Decolonising Museums: South-Asian Perspectives

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Abstract

This study adopts an osmotic ethnography in order to decolonise the museum as an intellectual institution that was born in the West and informed by a logic of command (arkheion). As in the biological process of osmosis, characterised by an equilibrium between the inner and the outer that shapes its own distinctiveness through its symbiosis, the museum constitutes itself as a space intertwined with external reality. This is particularly true in the case of South Asian museum artefacts: because of the concept of darśan *(the sensuous relationship between the worshipper and the deity's material embodiment) curators have faced the challenge of coming to terms with visitors' responses, from colonial to post-colonial times. A direct consequence of this challenge is represented by the reconstructions of religious spaces—shrines, altars, temples—that should evoke the so-called "original context" and be in consonance with local forms of material engagement.*

By adopting eco-phenomenology as its methodological framework, this article examines colonial sources, in particular the works of Thomas Hendley (1847–1917) and Fanny Parks (1794–1875), and compares them to the ethnographic fieldwork undertaken by the author at the Oriental Museum of the University of Durham in November 2014, as part of doctoral research.

Key Words: eco-phenomenology; osmosis; Thomas Hendley; Fanny Parks; Oriental Museum.

Introduction

With Dewey's *Art as Experience* and Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*,[1] which appeared a decade after the American philosopher's masterpiece, perception as an active form of engagement with the material surfaces of things started to be analysed. This inaugurated a revolutionary debate in the field of philosophy. The visual artefact and the viewer, in contrast with aesthetics and particularly with the Enlightenment theory of art-as-such,[2] are no longer separated: the seer does not infer from the materiality of things an alleged ideal of beauty, but rather constitutes a unit with them. Material artefacts and human

[1]J. Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, 1980 [1934]); M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London, 2002 [1945]).

[2]M. H. Abrams, "Kant and the Theology of Art", *Notre Dame English Journal*, 13, 3 (1981), pp. 75–106; M. H. Abrams, "Art-as-Such: The Sociology of Modern Aesthetics", *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 38, 6 (1985), pp. 8–33.

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perceivers are then reciprocally influencing organisms: perception is essentially participatory: a fundamental element of *Mitsein* (being-with) is operating, to use Heideggerian terminology.[3] Consequently, analysing this circuit between the perceiver and the perceived is synonymous with an ecological approach, as well as with a new conceptualisation of materiality:

> By asserting that perception, phenomenologically considered, is inherently participatory, we mean that perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives. Prior to all our verbal reflections, at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are *all* animists.[4]

By saying that we are all animists, Abram alludes to the application of the category of personhood to material things, as inaugurated by Gell in his *Art and Agency*[5] which is followed up, with an even more phenomenological approach, by Pattison in *Seeing Things*.[6] It is not my intention to mention here the heated controversy that arose from Gell's work.[7] Suffice it to say that with Gell's endeavour, materiality is no longer set at the margins of anthropological analysis but is rather part and parcel of it. In a similar attempt, although in clear contrast with Gell's concept of agency, Ingold, in his *The Perception of Environment*, proposes considering material artefacts as organisms, with the same relational dynamic as the living ones. [8]

What is important to note in these two main intellectual reflections, related to Gell and the more eco-phenomenological stance of Ingold, is that the separation between mind and body is overcome in favour of a fundamental lack of distinction between the two: body and mind are equivalent in their grasping of environment, so that they are distributed throughout it in an equal manner.[9] As a consequence, the internal structure of things can be penetrated and partially understood from the human perspective.[10] What we have therefore is an ontogenetic process that is continually shaped by the intersubjective relations between human and non-human[11] or, to use Hodder's expression,[12] is entangled within the intersubjective web, in other words the "*environing world*".[13] In this logic, seeing, as in any other perceptual activity, means making: the human body-mind follows the material crafting of things—their coming into the flux of life—and is symmetrically crafted by them, so that understanding things is synonymous with working with their materials.[14]

[3]E. S. Casey, *The World at a Glance* (Bloomington, IN, 2007), p. 35.

[4]D. Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York, 1996). (Abram's italics)

[5]A. Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998).

[6]S. Pattison, *Seeing Things. Deepening Relations with Visual Artefacts* (London, 2007).

[7]For an up-dated résumé of the debate on Gell's paradigm of agency, see L. Chua and M. Elliott (eds), *Distributed Objects. Meaning and Mattering After Alfred Gell* (New York, 2015).

[8]T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment. Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London, 2000).

[9]Gell, *Art and Agency*.

[10]T. Ingold (ed.), *Redrawing Anthropology. Materials, Movements, Lines* (Farnham, 2011); A. Pandian, *Reel World. An Anthropology of Creation* (Durham, NC, 2015).

[11]C. Toren, "Becoming a Christian in Fiji: An Ethnographic Study of Ontogeny", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 10 (2003), pp. 709–727; C. Toren, "Imagining the World that Warrants Our Mind. The Revelation of Ontogeny", *Cambridge Anthropology*, 30, 1 (2012), pp. 64–79.

[12]I. Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Hoboken, NJ, 2012).

[13]C. Toren, "Comparison and Ontogeny", in *Anthropology, by Comparison*, (eds) A. Gingrich and R. G. Fox (London, 2002), pp. 187–203, here p. 193. (Toren's emphasis)

[14]A. Causey, *Drawn to See. Drawing as an Ethnographic Method* (Toronto, 2017); T. Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London, 2013).

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Museums seem to be antithetical to these phenomenological dynamics: they are often depicted as dusty institutions, where the lively exchanges observed in the environment are suspended, frozen, in favour of an intellectual abstraction.[15] The different and heterogeneous forms of engagement with materials are silenced so as to express the ideas of the curators, usually understood as esoteric priests of a specialist, quasi-religious language.[16] Museums are therefore seen as perpetuating the aesthetic theory of the art-as-such: the division between a perceiving seer and the seen thing reproduces the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body, as already mentioned, and justifies a "formal egocentricity", namely the conviction that intellectual interests are superior to the lively characteristic of things.[17] As a curator confessed to me in an interview:

> Everything becomes essentialised in the museum space. No matter how long you work on these things, how much you're trying to stop that from happening, there's always going to be something that essentialises what you're trying to do. You don't have footnotes in an exhibition [laughs] you know, you can't explain your reasoning behind it or the fact you tried something and it didn't quite work out as you wanted, you'll just judge on what is there in that space and, so, it's a very difficult medium to get across the complex issues that you are dealing with […].

This drastic museum process is made by virtue of its etymology, or *arkhē*, as analysed by Derrida.[18] The word derives from the Greek *arkheion*, namely the residence of the *arkhons* or magistrates,[19] and therefore contains the principle of command or control and that of classifying and gathering, both features justified by domicile.[20] It is not coincidental that museums, as cultural institutions, came into being during the advent of the nation-state and colonialism: the need to control the "native"[21] was accompanied by the urgent need to classify the colonies in order to produce an "objective order of reality"[22] that dethroned non-Western, "magical", or "superstitious" connections between the human and non-human.[23]

However, recent literature on South Asian museums[24] has highlighted the fact that "vernacular museum understandings"[25] and appropriations, based on local phenomenologies of perception and material religions, challenge the traditional debate on museums and

[15]Ingold, *Making*; T. Ingold and E. Hallam (eds), *Making and Growing. Anthropological Studies of Organisms and Artefacts* (London, 2014).

[16]C. Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London, 2013).

[17]J. Durham, "Entering the Visual Mandala: Transformative Environments in Hybrid Spaces", in *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces. Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums*, (ed.) B. M. Sullivan (London, 2015), pp. 80–93, here p. 81.

[18]J. Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Repression* (Chicago, 1995).

[19]*Ibid*., p. 2.

[20]*Ibid*., p. 3.

[21]B. J. Fleming and R. Mann, "Introduction: Material Culture and Religious Studies", in *Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object*, (eds) B. J. Fleming and R. Mann (London, 2014), pp. 1–20.

[22]S. T. Bhatti, "Exhibiting and Viewing Culture, Curiosities and the Nation at the Lahore Museum", PhD thesis, University College London, 2005, p. 78.

[23]M. J. Wiener, "Magic, (Colonial) Science and Science Studies", *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 21, 4 (2013), pp. 492–509, here p. 494.

[24]M. Elliott, "Side Effects: Looking, Touching, and Interacting in the India Museum, Kolkata", *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 18 (2006), pp. 63–75; S. T. Bhatti, *Translating Museums. A Counterhistory of South Asian Museology* (Walnut Creek, CA, 2012).

[25]Bhatti, "Exhibiting and Viewing Culture, Curiosities and the Nation", p. 120.

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museography. Furthermore, recent research has pointed out that even in Western museums—hence not sustained by a specific vernacular culture—the boundary between the scientific, intellectual and didactic mission of the museum and religious, sensuous connections with museum artefacts is blurred.[26] The task of this article is to investigate whether an eco-phenomenological framework could be applied in a museum context. By examining colonial and post-colonial museum practices in the South Asian and Asian context and by comparing them with my own doctoral fieldwork in nine Western museums, the article seeks to find innovative potentials hidden beneath the apparently dusty surfaces of museums. In such a way, we want to deconstruct "many of the expectations of museums that continue to circulate widely within academic literature and professional discourse".[27]

Colonial and post-colonial voices

South Asian visual consumption is particularly apt for an eco-phenomenological analysis. It is not coincidental that Christopher Pinney has made an explicit comparison between *darśan*—the sensuous relationship between the Hindu or Jain devotee and the deity's material embodiment—and Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*.[28] In Merleau-Ponty's conception of flesh, the perceiving actor and the perceived environment are intermingled and every distinction between them collapses, so that there is an open-ended circularity between our own flesh and the flesh of the world: a structure or openness to the world, "a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself".[29] Similarly, in *darśan* there is a transfer of energy from the deity's embodiment to the worshipper which is subsequently returned in the form of homage of the latter to the former:[30] "It is another type of flow taking, in which the beneficiary mingles a superior, apparently fluid-like "seeing" with his own, thereby appropriating its powers".[31] Pinney suggests considering *darśan* within a logic of "corpothetics", which elevates the efficacy (*barkat*) of the image as "the central criterion of value":[32] images have a disruptive power, an allurement (*akarshan*), with respect to humans.[33] Consequently, *darśan* implies a different type of "attentive looking"[34] in which the visual component is part

[26]S. Berns, "Sacred Entanglements: Studying Interactions Between Visitors, Objects and Religion in the Museum", PhD thesis, University of Kent, 2015; B. M. Sullivan, *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces. Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums* (London, 2015).

[27]Elliott, "Side Effects", p. 71.

[28]M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston 1968 [1964]); C. Pinney, *"Photos of the Gods". The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London, 2004), p. 194.

[29]Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible*, p. 146.

[30]The debate on *darśan* is particularly controversial, as some scholars argue that it is not only a visual interaction—see S. Pinard, "A Taste of India: On the Role of Gustation in the Hindu Sensorium", in *The Variety of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, (ed.) D. Howes (Toronto, 1991) pp. 221–230; J. E. Cort, "Situating Darśan: Seeing the Digambar Jina Icon in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century North India", *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 16, 1 (2012), pp. 1–56; and J. McHugh, "Seeing Scents: Methodological Reflections on the Intersensory Perception of Aromatics in South Asian Religions", *History of Religions*, 51, 2 (2011), pp. 156–177—which is what Eck would say: D. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York, NY, 1998). In this article I adopt Babb's own view of the concept: L. A. Babb, "Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism", *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 37, 4 (1981), pp. 387–401.

[31]Babb, "Glancing", p. 396.

[32]Pinney, *"Photos of the Gods"*, p. 194.

[33]*Ibid*., pp. 190–191.

[34]S. Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing", in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, (eds) I. Karp and S. D. Lavine (Washington, DC, 1991), pp. 25–32.

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of a bodily and emotional relationship with the deity, a ritual homage with prescriptive "physical services".[35]

In such a way, the corpothetics of *darśan* is opposed to Western aesthetics: while the latter is based upon a contemplation of the signifier that leads to the signified, both of which pertain to separated spheres, *darśan* implies the co-presence and intertwining of the signified and the signifier. In other words, the act of *darśan* is an "apprehension of God's totality",[36] insofar as it coincides with a "cross-contamination" and "mimetic concatenation"[37] between realms that in the West would be allegedly set apart, such as the everyday, the sacred, the aesthetics, the human and the non-human. For instance, posters of Tamil actors are revered as religious icons and their auspicious sight bestows on their fans the actors' charisma and attractiveness[38] or, as in calendar art, access to religious icons within temple spaces, usually denied to the masses, can be substituted by reproductions of religious images by virtue of chromolithography.[39] Due to the fact that *darśan* is based upon a "transformation and intensification of elements that were already part of a popular visual consciousness",[40] it can be decontextualised from its Hindu origins in order to identify an underlying visual consumption common to South Asian communities. In this respect, Bhatti talks about *roshiani*, or a "glow radiating from a place/object that is felt inside the viewer's body satisfying both heart and mind", among Pakistani Muslims.[41]

Museums are part and parcel of South Asian visual consumption. Temples in South Asia have, in fact, started to be organised according to a museum structure: pilgrims pay in order to view particular relics or icons that are exhibited behind cabinets, and museums are visited as part of religious pilgrimages or meditation.[42] Bhatti has shown that at the Lahore Museum it is customary to leave shoes at the entrance to the museum hall, as when entering a religious space.[43] Furthermore, new Indian museums have been built by religious parties so as to impose their own religious ideology and manipulate the already existing distribution of the sacred in the everyday for their own sake.[44] Rather than confining these reflections to the South Asian context or, worse, to an alleged "East" opposed to a "rational West", we concur with that these counter-arguments to Baumgarten's aesthetics make us reflect on the same concept of museum as a secular parlour.[45]

If we look at colonial sources, we can see that the never-ending fight between aesthetics and corpothetics was at the core of earlier Western reflections upon museums in South Asia.

[35]R. H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), p. 50.
[36]*Ibid*.
[37]K. Jain, *Gods in the Bazar. The Economics of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham, 2007), pp. 187, 347.
[38]Pandian, *Reel World*.
[39]Jain, *Gods in the Bazar*; Pinney, *"Photos of the Gods"*.
[40]C. Pinney, "Indian Magical Realism: Notes on Popular Visual Culture", in *Subaltern Studies X: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (eds) G. Bhadra, G. Prakash and S. Tharu (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 201–233, here p. 211. In this regard, Pinney talks about "Indian magical realism", in contrast with Western rationality and in similar to South-American magical realism.
[41]Bhatti, *Translating Museums*, p. 221.
[42]Elliott, "Side Effects"; J. Robson, "Faith in Museums: On the Confluence of Museums and Religious Sites in Asia", *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 125, 1 (2010), pp. 121–128.
[43]Bhatti, *Translating Museums*, p. 154.
[44]S. Mathur and K. Singh, "Reincarnations of the Museum: The Museum in an Age of Religious Revivalism", in *Asian Art History in the Twenty-first Century*, (ed.) V.N. Desai (Clark Studies in the Visual Arts 2007).
[45]Robson, "Faith in Museums".

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While the first handbooks and manuscripts focused on a painstaking categorisation and cataloguing of India,[46] there were also works that proposed alternative ways by which to represent Indian material culture within exhibition spaces.[47] If we compare, 'Indian Museums' written by Colonel Thomas Hendley in 1914 and *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque, during four-and-twenty years residence in the East: with Revelations of Life in the Zenana* (1850) by the Welsh traveller Fanny Parks,[48] there is a common understanding of the mimetic concatenation or circularity between heterogeneous realms in South Asian fairs or *mela*.[49] As Bhatti insightfully argues:

> Any object, be it cloth or utensil, is slowly exposed in a successive display process that is anticipated by the customer, who hopes to see the full variety of form/style and eventually the best, latest, and ultimately, the unique piece, which the shop keepers hold back on purpose. […] To a certain extent, this commodity revelation represents a corpothetic spectacle that combines visual display with a sensory affectivity and delight that allow imagination/discourse around the object with a view to ownership.[50]

Melas are the intersection between recreational sites and religious festivities: they are used by locals as a way of sustaining religious proselytism, as well as attracting the attention of the masses to miraculous or wondrous events. On the one hand, then, each religious community or affiliate can use the space of the *mela* to exhibit their own religion by building temporary shrines or organising storytelling performances centred around religious episodes taken from the scriptures:

> a Jain banker of Ajmere exhibited [in a *mela* in Jaipur] his ideas of the birth of the first Jain lord of Tirthankar, and of the heaven from which he had descended, in the form of gilt and painted brass models […] The seth, or banker, informed us that he pitied the ignorance of his co-religionists and was therefore moved as an act of piety to instruct them. For this reason he had caused so many models to be made for which he had built a special hall in Ajmere, in which they may

[46]T. Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New Delhi, 2004), pp. 18–33, 76.

[47]Due to limited space, I do not refer to the attempts of scientists and museum curators to emulate Western museums nor to their contestations of vernacular appropriations of exhibitive spaces. The ambiguity between a Latourian purification (B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA, 1993)) and the need to resort to corpothetics in order to be understood by the masses can be found in: G. Prakash, *Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ, 1999).

[48]T. Hendley, "Indian Museums", *The Journal of Indian Art and Industry* 16 (1914), pp. 33–69. Thomas Hendley (1847–1917) was a commissioner and museum official in Jeypore, as well as a member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (P. H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display. English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley, CA, 2001), p. 230). Frances Susannah Archer or Fanny Parks, the second daughter of Captain William Archer and wife of Charles Crawford Parks, writer of the East India Company as well as Collector of Customs (J. Goldsworthy, "Fanny Parks (1794–1875): Her 'Grand Moving Diorama of Hindostan', her Museum, and her Cabinet of Curiosities", Blog post, retrieved from: http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/files/2014/06/Fanny-Parks-PDF-Final-19.08.14.pdf (2014), [accessed 2 May 2018], pp. 1–23, p. 3), lived for almost 23 years in India, where her husband was Collector of Customs, first in Kolkata and subsequently in Allahabad (*ibid*., p. 4). After her return to England, she published an account of her travels in India based in her journals and letters to her mother (*ibid*., p. 7). This was the starting point for *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque, during four-and-twenty years residence in the East: with Revelations of Life in the Zenana* (London, P. Richardson, 1850). The book reflects the fragmentary and random style of the journal, with a continuous shift from the present to the past tense.

[49]In this regarrd, Appadurai and Breckenridge have defined *mela* as "exhibition-cum-sale": A. Appadurai and C. A. Breckenridge, "Museums are Good to Think: Heritage on View in India", in *Representing the Nation: A Reader–Histories, Heritage and Museums*, (ed.) C. A. Breckenridge (London, 1999), pp. 404–420, p. 408.

[50]Bhatti, *Translating Museums*, pp. 216–217.

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now be seen. They were first shown in Jaipur, where most of them were made in the great hall of the Museum. The banker was so impressed with the value and reality of his own conception of heaven and of Adjudhya (the city in which Rakabnath, the Jain lord or pontiff, was born), that he was found one day scattering leaves of roses and other flowers, and even small seed pearls and minute precious stones, as well as bruised spices about the models in order to increase the effect on visitors, through the sense of smell as well as of sight, and because similar precious articles were showered down from heaven when the infant saint was born on earth.[51]

On the other hand, the *mela* attracts Western attention, particularly by responding to the thirst for the monstrous and the exceptional, where the limit represented by the unknown is exorcised by exaggerating the real.[52] See, for instance, this passage from Parks' *Wanderings*, where the dreadful atmosphere is particularly emphasised:

> One man whom I saw this day at the Melā was remarkably picturesque, and attracted my admiration. He was a religious mendicant, a disciple of Shivŭ. In stature he was short, and dreadfully lean, almost a skeleton. His long black hair, matted with cow-dung, was twisted like a turban round his head, a filthy jŭta. On his forehead three horizontal lines were drawn with ashes, and a circlet beneath them marked in red sanders his sectarial mark. If possible, they obtain the ashes from the hearth on which a consecrated fire has been lighted. His left arm he had held erect so long that the skin and flesh had withered, and clung round the bones most frightfully; the nails of the hand which had been kept immoveably clenched, had pierced through the palm, and grew out at the back of the hand like the long claws of a bird of prey. His horrible and skeleton-like arm was encircled by a twisted stick, the stem, perhaps, of a thick creeper, the end of which was cut into the shape of the head of the cobra de capello, with its hood displayed, and the twisted withy looked like the body of the reptile wreathed around his horrible arm. His only garment, the skin of a tiger, thrown over his shoulders, and a bit of rag and rope at his waist. He was of a dirty-white or dirty-ashen colour from mud and paint; perhaps in imitation of Shivŭ, who, when he appeared on earth as a naked mendicant of an ashy colour, was recognized as Mahadēo the great god. This man was considered a very holy person. His right hand contained an empty gourd and a small rosary, and two long rosaries were around his neck of the rough beads called mundrāsee. His flag hung from the top of a bamboo, stuck in the ground by the side of a trident, the symbol of his caste, to which hung a sort of drum used by the mendicants. A very small and most beautifully formed little gynee (a dwarf cow) was with the man. She was decorated with crimson cloth, embroidered with cowrie shells, and a plume of peacock's feathers as a jika, rose from the top of her head. A brass bell was on her neck, and around her legs were anklets of the same metal.[53]

Western collecting of "curios" while attending Indian fairs is strictly correlated to this fascination with the wondrous or the picturesque. As a visitor to a giant, open-air *Wunderkammer*, Parks scrutinises every corner of what she sees, stopping at each encounter and trying to sketch a descriptive label of each element. As any other visitor, she is nonetheless conditioned by her cultural background: instead of searching for a full understanding of the so-called "native's point of view", she is informed by Western aesthetics. For instance, she adorns her neck with a pink coral and values it as fine, even though red coral is esteemed

[51]Hendley, "Indian Museums", pp. 39–40.
[52]P. Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reaction to Indian Art* (Oxford, 1977).
[53]Parks, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim*, pp. 256–257.

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more highly by Indians.[54] Indian viewing, with its search for occasions at which to display political prestige, intersects with this type of Western gaze[55] and is organised according to a proto-museum structure:

> The custom of making niches in the walls of a treasury, in the shape of the vessels of value, in which they could be placed, and thus easily missed if removed, is said to have arisen in Persia, and was common in India, though in later years only the remembrance of it has been preserved by paintings on the walls of buildings. The more valuable arms are now displayed in *almirahs* or wall-cupboards or in table cases. In the Jaipur Armoury, for example, many beautiful specimens of damascened or inlaid daggers, swords, guns, etc., are now kept in such cases, and these are occasionally shown to privileged visitors. […] the general public in India do see most of the treasures which belong to the Indian chiefs and nobles, because, on ceremonial occasions (which are very frequent), jewellery and rich dresses are worn in great variety, and arms are displayed and always attract attention and comment.[56]

Museums, therefore, continue these occasions of visual consumption, inasmuch as the emphasis on the visitors' contemplation of selected items facilitates the worship of the charismatic aura of things. Hendley, thus, rightly defines South Asian visual interactions as "museum spirit".[57] Furthermore, he had a clear idea of the vernacular terminology of museums that is still used among South Asian visitors, namely the "house of wonder" or "house of magic", where the occasional visitor's visual stimulation leads to a religious absorption:[58]

> The Churchman thought that in this way the minds of the people might be drawn to church, and coming out of curiosity, they might remain to pray. […] This is undoubtedly true in the East, where a museum is popularly styled an *Jaigarh* [Hendley's emphasis], or House of Wonders, and its principal attractions are known as *tufachiz* or *tuhfajat* (that is rarities or curiosities), both Arabic words, which perhaps even in India point to the origin of museums.[59]

However, in defining Indian attraction to magic as the result of a "mediæval mind", Hendley is driven by a positivist approach, characterised by the confinement of the non-scientific to the realm of the superstitious.[60] We can safely assume that Hendley's proposal for a museum that was more respondent to South Asian visitors reflects the logic of instructing the "natives". In other words, stimulating the Indian imagination is regarded as a tool through which to educate the South Asian masses, as in the case of medieval cathedrals, where the visual representations of Biblical scenes were used as forms of education for the illiterate:

> […] I am convinced that a museum in the East which ignores the display of curios, or which neglects "attractions", will not—at the present stage of education—satisfy the requirements of the public. What is urgently needed is to stimulate the imagination of the people, but a purely scientific or formal arrangement of exhibits can never succeed in effecting this great end. The mosques in India, as well as temples, do not neglect the custom which was so common in European cathedrals

[54] *Ibid*., p. 254.
[55] I am using the notion as employed by Casey, *The World at a Glance*.
[56] Hendley, "Indian Museums", p. 39.
[57] *Ibid*., p. 34.
[58] Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments*; Prakash, *Another Reason*; Bhatti, *Translating Museums*; Elliott, "Side Effects".
[59] Hendley, "Indian Museums", pp. 33–34.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

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> and churches, or go back still further to the religious shrines of Greece and Rome, in which curiosities in the form of votive offerings were displayed and Murray mentions, as an example, ostrich eggs. [...] Temples in India contain many jewels and much rich clothing among their treasures, but these articles are usually only displayed upon the images and not in the treasury itself. It is by the sculpture on the outer walls of their shrines that the priests attract attention, and through the eye teach the myths on which the exoteric part of their religion is based and made popular.[61]

We must also be aware of the fact that Western attendance at Indian fairs was part of the logic of colonial power, rather than a symptom of an anthropological openness to "the Other". The colonial bazaar, to which the *mela* is often compared, was in fact a mythical trope of the exotic and the pre-modern, to which colonial imagination and literature referred in order to offer a familiar, and thus reassuring, portrait of the coloniser.[62] More importantly, guided tours and written accounts, sketches, photographs as well as reconstructions are "material re-tellings[63] through which to permanently freeze the colonised in an atemporal space that can be controlled and subjugated. In this way, the collected "curios" become part of the colony's "imagined ecumene" for the consumption of the coloniser.[64] Therefore, we disagree with Bhatti's [6] estimation of Hendley's work as pioneering in its understanding of vernacular material religion within museum spaces.[65] On the contrary, our reading of Hendley's words confirms his scarce anthropological background and sensitivity.

Nevertheless, 'Indian Museums' and *Wanderings* clearly reveal potentialities in Western museography that have hitherto been underestimated by scholars. As already mentioned, the birth of museums during the 19th century contained the seeds of a form of corpothetics, still present nowadays and in stark contrast with the museums' *arkhē* principle. I am alluding to the colonial museum practitioners' need to recreate religious altars and shrines. Far from being a naive form of realism, as canonical museography would have it, those reconstructions recall the aforementioned condition of *Mitsein* between the perceived and the perceiver, and the difficulty of rendering it in museum spaces. In other words, the entire ontogenetic process and organismal dialectic between the collector and material things must be reproduced by creating substitutes useful enough for the goal, which can trigger in visitors a process of re-enactment of the collectors' embodied experience. This operation of translation-cum-re-enactment in museum spaces was felt to be necessary by colonial collectors in order to help visitors understand other cultures and religions.

If we return to Parks' *Wanderings*, the author has the clear goal of presenting a list of curios to the reader, who potentially could become a visitor to Parks' altar, which she herself calls "the museum". Together with this spirit of a whimsical collector, proper to the medieval and Reinassance *Wunderkammer*,[66] *Wanderings of a Pilgrim* seeks to recreate an esoteric atmosphere that partly emulates the local religious practices observed by Parks and partly evokes

[61] Hendley, "Indian Museums", p. 34, quoted in Bhatti, *Translating Museums*, p. 189.

[62] See, for instance, Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display*, p. 230.

[63] E. Martin, "Charles Bell's Collection of 'Curios': Negotiating Tibetan Material Culture on the Anglo-Tibetan Borderlands (1900–1945)", PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies University of London, 2014, p. 145.

[64] C. A. Breckenridge, "The Aesthetics and Politics of Colonial Collecting: India at World Fares", *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History*, 31, 2 (1989), pp. 195–216.

[65] Bhatti, *Translating Museums*.

[66] N. Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing 1770–1840* (Oxford, 2002), p. 30.

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her own mystical journey in India. The connection between religious rituals and other practices (for example, that of pilgrimage) with the museum experience, as established by some religious scholars such as Paine, is candidly expressed by Parks, as she often defines herself as a pilgrim: "a poor hājī [pilgrim] in search of the picturesque".[67] The term "pilgrimage" returns in Parks' *Grand Moving Diorama of Hindostān*,[68] written in 1851 to accompany and guide visitors' experience of the three-dimensional reconstruction (diorama)[69] of the banks of the river Ganges in the Asiatic Gallery of the Baker Street Bazaar, which was part of the 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations in London.[70]

A sense of the usage of terminologies such as "pilgrimage" and "pilgrim" can be understood through two orders of things. First, the viewer—reader or visitor—must visualise and imagine India through Fanny's own body. To put it more precisely, we do not have a portrait of what Indians did nor of Indians' dynamics regarding religious artefacts, but we do have a faithful reconstruction of Fanny's own dialectic with the Indian environment or her own ontogenetic process of coming to know India. Her understanding of religious icons and her explanation of them—see, for instance, the equivalence of Buddha with the different Hindu deities[71]—is mentioned, along with her disgust at mosquitoes, her boredom and the social life she enjoyed with other colonial aristocrats based in India, etc. The juxtaposition of approximate ethnography with trivia should not make us merely jump to the conclusion of the colonial process of reification of the "native" in curios and types, but must also be read as a phenomenological—in the strict sense of the term—account of her bodily experience. What Parks incites in the reader is a form of re-enactment, the same as she experienced once back in the United Kingdom. Words, things and memories constitute an intricate assemblage, but efficaciously enough to be experienced as lively. Last but not least, each element of the assemblage stands on its own and impacts on humans dwelling on the world without being a secondary result of human agency:

> And now the pilgrim resigns her staff and plucks the scallopshell from her hat,—her wanderings are ended—she has quitted the East, perhaps for ever;—surrounded in the quiet home of her native land by the curiosities, the monsters, and the idols that accompanied her from India, she looks around and dreams of the days that are gone.
>
> The resources she finds in her recollections, the pleasure she derives from her sketches, and the sad sea waves [Park's note: "Written at St. Leonard's-on-Sea"], her constant companions, form for her a life independent of her own life.[72]

Parks' altar of Ganeś, invoked in the frontispiece of *Wanderings*, is a clear example of a re-enactment of religious rituals. Its description can be considered as a preview to the guided

[67]Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums*; Parks, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim*, p. 240.

[68]F. Parks, *Grand Moving Diorama of Hindostān, Displaying the Scenery of the Hoogly, the Bhāgirathi and the Ganges, from Fort William, Bengal, to Gangoutrī* (London, 1851 c.a.), Retrieved from: https://archive.org/stream/gri_00003312500850574I#page/n5/mode/2up, [accessed 2 May 2018].

[69]"While panoramas were essentially very large, realistic, paintings of a scene, dioramas, which also used painted backdrops, introduced a three-dimensional element to the viewing experience. Daguerre's diorama … first shown in Paris in 1822, was brought to London in 1823 and erected in a special building constructed in Regent's Park at a cost of £10,000": Goldsworthy, "Fanny Parks", p. 9.

[70]Parks, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim*; *ibid*.

[71]Parks, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim*, p. 162.

[72]*Ibid*., p. 496.

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tour of Parks' "museum", as announced in the *Diorama*.[73] Careful attention to the aesthetic features of each element of the composition is intertwined with the evocation of the context of use, thus emulating the *pūjā*, even though in a limited and non-anthropologically informed way. Religious icons are thus not merely scanned by the aesthetic gaze, but rather stimulate a sensuous engagement with their observer, who turns into a syncretic practitioner, albeit superficially:

> Gănésh is seated on an altar, such as is used in the *mut'hs*, Hindū temples, surrounded by diverse idols, sacred shells, and instruments of worship; small brass cups filled with oil, called *chirāghs*, are burned as lamps before the shrine. The worshippers pour oil and the holy water of the Ganges over the head of the god, which is thus bathed daily, and offerings of boiled rice and flowers are made at the time of prayer. The conch shell, which lies before him, is blown by the Brahmāns during the hours of pūja at different times—it is considered very holy—the priest holds it clasped in both hands, and blows into it from the top. The sound can be heard afar off, especially when on the river at the time of evening worship; it resounds from every side of the water, mingled with the ringing of the priest's bells and the sound of a sort of brass castanet, which they strike whilst chanting forth their prayers.
>
> The opening of these shells is on the left side; but they say a shell is sometimes found with the opening on the right side, and its spiral involutions reversed; it is then called *Dūkshina Vūrtū*, and is valued at from three to five hundred rupees. Vishnū is said to hold a shell of this sort in his hand. Shells are placed with flowers around the idol, the bull-mouthed is considered sacred, and often adorns the shrine.
>
> Small brass bells are used in worship; some are decorated with the image of Hūnoomān, some with the sacred cow. They are rung during pūja, not only, it is said, to amuse the god, but to keep off evil spirits.
>
> The shape of the spoon with which the rice or oil is put upon the head of the image is remarkably beautiful and antique. The top of the spoon bears the image of Ganesh, crowned by the *Nāgā*, or holy serpent, with a hundred heads, which are outspread, to screen him from the sun. This idol is made of solid white marble, and weighs three hundred weight and a quarter. It is painted and gilt, as in the Frontispiece. It was brought down from Jeypur to the sacred junction of the triple rivers at Prāg, at which place it came into my possession.
>
> Although a *pukka Hindū*, Gănésh has crossed the *Kālā Pānī*, or Black Waters, as they call the ocean, and has accompanied me to England.
>
> There he sits before me in all his Hindū state and peculiar style of beauty my inspiration my penates.
>
> O Gănésh, thou art a mighty lord! thy single tusk is beautiful, and demands the tribute of praise from the Hājī of the East. Thou art the chief of the human race; the destroyer of unclean spirits; the remover of fevers, whether daily or tertian! The pilgrim sounds thy praise; let her work be accomplished.
>
> SĀLĀM! SĀLĀM![74]

Religious icons, then, have multiple layers of meaning. First of all, Ganeś' statue is a material thing that autonomously impacts on humans, thus constituting a peculiar form of

[73]Parks, *Grand Moving Diorama of Hindostān*
[74]Parks, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim*, pp. viii-ix.

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engagement which is in dialogue with the cultural background of each human perceiver every time. Second, it is the proof of a cultural pillage, spatially and temporally defined, through the Western desire to categorise and possess. Furthermore, it is a reification of the traveller's own impressions and knowledge, to be passed to visitors or readers. As a museum artefact, Ganeś' statue is regarded as a relic: it is the remnant of the past encounter between the collector and South Asian material culture, and a vehicle through which the visitor's re-enactment of that experiential encounter is made possible. As Morgan would say, Parks' museum things are "focal objects": they are pivotal interfaces that shape the museum space by connecting it with the religious distribution outside its walls.[75] More than that, museum artefacts, as assembled by collectors for the formation of reconstructions of religious spaces, emphasise and expand that distribution of the sacred. The continuity between museum and temple spaces coincides, therefore, with the very structure of museum as a repository for collectors.

Methodological interlude

As we have seen so far, colonial and post-colonial sources show that, since their institution in the 19th century, museums contain an essential contradiction: they are the final product of an ontogenetic process between the collector and the material artefacts collected and, thus, mediate between the Western obsession with systematisation and the struggle for narrating ontogenesis. Furthermore, this narration or retelling, to use Martin's expression (see the previous section),[76] of the encounter between the collector and museum things does not mean a merely detached account of the former's experience—from which intellectual notions and information can be inferred—but is, on the contrary, a form of re-enactment. In a nutshell, the visitor must empathise with the collector and the circumstances around which the latter encountered not only material artefacts, but also their context of provenance, or, similarly, their forms of consumption, as elaborated by the culture which produced them. As a result, museums are at the confluence between aesthetics and Pinney's corpothetics.

If museum studies have so far highlighted the museums' element of *arkheion*, the same cannot be said about the capacity of museums to trigger *Mitsein*—to facilitate the organismal dialectic between the human and the non-human. Whilst there is a promising branch of urban studies which is starting to view cities as organisms where religious engagements are diffused within their tissues,[77] there is no extensive work that explicitly includes museums in the equation. A recent attempt in this direction has been made by Berns,[78] who has used Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to understand religious response in museum spaces. Once it has been established that the sacred is a form of "engagement that can potentially arise anywhere",[79] Berns explains each type of religious behaviour observed at the

[75] D. Morgan, "The Ecology of Images. Seeing and the Study of Religion", *Religion and Society: Advances in Research*, 5 (2014), pp. 83–105.

[76] Martin, "Charles Bell's Collection".

[77] S. Lanz, "Assembling Global Prayers in the City: An Attempt to Repopulate Urban Theory with Religion", in *Global Prayers. Contemporary Manifestations of the Religious in the City*, (eds) J. Becker, K. Klingan, S. Lanz and K. Wildner (Zurich, 2014), pp. 17–47.

[78] Berns, "Sacred Entanglements".

[79] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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British Museum as the result of a dialogue between specific material religions and the museum. For instance, Islam is site-specific and, consequently, its adepts cannot be stimulated in a religious sense in museums, whereas Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity are characterised by the religious aura of things, so that visiting an exhibition of relics and icons can be synonymous with pilgrimage and religious homage.

ANT undoubtedly has the merit of pinpointing the interrelatedness between things. Its main problem, however, as Ingold has argued extensively,[80] is that it simplifies ontogenesis and reduces it to a mathematical or mechanical equation, instead of viewing it as an open-ended and intrinsically ambiguous flux. For instance, it is true that Islam is site-specific, but this does not explain why Muslim visitors experience the Lahore Museum in a quasi-religious manner. If we employ an eco-phenomenological perspective, conversely, visitors' responses can be understood as part of the belief in *roshiani*, or the force of things in triggering embodied satisfaction, as seen above.

In our own research, then, we retain the importance given to interdependencies between the human and the non-human, but we maintain the focus on ontogenesis, inasmuch as each interconnection cannot be explained without its environment. In this, we concur with both Hodder and Morgan:[81] a phenomenological approach should neither be avoided nor minimised. In saying this, we give importance to the researcher's subjectivity. Rather than being relegated to the margins of ethnography as a non-scientific indulgence, the researcher's own engagement with fieldwork is the primary access to an understanding of the ontogenetic dynamics between the human and the non-human. We can define our standpoint as *osmotic*: as in the cellular phenomenon of osmosis, the researcher's subjectivity is both shaped by and shapes fieldwork in a reciprocal influence.

My fieldwork was undertaken at eight European museums and at the Penn Museum of Philadelphia [8] for eight months, from January 2014 to November 2014. An osmotic ethnography meant that interviews with museum curators, participant observation within the museum galleries—paying particular attention to my own understanding and response to museum things—and archival research on the cataloguing of artefacts, as well as historical sources on each museum, constituted a complex "meshwork".[82] Interestingly, our osmotic ethnography shares similarities with the colonial authors previously examined, insofar as written words and artefacts are not considered as two distinct realms, but rather as equally important for human ontogenesis. To put it differently, textual and ethnographic data allowed me to reflect upon the contradictions of museum communication, namely of pursuing *arkheion* whilst stimulating *Mitsein*. In particular, I will focus here on the reconstructions of altars and shrines within the Oriental Museum of the University of Durham.

The persistent need for reconstructions: the Oriental Museum

The Oriental Museum of the University of Durham was founded in the 1950s by Professor William Thaker, director of the School of Oriental Studies and keen promoter of

[80]See, for instance, T. Ingold, "When ANT meets SPIDER: Social Theory for Anthropods", in *Material Agency. Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach*, (eds) C. Knappett and L. Malafouris (Berlin, 2008), pp. 209–215.

[81]Hodder, *Entangled*; Morgan, "The Ecology of Images".

[82]Ingold, "When ANT meets SPIDER", p. 211.

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establishing a teaching and research collection for the School. In 1949, the acquisition of the Northumberland Collection, consisting of Egyptian antiquities collected by the fourth Duke of Northumberland, Lord Algernon Percy (1792–1852), prompted the progressive increase of collections through donations and loans. The Oriental Museum is therefore the result of a progressive accumulation and stratification of already existing colonial collections, with a strong representation in what concerns China and ancient Egypt.

The curator I interviewed, observed that it was difficult to organise temporary exhibitions that would engage the county's local religious communities, due to the fact that most of the museum's collections, especially those which concern South Asia, consist of colonial specimens, such as anthropometric data and weapons. In addition, since religious artefacts are no longer part of religious ceremonies, and consequently are no longer consumed according to a specific material religion, their display in museum galleries can be interpreted by local communities as lacking in respect. Therefore the decision has been made not to put certain items behind glass:

> We had a discussion with the Sikh community about the fact that we have this domestic shrine which is the kind of thing that the guru, the book, sits on within your house, but, as the book is regarded as a living entity, my feeling is that it's probably not appropriate to have it in the case. If you had the book at home then you'd wake up in the morning and you'd present offerings and you'd put it in bed at night and turn the lights out and so, therefore, for us to have a book within the case seems to me not terribly culturally sensitive. [...] the members of the Gurdwara we had a discussion with have come back to talk with other members of the Gurdwara about it and there is no easy solution to things like that and images, again, a photograph, might be a better way to show how a Sikh domestic shrine should look than trying to do a thing that could potentially be uncomfortable for people which is a thing we try to avoid doing, but it is an endless problem for us, because much of our collections are religious in nature and there is no right way to do it, I don't think [p.], I think you have to accept that you are always taking things out of context, so you'll never be able to keep everyone happy, which is the other issue [...][83]

Temporary exhibitions, therefore, have the principal aim of expanding the existing collections with new, contemporary artefacts that can be useful in terms of the social inclusion of the county's different cultural and religious minorities. An example of this was represented by the acquisition of seven portable shrines and a processional palanquin that had already been exhibited in Leicester at the New Walk Museum in 2002 . They are part of an itinerant project by the anthropologist and photographer Stephen Huyler. After extensive fieldwork on different religious interactions among Hindus, Jains and Sikhs in India, Huyler inaugurated an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution called "Puja. Elements of Hindu Devotion" in 2000. Subsequently, the initial idea was expanded to include Jain and Sikh rituals. Currently, the exhibition, with the title "Meeting God. Elements of Devotion",[84] can be permanently viewed online, with a structure that is identical to the previous exhibitions and which reflects the chapters of Huyler's monograph.[85]

[83]Interview with the curator of the Oriental Museum, University of Durham.

[84]The Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art: www.huntingtonarchive.org/Exhibitions/meeting-God.php, [accessed 2 May 2018].

[85]S. P. Huyler, *Meeting God. Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven, CT, 1999).

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Huyler's endeavour presents interesting parallels with the colonial museum practitioners examined earlier in this article. Starting with the assumption that religious icons can be viewed in India only after being adorned, as the worshipper's contemplation is otherwise considered disrespectful,[86] Huyler wants to challenge the traditional treatment of religious icons in Western museums—where they are shown as fine pieces of art without ritual paraphernalia, such as garlands of flowers and food—by recreating religious altars and sceneries. For instance, in the first exhibition, "Puja",

> The first gallery is organized around a Shiva *linga* (abstract phallic image) and Shiva's vehicle, the bull Nandi. The *linga* is shown as it would appear during worship with offerings of fruits and flowers, oil lamp, containers and ladle for holy water, burners for incense and camphor, and a bell. At one side are the elaborately dressed and ornamented images of the medieval saint Sundara and his wife, Paravati, who are also shown in an adjacent photograph in their unadorned state as they would "normally" be seen in an art museum. In the installation the images look as they would in a temple—nearly concealed by cloth and garlands.[87]

A documentary featuring interviews with Hindus from the Indian and South Asian diaspora in the USA was presented as part of the "Puja" exhibition.[88] The interviewees describe their personal relationship with the divine and the centrality of the material artefacts in guiding their religious encounters. More specifically, it is the assemblage of material artefacts, their scenic composition, that plays a preponderant role in the *pūjā*: being in touch with the deities requires a series of material interdependencies, from the offering of fruits, to the lighting of candles and ringing of bells. Certainly, the human organism, where the body and mind cannot easily be detected, for they are equivalent,[89] must be included in the assemblage: without touching the religious icons and further connecting with the materials, the *pūjā* cannot be possible. It is precisely the "temple effect"[90] derived from this assemblage that defines the entire personal experience of the divine: "when you are sitting and watching it, your breath is taken away by the beauty of it all. And that's what a religious experience is (Hema Murli)".[91] The aim of "Puja" was to transmit the "temple effect" to Western visitors, a form of re-enactment that colonial museum practitioners had already sought to trigger: museum artefacts could be touched, thus transgressing the canonical, unwritten rules of the museum experience.

"Meeting Gods" has continued the logic of "Puja", with even more emphasis placed on the centrality of assemblage in museum communication: each portable shrine is, in fact, an interactive wooden box, crafted in India, which contains a caption describing a ritual scene taken from Huyler's fieldwork, as well as ritual paraphernalia, such as bells and little bronze statues of deities. As we have seen, *darśan* is characterised by its fluidity: it is debatable what can constitute a *mūrtī*, namely the material icon in which the deity is invited

[86] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

[87] S. Bean, "Puja, Expressions of Hindu Devotion", *Museum Anthropology,* 21, 3 (1997), pp. 29–32; here p. 30.

[88] This is now available online at: http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/indianart/videoPuja.asp, [accessed 11 May 2018].

[89] T. Ingold, "Three in One: On Dissolving the Distinctions between Body, Mind and Culture", Manuscript, Department of Anthropology, University of Manchester, 1999.

[90] Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, p. 50.

[91] http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/indianart/videoPuja.asp

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to inhabit.[92] Contemporary ethnography in India has in fact demonstrated that every visual rendering of deities can potentially be used as a vehicle for *darśan*: even comic books are considered as imbued with a divine force or *teja*.[93] Consequently, the fact that Huyler's portable shrines contain photos of religious icons during *pūjā* does not minimise the element of re-enactment of ritual experience: "The shrines in this exhibition are recreations of some of those used in different parts of India. The transparencies at the back depict sacred images present in worship. Open the doors yourself to experience what it might be like to visit a shrine in India".[94] Photographs, on the contrary, retain the icons' religious power, insofar as local communities want to control their possible future usage: "Both the head priest (shown here) and the Maharaja had visions that this process should be allowed to be photographed so that it might be presented in this exhibition; but a request was made that its exact location not be stated".[95]

In reviewing my experience of the temporary exhibition at the Oriental Museum, therefore, we must bear in mind Huyler's heritage. In a certain sense, what I saw was the result of a subsequent rearrangement of Huyler's assemblage—an assemblage of and within an assemblage, so to speak—that manifests its own life by becoming part of a dialogue with the other collections exhibited. The display of Huyler's shrine was on the second floor of the museum and focused on contemporary South Asian and Southeast Asian artefacts and their particular connection not only with the local diaspora, but also with the county's broader community, in particular the North East Artist Network (EDAN) whose works could be also admired on the first floor. Korean books and music were to be found alongside the historical collection of the Anglican missionary Cecil Richard Putt (1925–2011), as well as a Japanese Gothic lolit dress. It is telling that even contemporary artefacts were dated according to the BCE/CE notation. I found in this approach a way for the museum not to freeze the past, but rather put the past and present in dialogue. The focus remained, however, on the different religious customs and creeds; thus, along with Japanese martial arts and mangas, there were Buddhist and Shinto family altars, together with the tools used in the tea ceremony. The interactive engagement with the portable shrines reflects the general approach of the museum, extremely concise in terms of information and more inclined to emphasise the materiality and visual appeal of the artefacts. Chairs, in fact, are available to encourage the visitor to spend time looking at museum items at a closer range. The research and storage room has also been placed between the exhibition on China and the Egyptian gallery in an attempt to get the public involved in the museum's activities. Not only can visitors watch researchers and members of museum staff at work, but they can also book an appointment to view the objects in storage.

The reconstructions of Hindu shrines were reinforced by several tools. The floor was painted with wax *kolam*s (floor decorations) by the museum staff, and the children's activities

[92]N. Karapanagiotis, "Cyber Forms, Worshippable Forms: Hindu Devotional Viewpoints on the Ontology of Cyber-Gods and -Goddesses", *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 17, 1 (2013), pp. 57–82.

[93]Cf. J. Gonda, *Eye and Gaze in the Veda* (Amsterdam, 1969); G. C. Tripathi, "The Daily Puja Ceremony of the Jagannātha Temple and its Special Features", in *The Cult of Jagganath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, (eds) A. Eschmann, H. Kulke and G. C. Tripathi (New Delhi, 1978), pp. 285–307; B. C. MacKenzie, "Purāna as Scripture: From Sound to Image of the Holy Word in the Hindu Tradition", *History of Religions*, 26, 1 (1986), pp. 68–86.

[94]www.huntingtonarchive.org/Exhibitions/meetingGod.php

[95]*Ibid*.

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on this floor were centred on the reproduction of their patterns. In the corner was a Hindu tree shrine made by a Middlesbrough-based artist. In addition, a touch-screen monitor led the curious to videos taken by the University's Department of Music which focused on Hindu religious songs, music and chants. The shrines were situated along one side of the exhibition in order to make space for the shrine dedicated to Lakshmi.

Although the South Asian community in the North East is quite small, its presence as well as the diversity provided by the University's students made the museum decide to dedicate more space to South Asia and host public events, such as the celebration of Diwali. In this case, *pūjā* towards Lakshmi's shrine was performed and storytelling about the "Ramayana" was provided for children, as well as a space for adults to ask questions about Diwali. Along with the Lakshmi shrine, there was a small section dedicated to Mughals and another on the Indian religions, where each object defined a religious creed.

Although the Oriental Museum emphasised the interactive function of the shrines, as already mentioned, during fieldwork I was able to observe a mother warning one of her daughters against touching Lakshmi's shrine, saying that it was a sacred shrine devoted to a Hindu goddess. I too found myself in a tricky position. Even though I correctly understood that the shrines were supposed to be touched—for instance, the deities' images inside all the shrines, except that of Lakshmi, were accompanied by photos and the labels that were placed at the level of the shrines, thus suggesting that the visitor kneel in order to read them properly—I did not know how to behave. I did not see any label or panel explicitly giving this permission. It was only after I talked with the curator that I opened and touched the shrines on my own. I experienced another ambiguous situation while observing a pile of ceramic faces on the third floor where the collections of Malcom MacDonald, a British diplomat in the Far East between the 1920s and 1940s, and that of Sir Charles Harding (1878–1968) are partly on display—as it was not clear if they were supposed to be touched or not. After my participant observation, the curator told me that the ceramic heads installation was created by an artist as an experiment, with the express purpose of observing whether or not visitors decide to touch the faces.

What I experienced, therefore, was the structural contradiction of museums: their phenomenological re-enactment of collectors' or curators' experience of religious material artefacts and the element of aesthetic reverence and detachment on the part of visitors, with the subsequent inhibition and interdiction towards the very form of engagement that they stimulate. The little girl and I were attracted by the reconstructions and part of us rightly perceived them as living organisms with which we can enter into dialogue and start a form of exchange. Nevertheless, there was also a very strong fear of carrying out our impulses without official permission from the museum staff. Reflecting upon fieldwork data thereafter, I noticed that this instinctual, visceral inhibition had been overcome by British Buddhist groups, which used shrines or altars in museums—usually assembled from existing pieces of the collections in storage—as meditative spaces, thereby confirming other scholars' findings.[96] It is true that Buddhism is characterised by the pivotal role played by assemblages

[96]Sullivan, *Sacred Objects*.

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in defining Buddha's force,[97] so that, as Berns would say, museums emphasise the religious aura of the artefacts displayed.[98] Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that sensuous relationships with museum artefacts are possible outside South Asian museums, which means that a new museography is urgently needed.

Conclusions

This study has shown that Western museums are not secular institutions exclusively driven by aesthetics and Latour's work of purification between the scientific and the superstitious.[99] [10] Nevertheless, the visitor's phenomenological response, if we exclude particular religious groups, is still viewed as a "rustic"[100] manifestation of museum illiteracy and is, therefore, repressed. This denial of a sensuous engagement with museum artefacts contradicts current curatorial practices, progressively devoted to the social inclusion and involvement of local minorities, be they religious or cultural.

The time is ripe for adopting an *osmotic* approach, with a solid background in phenomenology and autoethnography in a museum context. Autoethnography has started to be considered in museum practices,[101] but it has not been applied to museography. What this article has demonstrated is that reviewing *our own past*, namely the colonial period, can represent an important advancement towards a decolonisation of the notion of museums as conceptualised so far. In spite of their evolutionistic goals, colonial authors could not jettison the necessary translation of their own encounter with South Asian material religion. In brief, we must deconstruct the element of *arkhē* in favour of that of *Mitsein*: the reconstruction of religious spaces points out that the museum is primarily taking the visitor into an experience. In that sense, reconstructions of religious spaces seem an initial step towards a full recognition of the visitor's engagement. However, we are just at the beginning of our journey. valentina.gamberi87@gmail.com

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[97] Cf. Y. Bentor, "The Content of Stūpas and Images and the Indo-Tibetan Concept of Relics", *The Tibet Journal*, 28, 1/2 (2003), pp. 21–48; H. Diemberger, M. Elliott, and M. Clemente (eds), *Buddha's Word. The Life of Books in Tibet and Beyond* (Cambridge, 2014).

[98] Berns, "Sacred Entanglements".

[99] B. Latour, *Pandora"s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies (*Cambridge, MA, 1999).

[100] Bhatti, *Translating Museums*.

[101] L. Evans and J. Blair, "Listening to Self: An Appeal for Autoethnography in Art Museum Education", Blog post, 8 February 2016, retrieved from https://medium.com/viewfinder-reflecting-on-museum-education/listening-to-self-an-appeal-for-autoethnography-in-art-museum-education-c9903db25bc9, [accessed 23 May 2018].

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