Christopher Ondaatje Lecture on South Asian Art, History and Culture

Uncollecting India:
Hidden Histories Of A Museum

Friday, October 19, 2018 | 4:00 PM – 6:00 PM
Room 208, North House, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy
1 Devonshire Place

Speaker: Kavita Singh, Jawaharlal Nehru University
Chair: Kajri Jain, Department of Visual Studies, University of Toronto

The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, has the largest collection of Indian artefacts outside India, which was mostly acquired during colonial times. The V&A’s Indian collections can be used to track a history of the impulses and opportunities underlying colonial collecting: artefacts entered the collection as loot, as gifts, and as documentation of resources available in the colony.

Alongside a history of collecting, however, there is a history of uncollecting, where collections are trimmed and refined through the removal of artefacts that are considered unimportant or irrelevant to the museum’s changing aims. The process of “de-accessioning” is one that museums seldom discuss in public, but the museum’s records keep traces of this less visible process.

This talk will track the fate of four grand, architectural-scale Indian artefacts that were collected by the V&A in the 19th century but are no longer available to view. Each of these four artefacts was collected in response to different impulses; each was hailed in its time as an important acquisition and was prominently displayed; each fell out of favour and was removed from the galleries for a different reason and in a different way. By tracking the histories of these objects, the talk will open the door to a hidden history of the museum.

KAVITA SINGH is Professor of Art History and is currently serving as the Dean of the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, where she teaches courses on the history of Indian painting and the history and politics of museums. She has published essays on issues of colonial history, repatriation, secularism and religiosity, fraught national identities, and the memorialisation of difficult histories as they relate to museums in India and beyond. She has also published essays on aspects of Mughal painting.

REGISTRATION: https://uoft.me/UncollectingIndiaRSVP