

TAJ MAHAL

'Giles Tillotson's slim and balanced book is without question the best short introduction yet produced ... much needed and eminently readable it is likely to remain a standard work for many years to come' William Dalrymple, *Sunday Times*

'Thought provoking and absorbing' Michael Kerrigan, *Scotsman*

'Giles Tillotson's sprightly account of the Taj Mahal's structure and history, the stories that have accumulated around it and the impression it has made on tourists down the centuries is a welcome addition to Profile's 'Wonders of the World Series'. *Times Higher Education Supplement*

'How people have seen the Taj Mahal over the centuries is part of this interesting books remit ... The building has invited speculation and myths and part of Tillotson's task is to disentangle the truth from the fanciful tales.' *Contemporary Review*

'A comprehensive and highly readable study gleaned from the sea of architectural facts and fictional accounts about the Taj Mahal' Krishna Dutta, *Tablet*

'A little gem of a book about India's best-known monument ... lucidly written, solidly researched' Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Telegraph*, Kolkata

‘Tells with clarity and humour the story of the building, the genesis of the design, the competing accounts of its significance and its history as an image. Tillotson adds significantly to our understanding of the Taj’ Lucy Peck, *Indian Express*

‘Giles Tillotson masterfully recounts the human drama behind the Taj. He sets out the context, both historical and architectural, for a proper appreciation of the monument.’ Sushil Chaudhury, *Statesman*, New Delhi

‘Tillotson is indeed the right person to wade through the mythology of the Taj’s origins ... He is also the right person to look at the Taj’s “careers” over the subsequent 350 years as a source of inspiration’ Louise Nicholson, *Apollo*

‘He has an enviable knowledge of India’s cultural and artistic heritage.’ Dilip Bobb, *India Today*

‘With consummate skill – unerringly sifting fact from fiction in a surprisingly easy style – Tillotson provides a fascinating account.’ *Outlook Traveller*

‘This account is like a journey in time with the Taj.’ *Hindu*

‘If you like popular history and want to get beyond the few facts and myths that everyone knows about the Taj, this is a book worth owning.’ *Business Standard*

GILES TILLOTSON was reader in history of art at SOAS, University of London. He is now an independent writer and lecturer, living in Gurgaon near New Delhi. He is the author of many books on Indian architecture, history and landscape, including *Jaipur Nama: Tales from the Pink City*.

WONDERS OF THE WORLD

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TAJ MAHAL

GILES TILLOTSON

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To Madhav and his grandfathers,
Michael Tillotson and Kulbhushan Kumar

*Let those who scoff at overmuch enthusiasm
look at the Taj and thenceforward be dumb.*

Rudyard Kipling

CONTENTS

	<i>Introduction: Orientation</i>	I
CHAPTER I	<i>The Players</i>	16
CHAPTER 2	<i>The Design</i>	45
CHAPTER 3	<i>Everybody's Taj</i>	85
CHAPTER 4	<i>How to Make Your Own</i>	116
CHAPTER 5	<i>To Have and to Hold</i>	149
	<i>Epilogue</i>	173
	<i>Making a Visit?</i>	176
	<i>Further Reading</i>	181
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	190
	<i>List of Illustrations</i>	191
	<i>Index</i>	193

INTRODUCTION: ORIENTATION

The Taj Mahal is the queen of architecture. Other buildings might be as famous, but no other is so consistently admired for a beauty that is seen as both feminine and regal. Many people feel that to class the Taj Mahal as architecture is a mistake: it is both too personal and too magnificent. But it is also something of a cliché: it attracts the attention of advertisers and satirists almost as often as it is invoked as a measure of the sublime and the marvellous. Most of us, inevitably, encounter it first through photographs. We therefore approach the original in awe and trepidation, with our expectations ready to be either shattered or fulfilled.

Preconceptions, responses ... ideas about the Taj Mahal and the history that shapes them, form the subject of this book. We shall find that what you think about the Taj Mahal depends on who you are, where you came from, when and why. A Mughal court poet, an English Romantic traveller, a colonial administrator, an architectural historian and a couple on their honeymoon (to give just a few examples) start with very different perspectives and purposes. The enduring solid marble construction presents an illusion of stability. The familiar view of the pristine monument from the entrance gateway is the very image of permanence. But the thoughts it

has inspired have always been varied and changing. All these competing interpretations, overtly or not, represent claims to some sort of ownership of the building. Silent and compliant, the Taj will be what you want it to be.

WAH TAJ!

To many people in India the name ‘Taj Mahal’ suggests not only a building but a blend of tea. The famous architectural wonder in Agra has lent its name to a popular blend that is a staple commodity in countless households. The packet bears an image of the building along with the catch-phrase that features in all its advertisements: ‘Wah Taj!’ A cry of admiration, ‘Wah!’ is traditionally uttered at Urdu poetry recitals, and so obliquely implies a further reference to the building by conjuring a world of Mughal sophistication and elegance. There is more than one irony in this claimed association. Taj Mahal tea is a decidedly mid-market product. Besides, tea was not produced in India until the nineteenth century. At the time the Taj was built the only source of tea was China. Its builders drank coffee.

But the use of the name goes beyond tea. Even amongst buildings there are numerous contenders for the title ‘Taj Mahal’. Someone in Delhi uttering the phrase ‘Let’s meet at the Taj’ would be inviting you to a 1970s tower block rather than suggesting an excursion to Agra. The building is one in a whole chain of Taj Group hotels that stretches across the country, following one of India’s oldest and most famous luxury hotels: the Taj Mahal on the waterfront in Bombay (now Mumbai), designed in 1903 by W. Chambers and financed by the Parsee entrepreneur J. N. Tata, allegedly

after he was refused entry to a Europeans-only establishment. Conspicuous in any image of the harbour, the Taj Mahal hotel has become one of Mumbai's iconic buildings and remains fashionable amongst connoisseurs of the high life. It has produced clones not just across India but from Sydney to San Francisco. These include some other landmark hotels, such as the Boston belle the Ritz Carlton, now renamed in honour of the Taj.

Of course, these and other such appropriations of the name imply a reference to the original. They stake a claim to excellence that works only by presupposing a familiarity with the source. They certainly spread the fame of the name. But they crowd the original round with a new constellation of meanings. In everyday speech the frequent use of the name 'Taj Mahal' to refer to tea, hotels and a host of other items ranging from packets of saffron to bars of soap, forms a mire that the contemporary Indian consciousness has to wade through to reach the Mughal building.

LOVE AND THE NATION

The Taj Mahal in Agra is a tomb. The most famous product of the Mughals, whose empire in India flourished between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, it enshrines the remains of the fifth emperor of the dynasty, Shah Jahan, and those of his second wife Arjumand Banu Begam, known as Mumtaz Mahal. She died before him, in 1631, and construction of the complex began almost immediately. Her grave is placed centrally within the building and that of Shah Jahan was added later, alongside. These and other circumstances have led to the conclusion that the tomb was intended, initially and

primarily, for *her*, and this in turn has prompted the widespread interpretation of the building as a monument to love.

Here at least is one idea that is both international and historical: since the moment of its completion both Indians and foreigners have described the Taj Mahal as a symbol of love. This view is greatly assisted not only by Shah Jahan's known and documented affection for Mumtaz Mahal above all other women (a story that we shall return to) but also by the perceived beauty and perfection of the building itself. Few people in Mughal India (and no one since) could have gazed on the reportedly beautiful face of Mumtaz Mahal, but the building's beauty is taken as a metaphor for hers, and the place of burial is conflated with the buried. In this spirit, many commentators have described the building as 'feminine', and have seen it as expressing the patron's love, as if their own response to the anthropomorphised building must in some way echo the builder's feelings for the woman interred within. What else but passion, they ask, could have inspired something so perfect?

Entrenched in the popular imagination, this idea of the Taj as an expression of love has made it a favourite destination for honeymooners, who are likely to enact certain well-rehearsed rituals, notably having their photograph taken whilst seated on a marble bench with the monument as a backdrop. Such images are so widely circulated that Princess Diana only had to appear in this pose alone, on a royal tour of India shortly before the break-up of her marriage with Prince Charles, to convey to the world her sense of loneliness and loss. In fact, the bench has nothing to do either with the original design or with the love of Shah Jahan for Mumtaz Mahal: it was added only a century ago.



1. The Taj Mahal: the classic view from just inside the main, southern gate of the garden.

There have been sceptics. Those who oppose the 'symbol of love' theory appeal not to our sentimental but to our cynical side, not by denying the building's beauty but by insisting that it must have some explanation beyond the mere feeling of one individual for another. No one ever did anything so extravagant for love, they argue. We should be looking for some covert ideological agenda, or show how it was designed in the service of power. For example the American writer on Mughal India Wayne Begley appeals to our sense of reason by declaring that so grand a structure cannot be 'purely and simply' a tomb. On a different line of thought, the current leading expert on the building, Ebba Koch, hints that as a symbol of love it doesn't quite work for her, since its overwhelming beauty demands a passive response that is 'irritating to the adventurous'. We shall return to some of these alternative interpretations later in this book.

The Taj Mahal's secondary career has been as a symbol of India. The prize piece of India's heritage, it is seen to embody the country's celebrated history and civilisation. But by whom? Surprisingly, this idea is largely foreign in origin. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was eulogised more by Western than by Indian writers and artists. Elevated to the status of national symbol by outsiders, not until about 1900 was it accepted as such by Indians. Of course, Indians had long recognised its merits, but traditionally the architectural magnets for Indian travellers were more likely to be shrines: temples or the tombs of saints rather than of empresses. Early Indian visitors to the Taj, who came either as pilgrims or as sightseers, were far outnumbered by those going elsewhere. And this continues. Today the Taj is seen by nearly two million Indians per year. The Tirupati temple in

southern India, meanwhile, welcomes nearly twelve million pilgrims per year. Yet it is the Taj that is recognised as the symbol of India. It is still seen as such abroad too; indeed, few outside the country will have heard of the Tirupati temple.

The other seeming oddity of the Taj's role as a national symbol is that it has achieved this status for Indians in spite of being Islamic. As Muslims, the Mughal emperors were members of a religious minority. In a country where the vast majority practise other faiths we might expect some resistance to a national symbol that could be associated with a period of Muslim dominance. Interestingly, by and large (excluding for the moment some lunatic fringes) no such association is made. The popular attitude towards it is secular rather than sectarian: it is regarded as common heritage rather than the legacy of one religious group. In a similar way, most Indians today would identify both the four-lion standard depicted on the country's currency and the wheel at the centre of the national flag as 'ancient Indian', rather than as 'Buddhist', though these symbols are of Buddhist origin. Few regard the buildings designed by Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker for the British imperial New Delhi as casting any shadow of colonial rule, for they are now better known for housing the country's president, parliamentarians and bureaucrats. Origins are not meanings, and in the popular mind the Taj is generically 'Indian'.

Sometimes this is stated overtly. The year 2005 was declared (with little historical accuracy) as the building's 350th anniversary, and in September of that year a crowd of people collectively offered at the building a shawl measuring 100 metres in length. Presenting a shawl to a person is a standard gesture of congratulation, but offering a shawl at a

tomb is a religious rite in Islam. To avoid any misunderstanding, the members of this crowd were at pains to point out that they represented many different religions and that theirs was a 'secular shawl'. Reverence for the Taj was thereby removed from any specifically 'Islamic' context and a common ownership was declared.

UNORTHODOX TAJ

In playing down its religious associations, it may help that, viewed from an Islamic perspective, the Taj Mahal is itself unorthodox. Islamic law prohibits grand sepulchral architecture. Simple burials are preferred and ideally the grave should be covered with nothing but earth and bricks, to facilitate the raising of the dead on the Day of Judgement. Of the first six Mughal emperors (those traditionally called the Great Mughals), the first and the last, Babur (d. 1530) and Aurangzeb (d. 1707), insisted on adhering to this convention and have simple, open-air graves, respectively in Kabul and in Aurangabad. But there is often a tension between the demands of faith and the aspiration of rulers to commemorate themselves and their families. Historically, many Islamic regimes have built tombs regardless, and none more grandly than the Mughals.

More generally there is a *hadith* or religious tradition that records the Prophet's disapproval of any kind of ostentatious building, on the ground that it consumes too much of a man's wealth. The Mughals were aware of such ideas but they were also alert to the political and symbolic power of great architecture, and the tension was a matter of debate at court. The Emperor Akbar's companion and biographer Abul Fazl wrote:

'mighty fortresses have been raised, which protect the timid, frighten the rebellious and please the obedient. Delightful palaces and imposing towers have also been built; they afford excellent protection against cold and rain, provide for the comfort of the princesses of the harem, and are conducive to that dignity which is so necessary for worldly power.' So, expediency of various kinds won the day.

Some historians have suggested that the open doorways of Mughal tombs exempt them from the ban: not being enclosed, they are not really buildings at all but canopies over the graves. It is not clear whether this was also a Mughal argument, or, if so, whether anyone was persuaded: the Taj Mahal as a mere canopy seems a trifle far-fetched. Besides, the argument does not address the Islamic ban on delays in burial, and on the distant transportation of the body, both of which the builders of the Taj ignored.

A TAJ FOR ALL

No one, it seems, is willing to play by the rules. The original builders overlooked inconvenient aspects of orthodoxy, and modern devotees overlook unwanted historical associations, both in order to shape the Taj according to their own desires. In between there have been numerous efforts at recasting the Taj in different roles, and some outlandish interpretations. What are we to make of theories, soberly advanced, such as that it is merely one of a pair, whose twin was never built; that it is a gigantic symbol of the Day of Judgement; that it is not a Muslim tomb at all but an ancient Hindu temple; or that it is not really a specimen of Indian architecture, but Italian?

Suggestions like these will find a place in the chapters of

this book, not because they tell us much about the building itself (they do not) but because they are central to the 'Taj phenomenon'. Some of them stake claims of ownership, literal or metaphorical; others have been advanced with wider agendas about interpreting India's past; and together they keep the building in a state of flux. So this is only in part a book about the Taj of the Mughals: it is as much concerned with the building's career in Indian and Western imaginations.

Chapter 1 looks at the historical context and the human drama behind the building, particularly the relationship between Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. This aspect of the story has been as much contested as any other, with widely divergent accounts of their characters and motives – and serious discrepancies between the court histories and accounts by European residents in India at the time. The trick is deciding who to believe.

Unorthodox though it is, the Taj Mahal is by no means the only Islamic tomb in India. Chapter 2 considers its place in a larger pattern of tomb building, as well as explaining the secrets of its architectural success. This involves both tradition and innovation. Its design sustains and develops ideas that had been around for four hundred years and were to last for at least another hundred. Scattered across India are its many country cousins that are less well known, but which help to explain it. At the same time it was seen from the outset by both Mughal and foreign chroniclers as something exceptional, standing above the tradition from which it sprang. The frequent description of it as 'incomparable' may be misleading (to be pedantic, for there are many appropriate comparisons to be made) but it is also persistent. Almost every commentator has seen it as in some respect unique.