JNANAPRAVAHA MUMBAI

QUARTERLY

APRIL - JUNE 2026

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Director's Note

Amidst the turbulence and uncertainty that surrounds us, we are grateful to be successfully completing yet another academic year at the end of April. There is quiet satisfaction that our goals have been met through the consistent expansion of subject matter, as we never repeat a topic. This is quite a challenge we have given ourselves as it translates into constant research of areas not yet addressed.

The past academic year witnessed global scholars and specialists teaching seminars and giving lectures on Byzantine intellectual thought and material culture, Indian Ocean trade (lectures ongoing), Buddhist sites of Amaravati and Phanigiri, Shakespeare and the philosophy of his times, the Mongol conquest, and the Black Mediterranean, to name a few – a prodigious pedagogical vista.

The past quarter, in particular, saw an in-depth presentation under our rubric 'Creative Processes' by the eminent architect-academician Rahul Mehrotra who shared his intertwined modes of research and practice. Such first-person encounters become a veritable masterclass for both the attending practitioners and the casually curious.

It is rare to have a mix of text and iconography and that too in a chronological, historical context. Vasudha Narayanan provided just that, unpacking the image of Sheshashayi Vishnu, from its extant sculptures to its early literature, weaving a narrative of stillness and 'play', highlighting the reasons for its efflorescence even in Cambodia.

We close with four lectures on 'What is European?'. The author of this critically-acclaimed book will address its Colonial and Romantic clichés and elucidate on how an inclusive and critical vision of Europe can be developed without falling into Anti-Europeanism.

One of our major focusses for the academic year July-April 2026/7 is on a singular question: how has the concept of beauty been understood, theorised, and experienced across diverse philosophical traditions, cultures, and historical moments?

Across a yearlong series offered in parts, titled, 'On Beauty: A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Aesthetic Thought', the programme seeks to critically examine and challenge the predominant Western notion of beauty by foregrounding diverse intellectual traditions, including Islamic, Indic, and Chinese thought alongside Western philosophical

traditions from antiquity to the Enlightenment period. It asks how different cultures have defined, experienced, and valued beauty, and what these differences reveal about broader philosophical, ethical, and spiritual concerns. By placing these frameworks in dialogue, the series opens up a more expansive understanding of aesthetics as culturally embedded, historically contingent, and philosophically rich, while also inviting reflection on whether any shared or universal dimensions of beauty might still be meaningfully sustained.

Within this broader enquiry, the inclusion of two shorter, focussed lecture series on the art and material culture of Palmyra and Norman Sicily highlight how beauty is shaped in moments of intense cultural exchange. Both contexts reveal aesthetic forms emerging not from isolated traditions, but from dynamic encounters across regions, religions, and empires. By examining their art and material culture, the programme underscores how beauty operates in practice as a site of negotiation, synthesis, and power, complementing the philosophical perspectives explored across the year.

Another is the concept of Bhakti or distilled adulation – an intimate relationship between the devotee and his/her divine godhead, ranging from that of servant/master, parent/child, friend, and lover/beloved. Four internationally renowned scholars will take us to the realms of Murugan, Shiva, Durga, and Vishnu through related ritual, literary, visual, and performative lenses. In addition, the legendary *Shangri Ramayana* will be made available when the curator of this much-awaited exhibition shares her curatorial processes (another ongoing initiative) as well as selected folios (more than 600 identified) through four lectures.

The leitmotifs of Beauty and Bhakti will underpin our programming throughout the year, and we welcome you to join us in this incredible exploration. Needless to say, our flagship Indian Aesthetics yearlong diploma and certificate course begins its next iteration in mid-July, with changes and additions, as is our practice.

With my warmest wishes,

Rashmi Poddar Ph.D.
Director

AESTHETICS

A Folio from the Manuscript of Kalpasutra and Kalakacarya Katha: Jaina Tirthankara Enshrined (upper panel), Celestial Dancers (lower panel). c.1475

JPM's Aesthetics offerings include:
(1) an academic yearlong Postgraduate Diploma/Certificate course in Indian Aesthetics, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (2) a quarterly Postgraduate Certificate course in Yoga & Tantra, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (3) a quarterly Postgraduate Certificate course in Southeast Asian Art and Architecture, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (4) a fortnight of public seminars and lectures in Islamic Aesthetics; (5) an ongoing series of public seminars in Buddhist Aesthetics; (6) an ongoing series of public seminars in Southasian Painting; and (7) occasional academic conferences and workshops in these fields.

Indian Aesthetics

Every January, students of the Indian Aesthetics course enter the magical world of Indic painting. In January, Dr. Leela Wood brought her rare photographs of the exquisite Ajanta murals together with her deep knowledge of Buddhist painting and the *Chitrasutra* of the *Vishnu Dharmottara Purana* to enchant students with the 'singing' line of Ajanta. Discussing the narratives of the Buddhist *Jataka* tales depicted in Cave 17 at Ajanta, she showed with the help of her primary research that establishing a convincing link with the canonical *Chitrasutra* is not possible as far as these superb murals are concerned. Her session focussed on the tremendous freedom of composition and line in Cave 17, presenting students with a clear understanding of these murals and their innovative use of space.

In her discussion of 14th- to 16th-century portable paintings from the subcontinent, Dr. Shailka Mishra began with an exploration of early Buddhist manuscript paintings. She explained that Jain manuscripts were commissioned to gain religious merit and were first made on palm leaf before paper manuscripts became common.

Many copies of illustrated manuscripts of texts such as the *Kalakacharya Katha* and *Kalpasutra* can be found in the *bhandaras* or libraries of Jain temples. Scholars have noted angular figures with three-quarter faces and an extended eye in Western Indian Jain paintings. Islamic invasions and wars destroyed many manuscripts in the 12th and 13th centuries, leaving behind an incomplete picture of the texts and the artistic production of this period. The *Chaurapanchashika* style of painting was named after a single extant manuscript of a poem by Bilhana, but elements of this style are widespread in the Indian subcontintent across a long span of time, presenting a great variety of subject matter and style. Noting important manuscripts such as the Gwalior *Quran*, the speaker familiarised students with the five manuscripts of the *Chandayana*, a Sufi romance that echoes a well-known local story, demonstrating diverse representational strategies in different illustrated versions of the same text.

Roda Ahluwalia discussed the numerous examples of Mughal, Rajput, Pahari, and Deccani painting produced from the 16th century onwards. Both manuscripts and *muraqqas* (bound albums that brought together paintings and Islamic calligraphy from numerous sources) thrived in the courtly and elite culture of this time. Akbar's atelier comprised nearly a hundred and thirty painters who produced refined illustrated manuscripts. The speaker shared the research of Yael Rice, who has mapped the networks of relationships and collaborations between these artists in an attempt to understand the creation of the 'Mughal' style where Indic, Persian, and European elements are all seen. Akbar's successor, Jahangir, retained only thirty of his father's artists, but his reign produced even finer paintings with additional subject matter. He commissioned paintings of plants and animals, and of religious practitioners; under him, artists produced allegorical representations that showed the ruler in a favourable light. Other painters from the Mughal atelier dispersed to Rajput courts in present-day Rajasthan and in the Punjab hills, giving rise to new 'schools' such as Pahari painting where more Indic elements are seen. Schematic and symmetrical *durbar* scenes were painted during Jahangir's reign as well as in the Shah Jahani period. Less formal work produced in the smaller Rajput and Pahari kingdoms also exudes cultural politics. In the Deccan, the reign of Ibrahim Adil Shah II of Bijapur was a time of efflorescence; the ruler was a poet, a musician, and a patron of painting whose syncretic and mystical bent is reflected in the artistic oeuvre of his time. He commissioned the *Kitab-i-Nauras* and the *Nujum-ul-Ulum*; the latter manuscript has as its subject matter the occult, divination, and astrology.

Dr. Mrinalini Sil's wide-ranging talk on the varied subject matter and style of 18th- and early 19th-century Murshidabad painting revealed the political and social turmoil of the region during this period. As Mughal power receded, artists migrated to richer courts such as Murshidabad and Awadh, painting for diverse patrons: the *nawabs*, Jain merchants, and the '*nabobs*' of the East India Company, as well as other Europeans whose presence shifted the balance of power in the subcontinent. Such patrons moved artists from one region to another, producing hybrid painting styles that developed unique characteristics in particular locations. Dr. Parul Singh discussed Awadhi painting and showed that artists in the 18th century, such as Faizullah, tapped into the Mughal idiom in which they were trained but worked creatively to move beyond it. Both speakers illuminated the intersections between patronage, power, art, and cultural hybridity through their exciting analyses.

Dr. Neeraja Poddar's session, titled '*Encounters*

with Krishna', presented an analysis of four sets of illustrated manuscript paintings of the *Bhagavata Purana*, focussing on artistic strategies used to tell stories in these visual renditions. This freshly curated session used the lens of text and narrative to decode paintings. The speaker displayed folios which show signs of being refurbished, allowing the audience to witness the long history of the use of these illustrated manuscripts and series of paintings. Dr. Harsha Dehejia, using a philosophical lens, posited that the experience of Krishna *shringara* relies on poetic truth rather than factual truth. In this aesthetic position, Krishna is the single male principle beloved of male or female devotees (*bhaktas*) who consider themselves as female in this context. In Krishna *shringara*, the *bhakta* is a *rasika* or aesthete who submits completely to the deity to experience *madhurya* (sweetness or enjoyment) through the senses. *Shringara bhakti* traditionally espouses dualistic philosophy or *dvaita*. In this understanding, illustrated by Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, deity and

Bhagavata Purana, Malwa, 18th century

devotee are two separate entities; only then can they be lovers. However, the speaker argued that the *Bhagavata Purana*, in which diverse Indic devotional strands coalesce, begins with *dvaita* but ends in *advaita* or monism. Here, *shringara bhakti* is seen in the longing brought about by physical separation (*viraha*). This longing is so great that Krishna becomes omnipresent in the minds of the *gopis* (cowherdesses of Braj) leading to *advaita*. Metaphorical renderings of Krishna *shringara* are seen in later courtly poetry such as *ritikavya*, in the popular *baramasa* poetry, in Pahari paintings, and Rajput painting.

Dr. Pia Brancaccio's session on early Indian Ocean trade focussed on the Ulhas river estuary in present-day Maharashtra, which lies close to the ancient Buddhist monastic complex of Kanheri. The Ulhas estuary is an example of a waterway which allowed boats to reach important areas from which resources could be extracted, as well as markets upriver. On this estuary lie Kalyan and Sopara, cities that were once ancient 'ports'. Archaeological evidence and textual records show that such riverine cities in the Indian subcontinent were very different from the ancient Roman ports of the same period, where built infrastructure enabled trade. Dr. Brancaccio convincingly showed that the particular conditions in the Ulhas river estuary required seasoned local navigators who enabled the transportation of transoceanic cargo through this riverine system. These harbour management practices and the movement of goods down and upriver seem to have been controlled by the strategically located Buddhist site of Kanheri and the monks in residence there who also managed funds and extraction of resources. The connected Indian Ocean world, evidence of which is available from the early centuries of the first millennium, shaped Indian aesthetics in no small way.

Scholars have tried to decode the colonial art produced in the subcontinent through Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*. Dr. Jaya Kanoria presented Orientalist European painting and British literature that shows Orientalist leanings to introduce Said's critique. She then extended Said's argument to paintings from colonial India. She showed how the categories of the Romantic, the Picturesque, and the Sublime are discernible in the paintings of European painters who worked in India, such as Zoffany and the British artists Thomas and William Daniell, who presented Indian subject matter coloured by a colonial mindset. In the colonial context, these aesthetic tropes work differently from the way

The Great Parade
Fernand Leger
Mosaic
Les Abattoirs, Toulouse

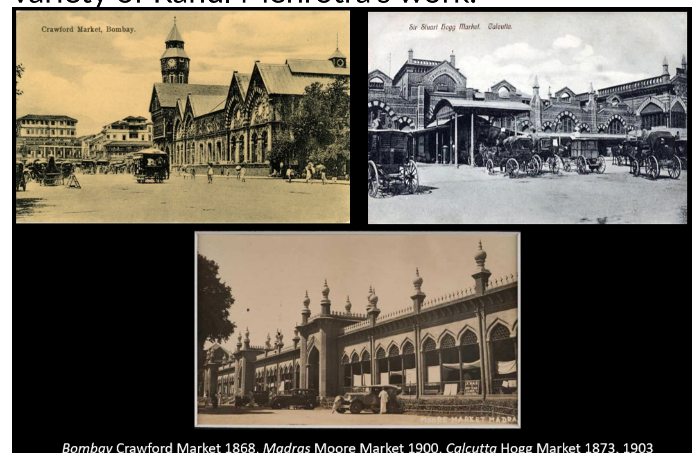
they operate in the metropole. Raja Ravi Varma's career and the trajectory of artworks clumped together under the category of Company school of painting show the effects of European and British techniques and patronage. They mapped the subcontinent in diverse ways, often enlarging the colonising Self and diminishing the colonised Other, showing the 'difference' upon which colonisation depended. Yet their artistic value is undeniable, demonstrating what Said termed 'productive' engagement. Dr. Suryanandini Narain analysed Indian photography in the colonial period, which developed simultaneously with its

Photos other than POI:

Pictorialism

Western counterparts. However, photography was deployed very differently by coloniser and colonised, becoming a vehicle for surveillance, political control, and racialised voyeurism on one hand and for self-documentation on the other. Nevertheless, Indian usage mirrored and extended the methods and functions of photography as practiced by the coloniser. In addition to painting and photography, the colonial period engendered new types of architecture. Dr. Pushkar Sohoni's survey of Indian examples of colonial architecture and his primary research on the colonial market hall showed that built forms are products of their time but can move in unpredictable directions, both exceeding their purported functions and failing to fulfil them. Market halls in the Indian subcontinent were built to provide a safer, sanitary environment for European, particularly British, buyers. Yet many such markets eventually became sprawling, chaotic locations where local sellers set up stalls surrounding them.

For the past few years, the IA course has shifted from offering survey lectures of contemporary artistic practice to deeper engagements with practitioners of contemporary art. This provides our students a more meaningful immersion into this dynamic terrain, and arguably, a truer picture of what contemporary practitioners do. This year, students and our general audience were privileged to hear a uniquely positioned talk by renowned architect Rahul Mehrotra who acknowledged that he did not usually speak simultaneously about his practice and his research as he did for us on 2nd March 2026. Titled *'Architecture in a Time of Flux: Research as Practice and Practice as Research'*, the talk urged architects to respond to the unpredictable and transitionary nature of the contemporary world. Rather than providing absolute solutions, such a response would produce an architecture that can make life on our planet more sustainable; a kinetic, temporary or ephemeral response to space which is a legitimate way of building cities in the rapidly changing and shifting present-day world. The speaker generously shared theoretical-research insights along with his views on pedagogy and advocacy, dividing his talk into sections titled 'Reflections' (which delved into his own ideas), 'Investigations' (his research projects), and finally, 'Propositions'. This last section showed the audience significant building projects that Mehrotra had undertaken which he saw as propositions for building a practice that produces not only aesthetic and functional spaces but also empathetic architecture. Nevertheless, architects should nurture the ability to change the way built architecture is perceived through thoughtful practice. This approach implicitly connected the speaker's ideas and his research to his practice, leaving the audience with a comprehensive understanding of the sheer breadth, depth, and variety of Rahul Mehrotra's work.



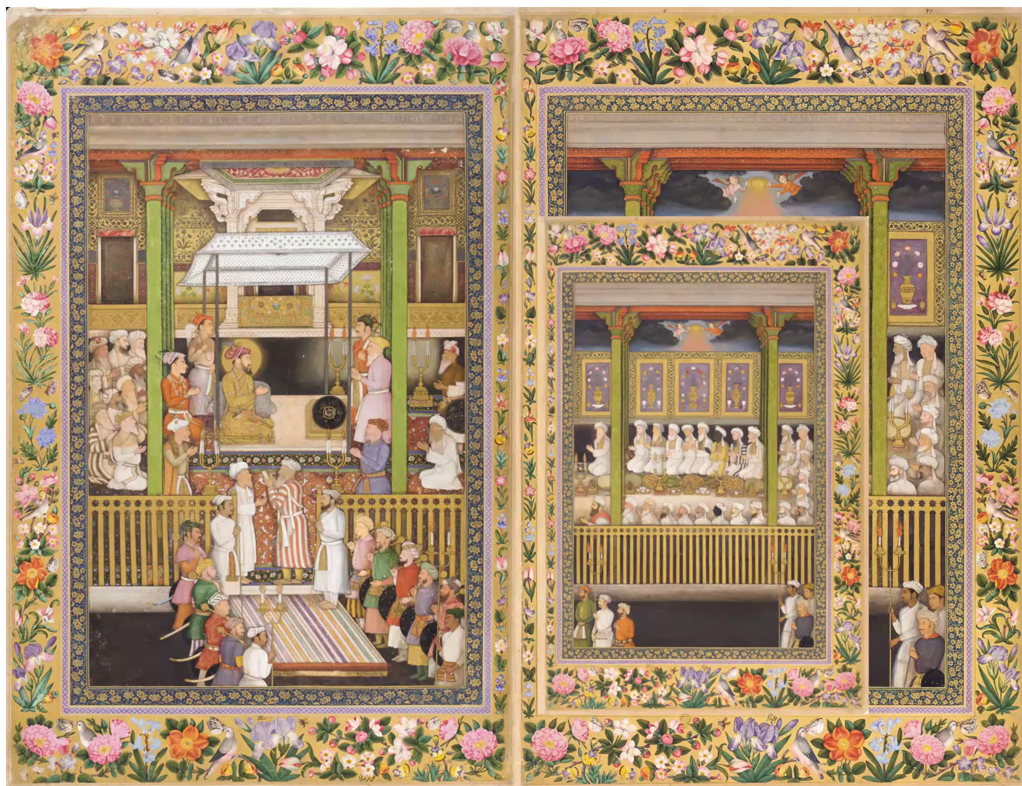
Bombay Crawford Market 1868, *Madras* Moore Market 1900, *Calcutta* Hogg Market 1873, 1903

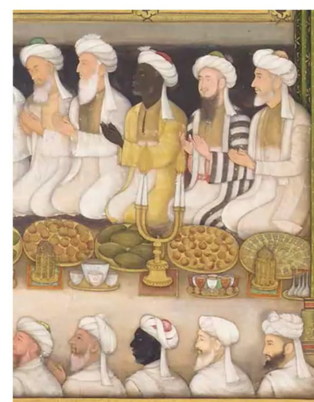
The IA course will engage with the aesthetics of the colonial and modern period in the subcontinent in subsequent sessions, in the months of March and April. ***– J.K.***

PAST PROGRAMMES

The Image of the African in Indian Paintings and Photographs

January 19th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Kenneth X. Robbins (A Collector-Archivist specialising in South Asia and International crises in Asia, Africa, and the Ottoman empire)





Dr. Kenneth Robbins began his talk on 'The African in Indian Paintings and Photographs' by making the point that while most of us may not be aware of Africans in India, they are seen all over miniature paintings. Indian miniature paintings portray two different types of Africans — those who came to India, and those who were legendary Africans who never came to India. One example of a legendary African is Bilal, shown calling to prayer in many paintings from the Sultanate period (15th century). Another example of such legendary Africans are the Zangis seen in the *Hamzanama*. On the other hand, miniature paintings also show African painters in the atelier, some of whom are even identified by name.

He clarified that one must be extremely careful while identifying someone in a painting as African purely on the basis of skin colour. Not all people of African descent are dark skinned, or have African features. This is especially true of those with one African parent, such as Hassan Ali Mirza, the first Nawab of Murshidabad, who was born of an Abyssinian slave, but was fair-skinned. Another example is Miss Zubeida, an early movie star, who had an African father, but was fair and showed no trace of her African ancestry.

Dr. Robbins highlighted the fact that portraits of Africans have often been overlooked in famous paintings, such as *The Four Tribesmen*, which shows an African, identified as a 'Seedee' (Siddi), a word often used for Africans. Another painting, accepted as Dara Shikoh's vision of Hindu-Muslim synthesis, has an African at the centre of a group.

Africans came to India across the Indian Ocean, along the trade routes. Trade connections between Ethiopia and India are seen through a number of objects, such as textiles from Gujarat from the 15th century found in monasteries in Ethiopia. He also showed a late-17th-century painting on copper by an Indian artist that went to Ethiopia.

He emphasised that while we know about the

slave trade from North Africa to North and South America, it has been established that by the 8th century, there were African slaves coming to South Asia as well. It has been estimated that, between 1600 and 1900 CE, about 5.5 million slaves came to Asia. However, here, they were not used for plantation labour, but for domestic and military servitude. They had the possibility of freedom, and even upward mobility. The most famous example is Malik Ambar, who came to India as a slave and went on to become one of the most powerful people of the Deccan in the 17th century, and is often depicted in paintings. Another example is that of Bava Gor, who came to India as an agate trader, and became a Sufi saint.

BILAL HABSHI
MUGHAL PAINTER

Painting 1598-9

Other African elites in India include Yaqut in the 12th century, the Abyssinian advisor to Razia Sultan, whom she fell in love with, and the Habshi dynasty in 15th-century Bengal. Abyssinians dominated the sultanate of Bijapur, and other places in the Deccan, and built numerous monuments. We know of the African elites of Gujarat through monuments like the Sidi Saiyyed Mosque in Ahmedabad, as well as paintings showing Africans among the elite, identified by their clothes. Awadh also had an impressive share of Africans, including a female African bodyguard, and some in charge of regiments.

There were lower classes of Africans in India as well, and these can be differentiated through their clothing, especially the kind of headdress they wear.

He also spoke of the Siddis of Janjira and Sachin, and how they saw themselves as Indian Muslims or African Habshis, but not as African Indians.

Dr. Robbins also spoke of the music of Africans in India and its integration into popular culture. He concluded with a few contemporary images, and the idea of stereotyping, where dark-skinned people are shown as uncivilised and demonic in nature.

It was a thought-provoking lecture, encouraging us to look deeper into miniature paintings and notice individuals. – ***A.S.***

CRITICISM & THEORY

Apnavi Makanji | Untitled - Significant Other | 2018 | Courtesy: Vadehra Art Gallery

JPM's Criticism & Theory offerings include: (1) a Certificate course in Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (2) an ongoing series of public seminars and lectures in Indian Intellectual Traditions; and (3) occasional academic conferences and workshops in these fields.

Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory

"What a Piece of Work Is Man": Shakespeare and the Staging of Philosophy

PAST PROGRAMMES

What is Shakespearean Drama?

October 8th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Paul Kottman (Professor of Comparative Literature and Chair of Liberal Studies at the New School for Social Research)

Is the Shakespearean tragedy an artform that is a distinct new way of experiencing a story that emerged from the mind of a singular man in the circumstances of 16th-century England? In the opening two lectures of our series on Shakespeare and philosophy, titled '*What a Piece of Work is Man: Shakespeare and the Staging of Philosophy*', Professor Paul Kottman argued that it is indeed so. But to arrive at this question we must first ask what 'artform' is. According to Kottman, all artforms are fundamentally ways of making sense of the challenges to sense-making. At its limit, the artform makes sense of what it is to be alive and what it is to be dead, as if these were things to be figured out, instead of simply being given to us to be accepted without question. And that all artforms, whether sculpture or music or painting or prose, work through this basic question.

Central to Kottman's argument on Shakespearean drama as an artform unto itself is the idea that these plays dramatise the erosion of established social and ethical frameworks. In pre-modern societies, structures such as family, religion, political authority, and fate provided individuals with a clear sense of identity and obligation. These frameworks determined how one should act and how one's actions would be judged. In Shakespeare's plays, however, these structures persist but no longer function reliably. Family ties, political loyalties, and social hierarchies remain present, yet they fail to provide stable guidance or meaning. As a result, characters must navigate a world in which the foundations of ethical life are weakening.

This historical shift has profound implications for how Shakespeare constructs character. Kottman argued that the psychological depth and complexity of Shakespearean characters emerge precisely from this instability. Unlike figures in ancient tragedy who are defined by their roles and duties, Shakespeare's characters possess an interiority that reflects their struggle to understand themselves in a changing world, whose inner conflicts are not simply personal but are shaped by the broader dissolution of social bonds.

One of the ways Kottman illustrated this was by contrasting Shakespearean tragedy with classical Greek tragedy. In works such as Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* or *Antigone*, characters are embedded within a 'closed world' in which actions and consequences are tightly linked. The meaning of an action is revealed through its outcome, and ethical conflicts arise from clashes between clearly defined duties. For example, Antigone's obligation to her family conflicts directly with Creon's political authority, creating a tragic tension that is both intelligible and resolvable within the framework of the play. In Shakespeare, however, this structure breaks down. Actions still have consequences, but those consequences no longer clarify their meaning. Kottman emphasised that in plays like *Hamlet*, events occur without producing clear ethical understanding. Hamlet's killing of Polonius, for instance, does not yield a

Prof. Paul Kottman speaks during 'What is Shakespearean Drama?'

definitive moral interpretation; instead, it generates ambiguity and uncertainty. This lack of clarity reflects a world in which traditional moral frameworks no longer provide reliable guidance. Shakespearean drama is less concerned with resolving ethical conflicts than on exploring the conditions under which meaning itself becomes uncertain.

A critical aspect of the distinctiveness of Shakespearean drama was in its emergence alongside early capitalism. Kottman suggested that Shakespeare's theatre represents one of the first instances of what might be called a 'culture industry'. Unlike earlier forms of drama that were embedded in religious or civic rituals, Shakespeare's plays were commercial enterprises. Audiences chose to attend performances and paid for admission, making attention and engagement central to the value of the work. This shift reflects a broader transformation in which cultural production becomes tied to market dynamics rather than traditional obligations. This economic context was not merely incidental but deeply connected to the content of Shakespeare's plays. Just as audiences must decide whether a performance is worth their time and money, characters within the plays must determine what, and who, matters to them in the absence of stable social norms. This parallel highlights the modernity of Shakespeare's drama, as both the form and the content of the plays engage with questions of value, meaning, and choice in a market-oriented society.

In the discussion following the talk, Kottman also addressed the role of ethics in Shakespeare's work. While he rejected the idea that Shakespeare's plays are purely nihilistic, he emphasised that they do not function as traditional moral narratives. In earlier dramatic forms, actions and consequences reinforced ethical norms, providing clear lessons for the audience. In Shakespeare, however, this direct connection is loosened. Characters often commit morally troubling acts such as murder or betrayal without these actions being neatly resolved or condemned within the narrative. Instead, Shakespeare's plays create a space for what Kottman described as 'ethical experimentation'. By presenting complex situations without definitive moral conclusions, the plays invite audiences to reflect on the nature of human relationships and the challenges of ethical decision-making. Their actions are shaped by a combination of personal desires, social pressures, and psychological factors, making them both comprehensible and unsettling.*– A.T.*

Shakespeare and Modern Aesthetic Culture

October 14th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Paul Kottman (Professor of Comparative Literature and Chair of Liberal Studies at the New School for Social Research)

The second lecture on Shakespeare and philosophy with Professor Paul Kottman began by revisiting Aristotle's theory of tragedy, particularly his claim that "plot is the soul of tragedy". In Aristotelian terms, tragedy is structured around *mythos*, a sequence of consequential actions whose meaning unfolds through their outcomes. These consequences are not merely narrative but ethical: they implicate the entire community. In plays such as *Oedipus Rex*, the protagonist's actions reveal tensions embedded in social structures, particularly between familial and

political bonds. Even if not all individuals are directly affected, they are collectively implicated. This shared implication produces *catharsis*, which serves as evidence that tragedy functions as an ethical practice rather than mere entertainment.

In contrast, *Hamlet* challenges this model. Kottman argued that Shakespearean tragedy emerges in a context where social bonds are too complex and fragmented to sustain the kind of ethical coherence assumed by Aristotle. The protagonist, Hamlet, occupies multiple conflicting roles of student, son, potential ruler, and courtier, none of which fully determine his actions. This multiplicity leads to a crucial shift: actions no longer derive their meaning from clear consequences. Instead, they exist within a fluid ethical space where accountability is unstable. Kottman described this condition as one in which actions fail to 'stick', a metaphor we likened to a Teflon surface where consequences slide off without binding the subject. Hamlet's attempt to use theatre to expose King Claudius's guilt by staging a play within the play initially appears to replicate the Aristotelian model. He seeks a public acknowledgment of wrongdoing that would implicate the entire court. However, even when Claudius reacts, the broader social body remains unmoved. The ethical force of the revelation dissipates, demonstrating that tragedy no longer produces collective moral recognition.

A key concept introduced in the lecture is 'theatricality' as a defining feature of modern ethical life. Hamlet is invited by Claudius to become a 'chief courtier', a role characterised by performance, appearance, and social manipulation. This reflects a broader cultural shift toward what Kottman described as "posing" or "phoniness", where identity is constructed through outward display rather than grounded in stable ethical commitments. This idea resonates with modern social behaviour, where individuals perform roles in response to being observed whether in public spaces or mediated environments. This performative mode becomes a legitimate 'practical identity', albeit one lacking substantive ethical grounding. In such a world, ethical life no longer depends on fulfilling duties tied to familial or political structures. Instead, it revolves around managing appearances and maintaining attention. Actions are meaningful not because of their consequences, but because of how effectively they are performed and perceived.

The lecture further illustrated this transformation through the treatment of death and mourning in *Hamlet*. In classical tragedy, burial rituals and mourning practices are central to maintaining ethical continuity between the living and the dead. In contrast, *Hamlet* presents funerals as hollow, performative events. The opening funeral of Hamlet's father fails to establish a shared understanding of his death's significance. Claudius quickly dismisses mourning in favour of political continuity. Later, the graveyard scene reinforces this breakdown: human remains are treated casually, and death loses its ethical weight. The burial of Ophelia becomes a theatrical spectacle rather than a moment of genuine grief. Both Hamlet and Laertes engage in exaggerated displays of emotion, competing for attention rather than expressing authentic mourning. Their declarations, such as willingness to be buried alongside her are clearly insincere, underscoring the dominance of performance over sincerity.

This new ethical condition produces a paradoxical form of freedom. On one hand, individuals are less constrained by rigid duties; on the other, they are unable to act meaningfully within a coherent moral framework. Hamlet's famous indecision reflects this predicament: he cannot fully commit to revenge because the act no longer carries the ethical significance it would have in a classical context. This leads to what Kottman described as a "perverse freedom" – the ability to act without being held accountable in a lasting way. Both Claudius and Hamlet commit serious moral transgressions, yet these actions fail to produce stable consequences that would restore ethical order. Importantly, this is not simply a matter of individual choice. Kottman argued that Hamlet "cannot do otherwise" because the social conditions of modernity undermine the possibility of meaningful ethical action. The proliferation of roles and identities prevents the clear conflicts that structured ancient tragedy.

A final major theme concerned the role of the audience. In ancient Greek drama, attendance was a civic and religious obligation, ensuring that the audience was ethically implicated in the performance. In contrast, Shakespearean theatre operates within a commercial framework:

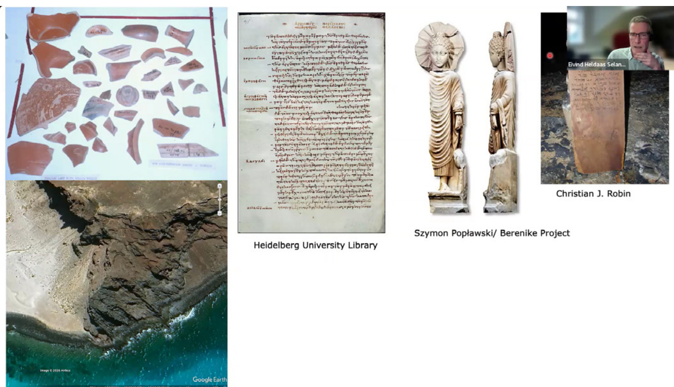
spectators choose to attend and are not morally obligated to engage. This shift raises a new question: why should audiences care? Without shared ethical foundations, the value of drama depends on its ability to hold attention. The lecture suggested that *Hamlet* itself stages this problem, asking whether viewers can find meaning in a world where ethical bonds are unstable. The audience's engagement thus becomes the only remaining measure of significance. If tragedy once relied on collective moral recognition, it now depends on individual investment and interpretation. This marks a transition from ethical necessity to aesthetic choice. – ***A.T.***

Prayer Winds and Profit: Indian Ocean Trade (1st–15^{th}c)

PAST PROGRAMMES

Coastal Sites as Spaces of Interaction in the Western Indian Ocean in the Early Historical Period

January 13th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Eivind Heldaas Seland (Professor of Ancient History and Premodern Global History at the University of Bergen, Norway)



Seland's lecture helped situate the course in time and place by laying a conceptual base that we could build on. One was to move from the idea of 'place' to the idea of a Lefebvrian 'space' — which could be perceived space, conceived space (representation of space, e.g. maps), or lived space (spaces of representations, not just physical but also symbolic, e.g. monuments and memorials). Spaces, thus, became places that come into contact with people, objects, and animals. Second was the concept, put forth by Sebouh David Aslanian, of 'circulation societies'. Another concept was to see trade routes not as lines in a terrain, but networks with nodes, clusters of, and links between these nodes. 'Circuits' is a preferable conceptual category to 'route'.

This helps make sense of a world where East Asian silks, Southasian cotton, spices, textiles, gemstones, pigments, and ivory; African ivory, pearls, tortoise shell, and slave; and Arabian wine, frankincense, and aromatics were circulating.

Maritime contact in the Western Indian Ocean dates back to 2000 BCE — with trade between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley Civilisation (Meluhha), for example. Between 1000–500 BCE, thousands of cities were formed between East Asia and the Mediterranean, cities which began trading with one another. By the time we get to 500–300 BCE, we have archaeological evidence of maritime trade — luxuries and necessities — but we do not know how this trade began.

Apart from the objects being traded, we also know that the sailors used the Monsoon Winds, using the Southwest monsoon to travel to India during the summer months and the Northeast to travel back in the winter months.

These cities were also going through a historic

churn, and as the centres of trade shifted, the zones of trade remained roughly the same over larger swathes of time. For example, in the Islamic period, Alexandria became less important, replaced by Cairo; Ctesiphon was replaced by Baghdad; and Muziris was replaced by Cochin. In 4th-century Aksum in Ethiopia, which transitioned to Christianity, the coinage changed from the moon and crescent moon to the Christian cross. The story of how Christianity came to Ethiopia, too, involves the sea — two boys travelling with Christian missionaries to India were taken hostage off the coast of Ethiopia, and served as slaves to the king, only to eventually impress and then convert him. Missionaries and merchants used the same prayer winds / profit winds — along with pirates and explorers.

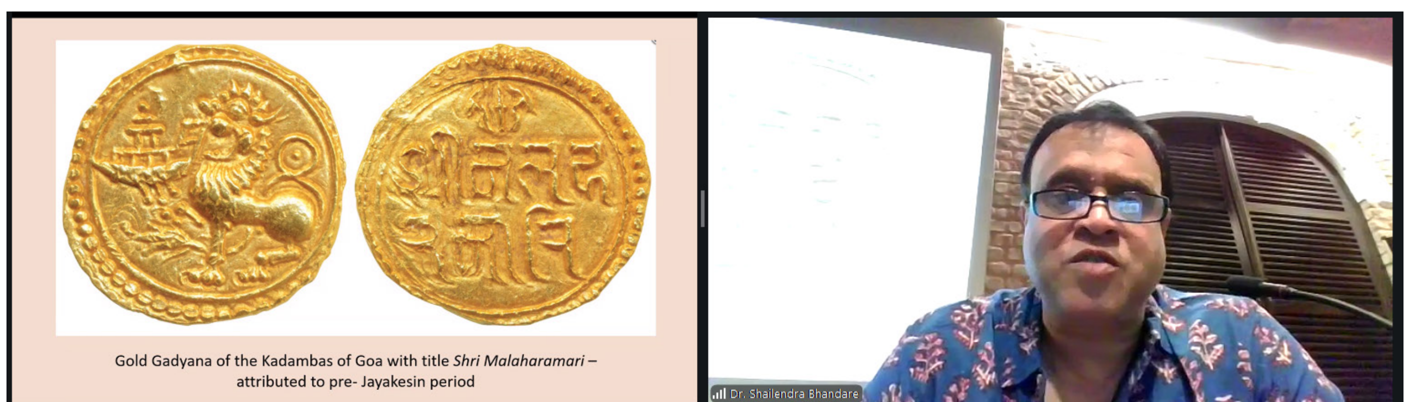
There were also islands like Socotra, off the coast of Yemen, which became a fertile pit-stop, with traders from South Asia, Africa, and Arabia pausing here, on their way to the final destination.

In 2001, Belgian speleologists chanced upon a limestone cave, 2-km deep, with inscriptions from Arab, Greek, and Indian traders in just as many varied languages — Indic languages, Aramaic, Greek, Arabic, and Geez (from Ethiopia). One of these traders, Abgar from Palmyra, left a moving imprint of his interiority there on a wooden tablet ("I came, in the pain of my soul"). Seland wondered how Abgar might have reached Socotra — one way was to spend two weeks crossing the Syrian desert on camelback, then a month on a raft on the Euphrates, before getting on a ship to Western India, and then drifting off to Socotra; alternatively, he could have gone from Palmyra to Egypt, and sailed from Berenike, or any other port, down the Red Sea to Socotra.

These trans-regional spaces come alive when looking at such fragmentary evidence — archaeological (pottery, sculptures), literary (Periplus), epigraphic, spatial, ethnographic, and scientific. – ***P.P.***

Money as a Marker: Coins and Monetary Exchange Networks of the Indian Ocean World

January 16th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Shailendra Bhandare (Assistant Keeper, South Asian and Far-eastern Numismatics and Paper Money Collections, a Fellow of St. Cross College and a member of Faculty of Oriental Studies)



As Braudel noted, the sea is not just a separator, but a unifying space, too. Bhandare, in his lecture, made sense of this unifying space by looking at coinage as a source of information on trade relations in the Indian Ocean world, connecting Arabia to Africa and Asia.

Coinage is often overlooked in the pursuit of answers, but coins often serve as a useful archive. For example, the sovereignty of Arab kings was expressed by mentioning the king's name in Friday prayers, as well as using the king's name in coinage.

The change in coinage also gives texture to the times. The Arabs, trying to subsume both the Byzantines (who used gold coins) and the Sassanians (who used silver coins), made small,

gradual changes to their coinage. For example, the horizontal line from the cross was removed as a sign of gradual de-Christianisation. Then, finally, in 696, the Umayyad Caliph Abdul Malik bin Marwan issued the first gold coins of completely Islamic character — entirely inscriptional, devoid of figurative art, struck in the name of Allah, and not in the name of the Caliph. We can read the change in culture from the change in coinage.

The *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, written in the 1st century CE, notes how deeply monetised some of these societies were. Denarius (Roman silver coins) was mentioned, alongside a mention of societies where coins were and were not important — i.e., on African coasts, small quantities of coins were enough; but in Bharuch and Muziris, coins were a commodity worth having, because people were aware of it. In Bharuch, old silver Drachmas from the time of Apollodotus and Menander were still circulating. A 'numismatic landscape' could be created from such descriptions.

So, the general consensus was that after the Roman empire collapsed, the trade, too, ended. But Bhandare is of the opinion that, perhaps, trade shifted to a different route — via the Persian Gulf — about which there is little archaeological evidence, and so lack of evidence is often assumed as evidence of lack.

We know that trade was skewed in favour of Indians, with Pliny complaining about India being a sinkhole for Roman gold coins, in exchange for Indian pepper. There is also evidence of Aksumite coins in Mangalore, Himyarite coins in Bharuch, and hordes of Roman coins in Peninsular India (mostly near Palakkad and the Andhra coast, and less so in the Gangetic plains and Gandhara). During the colonial period, Swedish copper and South American silver also entered India after getting demonetised.

But this doesn't mean Indian coins don't travel the other way. We find Satavahana coins in Berenike, uninscribed die-struck coins from Gujarat in Sharjah and Oman, Chalukyan coins in the Arakan coast, Chera coins in Egypt, and Kushana coins in Iraq and Ethiopia. Even non-metallic currency, like cowrie shells — manufactured in Maldives — circulated.

But in India, these foreign coins were treated as exotica, 'extra monetary use', with counterfeits and replicas being made. For example, they were used in jewellery, for chains, or as signet rings.

Indian coinage was even influenced by the coins that came in. Mahabhoja coins in Maharashtra, for example, have the Hippocampus. Some Chera silver coins have a very obvious Roman influence in their portraiture. The Arabs traded extensively with the Rashtrakutas — they called them Balhara, a corruption of Vallabharaja, which is what the Rashtrakutas called themselves — for the latter needed the former's horses, and certain features of Arabic coins, then, came into Rashtrakuta coinage. The influence spread in the other direction as well. Mughal coinage, for example, was considered reliable, and was used across the Indian Ocean.

The first numismatic depictions of ships come from present-day Bangladesh. The Satavahanas and Pallavas, too, used ships in their coinage. There are also ship stones in Borivali, which archive the naval battle where the Satavahanas lost North Konkan to the Yadavas in the 14th century. Thus, the presence of ships on coins and stones, as well as literary evidence of the various kinds of ships in texts like the *Arthashastra* can serve as evidence of both trade and war, just as the presence of coins themselves serve as evidence of not just trade but also of luxury and aesthetics. – ***P.P.***

Exchanging Goods, Sharing Ideas: Travellers and Traders in the Indo-Mediterranean Trade (Early First Millennium CE)

January 20th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Matthew Adam Cobb (Lecturer in Ancient History at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David)

Key Takeaways

1. *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*
2. Importance of scientific archaeology in relation to textual sources
3. Globalisation, glocalisation and transculturality
4. Greco-Roman world
5. Seascape and spiritscape

The lecture by Prof. Matthew Adam Cobb focussed on understanding the ancient maritime world of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Instead of looking at trade only as the movement of goods, the lecture encouraged us to think about the people who travelled across these waters - the sailors, merchants, and travellers who connected distant regions.

Prof. Cobb discussed how historians and archaeologists study these connections and the kinds of evidence that help us understand the experiences of those who lived and worked within these maritime networks.

Matthew Cobb

Travel for the pursuit of wisdom

- Wisdom from travel (Egypt, Aethiopia and India) – early literary *topos*.
- Pursuit of knowledge:
  - 'Cleombrotus of Sparta... had made many excursions in Egypt and about the land of the Trogodytae and had sailed beyond the Erythraean Sea Gulf ... [because] he was fond of seeing things and of acquiring knowledge [and planned to write a philosophical treatise on the gods]...' – **Plutarch *Moralia* 410a-b**.
  - Also Meropius (uncle of Frumentius) following in the footsteps of Metrodorus (Rufinus *Ecc.* 10.9–10).
- Merchant vessels not "taxi service" – genuine curiosity of traders like Cosmas.

The χοιρέλαφος – 'hog deer', *Codex Laurentianus Plut.* IX.28, fol. 268v, 11th century, now at the Laurentian Library, Florence, Italy.

One of the important ideas from the lecture was that the Indian Ocean world was not just a trading system but a space of interaction where people, cultures, and beliefs constantly met and influenced each other. Scholars once focussed mainly on the exchange of luxury goods such as spices, gemstones, and precious materials. But today, historians try to understand the wider cultural and social context of these exchanges through archaeology, textual evidence, and scientific analysis, all used together to reconstruct how these ancient networks functioned. For instance, modern scientific techniques can examine the chemical composition of stones or organic materials to identify where they originally came from. Such methods have helped scholars suggest that some gemstones found in the Roman world may have come from Sri Lanka and some of them may have come from Southeast Asia, showing the long-distance nature of these connections.

Another key theme of the lecture was how scholars interpret cultural interaction.

Earlier historical models sometimes used the idea of 'diffusion', suggesting that ideas simply spread from one place to another. Prof. Cobb explained that this approach can be misleading because it assumes a one-way movement of culture. Instead, modern studies emphasise that cultural exchange was mutual and complex. When objects or ideas travelled to new places, people adapted them according to their own traditions and beliefs, and as a result, objects found in different places could take on completely new meanings in different cultural settings.

A major difficulty in studying ancient maritime life is that most written sources were produced by educated elites rather than sailors themselves. Greek and Roman writers often used the sea as a metaphor in literature and philosophy rather than describing the real lives of mariners. In many cases, sailors and merchants were portrayed as unreliable or socially inferior. Because of this bias, historians have to read these texts carefully and combine them with archaeological evidence to understand the actual experiences of maritime communities.

To explore the perspective of sailors more closely, Prof. Cobb discussed an important text called *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a Greco-Roman periplus written in Koine Greek. While the author is unknown, it is a first-hand description

by someone familiar with the area and is nearly unique in providing accurate insights into what the ancient Hellenic world knew about the lands around the Indian Ocean. A periplus is a logbook recording sailing iteneries and commercial, political, and ethnological details about the ports visited. In an era before maps were in general use, it functioned as a combination of atlas and travellers' handbook. Berenike, an ancient significant Ptolemaic seaport on Egypt's Red Sea coast, is also a site that looks at the perspective of mariners involved in trade exchange across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

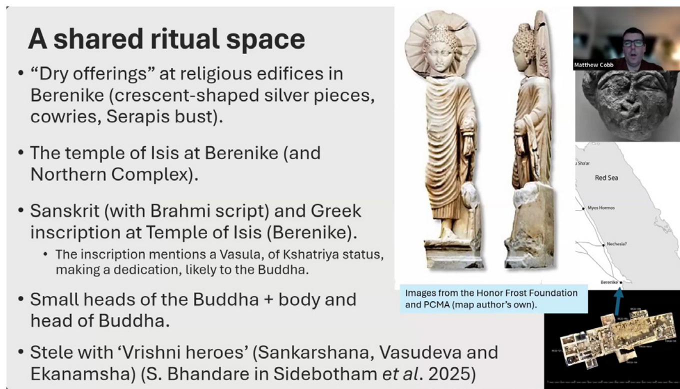
This work is generally dated to the middle of the first century CE and was likely written by someone familiar with trade routes in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. The text provides descriptions of coastal regions, ports, and trading centres from Egypt to India. Unlike many classical texts written for philosophical or literary purposes, the periplus contains practical observations that suggest knowledge of real maritime travel. For example, it describes how sailors observed the sea and the landscape in order to navigate safely. For example, the text mentions that changes in the colour or movement of the water could signal an approaching storm, advising sailors to seek shelter at nearby coastal landmarks. Such details show how mariners relied on close observation of their environment while travelling across long distances.

The *Periplus* also reveals how sailors understood the sea not only as a physical space but also as a place filled with spiritual meaning. In certain regions, the text refers to divine forces associated with particular coastal areas. For example, it mentions that frankincense could not be taken freely from certain places because local gods were believed to guard these resources. This indicates that religious beliefs were closely tied to maritime activity and that sailors respected the sacred character of certain landscapes along their routes. Prof. Cobb introduced the idea of 'seascapes' to describe how sailors experienced the maritime world. A seascape includes not only the sea itself but also ships, winds, weather patterns, and coastal landmarks that shaped navigation. Closely connected to this is the idea of spiritscapes, which refers to the belief that supernatural forces inhabited particular parts of the sea and coastline. Sailors often performed rituals or made offerings to ensure a safe journey. In the Greco-Roman world, the goddess Isis was widely associated with maritime protection. Images of Isis sometimes appeared on ships, and coins were occasionally placed beneath the mast of a vessel as part of a ritual seeking the goddess's protection.

Archaeological sites provide another way to understand these maritime connections, and the port of Berenike in Egypt is one of the most important examples discussed in the lecture. Berenike was a major Red Sea port that connected the Mediterranean world with trade routes leading to Arabia, East Africa, and India. Goods arriving at Berenike were transported across the desert to the Nile and then carried to other parts of the Roman empire. Because of its position along these routes, the port became a meeting place for people from many different regions.

Excavations at Berenike have uncovered a wide range of evidence showing the diversity of the people who visited the port. Archaeologists have discovered food remains such as rice, mung beans, and coconuts that are associated with Southasian diets. These finds suggest that travellers from the Indian subcontinent may have lived or stayed at the site for some time. Inscriptions written in multiple languages and objects connected to different religious traditions have also been found there. Among the most remarkable discoveries are small statues of the Buddha and inscriptions linking visitors to South Asia. These finds demonstrate that the port was not only a centre of trade but also a place where cultural and religious practices from different parts of the Indian Ocean world came together.

The lecture also highlighted the presence of shared ritual spaces at Berenike, particularly around the Temple of Isis. People from different backgrounds appear to have participated in acts of worship at



the same location. Offerings such as shells, metal objects, and other ritual items have been found in these areas. One especially interesting object is a carved wooden bust of the god Serapis that may have been made from the mast of a ship. If this interpretation is correct, the object symbolises the close relationship between maritime life and religious devotion. For sailors who had completed a dangerous voyage, dedicating such an object would have been a powerful act of thanksgiving. These discoveries show that ports like Berenike were important spaces of cultural encounter. Sailors, merchants, and travellers from different parts of the Indian Ocean met in these places, exchanged goods, and possibly shared ideas and beliefs. Although historians cannot always determine exactly how these exchanges happened, the combination of textual and archaeological evidence suggests that the Indian Ocean was a highly connected world where knowledge and culture travelled alongside commerce.

In conclusion, Prof. Cobb's lecture demonstrated that studying the ancient Indian Ocean requires looking beyond trade statistics and commodity lists. By examining texts like the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and archaeological sites such as Berenike, historians can begin to reconstruct the experiences of the people who navigated these spaces.

The lecture emphasised that maritime travel was not only about economic exchange but also about curiosity, cultural interaction, and the sharing of ideas across great distances. – ***S.T.K.***

How the Belief in Avalokiteshvara as Protector of Seafarers Led to the Formation of a Vast Trading Network in the Indian Ocean: India – Sri Lanka – Southeast Asia

January 27th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Osmund Bopearachchi (Corresponding Member of the French Academy of 'Inscriptions and Belles Lettres', Emeritus Director of Research of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS-ENS), Paris)

Professor Osmund Bopearachchi begins his lecture by situating it within a broad chronological framework starting in the third century BCE. He observes that, until roughly the fifth century CE, the geographical knowledge of the Greeks and Romans remained limited, with the Indian Ocean serving as their primary maritime horizon, alongside the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Caspian Sea. This positions the Indian Ocean as a crucial space for understanding early patterns of exchange, particularly given that maritime trade in this region was already well-established before the third century BCE.

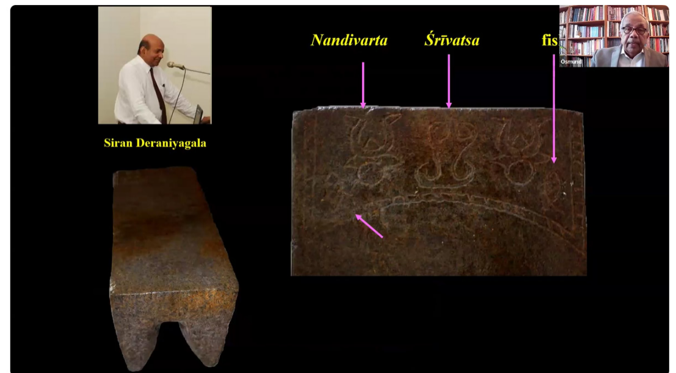
Turning to Buddhism, he highlights the deeply embedded relationship between Buddhist institutions and merchant communities, evident in both textual traditions and visual culture. A Gandhari narrative recounting a previous birth of the Buddha describes him as a *samudra vanij*, an ocean-going merchant who embarked upon the *mahasamudra*. This account underscores how mercantile activity was not only acknowledged but legitimised within Buddhist thought. He further advances the argument that the conversion of Ashoka to Buddhism may have contributed to loosening Brahmanical restrictions on seafaring, thereby facilitating greater maritime mobility. Under his reign, economic activity intensified, as evidenced by the widespread circulation of *karshapana* (*kahapana*) coins, indicating expanding trade and prosperity.

The spread of Buddhism from South Asia into Southeast Asia was closely intertwined with the expansion of maritime and fluvial networks. These networks supported thriving commercial centres located along coastal ports and navigable rivers, facilitating the movement of merchants, monks, and religious ideas. Importantly, major Buddhist sites were consistently situated along river systems rather than directly on coasts. In regions such as Gandhara, sites like Swat and Taxila developed along the Indus and its tributaries, enabling movement across vast inland distances. Similarly, key centres associated with Buddha's life, including Lumbini, Sarnath, and Vaishali, were located along the Ganges River.

This pattern extends to the Krishna River Valley, where Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda flourished, and to Sri Lanka, where inland capitals such as Anuradhapura were connected to maritime trade through river routes leading to ports like Mantai. Comparable configurations appear across Southeast Asia – Bagan in Myanmar, Ayutthaya in Thailand, and Borobudur in Java – all positioned along riverine systems. Rivers thus functioned as critical conduits linking inland religious centres to wider maritime trade networks.

This interconnectedness is exemplified by the site of Godavaya in Sri Lanka, where excavations revealed a temple with a Brahmi inscription dating to the second century CE. Located at the mouth of the Walawe River, the site corresponds to an ancient port mentioned in inscriptions. These records state that revenues collected at the port were granted to a Buddhist monastery, demonstrating how trade, taxation, and monastic institutions were closely integrated.

Artefacts recovered from the Godavaya shipwreck further illuminate these networks. Among them were grinding stones, similar to those found at sites such as Yatala Dagoba, where they were deposited as votive offerings. Some bear Brahmi inscriptions, while others feature auspicious symbols (*ashtamangala*), including the Shrivatsa, *nandivarta*, and fish motif. These findings suggest that even utilitarian objects could acquire ritual significance, circulating within trade networks while functioning as devotional offerings.



Buddhist art provides further insight into these networks. A relief from Amaravati depicts two traders within a *Jataka* narrative, offering a rare glimpse into mercantile life embedded within religious storytelling. These figures, interpreted as resembling African and Roman individuals, suggest diverse mercantile communities, what Bopearachchi describes as "self-portraits" of the ancient world. Similarly, reliefs at Nagarjunakonda depict figures identifiable as Scythian through their attire, including tunics, trousers, and Phrygian caps, often shown in scenes of leisure.

Other figures are identified as Kushans, based on their distinctive dress and association with trade routes during the reign of rulers such as Kanishka. These representations suggest that merchants were not only participants in trade but also patrons who may have commissioned their own depictions. Buddhist art thus actively registers the presence of cosmopolitan communities within its visual and devotional frameworks.

The movement of objects further reinforces these connections. Buddha images discovered in Sri Lanka have been identified as imports from the Krishna Valley, particularly from Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. Over time, Sri Lankan artisans adopted and adapted these styles, especially in *bodhighara* shrines dedicated to the sacred Bodhi tree. Similarly, reliefs depicting narratives such as Queen Maya's dream reflect the visual language of the Amaravati tradition.

Excavations at Pidurangala have yielded imported reliefs depicting Bodhisattvas, past Buddhas, and the Miracle of Sravasti. These findings highlight the role of maritime travel in the circulation of religious objects. Merchants often travelled with monks, valuing their spiritual protection and linguistic skills, facilitating the movement of both ideas and artefacts.

Among these objects are early depictions of the seven weeks following the Buddha's enlightenment, imported from the Krishna Valley and incorporated into Sri Lankan *stupa* architecture, particularly in the *vahalkada*. Figures such as Nagaraja further demonstrate the adaptation of shared iconographic traditions.

Yaksha figures associated with Kubera, such as Sankanidhi and Padmanidhi, symbolised prosperity and were especially revered by merchant communities. Their depiction at entrances of sacred sites during the Anuradhapura period reinforces their role as guardians of wealth. Artistic forms in Sri Lanka initially drew heavily from South Indian models but gradually developed distinct local characteristics. Notably, reliefs incorporating motifs such as griffins and winged figures reveal connections with Greco-Roman visual culture, supported by archaeological evidence of trade links with the Roman empire.

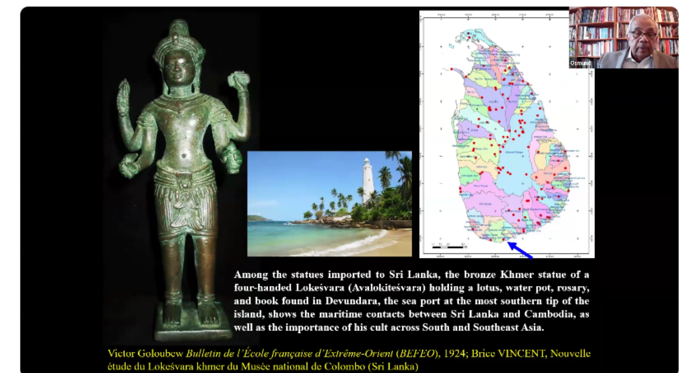
These networks expanded over time, connecting South Asia with the Persian empire and, following the decline of Rome, shifting eastward to integrate with Silk Road routes linking India to Southeast Asia, China, and Japan.

After the fifth century, the cult of Avalokiteshvara gained widespread prominence. As described in the *Lotus Sutra*, he was regarded as a protector of mariners and traders, making him especially significant for mercantile communities. His origins are traced to Gandhara, where early iconographic developments took place. In contrast, Maitreya was already established within earlier traditions.

By the fifth century, Avalokiteshvara appears prominently in representations of the Eight Great Perils (*ashtamahabhaya*), where he protects traders from dangers such as wild animals, serpents, demons, and shipwrecks. These narratives emphasise his role as a universal protector across both land and sea routes. His cult spread widely along the Silk Road, reaching Central Asia and China, as seen in depictions at the Mogao Caves.

Similar protective roles are also attributed to Tara, particularly in eastern India, further highlighting the integration of religious belief with trade networks. These traditions reached their peak around the eighth century.

The circulation of portable objects, such as small-scale depictions of the Eight Great Miracles (*ashtamahapratiharya*), further illustrates these exchanges. These objects travelled across regions, often carried by monks, and have been found in locations far from their place of production. For example, objects produced in Burma have been discovered at Bodh Gaya, while similar items have been found in Sri Lanka, made from non-local materials.



The journeys of figures such as Vajrabodhi

further exemplify these networks. Travelling from Nalanda to Sri Lanka and onward to China aboard Persian ships, his survival during a storm, attributed to devotion to Avalokiteshvara, reinforces the perceived protective power of the Bodhisattva.

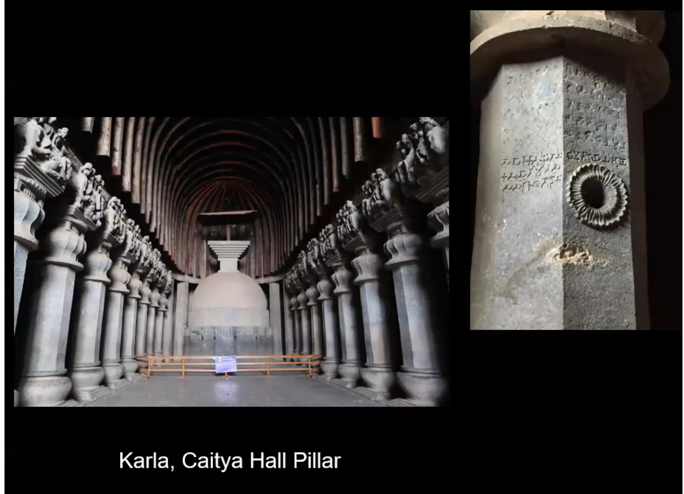
In conclusion, the lecture demonstrates that maritime and overland trade networks were not solely driven by economic exchange but were central to the spread of Buddhism. Merchants played a crucial role as patrons, facilitating the movement of monks, objects, and ideas across regions. The dissemination of Buddhist iconography, from South Asia to Southeast Asia and beyond, was deeply embedded within these networks, where figures such as Avalokiteshvara embodied the intersection of devotion and mobility. Ultimately, the circulation of images, texts, and people reveal Buddhism as a dynamic system of exchange, producing rich forms of cultural interaction and mutual influence. ***– T.V.***

Exploring the Ulhas River Estuary: Ports, Buddhism, and Indian Ocean Connections in Antiquity

February 3rd, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Pia Brancaccio (Professor of South Asian Art and Archaeology at Università di Napoli 'L'Orientale' in Italy)

Dr. Pia Brancaccio spoke on 'Exploring the Ulhas River Estuary: Ports, Buddhism, and Indian Ocean connections in Antiquity' as part of the course, 'Prayer Winds and Profits: Indian Ocean Trade (1st to 15th c)'. She began by talking about the Ulhas River, which descends from the ghats of Lonavala and heads towards the ocean, in the vicinity of Mumbai. The river is short, just around 122 km, but has an incredibly complex estuary, because it has two major outlets into the ocean – the Vasai creek and the Thane creek. The river brings down huge sediments from the ghats, and changes course rapidly, especially during the monsoon. These tidal sedimentations and changing courses of the river make these estuaries difficult to navigate, especially for those unfamiliar with them. Despite these challenges, important ports developed along the mouth of this river, in antiquity, including Sopara, Kalyan and Elephanta, which were the main focus of the talk. These ports are mentioned in a number of early historical sources, which along with archaeological evidence, as well as Buddhist texts, help us understand how trade and Buddhism developed in this area.

Among these three ports, Sopara is one of the places mentioned in multiple sources. Sopara (today Nala Sopara) was a lagoon, with an inlet from the sea, so it was an ideal port. There are two Ashokan edicts found here, highlighting its importance to the Mauryan empire. The edicts talk about a lot of rituals, including those performed before setting out on a journey. Mentions of such rituals are also found in the *Purnavadana*, which is linked to Sopara. Thus, in the Mauryan period, Sopara was an important port, a place from where people set out on journeys across the seas.



The *Periplus of the Eritrean Sea* mentions two ports at the mouth of the Ulhas River – Sopara and Kalyan. Kalyan is referred to as a lawful market town, with a functional administrative and legal

infrastructure, a port considered convenient for travellers. This is also backed by inscriptions at Kanheri, which indicate a tremendous affluence around the beginning of the Common Era. A Satavahana king is also mentioned here. Later Satavahana coins with ships on them indicate their interest in sea trade.

The *Periplus* also mentions the fight for control over the port, and mentions the problems that occur once Kalyan comes under Kshatrapa control. It is also mentioned that the Kshatrapas diverted ships towards Barygaza (Bharuch), a port under their control.

Dr. Brancaccio also drew attention to the differences between the Indian and Roman ports of the period. While Rome had proper ports with relevant infrastructure, the Indian ports had none, since the changing tides and river courses did not allow such infrastructure to be built. Thus, the Indian port towns are referred to more as markets than ports. The ships needed help from locals to enter the ports. They were usually led by guiding boats, and thus it was easy for the rulers to guide ships to their preferred ports. The Kshatrapas, for instance, diverted incoming ships to Bharuch instead of Kalyan.

This indicates that there was well-organised harbour management in place. We also know of this from the *Arthashastra*, which talks about a superintendent of shipping, whose duties include aiding boats bothered by gales and winds, and the relevant charges for goods damaged by water. Furthermore, the Superintendent of Shipping and the Superintendent of Ports were supposed to work together. This reflects the idea of a lawful market town, geared towards welcoming traders.

Coming to Sopara today, the geography is nothing like it was in the early historical period. However, satellite images of paleo channels of the river, and evidence of settlements along these channels indicate that ships would have been steered into these channels, and there was an infrastructure to transport goods from the ships to the warehouses. There is evidence of Kshatrapas and Satavahanas competing for power over Sopara as well, from coins as well as beads found.

The *Purnavadana*, a Buddhist text, part of the *Divyavadana*, a collection of stories, gives us more information about Sopara. This text was popular during the 3rd/4th century, and talks about the visit of the Buddha to the Konkan. According to the text, the Buddha flew from Shravasti to Sopara on the invitation of the merchant Purna, and a *vihara* was built for him. The text also talks about trade in sandalwood, guilds, and also the cost of sandalwood. Reference to the *Purnavadana* is also seen in other texts, including ones from Nepal with illustrations of Sopara, highlighting the importance of this port town in the early historical period, and also the Buddhist connection with trade. This is further emphasised by the *stupa* at Sopara, and the relics found inside.

Dr. Brancaccio also spoke briefly of Elephanta, which lies on the direct link between the Thane creek and the Ulhas River. The island of Elephanta must have been an active centre of trade during the 6th century, in the Kalachuri period.

While Dr. Brancaccio focussed on trade in the early period, she also drew attention to trade continuing in the later period, post the 6th century, drawing attention to the abundance of copper coins found in this region, as well as other metal artefacts. She also drew our attention to the paintings at Ajanta, which show ships laden with torpedo jars, which have been found here in abundance. She also briefly mentioned Kanheri, and its close proximity to all these ports, and the evidence of trade found there. She ended her lecture by drawing us a mental picture of the bustling market centre of Kalyan on the Ulhas river estuary, with trade dating from the Roman period to centuries later. – ***A.S.***

Localisation and Globalisation: South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal, from the Neolithic to the Early Historical Period

February 13th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Bérénice Bellina (An archaeologist specialising in South and Southeast Asia, is Research Director at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS))

Nestled among a series of lectures that focussed on the Indo-Roman trade, Dr. Bellina's account of the maritime connections between South and Southeast Asia offered a complex perspective of several centuries of trade, spiritual exchange, and impact on local material technologies and production. The account of Neolithic and Early Historical connections across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea privileged the archaeological record, situating itself in the framework of globalisation and subaltern studies. Thus, material remains were at the core of a research that aimed to reconstruct the growing connectivity of this maritime space, from local initiatives to progressive integration under the urban drive of the 5th–3rd centuries BCE across the region, and towards the global culture exemplified by the 'Maritime Silk Roads' between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE.

The Neolithic period saw the establishment of the maritime trade route in the South China Sea as a collective achievement of diverse small-scale groups, rather than of a centralising power. Dr. Bellina argued that the ethnic diversity of the region generated specialised interdependent trade networks, which gradually evolved to lay the foundation of an integrated space sharing many elements of cultural repertoire. At the time of the second urbanisation in South Asia, these networks extended towards the Bay of Bengal.

Several characteristics of the social, political, economic, and spiritual landscape of the subcontinent are important to understand the role it played in these networks. Urbanisation was accompanied by state formation, the crystallisation of crafts and guilds, as well as the rise and spread of Buddhism and Jainism, two religions heavily patronised by the merchant class. At the same time, Southeast Asia was experiencing a first phase of urban development and the appearance of early states. Crafts continuously evolved into a shared repertoire.

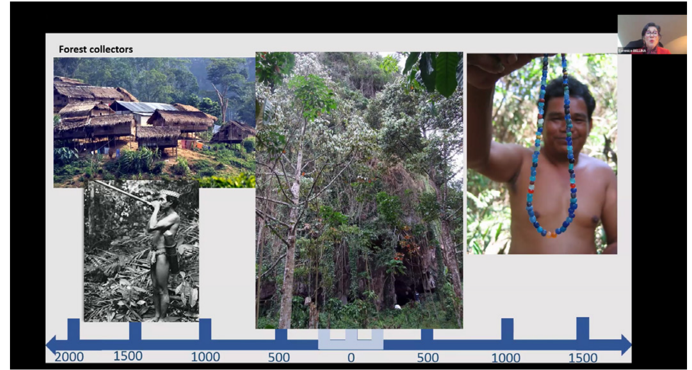
It is in this context that Dr. Bellina offered a matrix for understanding material production in Southeast Asia as it gradually underwent Indianisation. She tabulated raw materials, technologies, and shapes/decorations – all of which may be either local or exogenous – in an attempt to map possible interpretations of the artefacts uncovered during surveys conducted by her colleagues and her. Thus, a table focussing on ceramics could identify: local ceramics; local ceramics imitating exogenous shapes or decorations; locally made ceramics by exogenous potters; and imported wares.

The next period saw a massive increase in interactions across the maritime routes, accompanied by specialisation and the centralisation of production systems across South and Southeast Asia. At the same time, the region witnessed the growth of early port cities, the main nodes of trade operations. In the light of this evolution, Dr. Bellina argued that imports of goods in Southeast Asia, as previously tabulated, accounted for participation in the trade networks, but did not necessarily imply the presence of foreigners in these lands. She specifically referred to Roman goods found in the region, which she considers to have been filtered towards the South China Sea through the Indo-Roman trade by Indian merchants. Furthermore, Roman-inspired objects of Indian origin may have further inspired local production in Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, local production on demand may have been the sign of the movement of

Indian artisans within a political confederation, suggesting perhaps the existence of Southasian groups for whom it was important to maintain their cultural identity and not interact with the local one. These groups would bring their own craftsmen with them when travelling to Southeast Asia. Did these craftsmen produce goods for the local elites as well? Were they instrumental in the imitation of Southasian goods by Southeast Asian craftsmen? These and other questions of interpretation can only be partially answered by the archaeological record. In any case, the record clearly indicates a highly cosmopolitan context to the region in the Early Historical period, with details to be unravelled as research continues.

Finally, Dr. Bellina awarded special importance to the small local groups that had originated the exchanges in the earlier period: the inland groups of the Thai-Malay Peninsula which collected items that were then traded by coastal groups; and the mobile sea groups that moved between the numerous islands of Southeast Asia, collecting

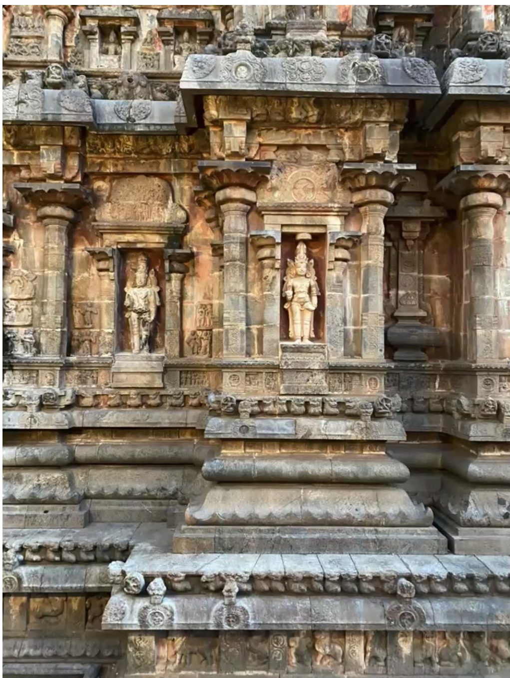


and trading items such as beads, shells, gems, as well as circulating ideas and beliefs.

In conclusion, the scholar described cultural exchange through the concept of *co-constructions between interconnected centres*, from the South China Sea to the Bay of Bengal. The coastal centres, as opposed to the inland ones, had relatively short lifespans, generating a different dynamic from the overland silk roads. This past globalisation was shaped more by small groups than by large centralised states that could not fully control them. **– *C.B.***

Pearls, Camphor, Gold: The Chola Empire, Tamil Merchant Corporations, and the Seas, c. 950–1300 CE

February 17th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Mr. Anirudh Kanisetti (An Author, Columnist and Public Historian)



Rather than treating trade as a peripheral economic activity, Mr. Anirudh Kanisetti's lecture positions Tamil merchant organisations at the very centre of early mediaeval state formation and Indian Ocean connectivity, demonstrating how commerce, political power, and cultural expression were deeply intertwined across regions. Moving from the local structures of the Chola heartland to expansive maritime networks stretching across Southeast Asia and China, the lecture reconstructs a world in which merchants were not merely participants in exchange but architects of a connected global world system.

The lecture begins by situating the emergence of merchant organisations within the political landscape of the 10th-century Chola world, centred in the Kaveri river valley. This was not a centralised empire but a layered and negotiated polity, where authority operated through institutions such as *nadu* assemblies, a corporate body representing clusters

of villages that regulated agrarian production, taxation, and local commerce. Within this decentralised framework, merchant bodies such as the *Ainnurruvar* (the ‘Five Hundred’) emerged as powerful actors. Crucially, they are described not as a singular guild but as a ‘collective of collectives’, composed of diverse and mobile groups who shared institutional frameworks, commercial interests, and a common ideological language.

To contextualise this mercantile culture, Kanisetti introduces the inscription of Muhammad ibn Shariyar at Sanjan, a port official under the Rashtrakutas. This figure, likely of Iranian Muslim origin, records a donation to the goddess Durga in Sanskrit, demonstrating how merchants navigated multiple cultural worlds simultaneously. Such examples foreground a key argument of the lecture: Indian Ocean merchants were culturally adaptive and politically embedded, capable of aligning themselves with local systems of authority while maintaining transregional connections.

The lecture then turns to inscriptional evidence from South India and Southeast Asia, particularly from Pudukkottai and Takua Pa, where merchant groups such as the *Ainnurruvar* and *Manigramam* funded irrigation works and operated across the Bay of Bengal. These inscriptions also refer to associated groups such as the *senamukham*, indicating the presence of organised military bodies. This connection is further elaborated through references to warrior identities such as the *Erivirapattinam*, whose chivalric codes, systems of payment, and even punitive measures reveal a highly structured relationship between merchants and armed groups. Merchants, therefore, did not operate in isolation but were embedded within networks of protection, coercion, and mobility.

A significant transformation in this world occurs with the activities of Queen Sembiyan Mahadevi in the late 10th century. Her extensive temple-building initiatives, far exceeding conventional royal patronage, established a network of sacred and political sites across the Chola landscape. These temples, often located in emerging commercial centres, functioned as nodes where ritual, economy, and authority converged. Their distinctive architectural and iconographic features, including the prominence of Nataraja, were subsequently adopted by merchant groups, indicating a process through which political idioms were absorbed and reproduced within mercantile contexts. This created a feedback loop in which temple patronage simultaneously reinforced royal legitimacy and facilitated commercial expansion.

Under Rajaraja I, this process intensified dramatically. His reign marked not only territorial expansion but also a transformation in the scale of resource mobilisation and circulation. The Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur stands as a monumental expression of this shift, supported by wealth derived from both conquest and trade. Inscriptions and visual materials from this period emphasise the circulation of luxury goods, particularly pearls from the Gulf of Mannar, which functioned as both economic commodities and ritual offerings. The scale of these resources underscores the extent to which maritime trade networks underpinned the Chola imperial project.

Within this expanding framework, the *Ainnurruvar* articulate an increasingly sophisticated corporate identity. Their inscriptions refer to them as the “Five Hundred of the Thousand Directions”, “known in all directions and in all eighteen lands”, and as bodies adorned by Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune. They described themselves as encompassing traders, warriors, scribes, port communities, and market actors, reflecting a structure that mirrors the composite nature of the Chola state. Importantly, these inscriptions also reveal mechanisms of regulation, including taxation systems such as the *ancu-tunt-ayam*, levied in gold based on the value of commodities like camphor before goods entered circulation. Such details highlight the degree to which merchant organisations exercised institutional control over trade.

The lecture then expands to consider long-distance connections, particularly with the

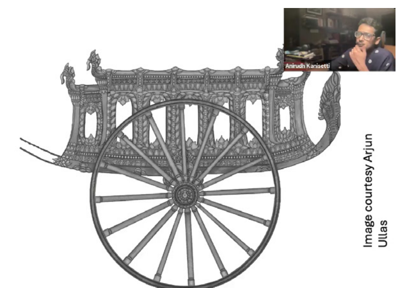
Song dynasty in China. Diplomatic exchanges involved the movement of substantial quantities of luxury goods, including hundreds of kilograms of pearls, elephant tusks, aromatics, and textiles. Merchants themselves participated in these exchanges, often functioning as ambassadors. This blurring of roles suggests that diplomacy and commerce were not separate domains but part of a shared framework of exchange, where prestige and profit were mutually reinforcing.

The reign of Rajendra I introduces a more overtly maritime dimension, particularly through the Chola raid on Southeast Asia, including Kadaram. Kanisetti interprets this event not as territorial conquest but as a strategic intervention in trade networks, aimed at accessing and redistributing wealth. Inscriptional accounts emphasise the seizure of specific items: treasures, gates, elephants rather than the establishment of administrative control, supporting the interpretation of the raid as a targeted extraction of resources.

Subsequent inscriptional evidence from Barus in Sumatra demonstrates the continued expansion and increasing autonomy of merchant organisations. These inscriptions record decisions made by the *Ainnurruvar* regarding taxation, trade regulation, and social organisation, without reference to royal authority. They also highlight the importance of commodities such as camphor, a highly valued export from Southeast Asia that was integrated into temple economies in South India. Such evidence suggests that merchant networks not only facilitated exchange but also governed aspects of economic life across regions.

The lecture further underscores the close relationship between merchants and military groups in the 12th and 13th centuries, particularly in Sri Lanka, where inscriptions describe reciprocal ties framed in familial terms, merchants as "great men" and warriors as "sons". These relationships reflect a shared institutional culture that combined commerce, protection, and loyalty.

In the concluding section, the lecture turns to the wider Indian Ocean world, including connections with China. Chinese court records and visual representations indicate an awareness of different regions of India, while archaeological evidence from Quanzhou reveals the presence of Tamil merchant communities. A temple dedicated to Shiva, likely established under the patronage of these merchants and even linked to permissions granted under Mongol authority, illustrates the extent to which religious and architectural forms travelled across regions. Even when constructed by local artisans, these temples retained distinct South Indian features, demonstrating the persistence of cultural identity within diasporic contexts.



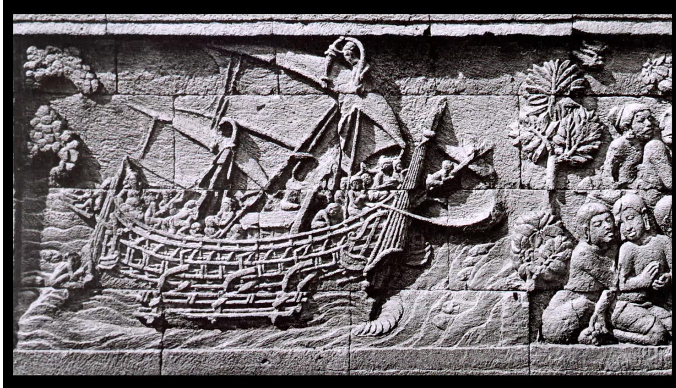
GIFTS FROM THE SEAS

In conclusion, Kanisetti's lecture demonstrates that Tamil merchant organisations were central to the making of the early mediaeval Indian Ocean world. Through their institutional coherence, cultural adaptability, and ability to integrate commerce with political and military structures, they shaped networks that extended from the Chola heartland to Southeast Asia and China.

– S.N.

Long-Distance Arab Shipping in the 9th Century Indian Ocean: What Recent Shipwreck Evidence Tells Us

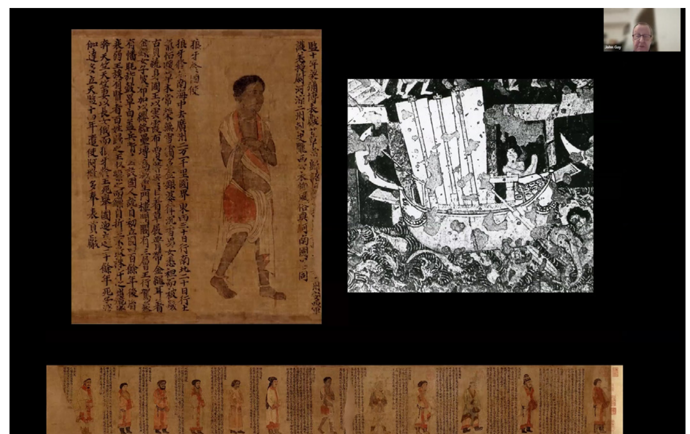
February 18th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. John Guy (Senior Curator of the Arts of South and Southeast Asia at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)



Dr. John Guy's lecture reconstructs the early mediaeval Indian Ocean through material and archaeological evidence, particularly shipwrecks, to argue that long-distance trade constituted a deep network of cultural, technological, and artistic exchange. Proceeding from early evidence of contact to detailed shipwreck case studies, the lecture builds a picture of a connected world stretching from Abbasid Iraq to South China. Rather than presenting trade as a linear movement of goods, Dr. Guy emphasises the circulation of objects, techniques, and communities across a structured maritime system.

The lecture begins by establishing the antiquity of Indian Ocean interactions, especially between South India and Southeast Asia. Evidence such as a Tamil-Grantha-inscribed goldsmith's touchstone from the Thai Peninsula, dated to the 2nd–3rd centuries CE, along with inscribed pottery fragments and merchant guild inscriptions from Takua Pa in Thailand and Barus in Sumatra, demonstrate the presence of expatriate Indian merchant and artisan communities. These communities were actively engaged in activities such as gold extraction and processing, suggesting that trade was socially embedded and institutionally organised from an early period. Gold emerges as a central driver of these interactions, reflected in Indian terms such as *Suvarnabhumi*, which conceptualise Southeast Asia as a land of wealth. Dr. Guy further underscores the structuring role of monsoon wind systems, whose seasonal reversals required merchants to pause for extended durations in regions such as the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra. These pauses transformed such regions into active commercial and cultural nodes rather than mere transit points.

Expanding outward, the lecture maps a network of interconnected ports, including Basra and Siraf in the Persian Gulf, ports along the west coast of India and the Bay of Bengal, Mantai in Sri Lanka, Kedah and Sumatra within the Srivijaya zone, and Guangzhou and Quanzhou in South China. In particular, Guangzhou and Quanzhou emerged as cosmopolitan port cities hosting diverse communities, including Arab and Persian Muslim merchants, Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, Christians, Jews, and South Indian Hindu traders. Material evidence such as mosques in Guangzhou, bilingual Arabic-Chinese tomb inscriptions, and the remains of Hindu temples in Quanzhou demonstrate that trade fostered multi-religious and multi-ethnic urban environments. These were spaces where diasporic communities maintained distinct identities while also integrating locally.



Before turning to shipwreck evidence, Dr. Guy introduces ceramics as diagnostic markers of exchange. Ceramics produced in inland Chinese kiln complexes, Changsha wares from Hunan, Yue celadons from Zhejiang, and Xing white wares from Hebei were transported via river systems to Guangzhou, the principal Tang-period export hub, where cargoes were consolidated for maritime distribution. At the same time, West Asian turquoise-glazed ceramics, produced in regions

such as Basra in Iraq, have been found across the west coast of India, at Mantai in Sri Lanka, in Kedah in Malaysia, and even in tomb contexts in Fujian in South China. These distributions allow ceramics to function as tracers of circulation, linking production centres, ports, and distant markets within a shared material network.

The Belitung shipwreck, located in the Java Sea near Sumatra and dated to around 830 CE, serves as a pivotal case study in the lecture. Its cargo comprised approximately 60,000 ceramic objects, predominantly Changsha bowls, which were mass-produced yet individually painted, along with Yue and Xing wares, and Guangdong storage jars used for packing and transport. The assemblage also included high-status gold and silver vessels of elite Tang craftsmanship, some of which reflect West Asian stylistic influences, as well as organic materials such as star anise, a Chinese spice. These goods were produced in inland kilns, transported to Guangzhou, and then shipped across Southeast Asia towards West Asian markets, likely the Persian Gulf, with trading occurring en route at key nodes such as Srivijaya in Sumatra and Mantai in Sri Lanka.

A significant feature of the Belitung cargo is the evidence for market-oriented production. Many Changsha bowls bear motifs resembling Arabic calligraphy, as well as Islamic vegetal designs such as palmettes and quatrefoils. These features indicate that Chinese artisans were producing specifically for West Asian consumers, suggesting not imitation but a dialogic exchange of forms across regions. Additionally, a small number of ceramics from the cargo display early cobalt blue decoration. Since cobalt was not locally available in China at this time, it was likely imported from West Asia, particularly Iran, indicating an early instance of technological transfer that predates the later development of blue-and-white porcelain traditions in China.

Before introducing the second shipwreck, Dr. Guy turns to shipbuilding technologies, particularly the Arab *dhow* tradition. These vessels were constructed using a stitched technique, in which planks were bound together with coconut fibre (coir) rather than nailed, resulting in a flexible hull capable of withstanding the stresses of oceanic travel. The materials used in construction were part of wider trade networks, with coir sourced from the Maldives and timber originating from Africa, Arabia, or South and Southeast Asia. Shipbuilding, therefore, reflects the same transregional circulation as evident in traded goods.

The Phanom Surin shipwreck in Thailand, dated to the late 8th or early 9th century, provides exceptionally rare archaeological evidence of these practices. Discovered in a waterlogged, anaerobic environment, the vessel preserved stitched hull construction along with ropes, pulleys, and wooden structural elements intact. Such preservation is extremely rare and allows direct observation of *dhow* construction techniques. The cargo included Chinese Guangdong storage jars, Islamic ceramics, local Mon pottery, and torpedo jars of Persian Gulf origin, marking their first known appearance in Southeast Asia, as well as precious materials such as ivory.

One of the most significant discoveries associated with this wreck is the presence of Pahlavi inscriptions on jars and seals, written in Middle Iranian script. Comparable inscriptions have been found in the Indian subcontinent, including in the Kerala copper plates and at sites such as Kanheri, indicating the presence of Iranian merchant communities. These findings confirm that such communities were actively engaged in maritime trade across the Indian Ocean, extending their role beyond the overland Silk Routes.

The lecture further emphasises the importance of Southeast Asia as a critical intermediary zone. Sites such as Kedah, Srivijaya in Sumatra, and ports along the Thai Peninsula functioned as trans-shipment hubs, redistribution centres, and zones of cultural interaction. Southeast Asia thus

emerges not as peripheral but as structurally central to Indian Ocean trade. In contrast, the Indian subcontinent presents a paradox. Despite its central position, it yields relatively limited archaeological evidence of imported Chinese ceramics. However, this does not indicate marginality. Instead, India's role is visible through merchant guild inscriptions, religious networks including Buddhist centres and the transmission of iconographic motifs such as the *makara* into Chinese artistic vocabularies. India functioned as a mediating and redistributive zone within the network rather than as a primary site of consumption.

Following the lecture's progression, Dr. John Guy demonstrates that the Indian Ocean operated as a system of circulation structured through ports and objects. Shipwrecks such as Belitung and Phanom Surin serve as rare material archives, preserving both cargo and technological practices. By tracing objects from Changsha ceramics to Persian torpedo jars and Pahlavi inscriptions, the lecture reveals a world of continuous exchange and adaptation across regions of the Indian Ocean. – ***S.N.***

PAST PUBLIC PROGRAMMES

Black Mediterranean: Artistic Encounters and Counter-Narratives

December 2nd, 3rd & 4th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Avinoam Shalem (The Riggio Professor of the Arts of Islam at the Columbia University in New York)

Professor Avinoam Shalem's three-evening seminar on the Black Mediterranean was based on a Getty Foundation project called *Mediterraneo Nero* which has conceptualised a fresh understanding of this region with a focus on Africa, studying the 1535 conquest of Tunis by the Habsburg empire, as well as the Red Sea corridor which connects the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, with both artistic and political ramifications. The term 'Black' or *Nero* was used by Paul Gilroy in the context of slave trade in *Black Atlantic* published in 1993. In the early modern period, the term Black Mediterranean was used by literary scholars in Italy and later by those responding to the crisis of migrancy over the Mediterranean. The geography and culture of the Mediterranean, long discussed in a 'horizontal' manner, reference powers to its east and west. Professor Shalem viewed the Mediterranean in terms of north and south, privileging Africa's interactions with Europe. Not explored in this seminar, but part of the Getty project, is the Spain-Morocco connection. The project creates three imaginary vertical lines: a central line from Tunis to Europe; an eastern line along the Red Sea; and a western one from Spain to Timbuktu.

The anthropologist Michael Herzfeld argued that Mediterraneanism, an aesthetic that combines political and religious affairs, national

and international, had been profitably used "because it provided excuses for everything, from epistemology to eating". Herzfeld suggested a re-examination of scholarly approaches to the Mediterranean, and a critical discussion of the role of institutions in creating and enhancing the image of the Mediterranean cultures today. The speaker called for a critical approach to the work of S.D. Goitein which was based on the Cairo Geniza. According to Horden and Purcell in *The Corrupting Sea*: *A Study of Mediterranean History*, 2000, the term 'Mediterranean society', adopted hastily by scholars, has caused the implicit idealisation, essentialisation, and monumentalisation of this fluid, varied space. There is a need to acknowledge, for instance, the distinctions between maritime, land, and island cultures, to generate a more complex and thorough picture of the Mediterranean.

The Getty project questions Mediterraneanism as a basis for the interpretation of mediaeval and early modern North African art and architecture, and for the writing of European art history. Distant spaces in China, Central Asia, the Black Sea, South Asia, and Southeast Asia find a place in the larger cultural and aesthetic power of the Mediterranean along with European spaces, but only the northern part of Africa is integrated within it. A tendency to whiten the history of North Africa has allowed it to be drawn in; yet the region was deeply connected with the cultural spaces of Black Africa, the Sahel, and the Berber, Islamic and Islamicate world in Asia and the Indian Ocean. The horizontal and European bias in reading the Mediterranean space is reflected in collections and displays at institutions such as the Louvre; the speaker suggested that African artefacts have been relegated to decorative or ethnographic categories, leaving the continent blank in relation to 'high' art. He examined the geohistory of Africa, the history of empires and seas, and the question of race to understand how Black Africa has been divided from North Africa, asking the question, "Who owns the Mediterranean?".

The oasis of Ghadames was an important centre for sub-Saharan trade with North Africa and the Mediterranean world since the 3rd century CE. Yet historical and modern maps present North Africa and its Mediterranean settlements as cut off from the rest of the continent. From the time of Herodotus in the 5th century BCE to the German philosopher Hegel and the present, the Saharan desert has been seen as dividing Africa into two sections. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Dominique-Georges-Frederic Dufour de Pradt wrote about North Africa as a space dependent on Europe. According to the speaker, an overlapping space has been created between history and geography which requires critical examination considering mediaeval networks linking African kingdoms such as Congo, Mali, and Ethiopia to global trade routes, and not simply as pre-civilisation hubs for raw material. The fine glass beads and delicate gold-ornamented objects excavated at archaeological sites (in West Africa and Nigeria respectively) counter the Eurocentric view of Africa as a primitive space. The speaker displayed a representation of the Ethiopian king in a fresco seen at the Umayyad palace of Qusayr Amra in Jordan as one of six important kings of the earth (including the Byzantine and Chinese emperors) that pay homage to the Umayyad Caliph, confirming Africa's participation in global affairs around the year 700.

The Mediterranean Sea became a major arena for quick and secure commerce in ancient and mediaeval times. Cities such as Alexandria, Carthage (gateway to Africa), and Venice (gateway to the Orient) became very important. Alexandria, on the delta of the Nile, was the gateway to Asia and India before the opening of the Suez Canal. Art discovered in Tunisia, such as a mosaic-decorated villa, a baptismal font, a portrait of Virgil, and a Roman residential complex, shows Africa's involvement with the Roman empire. The Mediterranean should be recognised as a vivid space of religious, cultural, and artistic exchange and diversity within the

assumed unity of the region which, according to Goitein, came from the common basis of the three Abrahamic religions that emerged here. Writers such as Henri Pirenne argued for a rupture in the unity of the Mediterranean region with the rise of Islam. Yet Mediterranean unity as a middle ground for east-west and north-south interaction remains important. Several islands – Sicily, Cyprus, Crete, Palma de Majorca, Sardinia, and later Malta – which dot the Mediterranean, accentuate its unity. North Africa, Egypt, and the Nile stretch into the rest of Africa, echoing the connections forged by sub-Saharan trade routes. The Mediterranean was a space of desire and control, and its unity was crucial for the concept of empire, creating constant tension between inclusion and othering.

A major 12th-century translation of books from Arabic into Latin in Toledo facilitated knowledge-transfer from one culture to another, bringing about a renaissance in the context of which the Sahel's role should be studied. The Islamic art of calligraphy is not considered to have a specific style in Africa despite the many examples that come from the region. The common use of the adjective *Maghrebi* (or occidental, as opposed to *Mashriqi* or oriental) to describe Arabic writing in Africa confirms this. These adjectives fit the east-west paradigm adopted in Mediterranean approaches, and neglect north-south interactions. It is assumed that the Al-Andalusian script was simply adopted in Africa. Tim Stanley, in discussing *Qurans* from West Sudan, has suggested calling their script *Ifriqi* (from Africa) to undercut the histories of calligraphical and imperial power which dictated the currently accepted classification.

A similar bias may have caused the false attribution of a now-rare book of mathematics to Euclid of Megara, a pupil of Socrates, who lived between 435 and 365 BCE. The book was written by Euclid of Alexandria who lived a 100 years later, between 325 and 264 BCE. A publication and translation into Latin when Alexandria was under Mamluk control rewrote history, burying its African origin. This is far from uncommon in Europe in the context of knowledge drawn from other cultures, as can be seen in the Gottingen scholar Karl Otfried Muller's vehement rejection, in 1820, of the then-prevalent theory of Egyptian and Semitic Phoenician influence on Greek civilisation; he put forward a racial theory of progress centred on the dynamic, conquering Aryans. Martin Bernal's controversial *Black Athena*, 1987, posited the influence of African cultures, such as Egyptian and Nubian cultures, on the ancient Greek and Phoenician civilisations. Professor Shalem displayed a subtly sculpted Yoruba head from Nigeria, and accomplished 12th to 15th-century metal, wood, and terracotta objects from the Sahel, which lend credence to Bernal's argument.

The scholar indicated that mediaeval biblical stories adopted by Jews, Christian, and Muslims, such as the story of Noah and his sons, reflect prevalent views on Africa. These stories were revived in early-modern times by Muller as a justification of theories of racial hierarchies. According to the *Bible*, the world was divided into three spaces occupied by three sons of Noah: Shem was blessed and became the ancestor of the Semitic people in some parts of Asia; Japheth, equally blessed, took Europe and some Asian spaces; whereas Ham was cursed for not covering a drunken Noah's genitals, and his people's descendants were cursed to become slaves. They occupied Kush or African Sudan and Mitzrayim or Egypt. Muller argued that the people in these spaces were passive and stagnant. Black African skin became associated with negative values. By contrast, the prolific Arabic writer Al-Jahiz of Basra (b. 776, d. 868), whose grandfather was from Sudan, wrote *Kitab Fakhr al-Sudan ala al-Bidan* or *The Book of Glory of the Black Race.* The word 'Sudan' comes from the word *aswed*, or 'black'. Al-Jahiz presented examples in nature such as the strength of black horses, ebony, and black stones, perhaps to convince the reader of the glory of Black people in an empirical manner. The title of his book suggests a clear awareness of race and colour in the context of social power. Ironically, both these theories aimed at creating an imagined unity of races, in colour or in geography. The black colour associated with

the Black race is not ubiquitous. North Africa, for example, encompasses many shades of brown and includes Egyptians, Arabs, Amazigh or Berber tribes, Jews, and Arab Christians. Both theories clash with reality.

Tunis, a multicultural Mediterranean port city, gained independence from French colonial power in 1956. Tunis's first president, Habib Bourguiba, probably to satisfy the indigenous Amazigh (Berber) community, declared Tunis's first identity to be African. The construction of the Hotel Africa in Tunis began in 1966 in the historical Habib Bourguiba Avenue that cuts through the new city, connecting the old city with the modern port. Each building along this avenue, such as the French embassy complex, the Place de l'Independance, the modern Municipal Theatre or the Arab Tunisian Bank, marked a specific political and cultural moment in the modern history of Tunisia. The Hotel Africa was built in a single, large block of granite emphasising the unity of Africa. A series of stamps designed by the Tunisian painter Hatem El Mekki, with imagery illustrating the wish for harmony between Black and Brown Africa, were issued on April 15th, 1961 to commemorate Africa Day.

The concept of Negritude sought to reclaim African culture and Black identity in response to French colonialism. Beya Othmani, an independent art curator based in Tunis, researched the First World Festival of Black Arts (Dakar, 1966), an important expression of Negritude in which Senghor, the first president of Senegal, and the festival organising committee, decided that only Amazigh or Black artists from North Africa could participate. Othmani investigated the participation of a Tunisian called 'Felake' to determine how a *Maghrebi* or North African participated in movements usually dominated by Francophone sub-Saharan and Caribbean perspectives. This offered a more nuanced understanding of Negritude, which has also been nurtured by African-American and Afro-Caribbean solidarity. During the Second World Festival of Black Art in Lagos in 1977, North Africa was declared as White Africa, raising questions about whether diversity, rather than unity, may be a more inclusive conceptual and political paradigm to create common ground between the Amazigh and North Africa.

The Mediterranean Sea has historically been the site of a struggle for water hegemony and the control of the movement of commodities in which port cities and straits are crucial. Italy, Sicily, and Tunis, with its double bay and quiet waters, divide the Mediterranean into Western and Eastern seas. Since 1516, the Ottomans had annexed Syria and controlled the ports of the Eastern Mediterranean. In 1531, during the reign of the Ottoman ruler Suleyman the Magnificent (r.1520 to 1566), the Mediterranean pirate Hayreddin Barbarossa, governor of Rhodes since 1522, captured Tunis for the first time, giving the Ottomans enhanced control over the sea. Suleyman then made him the grand admiral of the Ottoman empire, and admiral-in-chief of the Ottoman navy. Tunis changed hands repeatedly until Barbarossa seized it in 1534. The Spanish Habsburg emperor Charles V, with support from other European kingdoms, took Tunis (a region earlier called Ifriqiya) from the Ottomans in 1535 and allowed his vassal from the Sunni Berber Hafsid dynasty to rule it.

The fall of Tunis in 1535 to a European power ruptured the history of East-West interactions. The Latin West encountered Tunisia's classical past, especially in the Roman ruins that abound in the cities of Carthage and Tunis; antiquarian interest resulted in archaeological elements being removed to Europe, particularly to Italy. This changed the historiography of the Mediterranean region and helped Europe redefine its past, identifying it as the newly reborn Old World. In Professor Shalem's opinion, Charles V monumentalised his victory over Tunis: his larger-than-life sculpted image, bearing a compassionate expression, treads on a captive while holding a spear. Though the common use of the term refers to size, James Osborne suggests in *Approaching Monumentality in Archaeology*, 2014, that a distinction should be made between the terms 'monument' and 'monumental'; the

former relates to form, while the latter involves meaning-making and the human predilection to build huge public objects. This preference for exaggerated size goes beyond the human into the natural world. It reflects the human aspiration for cosmic creation and the desire to move from the ephemeral to the eternal, overcoming time.

Using a sardonyx cameo of Emperor Charles V and his son Philip II of Spain made by Leone Leoni as well as other artefacts, the speaker showed that a miniature object, if rare, precious, and long-lasting, can also be monumental: the word 'monument' originates from the Latin verb *monere*, meaning 'to remind'. In 1546, Charles V ordered the largest tapestries ever commissioned by the Habsburg family to depict the details of his victory over Tunis. The twelve tapestries were based on meticulous sketches by the Dutch painter Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen who accompanied Charles V on his expedition to document it, and later prepared the cartoons for their production in Brussels by the royal Gobelin weaver. These grandiose views with map-like accuracy were shown and copied in Europe and should be seen as royal propaganda. They function as huge portable paintings, as wall hangings and as portable walls, embodying a connection between monumentality and architecture. A gigantic mural on the walls of the Torre de la Peinador de la Reina in Alhambra also memorialised the conquest of Tunis, as does an engraving by Agostino dei Musi. According to the speaker, these and the panoramic view seen in tapestries and paintings of the conquest of Tunis, depicted not from directly above, flattening the object of the gaze, but from a slanted, oblique view, show an awareness that this provides a cosmic vision. It colours the battle, creating depth and breadth which makes the viewer a part of the act of seeing, yet creates an imperial gaze above and beyond the scene. Some views include the artist in them, providing the immediacy and accuracy of eyewitness accounts. The rapid recording of present as past moves a historical event into the realm of permanence, even mythology, associating it with a bygone time, suggesting spirituality and *renacimiento* (Spanish: renaissance).

Nevertheless, the capture of Tunis was violent, resulting in looting and military aggression. The violent image of Charles V crushing the wounded barbarian also presented as a noble savage marked by the exoticising gaze simultaneously suggests the hostility between Christianity and Islam. Charles V commissioned special armour for his 1541 expedition to Algeria, adorned with the figure of Santiago Matamoros, famous as St. James the Moor Slayer, and used this imagery extensively to project an image of himself as the Holy Roman Emperor on a crusade against the Muslims. Another noteworthy object made to commemorate the victory over Tunis is a feather-decorated leather shield, created in Mexico as a gift for Philip II. The shield depicts four allegorical scenes of victorious Christian battles against Islam: the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa won in 1212, the capture of the city of Granada in 1492, the conquest of Tunis in 1535, as well as the Battle of Lepanto of 1571 depicted with Philip II watching it. The shield presents the triumph at Tunis as one of the major Mediterranean wars against Islam and confirms George V and Philip II as protectors of Christendom. A second shield, made to adorn Charles V during a long parade in Italy after the conquest of Tunis, displays scenes of the Punic Wars between the Roman and Carthaginian empires. Geographically, this shield with its reference to Cartagena, relates to Carthage in Tunis, connecting the two wars. The shield served as a propaganda bridge, allowing Charles V to evoke the memory of Rome to justify and mythologise his, and Spain's, control over the Mediterranean; a shift in artistry allowed panoramic battle scenes to be brought immediately to Italian cities for display.

The speaker hypothesised that these objects, and others, including Rubens's *Adoration of the Magi*, display a desire to convert Muslims to Christianity, through depictions of Tunis with Roman aqueducts in the backdrop and through the presentation of the King of Tunis as one of the Magi. The Hafsid ruler King Mulay Hassan,

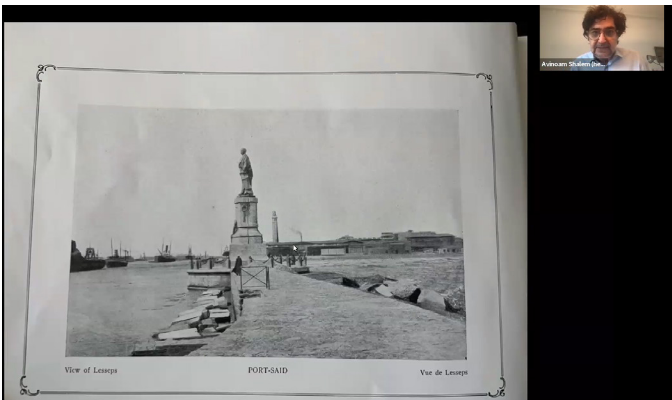
who was forced to abdicate after his defeat, was not brought back despite assurances to this effect, and died in exile in Italy. Instead, his son Mulay Ahmed was made the vassal king of Tunis. Intriguingly, Mulay Ahmed was painted first by Vermeyen and then as the King of the East, and in a portrait by Rubens, who referred to the earlier work. Rubens seems to revive visual culture from a century earlier: Vermeyen created his images, among others made in the mid-16th century, to glorify the social networks that enabled imperial ambitions.

The Red Sea is a corridor that binds the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal, built between 1859 and 1869 through the engagement not only of Egypt but also France, an imperial power. This intervention brought about a radical change in global maritime trade, politically destabilising the region to this day. A crisis occurred in the Middle East on July 26th, 1956, when Egypt's president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalised the Suez Canal, until then owned by the Suez Canal Company established by Ferdinand de Lesseps which was controlled by French and British interests. Despite Israeli support for the French and British, political exigency ensured that Nasser emerged unscathed by the diplomatic and military outcome of his move. Eventually, the UN evacuated British and French forces from the canal zone and Israeli forces withdrew. Nasser was hailed as a victor and an Arab and Egyptian national hero for his attempt to free the canal from Western hegemony. The crucial importance of the Suez Canal to the West and global trade explains the international interest in the peace treaty which Egypt and Israel signed in 1979.

The scholar opined that the Suez project cannot be viewed purely as a gambit of the erstwhile colonial powers advantageous to the West: its opening was coloured by optimism and aspirations for a better future for all. In an official letter to the members of the French Academy of Sciences, Lesseps called the Suez Canal the Egyptian Bosphorus, referring to its potential to be as important as the Bosphorus by connecting the Mediterranean Sea to Asia. Before the project even began, Lesseps waxed eloquent about a rainbow he saw in the Egyptian sky, reading it as a sign that the Suez would serve as a bridge between East and West, belying the dichotomy of divided worlds that still prevails. The Khedive of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, saw the opening of the canal as a way to make his country a part of Europe. Yet, in 1879, he was forced out of office under British and French pressure after being pressed to sell Egypt's shares in the Suez Canal Company to Britain. However, in 1869, a postcard printed as a souvenir for the opening of the Suez Canal illustrated the optimism of Ismail Pasha, projecting the Suez Canal as a secure trade zone through a utopian scene of Africa and Asia on the horizon of the Mediterranean. Other art, such as that of the Italian artist Pietro Magni who sculpted in an allegorical style recalling ancient Rome and Greece, also presented the bond created between Asia and Europe by the canal.

Lesseps was aware of the long history of the desire to create this connection. A canal between the Nile and the ancient, fortified city of Al-Qulzum on the Gulf of Suez was first planned at the time of the pharaohs, between 1000 and 800 BCE. A stele found near Al-Qulzum records the Persian ruler Darius's orders to dig such a canal after his conquest of Egypt. Canals are recorded by Ptolemy and Greek papyri which mention the people in charge of the maintenance of these, vital in a sandy and windy landscape watered by a flood-prone river which would have deposited a great deal of mud; canals on the Nile were probably usable for only three months in the year. In mediaeval times, the Canal of the Pharaohs was restored after the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641 but later blocked for political reasons, and neglected in the early Abbasid period during the reign of Abu Jafar al-Mansur around the mid-8th century. This eventually ended the traffic between the Nile and the Red Sea, as recorded by the 15th-century historian of Cairo, al-Maqrizi, in his seminal work known as *al-Khitat*. The

megalomanic Fatimid Caliph Al-Hakim, around the year 1000 CE, wanted a dam on the Nile and a shorter route between the Nile and the Red Sea, but was discouraged by the Arab scholar Ibn al-Haytham, whom the ruler wished to involve as engineer of the project. Al-Hakim imprisoned al-Haytham for opposing him. In his 1954 appeal to Said Pasha, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt, Lesseps recounted the great men who had wished for a uniting of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea: the pharaohs, Alexander the Great, the caesars of the Roman empire, the Arab conqueror Amr ibn al-As, Napoleon I, and even Muhammad Ali, the former ruler of Egypt. In the 19th century, the Ottoman empire was called 'The Sick Man of Europe' by the Russian Tsar Nicholas because of its failure to modernise. Lesseps played on the idea that this would change when the Suez project injected the vitality of trade into the region.



The opening of the Suez Canal caused a surge of Romantic Orientalist imagery; a postcard had the image of an Egyptian woman in the foreground, and the cover of a souvenir album of the early 20th century depicted modernity through images of a steamboat and a lighthouse with lemons, signifying Egypt's past, in the background. Inside, the album depicted a plan of the canal; it showed the people involved in its production, including important personages such as Muhammed Ali, Lesseps, and Ottoman officials; the biblical space of the desert fountain from which Moses brought forth water for the children of Israel; touristic spots along the way where the technology of the canal could be seen; but also images bound to the idea of the Holy Land and holy sites. Eventually, when the canal was inaugurated, Egypt became instrumental in global trade, inciting national pride. A new city was born in Port Said because of the opening of the canal, full of modern streets and buildings, merchants and the commerce of internationally procured goods, creating the boundary between the Orient and the Occident, between the passive and the active, and between the past and the future of industry and production. The architecture of the office of the Suez Canal Company, with its Mamluk-style domes and Venetian facade resembling the Doge's palace, reflected Port Said's changed nature from being a fishing village to an international port. Images of Port Said, its docks, its lighthouse, ships and boats, and the Avenue Lesseps were inserted. A tram in the Old city made modern transport possible; the minaret of a new mosque in neo-Mamluk style was built, and a sculpture of Queen Victoria of England seen on top of a water fountain, as if giving it generously to the citizens. Dominating it all was a monumental bronze sculpture of Ferdinand de Lesseps made with French engineering techniques, built on a huge podium. With a large overcoat resembling a Roman toga on the shoulders and the plans of the Suez Canal in one hand, the right hand of the figure of Lesseps pointed towards the Suez Canal, showing the importance of this spot at the crossroads of three continents. The grand size and posture of the statue was emblematic of the city, and recalled the Pharos of Alexandria, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Prior to the making of Lesseps's statue, the sculptor Auguste Bartholdi was eager to be involved in the grand Suez project and suggested a new colossal Pharos for the canal to Lesseps. Bartholdi made a 40-centimetre-tall cast maquette, today in the Musee Bartholdi in Colmar. The sculpture could be entered, and stairs would take visitors to the top, where the figure of an Egyptian woman was placed, to look down at the city of Port Said. Eventually, the project was rejected by the Khedive of Egypt, and Bartholdi moved on to create the Statue of Liberty for the port of New York. In Port Said, a minaret-shaped lighthouse was constructed and Lesseps presented himself in sculpted form atop the podium at the entrance of the canal. The speaker compared this sculpture to another bronze figure mentioned in a 12th-century travelogue called *Tawfat al-Albab* by Abu Hamid al-Gharnati, a Spanish Arab traveller who was a native of the city of Granada. The sculpture, formerly present in the city of Cadiz on the Strait of Gibraltar, is said to have been built by the Romans at the entrance of the strait; it represented a youthful, probably African figure, purple in colour, with curly hair, and holding a long key, which may have

been a symbol to indicate the entrance to Africa. Legend had it that the sculpture was created as a talisman to prevent anyone crossing into Europe. Once it decayed and disappeared, the Arabs conquered Al-Andaluz by crossing the straits of Gibraltar from Morocco.

A depiction of the British statesman Benjamin Disraeli (who was involved in 1875 in secretly purchasing the shares of the Suez Canal Company from the Khedive of Egypt) in a cartoon published in the magazine *Punch* shows him holding a key called the Suez Canal (the key to India) and holding a finger to his lips urging silence from witnesses to this act. The Sphinx in the cartoon winks at Disraeli. Eventually, in 1956, there was a decision to take the sculpture of Lesseps off its podium. In the present, there is no sign that marks the erstwhile presence of his statue on the podium. The sculpture is now at the Suez Canal

Prof. Avinoam Shalem speaks during 'Black Mediterranean: Artistic Encounters and Counter-Narratives'

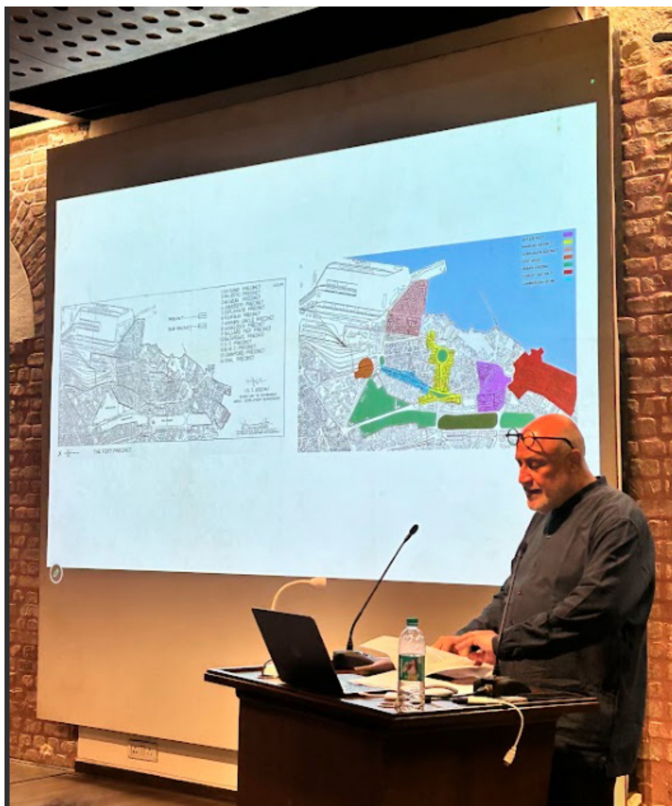
Museum in Ismailia where it is a popular exhibit, attracting viewers who have their photographs taken before it. Coming full circle, there have been suggestions on social media that the sculpture should be reinstated, as it is a part of the history of the city of Port Said, pointing to the shared past of geographical spaces north and south of the Mediterranean Sea. ***– J.K.***

Creative Processes

PAST PROGRAMMES

Architecture in a Time of Flux: *Research as Practice & Practice as Research*

March 2nd, 2026, 6:00 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Rahul Mehrotra (John T. Dunlop Professor in Housing and Urbanization at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University)



Prof. Rahul Mehrotra speaks during 'Architecture in a Time of Flux: Research as Practice & Practice as Research'

Rahul Mehrotra's lecture, 'Architecture in a Time of Flux', took us through the discipline of architecture via his ruminations and experiences of architecture as theory, pedagogy/advocacy, and practice. Mehrotra argued and illustrated how the three are interwoven and inform each other.

The lecture was an extended meditation on the discipline of architecture in a moment defined by transition. At its core was a provocation: architecture, as a discipline, remains deeply invested in permanence, even as the world it inhabits is increasingly characterised by instability and flux. What would it mean, then, to think of architecture not as the production of fixed objects, but as an engagement with processes of change, layered in experience and context?

Mehrotra's lecture had three parts: Reflections, which entailed his ruminations on the discipline, its theories, and its limitations; Investigations, which set out his research projects where he studied and documented his research; and finally, Propositions, which involved projects by his practice in which he applied his design principles and ideas.

I. Reflections: Rethinking Practice, Research, and Theory

The lecture opened with a series of reflections on some of the foundational categories of the discipline – namely practice, research, theory, and pedagogy.

Mehrotra began by expanding the idea of practice. Rather than limiting it to the professional act of designing buildings, he described practice as a 'capacious' field, one that includes research, archiving, advocacy, and teaching. This expanded view was accompanied by a vivid metaphor: architects, he suggested, often act as 'thermometers', merely reading existing conditions. The challenge is to become 'thermostats' capable of altering those conditions.

A similar rethinking was applied to research. Drawing on contemporary debates within universities, Mehrotra argued for a shift towards 'propositional research', which he conceptualised as a mode of inquiry that explores relationships between ideas rather than seeking narrowly

defined, testable outcomes.

The reflections also included an interesting conceptualisation of archives as 'sutures' that connect past and future, especially in postcolonial contexts marked by rupture. Similarly, theory was repositioned not as a fixed body of knowledge but as something that is grounded. Mehrotra argued that theory must emerge from reflections on what is happening on the ground instead of being adopted from a foreign context. It should act as a moral compass and a guide that must emerge from local conditions of geography, nature, and climate rather than being imported wholesale from Western contexts. Mehrotra provided several illustrations to substantiate his ideas and reframing of existing notions: the misfit of Western planning theories in dense tropical cities; the problematic binary of 'formal' versus 'informal'; and the effect that climate has had historically on the tenets of religion or of aesthetics.

The speaker noted that losing the sense of context is really detrimental to the way we think about architecture because style becomes superficial in the absence of context. He contrasted Manish Soni's *Isanama* with Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* to show how the former draws its inspiration from a place and culture while the latter is an aesthetic, stylised imagination. He also used the example of the Parthenon and the Ajanta caves to talk about how one architecture is a statement and another is a blend. One adds an autonomous object to the place while the other nestles in subtraction. The classification of 'great architecture' and its perpetuation and propagation through education led us down one path and not the other. He wondered what our places would look like if we had followed the path of subtraction, not addition.

Mehrotra added a new element to the discussion of context: the context of the context, which entails looking at not only the site, surroundings, climate, and material, but to situate those temporally, socially, culturally, politically, economically, and geopolitically.

II. Investigations: The Kinetic City and Ephemeral Urbanism

The second part of the lecture, 'Investigations', discussed specific research projects that explored and developed some of his key ideas.

One of these ideas was the 'kinetic city'. Through images of festivals, street markets, and temporary urban occupations like *shamianas* for weddings and *pandals* for festivals, the speaker demonstrated how a lot of urban life in cities like Mumbai is not defined by permanent architecture but by temporal, performative, and ephemeral practices.

The research on the Kumbh Mela, which he presented as a fully functioning, yet temporary megacity, was an eye-opener for me. Slides documenting the transformation of a riverbank from empty landscape to dense settlement within weeks, and the city, assembled using a simple kit of parts (bamboo, fabric, rope, nails), demonstrated a level of logistical sophistication that challenges conventional ideas of planning.

What was particularly striking, however, was the shift in perception that this framing made possible. The Kumbh is often described, especially from a distance, as chaotic, unhygienic, or irrational. Yet, through this new lens, it emerged as a highly organised, deeply collaborative system: a city, a community built on collective intelligence, improvisation, and an extraordinary capacity for self-organisation. What might appear as disorder to an outsider revealed itself as a different kind of order, one animated by faith, but also by ingenuity, industriousness, and an ethic of participation. In this sense, the Kumbh became not an exception to urbanism, but a powerful alternative model for thinking about it.

Equally important were the insights from this research:

- temporality as a planning tool
- self-organisation within a structured grid
- governance models that shift over time

These ideas were extended into a broader taxonomy of ephemeral urbanism, where Mehrotra mapped different types of temporary settlements, from festivals and markets to refugee camps and disaster zones. What emerged was a compelling argument: that temporality is not an exception to urbanism but one of its fundamental conditions.

And as he says, it's not a pop-up city. It is a fully functioning urban system with governance systems, infrastructure, and built-in guards against flooding on the banks of the river.

Another fascinating strand within this section was his work on tents and fabric structures, where Mughal encampments, Bedouin tents, and contemporary tensile architecture were brought into conversation. Here, the ephemeral was not seen as inferior to the permanent, but as a highly intelligent and adaptive mode of building.

III. Propositions: Practice as Advocacy

The final part of the lecture turned to Propositions, that is, architectural projects and interventions that emerge from these research insights.

Here, he emphasised the idea of research as advocacy. His books on Mumbai, for instance, were presented not merely as documentation but as tools that influenced policy, such as the conservation of the Fort precinct. This reframing of knowledge production as an active, public-facing process was particularly compelling.

Several projects illustrated how these ideas translate into practice:

- adaptive reuse of industrial structures into galleries
- conservation projects that treat heritage as dynamic rather than static
- sanitation 'hubs' that integrate infrastructure with community life

A recurring theme here was the shift from innovation to repair. Mehrotra argued that cities like Mumbai do not need more spectacular buildings, but more attention to maintenance, adaptation, and incremental transformation. In this sense, conservation becomes not an act of freezing the past, but a way of modulating change over time.

His projects weave in his ideas and the aspect of the architect as the mediator between the client, the regulators and the actual end-users. The elephant housing project in Rajasthan called *Hathigaon* showed how sensitive design can rewild barren land and take into account the needs of wildlife, their caretakers, the community, and its economy as a whole. The project was to build accommodation for elephants and their mahouts on a barren piece of land. They started with the landscape instead of the building. The land was rewilded, water was held in ponds, elephant ergonomics and their relationship and closeness with the mahouts were all factored in while designing the project. In other instances, the integration of craft into a factory, of greenery into an office, of responding to and respecting an existing architecture, culture and framework in designing the building for CEPT or the museum in Alibaug are all examples of sustainable, people-oriented design that respect the 'context of the context'.

Conclusion

What stayed with me after the lecture was not a single argument but a shift in orientation. Mehrotra invited us to think of architecture not as a discipline of objects, but as a field of relationships between permanence and change, form and time, and the static and the kinetic.

In a world where our spheres of concern are expanding — especially across climate, inequality, and urbanisation — while our spheres of influence seem to shrink, his call is ultimately one of recalibration. The task is not to withdraw into abstraction, nor to chase total solutions, but to find ways of acting meaningfully within complexity.

If architecture is to remain relevant in such a world, it must learn to work with flux as a condition to be engaged with and not necessarily as a problem to be solved. – ***M.G.***

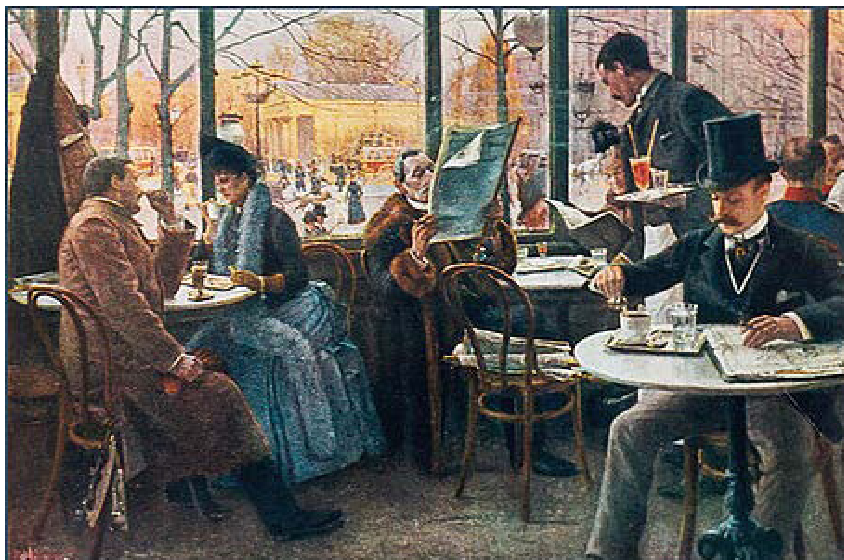
Announcements

WHAT IS EUROPEAN?

DAG NIKOLAUS HASSE

April 21st & 23rd, 2026 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Online Public Lecture on ZOOM

Registration Fee: Rs. 2,000/-, Students*: Rs. 1,000/- | Recording Available*



Im Café Josty by Paul Hoeniger (1890)

Many traditional ideas about European culture are one-sided and distorted, both historically and geographically. They remain burdened with intellectual baggage from the colonial and Romantic eras, leading to cultural arrogance and a midwestern European tunnel vision. The first lecture analyses persistent cliches about Europe and their historical origin, while the second lecture proposes an inclusive vision of Europe that is respectful towards other continents. It also addresses the question of whether criticism of European arrogance is possible without falling into anti-Europeanism: “Culture can provide an intellectual home for all people”.

Session I: Colonial and Romantic Cliches about Europe
Session II: How to Develop an Inclusive and Critical Vision of Europe Without Falling into Anti-Europeanism

Dag Nikolaus Hasse, professor of the history of philosophy at the University of Würzburg, is a leading authority on the passage of ideas between the Muslim, Jewish and Christian worlds in West Asia, North Africa, and Europe, and has worked on this topic for more than twenty years. Among his numerous publications, three monographs stand out: *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West* (London/Torino, 2000), on the impact of a Muslim philosopher on Latin European intellectual culture; *Success and Suppression: Arabic Sciences and Philosophy in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), on the European Renaissance around 1500 and its formation by Arabic sources; and *What is European? On Overcoming Colonial and Romantic Modes of Thought* (Amsterdam University Press, 2025).Thought (Amsterdam University Press, 2025).

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** More details available on: www.jp-india.org*
**Recorded lectures will be shared for 24 hours via Zoom, with scholar approval on a predetermined date*

POSTGRADUATE COURSE IN INDIAN AESTHETICS

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July 2026 – April 2027 | Typically Saturdays, 1:30 – 5:30 pm IST | Hybrid Mode: Physical & Online*

Platform: Zoom | Recording Available*

Introduced in 1999, Jnanapravaha Mumbai's academic, yearlong Postgraduate Diploma/ Certificate course in Indian Aesthetics (IA) examines the historical development of visual forms in context, employing the disciplines of art history, archaeology, architecture, anthropology, literature, and philosophy. The course traverses 5,000 years of Indian visual art, including pre-modern, modern, and contemporary forms as well as popular traditions, to illuminate aesthetic trajectories in the subcontinent. Internationally renowned scholars introduce students to this art, ensuring a material, geographical, historical, social, and cultural base that is broad and extensively representative. In keeping with JPM's mission, the course has evolved over the years to include topics of current research.

Illustrated folios of the Devimahatmya, Nepal, c. 18th Century

For admission, you are required to submit:
A digital copy each of your last degree certificate, CV, short bio (100 words) and passport-size photograph.

Fee structure:
Diploma (subject to writing and attendance) – Rs. 1,00,000 | Certificate (subject to attendance) – Rs. 75,000

For registration, click here: www.jp-india.org.

* Please check details of hybrid mode on our website before registering.

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Queen's Mansion, 3rd floor, Ghanshyam
Talwatkar Marg, Fort, Mumbai – 400 001
022 2207 2974/75
info@jp-india.org

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ON BEAUTY: WESTERN THOUGHT FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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August 11th – October 13th, 2026 | Mainly Tuesdays | Lecture: 6:30 – 8:30 pm IST | Various Scholars

FEE: Rs. 10,000 | Online Platform: Zoom | Register: www.jp-india.org | Recording Available*

Female head of the "Aphrodite of Cnidus" type, called "The Kaufmann Head"
C. 150 BC.
Provenance: Tralles (in present-day Turkey).

Beauty has long occupied a central place in human thought, shaping how societies understand art, ethics, emotion, and even truth. Yet, it is often treated as self-evident or universal, rather than as a concept shaped by culture, philosophy, and historical context. Across a yearlong programme offered in parts, the ACT programme examines what beauty has meant to societies across the world, and how its meanings have been constructed, debated, and transformed over time. By foregrounding beauty as a critical focus, it invites a deeper engagement with the values and assumptions that underpin aesthetic experience across traditions.

The yearlong programme begins with a 10-lecture series on the evolution of beauty within the Western philosophical tradition, from Antiquity to the Enlightenment. In classical Greek thought, beauty was closely tied to proportion, harmony, and mathematical order, before being elevated by Plato to a transcendent Form, an eternal ideal imperfectly reflected in the material world. This metaphysical understanding was further developed by Plotinus, who conceived beauty as an emanation of the divine. The Renaissance marked a significant shift, grounding beauty in the study of the natural world, where human form, perspective, and symmetry became central to artistic and intellectual inquiry. By the Enlightenment, beauty was increasingly systematised: Edmund Burke distinguished the beautiful from the sublime, while Immanuel Kant defined aesthetic judgement as both subjective and universal. Together, these developments reveal a tradition negotiating between transcendence, perception, and reason in its understanding of beauty.

This trajectory, however, represents only one entry point into a far broader and more diverse history of beauty. The programme moves beyond this Western framework in subsequent lectures, offered separately, to explore how different cultures have conceived of beauty through emotion, ethics, spirituality, and perception. By placing these perspectives in dialogue, this year, the ACT programme opens up a richer, more expansive understanding of aesthetic experience across world traditions.

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Queen's Mansion, 3rd floor, Ghanshyam Talwatkar Marg, Fort, Mumbai – 400 001
022 2207 2974/75
info@jp-india.org

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UNPACKING THE *"SHANGRI"* *RAMAYANA*

SONYA RHIE MACE

A forest is searched, from the "Shangri" Ramayana, c. 1700. Gum tempera on paper. 20.7 x 31.8 cm. Museum Rietberg, Zurich, Permanent loan from Eberhard and Barbara Fischer REF 15. Photo: Rainer Wolfsberger, Museum Rietberg

A special three-part lecture programme explores the widely dispersed and much-debated *'Shangri' Ramayana*, presented through new research and curatorial insight. The opening lecture, ***Reuniting a Ramayana***, will take place on **30th July 2026** as part of the Curatorial Processes programme, from 6:30 – 8:30 PM IST. This free public lecture introduces the first-ever exhibition dedicated to this remarkable pictorial series, examining its narrative strategies, newly identified climaxes, and the complexities of visual storytelling across folios. It also reflects on curatorial decisions, including the selection of key works and animated sequences, as well as the challenges of presenting an ancient Indian epic to global audiences.

This is followed by a two-day lecture series on **6th & 7th August 2026**, presented as part of the South Asian Painting Programme, and developed alongside a recent catalogue of Pahari paintings from the Benkaim Collection. Reuniting this extensive series reveals fresh perspectives on Pahari patronage and artistic practice. The sessions will be held from 6:30 – 8:45 PM IST, and the registration fee for the two-day series is Rs. 2000.

6th August: The *'Shangri' Ramayana*: Histories and Historiographies
7th August: Individual or Collective? Locating Meaning and Value in a Pictorial Series

Sonya Rhie Mace, Ph.D. has been the George P. Bickford Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art since 2012, following eight years as Curator of Asian Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Her special exhibitions include *Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose* (2007), *Tantra in Buddhist Art* (2013), *Mughal India: Art and Stories* (2016), *Revealing Krishna: Journey to Cambodia's Sacred Mountain* (2021), and *Epic of the Northwest Himalayas: Pahari Paintings from the "'Shangri' Ramayana"* (2026). She continues to teach and publish her ongoing research on aspects of early Indian sculpture.

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info@jp-india.org

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**By May 2026, more details will be made available on: www.jp-india.org*

PUJA, POETRY AND PERFORMANCE: ENDURING *BHAKTI* TRADITIONS IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

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August 5th, 12th,19th & 27th, 2026 | Mainly Wednesdays | Lecture: 6:30 – 8:30 pm IST

FEE: Rs. 4000 | Online Platform: Zoom | Register: www.jp-india.org | Recording Available*

Statue of Kartikeya at Batu Caves, Malaysia

Puja, Poetry and Performance: Enduring *Bhakti* Traditions in the Indian Subcontinent is a four-lecture series which will begin with an exploration of the veneration of Murugan, particularly popular in Southern India, evidence of which can be found from an early period. Both texts and material evidence confirm the great diversity of religions and their affiliated cultures in the Indian subcontinent for more than two millennia. Apart from 'mainstream' religions, for instance, those known today as Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism, many other religious strands which are designated as 'popular' also existed. These myriad religious views and practices were not isolated; coexistence meant that they often re-envisioned themselves as they cross fertilised. In addition to the worship of Murugan, this series will delve into Shaiva Bhakti and the *Tevaram*, the dramatically performative *Navratri* festival and the poetry of the Alvars.

FACULTY SCHOLARS:

Richard Davis
Indira Peterson
Vasudha Narayanan
Archana Venkatesan

Jnanapravaha

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Queen's Mansion, 3rd floor, Ghanshyam Talwatkar Marg, Fort, Mumbai – 400 001
022 2207 2974/75
info@jp-india.org

www.jp-india.org

*Recorded lectures will be shared for 24 hours via Zoom, with scholar approval on a predetermined date

Jnanapravaha Mumbai is deeply indebted to the following for their support:

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We know we have made a difference. Our endeavour to encourage and facilitate pedagogy meaningfully continues with the firm belief that the humanities are indispensable to the well-being of the community and the individual.

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Contributors to the Quarterly:

AS - Anuradha Shankar
AT - Adira Thekkuveettil
CB - Cristina Bogdan
JK - Jaya Kanoria
MG - Meghna Gill
PP - Prathyush Parasuraman
STK - Sandeep TK
SN - Sushmita Nandini
TV - Twisha Vaghasia

Text Editor: Suchita Parikh-Mundul

Design and Layout: Sharon Rodrigues

*****

Queens Mansion, 3rd Floor, G. Talwatkar Marg,
Fort, Mumbai - 400001. India.
www.jp-india.com
Facebook: JnanapravahaAtMumbai | Twitter: @Jnanapravaha_M | Instagram: Jnanapravaha_Mumbai