

Article

Collecting as Ordering or Scattering; Scattering as Destruction

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Abstract: Collecting and scattering may seem like opposites, but they are in fact complementary, interdependent actions. To collect religious art and other objects is also to scatter them. Though collecting can sometimes be virtuous, it is always disruptive to some previous order. Reversing that kind of disruption, which occurred on a grand scale during European explorations and colonization of much of the world, is not always possible, but telling the stories of those disruptions is an important first step for museums to take. A next step is to engage in meaningful conversations with places from which objects have been collected.

Keywords: collecting; art; museums; archaeology; preservation; colonialism; yogini; goddess; India; Tamil Nadu; Hinduism; god



Citation: Kaimal, Padma. 2022.

Collecting as Ordering or Scattering;
Scattering as Destruction. *Religions*
13: 1039. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13111039>

Academic Editor: Knut Axel
Jacobsen

Received: 8 August 2022

Accepted: 19 October 2022

Published: 1 November 2022

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To collect religious art and other objects is also to scatter them. The difference is usually one of perspective. Pulling objects together in one place requires extracting them from other places. To those toward whom the objects move, and especially to those who control the movement, collecting can feel like an ordering of random things, a fresh connection to sacred energies, a rescue of the undervalued, a gathering of orphans, and an assemblage that contributes to new knowledge. Some collecting can indeed be an act of preservation, such as gathering seeds from heirloom plants or supporting the work of living artists. The work of all collecting can seem the work of progress, an ordering of chaos. Collectors can feel they are part of making the world continually better.

Often, however, collecting disrupts a system that ordered the objects in their previous home—someone else's collection, an unfamiliar cultural system, a site of practice that intermediaries took care to obscure, or the compacted wreckage of some place buried by time. Even in the mess of long-buried settlements, there is order that archaeologists can discern. Extracting objects from such places erases those previous forms of order and erases knowledge that order carried with it regarding the contexts in which those objects bore meaning. Removing sacred objects from sites of worship produces more obvious forms of damage. Building collections replaces previous systems with newer forms of order and knowledge that are meaningful to the extractors and can be deeply revealing—even more so than those extractors intend them to be—about the values and aspirations of their new owners. Collecting can build knowledge and preserve, but collecting can also disrupt and destroy.

“Scattering and Collecting” was, for years, my working title for the book I wrote on the twentieth-century dispersal of thirteen-some sculptures of yogini goddesses from northern Tamil Nadu in India to eleven different museums across North America and Western Europe (Kaimal 2012). The mutuality of collecting and dispersing was, for me, the central insight of the project, though the editors ultimately produced a more appealing title for wider audiences. At the start of that project, opposite ethical values had come to mind when I thought of scattering and collecting. Scattering was violent, messy, destructive, a surrender to entropy. Collecting was disciplined, ambitious, focused work. Equating two actions that I had thought of as opposites—one centrifugal and one centripetal—suddenly gave me a rich oxymoron that took me beyond the edges of the dominant culture in which I had grown up.

Rethinking apparent oxymorons as being, instead, two sides of the same coin was something I learned to do by studying South Asian goddess worship, which I did to explore what the dispersed yogini sculptures might have meant when they were made in the ninth or tenth century. Yoginis were, by that time, worshipped as powerful goddesses who could empower or destroy their devotees, perpetuating the energies of ancient mother goddesses (*matrika*) who embodied diseases and their cures. Yoginis, like mother goddesses, came in multiples, embodying the infinite forms in which female divinity manifests in the physical world. Their ferocity was protective as well as dangerous. Hypaethral temples—those open to the sky rather than covered with a roof—across South Asia set their many yoginis around circular or rectangular courtyards, open to sunlight and moonlight.

Yoginis embodied complementarities over binaries and could encourage people to perceive interconnections between apparent opposites such as birth and death, poison and medicine, decay and growth, nurture and slaughter.¹ Such thinking was profoundly unlike the Manichean binaries inherent in the Abrahamic monotheisms that permeated even my secular upbringing.² Stressing continuities rather than hierarchies, as well as the multiple, female nature of the divine, yogini worship was associated with Tantra, deliberately subversive practices challenging the foundations of some of the many forms of Hinduism that flourished then and now.

I began to interrogate all sorts of apparent polarities for connections or complementarities that might exist between them. Once I applied this lens to other questions those sculptures raised, I found several specious binaries, in addition to that of collecting and scattering, lurking behind assumptions other scholars and I had carried into studying them. One was the construct of a “Hindu/Muslim binary” that has run like a poison vein through the discourse of South Asia’s history, with increasing intensity in recent centuries. Each of the yogini sculptures had been systematically vandalized. Hands, faces, breasts had been hacked off, particularly on figures that were emaciated, aged, or carrying lethal implements. Some scholarship assumed this destruction was the work of Muslim iconoclasts.³ However, a close look at the stones revealed that the breaks were very old, their edges worn and darkened with time. Verbal sources too show that hostility toward yogini worship is much older than Islam. For over 2000 years, Buddhists, Jains, and Christians in India, as well as many kinds of Hindus, have left behind writings that demonize, fear, or mock fierce goddesses in attempts to diminish their perceived power (Humes 2003, pp. 145–55). The evidence suggests that the likely vandals who broke these stone yoginis were not Muslim iconoclasts but rather members of earlier, and allegedly more Indic, traditions that frequently scorned the worship of fierce goddesses.

So too did the binary construct of East and West fail to fit the story of these sculptures’ removal from India. European colonial domination of South Asia certainly formed the enabling environment for the stones’ “informal extraction” to Paris, but the three identifiable agents of that extraction were a local South Indian operative (Thangavelu), a French archaeologist who longed to escape Paris (Gabriel Jouveau-Dubreuil), and a Chinese art dealer who adored Paris and whose parents had escaped China during the Taiping revolution (C. T. Loo) (Kaimal 2012, chp. 4). Jouveau-Dubreuil devoted his life to analyzing South India’s ancient architecture and took every chance to live in India. Anchored firmly in Paris and New York, Loo longed to give Asia’s past greater dignity in the eyes of Europeans and Americans. Both men loved Asia and cherished understandings of their work as noble. At the same time, with his expenses covered by Loo, Jouveau-Dubreuil scoured southern India energetically for antiquities Loo could sell from Paris. That involved removing some of the yogini sculptures from a recently built temple, where they seem to have been understood as five of the Seven Mother Goddesses (*sapta matrika*), and taking others from the area outside the temple, where they were lying about in pieces. It is not difficult to imagine that people doing the latter felt they were salvaging or rescuing those scattered fragments, though, with hindsight, we recognize that they removed evidence from a site rich in architectural and sculptural remains at which systematic archaeological excavation might have yielded significant information about their pasts. Neither Jouveau-Dubreuil nor Thangavelu, who

brought him the sculptures, chose to identify the find site precisely in the documents I was able to study. Thangavelu reported vaguely to Jouveau-Dubreuil that the sculptures came from Kanchipuram, which was already a large and busy city filled with temples. That report was probably not true. As the more recent research by Kasdorf and Stein in this issue demonstrates, the find site was likely some miles further west, near Kaveripakkam and Tirumelcheri. Scientific standards of archaeological precision have certainly changed over the past century, but even by the standards of the time, such record-keeping was loose. Perhaps those principles paled in the heady atmosphere of what Bernard Cohn has called the “museological modality” of gathering and displaying objects to know, order, and control a colonized space (Cohn 1996). In any case, Jouveau-Dubreuil’s collecting of these yoginis involved several kinds of scattering. These classic actions of a colonial marauder unfolded, however, in the hands of a scholar devoted to India, its religion, and its art—a man who understood these “extractions” as the only means by which he could avoid returning to France.

Thus removed from India, these sculptures experienced differing receptions by those who received them when they reached Paris in 1926. One of the smaller goddess figures exported with the yoginis was missing a right leg when it arrived, only to have someone remove the left leg, perhaps to make it more symmetrical. Under the care of Loo or the Musée Guimet in Paris, someone manufactured a complete-looking goddess figure by fusing a head from one figure with a headless body from a different figure.⁴ This produced the awkwardly long neck of the figure now displayed at the far right of the triple-yogini group in the Musée Guimet.⁵

While those three remained in each other’s company at the Guimet, the rest of the yoginis from Jouveau-Dubreuil were distributed one by one to eight or more museums and to three private collectors across the West, losing, in the process, the visual coherence that bound them together as a group and gave them meaning as a powerful gang of goddesses embodying protection, destruction, and the deep logic that bound protection and destruction together into a mighty whole. (The exact number of their new homes is unknown because two pieces that reached Paris have since vanished from the public record.) Like the Parthenon (or Elgin) Marbles that, on orders from Joseph Duveen, received a scrubbing with wire brushes and carborundum at the British Museum to make them whiter, the yogini sculptures’ journey from Tamil Nadu involved rupture and transformation, even though collectors understood themselves as rescuers.

They experienced other transformations as well. Once pieces of a larger architectural whole and divine collective, as well as individually powerful goddesses, they became individual “sculptures” and nothing else. Once objects of religious devotion, they became “art”, aestheticized and isolated on pedestals under dramatic lighting in clean and nearly empty spaces. They lived new lives—quite different lives but lives equally worthy of study, as Richard Davis has helped me see (Davis 1997). Their identity as prestigious or informative or mysterious commodities replaced their use value as aids to goddess worship. Granted, most of them seem to have lost their function as aids a thousand years before, when they were so assiduously smashed up by vandals, though the five yoginis Thangavelu found reinstalled in a new temple must have received gifts, songs, and love from devotees there.⁶ From another perspective, one could still make the case that they once again became objects of worship insofar as Western museums encourage their own kind of religious experience complete with atmospheres of hushed reverence and promises of intellectual and spiritual transcendence (Duncan 1995). The binary of temple vs. museum is thus another that benefits from interrogation. Different groups benefit from them, but those benefits are not completely unlike. Both kinds of spaces have been exclusionary at times, public and welcoming at others. Ranking either experience as more “civilized” than the other demeans any who try.

Museums can also offer the important benefit of educating their publics with their collections, reaching people who would never otherwise learn about the wisdom South Asian goddess worship offers, for example, and also reaching people who identify with

South Asia and may feel validated by the presence of South Asian sculptures in a museum's exalting spaces. The ethics of teaching people about their culture with objects taken from their ancestors are dubious indeed, and, yet, diasporic communities can experience this otherwise. Identifying simultaneously with the exhibited and the exhibiting cultures, we can feel a welcome resolution when the two join in one spot, as well as pride in finding these objects in exalting museum halls.

Turning these objects into commodities by collecting them sets them up for new risks by exposing them to the rapacity of art markets. They become valuable enough to steal. One of the yoginis' erstwhile companions, the second Shiva figure that Kasdorf and Stein discuss within this series of essays, vanished a few years ago from the courtyard of the Chennai Government Museum in India.⁷ One of the Tamil yoginis is inside that museum, where she has been cemented to the floor, clearly a necessary precaution. The fetishization of objects that collecting feeds can also encourage high-profile vandalism for political effect, such as the smashing of museum collections in Kabul or the repeated attacks on the Mona Lisa in the Louvre.⁸ Collecting is one of the forces that helped to transform such objects into cultural battlegrounds.

Ameliorating the damages that collecting has wrought is a brave goal that some museums are now aiming for, but it is no simple undertaking. Simply going home is not an option for the yoginis. Their ninth- or tenth-century temple home was long ago destroyed. The elite patrons who sponsored construction of that temple long ago lost power, their politics erased by neighboring Indic rulers well before European entrepreneurs absorbed the region into their various empires.

The Tantric form of goddess worship they were carved to facilitate has faded too. And yet we have seen one of these yoginis put back into worship on her own, without any sisters, and protected in the 21st century, primarily by women devotees and officiants.⁹ Women, many without brahmin status, protect and supervise the worship of this goddess figure, as they do at the yogini temple in Hirapur. She still signifies meaningfully as a goddess for these women. Might the other yoginis join her? The community would need lots of help protecting them from aggressive elements of the international art market that have systematically extracted such objects for decades (Keefe 2007). They would also need protection from local violence. Yogini sculptures in Lokhari that were intact in the late 20th century have since been smashed by persons unknown to this author and her colleagues, their pedestals and legs left on a hilltop and their other bits stacked unceremoniously at the foot of the hill.¹⁰ The fears and resentments that likely drove the vandalism of these yogini sculptures a thousand years ago have not faded.

Protecting repatriated objects by shutting them away in vaults where no one can see, worship, or learn from them is hardly a satisfactory alternative. The metal sculptures of Nataraja from the South Indian villages of Pathur, Sivapuram, and Tiruvilakkuti were repatriated to an airless, unconsecrated Icon Center in the town of Tiruvarur, where their materials are under duress and where visitors cannot enter. The bronze itself is deteriorating (Davis 2015; Davis 1997, p. 258). Hundreds of artifacts from the prehistoric Thai culture of Ban Chiang lie in limbo in US warehouses, seized from museums and judged to have been improperly exported from Thailand, but without another home awaiting them.¹¹

Would museums in India be a natural home for the yoginis now? Some perceive museums as culturally alien to India. The work of Bernard Cohn demonstrates that building museum collections there was a colonial and then an imperial strategy aimed at articulating British ownership and control over India. Museums are indeed cultural remnants of imperialism. Can they be decolonized within the former colonies?

Tackling the loss of meaning the yogini sculptures suffered by being separated from each other, curators at the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art are at work to reunite these yoginis, at least temporarily. This exhibition would address the multi-sited nature of the yoginis' current situation by traveling to multiple venues. The curatorial team is carefully considering ways to deal with the yoginis' 20th century stories honestly in ways that do not enable visitors to read that reunion as

a celebration of the looting that brought the pieces out of India. Curators are alert to the danger that visitors could perceive museums, as well as Loo and Jouveau-Dubreuil, as uncomplicated heroes who rescued these fascinating ladies from India. Telling the stories of how objects made their ways to their current museum homes is a crucial step in decolonizing museums, but telling them without celebrating those journeys is a challenge.

Involving India in this reunion project somehow is a high priority. Excluding India from an exhibition centered on objects from India would imply that the scattering activities of a century ago were the end of their story. Moreover, two yogini sculptures from this set remain in India. Bringing them into a reunion that takes place entirely outside of India cannot be an option. Few think it reasonable to ask Indian museums to let go yet again, to endure another round of depletion, to permit further scattering at their own expense to feed even a temporary collecting project in the West.

A better solution is to share the objects and the knowledge they offer as widely as possible, collecting information widely and sharing it among stakeholders so that it can then circulate further around the globe. Exhibition organizers will work with partners in the world of Indian museums to explore how to bring some version of this exhibition of reunited yoginis to India.

Conversations about sharing can trigger fears of mass repatriations. Claims do increase every year. In popular opinion, support for repatriation claims continues to grow. Will returning some objects lead to claims on many objects, entire collections? Would the British Museum empty out? Some museums with especially vast holdings have become temples through which the current possessors have constructed their identities. The scattering embedded in collecting becomes suddenly vivid for those who would find themselves on the losing side of that flow. That can be frightening, indeed, but fear is a poor guide with which to build policy.

Loosening a grip on objects need not lead to losing everything. Contributing to the repatriation of objects removed through imperial power imbalances can be good for museums. They can win back respect from publics who increasingly support cultural property repatriation. Institutions that do repatriate have publicized the work broadly. For example, Germany is returning Benin objects to Nigeria.¹² The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the National Gallery of Australia have returned objects to South and Southeast Asia.¹³ Colgate University returned a collection of pictures drawn by Australian children who were forcibly removed from their communities and sent to residential schools (Kraly and Flowers 2013; Kraly and Flowers 2016). The Carrolup community in Western Australia now takes care of these paintings in a museum that Colgate donors helped to build. Returned objects have built a warm and enduring connection between their old and new protectors. More recently, the Cleveland Museum of Art has established a deep collaboration with national museums in Cambodia that persists even after their stunning exhibition, “Revealing Krishna”, actually reuniting dispersed fragments and virtually reconstructing the temple homes of objects on both sides of the Pacific Ocean.¹⁴

Even such momentum is not likely to empty out Western museums. Not everyone wants objects from their places repatriated. Melody Rod-Ari notes that many nations appreciate the “soft diplomacy” that their histories’ objects can exercise in foreign museums, and many therefore choose not to seek their repatriation. Thais can find pride in having prehistoric ceramics on display around the world, demonstrating that people in Thailand were among the first to master wet-rice technology. These objects are, furthermore, inexpensive and plentiful in number. Rod-Ari makes a strong case for empowering nations of origin to set their own policies on what should be repatriated and what is welcome to stay (Rod-Ari 2019, p. 101).

It is not possible or necessary to “undo” all the scattering that art collecting has effected. Some of that destruction is irreversible. But addressing those past acts of collection in meaningful ways is not just possible—it is an opportunity for museums to capture admiration and the public’s fascination. It is increasingly necessary to recuperate the legitimacy of museums as institutions, as one story after another hits the news about how

famous museums came to some of their holdings. It will require profound re-imaginings of ownership, nations, and art, positing cultural property as belonging to the world's history rather than to one ethnic or political or national group. "Universal museums" can more convincingly live up to the goal of representing the world's history when they come to exist beyond the West—when, say, formerly colonized regions display public collections containing important objects from the regions that once colonized them. Partnerships among institutions, collaborations across continents, and radical empathy grounded in our shared humanity and in seeing objects as shared treasures can aim us toward an ethics of acquisition as personal and powerful as the principles that guide us to underwrite organic farms or divest in fossil fuels.¹⁵ Museums and private individuals can acknowledge that collecting art is, has been, and will continue to be an act of profound ethical responsibility, rife with possibilities for scattering and destroying as well as ordering and preserving.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ See for example (Apffel Marglin 1985; Michaels et al. 1996; Nagarajan 2007; Humes 2000; Schmid 2005).
- ² On what she calls "monotheistic thinking", see (Eck 1998).
- ³ See for example (Dehejia 1986, p. 124; White 2003, p. 22). On Muslims who acknowledged worshipping at shrines dedicated to Kali, see (Humes 2003, p. 160).
- ⁴ This was pointed out to me by the astute Charlotte Schmid (personal communication), and is visible in photos (Kaimal 2012, figs. 1 and 113).
- ⁵ For a photo, see (Kaimal 2012, p. 28).
- ⁶ For reimaginings of religious experience in yogini temples a millenium ago see (Kaimal 2012, chp. 2 & 3).
- ⁷ The sculpture, which is from Melcheri in northern Tamil Nadu, appears in (Goodall et al. 2005, pp. 56–57, Figure 29; and Nagaswamy 2006, cover photo).
- ⁸ See also the important analysis of the Taliban's theatrical destruction of rock-cut Buddha figures in Bamiyan after it had been appropriated as a World Heritage site (Leoshko 2011).
- ⁹ See (Stein and Kasdorf 2022, Figures 17 & 18) in this issue.
- ¹⁰ Thanks to Stella Dupuis for sharing photos of this sad situation during a Zoom symposium, "Reuniting the Tamil Yoginis: The Plans Take Shape", on 17 October 2020.
- ¹¹ (Rod-Ari 2019). In Southeast Asia, she finds, objects have more often been returned to their find sites.
- ¹² <https://www.cfr.org/blog/germany-return-some-african-art-nigeria> (accessed on 17 October 2022).
- ¹³ For example, <https://art-crime.blogspot.com/2018/08/repatriation-metropolitan-museum-of-art.html>; and <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/national-gallery-of-australia-returns-indian-artifacts-subhash-kapoor-1234600261/> (accessed on 17 October 2022).
- ¹⁴ See <https://www.clevelandart.org/about/press/media-kit/cleveland-museum-art%E2%80%99s-highly-anticipated-exhibition-revealing-krishna-journey-cambodia%E2%80%99s-sacred> (accessed on 17 October 2022) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uACscfEpLf8> (accessed on 17 October 2022).
- ¹⁵ For these imaginative suggestions, I am deeply indebted to remarks by Deepali Dewan of the Royal Ontario Museum and Deepthi Murali ("Reuniting the Tamil Yoginis: The Plans Take Shape", 16–17 October 2020, Colgate University); and Vineet Chander of Princeton University (Lilly Symposium, Sackler/Freer Gallery of Art, 19 May 2020).

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