

Curating the Past, Constructing Heritage:Transformation of the State Museum,Lucknow,1863-1971

Pooja Yadav¹

¹PhD Research Scholar

Department of History,

Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti Language University

Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Email:poojayatre@gmail.com

Abstract:*Museums are rarely neutral custodians of the past; they are institutions that actively select, classify and reinterpret what survives from it. This paper traces the transformation of the State Museum, Lucknow, from its founding in 1863 to 1971, focusing on how colonial collecting practices, administrative reorganisation and changing ideas of display combined to produce what is now presented as public heritage. Established as a municipal repository and elevated to Provincial Museum status in 1883, the institution was renamed the State Museum in 1950 and moved into a purpose-built home at Banarasi Bagh, inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1963. Drawing on the museum's institutional records, contemporary archaeological literature and Nehru's own address at the inauguration, the paper argues that postcolonial reorganisation did not erase the museum's colonial foundations; rather, archaeological collections and classificatory practices inherited from the colonial period were absorbed into a new framework of state-sponsored cultural education. The disputed Kankali Tila relic collection illustrates how provenance is itself a historical construction rather than a settled fact. The paper concludes that the museum's history is best understood not as rupture but as continuity punctuated by re-signification, through which material remains were progressively converted into a public narrative of Indian heritage.*

Keywords: *Archaeology, Curation, Heritage, Museum, Transformation etc.*

Introduction

Museums occupy an important position in the production of historical knowledge. They preserve material remains of the past, but that preservation is never entirely neutral: decisions about what is collected, classified, conserved and displayed determine which elements of the past become visible and meaningful to the public. The museum is thus at once a repository, a site of knowledge production and an institution of public culture. Understood in this way, a museum's history cannot be written simply as a list of acquisitions; it must instead be traced

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through the successive administrative bodies, individuals and institutional decisions that determined how a given repository was organised, governed and presented to the public at each stage of its existence.¹

The State Museum, Lucknow, offers a valuable case through which to examine these processes historically. Its origins lie in 1863, when a repository was established in the city to collect specimens of the art and manufactures of Oudh together with objects relating to the habits, customs and mythology of India. It functioned initially as a Municipal Museum and was declared a Provincial Museum in 1883; in June 1884 it moved to Lal Baradari, the former coronation hall of the Nawabs of Oudh.²

Archaeology grew steadily more important to the institution over the colonial period. A management committee was constituted in the 1880s, and Dr V. A. A. Führer became the museum's first curator in 1885, after which archaeological exploration and excavation contributed substantially to its collections.³

Independence changed the political context of the museum without producing a complete institutional rupture. The Provincial Museum was renamed the State Museum, Lucknow, in 1950. Its expanding collections eventually required a new building at Banarasi Bagh: the foundation stone was laid in 1956, and the completed building was inaugurated by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on 12 May 1963.⁴

That inauguration is significant because Nehru's speech reveals a changing understanding of what a museum should accomplish. He stressed not only the preservation of objects but also their selection, arrangement, display and educational value, and the museum came increasingly to be conceptualised as an institution through which visitors could encounter and understand the past.⁵

This paper examines the transformation of the State Museum between 1863 and the present. It asks how colonial collecting shaped the institution, how the postcolonial state redefined it, and how collections and displays contributed to the construction of heritage. It argues that the museum's history represents neither complete colonial continuity nor complete postcolonial rupture, but a process of institutional continuity, political reorientation and curatorial re-signification.

Colonial Origins and the Culture of Collecting

The 1863 establishment of the museum belongs within the wider nineteenth-century expansion of museums and antiquarian institutions across colonial India. Its founding

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collection derived from the private holdings of Colonel Saunders Alexius Abbott, Commissioner of Lucknow, and the initial objective was to build a repository of Oudh's art and manufactures alongside material relating to Indian custom and mythology. Administrative responsibility for this early repository rested with the Lucknow municipal authorities, and it remained a municipal institution for two decades before its elevation to Provincial status placed it within a more centralised structure of provincial government. The first of several administrative transformations that would recur throughout its history. Such collecting was never a purely antiquarian activity: it involved identifying particular objects as representative of a wider society and drawing them into an institutional system of preservation and classification.⁶

The museum's elevation to Provincial status in 1883 marked a significant administrative development. The contemporary Minutes of the Managing Committee of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh Provincial Museum show a body preoccupied with the museum's establishment, control and reorganisation: at its very first meeting, on 30 August 1883, the committee sought clarification of its authority over the existing establishment and the means available for reorganising it. This concern with lines of authority was not incidental. It reflected a broader pattern in which the transition from municipal to provincial status was accompanied by a corresponding transfer of decision-making power away from local custodians and towards a formally constituted committee answerable to provincial government. Museum-making, in other words, was from the outset closely bound up with administrative authority, and each subsequent change in the institution's name and status, Provincial Museum in 1883, State Museum in 1950, marked a comparable redistribution of institutional control rather than a change in the collection itself.⁷

The museum's relationship with archaeology strengthened over the following decade. Dr Führer, appointed curator in 1885, was simultaneously Assistant Archaeological Surveyor for the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, and his fieldwork brought substantial archaeological material into the collection. One especially revealing case concerns Kankali Tila at Mathura: Führer's 1892 accession record listed ten pieces of pottery said to contain the ashes of Jain monks, excavated at the site and donated by Führer himself.⁸

Peter Flügel's later investigation of this material illustrates the complexities of colonial collecting. Flügel's examination of the Lucknow Museum's holdings found no identifiable pots containing the reported ashes and concluded that their existence and provenance could not be established with certainty. This case is significant because it challenges the assumption

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that museum collections necessarily preserve an unbroken and transparent record of the past: documentation, classification and provenance are themselves historical processes, not neutral facts waiting to be read off the object.⁹

Archaeological collecting thus transformed the museum into more than a storehouse of antiquities. Excavated objects were removed from their original contexts and incorporated into a classificatory system in which their meaning was actively reconstructed; the museum became, in effect, a participant in the production of archaeological knowledge. Its colonial foundations can accordingly be understood through three related processes- collecting, classification and institutionalisation, which together supplied the material and administrative base on which the postcolonial museum would later build, and which explain why the institution's postcolonial history is better described as a layered re-use of colonial structures than as a fresh start.

From Provincial Museum to State Museum

Independence did not immediately produce a new museum institution; the Provincial Museum continued to operate much as before in the early postcolonial period. The Annual Report on the Working of the United Provinces Provincial Museum, Lucknow, for 1949–50 shows the continued weight of governmental administration, collection management and routine museum activity during these years. A reminder that political independence and institutional reform did not arrive on the same timetable, and that the museum's colonial administrative machinery persisted largely intact for several years after 1947.¹⁰

The decisive institutional change came in 1950, when the Provincial Museum was renamed the State Museum, Lucknow. This was more than a change of name: it placed the museum within the institutional framework of the newly constituted state of Uttar Pradesh, rearticulating its earlier identity as a colonial provincial institution within a postcolonial state cultural structure. The sequence is worth stating plainly, since it is easy to lose amid the detail: a municipal repository founded in 1863 became a Provincial Museum in 1883, and that Provincial Museum became the State Museum in 1950, three distinct institutional identities, each reflecting the political authority of its own period, but all attached to a single continuous body of collections.¹¹

Growing collections also created pressure for architectural reorganisation. According to Jeyaraj, the foundation stone of the new building at Banarasi Bagh was laid in 1956 and construction took roughly four years; the new museum opened in May 1963.¹² Contemporary

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archaeological literature further records that a Museum Reorganisation Committee recommended the new building and that the collections were eventually transferred from Lal Baradari to Banarasi Bagh.¹³

The significance of the new building was not merely architectural. It supplied a new institutional environment for the preservation, organisation and display of the collections, with dedicated spaces for galleries, storage, administration, photography and conservation. The move from Lal Baradari, a repurposed royal hall never designed for museum use, to a building conceived from the outset for that purpose, was itself a statement about how far the institution's ambitions had grown since 1863.¹⁴

Nehru's 1963 inauguration gave this institutional transformation a wider cultural meaning. In his address, he argued that museums could give visitors a picture of the past and help them understand how people had lived in earlier periods, and he placed particular emphasis on their educational function and on the importance of bringing children to museums. By the early 1960s, then, the museum was being conceptualised not merely as a repository of collected objects but as an institution for public education and historical interpretation.¹⁵

Curating the Postcolonial Past

The postcolonial State Museum developed as a multipurpose institution spanning archaeological, artistic, numismatic and natural-history collections, among others. The Government of India's Directory of Museums in India lists it as a state-government multipurpose museum established in 1863, with galleries devoted to Jain art, Indian sculpture, archaeology, the Nawabs and coins, Egyptian antiquities, metal art, natural history and Buddhist material.¹⁶

This diversity allowed the museum to construct a broad narrative of India's cultural past, in which archaeological objects could be viewed alongside sculpture, painting, manuscripts, coins and the decorative arts, creating connections across different periods and forms of material culture. The representation of Awadh carried particular weight given Lucknow's own history as the seat of the Nawabs, so that the museum's Nawabi and numismatic collections allowed local and regional history to be folded into wider narratives of the Indian past.¹⁷

The archaeological collections supplied a long chronological framework running from prehistory into the historical period. Jeyaraj records holdings spanning archaeology and prehistory, numismatics, painting, textiles, metalware, natural history and ethnography,

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together with manuscripts, farmans, arms and jewellery.¹⁸ The institution's role also expanded beyond preservation: the State Museum was recognised as a research centre in 1971 and undertook educational and cultural activities including lectures, exhibitions, guided tours and film shows, signalling a growing emphasis on the museum as a place of public learning rather than a repository for specialists alone.¹⁹

These stages describe a single, continuous line of institutional development: a nineteenth-century repository administered by municipal officials; a Provincial Museum run by a government-appointed committee and a curator with archaeological responsibilities; and, from 1950, a State Museum whose functions expanded from custodianship into research and public education. Each stage retained the collections and much of the classificatory apparatus of the one before it, even as the institution's name, governing authority and stated purpose changed.

The transformation of the museum therefore involved a change in the relationship between object and visitor. Objects were no longer preserved for specialists alone; they were increasingly expected to communicate historical and cultural knowledge to a wider public.

Collection, Display and the Construction of Heritage

A museum collection and a museum display are not identical. A collection consists of the objects an institution holds, whereas display establishes relationships between selected objects and supplies the interpretative frameworks through which visitors encounter them. The construction of heritage therefore involves selection, classification, arrangement and explanation together.

Nehru's 1963 speech offers direct evidence of the weight attached to display. He described the arrangement of museum exhibits as a specialised art, argued that objects should be arranged for intellectual and visual impact, and insisted that museums be visited not merely as spectacles but as places of learning through which visitors could grasp different periods of history.²⁰

This conception of display is especially relevant to the State Museum, whose collections span different periods, religious traditions and artistic forms. The classification of objects into archaeological, Jain, Buddhist, Nawabi, numismatic, Egyptian and natural-history galleries does not merely reflect the existence of different kinds of object; it creates an interpretative structure through which visitors encounter the past.²¹

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The archaeological object provides the clearest example. An artefact excavated at a historical site is removed from its original context and becomes a museum object, classifiable by period, material, artistic style, religious association or archaeological provenance; its significance is produced through the interaction of object, label, display and institutional knowledge. This may be described as the transformation of antiquity into heritage, antiquities being material survivals from the past, heritage being the meaning and value assigned to selected elements of that past in the present. The museum did not simply preserve the past; it actively mediated between the past and its contemporary audience.

Colonial Continuities and Postcolonial Transformation

The postcolonial transformation of the museum should not be read as a complete break with its colonial past. Archaeological collecting remained central to the institution, colonial-era acquisitions continued to form a substantial part of its holdings, and classification remained fundamental to museum organisation.²² The Kankali Tila material shows how objects gathered under colonial archaeological regimes went on to constitute part of the museum's historical inheritance.²³

What changed was the political meaning attached to the museum. Under colonial rule, collecting and archaeological classification were embedded within systems of knowledge tied to colonial administration and scholarship; after independence, the same collections could be redeployed within a narrative of India's own historical and cultural inheritance. The transformation therefore proceeded less through the replacement of objects than through their recontextualisation, a sculpture excavated under colonial auspices could become part of a postcolonial narrative of Indian art, coins could be read as evidence of political and economic history, and objects associated with Awadh could be absorbed into the cultural history of Uttar Pradesh.

The 1950 renaming, the construction of the Banarasi Bagh building and the educational philosophy articulated at the 1963 inauguration all point in this direction. Nehru's emphasis on selection, arrangement, education and historical understanding suggests that the museum was expected to turn material remains into intelligible historical narratives. The history of the Lucknow Museum thus represents postcolonial appropriation rather than simple replacement: the postcolonial state inherited a colonial institution and its collections but progressively

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reassigned their institutional meaning, binding the preservation and interpretation of material remains to public education and the representation of India's heritage.²⁴

Conclusion

The transformation of the State Museum, Lucknow, demonstrates that museums are active participants in the construction of historical meaning rather than passive containers of it. Established in 1863 as a municipal repository, elevated to Provincial status in 1883 and renamed the State Museum in 1950, the institution underwent successive administrative, spatial and intellectual transformations, each stage adding a further layer of governance and purpose onto the collections it inherited from the one before.²⁵

Its colonial history laid the foundations of collecting, archaeological classification and institutional preservation. The postcolonial period did not erase these foundations but absorbed them into a new framework of state cultural administration and public education. The significance of the 1950–63 transformation lies particularly in the changing conception of the museum itself: the move to Banarasi Bagh supplied a new physical and institutional setting, while Nehru's 1963 address articulated a vision of the museum as a place where visitors could encounter the past, understand historical change and learn through carefully arranged exhibits.²⁶

The transformation of the Lucknow Museum was therefore neither a simple continuation of the colonial museum nor a complete postcolonial rupture, but a process of continuity, reorganisation and reinterpretation, in which colonial collections and classificatory practices survived even as their meanings were progressively recontextualised within a postcolonial cultural institution. Through collecting, classification, preservation, display and education, selected material remains of the past were converted into publicly accessible narratives of history, the museum illustrating, in the end, how heritage is made rather than simply inherited.

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