

The Mobile Museum: Collecting and Circulating Indian Textiles in Victorian Britain

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In 1866, the India Office in London published the first of a series of eighteen albums containing 700 mounted samples of Indian textiles, together with details of the length, width, weight, and cost of the fabrics, as well as photographs indicating how they were actually worn. Twenty sets of the sample series were made for distribution to chambers of commerce and art schools in Britain and India. A second series, with smaller-sized and more elegantly mounted samples, was produced from 1873. The director of this laborious undertaking was John Forbes Watson, the reporter on the products of India at the India Office, who was responsible for a diverse collection of botanical, zoological, archaeological, antiquarian, ethnographic, and industrial objects at the museum inherited from the East India Company. These ever-expanding collections, reflecting the history and breadth of British involvement in India, were supplied in part by the Indian courts of international exhibitions of the period. Forbes Watson patiently selected his specimens from museum stores in the London suburbs, eventually producing around 30,000 hand-cut and mounted samples. But his efforts to extract the essential characteristics of Indian textile design and manufacturing have not been treated kindly by posterity. Considered something of an embarrassment by successive officials at the India Office and by later curators at the South Kensington Museum (which inherited the collections in 1879), his textile albums sank into

ABSTRACT: During the 1860s and 70s, the India Office in London produced over 30,000 hand-cut and mounted samples of Indian textiles in a series of albums for circulation to chambers of commerce and design schools in Britain and India. Described by their creator John Forbes Watson as “trade museums,” these albums were intended to educate manufacturers about the Indian market. In this paper, we consider the relationship between the collection and circulation of textiles—not only in the form of specimen fabrics, but also as abstracted patterns or as elements in theatrical performances. The circulation of knowledge in these various forms raises wider questions about the relationships between text, textiles, and Victorian cultures of display.

obscurity, though some survived in schools of design. The researcher seeking evidence of their presence in the Asian textile collections of today's Victoria and Albert Museum is confronted by the remnants of the process of excision in the form of scraps and offcuts, which nonetheless have their own kind of mute eloquence.

In this paper, we seek to locate Forbes Watson's project in the larger context of the history of the circulation of Indian textiles in Victorian Britain, from the Great Exhibition to the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886. This requires attention to the practices and institutional contexts of collecting, a subject that has received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years. In this literature, as Lara Kriegel has pointed out, the twin themes of the "imperial archive" and the "exhibitionary complex" have loomed large ("After the Exhibitionary Complex"; *Grand Designs* 6). The impulse to collect, arrange, and display natural products and cultural forms came to be closely associated, in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the development of new forms of political culture, governance, and imperial rule: the results are evident, above all, in the landscapes of South Kensington. Yet there was nothing inevitable about this: indeed, as Kriegel shows, the success of the reform movement in art and design (embodied in the campaigns of the Cole circle leading to the foundation of the South Kensington Museum in 1857) was far from pre-ordained. It is important to acknowledge the contingent contexts in which collections are gathered together and develop: their history consists not of the working out of some inexorable process, culminating in the modern public museum, but in a variety of plans and proposals, unanticipated developments, changes of course, acquisitions, sales, divestments, take-overs, and mergers. This too is readily apparent in the ever-changing geography of the South Kensington site, which, in the period between the Great Exhibition and the First World War, was an unstable agglomeration of scientific, artistic, imperial, and industrial interests. The South Kensington complex, in fact, was always on the move.

There is a larger point to be made here. Our emphasis on the mobility of collections poses a challenge to the ways in which museum histories have traditionally been written. Almost inevitably, histories of the museum that start from their present-day form tend to focus on processes of concentration: the growth and consolidation of collections, the development of expertise, the emergence of museum professionals. However, by highlighting the importance of circulation—of

things, images, people, and ideas—we can bring different perspectives to bear. Bruce Robertson has argued that conventional assumptions about the history of the South Kensington Museum need radical revision given the heterogeneity and instability of its collections. “It is possible,” he suggests, “to read the history of the South Kensington Museum, not as a steady progress toward a museum of decorative arts and design, but as a bazaar or emporium, with new products arriving and departing all the time” (9). Making the same point for a different purpose, Arindam Dutta treats the ever-changing physical form of the museum—its “state of permanent incompleteness”—as a spatial manifestation of its educational philosophy, an ever-expanding assemblage rather than a finished building (49). In the course of his argument, Dutta refers to a telling vignette in Moncure Conway’s account of the museum in *Travels in South Kensington* (1882), in which the narrator poses as a tourist unable to purchase a photograph of the building: “‘What, no photograph of the South Kensington Museum!’, I exclaimed, with some impatience. ‘Why, sir,’ replied the man mildly, ‘you see, the museum doesn’t stand still long enough to be photographed’” (27).

In this paper, we examine some of the ways in which textile collections were designed to circulate in a variety of forms. In this context, the relationship between the museum and the book is of particular interest: in the Victorian context, as we shall see, the museum could be described as a book, and the book as a museum. Forbes Watson’s Indian textile series was simultaneously book and museum, and therein lies its true significance. His own description of the volumes as trade museums affirms the importance of circulation as a key theme in the history of such collections, signaling the emphasis placed on the diffusion of knowledge, the accessibility of the museum, and the utility of the collections in commerce and education. We focus here on textile collections specifically as a means of considering the correspondences and discordances between the process of collecting, or gathering together, three different kinds of objects: patterns drawn from textile designs, specimens cut from actual fabric, and made items including costume and carpets. In what follows, each of these forms is associated with a different kind of “collection”: respectively, images arranged in a book, specimens organized in an album, or displays staged at an exhibition. Moreover, we suggest that each was associated with different kinds of knowledge about India. Three exemplary collections provide the focus for our discussion: Owen Jones’s design treatise

tise, *The Grammar of Ornament*, first published in 1856; Forbes Watson's textile series, published by the India Office from 1866; and Caspar Purdon Clarke's work for the South Kensington Museum, culminating in the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition.

The Abstracted Collection: Owen Jones and *The Grammar of Ornament*

Although not usually thought of as a "collector," Owen Jones was a key member of the Henry Cole circle, which shaped the development of the South Kensington Museum in its early years. An architect by training, he became better known as a designer, a printer of high-quality illustrated books, and an educator (Darby). The profound impression made on him by the Islamic art and architecture of Egypt, Turkey, and Spain (which he visited during the 1830s) inspired the production, from 1836–45, of his *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the Alhambra*, the first of a series of technically pioneering works illustrated with chromolithography. The *Alhambra* volumes were an important influence on *The Grammar of Ornament*, a lavishly printed album of design motifs intended to typify historic and world cultures (fig. 1). Its clearly pedagogic purpose has led Rowan Watson to describe the *Grammar* as "the publication that most clearly exemplified the role and aspirations of the South Kensington Museum in a national program of art and design education" (Watson 117). The book is perhaps best conceived as a portable museum, showcasing the arts of non-European as well as European cultures. That this was a very particular kind of museum, an instrument of reform as much as the fruits of arcane scholarship, was precisely the point. It was to the same purpose that Henry Cole dedicated the South Kensington Museum itself in 1857: "This Museum will be like a book with its pages always open, and not shut" (qtd. in Burton 84).

Jones was one of the superintendents of works for the Great Exhibition in 1851, responsible for the bold use of color in the Crystal Palace interior, as well as the decoration of the building after its relocation to Sydenham. Equally significant for the genesis of the *Grammar* is his role in the mid-Victorian movement for design reform. The collections of the Museum of Ornamental Manufactures at Marlborough House, Pall Mall, which opened in 1852, provided a key resource for government-funded schools of art. A sum of £5,000 was found to purchase exemplary works from the 1851 exhibition, selected by a

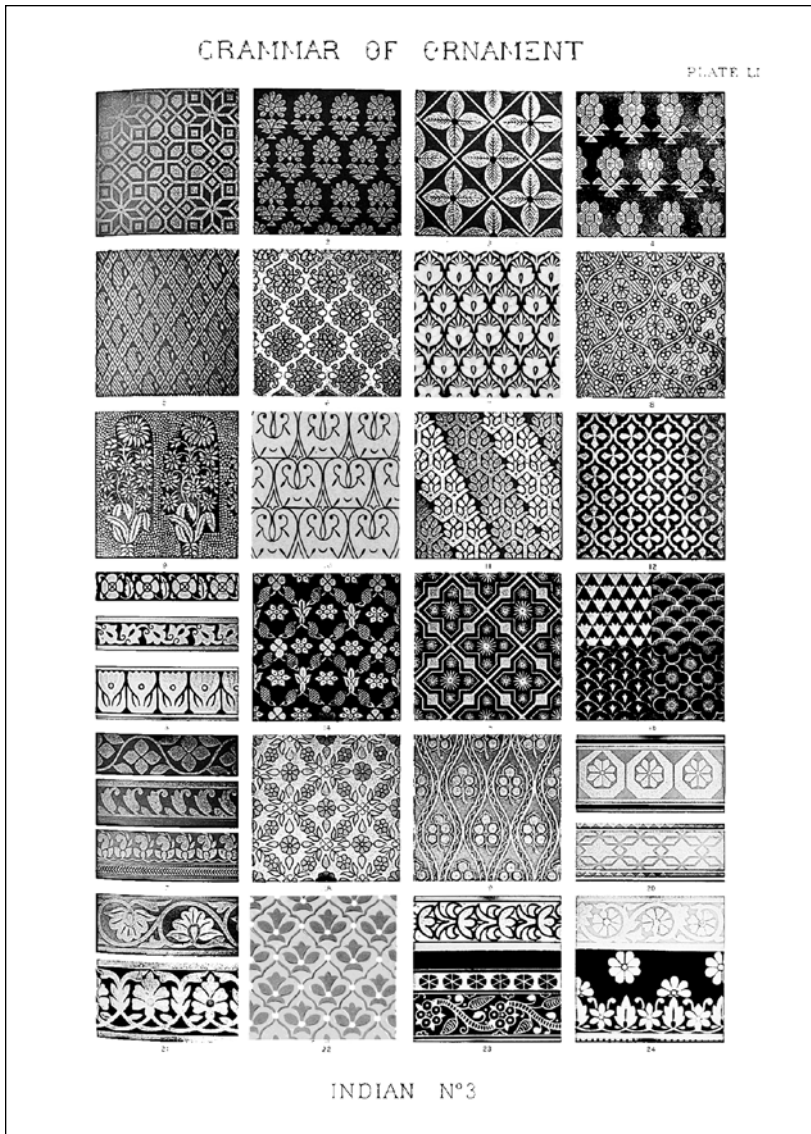


Fig. 1. “Indian no. 3” in *The Grammar of Ornament*, by Owen Jones. London: Day and Sons, 1856. © V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

committee that included Jones, as well as Henry Cole, John Rogers Herbert, A. W. Pugin, and Richard Redgrave. Nearly a quarter of the budget was spent on 139 Indian objects from the 1851 exhibition, sixty-five of them textiles. From its inception, Marlborough House was intended as “the nucleus of a Museum of Manufactures, which may have its connexions throughout the whole country” (Dept. of Practical

Art). One of the means by which this was achieved was the circulation and exhibition of the collections themselves, especially through local schools of art. By 1855, it was reported in the *Daily News* that “the authorities at Marlborough House . . . have now got together a small portable museum, intended for exhibition in the various provincial towns in which schools of design have been founded” (“Museum”). This was the precursor of what later became the circulation department of the South Kensington Museum, which survived in active form until 1978. In four and a half years, the first circulating exhibition, including a number of Indian textiles, toured twenty-six towns, was open for 907 days, and was visited by 306,977 people (“Organisation”). Besides objects, there was also an emphasis on sending art reproductions and books out to the regional art and design schools, prominent amongst them Jones’s *Grammar of Ornament*.

For critics of British industrial design, the 1851 exhibition revealed the insufficiency of mechanical ingenuity alone to realize the promise of modernity. In his own account of a visit to the exhibition, Jones highlighted what he called “the fruitless struggle to produce in art novelty without beauty [and] work without faith,” pointing the visitor to the Oriental courts for relief: “I would beg the wandering artist . . . to repose his distracted eye and head in the depths of India, Tunis, Egypt and Turkey. He will here find no carpets worked with flowers whereon the foot would fear to tread . . . here there is no struggle after an effect, everything arises quietly and naturally from some true feeling or some real want” (“Gleanings” 5–6). In a later lecture on lessons learned from the exhibition concerning the use of color, he argued the case more forcibly: “we were not only behind some of our European neighbours, but in common with these, were far outstripped by the nations of the East” (“Attempt” 256).¹ In 1852, Jones gave a series of public lectures on the principles of design, outlining thirty-three “propositions” said to be derived from an analysis of exemplary Indian, Egyptian, Turkish, and Tunisian objects displayed in the 1851 exhibition (*Lectures*). These were eventually developed into the thirty-seven propositions of the *Grammar*. Jones’s interpretation of the aesthetic value of Indian textiles became a key element of the principles of “good design” promoted by the museum.

The illustrations in the *Grammar* were based on a variety of sources, including objects in the South Kensington and other museums, and drawings of architectural decoration in the Vatican, Egypt, and

Constantinople. The assumption was that examples of “pure” pattern exhibited in a variety of manufactured objects could be extracted from their context, as grammar could from speech, absorbed by the viewer and applied to new manufactures (although Jones insisted that naïve copying should be avoided). The accompanying descriptions were provided by “old friends (and collaborators at Sydenham) including Joseph Bonomi, his brother-in-law James Wild and Matthew Digby Wyatt” (Snodin 13). The drawings were done with the assistance of his pupils, Albert Warren and Charles Aubert, and by Christopher Dresser. These motifs were drawn from western European classical and historical epochs (Greek, Roman, Celtic, medieval, Renaissance, Elizabethan, and Italian), as well as from a variety of world cultures, described under the headings of “Savage Tribes,” Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, Byzantine, Arabian, Turkish, Moresque, Indian, Hindoo, and Chinese.

Jones’s presentation of Indian designs in the *Grammar* was heavily dependent on the collections in London, especially at South Kensington, including objects shown in the exhibitions of 1851 (London) and 1855 (Paris). The displays at international exhibitions during this period were assembled via the East India Company and an elaborate network of committees and subcommittees in its four Presidencies in India: Bengal, Agra, Madras, and Bombay (Hoffenberg 49–55). An exhaustive classification system had been devised by exhibition commissioners in London in 1851 and followed subsequently. In 1851, textiles and clothing accounted for seven of the twenty-nine classes of materials exhibited. This gives some idea of the process by which “Indian Art” was filtered before it was subject to the gaze of Jones and his colleagues. In the *Grammar*, the art of the subcontinent was simply divided between “Indian” (i.e. Moghul) and “Hindoo” ornament, of which far fewer examples were available. Jones reserved judgment as to whether Hindu architects were, as commonly assumed by Europeans, “only heapers of stone, one over the other, adorned with grotesque and barbaric sculpture,” or whether they had achieved the “higher state of architectural perfection” claimed by Ram Raz in his *History of the Architecture of the Hindoos* (*Grammar* 153).

A number of the Indian designs in the *Grammar* were taken directly from textile specimens in the Marlborough House collections bequeathed to the South Kensington Museum in 1857. These drawings often took the form of details of repeating border patterns or embroidery motifs (Ashmore). Particularly admired by Jones were the *kincobs* of

Benares (Varanasi), rich silk fabrics with patterns woven in gold- and silver-wrapped thread. Amongst other textiles selected as paradigms of good design were a number of embroideries and a striking red muslin turban from Rajasthan, overprinted in gold. Another example, also from the 1851 exhibition, was based on a plainer woven silk from Aurangabad and later illustrated by Henry Cole's son, Henry Hardy Cole, in his 1874 catalog of the Indian section of the museum. Jones's influence at South Kensington extended to the fabric of the museum itself. His designs for the decoration of the Oriental Courts in 1863-64 bear a striking similarity to "oriental" motifs printed in the *Grammar*. While the painted cast-iron framework is now hidden from view, surviving watercolors indicate the delicacy of the coloring scheme.

The "collection" of designs in the *Grammar* was an abstraction, an ordering framework in which the individuality of objects *qua* objects was invisible. The printed volumes, handsome as they were, inevitably stripped the original objects of their material, tactile qualities. The sources—including items of stonework, textile, pottery, and metalwork, but also prints, books, and drawings—were necessarily diverse, reflecting the various highly selective channels through which knowledge was transmitted to the imperial metropolis. Furthermore, as Stacey Sloboda has recently suggested, the *Grammar* can be interpreted as an unstable accommodation between liberal cosmopolitanism and Victorian empire. Jones's aspirations to universality were inevitably skewed by the nature of the South Kensington collections, just as his critique of British design was compromised by its colonial and racial frames of reference (Crang and Ashmore, "Transnational spaces"). In accounting for its ideological content, however, it must be emphasized that the form of the work was intrinsic to its function. Less a scholarly text than a pedagogic device, the *Grammar* was above all an instrument for circulation. Indeed, the extent to which the book and the collections it represented did circulate, not only within Britain but also across the world, is itself extraordinary. If this was a museum, to adapt the words of Henry Cole, its doors have always been open.

The Circulating Collection: Forbes Watson and the Trade Museum

The Grammar of Ornament has had the misfortune, historically speaking, of being generally regarded as ahead of its time, anticipating or prefiguring modern principles of design and indeed modernist

aesthetics. However, by reconnecting the work to the idea of the circulating exhibition, we can better locate it historically. The idea of the book or the collection as a “portable museum” was developed in a number of other ways at this time. In less aesthetically elevated form, it was evident in John Forbes Watson’s textile books, conceived as miniaturized versions of larger collections and designed to educate manufacturers by direct example. Yet this series offered more than simply a set of patterns, reproduced in two dimensions on the page: consisting of actual cut cloth, framed and classified, Forbes Watson’s textile samples were more like botanical specimens organized within a herbarium.

Forbes Watson’s approach to the organization of his collection is best understood as that of an applied natural historian. Following a brief career as a physician in the Bombay Medical Service, he was appointed to the India Office in 1858 and given responsibility for its museum, which he retained until 1879 (when the collections were divided between South Kensington, the British Museum, and Kew). The function of the India Museum, established by the East India Company in 1801, was increasingly represented as an aid to imperial commerce: the undersecretary for India, M. E. Grant Duff, captured this well in an 1869 official memorandum describing it as “not a mere museum of curiosity, nor even primarily a museum intended for the advancement of science, but the reservoir, so to speak, that supplies the power to a machinery created for the purpose of developing the resources of India, and promoting trade between the Eastern and Western empires of Her Majesty, to the great advantage of both.” Forbes Watson’s interests in economic botany and his commitment to the idea of a “trade museum”—systematic collections of resources and products designed to promote commerce—fitted this utilitarian vision well. Having established his credentials in economic botany through a series of lectures to the Society of Arts (on the sanitary applications of charcoal and ventilation, the food grains of India, cotton production in India, and the fiber-yielding plants of India), he used his position at the India Museum to advocate a new kind of collection. The idea of a trade museum was not in itself novel; Forbes Watson’s contribution lay in his emphasis on circulation and diffusion of such collections, “the compactness of which would permit of their rapid multiplication” (Forbes Watson, *International Exhibitions* 19). Ideally, he suggested, mobile collections should consist of “several thousand specimens, arranged in such a manner that the whole collection may be exhibited in a moderate sized room” (“India Museum Question” 40). A key part of this plan was an inge-

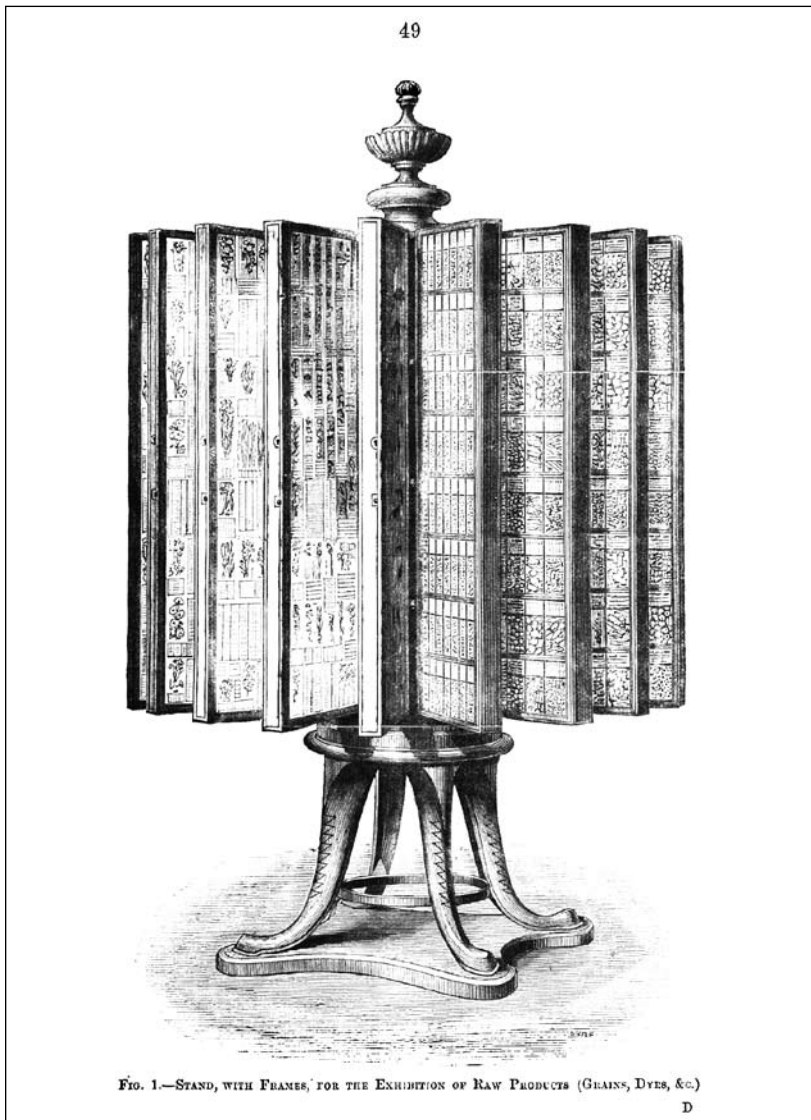


Fig. 2. “Stand, with frames, for the exhibition of raw products” in *The Imperial Museum for India and the Colonies*, by John Forbes Watson. London: W. H. Allen, 1876: 49. © V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

nious device designed to maximize the efficient use of space: a collection of glazed wooden frames attached to a portable stand capable of displaying one thousand specimens of “Indian raw produce,” intended to “represent the essence . . . of the extensive commercial collections” (41). This epitome of the resources of the subcontinent could be supplemented by various objects, models, and “tabular statements and descriptions, arranged

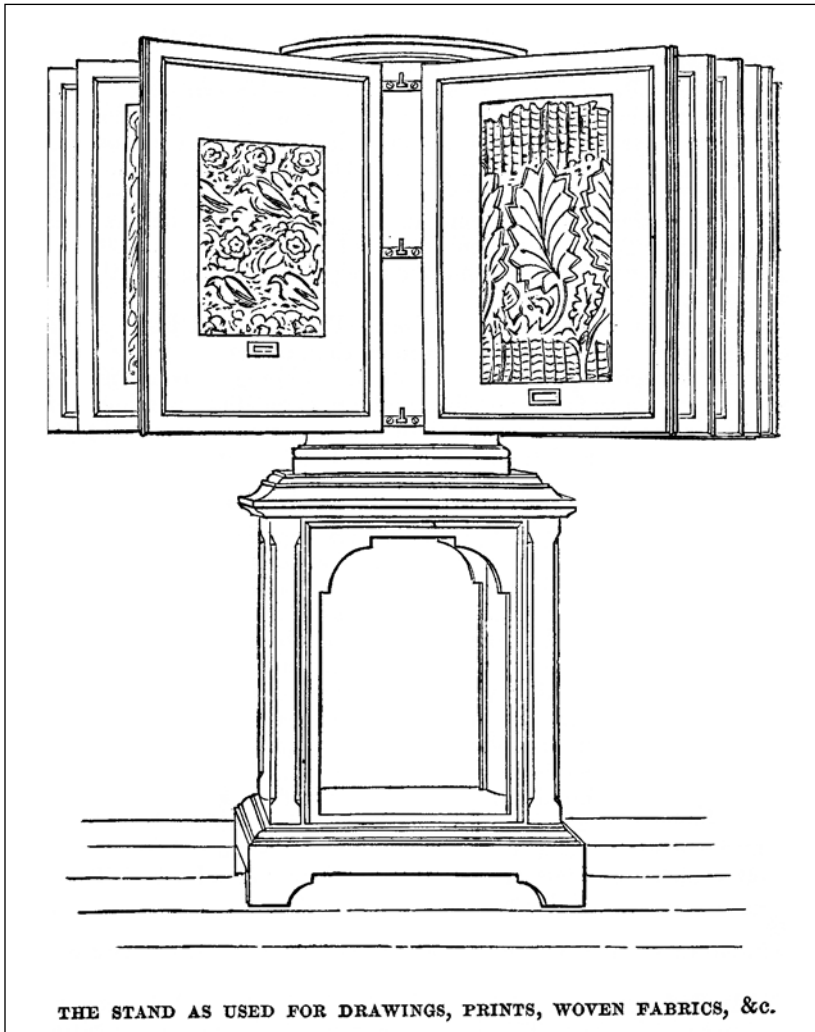


Fig. 3. Henry Cole's pillar stand in the *Sixteenth Report of the Department of Science and Art*. London: 1868. © V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

encyclopaedically” (50; figs. 2 and 3). Forbes Watson argued that such miniature museums could readily be duplicated, enabling them to work as sources of reference and comparison, both nationally and internationally (“On the extension”). Trade museums would thus become a means of invigorating British manufacturing, penetrating Indian markets and accessing raw materials (*Imperial Museum* 40).

Forbes Watson’s vision of the portable museum combined the taxonomic obsessions of the naturalist with the instrumental approach of the administrator. Significantly, his collections were not made first

hand: the “trade museum” was conceived less as a means of bringing the world to order, than as an attempt to reorder metropolitan museum collections so that they could be put to work in a commercial context. Moreover, his encyclopedic publications were intended less as works of reference for the scientist or scholar than as practical tools for the manufacturer and the administrator: here the comparison with a work such as George Watt’s six-volume *Dictionary of the Economic Products of India* (1889), intended as “the nucleus of an extended and systematic enquiry into the productive resources of the Indian Empire,” is telling (Watt vii). Watt’s involvement in the Indian display at the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition, alongside that of T. N. Mukharji, the Bengali civil servant and assistant curator of Calcutta’s Indian Museum, needs to be seen in the context of Forbes Watson’s earlier efforts (Hoffenberg 52–55).

Forbes Watson’s idea of a circulating museum was consistent with the approach being developed by Henry Cole and his circle at South Kensington, as discussed above. The circulation department’s own arrangements for the display of art objects were reminiscent of Forbes Watson’s proposals:

Contained in five glazed cases, so constructed as to fit together and form a stand, occupying a ground space of 12 feet by 6 feet; the case being formed of square boxes, in which the objects were packed when in transit. In addition to these cases, were seventy glazed frames, for the display of textile fabrics, lace, photographs etc., which were furnished with stands, the whole being so contrived as to admit of ready packing. (“Report”)

Moreover, the ingenious display cabinets that Forbes Watson described as “trade museums” had their counterparts in Cole’s designs for pillar stands capable of displaying large numbers of drawings, prints, fabrics, and other specimens (see fig. 3). These rotating stands, “analogous to the leaves of a book,” were intended as a space-saving strategy at a time when the museum was becoming overcrowded (Cole, *Report* 283). By 1870, the museum superintendent could report that “a greater part of the examples of early textile fabrics have been framed and hung on the new rotating stands,” increasing access and saving space at the same time (Dept. of Science and Art, *Seventeenth Report* 338). More generally, for all his hostility toward the absorption of the Indian collections within the South Kensington Museum, Forbes Watson’s model of the trade museum was broadly consistent with the utilitarian

vision of the Cole circle. In this spirit, Forbes Watson once echoed the title of Owen Jones's celebrated treatise in describing proposals for an Indian textile display as a "very complete grammar of Indian ornamentation, in so far as textiles are concerned" ("Memorandum" 12).

Although Forbes Watson's grander schemes often fell on deaf ears, he found other ways to realize his ideal "trade museum"—most notably, through the two series of textile sample albums produced under the title of *The Collections of the Textile Manufactures of India* from 1866 (figs. 4 and 5). This project drew to some extent on the format of textile manufacturers' pattern books, while also reflecting the applied natural-history orientation of the India Museum in the preceding two decades. In particular, Forbes Watson may well have been directly influenced by the example of the Schlagintweit brothers, whose expeditions to Northern India and central Asia between 1854 and 1858 had been jointly sponsored by the East India Company and the king of Prussia, in the name of Humboldtian science (Armitage; Finkelstein). Amongst the vast array of scientific and ethnographic materials presented to the India Museum by the Schlagintweits in 1858-59, which also included a set of plaster casts of Indian heads, hands, and feet (subsequently cast in metal for display in the museum) and over a thousand soil samples (which Forbes Watson later had tested with a view to their suitability for cotton and flax cultivation), was a set of paper and cloth samples, labeled and mounted in nine bound volumes under the title *Technical Objects from India and High Asia* (figs. 6 and 7). In a letter to the Schlagintweits in July 1859, Forbes Watson described them, together with some wood and seed specimens, as "a valuable addition to the industrial museum" (qtd. in Schlagintweit). The arrangement of these samples bears a striking similarity to Forbes Watson's own textile sample series, though the latter were compiled from sources closer to hand. Very soon after his appointment, Forbes Watson was promoting the use of samples from museum stores for circulation to chambers of commerce and museums through the country ("Forbes Watson, Draft Minute"). The sample sizes in his published *Collections* were broadly comparable to those of the Schlagintweits: generally around 34 x 19 cm in the first series, and 19 x 10 cm in the second, with an additional piece about 4 cm square, "for examination of texture" (see fig. 5).

Forbes Watson described *The Collections of the Textile Manufactures of India* as "Twenty Industrial Museums, illustrating the Textile Manufac-

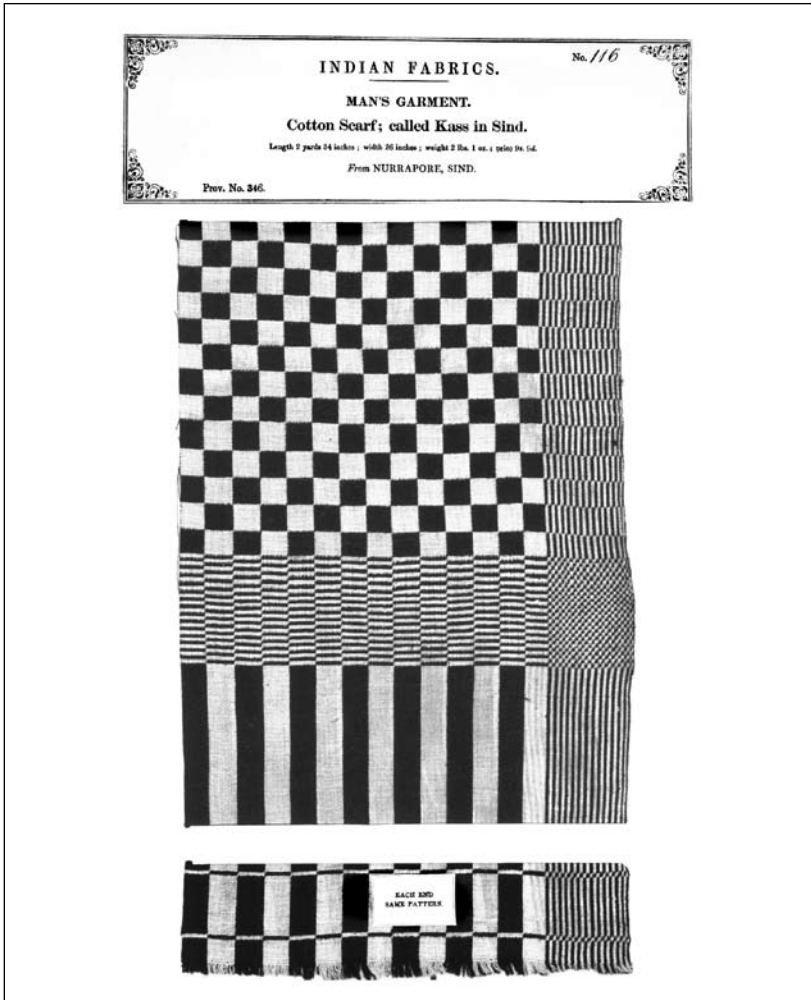


Fig. 4. “Indian fabrics, no. 116” in *The Collections of the Textile Manufactures of India*, by John Forbes Watson. London: India Office, 1866 and 1873-77. © V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

tures of India, and promoting trade operations between the East and West” (*Textile Manufactures* [1866] 1, emphasis original). In the accompanying book, *The Textile Manufactures and the Costumes of the People of India*, the material was arranged according to whether textiles were loom-made or piece, male or female costume; muslins, silks, or cashmere shawls, and so on. The book also contained a tabulated appendix, in which each specimen was located geographically, the places of manufacture or markets from which they came carefully enumerated under name, district, Presidency, or country, right down to latitude and longitude. In

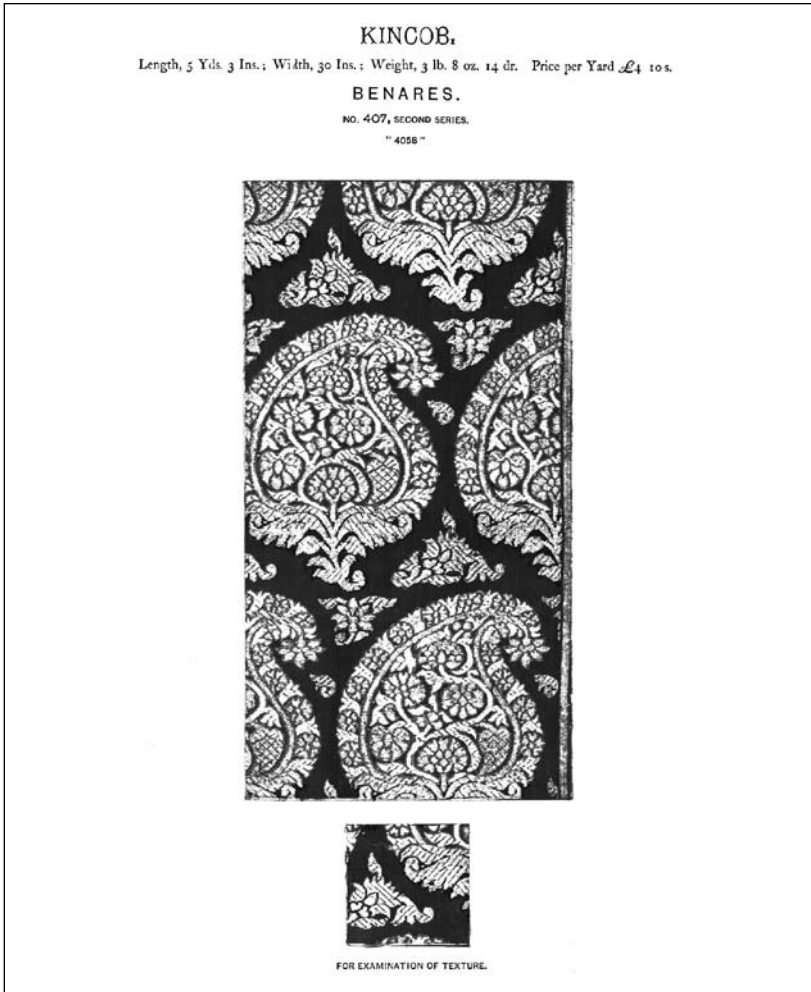


Fig. 5. “Kincob, no. 407” in *The Collections of the Textile Manufactures of India*, by John Forbes Watson. London: India Office, 1866 and 1873-77. © V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

these and other respects, the textile series bears direct comparison to another lavishly produced reference work, Forbes Watson and John William Kaye’s *The People of India*, an eight-volume compendium of photographic illustrations designed “fairly to represent the different varieties of the Indian races” that the India Office had published between 1868 and 1875 (Preface). Like the textile collection, the photographic volumes were supposed to encapsulate geographical variety through an informed selection of exemplary “types”: moreover, they too gave the appearance of comprehensive and systematic coverage. Each of the 480

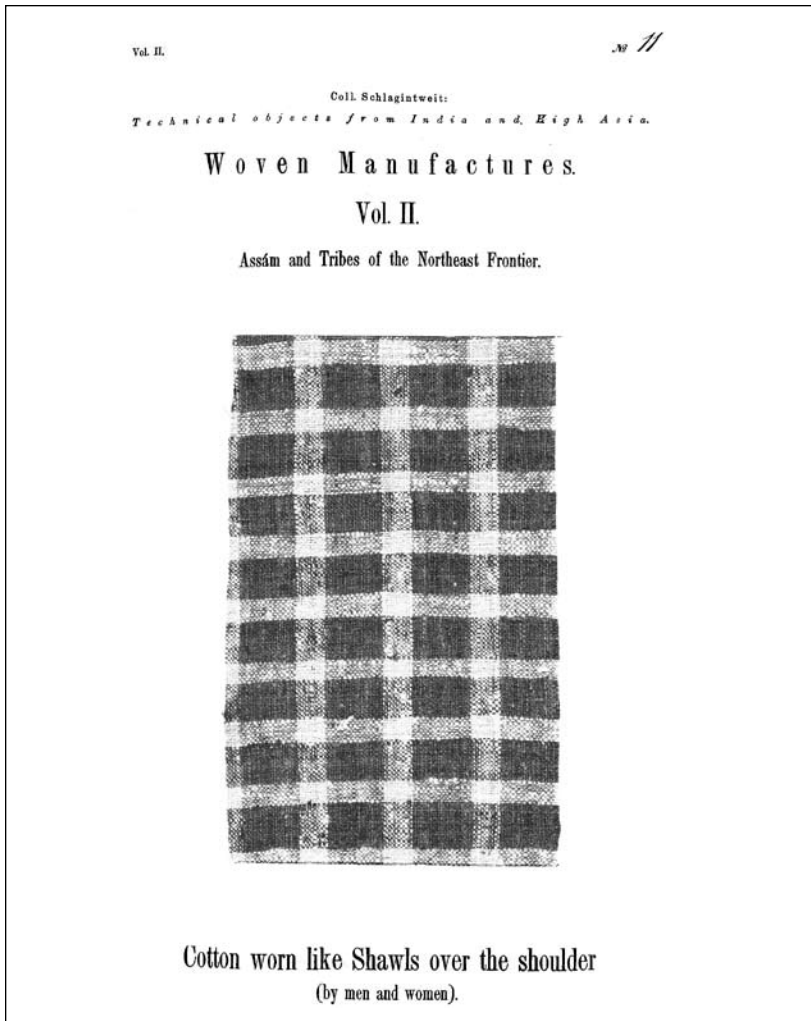


Fig. 6. “Woven manufactures, vol. 2, no. 11” in *Technical Objects from India and High Asia*, by A., H., and R. Schlagintweit. 1859. © British Library Board.

portraits were numbered, described in terms of tribe, caste, or nationality, and located geographically. Behind the façade were further similarities, for example in shared techniques of photographic reproduction in which Forbes Watson’s assistant, William Griggs, was a pioneer. In both series, moreover, the “specimens” were collected, sampled, and interpreted in ways that belied the surface appearance of consistency and comprehensiveness. And just as the collections forming the basis of the textile series had a variety of origins, so too were the photographs in *The People of India* produced, as the authors conceded, “without any defi-

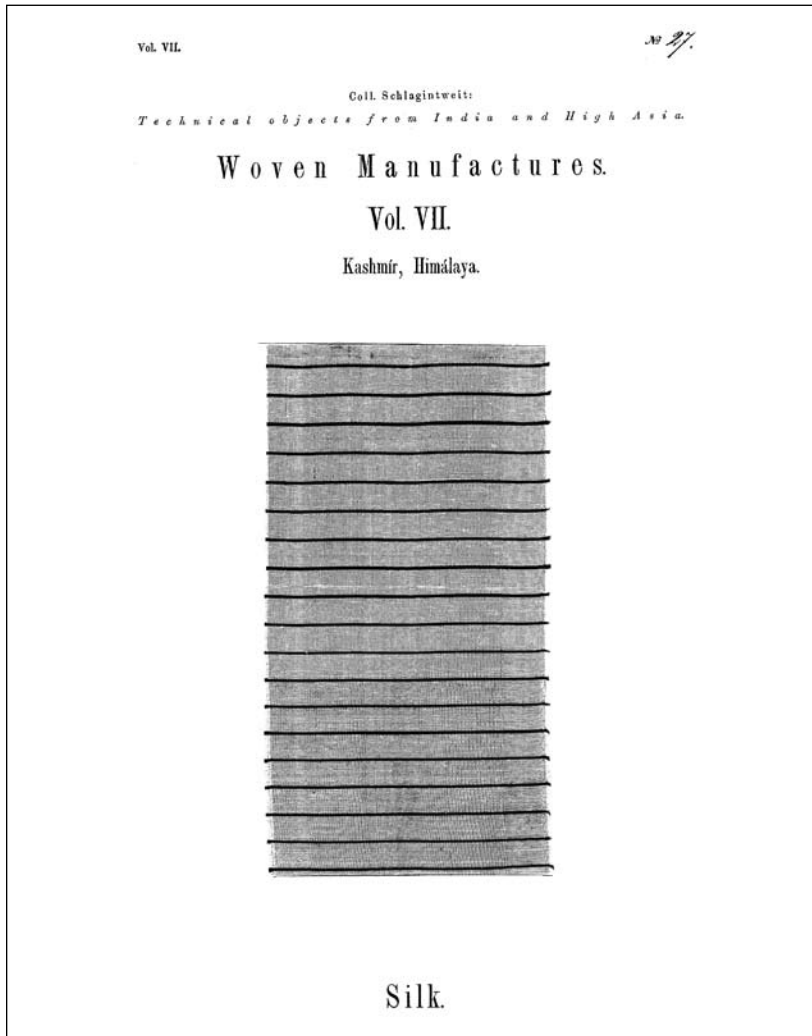


Fig. 7. “Woven manufactures, vol. 7, no. 27” in *Technical Objects from India and High Asia*, by A., H., and R. Schlagintweit. 1859. © British Library Board.

nite plan, according to local and personal circumstances, by different officers” (Preface). As John Falconer has noted, the geographical coverage of the photographic series was largely determined by what was available, allied to political and military concerns, leading to a preponderance of images of peoples from Northern India (78).

Forbes Watson’s account of Indian textile manufacturing highlighted regional variations in cloth and clothing styles, locating particular specimens geographically and commercially. For example, a printed cotton described as “piece goods, used for petticoats” was said to charac-

terize Bellary, Madras, now in Karnataka (*Collections X*: 372). Another example of a block-printed cotton was described as being intended for “peshgeer,” or “petticoats of the poorer classes”; peshgir were worn by Sindh women over trousers (*Collections VIII*: 315). In order to help British manufacturers understand exactly how the garment would be worn, labels indicated the section of cloth worn by a phrase such as “opposite end usually next to body” or “principal end to show.” (This concern with variations in the way saris, shawls, and other items of clothing were actually worn was also reflected in the choice of photographic illustrations, some taken directly from *The People of India*: the composition of ethnic “type” was clearly, in part, a matter of dress.) The textile volumes, like the photographic series, gave the local origin of the samples and, as noted in a review in the *Art Journal*, further commercial advice was available: “If [the English manufacturer] should still be in any perplexity, he can obtain information from the India Museum, which has been rearranged under Dr Watson’s superintendence, or he can examine entire pieces of clothing, which are kept for the purpose” (Taylor 83). As with the photographic series, moreover, the uneven geographical coverage in the textile volumes reflected the process of their acquisition. On this point Deborah Swallow has drawn attention to the relative overrepresentation of “areas which the Lancashire cloths had not fully penetrated by the 1860s,” such as the Madras Presidency (modern Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh), noting the “complex interaction between European manufacturer and colonial consumer” (36, 29).

Forbes Watson intended his textile volumes to be practical manuals of instruction for British manufacturers seeking access to a potentially huge market in India (see Lyons): “These ‘local Museums’ will show what the people of India affect and deem suitable in the way of textile fabrics, and if the supply of them is to come from Britain, they must be imitated there” (Forbes Watson, *Textile Manufactures* [1866] 3). He was especially concerned to ensure that the necessary information was provided to facilitate copying: “Each sample has been prepared in such a way as to indicate the character of the whole piece from which it was cut, and thus enable the manufacturer to reproduce the article if he wishes to do so” (2). The promotion of the textile albums as instruments of commercial intelligence needs to be seen in the context of the crisis of the cotton trade during the 1860s (Farnie 135–70). There were over half a million people employed in British factories alone, dependent upon supplies of cotton from the American slave states. The Lancashire facto-

ries were reduced to short-time working, ostensibly due to the shortages caused by the American Civil War, but, with hindsight, also resulting from poor management and overproduction in Britain. Whatever the cause of the crisis, the Indian market was widely seen as a source of salvation for the depressed British cotton industry. As far as Forbes Watson was concerned, the British manufacturer could not compete with India in the market for hand-loomed silks and muslins, embroideries, shawls, and carpets: “The plainer and cheaper stuffs of cotton, or of cotton and wool together, are those which he has the best chance of selling” (*Textile Manufactures* [1866] 7). He thus devoted a substantial portion of both series to woollen fabrics, where British manufacturers were thought to have an advantage.

The series of designs registered by the board of trade now held in the National Archives provide evidence of their influence on textile manufacturers in Manchester and Glasgow in subsequent decades.² Indeed, many of them appear to be direct copies from the Forbes Watson albums or objects in the South Kensington collections. However, priced at £150, a single set of the albums was about ten times the price of *The Grammar of Ornament*, and by necessity their circulation was restricted. The limited edition of specimens of cut cloth was made available, on certain conditions about authorized access and storage (in a special cabinet), to chambers of commerce in Belfast, Bradford, Glasgow, Halifax, Liverpool, and Manchester; the industrial museums of Edinburgh and Dublin; the Huddersfield Mechanics Institution; the towns of Macclesfield and Preston; the Borough of Salford; and the India Museum in London. In December 1867, Richard Redgrave, a key figure at the South Kensington Museum, recommended that nine additional sets should be bought for schools of art at Kidderminster, Leeds, Coventry, Norwich, Nottingham, Glasgow, and Paisley, and two copies for the art library (Redgrave). Later orders came from Germany, Vienna, Switzerland, and Russia, the first series reaching the end of its print run by 1878. A mere seven sets were allocated to places in India—Madras, Bombay, “Kurrachee,” Northwest Provinces, Punjab, and Berar. The latter policy was later bitterly criticized from an Indian nationalist perspective as being part of a strategy contributing to “the ruin of Indian trade and industries” (Basu). On the publication of the second series, and the breaking up of the India Museum in 1879, large collections of the museum’s textiles were exhibited in Britain, New Zealand, British Guiana, Philadelphia, and the

University of Virginia. Smaller collections were sent to other cities in the British Isles, the India Museum functioning as a “reservoir” from which specimens flowed (“Portrait”).

In some respects Forbes Watson’s commitment to the idea of the trade museum encapsulates what Thomas Richards has written of the imperial archive more generally: knowledge, brought back to London, pared down to its essentials, classified and mapped according to broadly colonial frameworks, and then transformed into an instrument of policy, for dissemination throughout Britain and the wider empire (Richards 4). And yet it is clear that Forbes Watson’s Indian projects—both the photographic and the textile series—relied heavily on his own somewhat idiosyncratic efforts, and were much criticized for their lack of system. Before the contents of the India Museum were finally dispersed in 1879, its position in the “confusion, discomfort and semi-darkness” of Whitehall, in the “inaccessible heights of the India Office,” drew much criticism from museum modernizers (“India Museum”). Indeed, more aesthetically inclined authorities were later to hold Forbes Watson responsible for a narrowly utilitarian understanding of Indian art and design. George Birdwood, appointed curator of the India Museum in 1875, highlighted very different aspects of the material culture of Indian civilization in his *Industrial Arts of India* (1880), a paean to the organic integrity of Indian village communities: “The intimate absorption of Hindu life in the unseen realities of man’s spiritual consciousness is seldom sufficiently acknowledged by Europeans, and indeed cannot be fully comprehended by men whose belief in the supernatural has been destroyed by the prevailing material ideas of modern society” (*Industrial Arts* 2). Privately, he was scathing about the curatorial methods encapsulated in Forbes Watson’s textile series:

It is indeed unfortunate that for the purposes of this work some of the finest historical examples in the Museum were destroyed. They were cut up into small fingering pieces as the manufacturers call them, shewing how many threads per square inch were in the weft and the woof of these glorious webs of sunshine and colour. (“Draft”)

Birdwood compared this approach to cutting up a Turner or a Claude by the inch, in order to teach art students something from “the smear marks of their brushes.”

Setting the Stage: Purdon Clarke and the Theater of Empire

When the India Museum finally closed in 1879, its collections were dispersed. The botanical specimens went to Kew (including two thousand samples of rice weighing three tons and thirty-six tons of wood sent up the Thames by barge), the zoological and selected antiquities to the British Museum, and a huge collection of objects relating to Indian art and manufactures (including textiles) were bequeathed to the South Kensington Museum.³ The process of cataloging the new Indian collections at South Kensington was a major undertaking: “Two series of numbers were started, one from 1 upwards, the other from 01 upwards, thus enabling two sets of Museum officers to work at the same time, and a double quantity of MS to be sent to printers from day to day” (Dept. of Science and Art, *India Museum*). Of the total of some 19,000 objects included in the initial inventory, over one thousand were samples of textiles including kincobs, cashmere shawls, embroideries, turbans, beetle-wing embroidery, ribbons, lace, trimmings, rugs, and carpets. Also included were returned loans of textile fabrics from the schools of art at Nottingham and Macclesfield, and four separate ethnographic collections, mostly from Northern India and central Asia, including some textiles. Thus were the incremental accumulations of the East India Company reclassified into the South Kensington system.

In 1880 Caspar Purdon Clarke, an architect by training and himself a product of the South Kensington system, was appointed curator of the Indian collections. He was soon to be responsible for the largest single purchase of Indian textiles for the museum during the nineteenth century, as well as the design of the Indian section of the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition. Prior to his appointment, he had undertaken a variety of work for the museum including supervision of architectural works in Italy, Alexandria, Damascus, and Tehran, the latter in association with James Wild, close colleague of Owen Jones. He also continued to undertake a variety of private commissions, including Thomas Brassey’s Indian museum in Park Lane and the new Indian hall at Elveden, Suffolk, commissioned by Edward Guinness. Purdon Clarke’s training as an architect, and his familiarity with the growing market for orientalist interior design, clearly shaped his approach to the Indian textile collections of the South Kensington Museum. His major role in this context was as a designer of exhibitions: it is clear that he had an eye for spectacle. His design for the



Fig. 8. “The New Indian Section, South Kensington Museum” in the *Illustrated London News* 22 May 1880: 501. © V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Indian section of the 1878 Paris International Exposition, dominated by two linked and elaborately decorated domed pavilions, was said to have been “inspired by the modern style of the palaces and temples of Hindustan” (“L’Exposition Universelle” 19). *The Times* hailed it as the “most complete and best arranged exposition of the natural products, arts and manufactures of India that has ever been made either in London or Paris” (“Paris exhibition”). The emphasis here, as in subsequent exhibitions, was on the overall effect of the displays, the ambience of the Orient: “One feels completely shut out of Europe and lost in some veritable oriental bazaar.”

The first exhibition of the reorganized Indian collections at South Kensington took place in May 1880 (fig. 8). Entering through a cast of the great gateway to the Buddhist stupa at Sanchi, the visitor proceeded past casts of temple sculptures and numerous models and photographs to the textile gallery, described by the correspondent of *The Times* as “one of the most striking successes of the Museum” (“Indian section”). The textiles and carpets were described in as “a joy for ever,” with a “superb show of embroidered muslins, silks, brocades, shawls and costly stuffs and clothing of all descriptions,” and a “wonderful exhibition of chintzes from Masulipatam, Rajpootana and Scinde.” Notwithstanding this favorable

reception, the museum authorities found much to criticize in the collections they had inherited from the India Office: “The late India Museum was not a systematic collection. It was to a great extent brought together by chance. Many of the best examples were donations, while the bulk of the collection consisted of unsaleable remainders of the various International Exhibitions since 1851” (“India Museum: Mr C. Purdon Clarke’s visit” [1857]). The director of the museum, Philip Cunliffe Owen, drew attention to deficiencies in the aesthetic judgments made by previous curators, including presumably Forbes Watson himself: “Numerous objects have been found in it, labelled ‘India’ which on careful examination, are found to be Persian and even Chinese and Polynesian . . . The Collections are also overloaded with objects of mongrel Indo-European design, which it is very desirable to be rid of when once this can be replaced by the examples of genuine native art.”

In the light of these apparent deficiencies, the museum authorities proposed to send Purdon Clarke to India “to select and purchase objects urgently needed to supplement the collection” in order to make it “completely representative of the arts and manufactures of our great Eastern dependency” (“India Museum: Mr C. Purdon Clarke’s visit” [1857]). A detailed itinerary was set out: textiles were to be collected in Madras, Masulipatam, Jaipur (for printed cottons), Lucknow, Delhi (for embroidered muslin), Sind, Kashmir, Mirzapur, Jubbulpur, Tanjore, Bangalore, Malabar, Warangul, and Coconada (for rugs and carpets). Metalwork, woodcarving, and pottery were the other main “industries” to be collected. Purdon Clarke was provided with a special fifth-class uniform that would “enable him to appear before the Native Princes” suitably attired; he was instructed to enter all acquisitions in a diary, to be kept in duplicate (but now apparently lost); and he was advised “as far as possible [to] attend to the packing of valuable and fragile objects himself” (“India Museum: Mr C. Purdon Clarke’s visit” [3371]).

During his two years in India, Purdon Clarke dispatched more than three hundred packing cases from India to South Kensington, containing architectural fragments, paintings, metalwork, jewelry, stonework, tiles, pottery, plaster casts, bird skins, spinning wheels, and a huge variety of textiles, including a large carpet that was unpacked on the museum’s lawn. On one celebrated occasion, he spotted paintings used to fill the gaps in the windows of a Kashmir curiosity shop: these proved to be folios from the *Hamzanama*, or “Book of Hamza,” now among the highlights of the V&A’s collections. The textiles purchased by Purdon Clarke

were almost all in contemporary production in India, mainly for the domestic market, and were purchased in bazaars as well as directly from makers. They included a variety of kincobs, block-printed cottons of varied quality, articles of worn clothing, and a substantial but somewhat ragged collection of Kashmir shawls. Purdon Clarke also bought associated objects, such as spinning wheels and a large numbers of wood blocks used for textile printing. Some of the textiles appear to replicate those cut up by Forbes Watson for his sample series, though there is no direct evidence to establish whether they were intended as direct replacements.

Purdon Clarke described his visit to India in 1881–82 in a subsequent lecture to the Royal Institute of British Architects:

Wishing to ascertain how far the art manufactures of India were indigenous, or whether they owed their introduction and patronage to different lines of alien princes who have ruled India . . . I made an especial study of the technical features of the several arts, and for this purpose caused objects to be made in all parts of the country; and in all cases I saw the workers, and got from them as much information as they were inclined to give me. With pottery, textiles, and metal work it was not a very difficult task to collect good modern illustrations, and with some trouble many old examples were secured: the most difficult task was in tracing the histories of many of the sumptuary arts, the principal localities of whose manufacture had more of a political than an economical cause for their existence. (“Moghul Art” 123)

Given Cunliffe Owen’s disparaging remarks about “objects of mongrel Indo-European design” in the existing Indian collections, it is notable that the difficulties of differentiating the authentically “indigenous” are not far from the surface of this account. In a later lecture, Purdon Clarke highlighted the disappointment experienced by many visitors, presumably including himself, on arriving in India to find “European looking cities . . . [with] rows of shops anything but Oriental in appearance, generally filled with German or Manchester goods” (“Modern Indian Art” 511). He concluded that “a very great responsibility rests upon ourselves for the part we have taken in destroying the ornamental handicrafts of India” (520). The imperative to salvage pure artisanal forms was also highlighted by George Birdwood’s handbook on *The Industrial Arts of India*, which had served as a guide for Purdon Clarke during his collecting tour. Birdwood had made the same point even more strongly:

Indian collections are now also seen to be more and more overcrowded with mongrel forms, the result of the influences on Indian art of European society,

European education, and above all the irresistible energy of the mechanical productiveness of Birmingham or Manchester. Through all these means foreign forms of ornament are being constantly introduced into the country; and so rapidly are they spreading, that there is a real fear that they may at last irretrievably vitiate the native tradition of the decorative art of India (*Industrial Arts* 132).

Purdon Clarke returned to India a second time in preparation for the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition, in which he played a key role as designer of the Indian section. The exhibition represented a new high point in imperial triumphalism, as evidenced in the opening ceremony held at the Albert Hall, which included the singing of the national anthem with two of its verses translated into Sanskrit by Max Müller, the Oxford orientalist. The Indian section, allocated about one-third of the total exhibition space, was designed to highlight the exoticism of India: its displays evoked an entirely different world preserved in its pristine purity under British “protection,” transported to London for the duration of the show. Purdon Clarke’s design—or, rather, stage set—included an “Indian Palace” with an elaborate “Durbar Hall” in the Punjabi style, carved over a period of nine months by two skilled craftsmen, Muhammad Baksh and Muhammad Juma, brought over from the Punjab. For all Purdon Clarke’s concerns about “mongrel” design, the “palace” was unashamedly hybrid, as suggested by the description in the *Graphic*: “A Hindu structure is made the entrance to a Mahomedan *serai* and Sikh modern carved woodwork has been adapted in the interior fittings of an ancient Mahomedan palace, and, still more incongruous, old English stained windows have been added to this aggregation of ideas” (“Indian palaces”). Similar complaints about the “compilation” of styles were made by *The Times* with reference to the ornate screens Purdon Clarke had commissioned from various parts of India, as if his sense of spectacle had trumped his commitment to purity in design (“Indian Art”). In this highly theatrical setting, textiles were the key decorative element: “All [is] set off by a background of the richest textile fabrics, carpets, curtains, silks, shawls, muslins, chintzes [printed cottons], and cotton goods of all descriptions, in the greatest profusion, the gold and silver laces of Lucknow deserving especial notice” (“Colonial and Indian Exhibition,” *Westminster Review*). The hall was draped with printed cottons and lustrous, silk-embroidered *phulkari* or “flower-work,” many examples of which Purdon Clarke had acquired on his trip to the Punjab (fig. 9). The vestibule, dominated by Boehm’s large equestrian statue of the Prince of Wales, was also hung, tent-like, “with the most superb examples of the chintzes from Kashmir



Fig. 9. “Vestibule of the Durbar Hall,” Indian Palace, Colonial and Indian Exhibition, in the *Illustrated London News* 17 July 1886: 84. © V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

and . . . the Punjab” (Cundall 24). As this indicates, Indian textiles were used for dramatic effect that generally bore no relation to their original purpose, echoing the spectacular techniques of the theater and department store (Lysack; Ziter).

Both the *Official Catalogue* and the press highlighted the richness of the textiles on display, some of which had been especially made for the occasion: “In every Court, the textile fabrics, whether in cotton or silk, will be found . . . The care and taste of Mr Purdon Clarke and

the ready co-operation of the Maharajah of Kashmir secured the special manufacture of these unequalled fabrics" ("Colonial and Indian Exhibition," *Official Catalogue* 13). In the provincial art-ware courts, sumptuous textiles were again draped liberally about Purdon Clarke's orientalized architecture. Thomas Wardle, the Leek silk dyer and printer who had recently visited Bengal to report on silk production, organized a separate Indian silk court, displaying 200 silk pieces and objects associated with silk production.⁴ Other items included a set of twelve "magnificent" Ahmedabad kincobs, new work commissioned by John Griffiths of the Bombay School of Art because those currently being made used "inferior foreign gold and silver . . . in place of the purer Indian material" ("Colonial and Indian Exhibition," *Official Catalogue* 35). The message was clear: whenever the real India fell short, the British could make up the difference.

Alongside the lavish display of Indian fabrics, the 1886 exhibition included a series of models of ethnic types made from body casts, designed to display the physical diversity of the Indian empire, as well as thirty-four living "native artisans"—including carpet weavers and calico printers, coppersmiths, engravers, goldsmiths, potters, and woodcarvers—selected as living embodiments of craft industry (Mathur 52-79). As Tim Barringer has noted, the presentation of these craftsmen was essentially theatrical, and, unlike other exoticized ethnological spectacles of the period, it was the simulated work of the carpet weavers at their loom that constituted the central performance (300-01). The idealization of craft labor was designed to affirm the perspective outlined in Birdwood's influential guide to *The Industrial Arts of India*, originally rushed out for the opening of South Kensington's new Indian galleries in 1880. "In India," Birdwood had written, "everything is hand wrought, and everything, down to the cheapest toy or earthen vessel, is therefore more or less a work of art." The spirit of art was dormant, waiting to be "quickened into operation" (*Industrial Arts* 131). The goal of British policy had to be the preservation of the crafts of India against modernization itself, a paradox that was embodied both in the 1886 exhibition and in Purdon Clarke's collecting expeditions that preceded it.

Just as Forbes Watson was criticized by his successors for his inexperienced and unsystematic approach to the Indian collections, so too were Purdon Clarke and his colleague Birdwood subsequently portrayed as conservatives. John Irwin has thus described Purdon Clarke's purchases in India as "an odd assortment of objects consisting mostly of contempo-

rary handicrafts bought hurriedly and in bulk” (7), while Craig Clunas notes that his commitment to the retention of a distinct Indian section within the structure of the Victoria and Albert Museum reflects the enduring significance of India within the British imperial imagination (424). Purdon Clarke was admired in his day as an effective director who recognized the need for reorganization of the internal structure of the museum. In view of his role in the 1886 exhibition, and his attunement to the market for Oriental taste in architecture and design, he might also be described as a stage manager for high imperial spectacle. By the time Purdon Clarke assumed the role of director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the irreverent Roger Fry could describe him as “the most lovely example of mid-Victorian taste that ever was made. He ought to be preserved in a glass case in our Museum with a label ‘circa 1850’” (rpt. in Sutton 273).

The Mobile Museum: Text and Textiles

This paper has highlighted the different forms that a “collection” of Indian textiles may take, from the abstract patterns on the pages of *The Grammar of Ornament*, through the sample albums produced by Forbes Watson, to the imperial spectacles orchestrated by Purdon Clarke. Forbes Watson’s portable museum was not in fact the only way in which textiles were “cut up” for display. Owen Jones, for example, abstracted pattern from cloth (as also from stone, metal, or wood) in order to characterize and situate “Indian” design. And while Purdon Clarke retained the form of textiles as dress or decoration, exploiting their sensuous qualities in spectacular displays, his well-choreographed exhibitions cut out of the picture the harsh economic realities of textile manufacturing in late-Victorian India in the interest of presenting a purely traditional aesthetic.

In highlighting the material forms of these collections, we hope to have restored to the center of discussion some of the qualities of the materials themselves: the cloth, cut up or whole, rich or plain, presented certain possibilities and challenges for those like Forbes Watson who sought to create an epitome of the diverse historical geography of Indian textiles. In this respect, the three models we have examined here—textiles as patterns, specimens, or stage set—have their counterparts in other fields, perhaps most notably the world of nineteenth-century botany. Here too the plants of the natural world were arranged and classified on the basis of comparable models: firstly, drawing, which neces-

sarily selected for form and pattern—in a word, morphology; secondly, specimens, the actual plant material collected, cut, dried, packaged, and stored in a herbarium; and, thirdly, botanic gardens, where plants could be grown in the soil and arranged together in settings designed to simulate particular climatic and topographical conditions. These different versions of what constituted the essential features of a plant—or a textile—were associated with different and sometimes competing varieties of expertise and training, as well as different kinds of visual display. Moreover, the connections between the collection of textiles and plants were more than simply metaphorical: there were more direct entanglements between the two, as for example in Christopher Dresser's botanical drawings for *The Grammar of Ornament*, or indeed in Forbes Watson's appointment under what the *Morning Post* dubbed "the somewhat ineuphonious but sufficiently indicative title of 'Reporter on the products of India'" (qtd. in Forbes Watson, *Textile Manufactures* [1868] 10).

In her influential account of the aesthetics and politics of the collecting of India at nineteenth-century world's fairs, Carol Breckenridge makes the point that objects on display "do not provide their own narrative": they must, she says, be "textualised," through accompanying narratives and other textual forms, locating the object world in the fields of history, ethnography, archaeology, art, and the sciences (205). The development of frameworks of interpretation, education, and expertise—and, eventually, the formation of disciplinary knowledges—is clearly an integral part of the history of such collections. However, as Breckenridge highlights, citing the example of the photographic studio of William Griggs (who produced many of the prints illustrating Forbes Watson's works), the circulation of such knowledge depended on the development of highly technical, applied forms of expertise. If this is "textualisation," it is a process which is clearly achieved by technical work and through the production of images as well as language. It also involves the mobilization of objects—whether in the form of individual artifacts, "portable museums," or books themselves—as effective, though not immutable, instruments of pedagogy and authority. The impact of works like *The Grammar of Ornament* or *The Textile Manufactures and Costumes of India* depended heavily on new techniques of illustration, notably techniques of color photolithography, such as that developed by William Griggs under Forbes Watson's supervision within the India Office and later in studios in Peckham. Griggs lectured on his new technique at a meeting of the London Photographic Society in 1868, using examples from the India

Museum collections; according to one report, his prints showed “all the glowing colours of the Eastern designs” (Brown). He went on to produce the illustrated *Journal of Indian Art and Industry*, appearing quarterly from 1884, which quickly became an authoritative source of European knowledge about Indian craft design: yet another instance of the museum on the move. But such translations from one form of collection to another were never unproblematic. Indeed, there were those who held that even the most skilled printer was unable to reproduce the textures and colors of the more elaborate fabrics; “sufficient proof,” as George Birdwood put it, “of the impossibility of reproducing the subtle, mobile harmonies of Indian textiles even by the highest skill yet obtained in the chromolithographer’s mechanical art” (Desmond 100).

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NOTES

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¹See also Barringer 258–65.

²A full evaluation of the commercial impact of the Forbes Watson volumes is a complex task that lies beyond the scope of this paper. See Swallow.

³See Desmond 129–89; Skelton.

⁴High on his agenda was the improvement of Indian silk so that it could compete, especially against China, in a world market. See King, *Silk and Empire* 130–32; Wardle, *Handbook*.

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