

## Confused and Confusing

Geoffrey and Emma had just finished watching the 4<sup>th</sup> episode of Civilisations on BBC 2. Geoffrey said with a sigh: “Well, Emm, that was the worst so far!”

“Yes, Geoff,” said Emma, “it was a bit bitty, wasn't it?”

“Bitty!” exclaimed Geoff. “I should say so, and superficial too.”

“It was billed,” said Emma, “as 'The Eye of Faith' in which Mary Beard would, and I quote, 'broach the controversial subject of religion and art'. But it seemed to concentrate on Christianity and Islam with fleeting references to Buddhism and Hinduism. If ever there was a civilization where art and religion flourished and were intermixed it was surely the ancient Egyptians.”

“Indeed!” said Geoffrey, “some three thousand years of it – but never a mention by Mary Beard! Nor any mention of the art and religion of ancient Mesopotamia, which many regard as the cradle of civilization; and, as you say, although Hindus and Buddhists were mentioned, there was no depth to it.”

“The only controversy,” said Emma, “seemed to be how Christians and Muslims could have religious art and conform to verses three and four of Exodus 20.”

“Yes,” agreed Geoffrey, “she seemed obsessed by that, but only dealt with it superficially.”

“How do you mean?” asked Emma.

“Well, Emm,” said Geoffrey, “there was some reference to the Reformation in western Europe and we saw a statue of Mary in Seville, without proper context given; but there was *no* mention of the 8<sup>th</sup> century iconoclastic movement, nor of the role of icons, which are especially important in the Orthodox churches. How could a programme on art and religion ignore that?”

“But, Geoff,” said Emma, “she did give us some insight into Islamic art.”

“*Some*' is about it,” said Geoffrey. “One had the impression it was all calligraphy and abstract patterns. There was no mention at all of the many exquisite miniatures found in illuminated manuscripts from all over the Islamic world; the Arabic, Ottoman, Persian and Mughal miniatures certainly portray animal and human forms, even sometimes Muhammad himself (though always veiled), and they are truly artistic gems.”

“It sounds as though you thought it was a bit one-sided,” said Emma.

“Certainly narrow, selective and superficial,” said Geoffrey, “and, as we've already said, it simply ignored the religious art of so many civilizations.”

“Yes,” said Emma, “wasn't there a long tradition among the Aboriginal peoples of Australia of religious art relating to the Dreamtime?”

“There certainly was, Emm,” said Geoffrey. “But maybe she doesn't regard that as civilization. Her 'How Do We Look' programme on the 8<sup>th</sup> March promised so much but turned out to be disappointing. But this was worse.”

“Oh that programme!” said Emma. “I don't remember much about it except the silly bit of the ancient story of a young man who's supposed to have ejaculated on a nude statue of Aphrodite ...”

“Which,” interrupted Geoffrey, “Mary Beard theatrically claimed was *rape* because the *statue* hadn't consented! I ask you!”

“Daft,” agreed Emma. “Theatricality for the sake of theatricality! There must have been some better bits, I suppose.”

“Yes,” said Geoffrey, “there were two or three better moments when Mary Beard encountered

an ancient statue for the first time. But nothing was really taken to any depth.”

“Well,” said Emma, “Simon Schama's been better, I think. I wasn't over-impressed at his first programme on the 1<sup>st</sup> March, but I liked his second programme.”

“Um”, mused Geoffrey, “he's certainly a bit better so far. But the first programme did jump about somewhat: we started with Islamic State destroying art in Mosul and in Palmyra; then we jumped back some 77 000 years to a cave in South Africa before shooting forward again some 40 000 years to see hand stencils in a cave in northern Spain. Although Simon Schama told us that similar things have been found as far away as Indonesia and Patagonia, we weren't shown any others nor given any reason why this should be. That programme was a bit of a patchwork.”

“But his second programme on 15<sup>th</sup> was better, I thought,” said Emma. “It seemed to have some coherence as it moved from those fascinating landscapes of ancient China to 'paradise' landscapes of Islamic Asia then to the more familiar European landscape tradition before going back to the east with Hokusai and Japanese landscapes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”

“It was a bit more interesting,” agreed Geoffrey. “But the series so far has been disappointing. It seems disjointed, somehow. What are you doing, Emm?”

“Just browsing the Internet, Geoff,” said Emma, “seeing if anyone's written anything about these programmes.”

“Any good?” asked Geoff.

“Yes,” murmured Emma. “I've just found something written by Will Gompertz.”

Emma paused as she read on.

“He doesn't seem over-impressed,” said Emma. “You'll like this bit: 'from the programmes I have seen, Civilisations is more confused and confusing than a drunk driver negotiating Spaghetti Junction in the rush hour.’”

“He's about right, isn't he?” said Geoffrey. “I couldn't have put it better myself. One gets the impression that there's no co-ordination between what Mary Beard and Simon Schama does. The programmes are rambling and don't give one any clear idea of the development of human civilizations; they have very little depth and give me practically no mental stimulation.”

Meanwhile Emma read on. “There's a glimmer of hope,” she said.

“How so?” asked Geoffrey.

“He says 'David Olusoga is altogether more measured and less mannered than his fellow presenters' and adds that his two programmes 'benefit from his inquisitive nature and relaxed style.’”

“I hope he's right,” said Geoffrey. “So David Olusoga's doing two programmes in the series, is he? Who's doing the others? Mary Beard and Simon Schama, I suppose.”

“I don't know,” said Emma. “Let's have a look and see what I can find.”

So Emma clicked away on the Internet for a few moments.

“Ah,” she said, “no more Mary Beard.”

“Thank goodness for that,” grunted Geoffrey.

“The next one,” continued Emma, “is Simon Schama with 'The Triumph of Art'; then comes David Olusoga with 'First Contact', followed by Simon Schama with 'Radiance'; then we have David Olusoga's second programme, 'The Cult of Progress' and, finally, Simon Schama rounds it off with 'The Vital Spark’.”

“Huh!” said Geoffrey, “there's been no vital spark so far. Pity we have to wait till the end for it!”

“Oh,” said Emma, “you don't have to wait. Apparently you can see the whole lot already on iPlayer.”

“Not sure I have the stomach for watching the whole lot in one go!” said Geoffrey. “We'll see what Simon Schama's like next week. If it's no good, I suppose, we can switch to iPlayer and try David Olusoga's first offering.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Emma. “I'm tired, Geoff. How about making us a mug of cocoa each while I shut down the computer?”

“Right ho, Emm,” said Geoffrey, as he disappeared into the kitchen.