
Obituary

Dr Mildred Archer OBE, MA(OXON), D.Litt

(1911–2005)



Dr Mildred Archer who died on February 4th 2005 aged 93 was the wife of Dr William “Bill” Archer OBE, MA (Cantab), D.Litt who died in 1979. For several decades she had been Curator of the Prints and Drawings Department at the old India Office Library before it amalgamated with the British Library. It was through her pioneering work on cataloguing those diverse and unknown collections that a new branch of art history came into being, an art form she called “Company” painting; art that had been drawn by European or Indian artists during the time of the East India Company.

Mildred (who was known all her life as “Tim”) Bell was born in 1911 the daughter of two London teachers. In 1930 she gained a History scholarship to St Hilda’s College, Oxford; while there she also attended drawing classes at Ruskin College. She already knew her future husband William Archer as he was a friend of her brother at Cambridge. Before he left for Indian Civil Service (ICS) employment in 1931 they became engaged and married in 1934 when William was in England convalescing. This dynamic partnership was to last until his death in 1979.

Tim and her husband were members of a new generation of Indian Civil Servant. They both held left-wing political views and sought in India not only an encounter with a foreign

culture but, unusually, they wanted to understand it and indeed help its progress towards independence. First as a District Officer in rural Bihar and then as a Deputy Commissioner Bill took every opportunity to meet Indians of all kinds and study their language and poetry and publish translations of it (much admired by Arthur Waley). From the beginning, and against the prevailing British tendency in India, they made many Indian friends. While Bill was engaged in official work, Tim helped in education writing several textbooks and giving English lessons.

Bill's job as Deputy Commissioner took him all over Bihar but they were happiest when exploring remote areas such as the Santal Purganas and eventually the hardly known land of the Nagas. Their collection of Naga carvings is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. It was while they were staying in Patna in the early 1940s that they met P.C. Manuk, Miss Coles and Ishwari Prasad who introduced them to the forgotten tradition of Patna painting, the subject of Tim's first book published in 1947.

Although Independence had occurred in 1947 they finally returned to England in 1948. At first life was difficult for Bill now classed as a retired ICS officer, until in 1949 he applied for and was given the post of Keeper of the Indian Section at the Victoria and Albert Museum. With the help of friends in India such as M. S. Randhawa, he was able to develop his interests in differentiating styles of Indian painting, particularly those of the Punjab Hills, then little understood.

In 1954 Stanley Sutton of the India Office Library offered Bill the job of cataloguing the unexplored collection but having little time he suggested that Tim should do it. Until then she had been happily looking after Bill and the growing children Michael and Margaret but at the age of 43 she was looking for something of her own to do. In the end a project that what was expected to take only a few weeks became her life's work.

In the IOL there was a huge collection amounting to literally thousands of drawings that had been sent back to East India House by various surveyor generals like Colonel Colin Mackenzie, and engineers and specialists in botanical studies such as Thomas Horsfield. Such drawings were considered to be "official" information rather than art; included in this category were many Indian miniature paintings such as the Richard Johnson collection. As well as work by Indian and European artists there was a huge collection of drawings by Chinese artists. When photography replaced drawing in the mid-nineteenth century as a conveyor of information the collection was not needed and became neglected. In fact much of the Mackenzie Collection was found stuffed up a chimney to keep the soot from falling!

Tim's (she was awarded a D.Litt from Oxford in 1977 in recognition of her work but she was far too modest to call herself "Dr Archer") great achievement was to re-discover what she termed "Company" painting and bring it into the public domain through her very many excellent catalogues. Beginning with *Natural History Drawings* in 1962, there followed several publications over the years including *British Drawings in the IOL* in two volumes in 1969; *Indian Popular Painting* in 1977; and *The India Office Collection of Paintings and Sculpture* in 1986.

These were scholarly publications but during the same period Tim popularised the subject by producing, with astonishing industry, over seventy articles for exhibition catalogues, and

for journals and magazines such as *Country Life*, *History Today*, *The Geographical Magazine*, *Apollo*, *Art International*, *The Connoisseur*, *The Burlington Magazine*. All of these helped to draw attention to this unrecognised field.

The catalogues appeared at a time in the 60s and 70s when there was an upsurge of public interest in India during colonial times. Many memoirs from former ICS people were published and it was to Tim at the IOL that people went for help to find illustrations. In 1969 Giles Eyre, a personal friend of the Archers, had opened a gallery in Duke Street St James's to specialise in selling Company painting and British paintings of India.; Dr Maurice Shellim was researching the life and work of Thomas and William Daniell and there were many others who became interested in re-assessing the architecture of British India. The main auction houses began to hold sales of this work and it was invariably Tim who was asked for help over identification. Company painting and British painting of India had become a recognised subject.

Interest began to spread to many other parts of the world including Australia and the United States. When the American art historian Stuart Cary Welch of the Fogg Art Museum curated a company painting exhibition entitled *Room for Wonder* in New York in 1978 it was dedicated to Bill and Mildred Archer. In the introduction he wrote "without the generous assistance and encouragement of both Archers I should not have dared venture into what I consider *their territory*".

Tim's exemplary magnum opus *India and British Portraiture 1770–1825* was published in 1979. In one volume and beautifully illustrated it revealed for the first time the work of professional artists such as Zoffany, Hodges, Devis, Daniell and Chinnery and many more who had tried courageously to make a living in India. This was followed in 1980 by *Early Views of India; the Picturesque Journeys of Thomas and William Daniell*. There was also a book about the artist William Simpson and another about James and William Fraser (written with Toby Falk). Still very active long after retirement Tim's last work, published in 1992, was a catalogue of the company paintings in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Her evocative memoir *India Served and Observed* was published in 1994.

In 1979 at the suggestion of the Honorary Librarian Simon Digby. I was asked to catalogue the collections of the Royal Asiatic Society then based in 56 Queen Anne Street, London. The project was supported by various officers of the society including Godfrey Goodwin who eventually saw the catalogue through to press. Tim was appointed as my supervisor. In the whole of the Society's history the collection had never been catalogued although at the beginning of the twentieth century Sir William Foster had compiled a list of some of the items. At one time there had been a large and diverse collection but over the years it had become depleted and very neglected. Numbering several thousand items, some found in books, others in dusty cupboards and still others hidden behind furniture, it was all very bewildering to a novice but from the beginning Tim urged me not to get bogged down in endless detail as this would only prolong the project indefinitely. Instead she proposed that it was important to be simple and then publish the results; once in the light of day others could use the collection and help refine details. There was no doubt that without Tim's IOL catalogues to use as templates and for information my task would have been harder. Tim was always ready and willing to help students, as I can testify. When I was researching material

for my book *The Indian Style* she generously allowed me to use her archive and gave me introductions to people in France and in America.

After a day's consultations and exhausted by Tim's immense capacity for work, I would often be invited back to Provost Road (she moved permanently to Dedham, Essex in the late 1980s) for tea or for a relaxing supper. It was then that she would talk freely about herself and her life in India. In relaxed situations she had a delightful sense of humour. Tim was a diminutive figure of great energy and resilience but she was also kind and especially encouraging to young people.

RAYMOND HEAD

*Author of 'A Catalogue of paintings and Drawings in the Collection of the
Royal Asiatic Society'*