

MUSEUMS
OF THE WORLD

Museums of the World

Towards a New Understanding
of a Historical Institution



Editors

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Preface

The first museum in history is arguably Ennigaldi-Nanna's, dating to circa 530 BCE. But whether any research in the modern sense was conducted there, or if the objects were accessible to the general public, we don't know. But today we presume that the collections discovered were intended to trace the ancestry of the king to previous rulers, and probably thereby claim legitimacy for the present ruling family. Therefore we can assume, as a hypothesis, that the later notion and ideal of collecting original objects in the modern sense might have a pre-history in the construction of ancestral lineage, i.e. in a universal human need of finding the first things and conditions.

To generalize we can say that the traditional modern museums are basically about accumulating a collective memory. A place where we collect, research and display preferably original objects of historical significance. The admiration of original objects is to a large extent also culture-bound. And the concept of originality is culturally contingent as a historical dominant and it became a categorical ideal in Western culture starting from the eighteenth century.

In Egypt, the tombs of the Pharaohs were plundered over the millennia also by locals for their riches long before Howard Carter in the 1920s discovered Tutankhamen, now at display at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The Sphinx was used by the Ottoman occupying army for target practices. The destruction by the Taliban of precious Buddhist statues of Bamyan is hard to forget. Countless historical examples can be found where religious passion has contributed to the destruction of for instance religious icons, such as was done by the Christians in Byzantium, initiated by Emperor Leo III 726–729 AD. Also Protestantism can be seen as a form of iconoclasm. During the sixteenth century Huldrych Zwingli and

John Calvin aggressively eradicated imagery from churches and considered most religious images as idolatrous. Also in Sweden Gustav Eriksson Vasa destroyed a lot of art in the churches.

The idea of the modern museum is also an integral part of the rise of the specific collective and manifest kind of national historical consciousness developed quite late in the West during a particular historical period.

Mark Twain said: 'A clear conscience is the sure sign of a bad memory.' In the West today it is often given vent to a bad conscience for the artifacts and the art that we find in our museums brought from other countries. But one must also bear in mind that all peoples have given in to plundering the riches of conquered territories during history, what is unique for the West is that the bounty often was taken care of and placed in museums for the benefit of the public. So it is not so sure that all cases have a solid base for regret.

As we today witness the destruction of invaluable pieces of art in Syria and Iraq, we might send a thought of thanks to the people who brought artifacts to our museums over the centuries but also to for instance The Indian Museum in Calcutta (founded in 1814 by a Dane) that has a 4,000-year-old mummy among its items. Many of these objects would no longer exist in physical reality but only, at best, as faint recollections, if they had not been abducted in war, stolen or traded.

So at least, the Western obsession with memory and collections care has the advantage that these treasures still exist today, irrespective of their present physical and geographical locations, and irrespective of the fact that many new nations and peoples, that have no direct ancestral relationship to the sometimes stolen items, today feel the need to repatriate them for the purpose of nation building and raising nationalistic sentiments.

Finally, to stress the real importance of the museums, I quote Elie Wiesel: 'Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, and no future.'

October 2015

Kurt Almqvist

President

Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation for Public Benefit

NAMAN P. AHUJA

The Body Redux

A Curator's Post-script on Exhibiting India



The Body in Indian Art and Thought was shown as the lead exhibition of the collaboration between ICCR (Indian Council for Cultural Relations) and Europalia Arts Festival at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels from October 2013 to January 2014. It was later taken to the National Museum of India in Delhi where it was called *Rūpa-Pratirūpa: The Body in Indian Art*. The exhibition's over 360 artworks from 60 lenders (Indian and European) encompassed objects from every epoch of Indian history, from diverse parts of South Asia, of every major religion, from urban and rural settings. The majority of the lenders were museums under the direct administration of the government of India. In addition to the 'artworks' it included selections from a wide array of documentary films to provide the context of rituals and performance traditions, as well as an original recorded soundtrack. The exhibition broke all records in terms of attracting international media attention and visitor numbers for an exhibition of Indian art, which are well known amongst museum personnel to be particularly low. 8,000 copies of the books/catalogues that accompanied the exhibition (6,000 in Belgium and 2,000 in India) were sold.¹ The exhibition was also documented as an eight-part series for television broadcasting.

An exhibition of this scale posed enormous institutional and procedural challenges which will not be discussed here. Important as that is for the administration of future exhibitions and the governing of museums, I am concerned here with the nature of what guided the narrative and

the subtexts of the exhibition. It has to do with the conceptualisation of how to engage the public in multi-cultural diversity and some of the political and social curatorial concerns that underpinned the exhibition of Indian art in its National Museum. How can one still engage with religious pluralism in secular times when the viewing publics are both, globalised scientific rationalists to whom such an endeavour is itself flawed, and yet cater to a large public of so-called superstitious and atavistic religious fundamentalists? Religion apart, how does one deal with class and caste, gender and sexuality in a country where these matters remain politically volatile? One is compelled to think afresh about the body as a contested site, and the display of that contestation as a valuable aspect of what the museum can enable for the public.

With this in mind, interventions were made in the way history, myth, religion, multi-culturalism, gender bias and social exclusion are, more often than not, written into displays of Indian art, demonstrating that art can question, nuance and expand on the stereotypical ways in which it is cast. In an age when art-historical specialisation has seen exhibitions become narrowly focused on a region, a particular art-school/style or even a single manuscript, the first challenge was to deal with the requirement of a massive 5,000-year history of the South Asian subcontinent in a single exhibition without falling into the obvious traps of being orientalist or reductive, and with the awareness of the critiques of previous endeavours to put 'India' into a single exhibition.

It was also aimed at addressing where the public, government policy and the intelligentsia stand on matters concerning the audience, the function and perceived roles of museums and exhibitions in India, and equally, the exigencies of exhibiting Indian art in the Western world. The body takes us to difficult conceptual matters about how we narrativise and curate the inseparable worlds of religion and art for a public in what we deem a secular 'art museum'.² One would imagine that there is all the greater need for museums in a country that is rapidly losing its traditional habitats forcing diverse publics to live together even as more archaeological discoveries are being made with the advance of urbanism. Yet, paradoxically, we also live in times when the very existence of museums is threatened, as much because they are intellectually disturbing, but also because, at least in India, they've become boring storehouses, irrelevant to the public, and preserved by legendarily unhelpful and litigious staff.

The exhibition was utilised as an opportunity to find answers to questions about how South Asian countries can deal with the almost intractable problems that confront museums and historical art. I consciously chose half the artworks for the exhibition from the National Museum of India with the intention of presenting them in a differently curated environment. The rest of the objects were deliberately chosen from museums in remote, small towns, inaccessible store-rooms, and provincial museums, to bring attention to collections that urgently warrant specialist conservation and curatorial attention. In a world where cultural politics and the role of museums are deeply debated, this exhibition also challenged established canons of masterpieces and styles through nuanced readings of ‘beauty’ – positing equally, that whereas newer theoretical readings remain important for scholarship, the very canon and chronological frameworks in the study of Indian art are still being challenged by new discoveries.

Context

This essay derives from a paper that was read in the same week as the monuments of ancient Nimrud and Hatra – the great historical sites of ancient Mesopotamia – were being destroyed.³ A fortnight later, the staff and tourists at the Bardo Museum in Tunis were killed by right-wing Islamic extremists who saw them as preservers and purveyors of idolatry.⁴ These were followed by the further destruction of Palmyra, in May 2015. In 2014, there was a shoot-out by a terrorist in the Jewish museum in Brussels. These stories are commonplace; archaeological sites, museums and artworks make for priceless targets. The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan in 2001 appears only to have emboldened right-wing forces to destroy more art and heritage. The rationale for their destruction lay not merely in the ignominious propaganda it accrued amongst lovers of history and art, but martyrdom and iconoclasm also remain persuasive phenomena.⁵ In India, too, art and museums appear, with regularity, to cause offence to the currently held religious sensibilities of some. Communal tensions are rife, and religiously motivated censorship on art not uncommon.⁶ For a variety of reasons then, as will become clearer further in this essay, the first set of objects that visitors to the exhibition met in Brussels and Delhi, were memorials to soldiers, zealots and martyrs; blades at their throats, innards spilling out, a weapon



in their hands, with representations of the promise of paradise in a world beyond the bodily, and a world beyond the artifice of the representation in art itself.

India is a complex multi-cultural society with six main recognised religions, each displaying a bewildering diversity and encompassing several sects. There are, additionally, numerous cults that do not form a part of any organised religion. India has twenty-two official languages and the number of dialects runs into the hundreds. The state is deemed secular as per the constitution which grants its citizens the freedom to practice the religion of their choice, but recent events have held this to question.

The recourse to defining secularism as the safeguarding of equal rights to practice any religious belief (as opposed to a disavowal of engagement with religion) was seen as the obvious solution to the diversity. However, this definition has found less favour with some forms of curatorial thought where engaging with religion in any form is looked upon as pandering to the stereotype that defines India as enslaved by fatalism and religiosity and projecting the culture as eternal, removed from the modern, and as a civilisation that lacks a sense of history. Conversely, art-historical enquiry on pre-modern Indian art became all the more engaged with

religious iconography, and this became the most important context within which artworks were to be studied.⁷

Museums have come to mean anything anyone wants them to be in our times. Their rich and now sizeable histories reveal how they perform varied roles, in diverse places and communities, making it impossible to define (and hence govern) them with any one set of parameters. There is no word in an Indian language that translates to ‘museum’. Of two new words which are commonly used in North India, *Sangrahālaya*, the Hindi word (of Sanskrit etymology) means a house that keeps/collects things. This definition, leads us to think of the museum as a place that protects objects, and indeed most museums in India offer little more than a storage space. Public dissemination of knowledge is notably absent from this meaning. The Urdu and Hindustani word for a museum, however, *ajaiibghar* – the house of curiosities where extraordinary things are kept, takes us in a very different direction predicated as it is on the human emotion of curiosity, leading at least to infotainment if not knowledge production. In some places such as Bengal, the word *jādū-ghar*, or house of magic, replaces *ajaiibghar*. Although these words can be critiqued as incorrectly defining the role of museums as we see them today, both suggest the strategic and important components of what museums do and stand for, whatever additional functions they may have in changing times.

India carries the heavy baggage of being seen as enslaved by transcendentalism, by spirituality, by matters of religion. This orientalist exoticisation remains an enduring stereotype regardless of the efforts of scholars and cultural theorists to argue against it. Yet, the tenacity of stereotypes also has its reasons.⁸ How do we create a participatory space (without a traditionally defining word for a secular art museum) where culture is not preserved like a taxidermist’s assemblage of dead specimens – but as a space that resonates with people’s practices, cultural mores, nostalgia, living memory, recreated memories and identity? As neither art nor identity can exist outside of, or by excluding the stereotype inherent in generalisations of religion and spirituality, on what terms will museums of a secular government be willing to engage with people and their religiously informed identities?

In a world where violence is guided by religious belief, it is not required to explain why public and political institutions need, constantly, to engage with the religious. The modernist disengagement with religion in its

writings on art is not tenable in an environment where politics and cultural administration have constantly to mediate to foster peaceful religious coexistence and understanding.

Busloads of pilgrims from Southeast Asia come to the National Museum of India every week to pray and chant in the Buddhist 'Art' Gallery where relics of the Buddha are kept. Hindu visitors, sometimes, take their shoes off when entering the gallery of bronzes. Several members of the museum can be seen taking the blessings of sculptures as they come into work every morning touching the feet of their favourite deities all the way from the entrance of the museum till they reach their offices. Some refuse to allow non-vegetarian food to be served in the museum because it would defile the museum, which is a keeper of ancient religious objects. And occasionally a sculpture of Ganesha will have a flower or a few coins placed before it. The state of Bihar is on the verge of opening a series of 'Buddhist' museums to lure more East Asian pilgrims to the land of its origin; Haryana has a government-run Krishna museum in Kurukshetra; and the state of Punjab has finished building a museum for the history of Sikhism at Anandpur Sahib. A significant aspect of the public's participation in the museum appears to be guided by their interaction with religious images, and if this becomes the dominant form of interaction within a museum it can alienate those who do not believe in image-worship, not to speak of those who visit the museum to engage with 'art'.

The secularising agenda of the modernist museum remains shattered in contemporary Western discourse, even though it is held on to by a dwindling intelligentsia because its perceived binary alternative – museums undergirded by religiosity – they fear, is a recipe for disaster in a multi-faith, multi-cultural country ridden with right-wing fanaticism. On what terms, then, will the museum engage with religious pluralism? There is a worldwide debate on the intersection of art and religion, and on the validity of the historical museum to contemporary society. Equally pressing are the philosophical debates in the art history community for the past decade that demand a serious re-examination of where the discipline of art history itself is heading. Do we need to question the foundations on which it is constructed so as to reinvent a more substantial calling for the discipline? And this leads to fundamental questions about the role of the museum and art: Is it ennobling? Does one see the aesthetic as something emancipating or is it, in fact, an exclusionary space?

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At the crux of these questions lie theoretical responses to the very nature of representation, the role of art, its inextricability from matters of spirit. The formation of identity and the self are fundamental to the role of the museum, and the Body stands as a concept at its epicentre. The exhibition on the Body allowed for an experimentation with ways in which an Indian museum may be willing/able to engage with the many 'others' that make up the body-politic, varied perceptions of what the museum stands for, consciously developing a multi-layered narrative and scenography to cater to a diversity of audiences and yet provide a response to many political, art-historical and museological problems that affect us.

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Expanding the canon

Before elaborating on the larger aesthetic, political and social concerns of the exhibition, I shall discuss the more conventional art-historical concerns, in terms of chronology/periodisation of art styles, iconography and the finding of new objects that disturbed or added to the existing canon, all of which suggested several avenues for future research. Indian art history remains tethered to great epochs and thus commonly, public perception tends to exclude elements made just before or after the reign of a major dynasty, or, for that matter, objects that do not come from the principal sites of that dynasty. Some instances are listed below.

Attention was drawn to the remarkable copper-hoard objects approximately made between 1500 and 300 BC, occupying a time-period between the Indus Valley and the Mauryan, an age that remains a perplexing hiatus for art historians. As important as the canonical masterpieces of the Gupta period are the vast numbers of bronzes and sculptures that come from the post-Gupta period around the seventh century, which are seldom seen in exhibitions, although there are extraordinary sculptures *in situ* at major monolithic sites. General surveys of Indian art often jump from the fifth-century epoch of classical Gupta art to the tenth-century phase of high medieval statuary. Images from Mandasaur in Madhya Pradesh, Badami in Karnataka, Kannauj in Uttar Pradesh, Achutrajpur in Orissa, Pallava sites in Tamil Nadu, Hindu Shahis in the Northwest Frontier and Afghanistan, Pehowa in Haryana, massive sculptures (both original and one perfect facsimile) from Chhatisgarh, and others that date between the sixth to ninth centuries, i.e. after the Gupta period, were

brought in to extend and question the canon of what is regarded as the period of idealised classicism. Similarly, the tenth to twelfth centuries become another major benchmark in standard Indian art histories with the Palas, Cholas, Chandellas, Pratiharas, Solankis (and for the more assiduous – some Kashmiri sculpture) already providing an almost overwhelming complexity. Bronzes from the Vijaynagara and Nayaka periods are often overlooked in favour of the more famous Chola ones. Despite their power and mannered stylisation, Kakatiya sculpture from Andhra Pradesh has seldom found a space in exhibitions or collections. The display of many extra-canonical paintings that come on either end of the ‘Mughal and Rajput’ constellation (Jain and Sultanate paintings of the late fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, or the many nineteenth- and twentieth-century schools across India including Solapur, Paithan, Raghogarh, Murshidabad, and so on), brought to attention schools/styles deserving of inclusion in art history texts, but also the need to deal with their often challenging iconographic forms.

Yet, while recognising chronological periodisation as important, the exhibition equally offered more than a merely didactic experience. It attempted to make art-historical matters of periodisation a subtext to a more participatory exhibition, that dealt with wider issues in other disciplines as well. This permitted the inclusion of objects that came from ritual contexts, personal/home environments, so-called ‘folk and tribal’ artworks, that were not just artistically compelling but which have resisted inclusion in chronological presentations of Indian art history. Every gallery in this exhibition included either a film or object (terracotta, clay, metal ornament, utensil) that took the viewer to the personal or quotidian, as well as a modern or contemporary work. These either showed how contemporary India has inherited its legacies, or served as a counter-point – the voice of a modern society’s dialogue with its past. Modern and contemporary artworks in the exhibition came not only from metropolitan studio practitioners but also from traditional craftsmen and popular print culture. This inclusive definition of the contemporary also allowed one to bring a variety of practices and contexts (urban studio and traditional practice) into the canon of Indian art history, where there has been a tripartite separation, exemplified by the three major museums of Delhi: The National Museum (holding only pre-modern art), the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Crafts Museum.

Histories beyond just chronologies

Putting India, as mentioned above, into a single exhibition, runs risks. It can collapse difference to a degree that renders the overall experience into an exotic mishmash, scarcely different from the Great Exhibition orientalist extravaganzas of the nineteenth century. Separation into demarcated enclaves of time, region, community and religion, on the other hand, can foster divisions and prevent conversations. It was felt here, that what a temporary exhibition with a three-month viewing in each city could mobilise by way of provocation, was more important than the stability that more permanent museum displays are meant to offer.

Yet, India's diverse voices, opinions and expressions have not always had a harmonious coexistence. Dividing lines exist between religions and within religions. They exist among classes and castes, and between rural and urban, ancient and modern, male and female. Each gallery in this exhibition sought to indicate these divides, using the juxtapositions (ruptures, if you will), and differences to get the viewers thinking. The visual simultaneity of different points of view provided both a counter-balancing of divergent opinions, as well as an opportunity to trace historical continuities.

Whereas certain ideas or myths explored in some galleries are commonly known in one version, the artworks often presented a variant telling of the same story. Each artwork, furthermore, was located in time and tied to a place of origin; while several works originating in different times and places were similar in content and iconography. This manner of display allowed for the generation of discussions on the change in ideas or beliefs in time; they also showed how eternal, cyclical views of time and cosmology intersect with linear histories, how ancient cultural concepts are invoked recurrently through historical eras, and how these histories influence and affect each present. Vast bodies of material interweave history, myth, science, psychology, and fiction with liturgical ritual texts, making it very difficult to posit neat chronologies when looking at art. The work of art may be from one age, for example, and thus historically grounded, while its subject matter could well be drawn from earlier ideas. Sometimes, a myth is invoked to legitimise the political status of patrons who see identification with mythical gods and heroes as lending them strength. Further, these myths are not always part of an elite literary tradition but may come from traditions of folklore. And sometimes,

myths, cosmologies and rituals are altered to accommodate new ideas and exigencies. Short texts were strategically positioned alongside some objects in each gallery to generate questions and thought on some of these matters, while taking care not provide any definite conclusions. The catalogues for the exhibitions, however, amplified on the metaphors inherent in myths and iconographies.

These have been extremely important issues in Indian history where the fundamental conundrum has remained the theorising of the concept of history and linear time, in a culture that purports to think of time as eternally cyclical. Arguments have been made using Indian philosophical ideas of the ephemerality of human life and aspiration to non-materialism, to show that Indians do not have a sense of preserving history or recording human time whether in writing or through material objects. Museums can thus, by extension, be interpreted as being antithetical to the very nature of 'Indian' thinking. Starting the exhibition with a gallery on Death forced us to think clearly around ideas of time, memory, material remains, archaeology, and history as also the philosophical resonance it may have with the public.

Before dealing with mythic or abstract ideas around death, the gallery presented a series of memorials to men and women from different parts of India: bodies that had been marked in linear time, bodies of the everyman and everywoman, rather than gods. The gallery also included a series of references to *samādhis*, stupas and mausolea to show that just as there are beliefs that espouse the eternal nature of the *ātman*, and the insignificance of the material stuff of the body, there are as many practices that seek to memorialise the body and hold on to its energy even when it is only symbolically present in art. This brought into focus the role of the museum as preserver of artworks that in turn preserve memory; and it equally brought to light that the timespan of each body intersects with all manner of culturally conditioned mores.

Staging difference

An ironic gesture toward how orientalism has guided the vision of India marked the very start of the exhibition in Brussels. A black-and-white film in slow motion of destitute Indians facing death on the burning ghats of Banaras shot on a gently rocking camera from a boat on the holy Ganga covered the façade of the entrance to the show in the atrium of

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the Palais des Beaux-Arts. The video was derived from Satyajit Ray's 1956 film *Aparājito* (*The Unvanquished*). Punctuating it, in vivid polychrome, were two huge kitschy images of a Durga and a Ganesh – that are intended to be used and then cast away at the end of a festival.

The public walked through this orientalist 'projection' to enter a show where these very essentialisms were being questioned. This display being less relevant for an Indian audience in Delhi, was altered to bring attention to other more pressing issues.

Behind the aesthetics of the display, lay a social commentary on the histories of communities who would have been excluded from the canon; or those whose material vestiges stand as markers of their death and destruction. Keeping in mind the devastating history of social and intellectual exclusion of the Northeastern states of India, the first object in the exhibition was a memorial to a Naga warrior, a symbol of death and the film of the Lai Haroba, a ritual of birth and creation, two galleries later, provided a strong conceptual base for the exhibition. In the Belgian version of the exhibition, the centre of the Gallery VI (*The Body Ideal: Heroic*) was occupied with a vitrine of Naga jewellery that signified their social hierarchy and status predicated on their prowess while in the

exhibition in Delhi, a video of the martial tradition of the Thang-Ta was screened in the same gallery. Both the Thang-Ta and Lai Haraoba belong to the most sophisticated aesthetic ways of contemplating the body both in its physicality as well as its spiritual basis, but this is not the place to expand on the richness of each 'artwork' in the exhibition.

Gallery IV's provocations lay in questioning the perceived infallibility of 'science' and the questionable role it has played in regulating the body and determining social relations. It did so by looking at the modern science of anthropology as much as it did at ancient understandings of time and the forces that governed the fate of men and women in time. The gallery began with an enormous 233-foot-long painted horoscope of one Indian woman from 1905, immediately establishing the widespread beliefs in destiny in the hands of supernatural forces. As one revelled in the many expressions of various systems of cosmology: Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and Jain which followed, similar patterns began to emerge even amongst rationalist philosophies like Buddhism and Islam that question the role of such pre-determined fatalism and espouse a clearer mandate for individual agency. Several pictures from the Jain sangrahani sutras showed the grid of the cosmos contained within the cosmic being or loka purusha. These were juxtaposed with a photo-performance work by the contemporary artist Pushpamala N. and her collaborator Clare Arni.

The photograph is a critique of the way in which colonial anthropologists instrumentalised the Indian body. The artist copies a famous nineteenth-century photograph by Oriole Henry on an Andamanese islander being measured against a chequerboard grid. Pushpamala put herself in the middle of the photograph, reversing the colonial gaze. She is a native woman informer telling her collaborator, and telling us, about the violence that was perpetrated on the Indian body in the name of scientific regulation. If the loka purusha was divided into grids to show how the cosmos was contained within the body, the modern photograph revealed how the body is oppressed by the grids and measuring boxes of the universe outside it. The gallery thus examined how various knowledge systems, including nineteenth-century scientific rationality which sought to regulate along racial lines, have exerted control on the body. Anthropologists used the measurement of the body as a new system of taxonomy. One oppressive system of regulation, an older Indian one, was thus replaced by another.

The most dominant form of regional marginalisation in India comes





along with the silencing or making invisible the histories of lower castes. Perhaps this is because curators do not have artwork to show. Or because when they have it, they cannot date it or fit it into histories. It remains easier thus for most museums to have separate galleries for popular, folk and tribal or ethnographic art. The inclusion of the representations of Bhakti and Sufi saints/sages allowed for a powerful history of social outcasts to be brought into the exhibition – their acceptance in the canon of Hinduism and popular appeal in Islam have ensured that. Thus art history is itself replete with images of Mānikavacakar, Sambandar, Kāraikkal Ammāiyar, Moinuddin Chishti, Rābia Basri and other such saints who have challenged orthodoxy, patriarchy and caste hierarchies, and these formed an important spine of Gallery VII.

There were other, more subtle ways employed to bring attention to these politics through the scenography of the exhibition. Gallery V on the Ideal Body: Supernatural, brought to light the plurality of opinions on perfected immortal bodies. The objects were curated to reveal how there can be no single hierarchy of Indian images. The pantheons of deities vary according to region, cult, caste and historical or political context. However, a significant question loomed about issues of caste – that of the makers of the images and those who would had the privilege to enter the

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temples in which the sculptures were housed. The scenography of the gallery in Brussels was designed as a paradisiac garden that gave equal access to all. The gallery in India, however, was designed like a temple *mandapa*, or processional pathway that is used by entire communities to come together to see their gods when brought out of their sanctums at festivals.

Alcoves and pavilions housed the kind of iconographies that would have been kept inside exclusionary sanctums, and the spaces outside displayed images of *yakṣas*, *nāgas*, doorkeepers and libation spouts covered with phantasmagoric imagery that would have been seen on the exterior of the temples.

The scenography was also used to make larger curatorial interventions. Just as Gallery II explored the many different ways in which the representation of the body in art was substituted by those who regarded it as being fallacious, misleading viewers from the truth, Gallery VIII explored how other systems believed that art itself is truth, capable of altering our reality. This dialectic was played out by transforming the public's perception of itself while in the space of the gallery in two significant ways. The long side of Gallery II was created by creating a false wall out of a cinema screen which cordoned off access to another part of the museum in



Brussels. Lights in that passageway were positioned such that the public unwittingly cast shadows as they walked down that passage, which became an integral and symbolic part of the gallery on the absent body.

The paradisiac garden used in Brussels as a home for the gods was repurposed for Gallery VIII in Delhi. The immersive landscape of Indian trees and flowers, the mythical abode of the gods, evoked the all-important forest (*āraṇyaka* or *vāṭikā*), where the self is lost and realisation is gained in all Indian epic stories.

This may have been more subtly expressed in the Brussels chapter of the exhibition where red light was cast on the viewers while the artworks were strategically lit in normal museum light.

When viewers looked at art, they found it was real, but when the viewers saw themselves, or when they looked at each other in the space, they realised they were transformed in the presence of art.

Finally, I wished to make an exhibition that could be read in multiple ways without a single narrative thread. In both iterations, I attempted to create an exhibition that could be seen clockwise or anti-clockwise with the gallery on death making both an entry and exit: preceded/succeeded by artistic Rapture on one side and artistic iconoclasm and efforts at capturing nothingness on the other.

The museum as preserver of religious pluralism

The exhibition explored, through its juxtapositions of artworks, how the rubric of religio-philosophical ideas themselves allow us now, as it did in times past, an opportunity to engage with multiple voices of dissent. Museums house objects made in social contexts that have now completely transformed. No religion has stayed static over the past 2,000 years and museums contain vestiges of the material culture of religions which might be interpreted as deeply offensive today.

The headless sculpture of the so-called Jain saint Mallinātha was not regarded as worthy of being shown in Brussels because of its damage. It was, however, shown in Delhi. It is remarkable, and rare, at first glance, because she is completely nude (being unadorned, even without jewelry).

This kind of nudity is only seen in Jainism, but some Jains believe that women cannot achieve the status of *mokṣa*, and thus cannot become seers, or *tīrthaṅkaras*. Some see this sculpture simply as a meditating female



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seated in a pose of yoga rather than as a Jain *tīrthāṅkara*. Others believe that Mallinātha was the only woman to attain the status of a liberated soul. Interestingly, later depictions of Mallinātha show her to be a man. The image thus hints at a sectarian divide where one group of Jains or a mendicant tradition might have created a female seer.

The last part of Gallery V on supernatural bodies similarly ended on a powerful question about the founding of cults, how gods can be created and bodies immortalised through historical circumstance. The gallery enumerated the rules for the representation of different deities, and also showed early images of the Buddha who transited from being thought of as a mortal to a miracle-working, supernatural being who was then presented through iconographic conventions similar to those of Hindu gods. Similar also were Deccani or Sultanate period paintings of the Prophet created by some (often Sufi) devotees on the basis of vivid descriptions of him in the Hadiths, despite injunctions against idolatry.

An extraordinary stele from the museum at Kannauj carved on both sides showed the composite body of an Ardhanārīśvara (or the ‘half-woman-lord’) on one side with an image of a two-armed goddess with one hand in *varadamudrā* (gesture bestowing a favour) and the other holding a lotus flower, an attribute common to Lakṣmī and Tārā, on the

other. As relief sculptures were placed against temple walls the question arises as to why this sculpture has reliefs on both sides.

If read as Lakṣmī, we may speculate that the image comes from a temple dedicated first to Viṣṇu that was turned into one for Śiva. If read as Tārā, who is a Buddhist goddess, it might indicate that a Buddhist shrine was repurposed into a Śaivite one. Or, perhaps, there was no case of sectarian rivalry at all, but merely indicative of a patron or sculptor's change of heart. At any rate, images like this provoke questions as to the possibility of transformations in religious affiliations in history.

Two displays in the sixth gallery called *The Body Ideal: Heroic*, looked at transformations of a different kind. It explored a variety of examples that demonstrated the kinds of social and political conditioning involved in modelling heroes, both folk and urban, and the inextricable flow of one into the other. It also looked at issues of gender and the necessarily patriarchal models that society has cast women in the context of heroism. The contemporary artist Sheela Gowda's work called *Draupadi's Vow* uses threads which hang from metal hooks. Long flowing hair may normally be associated with beauty, but tinged here with red, it has a specific cultural connotation. Draupadi, the wife of the Pāṇḍava brothers, heroes of the Mahābhārata epic, vowed she would only be avenged when she could wash her hair in the blood of those who had defiled her. Her vendetta makes for a violent archetype of heroism for women, as compelling as those of the warring men in the epic. Gowda's use of common materials brings the epic into the everyday. Equally, the episode also reminds us about the anger of the woman, which was required to goad and impel her husbands to fight to restore her honour. The need to protect, avenge and rescue a woman was played out again in a cluster of popular prints.

Between the 1920s and '40s, a number of popular calendar prints deified India as a goddess called Bhāratamātā, literally 'Mother India'. Cast as a cross between Lakṣmī and Durgā, with her many arms bearing the instruments of India's freedom from colonial oppression (flags, slogans, Gandhi's spinning wheel), she has a demure and peaceful countenance, and is invariably shown as someone being worshipped or rescued by men who led the Indian freedom movement.

Questions of gender were raised in each gallery, a few more will be elaborated below. Before addressing them, it is worth pausing to consider the importance of including calendar prints in this exhibition.





Symbols of popular faith, these are vivid and colourful objects of decoration. In fact, they come from that remarkably inchoate and subliminal in-between space that has confounded most writers: a space that is both religious and secular, decorative, kitsch, popular and informed by classical mythology, and ever open to contemporary fashion. Their inclusion brought home to visitors that the myths and symbolism of the antiquities in the exhibition have a continuing resonance in the body politic. It also allowed important aesthetic bridges to be made between objects of high classical art and high studio art by providing a much needed fluid (nay, amniotic) connection.

Gender stereotypes were explored in Gallery III called [Re]Birth. The first part of which dealt with the birth of ideas as much as the rebirth of matter. There were artworks that imaged the primal force as a creator, while others drew attention to a creatrix. The gallery posited, above all, that all creation could only take place if there was desire, and desire even when annihilated (as shown in Gallery VII on asceticism) could still be rekindled, leading, ultimately, to creation again. The same gallery explored the many kinds of mother. Compassionate, but also as a desiring seductress, a protector, and even dangerous ogress. A third segment staged artworks that showed miraculous stories of conception from a

variety of Indian traditions and compared several examples: Rustam, Siddhārtha, Kṛṣṇa, Gaṇeśa, amongst others. Paintings of the Jain *tīrthaṅkaras* stories showed how their embryos were miraculously transferred from the womb of a woman of one caste to a woman of a different caste. As an embryo, Śiva's son Kārtikeya is transferred to a variety of mothers. Pārvati's son Gaṇeśa is mysteriously born in the absence of his father. And the baby Kṛṣṇa, the most beloved of children, is, in fact, an adopted child. The metaphors and the timeliness of the stories were not lost on the public. The gallery's design was inspired by hypaethral yogini temples, the most powerful shrines to the feminine: a mud-coloured ground and hanging lights created the classic binary divide between earth mother and sky father and sculptures of mothers were arranged radiating around a singular male Śiva in the centre of the gallery.

Aesthetic solutions

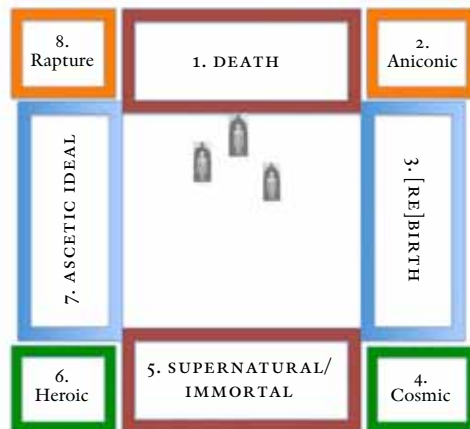
Several of the logistical complexities and intransigence in sanctioning certain loans for the exhibition tested the veracity of one's ideas. Would these ideas bear out with other examples, or, were the thoughts pegged only to an established canon? These challenges opened up newer and closer readings. Thus while some paintings that showed Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa nude, or making love (in the eighteenth-century Pahāri Gīta Govinda by Manaku) were regarded as being too risqué to be shown, others, such as the one showing them embracing in an incandescent reddish orange ground – a metaphor for their union – opened up the exhibition to love and romance beyond sexual depictions alone. The celebration of the women's bodies from medieval temples posing seductively while applying make-up, singing and dancing for their male audience, also displayed a self-confidence in their sexuality, articulation of female sexual desire, and an ability, as the final piece of the exhibition showed, the knowledge of how to read and write.

In a country where the Supreme Court has upheld the old Article 377 which criminalises homosexuality, an effort was made to show how religious and historical documents showcased several other forms of sexuality that might otherwise have been considered transgressive. Poetic verses by the Mughal princess Jahānārā reflected her obsessive desire for enslavement to her religious preceptor. Her brother Dārā Shikoh's testimony of the powerful touch of his Sufi teacher who ripped open his shirt

and rubbed his chest against the prince's and the vivid erotic verses of Mānikavacakar, the Tamil saint for the body of Śiva took the expression of male experience of desire out of heteronormative limitations. Videos of the Nāgamandala ritual dance showed a priest become possessed by an androgynous spirit serpent as he wrapped his body around another male priest.

Not all eroticism was played out under the guise of religion. Same-sex eroticism was also revealed in the large photograph by Dayanita Singh who artfully observed Saroj Khan as she choreographed the female body in a series called *Masterji*. In the early 1990s Saroj Khan was the catalyst that led to the change in the representation of the erotic female in Indian cinema. Her landmark choreographies invested the heroine with an overt seductiveness previously held by the 'vamp'. This frame, from a film that was never released, shows the famous Indian actress Rekha cross-dressed as a mustachioed male doctor examining another actress, Asha Sachdev, who sits on a bed, *déshabillé* in a short satin chemise while Saroj Khan (the scene's choreographer) can be seen in the same frame with her assistant in a space where the aesthetics and erotics of the female body are being orchestrated.

Although each gallery appeared not to present objects chronologically from the perspective of art history, it certainly brought to sharper focus the history of ideas. A spirit of plurality and difference formed the basis of the juxtapositions staged within each gallery, and each gallery itself held within it a constellation of different points of view that stood in dialogue with another gallery. The galleries were designed to balance each other.



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If concepts around the death of the human body inform our understanding of how it is memorialised, represented and made eternal in Gallery I, ideas of how immortal bodies of gods are represented formed the subject of Gallery V. While matters around how the spirit of ‘scientific-rationalism’ and astrological fatalism were presented as equally pernicious forces that aimed to control the body in Gallery IV, what inspires righteous action and individual agency were presented in Gallery VI. Creation, birth, and life itself, determined by desire, miracles and forces beyond human control, were discussed in Gallery III, while Gallery VII showed how human ascetical power can conquer desire and rebut societal norms. And while Gallery II explored how ‘truth’ cannot be represented in bodily form in a transient and illusory life, Gallery VIII was premised on the idea that the aesthetic sensorium of art is itself ‘truth’. The last two categories thus brought the exhibition squarely into the debates about the meanings and agency accorded to art and aesthetics in India. They shifted the debates from a purely political, socio-cultural and psychoanalytic one to demonstrate that the aesthetic cannot be separated either from these subjects, nor studied without its own tools. They also brought home a history of iconoclasm and ‘icono-clash’ as a long-standing dialectic within Indian aesthetic discourse.

Even as the academic community contemplates what the correct tone and register of a historical museum in India should be, and even as the government refuses to take the institution seriously, the fact remains that India is changing at a pace unlike any other time in its history. The demands of urbanisation, power projects, industrialisation, smart cities, and suburbs for a dramatically rising population threaten archaeological/heritage contexts which are being erased. Will these displaced publics now be stirred to visit museums? And how will museums be strengthened and protected to house these varied histories?

Most countries of the world have experienced tremendous political pressure in framing the narratives of their national museums at times when nation-building reached its height – Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or those of former colonies in the twentieth. Whereas the cultural politics of India has been strongly showcased in its performing arts, its museums have mostly been ignored. The lack of interference has been a bit of a blessing, as fewer cultural politics has been played out in India’s over 800 museums than in many other countries.⁹ The main reason for this has certainly not been because of a respect for

a non-partisan telling of history, but because of neglect. Halls of poorly lit objects in shoddily made and often very dusty displays, the public perception of these museums has remained one of being little more than a boring storage space. The truth is that the ostrich-like attitude of Indian curators and government funders of museums cannot be sustained. Just as drives for nationalism have been scrutinised to see what defined or constituted the nation as it was put on display in museums in the West, similar exercises have and are now being done in India. The acid test for this exhibition was no doubt being able to present it in India, without any change in the wall-texts or narrative from what was on display in Western Europe. The vernacular press in India: Hindi, Malayalam and Oriya, apart from several others all reported on the exhibition¹⁰ and the bulk of the visitors to the exhibition did not come from English-speaking sections of the urban intelligentsia. A significant curatorial approach right from the inception of the exhibition was to think its narratives and catalogues through in Hindustani.

Museums in most developing countries face a problem: How can they perform their function of being spaces that can transform peoples' outlook without causing at least some discomfiture? As a curator, I cannot deny that the reason much of the subtext of the staging of the displays and selections of objects were permitted was probably because the principal narratives, *prima facie*, seemed entirely acceptable. The exhibition simply displayed a series of important historical works, serving as visible evidence to challenge the way in which Indian art and religion are normally cast. Even those, however, would have been objectionable if seen in isolation, but the curatorial juxtapositions themselves allowed for counter-balances. Each gallery comprised various internal dialogues as much as it was itself counter-balanced by another gallery, which was premised on a complementary, if not oppositional point of view.

An intractable problem that is attendant to multi-culturalism and pluralism is the inherent danger of collapsing difference. By giving all points of view a common platform, one can at times end up achieving the very opposite of what one was trying to stave off: homogenisation, reductionism, lip-service or tokenistic engagement rather than a meaningful staging of difference. There can never be a perfect solution to this double-bind. Staging the problems however, immediately makes the public itself participants in the problematic. Exhibitions permit experimental interventions in how histories of different identities can be pre-

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sented without forcing any one agenda. This was one, and it shows that there is a healthy appetite for museums and exhibitions in India. It should inspire more, and hopefully those curators will be able to bring social and political commentaries on their milieu to attention. My endeavour in this 'postscript' is also to show how a curation of Indian art can make the viewers aware of the fine aesthetic-balance of accommodating different points of view.

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10. See P. Falguières, « La cité fictive. Les collections de cardinaux, à Rome, au XVI^{ème} siècle » in *Les Carrache et les décors profanes, Actes du colloque de l'Ecole française de Rome*, (Rome Oct. 1986), Paris & Rome, 1988, pp. 215–333.

11. Ernst Kantorowicz, « La souveraineté de l'artiste. Note sur quelques maximes juridiques et les théories de l'art de la Renaissance » in E. Kantorowicz, *Mourir pour la patrie*, Pierre Legendre (ed.), PUF, Paris, 1984, p. 35.

12. On the longevity of this economy of public ornament, see Anne-Valérie Pont, *Orner la cité. Enjeux culturels et politiques du paysage urbain dans l'Asie gréco-romaine*, Ausonius-De Boccard, 2010.

13. See « La cité fictive », op. cit., passim.

14. See Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre. Art, Politics and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, University of California Press, 1994.

15. Bénédicte Savoy, *Patrimoine annexé. Les saisies de biens culturels pratiquées par la France en Allemagne autour de 1800*, MSH, Paris, 2003; idem, *Kunstraub. Napoleons Konfiszierungen in Deutschland und die europäischen Folgen*, Vienna, 2010; Philippe Sénéchal & Monica Preti-Hamard (eds.), *La circulation des œuvres d'art, 1789–1848*, INHA/Getty, Rennes 2007; Ellinoor Bergvelt, Debora J. Meijers, Lieske Tibbe & Elsa van Wezel (eds.), *Napoleon's Legacy: The Rise of National Museums in Europe 1794–1830*, G + H Verlag, Berlin, 2009.

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1. Many of the objects and some of the core ideas of behind the exhibition's design and narrative are set out in *The Body in Indian Art and Thought*, Ludion, Antwerp, 2013, and *Rūpa-Pratirūpa: The Body in Indian Art*, National Museum, Delhi, 2014. They are further elaborated in the documentary films and their accompanying booklet: *The Body in Indian Art*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, 2015. An enormous team of people lay behind the realisation of these projects. I would like, particularly, to thank Dr Karan Singh, Dr. Venu Vasudevan and Baroness Kristine DeMulder for their constancy and support all through its many crises, and from my team, I would like to thank Belinder Dhanoa, Gita Sahgal, and Avani Sood who have helped me focus on many of the ideas contained in this essay. I hope this text will serve as something of an explanation for several decisions that were left unexplained at the time to Sabine Theunissen in Brussels and Siddhartha Chatterjee in Delhi – the designers of the exhibition – whose wonderful work I wish to record here with gratitude.

2. The fact remains that art is inextricably connected with religion, now, and has always been so. Aesthetics and representation in art, are part of a much larger discourse that takes philosophical questions into a variety of individual responses

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in different religious cults. Some of these have been addressed in South Asia in my *The Body in Indian Art and Thought*, op. cit. Much theoretical writing on this is available in a Western context, e.g., Preziosi, Donald, *Art, Religion, Amnesia: The Enchantments of Credulity*, Routledge, Oxon, 2014 and his *Brain of the Earth's Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis & London, 2003.

3. Reported all over the world. For succinct summaries, see Jon Lee Anderson's lament that the local population does not identify with these historical monuments: <http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/isis-and-the-destruction-of-history>, accessed 01-05-2015. Several writers, like Prof. Zainab Bahrani at Columbia have stated that such attacks have multiple reasons: 'the looting for the antiquities market, which is an illicit international market, is very important to consider, because this is very destructive. But the blowing up of shrines and monuments on site is really horrendous, and this is a form of cultural cleansing, certainly, but also ethnic cleansing.' View full transcript of the interview on: http://www.democracynow.org/2015/2/27/antiquities_scholar_islamic_states_destruction_of, accessed 01-05-2015.

4. A statement by the attackers of the museum described their act as a 'blessed invasion of one of the dens of infidels and vice in Muslim Tunisia'. See <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31960926>.

5. As Faisal Devji says: 'From spectacular attacks to sundry communiqués and beheadings, the jihad's world of reference is far more connected to the dreams and nightmares of the media than to any traditional school of Islamic jurisprudence or political thought' (p. 90). 'Only in mass media', he later amplifies, 'does the collective witnessing that defines martyrdom achieve its full effect, as various attempts by would-be martyrs to film their deaths or at least leave behind videotaped testaments, illustrate so clearly' (p. 95): *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity*, Cornell University Press, 2005. That it is was not just Islamic society that promoted martyrdom, and that martyrdom is always meant to be *seen* and commemorated, and that it is something age-old, was hinted at by placing memorials to martyrs from diverse Indian traditions at the entrance, encouraging viewers to think about how importunate socio-political actions are exonerated in almost all religious propaganda. Finbarr Barry Flood sums up the alienation that the divergent views on iconoclasm as propaganda and theological proscription in 'Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum' in the *Art Bulletin*, December 2002, Vol. 84, No. 4, pp. 641-659. For an instructive, larger discourse in the western art history, see Willem van Asselt et al. (eds.) *Iconoclasm and Iconoclasm: Struggle for Religious Identity*, Brill, Leiden, 2007.

6. Tapati Guha-Thakurta, 'Fault Lines in a National Edifice: On the Rights and offences of Contemporary Indian Art' in Sumathi Ramaswamy (ed.), *Barefoot Across the Nation: Maqbool Fida Husain & the idea of India*, Routledge, New York & Oxford, 2011, pp. 172-197. See also her 'Art History and the Nude: on Art, Obscenity and Sexuality in Contemporary India' in *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art*

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in *Colonial and Postcolonial India*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004, pp. 237–267.

7. These issues have been widely discussed in two works: Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004; Saloni Mathur & Kavita Singh (eds.), *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2015.

8. I have touched on how issues of how Asian cultures are stereotyped by religion and the unsustainability of the modernist disengagement from that stereotype: 'Tropes and Places' in Parul Dave Mukherji, Naman P. Ahuja & Kavita Singh (eds.), *InFlux: Contemporary art in Asia*, Sage Publications, Delhi 2013.

9. Guha-Thakurta & Mathur & Singh, op. cit. provide a study of the extremely resistant-to-change interpretative frames that have guided the displays of Indian museums from colonial to post-colonial times.

10. Some examples include: *Sentinel* (Guwahati) on 16-03-2014; *Mathrubhumi* (in Malayalam) (Delhi edn.) on 11-03-2014; *Malayala Manorama* (Delhi) on 15-03-2014; *Eenadu* (Delhi) on 15-03-2014; *Sakshi* (Delhi) on 16-04-2014; *Dinakaran* (Delhi) on 17-03-2014; *Mathrubhumi* (Delhi) on 25-03-2014; *Malayala Manorama* (Delhi) on 25-03-2014; *Malayala Manorama* (Delhi) on 14-03-2014; *Mathrubhumi* (Delhi) on 15-03-2014; *Malayala Manorama* on 28-03-2014; *Punjab Kesari* (Delhi) on 15-03-2014; *Hitavada* (Bhopal) on 31-03-2014; *National Duniya* (Delhi) on 11-03-2014; *Sakal Times* (Pune) on 16-03-2014; *Navbharat Times* (Delhi) on 25-03-2014.

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