The life of travelling things

The ambitious India and the World exhibition comes to Delhi’s National Museum

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The exhibition, ‘India and the World: A History in Nine Stories’, cannot be faulted for the scale of its ambition. A collaboration between the British Museum, London, CSMVS Mumbai, and the National Museum, Delhi, this is the second, somewhat reduced edition of the show, the first being at CSMVS. Supported by the Getty Foundation and Tata Trust, it is the kind of encyclopaedic exhibition the large universal museum aspires to – and may excel in.

At its core, it scrambles the national cultural display to set up a relational dialogue between objects so that we are able to make hitherto unrecognised connections. Couched rather awkwardly in an oddly winding layout at the National Museum, it is perhaps mostly appropriately described by Sabyasachi Mukherjee as “an experiment”, to envision a “world narrative” for those who can never make it to the encyclopaedic museum.

Thematic vision
At some point, there is the realisation that an exhibition can carry the viewer forward in buoyant anticipation, or it can lag and falter, as it tries to live up to its promise. ‘India and the World’ in its discrete nine sections has both such moments, through flashes of brilliant interconnection, and other somewhat less successful links.

This ebb and flow may be a reflection of art production in different periods, of great efflorescence and relative mediocrity, and such a historic exhibition must deal with both.

What is critical however is the kind of thematic chapterisation under which the material has been organised. The story of Indian and simultaneous world art histories, their direct and lateral influences, art as a document of trade, the making of the state religion, courtly taste and fashion are just a few of the nine stories. Such a grid-like thematic arrangement requires sustained curatorial vision, and objects that through their grandeur can sustain the meaning of the show.

The show does try to live up to this vision, notwithstanding the limitations of space, the low ceilings, the compulsion of displaying small objects, and the disturbing multiple videos. The curatorial vision, therefore, and a broad art history thread is perhaps best understood through single objects. Some of the readings are wonderfully lucid, such as of the earliest objects across geographies, the hand axe and the vessel.

In a fascinating comparison, the primitive hand axe from Tanzania (400,000-800,000 years old) and one from Chittor, Rajasthan (50,000 BC) are bound in a shared aesthetic and utilitarian mould. Some fascinating finds of early cities – such as Harappan and Sumerian seals; Harappan bricks; a decorative box from Ur, Iraq (about 2600 BC) with narrative images of city life; a charming Soul House from Egypt (a small clay funerary object) – all point to man’s earliest attempts at making the image a bearer of meaning.

At a time when material use was relatively less sophisticated there is a similarity of approach: an Ashokan carved edict with instructions on ethical behaviour as opposed to ostentatious rituals, an Achaemenid Persian relief and a Mauryan pillar.

‘Moulding’ art
At its core, the exhibition touches on the fundamental cultural phenomenon within India, of its relative indifference to or conscious distance from the outside world. Over a 2,000-year period, the ‘outside’ may mean other castes and communities within India, with their attendant views on pollution.

This extended to haptic use and even the viewing of objects, and the knowledge or the gaze of the outside was discouraged if not forbidden.

Nevertheless, objects travelled, as a sub-text to the exhibition emphasises. Harappan seals found 3,000 km away at Iraq is an instance.

That images travelled to strike unexpected roots is beautifully illustrated by two portraits of Jahangir, one of the emperor holding an of Virgin Mary, and the other a drawing of Jahangir by Rembrandt who collected Mughal paintings. Here, we see Rembrandt’s attempts to sketch in the Mughal miniature tradition.

Some of the more enjoyable bits are in the more cohesive sections. There is a wonderful interplay of the painted image in the section ‘Court Cultures’. Exquisite folios of the Baburnama are complemented by large-scale Deccani paintings of the 17th century, Safavid paintings, and a copy of a Ming scroll – linking three great centres of art in the 17th century.

In conclusion, the ‘moulding’ of art, rooted as it is in the encyclopaedic museum, is a curious function, full of pitfalls and odd imbalances. Globalisation with its hyphenated links, much like the contemporary biennale phenomenon, may flatten rather than enhance cultural identity.

Globalism as a museum curatorial agenda is pronounced in the newer entrants like the Louvre Abu Dhabi, with its historical, post-modern matrix of display. It depends on singular objects that allow the eye to bounce off heterogeneous cultures, styles and materials, ending with a quick and somewhat uncommitted incursion into the contemporary. The glittering chandelier by Ai Weiwei at the Louvre Abu Dhabi performs precisely such a function – it stuns even as it silences with its enormity. However, the question of agency remains, on how a selective polyphonic reading can enhance an understanding of art.

On a broad level is the question of how issues of identity are resolved when objects are ‘de-centred’ from their national framework. Or perhaps there can be other curatorial interventions – on the representing of women across cultures, for instance, their role in art-making, their place as subjects and consumers of art?