

Exhibitions, Histories: *Showing, Telling, Seeing* and Beyond

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Why Exhibition Histories?

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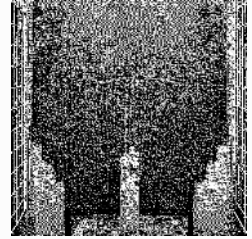
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Exhibitions, Histories: *Showing, Telling, Seeing* and Beyond

Article by **Sonal Khullar**

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The global turn in the discipline of art history over the past decade has generated new accounts of modernism and modernity, challenging Eurocentric, and especially Greenbergian, narratives of modern art. These new histories have expanded our canons and conceptions of modern art to include practices and discourses from Mexico, Brazil, Senegal, Nigeria, Vietnam, China, Japan, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Pakistan, Britain, and the Soviet Union, which is to say, outside the art world centers of Paris and New York. Examining overlooked artists and artworks and highlighting circulation and mobility, new scholarship has called attention to imperial and diasporic formations in ways that illuminate the aesthetics and politics of global cities and cosmopolitan art worlds rather than reinforcing the logics of empire or nation-state. Such scholarship has challenged the conventional organization of syllabuses, specializations, art exhibitions, and museum departments along national-cultural lines, and offered an opportunity to rethink the intellectual efficacy and analytic contours of subfields such as British art history and South Asian art history.

Taking its cue from these developments, *Showing, Telling, Seeing: Exhibiting South Asia in Britain, 1900 to Now* (co-organised by Sonal Khullar, Hammad Nasar, Devika Singh, and Sarah Victoria Turner), brought together specialists from these subfields that have functioned separately in modern museums, galleries, and the academy. Our focus was on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, given the relatively rich and robust scholarship on the nineteenth century. We took a *longue durée* approach to British colonial rule in South Asia, accounting for both pre- and post-independence periods. Our title emphasized the exhibition as a process: not a static collection of objects or assembly of forms, but rather like artistic practice that unfolds over time, tells stories, has histories, entails recursions, creates rituals, conjures place, displays objects, and shapes consciousness. Writing about exhibitions of Indian art in the United States, Rebecca Brown has used the evocative and historically resonant metaphor of the tent as “encampment, environment, all-encompassing lived experience”.¹ That metaphor extends to the Crystal Palace exhibition in London (1851) and *The Fabric of India* exhibition (2015–2016) at the Victoria and Albert Museum and refers to the ritual construction of kingship and sovereignty in South Asia through tents, canopies, carpets, and other luxury textiles (fig. 1). Often relegated to the category of crafts, decorative objects, or applied arts in histories of art, these textiles were crucial to constructing a relationship between South Asia and Britain, and thereby the making of the modern world. That relationship, as the *London, Asia* project demonstrates, did not end with India’s independence from British rule in 1947. Its reverberations are evident in artistic practice and exhibitions in Bradford, Manchester, Leeds, and London, home to large South Asian and other diasporic communities settled in Britain.



Figure 1

The Fabric of India, installation photograph, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2015. Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The conference explored the aesthetic, social, political, and phenomenological dimensions of exhibition practice, broadly construed to include institutions (e.g. Burlington House, the Museum of Modern Art Oxford) and individuals (e.g. Dayanita Singh, Lionel Wendt). Panels and roundtable discussions addressed “curatorial practice”, “crafting practice”, “institutional histories”, “writing about exhibitions”, “competing modernities”, “exhibition circuits/networks of display”, “experience and event”, and “other stories”, and involved curators, artists, critics, and professional academics from the United Kingdom, South Asia, and the United States. Our venues in central London—the Congress Centre, One Alfred Place, the Paul Mellon Centre, and Tate Modern—spoke powerfully to the themes of the conference. Jacob Epstein’s *Pietà*-like sculpture of a woman holding her dead son, a monument to workers who served in the two world wars and completed in 1956-57, stands in the courtyard of the Congress Centre, home to the Trades Union Congress (fig. 2). Epstein’s modernism—and that of other avant-garde British artists such as Eric Gill—was deeply influenced by traditional Indian temple sculpture and emblemizes what Rupert Arrowsmith has called a “global aesthetic exchange” centered on “London’s museum network” during the 1910s.² That sculpture suggests London’s privileged place as the site of exhibitions, collaboration, and education for many artists from Britain and South Asia. The pioneering art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), a friend of Epstein and Gill, made his home in England between 1907 and 1917 (with long stays in India) and founded the India Society in London in 1910. In 1908, he published *Medieval Sinhalese Art* on William Morris’s Kelmscott Press, and pursued multiple inquiries into the conjunction of art, labor, and value (fig. 3). Coomaraswamy’s friendship with Charles Robert Ashbee, a key figure in the Arts and Crafts Movement, and involvement with the Chipping Campden Guild and School of Handicraft attest to complex bonds that emerged from doing, making, and writing—and indeed, showing, telling, and seeing—and that defy nationalist or colonialist narratives of art.



Figure 2

Interior view of Congress House, Great Russell Street, London, photograph, showing the Trades Union Congress War Memorial by Jacob Epstein, 1956–1957, roman stone, 1956. Collection of English Heritage. Digital image courtesy of James O. Davies and English Heritage.

Four hundred and twenty-five copies printed under the care of the Author at the Essex House Press in the Norman Chapel at Broad Campden, Gloucestershire. Begun September, 1907, and finished December, 1908.
Of twenty-five copies on hand-made paper this is No. 114.

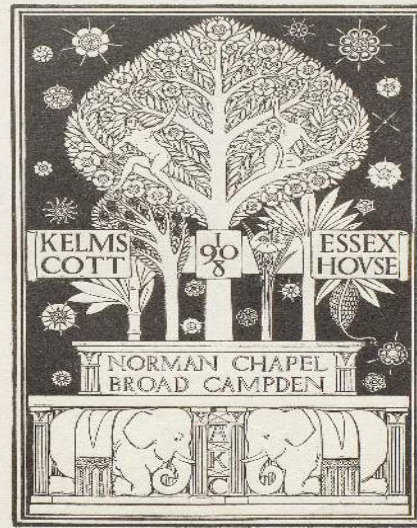


Figure 3

Publisher stamp, reproduced in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (Broad Campden: Essex House Press, 1908), 1908. Collection of The British Library. Digital image courtesy of The British Library Board.

Those bonds were not limited to the colonial period. Take, for instance, the exhibition *Bhupen Khakhar: You Can't Please All* (1 June–6 November 2016) at Tate Modern, which provided an ideal opportunity to explore themes of the conference with an art world audience (fig. 4). In 1976, Khakhar (1934–2003), a largely self-trained artist and part-time accountant, visited Britain, where he befriended the artist Howard Hodgkin and critic Timothy Hyman. He would later return to teach at the Bath Academy of Art in Corsham in 1979, with his style of figuration inspiring Francesco Clemente and Salman Rushdie, whose portrait, *The Moor*, Khakhar painted for the National Portrait Gallery in 1995. In 1962, Khakhar wrote a master's thesis on Company Painting (so named after the British East India Company), a genre of art executed by Indians, patronized by Europeans, and collected by British institutions. His paintings of the late 1960s and 1970s drew inventively on the visual culture of empire, including paintings, prints, and photographs, as well as the figure of the colonial hunter, surveyor, and ruler. "Photographs of the British Raj/Viceroy, battalions of attendants, pomp, hypocrisy, and glamor of white skin" were among the visual sources Khakhar cited.³



Figure 4

Bhupen Khakhar, *You Can't Please All*, 1981, oil on canvas. Collection of Tate (T07200). Digital image courtesy of Tate and the estate of Bhupen Khakhar.

In a public program at Tate Modern, organized by Sandra Sykorova and Nada Raza in conjunction with *Showing, Telling, Seeing* on 2 July, critics Geeta Kapur and Deepak Ananth and art historians Sonal Khullar and Karin Zitzewitz along with museum director Chris Dercon reflected on the artist's career and contributions. Jonathan Jones' controversial review of the exhibition in which he declared Khakhar a "hamfisted hack" whose "paintings belong in the Royal Academy summer show, not Tate Modern" made the stakes of the conference more urgent.⁴ Was Khakhar "Mumbai's answer to Beryl Cook," as Jones suggested, or an artist who "can make the language of painting offer the gift of a complex vernacular and vivid speech to their (beloved) subjects," as Kapur claimed in a rejoinder to Jones?⁵ What was Khakhar's place in Britain, and by extension, the role of South Asian artists and artworks in British museums? For Kapur, the debate over the exhibition was about "other cultures lay[ing] claim to modernity as a historically co-produced project," a claim she first articulated in a master's thesis completed in 1968 at the Royal College of Art, "In Quest of Identity: Art and Indigenism in Post-Colonial Culture With Special Reference to Contemporary Indian Painting".⁶ That project of modernity remains unfinished as other artists and artworks continue to demand representation on equal and ethical terms in our exhibitions, institutions, and imaginations."

About the author

Sonal Khullar is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Washington. Her first book, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930-1990* (University of California Press, 2015), received the Bernard S. Cohn Book Prize of the Association of Asian Studies in 2017. She is completing a book manuscript, *The Art of Dislocation: Conflict and Collaboration in Contemporary Art from South Asia*, under advance contract with the University of

California Press. Her research has been supported by the College Art Association, the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Institute of Indian Studies, the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, and the Japan Foundation.

Footnotes

1. Rebecca M. Brown, *Displaying Time: The Many Temporalities of the Festival of India* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2017), 3.
2. Rupert Richard Arrowsmith, *Modernism and the Museum: Asian, African, and Pacific Art and the London Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.
3. Bhupen Khakhar, "Notes on the Visual Sources of My Painting", *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 10 (1969): 24–26. This essay was first published as Bhupen Khakhar, "Visual Notes", *Vrishchik* 1, no. 1 (1969): n.p.
4. Jonathan Jones, "Bhupen Khakhar Review—Mumbai's Answer to Beryl Cook", *The Guardian*, 31 May 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/may/31/bhupen-khakhar-review-you-cant-please-all-tate-modern> (accessed 25 June 2019). See also Laura Cumming, "Bhupen Khakhar—You Can't Please All Review: A Sprawl Through a Life's Work", *The Guardian*, 5 June 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jun/05/bhupen-khakhar-you-cant-please-all-review-tate-modern-pop-art-pink-city-howard-hodgkin-david-hockney> (accessed 25 June 2019).
5. Geeta Kapur, "Guardian Review of Bhupen Khakhar at Tate Narrow-Minded", *The Wire*, 5 June 2019. <https://thewire.in/40568/guardian-review-of-bhupen-khakhar-at-tate-narrow-minded-geeta-kapur/> (accessed 25 June 2019). See also Amit Chaudhuri, "Bombay Dreams: How Painter Bhupen Khakhar Captured the City Spirit", *The Guardian*, 21 May 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/may/21/bombay-dreams-how-bhupen-khakhar-captured-spirit-of-city> (accessed 12 January 2018).
6. Geeta Kapur, *In Quest of Identity: Art and Indigenism in Post-Colonial Culture with Special Reference to Contemporary Indian Painting* (Baroda: Vrishchik, 1973), no page numbers. This thesis was serialized in the journal *Vrishchik* in 1971 and 1972, and published in its entirety as a special publication of the journal in 1973.

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