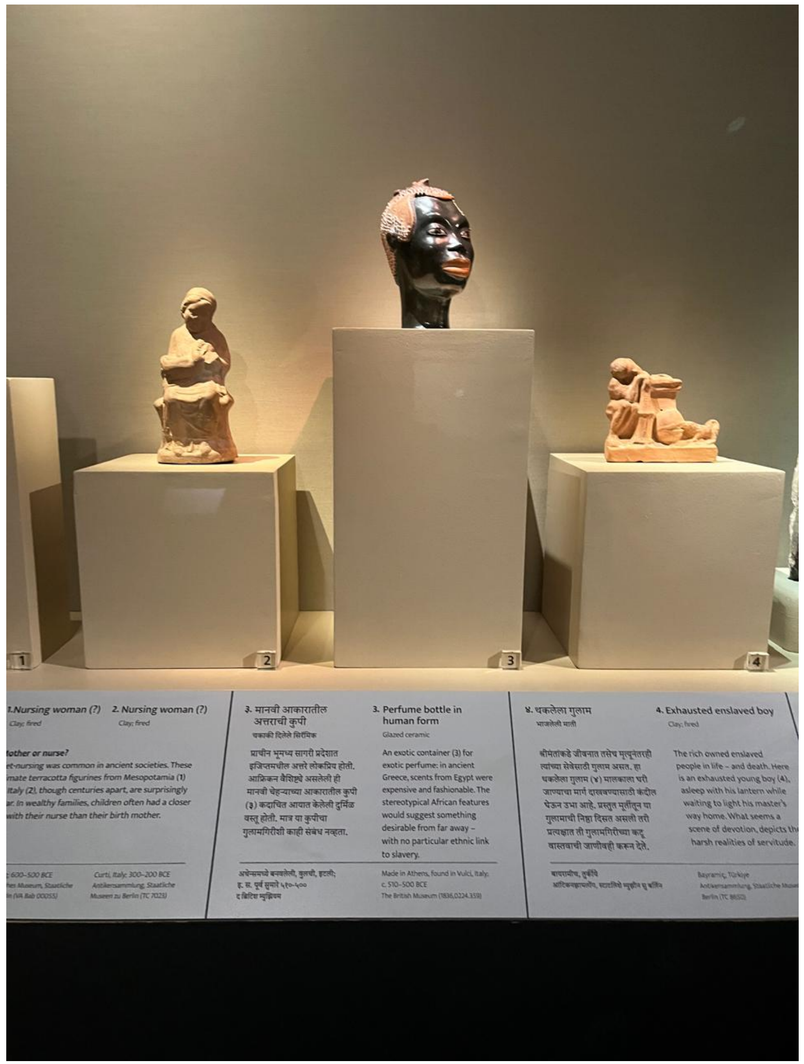
Representation or stereotype? The digital documentation of colonial collections

Archivschule Marburg: Data Ethics for Archival Science and Historical Research

Afreed Mehta, 27 Aug, 2026

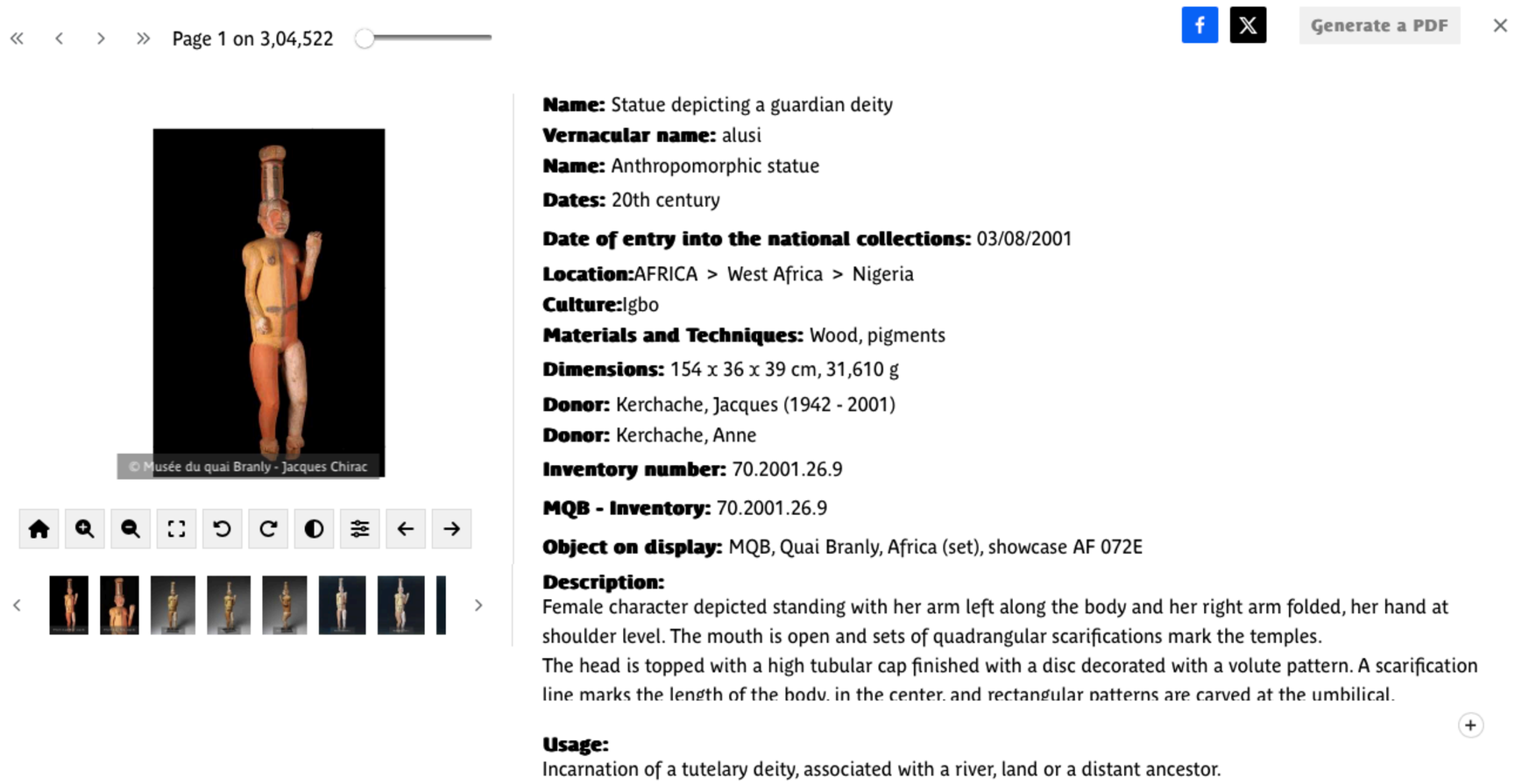
Museums and Representation





Photographs from the exhibitions of the Musee du Quai Branly, Paris and the CSMVS Museum, Mumbai

Digital Collections



https://collections.quaibranly.fr/

Thugs: British Museum



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model group; figure

Object Type

model group

figure

Museum number

As1847,0630.6

Description

Diorama (model) depicting Thugs strangling and killing travellers; 23 figures (all male). All figures dressed differently; some holding tools including pick-axes. Base painted green with yellowish-coloured path.

Production date

early 19thC (?)

Production place

Made in: Chennai



Thugs: British Museum



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model group; figure

Object Type

model group

figure

Museum number

As1847,0630.7

Description

Model depicting group of Thugs dividing spoil, following strangling of travellers (one equestrian figure, one standing figure, seven seated figures). All figures are maile.

Production date

early 19thC (?)

Production place

Made in: Chennai



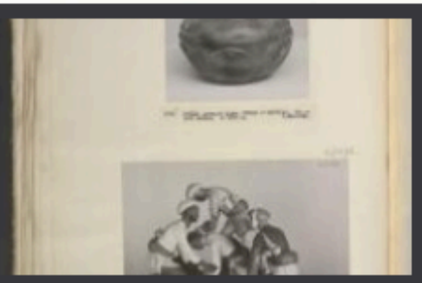
A Traveller being strangled by Thugs: Victoria and Albert Museum



https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O83226/a-traveller-being-strangled-by-model-unknown/

BRIEF DESCRIPTION	traveller being strangled by Thugs; Models, plaster, painted
PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION	Painted plaster model depicting the murder of a traveller (shown being forced to the ground) by a group of Thugs. One of the three Thugs is employing their usual technique of strangulation with a handkerchief.
CREDIT LINE	Given by Mrs. Mc. Leod, Andrews House, Tonbridge
OBJECT HISTORY	Placed in the Metal Room in the Museum. 19 October, 1888. Given by Mrs. Mc. Leod, Andrews House, Tonbridge. This acquisition information reflects that found in the Museum records (Asia Department registers and/or Central Inventory) as part of a 2023 provenance research project.
HISTORICAL CONTEXT	Thugs, from Hindi 'thag', a more generic term for criminal, were gangs of robbers and murderers who waylaid travellers, murdering and robbing them. They occurred all over India, but were particularly associated with Central India, especially the town of Jabalpur, today in Madhya Pradesh. Whether all the gangs designated as Thugs were members of a sect devoted to Kali, or merely thieves, is not clear. The term became a household word in England during the 1830s, when Sir (then Captain) William Sleeman undertook to supress 'Thuggee'. Colonel Meadows Taylor's popular novel 'Confessions of a Thug' (1839) also helped make the practice familiar in Britain. Models, paintings and posed photographs showing thugs and their activities were made for British patrons and museums during the 19th century. Read less





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V&A East Storehouse

Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai



Thug

1900/1935

Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum
Mumbai, India

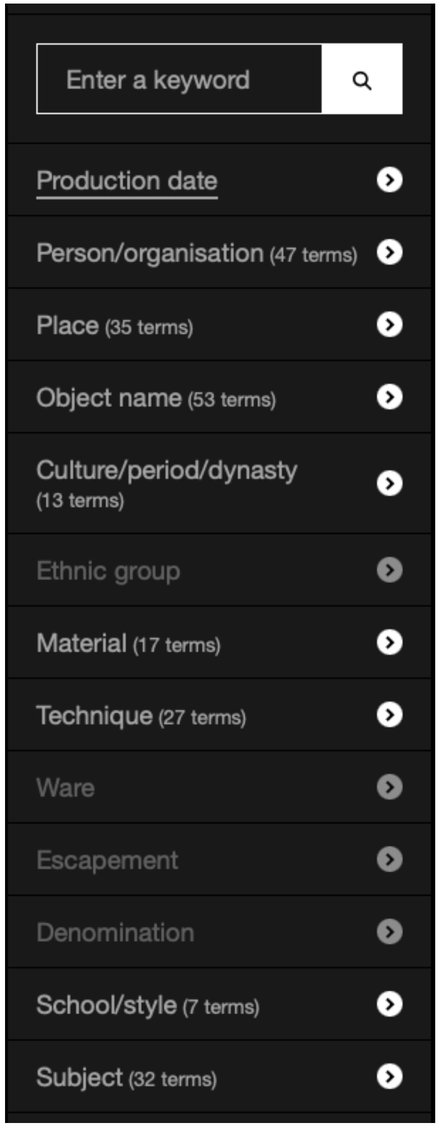
The Museum’s collection of clay models and dioramas document the people, lifestyles, occupations and cultures of Mumbai from the late 19th to the early 20th century. This model of a thug is depicted with a large moustache and has a fearsome appearance. The controversial term 'thug' was coined during the colonial period and used by the British Government in India. Thugs were said to be the followers of Hindu Goddess Kali and were known during the colonial era for their organized conspiracy of robbery and murder. However, recent history reveals that many people or tribes designated as thugs were those that resisted the British rule. Imprisoned thugs were often taught handicraft skills such as making carpets.

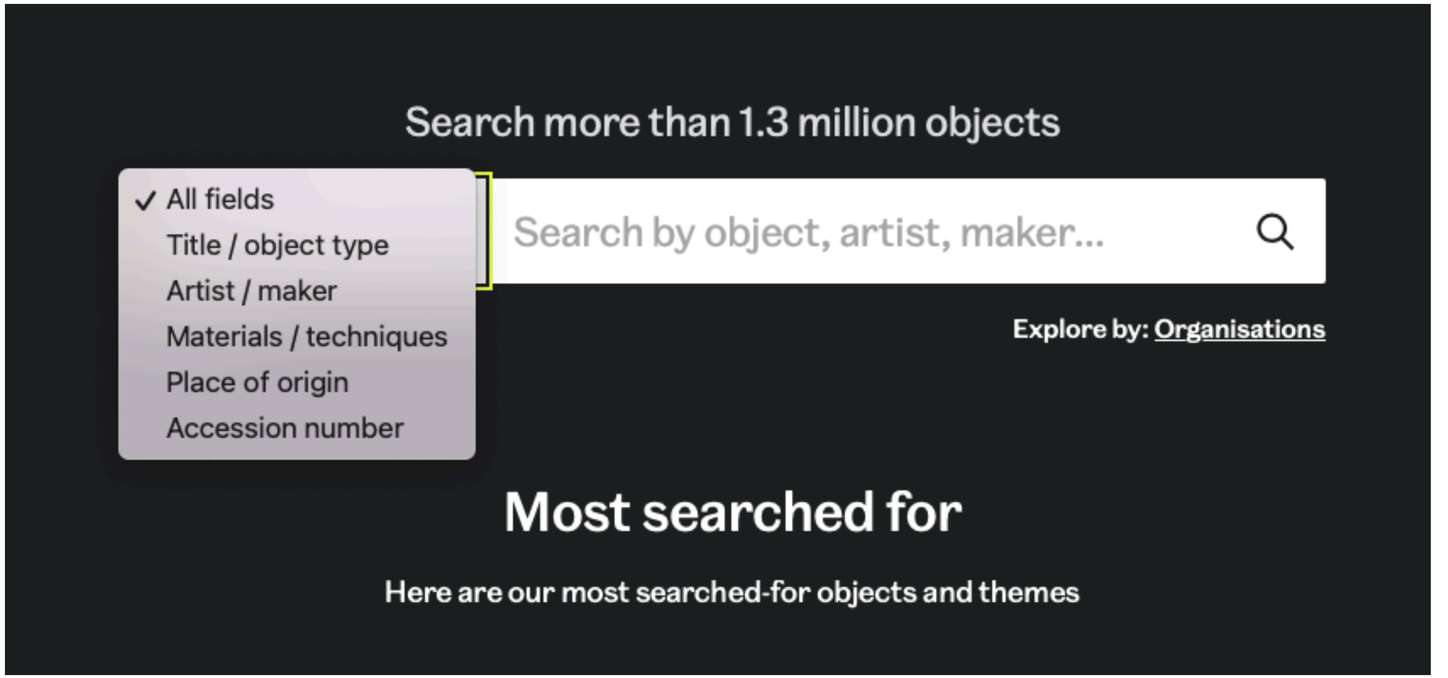
Details

Title: Thug
Date: 1900/1935
Location: V&A Museum, Bombay
Physical Dimensions: L 18.0 cm x W 15.0 cm x H 14.4 cm. Weight 0.513
Material: Half baked terracotta clay with pigments
Gallery: Kamalnayan Bajaj Mumbai Gallery

What is the role of the archive/ museum when it comes to ethically showcasing collections online?

Documentation: The data-fication of cultural knowledge





model group; figure

Object Type

model group

figure

Museum number

As1847,0630.7

Description

Model depicting group of Thugs dividing spoil, following strangling of travellers (one equestrian figure, one standing figure, seven seated figures). All figures are maile.

Production date

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Production place

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Institutional responsibilities

- The new role and understanding of cultural institutions today
- Providing contextual information
- Rethinking documentation practices
- Making searches more user friendly

Its focus is not exclusively on the reality of colonised countries nor on the context of former imperialist nations;
it reflects instead on their relations, the cultural exchanges and the politics that have been shaping museum practice and transforming current museological literature since the end of the last century.
(The Anticolonial Museum, p.18)



The advent of international exhibitions, the first held in London in 1851, saw an increasing interest in the exotic, and in the peoples, customs and traditions of the non-Western world (Mathur 2000, pp. 492-524). The clay figures of India were an obvious format in which to represent Indian people, life and culture. The use of clay figures as ethnographic representations and souvenirs was supplemented at many mid to late 19th century exhibitions by the use of living ethnographic exhibits, with exhibition organisers bringing out native 'craftsmen' to add to the authenticity of their display (Mathur 2000, pp. 492-524). The 'craftsmen' exhibiting at the 1886 Colonial and India Exhibition had been trained in their craft in Agra jail. Like the focus of the clay modellers on 'traditional' Indian life these 'living' exhibits represented European ideas of 'natives' rather than reality.

Stevenson, M. (2009) Clay Modelling in India in Museums Victoria Collections https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/2794
Accessed 11 August 2026

Thinking about access: Ethics of access to data

- Regional disparities and who has access to collections
- Who can afford to digitise?



Thank you for your attention