

TIMING THE TIMELESS

STELLA KRAMRISCH'S "UNKNOWN INDIA"

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ABSTRACT

This article reconstructs the physical and intellectual content of Stella Kramrisch's 1968 exhibition *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village*, organized for the Philadelphia Museum of Art. By probing Kramrisch's curatorial practice from conception to realization, it opens questions about her impact on canons and categories we continue to utilize today. In *Unknown India*, Kramrisch synthesized a vision rooted in the global Arts and Crafts movement and in India's movement for cultural independence. But here she explicitly struggled with taxonomy, moving South Asia to the forefront of global dialogues on terms including folk, tribal, tradition, authenticity, craft, design, and even art. As contemporary scholars debate the dynamism of authenticity, the intersectionality of the spiritual and practical, and the fluidity of hierarchies, *Unknown India* remains a touchstone.

KEYWORDS

Indian art; Folk art; Tribal art; Indigenous art; Stella Kramrisch; Haku Shah; Curatorial studies; History of museum exhibitions; Authenticity; Tradition.

In a career that spanned three-quarters of a century, Stella Kramrisch (1896–1993) engaged with a vast range of South Asia’s visual arts as an author, curator, teacher, collector, and advisor. Her work and life broke barriers in ways yet to be fully assessed. Her vision continues to resonate across her native Europe, the United States, and the Indian subcontinent.¹ Kramrisch’s name has long been inseparable from the historiography of South Asian art, but new understandings of the roles of museum collection, exhibition, and interpretive strategies in hierarchy and canon formation have placed her at the center of global discussions.²

During her final four decades, Kramrisch served as Indian curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among the largest and oldest “encyclopedic” fine arts museums in the United States.³ In 1968 she had her first opportunity to mount a major exhibition there.⁴ In practical terms, *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* was a coup. Kramrisch [Fig. 1], with the assistance of co-curator Haku Shah (1934–2019) [Fig. 2] and high-level supporters in India, managed to bring together over five hundred objects borrowed from public and private collections in India, the United States, and Europe.⁵ The objects were made in a range of materials, mainly clay, wood, cloth, metal, and paper. All originated in South Asia, primarily in what is today the nation of India but also in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), Pakistan, and Afghanistan. At the time (and, arguably, still today) the majority of these pieces would not have been termed fine art but would have been classified, depending on period and context, as folk art or craft, or as ethnographic or archaeological

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Barbara Stoler Miller (ed.), *Exploring India’s Sacred Art. Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, Philadelphia 1983, 3–33; Michael W. Meister, Kramrisch, Stella, in: Mircea Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2005 (July 16, 2024); Darielle Mason, Interwoven in the Pattern of Time. Stella Kramrisch and Kanthas, in: ead. (ed.), *Kantha. The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection and the Stella Kramrisch Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art*, Philadelphia 2009, 158–168; ead., La ley de la montaña. Vida y legado de Stella Kramrisch, in: Eva Fernández del Campo and Sergio Román Aliste (eds.), *Las mujeres que inventaron el arte indio*, Madrid 2021, 300–322. At the Philadelphia Museum of Art, my thanks to Kristen A. Regina, Leslie Essoglou, and Susan Anderson for their help with archival materials and Katie Brennan for her editorial acumen. Eternal gratitude to Stella Kramrisch, Michael W. Meister, and Hakubhai and Viluben Shah for sharing their memories and knowledge over many years.

2

Parul Dave Mukherji, Whither Art History in a Globalizing World, in: *The Art Bulletin* 96/2, 2014, 151–155.

3

Kramrisch arrived at the University of Pennsylvania in 1950, following her collection of temple sculpture, which was displayed at the museum and then purchased in 1956. She became curator of Indian art in 1954 and emeritus in 1972 with lifetime tenure as the Indian Art department head.

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Prior to 1968, her only US show had been Stella Kramrisch, *The Art of Nepal* (exh. cat. New York, Asia House Gallery), New York 1964. This was the first US exhibition of Nepalese art and led Philadelphia to open the first US gallery of Nepalese and Tibetan art.

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Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribes and Village* (exh. cat. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art), Philadelphia 1968.



[Fig. 1]
Stella Kramrisch (far right) accompanied by photographer Harry Holzman and museum president Bernice Wintersteen at the opening of the exhibition *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (January 20–February 26, 1968), Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, SKP Box 88, folder 5, Philadelphia Museum of Art Library and Archives.



[Fig. 2]

Haku Shah unpacks a puppet from Rajasthan for the installation of *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (July 15–August 20, 1968), St. Louis, MO, St. Louis Art Museum, in: *Globe-Democrat*, Wednesday, July 17, 1968, C-1, photographer: Jim Carrington, EXH, Box 42, folder 6, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art Library and Archives.

specimens. Prior to 1968, few of these types of objects had been exhibited – or even considered for exhibition – in Euro-American museums that self-identified as fine arts institutions, and fewer still had been permitted entry to these institutions' sacrosanct special exhibition galleries.

The exhibition traveled from Philadelphia to San Francisco to St. Louis. With its accompanying catalogue, it brought India's "folk arts" a moment of unprecedented respect and laid the foundation for a canon that persists to the present. While the works exhibited were new to US audiences, *Unknown India* was no epiphany for Kramrisch. Instead, she synthesized concepts honed decades earlier and engaged in ongoing debates over contested terms, including "folk", "tribal", "craft", "design", and "art". The show opened in Philadelphia when Kramrisch was seventy-two years old. Behind her was half a century of experience, including thirty years living, teaching, traveling, and collecting in India and nearly twenty years interfacing with student and museum audiences in the United States. Kramrisch's aggregate work on South Asia's folk art may prove to be among the most complex of her many legacies.⁶ Her approach to the subject shared a method with her work on other aspects of South Asia's art and architecture, ranging from intensive fieldwork and visual analysis to consideration of symbolism and devotional content, to an ideology buttressed by ancient texts, often anachronistic to her material. The types and individual objects she chose to study, collect, and exhibit emphasized what she considered the unbroken continuity of the Indic past. Yet at the same time, she maintained that individual objects possessed varying levels of aesthetic power, and that the aesthetic should be considered alongside the object's meaning in determining its importance and desirability.⁷

I had the good fortune to be Kramrisch's successor at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and have interacted with the collection she created for over three decades.⁸ Many of the pieces exhibited in *Unknown India*, including some she commissioned for it, comprise a significant part of the permanent collection. In re-presenting this material for museum visitors, I have faced many of the same issues as Kramrisch but have also had to grapple with her formidable legacy. In this paper, I discuss *Unknown India* from Kramrisch's intellectual background (Roots) through the realization of the exhibition

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She may be best known for *The Hindu Temple* (2 vols.), Calcutta 1946; and *Manifestations of Shiva* (exh. cat. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art), Philadelphia 1981.

7

See Clair Huff, Review of *Unknown India*, in: *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 11, 1968. Huff describes Kramrisch as "a tiny lady with silver hair and posture that makes you feel she is being presented at court" and quotes her as saying that her favorite period was from the fourth to eighth century when there was "much reticence. The whole awareness of life is there, but it was not a period of display – rather of collectiveness and power."

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I joined the museum as the first Stella Kramrisch Curator of Indian and Himalayan Art in late 1996 but knew and worked for Kramrisch while a student at the University of Pennsylvania during the mid-1980s.

(Experience). My primary aim is to delve into the conceptualization of *Unknown India* and the experience she created for visitors by reconstructing the physical organization of the objects within the space. In this way, I seek to reveal Kramrisch's curatorial practice and open questions about her influence on the canon and categories we use today.

I. Roots

Kramrisch's official work on *Unknown India* began in 1965, the same year she met Haku Shah. But the roots of her conceptual framework reach back to the beginning of her career. Kramrisch's intellectual maturation in Vienna began with her involvement with the Theosophical Society and the new artistic generation that had arisen as the Vienna Secession. The local manifestations of the international Arts and Crafts movement were equally important as, for example, the city's museums of folk and applied arts (the Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art, which opened in 1895, and the MAK – Museum of Applied Arts, which opened in 1864, originally the Österreichisches Museum für Volkskunde and the Österreichische Museum für Kunst und Industrie). At the University of Vienna, Kramrisch merged the conflicting methodologies of her two mentors, the archival professors Max Dvořák (1874–1921) and Josef Strzygowski (1862–1941). Books have been written on the Vienna School, the art history program in which both men worked and from where Kramrisch received her doctorate in 1919, but Strzygowski was a key inspiration for her involvement in “folk art”.⁹ Born into an industrial family and trained as a weaver, he considered “folk craft” to be a legitimate focus of study and thought the unappreciated, “anonymous” craftsman to be on par with “high” artists. Strzygowski became better known for his argument that works of art display unbroken lineages of racial, ethnic, and national “essence” or “purity”, an ideology that later connected him with Nazism.¹⁰ He also wrote virulent antisemitic texts, yet his mentorship and support of the Jewish Kramrisch offers nuance.¹¹

Kramrisch would later hold to some strands of Strzygowski's ideologies, including an appreciation for so-called folk and applied arts, the valorization of the anonymous craftsman, and even the

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For the Vienna School and folk art, see Matthew Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History. Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847–1918*, University Park, PA 2013. See also George J. Furlong, Strzygowski and the Origin of European Art, in: *Studies. An Irish Quarterly Review* 18/72, 1929, 664–667, here 664.

10

Margaret Olin, *The Nation without Art. Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art*, Lincoln, NE 2001, 33–73.

11

Strzygowski's views on individual Jews, versus “the Jews”, seem more empathetic. He mentored Kramrisch, whose lineage was Jewish, and in 1919 gave her his own invitation to a temporary lectureship in England. George Vasold, “Im Chaos wandeln”. The Vienna School of Art History and the First World War, in: *Austrian Studies* 21, 2013, 163–181, here 180 (transl. Deborah Holmes).

idea of cultural continuity. But her interpretations metamorphosed. While lecturing in England in 1919–1920, she met Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and, in 1921, arrived at his experimental university, Visva-Bharati, at Santiniketan in rural Bengal.¹² There the painter Nandalal Bose (1882–1966), principal of Kala Bhavan (the newly founded art program), hired her to introduce budding artists to the latest trends in European modernism.

Rabindranath's interest and philosophy of education incorporated the folk and the tribal by bringing everyday Bengali rituals into university life. *Alpona* (women's ritual rice-powder floor painting), for example, was taught as part of the curriculum, reinvented, and documented by members of Tagore's circle.¹³ His utopic rural vision extended to the local Santal tribal community, who were a favorite subject of Bose's paintings.¹⁴ The university held adapted or invented local festivals as well, including the harvest celebration of Poush Mela that involved not only performance but also a sale of local crafts and arts such as *pata* (vertical painted narrative scrolls), *kantha* (embroidered quilts), *dokra* work (resin-thread-technique metalware), and mundane items like *lota* (water pots), along with the sale of works by Kala Bhavan students.¹⁵

Kramrisch's (likely somewhat mythologized) memory was that her first day at Santiniketan coincided precisely with Poush Mela.¹⁶ She purchased a "folk" piece (a handmade wooden toy cart) but also desired a painting by a Kala Bhavan student, which she could not afford, so she asked Nandalal Bose for a loan. This story, along with her thesis on the early Buddhist site of Bharhut, conveys her enduring fascination with the full range of India's historical religious legacy, elite and non-elite, ancient to contemporary, as long as she could find in a work that all-important "Indic" thread.¹⁷ The anecdote also exemplifies Kramrisch's insatiable passion for acquiring

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Although Kramrisch recounted conflicting versions of her first meeting with Tagore and their interactions in England, it is likely that he did personally invite her to Santiniketan.

13

Abanindranath Tagore, transl. Andrée Karpelès and Tapanmohan Chatterji, *L'Alpona ou les décorations rituelles au Bengale*, Paris 1921.

14

Rhythms of India. The Art of Nandalal Bose (exh. cat. San Diego, San Diego Museum of Art), ed. by Sonya Rhie Mace and Pramod Chandra, 2008. The motif of the Santal was soon taken up by one of Bose's primary students, Ramkinkar Baij. *Santhal Family. Positions around an Indian Sculpture* (exh. cat. Antwerp, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst), ed. by Anshuman Dasgupta, Monika Szewczyk, and Grant Watson, Antwerp 2008.

15

Lota are everyday objects used for cleaning the body, including after defecation. But the same shape and name applies to a ritual water vessel used, for example, during morning sun salutation (*Surya namaskar*).

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Miller, *Exploring India's Sacred Art*, 10.

17

Kramrisch repeatedly says or implies "Hindu" or "Indic" when discussing this continuity, at times explicitly excluding "hybrid", meaning Hellenistic-Roman (Gandharan) and Indo-Persianate (Mughal in particular). With a few exceptions, she did not collect hybrid material for herself or for any institution.

things she found meaningful or beautiful, a passion central to her personality and biography.

The seeds for Kramrisch's deep appreciation of folk craft as art and glorification of the anonymous maker, two pillars of the transnational Arts and Crafts movement,¹⁸ had been planted in Vienna. They sprouted in London as she roamed the galleries of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), but bloomed under Santiniketan's intense sun. At Santiniketan, Kramrisch also strengthened her vision of the superiority of the spiritual over the material. Although embedded in academic debates across Europe, this view was grounded in the ideological strategy of Asia's cultural leaders, including the Tagores, Okakura Kakuzo, and Ananda Coomaraswamy, who used the idea to elevate "Eastern" cultural heritage above "Western". In the case of India, it also helped them create an art they believed would be appropriate for their postcolonial nation.¹⁹ Although Kramrisch spoke often of aesthetics as her primary criterion for collecting one object as opposed to another, her actual choices show that her decisions were equally if not more often based on her belief that a work had spiritual power, links with an unbroken Indic past, and makers who worked for a transcendent goal.²⁰

Kramrisch remained at Santiniketan for less than two years before moving to the University of Calcutta, where she could teach her own subject – Indian art. She was the first European and the first woman to teach at the school since its founding in 1857, and it was not an easy road.²¹ Although Kramrisch was self-reliant and introverted by nature, she soon became an active participant in the life of the city's artistic and intellectual elite. In 1932 she was appointed co-editor with Abanindranath Tagore of the leading English-language periodical, the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*. Another now-well-documented achievement was her role as primary curator, with Johannes Itten, of the 1923 exchange exhibi-

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Sria Chatterjee, Postindustrialism and the Long Arts and Crafts Movement. Between Britain, India, and the United States of America, in: *British Art Studies* 15, 2020 (October 28, 2024), and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New "Indian" Art. Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920*, Cambridge 1992, 52.

19

Partha Mitter, Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin in Calcutta. The Creation of a Regional Asian Avant-Garde Art, in: Burcu Dogramaci, Mareike Hetschold, Laura Karp Lugo, Rachel Lee, and Helene Roth (eds.), *Arrival Cities. Migrating Artists and New Metropolitan Topographies in the 20th Century*, Leuven 2020, 147–158.

20

Stella Kramrisch, Traditions of the Indian Craftsman, in: Milton Singer (ed.), *Traditional India. Structure and Change*, Philadelphia 1959 (repr. in Miller, *Exploring India's Sacred Art*, 59–66).

21

Her position as a full faculty member was not formalized until much later and her situation was always precarious and underpaid. To subsidize herself, she taught for several decades at the Courtauld Institute in London but was not offered a faculty position there.

tions of art between the Bengal School and the Bauhaus in Dessau, Germany.²²

Particularly notable in relation to *Unknown India* is her collaboration in her early years in Calcutta (now Kolkata) with her former student Devaprasad Ghosh (1894–1985) to collect for and establish the university’s Ashutosh Museum. The institution opened in 1937 with Ghosh as director. Its lower-level galleries brought together the standard material seen in India’s colonial museums of the time: archaeological relics such as excavated terracottas and religious sculptures, especially those of the local Pala-Sena dynasties. But in the large room on the top floor, Ghosh and Kramrisch displayed a vast collection of Bengali folk material. *Kantha* and *pata* jostled with Kalighat paintings. Wooden butter molds and other tools, utilitarian metalwork, clay votives, and ritual ephemera filled shelves around the walls.²³

Ghosh sent rurally based university students on collecting missions to their hometowns, which included present-day Bangladesh. There they gathered items, often from their families.²⁴ The *kantha* in the Ashutosh collection so closely resemble many from Kramrisch’s personal collection, now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, that it would seem they must have been made by the same families or even artists, indicating that Kramrisch acquired at least some of the overflow from the Ashutosh’s endeavor.

She was also friendly with prominent Bengali collectors of folk material in Calcutta, most significantly the writer and social activist Gurusaday Dutta (1882–1941).²⁵ Dutta founded the Bratachari movement, which shared approaches with the international Arts and Crafts movement. He published on his collection and eventually housed it in the Gurusaday Museum in Joka, a suburb of Kolkata.²⁶

Kramrisch’s help in establishing the Ashutosh, her interactions with Dutta and Tagore’s circle, and her ever-more-vigorous collecting propelled her toward the serious scholarly exploration of

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Saloni Mathur, *India by Design. Colonial History and Cultural Display*, Oakland, CA 2009; Kris K. Manjappa, Stella Kramrisch and the Bauhaus in Calcutta, in: R. Siva Kumar (ed.), *The Last Harvest. Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Ahmedabad 2012, 34–60; and Regina Bittner and Katherine Rhomberg (eds.), *The Bauhaus in Calcutta. An Encounter of the Cosmopolitan Avant Garde*, Berlin 2013.

23

This collection remains installed today, although light- and insect-sensitive works (such as textiles, paper, and books) are significantly deteriorated.

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Since I have never been given access to the Ashutosh’s files, I do not know the details of these acquisitions.

25

Gurusaday Dutta, *Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal. The Collected Papers*, Calcutta 1990; and Katherine Hacker, In Search of “Living Traditions”. Gurusaday Dutt, Zainul Abedin, and the Institutional Life of Kanhthas, in: Mason, *Kantha*, 59–79.

26

This museum has been teetering on the edge of permanent closure for a number of years. At present it seems to be shuttered, and it is unclear what will happen with the collection in the future.

folk material. Arguably her most original contributions came not in 1968 but in 1939. That year she published “Indian Terracottas” and “Kantha” in the same issue of the *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*.²⁷ In her writings on these very different subjects, we see her struggling with inherited constructs. In each article, she proposes new paradigms that gradually expand the foundation upon which she would later build *Unknown India*.

In the terracotta article, Kramrisch establishes a fundamental typology in which she argues against earlier scholars who had dated according to the formula of simple equals early, complex equals late.

[Timed vs. timeless] is not [...] a question of any temporal conditions. It is a question not of sequence but of principle. The principle involved is that of ageless types and timed variations. The timeless types persist, essentially changeless; the timed variations result from impresses which the passing moment leaves on them.

The two types occur side by side on the various levels of the different excavations. Today also the two types continue to be made, the one as “primitive” as ever, the other with all the attributes of style and local adaptations.²⁸

This perspective contradicts Ananda Coomaraswamy’s more analytic and chronologically oriented article published just a decade earlier on similar material.²⁹ It also differs from more recent studies of seemingly repetitive object production that understand non-industrial human production to be perpetually mutating. Here, though, the importance of Kramrisch’s division lies in the effect it would have on her later work.

On the surface, “Kantha” appears to make a closely related point, but what it instead argues is not that the object’s form persists “unchanged” but rather that it perpetuates representation of the unseen, a concept she privileges throughout.

Time has nothing to do with the symbolism of Kanthas nor with their making. The symbols stored in the Kanthas belong to the primeval images in which man beholds the universe. Their meaning is present in their shape and in the position

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Stella Kramrisch, Indian Terracottas, in: *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 7, 1939, 89–110 (repr. in Miller, *Exploring India’s Sacred Art*, 69–84); and Stella Kramrisch, Kantha, in: *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 7, 1939, 141–167 (repr. in Mason, *Kantha*, 169–183).

28

Kramrisch, Indian Terracottas, in Miller, *Exploring India’s Sacred Art*, 69. She uses “primitive” as a synonym for “timeless”.

29

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, *Archaic Indian Terracottas*, Leipzig 1928.

and relation which these shapes have within the whole; symbol and composition are inseparable in the Kanthas.³⁰

Tied in here with the “primeval” continuity of national/ethnic identity in symbol, form, and character is the romanticization of anonymous artists – despite the fact that some of the makers of *kantha* in Kramrisch’s own collection stitched their names onto their cloths. What is particularly notable for the time, though, is that she speaks of women makers without condescension. By turning the full strength of her scholarly lens to the category, she gives domestic female production an unprecedented level of respect.

One additional project worth mentioning in relation to *Unknown India* is Kramrisch’s single foray into the far south. Kramrisch had contributed chapters to a collaborative exploration of the arts of the then-princely state of Travancore (now the southern part of Kerala), for which she briefly surveyed stone and wooden temples, domestic architecture, murals, and metal icons.³¹ The majority of the material dated from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. Her primary foci were temples and the formal blending of Dravida (southern) style, here reflecting her definition of the region’s “Great” or “Brahmanical” tradition, with Kerala style, which she equated with “indigenous”.

Especially during the 1940s, Kramrisch was caught in traumas that intertwined the global and the personal. These included World War II, the death of her mother, the Great Calcutta Killings, Indian Independence, the Partition of India, the death of her husband, financial pressures, the misogyny and antagonism she faced in Calcutta, her rejection by the Courtauld Institute in London, and finally her move to Philadelphia. Over this period, Kramrisch’s scholarly production never faltered. If there are general trends in her writing during these years, they include a more homogenized and achronological view of artists across the (“Hindu”) subcontinent, along with a greater use of ancient texts to legitimize her conclusions. In addition, her written voice in English became more fluid (if no less complex) but also more definitive and universalized.

The revival of crafts as part of development schemes after Partition and the Nehruvian design movement that paralleled it brought renewed interest to India’s folk art and crafts. But the aims of India’s new movements were primarily modernization and establishing a market for handmade products rather than historical continuity, aesthetics, or cultural appreciation. In the United States, non-American folk art was excluded from fine arts institutions and

³⁰

Kramrisch, Kantha, in Mason, Kantha, 174. For her early articulation of the duality of unseen and seen in India’s literature on aesthetics, see Stella Kramrisch, Introduction, in *The Vishnudharmottara (Part III) A Treatise on Indian Painting and Image Making*, Calcutta 1928, 3–20c, here 10.

³¹

Stella Kramrisch, J. M. Cousins, and R. Vasudeva Poduval, *The Arts and Crafts of Travancore*, London/Travancore 1948. Kramrisch’s chapters were abridged as Drāvīda and Kerala. In the Art of Travancore, in: *Artibus Asiae*, Suppl. 11, 1953, 1–51.

relegated to ethnographic collections in natural history museums.³² One important precursor to *Unknown India* was the 1955 *Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, which showcased nearly a thousand objects.³³ Kramrisch lent to the show but appears to have had little or no intellectual input.³⁴ Edgar Kaufmann Jr. (1910–1989), then the museum’s director of industrial design, together with the architect, interior designer, and folk art collector Alexander Girard (1907–1993) borrowed and purchased many of the displays during a six-week trip around India.³⁵ Their research was rushed and minimal, although they were certainly shepherded by major figures in India’s arts realm. To imbue a bit of scholarship, MoMA commissioned Pupil Jayakar (1915–1997) and John Irwin (1917–1997) to write for the book. Jayakar was India’s leading voice in folk art and handicrafts (the following year she founded the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum).³⁶ Irwin, a textile specialist involved with Gira Sarabai (1923–2021) in establishing the Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad, was Keeper of the Indian Section of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The installation, designed by Girard, combined Orientalist fantasy, ethnography, and publicity for India’s current textile production and export [Fig. 3].

[It] was given the form of an imaginary bazaar or market place. Twelve square gilt columns were set around a fifty-foot pool of water and reflected in a wall of mirror at one end. Over the water were hung informally a bewildering assortment of saris. [...] Near this, the rarest brocades, tinsel gauzes, gossamer cottons and Kashmir shawls were ranged [...]. In an adjacent room, under a patchwork canopy [...] glittered a treasure-trove of the work of jewelers [...].

32

The interest in folk art in the United States had begun (as it continues) with a focus on US art from before the twentieth century. In the 1950s, the only attempt at a global focus was the Museum of International Folk Art that opened in Santa Fe in 1953.

33

Textiles and Ornaments of India (exh. cat. New York, Museum of Modern Art), ed. by Mortimer Wheeler, New York 1956.

34

MoMA’s press release and catalogue acknowledgments thank Kramrisch, but as was her habit, she lent anonymously (listed as “Private Collection”). The frontispiece is a color detail of one of her *kanthas* (Philadelphia Museum of Art inv. 1994-148-686).

35

Saloni Mathur, Charles and Ray Eames in India, in: *Art Journal* 70/1, 2011, 34–53, here 39. This was Kaufmann’s first visit to the country; Girard seemed to know little more.

36

This institution is usually called the Crafts Museum.



[Fig. 3]

Installation view of the exhibition *Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India* (April 11–September 25, 1955), New York, The Museum of Modern Art, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, photographer: Alexandre Georges © The Museum of Modern Art/ Licensed SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

Another room was devoted to a great variety of tribal attire, household utensils, ritual figures [...].³⁷

There were also female wax-mannequin groupings set on low platforms. They wore saris and jewelry and engaged in various craft-making activities. Ray and Charles Eames also lent a hand by creating a short explanatory film to be shown in the gallery.³⁸ Perhaps the most jarring and politically complex inclusion was just under the exhibition title. There Girard placed the V&A's *Tippoo's Tiger*, a life-sized wooden automaton that depicts an Englishman being devoured by a tiger. Through its subject, this monumental piece represents Indian resistance to colonial domination. In paradox, its history as having been looted by British East India Company troops during the 1799 sack of Tipu Sultan's Mysore Summer Palace embodies the savagery of that domination.³⁹

This stage set could hardly be more antithetical to the "white cube" coined to describe the supposedly neutral installations of former MoMA director Alfred H. Barr Jr. (1902–1981).⁴⁰ Barr's format had long been MoMA's signature exhibition strategy and is now so culturally ingrained that, as demonstrated at commercial galleries and museums, it has become globally equated with the appropriate setting not only for modern art but for all art. *Textiles and Ornaments of India* was self-consciously about promoting the hand-made products and designs of a struggling new nation. MoMA's exhibition marketed through "Eastern" fantasy what would be beautiful to the American pocketbook. This imperial commercialism reflected the Euro-American world's fairs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries though now overlaid with a Cold War propaganda that glorified independent capitalism.

II. Conception

At *Unknown India's* opening, Kramrisch reportedly said, "I've been wanting to stage this show for years and years. It has been my

³⁷

Textiles and Ornaments, 11. Girard had earlier used the term "folk craft" rather than "tribal" for this last section.

³⁸

Designers Ray (1912–1988) and Charles (1907–1978) Eames made over a hundred short films including this eleven-minute piece for MoMA. Although they were already collecting global folk art, this show was prior to their trips to India and involvement with the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, and the Nehruvian design movement.

³⁹

Beginning an exhibition meant to celebrate India's handiwork with this object not long after Independence raises questions about the curators' motivations. Perhaps Girard, who collected what he thought of as folk toys, may have seen it only through this lens and not as a representation of Indian resistance and British aggression. Likewise, perhaps V&A curator John Irwin suggested it as a monumental "masterpiece" from his own museum, a curiosity meant to draw New York audiences.

⁴⁰

For the term, see Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Berkeley, CA 1999 (repr. from his series of essays published in *Artforum* 1976 and 1986).

dream.”⁴¹ Yet her first formal exhibition proposal seems to be one submitted to the museum’s director Evan H. Turner (1927–2020) in 1965, although they undoubtedly had prior conversations.⁴² Scribbled on the top of the typescript is “Statement on Indian Popular Art prepared by S.K.”

An exhibition of the Folk Art of India will include mainly works of rural and ritual art but also popular art. [...] Each of these groups and others will be exhaustively represented by examples of outstanding artistic quality so that the ancient and still living traditions of India will be presented in their continuity. The majority of the objects will be from the seventeenth century to the present, some however go as far back as the eleventh century. [...] The second aim of the exhibition is to represent the Ritual Year such as it is celebrated in India by seasonal works of art in clay, grass, textiles, etc. and paintings. No such exhibition was held as yet in or outside India. The selection will be made on purely artistic merit. The visual impact of the exhibition will communicate the creative experience and with it, the myths and symbols which live in these forms.

In April of that same year, she submitted a longer proposal.

The purpose of the exhibition is to show *levels* of Indian art *which have not as yet been brought together* [emphasis mine]. They are 1. Ritual Village Art; 2. Tribal or primitive art and 3. Popular art of the large cities. Most of these died at the turn of this century. The majority of the exhibits will be from the 18th and 19th centuries, and a few from earlier centuries down to the third millennium B.C. [...] The single objects will be chosen as far as they are works of art, on the basis of their artistic quality. *Their meaning will be made clear through their form* [emphasis mine].⁴³

Here she simplifies the exhibition narrative by excluding the ritual year as a separate theme. She also pushes the chronological parameters from the eleventh century AD back to the third millennium BC, a move that allows her to demonstrate unbroken links with the

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Kramrisch quoted in Ruth Seltzer, Art and Music Flood Our City with Culture, in: *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 23, 1968.

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Undated but attached to a letter from Turner to Jack R. McGregor (director of the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, a potential venue for the show), February 9, 1965, EXH Box 44, folder 11, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives.

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Kramrisch to Turner, April 13, 1965, EXH Box 44, folder 11, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives. Kramrisch states that “about 300 objects (between 250 and 350) will be selected”. Why this number is lower than that of her other proposals is unclear. Perhaps she did not want to terrify her director.

ancient past (the idea of the “timeless” that she articulated in her 1939 article on terracottas). At the other end of the timeline, she now plans to conclude at 1900 rather than the present. That various types of art in India deteriorated or died at different points is not a new idea for her. As early as the 1930s, for example, Kramrisch had written that the “Great Tradition” of temple sculpture had deteriorated by the thirteenth century, and in many other places, she says it died by the sixteenth.⁴⁴

In the final sentences of the later proposal, she reassures the director of this self-consciously fine arts museum that he need not worry about the exhibition appearing ethnographic, as the focus would remain on the formal qualities of the objects. Visitors would be invited to admire an object and be inspired by it; they would intuit its use and context. For Kramrisch, cultural comprehension was secondary to artistic (aesthetic) appreciation and, she implies, never fully possible. Her aim was to spread even wider the umbrella of fine art and so encompass more of India’s makers, media, and moments. Katherine Hacker designates this change in terminology from ethnography to art as a “taxonomic shift” in large part attributable to W. G. Archer, the V&A’s keeper of the Indian Section and also a lender and advisor to *Unknown India* then working to aestheticize his own institution’s mission.⁴⁵

Another exhibition statement, handwritten on a sheet of notepaper and undated, seems to be dictated by Kramrisch more for herself than for others.

Folk art of India: Aim of exhibition: To present levels of living art of India today, past other than that of the great trad[ition] of Brahmanical India. From 3rd mil. BC to pres. Emerges interrelations of tribal and rural art and way in which dif[ferent] historical places are absorbed by one + other + another hand tribal + rural trad[ition]s find their way into art of Hinduism. Will bring out consistency and continuity of the great tradition of India – also il[lustrate]s elasticity + coexistence of purely tribal forms. Meaning that this will fulfil[l] a definite function which could not be fulfilled in written or oral trad[ition]; Visual form is essential to the ultimate purpose of these people, i.e. achievement in internal peace – : these [objects are] not just folk art as word

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Stella Kramrisch, Medieval Indian Sculpture, in: *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 87/4535, 1939, 1180–1194, here 1181: “Although the content and method of art in South India have not radically changed, there is a deterioration in the quality of the sculptures.” While she is speaking here about South Indian sculpture, she applied this idea of a hierarchy and aesthetic deterioration to all categories throughout her writings.

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Katherine Hacker, Displaying Tribal Imagery. Known and Unknown India, in: *Museum Anthropology* 23/3, 2000, 5–25, here 12. See also Partha Mitter, The Imperial Collections. Indian Art, in: *A Grand Design. The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (exh. cat. Baltimore, Baltimore Museum of Art), ed. by Malcolm Baker and Brenda Richardson, New York 1997, 222–229.

is usually used. Extent 450 exhibits – time wise from 3rd millennium BC to 1966.⁴⁶

Whereas she previously mentioned levels of India’s art, here she specifies her meaning. There is “the great tradition of Brahmanical-India” at the top level. Everything apart from that, but within a generous category she terms the “art of Hinduism” and includes tribal, are the other levels.

It is notable that, even as she continues to use the title “Folk Art of India”, she struggles with the phrase’s implications. The objects were “not just folk art” because they fulfilled a spiritual purpose the same as, in her view, any art within the long, unbroken stream of Indic/Hindu visual-form production.⁴⁷ As in her early writings, Kramrisch equates “Brahmanical” with Great Tradition, these phrases meaning both mainstream and of higher value. She conceives Great/Brahmanical as one-half of a complementary duality.⁴⁸ In this project, she avoids the polemic of great versus little or lesser, at first opposing Great/Brahmanical with “other” until she eventually settles on the more fluid term “unknown”. The most important aspect of her final choice is that “unknown” (rather than “other”) flips the perspective from the makers and users to that of the museum and cosmopolitan viewers for whom these types of objects are, indeed, unknown. As Katherine Hacker and Vishakha Desai both emphasize, these things are unknown not only because they are made in distant places but also because they have little monetary value outside their sphere of use.⁴⁹ Yet a fourth exhibition statement, dated September 1, 1965, shows Kramrisch continuing to massage her narrative:

The main stream of Indian art has been outlined in several standard publications, and its works are seen in museums and exhibitions. Their grandeur and diversity are of such absorbing interest that little attention has been given to *the undercurrents, sediment and subsoil whence the great monu-*

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Undated, EXH Box 44, folder 11, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives.

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The word after “inner” or perhaps “internal” is unclear but seems to be “peace”. Kramrisch’s lifelong conviction that transcendence was the primary motivator in Indic religions is a far stretch from John Irwin’s view on the practicality of village and tribal actions. In the 1970s, for example, he wrote that “worship is not directed with a view to improve prospects of life hereafter; rather it’s directed to gain immediate temporal advantage, or to avert the malignity of the spirits”. Irwin quoted in: *The Village Gods of South India*, in: *Ethnoflorence*, December 2, 2008 (June 28, 2023).

⁴⁸

As gender-studies scholar Shefali Chandra puts it, “the notion of a caste *system* occludes an analysis of Brahmanism: the power of the Brahmanical caste to reproduce its power and privilege over time”. Chandra quoted in *The Cunning of Brahmanism. Invisibility Has Its Privileges*, Washington University in St. Louis Center for the Humanities, March 12, 2015 (April 7, 2023).

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Hacker, *Displaying Tribal Imagery*, 13; and Vishakha N. Desai, *Re-Visioning Asian Arts in the 1990s. Reflections of a Museum Professional*, in: *Art Bulletin* 77/2, 1995, 169–174.

ments have arisen [emphasis mine]. Their time, moreover, is in the past, the main stream having been cut off by the middle of the last century. No major work of Indian art has been created since. But the landscape of Indian art has not become arid. [...] The ritual, traditional art of rural India is yet alive and it dies hard in spite of progressive industrialization of the country. This ritual art differs from hereditary crafts and it is not a folk art. It[s] images and symbols are ancient and sacred. They imbue with their meaning the forms in which they are vested and let them grow ever anew, forms which are vigorous and varied while they recreate the ancient types or play with them, presenting them with pristine joy, newly clad.⁵⁰

Looking over these concept statements in order, we see Kramrisch finding a way to subsume the idea of the ritual year without making it a competing theme, delicately balancing the Great Tradition with the “other” and reconciling an art she believed ended in the past with her desire to represent the vitality of the living. But this last statement also reveals that her terminological struggle was far from settled. She now draws a distinction between hereditary craft and folk art on the one hand and ritual art on the other. Throughout the planning phases, Kramrisch titled her exhibition variously “Folk Art of India”, “Folk and Tribal Art of India”, and “Traditional and Folk Art[s] of India”. It was only in March 1967 that she submitted the catalogue to the editor as “Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village”. The complete revision of the title demonstrates how much she had been wrestling with the taxonomy underpinning the whole.

Although the fundamentals of Kramrisch’s idea were articulated by 1965, the object list and lenders needed significant work. Her ambition was to survey the entire subcontinent, but her experience was not up to that monumental task. While she had traveled extensively during her three decades in India and knew many collections and collectors, her familiarity was primarily with Bengal, which she praised as “one of [India’s] richest provinces” (in terms of folk art).⁵¹ Her original choice for Indian collaborator-courier was Devaprasad Ghosh, who would have tilted the selection even more heavily eastward. Luckily, in late 1965 she visited the first National Institute of

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Stapled to letter from Turner to Charles E. Buckley (director of the City Art Museum of St. Louis), September 1, 1965, EXH Box 44, folder 11, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives.

⁵¹

Ibid.

Design in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.⁵² There she met Haku Shah, who was working as an ethnographer.⁵³

A multitalented painter inspired by the rural people and imagery of his native Gujarat, Shah had already built a significant personal collection. Kramrisch recognized his value to her exhibition. His passion for and knowledge of western India, his ability to communicate that passion, and his energy and persistence in researching and gathering eventually resulted in her naming him her co-curator. We have only a few of her letters to him but a number of his to her, almost all accompanied by a different, lively drawing [Fig. 4]. A September 1965 letter from Shah shows that Kramrisch had proposed him to the Indian government as official courier, although this was not confirmed for several years. This same letter demonstrates that he was commissioning work not only for the exhibition but also, in at least one case, for Kramrisch [Fig. 5].

I think godhra, posina and Ramdeo horses will be ready when we need. I will order one more posin [*sic*] horse for you. Also the grass [peacock] [...] when I will go to my place I will ask those Adiwasis to make for us. Those marriage toys I will ask them in October. Kutch toys I am not sure. Ayanar man is ready anytime. Don't hesitate in asking me for any work. [...] I am happy that Delhi people have agreed to your proposal. I will be very happy if I can join the exhibition.⁵⁴

A second letter from about six months later reveals not only the difficulty of transporting the delicate low-fired clay objects but also the primary research that Shah was conducting in tandem with collecting and shipping.

When the animals (especially she [buffalo] and cows) are not fertile they offer these horses to the god Dubaraj. They are for fertilizing function. [...] With these horses or some times instead of these horses they offer a Mor (it is made of card

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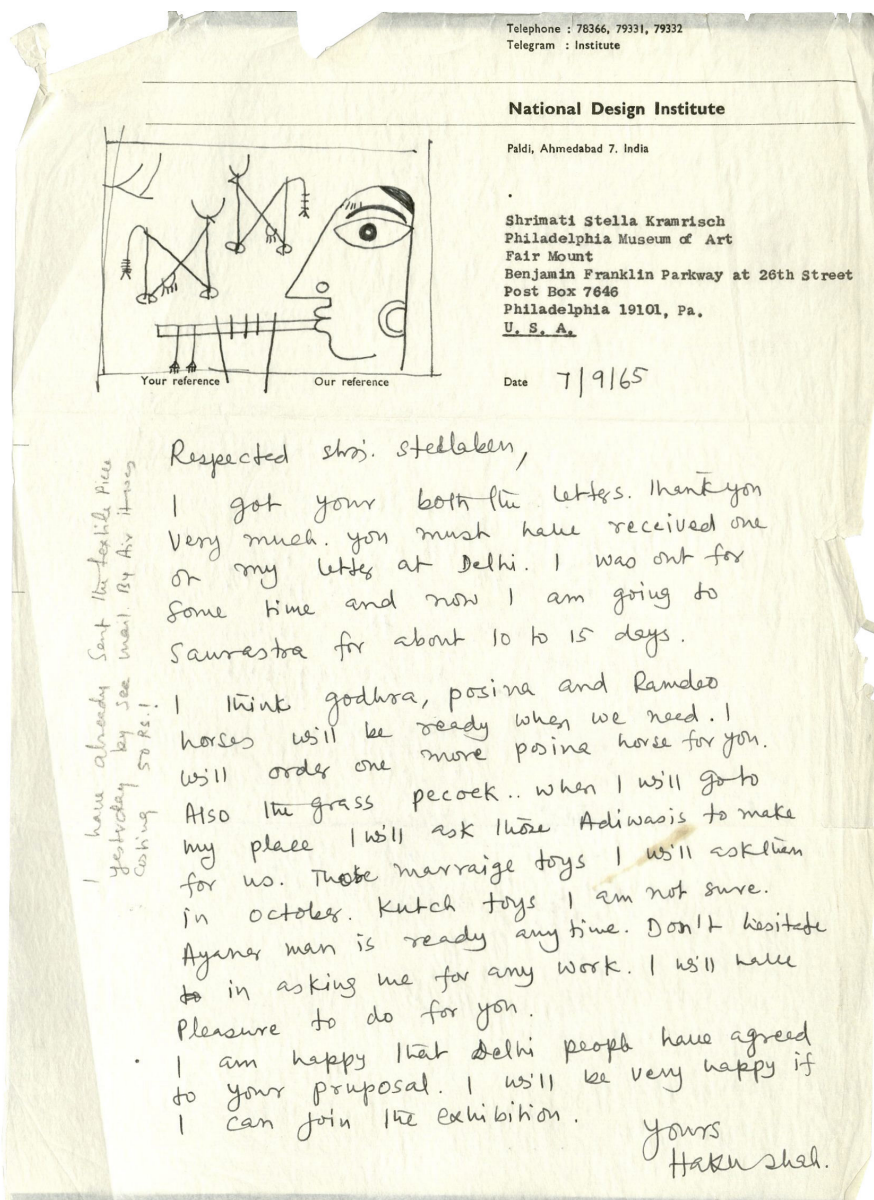
The National Institute of Design had been founded in 1961 as a joint local, international, and government venture. Among other works on the institution, see Rebecca M. Brown, *Art for a Modern India, 1947–1980*, Raleigh, NC 2009.

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Before and after his return from the United States, Shah collaborated with Swiss anthropologist Eberhard Fischer on Art for Tribal Rituals in South Gujarat, India. A Visual Anthropological Survey of 1969, in: *Artibus Asiae*, Suppl. 53, 2021; and *Rural Craftsmen and Their Work. Equipment and Techniques in the Mer Village of Ratadi in Saurashtra, India*, Ahmedabad 1970. Along with other publications and folk-art exhibitions, Shah also established several art and craft centers, including, in 1989, the still-vital Shilpagram in Udaipur, Rajasthan.

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Shah to Kramrisch, September 7, 1965, IND Box 11, file Haku Shah, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives. Ramdeo (now Ramdevra) is a place in Rajasthan; Posina (now Poshina), Godhra, and Kutch are in Gujarat. Adiwasis (Adivasis) is a term for individuals of tribal heritage, from communities officially labeled as “Scheduled Tribe” or “Janjati” and self-labeled as indigenous. Ayanar is a South Indian term for a village protector deity.



Telephone : 78366, 79331, 79332
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National Design Institute

Paldi, Ahmedabad 7, India

Shrimati Stella Kramrisch
 Philadelphia Museum of Art
 Fair Mount
 Benjamin Franklin Parkway at 26th Street
 Post Box 7646
 Philadelphia 19101, Pa.
U. S. A.

Date 7/9/65

I have already sent the textile piece yesterday by sea mail. By Air it was costing 50 Rs.

Respected shri. stellakam,

I got your both the letters. Thank you very much. you must have received one or my letter at Delhi. I was out for some time and now I am going to Saurashtra for about 10 to 15 days.

I think godhra, posina and Ramdeo horses will be ready when we need. I will order one more posina horse for you. Also the grass peacock.. when I will go to my place I will ask those Adiwasis to make for us. Those marriage toys I will ask them in october. Kutch toys I am not sure. Ayans man is ready any time. Don't hesitate to in asking me for any work. I will have pleasure to do for you.

I am happy that Delhi people have agreed to your proposal. I will be very happy if I can join the exhibition.

yours
 Haku Shah.

[Fig. 4]

Letter from Haku Shah to Stella Kramrisch, September 7, 1965 with a sketch of Krishna Gopala, IND Box 11, Correspondence 1966/67, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art Library and Archives.



[Fig. 5]
Votive Horse and Rider (Spirit Rider), Poshina, Sabarkantha District, Gujarat, India, 1966,
terracotta, 98.1 × 26.7 × 40.6 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Stella Kramrisch Collection,
1994-148-296. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

board and some colored papers). I have asked the fellow to send me that also.⁵⁵

In all, *Unknown India* borrowed objects from forty-four museums and private collections in India, Europe, and the United States. India sent the largest percentage. That the vast majority arrived at all is an astonishing diplomatic and logistical feat on the part of Kramrisch, Shah, and their Indian supporters. According to the catalogue, the show displayed a whopping 525 objects.⁵⁶ Of these, nearly 160 are listed as from anonymous lenders. In virtually all cases, this means that they were part of Kramrisch's personal collection and so mostly Bengali.⁵⁷ Some of these, from metal animals to early terracottas, appear in photographs of her last home in Calcutta [Fig. 6]. Others, like *kantha* [Fig. 7], she had published, while more are known from her homes in Pennsylvania. Another forty works are listed as in the museum's collection. These Kramrisch had either donated earlier or commissioned through Shah. By the summer of 1967, some of the 175 objects shipped from India had begun to arrive. The first group, packed by a professional shipper, experienced severe damage. The others, which Shah packed himself, arrived in better shape. Unfortunately, governmental red tape kept Hakubhai, to use Shah's Gujarati honorific, from being present for the unpacking, but he and his wife, Viluben, arrived in time for the exhibition.⁵⁸ Although Shah is mentioned only once in the catalogue, in the director's postscript, where he is called Indian Curator, he appears more often than Kramrisch in press for the show.

Kramrisch wrote her extensive, multipart catalogue essay in her usual poetically obtuse prose. She organized the essay entirely differently than the geographically arranged entries and installation. In the first section, titled "The Setting", she speaks of rural India and the importance of place. In the second, "The Spirit Rider", she explores what she takes as the primary archetype: the horse and rider, which for Kramrisch became more than a votive object or ancestral image. In both catalogue and exhibition, the spirit rider is

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Shah to Kramrisch, March 17 [1966], IND Box 11, file Haku Shah, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives.

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This seems to accord with lender and shipping records, but they are not entirely consistent, and it is likely that at least some of the loans did not arrive from India.

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Kramrisch donated most of her *kantha* and *pata*, as well as many of the smaller objects and paintings, to the museum during her lifetime. Some she gifted around the time of the exhibition, others in subsequent years, and the rest she bequeathed (in total, Kramrisch gave the museum nearly a thousand objects from her personal collection). For the exhibition, the museum was instructed to pack and transport a long list of works from her home. A few, however, did not enter the museum's collection.

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As India's representative, Shah was required to oversee the unpacking, but although India's major arts leaders pushed the government to cut the red tape, funds did not come through in time, and with permission, the museum unpacked without him. The John D. Rockefeller III fund then stepped in to support all of Shah's travel. Turner to Porter McCray, September 20, 1967, EXH Box 40, folder 11, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives.



[Fig. 6]
Cabinet displaying objects from Stella Kramrisch's "folk" collection in her home in Kolkata, about 1940s, SKP Box 88, folder 5, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art Library and Archives.



[Fig. 7]

Kantha (Embroidered Quilt), probably Faridpur District, Bangladesh, late 19th century, cotton plain weave with cotton embroidery, 114.3 × 165.1 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-684. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

an organizing principal, weaving a pattern of transcendent meaning that links the subcontinent. Among other places, it appears on the book's cover and on most of the full-page contextual photographs (Plates I–VIII). Kramrisch's next section she titles "Autochthony". Here she connects "The Setting" to "The Spirit Rider", reemphasizing the importance of place specificity. This is indigeneity not in a tribal sense but in the sense of one's own and one's ancestor's sacrosanct earthly locale, and through that, one's place and one's community's identity within the world.

The following section, titled "Varieties of Tribal Art", introduces the hundreds of communities across India considered outside mainstream Brahmanical society but whose identities and cultural and religious boundaries were (and are becoming ever more) fluid. From the 1930s, the collective nomenclature for these groups included "tribal" and "Adivasi" ("first inhabitants" or "indigenous"), and the government included them in the category of Scheduled Castes.⁵⁹ Kramrisch's essay emphasizes that, in her view, these are marginalized communities that have always been outside and an undercurrent to the Brahmanical mainstream [Fig. 8]. She carries this theme of marginalization into the penultimate section, "The Art Ritual of Women", which focuses on the types of women's arts she knew best from her time in Bengal.

The concluding section, titled "Rural Practice and the Great Tradition", answers, at least somewhat, the question of why she chose to include works that are clearly patronized by royalty or urban elites. Her argument derives from her idea that, at a certain point in time, the structures of what she saw as Brahmanical temple sculpture, including its system of proportion and measurement, gave way to a more abstract vision, especially in terms of the human body [Fig. 9]. This she attributed to mixing (read "contamination") of village, indigenous, and underlying or autochthonous forms. On first reading, the subdivisions in her essay appear random, but Kramrisch embedded a logic that unifies the whole. The first three sections set out the importance and interrelatedness of place and sacrality. The last three sections, on the other hand, analyze cultural hierarchy. Here she first explores the most marginalized makers (tribals and women), then ends with her theory that the elite Great Tradition was both diluted and invigorated by the various others (villagers, tribes, women) which comprise an ongoing, parallel substrate.

Preceding her essay are a vivid series of full-page glossy photographs, six in color.⁶⁰ The initial nine, plus the cover, are by Harry Holtzman (1912–1987), a prominent abstract painter and educator. His dramatic photographs depict what he called "the

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For an in-depth discussion of Kramrisch's treatment of "tribal", see Hacker, *Displaying Tribal Imagery*, 5–25.

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These six color plates plus two of the black-and-white full-page plates fronting the essay illustrate Kramrisch's *kantha*.



[Fig. 8]

Deity on an Elephant, Bastar region, Chhattisgarh, India, late 19th – early 20th century, metal alloy, beeswax thread technique, 11.1 × 4.4 × 10.8 cm, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with the Thomas Skelton Harrison Fund and the Elizabeth Wandell Smith Fund, 1969-163-2. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.



[Fig. 9]

Vishnu Anantashayana, part of a temple pediment, Kerala, India, c. 17th–18th century, wood with polychrome, 50.2 × 179.7 cm, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with the Stella Kramrisch Fund for Indian and Himalayan Art, 2027-105-1. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

village shrines” of southern India, with which he became obsessed.⁶¹ Mostly cropped to close-ups, they show multiple generations of donated terracotta figures of horses or humans, often monumental in size, many surrounding a sacred tree. While Kramrisch’s essay comprises the intellectual substance of the book, Holtzman’s glossy photographs sell it.

The remainder of the catalogue begins with a table of contents arranged entirely differently from the essay sections. The first is “Terra-cotta and Clay Figurines, 3rd Millennium B.C. to 20th Century A.D.,” clearly rephrasing the “timeless” argument she articulated in 1939. From there, all other sections of the catalogue she arranged according to large swaths of cardinal geography, as she conceived the exhibition itself. The appendix-like catalogue lists the objects by number. There are 470 entries, but some include multiples so that the show must have contained at least 525 individual objects. All seem to have been on view in Philadelphia, while fewer traveled to the other venues. For about half of the entries she gives only a descriptive title followed by place, material, date, and credit line. With the others she presents information ranging from a single sentence to an extensive paragraph. These seldom provide ethnographic or technical background information.⁶² Instead, in vivid and concise language, Kramrisch describes the visual and aesthetic importance of each piece. Scattered within the entries are fifty-six small photographs of individual objects meaning that only about 10 percent of the objects are illustrated although various reviews praised the book as generously and well illustrated. A group of old binder notebooks labeled *Unknown India* in the museum’s archives contain a black-and-white photographic record of the majority of the objects listed in the catalogue, although not always in catalogue order. Others listed in the catalogue are missing from the notebooks so only discoverable from outside sources. Rereading her essay with the full group of illustrations brings clarity to her organization. And when all five-hundred-plus images are placed in order, it is evident that she used them to test her own categories.

In the catalogue, Kramrisch divides India into five geographic regions subdivided by state. Within these sections, the objects are loosely grouped by type and, to a certain extent, by medium, but not by time period. Kramrisch’s ordering may seem arbitrary, but it is not. For example, the “Rajasthan” subsection under “Western

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Holtzman was a well-known modernist painter in his own right and Mondrian’s heir. Grace Glueck, Harry Holtzman, Artist, Dies. An Expert on Piet Mondrian, in: *New York Times*, September 29, 1987. Holtzman photographed the village shrines of South India in 1957–1958 and 1960–1961. He also took some votive terracottas. Kramrisch contacted him in 1966 to request permission to publish photographs as well as to borrow terracottas. Holtzman lent nineteen works; the catalogue states that these would only be shown in Philadelphia. He later wrote of his obsession with the shrines when his photographs were shown in the 1970s exhibition *Village Gods of South India* at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, NY.

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Compare to Ruth Reeves, *Cire Perdue Casting in India*, New Delhi 1962. Reeves (1892–1966) was an artist and designer who spent years in India focusing on the processes of metal casting, particularly that using resin and beeswax threads. She donated her collection to the Syracuse University Art Museum.

India” begins with a metal lamp-bearing woman (*dipalakshmi*) with broad shoulders and hips – stolid, flattened, and boldly frontal [Fig. 10]. She is followed by other metalwork, primarily “Spirit Riders” grouped consecutively, then painted objects including toys, a painted scroll in front of which the story of Pabuji would have been performed, a painting on paper, and a large group of marionettes. These works reflect common facial features so that, through her choices and sequencing, Kramrisch creates a regional “style” that brings unity to Rajasthan’s diversity. The following subsection, “Gujarat”, begins with a parallel but very different *dipalakshmi* [Fig. 11]. She is willowy and elegantly detailed, with a regal neck, long, thin legs, and narrow shoulders and hips. A single braid hangs down her spine to emphasize her verticality. Both *dipalakshmis* stand perfectly balanced, arms bent to hold lamps. Formally they represent opposite visions of the auspicious feminine.

“Gujarat”, the area best known to Shah, does not seem to try for a unified regional style. For example, tall wheel-thrown votive horses with elongated necks and legs and open pot-rim mouths with partially subsumed riders [see Fig. 5] precede cheery, off-kilter, hand-pinned horses covered with finger-dabs of white paint.

Looking through the objects she gathered, grouped, and sequenced, Kramrisch’s final title of *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* takes on additional meaning. The exhibition is not only about helping objects and makers become better known to cosmopolitan viewers as art and artists, it is also about crafting a taxonomy. *Unknown India* represents Kramrisch’s effort to classify and thus know India through a wide-angle lens. She had researched intensively and published on many of the object types in the show, such as Bengal’s *kantha* or Kerala’s architectural woodwork. But how could she now fit these types into a neat(er) art-historical puzzle engaging the entire subcontinent? While Kramrisch was aware that this task was ultimately impossible, she had been kneading and modeling the problem for close to half a century. It was time for her ideas to enter the kiln.

The subtext of Kramrisch’s writing in the catalogue is that everything in the show is a “traditional” art. While she continues to find repeated forms that she calls “timeless” and others that she sees as locatable within a historical framework, she presents them all as products growing entirely from the soil of village, tribal, and popular India. Shah, however, told me an anecdote that problematized her use of both “traditional” and “authentic”. It concerned an unbaked, polychromed set of individual figurines that together depict a marriage.⁶³ In Ahmedabad, Shah said, Kramrisch had met a group of itinerant potters from Ladol village, north of the city. Although they sold their animal and human figurines as individual pieces, she wanted an elaborate example for the exhibition. She

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Kramrisch, *Unknown India*, 88, cat. 57. The figurines were intended to be ephemeral and their polychrome is so fragile that it cannot be consolidated. Since the exhibition, they have remained in boxes and were part of Kramrisch’s bequest (inv. 1994-148-350a-ss).



[Fig. 10]
Dipalakshmi, Rajasthan, India, c. 17th–18th century, copper alloy, 19.7 × 7.6 × 7 cm, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-129. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.



[Fig. 11]
Dipalakshmi, Gujarat, India, c. 18th century, copper alloy, 47 × 22.9 × 11.4 cm, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994-148-128. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

asked Shah to commission the potters to create an entire wedding party, something wholly outside of their usual (“authentic”, “traditional”) practices. But Kramrisch’s catalogue caption reads only “Figurines of musicians, bride and groom, guests bringing offerings, ritual objects. These gaily painted toys are the work of the Vaghari, or toymakers, who sell their goods in village and town.”⁶⁴

My first reaction to Hakubhai’s story was one of disappointment at the discrepancy between Kramrisch’s presentation of all the material as authentic tradition and her willingness to manipulate production. On consideration, though, I recognized my own bias; rather than perceiving living artists interacting with their varied world, I perceived this “Western intervention” as negating the piece. I had been taught to value, as Vishakha Desai phrases it, an “authentic otherness” in “Non-Western” art, particularly “folk”. When the authentic otherness appeared to be absent, I “considered [it] suspect and not very ‘good.’”⁶⁵ Even dispensing with this hypocrisy, though, the question lingers: did Kramrisch intentionally frame all this material as authentically other to fulfill the expectations of her audience, or did she believe that all she gathered partook of some aspect of the unbroken Indic lineage, thereby imbuing it with authenticity, whether manipulated or not?

III. Experience

That *Unknown India* came to be realized in one of the nation’s largest and perhaps most conservative fine arts museums is a credit to Kramrisch’s stature. It is equally a credit to Turner, who was a young man during his tenure in Philadelphia and known for taking chances with unusual exhibitions. In his “Director’s Note” to the catalogue, he wrote, “That this material is so little known in the West is perhaps explained by the fact that not before today has there been an atmosphere which would properly accept some of the methods and attitudes which created it.”⁶⁶ Just as significant as its realization were the galleries Turner sanctioned for the exhibition’s installation. Rather than hiding what could have been seen as crude craft in the “Oriental” galleries, located in the rear of the south wing on the museum’s top floor, *Unknown India* was given a socially elevated location. It occupied the easternmost third of the focal special exhibition galleries. Its entry opened onto the Great Stair Hall at the museum’s core and was set nearest to the primary east doors that

⁶⁴
Ibid.

⁶⁵
Desai, *Re-Visioning Asian Arts*, 170. Although Desai is speaking of “Western” reactions to Asian contemporary art and its interpretation (referencing James Clifford, *Of Other Peoples. Beyond the “Salvage” Paradigm*, in: Hal Foster (ed.), *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, Seattle, WA 1987, 1), I believe the comment applies to a broader framework.

⁶⁶
Turner, Director’s Note, in: Kramrisch, *Unknown India*, 81.

looked out on the city above what are today known as the “Rocky Steps”.

But the file in the museum’s archive marked “Unknown India Gallery Plans” holds drawings for one of the permanent collection spaces that had nothing to do with *Unknown India* (notably, folk material was never included in the permanent collection spaces before or during Kramrisch’s tenure). So, at present, the only way to reconstruct the installation’s narrative and flow is by reimagining it via ten installation shots together with the object photographs now linked to the catalogue entries. Not every section of the galleries or every object is visible or legible in the installation shots. What makes it even more of a puzzle is that the galleries were entirely rebuilt in the 1970s and several times since. There is enough information, however, to imagine the basic exhibition layout and how Kramrisch transformed her concept into experience.⁶⁷

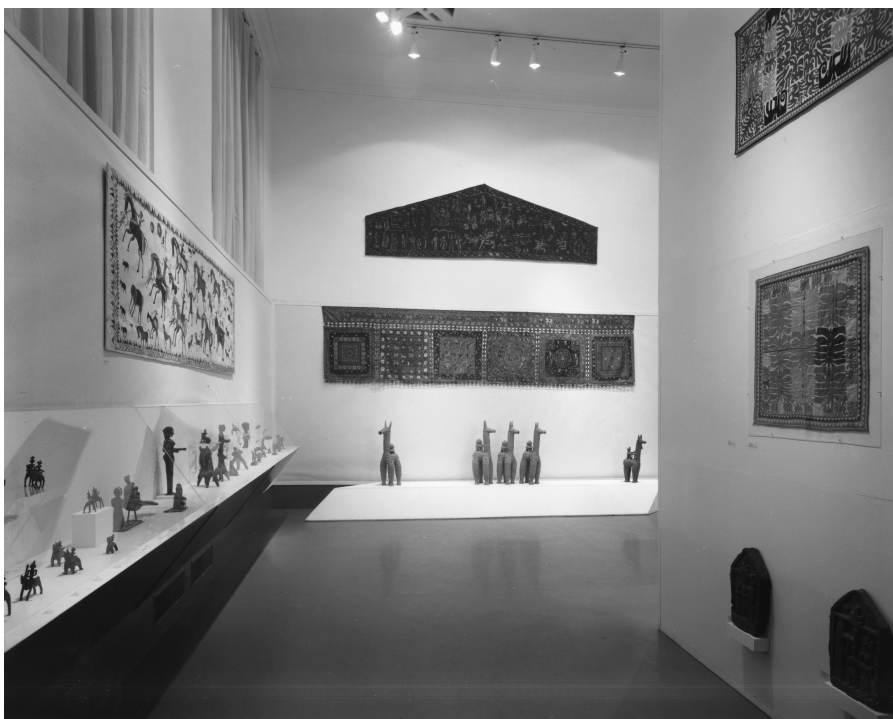
At first glance, the installation design appears banal. Each room has stark white walls and high white ceilings above polished cement floors. Unlike MoMA’s 1955 gilded bazaar, this *is* Barr’s white cube. These same galleries in Philadelphia had recently exhibited retrospectives of Picasso, Eakins, Mondrian, and Manet. While it is possible that the color might have been due to budget constraints, other design choices make it more likely that Kramrisch consciously selected the white cube to make a statement, marking these works as both “fine” art and “modern” art. She may even have intended to play off the audience’s elision of “modern” and “primitive”.

Although the majority of the objects in *Unknown India* were well under 30 cm high, it was still an achievement to accommodate their sheer number while preserving the openness and the breathing room between objects evident in installation photographs. Elegant triangular plexiglass wall vitrines maximized the visibility of each piece, eliminating shadow lines while reducing the weight of the bases. The large platforms slanted outward, reversing the angles of the vitrine bases [Fig. 12].

Labeling, though, seems to have been practically nonexistent. Looking back from inside the first gallery, a large topographic map of India rose above the entrance/exit [Fig. 13]. It carried place names but not state or regional borders. Most notably, neither this map nor anywhere else in the show appears to have specified the large geographic sectors by which the galleries and catalogue were organized. That this organization by geographic region was not immediately (perhaps seldom) comprehensible to visitors is evident not only from photographs but also from its almost complete absence of mention in reviews. Reviewers and visitors did

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My thanks to Jack Schlechter, The Park Family Director of Installation Design at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, for his help in determining the exhibition’s original location. Seltzer, *Art and Music Flood Our City*, states that Philadelphia architect David R. Singer designed and installed the show but there can be no doubt that Kramrisch organized the space and laid out the objects. She was known as a “hands-on” curator. Even for her last show, *Painted Delight*, installed the year she turned ninety, she famously sat on the ground to make sure the painters precisely mixed the wall color she envisioned.



[Fig. 12]
Installation view of the Western India Gallery, in the exhibition *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (January 20–February 26, 1968), Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art Library and Archives.



[Fig. 13]

Installation view of the Western India Gallery, with a map and the entry to the Mid-India alcove on the left, in the exhibition *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (January 20–February 26, 1968), Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art Library and Archives.

make frequent connections to traditions with which they were more familiar, from “primitive” and “folk” to African and Mexican, to Minoan and Matisse.⁶⁸ The restrained use of Holtzman’s photo murals, a major aspect of the experience of the exhibition, instilled minimal context that dramatically punctuated but never dominated the objects. In the Great Stair Hall stood a prismatically overlapping photo mural with details of multiple clay votive figures, presenting visitors a sense of being one with a crowd of worshippers [Fig. 14]. Above the exhibition entry/exit was a single square photograph of monumental South Indian votive horses’ heads, a detail of Kramrisch’s leitmotif of “The Spirit Riders”, and below it, against the gallery’s rear wall, stood a platform holding the clay votive horses Shah commissioned in Poshina, Gujarat. Most of this first gallery was dedicated to the art of western India from Rajasthan and into Gujarat. On the left, below high windows, ran a long vitrine filled with small metal, wood, and clay objects [see Fig. 12]. It seems that Kramrisch grouped works in her first catalogue section (terracottas) nearest to the Poshina horses. In this way, she gracefully negotiated the awkward shift in narrative between medium or time versus region. Above the vitrine ran a 305-cm paper version of a Pithora mural, a type of women’s festival art usually done as ephemeral wedding ornamentation on the wall of a mud house.⁶⁹

A partial wall projected from the right of the entrance. When a visitor turned the corner, they found an alcove-like space inside of which they glimpsed works from what Kramrisch called “Mid-India”.⁷⁰ The alcove’s axis wall held backlit leather shadow puppets, while on the left hung a grouping of “tribal” masks [see Fig. 13]. Inside of the door appeared a dramatic mask with peacock feathers labeled “Baiga Tribe, Madhya Pradesh”.⁷¹ A second wall projected from the opposite side of the door so that the space flowed toward the gallery exit, continuing the Western India section with a delightful sequence of Rajasthani marionettes dancing.

The central and largest gallery of *Unknown India* contained the arts of eastern India, especially Bengal. Down the center stood a

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For many visitors, formal elements of European primitivism such as geometric figuration or naive-appearing draftsmanship opened a door to works in *Unknown India*. But few would have been exposed to the work of South Asia’s cosmopolitan artists of the 20th century or other modernisms then thriving in recently decolonized regions around the globe. Kramrisch was not only familiar with but also personally involved with the trajectory of Indian modernism, as was the artist Shah. Yet in her text for *Unknown India*, she ignores and even denies its existence.

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Shah likely commissioned this piece for the show, and it may be the first example of Pithora painting “freed” from its mural context (inv. 1994-148-482). Made in 1966, Kramrisch kept the over 305-cm scroll in her personal collection until her death.

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This area includes present-day Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Odisha.

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Kramrisch, *Unknown India*, either cat. 157 or 158, likely the latter, which is larger (the photographs are missing from the notebooks and both are from a private New Delhi collection).



[Fig. 14]

Installation view with Holzman photographic murals and entry/exit between the Western India Gallery from the Great Stair Hall, in the exhibition *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (January 20–February 26, 1968), Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art Library and Archives.

series of accordion-like walls that added hanging space for *kantha* [Fig. 15]. The majority of these embroideries Kramrisch labeled as “East Pakistan” (present-day Bangladesh), and most were drawn from her personal collection.⁷² One of these walls displayed two elaborate woodcarvings from West Bengal borrowed from the V&A. Once parts of a temple chariot, they were 213 cm high, making them among the largest objects in the exhibition.

To the left of the entrance hung a series of long *pata*, many of which were also owned by Kramrisch [Fig. 16 visible through the door on the right]. As in the Western India gallery, a triangular vitrine filled the window wall holding metal, clay, stone, brick, and wood ritual and everyday objects.⁷³ Just above appeared four wooden sculptures that Kramrisch related in various ways to tribal communities across eastern India.⁷⁴

Unfortunately, there is no photograph of the space opposite the accordion walls. It must have displayed the rest of the Eastern India section, including souvenir paintings from the Jagannatha Temple at Puri and from the Kalighat Temple in Calcutta, along with the rest of the tribal works, including those from Nagaland.

From the Eastern India gallery, visitors could glimpse part of a Holtzman horse shrine mural that covered the entire rear wall of the final gallery [Fig. 17 and also see Fig. 15]. This five-panel montage used the same repeated overlap as the mural of the votive figures at the show’s entrance. In this smaller space, though, its scale and proximity would have given viewers a sense of being enwrapped by the sacred tree, facing multiple terracotta horses lined up like an invading army beneath massive boughs.⁷⁵

More than half of this final space was, like the mural, devoted to southern India. Against the window wall, Kramrisch mounted a selection of polychromed architectural wooden fragments from royally patronized temples in Travancore (present-day Kerala) and so in her view demonstrated the “deterioration” of the Great

72

Twenty-eight out of thirty-two were Kramrisch’s. Of the two *kantha* from Bihar, one belonged to the Crafts Museum and one to Haku Shah.

73

Those visible appear to be from Bengal and Bihar, but the case likely also held figurines made by Kond tribal artists in Odisha as described in Hacker, Known and Unknown, 16.

74

One is a crouching woman (Kramrisch, Unknown India, cat. 330) labeled only as “Comilla, East Bengal, East Pakistan” (present-day Cumilla, Bangladesh), borrowed from the Bratachari Society. It may be a work by the Tripuri people, now primarily inhabitants of bordering Tripura state.

75

Holtzman’s statements led to a confusion of the physical age of these terracottas with the deities and concepts they represent. He told reporters, for example, “We have every reason to believe that these deities are older than the Hindu Pantheon.” When one reporter questioned why the delicate figures survived so long, Holtzman replied, “These village deities belonged to the lowest caste – the untouchables. Hence they weren’t touched.” Holtzman quoted in Seltzer, *Art and Music Flood Our City*. By the time the show reached San Francisco, the ideas had conflated, and a journalist wrote that these sculptures were “believed to be the oldest religious figures since Babylonian times”. *San Francisco Examiner*, March 24, 1968.



[Fig. 15]

Installation view of the Eastern India Gallery, in the exhibition *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (January 20–February 26, 1968), Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art Library and Archives.



[Fig. 16]

Installation view of the Southern India Gallery with (left to right) monumental Kerala wooden figures, entrance into the Klee exhibition, northern India material, and entrance from the Eastern India gallery, in the exhibition *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (January 20–February 26, 1968), Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art Library and Archives.



[Fig. 17]

Installation view with a mural on the rear wall of the Southern India Gallery, in the exhibition *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (January 20–February 26, 1968), Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art Library and Archives.

Tradition, as discussed in her 1939 essay.⁷⁶ Nearby were the most dramatic pieces in the show, two 180-cm-high wooden attendant deities, a woman and a horse-headed man, from Karnataka. Unlike the relief temple sculpture, these stand in the round and provide a sense of scale and power comparable to Holtzman's photograph.⁷⁷

The southern Indian material alone could have filled this room, but Kramrisch had a final category, Northern India, with nowhere to go. Just to the right of these great Karnataka deities appeared a small doorway that seems to have connected *Unknown India* to the ongoing exhibition *Paul Klee 1879–1940. A Retrospective Exhibition*, so avoiding a cul-de-sac [see Fig. 16]. On the short wall to the right of this door, Kramrisch placed two wooden equestrians from Nuristan, Afghanistan, carrying her “Spirit Rider” to all parts of the subcontinent. Above both the doorway to the Klee exhibition and the doorway back to the Eastern India section hung appliqué canopies from Uttar Pradesh. Lining the right wall in another elegant triangular vitrine were, on the left, a selection of small sculptures from various parts of far northern India and, on the right (with no strict division), metal sculptures and ritual objects from the far south. Above the vitrine hung courtly embroideries, so-called Chamba Rumals, made in the Himalayan foothill region of Himachal Pradesh. In all, this gallery, rather confusingly, displayed objects from opposite ends of the subcontinent. Even so, Kramrisch's installation managed, through a process of aestheticization, to (almost) merge them into a unit, but it is unlikely that many visitors would understand the overarching regional organization without Shah as guide.

The exit to *Unknown India* was either via the side door of this final gallery into the rear of the Klee exhibition or back through *Unknown India* to the Great Stair Hall. If visitors exited the latter route, they encountered a gift shop.⁷⁸ From the shop, one looked down the corridor toward a Gujarati appliqué canopy that created a processional exit or introduction.⁷⁹ To further corral visitors, a case of backlit shadow puppets blocked the space between two of this corridor's massive piers.

On the evening of January 19, 1968, side-by-side exhibitions opened simultaneously in the museum's special exhibition galleries. In the eastern third was *Unknown India*. In the western two-thirds,

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See the quote in note 44 above. Two were shipped with the agreement that they would be acquired by the museum (inv. 1966-115-1 and 1966-115-2), while a third remained on long-term loan (and on view), entering the collection in 2017 (inv. 2017-105-1).

77

These were borrowed from the Crafts Museum. The catalogue lists four (113–116, p. 93), but neither the photo notebooks nor any installation shots show more than two, so it is likely that only two were shipped, possibly for financial reasons.

78

The temporary gift shop in the photograph displays a niche in its rear wall which was recently completed to fulfill its original intended purpose as an elevator shaft.

79

Is it too far-fetched to wonder if the canopy in front of the shop may have been Kramrisch's nod to MoMA's 1955 commercialized bazaar?

with its entrance prominently located along the museum's main north-south axis, was the Klee exhibition, highlighting this Swiss-born German painter and theorist.⁸⁰ The Klee show was organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in collaboration with the Pasadena Art Museum in California. Unlike Philadelphia's encyclopedic mission, the Guggenheim, from its 1939 inception as the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, had long promoted modern art as painting and sculpture by white, male, academically trained artists from Europe and North America.

Among some Philadelphia Museum insiders, reaction to this seemingly disparate pairing was mixed. Bernice Wintersteen, the museum's president, complained in that year's annual report that the "shared billing [...] detracted from the importance of both shows".⁸¹ But Turner understood that the pairing went deeper, as did Thomas M. Messer, director of the Guggenheim, who wrote Turner, "I think Klee and Indian Folk Art will go together splendidly and were it in New York, the link between the two would undoubtedly constitute the main theme of the critical commentary".⁸²

There can be no doubt that Kramrisch herself understood the relationship. Klee had spent a decade at the Bauhaus (1921–1931), and Kramrisch had included his work in her 1923 exhibition in Calcutta. Of all those affiliated with the Bauhaus, it was Klee who resonated most deeply among artists across India. In particular, the painter-activist Jagdish Swaminathan (1928–1994) spoke of Klee's influence on his own art as early as 1966. Swaminathan later became the moving force behind Bharat Bhavan, the institution that opened in Bhopal in 1982 and brought "tribal" and "modern" art into conversation.⁸³ Klee's appeal for Swaminathan and other Indian modernists ranged from his art's cosmologic content to its reflections of India's "tribal" and "folk" art styles of geometric figuration, flattened picture planes, and intense coloration.

Following Philadelphia, *Unknown India* traveled to the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum (today part of the Fine Arts Museums

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Paul Klee 1879–1940. *A Retrospective Exhibition* (exh. cat. New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), New York 1967. For the "influence" of the "Orient" on Klee, see, for example, Peg DeLamater, Some Indian Sources in the Art of Paul Klee, in: *The Art Bulletin* 66/4, 1984, 657–672.

81

Wintersteen, Report of the President, in: *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 63/298, 1968, 156–164, here 161.

82

Turner, Report of the Director, in: *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 63/298, 1968, 169–181, here 169; and Messer to Turner, October 19, 1967, EXH Box 41, folder 2, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives.

83

Madan Gopal Singh, Swami. Of His Times, in: *The India Magazine* 14/7, 1994, 15, quoted in Katherine Hacker, "A Simultaneous Validity of Co-Existing Cultures". J. Swaminathan, the Bharat Bhavan, and Contemporaneity, in: *Archives of Asian Art* 64/2, 2014, 191–209, here 207n46; and Jagdish Swaminathan, *The Perceiving Fingers. Catalogue of Roopankar Collection of Folk and Adivasi Art from Madhya Pradesh, India*, Bhopal 1987.

of San Francisco), whose director had been enthusiastic about the show since its inception. Oddly, like Philadelphia's, San Francisco's archive seems to retain no floorplans and has ten installation shots. From these, one can see that the space was smaller than in Philadelphia and had lower ceilings and fewer objects. But like Philadelphia, the design was white and modernist, although instead of slanting wall cases, San Francisco used square, freestanding vitrines with recessed bases [Fig. 18]. The first gallery again blended western and mid-India. Through its exit, visitors encountered another free-standing wall, this time holding two of Kramrisch's *kantha*. Around and beyond that, the second and larger room held the eastern India material. A separate vitrine contained terracotta and clay figurines, representing Kramrisch's first catalogue section. A faceted freestanding wall subdivided this gallery. On the side opposite the Eastern India section was Holtzman's mural of votive heads; presumably the space beyond contained the works from southern and northern India. As far as it is possible to determine, then, both San Francisco and St. Louis maintained the fundamental regional divisions and flow of Kramrisch's Philadelphia installation. The regional organization is seldom noted by reviewers apart from a review of the St. Louis show, which, unlike the other venues, had five separate galleries each clearly dedicated to a different region [Fig. 19].⁸⁴ But even that review focused primarily on the visual drama and incomprehensible but perceived religious power of the huge number of objects.

Announcements and reviews also differed in tenor from city to city. In San Francisco, performing arts and film took top billing. The museum's advertisement lacks Kramrisch's editorial hand, reading that the show is a "survey of a colorful, mystic, relatively unknown area of art. First showing in the Occident of rural tribal Indian art; 400 objects, 3000 B.C. to present created by primitive people for religious purposes."⁸⁵ Yet thoughtful reviews also appeared.⁸⁶

Both in India and the United States, Shah was frequently accompanied by his wife, Viluben, and their memories remained vivid. The couple had spent a year in the United States staying near all three venues, where Hakubhai Shah trained guides, presented gallery talks, taught children, and exhibited his own art locally. Newspaper reviews of the exhibition from all its venues highlighted his primary, public role in bringing the show to life for visitors. In San Francisco, Shah hosted a prime-time television segment

84

John Brod Peters, "Unknown India". A Stunning Show, in: *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, July 20–21, 1968.

85

Oakland Tribune, April 7, 1968.

86

See, for example, Alfred Frankenstein, Art Nobody Bothered to Destroy, in: *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, April 7, 1968.



[Fig. 18]

Installation view of the Eastern India Gallery with terracotta case in the foreground, in the exhibition *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (March 28–June 9, 1968), San Francisco, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, Courtesy of the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco.



[Fig. 19]
Installation view of the Eastern India Gallery, in the exhibition *Unknown India. Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (July 18–August 20, 1968), St. Louis, MO, St. Louis Art Museum, Courtesy of Saint Louis Art Museum.

called “Tales of India” illustrated by works from the show.⁸⁷ He loved his role as a cultural connector and went on to become not only a significant painter but also an author and institution builder, promoting folk and tribal artists in many ways. Unlike Kramrisch, who struggled with categories, Shah had little issue with the fluidity of high and low, great and little, Brahmanical and marginalized. In a line from his exhibition catalogue for *Form and Many Forms of Mother Clay*, he expresses value in his usual unpretentious terms: “Simply because an object is common in the social sense, it does not mean that it is ordinary.”⁸⁸ As his son Parthiv said, “My father respected the scholarship or skill in a person. He spoke of art critic Stella Kramrisch [...] in the same breath as he spoke of this tribal called Chelia. For him both were equal.”⁸⁹

IV. A Canon for India’s “Folk Art”?

Despite positive reviews for *Unknown India*, the objects in the exhibition were not accepted as “fine” art in the way paintings by Klee or Manet were, nor are they today. Even temple sculpture from the “great tradition of Brahmanical India” could not breach that barrier, although Kramrisch had already spent a long career trying to bring the latter the respect she thought it deserved. Regardless of lifelong interest, she did not expend the same effort on, or perhaps have the same expectations for, legitimizing the everyday mediums and marginalized creators included in *Unknown India*. Her words and choices in the catalogue demonstrate that, no matter how much she appreciated this “other” art, she never jettisoned her personal hierarchy of period, aesthetic, medium, and maker, where earlier sculpture and Brahmanical temples superseded what she called their “undercurrents, sediment and subsoil”.

Although Kramrisch deliberately eschewed the phrase “folk art”, in the half century since *Unknown India*, scholars and collectors in India and globally have looked to the enormous but miscellaneous range of object types she included in the exhibition as a canon of India’s folk art. Often the regional specificity she strove to demonstrate is homogenized into multicultural geographic enormities, and tribal groups are given overly broad nomenclature. Especially in the realm of “tribal” arts, the anonymity valued in Kramrisch’s

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Oakland Tribune, June 17, 1968.

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Form and Many Forms of Mother Clay. Contemporary Indian Pottery and Terracotta (exh. cat. New Delhi, National Crafts Museum), ed. by Haku Shah, New Delhi 1985. Today the Shah family retains thousands of slides that Hakubhai and Viluben took during their travels for *Unknown India* and over the course of a lifetime of research. Many are water damaged and can no longer be identified, but they remain an invaluable resource that Haku’s son Parthiv Shah is working hard to preserve.

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Parthiv Shah quoted in *My Father Is a Huge Influence on Me*. Parthiv Shah on Haku Shah and His Own Journey as a Photographer, in: *Abir Pothi*, March 19, 2021 (June 12, 2023); see also Parthiv Shah Talks about His Father Haku Shah, an Artist Who Blurred the Lines between Art and Craft, in: *Abir Pothi*, March 18, 2021 (June 12, 2023).

era is today, thanks to market and generational forces, being jettisoned in favor of individuality, a transition that equalizes these makers with their cosmopolitan cotemporaries yet can likewise deteriorate into a cult of celebrity. In perspective, though, perhaps the most significant critique of *Unknown India* has to do with Kramrisch's persistent, although not unquestioned, myths of authenticity and timelessness. Since 1968, many steps have been taken in scholarship, and to a lesser degree in museum display and the market, to imbue a dynamic vision of cultural interaction and perpetual change. With *Unknown India* to learn from and to push against, we may move past the static of authenticity, merge the spiritual with the practical, dispense with preordained hierarchies including centers and margins, and recognize "autochthony" as nuanced and fluid.

[Darielle Mason](#), PhD, was the inaugural Stella Kramrisch Curator and Head of South Asian Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and now serves as Senior Curator Emeritus. Her exhibitions and publications span multiple mediums and millennia across this vast region. Among her notable projects is a series of exhibitions on South Asian women's textiles, beginning with *Kantha. The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal*, which received the CAA's Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Award for Museum Scholarship. Mason's most recent book, *Storied Stone. Reframing the Philadelphia Museum of Art's South Indian Temple Hall*, integrates art-historical analysis and provenance research with the exploration of a century of evolving interpretive strategies and ethical considerations as witnessed through this pivotal museum space.