

CHHATRAPATI SHIVAJI MAHARAJ VASTU SANGRAHALAYA (CSMVS), MUMBAI

PROJECT STATEMENT

NETWORKS OF THE PAST: A STUDY GALLERY OF INDIA AND THE ANCIENT WORLD

CSMVS Mumbai will open a new educational gallery dedicated to the ancient world on 12th December 2025.

The Gallery presents key moments that have significantly shaped human society, through a thematic rather than a strictly chronological approach. The starting point is the Indian subcontinent with the Harappan Civilisation, developed approximately 5000 years ago; and it concludes with the Gupta Empire in the sixth century CE. Between these two milestones of Indian history, the gallery explores India's place within a broader global context – a departure from familiar Western narratives of the ancient world centred on the Mediterranean.

This initiative follows the remarkable success of two earlier exhibitions, *India and the World: A History in Nine Stories* (2017-18) organised in collaboration with CSMVS's longstanding partner The British Museum, and *Ancient Sculptures: India Egypt Assyria Greece Rome* (2023-24), in partnership with the British Museum and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, and many leading Indian museums, to culminate a unique series of global partnerships initiated by the CSMVS with Getty's Sharing Collections Program.

Four years in the making, this study gallery is the result of additional collaborations, which now include the Museum Rietberg, Zurich; the Al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait; the Benaki Museum, Athens; as well as the Ephorate of Antiquities of the City of Athens, Ministry of Culture, Greece.

The Ministry of Culture, Government of India has given its generous support, and facilitated loaning of antiquities from the rich collections of the Archaeological Survey of India, the National Museum, New Delhi, the Department of Archaeology and Museums (DOAM), Government of Maharashtra, the Allahabad Museum, Prayagraj, the Government Museums of Lucknow and Mathura, Indian Museum, Kolkata and the Bihar Museum, Patna.

Thanks to the exceptional generosity of our collaborators, the gallery will display more than 300 important archaeological objects for three years, affording India's growing young population its first prolonged encounter with original works of classical art from the cultures of India, Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, Persia, Greece, and Rome.

Civilisation is not a destination – it's a journey. The gallery invites us to explore the ancient world not as something lost to history, but as the foundation upon which our present stands and our future is built. The past has profoundly shaped global, national, and local relationships between societies and individuals. The events, innovations, and decisions made in antiquity continue to influence our world today. In today's interconnected world, no major event goes without impacting

humanity. To understand our history meaningfully, we must move beyond isolated narratives and adopt a global perspective.

Sabyasachi Mukherjee, Director General, CSMVS

Gallery Narrative The gallery traces the transformative journey from agrarian societies to the rise of civilisations, the invention of writing, and the building of empires, while also peeping into the day-to-day life of people and trade networks across civilisations. The narrative concludes with the two most famous cosmopolitan centres of learning and knowledge in the ancient world, Nalanda in India and Alexandria in Roman Egypt. Alexandria, a great maritime trading city with its library and the Mouseion – a place for teaching, debate and scientific study - became the repository of texts and manuscripts from around the western world. Nalanda, an early monastic university in the East, became a learning centre for monks and teachers who travelled here from Indonesia, Korea, China and even Japan. Both centres played a significant role in spreading the greatest legacy of the ancient world -- its knowledge, which remains timeless.

Ancient India, with its extensive connections to distant lands, played a pivotal role in this global conversation. From the advanced technologies of the Sindhu-Sarasvati (Harappan) civilisation to the profound wisdom of ancient scriptures, from maritime trade with Mesopotamia and Egypt, and later Rome, and philosophical exchanges with Greece and China, India stood as both a contributor to, and a beneficiary of, this evolving tapestry.

History is a dynamic and ever-evolving discipline. Each day new discoveries come to light - some challenge established narratives while others reaffirm earlier beliefs. It is neither possible nor intended to present every dimension of the ancient past in one gallery. Through a careful selection of objects and artifacts, the Study Gallery highlights certain thought-provoking ideas from our ancient past which are still relevant today. These glimpses are envisioned to encourage deeper curiosity, critical thinking and exploration among our visitors, especially students of history and other disciplines.

Global Co-curation

In the making of the Study Gallery, CSMVS curators faced a fundamental challenge. They were familiar with objects of the Harappan (Indus) Civilisation, many of which feature in school and university textbooks in India but they were not well versed in the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, China, Greece, and Rome which were either contemporaneous with the Harappan Civilisation or had later trade links with ancient India. This gap had to be bridged, in order to build a convincing story of India's connections with the wider world of antiquity.

Expert curators from London, Berlin, and Zurich responded to the needs of the project by making a careful selection of objects, often from their research collections, to explore these links.

Through a series of conversations between CSMVS curators and their foreign counterparts, over three years, the co-curatorial team developed a joint narrative of India's position in the ancient world. This will enable Indian audiences to explore India's history against a global backdrop, through the study of objects— the tangible evidence from which history is written.

CSMVS curators have gained knowledge and important insights into world history as an outcome of this collaboration. Quite unexpectedly, the lending partners who advised CSMVS on what they might want to ask to borrow, themselves discovered new dimensions and meanings in the objects in their care, which will now inform their future display. Global co-curation is in every sense a win-win development.

Education and Outreach

This new Study Gallery has been designed to support an ambitious educational programme, based on objects as material evidence of history. This educational programme has been developed by the CSMVS Education Department through strategic partnerships with academic and cultural institutions in Mumbai and across the country.

Our partner museums have generously taken the exceptional step of lending large numbers of significant objects from their collections for an extended period of three years. This has opened new perspectives on our shared human history, enriching the study of world as well as Indian history in schools and universities.

In a first-of-its-kind partnership between museums and universities in India, these long-term loans will make it possible for more than 20 universities across the country to structure their teaching around objects as primary sources of evidence. We hope that it will bridge the gap between museums and universities by converting galleries into classrooms where professors and students can engage, debate and learn from original objects. The participation of Indian and many international scholars in developing and structuring the programme has already generated new methodologies of study and research, likely to impact both teaching and curatorial practice in the future.

CSMVS has created a specially designated learning centre, NALANDA, close to the Ancient World Study Gallery, where specifically tailored educational programmes will be conducted for the hundreds of schools that visit the museum.

Beyond large cities, rural audiences across the country will also experience this gallery through micro-exhibitions that will travel on the *Museum on Wheels* buses, as well as through the CSMVS *Trunk Museum* project.

A project website is being developed for university and school teachers, which they will be able to use for classroom teaching and discussions about themes connecting India and the world – all through archaeological objects. The website will grow incrementally over the three years to

include additional resources and information about the objects, lectures, talks and educational videos that will help viewers from around the world to learn from these initiatives.

Project Partners

A project shaped and presented by

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai

We thank the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, for their support of the idea and for facilitating the involvement of Indian museums and universities

Jointly curated by

1. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai
2. The British Museum, London
3. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz
4. Museum Rietberg, Zurich
5. The Benaki Museum, Athens

In association with

International Lending Institutions

1. The British Museum, London
2. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz
3. Museum Rietberg, Zurich
4. Al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait
5. The Benaki Museum, Greece
6. The Ephorate of Antiquities of the City of Athens

and

Indian Lending Institutions

1. Archaeological Survey of India
2. National Museum, New Delhi
3. The Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Maharashtra
4. Allahabad Museum, Prayagraj
5. The Indian Museum, Kolkata
6. The Government Museum, Lucknow
7. The Government Museum, Mathura
8. The Bihar Museum, Patna

The **University Academic Programme**, conceived and shaped by The Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai, with Knowledge Partner, the Cambridge University – Global Humanities Program.

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