

V&A Archive Research Guide

India Museum and Indian objects

V&A

Background

The V&A's Indian collection has its origins in the East India Company's India Museum, founded in 1798 as the Oriental Repository. The India Museum was housed first on the premises of the East India Company on Leadenhall Street, London. When the East India Company was dissolved in 1858 the Secretary of State for India took over the Museum, which was moved to Fife House in Whitehall. In 1879 the collections were divided between the South Kensington Museum, which had been acquiring Indian art since the 1851 Great Exhibition, the British Museum, National History Museum and the Royal Botanical Gardens.



The new India Museum in South Kensington was formally opened in 1880; it retained its name through popular usage, despite being officially designated the Indian Section of the South Kensington Museum in 1879 (it was not until 1945 that the term India Museum was completely abolished). The Museum occupied the Eastern Galleries, a total of nine rooms, and a landing of the Cross Gallery, located on the west side of Exhibition Road, South Kensington.

In 1908 the V&A's Committee of Re-Arrangement recommended that the India Museum should be integrated with the V&A's main galleries. A press campaign, however, and the intervention of Lord Curzon (former Viceroy of India) ensured the India Museum remained where it was until the 1950s. Only when Imperial College was expanded and the buildings housing the India Museum were demolished was the Museum moved to the main site.

Administration

Please note that the records of the India Office, which include the archives of the East India Company (1600–1858), the Board of Control or Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India (1784–1858), the India Office (1858–1947), are held at the British Library.

The following files in the V&A Archive relate to the establishment and administration of the India Museum/Section at South Kensington:

- VA 170: India Museum – General. Part 1: 1874–86 (index); Part 2: 1876–79; Part 3: 1880; Part 4: 1881–84; Part 5: 1885–89; Part 6: 1890–95; Part 7: 1896–1904; Part 8: 1908–09; Part 9: 1908–09; Part 10: 1909; Part 11: 1910; Part 12: 1911; Part 13: 1912–18; Part 14: 1919–37; Part 15: 1938–45; Part 16: 1945–49; Part 17: 1947–59; Part 18: 1956–58; Part 19: 1959–63; Part 20: 1960–79; Part 21: 1980–87
- Early files include papers relating to the employment of Caspar Purdon-Clarke as special advisor in arranging the Indian collections; employment of Dr Birdwood as Professional Referee for the India Museum; lists of loans transferred from the India Museum to the South Kensington Museum; and general administrative papers relating to the management of the collection.
- Copy of the resolution or resolutions of the Secretary of State for India in Council respecting the transfer of the Indian Museum to South Kensington, with the opinions of the Members of Council recorded thereon, 1876
ED 84/8/10
- Notes and Report of subcommittee on the Indian Collections, 1913
ED 84/106/6
- Sub-committee on reconstruction and re-arrangement, 1937–44, includes notes on the organisation of the Indian Collections in London
ED 84/276
- Records of the Director, comprising correspondence files relating to the Indian & SE Asian Department, 1972–95
A0140
- Obituary for and correspondence with Kenneth de Burgh Codrington (Keeper of Indian Section), 1924–86
A0373
- Papers relating to former keepers of Indian Section: WG Archer, Kenneth de Burgh Codrington, Robert Skelton and John Irwin, 1958–94
A0419
- Minutes of the Committee of Re-arrangement with memoranda, reports and associated papers, 1908
ED 84/45
- Boards of Survey files, 1919–70 [recording disposals of objects from the India Section]
MA/50/2/42-45
- College of Keepers' records: India Section report, 1983 MA/47/2/11
- Annual Reports of the Science and Art Department (1880-99): the 27th Annual Report gives the background to the transfer of more than 19,000 Indian objects to the South Kensington Museum

Acquisitions

A sequence of special files documents the acquisition of Indian objects and casts of objects for the South Kensington Museum:



- India Museum (Mr C. Purdon-Clarke's visit to & purchases in India), 1880–83 [MA/2/I1/1](#)
- India Museum (Mr C. Purdon-Clarke's visit to & purchases in India), 1881–83 [MA/2/I1/2](#)
- India Museum (Mr C. Purdon-Clarke's visit to & purchases in India), 1882–91 [MA/2/I1/3](#)
- India Museum (donations & loans), 1851–69 [MA/2/I2/1](#)
- India Museum (donations & loans), 1870–79 [MA/2/I2/2](#)
- Indian architecture, casts of important structures, 1867–76 [MA/2/I3](#)
- Gwalior Gateway, 1883–1934 [MA/2/G10](#)

The V&A Archive may also hold correspondence (nominal) files for individuals or institutions from which the V&A acquired Indian objects (e.g. MA/1/R1875: Royal Asiatic Society). Please enquire with a member of staff. Note that there are unlikely to be records documenting the provenance of objects prior to their

acquisition by the India Museum, although there are lists of lenders in VA 170 Part 3 whose objects may subsequently have been absorbed within the V&A's collections.

Object-numbering systems used in the Indian Collections

Year of acquisition	Numbering system in use (examples)	
1851–79	851-1871	[Art Museum numbers; no prefix]
1880	45-1880	[no prefix]
[Three non-interchangeable systems]	IS.27-1880	
	05610 (IS)	[no year added]
1881–1902	950-1886	[no prefix]
1903–08	18-1903	[no prefix]
1909–44	IM.107-1942	
1945–	IS.147-1975	

Central Inventories

The Central Inventory registers (ref. MA/30) in the V&A Archive record information about objects acquired since 1843. The volumes covering the period 1843 to 1863 have few manuscript entries but usually contain the original printed object label, which sometimes gives the name of the donor or vendor, and the registration or object number; they rarely include cross references to acquisition correspondence (registered papers). Between 1864 and 1908 the information recorded includes: description of the object (including any revisions), price, registered number, condition, source of acquisition, date of receipt from the Museum stores, authority for purchase, accidents and general remarks, and in many cases a reference to registered papers. In 1909 a new format for recording details about objects was also introduced, which reduced significantly the level of description accorded to the objects.

There are two central inventory registers that concern specifically Indian Museum objects up to 1908:

- Inventory of the Collection of Examples of Indian Art and Manufactures transferred to the South Kensington Museum (1880) – Central Inventory copy A0615

This inventory records the collection of examples of Indian Art and Manufactures which was handed over by the India Office to the Science and Art Department of the Committee of Council on Education in November 1879.

Two series of numbers were used: one from 1 upwards, the other from 01 upwards. These series respectively mount up to 9,823 and 09,405, giving a total of 19,228 objects. The numbers originally assigned by the India Museum to many of the object have been inserted in the right-hand margin of the Inventory. Also included is: 1) an index showing India Office Museum numbers with their HMC (Her Majesty's Commissioners for the 1851 Exhibition) equivalents, and 2) an index to lenders and donors whose objects are in the Indian inventory.

This volume has been annotated with the registered paper numbers of objects that have been written off or transferred to other Museums or V&A departments.

- Central Inventory – Indian Museum – 1851 to 1908 – Central Inventory copy A0615

This inventory includes all the objects of Indian or allied origin, acquired by and for the South Kensington Museum, which were allotted to the Indian Museum when the Victoria and Albert Museum was divided

into Departments as from the 1st January 1909. All objects in the Inventory are Indian, and 19th century, unless otherwise specified.

This volume has been annotated with the registered paper numbers of objects that have been written off or transferred to other Museums or V&A departments.

Photographs of Indian objects

The V&A Archive holds about 900 guardbooks containing historical photographs of objects in the Museum's collections. These are arranged by negative number in broadly chronological order. If you know the Museum object number or the source of acquisition, archive staff can check the guardbook indexes for a negative number.

The Asia department holds black and white photographs of a large proportion of objects in the Indian collections arranged in Museum number order. For further information, contact asia.enquiries@vam.ac.uk

Increasingly photographs of objects are being added to the V&A's [Explore the Collections](#) site.

Photographs of Indian galleries and displays in the photographic guardbooks

- Negs. 37480 to 37481 Colonnade in Room 2 Indian Gallery, 1914
- Negs. 75189 to 75191 Indian Museum including the Mugal Room, 1936
- Neg. 76213 East India Company. View of in Room 5, 1937
- Negs. 76214 to 76216 Indian Museum, 1937
- Negs. F 443 to F 454 Indian Exhibition, 1948

Photographs of Indian scenes in the photographic guardbooks

- Negs. 11487 to 11616 India in the 1880s
- Negs. 11632 to 11633 Indian tea plantation
- Negs. 11635 to 11648 Tea in India
- Negs. 11718 to 11737 Photographs of India
- Negs. 53535 to 53547 Photographs of frescoes and sculptures at Ajanta and Elora India
- Negs. 55244 to 55247 The Great Stupa, Bhopal State
- Neg. 76753 Ancient India - Sanchi Stupa
- Negs. 80125 to 80129 Lucknow and Caunpore, 1857
- Neg. HC 4046 Delhi Railway Bridge over River

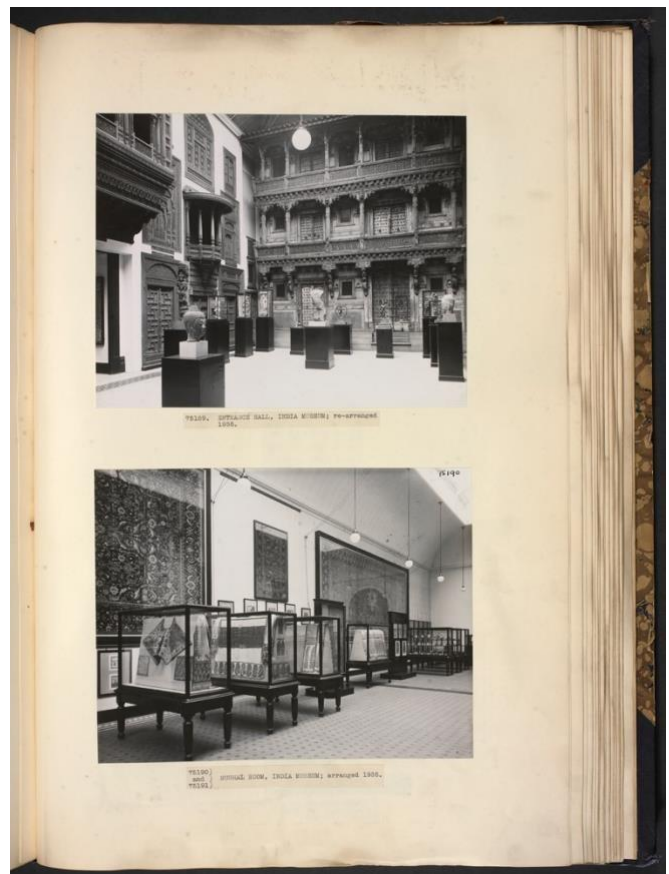
Records of the Colonial and Indian exhibition (1886)

The V&A Archive holds the following files:

- London: Colonial & Indian exhibition, 1886: general correspondence 1885–87 [MA/35/98](#)
- Press cuttings A0463

National Art Library

- *Collection of documents relating to the Colonial and Indian Exhibition held in London in 1886*: consists of official documents, copies of letters, memoranda, stationery, and press cuttings collected in a contemporary account book. [NAL Pressmark: SH.99.0023](#)
- *Official catalogue / Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886*. London: William Clowes and Sons, 1886. [NAL Pressmark: A.45.14](#)
- Royle, J. R. *Report on the Indian Section of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition 1886*. London: William Clowes & Sons, 1887



The National Archives, Kew

- General Plan of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, London, 1886 [CO 700/MISCELLANEOUS12](#)
- Commissions & Committees: Royal Commission for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886 [HO 45/9649/A37422](#)
- Commissions & Committees: Royal Commission for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886 [HO 45/9649/A37422B](#)
- Lord Chamberlain's Department: Miscellaneous Records. Programmes, Forms, Notes and Memoranda. Opening Ceremonies. Colonial and Indian Exhibition [LC 5/259](#)

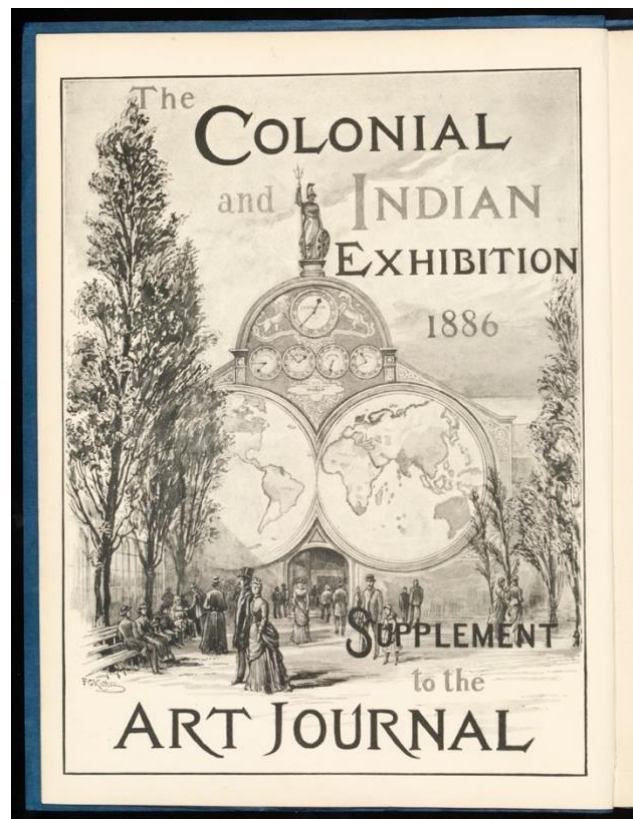
Other archive sources relating to the India Museum

British Library, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections:

- Copies of documents, papers and correspondence collected by Ray Desmond for writing his book on 'The India Museum 1801–1879' (London 1982), 1798–1979
Mss Eur F195
- Papers concerning the India Museum and its collections, and the site of the India Office, 1836–1878 IOR/H/787

The National Archives:

- Treasury: Treasury Board Papers and InLetters. Science and Art Department: India Museum: proposed removal of collection to South Kensington Museum; cost of custody, 1879
T 1/17026



Select bibliography

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- Stronge, S. *Painting for the Mughal Emperor: The Art of the Book 1560 – 1660*. London: V&A Publications, 2002. NAL pressmark: 603.AC.0823

Access to the V&A Archive

You can search the catalogue of the V&A Archive [online](#).

Access to the V&A Archive is available by appointment on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 11.00–16.30 in the National Art Library at the V&A. We recommend providing a minimum of two weeks' notice when booking your appointment.

If you have any questions about the V&A Archive or would like to make an appointment to see material in the archive, please [contact us](#).

Images

New Indian Section, South Kensington Museum; from Illustrated London News, May 1880. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

William Simpson, The Sanchi tope, Tanjore, 1861. Museum no. 1162-1869. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The Entrance Hall to The Indian Museum, re-arranged in 1936. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Frontispiece – The Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, A Supplement to The Art Journal, 1886. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London