BOOK REVIEW

Sullivan, B. (ed.) 2015. *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums*. London: Bloomsbury. vi + 184pp. ISBN: 978-1-4725-9081-7 £65.00 (hbk); ISBN: 978-1-4725-9083-1 £19.99 (e-book).

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Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces offers a timely collection of short, concise chapters dedicated to addressing diverse and pertinent issues in recent debates surrounding the roles of religious objects in museums. With an admirably tight focus on religious objects from Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh traditions, chapters bring considerations of “the sacred” and “the secular” (as well as the “profane”) into conversation to explore a variety of novel ideas and theories that challenge the ways in which such categories are created and maintained. The introduction states, “Chapters in this volume explore and problematize the idea that the objects in museums can be regarded as sacred and that the museum necessarily elides all sacred qualities from objects it exhibits” (p. 1). The changeable and versatile roles of religious objects “raise questions not only about their own identities, but also about the ways we understand the religious traditions in which these objects were created and which they represent in museums today” (p. 2). This extends to the museums themselves. Museum spaces and architectural structures can be at once secular and sacred depending on who is doing the visiting/encountering. They can also be relationally secular/sacred depending on who or what resides in their exhibits and what boundaries are drawn around them. An example of this is found in Sullivan’s chapter on the “adoption by many museums of the practice of yoga on the premises” (p. 5). The point made by many of the examples, or “stories” (p. 6), found in the chapters of this book is that the role of museums is contemporarily versatile. When museums house religious objects, their roles may not shift entirely from secular to sacred spaces, but their dynamics change in ways that raise questions about what those categories actually mean.

Current debates in the growing field of “material religion” necessarily sit at the heart of the discussions found in the chapters of this book. Namely, questions pertaining to “authenticity” and “inauthenticity” of replicated objects in museums, the dynamics of “virtual” museums and their visitors, the identities of objects (whether in situ or taken out of religious contexts/communities and displayed in secular ones), object biographies, curatorial practices, repatriation, and ownership of religious objects (who owns who?) are addressed in this book. Further questions relating to ritual, the “personhood” of objects,

and the differences (and similarities) between “normal” museum visitors and those who emerge from the religious communities whose objects are being exhibited, are also raised through discussions of specific examples of religious objects on display at museums in various parts of the world.

With much difficulty in selecting from such a rich variety of interesting chapters, let me draw particular attention to Chapter 1. Richard Davis's chapter “What do Indian Images Really Want? A Biographical Approach” explores the biographies of bronze and stone Indian statues when they are alienated from their original purposes. Likening these objects' biographies to the lives of humans whereby they “are born and live their entire lives without leaving their own villages” while others “experience lives of travel and change, disruption and transformation, influence and celebrity”, Davis argues that Indian images “want to have their stories told” (p. 11). Telling the diverse stories of two objects, the Nataraja and Somaskanda bronzes from Sivapuram, Davis explores the “life-paths” of these statues and how they went from their early lives as temple images to later lives into the hands of foreign collectors and museums. Both images spent centuries interred in the earth at Sivapuram which preserved them from the wear and tear of processions and daily ritual bathing. Both were also disinterred in 1951 (p. 11). The story of the Nataraja is particularly interesting because his personhood is highlighted. According to Davis, the Nataraja had to “choose” between “suitors”: the Indian government or the private art collector, Norton Simon (p. 20). Further, Davis tells us that an Anglo-Indian law was adapted whereby Shiva was a legal plaintiff. “The god Shiva, as ‘owner’ of the Sivapuram temple originally built as a residence for him, could make a legal claim for the return of alienated temple property, such as the temple's processional images” (p. 21). Shiva was clearly a persuasive plaintiff. The Nataraja of Sivapuram was resettled and transformed “into a prime trophy of cultural heritage” aimed at deterring “illegal trade in Indian antiquities” (p. 22). A story of repatriation, this chapter raises questions about how a vast and colourful career (from temple god to interment, and then to world traveller) might affect the original purposes intended for the Nataraja and other religious objects. Will the Nataraja be at home as a temple deity again? The Nataraja may yet be full of future surprises.

As a final point, the clarity with which the chapters of this book are written, coupled with the fact that the book is quite short in length, combine to create a manageable and easy text. Having good referencing, and a guide to approaching fieldwork concerning Asian religious objects in museums, this book is easily recommendable to both students and more established scholars alike. It will also be useful to a variety of subject areas such as museum studies and curating, studies in material religion, “civil” religion, religious studies more broadly, anthropological and archaeological approaches to religious material cultures, as well as studies pertaining to sociology.