What was the India Museum?

The India Museum was founded in 1801 by the East India Company to house objects the British had brought back from India as examples of Indian art and manufacture. It was located in Leadenhall Street in the City of London.

In 1858, the East India Company lost its administrative powers, and the India Museum became the responsibility of the India Office. The collections were moved to temporary sites in Fife Street, then Cannon Row, and eventually found a permanent home in South Kensington in 1874. The Eastern Galleries (situated on the west side of Exhibition Road) were leased for 50 years in 1891 for £3,500 per annum. By 1879, the India Museum was threatened with closure because it was underused.

An excerpt from a letter from W.H. Gregory to the editor of the Times, 20th July 1879, from MA/70/1/2, V&A Archive.

How Is the India Museum Connected to the V&A?

Version 2, May 2024
In July 1879 the India Office wrote to the Science and Art Department (which administered the South Kensington Museum, the V&A’s predecessor) regarding arrangements for transferring the India Museum’s 19,228 objects to another institution. The India Office stipulated that the collection should remain together and should be exhibited to the public. The options were for the British Museum to take the objects, or for the collection to remain in the India Museum building in South Kensington, but to be curated by the South Kensington Museum, which had been acquiring Indian objects since the Great Exhibition in 1851.

The India Office decided in October 1879 that the South Kensington Museum should be responsible for the collection, as the Museum offered ‘better facilities’ for keeping the collection together, and for raising awareness of the collection. The V&A’s Indian Section was formed in 1880 to look after the objects, but the collection continued to be referred to as the India Museum until 1945, when objects were given an Indian Section (IS) prefix rather than an Indian Museum (IM) prefix. The IS prefix continues to the present day.

The India Museum remained in its separate building in South Kensington for a further 47 years. By June 1946 the India Museum building was in a bad state of repair. It was demolished in 1955 as part of the expansion of Imperial College. The India Section objects were moved to the main V&A building, where they remain a valued part of the V&A’s Asian collections.

An excerpt from a letter from the India Office to Science and Art Department, November 1879, MA/70/1/1, V&A Archive.

Bibliography

- A letter from the India Office to Science and Art Department, November 1879, MA/70/1/1.
• An internal memo dated 27th June 1946 debating the future of the Indian Museum, from MA/70/1/17.

• The British Empire Review, from MA/70/1/9.

What Material does the V&A Archive Hold?

India Museum/India Section Policy Files

MA/70

The main source of information in the V&A Archive are the policy files which relate to the establishment and administration of the India Museum/Section at South Kensington.

SERIES LEVEL DESCRIPTION: MA/70
Title = Indian and South East Asian Collection Policy Files
Extent = 45 files & 9 volumes.
Dates = 1874 - ongoing
Scope Note = Policy files related to the Indian and South East Asian Collection, including inventories, loans and general policy.
Arrangement = Chronological order by year the file was opened.

SUB-SERIES LEVEL DESCRIPTION: MA/70/1
Title = Indian and South East Asian Collection Policy and Precedent Files
Extent = 31 files
Dates = 1874 - 1989
Scope Note = General policy and precedent files - subjects include the maintenance of the galleries; damage to objects; and the hiring of staff.

SUB-SERIES LEVEL DESCRIPTION: MA/70/2
Title = Indian and South East Asian Collection Inventory and Stocktaking Files
Extent = 11 files and 9 volumes
Dates = 1879 - 1978
Scope Note = The inventory and movement of India Section objects.

SUB-SERIES LEVEL DESCRIPTION: MA/70/3
Title = Indian and South East Asian Collection Loan Files
Extent = 3 files
Dates = 1958 - 1966
Location = VAAR1/MB09/BY01 shelves 5 & 6
Scope Note = The loaning of Indian and South East Asian Collection objects to other institutions for exhibitions.

Other V&A Archive Material

1 Please note that some of the files in this series contain historical colonial language which researchers might find offensive.
ED 84/8/10: 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 84/276: Sub-committee on reconstruction and re-arrangement, 1937-1944, includes notes on the organisation of the Indian Collections in London.
A0140: Papers relating to the Indian & SE Asian Department, 1972-1995 (mainly correspondence).
A0373: Obituary for, and correspondence with, Kenneth de Burgh Codrington (Keeper of Indian Section), 1924-1986. Includes press cuttings.
ED 84/45: Minutes of the Committee of Re-arrangement with memoranda, reports and associated papers, 1908.
MA/50/2/42-45: Boards of Survey files, 1919-1970 (recording disposals of objects from the India Section).
MA/47/2/11: College of Keepers’ records: India Section report, 1983. 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.

Records of the Colonial and Indian exhibition (1886)

MA/49/1/50: One volume of press cuttings from various nineteenth century exhibitions, 1878-1886, including the Colonial and Indian exhibition.
MA/70/1/5: India Museum, General, Part 5, 1885 – 1889. Includes correspondence re the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, December 1886.

Information about Indian Section Objects

Acquisitions
A sequence of special files document the acquisition of Indian objects and casts of objects for the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A):

MA/2/I1/1: India Museum (Mr C. Purdon-Clarke’s visit to & purchases in India), 1880-1883.
MA/2/I1/2: India Museum (Mr C. Purdon-Clarke’s visit to & purchases in India), 1881-1883.
MA/2/I1/3: India Museum (Mr C. Purdon-Clarke’s visit to & purchases in India), 1882-1891.
MA/2/I2/1: India Museum (donations & loans), 1851-1869.
MA/2/I2/2: India Museum (donations & loans), 1870-1879.
MA/2/I3: Indian architecture, casts of important structures, 1867-1876.
MA/2/G10: Gwalior Gateway, 1883-1934.

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 MA/70/2 and MA/70/3 whose objects may subsequently have been absorbed within the V&A’s collections.

Central Inventories (MA/94)
The Central Inventory registers record information about objects (the name of the donor or vendor, and the date of acquisition, and sometimes a description of the object). Not all of this information is recorded for every object, and details tend to be sparse for objects acquired in the nineteenth century.

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

- **MA/94/27**: Inventory of Objects transferred from the India Museum, November 1879. This inventory records the collection of 19,228 objects which were handed over by the India Office to the Science and Art Department in November 1879. The numbers originally assigned by the India Museum to many of the objects 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.

- **MA/94/26**: Central Inventory – Indian Museum – 1851 to 1908. This inventory includes all of the objects of Indian or allied origin, acquired by and for the South Kensington Museum, which were allotted to the Indian Museum when the V&A was divided into Departments as from 1 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 Galleries and Objects (MA/32)
The V&A Archive holds ca. 900 guardbooks containing historical photographs of individual objects in the Museum’s collections, as well as gallery displays. The photographs are arranged by negative number in broadly chronological order:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Numbers</th>
<th>Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>37480 to 37481</td>
<td>Colonnade in Room 2 Indian Gallery, 1914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75189 to 75191</td>
<td>Indian Museum including the Mugal Room, 1936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76213</td>
<td>East India Company. View of Room 5, 1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76214 to 76216</td>
<td>Indian Museum, 1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F 443 to F 454</td>
<td>Indian Exhibition, 1948</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Photographs of Indian scenes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Numbers</th>
<th>Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11487 to 11616</td>
<td>India in the 1880s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11632 to 11633</td>
<td>Indian tea plantation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11635 to 11648</td>
<td>Tea in India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11718 to 11737</td>
<td>Photographs of India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53535 to 53547</td>
<td>Photographs of frescoes and sculptures at Ajanta and Elora India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55244 to 55247</td>
<td>The Great Stupa, Bhopal State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76753</td>
<td>Ancient India - Sanchi Stupa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80125 to 80129</td>
<td>Lucknow and Caunpore, 1857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HC 4046</td>
<td>Delhi Railway Bridge over River</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How do I Access the V&A Archive?

You can view archive material by appointment in the V&A’s National Art Library on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday between 11.00 and 16.30. Please email archive@vam.ac.uk with your availability, and, where possible, a list of file numbers (which can be found on our online catalogue).
Please note that there is a limit of eight files per appointment, so you might need to book more than one appointment.

We recommend providing a minimum of two weeks' notice when booking your appointment.

Contact us if you have any questions about the V&A Archive.

Is There any Related Material I Can Look At?

India Museum Tales from the Archive blog – a summary of stories found by a member of the V&A archives team while they were cataloguing MA/70.

The V&A’s National Art Library has a wealth of primary and secondary sources (including books, journals, and archives) about the India Museum, and the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition which can be requested online once you have registered for an account.

The V&A’s 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

The British Library holds:
- The archives of the East India Company.
- The papers of the Board of Control or Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India.
- India Office records.
- **IOR/H/787**: Papers concerning the India Museum and its collections, and the site of the India Office, 1836-1878.

You can search the British Library catalogue here.

The National Archives has:
- **CO 700/MISCELLANEOUS12**: General Plan of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, London, 1886
- **HO 45/9649/A37422**: Commissions & Committees: Royal Commission for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886
- **HO 45/9649/A37422B**: Commissions & Committees: Royal Commission for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886

You can search The National Archives catalogue here.