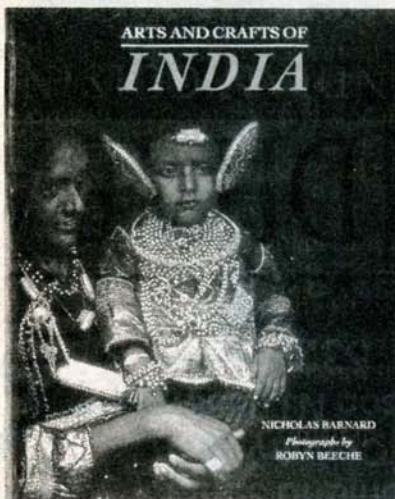


India — Real and Imagined



Arts and Crafts of India, by Nicholas Barnard, Photographs by Robyn Beeche (Conran Octopus, Distributed by Trafalgar Square Books), \$34.95.

This book is one of the best in what it tries to do, although the whole genre of 'coffee table books' should be seen with caution and critical eye.

This is a book that covers the arts and crafts of India as they are practiced today. The author and the photographer have traveled India in the hinterland and documented, mostly through photographs, some of the existing skills and craftsmanship in a great and diverse land. They take a regional approach to explaining and documenting the arts and then provide an exhaustive overview of wood and stone work, painting (walls, floors, textiles, wood, paper and glass), metalwork, jewelry and decorated metalwork, textiles, pottery and other crafts such as papier-mache, puppet-making and mask making.

The book is richly illustrated with color photographs, documenting for a novice as well as for an expert the boldness and richness of

primary colors. The introductions are meant to be cultural tours of the four geographical regions of India, touching upon the heritage of arts in temples, monuments and historic sculptures. For those who aren't informed about India, these four chapters provide excellent introduction.

The book will serve its intended purpose. It is a gift book, a showcase treasure.

Reading books like these requires a skill in itself. It needs an attitude that is unwilling to take things on face value, not because all acts of representing a culture are criminal, but because even best intentions are borne out of a way of seeing that could be damaging to the cause they are trying to serve.

The photography in this book shows a country that is clean, picturesque and textured exotically in feel and touch. It is the dominant

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aesthetic that laces the foreground in vibrant light and color, with shades of light accentuating only those objects that matter. The background or other elements in the picture are rendered worthless as props or as diffuse objects. This book, like so many others, shows an India which an Indian won't be able to recognize.

India is not a visual treat for photographers alone, but a veritable challenge to anyone who wants to engage all the senses in their critical combination. All of these crafts have a sense of belonging to them. They come from a sense of life, a set of values. How could anyone understand how and why silver is used by the North and the South Indians in so many different ways. In some weddings, silver seems to be present as much as food in the feast and in some gold shines up from corners you least expect. Pottery is also not a matter of arranging objects for the caressing shades of sunlight. It is part of living. It is impossible to see some pots in this book without any buttermilk in them.

Books like these are devoid of the life-like dimensions of arts and crafts of India. They try to do too much and end up doing nothing. Perhaps the clue is in the attitude the author has to the subject matter. He saw the activities of the artists and craftsmen as attempts to satisfy the demands of the rich and the poor alike. In the process of seeing this as activity which satisfies the buyer, the author and the photographer missed an opportunity to see the real life of its users. Richness of India is not in what it offers to the buyers, but in the community of its users.

— Shekhar Deshpande