

Exhibiting Pakistan, Italian Style: Partition and the Exhibition of Buddhist Sculpture in Italian Museums

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What was the role of the exhibition of Buddhist artifacts in early nation-state formation in Pakistan? How did museum curators use the transnational exchange of Buddhist sculpture to shape national narratives in South Asia after partition in 1947? To answer these questions, my paper investigates the exhibition of Buddhist artifacts from the ancient region of Gandhara (in contemporary northwest Pakistan and Afghanistan) in Italian museums in the 1950s and 1960s. After the violent partition of British India into the independent nation-states of Pakistan and India, some museum curators in Pakistan struggled to construct an ancient history for the new Muslim-majority nation-state that was separate from India and extended earlier than Islam. In response to these challenges, early Pakistani curators turned to the region's rich Buddhist material heritage to exhibit an ancient history for Pakistan. Specifically, some Pakistani curators worked with the Italian Archaeological Mission to Pakistan, the oldest archaeological mission in postcolonial South Asia, to excavate and exhibit Buddhist artifacts. This paper follows the transnational collaborations and material processes surrounding the first exhibits of Buddhist art from Pakistan in Italy from 1958 to 1963. My paper argues that Pakistani and Italian curators re-used and re-coded Buddhist artifacts to exhibit (and imagine) an ancient history for Pakistan and global connections for postwar Italy. In turn, my paper addresses the role of exhibits in the process of producing an ancient history for Pakistan that was distinct from India and contributes to scholarship on the impact of partition on museums and archaeology.