

ARTS

'If you saw yourself in a museum, you'd go back'

Real people and their stories and artefacts are at the heart of Manchester Museum's new South Asia Gallery, writes Debika Ray

In the corner of the Manchester Museum's new South Asia Gallery is a mannequin wearing a first world war uniform that belonged to Subedar Mohammed Ali, the great-grandfather of journalist Talat-Farooq Awan – crumpled, smudged and worn, but otherwise well preserved as a reminder of the soldiers from Britain's colonies who fought in Europe's major 20th-century conflicts. Awan discovered the outfit on a visit to his father's village in Pakistan. "It's an ongoing and personal journey to uncover my family history through these objects," his text next to the object reads. "I hope it inspires others to do the same."

Personal reflections have been rare in such contexts: it is uncontroversial today to point out that museums aren't objective containers of universal truth, but it's still not standard for major institutions to centre the perspectives of the people whose stories they are trying to tell.

That was the intention here in what is billed as the "first permanent gallery in the UK dedicated to the experiences and histories of south Asian diaspora communities" – people who, like more than 11 per cent of Manchester's population, have origins in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Pakistan, Nepal or Sri Lanka. It is one of several spaces opening this week as part of a £15m transformation of Manchester Museum, including a gallery dedicated to Chinese culture and another that explores notions of belonging.

Awan is one of 30 people known as the South Asia Gallery Collective – community leaders, educators, artists, historians, journalists and musicians with an interest in south Asia and a connection to Manchester. They were assembled in 2018 to collaborate with the institution



Above: a collage by Michelle Oliver focuses on those of mixed heritage. Below left: co-curator Nusrat Ahmed



and its partner, the British Museum, on the project. Manchester Museum director Feme Ward explains that the original idea in 2015 was for a more conventional gallery about south Asia, but when she entered her role in 2018, "it didn't feel right to create a gallery that said, 'These are your histories, folks.'"

Nusrat Ahmed, who had worked in the voluntary sector, started out as a member of the collective but was brought on board midway as the gallery's co-curator.

"I remember coming to Manchester Museum when I was seven and I can't remember anything other than old coins," she says. "Museums have to change, because that's what people want – and I think they would become extinct if they didn't."

The gallery makes people whose experiences aren't often narrated in these contexts feel visible. "It has been hard for us British-born members of the diaspora to connect to our south Asian backgrounds," Ahmed says. "This is a place I would bring my child and say, 'This is your heritage.' If you saw yourself in a museum, you'd go back – why wouldn't you?"

As curators and also as the intended audience, the collective will literally see themselves in the gallery – many stories are narrated through their quotes, rather than an anonymised museum voice. Their personal possessions – the first world war uniform or a sewing machine from the workshop of Taslima Ahmad, who trains women from disadvantaged backgrounds in textile skills – sit alongside objects from museum collections, including an ancient brick



Bodhisattva Maitreya statue in the South Asia Gallery

effort more realistic – it was clear from the outset that it would be a subjective and selective exploration. The display will evolve over time as new members, with other perspectives and identities, are brought in. Meanwhile, a central project space will have a more frequently changing display, including films and performances.

Balancing the views of the 30 members of the collective with those of two museums and their design team came with its own challenges, adding time, cost and unpredictability. It was essential to accommodate multiple perspectives, while recognising that 30 people can't represent the diversity of such a large region. Mining your personal history for public consideration can also be traumatic.

"Hearing what some of the others had been through was a real eye-opener – everyone was crying," says Taslima Ahmad, recalling the experiences of racism and abuse her fellow collective members related. The museum responded with counselling to support participants' mental health. "Co-curation isn't scripted," Nusrat Ahmed explains. "What I hope we've done well is that, when we knew it wasn't working, we stopped and re-evaluated."

Even for the British Museum, which

been a project like no other, according to Emily Hannam, its curator who worked on the project. "This is the biggest in scale and depth that we've done. And I don't think it's ever been done like this – I believe museums across the UK and the world will look to this as an important catalyst, and it's exciting to think about where it can go next."

Where next, then? Ward says museums don't need to make a choice between fact and feeling – they can value both. "A lot of museums have been telling a rather one-dimensional story for a long time and now, as a curators, we're thinking about what it means to not just to care for collections, but for people, their ideas, beliefs and relationships," she says.

For her, the South Asia Gallery is a study in how museums can build empathy. "I knew that this gallery could be a really powerful place for emotional connection, and I'm looking forward to seeing whether that has worked."

Taslima Ahmad already feels something changing. "I think this will draw in many people who never come to museums – ordinary people from every walk of life, rather than only middle-class people. Because museums should be for everybody."

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