

REVIEW

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The India Museum Revisited. By ARTHUR MACGREGOR. 230mm. Pp xxxi + 439, 121 figs, 1 tab. UCL Press in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2023. ISBN 9781800085718. £45 (pbk).

In March 1858, the *Illustrated London News* published a wood engraving of a striking new gallery at the India Museum – the remarkably diverse collection of items assembled by the East India Company at East India House, Leadenhall Street. The space had formerly been the Company's tea sales room. Transformed into a fantastical, Mughal-inspired hall by the architect Matthew Digby Wyatt (1820–77), it now featured highlights from the corporation's sculpture collection. The illustration, which serves as the cover image of Arthur MacGregor's excellent new study of the Company's museum, *The India Museum Revisited*, depicts a well-heeled Victorian couple casting their gazes over a row of stone deities.

It is all-too-easy to read into this image of the sales room turned sculpture gallery a well-rehearsed narrative of the Company's political transformation from trading venture to governmental institution – a narrative that concludes, of course, in the corporation's ultimate nationalisation. Indeed, the gallery was opened just a few months before Parliament passed the Government of India Act, responding to the crisis of the Indian Uprising of 1857–8 by demanding the liquidation of the Company and the transfer of its functions to the British Crown. By 1862, the corporation's former headquarters on Leadenhall Street had been demolished, the Mughal-style gallery furnishings sold off for a 'mere' £79 10s (p 12). The Company's nationalisation forced the India Museum into a peripatetic existence, before it was divided and assimilated into a range of other institutions in 1879.

The dispersal of the museum's collections has resulted in a once-major Victorian institution fading into relative obscurity. Understandably, contemporary scholarship on the collection has

centred on a handful of famous – or, rather, notorious – objects. First among these is 'Tipu's Tiger': a wooden semi-automaton in the form of an Indian tiger mauling a European soldier, built to house a hand-cranked organ that sounded the agonised screams of the latter. It was seized in 1799 following the storming of Tipu Sultan's (1751–99) capital at Seringapatam (present-day Srirangapatna), and displayed as a transparent signifier of military glory – Governor-General Richard Wellesley (1760–1842) even suggested the Tower of London as a more appropriate venue. Similar motives informed the display of the golden throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839), monarch of the Sikh Empire, appropriated in the wake of the Company's victory in the second Anglo-Sikh War of 1848–9.

These infamous examples of imperial loot certainly feature in *The India Museum Revisited*. Yet, as MacGregor explains, a focus on such exceptional items has tended to result in a mischaracterisation of the institution as a 'single uniform organism' (p 36), at the expense of a more granular understanding of the vast diversity of its holdings, as well as how its eight decades of existence witnessed successive curatorial regimes, the political transformation of the Company, and broader shifts in the social function of museums. Accordingly, the author's goal is to restore to contemporary discussions of the India Museum what he describes as its 'multifarious character' (p xxi). To do so, he marshals an overview of the approximately 20,000 objects that were transferred in 1879 to the South Kensington Museum – the forerunner of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) – primarily using a catalogue drafted in 1880 to organise this extraordinary transfer of materials. The resultant, and impressively comprehensive, survey constitutes the core of the book: nine chapters devoted to the vast range of the museum's holdings, from model boats to musical instruments, weights and measures to hats and slippers. Throughout, the author is not only concerned with foregrounding the diversity of the collection, but with reinvesting objects with a 'voice' (p xxii) – allowing them to speak about their original contexts of

production, consumption, and appreciation in the subcontinent, rather than just their part in the Company's imperial project of collecting.

MacGregor's catalogue-style survey is introduced with two opening chapters sketching the history of the museum and its collecting policies. He first narrates the institution's consolidation under the Orientalist Charles Wilkins (1749–1836), tracks its wanderings across Fife House, the India Office, and the so-called 'Eastern Galleries' on Exhibition Road, before concluding with the debates surrounding its ultimate dismemberment in 1879. What emerges is a clear sense of the external contingencies driving the collection's *ad hoc* character; the shifting ways that curators and officials sought to rationalise its political function as well as its potential commercial applications; and the connections among the museum, the Great Exhibition of 1851, and the Victorian ideal of marrying art, science, and industry. The final two chapters detail several substantial bequests by notable individuals, before briefly surveying the history of those objects dispersed to institutions besides the South Kensington Museum – primarily the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew.

The book began life as a research project conducted at the V&A, with the ambition of

producing a web-based output (although, as far as I can tell, the project website remains in progress). These origins have inevitably shaped the book's character: rather than being read cover to cover for its narrative argument, the work functions far better as an extraordinarily useful resource to be dipped into as needed. Inevitably, the survey format offers less space for the author to dwell on the stories or contentious politics surrounding particular items or individuals. He is frank about this, stating that his intention in assembling a comprehensive overview of the collections was to 'encourage others to continue to add flesh to the bones of this long-lost institution' (p 380). Such ambitions will surely be met. The book provides a model of meticulous research that will ensure that all future discussions about the India Museum are able to assess it 'as it was actually constituted': a 'physical construct and not an abstract concept', to use MacGregor's own phrasing (p 381). As both scholarly and popular interest in the East India Company continues to develop, *The India Museum Revisited* will serve as both the basis and a significant inspiration for future research.

TOM YOUNG