

# CONSERVATION MAKING ART HISTORY

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## CONSERVING MONUMENTS, REVIVING TEMPLES: COMMUNITIES, MONUMENTS, AND POLITICS IN SOUTH INDIA

This paper describes two voluntary organizations in South India that are involved in architectural conservation work. One is a religious foundation that sponsors the careful excavation of medieval temples; the other is an association of heritage-lovers that rebuilds ancient temples while scrupulously adhering to conservation norms. These groups value the temples they excavate and conserve for their art historical worth, but their goal is to make these neglected temples fit for worship once again. In doing this, they cross the tense boundary between two regimes that have fought to exert control over the objects of India's art history: the regime of religion, and the regime of the secular state. Time was when one could easily distinguish between Indian artifacts and monuments that had remained sacred and those that had been secularized through their "look," which in turn derived from the protocols applied to them. For things placed in the museal regime, utmost attention was paid to the preservation of physical bodies: icons were to be stripped, cleaned, and protected from touch and from sources of corrosion; temples had to be preserved in their original form without additions, alterations and coats of garish paint. An entirely different regime applied to temples under worship that could be expanded and altered to serve changing needs, while icons under worship had to be nurtured through regular lustrations and offerings of clothing and food. The two organizations studied here exemplify an emergent trend of "crossovers," acts that follow the norms and protocols of the museal regime are being applied to temples and icons—as a form of devotional care. What are the implications of the merging of the museal and the sacral in the actions of these individuals and groups? How does this phenomenon intersect with Hindutva politics of today? And what are the implications for the future of the secular domains of archaeology and art history in India? This paper offers some conjectures.

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colonial history, repatriation, secularism and religiosity, fraught national identities, and the memorialization of difficult histories as they relate to museums in South Asia and beyond. Singh has also published essays and monographs on Mughal painting, in which she explores style as a vehicle of meaning. Books include the edited and co-edited volumes *New Insights into Sikh Art* (Marg, 2003), *Influx: Contemporary Art in Asia* (Sage, 2013), *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia* (co-edited with Saloni Mathur, Routledge, 2014), and *Museum Storage and Meaning: Tales from the Crypt* (co-edited with Mirjam Brusius, Routledge 2017). Monographs include *Museums, Heritage, Culture: Into the Conflict Zone* (Amsterdam University of the Arts, 2015) and *Real Birds in Imagined Gardens: Mughal Painting Between Persia and Europe* (Getty Research Institute, 2016). She has curated exhibitions at the San Diego Museum of Art, Devi Art Foundation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and the National Museum of India.