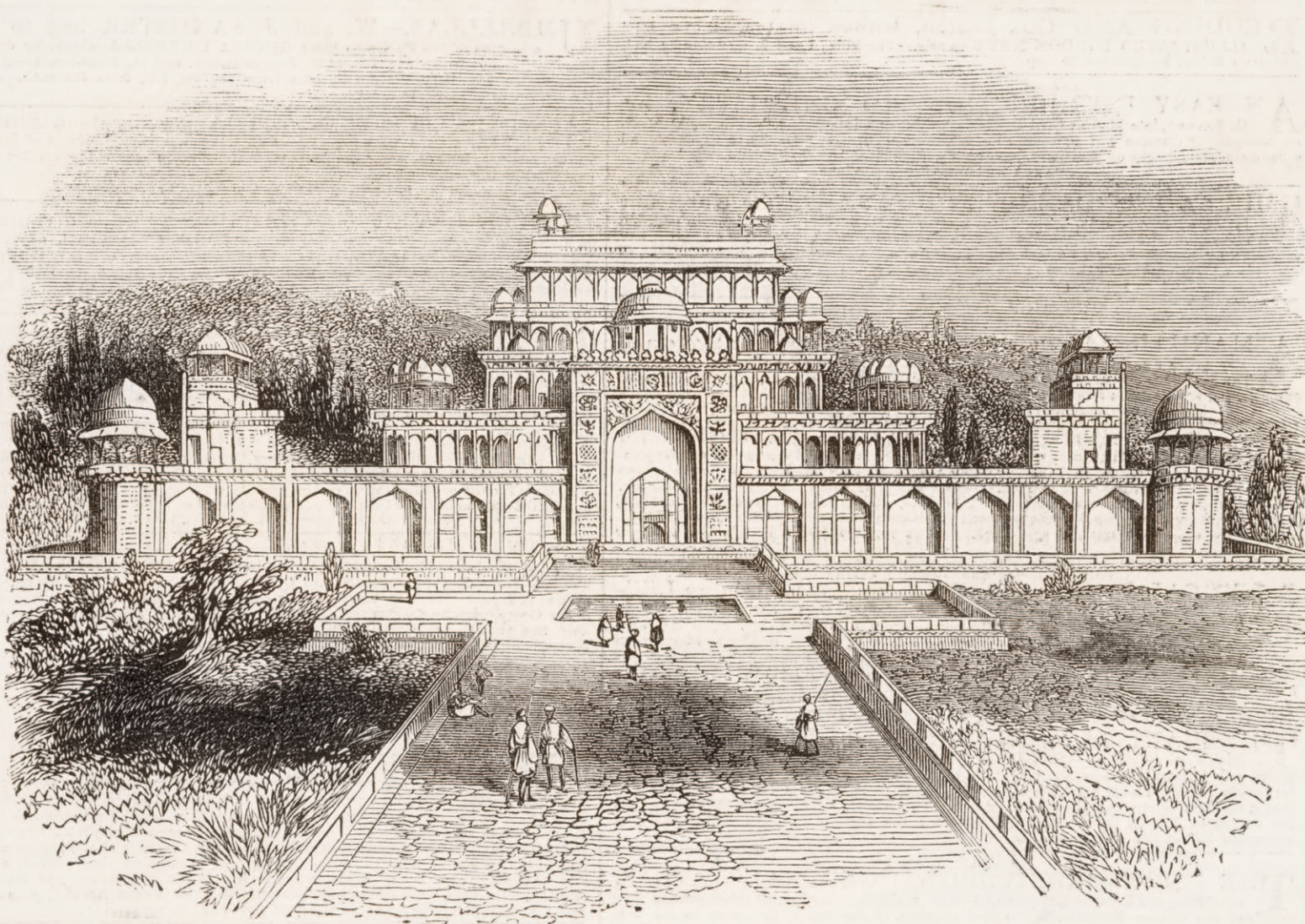


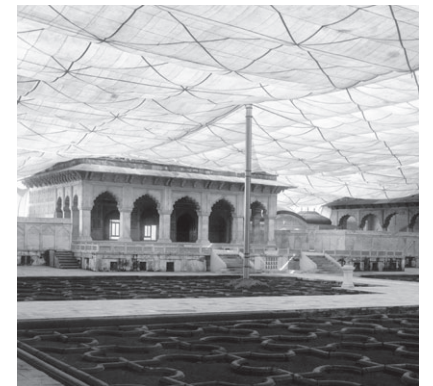
From loot to trophy

SALE OF THE MOGOL SULTAN AKBER'S PALACE AT THE EAST INDIA DOCKS.



TOMB OF AKBER.

How do we reconcile the robust efforts by Europeans and Americans to preserve their own cultural heritage, on the one hand, with the contemporaneous auctioning off of Indian monuments and antiquities, on the other?



On October 28 1843 the *Illustrated London News* published a curious article titled “Sale of the Mogol Sultan Akber’s Palace at the East India Docks” which began on the following melancholic note: “There is no reflection more mortifying to human pride than that which occurs to the moralist when he witnesses the degradation, ruin, and dispersion of the mighty edifices of ancient days – edifices which were destined by their founders to carry down to the latest generations the memory of the monarch or potentate at whose expence [sic] they were constructed”.¹ Such was the unfortunate fate of the once-grand palace of the Mughal emperor Akbar that the newspaper was reporting on.

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THE ARTICLE WENT ON TO EXPLAIN to its British audience the imperial lineage of Akbar and his role as an indefatigable patron of architecture and craft. It then provided a detailed description of the palace and fort complex that Akbar had commissioned for himself in Agra in 1564 (figure 1). The combination of grand scale and delicate detailing of the palace complex caused the authors to exclaim that: “Akber built like a giant, and finished his work like a jeweler”.²

Selling heritage

Indeed the admiration for Akbar’s architecture and the awestruck tone in which it is described in the piece almost distracts the reader from the title of the piece. If Akbar’s palace was indeed so magnificent, why was it being sold at the East India Docks nearly three centuries after it was built? Who in London would be interested in acquiring a Mughal palace, and why? Was the melancholic opening note meant to be a censure of this practice of selling Indian architectural objects on the open market, or a cynical resignation to it? Almost as an answer (and possible justification) to this last question, the article mentions that the sixteenth-century palace and fort had fallen from its original splendour and become little more than a ruin in contemporary times.

Upon visiting the premises over twenty years previously, the author of the news report had noticed the crumbling walls of the fort, the dried-up moat and the utter disrepair of the mansions and residences within the palace courts which had been stripped of their embellishments and robbed of many precious details. The report blamed these appalling conditions on the obstinate stinginess of unwise Indian rulers who refused to spend even trifling amounts of money on the upkeep of such architectural gems. The article skips over the fact that the fort had unfortunately been used as a garrison by the

British military for the past 40 years when they had conquered Agra from the Marāhtās in 1803. During this time, important structures like the Dīwān i-Ām (the Hall of Audience) was used as an arsenal whilst other structures had been completely razed and replaced with military barracks.³

The article, however, does incriminate the officers of the East India Company as agents partly responsible for the structure’s dilapidation on another count. For instance, Lord W. Bentinck (Governor General of India between 1828-1835) had removed marbles from the main audience hall in the palace and the seraglio with the purpose of auctioning them off. Hardly a stern chastisement of the role of British agents in despoiling Indian antiquities, this anecdote leads the article’s author to claim that the marbles being sold at the East India Docks in 1843 were the very pieces that Bentinck wanted to auction a few years earlier. The “sale of the Mogol Sultan Akber’s palace” therefore included: inlaid marble panels sold by the case costing between £5 and £14, and window screens either carved of red sandstone or made from terracotta which fetched anywhere between 12 shillings to 40 shillings a case (figure 2). The buyers, it was noted, were mainly “indefatigable and enthusiastic lovers of the fine arts”.⁴

The disregard shown by Lord Bentinck towards cultural heritage in India, deplorable as it seems in hindsight, was in fact consistent with the activities of many British officials during this time. Historians like James Hevia have compellingly argued that British armies in India, Southeast Asia and China were often “paid” through the loot they could amass from the wealthy palaces, mansions and forts in these regions.⁵ Hevia also reminds us that the term “loot” itself made its way into English from the original Hindi term (*lūt*), meaning thievery or pillage, and while it first appeared in English dictionaries as early as 1788,

it was only between the First Opium War of 1841, the Crimean War (1854-55) and the Indian Mutiny (1857-58) that the term became commonly accepted and understood in England.⁶

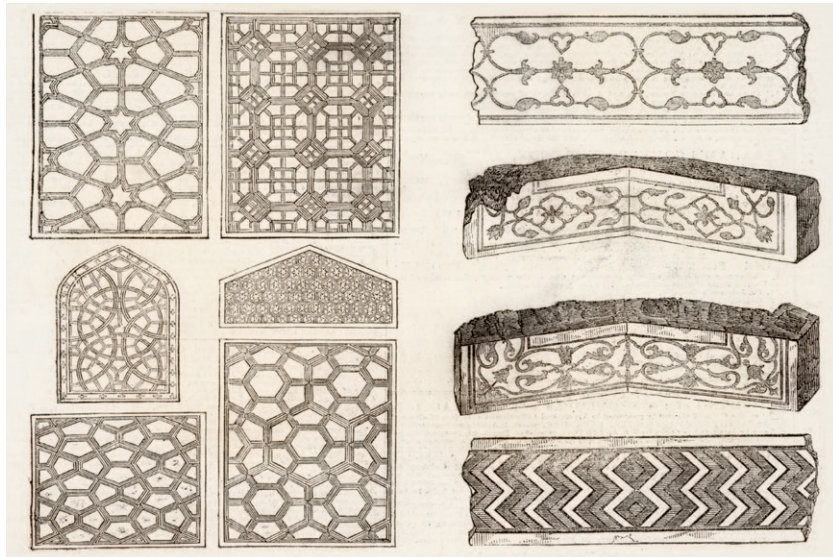
Although the article in *Illustrated London News* frames Bentinck as the villain of the piece, it was unlikely that the marbles offered for sale had anything to do with either Bentinck or Akbar’s Palace. More likely, the British public opinion of Bentinck as a miserly and tyrannical Governor General and a rumor of his desire to dismantle the Taj Mahal and auction it off to the highest bidders, had by 1843 (8 years after the end of his tenure in India) gained enough traction in England so that it could be leveraged at auctions to increase the value of the architectural fragments being hawked. It is also unlikely that the auctioneers or the buyers of Akbar’s palace on the East India docks saw these architectural fragments as loot, and indeed, may have even believed, as the *Illustrated London News* article implies, that they were in fact “saving” Akbar’s palace from complete erosion by securing it in the hands of “art lovers” in Britain. In either case, the auction brings up many vexing questions regarding the particular vectors that determine cultural heritage in colonial contexts.

The turn toward preservation *in-situ*

In 1843 India was not yet a colony of the British Empire and although the British had been a substantial military and political presence in the subcontinent for almost a century, their role was seen to be less in the realm of governance and more as aiding the commercial interests of the East India Company. Yet even in these early days, East India Company officials had amassed large “collections” of Indian artefacts – as a means of generating personal wealth, certainly, but also as a means of socially reinventing themselves in England as connoisseurs of Oriental art and antiquities.⁷

1 (above): Depiction of the Tomb of Akbar in the *Illustrated London News*, October 28, 1843.

The vexed history of architectural heritage in Imperial India



2 (above): The inlaid marbles and windows sold at the October 1843 auction at the East India Docks. *Illustrated London News*, October 28, 1843.

3 (left): ASI restorations of the Hall of Audience and the palaces in the Agra Fort, c. 1906. Photo by Frederick Oscar Oertel, courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, UK.

The mid-nineteenth century was also the period when robust debates regarding the preservation and conservation of cultural heritage were unfolding in Europe – particularly in Britain and France. In 1830, the French government established the position of Inspector General of Historic Monuments and around the same time, English intellectuals like John Ruskin and William Morris began to plead for the conservation of English heritage. Galvanized by the dramatic changes wrought by industrialisation and mass production (exemplified for John Ruskin by the opening of the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace in London), Morris in particular led tireless efforts for the preservation of British monuments as “national” heritage – a project that resulted in the establishment of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877. In North America, similar programs of heritage conservation were underway as evidenced by the 1858 “rescue” of George Washington’s estate, Mt. Vernon, from ruin by an independent women’s group. How do we reconcile these robust efforts by Europeans and Americans to preserve their own cultural heritage, on the one hand, with the contemporaneous auctioning off of Indian monuments and antiquities, on the other?

The laissez-faire attitude towards Indian antiquities appears to have changed dramatically with the official recognition of India as a British dominion in 1858 and specifically with the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in 1862. It is worth noting here that the first “official” body of preservation in India preceded the establishment of similar institutions in England (such as the Society for the Protection of Ancient Building (1877) and the National Trust (1895)), which unlike the governmental bureaucracy of the ASI were established by philanthropists and citizen’s groups. Indeed, the first Ancient Monuments Act of Britain was passed by the government in 1882, two decades after the establishment of the ASI. As with urban planning and architecture, the colonies thus also served as experimental grounds for heritage management and preservation policy, which were later carried back to the metropolises of empire. The ASI – a colonial institution entrusted with the protection of Indian antiquities across the length and breadth of the subcontinent – owes its existence largely to the efforts of colonial officials such as Alexander Cunningham. A lover of Indian antiquities and tireless champion of their preservation, Cunningham argued that the British government was obliged to preserve Indian heritage as a benefit to its colonised subjects. Whilst Cunningham’s role echoes the efforts of similar public agents in Britain and North America, it should be noted that the discourse of heritage preservation in Europe and America was centered around questions of nationalism, whereas in the case of India it was seen as part of the colonial project and its civilizing mission.

That colonial forms of knowledge significantly impacted and shaped Indian heritage is borne out by the words and actions of Cunningham’s most ardent supporter, Lord Curzon (Governor General of India, 1898-1905). In 1900 during an impassioned speech urging heritage preservation in India, Curzon mentioned the dangers to much of Indian cultural heritage, which included an ill-educated “native” public who had little regard for their own cultural heritage; the deplorable history of Oriental Indian despots who had mutilated and destroyed monuments of religions and cultures alien to their own; as well as the inexcusable actions of British soldiers and officials in the past who had freely looted Indian antiquities to gain quick riches.⁸ Curzon specifically repeats the shameful (and not entirely truthful) anecdote of Bentinck’s desire to dismantle the Taj Mahal and auction off the fragments, as an example of Britain’s past complicity in the erosion and dilapidation of Indian cultural heritage. Positioning himself as a true steward of India’s cultural heritage, neither consumed by the ignorance of Indian rulers nor given to the greed of his British predecessors, Curzon passed the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act in 1904 – a policy that continues to be the main legislative framework for the protection of cultural heritage in India.

It was under the directive of Curzon that Akbar’s fort and mausoleum were restored by the ASI in 1905, just in time for the visit of the Prince of Wales to India (figure 3). No longer seen as quarries offering fragments of Oriental curiosity that could be auctioned off in Britain, monuments in India now assumed a different life and value under policies of colonial heritage management. They became signifiers of those mighty empires and grand sovereigns that had preceded the British Empire in India. That the Prince of Wales could gaze upon the restored mausoleum of Akbar in 1905 must have reaffirmed his own place within the glorious history of his new colony.

Cultural preservation also pressed a further continuity between the now defunct Mughal empire and the British government; if Mughal emperors like Akbar had demonstrated their cultural keenness and artistic proclivities by building these magnificent structures in the past, then the British government displayed similar cultural magnanimity and foresight in saving Indian heritage for posterity. Indeed in 1904 when Curzon presented the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, he invoked the example of restorations undertaken at the Taj Mahal, the Agra Fort and the mausoleum of Akbar, which included the refurbishment of gardens, cleaning of water-courses, and the removal of recent unsightly additions to the complex. Justifying the large expenditure necessitated by the repairs, Curzon said:

— *Since I came to India we have spent upon repairs at Agra alone a sum of between £40,000 and £50,000. Every rupee has been an offering of reverence to the past and a gift of recovered beauty to the future; and I do not believe that there is a taxpayer in this country who will grudge one anna⁹ of the outlay. It will take some three or four years more to complete the task, and then Agra will be given back to the world, a pearl of great price.¹⁰*

From Bentinck to Curzon; from an auction on the East India docks in 1843 to the model of colonial preservation in 1904, from a site to be plundered for its cultural resources to a “pearl” restored through the efforts of British interventionists, the cultural heritage of Agra had definitively passed from colonial loot to colonial trophy.

Radical shift or variations on a theme?

On the one hand the two moments of the monuments presented here are evocative of a significant shift in terms of cultural heritage in India. There is little doubt that the colonial institutionalization of architectural and cultural preservation in India did much to arrest the physical dilapidation, vandalism and dismantling of monuments – whether at the hands of colonial agents, indigenous persons or due to the vagaries of nature. The establishment of colonial bureaucracies like the ASI also advanced the cause of preserving Indian monuments and antiquities in situ, ensuring their presence within India rather than in the museums or markets of Britain. Seen from this perspective, the story of cultural heritage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seems a triumphal and celebratory narrative, the moment of 1904 appearing as a positive reclamation of the wanton disregard that marked the auction in 1843.

Despite the monumental changes brought about by the colonial administration in the management of India’s cultural heritage it would, however, be overly simplistic to wholly conflate the beginnings of heritage preservation in India with the colonial enterprise. Indeed, there is ample evidence to suggest that Indian monuments were preserved and managed through imperial patronage as well as by local communities in India long before the British arrived there. For example in 1809 the Hindu ruler of Gwalior, Daulat Rao Sindhia, provided stipends for the upkeep of, and forbade the quarrying of stone from, the Arhai din ka Jhonpra, a 12th century mosque built by the earliest Islamic rulers of the subcontinent.¹¹ Similarly, in 1857 the last Mughal emperor of India, Bahadur Shah Zafar, issued a decree asking that peasants stop the cultivation of crops around the Qutb Minar (another 12th century Islamic structure) as a means to protect the monument.¹² Thus, whilst it is important to acknowledge the radical shifts brought about by colonial preservation policies, it is also essential to recognize the older forms of cultural preservation that were disregarded and swept aside as a part of colonialism.

There are also, however, continuities between the two moments in the colonial attitudes towards Indian built heritage that warrant critical examination. The most important is that the agents who determined an object’s value, whether based on capitalist “exchange” value at auction or on “exhibition” value, were all colonial officers. In addition, Indian cultural heritage was often preserved or restored for an exclusively European audience. The histories and policies of preservation established by colonial experts for Indian cultural heritage endures to this day in postcolonial India with little change or amendment. The second related point is that although Curzon and Cunningham believed that preservation in India was

a service that the colonial government extended to the colonised population, it is clear that prevailing European parameters of aesthetic and archaeological value were being imposed upon Indian art and architecture. In many ways, if Indian monuments had been dismantled and their fragments auctioned as curios in the mid-nineteenth century, the later movement of institutionalised preservation also separated these monuments from their wider cultural contexts and set them in environments akin to museums.

A common consequence of ASI policies was the cessation of indigenous practices of pilgrimage and memorialization. For example, it is highly possible that the mausoleum of Akbar would have been a site of veneration for local communities as well as pilgrims – practices discontinued once the structure was taken into custody by the ASI for preservation.¹³ Ebba Koch has convincingly argued that the traditions of *zīyārāt* (tomb visitation) were actively practiced, and encouraged by Mughal emperors in northern India from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. It was only during the reign of the more orthodox Islamic emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707) that tomb veneration was frowned upon, although this hardly means that the practice was eradicated. Specific evidence of these practices at Akbar’s mausoleum comes from a 1909 monograph on the structure published by the ASI.¹⁴ A cenotaph on the topmost storey of the mausoleum was designed to accommodate festive awnings and flags for memorial ceremonies. The colonial apparatus of preservation often interfered with such practices and radically altered the multivalent meanings of monuments in India. From objects of aesthetic beauty as well as religious sites, memorial institutions, burial grounds, festive spaces, etc., preservation turned Indian cultural heritage into fixed objects that were valued merely for their historical and artistic import. If the auction severed heritage from its physical context, colonial norms of preservation disconnected other vital links between the object and its larger cultural milieu.

The fate of the Agra monuments from 1843 to 1905 and from commodity to culture is but one example of the vexed history of the colonial origins of heritage preservation in India. The terms and conditions of preservation established by the British in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have survived unchanged in contemporary India, and colonial preservation has left a complicated legacy in postcolonial India. Monuments continue to exist in sanitized spaces cordoned off from their once vibrant cultural traditions, physically segregated from their larger social environments with ticketed entry, while their pasts are accessible only through colonial histories. And whilst we may never recover those pieces of Indian cultural heritage that were auctioned at the East India Docks in October, 1843, postcolonial India must surely reclaim the terms upon which its cultural heritage is evaluated.

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