



Ivory, James (b. 1928), and Ismail Merchant (1936-2005)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Perhaps the most enduring and influential gay partnership in film history, James Ivory and Ismail Merchant are known for their visually sumptuous period pieces based on familiar literary works. So closely intertwined was this team that many assume that "Merchant Ivory" is the name of one individual. But while associated in many minds with British literary and cultural traditions, their professional and personal relationship actually brought together diverse elements of American and Indian culture.

James Francis Ivory, who is the director in Merchant Ivory Productions, was born in Berkeley, California on June 7, 1928. After graduating from the University of Oregon, he received an advanced degree from the University of Southern California School of Cinema and Television in 1957.

His first film was an acclaimed documentary about Venice, and his second, *The Sword and the Flute*, examined Indian art. In 1960, at a New York screening of this latter film, he met his future partner and collaborator.

Ismail Noormohamed Abdul Rehman, later Merchant, was born December 25, 1936, in Bombay, India. He came to the United States as a student, and received an M.B.A. degree from New York University, a background that prepared him for his role as the producer and business mind of the partnership.

While working for an advertising agency, he produced a film based on Indian myth, *Creation of Woman* (1961), which earned an Academy Award for Best Short Subject. In that same year, he and Ivory formed Merchant Ivory Productions.

The Householder (1963), their first feature film, was set in India and based on a novel by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a Polish-Indian writer who has since written the screenplays for most of their productions. Their early films, as well as some of their more recent ones, have focused on the culture clash between East and West in India, including *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965), *The Guru* (1969), *Bombay Talkie* (1970), *Heat and Dust* (1982), and *Cotton Mary* (1999). By the mid-1970s, however, they began to branch out so as to attract larger audiences.

After critical and commercial mishaps with *Savages* (1972) and *The Wild Party* (1975), Merchant and Ivory found what would become their characteristic mode with *The Europeans* (1979), a cinematic adaptation of Henry James's novel. Subsequently, their most notable films have been settings of canonical literary works, usually by gay or lesbian authors and with significant gay or lesbian plots or subplots.

In *The Bostonians* (1984), Vanessa Redgrave sympathetically portrays James's protagonist Olive Chancellor, a woman caught in a rivalry with a man for the love of another woman, while *Maurice* (1987) created a new audience for E. M. Forster's long-suppressed novel of love between men.

Other works based on queer literary sources include their adaptations of Forster's *A Room with a View* (1986) and *Howards End* (1992), Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1991), and James's *The*

Golden Bowl (2001).

By bringing controversial issues of sexuality and race into films accessible to a mainstream audience, Merchant and Ivory, often in subtle ways, made advances in cinematic representations of social difference. Although often made on modest budgets, their films are visually stunning and they frequently showcase leading actors.

The two men shared a home in Claverick, New York, as well as residences on the three continents that shaped their work.

After forty-five years of collaboration in life and in art, the Merchant Ivory partnership ended on May 25, 2005, when Ismail Merchant died in London of complications from stomach surgery.

Bibliography

Long, Robert Emmet. *The Films of Merchant Ivory*. New York: H. N. Abrams, 1997.

Pym, John. *Merchant Ivory's English Landscapes: Rooms, Views, and Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*. New York: H. N. Abrams, 1995.

_____. *The Wandering Company: Twenty-One Years of Merchant Ivory Films*. London: British Film Institute, 1983.

About the Author

Patricia Juliana Smith is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtq.com.