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'Unraveling a National Symbol: Partition and the Lahore Museum'

The museum's close ties to the nation-state have long been central to its history in South Asia. Though introduced to the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth century, as an instrument of British colonial power, museums in India and Pakistan were quickly refashioned in the 1940s, as a crucial vehicle for national politics and identity. While the museum's historic ties to Enlightened, rational thought, and Western conceptions of progress made it an important declaration of civilization and power, museums erected anew at Delhi and Karachi proved to be key players in the production of nationalist art historiographies, that which have over time lent added credence to India and Pakistan's separate claims to sovereignty.

Lesser explored, however, are the histories of violence and disjuncture that punctuate this otherwise triumphant historical progression and transformation of museums in South Asia, histories often suppressed by the fervor of nationalist rhetoric on both sides of the border. Of concern to this paper, in particular, are those experiences catalyzed by the violence and trauma of partition in the 1940s that tend, by contrast, to configure the museum in South Asia less as a symbol of creation and national pride, and more as a site of destruction and loss.

Specifically, this paper examines the history of the Lahore Museum, and the process by which its collections were violently split between India and Pakistan in 1949. Central to my analysis are the physical ramifications of this process of division upon the institution's art and archaeological collections, as well as the ideological relationship that develops in the 1950s between the Lahore Museum, and its counterpart across the border at Chandigarh, where the Lahore Museum's 'exiled' collections in India eventually found refuge.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to unsettle prevailing claims that inscribe the museum as national in South Asia. It links the history of the Lahore Museum to discourses on exile, dispossession, and homelessness, and in so doing re-positions the museum in South Asia as a site of physical and ideological tension, where the politics of partition continue to unfold. In deference to my larger dissertation project on partition and visual culture in India and Pakistan, of which this paper is a vital part, my analysis of the Lahore Museum will also be a means to reflect on partition's larger epistemological ramifications for the field of South Asian art history today.