

India on Display: Nationalism, Transnationalism and Collaboration, 1964-86

Claire Wintle

Exhibitions have often been seen as representations of the nation, used as crucial tools with which to design and promote national identity. Exhibitions appear to unify diverse objects and subjects through their ‘disciplinary’ display mechanisms and ‘civilizing rituals’; they shape one nation by excluding or differencing the ‘other’.¹ Benedict Anderson’s seminal text on how the nation is imagined through the material instruments of cultural production features the museum as a key legitimising form of ‘state regalia’.² Exhibitions of the nation abroad, often requiring the sharing of expertise, funds and collections, have also consistently been viewed as a useful way of bringing together countries for mutual (but discrete) national benefit: from the Great Exhibition of 1851, to contemporary biennales and expos, exhibitions are seen by their organisers and their critics alike as forms of cultural diplomacy where the nation is defined, revealed and revered.³

After Indian independence in 1947, during the Cold War, exhibitions that included some form of international exchange were especially valued in diplomatic relations between India and the United States. India, under the premierships of Jawaharlal Nehru (1947-1964) and Indira Gandhi (1966-1977, 1980-1984), simultaneously

¹ Classic texts that make these arguments include: Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, Routledge, London, 1995; Annie E Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late-Victorian and Edwardian England*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994; Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Routledge, London, 1992.

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, Verso, London, 1991, pp. 163-185.

³ Eg: JA Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999; Robert A Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty: Exhibiting American Culture Abroad in the 1950s*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1997; Tim Winter, ‘Auto-Exoticism: Cultural Display at the Shanghai Expo’, *Journal of Material Culture*, vol 18, no 1, 2012, pp 69–90.

sought to project ideological non-alignment and foster economic entanglements with the US; the US hoped to create in India an economically and politically stable nation state with Western sympathies in order to contain Soviet encroachment.⁴ Exhibitions of ‘India’ in the US and, to a much lesser extent, exhibitions of ‘the US’ in India, attempted to support these overarching diplomatic concerns.⁵ Employing the language of the nation in her own writing, Susan Bean has convincingly argued that the motivation behind many exhibitions of Indian art in the US in the second half of the twentieth century was ‘to build and enrich relations between India and the United States and to assist a developing [Indian] nation.’⁶ Critical attention to the ‘politics of display’ in such exhibitions has also encouraged an emphasis on the bounded nation. Usually incorporating material derived from one country (rather than transcultural or regional collections), and commonly subject to the orientalising or self-orientalising approaches of their curators and audiences, exhibitions featuring Indian art and design in the US have often been understood as ‘traveling showcase[s] for *Indian* culture’.⁷ Even where these exhibitions are understood as representing spectral, plural and shifting ideas of ‘India’ (as they so often do), they are understood as representing a single national entity.

⁴ Robert J McMahon, *The Cold War on the Periphery: The United States, India and Pakistan*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994; David C Engerman, ‘South Asia and the Cold War’, in Robert J McMahon, ed, *The Cold War in the Third World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

⁵ Farhan Sirajul Karim, ‘Modernity Transfers: The MoMA and Postcolonial India’, in Duanfang Lu, ed, *Third World Modernism: Architecture, Development and Identity*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2011; Elise Hodson, ‘Exhibiting Independent India: Textiles and Ornamental Arts at the Museum of Modern Art in New York’, in Penny Sparke and Fiona Fisher, ed, *The Routledge Companion to Design Studies*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2016; Claire Wintle, ‘Displaying Independent India Abroad: Nationalism, Cultural Diplomacy, and Collaboration at the Nehru Memorial Exhibition, 1965–2015’, in Glenn Hooper, ed, *Heritage at the Interface: Interpretation and Identity*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2018.

⁶ Susan S Bean, ‘Post-Independence Indian Art and the American Art World, 1953–1970’, in M Sharma and P Kaimai, *Indian Painting: Essays in Honour of BN Goswamy*, Mapin, Ahmedabad, 2014, p 388

⁷ Hodson, ‘Exhibiting Independent India’, op cit, p 505, emphasis added. See also Tapati Guha-Thakurta, ‘“Our Gods, Their Museums”: The Contrary Careers of India’s Art Objects’, *Art History*, vol 30, no 4, 2008, pp 628–57.

Yet as Partha Chatterjee has noted, modern life operates in a ‘heterogeneous, unevenly dense’ reality: in the formation of the nation, ‘politics... does not mean the same thing to all people.’⁸ Further, as Andrew J. Rotter has argued, ‘there is nothing sacrosanct about the conceptual boxes built around nations’; in diplomatic relations, ‘the realities of human interaction and decision making’ often rupture national boundaries.⁹ Indeed, exhibitions abroad require human interaction beyond the nation.¹⁰ At the very least, they involve negotiating practicalities with a host venue; in some cases, they engender acts of close collaboration, with curators, designers and administrators working together to negotiate loans, collections care and narrative framework.

This article will explore three particular exhibitions that represented different versions of ‘India’ in the United States in the post-independence period but that all challenge the neat relationship between such events and the nation: ‘Jawaharlal Nehru: His Life and His India’, Union Carbide Building, New York, 1965; ‘Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village’, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968 and ‘The Costumes of Royal India’, the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1986. As we shall see, all these exhibitions of ‘India’ abroad were embedded in the nation, but were also forged through personal friendship and professional associations that transcended the state. Each was a transnational event,

⁸ Partha Chatterjee, ‘Anderson's Utopia’, *Diacritics*, vol 29, no 4, 1999, pp 131–132

⁹ Andrew Jon Rotter, ‘Culture, the Cold War, and the Third World’, in Robert J McMahon, ed, *The Cold War in the Third World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p 159

¹⁰ Here, I am reminded of Rebecca M Brown’s careful attention to the ‘minute, small durations’ of viewing, making and performing at the US Festival of India, 1985-1986, and how these ‘moments... take place because of and help to shape what seem like larger flows of money, information, political dialogue, fashion and commerce.’ In her preference for exploring the temporality embodied by artists, performers, visitors and objects, Brown avoids ‘trying to reconstruct curatorial motivations’. It is my contention that curatorial actions and intentions provide a useful point of entry into exploring how localised, more intimate forms of making not only support grand, high-level politics, but contradict them too (Rebecca M. Brown, *Displaying Time: The Many Temporalities of the Festival of India*, Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2017, pp 5–8).

co-produced by US and India-based curators, designers and scholars. Although state actors were commonly involved – sponsoring, commissioning, authorising and endorsing – at the crucial level of design and production, these exhibitions align entirely with Steven Vertovec’s definition of the transnational as ‘sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders’.¹¹ As Saloni Mathur has pointed out, the practitioners involved in these types of exhibitions were commonly ‘figures in an international art world... who possessed a spirited sense of mission, simultaneously nationalist and internationalist, in relation to the visual arts.’¹² I would further suggest that, to varying degrees, they were also cosmopolitans, in the sense that Ulf Hannerz describes, possessing a ‘cultural competence’, ‘a built-up skill in manoeuvring [the world] more or less expertly with a particular system of meanings and meaningful forms’.¹³ Acknowledging the national in Mathur’s description, we might further term them ‘cosmopolitan patriots’, a term coined by Kwame Anthony Appiah, where an individual can be ‘attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities’, and still invested in a wider world.¹⁴

¹¹ Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, Routledge, London, 2009, p 3

¹² Saloni Mathur, ‘Charles and Ray Eames in India’, *Art Journal*, vol 70, no 1, 2011, p 41

¹³ Ulf Hannerz, ‘Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture’, in Mike Featherstone, ed, *Global Culture*, Sage, London, 1990, p 239

¹⁴ Kwame Anthony Appiah, ‘Cosmopolitan Patriots’, in Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, ed, *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998, p 91. I am also influenced by Nancy Adajania’s attention to the ‘non-aligned alignments’ of NID designer Dashrath Patel (1927–2010), and Sonal Khullar’s description of Indian modernist artists as having ‘worldly affiliations’ in which national belonging is essential and not subverted or superseded by connections to an international artistic community (Nancy Adajania, ‘Dashrath Patel’s Non-Aligned Alignments’, *Seminar*, vol 659, July, 2014, pp 76–81; Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930–1990*, University of California Press, Oakland, 2015, p 13). Cosmopolitanism has been defined in many, sometimes contradictory ways (see Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, ‘Introduction: Conceiving Cosmopolitanism’, in Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, ed, *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002 for a useful overview), but here Hannerz’s framing of the term as an ‘intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences’ is useful (Hannerz, ‘Cosmopolitans and Locals’, op cit, p 239).

Hannerz's definition of cosmopolitanism is particularly useful because it attends to the 'built-up skill of manoeuvring' and the 'meaningful forms' engendered in the cosmopolitan condition. It is my contention that transnational exhibitions between India and the US were both symbolic and constitutive of the 'built-up skill of manoeuvring' possessed by their cosmopolitan curators, and that the objects that these practitioners attended to were the 'meaningful forms' that they shared. Exhibition making and the material culture of the nation were critical arenas in which the transnational, cosmopolitan identities of the post-independence art and design world were forged. Seventy years after Indian independence, a close attention to the practices of exhibition making, documented in oral testimonies and in the archives of government, museum and designers in the US and India, allows us to examine the construction and constitution of these cosmopolitan patriot identities. In analysing the production of transnational exhibitions of the nation, we can interrogate the nature of Indian nationalism, and test the limits of the relationship between the nation and exhibitions.

Jawaharlal Nehru: His Life and His India

The international touring exhibition 'Jawaharlal Nehru: His Life and His India' can be cast as a classic example of the nation on display.¹⁵ Commissioned by the Indian government to celebrate the life of India's recently deceased inaugural prime minister, the exhibition emphasised Nehru's heroic leadership and nationalist vision, while articulating the story of India's fight for freedom and the glory of its independence. Panels on Nehru's childhood, schooling and marriage were interspersed with others

¹⁵ Some of the ideas discussed here are developed from material included in Wintle, 'Displaying Independent India Abroad', op cit.

detailing the fast-paced political events that framed his life (Figures 1 and 2). A combination of three-dimensional, object-rich ‘pavilions’ and two-dimensional panels comprising over 800 photographs and text drawn from the speeches, private letters and published works of Nehru himself covered subjects such as ‘The India into which he was born’, ‘The tenth anniversary of the Republic’ and ‘An independent foreign policy’. The exhibition also included a separate ‘History Wall’, a multilayered horizontal timeline progressing from 1880 to 1964, where events in Nehru’s life were juxtaposed with international political and cultural events in order to demonstrate their simultaneous and interrelated nature. In line with Nehru’s confident global outlook and wider programme of enlisting designers, scientists, engineers and architects from Europe and North America to help build Indian modernity, the US designers Charles and Ray Eames, were commissioned to produce the exhibition.¹⁶ The Eameses and others from their design practice collaborated with staff and students at the new National Institute of Design (NID) in Ahmedabad. The show opened on January 1965 and ran for three months in the elevated foyer of the Union Carbide Corporation’s building in New York. The building was the headquarters of the US chemical giant that was investing heavily in India’s ‘Green Revolution’ during this period, and a well-known example of post-war innovation in office and skyscraper design. As such, in its links to technics and modernity, the venue was especially fitting for an exhibition of an Indian nation keen to represent its modernising capabilities.¹⁷ After New York, ‘Nehru’ forged a long career negotiating

¹⁶ Mathur, ‘Charles and Ray Eames in India’, op cit, p 44

¹⁷ As Mathur points out, the link between Nehru’s modernisation plans for India, the exhibition, and the Union Carbide Company soured following a catastrophic industrial accident in 1984 when an undetected toxic gas leak at Union Carbide’s pesticide plant in Bhopal killed almost four thousand people and permanently injured tens of thousands more (ibid, p 49).

Indian foreign policy objectives as it toured Europe, Africa, Asia, the Americas and the USSR throughout the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁸

From the US side too, the exhibition can be read in terms of national identity and interest. At the opening of the exhibition, the US Vice-President evoked the Cold War context, identifying the exhibition's attention to India's democratic process and emphasising the US stake in it.¹⁹ The participation of the Eames Office in 'Nehru', and NID's establishment more generally, had been financed by the Ford Foundation, the biggest private US philanthropic foundation of the Cold War era. In some ways, these philanthropic funds for NID – and the wider program of support for post-independence Indian 'modernisation' of which they were a part – were a soft power initiative related to US Cold War diplomatic strategies. Often understood as 'conscious instruments of covert US foreign policy', the work of US philanthropic foundations like the Ford Foundation has been termed 'informal imperialism', 'broadly congruent with [US] national and state objectives', if not specifically directed by them.²⁰ In as much as 'Nehru' was implicated in these nation-bound development discourses, it was an exhibition – in part – of the Indian and US nations.

Yet the Nehru exhibition also transcended these nationalist discourses. Elsewhere I have argued that the ways in which the US government infused these development funds in India is complex: in the case of NID, Ford Foundation representatives were led by designers and other cultural and scientific elites in India, Europe, and the US to

¹⁸ For more on the national and diplomatic contexts of the 'Nehru' exhibition, and for a history of this 'afterlife' in these various countries up to 2015, see Wintle, 'Displaying Independent India Abroad', op cit.

¹⁹ Note from SK Roy, Indian Consul General, New York, to IJ Bahadur Singh, Joint Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, on the opening of the exhibition in New York, 29 January 1965, XPP/305/4/64, Vol. I, Extra Publicity Section, Records Management Section, Ministry of External Affairs, National Archives of India

²⁰ Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, New Press, New York, 1999, p 116; Tim Livsey, 'The University Age: Development and Decolonisation in Nigeria, 1930 to 1966', PhD Dissertation, Birkbeck College, University of London, 2014, p 253

form alliances and viewpoints that were substantially liberated from government influence.²¹ Here, it is further possible to argue that for the designers involved, both at the Eames Office and NID, 'Nehru' was a collaborative, transcultural product that merged distinct 'national' approaches, and registered beyond the realms of political posturing.

'Nehru' was devised in the LA workshops of the Eames Office and finalised and constructed over three months in NID's workshops in Ahmedabad. Part of the reason for assembling the exhibition at NID was related to the Eameses' desire to impart their knowledge to their Indian colleagues.²² Yet exhibition design is an iterative, responsive process in which designers and curators react to their environments, materials and colleagues. The Eameses' American modernist approach to exhibition design (itself influenced by European émigrés²³), and the specific form of 'Nehru', were shaped through their working relationship with the things and people they encountered at NID.

Deborah Sussman, a graphic designer with the Eames Office at the time, has described the ways in which she and her colleagues had to come to terms with the production capabilities found in India in the 1960s: 'the technology, the communication systems, the pace of life, everything was different and difficult'.²⁴ The exhibition's subject matter meant that much of the required expertise was located in India: the Eameses sought advice from those who had known Nehru, and relied

²¹ Claire Wintle, 'Diplomacy and the Design School: The Ford Foundation and India's National Institute of Design', *Design and Culture*, vol 9, no 2, 2017, forthcoming

²² H Kumar Vyas, 'Rock Solid: Foundation of Industrial Design', *Pool*, vol 12, 2011, p 12; Eames Demetrios, *An Eames Primer*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2001, p 31

²³ Pat Kirkham, *Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century*, MIT Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995, pp 266–270

²⁴ Deborah Sussman, in a telephone interview with Maggie MacTiernan and Elise Hodson, January 2008, transcribed in Maggie MacTiernan, "'The India Photographs": A Case Study in Eames Photography', MA thesis, Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, 2009, pp 92–99

heavily on the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's HY Sharada Prasad, who led the research into and editing of Nehru's written word for display.²⁵ Founding NID faculty member Dashrath Patel and research assistant Haku Shah both contributed their knowledge of Indian craft production and photographs to the project.²⁶

The informal, interactive space of the design school also meant that opportunities for serendipitous conversations with many at NID, ranging from managers, designers and students to visiting politicians and those who had experienced India's freedom movement and Nehru's premiership, were in abundance and had the potential to direct the US team in profound ways. Figures 3 and 4 demonstrate how working models of the exhibition's layout and panels covered the tables and walls of the workshop. Models are classically iterative devices, and were regularly used in Eames Office projects as experimental and interactive tools allowing various members of the office to 'try an idea on for size'.²⁷ The wall panels and 'history wall' began their lives as empty mock-ups to be slowly layered with potential photographs, names of events and quotations. Figures 3, 4 and 5 demonstrate the dynamic nature of the information, temporarily positioned, removed, rearranged and finalised as research progressed (and as visitors and designers moved through the workshop). The potential for multi-author influence and collaboration is clear. In their investigation of collaboration in craft, Alice Kettle, Amanda Ravetz and Helen Felcey identify the chaos and risk, but also the 'new potential' supported by collaboration in which 'the invitation to share practice requires constant *repositioning*'.²⁸ In the making of 'Nehru', the creative

²⁵ National Institute of Design, *50 Years of the National Institute of Design, 1961-2011*, National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, 2013, pp 74–77

²⁶ See various working documents in 'Nehru Project Documents' file, Box 45, Charles Eames and Ray Eames papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁷ Demetrios, *An Eames Primer*, op cit, p 206

²⁸ Amanda Ravetz, Alice Kettle, and Helen Felcey, 'Introduction: Collaboration through Craft', in Amanda Ravetz, Alice Kettle and Helen Felcey, ed, *Collaboration through Craft*, Berg, London, 2013, p 20, emphasis added

project of the exhibition provided an arena in which a transcultural shared creative practice emerged and involved the ‘repositioning’ of national identity.

For some of those involved, the exhibition was valued not (only) as an opportunity for national development, but as an opportunity to connect with the design world’s most eminent authorities.²⁹ The designers who worked together on ‘Nehru’ formed relationships that would continue for the rest of their lives. The Eameses’ archive at the Library of Congress contains many warm letters between Charles and Ray and those involved in the Nehru exhibition at all levels of its production. The Eameses’ LA office hosted several NID designers during the 1960s and 1970s, and, in turn, NID welcomed both Charles and Ray back to Ahmedabad on multiple occasions with great enthusiasm. In her nuanced discussion of the Eameses’ encounter with NID’s Dashrath Patel, Nancy Adajania has suggested that friendship allowed for a breakdown in the ‘self versus other worldview’ engendered by the Cold War.³⁰ In the case of Patel and the Eameses (and we could add many more examples besides), friendship, despite ‘performances of nationality’, ‘could open up the unmarked space of non-aligned alignments.’³¹

Here, we also see that these friendships beyond borders were forged through the very process of exhibition making. H Kumar Vyas, NID faculty designer on the ‘Nehru’ project, has spoken about his experiences working with colleagues from the Eames Office, associating professional status and the act of making the teak and brass exhibition structures in Figures 1 and 2 with an emerging cross-cultural friendship:

²⁹ See enthusiasm for working with specific, named designers in Vyas, ‘Rock Solid: op cit, p 12; MP Ranjan, ‘I Walked with Dashrath Patel’, *Pool*, vol 6, 2010, p 3; and Vikas Satwalekar, student participant on ‘Nehru’ and former NID executive director, in an interview with the author, 4 April 2015, Mumbai

³⁰ Adajania, ‘Dashrath Patel’s Non-Aligned Alignments’, op cit, p 81

³¹ Ibid

I was personally involved mostly in *putting things together* along with Bob Staples. We were the only two senior persons. I came to like Bob very much.³²

Similarly, on her return to NID in 1979, Ray Eames spoke of the way in which ‘the relations of our people’ to those in Ahmedabad ‘had a profound influence on our work because we knew how difficult it was, how it could be done, and how the relations of people became so important.’³³

Indeed, crises in production (evidence of ‘how difficult it was’) seem to have had especially profound effects in terms of building relationships beyond national divides. Vikas Satwalekar, a Visual Communications student at NID at the time, recalled the lonely experience of realising his mistake when the photograph he was transferring to a display panel became misaligned, and how practical assistance, again from Robert Staples, created an association between design knowledge and personal indebtedness:

I was alone sitting in that place and Bob came up... I was looking at this, I said, ‘I’ve made a mistake, it’s no longer aligned, it’s stuck and I will spoil the panel if I try and take it out.’ ‘Oh not to worry; don’t worry; I’ll show you how to do it’... He got some paint thinner, took a ball of cotton, wet it, and dabbed it on the photograph. It melted the glue... everything was gone! ...So magical, I tell you, I have never forgotten that!³⁴

Satwalekar also remembers Sussman ‘tearing her hair out’ over the difficulties of having to work with apprentices at NID on a professional commission to a tight deadline.³⁵ Yet after the show, they maintained contact and in 1978 he stayed with her when visiting the Eames Office in LA. Staples visited both Vyas and Satwalekar at

³² H Kumar Vyas, in an interview with the author, 26 March 2015, Ahmedabad, emphasis added

³³ Ray Eames, address to the National Institute of Design, 1989, cited in National Institute of Design, *50 Years...*, op cit, p 74

³⁴ Satwalekar, interview, op cit

³⁵ *ibid*

their homes in 2015, when they were able to discuss these memories of making together.

As David Gauntlett has argued, ‘making is connecting’; it is a social activity with a binding capacity.³⁶ Personal relationships forged between the Indian and US designers were shaped by the time-intensive nature of their craft, the spatial syntax of the design school and cemented through the social, connective potential of making. That the NID team developed new skills in a climate of international influence chimed well with Nehru’s intentions for NID as a site of national industrial progress mindful of global innovation. The exhibition itself placed ‘India’ on display. Yet at the level of everyday experience and in the exhibition as process, ‘Nehru’ was an opportunity to practise cosmopolitanism as ‘a state of readiness’, as ‘a personal ability to make one’s way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting’,³⁷ in this case on the discipline of design and through making. It was about individual professional development and personal connections rather than the articulation of national ideologies.

Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village

‘Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village’ was the first major exhibition to showcase village and *adivasi* (tribal) devotional objects from across India as ‘art’ in the US. Held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art between 20 January and 26 February 1968, 470 handmade objects of clay, cloth, wood and metal from across India were displayed in three main rooms, accompanied by large black and white photomurals

³⁶ David Gauntlett, *Making Is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity, from DIY and Knitting to Youtube and Web 2.0.*, Polity, Cambridge, 2011, p 2

³⁷ Hannerz, ‘Cosmopolitans and Locals’, op cit, p 239

and arranged by broad geographical region. Exhibits were included ‘on the basis of their artistic quality’ with their formal characteristics emphasised against a white backdrop in sparse, modernist galleries (Figure 6).³⁸ The renowned historian of Indian art, Stella Kramrisch, conceived the exhibition. Born into a privileged Jewish family in Austria in 1896, Kramrisch trained at the University of Vienna before taking up lectureships in India at Rabindranath Tagore’s university at Santiniketan (from 1921) and Calcutta University (1923-1950). In 1950 she was appointed visiting professor of South Asian art at the University of Pennsylvania, taking an additional curatorial role at the Philadelphia Museum in 1954.

Art historian Katherine Hacker has explored how the object selection and arrangement of ‘Unknown India’ created a homogenised and essentialised view of India that can be situated in an orientalising framework derived from Kramrisch’s Austrian training, but also in her appreciation of Indian nationalist discourses.³⁹ In her choice to fix ‘indigenous cultures in a “traditional” mode’ through display, and in her emphasis on the idea of the ‘village’, Hacker argues that Kramrisch drew on and participated in the ‘utopic and romantic visions’ promulgated by the Indian nationalists with whom she had associated in pre-independence Bengal.⁴⁰ In this analysis of Kramrisch’s affiliations, ‘Unknown India’ becomes shaped by a complex but persistently nation-focused series of ideologies.

In Hacker’s useful attention to the impact of ‘India’ in the exhibition, she also emphasises the importance of Kramrisch’s Indian interlocutors.⁴¹ Indeed, a host of scholars and collectors in India contributed to the exhibition, loaning their objects and

³⁸ Stella Kramrisch cited in Katherine F Hacker, ‘Displaying a Tribal Imaginary: Known and Unknown India’, *Museum Anthropology*, vol 23, no 3, 2000, p 14. See Hacker’s article (pp 13–17) for a close reading of the display techniques of ‘Unknown India’.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp 16–17

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p 19

⁴¹ *Ibid*

expertise. The most significant figure in this Indian network was Haku Shah, the courier who accompanied the objects from India to the US. In her negotiations with the Indian Ministry of Education, and in order to secure the many Indian loans that would enrich the exhibition, Kramrisch had agreed to work with an Indian 'young scholar' appointed by the ministry who would supervise the packing and transport of the objects.⁴² Shah corresponded closely with Kramrisch after his appointment in January 1967, liaising with private collectors and public institutions across India to photograph objects and to obtain measurements for the designers. He prepared objects ready for shipping and arranged insurance and customs documentation.

In fact, Shah, a promising curator and scholar in his own right, took on further responsibilities beyond this official appointment. Even before the Indian government's requirements were made clear, the two scholars had already been working together on the exhibition. Shah was a specialist in the art of rural communities in Gujarat having grown up in Valod, a village where his family worked closely with adivasi groups.⁴³ He had worked closely with the influential cultural administrator and scholar Pupul Jayakar and participated in the development of the Indian government-sponsored network of Weavers' Service Centres intended to preserve, extend and market the skills of handloom weavers. He had also previously conducted fieldwork across Western India, contributed to numerous publications and exhibitions (including 'Nehru'), and developed and deployed his knowledge in his role as research assistant at NID.⁴⁴ Shah met Kramrisch when she came to give a talk

⁴² Letter from Stella Kramrisch to SJ Nanda, Private Secretary to the Minister of Education, 9 June 1966, IND Box 11, 'Unknown India Correspondence M', Philadelphia Museum of Art

⁴³ Jani Indukumar, 'The Living Spirit of the Art', in Eberhard Fischer, ed, *Invisible Order: Tribute to Haku Shah*, Art Indus, New Delhi, 1999, p 58

⁴⁴ Eberhard Fischer, 'Hakubhai', in Eberhard Fischer, ed, *Invisible Order: Tribute to Haku Shah*, Art Indus, New Delhi, 1999, p 17. The publications included: Joan Erikson, *Mata Ni Pachedi: A Book on the Temple Cloth of the Mother Goddess*, National Institute of Design Ahmedabad, 1968; Haku Shah, Vimal Shah and Ramesh Shroff, *Community Ancestor*

at NID in the summer of 1965 during one of her preparatory visits for ‘Unknown India’. During this trip and another in spring 1967 they travelled around Gujarat together, appraising potential commissions and examining museum collections with the exhibition in mind.⁴⁵ In 1965, Kramrisch told a colleague of her trip, ‘I was glad to meet a young scholar whose knowledge and efficiency would qualify him to accompany this exhibition.’⁴⁶ On her return to the US, Kramrisch asked Shah to,

collect more and other objects than those I have seen which you think suitable for our exhibition. I fully rely on your judgment that the objects would be unusual and of a high quality.⁴⁷

Indeed, as well as loaning his own objects, Shah commissioned a fulsome collection specifically for the exhibition.⁴⁸ In this intellectual activity of collecting, where objects transform from everyday use to become the ‘reified thoughts and feelings’ of the collector,⁴⁹ Shah made his major contribution to ‘Unknown India’. Kramrisch recognised this: by the time that the Indian government had appointed their own, alternative candidate to the courier role (who later fell ill and was eventually replaced by Shah at Kramrisch’s insistence), Kramrisch had already contacted the John D Rockefeller III Fund to ensure that Shah would travel to the US and participate in the

Worship, Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad, 1969 and Eberhard Fischer and Haku Shah, *Rural Craftsmen and Their Work, Equipment and Techniques in the Mer Village of Ratadi in Saurashtra, India*, National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, 1970.

⁴⁵ Letter from Stella Kramrisch to Haku Shah, 22 December 1965 and 4 January 1967, IND Box 11, ‘Haku Shah 1967/68’, Philadelphia Museum of Art

⁴⁶ Letter from Stella Kramrisch to Grace McCann Morley, Director of the National Museum of India, 25 August 1965, EXH Box 40, Folder 10, Philadelphia Museum of Art

⁴⁷ Letter from Stella Kramrisch to Haku Shah, 26 November 1965, IND Box 11, ‘Haku Shah 1967/68’, Philadelphia Museum of Art

⁴⁸ Letter from Stella Kramrisch to Haku Shah, 22 August 1968, IND Box 11, ‘Haku Shah 1967/68’, Philadelphia Museum of Art

⁴⁹ Susan M Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, Routledge, London, 1995, p 24

exhibition regardless.⁵⁰ In the US, Shah accompanied the exhibition to two further host institutions, the MH de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco (28 March to 9 June, 1968), and the City Art Museum, St Louis (15 July to 20 August, 1968), where he trained guides, gave media interviews and delivered lectures at museums, universities and galleries.

Shah's contribution 'Indianises' the US exhibition in a number of ways. Shah grew up enmeshed in the Indian independence movement, involved in non-cooperation and inspired by Gandhi's teachings.⁵¹ He has acknowledged how India's 'own rich traditions' informed his creative practice,⁵² and has linked his curatorial approach in other countries to *Satyagraha*, Gandhi's non-violent civil resistance to foreign rule.⁵³ For Kramrisch too, Shah represented his nation: she wrote to him in August 1968, 'And now our show is closed. You surely were one of the best ambassadors India ever had in this country.'⁵⁴

However, in much of their collaborative practice, their relationship transcended national boundaries. Since 1950, Kramrisch had made the US her home and she drew on Cold War-infused funding frameworks to shape her exhibition.⁵⁵ Yet as Sarah Turner points out in the context of an earlier exhibition held in the UK, Kramrisch's

⁵⁰ Letter from Stella Kramrisch to Haku Shah, 4 January 1967, IND Box 11, 'Haku Shah 1967/68', Philadelphia Museum of Art. JDRIII funded Shah's international transport and travel costs and the Ministry of Education paid for his travel expenses in India.

⁵¹ Indukumar, 'The Living Spirit of the Art', op cit, p 59

⁵² Haku Shah and Vandana Sood, 'Interview: Haku Shah', *DesiLit Magazine*, issue 4, 2008, <http://desilit.org/magazine/issues/2008/Winter/nonfiction/Haku.php>

⁵³ Haku Shah and his son, Parthiv Shah, in interview with the author, 30 April 2015, Ahmedabad. See also Rebecca Brown, 'Haku Shah: The Handcrafted Art of the Curator', in Haku Shah, *Nitya Gandhi: Living Reliving Gandhi*, Centre for Media and Alternative Communication, New Delhi, 2014, p 19, in which Shah's curating is linked to Gandhi's call for *swaraj* (home rule).

⁵⁴ Letter from Stella Kramrisch to Haku Shah, 22 August 1968, IND Box 11, 'Haku Shah 1967/68', Philadelphia Museum of Art

⁵⁵ In addition to Shah's JDRIII award, the Philadelphia Museum of Art was also awarded a \$5500 JDRIII award for Kramrisch to travel to India to collect and conduct research for the collection.

many years in India, her conversion to Hinduism and her European roots made her a cosmopolitan character in which national allegiance was a complex issue.⁵⁶ For both Kramrisch and Shah, 'Unknown India' was an opportunity to engage with and promote the art of the Indian nation, but theirs was also a personal, transnational engagement in which they shared their knowledge and their experiences beyond their own (already blurred) national contexts.

Shah's desire to work on 'Unknown India' was rooted in his admiration for Kramrisch and his own professional development. He wrote to her, explaining how 'my USA trip with this exhibition was like a pilgrimage and that is because of you.'⁵⁷ In his bid to the JDRIII Fund, Shah documented how he hoped to meet with many designers often with complex national affiliations themselves.⁵⁸ This was Shah's first trip outside India and he used the opportunity to travel beyond the US to Europe and Japan, 'to study the approach in collecting and documenting arts and crafts' and thus to garner new knowledge from a range of (national) arenas.⁵⁹ Kramrisch too, considered Shah as a 'source of new material and experience'.⁶⁰ Michael Meister, Kramrisch's colleague and successor at the University of Pennsylvania, describes Kramrisch and Shah's relationship as a 'mutual interchange of inspiration'.⁶¹

This relationship and their cosmopolitan 'readiness' to learn from each other was both based on and facilitated through the material world. Images and objects were

⁵⁶ Sarah Victoria Turner, "'Alive and Significant': 'Aspects of Indian Art'", Stella Kramrisch and Dora Gordine in South Kensington, c. 1940', *Wasafiri*, vol 27, no 2, 2012, p 44

⁵⁷ Letter from Haku Shah to Stella Kramrisch, 15 August 1968, IND Box 11, 'Haku Shah 1967/68', Philadelphia Museum of Art

⁵⁸ Haku Shah, Curriculum Vitae, nd, IND Box 11, 'Haku Shah 1967/68', Philadelphia Museum of Art, 7189. Shah mentioned Alexander Girard (French-Italian father, raised and trained in Italy), Jack Lenor Larsen (parents of Danish-Norwegian descent from Canada) and Leo Lionni (born in the Netherlands, raised and lived in both US and Italy).

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Michael Meister, 'Hakubhai and Stella Kramrisch' in Eberhard Fischer, ed, *Invisible Order: Tribute to Haku Shah*, Art Indus, New Delhi, 1999, p 82

⁶¹ Ibid

their point of connection: their first encounter had been over a clay toys made by Vaghri artisans that Kramrisch had noticed in Shah's office at NID. Kramrisch had sought out their owner to discuss the significance of the objects, and their collaborative work on 'Unknown India' progressed from there.⁶² Throughout the exhibition's development, Shah made many gifts to Kramrisch: 'all the lovely things you have given me personally', as with most gifts, retained a tie with their giver, cementing Shah and Kramrisch's relationship through the reciprocity enacted in all gift economies.⁶³ In time, Kramrisch responded with her own gifts, of support for grants, introductory notes for Shah's new ventures, and publications unavailable in India. Shah's letters were adorned with drawings (Figure 7) that charmed his mentor: she kept and treasured them, considering them 'quite a lovely collection',⁶⁴ and, as purposeful, selective acquisitions, the collection of his drawings began to reflect her own choices and worldview.⁶⁵ Shah later argued that 'there is a sort of signature of the personality embedded in the object':⁶⁶ here we see the combined personalities of Kramrisch and Shah in the collections they made together, for and of each other.

The often-fraught process of creating an exhibition which entailed bringing hundreds of fragile objects from one continent to another, was a traumatic process that stilted their working relationship but ultimately brought them closer. When Shah's supervision of the "'careful" but entirely thoughtless packing' of the highly prized large clay horses from Posina (visible in Figure 6) resulted in them being

⁶² Shah and Shah, interview, op cit.

⁶³ James G Carrier, 'Exchange', in Chris Tilley et al, eds, *Handbook of Material Culture*, Sage, London, 2005, p 376. On their relationship as evidenced through correspondence, see Meister, 'Hakubhai and Stella Kramrisch', op cit.

⁶⁴ Letter from Stella Kramrisch to Haku Shah, 28 September 1966, IND Box 11, 'Haku Shah 1967/68', Philadelphia Museum of Art

⁶⁵ Pearce, *On Collecting*, p 20

⁶⁶ Haku Shah and Geeti Sen, 'On Art and Ritual: Haku Shah Interviewed by Geeti Sen', *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol 11, no 4, 1984, p 19

damaged in transit, Kramrisch was ‘heart broken’.⁶⁷ In her written correspondence, her frustration over a lack of control over the practicalities taking place in India is palpable. Yet these tensions that centred on the materiality, movement and interpretation of objects for ‘Unknown India’ built an openness and honesty into their relationship that only strengthened it. After the exhibition they maintained a lively, affectionate correspondence until her death in 1993: ‘as time goes on’, Kramrisch admitted in 1975, ‘I am getting quite nostalgic about our Unknown India Exhibition.’⁶⁸

Their professional tasks in the service of the nation were blurred with personal encounters rooted in visits to each other’s homes and shared experiences: Kramrisch requested objects for the exhibition that she had seen ‘on your first floor roof’ and ‘like the one in your house’.⁶⁹ She was able to instruct specific commissions based on their being together, by identifying ‘the shop to which you took me’ and images and objects that ‘you showed me in the Tribal Research Institute’, for example.⁷⁰ In 1986, Shah penned what has been perceptively described as the ‘definitive description of their relationship’:⁷¹ ‘Stellaben’, he wrote, ‘it is all sharing. There is nothing more beautiful than sharing joy through visual forms, words – through senses – spirit of one another.’⁷² ‘Unknown India’ was the foundation for this relationship in which their shared professional interest in the material world, albeit of the Indian nation, created

⁶⁷ Letter from Stella Kramrisch to Haku Shah, 9 August 1967, IND Box 11, ‘Haku Shah 1967/68’, Philadelphia Museum of Art

⁶⁸ Letter from Stella Kramrisch to Haku Shah, 5 February 1975, IND Box 8, ‘Haku Shah 1968/79’, Philadelphia Museum of Art

⁶⁹ Letter from Stella Kramrisch to Haku Shah, 25 August 1965, IND Box 11, ‘Haku Shah 1967/68’, Philadelphia Museum of Art

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Meister, ‘Hakubhai and Stella Kramrisch’, op cit, p 82

⁷² Shah quoted in ibid. The appendage of ‘ben’ (for women) and ‘bhai’ (for men) to given names is a Gujarati form of respect and endearment.

cosmopolitan ‘common values’ and ‘overarching principles’⁷³ through which Kramrisch and Shah could connect beyond national boundaries. Facilitated by funds and authorisations which prized the nation, and working on an exhibition which aimed to display one nation to another, theirs was nevertheless a personal connection that went well beyond that level, and which was at its most profound, based in a human appreciation of material culture.

The Costumes of Royal India

Of all the transnational exhibitions of the post-independence period, the US Festival of India, proposed in discussions between Ronald Reagan and Indira Gandhi in 1982, and held in 1985 and 1986, can be seen as the most prominent example of nation-bound cultural diplomacy. Almost 800 India-related programmes, of exhibitions, talks and other activities introduced ‘India’ to audiences across the US. Ted MG Tanen, the US co-ordinator for the festival, used the language of the nation to describe his motivations. For Tanen (and many others), it was ‘a way of approaching a particular need in the United States’, ‘to make Americans aware of the many facets of another country’s culture’, and an opportunity for ‘binational dialogue’.⁷⁴ Less explicitly, but also well known, the festival would encourage tourism to India and build up new markets for its products, and support the US in drawing India away from Soviet influence and accessing India’s markets.⁷⁵

⁷³ Vertovec and Cohen, ‘Introduction’, op cit, p 10

⁷⁴ Ted MG Tanen, ‘Festivals and Diplomacy’, in Ivan Karp and Steven D Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1991, pp 367 and 371

⁷⁵ On the political, economic and cultural context of the US Festival of India, see Brown, *Displaying Time*, op cit, especially p 6

This increasingly open and intensified use of culture for national diplomatic purposes is partially related to the political and economic changes that had occurred in India by the 1980s. Mathur describes the festival as ‘both a sign and a symptom of the increased competition among developing nations in the emerging neoliberal global economy.’⁷⁶ ‘Costumes of Royal India’ can certainly be placed in this global and national economic context. Hosted by the MET’s Costume Institute, it displayed some 250 examples of historic dress and fine and decorative art, largely loaned from the royal families of northern India, and several specially commissioned silk and cotton saris based on historic collections. The Institute’s special consultant, Diana Vreeland, the former editor-in-chief of *Vogue* magazine, directed the exhibition. Vreeland had been hired in 1971 ‘to attract new people and new money to the museum,’⁷⁷ and ‘Costumes of Royal India’ was subject to her usual concessions to commerce and contemporary fashion.⁷⁸ Eight galleries of golden, modish mannequins borrowed from a previous Yves Saint Laurent exhibition were adorned with the spectacular clothes and arranged in interactive tableau designed to evoke the spatial arrangement of the royal courts: some figures lounged on beds with silver hookahs, others gossiped in groups on tiger-skin-print carpets as if in their own *zenana*, or women’s quarters.⁷⁹ A sandalwood fragrance made for the exhibition by Guerlain was pumped through the air-conditioning system to evoke ‘another period’,⁸⁰ exhibits were temporarily loaned to *Vogue* magazine for a four-page ‘fashion’ spread in which live models wore the

⁷⁶ Mathur, ‘Charles and Ray Eames in India’, op cit, p 50

⁷⁷ Russell W Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, Routledge, London, 1995, p 113

⁷⁸ For the most strident critique of Vreeland’s ‘distressing and inappropriate’ commercialism and historical inaccuracy, see Debora Silverman, *Selling Culture: Bloomingdale’s, Diana Vreeland, and the New Aristocracy of Taste in Reagan’s America*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1986, p xi.

⁷⁹ Jean L Druessedow, ‘Introduction’, *The Costumes of Royal India: Exhibition Checklist*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1986, pp 4–5

⁸⁰ Letter from Diana Vreeland to Suzanne Biallot, Director of Public Relations, Guerlain, 3 September 1985, Box 54, Folder 23, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

historic collections soon to be on display at the MET, and Bloomingdale's department store featured a display of the contemporary saris not needed in the main exhibition.

These links to global commerce were also engendered by the Indian team involved in the project. They were led by textile specialist Martand 'Mapu' Singh, who had been instrumental in developing the government-sponsored Weavers' Service Centres and was now director of the government development agency, the Indian Handicraft and Handloom Export Company (HHEC). Singh had met Vreeland in the 1960s when she had shopped at one of his earlier ventures, the exclusive boutique 'Psychedelhi' in New Delhi's Oberoi Hotel, which he co-owned with his friend Naveen Patnaik.⁸¹ Their paths crossed again when Pupul Jayakar, the Chairman of the Indian Advisory Committee for the festival and Singh's long-term mentor, matched Vreeland and Singh on 'Costumes of Royal India'. From March 1983, Singh worked under Vreeland's direction, supporting her conceptualisation of the exhibition, selecting and shipping the royal loans and new commissions from India, writing the exhibition text labels and recommending the publication that would be used to introduce the exhibition to visitors.⁸² He ran a special New Delhi-based exhibition office in the Handloom Pavilion in the Pragati Maidan exhibition centre, in which a team of seven coordinated proceedings from the Indian side and in which object photography, restoration and packing took place. Prior to the opening of the exhibition, Singh travelled to New York to help Vreeland and her US team with installation and press interviews.

As director of the HHEC, Singh worked within a commercial framework on behalf of the Indian nation that came to surpass Vreeland's more generalised location in US

⁸¹ Namita Bhandare, 'To the manner born', *India Today*, 16 June 1997 (online).

⁸² See various planning documents and letters in Box 147, Folder 11, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives. The text was *A Second Paradise* (Doubleday, 1986), written by Patnaik, who also worked on the exhibition.

consumer society. Indeed, when the possibility of an Indian exhibition at the Costume Institute had come up in the 1970s, Vreeland had strong reservations about ‘a commercial show to promote what India can do’.⁸³ While professing an admiration for Indian contemporary ‘clothes which are marvellous and made of enchanting fabrics’, she noted that ‘this had nothing to do with the Museum at all’.⁸⁴ In the case of ‘Costumes of Royal India’, Singh had to convince Vreeland that the new HHEC saris would be appropriate for the exhibition, writing how he felt ‘sure that once you have seen the saris you will be assured of their excellence’.⁸⁵ While customs regulations ensured that the Indian objects could not be sold in the US, when Singh hoped that the exhibition would ‘encourage people to visit India in search of things of great beauty and relevance’,⁸⁶ he understood that their ‘search’ would generate economic gain for his country. ‘Royal Costumes of India’ was billed as a tribute to the patronage of the historic princely families of India;⁸⁷ in some senses, however, it also represented Singh’s own role in Indian national development and in projecting abroad the skills of the regional and dispersed weavers whom he had helped bind to the state.⁸⁸

⁸³ Diana Vreeland, Internal Memo, 10 September 1976, Box 148, Folder 27, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

⁸⁴ Diana Vreeland, Internal Memo, 10 September 1976, Box 148, Folder 27, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

⁸⁵ Letter from Martand Singh to Diana Vreeland, 11 March 1983, Box 147, Folder 11, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

⁸⁶ Letter from Martand Singh to Diana Vreeland, 3 September 1986, Box 147, Folder 11, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

⁸⁷ Transcript of Diana Vreeland’s introduction to ‘Costumes of Royal India’ acoustiguide, Box 154, Folder 10, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

⁸⁸ On the relationship between the regional and the national as forged through post-independence government development agencies like the Weavers Service Centres and the HHCE see Sandria B Freitag, ‘Identity and Constructions of Community in Banaras: Introduction’, in Sandria B Freitag, ed, *Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment, 1800–1980*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989, pp 126–128.

Yet, in various ways, Singh and Vreeland's participation in 'Royal Costumes of India' also registered beyond the nation. Many of the loaned objects were facilitated through Singh's more localised connections as a descendent of the royal family of the former princely state of Kapurthala. For example, his mother's friend, Gayatri Devi, the Rajmata of Jaipur, lent her portrait, painted in 1949 by Deanshker, to the exhibition; in a literal layering of the personal, regional and national, it was displayed behind three of Singh's 1985 HHEC silk and cotton saris from Benares and mounted on Vreeland's orientalisng, high-fashion, golden mannequins (Figure 8). If the princely families remained 'potent symbols of regional identity' in post-independence India,⁸⁹ many were also part of a cosmopolitan, highly fashionable elite to which Vreeland, as a jet-setting fashion editor, also had access. Vreeland was born in France to a US socialite and British stockbroker and had lived and worked in London as well as the US. Vreeland knew and corresponded personally with Gayatri Devi to help acquire the Deanshker painting and wrote to Singh's mother, Sita Devi, the Maharani of Kapurthala, to complement her on her 'wonderfully marvellous son', who, in another layering of the personal and national, she described as 'a great, great credit to *you* and to *your country*.'⁹⁰

While characteristic of Vreeland's generally effusive language, her description of Singh also conveys the affection they had for each other. Theirs was a transnational, highly personalised connection rooted in professional respect that both supported the potential of 'Costumes of Royal India' in the first place, and was in turn strengthened by the process of working on the exhibition. Their correspondence betrays their

⁸⁹ Anna Jackson and Amin Jaffer, 'Introduction', in Anna Jackson and Amin Jaffer with Deepika Ahlawat, ed, *Maharaja: The Splendour of India's Royal Courts*, V&A Publishing, London, 2009, p 41

⁹⁰ Correspondence between Diana Vreeland and Rajmata of Jaipur, June 1985, Box 149, Folder 10, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives; Letter from Diana Vreeland to Sita Devi, 8 March 1984, Box 147, Folder 11, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives, emphasis added

longstanding mutual admiration: Vreeland asked Singh to consider ‘how much I love you and have loved you for so long’, and Singh also indicated that his commitment to the project was rooted in a pre-history to the exhibition:

We met twenty years ago and ever since then I have wanted to do something that would be worthy of your appreciation. That I have received this in so abundant a measure is of great importance to me.⁹¹

Their collaborative work on the exhibition and appreciation of the handmade objects that brought them together confirmed their prioritisation of each other in addition to the nation. Singh described his work as a ‘tribute’ to Vreeland ‘for understanding the relevance of Hands, and the magic they create’,⁹² and Vreeland’s most effusive praise was reserved for her confirmation that the cases of loaned Indian objects had arrived:

Dearest Mapu,

Well you really have knocked out my eyes... It was Monday when all of this was revealed to me, and I haven’t been normal since!

It is enticing and exciting, and the most extravagantly selected group of anything I have ever seen. You have done such a superior job... The beautiful way everything was packed and marked is simply an amazing job...

Do you realize that I’ve never seen clothing like this in my life?...

I am very happy and everyone at the Costume Institute is in ecstasy over the glory of what you have arranged. I do appreciate what you have done and I want you to understand.

⁹¹ Letter from Diana Vreeland to Martand Singh, 22 April 1985, Box 147, Folder 11, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives; Letter from Martand Singh to Diana Vreeland, 23 July [1985?], Box 147, Folder 11, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

⁹² Letter from Martand Singh to Diana Vreeland, undated, Box 147, Folder 11, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

I send you a million thanks which is not enough, and much much love. I am in vast admiration.⁹³

The objects that they shared, and Singh's particular treatment of them, including his marking of the collections for the uninitiated through a system of tags affixed to particular areas of the garment, evoked a professed change in Vreeland's behaviour not consistent with discrete and defined national boundaries. Gathering the objects and preparing them for use abroad also allowed Singh to practice the 'built-up skill in manoeuvring' beyond national boundaries that Hannerz identifies in the cosmopolitan condition.⁹⁴ In a letter to Naveen Patnaik who also worked on the exhibition and whom she also knew well, Vreeland further identified the affective impact that the exhibition had on her; evoking a transnational familial bond, she saw the exhibition as a personal endeavour that supported their shared perspective:

It is extraordinary and amazingly wonderful that all of us *have combined* and are working on this show... Between you and Mapu and Bajpai, I feel that I am in a family circle which is a very nice and cozy feeling.⁹⁵

Vreeland is clearly a very specific type of 'cosmopolitan'. Certainly harbouring a 'willingness to become involved with the Other', she is perhaps the epitome of Hannerz's more critical assertion that cosmopolitanism can emerge 'where the

⁹³ Letter from Diana Vreeland to Martand Singh, 10 July 1985, Box 147, Folder 11, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

⁹⁴ Hannerz, 'Cosmopolitans and Locals', op cit, p 239. See also Telex from Martand Singh to Stephen Jamail, 6 April 1985 ('Guidelines for the unpacking and restoration' of the costumes), Box 149, Folder 10, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

⁹⁵ Letter from Diana Vreeland to Naveen Patnaik, 12 March 1984, Box 147, Folder 10, Costume Institute Records, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives, emphasis added. K Shankar Bajpai was the Indian Ambassador to the US during the festival and godfather to one of Vreeland's grandchildren (a further indication of Vreeland's cosmopolitan lifestyle).

individual picks from other cultures only those pieces which suit himself [sic].⁹⁶ She regularly deployed a differencing and distancing rhetoric in the planning and the dissemination of the project, lamenting in an interview with *Vogue*, for example, how ‘in *our world* today, there is little splendor’, suggesting that the India show – presumably of another ‘world’ – would be ‘a romantic blackout from reality.’⁹⁷ Singh too, saw ‘Costumes of Royal India’ as a celebration of the bounded Indian nation. But in many ways, the exhibition is also a tribute to their long-term transnational relationship. It is evidence of the ways in which a shared love of objects and the practical requirements of transnational partnership shaped both the exhibition and its curators beyond the nation.

Nationalism, Transnationalism and Collaboration

Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions.⁹⁸

Writing in 1997, Stuart Hall could easily be describing the curators, scholars and designers discussed here. Earlier in the second half of the twentieth century too, those who constructed the most potent tools of nationalism and diplomacy also found their identities fragmented and fractured.⁹⁹ Especially for Haku Shah, Martand Singh and the students and staff at NID, their professional roles as designers and curators placed them in the service of an emerging, modernising Indian nation. The exhibitions they

⁹⁶ Hannerz, ‘Cosmopolitans and Locals’, op cit, p 240

⁹⁷ Vreeland quoted in Andre Leon Talley, ‘India’s Royal Splendor’, *Vogue*, New York, vol 175, no 12, 1 December 1985, p 311, emphasis added

⁹⁸ Stuart Hall, ‘Who Needs Identity?’ (1997), in Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans and Peter Redman, ed, *Identity: A Reader*, Sage, London, 2000, p 17

⁹⁹ The same image is evoked in Chatterjee, ‘Anderson’s Utopia’, op cit, pp 131–132.

produced were imagined by many, including those who constructed them, as spaces within which to articulate the specific characteristics of India, its people and its material culture. Yet their professional roles also aligned these practitioners with an international discipline of design that provided regular opportunity for transnational, collaborative practice. The exhibitions they created with colleagues in the US demanded the ‘willingness to share and act on one another’s ideas’ that curator Lesley Millar has characterised as an essential component of exhibition development.⁶⁰ ‘Nehru’, ‘Unknown India’ and the ‘Costumes of Royal India’ were all directed by US designers and curators; they were ‘US’ exhibitions of ‘Indian’ visual and material culture, but the practicalities of exhibition making and working with objects and images required a transnational practice that disrupted national affiliation and hierarchies of difference and ownership: new knowledge, skills and opportunities were arrived at together, cross-culturally, and shared by both sides. The dynamic internationalism of the omnipresent cultural administrator, Pupul Jayakar, and NID as an institutional magnet for foreign designers provided important contexts for this transnationalism. However, the physical characteristics and requirements of the objects and images on display required a shared commitment of care and an obligation to act together in ways which further challenged Indian non-alignment and US hegemony in both a geopolitical and design context.

While engendering a shared practice, the material culture displayed in these exhibitions, whether display structures, clay devotional offerings or silk robes, also seem to have attracted a certain type of person:¹⁰⁰ Kramrisch, Shah, Vreeland, Singh, and the designers at the Eames Office and NID all shared an appreciation of material

¹⁰⁰ On the ways in which objects collect people, see Chris Gosden and Frances Larson with Alison Petch, *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, 1884–1945*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, p 5

culture and a desire to encounter and understand objects and images with which they were unfamiliar. To varying degrees, they were also open to new ways of doing things and to learning from each other. As cosmopolitans, they took ‘pleasure from the presence of other, different, places that are home to other, different, people’,¹⁰¹ but they were also cosmopolitan in terms of their ability to traverse national boundaries by means of their shared vocabulary, skills and object-orientated sensibilities. All those discussed here conform to the common stereotype of the elite itinerant whose cosmopolitanism is supported by his or her privileged access to the necessary resources for travel.¹⁰² One of those resources was their intellectual access to the material world. To adapt to Hannerz, they displayed a *material* ‘cultural competence’ that both facilitated initial opportunities in exhibitionary practice and was honed by the transnational exhibitions they participated in.

There is, of course, a danger in relying upon a romantic, Ruskinian vision of the handcrafted object as the keystone of an egalitarian community.¹⁰³ There is nothing ‘inherently emancipatory’ about the transnational: scholars of transnationalism, like those of its conceptual cousins, transculturalism and hybridity, have recognised the instabilities, conflicts, and imperfections that accompany the tropes of ‘accommodation and facilitation’ in such cross-cultural creative outputs, and the pervasive contexts of the hegemonic power relations involved.¹⁰⁴ Robyn Thomas and

¹⁰¹ Appiah, ‘Cosmopolitan Patriot’, op cit, p 91

¹⁰² Vertovec and Cohen, ‘Introduction’, op cit, pp 5–6

¹⁰³ Glenn Adamson, ‘Craft in Action: Life, Art, Design: Section Introduction’, in Glenn Adamson, ed, *The Craft Reader*, Berg, Oxford, 2009, p 459. On the relationship between Indian nationalism and John Ruskin, see Patrick Brantlinger, ‘A Postindustrial Prelude to Postcolonialism: John Ruskin, William Morris, and Gandhism’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol 22, no 3, 1996, pp 466-85.

¹⁰⁴ Kevin Grant, Philippa Levine and Frank Trentmann, *Beyond Sovereignty: Britain, Empire and Transnationalism, c. 1880–1950*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p 2; Julie F Codell, ‘The Art of Transculturation’, in Julie F Codell, ed, *Transculturation in British Art, 1770–1930*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2012, pp 3 and 11; Annie E Coombes, ‘The Recalcitrant Object: Hybridity and the Question of Culture-Contact’, in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and

her colleagues have argued that cross-cultural collaborative projects are always influenced by hierarchies of power (and not only those related to *cultural* difference).¹⁰⁵ Indeed, despite the often close personal relationships between the creative practitioners involved, and the ways in which their commitment to images, objects and the discipline of design supported a cosmopolitan challenge to national narratives, other more acceptable hierarchies of age and experience infused these transnational exhibitions. These were undoubtedly layered with traces of ethnocentrism. Staff in the Eames Office, and Kramrisch and Vreeland, were all granted and in many respects exercised creative control, particularly in terms of concept and narrative. In addition, the reception of these exhibitions by their US audiences was not necessarily subject to the transnational, cosmopolitan processes evoked here (although audiences for such events in the US were not culturally homogenous either).¹⁰⁶ Yet exhibitions are inevitably more than just a concept, and neither are they only a final product. The behind-the-scenes, responsive process of making and design, and the organisation required to support those activities is important too.

Exploring the transnational, cosmopolitan qualities of these exhibitions does not preclude the demands of the nation on these events. Building on the legacy of Nehru who firmly believed in internationalism but also that global participation should ‘grow out of [India’s] national culture’,¹⁰⁷ the nation was a central component in the patriotic cosmopolitanism of these design and museum practitioners. Even by the

Margaret Iversen, ed, *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1994. See also Wintle, ‘Displaying Independent India Abroad’, op cit

¹⁰⁵ Robyn Thomas, Janne Tienari, Annette Davies, and Susan Meriläinen, ‘Let’s Talk About “Us”’: A Reflexive Account of a Cross-Cultural Research Collaboration’, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, vol 18, 2009, pp 314 and 321

¹⁰⁶ On how the visiting experience also ruptures the grand narratives of exhibitions in a US-Indian context, see Brown, *Displaying Time*, op cit, p. 60-100.

¹⁰⁷ Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999, p 208

1980s, when Nehru's vision had proved unattainable, and disillusion with India's global nationalism had prompted both an opening to world markets and a return to Gandhian self-sufficiency in some areas of design,¹⁰⁸ the nation and transnationalism were layered in their exhibitions in persistent ways. As others have shown, the nation state and transnationalism are rarely sequential or mutually exclusive.¹⁰⁹ 'Nehru', 'Unknown India' and 'Costumes of Royal India' demonstrate the possibilities of multiple affiliations within a cosmopolitan disposition, and they also show how transnational activities rely on the nation to sustain them, whether in terms of individual patriotism or government funds and sanctions. We also see the value of the transnational – as an arena for articulation and a source of inspiration – for the nation. In the end, exhibitions of the nation are not simply the compliant ambassadors of national ideologies. They operate at and through multiple registers, demonstrating the complexity and even the limits of the relationship between the nation and the exhibition.

¹⁰⁸ See Mathur, 'Charles and Ray Eames in India', op cit, pp 49–50

¹⁰⁹ Grant, Levine and Trentmann, *Beyond Sovereignty*, op cit, p 5