(Re-) Staging Translation: Meaningful Interaction with Hindu Devotional Objects in the Western museum

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(Re-) Staging Translation:
Meaningful interaction with Hindu devotional objects
in the Western museum

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Art & Art History from
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by

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Introduction

*In every possible sense, translation is necessary but impossible.*
Gayatri Spivak, 2000

*The Extraordinary is the ordinary celebrated.*
Ronald Grimes, 1992

*The solution will not be to invent new tropes of representation or new exhibiting devices for museum display...At best [exoticizing and assimilating] enable us to approximate other experiences and to appreciate new forms of art; at worst, they prevent us from truly learning about other cultures and their works of art. The error is not in using these strategies, but in failing to reflect on our own work...and in treating our works as if they were naturally occurring—as if they did not also carry the unacknowledged baggage of other associations.*
Ivan Karp, 1991

While observing the South Asian sculpture gallery at the Victoria & Albert Museum in preparation for this thesis, I watched a school group of kids, ages ten to twelve, come into the room. The group was gathered around a sculpture of Nandi, the god Shiva’s bull mount, which was sitting atop a plinth about waist high. I was listening to their leader read the label text to the children when my eyes widened. One of the boys had casually rested his elbow on Nandi’s back, leaning up against the sculpture without hesitation. It took the leader perhaps more time than it should have to realize the child’s mistake, and, while frozen in disbelief, I began thinking. When and how are we conditioned to interact with objects? At what age do we all innately know that a chair in a museum with a label is not an “ordinary” chair? A second example is not of a young child but of an acquaintance who apologized to me recently for touching a sculpture in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts because he “wanted to know what it felt like.” I will not, of course, condemn the museum guards who followed him around for the remainder of the visit; the preservation of artifacts is one of the museum project’s primary missions. Rather, this thesis will
explore the inexplicable attraction to “things” that these anecdotes both exemplify. Furthermore, the museum will emerge as a stage for repressing this attraction, but a stage capable of re-constructing attraction as well.

In both of these cases, looking was not enough. A haptic experience was required to fulfill curiosity. Even though my acquaintance knew that he should not touch an object in a museum, he felt compelled for a deeper understanding. If these natural tendencies to deeply know objects exist in all of us, then how has the museum project repressed such impulses in favor of the rational? For this thesis, I explored two Western museums that house Hindu objects—the British Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art—and analyzed their methods of interpretation and display. In doing so, I hoped to find answers to the broader questions stated above.

The two museum case studies not only house substantial collections of South Asian art,\textsuperscript{1} they also present their own unique contexts. The British Museum serves as an example of an anthropologically focused museum located in a country with direct colonial ties to India. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, on the other hand, is a museum of “fine art,” with indirect ties to colonial powers.\textsuperscript{2} South Asian art, in particular Hindu devotional objects, possess carefully prescribed ways of viewing in their original context. These rituals will be explained and placed in conversation with the museum visit itself. Adults, unlike children (or particularly curious college students), have been copiously conditioned to approach museum objects in a certain way,

\textsuperscript{1} Since Hindu objects are housed within South Asian galleries, the two terms (one denoting a religious tradition and one a regional area) are both used throughout this thesis. For my purposes, ‘Hindu’ will be used when referring to specific objects as well as ritual activity. ‘South Asia’ or ‘South Asian’ will denote the collection as a whole or the gallery designations.

\textsuperscript{2} Every Western institution holding South Asian art collected during the colonial period is implicit in colonialism. This study will not absolve museums in the United States of any responsibility of reconciliation; however, it is important to distinguish between Britain’s direct interference in the region compared to the United States’ indirect profit from colonialism.
and I am not sure that this conditioning can be radically altered. What can be altered is the museum’s anticipation of this conditioning. Rather than falling in line with it, the museum can and should seek unexpected moments of experiential understanding, catching the museum visitor off-guard and accessing that innate curiosity about “things” that was discovered in the examples above. I will not attempt an explanation of our attraction to things, but I can suggest ways that museums can harness that attraction and use it to create new and exciting experiences in their galleries.

The post-colonial museum follows a history of translation between colonizer and colonized, but this legacy is often reckoned with theoretically and not concretely. While this post-colonial theory is essential, it must now be coupled with decolonial methods to grapple with how exactly the museum can move forward. In order to properly decolonize a space, it is first necessary to understand how it was colonized in the first place and what systems are allowing that colonization to continue. Recognizing the museum project as an act of active and ongoing translation—of a culture and also of physical objects—can illuminate ways in which the museum continues to unintentionally perpetuate colonial narratives. Moreover, the museum visit is a performance, one that closely resembles ritual in its underlying structure. In Hindu ritual, interaction with the “object” (in this context, the living embodiment of the deity) is haptic, experiential, sensorial, and metaphysical; it is the framework of ritual action, rooted in the tradition, that allows for deeper understanding of the divine. In order to achieve a deeper cross-cultural understanding, therefore, scholars, staff, and visitors must be conscious of how this performance is constructed, contemplated, and carried out. Questioning these active translations

and subliminal conditioning will illuminate ways in which the museum may more appropriately act as an ethical translator of cultural objects and issues.

In this thesis, the Hindu devotional object will be tracked through many contexts and its role will change based on its geographic and cultural location. First, the original ritual context will be established, paying specific attention to ceremonial processes and actions that activate the objects. Next, I will sketch the approaches to interpretation used in the two museum spaces. In this movement between spaces, the Hindu object is de- and then re-contextualized. Museums can discover from this narrative the many ways that meaning is constructed, within and outside of a Western framework. It is this pivotal period of re-contextualization that forms the basis of my inquiry and my argument. My recommendations for gallery design and interpretation will focus on moments of translation of Hindu objects as they move between contexts and on ways to increase transparency surrounding the translation processes at work in permanent galleries. Only through a decolonization not just of the museum but of the museum experience itself can Hindu objects be re-contextualized in a manner that regains their vitality and captivation.

**The British Museum**

The British Museum’s Department of Asia houses material culture from East, South and Southeast Asia, and parts of Central Asia, extending to Siberia. Its collection highlights include one of the earliest and largest ethnographic collections of textiles and everyday objects from Southeast Asia, the “most important scroll-painting in the history of Chinese art” (the Admonitions scroll), and a large and comprehensive collection of sculpture from the Indian subcontinent. With such an extensive and significant collection comes a long history that begins

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with and is embedded in the British colonial presence in Asia. In an overview of the South Asian Collection at the British Museum (BM), J.R. Knox—then Keeper of the Department of Oriental Antiquities—describes the museum as “not concerned simply with ‘works of art’ but with the Indian people, their history, and the complex civilisation which they have and continue to author.” The association of the BM, not just with artworks but with broader world histories, distinguishes the institution from the other museum examined in this paper, the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Even a focus on human histories, rather than aesthetic objects, brings its own cultural misunderstandings and objectifications—not of things but of people. The approach to understanding a cultural history through the objects that culture produces serves as one of the best existing methods of exploring temporally and geographically distant cultures, yet it also allows for reductionist interpretations. The acts of collecting and curating are governed by unique biases, which are often concealed from—or are at least not openly stated to—museum visitors. The immense size of the BM collection elicits choices about which object are and are not displayed. Even after those choices are made, curators must pay attention to the kind of engagement their display creates in order to avoid the generalizing effects of surface level knowledge. With such a large collection, attempts at contextualization are limited, for the most part, to textual labels.

Like a handful of museums with substantial South Asian collections, such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago, the BM is currently undertaking extensive reinstallations of its Asian galleries. These reinstallations were preceded by museum-wide audience surveys on “object-centered approaches” to gallery interpretation, a portion of the

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7 This human-centric goal, with emphasis on the Indian people and their complex civilization, is further undermined by the previous name of the Department of Asia: the Department of Oriental Antiquities. It was not until 2003 that the Departments of Oriental Antiquities and Japanese Antiquities merged to become the Department of Asia. It was not until 2005 that the ethnography collections from Asia joined the “antiquities.”
results of which was published in Juliette Fritsch’s *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture* in 2011. My British Museum case study focuses on the recently installed South Asian gallery (Gallery 33) as a means of assessing and critiquing *current* trends in gallery interpretation and design with respect to non-Western objects. Many museums conduct similar audience response surveys and alter their galleries accordingly, but a comprehensive study of these surveys would be difficult, as the information is not generally published and the gallery alterations can pass unnoticed by the average visitor.

*The Philadelphia Museum of Art*

My second case study, the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), was founded during the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 as the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art. Its reinstalling South Asian galleries (2016) will serve as an example of “fine art” display. The PMA’s gallery highlights include the world’s largest collection of works by Marcel Duchamp, Brancusi, and Rodin (in the United States), as well as American painting, sculpture, furniture, silver, and ceramics. The most unique aspect of the PMA’s collection is the inclusion of immersive “period rooms” and architectural ensembles from around the world. The Asian wing incorporates many such architectural ensembles, including a South Indian pillared temple hall from Madurai which will be closely examined in this thesis. Immersive spaces such as the architectural ensembles will obviously hold much more power than the tradition museum space, and, in regards to this thesis in particular, they harness the temple’s architecture in a way the British Museum’s display never could. We should keep this advantage in mind during

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comparison and survey each space considering the objects already at each museum’s disposal.  

The period rooms were added in a new building on Fairmount (now the Main Building) under the direction of Fiske Kimball, who acted as director between 1925 and 1955. Kimball developed a lifelong career as an architect, which he began practicing in 1910. He served as an advisor on architectural conservation boards for sites such as Colonial Williamsburg and the National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings and Monuments. The inclusion of these period interiors transforms the traditional separation between art object and profane (museum) space; rather, the space itself becomes the art object and visitors are forced to reconcile this new designation with their understanding of typical museum behavior. Furthermore, the architectural ensembles themselves emphasize the visitor’s haptic experience, as the “period rooms” literally envelop visitors into the art on display. The South Indian pillared temple hall adds layers of complexity to an analysis of the gallery’s design, and the temple hall is also deeply entrenched in a long history of displacement, meaning-making, and art historical practices.

**Critical Approaches**

Ultimately this thesis will advocate for a restaging of South Asian galleries to move further toward a decolonial museum experience. Decoloniality emerged among scholars of the Global South, primarily, who sought to introduce plurality into existing narratives. As semiotician Walter Mignolo clarifies, decoloniality is “neither a ‘new’ or ‘better’ global design that will supersede previous ones,” but instead a global narrative that integrates different stories.

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9 In other words, I do not advocate for the relocation of a pillared temple hall into every Western museum.

from different perspectives around the same events and, in the case of the museum, objects.\textsuperscript{11} Post-colonial critique provides a solid basis for uncovering the control and exploitation of people and land exerted by colonial powers, and decoloniality takes this discourse one step further, attempting to “return agency to those who have lost it.”\textsuperscript{12} Decoloniality does not merely address issues of physical detachment from colonial powers; according to Ivan Muniz-Reed, an independent curator and researcher with interest in the Global South, the aim of decolonial theory is to “re-inscribe histories and perspectives, which have been devalued through ‘radical exercises of un-thinking, de-disciplining, and re-educating.’”\textsuperscript{13} The role of the museum as an educational institution, first, and as an arbiter of aesthetics, second, places it at the forefront of decolonial discussion. This thesis will argue, through specific case studies and colonial histories, that the museum has long been the stage for “un-thinking” and “re-educating.” Furthermore, art institutions’ efforts to include oppressed histories in recent years have fallen short of true inclusion since they still operate within a “coloniality of knowledge” that has yet to be addressed.\textsuperscript{14} That is, Dr. Marie-Laure Allain Bonilla, a scholar of the history of exhibitions, concludes: “the battle [to decolonize museums] will probably not be won until museums become spaces of ‘knowledge-without-power,’” being intentional and transparent in their role as ethical cultural translators and how those constructed narratives have shaped the history of art.\textsuperscript{15}

While decolonial theory will form the justication for arguments made in this thesis, theory falls short when building new methodologies and new practices.\textsuperscript{16} I will therefore also

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 129.
draw from museum studies scholarship on object-centered interpretation practices. Object-centered approaches leaves room in interpretation for the object to speak. In other words, the objects’ attracting power leads the conversation between space, object and viewer. Often object-centered approaches are framed by larger questions of materiality as in anthropologist Sandra Dudley’s anthology, *Museum Materialities*, which explores phenomenological and other approaches to embodied experience. A benefit of museum studies scholarship, as opposed to art historical research and theoretical critiques, is that it is based on museum practice and often considered from the perspective of the viewer. We, too, will take on the role of the museum visitor: a non-expert, perhaps seeing Hindu deities for the first time, and probably judging this “imaginative” and complex religious tradition by the few exquisite sculptures that were chosen for transcontinental travel.

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17 Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (1991); Hooper-Greenhill (2004); Sandra Dudley (2010); Juliette Fritsch (2011); Crispin Paine (2012).
Chapter 1: Contextualization

In order to trace the effects of colonialism and the Western museum\textsuperscript{18} on Hindu devotional objects, we must first situate the objects within their ritual context. This chapter will focus primarily on the notions of the image in Hindu ritual and from whence its meaning and value derive. Two characteristics of the image in Hinduism factor most heavily into the complexities of its translation into the Western museum space. First, its nature as a conduit for the divine, activated by ritual action, is what gives the image presence and power. Second, the physical adornment of the image with flowers, garments, and other offerings departs from the typical Western museum display; the rich, sensory experience of the Hindu image in the temple is difficult to translate into the sterile space of the Western museum. In order for museums to seek respectful translation, it is vital that the sacred and the many ritual activities that construct it are understood.

The image in Hinduism

Indologist Diana Eck says of “visual” India, “One sees people at work and at prayer; one sees plump, well-endowed merchants, simple renouncers, fraudulent ‘holy’ men, frail widows, and emaciated lepers; one sees the festival procession, the marriage procession, and the funeral procession. Whatever the Hindus affirm of the meaning of life, death, and suffering, they affirm with their eyes wide open.”\textsuperscript{19} Eck establishes Hinduism as an “imaginative” and “image-making” religious tradition early on in her book on darshan, or the act of “seeing and being seen” by deities. The “image” of the divine is abundant in India, from outdoor shrines to large temple

\textsuperscript{18} Museums are necessarily a Western construct, and a construct which often exists outside the West. As for the effects of the museum project in places outside the West, I can only postulate having not visited any nor extensively researched any for this project.

complexes and in the form of painting, sculpture, film, and more. While an in-depth knowledge of the Hindu pantheon and iconography is central to fully understanding Hinduism and its images, this chapter (and subsequent ones) will focus mainly on the function of the image in broad terms and in worship. This is not to say that study of iconography should not be or cannot be undertaken by the museum visitor, but rather that the image’s physicality and materiality is perhaps a more direct way to engage museum audiences in this imaginative and complex tradition.

The use of images is common across many religious and spiritual traditions, and even aniconic images are used to inspire meditation on the divine. Unlike the icons of Orthodox Christianity, however, which act as intercessors between devotees and God, Hindu images are perceived and treated as the divine embodied. Murti is the general term for the images one sees in Hindu temples. In the early period of the Bhagavad Gita (c. 200 BCE) and Upanishads (c. 800-600 BCE)—two religious texts to which Eck points for early uses of the term—murti does not mean “icon” but a “congealing of form and limit from that larger reality which has no form or limit.” Understanding this dual nature of the image—as both conduit for the divine and guide to the divine—is what professor of Religious Studies Richard Davis calls the “devotional eye”: a “lifetime’s worth of knowledge of cultural values and myths/theology.” This abstract concept is often foreign to Western audiences, and the museum’s role in initiating and elucidating this understanding is critical to a deeper experience with Hindu objects. While the consecrated image holds God’s presence continuously, like a conduit for the divine, the deity is by no means limited to the image nor is worship limited to murtis.

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20 Eck, *Darsan*, 38.
The Hindu pantheon consists of hundreds of deities and is notably inclusive of many sectarian traditions and spiritual paths; the goal of these many paths, however, is the same: union/communion with the One. Depending on the sectarian tradition, the one may be conceived of as a specific deity from which all other deities and material reality manifest. Three deities—Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi—are associated with the largest sectarian traditions, and many deities in the pantheon are iterations—various manifestations or avatars—of these three. Therefore, Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi are featured often in museum collections, along with Ganesha, the elephant-headed god. The next paragraphs will briefly survey two popular Hindu deities that will be discussed in this thesis in order to provide more explicit examples of their nature and roles.

Vishnu, in Sanskrit “The Pervader,” is worshipped by Vaishnavas, who recognize him as the creator of innumerable manifestations in which he is embodied and lives a life in material existence. He is said to manifest a portion of himself “anytime he is needed to fight evil and to protect dharma (moral and religious law).” Vishnu has ten main avatars: Fish Tortoise, Boar, Man-Lion, Dwarf, Rama with the Ax, Lord Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalkin. Lord Rama and Krishna, especially, have become deities in their own right, and both are represented in the case studies.

Shiva, in Sanskrit “The Auspicious One,” is worshipped as the supreme god by Shaivites as a god of paradox. He is conceived as simultaneously formless and with form, male and female, creator and destroyer, ascetic and erotic. He is often depicted in a manner that references this paradoxical nature. For example, he can be depicted as a naked ascetic or as the cosmic dancer (Shiva Nataraja) (Fig. 11)—the quintessential image of Shiva dancing in a ring of

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23 Ibid.
fire. While the Nataraja image has come to be synonymous with Shiva (and Hinduism in general) in the West, the temple image of Shiva is more varied. In temples and shrines, Shiva is worshipped in the form of the lingam, a cylindrical object often embedded in a yoni, or spouted dish (Fig. 1).\textsuperscript{25} This aniconic representation of Shiva is the most sacred of objects in Shaivite temples as it embodies his niskala/sakala aspects (or without parts/with parts).\textsuperscript{26} The linga represents both the “subtle body” of Shiva and the unmanifest absolute, neither completely formless nor completely formed.\textsuperscript{27} By contrast, the iconic nature of art museums dictates that the linga is often overlooked or excluded from South Asian art galleries, even if it is sometimes adorned with faces, as in the case of this linga in the Victoria & Albert Museum sculpture gallery (Fig. 2). The frequent exclusion of the aniconic linga exposes the Western understanding of Hindu murti as idol.\textsuperscript{28} As discussed above, the connotations of idol in Western culture do not parallel the Hindu use of murti. Rather, the murti embodies and points beyond itself to more abstract and pure forms and is intended to spur further meditation on the immaterial divine, even as a material object is facilitating this meditation.

**Ritual activity and adornment in the temple**

In Hindu ritual, the murti plays an especially prominent role. The focus of the worshipper is on the murti and ritual activity occurs on and around the murti itself. Ritual activity can occur anywhere from the temple to the home, but all ritual involves deep attention and respect for the

\textsuperscript{25} Doniger, “Shiva.”
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 172.
\textsuperscript{28} Kavita Singh, “Museums and the Making of Art Historical Canon,” in *Towards A New Art History*, ed. Shivaji Panikkar, Parul Mukherji, and Deeptha Achar, (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 2003), 333-57. Singh explains the impact of art historical genre on Indian art history in her essay, “Museums and the Making of an Indian Art Historical Canon.” The integration of Indian art into Western canon presents temple architecture as sculpture or illuminated manuscript as painting. Indian art history has literally had to repurpose objects to fit into existing categories. This organization is another reason that the linga is so often excluded.
murti. Most simply, the devotee comes to make offerings of flowers and food, receive darshan from the deity, and finally take prasad (sanctified food offerings from the preceding ritual activity). A general term for these rites of worship is puja, performed formally by special priests called pujaris or informally by ordinary devotees.\(^{29}\) While murtis are often mediated by a priest, a priest is not required for practicing darshan in a temple. Direct, personal interaction with the religious object is valued and encouraged. During engagement with murtis, all the senses—touch, sight, sound, smell, taste—are utilized. The murti is awakened, dressed, bathed, served, washed, and put to sleep, these intimate domestic tasks highlighting the “personhood” that accompanies the murti’s “objecthood.” Moreover, such simple ritual actions point to the “everyday” nature of ritual activity. During a visit to the Richmond Temple, I watched one priest dress a murti with fresh flower garlands while listening to the radio on his phone. The worshipper in the Hindu temple is comfortable with the permeability of the sacred and profane.

In addition to ritual action, murtis are enlivened with material adornment like flower garlands and cloth garments (Fig. 3). This adornment does not add to the murti but constitutes an essential part of the murti itself. The murti is most often seen adorned, as the deity is dressed every morning and curtains close over the shrines at night. Lavish ornaments and dress conceal much of the murti from the devotee, and access is often further limited by some sort of barrier to the front.\(^{30}\) In Figure 4, a set of stairs marks the boundary between the deity and viewer along with a polite sign stating, “Priest Only Beyond this Point.” Some museums have re-contextualized devotional objects within their ritual context, notably the Newark Museum which houses a Tibetan Buddhist shrine blessed by the Dali Lama. The Freer | Sackler Gallery’s 1997

\(^{29}\) Eck, Darsan, 47.

exhibition *Puja: Expressions of the Divine* displayed Hindu objects with their ritual adornments. A review of the exhibition by anthropologist Susan Bean showcases a unique conversation that emerges with re-contextualization:

> As an anthropologist-reviewer, seeing these religious images installed contextually in an art museum underscored the importance of also showing those works decontextualized—as art—for the sheer magnificence of their forms as technical and expressive achievements of the sculptors who created them.³¹

That is, according to Bean, anthropological consideration does not coexist with art historical method. Art history studies the “sheer magnificence of their forms,” while anthropological museums install objects contextually, not as art. Why, though, does “art” necessarily designate a bare object? This question cannot be fully extrapolated in this thesis, but the false dichotomy between anthropology and fine art plays a large role in how these two case studies translate their collections.³² The *murti* is not separate from its adornment but rather the adornment and ritual activity is integrated into the meaning of the object; therefore, speaking of displays of Hindu objects with ritual adornment as *added on to* and not *part of* the object itself needs to be further problematized.

In *Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion*, three settings for worship—temple, home, and outdoor shrine—were highlighted via the three principle Hindu deities—Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi. Objects were shown as they would appear during worship, with fruit and flower offerings, incense burners, etc. Next to the Shiva galleries, a video about *puja* played continuously, providing further context and sensory elements. The galleries holding images of Vishnu and Devi were similarly designed. The report also found an interesting tendency of visitors to see a

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³² See A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Examples of Indian Art*, Portfolio (London: Oldbourne Press, 1910). This question was also addressed by prominent Indian art historian, A.K. Coomaraswamy, when he lamented the “archaeological” treatment given to stone sculptures and architectural fragments coming from India. Coomaraswamy and others were pivotal in the shift of Indian art history from a focus on “artifact” to “art”.

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museum of Asian art “as being more about Asia than about art;” the visitors commended the museum for highlighting the context and background of the objects so as to explain “what meaning they have in the culture,” as one visitor said. The report concluded with this observation:

These visitors had such diverse backgrounds and approaches that no single exhibition or display method could be expected to satisfy them all equally. The same density of information that some visitors find personal, accessible, real, other visitors find cluttered and disturbing. The same emphasis on objects that some visitors associate with aesthetic, spiritual and imaginative responses, other visitors consider boring and inaccessible.

While this conclusion is rather bleak, the Freer | Sackler’s initiative to display contextualized Hindu devotional objects contributed valuable data and insight to the field. Many visitors expressed a deeper meaning found in the re-contextualized objects.

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Fig. 1. Shiva linga at the Richmond Temple. Richmond, Virginia. Photo taken by author.

Fig. 2. Shiva Ekamuklinga. About 400-50. Sandstone. Victoria & Albert Museum, London.
Fig. 3. Sri Shiva and Parvati shrine at the Richmond Temple. Richmond, Virginia. Photo taken by author.
Fig. 4. Sri Ganapati shrine at the Richmond Temple. Richmond, Virginia. Photo taken by author.
Chapter 2: De-/Re-contextualization

The following exploration of colonialism in the subcontinent represents just a small piece of a long narrative of conquest—political, cultural, and economic—and independence. While any study of South Asian art must include some acknowledgement of colonial discourse and power dynamics, it would be impossible and outside the scope of this study in particular to fully explore such a broad topic. Instead, I have chosen key moments and ideas that have emerged for me out of colonial discourse as essential to understanding the processes at work in Western museum spaces. The museum project itself has a lengthy history in many contexts other than South Asia, but, again, to explore this history in detail would detract from the goals of the study. The following remarks provide an overview of the emergence of Indian art history, as well as the history of collecting within the region, and the resulting de- and re-contextualization that the objects themselves have undergone through their transference into the museum context.

British colonialism in India

British engagement in India began as a commercial enterprise from the late seventeenth century onwards. The East India Company was royally chartered in 1600 to serve as a trading body for English merchants, specifically in the East Indian spice trade. This commercial enterprise soon became a territorial conquest, which in turn led to a “civilizing mission” by the early eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century. With the formation of a colonial government in the late eighteenth century came European study of Sanskrit, translation of Hindu texts, and

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eventually Christian missionary groups. Not only did British rule have drastic effects on the education and politics of the colonized, the identity of the subcontinent itself was changed forever. A unification of regions occurred that would eventually, after partition in 1947, form the modern nation of India. [Seems like you need a statement here about the collecting of Indian objects and their installations in Western museums] This nebulous history of peoples and nationhood presents certain uncertainties today in terms of the repatriation of objects. Kavita Singh, a scholar of the history of collections, suggests that returning to an “ordinary past” often results in a “game of infinite regress for before the British, there were the Mughals; before the Mughals, the Sultanates; before the Sultanates, a Hindu dynasty; before the Hindus, the Buddhists; before the Buddhists…and on, and on, and on.” Therefore, colonialism in this case does not mark an invasion of one nation into another nation but the systematic organization—performed by the British—of a multicultural society which was then positioned around British culture as the authoritative core.

As colonial presence slowly structured South Asian society, cultural practices and material culture underwent processes of translation. Anthropologist Bernard Cohn remarks:

The British conquest of India brought them into a new world which they tried to comprehend using their own forms of knowing and thinking…Unknowingly and unwittingly they had not only invaded and conquered a territory but, through their scholarship, had invaded an epistemological space as well. The British believed that they could explore and conquer this space through translation: establishing correspondences could make the unknown and the strange knowable.

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37 Singh, Kavita. “Why Nehru was right in failing to ask for the Kohinoor to be returned to India.” Scroll.in (opinion), April 24, 2016, https://scroll.in/article/807100/why nehru was right in not asking for the return of the kohinoor to india.

The complexities of translation ring true even today as cultural translation becomes increasingly present with the rise of modern globalization. If language is considered broadly—both spoken/written word and cultural epistemologies, narratives, and habits—then we participate daily in an act of translation. Translation of text requires deep understanding not only of language but of cultural values and worldviews. It is important to note, therefore, that in the following case studies and observations, each interpretation and presentation of Hindu art has undergone its own translation process. Sophie Williamson, Programme Curator at Camden Arts Centre, London, ended an exploration of cultural translation with a series of questions:

If we can admit defeat in transparent translation, is there then instead something to be gained from recognizing and embracing a lack of understanding? Can we transcend languages, whether linguistic or visual? If contemporary hybridity is infinitely nuanced, plural and porous, perhaps creating a framework within which a multitude of collective voices can be heard is the only plausible solution.

In subsequent chapters, the translations attempted by both the British Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art will be assessed against these “decolonized” criteria. If the most effective acts of translation occur as intimate, nuanced, and individual meditations, the art museum, I will argue, is the optimal stage for cultural understanding. This stage, of course, must be altered from its current state in order to fulfill that role, and unfortunately in the case of Indian art history, the structural forms of colonial power and bias that require altering are deeply ingrained in many Western academic institutions.

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39 I am using “modern globalization” here to refer to the mass migration of peoples and ideas occurring, helped by growing access to technology. Globalization in terms of the movement of cultures, objects, and peoples has been happening for millennia through intercontinental trade and migration patterns.

Constructing “Indian Art History”

Indian art history of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries owes its progress to the early “exotic travelogues” of European scholars in the mid-nineteenth century, which quickly developed into archaeological and ethnographical projects by the late nineteenth century. These projects chose objects of “curiosity” based on aesthetic considerations rather than financial value, and the aesthetic considerations were formed within the larger paradigm of “Orientalism.” Edward Said, post-colonial scholar, defines “the Oriental” as a “kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction” constructed by Europeans in order to highlight both a distinct image of the other and a contrasting idea of European culture itself. For the purposes of early trade, Indian manufactures in 1851 were subordinate in quantity and importance to the display of Indian raw materials—coal, oil, precious stones, saltpeter and spices—“symptomatic of the direct economic interests underpinning British involvement with India.” Early on, inconsistencies were found between the Indian art that the British encountered and the British’s own art historical genres.

In the twentieth century, national and regional museums in India were developed, which “slackened the pace of acquisitions” at the BM. International laws were established to protect the cultural heritage of regions whose material culture had been stripped from their lands.
During this time, the BM transformed from a “cabinet of Asiatic curiosities” (in the most traditional sense) into a cultural history museum.\textsuperscript{47} The effectiveness of such a transformation could be further debated and will be touched upon in subsequent chapters. With a greater interest in Indian art, however, came the need to categorize the ever-growing collections. Often, in a gallery of South Asian art, such as the one at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the sculptures, paintings, and other media are divided into categories of “Hindu”, “Jain”, or “Buddhist” art. These distinctions betray a European attempt to bring order to a “body of material which may actually be without order.”\textsuperscript{48} This particular quote further betrays a Eurocentric bias and I would add my own clarification: “which may actually be without an order that Western viewers immediately understand.”

Though South Asian art now is admired beyond its raw material value, this shift came at great cost to South Asians hoping to define their own genres of art. As with most non-Western art integrated into the Western academy, South Asian art was forced into existing categories.\textsuperscript{49} Kavita Singh powerfully comments on this construction of Indian art history by the West.

However, the two "fine art" genres constituted here for India--sculpture and painting--are artificial categories. Both are literally composed of shards wrenched out of other, embedding, cultural phenomena that are crucial to their understanding and appreciation. Instead of viewing objects \textit{in situ}, Indian Art History presents the architectural fragment as sculpture, and the detached manuscript folio as painting, in an approximation of a western model of these arts.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{47} Knox et al., “South Asia at the British Museum,” 56.
\textsuperscript{49} See A.K. Coomaraswamy, “Indian Nationality,” in \textit{Essays in National Idealism} (Colombo, Ceylon:Colomo Apothecaries Co. Ltd., 1909), 7-13. Important scholars who addressed these constrictions and sought to defend Indian art and culture against European attitudes are E.B. Havell, an English arts administrator, and A.K. Coomaraswamy, a prominent Indian art historian. Coomaraswamy especially sought to constitute a nationality for India (working pre-independence) through a progressive art history.
\textsuperscript{50} Kavita Singh, “Museums and the Making,” 352.
The Philadelphia Museum combated some of these concerns in their reinstallation by mounting temple architectural fragments onto a large image of a temple façade (Fig. 8). This display serves as a small step towards decolonizing genre.

**Repatriation and its complexities**

Given the contested histories of most non-Western objects in Western museums, scholars and public alike have voiced desire for action. Calls for repatriation are becoming increasingly common in the museum world; most famous among them, perhaps, are the Elgin Marbles, removed from the Parthenon in the early nineteenth century by Scottish nobleman Thomas Bruce and housed ever since at the BM. Other repatriation controversies at the British Museum in 2018 alone include the Rosetta Stone and the Moai statue from Rapa Nui (Easter Island). In April 2018, Alice Procter of “Uncomfortable Art Tours” spoke out against her detractors on the necessity of her tours, which focus on slavery and colonialism in London museums.51 Her groups wear badges bearing the words “Display It Like You Stole It,” which are designed to, in her words, “push museums and visitors to rethink the politics of presentation in galleries.”52 Procter’s assertion that the British Museum’s Benin and South Pacific collections or the V&A’s Indian collections are “largely spoils of war” is admittedly oversimplified, yet she effectively draws public attention to issues of colonialism and patrimony. Procter also suggests that her unaffiliated status allows her to interrogate histories that museum staff often cannot. This suggested notion is entirely valid, yet, along with outside tour groups and opinion columns, it should initiate a conversation about how exactly museum staff can interrogate their pasts. A reporter from *The Guardian* who followed Procter on one of her art tours states that, “at times,

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52 Ibid.
it’s a little like an echo chamber.”\(^{53}\) A change on an institutional level—which Procter notes is her bigger aim—would reach more people who may not necessarily have considered such perspectives in the first place.

A change in interpretive practices for non-Western objects is not as simple as blanket repatriation or even admitting to ambiguous collecting methods like “looting” or “spoils of war” on museum labels. Dr. Sushma Jansari, curator of the Asian ethnographic and South Asia collections at the British Museum, responded to Procter’s comments in another article entitled, “‘Not everything was looted’: British Museum to fight critics.”\(^{54}\) Jansari claims that the British Museum’s “Collected Histories” talks are meant to combat the widely-held assumption that the majority of the collections derive from a colonial context and were acquired by Europeans via looting. The talks are curator-led and will engage with the ways that artifacts entered the collection and other histories that may not make it into the forty-word object labels. Jansari’s own talk will include the Bridge collection of Indian art, collected by East India Company general, Charles Stuart. As Jansari explained her own stance on the nuanced history:

> If you just say East India Company…most people would just say: ‘Must be looted’,” she said. “But this is a guy who converted to Hinduism; he practised ritual bathing, hired two Brahmins to look after the collection, he was absolutely anti Europeans proselytising Christianity in India. When you tell a more nuanced story, it doesn’t fit other people’s agendas but it’s still fascinating. That’s the difference between what we are doing and what other people are doing.\(^{55}\)

Any reaction on the part of the British Museum would seem a sort of defense mechanism, and not an uncommon defense at that. Kwame Appiah cites a similar response to British collecting in a 2006 book review in which British officer, Major Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell,

\(^{53}\) Ibid.


\(^{55}\) Ibid.
ordered the inventory and removal of treasures from the Asante region of Ghana. “It wasn’t looting; it was collecting,” says Appiah, paraphrasing Baden-Powell.\(^\text{56}\) The museum’s emphasis on legitimate provenance does seem, however, a particularly insidious way to avoid responsibility for colonial power imbalances.

Modern India’s identity, shaped by its history and the many cultures that comprise it, adds even more complexity to cases of repatriation. The nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) clamors with the Indian National Congress for control of parliament.\(^\text{57}\) With the BJP pushing religious (i.e. Hindu) nationalism, often surfacing in violent ways, Hindu objects in foreign hands become an even more volatile issue. In April of 2016, a non-governmental organization (NGO) in India asked for the return of the Kohinoor diamond, now part of the British Crown Jewels.\(^\text{58}\) This request followed the successful repatriation of over 200 artifacts from the United States in the same year. The NGO called upon UNESCO’s *Prohibition and Prevention of the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* as grounds for removal from British hands, which actually exempts colonial-era transfers of cultural property, as they occurred before 1970. Generally then, the return of artifacts to the formerly colonized is not demanded by law or formal agreement, and while some have raised discontent on this issue, India never has.\(^\text{59}\)

Kavita Singh explains India’s longstanding government policy of avoiding repatriation demands. She cites the Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India clarifying his


\(^\text{59}\) Kavita Singh, “Why Nehru was right in failing to ask for the Kohinoor to be returned to India,” *Scroll.in* opinion, April 24, 2016, https://scroll.in/article/807100/why nehru was right in not asking for the return of the kohinoor to india.
“personal opinion” as opposed to official policy about his determination to “bring back” Indian objects. Former Prime Minister, Jawaharal Nehru, Singh thinks, understood that “it is far more productive to look forward, rather than to look back.” This history of silence begs the question, given a recent surge of repatriation requests from Prime Minister Narendra Modi (BJP) in the spring of 2016, why these objects and why now? Of the over 200 ancient artifacts returned, Modi chose to highlight just a few on his Twitter account: a statue of Saint Manikkavacakar, a Hindu mystic and poet and a bronze sculpture of the Hindu god Ganesha. The return of these objects to India, as well as the arrest of the dealer himself, is a step forward for the discontinuation of the illicit antiquities market; however, thinly veiled political motivations behind these repatriations should not be ignored. At the very least, repatriation cannot be considered synonymous to reparation and art will never be devoid of its political and cultural power. Moreover, given this parallel duty as vessel of cultural identity, the transference between contexts of Hindu objects causes more than just physical repercussions.

**Marks of Removal**

Colonial powers often construct images to fit into and serve their hegemonic societal structure. In *Orientalism*, Said describes the processes of image-construction and its adverse effects: “one tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well-known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things

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60 Ibid.
61 Singh, “Why Nehru was right.”
seen for the first time, as versions of a *previously known thing*.” Image construction is a reconstruction of reality. Therefore, the discourse surrounding colonialism must first deconstruct this reality in order to critique it in a way that “displaces” rather than “dismisses” the mechanisms of colonialism. This distinction between displacement and dismissal is central to the issue of objects in museums. Efforts for repatriation dismiss as they place physical dislocation as central to an object’s meaning, implying—on a broad level—that replacement (in the original context) will result in a reinstatement of original meaning and will right past wrongs. Unfortunately, marks of removal are far from purely physical, as are the effects of colonialism and “otherness” on our perception of culture and objects.

Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha brings up an “urgent need” within colonial discourse in his book *The location of culture*. He says that future discourse needs to “contest similarities of difference and to articulate diverse ‘subjects’ of differentiation.” The construction of the other creates a homogenized kind of diversity. This diversity can easily be presented to the public in a way that succinctly defines one culture from the other. Often, of course, the culture being presented is then simplified—resulting in a degradation of abstract concepts into a concrete form. The job of cultural institutions, therefore, is not only to present a culture; in the case of South Asian art and other formerly-colonized societies, there is a larger goal of de-objectifying these objects that have been fashioned into commodities whose images and meanings can be traded for political and social aims.

How can museums make amends to cultures that historically have been desecrated by the museum project itself? Surely in some cases, repatriation is appropriate, but even objects that were not torn from their context through warfare still represent the violence that has occurred

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66 Ibid., 74.
over centuries and has shaped the way westerners see the “East” more generally today. These objects, too, should be rectified, perhaps not as peace offerings, but as a means of radical change. The following case studies explore current trends in gallery design and the politics of display through two recently reinstalled museum galleries, the British Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. While these objects will be referred to in their new context and in their new roles, it is still important to keep in mind their prior vitality as objects charged with ritual power. While this ritual context can never be fully regained in most cases, the objects’ inherent attracting power can be harnessed once again.
Chapter 3: The Museum: construction of visual experience

Between the eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, some Western museums were designed to resemble palaces or temples and evoke the sacred secular rites performed within these public monuments. The façade of these secular temples of “culture” (of course, formed from a Western perspective) was meant to elevate the experience within, one that was dominated by “eye-minded” philosophy. Art historian Carol Duncan directly ties the museum to other acts of civil ritual.

The museum…is a complex architectural phenomenon that selects and arranges works of art within a sequence of spaces. This totality of art and architectural form organizes the visitor’s experience as a script organizes a performance…the architecture is a given and imposes the same underlying structure on everyone. By following the architectural script, the visitor engages in an activity most accurately described as a ritual. While the ritualistic nature of the museum visit has been established, little scholarship has investigated the exact mechanisms of this ritual and how it affects the objects within the museum. The following chapter will survey the “sequence of spaces” present within both Western museum case studies. This survey will serve as a foundation for the argument that the museum ritual is not only embedded within each visitor’s experience but is also embedded within a Westernized framework.

*The Primacy of Vision (within a Western epistemology)*

The primacy of visual experience—over other sensory experiences—begins well before the visitor walks through the museum doors. Starting in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment,

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69 Duncan and Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” 450
sight became “the organ of the intellect.” The visual was tied to objectivity and empiricism, as opposed to the subjectivity of the other senses. By the nineteenth century, new expectations for museum behavior were established along with a hierarchy of the senses. Museum studies scholar Viv Golding concisely sums up this hierarchy of senses in her chapter “Dreams and Wishes: The multi-sensory museum space.” Golding steps outside “the contemporary European ordering of just five senses, with the sense of sight positioned at the apex of ‘civilization’ followed by the aural, while smell, taste and touch are regarded as ‘lower senses’ associated with ‘lower races.’” In other words, the “rational” and the “sensual” have been pitted against each other incorrectly and at the expense of non-Western objects in the museum.

The expectations of museum behavior could be defined as a constructed phenomenology imposed upon the museum goer. It is this behavior that constitutes “ritual,” and that should be considered more seriously in the creation of museum display. We can map cultural phenomenologies onto the different viewers of Hindu objects (i.e. Hindu practitioner, museum curator, museum visitor, etc.). While the differences of motivation, context, and relationship to object—between and within each group—are individualistic and vast, I would argue that there are general principles present across each group and within each space which guide and define individual’s behaviors. A museum visitor, for example, primarily understands walking through a gallery as an experience of looking and reading. They seek out didactic texts, though often do not read those wall panels in their entirety. For the visitor to the permanent gallery, who is the primary focus of this thesis, browsing seems to be the preferred method of looking. Visitors may

71 Woodall, “Sensory engagements,” 100.
move to look closer at a work of art, but motion sensors and vigilant guards have conditioned
them to keep a reasonably safe distance. Mignolo combats the desensitization of modern
aesthetics with a counter-concept, decolonial aesthesis.74 According to Mignolo, aesthesis, an
ancient Greek concept broadly referring to the senses, was absorbed into Immanuel Kant’s
concept of aesthetics, thus, “devaluing…any sensory experience conceptualized outside of
European aesthetic categories.”75 These processes could account for the museum visitors’ lack of
awareness of their other sensory faculties while in the museum—even though these other sensory
faculties are being used—and instead considering the museum to be a place of “aesthetics,”
especially of sight.

**Textual Didactics**

While each museum experience is rooted in vision, museum professionals are limited in
their ability to control the act of seeing. Though supplemented by lighting, color, and methods of
display, often interpretive materials are limited to textual information, especially on section and
object labels. Published scholarship on museum interpretation of religion and objects is
abundant, and most studies focus on ways that viewers engage with objects.76 Often, to shape
interpretation practices, museums track audience engagement through observation and visitor
surveys, as do the PMA and BM, but the results of these studies are usually reserved for internal
use. Based on broad conventions, object labels—especially in art museum contexts—connect
first visually to the object and then intellectually or historically. As Curator of Ancient Art at the

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74 Muniz-Reed, “Thoughts on Curatorial Practices,” 100.
75 Ibid., 100.
76 Gretchen Townsend Buggeln and Barbara Franco, *Interpreting Religion at Museums and Historic Sites*
(Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Juliette Fritsch, “Education is a department isn’t it?:
Perceptions of Education, Learning and Interpretation in Exhibition Development,” in Fritsch, *Museum
Gallery Interpretation*, 234-248.
Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Peter Schertz noted to me two summers ago, how a curator begins a label reveals their priorities regarding interpretation.

To analyze the section and object labels in each set of museum galleries, I created five categories of information that tend to be included in didactic texts: iconography, context, myth, materials, and engagement. Iconographic information includes a visual description of the object and an explanation of the symbolic details and their meanings. Contextual information might be a description of the object in its original context or the viewers’ relationship to the object (i.e. ritual behavior, preservation, etc.). I also looked for mention of provenance and, if found, included it in this category. “Myth” encompasses more than merely the mention of religious texts; this category includes any mention of the relationship of the object to Hinduism (or Buddhism, Jainism, Islam in some cases) as a religion and/or spiritual path. Myth may be similar to iconography but tends to be more narratively, rather than visually focused. For example, a BM object label reads: “According to myth, Daksha [father-in-law to Shiva] refused to invite Shiva and Sati to a great sacrifice. In response to this insult, Shiva as Virabhadra beheaded Daksha.”77 For section labels that are not referencing specific objects, the myth category refers to any mention of religious traditions in an isolated and not strictly historical way. The material category refers to the material makeup of the object and the processes by which it was created. Finally, interactive elements directly involve the reader in an experience. Engagement can come in the form of prompts and suggestions and calls for interaction with the gallery and objects, usually beginning with active verbs. Engagement can also encompass iconography, myth, or even context, but the unique construction of the sentence makes these particular phrases stand out; thus, they should be noted as a separate entity.

77 British Museum label for “Ceremonial shield showing Shiva as Virabhadra,” about 1700-1800, probably Karnataka, India, 1853,0108.9. These two sentences explain the origin of Daksha’s ram-head, given to him by a remorseful Shiva after Shiva beheaded Daksha.
Specific examples of museum texts and labels illustrate the use of these categories. The Philadelphia Museum (PMA) object labels are generally between sixty and ninety words long, and section labels are around one hundred and fifty words. At a fine art museum, I expected didactics to focus primarily on iconography. The PMA’s object labels confirm this hypothesis; 35.84% of text concerned “iconography”, followed by 29.55% “myth”, 28.36% “context”, 3.31% “engagement”, and 2.93% “material.” The following example from a PMA object illustrates four of the five categories as they appear in an object label:78

This image captures the joining of opposites that is key to the god Vishnu’s avatar (incarnation) as Narasimha (nara=man, simha=lion). His position shows him as both a divine king and yogi, and as a fierce beast.

Vishnu took the man-lion form when a human king, believing himself invincible, upset the balance of the cosmos. When the gods requested Vishnu’s help he incarnated as Narasimha and gutted the king.

Devotees appease this ferocious incarnation of Vishnu by ritually bathing him in various cooling liquids, like milk and turmeric water, as can be seen in the video in this gallery.79

The first two sentences (underlined) guide the visitor through a visual analysis of the object in front of them, pointing to specific visual features and explaining how they are symbolic for other South Asian understandings of the god Vishnu. The next two sentences (italicized) offer a myth-based explanation of the visual elements. South Asian gallery didactics at both the PMA and the BM often draw on the rich textual traditions to enliven the objects. I split the last sentence into two categories. The first part (bolded) incorporates contextual information that often references ritual activities associates with the object; the second directs viewers to a supporting video in the gallery. In other museum label examples, the ritual activity is fortified by existing impacts on the object, such as pointing to smoothing of the surface from repeated touching. Finally, “as can be

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78 This particular example does not include materials in the text, and since material is underrepresented in the PMA’s didactic texts, no object label contains all five categories. This object label was chosen because each part seems to me an excellent example of the categories.

79 Philadelphia Museum of Art label for “Narasimha (Vishnu’s Man-Lion Avatar),” Around 1000, India (Tamil Nadu).
seen in the video in this gallery” is just one way that engaging elements are used in didactic text. Though there are no active verbs as in other examples, the reference to another area in the gallery can be helpful in connecting the space as a whole rather than isolating each object. In this case, the prompt is also a call to action—to move and view the video in which rituals involving the object are featured.

The British Museum (BM) object labels yielded surprisingly similar results given its status as a museum of world cultures rather than specifically fine art. Object and section labels at the BM have similar word counts to those at the PMA, but the BM gives almost every object a label and incorporates fewer section labels, whereas the PMA relies more heavily on section labels for conveying information. Since the BM has a higher concentration of small objects and includes a label for each one, in this analysis I used only the labels including the god Shiva. Even with this restriction, the BM analysis included only eight less labels than the PMA’s thirty. The category breakdown for the BM is: 30.36% “iconography”; 26.56% “myth”; 25.09% “context”; 10.54% “material”; and 1.68% “engagement.” The hierarchy of the type of information is the same for both museums, although they differ in textual distribution. The following is an example from the BM that includes “material” information:

Shiva as Nataraja (the Lord of the Dance) is today the most famous image of Hindu India. Nataraja dances with one leg across the other and within a circle of flame—this is the anadatandava, the Dance of Bliss. A mid-Chola period example marks the beginning of this gallery.

This example, with its several iconographic differences from the late Cholas, is perhaps the earliest surviving bronze sculpture in this form. Archaeometallurgical tests also support a very early date in the mid-9th century. 

Like the PMA example, the BM object label begins with an explication of iconographic details (underlined). The first section ends with a reference to another piece in the gallery, which I term

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80 British Museum label for “Bronze image of Shiva as Nataraja,” about AD 850, Central Tamil Nadu, south India, 1969, 1216.1.
“engagement” for the same reasons as the previous example. The second section references the object’s materiality (dashed underlined), which can be scientific, as in this example, or technical (for instance, an explanation of the lost-wax method of bronze casting). This object label, at eighty-three words, is also shorter than the PMA example. While it is referential to the gallery on the whole, the tone is informative rather than interactive. As in most of the BM object labels, very little focus is put on the original context or ritual uses of the object. This thesis will serve as a critique of excluding such topics from interpretive material, but, for now, these two breakdowns further solidify the differing agendas of museums of “fine art” and “history” or “anthropology.”

Surprisingly, the two museums diverge far more in their longer section labels (see Table 1). The BM section labels are overwhelmingly contextual, which fits the gallery’s overarching emphasis on historical progression. By including historical information in the section labels, they allow themselves more room for other types of information in the object labels. On the other hand, the PMA is able to incorporate context, myth, and iconography in their section labels since they are more frequent throughout the galleries. Overall, especially keeping in mind the BM’s designation as a museum of world cultures, the division of information within its section and object labels is effective at communicating a large amount of information in a clear way. In a restructuring of their interpretive material, the BM has moved

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<th>British Museum</th>
<th>Philadelphia Museum of Art</th>
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<td>Context</td>
<td>72.11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Myth</td>
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<td>Iconography</td>
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<td>Material</td>
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<td>Engagement</td>
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<td>8.82%</td>
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Table 1. Breakdown of section labels at the PMA and BM.
towards using section labels as signage, primarily, giving only the briefest of information also with graphic maps. This type of section label was first tested in the Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries in September 2006; the South Asian gallery section labels follow this pattern to a degree, with maps of the region in question at the bottom and quotes in English and Indic languages at the top (Fig. 15).\(^{81}\)

Furthermore, the BM’s section labels contain no examples of engagement—compared to the PMA’s 8.82 percent. For example, through section labels, visitors at the PMA are called, “through the individual works of art on view here as well as in the nearby galleries, [to] discover some of the many ways that artists have helped devotees share stories, ideas, and experiences of the divine.”\(^{82}\) In another gallery, section labels inform visitors that, “you can experience how one of South Asia’s distinctive architectural traditions created dramatic, evocative spaces that let living devotees celebrate with the gods in their many sculpted forms.”\(^{83}\) In these examples, a direct engagement with the reader stands out against the other, more straightforward elements of the text. Moreover, as the textual doorway to certain themes and ideas, section labels are the perfect places to include such calls to action. If read by visitors, section labels can set up a physical and mental experience of the gallery by explicitly guiding the visitor through their actions. This intentional and constructed experience will be discussed further in the next chapter, but, for now, I want to emphasize the role of textual didactics in shaping the museum visit with their positioning in the space and inclusion/exclusion of certain ideas. In reality, most visitors spend around three minutes in the British Museum’s older permanent galleries, leaving little time

to see much less read the information presented to them.\textsuperscript{84} This reality is part of the motivation behind this thesis: given the short attention of the museum visitor, what can museum professionals do to convey ideas in a different, more effective, more appropriate, and more engaging way?

\textit{Spatial Organization}

Textual didactics constitute an overt construction of the visitor’s experience. Though unnamed, the writers of these accompanying texts convey a specific tone, voice, and type of information. For many visitors, this tone is taken as fact, when in reality it is still subjective and prone to the same biases as the (more obvious) colonial projects of past. Still more subtle is the construction of space within the gallery and the underlying connotations that exist in typical gallery spaces. Museum visitors are quiet; they walk diligently from object to object often following spatial cues like the placement of section and introduction panels and the obvious divisions between “elevated” and “mundane,” as indicated by plexiglas or pedestals, spotlights, and other triggers. The following case studies will provide examples of recent approaches to installation design. While this thesis will clearly point out and explain choices made regarding display, it is important to note that the museum visitor is not granted the same explicit detail. I will sketch the following spaces as they exist and at the same time consider how space can be constructed in order to refer directly to its “constructed-ness.” In my view, proper decolonial approaches should not just \textit{include} diverse narratives, but truly \textit{integrate} those narratives into every aspect of gallery design.

\textsuperscript{84} Francis, “Object-Centered Approaches,” 159. This data was cited in Francis’s article specifically regarding the British Museum’s older galleries. Since evaluative data is not readily available for all museums, and dwell time changes depending on gallery size, individual museum, etc., this estimate cannot be universally applied to all museum spaces. The estimate is helpful, though, at proving the point that permanent galleries experience low readership and lower dwell times overall.
The Philadelphia Museum of Art’s South Asian collection is included in its Asian wing (see Table 2), which also incorporates Chinese, Persian, Japanese, Southeast Asian, and Korean objects. Visitors enter the wing by first passing through a Persian pointed arch (Gallery 223) that frames the pillared temple hall in the following gallery (Gallery 224) (Fig. 5). Prior to the reinstallation of the gallery in 2016, a trio of bronze Hindu deities occupied the main line of vision from the entrance. Today, however, visitors can see directly through the galleries to the Japanese Tea Garden in the very back of the wing (Gallery 226). This line of sight allows for a seamless visual and experiential integration of the regional arts of Asia. The subjugation of all Asian art into a separate wing apart from other artistic traditions is common among most museums and exposes the lingering “Orientalizing” that still pervades our experience of Asian art. The central axis of the wing showcases the architectural spaces that distinguish the PMA from other art museums: first, the South Indian Temple Hall from Madurai; next, the Reception Hall from the Palace of Duke Zhao; and finally, the Japanese Tea Room. Centering the immersive architectural spaces on the axis shapes the visitor’s perception in a way that

Table 2. Floor Plan of the Asian wing at the PMA. Red=closed windows and doorways. Blue=opened doorways. Courtesy of Leslie Essoglou.
emphasizes the physical and processual over the solely visual (though the visual is an experience in and of itself). When making observations of the galleries, I noticed that most visitors took a “straight-through” approach before circling back around to the side aisles. This movement presents an interesting path because it means that visitors see the pillared temple hall somewhat isolated from the other South Asian galleries as Galleries 230-227 would be the last visited.

Galleries 231-227, adjacent to the pillared temple hall, are themed South Asian galleries, together displaying a mix of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Jain art. Some galleries incorporate all or a combination of these traditions. A set of three galleries to the right of the Pillared Temple Hall constitute the main narrative surrounding Hindu objects at the PMA: “Art, Power, Status” (Fig. 7), “Temple Sculpture” (Fig. 8), and “Art and the Divine” (Fig. 9). Compared to the previous gallery before reinstallation, in the current iteration an effort was made to enhance the artworks through a softer blue-toned wall, integration of contemporary and ancient arts, and the creation of smaller, experiential moments within a larger gallery space. In the previous gallery, windows open to western light prevented the display of light-sensitive works, making the main inhabitants of the room stone sculptures. By closing off the windows, photographs, paintings, textiles, and prints can now be shown and are on rotation quite often. This change should recall Kavita Singh’s words about genres of Indian art history; the PMA’s effort incorporates not just sculpture but many aspects of South Asian production, including jewelry, items made for British patrons, ritual artifacts, and even art pieces made within the past century. A section label in “Art, Power, and Status,” sets up one theme of the gallery by summarizing just this:

Much of the artwork on view in this room highlights the complex relationship between the enormous region of India—including present-day Pakistan and Bangladesh—and the small island of Great Britain. English traders arrived in Asia in the early 1600s and by the mid-1700s exerted political control over a huge part of India. In 1857 the British government annexed India and ruled until the region achieved independence in 1947.
Indian artists created all of the objects you see here, producing them for sale to European markets. Many include “exotic” materials like ivory or tiger claws in exquisite displays of craftsmanship. Others, such as the images of India’s natural and human curiosities, reflect the way the British captured and catalogued their vast colony.⁸⁵

In the last paragraph, especially, the PMA is grappling with the shortcomings of genre and asking the visitor to do their own grappling as they turn to face portraits of the King and Queen produced in the early-1800s by Indian artists.

As I mentioned above, the reinstallation includes smaller, experiential moments within a larger gallery narrative. This intimacy is primarily achieved with stools for the visitors to sit on, perhaps meditating more fully on the works around them. In “Art and the Divine” (Fig. 9), three stools are placed in front of a large sculpture of a Jain Savior-Saint Seated in Meditation, mirroring visitors own posture and providing a sort of self-referential experience (Fig. 10). Intimate spaces are also created in entire galleries, as in “Temple Sculptures” (Fig. 8) and the Pillared Temple Hall (Fig. 6). I will devote the next chapter to analysis of space and atmosphere in the Pillared Temple Hall, but the “Temple Sculptures” room, too, harnesses this intimacy. Faced with looming sculptures mounted high on a wall to replicate their positioning on the temple architecture, the visitor is forced to consider their own scale in relation to the works. The gallery, though small, conveys the magnitude of sculpture from the Hindu tradition and helps to reassess the notion of “sculpture” as a genre of art.

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The British Museum’s South Asian collection is located in Room 33 (China and South Asia Gallery) (see Table 3). The main entrance presents visitors with two paths: one, to the South Asian side, and the other, to the Chinese side. The South Asian displays are organized chronologically, with a long central aisle and smaller side bays focusing on regional and period styles (Fig. 11). These side bays are accompanied by the following titles (on section wall labels with descriptive text): Early societies; Early history; Buddhism in Gandhara; Gupta art and architecture; Temples in west and central India; Tamil kingdoms and poet saints; Odisha; Eastern India; Himalayas and beyond; Kashmir and the Northwest regions; Sultans and Mughals; Sikhism, life at court and the art of storytelling; British period: rule and resistance; Independence, Partition and diaspora. The section labels for each theme focus on historical shifts in the region, especially sociopolitical changes. These geographical and religious categories succinctly outline a timeline along which visitors can move, but the creation of an obvious timeline can lead the visitor to think about the objects they see in progressive terms. Section labels introducing each bay are clearly meant to give a historical context for the objects within:

Table 3. Floor plan of South Asia side of Room 33. China side mirrors South Asia and the two join on the right hand side of this diagram. Visual taken from Duffy-Protentis et al., “Evaluating the China and South Asia Gallery,” 19.
72.11% of the text was dedicated to contextual information, compared to the 16.29% dedicated to myth, the second more represented category.

The reinstallation of the gallery opened in November 2017 added “British period: rule and resistance” and “Independence, Partition and diaspora” as part of the new narrative, as the previous gallery’s chronology had stopped before the colonial period. This change proved favorable for visitors who said that “their impression of China and South Asia was ‘ancient and modern history altogether’” meaning that visitors are able to “understand more profoundly both South Asia’s and China’s history.”86 Like the PMA, these bays explore the assimilation of British and South Asian techniques into material culture of the colonial period. The subthemes within each bay focus on historical events like the 1857 uprising that ultimately spurred the transfer of power from the East India Company to the British government or the South Asian diaspora in the West. The objects displayed in these two bays seem less an exploration of visual culture of South Asia after the colonial period and more an archival effort to map post-colonial history (Fig. 12). To see these archival records immediately after devotional objects—and, further, to see them displayed in the same way—reduces the sacredness of the devotional objects even more.

In 2008, the BM conducted an internal evaluation of seven permanent galleries in response to low readership of didactic texts in permanent galleries. Low readership was registered by a previous visitor survey in which 61.0 percent of visitors stopped to read introductory panels in temporary exhibitions, the same panels in permanent galleries only attracted around 10.0 percent.87 Nevertheless, the BM interpretive team working on this project surmised that, even though visitors may not read wall panels (normally the introductory label and

86 Jack Duffy-Protentis et al., “Evaluating the China and South Asia Gallery (Room 33) at the British Museum,” Interactive Qualifying Project, (Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 2018), 42-3.
section labels), they “may feel lost or frustrated if they do not see them.” As we consider the museum project in its recent developments, there are, of course, certain “givens” that visitors expect, which include the supporting apparatus of the galleries. Informational panels, pedestals, and section titles all contribute to visitors’ comfort within a space. Importantly, the effects of the removal of these elements can be seen in the PMA’s immersive architectural rooms. When the whole space is integrated into the display—in other words, when it is not clear what is art and what is not—visitors become uncertain as to how to navigate the galleries. Likewise, without section labels, the narrative flow of the gallery becomes ambiguous, even if those labels are not always utilized by viewers for their interpretive value.

**Roles and goals of the “museum project”**

In Ivan Karp and Stephen Lavine’s *Exhibiting Cultures*, cultural anthropologist Richard Kurin highlights the concept of the museum as a means not only of preserving objects but of the preservation of culture. Kurin suggests that two principal museum goals have emerged as a response to the massive destruction of world cultures in the twentieth century: “The lesser goal involves the effort to collect artifacts and document lifeways before those cultures or memories of them disappear. The greater goal is for museums to play a role in the conservation of those cultures, to actually help those cultures survive in the contemporary world.” The reality of South Asian museum collections outside of South Asia, and especially large collections like the

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88 Ibid., 159.
BM and the PMA, is that they become representative of a living culture that can never be known in its entirety and which is constantly changing.⁹⁰

Even though the museum project is united in its focus on preservation and conservation, the two case studies articulate their roles differently based on their own missions and prescribed societal expectations of the fine art versus the anthropological museum.⁹¹ The PMA website describes visitor experience as “surprising, lively, and always memorable,” and declares a commitment to “inviting visitors to see the world—and themselves—anew through the beauty and expressive power of the arts.”⁹² PMA didactics frequently refer to the cosmos and the devotees’ relationship to physical and metaphysical manifestations of the divine. By contrast, the BM’s didactics and gallery narrative point to an interest in geographic or historical notions of South Asian identity. While the traditions are mentioned frequently in didactic texts, the focus is overwhelmingly placed on the empires, courts, and political powers that shaped the region. Even in the early nineteenth century, the BM’s collections were fashioned to represent what it considered to be the very best of world culture: the Rosetta Stone, the Parthenon sculptures, and a large collection of classical sculpture. With such a reputation, one could argue that the BM is today constricted in the perspectives it can offer. Visitors expect the linear, historical narrative

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⁹⁰ Hindus also have an awareness of their role in preservation on a cosmic scale: dharma. The idea of “dharma” is untranslatable because it has no direct semantic equivalents in any western language; generally, it is translated as ‘duty’, ‘religion’, ‘law’, ‘principle’, etc. (Gavin Flood, An Introduction to Hinduism, 52). At its core, dharma is the performance of Vedic ritual by the Brahmans, but it has been extended to domestic rituals and to obligations associated with specific family and social groups. Conceptualized more broadly, the individual is related to the cosmos and vice versa in a constant act of continuation and maintenance of the universe.

⁹¹ This is not to say that museums are the only organizations working towards the preservation of Hindu culture. Hindu diasporic communities around the world work publicly and privately to promote cultural continuity. See Prema Kurien, “Hinduism in the United States,” in Hinduism in the Modern World, edited by Brian Hatcher (New York: Routledge, 2016) and Hanna Kim, “Public Engagement and Personal Desires: BAPS Swaminarayan Temples and their Contribution to the Discourses on Religion,” International Journal of Hindu Studies 13, no. 3 (2010): 357-90.

and the supply of dates and places within didactic texts (though, as we have established, these texts are rarely read).

Khristin Landry-Montes (Art History PhD Candidate, Elon University) and Jeff Kowalski (Professor Emeritus of Art History, Northern Illinois University) collaborated on a similar study comparing and anthropological museum and an art museum displaying objects of Native American and Maya origin. They concisely explain how the anthropological museum is limited in its display. Since objects are presented as “functional ‘artifacts of culture’ that develop within and play different roles in processes of sociopolitical evolution…viewers are somewhat limited in their ability to make additional inferences.” 93 These limitations have unfolded also at the British Museum. It is difficult for a living culture to breathe among halls entrenched in antiquity, and it is a challenge to anthropological museums in general to address this issue, if they are even thinking about it. The study of non-Western art illuminates a false dichotomy between “fine art” and “anthropology,” which can then be applied across all artistic traditions. Even if false, this dichotomy guides each museum-going experience in (possibly) irreversible ways. I propose that the new priority for museums is not to reverse this dichotomy, and other shortcomings of the museum project, but to add new perspectives to existing interpretations.

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Fig. 5. View into the Asian wing from the Persian gallery at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of Leslie Essoglou.
Fig. 6. Pillared Temple Hall from Madurai. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo taken by author.
Fig. 7. “Art, Power, Status” Gallery 229. View from Gallery 228 into the room. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo by author.
Fig. 8. "Temple Sculpture" Gallery 230. View of side wall with mounted sculptural fragments. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo by author.
Fig. 9. “Art and the Divine” Gallery 231. View from center of gallery towards Gallery 230. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo by author.

Fig. 11. Room 33, British Museum. View of Shiva Nataraja. Photo by author.
Fig. 12. Room 33, British Museum. “British period: rule and resistance.” Photo of display case showing artifacts of British rule in India including (from top) “Studies of the Gond tribe,” “Swami silverware,” “Edward Moor’s Hindu Pantheon,” “Studies of religion,” “Portable desk”
Chapter 4: The Museum: Potentiality Between Viewer and Object

The biggest deficiency of the museum project uncovered by this study is the lack of articulation on the part of museum professionals of their own roles in meaning-making. An acknowledgment of how objects and galleries are staged to present certain meanings, based on decoloniality or not, needs to be integrated into all museum galleries, and especially non-Western ones. This last chapter will bring Hindu ritual into conversation with particular aspects of the case studies. The construction of exchange between viewer and murti, I will argue, can provide direct guidance for more engaging display practices of Hindu objects. Beyond alterations in textual didactics and spatial organization, what can be done by Western institutions hoping to present their visitors with deeper cross-cultural understanding? Moreover, which contexts might be predisposed for this kind of treatment and why? These questions guide my final analysis of the case studies and the effectiveness of their reinstallations.

Exchange in Hinduism

Exchange underlies Hindu ritual and gives a foundation for the metaphysical spirituality often associated with devotional art. The living deity may be present in the murti but this presence must be activated by a series of ritual actions in order for exchange to occur. Therefore, these exchanges between object and viewer, which are present in the temple space, are often lost in Western spaces and especially museum spaces. Thinking of the Hindu devotional experience as a carefully constructed series of actions that give rise to deeper spirituality can demystify the experience in a way that is helpful for curators and museum educators. The following subsection

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will outline the construction of the Hindu ritual experience and the ways in which it can illuminate the display of Hindu devotional objects.

_Puja_, the general term for Hindu worship, begins and ends with exchange. The devotee first approaches the deity with offerings of devotion and material gifts. They come for _darshan_ and engage as both observer and subject as the deity looks back at them. Finally, they leave with _prasada_, the “transvalued ‘leftovers’ of the deity.” Already, reciprocity is materially present. Not only do devotees receive spiritual benefits from ritual but they also walk away with a smear of ash, small flower, or a fruit snack. In this way, the deity’s blessings are materially present and embodied by the devotee themselves when consumed. Another important materially rooted interaction is the practice of _abhisheka_, or the ritual bathing of the _murti_ with various substances such as milk or curd. A video played in the pillared temple hall at the PMA includes this practice, which can be done multiple times a day and sometimes by the devotees with the assistance of the priest.

Framing this personal exchange is a set of universalized actions: an approach, a bow or full _pranam_, prone on the floor with hands together pointing toward the deity, sometimes a circumambulation, and a final bow and silent or vocal prayer. For devotees participating in _arati_, a lamp-lighting ceremony performed by a priest, a few more actions are required. In the _arati_ I personally witnessed at the Richmond Temple, devotees first wave their hands over an oil lamp flame three times, the third time bridging a gap between the flame and their foreheads. Next, the

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97 The priest himself participates in a codified (word choice?) ritual actions while reciting prayers, prayers that changes from deity to deity. This thesis will not detail ritual from the priest’s perspective, though his recitation and action definitely structures the viewing experience. Since most museum visitors would be the equivalent of a devotee when visiting the South Asian galleries, I will maintain consistency by explicating ritual from their perspective.
98 All Hindu rituals differ based on sectarian tradition, region (especially South and North India), and setting. Nevertheless, the sentiment of repeated and intentional action reaping spiritual benefits is consistent across contexts.
priest pours coconut milk, a consumable *prasada*, into the devotee’s cupped hands, which they sip and wipe the remainder over their heads. Then, a cone is placed over the head of the devotee, and finally, now that the ritual is over, *prasad* is passed out. At the Richmond Temple, *prasad* usually takes the form of a banana or piece of coconut, which I enjoyed on my way out the door.

These ritual actions are performed by every person of all ages and indoctrinated at a young age. Small children follow their parents to each deity and attempt to mimic their movements. Just as most are taught at a young age how to act in a museum——quiet, respectful, not rambunctious——so this ceremony is imprinted on the young Hindu child’s mind. Action, though, holds even more power. A performance half-completed feels unbalanced. When Hindus step up to the shrine to perform ritual, they must fulfill each aforementioned step before moving on. By comparison, we might ask, what steps are museum visitors given as they approach the museum object? Using the Hindu ritual as a parallel, there is an approach based on interest, a bow maybe to read the label, and sometimes a circumambulation around the pedestal. Often, though, Hindu objects in museums are placed flush with the wall and no curiosity about the back or the sides can be satisfied. Certainly, no coconut milk is sipped nor banana received. The Hindu devotee comes for a specific desire, *darshan*, while the museum visitor’s motivations are far more abstract.99 As a result, for the museum-goer, there is no awareness of or yearning for completion. As it exists now, the museum visit will always be open ended and subjective despite an abundance of textual materials or interactive elements.

99 See John Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009). A few scholars have written on museum visitor motivations. Falk, a scholar who promotes "free-choice learning," has perhaps written most prolifically. He proposes that motivation is shaped by identity-related factors that affect the visitor’s interaction with their peers and with the museum objects themselves.
Potential for meaningful interaction – where do we go from here?

Many museums have begun to include tactile elements in their galleries often in the form of digital technology. Josie Appleton, author of Museums for ‘The People’?, warned of the “fetish of interactivity” at a conference on interactive learning in museums of art held at the Victoria & Albert Museum. She points out that the surface level signs of engagement registered by interactive museum displays could mask or limit deeper engagement opportunities.

Appleton’s remarks end with a defense of three key aspects of the museum experience that are under threat by what she terms the “fetish of interactivity”: that appreciation is a private matter; that the museum experience is unique and unpredictable; and that objects and paintings can hold an intrinsic power for people. Appleton also uncovers a deeper anxiety felt by curators in the modern museum about the authority of meaning. In highly interactive spaces, Appleton suggests, the visitor is missing out on a wealth of knowledge delivered from experts in the field, such as label text and metanarrative dispersed throughout the gallery.

There is a disingenuous idea that a more meaningful experience is one that is entirely subjective, but we have seen in the Hindu ritual that meaningful experiences can come from organized and well-communicated expectations. That is, Hindu ritual fosters a personal connection to the divine (often through the object) within a non-individual structure of practices. Rather than telling a story from multiple perspectives, open-ended interpretive material in museums coined as “interactivity” simply lets the viewer tell a story from their own perspective.

In Western art museums displaying non-Western objects, the demographics of the visitors are

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102 Appleton, “Interactivity in context,” 3. In conjunction with Appleton’s assertion that curators should always commit themselves to a particular interpretation—rather than allow for a ‘whatever’ interpretation—museums should move towards diverse curatorial teams with a wider range of perspectives.
overwhelmingly Western. Therefore, open-ended interpretive material inadvertently highlights this Western perspective and diminishes others.

Museum studies scholars Marianna Adams and Theano Moussouri suggest that effective interactivity “must engage in real problem-solving and foster/stimulate creativity…most visitors recognize gratuitous or superficial interactivity.” 103 I would argue further that the visitor needs not the ability to form their own opinion—they do this already—but a specific direction as to how to best create meaning in sensitive and cross-cultural ways. The benefits of this meaningful interaction are described by literary historian Stephen Greenblatt as “resonance,” or the ability of humans to actively reflect on experiences. 104 A resonant exhibition “pulls the viewer away from the celebration of isolated objects” and toward those half-visible questions: “How did the objects come to be displayed? How were they originally used? ...What is the meaning of the viewer’s relationship to those same objects when they are displayed in a specific museum on a specific day?” 105 Resonance does not necessarily require museums to answer these questions in their introductory text nor does it require a wholly decolonial theme among all colonial collections. It does, however, require of museums an intentionality behind their displays, an intentionality toward resonance, toward questioning. Keeping in mind this definition of “meaningful experience,” let us take the pillared temple hall at the PMA and the gateway objects at the BM and apply some of these transformative elements.

The Philadelphia Museum: Pillared Temple Hall

The pillared temple hall at the PMA (Fig. 6) is located at the very beginning of the Asian wing and providing access to all adjacent galleries. Originally, the temple hall was constructed around 1560 as part of the Madana Gopala Swamy temple complex in Madurai, dedicated to Vishnu and his avatar, Krishna. In 1912, the hall was purchased from local authorities by Adeline Pepper Gibson, daughter of one of Philadelphia’s original families. By 1920, the temple hall had made its way to the Philadelphia Museum with great fanfare, including a “totally imaginary” musical costume pageant about the gods of American welcoming the gods of India to North American shores. Ninety-six years later, the temple hall was reinstalled with its original bright and festive atmosphere. Pillars line a central space where large benches sit. Along the walls, bronze sculptures from Tamil Nadu—the Indian State where Madurai is location—stand on pedestals (Fig. 13 and 14). The visitor can move around and through the stone pillars and a flipbook guide is included for object labels about the architectural feature. To be standing within a work of art is irregular in the world of art museums. Irregularity serves an important purpose in the display of non-Western objects by extracting the visitor from their conditioned behavior.

Some scholars have already addressed a deconstruction of traditional display, and their conclusions take a few different forms. Ivan Karp and Stephen Lavine call this deconstruction a “shock of nonrecognition,” Cheryl Meszaros a dismantling of “established binaries,” Wood and

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106 This history is displayed in the gallery along with the temple hall on a timeline panel called “History of the Temple Hall.” When talking with the South Asian Department manager, Leslie Essoglu, about the history of the collection, she mentioned this (Orientalist) ‘pageant’ as something the department was continuing to research. Essoglu also expressed appreciation for the vast knowledge of the collectors involved in the creation of the collection at the PMA, even when information about the artists themselves is limited.

Latham a “disequilibrium.” None of these scholars explicitly state that this deconstruction is a vital step towards decoloniality. Meszaros goes on to suggest that educators should frame questions differently, from “What is the truth?” to “How is the truth constructed?” As important as it is for educators to be asking these altered questions, it is equally as vital that the museum visitor be prompted to ponder the questions on their own.

In addition to the unusual integration of space and art, the pillared temple hall includes video and sound to further uproot visitors’ expectations. The video itself provides interpretive content; it was shot at the original site of this temple hall, with the intent to show visitors what kind of daily activities would have been occurring in such a space. The gallery’s focus on activity can be attributed to the reinterpretation of the temple hall undertaken by curator Darielle Mason in 2016. Mason traveled to Madurai and found that the pillared hall, which originally was believed to be an inner sanctum of the Madana Gopala Swamy Temple, was more likely a celebratory outdoor marketplace. Her subsequent reinterpretation of the hall is reflected in the change in lighting and wall color from dark and somber to brightly colored and well-lit surroundings.

The use of video and sound in the space further contributes to its liveliness. Played on loop at the front of the gallery, the audio of the daily activities—ritual and non-ritual—provides ambient sound throughout the space distinct from those sounds normally heard in the museum, such as shoes clicking or whispered conversations. While visiting the PMA temple hall in the summer of 2018, I directly observed a child react to the unexpected noise, stopping in his tracks and quizzically looking around. Even at his young age, the presence of sound in a normally silent

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108 Karp and Lavine, “Culture and Representation,” in Exhibiting Culture, 22; Meszaros, “Interpretation and the Art Museum,” 40; Wood and Latham, The Objects of Experience, 55.
109 Meszaros, “Interpretation and the Art Museum,” 44.
and restrained setting caused confusion and curiosity. Even in galleries not devoted wholly to the act of worship, video of ritual is significant in the activation of meaning in Hindu art.

This significance is supported by visitor surveys performed by the Freer | Sackler Gallery for their exhibition *Puja: Expressions of the Divine*. The Freer | Sackler often uses narrated videos in separate rooms in their galleries, but *Puja: Expressions of the Divine* marked the first time narrated video was placed directly next to objects. For a summative report, the Freer | Sackler surveyed visitors about specific display elements—narrative video (in a separate gallery), display video (located next to the objects), shrines or altar set-ups, didactics, touchable objects, reading materials, puzzles and photo albums of local home shrines, and colors—that either detracted or enhanced their experience in the exhibition.\(^\text{110}\) Eighty-two percent of visitors said the narrative video enhanced their experience, and seventy-eight percent said the display video enhanced their experience.\(^\text{111}\) Video thus serves as an unexpected and positive experience for museum visitors, and can possibly fulfill the role of re-staging action during the visit.

*The British Museum: Gateway Object Framework*

Before contemplating the British Museum’s gateway objects, I will first recall one of Appleton’s key aspects of the museum experience that are under threat by what she terms the “fetish of interactivity”: that the museum experience is unique and unpredictable. The BM’s gateway object framework does just the opposite, not through interactivity but with carefully placed and curated “gateway objects,” pieces that are deemed popular or particularly significant by the curatorial and interpretation teams at the British Museum. This shift in organization might

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\(^\text{111}\) The percentage is calculated among visitors who said they looked at the specific elements. Ibid., 12.
suggest a parallel shift in thinking on the part of the Museum “to recognize that each visitor will make her own connection to an object.” The BM’s interpretation team established an ideal set of qualities that gateway objects should possess (though not all gateway objects can or do possess all four qualities):

1. Narrative relevance—the object must be able to illustrate the key themes of the gallery.
2. Importance—ideally the gateway object will be an important, perhaps unique object in the collection that the museum wishes to showcase.
3. Iconic—Objects that visitors recognize…make ideal gateway objects as visitors actively seek them out and are drawn to them when they enter gallery spaces.
4. Attractive—Even if visitors do not intrinsically recognize an object, they can still be attracted to it by its size, color or unusual appearance.

Within the “gateway object” labels, the teams hope to convey big ideas about the gallery. This shift was undertaken in reaction to internal evaluations of seven galleries at the British Museum, in which surveys showed that only ten percent of visitors to permanent galleries stopped to read the introductory and section panels. Gateway objects offer an innovative solution to the lack of readership; instead, this organization acknowledges the object’s own attracting power. This tactic seems to be a direct acknowledgement by the BM of the object’s inherent power of communication, and its implementation further combats the typical chronological display of traditional anthropological museums, or any museum for that matter.

Gateway objects are not identifiable to the museum visitors as such, and their special identity is unpublished. I deduced from articles about the gateway object format which South

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114 Ibid., 154, 159. The same report found that although visitors do not usually read the introductory or section labels, they still feel lost when they are not present. Therefore, the BM has refashioned many of their section labels as signage, showing a map of the gallery with only the briefest of texts.
Asian objects are meant to be highlighted.\textsuperscript{115} To closely examine the gateway object at work, I will focus on just one subsection of the South Asian gallery at the BM, titled “Tamil kingdoms and poet saints.” This subsection features bronzes from the Chola period in South India. It begins with this section label (Fig. 15):

South India was the centre of powerful dynasties, including the Pallavas (AD 600s-800s) and the Cholas (AD 800s-1200s). Languages such as Tamil, from a different family to those spoken in north India, flourished. Tamil literature and stone inscriptions are known from the early centuries AD onwards.

The region’s first shrines were cut from the living rock. Later Pallava kings built fine stone temples at their capital, Kanchipuram. Under the Chola rulers, power moved south to the Kaveri River delta and very large temples, at sites such as Thanjavur, were built. Here, devotion was mainly centered on the Hindu god Shiva.

Mastery of lost wax bronze-casting is a feature of the Chola period. Amongst the finest bronze sculptures ever produced in India, perhaps in the world, were made at this time.\textsuperscript{116}

In addition to this text, the label features a quote from the Poet-Saint Appar in both English translation and Hindi: “If you could see the arch of [Shiva’s] brow…then even human birth on this wide earth would become a thing worth having.”\textsuperscript{117} There is also a map of the key sites in South India from AD 800-1300. This section label focuses on the history of the region, political trends, and art-making methods. No elements of context or engagement were included. Instead, two gateway objects introduce the major contextual themes, a bronze sculpture of Shiva and one of Vishnu (Fig. 16 and 17).

In the case featuring Shiva (Fig 16), the gateway object, “Bronze sculpture of Shiva Vishapaharana”, is seated in the very center and highlighted with a muted photograph of a

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 159-161; Jane Batty et al., “Object-Focused Text at the British Museum.” Exhibition 36, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 70-80; Email exchange with Head of Interpretation Stuart Frost was also helpful in my understanding of the gateway object framework.
\textsuperscript{116} BM Section Label, “Tamil kingdoms and poet saints.”
\textsuperscript{117} BM Section Label, Poet-Saint Appar, Chidambaram, about AD 600.
temple behind it. Above Shiva’s head is a longer object label that begins with general information about temple building in southern India. There is a bit of engagement in the last sentence when it states “the main image in the sanctum is usually made of stone and never moves, whereas large bronze sculptures like those displayed here are made to be processed through the streets during festivals.” A short description of the mythical narrative of the sculpture follows this longer contextualization. While the twelve other sculptures in the case have their own object labels, they could also share this longer label with the gateway object. The additional object labels are situated to the side and do not interfere with the assortment of Shiva’s radiating out from this thematic label. The BM curators seem to be following Wood and Latham’s fourth and fifth suggestions: “Don’t forget about simplicity and balance” and “An object is worth 1000 meanings”. This display does not hit the other more creative marks though; while the objects are highlighted, they are highlighted in a way that does not challenge preconceptions. They are still just objects in a museum.

The Asian galleries at the BM were reinstalled after the gateway object format had been implemented and summative evaluations have been internally produced at the museum in order to judge the effectiveness of the spatial organization. The interpretive team tracked visitors throughout the gallery, made observations about their activity surrounding each object (dwell time, photography, label interaction, etc.), and conducted exit surveys about the motivations for visiting, and recorded demographics. The team found that around 58.0 percent of visitors followed the chronological order of the gallery, while 42.0 percent chose a random path. They also found that the gateway objects were successful in terms of attracting visitor attention: 74.0

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119 Batty, “Object-Focused Text at the British Museum.”
120 Duffy-Protentis, “Evaluating the China and South Asia Gallery,” 32.
percent of gateway objects were interacted with.\textsuperscript{121} Gateway objects can be encountered in any order and can communicate a nonlinear narrative, perhaps counteracting the otherwise chronologically linear gallery organization.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 33.
Fig. 14. View of Pillared Temple Hall with Goddess Uma in background (Around 1000, India (Tamil Nadu), Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1994-148-64).
Tamil kingdoms and poet saints
AD 800–1300

South India was the centre of powerful dynasties, including the Palas (AD 600s–800s) and the Cholas (AD 800s–1200s). Languages such as Tamil, from a different family to those spoken in north India, flourished. Tamil literature and stone inscriptions are known from the early centuries AD onwards.

The region’s first shrines were cut from the living rock. Later Pallava kings built fine stone temples at their capital, Kanchipuram. Under the Chola rulers, power moved south to the Kaveri River delta and very large temples, at sites such as Thanjavur, were built. Here, devotion was mainly centred on the Hindu god Shiva.

Mastery of lost wax bronze-casting is a feature of the Chola period. Amongst the finest bronze sculptures ever produced in India, perhaps in the world, were made at this time.
Fig. 16. Shiva gateway object display, Room 33, British Museum. Photo by author.
Sculpture of the Chola kingdom: Vishnu

In southeast India, the Tamil built temples dedicated to both Shiva and Vishnu. Vishnu was imagined either as one in a series of avatars (incarnations) or as the Supreme Being. Under the Chola rulers, the more popular avatars included Narasimha (the man-lion) and Rama (the hero-king). The avatars are also variously depicted and accompanied by their consorts (Shri), the embodiment of good fortune, and Bhu (earth), the embodiment of the fruitful earth.

These three bronze sculptures of about AD 1000 depict Vishnu (or) not as an avatar but as an ideal king and husband. He is accompanied by his consorts (Shri (goddess)).

In Southeast Asia, as elsewhere in South Asia, tribal and tribal communities — the latter probably the earliest inhabitants of all of South Asia — maintained elements of their own culture. These remote cultures were often only loosely linked to temple-based practices.

Fig. 17. Vishnu Gateway Object. Room 33, British Museum. Photo by author.
What is the fate/future of the Hindu object in the museum?

How can an object in a museum, with its obscured and distantly told histories, resonate deeply with the museum visitor? Can museum professionals instill some sort of meaningful presence back into the object even in instances of violent displacement and de-contextualization? For Hindu objects, I believe this is possible. In most cases, the museum visitor has a notion of the objects’ spirituality, even if this notion is sometimes misunderstood. There is a difference, however, between knowing about an object’s ritual origins and truly sensing an object’s attracting power. This thesis has exposed the ways that Hindu objects have been robbed of their attracting power by the museum project, but, at the same time, I will conclude with some suggestions as to how this power can be restored.

Darshan in the museum

The two case studies considered in this thesis took different approaches to innovative interpretation. The Philadelphia Museum of Art’s immersive pillared temple hall (and adjacent galleries) contextualizes the object mostly in their original location, whether that is architectural or solitary. The British Museum also contextualizes their objects within a larger cultural, political, and geographical history. Just based on these two examples, it seems there are many ways to “contextualize” an object in the museum, and that “contextualization” cannot be the only word used when developing inclusive and respectful display. The title of this thesis, “Re-staging Translation,” points to a different, and I would argue better, mindset that museums may be grasping for but have not found yet. The colonial histories of objects need to be addressed, of course, but alongside a confrontation of the ritual of museum-going itself.
"Darshan”—“seeing and being seen”—expresses the self-awareness of both deity and devotee. I hoped to find ways in which the museum visitor was similarly self-aware: of their existence in the space, of their role in meaning-making, and of their own object-hood in the face of objects with presence. The architectural ensembles at the PMA came the closest to these goals. The museum visitor is forced to reconsider their expectation of sacred and profane, and their self-consciousness was communicated through body language, such as placing their hands behind their back, keeping a wide distance from the objects on pedestals, and walking more slowly. Labels that reach into the space with engaging text and tone are key to breaking the habitual museum visit as is the inclusion of video and sound. The display of Hindu devotional objects as they are seen during devotion (with adornment) has proven beneficial to some and distracting for others. Though it was briefly mentioned in this thesis, the dichotomy between fine art and anthropology is a topic requiring increased concentration and awareness. It is also a topic very relevant to objects with ritual purposes as their vitality is often activated by the action and materiality associated with ritual.

Conclusions

What is the future of Hindu devotional objects in museum spaces? The field of postcolonial studies, decoloniality, and object-based interpretation has proven promising for their ongoing lives in the museum. There seems to be an increasing acknowledgement of the inherent attracting power of objects and, moreover, the curiosity of the visitor. Curiosity, though, can be fostered through structured experiences, a concept missing from scholarship. By incorporating

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122 These body language cues were pointed out to me by a security guard in the South Asian galleries at the PMA. I am grateful for his insight and willingness to listen and talk about my project and his own experience watching visitors.

Hindu ritual into my arguments, I hope to show that constructed experiences are unavoidable and not always negative. Conditioning is bound to happen, and it is up to the museum to shape or break this conditioning in favor of deeper, more respectful cross-cultural understanding. The museum visitor should be guided through their attraction to objects and the power of material things should be celebrated, not rationalized.

I advocate for the fine art museum as the optimal space for decoloniality. Unlike the anthropological museum, visitors come to the art museum with a less consistent expectation of what they will learn, and therefore are in a better mindset to be faced with unexpected and uncomfortable displays. Essential to any museum display is an integration of post-colonial theory and decoloniality along with an unabashed pursuit of the unlikely and the surprising. Decoloniality can be achieved through transparent display, unveiling the many processes at work in translation of object into museum. Importantly, this unveiling should not conceal the older colonial agendas but display new perspectives alongside the old ones, effectively showing just how dangerous the colonial perspectives are. To combat the typical museum-going experience, which in itself is colonized, I suggest displays which take visitors out of their conditioned behavior, such as sound, video, or irregular positioning of objects (for instance, the PMA’s mounted temple sculptures). The permanent gallery is a primed stage for this kind of experimentation because, unlike the temporary or traveling exhibition, visitors do not expect particularly creative display. The objects are static, literally. For these reasons, the fine art museum should be, and I suspect will be, the stage on which substantive and experiential change can occur at an institutional level.
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