



ARTICLE

## Modelling India. Unfired clay figurines and the East India Company's collections: from devotional icons to didactic displays

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### Abstract

A well-known series of miniature figures produced in India from unfired clay, appropriately clothed and in many instances represented carrying out their respective secular or ritual duties, enjoyed a period of particular popularity on the world stage in the nineteenth century when they were appropriated as illustrative devices in museum displays and international exhibitions. Over the previous half-century or more they had emerged as products of a dynamic industry that responded to changes in taste as well as religious and artistic practice within Indian society, before being taken up by the West to serve new colonial imperatives. There they received perhaps their most enthusiastic reception at the India Museum, established in the headquarters of the East India Company in London in the early 1800s, and surviving beyond the suppression of the Company itself until they were dispersed to a number of other institutions in 1879. From an early appearance at the Great Exhibition in 1851, the figures also became a regular feature of the international exhibitions of the latter part of the century. Initially they celebrated the traditional crafts and practices of India but gradually were recruited to communicate other messages of Western industrial dominance and perceived artistic and industrial superiority. Although comparatively few of these figures survive intact in Western collections, the history of their considerable impact on the European stage can be enlarged upon with the aid of the documentary record.

**Keywords:** Unfired clay figures; India Museum; East India Company; Great Exhibition; international exhibitions

Conceived initially to perform a transient role in sacred ritual, figurines moulded in unfired clay defied their evanescent nature to achieve popularity in a wider secular context in India. Later they were further adopted for a representational role in Western museum displays and exhibitions. Although modest in scale and in their raw materials, in the case of the museum of the East India Company (EIC)—where the present investigation has its origins—the models of human and other figures discussed here became so numerous as to form one of the defining features of the display, although their role in this respect has long been forgotten. The value of these figures to curators and their appeal to the public lay in their ability to summon up a range of aspects of everyday life on the sub-continent in a direct and vivid way. As observed by a visitor to the



**Figure 1.** A visitor to the India Museum admires a display of model figures (left). Source: From *The Leisure Hour* 7 (1858).

museum (Figure 1) at the Company's headquarters<sup>1</sup> in 1858—that is to say, on the very eve of its winding-up:

The models of figures may be numbered by the thousand. Perhaps the most useful and interesting are those which represent the workers at their several crafts and occupations ... we see them at work, weaving, digging, carrying water, tilling the soil, grinding the corn, cooking their food, or juggling, conjuring, snake-charming, and exercising themselves in feats of agility or muscular exploits—at all their occupations, in short, as they would be found actually engaged on their native soil.<sup>2</sup>

It was as if the models had been custom-made with this display function in mind—and indeed by the time of the museum's dispersal just over 20 years later, some were undoubtedly being commissioned specifically for that purpose, but their earlier history lies elsewhere.

### **Production of the figures: context, chronology, and distribution**

Against a background of social change that saw the emergence of new elites and an evolving landscape of patronage in eighteenth-century India, a decline has been detected in the practice of earlier, more exclusive, and caste-based forms of worship in favour of increasingly inclusive celebrations.<sup>3</sup> Many of these were funded by public subscription, with prominence given to tableaux of deities attended by human devotees. Frequently (but not exclusively), models in unfired clay provided a centrepiece for such celebrations. It seems likely that these called on long-established traditions of secular modelling that

<sup>1</sup> The museum at East India House in Leadenhall Street, London, lacked a formal title in its earlier years; by the mid-century it was commonly referred to as the India Museum and is generally so designated today. For the later history of the collection, see note 22.

<sup>2</sup> 'A visit to the East India Museum', *The Leisure Hour* 7.344 (1858), pp. 469–473.

<sup>3</sup> Benoy Ghose, *Traditional Arts and Crafts of West Bengal. A Sociological Survey* (Calcutta, 1981), pp. 44–51. The models of fruit and vegetables mentioned incidentally below may also have had their origins in the offerings accompanying these tableaux before finding a wider market.

have remained undetected due to the ephemeral nature of the material. Certainly, their popularity was boosted by the intervention of one important patron whose name is invariably linked with the type: Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy (1728–1783) of Kishnaghur (Krishnanagar). In the mid-century he encouraged the settlement of potters from elsewhere in Bengal at Kishnaghur,<sup>4</sup> with the specific intention that they should produce clay figures to supply religious needs. Here the potters-turned-modellers not only found new markets but developed new skills in representing human and supernatural forms on a variety of scales, from miniature to life-sized.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the best-known representatives of the type today are the large-scale figures of the Durga puja, attended by a varying cast of supporting characters, which continue to be produced anew each year and are consigned to the water at the end of the festivities, where the unfired clay returns to nature.<sup>6</sup> Other deities were similarly venerated: representations of Kali, for example (Figure 2), continue to be manufactured for the annual Kalipuja before being committed to the water where again they dissolve.<sup>7</sup>

The meticulously realistic secular figures that have come down to us seem to be representative of an early move away from production for purely devotional purposes to one in which skills that were developed in the field of modelling were turned to representing contemporary secular society. The clientele for such figures must surely have overlapped initially with that for the ritual pieces, but clearly it expanded at an early date to include European buyers. The accounts of early English travellers included here show that many of these purchases originally fed a demand for tourist souvenirs, but the capacity of the figures to represent the diversity of Indian society quickly became apparent to government administrators and others. It was certainly a novel form of documentation and illustration, whose further success on the international exhibition circuit (discussed below) must have gratified those who first recognised their potential in this respect.

While Kishnaghur presents an exceptionally well-documented case-history for the development of clay modelling from minor craft to sizeable industry (and indeed has come to be regarded almost as the type-site for items produced by this technique), it was by no means the only centre of production. While no individual promoters of the stature of Krishnachandra Roy can be found elsewhere, a number of urban centres

<sup>4</sup> The exact origins of these potters, previously thought to be Dacca in East Bengal and Natore in North Bengal, is now a matter of dispute.

<sup>5</sup> Whether the India Museum received life-size figures, such as survive most spectacularly at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, is unclear. Susan S. Bean, 'The unfired clay sculpture of Bengal in the artscape of South Asia', in *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, (eds) R. M. Brown and D. S. Hutton (Chichester, 2011), pp. 604–628. One candidate might be a figure of the 'Nawab Schurff' of Lucknow, described as occupying a niche at the end of one gallery: 'There he sits, as large as life, and just as natural, smoking his hookah under his awning of crimson velvet, with his legs crossed beneath him on the mat, and surrounded with all the elements of wealth and splendour becoming his condition': 'A visit to the India Museum', p. 471. The material of which the nawab's likeness was constructed is unfortunately not recorded.

<sup>6</sup> All such figures tend to be unfired, and certainly for those produced for religious purposes this was an essential feature, allowing for their ultimate disintegration and the return of their raw materials to their natural state: see T. Richard Blurton, *Bengali Myths* (London, 2006), pp. 28–37. For the attendant revelries surrounding the annual Durga and Kali pujas, see Rachel Fell McDermott, *Mother of my Heart, Daughter of my Dreams. Kali and Uma in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal* (Oxford, 2001), p. 409, note 53.

<sup>7</sup> A. L. Dallapicola, *Hindu Visions of the Sacred* (London, 2004), pp. 70–71. Holly Schaffer, 'An architecture of ephemerality between South and West Asia', *Journal18* 4 'East-Southeast' (Fall 2017), <https://www.journal18.org/2054> (accessed 9 February 2023); doi: [10.30610/4.2017.1](https://doi.org/10.30610/4.2017.1), traces the contemporary emergence of a parallel trend towards more inclusive forms of ritual observance in Shia communities, notably in Lucknow and Awadh. Similarly backed by the nawabs with a view to encouraging social cohesion, these were celebrated with the production of essentially ephemeral architectural structures of a memorialising nature (*ta'ziya*). I am grateful to the *JRAS*'s anonymous referees for drawing my attention to this publication.



**Figure 2.** Figure of Kali striding over the recumbent Śiva. Kali wears her conventional garland of human skulls and carries a severed head. Painted clay, the crown and ornaments gilded. Height 53 cm. Kishnaghur [?]. Source: The British Museum, London, inv. no. 1894.2-16.10. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

experienced significant growth in the eighteenth century under newly established elites; these included wealthy landholders and the mercantile middle class, the Maratha peshwas of Poona and the nawabs of Awadh. They too participated in the promotion of cultural practices that aimed to forge a sense of communal identity, among which newly developed devotional programmes employing ephemeral objects like the clay models played a prominent role. Likewise, the high levels of skill developed in the name of religious observance were soon extended to the production of the purely secular figures that form the focus of this article (Figure 3).

One immediately striking fact concerning the models in question is that their production seems not to have been evenly distributed over the whole of the Indian sub-continent but was, to some degree, concentrated in a limited number of towns or cities. This stands in contrast to the widespread manufacture of (kiln-fired) terracotta figures produced for devotional or ornamental purposes, or as toys.<sup>8</sup> A few sites appear to predominate: as well as Kishnaghur in West Bengal on the eastern side, a clutch of centres is identifiable at Poona (Pune), Belgaum (Belagavi), and Gokak in the west; Lucknow is also a source of clay figures of a particular kind, on which see further below. Less well known (but clearly indicated by the India Museum collection) is that some production also took place further south, within

<sup>8</sup> Sir George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi, 1903. Being the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition, 1902-1903* (Calcutta, 1903), mentions that 'every village has its potter who turns out idols and toys in clay' (pp. 88-89), while George Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India* (London 1880, new edn 1884), vol. ii, p. 145, states that these figures—no more than summarily painted—'are thrown away every day after being worshipped'. See further Stephen P. Huyler, 'Terracotta traditions in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India', in *From Indian Earth. 4,000 Years of Terracotta Art*, (ed.) Amy G. Poster, exh. cat., Brooklyn Museum (New York, 1986), pp. 57-66. For the wider terracotta tradition, see Pratapaditya Pal, *Icons of Piety, Images of Whimsy. Asian Terra-cottas from the Walter-Grounds Collection*, exh. cat., Los Angeles County Museum (Los Angeles, 1987). For an account (and a detailed 3-D scan) of a painted terracotta figure of a trooper of Skinner's Horse, dated circa 1819-1820, see Malini Roy, 'Sketchfab 3-D modelling of trooper Ami Chand of Skinner's Horse', at <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/> (accessed 9 February 2023).



**Figure 3.** A market trader selling models illustrating religious and secular subjects, *circa* 1870. Tentatively attributed to Siva dyal Lal, Patna or Varanasi; neither of these cities is recorded as a production centre for the clay figures discussed here, but the image is uniquely valuable in the record it supplies of the popular trade in these figures. 26.5 × 39.8 cm. Source: The British Museum, London, inv. no. 1948,1009,0.156. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

the Madras presidency of the East India Company, a phenomenon that remains to be investigated in greater depth. Also in need of further research is the detailed nature of the social patterns that favoured production in these particular centres but not in others.

### *Production centres and their typologies*

In the continuing absence of a wide-ranging and detailed survey of securely provenanced surviving figures, the following notes must be regarded as provisional. The field is open for further research and the remarks provided here on the production centres established so far—based on the largely lost collection of a single museum—can provide only a tentative starting point.

Typical Kishnaghur figures have been characterised as being modelled over a metal armature fixed in a rectangular base.<sup>9</sup> They adopt convincing poses, are painted in naturalistic colours, and are finely modelled with animated expressions. Hair may be represented by wool or jute and the figures are clothed in appropriate textiles. Like the religious images already mentioned, the figures are traditionally not kiln-fired but are simply dried in the sun; as a result, they are fragile and prone to cracking—a characteristic that must certainly have contributed to their very high casualty rate.

These comparatively sophisticated features immediately separate the Kishnaghur products from those of Poona, which are characterised by a more limited range of poses and

<sup>9</sup> These general observations are based on Charlotte H. F. Smith and Michelle Stevenson, 'Modeling cultures: 19th century Indian clay figures', *Museum Anthropology* 33.1 (2010), pp. 37–48. Their observation on the use of metal armatures with unfired figures is of particular interest: Susan Bean observes (personal communication) that by the later phases of production, when some figures, at least, were kiln-fired (see below), use of a metal armature would become more critical.



less animated postures. They tend to rely for their individuality on a high level of finish to their anatomy (occasionally stretching to include body hair), clothing, and accoutrements. Among the latter, tools, for example, are made of materials corresponding to their full-sized prototypes. Characteristically, these clay figures are said to be moulded over a wooden rather than a metal armature and to stand on a turned wooden base. Henry Moses, attending a Durga festival in Poona in the mid-eighteenth century, noted many stalls there selling such figures, and by the 1840s permanent shops had been set up to supply them.<sup>10</sup> A decade or so later Mrs Hervey, an inveterate traveller, purchased about 30 examples representing ‘the various classes of natives, parsees, servants, tradesmen and fakirs’ as well as ‘idols’ and animals, all for 16 rupees. By 1880 the trade—whether catering for religious celebrations or tourist souvenirs—was estimated to be worth 10,000 rupees a year to Poona’s municipal corporation.<sup>11</sup> Those sent to London to the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in 1886 were said to be ‘distinguished for their truthful modeling and life-like representation of the large variety of races inhabiting the Bombay Presidency, each race having its dress and turban distinct from another’.<sup>12</sup>

A number of other centres of production are signalled less widely within the India Museum lists. Gokak, for example, a town in Belgaum district to the south of Poona, evidently was a recognised source of figures. Among those sent to the Great Exhibition of 1851, the Gokak products were judged ‘less perfect in point of execution than the Kishnaghur clay figures, but still most interesting’.<sup>13</sup> Although the range of figures produced at Gokak seems fairly standard, they were said to have been made there purely to order and did not normally form part of a regular trade.

Condapilly (Kandapalle), a remote and rather unpopular hill station as far as the British were concerned, lying in the Northern Circars—inland from Madras (Chennai)—seems not to have been recorded elsewhere as a source of figures of this kind, beyond an oblique reference in Henry Morris’s *Descriptive Account of the Godavery District* in which he mentions that ‘Curious toys, figures, and artificial fruits are made by a family of the Muchi caste at Nursapore. They are rather larger, but quite as lifelike, as the similar figures manufactured at Condapilly in the Kistna district.’<sup>14</sup> Both Condapilly and Nursapore (Narsapuram) were represented in the India Museum collections.

A number of figures attributed to Madras may have been acquired within the city but could equally have come from one or other of the centres already mentioned, which lay within the Madras presidency. The same difficulties of precise location apply to the many figures from Belgaum, which may have been a production centre in its own right or the figures may have come from Gokak which, as mentioned, lies within Belgaum district.

A rather different trajectory has been traced for the clay models known to have been produced in Lucknow—a distinction so fundamental as to merit their separate

<sup>10</sup> In a wide-ranging article on the practice of art at the court of the peshwas in Poona, Holly Schaffer mentions the attachment of the influential minister and statesman Nana Fadnavis (1742–1800) to the worship of Durga: see Holly Schaffer, “‘Take all of them’: eclecticism and the arts of the Pune court in India, 1760–1800”, *Art Bulletin* 100.2 (2018), pp. 61–93, at p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> T. N. Mukharji, *Art-Manufactures of India (Specially Compiled for the Glasgow International Exhibition, 1888)* (Calcutta, 1888), p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* Figures from Surat sent to the same exhibition were of ‘camels, horses, cows, and other familiar animals and birds’, suggesting perhaps some regional variation in manufacture. Tonk and Gwalior also contributed.

<sup>13</sup> See *Reports of the Juries on the Subjects of the Thirty Classes into which the Exhibition was Divided* (London, 1851), class XXIX, p. 649. Mukharji, *Art-Manufactures of India*, p. 72, mentions Delhi and Ambala as further production centres (Ambala, at least, being a very recent producer), while life-size models made at Jaipur were contributed to the Glasgow exhibition.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Morris, *A Descriptive and Historical Account of the Godavery District in the Presidency of Madras* (London, 1878), p. 77. Fruits and vegetables—impossible to preserve and to present in their natural forms—are also represented in fired clay in the exhibition context. These models seem likely to have originated as ancillary elements in ritual installations (that is, as offerings) before they too were taken up by souvenir-hungry Europeans.

consideration from the others examined here. Clay modellers were certainly to be found at work there in the 1700s, as elsewhere, but when Nawab Asaf ud-Daula (1748–1797) conceived the idea of beautifying his palaces and gardens, he did so with the aid of imported Italian sculptors. In 1780 the city's most distinguished European resident, Claude Martin, formerly of the French and later of the English EIC, commissioned local carvers to produce sculptures in stone and in stucco for his estate, also executed in classicising European style. So influential were these developments that the output of some of the Lucknow clay modellers—even those working at the small scale considered here—came under European neo-classical influence.<sup>15</sup> Surviving examples of their products, formed over a metal armature, are distinguished by having their draperies entirely modelled in clay, carved and tooled while it remained ductile; from the 1850s they were further marked by being painted in full colour.<sup>16</sup> A further significant difference, as observed by Susan Bean,<sup>17</sup> is that most of the Lucknow figures are of fired clay (for which a metal armature would have been a prerequisite). The implication is either that they may belong to a separate manufacturing tradition, or it may be that the known examples simply belong to a later phase of production when firing became more prevalent (see further below).

A degree of specialisation between these various producers, both in subject-matter and in technique, was detected by H. H. Cole in his *Catalogue of Indian Art*, where he also extends the range of production centres:

At Poonah, in the Bombay Presidency, all kinds of models are made to illustrate the castes and trades of Western India, as, for instance, dyers, singers, and musicians, oil-sellers, dancing or nautch girls, weavers, jewelers, merchants, all classes of domestic and State servants, women grinding corn, corn dealers, carpenters, shoemakers, blacksmiths, butchers, barbers, tailors, potters, Parsees, native officials, water-carriers, sweepers, &c. At Lucknow models are also made of figures, but the best are those representing different kinds of fruit. Models of the latter description are also made in Calcutta, Agra, and Jaloun in the North-west Provinces. The models of fruit made at Gokak, near Belgaum, are celebrated throughout India.<sup>18</sup>

The above remarks referred principally to figures made in clay, but alongside these there existed a parallel series fashioned in wood, similar in the range of types encountered but invariably with details of costume and hair applied solely in paint: one such figure from Belgaum from the India Museum collection is illustrated in [Figure 4](#). All must have borne a strong resemblance to those in clay produced in the same city.

### Figures in the India Museum collection

The broad characterisation of the industry provided above is (so far as we can tell, given their largely vanished state) borne out by the models that formed part of the India Museum collections. These are numbered 1 to 274 in the first part of the two-section catalogue printed in 1880 to mark their transfer to the South Kensington Museum, plus a

<sup>15</sup> At an average of about 14 cm high, the Lucknow models are also among the larger examples of this type. Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi*, 1903, p. 89, singled out the Lucknow models sent to the Delhi exhibition for special praise, mentioning that those submitted were considered of such merit that they were exhibited under the category of Fine Art, where they won a gold medal.

<sup>16</sup> Smith and Stevenson, 'Modeling cultures', p. 43, quote the Reverend Henry Polehampton who at this time bought in Lucknow a very Western-sounding 'pair of boys, about eight inches high, carrying baskets of flowers on their heads' which had in fact been copied from an illustration in the *Art Union Journal*.

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>18</sup> Lieutenant H. H. Cole, *Catalogue of the Objects of Indian Art exhibited in the South Kensington Museum* (London, 1874), p. 109.



**Figure 4.** Model in painted wood from the India Museum, illustrating cleaning cotton with a foot-roller and conforming to the same aesthetic as the clay models discussed here. Height 16.5 cm. Belgaum. Source: V&A, inv. no. 259(IS). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, inv. no. 259(IS).

further 120 or so entries scattered through the second part.<sup>19</sup> They include some sizeable groups and tableaux, so that the total number of figures would have been considerably higher: one such group of 68 figures was ‘painted, in native costume’; another, a box with 40 ‘painted and draped figures’; a third, a box containing ‘15 perfect and a number of imperfect figures’; and a further set of 40 unclassified. It seems possible that some may reflect attempts to illustrate the diversity of India’s population in terms of physical types or professions, or simply of dress. Other formal groupings were certainly arranged to illustrate themes—‘an Indian village and Court of Justice, with a European Judge, presiding for the purpose of promoting its dispensation’; and perhaps most impressively,

a kind of regal levee, at which a prince, sitting in front of a tent of crimson velvet, fringed with a massive bordering of silver-work, receives the homage of his ministers and chiefs, or perhaps his guests. The whole affair is of the most gorgeous description, blazing in gold, silver, and brilliant colours.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most impressive tableaux surviving today (Figure 5), representing an indigo factory with some 100 figures at work on various tasks, was commissioned by T. N. Mukharji of the Bengal Civil Service (and also a curator in the Indian Museum in Calcutta), whose published works are cited here, for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886. It now forms part of the Economic Botany Collections at Kew Gardens. The maker is recorded as Rakhhal Chunder Pal (1834–1911).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Science and Art Department, *India Museum. Inventory of the Collection of Examples of Indian Art and Manufactures transferred to the South Kensington Museum* (London, 1880). The catalogue—produced for internal use within the museum—records the work of two teams, working independently to list all the relevant material in a succinct manner: one team compiled an inventory numbered from 1 to 9821 and the other a separate listing numbered from 01 to 09245—hence the bipartite structure of the catalogue. The entire text has recently been made available online by the National Art Library: see <https://archive.org/details/india-museum-inventory-of-the-collection-of-examples-of-indian-art-and-manufacture> (accessed 9 February 2023).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> See Caroline Cornish, ‘Kew and colonialism: a history of entanglement’, <https://www.kew.org/read-and-watch/kew-empire-indigo-factory-model> (accessed 9 February 2023).





**Figure 5.** Model of a factory producing indigo dye (detail), produced by Rakhai Chunder Pal for display in the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886 in London. The model, populated with over 100 figures, shows every stage in the production process, from the arrival of the indigo plants by oxcart to the finished product. 1.5 × 2.0 m. Source: Economic Botany Collections, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, inv. no. EBC 79733.

All the production centres already mentioned appear in the India Museum catalogue, with 56 entries relating to Kishnaghur, four to Lucknow, and nine to Poona. For Gokak, 16 entries are recorded. To these may be added a further 33 models assigned to Belgaum and 17 entries to Desnoor (Deshnoor), also in Belgaum district. More unexpectedly, there are 13 entries for South Arcot, 17 from Trichinopoly (Tiruchirappalli), and two from Condapilly—all within the Madras presidency which, at its greatest extent, stretched from coast to coast in the southern part of the sub-continent. A further 63 entries are given simply to 'Madras', but for the above reasons it is difficult to assign meaning and importance to them, except to say that southern India has hitherto been under-represented in discussions of this industry.

It may be noted that entries for other categories of material in the India Museum catalogue indicate that by the time of its authorship the collection had been heavily augmented by material which had not been collected directly in the course of fieldwork in India. It had, rather, arrived through the medium of the series of international expositions that followed in the wake of the Great Exhibition of 1851 (see below). Since few dates of acquisition are attached to the entries for unfired clay figures, many of them may have belonged to the period when indigenous production was already being influenced by external factors. Others mentioned below are likely to have been acquired from one or other of the international exhibitions in the 1850s and beyond. Undoubtedly, production for local consumption continued alongside this new market, but in the absence of the original material, the potential for further analysis or the construction of a chronology remains limited.

The seemingly alarming scale of the losses suffered by the figures and models needs to be seen in context. In the first place, the unfired state in which they were produced<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> By the later nineteenth century, however, it seems that those figures destined for export to the international fairs, at least, could be fired to render them more durable—representing not only a technological

meant that many of them were always doomed to self-destruction. Certainly, they would have been exceptionally vulnerable to damage during their peregrinations from India to London, to the several venues in which the India Museum came to rest in the course of its 80-year existence,<sup>23</sup> and in some instances during exhibition elsewhere, even internationally. Secondly, it seems clear that few of these would have been treasured for their own sake as works of art—even as folk art. In the museum and exhibition context they evidently functioned rather as props or visual aids—as means of representing the wide social themes or large-scale industrial and preparative processes that were at the heart of Britain’s interest in the sub-continent and which would certainly have defied treatment in the cramped quarters of the India Museum. Added to that, the undoubted perception that they would have been infinitely replaceable, simply by sending a repeat order to the appropriate presidency, must go a long way to explaining the seemingly cavalier attitude to de-accessioning that took place in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Although the bulk of those listed in the catalogue are entirely anonymous as to their manufacture, a single name stands out—‘Joodoonath Pal’—but it is of real interest. The Pal family—Jadunath, his brother Ram Lal Pal, his nephew Bakkeswar Pal, and their neighbour and relative Rakhhal Das Pal—were said by the 1880s to be the only modellers of real note then working in Kishnaghur, which we may take to mean the only ones considered as artist-craftsmen with a wide European market. Their work is represented by four models, now in Asian and African Studies at the British Library (Figure 6): representing a brahmin, two potters, and a tailor, they came to the library from the collection of Sir William Foster, registrar and historiographer to the India Office, and are said to have been brought to England first for the Great Exhibition. Jadunath Pal contributed life-size figures to the Amsterdam exhibition of 1883 and shortly afterwards was commissioned to illustrate the races of India with a set of models for exhibition at Calcutta.<sup>24</sup> The British Library’s description of its models as from the ‘studio’ of Jadunath Pal is perhaps more apposite than it might at first appear: Jadunath (circa 1821–circa 1900) had attended the Government School of Art in Calcutta and also served as an instructor there. He and his family ‘repeatedly gained medals and certificates in most of the International Exhibitions’,<sup>25</sup> so his working practices as well as his style may well have been quite heavily imbued with European influence. While the Pals worked in a range of scales, some of the figures produced for exhibition by Jadunath were certainly life-sized, while his kinsman Rakhhal Das was said to be the best artist in miniature scenes,<sup>26</sup> as represented in the

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development but a significant conceptual shift away from the ethos described above. See Bean, ‘The unfired clay sculpture of Bengal’, pp. 615–622.

<sup>23</sup> At the winding-up of the EIC in 1858 the museum collection (with much else) passed to the control of the India Office: it was moved from East India House in 1858 to Fife House in Whitehall, in 1869 to an attic storey in the India Office, and in 1875 to the ‘Eastern Galleries’ adjacent to the South Kensington Museum. In 1879 the collection was divided between a number of institutions, with most of the clay figurines passing to the South Kensington Museum (today the Victoria and Albert Museum). See Ray Desmond, *The India Museum 1801–1979* (London, 1982), *passim*; Arthur MacGregor, *Company Curiosities. Nature, Culture and the East India Company, 1600–1874* (London, 2018), pp. 168–235.

<sup>24</sup> T. N. Mukharji, *A Handbook of Indian Products (Art-Manufactures and Raw Materials)* (Calcutta, 1883), p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Mukharji, *Art-Manufactures of India*, pp. 59, 62. At one point Mukharji describes Jadunath as ‘the Government modeller’ and mentions that copies of his work were available through the Revenue and Agriculture Department in Calcutta at 40 rupees each, ‘exclusive of arms, dress, and other appurtenances’ (p. 67). A complete collection of his work was deposited in the Indian Museum at Calcutta and copies were sent to the Imperial Institute in London. The Amsterdam models were displayed in context within a row of reconstructed Bengali shops, an arrangement repeated with success at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886.

<sup>26</sup> Mukharji, *Art-Manufactures of India*, pp. 67–68. He produced several of the tableaux sent to the Glasgow exhibition and was said to charge ‘a very high price’—clearly having nothing further to do with the popular craft that gave birth to the genre.



**Figure 6.** Figure of a potter applying painted decoration to his vessels; missing here are the paint-brush originally held in his right hand and a bowl from his left. Height 14.3 cm. From the collection of Sir William Foster. Source: The British Library, London, inv. no. Foster 1039. © The British Library Board.

India Museum. The producers of the hundreds of other figures, as might be expected, remain anonymous.

### The international exhibitions and the reception of models in Europe

Apart from the assembly of its own publicly accessible museum, the EIC contributed hugely to the 1851 Great Exhibition (its exhibits coordinated by John Forbes Royle<sup>27</sup>) and to several succeeding world fairs, generally overseen under the regime of the India Office by John Forbes Watson.<sup>28</sup> At all of these, the contextual role of the small-scale models is clear. One contemporary observer in 1851 enthused:

If the East India Company had conceived the idea of fitting up a large portion of the Exhibition Building with the machines and implements employed by the Hindoos, and had, at the same time, imported the native workmen to use them, and grouped Indians of every caste around as spectators, they could not have better succeeded in portraying the peculiarities of oriental costume and habits, than by exhibiting those interesting models in clay and wood, illustrative of many ceremonials and customs of a novel and characteristic description. They did not merely represent machines and men, but had so much life and sprightliness infused in their every attitude, that they looked more as if they were intended for models of manners.<sup>29</sup>

Included among these displays were not only individual figures and small groups but also quite elaborate tableaux featuring multiple objects. The *Reports of the Juries* of the 1851 Exhibition single out for comment a contribution from a Mr Mansfield of the EIC's civil service, showing the encampment of a government collector on his tour of duty, which was populated by some 300 figures contributing in various ways to the scene. The

<sup>27</sup> Formerly a Company surgeon and naturalist in India, John Forbes Royle (1798–1858) was later appointed professor of *Materia Medica* at King's College, London, from which time he formed a close association with the India Museum, designated 'Correspondent relating to the Vegetable Productions of India'. He was a commissioner for the 1851 exhibition in London and was made an officer of the *Légion d'honneur* for his role in superintending the Oriental department of the Paris exhibition of 1855.

<sup>28</sup> John Forbes Watson (1827–1892), a former surgeon in the Bombay Army Medical Service, was placed in charge of the India Museum at its transfer to the India Office in 1858. He was an energetic supporter of the international exhibition movement, an industrious author on Indian matters, and an keen promoter of trade, both import and export.

<sup>29</sup> Dickinson's *Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851* (London, 1852), pl. V.

potential of some models for the instruction of those who might be expected to bring about improvements to the Indian agricultural economy was also appreciated. Commenting on one group, including a representation of six oxen being used to raise water from a well, the authors of *The Crystal Palace and its Contents* observed that ‘this set of models might afford the means of a very useful and interesting lecture on the application of simple machinery to irrigation. To intending colonists such lessons would have great value.’<sup>30</sup> Among the awards made to the Company in 1851 was a prize medal for ‘Clay figures, representing the various Hindoo castes and professions, manufactured in Kishnagur’ (Figure 7), a selection of which made an appearance in the ‘illustrated cyclopaedia’ of the exhibition.<sup>31</sup> Following the exhibition, at least some of these were sold off, indicating that they were perceived to have fulfilled their essentially ephemeral function.<sup>32</sup>

In 1855 the Company had a presence at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, about which we know rather less in detail, but a Christie’s catalogue published two years later lists among the surplus material sold off by the Company in London after the exhibition ‘An elephant with a figure in a howdah, a sacred bull, a dog, various male and female figures, two horsemen and four figures carrying a palanquin’.<sup>33</sup>

In 1862 it was again London’s turn to host the international exhibition, installed on the western side of Exhibition Road. The Indian section there was arranged by Forbes Watson, whose *Descriptive Catalogue of the Indian Department* of the exhibition lists over 100 models, several of the entries being for multiple figures. Major groups illustrated the various ‘native classes, trades and professions’, most contributions being credited to the Government of India but with a sizeable number described as ‘Condapully figures’ from the Kistna district, exhibited by the Madras government.<sup>34</sup> In 1865, several models showing ploughing and harrowing are known to have been sent for exhibition in New Zealand.<sup>35</sup>

Records of a further 55 models and figures in the South Kensington Museum’s catalogue are annotated with the date 1867, suggesting (and in some instances specifically stating) that they formed part of the Exposition Universelle that ran in Paris from April to November in that year. A point of special interest in these is that many of the records also show a price in rupees (all modest, varying from 2 or 3 up to 18 rupees for a group of dancing girls and musicians), strongly suggesting that they resulted from a specific buying campaign undertaken with the exhibition in mind.

Others specifically mention the Vienna Universal Exhibition of 1873, for which Forbes Watson compiled a *Classified and Descriptive Catalogue of the Indian Department*.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *The Crystal Palace and its Contents: being an Illustrated Cyclopaedia of the Great Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations* (London, 1852), p. 102. Among the figures sent to the Glasgow International Exhibition in 1888 were some illustrating ‘irrigation by swing basket’, ‘irrigation by lever’, ‘well irrigation by leathern bags’, and ‘irrigation by Persian wheel’: Mukharji, *Art-Manufactures of India*, p. 71.

<sup>31</sup> *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, List of Awards Granted by the Juries* (London, 1851), p. 44.

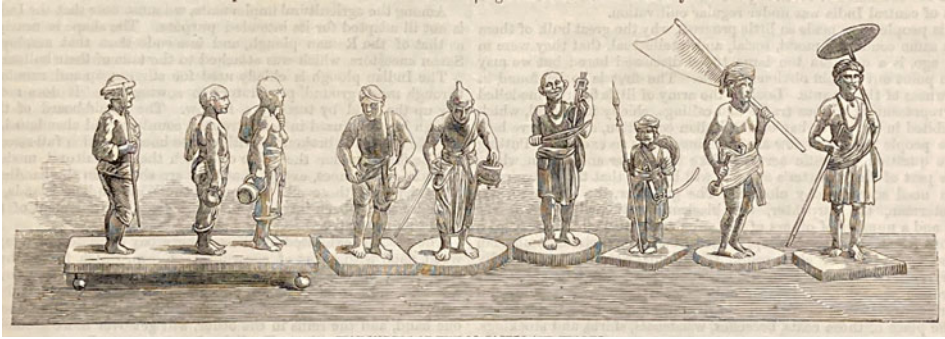
<sup>32</sup> Messrs Hoggart, Norton and Trist, *A Catalogue of ... by far the greater Proportion of the valuable and interesting Collection as exhibited by the Honourable the East India Company at the Great Exhibition in 1851* (London, 7 June 1852), lots 2043–54 (Native Trades, Habits and Costumes), 2055–60 (Wood figures illustrating Native Customs), 2061–72 (Figures curiously carved in Wood, Models, &c.), and 1962–7 (Artificial Fruits and Vegetables).

<sup>33</sup> Messrs Christie and Manson, *Catalogue of the Celebrated Collection of the Works of Art and Manufacture of British India exhibited by the Hon. The East India Company at the Exposition Universelle at Paris in 1855* (London, 9 March 1857), lots 3320–34.

<sup>34</sup> J. Forbes Watson, *International Exhibition of 1862. A Classified and Descriptive Catalogue of the Indian Department* (London, 1862), pp. 275–257.

<sup>35</sup> J. Forbes Watson, *New Zealand Exhibition, 1865. A Classified List of Contributions from British India ... forwarded ... from the India Museum* (London, 1864), p. 45.

<sup>36</sup> J. Forbes Watson, *Vienna Universal Exhibition, 1873. A Classified and Descriptive Catalogue of the Indian Department* (London, 1873).



**Figure 7.** Figures from the India Museum exhibited at the Great Exhibition. Source: *The Crystal Palace and its Contents*, p. 101.

Interestingly, some of the models there were by now being used to demonstrate ways in which traditional Indian practices had been superseded by industrial processes introduced from or inspired by Europe. There was, for example, a major display on the cotton industry in which use of the traditional foot-roller was included (see Figure 4). The only cotton shown, which had been prepared by the traditional method, was described, however, as having been ‘much injured by the foot roller’ and re-cleaned by another method, so that the models now carried new messages of obsolescence and the need for industrial reform.<sup>37</sup>

Further agricultural models as well as model boats (in wood) travelled to Philadelphia for the Centennial Exhibition of 1876,<sup>38</sup> seemingly the last opportunity for the India Museum collection to contribute in this way. After it was dispersed in 1879, however, other figures continued to appear on the international exhibition circuit. They were prominent at Amsterdam in 1883. The Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886 included 12 sets of life-size figures in clay or plaster scattered throughout the exhibition, each illustrating ‘typical’ peoples of particular regions: they included ‘a series of terra-cotta figurines, sketched in clay from living models, illustrating the working people of the Panjab’, mostly made by G. P. Pito of the Mayo School of Art in Lahore,<sup>39</sup> and a series of Andaman Islanders modelled by Jadunath Pal.<sup>40</sup> The Glasgow International Exhibition of 1888 featured 17 life-size models, again by Jadunath Pal.<sup>41</sup>

The presence of these specially commissioned sets of images in clay calls to mind other forms of systematic survey that were by now being applied to documenting the ethnic

<sup>37</sup> In the exhibition catalogue (*ibid.*) the device is described as ‘a metal roller, which, with the aid of a wooden slipper, is worked by the foot backwards and forwards amidst the cotton and the seed, so that, by degrees the seeds become loosened and separated from the fibre’. Other ‘toys and waxworks’ shown at Vienna included ten figures in carved wood from Belgaum illustrating various trades and classes, and a further 26 ‘wood figures of animals’ from Surat.

<sup>38</sup> J. Forbes Watson, *India. A Classified and Descriptive Catalogue of the Collections from the India Museum and Exhibited in ... the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876* (London, 1876).

<sup>39</sup> Mukharji, *Art-Manufactures of India*, p. 72. Use of the term ‘terra cotta’ would seem to suggest that they illustrate the transition from unfired to fired clay, in response to Western demands.

<sup>40</sup> See Claire Wintle, ‘Model subjects: representations of the Andaman Islands at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886’, *History Workshop Journal* 67 (2009), pp. 194–207.

<sup>41</sup> Mukharji, *Art-Manufactures of India*, p. 63. Rather than forming a neutrally academic exercise, it may be suggested that these and other forms of surveys stemmed from a growing conviction that the Uprising of 1857 had been fuelled by inadequate understanding of the diversity of local groups and societies by the colonial administration: see Abigail McGowan, *Crafting the Nation in Colonial India* (New York, 2009), pp. 26–27.



diversity of the Indian population. Prominent among these are the plaster moulds of human features produced by the Schlagintweit brothers on the eve of the Uprising of 1857. Some 250 of these (plus hands and feet) had been completed by the time the unrest brought their survey to a premature end; zinc castings produced afterwards were then made available to the emerging body of ethnologists and to museums on a commercial basis.<sup>42</sup> Photography was similarly employed in large-scale surveys of this kind, one of the most important being *The Costumes and People of India*, published in eight volumes by the India Museum between 1868 and 1875, under the editorship of Forbes Watson and J. W. Kent.<sup>43</sup> While it cannot be claimed that the small-scale clay figures described here were ever produced with such a specific aim in mind, some of them clearly came to perform a comparable role once they entered the museum environment. In this context their attention to the details of dress, accoutrements, and practices as well as the physical appearance of their subjects became a matter of primary importance, although this did not please everyone.

### *The reception of the figures*

While responses to the roles played by figures in the museum and exhibition context were universally appreciative, from an aesthetic point of view the critics proved ambivalent in their responses to them. Evidently they were willing to acknowledge the documentary role of the figures but adopted a rather lofty and often supercilious tone when judging these (essentially craft-based) products against the clay modelling traditions of European studio practice. This is perhaps most relevant in the case of the larger-scale figures which found themselves the object of direct comparison with European sculptures in the international exhibition setting, although at times it is difficult to tell whether large- or small-scale works are being cited.

The ambivalent position they occupied in this respect was partly due to what was described as the modellers' 'unhappy predilection for introducing pieces of real fabrics in the clothing; actual hair and wool in the figures; and in the accessories, straw and grass, &c', which reduced the figures in the eyes of the critics to the level of 'ingenious toy-making'.<sup>44</sup> Sir George Watt was similarly dismissive of these 'toys dressed in actual clothes'.<sup>45</sup> George Birdwood was prepared to acknowledge the documentary role of the Lucknow figures—'most faithful and characteristic representations of the different races ... and highly creditable to the technical knowledge and taste of the artists'—but denigrated those espousing European influence, produced 'in a very debased style, being modelled after the Italian work that is to be found all over Lucknow'.<sup>46</sup> By the time of the exhibition of Indian art at Delhi in 1903, however, Watt, the exhibition's director, was content to describe unequivocally the works of Bhagwant Singh, modelling master of the Lucknow Technical School ('a modeller by caste and an artist by instinct'), as 'a very

<sup>42</sup> The India Museum possessed a complete set of these. See Felix Driver, 'Face to face with Nain Singh: the Schlagintweit collections and their uses', in *Naturalists in the Field. Collecting, Recording and Preserving the Natural World from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-first Century*, (ed.) A. MacGregor (Leiden and Boston, 2018), pp. 441–469; Andrew Zimmerman, 'Die Gipsmasken der Brüder Schlagintweit: Verkörperung kolonialer Macht', in *Über den Himalaya. Die Expedition der Brüder Schlagintweit nach Indien und Zentralasien 1854–1858*, (eds) M. von Briescius, F. Kaiser and S. Kleidt (Cologne, 2015), pp. 241–249.

<sup>43</sup> J. Forbes Watson and J. W. Kent, *The Costumes and People of India* (London, 1868–1875).

<sup>44</sup> Henry H. Locke, principal of the Calcutta School of Art, quoted in Mukharji, *Art-Manufactures of India*, p. 59.

<sup>45</sup> Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi*, 1903, p. 89.

<sup>46</sup> Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India*, p. 302. Birdwood is unusual in applying the term 'artists' to these manufacturers, and he is indeed dismissive of Indian sculpture on a larger scale: 'Nowhere does their figure sculpture shew the inspiration of true art. They seem to have no feeling for it.'

instructive and realistic series of examples of Fine Art'.<sup>47</sup> Modelling in this sense had by now moved well beyond the milieu in which it had first developed in India. Both in the sub-continent and in England it found itself enmeshed in debates whose proponents advocated passionately for, on the one hand, the extension of access to European traditions through the government schools of art established in India from mid-century, or who bemoaned, on the other hand, the undermining of established Indian traditions by the imposition of alien aesthetic values derived from the (European) classical canon.<sup>48</sup>

Although treated hitherto as primarily illustrative in intent, the representations of craftsmen at work, which constitute a large part of the surviving corpus, may also be seen in relation to the body of scholarship which, in recent decades, has concerned itself with the central role played by the figure of the craftsman in debates that followed in the wake of the international exhibitions of the later 1800s. Here the traditional crafts of India were perceived as imbued with an integrity born of generations of hereditary craftsmanship, a process characterised as biological as much as social by the likes of George Birdwood, but they were also seen as essentially in decline and under threat from Western industrialisation. This discourse was staged around a flood of visual representations of the craftsman at work—whether in the form of drawings, photographs, or illustrated publications, many of them issuing from the government art colleges in India. Initially epitomising the essential virtues of traditional forms of production, these compositions were gradually recruited into a more socially conscious narrative that sought first to highlight the damaging impact wrought by the aggressive Western assault on indigenous production and, ultimately, by the promotion of a nationalist agenda that called for the rejection of colonial influence and political control. Prominent among the authors who have articulated the visual dimensions of this trope are Saloni Mathur<sup>49</sup> and Deepali Dewan.<sup>50</sup> Although neither author makes specific mention of the clay figures considered here, their characterisation of the common range of these images could apply equally to the craft figures produced in clay—the craftsman with his head bent as if concentrating on the task before him, his gestures and facial expression capturing the 'the knowledge of traditional Indian arts ... being transferred from the craftsman's body to the object he produces'.<sup>51</sup> And like the two-dimensional images—often regionally specific—that they discuss, the clay figures too were commonly displayed in the exhibition context alongside the products of the craft concerned.

Given these similarities and the degree of chronological overlap, the unfired clay figures considered here must in some sense have participated in that same visual trope, although the range of subjects extends far beyond the hereditary craftsmen who concern

<sup>47</sup> Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi, 1903*, pp. 453–454, pls 62, 65.

<sup>48</sup> There was, however, more than aesthetics at stake, as a curiously carping note, seemingly prompted by innate nationalism, also creeps into contemporary criticism. Mentioning representations of the 'soft and delicate-limbed Bengallee' and the 'tall and slender inhabitant of Southern India', even the *Great Exhibition Official Catalogue* jibes that 'all are not so effeminate-looking', contrasting them unfavourably with the 'well-clothed inhabitants' from Belgaum and the North-West, and even with the Thugs modelled in an exhibit submitted by a Captain Reynolds. See *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations 1851. Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue* (London, 1851), vol. ii, section IV, class XXX, p. 930. Others professed themselves positively 'repulsed' by the emaciated and (again) 'effeminate' figures: Lara Kriegel, *Grand Designs. Labor, Empire and the Museum in Victorian Culture* (Durham, NC, 2007), p. 117.

<sup>49</sup> Saloni Mathur, *India by Design. Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Berkeley, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> Deepali Dewan, 'The body at work: colonial art education and the figure of the "native craftsman"', in *Confronting the Body. The Politics of Physicality in Colonial and Post-Colonial India*, (eds) J. H. Mills and S. Sen (London, 2004), pp. 118–134. The chapter is developed from Dr Dewan's doctoral thesis, 'Crafting and Knowledge of Crafts: Art Education, Colonialism and the Madras School of Arts in Nineteenth-Century South Asia' (University of Minnesota, 2001). I am grateful to Dr Dewan for sharing both texts with me.

<sup>51</sup> Dewan, 'The body at work', p. 119.

Mathur and Dewan. In fact, the extended range of everyday subjects—beggars, jugglers, water-sellers, and so on—would make it difficult to apply the workings of the mechanisms they describe to what we know of the deployment of the figures within the India Museum. Here there is every indication that the figures were used in the pursuit of a more narrowly drawn mercantile agenda, in which the influence of the critics, designers, and philosophers who engaged so closely with the aesthetic preoccupations of the South Kensington Museum were comparatively muted. No doubt the craftsman was seen here too as the repository of much traditional skill and knowledge,<sup>52</sup> but he was presented almost in an ethnographical mode—illustrative of the industries whose products he accompanied but lacking the evangelising role attributed to the drawings produced in the art school milieu.

Further light is cast on the roles played by figures of this type in Abigail McGowan's admirably insightful *Crafting the Nation in Colonial India*, which charts the emergence of an interest in viewing craft products in relation to both production methods and producers.<sup>53</sup> Much of this work was articulated in the commissioning of surveys and gazetteers that had the ultimate aim of characterising the productive potential of communities throughout British India. Of particular note here is the locating of these various initiatives, which McGowan illustrates with a display of clay models of artisans from the Victoria and Albert Museum (today the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum) in Bombay, in the two or three decades from about 1880. By this time the independent existence of the India Museum collections on which the present survey is based, had already been brought to an end and control of the objects had been transferred to the South Kensington Museum. While that particular collection became a closed archive from 1879 onwards, the role ascribed to the figures by McGowan marks a further chapter in the continuing evolution of the purposes to which these figures were recruited. Their long history, from their conception as adjuncts to religious ritual a century earlier, remains to be fully explored.

### Plaster modelling

An increase in the use of plaster rather than clay as a modelling medium becomes increasingly apparent in the later nineteenth century. T. N. Mukharji attributes the introduction of plaster of Paris in this genre chiefly to Italian artists employed in the schools of art founded by the British.<sup>54</sup> This assertion finds support from Sir Edward Buck who writes, in the preface to the catalogue of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, that 'the system for the first time adopted in connection with this Exhibition of reproducing work in Plaster of Paris seems likely to give prominence and encouragement to the plastic art of the country, since it will now be possible to meet any demand which may arise for such work with less risk of breakage and at much smaller cost'. Buck attributes its introduction specifically to 'Mr J. Schaumburg, artist, attached to the Geological Survey Department of India'.<sup>55</sup> A group in plaster 'representing "suttee", &c., formerly exhibited at the Paris

<sup>52</sup> Birdwood, *Industrial Arts of India*, p. 144, for example, comes close to implying that these hereditary skills were acquired genetically rather than exclusively by hands-on training: 'the patient Hindu handicraftsman's dexterity is a second nature, developed from father to son, working for generations at the same processes and manipulations'. In *The Crystal Palace and its Contents*, p. 101, present-day Hindus were characterised as the inheritors of 'an unbroken legacy of the agricultural and manufacturing arts of the ancient Egyptians'.

<sup>53</sup> McGowan, *Crafting the Nation in Colonial India*, especially chapter 1.

<sup>54</sup> Mukharji, *Art-Manufactures of India*, p. 74.

<sup>55</sup> Sir Edward Buck, 'Empire of India', in *Colonial and Indian Exhibition 1886. Official Catalogue* (London, 1886), p. 12. An example from a century earlier shows Sir Charles Warre Malet, Resident at the court of the Peshwa in Poona, in 1789 receiving 26 sculptures in response to his request that the East India Company send 'some pieces of

Exhibition, 1867' suggests that this movement got under way at quite an early date in the history of the international exhibitions.

Modelling in clay remains a universal studio practice, the slow-drying medium allowing the artist or craftsman to mould and to modify the work until the desired form is reached. Plaster of Paris, by contrast is comparatively quick-drying: the process (involving a chemical reaction rather than merely desiccation) begins about 10 minutes after the powdered gypsum is hydrated and is complete within around 45 minutes. Rapid working is therefore essential, but the principal use of plaster of Paris has been in the production of casts: Buck's reference to the 'reproducing' of sculptural art implies that this is the function he had in mind, so the status of at least some of the works referred to remains ambivalent. Certainly there is no suggestion that any of the figures discussed here were cast rather than moulded.

The term 'plaster' further crops up in contexts suggesting that it was in much wider use in everyday society both in India and beyond, and that its use in modelling already had a lengthy history. For example, in the collection of Dr Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner—assembled in Central Asia, far from European influence and deposited in the India Museum—there were numerous heads, busts, and religious figurines, as well as a 'group of grotesque figures' from Takht-i-bahi, said to be of plaster. These would have dated from the early centuries AD. There are also numerous more recent figures in the collection which sound indistinguishable from those discussed here, except for their being identified as made of plaster. These include a 'Native, with textile girdle and turban', a 'Warrior, with sword and shield', a 'Female, costume covered in tinsel', 'Dolls, twenty-three, plaster, dress[ed] in native costume', and models of a loaf of bread on a plate and of fruit on a plate in painted plaster. Some of these are even from Kishnaghur—so strongly associated with the production of unfired clay figures—including a 'Model of an oil mill, with bullock', and two further figures of bullocks. These seem unlikely to be of the 'Plaster of Paris' mentioned specifically by Buck and are no doubt modelled in white clay, whether fired or otherwise.

## Conclusion

The figures described here not only stand as representatives of a formerly vibrant minor industry but form an extraordinarily vivid record of many aspects of popular culture—from religious observance to craft activities, agriculture and transport, regional dress and ornament, and so on—as captured by those who lived and worked among their subjects and were well placed to observe them. Their enthusiastic adoption by the curators of Western exhibitions and displays is reflected in the large numbers of figures alluded to in the historical record, adding further dimensions to their erstwhile roles. Perhaps no other institution did more to influence the latter development than the India Museum: significantly, following the transfer of the collection in 1879 to the South Kensington Museum—dedicated to matters of art and design rather than ethnology—we hear no more of the figures beyond the record of their progressive disposal, occasionally sold at auction but more frequently written off due to their having self-destructed with the passage of time. The ephemerality that formed an essential aspect of their earliest development reasserted itself inexorably, placing a limit on the collection's capacity to contribute at more than a documentary level to continuing research into these fascinating but elusive artefacts.

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workmanship in plaster of Paris and a Suit of Armour . . . for Nanna Furneze [Fadnavis], the Principal Minister of the Poona Durbar'. Quoted in Schaffer, "'Take all of them'", pp. 74–75.

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