

insist on the concept of cultural heritage, whereas the foreword and the last article—both by the anthropologist Christoph Wulff—claim that nature and culture in an age of the Anthropocene cannot be separated any longer.

The geographical approach might also be questioned. Most articles relate to Jordan, some relate to what is denoted the Near East, West Asia, the Orient, the Middle East, the Levant or MENA (Middle East and North Africa), Israel for some reason is almost totally absent and there are individual articles related to Greece, Portugal, Romania, Switzerland, Mexico and Japan. Perhaps a greater focus on solely the Middle East or MENA would have been more meaningful, regardless of the quality of the other contributions.

The volume of *Cultural Heritage* is in itself a monument; but, while one has to recognise the effort taken to create it, this monument should be used diligently and with a questioning approach.

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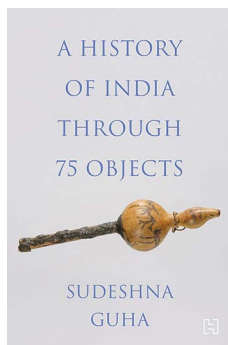
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ANTIQUITY 2024 Vol. 98 (397): 272–274

<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.195>

SUDESHNA GUHA. 2022. *A history of India through 75 objects*. Gurugram: Hachette India; 978-93-5009-902-5 hardback £40.03.



With her experience as archaeologist and historian, curator and professor in both the UK and India, Sudeshna Guha is well qualified to present the many historical ramifications she elicits from her selection of remarkably diverse objects. The number seventy-five was selected because it is the number of years between India's independence and 2022, when the book was published. As the image on the cover of the volume suggests, this book is not a survey of archaeological artefacts or highlights from the art historical cannon, though she includes examples of both. Guha also discusses obscure objects that connect to significant events or ongoing sociopolitical issues confronting marginalised people. The gourd-and-bamboo flute on the cover, for example, leads Guha to explain how the Chenchu people of the south-central state Telangana have been evicted from their ancestral forests by wildlife-protection laws in the decades after an Austrian ethnographer acquired it while studying them in 1940. With such an exciting range of objects and the often surprising directions in which their stories unfold, the reader is eager to discover what the author has chosen next and what she has to say about it.

Each well-researched essay is substantial (approximately 2000 words) and illuminates the time when an object was made, provides insights into how the object was received over the course of its lifetime and reveals related social implications for the people with whom it came in contact. The book flows chronologically from the palaeolithic to 2019 unbroken

by thematic sectioning, thus reflecting a running theme: that history should be free from constructed categories or periodisation. The writing is pitched to a general readership, though a basic knowledge of India is presupposed—there is no map or glossary. The author has made a valiant attempt to include an object that pertains to every region, religion, foreign interaction and major social issue, so it is hard to identify a critical lacuna. Provocative and unpredictable in content, most essays end with an admonition to further reflect on how we might be more aware of the prejudices, injustices and entrenched colonial assumptions that may influence our understanding of India's histories. Overall, Guha presents the material through the lens of her personal values. She praises made-in-India movements, decries heritagisation schemes in support of political agendas and she revels in moments when people of different religions, nationalities and castes co-exist peacefully.

Guha queries the conditions that led to identifying objects without sufficient evidence, showing how incorrectly imagined identities remain embedded up to the present day. In the case of the small bronze sculpture from Mohenjodaro, she examines the colonial cultural milieu of the 1920s when the excavation report by John Marshall (1876–1958) first identified the figure as a dancing girl (Marshall 1931). Guha notes that seeing the image as a dancer was symptomatic of the British colonial obsession with the Indian *nautch* (dance), implying that the identification derives from a prurient, oppressive male gaze. Indeed, she continues, there is as much—i.e. very little—cause to identify the image as a warrior, citing a recent suggestion by Naman Ahuja (Gohse 2017). Guha does not explore the figurine in relation to other Indus Valley objects depicting similar female figures that could provide yet other identifications such as, for example, a follower of a nature goddess. Instead, she brings the discussion to the present, drawing attention to the way the agents of the post-colonial nation of India have ironically perpetuated the colonial-era identification, heritagising and souvenirising the figurine's image in the service of a new religious nationalism.

The essays do not focus directly on the objects themselves. The modest-quality illustrations by, often, amateur photographers do not present them in their best light, indicating that it is not so important to see them well. The objects largely function as a springboard leading to discussions of salient socio-anthropological issues (e.g. sati, caste, contested land), complex interactions between diverse groups (e.g. spies, refugees, slaves), and little-known episodes pertaining to India in a wide variety of ways. The author's occasional deviations from her own rule—of avoiding erroneous classifications and identifications based on lack of evidence—pertain to issues that typically fall within the purview of the art historian. Her dating and identification of the monumental standing female figure from Didarganj as a *yakshi* “possibly holding a flywhisk” (p.67) of approximately the first century BC to first century AD places faith in one side of an ongoing art historical debate. In the essay on the sculpture of Kanishka from Mathura, the foreign Kushan kings are credited with creating the “resplendence of a city” (p.92) thereby perpetuating the dynastic periodisation that Guha so earnestly attempts to break down. She confidently identifies the flower on a Mughal jade cup as a lotus, when it is probably a poppy that would imply its use for drinking opium rather than wine, which would have provided the opportunity to comment on a history of addiction and the opium trade. Rather than—like those she criticises—historicising the unknowable or uncertain through the “imposition of our classificatory schemes” (p.49), readers might prefer that she more consistently embraces “establishing the materiality of enigma” (p.55).

Although following a similar format, this volume stands apart from other recent histories told through a number of objects. In contrast to the urtext of the genre, Neil MacGregor's *History of the world in 100 objects* (2011), Guha's book is more serious, thought-provoking and not limited to objects in one collection, though it draws disproportionately from the two institutions where she worked: the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge and the National Museum in New Delhi. It recalls Sunil Khilnani's *Incarnations: a history of India in 50 lives* (2016) but with objects' biographies rather than those of individuals. *The Middle Ages in 50 objects* (Gertsman & Rosenwein 2018), limited by temporal rather than geographical parameters, benefits from its collaboration between a historian and art historian; and *India: a story through 100 objects* (Dehejia 2022) has shorter, more descriptive essays with equal space dedicated to glossy illustrations that include details, related images and sites. Most recently, *Himalayan art in 108 objects* (Pakhoutova & Debreczeny 2023), a much larger and weightier tome, foregrounds a pedagogical intent. The strength of Guha's *History of India through 75 objects* lies in her uncovering and critiquing the contexts and work of people behind their creation, discovery, and reuse as well as the imposition of meanings and the attendant implications, especially for underserved populations.

The author's impressive attempt to present many histories from multiple perspectives resonates with her praise of the powerless ruler Serfoji II Bhonsle (1777–1832). He was a devout Hindu who embraced the study of European sciences and literature with Danish, German and British missionaries and officers. Eschewing tyranny, he used his position of privilege to create a “tradition of vitalism” nurtured through collecting practices that harnessed visual histories of objects and built upon networks of social connections that the objects facilitated. Guha has similarly engendered a vital contribution to the new genre of writing of histories through objects in her ambitious collection of essays.

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