

Lecture I - Tuesday, October 25

THE OBJECT FLOWS OF EMPIRE - I CROSS-CULTURAL COLLECTING IN EARLY COLONIAL CALCUTTA

This paper uses the lens of object collecting to reflect on the interdependence and enmeshing of cultures that brought together the colonizers and the colonized and bred a milieu of cross-cultural encounters that defined the nature of early empire in British India. It takes up two case studies of private collecting and the building of house museums from the colonial capital, Calcutta – the accumulation of the earliest collection of Hindu temple sculptures by an Irish military officer turned antiquarian, Charles Stuart which brought him the acronym of ‘Hindoo’; and the acquisition of a grand array of neoclassical European sculpture, furniture and art decor by a Bengali merchant-aristocrat, Raja Rajendra Mullick in a Palladian mansion that came to be known as the “Marble Palace”. It wishes to juxtapose the well-known story of the outflow of Indian objects from the colony to the metropolis with the lesser-known scenario of the inflow of a vast, hybrid array of Western objects into the homes of the Indian elite. What would be the changing registers of rights and legitimacies in accessing and the owning of objects? How do new desires of art collecting and museum-making inflect these object flows of empire? What are the unintended destinies and the contingencies of preservation or dispersals that make for the afterlives of these private collections? It is with this set of questions that this paper explores how different pre-histories of the modern institution of the museum are thrown open in colonial Calcutta by Charles “Hindoo” Stuart’s first “Oriental Museum of Hindu Sculptures” and by Raja Rajendra Mullick’s display of his collection as “India’s first museum of Western art”.

Lecture II - Monday, October 31

THE OBJECT FLOWS OF EMPIRE – II THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF CALCUTTA’S COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL STATUARY

This paper confronts the obduracy of urban public statuary as a subject both for India’s imperial and nationalist histories as well as for today’s burgeoning field of study of India’s popular visual culture. On what terms do we constitute its ‘public’ and ‘popular’ identity of this body of statuary? What are the many stories of travels and transactions, exchanges and relocations lie behind these apparently immovable figures? What are the indelible colonial markers of this genre, and what attends its postcolonial transitions? One of the central paradoxes that the paper sets out to explore is the draining of life and affect from objects that are intended to embody presence and personhood, whereby public statues become, literally and metaphorically, as dead as the public personalities they were made to commemorate. Despite their largeness and privileged locations, these public statuary are usually rendered the least visible and most ignored objects of public spectatorship, consigned to a liminal status of being neither ‘art’ nor ‘icon, of fully belonging to neither ‘high’ nor ‘popular’ visual culture. With a focus on Calcutta’s colonial and postcolonial statues, the paper interrogates the public lives and functions of these street objects from three broad angles – (i) the logic of form and materiality in this genre of imagery, to see how human likeness is transformed into inanimate object and commemorative symbol (ii) the ‘sculpture’/‘statue’ binary, to ask why statues continually fall short of being ‘sculpture’, and when, and in what contexts, they may move from one nomenclature to the other, and (iii) the slippage from the ‘fine art’ of British realist sculpture to local image-making practice in the making of the city’s proliferating corpus of nationalist and contemporary statuary.