

# DISPLAYING THE SACRED

## HINDU-BUDDHIST ART FROM ABU DHABI TO ASIA

This workshop focuses on religious collections, particularly Hindu and Buddhist art, at the Louvre Abu Dhabi and various museums across Asia. It examines the differences in perspectives among curators, visitors, and religious communities. The goal is to explore how religious objects are reinterpreted within the museum framework and how this process influences cross-cultural understanding.

This workshop forms part of Dr Mizuho Ikeda's research project, supported by the Department of Culture and Tourism–Abu Dhabi, under the Louvre Abu Dhabi Research Fellowship Program.

### WORKSHOP ORGANISER

**Dr. Mizuho Ikeda** is a Research Fellow at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, where she focuses on the display of Hindu and Buddhist art within the context of the universal museum. She specialises in the cultural anthropology and archaeology of Southeast Asia and is also a Research Associate at the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies at SOAS, University of London. Previously, she served as Project Curator for the *Burma to Myanmar* exhibition at the British Museum and as Heritage Documentation Manager at the Maritime Asia Heritage Survey, Kyoto University. Ikeda received her Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from Waseda University in 2018 and has participated in archaeological fieldwork in Japan, Ireland, Egypt, and El Salvador.

**Dr Stephen A. Murphy** is Pratapaditya Pal Senior Lecturer in Curating and Museology of Asian Art at SOAS, University of London. Prior to this he was Senior Curator for Southeast Asia and curator-in-charge of the Tang Shipwreck Gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. He holds a PhD from the Department of History of Art and Archaeology, SOAS. He specializes in the art and archaeology of Buddhism and Hinduism in Southeast Asia with a focus on Thailand and Laos. He has a particular interest in the 7th to 9th centuries CE and looks at connections between Southeast Asian cultures and the wider Indian Ocean World.

His latest book *Buddhist Landscapes: Art and Archaeology of the Khorat Plateau, 7th to 11th Centuries* (Singapore: NUS Press 2024) traces Buddhism's spread into Northeast Thailand and Central Laos. He is co-editor, with Alan Chong, of *The Tang Shipwreck: Art and exchange in the 9th century* (2017) and has contributed papers to leading academic journals such as *Antiquity*, *Asian Perspectives*, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* and *The Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* amongst others.

## Schedule

### TUESDAY 12 MAY

9.00 – 9.05	Greetings from Chair of CSEAS-SOAS	Stephen Murphy
9.05 – 9.15	Opening Remarks and Workshop Overview	Mizuho Ikeda
9.15 – 9.45	Exhibiting the Sacred in Cross-cultural Perspective: The Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore	Heidi Tan
9.45 – 10.15	Art and Ritual in Tension: Dual Modes of Display at the National Museum of Cambodia	Seang Sokha
10.15 – 10.45	TBC	Guilhem André
10.45 – 11.15	The Object Before You	Nilanjana Som
11.15 – 11.25	Break	
11.25 – 11.55	Reanimating Tibetan Heritage: Transforming Collections, Empowering Communities	Thupten Kelsang
11.55 – 12.25	Colonial Legacies and Local Practices: The Case of the Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture	Duyen Nguyen
12.25 – 12.55	Between Devotion and Display: Interpreting Sacred Objects Within the National Museum Bangkok	Suppawan Nongnut
12:55– 13.00	Closing Remarks	Mizuho Ikeda

## SPEAKER BIOS AND ABSTRACTS

### **Exhibiting the Sacred in Cross-cultural Perspective: The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), Singapore — Heidi Tan, SOAS University of London**

#### **Bio:**

**Heidi Tan** is Lecturer in Curating and Museology at SOAS, University of London. Her doctoral thesis '[Meritorious Curating and the Renewal of Pagoda Museums in Myanmar](#)' examined museological praxis in sacred space, through the lens of comparative museology. Her research currently focusses on socially engaged curating, transcultural spaces, and the Shan diaspora. A founding member of the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore (1997), she co-developed the Chinese and Southeast Asian collections and curated a series of special exhibitions from the region, including *Viet Nam: From Myth to Modernity* (2008), and *Enlightened Ways: The Many Streams of Buddhist Art in Thailand* (2012).

#### **Abstract:**

How does a national museum in multicultural Singapore re-present 'sacred' objects from Southeast Asia? I discuss personal observations of curatorial practice at the ACM in the first decade or so after the Museum opened (1997–2012). More specifically I look at how attempts to interpret the sacred, and Buddhist art in particular, were undertaken through the medium of the exhibition. I will discuss the development of protocols to accommodate ritual engagement, in displays of Javanese gamelan instruments, and Buddhist ritual objects. As I reflect on the curator's role in this approach, I ask how nuanced our notions of the 'sacred' were at the time. Could revisiting Baxandall's three agents of exhibition – curator, object maker, and audience, further elucidate this understanding (Baxandall 1991)? Moreover, the Museum's underlying cross-cultural remit has long been underpinned by the need to engage diverse local audiences. Was the resulting emphasis on multiplicity and diversity uniquely attributable to the Singapore context? Or might this approach to be more in keeping with the notion of the 'universal'; a construct that museums around the world had been eager to engage with since the early 2000s?

## **Art and Ritual in Tension: Dual Modes of Display at the National Museum of Cambodia — Seang Sokha, National Museum of Cambodia**

### **Bio:**

**Seang Sokha** is a Khmer art and museology scholar at the National Museum of Cambodia. He holds a BA in Archaeology (Royal University of Fine Arts, Phnom Penh) and MAs from Chulalongkorn University and SOAS. He is a PhD candidate at SOAS researching tenth-century Angkorian iconography. His work focuses on Khmer epigraphy, the historiography of Khmer art and museum display practices, and includes curating exhibitions at the National Museum of Cambodia.

### **Abstract:**

This presentation examines the display of Hindu and Buddhist objects at the National Museum of Cambodia (NMC), arguing that two distinct curatorial approaches operate within the museum: a Western approach and a Khmer approach. The Western approach, established during the colonial period, frames objects primarily as art or historical artefacts, detaching them from their sacred contexts. In contrast, the Khmer approach reintroduces ritual engagement by arranging certain spaces in ways analogous to a pagoda and enabling practices such as offerings and prayer.

By analysing how these approaches shape the presentation and reception of objects, this presentation highlights a key distinction: where Western museums have increasingly adopted 'local' display modes as a deliberate decolonial strategy, the Khmer approach at the National Museum of Cambodia emerged organically from the director's cultural background and spiritual relationship to the objects. The NMC thus offers an instructive case study in how curatorial practice can diverge from — and potentially enrich — theoretical frameworks of decoloniality.

## **TBC— Guilhem André, Louvre Abu Dhabi**

**Bio:**

**Abstract:**

## The Object Before You—Nilanjana Som, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), Mumbai

### Bio:

**Nilanjana Som** is a Curator at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), where she oversees a wide range of collections including costume-textiles, jewellery, arms and armour, and decorative arts, in addition to the museum's extensive numismatic holdings of Indian and international coins. She is responsible for collection management and plays a key role in the development of the museum's collections. She is also a co-curator of *Network of the Past: A Study Gallery of India and the Ancient World*, an educational exhibition that explores connections and cross-influences across the ancient world—from the Mediterranean to the Pacific—through more than 400 archaeological objects and works of art.

Holder of dual Masters in Museology and (Medieval) Indian History from the University of Delhi, Nilanjana Som was awarded the Nehru Fellowship in 2014 to study the Indian arms collection housed in various museums in the UK. She has been involved in permanent galleries, temporary exhibitions, collection management, and other programs since joining the Museum in 2015. In 2022, she participated in the British Museum's International Training Programme, which was generously supported by the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust.

### Abstract:

Museums today grapple with a fundamental question: how to present culture? At Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), Mumbai, shifting visitor profiles, especially among younger urban visitors, challenge assumptions about engagement, as many spend extended time reading labels and seeking authentic interpretations of material culture. Art in India is deeply associated with religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, therefore museums often assume local familiarity. This, however, is a common mistake. An Indian audience may recognise an image, but these works do not always resonate with lived practices in daily life. They frequently need to be brought to that starting point — a place from which they can genuinely begin to understand what is displayed before them.

Museums must thus guide their audiences from recognition to deeper interpretation, often through clear, concise text and multi-layered engagement strategies such as tours and public programmes. This approach was exemplified in the exhibition *Ancient Sculptures: India Egypt Assyria Greece Rome* at CSMVS, where objects from different ancient cultures were displayed together and interpreted through comparative frameworks. By pairing unfamiliar works with more recognisable Indian counterparts, the exhibition enabled audiences to better grasp their meanings. Regular dialogue with international lenders yielded valuable cross-cultural insights. The same approach was subsequently extended to CSMVS's Indian Sculpture Galleries. CSMVS's model—combining rigorous scholarship, audience-centred interpretation, and international partnerships—highlights a broader shift from object-focused display to public-oriented engagement. Increasingly realised through co-curation, this approach seeks to foster curiosity and deeper reflection, encouraging visitors to move beyond viewing objects toward meaningful understanding.

## **Reanimating Tibetan Heritage: Transforming collections, Empowering communities — Thupten Kelsang, Victoria and Albert Museum**

### **Bio:**

**Thupten Kelsang** is the AHRC Research Fellow at the V&A, leading the Reanimating Tibetan Heritage project. He is a museum anthropologist by training, with a DPhil in Anthropology from the University of Oxford, where he was also awarded the Clarendon fellowship. With a focus on provenance research and community collaboration, he has been consulted by the British Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum, the British Library, and the Horniman Museum. Before pursuing museum research and practice, he was a community organiser and independent researcher, speaking and advising on Tibetan heritage at platforms such as the Kochi-Muziris Biennale and the Prince Claus Fund.

### **Abstract:**

While Tibet has ceased to exist as a nation, Tibetan material heritage continues to be extensively circulated, collected, displayed, and interpreted in museums, the art market, and academia. Tibet's portable heritage, now accessioned and dispersed in museums across the Global North, is entangled in a "doubly colonial" context, that of both British and Chinese looting in the twentieth century. Tibet's complex and contested nature raises a critical question: Who can represent Tibetan interests in museums and its "authorised heritage discourse"?

While working with communities has become increasingly mainstream across the museum and heritage sector in the United Kingdom (and beyond), prevailing practices and discourse primarily focus on the outputs of community engagement or collaboration. Drawing on the case study of Tibetan collections, the Reanimating Tibetan Heritage project focuses on developing a proof-of-concept and a methodology for working with communities at the intersection of theory and museum practice. The two-fold premise of the project is to gauge the scope and nature of the Tibetan collections in the UK and build on the project lead's sustained ethnographic research with the Tibetan diaspora to co-develop ethical recommendations for the care, display, and knowledge production on Tibetan material heritage. Working with conservators and curators from fourteen institutions, this research seeks to improve our understanding of the shared ethical and critical challenges in caring for Tibetan collections and begin addressing their colonial entanglement. Focused on developing methodology and structure, this project aims to highlight new 'decolonial' approaches to museums, contested collections, and working with communities.

## Colonial Legacies and Local Practices: The Case of the Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture — Duyen Nguyen, Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture

### Bio:

**Duyen Nguyen** is a curator at the Đà Nẵng Museum of Cham Sculpture, where she oversees the Research, Conservation, and Exhibition section. She holds an MA in Museology from New York University and a PhD from SOAS University of London. Her doctoral thesis explored issues in the curation of Champa art in Vietnam from 1915 to 2020, particularly on stylistic chronology, object authenticity and museum identity. Her current research focuses on the Hindu and Buddhist art of Champa, as well as the restitution of Southeast Asian cultural heritage. She contributed essays to the exhibition catalogue *Vibrancy in Stone: Masterpieces of the Đà Nẵng Museum of Cham Sculpture* and authored a chapter in *Returning Southeast Asia's Past: Objects, Museums, and Restitution*.

### Abstract:

Founded in late 1915 and opened to the public in 1919, the Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture is one of the earliest museums established by the French in Vietnam. Today, it houses and displays the largest collection of Hindu and Buddhist sculptures from the ancient Champa kingdom in central Vietnam. Over a century, the museum's mission and display practices have undergone significant transformations—from a colonial archaeological institution to a museum of sculptural art and Cham contemporary culture. However, these transformations continue to bear the imprint of colonial curatorial practices, particularly in the aestheticisation and secularisation of religious objects.

This study examines the museum's historical formation, its modes of displaying religious objects, and its current curatorial practices. It argues that while exhibition strategies emphasise the aesthetic and educational values of the objects, their ritual functions and sacred dimensions remain insufficiently addressed. Drawing on this case, the study asks: in a context where museums worldwide are rethinking their approaches to religious heritage, how might the Da Nang Museum of Cham Sculpture reconsider and reconfigure its curatorial practices?

## **Between Devotion and Display: Interpreting Sacred Objects Within the National Museum Bangkok— Suppawan Nongnut, National Museum Bangkok**

### **Bio:**

**Suppawan Nongnut** has served as a Professional-Level Curator at the National Museum Bangkok, since 2015. She graduated from Silpakorn University (Art History, 2000) and SOAS, University of London (Religious Arts of Asia 2015). She began her career as an Assistant Archaeologist at Si Thep Historical Park (2000–2004), before working as an Assistant Curator at the Ban Chiang National Museum (2005–2006) and held the same position at the National Museum Bangkok (2007–2014), prior to her promotion to her current role. Her research interests include religious art and iconography (particularly in Buddhism and Hinduism), ancient technology and trade between China and Southeast Asia with a focus on ancient weaponry and ceramics, cultural heritage and museum studies, and the prevention of transnational illicit trafficking in antiquities.

### **Abstract:**

Curators must balance the dual imperatives of knowledge production and cultural guardianship when engaging with religious objects. Sacredness extends beyond formal religious spaces into secular contexts, where Buddha images remain objects of reverence and visitor practices—such as bowing and silent contemplation—sustain their sanctity. The gallery thus operates as a hybrid space of aesthetic display and lived religious experience.

Accordingly, the museum may be understood as a space for sacred objects, where artefacts retain religious and affective meanings rather than being fully secularised. Their continued agency invites devotional engagement, positioning the museum as a site of negotiation between curatorial authority and lived belief, in which scholarly, aesthetic, and devotional modes coexist. This discussion examines how curators approach religious art at the National Museum, Bangkok.