Museum Meanings

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The museum has been constructed as symbol in Western society since the Renaissance. This symbol is both complex and multi-layered, acting as a sign for domination and liberation, learning and leisure. As sites for exposition, through their collections, displays and buildings, museums mediate many of society's basic values. But these mediations are subject to contestation, and the museum can also be seen as a site for cultural politics. In post-colonial societies, museums have changed radically, reinventing themselves under pressure from many forces, which include new roles and functions for museums, economic rationalism and moves towards greater democratic access.

Museum Meanings analyses and explores the relationships between museums and their publics. 'Museums' are understood very broadly, to include art galleries, historic sites and historic houses. 'Relationships with publics' is also understood very broadly, including interactions with artefacts, exhibitions and architecture, which may be analysed from a range of theoretical perspectives. These include material culture studies, mass communication and media studies, and learning theories and cultural studies. The analysis of the relationship of the museum to its publics shifts the emphasis from the museum as text, to studies grounded in the relationships of bodies and sites, identities and communities.

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London and New York
The South Kensington Museum and the colonial project

Tim Barringer

'Come' said my friend, Professor Omnium, one clear morning, 'let us take an excursion round the world'. . . . 'My dear friend', said I, 'it is among my dreams one day to visit India, China, Japan, California, but at present you might as well ask me to go with you to the moon.'

'You misunderstand', replies Professor Omnium, 'I do not propose to leave London. We can never go round the world, except in a small, limited way, if we leave London... Ten thousand people and a dozen governments have been at infinite pains and expense to bring the cream of the East and of the West to your own doors'.

(Conway 1882: 21–3)

The destination of the inter-cultural day trippers in Moncure Conway's book, Travels in South Kensington, published in 1882, was the South Kensington Museum, which came into being on the present site in 1857, and survived until 1899 when it was renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum. There was nothing new in Conway's conceit; from the Renaissance cabinet of curiosities onward, the museum had been viewed as a microcosm, an ordered representation of the world in miniature (Shelton 1994). Yet South Kensington's presentation of the world (unlike that of the older British Museum) enshrined a uniquely modern world-view, that of Victorian imperialism. As the collections grew from modest beginnings in the 1850s to include objects from India and South East Asia, China, and Japan, as well as European fine and decorative arts from the Byzantine to the contemporary (though excluding the work of so-called 'savages'), the museum struggled to impose order over a cultural field of bewildering diversity. The representations of the world which it offered were deeply imbedded in the developing culture of Victorian imperialism. Thomas Richards has described the Victorian fixation with the central collection of information, and its ordering and re-ordering, as characteristic of the 'Imperial archive', a fantasy of knowledge made into power (Richards 1993). The acquisition of objects from areas of the world in which Britain had colonial or proto-colonial political and military interests, and the ordering and displaying of them by a museum which was a department of the British state, formed, I suggest, a three-dimensional imperial archive. The procession of objects from peripheries to centre symbolically enacted the idea of London as the heart of empire.
The meaning of an object is inflected, even re-invented by the context in which it is displayed; the removal of objects from a colonial periphery to the imperial centre profoundly alters the ways in which they are understood. Accordingly, rather than addressing the museum’s collections in isolation, I shall consider the museum as a cultural formation. Seen in this way, a museum is comprised of objects ordered into taxonomies, whose interpretation is determined by labels, guides and catalogues, by lectures and tours, and (in the case of South Kensington) by buildings encrusted with didactic texts and images. In looking at South Kensington’s strategies of display and interpretation as they relate to non-Western objects, I shall distinguish three periods which broadly conform to the wider political and ideological development of British Imperialism. The first, from 1851 to about 1870, was a didactic moment in which the formal qualities of Indian objects, especially, were promoted for the purposes of reforming design to improve national economic performance; the second from about 1870 to the mid-1880s, was a moment of academic imperialism, characterised by an increasingly prominent assertion of scholarly and popular interest in, and authority over, non-Western objects and the non-Western world; and finally, from about 1885 to the end of the century, a period of popular imperialist triumphalism, marked by the 1886 Colonial and Indian exhibition, and concluded by the erection of Aston Webb’s new building for the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1909.

An empire of things: free trade and design reform

The South Kensington project was inaugurated by the Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, held in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, in 1851. It was organised, like the future Museum, by Henry Cole under the patronage of Prince Albert. The 1851 exhibition provided a benchmark in changing popular attitudes to Britain’s colonial possessions, and its organisers emphasised the commercial importance of more than thirty colonies and dependencies whose manufactures and raw materials were displayed (Greenhalgh 1989: 53–6). The Indian Court, appropriately for the grandest of British territories, covered 30,000 square feet, and its array of exotic objects was highly significant in popularising Indian design for the British consumer market. Prominent in representations of the Indian Court was a howdah with magnificent trappings in gold and silver, given to Queen Victoria by the Nawab of Murshidabad, displayed with some panache on a stuffed elephant found at the last minute in Saffron Walden (Guy and Swallow 1990: 220) (Fig. 2.1). Royal gifts from subordinate colonial rulers and peoples would repeatedly be displayed at the South Kensington Museum, which offered a popular forum for the display of imperial tributes for the next fifty years. Despite their spectacular presentation, the Indian manufactures shown in 1851 were subordinate in quantity and importance to the display of Indian raw materials – coal, oil, precious stones, saltpetre and spices – symptomatic of the direct economic interests underpinning British involvement with India.
The 1851 Exhibition was the direct progenitor of the Museum (Purbrick 1994; Barringer 1996); the £186,000 profit from admission tickets was used to purchase the Museum's site while the core of its collections derives from Great Exhibition purchases, made using £4217 1s 5d of a government grant of £5000 voted for the purpose (Wainwright 1994: 359). About half of this was spent on continental European objects, acquired to assist the competitiveness of British designers; but next in order of magnitude — greater than the amount spent on British objects — was a sum of £1276 10s 0d for items from the East India Company, still effective rulers of India, which had organised the massive Indian court. It was believed by the members of the purchasing committee, Owen Jones, Henry Cole, Richard Redgrave and A. W. N. Pugin, that the formal qualities of Indian design ‘illustrate correct principles of ornament, [even if they] are of rude workmanship’ (Catalogue of the Articles 1852: iv). Prior to the erection of a museum building at South Kensington, some of these objects were temporarily exhibited at Marlborough House, a vacant Royal Palace, where the catalogue included a laudatory article by Owen Jones on Indian design. Jones also reproduced examples from Indian fabrics in the collection in his theoretical work, The Grammar of Ornament, in 1856, and in later editions insisted that ‘The Indian collection at the South Kensington Museum should be visited and studied by all in any way concerned with the production of woven
fabrics' (Jones 1865: II, 79). For Jones and his colleagues, the stylised ornament of Indian textiles contrasted favourably with the jarringly naturalistic ornament of contemporary British designs such as those featured in Henry Cole’s infamous Gallery of ‘False Principles’ of design at Marlborough House (Mitter 1977: 221; Wainwright 1994; Barringer 1996).

The institution which grew up at South Kensington from 1856 was not just a museum. Also on the site were a large art school and the offices of the Department of Science and Art, which controlled government art and design education through a centralised network of art schools with standardised methods of teaching and examination which extended throughout Britain and Ireland. In 1858 John Charles Robinson, the first curator of the museum drew attention to ‘the Art-Library, Schools, and general Departmental Machinery, at Kensington, the action of which, be it remembered, is emphatically Imperial rather than Metropolitan’ (Robinson 1858: 404).

Robinson exaggerated, for though South Kensington might hope to have an influence throughout the colonies and dominions, it had no official remit beyond the shores of Britain and Ireland. None the less, teachers trained in South Kensington were employed throughout the British empire, from Sydney and Adelaide to Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, where the School of Art was headed from 1865 to 1875 by Lockwood Kipling, who thereafter moved to the Mayo School of Art in Lahore (Guy and Swallow 1990: 227; Ata-Ullah, Ch. 6). The early administration of the museum strikingly paralleled the methods of colonial authorities. Objects were sent to the provinces in touring exhibitions organised by a circulation department, and tight central control was exerted over local art education with regular inspection by officers from the centre, strategies which underscored the authority of the central institution. The first museum building in Kensington was an unsatisfactory prefabricated iron structure, soon nicknamed the ‘Brompton Boilers’, designed by Charles Young and Company and reflecting Young’s speciality in exporting prefabricated iron buildings to the colonies, for hospitals, barracks and houses (Physick 1982b: 23). Close links were established between the Museum and the military; much of the manual labour was carried out by a division of sappers, drafted to the site, and throughout the century the hierarchy of the institution was dominated by military figures (Denis 1995).

The project of the museum was didactic; central to the intentions of its founders was the idea of promoting good design among both producers and consumers, and more broadly the pursuit of increasing general standards in education, especially among artisans and skilled labourers. The Science and Art Department’s First Report, drafted by Henry Cole, claimed:

> A museum presents probably the only effectual means of educating the adult, who cannot be expected to go to school like the youth, [yet] the necessity for teaching the grown man is quite as great as that of training the child. By proper arrangements a Museum may be made in the highest degree instructional.

(First Report 1853: 30)
The museum aimed to instil a culture of self-education and self-help into the artisan community and to improve the profitability and competitiveness of industry by doing so. It could also open up economic and cultural possibilities of empire to a general public. The interior of the ‘Brompton Boilers’ in the late 1850s featured an educational collection, including geographical materials, scientific apparatus, and models of foods: a special display of Chinese food was mounted in 1859. Non-Western objects were prominent in the Museum, providing examples of good design for manufacturing, as its pedagogical sixpenny guide noted: ‘a court is appropriated to specimens of ornamental art manufactures, especially rich in Indian tissues – Chinese and Japanese porcelain and lacquered work, decorative arms, bronzes, objects in marquetry, damascene work, etc.’ (South Kensington Museum Guide 1857: 3). Although, as contemporary illustrations make clear, the early displays were somewhat chaotic, didactic considerations were uppermost in the organisers’ minds: ‘it is intended that every specimen should, as soon as possible, be accompanied by a descriptive label, containing the name, date and all other details of the object judged necessary’ (South Kensington Museum Guide 1857: 3). Henry Cole had written of the museum as ‘an impressive schoolroom for everyone’ (First Report 30), and as a part of this strategy, coloured drawings by Owen Jones, ‘illustrative of oriental art generally’ were situated near the Chinese and Japanese objects.

The successor to this early installation was far more ambitious. It took a more prominent place in the magnificent glass and cast-iron South Court, designed by a co-opted military man, Captain Francis Fowke, and opened in 1862 (Physick 1982b: 52–6). One of the cloisters to the sides of the grand central arcades was, from 1863, set aside for the display of the Oriental collections – Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Persian objects being subsumed under this rubric (Sheppard 1975: 110). Here the fabric of the building, rather than a mere housing for the objects, took on an interpretative role, impressing upon the visitor not only the splendour of the institution, but also (it was hoped) the specific significance of the objects displayed. The commission for polychrome wall and ceiling decorations (Fig. 2.2) and tile pavements went to Owen Jones, who had installed elaborate decorative schemes evoking historic styles of ornament – Greek, Egyptian and Indian – at the Crystal Palace in its new position at Sydenham (Phillips 1857: 141–3). South Kensington’s desire for a similarly evocative interior for the Oriental Courts indicates the Museum’s use of display techniques balancing education and popular entertainment. The decorations served to enhance the ‘otherness’ of the objects by creating an ‘oriental’ ambience and also demonstrated the ways in which Indian, Japanese and Islamic decoration could serve as source materials for contemporary British design. The Oriental courts, in fact, stood as an example of the type of design the museum’s founders hoped would catch on in Britain. The Builder responded favourably to the Indian court, first to be finished, in 1863:

The decoration on the ceiling and piers, which is very elaborate, is from the designs of Mr. Owen Jones.... The whole is treated on the non-naturalistic, non-imitative, or conventional principle; but, in one
of the ceilings especially, there is a right and perfect bringing of ‘realities to mind’.

(Physick 1982a: 117)

Even the windows in the cloister area were quite different from those in the rest of the museum; commissioned specially from the architect J. W. Wild, they were decorated with plaster tracery in the Moorish style (Physick 1982a: 117) indicating the resemblance of the courts to later and more fanciful examples of Victorian architectural orientalism such as Arab Halls by George Aitchison at Leighton House (1877–80) and William Burges at Cardiff Castle (1878–81) (Campbell 1996; Crook 1981). The Oriental Courts, through their very separateness, served the orientalist function, described by Said, of asserting an absolute difference between the Orient and the Occident, while collapsing differences within the category of ‘Oriental’ (Said 1978). Oriental art was grouped together and set apart from the mainstream, its otherness emphasised.
through isolation and exoticisation. Ultimately, however, such spectacular strategies of display drew attention to themselves rather than the objects in the collection, and indeed press coverage of the Oriental Courts concentrates almost exclusively on the building. Visitors frequently complained that the garish decoration reflected in the glass of the cases and obscured the exhibits; an example of the colonial object literally being subordinated to the imperial design (Conway 1882: 43–4).

Power and knowledge: academic orientalism and critique

My second period, that of academic imperialism, coincides with the next major development of the South Kensington buildings in the early 1870s, General Henry Scott’s Architectural Courts (Physick 1982b: 156–60). They were intended to house the museum’s collection of plaster casts of great monuments of Western art, notably Trajan’s column – significantly, one of the greatest monuments of Imperial Rome, often seen as a parallel to the British empire – and Michelangelo’s David (Baker 1982). The Architectural Courts epitomise the museum as the Victorian sublime: the visitor is overwhelmed by the sheer physical size, the cultural scope and technological prowess of the museum, which functions as a metonym of the state itself.

The erection of the Architectural Courts coincided with a growing popular interest in India which peaked with the ceremonial and publicity generated by Queen Victoria’s creation as Empress of India in 1876. At this time, India provided a vital market for the sale of British goods and large numbers of middle- and upper-class Britons found employment in the Indian Army and colonial administration (Cain and Hopkins 1993: 329–36). Around 1870 large numbers of casts of Indian ancient monuments and sculpture began to arrive in South Kensington, largely as a result of the work of Lieutenant Henry H. Cole, son of the museum’s Superintendent, who as a Royal Engineer was himself Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey of India’s North Western Provinces. It was symbolic of an increasing consciousness of empire in South Kensington, that by the time the vast new courts opened in 1873, a large part of the Eastern court was occupied by over a hundred casts of Indian architecture and sculpture. The space was dominated by what the Art Journal described as ‘a cube-like erection of uncouth proportions containing a cast of Akbar Khan’s throne’. A ‘clever piece of scene-painting’ (Art Journal 1873: 276) on one end of this structure represented the spectacular site of Fatehpur-Sikri, the red sandstone city built in the 1570s by Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Akbar (1556–1605), one of the key sites of Mughal culture. Once again, a potentially rarefied and academic display was couched in terms of a populist rhetoric.

In a photograph of the court in 1872, with decorative work in hand, can be seen a cast of the Eastern Gateway of the Great Stupa at Sanchi in India, 33 feet high (Fig. 2.3). A new departure is signalled by the copying of an ancient Indian object dating from the late first or early second centuries AD, considered as a work of art rather than an example of ornamentation, craft
Figure 2.3 The Architectural Courts under construction with plaster cast of the Sanchi Gateway. Photograph, c.1872. (By courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.)
or manufacturing (Harle 1986: 31–4). The Sanchi site, rediscovered in modern times in 1818 by a British officer, General Taylor, had been partly excavated by various military expeditions and published by James Fergusson in *Tree and Serpent Worship* (1868) (Irwin 1972). But the presence of a physical copy of the gateway far outshone any textual or photographic representations: Moncure Conway enthused, ‘the intricacy and fineness of all this work, constituting, as Fergusson has said, the “picture bible of Buddhism”, are indescribable’ (Conway 1882: 88). The cast was made by the Royal Engineers in 1869, at a cost of £900, in a campaign described by Conway in the rhetoric of the exploration literature of the period:

the party set out with twenty eight tons of materials, chiefly plaster-of-Paris; these were drawn by bullocks one hundred and eighty miles; and in a year three full-size casts of the magnificent structure were completed without a flaw.

(Conway 1882: 87–8)

An account of the workforce underpinned a colonial hierarchy of expertise and authority, offering a kind of microcosm of the colonial ideal, with an efficient military administration and native labour directing colonial production to the home market:

The work has been effected in a most satisfactory manner by a trained corps of sappers of the Royal engineers and a body of nine native workmen under the direction of Lieut H. H. Cole. . . . The cast was completed on February 21st, and being packed in suitable sections, arrived at Liverpool early in June [1869] via Hoshungabad, Bombay and the Suez Canal.

(Art Journal 1870: 65)

Copies of the cast were made at South Kensington and were exhibited in Berlin and Paris. Their political significance was unmistakable: the monument was situated in British India, rediscovered, excavated, photographed and published by officers of the British army; the South Kensington cast was proudly displayed at the imperial centre as a symbol of responsible British custodianship of, and authority over, Indian history and culture. The arrival of the cast was prefaced by a scholarly article in the *Art Journal* (1871: 65–8), and the Sanchi gateways became a recognisable symbol of Indian art, reproduced on the covers of the museum’s publications (Birdwood 1881). Through the presence of such elaborate simulacra, the universal survey museum of South Kensington could claim authority over the cultural terrain of Britain’s Asiatic empire as well as the history of Western art and design. The cast courts were a three-dimensional equivalent of Richards’s imperial archive. From the balcony, the visitor could experience an equivalent of that key trope of imperial travel writing, described by Mary Louise Pratt as ‘the monarch-of-all-I-survey’ description (Pratt 1992: 201). Conway, predictably, rose to the challenge:

Vista upon vista! The eye never reaches the farthest end in the past from which humanity has toiled upwards, its steps traced in victories over
chao, nor does it alight on any historical epoch not related to himself: the artisan, the artist, the scholar, each finds himself gathering out of the dust of ages successive chapters of his own spiritual biography.

(Conway 1882: 25)

The complex history of the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Indian collections is given elsewhere (Skelton 1978), but it is important to recognise the centrality of Indian objects to the South Kensington Museum. Henry Hardy Cole published in 1874 a Catalogue of the Objects of Indian Art Exhibited in the South Kensington Museum, documenting a considerable collection of objects particularly strong in textiles; Cole’s introduction suggested, however, that South Kensington should also assume control of the much larger collections of India Museum, formerly the property of the East India Company and open to the public in crowded conditions at the India Office in Whitehall since 1861. After complex negotiations this was achieved in 1879 and, in 1880, Sir George Birdwood, of the India Office staff, oversaw as Art Referee the arrangement by Caspar Purdon Clarke of the amalgamated Indian collections in new galleries occupying a vacant building separate from the museum on the west side of Exhibition Road. Birdwood evinced a Ruskinian abhorrence of industrialisation foreign to the earlier generations at South Kensington (Mitter 1977: 236ff). For him the beauty of Indian art was the result of its roots in village life: ‘In India, everything is hand wrought, and everything, down to the cheapest toy or earthenware vessel, is more or less a work of art’ (Birdwood 1880: 131–2).

The galleries adopted a didactic, rather than an aesthetic presentation of the objects: photographs and casts of Indian architecture and ‘Sepia drawings of native handcraftsmen’ by Lockwood Kipling were displayed alongside original objects. Kipling’s picturesque vignettes, which were reproduced in the museum’s Portfolio of Indian Art (1881), according to Birdwood,

have been objects of particular interest, during the last ten years, at the Indian Museum. They are from life and being rendered with perfect truthfulness, and skill, they serve to give a remarkable reality to the Museum in which it would be wanting without them, as an exhibition of the industrial arts of India.

(Birdwood 1881: Preface)

These images, while replicating familiar tropes of racial difference, indicate a response to Indian handicraft skills among the Arts and Crafts group redolent of a critique not only of industrialisation but also of the imperial project itself. The anxiety of Birdwood, Kipling and others about the effects of mechanisation and industrialisation at the imperial centre, fuelled by their readings of critics such as Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris, led them to invert the standard account of imperialism’s triumphal technological transformation of ‘backward’ colonised lands:

We are beginning in Europe to understand what things may be done by machinery, and what must be done by hand work, if art is to be of the slightest consideration in the matter. [To introduce machinery into India
... would inevitably throw the traditional arts of the country into the same confusion of principles... which has for three generations been the destruction of decorative art and of middle class taste in England...

(Birdwood 1880: 134–5)

Unlike Owen Jones’s adaptation of geometric ornament into mainstream industrial design, the presence of hand-crafted Indian objects in South Kensington now seemed to expose by comparison the shortcomings of the modern industrial object.

**Imperial spectacle**

Despite this note of critique, from the mid-1870s onward, the museum followed more general cultural trends and evinced an increasingly populist and even rampant imperialism. Henry Cole’s successor as Superintendent after his retirement in 1873, was Philip Cunliffe-Owen who, the *Dictionary of National Biography* records, ‘never professed any special enthusiasm for art’ but was a capable administrator of temporary exhibitions, and these became the main focus of the museum’s attention. Before discussing the greatest of these, the spectacular Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, it is important to acknowledge that the museum had never eschewed popular imperial display at any time in its history.

There are earlier examples of temporary displays relating directly to colonial military action. One, which brought forth press responses couched in language of violent triumphalism, included the royal regalia of King Theodore of Abyssinia, captured during a military campaign in 1867 (Pakenham 1991: 470–1). An essayist in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* wrote of contemplating ‘at South Kensington... this show-case full of victorious trophies, spolia opima of our late enemy, his Majesty King Theodore’ and mocked ‘a blue robe hung with what look like extinguishers... tinsel and royal rubbish’; yet a portrait of ‘Theodore’s head as he lay defunct and bloody on the hill-top at Magdala’ drew some respect for the ‘princely thought of savage kingliness [and]... air of unsubdued pride upon his jaws and lips’ (Arnold 1868). Twenty years later, it was still felt to be worth recording in the *Museum Guide* that the ‘vestments and garments’ had been ‘captured during the Abyssinian campaign under Lord Napier of Magdala’ (*Guide to the South Kensington Museum* 1888: 46). Such displays made no contribution to the museum’s original mission in relation to design and social reform but rather offered the Victorian public the spectacle of the remains of a defeated enemy whose perceived status as a racial and cultural inferior was implicit in the mode of display....

The exhibition of some African objects seized during a bloody campaign in 1873–4 against the Ashanti leader Kofi Kari-Kari, described by Robinson and Gallagher as ‘a sharp act of supremacy’ (1981: 31), proved enormously popular. Through the reporting of H. M. Stanley, the war with ‘King Koffee’ became well known to a wide public. Some of the objects, notably ‘King
Koffee’s Umbrella’, remained on permanent display, causing Conway to remark in 1882 ‘These African trophies are unpleasantly reminiscent of the worst phase of British policy’ (Conway 1882: 71). Undoubtedly the South Kensington authorities welcomed the extra publicity gained by such exhibits, even if the museum did pride itself on being ‘the ripest fruit of the long Victorian and victorious era of Peace’ (Conway 1882: 72).

The exhibition in 1876 of the gifts from the Prince of Wales’s tour of India was overtly political in intention, as The Times made clear:

It is understood that HRH desired . . . [that] by the sight of this rare collection of Oriental manufactures . . . the people of this country might have the opportunity of judging for themselves . . . the very great political value of many of the presents as proofs of loyalty of some of the most famous of the historical sovereign families and tribal chiefs in India to the British government.

(The Times 22 June 1876)

Ultimately, however, The Times correspondent was unimpressed, regretting that the collection is overloaded with objects which would be very interesting in a museum but are certainly incongruous among the treasures of a prince. . . . The whole contents of an Indian bazaar have been emptied out of the hold of the Serapis.

(The Times 22 June 1876)

Some of these objects were reproduced in the museum’s Portfolio of Indian Art (Birdwood 1881: Part 12), but in most cases their significance was political rather than aesthetic, and they appeared in the exhibitions as tokens of loyalty to the heir to Queen Victoria, newly created Empress of India, rather than examples of Indian manufactures.

In addition to its traditional function of providing a storehouse of designs and techniques in the decorative arts, it was believed that if the South Kensington Museum had an encyclopaedic collection of Indian goods and manufactures, importers and potential customers could examine specimens in the museum and then apply to purchase similar items from the makers in India. In this case, specific information would be needed about the source of each item. As a museum memorandum noted:

What importers and art students equally desire to know is the exact place of production of a particular manufacture. It is not enough to say that it is Indian . . . the merchant who desires to import Indian articles of art interest can do nothing unless he knows the exact town of their manufacture.

(Skelton 1978: 301)

The museum came to be understood almost as a giant three-dimensional mail order catalogue for Indian manufactures, and an aggressive policy of Indian acquisitions was undertaken in order to ensure the comprehensiveness of the collection. Caspar Purdon Clarke, later Director, was sent to India to make
purchases from a sum of £2000 from the museum’s funds, plus an extra £3000 provided by the India Office. He returned from India in 1883 ‘having collected a vast number of objects, useful and ornamental, great and small,’ The Times noted, including

specimens of pottery, metal-work, papier-maché, lacquerware, inlaid sandal-wood and ivory, embroideries, printed cottons, glass vessels &c. His best acquisitions are built into the great court and are principally of a modern and architectural character . . . [including] a complete wooden house front, lavishly painted and somewhat gaudily coloured.

(The Times 21 May 1883)

Such a lavish array of colonial spoils certainly buttressed the museum’s claim to encyclopaedic status, but they had of course been appropriated from their original context. Amid the euphoria of Purdon Clark’s campaign, The Times sounded a note of dissent: ‘Pleasant though it may be to have these original relics at South Kensington, is not their removal a veritable vandalism – in short, a defiance of the system of using plaster casts?’ (The Times 21 May 1883). This illustrates the dilemma of the imperial collector, balancing the desire or need to present colonial objects at the centre and the wish to be seen as a just and benevolent power in the colonies.

In addition to building up the permanent collection, Cunliffe-Owen organised a highly successful series of exhibitions on the large site west of Exhibition Road, culminating in the key event of South Kensington’s popular imperialism, the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, which was attended by 5.5 million people (Mackenzie 1984: 101–2). It opened in a blaze of ceremonial glory, a part of the invented traditions of empire (Fig. 2.4). The Graphic carried a large engraving of the Queen, also Empress of India since 1876, depicted ‘twixt East and West’, processing through an architecture of colonial simulacra, and standing at a fulcrum of race, history and culture. The catalogue featured colour-coded maps of the exhibition and of the world, with British possessions in pink, offering the visitor the chance to process through the empire in miniature, just as Professor Omnium suggested. The exhibition was a massive exercise in publicity for the imperial ideal and a bonanza of national self-aggrandisement:

No alien, of whatever race he may be – Teuton, Gaul, Tartar or Mongol – can walk through the marvellous collection at South Kensington and look at the innumerable variations of our national Union Jack, without feeling the enormous influence that England has had, and still has, over every part of the globe.

(The Graphic 8 May 1886)

The Graphic’s commemorative map (The Graphic: 24 July 1886) demonstrated the diverse racial types of the empire and a key feature of the Indian court was a display of models of ethnic types made from body casts, simulated figures providing popular entertainment under the guise of ethnology, and offering a grotesque reprise of the high-minded cast collecting from ancient monuments in the 1870s. The press admired the ‘lifelike casts of natives – all, be it said,
taken actually from life’ which indicated ‘the immense variety of... race and customs... found in our Indian Empire. Not even the most experienced traveller can look upon the stalwart Sikh and the comparatively puny Andaman Islander, without feeling this’ (*The Graphic*, 8 May 1886).

The exhibition was entered through the spectacular Indian section, access to courts representing specific areas and provinces provided from a central ‘Provincial Art Ware Court’ stacked with objects of Indian manufacture. Once again, Empire was commodified and reduced to the sum of its material productions. At the heart of the exhibition lay the ‘Indian Palace’ constructed by Purdon Clarke using diverse elements including windows cast from buildings in the city of Fatehpur-Sikri. Even the loyal *Graphic* was forced to acknowledge the bizarre hybridity of Clarke’s ‘Palace’:

‘A Hindu structure is made the entrance to a Mahomedan *serai* and Sikh modern carved woodwork has been adapted in the interior fittings of an ancient Mahomedan palace, and, still more incongruous, old English stained windows have been added to this aggregation of ideas.

(*The Graphic*, 15 May 1886)

The Palace’s ‘Durbar Hall’, in which the Prince of Wales held receptions during the exhibition, was perhaps the most elaborate aspect of his design. Superbly
carved by the Punjabi craftsmen, Muhamma Maksh and Juma, it remains, like the Gwalior Gateway and the Screen of Ram Singh, a somewhat unhappy hybrid of British demands and Indian workmanship. Expensive, political in conception, contingent and impermanent in execution, and finally useless, the room's melancholy grandeur marks it out as the ultimate example of the official colonial object (Fig. 2.5).¹

So successful had been South Kensington's imperial jamboree that the Prince of Wales proposed a permanent building on the site to commemorate the Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887:

It appears to me that no more suitable memorial could be suggested than an Institute which should represent the Arts, Manufacture and Commerce of the Queen's Colonial and Indian Empire. Such an institution would . . . illustrate the progress already made during Her Majesty's reign in the Colonial and Indian Dominions, while it would record year by year the development of the Empire in the arts of civilization.

(The Times, 20 September 1886)

Figure 2.5 The Durbar Hall. Originally created for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in 1886, this hall was re-installed in the home of Lord Brassey, on Park Lane in London, before reaching its final resting place in Hastings Museum and Art Gallery. (Photograph: Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.)
Despite these fine words, no one seemed quite sure what an Imperial Institute might be for. The financiers of the City of London, conceiving of it as primarily a commercial centre, argued against South Kensington as the site. However, South Kensington had become so embedded in the symbolic geography of London as a point of intersection between empire and scholarship, between learning and display, education and entertainment, that the new Imperial Institute was erected there, to a grandiose design by T. E. Colcutt (Fig 2.6). The laying of the foundation stone provided the opportunity for one of the greatest of all imperial ceremonies, attended by 10,000 people on 4 July 1887; it was emulated, however, by the opening of the building, in brilliant sunshine on 10 May 1893; which was attended by 25,000. The Institute’s functions were listed as being: to display Imperial produce; to illustrate the Empire’s economic growth; to collect and disseminate commercial and other information; to hold special exhibitions; promote commercial and industrial education in the colonies and ‘to advance systematic colonisation’. As John Mackenzie notes in a witty discussion of the Institute, it failed in each of these respects (Mackenzie 1984: 122–46).

The Institute was physically adjacent to the existing India Museum and the so-called Link gallery ran through the new building, joining the Indian museum with the Chinese, Japanese and Near Eastern collections. Although never
formally a part of the Imperial Institute, these collections formed a spectacular display of non-Western art in a complex closely identified with the imperialist policies of late-Victorian Britain. However, parts of these collections also remained on the main site across Exhibition Road, where, increasingly, they were separated by media and integrated with the Western collections. The tension between rival taxonomies – culture and history versus materials and techniques – persists in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s displays to this day, where European and Islamic objects are distributed throughout the material-based departments (Textiles, Metalwork, etc.) but separate departments administer Indian and South East Asian and Far Eastern collections.

The demise of the South Kensington Museum coincided with the Queen’s last public appearance on 17 May 1899 when, amid great pomp and circumstance, she laid the foundation stone for Aston Webb’s grandiose new building and renamed it ‘the Victoria and Albert Museum’. When the new building opened in 1909 its role was confirmed as the most spectacular repository of the material culture of empire, though the redisplay under the patrician eye of Sir Cecil Harcourt Smith toned down the didactic mission, links with populist forms of display and jingoistic tone which had characterised its recent history.

This chapter has emphasised the significance of the interaction between buildings, objects and texts for an understanding of the museum as a cultural formation, and suggested that the South Kensington Museum occupied a central location in the symbolic geographies of the British capital, the nation and the empire. By 1909 the green fields of Brompton, purchased by the free trade reformists of 1851, had been transformed into a matrix of imperial archives, its geography blocked out by institutions whose purview extended across the discursive spaces not only of art, design and material culture, but also technology, natural history and geography. Today, the empire has gone, but the archives still remain, fluctuating as ever between the popular and the scholarly, desperately starved of that funding which the empire was supposed to supply, and awaiting a fundamental reassessment of the role of imperial institutions in the post-colonial period.

Note

1 Adapted after the exhibition to provide a smoking room for Lord Brassey’s Park Lane residence, it is now permanently installed in the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.