

## **The Challenges of Loan Exhibitions in India: Experience at Victoria Memorial Hall and Indian Museum, Kolkata**

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The Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata, India (VMH), is India's most-visited museum and arguably the most important modern South Asian history museum, while the Indian Museum, Kolkata, India (IM), is the oldest museum in the Asia-Pacific region (dating back to 1814), and houses possibly the most significant collection of antiquities historically in the country. The VMH specializes in oil paintings as well as watercolours and other objects on paper. The IM collection is dominated by archaeology – statues, friezes, and other sculptural objects, as well as coins and anthropological objects.

Both these museums have been involved in the recent past in the international loan of exhibitions. VMH loaned oil paintings by Thomas and William Daniell to Rome in 2005, and hosted an exhibition of 'Kalighat Paintings' from the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2011. It is now considering a request from the National Gallery of Singapore to loan six iconic oil paintings and watercolours for the 'Artist and Empire in Singapore'. In 2014-2015 IM sent its 'Indian Buddhist Art' exhibition to Shanghai, Tokyo and Singapore.

The challenges of providing ideal climatic conditions in these two museums for objects loaned from other countries are many. Climate control is probably the aspect that has traditionally received the least attention in museums in India, though of late – as an increasing number of such museums are going in for renovations and modernization – it has started to be addressed. Some of these museums are housed in complex heritage buildings (like VMH) that are technologically difficult and financially prohibitive to climate-control entirely.

This does not mean that the difficulties of hosting loan exhibitions in India with weather-sensitive objects from major museums in the West are insurmountable. It is important to note the burgeoning interest of the Indian government in facilitating cultural ties by means of exchange exhibitions. Also, thanks to the recent spurt in international training programmes, we now have better-trained conservators in India, who are more equipped to create best possible climatic conditions in their museums for loan exhibitions from abroad.