ON NOVEMBER 22nd, 1990, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II opened the Nehru Gallery of Indian Art, which presents the Victoria and Albert Museum’s superlative collection of art and design from the Indian subcontinent in an innovative, intellectually stimulating and visually evocative way (1). For all those who worked on the project, the event was the culmination of many years of effort. Yet, it marked not the end, but the beginning of a new chapter in the long story of how South Asian art has been collected and displayed in South Kensington.

The South Asian collection has its origins in the Museum of the East India Company. Transferred to the newly established India Office in the second half of the 19th century, the India Museum was finally dispersed in 1879 and many of its holdings, including famous works such as “Tippoo’s Tiger” and the golden throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (see Deborah Swallow’s article in this issue), came to what was then called the South Kensington Museum. Here they joined the collection of Indian art that had been developing since initial acquisitions were made at the Great Exhibition of 1851. The “India Museum” continued to have a separate identity, however, and many of the objects were displayed in buildings to the west of the museum. It was not until the mid-1950s that the displays were amalgamated, but on a much reduced scale, in the main site.

Particularly renowned for its paintings, textiles and Mughal court art, the V&A’s South Asian collection has grown substantially over the last 160 years and remains one of the largest and most important in the world. Since the opening of the Nehru Gallery, and despite the financial constraints under which many institutions now operate, the museum has continued to acquire significant objects, which enable it
to develop its expertise and tell fresh stories. Works on paper entering the collection in recent years have included: exquisite court paintings; Thomas Holbein Hendley’s lavish illustrations of the objects shown in the 1883 exhibition in Jaipur; dramatic posters for Bollywood movies; and a broad range of pieces by contemporary artists (see Divia Patel’s article in this issue). The V&A’s collection of Buddhist, Hindu and Jain objects have been enhanced by notable works such as: a late 2nd–early 3rd century seated Buddha, which is an early example of iconic Buddhist imagery; a late 6th–early 7th century standing figure of Shakyamuni, known as the Radiant Buddha, which was acquired jointly with the British Museum (see John Clarke’s article in this issue); a beautifully detailed Jain pilgrimage painting on cloth dating to the late 19th century; and a wonderful pair of early 20th century Kamadhenu, or wish-fulfilling cows (2). A silver filigree casket and a pair of flintlock pistols, the latter decorated with tiger heads and verses praising the ruler, have augmented the museum’s holdings of objects made for Tipu Sultan (3). In making a number of these major purchases, the V&A has benefitted from the support of the Art Fund, but the collection is also able to expand thanks to the great generosity of private donors such as the late Waltraud Ganguly, who recently gifted her extraordinary collection of Indian jewellery.

All new acquisitions are catalogued electronically, and are thus available via the V&A’s website to anyone, anywhere in the world. The historic collections are also being catalogued online, a major recent initiative being the digitisation of over 8500 paintings, textiles and hardstones, funded by the Parasol Foundation Trust (see article by Nick Barnard, Sonia Ashmore and Emma Rogers). Many of the
newly acquired pieces are displayed in the Nehru Gallery and in adjacent spaces devoted to religious sculpture and to the arts of the Himalayas, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, including Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and Cambodia. These galleries were refreshed and redisplayed in 2011, while The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Gallery of Buddhist Sculpture was opened two years earlier and is presently in a new phase of development (see John Clarke’s article).

While the upgrading of the permanent galleries allows the V&A to improve access to its world-class collections in new and imaginative ways, temporary exhibitions provide an opportunity to display the museum’s objects alongside prominent international loans, to explore particular themes in more depth, and bring the richness of South Asian culture to ever wider audiences. The 1995 groundbreaking exhibition, “Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India”, was a collaboration with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, while “The Adventures of Hamza”—which reunited many of the Hamzanama folios created for the Mughal Emperor, Akbar—was organised by the Smithsonian Institute in Washington and shown in the V&A in 2003. Most exhibitions are developed by the V&A itself, however. Some are staged to commemorate particular events, such as “Colours of the Indus” held in 1997 to mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of Pakistan. This was the first major exhibition to focus on the immensely fertile textile tradition of the region. "The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms" of 1999 celebrated one of the most important anniversaries in Sikh history: the creation in 1699 of a new order called the Khalsa, or “the pure”.

The early years of the new century saw a change in the structure of the V&A’s curatorial departments. In 2001, the Indian and Southeast Asian section was brought together with the East Asian section and the holdings of material from the Islamic Middle East to create the Asian Department; a coherent strategy for all the Asian collections was thus formed for the first time in the V&A’s history. Even before this happened, the South and East Asian curators had been thinking of ways of working together to present an exhibition on the theme of cross-cultural interaction. This was realised in 2004 with “Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500–1800”, which examined the dynamic period of commercial, artistic and technological exchange that followed Vasco da Gama’s arrival in India.

While “The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms” travelled to San Francisco and Toronto, the rarity and fragility of many of the works shown in “Encounters” meant that the exhibition was only shown at the V&A. Many exhibitions do tour however, enabling the museum to connect with audiences nationally and internationally. “Cinema India: The Art of Bollywood”, which featured many of the newly acquired posters, was shown in the V&A in 2002 and then toured to several venues across the UK and later to Australia, while the Radiant Buddha was the focus of a national tour of Indian Buddhist highlights from the V&A and British Museum collections. One of the most successful touring shows was “Maharaja: The Splendour of India’s Royal Courts”, which was seen by 970,000 people worldwide. The first exhibition to explore comprehensively the extraordinary world and rich culture of India’s kings, it was first shown at the V&A in 2009 before touring to Munich, Toronto, San Francisco, Richmond and Chicago, and then in revised form to the Palace Museum in Beijing (4).
One of the most notable aspects of the “Maharaja” exhibition, seen in London and Munich, was the unprecedented inclusion of a large number of objects from Indian royal collections, loans that were facilitated by the Ministry of Culture and the National Museum in Delhi. The V&A has a long history of working with colleagues in India and strong relationships with a number of Indian museums. It also developed the first international exhibition to tour India, “Indian Life and Landscape”, which featured paintings and drawings by Western artists who travelled in India from the late 18th to the early 20th century, and was shown in six Indian museums from 2008–2010. This was followed by “Contemporary Photography: Something That I’ll Never Really See” in 2010–2011, “A Century of Olympic Posters” in 2011, and “Kalighat Paintings” in 2011–2012. Also in 2011, the V&A played host to the loan exhibition, “Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Painter”, which was organised by the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

In 2010, the V&A signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Culture, India, which led to a collaborative digitisation programme and a course in museum education for Indian museum professionals, which was held at the V&A in summer 2012. These initiatives were generously supported by the Parasol Foundation Trust, which has also funded a number of other skills enhancement and knowledge sharing events including: museum development master classes held in Kolkata (Calcutta) in collaboration with the British Council in October 2011; textile conservation workshops run with the Sutra organisation in Kolkata in November 2011; and a workshop on paper and book conservation at the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, in November 2012.

The sharing of conservation skills is of enormous benefit to the V&A. The conservation and preservation of the Indian collection requires knowledge of materials, techniques and cultural craft traditions, and V&A conservators welcome opportunities to collaborate with fellow professionals, some of whom come on placements and exchanges, and with artists and craftsmen. Understanding the preparation of paper and the way pigments have been applied and finished, for example, enables the V&A’s Indian paintings to be more fully understood and interpreted. In preserving the Indian collection, cultural respect influences the choice of materials and techniques. In a recent project to conserve and digitise 15th century Shvetambara Jain manuscript pages, a synthetic alternative had to be found for the gelatine adhesive conventionally used in order to accommodate the Jain prohibition on the use of animal products.

The knowledge gained by curators and conservators informs all the V&A’s work and is disseminated through displays and exhibitions, online initiatives and publications. In recent years, the V&A has brought out books on a diverse range of subjects, including: “Kalamkari Temple Hangings”; “India: Contemporary Design”; “British Asian Style”; “Tipu’s Tigers”; “Indian Jewellery”; “Chintz”; “Paintings for the Mughal Emperor” and “Indian Temple Sculpture”, as well as publications to accompany all the exhibitions. The museum also hosts international conferences, such as that held in 2010 on Buddhist sculpture, and events such as the annual lecture of Mughal art, generously supported by Benjamin Zucker, which in 2015 is celebrating its 22nd year. Lecture series have also been held on other aspects of Indian art thanks to the support of Narinder Singh Kapaney and the Anthony Gardner Fund. The latter is now used to provide bursaries for students on the V&A/RCA postgraduate course, while museum curators also pass on their knowledge through lectures presented around the world and through teaching on the V&A’s Arts of Asia course and, with colleagues from the British Museum, on the Asian Art diploma course at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

The V&A has also pioneered different ways of providing educational programmes for communities in London and around the UK. When the Nehru Gallery opened in 1991, the museum established a national textile project which became known as “Shamiana: The Mughal Tent”. This united groups of women and children in the creation of a unique group of embroidered panels that were shown at the V&A in 1997, and then toured nationally and internationally. Such outreach initiatives continue today, coupled with a very lively mix of India-related events and activities for families and children held within the V&A. These are often organised in conjunction with exhibitions or to celebrate events such as Diwali. In Autumn 2015, visitors to the V&A will be able to take part in dance, music, storytelling, digital activities and art workshops as part of the India Festival that, with a stimulating series of exciting exhibitions, displays and events, will celebrate the 25th anniversary of both the opening of the Nehru Gallery and the launch of the Nehru Trust for the Indian Collections (see respective articles by Rosemary Crill and Deborah Swallow).

The V&A is constantly expanding its collections, its knowledge, its relationship with partners, and above all its audiences, at home and internationally, whether they come with a pre-existing interest or background in India or are discovering the culture and collections for the first time. The museum will likewise continue with its mission to inform, inspire, excite and encourage engagement with the vibrant and varied cultures of South Asia, both past and present.