

The National Museum of India: A Museum to and of the Nation

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More than any other type of museum, a national museum provides its publics with a theatre for presenting the ultimate act of the modern era, namely the performances of citizenship and nationhood. In this paper, I will explore the founding of the National Museum of India as a colonial institution, and follow its development as a national symbol through the 1950s. Given the colonial framework for the museum's original conception, including its site, the physical development of its collections, as well as their intellectual meanings, how did the National Museum come to symbolize the national aspirations of the postcolonial Indian government? How did museum objects that were collected and categorically assigned to the imperial canons of Indian art history shift in meaning to assume a national significance, associated with cultural pride, heritage and modernity? These questions epitomize the complexity of the museum as an experimental zone of the postcolonial era, working to consistently reproduce itself as a national symbol, its public as citizens, and its culture as modern.

When one visits the National Museum of India, the experience is different than at any other museum in India. The route to the museum usually involves taking a bus or auto rickshaw past some of the country's most important monuments dedicated to the federal government and its imagined nation. Glimpses of the President's House (Rashtrapati Bhavan), the Parliament House, India Gate Memorial archway, government meeting halls and ministerial offices, the National Archives and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts help to build a visual crescendo of political authority that culminates at the entrance of the institution. At the National Museum of India, there is an opportunity for the public to come closer to the official operation of the state than at any other government monument in the country. In this space, the "nation" surveys its subjects and its authority is confirmed through their reciprocal and legitimizing gazes.

Just beyond the regal lion balustrades that frame the National Museum's wide staircase, guards clad in khaki security uniforms flank the main entrance and pat down each visitor individually as bags are placed on conveyor belts and screened through x-ray machinery. These guards help to underscore the authority and legitimacy of the museum's mandate and its containment of officially sanctioned narratives. They foreground the contents of the institution—mostly South Asian objects dating from the third millennium BCE to the nineteenth century—and remind visitors of the museum's status as a guardian of "national treasures."

Inside the museum, these narratives take shape as visitors are greeted by a rotunda lined with red sandstone sculptures depicting voluptuous *yakshis* surrounding a stone sculpture of the Hindu solar deity Surya (figures 1; a,b). Some of these *yakshis*, feminized nature divinities, are portrayed with children and entwined within organic foliate environments. These idealized mother figures invoke an appropriate frame for the national collection, foregrounding a nation state that is often feminized in popular rhetoric as the "Mother". The physical presence of Indian visitors in this landscape at the political heart of the nation renders them active participants in the museum's history-sanctified narratives, and offers a vision of Indian identity and citizenship as long as they are prepared to partake in the institution's carefully orchestrated rituals. Walking through these sculptures across the foyer towards the ticket office, the nation's "children" or citizens are thus affirmed. Referents to worlds outside of this liminal sphere are blocked out; the only natural light in the museum streams in from windows that face inward onto a central courtyard filled with plants and stone sculptures. Paralleling the experience of entering a temple, which enables worshippers to physically and consciously leave the mundane world behind as they embrace the spiritual realm, the outside contexts of the museum immediately give way to a temporal space of suspended time.¹

The National Museum's vision of itself is likewise self-contained and self-perpetuating, reflecting the interpretations of its creators (past and present), rather than its publics. It is the product of lingering epistemologies from the nineteenth century and disparate political and social ones from the twentieth. Through its nearly sixty-year career, it has distinguished itself as a testing ground of modern government ideologies for visually working out and through the entanglements of a new nation-state. More than any other type of museum, a national museum provides a theatrical space for presenting the ultimate act of the modern era, namely the performances of citizenship and nationhood. In this essay, I will briefly explore how the stage for these performances was formed in the early days of the National Museum—from its conception in 1912, to its founding in 1949—and transfer to its current building in 1960. By tracing the early life of the National Museum of India, I will not only suggest how the

1 See Carol Duncan, *Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. (London, 1996) for an extensive discussion about ritual and temporality in public museum spaces.

European model has been used and transformed over the twentieth century in India, but also how India's challenges to refine and redefine the National Museum offer alternative models and strategies for thinking about national museums in the rest of the world.

New Delhi's Central National Museum of Art, Archaeology and Anthropology was conceived under colonial rule in 1912, when it existed as a blueprint in the minds of the country's imperial administrators. As an encyclopedic homage to British knowledge, the national museum in India was a critical mark of European ownership and was intended to help define an intellectual domain both in the colony and the metropole based on the legitimacy of imperial power. Following Indian Independence in 1947, plans for the institution were literally passed off to the new nationalist government, where it was subsequently reconstituted as the National Museum of India within the Indian Republic. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, regarded the National Museum as a place where Indians would take pride in their pasts, unite, and be inspired to move together into their future. Given the colonial framework for the museum's original conception, including its site, the physical development of its collections, as well as their intellectual meanings, how did the National Museum come to symbolize the national aspirations of the postcolonial Indian government? How did museum objects that were collected and categorically assigned to the imperial canons of Indian art history shift in meaning to assume a national significance, associated with cultural pride, heritage and modernity? These questions are at the heart of much of my work; this paper provides an entry point of analysis by tracing the status of the National Museum as an instrument of both imperial and nationalist agendas.

As Susan Stewart has noted in her dual portrayal of the souvenir and the collection, the past is at the service of the collection and lends it authenticity, while the object, perceived as isolated and individual, lends authenticity and legitimacy to the past.² The practice of inscribing history within the museum and of thus authenticating its collections with narratives of the past occurs with complete freedom and authority in a designated national museum. Groups of objects legitimize a museum narrative while they are simultaneously legitimized by their collective historicity. This process is critical to consider in light of the National Museum of India, where the transition of imperial *objects* of study to a national *collection* of symbolic heritage was perhaps its greatest feat, and could only be accomplished by the detachment of objects from the historicity of their specific regional and local contexts, and reinserted into a monument dedicated to a national, all-embracing vision of the country. In other words, the museumized Indian object that art historians lament today, which is decontextualized from its location, religion, art history and/or political and social histories, was part of a critical practice to redefine that object as part of a national collection and seemingly to cast off the webs of the imperial project of knowledge production in India.

Also intrinsic to this move was the negotiation between broad epistemic categories of "art" and "archaeology" that became the uneven grounds on which a collective identity attempted construction at the National Museum. Indeed this identity was fostered within the dual displacement and continual recasting of both designations. The institution's opening decade of collection and definition highlights the instability of these historic disciplinary knowledges in Indian museums following Independence. Art, archaeology, and to a lesser extent, anthropology, are particularly critical points of enunciation of a national identity. While the National Museum provides insight into the privileging of the category of "art" over archaeology as a designation that denotes modernity and progression, the category of "archaeology" continues to serve the museum's collections and negotiates a certain historical

2 Ibid, 151.

space within the national narratives of its galleries, referencing its imperial origins while recasting them in the context of a modernized collective heritage for the nation-state.

Constructing a Colonial Institution

In 1912, as the British Government prepared to shift their capital from Calcutta to Delhi, the National Museum found its way onto a proposed city map. The earliest imagining of the museum had its roots in the plans of architect and city planner Edwin L. Lutyens, as part of Lutyens' and Herbert Baker's designs to transform the site of Raisina Hill (the elevated pinnacle of the city's "Central Vista" area) into the governmental locus of New Delhi.³ Under British possession since 1803, Delhi had become a shell of its former Mughal dynastic glory. Unlike the ad hoc construction that had accompanied the growth of the Raj from commercial to political force in Calcutta since 1774, Delhi provided the ideal domain for the planned composition of a new capital city. It legitimized the heights of British power by usurping the location of Mughal rule and provided a more geographically advantageous political and strategic center than Calcutta.⁴ The National Museum was envisioned for the middle of this new city as part of an intellectual and cultural plaza shared with the Oriental Institute, the National Library and the Imperial Record office—all monuments dedicated to the collection of imperial knowledge in India.⁵ They were designed to punctuate the transportation route through the Central Vista, up to the imposing new Viceroy's House and its flanking Secretariat buildings, completing the picture of an unyielding government that measured its strength in the accumulation, organization, and categorization of the colony.

The importance of the National Museum as a symbolic monument at this early stage is best noted within its landscaped site. James Duncan has argued that the landscape is one of the central elements in a cultural system, "for as an ordered assemblage of objects, a text, it acts as a signifying system through which a social system is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored."⁶ The meaning of landscape is constituted in its carefully designed vernacular of signs, symbols, icons and monuments. Taking advantage of the absolute power acquired by the Raj in Delhi after the exile of the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah in 1858, the design for the new city reflected the ideals of settled authority and the overt legitimacy of rule.⁷

The encoded narrative of the Central Vista landscape was framed within the cultural system of imperial dominance and specifically, intellectual dominance. As a symbolic monument of the imperial project, destined to be reborn later as a monument to the national image, the museum's perceived importance was structured within these initial aims of its central government and within the careful assemblage of its landscaped site. In government circles, distinctions were drawn from the country's largest imperial museums at Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay,⁸ which were significantly not aligned with local monuments of government. Lutyens' inclusion of the National Museum in one of the earliest plans for the political hub of New Delhi indicates that the museum was envisioned as instrumental in

3 Robert Grant Irving, *Indian Summer: Lutyens, Baker, and Imperial Delhi* (New Haven, 1981); Andreas Volwahn, *Imperial Delhi: The British Capital of the Indian Empire* (New York, 2002).

4 Irving 1981, 8.

5 Razia Grover (ed). *Concepts and Responses: International Architectural Design Competition for the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts* (Ahmedabad, 1992), 16.

6 James S. Duncan, *The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1990) 17.

7 Irving 1981, 4.

8 These museums are the Indian Museum, Calcutta (1814); Government Museum, Madras (1851); and the Prince of Wales Museum (Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya), Bombay (1914).

establishing a dramatic built environment that rivaled the best of Indian historic architecture and assumed a natural place within the legacy of grandiose imperial building in the region.

Lutyens' plans for New Delhi are often compared to Haussmann's plans for Paris or L'Enfant's Washington; from the hub of the Viceroy's House at the top of Raisina Hill, he created a radiating series of linear routes that cut through the city and were managed visually by punctuating structures designed to produce strong visual climaxes at key historical and contemporary sites.⁹ The focal point of this network of arteries was The Government or Viceroy's House (later renamed Rashtrapati Bhavan) at the top of King's Way parkway that extended in one direction, linking the Connaught Place commercial center to the 17th-century Jami Masjid (Congregational Mosque) and Lal Qila (Red Fort) of Shahjahanabad. Crossing the parkway was Queen's Way, which linked the new railway station in the north with an Anglican cathedral on the south. This comprised a ceremonial route from the railway station to the intersection of Queen's Way and King's Way and west to Government House. On the east/west axis from the heart of this intersection, the route from Government House extended to the Purana Qila (Old Fort) from the sixteenth century, completing the visual lineage of power between past Mughal and present British rulers in the city that was reinforced with a self-conscious architectural vocabulary in the new imperial buildings.¹⁰ The only planned buildings within the vista were located at the climatic node of the King and Queen's Way crossing and were designed to be embraced by the panoptic view from the Viceroy's court.¹¹ Vision was owned by and radiated from its prominent hill location, taking in the Oriental Institute and Museum, a National Museum, National Library, and Imperial Record Office, although these structures varied in other drafts of the plans that included a War Museum, Ethnological Museum and Medical Institute and Museum.¹² The navel of the city was constructed from the seat of the Viceroy whose first gaze encompassed the museumized quadrant of collected knowledge and "encyclopedic totality".¹³ Of these structures, only the Record Office (now the National Archives) was realized in Lutyens' time; the National Museum made an appearance at the site almost forty years later.

Prior to the First World War, an organizational scheme for the museum had already been drawn up in conjunction with plans for the proposed Ethnological and Oriental Research Institutes, and the Imperial Delhi Committee had demarcated its site. The expenditures of the war, however, ultimately prevented the plan from attaining parliamentary approval, leaving the National Museum as an abandoned monument that existed only on paper.¹⁴ It was not until the mid 1940s that the cause of the museum once again peaked interest from the government. In November 1944, the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, with the backing of the Anthropological Society of Bombay, addressed the Government of India again recommending the establishment of a National Museum of Indian Archeology, Art, and Anthropology at New Delhi.¹⁵ It is possible that the idea for a National Museum resurfaced in response to the

9 Irving 1981, 83; Grover 1992, 16.

10 Irving 1981, 73.

11 Foucault's model of the panoptic vision is useful to consider within this constructed landscape as the radiating roads from Raisina Hill were clearly metaphors for the surveillance—and omnipotent vision—of the central government imposed on "unseeing" colonial subjects. This metaphor was also seamlessly incorporated into Nehru's national model that encouraged control of the regions from the central political base of Delhi. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York, 1995).

12 Ibid; Kavita Singh, "Capital Ideas?" *ArtIndia*, vol. 8 (2) (2003), 56.

13 Singh 2003, 56.

14 I. D. Mathur 2002, 7.

15 Government of India, "Establishment of a National Museum of Art, Archaeology and Anthropology – Selection of site for building and securing of temporary accommodation" *Ministry of Education Report* (New Delhi, 1950).

mounting pressures of decolonization on the British government. In an attempt to hang on to any declining images of control in India, the museum may have re-presented itself again in the 1940s as a necessary and urgent symbol of enduring empire. Following government recommendations which were marked by the particular initiative of Sir Mortimer Wheeler (Director General of Archaeology between 1944–48), the Gwyer committee, led by Sir Maurice Gwyer, former Chief Justice of India and Vice Chancellor of Delhi University, was organized in 1945 to lay out some of the investigative ground work for the new institution.

The immediacy granted to the project of the National Museum suggested an increasing anxiety about the British situation in India and the National Museum's potential role in providing a useful symbol of benevolent rule and knowledge. The Gwyer report was released in 1946 on the cusp of Independence and recommended that two keepers ("one representing Anthropology, the other, a Muslim") be appointed immediately and sent overseas for tours of the "best museums" in Great Britain and America.¹⁶ Significantly, this report highlights a critical shift in the conception of the museum from the original vision of Lutyens. The policy of sending curators overseas for training had never been suggested in an Indian museum before, so it seems that even for this second wave of proponents of the National Museum, its role in India was intended to operate differently than its predecessors. In the eyes of the Gwyer committee, the National Museum came to represent something beyond the 1912 paper incarnation, composed when the empire was at its peak and envisioned within a landscape of monuments commemorating an enduring colonial rule. By the early 1940s, prevailing nationalist voices argued that the British had failed in their attempts to bring modern and technological development to India.¹⁷ In this context, the museum was viewed as a means to shore up the diminishing power of the empire and act as an evidentiary reminder to the public of how progressive and modern imperial rule had become in India.

The language surrounding the Gwyer proposal spoke to the sudden exigency of this mandate. Gwyer's committee determined that the museum was of the "highest priority" and explained that it was crucial to the salvaging of "local arts and crafts" that were "rapidly disappearing".¹⁸ An increasing European market for Indian objects may certainly have fueled this complaint of disappearing objects, but instead, it is more likely that what was actually disappearing was the strength of the empire, and with it, the immediate plans to realize the Gwyer committee's vision of New Delhi's National Museum. Vitaly distinct from other museums in India, which had been initiated out of necessity by archaeological surveyors as early as the eighteenth century, as vessels to support and store the fruits of scholarly research, it is clear that even at this early stage, the National Museum was conceived as a symbolic presence and a monument to a certain image of authority. As a testament designed to commemorate power and knowledge, its intrinsic symbolism made the institution imminently available for appropriation by the new Indian Republic. After 1947, the grand buildings of the Central Vista, which formed the core of the British government in India, were quickly appropriated by Nehru's administration; their meanings shifted overnight to become the heart of the new India.

16 Ibid, 8. While beyond the parameters of this work, it is fascinating to note the relevant criteria for keepers listed in the Gwyer Report and consider why a religious designation was paralleled with academic qualifications.

17 Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, 1999), 188.

18 Sir Maurice Gwyer (chair), "Central National Museum of Art, Archaeology and Anthropology: Report of the Gwyer Committee" *Government of India Report* (New Delhi, 1946), 8.

The National Museum: Building a Mythology of Art, Archeology and Nation

In her book *Monuments, Objects and Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, Tapati Guha-Thakurta provides an analysis of the 1948 *Exhibition of Indian Art* held at New Delhi's Government House that eventually formed the locus of the collections at the National Museum.¹⁹ The objects on display were selected originally for a 1947 exhibition in London at Burlington House in cooperation with India's Central Asian Antiquities Museum and Archaeological Survey. Taking the lead from the London organizers, objects were amassed from state and archaeological museums all over India, as well as from private collections. The exhibition spectacle was designed to mark the transfer of power in British India and was promoted as a comprehensive presentation of South Asian "masterpieces" prior to the subsequent division of the region. Drawing on both imperial and nationalist canonic art narratives, of unsurprising emphasis in the exhibition were stone objects produced during the Mauryan empire (fourth–second century BCE), Buddhist sculpture from Mathura and Gandhara dating to the Kushan dynasty (first–third century CE), Gupta (third–sixth century CE) and Chola (ninth–thirteenth century CE) Hindu stone and bronze sculptures, and Mughal paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁰

When the consignment of objects returned to New Delhi in August 1948, the Governor-General of India, C. Rajagopalachari, provided the staterooms of the Government House for their storage. Officials from the Archaeological Survey were subsequently charged with the task of organizing a similar presentation in New Delhi between November sixth and December thirty first of that year.²¹ In practice, the presentation was not similar at all. While the British exhibition received little fanfare, the Indian version was orchestrated as a grand state event, carefully surveyed by the offices of the Prime Minister of India, as well as the Ministries of Education and Information and Broadcasting. The exhibition generated much local excitement and, in a city with few public spaces that transgressed class divisions, it was promoted as a public show for every Indian and was reportedly attended by citizens from all sectors of society.²² In 1949, following this successful Indian incarnation of the London show, the National Museum was officially founded in the staterooms of the Government House, employing the Durbar Hall (Imperial Throne Room) as the central exhibition space for stone sculptures, identified in the accompanying catalogue as "masterpieces" (figure 2). Separate galleries for terra-cottas, Central Asian "antiquities," and a pre/proto historic presentation were later created, as well as a more extensive display of manuscripts and an exhibit demonstrating the development of Indian scripts.²³ As Guha-Thakurta notes, the 1948 presentation is often skipped over quickly in narratives of the National Museum, but her careful and deliberate reading demonstrates that the museum was the most natural outcome of its "nationalized" display.²⁴

The Government House exhibition in New Delhi marks one additional step in the process towards a National Museum, whose details and conceptual scheme had already been laid out

19 Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York, 2004).

20 Leigh Ashton, *Exhibition of Art, Chiefly from the Domains of India and Pakistan* (London, 1947); Tapati Guha-Thakurta 2004; Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Instituting the Nation in Art" in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-State* (New Delhi, 1998); V. S. Agrawala, *Exhibition of Indian Art*, catalogue (New Delhi, 1948).

21 Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Marking Independence: The Ritual of an Art Exhibition" *Journal of Art and Ideas* 30 (31), 1997; and V. S. Agrawala 1948.

22 Staff reporter, "Art Exhibition Opened by Governor-General, An Inspiration for the Future" *Statesman*, Nov. 7, 1948.

23 National Museum of India, *A Guide to the Galleries of the National Museum of India*, (New Delhi, 1956).

24 Guha-Thakurta 2004, 179.

prior to Independence. This was not an insignificant step, as it enabled the unique pre-Independence goals of the museum to be recast in terms of the Indian nation with the full support of the Nehruvian government. Indeed, the importance of the exhibition and its role in subsequently conditioning the “national collection” can be measured in visits from Nehru who attended the exhibition at least four times during its run, and in the rhetoric of the open and free public spectacle that accompanied the show.²⁵

One pointed feature of the exhibition was the designation of certain objects in the collection as evidence of “archaeology” whereas others were qualified as “art”. Each category involved a distinct mode of display and specific lexicon in the catalogue descriptions. This duality continues in the National Museum to the present day and can be read as a significant sign of tension within this critical transition from colonial to national. If India itself had been constructed by its colonial rulers as an ancient, unchanging culture—as a living archaeological artifact—then the new nation sought to define itself not through its staid archaeology, but rather through its sophisticated art. And yet, it was only through the evidence of archeology that India could point to an extended historic civilization of culture and sophistication. Gyan Prakash has characterized the newly formed Indian state as an entity that was both archaic and modern at the same time, “neither one nor the other, but formed in the displacement of both.”²⁶ The National Museum is a true articulation of this displacement and (re)characterization of both epistemes shaping postcolonial conceptions of how the nation would define itself through art and archaeology vernaculars.

Although the visual archive is sparse, an examination of some of the actual makeshift gallery spaces in the Rashtrapati Bhavan reinforces this argument that the actual exhibition was a mix of both formal art techniques of display and archaeological modes of presenting the evidentiary remains of hoards. The sculpture gallery in the Durbar Hall, for instance, featured stone sculptures isolated from each other on singular pedestals surrounded by adequate viewing room denoting the appreciation of each art object individually (figure 2). Other galleries, such as in the Deccan Room, featured displays in the form of colonial “trophy cases” designed to present an amassed group of arms, armor, manuscripts and textiles arranged by size and shape for an overall aesthetic tableau of the “souvenir” that referenced archaeological and natural history displays common in imperial museums (figure 3).²⁷ Groups of small, “pre-historic,” objects displayed together in cases clearly derived meaning as part of an archaeological hoard, rather than art objects for individual evaluation, thus highlighting the art historical hierarchies inherent in these types of displays (figure 4). Indeed, this hierarchical display reveals a tension within the collection that continued in the later incarnation of the National Museum in the 1960s and 70s, where Central Asian and Harappan archaeological galleries featured groups of unidentified relics buttressing stone and bronze art galleries designed for singular examined gazing and appreciation.

This archaeology/art dichotomy also exposed the underlying social hierarchy left by the retreating colonial systems. Lectures by prominent Indian and European art historians accompanied the exhibition; they encouraged the reading of objects as “art,” but their talks were aimed primarily at an English audience—only three of the fourteen lectures were provided in Hindi.²⁸ It is critical to keep in mind that nationalism and its progressive rhetoric selectively chose its audiences and its citizens. Despite this underlying meta-narrative, the exhibition was promoted to and apparently attended by a wide swath of the middle classes in India. This poses interesting questions about the institutional conceptions of a public and the

25 V.S. Agrawala, “Exhibition of Indian Art,” *The Journal of Indian Museums*, 5 (Bombay, 1949) 27.

26 Prakash 1999, 199.

27 I take Susan Stewart’s characterization of the “souvenir” in this instance: Stewart 1999, 132.

28 Agrawala 1948, viii.

embedded quality of class hierarchies within governmental definitions of a national identity. Nehru's intellectual sense of citizenship was particularly engaged with an influential Soviet museum model of mass ownership that called for art and archaeology to be stripped of its bourgeois nature so that "the people" could claim museum objects for themselves. If Independence was Nehru's revolution, the National Museum was a critical symbol around which to rally the masses and construct a collective identity based on this freedom from colonial governance and potential to rewrite Indian history.²⁹ Admission fees were charged only on Saturdays so that the general public would be able to participate in this performance of viewing and reclaiming the narratives of their national collection.³⁰ Now that the Central Vista had effectively been reclaimed and recast as an Indian navel of the nation within the heart of the former imperial "landscape of domination,"³¹ the ground had been laid for a National Museum building that would further build on these claims of sovereignty. As a monument to the new nationalized status of Indian heritage objects, records indicate that officials hoped its messages of history and beauty would calm and connect with the general populace as it sought to embody them.³²

Yet the nature of modernity in the political reconstruction of India meant that the term "national" would remain an ambiguous and ill-defined category at the museum. Even at its outset, the National Museum inclined towards the attraction of an elite and foreign audience rather than the general local masses, undermining in practice the Soviet models that appealed on a conceptual level to the Indian government. Embedded within the very structures of this new public museum was the belief of the Ministry of Education that the museum should be located in a "central place" that specifically attracted "scholars not only from India, but from abroad also....". Said Tara Chand, Secretary to the Minister of Education in 1950, "The presence of the Capital of Foreign Embassies and the members of the Constituent Assembly whose discussions attract a large number of visitors, makes New Delhi the ideal place for locating such a museum."³³ This contradiction within the definition of a proper museum audience highlighted the ambiguity that surrounded the meanings of the Delhi institution at its inception. The consciousness of a foreign gaze on the museum was certainly part of these initial foundational plans. Later comments from other officials at the National Museum advocated the production of English museum catalogues because they showed "the world what India had to offer".³⁴

Was the National Museum dedicated to the instruction and construction of a citizenry; a controlled image of the state designed to appeal to elite expectations of a modern society; or was its evidentiary nature conceived more as a means to prove to the world that India was deserved of an international profile? It is significant that this latter framing of the museum is distinct from the concerns of European public museums in the post-war period, whose goals of educating the public, while political in nature, were designed predominantly to impress

29 For a further discussion of how Soviet museums were regarded as models in India see: Ajit Mookerjee, *Museum Studies* (Calcutta, 1945); Oksana Tamulina, "Museum and Society in the USSR" *Indian Museum Bulletin* (July 1966) 47-50.

30 Government of India, "Establishment of a National Museum of Art, Archaeology and Anthropology: Preparation of a modified graduated scheme" *Government of India report* (New Delhi, 1950).

31 Irving 1981.

32 Letter from Dr. N.P. Chakravarti, Director General of Archaeology to Dr. Tara Chand, Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Education (16/2/49) 3.

33 Government of India, "Establishment of a National Museum of Art, Archaeology and Anthropology" *Government of India report* (New Delhi, 1950).

34 V. S. Agrawala, "Problems and Trends in Museology" *Cultural Forum* special number on museology (New Delhi, 1967), 22.

inwardly upon a local populace rather than the watching world.³⁵ India's National Museum was a fertile ground upon which the Indian elite and its Nehruvian government attempted to map "India" after its Western masters. That is, *after* the era of colonial rule; but also *after* in the sense that development strategies of the new Indian government sought to emulate certain characteristics of the universal modern as the products of choice rather than the oppressive tactics of colonial rule.³⁶ But even within these choices, the concerns of Independent India were so divergent from their European counterparts that the model of the National Museum could only have come from the wholly Indian conditions of colonialism, the relatively rapid rise of nationalist self-government and the demand to imagine a united Indian identity so that India could assume a solid presence on the world stage. While contemporary western concerns about the museum are necessary to consider, they are altogether inadequate for understanding the unique context of Indian museology in the modern era. The role of the legitimizing gaze from outside the country in framing the national image is just one element that highlights this condition.

Government officials further reinforced the primacy of the museum's symbolic impact as they announced the importance of the 1948 exhibition to the masses through the media. Perhaps the words of Nehru that were broadcast on All India Radio on the night prior to the opening of the *Exhibition of Indian Art* indicate best what was truly at stake in the regeneration of objects as symbolic signs of the nation,

One finds that whenever a nation is great or the people are great, they are creative. Whenever their greatness passes away, their creative instinct passes away and they become servile imitators of the past. The history of India shows this well enough. *We were great and the evidence of this greatness is in this exhibition and other works of ancient times*³⁷ [my italics].

The assertion that this assemblage of objects representing the entire country proved that "we were great" demonstrated the metonymical activation of the collection as each object stood in for a citizen, whose body commemorated the same "great" past, and "belonged" to a shared national destiny. The evidentiary nature of the museum objects would dually impress upon an Indian citizenry as well as a legitimizing global audience. Nehru's words also point to the key means by which objects in the National Museum—those from the 1948 exhibition that would form the core of the collection and those that would be collected *en masse* throughout the 1950s—would be forever distinguished from those in any other museum in India.

Building a Collection

Even before the close of the Delhi exhibition on the thirty-first of March, it had been decided by government officials that the Rastrapati Bhavan was not a suitable venue for a museum. Among other things, they cited poor lighting and unstable floors as particularly disagreeable features for galleries.³⁸ But more than these factors, the initial plans for a separate museum called for an "entirely new building...on the lines of progressive museums abroad" indicating the intention of its founders to impress a sign of progressive modernity on the Central Vista

35 Brandon Taylor, *Art for the Nation: Exhibitions and the London Public 1747-2001* (New Brunswick, 1999).

36 Vikramaditya Prakash, *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier: The Struggle for Modernity in PostColonial India* (Seattle; London, 2002) 5.

37 *Ibid*, 11.

38 Letter from Dr. N.P. Chakravarti, Director General of Archaeology to Dr. Tara Chand, Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Education (16/2/49); Government of India, "Establishment of a National Museum of Art, Archaeology and Anthropology – selection of the site for building" *Ministry of Education report* (New Delhi, 1950).

landscape.³⁹ The nationalist city planners immediately returned to the 1912 plans of Lutyens and the National Museum was earmarked to shift from the Government House, around the corner to Lutyens' original Queen's Way (renamed Janpath after Independence, or "The People's Way") location. Still, the museum was promoted as an entirely new endeavor of the Indian government that paralleled the finest institutions in the world. Much was made of the fact that city officials called upon European "experts" to approve and confirm both architectural and lighting plans for the institution.⁴⁰ Correspondence between the Department of Archaeology and the Ministry of Education regarding the need for an alternative site echoed the urgency voiced earlier in the Gwyer report, although the meaning behind this urgency had changed significantly within the context of a post-1947 open market that suddenly gave major Indian collectors access to a global arena of buyers. In addition to building a heraldic architectural symbol of modernity and national pride to house the National Museum, the Indian government was eager to keep its "newly (re)discovered" treasures in the country.

With the eventual construction of the new museum building in mind (a project that would see city officials eventually laying the museum's foundation stone in 1955), a widespread government mandate for collection was immediately instituted along with the instigation of an Art Purchase Committee made of members of the Central Advisory Board of Archaeology.⁴¹ The committee was varyingly staffed with a handful of archaeologists and art historians from India's major museums as well as government officials from the Ministry of Education. This first wave of collecting for the National Museum, which extended between 1948 and 1952, drew heavily on these scholars' contacts, artistic interests and personal relationships with private collectors. Funding for mass collecting was granted by Parliament from 1947; although no guidelines for the types of objects to be collected seem to have ever been laid out officially.⁴² Documentation regarding the exact conditions of employing these early collectors is scant, but it seems they were "voluntary" positions that were called for by the central government, strongly encouraging regional governments to volunteer their "experts" for the national cause.

Although costs associated with art purchases for the National Museum had to be approved by the Ministries of Education and Finance, each collector's report indicated their confidence in selecting objects worthy of the National Museum, and indeed their selections were never challenged. Collecting was guided by the proposed departments of Historic Archaeology, Art, Pre-historic archaeology, Numismatics, Epigraphy and Anthropology, as well as by the individual interests of collectors.⁴³ The historical parameters of objects continued the ancient dynastic privileging seen in the 1948 exhibition; Indian objects from the twentieth century were not considered. In examining the disjointed and ill-recorded records during this period, there is an undeniable frenetic energy that seems to emanate from the early lists of acquisitions as they trace the movements of these few National Museum collectors from Delhi to Calcutta and Bombay, but also to Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bharatpur, Amritsar, Patan, Agra and Gwalior, revealing a focused terrain of the former princely abodes of Northern

39 Ibid.

40 Two of these "experts" may have been William Archer from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and Lawrence Harrison from the Metropolitan Museum, New York. Interviews with former curators of the National Museum of India (New Delhi, 2003).

41 Government of India, "National Museum of Art, Archaeology and Anthropology - purchase of antiquities" *Ministry of Education report* (New Delhi, 1948).

42 Government of India, "Memorandum for the Standing Committee of Parliament on Education: Establishment of a National Museum of Art, Archaeology and Anthropology" *Ministry of Education report* (New Delhi, 1950).

43 Government of India, *Indian Museums Review 1957-58*, (New Delhi: 1958) 19.

India. It should be recalled that these princely families, from disparate kingdoms, were considered symbolically autonomous from the nation state and received privy purses from the government until the 1970s. Thus, the government's call to the former maharajahs to contribute to the "nation" was largely met with indifference and skepticism. The purely constructed nature of national unity – and the government's task of imagining India into being as a collective force with a shared future could not be better articulated than through the National Museum, its primary lens of the national vision.

What is made abundantly clear in these early acquisitions is the lack of focused amassment, the lack of verification of material, and the tremendous degree to which the entire, or near entire, collections from private houses were purchased in their totality. "Lump sums" were regularly requested by the Ministry in order to purchase whole private collections. Thus, the core of the National Museum's collections was very much contingent on and shaped by the personal tastes of mainly wealthy Indian families who, unusually, had amassed or inherited objects at a time when European items dominated the definitions of aesthetics and Indian objects were barely admired for their artistic value. Indeed, the prices paid by the National Museum collectors for some of these items were so low, one wonders about the value they held for the private collecting families by the mid 20th century.⁴⁴ Only in the registry books do the local provenances of objects come alive through their association with specific collectors. These transitions from private to public, and from personal object to national collection, are articulated in this distinction between the publicly viewed label and privately viewed acquisition registry, but they are also metaphors for the building of the nation and the process of arbitrarily selecting personal or distinct regional histories and reshaping them to speak for an image of the nation as a whole.

As the National Museum's collecting committee was comprised of seasoned connoisseurs and scholars including Moti Chandra, Karl Khandalavala and Rai Krishnadasa, it seems likely that the random nature of their collecting was in part due to this practice of purchasing near complete private collections. One might ask again about the capacity of the National Museum to be *national* and serve the cultural needs of the whole nation at this early date when its contents relied on the collecting principles in private cabinets of India's gentlemanly patrons. Could the National Museum ever truly represent the entirety of its class and ethnic diversity when its core collections were contingent on the personal tastes of the regional elite?⁴⁵ Meanings directly linked to an assemblage, such as the "Jalan collection of jades," the "Tarapore collection of coins," "Vyas collection of Muslim coins" and the "Verrier Elwin collection of anthropological objects"⁴⁶ became standardized descriptive terms in the museum, indicating how large personal groups of objects were embraced by the museum as collective wholes and granted artistic or archaeological legitimacy from the attached names of the benevolent elite or princely families. It is also possible that the relative financial freedom allotted to the amassment of these objects and therefore the opportunity to secure them from leaving the country would have particularly appealed to these nationalist scholars. In their urgency to justify the government's interest in the National Museum, they perhaps sought to gather quickly the accoutrements of a national collection, which later could be culled within the security of an established institution.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the colonial legacy of World

44 For example, collectors often purchased paintings in the early 20th century by weight because their individual costs were next to nothing. Interview with Anand Krishna (New Delhi; Benares: 2003).

45 Similar questions are raised in Carol Duncan, "Putting the 'Nation' in London's National Gallery" *Studies in the History of Art* 47, 1996.

46, P. Venkatasubbiah, Chair. *Estimates Committee Report* (New Delhi, 1967) 2.

47 Government of India, "Establishment of a National Museum of Art, Archaeology and Anthropology: Preparation of a Modified Graduated Scheme" *Ministry of Education report* (New Delhi, 1950).

Expositions and Fairs, “multi-purpose” museums like the Indian Museum in Calcutta, and the more recent participation in the “comprehensive” Burlington House exhibition also helped to devise a collecting framework based on years of claiming “India” as a totality of culture and religion in the context of its visual masterpieces.⁴⁸ These practices fostered the expectation that the National Museum *could* represent the entirety of India, if only collected properly. Certainly this belief that a monolithic, or “5,000 year”, Indian heritage had the potential to be placed on display was a descendent of this imperial history of cultural representation and the practices of visually “summing up” the colony.⁴⁹

During this period, the geographic centrality of the National Museum was a critical metaphor for the new capital and helped to activate the Central Vista space as a vital national landscape that literally transformed the museum objects as they were acquisitioned. The Nehruvian image of a centralized government that radiated outwards, feeding and supporting the regions, was echoed by the very process of collecting in the new National Museum and indeed, it was Nehru’s belief that the museum should become a place of national “pilgrimage”.⁵⁰ By 1950, the Central Vista landscape was already a galvanized space of national performance and pilgrimage as the location of the first Republic Day parade. Sprawled in front of the Government House, the grassy fields and deep ponds with rental boats were encouraged as public spaces of activity that transcended class and caste barriers, and so commemorated the formation of the national citizen as they participated in the autonomous claiming of this charged landscape.⁵¹ The National Museum added to this activation of national sentiment, playing the role of an Indian monument whose contents collectively performed and reenacted the historical narratives of the nation. The actual act of Independence was so mired in violence and psychological displacement that the making of symbolic monuments and spaces dedicated to a perception of national unity were tangible signs of stability at last. As Vikramatitya Prakash has noted, “one can sense that the hubris of independence must have been invested with gusto in an attempt to nullify the disaster of Partition.”⁵²

Consciously participating in the myth-making of New Delhi as a cultural locus, it is clear that for some private collectors, local or state museums, the National Museum meant the loss of their own voices and treasured objects. To become part of the public national narrative was to forget reality’s splintered, localized natures involving the lingering vertical class hierarchies of colonial rule, and the expansive gulf between rural and urban conceptions of modern India. The Ministry of Education proposed that letters of request specifically be sent to the Maharajas of Bikaner, Udaipur, Jaipur, Mysore, Rampur, Jodhpur, Gwalior and Hyderabad in order to secure their family treasures for the National Museum. Following these letters, appeals were concurrently issued to the Chief Ministers of Rajasthan and Madhya Bharat, Chief Civil Administrator, Hyderabad and the Chief Minister of Mysore, subtly suggesting the tensions of power that existed between local and national government bodies

48 Arindam Dutta, “The Politics of Display: India 1886 and 1986” *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, nos. 30-31 (Dec. 1997) 115-145; Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley, 2001).

49 Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton, 1996); See also Hermann Goetz, *The Art of India: 5,000 Years of Indian Art* (New York, 1959), as an example of how India’s “5,000 years” became normalized terminology for addressing all representative art in the nation.

50 Staff reporter, “Art Exhibition Opened by Governor-General, An Inspiration for the Future” *Statesman*, Nov. 7, 1948; for brief overviews of Nehru’s centralized political vision, see Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Oxford, 1998); Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*, (New York; London, 1997).

51 Irving 1981.

52 Prakash 2002, 7.

and the lingering princely families.⁵³ Surveillance or acknowledgement of the proposals by local government officials might have been considered a persuasive means to approach the former Maharajahs who, as Chakravarti noted, were likely to feel “rub[bed] the wrong way” by the central government’s request.⁵⁴ Official correspondence from the government was also sent out to state museums and to known private collectors in India, urging contributions to the “Central National Museum” or the extensions of “loans”.⁵⁵

The government officials and the scholars who led the National Museum’s first collecting missions aggressively promoted the prestige of the institution and its symbolic role in building a national image although its collections were ad hoc in nature. Nehru sent numerous state gifts from foreign dignitaries into its storerooms and even some Maharajas paid tribute to the cause by choosing to donate, rather than sell, treasured objects to the National Museum, although the context of these “donations” demands further investigation.⁵⁶ As the designated chief recipient of Treasure Trove finds, the National Museum was further fashioned as the major repository of the nation, with little scrutiny in its selection process.⁵⁷

Finally, the political excitement generated around the National Museum and its use as an effective symbol for promoting national unity was surely a catalyst of the government’s Museum Reorganisation and Development Scheme, which assembled a committee of curators and scholars with the aim of enforcing modern uniformity on all Indian museums. To this end, the committee raised the concern of encouraging closer cooperation between the National Museum and State Museums by placing the latter institutions under the control of the central government and stipulating that, like the Delhi museum, all regional museums should have an “All-India scope and character”.⁵⁸ The displacement of local narratives was clearly encouraged for the greater good of the national ones. Again, the fruits of these proposals were limited, but the sentiments behind them indicate the specific role prescribed for the National Museum as it echoed the political aspirations of the government and enforced its centrality not only geographically, but in its rendering of a globally-defined nation by the recasting of its local identities. Like the hub of a spoked wheel, the authority of the Delhi museum inspired a mass movement of objects from India’s peripheries, and a conceptual movement of national narratives to its political and imagined cultural center.

The National Art Treasures Fund

The ad hoc collecting practices for the National Museum were soon subjected to more systematization that further enforced the dominance of the Delhi institution over regional and local museums and again highlights the tensions from the regions that were the natural outcome of constructing this national symbol. In 1952, a formalized National Art Treasures fund had been constructed that reported to the Government of India and was inaugurated by Nehru. The Fund was administered by art historians, archaeologists and six representatives from state governments, and was divided into two Art Purchase Committees: one for “old art” and another for “contemporary art”. All “old art” was defined as objects older than

53 Government of India, “National Museum of Art, Anthropology and Archaeology – Acquisition of works of art from Private Museum and Collectors” *Ministry of Education report* (New Delhi, 1949.)

54 Letter from N.P. Chakrabarti, Director General of Archaeology, to Tara Chand, Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Education (16/2/1949).

55 Government of India, “Appeal to the Maharajas of Bikaner, Udaipur, Jaipur and Mysore by Ministry of State in respect of exhibits kept by State Government exhibition in New Delhi” *Ministry of Education report* (New Delhi, 1949).

56 National Museum of India, *General Accession Registry*, 1950.

57 Government of India 1958, 19.

58 Government of India, “Conference on Museums: Agenda and Proceedings” *Ministry of Education report* (New Delhi, 1955).

1857;⁵⁹ they went directly to the National Museum while the latter group was designed to gather art for the newly proposed National Gallery of Modern Art (1954).⁶⁰ However, the privileges and funding allotted to the National Museum far outweighed the government's attention to the National Gallery.⁶¹ The most obvious reason for this is the enduring colonial fetish with the ancient over modern and contemporary objects, and the former's perceived greater role in evoking national pride and educating the public about its heritage. The new Indian nation specifically hinged its construction on the picture of ancientness and art heritage; this history reified not only the fabrications of an art historical hierarchy, but also commemorated the true foundation of the nation in the past, subsequently inventing a new historical context that is key to the creation of an imagined nation-state.⁶²

The initiative of the National Art Treasures Fund underlines the assumptions of power and authority that were embedded within the construction of the National Museum and reveals how they were met or resisted by regional governments and their museums. Although state museums were not officially granted anything from the National Art Treasures Fund beyond the possibility of loan agreements, plaster cast replicas or occasional training courses from the central museums, each state was required to set up its own Regional Advisory Committee (with its own funds) that could guide the purchasing of the National Art Treasures Fund in each respective region. The national duty of the regional governments was called upon as each state was further asked to provide a "*pro rata* contribution" to the building up and maintenance of the Delhi museums. Unsurprisingly, few state governments actually responded to this government call with either funding for the central museums or by setting up a regional committee; indeed, it is unclear how, if ever, this was enforced.⁶³ Implying the work of political persuasion, Chief Ministers of the States were sent a letter of encouragement from Nehru who urged them to contribute to the fund and to remember "the basic importance of culture and art," but it was to little avail.⁶⁴ State museums similarly dragged their heels in 1953 when a government call was issued to send free examples of regional clothing to the National Museum also at the request of Nehru who wanted the museum to represent the diversity of garments in the country.⁶⁵ The direct hand that Nehru played in this correspondence not only demonstrates the significance of the National Museum to the government's construction of national identity, but also reveals the subtle opposition and anxiety from the regions towards centralized rule in the early post-Independence years. The overwhelming focus on the Delhi museum and on the support of its collecting practices must certainly have provoked ire from state authorities struggling with economic downturns and poverty, and state museum officials who were being pressured to relinquish their treasures and their funds in order to make the mythology of the National Museum a reality.

59 This is also the crucial date of the Indian resistance or "mutiny" against British forces that remains pivotal in Indian historical narratives of the nation. While the choice of this year as a distinguishing characteristic between the two institutions is not directly discussed in official documents, its charged significance makes it difficult to dismiss. Indeed, as this date also signifies the official imposition of British Crown rule in India from 1858, spurred by the bloody resistance battles, it is significant that the identity of the National Museum's collections, as stipulated by the national government, were framed explicitly to recall an imagined "non-British," or pre-Crown rule past.

60 Letter from Jawaharlal Nehru to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, (7/3/1948).

61 Government of India, "National Art Treasures Fund" *Ministry of Education report* (New Delhi, 1952).

62 An extended discussion is offered in: Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India" in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (eds.) *Subaltern Studies VII* (New Delhi, 1992).

63 *Ibid.*; also see Government of India, "National Art Treasures Fund" *Ministry of Education report* (New Delhi, 1952) for letters from state governments excusing themselves from contributing to the fund.

64 Extract from Prime Minister's fortnightly letter no. 52, 16 June 1952, to all the Chief Ministers of the States. Government of India, "National Art Treasures Fund" *Ministry of Education* (New Delhi, 1952).

65 Government of India, Report from Ministry of Education and Scientific Research (New Delhi, 1953).

The political history of the mid 20th century in India inevitably exposes stories of continual disconnection and dissonance between governmental visions for the nation and its disparate citizenry, between the centre of the country and the regions; and between government officials and their agents, such as the Art Purchase Committee and curators at the National Museum. As a product of both the colonial and nationalist performances of power, the National Museum of India is unique in the history of museums in India and stands alone as an institution that was always envisioned by its creators as a singular public monument whose symbolic currency superseded its identity as a storehouse of historical objects. This symbolic power came to serve the ambitions of a nationalist government and elaborated the museum's mythology as the country's showpiece and "premier" national institution.⁶⁶

The building records of the National Museum finally force us to return again to the mythological narrative of the institution that would help to define its postcolonial presence, as well as its ultimate detachment from the masses it was intended to inspire. Already alienated from other imperial museums of note, a memorandum from the Ministry of Education in 1955 noted the critical importance of the National Museum to fill an institutional void in the country. Despite the long-standing reputations of large imperially-founded museums in Madras, Bombay and Calcutta, they were specifically ignored in the statement that announced, "there is no institution in India where the public and the student can obtain anything approaching a general conspectus of the development of Indian civilization..."⁶⁷ Hence the National Museum was conceived specifically to displace its predecessors, and in this displacement, to become a metaphor for the appropriation and alteration of a colonial ideology of museology and central authority. This is why building reports stipulated that "nothing less than the very best construction must be envisaged" for the National Museum, including "first class teak" and the finest accessories available, such as new florescent tube lighting.⁶⁸ By 1967, government officials noted that the vast expenditure on building materials and interior accessories had led to spiraling costs for the National Museum throughout the 1960s that were more than double the costs of the country's three largest colonial museums combined, all of which suffered from inadequate funds as the Ministry showered its attentions on the Delhi institution.⁶⁹ But the statist engine behind the National Museum, and the subsequent construction of its mythical place in the nationalist imagination, had generated this most intentional of monuments that would increasingly take flight and precedence over other museums under its first director in the Janpath building. This "premier" institution would continue in the 1960s and 70s to be a critical locus of postcolonial negotiation of Indian cultural and political identities, art histories, and international modernities.

66 P. Venkatasubbiah 1967, 19.

67 Government of India, "Construction of National Museum at New Delhi, Phase I" *Ministry of Education report* (New Delhi, 1955).

68 Ibid.

69 P. Venkatasubbaiah 1967, 12.

Figures

Figure 1a

The National Museum's entrance rotunda.



Figure 1b

Two of the *yakshi* stone images adorning the circular space.



Photos by Kristy K Phillips, 2003.

Figure 2
Government House (Rashtrapati Bhavan),
stone sculpture display in the Durbar Hall, c. 1948.

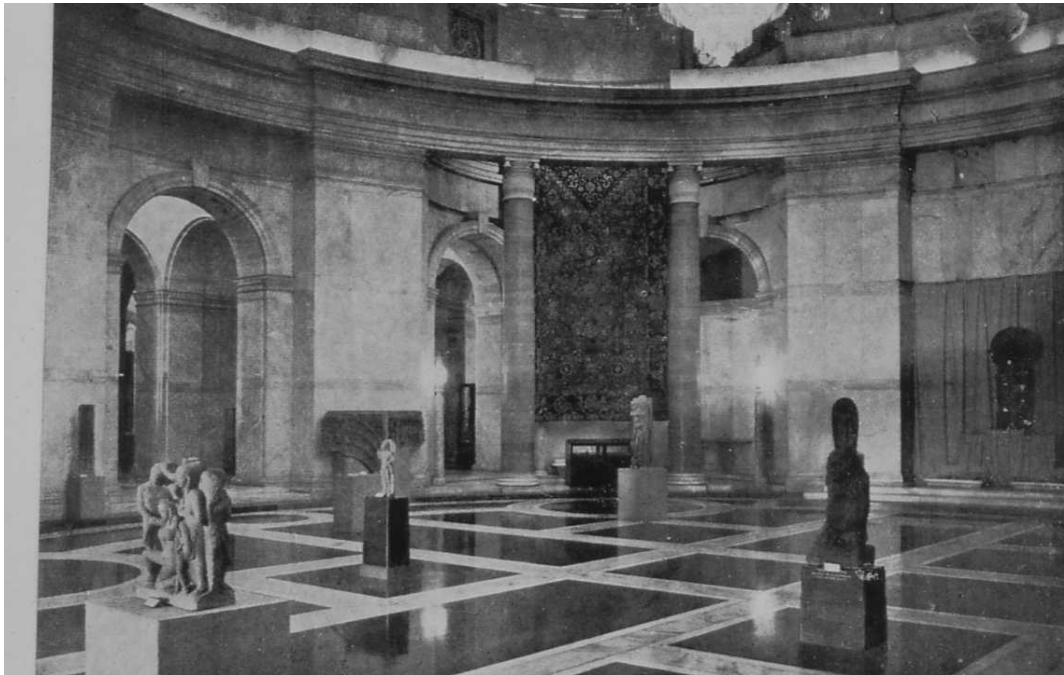


Photo courtesy the National Museum of India.

Figure 3
The Deccan Room Gallery at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, c. 1948.



Photo courtesy the National Museum of India.

Figure 4

Another example of display techniques at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, c. 1948.
Possibly from the inauguration of the *Exhibition of Indian Art*.



Photo courtesy the National Museum of India.