Renovation, Disposal, and Conservation of Hindu Temples and Images: The Institutionalization of Creativity in South Indian and American Art Worlds[*]

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Abstract: According to a widely accepted (but rarely followed) convention, Tamil temples are supposed to be renovated every 12 years. These practices commonly involve the destruction and replacement of older images. They may also be destroyed if damaged or ritually polluted, or if they are temporary icons made for a specific festival period. Ritualized practices of renovation and disposal indicate ways of seeing and knowing reality that are sometimes at odds with modernist perspectives informing museum conservation. Should the cosmological foundations of conservation be privileged over those of South Indian Hindus who practice the renovation and disposal of images? [Keywords: South India, rituals, creativity, cosmology, conservation]

In this article I will combine some relatively rare textual sources with ethnographic observations collected during fieldwork I conducted in India in 1985-88 and in 2007-08 to consider the character of traditional creativity in South India and its sometimes tense relation to contemporary assumptions and art institutions.

Given the conservative and improvisational character of Hindu ritual, perhaps it should come as little surprise that the primary nature of change in recent decades has been a matter of degree. There is more money, more prosperity, more temple and image production, more renovation, more bureaucratization, standardization, and emphasis on licensing. All these trends had already been well developed by the 1980s. The trend of primary interest to me here is the growing tension between globalizing market values and the processes of temple and image-making.

Objects commonly classified as "traditional Hindu art" are, from another perspective, remnants of sacrificial rites. Indeed, every term of the phrase "traditional Hindu art" is a taxonomic minefield.[1] I argue that the creative practices of South Indian architects and image makers is better understood as a ritual mode of production than when seen through the lens of ex-nihilo creativity and its modern market-oriented mode of personhood, usefully glossed by Crawford B. MacPherson's classic text as "possessive individualism" (MacPherson 1962). The latter constellation of ideas has been extensively critiqued at the level of theory, however at the level of institutionalized practice, the market myths of creativity and person are arguably waxing, theory notwithstanding. As a consequence of such institutional framing—by archaeological parks, museums, conservation practices, cultural tourism, and the like—what one sees when

experiencing a Hindu temple or image has become complicated in fascinating ways, and perhaps from some points of view, also deeply problematic.

In everyday speech the word creativity is widely assumed to refer to an unalloyed good. To deem something creative is assumed to be praise. There are some specialized contexts that suggest otherwise, as for instance when an attorney is accused of creatively interpreting the law, however, the irony of such usage confirms that a conceptual opposition between good and bad is lurking in the implications. For the most part, creativity and its absence are imagined in common usage as anabolic and catabolic forces, operating as if the essential goodness of creation is engaged in perpetual war against the essential evil of stagnation and decay. This mode of opposition is explicitly evident in today's American culture wars, waged in a broad sense not just against perceived agents of the destruction of civilization—absolute relativists (an oxymoron if there ever was one), multiculturalists, or feminists—but also against the evils of disease, pests, weeds, drugs, terrorists, poverty, teen pregnancy, or, apropos to this discussion, the decay of art objects. This is not a mater of liberal versus conservative, or good guys versus bad, but offered more as an observation regarding a culture in which an adversarial mode of relating to the natural world, and to other people, has been institutionalized in sports, business, politics, law, medicine, and so on. While the aim of such literal and metaphorical wars is the elimination of some designated evil, the institutionalized production, use, and disposal of Hindu images in South India is organized around quite different myths of creativity and institutionalized in equally different practices. This is especially clear, for instance, in the case of temporary images made for specific ritual occasions, however it is less obvious that more durable images of stone and metal are also situated within variants of the same temporal continuum, institutionalized in ritual phases of creation, preservation, decay, and destruction. However, if and when these images migrate into domains of collecting, documenting, cataloging, authenticating, commodifying, and museumizing, they automatically become tokens of another institutionalized model of creativity, one that is substantially different from the domain of creative sacrifices, of which these objects are both remnants and instruments.

Thus, alongside culture wars, one can also observe analogous wars being waged worldwide against the entropic forces of decay by archaeological and museum conservators, as the value of objects designated as "art"—whether at auction or for the attraction of tourism, publicity, or for their contributions to regional economic development—continues to soar. One could argue that in the case of art such battles are a good thing, or that they do not constitute a problem, or at least not one that anything can be done about. Routine World Trade Organization (WTO) protests not withstanding, they simply express the inevitable operation of a globalizing cultural system in which value is increasingly reducible to the political-economic means of existence, at the expense of diverse local ends, some of which may be deemed spiritual or religious, others social or ecological. However, as that globalizing culture is naturalized to the point that it appears to its inmates to have no exterior, it becomes at the very least an epistemological problem with practical ramifications. How does the creation mythology of property rights—naturalized among a "people of the market"—tend to condition widespread assumptions about South Indian objects now practically classified and deployed by modern institutions as some form of "art" (folk, fine, traditional, sacred, decorative, or whatever)?

Much ink has been expended in theoretical critiques of modernist notions of creativity since the 1970s. These have largely surfed the wake of Roland Barthes' proclamation of the death of the author (1967), the conceptual collapse of a modernist avant-garde, and Michel Foucault's analysis of proprietary meanings in his influential essay titled "What is an Author?" (1977). These critiques cumulatively expose the workings of a creation mythology underwriting the practices of a market culture, in which private ownership must be somehow authorized in the teeth of contrary testimony offered by history itself, in which, of course, every creative act obviously stands on the shoulders of countless previous ones. Nevertheless, theoretical conversations among academics have had little effect on the mode of creativity informing public institutions and agreements. The atomistic cosmology of neo-liberal economics has, in fact, become increasingly more potent, not less, and its creation mythology and correlated myths of radically individualized possessive personhood have achieved greater reach and force in recent decades, in part, through trade agreements that work to naturalize private intellectual property rights. And so despite the theoretical poverty of the idea of an artistic avant-garde composed of heroic, creative personalities leading the rest of us into the future, forms of progressive, "residual modernism" (McEvilley 1995:138) abound at the level of routine practices.

In contrast to the creation myths underpinning an atomistic market culture, where the components of the cosmos are implicitly imagined as a simple aggregate of inherently independent entities forming relationships through simple juxtaposition or voluntary contracts, the Hindu *trimurti*—Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer—give visual and ritual form to an assumption that creation and destruction are two sides of a unified movement, moderated by a phase of duration sandwiched between. In this mode, creativity is not simply an essential good existing independent of essential evils, but one that entails the destruction of one mode of being for the sake of manifesting another, as-yet unrealized potential.

Creating and Destroying Images in South India: Some Evidence

Abstract conceptions of creation and preservation can be easily made to harmonize with market realities, but the same cannot be said about concrete, institutionalized South Indian practices of renovating and destroying images.[2] Given the nature of our scholarly interests, it is perhaps only natural that there would be little literature on the rituals of renovating and destroying images in South India. After all, I do not make use of Hindu images as a traditional Hindu might, nor do I see them in the same light, and I certainly have no interest in seeing them destroyed. Rather, I have been socialized in a culture that tends to use objects designated as "art" as aesthetic fetishes (Clifford 1988:215-251). Consequently, useful published evidence on institutionalized image destruction is rare in the scholarly literature and seems to be most commonly found scattered in sources dedicated to other topics.

One rich source is Wilber T. Elmore's *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism* (1984), based on fieldwork conducted in rural Tamil Nadu in the years prior to World War I. By focusing his attention on folk and rural practices instead of elite temple rituals, Elmore identifies temporary images as the most distinctive characteristic of what he problematically calls "Dravidian"—as opposed to "Hindu"—worship. In his accounts, the village potter is ordinarily enlisted to make the images needed for a local festival (however, in one of the cases he describes the image-maker

as a local storyteller and in another a carpenter). The deities are invited to take up residence in the image in order to receive the hospitality of the community using methods similar to those described by Paul Younger in his *Playing Host to Deity: Festival Religion in the South Indian Tradition* (2002)*,* which focuses on large urban festivals in South India. At the conclusion of the festival the gods are bidden farewell. The images, thus emptied of their divine contents, are subsequently abandoned at the village boundary facing away from its center (Elmore 1984:19, 29, 39, 41). There they are expected to be trampled underfoot and dissolve in the rain (Elmore 1984:19, 39).

Elmore's observations are confirmed in broad outlines by late 20th century research (Inglis 1980). However, Elmore concludes with a dubious argument that, because of their emphasis on ephemeral icons, the "Dravidians"—unlike "Hindus," by whom he means Indo-European north Indians—are not really idolators, but worshippers of spirits:

> The Dravidian idea is not the same [as the Hindu]. In the foregoing chapters we have seen no instance of the worship of any object as an object, or because of the spirit in the object. In every case the worship is addressed to an outside spirit which has taken up residence, temporary or otherwise, in the object. The Dravidian makes a god for the day and throws it away, or leaves it on the boundaries. After the one day it is nothing, and the cattle may trample it underfoot. This by no means indicates that the deity is discarded. It cannot be that the image is the object of worship. [1984:147]

While Elmore's point about the valorization of temporary images in South India is well taken, he is on empirically shaky ground when he insists that this disposition is geographically distinctive of the Dravidian south. Indeed, one of the most prominent festivals of renovation in India centers on renewing the wooden images of Lord Jagannath and family in Orissa. The Ganesh Chaturthi festival in Mumbai, the Durga and Kali *pujas* in Kolkata, and the Ram Lila celebrated in Uttar Pradesh are just a few of the most well-known among North Indian rites in which large temporary images are annually made only to be ultimately dissolved in water or burned in a sacrificial fire. Furthermore, conventional Hindu practice recommends the use of a momentary *ksanika linga,* in which a lump of earth or sand may be formed in the palm of the hand to serve as a temporary focus for *puja,* then dissolved in a body of water.

In his book, *A Village Art of South India*, Stephen Inglis (1980) documents fieldwork focused on images made by the Velars, a community of potters who work in villages in the region surrounding the South Indian temple city of Madurai. The book documents his collection of a sample of these otherwise-ephemeral images for preservation by the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Inglis' descriptions generally indicate practices and forms of a higher order of ritual complexity than Elmore's, centered on more architecturally elaborated village temples. This may be an artifact of specific regional differences, or indicative of the relatively greater resources available to villagers in the late 1970s than at the outset of the 20th century. The main icons worshipped in the temples Inglis examines are renewed roughly every one, two, or three years, more or less, depending on a host of practical considerations (Inglis 1980:26-27). In the event the old images are discarded and replaced by new ones. It is perhaps revealing that the author, as an agent of documentation, preservation, and conservation,

does not inform the reader of the specific mode of disposal. Aside from fabricated bodies for gods and goddesses, other common categories of temporary clay temple images made for the Vancouver collection include horses offered to the boundary deity, Aiyanar, and clay limbs and bodies called *matalam pillai.* Figures 1 and 2 illustrate examples of the type of clay images used in Madurai in the 21st century. These are typically offered to the deity in exchange for fertility and the healing of children (Inglis 1980:55), often accompanied by clay images of assorted animals believed to have beneficial or harmful relations with devotees. At the conclusion of the relevant rites, all such images are left exposed somewhere on the sacred site, often on the roof of the shrine, behind it, under the sacred tree *(sthala vriksa),* or near its boundary, to scorch under the sun and be dissolved by rain (Inglis 1980:56).

Figure 1. Matalam Pillai. Photograph by the author, 1999.

Figure 2. *Kai* (hand/arm). Photograph by author, 1999.

Barring explicit collection efforts such as this one, temporary icons resist becoming collectables and thus do not usually make their way into museums, the consciousness of scholars, or canonical accounts of Indian Art. But what is lost in this invisibility is also a richer comprehension of the cosmological and cosmogonic ground of image production and use in South India. And in a narrower sense, what is also rendered invisible, or at least hard to notice, are the aesthetic products of female hands.

A prominent form of temporary aesthetic production in South India is the daily act of making an image or diagram of powder (*kolam*) just outside the threshold of the door (Figure 3).[3] In contrast to stone temples and icons, these images function through relatively short cycles of creation and destruction. In the conventional division of labor, *kolams* embody female expertise. According to my landlady, early in the morning she first opens the back door to let Bhudevi (the

"earth" or "dark" aspect of the goddess) out of the house, then she opens the front door and creates a *kolam* at the threshold to invite Sridevi (the auspicious, "light" aspect) inside.[4] Her husband is expected to be the first one to step on it as he leaves the house, and if all is going well, many others will ideally come and go during the day, gradually destroying the *kolam*. The next morning she will sweep away anything left of it before making another design.

Figure 3. Threshold *kolams* are made daily. Photograph by author, 1985.

Kolam making is a structured practice of improvisation. While patterns may be repeated, they are commonly varied from day to day, and on special occasions, large colorful *kolams* are composed. These are variations on systems of auspicious design-making usually passed down from mother to daughter. Today however, there is a minor industry devoted to selling cheap printed pamphlets with ideas and recipes for *kolam* makers, offering women an extra-familial source of knowledge at a small monetary price.

In her ethnographically rich study of the South Indian floor designs (which include *kolams* and more), Smt. Archana concludes that these ephemeral compositions are ritually produced, destroyed, and reproduced to articulate and influence "processes of fertility, death and rebirth" (Archana n.d.:83). Her analysis of formal elements and the rites and occasions of production exposes what she calls a "language of symbols," that seems to be little understood by today's practitioners:

> With the qualitative change in the character and perception of life, the rituals, as practiced now, have become fossilized reminiscences. The symbols have lost their relevance. At their most sublime, the *kolams* survive as a decorative visual art form. Even as a ritualistic practice it is not motivated by the original compulsions. [Archana n.d.:89]

With these and similar remarks Smt. Archana frames her study with the familiar art historical narrative of South Indian art. Original creative impulses are inevitably followed by gradual degeneration until one arrives at a sadly corrupted present. However, reading her analysis against the grain one can argue that the situation might not be as sorry as it sounds. The very fact that she could conduct such empirical research and arrive at such a rich understanding in the later 20th century shows that these complex "original" meanings can still be recognized. She displays an obvious ability to sensitively read this symbolic language in relation to the specific ceremonial acts and intentions belonging to the public contexts of their production. Indeed, the wealth of symbolic meanings she recognizes are not "original" ones, in the sense that they belong to and exist in the past, but are those available to her today. They index her rich, contemporary knowledge of the public ritual and visual culture of South India combined with a sophisticated, academic talent for intellectual analysis and verbal representation. From that point of view she has not so much recovered original meanings lost through degeneration as she has recognized and articulated some of the latent potentials smoldering in this rich visual culture, ever ready to flare up in the presence of sustained attention and skillful communication. Moreover, just because her informants do not articulate significance in verbal form does not mean that it is not encoded directly in their behavior and its formal correlates. That is to say, in C. S. Peirce's terms, that it may be better to understand the meaning of the *kolam* in indexical, rather than symbolic, terms. From this point of view, Smt. Archana's insightful analysis does not simply restore a degenerate visual language, it participates in its ongoing growth and transformation.

A thoughtful, masculine explanation of the *kolam* comes from Mr. Varadarajan, an engineer for the Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments department. He says that their significance must be understood in relation to the fact that the domestic house is also a temple. So the lady of the house who makes a *kolam* at the threshold each day to get blessings from the lord performs a priestly function. Women are also the ones who make *kolams* at the threshold of the *puja* room inside the house, and at local temples on important occasions. The beauty and perfection of a *kolam* indicates what he described in English as the "mental caliber" of the lady who makes it. It is a sign that the woman cares about her house and extends her hospitality to visitors. If she does not make a *kolam* every day at the threshold her neighbors might worry, wonder what is going on, or they might be critical of her negligence. He adds that according to textually formalized custom (*sastra),* a *kolam* should be made of rice flour in order to feed insects, but today only rich people use rice flour. Most people use cheaper lime powder, or at best, a mix of lime and rice powder. When women make *kolams* at the temple for a special occasion they mix the powder with water to make them more substantial (Figure 4). Unlike the domestic *kolam,* which must be renewed every day, the temple *kolam* should be able to last the duration of the festival it is made for. I asked, what happens to them after the festival is over? He said, they will be eaten by bats (Varadarajan, interview with author, September 6, 1987).

Figure 4. More durable *kolams* are made to last the duration of a festival. Photograph by author, 1986.

Temporary images are also made and destroyed in connection with rites of creativity deployed in classical image making. At the inauguration of work on a bronze festival image in Swamimalai I watched the master sculptor, Kovintacami sthapati prepare an impromptu altar using fruit, flowers, a stainless steel plate of puffed rice, incense, and a small brass oil lamp marked with a vermillion dot (*bindu*).[5] He then mixed a quantity of turmeric with water and carefully formed it into a tidy cone shape, which he gently set next to the lamp and marked with another vermillion *bindu* (Figure 5). Having previously bathed and dressed in ritually appropriate clothing he then sat cross-legged in front of the plate along with several apprentices. One of the senior apprentices lit a chunk of camphor on the stainless steel plate and waved it in clockwise circles in front of the altar while reciting a version of the Sanskrit Ganapati *sloka*, routinely used in the inauguration of rituals. After this ceremony the *sthapati* proceeded to make a wax model, which would later be cast in bronze. I asked him about the lump of turmeric and he explained that it is an image of Pillaiyar (the elephant headed lord Ganesha, who governs auspicious beginnings). The adjacent oil lamp is an embodiment of the goddess Kamakshi Amman, family deity (*kula devata*) of the Visvakarma caste. I asked him if the lamp itself was marked with some sort of iconographic sign of the goddess, and he replied no, in this case her form was the flame itself.

Figure 5. Ganesha made of turmeric next to a flame-embodiment of Kamakshi Amman. Photograph by author, 1987.

After an hour or so the oil of the lamp was exhausted and the flame (temporary body of Kamakshi) vanished. Later as the work-space was being cleaned up the turmeric Ganesha was immersed in water. This act is consistent with the routine disposal of images at the conclusion of festivities commemorating the birthday of Ganesha, when temporary images are placed in a body of water to "send him home" (Hanchett 1982:234).

In this event three ephemeral images, of flame, turmeric and wax, were produced en route to making more durable image of metal. The turmeric Ganesha provides a useful index of cosmological assumptions woven into this image production process. The sthapati owns metal images of Ganesha (and Kamakshi) and is certainly comfortable with their use, yet he took the trouble of making a temporary body for Ganesha specifically for this small rite, the form of which loosely re-enacts a creation myth of the god's own origin. Ganesha's mother, the goddess Parvati, formed him from a substance scraped from her body. In Tamil Nadu mothers routinely apply turmeric as an antiseptic and cosmetic to the bodies of their children as well as to themselves, and so it is locally understood that the original body of Ganesha was made of turmeric. This idea is supported by at least one ancient textual reference (Courtright 1985:102). To be a bit more precise, the substance of Ganesha's body is a mixture of turmeric and water; 'earth' and 'water' are the two coarsest of the five elements of local cosmology. Correspondingly, that of the mother, here Kamakshi Amman, is yet subtler, composed of fire-consuming-air. Ethereal space (*akasa*), the fifth and most subtle element, is commonly said to be

concretely present in sacred sound, in this case a chant, but most often made manifest in *puja* by ringing a bell.[6] Thus the inaugural rite not just invokes, but concretely enacts the elemental totality of the material world in renewing afresh, the primal processes of lord Ganesha's physical manifestation. All five elemental substances, or more precisely, five modes of physical manifesting—solid, liquid, combustion, gas, and reverberating space—are here directly combined and harnessed to the creative work at hand. After the rite is completed the relations among these elements are reversed: earth (here turmeric) is absorbed *by* water as it is thrown into the well, fire is absorbed *by* air as the flame is extinguished, and reverberating space is absorbed into silence, as the sound of the voice (or bell) trails off. Thus the small rite encodes a pattern of emanation and reabsorption that Richard Davis, in his book *Worshiping Siva in Medieval India: Ritual in an Oscillating Universe* (2000)*,* has shown to be integral to classical modes of worship in South India.

A revealing relation of the everyday *kolam* to the turmeric image of Ganesha can be seen in these practices. The use of rice flour does not just symbolize something else, in an abstract sense. It is a concrete *enactment* of hospitality, offered not only to the gods, who may consume its subtle essences, but also to the insects and bats expected to consume the coarse substance. In this regard, the modern, allegedly degenerate, use of lime powder too, may not be simply reducible to economizing motives. As Smt. Archana observes, in parts of South India the lime used in *kolams* today is variously associated with funerary practices, purification, and protection from ghosts (Archana n.d.:15-16). In addition, she explains that lime powder is commonly mixed with turmeric to ward off evil, motivated by the latter's use as a popular medicine for skin afflictions (Archana n.d.:17).

Floor and altar diagrams made by temple priests for rites of consecration and renewal belong to the same class of short-term aesthetic production as the turmeric Ganesha and the *kolam*. Figure 6 illustrates one such ephemeral diagram composed of rice and colored grain. It serves as the seat of a central pot (*kalasa*) representing the Hindu deity Siva Nataraja, surrounded by smaller pots representing the guardians of the eight directions. Full moon ceremonies focused on the sacred waters held in these pots generate a rejuvenating power that is transferred through bathing (*abhisekam*) of the metal image of Nataraja at his temple in Chidambaram.

The ephemeral image then, is thus not simply an esoteric element in image making or a feature of domestic and village practices. The great temple of Rameswaram, located on the southeast coast of India facing Sri Lanka, for instance, commemorates Rama's fabrication of a Siva lingam, made of sand by his own hands, prior to his invasion of Lanka. The *Garuda Purana* similarly instructs the celebrant of Sivaratri to establish a temporary Siva lingam made of sand, clay, and turmeric, to be subsequently dissolved by a series of prescribed baths (*abhisekam)* (Long 1982:203). Thus, despite the fact that more durable images and structures made of stone, brick mortar, and metal became normative under royal patronage during the past 1500 years, assumptions about the transitory nature of manifestation continues to be embedded in the canonical traditions. A particularly dramatic and costly expression of this can be observed in the conventional practices of temple renovation.

Figure 6. Mandala made of colored grains at a Chidambaram full moon ceremony. Photograph by author, 1988.

Mr. N. Ayaswami, Superintending Engineer for the Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments department (the HR&CE) gives voice to a widely held notion when he says "Jupiter occupies a certain sign every 12 years, that is why 12 years is specified in the *Agamas* for renovations" (interview with author, July 30, 1987).[7] He does not hesitate to note, however, that temples are not *really* renovated every 12 years. R. Venkatraman speculates that the 12 year cycle for renovation may have been more rigorously enforced during the age of kings because they may have feared ruin if auspicious occasions were not properly observed, but admits that he knows of no empirical evidence to support this (interview with author, June 30, 1987). Mr. Ayaswamy explains that before independence and in the years following, Tamil temples were in bad financial shape, but in the later 20th century most of the big, famous temples have returned to prosperity and have been renovated at least once, some several times. But, he says, one of the biggest problems faced by the HR&CE, is that the vast majority of the 34,000 temples under government control are desperately poor and badly in need of renovation. Many have not been renovated in centuries, but the HR&CE staff and funds are woefully inadequate (interview with author, July 30, 1987).

Mr. Varadarajan, an HR&CE engineer, has had extensive experience in temple renovation. He explains the temporal predicament as follows: the *mantras* chanted during the construction and at the consecration of a temple concentrate substantial power (*sakti*), but as pilgrims and devotees come asking for favors, that power is slowly dissipated. If it is not renewed after 12 years the deity abandons the *garbhagriha* ("womb house," or sanctum) and takes up residence in the flagstaff for another 12 years. If after that time the temple is still not renovated the deity moves to the *sthala virksa* (tree of the site) for another 36 years. Next the deity would reside in the temple tank for an additional 18 years. If no renovation is completed within this 78 year period, the deity will give up on the temple. With a lot of work an abandoned temple could be renewed, but otherwise it is now like a corpse, an inauspicious place where thieves, snakes, ghosts, and demons reside. With this expanded schedule in mind, he claims that it is not really a problem that renovations are rarely, if ever, done after 12 years. He says that just as Brahmans (like himself) annually chant the *gayatri mantra* 1008 times when they put on a new sacred thread in order to make up for any lapses in the previous year, so too, a temple renovation that occurs after the proper 12 year cycle has passed simply needs to incorporate additional chanting of mantras to compensate for the shortfall (Varadarajan, interview with author, July 20, 1987).

Temple renovation commonly entails the destruction of older images and their replacement by new ones. There are no narrowly determined iconographic programs for these monuments. Damaged *cutai* (brick and mortar) sculptures located on the towers may be patched, modified, or even removed altogether and replaced by imagery that seems more appropriate at the time. For instance, after the completion of the Rajagopuram at Srirangam I asked the sthapati responsible for the work about the obvious dearth of images on the tower. He said money was tight; they could only afford to provide some basic ones, but that on the occasion of future renovations any number of images would be added if funds are sufficient (Parker 1992:115-116).

In contrast to conventional practice however, the *Mayamata,* a *vastusastra* apparently compiled in the Chola period (Degens 1985), insists that renovations should proceed "without anything being added (to what originally existed) and always in conformity with the initial appearance (of the building) and with the advice of the knowledgeable" (Degens 1985:335).[8] Such textual injunctions provide authorities with some justification to interfere in customary practices when an ancient temple is facing renovation. Local temple authorities, sthapatis and the HR&CE must occasionally negotiate the renovation plans of ancient temples (many of which are celebrated in art history) with officials of the Tamil Nadu Archaeological Survey. The values and aims of these interests do not mesh easily, but eventually they must accommodate each other. For instance when the well-known 9th century Nageswaraswamy temple in Kumbhakonam was renovated in the mid 1980s the temple tower was provided with a number of new, brightly painted images that departed significantly from the scheme of the older tower. In particular, the painted *cutai* image of Daksinamurti shown in Figure 7 is a prominent new addition. This, of course, flatly contradicts the authoritative instructions of the *Mayamata,* noted above. A temple official explained to me that they had to clear their plans with a representative of the Archaeological Survey, who had initially objected. But because the older, disintegrated *cutai* sculpture on the tower slated for replacement was of no great antiquity, these objections were eventually removed with a stipulation that none of the 9th century stonework (the *kalkaram*) below the tower would be touched.

Figure 7. A new mortar Daksinamurti in front of an ancient stone Vinadharamurti. Nageswaraswamy temple, Kumbhakonam. Photograph by author, 1988.

In a sense that is what happened. However, if viewed through the values of art conservation, the 9th century sculpture in the central (*bhadra)* niches of the *kalkaram* have never remained unmolested. They are regularly adorned with a variety of ritual items, and sometimes liquid substances, that significantly modify their appearance. In particular the graceful image of Ardhanari, located in the western niche is now blackened, not with the paint of renovation, but the glistening stains of frequent ritual baths (Figure 8).[9]

Figure 8. Ardhanariswara formally modified by ongoing *puja.* Nageswaraswamy temple, Kumbhakonam. Photograph by author, 1988.

A similar tension was reported to me by an official of the Government School of Temple Architecture and Sculpture at Mamallapuram who was frustrated with the archaeological survey's objections to the school's plans to construct a sculpture park at the site celebrating the skills of contemporary stone carvers (*silpis).* This display was to include musical pillars, chains carved of stone, animals with balls in their mouths that can be moved but not removed, and similar displays of mastery. According to my source, the archaeological survey claimed jurisdiction over the site and objected to any display of contemporary sculpture at Mamallapuram because unsophisticated visitors might confuse it with the ancient sculpture for

which the site is famous. This claim is controversial because Mamallapuram is not just an archaeological site but also a living town with active temples, an architecture and sculpture training institute, and an associated image production yard. The issue was resolved when the school moved to a new site outside the city limits, allowing the old school to be transformed into a kind of museum for contemporary images, chock full of brightly colored statues and paintings of famous ancient works copied from art history books (Figure 9). The Archaeological Survey of India was satisfied that no museum was built near the ancient monuments and the institute got a readymade space for their museum.

Figure 9. Museum of contemporary sculpture, mixing traditional and non-traditional styles in the former government Institute of Temple Architecture and Sculpture, Mamallapuram. Photograph by author, 2008.

Above I have discussed the village practices in which temporary images are produced for festivals and discarded on the village boundary. At first glance this might seem to be a radically different world than that of the large, ancient Brahmanical temples housing permanent images of stone and metal. But are they really permanent? The *sastras,* both in their written forms and in the oral knowledge circulating among specialists routinely stress a hierarchy of materials from which images are made. Nityananda sthapati once expressed this relation to me by saying that the metal festival image (*utsavar*) is the slave of the stone sanctum image (*mulavar*), while

images made of wood, *cutai*, or other less-durable materials are the slaves of both.[10] Permanence is thus a matter of relative degrees and ranks. There are accordingly textual provisions for the disposal of stone and metal icons. According to the *Mayamata,* if a stone or metal image is polluted or damaged, it should be thrown away and replaced with ritually perfect images, fit for hosting the deity. If stone, it should be thrown into a body of water, if metal, it should be "melted by fire and the purified metal recovered" (Degens 1985:338-339). According to R. Venkatraman, villagers whose local rites emphasize the ephemeral, ironically, disagree with Brahmans on this issue. They say if the child gets dirty or loses a limb do you throw it away? (interview with author, March 10, 1988). Consequently it is not uncommon to see fragments of ancient sculpture set up in public spaces where locals offer semi-formal worship—flowers, incense, camphor, fruits, and the occasional bath—without the mediating services of Brahmans (Figure 10).

Figure 10. A broken fragment of ancient sculpture worshipped in violation of textual injunctions. Madurai. Photograph by author, 1988.

In an elementary sense, Hindu worship consists of extending hospitality to divine powers. Villagers know that tending to a three-dimensional object can be onerous because of their potential potency. The *Sakaladhikara* classifies images as in the round (*citra*), in relief (*citrardha*), and two-dimensional (*citrabhasa*): "these three kinds of images yield respectively

the maximum, the middling and the minimum benefit to the worshipers" (Iyengar, trans. 1973:4).[11] Because two-dimensional images are deemed less powerful, they are also considered much less demanding to keep at home. In the case of three-dimensional images a much higher level of hospitality must be maintained. If not, the deity will abandon the image and it will become inauspicious. A corpse. Thus for many South Indian villagers the accidental unearthing of an image or carved fragment poses a moral problem. If the event is interpreted as an auspicious sign (and if the discoverer is suitably predisposed), the image might be welcomed. But to do so entails an indefinite commitment of time and resources. Alternatively the image may be discarded. In rural Tamil Nadu this means abandoning it at the village boundary. A dramatic instance of this popular practice found its way onto the pages of *The Hindu* newspaper in 1987 in an article titled "Passing the Buck" (Figure 11).[12] According to the article, in North Arcot the unearthing of a carved image within the boundaries of village lands is seen as an omen of infertility, famine, or drought, and so after a brief ceremony it is taken outside the village boundary and placed inside the boundary of the neighboring village to the east. The neighboring villagers then repeat these activities until the image eventually reaches its final resting place in the Bay of Bengal. Some of the images transported on this informal conveyor belt are reportedly of considerable quality and antiquity. The article notes for instance, a 9th century statue of Durga rescued from its migration toward the sea by officers of the Vellore Museum.

This newspaper account neatly exposes a South Indian logic of image disposal and the deployment of both conventional methods, i.e. abandoning at the boundary and immersion in water. The contrast between the popular valorization of images among rural Hindus and that of modernist institutions, such as the museum and the archaeological survey, is exposed here in a particularly stark manner.

Conclusion: If So, Then What?

What could we make of this evidence? Should opportunistically unearthed images be handled according to the conventions of Hindu villagers? Should the destruction and replacement of old *cutai* images adorning ancient temples be allowed by the archaeological survey? Do the technicolor statues of modern showboating *silpis* make good neighbors to the ancient monuments of Mamallapuram?

These questions arise out of the intersection of incompatible value frames. It would be nice to imagine negotiation, tolerance, and compromise as a happy formula for resolution, but from the time of British colonialism up to and including the present, the historical relation of these value frames has largely been one of domination and subordination: who is in the position of tolerating and who must seek tolerance?

It is one thing to accept the destruction of temporary icons made by contemporary village potters and carpenters, but when it comes to tossing 9th century Chola carvings into the sea, my own socialization and education predisposes me toward protest. Clearly officials of the archaeological survey and the Vellore and Arcot museums share my discomfort. However, before one asserts a superior authority to forcefully intervene, this predisposition should be subjected to critical scrutiny.

Passing the buck

Do gods use bullock carts as a form of transport? Their idols do — for a trip to the sea! No, this trip is not in connection with any religious festival, but just because Father Time has chipped away some parts of the anatomy of idols generally more than 1,000 years old.

The existing notion among folk in rural areas in North Arcot is that such idols, if found within the boundary of their village, presage all sorts of bad luck, including drought, famine and infertility. Hence, after going through the prescribed rites (yes, there are rites even to send such idols into oblivion), the villagers dump the idols within the perimeter of the neighbouring village (surely not a sign of good neighbourliness!), where once again the above-mentioned exercise is repeated, and the idols are passed on to the boundary of the next village, and so on down the line, till they finally reach the sea, which to rural folk of North Arcot, means the Marina in Madras. The journey ends with the idols being carelessly dumped into the sea because of the idea that they will not bother anyone there.

These strange facts came to light when the curator of the Government museum in Vellore recovered five stone idols found in the boundary of Poigai village near Vellore, on the Vellore-Bangalore highway. The idols had been dumped there by the villagers of the neighbouring Seduvalai. Villagers of Poigai were in the process of making a collection to hire carts to dump the idols within the boundary of the next village, Anpoondi, when the idols were recovered.

Poigai villagers said that if the museum staff had not intervened, the five idols would have reached Madras via Abdullapuram, Mel-monavoor, Karugamputhur, Mullipalayalm, Vellore, Sathuvachary, Perumugai, Nandiyalam, etc.

In 1985 the Vellore museum got hold of a ninth century Durgai Amman statue (with the connivance of villagers of Melseeshamangalam and Sozhapattu), and the resultant competition between the Vellore and Arcot museums has resulted in officials of both museums now making it a point to cultivate villagers, with a view to laying their hands on more such idols, with which this district seems to be liberally sprinkled.

Recently the president of the Kuppam panchayat in Vellore panchayat union lamented that in these drought-stricken times, he had to raise collections often to remove from within his boundary, similar idols, whose presence, his panchayat colleagues claimed, was one of the reasons for the acute water shortage in the village.
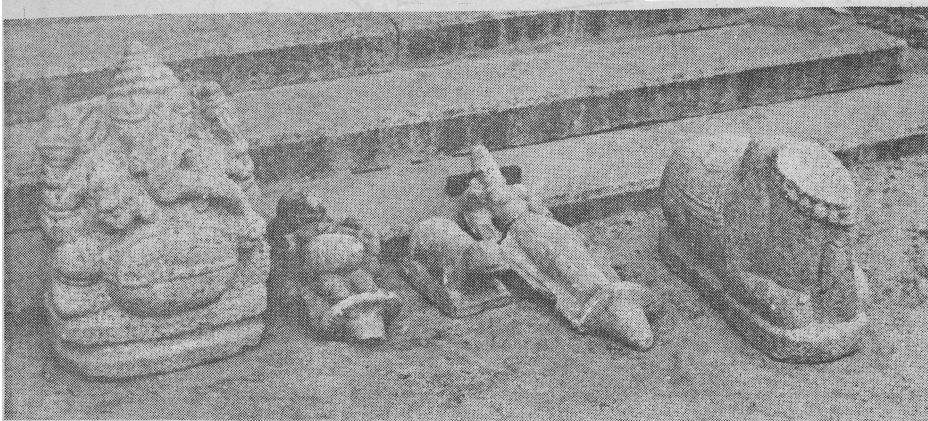
The idols found recently on the Vellore-Bangalore highway.

Figure 11. A newspaper report on a village strategy of image disposal. Photograph by author, 1988.

Writing here today in the Pacific Northwest of the United States it appears to me a special fact that there may be people in South India so unconcerned with the market value of antiquities that they would throw them into the sea. More broadly, the entire constellation of practices described above points toward domains of value that have so far escaped colonization by the values of the global art market.[13]

Of course there has always been an economic component to Hindu image production and use. Political-economic advantage (*artha*) is one of the four traditional aims pursued by Hindu image-makers and patrons alike. However, *artha* is a value belonging narrowly to the householder stage of life, and is traditionally subordinated to duty (*dharma*) and freedom (*moksa*). One might agree with Von Hayek, Milton Friedman, and the Chicago school of economics that capitalism too, is ultimately about the value of freedom, not money.[14] However, because the deity of the market, (anthropomorphically signified by Adam Smith's "invisible hand") optimally operates through systemic feedback loops provided (ideally) by unregulated prices, the "freedom" offered by this deity is tightly bound to monetary resources: a person is, in effect, as free-to-choose as her bank account is large.

In practice, unlike *moksa,* neo-liberal market freedom is primarily a freedom to choose between competing products, and by analogous extension, spouses and political candidates. From the perspective of *moksa,* such freedom is a mirage: a self-fabricated slavery to desires that entangle the person ever deeper into the bondage of hankerings, fueling a grim hedonic treadmill of unending action and reaction, mechanical habits of stimulus and response (*karma*), paid for by sacrificing the nectar of one's own conscious life force.

When traditional Hindu images become collectables, they largely cease being instruments of *moksa* and start becoming instruments of a market-centric worldview. Their previous role must be sacrificed so that they may serve in the realm of a different conception of freedom, i.e. market freedoms. The reader may well be tempted to protest that the practices of image conservation and museum display are not simply reducible to market value. They are also motivated by other values, such as truth, beauty, and knowledge. To some extent this is still true, and to that very extent we all have reason to rejoice. However, in a liberal market culture, prices remain total social facts, whereas beauty—and increasingly even truth itself—tend to be positioned as a matter of *private* values and preferences. Through the conditioning of sovereign market preference, beauty becomes profoundly asocial, as if it exists only in the eye of the beholder. Likewise, where freedom of market choice trumps all, truth becomes similarly relativized: you are free to have yours, I have mine. We are free, for instance, to differ on whether there should be public support for the arts, however, it is pragmatically futile for us to differ over the ultimate economic frame—or "reality"—through which such support happens or not. Even more to the point, because we no longer generally agree on aesthetic values, the competitive art auction fills the vacuum by default. At auction the complexities of qualitative value are neatly converted to quantitative value—the kind of value that really "counts" in an imbalanced, accounting-and-accountability-oriented cosmos.[15]

As many others before me have pointed out, the museum today has become a tourist destination and an engine of downtown re-vitalization, competing for leisure dollars against other entertainment options.[16] Universities likewise find themselves justifying their costs to skeptical

policymakers and taxpayers in terms of private financial outcomes for students, communities, and industries. Why shouldn't this "freely" happen? After all, other domains of value in the United States—prominently justice, health, and sports—have already been so deeply colonized by the values of the market that it is hard to see how museums and universities could hold out indefinitely (Schwartz 1994). But why should it matter? Why shouldn't popularity and sales rule? After all, do market values really have any impact on the ontological status of the museum object itself? And if not, why should it matter to academic knowledge of it?

In one sense, of course, a South Asian image displayed in a museum exhibit may be factually the same object it was when it was surrounded by earlier contexts of its production and use. But have the conditions of its existence so radically shifted that it is no longer quite the same object? This obviously implicates questions Immanuel Kant raised about the limits of our ability to perceive the "thing in itself." To be precise, how much of what I see in the "Art of India" mirrors the naturalized ontological presuppositions informing categories that have been institutionalized by archaeology, museums, vacations, and markets? Alternatively, how much of what I see reflects presuppositions physically institutionalized in the practices of unsentimental Hindus who boldly renovate antique temple complexes, abandon images at the village boundary, or toss them into a body of water?

Perhaps for a tourist or casual museum visitor this puzzle may not be terribly important, but for academic researchers still holding out for the value of truth—as opposed to whatever sells—it is an important question. The values and practices of a market-driven reality tend to turn objects of South Indian art into fun house mirrors. What is seen in them is partly other, and partly self-referential. Thus, narratives structured around, say, ancient originality and subsequent replication, the tensions of great and little traditions, or a creative past and degenerate present, may be seen on one hand as empirical descriptions of how things are, but on another, as displacements onto the subject matter of a more immediate conflict among institutionalized constructions of reality embedded in contemporary, political-economic agreements. A doubting reader may reply that scholars of Indian art have always known that the fluid institutionalized realities of the Hindu temple and the static mechanisms of capitalist modernity are profoundly different. Didn't A. K. Coomaraswamy proclaim long ago that Indian art seeks to imitate nature, not in its mode of appearance, but in its mode of operation (Coomaraswamy 1956:11)? Well and good. However, when Coomaraswamy engaged in the concrete practice of collecting and museumizing South Asian images, his abstract ontological claims about them could not but tag along as *independent* items of knowledge. In the collecting act the object and associated facts are abstracted, and their reality is implicitly atomized. Just as the facts may be treated as hard or soft, the object is treated to a host of institutionalized practices that suppose it to be something discretely bounded, hard and static.[17] Something that can be held in the hand, appropriated (i.e. turned into property), bought, sold, insured, conserved, and placed on display for fee-paying seekers of leisure and edification, and it is the temporality of *that* world that now becomes integral to its new mode of existence. Moreover, through this kind of institutionalization, the reality of markets shifts from being a socially constructed reality to simply Reality, while the realities of the Hindu temple are re-made, subordinated, abstracted, and rendered exotic.[18] Thus, to the degree that the re-classification of Hindu imagery as "art" converts them into indistinct mirrors of their new homes, to that extent they tend to reflect back to the visitor a set of self-

referential presuppositions radically different from those of the Hindu rites they were made to support.

None of this is to say that museums are bad, or that Hindu images should all be put back into worship, or thrown into the sea, consistent with a false idea of putative authentic meanings and purposes.[19] This is largely an elucidation of challenges they face and marketing forces they need to resist. From an abstracted aesthetic point of view museums are a great success. As Prithwish Neogy, former professor of art history at the University of Hawaii used to say frequently, "a Hindu image in a museum usually looks a lot better there than it does on a temple wall." It is provided with careful illumination and situated at a comfortable viewing height, away from neighboring objects, enabling its visual properties to be highlighted in a superior way, all in concert with the formalist assumptions implicitly built into the conventions of displaying "art." Furthermore, there are vast numbers of images in South Asia that no longer have an active ritual life. The archaeological park, art collection, and museum provide a kind of afterlife, in which they endure as aesthetic fetishes, suspended in a realm that encompasses all historical time, and therefore hovers mythically beyond it. This certainly may be a valid adaptive re-use of objects that would otherwise simply decay and disappear.

That said, however, Elmore (1984) was on target when he argued that the Dravidian image is not an "idol." I would add that it is equally likely to be misrecognized if treated as an aesthetic fetish. The museum and archaeological park—as modernist forms—profoundly condition both vision and recognition in ways that encourage such misunderstanding. If it is a good thing to let them flourish, it is all the more important to note the specific forms of institutionalized delusion they generate. Specifically, insofar as they are sites for the accumulation of value in the form of discrete things and thing-like units of knowledge, they have been made possible by substantial asymmetries of possessive power. And while such power is creative, it is never entirely benign; it tends to exact a heavy price on the eyesight of those who wield it. Blind spots and misrecognitions are exacerbated further still when power—as it nearly always does—asserts the pure nobility and benevolence of its intentions. Consequently, when framed by the dominating values of modernist institutions, the South Indian images they generously offer for display are made hard to see, notwithstanding the excellent lighting.

In the end, I do not offer constructive remedies for museums that exhibit South Asian objects. The real problem does not lie with the museum itself, or even with its specific protocols of conservation and exhibition. Museums and their practices have changed, and will go on changing, as the culture around them changes. But if the museum, as a range of institutionalized forms is to persist, those forms can hardly be radically different than they already are. Rather, the problem lies at the deeper level of cultural critique, or its absence. The limited evidence presented here points toward a radical mismatch between the real world presumed by the world of free markets and museums and that of traditional South Asian cosmogonies and cosmologies. This is not so much a problem in India, where modernity tends to be "compartmentalized" (Singer 1972:ix, 320-325) through a "context-sensitive" (Ramanujan 1990:47-57), or "context-dependent" (Shweder 1991:146-155) orientation to values, practices, and personhood. However, in the Western world it is particularly ironic that the institutionalized activities of museums and art markets end up utilizing South Asian objects in ways that presume free consumer choice as a model of and for aesthetic preference and interpretation, thereby fulfilling market-models of

reality (as expressed for instance, in possessive individualism, private property, aesthetic fetishism, and the spatiotemporal practices of conservation, protection, and exhibition normalized in museum policy). Thus, what may start as unintended self-congratulation, or at best, irony, risks sinking into profound ignorance to the exact extent that the *other* dimensions of reality—the ones presumed by the ritual contexts of production, use and disposal, in which these South Asian objects were brought into being, and from which they have been removed—are, in one stroke, unintentionally, automatically, simultaneously, and reflexively, made exotic.

Notes

1. Every word in the phrase "traditional Hindu art" is a classificatory landmine. Traditional emerges as a category only in the context of modernity and progress. In the modernist era it was negatively assumed to be what held back the progress of reason, while in the postmodern era it is often considered to be a reification at best, or a phony re-invention at worst. Hindu, as is well known, is similarly a residual category, reifying and lumping together a wide array of sacred phenomena practiced by people living near and beyond the Indus river. And finally, critiques of essentialist concepts of "art" are a post-modern staple.

2. Many late modern and postmodern artists in the Western world have experimented with temporary and self-destructing imagery that would be indigestible in art markets. However to the extent they can succeed in generating public significance they need to have been suitably documented. For the most part such documentation then becomes the commodified and collectable form of the work of art. And so while such works may appear to pose radical challenges to a market-based reality, they can rarely, if ever, completely resist being consumed and digested.

3. Although the diagrammatic conventions of today's *kolams* are characteristic of South India, making temporary images on the floor using colored powder is not confined to South India. It is also practiced in parts of North India and appears to have been an ancient practice there according to the *Silparatna* and the *Vishnudharmottara* (Kramrisch 1928:8). Today the temporary sand *mandalas* produced by Himalayan Buddhist monks is the most well known among these practices in the United States, where they are commonly produced for cultural events. See also Kramrisch's discussion of temporary floor images in "The Ritual Arts of India" (1985).

4. See David Shulman's *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition* (1980:267-294) for a discussion of the dark and light aspects of the goddess.

5. Sthapati is a title used for a master bronze sculptor or architect. The title is applied to the person who designs and takes ultimate responsibility for the production process. In recent decades the State Governments have tried to institute a system of licensing. However instead of appropriating authority over the title itself, the system has generated a new category of "government approved sthapati." This applies only to those who are willing to be treated as "building contractors" by the state when they submit competitive bids for government-sponsored

temple renovation projects. Some sthapatis, including most bronze sculptors, limit themselves to work that does not require a license.

6. Stone sculptors routinely evaluate the quality of stones based on the sounds they make when struck with chisels. The finest stones are those said to be rich in *akasa*, indexed by their bright, ringing tones. The refined connoisseurship of the sound of stones among sculptors has been institutionalized in South India in the convention of musical pillars.

7. Jupiter (or Guru/Kuru) is of key importance in the timing of construction and renovation because it governs anabolic forces of expansion and growth, countering the catabolic forces of Saturn. According to a logic that Claude Levi-Strauss has called "the science of the concrete, the rings around Saturn signify the principle of limitation while the large, expansive size of Jupiter is indicative of growth and prosperity". If the temple is renovated every 12 years, Jupiter would be in the same auspicious location in the sky as it was when the temple was consecrated.

8. Sastras are bodies of traditional knowledge. The term is also used in reference to manuscripts in which traditional knowledge is collected in written form. Vastusastra is a type of sastra dealing with matters of spatial organization (like architecture, for instance).

9. Ardhanari is another name of the Hindu God Siva.

10. *Cutai* is a technical term for architectural sculpture and moldings done using a finely sifted mortar covering a coarser brick and mortar core.

11. Sakaladikara is the name of an ancient text ("sastra") known through many ancient manuscript versions.

12. The photograph in Figure 11 was taken by the author in the field and full citation information is not available.

13. The construction of the history of Indian art in the colonial era enacted overtly asymmetrical relations of power. In postcolonial India the momentum of those relations, encoded into institutions of dominating knowledge, such as the museum and the archaeological site, continue to persist. Nevertheless, there are Hindus in South India harboring renegade cosmologies that have not yet been brought to heel by a modernist, market-driven rationality. Likewise, in her *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World* (2004), Joanne Punzo Waghorne has provided ample evidence of a vigorous stream of alternative Hindu cosmology presently flourishing in South India's English speaking middle classes. Thus, while some may wish to persuade us that that there is no practical alternative, or even any exterior, to the globalization of the market and the universalization—forced or willing—of its peculiar cosmology, the context-sensitive embrace of multiple cosmologies by South Indian Hindus provide reason to doubt that this is true.

14. However, they might be more likely to give precedence to individual rights over relational duties.

15. Barry Schwartz has elaborated an argument along these lines in his book, *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life* (1994).

16. Melanie Smith's book, *Issues in Cultural Tourism Studies* (2003), provides a useful summary of how this is happening.

17. In a particularly lucid example of the ossification of South Asian images in museum practice, a temporary sand *mandala* produced by Tibetan monks at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts was subsequently glued down after the event and displayed on a wall to be conserved in perpetuity.

18. By this I do not mean to suggest that the life of the image is necessarily terminated from a South Asian point of view, nor from the analytic perspective utilized by Richard Davis in his *Lives of Indian Images* (1997). Rather the practical and symbolic efforts to remove the object from its former social life and suspend the action of time turns the museum into a kind of mausoleum, in which the outer shell of once-vital images are displayed in protocols that have just a bit too much in common, for my comfort at least, with the display of Lenin's body.

19. A collision of similar modernist notions of authenticity was dramatically played out in 2006 over a collection of 83 Hawaiian artifacts, including some of the finest and rarest pieces of Hawaiian sculpture in existence, which were loaned by the Bishop Museum to the activist group Hui Malama in 2000, after which they were hidden away in a cave on the Big Island. According to Hui Malama representatives, these were originally made as grave goods and should be returned to the grave, never to be seen again by the public. Other Hawaiian groups (including the Bishop Museum) dispute these claims and the authority of Hui Malama to bury the objects (Barayuga 2006). The more profound question is whether the actions of any party in this dispute are grounded in pre-contact Hawaiian realities given that they fully articulate modernist realities of legal property rights, authorship, authority, and authenticity?

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