

< Previous +

- University Collections**
- Collections Home
 - Browse All Collections
 - Makers A-Z: individuals and organisations
 - Shared My Collections
 - Sign In to My Collections

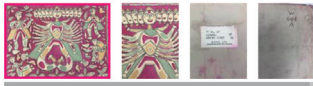
Search this collection 🔍

Advanced Search

Back



Images (4)



< 4 of 8 >

Print

Collection: [The Camberwell ILEA Collection](#)

Classification(s): Wood

Date: c.1951-1976

Medium: Paper

Object number: W608A

Place of Production: India

Title: Ravana - demons singe

- Description

Ink and watercolour print. The print depicts Ravana - a Hindu demon. Ravana is shown seated with multiple arms and heads. The print was handmade in India.

- Provenance

< Previous +

- University Collections**
- Collections Home
 - Browse All Collections
 - Makers A-Z: individuals and organisations
 - Shared My Collections
 - Sign In to My Collections

Search this collection 🔍

Advanced Search



Images (2)



Photograph

Collection: [Camberwell Inner London Education Authority \(ILEA\)](#)

Classification(s): Photograph

Date: c. 1951-1976

Dimensions: 248 × 198 mm (24.8 × 19.8 cm)

Medium: Black and white photographic print

Object number: IA_057

See Also

[Archive Material](#)

Place of Production: London, England

Title: Pop Folk Modern

+ Description

+ Provenance

1 of 1

< Previous +

- University Collections**
- Collections Home
 - Browse All Collections
 - Makers A-Z: individuals and organisations
 - Shared My Collections
 - Sign In to My Collections

Search this collection 🔍

Advanced Search

Back



Images (2)



Textile elephant

Collection: [Camberwell Inner London Education Authority \(ILEA\)](#)

Classification(s): Textile

Date: c. 1951-1976

Object number: T3001

See Also

[Craft](#) [Textiles](#) [Animals](#)

[Non-European Material](#) [Toys](#)

Place of Production: Nepal

- Description

Stuffed textile patchwork elephant with embroidery to the body, made in Nepal. The maker is unknown.

+ Provenance

→ Fig. 1

→ Fig. 1

Deniz Sözen, *Maker Unknown* (2023), collage of screenshots of the Camberwell ILEA Collection, Collection photography © University of the Arts London. Photo: Ben Mullins and Julia Parks.

I

The Decolonising Archives programme is a partnership of the Decolonising Arts Institute with University of the Arts (UAL) Library, Archives and Special Collections. It aims to explore institutional histories, memories and what it means to decolonise the university from within. See <https://www.arts.ac.uk/ual-decolonising-arts-institute> [last access: 20.06.2024]

MAKER UNKNOWN—DECOLONIAL METHODOLOGIES FOR DIGITAL ARCHIVAL PRACTICE

Deniz Sözen and Vayu Naidu

“Stuffed textile patchwork elephant with embroidery to the body, made in Nepal. The maker is unknown.” (T3001)

“Ink and watercolour print. The print depicts Ravana—a Hindu demon. Ravana is shown seated with multiple arms and heads. The print was handmade in India.” (W608A)

“Hand-carved wooden block for printing. The hand block has a fine geometric pattern with a border to the top and bottom. There is a handle to the reverse. There are five hollow tunnels running the length of the hand block. Possibly Indian. The maker is unknown.” (W596)

The quotes above are taken from the online catalogue entries for objects which form part of The Camberwell ILEA’s collection of non-European material. This historic collection was founded in 1951 upon a joint initiative by the Council of Industrial Design and the London County Council. The collection served a pedagogical purpose and was meant “to teach children the principles of ‘good design’ through the study of objects and materials.” (University of the Arts London). It was managed by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and became known as *The Circulating Design Scheme*, which operated until the mid-1970s. The collection is now housed at the Camberwell College of Arts at the University of the Arts London (UAL).

My first encounter with this collection dates back to 2021, when I conducted research for a project proposal for the Decolonising Archives residency at the Decolonising Arts Institute at UAL.¹ The recurring reference to the maker’s “unknowability” in the catalogue entries for the non-European collection signaled a gap or possible omission in the archive, raising questions regarding circumstances of the objects’ acquisition, and provenance history. If the archive was to be conceived as “a space of pure knowledge” (Voss/Werner 1999, i), then this element of the unknown exemplified the link between power and knowledge in the imperialist practice of archiving (Stoler 2002; Ghaddar/Caswell 2019). This marginalization of non-European histories of making and the lack of provenance records exposed the archive as “an ideologically charged space” (Voss/Werner 1999, i) and a tool of colonial dominance—in this case of the British rule in India or

Deniz Sözen, Vayu Naidu, *Maker Unknown—Decolonial Methodologies for Digital Archival Practice*, in: Amalia Barboza, Mariel Rodriguez (ed.), *Umwege / Detour. Künstlerische Wissenspraktiken als dekoloniale Strategien / Artistic Knowledge Practices as Decolonial Strategies*, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net 2025, pp.54-63, <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthisoricum.1588.c22904>

what is considered to be South Asia. What had led to this lack of information on a collection of objects which were dislocated from their original contexts to be handled by school children in post-colonial Britain? What stories were embedded in the “making” and “handling” of these objects? How come non-European artefacts were classified as “folk art”, as opposed to Western artefacts showcased as examples of “modern art”?

Departing from these questions, the project *Maker Unknown* aimed to explore gaps and blind spots in the collection history, and in the categorization and provenance of non-European objects through a digital archival exhibition. While the initial project was not selected for the Decolonising Archives residency, I was later able to secure funding from the Arts Council England to realize *Maker Unknown* as a multilingual online archival exhibition, with in-kind support from the collections’ archivists, yet independent from UAL. Realized in collaboration with storyteller-author Vayu Naidu and artist-researcher Mukul Patel, *Maker Unknown* proposes to reimagine the Camberwell (ILEA) collection of non-European artefacts by exploring “archival silences”, such as the lack of information regarding provenance to address the legacy of empire through object-based stories in English, North- and South-Indic languages.²

Maker Unknown explores the potential of “critical fabulation”, multilingualism and oral storytelling in the digital realm as a decolonial methodology to intervene in existing archives and collections of non-European objects. To what extent can the objects of this collection—which embody the history of empire, such as a textile elephant or saree fabric from India,—be considered as “agents of diaspora” (Peffer 2005) connecting dispersed people with their cultural heritage? What is the potential of multilingual storytelling, digital assets and sound to re-imagine the archive as an educational tool in the digital sphere?

Maker Unknown departs from the premise that the legacy of the British empire and colonialism forms an integral part of European history; a history which is represented and embodied by non-European objects in various archives and museum collections in the UK and on the continent. Eurocentric attitudes and narratives prevalent in these collections tend to extend into the virtual sphere, evident in binary classifications (“folk art” versus “modern art”, “craft” versus “fine art”) on which I am going to expand on further below and the taxonomy of the archive in the Camberwell ILEA collection’s online catalogue. In contrast, our approach to the archive is inspired by Stuart Hall who does not emphasize the archive’s classificatory, taxonomic logic, but instead celebrates it as a “living” institution that is by definition incomplete and open to the future (2001, 92).

Maker Unknown does not attempt to close any gaps in knowledge; on the contrary—it aims to explore the potential of “critical fabulation” (Hartman 2008) as a critical engagement with the archive, put in practice by speculating about the objects’ memory and biography. The selection of objects ranging from a “stuffed textile patchwork elephant with embroidery to the body”, an “ink and watercolor print of Ravanna—a Hindu demon”,

to a “decorative tiger on stand made of plaster”, speak in the first-person, in short fictional vignettes, written and narrated by Vayu Naidu and translated in eight languages. Inaccessible, silenced voices of the past, come alive to tell stories of what has been left out of the archive. The following fable, conceived in response to the “stuffed textile patchwork elephant” or object “T300I”, exemplifies this method:

My name is *Haathi*, and I am also a *saathi*—friend and companion. When I was made there were a few Maharajas left. There were emperors who looked after me better than their wives and wrote poetry to me. Memorable as animal and now I am an object, *haathi*, as a toymaker’s joy. With a hand embroidered mirror blanket and headdress in bright desert colours, *haathi* bridges the idea of transport as it is a carrier, an animal worshipped as Ganesha to remove obstacles particularly in travel, with its vegetarianism to bring peace. Between 1951-1976, elephants for makers’ markets were ceremonial—at temples, or state occasions. To have a “mobile” *haathi*, both as a toy and as a memory of decorative embroidery from Rajasthan or Kutch filled the shops. Elephants in the south carried logs of wood from forests for building and participated in temple rituals. Makers were unknown, but the gaze of the one who bought me was of India’s grandeur. This changed.

In 1971 the film *Haathi mere Saathi* was the biggest Indian box office hit with south Indian director MA Thirumugam and Bombay star Rajesh Khanna telling the story of an orphan rescued by elephants. This *haathi* carries many associations of loyalty, livelihood and majesty. Do popular events influence makers and collectors? (Vayu Naidu; fable for “T300I”)

Reflecting on their potential function as toys, the storyteller’s narrative evokes the ethos of the maker transporting the viewer to the era when these objects may have been made. The elephant doll “speaks” through the storyteller’s first-person narrative, reminiscing about the object’s cultural heritage. The narrative gives rise to multi-layered meanings, opening up a new set of questions. Resonant of Hartman’s method of “critical fabulation” *Maker Unknown* works with and against the archive, marked by “the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure” (Hartman 2008, 2). Crucially, the fable is not a precise representation of facts relating to the object’s and its unknown maker’s history. Vayu Naidu describes the creative process and the storyteller’s artistic sensibility as follows:

The storyteller’s realm is visual and virtual. Hence the digital sphere, as orality, is a voyage that is fluid in the contemporary moment; not primitive and past as is assumed in regard to the notion of “folkart”. Synesthetic properties of the objects signified by touch and their haptic quality; the objects’ variations of color, weight, size, texture, immediately stimulated my memory of travel and research in rural workshops where the objects would have been created. I select the embroidered elephant toy I can hold in both hands. As a storyteller who is trained in the oral tradition, I close my eyes for inner visualization. Nothing mystical. It is the pure science of the imagination when time, space, and cause refer to the object and its maker. The stories are composed and



→ Fig. 2

→ Fig. 2

Deniz Sözen, Collage *Maker Unknown* (2023), collage, making of images by Deniz Sözen and Collection photography © University of the Arts London, archive photographs, Photo: Harold King (Photography) Ltd. Courtesy of the authors.

3

Fable as a narrative device, has evolved in the oral storytelling tradition for non-literate societies and as written texts over time. The subversion of power is a seminal element in a fable particularly in feudal societies. With humour, the oppressed are able to trick the oppressor through a fable about how for instance the rabbit was able to trick the tyrant lion and bring freedom to the forest. (*The Rabbit and the Lion* is a fable that was part of the Panchatantra and Indian text of fables that travelled by word of mouth and is a story integrated in Aesops and *The Animals of Bremen*. These fables were also to teach princes in India about statecraft and strategy.) It was a way to illustrate that status and might are not the only tools to survival and harmony. The fable diversified and gained status as social and political satire and with irony has become integral to stand up comedy. In this sense it has currency for our times as well.

improvised in the telling. The storyteller's imagination is visually active in creating while also "reporting" in the moment of composition to a live audience.

I use fable—a powerful storyteller's device. The fable is a world-wide and intercultural trope that integrated all sentient forms: animal and human, even landscape. It afforded license for the storyteller to put out a message that could be radical. The fable has been used as a "safe" creative space to argue, critique, and satirize the views on social phenomenon as dangerous or oppressive as dictated by tyrants or foolish masters already in feudal times. It continues to have currency now.³

Through the Asian subcontinent, the elephant is held in reverence. Its memory, powerful and graceful gait has influenced architecture, sport, pageantry and poetry. In Hindu mythology the elephant transformed into a god: Ganesha is an amanuensis for Mahabharata. From the 1950s on, with India becoming a republic, elephants lost their royal households but were still used in state processions. The 1950s–1970 was a period of "cottage industry" featuring hand loom and artisan crafts that had ornate subjects—of elephants, horses, camels decorated with royal livery to satisfy tourism with the image of India as "exotic" consisting of pageantry and procession. These hand-held toys depicted that era. The maker too cannot let go of the legacy of an intercultural and intracultural colonial memory. Indian arts and textile crafts have historically adapted to European colonial markets from the 1500s, such as the Portuguese, Dutch, English (Crill 2014). These colonial memories are embodied in the artefact of the elephant and its regional variations, becoming popular within tourists and markets across India.

Taking as a departing point the popular film *Haathi mere Saathi* ("Elephant is my sole companion"), I include in my fable the maker's awareness of an essential quality of the elephant. The song accompanying the film lives in the collective Indian memory of cinema, it was broadcast from every tea kiosk, and wedding pageant. It is a pervading ethos that is captured in the maker. The specificity of the object's craft is present in the choice of materials. The use of embroidery and mirror work—what is the trend of the time –, could be from a village in Rajasthan, but the style could also be from makers in Nepal. The style is iconic of a tourist market. In the home-workshops of the period, the elephants are crafted with members of extended family specializing in doing the body part and passed on for embellishments. It is done as an artisanal approach and in a series for festivals. It plays on an idolized value that the object and its craft must be of greater value than the individuality of the maker. The philosophy of Indian craft making is founded on creativity and its product having a spiritual impetus. Following commissions by royalty and the rise of commercial markets, a part of the shared artisanal process accepts the anonymity of the maker. As these traditional arts are passed across generations, the named family achieves recognition, not the individual. With the development of tourism and the introduction of this objects into markets, the maker becomes subservient to the middleman who markets the goods.



→ Fig. 3

→ Fig. 3

Deniz Sözen, Collage *Maker Unknown* (2023), collage, making of images by Deniz Sözen and Collection photography © University of the Arts London, Photo: Ben Mullins and Julia Parks, archive photographs © Harold King (Photography) Ltd. Courtesy of the authors.

4

Inspired by Édouard Glissant, we use the term “imaginary” in the sense of “the collective unconscious, the way we see and feel the world” (Diawara 2010).

Oral traditions are performative. As a storyteller I flex the form, to create a portrait of the science of society; a chemistry of consequences taking place by reactions to circumstances created by plot. Characters are the agents of the outcome, as the listener is a participant in the story through the device of emotive intelligence that enables empathy of the human condition. Irony makes for its contemporaneity, and like jazz the known lyrics or story is charged and fluid in the context that it is sung or told holding time, viewers, space, as an arc of performance. Orality as spoken storytelling takes on multidisciplinary forms including poetry, music, gesture, movement as dance that are integrated into the visual delivery of text.

We explore the imperial legacy within museum collections and archival practices, using “fabulation” by exposing the Eurocentric character of classification systems and knowledge production, shaped by binary thought.⁴ As Ann Laura Stoler writes, “(w)hat constitutes the archive, what form it takes, and what systems of classification signal at specific times are the very substance of colonial politics” (2002, 92). Using multilingual fabulation and storytelling *Maker Unknown* aims to disrupt and destabilize hierarchies, value systems and the binary perception of self and Other that have informed art historical classifications, such as “folk art” versus “modern art”, or “craft” versus “fine art”.

The modern European concept of fine art (painting, sculpture, and architecture) marked by its distinction from craft was formulated in the eighteenth century, arguably stemming from Immanuel Kant’s division of art into “mechanical art” and “beautiful art” (Clowney 2008; Shiner 2001; Kant 2012). Beauty was no longer connected to utility, and the focus shifted on the maker as “individual genius”, with the aesthetic appreciation of fine art becoming a marker of refined taste and social status, and lesser artistic value being attributed to craft (Clowney 2008; Shiner 2001).

In fact, as the art historian Avinoam Shalem points out, “it was invariably in the nineteenth century, with the beginning of the industrial revolution, that the stigma of ‘crafts’ was given to any non-European (and occasionally East European) art” (Shalem 2012, 17). This led to many objects of non-European art to be classified as ethnographic, folklorist and “set back in time” (ibid.). Rather than acknowledging alternative expressions of modernity, exhibitions such as *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (MOMA, New York, 1984) juxtaposed non-European art objects (by unrecorded makers) with works by modern European artists such as Picasso, reinforcing the master narrative of the Western “genius artist” who drew inspiration from “primitive art” (Clifford 1988). In this universalist conception of art from a Western perspective, the point of view of the non-European maker who had created and used these objects was ignored and erased from history. The grouping of visual learning materials that were produced in conjunction with the ILEA collection, with references to craft, modern and folk art etc. are testimony to such systems of classification and the lesser

value attributed to non-European art in the context of the 1950–1970s British art and design education.

Through multilingual storytelling *Maker Unknown* creatively responds to colonial power relations inscribed in the gaps of the monolingual archive that holds this collection. Through the fables written by Vayu Naidu the project enables the objects to “speak” in first-person narratives, recorded in multiple languages relating to their provenance histories and geographical origins. We discussed the greater resonance of the audible fable being told in the first person, and this gives a greater sense of affinity with the object, the maker, holding on to the thread of why it may have been collected as a memory of a whole subcontinent. To emphasize the transcultural memory and diasporic agency of the objects, the fables have been recorded in English, Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, Urdu, Gujarati, and Malayalam. We are inspired by Glissant who compellingly asserts in *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers* that multilingualism means to practice (or create) in the presence of (or with an awareness of) all the languages of the world (1996, 41). To challenge monolingualism and the dominance of the English language in the archive, and to make the diversity of languages related to the objects’ imagined biographies and cultural belonging audible through multilingual soundtracks in the digital sphere, we have provided translations.

The digital archive was the perfect frame to unravel the fossilization of past legacies in branding: folk art or story deemed as “archaic” or “primitive”, unknown makers or craftspeople not seen as inventive in variations of craft handed down by generations, sweeping regional provenances ignoring the cultural specificities of location. In the process of decolonization there is the double helix of reclaiming sociological relevance of the time during which the objects were created while challenging hegemonic viewpoints of the past that silenced the story of the maker and the object as one homogenous whole.

Our understanding of decolonization departs from Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet’s approach that “decolonization requires a revolution in politics, thought, and language, all simultaneously, and is much more than a reaction against colonialism. Rather, it is an act of self-assertion and self-creation” (2011, 17). Vayu Naidu’s creative writing and fabulation weaves fragmented histories and memories into the gaps of the digitized collection through the archival exhibition *Maker Unknown*. The virtual exhibition refers back the Camberwell ILEA collection’s archive of non-European material, revealing the possibility of connecting globally dispersed objects and diverse audiences through digital technologies, such as 3D rendering of objects, multilingual narratives and soundscapes. The multilingual soundtrack renders alternative and hidden histories audible in the digital sphere, asserting and creating a multilingual, diasporic and decolonial agency. In this sense the object is a rite of passage, a ritual of orality in telling the story in so many languages—literally and metaphorically, of histories and our new learning. The digital sphere enables repeated and interactive access intergenerationally too.

→ Bibliography

Clifford, James : “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern”. In: Clifford, James (ed.): *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. Cambridge, Mass.: 1988, pp. 189–214.

Clowney, David: “A Third System of the Arts? An Exploration of Some Ideas from Larry Shiner’s The Invention of Art: A Cultural History”. In: *Contemporary Aesthetics* 6 (2008).

Crill, Rosemary: “The Fabric of India”, V&A Blog, September 19, 2014; → <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/fabric-of-india/the-fabric-of-india> [last access: 3.04.2024]

Diawara, Mathia (dir.): *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation*. New York 2010.

Ghaddar, J.J. and Michelle Caswell: “‘To go beyond’: towards a decolonial archival praxis”. In: *Arch Sci* 19 (2019), pp. 71–85 → <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09311-1> [last access: 20.06.2024]

Glissant, Édouard: *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*. Paris 1996.
Hall, Stuart: “Constituting an Archive”. In: *Third Text* 15:54 (2001), pp. 89–92; → <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820108576903>. [last access: 20.06.2024]

Hartman, Saidiya: “Venus in Two Acts”. In: *Small Axe* 12:2 (June 2008), pp. 1–14 → <https://doi-org.bham-ezproxy.idm.oclc.org/10.1215/-12-2-1> [last access: 20.06.2024]

Kant, Immanuel: *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by John Henry Bernard, 2nd ed., New York 2012.

Lionnet, Françoise, and Shih, Shu-mei (eds.): *The Creolization of Theory*. Durham 2011.

Peffer, John. “Africa’s Diaspora of Images”. In: *Third Text* 19:4 (July 2005), pp. 339–55.

Schwieger Hiepko, Andrea. Europe and the Antilles: “An Interview with Édouard Glissant”. In: Lionnet, Françoise, and Shih, Shu-mei (eds.): *The Creolization of Theory*. Durham 2011, pp. 255–261.

Shalem, Avinoam, "What do we mean when we say 'Islamic art'? A plea for a critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam". In: *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (June 2012).

Shiner, Larry: *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*. Chicago: 2001.
Sözen, Deniz: *Maker Unknown*, 2022 → <https://makerunknown.org/> [last access: 22.03.2024]

Stoler, Ann Laura, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance", In: *Archival Science* 2 (2002), pp. 87–109; → <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435632> [last access: 20.06.2024]

University of the Arts London: The Camberwell Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) Collection → https://collections.arts.ac.uk/collections/camberwell_ilea [last access: 28.04.2024]

University of the Arts London: The Decolonising Arts Institute; → <https://www.arts.ac.uk/ual-decolonising-arts-institute> [last access: 22.05.2023]

Voss, Paul J. and Werner, Marta L.: "Toward a poetics of the archive: Introduction". In: *Studies in the Literary Imagination*. 32, 1 (Spring 1999), pp. I–VIII.

We hope that our accompanying reflections on *Maker Unknown* will contribute to debates on decolonizing museum collections and instigate further research and development of decolonial methodologies and decolonial archival practice in the digital sphere. We would like to close with a quote by Édouard Glissant who compares the internet to technologies of orality and endorses the potential of digital technologies to shift our imaginary, enabling a new rhizomatic conception of identity:

"I think that a poetics of relation is akin to electronic technologies. All the concepts of the poetics of relation are present in information technology. [...] What I think is that the two can change our imagination and our relationship to the unforeseeable, something which is essential if we are to find a new identity, a rhizomatic identity" (Schwieger Hiepkö 2011, 260).