

Enhancing Research Culture Workshop: Collaborating with Communities

The Courtauld Institute of Art – Vernon Square Campus

1 July 2024

This day-long workshop engages with the opportunities and challenges of collaborating with communities and demonstrates the benefits of enhancing wider participation in research. The workshop brings together participants from diverse backgrounds and facilitates discussion amongst art historians, conservators, anthropologists, curators, scientists, educators, community members, and monastics, focusing on experiences gained from previous collaborations with indigenous, diasporic, and religious communities, while also exploring best practices, innovative approaches and methodologies, and ways to assess and value impact.

Through active engagement and exchange of ideas with workshop participants and audience members from The Courtauld community, the workshop seeks to raise awareness of collaborative practices that contribute to a more inclusive, impactful, and forward-thinking research culture.

Co-organised by Lori Wong (Senior Lecturer in Conservation) and Dr Sujatha Meegama (Senior Lecturer in Art History) as part of The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Centre for Buddhist Art and Conservation at The Courtauld. <https://courtauld.ac.uk/research/research-areas/the-robert-h-n-ho-family-foundation-centre-for-buddhist-art-and-conservation/>

Generously supported by The Courtauld Research England Research Culture Fund

Venue Information

Research Forum Seminar Room

The Courtauld Institute of Art

Vernon Square Campus

London WC1X 9EW

SCHEDULE

09.30 Morning Tea & Coffee

10:00 Welcome Address - Lori Wong and Sujatha Meegama

Introduction to the Collage Making Activity – Ayesha Fuentes

PANEL 1

10:10 Ayesha Fuentes (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge)

- *Local Museum Pest Management in the Southeastern Himalayas*

10:30 Ven. Mahinda Deegalle (SOAS)

- *Fluid Communities: Engagement in Śrī Pāda Pilgrimage*

10:50 Renata F. Peters (Institute of Archaeology, UCL)

- *Weaving Fibres for Fieldwork*

11:10 Discussion

11.30 Lunch (Seminar Room 2)

PANEL 2

13:00 Thupten Kelsang (V&A)

- *Reanimating Tibetan Heritage: Transforming collections, Empowering communities*

13:20 Sanyukta Shrestha ('Indigenising The Himalayas' Project)

- *Archival Study through Community Collaboration*

13:40 Short Break

14:00 Arani Ilankuberan (British Library)

- *Diverse Voices in Exhibition Spaces: Collaborating with British Bengali Women as Co-curators*

14:20 Bhavesh Shah (English Heritage)

- *Being a Bridge between the Jain Community and Heritage*

14.40 Discussion

15.00 Tea Break and Sharing of Collages

OPEN SHARING SESSION

16:00 Open Sharing Session

17:00 Close of Workshop

ABSTRACTS

PANEL 1

Ayesha Fuentes

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge

Local Museum Pest Management in the Southeastern Himalayas

This talk will reflect on two recent periods of conservation research-in-practice as a volunteer consultant with the Museum Division at the Department of Culture in Bhutan and Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Sikkim. Framed as a discussion about heritage pest management, I'll be exploring the challenges and opportunities of developing an approach to the control of pest species in museum collections that is socially and economically sustainable, locally sourced and appropriate to the geographical and cultural historical context.

Ven. Prof. Mahinda Deegalle

Centre for Buddhist Studies, SOAS University of London

Fluid Communities: Engagement in Śrī Pāda Pilgrimage

My presentation delves into the dynamic and 'fluid' nature of the community surrounding the Śrī Pāda Pilgrimage in the Sabaragamuva Province of Sri Lanka. This pilgrimage to the revered Mt. Samanala ('Butterfly'), also known as Adam's Peak, with its centuries of historical and literary accounts, is a profound and awe-inspiring experience for both local and international visitors, religious or secular. The presentation explores the ever-changing community dynamics, based on religious and commercial grounds, highlighting the seasonal lifestyle of residents at the foot of the mountain during pilgrimage season and the continuous influx of pilgrims of enormous persuasions.

Renata F. Peters

Institute of Archaeology, University College London

Weaving Fibres for Fieldwork

Renata will discuss some of the challenges, expectations and joys involved in planning and implementing a research project in the Brazilian Amazon. The project is a collaboration between UCL, Universidade Estadual de Feira de Santana and representatives from the Tikuna nation. The focus is on the investigation and documentation of material culture produced for the Tikuna Young Woman Festival (YWF), an important Tikuna rite of passage, with particular attention to the use of

tree bark known locally as tururi. Besides documenting procurement and botanical identification of tururi plants, the team will document continuity and change in the use of raw materials, manufacturing technologies of tururi masks associated socio-cultural practices, current uses and significance, as well as choices and uses of natural pigments.

PANEL 2

Thupten Kelsang
Victoria & Albert Museum

Reanimating Tibetan Heritage: Transforming Collections, Empowering Communities

Thupten's praxis-based research explores the potential future(s) of Tibetan collections in museums in the UK and their latent affordances for the Tibetan community. Through collaborative inquiry and co-production of knowledge with community experts and stakeholders, this project asks how Tibetan museum collections could be reimagined and reactivated. The developed research methods and methodologies for the Tibetan case study aim to achieve ethical and critical precision in creating best practices for community engagement and collaboration in museums. Moving away from sensationalised and restitution-centric public discourse, this sustained research project hopes to offer a template for community researchers and museums, allowing Indigenous, subaltern and marginalised communities (as sub-state actors) to assert agency and participate in 'authorised heritage discourse'.

Sanyukta Shrestha
Teaching Assistant, Art History Link-Up
Community Consultant, 'Indigenising The Himalayas' Project

Archival Study through Community Collaboration

Western archives of Indigenous communities can portray them as less cultured and socially unsophisticated. My team collaborated with several diaspora communities in the UK who trace their roots back to the Himalayan region across Nepal and India. We allowed them to interact with archival materials from the Royal Geographical Society and express their impressions freely. The Rai, Limbu, Gurung and Newar communities conducted traditional dance and story-telling workshops based on the historical images and paintings selected from the archive. The workshops were designed to help the British audiences understand their community aspect through interaction with the processes and instruments involved in the narration. They staged their lived realities which had otherwise not been reflected accurately or respectfully in the catalogues of the archives. In this talk, I present how the workshop attempted to achieve its objective of giving a

voice to the underrepresented communities through a research-based and interactive format.

Arani Ilankuberan
The British Library

Diverse Voices in Exhibition Spaces: Collaborating with British Bengali Women as Co-curators

This talk presents the community co-curated exhibition titled 'Our Stories Ourselves' which is the second in a programme of pilot displays within the British Library's Treasures permanent gallery. These explore new ways of working, developing displays and presenting collections with and for increasingly diverse audiences. This exhibition focuses on audience participation and highlighting community voices. It makes connections between the Library's rich collections and personal stories. In particular stories and life experiences shared by two groups of British-Bangladeshi women in London and Leeds. It also uses the Library's vast South Asian collections to tell profoundly human stories through the lens of these women who have co-curated the narrative and selected the content. Sharing their deeply personal stories of hopes and dreams, work, community and family is both touching and connecting. Evaluation illustrates that these very human stories have resonated with audiences and suggests co-curation is the future of community exhibitions.

Bhavesh Shah
English Heritage

Being a Bridge between the Jain Community and Heritage

When communities and heritage organisations collaborate on projects, understanding each other is important. Overcoming barriers, including differences in language and culture, often necessitates volunteers from the community with heritage expertise to act as intermediaries. These "bridgers" facilitate interactions between complex heritage organisations and diverse communities, necessitating a deep understanding of both. This presentation highlights the experiences of being a 'bridger' during two heritage-related projects: the Jainpedia project and the Pure Soul exhibition at SOAS, along with the Jain community-coordinated Jainism Inside Out programme. These initiatives offer opportunities for mutual learning, breaking down barriers, celebrating and enhancing heritage. Additionally, practical tips and advice are provided to help build effective bridges.

SUGGESTED READINGS

“American exchanges in Cambodia - Julia Brennan.” Interview by US Embassy in Phnom Penh. Facebook, July 14, 2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/us.embassy.phnom.penh/videos/1356418181222218/>

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<https://www.sharemuseumseast.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Co-creating-Community-Projects.pdf>

Chennells, Roger and Doris Schroeder. The San Code of Research Ethics: Its Origins and History. TRUST Equitable Research Partnerships, 2019.

<https://www.globalcodeofconduct.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/SanCodeHistory.pdf>

Critical Himalayan Collective. “Indigenising the Himalayas: Reimagining its past, present and futures.”

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Jitendra B. Shah. “The Jain Approach to the Conservation of Manuscripts.” In *Samrakṣikā Series 1: Indigenous methods and manuscript preservation*, edited by Sudha Gopalakrishnan, 205-211. New Delhi: National Mission for Manuscripts, 2006.

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McMullen, Ann. “The Currency of Consultation and Collaboration.” *Museum Anthropology Review* 2, no. 2 (2008): 54–87.

Peters, Renata F. “Who is afraid of listening to the Tupinambá?” In *From Conservation to Conversation: Rethinking Collections Care*, 53-64. Hamburg: Markk Museum Am RothenbaumKulturen und Kunst der Welt, 2023. https://markk-hamburg.de/files/media/2023/05/MARKK_CtoC_230504_1_web-3.pdf

Phillips, Ruth B. “‘Can You Go out without Your Head?’ Fieldwork as a Transformative Experience.” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 39 (Spring, 2001): 61-77.

BIOS

Ven. Professor Mahinda Deegalle is a Professorial Research Associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London and Professor Emeritus at Bath Spa University. Trained in the History of Religions and Buddhist Studies at Harvard University and The University of Chicago, he held Numata Professorship at McGill University and NEH Professorship at Colgate University. He has conducted post-doctoral research at Kyoto University and been awarded grants by the British Academy / Leverhulme Trust, British Council, Fulbright and JSPS. He is the author of *Popularizing Buddhism* and editor of several volumes, including *Philosophy, Ethics and Buddhist Practice* (2023) and *Buddhism and Humanitarian Law* (2024).

Ayesha Fuentes is the Isaac Newton Trust Research Associate in Conservation at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge. She is an objects conservator specializing in the care and handling of archaeological and ethnographic collections. She has a MA from the UCLA/Getty conservation training program (2014) and a PhD from SOAS University of London (2021).

Arani Ilankuberan is the Head of South Asian Collections at the British Library leading a team of expert curators and cataloguers specialising in all South Asian languages. Her specialism is in South India and Sri Lanka, and she has previously held the post of South Indian collections Curator. Before joining the library, she worked as a researcher of the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu community in London as part of an ESRC-funded project on London faith communities at Goldsmiths, University of London, where she also completed her PhD on faith literacies and identities of UK Tamil diaspora through viewing film.

Thupten Kelsang is the AHRC's Early-Career Research Fellow at the V&A, focusing on Tibetan museum collections at multiple GLAM sites in the UK. Supported by the Clarendon Fellowship, he completed his DPhil in Anthropology from the University of Oxford. He has also received Wenner-Gren's Engaged Research Grant and the Ho Family Foundation Dissertation Fellowship. He has been consulted by the British Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum, the National Trust, the British Library, and the Horniman. Before pursuing his studies, Thupten worked as a community organiser, speaking and advising on Tibetan heritage at platforms such as the Kochi-Muziris Biennale and the Prince Claus Fund.

Renata F. Peters is a conservator of archaeological collections and indigenous material culture. She is Associate Professor at the UCL Institute of Archaeology; the head conservator of the 'Olduvai Geochronology Archaeology Project' (OGAP), a cross-disciplinary project in Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania; and the principal investigator of 'Weaving Fibres of Resistance: Tikuna tree bark and identity in the Amazon', a

research project she will explore in her talk. Renata comes from an art background and holds a BA in Fine Arts from Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG, Brazil), as well as MA and MSc degrees in Conservation and a PhD in Museum Studies from UCL.

Bhavesh Shah is a Conservation Scientist who recently joined English Heritage, following nearly 17 years at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is experienced in preventive conservation science and has demonstrated a commitment to preserving cultural heritage through his work. Bhavesh is an active member of the Jain community and has served as the Secretary of the Young Jains UK charity for two years. Additionally, he has contributed to the Museum Detox network as the Membership Officer.

Sanyukta Shrestha has been teaching Art History at the Courtauld Gallery for Art History Link-Up since 2023 when he completed an MA in Buddhist Art History and Conservation from the Courtauld Institute of Art. With a 2019 book 'Fragments of Nepali History in the UK', and a chapter contributed to a 2022 book 'Art as Ethnography', Sanyukta's investigations into art and culture are widely published in Nepal's leading daily newspaper, The Kathmandu Post. He also has an MSc in Multimedia Systems and has worked as a software developer for two decades in London. He is an award-winning artist and a filmmaker.