

MUSEUM  
MEANINGS

# Colonialism and the Object

Empire, Material Culture and the Museum



ROUTLEDGE

Edited by Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn

# *Colonialism and the Object*

The post-colonial world has seen a major re-evaluation, political as well as theoretical, of the institutions and ideologies of colonialism. In addition to historical and literary studies, innovative theoretical analyses have opened up new approaches to this subject area. In the light of this new thinking, *Colonialism and the Object* discusses the impact of colonial contact with other cultures on the material culture of both the colonised and the imperial nation.

Drawing together an international group of scholars from a variety of disciplinary and cultural backgrounds, *Colonialism and the Object* demonstrates that the intensive analysis of museum objects and their contexts can provide timely and substantive insights into issues of global importance. The volume includes intensive case studies of objects from India, Pakistan, New Zealand, China and Africa, all of which were collected by or exhibited in the institutions of the British Empire. Other chapters address issues of racial identity across cultural barriers, and the hybrid styles of objects which can emerge when cultures meet.

*Colonialism and the Object* is essential reading for all those interested in post-colonial theory, museum studies, material culture and design history.

**Tim Barringer** is a lecturer in History of Art at the University of Birmingham, following earlier positions at Birkbeck College, University of London and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. **Tom Flynn** is Henry Moore Fellow in the history of sculpture at the University of Sussex. He is currently preparing a book on mixed media sculpture in the nineteenth century.

# *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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# *Colonialism and the Object*

Empire, material culture and the museum

Edited by

*Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn*



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## *Introduction*

Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn

The 1995 British Association of Art Historians' Conference, hosted by the Victoria and Albert Museum and entitled 'Objects, Histories and Interpretations', focused attention on the understanding and interpretation of objects and on the role of museums of material culture. Many of the chapters in the present book have grown out of papers presented in the conference session, convened by the editors, which examined the influence of colonialism, its ideologies and power relations, on the ways in which objects are understood. The papers stimulated lively debate and it became clear that the session had raised a range of historical and interpretative issues crucial to museum professionals and their publics in the post-colonial era, questions which are of equal import and urgency across the academic fields of museum studies and cultural studies, anthropology and ethnography, and the histories of art, design and material culture. These are: What impact did the imposition of colonial power have on indigenous societies and on cultural production within them? How have objects imported or appropriated from colonies been displayed at the imperial centre? What effects did the importation of objects and materials from the colonies have on artistic production in the imperial nation? What impact do the power relations of colonialism have on the interpretation of objects? What are the possibilities for the display of 'colonial' objects in the present day and how can contemporary museum practice address the inheritance of colonialism?

The location of the conference at the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington – itself a formidable colonial institution, situated only yards from the sites of such imperial spectacles as the Great Exhibition of 1851, the 1886 Indian and Colonial Exhibition, and the former Imperial Institute – could not have been more appropriate, indicating the web of continuities between colonial past and post-colonial present. Many of the conference speakers examined case studies of objects enmeshed in the complex colonial history of South Kensington, such as the Gwalior Gateway, made by Indian craftsmen under the authority of the British Raj and subsequently built into the very fabric of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Maori House removed from New Zealand and exhibited at South Kensington and then at the British Empire Exhibition in Wembley in 1924. As Swallow and Allen indicate in their

respective analyses, when such objects are removed from their original contexts, and are subjected to appropriation and exhibition, their meanings undergo radical changes.

The essays gathered in *Colonialism and the Object* demonstrate that the intensive analysis of museum objects and their contexts, once considered the province of curators and specialist connoisseurs alone, can provide timely and substantive insights into issues of more general – indeed of global – interest. The intersection between colonialism, museums and objects unites three major disciplinary areas, and three substantial bodies of contemporary theory; post-colonial theory, museum studies and material culture studies/design history. The post-colonial world has seen a major re-evaluation, political as well as theoretical, of the institutions and ideologies of colonialism. In addition to a vast array of purely historical studies, innovative theoretical analyses have opened up new approaches to this subject area. Among the most powerful and influential analyses of colonialism's effects on the culture of the coloniser and the colonised is the work of Edward Said. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) Said's avowed intention was to

connect these different realms [culture and imperialism] to show the involvements of culture with expanding empires, to make observations about art that preserve its unique endowments and at the same time map its affiliations. . . .

(Said 1993: 5)

This book is intended as a contribution to such a project. From *Orientalism* (1978) onwards, Said's critique laid the foundations for an enquiry into colonial culture which has had wide repercussions across the humanities. Said's work, like that of a younger generation of cultural critics, such as Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, has taken language as its subject matter, achieving its most brilliant effects through analyses of the novel. The essays collected in Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), in which a theory of 'colonial discourse' is deployed to emphasise the ambivalence and hybridity of colonial culture and the paradoxical interdependency of coloniser and colonised, have provided an interpretative framework taken up by many of the contributors to this volume. Flynn applies the concept of fetishism to Belgian colonial cultural practices in the 1890s, while Ata Ullah explores the making and meaning of an object which seems the very epitome of the notion of inter-cultural hybridity. The screen made by the master craftsman Ram Singh under the tutelage of Lockwood Kipling draws deeply on the skills and traditions of Punjabi woodworking, while remaining a European object-type both produced and consumed within a colonial economy. Layton deals with questions of 'race' and identity, detailing the fascinating life history of a silversmith born in the Danish West Indies of 'free coloured' status (having a mother of mixed race and a white father) and who, conforming to essentialising definitions of neither 'white' nor 'black', found himself, as Layton writes 'on a boundary or seam between cultures: European and African (free and slave); Danish West Indian and American; African-American and European'. Himself a direct product of a

colonial liaison, Bentzon was ultimately unsuccessful in his attempts to settle securely in either St Croix or in Philadelphia. His hollow-ware silver objects are typical of a Philadelphia-trained silversmith of the period, and they are displayed today in the 'Old World and New' Gallery of the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (see Fig. 7.3), indicating a move on the part of museums towards addressing issues of colonialism and acknowledging the contribution of African-American craftspeople. None the less, as his presence in this collection attests, Bentzon's work is, after a century and a half, still refracted through the discursive prism of race and colonial social relations.

Historians of visual culture have responded to developments in post-colonial theory with a range of sophisticated studies of race and representation: the influential work of Linda Nochlin on 'Orientalist' paintings has now been supplemented by a plethora of works questioning the legacy of 'Primitivism' in modern art (e.g. Pollock 1993) and examining representations across visual culture through issues of race (Biddick *et al.* 1996). A number of important studies of ethnographic photography have emerged (Edwards 1992) and Mirzoeff's chapter here contributes to that body of work, revealing the role of photography in constructing 'a cultural geography of colonialism in a specific time and place', in this case the Congo region of West Africa between 1900 and 1915. Kettering and Flynn demonstrate how three-dimensional artefacts can mediate the power relations that underlie the colonial project. As Flynn maintains, the revival of ivory-based mixed-media sculpture in Belgium in the 1890s became part of a broader programme designed to sell the colonial adventure to the Belgian people. The appropriation of ivory – colonial material par excellence – adds layers of meaning beyond the objects' specific iconographies. Kettering notes, in her analyses of ceramic figurines made at the Lomonosov factory in Moscow, how objects which might be considered to be ephemeral, or even 'kitsch', can play an important ideological role in popular culture. As Kettering argues, the very domestication of Uzbek figures through their representation in such an innocuous format could naturalise for the Soviet consumer the centralisation of political control over the Central Asian population. The figures simultaneously represent the Uzbek as exotic – and therefore attractive – and as backward, and subject to liberation through Westernising reforms. While Soviet Central Asia was not, in name, a colony, Kettering demonstrates a colonial imbalance of power in the relationship of centre to periphery.

While representations of all kinds have been subjected to critical scrutiny within the general project of post-colonial enquiry, the broader category of functional, or non-representational three-dimensional objects (whether considered as 'the applied arts', 'the decorative arts', or less restrictively as 'material culture') has largely been ignored in the context of debates about colonialism. There is a certain irony in this since the circulation of goods and the increase of trade was a primary underlying motivation for imperial expansion. The absence of considered accounts of the relationship between colonialism and the object is hardly surprising given the dearth of publications in general devoted to material culture when compared to the seemingly inexhaustible literature on the fine arts of painting and sculpture. The designations 'fine' and 'decorative' arts,

which imply a hierarchy of value, prove particularly inappropriate when applied to the products of cultures where such a distinction is meaningless (such as the multiple artistic traditions of India, China and the Islamic world). None the less, as Clunas argues below, the notion of 'art' 'remains a site of conflicting interpretations, fissured along class and gender lines, among others, and the right to define something as "art" is typically seen as an important attribute of those dominant in society at a given moment'. Only when the status of 'art' is conferred on a body of work can it begin to generate a history; as Allen notes 'ten years ago, no one would have accepted that Maori could have an art history'.

A second historiography with which this collection engages is that of museum studies. This field has attained in recent years the status of a separate academic discipline, a discipline marked by its close and fruitful links with actual curatorial practice in museums. Since Peter Vergo's announcement of a 'new museology' (1989), critical studies both of museums in general (most recently Macdonald 1996) and of fine art in particular (Duncan 1995) have proliferated, informed by critical theory and by ideas drawn from such disciplines as anthropology, sociology and archaeology. As Clunas argues in the present volume, the official ideology of museums has, until recently, insisted that they stand outside of time and historical process; museums and their curators have tended to constitute themselves as the recorders of history, rather than as committed participants. The very existence of museum studies as a discipline implies that the museum is now seen as an object of study in itself, subject to the same historical influences as other institutions and representations. Pioneering work in this field with regard to colonialism and issues of race and multi-culturalism can be found in Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine's collection *Exhibiting Cultures* (1991), which is largely concerned with contemporary issues, and Annie Coombes's major historical study *Re-inventing Africa* (1994). Coombes's book is of particular value in examining in detail the construction through exhibitions of an idea of 'Africa' in Britain in the era of frantic European colonial expansion in sub-Saharan Africa. This area of scholarship has been influenced by recent anthropological critiques of ethnographic writing, notably the work of James Clifford, for whom ethnography is 'always caught up in the invention rather than the representation of cultures' (Clifford 1988: 9). The same problem faces the ethnographic museum, or indeed any display purporting to represent a culture or civilisation through objects or artefacts: can representations of culture ever be anything other than partial? What are the limits to the stories objects can tell, or be made to tell?

In this volume, the role of the museum is problematised both historically (Barringer, Swallow) and in the present; senior museum professionals (Clunas, Poovaya-Smith) offer searching analyses of their own practice in relation to colonial ideologies and objects. Many of the contributors have themselves organised galleries and exhibitions, confronting in practice the very issues under theoretical consideration here. Deborah Swallow and Craig Clunas both played pivotal roles in the rethinking of (respectively) the Nehru Gallery of Indian Art and the T. T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum,

two major curatorial initiatives which, along with re-displays of the Museum's Japanese and Korean collections, have reformulated one of the great 'imperial archives' of non-Western art for the 1990s. As the authors of major galleries, Clunas, Swallow and their colleagues are of course the direct successors of the original curators of the South Kensington Museum discussed by Barringer. Though on the face of it there might seem to be little common ground between the didactic and triumphalist displays of the nineteenth century and the self-reflexive, technologically and intellectually sophisticated galleries of the 1990s, each undoubtedly and unsurprisingly conforms to the broad ideological expectations of its own day.

Jeanne Cannizzo, whose essay 'Gathering Souls and Objects' discusses missionary collecting in Africa, was curator of the controversial exhibition *Into the Heart of Africa* on the same subject at the Royal Ontario Museum in 1989. In line with James Clifford's ideas, and those of most contributors to this volume, Cannizzo sees the museum as a 'cultural text, one that may be read to understand the underlying cultural or ideological assumptions that have informed its creation, selection and display' (Cannizzo 1991: 151). Yet one influential group of visitors produced a reading of Cannizzo's exhibition dramatically at variance with her own avowed intentions of producing 'a self-reflexive critique of the colonial collecting practices of the museum' (Riegel 1996: 89–90). Cannizzo's ironic critique of the ideas of Canadian missionary collectors in Africa (one of whom, Walter Currie, is discussed in her essay below), stressed the ideological assumptions behind missionary collecting. However the exhibition was the subject of protests from a group calling itself the Coalition for Truth About Africa (Riegel 1996: 90), which claimed to represent Toronto's African-American community, for whom the exhibition failed to distance itself clearly enough from the agenda of its subjects.

Other contributions (Swallow, Barringer, Flynn) assess the historical role of museums, collections, art exhibitions and temporary displays in the promotion and presentation of the colonial project, revealing them as potent mechanisms in the construction and visualisation of power relationships between coloniser and colonised. The relationship between the interpretation of objects in the past and their display in the present is a recurring theme (Mirzoeff, Layton, Allen), while the possibilities for a celebratory, post-colonial museology in a modern, multi-ethnic British city are explored by Poovaya-Smith. Hooper-Greenhill and Allen both present life histories of Maori houses which have been integrated into the culture of the coloniser: one, Mataatua, as a museum piece ('a desirable feature in the Colonial Annexe' at South Kensington in 1882); the other, Hinemihi, ending up as a boat house at Clendon Park, a National Trust property near Guildford, Britain. In 1995, Mataatua was the subject of a restitution claim and, writing as a Maori, Ngapine Allen explains the basis of this claim and the cultural role of the house. Happily, a satisfactory resolution of this issue was achieved shortly before this book went to press, as Allen notes in her post-script. Hooper-Greenhill's account opens with a description of the ceremony of 'blessing of carvings for Hinemihi meeting house in England' and proceeds to plot the specific conditions which marked the passage of the ancestral house

from the periphery to the centre of empire, in the process drawing attention to the diverse meanings and associations – the ‘disjunctions and dislocations’ – generated by Hinemihi on its colonial journey from the southern to northern hemisphere. Underlying the entire process of colonial collecting, which implies a severe imbalance of economic and political power between coloniser and colonised, is the question of legitimacy. These issues, although not the main focus of the present collection, are of prime ethical concern to museum professionals across the world and the subject of lively and often impassioned debate (Knell 1994: 54–6; Simpson *et al.* 1996: 19–23).

While each chapter negotiates theoretical and museological issues, this book is concerned with the impact of colonialism on the production, consumption and interpretation of material objects, and some limiting definition should perhaps be placed on this capacious term. Susan Pearce has offered an initial definition of museum objects as ‘selected lumps of the material world to which cultural status has been ascribed’ (Pearce 1992: 4), while another term commonly used for material objects is ‘artefact’. However, as Pearce notes, ‘artefact’ in itself often implies an inferior status to the work of art through its connections with ‘artisan’. Useful in this regard is a final methodological ingredient: the developing field of material culture studies, also known as design history, which offers broader and more sophisticated contextual readings of a wide range of objects than that allowed by traditional art-historical and museum scholarship. It is in this vein that Flynn and Ata-Ullah address the ambivalences implicit in the production and consumption, display and interpretation of objects whose very existence was premised on the colonial system. The work of Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai (1986) on the biographies of objects offers models for discussing the ‘social life of things’, indicating that while social contexts encode objects with changing meanings, a close examination of the object can also provide insights into the societies which produced and consumed them. Clunas notes below that these approaches to single objects may also be applied to collections, and to museums: all the chapters in this volume may be considered as contributions to this broad project. Biographies of objects and their interactions with collections are deeply revealing of the contradictions of colonial culture. None is more poignant than that of the Gwalior gateway discussed by Swallow, a huge stone construction which, for all its magnificence, was only ever appreciated during its brief tenure at South Kensington’s Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886. Presenting a constant headache to its subsequent custodians, the gateway now lies concealed behind partition walls in a gallery devoted to those monuments of European high art, Raphael’s cartoons. It is hard not to see in this post-war history a denial of Britain’s colonial past; as Swallow demonstrates, the unravelling of layers of meaning inscribed in and around such an object offer rich insights into colonialism’s culture.

This book, then, consists of a collection of case studies, histories of individual objects and collections, firmly rooted in archival and physical analysis of objects and contexts. And while a range of theoretical positions is adopted by the contributors, most begin by focusing on a particular object or collection, subsequently broadening out their arguments to encompass more general historical

and theoretical concerns. In this way, an elision can be effected between what are often perceived as opposing strands in the culture of museums: 'object-based' and 'theoretical' approaches. It could be said, indeed, that the contributors to this volume are object-based, but not object-limited, in their analyses.

Our concern has been to incorporate a plurality of voices and perspectives, though we make no claim to complete coverage of the field. The authors are based variously in New Zealand, Pakistan and the USA, as well as Great Britain, and draw their case studies from around the world. We write as museum curators – of ethnographic, Far Eastern, Indian, fine and decorative art collections – and university teachers of anthropology, art history, design history, critical theory, museum studies and studio art. The interdisciplinary nature of this shared project may be discerned from the fact that the contributors to the present volume come from across these disciplines but their essays are informed as much by the continual exchange of ideas between the various communities as by developments in their own subject area.

On 1 July 1997, the Union Jack was lowered for the last time over the British colony of Hong Kong, and power was transferred to the new Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region, regarded by some Hong Kongers as a new colonial regime, this time based in Beijing. Such events serve as a reminder that colonialism continues to affect the daily lives of millions of people across the world, and indicate too that many of the cultural processes and dilemmas discussed in this book continue in a world which describes itself as post-colonial. The complex negotiations surrounding the hand-over of Hong Kong and the sometimes caricatured representations of China and its rulers offered by the British press can be viewed in the context of a long history discussed in this volume (Pagani, Clunas). For Clunas, the fascination of twentieth-century Britain for objects from Imperial China results from a process by which 'nostalgia for one empire became nostalgia for all and souvenirs of empire became fetishes of consolation'. The 'imperial archive' (Richards 1993), losing all pretence of relevance, becomes a mere souvenir, the only surviving token of imperial power. In a further fascinating development, as British colonial influence over the colony of Hong Kong waned, and economic decline restricted government spending on museums, it was members of the economically prosperous Hong Kong business community who sponsored two major redisplays of Chinese objects in national museums in Britain in the early 1990s: the T. T. Tsui Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum (1991) and the Joseph Hotung Gallery of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum (1992).

Recent developments in the colonial history of Hong Kong have also had their effect on objects and collections: news reports at the time of writing suggest that 'works of art worth one billion pounds may have been moved out of Hong Kong as the colony prepares for the handover to Chinese rule' (Glaister 1997). This instance, in which the exchange value of objects in question – 'one billion pounds' – momentarily takes precedence over their significance as 'works of art', serves to remind us of the complex role which objects continue to play in the shifting economic and political geography of the 'post-colonial' world. The

present book is intended as a start, rather than the last word, on colonialism and the object. As these early reports from Hong Kong suggest, the social life of things in the post-colonial world looks set to be equally problematic, equally contentious, and equally ripe for analysis.

*Part 1*  
*Institution, object, imperialism*



## *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.