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The Friends of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford Magazine

Pitt Rivers Museum

SOUTH PARKS ROAD, OXFORD, OX1 3PP

IN THIS ISSUE

Cover image: 'Joyful Pure Dance' © Prasanna (See page 10 article 'See the Music Hear the Dance' by Alarmel Valli)

Photo © Prasanna

'God of love with his flower arrows'

Between Friends

Photo © Anthony Flemming

The anthropology of writing is a subfield of anthropology that studies the cultural and social aspects of writing systems and their use in different societies. It explores the ways in which writing is embedded in social, political, and economic systems, as well as how it shapes and is shaped by cultural beliefs and practices. The anthropology of writing also considers the history of writing and its development in different cultures, and the relationships between writing, literacy, and power.

True enough…but...I didn't write that. That was the artificial intelligence chat-bot, ChatGPT. Arthur C. Clarke famously wrote that "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" I think this is the kind of thing he had in mind. The PRM has much of the paraphernalia of writing: a stylus or two from the ancient world, calligraphy brushes from the far East and so on. Also, of writing itself: Oroko messages written in feathers and cowrie shells, a cuneiform tablet recording grain accounts, or stories and legends written on a Chinese scroll recently found unentered in the catalogue (always my favourite provenance!) but likely 19th century in origin. In all cases though, what was written came first from someone's head. Not any more with ChatGPT and its kind.

Except, of course, it's not an idea-generating entity itself – it doesn't think and therefore it isn't. ChatGPT's knowledge is *our* knowledge gleaned from the internet and which is further refined by its interactions with ourselves. Like it or not, it seems set to influence both how and what we write and so become a significant part of our culture. Where, then, would we put ChatGPT in the PRM? Is it a virtual scroll, a collection of information to be interrogated, and so belonging with examples of writing? Is it a quasi-magical item perhaps? Or is it a tool to go alongside quills and brushes, just another piece of technology that helps us communicate? It suggests the latter, when asked.

Anthony Flemming, *Member of the PRM Liaison Committee and Friend*

Editorial

Photo © Dawn Osborne

Looking across the contents of this magazine and the topics tackled: digital technology; migration; reframing and repatriation; refugees finding new safe lives and inspiration while preserving their culture; self-expression in times of economic difficulty, and environmentalism, we are nothing if not relevant and topical, while all the time respecting tradition and history.

Who could not be inspired by Alarmel Valli's article on Indian Classical Dance on page 10 giving a unique perspective on that traditional art form from the inside?

The Museum also celebrates ordinary working practices and the article on the humble smock on page 11 casts an eye on the garments worn by the ordinary rural workers for hundreds of years in the local area of Oxford. As well as looking far and wide we are also looking in our own back yard.

Thanks to all the authors, production, design, distribution and editorial teams, the curators and administrative staff and volunteers at the Museum that make putting this magazine together a privilege and joy.

We get very little feedback on the Magazine. I hope this is because you are all somewhat satisfied and happy. We are always open to constructive criticism and suggestions for making the Magazine better…or perhaps you learned something amazing about a culture on your travels or are an expert in a niche area which would make an interesting article to share with others. If any of this is ringing a bell, do get in touch! We would love to hear from you.

Dawn Osborne, *Editor*

Museum News

Photo: © PRM

It has been a real pleasure to see visitors return to the Museum once again enjoying a full range of activities and programmes. Our half term events for children were particularly busy this year with record numbers joining us for fun and learning!

This year we have a wonderful Spring/Summer programme for visitors that includes talks, workshops, and late nights. In fact, as we move ahead in 2023, now has never been a better time to join the Museum as members can enjoy access to many free talks and behind-the-scenes tours (joining details on back of this Magazine). If you can't always join us in person, many talks are now available online too.

If you have never been a member, do sign up and have a year's worth of wonderful membership benefits. You will be able to enjoy free or discounted admission to our talks, learn a new skill or craft in one of our workshops and participate in exclusive and member-only events. You will also get a subscription to the Magazine, which keeps you up to date with what's going on in and around the museum. Not only will you have a great time, but you will also be supporting the work of the Museum. You will be joining a growing international network of people committed to the future of the Museum and its work with our local communities, students and partners across the world. We all look forward to seeing you!

Karrine Sanders *PRM Senior Administrator*

From the Director

Photo: © PRM

Seven years ago, I started as the new director of the Pitt Rivers Museum and what an honour it has been to lead this place alongside a phenomenonal team, inspiring partners, friends and visitors. I doubt that I could have ever have been fully prepared for the whirlwind of energetic activity that has had us spinning at least a dozen plates at once, but what an amazing journey we've been on together. Leafing through our annual reports and the Friends' magazines of those years, it's clear we have much to be proud of, even though our work had to be developed under quite challenging circumstances that included the covid pandemic, Brexit and the climate and migratory crises, all topics we will continue actively discussing as part of our programming.

Spring is in the air and the first flowers are showing their faces after a long winter. December and February half term were busy periods in the Museum and it's a pleasure to see the excitement on visitors' faces when they hear music coming from the new exhibition in the long gallery. *'Unmasked'* is a captivating combination of two exhibitions; the music comes from David Pratten's '*Spirit in the City',* and introduces us to the Niger Delta's Agaba masquerading (it includes the Agaba mask that the Friends helped acquire). Further along, we find British-Nigerian environmental artist Zina Saro-Wiwa's '*Bad Boys & Broken Hearts'*. This installation's audiovisual force reverberates through us, with the Niger Delta's drumming heartbeat helping us understand its present and history. Saro-Wiwa unmasks the challenging economic realities of two Port Harcourt-based Agaba masqueraders, while also giving us an intimate glimpse into their lives, full of hopes, dreams and colour. It also shows us the destructive effects of the environmental exploitation of the rich reserves of crude oil, with its devastating effects on Zina's ancestral Ogoni homeland. (See page 8 for further details of both exhibitions.)

Laura Van Broekhoven, *Director*

Photo: © Penny Maltby

Make a Harvest Trophy
Saturday 17 June, 10.00 - 16.30
With visual artist and maker Penny Maltby. Ticketing link coming soon.
Spend a day learning about the traditional and endangered craft of straw work. During the workshop your tutor will teach you how to prepare and store the straw, as well as discussing the history and significance of this humble material.
Make a harvest trophy using a 5-straw spiral plait and learn how to increase, decrease, and add new straws. The workshop will take place behind the scenes in the Conservation Laboratory, where you can take inspiration from straw work in the museum collections for your own work! All materials are included.
Please bring an apron, as the straw can be dusty.
No experience is necessary, although some manual dexterity is required.
Suitable for 18+.

KK Day - Migration

This year the Museum celebrated its 20th Kenneth Kirkwood Day with a topic that could not be more timely – migration.

Using the fascinating mix of perspectives and specialisms for which the KK Day has become renowned, speakers covered everything from history's original migrants to the UK's very own 'Stop the Boats' campaign, that is currently so dividing opinion.

Photo: © Free from Bing

Empire Windrush arrival in Britain 1948

Dr Nando Sigona, Chair of International Migration and Forced Displacement at Birmingham University, began by doing some contemporary scene-setting with his talk on *'The Changing Politics of Migration in Global Britain'*. The picture he painted was revealing - and paradoxical.

Since the Brexit referendum, migration to the UK from the EU has indeed fallen, he said, as promised by the Leave campaign, and more migrants who had moved here from the EU pre-referendum have returned to the other side of the English Channel. However immigration to the UK from elsewhere in the world has increased. Thus there are two very distinct sides to the notion of 'taking back control'. Hard-pressed UK businesses who are struggling to find staff in post Brexit Britain – and some politicians - are now calling for restrictions on immigration to be relaxed.

As a member of the EU the UK did not have the type of refugee and small boats challenge that it is seeing today he said, because movements of migrants were managed collectively within the EU block.

"There is a gap between the rhetoric and the reality – people are finding that 'taking back control' is not that easy."

Added to the pressure is the huge backlog of migrants waiting to have their applications processed by the UK. "It would take seven to eight years to work through the current backlog, even if no more migrants arrived."

Dr Andrew Spicer, Professor of Early Modern European History at Oxford Brookes University, shone a fascinating light on migration in Elizabethan Britain to demonstrate that unexpected arrivals on the UK's shores is nothing new. Indeed the picture he painted of political and societal alarm at boats arriving daily from France almost five hundred years ago struck some striking contemporary notes.

His talk, *'Immigration in the Elizabethan Age'*, explained that migration from continental Europe to the UK at that time was often driven by people wishing to flee religious division and war, although there were also economic migrants and indeed, even a few examples of tourism! Records show that in 1572 scores of people sailed from Dieppe to Rye in small boats. In one report relayed to the government, local officials wrote of the arrival on their beaches of 641 'strangers'.

Photo: © Open source

The Massacre of Saint Bartholomew by Francois Dubois

This fuelled anxieties both in the affected communities and in Westminster about threats to order, potential contagion by religious radicals from abroad, the dangers of infiltration by spies and the pressures the newcomers might place on local economies. Queen Elizabeth responded by taking steps to impose conditions on migrant numbers that were admitted and the trades they plied to try to ensure that they didn't duplicate skills already available within existing settlements. Strategies were also introduced to create separate places of worship for immigrants, as well as separate buildings in isolated locations for plague victims from the immigrant communities.

Photo: © Open source

Early weaving

Archives show that there was also a small black population in England at that time.

"But there wasn't serious xenophobia about immigration,

and by the end of Elizabeth's reign migrants had begun to integrate – and marry – into the wider community."

Dr Shadreck Chirikure, Professor of Archaeological Science at Oxford University, focused on *'Bantu Migrations and their Implications for Contemporary Southern Africa'*.

As an archaeological scientist his work involves applying techniques from the physical and chemical sciences to study ancient materials and technologies, using the results

Photo: © Free from Bing

Early Bantu people

to develop new understandings, tackle global challenges and conserve heritage. For emphasis he posed the rhetorical question 'Whose ancestors did not come from somewhere?'.

Movement was an inherent feature of ancient Africans, he said, and evidence shows that in 5,000 years or so the Bantu people have moved from Cameroon all the way across Southern Africa to Durban in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province. Between them they speak between 600 and 800 Bantu languages, but all of these are comprehensible to Bantu people.

He gave some modern day examples of xenophobia towards migration in contemporary South Africa, but said "Mobility is a part of human nature. Perhaps we can use this in the context of the present tensions to bring society

Photo: © Free from Bing

Bantu Migration

together. Down with the (border) Gatekeepers!"

Oxford Research Fellow Dr Dylan Gaffney, shortly to become Associate Professor of Palaeolithic Archaeology, is an expert on population movements and behavioural change in the islands of the south-east Pacific. He gave a talk entitled *'First Voyagers: Fifty Thousand Years of Human Migration in the Pacific Ocean'*.

"There have been extensive migrations throughout our species' history," he said, starting when the first humans began dispersing from Africa. During these earlier migrations the world climate was often fluctuating.

Photo: © Dr Dylan Gaffney

Red hand stencils in the Raja Ampat Islands, West Papua, related to movements of the Austronesian language family into the Pacific

In south-east Asia rafts of people gradually navigated the gaps of water between the islands. "The migration was complex in terms of languages and technologies and how people interacted."

The archaeological evidence tells a story of resourcefulness and ingenuity, as humans found ways to sail distances of many hundreds of miles - adapting their behaviour and tools as required - to find ways to live successfully on even the most remote and geographically difficult islands.

"What we're going to see in the current century is substantially different and the challenges from things like climate change will alter migration flows. Many of the inhabitants of the lower-lying south sea islands feel at the mercy of the international community (whose behaviours are driving global environmental degradation) but islanders are increasingly working to find a stronger voice together.

Their resilience remains striking. Even as sea levels rise around them "they don't give in to the doom and gloom narrative: they want to stay."

Nicky Moeran, *Friend*

The Study Day is held annually in honour of Kenneth Kirkwood, Oxford's first Professor of Race Relations, who was instrumental in setting up the original Friends of the Pitt Rivers Museum. Professor Chris Gosden described him "as a man of great moral commitment and enormous energy." Chris also paid warm tribute to FPRM Friend Shahin Bekhradnia for being the "tireless inspiration" behind each study day. In reply Shahin spoke of her friend the late anthropologist Peter Parkes, who "was a huge support in helping me decide the subject matters for these study days." Proceeds from the study days are used to provide grants to Pitt Rivers Museum staff to help further their work.

Wandering in Other Worlds – ways of reconciliation at the Pitt River Museum

Evenki reconciliation ritual

On the 20th October 2022 something extraordinary happened: the Pitt Rivers Museum was filled with the sound of traditional Evenki song and visitors to the Museum's late-night event linked hands in Evenki dance. Despite the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine we were very pleased to have been able to host contemporary artist and master of traditional Evenki song and dance, Galina Veretnova. Galina was at the Museum through the month of October on an artist residency funded by the Friends of the PRM and the Bertha Foundation. Joining her for the residency was performance artist and researcher Anya Gleizer. The residency formed part of a much larger project, *'Wandering in Other Worlds'*, with big ambitions to change the way that we approach and think about the Evenki collections made by Marie Czaplicka in 1914-15 on her expedition to Siberia.

Prior to Galina's time spent in Oxford, doctoral student Jaanika Vider and Ruskin School of Art graduate Anya, prompted by research into Czaplicka's Siberian collections at the PRM and with funding from TORCH, retraced Czaplicka's 1914 expedition along the shores of the Yenisei river, central Siberia. They took with them an iPad with images of objects and photographs now at the Pitt Rivers Museum, and Anya also took a VR headset with footage of the Siberian collections, hoping to find out more about the objects Czaplicka had bought to Oxford a century before. When they returned, we forged ahead with a project collaborating with our Evenki partners Galina Veretnova and Alexander Varlamov, whom Anya and Jaanika had become friends with when visiting Evenkia, engaging in a relationship of equity and self-representation. Alexander, Galina and Anya, with help from Faye Belsey, Jaanika Vider and Zena McGreevy, curated a new display focused on Evenki Cosmology and Shamanic traditions, replacing the 2014 exhibition which focused heavily on the achievements of Czaplicka as an intrepid female anthropologist.

As well as updating the display to show Evenki worlds through indigenous cosmological knowledge systems, a major part of Galina's residency was to perform a reconciliation ritual choreographed by Galina and Anya based on the traditional Evenki bear hunting ritual. Among the objects Czaplicka acquired on her expedition are a wooden raven and fish figure. These figures, much weathered, were taken from the grave of the Evenki Shaman Nakte. The Evenki partners we worked with were disturbed by the presence of these objects in Oxford. As animate objects they still carry great spiritual power. The ritual was performed to PRM staff and was the first time non-Evenki have taken part in traditional Evenki song and dance in this context. More extraordinary things happened: a fire was lit on the Lower Gallery and eight members of staff across the collections and education department, including the PRM Director, spent many hours with Galina and Anya perfecting the choreographed moves and learning to inhabit the crow spirits we danced as. The concept of the ritual was to heal the relationship between the Pitt

Galina Veretnova viewing the Evenki exhibition in the Court

Rivers Museum as the current custodians of Evenki material culture collected by Czaplicka and encourage a positive and equal relationship moving forward, restoring internal stability, health, balance and trust. What to do with the fish and the raven remains undecided, perhaps a repatriation if it is possible to identify any descendants of Nakte or some other form of reconciliation removing the spirit from the objects. During Galina's residency the Museum also purchased two sets of exquisite beadwork handmade by Galina. One of the sets, based on a historic piece from the Tura Ethnographic Museum, will be accessioned into the main collection and the second will be used for teaching in the education handling collection. At the end of the ritual, Laura Van Broekhoven was presented with a carved wooden bear in an offering of good faith and for future use if more help from the Evenki spirits is required.

Faye Belsey, *Curator*

Multaka

Mohammad working at the PRM

I started my career volunteering for the Multaka-Oxford project when I came to the UK with my wife who works for a refugee organisation. Currently, in addition to my job full time as Front of House in PRM, I also work as a volunteer in the collection department, and I work on research and translation of Arabic and Islamic writings on artifacts. I am ambitious to develop my personal skills to support the Museum even more, as they support me.

Multaka-Oxford was an amazing idea for me personally, because this place restored my self-confidence and helped me to find myself again after the bitterness of being away from Syria and family for a long period of time: we do not know how long it will last, perhaps forever.

Therefore, when I am in the Museum, I feel that it is my home, my second home, where I spend significant time, and my relationship with the Museum has become a relationship of integration as body and soul.

From the beginning, I planned to take full advantage of the time I have in order to leave a positive impact on everyone, introducing our Arab and Islamic civilization, artefacts, culture and heritage to visitors.

The Museum is the most appropriate place for launching unity and integration among peoples because it is a place that combines all the cultures and civilizations of the world. It is a wonderful example and I always say let's talk about everything positive in this museum of history and artefacts.

The credit for the development of current science and technology is due to previous sciences from all civilizations and scientists from the world.

The method of displaying artefacts from many cultures, civilizations and countries in one treasury is a message of unity among all cultures, civilizations and countries.

Let's perceive each object and artefact next to each other, so that each one stands with the other, not in front of the other, no contradiction or dissonance. It is convergence and a constructive dialogue. Let's be a brick in the bridge of civilized dialogue, which calls for living happily together.

Dialogue about civilisations is a means of exchanging knowledge, culture and experience with other peoples. We find cooperation and integration in order to achieve world peace. We can get to know strengths and advantages, to know what others have in terms of skills, inventions, knowledge and creativity and become familiar with their culture in order for us to integrate. Why do we integrate? In order to achieve global prosperity. Global prosperity is usually the result of cooperation between cultures, civilizations and countries.

All thanks and appreciation to the Multaka-Oxford project, which allowed me first to join as a volunteer and then develop my skills to be an employee in the PRM museum.

Mohammad Al Awad, *former assistant professor at Damascus University, department of History and Archaeology.*

Mohammad in Syria

Photos: © PRM

Unmasked - Spirit in the City

Poster for Unmasked- Spirit in the City

...is a radical new exhibition and installation that explores the personal stories behind modern masquerade in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, challenging traditional museology to unmask, not just the costumed dancers, but also their emotional universes and economic realities.

Masquerade is a public spectacle based on disguise. It conceals and resists knowledge. In many ways it is unknowable. In ethnographic museums such as the Pitt Rivers Museum, masks are presented as if they reveal the mysteries of a culture and its cosmology. Museums pin them down in glass vitrines and furnish them with explanatory labels. As a result, African masks are often presented as static symbols of the identity and material culture of rural communities from a bygone era. But masking has always been current, reflecting the times in which it is performed, and the landscapes - including cities - that masked spirits encounter. A collaboration between Port Harcourt-born British-Nigerian artist Zina Saro-Wiwa and Oxford anthropologist David Pratten, *'Unmasked'* tells a very different story about the meaning of masquerade. The show's focal point is a modern urban masquerade tradition called Agaba, which comprises of young and middle-aged men, who often work in the underbelly of Port Harcourt society, but use masquerade as a way to express themselves, make money and provide social cohesion and protection.

The Agaba is one of the enduring masquerades of the oil-producing Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It is outdoor theatre: loud, rambunctious and urgent. On the surface, Agaba masking enables the men that comprise the group to perform a tough, masculine identity that is physically, politically and spiritually 'rugged', but *'Unmasked'* shows that behind the mask, in the songs they sing and, in the bedrooms where they dream, these men reflect on their fate in intimate and ironic ways. It is striking how many of the songs sung by these men and boys are tender, wry love songs, contrasting with the *'bad boy'* image of urban masqueraders, as well as the drier taxonomic presentations of masquerade culture in Western museums.

Using the songs, the mask carving and performance, the storytelling employed in this exhibition weaves art and anthropology, creating an expansive visual language that exposes the vitality and vulnerability of life in modern day Port Harcourt, life which has been impacted deeply – and often traumatically – by the international oil and gas industry. Using film and audio to bring these stories to life, Zina Saro-Wiwa's featured major new installation *'Bad Boys & Broken Hearts'* is inspired by David Pratten's findings on the nature of the songs of urban masquerade; it continues her own work exploring emotional landscapes and the intersection with masquerade culture. Instead of the usual museum displays of artifacts from masquerade culture, the installation features two large vitrines containing life-size replicas of the actual bedrooms of two Agaba masqueraders from Port Harcourt. These roomscapes, furnished with clothes and objects gifted from the featured men, are a poignant reflection on power, poverty, strength and vulnerability. Exploring the spiritual ecologies of the oil-cursed Niger Delta of her birth, the artist asks: "Does a permanent sense of socio-political heartbreak lie at the heart of the Niger Delta experience? And does this societal grief manifest itself in the bodies and cultural performances of its citizens?"

Oxford University anthropologist David Pratten says: "In collaborating with Zina and in combining anthropology and contemporary art, *'Unmasked'* tells a new story of masquerade, finding tenderness and everyday tragedy in the personal and the political."

'Unmasked' takes us through the glass vitrine to expose the beating heart of the humanity that created the mask. It shows that the secrets of masquerade are not essential and esoteric, but elusive and everyday. Capturing the universal emotions of love, joy and hope combined with tales of loss, fear and heartbreak, the exhibition explores how masking is an art form of the urban present, speaking to modern day hopes and hurt.

David Pratten
Head of School
School of Anthropology & Museum Ethnography
Oxford University

Photo: © PRM

Activating the Archive

An example photograph and object the team analysed. L – 1998.209.44.2 Nyanza, Kenya 1902, people gathering grass and papyrus along the lake shore for making rope

R- 1937.34.30.1 Nyanza, Kenya 1936, perforated snail shell necklets worn by Luo men called ogongulo

Activating the Archive: African environmental histories and knowledge materialised in museum collections was a year-long project funded by a joint Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Natural and Environmental Research Council (NERC) grant to research the "Hidden histories of environmental science: Acknowledging legacies of race, social injustice and exclusion to inform the future". It was led by Dr. Ashley Coutu (PRM), Dr. Chris Morton (PRM) and Dr. Tabitha Kabora (University of York).

Tabitha Kabora at Oxford City Farm for one of the public engagement days in July 2023

When I first read the remit for the Hidden Histories funding call, I was excited by the idea of building an interdisciplinary team to research the Pitt Rivers collections. I invited my colleague Tabitha Kabora to co-lead the project with me, as she is an environmental scientist, mapping specialist, and landscape modeller who has worked most of her career studying eastern African landscapes. Tabitha and I gathered a range of colleagues, some we had worked with before, and others completely new to us. Most of our colleagues on the project have completely different expertise than us – and that was the point! We also had to narrow the geographical focus to Kenya, Tanzania, and Nigeria, and even then, the project team had difficulty choosing what objects and photographs to study.

The premise of the project was to bring the team together in a series of online workshops to look at Pitt Rivers photographs and object collections that each team member chose to research for environmental knowledge and histories. In the first workshop, we weren't sure how people would respond, as many of the team had not met before or worked with museum archives. As a backup, I put together slides to discuss 50 different photographs and objects just in case we ran out of things to discuss – yet we didn't really make it to any of my slides, the partners had so many ideas and knowledge about the collections.

The main outcome of the project was the wealth of information that the group brought to the context of the museum collections, which will be added to the PRM database and eventual re-interpretation of these archives. The new network we created is also key for future work, as we have already created spin-off research projects, such as a repeat photography project on our archives of East African landscapes, and understanding changing crop use due to the impact of colonial planting schemes. Our colleague Uwagbale Edward-Ekpu is working with us to write new labels for the Art of Benin case to provide interpretation of the objects from someone who grew up in Benin City.

We have also had some great public engagement events through the project developed with our PRM Public Engagement with Research lead Jozie Kettle. Our star event was the weekend we hosted in July. The first day was a drop-in event on the lawn outside the OUMNH, with Uwagbale Zooming in from Nigeria to teach kids about animals on the Benin kingdom objects and Pauline talking to people about indigenous African grains and how palm oil is an integral part of Nigerian culture. On the second day, we took our project maps, grains and handling objects to the Oxford City Farm, where we met with a group of keen growers and environmentalists who gave us an interesting and inspiring debate.

In the next instalment, we will discuss the launch of our digital exhibition as well as changes in the museum as a result of the project research. A project webpage can be found on the PRM site: https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/activating-archive

Ashley Coutu, *Research Curator (African Archaeology) and Deputy Head of Research at the Pitt Rivers Museum*

Photos: © PRM

See the Music, Hear the Dance

In its universalist approach to life, Hindu thought included among its many expressions of the sacred, all the creative arts. In a culture which perceived god as a dancer who danced the universe into being, dance was cherished as the most powerful symbol of cosmic rhythm, embodied in the exquisite form of Lord Shiva as Nataraja - the Lord of Dance. The iconography of Nataraja is a powerful reminder that the sacred also lies in a celebration of the body - that the Supreme can be accessed in terms of joy, or *'Ananda'*. At its finest, classical Indian dance expresses and invokes the truth, or the essence of joy.

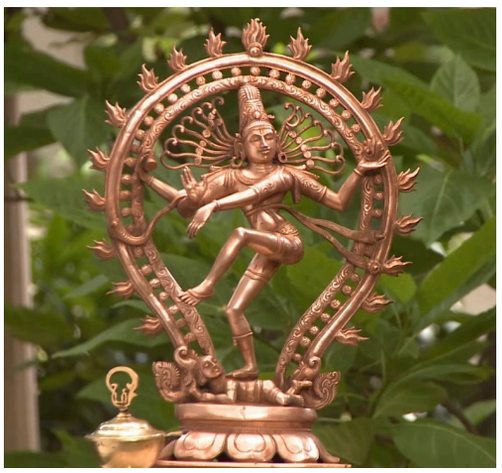

Photo: © Nagarajan

Screen shot from Lasya Kavya film

With a history that goes back more than two thousand years, such a hoary art could well have hardened into a fossil. As poet Arundhathi Subramaniam comments, "For the Indian classical dancer today, the challenge is to turn an ancient stylised vocabulary into a green living language." The finest dancers who have deeply internalised their art can do precisely this. They can re-invent and turn a traditional, received grammar into an intensely personal dance poetry.

The dance form that I interpret is called Bharatanatyam. To absorb and interpret its "subtle language of resonance", is to evoke the vital connection between dance, music and poetry. My first and most epiphanic experience of this happened when I was fifteen, at a performance of the legendary dancer, T Balasaraswati - Bala Amma as she was fondly known, Before the accompanying musicians took over, she herself would sing and depict with gestures, the opening lines of each song. A scene remains vividly etched in my mind, where she portrayed a woman, combing and knotting her hair, elaborating the image in myriad ways, both aural and visual. At one point, I could not distinguish between music and dance, between the music and the text and between the dancer and the dance. "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" WB Yeats asks. He could have been speaking about Bala Amma.

When I was seventeen, I began to study music, specifically, the tradition of sung poetry or padams and javalis, under Bala Amma's cousin, T Muktha, repository of a great music lineage. It was a major turning point in my life that helped me perceive the seamless link between word, meaning, music and dance. Suddenly, I found I had become intensely aware, even of spaces between words and pauses between notes. And I came to realise that *'abhinaya'*, the interpretative dance aspect in classical Indian dance, is not merely the art of using *'hastas'*, or codified hand gestures and facial expressions to depict the text. It's when the *entire body* listens to the music. German music critic Eduard Hanslick describes music as "form, moving in sounds". Studying music with Muktha Amma, it occurred to me that it is possible to see dance as sound, moving in forms. That ideally, one should be able to see the music and hear the dance.

Bharatanatyam weaves together many diverse strands – of music, poetry and theatre, painting and sculpture, philosophy and psychology. It is much more than the sum of architectural grandeur, geometry and breathtaking physicality for which it is noted. Its magic lies in the interpretation of subtexts, in subtle shades of meaning that are suggested in the turn of head, twitch of eyebrow, glance of eye, flick of wrist, fluid musicality, light and shade in footwork.

The dancer is at once, the painter adding tints and hues to a line-drawing and bringing it to life, the poet, writing poems with hand gestures and expressions, the singer, singing with the body. Ultimately the dancer is a seeker, for whom dance can become a transforming experience - a prayer with one's very being that celebrates the wonder and mystery of life.

Alarmel Valli, *Dancer*

Photo: © Inni Singh

Anguish

Photo: © Nagarajan

Hunger for the sacred

A Kiss

Photo: © Inni Singh

Smocks – Looking good in the countryside: A display at the Oxfordshire Museum, Woodstock

Smocks were once the uniform of Oxfordshire's rural workers. As the Industrial Revolution grew, their use declined, but their memory is preserved by a wonderful selection in the collection of the Oxfordshire Museum.

Smocks were normal work wear for rural communities and a characteristic of the Oxfordshire countryside. Largely worn by men, they were a uniform for agricultural labourers, shepherds, dairy workers, farmers, carters and waggoneers, and were worn as an overall to protect clothing. The Oxfordshire collection also includes examples from bakers, gardeners, gamekeepers, canal boat workers and horsemen.

The smock's origins are not well documented, but there are references to similar garments as far back as the Roman and early medieval periods. It is not until the 18th century that references to smock-frocks became common. Thomas Hardy in his books *'Far From The Madding Crowd'* and *'Under the Greenwood Tree'*, published in the 1870s, makes frequent references to the smock frock.

Exhibition mid 18th - early 19th century

Made of cotton or linen, length reflected the role of the wearer. Longer versions were considered better protection against the weather and so shepherds often wore them. Shorter lengths were for occupations requiring more movement.

There were three predominant styles: reversible, shirt and coat styles. The Oxfordshire collection's smocks are mostly reversible, with a few examples of the shirt style with simple embroidery to the 'box' (chest) area popular in the Vale of White Horse area. The collection has only one example of the coat style. Were these not commonly used in Oxfordshire or were they not considered worth keeping?

Smocks from different areas of England and Wales had their own characteristics. Those in the collection are white, beige, straw or Holland Cloth Brown. Elsewhere, blue or green could be found. Very large collars and oiled smocks were worn in areas with harsher climates.

Social convention demanded ownership of two, one for special occasions and church (lighter colour, finer fabric and elaborately decorated) and another for work (plainer and rougher). They were essential for obtaining work and would be worn to hiring and Michaelmas fairs. So important were they, that records of the Oxfordshire Court Quarter Sessions (1836-1853) describe labourers being found guilty of stealing them.

As clothes became cheaper and more convenient to purchase, the desire for smocks declined. The increase in use of machinery also made them dangerous to wear. Safety was not a consideration for machine designers and there were many moving parts for loose fabric to become entangled in. For example, in 1880 George Smith of Ascott-under-Wychwood was working alone on a threshing machine, when tragically his smock was caught in the machinery. He was pulled into the engine and killed.

Flora Thompson describes in *'Lark Rise to Candleford'* the decline of the smock frock in 1880s Oxfordshire: "The carter, shepherd and a few of the older labourers still wore the traditional smock-frock, topped by a round black felt hat, of the kind formerly worn by clergymen. But this old country style of dress was already out of date; most of the men wore suits of stiff, dark brown corduroy…" (1945).

Smocks transitioned from everyday workwear to a symbolic link to an idyllic rustic past. They evolved into a novelty item of nostalgia worn at special occasions and events. They were adopted by the Arts and Crafts movement as a garment for artisans and appreciators of traditional crafts. William Morris and some of his workers were amongst those to do so. It was part of their homage to traditional craft and a challenge to rigid Victorian garments.

Within museum collections, most examples are the 'best' and not the working type, so it is hard to paint a picture of actual use. These garments tended to be treated as family heirlooms and were passed down the generations. The smocks in the Oxfordshire Museum collection date from 1830 to the early 20th century and represent working, celebratory (the Museum displays one for the coronation of Queen Victoria) and formal clothing.

Sam Vandegeer, *Conservator, Oxfordshire Museum.*

Detail of the reversible shirt style large collar smock. Late 19th early 20th century

Photos: © Graham Cawsey

Friends of The Pitt Rivers Museum **Summer 2023**

INFORMATION SHEET

The Friends' Magazine is published three times a year

INFORMATION

Friends

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Museum

Pitt Rivers Museum, South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3PP
01865 613000
www.prm.ox.ac.uk
Email: prm@prm.ox.ac.uk
Open: Tuesday-Sunday 10.00 - 17.00
Monday 12.00- 17.00
Admission FREE.
Refreshments. The Horsebox Coffee Company on the lawn is open from 9.00 - 17.00 daily, serving hot and cold drinks and homemade cakes. With delicious locally roasted coffee, scrumptious brownies, flapjacks and cookies, the Horsebox Café is the perfect place for a coffee break!
After Hours
Occasional themed evening events.
All museum events:
www.prm.ox.ac.uk/events

Magazine

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www.prm.ox.ac.uk/events

Membership

Membership: 01865 613000 membership@ prm.ox.ac.uk
Annual Subscription: £36 (Joint: £50); Student: £20 (18-25, in full time education). Life £500 (Joint £750) Benefits: Priority booking for Museum events and courses, Private views, Behind the scenes visits. Members-only: Shop 10% discounts, Friends Members' Magazine posted to you three times a year, Friends' lecture series.

MUSEUM DIARY DATES

The Museum is open and pre-booking is no longer required.
We look forward to welcoming you to the galleries, exhibitions and events.

Exhibitions and case displays

Long Gallery and Special Exhibition Space. 27 January 2023 - 7 January 2024
UNMASKED - Spirit in the City

Co-curated by artist Zina Saro-Wiwa and anthropologist David Pratten, this new exhibition fuses art and anthropology to unmask the violence and vulnerability of life in Nigeria's oil capital Port Harcourt.


Photo: © Zina Saro-Wiwa
Poster for Unmasked- Spirit in the City

Archive case - First Floor
5 April 2023 - 3 March 2024
Collaborating with the past: Native American portraiture

American ambrotypist, Shane Balkowitsch has set out to create one thousand portraits of Native American people using this historical wet plate photographic process, and to collaborate closely with each sitter on their photographs.


Photo: © PRM
Ira High Elk (Scares the Eagle) Lakota nation Photographed 23 October 2020

Museum Trail
'His Dark Materials'

Follow in the footsteps of Lyra as props from the BBC HBO production of *'His Dark Materials'* go on display amongst the permanent collections. Pick up a trail to help you find the film props alongside the Arctic objects, armour and instruments which inspired Philip Pullman.


Photo: © PRM
Lyra's coat from '*His Dark Materials*' on display at Pitt Rivers Museum

Object handling

Object handling in the Pitt Rivers. Discover more about wonderful and fascinating objects from the Museum's collections. Free weekly Saturday drop-in activity run by museum volunteers. 11.00 - 13.00

FRIENDS' DIARY DATES

Future talks will be held in person and on Zoom with captions. Information on accessing these talks is provided to Friends via electronic communication from the Pitt Rivers Museum. An easy way to watch and enjoy the speakers from the comfort of your home!

2023

Talk: Mohammad Al Awad
Tuesday 30 May , 14.30

Mohammad speaks about his experience at the PRM and *'Multaka Oxford'* acting as an ambassador to the culture and civilization of human exchange and cooperation reflected in our museum.


Photo: © PRM
Mohammad Al Awad

Event: BB Lecture - ' Why Museums?'
Friday 29 September, 18.00
Natural History Museum Lecture Hall

Sir Paul Ruddock is a Trustee of the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of New York, and a former Trustee of the V&A and the Courtauld. He will speak about the role of museums from the 17th century onwards as custodians of 6000 years of human history and their importance in the context of 21st century anxieties. Ticket details to follow.


Photo: © Sir Paul Ruddock
Sir Paul Ruddock

Talk: Unmasked
Wednesday 20 September , 18.00

Anthropologist David Pratten talks about *'UNMASKED Spirit in the City',* a radical new exhibition and installation that explores the personal stories behind modern masquerade in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, challenging traditional museology to unmask not just the costumed dancers, but also their emotional universes and economic realities.

Further information, please contact julieteccles@virginmedia.com.