International Journal of Leading Research Publication (IJLRP)

E-ISSN: 2582-8010 ● Website: www.ijlrp.com ● Email: editor@ijlrp.com

The Picturesque and the Imperial Gaze: William Hodges and British Travel Art in Eighteenth Century India.

Vaibhav Meena[1], Dr. Aditi Kalra[2]

[1]PhD (Pursuing), Department of English, University of Rajasthan.
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Rajasthan.

Abstract

This paper examines the role of the picturesque in shaping the imperial gaze in the travel-inspired art of William Hodges during the late eighteenth century. As one of the earliest British landscape painters to work extensively in India, Hodges played a pivotal role in visualizing the subcontinent for metropolitan audiences. Grounded on Orientalist theory, visual discourse analysis, and scholarship on colonial patronage, the study argues that Hodges' aesthetic strategies transformed Indian landscapes into politically legible spaces, simultaneously expressing artistic wonder and reinforcing imperial authority. Through an analysis of Hodges' paintings and his *Travels in India*, the paper demonstrates how the picturesque functioned not merely as an artistic style but as a visual technology of empire. By framing ruins, temples, riverbanks, and urban spaces within European landscape conventions, Hodges naturalized British presence while aestheticizing political domination. His art reveals an ambivalent colonial gaze oscillating between admiration and hierarchy thereby exposing the emotional and ideological foundations of early British imperial representation. The study situates Hodges within broader traditions of British travel art, arguing that the picturesque became a crucial mechanism in constructing India as both spectacle and possession.

Keywords: Romanticism, Architecture, Travel Art, Colonialism, Aesthetics, Empire.

1. INTRODUCTION

Travel art in the eighteenth century functioned not merely as aesthetic expression but as a crucial medium in the production of colonial knowledge. As Britain expanded its imperial reach across Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, visual representations of distant territories played a significant role in shaping metropolitan understanding of newly encountered landscapes and cultures. Paintings, engravings, and illustrated travel accounts circulated widely, transforming geographically distant regions into visually accessible spaces. In this context, travel art became intertwined with the epistemological and political ambitions of the empire. Geoff Quilley argues that British travel imagery was central to constructing imperial space by mapping territory through aesthetic conventions that rendered foreign environments both legible and possessable (18). Visual representation thus operated as a subtle yet powerful instrument in the consolidation of colonial authority.

In British India, this relationship between art and empire emerged with particular clarity during the late eighteenth century. The East India Company's transformation from commercial enterprise to territorial power required not only military force but also cultural and symbolic legitimization. Natasha Eaton emphasizes that art in this period participated in the "trafficking of aesthetics," where visual culture mediated political power and economic ambition (24). Landscape painting, especially in the picturesque mode, offered an aesthetic vocabulary through which India could be framed as both wondrous and governable. The visual domestication of unfamiliar terrain worked alongside military and administrative structures to stabilize imperial presence.

The theoretical grounding of this study rests on two interconnected concepts: the picturesque and the imperial gaze. The picturesque, popularized in Britain through the writings of William Gilpin and later aesthetic theorists, privileged irregularity, textured ruin, dramatic light, and harmonious composition. Elizabeth Bohls notes that picturesque travel transformed landscape into a consumable spectacle, inviting viewers to experience distant places through aesthetic pleasure while masking the political conditions under which such viewing occurred (248). Nigel Leask further argues that the aesthetics of curiosity and wonder in travel culture were closely linked to imperial expansion, enabling British audiences to engage imaginatively with territories under increasing colonial influence (12). The picturesque was therefore not a neutral artistic category but a cultural mechanism that shaped imperial perception.

Closely aligned with the picturesque is the concept of the imperial gaze, which describes the asymmetrical visual relationship between observer and observed within colonial contexts. Drawing on Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism, the imperial gaze constructs the colonized world as spectacle, object of knowledge, and site of aesthetic fascination, while positioning the European observer as interpretive authority (40). Visual framing, compositional distance, and selective representation contribute to this hierarchy. Beth Fowkes Tobin demonstrates that eighteenth-century British painting frequently depicted colonial subjects within aesthetic structures that affirmed imperial superiority, even when the imagery appeared admiring (6). The imperial gaze thus operates not through overt domination alone but through subtle visual ordering.

Within this historical and theoretical framework, William Hodges (1744–1797) emerges as a foundational figure in the visual construction of colonial India. Trained under Richard Wilson and shaped by his participation in Captain Cook's second voyage, Hodges developed a global landscape sensibility that he later applied during his travels in India between 1780 and 1783. His Indian works depicting the ruins of Gaur, the ghats of Benares, and Mughal architectural sites were among the earliest systematic visual representations of the subcontinent produced by a British artist. Giles Tillotson identifies Hodges as instrumental in establishing the "Indian picturesque," a mode of representation that framed India as monumental, ancient, and visually sublime (380). Through both his paintings and his published *Travels in India*, Hodges shaped metropolitan perceptions of India at a formative moment in imperial expansion.

Hodges' work was also deeply embedded in colonial patronage networks. His association with Warren Hastings and the East India Company placed him within the institutional framework of imperial governance. Isabel Stuebe's study of Hodges and Hastings demonstrates how artistic production was intertwined with political ambition, suggesting that patronage shaped both subject matter and representational tone (659). Art, in this sense, functioned as a cultural extension of administrative authority.

This paper addresses three central research questions. First, how does Hodges deploy the picturesque in his representations of India? By analysing compositional techniques, treatment of ruins, and atmospheric effects, the study explores how aesthetic framing organizes Indian space according to European visual conventions. Second, how does such aesthetic framing reinforce imperial power? The paper argues that Hodges' landscapes transform politically contested territories into harmonious spectacles, thereby naturalizing British presence and authority. Third, where does ambivalence emerge within Hodges' visual discourse? While his paintings frequently affirm civilizational hierarchy, they also express admiration, curiosity, and dependence on local knowledge. Scholars such as Dipak Raj Joshi and Uttam Poudel have identified this tension as central to Hodges' representation of India, describing it as an ambivalent and paternalistic mode of colonial vision (66; 4).

By situating Hodges within broader debates on travel art, Orientalism, and imperial aesthetics, this study demonstrates that the picturesque operated as more than stylistic preference. It functioned as a visual technology of empire, mediating wonder and authority, admiration and hierarchy. In doing so, Hodges'

work contributed to the formation of an imperial imagination that would shape British visual culture throughout the nineteenth century.

2. THE PICTURESQUE: AESTHETIC THEORY AND IMPERIAL CONTEXT

The picturesque emerged in eighteenth-century Britain as a powerful aesthetic category that shaped how landscapes were seen, composed, and valued. Associated most prominently with William Gilpin's travel writings and landscape theory, the picturesque privileged irregularity, textured surfaces, dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, and the presence of ruins or rugged natural features. Gilpin encouraged travellers to view scenery "as a picture," selecting and framing elements according to painterly harmony rather than empirical accuracy. This mode of seeing disciplined perception itself, training viewers to organize space through aesthetic criteria that could be reproduced in painting and print. Elizabeth Bohls argues that picturesque travel writing and visual culture did not merely describe landscapes but actively constructed them as consumable spectacles, transforming geographic sites into aesthetic objects available for metropolitan enjoyment (248–50). The picturesque therefore functioned as a cultural technique of ordering space, privileging compositional beauty over political complexity.

Within the context of imperial expansion, the picturesque acquired additional significance. As Britain extended its commercial and territorial interests overseas, landscape aesthetics became intertwined with the representation of colonial territories. Nigel Leask notes that late eighteenth-century travel culture fused curiosity with imperial ambition, producing representations that invited admiration while reinforcing hierarchical distance (15). The picturesque offered a visual language capable of mediating unfamiliar environments, making distant lands appear both wondrous and accessible. Through selective framing, artists could emphasize antiquity, grandeur, or natural abundance, while minimizing signs of resistance, conflict, or instability. The aesthetic ordering of colonial space thus paralleled administrative and military efforts to render territory governable.

Romantic aesthetics further intensified this dynamic. The late eighteenth century witnessed growing fascination with the sublime, the exotic, and the emotionally charged encounter with nature. Hermione de Almeida and George Gilpin observe that British Romantic art frequently projected spiritual and historical depth onto non-European landscapes, investing them with symbolic resonance while situating the European observer as interpreter (21–23). In the case of India, this tendency encouraged representations that framed temples, ruins, and riverbanks as remnants of a glorious yet static civilization. Such imagery subtly reinforced a narrative of decline that implicitly justified British intervention as restorative or civilizing. Landscape, in this sense, became a moral and civilizational metaphor: grandeur suggested ancient achievement, while decay signalled stagnation requiring imperial stewardship.

The moral dimension of landscape representation is central to understanding its ideological force. Percy Adams emphasizes that eighteenth-century travellers rarely perceived foreign territories neutrally; perception was structured by prior expectations, aesthetic training, and cultural assumptions (142). When British artists approached colonial landscapes, they did so equipped with interpretive frameworks that translated difference into aesthetic category. The picturesque mediated this translation, enabling viewers to experience foreign environments without destabilizing their cultural authority. By situating India within familiar compositional conventions, artists could affirm both artistic mastery and civilizational superiority.

Travel art also depended upon metropolitan spectatorship. Images produced in colonial settings were often intended for exhibition and publication in Britain, where they shaped public understanding of imperial expansion. Bohls underscores that picturesque representation was oriented toward an audience that consumed landscapes visually and imaginatively, transforming distant spaces into objects of cultural possession (252). The circulation of engravings and illustrated travel volumes extended this visual consumption, embedding colonial imagery within domestic interiors and print culture. In this process, landscape became not merely scenery but a symbol of imperial reach.

Leask further argues that the aesthetics of curiosity fostered a sense of exploratory wonder that masked political domination (19). By inviting admiration rather than scrutiny, picturesque travel art encouraged viewers to engage emotionally with colonial territories while overlooking the violence and economic extraction underpinning imperial control. The aesthetic pleasure derived from irregular ruins or dramatic river vistas could coexist with, and even legitimize, expanding British authority.

In sum, the picturesque must be understood not only as an artistic preference but as an aesthetic framework deeply entangled with imperial context. Originating in British landscape theory and refined through Romantic sensibilities, it provided a visual grammar for representing colonial territories. By framing landscape as morally resonant, historically monumental, and aesthetically harmonious, the picturesque transformed political space into visual spectacle. This transformation laid the groundwork for artists such as William Hodges, whose Indian works deployed these conventions to shape the early visual imagination of the empire.

3. WILLIAM HODGES: ARTIST OF EXPLORATION AND EMPIRE

William Hodges (1744–1797) occupies a pivotal position in the history of British travel art, not merely as a landscape painter but as an artist whose career unfolded alongside the expansion of British imperial power. His artistic formation, global voyages, and patronage networks positioned him at the intersection of exploration and empire. Through these institutional and aesthetic affiliations, Hodges developed a visual language that would shape early British representations of India. Understanding his artistic training and imperial associations is essential to situating his work within the broader context of colonial knowledge production.

Training under Richard Wilson

Hodges' early training under the Welsh landscape painter Richard Wilson was foundational to his artistic development. Wilson was instrumental in introducing the classical landscape tradition into British art, drawing inspiration from Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin. Under Wilson's influence, Hodges absorbed principles of balanced composition, atmospheric perspective, and the idealized arrangement of natural scenery. These conventions emphasized harmony, light, and the integration of architecture within landscape settings. As Giles Tillotson notes, Hodges' later Indian works retained clear traces of Wilson's compositional strategies, particularly in the structuring of space and the controlled deployment of light (379).

This academic grounding equipped Hodges with a disciplined aesthetic framework that he would later apply to unfamiliar territories. The classical landscape tradition predisposed him to interpret foreign environments through established European visual categories. Such training reinforced what Geoff Quilley describes as the portability of British landscape aesthetics, enabling artists to transpose metropolitan conventions onto colonial spaces (22). Hodges' technical formation thus prepared him to frame India not as an unknown terrain but as a scene capable of aesthetic assimilation.

Experience in Cook's Voyage

Hodges' participation as official artist on Captain James Cook's second Pacific voyage (1772–1775) marked a decisive turning point in his career. This expedition exposed him to global landscapes beyond Europe and initiated him into the visual culture of imperial exploration. During the voyage, Hodges produced numerous sketches and paintings of Tahiti, New Zealand, and Antarctic regions, developing a capacity to represent unfamiliar geographies within painterly conventions. David Attenborough observes that Hodges' work during this period demonstrated a sensitivity to atmospheric effects and scale, qualities that later informed his Indian landscapes (34).

The Pacific voyage also embedded Hodges within the structures of imperial documentation. Exploration required visual records that could convey geographic discovery and cultural encounter to

audiences at home. As Quilley argues, artists attached to voyages functioned as mediators between exploration and metropolitan spectatorship, translating distant landscapes into authoritative visual narratives (3). Hodges' role in Cook's expedition established him as an artist of empire, accustomed to representing territories in ways that balanced scientific observation with aesthetic appeal.

This global exposure shaped his perception of India when he arrived there in 1780. Having already participated in the visual articulation of imperial exploration, Hodges approached India with an established repertoire for depicting exotic environments. The continuity between his Pacific and Indian works underscores the interconnection between artistic practice and imperial expansion.

Patronage of Warren Hastings

Hodges' Indian career was profoundly influenced by his association with Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of Bengal. Hastings' patronage provided financial support and institutional legitimacy, enabling Hodges to travel extensively and produce a substantial body of work. Isabel Stuebe's study of Hodges and Hastings demonstrates how this patronage relationship reflected broader political ambitions; Hastings sought to cultivate an image of enlightened governance, and artistic representation played a role in this cultural strategy (660).

Through Hastings' support, Hodges gained access to sites of political and historical significance, including Mughal monuments and major urban centers. His paintings of Benares, Gaur, and other locations aligned with Hastings' vision of presenting India as a land of ancient grandeur under British stewardship. Stuebe argues that this patronage shaped the thematic focus of Hodges' work, encouraging emphasis on monumental architecture and civilizational antiquity (662). Artistic production, therefore, was not autonomous but intertwined with colonial statecraft.

The patronage network also situated Hodges within elite colonial circles, reinforcing the ideological orientation of his art. By depicting India through picturesque harmony rather than political conflict, Hodges' paintings complemented the administrative narrative of stability and order promoted by Hastings. The relationship between artist and governor illustrates how aesthetic representation could function as cultural diplomacy within the colonial project.

The East India Company as Artistic Sponsor

Beyond individual patronage, Hodges' work was embedded within the broader institutional framework of the East India Company. The Company's transformation into a territorial power created demand for visual representations that could document, celebrate, and legitimize its expanding authority. Simon Howes emphasizes that the Company acted as both patron and collector, shaping artistic production through commissions and acquisitions (78). Hodges' Indian paintings circulated within this corporate milieu, contributing to a growing archive of imperial imagery.

Geoff Quilley further argues that Company-sponsored art operated as a form of symbolic mapping, transforming geographic possession into visual possession (27). Hodges' landscapes, exhibited and engraved in Britain, enabled metropolitan audiences to imagine India within aesthetic frameworks that emphasized order and sublimity. Through these images, territorial control was subtly reinforced as a natural extension of aesthetic appreciation.

Tillotson identifies Hodges as a precursor to the later Daniell tradition, establishing visual tropes that would dominate British representations of India for decades (381). The Company's institutional support ensured that his work reached influential audiences, embedding his aesthetic vision within the broader imperial imagination.

In sum, William Hodges' artistic trajectory from his training under Richard Wilson to his global exploration with Cook, and finally his patronage under Warren Hastings and the East India Company

positioned him as a central figure in the visual articulation of empire. His formation within European landscape traditions, combined with his immersion in imperial exploration, equipped him to deploy the picturesque in ways that aligned aesthetic pleasure with colonial authority. Through institutional sponsorship and metropolitan circulation, his art contributed significantly to shaping Britain's early visual understanding of India, reinforcing the interdependence of artistic production and imperial power.

4. FRAMING INDIA: THE PICTURESQUE AS COLONIAL VISION

William Hodges' Indian landscapes represent one of the earliest sustained attempts to frame the subcontinent within the aesthetic logic of the picturesque. His paintings do not merely depict sites; they reorganize space through light, scale, and compositional balance in ways that render India visually harmonious and historically monumental. Through this framing, Hodges contributes to what Natasha Eaton describes as the aesthetic mediation of empire, where art transforms politically complex spaces into consumable visual narratives (41). The picturesque becomes a colonial vision, an interpretive structure that naturalizes imperial presence while staging India as spectacle.

Ruins of Gaur: Antiquity and Romantic Decay

Hodges' depictions of the Ruins of Gaur exemplify his use of decay and architectural remnants to evoke historical grandeur. The crumbling arches and overgrown masonry are framed within balanced compositions that highlight texture, irregularity, and atmospheric depth. Giles Tillotson notes that Hodges' representation of Gaur emphasizes antiquity and desolation, aligning the site with European picturesque conventions that valorised ruin as a marker of sublime history (383). By selecting and composing these ruins within harmonious visual fields, Hodges transforms political decline into aesthetic beauty.

This transformation carries ideological implications. The picturesque ruin suggests a civilization whose glory belongs to the past, inviting contemplation rather than engagement. Eaton argues that such imagery subtly positions Britain as inheritor and steward of a fading grandeur, legitimizing imperial authority through aesthetic reverence (53). The ruins appear timeless, detached from contemporary socio-political realities. Their decay becomes romantic rather than symptomatic of colonial disruption. Through selective framing, Hodges removes signs of instability and foregrounds monumentality, producing what Harriet Guest terms a "distanced exoticism," where admiration coexists with hierarchical detachment (302).

Views of Benares: Sacred Landscape and Spectacle

Hodges' views of Benares (Varanasi) further illustrate the interplay between picturesque composition and imperial gaze. The riverbank, temples, and ghats are arranged within expansive spatial vistas, often illuminated by dramatic light that emphasizes architectural silhouette against sky and water. The composition situates the viewer at a slight remove, creating a vantage point that commands the scene. Tillotson observes that Hodges' Benares images contributed to establishing the city as a central emblem of the Indian picturesque, merging sacred architecture with scenic harmony (385).

The manipulation of light and scale is central to this effect. Figures, when present, appear small against monumental structures and broad landscapes. This proportional imbalance reinforces the sublimity of architecture while minimizing individual agency. Beth Fowkes Tobin argues that eighteenth-century British painting frequently subordinated colonial subjects within grand compositional schemes, thereby reinforcing imperial hierarchy even in seemingly neutral landscapes (9). In Hodges' Benares scenes, Indian inhabitants become ornamental presences rather than historical actors.

Luciana Martins highlights that tropical travel art often framed non-European landscapes as spectacles of abundance and antiquity, inviting emotional engagement while sustaining cultural distance (66). Hodges' Benares compositions reflect this dynamic. The viewer experiences awe and wonder, yet remains positioned outside the lived realities of the site. Sacred space becomes aesthetic object,

reinforcing what Eaton identifies as the conversion of colonial territory into visual capital (59).

Mughal Architecture: Monumentality and Civilizational Narrative

Hodges' renderings of Mughal monuments forts, tombs, and palaces extend this logic of monumental framing. Mughal architecture appears bathed in warm, atmospheric light, often set against expansive skies that enhance vertical scale. The compositional emphasis on symmetry and elevation underscores grandeur, yet the surrounding environment frequently suggests isolation or quietude. Tillotson notes that such imagery contributed to constructing India as a land of architectural marvels detached from contemporary vitality (387).

This emphasis on monumentality supports a civilizational narrative in which India is admired for its past but implicitly portrayed as stagnant. Guest observes that Hodges' aesthetic admiration often coexists with subtle positioning of the viewer as culturally superior, able to interpret and preserve what is represented (310). The distance between viewer and monument reinforces a hierarchy of interpretation: Britain sees, categorizes, and aestheticizes.

Tobin's analysis of imperial portraiture and landscape suggests that the placement of colonial architecture within picturesque frames performs a symbolic act of possession (14). By incorporating Mughal monuments into European compositional conventions, Hodges integrates them into British aesthetic systems. The monument becomes part of an imperial visual archive, its cultural specificity subsumed under painterly harmony.

Light, Scale, and Composition as Instruments of Vision

Across these works, Hodges' use of light, scale, and composition functions as more than artistic technique; it constitutes a visual grammar of control. Dramatic lighting isolates architectural forms, guiding the viewer's eye toward monumental features. Foreground elements frame distant vistas, reinforcing depth and spatial mastery. Figures are scaled to emphasize environment over individual presence, producing what Martins identifies as the sublime effect of environmental dominance (72).

Such compositional strategies generate what can be described as "sublime distance." The viewer is invited to contemplate India from a secure vantage point, emotionally engaged yet physically detached. Eaton argues that this distance is central to the imperial aesthetic, enabling admiration without destabilizing authority (61). The sublime thus operates as an affective extension of imperial hierarchy.

India as Timeless and Monumental

Through these aesthetic choices, Hodges consistently frames India as timeless and monumental. Ruins suggest ancient glory; sacred cities appear suspended in contemplative stillness; monumental architecture dominates the horizon. Historical continuity is implied, yet contemporary political realities remain largely absent. Tillotson remarks that Hodges' work contributed to establishing enduring tropes of Indian representation that emphasized antiquity and grandeur over change (390).

This timelessness reinforces civilizational hierarchy. By portraying India as historically rich but temporally static, Hodges' imagery aligns with narratives that justified British governance as progressive intervention. The picturesque aesthetic thus intersects with colonial ideology. As Tobin contends, visual representation in the eighteenth century often encoded political relations within aesthetic form (18).

In sum, Hodges' paintings of Gaur, Benares, and Mughal monuments demonstrate how the picturesque operated as a colonial vision. Through controlled light, monumental scale, and harmonious composition, India is rendered aesthetically coherent and historically distant. The resulting images produce wonder and admiration while sustaining civilizational hierarchy. The picturesque, far from

neutral, becomes a visual technology that transforms imperial space into spectacle and subtly reinforces the authority of the imperial gaze.

5. THE IMPERIAL GAZE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE "OTHER"

If landscape in Hodges' work frames territory as picturesque and monumental, the representation of Indian figures within these landscapes reveals how the imperial gaze operates at the level of the human subject. Hodges' paintings and his *Travels in India* position Indian bodies within carefully structured visual and textual hierarchies. Through selective visibility, exotic detail, and compositional subordination, Indian figures are incorporated into the scene as elements of spectacle rather than as agents of history. This section examines how Hodges' work participates in the construction of the colonial "Other" through Orientalist framing and aesthetic mediation.

Representation of Indian Figures

In Hodges' landscapes, Indian figures are frequently present yet visually diminished. They appear along riverbanks, near ruins, or at the margins of architectural grandeur. Their scale is often reduced relative to monumental surroundings, reinforcing spatial and symbolic hierarchy. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism provides a framework for understanding this positioning. Said argues that the Orient is produced as an object of knowledge and aesthetic contemplation, structured by a Western gaze that assumes interpretive authority (40–42). In Hodges' compositions, Indian figures are visible but rarely individualized; they function as compositional accents rather than narrative centres.

Dipak Raj Joshi observes that Hodges' visual and textual representations often oscillate between admiration and detachment, portraying Indian society as culturally rich yet politically static (66). This ambivalence becomes evident in the depiction of labourers, ascetics, and local inhabitants. Their presence lends authenticity to the scene, yet they are seldom foregrounded as agents shaping their environment. The viewer's attention is directed toward architecture and landscape rather than lived experience.

Exoticization and Selective Visibility

The imperial gaze operates not only through what is shown but also through what is omitted. Hodges' works emphasize architectural splendour and scenic harmony while minimizing signs of economic hardship, political tension, or resistance. Uttam Poudel characterizes Hodges' approach as paternalistic, suggesting that admiration for India's antiquity coexists with a subtle framing of its people as in need of guidance or reform (4–5). Such framing reflects selective visibility: Indian culture is rendered picturesque, but its complexity is simplified.

Md Monirul Islam argues that in *Travels in India*, Hodges' descriptive prose similarly privileges aesthetic and moral commentary over political engagement, reinforcing a narrative of civilizational hierarchy (12). Visual and textual strategies converge to produce India as an object of fascination rather than as a contested political space. The exotic becomes an aesthetic category, highlighting costume, ritual, and architectural ornament while detaching these elements from their social context.

Selective visibility also extends to gender representation. Female figures, when present, are often incorporated into scenes as markers of cultural difference rather than as subjects with agency. Their portrayal contributes to what Said identifies as the feminization of the Orient rendered passive, contemplative, and visually accessible (188). Even when not overtly sexualized, the visual ordering of figures reinforces asymmetrical power relations.

Spectacle versus Agency

A central tension in Hodges' work lies between spectacle and agency. Spectacle invites contemplation from a distance; agency implies participation and self-determination. Hodges' compositions privilege the former. Indian figures are frequently depicted as part of a larger scenic whole, contributing to atmosphere

rather than directing narrative. The viewer, positioned outside the scene, assumes a vantage point of control.

Suvir Kaul notes that eighteenth-century British cultural production often represented India as an aestheticized territory awaiting interpretation, thereby erasing indigenous political agency (39). In Hodges' paintings, monumental architecture and expansive landscape dominate, while human activity appears subdued. The reduction of figures to scenic detail reinforces what Joshi identifies as ambivalent representation admiring yet subordinating (69).

Islam further argues that Hodges' narrative voice in *Travels in India* occasionally acknowledges complexity, yet ultimately returns to moralizing commentary that reaffirms British interpretive authority (18). The aesthetic frame thus becomes a mechanism through which spectacle supersedes agency. Viewers are invited to marvel at temples, ghats, and palaces without confronting the political realities underlying colonial expansion.

Orientalist Framing

Orientalist framing in Hodges' work operates through compositional distance, thematic selection, and descriptive emphasis. Said contends that Orientalism functions by establishing a binary between a rational, progressive West and a static, exotic East (43). Hodges' art aligns with this framework by presenting India as ancient and monumental yet detached from modernity. Architectural ruins suggest historical grandeur; serene river scenes imply timeless continuity. Contemporary transformation, resistance, or adaptation remain largely invisible.

Poudel argues that Hodges' paternalistic tone reinforces this binary, portraying British governance as potentially beneficial to a civilization depicted as morally and administratively deficient (7). Even when expressing admiration for Indian art and architecture, Hodges' framing situates the European observer as the ultimate interpreter of value. Joshi emphasizes that this ambivalence, simultaneous appreciation and hierarchy is central to Hodges' representation of India (72).

Through Orientalist framing, the picturesque aesthetic becomes intertwined with imperial ideology. The Indian "Other" is constructed as visually rich yet politically subdued, culturally ancient yet temporally distant. Spectacle replaces complexity; admiration coexists with asymmetry. The imperial gaze, therefore, does not rely solely on overt denigration but on subtle compositional strategies that structure perception itself.

In sum, Hodges' representation of Indian figures reveals how the imperial gaze constructs the "Other" through selective visibility, exoticization, and aesthetic subordination. Indian subjects are integrated into picturesque compositions as elements of scenic authenticity rather than as historical agents. Drawing on Said's Orientalism and recent scholarship by Joshi, Poudel, Islam, and Kaul, this analysis demonstrates that Hodges' visual discourse participates in the broader colonial logic of representation. The picturesque frame sustains admiration while reinforcing hierarchy, ensuring that spectacle prevails over agency within the early visual imagination of empire.

6. AMBIVALENCE AND PATERNALISTIC COLONIALISM

While William Hodges' paintings and travel writings participate in the construction of an imperial gaze, they also reveal moments of tension and contradiction. His representations of India are not uniformly dismissive or triumphalist. Instead, they oscillate between admiration and hierarchy, curiosity and correction. This ambivalence is central to understanding the ideological complexity of early colonial aesthetics. Hodges' work demonstrates how wonder and appreciation could coexist with paternalistic assumptions about civilizational stagnation and the necessity of British stewardship.

Moments of Admiration

Hodges frequently expresses admiration for Indian architecture, landscape, and artistic achievement. His renderings of Mughal monuments and sacred sites are infused with atmospheric luminosity and compositional reverence. Natasha Eaton argues that Hodges' Indian works display a genuine aesthetic engagement with architectural grandeur, suggesting a respect for historical depth and craftsmanship (61). Such admiration distinguishes Hodges from later, more rigidly racialized forms of colonial representation.

Dipak Raj Joshi identifies this duality as ambivalent representation: Hodges acknowledges India's cultural richness while simultaneously framing it within narratives of decline (66–67). The grandeur of temples and forts is emphasized, yet they are often depicted in states of partial decay or isolation. Admiration thus becomes inseparable from the picturesque fascination with ruins, where beauty emerges from perceived decline. The viewer is invited to marvel at antiquity, but that antiquity is implicitly severed from contemporary vitality.

Uttam Poudel further observes that Hodges' textual commentary in *Travels in India* often conveys appreciation for Indian customs and aesthetics, yet this appreciation is mediated by evaluative comparison to European standards (4). Admiration remains conditional, filtered through the authority of the European observer.

Moral Justification and Paternal Tone

The ambivalence in Hodges' work extends into a paternalistic register. While India is celebrated for its ancient achievements, it is frequently portrayed as lacking modern progress or administrative efficiency. This framing aligns with a broader colonial narrative in which British intervention is implicitly justified as restorative or corrective. Eaton argues that imperial aesthetics often functioned to legitimize governance by presenting colonial authority as harmonizing or preserving endangered cultures (65).

Poudel characterizes Hodges' stance as paternalistic colonialism, where admiration coexists with an assumption that British oversight could improve or stabilize Indian society (7). The tone of moral evaluation in Hodges' travel writing suggests that the observer not only appreciates but also judges. Cultural practices are described with curiosity yet framed within implicit hierarchies of civility and progress.

Joshi reinforces this interpretation, noting that Hodges' narrative voice frequently positions Britain as a potential agent of renewal within a civilization portrayed as historically grand but presently weakened (71). The paternal tone is subtle rather than overtly authoritarian, yet it reinforces asymmetrical power relations.

India as Ancient Yet Stagnant

A recurring theme in Hodges' visual and textual representations is the emphasis on antiquity. India appears as a land of monumental ruins, sacred cities, and timeless rituals. This emphasis contributes to what Janet Sorensen describes as the romanticization of tropical landscapes, where colonial territories are framed as sites of enduring natural and historical spectacle rather than dynamic social change (428).

The portrayal of India as ancient yet stagnant reinforces civilizational hierarchy. While the past is celebrated, the present is depicted as static or derivative. Eaton notes that such imagery contributed to a metropolitan perception of India as historically significant but politically inert, thereby strengthening narratives of British modernity (70). The picturesque fascination with ruins intensifies this effect: decay becomes aestheticized, suggesting decline without explicitly addressing colonial disruption.

Poudel emphasizes that this framing produces a subtle ideological move. By highlighting stagnation, Hodges' representations imply the necessity of guidance and reform (8). The image of India as timeless thus becomes politically charged, aligning aesthetic admiration with imperial justification.

Emotional Politics of Wonder

The emotional register of Hodges' work is shaped by wonder. His landscapes evoke awe through scale, luminosity, and atmospheric depth. Wonder, however, is not ideologically neutral. Sorensen argues that the romanticization of tropical environments encouraged emotional engagement that could coexist with imperial control (430). The viewer experiences fascination without confronting the structures of domination underlying representation.

Eaton further suggests that wonder operates as a form of aesthetic diplomacy, softening the perception of empire by foregrounding beauty rather than conflict (73). In Hodges' paintings, dramatic skies, expansive rivers, and monumental ruins generate emotional intensity that transcends political specificity. This emotional politics of wonder enables admiration while preserving distance.

Joshi identifies this emotional oscillation as central to Hodges' ambivalence: the artist is captivated by Indian landscapes yet frames them within a discourse that ultimately affirms British interpretive authority (72). The emotional appeal of wonder thus reinforces hierarchy rather than dissolving it.

In conclusion, Hodges' work embodies ambivalence and paternalistic colonialism through a complex interplay of admiration and hierarchy. Moments of genuine aesthetic respect coexist with moral evaluation and implicit justification of imperial oversight. India is presented as ancient and monumental yet subtly stagnant, a civilization worthy of admiration but positioned within narratives of decline. Through the emotional politics of wonder, Hodges' picturesque vision sustains fascination while reinforcing asymmetrical power relations. Ambivalence, therefore, does not undermine imperial ideology; it refines and stabilizes it within aesthetic form.

7. FROM WONDER TO POSSESSION: LANDSCAPE AS SOFT POWER

If wonder structures the emotional register of Hodges' Indian landscapes, possession underlies their political function. The picturesque does not merely invite admiration; it prepares the ground for territorial imagination. Through compositional framing, spatial ordering, and metropolitan circulation, Hodges' art participates in what may be described as imperial soft power, an aesthetic mode of control that operates through visual normalization rather than overt coercion. Landscape becomes a subtle instrument through which empire is imagined, internalized, and legitimated.

Visual Mapping and Territorial Imagination

Hodges' landscapes function as visual maps that translate complex territories into coherent, legible scenes. Rivers, forts, temples, and cities are arranged within balanced perspectives that suggest mastery over space. Geoff Quilley argues that British travel art in the late eighteenth century often operated as a form of symbolic cartography, rendering distant lands visually intelligible to metropolitan audiences (27). Unlike technical maps, however, Hodges' paintings achieve this legibility through aesthetic harmonization. The irregularities of terrain are composed into unity; architectural forms anchor the eye within structured vistas.

This visual mapping fosters territorial imagination. By framing India within recognizable compositional conventions, Hodges transforms foreign landscapes into spaces that can be imaginatively possessed. Quilley emphasizes that such imagery encouraged viewers to conceptualize colonial territories as extensions of British visual and cultural systems (5). The act of seeing becomes analogous to the act of claiming. Through picturesque arrangement, India is not only admired but also domesticated within European aesthetic logic.

Beth Fowkes Tobin further notes that eighteenth-century British painting frequently embedded imperial relations within landscape composition, positioning the viewer as an authoritative observer (14). In Hodges' work, elevated vantage points and expansive horizons reinforce this authority. The viewer

surveys the scene from a secure distance, mirroring the administrative perspective of colonial governance. Visual mastery anticipates territorial control.

Art as Imperial Soft Control

The power of Hodges' landscapes lies in their subtlety. Unlike military reports or administrative decrees, paintings do not declare authority explicitly. Instead, they cultivate acceptance through aesthetic pleasure. Tobin argues that imperial imagery often worked by naturalizing domination, presenting colonial presence as harmonious and inevitable (18). Hodges' compositions, with their serene atmospheres and balanced forms, exemplify this process.

Geoff Quilley highlights that art associated with the East India Company contributed to constructing a visual narrative of order and civility, counterbalancing anxieties about conquest and governance (31). By emphasizing beauty and antiquity rather than conflict, Hodges' paintings redirect attention from violence to vision. Landscape becomes a medium of reassurance, suggesting that British presence coexists peacefully with monumental antiquity.

Simon Macdonald's analysis of Hodges' later allegorical works underscores how visual imagery could articulate moral narratives aligned with political ambition (59). Although Macdonald focuses on Hodges' European works, the broader insight applies to his Indian landscapes: aesthetic representation shapes moral perception. The viewer is invited to interpret British engagement with India as enlightened and culturally appreciative rather than extractive.

Through such mechanisms, art functions as imperial soft control. It cultivates consent and admiration, embedding territorial expansion within aesthetic satisfaction. The picturesque does not compel; it persuades.

Circulation of Images in Britain

The effectiveness of Hodges' visual strategy depended upon metropolitan circulation. His paintings were exhibited in London and reproduced as engravings, reaching audiences far removed from Indian realities. Quilley argues that the circulation of travel imagery played a crucial role in shaping public understanding of the empire, embedding colonial landscapes within domestic visual culture (35). Through exhibition and print, India entered British homes as spectacle.

Tobin emphasizes that such circulation transformed colonial subjects into aesthetic commodities, reinforcing Britain's cultural centrality (21). The consumption of Hodges' landscapes enabled viewers to participate imaginatively in imperial expansion. The act of viewing became a symbolic extension of possession. Through repetition and reproduction, picturesque visions of India solidified into recognizable tropes ruins bathed in golden light, river vistas framed by monumental architecture.

Macdonald's study of Hodges' allegorical paintings suggests that viewers were encouraged to interpret images through moral frameworks aligned with national virtue (63). Similarly, Hodges' Indian landscapes could be read as affirmations of Britain's cultural mission. Circulation amplified their ideological reach, transforming individual artworks into components of a broader imperial narrative.

Institutional Consolidation of Visual Empire

The East India Company's role as patron and collector institutionalized this visual regime. Quilley underscores that Company-supported art formed part of a corporate strategy to legitimize expansion through cultural means (40). By acquiring, exhibiting, and promoting such works, the Company embedded aesthetic representation within its administrative structure.

Landscape painting thus became integrated into the consolidation of the visual empire. Images did not remain isolated artistic expressions; they entered institutional archives, collections, and print networks. Tobin argues that this institutionalization reinforced imperial ideology by stabilizing particular modes of representation (25). Hodges' picturesque vision contributed to an enduring visual vocabulary that would later be expanded by artists such as the Daniells.

Macdonald's broader argument about the moral dimension of visual culture suggests that art in this period functioned as a site where virtue, governance, and national identity intersected (Macdonald 66). Hodges' Indian landscapes participated in this intersection. Through aesthetic coherence and monumental framing, they presented the empire as culturally enriching and historically continuous.

Hodges' landscapes marked a transition from wonder to possession. The picturesque, initially experienced as aesthetic fascination, becomes a mechanism for territorial imagination and ideological consolidation. Through visual mapping, harmonious composition, and metropolitan circulation, Hodges' art operates as a form of imperial soft power. Landscape does not simply depict empire; it helps constitute it. By rendering India visually legible and aesthetically ordered, Hodges' paintings contribute to the institutional consolidation of a visual empire that complements military and administrative control.

8. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the picturesque in William Hodges' Indian works functioned not merely as an aesthetic preference but as an imperial technology. By organizing space through compositional harmony, atmospheric light, and monumental framing, Hodges transformed politically complex landscapes into visually coherent spectacles. The picturesque disciplined perception itself. It converted territory into scenery and history into contemplative ruin. In doing so, it aligned aesthetic pleasure with imperial legibility. As Geoff Quilley argues, British travel art participated in shaping imperial space by rendering distant regions culturally accessible and symbolically possessable (27). Hodges' landscapes exemplify this transformation of vision into subtle authority.

Through the deployment of picturesque conventions, India is framed as ancient, monumental, and aesthetically sublime. Ruins evoke grandeur and decline. Sacred cities appear timeless. Mughal monuments are bathed in light that enhances reverence while reinforcing distance. These visual strategies produce what Beth Fowkes Tobin describes as aestheticized imperial hierarchy, where compositional order encodes relations of power (18). The viewer occupies a position of detached mastery, surveying landscape and architecture without confronting the structures of colonial expansion that enable such viewing. The picturesque thus becomes a technology of normalization, making the empire appear harmonious rather than coercive.

Within this framework, William Hodges emerges as a pioneer of colonial visual discourse. His training under Richard Wilson, his experience with Cook's Pacific voyage, and his patronage under Warren Hastings placed him at the intersection of exploration and imperial consolidation. As Giles Tillotson notes, Hodges helped establish enduring tropes of Indian representation that would influence later British artists (381). His paintings shaped metropolitan perceptions at a formative moment in the expansion of British authority in India. Through exhibition and reproduction, his images circulated widely, embedding a particular vision of India within British cultural consciousness.

Travel art, as this paper has argued, functioned as the aesthetic arm of empire. Unlike military conquest or administrative decree, it operated through fascination and admiration. Natasha Eaton emphasizes that colonial art mediated political authority by translating it into cultural form (61). Hodges' landscapes exemplify this mediation. Wonder becomes persuasion. Sublime distance sustains hierarchy. Monumentality naturalizes possession. The aesthetic frame softens the appearance of domination while reinforcing its logic.

At the same time, Hodges' work reveals ambivalence. Admiration for India's architectural grandeur coexists with narratives of decline and stagnation. This ambivalence does not destabilize imperial ideology; it refines it. By presenting India as historically rich yet temporally static, Hodges' imagery supports a civilizational narrative in which British presence appears progressive and restorative. The emotional politics of wonder thus operate in tandem with moral justification.

The contribution of Hodges' travel art to the colonial imagination lies in its capacity to shape how India was seen before it was widely experienced. His picturesque vision provided a visual vocabulary through which India became legible to metropolitan audiences. Landscape was transformed into spectacle, spectacle into symbolic possession. Through light, scale, and compositional authority, Hodges helped inaugurate a visual regime that linked aesthetic appreciation with imperial expansion.

In tracing the intersection of the picturesque and the imperial gaze, this study underscores the importance of travel art in the broader history of colonial discourse. Hodges' work reveals how representation precedes and accompanies governance. The empire was not only conquered and administered; it was framed, painted, and circulated. The picturesque, far from neutral, became a mechanism through which colonial space was imagined, admired, and ultimately claimed within the cultural sphere of British power.

REFERENCES:

1. Adams, Percy. "Perception and the Eighteenth-Century Traveler." *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1985, pp. 139-57.
2. Bohls, Elizabeth A. "Picturesque Travel: The Aesthetics and Politics of Landscape." *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, edited by Alasdair Pettinger and Tim Youngs, Routledge, 2015, pp. 246-57.
3. De Almeida, Hermione, and George H. Gilpin. *Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India*. Ashgate Publishing, 2005.
4. Eaton, Natasha. "Nostalgia for the Exotic: Creating an Imperial Art in London, 1750-1793." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2006, pp. 227-50.
5. Eaton, Natasha Jane. *Imaging Empire: The Trafficking of Art and Aesthetics in British India c. 1772 to c. 1795*. 2000. University of Warwick, PhD dissertation.
6. Guest, Harriet. "The Great Distinction: Figures of the Exotic in the Work of William Hodges." *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, edited by Isobel Armstrong, Routledge, 2012, pp. 296-341.
7. Hodges, William, and David Attenborough. *William Hodges 1744-1797: The Art of Exploration*. Yale University Press, 2004.
8. Howes, Jennifer. *The Art of a Corporation: The East India Company as Patron and Collector, 1600-1860*. Routledge India, 2023.
9. Islam, Md Monirul. "Travel Writing and Empire: A Reading of William Hodges's *Travels in India*." 2017.
10. Joshi, Dipak Raj. "Ambivalent Representation of India and its Politics in Hodges's *Travels in India*." *Contemporary Research: An Interdisciplinary Academic Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2023, pp. 63-71.
11. Kaul, Suvir. *Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*. Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
12. Kitson, Peter J. Review of *British Art and the East India Company*, by Geoff Quilley. *International Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2023, pp. 263-66.
13. Leask, Nigel. *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel-Writing, 1770-1840: 'From an Antique Land'*. Oxford University Press, 2002.
14. Macdonald, Simon. "To 'Shew Virtue Its Own Image': William Hodges's *The Effects of Peace* and *The Consequences of War*, 1794-1795." *The British Art Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2008, pp. 57-67.

15. Martins, Luciana. *The Art of Tropical Travel, 1768-1830*. Manchester University Press, 2004.
16. Nayar, Pramod K. "Writing and India, 1750-1820." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2002, pp. 124-34.
17. Poudel, Uttam. "Paternalistic Colonialism in William Hodges' *Travels in India*." *Haimaprabha*, 2022, pp. 1-9.
18. Quilley, Geoff. *British Art and the East India Company*. Boydell & Brewer, 2020.
19. ---. "Introduction: Mapping the Art of Travel and Exploration." *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 43, 2014, pp. 2-8.
20. ---. *The Imagery of Travel in British Painting: With Particular Reference to Nautical and Maritime Imagery, Circa 1740-1800*. 1998. University of Warwick, PhD dissertation.
21. Schürer, Norbert. "Surveying the Eighteenth-Century Anglo-Indian Canon." *Literature Compass*, vol. 7, no. 7, 2010, pp. 597-609.
22. Sorensen, Janet. "Colonizing Nature: The Tropics in British Arts and Letters, 1760-1820." *Clio*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2006, pp. 426-31.
23. Stuebe, Isabel. "William Hodges and Warren Hastings: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Patronage." *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 115, no. 847, 1973, pp. 659-68.
24. Thomas, Sarah. "'On the Spot": Travelling Artists and Abolitionism, 1770–1830." *Atlantic Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2011, pp. 213-32.
25. Tillotson, Giles Henry Rupert. "The Indian Picturesque: Images of India in British Landscape Painting, 1780–1880." *The Raj: India and the British 1600-1947*, edited by C. A. Bayly, National Portrait Gallery Publications, 1990.
26. ---. "The Indian Travels of William Hodges." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1992, pp. 377-98.
27. Tobin, Beth Fowkes. *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting*. Duke University Press, 1999.