

## Book Review:

### ***Translating Museums: A Counterhistory of South Asian Museology***

**Shaila Bhatti, 2012, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, California.**

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Shaila Bhatti's, *Translating Museums: A Counterhistory of South Asian Museology*, is a fascinating biography of the Lahore Museum. Drawing on detailed archival research, visitor interviews and oral histories, the author presents the first in-depth, ethnographic study of a South Asian museum. The Lahore Museum is Pakistan's most popular: characterised by Bhatti as a 'universal survey museum', its twenty two galleries spread over two floors cover subjects as diverse as archaeology, art, craft, ethnology, political history and religion, as well as world renowned collections of Gandharan art.

Chapter 1 begins with the author's experiences of visiting the museum, and moves on to provide a detailed introduction to the galleries. The Lahore Museum is Pakistan's oldest, established in 1856 by British colonists in order to visualise the material knowledge of the Punjab. Museums were introduced in India as a way for colonial officers to 'understand India's history and culture and to evaluate its economic worth and potential'. They were, in other words, part of the colonial apparatus of control and domination. In 1875, John Lockwood Kipling, father of Rudyard Kipling, became Curator of the Museum and the Head of the Art School: with a concern to reform and save Indian crafts from the destructive force of industrialisation, the building functioned here as a trade museum for crafts. Rudyard Kipling referred to it as *Ajaib Ghar* - 'Wonder House' - in his novel *Kim* (1912). Dominated initially by Europeans, the first Indian curator was only appointed in 1928.

In chapter 2, the transformation of the Lahore Museum during, and after, Independence in 1947 is charted. The ramifications of the end of colonial rule and formation of Pakistan are discussed: this turbulent period in the subcontinent's history not only divided land and peoples but split museum collections too. An astonishing 40% of Lahore Museum's objects went to the Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh, India. The difficulties of transforming a colonial museum into an institution for the new nation are lucidly explored. This chapter analyses the nationalistic focus of certain galleries - the *Islamic Gallery* and the *Independence Movement Gallery* and, to an extent, *Manuscripts and Calligraphy*, *Contemporary Crafts of Pakistan* and *Pakistan Postage Stamps*. The text here provides a subtle and nuanced reading of the relationships between the museum and nationalism –

despite the new displays, the institution retained its 'colonial classifications' and its Buddhist, Hindu and Jain galleries.

Chapter 3 discusses the organisation, structure and backgrounds of those working in the museum, providing an insight into the behind-the-scenes culture and the voices of museum professionals. Chapter 4 focuses on visitors, documenting the responses of local people, in particular, to the displays. Drawing on in-depth interviews, Bhatti sketches a very different world of visiting to that of the West. The book adeptly exposes the dissonance between the 'ideal' visitors envisaged by curators and the actual visitors: local Indians have always been interested in the museum, not Europeans, and the upper classes in Lahore rarely go - rather the museum is associated with 'lower-class' recreation. While for visitors there is a sense of pride in heritage, Bhatti argues that this museum is not fundamentally about identity formation but spectacle and wonder. Chapter 5 explores the museum as part of Lahore's wider landscape of visibility, drawing on the notion of a South Asian 'visual grammar'. The museum experience is related to indigenous practices of looking - 'darshan' (visual reception of sacred images in Hinduism), which comprises intense absorption, or 'nazar', associated with 'good' and 'evil' vision. The links between museums and other everyday ocular sites - television, cinema, bazaars and saints' shrines - are discussed in relation to these South Asian modes of visibility.

This detailed institutional biography of a non-Western museum is a very welcome addition to the expanding field of museum studies. Over the past few decades there has been a burgeoning literature in the West on post-colonial critiques of museum representations and the museum's historic complicity in colonialism. Bhatti's monograph represents a valuable contribution to these debates, demonstrating how museums were constructed in India during the colonial period as tools of imperialism, and yet were transformed, in their own particular ways, after Independence. The Lahore Museum was appropriated, she argues, not so much as a symbol of a new Independent Pakistani identity but as a 'wonder house'. An important element of the book is the analysis of visitor behaviour, and the correspondences between the scopical regime of this museum and wider South Asian modes of visibility. The idea of the museum may be universal, but Bhatti adeptly demonstrates how they are always deeply embedded within, and emerge from, their local cultural contexts. *Translating Cultures: A Counterhistory of South Asian Museology* is a highly recommended read for students of museum studies, anthropology, history, sociology, cultural and post-colonial studies, as well as Indian and Asian studies.

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