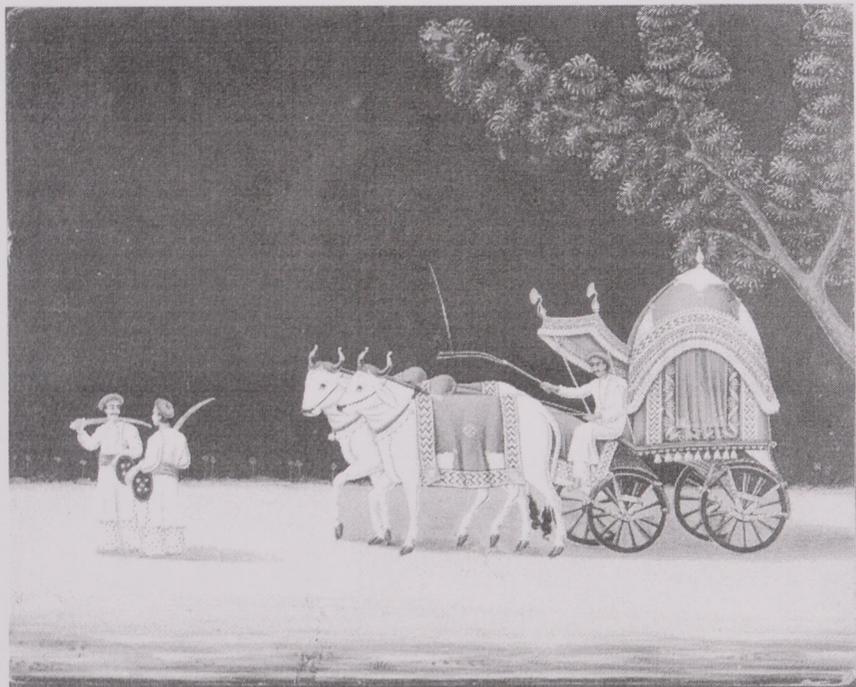




THE SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA COLLECTIONS OF  
THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

*Dagmar Pospíšilová*

The Náprstek Museum's Indian collection comprises items from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Sri Lanka. The first objects reached the museum thanks to **Otokar Feistmantel (1848 - 1891)**, geologist and paleontologist who was a friend of Vojtěch and Josefa Náprsteks. At their request he kept sending to the museum objects he accumulated during his stay in India, between 1875 and 1883. His collecting activity was by no means haphazard; on the contrary, he engaged in systematic gathering of objects documenting Indian applied and folk art from different parts of the Subcontinent. Thus the museum acquired artifacts made from various materials and decorated by diverse techniques, such as enamelling of metal articles - both vessels and jewellery - inlaying of precious species of wood with bone and mother-of-pearl, and of marble with semiprecious stones, as well as wood-, stone-, bone- and ivory-cutting and carving. The collection also contains pottery, clothes and textiles decorated with embroidery; and utility articles including vessels, working tools, baskets, etc. Worth noting are assorted period souvenirs and mementos, including e.g. pictures painted on paper and mica in the so-called East India Company style (Company Drawings), depicting the reality of everyday life: various trades, clothes, etc. The value of the collection, which consists of around 500 items, is enhanced by its collateral documentation provided by Feistmantel himself, who thereby prepared the ground for its subsequent scholarly study.



Bullock – cart. Company Drawing, Gouache on mica. India, Bihar, Patna, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. 13 x 16.5 cm (NpM 43 616).

In the course of years that followed the donation, the collection was built up largely through occasional gifts and purchases. The next substantial body of approximately two hundred items was added to it only in the 1950s, when the museum received a gift from the All India Handicraft Board, which comprised examples of contemporary applied art production featuring all the traditional materials, as well as toys, masks, puppets and other ethnographic items. A significant part of that collection was formed by textiles and clothes. Since the 1960s the Náprstek Museum's collection has likewise continued to receive gifts from Indologists bringing from India objects of ethnographic interest and works of applied art. Figuring prominently among them was **Otakar Pertold (1884 – 1965)**, who enriched the collection chiefly by items from southern India and Sri Lanka.

Sculpture is represented in the museum's Indian collection by fragments of Gandhara reliefs which evolved under Hellenistic influence in the first half of the first millenium after Christ in north-western India, on

the territory of today's Pakistan. The grey and grey-green slate fragments depict scenes from Buddha's life, accompanied by vegetative and geometric motives, garlands of flowers and palm leaves, kneeling atlantes, winged lions, men clad in tunics, and women holding the tree. The collection also contains stucco heads of Buddha which recall, by the refinement of execution and sophistication of carving, the beauty of classical Greek sculpture. Mathura sculpture, which drew inspiration from Indian sources, has only a minimum representation in the collection, being exemplified by several ornamental architectural elements in the characteristic red sandstone. Similarly, further

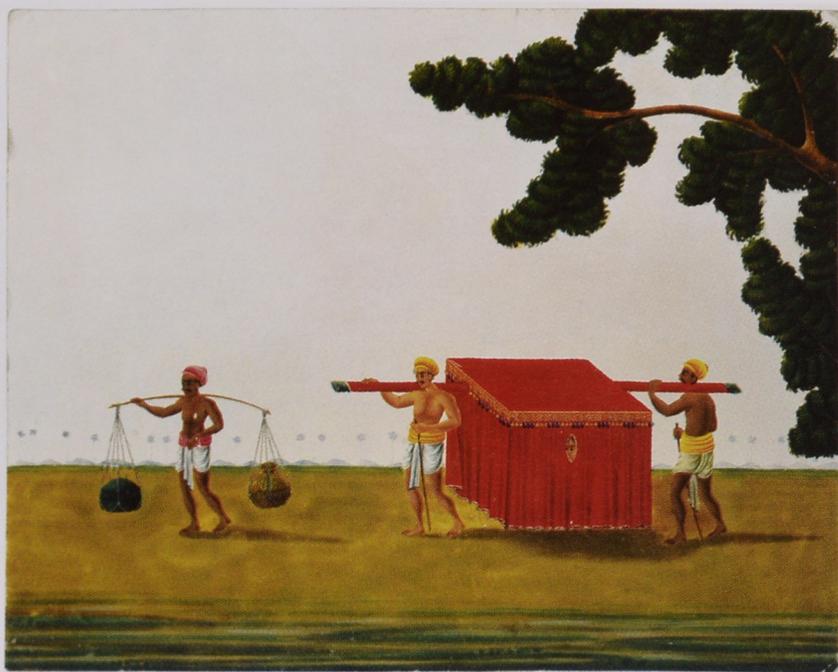


Tile with a couple of lovers, facing of a terracotta temple. India, Bengal, late 17<sup>th</sup> - early 18<sup>th</sup> c. 15.8 x 9.8 x 2.5 cm (NpMA 25 618).

stages of the historical evolution of Indian sculpture are represented only by isolated specimens dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, coming from Madhya Pradesh and eastern India. Samples of relief decoration from Bengal's terracotta temples date from the 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Fragments of wooden ornaments of temple architecture; they depict predominantly deities of the Hindu pantheon, and scenes from the Hindu mythology.

Painting is an art form plentifully represented in the collection which features a wide scale of types, styles and media. A highly prominent type is that of the art of the miniature, where Indian artists introduced fresh elements based upon their domestic traditions, and thereby established original local schools sponsored by local rulers. Thus was formed the Raj-

put style which linked up with pre-Islamic traditions, and whose products include for example miniatures in the Mewar style, as well as those in the Pahari style in the Himalayan region, e.g. in Kangra. The art of the miniature was brought to perfection by the Mughal school which is represented in the museum's collection by two rare sheets from the Jahangir album. The art of portraiture, depicting India's rulers and Indian architecture, is exemplified in the collection by painting on bone. Developing independently from the official painters' workshops was a folk art production, including notably pilgrimage pictures from various parts of India, portraying local deities and recreating mythological stories. The collection contains specimens of the famed Kalighat pictures, sold at the Kalighat, near the temple of the goddess Kali in Calcutta, painted on paper with gouache paints and depicting both religious and profane themes. Orissa pictures, shining with brilliant colours, are painted on canvas hardened with white chalk and coated with transparent varnish. Mithila pictures, originally painted during



Palanquin with an Indian lady. Company Drawing, Gouache on mica. India, Bihar, Patna, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. 13 cm x 16.5 cm (NpM 43 617).

religious rituals and family celebrations, notably weddings, on the walls of village houses, frequently depict legends of Krishna, portraying the god in the company of shepherdesses or of his beloved, Radha. Pictures in the so-called East India Company style, from Patna, Bihar, dating from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, are painted on paper or mica with gouache paints. They depict crafts of the period, jugglers, musicians and acrobats, or means of transport. Originally serving as souvenirs, they have eventually become sought after as collectors items documenting the time of their origin. Another type of pilgrimage pictures is represented by underpaintings on glass depicting Indian deities in rich gouache paints and amalgam, sometimes lined with metallic foil. Massive demand for pictures on mythological themes could be fully satisfied only after the introduction of colour prints on coated paper, and black-and-white hand-coloured woodcuts and wood engravings.

Handicrafts take up a substantial part of the museum's Indian collection, being represented by a comprehensive array of materials and decorative techniques. Early Mughal handicraft production is exemplified by only a few items. The core of the collection consists of objects dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when enlightened officials of the British administration encouraged the resuscitation of traditional handicrafts, through exhibitions staged both in India and abroad. These shows provided strong impetus for the revival of declining crafts, notably decorative ones. These included carving in precious wood species, particularly sandalwood, as well as in bone and stone (especially marble), and their inlaying with metal, bone, mother-of-pearl and semiprecious stones, plus other decorative methods, such as enamelling and application of colour lacquers. Carving was used in the decoration of a wide variety of wooden cases and boxes, holders, screens and furniture. The last-mentioned category is represented in the collection only by individual specimens. The collection's body of highly decorative items includes ivory carvings, such as a jewel-box decorated with miniatures set in medallions, depicting Islamic architecture; paper-knives; a case for visiting cards; scale models of boats and a four-wheeled bullock-cart; and delicate toothpicks tipped with heads featuring zoomorphic motives. The collection also contains carvings in white, black and pink marble, both undecorated and decorated with polychromy and gold pigment, exemplified by portrayals of Hindu deities produced by workshops in Jaipur. The softness of grey talc provides an ideal vehicle for detailed rendition of floral compositions on various boxes, plates and paperweights. The tradition of Mughal applied art

has continued to nourish the technique of inlaying marble with precious or semiprecious stones, known as *manibhatkari* (*pietra dura*). The Náprstek collection contains specimens dating mostly from the first decades of the present century, with only several items dating from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Other impressive examples of handicraft production include artifacts decorated with colour lacquers and painting: a wide variety of boxes, visiting card holders, and writing implements, paper-knives, bowls, trays and spoons. Typically, these objects have a core that is made of wood or paper, or woven from reed. Layered onto this core are several coatings of lacquer, whereupon the design is scratched into the smooth surface or painted on it, finally to be covered with transparent lacquer. The wide popularity of the card game *ganjeefa* is documented by sets of round playing cards kept in an oblong case with a sliding lid, covered with a rich display of floral motives in the Persian style.

Pottery is represented in the collection by a comprehensive body of items, embracing wares from the principal kilns which were active in the Punjabi cities of Multan and Peshawar, as well as in Bombay and Delhi. The glazed Multan faience is decorated by hand-painting in blue and turquoise colours on white glaze; and the glazed pottery from the



Jewel box decorated with oval miniatures in metal frames depicting Islamic architecture. Ivory. Northern India, 19<sup>th</sup> c. 7.5 x 33.5 x 11.5 cm (NpM A 18 270).

Peshawar kiln, represented in the collection by two specimens, is hand-painted with yellow distemper and its green glaze is applied in a way generating stylized vegetable decorative pattern. The Bombay kilns which imitated the glazed pottery produced by other kilns from western and north-western India, are likewise represented in the collection. The most plentiful array of items is constituted by specimens of the Delhi porcelain stoneware, both thick- and thin-walled, known as kagazi, which was inspired by Persian faience and which is decorated with geometrical and vegetable designs applied with the use of stencils in blue and turquoise colours.

Examples of metalwork include objects of the arts of metal casting and metal beating, which are represented in the collection by both decorative, utility, and ritual items. Vessels intended for everyday use, such as containers for water called lotas, ewers, bread containers, as well as cases for bridal gifts, boxes for betel ingredients or betel rolls, areka nut choppers, spittoons, incense burners, lamps, incense-stick holders and cosmetic boxes, are made from brass or tin-coated copper sheet, or cast from copper, brass or bell-metal.



Box with ganjifa card game, elaborately decorated with vegetable pattern. Wood, lacquer. India, Kashmir, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. 7.5 x 17 x 7.5 cm (NpM A 4 501).

Characteristic artifacts include statues of gods used in both home and temple rituals, oil lamps, and ritual spoons and stamps with various Shiv-aistic and Vishnuistic symbols. Metal decorative objects exemplify the widest variety of techniques, ranging from engraving, embossing and in-laying, to the highly decorative enamelling method known as minakari, involving the champlévé process. A typical Indian, highly decorative orna-



Brahma. The Hindu Creator God. Brass India, 19<sup>th</sup> c. 10 x 5.3 x 3.3 cm (NpM A 19 984).

mental technique which was brought to perfection in the workshops of Mughal craftsmen, is known as bidri, the name deriving from the city of Bidar, in today's Andhra Pradesh state. It involves inlaying metal with silver or gold platelets or threads. The museum's small body of bidri ware consists of a representative selection of objects from the major production centres in Hyderabad, Purnea and Murshidabad; the oldest item dates from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Decorative metal artifacts include most notably jewellery, represented by a comparatively extensive assortment of rings, bracelets, anklets, necklaces, pendants, headdresses, brooches, pins, buckles, medallions, buttons, belts, etc., made of both precious and, more frequent-



Cosmetic box in the shape of trefoil (back side). Bidri - alloy with black mordanted surface, inlaid with silver with the use of aftabi technique - thin strips of silver fill in the background of a dark-coloured pattern. India, Hyderabad, 19<sup>th</sup> c. 5 x 10. 6 x 8. 8 cm (NpM 53 870).

ly, common metals, beaten or cast, decorated with precious and semiprecious stones, glass beads and enamels.

Metalwork is furthermore exemplified by weapons, particularly cold ones, such as daggers, including especially katars or fist daggers, swords, sabres, axes, as well as helmets, shields and spikes for the handling of elephants, called ankus. The weapons' hilts and sheaths are decorated by the same techniques as those employed in the decoration of other metal objects.

The traditional crafts which earned India fame early on, in ancient times, include weaving, spinning, and decorating textiles by dyeing, printing and, most particularly, embroidering. The Náprstek Museum's collection demonstrates all of these techniques on specimens of textiles and traditional clothes. Among the best known of these are Indian saris, represented in the collection by fine examples coming from Aurangabad and Kanchipuram, with designs interwoven with gold thread. Also featured in the collection are specimens demonstrating the elaborate ikat technique with original patterns of stylized figures and flowers, known as patola, which originated in Gujarat and which combines the qualifications of the crafts of weaving and dyeing. Dyeing has an ancient tradition in India. By tying fabrics up and dyeing them are produced elaborate figural and vegetable patterns. Cotton and silk fabrics known as kalamkars, decorated by hand-printing from wooden blocks, are widely used in home and temple interiors, as well as in dress-making. The museum's collection contains both kalamkars, the oldest of which date from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, decorated with a wide scale of designs, and stereotype blocks used in their making. The designs are cut into the wooden blocks, or are shaped from threads of metal, as in the case of stereotypes from Punjab. The collection also contains stereotypes from Gujarat and Rajasthan, with designs imitating tie-dye batik.

Embroidery is another of India's traditional decorative techniques. Fine



Stereotype block depicting Punjab king. The pattern shaped from thread of metal on wooden surface of the block. India, Punjab, 20<sup>th</sup> c. 3.3 x 6 x 7 cm (NpM 57 227).

Kashmir shawls, spreads and hangings covered with embroidered ornamental compositions have been one of the collection's prides since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among the most remarkable specimens are those coming from Gujarat, featuring large richly coloured designs enhanced by tiny mirrors. A splendid example of the art of embroidery is provided by Punjabi phulkaris, with motives of flowers, often involving a high degree of geometrical stylization.

Another section of the collection contains specimens of folk art and objects of ethnographic character from various parts of India, documenting lifestyles of the rural and urban populations, as well as of the tribes, notably those of eastern India and Madhya Pradesh. The daily chores are accompanied by a wide variety of products of basket-making, a craft using local raw materials, as well as glass-bead embroideries, cases made from paper pulp, and miscellaneous vessels and domestic tools. Objects made from clay, including both vessels for keeping and serving food, and sculptures intended for home and temple rituals, rank among the most commonplace expressions of folk artistry. Wood is employed in folk arts and crafts mostly in the making of objects of daily use destined for both profane and votive purposes, as well as of masks and puppets, both rod puppets and marionettes.



Buddha standing on a lotus pedestal, both hands in the gesture called abhaya mudra. Bronze, lacquer and gilt. Thailand, 19<sup>th</sup> c. H. 118 cm (NpM 16515 cm).

### **The Collections from Burma and Southeast Asia**

Historically, Indian influence was projected into the art of neighbouring Burma, as well as of the other southeast Asian nations: Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Indonesia. These countries, with the exception of Indonesia, are represented in the Náprstek Museum by a comparatively small collec-

tion which, nonetheless, has its definite informative value. It was built gradually, as were the museum's more relevant collections, from the time of Vojtěch Náprstek, through gifts from the latter's friends. The earliest acquisitions come from physician and explorer **Jan Vilém Helfer (1810 - 1840)**, who brought from Burma marble statuettes of Buddha and terracotta votive steles depicting Buddhist themes. Another addition to the collection was provided by **Joe Hloucha (1881 - 1957)**, who contributed for example a Burmese wooden sculpture of a seated monk polychromed with red and gold lacquers, and large Thai statues of seated and standing Buddha, made of marble. **Josef Kořenský (1847 - 1938)** enriched the collection by two Thai gouache paintings on cotton fabric, depicting a battle and a court scene. One of the collection's two Cambodian manuscripts was donated by **E.S. Vráz (1860 - 1932)**. The collection's Burmese section was enlarged by Indologists **O. Pertold (1884 - 1965)** (e.g., by lacquer boxes and wooden sculptures) and **M. Krása (b. 1920)** (puppets from popular children's plays characters). In the 1960s the Burmese section was substantially expanded by items gathered during his stay in Burma by **Jiří Skřivánek**. He collected both objects of ethnographic interest and wood carvings, sculptures from soft clay, as well as glazed and plain pottery.

The Burmese section comprises sculptures in metal, marble and wood. Figural wood carving is represented by statuettes of the seated Buddha, and of nats and demons, coated with gold lacquer and decorated with tiny mirrors and colour glass beads. Polychrome figures of dancers, monks and courtiers were parts of the decoration of local temples. The art of metal casting is represented by weights in the shapes of animals, bells, as well as weapons, exemplified by the dha sabre. The silversmith's craft is documented by vessels covered with elaborately beaten ornaments and scenes of palace life. The collection also contains specimens of clothes and textiles, toys and marionettes of popular puppet theatre characters. Typical examples of craftsmanship include objects made from natural lacquer: vessels and boxes for offerings and betel, decorated by scraping through the individual coatings of lacquer to form designs depicting scenes of palace life or episodes from Buddha's life.

The museum's Thai collection contains figures of Buddha dating from various periods of Thai history, ranging from miniature heads through large-scale statues of seated or standing Buddha, made of marble, wood and metal. The style characterized by turret shape, whose influence spread to neighbouring Burma in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, is represented e.g. by a wood-



Rubbing of a relief from Angkor Vat temple (12<sup>th</sup> c.), depicting a scene from the Hindu mythology. Cambodia 58 x 115.5 cm (NpM 47 240).

en box coated with gold lacquer. A set of marionettes features heroes of the Thai version of the Indian epic Ramayana.

The Cambodian and Laotian collections, which rank among the museum's smallest in terms of size, contain several metal, clay and wooden sculptures of Buddha, Vishnu and the heavenly dancers, Apsaras, whose figures are also found, alongside protagonists of the Hindu mythology, on

black-ink stone imprints. The collection also includes gouache paintings on cotton fabric depicting heavenly creatures, an ivory statuette of a goddess, a small wind organ called khen, and miscellaneous items of ethnographic interest.

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