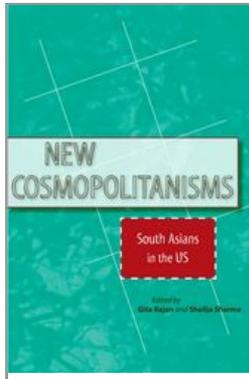


University Press Scholarship Online

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### New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the US

Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma

Print publication date: 2006

Print ISBN-13: 9780804752800

Published to Stanford Scholarship Online: June 2013

DOI: 10.11126/stanford/9780804752800.001.0001

### Identity and Visibility: Reflections on Museum Displays of South Asian Art

Vidya Dehejia

DOI: 10.11126/stanford/9780804752800.003.0003

#### [–] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores the layered status and reception of South Asian art in US culture. It begins by setting the context for museum displays, explaining both the strategies used in exhibiting cultures and the power-play that museum organizers engage in, to suggest that what the public sees is not “just art” but the careful showcasing and eliciting of aesthetic responses by “mediating between art and the visitor.” Next, using three different exhibitions curated by the Sackler Gallery—“Devi The Great Goddess,” “India Through the Lens,” and the “Chola Bronzes”—the chapter explains how the author's Asian Americanness, that is, “the politics of her own identity as an insider-outsider, an individual with a hyphenated status, and a woman” coincided with the planning and curating of the exhibitions. “Devi,” in particular, was executed as an interactive exhibition that made concrete numerous aspects of Hindu culture as the materiality of many South Asian homes in the United States.

*Keywords:* South Asian art, museum exhibits, aesthetic responses, Hindu culture

One in every 480 adults in the United States is a museum volunteer, a remarkable fact that testifies to the role played in American culture by museums, which rank among the top three family vacation destinations. Statistics reveal as many as 2.3 million visits daily to some 16,000 museums that are devoted variously to explicating art, history, science, military and maritime issues, as also flora and fauna by way of zoos, aquariums, and botanical gardens (AAM 2003). Art museums constitute a more rarefied world, but even so, no less than 648 institutions fall into this category. While Asian art has been on display in major US museums for the better part of the twentieth century, the word "Asian" (as in census categories) has held the primary meaning of East Asian, in other words, Chinese and Japanese art (Korean art is less well represented). South Asia—today's standard term to describe the Indian subcontinent, and including the nation states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan, with Tibet often being considered part of the South Asian rather than East Asian cultural continuum—is a relative newcomer to the museum scene. However, at the start of the twenty-first century, a dozen or more museums in major cities house significant collections of South Asian art, while increasing numbers of smaller institutions have also entered this underrepresented area.

The prime purpose of museums across the world is, obviously, the acquisition, conservation, and exhibition of the material cultures of people. South Asia's rich ancient remains—its stone sculptures and bronze images, **(p.72)** its miniature paintings and its decorative arts—have become much desired acquisitions. Museum professionals seek out choice objects, conduct research on their authenticity and legality, and provide displays that highlight the artistic and cultural heritage of the area. However, the ability of a museum to develop a representative collection, spanning some 2000 years of history and covering the subcontinent's geographical expanse, is clearly limited. The growing commodification of ancient art and its rapidly rising prices, the increasingly stringent rules of "provenance" following the signing of the UNESCO convention on antiquities, and the restricted budget of most museums implies that their South Asian collections will remain uneven and partial. With the exception of a few institutions that have achieved some degree of overall coverage, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the general picture is one of scattered representation. Contemporary art, not surprisingly, has been a recent entrant onto the scene. It is only in the last fifteen years, since Sotheby's and Christie's commenced their regular auctions of contemporary South Asian art, that twentieth-century works have entered the precincts of museums. As yet, only one museum, the Peabody-Essex in Salem, Massachusetts, has a permanent gallery devoted to contemporary art, and that is entirely because a local American donor made a generous gift of a substantive part of his contemporary art collection.

Apart from museums, private individuals of wealth and taste in the United States have, throughout the twentieth century, collected the ancient art of South Asia. The early collectors were white Americans and included names such as Charles Lang Freer, Avery Brundage, J.D. Rockefeller, and Norton Simon, all of whom established museum

collections in their names. Other major American collectors have variously pledged their objects to museums, sold them in auctions, or still hold them as private collections. In recent years, members of the South Asian diaspora have also entered the realm of collecting ancient art, but the diasporic presence is more strongly felt in the realm of contemporary South Asian art. In fact, an interesting buyer profile has emerged that makes itself strikingly evident both during auction previews and in the auction room itself. By and large, ancient art interests the white American collector, while Americans of South Asian origin crowd into the contemporary displays. In fact, it is largely due to the buying power of South Asians that contemporary art today has a high enough profile for a handful of New York galleries, mostly in South Asian hands, to specialize in the **(p.73)** contemporary. As a corollary, one might note that in the case of dealerships in ancient South Asian art, the balance tilts slightly in favor of white American ownership. Art collecting, clearly a mark of taste and cultivation that signals an upper class cosmopolitanism, goes hand in hand with education, urban life, class, and privilege.

It is useful to remind oneself that, with the exception of miniature paintings, most collections of Indian art, in museums or in private hands, consist of objects whose primary aim was not to arouse admiration of their aesthetic qualities, but rather to inspire devotion. Stone and terracotta sculptures had specific roles in completing the iconographic programs of temples; and bronze images fulfilled explicit ritual functions. While ancient visitors to temples and palaces admired the sculptors' creations, and ancient poets have left us verses testifying to such appreciation of fine workmanship, the category of "art," as such, is a recent invention. As Donald Preziosi somewhat sardonically puts it, the notion of art is "one of the most brilliant of European modernist inventions ... which has for the past two centuries retroactively rewritten the history of the world" (Preziosi, 1995), whether Asian, Mediterranean, Medieval European, or Meso-American. Art, as a collectible, is a rarefied commodity, and not one for popular consumption. In South Asia, art was collected by the maharajas, and later by wealthy industrialist families like the Goenkas, Birlas, Sarabhais, Kanorias, and by the occasional discerning scholar-collector. Those of class and education among the new South Asian cosmopolitan diaspora, many of whom collect art, readily visit museums and attend exhibition openings; those of lesser privilege need to be coaxed into art museum visitation.

Museums in the United States place considerable weight on the institution's educational role and the need to communicate effectively with its audiences. In fact, every definition of a museum, whether from the American Association of Museums (AAM), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), or the federal government, includes the word "education." The need to be centrally concerned with communication and hence with reception seems self-evident. Yet, one might note that museums with Asian collections have largely ignored the diaspora, which could and should form a significant part of the museum's constituency. The reflections on educational and display strategies, museum priorities, and South Asian participation in museum activities that form the body of this essay, draw substantially upon my personal curatorial and museum management experience at the **(p.74)** Smithsonian Institution's Freer Gallery of Art and its Arthur M. Sackler gallery, which are viewed as jointly constituting the nation's national museum (the

small caps are intentional as the name is not officially on the letterhead) of Asian art. A onetime insider's ability to explain the rationale for decisions may be of some interest since there are no standardized or even customary practices that museums follow, or are expected to follow, in their choice of themes for special exhibitions, the decision to highlight one cultural complex at the expense of another, the alternation of large and small exhibitions, display tactics, or outreach activities. Myriad contesting priorities, ranging from the financial to the aesthetic, compete for attention. For instance, museums will agree to showcase private collections of which they publish catalogues in the hope of securing those collections for their institution; instances include the Metropolitan Museum's *The Flame and the Lotus* (1985) and the Norton Simon Museum's *Painted Poems* (2003). One might note too that total control over the choice of subject matter is not always in the hands of individual museums since they do not routinely generate their own exhibitions of South Asian art. More often, they host an exhibition offered by an institution with an active curator, and the ultimate choice of an exhibition might well depend upon the availability of a particular show during a time slot that suits the museum. The size and scale of the show, whether generated inhouse or taken from traveling offerings, depends largely upon the museum's priorities and the funds that it is willing to make available for a show of South Asian art that is not generally expected to be a crowd-pleaser.

Today it is widely recognized by specialists that museums and their exhibitions do not constitute "a neutral and transparent sheltering space" (Duncan 1991); rather, museums are acknowledged to be instruments of power that make moral statements (Karp 1991). The act of choosing and displaying objects is a weighted decision, and there is awareness that museums and exhibitions are, or can be, culturally, ideologically, and politically freighted enterprises (Baxandall 1991, Duncan 1991, Lentz 1998). As Susan Vogel (1991) points out, the very banner hung in front of a museum communicates that institution's values to visitors even before they enter the building. It is difficult to argue with public perception of the relative values assigned to cultures when a museum banner for an Asian show is a quarter the size of an adjoining banner for a European art show. The gallery space given to a particular culture is often perceived by visitors, and indeed by museum staff, as highlighting **(p.75)** the importance of one cultural complex at the expense of another. Even having an established, well-regarded curator in a particular curatorial field is perceived as a museum's high regard for that field, and is usually viewed as being at the expense of some other area of expertise. Consequently, museums with limited displays of South Asian art might do well to point out to their critics that the blame lies with the vagaries of collecting history, and does not reflect the management's current value judgments.

A museum's displays from its permanent collections, as well as its special exhibitions, represent South Asian identity both directly through the images on display and indirectly through the many nuances and implications of the chosen objects. It is not the unknown, anonymous creator of the ancient art object who enunciates that identity, nor indeed does the exhibition's audience somehow perceive that identity. Rather, it is the exhibition makers, the curators, who have taken on this vastly important role (Karp 1991). The very

first publication dedicated entirely to museum practices, Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine's 1991 *Exhibiting Cultures*, brought together papers from a 1988 international conference, and reflected the times when museum professionals in non-Western fields were largely white Americans. Today that scenario has begun to change, bringing with it different curatorial perspectives, guarded but generally responsive reactions from museum management, and wide-ranging feedback from differing categories of the public. Increasingly, it is women of South Asian origin who seem to be filling curatorial positions in museums with South Asian collections. While Svetlana Alpers found it troubling that objects of other cultures are made into something we can look at (1991), today those who make it into an object to be admired are often from the culture represented, as indeed are those who look at it. The curatorial voice is one that can, and does, wield immense power in its ability to control the manner of representing a community. It is not surprising that local communities of South Asians feel ignored, if not slighted, when not brought into the consultation process that accompanies an exhibition. When an art exhibition is largely a stylistic exercise and presents, for instance, a group of paintings by different contemporary artists, or from different ancient schools, the curatorial voice may be largely of stylistic ascription. But when an exhibition takes cultural interpretation as its mandate, as in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's "Manifestations of Shiva" (1981), the Los Angeles County Museum's "The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India" (1995), or the Sackler's "Devi: The Great Goddess" (1999), the curatorial (p. 76) voice, its inevitable cultural assumptions, and its role in constructing identity become paramount. In such cases, it would be wise for a museum to put the name of the curator upfront, rather than only in the catalogue, so as to assign responsibility for the construction of meaning within the exhibition. The exhibitions that will be the focus of my reflections in this essay are inevitably charged, to a lesser or greater degree, with the politics of my own identity as an inside-outsider, an individual of hyphenated status, and a woman.

As far as art museums are concerned, one may speak of two very different philosophies of display. One, the masterpiece approach, stresses the primacy of the object, with aesthetics as the ruling factor, and visual concerns of overriding importance. The second, the contextual approach, stresses the function of the object, and sociocultural concerns are of prime significance. Between them, the Freer and Sackler galleries exemplify both approaches. The Freer Gallery of Art (founded 1923) follows the principles of its founder, Charles Lang Freer, for whom artistic masterpieces stood in stately grandeur on pedestals and spoke a universal language of beauty in which context was largely irrelevant. A Buddha from the so-called golden age of India's Gupta period, a Chola dynasty bronze image of Shiva, a Pala period stele of Vishnu stand in exquisite isolation, and the primary message concerns beauty of line, form, and color. Rooms are painted in shades of restrained elegance, with discretely carpeted floors, and lighting that is appropriately subdued; viewers generally feel constrained to converse in lowered tones. The adjoining Arthur M. Sackler gallery (founded 1987), on the other hand, plays up the role of context whenever the opportunity presents itself; interpretation of the art is all-important, and meaningful communication and interaction with viewers is considered rewarding. Walls are frequently painted deep green or rich burgundy, lighting may be used to dramatic effect, and flowers, garlands, and silks may be used to recreate an

appropriate setting for a specific work of art. Since the terms of Freer's gift decreed that his gallery would neither lend its objects nor borrow from outside collections, all major loan shows of South Asian art are presented in the Sackler Gallery with its possibilities, and pitfalls, of contextualization.

Over the years the Freer, and its much younger sister the Sackler, acquired a high reputation for exhibitions devoted to the sophisticated artistic traditions of China and Japan. Special exhibitions of South Asian art were few and far between and when they were mounted, they focused largely on the refined painted miniatures of the Mughals, which forms the wealth of the Freer (p.77) collection. This emphasis was partly due to the portable character of paper pages, which could be readily transported across continents, and partly due to the appeal of the Mughal style to Western taste into the 1970s and 80s. Painted pages, held together in manuscripts or albums, were created largely for the viewing pleasure of monarchs and aristocrats. Context was thus relatively simple even if artistic conventions, like the use of multiple perspective or the non-naturalistic color schemes, needed to be explained. Added to this was the fact that "traditional" museum audiences—Western viewers—found it easier to relate to the two-dimensional flat surfaces of a page of paper, as indeed of silk hanging scrolls or hand scrolls, since the recent Western artistic tradition has been largely dominated by two-dimensional painted canvases. Mughal paintings might hold great appeal for Western audiences, but it was a fair guess that the relevance of such material to the diasporic South Asian community would be limited.

Arriving at the museum in the 1990s, it seemed appropriate that I highlight the depth of the cultural tradition of South Asia, largely though not exclusively of India, through its rich repository of stone, bronze, and terracotta sculpture that, for centuries, was its dominant and highly visible form of artistic expression. The sensuous impact of three-dimensional figural sculpture from South Asia generally leaves Western audiences feeling uncomfortable. The abundance of flesh in a Rubens' canvas seems to be something audiences can take in their stride, but the three-dimensionality of Indian female figures that, apparently, appear to invade the viewers' space, is something that leaves many visitors ill at ease. While this discomfort is rarely expressed directly to museum authorities, any museum professional who walks through galleries to assess visitor reaction will hear such sentiments voiced. It seemed necessary, however, to handle that challenge as well as the accompanying complex issue of mediator between the art and the visitor. Since the permanent collection of the Freer and the Sackler galleries had limited sculptural material, it became clear that special exhibitions with international loans would need to be mounted.

Three very different types of visitors constitute the Freer and Sackler's audience, and their expectations had to be borne in mind in planning a long-term exhibition schedule, determining the character and content of exhibition catalogues, and deciding upon the appropriate "voice" for wall-text panels and labels. For connoisseurs and aficionados of South Asian art and culture—scholars at universities and museums, as well as collectors and (p.78) dealers—a special exhibition must present unknown or lesser-known objects

and offer new insights. Exhibition catalogues containing new research and fresh perspectives were largely aimed at this audience, which included South Asians, as were the scholarly symposia that accompany major exhibitions. The second category of visitors comprised “nonspecialist” Americans, generally Caucasian, both adults and children, who would appreciate easy access to an “exotic” cultural complex. Audioguides, interactive videos, colorful brochures, children's programs, and activity-cum-reading areas largely cater to this group. Finally, there is the South Asian diasporic community, representing the new cosmopolitanism discussed by the editors, and including those of class, education, and wealth, as well as those of lesser privilege. By and large this community is familiar with the cultural milieu of the art objects displayed, but has rarely thought of its material culture in terms of aesthetic significance or a museum display. An exhibition must be relevant to all three types of audiences whose participation in one way or another is crucial to its success. And the extension of the exhibition through lectures, music and dance performances, films, and community participation, helps provide a fuller experience of the art on display, extending its scope and significance. Critics might question whether museums are moving out of the art business into the realm of popular culture. But this may be necessary with increasing awareness that a museum visit is a leisure-time activity that competes with a range of other such activities including movies, concerts, theater and indeed, open-air pursuits. For some museum visitors, the art, in and of itself, is a sufficient draw; others, especially the lesser-privileged members of the diaspora, may have to be coaxed into a museum through its public programs.

While marked by strong pride in their cultural heritage, the South Asian diaspora is by and large indifferent, even disinterested in museums, only slowly appreciating that museums serve as “valorizing agencies” (Lavine 1992). In addition to obvious commonalities like food, dress, and adornment, the shared experience of its members includes distant memories of colonial rule, familiarity with ancient myths and legends, temples and mosques, the all-important deliberate dislocation from a known environment, and subsequent relocation within a new value system. There is a shared nostalgia for ‘back home,’ but there is no intention to return. The term transnational is one that seems ideal to describe this diaspora; as Tololyan explains in his choice of the word to feature in the subtitle of his journal *Diaspora*, it “contains (p.79) the root term “nation,” which was and remains indispensable to thinking about diasporas” (2002), and the South Asian diaspora in particular. While readily adopting American citizenship, the diasporic communities continue to have strong emotional and cultural ties to the home nation; their temple and mosque building activities are examples of this rootedness, of the need to assert and emphasize identity. It is clear that American citizenship and nationalism are not viewed as oppositional by individuals who are viewed as caught in the hyphenated betwixt and between. It is increasingly evident that members of the diaspora no longer see themselves in a noman's land; rather it is a specific if liminal space within which many are increasingly comfortable.

It is not useful to speak of the South Asian diaspora as a monolithic entity in the context of museum visitation. The diasporic community is split between the upper class elite whose circle of friends would include Western museum goers, and those from a strata of society

to whom a museum visit is an unfamiliar concept. "Art" has a marginal role in many lives unless it is in the form of "calendar art," which rarely forms part of an art museum collection, being considered more worthy of study in sociological, religious, or anthropological contexts. To view as "art" stone figures from temple walls, frequently of sacred import, requires new ways of thinking that are not part of immediate past experience. Such difficulties are faced not only by those from the less wealthy segments of the diaspora; those who have amassed wealth and status may also find themselves in the same conundrum; for many, a twenty-first century bronze of, say, god Krishna, is as good as the fourteenth century image that they have recently been persuaded into purchasing for their local museum.

Today, increasing numbers of successful contemporary artists are members of the South Asian diaspora. Their approach to the display of their works in specialized museums like the Smithsonian's Freer and Sackler galleries that display only Asian art varies immensely. Some are delighted and consider it an advantage to show their work in a South Asian context. Others would prefer to display in museums of contemporary art, construing a display in an Asian art museum as a marginalization of their relevance.

Two small-scale exhibitions which, independent of curatorial and management intention, seem to have functioned as sites of "retelling," and thus of community building (Berman 2001) were mounted at the Sackler Gallery in 1995 and 1996. "Puja: Aspects of Hindu Devotion," displayed objects of **(p.80)** cultural and ritual significance, both from the angle of the devotee and that of the art lover. The compact exhibition was tripartite and focused on the ritual worship of Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi. It presented a temple shrine to Shiva, a home shrine to Vishnu, and a wayside shrine to the goddess; each was shown first in a simulated sacred context that would be familiar to the South Asian devotee, and the three in situ displays were then juxtaposed with a standard museum-style presentation of similar objects as works of art. Thus, the temple-shrine section of the exhibit commenced with a Shiva linga, dressed and adorned, and placed within a simulated shrine with trays of devotional offerings of fruit, flowers, and coconuts. The adjoining room provided a total contrast by displaying lingas, and mukhalingas, as works of art, placing them within glass cases with spotlights. The exhibition, which won an award for the museum's education department, was proposed initially as a way to introduce a complex religion to the general public. In addition, it was a good instance of an exhibition that might face the criticism that museums turn cultural materials into works of art. It proposed that the objects in the exhibition possessed equal validity in two very different contexts. In their roles as objects of devotion, intended entirely for ritual worship and adoration, beauty was irrelevant; this is the normal approach to such objects by devotees. On the other hand, those same objects have today acquired a valid existence as works of art; as such they were presented in a strikingly lit museum display with an ambience very different from that of their ritual context. The exhibition was attended by substantial numbers of Washington area South Asian diaspora who had heard of the exhibit largely through their involvement with the Shiva-Vishnu temple in Lanham, Maryland, whose chief priest had ritually dressed the Shiva linga prior to the opening of the exhibition. Young teens of South Asian origin found themselves perplexed, even

confounded, by viewing in a Smithsonian display, objects similar to those in their parents' homes where they were placed on kitchen or bedroom shelves, or in special puja rooms. For these teens feeling that ubiquitous, probably imagined, pressure to conform, it turned out to be a validation of cultural practices (of art too?), which they had hitherto faced with a degree of ambivalence if not actual discomfort. "Puja" resonated with the mix of classes that constitutes the new cosmopolitanism.

Another such experience was provided by "Painted Prayers," an exhibition centering around a set of striking photographs of those ubiquitous threshold designs created by women in Indian homes, known variously as *kolam*, (p.81) *rangoli*, *alpana*, and the like. To emphasize the impermanent nature of these works of art and their constant renewal, as also to stress their continuing relevance in the cultural life of the community, both in India and overseas, women of the diasporic community were invited to create a different "painted prayer" each weekend. A specially constructed large wooden platform, a foot high, was placed in an open area at the entrance to the show, and the creativity displayed by the local South Asian women attracted a substantial viewership. This was an occasion tailor-made to stress Raymond William's dictum that "culture is ordinary," (1981) that Mughal miniature paintings, Vilayat Khan's ragas, and Satyajit Ray's films were no more "culture" than women's daily "art," bhangra rock, or a Bollywood musical. Yet, in highlighting the fact that the designs held symbolic meaning and were viewed as harbingers of the auspicious, the exhibition simultaneously emphasized the view of culture as "the order of life in which human beings construct meaning through practices of symbolic representation." (Tomlinson 1999). Both "Puja" and "Painted Prayers" were museum successes in being low-budget exhibitions that brought in large numbers of viewers.

It is a repeatedly emphasized fact that museum displays isolate and transfer objects from their original setting/s, and in doing so invest them with new meanings as works of art. Svetlana Alpers (1991) refers to "the museum effect" that turns cultural materials into works of art, and Vogel (1991) speaks of the resulting "drastic recontextualization." To my way of thinking, this is not a troubling phenomenon, even though most South Asian sculpture is sacred imagery that was created to be approached with devotion. Richard Davis (1997) actually argues that subsequent reinterpretations of India's art objects, particularly images of the gods, are as worthy of study as their original intent and context, while Philip Fisher (1996) comments on art objects surviving recontextualization "in the way that certain personalities survive and even thrive under the strain to personality that immigration imposes." Three very different exhibitions, curated at the Gallery between 1999 and 2002, will be used to illustrate some of these comments on museum practices and priorities. All three required extensive fund-raising to facilitate the national and international loans, and all three had cultural interpretation as part of their self-imposed mandate.

To feature the ubiquitous presence and importance of Devi in the artistic and cultural heritage of South Asia, a 1999 exhibition, "Devi: The Great Goddess," brought together a hundred and twenty objects from thirty-seven (p.82) different collections, public and

private. It included works produced in the first century BCE as well as contemporary art; a fiberglass sculpture by the British diaspora artist Anish Kapoor enabled portraying the culture as a dynamic, living entity, rather than a static one of past glory. Although the exhibition focused on classical sculptures of high monetary value, place was given to tribal brasses from interior India, as also an inexpensive “calendar art” image. Possibilities of presentation included a chronological or art historical approach but these were abandoned as being neither challenging nor enlightening, nor indeed of interest except to a limited few. Instead, the exhibition proposed a new set of categories, organized on the basis of Devi’s “function,” which seemed intriguing and evocative, and would hopefully create a meaningful experience for visitors. This classification started with the most powerful, most expressive forms of the goddess, and moved toward gentler and less dominant categories. Commencing with Devi as Cosmic Force, the exhibition moved to her role as *Dayini* or Giver (of boons), her presence as Heroine and Beloved (Sita, Draupadi, Radha), her role as local protector (village and tribal deities), the category of Semi-Divine and Auspicious (*yakshis, naginis*), and concluded with deified Woman Saints. It was acknowledged that categories of this type overlap and intersect and that all boundaries are fluid; the inclusion of the final two categories in an exhibition titled “Devi” would undoubtedly be controversial and thought provoking.

A substantive volume on Devi, with catalogue entries preceded by a series of essays from scholars in a range of disciplines including religious studies, literature, anthropology, and art history, was intended for specialists, as too was a daylong symposium on aspects of Devi. An innovative audioguide was created largely with the uninitiated public in mind. While one segment, directed toward adults, allowed them, for instance, to explore a range of poems on the goddess, a second segment for families was narrated in the dynamic voice of Devi herself. Would South Asian families find this offensive? Judging from the comments in the visitor book, viewers found it stimulating and indeed more people listened to it than to the adult segment. The Sackler’s inhouse children’s program, *ImaginAsia*, was directed toward Devi for the duration of the show. Each session commenced with story telling, followed by a gallery visit during which the 6- to 10-year olds were asked to select an image of Devi (from a chosen few) on which they would like to write a story. Innovative responses, revealing the children’s ability to get deeply involved in unfamiliar material, included several who chose to write about (p.83) Durga battling the buffalo-demon, but from the angle of the defeated animal. In order to further enrich the experience of the exhibition, and to put it into its wider context for all categories of audience, the Gallery provided an extensive series of public programs that included performances of dance, music, film, and sacred chants. These were well attended by the diaspora who were repeatedly exhorted, at these events, to visit the exhibition itself. While artists of international stature participated in the program, the diaspora of the greater Washington area was more closely involved in the performance aspects; it was they who provided the sacred chants, the story-telling sessions, and many of the music and dance performances, bringing family and friends with them. To reach audiences unable to visit the show in Washington DC, a rich web site was created, which included also a children’s section and resources for teachers.

The ability of art objects, in appropriate museum settings, to arouse wonder is something that museologists capitalize on, frequently using theatrical tactics in presenting exhibitions. In their original context, most of the images in the Devi exhibition were neither intended to be portable objects, nor to be viewed as “art,” but history has decreed that they take on a new persona in which they are highly valued objects of aesthetic significance. There are no curatorial apologies for using “boutique lighting” (Greenblatt 1991) to make the images of Devi glow and sparkle; it seems a wholly appropriate way to suggest to viewers that they might view the multiplicity of divine images as multiple sparkling facets of a single diamond, as many Hindus themselves do. Any exhibition creates a structured path, an imposed order, “a programmed narrative” (Duncan 1991). Images are juxtaposed in specific ways and often take on new meanings when viewed in relation to particular works. There is usually only one way to enter an exhibition and one way to leave, and specific meanings are constructed by placing images early or late in an exhibit, before this image or after this one, or standing in splendid isolation rather than forming part of a cluster. As Fisher (1996) so aptly phrased it, “The path, the wall with its juxtapositions, the room with its cluster, are all tiny narratives or histories, built into the architecture and into the experiential unit of the visit.” In any exhibition, the material is filtered through the interests, and research experience of the curator and in the case of Devi, the experience was indeed structured by distinctive curatorial interests, sensibilities, and biases. A Devi exhibition by another curator would certainly have a different structure. That should not seem strange since something **(p.84)** very similar occurs when academics write a book. There is a first chapter and a last, and an idea is presented before this one or after that, and the various chapters, in place of rooms, build into the experience of the book. Two scholars writing about the same subject are likely to come up with two different books; the choice of material, the approach, the emphasis, whether in a book or in an exhibition, is all-important.

The complex nature of the subject of Devi, its numerous ramifications, its vast chronological span and geographical reach, indicated the necessity to guide the viewer through what was indeed “a cultural obstacle course” (Lentz 1998). Apart from impressing visitors with the sheer beauty of the objects on display and with the overwhelming significance of the goddess in the South Asian context, there were two main strands of thought to be conveyed to those willing to engage deeper. It is more or less a museum dictum that a successful exhibition is one that restricts itself to conveying two major avenues of thought; more than that cannot be absorbed in a single museum visit. The first was to suggest to viewers to come to terms with the paradoxical nature of the Goddess. She is Ma, mother, that most approachable of beings, gentle, nurturing, and concerned with her children's every need. At the same time she is Jaganmata, mother of the universe, an awesome being of great power, remote, fearsome, and difficult to approach. It was hoped that visitors would accept this paradox through viewing a range of beautiful images that expressed the one aspect or the other, and in some instance, combined both aspects in one image. This was a strand of thought that caused much confusion to the general nonspecialized audience, but caused little concern for either the scholar or viewers representing the new cosmopolitanism. The second thought to be imparted to the more serious visitor was posed in the form of a question. Is Devi One? Is

she many? Is she One through, and in, the many? This question resonated throughout the exhibition, but no answer was proposed, as any answer, especially within the context of an exhibition experience, would indeed constitute an oversimplification. While neither scholars nor the general public wished to express themselves on this issue, it was one that was enthusiastically, even excitedly, debated by members of the diaspora. To them this was an issue of cultural, and hence, everyday discourse, and one which they wished to contest. It was a sobering curatorial reflection to recognize that the exhibition ultimately bore the awesome responsibility of being representative of an entire culture through its portrayal of one major facet of that culture.

**(p.85)** An unexpected objection to “Devi” took the form of letters and e-mails that claimed that this exhibition promulgated a specific religious tradition, and accused the Smithsonian, a federal institution, of failing to recognize the separation of church and state. Each communication was answered individually, explaining that the Gallery was not highlighting the Hindu religion as such, but rather the art produced by the Hindu religious and cultural tradition. This exchange highlights an interesting conundrum since none, I am sure, would ever debate whether an exhibition of Giotto's painting, or a display of Byzantine art, represented art or the Christian religion. It is no doubt the level of unfamiliarity with Hindu art that provokes such reactions.

A very different type of exhibition, “India Through the Lens: Photography 1840–1911” was mounted at the Sackler Gallery in the year 2000. Its declared aim was to emphasize the aesthetic qualities of nineteenth century photographs as works of art, and disassociate them from their all-too-frequent status as documentary aids to a range of disciplines that include history, anthropology, and art history. At the same time, however, the images provided visitors with an insight into the complex relationship that existed between India and the British Raj, but without making this the central point of what was an art exhibition rather than a photo exhibit mounted in a history museum. Negotiating between these two disparate aims proved to be a tricky exercise. Scholars interested in the history of photography wondered why the exhibition dealt at all with issues pertaining to colonialism and the imperial presence, while those working in postcolonial or subaltern studies felt the exhibition had sidestepped important issues. A 2003 exhibition titled “Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation, 1850–1900” presents the opposite end of this spectrum. Its aim was to bring fine photographs “into the context of larger debates about colonialism's cultural technologies and the production of national histories” (Pelizzari 2003). While immensely successful in its intention, and totally stimulating as a book, there was no way to avoid the visual disjunctures in the exhibition experience.

A third exhibition, which illustrated attempts at in-situ and contextual displays, issues of “voice,” and the possibilities of outreach activities, focused on some of the most aesthetically satisfying imagery created anywhere in the world—bronze images of the Chola period (ninth to thirteenth centuries) from south India. As always, the challenge was to present material that makes a scholarly contribution to the field of South Asian art and culture, and is yet **(p.86)** what one might term “user-friendly.” This 2002–2003

traveling exhibition was titled “The Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola Bronzes from South India,” and it presented viewers with the paradox of the “sensuous-sacred image.” It invited viewers to ponder the fact that, for both artist and devotee, beauty of external form went hand in hand with inner spiritual beauty. This concept was unsettling to all but the diaspora who took it in their stride, commented that sacred temple images were always beautiful, and wondered what all the fuss was about.

In the welcoming but artificial environment of a museum exhibition, sacred bronzes of the Chola period, each a unique piece emerging from a clay mold that must be broken to release the image, were presented as works of art. Visitors could study them up close and admire their sensuous form and swaying movement, their technical virtuosity and refined details. But it was necessary to emphasize that viewing them in their original temple context, covered with silks, jewelry of gold and precious stones, and fragrant flower garlands, would be an utterly different experience. Context was vital to demonstrate that for priests and devotees today, as much as in Chola times, the bronze had no existence as a work of art; it existed solely as an object of adoration. Thus, a large bronze of dancing Shiva was draped and adorned by the local temple priest, and placed in a simulated sacred context to alert viewers that the bronze images were sacred processional images carried through town and temple for the many ritual festivities of the south Indian religious and social milieu. Photomurals of adorned images in context, as well as actual jewelry of a type that would have adorned temple bronzes, encouraged viewers to envisage the bronzes in their ritual context. Carnatic music in the galleries alerted viewers to the fact that music is an integral part of the southern temple milieu. The exhibition emphasized the continuity, into the twenty-first century, of both the creation of bronze images and their ritual significance. The exhibition was one where South Asian diasporic communities, as part of the new cosmopolitanism, could feel their cultural practices and everyday life to be legitimized.

Since “voice” is such a crucial issue in museum presentations (Lavine 1991), the Chola exhibition attempted to present multiple voices—of the curator and the diaspora, of story-teller and ancient poet saints—in an attempt to provide a richer overall dimension. To supplement the curatorial voice and provide a different perspective on the bronzes, the Education department interviewed practicing Hindus from the greater Washington area and featured **(p.87)** their voices in a series of wall text-panels placed throughout the exhibition. Their interventions were varied; some provided personal and devotional approaches to individual bronzes, others expressed perplexity at seeing sacred images in a museum and questioned its appropriateness. Here, one might say, was an experiment in how “the *audience*, a passive entity, becomes the *community*, an active agent.” (Karp 1992, italics in original). Separate “labels” telling the stories of the myths and legends surrounding the various deities were planned to supplement the ecstatic poetic verses composed by the saints between the sixth and ninth centuries. The exhibition title, the headings of each text-panel, as well as a verse by one of the saints, were provided in the Tamil script. In an attempt to draw in visitors from the diaspora who frequent the many Hindu temples in the greater Washington area but never visit the museum, the Education department came up with an extensive outreach program in which it identified

a group of teens of South Asian background and trained them to be “exhibition guides.” It was determined that those members of the diaspora who would not normally visit the museum and attend a standard docent-led tour of Chola bronzes would indeed come to one “advertised” in the temple and led by young people from their own community.

What then is the construction of South Asia produced through museum spaces? A reasonably accurate one, by and large, that attempts to represent the range of countries, and religions, that comprise South Asia, and covering a time span from the second millennium BCE (when possible) to the present. With India being the largest country in the region, collections naturally tend to highlight its sculptural wealth of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain imagery. However, both Pakistan and Bangladesh are featured, the one through the Indus civilization and its Gandharan Buddhist art, and the other through sculptures of the Pala-Sena monarchs of the ancient region of Bengal. Mughal miniatures, carpets, architectural units, and jeweled objects are featured without a country ascription since Mughal rule extended over more than one modern nation-state. Sri Lankan Buddhist images, and the Himalayan art of Nepal (and Tibet) are also significant players in South Asian collections. The stone and bronze sculptures, the miniature paintings and jewelry, speak of a world of shrines and palaces, a sophisticated world, the upper class of an ancient milieu. Contemporary South Asian art likewise speaks of an urban and urbane milieu. It is the wealthy social strata that sponsored the production of finely crafted images, and exquisitely painted miniatures, and which also **(p.88)** constitutes the purchasing audience for contemporary urban sculpture and painting. The vibrant works of everyday culture, created by tribal and village India, tend to be seen largely in Natural History museums, in displays of craft items like basketry, pottery, and often textiles. This division between art and natural history museums is beginning to blur, but by and large, as is evident in both Washington and New York, the division still holds. While we might indeed object to this fragmented view of South Asian culture, it is certainly a fact that all art museums represent an upper class milieu, a sophisticated world of which each culture, whether Greek, Roman, Chinese, Flemish, or Renaissance, was proud and which sponsored the creation of beautiful objects. More disturbing is the fact that several large museums, with major collections of art works from the Islamic world, have taken it upon themselves to carve up the world of South Asia. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, anyone wishing to examine South Asian miniature paintings must walk to the far right of the museum to view Rajput paintings in the South Asia galleries, and to the far left to see Mughal paintings in the Islamic wing.

Today the United States seems to have set aside the ideal of assimilation in a melting pot in favor of not merely an acceptance, but an actual embrace of multiculturalism. And reacting to this unstated, though palpable atmosphere, a range of diverse communities are reasserting their differences, all the way down to the emphasis, clearly audible on National Public Radio, on the authentic pronunciation of often complex diasporic names. If Sampath and Rajnikant had arrived in the US in the last decade or two, it is unlikely there would have been a store named “Sam & Raj.” The question one might appropriately raise in this context is whether the South Asian diaspora is comfortable about inhabiting the everyday space of American culture that includes art museum visitation. In India,

museums were introduced by the British as part of their attempt to catalogue the monuments and archives of the subcontinent; Indian museums have since remained as mere repositories of objects, with little attempt to create displays that communicate with their audiences. As such, the idea of museum visitation as a popular leisure-time activity is new to most South Asian immigrants. Any attempt to assess South Asian museum visitation in the United States requires acknowledging the differences between first and second generation diaspora, between its more and less privileged sections, between women and men, and of course, the many possible combinations of the above. As with any other (p.89) diaspora, members of the first generation tend to have stronger ties with the homeland, while subsequent generations increasingly absorb American values through interaction with peers at school and college. The more privileged, even of the first generation, generally feel part of the fabric of this nation, comfortable in most social and cultural situations, with little need for separate spaces; participation in events at art museums is initiated by women, with men frequently, though not invariably, accompanying them. With the less privileged, it appears to be the second generation that moves toward the same comfort level, inhabiting the everyday American world of, say, sports and leisure-time activities that might include a visit to Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. It appears that second and third generation diasporic communities have no need for separate spaces or discrete pleasures; the Metropolitan Museum of Art is already on their New York trip agenda. And this is just as well since museums, as "certifiers of taste and definers of culture" (Karp 1992), constitute a world in which the new cosmopolitanism clearly has a stake.

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