4

museu

the museum is national

Kavita Singh

the idea of a national museum

Along with the national anthem, the national emblem, the national festival, a nation needs its national library, its national archive, and its national museum. For poor indeed would be the country that could not lay claim to enough history to fill an archive, enough scholarship to fill a library, and enough artefacts to fill a museum! Shortly after Indian Independence, thus, the project of a National Museum for the country was begun. Here, as in most Asian, African and Latin American nations at the moment of decolonisation, the erection of a grand national museum became an act of great symbolic importance, for it was a visible assertion of newly-gained sovereignty.[1] (Plate 4.1)

By making national museums these new nation-states were able to demonstrate their ability to define and to care for their patrimony. The newly-formed museums became sites for the retrieval of their own past: within their halls, the new nations could collect, protect and assign value to their own heritage independent of the scrutiny and judgements of their erstwhile colonial masters. And by throwing open the doors to the public, the nations could share these masterpieces with their citizens in a symbolic affirmation of their rights. These gestures, of gathering and giving, were sufficiently urgent to overcome the conditions of financial stringency faced by most decolonised nations in their difficult early years. For to make a national museum of one's own was to step onto the world stage and establish a cultural and political equivalence with Spain, France or Britain whose grand national museums in Madrid, Paris and London had held and shared their nation's patrimony with its citizens for 100, 200 or 300 years.

However, while the desire to have a national museum was inspired by examples of museums in the European metropolises, the museums of new states needed to do something markedly different from what had been done in Europe. The old European 'national' museums related a supra- or trans-national tale of the history of Western civilisation. Claiming as their own heritage the art of ancient Egypt, progressing to ancient Greece and Rome, and then directly to Renaissance Europe, the great European museums developed a 'universal survey'[2] of the history of art, incorporating all that

[1] In many instances, a pre-existing colonial museum is made 'national' through a change in its emphases and interpretation of colonial collections. For the case of 'Indochina', see, for instance, Gwendolyn Wright, 'National Culture under Colonial Auspices', in *The Formation of National Collections of Art and Archaeology*, Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1996, pp. 127–42; and for the island states of the Pacific, see Adrienne L. Kaeppler's 'Paradise Regained: The Role of Pacific Museums in Forging National Identity', in Flora E. S. Kaplan (ed.), *Museums and the Making of 'Ourselves': The Role of Objects in National Identity,* Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1994, pp. 19–44.

[2] Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach coined the term and pointed out pervasive patterns in art history survey books and museums in their classic essay, 'The Universal Survey Museum', *Art History*, vol. 3, December 1980, pp. 447–69.

PLATE 4.1 • *Façade of the newly constructed National Museum, New Delhi, 1961. SOURCE*: ALL PHOTOGRAPHS IN THIS CHAPTER ARE COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM, NEW DELHI.

it admired into its own past.[3] (Adjunct galleries might house material from other world cultures that had no place in this evolutionary sequence, but they served to expand the territory of connaissance.) Transcending nationality, the narrative retold by the museums in Europe was one of transnational dominance.

Among the new nations, the purpose was different: national museums were required as shrines of the *national* culture, extending their scope to civilisations produced through the ages but confining them to those produced within the boundaries of the modern state. This museological form, in which a national heritage is gathered and disseminated, is a specifically postcolonial phenomenon. Arrogating to the modern nation all the cultural productions of the past, these museums turn civilisation into heritage and predecessors into ancestors, binding the populace into a citizenry through their shared pride in 'their' past. By transforming all of the past into a pre-history of the present, the national museum displays the new nation as something that had always existed in a spiritual or cultural sense, even if historical exigencies had prevented the attainment of nationhood in the political sphere. This was the project that was desired and assiduously developed

[3] These issues are discussed in several essays in Wright, *The Formation of National Collections*. See particularly the essays by Andrew McClellan, 'Nationalism and the Origins of the Museum in France', pp. 29–40, and Thomas W. Gaehtgens, 'The Museum Island in Berlin', pp. 53–78, in Gwendolyn Wright (ed.), *The Formation of National Collections of Art and Archaeology*, Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1996.

by the newly de-colonised non-Western nations in the great wave of museum-building across Asia and Africa, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

In its formulation and celebration of Indian national culture, the National Museum of India had two tasks: to show that India was eternal, and to show that the country had eternally been great. By arranging objects taken from diverse periods of history and made for many different contexts in one evolutionary sequence, the museum was able to show that something akin to 'India' had always existed. The historic periods, when the land was not yet a nation but was divided or subjected, could then be presented as interruptions in the nation's natural destiny, something felt by the 'people' even if denied by their rulers.

That the nation is, and always was, great could be demonstrated through its possession of a high culture over a long period. But high culture does not simply exist: it must be produced through intellectual labour that sifts through the available objects to form a canon. In formulating a high national culture, one strand or a few interrelated strands are chosen as the dominant, representative or mainstream culture from among the proliferation of local cultures. Typical candidates for the 'mainstream' culture are associated with an ethnic group that is dominant in the present period (the past thus legitimates the present), is possessed of a textual tradition (which provides historical evidence as well as an expression of intentionality), is relatively widely diffused (so that it can claim to be proto-national), and offers in its history at least a few figures (patrons, artists) who can function as national heroes.

If the National Museum was to demonstrate that India was eternal, and further that India was eternally great, it was inevitable that the main burden of the narrative would fall upon one category of objects: stone sculpture. These alone had survived so plentifully through the centuries that it was possible to trace a deep and continuous history through their evidence. However the value of stone sculpture lay not just in their antiquity but also in their resemblance — at least superficially — to the stone sculpture of Greek and Roman antiquity. By foregrounding the fact that India too had an antique and long-lasting tradition of monumental stone sculpture, enthusiasts of Indian art could testify to a civilisation that in some respects resembled European civilisation, and which might also be considered its equivalent.[4] (Plate 4.2)

Yet it did not fall on the National Museum to 'discover' India's stone sculpture and present it to the public for the first time. On the contrary, such sculptures, whether loose or attached to structural buildings or carved into the living rock of hills and caves, had always been the most visible of Indian artefacts and had been the litmus against which outsider responses to Indian art and religion were tested. If in the 17th century European travellers believed the many-armed and many-headed sculptures they saw were evidence of devil-worship in India, in the 18th and 19th centuries the antiquarian and Orientalist scholars mined these sculptures for information about the distant Indian past.[5] However, these colonial-period researchers disdained these objects even as they amassed vast collections of them for the repositories of their learned societies. For these early scholars, the value of these objects lay in the evidence they might provide about history, but as carvings they were considered un-aesthetic: their symbolic language and anatomical inaccuracy were alien to

[4] The assertion of this similarity had to be made at the cost of suppressing dissimilarities between ancient Indian sculpture and ancient Greek. Unlike independent sculptures of Greece and Rome, ancient Indian 'marbles' were primarily architectural fragments, which was why they are almost all reliefs; and they were meant to be seen as part of an ensemble, which surely affected their form. Presenting them as an 'equivalent' sculptural tradition, early Indian art history then had to devise theories that explained these qualities as an intentional spurning of the intention and effect of realistic representation. I discuss in some detail the process by which a canon of 'fine art' was constructed for India in the first half of the 20th century in 'Museums and the Making of an Indian Art Historical Canon' in Shivaji K. Panikkar, Parul Dave Mukherji and Deeptha Achar (eds), *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art*, New Delhi: D. K. Printworld.

[5] The classic study of the European encounter with Indian art from the 17th to the 20th centuries is Partha Mitter's *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.

PLATE 4.2 • *Sculptures selected for the National Museum stored in the open air while the galleries were readied before the new building opened in 1961.*

European tastes and were seen as symptomatic of the irrationality of the Indian mind.

How then, in the National Museum, were stone sculptures to be presented to the public anew: as an aesthetic triumph and as proof of India's civilisational richness, when these artefacts had been known for so long and so often damned with faint praise? By the time the National Museum was instituted, nationalist critics, artists and intellectuals had already developed a framework through which these objects could be seen in a different light. Since the start of the 20th century, a growing cadre of Indian and Indophile artists, intellectuals and critics had begun a recuperative project for Indian art in which interpretive strategies refuted, point-by-point, colonial criticisms that were levelled against it. Rather than trying to prove that Indian art was equivalent to, or as good as, the art of the West, nationalist historians developed a discourse of difference. Here the aims of Indian art were shown to be contrary to those of Western art; what was formerly criticised as shortcoming was turned into intention. Thus, the deviations from naturalism seen so often in Indian art were described as the higher and purer sightings of an 'inner eye' that was fixed upon 'spiritual vision and not the visible objects perceived by the external sense'.[6] By this token, the accuracy of musculature in Greek statues, or perspective views in Renaissance painting, were

[6] E. B. Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, Delhi: Cosmo Books, 1980 [1908], p. 23.

seen as evidence of a mentality that was enslaved by dross materialism. The pioneering critics who produced this discourse in the first decades of the 20th century — E. B. Havell, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch — were followed by a generation of Indian scholars such as V. S. Agrawala and C. Sivaramamurti who elaborated upon these arguments by drawing upon Sanskrit texts. And at the cusp of Independence, it was this latter generation who were poised to formulate a narrative for the National Museum.

a new ancestor

Today, as much as at its inception, a visit to the National Museum is dominated by its sequence of sculpture galleries, which occupy almost the entire ground floor. As we shall see, this is the only set of galleries in the museum that form a coherent, interlinked and chronological sequence that tells an unfolding tale. The visit to the sculpture galleries, however, is prefaced by a walk through the galleries dedicated to the Indus Valley Civilisation. As the earliest known civilisation in South Asia that established a network of cities across a broad belt of the subcontinent in the 3rd millennium BCE, the Indus Valley Civilisation is an obvious starting point for any overview of Indian history through art. Yet, behind the unexceptionable presence of this gallery in the museum are tales of seething rivalries, fissures and anxieties that racked, and continue to rack the subcontinent.

In 1921, archaeological investigations at Harappa in Punjab, now in Pakistan, revealed an entire city from a hitherto unknown civilisation. Up till this point, Buddhist relics from the 3rd century BCE had been the most ancient traces of Indian civilisation, but now there was evidence for a sophisticated and complex civilisation in India several millennia before. Soon, two other major sites — Mohenjo Daro and Chanhu Daro — were excavated in Sindh, and the growing knowledge of the cities, artefacts and technologies of the Indus Valley people contributed an entirely new chapter to Indian history.

Unfortunately for India, at Partition all of these sites fell on the Pakistani side of the border. Pakistani historians framed the Indus Valley Civilisation as a proto-historical precursor of Pakistan, as it 'occupied almost exactly the same area as West Pakistan occupies today. It could thus be thought of as sort prehistoric prototype of the new State.'[7] Indian archaeologists were dismayed to lose jurisdiction over these important sites. Moreover, if the civilisation had flourished within the boundaries of Pakistan, the suitability of claiming it as India's heritage became questionable; yet it was too important to let go. Thus, almost immediately after Partition, Indian archaeologists pressed for funds to explore promising sites on the Indian side of the border. Within a year, some 70 sites of the Indus Valley Civilisation were found within India. Now confirmed as the heritage of both India and Pakistan, the Indus Valley Civilisation could legitimately supply the opening flourish of any survey of Indian art, as well as of India's National Museum.

However, through a curious twist of fate, the stellar objects from the Indus Valley Collection in India's National Museum came not from the newly-discovered sites on Indian soil, but from Mohenjo Daro in Pakistan. When Mohenjo Daro was excavated in the 1920s, archaeologists deposited its important finds first in the Lahore Museum, and then moved these to Delhi in anticipation of the construction of a Central Imperial Museum there. At the time of Partition some 12,000 objects from Mohenjo Daro were with the Archaeological Survey of India in Delhi. The Pakistan Government asked for these to be turned over to them. The issue of ownership was complicated; neither country was willing to give up the objects, and no museum had clear title to them. Eventually the two countries agreed to share the collections equally, although this was sometimes interpreted all too literally: several necklaces and girdles were taken apart with half the

[7] Fazlur Rahman, 'Preface', in *National Museum of Pakistan: General Guide*, Karachi: Civil & Military Press & Frere Hall, 1950, pp. 5–6. Cited in Andrew Amstutz, 'Buddhist History & Heritage in Pakistani National Discourse: Museums, Textbooks, & Cultural Policy', *European History Colloquium Series*, Cornell University, 4 March 2010.

beads sent to Pakistan, and half retained in India.[8] Of the two most celebrated sculpted figures found in Mohenjo Daro, Pakistan asked for and received the steatite figure of a bearded male, dubbed the 'Priest King', while India retained the bronze statuette of the 'Dancing Girl', a nude bejewelled female. Both choices aligned well with the kind of heritage that each country was to choose to foreground.[9]

In the decades that have followed, both India and Pakistan have produced divergent interpretations of the Indus Valley Civilisation, in ways that align with their respective cultural currents. If Pakistani studies have stressed the highly planned and surprisingly egalitarian nature of the Indus cities, or the technological achievements of their people, Indian scholars have dwelt on tiny figural representations found on Indus Valley seals, and the puzzling and undeciphered script that they bear. If the Pakistani approach avoids speculation about Indus Valley religion and beliefs, then Indian interest focuses precisely on these topics, hoping to find a precursor of the gods and beliefs that are current in India today. In the National Museum in Delhi, these divergences came to a head in 2000 when a newly-mounted arrangement of the gallery identified the Indus Valley language as Sanskrit, and the religion as an early Vedic Hinduism. Here the Museum was materialising a right-wing Hindu interpretation of the Indus Valley as an early manifestation of Hinduism, turning it more fully into an ancestor of current-day India. However, this interpretation is not tenable in the current state of knowledge and is vehemently contested by left-wing historians in India. In the ensuing controversy, a number of prominent historians mounted a protest, forcing the museum to remove the text panels that made these assertions.

But when the National Museum first opened its doors, this controversial re-making of the Indus Valley gallery lay many decades ahead. For now, it is sufficient to remember how India came to inherit the Indus Valley legacy and its actual objects, at the cusp of Independence, as we proceed further along the path that was laid out for visitors when the National Museum installed its galleries in the present building in 1961.

the garden of sculpture ...

Just as historical research has not been able to establish firm connections between the enigmatic Indus Valley Civilisation and the later history of India, the National Museum too offers no bridge between this gallery and the next, which leaps across some 1,500 years to pick up a narrative that will thenceforth be continuous.

The galleries that trace an evolutionary sequence through sculpture were installed when the Museum first opened in these premises, and remain substantially unaltered till today.[10] The first of these galleries is dedicated to Maurya and Sunga art, and shows sculptures produced for Buddhist monuments between the 3rd century BCE and 1st century CE. Signally important for the history of Indian art, both these dynasties produced monumental sculptures that adorned royal structures (such as the famous Ashokan pillars) and Buddhist stupas. However, the Museum's gallery can do no more than gesture towards the art of the Mauryas and the Sungas: important objects from this period belong to other

[8] See Nayanjot Lahiri, 'Partioning the Past', in *Marshalling the Past: Ancient India and its Modern Histories*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012.

[9] Although inaccurate in its details, Hafeez Tunio's article 'With King Priest "in hiding", Dancing Girl yet to take the road back home', *The Express Tribune*, Karachi, 17 June 2012, expresses some of these sentiments. The figure of the dancing girl can supply a lineage for the thousands of figures of alluring females — *apsara*s, *alasakanya*s — seen in medieval Indian sculpture. The priest king, by comparison, is a chaste and even austere patriarch.

[10] The next several paragraphs analyse the display of the National Museum, based on a description of the galleries published in Grace Morley, *A Brief Guide to the National Museum*, Delhi: National Museum, 1962, and supplemented by my own visits to the Museum from the 1980s to the present day. Comparing Morley's description with the sculpture galleries' current display, one can see that there have been few alterations in the intervening decades.

collections,[11] and the National Museum has only some small fragments at its disposal. The fact that a good-sized gallery is given to a relatively nondescript set of objects suggests that in the installation of the Museum, ideas were more important than objects. The walk through the Museum was intended as an informative overview of Indian history, rather than an aesthetic encounter with masterpieces that the Museum happened to have.

At the threshold between this room and the next stands a Bodhisattva from Kushana-period Ahichchhatra (Plate 4.3). This figure inserts into the galleries, art historical debates on the evolution of the Buddha image. Since the earliest Buddhist sculptures had shown the Buddha aniconically through symbols, scholars had sought to understand the shift — sudden and thoroughgoing — to iconic depictions of the Buddha in about 2nd century CE. In the early decades of the 20th century, the issue of the origin of the Buddha image had been one of the most hotly-contested debates in Indian art history. European scholars had asserted that the Buddha image was modelled on the figure of the Greek god Apollo, and that it developed due to impulses brought by Hellenistic artists to the Gandharan School. For the nationalist scholars, a 'foreign' origin for a figure as important as the Buddha was unacceptable, and they maintained that the iconisation of the Buddha developed indigenously from chthonic cults dedicated to local guardian spirits or *yakshas*.[12] Towards the end of the 1st century CE, yaksha figures began to be

PLATE 4.3 • *Bodhisattva Maitreya from Ahichchhatra, Kushana period, displayed at the threshold between the Maurya–Sunga and Kushana galleries of the National Museum.*

[11] The most significant collection of Mauryan material belongs to the Indian Museum, Kolkata, which received the lion's share of all early archaeological finds since it was the central museum in the early colonial period when Calcutta was the capital of British India. Other important Mauryan objects are in the Patna Museum, the provincial museum closest to the ancient Mauryan capital. Of Sunga material, again, the Indian Museum has the most significant collection from early find-spots.

[12] The classic work that summarises the 'Apollo' Buddha position and refutes it, is Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Origin of the Buddha Image and Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, New York: College Art Association, 1927.

carved in stone, and many of these closely resemble this Bodhisattva. The strategic presence of this yaksha-like Bodhisattva, located just before visitors encounter their first Gandhara Buddha in the next gallery, aligns the museum's narrative firmly with the nationalists.

The Kushana room that we enter now presents material from the 1st–3rd centuries CE. This was a period of important empires, widespread urbanisation and flourishing Buddhism in India. The gallery presents three schools of sculpture that flourished simultaneously in three different parts of the subcontinent; through its display, the gallery becomes an abbreviated 'map' allowing the visitor to scan simultaneous developments in the Gandhara region, in peninsular India and on the Indo-Gangetic plain. Ranged along the left wall of this gallery are sculptures from the Gandhara School, developed under Hellenistic influences in the Indo-Greek kingdoms in areas that are in Afghanistan and Pakistan today. These include large standing Buddha and Bodhisattva figures, and small stucco figures salvaged from narrative panels. Placed along the right wall of this gallery are a number of relief panels from the stupa in Nagarjunakonda in the Ikshavaku kingdom in central Andhra Pradesh, showing scenes from the life of the Buddha. These belong to the beautiful Roman-influenced school that produced the masterpieces of Amaravati. The centre of the gallery is given to images from Kushana sculpture workshops in Mathura. These include a large Bodhisattva, the potbellied yaksha guardian of wealth, Kubera, as well as large narrative panel that has been interpreted as the illustration of a Sanskrit play (Plate 4.4).

As in the gallery dedicated to the Maurya and Shunga period, the arrangement of this gallery is governed by the ideological drive to deliver a particular message rather than an aesthetically-driven intention to display important artefacts in the best light. The museum gives its few sculptures from Mathura pride of place in the centre of this room, while it relegates the more substantial Gandharan holdings to the margin. This is in tune with nationalist assessments of the 'Greco-Buddhist' sculptures of the Gandharan School. Colonial scholars had placed Gandharan sculpture at the apogee of Indian art, valuing its familiar Hellenistic aesthetic and sympathising with what they saw as the rationality and restraint of the Buddhist faith. In response, nationalist critics and writers had derided this school, which they dismissed as hybrid and 'listless' in comparison to the 'affirmative force' of the truly Indian art of Mathura.[13] In line with this interpretation, Gandharan art is literally marginalised in this gallery, and the Mathura sculptures, placed in the centre of the room, are posited as the 'mainstream' tradition.

Mathura sculpture was valued because it was seen as the purely local precursor to the art of the Gupta period (5th–6th centuries CE), the period that nationalist historians had identified as India's Golden Age. Not only did the Guptas rule over a large empire that 'unified' much of India, but they were an indigenous dynasty and under their rule Brahmanical and Jain icons proliferated along with Buddhist ones. In this, the Gupta period prefigured religiously diverse India of the present day.

Gupta art was hailed by nationalist art historians as the 'classical' period of Indian art. Here, they said, Indian art arrived at a magical moment when balance, finesse, elegance, and restraint all met — before skill turned to virtuosity, engendering the florid excess of medieval schools.[14] Accordingly, in the Museum, we come upon the sculptures of the Gupta period next, in a special gallery that houses a series of fine images of the Bodhisattva, Buddha,

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 314.

[14] Gupta sculptures from Mathura and Sarnath are highly skilled and refined, but their exaltation as the finest moment in the history of Indian plastic art was to some degree motivated by a desire to locate one, suitably early period as the 'classical' one in which a purely 'Indian' aesthetic is achieved. The definitive statement of Gupta sculpture as India's classical art came in Stella Kramrisch's *Indian Sculpture*, first published in 1933. As Romila Thapar has shown, the Guptas became the centrepiece of Indian history (not just art history) because they provided a desirable ancestor for the modern Indian nation. The Gupta Empire was prosperous and extensive, but it was also the period in which Buddhism declined and Brahmanism gained ground. See her *The Past and Prejudice*, Delhi: National Book Trust, 1975.

PLATE 4.4 • *View of the Kushana period gallery. Sculptures from Mathura are placed in the centre of the room, and relief carvings from the Ikshvaku kingdom in Andhra Pradesh are arranged along the wall on the right. Gandhara sculptures are not visible in this photograph, but they were arranged along the wall on the left.*

Vishnu, and Shiva from the most important Gupta sites at Mathura, Sarnath and Gwalior. This shrine-like room is the only gallery exclusively dedicated to one period and school. In it, Buddhist figures are carefully juxtaposed with sculptures of Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta themes. Their religious contexts may differ, but the formal qualities of these figures — their graceful elongation, the subtle three-dimensional curves, the contrasting areas of dense ornamentation and unadorned volumes — manifest a common aesthetic tendency.

If Indian sculpture had the unitary aim of evolving into Gupta sculpture, then Gupta sculpture had the unitary aim of perfecting a single theme: of the human, and particularly the male, body. Everywhere in Indian sculpture there is the inescapable presence of the full-bodied female form. But in the National Museum, the achievements of the Gupta period are predicated upon the *male* body, seen again and again in the figures of the Buddha, the Bodhisattva, Vishnu, Rama, or Shiva. Subtly rising and falling flesh beneath the ascetic's robes, the in-held breath of the yogic body, the eyes turned inward upon themselves — these become the corporeal signs of spiritual attainment. Not only does the yogic male body allow escape from the embarrassing presence of the female form that is all too common in Indian sculpture, the single theme of the iconic male shifts attention away from the cultic differences between Brahmanical and Hindu, Vaisnava, and Saiva images, further unifying the purpose of Gupta sculpture. With the body of the divine male presented as the real theme of Gupta sculpture, the period becomes an icon of nationalism, integrating diverse people towards a common and spiritual goal (Plates 4.5 and 4.6).

The history of Indian sculpture, as told by the Museum, is that of progressive development

PLATE 4.5 • *Bodhisattva Padmapani from Sarnath, Gupta period, 5th century CE. On display in the Gupta gallery, National Museum.*

PLATE 4.6 • *Vishnu from Mathura, Gupta period, 5th century CE. On display in the Gupta gallery, National Museum.*

in which naïve and eclectic styles struggle towards a sophisticated but 'pure' expression. From the 'foreign' influence in the Mauryan period (which was shrugged off), to the naïve and charming art of the early Buddhist stupas, to the Indo-Greek byways and the earthy Kushana–Mathura, and finally to the 'classic' phase of the Gupta period — it seems as though Indian sculpture was striving for something that finally was achieved in Gupta art. In this retelling, Buddhist sculpture also becomes a prelude to the authentic, Indian tradition of Hindu art, which came robustly into its own at this point.

After the Gupta gallery, the chronological narrative of the National Museum breaks down. The two rooms that follow are vast galleries for 'early' and 'later'

medieval sculpture (7th to 10th and 11th to 13th centuries respectively). These rooms are jumbled, and sculptures from different regions and periods are placed side by side without an easily discernible plan. If some corners seem to assemble objects from a particular region, other clusters seem to collate sculptures from different regions that address the same iconographic theme.

The confusion of these rooms might be a reflection on the state of the field at the time of installation. Early studies of Indian sculpture had concentrated upon the ancient period, and later medieval monuments were not fully interiorised into the art historical narrative at the time. Understandable in the colonial period or even at the time of Independence, the medieval medley which now persists within the National Museum is inexplicable, for in the intervening decades this phase of Indian art has been the subject of much study.

The medieval period was the era after the Gupta Empire, when Buddhism waned and small kingdoms all over the subcontinent embraced either Hinduism or Jainism. Invoking the support of their tutelary deities, these kingdoms embarked on vigorous and competitive temple-building projects, giving rise to an extraordinary efflorescence of the architectural and sculptural arts, in the entire subcontinent. However, the display in the gallery does not explicate the complex richness of this period.

The underdeveloped narrative in this gallery seems to simply lump diverse objects together. Yet this arrangement has an interesting, and perhaps intentional, effect. In preceding galleries, early developments in Indian sculpture were traced mostly through objects from north and central India. These could be placed within a single and unified process of development. The medieval and later medieval phases were times of tremendous regional achievements seen in the enormous projects, distinctive styles, localised cults, and iconographic innovations. But dealing with the particular qualities of north, south, east, and west would have divided the river of Indian history into many distinct streams; regional identities would have become stressed over the national, and the strong centre would be subjected to the forces of the centrifuge. When the medieval sculpture galleries eschew regional and dynastic categorisation, as they do here, they present an undifferentiated and therefore unified mass for our regard. The Museum is then able to present Indian art as a single homogenous tradition — regardless of the facts.

... and the weeds in the path

Once the ancient sculpture has been dealt with, the Museum's chronological narrative comes to an end and the remainder of the galleries are devoted to Manuscripts, Painting, Central Asia, Textiles, Carved Wood, Arms and Armour, Coins and Jewellery, and Anthropology and Ethnography. If on the ground floor the Museum is arranged roughly chronologically with the intention of following the river of history, upstairs it is turned into a series of still pools, in which we might reflect upon the technical finesse of different kinds of artists and artisans as they work on metal, wood or cloth.

One consequence of the shift in this mode of display from 'chronology' to 'material' — whether it was intended or not — is that artefacts produced after the phases of Buddhist and Hindu ascendancy are placed *outside* the realm of history. This applies to all objects that derive from an Islamic context. When the Museum displays an object produced for the Sultanates or the Mughal court, it is absorbed into a display not of a particular cultural or historical period, but of a particular material: as, say, textiles or metalwork. Thus the sword of a Mughal prince becomes an example of damascening; a sash worn by a Nawab becomes an illustration of a brocading technique. The result was, and is, that one can walk right through the National Museum and be only dimly aware of the fact that the Mughals had been in India.

In the early fervour of Independence, the formulation of a national culture was undoubtedly powered by a desire to recover India's indigenous traditions, untainted by 'external' influences of the European or the Islamic world. Engaged in a project of recovery of the ancient past, scholars in the field may not have spared a thought for the more recent

past which, it would have seemed at the time, had not suffered from the same degree of neglect as the 'much maligned monsters'[15] in the further reaches of India's history. In today's context however, the National Museum's omissions are startling and its narrative partisan.

Let us be aware that we should exercise some caution here. In critiquing the Museum's methods of classification and display, we should make a distinction between the way it appears to us today, and the intentions that probably guided it at its formation. If we see the National Museum in the context of its predecessor-museums it becomes possible to take a less than sinister view of the inclusions, exclusions, trajectories, and deviations in the tale of the National Museum. Instead of reading a theory of conspiracy in the exclusion of India's late-medieval and Islamic past from the Museum's historical narrative, one might see it instead as an unintended victim of the Museum's attempt to accommodate two colonial epistemologies within its walls. But for this, one would need to glance backward at the early history of museums in India, the purposes for which they were established, and the kinds of order they imposed upon the collections in their charge.

a concise synopsis of India

The institution of the museum came to India as part of the vast knowledge-creating project of the Raj. The intention of early British museums that took India as their subject was to 'present to the eye a typical collection of facts, illustrations and examples which … will give a concise synopsis of India — of the country and its material products — of the people and their moral condition'.[16] The museum collections were to be a metonym for the land, presenting all the pertinent information about India through an inventory of her products, materials and human resources. Moreover, objects in the museum would bear witness to the degree to which India had achieved or fallen short of civilisation, fixing the 'moral status' of the subject race.

Accordingly, the first museums that took India as their subject (whether in India or in Britain) were encyclopaedic in scope. Gathering science and art under one roof, these museums included scientific,[17] economic,[18] industrial,[19] and archaeological[20] collections. A satisfactory museum needed to possess sections for Natural History, Ethnology, Geology, Archaeology, and the Industrial Arts. The museum-as-microcosm was part of the imperial fantasy of being able to create a complete and comprehensive archive of the Empire, in which a correctly classified and labelled array of samples could adequately represent the imperial domain.[21]

The two earliest colonial museums dedicated to India were the India Museum in London and the Indian Museum in Calcutta. The India Museum in

[15] I cite here Partha Mitter's classic study of European encounters with Indian art, *Much Maligned Monsters*.

[16] These are the words used by Monier-Williams to describe the encyclopaedic Indian museum that he attempted but failed to establish in Oxford. Quoted in 'History of the Indian Collections', in J. C. Harle and Andrew Topsfield (eds), *Indian Art in the Ashmolean Museum*, Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1987, p. x.

[17] Scientific collections primarily dealt with natural history and geology.

[18] Economic collections displayed raw materials that could be obtained in India, whether these were crops that could be grown or minerals that could be mined.

[19] Industrial collections demonstrated the craft skills that were available in India for the making of exportable produce.

[20] Archaeological collections included antiquities of various kinds — sculptures, architectural fragments, stone or copper plate inscriptions, coins, relics, potsherds, and other archaeological finds. As none of these objects was infused with the aura of 'art', reproductions mingled freely with the originals, and copies of paintings, or plaster casts of sculpture or architecture were greatly valued parts of such collections. It was part of the museum's duty to make plaster casts of antiquities in its collection, or in its neighbourhood, and distribute these among other museums in the Empire.

[21] See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, 'The Museumised Relic: Archaeology and the first Museum of Colonial India', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1977, pp. 21–51. Guha-Thakurta prefaces her discussion of the Indian Museum's Archaeological galleries with a succinct overview of colonial museum-making.

London was established in 1801 by the East India Company to house the collections being brought from India to England by officers of the Company. No branch of knowledge was outside its purview: its collections included specimens of insects and molluscs, minerals and clays, manuscripts and textiles, as well as jewels and arms taken from the treasuries of defeated Indian princes. This museum had a chequered history, reflecting the rises and falls of 'India' within the British economy as well as the public imagination. With the demise of the Company in 1858, the collections were transferred to the Crown, which dispersed them among various London institutions.[22]

While the fortunes of 'Indian' museums in Britain waxed and waned through the 19th century, the museum movement within India gathered strength as colonial scholars explored the territory and gathered samples in the course of their researches. The Indian Museum in Calcutta, that other great encyclopaedic museum of India, began its life in 1814 as the Museum of the Asiatic Society that housed collections made by its member–scholars. As the first museum instituted on Indian soil, it was, like the India Museum of London, dedicated to the study of 'art and nature in the East'. It included specimens of natural history, geology, zoology, and antiquities and currently available craft skills or 'industrial arts'. Both museums saw their mission as primarily scientific and their collections and the staff were dominated by scientists and natural historians.[23] In 1866, the Asiatic Society Museum in Calcutta was taken over by the colonial government and transmuted into the Indian Museum.[24] As the prime museum in the capital of British India, it was nurtured as India's central, indeed as India's Imperial Museum. It occupied pride of place among the evolving hierarchy of central, provincial and local museums; and for some time it was the official policy that all truly important collections be centralised in this one museum, while museums in the provinces could retain copies and duplicates.[25]

Today, the institutional form of the Indian Museum of Calcutta is as much a curiosity as any of its exhibits; it preserves for us a particular moment in the early history of museum-making. Even a mere 20 years further on into the Raj, specialist fields of knowledge had grown to such a point that the *encyclopedia indica* became too unwieldy for the one museum, one scholar or one government department to manage. The days of encyclopaedic museums were over, and museums that were set up henceforth limited themselves to a particular discipline or field of knowledge. Thus there were specialist museums for natural history, for medicine, for forestry, or for art. What today constitutes the field of 'art' was itself split into two categories — of antiquities: the monuments, sculptures, inscriptions, coins and relics that could yield information about India's historical past; and of 'industrial arts': the

[22] The continuous history of this museum is well known; it is the subject of Ray Desmond, *The India Museum, 1801-1879*, London: HMSO, 1982. The dispersed collections of this museum formed the kernel of the Indian collections in the British Museum (which derived its great Amaravati sculptures from this source), the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Natural History Museum and the Kew Gardens.

[23] The keepership at the India Museum in London was held by a succession of naturalists; and one can judge the situation at the Indian Museum in Calcutta by the fact that even after the museum had acquired the Bharhut stupa railings and sizeable quantities of Gandharan, Kushana-Mathura and Gupta period sculptures, the handbook of the museum's archaeological collections was prepared by a zoologist. This was John Anderson, Superintendent of the Indian Museum and author of its *Catalogue and Handbook of the Archaeological Collections in the Indian Museum*, Calcutta: Indian Museum, 1883. See Guha-Thakurta, 'The Museumised Relic'.

[24] See Guha-Thakurta, 'The Museumised Relic'.

[25] In a note dated 18 October 1882, E. C. Buck, Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department writes: 'Local governments may be asked to use their influence to concentrate all archaeological collections in the Indian Museum unless there are special reasons for preferring to deposit them at a Provincial Museum. Small local museums ... simply interfere without any adequate object with the completeness of the archaeological series at the Imperial Museum', National Archive of India, Archaeology 'A', nos 3–7, December 1882.

living craft skills that were so admired in Europe, and were seen to present economic opportunities for both India and Britain.

From 1851 onwards, the Government of India had begun vigorous participation in international exhibitions in which Indian materials, crops and products were displayed and advertised to an international market. These exhibitions were highly successful as a marketing device that expanded the demand for Indian products in many parts of the world. As trade in India's art-wares grew, the economic and industrial museums (which collected samples and information about raw materials, crops and craft skills) became increasingly useful to the Government's Revenue and Agriculture Department. Several 'industrial art' museums were established all over the country, in which examples of native skills were gathered as a ready reference or as an exportable collection that could efficiently be sent to the next exhibition. The logical system of arrangement for the 'industrial art' museums was by 'industry': showing the many different processes and skills available within India for, say, textiles, or woodworking, or metalworking.

Meanwhile, growing numbers of antiquarians were pressing for governmental care for monuments decaying all over the country. In response to their pleas, the Archaeological Survey was established in 1861. The task of archaeological museums was to collect, decipher and date antiquities. These museums collected sculptures and fragments of monuments, coins, inscriptions, and other relics from the distant past. The field of early archaeology, however, remained dominated by an antiquarian attitude, which valued the most ancient over the medieval.[26] By and large, when archaeological collections were displayed they were arranged in a broadly chronological order, keeping together groups of objects from one site or with a shared iconography.

In recognition of the divergent interests that occupied the field of 'art', in 1882 the Government of India split the field between two government departments. Henceforth, archaeology and fine arts would remain with the Home Department, which would arrange for the excavation, survey and protection of antiquities — a moral duty for the government that offered no financial returns. Practical Arts, exhibitions and museums would go to the Department of Revenue and Agriculture, which would link art schools and museums for the furtherance of industry. The official who oversaw this division of labour observed:

> The main object of the exhibition of Indian products is not the gratification of occidental curiosity, or the satisfaction of aesthetic longings among foreign nations, but the development of a trade in these products, whether raw or manufactured, rough or artistic.[27]

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It should be clear by now that the two typologies of display seen within the National Museum bring together the intentionalities of the two principal kinds of colonial museums. Downstairs, the National Museum is an archaeological museum. Upstairs it becomes an industrial museum. These two taxonomic systems, which were united in the earliest, encyclopaedic museums of the colonial period, and then split apart in the later 19th century in the face of growing specialist knowledge, were once again brought together to fill the halls of the new National Museum. Why? It would seem that in the desire to create an institution vast enough and grand enough to be the National Museum, the

[26] For instance, colonial-period archaeology showed a marked preference for Buddhist over Hindu art; it held that Indian art had been in decline since about the 2nd century CE. For discussions of this issue, see Pramod Chandra, 'Sculpture', in *On the Study of Indian Art*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983. Also, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of A New 'Indian' Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 178–79.

[27] A. Mackenzie (Secretary [Home Deptt] to the GOI), 'Note on Arrangements for Exhibitions', National Archive of India, Home Department Public Branch 'A' File no. 157, July 1882.

founders could only think to aggregate the different kinds of museums that existed then.

There is surely a failure of imagination here, in the inability to give shape to a new form of a museum, and to make new values and *new meanings* for the art within. In the face of a new task in a new era, the creators of the National Museum, instead of devising a new epistemology for a new situation, fell back on one that was more than 150 years old.[28] If there is any consolation, it lies only in the concession that we may now make, that perhaps later-medieval and Islamic art are excluded from the Museum's national narrative unintentionally, in an unthinking application of two incompatible systems of taxonomy.

three quadrants full

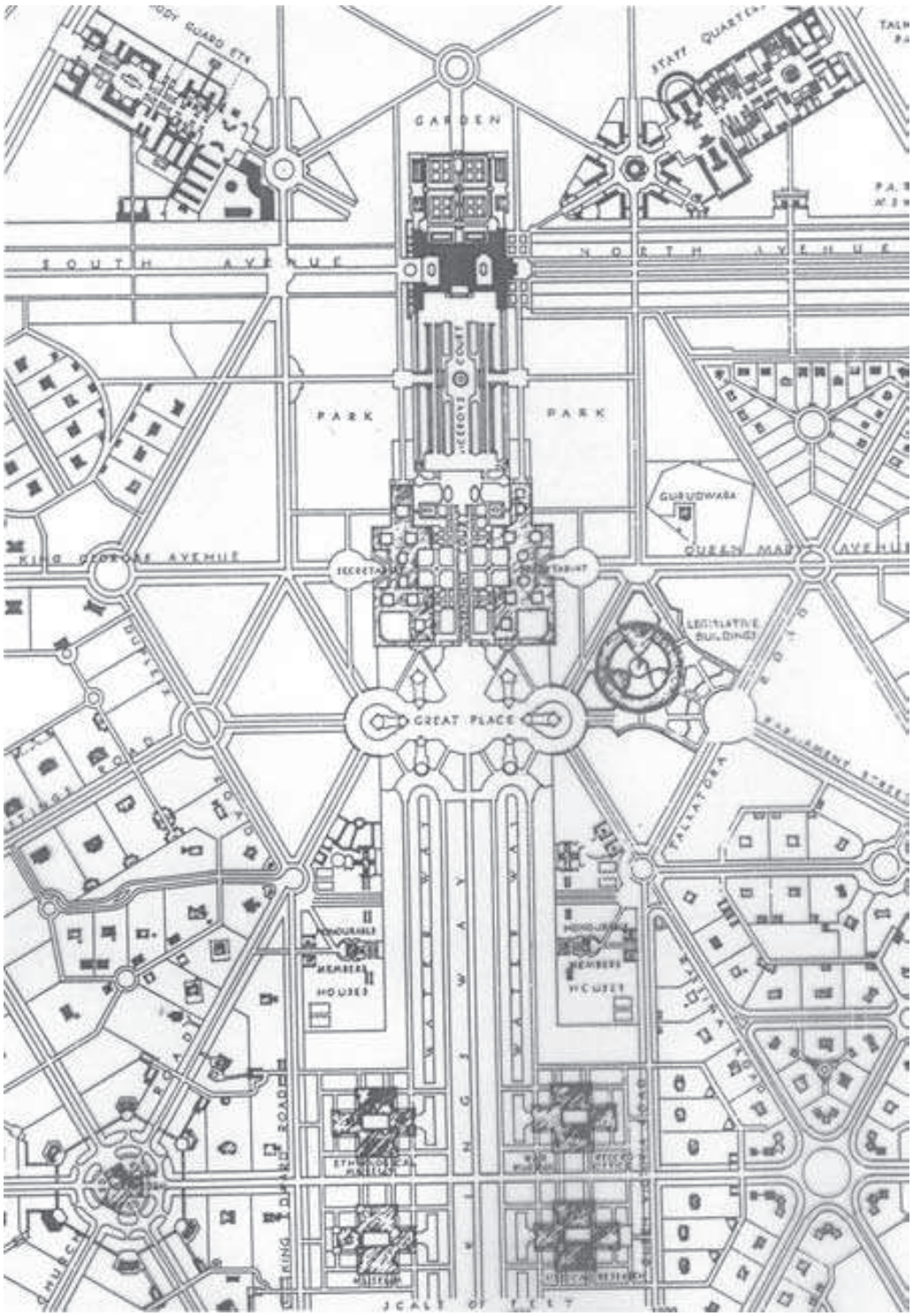
If the National Museum is stalked by the ghosts of the colonial museum, it is perhaps because it lives in a haunted house. A perusal of the history of the National Museum reveals that it is not just the Museum's sense of order that derives from epistemology of the colonial period. The idea of this Museum, its very location, and the exercise of research and collecting on which it was founded, all derive from colonial projects. Even the Museum's presence in the ceremonial centre of New Delhi is not so much the assertion of a new national confidence as much as the completion of an old colonial plan.

When the decision was taken in 1911 to shift the capital of British India from Calcutta to Delhi, there were plans to erect suitably imposing structures in New Delhi to house the great archives of colonial knowledge. The original plan for New Delhi had always envisaged the intersection of Kingsway and Queensway (today renamed Rajpath and Janpath) as the nucleus of four important institutions. This intersection was at the halfway mark of the grand processional pathway stretching between the Viceregal Palace and the Memorial Arch (now called India Gate). Four large lots were blocked out here: on the northwest, for the Records Office and the War Museum; on the northeast for the Medical Museum; on the southwest for the Ethnological Museum; and on the southeast for the Imperial Museum. Mirroring each other across the broad avenues would be the museums dedicated to the sciences of war and peace, death and life, as it were; and of the arts of forest and city, the tribal of today and the civilisation of yesteryears. Around this hub would be concentrated the sum of knowledge and understanding of India that had been gathered in the past century and a half (Plate 4.7).

This grand quartet of repositories and museums was never erected. The project was presumably overtaken by other and larger events. The First World War occurred; and when it was over and most of New Delhi had been built, the conditions within India were sufficiently unsettled to discourage investment in such triumphal gestures. There was even less sense in taking up the project after the Second World War, when the imminent loss of the Indian colony was apparent to all.

While Lutyens' plan for this museological hub at the heart of Central Vista was never realised, some structures did come to occupy three of the four quadrants. The Records Office was built according to plan, and is now the National Archives of India. In the space for the Imperial Museum, the Archaeological Survey gained its offices and added a small structure to house Sir Aurel Stein's collection of Central Asian artefacts. In the place for the Medical Museum, however, temporary military barracks were built. This plot was given over to the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in the 1980s. The fourth quadrant, intended for the ethnological museum, remained empty for a long time. Although past defence ministers did speak of building a War Museum — very nearly discharging Lutyens' original plans — this site was eventually transferred to the Ministry of External Affairs

[28] The National Museum does limit itself to the category of 'art' and does not try to become an encyclopaedic museum for all branches of knowledge. By this time, 'art' has come to be valued as the embodiment of the spiritual and intellectual qualities of the people. As such, it was a special category of objects and could no longer be ranked with commercial products.


GARDEN
SOUTH AVENUE
NORTH AVENUE
PARK
PARK
GREAT PLACE
KING GEORGE AVENUE
QUEEN MARY AVENUE
KING GEORGE ROAD
GURUDWARA
LEGISLATIVE BUILDING
SECRETARIAT
SECRETARIAT
HONOURABLE MEMBERS HOUSES
HONOURABLE MEMBERS HOUSES
WAY
WAY
SCALE OF FEET

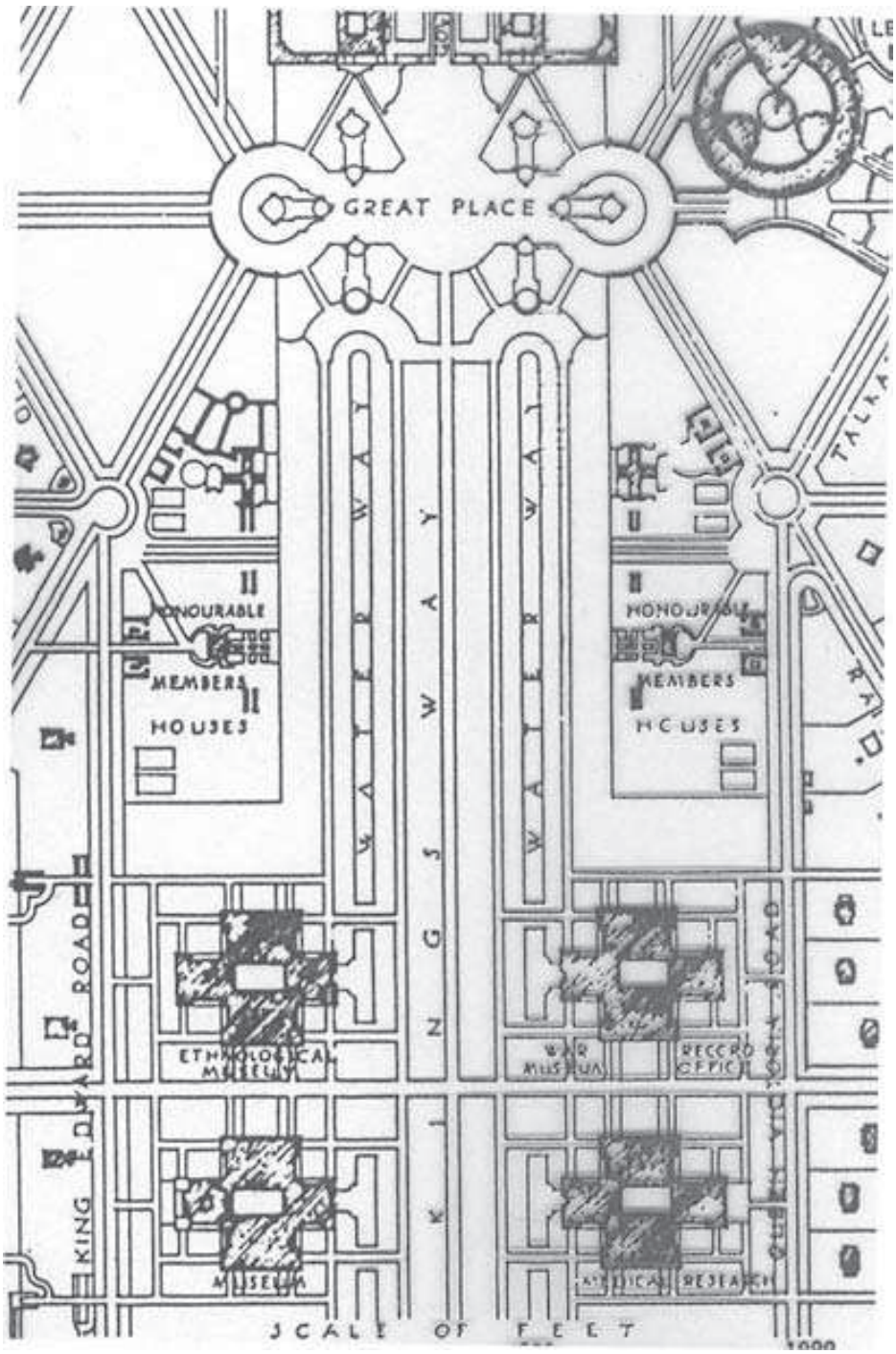


PLATE 4.7 • *Edwin Lutyens' plan for central vista, showing the concentration of museums at Point B, midway between the Viceregal Palace (Rashtrapati Bhavan) and the Memorial Arch (India Gate).* *SOURCE*: PREPARED BY THE AUTHOR.

which constructed its headquarters there in 2010.

Of all the institutions planned for the quadrant, the only grand project to be taken up in the early years after Independence was the building of the Imperial Museum, now recast as the National Museum. What were the circumstances in which the project of an Imperial Museum was revived after Independence? And in what way was the project transformed, allowing the Imperial Museum to turn 'national'?

Delhi–London–Delhi

To trace the history of Delhi's centrepiece, we must turn our attention now to an event that occurred in London. A scant three months after India's Independence, the Royal Academy of Art in London had mounted an ambitious exhibition titled 'The Arts of India and Pakistan'. Remembered as a significant moment for Indian art history, the show has been spoken of as a timely gesture on the part of the British, a gracious celebration of the independence of India and the creation of Pakistan very soon after the fact. That it was housed in the Royal Academy, a prestigious, conservative and Eurocentric institution, has been construed as an ultimate acknowledgement on the part of the imperial masters of the deep level of civilisation of the region, and indeed of the nation-worthiness of the ancient land. In truth, this exhibition marked the first time that the British art establishment treated Indian artefacts as fine art, speaking of its carved stone as 'sculpture', appreciated for their beauty, rather than as 'antiquities' that were distinguished merely by their age.

Coming, as it did, just three months after Indian independence, it was inevitable that the Royal Academy exhibition would acquire political piquancy. As it happens, the exhibition's exquisitely appropriate timing — and therefore, the inclusion of a number of politically correct gestures — was in fact, an accident.

In the 1930s, the Royal Academy first opened its doors to non-Western art with lavish exhibitions of the art of Eastern lands. In 1931, it hosted an International Exhibition of Persian Art. This was followed in 1935 by the London International Exhibition of Chinese Art. Sponsored by the Shah of Iran and the Republican Government of China respectively, both exhibitions were staggeringly ambitious. The Persian exhibition displayed more than two thousand objects; the Chinese exhibition had almost four thousand artefacts on show. Both exhibitions were critical, popular and diplomatic successes. The Persian exhibition had 259,000 visitors, the Chinese exhibition nearly 450,000. Both exhibitions created interest in the rich cultures of these Asian lands and sympathy for their contemporary regimes. To top it all, the brisk sale of tickets made the exhibitions a profit-making venture for the Royal Academy.

Despite Britain's long colonial entanglement with India, the arts of the subcontinent were little-known and not much appreciated in Britain. Nor did the museums in Britain have representative collections of Indian art that could enlighten British audiences about the major periods of Indian art. After the end of the 19th century, most excavated sculptural material remained in India, either *in situ* in monuments, or in museums there; museums in Britain had collections of the Indian industrial rather than the fine arts. Inspired by the successes of the Persian and Chinese exhibitions, however, a group of Indian art scholars and collectors in London began to press for a similar show for Indian art in 1931. Although the project was proposed by a group of enthusiasts without official positions or favour, they were allotted a date for their exhibition at the Royal Academy; they were informed by the Royal Society that the 'International Exhibition of Greater Indian Art' could be scheduled for January 1940.

Even as the group struggled to find funding and sponsorship to mount this exhibition, the Second World War broke out, scotching all plans for major exhibitions. After the end of the War the project was revived; but by this time the political situation was utterly altered. It was the eve of India's independence and the creation of Pakistan. The exhibition was now a politically sensitive event, now the British establishment had to take note of the project. As the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum commented, well done, this show could

'make a great contribution in linking up (Britain) and India',[29] but poorly done, it could worsen relations between the two countries.

In order to regulate this important exhibition, the colonial art-establishment took control of its planning and management. The core committee in London now included Basil Gray and Douglas Barrett, respectively Keepers of Oriental and Islamic Antiquities at the British Museum; K. de B. Codrington, Keeper of the India Museum at the V&A; in India the committee was headed by the stateswoman and poetess Sarojini Naidu, assisted by the Sanskritist scholar Vasudeo Sharan Agrawal and the country's leading archaeologists. The individual scholars and collectors who initiated the project were eased out of it, and the exhibition turned into an official performance.

The fact that the exhibition occurred with full support of the government machinery in both Britain and the Indian subcontinent had great impact on its curatorial scope. With the help of the governmental infrastructure, sufficient funds and the authority of two governments, the exhibition was able to gather over 1,500 artefacts from British, European and Indian collections. Especially important was the inclusion of many colossal and ancient sculptures that travelled out of India for the first time.

Visitors to Burlington House, the site of the exhibition, were greeted by the massive more-than-life-size figure of a carved bull on the stairs. This was the capital of an Ashokan pillar from the 4th century BCE. Passing this ancient and stunningly lifelike object, they passed into a display of Indus Valley material. The exhibition proceeded to show large yakshas from the Sunga period, Bodhisattvas from Kushana–Mathura, and the Amaravati reliefs that were already in London in the British Museum. Gupta sculpture was there in profusion, and was presented as India's classical phase. Given full representation also were sculptures from the medieval phase, with voluptuous figures from Orissa and Khajuraho. The survey of sculpture was rounded off with a selection of bronzes from the Tamil region in Chola times.

The sculpture galleries were followed by rooms full of miniature paintings and illustrated manuscripts. These included a selection of Mughal masterpieces, but there were also an unprecedented number of Deccani paintings that are seldom studied or seen. There was also an extensive showing of Rajput paintings 'often clumsy and ignorant copies of the imperial style, but most … amongst the most beautiful pictures in the exhibition'.[30] The survey of Indian painting extended into 19th-century Company painting, as well as the romantic landscape views made by European travellers to India in the 18th and 19th centuries.

It is worth stressing that this show in London was the first major exhibition that dignified Indian antiquities as 'art'. We witness a curious phenomenon here: for the narrative that was developed for Indian art by anti-colonial nationalist figures such as E. B. Havell and Coomaraswamy, which asserted that Indian objects were truly fine art, abounding in masterpieces, found its first exhibitionary incarnation in a show mounted by colonial authorities in the bastion of Western art! Organisers stressed that objects had been chosen for this exhibition based on their aesthetic value. As a member of the organising committee said, '[t]he standard that we held before us was to admit only objects of art and not documents of archaeology, history or ethnology'.[31] Architectural fragments were presented as 'sculptures' and manuscript pages as 'painting'. In fact, organisers asserted that all the Indian objects would 'speak directly by their formal qualities', hoping to allay visitor concerns

[29] V&A Registry: SF 47-45/1420: Indian Section General, part file Exhibitions — UK. Undated note (1946) by Leigh Ashton, Director of the V&A.

[30] Douglas Barrett, 'Indian Art', *The Spectator*, London, 5 December 1947, p. 10.

[31] Basil Gray, 'The Art of India and Pakistan with Special Reference to the Exhibition at the Royal Academy', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 96, no. 4758, 19 December 1947, pp. 79–81, 69–72.

that only those who understood Indian religion and philosophy would be able to gain any enjoyment from Indian art.[32] The exhibition also aimed to provide a comprehensive survey of the different schools and periods of the arts, no longer confining its interest to Gandharan Buddhist sculpture or Mughal painting, two phases whose absorption of Western influence had made these objects easily comprehensible to European eyes.

In addition to the sections on sculpture and painting, the exhibition had galleries for textiles and decorative arts, all of which included large numbers of rare objects of very fine quality. More unusual was the exhibition's decision to include a section on contemporary art that displayed paintings made by present-day artists from India. Amrita Sher-Gil, Zainul Abedin, N. S. Bendre, F. N. Souza, Dhanraj Bhagat, and Kanwal Krishna were among the contemporary artists shown. Interestingly, the decision to include this section came not from the critics or organisers of the exhibition (who had intended only to show works prior to 1858), but from government officials who were alive to the political significance of every inclusion and exclusion. A Secretary in the Government of India wrote:

> The Government of India are most anxious … that no impression should be left in the minds of the British public that India is a static community living upon the glories of its past … if modern art is excluded from the exhibition, the Exhibition might be misrepresented as a deliberate attempt to display India in this light.[33]

The exhibition that was installed in Burlington House in London was unprecedented in its scale, and the sheer importance of precious objects on show. Never-seen-before objects from the treasuries of major princely states shared space with museum collections from India and Europe. No exhibition of Indian art mounted since has equalled this exhibition. Yet, despite the best efforts of institutions and scholars, the exhibition failed to attract more than 100,000 people over its three-month run in London (an average of 37 people a day) and met with only mild approval from critics. British interest in India was waning; perhaps there was even a note of bitterness and resentment at the loss of Empire in the public's response to the show, and audiences refused to come. The very authorities that had supported the exhibition now claimed that they had always had reservations about it. Leigh Ashton, the Director of the V&A, noted:

> That the exhibition has been a failure has never been a surprise to me: it is a difficult art (in itself repugnant in many spheres to present-day tastes) and is nothing like so good in the realm of painting and textiles as Persian art, in the realm of sculpture, metalwork, jade, as Chinese.[34]

As the exhibition wound down to a dismal end, the organisers found they would not be able to recoup their expenses.

The exhibition may have had only moderate success in London but it was destined to have a far more significant afterlife in Delhi. When the objects loaned from Indian museums and private collections were returned to India, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru opined that 'it would be a pity to disperse this collection' without allowing the Indian public to see it first.[35] Accordingly, the Government of India decided to mount an exhibition of the nation for the nation, *in* the nation. The appropriate location for this show would be the national capital, New Delhi. However, there was no public museum or gallery present in the city that was suitable for an exhibition as large as this. In a finely calibrated symbolic gesture, the government decided to mount the exhibition in the Palace that the Viceroy had

[32] *Ibid.*, 76.

[33] Letter from G. S. Bozman, Esq., CSI, CIE, ICS, Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Information and Arts, New Delhi, to Sir Water R. M. Lamb, Secretary Royal Academy of Arts. Dated 16 May 1946, New Delhi. V&A Indian Section (IM General) 1945–49, Part XVI NF.

[34] Leigh Ashton, file notings on letter from Walter R. M. Lamb to Sir Stafford Cripps, dated 16 February, 1948, V&A 45/1420.

[35] Jawaharlal Nehru, letter to K. de B. Codrington, dated 28 February 1948, V&A SF 47, 45/1420.

just vacated. Although this edifice now housed the Governor-General (and later the President) of India, a circuit of state rooms were turned over to the exhibition in the winter of 1948. The public was welcomed into these magnificent rooms. What more potent gesture could there be, to signal the end of colonial subjugation and the arrival of democracy, than to turn the Viceroy's Palace — now renamed Government House — into a shrine to the national culture?

The exhibition that was displayed in Government House was titled 'Masterpieces of Indian Art'.[36] Installed by V. S. Agrawal, the prime mover of Indian committee for the London exhibition, along with the curator C. Sivaramamurti and the archaeologists N. P. Chakavarty and K. N. Puri, the Director-General and the Superintendent respectively of the Archaeological Survey of India, some sections of the exhibition deliberately played with the venue, making the evacuation of British authority all the more visible to the visitors. In the grand ceremonial room of the Darbar Hall, a low platform adorned with curtains and swags held the thrones of the Viceroy and Vicerine. Upon this throne platform the exhibition organisers placed a magnificent Gupta-period statue of the Buddha from Sarnath. This gesture, of replacing the throne of the colonial power with an icon of Indian spirituality, has such obvious symbolism that it hardly needs to be dwelt upon (Plate 4.8).

The show in Delhi repeated the London exhibition, albeit with some omissions. As it consisted of objects that were returning to India after the exhibition, one would expect that not all loans from Pakistan, Europe or Britain would be part of the show. Surprisingly, however, some artworks that had travelled from India for the London show were also excluded from the show in Delhi. In particular, the last two sections of the London show were eliminated. The first of these was the room of Indian landscapes by European artist–travellers. The second of these was the section on contemporary art from India. While the authorities in London had been anxious about dwelling exclusively on India's past, lest this be seen as a denigration of India's present, the Indian organisers of the exhibition had no such anxiety, and were content with a show that focused exclusively on past glories.

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The exhibition in New Delhi was thronged with visitors. Its compression of five thousand years of Indian art was seen as a valuable mirror to the national self. The show was visited by high dignitaries. As the exhibition's term drew to a close, even the prime minister felt that it would be a pity if the collection was dispersed. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education chose to retain this exhibition and make it the core of a new National Museum. Letters of 'request' were sent to the lenders to allow their objects to stay in Delhi and form the nucleus of a new museum. Through the simple act of renaming, the temporary exhibition in the Rashtrapati Bhavan became the National Museum of India! (see Plate 5, page 9, in this volume).

Now that the Museum had been conjured into existence, it sought its own appointed place. When the monsoon of 1949 approached, sculptures displayed outdoors on the Rashtrapati Bhavan lawns needed better housing. N. P. Chakravarty, the new Director-General of the National Museum — also the Superintendent of Archaeology — sought to take over the Museum's 'own' plot of land, but the plot earmarked in Lutyens' plan for the Imperial Museum was already occupied by a small Museum of Central Asian Antiquities that housed the important collection of the explorer Sir Aurel Stein. It was agreed that if the National Museum would incorporate the Central Asian collection in its own future building it could demolish the existing building and construct a suitable structure of its own. Thus, fortuitously — or perhaps superfluously — the ambit of the National Museum was expanded beyond the strictly national.

[36] Tapati Guha-Thakurta has discussed the exhibition in the Rashtrapati Bhavan in her 'Marking Independence: the Ritual of a National Art Exhibition', in *Sites of Art History: Canons and Expositions*, *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, special issue, December 1997.

PLATE 4.8 • *View of the exhibition of 'Masterpieces of Indian Art' in Government House. In the Darbar Hall, a Gupta-period Buddha sculpture from Sarnath occupies the throne platform.*

There is no doubting that the expansion of the collection beyond India's boundaries was irrelevant to the priorities that this institution had set itself. It was to be a shrine to an idea of the great and glorious history of the India of today, whose past could be traced through a series of aesthetic high-points, where many communities and cults were confluent, and where the multifarious kingdoms and empires were united in one aesthetic–spiritual quest. But even as an essential and autochthonous India was invoked in the National Museum's displays and their underlying ideology, Nehru's administrators were seeking international expertise to run the museum. What needs impelled Nehru to scour the world to find a foreign director for the National Museum of India? Making the distinction between archaeologists — who would know about the objects in the museum — and museologists — who would know how to run a museum efficiently, and exploit its potential for education, the government began an international search for the director of India's National Museum. Kristy Phillips' paper in this volume, on Grace Morley the American specialist on modern art museums who became the Director-General of India's National Museum and the 'Mataji' of Indian museology, deals with the incongruities and the congruences that emerged when this foreign woman set sail to make a national museum for India (Plates 4.9 and 4.10).

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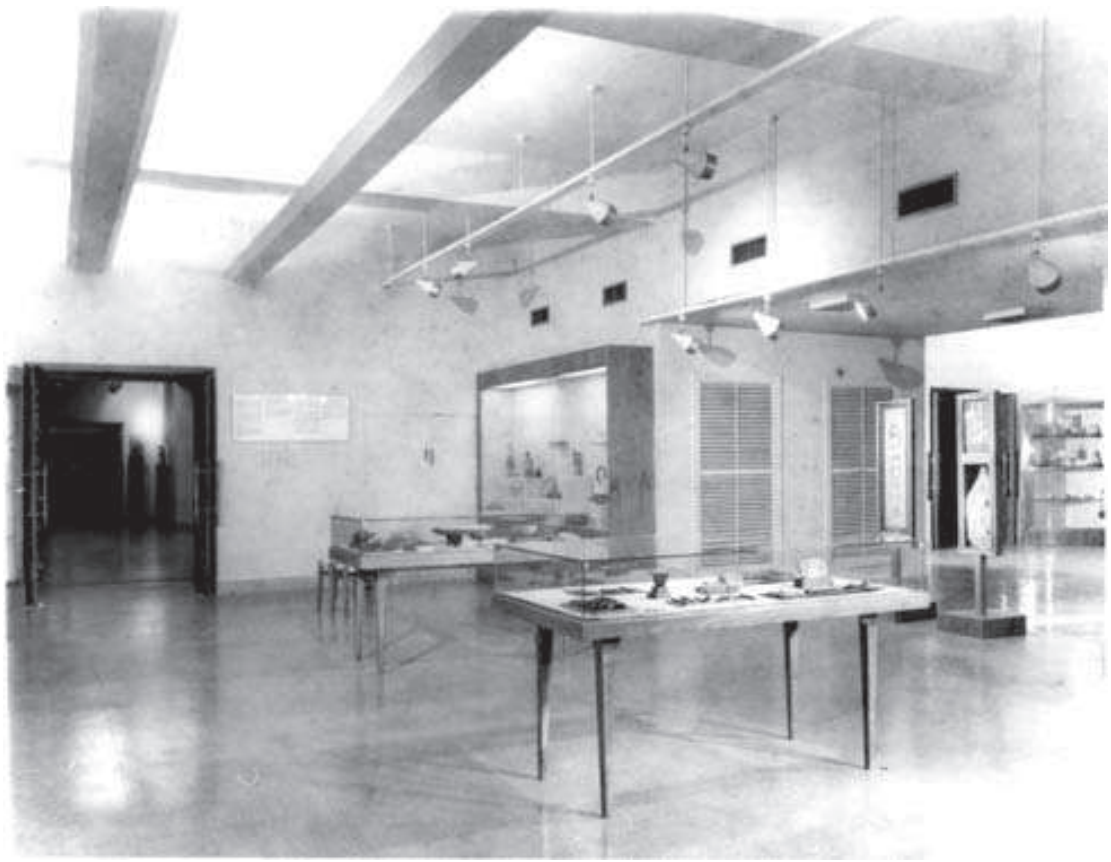
is the museum national?

These then are the circumstances in which India gained its National Museum: its location determined by the plans for the Imperial capital, its epistemology the conflation of two complexes of colonial knowledge, its core collection determined by the committee of curators of an exhibition in London, its first director an American modernist. By such accidents are institutions made. And the Museum reveals the accidents that gave it shape.

PLATE 4.9 • *The Indus Valley gallery of the National Museum in its initial quarters in Government House (now Rashtrapati Bhavan). This photograph was taken in 1961, just before the exhibits were moved to the new National Museum building.*

PLATE 4.10 • *View of the Central Asian Antiquities Gallery, installed in the modern style introduced by Grace Morley. Photograph taken in the National Museum's new building around 1962.*



This is most visible in its adherence to the dual and outmoded taxonomies of 'archaeology' and 'industry', which allow so many areas of Indian history to remain underrepresented. It is also visible in the Museum's poverty in the precise areas of collection that it foregrounds: the National Museum's collection of ancient sculpture is not of the best. The great collections had already been made in Calcutta, Mathura, Chennai or Lucknow, 50 or a 100 years before the National Museum was established. When the National Museum tried to retain the loan objects that had been borrowed from these august institutions for the London exhibition, most lenders refused to relinquish their things. Faced with their recalcitrance, the Prime Minister regretfully realised that the Museum had no national prerogative over these artefacts, and could not retain them through a fiat. The National Museum had to make do with what it could acquire, and what a Central organisation like the Archaeological Survey was willing to lend. What results is a provisional collection — full of gaps and second-rate material — that still insists on relating an authoritative account of Indian art.

With all these gaps and accidents in its history, we must ask: Is the Museum National? Despite the deficiencies of the Museum, I would contend that the Museum would have been received as 'national' regardless of its narrative or its display. It is not what the museum does, but the fact that it *exists* that makes the museum national. The National Museum acquires symbolic depth through the very shallowness of its history: that it was a new museum made by a new nation; that it would house Indian artefacts, and that it would judge them as aesthetic objects and display them as masterpieces. By the simple fact of its establishment in its particular place, in its particular place in time, the National Museum's symbolic meaning was strong enough to serve as an assertion of India as a sovereign land.

Perhaps the inconsistencies and the deficiencies in the National Museum even lead us to a worthwhile insight. Like the land it represents through culture, the Museum's National-ness is full of gaps and compromises, ideals contradicted by reality, Central desire met with Provincial recalcitrance. Very much like India itself: India's National Museum is national by default and not design.

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