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Imperialism, Identity, and Image: Looking at Colonial Objects in English Museums

By: Hope Elizabeth Gillespie

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Abstract: *This article explores how objects provenanced in once colonized territories carry a history of both its country of origin and its colonizing power. By evaluating the presentations of the Rosetta Stone from Egypt, a wampum belt from the United States, and the Throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh from Pakistan, all of which are displayed in British institutions, this piece claims that tangible culture can create a necessary cognitive dissonance within their own historical identities. The British hegemony over these objects provides a conundrum for the presentation of their object biographies, namely that their later history in England takes precedence over their original history in their country of origin, reinforcing the identity of Imperial Britain and the power that it once held. The author utilizes theories of Orientalism, museum presentation, and the western conceptualization of heritage and historiography to argue that to create a full object biography of these pieces a complete picture of its full history must be presented, which is necessary for the fuller understanding of the object as it relates both to its place in history and its physical place in the museum.*

Key words: *Colonialism, post-colonial history, Egyptology, colonial America, British India, British Egypt, archaeology*

“I believe,” said Alys to Darsee, “a book and an author can belong to more than one country and culture. English came with the colonizers, but its literature is a part of our heritage too, as is pre-partition writing.”¹ In Soniah Kamal’s Pakistani update of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Unmarriageable*, the reimagined Darsee and Alys, Kamal’s modern, English teacher Elizabeth, have an impassioned debate on the merits of teaching young Pakistani girls’ British literature, while also imbuing them with a sense of their Pakistani and Muslim roots. This novel, a brilliantly written reimagining, grapples with a key issue that is faced by many in formerly occupied territories: how do we reconcile opposing forces within national, local, and even personal identities?

This question of how we reconcile the identities of the colonizer and the colonized applies not only to the literary tradition but to material culture from previously colonized territories. This material culture is often taken from its country of origin and displayed in the museum of the conquering country. The British Empire is no stranger to this practice; artifacts from colonies, protectorates, and mandates fill the halls of the British Museum, the Ashmolean Museum, the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and many other institutions dotted amongst the isles. The focus of this article will be three objects, provenanced in territories that were annexed, colonized, or controlled by the British empire and are currently retained by one of two popular English museums: The British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. From the Indian-Subcontinent, taken from Lahore in modern Pakistan, is the Throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, which resides in the Victoria and Albert Museum. From the British Museum collection comes the Rosetta Stone, an infamous symbol of pharaonic Egypt, and a wampum belt, a trading tool for Native Americans, provenanced to the Northwestern United States. These three objects, taken from very different parts of the world that eventually gained independence from England, provide a sampling of how English imperialism is expressed. The British hegemony over these objects provides a conundrum for the presentation of their object biographies, namely that their later history in

England takes precedence over their original history in their country of origin, reinforcing the identity of Imperial Britain and the power that it once held over nearly 412 million people and nearly one-fourth of Earth's land mass.

Orientalism and Empire

A key component of the analysis of these objects in this article is the concept of Orientalism, which is a way of coming to terms with the "Orient," which is a term that has been often used to describe the Near East and Asia. This concept is based not on the actual reality of the so-called "Orient", but instead on its special place in European Western experience.² In its original meaning, Orientalism was defined as speaking predominantly, but not exclusively, of a British and French cultural enterprise, that applied primarily to India and the Bible lands; the Levant and Egypt.³

Now, as the first two artifacts under discussion are from modern Pakistan and Egypt, the theme of Orientalism fits squarely into the discussion of their object biographies. In the discussion of British imperial power in the Americas, a broader definition of Orientalism is required. In this sense, it does not require that the object comes from East of the centralized West, but rather that the place of origin of the object has an imperial power excised over it- power that is intellectual, political, moral, and cultural.⁴ Put plainly, Orientalism has less to do with the actual reality of the Orient, or for the purposes of this article, the colonized, and everything to do with the Western - the British -world.⁵

The idea that Europe acts as a referee in historical knowledge is also a concept that becomes highly visible in the discussion of these objects. Generally, so-called third world historians – for the purposes of this article, these intellectuals will be called non-Euro-American historians- feel a need to refer to works in European history to lend both a sense of chronological placement and an air of legitimacy to their work.⁶ The obvious disparity is that historians of Europe, that is historians who write,

study, and teach European history, do not reciprocate with a discussion and referral to non-Euro American works, and this does not affect their work.⁷ This is not to say that European historians are writing their histories in a contextless vacuum, but rather that there is an expectation of non-Euro-American historians to place their work within the parameters of the narrative of Western civilization, which is not reciprocal for European historians. This one-sided approach will also feature in the discussion of these objects, primarily with the information provided by the museum about the objects on their webpages and their displays.

This idea of a nonreciprocal relationship leads to the final factor used in discussing these objects, which is that in the Museum, the 'world as picture' means that human subjects stand not only separate from but also opposed to the objects on display.⁸ Using Heideggerian philosophy, Elliot Colla claims that "the world grasped as picture" suggests that the relation obtained in museum display is one of domination and control.⁹ The discussion in this article sees this inequitable relationship as the lynchpin in the display of imperial power because not only does the museum control the information surrounding the object, it controls the physical object- not unlike it controlled the regions from which the object came.

British Punjab: The Throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

The throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, "The Lion of the Punjab," was crafted between 1805 and 1810 by Hafiz Muhammad Mutani.¹⁰ The throne is made of wood with a resin core and plated with sheets of gold worked in repousse, then chased and engraved.¹¹ The design of the chair is indicative of a lotus flower, which is a metaphor for purity in Sikh scriptures.¹² After being inherited by his descendants, the throne was found in Lahore during the English annexation of Punjab in 1849, along with the rest of the Sikh treasury.¹³ Though most of the remaining treasury was auctioned off, the throne

was retained by the East India Company and sent to Calcutta in 1853, where a wooden replica was made.¹⁴ Afterwards it was sent to London, it resided in the Indian Museum until 1879, when it was moved to the South Kensington Museum, now the Victoria and Albert Museum, where it is today in room 41 of the South Asia display.¹⁵

Looking first at the man for whom the throne was made, the figure of Ranjit Singh looms large in 19th century Indo-English relations. In 1799, Singh unified the 12 *misl*s into one state and gained control of Lahore, where he proclaimed himself Maharaja in 1801.¹⁶ For 40 years, he expanded the Sikh empire into Kashmir, Afghan territory to the west, Lahasa, and Tibet .¹⁷ Due in equal parts to the 1809 British-Sikh treaty and his newly westernized military, he was able to hold off the East India Company from his land until his death in 1839.¹⁸

As previously mentioned, the throne was initially displayed in the India Museum, a short-lived museum dedicated to the possessions of the British East India Company.¹⁹ When the British East India Company was disbanded in 1858, the India Museum came under control of the India Office and its collections were moved to the office's space in Whitehall.²⁰ It stayed in this collection until 1879, when the India Museum and its collections were absorbed by the British Museum, Kew Gardens, and, of course, the South Kensington Museum.²¹

The South Kensington Museum was founded in 1852, a direct result of the Great Exhibition of 1851.²² The Exhibition had stoked the fascination about cultures beyond Western Europe and portrayed the 'traditional East' as authentic and romantic, fueling the spread of Orientalism.²³ In this vein, it is vital to note both the physical and political space that the museum inhabits. Locating the South Kensington Museum, now the Victoria and Albert Museum, in these spaces is key to understanding the collection as both a physical space designed and built by the commissioners of the 1851 exhibition and

as an education arm of the British government.²⁴ In these contexts, the museum cannot be looked at as a typical modern art museum, because it both predates the genre and had a collection that was ever-changing and primarily motivated by an educational vision.²⁵ In fact, upon the acquisition of the India Collection, Henry Cole, the visionary first director of the museum, stated, ““There is no university in the world where one can learn so much about India.”²⁶

The key issue within this biography is, in fact, education. The vision of the South Kensington Museum as an educational arm of the British government immediately calls into question the content and perspective of that education. According to the Victoria and Albert Museum, their mission was “to improve the British standards of industry by educating designers, manufacturers and consumers in art and science.”²⁷ While this aim is admirable, when looking at the information provided about the throne, it seems to fall short.

Looking purely at the design aspects of the throne, the materials and techniques are clearly identified and documented for the public. The maker of the throne is named, Hafiz Muhammad Mutani, and he is also identified as a metalworker. The online summary also notes that a replica of the throne was made in Calcutta, which is useful information for anyone who would wish to investigate how the design translates through reproduction. What information is missing, however, far outweighs these observations.

Who is Hafiz Muhammad Mutani? Does the artist have other known work? Is there some stylistic component that supports that this is his work other than his signature? In order to truly learn about the design of this object, should not more information on its creator be provided? And if it is unknown, should that not also be stated? These gaping holes in the object’s creation narrative directly

contradict the idea that this object is a tool in education, at least for an education about gold and metal working in the Indian subcontinent during the Sikh empire.

Instead, the bulk of the narrative surrounding the throne provided by the museum is about where it traveled to and where it was exhibited after the territory was annexed and taken into British custody. It is logical that a British institution would know the most about an object when that object was under British control and gaps in knowledge are common in artifact biographies. The issue however is one of ignorance and negligence. Great Britain had been involved on the Indian subcontinent since 1604 and acted as a power broker through the area until it finally took over the entire sub-continent in 1858. This is an example of the subalternity previously discussed; the object is now being presented by English historians, and therefore any non-Euro-American history that may be less than absolutely vital need not be presented. The imperial narrative is what is chosen to be presented in the lesson about design that the throne has to offer, not the Sikh origin narrative.

Egypt: The Rosetta Stone

If any object would be chosen as the poster child for western recontextualization and as an emblem for imperial power, the Rosetta Stone boasts a strong case. The stela was commissioned in 196 BC by Egyptian priests on behalf of Ptolemy V as a part of a copy of a series of decrees that affirm his royal cult on the first anniversary of his coronation.²⁸ The stone features three sets of text: Egyptian hieroglyphics, Demotic, and Greek; this was later the key to the decipherment of hieroglyphics by Champollion in 1823.²⁹ The stela was discovered by Napoleon's forces during the 1798- 1799 Egyptian campaign near the town of Rashid in the Nile Delta.³⁰ The stone came under British control after Napoleon's defeat in 1801 and arrived in England in early 1802.³¹ The stone has been on display since 1802, except during the First World War, when it was placed with other 'important' objects underground

in a station on the Postal Tube Railway at Holborn.³² The stone is currently on display in room 4, the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery, and is available virtually on Google Street View.³³ Additionally, there is a replica open to touch in the museum's Enlightenment Gallery, room 1.³⁴

Looking further at the theme of Orientalism, the Rosetta Stone clearly represents the view of Orientalists as rescuing the "Orient," in this case Ptolemaic Egyptian and hieroglyphics, from obscurity and alienation.³⁵ This act of modernization holds traces of power because once object becomes knowable or familiar, its power can be harnessed by those who have control of it.³⁶ While the object is chosen for display because of its connection to a former powerful empire and as the key to a newly opened vein of knowledge, the act of the display in a foreign and invading museum is also reflective of a sense of domination and control over that power and knowledge. Nowhere is this principle clearer than in Egypt. Egyptian material culture was not just a key to understanding the ancient past, but also as tool of colonial intervention.³⁷

When Napoleon Bonaparte entered Egypt in 1798, it was not only a precise military invasion, but also an intense ideological strike at the Mamluk rulers who ran the nation at the time.³⁸ Bonaparte wanted to give the illusion of liberation, evoking a cultural memory of Alexander the Great, in both the sense of territorial acquisition, as well as through the appropriation of its past.³⁹ The academic result of the invasion was the *Description de l'Egypt*, which incited the Western popularization of Pharaonic civilization.⁴⁰ This invasion was the catalyst for how both the West and Egyptians would view the cultural heritage of the area.

In response to the growing interest in the area, as well as accelerated dilapidation of ancient sites due to increasing industrialization, in the 1820s and 30s there was a change in travel and antiquities laws in Egypt.⁴¹ In 1835, Mohammed Ali, the self-declared Khedive of Egypt and the Sudan, made a decree

about the exportation of antiquities in the hopes of collecting materials for a museum in Egypt that would be of in the style of those being built in Europe.⁴² In 1858, Frenchman Auguste Mariette reestablished the Egyptian Antiquities Service, beginning what was nearly a century of French control over Egyptian cultural heritage.⁴³ Mariette also founded the Egyptian Museum in Cairo for Pharaonic antiquities in the same year, which opened in 1863 to the public.⁴⁴ After the 1881 revolution, the British seized full control of Egypt, making it a colony in everything but name by the end of 1882.⁴⁵ Thus begins the period, spanning from roughly 1882 until 1914, that is termed the “Golden Age of Egyptology.”⁴⁶

Teams of excavators from Great Britain, France, Germany, and the United States all held concessions and permits, working on sites across the country including Deir el Bahri, Saqqara, and Tanis.⁴⁷ Europeans founded the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria and the Museum of Islamic Art, which were established in 1892 and 1884 respectively.⁴⁸ Additionally, the Coptic Museum was founded in 1902 by Marcus Simaika, an Egyptian, though this museum was controlled by the Coptic Christians and not the state.⁴⁹ It is in these four divisions- Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic and Islamic- that Egyptian history was divided and viewed by the Western world.⁵⁰

What is key to note from this brief history is that, in the Western gaze, all Egyptian history is not created equal. The term ‘Egyptology’, etymologically speaking, should mean the study of Egypt in its entirety. Unfortunately, this was not – and to this day, is not – the case. The standard definition of Egyptology does not include Islamic or modern Egypt, and the line between Egyptology and Egyptomania is heavily blurred in Western scholarship.⁵¹ What Egyptology and Egyptomania conjure rather, is Pharaonic and Greco-Roman history, to which the Rosetta Stone provides a direct link. This gives the impression that Egypt’s only past, or rather, only impressive past, is ancient and separated from the modern citizens of the nation. When Elliot Colla discusses colonial control through objects, this is

what he means: the separation and alienation of certain parts of a nation's history in order to control its political present. It simultaneously communicates that England is great because it rules the land of pharaohs and proves it by taking the Rosetta Stone, and making it a crown jewel in its national museum's collection.

American Colonies: Wampum Belt

One of several wampum belts held by the British Museum, object Am1949,22.13, is woven on a bow-loom with skin thong warps with wool or vegetal fiber wefts, strung with shell beads.⁵² The white ground is decorated with purple wampum in seven V's touching at the apexes and the bases.⁵³ The belt has nine warps and is 145 beads long and 8 rows wide; the total bead count is 1160.⁵⁴ At one end of the belt, the base of the v shape ends with two beads, while at the other it ends with three; this, along with marks indicative of prior bound wefts left on the thong warps, suggest that complete lines of beads are missing from either one or both ends.⁵⁵ The belt was produced between 1600 and 1800 CE in the northwestern United States by either the Algonquin or the Iroquois people.⁵⁶ It was collected by William Ockleford Oldman and stayed in his personal collection until his death in 1949, when it was sold by his wife to the British Museum.⁵⁷ The belt was exhibited from 1982 to 1987 in the Museum's space for the department of Ethnography, the Museum of Mankind, in an exhibition entitled *Thunderbird and Lightning: Indian Life in North America, 1600-1990*.⁵⁸ Since 2011, the belt has been displayed in room 26, the Gallery of North America, in a case entitled "The Northeastern Woodlands."⁵⁹

Wampum belts were used for a variety of purposes, including the creation of alliances, prevention of disputes, a sign of friendship, assurances of fidelity, and the identification of messengers.⁶⁰ The value of the wampum belt or string lies in its size; the larger it was the more power it held.⁶¹ The rows of black or white wampum on the belts generally represented paths, open ones connotating

friendship.⁶² When a belt or string was returned, it indicated that the party addressed did not comply with the sent request; for obvious reasons, this was an important step in declarations of war.⁶³

Again, like the Rosetta Stone, the object on display is linked to political power. It was well-known among traders and early settlers of the Americas that, in order to foster relationships with local tribes, that wampum beads were vital.⁶⁴ Unlike the Rosetta Stone but similar to the throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, this wampum belt belonged to a culture group that English colonizers interacted with and directly exerted power over. Specifically, with the wampum belt, it was an object that was used to foster relationships with Native Americans, creating control not only in its acquisition but also in its original and intended use.

Whether or not this particular wampum belt was used between Native American tribes or between Native Americans and settlers is unknown- in fact, very little is known about the belt in its primary context at all. This again is problematic for display because its original use is almost a complete mystery. In this case, because the object came from a private collection, the opportunity to know more about the object is also limited and is likely the main culprit for the loss of knowledge about its origins. Similar to the Throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, there is vital information missing about the origins of this object, but in this case the information is most likely completely lost because it was not included in the notes from the private collection. This too is problematic- if so little is known about an object, should that not be stated? In this way, the presentation of the belt is almost like an object in a cabinet of curiosity, which in spirit, did not have to be scientific nor factual at all, but only had to provide collections with a sense of ease and mastery over a world that was foreign to them.⁶⁵ The wampum belt is interesting because it is mysterious; it is different; *it is oriental*. Though no information about its origin, not even a concrete provenance can be presented, it can still be controlled. With this object, the true definition of Orientalism shines through- the lack of detail about this wampum belt's origin shows

that the origin of the object is not important in the museum's narrative, but rather that the acquisition and the view of the object by the museum is what is truly coveted.

Conclusions

If presenting the objects in this way is deleterious and dishonest, then how else should these objects be presented? Is it not idealistic to believe that objects can be presented without bias? If information simply isn't known or lost then how can any institution possibly present a thorough history on an object? All of these are valid counterarguments, and truthfully, there is no right way to present objects- just as there is no right way to present history. It is not a solution to pretend that the balance of power that has been created through historical events can or should be ignored in the presentation of material culture- in fact, it would be irresponsible.

There is, however, an honest way to present these objects that does not render some pieces of information more important than others- transparency. Objects should be presented in ways that acknowledge the gaps in their history, not merely gloss over them. Information that deviates from the narrative of power and control that has dominated museum display in the wake of imperialism is the key to decolonizing museum display. What is required then is having the courage to present a narrative cognizant of past deeds and transgressions. This is not a call for apologies and penance, but simply the idea that admitting to the full truth of the past can create an environment that is more conducive to the education of history. History is not something that is comfortable, or that fits into a neatly packaged box. The objects that are left for us to study are no different- they have agency, and not unlike their human creators, they too must reconcile the details of what constructs their identities.

The presentation of the Throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, The Rosetta Stone, and the Wampum belt provide three case studies for reconciling identities within objects. What unites these three objects,

separated by oceans and time, is that in their acquisition by the English, they became emblems of not only their places of origin but of the power of the British Empire. Their displays in both the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum are problematic because they showcase the objects not through their full history, but as trinkets collected by the empire, imbuing the narratives with an Orientalist spin. Though Egypt, India, and the United States are no longer under imperial rule, what these objects show is that 'Rule Britannia' still rings true, if only in their own museums.

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Figures:



Figure 1:
Hafiz Muhammad Multani
Throne of Maharaja Rangit Singh
ca. 1805-10
Wood and resin core, covered with sheets of
gold worked in repoussé, chased and
engraved

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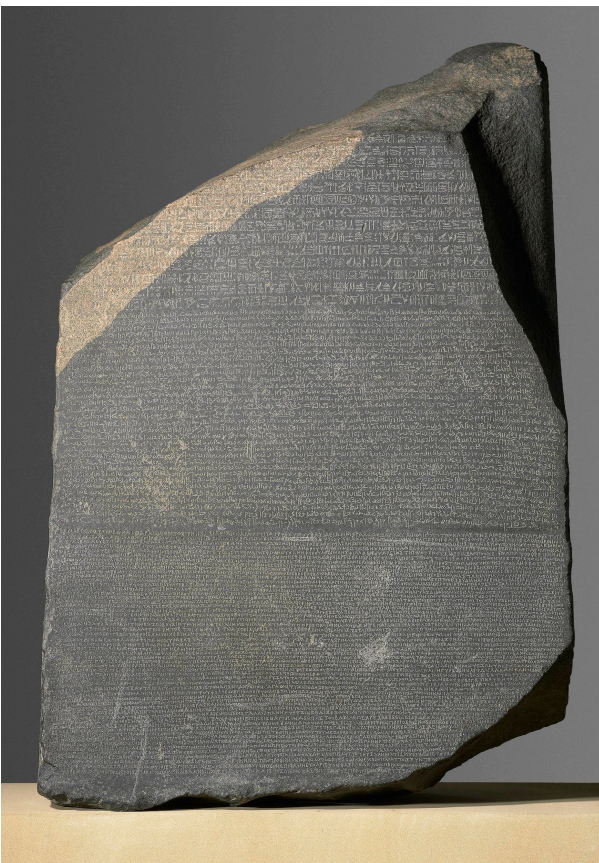


Figure 2:
Rosetta Stone
196BC
Granodiorite
CC BY-NC-SA 4.0,

[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/
image/16456004](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/16456004)

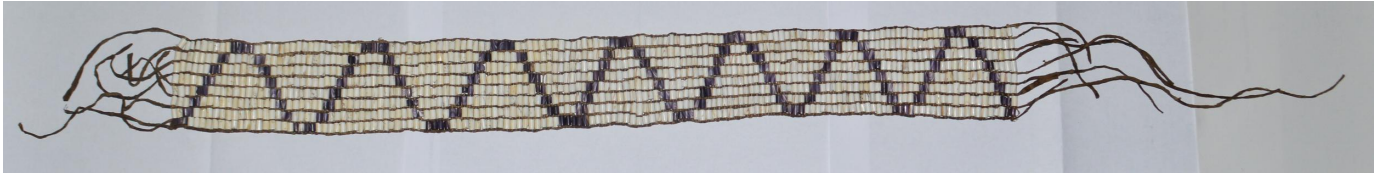


Figure 3:
Wampum Belt
ca. 1600-1800
Shell, skin, wood, fibre.
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image/1613646152](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/1613646152)