

The Arts and South Asia

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FROM THE DIRECTOR



Courtesy of Ekabhishek

Artists, musicians, and creative writers are as important to the Harvard South Asia Institute as historians and economists, entrepreneurs and scientists, political leaders and civil servants. The arts—fine arts and music, theater and literature, and more—comprise a fundamental part of South Asian culture and society. The arts are uniquely lived in this region, giving South Asia its nuanced history and flair. South Asia is in fact defined by its artistry, its architecture and epic poetry, its textiles and crafts, by its vibrant, continuously evolving traditions and movements. The arts come to life in all facets of South Asian culture. South Asian artists have played a leading, innovative role in the arts from antiquity, and have had lasting influence on international art forms.. This publication is a further extension of our commitment to the arts in South Asia.

In the pages that follow, you will encounter a collection of essays by artists and scholars on topics as diverse as the region itself. Sona Datta, curator of South Asian art at the Peabody Essex Museum, demonstrates how art reflects life in paintings and installation art following the Partition period; while Fakrul Alam, a literary critic, explores the impact of Ekushey (Mother Language Day) on Bangladeshi society and on other native tongues. Sonali Dhingra, a doctoral candidate in art history at Harvard, raises urgent questions about the disappearance of premodern Buddhist sculptures from Odisha; as Rachel Parikh, Calderwood Curatorial Fellow of South Asian Art for the Harvard Art Museums, describes the surreal and humbling feeling of what it is like to hold and care for precious centuries-old artwork. Shazia Sikander, a renowned Pakistani artist, wrestles with tradition as she seeks to preserve some elements but also ultimately break with it in her own original miniature paintings. And Sunil

Sharma delves into the deep realm of Mughal-era poetry, shedding light on the paradisaical beauty of historic Kashmir. The collection ends with verses of Tamil *sangam* poetry, translated into English. With stunning economy of language, they offer us a glimpse into what Tamil poets call the *akam* (the inner world) and the *puram* (the outer world).

These essays, all newly commissioned, are concise and fascinating explorations of the arts and South Asia. They offer us fresh ways of thinking about the region—the past and the future; the commitment to traditions and the forging of modernity; great political narratives and textures of everyday life; the language of loss and the riotous music of resistance.

As always, we invite you to engage actively with the essays that follow. Please feel free to take notes in the blank pages provided, and share the digital edition with your friends and colleagues.

Regards,

Tarun Khanna

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Shazia Sikander is a Pakistani artist. Her work has been shown in both solo and group exhibitions at several museums, including the Whitney Museum and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

Navigating the Past in India's Museums

Jinah Kim



Courtesy of Biswarup Ganguly.

The oldest museum in India, the Indian Museum in Kolkata, celebrated its second centennial in 2014. It was founded in 1814 by the members of the Asiatic Society, itself established in 1784 by Sir Williams Jones, a noted Orientalist and Sanskrit philologist. The beginning of British direct rule in colonial India in 1858 had ushered in a new era for imperial museums: the new government announced its mission to establish a “public museum” in Calcutta, and the Indian Museum became a government institution. In the 1860s architect Walter Granville (1819–1874) drew the initial neoclassical designs for the museum, which was to be built on Chowringhee Street. The building was completed in 1875, and the museum opened its doors to the public in 1878.

Nearly 140 years later, an oversized statue of Queen Victoria portrayed as youthful Flora still welcomes visitors at the top of an impressive stairway. People bustle about, finding their way to the rustic but grand zoological gallery on the opposite side or to the painting gallery behind the queen. The small Egyptian gallery around the corner from her is a popular tourist site. The room is climate-controlled to fight against extreme humidity during Kolkata's summer months, and the small collection of artifacts from Egypt, itself a legacy of the British colonial rule, provides a rare chance to see something wondrous and exotic. However, the queen's statue itself rarely draws any attention, despite its prominent position on the second floor's landing plaza. I, for one, would thoughtlessly pass by this statue countless times during my daily visits to the museum while I was a research affiliate of the museum in 2003–2004. I had always been preoccupied with examining the much older sculptures in the archaeology section. The statue of Empress Victoria, while symbolic, is

not itself particularly imposing; it was only during a visit in January 2013 that I began to think about this statue's muted presence.

There is no placard explaining the statue, but, unlike any other stone sculpture on display, this white marble statue stands tall on a marble pedestal, and a simple but elegant metal railing keeps the statue out of easy reach. A long inscription inked in black on one side of the pedestal identifies it as "Her Majesty Victoria, Empress of India." It further informs us that the patron of the sculpture was Mahatab Chund Bahadur, a maharaja of Burdwan who was a loyal supporter of the British Indian government. It also records that the funding for the pedestal was given by his successor, Aftab Chund Mahatab Bahadur. The occasion for the statue's commission was not the opening of the museum to the public, the inscription tells us, but her assumption of the title "Empress of India" in 1877. The statue was commissioned from Marshall Wood, a portrait sculptor based in London, whose name is inscribed on the statue's round base. Another inscription in Devanagari on the other side of the pedestal translates the same message in Hindi.

A crowded scene in the bronze relief on the front of the pedestal right beneath her feet is often taken as depicting the event of coronation, the Delhi Durbar of 1877, but, in fact, it portrays Viceroy Lord Lytton (identifiable by his distinctive long beard, and depicted as followed by his children and his wife, Edith Villiers) granting an honor to the maharaja of Burdwan.¹ Why did the maharajas of Burdwan (today, Bardhaman, about 100 km northwest of Kolkata) commission the statue and the pedestal, and why was it installed in the Indian Museum? We will find answers to these questions only by examining the local histories. Seeing this seldom-noticed relief in a new light urges us to see beyond the manifest narrative of colonial rule in India. As much as the museum was a site of imperial visions bestowing benign benefits on colonial subjects, it was also a site for realizing the ambitions of local elites.

The statue caught my attention in 2013 partly because the inscription on the pedestal had just then been freshly inked. When I had first arrived in 2003, only the letters of the top line had a trace of black ink, while the rest of the inscription, long since etched on a dusty marble surface, was barely visible. Ten years later, a crack in the pedestal had also been carefully repaired. In fact, many areas of the museum underwent numerous improvements to update the museum's overall display and enhance the visitor experience in preparation for the second centennial celebration in 2014. The archaeology gallery that showcases the museum's world-famous collection of Buddhist and Hindu sculptures, especially of the Pāla-Sena period (ca. 750–1200 CE), used to be a dusty, with many objects sheltered behind glass. Given the hefty weight of each stone sculpture—even a relatively small sculpture less than two feet tall requires more than two men to lift—altering the display of these objects was no simple feat. In effect, the archaeology gallery underwent a complete transformation in 2013. When it reopened, the sculptures were displayed more

accessibly and with better lighting, most of them out of glaring and smudged glass cases that had hindered viewing.

In fact, recent years have witnessed a number of renovation projects at India's premier museums such as the National Museum, New Delhi, where much more attention is given to display strategies and upkeep of physical facilities to improve visitor experience. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS, formerly, the Prince of Wales Museum) in Mumbai has undergone extensive renovations and makeovers in multiple areas since the arrival of the director general, Mr. Sabyasachi Mukherjee. A dramatic transformation in a relatively short span of time was possible partly because the CSMVS is governed by an independent board of trustees and relies on its own funding that attracts donations from private sectors to proud citizens of Mumbai and beyond. More funding, both from the government and private sectors, will help transform India's museums from a storehouse of antiquities to a public site of learning and leisure. After all, many of India's public museums are places with deep histories, like the Indian Museum, which moved to its current location in 1875, a year before the younger Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, opened at its location in Copley Square. These histories await many more serendipitous discoveries.

1 Further research is necessary to determine which one of the two maharajas is portrayed here.