

Troubling

Standards

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A social history of measurement in South Asia

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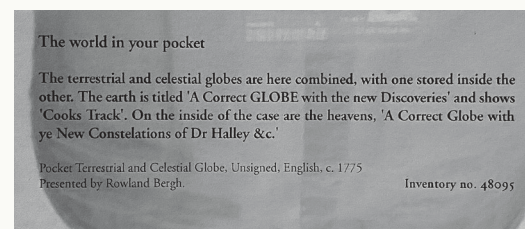
This pamphlet was curated following a one-day workshop entitled 'Troubling Standards: a social history of measurement in South Asia' co-hosted by Birmingham Museums Trust (BMT) and History of Science Museum (HSM) at the History of Science Museum in Oxford in July 2023.

Participants were introduced to the collections at HSM and BMT and reflected on community participatory research on South Asian collections. This pamphlet contains extracts from the rich conversations that took place and ended up forming a guide to approaching collections for museums and their communities.

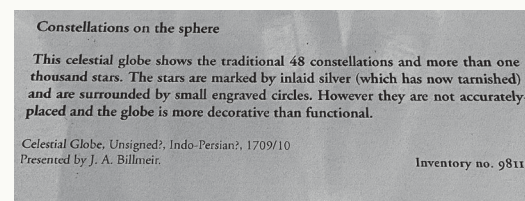
RESPONSES TO WORKING WITH SOUTH ASIAN COLLECTIONS ON MEASUREMENT & STANDARDISATION

What is meant by being 'correct'?

Compare the descriptions of two globes made in the 18th century: a pocket globe made in England, (Inv. No. 48095)



and a celestial globe made in South Asia (Inv. No. 98115).



One is 'correct' and one is 'inaccurate' – these are scientific terms, often considered to be neutral or objective statements. But are they?

Who determines what is correct? How do they determine this? What gets counted and what gets dismissed?

RESPONSES TO WORKING WITH SOUTH
ASIAN COLLECTIONS ON MEASUREMENT &
STANDARDISATION

Whose knowledge is being privileged?

**Tackling the absence of knowledge transfer through
the use of South Asian language sources and
archives to curate South Asian collections.**

**When it comes to matters of precision and
accuracy – who/what matters?**

How do museums respond to shifting geographies?

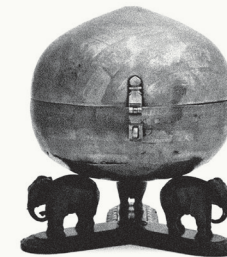
**Terminology and language are important
considerations.**

**There was an active interaction between indigenous
and colonial cartography in the 18th century in
South Asia.**

**Representing indigenous communities as
stakeholders in the history of science.**

**Before colonial surveying – many different types of
maps existed in South Asia including geographical,
cosmological and celestial.**

**Bhugola or Earth-Ball, by Ksema Karna, Indian,
1571, example of a cosmological map in the History
of Science Museum's collection – INV 51703**



**Maps can also have different types of
representations e.g. contrast between indigenous
logs and European visuals.**

Book recommendations

Jahangir and the Jesuits by Fernão Guerreriro

Mathematics and Society by Senthil Babu

*Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and Construction of
Knowledge in South Asia and Europe 1650-1900* by Kapil Raj

*Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British
India* by Matthew H. Edenev

WORKING WITH COMMUNITY PARTICIPATORY RESEARCHERS: GUIDELINES FOR MUSEUMS

Cultivate a safe space for dialogue and conversation.

Use thoughtful language (e.g. on labels – and these should be reviewed regularly).

Provide clarity on whether the relationship between the community being engaged by the museum is seen as a temporary intervention or permanent.

Make visible decision-making processes and unpack the invisible authority within the museum.

Support intergenerational conversations e.g. through making learning resources available on websites.

Take care to consider who is seen as representing 'the community'.

Interrogate what prior knowledge is assumed when working with the collections.

Embed the knowledge gained through community participation into the museum's collections database, interpretation and content production.

Make community participation an ongoing process rather than a one-off event.

PROVOCATIONS FOR MUSEUMS:

Museums can be a powerful tool:

- ★ for exploring and identifying (making space for) a range of ideas, perspectives and voices; for changing/widening the narrative
- ★ for engaging (wider and/or marginalised) communities in/with important discussions

How can we place what happens in museums in a larger context?



PROVOCATIONS FOR MUSEUMS AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATORY RESEARCHERS WORKSHOPPING TOGETHER

What next?

How can this association grow into something?

What happens if we do not question practice?
Decolonise the collections?

How are we working with: emotion, care, feeling,
rationality, spirituality.

Considering which comes first the object or the
question: where does neutrality sit? Can there be
neutrality?

WHAT MUSEUMS AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATORY RESEARCHERS CAN DO TOGETHER

Storytelling.

Work with absence as tool.

Engage with the question of access and who gets to
enter the conversation.



EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE:

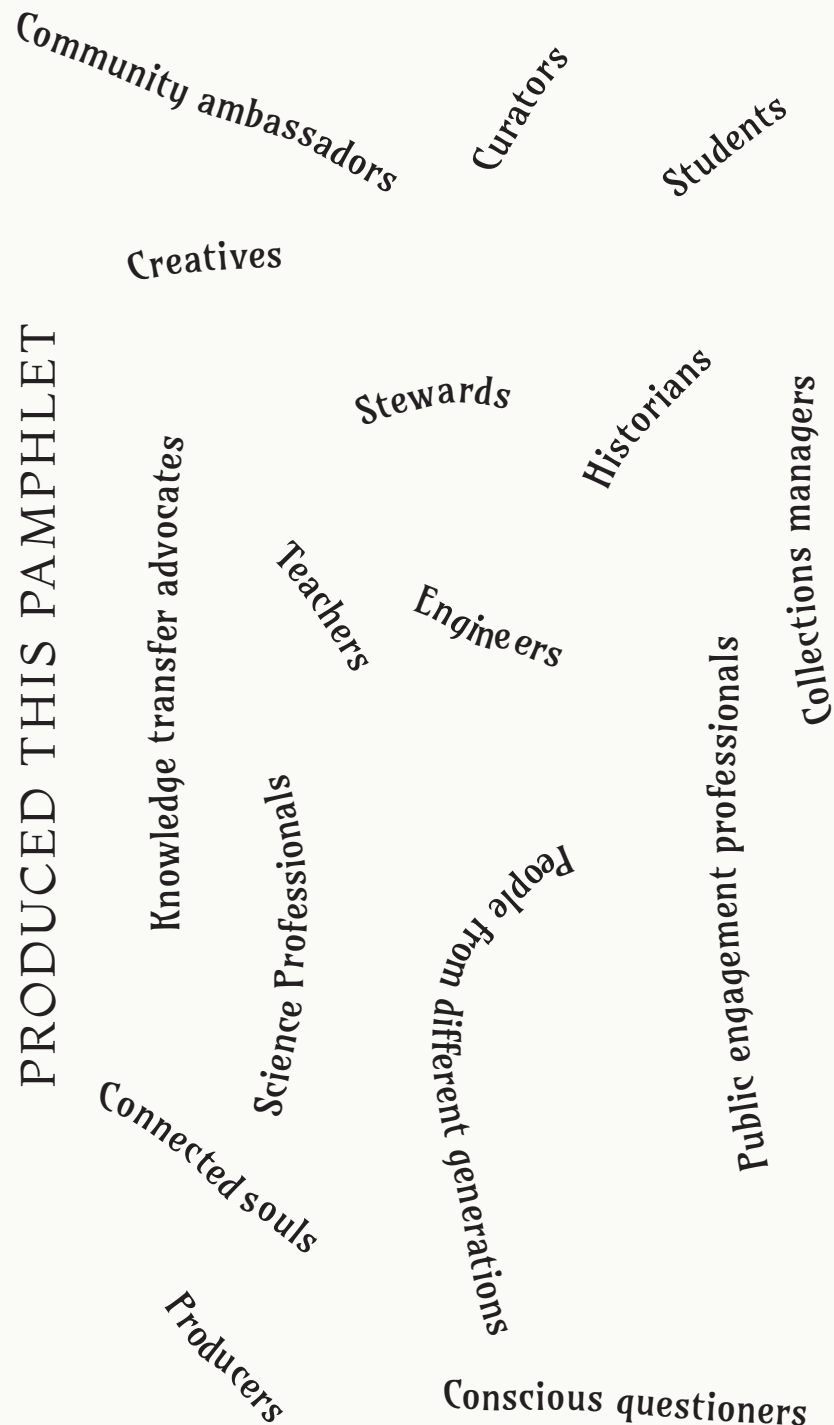
Birmingham Museums Trust: engagement-led collecting methodology developed during the HLF-funded Collecting Birmingham project, working to incorporate community consultation and decision-making into every new acquisition.

Museum Association Deaccessioning Toolkit.

Horniman Museum and Gardens – supporting projects where the museum can be decentred, for example ‘Rethinking relationships and building trust around African collections’.



WHO TOOK PART IN THE WORKSHOP THAT PRODUCED THIS PAMPHLET



Why work with Absence?

Museum collections are most usually defined by what is present. Yet, when carrying out research on them, the gaps within them become apparent. There are gaps created by the person or people who did the collecting, cataloguing and curating and initially they can be a source of frustration. Working with decolonial methodologies allows us to see gaps differently. Gaps allow researchers to ask questions and provide an opportunity for a different way to approach collections. Gaps remind us of the partiality of collections and allow us to co-produce knowledge. After all if everything was known – there would be nothing left to know.

Absence also serves as a reminder. For every object in a collection that is present in a museum – there is an absence in the place that it was taken from. Sometimes these absences go unnoticed and other times they become a defining feature. Absence is another route to engage with provenance. Previously, absence was seen as a problem to be fixed, something that needed solving. We instead propose absence as a tool – something that can be actively worked with. It gives room for questions to be asked. Absence allows many different ways to probe how we engage with museums and the collections they hold.

Absence is also a way to work with communities that are connected to collections. It makes the questions of who is in the room or not in the room an important one. It can be a trigger to bring people together.



**WORKING
WITH THE
GAPS
:
DECOLONIAL
APPROACHES
TO RESEARCH
METHODOLOGIES**

By JC Niala

Thinking
about
collections

- Relationship between collections and museums
- Accessing collections
- Why research with collections

Challenges and Opportunities

- Who did the collecting and who for?
- What effect does this have on the collections?
- How does this affect our work with the collections?

Decolonial approach to knowledge production

- Different knowledge systems
- Whose knowledge gets privileged
- Redressing imbalances
- Questioning assumptions

Formulating a research question & identifying objects

- What comes first question or objects?
- Entering the conversation- democratising research
- Focused & feasible

Absence

Considering Absence

- Absence calls attention to what is missing materially and in terms of knowledge
- Absence in the place that the object was collected from

Engaging with Absence

- What if absence doesn't need to be fixed?
- What does it allow us to do?
- What other things can we see through that will give us insight?
- What if instead of a gap we see an opening?

Absence as a tool

- Gives space for researchers to work with collections, other researchers & museum staff
- Can be used as a tool for interrogation or the entire methodology
- Silence in the archives is also saying something if we choose to listen

ONLY YOU CAN DO THE RESEARCH THAT YOU
SET OUT TO DO: THE WORLD AWAITS YOUR
WORK!

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Birmingham
Museums



"There is a huge lag between conversations & practice"

"Why is decolonisation work often temporary? Events etc. not the permanent collections"

THE GREAT TRIGONOMETRICAL SURVEY WAS ONLY POSSIBLE DUE TO MUGHAL LOGS



IS YOUR VIEWPOINT MOVING OR EXISTING?

WHOSE KNOWLEDGE?!



"Correct"?!
"Accurate"
"Precision"

TROUBLING STANDARDS

CURATION IS INVISIBLE + A CHOICE

ABSENCE IN THE PLACE & OF KNOWLEDGE & MATERIALITY

The Social History of Measuring in South Asia - a workshop

1m OBJECTS - BELONG TO THE PEOPLE OF B'HAM

45k SCIENCE OBJECTS - LITTLE USE OR SOCIAL HISTORY



"BRUM-A-GEM"
-REPRODUCING EN MASSE, LOW QUALITY

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER



WHICH COMES FIRST? THE OBJECT OR THE QUESTION??



BIRMINGHAM

'TO INSPIRE THE MAKERS + CRAFTERS OF THE CITY' TO REPRESENT THE PEOPLE OF B'HAM
NOW NOTHING IS ADDED TO COLLECTIONS WITHOUT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

CLASSIFICATION: AGE? USE? GEOG? COLLECTOR? MATERIAL? RARITY?

"What you think is true might not be true..."



Birmingham Museums