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American Institute of Pakistan Studies (AIPS) Travel Grant Final Report
Significance of Presentation for Pakistan Studies

I presented my paper “Unraveling a National Symbol: Partition and the Lahore Museum” at the American Council for Southern Asian Art’s (ACSAA) 18th Biennial Symposium, held in Boston, MA from October 12-15, 2017. My presentation, an excerpt of my larger dissertation project on partition history and the historiography of art in South Asia, was part of a diverse panel entitled “Museums in Contention,” that explored museums in South Asia as sites of contentious discourse where notions of authenticity, identity, and history itself are defined and redefined.

My paper contributed to the field of Pakistan Studies in a number of critical ways. First, it shed new light on the history of the Lahore Museum, an institution that has played a critical role in the development and protection of art and culture in Pakistan in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While much has been written on the Lahore Museum’s colonial moorings, little has been published on the institution’s experience during the partition of 1947, when its archaeological and permanent collections were dramatically split between Pakistan and India over the course of several years (1947-1952). My paper brought this process of division (and its aftermath) into greater focus in a broader effort to raise questions around the physical and ideological impact of partition on the development of museological institutions in South Asia. Over the course of the presentation, I delved into the mechanics of the division process to reflect on its administrative and physical complexities. This was to diversify present understanding of who was involved in the division of museums and museum collections at partition and what was divided between Pakistan and India, a narrative that has primarily been told through the region’s archaeological heritage, to the exclusion of the museum’s permanent collections and other forms of visual culture.

Second, my paper endeavored to problematize prevailing historiography that inscribes the museum as national in Pakistan and South Asia more broadly. To this end, I followed on my discussion of partition’s violent ramifications for the Lahore Museum and its collections with a discussion of the division’s aftermath, paying special attention to the fate of those exhibits transferred from the Lahore Museum to India in the 1940s. Specifically, I detailed the Lahore collections’ long sojourn across East Punjab in the 1950s, as well as their eventual acquisition by the Chandigarh Museum in the 1960s to illuminate the ideological relationship that developed between the Lahore and Chandigarh Museums in the years following partition. I argued that this cross-border connection presented an important opportunity to re-think the history of museums in South Asia in terms of exile, displacement and homelessness, discourses that have significantly reshaped partition historiography in recent years, and, in this case, further pointed to the disjointed relationship between the museum and the nation-state in Pakistan by opening up the entangled histories of museums, museum collections and processes of nationalization in Pakistan and India in the twentieth century.