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A detective across centuries

SHABNAM MINWALLA.

'I try to reconnect an object with its forgotten history,' says John Guy, scholar and curator of the Arts of South & South East Asia at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in a conversation with SHABNAM MINWALLA.



On the screen is the image of a rough stone pillar bearing an elegant Sanskrit inscription. At the podium is a bespectacled man delivering facts and figures with scholarly precision. And gliding silently through our collective imagination is the shadowy figment of an ancient ship.

It's a ghostly, imprecise image — and however intently we peer, few details emerge. A snatch of Tamil conversation. Holds stuffed with bolts of printed cotton cloth. Perhaps a couple of portly Brahmins on the deck, gazing at the Bay of Bengal as they glide towards new homes in distant Dvaravati or Srivijaya.

This evanescent shadow is all that remains of the Tamil merchant community that, historians believe, were power players in the first millennium. Over centuries they transported not just jewel-toned *kalamkari* fabrics, but also Indian ideas, religion and knowledge to vast swathes of Southeast Asia. Memories have faded, and records have disintegrated. So today our knowledge of that intriguing chapter depends on the scattered archaeological discoveries in the remote villages and jungles of Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar.

The remarkable object on the screen is one of these clues — a *yupa* stone found in Eastern Borneo that dates back to the fourth century AD. The Sanskrit inscription describes the sacrifices performed by a local king called Mulawarman. "The inscription is in grammatical, perfectly good Sanskrit," says John Guy, while delivering the Vasant J. Sheth Memorial Lecture during which he uses antiquities to offer a glimpse into the world of the intrepid Tamil traders who ruled the waves before the Gujarati merchants arrived on the scene.

"The Sanskrit inscriptions indicate that local rulers in Southeast Asia employed South Indian Brahmins as advisors and counsellors. The Brahmins were the mechanisms through which the inscriptions and objects of Vedic ritual landed up in these improbable, remote places. There was clearly an Indian presence in Southeast Asia, not just of ideas and religion but of people as well."

John Guy should know. He is the curator of the Arts of South and South East Asia at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Besides building collections and organising blockbuster exhibitions, he acts as a detective across centuries. "I try to reconnect an object with its forgotten history," he says, pointing out that sometimes all that remains of kingdoms and cultures are a handful of coins and seals, or a few crumbling sculptures. "We can read the past only on the basis of what has survived."

Over the last two decades, Guy has tried to fit an array of objects into the larger jigsaw puzzle of history. He has studied the ceramics of Southeast Asia, the Indian textile trade, the bronzes and sculptures of Southern India and Indian miniature paintings. "It's the nature of working in a museum that one must have a wide range of interests," he explains during an interview. "But, I have to admit, my heart is really in the South."

But how did a boy growing up in East Anglia in England develop a fascination for Indian temple sculpture? "I had a passion for the visual arts — museums, churches, that sort of thing," says Guy. "I had a taste for the medieval and for ritual. As a student, I travelled to this part of the world and my two interests came together."

Guy began his career at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and worked with the spectacular East India Company collection. In the museum godowns, he stumbled upon forgotten treasures and gave them back their identities. He also wrote a lavishly illustrated book on Indian temple sculpture that he modestly maintains is "by an outsider for other outsiders". And he began building a collection of Indian chintzes made for the Southeast Asian market. "The V&A has the greatest collection of Indian textiles made for the European market during the import boom

of the 19th century,” he says. “I started a collection of Indian textiles made for the Southeast Asian market, which were traded for spices and were commercially much more important. Cotton cloth was historically India’s greatest contribution to world trade and I always say that printed cottons were to India what porcelain was to China. In India, these textiles were considered objects of commerce and had little value and were not cared for. But in Southeast Asia they were seen as exotic and valuable and were often preserved.”

The nature of his research ensures that Guy is often in India — soaking in the atmosphere at the grand temple festivals of Mylapore and Chidambaram; spending days in dusty archives and seeking clues to historical mysteries. “When I was looking for evidence connected with textiles, I visited Pulicat, a sleepy town in the South that was once the Dutch headquarters,” he says. “I visited the Dutch cemetery and found that the tombstones all had borders with textile patterns. Because they were tombstones they were dated. So that visit proved surprisingly informative. Moments like those are exciting.”

Guy moved to the Met seven years ago — and slowly started planning the exhibition that stunned New York last year. “Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Early Southeast Asia, 5th to 8th century” may sound like your average, dry academic jamboree. But the monumental venture proved once again that it is foolish to judge a book by its cover or an exhibition by its title.

“Lost Kingdoms” featured 160 works of art, many of which were large sculptures. Almost 100 national treasures made the long journey to the U.S. from six countries in Southeast Asia. Slim *devis* from Cambodia with the air of fashionistas. A warrior-like Vishnu from Thailand. A podgy sandstone Yaksha from Vietnam. All came together to create a spectacle that the *New York Times* described as “as rich as a massed chorale and as haunting as a single-voice chant.”

The silent song described a prolonged conversation between India and the lost kingdoms of Pyu, Phunan, Zhenia, Champa, Dvaravati and Srivijaya. And, of course, in the background were the shadowy figures of the Tamil merchants who facilitated this dialogue.

The exhibition wrapped up some months ago, and the treasures have returned to their homes. Guy has started thinking of his next adventure. But if he were to describe his dream exhibition, what would it be? “I think the ‘Lost Kingdoms’ came close,” he says with a small smile. “Really quite close to a dream.”

John Guy was in India earlier this month to deliver the 17th Vasant J. Sheth Memorial Lecture in Mumbai. His topic was ‘In Search of Suvarnabhumi: Tracing Tamil Merchants Traders in First Millennium Maritime Southeast Asia.’

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