review*, the English-language magazine published by the Kokuryūkai. D. T. Suzuki and his wife

were members of the Tokyo branch of the Theosophical Society, to which Cousins devoted his efforts, and Singh too was one of its members. Since there were said to be members from the Korean Peninsula as well, it is conceivable, given the timing, that among the friends Singh photographed there were people connected with the society.

Cousins met Leach, on the introduction of the poet Speight, on 25 June 1919—just before Leach left Japan—at the venue of a solo exhibition at Ryūitsu-sō. Cousins was impressed, and made special note of, Leach's words that in making ceramics one returns to a child's heart, seeks simple things, and follows the tradition within one's own heart. Soon afterward Cousins contributed a poem, "Lines," to the *Japan Advertiser* of 6 July. The potter, he wrote, who unconsciously reiterates a kind of transmigration—God forming man from earth and returning him to earth in death—is sublime beyond measure. In interpreting the words "dust to dust," originally derived from Genesis, as a Buddhist transmigration by intimating that the earth is the soul, and in depicting the religions of East and West as though they coincided, his thoroughly Theosophical cast of thought is plainly evident.

In a letter to Leach dated 6 August 1919, Yanagi expresses his pleasure that Cousins was a friend not only of Leach but also of Speight, and states, "I like Mr. Cousins's 'Lines.'" Leach himself seems to have taken an interest in Theosophy from around the spring of 1919, and a letter survives in which his friend Reginald Turvey, doubtless at Leach's request, expounded on it. By 1926, when he became Turvey's neighbour, Leach had read a fair number of related books and wrote to Yanagi that, likening himself to the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures, he was at last beginning to grasp the tail of the ox, that is, of the self. After they left Japan, however, the exchange between Leach and Cousins seems to have lapsed, and there is no trace of Singh, Yanagi, or others discussing Theosophy.

Singh himself, according to the *Japan Advertiser* of 18 January 1921, lectured on the Indian mystic poet Kabir at a regular meeting in Tokyo. Kabir, a fifteenth-century Indian poet and saint, was highly valued in the Theosophical Society for having asserted that Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism were fundamentally identical. Since Singh was born into a Sikh family in the city of Gujranwala in present-day Pakistan, the conciliatory claims of Theosophy may have been urgently meaningful to him.

A symbol that bears a special significance in Kabir's poetry is the "swan." In Hindu and Vedic thought the swan (hamsa) is a word denoting the supreme soul, a sacred being; in Kabir's poetry it often appears as a symbol of the pure soul that, while dwelling in the mire of a defiled world, soars transcendent above it. The lotus, which blooms purely from the muddy slime without being stained by it, and the swan, which skims over the pond without being wetted by the water, form, in Kabir's poetry, an inseparable poetic image. Both indicate a mode of the soul that preserves truth and purity without being tainted by the grime of the secular world.

This symbol of the swan also resonates deeply with the history of partition. For Singh, of a Sikh family born in what is now Pakistani territory, the partition of India and Pakistan (1947) meant the loss of his homeland. The division of the Korean Peninsula into North and South occurred at almost the same time. The swan, as a

being capable of flying across the lands and peoples thus torn asunder, takes on a deeper connotation. The 2023 documentary film *The Lotus and the Swan* follows the ceramic careers of Gurcharan Singh and his son Mansimran, while seeking to capture, through these two symbols of the lotus and the swan, the trajectory of Singh's ever-border-crossing art and life. The "lotus and swan" of the title is no mere design, but a symbolic expression of the ethical practice of Singh, who lived through an age of colonialism and partition.

6. Participation in the Garakuta-shū and the Appropriation of the Lotus Motif (1920–1922)

It was in Japan that Singh took his first step as a ceramic artist. Although he had studied ceramics in India as well, this had been confined to practical fields such as tile-making. His coming to Japan in 1919, entering the Tokyo Higher Technical School, and graduating from its ceramics department had likewise been chiefly in order to learn techniques such as glazing and firing. As he records in his autobiographical work *Pottery in India* (1979), it was through meeting Leach and Yanagi—and, further, Tomimoto Kenkichi and Hamada Shōji, the latter a senior in the ceramics department—that he came to aspire to be a ceramic artist. The masters he privately revered were the sixth-generation Kenzan and Leach.

Moreover, at the end of 1920, Singh joined the Garakuta-shū as well. The Garakuta-shū was a peculiar group of collectors centred on Mita Heibonji. Members were given monastic-style sobriquets, and Singh's was "Jūryūji Shishi Bonsetsu Singh." Singh soon invited Raymond into the Garakuta-shū. A photograph dated 25 December 1920, in which Raymond, Heibonji, and the others are all costumed in turbans, was published in *Shumi to Heibon*, the group's newsletter, and the original photograph from which it derived also survives among Singh's effects. The combined issue nos. 14, 15, and 16 of *Shumi to Heibon* (1922) records how, on 10 March 1921, Singh took the lead in holding a costume party, serving Indian dishes such as shorba, keema, chutney, and papadum. The Garakuta-shū provided occasions for members to exhibit their collections, and according to issue no. 7 of *Shumi to Heibon* (1921), on 13 March, a few days after the costume party, Singh exhibited his own ceramics. Although it was an in-house affair and only a few pieces, this must have been the first time Singh's ceramics were displayed.

In January 1922 Singh held his first solo exhibition at Hoshi Pharmaceutical in Tokyo. According to Speight's exhibition review in the *Japan Advertiser* of 22 January 1922, Heibonji, and Raymond exerted themselves to bring the solo exhibition about. Raymond had been commissioned by Hoshi Hajime to design the Hoshi Pharmaceutical Commercial School (now Hoshi University), which opened in 1922, and this connection probably played a part. Speight, after noting that Singh's ceramics were an homage to the ceramics of the Korean Peninsula, praised the way that—despite having been produced in a mere two months—Indian decorative designs combine with an archaic charm. The short period was probably because Singh, unable to borrow a kiln in Tokyo, had to go to Seto to make his work. Although he had secured a promise to borrow a kiln from Naka Shōgo of Ryūitsu-sō in place of Leach, he was obstructed and could not use it. In the end, in

April 1921, Singh turned to Gokan Bunnosuke—his university alumnus, a teacher at the Seto Ceramics School and a geology specialist—and was at last able to make pottery at a Seto kiln. The friend “Gokan” to whom Singh refers in *The Lotus and the Swan* is probably this man.

Issue no. 381 of *Kokka* (“Flower of the Nation”), an influential Japanese art journal on East Asian art, published in February 1922, carries a short unsigned article, “Ceramics Made by Mr. Singh, an Indian.” Although it judges the ten-odd pieces to be “unable to escape the realm of unfinished work,” it appraises them as looking up to the ceramics of the Korean Peninsula in a Goryeo style or a brushed-slip Mishima style, while at times displaying individuality. It especially notes that Singh privately revered Kenzan, and says that from this it feels “a pleasure and a reassurance” that Indian pottery should be born. It is suggestive that the article begins from a survey of the Ajanta cave paintings. This is probably because, contrary to Okakura Kakuzō’s thesis that Indian murals flowed through the Chinese continent and the Korean Peninsula into Hōryū-ji on the Japanese archipelago, it seemed as though ceramics were now being transmitted from Japan to India.

This carries a special significance when viewed from the standpoint of the lotus motif. For the lotus motif—which offered him suggestions in the harmony of ceramic technique and beauty—was precisely what Singh chose as a symbol of Asian solidarity. To be sure, it was through his stay in Japan that Singh discovered the beauty possessed by the ceramics of the Korean Peninsula. Among them, the “white jar with lotus design in underglaze blue and copper-red” seems to have left a particularly strong impression, and among Singh’s representative works from his Japanese period there is one that clearly imitates this masterpiece (Figure 4). It is a work in which white glaze is applied to a maebyeong (plum-vase) form, but—unlike the lotus-design jar—the lotus flowers, in almost the same design, are not drawn with a brush but incised with a spatula-like tool. Singh went on to depict this same lotus-flower design repeatedly in his works thereafter.

The lotus, native to India, appears as a motif and ornament across nearly the whole of Asia, mediated by Buddhism. The most fundamental characteristic of the lotus is that it raises its stem from the mud and, repelling the muddy water entirely, blooms in purity. This flower has been widely shared throughout India, China, Korea, and Japan as a symbol of truth and transcendence—of preserving purity while existing within a defiled world. At both Ajanta and Hōryū-ji, the Buddha holds the lotus. Singh’s fondness for taking up the lotus was probably because it embodies the trans-Asian spread of ceramics and his own peregrination in tracing it. Singh wrote that the Korean Peninsula, which had produced the ceramics he idealized, resembled India; and his love of the lotus must surely have been one of those points of commonality. One can readily imagine that he used an arrangement of the lotus from the lotus-design jar precisely because he found in it such a connection with India.

However, the design of depicting five or so large lotus petals scattered separately, while often seen on Joseon-dynasty or Song-dynasty porcelain, was in fact an unusual expression in the India of the time. Partly because the lotus in the Ajanta cave paintings overlaps slender petals, the lotus was often depicted like a thistle or

an acanthus. This is related to Birdwood's doctrine. Birdwood maintained that, through the eastward migration of the Aryans, the palmette motif had been transmitted to Egypt and India and there rendered as the lotus—and this thesis wielded enormous power.

On the other hand, in *Pottery in India*, Singh quoted from Birdwood's book only a single passage praising the ancient Indian ceramics—to the effect that the European has far more to learn than to teach—thereby presenting Indian ceramics as though they had developed entirely apart from British influence. On reflection, Singh's whole career as a potter ran utterly counter to Birdwood's view of ceramic history, which held Indian ceramics to be the inheritors of the “tradition” of an Aryan civilization continuous with Greece. That Singh depicted the lotus with designs of the kind found in Song-dynasty and Joseon-dynasty ceramics meant nothing other than an attempt to grasp the lotus within the connections of Asia rather than of the Aryans. It is possible to read in this an echo of Okakura Kakuzō, who linked the Ajanta cave paintings to Hōryū-ji.

For Birdwood, the lotus of Ajanta was no more than a transformation of an Aryan palmette (of palm, Egyptian, and Greek origin). But Singh re-read that very lotus as a pan-Asian symbol that had spread from India across the whole of East Asia, and incised it with his own hand. This was a quiet rebuttal of Birdwood's colonial view of art history, conducted through the practice of ceramics.

Notwithstanding Cousins's appraisal, the two seem to have had no further contact thereafter, and no mention of Singh appears in Cousins's writings after *New Japan*. Singh, on the other hand, built intimate relations with the circle of Mingei and studio potters such as Yanagi, Leach, Hamada Shōji, and Tomimoto Kenkichi.

In a letter to Leach dated 8 November 1922, moreover, Singh wrote as follows:

I have heard from Yanagi that you held an exhibition in London which was quite a success and that you now intend sending your exhibits to Japan. I am extremely glad at it. Yanagi sent the beautiful handbook of Korean art a few days ago. I have seen its photographs over and over again at least hundred and fifty times. Ah, the Corean line, I see it in my vision running in the pictures drawn across my memory—

of a Corean walking

A Shiragi spoon

A Korai vase

The Diamond mountain

The folds of a Corean dress

And in fact everywhere where the delicacy of the line and its sharpness predominate in Eastern art.

Tomimoto had a successful exhibition in Osaka and is now preparing things for Tokyo.

Where is Hamada? Is he returning to his country? If he is still there? please ask him to pay me a visit in India while on his way to his country.

As this letter eloquently shows, even after his return home the beauty of the Korean “line” was deeply engraved in Singh's heart. The Silla spoon, the Goryeo vase, the Diamond Mountains, the folds of Korean dress—the delicate yet sharp line

that connected them was, for Singh, a symbol of a visual unity running through the whole of Eastern art.

7. Activities after His Return: The Revival of Delhi Blue (1922–)

After concluding his solo exhibition at Hoshi Pharmaceutical in 1922, Singh returned to India. According to *Pottery in India*, on the occasion of his return Singh and Tomimoto realized that each had presented the other with an item that he had known the other wanted but had until then never handed over. Yanagi, for his part, seems to have given Singh a photograph of himself; a photograph inscribed in Yanagi's hand "March 1922" remains among Singh's effects. And in a letter to Leach dated 21 July, Yanagi reported, "Singh has gone home. In Delhi, he has his own kiln." With this, Singh's figure disappears from Yanagi's writings. Although Singh continued to associate with Leach for a long time, the letters he sent to Yanagi reportedly went unanswered. It therefore seems likely that he never learned of the opening of the Korean Folk Art Museum or of Asakawa Takumi's death.

It was precisely the pride in his homeland and the attachment to craft that he had learned on the Korean Peninsula that enabled Singh, after his return, to revive "Delhi Blue" in his native India. Singh too was to pass a long period of hardship and patient obscurity in an India where ceramics were used chiefly as disposable tableware and seldom prized as ceramic art.

Just as Yanagi and Asakawa re-evaluated the white porcelain of the Korean Peninsula, so Singh sought to re-evaluate and "revive" India's ancient, so to speak, "celadon." In 1952 Singh established Delhi Blue Pottery. Indeed, the lotus motif that Singh had reproduced on white jars during his time in Japan he now brought back—this time not in white, but in works of Delhi Blue. The works included in *Sekai tōji zenshū* (Catalogue of World Ceramics), vol. 16, Contemporary volume (1958), show one part of these results. In that volume Mikami Tsugio reproduced two plates and wrote that Gurcharan Singh, who had studied in Japan, "built a kiln on the outskirts of Delhi and, skillfully using iron-oxide and copper-red, painted neat plants and flowers in a Mingei style, as well as firing wares that add new elements to traditional Indian pottery," a description that reflects Mikami's role as a leading specialist on East–West ceramic exchanges and suggests he probably met Singh during his research trip to India. To the best of my knowledge, there is no trace of Singh being properly taken up in Japan thereafter.

Singh's activity might be regarded as an appropriation of the Arts and Crafts movement, or a ceramic version of the Swadeshi ("use domestic products") or "Buy Indian" movement; but the fact that he discovered the value of craftsmanship through a movement, in Japan and Korea, in which Europe and Asia were fused must not be overlooked. Apart from Bernard Leach, he had no further contact with the circles of Japan or Korea, yet he developed and refined the lotus-motif design he had seen in Korea and left it in his later works, such as the Delhi Blue jars and plates of the 1970s.

His thought came to fruition in his representative work of the 1970s, the "Three-Symbol Jar" (Figure 5). The jar, with its three faces inscribed respectively with sacred verses of Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism, may be regarded, in an age of

religious and political division, as a symbol of a trinity-like reconciliation. It was a work in which the idea of the “fundamental unity of all religions” preached by Kabir was literally inscribed upon the vessel. In this sense, Singh’s practice also invites a quiet recollection of another image from Okakura Kakuzō’s *The Book of Tea* (1906), whose opening chapter, “The Cup of Humanity,” presents the vessel—not tea alone—as the site where an everyday cup becomes a locus of aesthetic and ethical harmony among those who share it. Singh’s “Three-Symbol Jar,” with its triadic iconography, may even be read as a distant echo of the East Asian motif of the Three Vinegar Tasters—Sakyamuni, Confucius, and Lao Tzu gathered around a single vat—which Okakura himself invokes (pp. 58-59) as a parable not only of doctrinal difference but of the underlying unity and harmonious coexistence beneath that difference, transforming doctrinal difference into a shared act of tasting.

To be sure, Singh’s involvement with Japan was brief. According to his family, he harbored complicated feelings toward a Japan that had fallen into a state of war with the Korean Peninsula and the Chinese continent. Yet the beauty of the ceramics of the Korean Peninsula—above all the lotus-design jar to which Yanagi and Asakawa had opened his eyes—and the importance of reviving and producing them seem to have remained long in Singh’s heart thereafter.

Furthermore, exactly like his beloved lotus design, Singh kept his distance from the opacity of politics, while embracing the muddy clay itself—kneading it with his own hands and turning the wheel to shape beautiful vessels amid the upheavals of colonial rule and partition.

8. Conclusion: The Border-Crossing Vessel—As a Critique of Nationalism

What the life and works of Gurcharan Singh demonstrate is the fact that ceramics are a multinational, powerful cultural medium capable of binding people together across borders and religions. Morris preached the revival of handicraft against mechanized production; Birdwood interpreted Indian craft within the framework of an Aryan lineage; Okakura proclaimed that “Asia is one.” At the crossroads of these three lineages stood Singh the practitioner. Yet his work was neither a simple following of, nor a critical rejection of, any one of them. Singh was a potter who sought to surpass all three on a different plane.

Against Birdwood, he re-read the lotus not as a transformation of an Aryan palmette but as a pan-Asian symbol that had spread from India across the whole of East Asia. The lotus that blooms purely from the mud was inscribed upon the vessel not as a palmette derived from Greece and Egypt, but as a symbol of the very spirituality of Asia. Against Okakura, he converted the ideal of “Asia is one” from a political slogan into the concrete practice of carving by hand the lotus motif drawn on a Korean jar and firing clay that imitated Joseon-dynasty white porcelain. He sought to give substance, in the form of a vessel, to the continuity of art from Ajanta to Hōryū-ji. Against Morris, he did not subsume the revival of handicraft within the framework of nationalism. Singh’s ceramics, while running in common with the Swadeshi movement, embodied a border-crossing quality that deliberately could not be reduced to the “tradition” of any single nation, by freely combining Indian, Japanese, and Korean elements.

This border-crossing quality also corresponds to the essential character of ceramics as a material. The vessel includes. It receives liquids and food, and fuses the techniques and motifs of different civilizations into a single form. The vessel preserves integrity. However diverse the elements it incorporates, by being fired it becomes one unshakable form. Singh's wager on the lotus motif came, it seems, from just such an insight into the essential mode of being of ceramics—their "inclusion and integrity."

The partition of British India in 1947 and the entry of India and Pakistan into a relationship of tension overlap, in their timing, with the division of the Korean Peninsula. As religious and political antagonism intensified, the wish for reconciliation that Singh entrusted to the making of beautiful vessels may be said to have been an ethical practice surpassing a merely artistic endeavor. Just as the swan in Kabir's poetry skims undefiled over the muddy water, so Singh's lotus jars may be called the expression of a soul seeking to rise purely from the mud of political antagonism and division. The "Three-Symbol Jar," which inscribed the sacred verses of Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism upon a single vessel, is in this sense no mere work of art. It is a vessel that refuses division—an ethical object presented as a container that binds people together beyond religious and political antagonism. The 2023 documentary film *The Lotus and the Swan* captured the ceramic journey of Gurcharan Singh and Mansimran through the imagery of the "lotus and the swan." As noted above, both symbols share the same ethical core: the preservation of purity within a defiled world. Here, however, the swan takes on a deeper political connotation—as a being capable of flying across both a divided homeland (India and Pakistan) and a divided peninsula (North and South Korea). However politically opposed people may be, the very act of continuing to make vessels that accompany people's daily lives and bring them moisture and repose constitutes a powerful critique of division. The state that Singh attained in ceramics, by way of Japan and the Korean Peninsula, may be interpreted as a quiet but unshakable rebuttal of narrow nationalism. Birdwood read Indian craft as an extension of Aryan civilization, and Okakura read the art of Asia as the unity of an Asiatic civilization. But Singh, by kneading the clay with his own hands, turning the wheel, and carving the lotus, placed the vessel in a site beyond the magnetic field of civilizational discourse. It may be called a "border-crossing vessel" that contains every civilizational framework while fitting wholly within none.

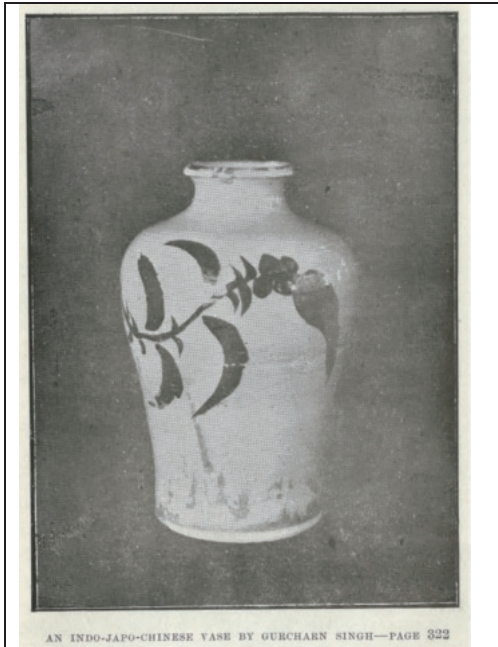


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

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