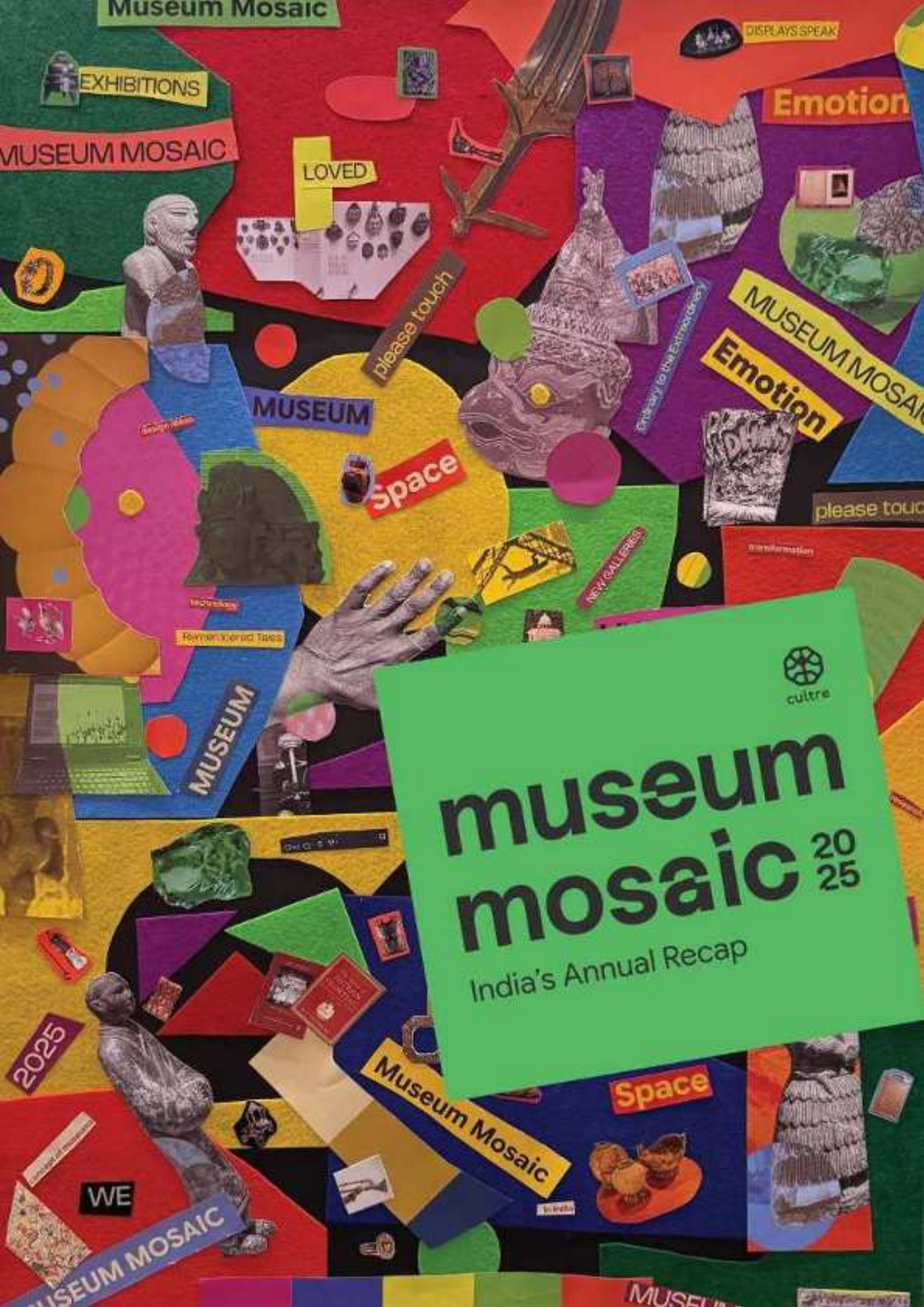




**museum
mosaic** 20
25
India's Annual Recap

Museum Mosaic

Issue 3 | May 2026

Published by Cultech Wave Pvt. Ltd.

Publisher

Cultre, New Delhi

www.cultre.in

Editor

Anjchita B. Nair

Production

Vivek Sharma

Design & Layout

Namrata Dhall

Gauri Shilendran

Manisha Sharma

Avishi Agarwal

Hrishika Singh

Rashmi Ray

Vasundhara K.

Editorial

Jahān Thakur

Monjima Kar

Ichha Munshi

Ritika Gour

Yusra Naqvi

Communications

Aastha Soni

Print Edition

Printed at Print 'N' Design, J-99/B, Hanuman Mandir Marg,
Puran Nagar, Palam Colony, New Delhi - 110077, India.

Typefaces

Titles and headings: Stack Sans Notch

Body text: Google Sans Flex

©2026 Cultre

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, adapted or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or translated in any language or performed or communicated to the public in any manner whatsoever, or any cinematographic film or sound recording made therefrom without the prior written permission of the copyright holders.



CONTENTS

Cultre Curates - Toilet Tales Gallery at the Sulabh International Museum of Toilets

Museum Watch 2025

New Museums, Spotlighted

Museum Trails

Artefact Mayhem: Decode the chaos

Museum Matters: In their words

Museum Exhibitions We Loved

Museum Influencers 2026

Instagram Handles We Loved

Museum Musings: Hope for a better tomorrow

Museums Through Your Eyes

Museum Memory Match: A game of objects and recall

Foreword

Since I stepped into the world of art, culture and museums, and more specifically - Cultre, I feel like the art, culture and museum sector is going through a very positive, hopeful and forward looking phase. While still rooted in traditions and heritage at its core, there is a slow shift in the way interactions are being curated. There was a time when museums in India were often imagined as silent spaces: places of preservation, memory, and authority. They were institutions one visited (rarely at that) to observe history carefully arranged behind glass, where knowledge moved in a single direction: from the institution to the visitor.

That image, however, is slowly and steadily changing.

Across the country today, museums are becoming more experimental, more accessible, more immersive, and, perhaps most importantly, more human. There is a visible shift underway in how cultural institutions are imagining themselves and their audiences. Museums are no longer functioning only as spaces of preservation, but increasingly as spaces of conversation, participation, curiosity, and even play.

Over the last few years, one can sense a new energy entering the sector. New museums are emerging across vastly different subjects and regions. Existing institutions are rethinking display methods, experimenting with digital technologies, collaborating with artists and designers, and exploring more layered ways of storytelling. Exhibitions are becoming increasingly immersive and multidisciplinary. Community-led initiatives are gaining visibility. Archives are entering public conversations. Even museum gift shops (long neglected creatures of the cultural ecosystem) are slowly becoming interesting.

Most importantly, new kinds of people are entering the museum world. Today, museums are no longer shaped only by historians and archaeologists, although they remain central to the field. Increasingly, the sector is being enriched by graphic designers, architects, animators, game designers, educators, filmmakers, technologists, experience designers, accessibility consultants, sound artists, researchers, digital storytellers, and “managers” who somehow know how to make these varied sets of people work together without losing their minds.

This cross-pollination is changing the way museums think.

The conversations now extend beyond collections and chronology. Museums are engaging with questions around accessibility, sustainability, identity, memory, ecology, participation, technology, and public engagement. The boundaries between museums, public art, cultural festivals, archives, libraries, research institutions, and immersive experiences are becoming increasingly fluid. In many ways, museums are beginning to behave less like isolated institutions and more like active cultural ecosystems.

This issue of Museum Mosaic emerges within this moment of transition. Through sections such as Museum Watch 2025, New Museums, Spotlighted, Museum Trails, Museum Matters: In Their Words, and Museum Exhibitions We Loved, the publication attempts to capture the changing landscape around museums in India. Across these pages are stories of experiments and initiatives carried out by various institutions and practitioners rethinking what museums can become.

Perhaps the most significant shift is this: museums are increasingly being understood as spaces through which societies negotiate memory, identity, conflict, aspiration, and imagination. They are becoming places where difficult conversations can happen alongside wonder, where scholarship can coexist with emotion, and where audiences are invited not only to observe history, but to engage with it.

This issue does not attempt to present a complete overview of India's museum landscape. That would be impossible, and also probably require several additional volumes and a highly stressed editorial team. Instead, it offers fragments, observations, trails, reflections, and experiments that together point toward a sector that is actively evolving.

And perhaps that is the most exciting part. If there is one thing this publication hopes to capture, it is this sense of movement. A movement toward institutions that are willing to question inherited formats and embrace new ways of being. And perhaps most importantly, a movement towards recognising culture not as something distant or static or pickled, but as something living, something that continues to evolve through people, participation, and shared experience.

We hope this issue encourages curiosity, dialogue, and new ways of looking at museums, not simply as spaces one visits, but as spaces that continue to shape how we understand ourselves, our histories, and our collective futures. And ideally, also as spaces where nobody should feel embarrassed for spending too much time staring at one extremely specific bronze figurine for reasons they themselves cannot fully explain.

Anjchita B. Nair
CEO, Cultre





do."
Ware.



"Japanesque,"
No. 30—Printed, Blue and White Ware.

Cultre Curates

Toilet Tales

Pits to Plumbing

In November 2025, the Sulabh International Museum of Toilets opened a new gallery on sanitation that turns attention to one of the most overlooked yet essential aspects of human life. Toilet Tales: Pits to Plumbing, conceptualised and curated by Cultre, builds on the museum's long-standing commitment to tracing the cultural and technological histories of sanitation. The gallery, built upon historical artefacts and archival research, brings together museum interpretation and spatial design to tell an unlikely story of how toilets, baths, and soaps shaped English society and became markers of civility.

The Cardinal. | White or Ivory. | Th
54/-

Deluge. | Paper Box.
6/6 | 8/-



No. 26—"Poppy."

The Cardinal. | White or Ivory. | The Deluge
54/- | 46/6 | 8/-

The Cardinal. | White or Ivory. | The Deluge. | Paper Box.
54/- | 46/6 | 8/-



cm.
id.





Delphic

The Delphic Chalice is a golden cup, known as the Chalice of the Delphic Oracle, which was used by the Oracle of Delphi to deliver her prophecies. The chalice is made of gold and is decorated with a central medallion and a band of figures. It is one of the most famous objects in the collection of the British Museum.

The chalice is believed to have been made in the 5th century BC. It is one of the most famous objects in the collection of the British Museum. The chalice is made of gold and is decorated with a central medallion and a band of figures. It is one of the most famous objects in the collection of the British Museum.

At the core of the gallery is a remarkable collection of sanitation fixtures sourced from Victorian and Edwardian England, objects that took nearly four decades to assemble. These include ornately designed water closets, earth closets, bidets, and early flush systems that reveal how sanitation became intertwined with ideas of progress and civility. As the exhibition makes clear, the evolution of plumbing was never simply about engineering but equally about reshaping how societies understood cleanliness, privacy, and the boundaries between public and private life.

The exhibition situates these objects within a broader narrative of urbanisation and public health. From the proliferation of cesspits in 18th century London to the development of sewer systems, the gallery traces how cities grappled with the management of waste at scale. Archival references ranging from scientific observations on river pollution to the dangers of poorly managed cesspits, underscore how sanitation crises shaped modern urban infrastructure. In doing so, Toilet Tales connects the history of toilets to the histories of cities and towns themselves.

Equally compelling is the gallery's attention to the cultural politics of sanitation. Through sections such as Potty Parity, the exhibition highlights the gendered dimensions of access to toilets, highlighting how the absence of public facilities for women historically restricted their mobility and participation in public life. By tracing these inequities, the gallery positions sanitation as a site of ongoing social struggle, one that intersects with questions of gender, class, and rights.

The curatorial vision is closely tied to using design in its interpretation of the gallery. Drawing on Victorian visual language of ornamentation, and decorative motifs, the gallery creates an immersive environment that both contextualises and contrasts with the objects on display. Bold colours and contemporary interventions encourage visitors to re-encounter familiar objects with a renewed sense of curiosity. Everyday items such as soap bars, advertisements, and sanitary accessories are curated to reveal hygiene practices shaped by economies, imperialist ideas and shifting consumer cultures. Among these, a British royal bathtub from 1915, made for Carriage No. 800 of the Royal Train and fitted in a bathroom for King George V and Queen Mary, the first such to be installed on a train, finds its place in the gallery.



THE UNITAS Toilet Tales

Pits to Plumbing

Step into the world of Victorian England, when becoming married brings together bathrubs, bars, people to the design, engineering

Curated by



RELiance

Victorian period, women would use chamber pots. Wealthier women would have servants to bring pots or carry the chamber pots to the toilet. Most of the time, women would use a chamber pot or a toilet. Women would use a chamber pot or a toilet. Women would use a chamber pot or a toilet.



Give a Sh*t

Because women literally weren't allowed to!

Toilet Tales: Pits to Plumbing, curated by Cultre at Sultan International Museum of Toilet.

OPEN NOW!

Pre-19th century

Give a Sh*t

Because white supremacy used to come wrapped in and spread by a bar of soap.

Toilet Tales: Pits to Plumbing, curated by Cultre at Sultan International Museum of Toilet.

OPEN NOW!

Give a Sh*t

Because one of the first bathrubs on a train in the world is now housed in Delhi.

Toilet Tales: Pits to Plumbing, curated by Cultre at Sultan International Museum of Toilet.

OPEN NOW!

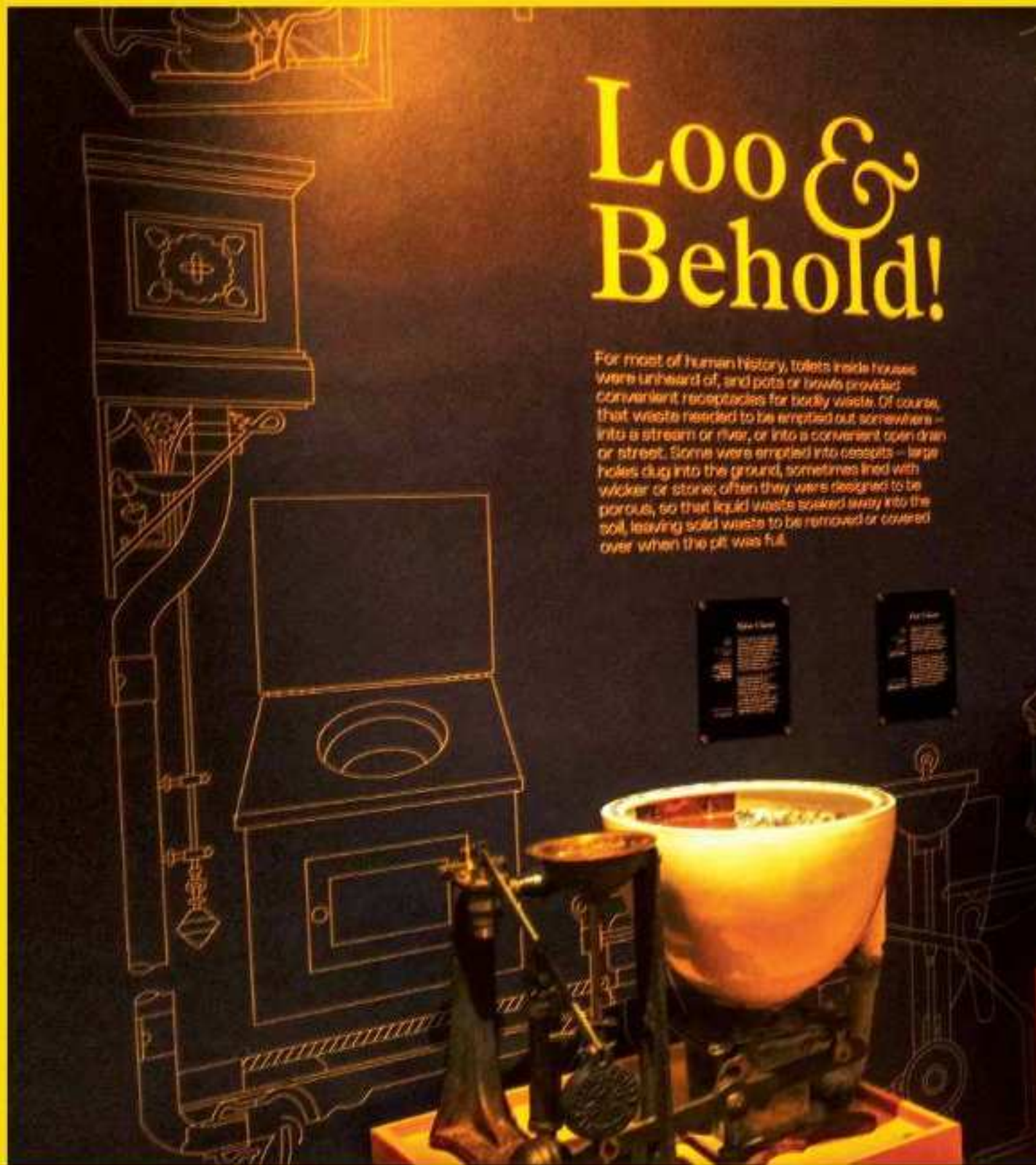


No. 25 - "Venerable" Toilet

Cardinal 131/6 | White or Ivory | The Dilemma 124/- | Paper Cow 18/-

Loo & Behold!

For most of human history, toilets inside houses were unheard of, and pots or bowls provided convenient receptacles for bodily waste. Of course, that waste needed to be emptied out somewhere – into a stream or river, or into a convenient open drain or street. Some were emptied into cesspits – large holes dug into the ground, sometimes lined with wicker or stone; often they were designed to be porous, so that liquid waste soaked away into the soil, leaving solid waste to be removed or covered over when the pit was full.





Importantly, Toilet Tales extends beyond historical display to engage with the present. The gallery resonates with the legacy of Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, whose work through the Sulabh movement transformed sanitation into a matter of social justice and human dignity. By historically situating the developments in Europe, the exhibition underscores the persistent inequities in access to safe sanitation, that are sometimes still urgent and ongoing concerns.





Toilet Tales: Pits to Plumbing attempts to transform the way visitors perceive the toilet, from an invisible and private necessity to a powerful lens on human society. The exhibition invites reflection on the infrastructures that sustain everyday life. Visitors are invited to ponder over the museum's larger proposition, that the history of sanitation is inseparable from the history of civilisation itself.



MUSEUM WATCH 2025

This dedicated feature looks back at the moments that shaped India's museum landscape over the past year. From ambitious exhibitions and curatorial experiments to major openings, key acquisitions, and shifting policy frameworks, *Museum Watch* offers a concise yet layered view of a field that is growing, adapting, and reimagining itself.

jan

feb

mar

apr

may

jun

jul

aug

sep

oct

nov

dec

January



Image Source:
Vadnagar Archaeological
Experiential Museum

INDIA'S FIRST LIVE-DIG MUSEUM UNVEILED IN VADNAGAR

The Vadnagar Archaeological Experiential Museum was inaugurated on 16 January by the Union Home Minister, Amit Shah. India's first museum to blend a live excavation site with immersive digital and physical storytelling exhibits, the showcases over 5,000 artefacts including ceramics, coins, tools, sculptures, skeletal fragments, and ancient food grains.



Image Source:
Vadnagar Archaeological Experiential Museum



Image Source:
Wikimedia Commons



THE BHAU DAJI LAD MUSEUM REOPENS AFTER CONSERVATION WORK

The newly renovated Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Mumbai's Byculla East reopened to the public after four years. A 154-year-old institution and Maharashtra's oldest museum, the structure has been conserved while retaining its original 24-karat gold gilding on the ceiling and columns, which is complemented by freshly painted celadon green walls.



Image Source:
Wikimedia Commons

NEW GALLERIES ADDED TO ODISHA STATE MUSEUM



Image Source: Odisha Museum

Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi inaugurated nine new galleries at the Odisha State Museum, bringing the state's rich heritage to life. These additions delve into natural history, prehistoric artifacts, tribal cultures, and artistic traditions through interactive and informative exhibits that immerse visitors in Odisha's past.

ALMORA TO BE HOME TO NEW MUSEUM SHOWCASING AVIAN BIODIVERSITY

Himalayan Bulbul

Image Source:
Wikimedia Commons



A bird museum is to be established in the Sauni Binsar village in Almora, Uttarakhand. To be modelled along the lines of the tiger museum at the Jim Corbett National Park, the museum will showcase the region's avian biodiversity and hopes to become an important ecotourism destination for the state. Sauni Binsar is home to more than 50 bird species, and some rare birds such as the Ultramarine Flycatcher, Himalayan Bulbul, and the Red-headed Vulture can be seen here.

Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary

Image Source: Wikimedia Commons



February



A wall mural from the Open-Air Art Wall Museum
Image Source: The Patriot

INDIA'S FIRST OPEN-AIR ART WALL MUSEUM INAUGURATED IN DELHI

Jitendra Singh inaugurated India's first "Open-Air Art Wall Museum" at the Mausam Bhawan in Delhi's Lodhi Road. Developed as a visual narrative of the Indian Meteorological Department's scientific and technological journey, the museum spans a large public wall and presents milestones from the past 150 years. The art showcase features 38 unique murals depicting India's meteorological history, the evolution of weather forecasting, and its impact on agriculture, disaster management, and everyday life.

INDIAN NAVY HANDS OVER INS GULDAR FOR INDIA'S FIRST UNDERWATER MUSEUM AND REEF

The Indian Navy handed over Ex INS Guldar, a Landing Ship Tank, to the Maharashtra Development Corporation Limited for it to be converted into India's first underwater museum and artificial reef. Decommissioned in 2024, INS Guldar will showcase the significance of India's naval heritage and has the potential to provide a boost to India's underwater tourism economy.

INS Guldar (Bottom)
Image Source: Wikimedia Commons





MSMS II MUSEUM LAUNCHES 'WE THE PEOPLE' AT INDIA ART FAIR 2025

The Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum inaugurated their exhibition titled *We The People* at India Art Fair to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Constitution of India. The exhibition highlighted the role of ordinary people centred around the subcontinent with a focus on Jaipur, attempting to reconstruct histories of ordinary workers and people.



'We The People' by the Maharaja
Sawai Man Singh II Museum Trust

Image Source:
City Palace Museum, Jaipur

March



Madurai Kamaraj University

Image Source:
Wikimedia Commons

TAMIL NADU PLANS MUSEUM FOR TAMIL'S ENDURING LEGACY

The Tamil Nadu state government announced plans to open Agaram - Museum of Languages in Madurai. Envisioned as a space dedicated to Tamil, one of the subcontinent's oldest surviving languages, the museum will feature archival records supported by high-tech facilities. The move aims to preserve cultural and linguistic diversity in the face of a homogenising Hindi influence.



Image Source: Wikipedia



RK Narayan's personal artefacts which are now housed in the Mysuru museum
Image Source: The Hindu

MYSURU'S RK NARAYAN MUSEUM SET FOR REVIVAL WITH INTERACTIVE UPGRADES

The RK Narayan Museum in Mysuru, opened in 2016, is poised for a revitalisation to draw larger crowds. Despite boasting an impressive collection of the novelist's memorabilia, the museum struggles with low footfall. To breathe new life into the site, officials are planning innovative upgrades such as interactive audio-visual displays, regular programming, and addition of modern amenities, with the Karnataka Tourism Department likely to play a key role.



RK Narayan's House Ground Floor
Image Source: Museums of India

MASSIVE CULTURAL CENTRE ANNOUNCED FOR BANDRA-KURLA

The Maharashtra government announced plans for a state-level cultural centre and museum at Bandra-Kurla Complex to preserve the state's rich heritage. Spanning 14,418 sqm, it will house an auditorium, art galleries, research centre, and museum with artefacts, sculptures, and a range of historical items. The space will be modelled on the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya museums.



Mario Miranda Artworks
Image Source: BBC News

A GOA MUSEUM'S TRIBUTE TO CARTOONIST MARIO MIRANDA

To commemorate iconic cartoonist and painter Mario de Miranda, a museum in Goa's Old Secretariat Building (Adil Shah Palace) will dedicate galleries to his life and works. The space will depict Miranda's art as a tribute to his major contributions to art and culture.





BR Ambedkar statue at
Dr. Ambedkar National Memorial
Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

NEW MUSEUM-LIBRARY SLATED FOR HUSSAIN SAGAR LAKE

A museum and library in honour of Dr. BR Ambedkar is to be set up near the Hussain Sagar Lake in Telangana. To be executed through the Hyderabad Metropolitan Development Authority, the memorial space will be located close to the 125-foot tall Ambedkar statue, which was unveiled in 2023.



Hussain Sagar Lake, Telangana
Image Source: Wikimedia Commons



Image Source: Alpaivalla Museum

FD ALPAIVALLA MUSEUM REOPENS AFTER FACELIFT

The FD Alpaivalla Museum was reopened in Mumbai, following a period of renovation. Dedicated to the Parsi and Iranian Zoroastrian community, the museum houses archaeological and ethnographic collections and artefacts significant to the community's history and culture.





Dandi March statue at
National Gandhi Museum, Delhi
Image Source: Wikipedia Commons

GANDHI'S HEIRLOOMS HANDED OVER TO NATIONAL GANDHI MUSEUM

Several personal artefacts of Mahatma Gandhi have been added to the National Gandhi Museum, including letters, documents, and a saree he hand-spun for his wife in prison. The items were presented by his grandson, Kedar Ramgobin, to museum director Alagan Annamalai in the presence of External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar.



'Satyagrah' motif—an enlargement of the
woodcut by Willem Maber Ogterop
Image Source: National Gandhi Museum



Early phase of Gandhi's life in
National Gandhi Museum
Image Source: Museums of India

April



सत्यमेव जयते

The Ashoka Emblem

Image Source:
Wikimedia Commons

DELHI SECRETARIAT PUSHES FOR HERITAGE MUSEUM CONVERSION

The Delhi Assembly building, a century-old landmark, could soon house a museum dedicated to the city's rich history and heritage. Although it is currently home to the historic gallows chamber, the Assembly Secretariat is eager to initiate discussions with relevant agencies to transform the site into a space chronicling the city, as well as the building's key historical milestones.



Image Source: The Patriot



National Maritime Heritage Complex
Image Source: NMHC

LOTHAL MARITIME HERITAGE MUSEUM'S FIRST SIX GALLERIES TO DEBUT END-2025

The Gujarat government announced that six galleries at the National Maritime Heritage Complex in Lothal, currently under development, will open by the end of 2025. Featuring 14 galleries in total, the museum will trace India's maritime heritage from the Harappan era to the present. Lothal, a site of key Indus Valley Civilisation remains, was once a bustling maritime trade hub.



Lothal, ancient site of Harappan Civilisation, Gujarat
Image Source: Wikimedia Commons



COIMBATORE GETS A NEW SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY MUSEUM

The PSG-GRD Museum of Science and Technology, which contains exhibits on energy, automobiles and space, was inaugurated at the PSG iTech Campus in the Neelambur area of Coimbatore. The museum, set on an area of 30,000 square feet, has been established with an aim to draw students towards pursuing careers in the manufacturing sector.



Image Source:
The PSG-GRD Museum

May



Saroj Ghose
Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

SAROJ GHOSE, INDIA'S SCIENCE MUSEUM MAN, PASSES AWAY

Dr. Saroj Ghose, widely regarded as the father of India's science museum movement, passed away on 17th May 2025. As the founding Director-General of the National Council of Science Museums, he championed interactive, decentralised science centers, including Science City Kolkata and the National and Nehru Science Centers, transforming public engagement with science and shaping modern museology in India.



Science City, Kolkata entirely conceptualised by Dr. Saroj Ghose

Image Source: Wikimedia Commons



Water Heritage Museum
inside CWRDM

Image Source: CWRDM Kerala

KERALA'S WATER HERITAGE MUSEUM GETS GLOBAL RECOGNITION

The Water Heritage Museum in Kozhikode, run by the Centre for Water Resources Development and Management, was added to the Global Network of Water Museums, which is endorsed by UNESCO's Intergovernmental Hydrological Programme. The museum showcases Kerala's indigenous water traditions through immersive exhibits and hosts an on-site climate change study lab.



Centre for Water Resources Development and Management

Image Source: CWRDM Kerala

UK-INDIA CULTURAL PACT BOOSTS MUSEUM TIES

The UK Government and Government of India linked a new cultural agreement to boost partnerships between their museums and institutions. Key collaboration areas include joint programs and exhibitions, heritage conservation, museum management, collection digitisation, and combating illicit trafficking of cultural property.



Lisa Nandy and Gajendra Singh Shukhla

Image Source: Times of India



Image Source:
Nagaland Tribune

NAGA DELEGATION RECLAIMS HERITAGE FROM PITT RIVERS MUSEUM

A delegation from Nagaland, including tribal leaders, the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR), and Recover, Restore, and Decolonise (RRaD), visited Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum to initiate the historic repatriation of Naga ancestral human remains that had been displayed at the museum till 2020. This marked a key decolonisation step, with formal claims pending for full return to their homeland.



Image Source:
Wikimedia Commons



TERRACOTTA SCULPTURES UNVEILED AT MUSEUM IN BIHAR

Bihar's Sitaram Upadhyay Museum unveiled rare terracotta sculptures from Chausa Garh, Buxar, at a new gallery opening. Excavated between 2011-2014, highlights include Shiva-Parvati's marriage scene, Hanuman, Ram, and Kumbhakarna depictions, as well as some pieces bearing ancient script inscriptions.



Terracotta artefact depicting a scene from the Ramayana from Chausa Garh Excavation

Image Source: ETV Bharat

Terracotta art found at Chausa Garh

Image Source: ETV Bharat

Sitaram Upadhyay Museum, Buxar

Image Source: Times of India





PRIME MINISTER LAYS DOWN VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF INDIA'S MUSEUM SCENE

At the 47th Annual General Meeting of the Prime Ministers Museum and Library in New Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined a vision for India's museums. He stressed their global role in connecting people to history, proposed a Museum Map of India platform, and urged state-level committees for tech-driven innovations.



Inside the Prime Minister Museum
Image Source: Indian Express

MUSEUM AND RESEARCH CENTRE ON ANCIENT SCRIPTURES INAUGURATED IN VARANASI

The Shashtra Museum & Research Centre was inaugurated in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh with a view to preserve, digitise, and present ancient textual heritage with the help of modern technologies.



Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

July



Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation
Image Source: Wikipedia

BIDS INVITED FOR TEXTILE MUSEUM AT BYCULLA'S HISTORIC INDIA UNITED MILLS

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation invited expressions of interest from external agencies for the development and long-term maintenance of a textile museum at Kalachowki in Byculla East. Set on a 44,000-sqm plot of the India United Mill no. 2 and 3, the project aims to restore the old mill buildings, while developing it and also educating citizens about the industrial history of Bombay.

Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation

Image Source: Wikimedia Commons



MUSEUM ROUNDTABLE TACKLES CURATION, DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY

The Ministry of Culture hosted a high-level Museum Roundtable on July 24, 2025, on the theme "Latest Advancements in the Museum Sector." The one-day event convened experts and culture professionals to explore key pillars shaping museum practices, including curation and programming, design, and emerging technologies.

The Ministry of Culture's
Museum Roundtable
Image Source:
Ministry of Culture



CONSTRUCTION BEGINS ON KALINGA MARITIME MUSEUM IN PARADIP

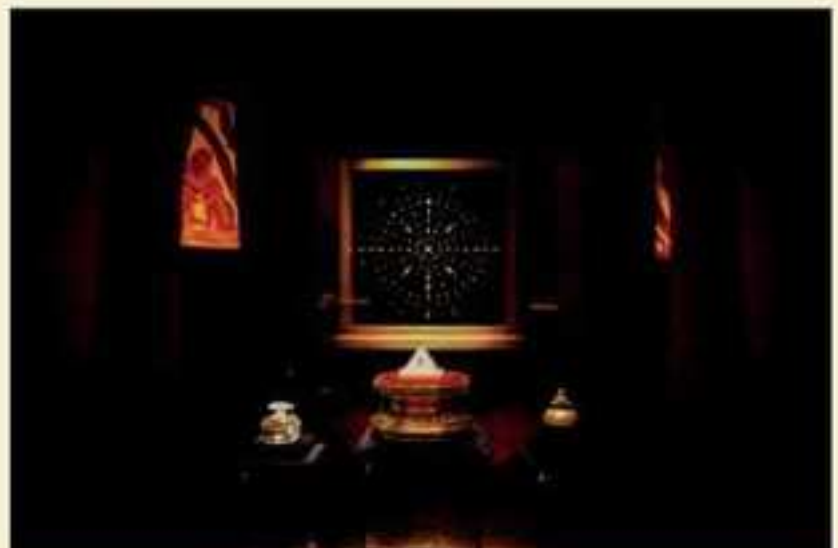
Work commenced on the Kalinga Maritime Museum, a Paradip Port Authority initiative that will redefine marine heritage conservation. The museum's innovative fish-shaped design faces the sea, harnessing natural winds for resilience while enduring Odisha's temperature swings from 80°C to 45°C. The museum will be Odisha's premier cultural and educational landmark.

Proposed fish-shaped structure
design for Kalinga Maritime Museum
Image Source: PIS



INDIA RETRIEVES BUDDHA'S PIPRAHWA GEMS AFTER 127 YEARS

India successfully repatriated the sacred Piprahwa gems, ancient relics linked to Lord Buddha's remains, after 127 years, following a halted auction in Hong Kong. Excavated in 1898, over 300 jewels were acquired through a government-Godrej Industries partnership.



The Piprahwa Relics of the Historical Buddha Mauryan Empire, Afghanistan, circa 240-200 BCE

Image Source: PIB

August

Museum Watch August 2025



**Bihar Museum
Biennale 2025**

Global South: Sharing Histories

PATNA HOSTS THIRD BIENNALE, ASIA, AFRICA, LATIN AMERICA UNITE

On August 7, 2025, the Bihar Museum in Patna hosted the third edition of its Biennale, on the theme "Global South: Sharing Histories." The event gathered museums and cultural institutions from Asia, Africa, and Latin America to share perspectives and celebrate diverse cultural narratives.

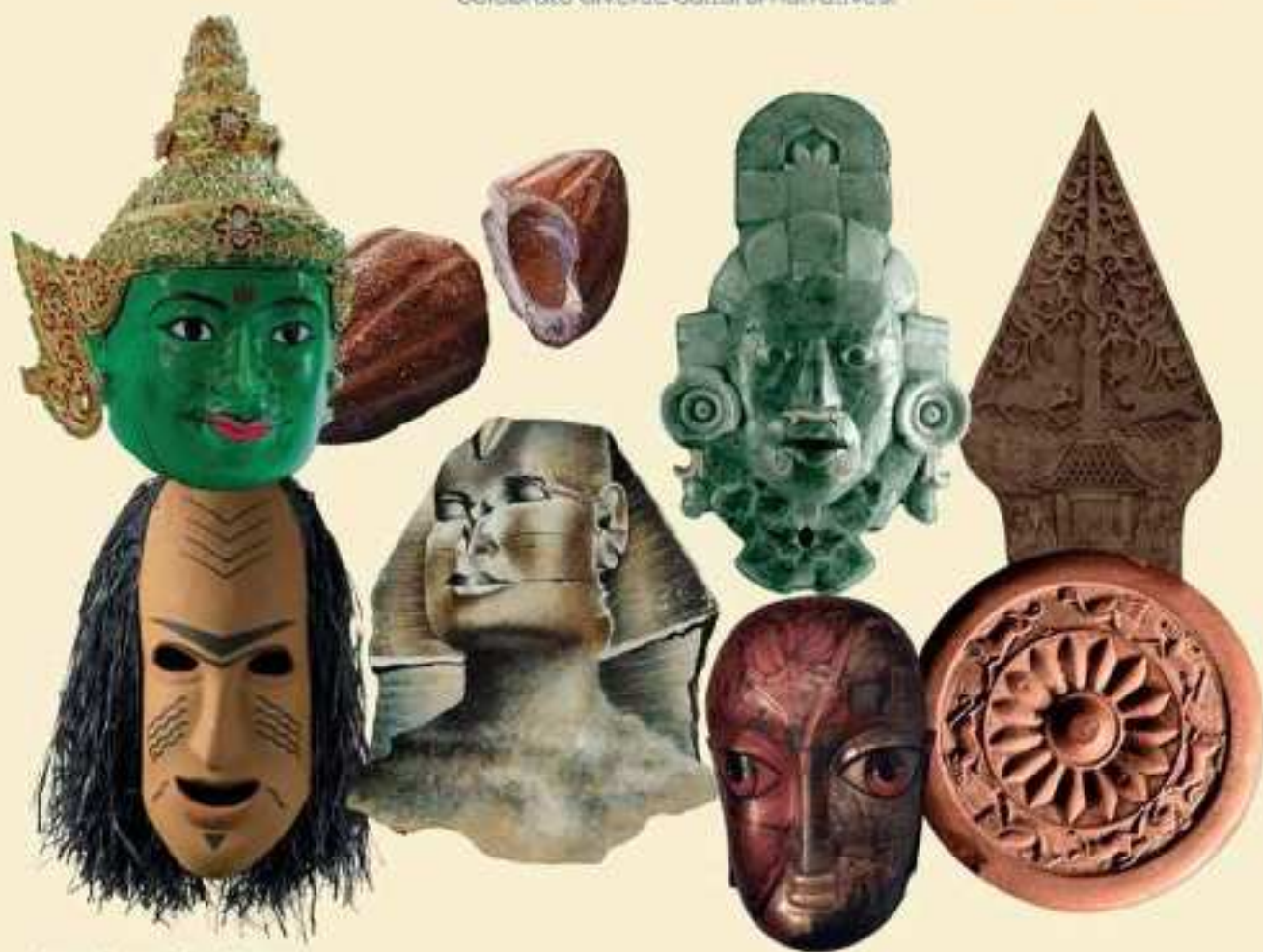


Image Source: Bihar Museum

RE-IMAGINING INDIGENOUS TEXTILES AT DELHI'S CRAFTS MUSEUM

Woven: The Future 2.0 exhibition organised at Crafts Museum in Delhi on National Handloom Day
Image Source: Hindustan Times

The rich legacy of Indian textiles displayed in Crafts Museum, Delhi
Image Source: India Art Fair

Ahead of National Handloom Day 2025, the Fashion Design Council of India, with India Art Fair's Young Collectors' Programme, opened a textile exhibition titled Re-imagining A Way Back to Us: Contemporary Indigenous Fashion and Textiles in India at Delhi's Crafts Museum, showcasing contemporary indigenous fashion, regional artisan narratives, and the evolving language of Indian textiles through innovation.



IMMERSIVE MUSEUM UPCOMING IN UJJAIN

The Veer Bharat Museum, being developed in Ujjain ahead of the 2028 Simhashta Mela, will showcase the journey of Indian civilisation using immersive 3D and augmented reality technologies. The museum will be housed in the historic Kothi Palace, currently under conservation.



Kothi Mahal, Ujjain
Image Source: Dnyanesh Bhaskar



St. J.J. School of Art
Image Source:
Wikimedia Commons

MUSEUM AT J. J. SCHOOL OF ART TO SAFEGUARD AGEING ART TREASURES

Mumbai's iconic J. J. School of Art will soon have a dedicated art museum as the ageing heritage building, now in poor condition, lacks facilities to conserve artworks under controlled temperature and humidity. Pegged at a tentative budget of Rs. 28.7 crore, the museum will house over 3,500 rare paintings, student galleries, and climate-controlled archives.

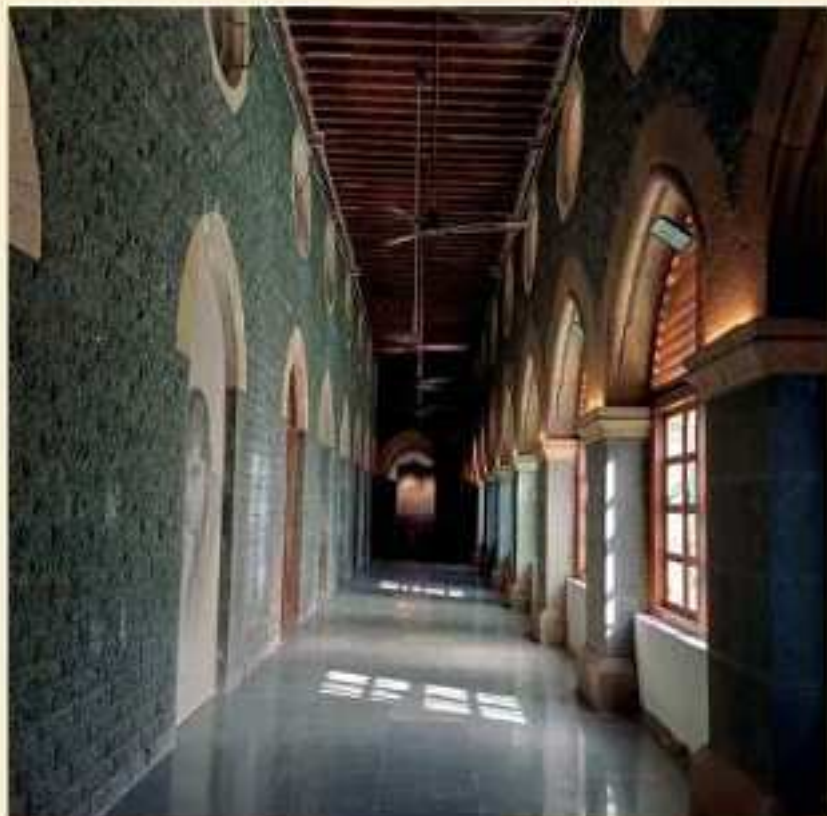


Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

GORAKHPUR TO HONOUR GORKHAS WITH WAR MEMORIAL MUSEUM

The foundation stone for the Gorkha War Memorial Museum was laid in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. The museum will celebrate the Gorkha soldiers' legacy with exhibits featuring traditional artefacts alongside digital and immersive displays.



CM Yogi lays foundation of
Gorkha War Memorial
museum in UP

Image Source: The Statesman

October



UNESCO's Virtual Museum of Stolen Objects

Image Source: UNESCO

UNESCO LAUNCHES VIRTUAL MUSEUM OF STOLEN CULTURAL OBJECTS, FEATURES INDIAN TREASURES

At the World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development (MONDIACULT 2025), UNESCO launched the Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects—a groundbreaking platform built with 3D modeling and virtual reality to digitally reconstruct and exhibit stolen or missing cultural artefacts worldwide, safeguarding global heritage. Notably, this new virtual museum prominently features three sacred Indian artefacts: a statue of the god Bhairava (from the Bhairav Baba Temple in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh), a statue of Shiva as Nataraja (from the Mahadev Temple in Pali, Chhattisgarh), and a statue of the god Brahma (also from the Mahadev Temple in Pali, Chhattisgarh).

First Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects

Image Source: UNESCO



NEW ROYAL KINGDOMS MUSEUM TO CHRONICLE SARDAR PATEL'S PRINCELY INTEGRATION

Landscape Design for upcoming Royal Kingdoms Museum near Statue of Unity
Image Source: ETV Bharat



SUPERCARS GALLERY AT COIMBATORE MUSEUM TRACES HIGH-SPEED INNOVATION HISTORY



Image Source: GEDEE Car Museum

Coimbatore's Geedee Car Museum opened a new wing focused on performance vehicles, featuring race cars, sports cars, and supercars. It traces the history of high-speed innovation, highlighting the engineering and design insights that drive them. A special section also displays locally built race cars from both historical and modern eras.



KOLKATA'S SCIENCE CITY NOMINATED FOR TOP GLOBAL MUSEUM AWARD

Science City in Kolkata was one of only two science facilities worldwide nominated for the prestigious CIMUSET award by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). The nomination recognises its innovative Climate Change gallery, *On the Edge?*, which combines interactive exhibits, immersive technology, and educational storytelling to engage visitors on climate issues and promote public awareness.

Science City Museum, Kolkata
Image Source: Telegraph India



November



ASSAM SECURES 18-MONTH LOAN OF SANKARDEVA'S ICONIC TAPESTRY FROM THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The Assam government signed a letter of intent with London's British Museum to repatriate the 16th-century Vrindavani Vastra, a magnificent silk tapestry woven by Assamese artisans under the guidance of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva, for an 18-month loan and exhibition in the state in 2027.

The British Museum, London
Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

The exhibit features 15 pieces that were later assembled
Image Source: The Assam Tribune

17th-century Vrindavani Vastra
Image Source: Wikimedia Commons





Image Source: Miranda House

MIRANDA HOUSE UNVEILS DIGITAL MUSEUM HONOURING 15 WOMEN OF INDIA'S CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

Delhi University's Miranda House college unveiled an immersive digital museum celebrating the 15 women who helped craft India's Constitution. Featuring a living wall with their Constituent Assembly portraits and original clippings from the Constituent Assembly debates on equality, minority rights, education, and gender justice, this first phase will set the stage for future artworks, sculptures, and installations to be added as part of the project.

Founding Women of Indian Constitution

Image Source: ETV Bharat



BHOPAL HOSTS 78TH MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION OF INDIA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The 78th Annual International Conference of the Museums

Association of India took place from November 7-9, 2025, at the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Centered on the theme "Community & Sectarian Identities: Their Representations in Museums - The Global Scenario," the event drew dignitaries, delegates, and participants from across India and abroad.

Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya Bhopal

Image Source: Wikimedia Commons



December



Image Source: Jain Exhibitions

AVIATION HISTORY MEETS ARMOUR IN RED FORT'S FRESH EXHIBITS

The Red Fort introduced new permanent exhibitions that enrich its museum offerings, uniting aviation history, modern Indian art, and martial traditions in a single destination. Featuring two galleries from the Air India Maharaja Collection alongside an expansive Arms and Armour display, the new additions significantly broaden the fort's cultural scope.



NMACC AND QATAR MUSEUMS INK 5-YEAR MUSEUM EDUCATION PACT

The Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre and Qatar Museums signed a five-year agreement to launch Museum-in-Residence education initiatives across India and Qatar. These programs will foster playful, museum-based learning for children while equipping educators with innovative tools to spark creativity.



The facade of the NMACC at the Jio World Centre in Mumbai

Image Source: Wikimedia Commons



Image Source: Wikipedia

PATNA TO REPURPOSE THERMAL PLANT FOR INDIA'S FIRST ENERGY MUSEUM

India's first energy museum is set to come up in Patna at the city's defunct Karbigahiya thermal power plant. To be developed by the Bihar State Power Holding Company Limited, the museum will drive educational research, tourism, and energy heritage conservation.



Karbigahiya Thermal Power Station in Patna

Image Source: Times of India

ASI REVIVES PANNA SITE AS GUPTA-ERA SCULPTURE MUSEUM

The Jabalpur Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India has transformed a sculpture shed in Madhya Pradesh's Panna district into a village museum, now home to 58 rare Gupta-period sculptures and friezes. The site boasts some of central India's earliest surviving stone temple complexes, with the artefacts highlighting the era's remarkable craftsmanship and artistic mastery.

Gupta-Era Sculpture
Image Source:
Wikimedia Commons



NEW MUSEUMS, SPOTLIGHTED

In 2025, India's museum landscape continued to expand, with new institutions taking shape across the country. Each brings its own voice and vision, spanning fields such as archaeology, living traditions, artist archives, and design, as well as more unexpected and niche subjects that stretch the idea of what a museum can be. Together, they point to a broader shift toward more diverse, inclusive, and experimental ways of telling stories. *New Museums, Spotlighted* brings together some of the most compelling openings of the year.

A. Ramachandran Museum	October 2025
Archaeological Experiential Museum	January 2025
Buddha Samyak Darshan Museum	July 2025
Delhi Metro Museum	December 2025
Living Museum of Mizo Culture	October 2025
Miller Museum of Anamorphic Art	September 2025
Shaheed Veer Narayan Singh Memorial-cum-Tribal Freedom Fighters Museum	November 2025
Sungsalee Lepcha Museum	October 2025
TEM (Toyota Experiential Museum)	November 2025
UH-3H Helicopter Museum	August 2025

NEW MUSEUMS



Image source: Vadehra Art Gallery

A. Ramachandran Museum

Kollam,
Kerala

October
2025

A museum dedicated to A. Ramachandran, inaugurated in October 2025, brings together the vast and diverse works of one of India's most significant modern artists. Spanning over six decades, Ramachandran's practice moved across painting, sculpture, and drawing which was shaped by his training at Kala Bhavan, experiences in Rajasthan and Kerala, and his collaborations with different institutions. It is with this spirit that the museum presents the shift in his practice from early sociopolitical concerns to a deeper engagement with nature, mythology, and Indian and Asian artistic traditions. The museum introduces the visitors to Ramachandran's artworks and also highlights his process through drawings and archival material, offering a comprehensive view of his evolving visual language and his lasting contribution to Indian art.

NEW MUSEUMS

Image source: Archaeological Experiential Museum

Archaeological Experiential Museum

Vadnagar,
Gujarat

August
2025

Opened in January 2025, the Archaeological Experiential Museum in Vadnagar presents over 2,500 years of continuous habitation through a combination of excavated material and digital interpretation. The museum is organised into thematic galleries that trace the town's historical, cultural, and economic developments, displaying over 5,000 objects including ceramics, coins, ornaments, and skeletal remains. The museum connects artefacts to larger narratives of trade, craft production, and everyday life across different periods. A section of the museum also provides access to an active excavation site which is accompanied by a 3D virtual tour. Through this integration of archaeological evidence and interpretive tools, the museum offers a detailed account of Vadnagar's long settlement history and its place within wider regional networks.

NEW MUSEUMS

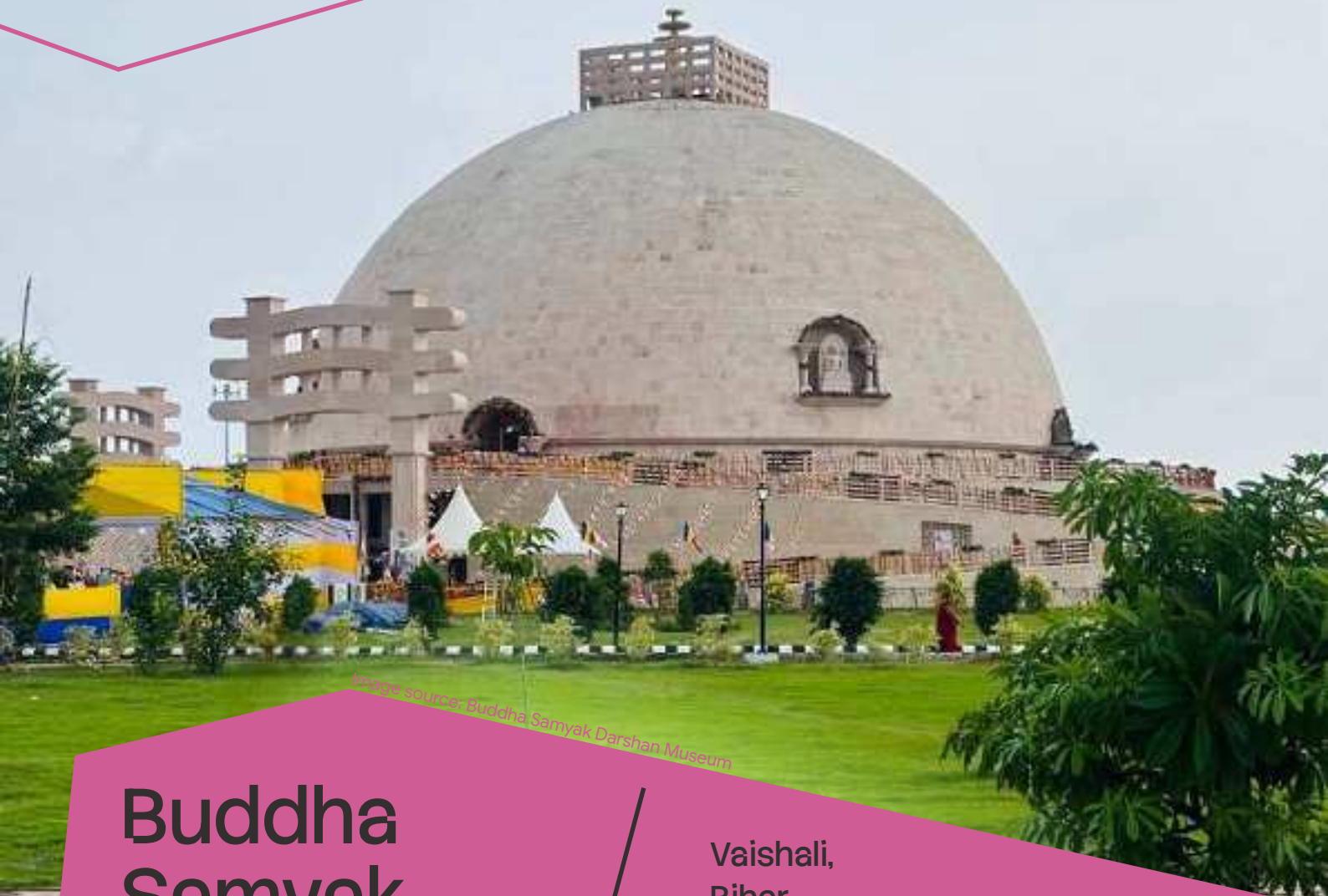


Image source: Buddha Samyak Darshan Museum

Buddha Samyak Darshan Museum

Vaishali,
Bihar

July
2025

The Buddha Samyak Darshan Museum, inaugurated in 2025 in Vaishali, Bihar, marks a milestone in preserving and showcasing Buddhist heritage. Constructed using over 42,000 blocks of pink sandstone, it houses the relic casket discovered from a 5th-century mud stupa – putting the Buddha's relics on public display for the first time in nearly six decades. The museum also features a meditation center, library and guesthouse, drawing archaeologists, scholars, and visitors alike.

NEW MUSEUMS



Delhi Metro Museum

New Delhi

December
2025

The Delhi Metro Museum in New Delhi presents the development and functioning of the city's metro system through interactive and process based displays. Inaugurated in 2025 at the Supreme Court Metro Station, the museum builds on an earlier initiative at Patel Chowk and expands it into a larger, more technologically equipped space. It is with this approach that the museum combines simulators, working models, and digital installations to explain metro construction, operations, and infrastructure. Additionally, the panels, dioramas, and archival material trace key milestones in the system's history, situating it within the broader context of urban transport in Delhi.

NEW MUSEUMS

Image source: Directorate Of Information & Public Relations, Government Of Mizoram

Living Museum of Mizo Culture

Falkawn,
Mizoram

October
2025

Inaugurated in October 2025, the Living Museum features live demonstrations of traditional Mizo village life. The aim to design this 'living museum' was to familiarise the visitors with the cultures of Mizoram. Traditional cultures cannot always be museumized in conventional way. As culture grows, so does the museum. The museum is a replica of a traditional Mizo village to introduce the visitors to the traditional cuisines, games, attires, songs and dances. The immersive cultural experience is in the centre of this museum's approach. Additionally, they have programs and events scheduled every Saturday to promote tourism while preserving and showcasing Mizo's cultures and traditions.

NEW MUSEUMS



Image source: Miller Museum of Anamorphic Art

Miller Museum of Anamorphic Art

Bengaluru,
Karnataka

November
2025

The Miller Museum of Anamorphic Art emerges from the long held vision of artist Shereen Miller, who spent over five decades living across continents before returning to India. After 55 years abroad, she felt a strong desire to bring her work back to India and introduce anamorphic art, to Indian audiences. It is with this intent that the museum was established. The museum showcases her work in anamorphic art and presents her engagement with sculpture, painting and drawing across both realism and abstract traditions. Shereen passed away in 2023, just a month before the museum was completed, after which her daughter Cheryl Anita Miller carried her vision forward. The museum was inaugurated in September 2025 and today, it stands as a tribute to her artistic journey and continues to offer visitors an immersive and layered visual experience.

NEW MUSEUMS

Image source: Shaheed Veer Narayan Singh Memorial-cum-Tribal Freedom Fighters Museum

Shaheed Veer Narayan Singh Memorial-cum- Tribal Freedom Fighter Museum

Raipur,
Chhattisgarh

November
2025

The Shaheed Veer Narayan Singh Memorial-cum-Tribal Freedom Fighters Museum focuses on the histories of tribal resistance in Chhattisgarh, with particular attention to figures such as Veer Narayan Singh. Inaugurated by the Prime Minister in November 2025, the museum is structured through a series of thematic galleries that trace everyday tribal life, the disruptions caused by colonial and regional powers, and various uprisings across the region. It is with this framework that the museum explores events such as the *Bhumkal Kranti* alongside lesser known resistances, including those led by women. With a combination of sculptures and digital installations, the displays aim to contextualise these histories while also highlighting their place within broader narratives of the 19th and early 20th century.

NEW MUSEUMS

Sungsa Lee Lepcha Museum

Dzongu,
Sikkim

February
2025

A museum that stands as a reflection of the Lepcha community. Inaugurated in February 2025, this museum is a community-led museum in Sikkim. The museum documents the culture of the Lepcha community by reflecting on the ecological practices and indigenous knowledge systems. Sungsa Lee in Lepcha language means 'House of Stories' and, as the name suggests, the museum aims to preserve the stories of the community and impart knowledge and wisdom about the Lepcha community. The museum houses objects and artefacts such as *Puntaong* and *Papri*, which are crucial in the practices of the community. This museum signifies the importance of tribal cultures and their preservation through community-led initiatives.

Image source: Sungsa Lee/Instagram

NEW MUSEUMS



Image source: India Today

TEM (Toyota Experiential Museum)

Bengaluru,
Karnataka

November
2025

Opened in 2025, the Toyota Experiential Museum (TEM) by Toyota Kirloskar Motor in Bengaluru presents a sensory driven space that explores ideas of mobility, design, and cultural exchange. Located within Phoenix Mall of Asia, the museum is structured as an immersive environment that combines Japanese aesthetics with Indian philosophies. The space attempts to move beyond conventional displays, using projections, sound, and interactive installations to create a multi sensory experience. Alongside this, curated retail and café spaces extend the engagement, positioning the museum as a hybrid site that connects technology, lifestyle, and culture.

NEW MUSEUMS



Image source: defence.in

UH-3H Helicopter Museum

Visakhapatnam,
Andhra Pradesh

August
2025

The Helicopter Museum in Visakhapatnam presents the history and engineering of helicopters within the context of India's naval aviation. Developed by the Visakhapatnam Metropolitan Region Development Authority, the museum is located along Beach Road, an area known for its cluster of maritime museums. Opened in August 2025, the museum centres around the decommissioned UH-3H Sea King helicopter, allowing visitors to explore its structure and operational history. Through displays on search and rescue missions, technical features, and naval operations, the museum situates the helicopter within broader discussions of defence and military use, while also contributing to the city's growing network of defence related museums.

**Peeling the Layers of Domestic Labour
and Leisure in Sikkim Himalayas**

Abhibyanjana
R. Thatal

Leisure and Learning
Play Through Time

Aditi
Chaudhary

The People's Charter

A collection of contemporary artworks
featured in The Constitution Museum
and The Rights and Freedoms Academy

Anjchita B. Nair

The Subaltern Across the Seas

Anirudh Kanisetti

A Sacred Confluence

Art, History, and the Enduring
Legacy of Saint Francis Xavier

Benjamin Monserrate

**Birdspotting: Gliding Through
Indian Visual Culture**

Cultre

**Persianate Inscriptions of
the Hyderabad Museum**

Deccan Archive
Foundation

**The Ghost Garden of Byculla:
Trail of a Fallen Empire**

Mallika Keer

The Many Faces of the Divine

Mandira Neware

The Language of Flowers

Rohini Kejriwal

Relics of Faith and Return

Shah Umair

The Elephant Carries the Sky

Shreya Sahay

**From Clay to Cannon: Shaping
the Sacred, the State, and the Self**

**Taha Mughal and
Mohammad Fazil Panjwala**

Threads and Traditions

**Tara Rachel
Thomas**

MUSEUM TRAILS

What if museums were explored through ideas rather than timelines? This year's *Museum Trails* take that question as a starting point, mapping thematic journeys across collections that cut through time, geography, and discipline. Each trail brings together objects linked by a shared concept, inviting connections that might otherwise go unnoticed within conventional displays. In tracing these relationships, the section highlights how recurring forms, concerns, and narratives surface across contexts, offering a more layered and associative way of encountering museum collections.

Yangthang Cultural Centre, Pelling, Sikkim
Ramgauri Sangralaya, Rhenock, Sikkim
Nepali Museum, Aho, Sikkim

Peeling the Layers of Domestic Labour and Leisure in Sikkim Himalayas

Domestic spheres are one of the most active sites of socialisation and identity formation, marked by gendered and class-based roles. Through the material artefacts associated with cooking, caregiving, hospitality, and worship, we look at the repetitive labour embedded within everyday life.

This trail covers artefacts from households across Sikkim and the Himalayan region, showing that traces of domestic comfort and ritual continuity within these intimate quarters, along with leisure, are a result of these rituals, produced and sustained through labour.

Through a gallery of household heirlooms — collections of ancestors and memories that are remembered — the artefacts in this trail once belonged to such intimate spaces inside homes that were lived and worked in.

Abhibyanjana R. Thatal
Musician & Researcher

Yangthang Cultural Centre

Pelling, Sikkim

The Yangthang Cultural Centre contains over 2000 artefacts, all of which are family heirlooms of the Thakarpa family in Sikkim. The rare display captures the memories of their house and with it, larger Sikkimese history. It features collections of Sikkimese household items, carrying influences from Tibetan and Newari art styles, and the ritualistic and religious life in Tantric Buddhism. The gallery thus presents a fascinating walkthrough of Sikkimese history through material artefacts.

*Sites of
Production*

Rang-Thag or Jaato

Estimated to date back to the 19th century, the *Rang Thag*, or *Jaato*, is a hand-operated quern used to grind agricultural produce like wheat and maize for household consumption. Central to domestic food preparation, the object reflects the repetitive physical labour embedded in the sustenance and the maintenance of a domestic kitchen.



Sho-Dung or Dudheyro

Crafted from local timber and jute bindings, *Sho-Dung* was used to collect milk from household cattle. Relying on both humans who rear the cattle and the animal itself, the agrarian household is sustained by intertwined systems of labour.



Ja-Dung

This traditional butter churner made of wood was used in the preparation of butter and butter tea (*po cha* or *so cha*) within Himalayan households in the 18th and 19th centuries. The object reflects culinary practices shaped by endurance, skilled handling, and collective rhythms of domestic life.



Earthenware for Raksi (alcohol)

This earthenware from the early 19th century is a part of the larger distillatory paraphernalia used to make batches of alcohol at home. It preserves the memory of distillation processes within domestic spheres and presents the household in an agrarian society as a site of production.



*Sites of
Cooking /
Production*

Mok-Thro

The 18th-century *Mok Thro* is a large copper cooking vessel used to steam food and prepare dishes in substantial quantities. Its scale reflects forms of communal domestic labour, where food preparation involved coordinated acts of preparing ingredients, filling, steaming, serving, and collective participation during household and ritual gatherings.

The top vessel with holes in the container and the water vessel for soup and steam to cook the food.



Kharkunda and Chu-dong

Both made of copper, a material rare in Sikkimese households in the 17th century, the large size of the vessel points towards communal cooking and storage. The *Kharkunda* is a vessel usually used to cook rice, and the *Chu-dong* is used to store water for domestic usage. Since water is essential to all mundane or ritualistic functions in a home, the vessel serves as a storage container for water.



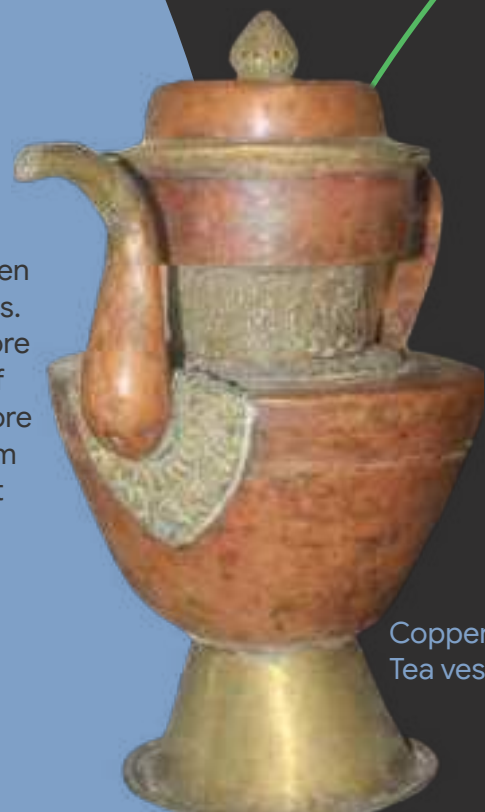
Chu-Dong



Sites of Hospitality

Tibetan-style Teapot

Standing approximately 2 feet tall, this traditional tea pot used in Sikkimese households is made in Tibetan style and is a copperware dated between the 18th and 19th centuries. Used as a container to store tea, the bottom section of the vessel was used to store coal, keeping the tea warm for monks who would visit houses to perform rituals.

Traditional
Tibetan-style
copper tea
vessel with
coal containerCopper
Tea vessel

Drakya



Ewers and Drakya (tea cup)

These ewers, some commonly also called “monk-hat ewers” in parts of the Himalayan belt, were used to serve water, tea, and wine within households. Their embossed silver

surfaces and ornamental detailing reflected both status and ceremonial refinement.

Darkyas (est. 19th century), silver tea cups used for serving guests, further reveal how moments of leisure and hospitality were sustained through extensive artisanal skill.

Ewer



Spittoon



Spittoon, Water Pitcher, and Bowl

The hand-washing pitcher and spittoon made of brass reflect practices of bodily maintenance, etiquette, and ceremonial hosting. Hand washing and the spittoon as an object of dedicated space to spit in are not only a matter of hygiene but also culturally performed actions.

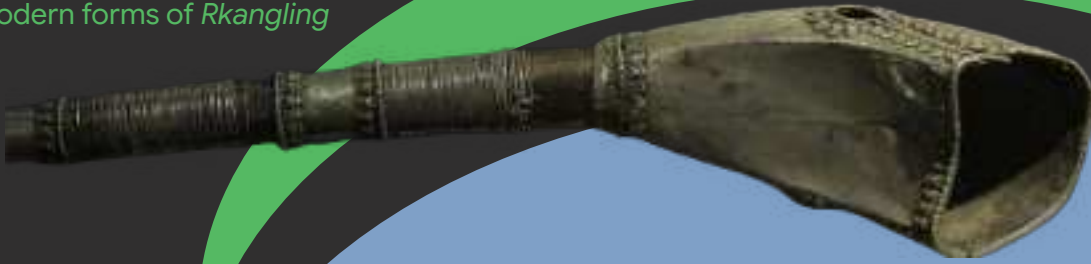
Bowl



Water Pitcher



Modern forms of *Rkangling*



Rolmo or Sukyen (Cymbal) and Rkangling

This artefact occupies the ritualistic space within households practising Tantric Buddhism. The cymbals are struck, and the *Rkangling* is a trumpet made of human femur with later adaptations in different materials.



Cymbal (*rolmo ro sukyen*)
with femur *Rkangling*

Ramgauri Sangralaya Rhenock, Sikkim

The Ramgauri Sangralaya is a private museum in Rhenock with diverse collections of stamps, coins, a nursery with exotic and local bonsai, ferns, artistic stones collected from river banks, and an extensive driftwood collection, along with an ethnographic collection of household artefacts. It is situated at the center of Rhenock town, a historical halting site for traders moving along the old silk route from Kalimpong to Lhasa.

Sites of Cooking & Labour

Kasori or Degchi

Dating to the early 20th century, the *Kasori* or *Degchi* is a cooking vessel used in the preparation of everyday meals. Frequently used in cooking, this object is central to the process of food preparation.



Chappani

The *chappani*, from the mid-19th century, is a tea strainer crafted from bamboo, used in the preparation and serving of tea. This object is a significant part of the daily lives of Sikkimese families for rituals and gatherings.



Dabaka, Anti and Brass Goblet

Sites of hospitality

One of the most enduring symbols of hospitality in the Newari community, the *Anti* is a wine vessel used to serve wine to guests. The brass *Dabaka* (c. 1910) was used for drinking *jaar* (locally brewed alcohol) during social and ceremonial gatherings, and the brass goblet was also a drinking vessel for wine.

These vessels reflect how acts of serving and consumption structured domestic sociability and provided leisure within the home.



Brass
Dabaka



Brass Goblet



Anti

Chabuk

A culturally loaded artefact from the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, the *Chabuk* was used in a system in which punishment and coercion were commonplace. The *chabuk* was used by Kazis and Thekkadars as a means to control both animal and labour.



Nepali Museum

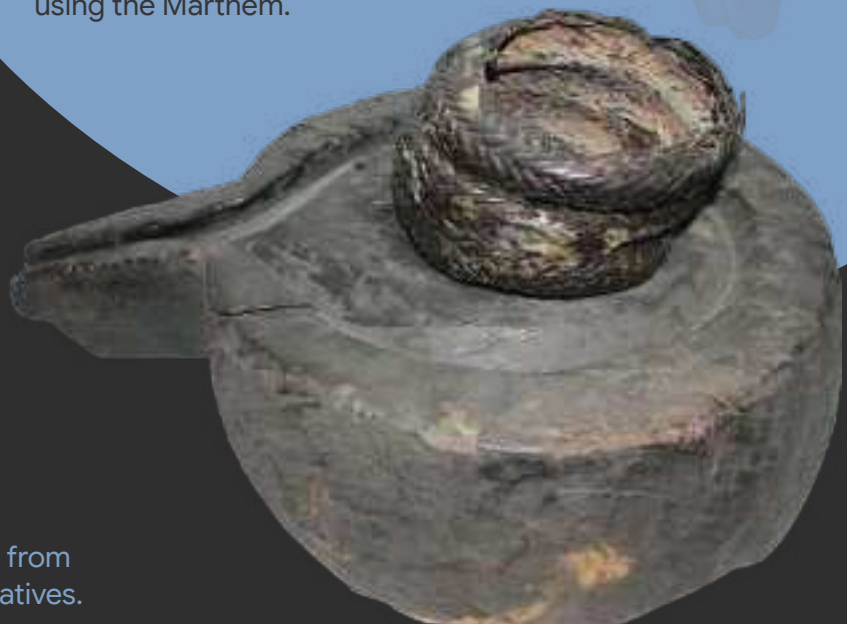
Aho, Sikkim

A community effort of the Aho Yuva Kalyan Sangh, the museum hosts collections and donations from households across Sikkim, and hosts domestic and ritual artefacts of an agrarian Sikkimese past. Though called the Nepali museum, the collection houses artefacts from across ethnicities and tribes from the Himalayan region.

Site of
production

Til Pilney or Marthem

The Marthem, also colloquially called *Til pilney*, is a large paraphernalia of oil pressing, common in Sikkimese households. Women would engage in the production of oil used for cooking from mustard and sesame seeds by using the Marthem.



Note: All dates are estimates from museum curators/ representatives.

National Museum, Delhi

Leisure and Learning

Play Through Time

The idea of play itself is de-stressing, allowing a pause from life, something which lies outside of work and responsibility. However, across centuries, play has never been distinct or separate from how we live. It has been part of our learning systems, our stories and traditions, heritage and culture, shaping how people think and perceive the world. This trail takes on a journey through seven objects from the National Museum, Delhi, that explore the tradition of play and how it is embedded deeply in our culture.

Aditi Chaudhary
Founder, Jildsaaz



World of a child



Toy Cart, Indus Valley Civilisation

2500 BCE

One of the earliest traces of play appears in the small, handheld world of a child. This terracotta toy cart from the Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 2500–2000 BCE) is simple in design but potent in meaning. It serves not only as a tactile toy but also as a representation of its time, reflecting themes of transport, trade, and mobility in the ancient civilisation.

Unknown, *Toy Cart*, c. 2500 BCE, Terracotta, Sindh (present-day Pakistan), Indus Valley Civilisation. Image courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi, accessed via Google Arts & Culture.



Strategy in Play

Chessboard and Gamesmen, Gujarat

19th Century

Chess has evolved from the Indian game of *chaturanga*, a four-player game played with dice and stakes, involving the element of chance. Chess, on the other hand, distils war simulation into a utopian, two-player system of equal armies governed by logic and strategy, demanding anticipation, restraint, and foresight.

Unknown, *Chessboard and Gamesmen*, 19th century, Glass, beadwork and Ivory (carved and painted), 30 × 30 cm (board), Gujarat, India. Image Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi, accessed via Wikimedia Commons.

The chessboard featured here, crafted in glass and beadwork, brings a striking interplay of red, white, and green. The accompanying gamesmen, carved in ivory, are modest in scale yet are geometric, almost architectural, with canopy-like shapes that move away from naturalistic representation seen in other sets of Indian origin.



Unknown, *A Game of Chaupar*, early 20th century, Ivory (carved and painted), Rajasthan, India, h. 11.5 cm; base 9.5 × 9 cm. Image courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi, accessed via Wikimedia Commons.

Play as Encounter

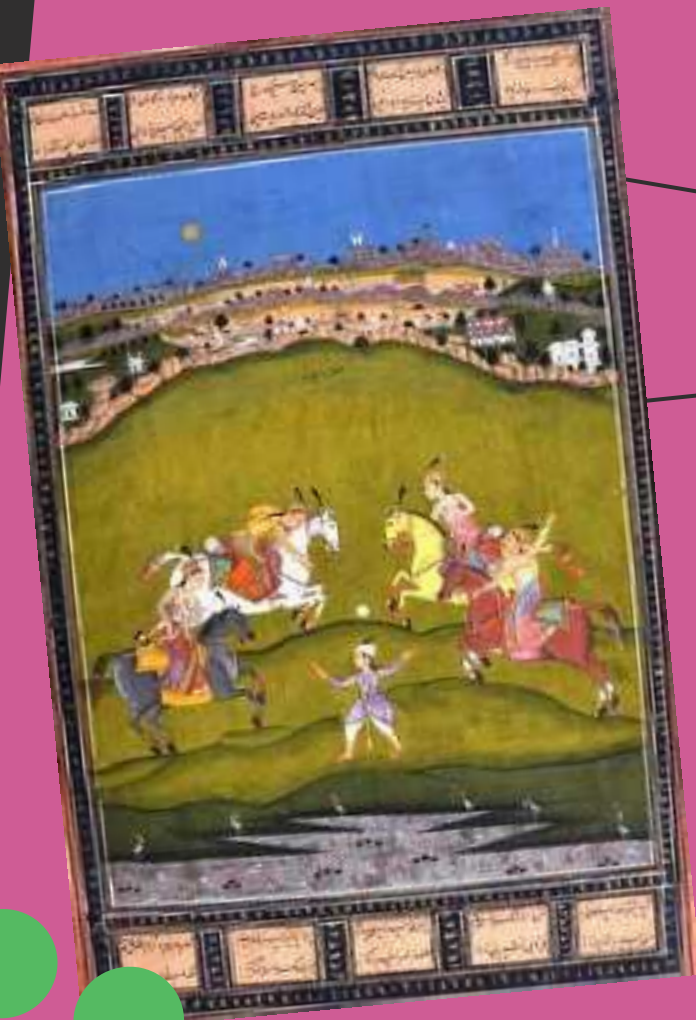
Game of Chaupar, Rajasthan

early 20th century

Play here unfolds as an intimate exchange between the two figures, captured mid-game, absorbed in *chaupar*. This motif is frequently found in Indian visual traditions, where couples engaged in play serve as a metaphor for engagement and companionship.

Carved in ivory and delicately painted, the object transforms the idea of play from solitary or abstract to relational.

Unknown, *Chand Bibi Playing Polo*, c. 1700–1750 CE, Painting, India, Mughal Period. Image courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi, accessed via Wikimedia Commons.



Play as Power and Performance

Chand Bibi Playing Polo, Telangana

18th-century

The scale of play shifts from the intimate to the spectacular through this object. In this painting, Chand Bibi and other women are shown engaged in a game of polo, mounted on richly adorned horses, set against a lush landscape. Polo, or *chaugan*, was not merely a pastime; it was a courtly sport associated with nobility, skill, and control. To play was to display authority, physical prowess, and refinement. That women are depicted here playing the game is equally telling; it gestures toward spaces of agency within elite society.

Playing The Game of Knowledge

Jain Gyan Chaupar,
Rajasthan

18th-century

Gyan Chaupar, also known as *Mokshpattam*, is the predecessor of the modern game of 'Snakes and Ladders'. Unlike its contemporary version, which is based on a 10x10 metric grid of a post-industrial world and lacks a narrative, the layout of *Gyan Chaupar* varied depending on the philosophical system it encoded. For example, a board belonging to the Vaishnav tradition featured 72 squares arranged in an 8x9 grid, while a Jain variation included 84 squares to align with its philosophical narrative

Players navigated through the board, encountering virtues that lifted them up and vices that pulled them down. The presence of a snake even at the final square suggested that the goal was never to win but to engage.

The board presented here belongs to the Jain tradition and is decorated with a floral border that resembles a creeping vine. This design is similar to the *pietra dura* pattern used in architecture. In the upper half of the board, two bearded men wearing crowns can be seen.

Unknown, *Gyan Chaupar*, Late 18th century, Cloth, Rajasthan, India, Jain Tradition. Image courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi, accessed via Wikimedia Commons.



Play as Material Culture

Chaupar Set, Himachal Pradesh

— 19th century



Unknown, *Chaupar* Set, 19th century, embroidered textile with mirror work, Chamba, Himachal Pradesh; jade (counters and dice), Rajasthan, India. Image courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi, accessed via Wikimedia Commons.

Chaupar is an ancient race game and a precursor to one of the most widely played games today, *Ludo*. Traditionally played with a long, four-sided dice and four sets of counters, with two sets assigned to each player, it is far more complicated and nuanced than its modern counterpart.

The featured *chaupar* set in here is rendered in embroidered textile from Chamba, while the playing pieces and dice are carved from jade and are from the province of Rajasthan.

Play as Living Craft

Ganjifa Cards



Long before the standardised deck of modern playing cards, *Ganjifa* cards in South Asia existed as hand-painted objects of skill and storytelling. Each card is both an object of play and a work of art, carrying within it the visual language of a living craft tradition.

The eclectic mix of *Ganjifa* cards featured here from the National Museum collection demonstrates the diversity of the *Ganjifa* tradition, reflecting regional aesthetics, courtly patronage, and inherited craft practices.

Unlike fixed game boards, cards travelled easily, gathering people around systems of memory, chance, anticipation, and exchange. Today, as this practice declines, *Ganjifa* endures not merely as a game but as a repository of artistic skill, storytelling, and cultural continuity, where play serves to preserve heritage.

Unknown, *Ganjifa* Cards, India. Image courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi, accessed via Museums of India.



The Constitution Museum and The Rights and Freedoms Academy

The People's Charter

A collection of contemporary artworks featured in The Constitution Museum and The Rights and Freedoms Academy

As Cultre undertook the research, design, curation, and execution of the Constitution Museum and the Rights and Freedoms Academy at the O. P. Jindal Global University, my team and I were faced with the massive responsibility of making sure every visitor who walked into the museum had a better understanding and a better connection with the concepts, journeys and evolutions encompassed in the Constitution of India. To cater to a variety of audiences of different age groups, backgrounds and interest levels, we decided to approach the topic from different angles. One especially powerful approach was commissioning contemporary artworks: original pieces that could spark emotional connections, provoke thought, and make the museum experience more vivid and accessible.

It has been fascinating to see how different artists interact with the ideals of the Constitution, its making process and its journey since its adoption. Their works attract, inspire, and uncover new perspectives, which encourage the audience to sometimes even question the default narratives we have in our minds. Working with these artists was a transformative experience for me and below are a few of my favourites from across various sections of the museum, where I believe the artist's personal style beautifully comes together with the narrative in an emotionally engaging manner.

Anjchita B. Nair
CEO, Cultre

Triad Of Unity

Artist — Harsha
Durugadda

Triad of Unity, by Harsha Durugadda features an intricately detailed form of three lions, their paws connected at the centre, forming a Y-like shape. This composition pays homage to the Lion Capital of Ashoka, the revered national emblem of India, subtly linking the sculpture to the principles of unity, justice, and sovereignty enshrined in the Constitution of India. The tripartite structure of the sculpture, combined with its choice of materials, serves as both a tribute to the historical significance of the Lion Capital and a contemporary reinterpretation of its themes.

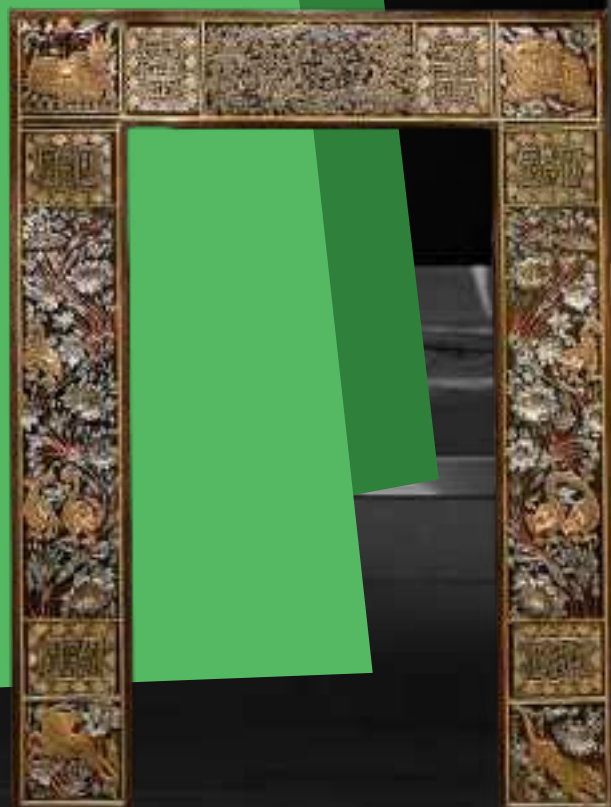


THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA

Freedom Gateway

Artist — **Wolf - Ritu and
Surya Singh**

Freedom Gateway by artist duo Wolf-Ritu and Surya Singh is envisioned as a symbolic portal that invites reflection on and access to the Constitution of India, drawing inspiration from the Preamble, often regarded as the “soul” of this monumental document. This piece not only celebrates the Constitution’s guiding principles but honours the intricate, hand-drawn borders found on each page, which we interpret as guardians of the words within, enshrining the document and presenting an illustrated history of India. In this work, we reference two specific pages: the Preamble itself and the preceding title page. The contrasting sides of the gateway reflect the dual nature of the Constitution itself: one side, rich and ornate, embodies the aspirational ideals of the nation, while the other side’s modest presentation represents the foundational text — a reminder of the guiding principles that underpin Indian democracy.



The Layered Portrait of the Nation

Artist

Debashish Mukherjee



This artwork by Debashish Mukherjee created from *Khadi* fabric, is a tribute to the vast and complex tapestry that is India. *Khadi*, the handspun cloth advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, stands as a symbol of resilience, self-reliance, and unity. Gandhi's vision for India transcended politics; he understood that the very soul of the nation was woven with threads of diverse cultures, languages, and traditions, forming a cohesive whole. The artwork spans approximately 320 metres of layered fabric, representing the multiplicity of identities that coexist within India. The stacked layers of fabric echo India's enduring spirit — a dynamic yet unbroken thread that unites the past, present, and future.

Gandhi

AND THE CONSTITUTION

"I shall strive for a Constitution which will free India from all bondage and wrongs"



Gandhi

AND THE CONSTITUTION

"I shall strive for a Constitution which will free India from all bondage and wrongs"

THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA

DEBASHISH MUKHERJEE



Illusion

Artist

**Sibdas
Sengupta**

Illusion, an artwork by Sibdas Sengupta presents Dr B. R. Ambedkar's image in a monumental scale, emphasising his enduring presence. This magnification transforms his likeness into a symbol akin to a monument. The artwork does not merely incorporate the image of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, but also looks at his representation across various histories and ideologies, inviting viewers to reflect on the evolving narratives surrounding Ambedkar's legacy in the current socio-political context.





Visceral Paths

Artist — **Ravikumar
Kashi**

The Constitution of India and the ideas built therein are the roots from which the Republic of India is continuously blooming. *Visceral Paths* by artist Ravikumar Kashi becomes a metaphor for this foundation. It also invokes the paths that connect us, its people, and our nation in a million different ways, via its cultures, languages and shared histories. These paths are strewn with lived experiences and collective determination that are delicate and ephemeral, but also resilient and life-giving.



Genesis

Artist — Alex Davis

Genesis symbolises the origin and growth of India, echoing the essence of the Constitution. At its core, a sculpted seed embodies the text of the Preamble, representing the foundation of our democratic values. Suspended by fine stainless steel cables, this seed is encircled by botanical scrolls inspired by the borders in the Constitution, suggesting life emerging from the Constitution's pages. Over time, the polished brass sculpture will develop a patina, reflecting the enduring nature of India's democratic journey.



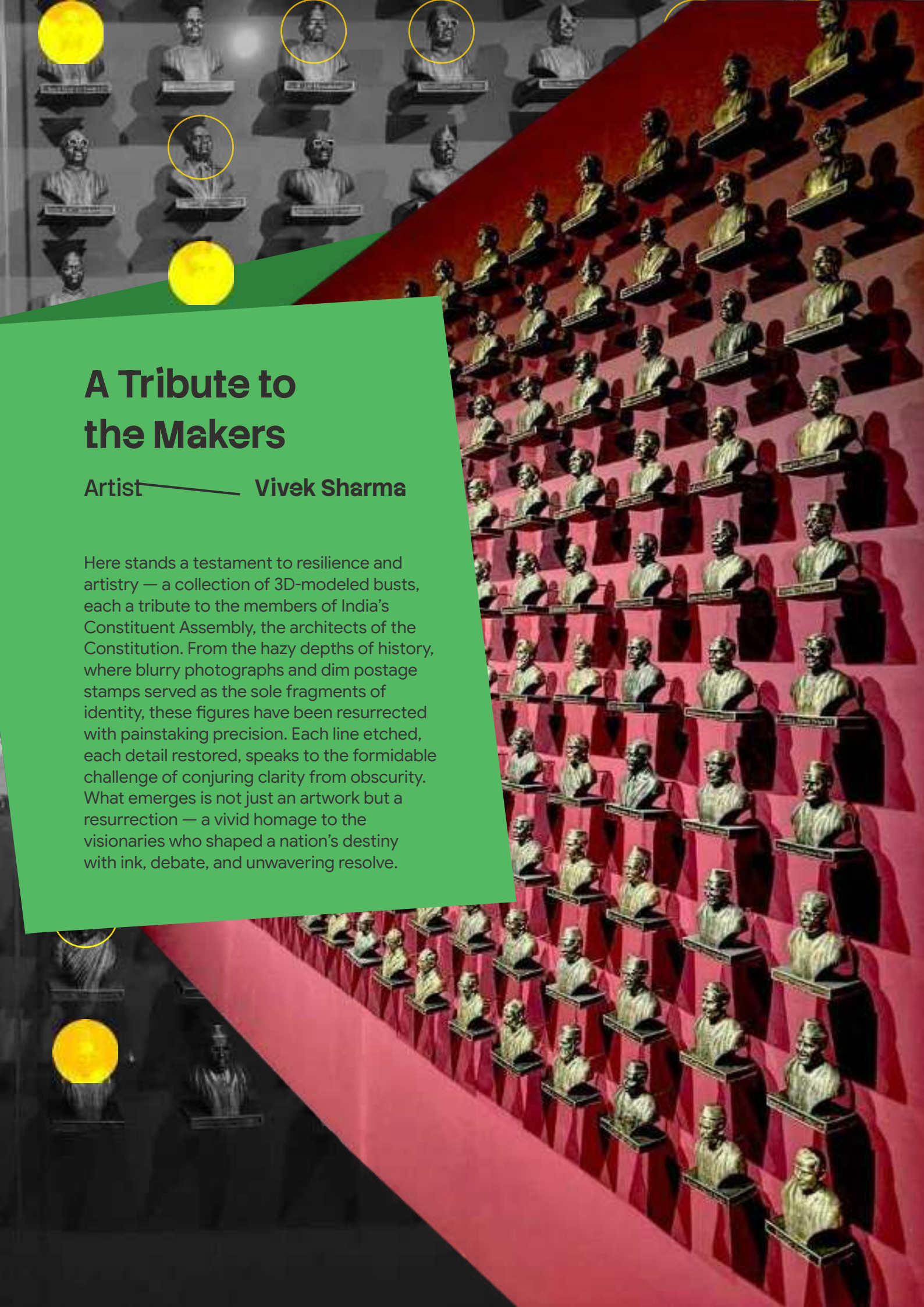
एकता के हाथ (Hands of Unity)

Artist — **Aashti Miller**



एकता के हाथ showcases the Constitution of India as a living document, capturing its continuous journey from inception to the present day. The artwork is built upon an interwoven interpretation of the Constitution's front and back covers. The front cover represents the 'start' — India's rise from its past, blossoming into a sovereign democratic republic. In contrast, the back cover symbolises the 'end.' However, with its infinite, circular form, it transcends the notion of a simple ending. To capture the Constitution's diversity, the artwork features hand motifs derived from the document's original illustrations. एकता के हाथ is a visual celebration of the Constitution's past, present, and future, and the enduring values that continue to inspire and guide the nation.





A Tribute to the Makers

Artist — **Vivek Sharma**

Here stands a testament to resilience and artistry — a collection of 3D-modeled busts, each a tribute to the members of India's Constituent Assembly, the architects of the Constitution. From the hazy depths of history, where blurry photographs and dim postage stamps served as the sole fragments of identity, these figures have been resurrected with painstaking precision. Each line etched, each detail restored, speaks to the formidable challenge of conjuring clarity from obscurity. What emerges is not just an artwork but a resurrection — a vivid homage to the visionaries who shaped a nation's destiny with ink, debate, and unwavering resolve.

Territorial Sublime IV

Artist

**Pinaki Ranjan
Mohanty**

Territorial Sublime IV by Pinaki Ranjan Mohanty uses found wood and stone collected along the shores of Chilika Lake in Odisha. This artwork showcases migratory flamingos, flight of these birds symbolises autonomy, the freedom to choose, to live, and to thrive. As these birds traverse the vast landscapes, they reflect the constitutional ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity that guide our nation. The circular form of *Territorial Sublime IV* embodies inclusivity and harmony, reflecting the constitutional principles that advocate for unity. This dynamic imagery reinforces the strength found in our shared journeys, urging us to embrace the principles of the Constitution that promote freedom, equality and justice for all.



Lotus Lectern

Artist ——— Valay Gada



Lotus Lectern is a harmonious fusion of tradition and contemporaneity reflecting modern India. Rising from the earthy depths of clay, the brass lotus synthesises traditional, realistic and innovative forms, culminating in a distinctive artistic language. This pedestal is inspired by Nandalal Bose's illustrations in the original Constitution, and honours India's national flower, and its symbolic triad of purity, prosperity, and fertility. This artwork celebrates India's founding document, illuminating the path to a harmonious, prosperous society. This sculptural ode is an affirmation of the Constitution's aspirations and timeless ideals radiating enlightenment for generations to come.





Votus Indica

Artist — Megha Joshi

Votus Indica is an imagined, unique Indian bloom. The name *Indica*, a botanical term, is modern Latin for “of India,” and references a plant’s nativity to India. *Votus* is a play on the Lotus, which we find often in the artwork of the Constitution as a decorative and metaphorical element. This artwork seeks to make the voting ink on the finger-petals of this bloom the enduring national symbol – over and above all connotations. The blooming success of nation-building lies in the power of the vote of the people, rising from the earth of the nation. It is how diversity can live on and disparity cease to exist.





The Subaltern Across the Seas

Most histories of India's global presence focus on temples and texts, buddhists and brahmins. But the history of Indians on the move overseas is diverse, involving seaborne communities and divinities, financiers and trafficked labour, diplomats and craftsmen. And this mobility wasn't always voluntary, pleasant or profitable for the Indians being moved.

The footprints of these people are scattered across museum collections: often invisible in the literary record, can only be seen them by reading artefacts against the grain. This trail is a socially "deep" history of Indian migration, voluntary and otherwise, linking Indians to broader Afro-Eurasian currents centuries before the advent of global empire. These objects, and the people who inspired or created them, were carried by trade winds, debt, conquest, and curiosity.



Anirudh Kanisetti
Historian and Author

Image credits: Museums of India

Textile fragment with bird (haṃsa)

**Silk, warp-faced
compound weave**

**Eastern Han dynasty,
1st–2nd century CE**

**National Museum,
New Delhi**

The *haṃsa* — the goose or swan of Indian visual culture, wise companion and bearer of messages to distant beloveds, associated with the goddess Sarasvatī — is one of the oldest and most travelled motifs in South Asian, arguably Indian Ocean, art. Its appearance in Han silk excavated from graves in Xinjiang, centuries before Buddhism made the exchange of Indian and Chinese visual vocabularies explicit, indicates how far Indian forms had moved before any nameable Indians had followed them. In subsequent centuries, *haṃsa*-patterned textiles would be exported across Afro-Eurasia: they are depicted in luxury fabrics on Angkor temple sculptures dating to the 12th century, and humbler *haṃsa*-blockprinted cotton fragments have been found dating to the 14th century in Fustat, Egypt.

The *haṃsa* in Indian literature is the archetype of the wanderer: a bird that migrates beyond the Himalayas and the Gangetic plains, only to return every year. Like premodern Indians on the move, its travels were regular and quotidian, but also bore a hint of mystery and adventure.

Image credits:
Wikimedia Commons



Ivory elephant chess piece (attributed to Yūsuf al-Bāhili)

Elephant ivory

Sindh or northwestern India,
9th century CE

Bibliothèque nationale
de France, Cabinet des
Médailles, Paris

At first glance, this is a curiosity from European legend — a “chess piece” said to have been a gift from Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd to the Holy Roman emperor, Charlemagne. Look instead at what the object actually is: a royal elephant procession carved in Sindh in the 9th century, bearing an Arabic inscription naming its maker or commissioner, Yūsuf al-Bāhili. Sindh had recently been absorbed into the Abbasid empire, and this elephant was carved from African ivory, sourced either by Arab or Indian merchants.

Only decades before this statuette was completed, the Zutt, buffalo-herding tribespeople of the Indus estuary — possible ancestors of the Roma — had been deported in their tens of thousands to the marshlands of Iraq and, after an uprising, to the deserts of Syria.

This object must have passed through Basra, in southern Iraq, where the Zutt had rebelled. Eventually it was traded all the way to France, possibly by the 11th century. Here it came to be associated with the memory of an actual Indian elephant, Abul-Abbas, who had indeed been gifted by Hārūn al-Rashīd to Charlemagne. The courtly object and the enslaved body moved through the same networks: one delivered to a treasury, the other to a military frontier, both via a cosmopolitan port.

Image credits:
Wikimedia Commons



Tomb figurine of a dancing boy

Painted earthenware

Tang dynasty,
8th–9th century CE

**Victoria and Albert Museum,
Kolkata**

The Tang court's appetite for foreign entertainment was voracious and well documented. Less documented are the supply chains that fed it. Tang storybooks often feature the motif of the magical *Kūnlún* slave — a term used for dark-skinned people moving through the ports of the South China Sea. They were littoral East Africans, Malays, and South Indians, brought into Guangzhou and Chang'an as curiosities, performers, and enslaved household attendants. The traffic in people, especially children, continued in Asian port cities well into the 19th century.

This small painted figurine, a dancer frozen in mid-movement, captures none of that violence in its surface. It was made for a tomb — a gift to the dead, a record of pleasures enjoyed in life. But the body it depicts — dark-skinned, performing, young, and in the exotic draped textile fashions of the Indian Ocean world — was moved across the Indian Ocean into Chinese households by the same networks that moved the silk and spice that command the imagination.



Illustration by Biboswan Bose

Bronze lion statuette

Bronze, lost-wax cast

**Shanga, Lamu Archipelago,
Kenya, 9th–10th century CE**

**National Museums of
Kenya / British Institute
in Eastern Africa**

Shanga is a buried city on Pate Island, excavated in the 1980s by Mark Horton. Its archaeology reveals a Muslim trading community connected to the Indian Ocean world from at least the eighth century: glass beads from the Gulf, Chinese porcelain, locally made iron. Among its finds is this small bronze lion produced with the lost-wax technique, associated with Indian metalworking traditions. Stylistic and material analysis suggests links with bronze traditions on the coast of southeast or southwest India; like some medieval Indian bronzes, this lion may have been produced in part by smelting Chinese copper coins. It shares the distinctive looped tail of medieval Konkan coast lions, but the prominent mane and genitalia suggest an African model.

Whether the person who made this was Indian, locally trained, or working from an Indian-derived model cannot be resolved. Read in conjunction with Indian ceramics and beads found along the coast of East Africa, it's possible that this was produced by a diaspora of craftspeople, pushing backward the evidence for Indians in Africa into the early medieval period. Diaspora Indian Africans continue to be influential on the Swahili coast, though they are the descendants of more recent Raj-era migrations.



Mural fragment with the Buddha and arhats

**Mineral pigments
on plaster**

Central Asia, 5th–8th
century CE

**National Museum,
New Delhi**

The *arhat* — the enlightened Buddhist master — appears across Central and East Asian Buddhist painting with a recurring face: heavy jowls, a prominent nose, deep-set eyes. This is the visual grammar that Central Asian and Chinese Buddhist painters used to depict Indian monks, the face of the magical, almost fierce foreigner. From as early as the 3rd century CE onward, Indian Buddhist monks, Brahmin scholars, and alchemists made the journey into Central Asia and China, carrying texts, techniques, and astronomical knowledge. Some became court astronomers — the Gautama family served the Tang imperial court for generations. Others, especially Buddhists, translated sutras or taught the compounding of medicines.

The *arhat's* exaggerated face is both stereotype and archive. It would inspire renditions of Indian masters as far east as Japan, which conducted a vigorous exchange in Buddhist objects and experts with the coast of China — where many Indians, elite and subaltern alike, would alight to make lives in the medieval period.



Image credits:
Museums of India



Portrait of Hazrat Muhammad Shah in tiger skin

Opaque watercolour on paper

Deccan, 17th–18th century

Salar Jung Museum,
Hyderabad

Image credits: Museums of India

The tiger skin is an ancient garment. Before it clothed wandering Sufi masters it clothed wandering Shaivite renunciants and esoteric Buddhists. The Sufi orders that spread through the Indian Ocean world from the 13th century shared this grammar of sacred mobility. Their legendary travels, across South, Southeast, Central, and West Asia, imbued them with special significance to sailors. This enabled them, like this master in his tiger skin, to step into very old roles: the same roles that Buddhist divinities like *Avalokiteśvara* and *Manimekalai* once had, to calm storms and rescue ships from wreck. At Nagore on the Coromandel Coast, the shrine of Shahul Hamid, a Gangetic master who completed the *Hajj* before arriving in South India, drew Tamil Muslim and Hindu sailors alike.

The parallel extends further. The Sufi master's power to intercede with the sea made him indispensable to the merchant networks of the Indian Ocean, and his shrines at port cities served the same function that Buddhist *viharas* had once served: places of protection, arbitration, and trust at the edges of the known world. Indeed, when Tamils first arrived in colonial Singapore, the first religious institutions they established were to *Mariamman*, the village mother goddess, and to the *Nagore Sharif*.

Portrait of Caetano, a native of Goa, detained in Hirado



Japan, 18th century

Matsura Museum,
Nagasaki



Some time in the 1700s, a young man called Caetano arrived in Hirado through the Portuguese trade networks that linked Goa to Nagasaki and beyond through galleons — seaborne fortresses that had brought Asia and the Americas into direct contact. His portrait shows a dark-skinned man in dandyish Western dress with a coat, trousers, scarf and headband — the costume in which Goans travelled as soldiers, interpreters, cooks, and clerks across Portuguese Asia. This portrait, made when Caetano was detained, suspends him between worlds. He embodies the developing paradoxes of Indian diasporas in an age of global empire: too brown to be European, too European to be Indian, and present in Japan because of Indian Ocean networks that were being pushed ever-further by growing European power.

Image credits: Matsura Museum

A Sacred Confluence

Art, History, and the Enduring Legacy of Saint Francis Xavier

Benjamin Monserrate

Curatorial Associate & Educator,
Museum of Christian Art (MoCA), Goa

Museum of Christian Art (MoCA), Goa

The Museum of Christian Art, established in 1994 at the Rachol Seminary and later relocated to the Convent of Santa Monica in 2002, has evolved into one of Goa's most significant cultural institutions. Recognised as the first museum of its kind in Asia, it is dedicated to showcasing Indo-Portuguese art. Its founding was made possible through a collaborative effort between the Archdiocese of Goa, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (Portugal), and INTACH, New Delhi. At the heart of the Museum's collection lies a remarkable story of artistic exchange. Following the arrival of the Portuguese, European artistic traditions encountered local materials, techniques and aesthetic sensibilities. This interaction gave rise to a distinctive Indo-Portuguese style, where imported forms were reimagined through Goan craftsmanship. The result is evident across the collection, from intricately carved furniture and finely worked silverware to richly adorned textiles, each piece reflecting a vibrant synthesis shaped by skilled local artisans.

The ships that survived the long and perilous journey from Lisbon to Goa during the early Modern Age carried soldiers, merchants and missionaries to Indian shores. Among them was Saint Francis Xavier, whose life and legacy would leave an indelible mark on Goa and beyond. The collection at the Museum of Christian Art, Goa, offers valuable insight into how artists have interpreted the saint's life and iconography, reflecting diverse perspectives on his spiritual journey and enduring influence.

This polychrome, gilt image of Saint Francis Xavier features ivory-crafted face and hands, while the rest of the sculpture is in wood. He stands on a simple pedestal with outstretched arms, likely once holding a crucifix. He wears a gilt-edged white surplice over a black cassock, a painted stole, and a silver radiating halo.



Born on 7th April, 1506 in the kingdom of Navarra, Spain, Francis Xavier was the youngest of six children. In 1525, he enrolled at the University of Paris where he met Ignatius of Loyola. Loyola's guidance led to a profound spiritual transformation. In 1534, Francis Xavier, Loyola, and five companions founded the Society of Jesus, popularly known as the Jesuits. The Order adopted the Christogram "IHS", accompanied by three nails and a cross as its emblem, a symbol frequently seen on Jesuit architecture, textiles, and liturgical objects.

This white silk humeral veil, worn over the shoulders and fastened in front, is richly embroidered with gold and coloured silk threads. Plant motifs rise from the corners, while scattered Mughal-inspired floral designs decorate the field, edged with a gold border. The trim features an undulating pattern of gold foliage with stylised leaves and flowers. At the centre, a radiating medallion displays the Jesuit emblem, the Christogram "IHS" with three nails and a cross.



In 1541, Francis Xavier set sail for India under the authority of Ignatius Loyola, the Pope and the King of Portugal. He arrived in Goa in 1542, which became the base for his missionary work over the next decade. From here, he travelled extensively across regions such as the Coromandel Coast, Malacca, and Japan.



An incense boat is an oblong vessel used to hold incense, often shaped like ships from the Age of Discovery. Likely offered in thanksgiving for safe voyages, this example is a detailed sailing ship with engraved sailor profiles, gun ports, and a cabin above the deck for storing incense. It also has the emblem of the Jesuits "IHS" inscribed on it.

One enduring account recounts that during a storm at sea en-route to Malacca, the saint prayed for calm waters and dipped his crucifix into the turbulent sea. The crucifix slipped from his hand but later, on the shore, a crab emerged from the waves carrying in its claws the crucifix.



This altar card likely belonged to an altar dedicated to Saint Francis Xavier, indicated by the crab holding a crucifix on its frame. The tablet is silver-plated, while the surrounding frame is silver. At the top, decorative urns (*ramalhetes*) with floral motifs adorn both ends.



Francis Xavier died on 3rd December 1552 on Sanchian Island while awaiting entry into China. His incorrupt body was first taken to Malacca in 1553 and later brought to Goa, where it was initially housed at St Paul's College. He was canonised in 1622, and in 1624, his relics were enshrined in a simple silver casket at the Basilica of Bom Jesus. Over time the casket evolved into a silver shrine that sits atop an intricately made Italian pedestal, where it remains to this day.

This votive plaque depicts the Saint lying in the coffin. The frame features stylised branches, a dove of the Holy Spirit topped by a cross, and two praying angels. His name appears in a cartouche below with the inscription "S. Francisco Xavier"

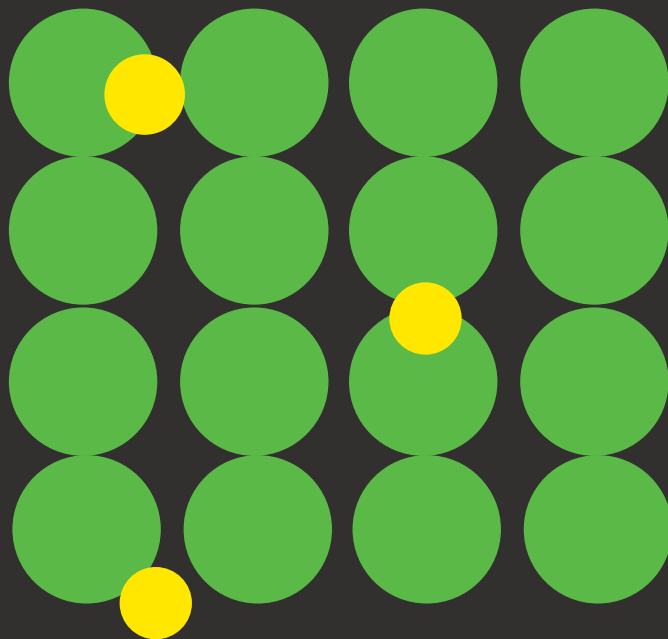




This model of the tomb was commissioned by Percival Noronha in the 20th century. Intricately carved out of ivory, it gives you a sense of the design and details of the main casket, while also showcasing the skill of the master carver, Vamona Zó.

In 1638, when Portuguese Goa faced an imminent threat of invasion, the Viceroy sought the saint's intercession. He ordered the silver casket containing the sacred relics to be opened and placed his viceregal staff in the saint's hand, a symbolic act entrusting the territory to his protection. The enemy retreated, and this moment reinforced Xavier's role as Goa's protector, earning him the beloved title Goencho Saib. This practice of offering the viceregal staff was continued by subsequent Portuguese Viceroys.

This staff in silver has a hexagonal shaft with a hexagonal handle, with minimal ornamentation. It has the inscription *Oferrecido Por A.C Rego. A Senhor Milagroso Sao Francisco Xavier apostolo das Indias*



Miracles performed by St. Francis Xavier included raising of a dead man, possibly an Eastern potentate, and another alluding to the help given to the Vicar of Malacca, the saint drove away the demons persecuting him at the hour of death.

This wooden reliquary coffer, entirely clad in chased silver, features symmetrical plant motifs in low relief across its surface. On the coffer's sides, the artist carved scenes depicting miracles performed by the saint. The delicate silverwork on the back reveals it once held a fragment of the saint's surplice. A central medallion bears the Jesuit emblem flanked by inscriptions reading "SOBREPELIS" (surplice) and "D.S. FRANCISCO XAV," identifying the relic and the saint.



Through reliquaries, sculptures, and sacred objects, we have encountered not just a historical figure, but a living presence, one that continues to inspire devotion, identity, and faith. Even today, pilgrims from across the world travel to Old Goa, drawn by the enduring legacy of Saint Francis Xavier.



Birdspotting:

Gliding Through Indian Visual Culture

Birds have always held a special place in our visual and cultural imagination. They glide easily between earth and sky, between the seen and the unseen, meanings that often go beyond their form. In art, they may appear as divine companions or demonic characters, storytellers or silent witnesses to moments unfolding around them, or sometimes simply as a part of nature and our world.

As these birds appear fluently in our visual culture, this trail invites you to follow them as they glide across museum collections. From one artwork to another, from one museum to the next, the birds become your guide, leading you through different spaces, time periods and cultures. As you move along, watch how their roles change. A bird may take the form of a demon to be defeated or stand as a symbol of beauty and grace. It may interrupt a story, carry a message or quietly observe from the edges of a scene. But as you pause and look closely, you begin to see how they connect artworks that may seem distant at first.

Team Cultre

Congregation of Birds

A folio from an illustrated manuscript of *Anwar-i-Suhaili*

Unknown Artist,
c.17th century, Mughal

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu
Sangrahalaya, Mumbai

The Mughals played a significant role in shaping the visual culture of the Indian subcontinent. Under Akbar's patronage, manuscripts from across the world were translated and illustrated for the imperial library. Impressed by the fables of *Panchatantra* as compiled by Husain bin al Kashifi in the *Anwar-i-Suhaili*, Akbar commissioned his court historian, Abu'l Faz'l, to translate and compile the text for his sons.

This miniature painting illustrates one such tale from the *Anwar-i-Suhaili*, in which a small partridge, through her unwavering courage, compels the sea to return her eggs. After the sea swallows them, the grieving bird, supported by other birds, appeals to the *Simurgh*, the mythical king of birds, in a grand assembly. Moved by their plea, the *Simurgh* orders the sea to restore the eggs.

The painting painstakingly depicts a range of birds, including the *saras* crane, hoopoe, pelican, peacock, owl, and others. Commissioned by Akbar and illustrated by artists of the imperial atelier, the miniature is now part of the collection of the British Museum.



Image credits: Chhatrapati Shivaji
Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Google
Arts and Culture



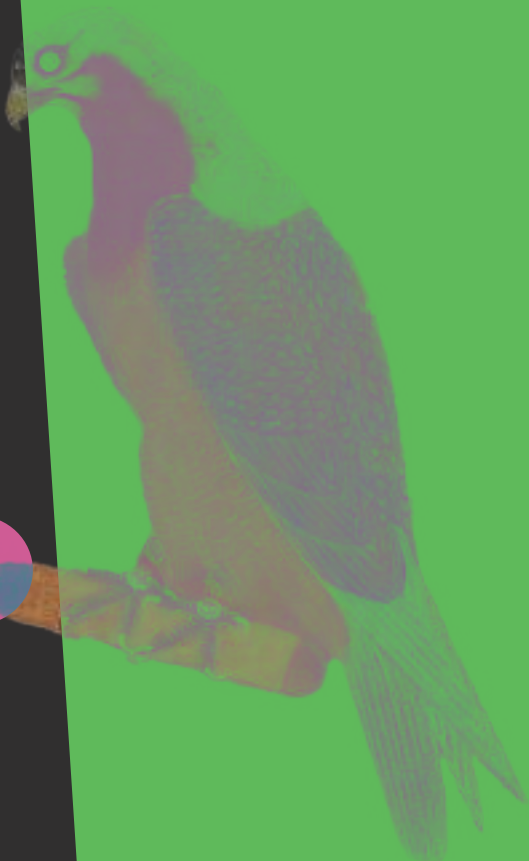
Peregrine Falcon on Perch

**Ustad Mansur,
c.17th century, Mughal**

**Chhatrapati Shivaji
Maharaj Vastu
Sangrahalaya, Mumbai**

In the *Jahangirnama*, the autobiography of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, the ruler describes numerous birds and animals with remarkable attention and curiosity. Fascinated by the natural world, Jahangir often commissioned artists from the imperial atelier to document these creatures in paint. In one instance, he recounts receiving a falcon from the ruler of Iran. Although the bird survived for only for a week, Jahangir remained captivated by its beauty, writing: "What can I write of the beauty of this bird's colour? It had black markings, and every feather on its wings, back, and sides was extremely beautiful."

Later, he asked Ustad Mansur to paint the bird. While it is uncertain whether this painting depicts the same falcon described in the *Jahangirnama*, the 17th century work by Ustad Mansur is now housed at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya in Mumbai.



Portrait of Maharajadhiraja Madho Singh Ji

Unknown Artist,
Late 18th century CE

National Museum,
New Delhi

The falcon, a skilled hunting bird, emerged as an important symbol of imperial authority, prestige and elite status, especially under the Mughals. Influenced by Mughal visual culture, regional courts and smaller kingdoms gradually incorporated such symbols into their own artistic traditions to express political ambition and legitimacy.

This royal portrait of Madho Singh I depicts the ruler of Jaipur in formal royal attire, wearing a green and red turban, a red *jama*, and a richly ornamented green-yellow *kamarband*. Shown in side-profile, a falcon is perched on his gloved hand, a powerful emblem of kingship and imperial aspiration. In the portrait, the falcon signifies controlled aggression, sharp vision, and discipline, reflecting the ruler's command over both nature and his adversaries.



Madhu Madhvi Ragini

Unknown Artist,
c.18th century, Rajasthan

Allahabad Museum,
Prayagraj

The arrival of the monsoon is often heralded by the dance of a peacock fanning out its indescant feathers. Associated with longing, love and romance, the bird appears frequently in *Ragamala* paintings, where *ragas* and *raginis* are visualised through evocative moods and settings. Animals and birds are often used in these folios to heighten the emotional atmosphere of the scene.

This miniature from Rajasthan depicts a peacock perched on the edge of a house. Turning outward, the bird bends gently to receive food from a woman reaching up from below. Dressed in a red skirt and decked in ornaments, she holds a small vessel in her hand, while a female attendant beside her carries another vessel. In paintings such as this, the peacock serves as a symbol of longing and anticipated union. This *nayika*, perhaps still waiting for her lover, is now part of the collection of the Allahabad Museum.

Image credits: Allahabad
Museum, Museums of India

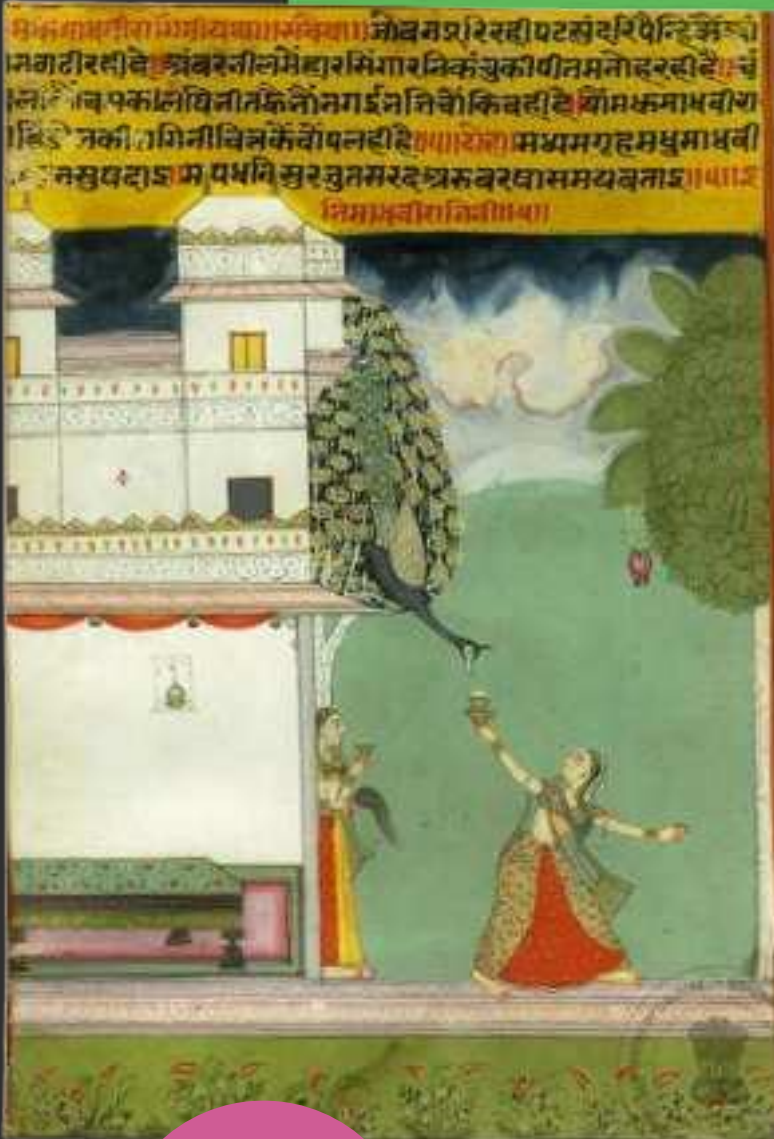




Image credits: National Gallery of Modern Art, Museums of India

Hiraman Tota

M.A.R Chughtai, 20th century

National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi

While one *nayika* longs for her lover, another one is seated quietly in the collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art, in patient and earnest love. Mohammed Abdur Rahman Chughtai, a pioneering modern artist influenced by the Bengal School, often explored themes of romance and spirituality in his work.

This celebrated painting by Chughtai depicts the *nayika* from the Sufi poet Jayasi's *premakhyān*, *Padmavat*, seated against a lush banana grove. As she adorns herself, her wise parrot, Hiran, sits close to her ear, carrying a message from her beloved. Rendered in delicate shades of green and yellow, the painting draws the eye to the vivid green parrot on her shoulder.

In Indian visual culture, parrots frequently appear as symbols of love, passion and companionship. Here, the bird's presence heightens the mood of *shringara rasa*, evoking intimacy and romantic anticipation.



Killing of the Crow Demon

Abanindranath Tagore,
1938

Victoria Memorial Hall,
Kolkata



Image credits: Victoria Memorial
Hall, Museums of India

While birds often appear in scenes of romance and melody, they also inhabit the realm of gods and demons, taking on both benevolent and malevolent forms across Indian visual culture. Artists from different schools of art have depicted birds as divine companions, saviours, and fearsome adversaries within mythological narratives.

Abanindranath Tagore's *Krishnamangal* series portrays an episode from the life of Krishna in which the infant deity slays a demon crow. Executed in the neo-folk style of the Bengal School and inspired by regional texts from Bengal, this watercolour painting depicts Krishna seated atop the defeated bird-demon, overcoming it with striking ease. The work is now housed at the Victoria Memorial Hall in Kolkata.



Image credits: Cleveland
Museum of Art

Jatayu hinders Ravana's chariot

Unknown Artist, c.1890,
Eastern India

Cleveland Museum of Art,
Cleveland

Just as birds appear in demonic and malevolent forms, they are also portrayed as wise, noble, and benevolent beings in Indian mythology. In many versions of the *Ramayana*, the vulture takes the form of a majestic demi-god, Jatayu, who is central to the story.

This Bengali depiction of the *Ramayana* shows Jatayu confronting Ravana as he abducts Sita. The ruler of vultures is seen swallowing Ravana's chariot, but upon realising that Sita is also inside, he immediately releases it. Soon after, Jatayu is killed by Ravana in battle. Rendered with a distinctive U-shaped beak and green wings, the majestic bird is painted in gum tempera and tin on paper. The work is now part of the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art.



Image credits: Allahabad Museum,
Museum of India

Goddess Saraswati

Unknown Artist,
c.19th Century CE

Allahabad Museum,
Prayagraj

Birds have long served as important companions to gods and goddesses in Puranic mythology. Appearing as *vahanas* or divine companions, they are closely associated with particular deities and frequently accompany them in visual representations.

In this 19th-century miniature, Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom and arts, is shown seated upon a bird distinguished by its prominent red comb, alert posture, and long, flowing tail feathers rendered in elegant sweeping curves. The bird delicately holds a string of pearls in its beak. Saraswati is dressed in layered garments with patterned borders and adorned with necklaces, armlets, and earrings, while a male attendant stands behind her in a supportive stance within the compact composition. This painting is currently part of the collection at the Allahabad Museum.





Image credits: Salar Jung Museum,
Museums of India

Make-up Box

Unknown Artist, c.19th
century, Deccan

Salar Jung Museum,
Hyderabad

We have explored the presence of birds across the visual culture of the Indian subcontinent, where they appear in paintings, manuscripts, and mythological narratives. Yet these creatures exist beyond the surface of paper, finding form in objects, sculptures, and everyday utility ware preserved in museums across India.

An intricately designed make-up box in the collection of the Salar Jung Museum offers one such example. Shaped like a leaf, the metal box contains two stacked compartments. Perched above them is a larger bird holding two smaller compartments adorned with three smaller birds. The delicate craftsmanship of the object suggests not only an appreciation for finely made wares, but also an enduring fascination with these graceful, winged creatures.





Image credits: National Museum,
Museums of India

Ganjifa cards

Unknown Artist, c.19th century,
Rajasthan

National Museum,
New Delhi

Finally, these winged creatures also enter everyday life and leisure, appearing in objects designed for play and entertainment. Across the Indian subcontinent, birds have long been represented in games and decorative arts, bringing these familiar forms into daily use.

Ganjifa cards, played across the subcontinent for centuries and believed to have Persian origins, often feature a rich variety of characters, themes, settings, and animals. This *Ganjifa* set from Rajasthan depicts four birds set against a vivid red background. Painted in bright shades of yellow and green, the birds are carefully arranged within the composition. They appear to be parrots, though to be certain, one would need to view them in the National Museum's painting gallery.



As this flight trails its end, birds have however never really left our imagination. A lot of us are still thrilled spotting a colourful bird in a concrete filled city. Our affection and attention towards these creatures only point towards how they still capture our imagination, staying imprinted on what we create. Jahangir kept his birds close to him, either in cages or in his gardens; Mansur drew them extensively; emperors often included them in their portraits; devotees worshipped them; admirers moulded them on their wares. This trail tries to trace birds in the Indian visual culture and encourages you to think about their presence in skies, nests and in the art that surrounds us (with a subtle agenda that you might think about this trail whenever you see a bird next time!)

Telangana State Archeology
Museum, Hyderabad

Persianate Inscriptions of the Hyderabad Museum

Hyderabad Museum, better known as the Telangana State Archeology Museum, houses a remarkable collection of inscriptions from different ages and dynasties that often remain hidden in plain sight. Through this trail, one can visually trace the evolution of calligraphic styles, the materials used for inscriptions, and the cultural significance, symbolism, and contexts associated with them.

Inscriptions often functioned as instruments through which rulers elevated and immortalised themselves, leaving behind enduring reminders of their power and authority. The museum itself stands as part of this legacy, shaped through the efforts of Dr. Gulam Yazdani, the first Director of the Department of Archaeology of the Hyderabad State.

Deccan Archive Foundation

Inscription over the Entrance Arch

Built in 1924 CE (1342 AH), this monument was commissioned by the Nizam State to display the arts and crafts of the Deccan, including *Bidri* silverware, Warangal carpets, *Nirmal* paintings, and other regional products. Conceived as a showcase of the kingdom's distinct identity and craftsmanship, the exhibition was later shifted in 1938 to the present-day Exhibition Grounds, where the annual *Numaish* continues to this day.

From 1938 onwards, the building was repurposed as an Archaeological Museum. In many ways, it still remains an exhibition space, though now of history and memory rather than commerce. Interestingly, while the Nizams never officially declared themselves kings, this inscription refers to Osman Ali Khan as the "Shah of the Deccan." What was once envisioned as a monument to invigorate Deccani pride has today become part of the city's heritage fabric, continuing to evoke the same spirit through different means.

A French Cannon Forged in Top-ka-sancha, Hyderabad

An often-overlooked aspect of history is the rivalry between European powers seeking influence in the subcontinent. This bilingual cannon was forged barely a kilometre away from the museum at the Gunfoundry established by the French military commander Raymond.

The French inscription records the date 1793, while the Persian inscription names the ruler Nizam Ali Khan. Together, they place the object in a turbulent moment just five years before the fall of Tipu Sultan and the decline of French ambitions in India, after which the British emerged as the dominant power in the subcontinent.



Adil Shahi Inscription

Dating to 1619 CE (1028 AH), this inscription from the reign of Ibrahim Adil Shah II was discovered on the Kamal Burj of Raichur Fort. The Raichur region was fiercely contested during the Sultanate period because of its strategic location and the diamond mines under its control.

Like many royal inscriptions of the period, the text employs poetic and exalted language to project the Sultan's might and divine right to rule, presenting the emperor as unrivalled and almost deity-like. This also reflects Ibrahim Adil Shah's syncretic approach to kingship, where Islamic and Hindu symbols coexisted within the same visual and political language.

The inscription is particularly striking for its elaborate ornamentation, featuring motifs such as minarets, arches, and the 'tree of life' motif. Such richly decorated inscriptions on fort walls are comparatively rare.



Badshahi Ashurkhana

Among the oldest surviving tile-work inscriptions in Hyderabad, these were commissioned in 1596 by Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah. Inspired by Persian shrine architecture, the inscriptions display intricate tile work alongside vegetal and geometric motifs characteristic of Safavid artistic traditions.

This particular inscription mentions Abdullah Qutb Shah, who renovated and expanded the Ashurkhana complex. The site is renowned for preserving some of the finest examples of Golconda-era calligraphy. The motifs and inscriptional styles seen here were later replicated and displayed within the State Museum itself.



Cobalt Blue Plate Inscription

This ceramic dish is inscribed with *Surah Ikhlas* from the Holy Quran, a chapter centred on *tawheed*, or the oneness of God. Ceramics with blue inlay of this kind came to be known as “Cobalt Blue” or “Mohammadan Blue,” as Chinese craftsmen historically imported cobalt pigment from Muslim kingdoms.

Likely produced in the 19th century using similar techniques, the plate reflects a long-standing belief that eating or drinking from vessels inscribed with Quranic verses could protect against illness, misfortune, and black magic.

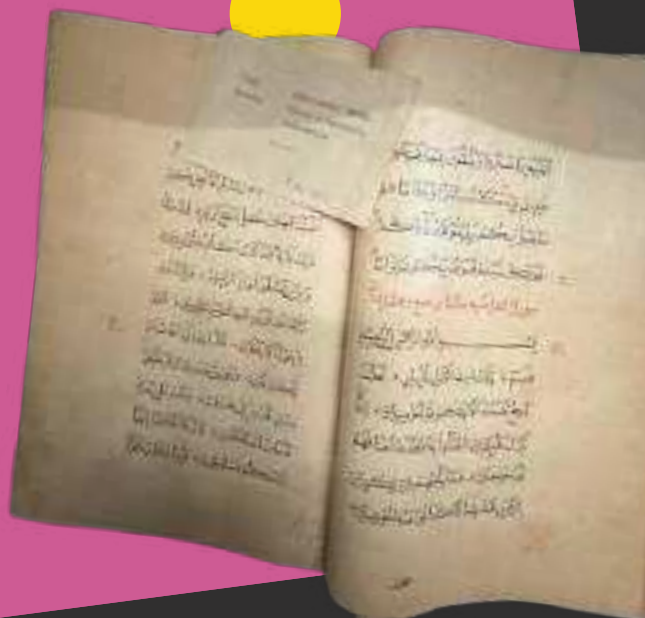
The object therefore existed not merely as a decorative artefact, but also as one invested with spiritual and healing significance.



Holy Quran Inscribed by Aurangzeb Alamgir [from Bibi Ka Maqbara, Aurangabad]

This copy of the Holy Quran is believed to have been written by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir during the later years of his life. Historical accounts describe how Aurangzeb earned money for his personal expenses by hand-copying the Quran and sewing caps rather than relying on the imperial treasury.

The manuscript was written in the Shahi Mosque of the Qila-e-Ark in Aurangabad. In contrast to richly illuminated royal manuscripts, this copy is restrained and austere in its decoration, reflecting the emperor's personal reputation for piety and simplicity.



North Inscription of Numaish Gah

Located on the northern entrance of the Numaish Gah, this inscription reads “*Osmania Numaish Gah Hyderabad*” and records the date 1333 Fasli (1923 CE). The *Fasli* calendar, officially used in the Deccan administration, was based on agricultural and crop cycles.



Holy Quran from the Library of Aurangzeb with his Seal [from Bibi ka Maqbara]

This manuscript, also associated with Aurangzeb Alamgir, bears the emperor's seal but is not in his own handwriting. Originally part of his library and later found at Bibi Ka Maqbara, it is richly illuminated with ornate borders and decorative embellishments.



The House of Qutb Shah

This miniature painting, drawn from an illustrated manuscript, is the only known visual representation bringing together all the rulers of the Qutb Shahi Dynasty in a single composition. Believed to have been commissioned during the reign of Abul Hasan Tana Shah, the work includes label inscriptions identifying the assembled figures.

At the centre sits a towering ruler identified by the inscription beside him as “*Bade Malik*,” a now-forgotten contemporary title used for the dynasty’s founder, Sultan Quli Qutb-ul-Mulk. The painting functions not only as a dynastic portrait but also as an inscriptional archive, preserving names, titles, and memories that may otherwise have faded from history.



Concept:

Mohammed Sibghatullah Khan

Research and Content:

Mohammed Wahajullah Khan

Dheeraj Vanarasa

Camera:

Ammara Haroon

Gattu Mani Sahith

Mohammed Safwan

Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum,
Mumbai

The Ghost Garden of Byculla:

Trail of a Fallen Empire

Beyond the beautiful Palladian-style museum, a meticulously curated vitrine of the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum (formerly the Victoria and Albert Museum), lies a silent, outdoor stone purgatory. The museum is a testament to Victorian architecture and Mumbai's industrial history — many visitors come for its gilded interiors, vibrant dioramas, and historic artefacts. However, what most visitors don't know is that an assembly or graveyard of colonial icons, of famous British people, lies just next to it, watching them from the weeds.

This is not a formal gallery, but a space where the once mighty have been retired to a patch of grass, stripped of their pedestals and dignity. They are the "unwanted" — for decades, they occupied the most prestigious intersections of Bombay, looking down from towering pedestals of basalt and marble. Today, they are at eye level, stripped of their heights and, in many cases, their faces. To find them, you must intentionally step off the beaten path, entering a "ghost garden" that the city has largely chosen to forget.

Mallika Keer

Founder, Beyond Heritage

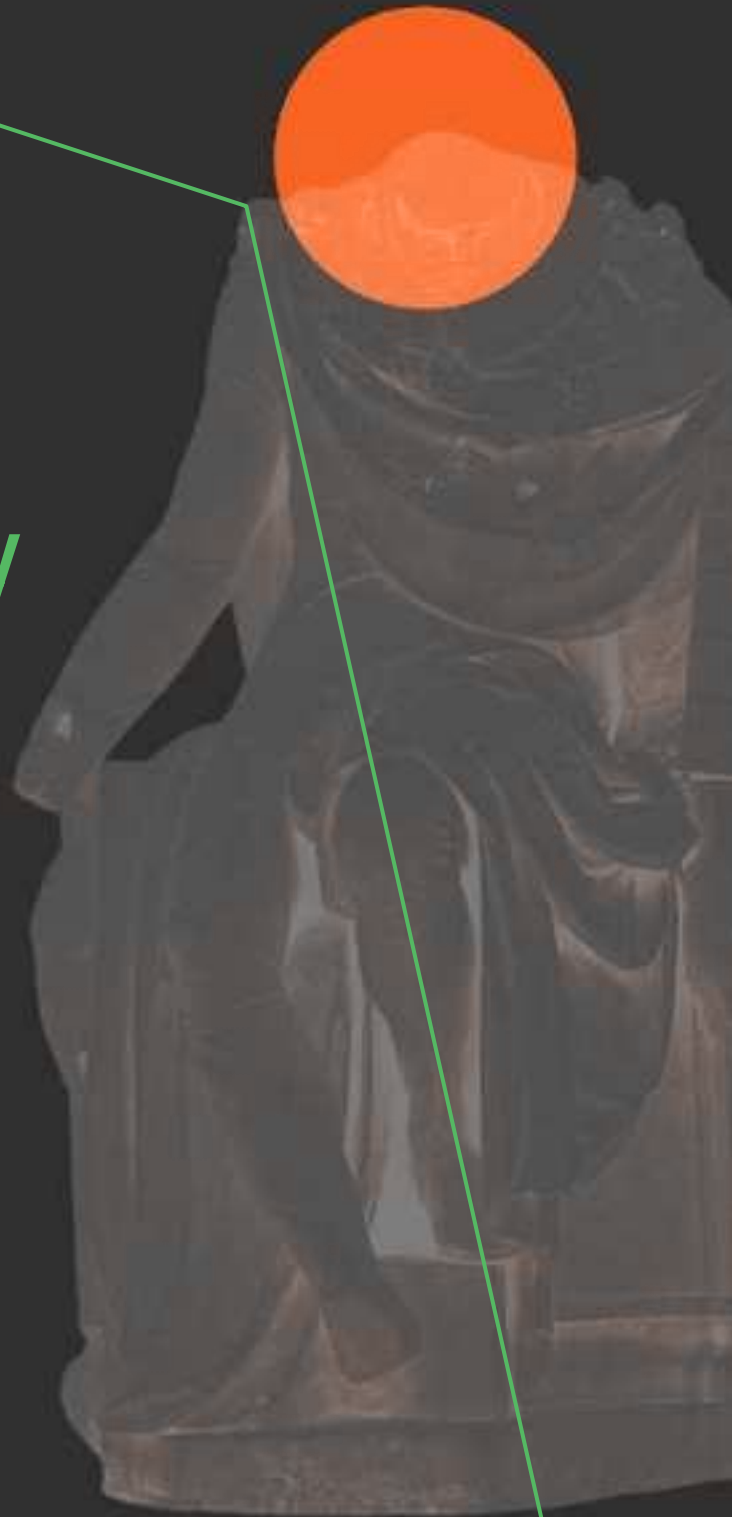
All images are provided by the author

The Anatomy of a Revolt

During the British Raj, the streets of Bombay were a forest of imperial propaganda. Statues of governors, viceroys, and monarchs stood on towering pedestals at every major intersection, designed to dwarf the common citizen and project an aura of permanent authority.

During the mid 20th century, particularly as nationalist fervour peaked in the 1960s, these icons were systematically toppled. In a visceral act of defiance, protestors decapitated, defaced, and dismantled such monuments. To the locals, these were not works of art, but the stony faces of an empire that had systematically drained the subcontinent.

Many were later moved to this museum, and today they are preserved as historical artefacts, though stripped of their pedestals.



Faces of the Displaced

The Shamed Monarch: Queen Victoria

Original Location

**The Fort (CST/
Victoria Terminus)**

Once seated majestically under a 42-foot neo-Gothic canopy, this icon of the Empress is now weathered. In her hand, she holds a globe, a chillingly literal demonstration of her 'world-spanning' rule.

In her present state, her nose is broken. In Indian culture, cutting of the nose (*naak kaatna*) is the ultimate symbolic act of dishonour. By shattering her profile, the protestors did more than damage stone executing a public shaming of the Crown itself.



The Outlier: Dr. Thomas Blaney

Original
Location

**Opposite Municipal
Buildings (CST)**

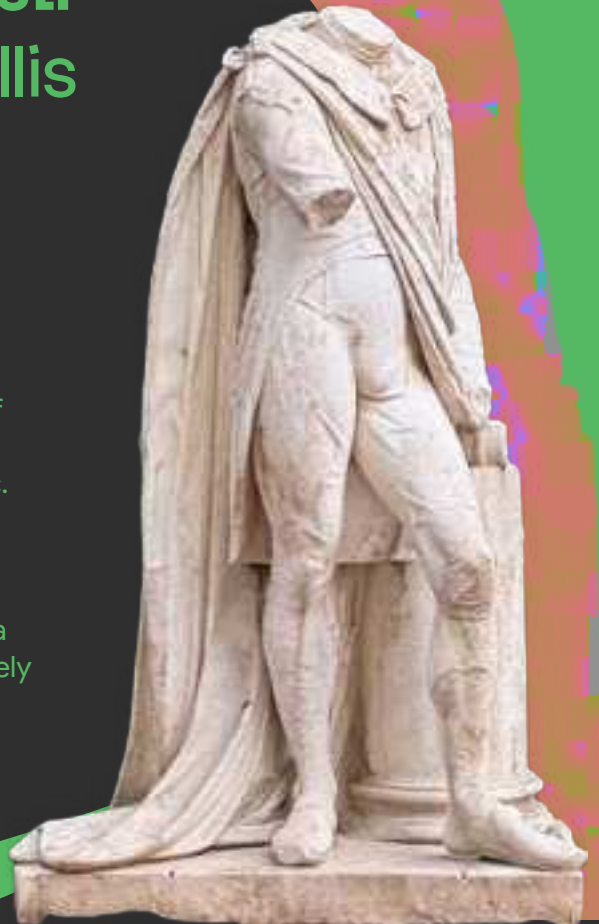
Amidst all Governors and Queens stands Dr. Blaney, a physician and philanthropist, whose statue is still intact. Blaney was a 'citizen-hero,' beloved for his public service. His presence in this garden is a paradox—he wasn't exiled in anger, but moved for his own protection. He stands as a foil to the officials around him; a reminder of the individual humans who worked within the city's evolving fabric.

The Beheaded Strategist: Lord Marquis of Cornwallis

Original Location — **The Fort, Mumbai**

Standing amid the shadows of the garden, the figure of Cornwallis, once the Governor-General of India, cuts a haunting silhouette. In his prime, he was the architect of the 'Permanent Settlement', a sweeping land tax reform that fundamentally altered India's socioeconomic fabric. His statue was meant to embody the unwavering permanence of the British administration.

Today, his statue is a macabre remnant of that perceived permanence. He stands beheaded, his neck a jagged stump of stone, with a missing arm that once likely held a scroll or a sword of state. This physical 'de-crowning' serves as a visceral counter-narrative to his historical title; the man who structured the empire's finances is now a broken figure in a museum backyard.



The Architect of Empire: Lord Marquis of Wellesley

Original Location — **The Fort, Mumbai (Erected by the merchants of Bombay)**

Wellesley was perhaps the most aggressively expansionist Governor-General in the history of the Raj. It was his 'Subsidiary Alliance' system that effectively brought vast Indian princely states under the British thumb. Due to his favour towards trade, the wealthy merchants of Bombay funded this monument as a tribute to the man who secured their commercial routes through conquest.

At present, the statue serves as a study in radical transformation. Like Cornwallis, Wellesley has also been decapitated. Furthermore, a hand and a foot have been struck away, leaving him precariously balanced and incomplete. To see this statue is to witness the physical dismantling of a man who once sought to map and own an entire subcontinent.



The Administrator of Crisis: Lord Sandhurst

Original Location — **The Esplanade**

William Mansfield II governed Bombay during the catastrophic plague of 1896, a time of immense local suffering.

Like Victoria, Sandhurst's nose has been struck off. The symbolic disrespect etched into his face serves as a permanent reminder of the friction between the colonial administration and the people they governed during times of crisis.



Lord
Hardinge

The Intact Survivors: Lord Hardinge and Sir Richard Temple

Original Location — **Apollo Bunder and
Oval Maidan**

Not every statue met a violent end. Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy who survived an assassination attempt in Delhi, stands remarkably intact. Sir Richard Temple, a Governor known for his extensive public works, also remains physically preserved.

Their survival offers a rare opportunity to see the full, unadulterated 'imperial gaze' — the stern, paternalistic expression meant to command the streets of Bombay for eternity.



Today, the display remains a site of controversy. To some, keeping them is an act of acknowledging a difficult past; to others, they are painful remnants of injustice. But to walk through this trail is to realise that history is not just about what we save; it is about how we choose to remember what we broke.

In their current, "broken" state, these statues tell a more profound story than they ever did on their pedestals. They are no longer monuments to the men they represent; they are monuments to the moment a nation decided it would no longer be looked down upon. Acknowledgment is not celebration; it is the courageous act of looking history in its shattered face.



Sir Richard
Temple

**Rai Bahadur Dr. Hiralal
Archaeological Museum,
Nagpur**

The Many Faces of the Divine

**An assemblage of Vakataka-era
sculptures from the
excavations at Mandhal,
Vidarbha (eastern Maharashtra)**

Tucked within the campus of Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj Nagpur University, the Rai Bahadur Dr. Hiralal Archaeological Museum stands as a quiet repository of Vidarbha's past. Named after Rai Bahadur Dr. Hiralal, a pioneering scholar of epigraphy and regional history, the museum functions under the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, and is envisioned as a centre for research and documentation of the region's cultural heritage.

This trail moves through a remarkable group of sculptures excavated at Mandhal, dating to the time of the Vakataka Dynasty (c. 3rd–5th century CE). Carved in local sandstone, these sculptures are marked by rounded forms, composed expressions, and a quiet solidity that defines the Vakataka visual language, offering a glimpse into a rich yet often overlooked artistic tradition of Vidarbha.

Ar. Mandira Neware
Founder, Nagpuri

All images are provided by the author

A form that sees in all directions,
yet remains unseen

Mahasadashiva

Among this assemblage emerges a form that commands immediate attention, *Mahasadashiva*, a rare twelve-headed representation of Shiva, excavated at Mandhal during the 1975–76 explorations. The sculpture is carved in fine sandstone, now bearing a reddish hue from prolonged burial in mineral-rich soil.

Depicted in *sthanaka* posture, the figure holds a *danda* (staff) and a *tumbi* (water vessel), while its twelve heads unfold in a striking arrangement — four along the neck, with additional faces emerging from the shoulders and thighs.

Multi-headed forms of Shiva are known across India; however, a twelve-headed configuration of this kind remains exceptionally rare, with no widely documented parallel in the country. While other Vakataka-period sculptures, such as those from Mansar, have found a place in national collections, the *Mandhal Mahasadashiva* stands apart in both scale and iconographic complexity.

At once an artistic achievement and a theological statement, the sculpture opens a window into the expansive imagination of early historic Vidarbha, positioning it firmly within the larger narrative of Indian art.

Surrounding this extraordinary form is a diverse yet cohesive group of sculptures that shares a common visual language while representing varied traditions. Together, they reflect a cultural landscape where multiple strands of belief and artistic expression coexisted within the region.



Vishnu

This fragmentary representation of Vishnu reflects the sculptural sensibility seen across the Mandhal assemblage. The sandstone figure is marked by a rounded face, gently defined features, and a composed expression that conveys a stability. Despite partial preservation, the sculpture retains a strong presence, suggesting the continuity of Vaishnavite traditions alongside Shaivite imagery.



Balarama

This fragmentary image of Balarama is defined by its heavy, compact form and emphatic modelling. Though the head is missing, the torso is broad and full, with a pronounced abdomen, while the surviving arm is bent upward, once likely holding an attribute now lost.

A smaller attendant figure is carved at the side, adding a narrative element to the otherwise frontal composition.



Padmapurusha

Marked by a frontal presence, this figure is distinguished by its broad face, wide eyes, and softly defined lips, and is framed by stylised hair that falls to the shoulders. One hand holds a lotus, while the other rests on the waist in a poised gesture.



Naigamesha

An unusual and compelling form, this figure combines a human body with an animal-like head, now heavily worn. The kneeling posture is compact, with one hand holding a long attribute diagonally across the body while the other rests on the waist. Though the facial details are eroded, the sculpture retains a distinct identity within the assemblage.



Brahma

This image of Brahma is marked by a multi-faced form, with three visible heads emerging from a shared, rounded mass. The central face is frontal, while the adjoining faces extend outward, suggesting the deity's all-seeing nature.

The figure is seated in a compact posture, the legs folded over a lotus base with clearly defined petals. One surviving hand holds a rounded pot, while the other rests across the body, creating a balanced, contained composition. Though partially damaged, the sculpture retains a sense of symmetry and authority.



Shiva

Rendered in a compact, frontal form, this seated figure leans slightly forward. The softly modelled face, with downcast eyes, suggests introspection, while the hair is arranged in a voluminous matted mass. A vessel held at the torso, supported by both hands, adds a sense of weight and stillness. Minimal ornamentation reinforces a restrained aesthetic typical of early Vakataka craftsmanship.



Durga



Depicted in a relaxed seated posture, with one leg folded and the other extended, this figure balances composure with strength. The rounded torso, with one arm resting across the raised knee, and serene expression, lends a sense of calm authority. The base features animal forms, likely her lion mount, grounding the figure within its iconographic context.

Tripurantaka Shiva



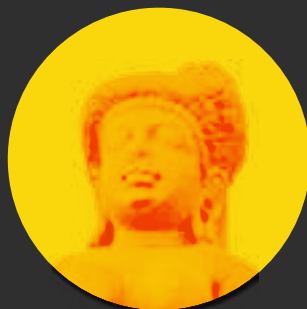
This weathered sandstone head depicts Shiva in his form as *Tripurantaka*, the destroyer of the three mythical cities. The broad face, softened by erosion, is framed by matted hair and retains a calm, meditative expression with half-closed eyes.

Parvati

This image of Parvati is presented in a standing pose, with a columnar body that conveys stability. The torso is softly modelled, with full, rounded forms that emphasise fertility and grace.

Her hair is arranged in a broad mass framing the head, adding to the sculpture's balanced symmetry. The figure holds attributes at either side, one hand cradling a rounded object, while the other arm falls in a relaxed yet deliberate gesture. The lower garment is rendered as a simple, cylindrical form, adorned with minimal detailing.





The Language of Flowers



A Floral Trail through the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad

Rohini Kejriwal

Founder & Curator,
The Alipore Post

I have never plucked a flower. I forage, I look, I lean close, I sometimes photograph — but I've always stopped short of taking. There is something about the act of plucking that troubles me: the beauty ends at the moment of possession. Cut from its roots, the flower immediately begins to become something else.

And yet, the urge remains to close your hand around the stem and pull. In many ways, this is where our trail begins; with that suspended moment between desire and restraint. With the question: What does it mean to engage with a flower?

What happens after the urge is where the more interesting story begins. We learn to hold instead of pluck. We learn to look long enough that the flower becomes something more than itself — a feeling, a declaration, an offering between two people. And then, because beauty is relentless in its insistence on being remembered, we find ways to make it last: etched into jade, inlaid in silver, stitched into thread, so that the bloom outlives the garden it came from.

The artists and craftspeople whose work fills the Salar Jung Museum understood this intimately. Flowers appear here in the hands of emperors and saints, of lovers and ordinary women sitting quietly; they are carved into boxes meant to hold spice, embroidered into cloth meant to cover beds; translated into stone and metal so that what is fleeting in nature could be made to last.

The flowers in these galleries have been speaking for centuries. This is an invitation to listen to what they've been saying.

Flowers as Syntax

Muraqqa (Fairy Seated on Throne)

Miniature painting, watercolour on paper ·
Late 18th century

A fairy, neither fully human nor divine, is seated on a throne, lightly holding a lotus stalk in her right hand. The flower is not offered to anyone; it is simply held, as one holds a thought. Plants rise on either side of her — a golden creeper border frames the scene; gold is sprinkled into the very margins, as though the air around her is already in bloom.

The lotus is perhaps the oldest word in the floral vocabulary of this subcontinent. Rising from murky water into light, it carries the weight of purity and transcendence. That a fairy should hold it tells us something about how this tradition thought of flowers — as thresholds, as signs of passage between one state and another.

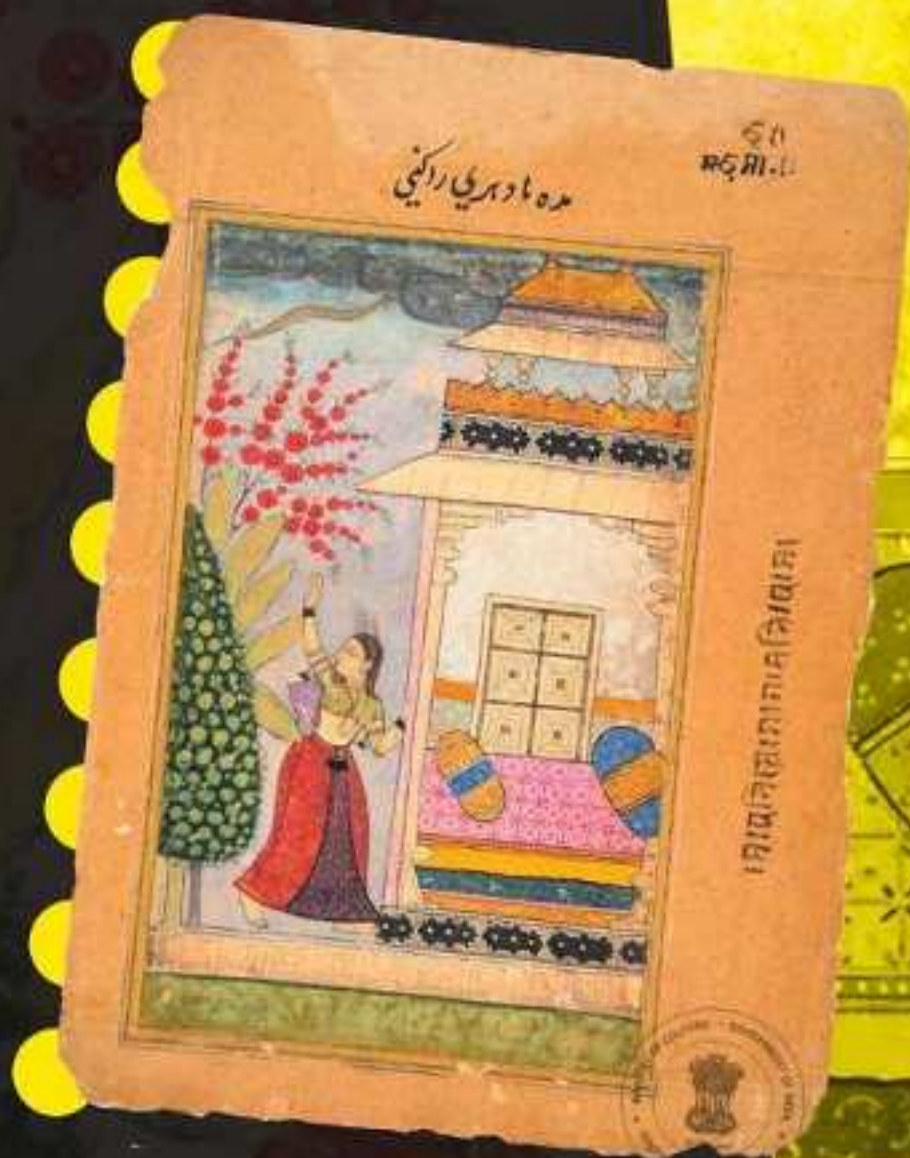


Ragini Trying to Pluck a Flower

Miniature painting, pigment on paper ·
Mughal period, 1625

In the *raga* tradition, each *ragini* is a mood, a time of day, a season, a particular emotional weather. In this painting, the ragini reaches toward a blossom, caught mid-gesture between desire and restraint. The flower, just out of reach, becomes more than an object — it becomes a point of longing.

What would she do with the flower if she reached it? *Offer it? Adorn herself?* This painting understands something that all great floral language knows: it is the gesture toward the flower, not the flower itself, that carries the meaning.





Hesitation

Oil on canvas · Raja Ravi Varma · 19th century

A woman in a sari holds a rose, idly plucking its petals while her companion watches, hands resting on his cheek. The flower becomes a quiet language of emotion, each petal marking hesitation, anticipation, the unfolding of something unspoken. *He loves me, He loves me not.* The oldest divination in the world, conducted with petals.

Ravi Varma was among the first to bring this kind of psychological precision to Indian painting; the interior life of a person made visible through what their hands are doing. What the hands are doing here is speaking in flowers.



Couple

Deccan watercolour painting · Mid 20th century

In Persian-influenced Deccani art, the garden is the proper setting for love — jannat, paradise, which has always been imagined as a place in bloom.

In the painting, a prince holds a flower in his right hand and places his left hand on the shoulder of his lover. The flower the prince carries is both a gift and a declaration. He has not offered it yet. He is still holding it, still in the middle of saying something. The flower here is part of a shared moment; a pause in time, an object that gestures toward companionship and playfulness.

Portrait of A King (Shah Jahan)

Miniature painting, watercolour on paper ·
Mid 17th century

Look at him before you read the label. A man in a gold robe scattered with pink flowers, standing on a ground of flowering grass, holding a single bloom raised toward the light. Everything in this image flowers: his garment, the earth beneath him, the object in his hand.

In Mughal portraiture, the flower held by a male figure was never incidental. It signalled refinement over brute force: power, beauty, and nature held simultaneously. The flower does not soften the dagger at his waist. It keeps it company. In Shah Jahan's case, it carries something more personal still — he was the emperor who built the Taj Mahal, that great monument of marble flowers, for Mumtaz Mahal, whose name means jewel of the palace. The flower he holds so carefully already points toward her absence.



Calligraphic Panel in Persian Nastaliq

Ink and pigment on paper with floral designs around

A magenta border carries loose gold floral sprays. Beyond that, a band of silver arabesque on dark ground, tightly interlocking. At the outermost edge, blue-black scattered with gold and white flowers. Four borders, four different floral registers; all of them moving outward from the text located at the centre.

In the Islamic artistic tradition, which shapes so much of this collection, the arabesque is not decoration. Its endlessly unfolding floral patterns carry a theological argument: beauty is not separate from meaning. The flowers at the margin are part of the sentence. The Nastaliq script itself has been described as floral: a hand that moves the way a vine moves, always finding the light. Here, script and flower share one grammar.



Flowers that Never Fade

Filigree Tray

Silver filigree · Karimnagar, Telangana

The tray itself is shaped like a flower. Six petal-shaped lobes curve outward from the centre. The entire surface is silver wire twisted into spiralling floral forms so fine it reads like lace. Gold lines divide it into arch-shaped panels, each containing more flowers. There is no negative space. No surface that is not flowering.

This is filigree work from Karimnagar in Telangana — wire drawn to near-invisibility, then shaped by hand into patterns of extraordinary intricacy. A flower-shaped tray, covered in flowers, made to hold a leaf — *paan*, or betel leaf folded around areca nut and sweet spices; one of the oldest gestures of hospitality in Indian domestic life. Elaborate trays were made for this purpose, not because *paan* required them, but because the ritual deserved them. The language of flowers, folded into itself.





Jade Spice Box

Jade, carved · 18th century

Grape-coloured jade, carved into the shape of a flower, with four compartments inside for four spices, with floral designs carved on the lid and below the box. A small object, meant for daily use. And yet someone decided that daily use should be beautiful; that the container for the things that make food fragrant should itself be made from stone shaped into flowers; that a box that holds spice, the preserved essence of plant life, should wear flowers. Such objects draw attention to the quieter rhythms of life, where flowers exist as part of lived, everyday experience.





Huqqa Bottom

Enamelled glass · Mughal period · 17th century

Red carnations bloom across the surface of this globular *huqqa* base, painted in enamel on glass so pale it is almost translucent, so the flowers seem to glow from within. Gold arch-shaped panels frame them; green creepers wind between; small buds hang like bells from every stem. Even the neck carries a single bloom. There is no surface left unflowered.

A *huqqa* moves between hands. It is breathed through, shared, and passed around a gathering. Flowers here become part of a social object: something handled, held close, and used in everyday or ceremonial settings.



White Jade Pendant

White jade, ruby, emerald · Mughal period · 17th century

Each petal of this flower is cut from ruby, the deep, saturated red stone, and set into white jade, outlined in silver, encircled by carved emerald leaves. Buds appear at different stages of opening, held mid-bloom. The entire composition is inlaid into a jade ground that itself takes the form of a scalloped flower. A flower within a flower, made entirely of stone. To translate a flower into ruby, jade, and emerald was to make a quiet, absolute declaration: *this bloom will not fade*.

This is the same technique used on the interior walls of the Taj Mahal. White jade came from the riverbeds of Khotan, thousands of miles to the north — a stone so far-travelled it seemed to carry desire within it. Shah Jahan, who prized it above all other materials, was called by his contemporaries *padshah-i-sang*, the emperor of stone.

Finger Ring

Silver · Hyderabad · 20th century

Four coins, arranged as petals. Someone looked at a coin, that most transactional of objects, stamped with the name of a king, and saw a flower instead. These are Nizam-era coins from the Princely State of Hyderabad, their faces pressed with inscriptions and architectural motifs by the authority of the state. The Banjara people, a nomadic community with a long tradition of working with metal, took coins like these after independence and soldered them into jewellery.

A flower over a king's name. A bloom where an empire's currency once circulated. Worn on the finger, the coins no longer transact. They have been lifted out of the economy of power and distilled into beauty and adornment.



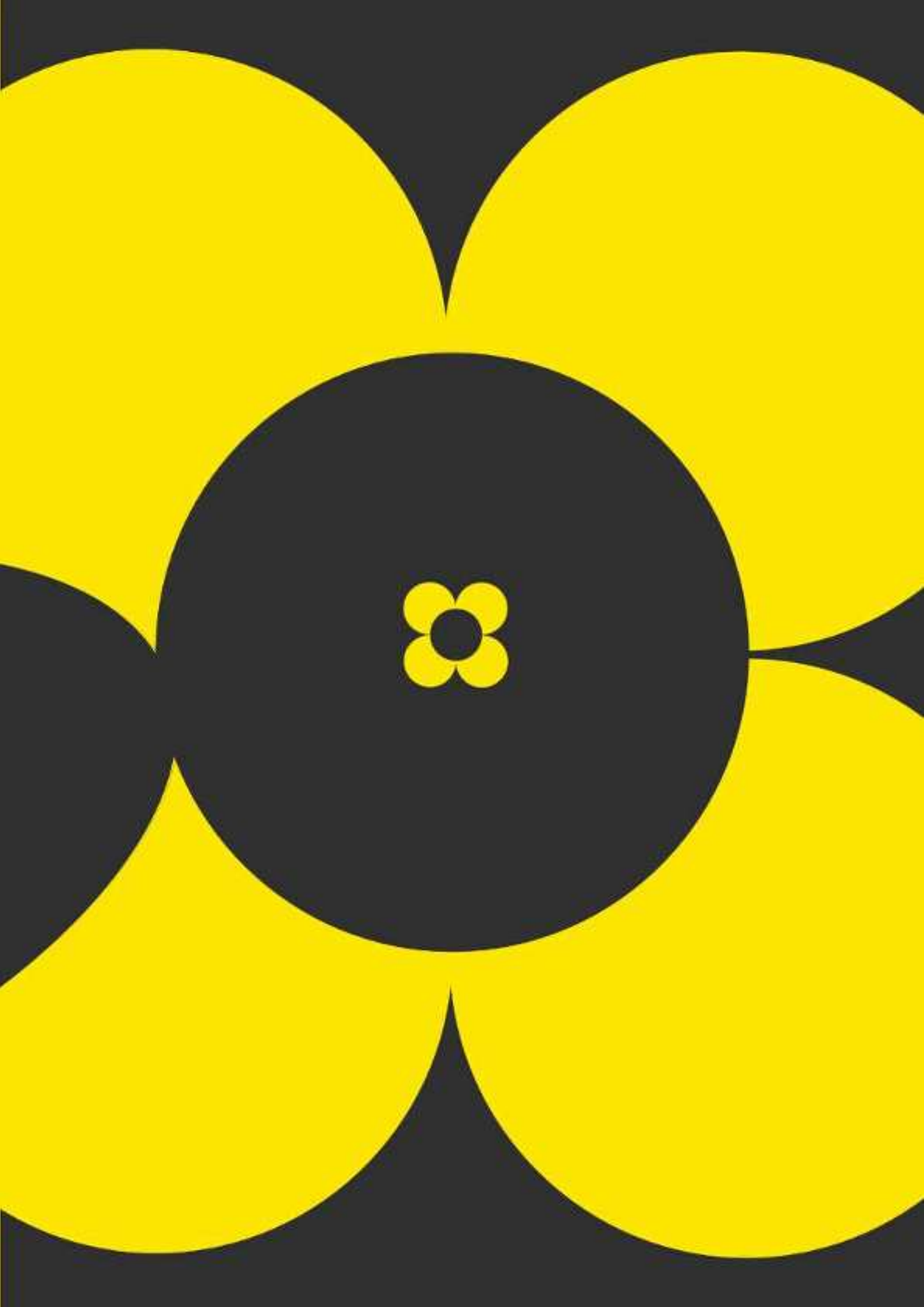
Bedsheet

Embroidery with shisha work · Kutch · 19th century

A field of red, dense with embroidery. Trees radiate outward from a central bloom, their forms repeated, mirrored, and held within a geometric frame. Small mirrors punctuate the surface, catching light where leaves and flowers might have been. This is *shisha* work, the practice of inlaying mirrors into embroidery, common across Kutch and Sindh. Here, the flower becomes not just a pattern but a light source.

The embroidery draws from the *phulkari* tradition (literally translated to 'flower-work'), a form of needlecraft in which thread is pulled across cloth to build up floral forms from the reverse side, so that the pattern emerges as if growing outward from within. Here, the flower is no longer a single form. The motif becomes immersive; something one inhabits rather than observes. It multiplies until it fills the cloth entirely: present not as image but as the ground. Whoever slept under this bedsheet slept inside a garden that flickered in the dark.





RELIQS OF FAITH AND RETURN

The Light and the Lotus:
Piprahwa Relics,
Rai Pithora Cultural Complex,
New Delhi

Shah Umair

Numismatist and
Heritage Walk Leader





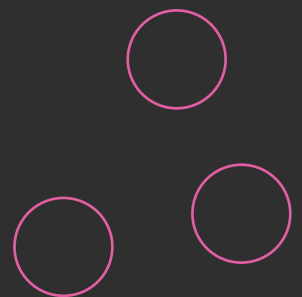
In Michael H. Hart's well-known book, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, Gautama Buddha is frequently placed in the top five. He is acknowledged for establishing a religion and philosophy that have influenced the lives of hundreds of millions. After his death in the 5th century BCE, his remains were divided into eight parts and given to various groups, including the Sakyas of Kapilavastu, the Licchavis of Vaishali, and the Mallas of Kushinagar. One part was buried in a stupa near Nepal's borderlands at Piprahwa, across the plains of Siddharthnagar in Uttar Pradesh. This stupa, dating to the early centuries after Buddha's death, traces its origin to Kushinagar.

The modern history of Piprahwa began in 1898, when William Claxton Peppé excavated a large mound on his estate. At its centre lay a sandstone coffer containing reliquaries with bone fragments, ash, and jewellery such as amethyst, garnet, pearls, and worked gold. A Brahmi inscription on one of the caskets linked the deposit to the Buddha, establishing Piprahwa as an important site within Buddhist archaeological discourse.

During colonial times, these relics were sent to museums in India; some were given to foreign countries, and a part stayed with the Peppé family in Britain for over a hundred years. In 2025, when Sotheby's planned an auction of the Piprahwa gems in Hong Kong, public protests and diplomatic actions halted the sale, leading to the collection's return to India after 127 years through cooperation between the Indian government and the Godrej Industries Group.

Today, these relics are showcased at the Rai Pithora Cultural Complex in Saket, New Delhi, in an exhibition titled *The Light and the Lotus: Relics of the Awakened One*, marking the first time in over a hundred years that relics, reliquaries, and repatriated gems have been displayed together. The exhibition has also recreated a stupa, situating the relics within their original ritual environment.

The exhibition showcases crystal caskets, terracotta pieces, and over a thousand gemstones shaped into lotus symbols and other meaningful motifs, illustrating their journey from ancient relics to colonial dispersal and finally, back to India. Additional displays broaden the story beyond Piprahwa, featuring manuscripts like the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* with Indian and Nepalese covers, Gandharan reliefs of the Buddha's Mahaparinirvana, and a contemporary image of a walking Buddha on a painted reed mat. Older Shunga-period reliefs show devotees interacting with stupas through touch and gestures. This trail documents objects that constitute the very heart of this exhibition, encapsulating over a millennium of Buddhist art, history, and spiritual practice. Despite the exhibition's beauty, debates persist over Piprahwa's identification with Kapilavastu. However, the focus at Saket lies in tracing how relics move through time, with their meanings continually evolving through discovery, scholarship, and display.



Reliquary Casket with Inscription

2nd Century BCE – 1st Century CE

This soapstone vessel was designed to contain sacred remains at the heart of a Buddhist stupa. The Brahmi script etched on the surface identifies the donor and the spiritual merit intended by the gift.

Source Museum:
Indian Museum,
Kolkata



The Piprahwa Gems of the Buddha

Mauryan Empire, Ashokan era, c. 240–200 BCE

A sacred assemblage containing hundreds of delicate gems, pearls, and gold ornaments excavated from the Piprahwa Stupa, these offerings were interred with the Buddha's bone relics, reflecting the height of Mauryan lapidary art.

Source Museum:
National Museum,
New Delhi







Casket of Holy Relics of Lord Buddha of Piprahwa

c. 5th – 3rd Century BCE

This casket holds the Buddha's bone relics. Its simple yet honourable appearance emphasises the profound spiritual importance of the Buddha's mortal remains. The casket has provided crucial epigraphic and archaeological evidence connecting Piprahwa to ancient Kapilavastu.

Source Museum:
National Museum,
New Delhi

Crystal Casket with Fish Finial

1st Century BCE – 1st Century CE

Carved from a single block of quartz, the casket features a lid surmounted by an auspicious fish finial. The crystal's transparency was a deliberate choice, allowing the devotee to witness the relic's presence.

Source Museum:
Indian Museum,
Kolkata

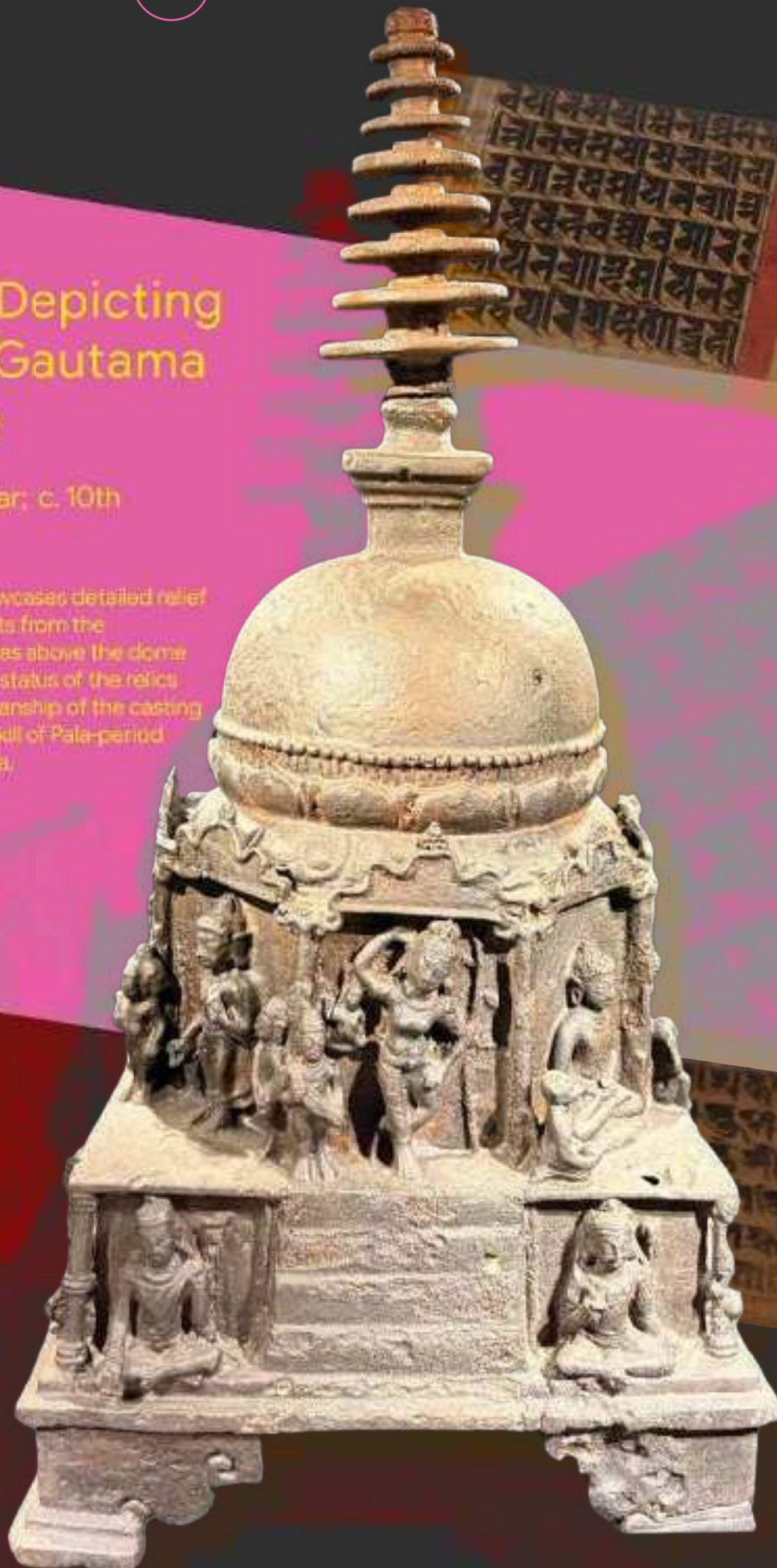


Votive Stupa Depicting Scenes from Gautama Buddha's Life

Pala period, Nalanda, Bihar; c. 10th
Century CE

This portable bronze shrine showcases detailed relief carvings illustrating key moments from the Buddha's life. The tiered umbrellas above the dome symbolise the elevated spiritual status of the relic once stored within. The craftsmanship of the casting demonstrates the exceptional skill of Pala-period metal artisans from Eastern India.

Source Museum:
National Museum,
New Delhi



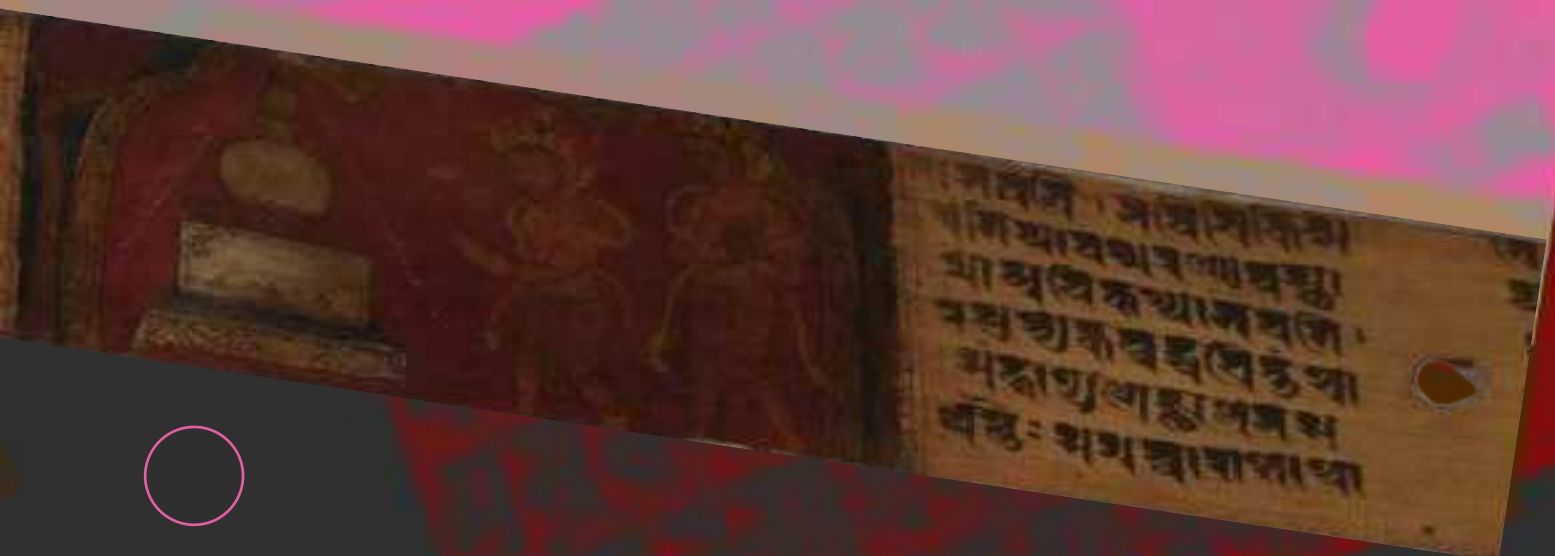
The image shows a close-up of a palm-leaf manuscript. The leaf is long and narrow, with a hole punched near the left end. It is covered in handwritten Sanskrit text in a dark ink. A central miniature painting depicts a Buddhist deity, possibly a Buddha or a Bodhisattva, seated in a meditative posture. The deity has a serene expression and is adorned with traditional Buddhist iconography. The background of the painting is a mix of red and blue. The leaf is set against a dark background with a pink and blue geometric pattern.

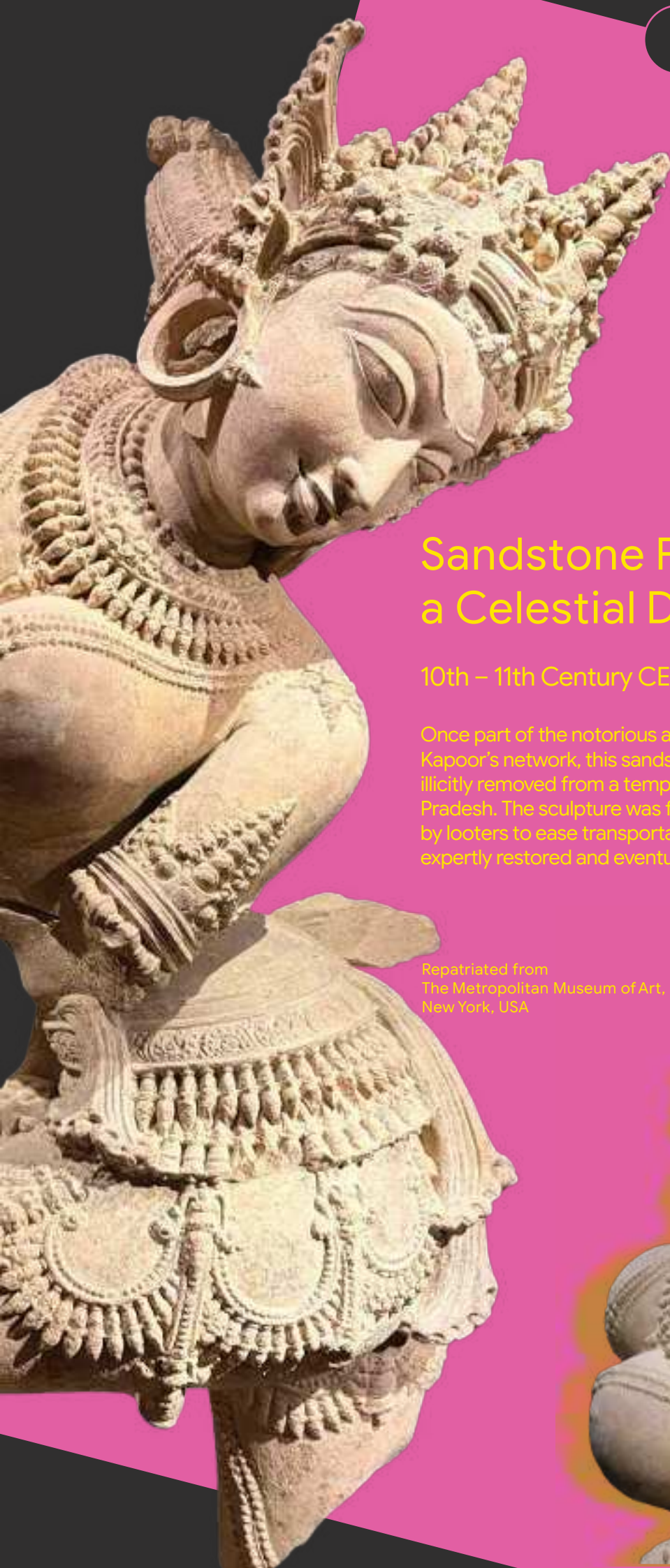
Illuminated Palm-Leaf Manuscripts

Late 10th – 12th Century CE

Inscribed with Sanskrit text and vibrant miniature paintings of Buddhist deities, these fragile palm-leaf manuscripts were essential to the transmission of Buddhist philosophy across monastic centres in India and Tibet.

Source Museum:
National Museum,
New Delhi





Sandstone Figure of a Celestial Dancer

10th – 11th Century CE

Once part of the notorious art dealer Subhash Kapoor's network, this sandstone figure was illicitly removed from a temple in Madhya Pradesh. The sculpture was famously sawn in half by looters to ease transportation, before being expertly restored and eventually repatriated.

Repatriated from
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York, USA



Footprint of the Buddha (Buddhapadapankaja)

Bodh Gaya, c. 11th Century CE

A monumental stone slab depicting the Buddhapada, with the Dharmachakra (Wheel of Law) at its centre. Such aniconic representations enabled devotees to venerate the Buddha's presence and his physical journey towards enlightenment.

Carved from dark basalt, this artefact exemplifies the sculptural traditions prevalent at the site of the Buddha's awakening.

Source Museum:
Indian Museum,
Kolkata



The Subjugation of Nalagiri

Pala period, Nalanda, Bihar; 11th Century CE

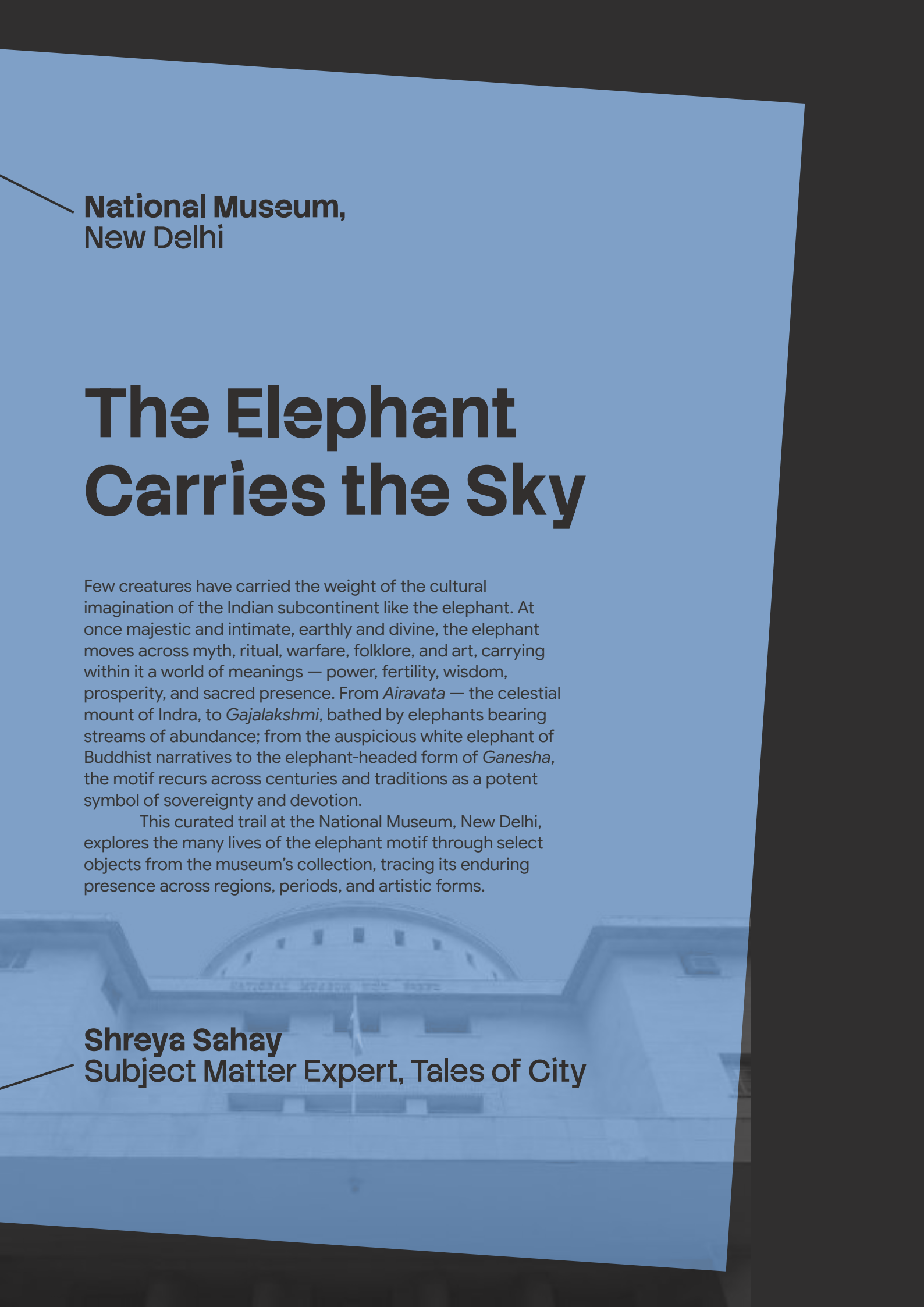
This stone sculpture depicts the Buddhist narrative of the Buddha calming the enraged elephant, Nalagiri.

The composition highlights the triumph of spiritual compassion over brute force and worldly aggression. The detailed carving, typical of the Nalanda school, captures the dramatic moment of the animal's submission at the Buddha's feet.

Source Museum:
National Museum,
New Delhi







**National Museum,
New Delhi**

The Elephant Carries the Sky

Few creatures have carried the weight of the cultural imagination of the Indian subcontinent like the elephant. At once majestic and intimate, earthly and divine, the elephant moves across myth, ritual, warfare, folklore, and art, carrying within it a world of meanings — power, fertility, wisdom, prosperity, and sacred presence. From *Airavata* — the celestial mount of Indra, to *Gajalakshmi*, bathed by elephants bearing streams of abundance; from the auspicious white elephant of Buddhist narratives to the elephant-headed form of *Ganesha*, the motif recurs across centuries and traditions as a potent symbol of sovereignty and devotion.

This curated trail at the National Museum, New Delhi, explores the many lives of the elephant motif through select objects from the museum's collection, tracing its enduring presence across regions, periods, and artistic forms.

Shreya Sahay
Subject Matter Expert, Tales of City

"The footprints of all creatures that walk
can fit inside an elephant's footprint."

— *Mahāhatthipadopamasutta*

Elephant Seal, Mohenjo-Daro

Harappa Gallery

2700 BCE

Image credits:
Museums of India



This square grey steatite seal, belonging to the Indus Valley Civilisation, excavated from Mohenjo-daro, bears the finely incised image of an elephant beneath a row of pictograms. Among the many animal motifs of the civilisation, the elephant appears with striking frequency, second only to the bull. Delicately rendered with details such as the curve of the trunk and folds along the back, the seal reveals not only the artistic sophistication of the Harappans but also the symbolic importance of the elephant within one of the world's earliest civilisations.

Elephants carrying Buddha's relics, Bharhut

Maurya-Shunga
Gallery

200 BCE

Image credits:
Google Arts and Culture



Carved in the delicate low relief characteristic of Shunga-period art, this coping stone from the Bharhut Stupa depicts the royal procession carrying the relics of the Buddha following his *Mahaparinirvana*, as narrated in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutta*. Caparisoned elephants bearing reliquary caskets move alongside dancers and musicians playing drums, castanets, and the harp, transforming the scene into both a sacred procession and a spectacle of royal ceremony. The elephants lend grandeur and solemnity to the event commemorating the division of the Buddha's relics among the eight ruling clans of ancient India.

Kumara Gupta-I Coin

Coins Gallery

414–455 CE



Image credits:
Museums of India

Issued during the reign of Kumaragupta I (c. 415–455 CE) of the Gupta Empire, this gold coin belongs to the celebrated “Elephant Rider” type. The obverse presents the king astride a richly caparisoned elephant, shaded by an attendant holding a parasol—an image that combines martial power with royal spectacle. The elephant here becomes an emblem of authority and triumph. The Brahmi legend proclaims, “*Kshataripu Kumaragupto jayatiripun.*” On the reverse, the goddess Lakshmi stands gracefully upon a lotus, holding a lotus creeper and cornucopia, accompanied by the inscription “*Sri Mahendragajah.*”

Ganesha

Bronze Art Gallery

10th Century CE

Seated in a relaxed posture on a double-lotus pedestal, this 10th-century bronze sculpture of Ganesha from the Pala period captures the deity’s familiar elephant-headed form. Lord Ganesha is revered as the remover of obstacles and the patron of wisdom and beginnings. Here, the elephant is transformed from a symbol of earthly strength into a sacred form.



Image credits:
Museums of India

The marriage procession of Dara Shikoh

Paintings Gallery
17th Century CE



Image credits:
Wikimedia Commons

Set amidst the dazzling 1633 CE wedding procession of the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh and Nadira Begum, the painting captures the splendour and theatricality of the Mughal court. Amid nobles, musicians, fireworks, and richly dressed attendants, ornamented elephants emerge as powerful symbols of imperial authority and ceremonial grandeur. Decorated with elaborate textiles and carrying members of the royal entourage, the elephants contribute to the spectacle of sovereignty that defined Mughal visual culture.

Soldiers with a mad Elephant

Paintings Gallery
18th Century CE



Rendered in the vibrant visual language of 18th-century Rajasthani painting, this dramatic scene captures the struggle to restrain a rampaging elephant. Armed with spears and chains, a group of men attempts to subdue the powerful animal, while a lone rider lies precariously across its back. The elephant here appears untamed and volatile, embodying immense physical force and unpredictability.

Image credits:
Museums of India

Gaja Lakshmi

Thanjavur Gallery

18th-19th Century CE

Seated in the *padmasana* posture upon an ornate throne, *Gajalakshmi* appears resplendent in gold garments and a green blouse, embodying abundance, beauty, and divine grace. Flanking the goddess are two milky-white elephants, richly adorned with jewels, offering lotus flowers in an act of devotion and auspicious blessing. The pairing of Lakshmi and elephants evokes fertility, prosperity, and royal fortune, transforming the elephant into both a sacred attendant and a symbol of cosmic abundance.



Image credits:
Museums of India

Bangle/ Kada

Jewellery Section

18th Century CE

This ornate *kada* terminates in two opposing elephant heads with intertwined tusks; their surfaces embellished with diamonds and delicate *gulabi mina* enamel work. Set against green enamel and floral motifs, the bracelet transforms the elephant into an object of luxury and adornment. Here, the elephant motif moves from the monumental and sacred into the intimate world of jewellery.



Image credits:
Museums of India

Jewellery Box

Decorative Arts Gallery

20th Century CE

Inspired by the delicate *jaali* patterns of Mughal architecture, this early 20th-century ivory jewellery box showcases the remarkable craftsmanship of Delhi's ivory carvers. Resting on legs shaped as elephant heads, the object incorporates the elephant motif into a refined vocabulary of ornamentation, where the animal appears not as a sacred or royal figure, but as an element of decorative elegance.

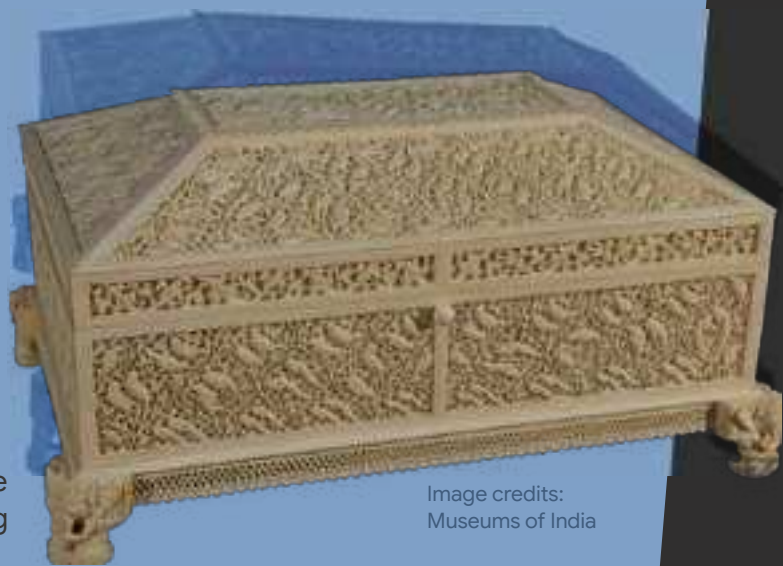


Image credits:
Museums of India

Tusk depicting Buddha's life scenes

Decorative Arts Gallery

10th Century CE

Carved upon an elephant tusk, this intricate object narrates the life of the Buddha through 43 delicately rendered roundels, tracing episodes from his birth to his *Mahaparinirvana*. Among them appears Queen Maya's dream of the white elephant descending from heaven, an auspicious vision foretelling the Buddha's birth. Here, the elephant occupies a striking dual presence: both as a sacred symbol within the narrative and as the very material upon which the story is carved, collapsing the distance between medium and meaning.



Image credits:
National Museum

Across stone, ivory, paint, gold, and memory, the elephant moves endlessly through the artistic imagination of the subcontinent—at once god, guardian, ornament, and companion. Long after empires fade and processions fall silent, its footprints continue to echo through the corridors of art and history.



Shri Pratap Singh Museum,
Kashmir

From Clay to Cannon

Shaping the Sacred, the State, and the Self

Set along the banks of the Jhelum in Srinagar, the Shri Pratap Singh (SPS) Museum is housed in what was once a summer guesthouse of 19th century Dogra rulers — a space that has, over time, become a repository of Kashmir's many pasts. While the historic building is currently undergoing restoration, an adjacent new structure curates only a fraction of its 82,000 artefacts, offering a glimpse into a history that is layered and never entirely contained.

Across the galleries, objects made of clay, stone, metal, and wood appear to belong to different times, rulers and traditions. Yet, when read together, these materials carry within them the imprint of Kashmir's layered spiritual, political, and cultural traditions, where forms of belief have transformed and overlapped across centuries.

Early objects press the sacred into surfaces that are embedded and are almost inseparable from the spaces they inhabit. Over time, the divine is given a body, fixed in stone, multiplied, and made visible. Metal allows these forms to travel with inscriptions and coins beginning to circulate authority beyond the monument, placing it into the hands of the masses. By the 19th century, materials took on an additional role altogether, not merely of representing, but also enforcing. This trail follows that movement, from clay to cannon, tracing how each material carries a different way of shaping the sacred, the state, and the self in Kashmir's layered past.

Taha Mughal
Historic Preservationist and Writer

Mohammad Fazil Panjwala,
Independent Researcher



Terracotta tile

Harwan

4th Century CE

In the Archaeology Gallery of the SPS Museum, this terracotta tile is among the first artefacts to be encountered in the collection. Excavated at the Buddhist site of Harwan, about 18 kilometres from Srinagar, it dates back to the 4th century CE and is one of the many tiles preserved in the museum. Such tiles were used on walls, pavements, floors of *stupas*, monasteries, and *viharas*. Excavations at Harwan have revealed a thriving Buddhist complex from the Kushan period. This tile's surface shows a man and a woman in conversation, adorned with ornaments, surrounded by floral and lattice motifs. Below the couple, the tile also depicts a hunting scene. Produced in large numbers, such tiles were laid across surfaces to create patterns. Through such repetition, the sacred extended across space, encountered through movement.

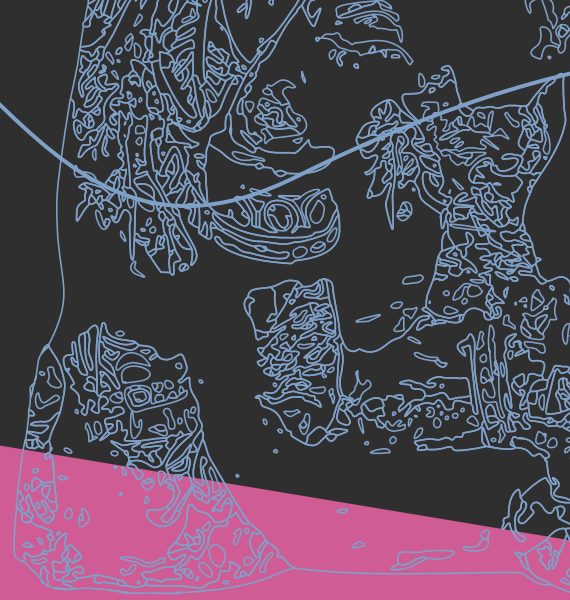


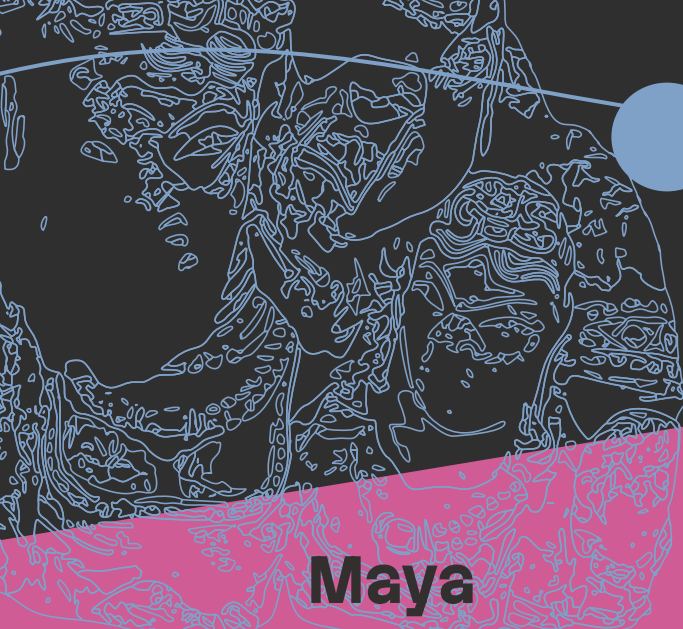
Ek Mukh Līṅga

Harwan

7th Century CE

Located in the Archaeology Gallery, this stone *līṅga* dates to the 7th century CE and represents significant artefacts that visualised the divine. Identified as an *ekamukhalinga* (single-faced *līṅga*), it is a rare form in which Shiva's face is carved onto the otherwise aniconic pillar. Discovered in Harwan in the outskirts of Srinagar, it demonstrates how stone sculptures expressed the sacred in Kashmir. A *līṅga* with a face — known as a *mukhalinga* — bridges the formless and the embodied. The carved features of the *līṅga* include the third eye, matted locks, and the crescent moon, making Shiva's presence recognisable. Such forms resonate with the traditions of Kashmir Shaivism, where the divine is understood as both formless and manifest. Unlike the terracotta tiles, which extended across architectural surfaces, the *līṅga* appears self-contained and singular. Stone allows for weight, durability, and permanence to permeate into the sculpture, the sacred anchoring attention.





Maya

The Birth scene of Siddhartha

Pandrathan

7th century CE



Stone becomes a recurring material in shaping depictions and representations of the sacred across different religions. A 7th century CE relief titled *Maya* from Pandrathan portrays the birth scene of Siddhartha, the future Buddha. The Queen Mother, on her way to her parental home, is shown pausing in the Lumbini garden, where she grasps the branch of an Ashoka tree by her right hand, as the moment of birth arrives. With her left hand, *Maya* steadies herself on the shoulder of her sister *Prajapati*, who is depicted on the left side of the queen. Immediately, the gods—led by Brahma and Sakara—arrive to offer adoration; the figure on the right is likely one of them. Above, a female figure holding a *chauri* (fly-whisk) probably represents a goddess. Overall, the scene elaborately captures a narrative moment rendered in carefully organised form, where multiple figures, gestures, and symbols are brought together within a single frame. The work shows how stone was used to articulate different sacred narratives, allowing varied traditions to take visible and enduring shape.

Teen Mukh Shiva

Gupkar, Dalgate
9th Century CE

Displayed in the Archaeology Gallery, this 9th century CE monumental stone head of Shiva was excavated near the banks of the Dal Lake at Gupkar during the construction of Maharaja Hari Singh's palace. Among the largest known representations of Shiva from Kashmir, the sculpture presents him in a *trimukha form* - *Tatpurusha*, *Ekavaktra*, and *Aghora*, in continuity with Kushan iconography. The central visage, frontal and composed, is flanked by two profile heads, articulating a multi-aspect presence within a single sculptural field. The treatment of the coiffure, crown, and facial modelling reflects three distinct faces of Shiva in their totality: Creation, Preservation and Destruction. The central face, *Tatpurusha*, is benign, with its *jata* arranged and secured beneath a tiara-like crown. On one side appears the feminine aspect, identified with Uma, while the opposing face, *Aghora*, conveys a ferocious presence, its head-gear adorned with human skulls and dismembered hands. Each of the three heads bear a distinct *mukuta* (crown) and the third eye on the forehead.



Vaishnava Avatar Frame

Kulgam

9th century CE



This rare 9th century CE bronze frame, discovered at Devsar (Kulgam), is among the museum's finest metal works that represents the technical skill of metal-workers in Kashmir. At the top, the frame has a pillared shrine surmounted with an *amalaka* adorned with ribbons and a crescent above. The *varman* frame presents multiple incarnations of Vishnu within a carefully organised, tiered structure. It depicts a transcendental, seven-headed, and ten-armed form of Vishnu, the Hindu God. The lower tier is of *Vaikuntha*, the second tier is of *Vasudeva*, *Aniruddha* and *Samkarsana* and at the apex is *Hayagriva*, the horse head. The remaining fifteen figures arranged along the frame, read from left to right: a possible Nāgarāja donor beneath a seven-headed serpent canopy; *Sheshashayi* Vishnu reclining on the serpent *Shesha*, with Brahma seated on a lotus emerging from his navel, accompanied by *Madhu* and *Kaitabha*; *Hayagriva*, six-armed, with the upper hands holding solar and lunar symbols; Vishnu slaying *Madhu* and *Kaitabha*; a three-headed Vishnu with a kneeling four-armed Brahma to the left; a seated three-headed Vishnu with Lakshmi kneeling to the right; Varaha standing upon the coils of the serpent *Adisesha* and raising the goddess upon his left arm; Vishnu in *yogasana* with two attendants; Varaha slaying *Hiranyaksha*.

Narasimha slaying *Hiranyakashipu*; two missing figures, one later replaced by an indeterminate form; *Vamana* accompanied by the kneeling figure of Bali holding a libation pot, with his queen shown with veiled hair; *Trivikrama* striding over Bali with a diminutive horse; and another possible Nāgarāja donor beneath a seven-headed serpent canopy.

Cast in bronze, the frame allows for precision and complexity, reflecting a nuanced Vaishnava imagination. It shows how metal work accommodated more elaborate, systematised visualisations of the divine within an integrated image.

Persian Stone Inscription

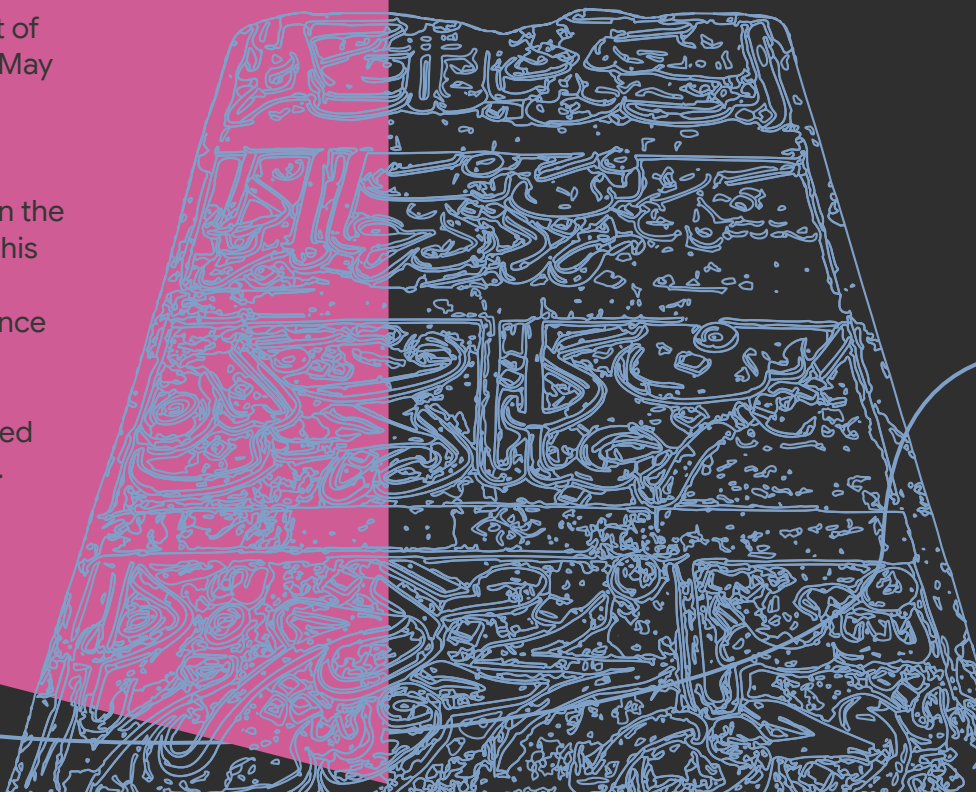
Zaina Lank

15th century CE

This limestone Persian inscription exhibited in the Archaeology Gallery, commemorates the construction of Zaina Lank, an artificial island built within the Wular Lake under Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin in 847 AH / 1442 CE. Executed in *Thuluth* calligraphy, the inscription records the foundation of a carefully engineered landscape intervention, that broadly included a palace and a *khilwat khana* (solitary retreat cell), the latter later believed to have functioned as a mosque. The chronogram for the island's construction was composed by the Sultan's poet laureate, Mulla Ahmad, and inscribed onto this stone plaque now preserved at the SPS Museum. Its translated verses read: "May this foundation be as firm as the foundation of Heavens; May it be the most renowned ornament in the entire Universe; As long as the 'Adornment of Worshippers' holds carnivals there ;May it be like the date of his own reign-happy"

[Trans.: Mehran Qureshi]

Unlike earlier stone objects in the trail that depicted sacred imagery, this inscription uses stone to project sovereignty, memory, and permanence onto the landscape itself. Through architecture, calligraphy, and engineering, political authority is fixed not only in territory, but also in time.



Glazed Tile Fragments

Madin Sahib Shrine
17th century CE

The Decorative Arts Gallery on the first floor of the museum displays these irregular fragments of glazed tiles originating from the shrine of Sayyid Mohammad Madni at Madin Sahib, Zadibal, Srinagar. Despite their fragmentary condition, the brilliance of their glaze remains striking, preserving a surface quality that belies their age. The shrine itself, built in the 15th century during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, is noted for a distinctive tile tradition rarely encountered elsewhere in Kashmir or the Indian subcontinent.

Applied to exterior walls and entrance arches, the tiles were executed in the *cuerda seca* technique, using manganese outlines to separate coloured areas, which were individually painted before firing. Among these is an incomplete picture of a turban headed man, currently on display in the gallery. The fragments recall a composite creature engraved at the shrine's entrance, described by W. H. Nicholls (1905) as a leopard-bodied figure merging into a human form, drawing a bow toward its own tail (sign of Sagittarius), and accompanied by smaller animal figures and cloud motifs associated with Chinese and Persian visual traditions.

The presence of such imagery is notable within Islamic shrines in Kashmir, where figural representation was not typically emphasised. The tradition of using such glazed tiles, in shades of blue, crimson, yellow, orange and green, continued through the Mughal period. Rather than replacing architectural carving, these tiles introduced a new layer of visual expression spreading colour, narrative, and symbolic form across the surface of the building. Some tiles were removed to collections such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and later to institutions in Srinagar, including the SPS Museum, where these fragments are now preserved.





Alam

c. 18th century CE

This 18th century bronze *alam* is among the key ceremonial and commemorative objects preserved in the Archaeology Gallery of the museum. Although the original location of the object is not known, its scale and workmanship suggest that it once formed part of a significant Muslim shrine in Kashmir. The upper section is organised around four projecting arms resembling stylised sword forms, each inscribed with the names Abu Bakr (al-Siddiq), Umar (ibn al-Khattab), Uthman (ibn Affan), and Haider (Ali ibn Abi Talib), while the central axis reflects *Allah* and the name of Prophet Muhammad. The invocation of the four caliphs, *Khulafa-e-Rashideen* through both inscription, seemingly carved later, and form, points toward a likely Sunni devotional context.

The object combines inscriptions, bronze metal-work, symbolic geometry, and stylised dragon-head imagery into a highly ceremonial form. Dragon motifs, frequently seen on 17th and 18th century Persian and Deccani *alams*, were often associated with strength, protection, and martial power. Across South Asia, *alams* functioned as ritual standards displayed within shrines and carried in commemorative religious processions, particularly those associated with Muharram and the memory of Karbala. In Kashmir, objects such as this demonstrate how metal moved beyond architecture and fixed inscription into devotion and collective memory.



Coins Across Empires: Mughal, Durrani, and Sikh

16th - 19th century CE

The Numismatics section in the museum displays these silver and copper coins that trace successive political transitions in Kashmir from the Mughal, Durrani and Sikh periods. Though separated by dynasties and centuries, these coins reveal striking continuities in material, inscriptional practice, and the visual language of sovereignty. Mughal coins of the 16th and 17th centuries, including those in copper, silver and gold, combined imperial authority with artistic refinement through Persian calligraphy, poetic couplets, mint names, and regnal years. Under emperors such as Akbar and Jahangir, coinage, such as the one in the image, became a site of experimentation, incorporating religious and imperial symbolism.

Durrani coinage of the mid 18th century largely continued Mughal numismatic conventions and materials, retaining Persian inscriptions while marking the rise of Afghan political control across Kashmir and North-Western India. Many displayed mint names and regnal years, carrying ruler's titles. Some coins issued in Kashmir invoked the Kashmiri Sufi mystic Sheikh Nur-ud-din, reflecting the intersection of political rule and local spiritual traditions.

Sikh coinage of the nineteenth century similarly inherited earlier Mughal and Durrani formats, including mint names and dates, while gradually introducing references to Sikh Gurus, Gurmukhi script, and symbols such as the *chhatra* (royal umbrella), signalling an increasingly distinct political identity that expressed itself with clear religious devotion.

Unlike the monumental permanence of stone inscriptions or ceremonial metal objects, coins circulated through everyday exchange. Yet, in miniature form, they carried some of the same assertions of authority, faith, and legitimacy. Across changing regimes, coins became a portable medium through which rulers projected sovereignty, negotiated continuity, and embedded political power into daily life in Kashmir.



Brass Dogra Paper Currency Printing Block

19th century CE

This brass printing block, displayed in the Numismatics Gallery of the museum, formed part of the paper currency system introduced under Dogra Maharaja Ranbir Singh in late 19th century. The object consists of reusable printing blocks designed for producing multiple denominations of Dogra paper currency. One block carries the ornamental ground design, usually printed in dull gold ink, while another contains the textual and numerical details printed in black. A slotted mechanism allowed denominational inserts to be changed, enabling the same block system to print notes of different values. At the centre, the word *Shrikara* appears in bold ornamental *Nagari* script — a Sanskritised adaptation of the Persian term *Sarkar*, meaning “government” or “state authority.” Above it is a radiating human-faced sun motif, invoking the solar emblem associated with the ruling Dogra dynasty. Flanking the sun symbol on either side are narrow rectangular panels intended for handwritten serial numbers, introducing an additional layer of administrative authentication to the printed note.

The visual structure of the notes reflected the multilingual and layered administration of the Dogra state. Notes of the period carried inscriptions in Dogri, Urdu, and Hindi, allowing the currency to circulate across diverse linguistic communities. Official seals, signatures, and carefully organised inscription panels additionally functioned as safeguards against forgery.

The object marks a technological and administrative shift in Kashmir’s monetary culture. The block thus survives as an evidence of how the Dogra state translated political authority into repeatable graphic form encapsulating the cultural and linguistic diversity of the region.



Wood Lattice Work

19th century CE

This intricately carved walnut wood partition wall (*warusi*), from the Decorative Arts gallery, represents the refinement of Kashmiri interior architectural traditions during the 19th century. Such partition screens were commonly used within domestic, shrine, and palace interiors to divide space while allowing the movement of light, air, and visibility through elaborate latticework. Historically, woodwork began flourishing in Kashmir from the 15th century during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, whose patronage encouraged artistic exchange and the growth of local crafts.

The exhibit combines fixed carved wooden pillars and framing members with removable, horizontal, *pinjrakari* lattice panels that could be lowered or opened, allowing adjoining rooms to be visually or physically combined when required. Arched openings, repeating star-patterned grids, and layered floral motifs transform the partition from a functional architectural element into an ornamental surface shaped through rhythm and shadow. Rather than creating complete separation, the screen mediates between concealment and openness, allowing space to be filtered rather than fully enclosed.

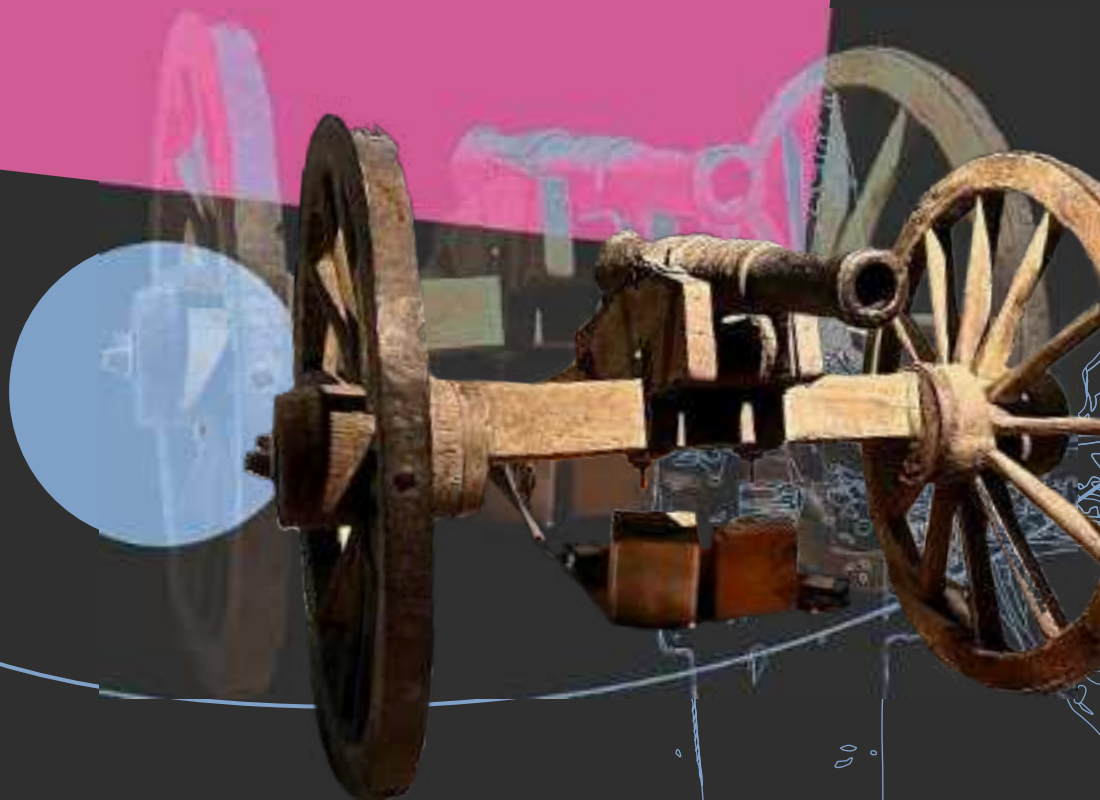
Seen within the larger trajectory of the trail, the *warusi* demonstrates how wood occupied a central place in Kashmir's material and architectural culture. Unlike stone or metal, wood allowed surfaces to be continuously carved and perforated, producing interiors defined not by intimacy, atmosphere, and skilled craftsmanship. Here, material is used not simply to construct space, but to regulate vision, movement, and social interaction within everyday life.



Dogra Cannon

19th century CE

This 19th century Dogra cannon in the Arms and Armoury Gallery on the first floor represents the expansion of military power under the Dogra rulers of Jammu and Kashmir, particularly during the reign of Maharaja Gulab Singh, founder of the Dogra dynasty. Cast in metal and mounted on a heavy wooden carriage with spoked wheels, the cannon reflects the warfare technology across the mountainous terrains of Kashmir, Ladakh, and Baltistan. Dogra artillery emerged at a moment when older forms of regional warfare were increasingly shaped by modern military technologies and transregional exchange. While grounded in local metal-working traditions, the form and deployment of these cannons also reveal the influence of contemporary European artillery systems circulating across the subcontinent during the nineteenth century. Such weapons were positioned in forts, mountain passes, and frontier outposts, where they functioned not only as instruments of warfare but also as visible assertions of territorial control and state authority.



Like the coin, the inscription, the *alam*, or the printing block, it demonstrates how material objects in Kashmir were deeply tied to structures of power as much as ordinary daily lives of people. Here, however, metal is no longer cast into icons, ritual objects, or currency, but into artillery, transforming craftsmanship into an instrument through which territory, sovereignty, and political order were secured and maintained.

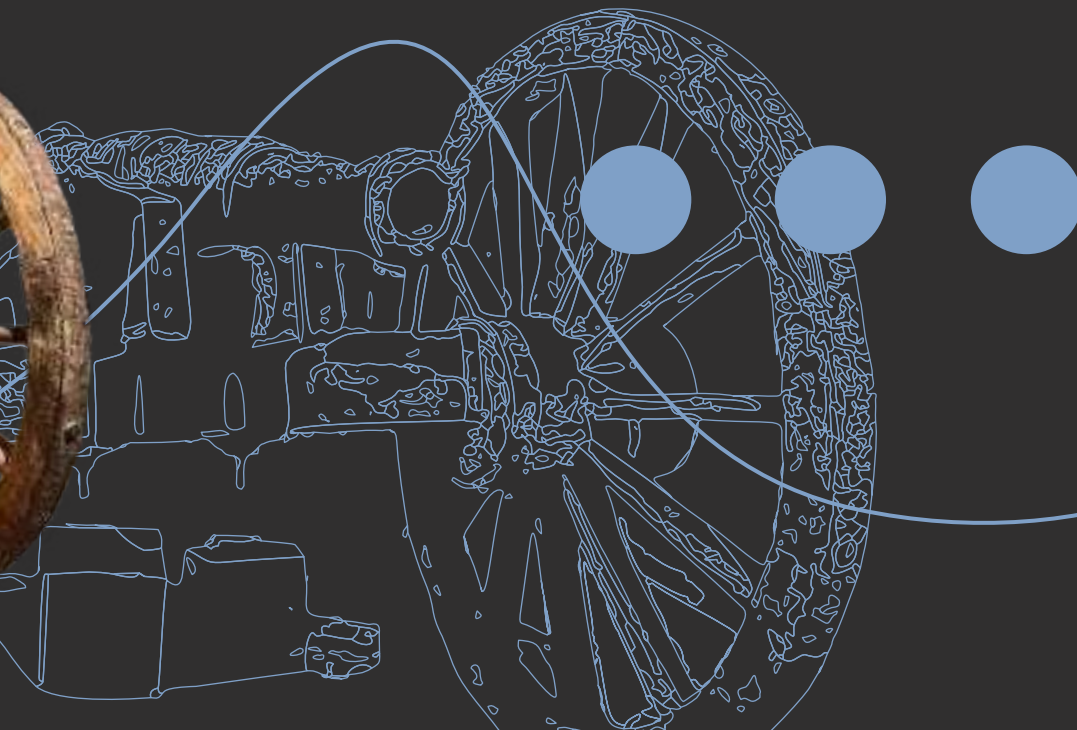
Notes:

1. Terracotta Tile Image Credits: Ab Rashid Lone, for Sahapedia.
<https://www.sahapedia.org/terracotta-art-kashmir-overview>

2. a) We are thankful to the support extended by Ms. Rabia Qureshi, Curator SPS Museum, and Mr Shabir Ahmad Wani for their support. We also thank Dr Hakim Sameer Hamdani, art historian and author, and Mr Mehran Qureshi, Assistant Professor, Islamic University of Science and Technology for their key inputs.

b) The text has borrowed itself from curatorial descriptions and records as provided by SPS Museum, and other research materials.

3. Photo Credits: Mohammad Fazil Panjwala.



Threads and Traditions

India's rich tapestry of fabrics was all the rage for centuries, even millennia, before the Pradas and Versaces of the world came to be. Charred remains of cotton cloth, dated back to 2500-2000 BCE, have been found at Rakhigarhi, Haryana. Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History* (77 CE), also grumbled about India, China, and Arabia draining Rome of 100 million *sestertii* each year — roughly \$40 million USD today — spent on luxuries, including the finest Indian textiles.

In southern India, textile hubs like Machilipatnam, Srikalahasti, and Chirala dyed, spun, and wove wonders that were in high global demand. British colonisation is remembered for decimating these vibrant industries and their global dominance through the 18th and 19th centuries. In pockets, however, these highly specialised skills and the artisans who practise them continue to live on. DakshinaChitra captures and preserves these living traditions amongst many others in folk, craft, and architecture to foster dialogue for future generations

Tara Rachel Thomas
Senior manager, Programs and
Communication, DakshinaChitra:
The Living Museum

Real Madras Handkerchief

Once a symbol of prowess for the Indian textile industries of the South, with its locus in the Madras Presidency, the Real Madras Handkerchief (RMHK) is a cotton-handloom fabric known for its signature hand-dyed, colourful plaid checks. It has navigated a long journey from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu to the rest of the world.

After Vasco Da Gama's arrival in 1498, the fabric became entangled in the transatlantic slave trade, used by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British as currency in exchange for enslaved people bound for the Caribbean and the Americas. This tragic route carried the RMHK to West Africa, where it was adopted by communities like the Kalabari in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, where it was rechristened 'injeri' and woven into ceremonies from birth to funerals.

The fabric featured here is a hybrid of the classic RMHK and the '*pelete bite*' style – where threads are cut and pulled out, thereby giving the fabric a thin net-like appearance. The patterns incorporate an Indian twist, using peacock motifs instead of the standard geometric patterns.





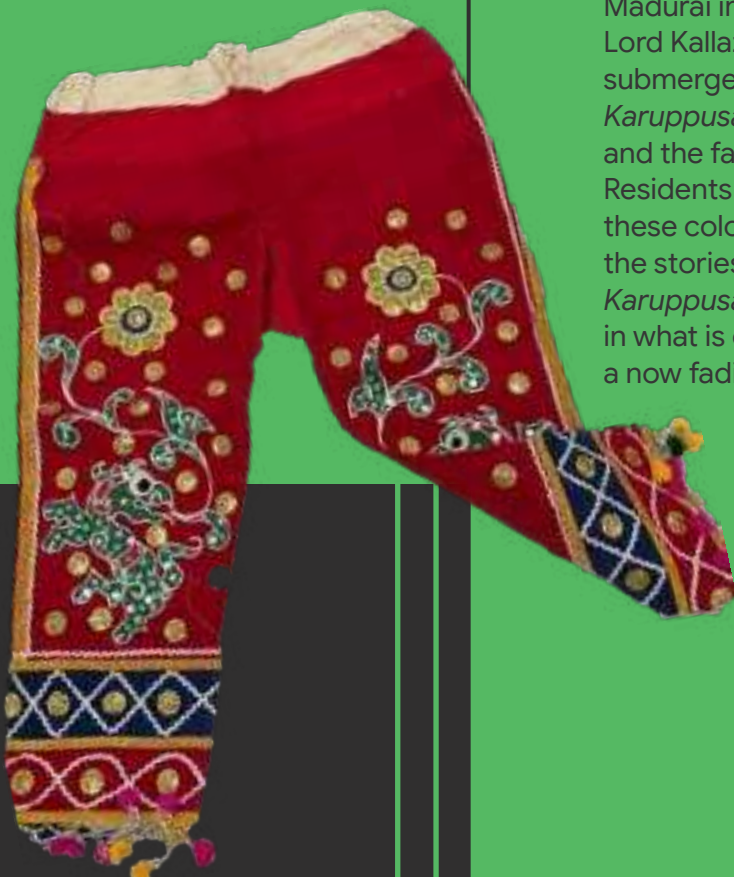
Ceremonial Fan

The *Aalavattam* or *Aalarvattam* fan has been a traditional symbol of respect and royal honour offered to deities in temples. It is often a velvety or satiny affair, adorned with religious patterns such as the *Shankh-Chakra-Namam* (Vishnu), *Vel-Peacock* (Murugan), or *Trisoolam-Singam* (Shiva).

This fan, sourced from the Nagarathar community in the Chettinad region, appears to contain a stylised depiction of a conch, and is made from more humble cotton, featuring lively pastel colours, with a leather handle and a cane frame. The choice of colours and style may be a result of the Chinese-Burmese influence on the Chettiar community, members of which conducted business in Burma and south-east Asia for many generations.



Chithirai Thiruvizha (Chithirai Festival) Folk Costume



The *Chithirai Thiruvizha*, which takes place in the first month of the Tamil calendar (April-May) and celebrates Goddess Meenakshi and her consort Sundareswarar (Shiva), has given rise to various regional tales. Festivities in Madurai include re-enactments of Lord Kallazhagar (Vishnu) being submerged in the river Vaigai, *Karuppusamy* (the guardian deity), and the famed '*Madurai Veeran*.' Residents and local performers don these colourful costumes to re-enact the stories of local legends like *Karuppusamy* and *Madurai Veeran* in what is called *Deiveega Natanam*, a now fading performance art.

Lambani Embroidery

The Lambanis, also known as Banjaras, are a nomadic community originating from Northern Gujarat and Rajasthan. Historically known for their vibrant attire and intricate embroidery, this top is an example of the Lambani 'Choli' or 'Kanchali' – decorated with mirror work, shells, and coins, turning surprisingly heavy on the shoulders!



Kodava 'Chele' Sash



No Kodava formal outfit is complete without the woven sash, referred to as a '*chele*'. Often using gold brocade on crimson silk, the *chele* ties together the formal black *kupya* attire—a reflection of the community's historical martial heritage—and offers space for the dagger, *Peeche Katthi*, to sit. The *chele* is often 7-8 metres long, containing decorative motifs like flowers, peacocks, and mangoes. Folded and pressed for wear, it adds panache to the already dapper attire!

Korvai Sari

Kanchipuram's famous 'Korvai' sarees are traditional handwoven silks from Tamil Nadu, where the body and border are woven in contrasting colors and joined through a specialised and precise interlocking technique. Two weavers work simultaneously on a three-shuttle loom to create the weaves, producing rich temple-inspired designs that are as durable as they are labour-intensive.



A dense, colorful collage of various Indian religious and cultural artifacts. The composition is a complex arrangement of numerous small and medium-sized objects. At the top left, there's a bronze statue of a standing figure. Below it, a large, ornate golden crown or headdress. To the right, a green face of a deity or deity's head is visible, surrounded by jewelry and a red circular object. In the center, a purple, multi-armed figure is prominent. Below that, a circular painting of a deity in a red robe. To the left of the center, a standing bronze figure with a green cloth. Below that, a large, ornate golden pot or vessel. At the bottom left, a large, ornate golden pot or vessel. The background is black, making the colorful objects stand out. The overall style is a rich, textured collage of Indian religious and cultural artifacts.





Pommel (of a sword)

Mehrangarh Museum, Rajasthan

This pommel of a sword has a lion head on top decorated in gold. It is part of the Arms and Armour gallery.



Ayyanar on Elephant

Government Museum, Chennai

This bronze sculpture is from 16th century AD. In the sculpture, Lord Ayyanar is seated on an elephant.



Surahi

Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad

This 19th century Surahi (or ewer) is from Persia.



Goa Stone and Gold Case

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

This container made of gold and Goa stone is from the 17th-early 18th century.



Sarpech (Turban Ornament)

National Museum, New Delhi

This 19th century turban ornament is from Rajasthan. It is carved with emeralds and filled with floral motifs and is part of the Jewellery Gallery.



Didarganj Yakshi

Bihar Museum, Bihar

The intricately carved sculpture Didarganj Yakshi is a famous Chunar sandstone sculpture from the Mauryan period discovered in 1917.



Astrolabe

Humayun Tomb's Museum, New Delhi

This Brass Astrolabe is made by Muhammad Muqim during the reign of Jahangir. Muqim is mentioned in the inscription on the back side of the Astrolabe.



Climbing Monkey

National Museum, New Delhi

The Climbing Monkey is a terracotta figurine from the Indus Valley Civilisation. It is a part of the Pre-history gallery.



Scan the QR code to uncover the answers hidden within the collage!

MUSEUM MATTERS: IN THEIR WORDS

Museum Matters: In Their Words brings together reflections from people helping shape museums in India today. Through short, focused responses, curators, educators, designers, and cultural practitioners share their views on the questions, challenges, and possibilities that define their work. The format allows different voices to sit side by side, sometimes converging and sometimes diverging, each offering a distinct perspective on contemporary museum practice. From new approaches to public engagement and learning to experiments in design, technology, and curatorial thinking, this section captures a sector in active conversation with itself.



CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Dr Alka Pande • Archana Saad Akhtar •
Arundhati Mitter • Jahan Thakur • Lolita Dutta •
Medhavi Gandhi • Dr Mrinalini Venkaterswaran •
Pankaj Manchanda • Pavithra Muddaya •
Pia Bakshi • Risa Wahlang • Dr Sabyasachi Mukherjee
• Sakshi Ahuja • Sukrit Sukumama • Varun Jain

Why a Museum Biennale in Bihar

Dr. Alka Pande
Curator and Author





A museum is a place where one should lose one's head.

—Renzo Piano

A confluence of royalty, culture, and learning, the Bihar Museum serves as a world-class showcase for the history and heritage of the lands now known as Bihar. Its mission has focused on celebrating Bihar's ancient past and instilling pride among the residents of one of India's most significant states.

Against such a rich and diverse landscape, it was a natural step forward to create yet another historical first — a Museum Biennale that valorised museum collections and what they present to the world. There have been art biennales across the world, from the Venice Biennale (initiated in 1895) to the Istanbul, Sharjah, and Gwangju Biennales, and, closer home, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. All these biennales, including art fairs such as ARCO in Spain, and Art Basel in Switzerland, Hong Kong, and Singapore Centre, focus on the production and consumption of art.

While there are enough seminars and conferences around the world exploring museum cultures, we were yet to identify a museum biennale that pondered on the significance of museum cultures as a collective in today's times. Museums are turning into interactive spaces for discursive dialogue between the object and the viewer; and so, a deeply personal engagement occurs. They can be envisioned as sites of engagement that spark inquiry, exploration, and creativity.

Against this backdrop, the Bihar Museum Biennale was envisioned as a path-breaking initiative that would lead the dialogue on museums, moving beyond their traditional roles as repositories of knowledge and knowledge-creation. The Biennale aimed at fostering knowledge and cultural production, translation, and identity through a hybrid, physical-virtual event format spanning seven days.

The week-long Biennale features exciting collaborations with museums worldwide and masterclasses with a special focus on art, archaeology, restoration, culture, and literature, both in English and Hindi. The bilingual nature enhances the flavour of the discourse, as is the nature of the visual in fine art practice.

Through the Biennale's three verticals of Performing Arts, Archaeology and Conservation, and Literature, the Bihar Museum has sought to initiate an understanding of museums as an interdisciplinary institution and an agency of knowledge production.

Performing Arts

Up until the 1960s, performance art was viewed as a form of art that could not be showcased within museums. Its spontaneity and, rather, temporality, made the performing arts, such as dance and music, inherently different from static and traditional art, due to which it was left out of the broader understanding of art history.

Today, the audience is more receptive to understanding performance art, while museums, such as TATE and the British Museum in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, are expanding their horizons to include the performing arts in their multidisciplinary programming.

By bringing the state's local musical, dance, and theatrical performances to the Bihar Museum, the aim has been to initiate an interdisciplinary channel of communication that would effectively activate the various museum collections that are part of the Bihar Museum Biennale.

Art, Archaeology, and Restoration

The conservation of museum collections goes beyond the physical maintenance or repair of artefacts. The focus also remains on the preservation of identity. Most museums today place a special emphasis on creating a strong in-house restoration or conservation programme to ensure consistent maintenance of their collections. One of the pioneering departments in conservation is located at the Museo Nacional del Prado, in Madrid.

Closer home, the most important restoration team is within the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), Mumbai. Under Anupam Sah's direction, the CSMVS Museum Art Conservation Centre is committed to the practice of caring for the museum's collection, as well as those of other institutions. The aim of this centre is to strengthen the art conservation movement in India.

Since it is such an integral aspect of the museum environment, through the Bihar Museum Biennale, we have endeavoured to curate an intensive and thorough programme on understanding the importance of archaeological practices and the need for a dynamic conservation management in the country.

Bhasha/Literature

Image and text have always been the backbone of almost all artistic representations. The Bible stands as the foremost example of a text that has given rise to a plethora of artworks studied for an understanding of the evolution of humankind.

Similarly, the significant relationship of image and text in Indian art is evident. The secular and religious art of India is inspired by the country's rich, ancient literature. Canonical texts such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Prajna Paramita, Natyashastra, and the Citrasutra have served as references for a generation of artists and have been responsible for the highly nuanced ancient art, architecture, and heritage of our country. Further, although the miniature paintings and literary traditions of the Mughal Empire may be studied separately, both art forms were practiced and produced within the same courtly settings. Hence, the influence of these two media on each other, in terms of style, motif, or narrative, is apparent.

The influence of text on image is also visible in modern and contemporary Indian art. Whether it be ancient religious texts, local and vernacular literary traditions, or contemporary world literature, the visual art practice in India is ostensibly reliant on text to activate its meaning and agency. Therefore, it is important for museums to also facilitate an understanding of literature for the audience.



Bihar Museum
Biennale 2025
Global South, Global Histories



Impact, Legacy, and Vision

The Bihar Museum has been a leader in many ways: from establishing the largest public museum post-independence to facilitating the growth of knowledge networks through the Biennale.

Having been involved in conceptualising the first two Biennales, I brought in a host of academics to the Bihar Museum, from the key person who built the Abu Dhabi Louvre, Hala Wardé, and the head of the Musée Guimet from Paris, Dr Yannick Lintz, to people from the Humboldt Forum and most importantly, the British Art Historian, Neil MacGregor, who was the keynote speaker at the first Biennale.

From the very beginning, the Bihar Museum Biennale was envisioned as a collaborative endeavour. In 2021, with the first edition that was conducted in a fully digital format, we were able to build significant cross-cultural connections, bringing together a wide network of institutions and audiences across geographies. Several leading Indian museums participated in this initiative, including the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai; the City Palace Museum, Udaipur; the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal; the Kanha Museum of Life and Art, Singinawa; the Assam State Museum, Guwahati; the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi; Museo Camera, Gurugram; the Museum of Goa, Bardez; the Museum of Art & Photography, Bengaluru; the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi; the Piramal Museum of Art, Mumbai; and Virasat-e-Khalsa, Anandpur Sahib.

At the same time, the Biennale extended its global reach through virtual tours conducted by several international institutions, including Museo Nacional de las Intervenciones (The National Museum of Interventions), Mexico; the Liberation War Museum, Bangladesh; the National Museum of Colombia; the Sarmaya Art Foundation; and the Castle Museum in Pszczyna, Poland, further strengthening its role as a platform for international cultural dialogue and exchange.

Marking its physical debut in 2023, the second Bihar Museum Biennale unfolded as a multifaceted cultural platform featuring symposiums, exhibitions, virtual tours, quizzes, film screenings, workshops, and immersive art experiences, all anchored in the theme 'Connecting People, Connecting Cultures, Interrogating Museums.' It brought together leading Indian museums alongside international exhibitions from countries such as Brazil, France, Nepal, Costa Rica, Panama, and Italy, while simultaneously hosting the G20 Art Exhibition, 'Together We Art'. In collaboration with the G20 Cultural Working Group, featuring works by renowned artists from across the G20 nations and guest countries alongside 20 senior Indian artists.

For the 2025 edition of the Biennale, Shri Anjani Kumar Singh, the Director General of the Bihar Museum, wanted to organise an exhibition with the countries of Africa and Latin America. Building on this idea, I envisioned the possibility of including the Global South within the Biennale's overarching focus, resulting in the theme 'Global South: Sharing Histories.'

At present, the Global South as a region holds immense significance in literature, visual arts, and international politics. This is a natural development resulting from the process of decolonisation – of finding empowerment and building a strong voice of artists and communities, particularly in the area of migration, gender, identity, and sexuality.

The term 'shared histories' came from my understanding that most of the countries that form a part of the Global South have all been colonised for a long time. Therefore, the process of decolonisation has had similarities within each of their historical narratives. I used the term 'shared histories' because there was the same sharing of oppression, the same sharing of removal of agency, the same sharing of economic exploitation, and a similar movement of indentured labour and diaspora. Within the context of migrations and translations, interrogating the Global South became particularly important.

To me, the idea of the Global South becomes especially relevant because when I think of Bihar, I inevitably think of Buddhism and its expansive journey. Across South Asia and particularly Southeast Asia, one can trace how Buddhism travelled outward from India, transformed within diverse cultural contexts, yet always returning, reshaped; indelibly linked to its place of origin.

In today's polarised environment, public institutions like museums are expected to inculcate values of empathy with various initiatives, including exhibitions, conferences, performances, and educational programmes. With museums and their collections, artistic expression has entered the domain of history, identity, and culture.

How are we engaging with technology in the new learning landscapes of the museum? How do we engage with the museum as a site for incubation, ideas, and innovation? How do we retain the relevance of the physical museum in a digital age? Such lines of inquiry have consistently influenced the intellectual vision of the Bihar Museum Biennale over the past five years. Within the post-pandemic world, the Bihar Museum Biennale has emerged as a signpost of vision for future museums.

Connecting a Historic Precinct – Humayun's Tomb World Heritage Site Museum

Archana Saad Akhtar

Program Director,
Aga Khan Trust for Culture



“Insofar as civilisations manifest and express themselves through their art, museums have an essential role to play in teaching understanding, respect, and appreciation. They ensure that whole populations are given fresh opportunities to make contacts with each other, using modern methods imaginatively and intelligently to bring about truly global communication.”

- His Highness The Aga Khan

The Humayun's Tomb World Heritage Site Museum, built by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), is situated at the entrance zone of Humayun's Tomb and Sunder Nursery in the historic district of Hazrat Nizamuddin — a site steeped in history, one which has seen a continuum for the last 700 years. The museum's role here becomes much more than providing a platform for the collection; here, it becomes a bridge that connects these segregated sites into one large historic precinct and presents the tangible and intangible heritage of the area as one unified visitor experience.

Physically, the Humayun's Tomb Museum is strategically located at the confluence of all three sites constituting the precinct. Visitors exit directly into the Sunder Nursery and the Humayun's Tomb complex.

Formerly known as Ghiaspur, the area is named after Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, the revered 14th-century Sufi saint who practiced and preached here and was later buried in this region in 1326 CE. The presence of his tomb (or *dargah*) not only gave this area its present name (Nizamuddin) but also transformed it into a sacred landscape. For the next 500 years after his presence here, every major dynasty to have ruled Delhi, ranging from the Khiljis, the Tughlaqs, the Lodhis, and then the Mughals up till 1857, added significantly to the architectural heritage of Nizamuddin. The area is home to over 100 buildings dating from the 14th century to the early 20th century, when the British built the Sunder Nursery. The precinct has also been home to many cultural icons of the Indian subcontinent, such as Hazrat Amir Khusrau and Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, whose literary works have been a part of our everyday milieu and a cornerstone of India's pluralistic society. However, over the years, due to urbanisation, this significant historic precinct got divided into three distinct sites — Nizamuddin Basti, Sunder Nursery, and the Humayun's Tomb Complex. This led visitors to these sites to obtain a fragmented understanding of the area's history. There were information gaps that needed to be addressed to help visitors gain a holistic understanding of Nizamuddin's history and heritage.



Humayun's Tomb has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1993, and the Sunder Nursery, with its own collection of 16th-century Mughal tombs, forms an integral part of this heritage buffer zone. The museum is not an isolated project, but the culmination of a two-decade-long redevelopment effort by AKTC and the ASI to restore the entire Nizamuddin precinct. This included desilting historic water channels, reviving the nursery's landscape from a neglected government nursery into a 90-acre heritage park, and improving infrastructure around the Basti. The museum now anchors this larger vision of reuniting a fragmented historic landscape.

The Humayun's Tomb World Heritage Site Museum, therefore, acts as a bridge: it provides both a physical connection between the sites and weaves a cohesive narrative of the tangible and intangible heritage of Nizamuddin, providing for a complete understanding of this historic precinct. The museum houses over 500 artefacts from the collections of the National Museum, ASI Museums, and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

The museum has five galleries, which have been divided into:

The Immersive Gallery, which summarises Nizamuddin's history across seven centuries. Its evolution is captured in a 10-minute film projected onto a 270° screen, creating an envelope of visuals and soulful Qawwali music around the visitors. The film also presents the story of Nizamuddin through its monumental architecture, beautiful patterns, and miniature paintings of the cultural icons connected with the area. Here, for the first time, never-seen-before sweeping aerial views of the lush Sunder Nursery park and the monuments and gardens of the Humayun's Tomb Complex have been displayed for the visitors.



The Orientation Gallery offers a bird's eye view of the larger Nizamuddin Area up to Purana Qila/Old Fort – Humayun's capital city. This gallery familiarises the visitor not only with Nizamuddin but also introduces them to the historical significance of Delhi and its antiquities dating back to the Mauryan period – a revelation that extends Delhi's history from one millennium (1000 years) to 2,500 years.



Where the Emperor Rests, a gallery that introduces visitors to one of the least known Mughal emperors, Humayun, along with Humayun's Mausoleum. The gallery is a mix of historical antiquity, miniature paintings, true-scale architectural reproductions, films, and hand-crafted models of Nizamuddin's monuments.



The **Cultural Icons of Nizamuddin Gallery**, which presents the iconic personalities and traditional building crafts of the Nizamuddin area. The region has been home to personalities like Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya and his Sufi teachings, Amir Khusrau and his musical wealth of Qawwali, Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan and his literature and dohas, and Dara Shukoh and his pluralistic fervour. The gallery binds such intangible heritage with relevant architectural monuments and weaves the unique story of Nizamuddin's history.



Gardens within a Garden, a gallery dedicated to the 90-acre Sunder Nursery park. Situated at the exit leading towards the park, the gallery is an attempt to both inform and inspire visitors to explore the park's multifarious attractions, ranging from UNESCO World Heritage monuments to over 100 bird species, planned formal gardens to wilderness zones – this gallery completes the final checklist for visitors.

The museum delves deep into key questions that visitors to these sites often raise, and answers them through the above-mentioned galleries. Unlike a conventional freestanding museum, the Humayun's Tomb World Heritage Site Museum is built largely underground. This deliberate design choice serves two purposes: it preserves the visual integrity of the surrounding monuments by keeping the museum unobtrusive, and it also provides easy access to all segments of visitors.

As I write this article, the museum has welcomed over 4 lakh visitors in a span of one-and-a-half years since its opening in 2024.

Raising The Sluice Gates Of The Experience Design Thought Box



Arundhati Mitter,
Director, Flow India

An orange scribble is located at the top left of the page. A long, thin orange line starts from the scribble, curves across the top, and then descends on the right side of the page, ending near the bottom right corner. There are two solid orange circles: one on the right side where the line descends, and another at the bottom left corner.

I love unpacking ideas and thinking approaches that cut across different disciplines and domains. Lately, my brain has been dwelling on what ‘experience’ design has to offer when freed from industry-led silos in thinking, and how museum spaces in India can benefit from its versatility when we cast a wider net in our approach to crafting experiences.

What is experience design?

Experience design is the intentional shaping of how people feel, think, and act during an interaction or event. Expanding its scope beyond the mere outlay of activities, it concerns itself with creating emotional resonance, prompting reflection, and designing moments that leave a lasting impact.

The contours of an experience may be defined by three critical dimensions - context, time, and impression, which in turn influence one another.

Context speaks to the conditions in which an experience unfolds - the (spatial or cognitive) situation in which the user or audience finds themselves, the lead-up, or the immediate surroundings within which the experience occurs.

Any experience unfolds in time. Its temporal structure and pacing have a direct bearing on the audience’s willingness to engage and the intended outcome.

Impression signals the perceived outcome of the experience - what made it memorable or forgettable and informs the audience’s willingness to reengage.

Experience design contains within itself many overlapping domains - user experience design, interaction design, user interface design, service design, learning experience design, and more. All of these disciplines offer us a wide variety of thought trails to further unpack within the context of experiences in museums and other cultural spaces. For the purpose of this article, let's consider two of these subsets: user experience design and learning experience design.

What is user experience design, and what can museums derive from it?

User experience design is a term we usually encounter in product and digital product design. It concerns itself with a person's perceptions and responses resulting from the use or anticipated use of a product, system, or service. It typically zooms out to encompass the entire journey or life cycle of engagement, rather than focusing solely on the usability or functionality of a product or service.

Professor Dom Norman, who is credited with coining the term, draws our attention to three levels of design in his highly celebrated book - *Emotional Design — Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*. He posits, ‘Human responses to the everyday things of the world are complex, determined by a wide variety of factors. Some of these are outside the person, controlled by designer and manufacturer, or by advertising and such things as brand image. And some come from within, from your own, private experiences. Each of the three levels of design— visceral, behavioral, and reflective—plays its part in shaping your experience. Each is as important as the others, but each requires a different approach by the designer.’

Visceral is all about the first impression, the appearance, the physical feel, aesthetics, and the emotional impact it triggers.

Behavioural is all about use – determining how functional, understandable, and usable a designed solution is. It concerns itself with satisfying both the articulated and unarticulated needs of the people for whom the designed solution is intended.

Reflective is all about the cultural context in which a designed object or experience is situated, and the role it plays in fulfilling people's emotional needs and in contributing to their sense of self and place in the world.

The blend of these three dimensions within user experience design offers many intriguing threads of exploration for curators, exhibit designers, outreach planners, and marketing strategists who are in the business of crafting museum experiences. What might a pleasing sensorial experience look and feel like for our diverse audience groups, and where and how do we precipitate their encounter with it? How does one catalyse discovery and delight in engagement while ensuring that an exhibit interpretation or spatial way-finding design is clearly comprehensible? How do we weave in moments of personalisation that signal to the audience that their thoughts and reactions matter? What are those various touchpoints within a cultural space where it is possible to foster the audience-institution relationship? All of these are worthy considerations on the design and planning board.

Now let's consider what the other subset, learning experience design, has to offer.

What is learning experience design, and what big ideas can museums draw from it?

Learning experience design is a focused domain within experience design that draws from other disciplines such as cognitive or learning psychology, neuroscience, and interaction design to intentionally craft a holistic experience with a meaningful learning outcome. I am particularly drawn to the thinking and work of celebrated Hungarian psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who is recognised for positing the Flow theory. In the early 90s, he co-authored a paper with Kim Hemerson at the University of Chicago on what motivates visitors to want to learn in a museum context. With the intent of speaking to museum experience and learning planners and developers, they argued that unless the audience's interaction with the exhibits becomes intrinsically rewarding, they are unlikely to hold the former's attention long enough for any positive intellectual or emotional change. Therefore, it was important to investigate what made an experience rewarding in and of itself, so as to understand what motivated a person to look and think about an exhibit for "no good reason"—that is, in the absence of external rewards.

The authors were wise to caveat that no single recipe for motivating audiences would work across the diverse visitor profiles found in museum environments. That being said, a broad outline could be adapted to specific conditions.

The first step in triggering intrinsic motivation is invoking curiosity. This is defined as the 'hook', which may call upon a variety of sensorial stimuli (visual, auditory, tactile or kinetic) to speak to the audience's prior interests. Once an individual's curiosity is aroused, interest is likely to be sustained when opportunities for self-discovery or those that invoke awe are leveraged to support engagement and subsequent learning. Learning involves the use of sensory, emotional, and intellectual faculties; this connection leads us to the

third step of the process: the state of mindfulness. Mindfulness is that state of mind that results from drawing novel distinctions, examining information from new perspectives, and being sensitive to context. When information is presented as true and without alternative perspectives, it discourages the motivation to explore and learn more. In learning psychology, such a situation is defined as ‘premature cognitive commitment’. Thus, creating an experience, an environment that is effectively able to immerse, involve, absorb, and engross visitors, is essential to precipitate intrinsically motivated learning.

Here again, certain factors are critical for such an immersion to occur. Helping visitors set manageable goals for their entire visit and for individual exhibit points can facilitate an enjoyable experience. Offering a feedback loop allows visitors to commit to making guesses, evaluating, responding, and reflecting. Matching opportunities for involvement to a broad range of visitor skills supports meaningful engagement and keeps the visitor ‘hooked’.

While Mihaly’s framework directly speaks to how ‘learning’ is intrinsically triggered, it can also be an equally fascinating guide for experience designers planning both the wider engagement arc of visitors and their encounters at individual touchpoints. What may yield when interpretation planners collaborate with their strategic marketing team to map out the emotion graph of their audiences with reference to this framework? How would one deliberately position ‘hooks’ within the engagement to ‘reel’ in the visitor? What kind of choices would one make in language and tone of communication to have a similar effect? What kinds of conceptual and editorial decisions might the curatorial team make to successfully stimulate visitors’ sensory, emotional, and intellectual faculties?

These are all plausible questions and, interestingly, point to two critical considerations.

Firstly, both the subsets of experience design explored in this article give considerable focus to understanding the user: the audience, the visitor. Museums ultimately communicate to people, thus the mindset of putting people first. Examining their behaviour, choices, and habits should not be an afterthought or the least considered criterion in development. This has a direct bearing on building audiences in the long run. It is also valuable to clarify that researching one’s audience does not mean developing only what the audience ‘wants’. Valuable insights are also drawn from what remains unknown and unarticulated, which helps frame how a new idea or viewpoint may be presented to visitors or how an institution may expand its reach to new audiences.

Secondly, crafting experiences is a multi-skill effort. It requires a synergistic approach involving design, curatorial, conservation, outreach, marketing, merchandise, and leadership teams working in tandem. However, one often finds teams working in sequence or silos instead. Outreach, programming, and marketing teams begin building an audience and mapping their digital and physical reach only after the exhibition experience has been inaugurated. Interpretation, design, and merchandise teams miss the window to work collaboratively to explore how the spatial extent or the conceptual idea of an exhibit is coded in a physical takeaway. In such situations, the opportunity to create anticipation or spark curiosity is lost, as is the benefit of drawing from shared expertise on the design board.

And this brings me back to where I started; we surely have more ways to strengthen our toolboxes and our craft when we allow ourselves a birds-eye view of experience design.

Field Impressions: Notes from Beyond the Desk

Jahān Thakur,
Researcher, Cultre



What does research look like when it is embedded in the making of museum exhibits today? It is easy to imagine it as a quiet, contained activity: a scholar seated at a desk, turning pages, taking notes, moving steadily from one source to another. In many ways, it still begins like this. Though the desk now, is just as likely to hold a screen crowded with open tabs as stacks of books and notebooks filled with hurried annotations. But within museum work, research rarely unfolds in such a linear way.

Working as part of the research team at Cultre across projects, such as The Constitution Museum and the Rights and Freedoms Academy at O.P. Jindal Global University, as well as the Toilet Tales Gallery at the Sulabh International Museum of Toilets, one begins to notice how quickly the practice moves beyond this familiar image. It shifts constantly between reading, discussion, revision, and translation into forms that can exist within a physical exhibition space. Rather than functioning separately from curatorial vision, research develops alongside it, gradually becoming an exercise in understanding how ideas take shape within a museum environment.

To research for a museum is to work with the expectation that most of what one finds will not be shown. Material is gathered not to be presented in full, but to be selected, condensed, and often discarded. A paragraph becomes a sentence; a sentence becomes a caption. This reduction can feel uneasy at first. It raises difficult questions about what is essential and what is chosen to be left behind. These decisions are shaped not only by the material itself, but also by the format it will take, the space available, and the amount of time a visitor is likely to spend with it.

In this context, the question of the audience becomes especially immediate. An exhibition does not speak to a single viewer, but to people with different levels of familiarity, interest, and time. Studies on museum fatigue, first observed in 1928, suggest that attention declines over the course of a visit. John Berger's observation that ways of seeing are shaped by what one already knows and believes becomes especially visible here, where the same exhibition may be read in markedly different ways. One is constantly recalibrating how much text is too much, and when detail begins to tip into excess rather than clarity.

These questions are shaped not only by how visitors read exhibitions, but also by how they move through them. Visitors rarely follow the sequence imagined during the writing process; they pause, skip ahead, return, or encounter sections in isolation. As a result, a panel or caption often has to remain meaningful even when separated from the larger narrative surrounding it. Research in a museum is therefore shaped not only by what is being communicated, but also by the unpredictable ways in which visitors physically navigate space.

At the same time, writing is only one part of how research appears in a museum. At Cultre, the process often continues through its translation into other forms. A legal concept may become an animation, a historical sequence may be restructured into a navigable timeline, or a complex debate may be distilled into a short video where sound and image carry what text alone cannot. In the Constitution Museum and the Rights and Freedoms Academy,

this resulted in a layered approach: short explainer videos on fundamental rights sit alongside recorded interviews with legal scholars, allowing visitors to move between concise overviews and more detailed accounts.

These translations are rarely straightforward. Something that appears clear in text may become difficult to visualise, or may need to be entirely restructured to function in another medium. At times, a concept that seemed impossible to simplify on paper became unexpectedly clear once discussed visually with designers, animators, or editors. In that sense, interpretation remains ongoing even after the writing is complete.

The Toilet Tales Gallery, set up afresh at the Sulabh International Museum of Toilets, required a different approach altogether. Here, the objects themselves were central. Victorian and Edwardian water closets, chamber pots and bathtubs carried their own histories. The focus became less about translating information across formats and more about situating these objects within broader social and material contexts. It also involved close engagement with the objects themselves, often through conversations with collectors or previous owners. Method adjusted to the material, rather than the other way around.

Working across these projects made one thing clear: there is no fixed method in museum research. Some subjects arrive with an overwhelming abundance of scholarship, archival records, interviews, and commentary, requiring weeks of distillation simply to determine what can meaningfully enter the exhibition space. Others emerge from near absence, where information is scattered across fragmented references, oral accounts, regional archives, or materials that have rarely been documented together. The process shifts constantly between archival data collection, visual analysis, translation, and collaborative interpretation, with each project demanding its own method of inquiry.

At times, the work also produces moments of unexpected intimacy with history. While gathering material related to the Constitution and the making of modern India, one particularly memorable experience was visiting the archives of Prasar Bharati in Delhi. I still remember sitting in the listening room with a pair of headphones on, hearing the faint crackle of archival audio before the voices of the Constituent Assembly slowly came through. Until then, many of these figures had existed primarily through transcripts, photographs, and quotations encountered on paper. Hearing them linger over certain words, emphasise particular ideas, interrupt one another, or shift in tone made the debates feel unexpectedly present and human. The material no longer felt distant or purely textual; it felt immediate and alive in a way that changed the texture of the research process entirely.

Equally revealing were encounters with regional-language materials, where pamphlets, newspapers, and archival documents in Bengali, Assamese, Tamil, Malayalam, and other languages opened up histories and perspectives that would have remained inaccessible otherwise. In these instances, multilingual researchers within the team became indispensable, not only for translation, but also for interpreting nuance, context, and regional specificity. Often, a

conversation around a single word, phrase, or visual reference would shift the direction of inquiry altogether. A designer would notice a detail overlooked in the text, or someone working across languages drew connections that altered how the material was eventually understood and presented. Rather than unfolding in isolation, it emerged gradually through discussion, revision, and shared interpretation.

There are also moments when the work feels less defined, when a line of inquiry does not lead anywhere clear, or when the available material feels incomplete. These pauses are not always comfortable, but they are a part of the process. Not everything resolves neatly, and not everything finds a place within the final exhibition.

Installation is often the point at which research shifts from process to exhibition form. Drafts, notes, and conversations begin to take physical shape. Text moves onto walls, objects find their positions, screens are tested and retested. Details that once felt minor — the height of a panel, the sequence of movement, the distance between elements — begin to shape how the space is actually encountered. It is in these moments that research feels inseparable from design, and more closely tied to how a museum is experienced.

Rather than existing solely as a prelude to an exhibition, research continues within it, moulding itself to space, image, and experience. Perhaps that is what has stayed with me most across these projects: the understanding that research in museums is never entirely fixed or complete, but something that remains continually in motion.



Space as an Emotion: A Look At How Museum/Exhibition Displays Speak To Us

Lolita Dutta

Dean, School of Communication,
World University of Design



As a child, I was fascinated by spaces. An early memory of mine involves lying under the open sky at night, looking up at the stars and moon, imagining myself sailing across the sky and settling in a home of sorts on the moon. To me, spaces were vast and evoked an emotion that I still connect with whenever I have to work within one.

My journey as an exhibition designer at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, began when few could tell what exhibition design was, let alone picture a woman in a design practice. I studied exhibition design under Dashrath Patel (a Padma Shri awardee), whose approach to design was visually evolved. We understood space simply by looking at it, gauging it in our own minds, and letting it speak to us.

As a student, the first museum project that I got to work on was the Commonwealth Museum in London, UK. We had to understand the museum space solely from the floor plans and use spaces on the campus to map it according to what was being planned. In retrospect, this was definitely one way to comprehend the visual dimensions of space.

Museums are tactile, experiential spaces featuring realistically recreated environments that often enthrall viewers. During the 1960s, one such experience I had was at a museum of mining, where we were led through a mining shaft designed to replicate one in a coal mine. As an 8-year-old, I was mesmerised! This experience stays with me to this day and attests to the impact that spaces can have on young minds. In another instance, in 1969, an exposition came to India soon after man landed on the moon. Subsequently, an international exposition was held at what would eventually become Pragati Maidan in Delhi. At the US pavilion, braving the large crowds, we finally saw a slightly greyish-looking moon rock. We left with a badge that said "I have seen the moon rock," a tactile experience that also stayed with me for a long time.

Museums don't just offer a three-dimensional user-centric experience; they can, in many ways, recreate stories of the past and present and provide information to wide-reaching audiences. Several museums abroad offer engaging three-dimensional experiences through images, light, sound, and projections, among other tools. Two such experiences that resonated with me have been the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland, for its interactive focus, and the Holocaust museums in Germany and Poland for their simple, informative, yet heart-wrenching display of the sheer concept of the subject – the horrors of World War II.

In India, the concept of museums has undergone a transformation. The ample use of technology and well-executed design ideas grounded in strong concept, ideation, and research have led to well-designed, strong experiential interactions. The viewer no longer drifts through passively, but can engage with the fine nuances of exhibition and museum design. However, these changes began only after 1982, when the Nehru Centre, Mumbai, set up the 'Discovery of India' exhibition. A radical new approach was taken, and the deployment of new technology became the norm. Subsequently, several museums across India adopted new concepts and methods, leading to advanced technology, better storytelling, and well-maintained spaces in the current context. So now when I visit a museum, the "space" speaks to me.

A word here about the emotional quotient of space: Space is often personal, often public, and often a manifestation of one's own understanding. It's how each and every person perceives it. Often, we are drawn to certain spaces, and often we reject them. As a space designer, I experience space the moment I step into it. Years ago, at a museum in Nagpur, I recall a dark, dusty room, housing the most amazing collection of intricately crafted miniature clay models depicting India's freedom struggle. The display in a gloomy room, along with broken, dusty boxes, had completely destroyed any regard for the craftsmanship, let alone the display. It was a disturbing emotion; a blatant disregard for the museum space. I've witnessed many such instances of poor museum display and management, but in recent times, the changes have been surprisingly good— the importance given to museum design has superseded expectations.

As a designer and educator, I rely on instinct and imagination. There can be no greater joy than when you see your 2-dimensional drawings and sketches transform into 3-dimensional experiences before your eyes.

Stories of moon rocks and skies linger, and I am thrown into the depths of “space.”

Beyond the Feed: Rethinking Digital Community for Museums

Medhavi Gandhi

Founder,
The Heritage Lab



The original promise of social media platforms was not just reach, but also connection. For cultural institutions, they offered a way to speak in a more relatable voice, connect with audiences, and invite participation beyond geographic boundaries.

Until around 2022, this felt genuinely transformative. At a time when many institutional websites were clunky and newsletters felt obligatory, platforms like Twitter and Instagram opened new doors. Campaigns like **#AskACurator** and **#MuseumWeek** showed what was possible: museums joined public conversations; curators shared scholarship in accessible ways; peers across the sector found one another. Today, that landscape looks very different.

The beginning of platform instability

Social media still delivers visibility, but it is no longer a reliable tool for sustained community building (and engagement). Take the case of Twitter – its transition to 'X' prompted several people to quit the platform. Years of audience building, professional networking, and institutional presence fell apart before one could fully grasp the impact caused. Some of us migrated to Mastodon, some to BlueSky, some to both (while testing waters on LinkedIn), and yet some disengaged entirely. I fall into that last category, but the experience left me with the larger question about dependence on platforms for community building – if platforms come and go, will institutions keep investing resources in rebuilding audiences again and again?

So what comes after social media as we know it?

In early November 2025, the Financial Times released a report suggesting that we may have passed what it called "peak social media." Drawing on data from a global survey of more than 50 countries, the report highlighted slow user growth, algorithmic fatigue, and a sharp decline in time spent on platforms (most evident among Gen Z). This is not entirely surprising. Who wants a social feed dominated by influencers, advertisements, and AI-generated content? What seems to be shifting is not a desire to disengage completely, but a growing consciousness around how and why we engage online.

In my own experience and in conversations with colleagues, I've noticed a growing tendency to lurk rather than participate. We scroll, save, and read, but post, comment, and share less. To be completely honest, I've saved more cat-posts last year than culture ones! Platforms like Instagram have noticed this change, too. If you notice, 'views' has become the dominant metric in the 'insights' tab, normalising 'visibility without interaction'. But for museums, libraries, and cultural institutions that have spent nearly a decade optimising for engagement metrics, the implication is deeper than a drop in likes or comments.

Around the time the Financial Times reported signs of “peak social media,” an Instagram carousel predicting that “analog is making a comeback” began circulating widely, featuring nostalgic images of iPods, digital cameras, and other technologies of the recent past. Soon after, similar reflections appeared across mainstream publications. Vogue Business described going offline as a new “status symbol,” while The New Yorker suggested it is now “cool to have no followers.” Eventbrite reported rising interest in board-game gatherings, Polaroid’s Real vs Reel campaign pushed back against the dominance of screens and AI, and Pinterest predicted a revival of letter-writing alongside the growth of printed zines and newsletters. Alongside growing fatigue with social media, analog culture is having a quiet resurgence.

At the same time, digital platforms themselves are shifting toward smaller, interest-driven communities. Meta’s investment in WhatsApp Communities, Facebook Groups, and Instagram broadcast channels reflects a move away from the open feed toward more intentional spaces. Platforms such as Reddit, Discord, and email newsletters similarly thrive on shared interests. Together, these trends point to a renewed appetite for slower, participatory experiences—something museums are uniquely positioned to support, both offline and online.

Rethinking digital communication beyond the feed

With social platforms continuing to shift, the more urgent question is not where museums should post next, but what kinds of digital relationships they want to sustain, and on whose terms. The challenge is also how to translate this shift, and these values digitally (towards community, continuity, and more human-centred forms of engagement) without defaulting to endless content production.

What would it mean for museums & cultural institutions to act as community hosts, and not “content producers”?

Social media rewards volume: more formats (posts, videos, stories) and higher frequency mean more chances of surfacing in someone’s feed. For lean teams, this is exhausting and unsustainable.

Community hosting offers a different framing. It implies responsibility, supporting contributors, and valuing participation.

Let’s take the example of the National Gallery’s bicentenary initiative – the Gallery invested in a sustained collaboration through its 200 Creators Network. It invited artists, writers, and cultural practitioners to engage with the collection over time. This has since evolved into a Creative Collaborators programme, working with local social media creators (supported by stipends). Here, the emphasis is not on constant output. It is on relationship, interpretation, and shared authorship.

Berlin’s Museum of Islamic Art employed a similar approach towards foregrounding creators and collaborators. During the Pergamon Museum’s closure, its CulturabxCollabs initiative used Instagram as a public record of the engagement already underway.

Using social media as part of a 'distribution' ecosystem, not a destination

Many museums and cultural organisations produce content for social media exclusively – a post is published, gathers attention, and then vanishes into the feed. There aren't many optimisable ways to keep certain posts linked together if they are part of a story. This often results in teams spending significant time creating content that cannot be reused, extended, or meaningfully archived. With limited resources, perhaps the question becomes – "Where does this story travel, and what does it build over time?"

This is where editorial and distribution partnerships matter. Cultural narratives can live across multiple contexts: institutional websites, partner publications, collaborative platforms, and shared-interest communities. For example, over the last year, The Heritage Lab's editorial collaborations with the German Digital Library and Wikimedia UK have allowed our audiences to access museum stories while remaining contextualised, discoverable, and archivable. Within social media itself, features like Instagram 'collaborations' can support this ecosystem approach to amplify reach without duplicating labour.

Owned channels as spaces for continuity

Hosting a community requires at least one owned channel. Again, this isn't a call to abandon social media platforms altogether, but instead to ensure that platforms aren't the only place where institutional memory lives.

Websites, blogs, and newsletters are not immune to digital fatigue, but they offer something social feeds cannot: continuity, context, and ownership.

This is an excerpt from an article published in The Heritage Lab. To read more, visit <https://www.theheritagelab.in/beyond-social-media-museums-cultural-institutions/>

The background of the entire page is a collage of museum-related images. At the top, a large, yellow, scalloped archway frames the central text. To the right of the arch, a large, ornate crystal chandelier hangs. Below the arch, on the left, is a large, ornate sword with a golden hilt and a dark blade. To the right of the sword is a framed portrait of a man in traditional Indian attire, including a turban and a white dhoti with a red sash. Below the portrait are two small, dark wooden display cases on stands, each containing a small object. The background is a solid light blue color.

Confident and Cosmopolitan: The City Palace Museum on the eve of Jaipur's Tercentenary

Dr Mrinalini Venkateswaran

Deputy Director and Head of Collections,
City Palace Museum

Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II (r. 1922–1970) knew what Jaipur's heritage was worth. After Independence, in 1947, when the Government of India sought to persuade him to loan or gift objects from the Jaipur royal collections to the new National Museum in Delhi, his response (filed away at the National Archives of India) was polite but firm. Jaipur, he explained, had long been recognised as a centre of artistic excellence, and visitors from across the world had been coming for generations to see its treasures in their original settings. There was little reason to send them elsewhere when the city itself had been a cultural magnet for at least two centuries.

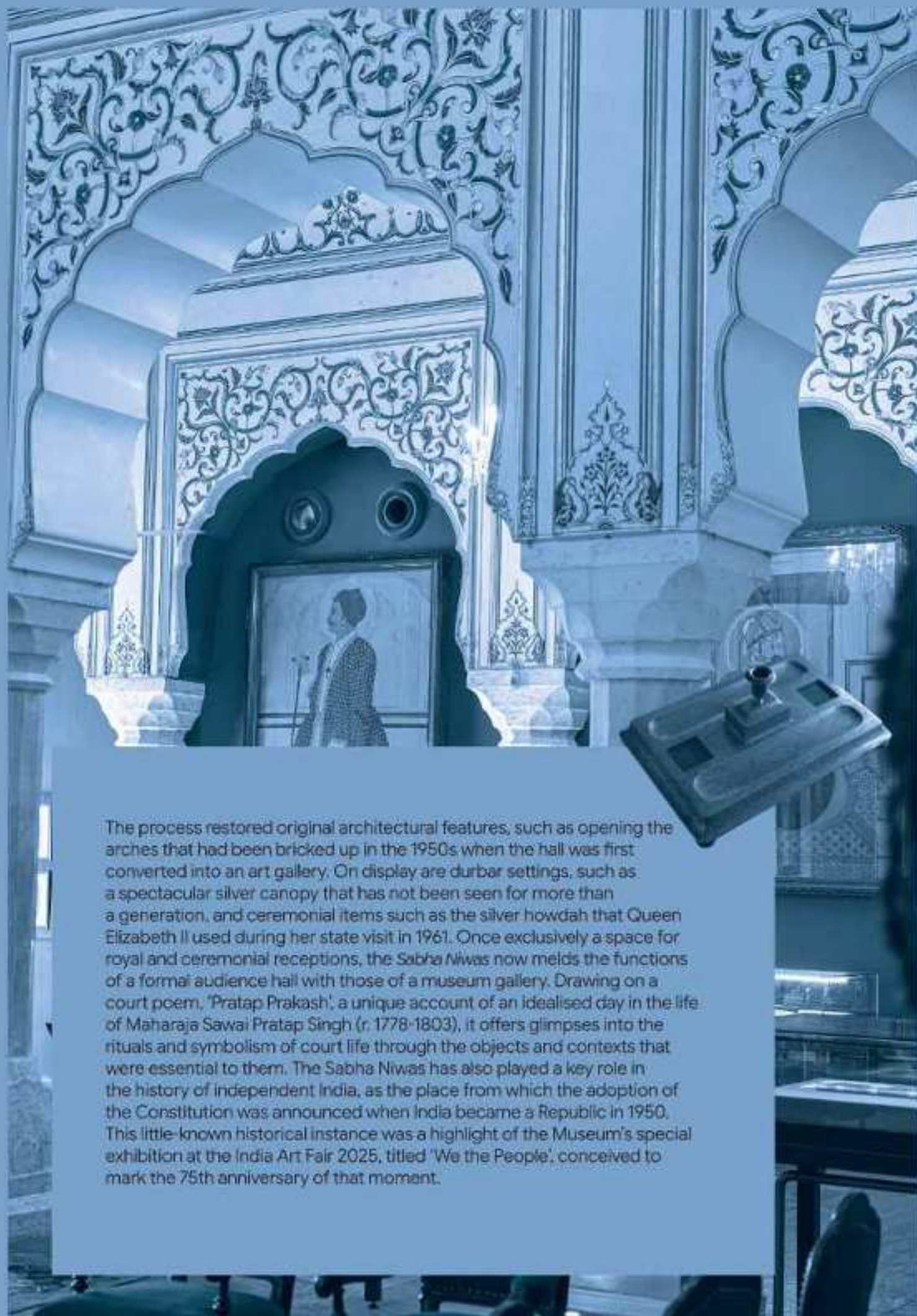
This confidence rested on precedent. His adoptive father, Maharaja Sawai Madho Singh II (r. 1880–1922), had opened the Albert Hall, the region's first museum, in 1887. Sawai Madho Singh had, in turn, built on the vision of his predecessor, Sawai Ram Singh II (r. 1835–1880), who is remembered as a reformer and institution-builder. He sponsored the Jaipur exhibition of 1883 (although he did not live to see it), which was the source of much of the Albert Hall's collections. An initiative led by Thomas Holbourn Hendley (nominally the Surgeon General at the British Residency, but better known for his lifelong championship of the arts, especially of Jaipur State), it drew together the best examples of craftsmanship from across Rajputana (as it was then) and northern India, including those from royal collections.

In the ensuing awards for work of an excellent standard, artists and craftspeople based in Jaipur or supported by the court garnered several prizes, highlighting Jaipur's deep engagement with art, design, and craftsmanship that dated back to the city's foundation, when Sawai Jai Singh II (r. 1699–1743) invited the best artists from across the Indian subcontinent to settle in his new capital. When Sawai Man Singh II opened the Maharaja of Jaipur Museum in the City Palace in 1959, the museum, as seen and experienced in Jaipur, already possessed national and international standing. After his death in 1970, his son, Maharaja Sawai Bhawani Singh, re-founded the Museum in his father's name; yet it is popularly (and now officially, after a rebranding in 2025) known as the City Palace Museum. The collection today reflects both the connoisseurship of the *Kachhwahas* and the foresight of these two rulers, who placed objects from royal holdings into a public trust so that Jaipur's story, as told through the Museum's collections, would remain accessible to locals and visitors alike. This became all the more necessary once the Albert Hall was taken over by the Government of Rajasthan to represent the state's cultural riches rather than Jaipur's alone.

New Horizons

In the lead-up to the tercentenary of Jaipur's founding, the City Palace Museum has forged ahead with its transformation.

Beginning in 2015 with the opening of the Painting and Photography Gallery, visionary initiatives have been rapidly gaining pace. After the opening of the *Rathkhana* in 2023, the next major task was restoring the *Sabha Niwas* — the historic Hall of Public Audience. Work began in July 2024 and concluded with its reopening on International Museum Day, 2025.



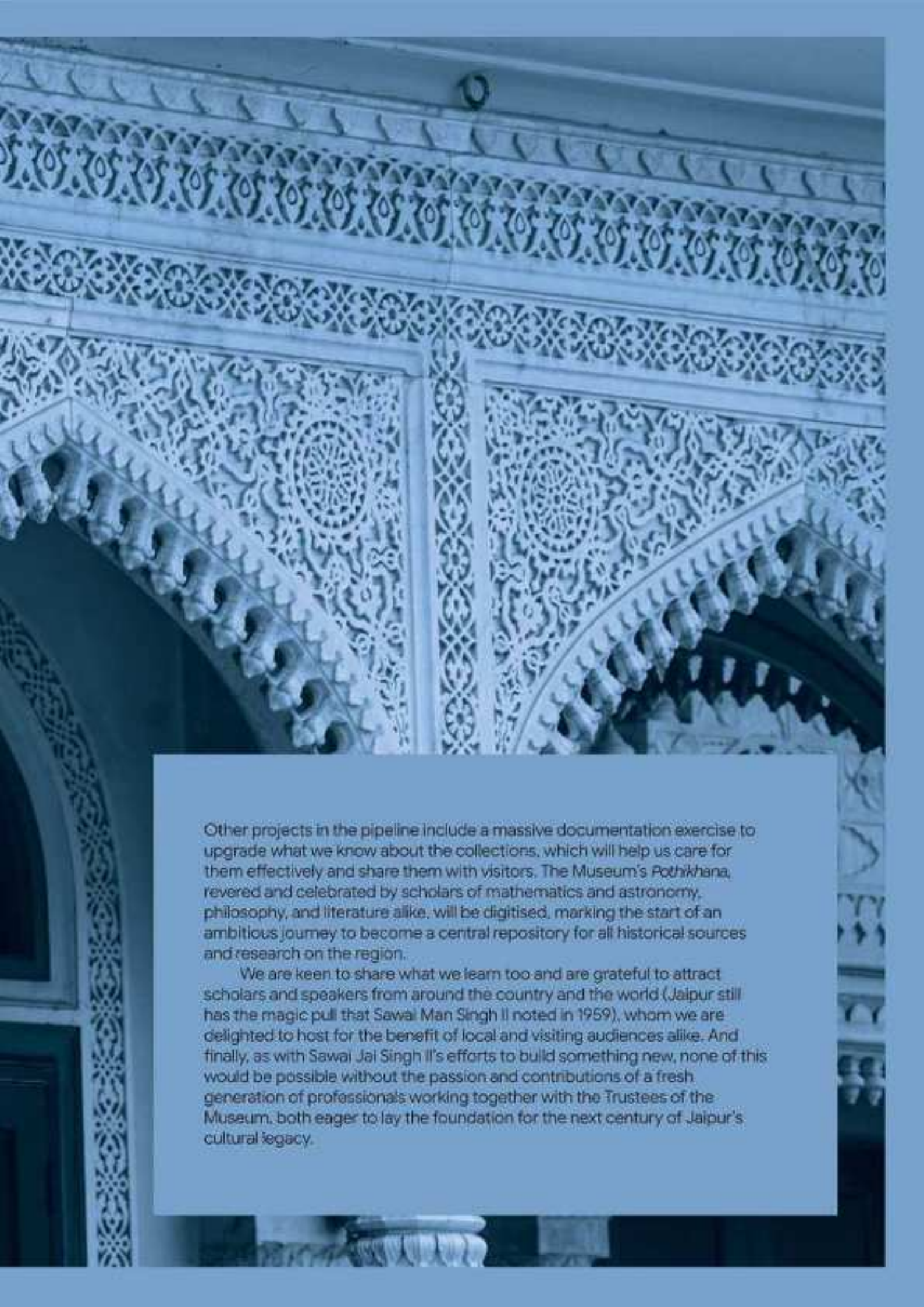
The process restored original architectural features, such as opening the arches that had been bricked up in the 1950s when the hall was first converted into an art gallery. On display are durbar settings, such as a spectacular silver canopy that has not been seen for more than a generation, and ceremonial items such as the silver howdah that Queen Elizabeth II used during her state visit in 1961. Once exclusively a space for royal and ceremonial receptions, the Sabha Niwas now melds the functions of a formal audience hall with those of a museum gallery. Drawing on a court poem, 'Pratap Prakash', a unique account of an idealised day in the life of Maharaja Sawai Pratap Singh (r. 1778-1803), it offers glimpses into the rituals and symbolism of court life through the objects and contexts that were essential to them. The Sabha Niwas has also played a key role in the history of independent India, as the place from which the adoption of the Constitution was announced when India became a Republic in 1950. This little-known historical instance was a highlight of the Museum's special exhibition at the India Art Fair 2025, titled 'We the People', conceived to mark the 75th anniversary of that moment.



For decades, the *Silehkhana* (or armoury) gallery was displayed in *Anand Mandir* (the Abode of Bliss), one of the palace's oldest apartments. Overlooking the courtyard in front of the *Charitra Mahal*, the private residence of the rulers of Jaipur, this was historically a private domain in which the maharaja met his closest advisers to discuss matters of state. It was also a space for reflection, relaxation, and refined connoisseurship of music and the performing arts, which were essential attributes of a ruler of distinction. Towards the end of 2025, this gallery reopened with an exhibition exploring 'Power and Diplomacy' at the Jaipur Court, inspired by the Jaipur *Silehkhana*. A collection of national importance, the armoury contains many fine weapons, noted not only for their superb quality, but for what they can tell us about Jaipur's history in areas as diverse as politics, diplomacy, science and military technology, trade and knowledge networks, art and craftsmanship, and design. The armoury remains at the heart of the gallery in the form of a visual store, for visitors and researchers to explore and discover the many other stories that these objects can tell. The gallery also displays a variety of other objects – the best of their kind – from carpets to maps, as well as a unique embroidered *gaddi-masnao* that has no known equal.

In 2026, the Museum will reopen the Mubarak Mahal gallery. For decades, this has housed the superb textile collection of Jaipur. While textiles will remain at the heart of the new display, the exhibition on 'Jaipur and the World' is inspired by the history of the Mubarak Mahal, built around 1900 as a guesthouse for foreign visitors. It will tell the story of Jaipur's cosmopolitan history as a hub of trade, art, design, and knowledge exchange that linked it to far-flung areas of South Asia and the world beyond. As we have already seen, these roots are deep and date to the city's foundation. Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II's foresight and investment in art, design, trade, and exchange laid the foundations for Jaipur's economic prosperity and longevity, which were reimagined anew by each generation. Engagement with science and technology was also present from Jaipur's inception, exemplified by the Jantar Mantar observatory. In later eras, Jaipur would see the first gas-lit streets and municipal piped water supply in the region during the reign of Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II (known as the 'engineer prince'), who was also noted for his expertise in photography.





Other projects in the pipeline include a massive documentation exercise to upgrade what we know about the collections, which will help us care for them effectively and share them with visitors. The Museum's *Pothikhana*, revered and celebrated by scholars of mathematics and astronomy, philosophy, and literature alike, will be digitised, marking the start of an ambitious journey to become a central repository for all historical sources and research on the region.

We are keen to share what we learn too and are grateful to attract scholars and speakers from around the country and the world (Jaipur still has the magic pull that Sawai Man Singh II noted in 1959), whom we are delighted to host for the benefit of local and visiting audiences alike. And finally, as with Sawai Jai Singh II's efforts to build something new, none of this would be possible without the passion and contributions of a fresh generation of professionals working together with the Trustees of the Museum, both eager to lay the foundation for the next century of Jaipur's cultural legacy.

Designing the Modern Museum:



Where Technology Meets Visitor Experience

Pankaj Manchanda,
Founder, Augtraveler

In many museums today, one can observe an interesting contradiction. Spaces that are being reimagined as dynamic, interactive environments are often still anchored in largely passive modes of engagement. Large digital screens play looping films, and interactive kiosks sit underused, overwhelming visitors as they move through galleries at a pace that rarely matches the depth of the stories being told.

This is not a failure of technology. It is often a question of how it is being used.

As museums across India evolve into more participatory and experiential spaces, the role of technology is becoming increasingly central. Yet the real opportunity lies not in adding more digital layers, but in designing them more thoughtfully—around the visitor rather than the device.

From Observation to Engagement

In our work across museum and heritage environments, one recurring pattern becomes evident: visitors are curious, but their engagement is often brief. They pause at a screen, watch for a few seconds, and move on. The content may be rich, but the format does not always invite exploration.

The same screen that plays a passive video can also serve as an interactive entry point, allowing visitors to choose what to explore at their own pace. When designed this way, digital installations move from being informational to becoming exploratory.

Designing for Multi-Visit, Not One-Time Consumption

Museums are increasingly being envisioned as multi-visit learning destinations. Visitors return not just to see exhibits, but to participate in workshops, attend curated screenings, and engage with experts and peers. Museum event calendars and social integrations support this ongoing engagement, transforming museums into living cultural ecosystems.

Extending Content Through Partnerships

Digital infrastructure enables museums to host curated films, collaborate with schools, universities, and related institutions, and facilitate an exploration of traditional knowledge systems in contemporary contexts. These partnerships allow museums to evolve into active knowledge hubs rather than static spaces.

Designing for Inclusion and Access

Museums serve diverse audiences. Multilingual content layers, accessibility-focused design, and inclusive interfaces ensure that experiences are available to all visitors, including those with mobility or visual challenges. Technology, when used thoughtfully, democratises access to knowledge.

When Simpler Works Better

Some of the most engaging museum experiences rely on simple interventions. A case of lighting automation synchronised with sound design, complemented by well-crafted dioramas and ambient storytelling, often outperforms complex digital systems in both engagement and sustainability.

Sustainability as a Design Principle

Technology can also support sustainable museum operations. Beyond interactive digital design, adoption of allied intelligent systems can help optimise energy use, manage water resources, and integrate renewable solutions, allowing museums to lead by example.

Museums today are evolving into spaces of engagement, dialogue, and interpretation. The most effective use of technology is not visible and in-your-face — it works quietly in the background, subtly enhancing the visitor journey without overwhelming it.

The future of museums lies not in becoming more digital but in becoming more human-centric, inclusive, and continuously relevant.

Reading Against the Grain: A List to Make Museum Studies More Inclusive

Pia Bakshi

Assistant Professor,
O.P.Jindal Global University (JGU)



Profusion

The idea of objects having a social life is a concept I coined in 1986 in a collection of essays titled *The Social Life of Things*. Since then, I have continued to be engaged with the idea that persons and things are not radically distinct categories, and that the transactions that surround things are intertwined with the properties of social relations. Thus, today's gift is tomorrow's commodity. Yesterday's commodity is tomorrow's junk. And yesterday's junk is tomorrow's treasure.

Furthermore, any and all things can make the journey from commodity to sub-gallery and back. Staves, once sold as charcoal, can become gradually humanized, personalised, and re-enacted by the investment of humanity. But they can also be recommodified, moved once again into more bodies or walls, put back in the marketplace, available for a price, dumped into the world of mere things.

In some way, all things are co-opted moments in a longer social trajectory. All things are brief deposits of this or that property, photographs that conceal the reality of the motion from which their objecthood is a momentary residue. Consider the objects of traditional plastic art, such as paintings, drawings, sculptures, buildings, or monuments. Despite their aspiration to the illusion of permanence, they are only momentary aggregations of material, such as paint, bricks, glass, acrylic, cloth, steel, or canvas. These underlying materials are ever volatile, which is why museums always insist that we "do not touch." What is at risk is not just their authenticity but the fragility of objecthood itself.

Furthermore, it is not just the materials from which art objects are composed that threaten to break through the illusion of permanence. It is the very action

After a class on 20th-century museums, a student wrote an email asking how the readings and case studies of museums from what can be loosely called the 'Global North' translate into an Indian museum. As a cultural memory studies and postcolonial scholar from what can be problematically called the 'Global South', I have always had to rely on distant and perceivably impenetrable theory to make sense of more localised topics of my own scrutiny. But I have always believed in a more capacious use of theory—if the author is dead, like Barthes reminds us, then maybe their authority also dies with them, allowing the readers to play with theory as they wish. I have a lot of that play in my method. But play is not enough. The playground itself requires diversity for the play to feel inclusive.

To that end, accelerated by the chance to curate a Museology program, I began searching for readings that themselves read against the grain, that question the limitations of universalising theory to create spaces for critique, not only of existing systems but the theory written out of the systems—some more explicit than others, and some that read that way to me.

1. Appadurai, Arjun. "The Thing Itself." *Public Culture*, vol. 18, no. 1, Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 15–21.

A more accessible introduction to Appadurai's theorisations on material culture than the pathbreaking *The Social Life of Things*, this article looks at the profusion of things and the quotidian nature of the interactions of things, art, and people as a distinct element of India's material culture, substantiated through Raghubir Singh's photographs.

2. Mathur, Saloni, and Kavita Singh, editors. *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia*, Routledge India, 2015.

This collection of essays addresses the diversity of museum culture in South Asia, addressing the legacy and postcolonial reckoning with a colonial institution through contemporary case studies and historical narratives. Vidya Shivadas' stellar study of the origin of the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi is particularly insightful.

3. Kreps, Christina. "Non-Western Models of Museums and Curation in Cross-Cultural Perspective." *A Companion to Museum Studies*, edited by Sharon Macdonald, Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 457–472.

Kreps argues against the general understanding of museums being a Western construct by looking at mnemonic collection strategies and efforts through what she calls "comparative museology." This involves studying rice barns in East Kalimantan and the Maori pataka.

4. Andrew, Brook Garru, and Paris Lettau. "Decolonising Archives: Killing Art to Write Its History." *Curating Lively Objects: Exhibitions Beyond Disciplines*, edited by Lizzie Muller and Caroline Seck Langill, Routledge, 2022, pp. 23–35.

This fascinating conversation shows how artists intervene in museum spaces to critique existing epistemes. Andrew focuses on the motivations of and expectations from his work, like 'Vox: Beyond Tasmania' and '52 Portraits', to show how a direct confrontation of colonial museology can disable its authority over representation.

5. Geismar, Haidy. "What's in a Price?: An Ethnography of Tribal Art at Auction." *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2001, pp. 25–47.

Geismar walks the reader through Sotheby's 1999 auction of African and Oceanic Art to discuss how the economic system of assigning value to the artefact divorces its meaning from its source of production. The fact that the objects under study are "tribal" lends political urgency to her arguments.

6. Pandey, Gyanendra. "Un-archived Histories: The 'Mad' and the 'Trifling.'" *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, no. 1, 7 Jan. 2012, pp. 37–41.

Pandey directly addresses the gaps in archives that privilege the event over the ordinary and the discernible over that which escapes documentation through the story of an Indian civil servant's career and the memoir of an African-American woman. In doing so, he makes a case for expanding the archive as an act of political compulsion; a note essential for museums that represent archives in varied forms.

I will close with the work of two scholars who deeply impacted the space of heritage and art in India, and with whom I had the pleasure of working a decade ago. Any list on inclusive museology would be incomplete without a tribute to them.

7. Goswamy, B. N. *The Spirit of Indian Painting: Close Encounters with 101 Great Works, 1100–1900*. India Allen Lane, 2014.

A stunning collection of essays that marry the academic rigour of a scholar with the love and appreciation of an admirer, this book renews the ways readers will themselves encounter these works, offering a method to do so for the ones outside the collection of the book.

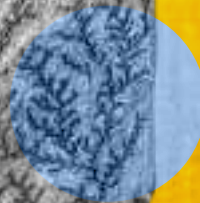
8. Punja, Shobita. *An Illustrated Guide to the Museums of India*. Photographs by Jean-Louis Nou, The Guidebook Company Limited, 1990.

The book celebrates how museums in India house what can be understood as 'living traditions', thereby enabling a distinct relationship between the museum goer and the museum's material culture. While the focus is on major cities and historical sites, the deep dive into one or two artefacts from each gallery discussed offers a microcosm of the diversity of Indian museums available to enthusiasts.

This list is no way exhaustive, but should in itself be read as a cosmopolitan playground of possibilities where Punja's analysis can be placed alongside Andrew's decolonial art; where Goswami's appreciation can sit with Pandey's unearthing; where Kreps' comparison can accompany Raghubir Singh's photography—a disparate assemblage, a word borrowed from a distant theoretical framework, that becomes renewed through what it seems to be doing here.

The Museum Beyond The Museum

Risa Wahlang,
Independent Researcher,
Cultural Practitioner



Museums have evolved from being stagnant cabinets of curiosities, where objects were left to gather dust, into dynamic institutions of creativity, education, and innovation. Today, museums are increasingly community-oriented, participatory, and inclusive. Curation is more intentional, with a focus on engagement.

This prospect of what a museum can be has been central to envisioning Meghalaya's Ever Living Museum. Built over many years through the dedication of one man, it is one of the state's most notable ethnographic museums. Located in a suburban area, it is surrounded by a garden and attracts visitors and children from the neighbourhood who come to spend time there. At first, it looks like a typical museum with objects in glass cabinets; however, what makes it special is the passion behind it. Unlike many state-run museums, this space feels personal. It is one of the few spaces where heritage feels democratised rather than elite, as is the case with many similar institutions. This uniqueness has also facilitated collaborations with organisations such as the India Foundation for the Arts.

Through the Foundation's Museums and Archives programme, I worked with the museum as a project coordinator for 18 months. This experience helped me see the museum as a dynamic space for learning and creativity.

I had the freedom to design outreach programmes. These included workshops on nature–culture linkages, traditional musical instruments, and textile processes. Students engaged directly with the collections through these sessions. In this way, even though the museum may appear to follow a typical glass-cabinet display format, it became a space that allowed for change and engagement.

The Idea of a Museum in a Box

Even so, this experience still felt insufficient. I kept returning to a question asked during my interview for the programme: how can we make this museum more inclusive? This led me to think about the politics of who gets to experience a museum. Museums are often influenced by those who financially support them, which in turn shapes whose stories are presented and who feels welcome. As a result, access is not equal, and certain groups are left out. This raises a contradiction: even though this museum is not elite in its setting or ethos, the politics of representation can still operate within it. This created an opportunity to truly democratise the museum and make it inclusive.

Building on this, I began to consider students with disabilities and how this outreach could extend into their curriculum. This proved to be a particularly challenging task. To address this, I collaborated with the State Resource Centre on Disability Affairs. Engaging with them was important, as it meant involving people who understood the needs of children with disabilities. They did not see them as a burden, but as individuals with a rightful place in society.

During our discussions on creating tactile experiences, we initially considered allowing children to handle the objects directly. However, this raised concerns, as the objects are precious and could be damaged. The next challenge was accessibility. Children with locomotor disabilities

would not be able to climb the stairs to reach the museum, and with a limited budget, changing the infrastructure was not feasible.

In response, the idea of a “museum in a box” was developed, inspired by the “Museum on Wheels” initiative by the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya. While not original, this approach was relatively new in Shillong.

Executing the Idea

Once the idea was in place, the planning commenced. While planning, I didn't want this to be seen as just an appendage of the museum. As someone from a community that has experienced marginalisation, I was conscious of not further marginalising those who are already excluded.

In Shillong, where the heritage sector is still flourishing, museums are just starting to become more engaging, and accessibility is treated as an afterthought. This reflects a divide between the abled and the disabled, which continues to shape how such spaces are designed. Further, it highlights a significant gap in our public infrastructure, where basic provisions, such as those enabling wheelchair access, are poorly designed and difficult to use. This project attempted to challenge that divide by placing children with disabilities at the centre of its design. The idea was that if their needs are meaningfully addressed, the space would become accessible to everyone.

Even while working within a limited budget and with no full-time staff, the planning remained true to the spirit of the museum. Much of the work depended on the support of friends and family.

The aim was to create something that would spark curiosity while also recognising that children often have short attention spans. Hence, instead of a single large box, the idea was to use multiple boxes so that children could engage with them one at a time. The collection was divided into four boxes, which can be used depending on time and interest.

One of the central curatorial ideas was the “social life of objects”, as these are not relics of the past but an active part of living heritage. Many of the items on display are still made, worn, and used today, though sparingly. It was therefore important to present their continuing cultural significance. To enable this engagement, small-scale models were used to allow children to closely interact with the objects.

For example, jewellery was not shown only as an adornment, but explained through how, when, and by whom it is worn. Everyday items like pots, loofahs, and soap nuts were included to demonstrate their continued use. A floor loom was used to explain weaving, and musical instruments were introduced through their rhythms and meanings. Traditional huts and basketry helped explain the purpose behind their designs. Seeds were used to show processes like winnowing, and small dolls demonstrated how objects such as traditional umbrellas are used.

To support engagement with the objects, QR codes were included on each box. When children scan the code, they are directed to videos that guide them through the activity. In these videos, the instructor first encourages them to observe the object, to touch and smell it where needed, before any explanation is provided.

This approach was important because the staff was limited. Since the boxes travel to different places, it is not always possible to have facilitators present. Digital tools offer a practical solution. The QR-enabled videos act as portable guides, so the boxes can be used anywhere – whether in classrooms or at home.

Along with the objects and QR videos, each box also includes an instruction booklet. It explains how to use, handle, and store the materials, and includes activities that help children connect the objects to their own experiences. The aim is to nurture archiving and remembrance, especially in a world where objects are easily disposable.

For instance, in the *Create Your Own Mini-Museum* activity, children choose objects from their home that remind them of something handmade or something used during special occasions. When kept together in a shoebox or pouch, these objects become memories and constitute a part of their identity.

The weaving activity lets children learn by doing. Using simple materials, they make a small cardboard loom and understand how weaving works. They also gain familiarity with what it feels like to create something with their own hands. The finished piece can be added to their mini museum.

The *Huts Then & Now* activity encourages children to visit traditional huts in nearby villages and observe them closely. By drawing or taking photos, they can notice different materials and designs. They then compare these huts with their own homes and reflect on the similarities and differences. Their drawings or photos can also be added to the mini museum.

The *Guess the Drum Beats* game allows an exploration of sound. Children are also encouraged to attend *Shad Suk Mynsiem*, an indigenous festival, and experience these rhythms in person. After this activity, they are encouraged to write about their favourite beat, take photos, and add these to their mini museum.

These activities are also designed to let children create their own souvenir instead of buying one. This DIY keepsake becomes a memory of their *museum-in-a-box* experience. It is also a form of museum merchandise. Instead of being a generic souvenir, it is closely connected to the museum experience, unlike items found in common tourist shops.

Although this approach may seem complex, it grew out of a pilot workshop at a special needs school, where the children's perceptiveness challenged assumptions about their ability to engage and think.

Launched in February 2026, the "*museum in a box*" is still evolving, with scope to improve accessibility and expand its collection. It reflects resilience and experimentation and could become a model for accessibility and engagement. Taken forward by the Ever Living Museum team, I hope it continues to develop and grow. If a small private museum with limited resources can make such an attempt, the question arises: what possibilities exist for larger public museums with greater institutional support and funding?

Networks of the Past: A Study Gallery of India and the Ancient World



**Dr. Sabyasachi
Mukherjee,**
Director-General,
CSMVS



The Ancient World Gallery Project by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) is a unique international and educational initiative by the Museum. The objective of the project was to bring great works of art from other cultures to Mumbai, so that people could witness a shared human history in order to deepen and enrich the study of world history in Indian schools and universities.

The initiative follows the remarkable success of two earlier exhibitions. *India and the World: A History in Nine stories* (2017-18) organised in collaboration with the British Museum, London; and *Ancient Sculptures: India Egypt Assyria Greece Rome* (2023-24), in partnership with the British Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, and many Indian museums to culminate in a unique global partnership with Getty's *Sharing Collections* programme, have preceded this initiative.

Four years in the making, this study gallery is the result of additional collaborations, which now includes the Museum Rietberg, Zurich; the al Sabah Collection, Kuwait; the Benaki Museum, Athens; and the Ephorate of Antiquities of the city of Athens, Ministry of Culture, Athens.

The Ministry of Culture, Government of India, has given its generous support. It has facilitated loaning of antiquities from the rich collections of the Archaeological Survey of India, the National Museum, New Delhi, the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Maharashtra, the Allahabad Museum, Prayagraj, the Government Museums of Lucknow and Mathura, the Indian Museum, Kolkata, and the Bihar Museum, Patna.

The idea for this project first emerged in 2020, during a conversation I was having with Dr. Jim Cuno, former President of the

Getty Trust. I had raised a few fundamental questions then: Why has the Indus Valley Civilisation, also known as the Harappan Civilisation, not been highlighted more prominently in global history? How did people and societies connect across vast geographies? How did the Harappans, Mesopotamians, and Egyptians develop unique scripts to record their social and cultural histories?

Ancient India was well connected to the wider world and contributed significantly to global knowledge, yet this has not been adequately projected or acknowledged. How can we explore India's place within a broader global context, a perspective that moves beyond familiar Western narratives of the ancient world, which have traditionally centred on the Mediterranean?



After the *India and the World* exhibition, I became increasingly convinced that India's role in antiquity needed to be far more prominently recognised. It is a fact that European scholars rarely presented the Harappan Civilisation as dynamic, innovative, or deeply connected to global networks. It was hardly ever asserted that India was not a passive receiver but an active contributor to the ancient world. One of the aims of this project, therefore, was to challenge such colonial misinterpretations.

Thanks to the Getty Trust and two of our dear friends, Mr. Neil MacGregor and Mahrukh Tarapore, who understood our vision. The idea found meaningful shape through their insights. The project incorporates archaeological discoveries, environmental studies, ancient Indian scripts, intangible heritage (including oral traditions), and technological analyses. It enables us to build narratives grounded in scientific evidence rather than colonial speculation. The project has fostered deep collaboration with researchers, museums, universities, and regional experts.

In addition, it has allowed us, for the first time, to work closely with experts not just from leading institutions, but also with

archaeologists and scholars from the source countries themselves. The project aims to rebuild historical narratives with India at the centre, placing Indian creativity, scientific innovations, urbanisation processes, trade networks, philosophical systems, and artistic achievements as independent forces that have shaped regional and global histories.

It is indeed true that the narratives here are developed from an Indian perspective and largely for Indian audiences. History is a dynamic and ever-evolving discipline. Every day, new discoveries come to light — some challenge established narratives, while others reaffirm earlier beliefs. It is neither possible nor intended to present every dimension of the ancient past within a single gallery.



Through a careful selection of objects and artefacts, the Study Gallery highlights certain thought-provoking ideas from our ancient past that remain relevant even today.

Gallery Narrative and Global Co-curation

The narrative begins in the Indian subcontinent with the Harappan Civilisation, which developed approximately 5000 years ago. The Gallery then displays objects representing the global cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, Persia, Greece, and Rome, along with India, tracing an exciting and transformative journey — from agrarian societies to the rise of civilisations, the invention of writing, and the building of empires; all while also peeping into the day-to-day life of people and trade networks across civilisations. The narrative concludes with the two most famous cosmopolitan centres of learning and knowledge in the ancient world: Nalanda, operational from 5th century CE in India and Alexandria (3rd century BCE) in Roman Egypt. Alexandria, a great maritime trading city with its library and the Mouseion — a place for teaching,

debate and scientific study, became the repository of texts and manuscripts from around the Western world. Nalanda, literally meaning 'where the gift of knowledge never ceases', was an early monastic university in the East. It became a learning centre for monks and teachers who travelled here from Indonesia, Korea, China, and even Japan. Both centres played a significant role in spreading the greatest legacy of the ancient world — its knowledge, which remains timeless, and much of it is the bedrock of civilisation as we know it today.



Ancient India, with its extensive connections to distant lands, played a pivotal role in this global conversation. From the advanced technologies of the Harappan Civilisation to the profound wisdom of ancient scriptures, from maritime trade with Mesopotamia, likely Egypt, and later Rome, to philosophical exchanges with Greece and China, India stood as both a contributor to and a beneficiary of this evolving tapestry.

The Study Gallery is intended to bridge a gap by providing the Indian public, especially students, with one of their first encounters with objects from global antiquity outside the pages of their textbooks. Based on their knowledge of ancient Indian history and India's historic interactions with the world, the CSMVS curators began exploring narratives from world cultures that could be introduced to this audience. The idea was to establish a thread of continuity in the story of India's connections with the wider world of antiquity, using familiar objects as anchor points, while also introducing a new visual vocabulary.

The project invites us to explore the ancient world not as something remote or lost, but as the foundation upon which our present stands and our future is built. The past has profoundly shaped relationships among societies and individuals at the global, national, and local levels. Events, innovations, and decisions made in antiquity continue to influence our world today.

Through carefully chosen artefacts, the gallery highlights ideas from antiquity that remain relevant, inviting curiosity, reflection, and learning, especially among students.

Networks of the Past is a truly collaborative endeavour — a new way to develop relationships among objects, institutions, and individuals. The objects on display, representing varied cultures, offer people from diverse countries and backgrounds the opportunity to participate in a shared world narrative. They encourage visitors to reclaim and reposition their own unique regional, national, and global identities within a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

Civilisation is not a destination – it's a journey. To understand our history meaningfully, we must move beyond isolated narratives and adopt a global perspective.



100
101
102
103
104
105
106
107
108
109
110
111
112
113
114
115
116
117
118
119
120
121
122
123
124
125
126
127
128
129
130
131
132
133
134
135
136
137
138
139
140
141
142
143
144
145
146
147
148
149
150
151
152
153
154
155
156
157
158
159
160
161
162
163
164
165
166
167
168
169
170
171
172
173
174
175
176
177
178
179
180
181
182
183
184
185
186
187
188
189
190
191
192
193
194
195
196
197
198
199
200
201
202
203
204
205
206
207
208
209
210
211
212
213
214
215
216
217
218
219
220
221
222
223
224
225
226
227
228
229
230
231
232
233
234
235
236
237
238
239
240
241
242
243
244
245
246
247
248
249
250
251
252
253
254
255
256
257
258
259
260
261
262
263
264
265
266
267
268
269
270
271
272
273
274
275
276
277
278
279
280
281
282
283
284
285
286
287
288
289
290
291
292
293
294
295
296
297
298
299
300
301
302
303
304
305
306
307
308
309
310
311
312
313
314
315
316
317
318
319
320
321
322
323
324
325
326
327
328
329
330
331
332
333
334
335
336
337
338
339
340
341
342
343
344
345
346
347
348
349
350
351
352
353
354
355
356
357
358
359
360
361
362
363
364
365
366
367
368
369
370
371
372
373
374
375
376
377
378
379
380
381
382
383
384
385
386
387
388
389
390
391
392
393
394
395
396
397
398
399
400
401
402
403
404
405
406
407
408
409
410
411
412
413
414
415
416
417
418
419
420
421
422
423
424
425
426
427
428
429
430
431
432
433
434
435
436
437
438
439
440
441
442
443
444
445
446
447
448
449
450
451
452
453
454
455
456
457
458
459
460
461
462
463
464
465
466
467
468
469
470
471
472
473
474
475
476
477
478
479
480
481
482
483
484
485
486
487
488
489
490
491
492
493
494
495
496
497
498
499
500
501
502
503
504
505
506
507
508
509
510
511
512
513
514
515
516
517
518
519
520
521
522
523
524
525
526
527
528
529
530
531
532
533
534
535
536
537
538
539
540
541
542
543
544
545
546
547
548
549
550
551
552
553
554
555
556
557
558
559
560
561
562
563
564
565
566
567
568
569
570
571
572
573
574
575
576
577
578
579
580
581
582
583
584
585
586
587
588
589
590
591
592
593
594
595
596
597
598
599
600
601
602
603
604
605
606
607
608
609
610
611
612
613
614
615
616
617
618
619
620
621
622
623
624
625
626
627
628
629
630
631
632
633
634
635
636
637
638
639
640
641
642
643
644
645
646
647
648
649
650
651
652
653
654
655
656
657
658
659
660
661
662
663
664
665
666
667
668
669
670
671
672
673
674
675
676
677
678
679
680
681
682
683
684
685
686
687
688
689
690
691
692
693
694
695
696
697
698
699
700
701
702
703
704
705
706
707
708
709
710
711
712
713
714
715
716
717
718
719
720
721
722
723
724
725
726
727
728
729
730
731
732
733
734
735
736
737
738
739
740
741
742
743
744
745
746
747
748
749
750
751
752
753
754
755
756
757
758
759
760
761
762
763
764
765
766
767
768
769
770
771
772
773
774
775
776
777
778
779
780
781
782
783
784
785
786
787
788
789
790
791
792
793
794
795
796
797
798
799
800
801
802
803
804
805
806
807
808
809
810
811
812
813
814
815
816
817
818
819
820
821
822
823
824
825
826
827
828
829
830
831
832
833
834
835
836
837
838
839
840
841
842
843
844
845
846
847
848
849
850
851
852
853
854
855
856
857
858
859
860
861
862
863
864
865
866
867
868
869
870
871
872
873
874
875
876
877
878
879
880
881
882
883
884
885
886
887
888
889
890
891
892
893
894
895
896
897
898
899
900
901
902
903
904
905
906
907
908
909
910
911
912
913
914
915
916
917
918
919
920
921
922
923
924
925
926
927
928
929
930
931
932
933
934
935
936
937
938
939
940
941
942
943
944
945
946
947
948
949
950
951
952
953
954
955
956
957
958
959
960
961
962
963
964
965
966
967
968
969
970
971
972
973
974
975
976
977
978
979
980
981
982
983
984
985
986
987
988
989
990
991
992
993
994
995
996
997
998
999
1000



1001
1002
1003
1004
1005
1006
1007
1008
1009
1010
1011
1012
1013
1014
1015
1016
1017
1018
1019
1020
1021
1022
1023
1024
1025
1026
1027
1028
1029
1030
1031
1032
1033
1034
1035
1036
1037
1038
1039
1040
1041
1042
1043
1044
1045
1046
1047
1048
1049
1050
1051
1052
1053
1054
1055
1056
1057
1058
1059
1060
1061
1062
1063
1064
1065
1066
1067
1068
1069
1070
1071
1072
1073
1074
1075
1076
1077
1078
1079
1080
1081
1082
1083
1084
1085
1086
1087
1088
1089
1090
1091
1092
1093
1094
1095
1096
1097
1098
1099
1100
1101
1102
1103
1104
1105
1106
1107
1108
1109
1110
1111
1112
1113
1114
1115
1116
1117
1118
1119
1120
1121
1122
1123
1124
1125
1126
1127
1128
1129
1130
1131
1132
1133
1134
1135
1136
1137
1138
1139
1140
1141
1142
1143
1144
1145
1146
1147
1148
1149
1150
1151
1152
1153
1154
1155
1156
1157
1158
1159
1160
1161
1162
1163
1164
1165
1166
1167
1168
1169
1170
1171
1172
1173
1174
1175
1176
1177
1178
1179
1180
1181
1182
1183
1184
1185
1186
1187
1188
1189
1190
1191
1192
1193
1194
1195
1196
1197
1198
1199
1200
1201
1202
1203
1204
1205
1206
1207
1208
1209
1210
1211
1212
1213
1214
1215
1216
1217
1218
1219
1220
1221
1222
1223
1224
1225
1226
1227
1228
1229
1230
1231
1232
1233
1234
1235
1236
1237
1238
1239
1240
1241
1242
1243
1244
1245
1246
1247
1248
1249
1250
1251
1252
1253
1254
1255
1256
1257
1258
1259
1260
1261
1262
1263
1264
1265
1266
1267
1268
1269
1270
1271
1272
1273
1274
1275
1276
1277
1278
1279
1280
1281
1282
1283
1284
1285
1286
1287
1288
1289
1290
1291
1292
1293
1294
1295
1296
1297
1298
1299
1300
1301
1302
1303
1304
1305
1306
1307
1308
1309
1310
1311
1312
1313
1314
1315
1316
1317
1318
1319
1320
1321
1322
1323
1324
1325
1326
1327
1328
1329
1330
1331
1332
1333
1334
1335
1336
1337
1338
1339
1340
1341
1342
1343
1344
1345
1346
1347
1348
1349
1350
1351
1352
1353
1354
1355
1356
1357
1358
1359
1360
1361
1362
1363
1364
1365
1366
1367
1368
1369
1370
1371
1372
1373
1374
1375
1376
1377
1378
1379
1380
1381
1382
1383
1384
1385
1386
1387
1388
1389
1390
1391
1392
1393
1394
1395
1396
1397
1398
1399
1400
1401
1402
1403
1404
1405
1406
1407
1408
1409
1410
1411
1412
1413
1414
1415
1416
1417
1418
1419
1420
1421
1422
1423
1424
1425
1426
1427
1428
1429
1430
1431
1432
1433
1434
1435
1436
1437
1438
1439
1440
1441
1442
1443
1444
1445
1446
1447
1448
1449
1450
1451
1452
1453
1454
1455
1456
1457
1458
1459
1460
1461
1462
1463
1464
1465
1466
1467
1468
1469
1470
1471
1472
1473
1474
1475
1476
1477
1478
1479
1480
1481
1482
1483
1484
1485
1486
1487
1488
1489
1490
1491
1492
1493
1494
1495
1496
1497
1498
1499
1500
1501
1502
1503
1504
1505
1506
1507
1508
1509
1510
1511
1512
1513
1514
1515
1516
1517
1518
1519
1520
1521
1522
1523
1524
1525
1526
1527
1528
1529
1530
1531
1532
1533
1534
1535
1536
1537
1538
1539
1540
1541
1542
1543
1544
1545
1546
1547
1548
1549
1550
1551
1552
1553
1554
1555
1556
1557
1558
1559
1560
1561
1562
1563
1564
1565
1566
1567
1568
1569
1570
1571
1572
1573
1574
1575
1576
1577
1578
1579
1580
1581
1582
1583
1584
1585
1586
1587
1588
1589
1590
1591
1592
1593
1594
1595
1596
1597
1598
1599
1600
1601
1602
1603
1604
1605
1606
1607
1608
1609
1610
1611
1612
1613
1614
1615
1616
1617
1618
1619
1620
1621
1622
1623
1624
1625
1626
1627
1628
1629
1630
1631
1632
1633
1634
1635
1636
1637
1638
1639
1640
1641
1642
1643
1644
1645
1646
1647
1648
1649
1650
1651
1652
1653
1654
1655
1656
1657
1658
1659
1660
1661
1662
1663
1664
1665
1666
1667
1668
1669
1670
1671
1672
1673
1674
1675
1676
1677
1678
1679
1680
1681
1682
1683
1684
1685
1686
1687
1688
1689
1690
1691
1692
1693
1694
1695
1696
1697
1698
1699
1700
1701
1702
1703
1704
1705
1706
1707
1708
1709
1710
1711
1712
1713
1714
1715
1716
1717
1718
1719
1720
1721
1722
1723
1724
1725
1726
1727
1728
1729
1730
1731
1732
1733
1734
1735
1736
1737
1738
1739
1740
1741
1742
1743
1744
1745
1746
1747
1748
1749
1750
1751
1752
1753
1754
1755
1756
1757
1758
1759
1760
1761
1762
1763
1764
1765
1766
1767
1768
1769
1770
1771
1772
1773
1774
1775
1776
1777
1778
1779
1780
1781
1782
1783
1784
1785
1786
1787
1788
1789
1790
1791
1792
1793
1794
1795
1796
1797
1798
1799
1800
1801
1802
1803
1804
1805
1806
1807
1808
1809
1810
1811
1812
1813
1814
1815
1816
1817
1818
1819
1820
1821
1822
1823
1824
1825
1826
1827
1828
1829
1830
1831
1832
1833
1834
1835
1836
1837
1838
1839
1840
1841
1842
1843
1844
1845
1846
1847
1848
1849
1850
1851
1852
1853
1854
1855
1856
1857
1858
1859
1860
1861
1862
1863
1864
1865
1866
1867
1868
1869
1870
1871
1872
1873
1874
1875
1876
1877
1878
1879
1880
1881
1882
1883
1884
1885
1886
1887
1888
1889
1890
1891
1892
1893
1894
1895
1896
1897
1898
1899
1900
1901
1902
1903
1904
1905
1906
1907
1908
1909
1910
1911
1912
1913
1914
1915
1916
1917
1918
1919
1920
1921
1922
1923
1924
1925
1926
1927
1928
1929
1930
1931
1932
1933
1934
1935
1936
1937
1938
1939
1940
1941
1942
1943
1944
1945
1946
1947
1948
1949
1950
1951
1952
1953
1954
1955
1956
1957
1958
1959
1960
1961
1962
1963
1964
1965
1966
1967
1968
1969
1970
1971
1972
1973
1974
1975
1976
1977
1978
1979
1980
1981
1982
1983
1984
1985
1986
1987
1988
1989
1990
1991
1992
1993
1994
1995
1996
1997
1998
1999
2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
2005
2006
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
2024
2025
2026
2027
2028
2029
2030
2031
2032
2033
2034
2035
2036
2037
2038
2039
2040
2041
2042
2043
2044
2045
2046
2047
2048
2049
2050
2051
2052
2053
2054
2055
2056
2057
2058
2059
2060
2061
2062
2063
2064
2065
2066
2067
2068
2069
2070
2071
2072
2073
2074
2075
2076
2077
2078
2079
2080
2081
2082
2083
2084
2085
2086
2087
2088
2089
2090
2091
2092
2093
2094
2095
2096
2097
2098
2099
2100
2101
2102
2103
2104
2105
2106
2107
2108
2109
2110
2111
2112
2113
2114
2115
2116
2117
2118
2119
2120
2121
2122
2123
2124
2125
2126
2127
2128
2129
2130
2131
2132
2133
2134
2135
2136
2137
2138
2139
2140
2141
2142
2143
2144
2145
2146
2147
2148
2149
2150
2151
2152
2153
2154
2155
2156
2157
2158
2159
2160
2161
2162
2163
2164
2165
2166
2167
2168
2169
2170
2171
2172
2173
2174
2175
2176
2177
2178
2179
2180
2181
2182
2183
2184
2185
2186
2187
2188
2189
2190
2191
2192
2193
2194
2195
2196
2197
2198
2199
2200
2201
2202
2203
2204
2205
2206
2207
2208
2209
2210
2211
2212
2213
2214
2215
2216
2217
2218
2219
2220
2221
2222
2223
2224
2225

Conservation Framing

Preserving Art
Beyond Display

Sakshi Ahuja,
Art Conservator



The best part of creating art is sharing it with the world. To ensure that an artwork is exhibited professionally and artistically, the use of a picture frame becomes almost non-negotiable. A frame, along with its mounts and protective elements, not only enhances the visual appeal of an artwork but also safeguards it from environmental and physical damage. Proper framing helps artworks remain stable and in good condition for generations.

Vincent van Gogh is often credited with saying, “A picture without a frame is like a soul without a body.” Beyond aesthetics, a frame possesses the ability to transform the way an artwork is perceived. Ideally, while viewing a framed piece, the viewer’s attention should first be drawn to the artwork itself, then to the frame, and finally to the harmony created between the two. More importantly, frames chosen for their preservation qualities protect artworks from a range of damaging factors that can compromise their longevity. Framing provides artworks and artefacts with a secure structure for display, handling, transportation, storage, and support.

When Framing Causes Damage

Ironically, many conventional framing practices can themselves become a source of deterioration. Materials commonly used in commercial framing including mats, backing boards, decorative fabrics, and hinges are often neither chemically stable nor truly acid-free, despite labels claiming them to be “archival” or “acid-free.” Over time, these materials can release acids and harmful compounds that slowly discolour, weaken and damage the artworks.

Such deterioration may occur gradually over years or decades, or in some cases surprisingly quickly, within days or even hours. Light exposure, fluctuating humidity, poor-quality adhesives, and acidic supports all contribute to the degradation of paper, textiles, photographs, and painted surfaces.

What is Conservation Framing?

Conservation framing is a specialised approach to framing that prioritises the long-term preservation of artworks. It protects artworks from two major forms of damage: chemical damage typically caused by acidic materials and accelerated by ultraviolet (UV) light and mechanical damage resulting from improper handling, pressure, or structural instability.

Within museums and professional conservation studios, framing is approached with a deep understanding of an artwork’s individual requirements. The goal is not merely to display an object attractively, but to ensure its stability and survival for future generations. Conservation framing is particularly important for artworks and artifacts of historical, cultural, or emotional significance.

One of the fundamental principles of conservation framing is reversibility. Any artwork that has been framed should be capable of being returned to its original state without damage. Consequently, artworks should never be permanently altered, trimmed, folded, or adhered irreversibly. If an artwork is mounted to a support, it must be removable without causing harm to the object.

The Components of Conservation Framing

Every material used in conservation framing is selected according to one guiding principle: nothing that surrounds or comes into contact with the artwork should cause damage.

Frames

Conservation-quality frames are typically made from wood or metal. Before becoming a frame, the raw material exists as a molding usually supplied in long lengths. These moldings contain a rabbet, a recessed groove designed to hold the glazing, mat board, artwork, and backing securely in place. Wooden frames often undergo careful finishing processes, including sealing, gesso application and gilding, all of which must be completed using stable and conservation-safe materials.

Glazing

Glazing refers to the protective glass or acrylic placed at the front of a frame. It serves both protective and visual purposes. Conservation framing commonly employs three types of glazing:

- Standard glazing, offering basic physical protection
- Conservation glazing, which reduces UV radiation and glare
- Museum glazing, which minimizes reflections while providing superior UV protection

Proper glazing shields artworks from dust, pollutants, humidity, and harmful light exposure while ensuring optimal visibility.

Mat Boards

A mat board is the flat paper-based material placed between the artwork and the glazing. Besides enhancing presentation, mats create necessary space between the artwork and the glass, preventing condensation and surface damage.

High-quality conservation mats are typically made from cotton fiber and are free from lignin and harmful acids. They also help conceal hinges and mounting systems while providing visual breathing space around the artwork.

Backing Boards

Backing boards protect the reverse side of an artwork and provide structural support. In conservation framing, backing materials must be acid-free, lignin-free, and chemically stable to prevent long-term deterioration. Artworks may also be hinged to these boards using reversible conservation techniques.

Framing

Framing Raja Ravi Varma's Yashoda and Krishna

Among the many challenges in conservation framing is the ability to create a frame that not only protects an artwork but also enhances its historical and aesthetic identity. This balance was carefully achieved by Ahuja Framers Pvt. Ltd. in the framing of Raja Ravi Varma's celebrated 19th century masterpiece Yashoda and Krishna, which later achieved recordbreaking success at auction as the highest-valued Indian artwork sold globally.

The artwork required a framing solution, that respected both Ravi Varma's painterly richness and the cultural grandeur associated with his works. The chosen frame design was therefore developed with two primary objectives in mind: long-term preservation and visual harmony.

The framing process began with a careful consideration of the artwork's tonal qualities, historical context, and material sensitivity. Since Ravi Varma's paintings are known for their luminous surfaces, deep tonal transitions, and regal compositions, the frame needed to complement these qualities without visually overpowering the work.

A museum-quality wooden frame was selected for its structural stability and timeless appearance. To soften the transition between the dark outer molding and the painting surface, an inner gilded slip was introduced. Finished in warm gold tones, this delicate inner border reflected the rich jewellery, textiles, and earthen vessels depicted within the composition. The gold detailing subtly enhanced the warmth of Ravi Varma's palette while lending the frame an elegance reminiscent of late 19th-century academic portrait framing traditions.

From a conservation perspective, the framing materials were selected according to museum standards. Acid-free backing materials and chemically stable components were incorporated to prevent long-term deterioration. The artwork was fitted securely within the frame using reversible conservation methods so that it could be safely removed in the future without damage. Protective glazing and archival support systems further ensured the painting's preservation during handling, transportation, display, and storage.

Beyond aesthetics, the project demonstrated how conservation framing plays a crucial role in safeguarding culturally significant artworks. In the case of Yashoda and Krishna, the frame became more than a decorative enclosure, it became an essential part of the artwork's preservation, presentation, and legacy.



Horst: Photographer of Style at the V&A Museum

For the exhibition Horst: Photographer of Style at the Victoria and Albert Museum, specialist framers at John Jones collaborated with private collectors to frame more than 200 works by renowned photographer Horst P. Horst.

The project involved museum-grade wooden and welded metal frames finished with gilding, gesso, and colour washes. Each frame was designed not only to aesthetically complement Horst's striking fashion and surrealist photography, but also to protect the works from long-term damage.

Many prints were dry-mounted onto inert aluminum supports to ensure stability and longevity. Some frame designs featured porcelain-smooth finishes with high-gloss surfaces reminiscent of luxury fashion aesthetics from Horst's era, while others employed sleek matt-white metal profiles that echoed the modernity of his color photography.



Image Source: London, J.J. 2008b, Framing the Horst: Photographer of style exhibition at the V&A - case studies

Framing the Walter Langley Watercolour

A 1910 watercolour by Walter Langley demonstrated how poor framing can contribute significantly to deterioration. Conservators discovered fading from light exposure, yellowed adhesive residues, rust staining, insect activity, and brittleness caused by acidic support materials.

After a detailed condition assessment, conservators carefully removed the deteriorated secondary support and reduced adhesive residues using controlled solvent treatments. The artwork was then humidified and flattened before reframing.

To preserve the work, conservators selected a museum-quality frame crafted from poplar wood finished with gesso and gold leaf applied over a red clay base. Ultraviolet-protective glazing and museum-grade paper tabs ensured both visual harmony and long-term protection.

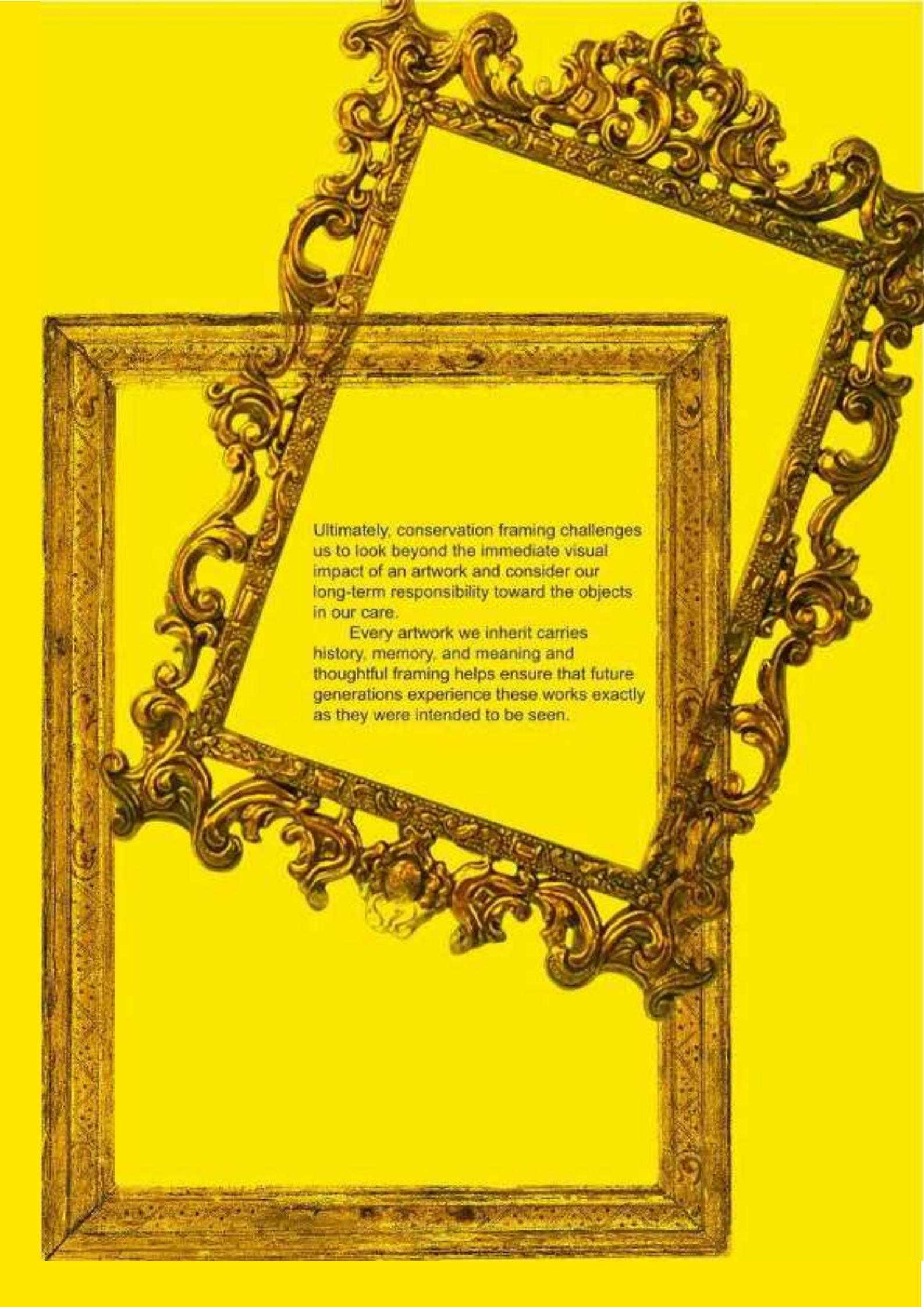


Image Source: London, J.J. 2008d, Walter Langley Watercolour – conservation framing - case studies

Beyond Aesthetics

Conservation framing extends far beyond decorative presentation. It represents a commitment to preservation. While no framing method can entirely prevent the natural aging of materials, conservation framing significantly slows deterioration and minimizes preventable damage.

For collectors, museums, conservators, and artists alike, conservation framing is an essential investment in the future of cultural heritage. It ensures that artworks are not only displayed beautifully in the present but are also preserved responsibly for generations to come.



Ultimately, conservation framing challenges us to look beyond the immediate visual impact of an artwork and consider our long-term responsibility toward the objects in our care.

Every artwork we inherit carries history, memory, and meaning and thoughtful framing helps ensure that future generations experience these works exactly as they were intended to be seen.

The Role of Performing Arts in Museum Making

Sukrit Sen,

Kolkata Chapter Lead, Living Waters Museum
and Curator, Jalkatha Series



The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines a museum as *"a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."*

This article focuses on the words "accessible and inclusive" within the context of this definition. One of the biggest challenges that museums across the world encounter is remaining relevant in a rapidly evolving society, which is why many museums are gradually shifting from object-centred to audience-centred experiences, with a focus on storytelling and community engagement. Although the digital era opens up avenues for virtual exhibitions and online archives, it continues to raise questions about maintaining authentic and meaningful connections. In the process, modern museums are often initiating more collaborative efforts involving artists and communities to shape exhibitions and reflect diverse voices.

The Living Water Museum (LWM) is one of the first hybrid museums in India that has spearheaded the use of arts and digital media to preserve and reimagine water heritage while engaging youth and communities in shaping sustainable water futures. Apart from visual arts, performing arts has also been extensively used as a medium by the museum to represent various stories and emotions around water.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, LWM launched a fellowship to support performing artists who were deeply affected by the lockdown. Musicians, dancers, thespians, and poets from across the country responded to the call with highly innovative performances that showcased their relationship with their surrounding waters.



Some of these performances can be accessed using the QR Code:



Drawing inspiration from the realm of performative exhibitions, *Jalkatha*, which literally translates to “the story of water,” transforms research into immersive storytelling in the *dastangoi* style — a traditional Urdu oral storytelling format that originated in Persia, travelled to India, and became extremely popular in the 19th century. This series reimagines the role of museums, extending its audience from information seekers to engaged participants through a dialogue on the cultural, political, and social dimensions of water. It simultaneously offers opportunities to communicate narratives of water bodies — their conservation, urban transformation, and climate resilience — while merging education with entertainment, thus attracting an audience beyond the conventional museum-going crowd.



The initiative aims to empower and engage local artists and students by positioning them alongside researchers, scientists, and climate activists. By fostering awareness of their cultural and ecological significance, it also catalyses an instinctive commitment to safeguard these waters and their stories for generations to come. It reinforces the role of the artist and the audience as cultural stewards of society and offers replicable models that merge creativity with environmental education, further inspiring policy-level conversations.

The *Jalkatha* debuted at the launch of LWM's urban water chapter in Kolkata as *Kolkata ki Jalkatha* and has been performed several times with various artists and students across different locations. Its core story revolves around the water narratives of diverse communities that settled in the city at different points in time, each carrying its own deities and water traditions. These tales are performed through the perspective of their gods, bringing together myth, memory, and migration. With the careful placement of local songs and traditional music, the performance invites the audience to reconnect with their rich past, reminding them of a time when these musical renditions went beyond mere entertainment. It highlights how water, one of the first criteria for the emergence of any civilisation, does not just remain a resource but also shapes cultural identities, spiritual practices, and the evolving fabric of the city itself.



Having been performed in various cities so far, including Mumbai, Jodhpur, Delhi, Champaner, Rajmundry, and Varanasi, the *Jalkatha* series takes a similar approach for each episode. These episodes have brought together over a hundred artists and students into collaborative conversation and have also been featured at the prestigious Kala Ghoda Arts Festival in Mumbai and the Pavagadh Heritage Festival in Gujarat, among others.



By 2035, LWM aims to create a *Jalkatha* not just for all major cities and towns across the country but also seeks to replicate it for global audiences. This sustained effort will reinforce the idea that art and cultural performance hold transformative power in the discourse around environmental sustainability.

Rooted in local contexts yet relevant on a global scale, the *Jalkatha* series redefines the boundaries of museum making by inviting audiences to engage with water as not only heritage but also a living force shaping culture, communities, and collective futures, making it more accessible and inclusive for all.

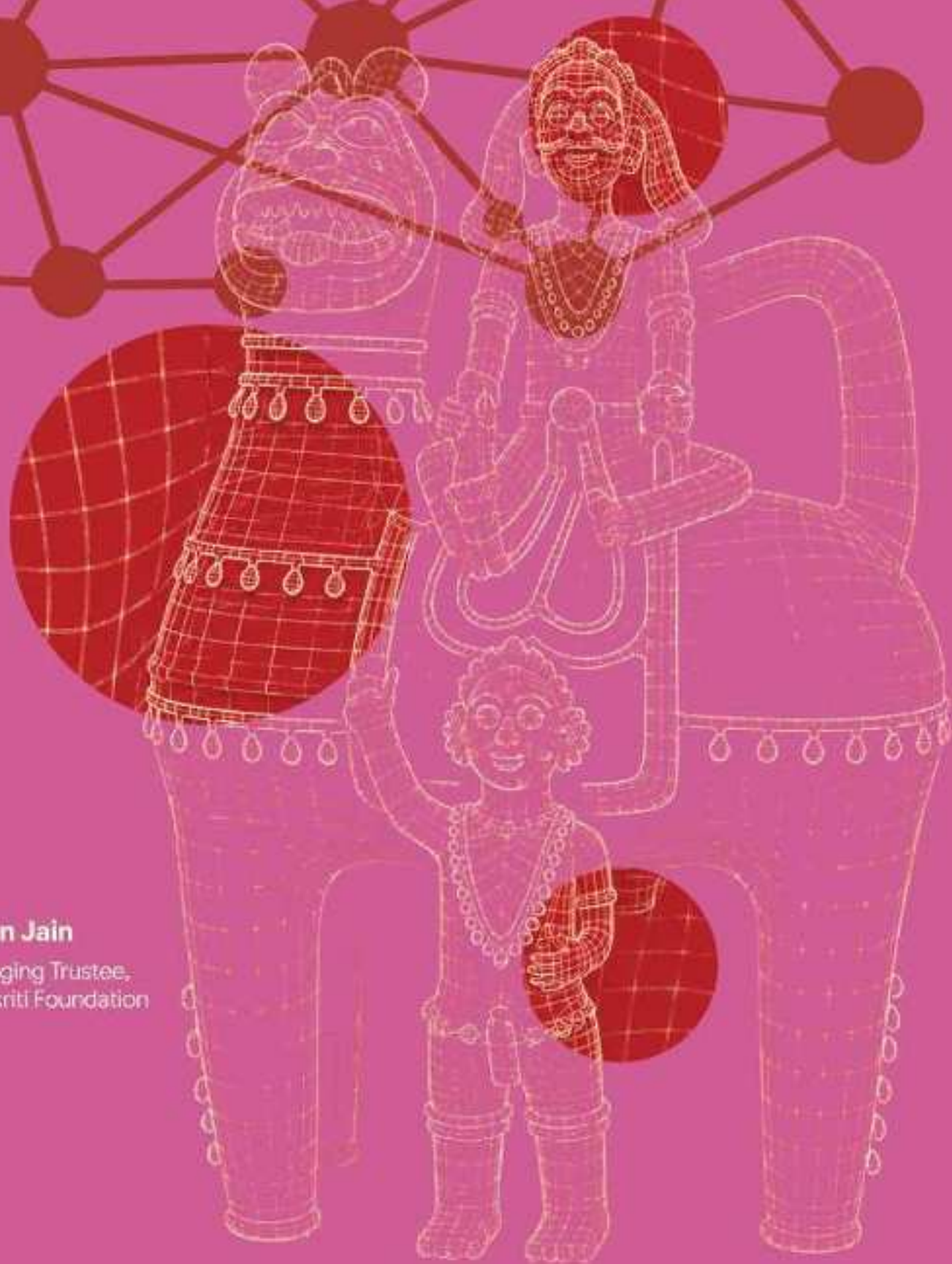


Maati Darshan

A Novel Use Case for AI at
Sanskriti's Terracotta Museum

Varun Jain

Managing Trustee,
Sanskriti Foundation



More than an Object

Indian Clay Traditions as Narrative

The Sanskriti Museum of Indian Terracotta, part of the Sanskriti Kendra complex in Delhi, is notable among Indian cultural institutions for its living, contextualised presentation of everyday Indian craft. Unlike archaeological and ontological displays that arrange objects by period or region, the museum presents terracotta as living culture — a reflection of rural aesthetics, ritual practice, community life, and artisan ingenuity.

Terracotta has been an artistic language in South Asia for millennia, creating utilitarian wares, architectural ornaments, religious icons, and festival paraphernalia. These objects are not just beautiful; they encapsulate dialogues across time: between maker and community, between function and faith, between history and contemporary creativity.

Yet conveying this rich texture to visitors, especially to those unfamiliar with Indian craft traditions, has always posed a challenge. Conventional museum captions can only offer limited text; audio-guided tours are unidirectional and hard-coded in time.

Clearly, AI can offer a novel interface here. We wanted to position a pioneering use case for museum experiences during the seminal AI Impact Summit, and we found ideal partners in OpenAI and Ask Mona for the purpose of this pilot. The pilot experience was exhibited and launched at Travancore Palace during the AI Impact Summit, and then continued at Sanskriti Kendra for two months.

An Interactive Experience that Leverages Conversational AI

The pilot consisted of objects thoughtfully curated from 10 state galleries of the Sanskriti Terracotta Museum, selected for their depth of narrative, aesthetic excellence, and rich traditions; each paired with a QR code. Visitors scanned these codes on their phones and began a conversational experience powered by generative AI.

Algorithmically and ergonomically, this represented a paradigm shift from earlier museum experiences. Imagine a user journey of the past, where one glanced at an object, looked at the caption, and then returned to the object. Based on one's interest and patience, this cycle repeated itself for a few iterations. Furthermore, if the caption was in a language that one was not comfortable with, there was an attrition in the experience at the outset; if one didn't speak the language, then even more so.

Now, on the other hand, with this pilot experience, one can begin a conversation (in a language of one's choice – we chose three for the pilot, but they are extensible to a much larger set) that builds on the level of curiosity, interest, and expertise of the user. Ask Mona's interface, in fact, had some starter prompts to help the user overcome the inertia of the first question. Also, as with most LLMs, the response could also end with prompts that could keep the dialogue going. What a sea change!

The pilot invited visitors to ask questions in natural language — Hindi, French, or English — about form, technique, ritual significance, regional context, and even storytelling. The AI responded in real time, drawing on curated explanatory texts prepared by the museum's curators, not on unfettered internet search. These guardrails, built into the Ask Mona engine, avoid hallucinations and keep the responses grounded in the curatorial context of the museum.

Not only does the technology democratise access across user backgrounds and language constraints, but it also makes the whole experience self-paced, private, and richer. When some of our staff used the technology for the first time in Hindi, the smiles on their faces were priceless. Some of the other visitor comments were equally heartwarming in their ability to convey the attributes and associations of artefacts hitherto hidden or beyond grasp.

A visitor lingered at a small votive figure, curious about its spiritual meaning. Within seconds, based on curated museum metadata, the AI contextualised it within village ritual practice, explaining how such figures were placed at thresholds for protection and invoking local deity associations.

Another visitor, intrigued by a terracotta animal form, asked about stylistic differences across regions. What followed was a lively comparative narrative about terracotta traditions in West Bengal, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu, highlighting how shape, motif, and firing techniques vary across India's diverse cultural landscapes.

These were not canned responses. They were situated narratives unfolding as a dialogue — shaped by real museum research and by questions that real people asked in real time. This was not scripted, but rather a dynamic exchange engineered by curiosity. And ethically, it was grounded in museum-validated knowledge.

Why This Matters

Take the example of the *Manasa Jhar*, one of the most fascinating votive objects devoted to the worship of the snake goddess Manasa, and one of the pilot objects chosen from the state gallery of West Bengal. It has engaged the interest of many due to its variegated structure, iconography, and gripping folk traditions. The snake goddess Manasa is revered in Bengal and Eastern India and is believed to protect and cure snakebites and disease.

The legend behind the worship of the goddess tells the story of a merchant named Chand Saudagar, a devout Shaivite, who did not pay appropriate respect to Manasa during ritual worship. This made the goddess furious, and she punished him by taking away his seven married sons. The wife of the youngest grieved and blamed the merchant father-in-law for the loss. She placed her husband's body on a raft made from a banana trunk and reached the heavenly abode of the trinity — Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva — who granted her prayers of bringing to life her husband and his brothers. Thereafter, it became a ritual for the family and community to worship Manasa.

There are layers of history, meaning, and tradition woven into the fabric of this story, which benefit tremendously from a deeper inquiry using a conversational tool like generative AI. Training of the AI docent was done using a structured template that captured not only these folklore aspects, but also motifs, iconography, semantics, and etymologies. A conversational

his legend and its assimilation with the aesthetics of the actual object itself inspire one's imagination. It develops a more nuanced appreciation of the utility, significance, and faith associated with the object – an appreciation that is essential to nurture the spirit of conservation, and at the same time inspire new designs, stories, narratives that can feed the creative economy of the world in a way that only India can provide the fodder for. This catalysis for the creative muse and imagination is a significant benefit for the use of AI in museum experiences.

Looking Ahead

The Sanskriti Foundation believes that this pilot is just the beginning for the museum space in India. The scale of conversational interpretation across museums is immense. It has the potential to integrate contemporary artists' and artisans' voices into the content base, and explore how AI might serve teachers, students, and remote audiences who cannot visit in person.

For Sanskriti, it is the ability to fire the imagination of creative practitioners, of children, and of teachers by coupling 'Kal aur Kal' (yesterday and tomorrow), which is the key go-forward opportunity here. We want to find ways to combine the slow-bake of millennia-old traditions with the slow gaze of an imaginative and curious visitor to the Sanskriti Kendra. We aspire to be a centre of excellence to curate, catalyse, and inspire the alchemy that will result from these two processes of making and looking. In a world starved of attention and mindfulness, such a juxtaposition will not only make the aesthete slow down but also make them look up and look ahead to the future with deep grounding in the excellence of their unparalleled heritage.



From Idea To Institution: In Conversation with Pavithra Muddaya, Founder, The Vimor Museum of Living Textiles

Founded in 1974 by Chimy Nanjappa and her daughter Pavithra Muddaya, Vimor's origins lie in a journey shaped by passion, dedication, and a deep love for textiles and handicrafts. Chimy and Pavithra have documented a range of motifs, terminology, weaving techniques, and design traditions after recognising a decline in traditional saree designs and the scarcity of antique textiles. Since 2004, the Vimor Foundation has been conducting training programs for Indian weavers. The Museum of Living Textiles, which became a natural extension of this journey, was established in 2018-19. By then, Vimor had carefully preserved a collection of unique sarees, along with generous donations of family heirlooms and their customers.

We spoke to Pavithra Muddaya to learn more about her experience of setting up and running a museum documenting India's handloom heritage.





1. What motivated you to establish the Vimor Museum of Living Textiles, and what gaps in existing textile museums were you hoping to address?

The idea of setting up a museum had been with me for many years, perhaps since my early 1980s. What stayed with me deeply was the realisation that there was no museum that truly showcased the textiles of the common person — the everyday sarees worn, loved, and lived in by ordinary women.

Most textile museums celebrate rare, royal, or commissioned pieces. While these are undeniably beautiful, I often felt something was missing — an emotional connection. Over the years, whenever I encountered a saree accompanied by a small story about someone's grandmother or family, I realised that these stories gave the textile its soul. Without them, it was just fabric. With them, it became memory, identity, and emotion.

That is when I knew: if I ever created a museum, it would be one that told these stories.

Many people discouraged me. They said a museum required vast resources, infrastructure, and institutional backing. But I had already spent over five decades building Vimor as a small, independent handloom store, without advertisements, driven purely by passion and trust. I believed the same spirit could shape a small, meaningful museum.

When I couldn't secure an external space, I made the decision to convert the upstairs floor of my own home into a museum. It was a modest space, but I believed thoughtful design could make it meaningful. Using simple, natural materials like brick, stone, and red oxide, I created an intimate, accessible space that could display 60-70 textiles.





2. 'Museum of Living Textile' is certainly a curiosity-generating name. It considers the textile as a living object. What does the term "Living Textiles" mean to you? How does this shape the museum's vision?

To me, "Living Textiles" reflects the deeply personal and emotional relationship people share with clothes. Textiles are not static artefacts confined to display cases. They carry memory, identity, and lived experience. From birth to death, cloth remains intimately tied to our lives, often reminding us of family, heritage, and moments we associate with a particular saree, dupatta, or garment worn during significant occasions. In that sense, textiles are living repositories of memory.

This idea also shapes the vision of the museum. Over my 52 years as a textile designer, I have worked towards recreating and reviving traditional textiles in ways that remain accessible and sustainable as well as meaningful for wearers. Revival, for me, is not about reproducing something exactly as it once was, but about adapting it thoughtfully by considering the skill of the weaver, the cost of production, and the needs of the buyer. My approach has always been rooted in a step-by-step process that allows artisans to grow, earn, and eventually create more complex work while keeping the craft alive.

The museum, therefore, sees textiles as part of a continuing, living cultural legacy. It is about ensuring that these traditions continue to be worn, remembered, and passed on within families and communities. That is why the idea of "living" is so important to me, because cloth itself is living.

3. How do you approach storytelling in the museum, especially when working with textiles that carry personal and inter-generational memories, in translating them to a museum experience?

I see every textile I receive as a story in itself, each with a distinctive past that carries the fascinating account of its ownership and origins. As a designer, I work to connect these narratives, whether by identifying the specific weaving areas the textile could have originated in, the technique used to weave it, or the motif utilised.

When working with any textile, I start by naming it after the user. I don't have provenance for any of the textiles I have worked with — I would rather name the garment after the person who has donated it, worn it, and cherished it, thereby choosing to honour them. While I explore the user's personal history with the textile, the latter remains the core focus of the story that is woven. I also tend to use textiles for storytelling, especially for younger audiences, as they are pictorial. While building a story for each textile, I always let the children visiting the museum make up another. Although the fabric remains the same, our gazes differ. Through this approach, it's quite interesting to get them involved in the histories of these textiles.

What is also compelling is the response from weavers. Seeing their expressions — wonder, pride, and possibility — is priceless. Many have told me, "If you can do this without a weaving background, we too can create something in our own villages." That, to me, makes everything worthwhile. I strongly believe that weavers are the true custodians of our textile heritage. If this museum can inspire even a few to create village-level museums, rooted in their own traditions, it would be a meaningful step forward.

4. Could you share one object from your collection that encapsulates your curatorial philosophy and the significance it carries?



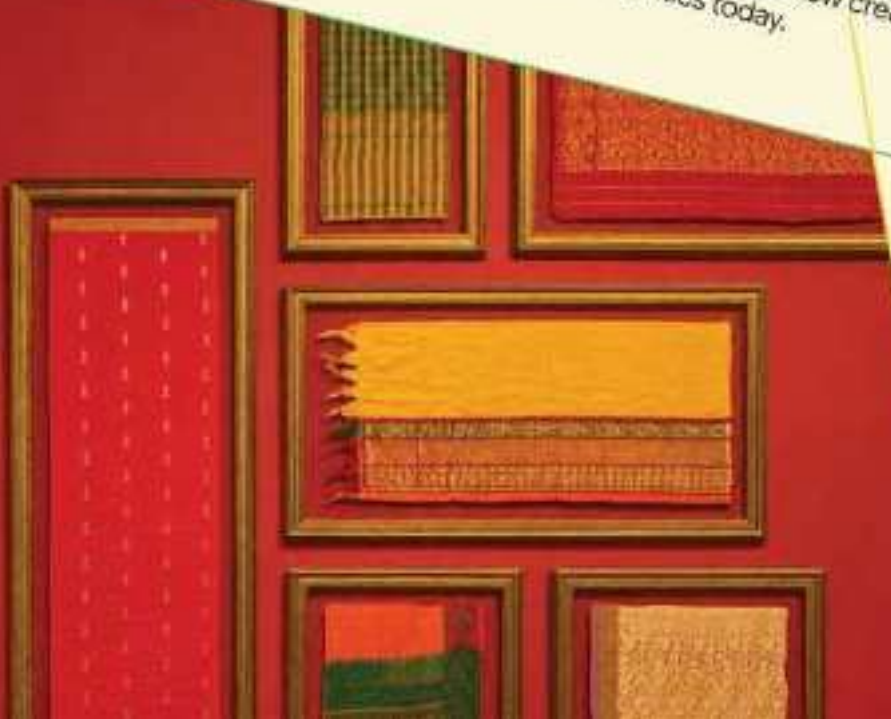
It is very difficult to choose a single object, but one textile that deeply encapsulates my curatorial philosophy is a saree woven around 1946–47, just before Independence. It was donated to me by a weaver, who told me that his mother was once hesitant to wear it because people made fun of its unusual design. Yet, to me, it is an extraordinary work of imagination and vision.

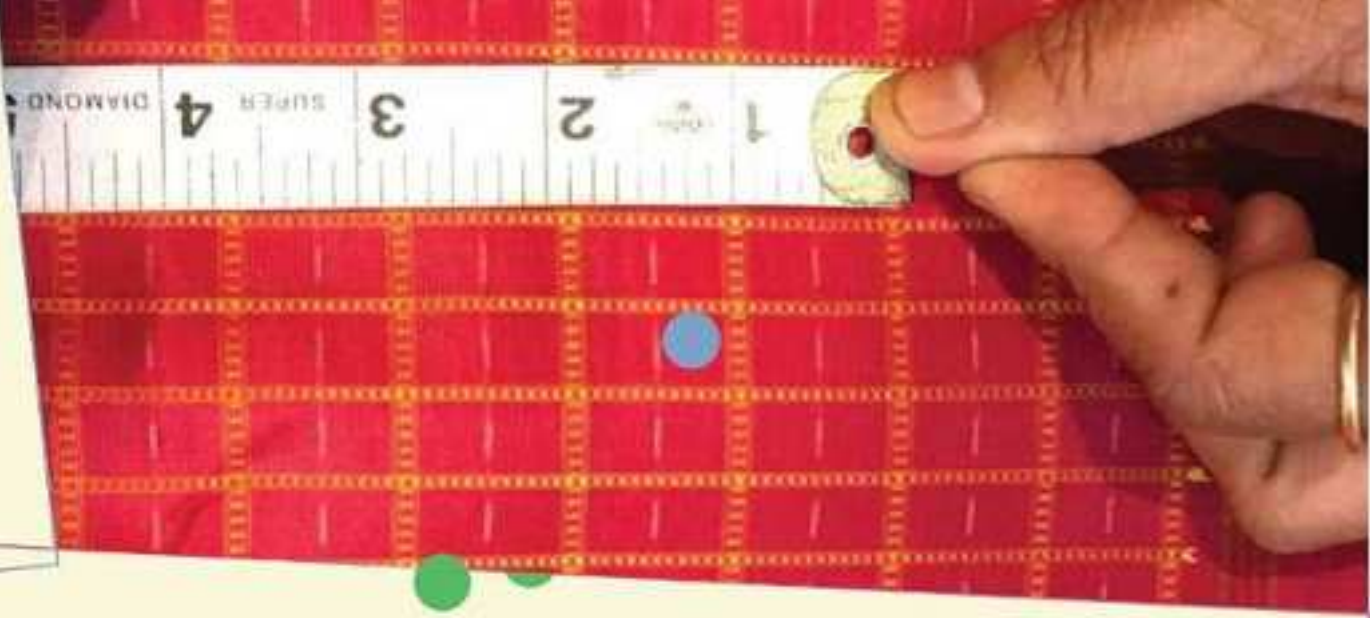
The saree features the Parliament House, globes woven into the borders, sailing ships, and peace doves moving towards the globe. The weaver was imagining India's Independence not simply as a national moment, but as part of a larger vision of global peace and connectedness. At the centre is the lotus, which carries deep symbolic meaning in textile traditions, representing beauty, purity, and creation.

What moves me most about this piece is that it was conceived by an unlettered weaver from a small village whose name is unknown today, yet whose imagination was so expansive. For me, this textile represents the intelligence, creativity, and philosophical depth embedded within craft traditions. It reflects my belief that textiles are not merely decorative or functional objects, but powerful carriers of ideas, aspirations, and histories.

5. You established the Vimor Foundation in 2004. How did the foundation's work in conducting training programs for weavers inform the development and structure of the museum?

When I established the Vimor Foundation in 2004, the idea was always to create a weaver-centric initiative that focused on livelihood with dignity, not just employment. I have always believed that India's handloom traditions, celebrated for centuries across the world, should not be reduced to a "sunset industry" in the age of mechanisation. That belief shaped the foundation's training programmes and my approach to working with weavers. The programmes became spaces for experimentation, where I could explore different techniques, materials, and ideas alongside artisans. They gave me the freedom to reinterpret traditional textile practices in ways that felt contemporary, while still remaining rooted in craft knowledge. This directly informed the development of the museum as well. Our collection is not only about preserving textiles, but also about understanding how elements of historical textiles can inspire new creations and sustainable opportunities for weaving communities today.



A hand is holding a white measuring tape against a red fabric with a yellow and white plaid pattern. The tape shows measurements in inches, with the number 4 visible. The hand is wearing a gold ring.

6. What are the key challenges you face in managing within a home-based museum setting, and how do you work around them?

A close-up of a dark, textured object, possibly a piece of wood or a tool handle, with a blue circular sticker on it.

There are definitely challenges in managing a home-based museum, especially because the space is limited, but we have always tried to make the best possible use of it. The entire space evolved very organically. I designed the house myself without an architect because I have always had a strong sense of spatial understanding, and I was clear about what the museum needed, whether it was specific kinds of looms, storage, or display areas for textiles. We worked with local carpenters to create drawers and display systems, and the museum gradually came together piece by piece, rather than through a large formal design process. That is how I have always worked as a designer: in a simple, functional, and organic manner, rather than an overly elaborate one.

What has also helped is that the museum has grown collectively through constant input from visitors, customers, and weavers. Their suggestions and responses have shaped the space over time. In that sense, it doesn't feel like something created by one person alone. It has become everybody's baby, and I think that collaborative spirit is what has made it work despite the limitations of a home-based setting.

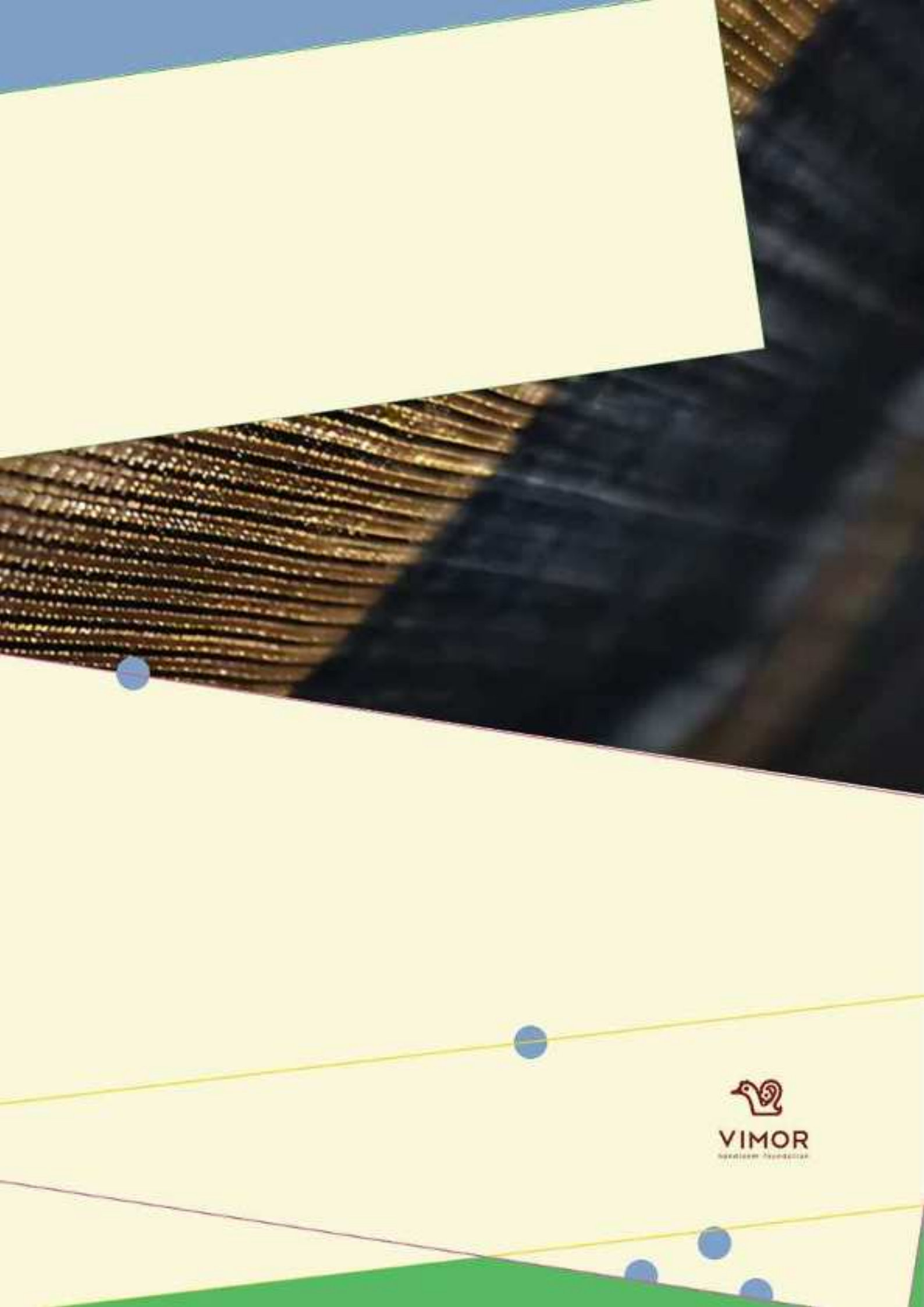
7. Looking ahead, what possibilities do you see for expanding textile archives, whether through digital tools, community-led initiatives, or new forms of recording knowledge?

The possibilities are tremendous, especially because there is now a younger generation that is deeply curious, engaged, and open to experimentation. They want to look closely at textiles, ask questions, and even take risks without being afraid of failure. That gives me a lot of hope for the future of textile archives in India.

For me, archives are not only about academic documentation or digital systems, but also about preserving lived memory and oral histories. I may not be very technologically inclined, but over the years I have realised the importance of listening carefully to people's stories. I spend a lot of time speaking to older generation, often people above 70 or 75, trying to understand their memories, practices, and experiences that were earlier overlooked or glossed over. Through questioning and conversation, I am able to translate those histories into fabric and design.

I think the future of textile archives will lie in bringing these approaches together, where digital tools and community-led initiatives can help preserve not just objects, but also the voices, memories, and knowledge systems connected to them.







MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS WE LOVED

This feature presents a selection of some of the most memorable museum exhibitions across India in 2025. Spanning institutions, regions, and subject areas, these shows stood out not just for what they covered, but for how they were imagined and experienced. Whether through strong curatorial ideas, inventive display strategies, or fresh takes on familiar material, each offered something distinctive. While the year saw many important exhibitions, this curated selection highlights a few that continue to linger in the mind.

**Disobedient Subjects:
Bombay 1930–1931**

Mumbai

**Gamchha: The Extraordinary
in the Ordinary**

Delhi

Lucknow Ke Gali Kooche

Lucknow

**Madhvi Parekh:
Remembered Tales**

Delhi &
Mumbai

Odyssey of the Rupee

Mumbai

**Please Touch Gently
(zines, comics, ephemera)**

Delhi

**Shaktirupa: Goddess as
Imagined by the Artists**

Ahmedabad

**Ticket Tika Chaap: The Art of
the Trademark in Indo-British
Textile Trade**

Bengaluru

Disobedient Subjects: Bombay 1930-1931

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj
Vastu Sanghralaya (CSMVS)

11 Oct'25 - 31 March'26

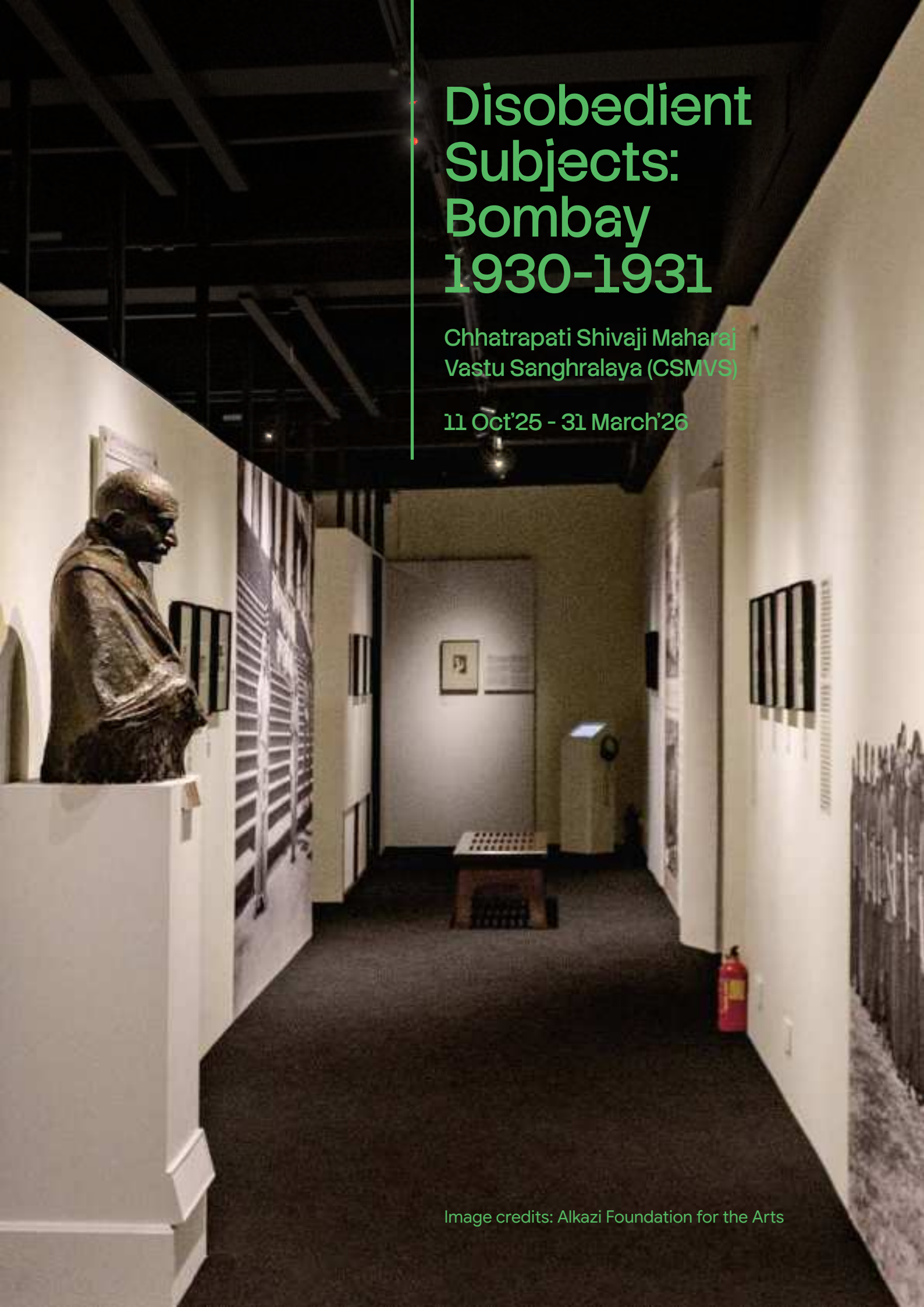


Image credits: Alkazi Foundation for the Arts

There are certain moments in history that we keep thinking about. These are the moments that stay with us, even if we were not present to witness it first hand. These moments shape a nation and its people. The Civil Disobedience Movement was a pivotal movement in the history of the Indian subcontinent. This included a series of non-violent protests against colonial rule by boycotting British goods, refusing to pay taxes and so on. This key moment is remembered again in the year 2025 with the exhibition called '*Disobedient Subjects: Bombay 1930-1931*' by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya in Mumbai.

This photo exhibition explored the theme of colonial rule in 1930s Bombay and the unfolding of the Civil Disobedience Movement. It started with the famous Dandi March when M.K.Gandhi called the fellow Indians to join him and break the salt law. With this protest began the larger movement which objected to the monopoly of production, distribution and sale of Colonial power.

The exhibition included the photographs from a rare album held by the Alkazi Collection of Photography. The album documented the rhythm and progress of this movement. The collection of 245 carefully preserved photographs allowed the viewers to get connected with the movement and the energy of the people who participated. It included the prominent leaders of the time as well as the volunteers and residents who joined the Congress Party and the protest in Bombay.

These photographs not only connected the viewers to the people, but also portrayed the city of Bombay as it transformed into a city of disobedience. The geographical location of Bombay and its political and economical positioning is equally important; Bombay was the financial capital, a colonial city and a coastal land (which allowed ports to be built). The exhibition invited viewers to experience the streets of Bombay in the 1930s as it explores one of the key events in Indian history.



EXHIBITIONS WE LOVED

Curated by Avrati Bhatnagar and Sumathi Ramaswamy, this work also explored the role played by women in the movement. When the movement began, it invited participants from different walks of life. This also included the women of Bombay who made history on the city's streets. It features Desh Sevika Sangh (DSS)- a women's organisation- that became the face of resistance in Bombay.



THE PROTESTING WOMEN IN AGGRESSIVE CONDITIONS THAT MAY LEAD TO A "DOLE"



ज्या लोनीनार
देशमकीसाठी
इलस्ट्रेटेड लंडन
ब्रिटिश कायदा
हा एक मोठा वि

Ironically,
that were
Indian new
laudable e
order in ve
London N

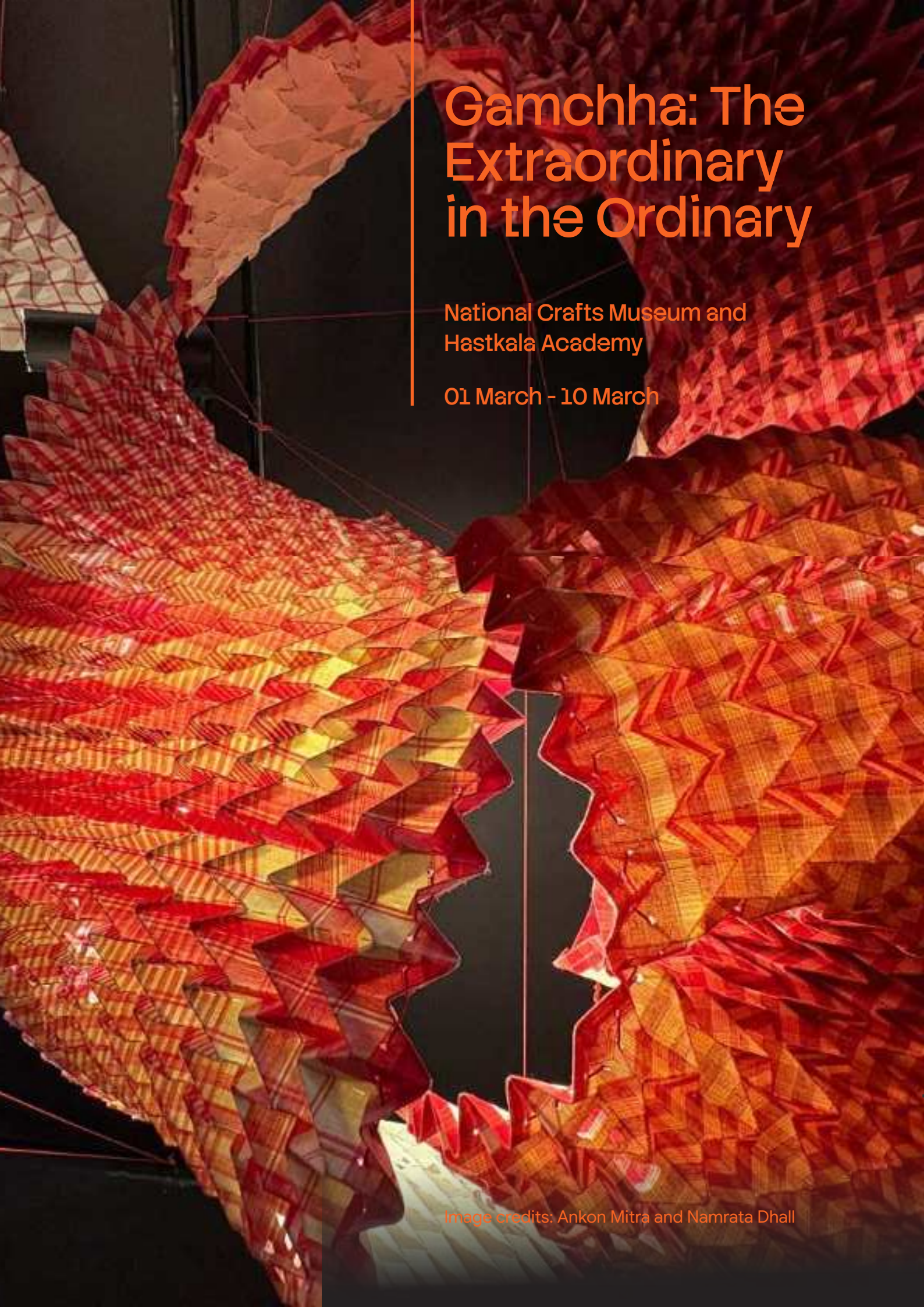
The exhibition was also accompanied by a scholarly volume, called *Photographing Civil Disobedience: Bombay 1930-31*, which includes essays from various scholars.





These essays engage with the visual culture of the first half of the 20th century which shaped the nation and contributed to its independence.

Along with the volume of essays, this exhibition brought back the memories of a very important time in history through the photographs of the K. L. Nursey Album.



Gamchha: The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

National Crafts Museum and
Hastkala Academy

01 March - 10 March

Image credits: Ankon Mitra and Namrata Dhall

Can a piece of cloth serve more than one purpose? The exhibition by Dastkari Haat Samiti (DHS) introduces us to a fresh perspective of looking at a simple garment i.e., the *Gamchha*. The checkered cotton fabric is a very common one in Indian culture. From being the symbol of the common person to a marker of identity, the *Gamchha* had a long journey in the history of the Indian subcontinent.

The garment is particularly important in warm and humid regions which includes Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Mizoram, Nagaland, Bangladesh. It is used to reduce the effect of heat as well as to wipe-off sweat on a hot summer day. The exhibition explores this utilitarian aspect of the textile through its display and installations.

The garment cannot be separated from the people. After all, it is the people who use it. The exhibition does not forget this and tries to explore this dynamic nature of the garment through people and instances. Jaya Jaitly, President (DHS), shares her journey of bringing the *Gamchha* into the spotlight where she mentions its significance during the COVID-19 pandemic when the migrant workers were returning to their villages. This key moment in our recent history gave rise to the concept of the exhibition.

The *Gamchha* is a popular garment in almost every region of India. So, naturally, it has regional variations in design, fabric and use. The exhibition includes these and provides a thoroughly studied journey of the *Gamchha*. This simple piece of cloth has many personalities. For instance, in Kerala, it is called *Thorthu* and it usually comes in white colour with a single stripe. It is wrapped around the waist, draped over shoulders or tied around the head. Meanwhile, in Assam, the *Gamosa* has important cultural significance. It is woven with intricate motifs and often gifted as a mark of respect.



A young girl reminiscing about her father in the village. He would rest in the sun on his charpai on a winter morning. On a whim he would get up and go to the market, gamchha on shoulder and cane in hand, he would return soon enough with the cane on his shoulder, a gamchha bundle at the end of it, containing a treat of fresh peas. He would settle down to peeling and eating his peas, enjoying them in a patch of sunshine.



EXHIBITIONS WE LOVED

Gamchha

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

1 to 10 March 2025
National Crafts Museum
and Hastakala Academy
New Delhi



গামছা

Gamchha



Designed by Suparna Bhalla, the exhibition brought attention to the works of many artists. The exhibition not only examined the piece of cloth but its vast history and cultural significance. It really makes one think about the very mundane objects, often a part of our household, beyond its ordinary use. The exhibition truly brought the extraordinary part of the ordinary Gamchha for the viewers and made us think about it beyond our household.

Lucknow Ke Gali Kooche

Lucknow Bioscope

09 March - 08 June



by the artist who has been looking at the world of Lucknow.



Image credits:
Lucknow Bioscope

An exploration of people, culture, and memory, *Lucknow Ke Gali Kooche*, curated by Lucknow Bioscope in 2025, mapped the city's bustling *galis and kooche*, or narrow lanes and bylanes, offering a window into their rich historical legacy and shared heritage. The exhibition celebrated the charm of these unique cultural spaces, documenting them as lived institutions of craft, memory, and community.

Spread across five thematic sections, the exhibit incorporated personal histories, maps, memoirs, books, and souvenirs, showcasing the intricate network of Lucknow's *gali kooche*. It focused on capturing the primary elements that define them – from crafts, people, and architecture, to the historical significance and syncretic culture they foster. *Galīs* are dynamic institutions, shouldering a living body of stories, tangible heritage, and collective lived experiences spanning multiple generations. They form an indispensable part of the quintessential Indian *mohalla*, or neighbourhood, where bustling shops, busy routines, and lively conversations forge shared memory.

As one delves deeper into Lucknow ki galiyan, the unique characteristics of each *gali* become increasingly evident. The acidic odour emanating from *Sirke wali Gali*, where sellers skillfully craft and supply the city with various types of vinegar, quietly reminds one of its origins. *Chikankari ki Gali*, with its craftspersons who painstakingly hand-embroider delicate fabrics, attracts connoisseurs from across the world, bearing witness to the city's long history of chikankari embroidery. For centuries, by facilitating a subtle fusion of familiarity, comfort, and partnership, the *galis* of Lucknow have nurtured anecdotes, stories, and experiences alike. The exhibition was unique in featuring distinct stories involving some of the people whose presence has shaped life within the lively expanse of these *galis*.



EXHIBITIONS WE LOVED



With changing times, the character of Lucknow's older streets has seemingly shifted. Once home to traditional artisans crafting intricate embroidery, jewellery, or pottery, these spaces now feature an interplay of old and new influences – some areas have retained longstanding traditions of metalworking or weaving, others have given way to contemporary spaces like cafés, internet hubs, and boutiques.





As vibrant hubs of craft and tradition, the *galis* of Lucknow are vital to understanding the city's broader economic and cultural landscape.





The exhibition successfully attested to the tenacity of traditional spaces in Lucknow, which have retained their rightful cultural significance against the heightened pressure of rapid change.



Madhvi Parekh: Remembered Tales

DAG (Delhi Art Gallery)

New Delhi
11 July - 23 Aug

Mumbai
13 Sept - 5 Nov



Image credits: DAG

Delhi Art Gallery (DAG) celebrated the works of Madhvi Parekh in 2025 through their exhibition '*Madhvi Parekh: Remembered Tales*'. We frequently categorise artists based on their style, form, period, or movement. But what about artists who do not fit into any of these categories? Madhvi Parekh is one such artist who has gained worldwide recognition for her distinct take on 'folk modernism.'

The exhibition explored Parekh's works of her six-decade-long artistic journey through paintings and sketchbook practice. Gods and goddesses, mythological figures and folk traditions are the most frequent themes in her practice. However, another central theme of her works is the stories and tales she grew up hearing. Her subjects depict anthropomorphic features in the creatures which are integral to her fantastical paintings. Raised in the Sanjaya village of Gujarat, Parekh interacted with her surroundings as a young girl through festivals and other ceremonial activities of the village. Drawing inspiration from her early life and the world around her, Parekh developed a unique visual language which is not quite modern and not quite folk, but rather a blend of both.

The exhibition introduced viewers to the eclecticism observed in Parekh's work. Following the Covid epidemic, Parekh resumed her practice of painting on large canvases, revisiting the style and technique that she enjoyed in the 1970s and 1980s. The exhibition juxtaposed Parekh's early practice with her most recent pieces. She believes that "every object in our life shares a relationship with us" and that everything is interconnected. As a result, gods, humans, animals, and birds are all represented in her paintings, which has been a recurring theme throughout her artistic career.



EXHIBITIONS WE LOVED



Madhvi Parekh did not receive formal training in art. This allowed her to develop the kind of visual language which is more rooted in instinct.





Her artistic and creative journey gained prominence on a global scale when her work was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Following that, in 2024, her work was included in the collateral presentation at Venice Biennale.



Even while her works were travelling globally, the subjects of her art remained grounded in her village and fabular imagination.



The artist began her journey after she was introduced to Paul Klee's Pedagogical Sketchbook by her partner, Manu Parekh.



Through her practice, she refused to surrender to a specific style or form. This fresh step, taken by Madhvi Parekh, is explored in the exhibition by DAG.

The exhibition, as the name suggests, takes us into the world of *remembered tales* of Parekh's career and life.





Odyssey of the Rupee

SARMAYA Arts Foundation,
Mumbai

01 Nov'25 – 31 Jan'26

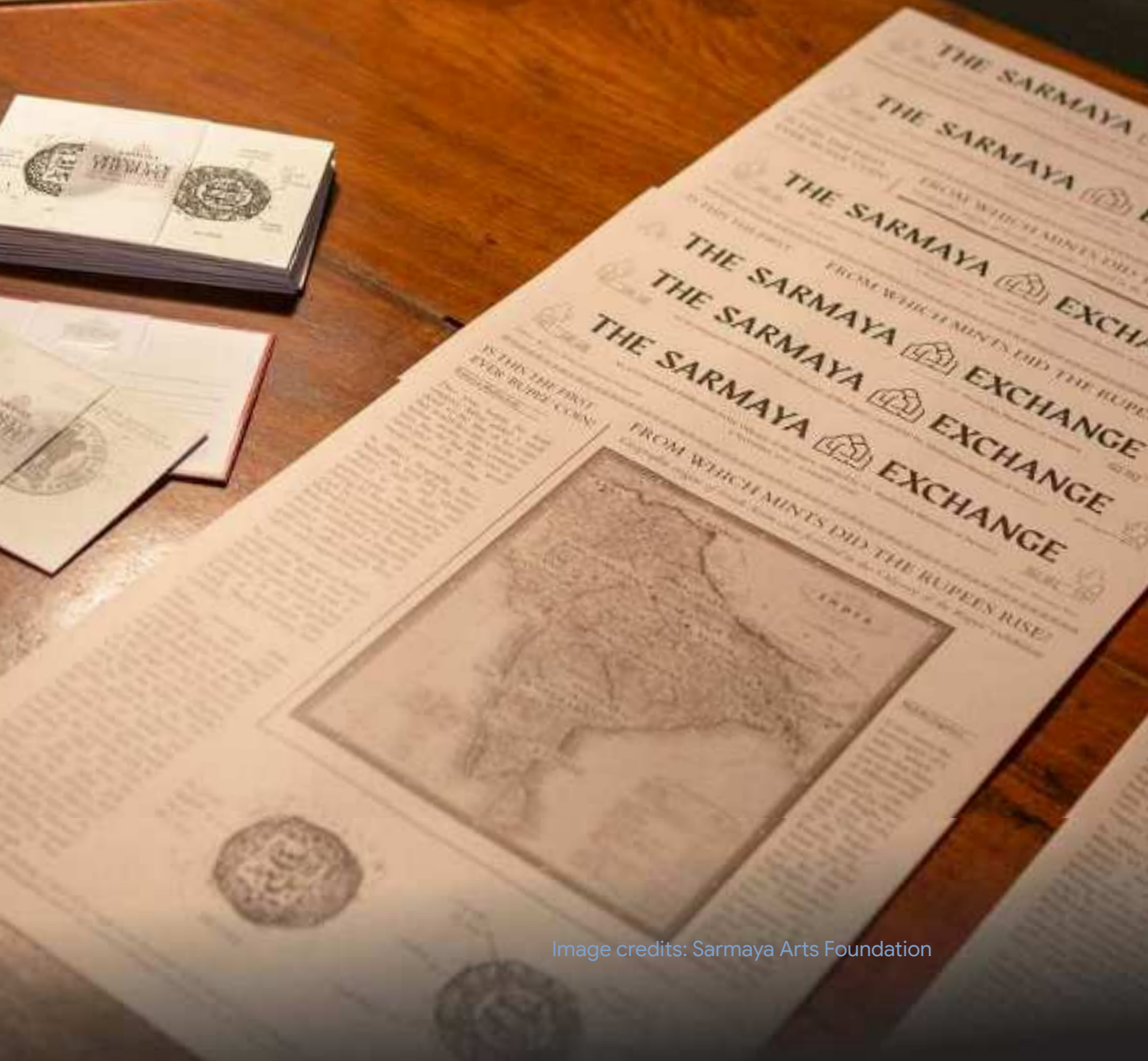
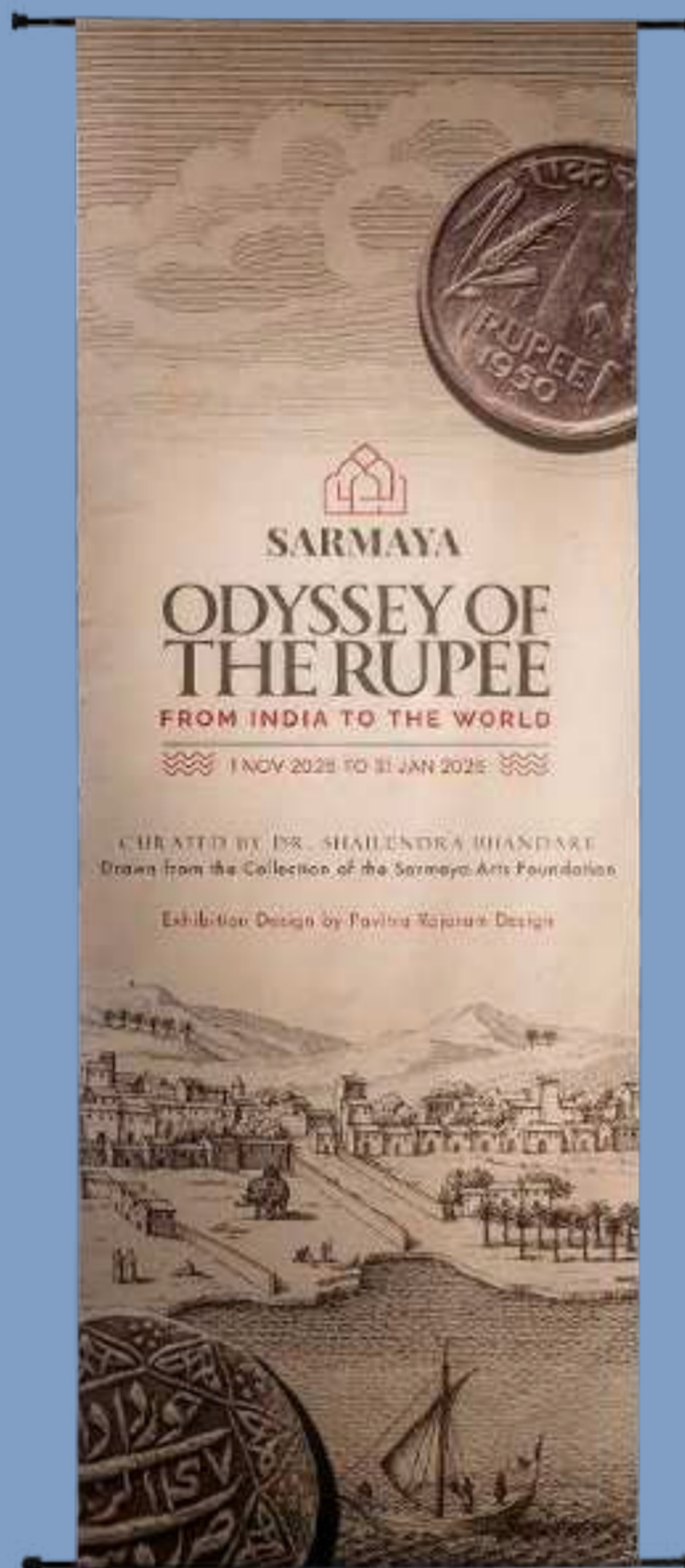


Image credits: Sarmaya Arts Foundation

We all carry the most important object in our pockets and often do not think about it beyond its economical value. This is the currency, circulated in the form of paper money and coins. But where did it all start? The coins have been a part of the currency across regions and time periods. However, the currency in the form of paper money is a comparatively newer practice. The 'Rupee', adopted as the currency of India, has a long history which is explored in the exhibition '*Odyssey of the Rupee*' by Sarmaya Arts Foundation.

Curated by Dr. Shailendra Bhandare, this exhibition celebrated the 75th anniversary of the rupee as Independent India's national currency. Beginning nearly 500 years ago, the rupee has had a very dynamic journey before its current form. Sher Shah Suri, the Sultan of Delhi, made currency reforms and that gave birth to the rupee in the form of a silver coin of one *tola* (about 11.6gms). Under the Mughals, it became the preferred currency for trade across the Indian subcontinent. This led to the introduction of rupee by all major powers from the Marathas to Sikhs to the Europeans. Ultimately, a uniform subcontinental currency was introduced under British rule.

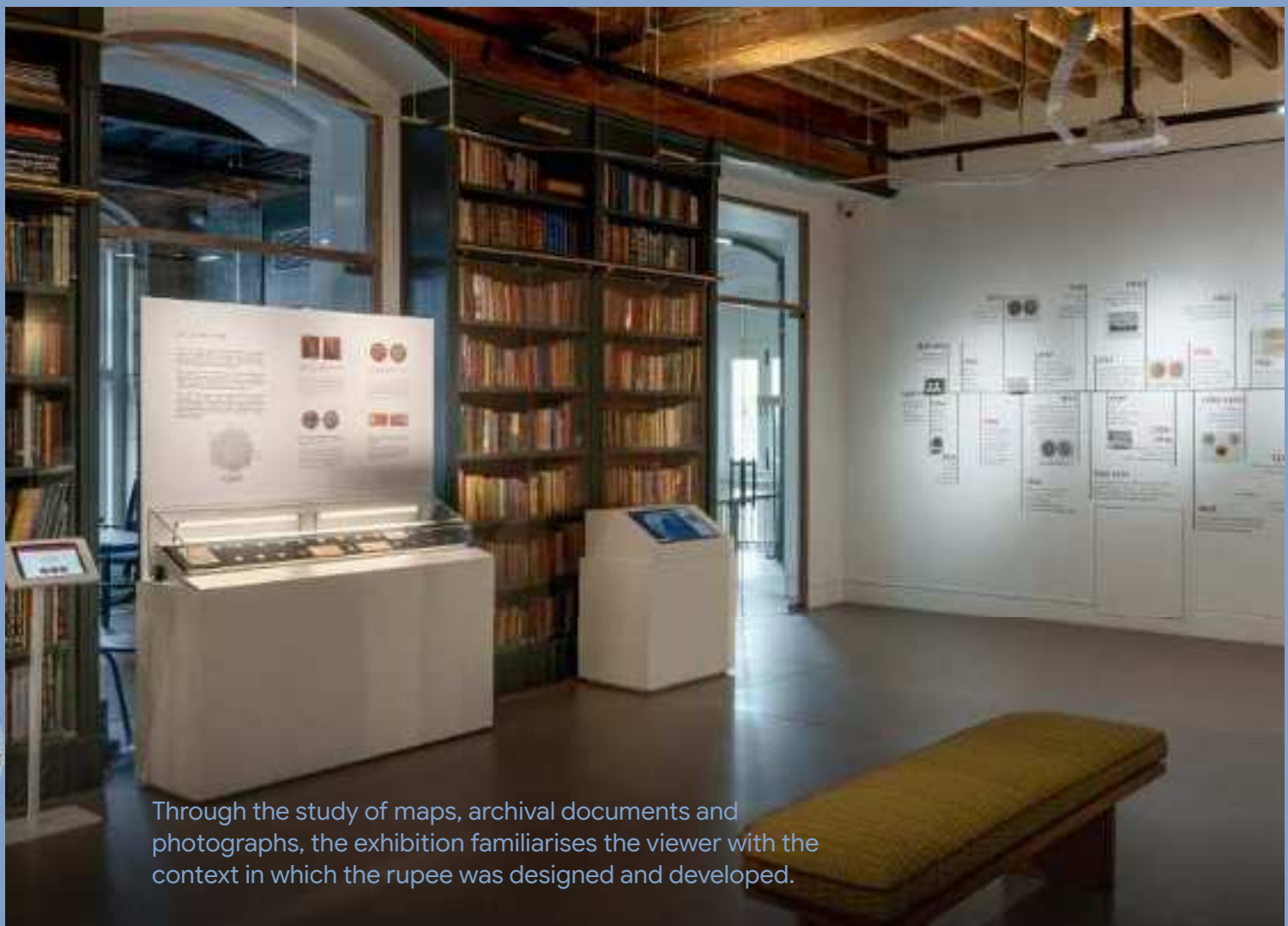
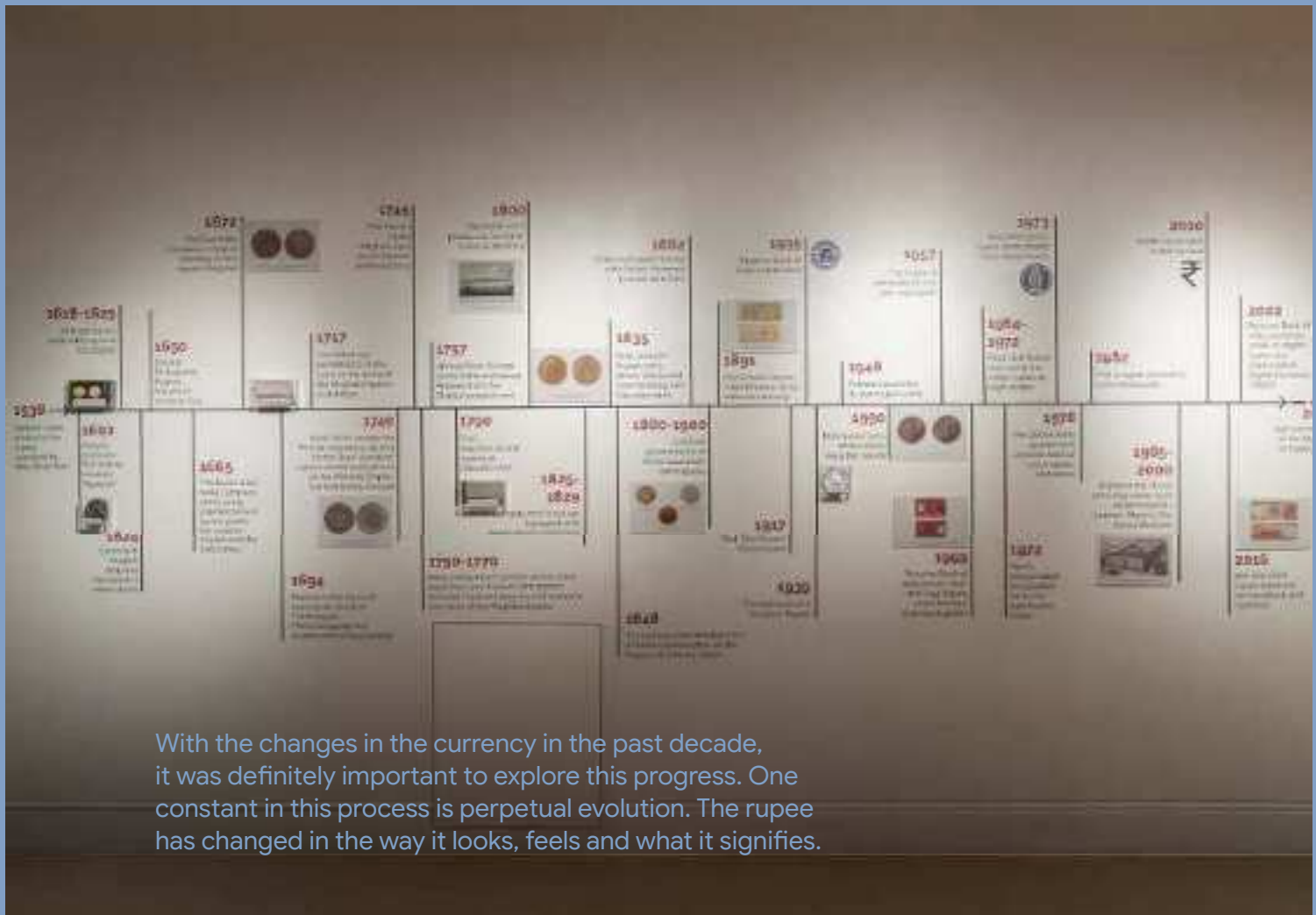
The life of the rupee transcends the geographical and temporal boundaries. For instance, the exhibition features the story of a King from Cocos-Keeling islands in the Indian Ocean who printed his own money. Instead of choosing the popular denominations in circulation (like the dollar or the pound), the king chose the Indian rupee for his small kingdom. The exhibition explored this vast journey through coins, notes, paintings, maps, postcards and photographs. From the first rupee coins to accounts from different parts of the world to its current form, this exhibition provides the historical development of rupee. As the name suggests, it is after all the '*Odyssey of the Rupee*'.



EXHIBITIONS WE LOVED

On 15 August, 1950, the first rupee of the independent India was introduced with the national emblem, (Lion Capital from Sarnath), printed on it. In the year 2025, the first rupee completed its 75 years.









The exhibition, undoubtedly, forces one to stop for a minute and take a look at the most important object in our pocket. This fairly common object (i.e., the coins and notes) became artifacts in the museum. They are taken out of their mundane presence to the pedestals of the exhibition. The exhibition presents the rupee as more than just currency. It explores the rupee beyond economy, through historical, geographical and cultural lens.

Please Touch Gently

(zines, comics, ephemera)

Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, Saket
New Delhi

1 April - 30 Nov



Image credits: KNMA and Namrata Dhall

Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) celebrated the fifth exhibition in its 'Young Artists of Our Time' series with *Please Touch Gently*. The title itself immediately raises questions about the nature of the exhibition. In most museums and galleries, visitors are conditioned to look without touching. *Please Touch Gently* challenged this familiar rule and invited visitors to become participants rather than passive viewers.

The exhibition brought together works by thousands of zinesters, comic artists, illustrators, and independent publishers working across 22 languages. Visitors were encouraged to handle, browse, and explore the material freely, and after the exhibition concluded, the collection was integrated into KNMA's library. Through this expansive gathering of zines, comics, and self-published works, the exhibition examined contemporary print cultures in India and the worlds of independent publishing and small presses coming together.

What made the exhibition especially striking was its refusal to place these materials behind glass or treat them as distant artefacts. Instead, it approached zines and comics as living, circulating forms of culture. Curatorial Advisor Akansha Rastogi envisioned the exhibition in a way that resisted "museumising" this evolving practice. The exhibition also brought together distinct curatorial perspectives through the contributions of Himanshu S, Bharath Murthy, and aquí Thami, each engaging with different histories, aesthetics, and possibilities within comics, zines, and independent print cultures. Rather than guiding visitors through a fixed narrative, the exhibition unfolded differently for each person, shaped through browsing, handling, and discovery at one's own pace.



EXHIBITIONS WE LOVED

Zines have long existed outside conventional publishing structures. Often associated with self-publishing, they have also functioned as spaces of protest, experimentation, and immediacy — forms through which people publish without waiting for institutional approval.



Comics and zines alike offer makers greater control over how ideas, memories, and political thoughts are circulated. In a similar way, the exhibition gave visitors agency over how they experienced the space, allowing interaction, movement, and participation to shape their encounter with the works.





More than simply displaying material, *Please Touch Gently* created an environment where visitors could engage directly with print culture as something tactile, collaborative, and continually in motion.





SHAKTIRUPA: Goddess as Imagined by the Artists

Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Museum
Ahmedabad

29 March - 20 July



Image credits: Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Museum

The idea of the Goddess has always held a powerful place in Indian imagination. She is known as Devi, often understood as Shakti, the divine feminine energy that sustains the universe. Across mythology, art, and lived traditions, she appears in many forms, each carrying its own meaning and emotion. The exhibition *Shaktirupa: Goddess as Imagined by the Artists* at the Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Museum brought together these varied visions and invited visitors to reflect on how artists have imagined and represented the Goddess over time.

The concept of the feminine as a source of creation is not new. Long before structured religious systems, ancient cultures worshipped mother goddesses as symbols of fertility, protection, and prosperity. In Hinduism, the divine is seen as both male and female, and sometimes as a union of the two, such as the form of Ardhanarishwara. Within this framework, Shakti emerges as a central force, shaping both the cosmos and its artistic expressions.

Over time, this idea evolved into a rich visual and narrative tradition. Artists turned to sacred texts and oral stories to give form to the Goddess. One such text, the Durga Saptashati, offers detailed descriptions of Devi, her powers, and her many manifestations. These descriptions became a starting point for artists, who interpreted them with imagination while remaining rooted in tradition. The result is a wide range of paintings that feel both familiar and distinct.

In the exhibition, the Goddess appears in multiple forms. She is Parvati or Uma, gentle and nurturing, often seen with her children. She is Lakshmi, associated with wealth and well being. She is also Kali, fierce and commanding, representing destruction and transformation. In more intense depictions, such as Chinnamasta, she challenges conventional ideas of beauty and divinity. Each form expands the understanding of what the Goddess can be, moving beyond a single identity into a spectrum of meanings.

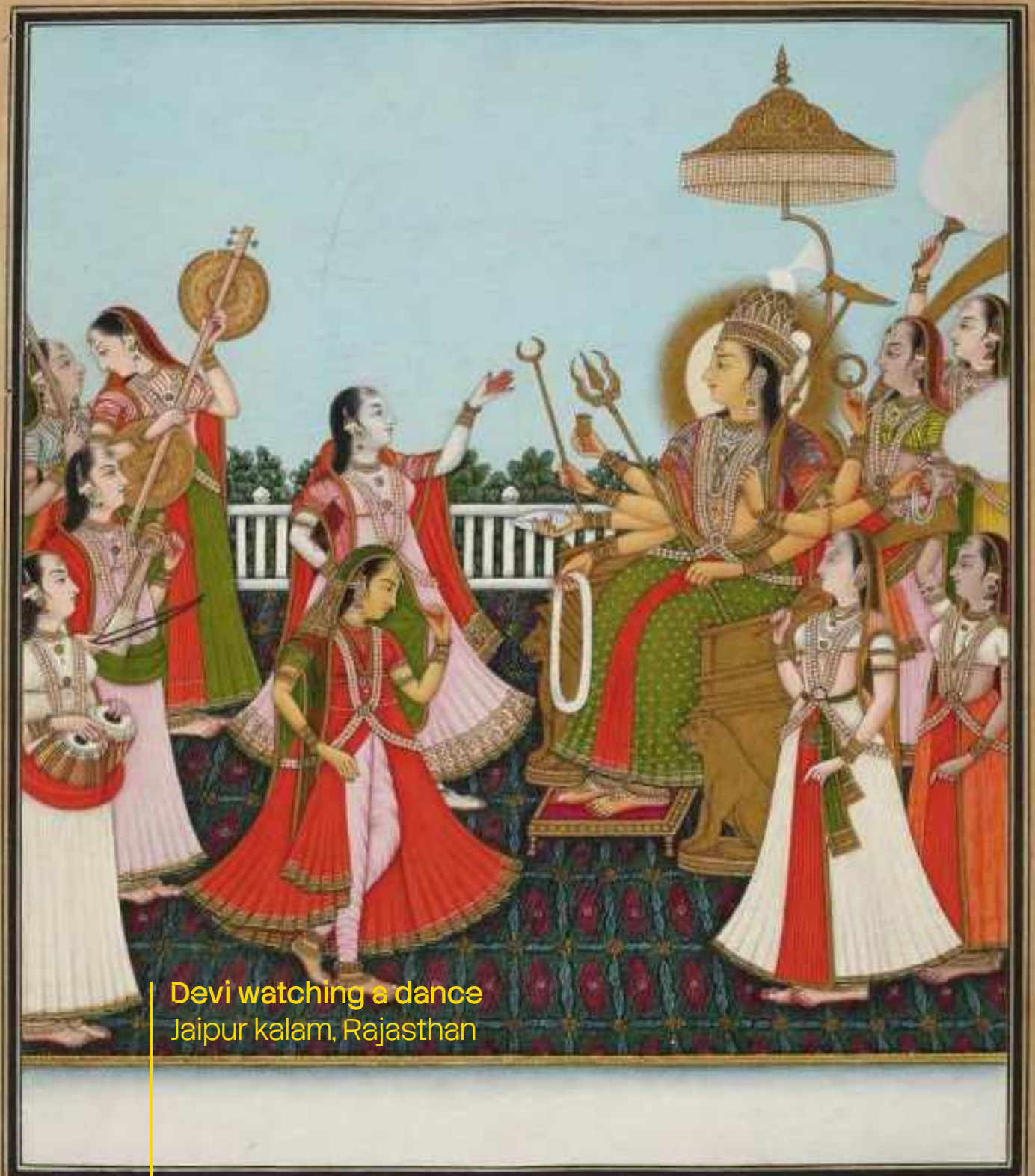


EXHIBITIONS WE LOVED



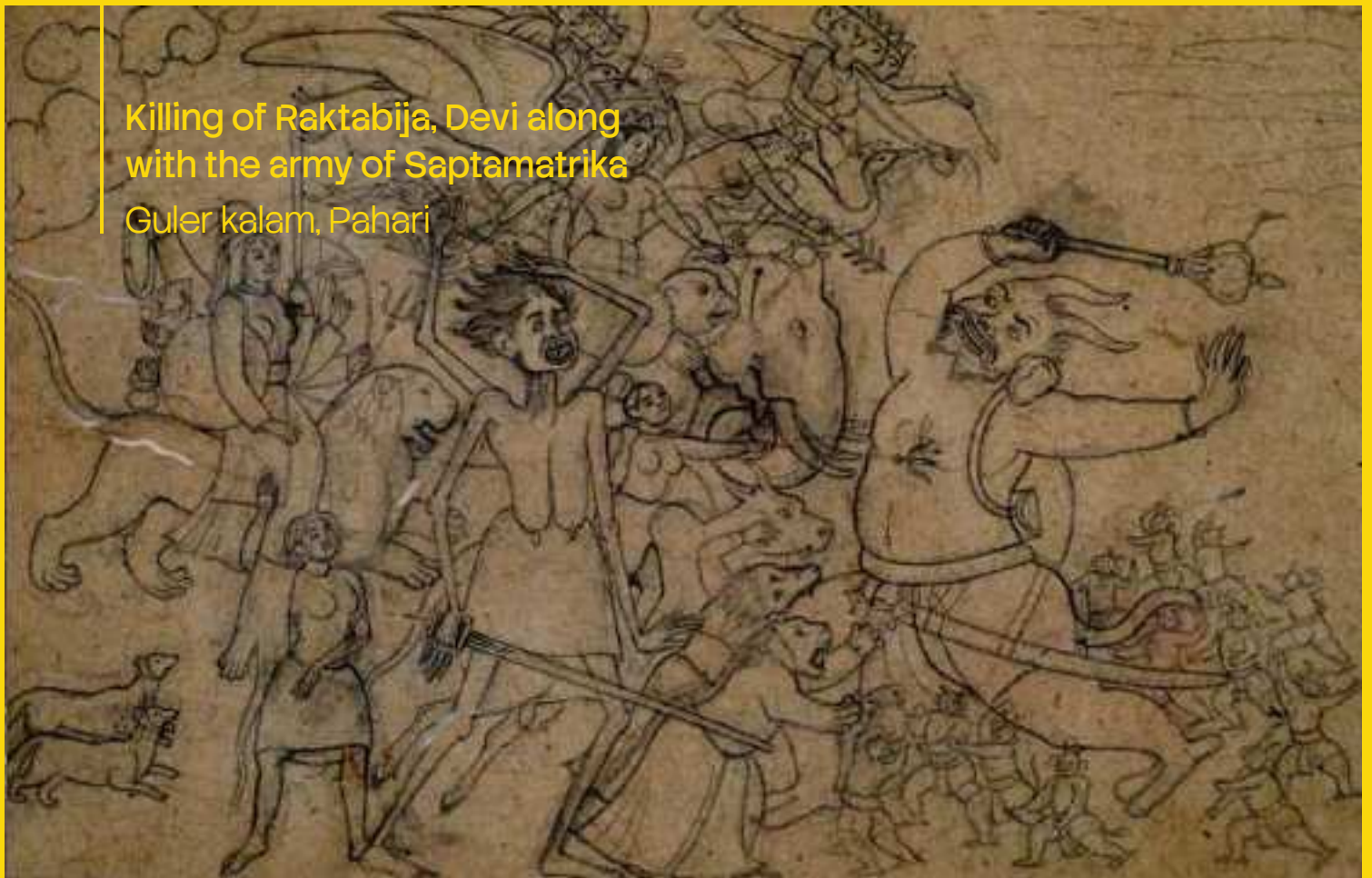
Shiva and Parvati
Jaipur kalam, Rajasthan

The exhibition brought together works from the Kasturbhai Lalbhai Collection and the N C Mehta Collection, along with folios from a Durga Saptashati manuscript housed at the Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Institute of Indology. Through these works, it created a dialogue between text and image, between what is written and what is imagined.

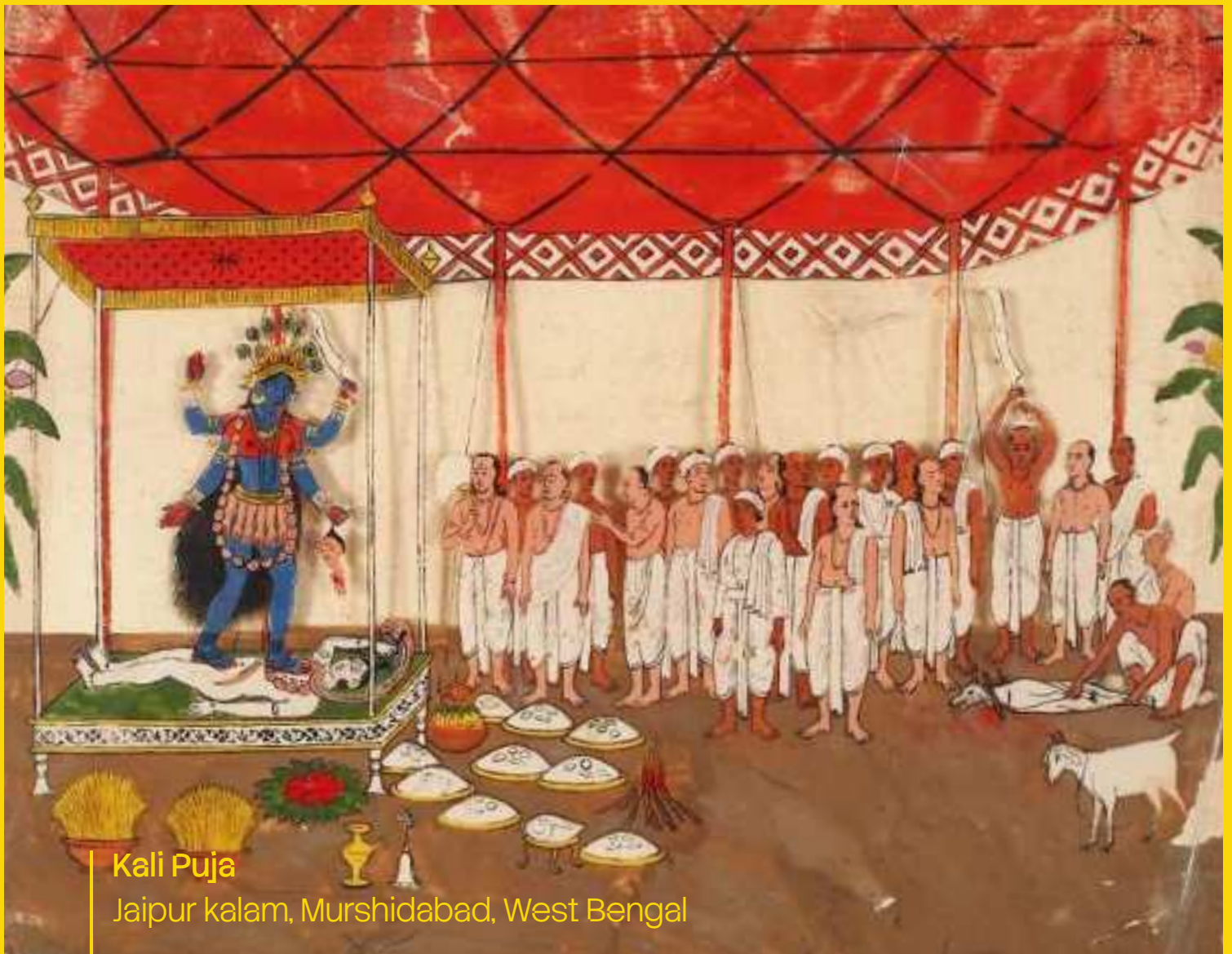


Devi watching a dance
Jaipur kalam, Rajasthan

Killing of Raktabīja, Devi along
with the army of Saptamatrika
Guler kalam, Pahari



Kali Puja
Jaipur kalam, Murshidabad, West Bengal



इति मन्त्राणि हुमवावापरा कलावक्रमोले विनेत्रां पादोत्तमध्यां स्तम्भान् विना
पत्तिलोमानयनी एतेतामैवेत्रकमकमकमध्यायनीमनोदोदनीध्यायेइनेला
कुनमस्वितेतादिव्याहामेहमा १



अश्वारूढा होउं कामातक

Devi on horseback
Kangra kalam, Pahari

Shaktirupa encouraged viewers to think about how the Goddess has been described, visualised, and worshipped across time. It moved beyond fixed representations and opened up a broader vocabulary of Shakti. The exhibition delightfully familiarised its visitors with the long and expansive history of painting traditions in India with one of its favourite subjects (The Goddess) in the centre.

Ticket Tika Chaap: The Art of the Trademark in Indo-British Textile Trade

Museum of Art and
Photography (MAP),
Banglore

22 March'25
– 15 Feb'26



Image credits: Philippe Calia and Museum of Art
& Photography (MAP)

'Ticket, Tika, Chaap', as the title suggests, is an exhibition on textile labels and their art-historical and commercial relevance. These Tickets (or *Tikas* or *Chaap*) were perhaps the earliest form of branding and advertising, featured on clothing and fabrics. The 19th century and 20th century saw an influx in the number of textile labels that drew attention to not just the cloth, but also the business that manufactured it.

India, in the 19th and 20th century, was the epicentre of textile production. So, it went from being a place that had a well established textile production to supplying raw materials to the British. The British produced clothes from the fabric provided by India and brought back the final factory-manufactured clothes to the Indian market. In order to appeal to India's vast population, these ticket labels were designed and put on the cloth according to the Indian visual traditions. The textile labels featured motifs showing Indian people and communities that were inspired by painting traditions such as miniature paintings. It also depicted religion and festivities. The exhibition offered visitors a diverse collection of textile labels and their art-historical relevance.



EXHIBITIONS WE LOVED

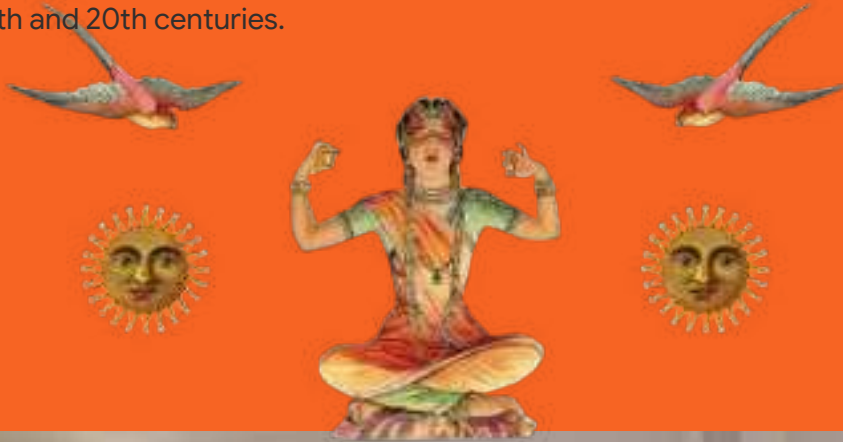


The 19th and 20th centuries provided opportunities for people to experiment with better printing technology, allowing them to mass-produce these textile labels and reach as many people as possible. Lithographic presses such as Calcutta Art Studio, Chore Bagan Art Studio, Chitrashala Press, and The Raja Ravi Varma Press were already distributing prints depicting deities and mythological episodes across Indian homes. These images were then spread everywhere, from garments to matchboxes, *bidi* wrappers, and soap.

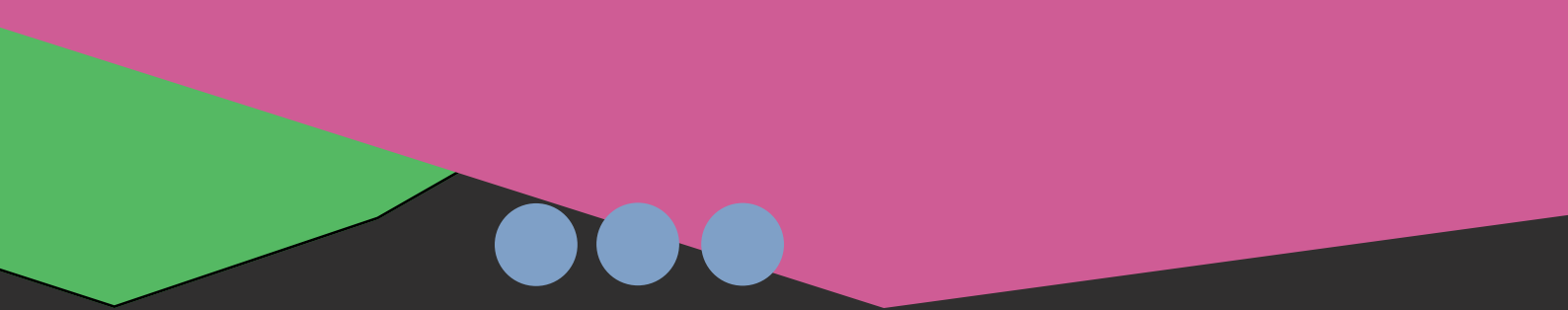


The early 20th century additionally witnessed the rise of the freedom struggle and the independence movement. The artists of the time were inspired by the world around them and frequently painted on various subjects such as flags, maps, and Bharat Mata. Naturally, this spread to the textile labels as well. The exhibition featured almost 7,000 such textile labels and related artifacts.

The exhibition successfully evoked nostalgia for the past century. Branding in colonial India was more than just naming a product; textile labels became an essential source of advertising and branding. They found their way into Indian homes and remained there for decades, either on the walls or between pages of a book. So, from factory to market to home to now museum, these textile labels have traveled a long way, bringing with them nostalgia for the visual traditions and culture of the 19th and 20th centuries.







Museum Influencers 2026



Museum Influencers 2026 features individuals whose work is actively reshaping museum practice today. Their contributions range from community-led initiatives and alternative formats to large-scale exhibitions and institutional interventions, but they are united by a common drive to rethink how museums work, and who they are for. These practitioners attempt to move the museum beyond its physical walls, reaching new audiences and experimenting with different ways of telling stories. This section maps a field in motion and foregrounds those expanding its possibilities in thoughtful, unexpected ways.



MUSEUM
INFLUENCER
2026

Dr Abira Bhattacharya

Assistant Curator (Anthropology)
National Museum, New Delhi

Dr Abira Bhattacharya is an art historian and museum professional specialising in Buddhist art and iconography across South, Southeast, and Central Asia. Her work brings together curatorial practice, anthropology, and heritage studies, with a particular focus on interpreting sacred objects within contemporary museum frameworks. At the National Museum, New Delhi, she has contributed to a range of research-driven exhibitions that bridge academic inquiry with public engagement. Recently, she also curated Comparative Buddhist Art History at the Tam Chuc Pagoda in Vietnam and remains actively involved in workshops and discussions on building careers in the museum and creative sectors.

In 2025–26, Bhattacharya played a key curatorial role in The Light and the Lotus: Relics of the Awakened One at Qila Rai Pithora. The exhibition brought together repatriated relics of the Buddha alongside ancient reliquaries and jewel fragments, presenting them within a contemplative, carefully designed setting. By foregrounding both their spiritual and historical significance, the show situated these objects within broader narratives of Buddhist heritage and transnational exchange, marking an important moment in the public display of sacred material in India.



आपका अधिकार है कि आप अपने अधिकारों को
सुनिश्चित करें कि आप अधिकारों को सही ढंग से
सुनिश्चित करें



MUSEUM
INFLUENCER
2026

Kamini Sawhney

Artistic Director of Public Arts
Projects at BLR Hubba

Kamini Sawhney, former Founding Director of the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), Bengaluru, has been instrumental in shaping contemporary museum practice in India. At MAP, she developed a model that combined digital access, interdisciplinary curation, and sustained public engagement, positioning the museum as both a physical and virtual space. Her work reflects a long-standing commitment to expanding how audiences interact with art and cultural institutions.

Extending her practice beyond a single institution, Sawhney took on a city-wide curatorial role in 2025 as Artistic Director of the public arts initiative within BLR Hubba. Here, the museum became a distributed urban experience, with artistic interventions embedded across neighbourhoods and civic spaces. Through installations, performances, and technology-driven projects, the programme foregrounded participation and accessibility, dissolving boundaries between gallery and city. This shift from institution-building to activating an entire cultural ecosystem marks a significant evolution in her curatorial approach.







MUSEUM
INFLUENCER
2026

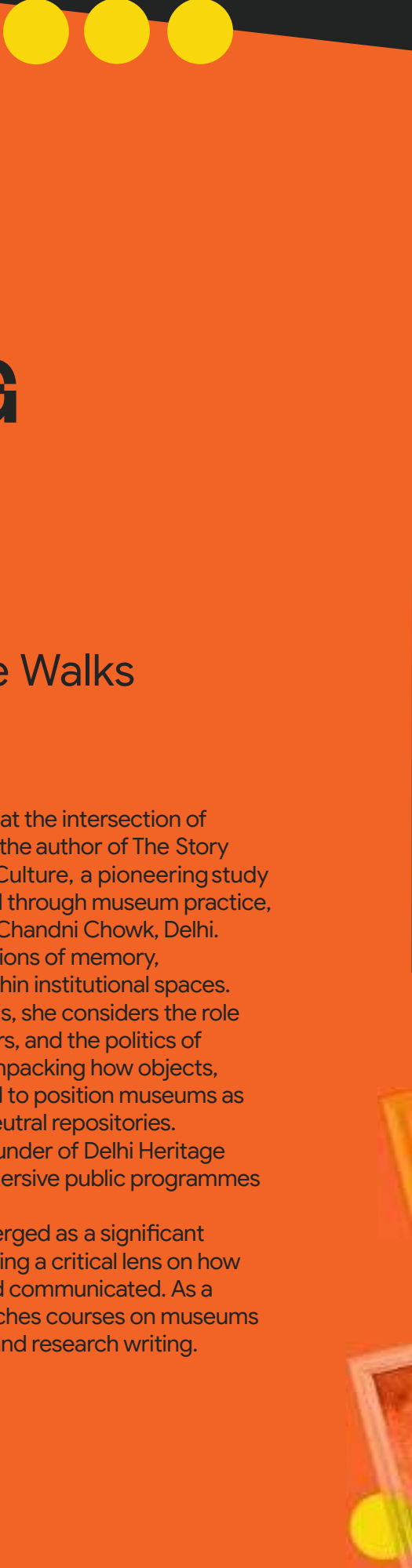
Dr Kanika Singh

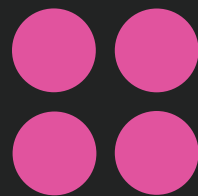
Historian, Author &
Founder, Delhi Heritage Walks

Dr Kanika Singh is a historian whose work sits at the intersection of museums, heritage, and public history. She is the author of *The Story of Sikh Museum: Heritage, Politics, Popular Culture*, a pioneering study that examines how Sikh history is constructed through museum practice, with a focus on the Bhai Mati Das Museum in Chandni Chowk, Delhi.

Her research engages closely with questions of memory, representation, and community narratives within institutional spaces. Moving beyond conventional museum analysis, she considers the role of institutional actors, community stakeholders, and the politics of display in shaping historical consciousness, unpacking how objects, dioramas, and narrative devices are mobilised to position museums as active sites of meaning-making rather than neutral repositories. Alongside her academic work, Singh is the founder of Delhi Heritage Walks, through which she has developed immersive public programmes that expand access to urban history.

Published in July 2025, her book has emerged as a significant contribution to museum studies in India, offering a critical lens on how religious and cultural histories are curated and communicated. As a faculty member at Ashoka University, she teaches courses on museums in South Asia, Delhi's heritage, visual culture, and research writing.







MUSEUM
INFLUENCER
2026

Madhavi Kuckreja

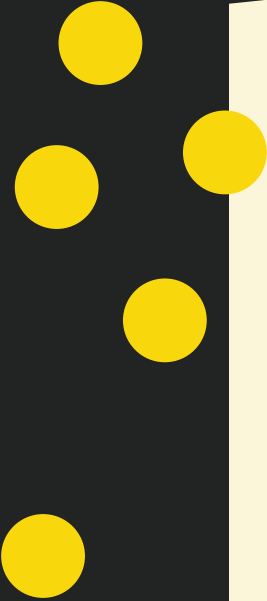
Founder, Lucknow Bioscope

Madhavi Kuckreja is an architect and designer whose work reimagines how history and heritage can be accessed outside formal institutions. As the founder of Lucknow Bioscope, a mobile museum initiative, she has developed an innovative practice that brings together spatial design, storytelling, and public history. Drawing on the nostalgia of the traditional “bioscope,” the project transforms archival material, oral histories, and everyday narratives into immersive, participatory experiences within public spaces.

A key initiative undertaken by Lucknow Bioscope is the “museum mixer,” an after-hours format that reactivates museum spaces through themed evening gatherings. Across five editions, these events have explored photography, crafts, Hindustani music, gastronomy, and postcard-making, bringing together creative communities while expanding the museum’s audience. The museum has also evolved through neighbourhood interventions, pop-up exhibitions, and collaborations with schools and local groups, embedding itself within the city’s social fabric. By situating history within lived environments, Kuckreja’s work offers a compelling model for decentralised, community-driven cultural engagement in India.







MUSEUM
INFLUENCER
2026

Subodh Kerkar

Artist and Founder Director,
Museum of Goa

Subodh Kerkar left a career in medicine in 1990 to pursue art, eventually establishing the Museum of Goa (MOG) in 2015. Conceived as an accessible, community-oriented space, the museum brings together art, storytelling, and public programming to engage with Goa's past, present, and future. Kerkar's practice consistently bridges contemporary art with local histories, shaping MOG into a platform that invites diverse audiences into cultural dialogue. His vision for the museum stands out for its emphasis on experimentation with formats, infusing the space with creativity and welcoming contemporary art.

Marking its 10-year anniversary, 2025 became the museum's most ambitious phase yet under Kerkar's leadership. The flagship exhibition Festivals of Goa brought together over 90 artists and 150 works, exploring shared traditions and cultural coexistence through multimedia installations, photography, and sculpture. This expansive vision extended across the year's programming, with festivals, film screenings, workshops, and talks drawing both local and international audiences. Initiatives such as Silver Fest Goa and the Goa in Film festival further cemented the museum's position as a dynamic cultural hub. Looking ahead, Kerkar's upcoming Beer Museum signals yet another expansion of his efforts to rethink what museums in India can be.





INSTAGRAM HANDLES WE LOVED

In a world shaped by quick scrolling and fleeting attention, these Instagram accounts offer a more thoughtful way of engaging with culture. Through archival deep dives, visual storytelling, documentation of everyday objects, and reinterpretations of historical material, each handle brings a distinct voice to the digital space. This section is a nod to those extending the life of museums and collections online with care and creativity.

- ♡ @unseenartofindia
- ♡ @ldmuseum.ahmedabad
- ♡ @imuseumofgoa
- ♡ @citypalacemuseumjaipur
- ♡ @indigoartmuseum
- ♡ @royalasiaticsociety
- ♡ @itheregistryofsarees
- ♡ @indianmusicexperience

Lalbhai
Dalpatbhai
Museum



@unseenartofindia



@ldmuseum.
ahmedabad



Unseen
Art of
India

@royalasiaticsociety



Museum
of Goa



The Royal
Asiatic
Society



@imuseumofgoa

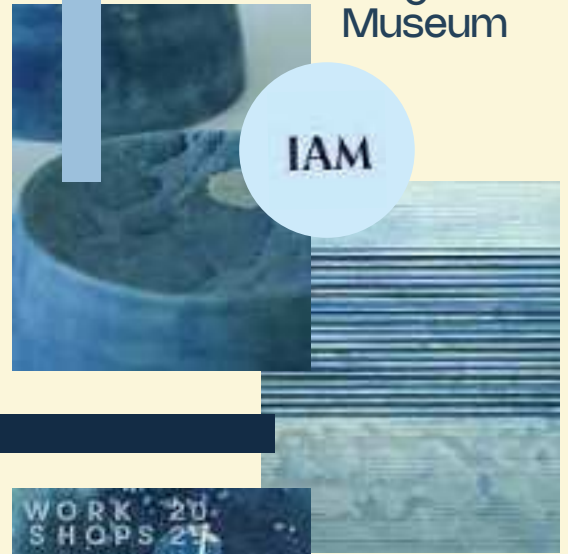
MUSEUM
OF
GOA

City Palace
Museum,
Jaipur



@citypalacemuseumjaipur

Indigo Art
Museum



@indigoart
museum

Indian Music
Experience Museum



@indianmusicexperience

The
Registry
Of Sarees



@itheregistryofsarees

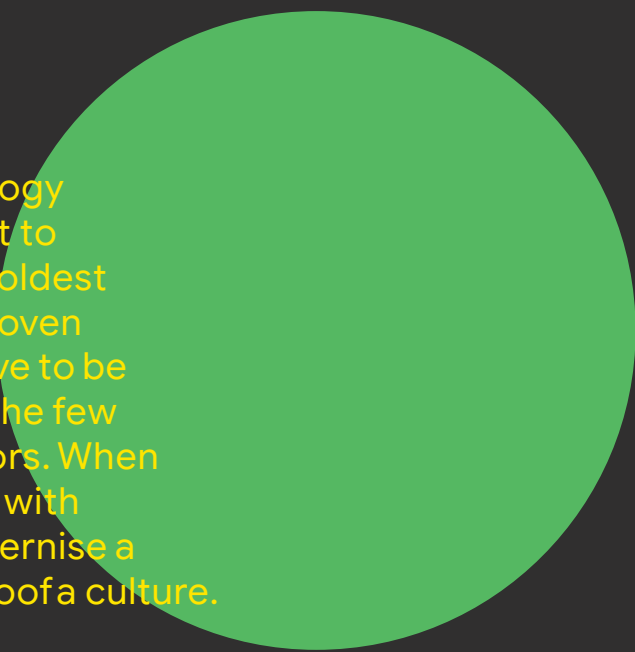
What is one fresh idea you think museums should embrace in the years ahead?

We reached out to some of India's leading heritage and museum professionals to hear their thoughts on what they envision for the future of the museums. Here's what they had to say!



Museums should move beyond listless descriptors of art works and embrace live stories associated with these works.

-Professor A Damodaran,
Author and Visiting Professor, Indian Institute of
Management, Bangalore and Ahmedabad University



Technology is not a threat to tradition. It is its boldest amplifier. The stories woven into centuries-old art deserve to be heard by millions, not just the few who walk through our doors. When we embrace digital tools with intention, we don't modernise a museum; we future-proof a culture.

Museums as places of education typically feature physical objects from their collections. With the advent of digital, museums have aggressively implemented various digital technologies to reach out to a wider audience group. However, it still tends to be one-way traffic.

Perhaps there is an opportunity for museums to create some space for visitors to share and showcase their collections, with appropriate guardrails/guidance. That will make museums a really living, breathing, constantly evolving organisation embedded in the community.



-Abhishek Poddar,
Founder-Trustee, Museum
of Art and Photography



One of the most innovative directions museums should embrace in the years ahead is living, participatory storytelling: an approach in which visitors are not merely passive viewers but active contributors to the meaning and interpretation of an exhibition. The future of museums

-Dr. Abira Bhattacharya,
Deputy Curator (Anthropology) at the
National Museum, New Delhi

lies in moving beyond one-way interpretation toward a dialogic and multi-vocal experience. In this model, an object does not speak through a single authoritative curatorial voice alone. Instead, it becomes a site of layered narratives, where multiple perspectives coexist: academic, community-based, emotional, and experiential. For example, the Piprahwa gem relics of Lord Buddha displayed in The Light and the Lotus exhibition at the Rai Pithora complex provide an extensive curatorial note explaining its chronology and excavation context, the archaeologist's interpretation, its philosophical significance alongside the story of its repatriation and historic reunification with the other findings of the Piprahwa stupa. The use of design elements and advanced digital interactive audio/visual tools emphasise the story of Piprahwa, transforming the museum from a space of display into one of dialogue and co-creation. In addition, by organising talks, curatorial walkthroughs, and activities, community voices and youth engagement have been emphasised upon within the curatorial framework, creating emotionally resonant, human-centred narratives rather than static object-led displays. This project, executed by the Ministry of Culture, interprets history through reconstructed environments and public participation using immersive storytelling shaped by community memory and lived experiences.

Ecological sustainability, social harmony and well-being, and human environment. A museum for me is a place to showcase tangible and/or intangible heritage in an aesthetically pleasing atmosphere derived from local cultures. The museum is for one and all – a place where education and enjoyment go hand in hand.

-Dr. Achal Pandya,
Professor and Head of Department, Conservation,
Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts

-Professor
(Dr.) Amareswar Galla,
Pro-Chancellor and Distinguished
Professor of Indigeneity and Inclusive
Museum & Heritage Studies, Kalinga
Institute of Social Sciences

Center the museum's identity around a single signature object. This object can evolve into a recognisable mascot and serve as a traveling ambassador – first across the country, and eventually internationally. Its journey can unfold both physically and digitally, through platforms like Instagram, public projections, and museum facades. By following a strong storytelling approach, the object becomes a narrative device through which audiences connect with the museum's history and purpose. Over time, this concept can expand into a collection of many such objects, each carrying and sharing its own story.

-Dr Alka Pande,
Curator and Author

Museums in a rapidly changing world — marked by geopolitical tensions, escalating climate crises, and deepening social inequalities — demand renewed attention to how museums curate, interpret, and communicate narratives about the past, present, and future. How can museums remain relevant and reflexive as they confront contemporary realities? Intercultural and intergenerational dialogue remain pressing priorities as institutions grapple with contested histories, shifting demographic landscapes, and the need for reconciliation and community building. How can museums craft narratives that respond to diverse audiences; how can collections, exhibitions, and AI digital affordances expand participation; and how can institutions cultivate trust, care, and shared authority with the communities they serve?



The
museum
needs play areas
that instill wonder and
fantastical imagination in the
minds of its youngest visitors. From
live archeological pits to playgrounds made
by contemporary artists, the outdoors is where the
visitors can process the stimulating visual journey they
take on inside. Artist Isamu Noguchi built the concepts of
playscapes yet never actually built that concept. In India, several
artists like Ansh Kumar and Amrit Pal Singh among many others
are building artist designed universes for children where
tactility is at the core of self exploration.

-Anica Mann,
Archaeologist and Curator

As a designer who hopes to design many many museums in
the future, I hope museums become more playful and
irreverent with their collections. While permanent collections
will always remain the central attraction in any museum, it
would be interesting to see how the extended collections,
especially items languishing in storages can be used to create
new narratives, in new formats to excite new audiences.

-Anjchita B. Nair,
CEO, Cultre

We
have always
seen that curated
spaces come alive when
the "audience" becomes a
co-creator, so the museums should
wholeheartedly embrace lively, community
participation which will definitely ignite
conversations and ideas which will last beyond the
physical limits of the museum.

-Anumita Banerjee,
Assistant Director of Archives,
National Archives of India





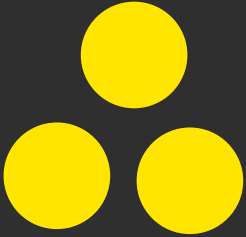
From my perspective, museums should rethink accessibility not just as entry, but as presence. This means extending beyond their walls — placing fragments of exhibitions in public spaces like parks, metros, and plazas, and using façades as dynamic surfaces to project their collections. In doing so, the museum itself becomes a living, communicative interface, shifting from a passive institution to an active part of the urban fabric — engaging people through everyday encounters.

-Arjun Bahl,
Co-Founder, St+art India

I am interested in exploring the potential for Indian museum collections to integrate themselves into the contemporary popular culture landscape, whether through film, music, or other visual media. An intriguing precedent for this lies with the Gyeongju National Museum in South Korea, which loaned the sound of the Divine Bell of King Seongdeok (National Treasure No. 29, dated 771 AD) to the producers of the K-pop group, BTS, for their 2026 album. The resulting track, titled after the artefact, surpassed 6 million streams globally in its first week of release, successfully generating international curiosity about the object's historical significance.

A closer-to-home, though-not-exact example may be the Amul girl's topical vignettes. I believe there is a lot of uncharted ground to experiment with, if our museums choose to do so.

-Arundhati Mitter,
Director, Flow India



Museums should rethink “immersive” through responsible AI. Instead of fixed VR spectacles, imagine adaptive galleries that respond to visitors in real time like AI guides that shift narratives based on curiosity or multilingual chat interfaces that interpret collections across 22 official languages of India. Behind the scenes, predictive conservation and data-led curation will make institutions smarter. Immersion should not be projection-heavy theatre but an intelligent, responsive ecosystem that evolves with its audience.

-Asad Laljee,
CEO, Avid Learning

Museums should evolve into creating laboratories for imagination, where objects spark not only questions about the past but explorations of possibility. Through reinterpretation, empathy, and creative experimentation, visitors can imagine different perspectives, alternative uses, and future scenarios. In doing so, museums become socially relevant in the present and help communities practice curiosity, creativity, and collective thinking about the worlds they might build together.

Open Days and/or workshops offered where Art History meets History - intercultural and intergenerational exchanges to build community for and along with youth.

-Bilwa Kulkarni Poddar,
Museum Education
Consultant

We are losing our sense of belonging and in my experience, art has the power to engage and neutralise... just like music or dance.

-Chiara Nath,
Multi-disciplinary designer



I think museums must open themselves up radically – provide intellectual access with no conditions, embrace cultural diversity, be emotionally welcome, and focus on local communities.

-Deepthi Sasidharan,
Co-founder, Eka
Archiving Services

We have, for far too long, run museums with the assumption that the public visits us to be impressed by our collections, our knowledge, and our exquisite displays. We might want to instead begin from a desire to engage, to enter a conversation about collective concerns, and to create opportunities for rescue from the relentlessness of everyday life.

-Jahnvi Phalkey,
Founding Director,
Science Gallery
Bengaluru

Traditionally, museums operate on a broadcast model: curators research, organise, and present a narrative, and the community passively consumes it. The UNESCO 2015 Recommendation fundamentally shifted the paradigm of what a museum should be: moving from being merely static repositories of the past to active agents of social cohesion, sustainable development, and intercultural dialogue. To truly embrace this community-centric mandate in the years ahead, museums need to rethink their relationship with the public.

-Junhi Han,
Chief of Culture Sector, UNESCO,
Regional Office for South Asia

As museums, we exist to serve our audiences and perhaps it is time to change the nature of the relationship we share with them? When we designate them as visitors there is already a power dynamic implicit. Our audiences are welcome to visit our spaces over which we, rather than they, have ownership.

It is time to acknowledge the cultural knowledge that also resides within our communities. Many of the works in our museums in India are objects that are still in use. They are part of ritual and cultural practices even today and their practitioners are storehouses of knowledge on their symbolic and cultural value. If we can work towards a relationship of mutual exchange where we recognise that we receive as much as we give, we would all be so much richer for it.

-Kamini Sawhney, Head, Public Arts Project, BLRHubba

There is an urgent need for more cultural spaces – especially near museums and art institutions – where visitors can enjoy multifaceted experiences, seamlessly moving from one event to another. Museums should plan a year-round series of events on their campuses, inviting enthusiasts to organise activities based on a pre-planned, widely advertised calendar.

-Komal Anand,
Director, Urasvati Museum of Folklore
and Centre for Contemporary Art

Museums should constantly be in the momentum of embracing new ideas, and use technology to their advantage. No museum should, however, lose sight of what they primarily showcase. It could be anything from utensils to data science. The approach should engage the viewer, and the experience has to be sensory.

-Lolita Dutta,
Dean, World University of Design



Museums must embrace empathy as a core practice in an increasingly polarised, distracted world. We need to question how neutral museums are and if they are meeting the criteria for a reflective space where we can slow down and encourage individual thinking. By incorporating multiple voices and community participation, museums can play an integral role in reinforcing who we are. Beyond preserving objects and building collections, museums can shape consciences – using history to build connection, inclusivity, and meaningful social impact for the future.

-Mandira Row,
Curator, Amar Nath Sehgal Museum

Museums should embrace collective intelligence by transforming exhibits into evolving, crowd-informed-narratives. Visitors can contribute memories, insights, and interpretations alongside expert views, creating dynamic knowledge layers around objects. With thoughtful use of digital tools and human inputs, museums can foster participatory knowledge while maintaining trust and scholarly integrity. Effectively implemented, this approach broadens representation, deepens engagement, and advances the principle of 'leave no one behind' central to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

-Meghna Vyas Arora,
Government Employee

According to my vision, the museum should try to reach the visitor by different means. Visitors must be prompted to visit the museum. The museum should think about what visitors expect from the museum. If you keep them satisfied with innovative objects and information, they will definitely fall in love with the museum.

-Dr. N. R. Shah,
Former Professor of Museology, The M.S. University of Baroda

The
next
frontier for
museums is
human connection.

Beyond the walls and
collections, the institutions
can become spaces where art
sparks reflection and
conversation, where visitors feel
seen and heard. A museum that
listens as much as it speaks can
transform from a building into a living,
breathing companion for creativity
and culture.

-Nivedita Poddar,
Founder, Art Fervour

The one idea I believe
museums must embrace
in the near future is this:
they must move beyond
being repositories of objects
and become active custodians of
culture for the next generation.

Preservation is essential, but
transmission is transformative.

Children cannot connect deeply
through artefacts behind glass and long
explanatory panels alone. Museums need
to be interactive, immersive, and rooted in
play – spaces where young minds can touch,
experiment, imagine, and co-create meaning.

By integrating sensory experiences and
thoughtful digital tools, museums can turn
passive viewing into lived engagement. When
culture is experienced, not just displayed, it becomes
relevant, remembered, and carried forward.

-Preeti Goel Sanghi,
Co-Founder & Director, ImmersiKriti

Museums must evolve into
curiosity hubs where
knowledge sticks through
seamless phygital
integration. By avoiding
digital fatigue and
embracing creative,
low-cost technological
models, we can ensure
museums remain
sustainable and accessible
to all. The vision is clear:
replace overwhelming
complexity with bespoke
innovation, creating
enduring educational
experiences that bridge
the gap between physical
wonder and digital insight.

-Pankaj Manchanda,
Founder and CEO, Augtraveler



I propose that museums must move beyond the logic of permanence. Instead of curating collections as fixed, authoritative narratives, they should embrace epistemic porosity. This involves actively inviting communities, artists, and marginalised knowledge systems to destabilise and rewrite institutional memory. The museum's future lies not in preserving a singular past, but in holding multiple, contested histories simultaneously, with honesty and humility.

-Premjish Achari,
Curator, Writer, and Filmmaker

Museums should embrace AI-powered "living collections," where artefacts dynamically interact with visitors via augmented reality, revealing hidden narratives, restoration histories, or visitor-submitted stories tied to cultural heritage. This fosters deeper emotional connections, democratises expertise, and keeps static objects vibrantly alive, ensuring relevance in a digital era while honouring their timeless essence.

-Priya Kapoor,
Founder- Director, International
Heritage Conservation

Mobile museums, in today's time when museums are becoming gentrified along with art. I strongly feel a mobile museum can reach the larger public, thereby reducing the gap between a philistine and an aesthete.

-R. B. Thiruvengadam,
Founding Partner, Uri Design Studio



-Dr. Rima Hooja,
Director, Maharaja Sawai
Man Singh II Museum



Museums have innovated many ways to increase visitors & local communities' interests. In my view, a 'Chill Zone' (calling it by appropriate names, keeping local cultural norms in mind) should be universalised. A space where museum visitors have an option for a time-out mid-way through their visit, in a congenial space, with the option of just doing nothing for short periods, or chatting with members of their group, or handling in-situ interactives and 3D models from the museum, or trying their hand at a basic pre-set conservation table.

This is visualised not as a cafe, nor a bookshop or museum store, though the interiors and decor can replicate sections of that museum's galleries - or be starkly in contrast. Museums continue to be short on in-gallery seating spaces, so comfortable seating should be provided, along with a section for younger visitors to indulge in play and interactives. Depending on the volume of visitor movement in

For me, the museum of tomorrow should feel like a place that belongs to everyone – genuinely open to those who might never have considered crossing its doors.

special museums, there can be more than one Chill Zone in different zones, but each should be different.

Accessibility is the vision. What I would also like is a rebuilding of the living heartbeat behind the objects on display. For instance, a ceramic bowl is a conversation between earth, fire, the human hands of the artisans, their processes, and knowledge passed down generations. These belong inside the gallery. For we need material culture to go beyond being a relic and to become a story still being told. That, for me, is the museum of the future.

-Ritu Sethi,
Founder-Trustee, Craft Revival Trust



Museums in India must evolve as inclusive cultural hubs that align with national priorities such as digital accessibility, 'Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat', and the preservation of diverse heritage. By integrating technology-driven engagement, regional narratives, and community participation, museums can move beyond static display spaces to become vibrant platforms for cultural dialogue, education, and soft power projection. Strengthening outreach, especially to younger audiences, and fostering collaborations at national and international levels will be key to making our museums future-ready.

-Dr. Sanjeev Kishore Goutam,
Director General, National Gallery of
Modern Art, New Delhi

Even as
AI-driven
technology is here to
change the way we receive
information and understand the past, present
and future, museums which have been the
repository of our collective history need to
evolve and provide unique ways to access their
invaluable collections. Given the widespread
scale of destruction through war and violence,
climate change and geographical challenges
across key historic sites, documentation and
digitisation is now a vital part of preservation.
Museums need to share their knowledge not
only through brick and mortar institutions, but
through ever evolving platforms online. In
addition, they need to reflect the breathless
march of innovation through the
socio-politico-religious and
economic lens, and move beyond
portraying the past and be
equally adept in
capturing the present
and envisioning
our possible
future.

-Sanjoy K Roy,
Managing Director, Teamwork Arts

In my ideal world, I would like museums to be spaces that give all of us a sense of belonging – an institution where no individual, whether from the local community or from an altogether different cultural or national context, should feel alienated as a member of humanity. It should record not only humanity's achievements but also its failures and vulnerabilities. They must equally serve as arenas of leisure, where families and friends may gather, converse, and rediscover the essence of human connection in an age increasingly mediated by technology.

-Dr. Savita Kumari,
Associate Professor & Head, Department of
History of Art, Indian Institute of Heritage

Museums should invest in thoughtfully curated gift shops that extend their storytelling beyond gallery walls. Well-designed, representative and culturally rooted merchandise can carry narratives into everyday life. Shops with unique and bespoke merchandise not only generate meaningful revenue, but also act as powerful PR engines, allowing visitors to take a piece of the museum's story home and share it further. A museum shop can become the go to Gift Shop!

-Shaline Ghosh,
Founder, FroggMag

-Shalini Bansal,
Co-founder, Museums22 and
HopOn

I think Indian museums, especially government museums, should be allowed to accept donations and actively solicit private CSR partnerships, and to operate as independent entities to be able to self-sustain. This may help make them more vibrant, prolific and relevant for the public. Museums need to focus on spending their funds more on creating long term visitor experiences for all rather than ribbon cutting ceremonies for VIPs.

People and emotions...giving choice to curate a customised museum experience to each and every visitor.

-Dr. Shikha Jain,
Founder Director, DRONAH



Instead of built architectural statements, museums of the future could inhabit the post-industrial landscape of quarries (already used in some instances for archiving and storage) and subterranean structures of hollowed out mines. Like sunken stepwells of the past, where rain water harvesting and circulation of air was an integral ecological component, museums need to devise ways to work with the debris of human excess, to create spaces that are accessible, serve as archival repositories and make space for community building and knowledge sharing, instead of being panoptic, resource guzzling, behemoths of the contemporary imagination.

- Professor Shukla Sawant,
School of Arts & Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Neurodiversity access in museums ensures inclusive experiences for individuals with autism, ADHD, and sensory sensitivities. Strategies include quiet hours, sensory maps, trained staff, flexible lighting, and clear signage. Interactive exhibits can offer multiple engagement styles. By prioritising accessibility, museums become welcoming cultural spaces where diverse cognitive needs are respected, enabling all visitors to learn, explore, and feel comfortable and safe.

-Siddhant Shah,
Founder, Access for All

To maximise impact, museums need two distinct evolutions. First, go beyond static displays and add human connection. Featuring resident artists, guides, and live actors ensures the space feels constantly new, driving repeat visits. Second, serve as society's mirror. Curate themes that do more than show history, they must leverage past lessons to solve modern challenges.

-Siddharth Bathla,
Managing Director and Founding Partner,
Design Factory India



Generative
AI creates
dynamic narratives
tailored to audience
segments. An AI-powered
personalised museum app could
tailor each visitor's journey through
dynamic recommendations, indoor
navigation, and contextual storytelling. It would
adapt in real time to interests, pace, and crowd
conditions, offering multilingual audio, AR
overlays, and accessibility features. Off-site, it
could extend engagement via curated
content, virtual tours, and updates,
transforming visits into continuous,
data-driven cultural
experiences for diverse
audiences across age
groups.

-Subrata Nath,
Former Additional Director General at the
National Museum, New Delhi

To reimagine museums as places of pause rather than pace. By presenting fewer objects, offering quiet seating, and using minimal interpretive prompts, these galleries would encourage deeper observation and personal reflection. Rooted in contemplative traditions, they would foster emotional engagement and mental stillness. To position museums as restorative environments that value attention, presence, and meaningful connection over rapid consumption, specially in the age of endless social media scrolling.

-Sunayana Rathore,
Curator, Mehrangarh Fort Museum

Museums
can become gentle
but powerful catalysts for
climate action, inviting people not just to
learn, but to care and act. Through their collections,
exhibitions, and programmes, they can nurture
climate-conscious communities. By embracing net-zero practices
themselves, museums can lead by example, inspiring collective
responsibility and more sustainable ways of living.

-Tejshvi Jain,
Founder and Director,
ReReeti

As we reflect on the Year of Compassion (90th Birthday of HHDL), museums, especially institutions like The Tibet Museum, can evolve as spaces that cultivate compassion alongside knowledge. A fresh idea is to design exhibitions that invite ethical reflection, empathy, and mindful engagement, encouraging visitors not only to learn history but to practice compassion as an active responsibility toward society and the future.

-Tenzin Topdhen,
Director, The Tibet Museum

I think museums should look at ways of becoming more engaging. There is a need to move beyond existing frameworks to reimagine the role of visitors as more than mere passive viewers. Not every idea needs to take the form of an elaborate exhibition, and more value should be placed on fluid interventions such as conversations and workshops that allow for active engagement. It is equally important to blur the rigid silos and encourage more seamless interdisciplinary exchange within museum structures.

-Vandana Kalra,
Deputy Associate Editor,
The Indian Express

Museums have the potential to be more inclusive now and make access to their collections more democratic. Today, with technology and an interdisciplinary approach, the user experience can become more ergonomic, more accessible, and more enjoyable. A wider lens is needed in the museum community to embrace these opportunities and go beyond the object and their historical ontologies.

-Varun Jain,
Managing Trustee, Sanskriti Foundation



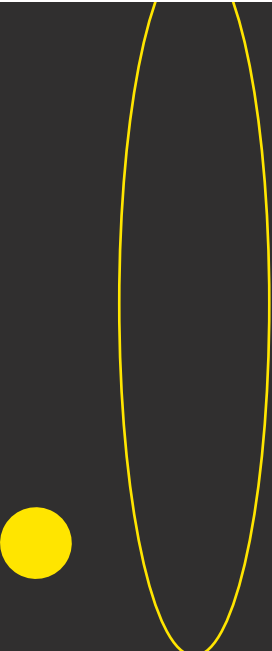
-Victor Hugo Gomes,
Founder, Goa Chitra Museum

Museums
must evolve from being
repositories of objects to living cultural
ecosystems — places where heritage, environment,
community knowledge, and contemporary life intersect.
The future lies in immersive, community-rooted museology
that sustains traditional knowledge systems while inspiring
new generations to see culture as a living, participatory
experience rather than static history.

As an
Indian
museum-goer and cultural
sector enthusiast, the growth of
museums in the country is a matter of pride
and happiness to me personally. One fresh idea, then, is
to be culled out from a bouquet of initiatives that are
infusing Indian museums already with energy, relevance
and significant infrastructural inputs.

That single idea is to fashion museums – whether large or
small, physical or digital and so on – into tools of
influence for growing social and cultural capital that our
younger generations need. The museum mile in
New York and similar museum destinations
internationally throng with visitors who are driven to
think, absorb ideas and interpret the narrative to
create their own realities. I think that we need to list
the museums that don't exist in India today, but are
of prime importance and absolutely must be
brought into being. And we must start working on
these in a directed manner.

-Vinita Srivastava,
DRM, Northern Railway



-Vrinda Kapoor,
Creative Producer

Spaces in museums should be curated to become hyperlocal community hubs to spark collective creativity in the current scenario of uncertainty and digital isolation to develop social support and solidarity, all while celebrating and learning about culture. Their activity can be rooted in shared lived experiences, indirectly leading to relearning about history and culture.



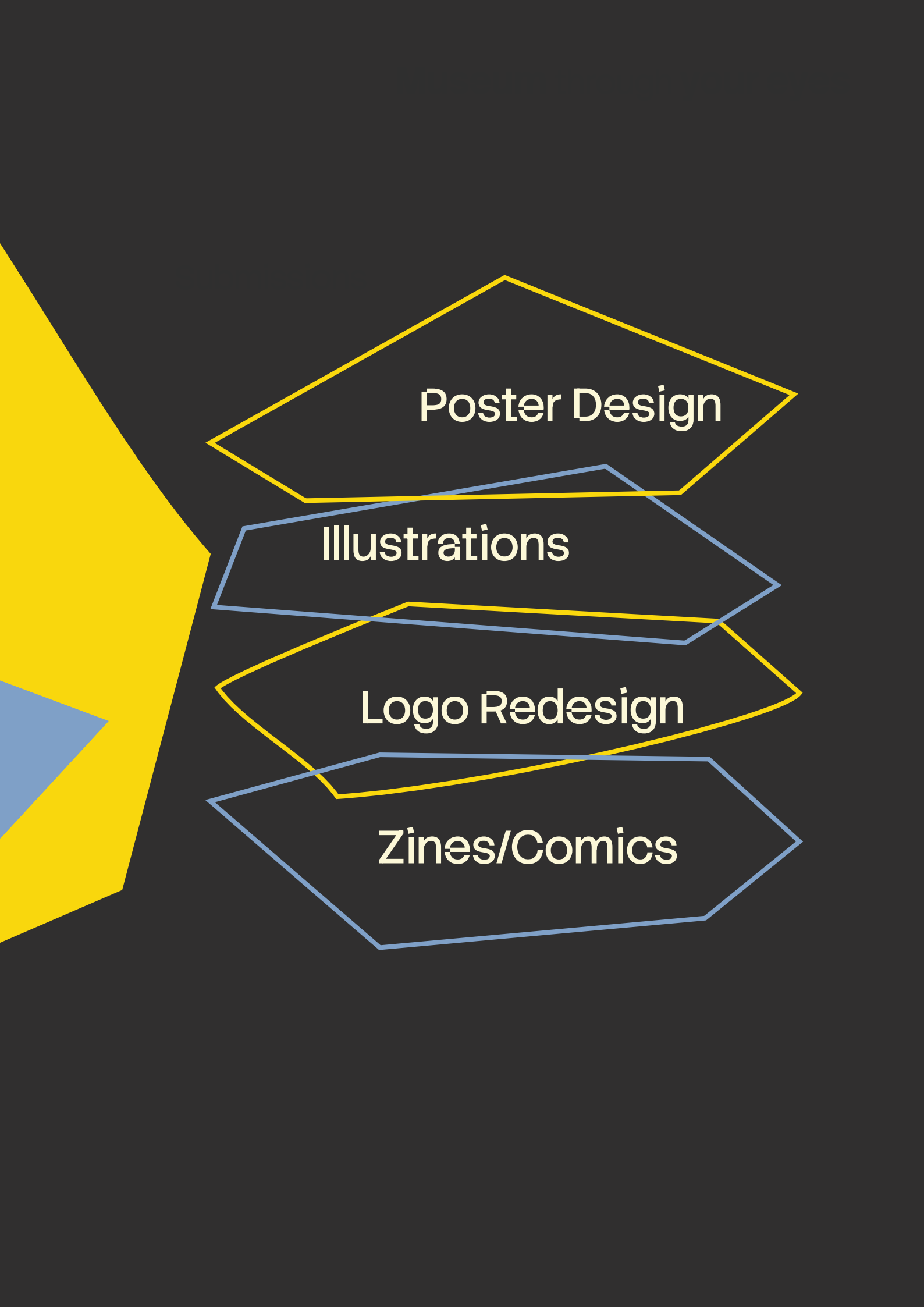
Museums
in India and
outside should be
made inclusive, but not
necessarily as mere
romantic admiration of the past.
It should showcase the hard realities of
life, including social and material
conditions. Conflicts are another area that
needs to be narrated to ward off the narrative of
homogeneity in tradition. People should develop natural
ownership and affinity with the museum so that it becomes
not only a site of engagement with the understanding of the
past, but also develops a future devoid of conflicts and
violence. It has the ability to create a compassionate
fraternity to have a better future.

-Professor Y. S. Alone,
School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru
University, New Delhi.



MUSEUMS THROUGH YOUR EYES

This section showcases illustrations that celebrate the magic of museums. Each artwork in this section captures their quiet corners, iconic objects, and the people who bring them to life. These creative expressions reveal museums through diverse, personal perspectives, highlighting them as living spaces that inspire curiosity, connection, and imagination.

The image features a dark gray background with a large, abstract yellow and light blue shape on the left side. On the right, four overlapping, irregular polygons are arranged vertically. The top polygon is yellow and contains the text 'Poster Design'. The second polygon is light blue and contains 'Illustrations'. The third polygon is yellow and contains 'Logo Redesign'. The bottom polygon is light blue and contains 'Zines/Comics'.

Poster Design

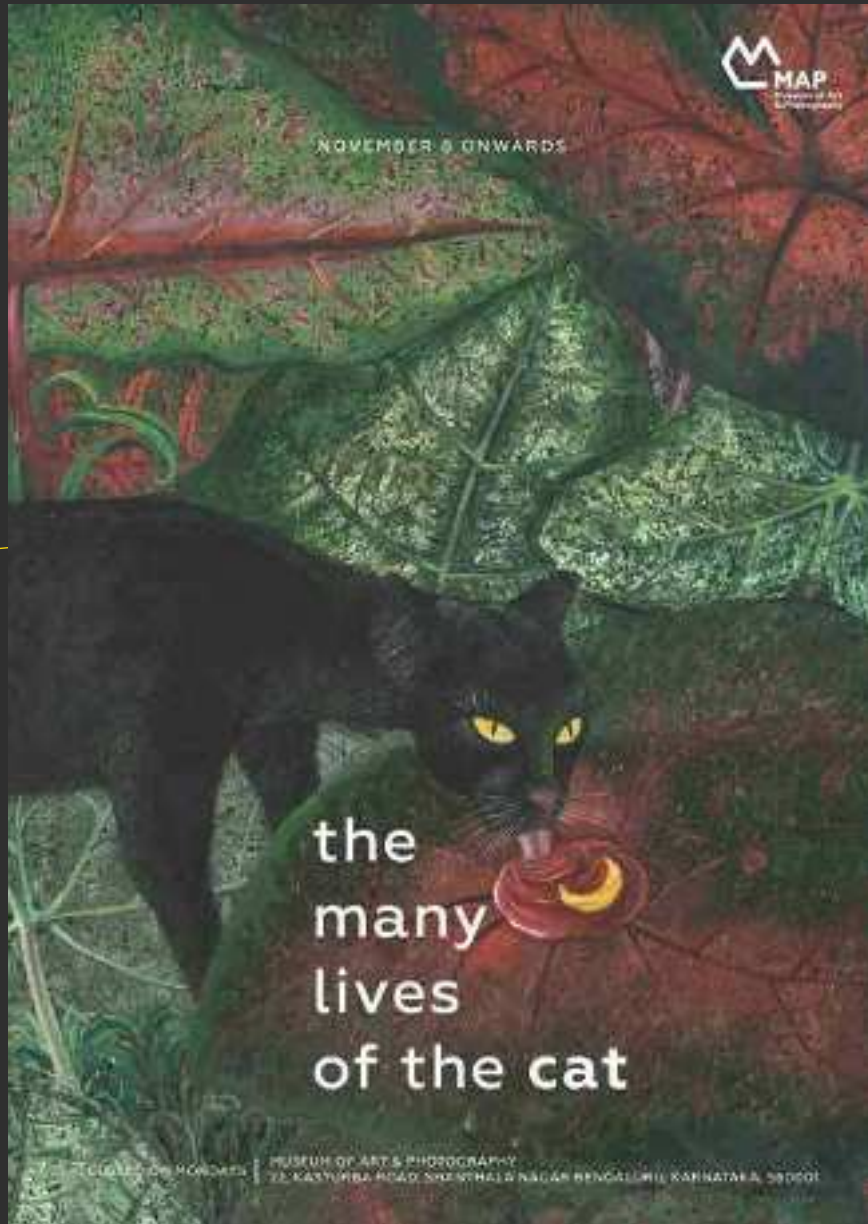
Illustrations

Logo Redesign

Zines/Comics

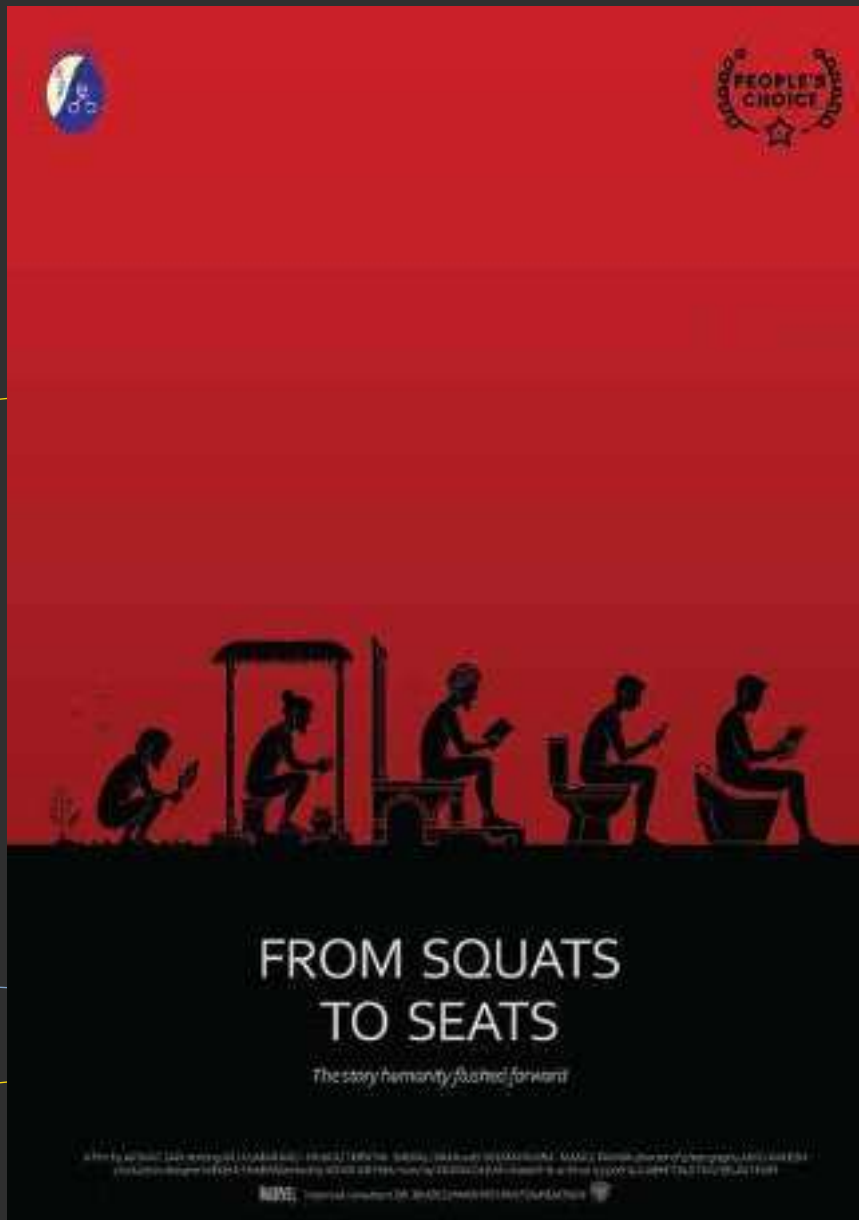
Museum Through Your Eyes

Posters



The poster is strongly inspired by the book covers and film posters. The design approach is minimal, using a grid system that supports the layout. The typography is intentionally loose, with the primary focus placed on the cats, which are central to the exhibition.

Designed by *Cibal Prem*



This poster draws inspiration from the Sulabh International Museum of Toilets. The concept reinterprets the familiar 'March of Progress' visual. Through minimal black silhouettes and a progressive change in posture, the design transforms an everyday necessity into a powerful visual story of human advancement and innovation.

Designed by *Akshat Jain*

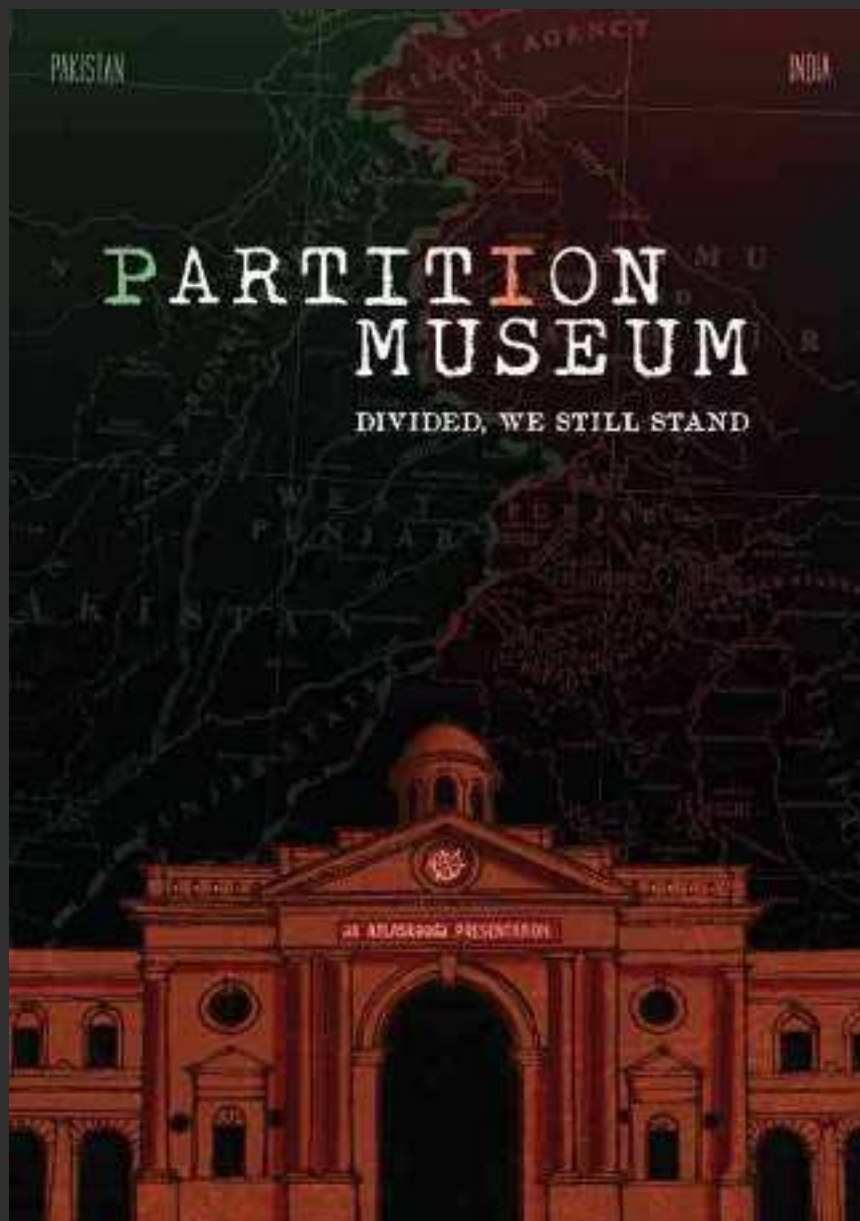
Museum Through Your Eyes

Posters



The poster reimagines Salar Jung Museum through a cinematic visual language created in Photoshop. Sculptural elements are reinterpreted through scale and composition, introducing a subtle feminist lens that positions them as central, protagonist-like figures. Overall, the design frames the museum as a living narrative space.

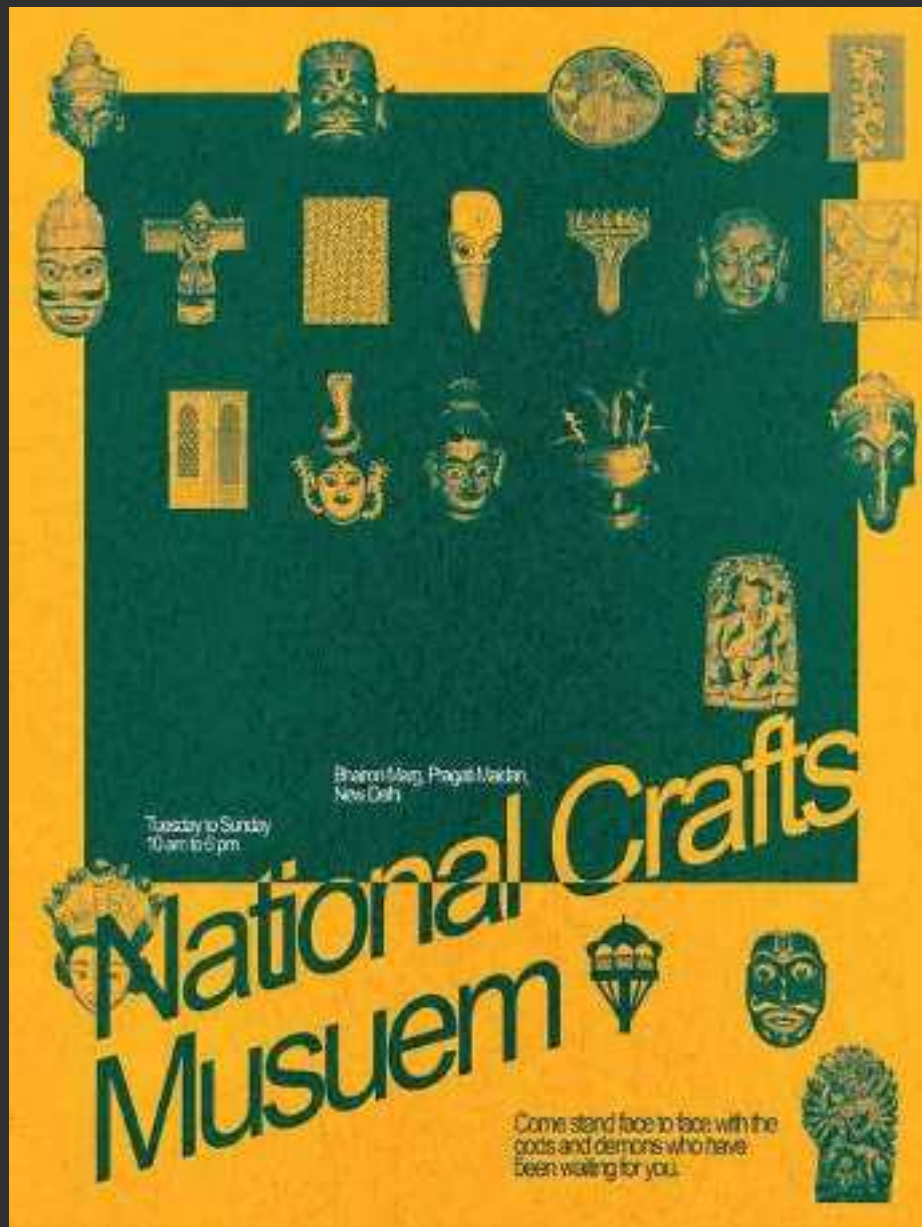
Designed by Shubhangi Kakati



Designed by *Team ATLASkeeda*

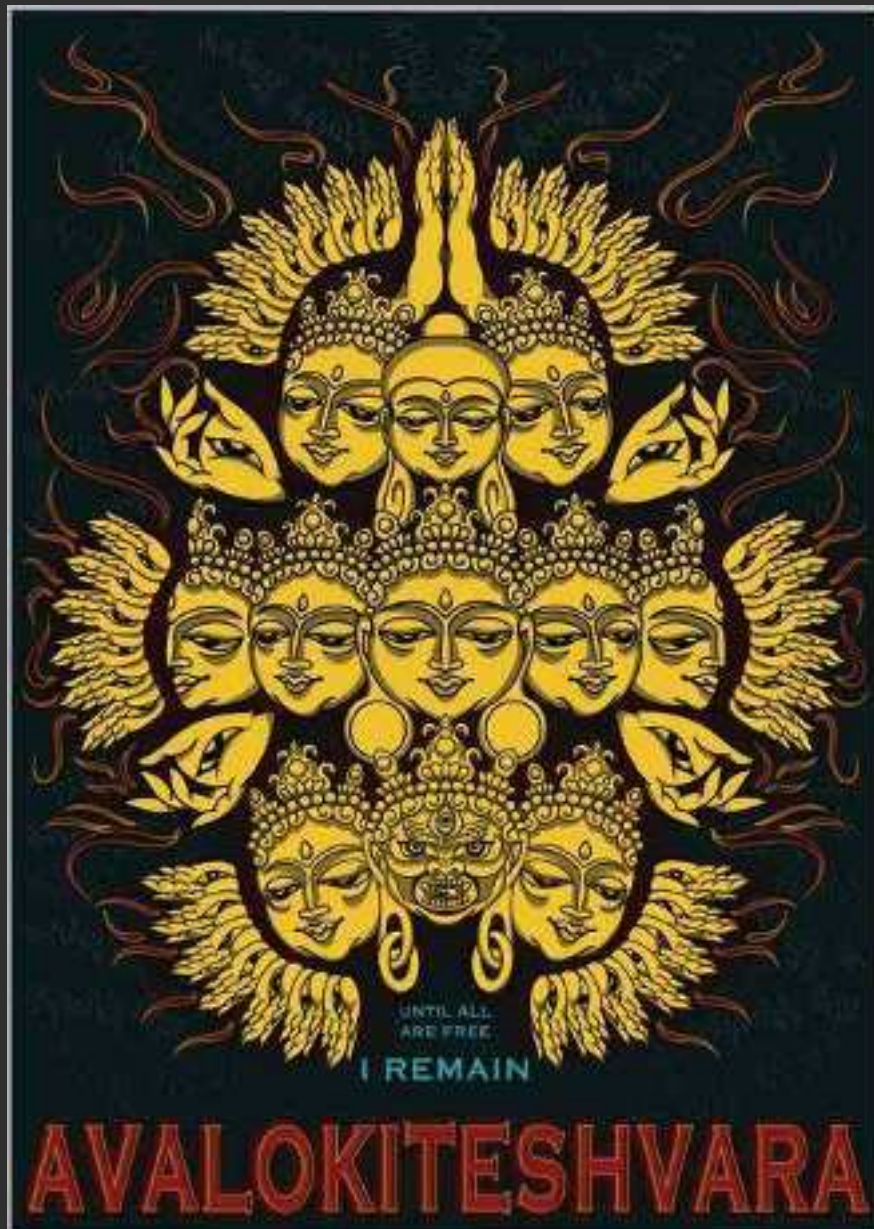
Museum Through Your Eyes

Posters



This poster was designed to promote the Cultic Craft Gallery at the National Crafts Museum, New Delhi. The concept focuses on presenting India's ritualistic and traditional craft heritage through a contemporary graphic style using earthy yellow-green palette and textured treatment. The bold typography contrasts with the historical objects, symbolising the connection between traditional crafts and modern visual communication.

Designed by *Hrishika Singh*



This poster, inspired by Avalokiteshvara, explores his role as a guide and protector of all beings. Rooted in the essence of Om Mani Padme Hum, the visual centers on his sacred vow—"Until all are free, I remain"—reflecting his choice to delay enlightenment in order to relieve the suffering of others.

Designed by *Manjima Pramod*

Museums Through Your Eyes

Illustrations



MF Husain



FN Souza



ATLAS keeda



Museums Through Your Eyes

Illustrations



Timeless Yakshi

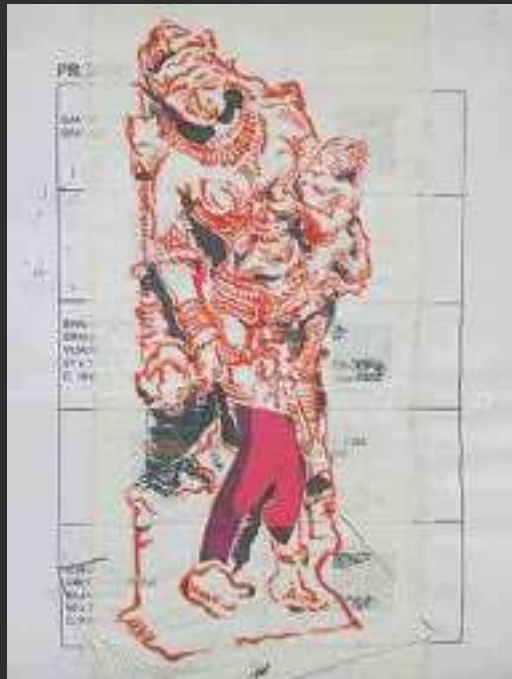


Uma-Maheshwara

Sreeneeth Jadhav



4xShiva



Mother and child



Mahishasurmardini

Museums Through Your Eyes

Illustrations



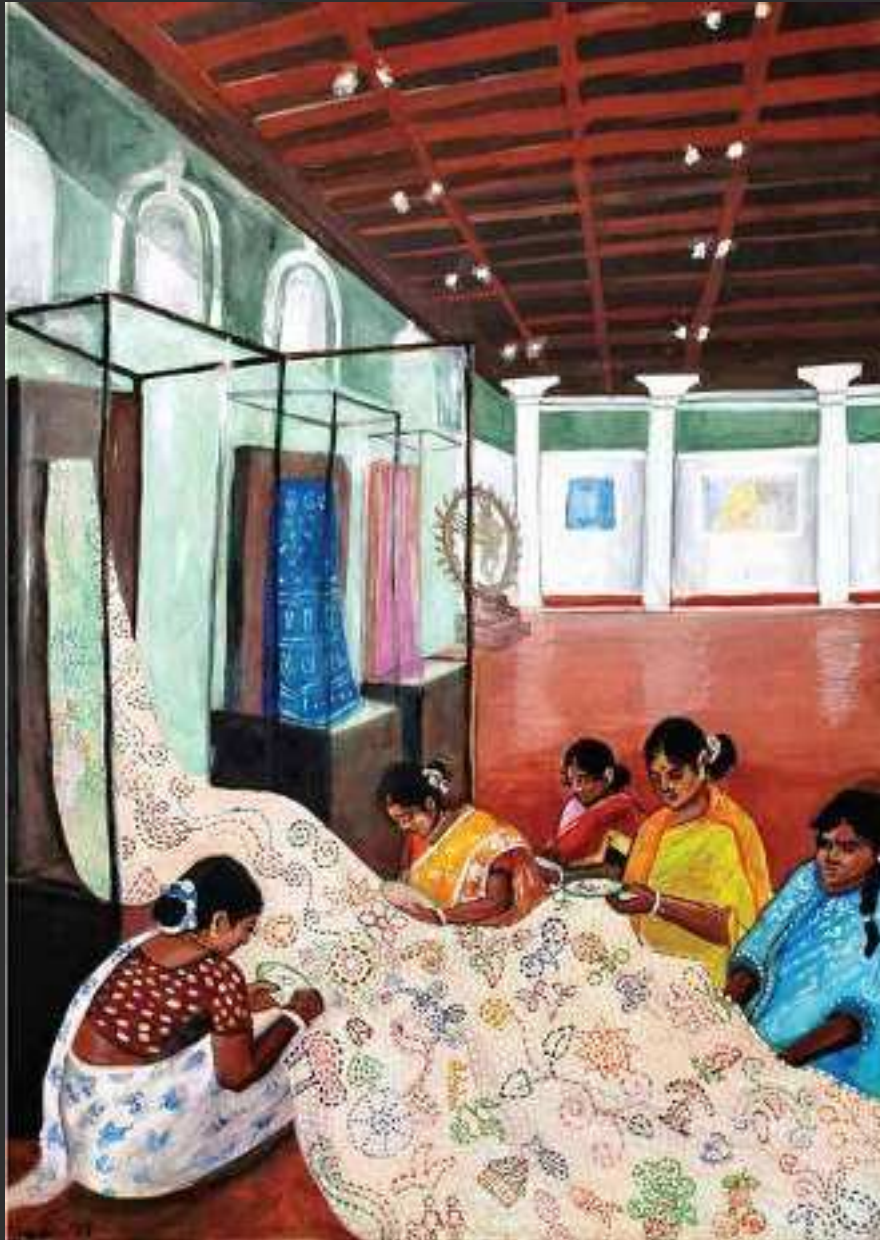
Aparjita Vasudev



Shikha Nambiar

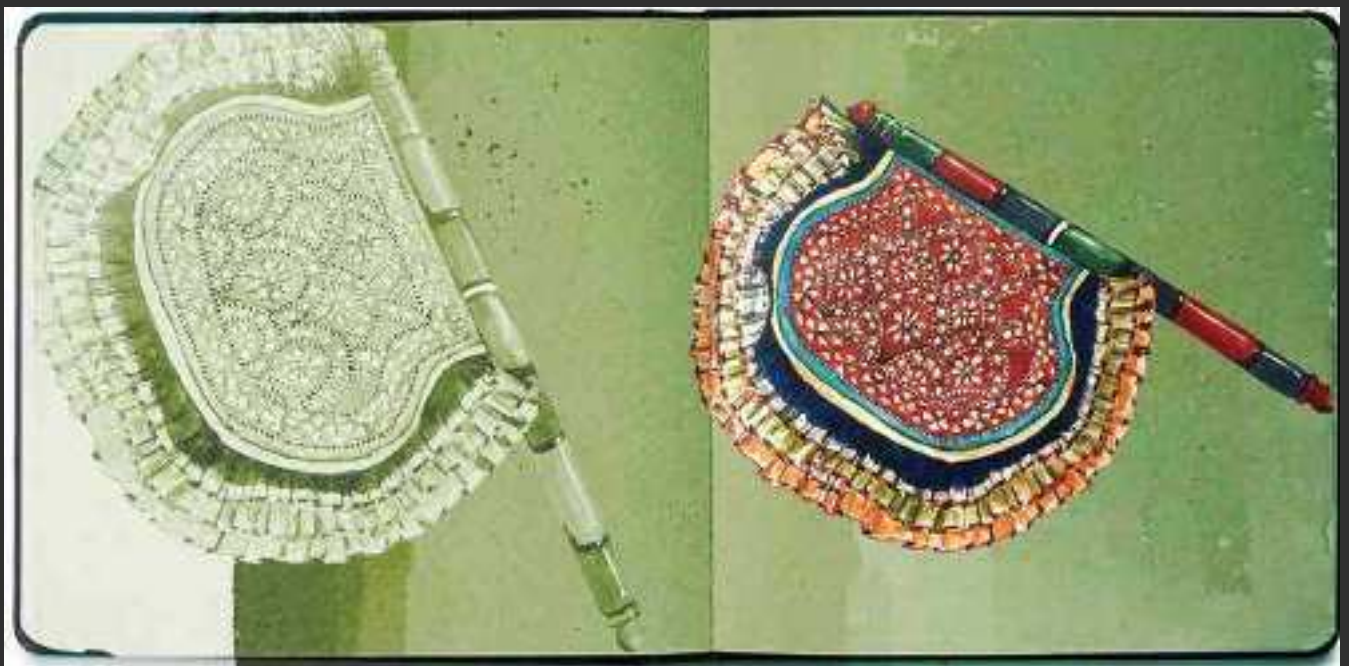
Museums Through Your Eyes

Illustrations



Nakshi Kantha

Nodi Judith Gomes



Nakshi Kantha

Shreya Biswas

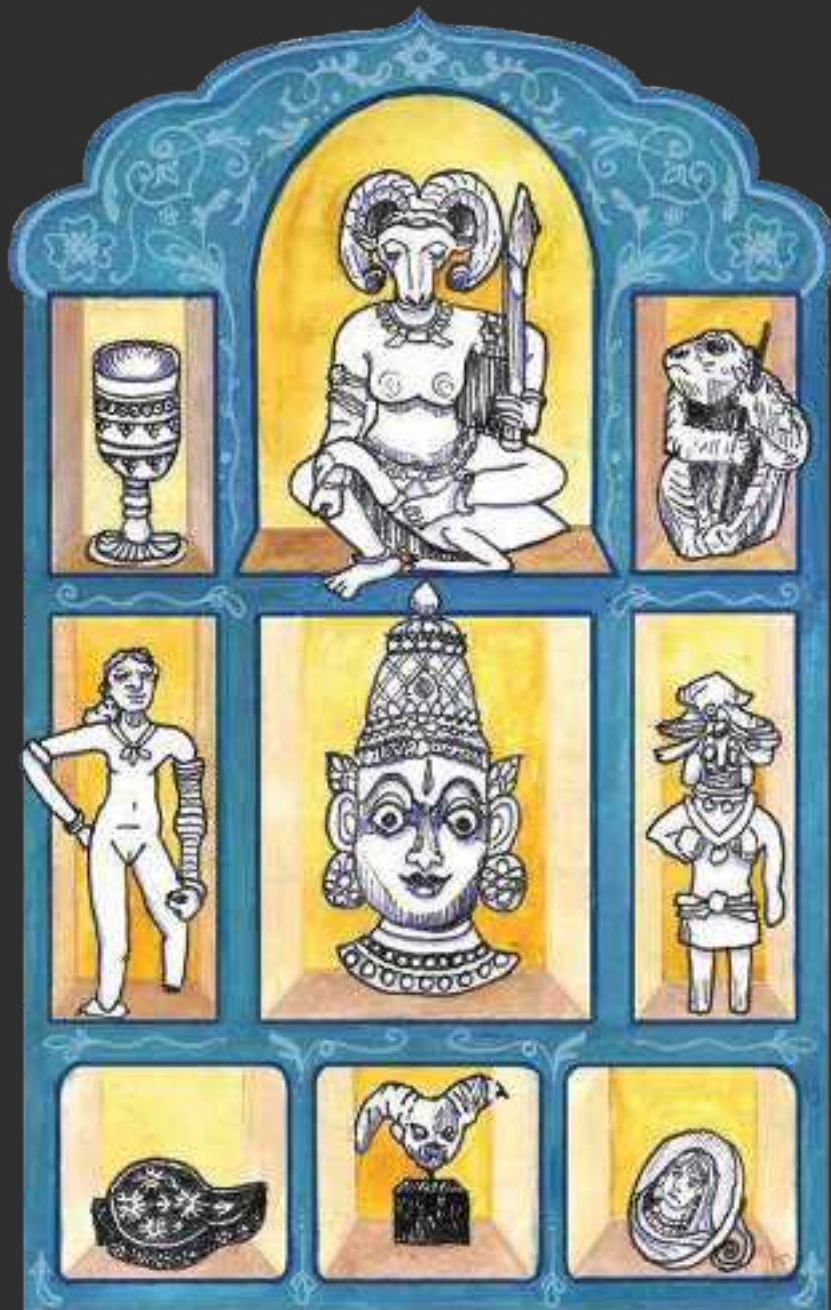
Museums Through Your Eyes

Illustrations



The Indian Music Experience Museum

 Vibha Surya



Basundhara

Museums Through Your Eyes

Illustrations



The Living Thread

Arundhati Rana



Dolls Museum

Akshat Jain

Museums Through Your Eyes

Illustrations



CSMVS museum

 Madhvi Singh



Antarāl: Between Seeing and Sensing

Subhav Nogia

Museums Through Your Eyes

Illustrations



NIGHT BOMBING

MEGHNA HELIBRIDGE



INDIA'S AIR FORCE

Aadyan Sonawne



Untitled 2026

Aditya Sharma

Museums Through Your Eyes

Logo Redesign

Indian Museum, Kolkata

Redesigned Logo



The visual identity for Indian Museum draws from the museum's architectural heritage and contemporary museum aesthetics. A modular grid system symbolises the museum's diverse collection. The terracotta red and warm off-white palette references the city's historic architecture. The serif typography balances legacy, authority, and academic credibility.



Original Logo



Designed by Sindhuja Suryanarayanan

Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad



Original Logo



Redesigned Logo

The reimagined logo for Salar Jung Museum blends cultural heritage with a contemporary design language. Its geometric and architectural lines evoke blueprints, suggesting preservation. The circular emblem and the unchanged elephant motif retain the museum's institutional identity, while the monochromatic palette brings elegance and focus to the artifacts themselves.

Designed by Saachi Kamble

Museums Through Your Eyes

Logo Redesign

Wakankar Museum , Ujjain



Redesigned Logo

The logo draws inspiration from rock stratification. Through rugged, stratified forms and earthy tones of terracotta and deep brown, the identity reflects rocks as silent carriers of cultural memory and human evolution. Designed for the Wakankar Museum, the logo honours the legacy of V. S. Wakankar.



Original Logo



Designed by Yashaswi Shetty

Chandigarh Architecture Museum



Redesigned Logo

The redesigned identity for Chandigarh Architecture Museum reflects the museum as a space of architectural memory and public engagement. It maps the city's evolution through geometric and organic lines drawn from Chandigarh's original planning history. The redesigned logo transforms the museum's identity into a living archive of modernist thought.



Original Logo

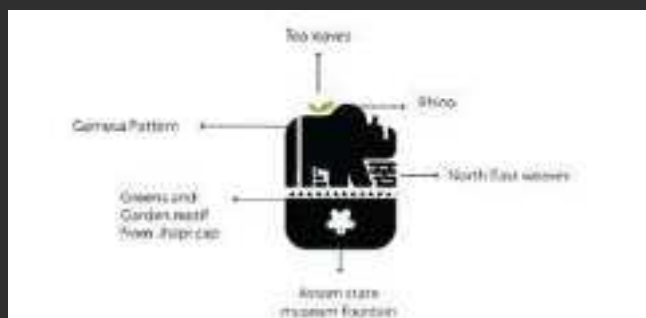
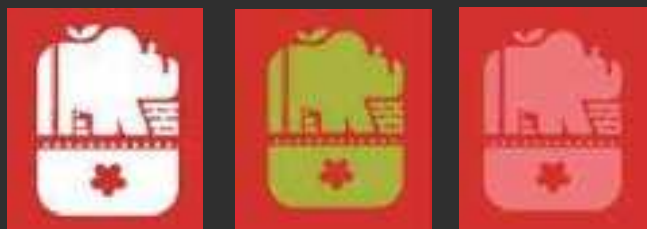


Designed by Sukhmani Kaur

Museums Through Your Eyes

Logo Redesign

Assam State Museum, Guwahati



New Logo Concept

The lack of a defined identity for the Assam State Museum led to the creation of a logo as a foundational visual system. The logo brings together key elements of Assam's identity; the rhinoceros, the tea leaf, and patterns inspired by the Gamusa and North-East weaving traditions.

Designed by @oodesignernari

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai



Redesigned Logo

This redesign reimagines the museum as an entry point into history. Inspired by the iconic dome and architectural arches, the logo simplifies these elements into a modern visual form that represents access and continuity.



Original Logo



Designed by Sethu Lakshmi Biju

Museums Through Your Eyes

Logo Redesign

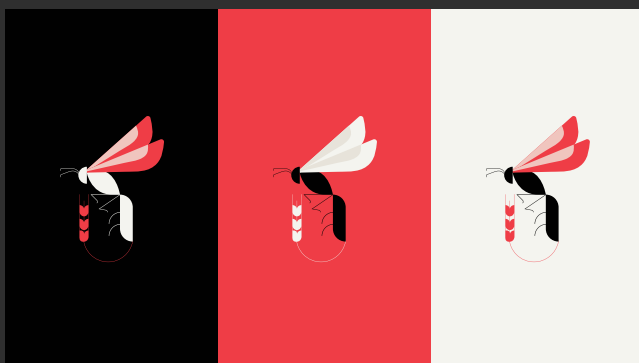
National Bureau of Agricultural Insect Resources, Bengaluru



Redesigned Logo

This project reimagines the identity of the National Bureau of Agricultural Insect Resources as the more modern and accessible “National Insect Museum,” replacing the complexity of a traditional government seal with a clean and contemporary visual language.

The redesigned logo simplifies the museum’s message, helping audiences understand the vital relationship between insects and agriculture. Using a minimalist flat vector style, the logo visualises biological pest control through a geometric wasp connected to a stylised wheat stalk, symbolising protection and balance. Paired with a bold black and red palette and modern serif typography, the design balances the authority with the creative energy of an art and science space.



Original Logo



Designed by Saloni Thakur

All the winners!



From left to right (top to bottom), the winner names are:

- Manishha — Assam State Museum
- Sethu Lakshmi Biju — CSMVS
- Sindhuja — Indian Museum Kolkata
- Sukhmani — Chandigarh Architecture Museum
- Saachi Kamble — Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad
- Yashaswi Shetty — Wakankar Museum
- Saloni Thakur — National Insect Museum

Zines/Comics

Art by A.P Payal



Haunting the Narrative

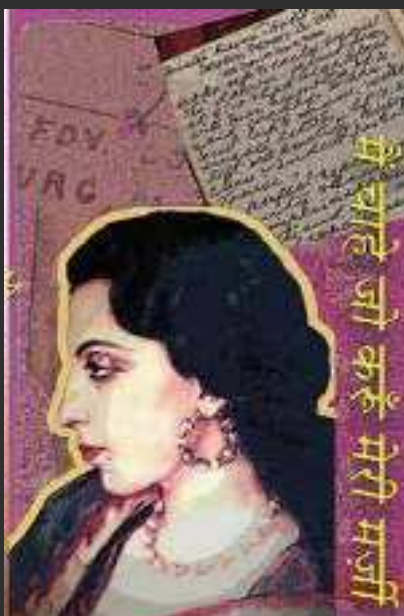


Art by Port & Kettle

Museums Through Your Eyes

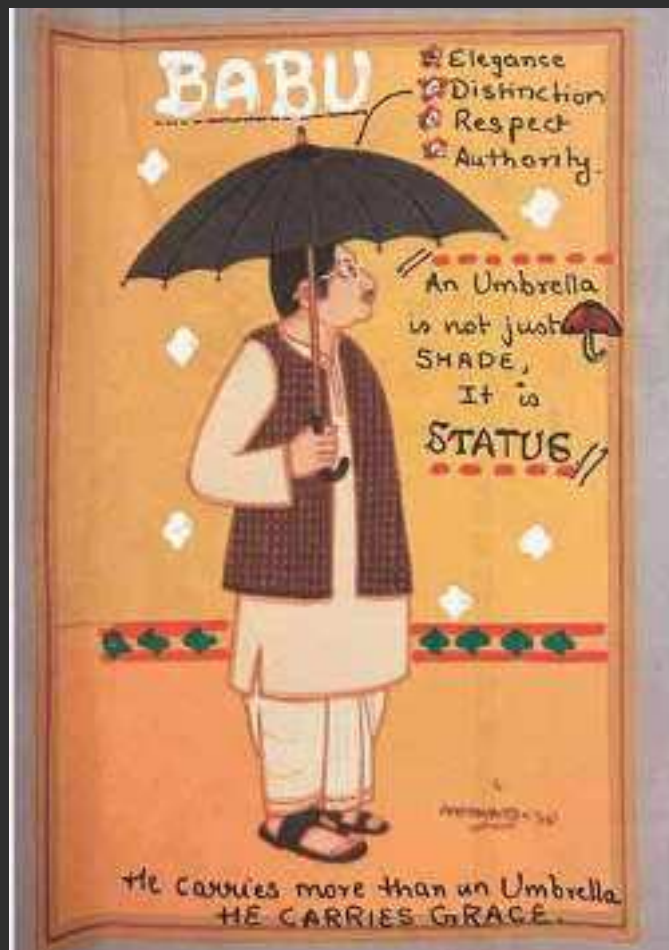
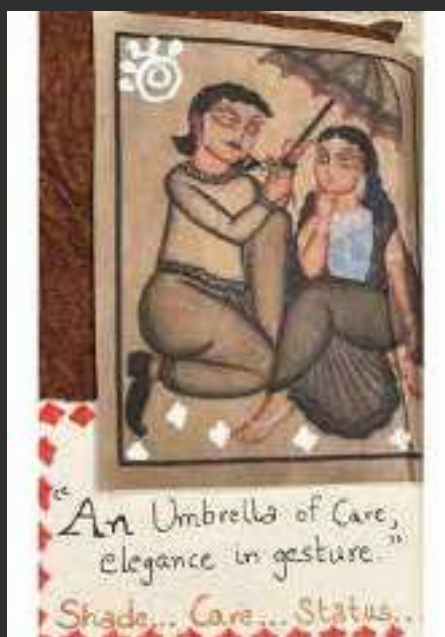
Zines/Comics

Feminists of Awadh *Par Salaam*



Art by Stuti Mishra

Canopy of Cultures: A Museum of Umbrellas

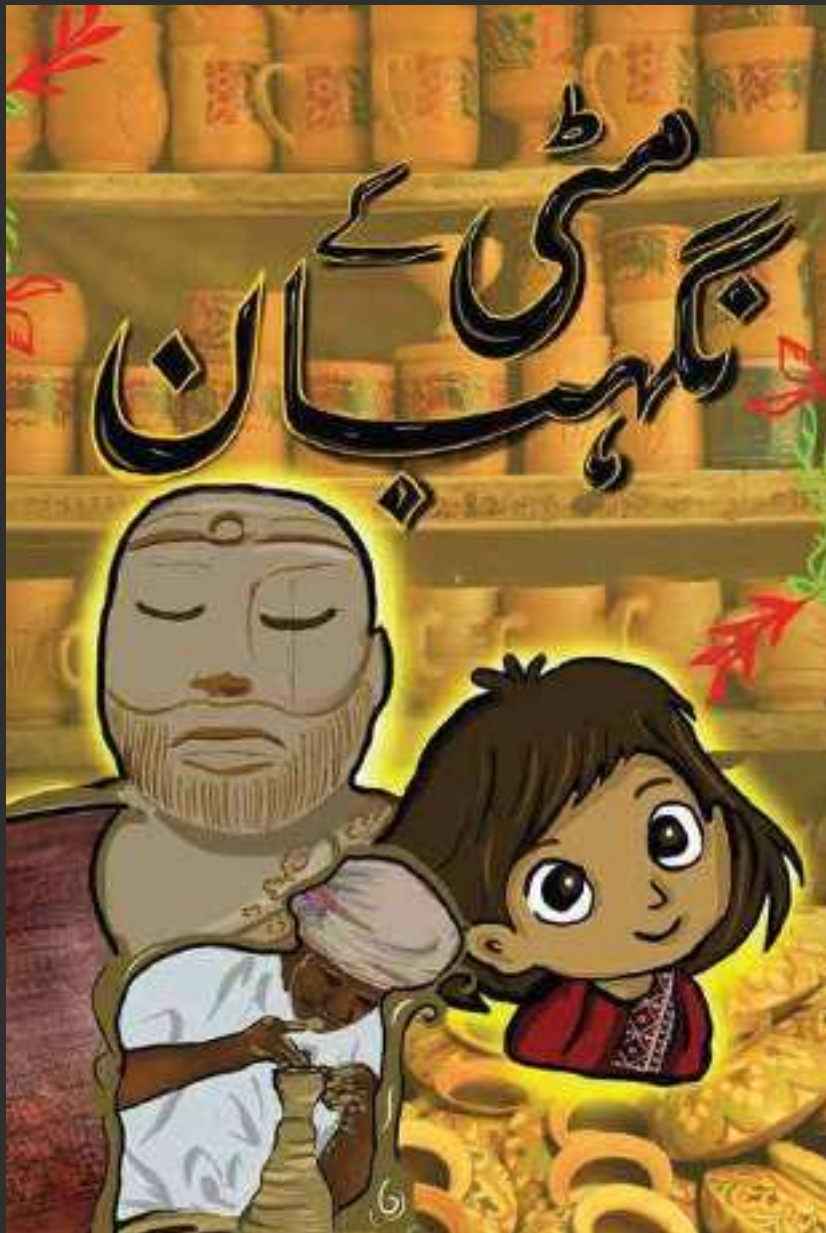


Art by Sheetal Verma

Museums Through Your Eyes

Zines/Comics

Mitti ke Nigehbaan (Guardians of the Soil)



Iraj Hasan

Summary

Mitti ke Nigehbaan (Guardians of the Soil) is a comic exploring the pottery traditions of the Indus Valley Civilisation and its relevance in the present. A young girl, Hiba, visits a museum in Karachi. She stops by a famous statue from Mohenjodaro. To her surprise, the statue comes to life and introduces himself as '*pujari badshah*' (Priest King), asking for water. As Hiba offers him a plastic water bottle, he starts telling her about the importance of terracotta pottery in ancient society. During their conversation, Hiba gets introduced to different kinds of vessels from around 2500 BCE. Hiba explains that these traditions still survive in her city Haala in Sindh province. Artisans still continue to make pottery using these ancient techniques. The two of them continue to discuss the cultural importance and health benefits of clay pottery, while also expressing concern for the decline of traditional crafts due to the growing use of plastic and industrial products.

Further, they discuss the artisans' loss of livelihood and sustainable practices left behind that were once part of everyday life. Hiba admires the skill of Sindhi potters and encourages the young readers to value handmade crafts, support local artisans, and reconnect with their heritage. In the end, the Priest King reminds Hiba that preserving historical and cultural knowledge should be the responsibility of the younger generations. The comic ends with interactive activities for children to imagine their own clay vessels and think about changes that could support artisans.



Museum Memory Match:

A game of objects and recall

Uncover matching pairs of artefacts from museums across India.

1. Carefully tear out the cards along the perforated lines.
2. Shuffle them and place them face down in a grid.
3. Players take turns turning over two cards at a time.
4. If the cards match, keep the pair and take another turn.
5. If they do not match, turn them face down again.
6. The player with the most pairs at the end wins.

Look closely, remember carefully, and see how many treasures you can discover!





Kettle and a creamer from a tea set, Amrapali Museum, Jaipur



Hand Painted Fan, Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba



A Mendicant's Portable Shrine, Sanskriti Museum of Everyday Art, Gurugram



Museum of Art & Photography, Bengaluru
Teyyam breast-plate of Bhagavati



Armlet, Odisha State Tribal Museum, Bhubaneswar



Partition Museum, Amritsar
Muraqqa-i-Chughtail



Armlet, Odisha State Tribal Museum, Bhubaneswar



Tandavesvara, Government Site Museum, Aihole



Prince and Princess of Iran, Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata



Wood Carving, Door, Tribal Dance, 19th Century, Koraput, Purvasha Folk & Tribal Art Museum, Odi Art Centre, Barkul



Chupa of the bodyguard regiment of the Tibet army, The Tibet Museum, Dharamshala



Kori (local currency), Kutch Museum, Bhuj



Mother Goddess, Archaeological Museum, Nagarjunakonda



Coin Boards - Pana Palakas, Napier Museum, Thiruvananthapuram



Vechaar Utensil Museum, Ahmedabad Dowry Box



Sarangi, Arna Jharna: The Thar Desert Museum, Jodhpur



Statue of the emperor Kanishka with inscriptions in Brahmi Script, Archaeological Museum, Mathura



Hero stone, Archaeological Museum, Goa



Silver swamy tea service, C. Krishniah Chetty Crystal Museum Salon, Bengaluru



Vechaar Utensil Museum, Ahmedabad Dowry Box



Ghee Container, Kerala Museum of Folklore, Kochi



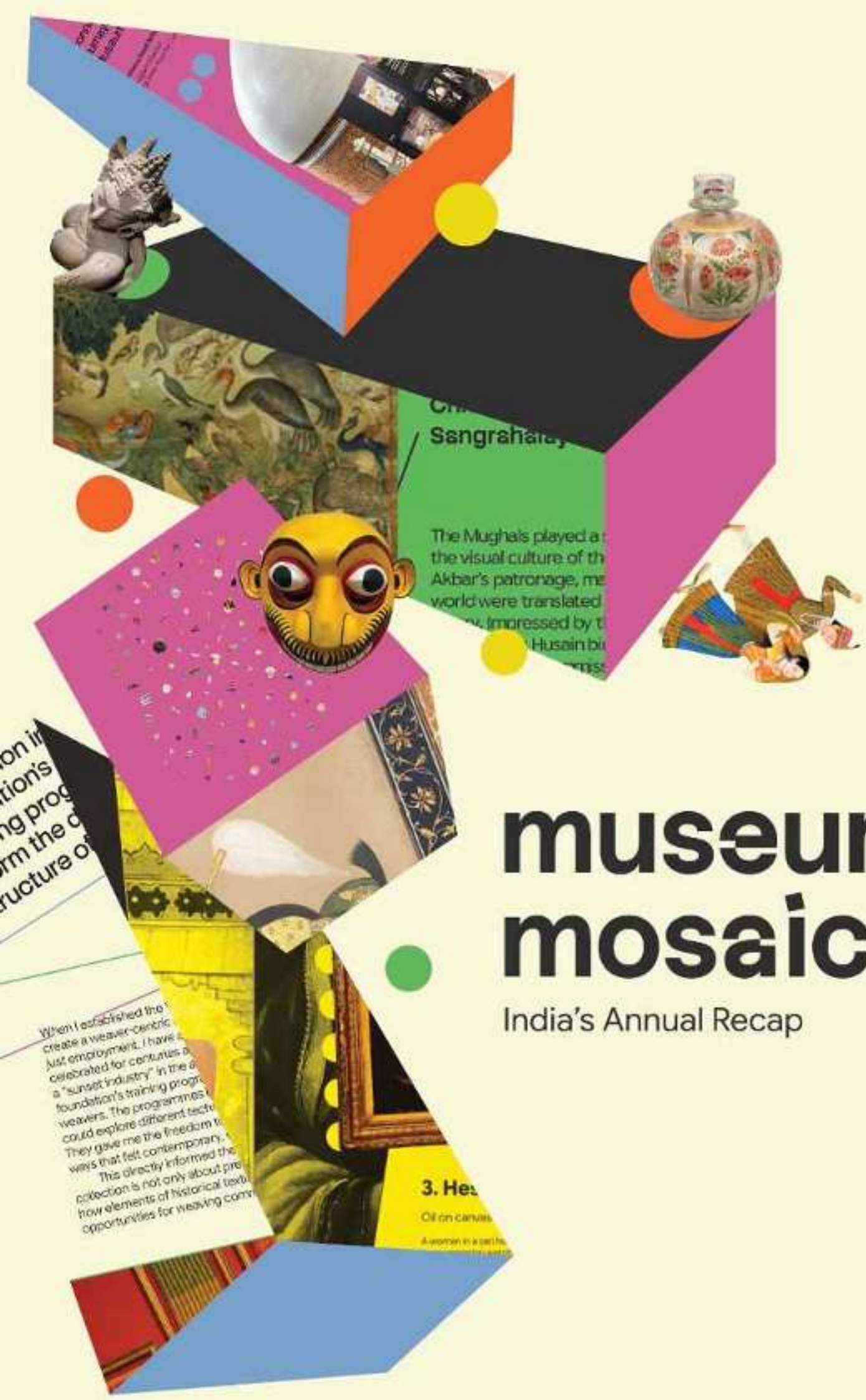
Hookah, Gyan Museum, Jaipur



Theli (Bag), SEWA Hansiba Museum, Ahmedabad



Protection ring for Santal men and women, The Museum of Santal Culture, Bishnubati



museum mosaic 20 25

India's Annual Recap

on in
tion's
ng prog
rm the d
structure of

When I established the
create a weaver-centric
just employment. I have
celebrated for centuries
a "sunset industry" in the
foundation's training prog
weavers. The programmes
could explore different tect
They gave me the freedom
ways that felt contemporary.
This directly informed the
collection is not only about pre
how elements of historical text
opportunities for weaving com

Ch
Sangrahalaya

The Mughals played a
the visual culture of th
Akbar's patronage, me
world were translated
Impressed by t
Husain bi
artists

3. Hes

Oil on canvas
A woman in a saris

 **cultre**