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**Episode name:** Interview with Robert Bracey on South Asian Coin Collections in the British Museum (June 28, 2024)

**People:** Robert Bracey, Shreya Gupta



**Gupta, Shreya**

Hello, I'm Shreya Gupta. I'm a third year PhD researcher at the University of Exeter and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, working on an AHRC funded collaborative doctoral project, titled decolonizing collections, investigating knowledge formation networks in colonial India with special reference to numismatics. The project looks at the history of four collections of Indian coins that are currently held in the Ashmolean, the British Museum in London, and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. While these collections are named after four European male coin collectors, we know very little about the Indian dealer scholars and collectors who helped them in assembling these collections. My aim is to uncover their role in creating these coin collections, and in producing expert knowledge about Indian history and numismatics on their basis. This interview was conducted as part of my PhD research under the topic afterlife of South Asian coin collections in UK museums. Here, I'm interviewing coin collectors, curators and scholars who work with Indian coins to inquire about the afterlives of these collections after they're acquired by UK museums, as well as understanding the interests and motivations of coin collectors and curators in collecting, studying and working with coins from South Asia.

Today I am interviewing Robert Bracey. Robert, would you like to just start by introducing yourself?



**Robert Bracey** 01:25

OK, so I'm Robert Bracey and I work at the British Museum where 5-6 weeks ago I was appointed as Curator for Asian numismatics.

I have worked. I have worked in a variety of roles at the British Museum previously between 2007 and 2019.



**Gupta, Shreya** 01:50

Great.

Thank you very much and thank you very much for taking out the time to do this interview.

I really appreciate it.

So I'm going to start a bit by some of the questions that I sent you, but we'll we'll build on it as the interview goes on, starting with what sparked your interest in your numismatics and especially of coins from South Asia.



**Robert Bracey** 02:10

So I developed an interest in specifically the history of Kushan dynasty at university, and I pursued a private interest in that through to 2007 and in 2007 I was offered a role at British Museum to support a catalogue of Kushan coins, umm the, the Kushan coins that are held at the British Museum and so that's the point at which I began to work on numismatics in 2007.

So my interest was initially sparked by South Asian history rather than by coins, and that say I think an almost universal feature of numismatic departments that I'm aware of.

Most people are initially hired because they're interested in the period and culture, and they subsequently learn numismatics on the job, so to speak.



**Gupta, Shreya** 03:15

Right. I see. Right off the bat that's very interesting to me because that really addresses that big question of whether coins are useful as sources to study history and how coins have been understood in this way for a very long time.

But people who study them tend to start out as historians and then turn numismatists, or, on the other hand, might start out as collectors, and perhaps very rarely become historians.

What do you think?



**Robert Bracey** 03:45

I think it's so, .. there is a distinction between numismatics as collecting and numismatics as scholarship.



**Gupta, Shreya** 03:54

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey**

And since at least I think the 1980s, the general tendency has been to think of numismatics as the study of physical representation of money and whereas it derives from the same basic enlightenment place as coin collecting.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey**

So when somebody describes themselves as a numismatist, as a collector, they mean they're a coin collector.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey**

And when they describe themselves as numismatist, as an academic nowadays, they mean that they essentially study the way money works through material culture as opposed to being an economic historian.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes

Hmm.

Umm, that's a that's a good point actually and it's it's interesting to trace sort of where appeared and how it happened, but that's that's for another time.

So you mentioned that your primarily interested in studying Kushan coins.



**Robert Bracey** 05:02

And that's where it began.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey**

And so in my current role, I, as I said, I'm curator for Asian numismatics and the British Museum has essentially 4 subcollections, which collectively I am grouping together under that heading.

That would be South Asia, from the origin of coinage in South Asia, the punch-mark tradition through to the arrival of Islam with the Ghazna bits in the 10th, 11th century. There would also be South Asia after the arrival of Islam, so that would include both and is both Arabic and Persian on South Asian coins and also colonial coins which while they they look European after 1848 or essentially derive out of Mughal tradition and the then there would be the East Asian collection, to think of that simply that is everything that looks like a Chinese coin.

In the classic sense of round, with a square hole in the middle, I'm gonna put my phone on silent or we uh alerts so that it doesn't beep at us every four minutes and. And then finally, the 4th section would be the Islamic world which would essentially be everything with Arabic and Islamic inscriptions, excluding South Asia. So, within the British Museum and a distinction is drawn between Islamic coinage in South Asia and Islamic coinage everywhere.

So when I say curator for Asian numismatics, of course I'm including North Africa.



**Gupta, Shreya**

I see.



**Robert Bracey** 07:20

I have, under under Islamic rulers, but I'm not including the Lydian tradition from which we get umm the Greek and other Asia minor coinages. So, of the three independent inventions of coinage, it is the two derived from, umm, punch marking and casting that fall in this section.




**Gupta, Shreya**

Right.

**RB** **Robert Bracey** 07:54

So again, it gets all museum collections like this are complicated. The boundaries are always fuzzy. When I worked here previously, I was responsible for one of those four collections, South Asia, before the arrival of Islam, and that included in my formal responsibility the Kushans, but also their predecessors, the Indo-Scythians, Indo-Parthians, Indo-Greeks and Bactrian Greeks.

One of the elements that's new or at least very unusual in the history of the collection in my role is that there have, for most of the Museum's history been two people responsible, at least for this collection. Usually there's been a division between an East Asian specialist and either a South Asian specialist or an Islamicist.

 **Gupta, Shreya**  
Right.

**RB** **Robert Bracey**

Right. Now, I am also responsible for the East Asian collection. That has happened occasionally in the museum's history, but it's it's unusual for it to happen.

 **Gupta, Shreya** 09:00  
OK.

That's very interesting.

The divisions and the way they have moved over time, which really is is the point that I'm trying to understand in these interviews, which is once coins are acquired by museums, the way that they are classified, the way they're catalogued, with which collection they are stored really has implications on how they're studied, which you're trying, which you've basically just hinted at with with the changes in staffing and departments and divisions etcetera.

**RB** **Robert Bracey**  
Yes.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Umm I I come to that again.

But the reason I was asking about what coins were you particularly looking at is is to

understand what about them particularly attracted you? Was that the job title essentially, or an interest in history as you mentioned in the beginning?

 **Robert Bracey** 09:56

It's the job. It's always the job that brings you to the coins.

So you you develop an area, an interest, the institution wants the expertise that comes with that interest, but the institution wants you to do certain tasks and the institution builds its job descriptions around the tasks it wants to be done.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.

 **Robert Bracey** 10:29

And then what happens once you're in a role is of course there is a push and pull between your own interests and the requirements.

So today I have mostly been making labels to go on the Chinese coins coin cabinets, and I'll explain this because it's a very simple and obvious thing.

We have a study room and the study room allows anybody wants to to come and access the collection and see material. But in order for that to work, it is necessary that members of staff, any member of staff, can locate objects when they are needed.

Uh, very recently somebody came to look at Chinese coins. I was able to assist with that remotely, but it was very hard for the person was doing it. I have realized why it was hard. In my section and cabinets are labeled uh with sort of internal information, but then also simply with a list of dynasties. If you look at the cabinet, it will say Guptas or umm, I'm just looking across at one of them now, so the one of the cabinets says Chera, Vijayanagara, Nayaks and Trivelli, Madurai. So you can glance instantly and go this is where I need to be.

The Chinese cabinets are a bit of a peculiarity being having been the province of specialists in East Asian studies and their main focus for at least half century without anybody from another discipline looking at them and the entire of Chinese coinage from the origin to the People's Republic of China, right, is located in 34 physical storage units which are labelled China 1 to China 34.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

I see.

**RB** **Robert Bracey** 12:38

So if you're asked a simple question like can you bring me the Tang period coins, I would like to look at them, you have the difficulty of working out where do I look for Tang period coins? So I've literally today been making labels for the cabinets that indicate their common era date, the dynasties that are inside and how they're organized so a curator that is not myself or an East Asian specialist can locate objects when they're needed.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.

**RB** **Robert Bracey** 13:12

Umm, so again, that's an example of how simply the job itself makes you look at things and we have an exhibition taking place on India in a few years time. I was asked a question about coins of the kings of Mathura who rule from the about 200 BC to about 100 AD and at the city of Mathura. There are about 15 or so rulers. They produce small copper coins weighing between 4 and 8 grams, and I was asked because some of these coins contain relatively early image of Lakshmi with elephants either side of her, umm, standing on lotus petals showering her and but they also the distinctive feature coins of Mathura is a standing goddess, above a river, on the reverse of the coins, and the person who was inquiring in order to write a description for the purposes of the public presentation, was intending to identify, they were checking their text, which is totally normal activity museum, to write a text, you check it with specialists and they had described this goddess as Lakshmi. Now the problem I had with that when I physically looked at the coins, I had to physically look at coins and the the only substantive publication on these coins is by Allan in 1934. It's the catalogue of the British Museum, umm, there's a small number of articles subsequently by PL Gupta, Shailendra Bhandare and others. Umm the problem I had was these coins consistently feature this standing goddess on the reverse. They usually have other designs on the obverse and in this warm, relatively famous group, the design on the obverse is Lakshmi being showered by elephants.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

OK.

**RB** **Robert Bracey**

Now to my mind it seems unlikely that if the goddess on the reverse were consistently Lakshmi, you would repeat her image on the obverse.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes, I yeah.

**RB** **Robert Bracey**

It's so it seems to me that if we know the figure on the obverse on that point is definitely Lakshmi, then the figure on the reverse is probably somebody else.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Hmm.

**RB** **Robert Bracey** 15:53

Well and of course that's the kind of question I mean, it's a very simple question to answer for the purposes of a label, it's much more complicated question to answer theoretically, how do you classify an attribute, divinities' on coins, because with a very small number of exceptions, they're almost never labelled and so that led me over the last few weeks to sort and organize all of our examples of those coins and to begin to prepare those for the online database as part of trying to my satisfaction to resolve the problem of who the female figure on the coins.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah. Hmm, that's good example, yeah.

**RB** **Robert Bracey** 16:43

You know, so it. Yeah. I just.

Well, that would be an interesting because I that's the reality you get given bits of work, you see things that are interesting. It is a combination of those that leads you to look at particular coins and to do particular things and and that can be driven by a lot of different factors. Umm, but sometimes those factors can be public.

There is no question that we will need to, I'm sure in my tenure here produce something about the Mughal coinage in the collection.



It has been very poorly served by publications by the British Museum. It is one very specific group of it is the most popular South Asian coins in the museum.



**Gupta, Shreya**

I can guess.



**RB Robert Bracey**

Would you like to take a guess?



**Gupta, Shreya**

It's the Jahangir Zodiac coins, isn't it?



**RB Robert Bracey** 17:37

Yes, it is the Jahangir Zodiac coins.

The British Museum has two complete sets in gold and one complete set in silver. It also has a set in gold that is missing only Aries. So at the moment two gold sets are on display in the museum, one in the South Asian galleries and one in the Islamic Galleries One set, the partial set is on its way to a loan in the United States at any one time. I would say it is normal for two to three Zodiac sets to be on display and it is a regular occurrence for the British Museum to loan Zodiac sets to other institutions. We have had a visit to the study room in the last four weeks to look at them. I would say you get multiple visits to the study room every year to look at those specific coins and we just. So that's a case where it's just very obvious the British Museum really should publish something at some point about those.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes, yes, you.

That's a very good segue into one of my other questions, which is about you've answered it partially, about how often these coins are used both for public display and by public in the study room.

And you've mentioned about Jahangir's Zodiac, which are of course more rare and more famous pieces, but if ...



**RB Robert Bracey** 19:11

Well, they importantly, that's a very common public misconception which I think helps extend their aura. They are exceptional, but they are not rare.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Uh-huh.



**Robert Bracey** 19:22

They are the standard issues of Jahangir's imperial mints throughout the last part of his reign. They are just normal coins, the idea of marking the months with the Zodiac, is the oddity. The coins themselves are not commemorative or unusual in that regard. They're often misperceived to be so, and the assumption is that they are an oddity, a deliberate rarity, and the way that, for example, the portrait coins that feature Akbar or Jahangir are, but the Zodiacs themselves are just standard coinage of the Mughal Empire, and for that brief period.

Umm, So what, they they have this simultaneous....

I mean, if they weren't, we wouldn't have three complete sets of them.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes, but ohh that shows about how uh historiography and memory and publicity of certain collections has played a role in increasing the aura of one versus the other, isn't it?



**Robert Bracey**

Yes.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.

So yeah, so, so what I meant essentially was that for pieces that are, say, not as famous, do you still get requests, are they still sent out to loans for to other collections?



**Robert Bracey** 20:54

Umm. I think. There are huge gaps. Umm, objects which have acquired a, an aura, a presence, get requested a lot. Umm, uh, let me let me think. I could, I just want to check something in one of the cabinets.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Absolutely. Take your time.



**Robert Bracey**

Yes.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey**

So this is a good example. We have, these are coins of the Gupta empire.

This is the Asvamedha type of Samudra Gupta, the horse, right.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey**

We have, 8 examples of the Samudra Asvamedha, but only two examples of the Kumara Gupta Asvamedha and for reasons which I think basically came down to a typo.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Umm. OK.



**Robert Bracey** 22:22

A mistake ... in the History of the Objects of the 100 year that the 100 Objects History of the World project that Neil McGregor did, it was the Kumaragupta I think that got displayed.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah, I'm trying to remember as well, but now that you've said the, I can't. Yeah.



**Robert Bracey**

Right.

It was the Asvamedha that was the story.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah, yeah.



**Robert Bracey**

The thing was being discussed, but I think we displayed the Kumarauptha and we then found ourselves at a very awkward position of being consistently asked for Kumaraguptas, right, for display and loan because that specific object had been used.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Umm.



**Robert Bracey** 23:14

Which we couldn't fulfil because we have so few examples of Kumaragupta, but we have a wide range of high quality examples Samudra.

Umm, so that was an example of how something quite minor could give an object like. Now, as it happens, there are several coins from this section that are currently on display. There's one of some Samudra's lyricist type that is out on display at the moment. So, there are collections like this where absolutely things go on display a lot. Exactly which things go, how often, is it can vary for a lot of very peculiar reasons.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Umm.



**Robert Bracey** 24:02

And they can be quite. But then there are large sections of the collection where there are a lot of coins and very modest number of them ever go out on display.

So I have been working on the East Asian collection, I've been looking at the Song dynasty. I believe we have about 3000 Song dynasty cast coins.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Wow.

**RB** Robert Bracey 24:30

I think three or four of them are on display, internally, none of them online.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Hmm.

**RB** Robert Bracey

And essentially they're on display because there's a display that says the Song dynasty did this. This is what it's coins looked like. Umm, we don't need 3 or 4000 coins to support that kind of labelling exercise. Umm, so the vast majority stay in the cabinets and the ones that go out are invariably just very best ones.

There's also a tendency, it's certainly with external loans, people like to use coins they've seen, and they're not. They don't have curatorial access to collections, so they will tend to focus on coins that have appeared in exhibitions.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Hmm.

**RB** Robert Bracey

So the same coin. Once coin has been out once, the chances of it going out in the future increase and.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Increases... so potentially this future exhibition on sculptures might influence some coins to come out more often.

**RB** Robert Bracey

I don't. Yes, of course.

You know what you do exhibitions about, changes enormously over time as so I've I've shown you behind me, below the sight of your camera.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.

**RB** **Robert Bracey** 25:59

I have a cabinet dedicated to Toy Money. This is a plastic coin based on a Roman type, right, for children to play with. The department has been collecting Toy Money since the 1870s.

Uh, uh, you must imagine right, very dour, very serious Victorian gentleman, because they were all gentlemen, raiding their children's play boxes for you know the money for playing shop and then acquisitioning it into the collection, right?

 **Gupta, Shreya**

I had no idea.

**RB** **Robert Bracey**

There is a catalogue of this material produced in the 70s.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Wow.

**RB** **Robert Bracey** 26:51

Uh, the reason that the material is behind me or about half the material in the museum has behind me is because we ran out of space in the cabinet upstairs and because in 2018-2019 I put on an exhibition about the way that money relates to play, which included sections of toy money. So despite the fact that I am the curator deals with Asian material, umm I'm also the person in the Department, probably with the most expertise on European Toy money. That material there was material there that I used in that exhibition, which had not left its cabinets for 120 years.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Wow. Hmm.

**RB** **Robert Bracey**

It had been acquired because somebody in 1880 thought that it was an important element of social history, but it had to wait more than a century for the exhibition that actually needed it.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 27:53

And that will happen all the way across the Department.

There will be dynasties or kingdoms that we have no interest in at the time. The objects in it for display purposes at the time the objects are acquired, but fifty- a hundred years later we might do a minor Princely state, may have been acquired simply so that we could have a good type series of Princely states. If the Asia Department would then at some point to acquire a collection of miniature painting that came from that princely state suddenly, now the coins would be interesting for display purposes. So again it's, you know, the thing to remember is the amount of material on display is tiny, ..., you know even including large loans, all the galleries in the museum, the fact that we have a dedicated gallery for the department, permanent gallery for the department, you are dealing with a collection that has approximately eight hundred and fifty thousand objects across the entire department, about a hundred and sixty thousand objects in the Asian section, umm, we can't be talking more than a few thousand on display.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah, perhaps lesser.



**Robert Bracey** 29:16

Perhaps lesser. Perhaps only hundreds on display at any one time, and so yes, much of the collection, remains in its storage or for lot of its life. Partly because I think even 140 years ago somebody was very aware that in a 100 years time what somebody would want to display might be very different.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah, yeah.



**Robert Bracey**

And and therefore they want to make sure that the opportunity of display was there.

That's one of the important collecting acquisitional practices is to make sure that you collect material, not just that might be of interest or utility to you. It might be of interest or utility to future curators.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah, that's very important point.

Umm, but invariably it also gets influenced by what is prevalent in, in research at that particular time.



**Robert Bracey** 30:28

Yes. And until to me, that that I would say is the principal determinant for the number of objects and the Gupta dynasty, the western Satraps, individually are the same size in our collections, about 800 to a 1000 objects in each case, as essentially all of their contemporary dynasties, what, what would be called ancient India.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Hmm hmm.



**Robert Bracey**

Because the Guptas in the Western satraps have been the primary focus of, along with Kushans, have been the primary focus of scholarship and for a century. It's it, it is pretty much the case that to the extent that it is almost inevitable, once you've worked with a collection for any extended period that you come to the conclusion that scholarship drives acquisition, the number of extant objects, to the extent that literally it is that that clear the number of objects that are extant is a function of scholarship more than it is a function of any process that is archaeological.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Hmm. Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 31:55

I the the worldwide as far as I can find, the British Museum has approximately half the kings of Mathura coins that are extant, right?

There are probably 400 known worldwide right and I would say that it is amongst the worst samples of coinages from that period that I know of. I would, there are,



exceptionally large numbers of types known from a single coin. There would almost there are almost certainly kings missing, right?



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 32:33

People who ruled, who we simply don't have a readable example of their name. We, it's not the only case in the series. The amirs of Multan were known from only two coins before the mid 1980s and and and neither of those have been correctly identified. Only once scholarship began to pay an interest in what in Sindh itself did the Amirs of Multan's coinage, which in fact is centuries long, become visible.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Hmm.



**Robert Bracey**

So and that directs everything in the institution. You can see the colonial trace.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah, absolutely.



**Robert Bracey** 33:21

In the, in the collection, in that way the, if it looks Greek, if it's a bit closer to looking Greek than other things, it goes. If it's imperial, if it's perceived as imperial, we have a much better collection of it, right? Empires are more important to kingdoms if you are subject to the British Empire.



**Gupta, Shreya** 33:44

Yeah.

No, that's that's very true.

That's so that's been so evident in my research about how much collecting histories have been influenced by interests of imperial officials, but also empire in general, towards particular dynasties and particular rulers. So yeah, that's that's quite, umm, a

revelation in some ways.

We've already answered some of this, but I want to uh, move on a little bit to catalogues and the online database as well. You're working on the Kushan catalogue right now. Thank you so much again for sharing proofs of that for me with me. You've mentioned that we are in desperate need of updated Mughal, I don't know, catalogue, but some form of public.

 **Robert Bracey**

Yes, we, no, no, we don't have a Mughal catalogue.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Ah, you don't.

Okay, I didn't know.

 **Robert Bracey** 34:42

That the in the in the British Museum has a BMC which is collection catalogue from the early 20th century that talks about what holdings it has, other people have museum catalogues like that.

There are catalogues of Jahangir's coins. There are catalogues of Akbar. There is a die study of Humayun. Umm, but there is no standard type catalogue of Mughal coins in the way that there are two standard type catalogues for the Western satraps. There are three successive standard type catalogues for the Guptas there is, umm, one I, I've shared with you text from our attempt to replace Gobl's 1984, *Munzprägung der Kusanreiches*. And you know, there's no if you want to identify a Mughal coin, right?

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.

 **Robert Bracey** 35:41

You look in Kraus Mitchner, which is a sales umm, the thing for collectors which is nowhere near comprehensive.

I've looked at our Shahjahanabad coins and we have six or seven date combinations that aren't listed and you would think a standard catalog would at least have looked at the BM's collection...



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey** 36:15

And you know, so it's, there is a, there is a project, I understand that Dilip Rajgor in India is working on a series of Mughal catalogues which will be type catalogues. Umm, but it's. Uh. There are more dynasties in South Asian history without standard catalogues than there are with.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey**

And the we are working on a digital uh catalogues, as most museums are. The British Museum has been working on a digital catalogue since the 1980s. It began as an auditing tool. It was subsequently turned into a public offering.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 37:06

There is a public commitment on the museums part to digitize its collection I believe the kinds of time scales that are being used are five to ten years publicly and I'm contributing to that effort. I'm wondering, we have. Well, I mean, we physically know how many objects there are. We counted them more than once throughout the history of the department and I haven't. We know how many records we have and we know that there is a very large gap between the two. We, as I said, 160,000 Asian objects, proximately 120,000 of them have some representation on our digital online platform. I would say 30 to 40,000 of them have a representation that would be generally useful to scholars or members of the public, i.e. the the main indicator being do they have a photograph of the object so you can see that's that's a very large gap between the digital offering and the collection and and it again will vary. significantly, depending on what it is you are looking at. Umm.



**Gupta, Shreya**

So.



**Robert Bracey**

Yeah.



**Gupta, Shreya** 38:44

No, no.

I was just in for following up on that bit about the digital catalogue that you just ended at, which is that it of course depends, how useful it is depends upon what you're putting it to use to.

For instance, for I guess, numismatists, collectors, scholars working with these coins, they would want to look at photographs as you've mentioned. For somebody like me who's researching collecting history is I immediately go to the person that it's been collected by and try to see their profile.

So my very basic question is when you are uploading a particular coin or series or set of coins, are you also looking into their provenance and their collecting histories and as and is that also something that is prioritized while it's put on the database?



**Robert Bracey** 39:33

So every coin in the collection comes with a paper ticket, which is stored with it to identify it. Usually multiple paper tickets. This is a recent modern paper ticket created. Let's see if I can get that close enough.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey**

Created as part of our process.

It contains the acquisition number and what's called the PRN number which identifies it on the database. So it's part of the process of putting these coins on the database.

This is the historic register ticket which contains the acquisition number and indicates that it came from Spink. Spink as numismatic dealer, right.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 40:20

So I can tell at glance from the number that it was acquired in 1928, right? Because the ticket says Spink on it, I can guess that it was probably purchased and that it it was purchased from that dealer. In, those connect to acquisition registers, those registers sometimes contain more information, sometimes they do not. Sometimes there is correspondence associated with something, sometimes that can be linked to other information.

We have a collection from Rudolph Hoernle, a German scholar in the late 19th century where we can connect it to articles he wrote talking about acquiring the coins through a network of contacts in the Himalayan region and ..



**Gupta, Shreya**

Ohh, that's pretty cool, huh?



**Robert Bracey**

So, but that's unusual in a lot of cases we simply have a name and the person need not be famous. Some people are. We have the personal collection of Indrajī Bhagvanlal right.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey**

We have the collection of Alexander Cunningham.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey**

Yeah. So we have people.., but then we have coins that just came from somebody who we otherwise haven't heard of. Sometimes we don't always know who precisely the person is, but we know roughly.

There were two brothers, with the surname Lafonte, who fought for the Sikhs, two Frenchmen, but their first names were August and Alexander, and we only recorded that we received the coins from an 'A' Lafonte.



**Gupta, Shreya** 42:20

So there was not a..

So how did you find out that there were two brothers?



**Robert Bracey**

And we know that there are two brothers because they fought for Ranjit Singh.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Aah.



**Robert Bracey**

And so they're sufficiently famous that they've not disappeared from history, but we don't know which of the two brothers gave us the coins.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Understood, yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 42:40

Right.

So, that sort of thing is normal. There are lacunae in our collecting history, in part because, in the the relative interest in different elements of the provenance has changed over time.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey** 43:03

We think much more archaeologically today, certainly here because we are exposed

to the I mean almost unique worldwide, Portable Antiquities and treasure system in the United Kingdom, which capture just truly tremendous amounts of archaeological provenance information that would otherwise be lost, about objects. And so, inevitably, you can't help if you work in the same space as at least four people who were involved in the project that you would begin to absorb some of their ideas of how important find spot is. But fine spot was not particularly important to most of the early curators of these coins.

They want to understand the coins production. Now the coins production is understood by classifying them into type and variety. Right, and that means actually breaking the connection with the collector.

A coin from 1928 might be sitting next to a coin from 1973, or a coin from 1850, because they are the same lyrist type rather than tigerslayer, with one exception, two exceptions. Nothing in this collection is organized by its find. In two specific cases, the coins are organized together because they were from the same hoard, ... in, but those came in the 1950s and in the 1980s. Umm, everything else is broken up. Even if it was part of a hoard, and quite a few things were. We know that they were from hoards but they are dispersed across the collection according to where the coin would fit in a typological series, not grouped together according to provenance.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Collectors.



**Robert Bracey** 45:18

Yeah.

That's not, that's not the only way you can do it. Other, some institutions do group things by collector. So, they would have a named collector and all of that person's coins would be in one place. We, we definitely don't do that, and the degree to which we don't do that can be illustrated by the fact that we have a wooden cabinet that is very old, 200 years and we believe it's James Prinsep's cabinet. Right.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey**

Right.

But none of the coins are in. We have the cabinet, but any coins we have from James Prinsep are scattered across the collection.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Right



**Robert Bracey**

According to where they would belong in the type series. It never occurred to anybody. It clearly occurred to somebody that we should keep James Prinsep's cabinet, but it never occurred to anybody that we should keep James Prinsep's coins together in the form they would have had in Prinsep's cabinet.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 46:20

And, and you can see that all the way through. Our organizational principle almost always breaks any organizational principle that existed in the coins before they arrived with us.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes. So once they are acquired, they actually lose, their coherence and acquired new systems and new, new order.



**Robert Bracey** 46:47

Yes. If you, if you conceive of a group of objects that are found together as having a common identity, as a find, they lose that in the process of becoming museum object. They don't have to, but they do in this collection. In this collection they become dispersed. That it has advantages and disadvantages.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey** 47:15

Umm, depending on the scholarship you wish to undertake. It is potentially



something you can undo and digital databases give you those opportunities, but you have to make a decision with the coins and the decision that was clearly collectively made over succeeding generations by multiple people working on this collection was that typology, not provenance, ....



**Gupta, Shreya**

Is more important?



**Robert Bracey**

Yes.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah. Hmm. That's interesting. Of course, there are ways in which you can reconstruct these histories, but it's not straightforward, like you said. You can look at the index, you can look at the database, but perhaps just by looking at the cabinet you can't see all the collection, all the coins that came from one particular collector.

Umm, so moving on in a little bit to the fact that the British Museum collection is open to the public, in terms of anybody who wants to see them can come to the study room and have a look at them. My, I'm curious to know how many people, come from the subcontinent, from South Asia to look at these coins and study them perhaps.



**Robert Bracey** 48:42

Umm, so I have had one visitor in the last six weeks. I have two scholarly visitors in the next three months, who I know of, all coming from South Asia. I've had two visitors from East Asia.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Hmm.



**Robert Bracey**

And, have recently I've got another one in a few months and I would say the Asian collection as a whole, I've not yet seen a week in which there wasn't at least one visitor in the study room who wanted to look at it. The question of where people come from is complicated.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes, I understand.



**Robert Bracey** 49:32

Yeah, yes, because there is a big difference between uh, so I, I named two because I know specifically those people and I know they're institutional affiliations. So I know one is coming from Pakistan and one is coming from India, right?

But if somebody suddenly arrives at the study, we might can't necessarily tell the difference between South Asian heritage and, you know, and and that question always arises, to what extent is somebody who was brought up in Chicago, right and attended an American University and lives in the US, South Asian? You know, to what extent is their felt heritage an accurate guide to the way in which their position relative to the objects. So



**Gupta, Shreya**

Uh, yeah, that that's a complicated question. Definitely and and certainly not for, it's only for the person themselves to define in some ways, but.



**Robert Bracey**

It is, a person's self-identity should never be denied, but understanding that people self-identities are not always the same as the data you wish to understand is important.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey**

And I mean a a project recently that I think very much suffers with this issue is the Murty Classical Library.



**Gupta, Shreya**

OK.



**Robert Bracey** 51:09

Right, which is this attempt to publish material from, literary material from South Asia. There are a number of authors within that, translators, who I'm sure would self-identify by as being of South Asian heritage. There's only one person in the entire project so far who works in a South Asian institution. Everyone else works in a European or North America, and that in a sense is probably a more telling and important point, than their self-identity and the same applies here, because your question is really about accessibility and the fact that the UK has an exceptionally large population which self identifies as having South Asian heritage does not mean that collection is reaching an international audience.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah, no.



**Robert Bracey** 52:05

Umm but, but it does mean that lots of people come to see the collection who are I mean in every in all, in almost all senses English but, who feel a heritage connection with the objects?



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey**

Umm, you know and and and you know, don't knock back at me. Violence, colonial power, economic inequality drove a lot of these objects to cabinets, but that was accompanied by a sense of genuine inquiry, a sense of heritage, certainly after the early 20th century. Umm, no, so it's not an entirely negative emotional response that that creates the collection.



**Gupta, Shreya** 53:04

Yes.

Yeah.

I think my aim and asking this question which you rightly perceived as to understand how, how much of it is accessible to audiences beyond the UK in some ways, yeah.

**RB Robert Bracey**

Yeah.

And the answer is virtually none of it.

And I would go further and I would say virtually none of it is accessible to almost any audience, right, to access the British Museum's collection, you need a remarkable amount of privilege, right?

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Yes, I agree with that.

**RB Robert Bracey** 53:42

Yes, the collection is open. Anybody who wants to can apply, attend the study room, right and look at the objects. Any of the objects, right? That is a completely open offer. It is only offered in working hours. It is offered for short periods, right, at a time, meaning that you need to have the relative monetary capacity to get to London, to do so for several days, you also have to simply understand that that you can do that. You have to have enough command of English or be able to access a translator to be able to communicate with us. Right. I cannot speak Hindi, I cannot speak Mandarin. I cannot speak Japanese. If you can't speak English right, then you cannot access the information that I will freely share, right? So yes, we make an offering. It is utilized by people from all across the world. However, the reality of that offering is that everybody who uses it possesses a remarkable amount of personal privilege.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.

**RB Robert Bracey**

Right, it is a very elitist opportunity.

 **Gupta, Shreya** 55:07

Absolutely. And not to mention in in terms of international audiences, visa issues and your, capacity to be able to travel from halfway across the world to here, which is very tough to do. Umm. So of course, if we've established that people are interested

in the collection, but the interest are sort of limited to certain types of audiences. As, as somebody who works with this collection and who's researchers this you've of course collaborated with, met with and worked with people from the subcontinent. What are some of these forums, some of the societies where you've met them, where you found it useful to talk about your research and exchange ideas and build connections with collectors, but also with academics and students, et cetera?

**RB** **Robert Bracey**

So people visit the institution and that automatically creates an opportunity for connections. I have visited Indian institutions. I have used the collection at Calcutta. I have visited the collection of Mathura. In the same way, the collection at the CMVS, the former Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai, the museum, has an ongoing relationship with the CMVS at a very high level.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.

**RB** **Robert Bracey** 56:41

So the museum itself has relationships with other museums, in that way. The museum has something called the ITP, the International Training Program, which has been going on for well over a decade and has in every single year I've had contact with it, had multiple members of curatorial staff from South Asian institutions involved visiting the UK for an extended period in a funded opportunity to learn about curatorial practices. Umm, I'd obviously, probably the single most important thing are papers, academic papers and and those can even transcend, those can transcend language barriers, to a degree. Language remains a major obstacle, but the most important work on surviving remnants of casting technology for coins from South Asia is by Sahni and Sahni wrote it in Hindi.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Aah, so and you accessed the translated version.

**RB** **Robert Bracey**

We have a copy here in the Department. It's an extremely valuable piece of work.

Umm, you know, it is, and it is an extremely valuable, if it's that valuable piece of work, it's the only piece of work you will access it in, whatever language it's available.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 58:14

It's an exceptional piece of scholarship. So, but it's exceptionally rare, right? In Kushan studies, which I know better, bibliographically uh, since 1968, there have only been about 2000 publications. There have been more publications in Italian than there have been in Hindi.



**Gupta, Shreya**

....



**Robert Bracey**

Pardon.



**Gupta, Shreya**

On, on Kushan coins?



**Robert Bracey**

Yes. Right, now if you write in Italian, you are limiting your audience very substantially.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 58:53

But if you, but if you write in Hindi, you're basically wiping it out.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Hmm.



**Robert Bracey**

Your work would have to be absolutely exceptional for it to receive attention. You if you want to writing in Kushan studies, you need to write in English.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 59:07

There was a time when you could get away with writing in Russian. Umm, but if you want to, if you want your work to be understood and known, you need to write in English.

In East Asian collections, you can write in Chinese. The, there is a large enough body of literature in Chinese that Chinese literature forms its own thing. Russian literature has historically been important because of the Soviet Union scholarship and German literature remains important in Sanskrit studies.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey**

But Robert Gobl's work on the Kushans was so important, somebody just did an unofficial English translation. Every library I know of has a photocopy of the English translation, which is, which is here.



**Gupta, Shreya**

OK.



**Robert Bracey**

So it's just, this is the library behind me and this is just a TypeScript, translating all of the German in in his work into English, right? I've never read the original.



**Gupta, Shreya** The German one



**Robert Bracey** 1:00:17

The German one. I've only ever read the the translation, which Gobl did not want. It's language matters in in the in the whole thing.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey**

And of course that that means that, I would, our online collection offerings affected by that, in English, right. There's a limit to how much of that language barrier you can overcome. The inscription of the coin would be meaningless if you don't read English, because even if you fed it through a translation engine, there's so much nuance. It's such a condensed specialist thing, describing a numismatic object, it probably wouldn't mean very much.



**Gupta, Shreya** 1:01:17

Umm yeah, but uh, which brings me, I'm naturally thinking of you mentioned academic papers. If you think of conferences which are almost always held in English, at least in this part of the world.



**Robert Bracey**

Yes.



**Gupta, Shreya**

And perhaps even in India, that again, of course that is technically a forum to meet other collectors and scholars working on Indian coins but I'm guessing that they're all happening in English as well.



**Robert Bracey**

Umm, so I've attended conferences in which people have given papers in French and Italian.



**Gupta, Shreya**

OK.



**Robert Bracey**

Umm, I have never attended a conference in which somebody has given a paper in a language of the subcontinent.





**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 1:02:03

Right. I have occasionally attended a conference where somebody from the subcontinent felt sufficiently unsure of their English that I read their paper from a written, presentation. But, I've never encountered as I have with French and Italian people at a conference that is otherwise receiving papers in English, they'd do that. Umm. So, when I've been to Pakistan, to, when I've been to India, when students of mine have been to Pakistan, uh, when I've been to Uzbekistan, the papers have almost all been in English.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey** 1:02:51

And then I think casually in Uzbekistan, you'll sometimes have something in Uzbek, but it tends not to be an academic paper though might be as part of an academic event. The only place I know of where my English would be a barrier, an impediment rather than an advantage would be in East Asia.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Hmm yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 1:03:21

In China? I would expect and understand from colleagues that essentially, most, you know, papers would be given in Chinese and that would be true for European scholars who specialize in the area, assuming mostly get their papers in Chinese. There are some exceptions like Joe Cribb, my predecessor here, is now a professor at Hebei Normal University in, and I believe he gives his lectures in English and a, one of his Chinese PhD students translates.



**Gupta, Shreya**

OK.

**RB Robert Bracey**

He does speak Chinese, but I think just not confidently enough to deliver his papers.

 **Gupta, Shreya** 1:04:08

Yeah. That's whole sort of... OK, that's interesting.

In my field work India, I spent some time, in Nasik with coin collectors who work there, and both at the Research Institute as well, but outside, outside in the city and in Bombay as well, and I also went to the Numismatic Society of India in Varanasi. Of course, that didn't attend any conferences or workshops etcetera, but the people day to day, of course conduct all their proceedings and dealings in in Hindi, right. I am not sure how academically inclined they are to attend conferences that are purely about academic matters, but certainly they they hold exhibitions and they have local numismatics societies that you know, conduct their proceedings in Hindi, which is quite interesting and but perhaps very different community from the one ...

**RB Robert Bracey** 1:05:14

But it is worth saying that the IIRNS in Nasik, right, the people who work there, write their academic papers, which they intend for audiences to see in Europe, in English. Books and papers. And in fact, they, I know several of the scholars there and they're quite capable of delivering papers in very fluent English. So, you know, I'm aware that the Numismatic societies is, and I think it's a very good thing that they have a broader membership and deliver papers, but when I've spoken, for example, to the Numismatic Society in Mumbai, I've delivered my paper in English without translation. So, the assumption has been made that the vast majority of the membership will be able to follow my paper in English, and that's true when I've given it on the cam., given talks on the campus at Mumbai University as well, that I delivered those in English.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah, well, that's very particularly, particular kind of audience being, considering that it's Bombay and it's University, they've all probably been educated in in English.

**RB Robert Bracey** 1:06:38

Absolutely. I'm sure this is the case and I and I have I, you know, I visited India a few

times. I don't know India well. I have managed to get myself lost on occasion. So I have had that experience of moving from an urban setting where the people I am dealing with speak English fluently to a more rural setting where I'm lost, where most people do not speak English.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey**

Umm, you know? So, there is a bubble effect for any European scholar, doing academic outreach in India because they they'll invariably be invited to conferences where everybody's expected to speak in English.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 1:07:23

The people who attend those conferences will speak English. You know, it's so it becomes, you don't see the broader community as potentially interested who, of course, will communicate in a variety of, umm, languages, yeah.



**Gupta, Shreya**

In Nasik, for instance, the majority of them would be discussing in Marathi.



**Robert Bracey**

Yes.



**Gupta, Shreya** 1:07:50

Umm, right. So so some of these people that you've that you've been teaching, or that you've been working with, could you just give me a rough idea, some names, maybe? I'm just interested in knowing where they're coming from.



**Robert Bracey**

Okay, okay, so people I've worked with fairly directly because they overlap with my areas of interest are the people at the Nasik Institute, the people of the ,staff at the

University of Calcutta. Those are the two groups that I've probably worked with on a most consistent basis, the University of Calcutta has had about historically three to five members of staff with an interest in numismatics and it has a relatively good track record of attracting the sort of funding necessary for those people to visit collections in the UK. Nasik, of course, has a reputation as a center of excellence within India in European circles and therefore you know, attracts scholars from a variety of different walks. I've also been to conferences at the University of Chandigarh. I've been to the museum at Dehli. Mathura I mentioned. Umm



**Gupta, Shreya**

Bombay.



**Robert Bracey** 1:09:25

Most of my most of my interest is North India. I've never been able to access the collection at the Uttar Pradesh State Museum. Umm, that's one of those ones that I have asked to visit on occasion and been politely rebuffed. Usually the form of it comes that I I I write and ask saying that I'm visiting on a certain date, and after I've already commenced my travels and it's clearly too late for me to actually arrange to visit, I am then contacted by the institution which I take to be a polite way of saying we don't really want you to come. Umm, so.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 1:10:18

But, when I've travelled, I've mostly Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta. I've not. I've, you know, I'm not one for traveling a lot and I haven't travelled very widely in India. Colleagues who travelled in South India, looking at the material there.



**Gupta, Shreya**

OK.



**Robert Bracey**

There they've accessed a wide variety of museums, though usually, through often an individual contact. The experience most of my colleagues have told me, it seems to

match up largely with mine, is that a single well connected Indian scholar is often the key to accessing collections. For a generation of scholars I know that were slightly older than me, that was B N Mukherjee, Dr. Suresh for South India.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Okay.



**Robert Bracey** 1:11:15

So, it's, you know, there's relatively small number of places you can access easily simply by writing and saying I'd like to come and look at the material, and though and Mathura is not one of them. Like Mathura, I accessed by turning up at the door and saying I'd like to speak to the director, who turned out to be incredibly friendly, was more than happy to show me the objects but I wasn't able to contact the museum in advance. That was purely that, that museum for my particular interest, is so ...



**Gupta, Shreya**

Important.



**Robert Bracey**

...central that I thought it worth taking the chance and simply building into my schedule, turning up in Mathura for a couple of days as I moved from Delhi to Mumbai. But the CMVS, Calcutta, right and Nasik. I think if you work North Indian, those are the institutions that..



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah. Yeah, you're you're right and your experience is consistent with mine in the sense that often one key person is the key to unlock.



**Robert Bracey**

Yeah.



**Gupta, Shreya** 1:12:35

Yeah.

And well, if certain collections don't want to show you their collection, they will find

all ways not to, and if they're open, they're open. It's, it's pretty much straightforward in terms of their policy is what I've realized.

OK. So that's, that's interesting in terms of institutions. You've mentioned this already about the catalogue that you're working on and some other projects that are underway, including of digitizing etcetera. Umm and we've discussed also about how how much they pay attention to history of collecting and and provenance. But my last sort of broad but more contentious question I guess is how they fit in this broader agenda of decolonizing etcetera. And you've mentioned about how this is a complicated term and a complicated understanding and you're essentially working with collections that are built on economic, colonial economic power and imperial might, cultural, economic, infrastructural, etcetera. But in this day and age, you're also writing about these collections to a different audience and to a public which has a different lense of looking at colonial history. So how are you trying to make sure that these issues are addressed and what's sort of your approach of dealing with this, turn in the way the collection was built and how it's used and interpreted now?

 **Robert Bracey** 1:14:09


Uh, so. So I would say first of all, I think it's important to recognize that the public element of the engagement is not different, it is completely fragmented, right?

 **Gupta, Shreya**

OK.

 **Robert Bracey** 1:14:26

Umm you can, you can offend almost anybody for saying almost anything and because the way in which different people perceive that colonial history from a very positive tool, a very negative light, right, is enormously varied, even within communities who might otherwise be expected to have. So, I have encountered Uzbeks who are enormously happy to see their material in foreign museums.

 **Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.

 **Robert Bracey** 1:15:07

Right? Because they see it as a form of soft power for their country and I have found

their colleagues sitting next to them to be adamantly believed that material is looted and should all be returned right now. Right. So two people from very similar cultural background, from the same place, thinking diametrically opposed things about the same set of objects and I would say that's true, umm, across communities in general. Umm, I think decolonizing is a very complicated problem. I think, the problem is, I would say that academically we recognized theoretical problem for a long time. Right? I was two years old when Said published Orientalism.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yes.



**Robert Bracey** 1:16:12

Right? And I would say that's fundamentally the set of interlocking problems that he is attempting to wrestle with there and yet I can walk into a room today and see somebody doing something that might have been embarrassed R B Whitehead a 100 years ago.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah.



**Robert Bracey** 1:16:39

So. We've and and we've I have been in discussions about this with people where people have talked about, well, we know this is a problem, why haven't we solved it? And I sent you the sections I've written for the introduction to our Kushan catalogue, which I wrote in about 2018-2019, and I did that because in the introductory section I talk about how the collection came to be and why we are studying it and the way that we are studying it and entwined with that problem is the colonial legacy that's shaped it. Right? The collection is the size of it is, because of the coins that people like Alexander Cunningham encountered, those are the Indian coins that looked to them most Greek.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah. And those that they decided to acquire and send to the Museum.



**Robert Bracey** 1:17:35

Yes, and the result of the collection being larger is attracted more scholarship. The result of the scholarship is that we attracted more coins. Right? We built upon the scholarship that had come before us. Right? And the result is we cannot write that volume about any other dynasty in ancient India, right? It's not a question. I mean, the the simple decolonization which I raise in that introduction would be that I would go and do the same thing for the Maghas who are a contemporary dynasty that we have exactly the same type of evidence for, right? Exactly the same set of theoretical problems, right? And I can't because I have one article right on a hoard by one Indian scholar in the 1970s. That is the sum total of the academic material I have to engage with and I have a 100 coins as opposed to 4000. Right? Not because the dynasty only made a 100 coins, but because we have only acquired them because nobody has ever had any interest in doing that. I and that's the, that's the problem. The decolonising position would say, well, just do it about something else. It's like, you know, that's how you do it in. So, literary studies and philosophy, you go, "Oh well everybody, we write about dead white men. Let's just set readings on our course that aren't by dead white men." And I think sometimes that's okay and sometimes even there people run into the problem of going "hmm, everybody who's ever written something about this is a dead white man". And you know, it's it, it's fundamentally problematic. Un- unrelated to my museum work, I do research that is not part of my job. I do online talks. One of the elements of the online talks they do is to look at key works, to look at famous works written by particular people to give ... I try to give short 10-minute explanations of what they're about and why they're important.



**Gupta, Shreya**

OK.



**Robert Bracey** 1:20:02

R S Sharma's feudalism, is an example of that. Umm, Barbara Tuchman's Practicing History. Umm. I looked at the, I think 8-10 of those I've done, and I was actually genuinely pleased to discover that only 50% of them were dead white men.



**Gupta, Shreya**

OK, that's great.




**Robert Bracey**





I was like 50%. I'm I'm pretty happy with that. I mean, demographically, right, dead white men should be 5% of the entire total. But but I was quite happy to have them down to half, but this is, this is the problem we tackle. It's fine to theoretically identify there's a problem, and then easy to come up with a very simple solution. And but simple solutions don't work because they're complex problems.


 **Gupta, Shreya** 1:21:06


Yeah, yeah. Even in my project, it's been tough to, even though the aim of the project is to find out more about Indian scholars and Indian collectors, it's tough to decentre the four dead white collectors that I'm looking at.

 **Robert Bracey**  
Yeah.

 **Gupta, Shreya**  
Yeah, because.

 **Robert Bracey**  
You know, I don't think. I mean, don't. And you know don't feel bad at all about making the observation that you are speaking to the curator at the British Museum, right, a 150 years after the British Museum's first started looking at this and he still is a white guy who was born in England. I, you know. I am, you know so much the demographic caricature of the 19th century scholar, right? Nobody has held my post who is female.

 **Gupta, Shreya**  
Yeah.

 **Robert Bracey** 1:21:59  
Right. We have had three women. Three? Yes, three women hold posts in this section, right? Liz Errington and Paramdip Khara, right, on short term projects and most importantly and I think hugely importantly, Helen Wang, as East Asian curator. So, and I wasn't a Sanskritist, my undergraduate degrees, which are the highest level I took were on African history and classics.



**Gupta, Shreya**

Ohh, that's an interesting combination.



**Robert Bracey** 1:22:40

I went to Keel, which I don't know if it's still does, but historically had very odd attitude towards breadth of subject, insisting that all its degrees be formally dual degree subjects. Uh, so, but you, you know, we are, why didn't the British Museum appoint a person who was born in South Asia, educated in South Asia and educated in the South Asian specialism to this role. Right. Or an East Asian right?



**Gupta, Shreya**

Yeah, either way.



**Robert Bracey** 1:23:22

You know, somebody from the geographic area and cultural background that the collect-., that some part of the collection represents and I mean some part of the collection that isn't the East India Company's coinage. So, why didn't it do that? The answer I always get because I'm not the person who makes that appointment, I'm the person who got that appointment. The answer I always get is nobody else was as qualified to do it as you want, but I don't think that coming from a particular cultural background is a handicap. Right? I once had this disagreement with a colleague, female colleague, who was born in India, right? Because one of the things that I occasionally work on is women in ancient India, and particularly I was talking about umm, the Buddhist nun Buddhimitra who is very famous, uh, and she insisted I couldn't possibly know what I was talking about, being English male. Yeah. And I was like, "you're from a relatively wealthy Calcutta family. I'm not sure you have that much more in common with a 1st century Buddhist nun than I do". Umm, but I think the thing that is important is diversity. Your background does condition and shape what you're interested in, the types of questions you ask, how you go about asking them and the diversity of scholarship means we get a diversity of questions and a diversity of approaches and that's the problem. That's why the fact that the British Museum curator is basically always been an Englishman is an issue.

I mean it's, you know, it's yeah, it's bad. It's not even like occasionally there's been an American man doing the job or a French man doing the job, you know, always men,

always English. Umm, you know, it's... There's been more diversity, right, in the study of Anglo-Saxon pennies in this Department than there has in South Asian coins, where at least a woman has held the position at some point in its history. Umm, so I mean I think all I am doing really is kind of reiterating why the decolonizing question is so complicated.



**Gupta, Shreya** 1:26:14

No, I agree with and there factors we haven't even discussed, infrastructural factors, about what limits people to apply, for instance, or what's the reason people are quote unquote, not as qualified as you, if that's the reasoning, but well, yeah, that's a whole another discussion. But I understand what you're trying to say about what that how that, that that has implications on this question of what are you doing to decolonize the collections.



**RB Robert Bracey**

Yes



**Gupta, Shreya**

Great. Thank you so much again for your time

● **Gupta, Shreya** stopped transcription