

What Empire Took, What Empire Left: Museums, Borders and the Politics of Return in South Asia

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Across the world, museums and governments have begun returning objects acquired through colonial conquest, war, forced sale and illicit trade. Nazi-looted art, Benin bronzes, Khmer sculptures, ancestral remains and sacred objects are moving out of institutions that once claimed permanent possession. India has received hundreds of antiquities in recent years, while sculptures stolen from Nepal have returned from museums and private collections abroad. These acts matter. They acknowledge that legal ownership cannot erase histories of violence and that the museum cannot remain the unquestioned beneficiary of empire. **But can an object simply go back to where it came from?**

Return is often imagined as the reversal of a journey: the object leaves a foreign museum, crosses a border and arrives home. Yet the world it left may no longer exist. A temple may have disappeared; a community may have dispersed; a border may now divide the landscape; ritual knowledge may have weakened; the object's original site may be unsafe or unknown. A returned deity may enter a shrine, a national museum, an archaeological repository or storage. It may return geographically without returning socially or spiritually. Who decides its future—the state, the museum, the archaeologist, the worshipper or the community from which it was taken?

Colonial loss in South Asia cannot be measured by counting the objects that left. What disappeared was sometimes tangible—a deity, manuscript,

ceremonial ornament, textile or archaeological fragment. But colonialism also divided land, reorganised labour, weakened local economies, classified communities, dispersed archives and shifted the authority to write our histories elsewhere. It did not simply remove things from South Asia; it changed the relationships between objects, people, place and history.

The colonial museum institutionalised this transformation. Sacred images became sculpture; manuscripts became collectible folios; living practices became ethnographic evidence. Not every South Asian object in a Western museum was stolen; objects also travelled as gifts, purchases and diplomatic exchanges. Yet legality and ethical legitimacy are not the same. Under empire, even a documented exchange could take place within profoundly unequal structures of power. The deeper question remains: who determined the terms of movement and acquired the authority to name, classify and speak for the object?

When an idol leaves a temple, its material body may survive, but its world does not travel with it. Separated from architecture, landscape and community, it no longer receives flowers, food, music, *tika*, touch or procession. The reciprocity of *darśan*—seeing and being seen—becomes museum spectatorship. A presence in ritual time becomes an object identified by dynasty, date, medium and provenance. These categories produce knowledge, but they cannot contain everything that has been lost.

What Empire Took, What Empire Left begins with this separation of matter from relationship, but moves beyond the sacred object. At its threshold, Tamsüyanger Longkumer's *Return to Sender. Fake Totem No. 32* (2026) presents a replica of a colonial boundary pillar marking the India–Myanmar border. Using the visual language of museum conservation, shipping and deaccession, Longkumer recasts the border as an artefact manufactured by empire rather than a natural fact of geography. The imposed line continues to divide Naga territories, ancestral lands and kinship networks. Yet there is no

deaccession procedure for territory. If an object can be repatriated, can a border be returned—and if not, must it be erased?

From this fixed line, Reetu Sattar's film *Shabnam* (2023) follows another colonial geography: the routes through which Bengal's muslin travelled while the history of its production was scattered across archives around the world. The film stitches archival images, hidden narratives and uneasy encounters into a deliberately unsettled account. Muslin's legendary refinement can easily romanticise Bangladesh's artisanal inheritance, but Sattar turns that beauty inside out. For centuries, this almost weightless cloth, woven through extraordinary technical knowledge, was entangled with courtly consumption, slave economies, imperial trade and colonial expansion. Sattar makes this fractured history bodily. Bangla speech and readable English translation arrive out of time with one another. The delay prevents the archive from becoming immediately and comfortably available to every viewer; it creates small, untranslatable moments of discomfort around materiality, institutions, authorship and collective loss. *Shabnam*—"night dew"—does not pretend to reconstruct a complete history. It visualises the churn of encountering what has been dispersed and asks how a displaced history reshapes belonging. Unlike a looted sculpture, the destruction of labour, technical knowledge and economic autonomy cannot be repaired by returning a single object.

In *All That Could Be Held Closely* (2025), Sattar transforms an old teak cabinet into an archive and reliquary, gathering *photi kapas* seeds and cotton, weaving implements, animal materials, and Raghunath Basak's photograph and account book. These fragments cannot reconstruct muslin's lost world; held closely, they turn material, bodily and mnemonic loss into an intimate form of inheritance.

Shaurya Kumar locates dispossession in vacant architecture and circulation. In *Where Yoginis Once Danced* (2025), thirty-six photographs record surviving forms at a temple originally dedicated to sixty-four Yoginis. Its empty niches reveal that identifying or recovering an individual sculpture cannot

reconstruct the sacred ensemble, ritual practices or female cosmology to which it belonged. In *It's Mine; No It's Mine; Now It's Yours; No It's Ours; Yes It's Missing* (2016), Draupadi's wagering in the *Mahabharata* becomes an allegory for an antiquities trade that moves deities among thief, dealer, collector, museum and state. By turning possession into a game, Kumar shows how sacred beings become pawns within competing claims of ownership, legality and national heritage.

Kumar exposes the narratives constructed around displaced objects; Raqs Media Collective asks what happens when damage cannot be securely explained. *Autoluminous* (2024) recalls the decapitated Buddha friezes at Kesariya Stupa but refuses to invent who damaged them or when.

Approximately seventy-two laser engravings on silk-coated paper surround a larger laser-etched image of a headless seated Buddha. The work joins the *Kālāma Sutta's* defence of doubt to the Fire Sermon's declaration that "everything is burning." The laser literally writes through heat, leaving soot, smell and residue. Burning is both the method of making and the work's philosophical condition. Raqs asks us to remain vigilant before unsupported certainty: every attempt to illuminate the past expends energy, produces debris and carries ethical consequences.

Where Raqs remains with the uncertainty of a damaged past, Mithu Sen uses fiction and performance to imagine what might happen when an object is released from the museum. In *Hiraeth* (2023), she stages a satirical farewell to a Gandharan sculpture of Shakyamuni Buddha at the RISD Museum. With little secure knowledge of its provenance, donor, collector or original site, the Buddha is imagined adrift between museum and homeland, possession and freedom. The Welsh word *hiraeth* describes longing for a home that has disappeared or cannot be recovered. Sen asks what return can mean when the place of belonging is itself uncertain. Repatriation is no longer a neat conclusion to displacement, but the precarious beginning of another life.

Sen's fictional departure finds a material counterpart in Divya Mehra's *Returnism* (2022). While researching the MacKenzie Art Gallery's collection in Regina, Canada, Mehra discovered that a carving stolen from a shrine beside the Ganges in Varanasi in 1913 and catalogued as Vishnu was actually Annapurna, goddess of nourishment and "Queen of Banaras." Misidentification had produced a second displacement: the object remained materially present while its gender, sacred identity, place and history of worship disappeared within the museum catalogue.

Mehra's research led to a rare instance in which an artist's intervention helped produce an actual repatriation. The museum in Regina repatriated the carving to India over Zoom in November 2020, and Annapurna travelled ceremonially to Varanasi in 2021 before being installed at the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, where she re-entered ritual life. *Returnism* records more than an institutional correction: cataloguing is never neutral; even without errors, it can estrange an object from itself and its meaningful past. Here, an artist moved restitution from museum debate into an actual change in the object's legal, geographical and sacred condition.

The title borrows former British prime minister David Cameron's dismissal of demands for the Koh-i-Noor as "returnism," exposing how restitution is cast as ideological excess while retention passes as neutrality. Mehra returned to the diamond directly in *A reasonably held belief that a "moral claim" exists* (2022), a postcard sent to King Charles III requesting its repatriation to India ahead of his coronation. The gesture extends the logic of Returnism from a successful act of restitution to an unresolved one, directing the demand for return from the museum to the British Crown.

Where Mehra presents a rare instance in which physical return also restored a context of worship, Mariam Ghani reveals why return is not always achievable. Her photographic prints *Removed, Limbo, Dismembered and Spectacular* (2026), trace Afghan antiquities and archives through war, museum looting, trafficking, iconoclasm and foreign collections. Some objects were stolen;

others were moved abroad for protection and remain suspended between preservation and return. Without equating people with artefacts, Ghani exposes a disturbing contradiction: Afghan cultural objects may be granted sanctuary in international institutions while displaced Afghans confront visas, asylum regimes and fortified borders. Return is shaped not only by museums, but by war, diplomacy and unequal control over who—and what—is permitted to move.

L. N. Tallur's *Interference* (2019) shifts the exhibition from the removal of objects to the removal of evidence from their surfaces. His video records dust being beaten from a monumental nineteenth-century carpet woven by prisoners involved in the struggle against British rule in Junagadh. In extreme slow motion, the dust resembles weather, smoke or bombardment. Cleaning preserves the carpet and prepares it for display, yet it also disperses the material residue of labour, confinement and time. Tallur does not oppose conservation; he reveals it as historical judgement. The museum continually decides what belongs to the object and what may be discarded, what counts as value and what is treated as waste. Can an object be preserved while the difficult history embedded in its material life is cleaned away?

Roshan Mishra carries this question into the sacred neighbourhoods of the Kathmandu Valley. *Disappearing Devatās and Fading Faith* (2026), recalls a Śiva-Pārvatī stolen from Patan and now in the British Museum, and a fifth-century Standing Buddha whose location remains unknown. Etched as translucent presences, the deities appear simultaneously visible and absent, mirroring their uncertain existence between sacred site, museum and illicit market. One is preserved but displaced; the other has vanished. Theft leaves more than an empty niche: it weakens the rituals, memories and communal relationships organised around sacred presence. The loss of the deity can gradually become the loss of the practices that once made it present.

Bishal Manandhar's *Threads of Faith* (2023–24) translates images of museum-held Nepalese deities and ceremonial ornaments into Jacquard

weavings. These textiles do not replace displaced objects. Instead, they show what representation cannot carry. By remaking sacred forms in cloth, Manandhar preserves their memory while acknowledging that their ritual efficacy depends upon prayer, touch, adornment and continuing care. The work exposes a central tension within the exhibition: a museum may conserve the material body of a sacred object by suspending the practices that once gave it life.

The distance between physical return and restored sacred life culminates in Jagath Weerasinghe's ten-part painting and collage, *Tara's Lament: Where Is Home If All Homes Are Colonial?* (2025). The work gives voice to the nearly life-size, eighth-century gilded-bronze sculpture of the Buddhist goddess Tara from Sri Lanka, now in the British Museum. Through Tara's imagined lament, Weerasinghe traces her movement from sacred presence to colonial acquisition, classification and confinement. Yet the work also asks what repatriation would return her to. If Tara were transferred to a postcolonial national museum, she might cross a geographical border while remaining behind glass and separated from worship. Her location would change while her condition as a museum object remained intact. Can return be complete without restoring the relationships of belief and care that once made her a sacred presence?

Together, these artists refuse to treat restitution as a simple journey from removal to return. Colonialism did not merely carry deities, manuscripts, textiles and antiquities elsewhere. It reorganised land, labour, knowledge, belief and sovereignty, while transferring the authority to interpret South Asia's past to institutions outside it. The displaced object is therefore evidence not only of what was taken, but of what was broken around it. The difficult questions begin when the shipment ends. Is the return of a deity sufficient if the community that sustained its sacred life has dispersed? Can an object be restored without returning authority over how it is named, interpreted, displayed—or withheld from display? Who should determine its future when

the state, museum, worshippers and source community make different claims? And how do we address what cannot be packed into a crate and sent back: a border cutting through ancestral territory, a craft economy damaged by imperial trade, a scattered archive, or ritual knowledge that disappeared with the object?

Museums do not merely preserve history; they determine which histories become visible, credible and accessible. Provenance research, digitisation and collaboration are necessary, but they cannot substitute indefinitely for redistributing ownership, access and decision-making. If the possessing institution continues to define the meaning and terms of return, restitution risks becoming another performance of the authority it claims to relinquish.

What Empire Took, What Empire Left therefore moves beyond asking, “Should the object return?” It asks what was dismantled so that the object could enter the museum, and who continues to live with the consequences. Return is not an act of generosity, nor can it undo historical time. Its measure is not simply whether an object crosses a border, but whether relationships and cultural authority are restored—and whether the power that governed removal has begun to change.

Return is not the end of an object’s journey. It is the moment responsibility begins.