

# **Museum Catalogs: Remarkable Re-presentations**

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The museum exhibit catalog holds an unusual place in the art history world. For many people, it is the only way they are able to experience an artwork or exhibition. However, many catalogs have become historical art statements in their own right, taking on an historical preciousness sometimes equivalent to the objects they are presenting. In this brief essay, I will use the arguments of Richard Davis, Tapati Guha-Thakurta and Stephen Bann to illustrate how the catalog has affected museum culture by representing an additional, different life of an art object, and by examining what elements give printed, documentary images their foundational status in the practices and the formation of museums?

Briefly evaluating the physical characteristics of Pramod Chandra's exhibit catalog, *Sculpture of India 3000 BC to 1300 AD*, reveals the primary audience of this book—academics and collectors. Harvard University Press published the catalog from the 1985 exhibit at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. J Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery, positions the reader in the historical time frame by writing in his introduction that the objects chosen range from the middle of the third millennium B.C. to approximately the fourteenth century A.D., and that much of the Indian art followed a character that distinguished it from what had passed before. Chandra, in her forward, further grounds the reader in the book's purpose. "A deliberate attempt has been made in this exhibition to give the viewer an impression of Indian sculpture as a whole, in all the rich diversity of idioms that flourished in the ancient regions of the country" (19). The specific goal of the exhibit was to "break negative stereotypes of Indian art." and to "convey a sense of the contribution of Indian sculpture to the common artistic heritage of

mankind” (18). Brown supports Chandra, writing, “The basis of selection of these works has been largely to show how wrong nineteenth century attitudes and perceptions were. We have assembled some one hundred pieces in an effort to clarify and focus the achievement of India’s artistic tradition” (17).

Visually the catalog book is enticing and richly presented, with a deep green hard cover cloth binding and gilded lettering. The chronological arrangement of the images in the catalog corresponds to the arrangement of the exhibition. Each item in the exhibit has been re-presented as a black and white image in the catalog, with a description detailing where it was created, or found; its material composition; dimensions; who owns the object and where it is housed. These catalog entry images present the objects in a scientific manner, with sterile backgrounds and highly focused, emphatic lighting. At the front of the catalog, there are several color plates. These bring attention to those items the curator and author considered to be prized representations of broader classes of Indian sculpture. The catalog ends with a glossary and bibliography. Taking in the entirety of the book, its content, design and delivery, present this catalog as a precious object in its own right—one that would especially appeal to academics and researchers of Indian art. It is an object that would be at home in a college or public library’s rare book or special collection or readily available at a museum’s archives and reference collection.

To this end, Richard Davis would argue that this catalog is another “life” of the art collection—a life different from the exhibition. In his book *Lives of Indian Images*, he writes,

“In recounting diverse adventures of Indian images I portray them as fundamentally social beings whose identities are not fixed once and for all at the moment of

fabrication, but are repeatedly made and remade through interactions with humans. Responses to such objects, I will argue, are primarily grounded not in universal aesthetic principles of sculptural form or in a common human psychology of perceptions, but more significantly in varied and often conflicting cultural notions of divinity, representation and authority”(8).

This exhibit catalog provides a way for the objects as image to have many lives in different cultural and social settings. Each time the catalog is opened it re-presents the objects as a group to a different audience, for a different reason, in a new time and different setting. The series of related images and text are presented in order to communicate its “cultural notions of divinity, representation and authority.” Museum culture prizes the ability to capture this kind of experience in order to promote learning and acceptance of other cultures. But are the museums mistaken in thinking that the catalog representation can be similar to the in person experience with a piece of art?

The codex format, besides providing a more intimate presentation and allowing for in-depth examination and comparison, allows the audience a more controlled experience than the museum environment of live art. The two dimensional images limit full engagement, and are presented with an edited perspective—someone had to choose what to include and what to discard, what angle shot to use, and what order to present them. These catalog encounters do bring a new and different life to exhibition objects, but it is a different life, a different type of encounter.

At the same time, these catalogs develop lives of their own. For example, the catalog may be shelved by a private collector of books; it may be referred to as an authority on its subject; it may be used as a teaching tool about its subject, about the exhibition, or about its own construction; or it may be disassembled for use in another piece of art; or it

may be treasured in a rare book collection, preserved and untouched. For those who engage with the catalog bring to it their own predispositions for its use and care. Museums need to consider how best to use these exhibition catalogs and they need to educate their patrons on the difference between live interaction and catalog use.

Tapati Guha-Thakurta looks at the ability of art historical records to preserve and affect political, cultural and social histories. She challenges us to consider that these representations can support and create nations, rules, orders and social constructs. By preserving images in books or as print folios for reference, a museum defines the importance and significance of an object. The catalog can extend value to a particular culture (or non-value if not included), and lengthens the time span of the relationship between object and society. These re-presentations also “objectify and memorializes the past in sharp dissociation from the present, celebrating history and heritage over modern achievements”(Guha-Thakurta, 90). So, too, in Chandra’s catalog the emphasis is on the historical and cultural relevance, and the establishment of prototypical Indian sculptural forms, of the objects in the exhibition.

"Like the detailed Catalogue, such albums, folios, prints and postcards would henceforth feature as an integral part of museum and exhibition practice. "

"We see the power of these images, now, in the possibilities of endless reproduction --in their continuous proliferation in these period in a host of others such albums, booklets and illustrated folios on Indian art that the Ministry of information and Broadcasting issued. These images acquire a life and presence de-linked from the objects from which they were derived...They reflect a strong official compulsion at work through these years of compressed packaging, propagation and public dissemination of the idea of a ‘national heritage’: something that could be captured in a single display, housed in a single museum collection and most important, offered between the covers of single select albums"(Guha-Thakurta, 106)

Guha-Thakurta's argument is supported by the role we see these catalogs play in defining a culture on which academics refer to and build upon. Museum curators need to be mindful that their choices have a significant impact on determining what is valued by its culture. Referring to catalog representations for may have the detrimental effect of limiting curators' research, by not expecting them to reach out into new ideas and to use new perspectives to search historical and social interpretations of art works and artifacts.

One point that Stephen Bann makes in his article, "Art History and Museums" in the book *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, is that the museum is a "project which has been fulfilled precisely through its negation: that is to say, from the point at which the didactically assembled objects became also vehicles of feeling and testaments of loss. It is not possible for the museum to emancipate itself from this dual identity" (239). In this sense, a catalog of an exhibit is like its eulogy. The gathering of specific objects together maybe a joyous event that may never happen again, and there is a sadness that one feels at that loss. The exhibition is memorialized, perhaps even sentimentalized in the compilation of an exhibition catalog. Does that sentimentality get encompassed within the catalog presentation? Does the catalog memorial take away from the effective academic objectivity of an exhibit?

Museum curators, and the museum culture need to consider these ideas when determining to produce an exhibition catalog. Whether the catalog brings new life to an art piece or group of objects, or if the catalog creates a new historical or social definition for an object, museums need to recognize the duality that museums and related art historical reproductions have. Those who curate and present exhibitions need to recognize the dual

identity of the museum. Bann states this duality of the museum as “assembler of objects and as vehicles of a feeling of loss, as the catalogs try to capture and maintain an experience of an exhibit.”

The exhibition catalog can be a remarkable and potent re-presentation of an exhibition and of history. It can bring a new life to an object or group of artifacts. It can create a history by defining and bringing value to a culture. And it can memorialize a moment in time. The catalog itself can even become a treasured artifact. With all of this potential art historians and curators need to be careful that the museum machine doesn't self-propagate its structures, and influence the measures themselves when producing these catalogs (Bann). Art history and museums need to be able to withstand outside critique in order to be viable and agents of education. And curators do this by expanding their research methods to areas beyond what has already been recorded.

## Works Cited

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