DECOLONIZING NARRATIVES: RETHINKING INDIAN COLLECTIONS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUMS IN GERMANY

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Abstract: ***In the last few decades, ethnographic museums in Europe have witnessed a change in curatorial and display practices. With critical attention to differentiation and Othering resulting from the interconnected experiences of imperialism and coloniality, the role and responsibility of museums is evolving, intended at decolonizing exhibitions and narratives. However, the impact of decolonial approaches in those museum exhibitions in Europe, where colonial contexts are indirect, i.e., not involving territorial occupation, remains underexplored. This paper aims to critically analyse one such less-explored context, focusing on Indian collections in German museums. Taking the case of Indian collections in the erstwhile Prussian State holdings in Berlin (now housed in the Humboldt Forum), it traces the historical, institutional, and sociopolitical contexts in which they were acquired and continue to be displayed. This discussion is interlaced with interest in Indology–the study of Indian culture, history, and literature, which gained momentum in the 19th century. Engaging a theoretical-analytical lens, the paper examines how colonial knowledge systems shaped certain narratives and how they are reflected in the current exhibition. Moreover, it explores the use of contemporary strategies, influenced by the ongoing decolonizing discourses and their impact on presenting the story of Indian collections in German museums today.***

Keywords: ***Indian collections, narratives, decolonization, Indology, postethnology***

Decolonization in Ethnographic Museums: An Overview

In recent years, the discourse and practice of decolonization has gained a stronghold in ethnographic museums. The key criticism against these museums has been the partisan portrayal of world cultures that rendered the patterns of self-differentiation and determination among cultures and societies visible. Ethnographic museums, which emerged in many parts of the world during the 18th and 19th centuries, can be seen as an outcome of the emergence of ethnology as a scientific discipline and a principal way in which anthropologists addressed notions of alterity through material culture (Boursiquot 2014). In their quest to study and display other cultures, these museums persisted throughout the 20th century, despite anthropologists increasingly shifting from the material study of societies to focus on meaning, social structures, power relationships, and social practices (Boursiquot 2014).

Through the nexus of knowledge and power in colonial-imperial times, ethnographic museums created hierarchies while engendering notions of supremacy of certain cultures over others (Sturtevant 1969). This mode of knowledge production, deeply embedded in the colonial context, influenced the display and presentation of objects in museums and established the Western gaze that privileged people from the West as having authority in interpreting collections. The univocal lens of presentation and interpretation faced criticism due to complications of representing the Other in the era of decolonization and globalization, "as every place and every act became trans-cultural in our evermore-interconnected world" (Singh 2014, 3; see also Pieterse 1997; Yap 2014). Increased attention to anthropology's relevance within postcolonial critique, alongside transformations in the role and responsibility of museums towards contemporary societies, created an urgency to decolonize the exhibition of ethnographic collections in European museums (Harris and O'Hanlon 2013; Jones 1993; Pieterse 1997; Fromm 2016; Fairweather 2004). Interlaced with this discussion is the growing demand from communities of origin for the restitution of objects that once belonged to them.

In Germany, many ethnographic museums (Museum für Völkerkunde)[1] established in the 19th century, either through the initiatives of the state, universities, or private collectors, are facing the challenge of reframing their

[1] The term *Völkerkunde* became associated with the "non-European 'primitive' peoples" of those societies "marked by colonial expansionism" (Welz 2001, 4864).

collections and narratives (Kravagna 2015; Macdonald, Gerbich, and Oswald 2018).[2] The term *Völkerkunde* has come under criticism in recent decades due to its association with racial and unjust colonial practices (Dilger 2018) and is largely being disregarded in museums. In response, many museums have rebranded themselves as world cultures or art museums (e.g., the Museum of World Cultures in Frankfurt, the Museum of Five Continents in Munich, and the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum-Kulturen der Welt in Cologne). These museums have adopted hybrid strategies, redefining their engagement with communities through artistic interventions and knowledge exchange (Vogel 1989; Price 1989; Lidchi 2013; Kraus and Noack 2015; Wonisch 2018). Many have also initiated provenance research to include the complex past of objects in their presentation in museums.

While this reorientation has been termed *post-ethnology* by museums, it has faced criticism from scholars. In a post-ethnological context, the emphasis shifts from the classic methods and frameworks of ethnology to more critical, reflexive, and often interdisciplinary approaches. Moving away from a Western-centric viewpoint and giving voice to indigenous and marginalized perspectives, this reconfiguration recognizes the fluid and interconnected nature of cultures and emphasizes the need to decolonize the study of societies. However, critics argue that this shift is often superficial, with museums claiming to embrace post-ethnology but, in practice, only engaging in renaming/reorienting/refashioning towards art rather than making a genuine departure from classical ethnology. A case in point is the Musée du Quai Branly, a museum dedicated to art and ethnography of non-Western cultures that opened its doors in 2006 in Paris (Price 2007). While it offers an intriguing approach by showcasing ethnographic collections as high art in the heart of a city landscape, it still clings to the exotic display techniques and overlooks France's complex colonial legacies (Benoit 2008).

Such an approach offers new modes of co-creation, co-curation, and intellectual reciprocity, but at the same time risks diluting the historical, political, and anthropological context of these collections and the power asymmetries

[2] "In the historiography of the social sciences, ethnology represents an early stage in the development of the anthropological disciplines" and "indicates a scholarly interest in how aggregations of human beings are distinct from each other in terms of material culture, language, religion, moral ideas, or social institutions" (Welz 2001, 4862). On the other hand, ethnography is understood as a data-gathering and documenting practice. In this paper, the words *ethnology* and *ethnography* are used interchangeably.

underlying interactions and exchanges (Hoggart 2004; Clifford 2019; Oswald 2018; Schorch and McCarthy 2019). As art historian Christian Kravagna suggests, "'post' in ethnology should not be seen as a temporal 'afterwards' with regard to colonialism [...] but rather an oppositional force with the aim of overcoming colonial relations of power" (Kravagna 2013 in Wonisch 2018, 5). Many scholars have advocated for a more comprehensive notion of post-ethnology, one that foregrounds historical connections through provenance research and fosters collaborations with source communities to build more comprehensive and inclusive narratives (Oswald 2018; Sarr and Savoy 2018; Clifford 2019; Rassool 2022). As curator Regina Wonisch writes, "Decolonizing ethnological collections and museums [...] implies questioning the disciplinary boundaries between ethnology, cultural history, history, and art, and the corresponding orders of knowledge" (Wonisch 2018, 7). Our work positions itself within this critical discourse of post-ethnology, influenced by global forces, and analyses the museum narratives in relation to their rootedness in geo-historical continuities and contemporary practices.

The Politics of Cultural Representation: Othering, Indology, and Indomania

The debate on the politics of cultural representation and display has brought awareness to the relation between "the displayer, the displayed, and the viewer" (Kuwayama 2003). Considering museums in a postcolonial context, understanding cultural identity is crucial, as the portrayal of cultures as static or monolithic is challenged and/or ruptured (Hall 1990, 1997). This perspective urges museums to present artefacts and narratives in ways that reflect ongoing cultural changes and the complex legacies of colonialism, rather than perpetuating outdated or essentialist views of culture. The historicity of objects, along with their procurement and display, was shaped by underlying assumptions about the acceptability of "ways of thinking" and particular discourses of power (Foucault 1970). Comprehending this subjectivity and relationality is crucial to contextualizing Indian collections, and we therefore take recourse to postcolonial discourses.

Building on Edward Said's work on the concepts of Orientalism, the Western gaze, and imagined constructions of self and Other that empower the colonizer against the colonized (Said 1979), we proceed with Homi Bhabha's strategies of hierarchization and marginalization as employed in the

management of colonial societies (Bhabha 1986), alongside Gayatri Spivak's "epistemic violence", which provides an important theoretical paradigm for addressing this issue (Spivak 1988). The implication of the positionality or standpoint of the subject means that post-ethnological museums embody this concept by enabling us (the Other) through social imaginings of the past and its material relations, thus transforming contemporary relational configurations. The discourse of post-ethnology is embedded in the postcolonial critique, allowing museums to recognize and connect with the diverse aspects of ourselves, helping construct and understand the points of identification, dialogue, multiperspectivity, and representation politics.

Building on these concepts, subsequent scholars have utilized these frameworks to analyse the cultural, political, and economic dimensions of postcolonial societies, particularly in examining the dynamics of power and representation within global narratives. The notion of Orientalism, in particular, "marked by a series of fundamental absences (of movement, reason, order, meaning, and so on)", demonstrates how the constructed distinction between representation and reality reflects the broader division between the West and the non-West (Mitchell 2004). The European apparatus of representation, particularly museums and world exhibitions, has become instrumental in showcasing this difference and constructing Otherness, which facilitated national identity and served imperial and colonial intentions (Mitchell 2004; Bennett 2017; Clifford 1997). "For Spivak, epistemic violence is an integral part of proclaiming Western knowledge of the Other as truth" (Bartels et al. 2019, 153).

In an Indian context, several scholars called for a re-examination of narratives surrounding colonialism, arguing that these narratives undermine and dismiss indigenous knowledge systems by projecting European epistemologies onto the subjugated Other, misinterpreting Indian cultural history, particularly in Western museums (Mitter 1977; Ganguly 1988; Guha-Thakurta 2007; Chatterjee, Guha-Thakurta and Kar 2014; Singh 2014, Sullivan 2015). Keya Ganguly highlights the "intersections between the trajectories of colonialism and that of Indian art history" (Ganguly 1988, 39). She discusses the problematic articulation of Indian art as the colonized Other and the epistemic violence that ensues this discourse (Ganguly 1988). Adapting Raymond Williams' discussion of the "internal dynamic relations" in cultural processes, Ganguly uses the categories of "dominant, incorporated, and oppositional modes of cultural practice" to analyse colonial ideology in relation to Indian art history (Ganguly 1988; Williams 1977). This aspect of epistemic violence has also

been discussed at length by Partha Mitter (1977), who juxtaposes the myth of the innocent eye as elaborated by Ernst Gombrich (1960) and critiques the reception and interpretation of Indian (particularly Hindu) sculpture, painting, and architecture through a European eye. He observes a curious paradox in the reception of Indian art in Europe: while it remains one of the most discussed non-European artistic traditions, it is widely misunderstood in the modern West (Mitter 1977).

While our work addresses this issue, a key aspect to consider is the indirect colonial context. Unlike colonial powers such as Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Portugal, Germany did not acquire territory in India. Nevertheless, the German intellectual interest in India developed from the late 18th century, leading to a deep engagement with Indian texts, philosophy, culture, and languages, as well as objects and people. Indology, as this discipline was termed, advanced in the German context distinctively and more robustly than other European countries and remains a rich source of historical study in a post-Orientalist debate. German Indology emerged, alongside Orientalism, in the context of colonial rule in the 18th and 19th centuries. In German Indology, the main focus was not on how Europeans viewed India, but rather on how Germans used India to shape and project their own self-image, seeking validation from other Europeans (Adluri 2011). In the 19th century, India became a significant reference point in shaping Germany's cultural identity, giving rise to the term "Indomania". As described in Wilhelm Krug's *Allgemeines Handwörterbuch der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (1838), Indomania referred to "a kind of mental illness", characterizing those obsessively infatuated with everything Indian (Chakkalakal 2024, translated). These so-called Indomaniacs romanticized India as "the only real source of all human wisdom, education, and morality" (Krug 1838). Douglas McGetchin writes, "The German interest in ancient India developed because of specific cultural, institutional, and political motivations" (McGetchin 2009, 17–18). He argues that Indology was used as a "counter to contemporary French cultural hegemony" (McGetchin 2009, 18). The Prussian State was instrumental in advancing Indology, establishing numerous academic chairs as key centres for Indological research, including Berlin as an important centre. On account of Germany's lack of colonial occupation in India, which led them to rely on Britain for resources, this has often led to the misconception that German interest in India was free from Orientalist motives.

However, by emphasizing myth and symbolism in sustaining India's Otherness, the Orientalist portrayal of India as "spiritual", "mysterious", "exotic", and related stereotypes are reinforced within the Indological discourse (Inden 1986; McGetchin 2009). Peter Gaeffke's analysis reveals that German Indology lacks self-criticism and ignores its historical roots, both in scholarship and its religious-political origins (Gaeffke 1990). Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism "as potentially directed inward" was inextricably linked with two sources: colonialism and evangelism (Said 1979, 77). But Sheldon Pollock suggests that in the case of German Indology, a third constituent may have been important: "German Romanticism-Wissenschaft" (Pollock 1993). This connection nurtured a specific reading of Indian texts, often idealizing the past and suggesting a cultural decline in the East, which was used to justify the Western colonial presence. Various approaches towards India, such as Indology, along with the enduring phenomena of Indomania (a mix of admiration and aversion), *Sehnsucht Indien*, and *Indienliebe*, continue to shape both scholarly and artistic perceptions. (McGetchin 2009; Chakkalakal 2014, 2024). The romantic preoccupation, still evident in modern museum interpretations, is critically examined here through a postcolonial lens, with attention to the narratives being promoted within the context of Indian collections in German museums.

Ethnographic Museums in Germany: Positioning Indian Collections

Indian collections have formed an important part of German ethnographic museums since their very foundation in the 19th century. Along with Indologists, expeditions by anthropologists, curators, missionary activities and also international market trade, exchange, and donations as well as other known and unknown ways and means resulted in the acquisition of Indian collections in German museums. In recent years, interest in Indology appears to be declining, with several Indology departments in German universities closing down. Consequently, Indian collections are increasingly reduced from display in German museums. Although museums in Germany have been undergoing narrative shifts in a postcolonial context, the study of the cultural historicity of Indian collections is often subsumed within other problematic (often African) collections and remains relatively unexplored.

Nevertheless, the Museum of Asian Art (Museum für Asiatische Kunst)[3] in Berlin houses one of the largest collections associated with India.[4] Although it is fashioned as an art museum, its origins date back to the Ethnological Museum (Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde), founded in 1873 by Prussian King Wilhelm I. Now housed in the Humboldt Forum, a reconstructed 17th century Baroque palace that once belonged to the Prussian royal family, the collections showcase "world cultures" alongside those of the Ethnological Museum (now a separate entity). Opened in 2021,[5] the Humboldt Forum has become a focal point of postcolonial debates. This controversy has heightened the focus on restituting objects with contested provenances and compelled the Forum to confront the colonial legacies embedded in its institutional history and collecting practices. The decolonial approach, such as provenance research, collaborations with communities, and the acknowledgement of diversity, is prominently applied to African collections in the Humboldt Forum and attracts considerable scholarly attention.[6] Although the Museum has begun to explore decolonial perspectives, their presence in the exhibition of Indian collections is still limited, and ongoing research on the subject is similarly underdeveloped.[7] Against the

3 All museum names have been translated from their original German names into English for consistency.

4 Other museums in Germany, including Berlin, also house Indian collections, like the Übersee Museum in Bremen, the Linden Museum in Stuttgart, GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig, and MARKK-Museum am Rothenbaum Kulturen und Künste der Welt in Hamburg, to name a few. Most of these museums are predominantly ethnological museums; in contrast to the Museum of Asian Art, which is fashioned as an art museum, with roots in the ethnological museum. It underscores the compelling issue of distinguishing between categories of art and ethnology, a central critique in post-ethnological discourse.

5 After the online opening in December 2020, the Humboldt Forum was partially opened to the public in July 2021. The museum was fully opened from September 2022.

6 See, for instance, Margareta von Oswald's research on the history and problematics of colonialism in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, which offers useful references and parallels for the study of the Museum of Asian Art (Oswald 2022).

7 The Museum of Asian Art has engaged with a decolonial discourse and published a *Position Paper on Decolonisation*; however, this approach is not yet well reflected in the Indian exhibition. www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst/about-us/colonialism/ (accessed 21.04.2024). A booklet published on the postcolonial provenance research in the permanent exhibitions of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art in Humboldt Forum highlights only a single object from the gallery exhibiting Indian collections (2022).
A project to study provenance research on Asian Art has been introduced in Berlin since 2020 in collaboration with the National Museum of Asian Art of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin's Zentralarchiv and Museum für Asiatische Kunst. It explores trade networks and other movements responsible for circulation of objects. www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/

backdrop of emerging decolonial themes, we consider how historical acquisition practices and the institutional history of the Museum of Asian Art have influenced the presentation of Indian collections in the Humboldt Forum.

History of Indian Collections: Retracing the Prussian Holdings

The Indian collections in the Prussian holdings can be traced back to the Royal Museum of Ethnology, established in 1873 and opened in 1886.[8] Its early origins lie in the Prussian-Brandenburg Cabinet of Art established at the Royal Prussian Palace in Berlin in the 18th century. Following the creation of the New Museum (Neues Museum) in 1855, the early ethnographic collection was exhibited there before moving to the independent museum.[9] Art historian Claudine Bautze-Picron has documented the brief history of the acquisition of these collections, particularly from East India (Bautze-Picron 1998).[10]

In Berlin, Indian collections began to be acquired in the 19th century, with one of the earliest artefacts dating to 1846. These collections grew through donations and acquisitions, such as "four decorative terracottas" from a temple in Bollotpor, donated by Hermann Ansorge in 1857. As Bautze-Picron points out, Indian art historian Rajendra Lal Mitra, who worked on sites, such as Bodh Gaya, was a key figure in helping the ethnological museum in Berlin acquire

museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst/collection-research/research/provenance-research-on-asian-art/ (accessed 21.04.2024).

Post-doctoral research by Ranjamrittika Bhowmik maps the emotional journey of museum visitors, exploring history of emotions, individual value production, memory, digital mediation, object biography, decolonization, and intersectionality between the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and the Institut für Museumsforschung. https://museumsandsociety.net/en/team/dr-ranjamrittika-bhowmik (accessed 10.08.2024).

An ongoing doctoral work conducted by Habiba Insaf looks at the politics of display and interpretation of Indian objects in Berlin Museums. www.carmah.berlin/people/auto-draft-2/ accessed 21.04.2024). However, this work uses an object biography approach, with an object and its many lives and transformations as a starting premise with objects from various Berlin museums. In contrast, our work examines and contextualizes the current exhibition and narrative of Indian collections, particularly in the Humboldt Forum.

8 Ethnologisches Museum. www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/about-us/profile/ (accessed 20.03.2024).

9 Ethnologisches Museum. www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/about-us/profile/ (accessed 20.03.2024).

10 The Indian collections in the Museum originate from various sources, with each artefact carrying its own rich history. Here, only a few examples are provided to showcase the diverse pathways that brought these objects to Berlin.

"architectural fragments, glazed tiles, and sculptures from Gaur and Pandua" in the 1870s (Bautze-Picron 1998, 9). She also notes the contributions of collectors such as ethnologist Andreas Fedor Jagor, Captain James Waterhouse, Marion Rivett-Carnac, and medical officer Lawrence Austine Waddell in expanding this collection (Bautze-Picron 1998, 9). Jagor made multiple trips to India, collecting objects related to natural history and ethnology. He was supported by the Prussian Government, which corresponded with the British Government to offer assistance to Jagor during his visit to India.[11] Ethnologist Adolf Bastian, who became the first director of the Royal Museum of Ethnology, also made a few voyages to India between 1878 and 1903 (Kreinath 2013, 52–56). He was presented in 1879 with sculptures from Bodh Gaya, which were originally collected by Rajendral Lal Mitra.

In 1904, the Royal Museum of Ethnology established a dedicated Indian Department. The museum expanded its Indian collection by acquiring objects from Bodh Gaya through British orientalist Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner and Jain images collected by missionary Paul Wagner (Bautze-Picron 1998, 10). In 1911, Raj Kumar Shyama Kumar Tagore donated items during the Crown Prince's visit to India. Two years later, with support from J. P. Rawlins, the museum purchased another collection that was then located in England.

The turmoil during and after the Second World War led to the loss and reorganization of Indian collections. This must be viewed in the postwar context of divided Germany, during which the collections were damaged, lost, or scattered. Berlin's division into East and West further split the collections. In 1963, the Indian Department of the Museum of Ethnology became the separate Museum of Indian Art (Härtel 1973, 223). Herbert Härtel, an Indologist and the founding director of this museum, played a key role in establishing Indian art history as an independent academic discipline (Wessels-Mevissen 2006, 30, translated). The Museum of Indian Art officially opened on 7th October 1971 in West Berlin in the Dahlem area (Härtel 1973, 223). During this time, "large Hindu images were acquired [...] from the international art market" (Bautze-Picron 1998, 10).

The Museum of Indian Art came under the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz), which was established in 1957 for the purposes of "the maintenance, preservation, and augmentation of the Prussian art collections" (Waetzoldt 1973, 207). At the turn of the millennium,

[11] Correspondence in the General Department, 1873, Vol. 74. Maharashtra State Archives.

the Museum of Indian Art was merged with the Museum of East Asian Art, forming the Museum of Asian Art in 2006. Indian collections were displayed in Berlin-Dahlem for nearly 50 years before they were moved to the centre of Berlin in the Humboldt Forum. The establishment of the Humboldt Forum has become a key point of contention in recent years.

Confronting Colonial Legacies in the Humboldt Forum

The site of the Humboldt Forum has had a chequered history.[12] Understanding this history is essential to comprehending the debates surrounding the Forum. From serving as the seat of the Hohenzollern Dynasty of Brandenburg since the mid-15th century, with its grand Baroque Palace built at the turn of the 17th century, to the Parliament (Palast der Republik) of the German Democratic Republic in the post-World War II period, the site has often been at the centre of power. Following the reunification of Germany and the subsequent demolition of the Palace of the Republic, the demand for rebuilding the previous Baroque Palace intensified. In 2002, the Berlin Senate approved its reconstruction.[13] The Palace was to accommodate the Humboldt Forum, reminiscent of the exploratory spirit of the Humboldt brothers (Alexander and Wilhelm). It embodies their scientific quests, openness, and connection between the global and local perspectives.[14] Open since 2021, the Humboldt Forum houses several institutions, including the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art of the State Museums of Berlin (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (overseen by the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), the City Museum of Berlin (Stadtmuseum Berlin) in collaboration with the Kulturprojekte Berlin, and Humboldt University of Berlin. The Humboldt Forum Foundation serves as an umbrella organization, overseeing the operations of the Humboldt Forum.[15]

12 Short Architectural History; https://berliner-schloss.de/en/palace-history/short-architectural-history/ (accessed 26.03.2024).

13 The construction began in 2013 with Italian architect Franco Stella winning the commission. The Palace was reconstructed in Baroque design, with only one side kept modern.

14 Impressions. The Humboldt Brothers. Press File. 2021. www.humboldtforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/HF_20210718_Humboldt-Brothers_Press-Kit-1.pdf (accessed 14.08.2024).

15 www.humboldtforum.org/en/about/ (accessed 25.03.2024).

Located on Museum Island in the heart of Berlin, the site served as a seat of nobility from 1443 when the Hohenzollern dynasty ruled Brandenburg. At the turn of the 17th century, a grand Baroque palace was built on the site by famous architect and sculptor Andreas Schlüter. This was also the time when Friedrich III was crowned the king of Prussia. Following the end of Prussian rule in 1918, the palace was abandoned

In its formal declaration, as displayed on the museum panel, the Humboldt Forum was envisioned as a "space for dialogue, civic participation, and the coequal contemporaneity of world cultures". However, the decision to reconstruct the Berlin Palace in the Baroque style (though partial) and the decision to present the ethnographic collections sparked a big controversy. The reconstruction of the palace was seen as "a historically problematic gesture of identity politics towards an alleged 19th-century Prussian glory", igniting the questions of authenticity and reconstruction in the context of cultural heritage conservation. Additionally, the idea of a universal museum has faced multiple challenges, given its 19th-century origins (Von Bose 2013). "The Humboldt Forum was originally touted as a place for world cultures, as a site that could open the Berlin museum system to a broader international dialogue: a global perspective, but one that conflictingly projected diversity through the homogeneous universality of the Enlightenment" (Majluf 2021).

The interplay between local, national, and universal identity creations makes the Humboldt Forum complex and contested. "The triangle of European high art (Museum Island), non-European arts and cultures (Humboldt-Forum) as well as of the sciences, represented by the scientific collections of Humboldt University, is not only said to resemble a unique 'sanctuary for art and culture', but is last but not least regarded as an important selling point in the cultural landscape of European cities" (Von Bose 2013). For critics of the Humboldt Forum, the decision to portray non-European cultures, especially ethnological collections, evokes memories of imperial brutality in the colonies, the looting of objects, and the perpetuation of Othering, reinforcing hegemonies rooted in the colonialist-imperialist discourses.[16] The Ethnological Museum's collections displayed on the second floor of the Humboldt Forum, especially the Benin Bronzes and collections from other African countries like Tanzania and Namibia, have been especially scrutinized (Sarr and Savoy 2018).

as a seat of power and was used for other purposes. Towards the end of World War II, it was damaged during the bombings. Following the occupation of East Berlin by the Soviet Union, it was subsequently demolished to make way for the Palace of Republic (Palast der Republik), with many important events of the German Democratic Republic taking place there. The Palace was closed in 1990, citing asbestos contamination. The calls for rebuilding the old palace started right after the unification of Germany. In 2002, the German Parliament voted with a majority in favour of rebuilding. The Palace of the Republic was finally demolished in 2008.

16 See for instance, No Humboldt21. www.no-humboldt21.de/ (accessed 21.04.2024).

Amid growing calls for decolonization, the Humboldt Forum has acknowledged colonialism and coloniality as the core theme to be redressed in the exhibition by engaging with postcolonial voices and perspectives.[17] Coloniality is defined in the discourses adopted by the Humboldt Forum as "the colonial patterns of thought and action that, in their various (re)configurations, continuously and sustainably structure today's realities in former colonized and colonizing societies".[18] The Humboldt Forum aims to break out of "the coloniality that is also inherent in the traditions and practices of educational and cultural institutions such as museums."[19] Among the key strategies of the Humboldt Forum, provenance research seems to have taken centre-stage, alongside working with communities of origin. The Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation in particular has developed a policy for the "appropriate handling of non-European objects and their history".[20]

While the ethnological museum at the Humboldt Forum has actively engaged with redressing the colonial problematics, albeit disappointingly (Cardoso 2021), the Museum of Asian Art has echoed similar sentiments. In its "Position Paper on Decolonization", the museum acknowledges the role of its predecessor institutions and employees in the "European processes of studying, exploring, and appropriating the world, as well as those of imperialism and colonialism".[21] The Museum of Asian Art endeavours "to be sensitive to diversity" and "to critically reflect on their own perspectives and engage in a critical appraisal and overcoming of the practices and mindsets of museum-associated traditions of collecting and of disciplinary discourses". They aim to incorporate voices of "local and international partners and knowledge producers" to foster multiperspectivity. Overcoming discrimination, particularly Eurocentrism, is also a central goal of the museum, as asserted in the Position Paper. In view of this approach, it is important to revisit how the Indian collections are presented in the Humboldt Forum.

17 For instance, see the publication *(Post)Colonialism and Cultural Heritage: International Debates in Humboldt Forum*. 2021.

18 Colonialism and Coloniality. www.humboldtforum.org/en/colonialism-and-coloniality/ (accessed 27.03.2024)

19 Colonialism and Coloniality. www.humboldtforum.org/en/colonialism-and-coloniality/ (accessed 27.03.2024)

20 Colonialism and Coloniality. www.humboldtforum.org/en/colonialism-and-coloniality/ (accessed 27.03.2024)

21 Museum für Asiatische Kunst www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst/about-us/colonialism (accessed 30.03.2024).

Presenting "Religious Arts of South Asia" and Narratives

The Museum of Asian Art, located on the third floor of the Humboldt Forum, consists of many exhibitions, such as *Southeast Asian Religious Art*; *Religious Arts of South Asia – Buddhism, Jainism*; *Northern Silk Road – Himalayas*; *Religious Arts of South Asia – Hinduism, Courtly Art*; *Northern Silk Road*; *Arts of Japan*, *Tea House*, *Sacred Arts of East Asia*; *Art of China and Korea – Study Collections*; and *China and Europe*.[22] Our paper primarily examines the permanent exhibition *of Religious Arts of South Asia* and the narrative it conveys.[23] Divided into two galleries, the first gallery (Room 314) is located next to the introductory room and is dedicated to Buddhism and Jainism. The second gallery (Room 316) focuses on Hinduism and Courtly Art.[24]

This exhibition can be analysed on multiple levels: its spatial layout and design, the choice and placement of objects, and the narrative contexts. As archaeologist Stephanie Moser has shown, various aspects of the museum influence the production of knowledge, be it architecture, location, setting; space; design, colour, light; subject, message, and text; layout; display types; exhibition style; and audience and reception (Moser 2010). While our focus is on the narrative aspect, as controlled by an institutional agency, the choice of objects, their categorization, and display need to be briefly referred to fully comprehend the narratives employed. The idea is thus not to discuss each and every object, but to highlight the larger themes and narratives presented in the exhibition that connect the various objects in these galleries together. A narrative integrates "objects and spaces – and stories of people and places – as part of a process of storytelling that speaks of the everyday and our sense of

22 The Eastern wing on the third floor has on view other exhibitions on Asia that are managed by the Ethnological Museum, which were not considered for the paper. Additionally, there are exhibitions, such as the *Naga Land*, which have objects from India; however, they remain outside of the purview of this paper. www.humboldtforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Lageplan.pdf (accessed 12.12.2023).

23 The Silk Road expeditions in the early 20th century and the objects collected form among the important collections of the Museum of Asian Art. However, this has not been dealt with in this paper, considering its geographical and thematic focus. Even though we refer to Indian collections, we are aware that the exhibition on *Religious Arts of South Asia* comprises objects from other South Asian countries beyond India. However, since the objects from India (and the Indian subcontinent before the partition) predominate this exhibition, our analysis and approach, with its focus on Indian collections, applies to these objects as well.

24 Even though visitors can freely move on the third floor, for the sake of clarity and ease of explanation, the sequence of room numbers as displayed on the map is followed.

self, as well as the special and the unique" (Hanks, Hale, and MacLeod 2012). It thus becomes a powerful tool that allows for multilayered interpretation. However, in a museum context, the narrative also serves as an instrument for legitimizing the institution's vision and agenda, thereby revealing the underlying power dynamics related to the material objects and the curatorial projects of the institutions involved.

In examining the overall arrangement of both galleries, most objects are displayed on pedestals and in vitrines, accompanied by short labels describing each object. Large panels on the walls provide details on the thematics of the exhibition. There are other panels which offer contexts for the displayed objects through texts and contemporary photographs. Additionally, the exhibition features various projector screens, showcasing films and touchscreen panels that cover a range of themes.

The exhibition on Buddhist art in South Asia features objects from notable sites, such as Sanchi, Amaravati, Bharhut, and Gandhara. The collection includes a variety of objects, ranging from sculptures of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, decorative elements and narrative panels from the stupas, and a partial replica of the Sanchi Gateway. The gallery walls are predominantly white, except one wall painted in gold, serving as a background for the sculptures of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. At the centre of the gallery, a reconstructed rotunda glass case displays the heads as remnants of various Buddha statues, while another rotunda, designed to resemble a stupa, features storytelling panels. The narratives here largely focus on the origins of Buddhism, stupas, and the iconography as seen in the panel "Buddhist Art in South Asia". A large projector screen at the exhibition's entrance (from the introductory room 313) greets visitors with talks about the history and spread of Buddhism throughout Asia and its contemporary revival. The Sanchi Stupa receives particular attention, with a replica of its half-gateway positioned in front of the projector screen. The panel "Stupa, Throne, Wheel, Tree" highlights the aniconic aspects of Buddhism. A number of iconographic illustrations, such as depictions of Buddha, Bodhisattva, and partial cast of the eastern gate of the Sanchi Stupa and the *Vedikas*—stone fences for sacred places, appear on various smaller panels.

The "Fascination Gandhara" panel explores British colonial efforts to excavate Buddhist sites and highlights the impact of Greek and Roman art on Gandhara sculptures, a result of ongoing Western cultural influences on India. Although Buddhist art developed concurrently in Gandhara (now in northwestern Pakistan) and in Mathura (northern India), the exhibition emphasizes

Gandhara art. The "Ideal Beings in Human Form" panel further illustrates this focus, showcasing the prominence of Gandhara art. Additionally, the panel on "Transformed Belief in the Land of the Buddha" features Buddhist sculptures from eastern India, dating from the 8th to 12th centuries, exploring the influence of Hinduism on esoteric Buddhism, as well as the development of similar rituals.

In the Jain art section, several sculptures of Tirthankaras (Jinas–the spiritual teachers) are displayed, along with a painted cloth and a wooden shrine depicting the temple of Shatrunjaya, a pilgrimage site in Gujarat, Western India. The panel "Jain Art in India" provides a brief history of Jainism and the Tirthankaras, comparing Jain statues to those of the Buddha from an iconographic perspective. Another panel, "Victors and Ford-makers", discusses the 24 Tirthankaras. The pilgrimage to Shatrunjaya is detailed in a smaller panel, offering context for the painted cloth, which serves as a "spiritual substitute for a real pilgrimage". The gallery features two tactile models that illustrate Buddha iconography and a Jain temple model. Additionally, two touchscreen displays focus on Buddhism and the Shatrunjaya pilgrimage. A reading corner in this gallery offers a selection of related books, and an audio guide, narrated by a German-Buddhist monk, which provides insights into the story of Buddhism, the importance of its teachings, and the role of meditation in leading a happy life.

The next gallery is divided into two main sections: Hindu Religious Art and Courtly India. The Hindu religious art section displays various objects, including sculptures, picture prints, textile and miniature paintings, and a travel shrine. The introductory panel "Hindu Art in South Asia" highlights the significance of key deities, such as the male gods Vishnu and Shiva, as well as the female goddess the "Great Devi". It explains their "multiple manifestations" and attributes such as having "more than two arms" and "multiple heads, vividly illustrating their superhuman abilities". Further panels delve into different aspects of Indian divinity. One panel, titled "Form-bearing, Feeding, Sometimes Frightening", explores the role of Hindu goddesses, noting that while they often serve as "companions to male gods", they also possess the power to act independently. The dual nature of these goddesses, whether benevolent or fierce, is emphasized, with particular attention to "the bloodthirsty Chamunda". The gallery also touches on the role of processional images used in festivals, accompanied by a pictorial depiction of a contemporary Durga Puja scene featuring a temporary idol of Devi. Additionally, two separate panels provide an in-depth look at the attributes of the God Shiva —"Dreadlocks, Crescent Moon, and Trident" and Vishnu—"Crown, Fiery Disk, and Conch Shell".

Another notable aspect highlighted on the panels is the "diversity" of Indian gods, such as the "Sun God, Fire God, Creator God". Many of these Hindu deities have origins in the ancient Vedic era (1500–800 BCE), a period renowned for the creation of the Vedas, revered as "primordial knowledge", and the revered Gayatri mantra, as stated in one of the panels. Another panel emphasizes the "colourfulness" of these gods, particularly focusing on 150 years of colour printing, which played a significant role in Indian religious life. While the exhibition showcases these vivid picture prints, the panel outlines the advancements in 19th century colour printing that allowed for the mass production of religious images. Special mention is made of Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906) and the assistance he received from German experts in establishing his printing house. In this section, a big multimedia screen showcases the "Imagery of Hinduism", highlighting the iconographic aspects of important Hindu deities, like Vishnu, Shiva, Devi, and Agni. A touchscreen display visually narrates the story from the *Devi Mahatmya*, a text celebrating the great goddess. Additionally, a tactile model of Nataraja is also featured alongside these screens.

The gallery includes a section on Courtly India, with a focus on Islamic art. This display features a variety of objects, including glazed tiles from the Sindh region, Bidri ware, ivory, textiles, clothing, architectural fragments, and photographs. The architectural fragments, mainly from Eastern India and dating to the Sultanate period, are described as "masterpieces of Indo-Islamic culture" in one of the panels. Bidri ware is highlighted as part of a "long tradition" of Islamic art that continues to thrive today. Ivory, celebrated as a "definitive aristocratic material", became a prized addition to European art collections and cabinets of curiosities and is still displayed here.

A significant focus in this section is on the Mughal Empire (16th–19th centuries). The panel "Courtly India" emphasizes how "the courtly culture of this powerful Islamic dynasty shaped Indian art and architecture well into the 19th century". The Taj Mahal is highlighted as the most famous monument from the Mughal period. The panel also connects this history with Berlin, noting that the "enthusiasm for the refined Mughal style reached its peak in 19th-century Berlin, when many of the works displayed here were acquired for the Königliche Museen." It further explains how "Mughal painting, incorporating Persian, Indian, and European influences, achieved an exceptionally high level of artistry and served as a stylistic model for many later Indian courtly schools of painting", and how "Mughal decorative arts were primarily inspired by the flora of the garden, representing 'civilized' nature."

Another panel explores the Central Asian origins of the Mughals and their openness to Indian culture, which fostered a harmonious blend of Persian and Indian traditions. The following panel highlights how "the new Muslim rulers shaped Indian culture through their refined lifestyles and their proverbial lust for luxury". These rulers, known as collectors, connoisseurs, and artists, showcased their refined taste in fine textiles, intricate jewellery, and the use of precious materials. A panel on "Kashmir" reinforces this idea of how Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, with "the extreme heat and barrenness of North India and his longing for civilized nature", commissioned the first gardens in the Persian-Islamic tradition in India. It further mentions how the Kashmir Valley developed into a summer retreat and "the cradle of refined Indo-Islamic horticulture" during the reign of Mughal ruler Akbar and his successors.

Another theme presented here is the "Harem". As the panel describes, "A spacious area of the palace was reserved solely for women. Here, behind closed doors, they could move about freely and even engage in 'improper' activities such as smoking, exuberant celebrations, or bathing in the nude". A section on early photography (dating back to the 19th century), which talks about the advent of photography in British India, presents views of buildings from the Mughal Empire, including Agra, Delhi, Fatehpur Sikri, and Lahore.[25] Along with multimedia screens providing more information on Bidri ware, ivory, and Ragamala miniature paintings, the gallery features an interactive game where visitors can design a Mughal garden. A tactile model of the Taj Mahal is also on display. The centrepiece of this gallery is an 18th-century textile depicting the plan of the Taj Mahal. To preserve the textile, the object is kept in a closed cabinet, viewable for only five minutes every half-hour. The exhibition's focal point is an artwork by Alexander Gorlizki titled "Gardens in the Sky", which incorporates animation and music. Two other artworks, "Ram Darwaza No. 9" by Anil Revri, based in Washington D.C. and another by contemporary London-based Indian artist Shubha Taparia, have been presented in this gallery. Revri conceptualizes "the image space as the map of an inner world", hinting at his roots in Indian spiritual traditions. The symmetrical structure of his work is "reminiscent of Islamic principles of composition". Titled "Transitional Weaves 1 (Illumination Series)", Taparia's work plays with the two-dimensional

[25] During our recent visit, we noticed that the section on early photography had been removed from the exhibition. However, since it was present during our initial inquiries, we have still included its brief description in our paper.

industrial fabric, applying composition gold, transforming "the everyday material into something precious and sacred".

This description offers insights into the narrative underlying the categorizations and classifications of objects in the galleries showcasing *Religious Arts of South Asia*, which encompasses Buddhism and Jainism, as well as Hinduism and Courtly Art. The objects displayed can be traced through the history of museum collecting, from Prussian cabinets of curiosity to the ethnological museum, the establishment of the Museum of Indian Art, and later developments. The interpretations presented here reflect patterns rooted in both colonial history and contemporary decolonizing discourses. These themes also appear in exhibition materials, such as the exhibition catalogues, audio guides, and guided tours.

Analysing the Narratives with a Post-Ethnological Lens

The current presentation of Indian collections faces several challenges, including narratives that signify a particular choice and ordering of objects, aligning them within rigid temporal and typological classifications and categorizations. While these narratives have been shaped by institutional history and collecting practices, they continue to reflect notions of Western hegemony, influenced by the academic development of Indology and broader 19th-century social discourse in Germany. Although attempts to reorient current curatorial practices within a decolonial discourse are a welcome move, they fail to subvert the Western gaze, as can be seen through various examples. Moreover, a recourse to using indigenous knowledge by combining emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives, but without critical examination, further complicates the interpretation.

When deconstructing the narratives surrounding Indian collections at the Museum of Asian Art, it is crucial to consider 19th-century German perceptions of India, where Indology was driven by cultural and political motives. The exhibition's emphasis on Buddhism is rooted in this period's intellectual and societal interests, spurred by a quest for scientific inquiry, philosophical exploration, and a fascination with Asian culture – an influence that continues to shape the exhibition today. A stunning visual display showcases the history of Buddhism and its revival as a living faith on a massive screen at the exhibit's entrance, facing the partial cast of the Sanchi gateway, powerfully underscores the emphasis on showcasing Buddhist practices and philosophies. Meanwhile, a multitude of Hindu gods and goddesses are portrayed with descriptions that

use reductive and inarticulate vocabularies like "seductress" and "bloodthirsty", diminishing their profound significance, often portraying them as barbaric.

Within this colonial context, Buddhism was often aligned closely with Christianity, which was usually deemed superior. The influence of European traditions on Buddhist art became an important reference point in the narrative of Buddhism. In this milieu, the weightage given to the Gandhara art in the exhibition, as opposed to the Mathura School, is particularly striking yet hardly surprising. While the Mathura School was designated as an indigenous Indian development, the Gandhara School of Art has been connected to Greco-Roman traditions. The emphasis on the flourishing of Gandhara art resulting from "the repeated influxes of Western culture to India" perpetuates the narrative of Western hegemony. The continued curiosity about the teachings of Buddhism in Germany, be it the Zen meditation popularized in the 1960s (Baumann 1997, 37) or the recent general upward trend towards accepting Buddhism as a way of living a happy, compassionate life (Walker 2007), is reflected in the exhibition. It can also be discerned in the choice of creating a new replica of the Sanchi Gateway,[26] which is now positioned in front of the Humboldt Forum, juxtaposed against the Baroque façade, symbolizing "the diversity of the world in the centre of Berlin".[27]

In contrast to Buddhism, it is apparent that the case of Hindu sculptures presents a different narrative, one deeply entwined with colonial imaginations. During the colonial period, interpreting Hinduism proved challenging as Hindu art did not conform to classical European tastes. McGetchin has argued that German Indology functioned within a broader Saidian framework, where the study of the Other was intertwined with a desire for control (McGetchin 2009, 22). For the Western viewer, representations of Indian gods not only originated from a specifically Other community, but they also did not conform to Occidental ideals of order and rationality and could not be accommodated in

[26] What is intriguing is the creation of multiple casts of the Sanchi Gateway for the Berlin museums from the 19th century. The site of Sanchi, located in Central India and dating back to 3rd–1st BCE is one of the important sites of Buddhism. The Sanchi gateway has been linked to the museum since the 1880s, when the Ethnological Museum acquired its first replica. British colonial explorers discovering Sanchi in the 19th century sparked widespread interest, leading many European museums to obtain replicas based on Henry Cole's cast. In Berlin, this interest continued, with new replicas created in the 1960s, followed by the most recent one in 2022, placed outside the Humboldt Forum. The Sanchi casts and the representational politics surrounding their continued reproduction in the Berlin museums will be addressed in another paper (Singh and Bhatawadekar, forthcoming).

[27] Das Tor von Sanchi. *The Gate of Sanchi*. Brochure of the Humboldt Forum.

the Christian order of the universe (Ganguly 1988, 46). Mitter identified perspectives that viewed Hindu philosophy and its expression in Hindu idols as abstract and lacking naturalistic representation (Mitter 1977). For instance, the anthropomorphic conception of god, naturalized in the perceptual frameworks of Western viewers, made it difficult for Europeans to deal with the "irrationality" of gods with many arms and heads. The narratives denoting "more than two arms", "multiple heads", and "superhuman abilities" of the Hindu deities, especially the "bloodthirsty Chamunda" as seen in the exhibition, also stem from this colonial discourse revolving around the polytheistic traditions of Indian gods.

According to Indian philosopher Deepak Sarma, the depiction of goddess Kali – characterized by blood sacrifices and her fierce iconographic presentation as "exotic" – has historically been exploited to justify colonization and imperialism (Sarma 2015). He contends that Kali's representation is never innocent, but intended to provoke and challenge. This image of Kali, with its emic and etic archetype, continues to be used in the postcolonial imagination as well. Thus, it is crucial to stress that although labelling the "native" culture as savage does not cause it to disintegrate, the broader impact of "wars of position" fought within dominant/European discourses is the continued fetishization of the primitive (Ganguly 1988, 50). This underscores the ways in which the historical positioning of the investigating subject is embedded within the colonial matrix of power and processes of knowledge production (Ganguly 1988, 46). Such stereotypes and the Western gaze are reinforced in the narratives currently presented in the exhibition in the Humboldt Forum. For instance, the harsh depictions of Hindu gods are often juxtaposed with more benign portrayal of the compassionate Buddhist Avalokiteshvara, while the Tantric aspects of Buddhism are a recondite subject matter. This selective presentation perpetuates a stereotypical framing of Hinduism, reinforcing the colonial gaze. The violence exerted through knowledge, as discussed by Spivak (1988), is evident in the portrayal of these figures. Picture prints of Indian gods and photographs taken by British photographers also allude to this violence, as they often uphold a Western gaze.

The *Courtly Art* exhibition continues to reflect a colonial epistemology. The museum's presentation nurtures an evolutionist perspective, which positions monotheistic religions like Islam as the peak of cultural development. Although the term "Islamic art" references the Islamic religion, religion was not viewed as the main influence on art; rather, cultural and civilizational factors were

predominant, in line with diffusionist theories of an Islamic cultural area. It thus represented a purely formal definition of art, giving it a universal value (Shatanawi 2022, 255). For instance, in the case of Bidri ware, it is designated purely on stylistic criteria in the exhibition, as an Islamic work, regardless of its innovative origins, function, and cultural or spiritual significance. It is also evident in the descriptions of how the Mughals rulers "with their refined lifestyles" and "their longing for civilized nature" created gardens and served as patrons for art. Orientalist imaginaries are conveyed through narratives featuring opulent garden spaces, elegant courtly art, and architecture adorned with evocative plant motifs. The sensual fantasies surrounding the harem, along with the forbidden interactions between non-familial men and veiled women, introduce an element of mystery and intrigue. These themes serve to reinforce Western depictions of the "exotic Other". Such a restricted position, by default, leads to the exclusion of a broader view on Islamic material culture, overlooking its nuanced geo-historical interactions.

This narrative production can be attributed to the larger problem of writing and framing Indian historiography. Testimony to this is the practice initiated by the archaeologist General A. Cunningham (1854), who categorized Indian art into Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Muhammadan periods. Similarly, Scottish historian James Mill wrote *The History of British India*, where the history of Hindus and Muslims was considered to be divided from each other and conflicting (Mill 1817). A case in point is the portrayal of Islamic rulers as an external influence on India, coming from outside India to rule and contribute to Indian art. This shows how German Indologists reinforced colonial stereotypes, much like their British counterparts, particularly in their classification and interpretation of religions. The narratives in the exhibition ignore the multilayered histories and still adhere to this problematic compartmentalization and views supporting structural injustice and patterns of discrimination.

The issue is further compounded by the trajectory of Indian art history, which remains rooted in a colonial context, as Ganguly has already highlighted. The abovementioned categorization was uncritically adopted by many "nationalist" historians in their efforts to promote an ideology of unity in artistic production. Thus, even "nationalist" or "oppositional" histories produced by Indians have had to operate on colonialist turf. By failing to adequately address the heteroglossic nature of artistic traditions in India, this periodizing strategy undermined the nationalist agenda because it fostered simplistic ideas of the "unity" and "true" character of Indian art (Ganguly 1988, 49).

Extending the discussion on the presentation of India, it is crucial to recognize that stereotypes shaped by colonial imagination are not always etic perceptions. Many stereotypes and anxieties from the source regions resonate with, and reinforce, their counterparts in the Western context. Indian art history, deeply rooted in colonialism, has been critiqued, prompting a need for a perspective that embraces pluriversal thought and challenges the dominant narratives. Both dominant and incorporated histories of Indian art, displaying a particular aesthetic sensibility and exemplifying museum practices that, as Ganguly notes, are "ideologically consonant" with colonial discourses (Ganguly 1988, 48). Collaborations with source communities and experts should also be critically examined to avoid perpetuating these stereotypes.

Another important aspect that needs to be unpacked is the reorientation of the exhibition as "religious art", which has guided its narrative. The inclination towards art can be traced historically. In the 19th century, Adolf Bastian considered Indian collections to be separate from other ethnological objects "to be treated through the discipline of 'history', rather than 'ethnology'" (Bastian 1872, in Oswald 2022, 165). It is important to note that a significant portion of the objects in the collections at that time were Buddhist artefacts. The subsequent transformations in the institution, with the formation of the Indian Department in 1904 and the founding of the Museum of Indian Art in 1963, reinforced a shift towards "art", and continues even today. In line with art, the iconographic characteristics are highlighted, engendering aesthetic appreciation. However, the historical-colonial context and the ethnological-archaeological character and complex provenances of the objects remain overshadowed. As the post-ethnological critiques assert, framing the collections as "art" can render the objects "innocent", not directly associated with the discourses of Othering and discrimination. A post-ethnological perspective challenges this approach as problematic, when viewed in the context of decolonization, as it obscures the colonial issues associated with these objects and their collections.

The term "religious art" warrants a closer examination, especially considering its roots in the colonial taxonomies and hierarchical classifications. Displaying sacred objects in the museum context comes with its own challenges, often creating binaries of the secular and sacred, as discussed by Bruce Sullivan (2015). In the case of the Museum of Asian Art, the approach adopted aims to connect the objects to the living faith, echoing the demands of decolonization to refer to and connect to the indigenous knowledge systems. As Tapati Guha-Thakurta states, "In a freshly anthropologizing turn, much of Indian art, like

all of African or Oceanic art or Himalayan Buddhist imagery, is being powerfully re-inscribed within museums as religious icons, with elaborate attempts made by curators to recreate around these objects the performative practices of worship of priests and local communities" (Guha-Thakurta 2007, 157). The unresolved tensions between sacred and aesthetic tropes that surround the contemporary lives of India's art objects, both within and outside the precincts of museums, combined with "the multiple demands of art, authenticity, and popular devotion", lead to ambiguity and fluidity (Guha-Thakurta 2007). In the museum, the classification of objects from Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu traditions as "religious art" contrasts with the labelling of Islamic artefacts as "courtly" or "civilizational". This distinction underscores the challenges of representing Islam in European museums today.

While the Museum of Asian Art has made efforts to shift these Eurocentric narratives through the adoption of decolonial approaches, such as focusing on diversity, shared practices, and collaborations with diaspora and source communities, these strategies fall short of addressing the complexity of India's history, religion, spirituality, and society. The use of notions like diversity remains superficial, failing to fully engage with the nuanced realities of the region. Even the acknowledgement of the long-standing knowledge exchange between countries (e.g., Ravi Varma and his use of German printing technology) does little to challenge the existing power hierarchies within the exhibition's narrative. Despite attempts to bring out the transcultural aspects, such as in the case of an ivory object depicting the "Good Shepherd" or a porcelain plate depicting the German princesses in Indian-styled garments, these remain isolated cases, and are not well integrated into the broader narrative. Additionally, multilayered trajectories of the objects, contested provenances, and stereotyping is not paid heed to in this process. The museum's narratives do not adequately reflect the country's historical course, colonial context, or the shifting geographical borders of India. The resulting narrative is overly simplified, ad hoc, ambivalent, and superficial, failing to capture the complex layers of religion, faith, and societal practices. Other interpretation material, such as the catalogues,[28] audio guides, and even the guided tour through the museum, also largely reinforce this "innocent" narrative.

[28] See for instance, Ausstellungsführer, Humboldt Forum: Ethnologisches Museum; Museum für Asiatische Kunst, 2021.

With reference to the provenance of objects, in both the galleries, the source of acquisition for objects has been mentioned in most cases. However, a detailed provenance research, highlighting the problematic contexts if any, in which the objects were collected, has not been elaborated. Only a single object has been subject to such a detailed inquiry (also see the panel in the exhibition).[29] It highlights the "harmonious situation" resulting in the gift of a Buddhist statue from the King of Afghanistan, Amanullah Khan, to the Berlin collections in 1928. It mentions the role of the French in excavations in Afghanistan at the time, and a 50-50 division of excavated collections between Afghanistan and France. What is foregrounded here is the "peaceful acquisition of objects by museums..." The text in both galleries is bilingual (German and English). In order to connect the objects to the contemporary contexts, photographs have been used, many purchased online via stock image agencies (e.g., Alamy), but no direct collaborations with the source communities are evident in terms of the interpretation material presented. The potential of stories like that of Rajendra Lal Mitra and his role in acquiring the objects for the museum remains untapped.

The *Religious Arts of South Asia* exhibition overall seeks to create a harmonious effect in the viewer's visual experience, as evident from changes made in the placement, staging, and lighting of the objects. For instance, a wall painted in gold stands out as a subtle overture to subvert the construct of a neutral container amidst a white space, designed to accentuate the richness of Buddhism. However, rather than circumventing the "white cube" (O'Doherty 1976), a place free of context, and where time and social space are thought to be excluded, it crystallizes Western cultural hegemony by erasing the colonial past of the objects (Wang 2021). As Shuchen Wang further states, through such a muséographie, the deities of the Other are "elevated" from ethnographic specimen into art in the West while "diminished" from sacred icons into art or historical artefacts in Asia (Wang 2021). Instead of restoring indigenous beliefs or identities, such displays often perpetuate new power struggles.

When comparing the Museum of Asian Art with the exhibitions of the Ethnological Museum on the second floor of the Humboldt Forum, stark contrasts in their presentations become evident. As Rafael Cardoso pointed out, "Whereas its downstairs neighbor is all jumble and darkness — with sleek

[29] em-power relations, a booklet on postcolonial provenance research in the permanent exhibitions of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst at the Humboldt Forum, 2022.

showcases painted in matte black — the Museum of Asian Art is airiness and light. Its panels are colored in cream, gold, white. Its vitrines contain one or a few objects, not dozens. There is room for contemplation, rather than confrontation and prescription. Visitors are made to feel that they are in a cultivated setting, in which the purpose is to view extraordinary objects and appreciate them" (Cardoso 2021). This calls to attention the challenges of perceiving the Indian collections within the decolonial discourse. The exhibition's focus on "art" and its indirect colonial context prioritizes aesthetic appreciation of objects rather than bringing out their multivalence. This approach fails to challenge the hegemonic domains like ethno-orientalism and epistemic violence, as our analysis reveals. Recognizing this shifting perspective, Kavita Singh asserts, "All museums are inherently ethnographic". This awareness and conscious shift foster a deeper understanding of their histories and relationships, acknowledging their transformations and situating them within a transcultural, polyvalent setting.

Conclusion: Towards a Decolonized Future

The collections from Africa, the Americas, Oceania, and Asia present distinct challenges within the postcolonial discourse, reflecting the complexities of representation and ownership. As museums gain increasing prominence in the global cultural landscapes, they are increasingly expected to cater to a diverse global audience. In the era of immigration and multiculturalism, they have evolved into dynamic spaces and have sought to empower communities with the right to represent themselves and express their agency. By acknowledging these evolving roles and the unique challenges posed by their collections, museums can better align their practices with the expectations of a diverse global audience.

Embracing this responsibility and recognizing the diasporic nature of cultural objects, museums could challenge colonial ideologies, foster more inclusive practices, and develop dynamic and reflective curatorial approaches that honour global cultural heritage. Our study insists on the importance of rethinking how cultural institutions like the Humboldt Forum present and interpret non-Western collections within an indirect colonial context.

Integrating the concept of "object diaspora", which views cultural objects as moving across different cultural histories, could help museums move beyond the traditional debates of cultural patrimony. This perspective accentuates the

potential for transcultural dialogue and engagement with contemporary communities, rather than focusing solely on repatriation. Through the "remittance corridors", these objects could create and open up opportunities for mediating experiences of entanglement in a global mediascape, rather than relegating them to superficial roles within Western-centric narratives (Basu 2011).

As custodians of cultural heritage, museums play a pivotal role in shaping how cultural assets are perceived, valued, and preserved. While it grants museums the authority and ability to control narratives, it also presents a significant opportunity for museums to shift their agency. In an effort to foster transparency and openness, the museum could take significant strides by making the histories of its collection more accessible to the public. By acknowledging the agency of the Other and engaging them, for instance, through feedback sessions or public forums where people can ask questions and share their thoughts about the collection and its history, museums can further enhance transparency in the ongoing process of decolonization and post-ethnology within cultural institutions.

While our research provides a critical lens on the colonial legacies within the Humboldt Forum's Indian collections, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Our focus has been on the narratives constructed by the museum and their broader sociopolitical implications, but we have not explored the perceptions and experiences of visitors. Understanding how these narratives are received and interpreted by the public is crucial for a comprehensive analysis. This points to the need for further research that investigates visitor experiences, which could offer valuable insights into how museums can better engage with diverse audiences and contribute to more inclusive cultural networks.

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