Archival Aesthetics: Framing and Exhibiting Indian Manuscripts and Manuscript Libraries

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ARTICLE

Archival Aesthetics: Framing and Exhibiting Indian Manuscripts and Manuscript Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Can the Indian manuscript and manuscript library be art? In what follows, I reflect on this question by examining a set of photographs I created for an art project called *Manuscriptistan*. I explain what it has meant for me to aestheticise Indian manuscript libraries and manuscripts, and I offer some insights about why it is important for scholars to bring sensual, spatial and artistic awareness to the things with which, and the spaces in which, they do their research.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics; archives; art; manuscript libraries; manuscripts; photography

Introduction: Seeing art in the manuscript library

The *Manuscriptistan* project technically began in 2003 when I was in graduate school doing pre-dissertation research in South India. I was in western Tamil Nadu studying one of the Sanskrit medical classics, the *Carakasamhita*, with Dr. Mishra, an Ayurvedic doctor and former professor of Ayurveda.¹ At the time, Dr. Mishra ran a research institute that was connected to an in-patient Ayurvedic health-care centre. The place was a mixture of spa-like accommodation for patients, with spacious multiroom living quarters and verandas overlooking tranquil gardens, and spartan clinical rooms for doctor visits. It was my first experience with what is sometimes called ‘Ayurvedic tourism’, which is especially popular in Tamil Nadu’s neighbouring state to the west, Kerala. I spent about a week studying with Dr. Mishra. He was a mesmerising teacher, and he sent me down a path of discovery of the *Carakasamhita* and several other Sanskrit medical texts that I still work on today. But it was Dr. Mishra’s matchmaking that planted the seeds of *Manuscriptistan*.

I had about ten unplanned days between my time with Dr. Mishra and my next obligation, which involved a long train ride north to Benares to do more research and run some archival errands for one of my professors. I did not feel well as my work with Dr. Mishra ended, however, and I considered staying a few extra days at the health centre to recuperate before going to Benares. When I mentioned this to Dr. Mishra, he sat me

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1. All names of people in this article are pseudonyms. Place and institutional names have purposefully been kept nondescript to maintain the anonymity of the people and institutions under discussion.

Figure 1. Kerala, 2019. ©Anthony Cerulli. All photographs by author.

down, felt my forehead and checked my pulse. ‘You’re not *that* sick’, he said. ‘You have a cold and maybe some lingering jet lag’. He gave me an Ayurvedic decoction and some thick charcoal-coloured paste to smear on my forehead throughout the day. ‘Drink the decoction, apply the paste, and see me in the morning’, he coolly instructed. Then he added, ‘You’ll have a roommate this evening, a man from Japan’.

I followed the instructions and around dinnertime, while I sat in my room reading, medicinal paste flaking from my forehead, Dr. Matsuzaka arrived. We got to know each other that night over dinner on the veranda. I learned that he and Dr. Mishra were old friends and collaborators, and that Dr. Mishra had told him I would be a good assistant over the next three–four days on a documentary project he was doing in Kerala. In the morning, Dr. Matsuzaka and one of Dr. Mishra’s students, Gopal, were going to drive to Kerala to film a number of private manuscript collections and interview some of the people associated with them. I was intrigued. The next morning I felt better. So I said goodbye to Dr. Mishra and took my place in the back seat of Gopal’s tiny red Maruti-Suzuki hatchback. For the next few days, I lugged camera equipment and followed Dr. Matsuzaka and Gopal to numerous houses whose owners, Dr. Matsuzaka had been told, had manuscripts related to Ayurveda.

I had seen pictures of palm-leaf and paper manuscripts from India before this online and in my Sanskrit classes. But on this short adventure, I learned a little about the culture of medical manuscripts in Kerala. I discovered, for example, that the contents of many of the manuscripts we saw were relatively unknown to their owners, save perhaps

Figure 2. Kerala, 2015. ©Anthony Cerulli.

the titles, and sometimes even the titles were not known. Most were heirlooms, and many of the people we met simply had no interest in learning about, much less studying, them. But given the general lack of awareness, I was surprised to learn that many people were reluctant to let us see their collections. Some would not allow us to photograph individual texts, while others simply prohibited us from opening the cabinets where they kept their collections. Gopal, a twenty-something Malayali, suggested that the most taciturn and apprehensive people were often under the impression that there might be valuable information in the texts, especially now that a team of researchers was showing interest in them. What if some terrific cures that had not yet been performed or developed were in them? If they released the data, they might not reap the potentially lucrative benefits of that knowledge, Gopal surmised.

Soon after my excursion with Dr. Matsuzaka ended, I caught a train to Benares. When I got there, I spent three days at one of the city's oldest manuscript libraries. Though there was plenty of bureaucratic rigmarole involved in getting access to the texts I needed, I generally had a freer exchange of information with the administrators there than I had had with the private manuscript owners in Kerala. What was more, I was so struck by the space, the enormity of the collection and the obvious care that went into collecting, categorising and preserving the store of texts that I requested permission from the library's director to take pictures of the place before I left. I wanted to have some documentation, for myself, of what I saw. Looking back now, I see that the manuscript library at this institution must have symbolised great potential for me, a graduate student aspiring to immerse himself in Indian texts, stories and knowledge systems. This massive collection of knowledge, its history and the challenge of finding my way through even just a portion of it must have, if only incipiently, betokened my

Figure 3. Kerala, 2015. ©Anthony Cerulli.

future in some way. I took dozens of pictures that day, and then, for the next several years, I went back to my philological project of reading and translating Sanskrit medical literature. While visiting manuscript libraries for my research, I continued to visually document the spaces, shelves and manuscripts I was seeing. I took pictures of aspects of the libraries that I thought I might want to see again. I presumed that others in Indology and South Asian Studies would appreciate these sights too, and that they were likely taking photographs of their research sites, just as I was, even if it felt somewhat peripheral to their primary assignments as it did for me. I also thought the manuscript libraries were compelling sights in their own right, and the pictures I was taking might appeal to people who had no awareness of the locations or ‘stuff’ in my photographs.

Ever since those two experiences in Kerala and Benares, I have been seeing and documenting the manuscript library as an art space. It was not until 2015, however, when I secured some funding to purchase new equipment and support fieldwork, that I was able to move what had begun as a keen interest into an official art project that I began calling *Manuscriptistan*. This title uses the Persian suffix *-stan*, meaning ‘place of’ or ‘country’, to evoke the region’s rich linguistic history and millennia of handwritten manuscript cultures—hence, *Manuscriptistan*, ‘place of manuscripts’ or ‘manuscript country’. Since the images I have taken thus far are restricted to three Indian states, the project cannot represent all of India. Yet, the libraries in Kerala, Telangana and Uttar

Pradesh that I have photographed are not atypical in India. There are many other manuscript collections across the country and thus, at a macro level, I image India itself as *Manuscriptistan*. The obverse perspective, however, is also imaginable: *Manuscriptistan* could be contained within each library, suggesting that the title of this project points to the manuscript library—a place of manuscripts—as a method with which to wrestle and make sense of the history of writing and book cultures in India before typography and, with each photographic presentation of manuscripts and manuscript libraries, a means, to query the aesthetic associations between functionality, context and art objects.

Manuscriptistan is thus both an old and a new project. I have been photographing manuscript libraries for about seventeen years, all told, with a particular motivation in mind. On the surface, I want to visually capture the objects and spaces that I have been seeing while doing research in India. But underlying this aim is an impulse to aestheticise the manuscript and library in an effort to capture the feelings that arise in me when I see these objects and spend time in these spaces. The images of *Manuscriptistan*—in publications, exhibitions and presentations—point to my responses to seeing shelf after shelf and pile after pile of bound and unbound palm-leaf manuscripts; to walking through fluorescent-lit spaces, inhaling musty, lemon-grassy and disinfecting odours; to searching for texts in tidy libraries alive with human activity and in those that are hushed, tumbledown and relatively unused. To do this, I have had to square an urge to objectify these objects and spaces as ‘autonomously knowable’ and ‘instinctively open to the interpretation and enjoyment’ of art students, authorities and connoisseurs—standard criteria in art history for labelling something ‘art’ until the end of the twentieth century²—with an understanding of the contexts and usefulness of these objects and spaces that has and continues to inform my historical and philological training. *Manuscriptistan* is the outcome of the union of two kinds of appreciation that for a long time were seldom seen as complementary in discussions about what makes an art object: the autonomous power of the object (and space) and the object’s (and space’s) context. This project attempts to simultaneously aestheticise the Indian manuscript library and acknowledge that the Indian manuscript qua art object (something visually pleasing) also inherently evokes cultural contexts of function and history.

Aesthetics call to mind a certain framework within which art and literature operate, are produced, and evoke a sense of beauty in their observers and readers. In this article, I discuss the principles that guided my aestheticisation of manuscript spaces into art spaces and how I bid to frame what I find to be aesthetically pleasing spaces and objects (libraries and manuscripts) through photography. The Indian manuscripts and libraries in the images of *Manuscriptistan* are beautiful to me, as I explain below, because of several things, including the viewpoints and lighting of the photos that I created and captured. But the structural designs and the manuscripts themselves are equally attractive. The space of a library and the people who tend those spaces further ground the beauty in the photography, collectively creating a context that is integral to the aesthetic I want to create in this project.

2. Morgan Pitelka, ‘Introduction’, in Jan Mrazek and Morgan Pitelka (eds), *What’s the Use of Art: Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), p. 2.

Figure 4. Telangana, 2017. ©Anthony Cerulli.

The photographs of *Manuscriptistan* imbricate makers of art, art objects and viewers of art. This relationship triangle occupied Indian aesthetic theory, *rasashastra*, for centuries, and it can help us understand what makes something beautiful and how art makes people feel. An awareness of this tripartite association—maker, object, viewer—informed the way I developed *Manuscriptistan*'s exhibitions as a potential counter to the tendency in art history books, especially books about Asian art, that Stanley O'Connor observed 25 years ago. These books, he wrote, typically show 'no visible effort to establish [Asian art objects'] place whether in the landscape or in the house, compound, palace or monastery. They are placeless, viewed from nowhere, unframed by cultural practice or physical circumstance and are thus unworlded'.³ By intending for *Manuscriptistan* to be photo-*ethnographic*, I aim to eschew the art historical tendency to uncouple the viewer from the art object and curator/user/consumer of the art object being viewed.

Indian manuscript libraries and their users

I like to think, looking back now, that I was always taking pictures of Indian manuscript libraries with these pointed interests in mind. The reality is that during my first decade of photographing manuscripts and libraries in India, I was simply aware that I liked what I was seeing and thus, whenever possible, I tried to get permission to document those sights in pictures. But my first and most pressing charge was always to

3. Stanley J. O'Connor, 'Human Literacy and Southeast Asian Art', in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 26, no. 1 (1995), p. 157.

Figure 5. Telangana, 2017. ©Anthony Cerulli.

locate, possibly photocopy, and then read and translate particular texts. I went to manuscript libraries as a researcher first and foremost. Only after that work, and if the situation allowed for it, would I set up my tripod and camera and shoot the shelves, aisles, walls, employees and holdings of a library.

The presence of my camera was never unusual in this context. Scholars often bring photography equipment with them to manuscript libraries in India. Oftentimes the equipment is for reproducing specific leaves of manuscripts related to a research project. These people want to bring the knowledge contained in manuscripts back home with them and study it. In general, since 2003, most people I have encountered in Indian manuscript libraries have been there for one or a combination of three reasons: because they work there; because they are potential donors (and, for example, are being given a tour of the spaces and collections); or because they are visiting scholars who want access to the knowledge contained inside the texts (i.e. they want to read them).

The images of *Manuscriptistan* that I consider most obviously ethnographic speak to the first group. These pictures recognise the constellation of people in India's manuscript cultures at the everyday and operational level. These images are meant to expand the aesthetic nature of the library by putting the viewer in touch with the personal and social context of these spaces, to offer views of the lives of strangers. Some of these people are professors who use the libraries as spaces to teach students about manuscriptology and conservation. Others are career administrators with little or only superficial scholarly interest in what the texts in the libraries are actually about. Still others are custodial workers and security guards who clean and safeguard the collections to ensure they endure. The work of all these people supports the texts, and the lives of the texts in turn impact these people's livelihoods. The staffs at these places are obviously

and practically important to ongoing academic research that involves manuscripts, and at the end of this article I explain how and why the ethnographic component of *Manuscriptistan* is indispensable to the project.

What's noteworthy about the other two categories of people I have encountered at manuscript libraries? Remarks from a graduate student in a library in Kerala in 2008 explain part of the second group. 'You see that man over there', she quietly said to me, pointing to a handsomely dressed, grey-pated septuagenarian man being led around the library by its senior conservator. 'The in-charge is trying to get him to donate his private collection of palm-leaf manuscripts to our library. He's a retired scholar from Alappuzha, and he apparently has over one hundred of them. They would improve the *kavya* (poetry) collection here, which is small'. That library already had an abundance of medical, astrological and grammatical manuscripts. Boosting its literature was seen as a way to bring a wider range of attention to the library. More attention could, in turn, result in (more) funding and preservation projects. Over the past seventeen years, I have also seen local politicians touring university manuscript libraries in Kerala and Uttar Pradesh, a few presumably wealthy philanthropists in libraries in Telangana, and any number of curious tourists. All of these people took tours and marvelled at the manuscripts for the diverse and towering local and national histories of learning they embody. I presume, though I never verified, that many of these people left money as donations to the institutions at the end of their tours or, in the case of the politicians, pledged to lend their support to the libraries' efforts to upkeep their collections.

The third category has been my category for many years. I was (and still am) a student of Indian medicines and religions, and at times over the last two decades, manuscripts have been part of my research, sometimes to understand how different manuscript traditions have been standardised by editors and translators in critical editions, and at other times because no printed editions of texts I have needed exist. But I was also always taking pictures, and on reflection, if the origin of *Manuscriptistan* was in 2003, since then I have also been straddling a fourth category of manuscript library clientele. People in this group see the library as an art space. The aims motivating people in this category—though I can only speak for myself—are what I describe now.

Framing Indian manuscript libraries

The images of *Manuscriptistan* are meant to stir viewers to think about the manuscript library in a typical dictionary definition sense, as an institution or establishment that is charged with the care of a collection of manuscripts and the duty of making manuscripts accessible to those who need to use them. The libraries I have photographed are also sometimes more than this, however. In many of these places, the contents of the manuscripts extend beyond humanistic and scientific literatures and include public records and other important historic documents, such as documentation of local births, marriages and deaths, government reports and municipal agreements. When we consider the holdings of these places as a whole, therefore, what I label a manuscript *library* in this article is just as aptly defined as an *archive*. These places have complicated economic, political and social pasts. The materials they have preserved and make

available are products of decisions made by people in positions of authority in powerful cultural institutions like colonial regimes, state-run universities and government organisations. The information they present about Indian history, social construction, politics and so much more is bound to incite a range of responses in people who observe and work in them. One can feel wonder and see immense creativity as well as sense the violence and social fragmentation that's reflected in the holdings.⁴ The sheer volume of India's manuscripts is impressive. But the reality is that writings and voices of minority groups are frequently missing from these collections. The picture of history they present is thus incomplete, often reflecting a repressive distribution of social privileges and misrepresenting the actual scope of cultural diversity that existed in the communities where the materials in the archive were produced.

While presentations about the *Manuscriptistan* project recognise the political histories of archives, photographs in the project's exhibits ask viewers to consider reframing the way they look at the library and archive by inquiring: can the manuscript library and manuscript be art? As the title of this project suggests, *Manuscriptistan* is concerned with particular types of historic documents held in archives and libraries: manuscripts—i.e. books, texts or other documents that were composed by hand. Most of the manuscripts I have photographed are palm-leaf manuscripts, arranged in what is known as a 'bundle form' that has 'a number of folios of similar size, pressed between

Figure 6. Kerala, 2018. ©Anthony Cerulli.

4. There is a lot of research on the politics of the archive that could be cited here. Although the topic is beyond the scope of this article's remit, it is worth pointing to Nicholas Dirks' collection of essays that cogently tackle this topic in the Indian context. See Nicholas Dirks, *Autobiography of an Archive: A Scholar's Passage to India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

two wooden panels slightly larger in size than the folios'. They typically have one or two holes 'bored in them through which a cord is passed to tie the bundle'.⁵ But palm-leaf manuscripts are not the only objects on display in *Manuscriptistan*. There are also plenty of images of paper manuscripts, not to mention modern-style books, municipal documents, maps and people, in the project's presentations and exhibitions.

Handwritten manuscripts started to appear in South Asia before the turn of the Common Era. B.S. Kesavan argued that there was likely manuscript-style writing in South Asia as early as the fifth century BCE, given references to 'various types of material used for writing, such as leaves (*panna*), wood (*phalaka* or board, and *salaka* or bamboo chips or slips), and metals' in the earliest layers of the Pali Canon.⁶ It is actually difficult to pinpoint when scribes in South Asia began writing texts—or, more accurately, inscribing texts with metal and wooden styluses on dried birch bark, palmyra and talipot palm leaves—in classical Indian languages like Pali, Sanskrit and Tamil. Manuscript editions were produced and reproduced in this way for centuries, mostly with just text but occasionally with images, some in black and white and some with simple colouring.

Today, archives and libraries across South Asia contain countless manuscripts of varying quality and age. The holdings of each one of these spaces offers a glimpse into the linguistic, religious and cultural diversity of the region. *Manuscriptistan* is a visual study of manuscripts and libraries only in India, where the National Mission for Manuscripts (NAMAMI) in New Delhi estimates that roughly seven million manuscripts are stored.⁷ Scholars have proposed a much larger figure, anecdotally at least, taking into account manuscripts in public and government libraries as well as those in private collections. For instance, I have seen projections go as high as thirty million.⁸ By either count, Indian manuscript collections contain a lot of information about the cultures and histories of India and its neighbours.

Nevertheless, most of India's manuscripts have not been read or formally studied in recent decades and, as a result, the condition of many of them is poor. The lifespan of a paper manuscript is generally thought to be about two centuries before it becomes illegible and so brittle that it cannot be handled. A palm-leaf manuscript can last much longer before worms and other insects damage it if the storage climate is appropriate. Some libraries in India cannot financially sustain climate-controlled rooms with non-damaging lighting, and in these circumstances, many manuscripts (especially the paper ones) are today in danger of soon becoming unreadable.⁹

5. Anupam Sah, 'Palm Leaf Manuscripts of the World: Material, Technology and Conservation', in *Studies in Conservation*, Vol. 47 (2002), pp. 15–6.

6. B.S. Kesavan, *The Book in India: A Compilation* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1986), p. 9. Most Buddhological scholars agree that the Pali Canon as we have it today was not put into writing until the first century BCE.

7. National Mission for Manuscripts, Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Government of India [<http://www.namami.org/national-survey.htm>, accessed 26 Feb. 2020].

8. On the Indology Listserv, for example, on 19 March 2009, Dominik Wujastyk recounted a conversation in which the famous scholar of Sanskrit astronomical literature and a recognised authority on India's manuscript history, David Pingree, postulated the number as around thirty million, though there are apparently no published sources to corroborate this [http://list.indology.info/pipermail/indology_list.indology.info/2009-March/032925.html, accessed 13 Sept. 2019].

9. In the same Indology Listserv post mentioned in note 8, Dominik Wujastyk came up with a rough calculation among existing manuscript corpora in India that have dated colophons, which number about 15 percent in a typical collection, and the median date for surviving Sanskrit manuscripts is 1830.

Figure 7. Kerala, 2015. ©Anthony Cerulli.

The size of India's manuscript stock, the import of the information these works contain, and the value of that information to Indians, South Asian history and to many other places and people prompted the Indian Ministry of Tourism and Culture in 2003 to create NAMAMI with the express purpose of finding India's most important manuscript collections and preserving them through large-scale digitisation projects.¹⁰ It is a slow venture. But the project will preserve important cultural and scientific knowledge for posterity and future study. It is already making available its ever-growing database online (www.namami.gov.in), which presents enormous benefits for scholars of South Asia as well as anyone interested in Indian history and culture.

The literary ideas, philosophical arguments, poems, scientific speculations and more recorded in India's manuscripts need to be preserved, and they should be available to everybody who would like to read them. The *Manuscriptistan* project is, somewhat curiously I realise, a digital-visual project that attempts to draw out and compensate for some of the downsides of a massive digital humanities effort to preserve Indian knowledge like the one NAMAMI has been doing. Images in *Manuscriptistan* offer insights into some of the ways in which the national digitisation project changes people's modes of engagement with the history of writing, reading and research in India. My photographs are meant to evoke aesthetic aspects of manuscripts and the places that hold them. They encourage us to ask: when knowledge becomes the singular object of interest in our studies of the history, development and transmission of scientific and literary forms, such as *kavya*, *jyotisha*, *nataka*, *ayurvedaa* and others, and that

10. The NAMAMI website states that its original mission was to 'unearth and preserve the vast manuscript wealth of India'. See National Mission for Manuscripts [<https://www.namami.gov.in/history>, accessed 10 Sept. 2019].

Figure 8. Kerala 2018. ©Anthony Cerulli.

knowledge is stripped of its physical casings and locations of reference, then digitised and made available online, how does that reconfiguration impact the way we receive that knowledge? Put another way: how does a hands-on engagement with a manuscript impact the way we understand, explain and use the knowledge it expresses? Without contact with the physical object, how does the digitisation process help us explore the ‘life’ of the text, including how it might have been used and where it might have circulated, or even to appreciate the conservation work that might have gone into it before we saw it? This project asks, along with Benjamin Fleming’s recent inquiry: is a manuscript ‘something that we can ever think of without material properties?’¹¹ Indeed we are already doing that in the Indian context, and it is happening elsewhere around the world. As manuscript libraries are digitised, their collections are decontextualised from the physical spaces they inhabited and recontextualised to meet requirements for online presentation and access. In the process, the loss of the physical text and its space produces a number of consequences for research that involves manuscripts and manuscript libraries, and I would like to consider what this loss might mean in aesthetic terms.

Before I do this, it is important to pause to remark on two things. First, I do not see the digitisation of India’s manuscripts as a setback. NAMAMI’s work (and the work of numerous other international groups)¹² has been and continues to be vital to the preservation of India’s history. What is more, there are exceptional digital resources available today that can make the complex appreciation and understanding that emerges

11. Benjamin Fleming, ‘The Materiality of South Asian Manuscripts from the University of Pennsylvania MS Coll. 390 and the Rāmamālā Library in Bangladesh’, in *Manuscript Studies*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (2016), p. 50.

12. In the same Indology post referenced in note 8, Wujastyk cites as an example the digital collection of the Directory of Oriental Manuscripts in Germany (Verzeichnis der Orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland).

from the engagement with physical manuscripts relatable and shareable with large audiences online. Here, I am thinking about the work of Flavio Marzo at the British Library¹³ and Dot Porter's VisColl project at the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies in Pennsylvania,¹⁴ which preserve and, in a sense, re-establish some of the experience of handling physical manuscripts when viewed virtually. Some of the techniques that preservationists and librarians are using to digitise manuscripts elsewhere around the world are not always matched in online Indian archives. More of this technology will improve the use of these resources.

Second, I do not imagine *Manuscriptistan* as a nostalgic project. Two important goals of this work are to document collections of physical objects and spaces and to invite viewers to consider them as art objects and spaces. The manuscripts and libraries have not gone away with the advent and progress of India's digitisation projects and the digitisation efforts of teams of Indologists at libraries and universities around the world. It may happen that the digitisation of certain manuscript libraries will bring them 'fame', and an increase in requests for digital access to certain collections might bring better funding to the libraries that maintain those texts, thereby extending the longevity of the objects and spaces. Though it is impossible for me to predict the reactions of viewers of *Manuscriptistan*'s exhibits and publications, these photographs are meant to do more than inspire reveries. They are intended to call to mind the things that one encounters in a manuscript library that are not reproduceable digitally—namely, aesthetic texture. The images are meant to prompt a sensibility in the viewer by framing what you see when you visit an Indian manuscript library, browse its collections and speak with the employees there. It is a documentary of a researcher's experiences, the substances of archival spaces and the physical qualities of manuscripts that (in my own experience) engagement with manuscripts on a computer screen alters and often omits. But I do not want to communicate through the images of *Manuscriptistan* a longing for the work of the researcher of manuscripts never to change, not to go virtual or online globally.

What, then, are some of the aesthetic consequences of digitisation schemes? A major effect of digital preservation is the reduction of the physical *mise-en-scène* of the library. Removal or erasure of the material environment obscures the checks and constraints that have been imposed on manuscripts through taxonomic assignment, which affects their probability of use by ordering archivists' and readers' relationships with them. While it is true that online databases of scans of Indian manuscripts rework classificatory structures and our bodily proximities to them, for many people, if not most, these changes are appreciated. We no longer have to travel to India to access many of the texts we need to do our research, which saves time and money. Our searches can be more precise, too. Using NAMAMI's database, for example, we can do multi-pronged advanced searches by title, author, script, manuscript material, commentator

13. Flavio Marzo, 'Digitising Books as Objects: The Invisible Made Visible', The British Library Collection Care Blog (19 Feb. 2018) [<https://blogs.bl.uk/collectioncare/2018/02/digitising-books-as-objects-the-invisible-made-visible.html>, accessed 14 Sept. 2019].

14. Dot Porter led this project from the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in collaboration with Alexandra Gillespie, Alberto Campagnolo and Conal Tuohy and the University of Toronto Libraries and the Old Books New Sciences Lab [<https://github.com/KislakCenter/VisColl>, accessed 14 Sept. 2019].

Figure 9. Uttar Pradesh, 2017. ©Anthony Cerulli.

and/or commentary title. Searches can focus on specific locations where manuscripts are located by state, city, district and institution. But these classifications express a different logic than the ones in the spaces that were built to hold manuscripts. The physical structures that literally support the manuscripts are not visible. There are no ladders alongside wooden and metal shelving, no overhead tubelights, no glass cases displaying a collection's esteemed assets. The placement of manuscripts in each library is the product of idiosyncratic, sometimes innovative and sometimes routine decisions of a series of directors and administrators. The decisions of online archiving may be like this as well. But the digital collection is the product of a total reimagining, reorganisation and coalescing of spaces that, materially, are anything but uniform from library to library.

Some spaces that I visited for the *Manuscriptistan* project are orderly, uncluttered and replete with visual categories of classification that more or less match the classical knowledge systems of Indian intellectual history. Others appear to have little to no outwardly noticeable organisation, requiring a conversation with library staff to know what the space contains and where texts are located. 'We don't have any categories', an archivist told me in Kerala. 'Texts are numbered when we receive them and placed on the shelves according to the date they arrived at the library. We recently reorganised the library so that the oldest texts are at the back and on the highest shelves'. She continued: 'We also keep some in this glass display case because they are rare and beautiful'. At larger libraries with a simple numerical convention, library staff may also 'tag' each manuscript with metadata on the binding of the manuscript itself and/or in their files to mark each work's general field, and these categorisations will be published

periodically as a catalogue of the collection's holdings. Some libraries arrange their manuscripts according to language of composition. A few places I visited were not organised in any noticeable way apart from the material substrate of the manuscript (e.g. paper and palm leaf). At others, it appeared as though organisation had been suspended quite some time before I arrived.¹⁵

Digitisation does not account for, but often obscures or ignores, the architectural and spatial aesthetics of the library. Shelves of palm-leaf texts, stacked from floor to ceiling, sometimes wrapped in colourful cloth bundles, are telescoped into URLs that belie their impressive and sturdy histories as repositories of knowledge. Online pictures of manuscripts are edited for clarity, with measuring scales placed alongside their leaves to show how big they are in 'real life'. The fluorescently-lit glow of the archive is absent in an online engagement, whose viewer misses the halting sight of an illuminated manuscript amid the grayscale landscape of concrete and whitewashed walls. When we work with these materials on our computers, naturally we do not have to dust off manuscripts that have sat unused for some time, nimbly hold together crumbling pieces of leaves, or carefully avoid inhaling mould spores while we inspect and read them. This is a routine experience at some manuscript libraries in India. It is a material experience that points to the life and usage of a text even before it has been studied. Even if this experience does not obviously or immediately influence a translation or analysis of the text, it nevertheless frames the reader's perception of that text and informs their understanding and appreciation of Indian manuscript cultures today. The tacit digestion of that information can emerge later on, in one's teaching, for example, or in a photo-ethnography project like *Manuscriptistan*. In a modest way, this project aims to curb some of this material erasure by making these spaces visible and, in so doing, to provide prompts for discussion about preservation, digitisation and contemporary engagement with literature and a past that is contained in manuscripts.

I also want this project to challenge us to confront, see and think about manuscripts and libraries as visual objects and sites as such, aside from their content. I do not want to deny that the images of this project are about India's past, pre-typography recording and transmission of knowledge. They are. But that meaning is deliberately opaque. First and foremost, the images are meant to help the viewer appreciate what it feels like to be around these works and in these buildings and to see spaces, storage structures and still-life images of the manuscript and manuscript library as functional art objects and spaces. While the images do convey socio-historical information about manuscriptology and manuscript storage and conservation, that these images also incite responses in me that are epi-intellectual, not entirely logical or sober, but bordering on affective and enthralling, puts in stark relief for me that what I am doing, *what this project does*, is also intimately personal in visible ways that many of my other professional pursuits are not. Creating, editing and framing exhibits of 60+ photographs (ranging in size from 13 × 18 cms to 61 × 92 cms) out of thousands of images from multiple libraries exposes more than my style of writing, the way I structure an argument and the

15. Benjamin Fleming's study, cited in note 11, looks at the materiality of manuscripts, comparing research on South Asian manuscript cultures at the University of Pennsylvania and the Rāmamālā Library in Bangladesh. The article nicely illuminates some of the organisational differences and difficulties one finds in archival spaces that hold manuscripts from South Asia. See Fleming, 'The Materiality of South Asian Manuscripts from the University of Pennsylvania MS Coll. 390 and the Rāmamālā Library in Bangladesh'.

Figure 10. Kerala, 2019. ©Anthony Cerulli.

rationale for why I opt to do the work I do. *Manuscriptistan* reveals some of these things. But it also reflects something more, something different: my own ‘taste’, or what classical Indian literary theorists called *rasa*. It especially displays my ‘faculty for judging’, a phrase Immanuel Kant used to describe taste in his third major critique, the *Critique of Judgment*.¹⁶

Judgements of taste, Kant argued, determine whether or not something is beautiful. These are aesthetic determinations, and they are based on feelings of pleasure, which is precisely what gave him pause about them: they are prone to subjectivity and cannot amount to real knowledge, i.e. knowledge that can be linked to absolute and determinate concepts.¹⁷ The pleasure that comes from this kind of judgement, he said, derives from the ‘freedom to make for ourselves an object of pleasure out of something’.¹⁸ Here Kant’s ideas about taste are useful to explain how we can understand manuscripts and manuscript libraries as art objects and spaces. The ‘freedom to make for ourselves an object of pleasure’ describes the process of artists to make creative or poetic use of their productive imaginations. A thing becomes beautiful when our productive imagination makes it into an art object, by relating to it with creativity and/or a poetic sensibility, and thereby bringing us pleasure.¹⁹ The pleasure of aesthetic experience is problematic for Kant because it hangs on the chemistry of imagination and

16. *Critique of Judgment* (1790) followed Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).

17. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, J.H. Bernard (trans.) (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1951), Book I, Sections 1–2.

18. *Ibid.*, Book I, Section 5, pp. 210.

19. Michel Chaouli, *Thinking with Kant’s Critique of Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 13.

understanding in an individual, and this interplay cannot eventually be borne out by absolute and determinate concepts, thereby producing so-called real knowledge. And yet, Kant also mounted a defence of creativity and the making of art that makes ‘a new kind of sense’ and ‘aesthetic ideas’, both of which he thought surpass the realm of universal concepts by enlivening the spirit.²⁰

I brought together the images of *Manuscriptistan* as a way to build a sustained inquiry into a collection of responses I had in similar circumstances over many years. The images I ultimately selected to exhibit are reflective of my own aesthetic judgement. I have aestheticised these objects and spaces—attempted to make them attractive or acceptable to so-called refined taste, to make them the subject of artistic treatment. The objects and spaces in the images bring me pleasure. And while I hope the ways I have framed—in all senses of the word—the spaces and objects in the pictures disclose beauty, and they are capable of provoking responses of pleasure or displeasure, expectancy or disbelief, concentration or amusement, or some combination of these feelings and others, I cannot, as Kant understood it, ‘compel assent’ in observers.

The aesthetic judgements that have gone into *Manuscriptistan* might not amount to true, universal knowledge in the Kantian sense. Kant was correct that aesthetic knowledge is subjective. I do not expect others to respond to these images like I do. But I find solace in Kant’s observation that people make judgements of beauty with the belief that other people will agree with them, suggesting that there is a *sensus communis*, a common aesthetic sense, a ‘community of taste’, where my judgements about beauty align with those of others.²¹ In this regard, it is worth noting that one of the things I most enjoy about doing this project is that, even if I hope to tap into a community of like-minded people, *Manuscriptistan* is not aimed at a particular audience. Since 2015, I have shared many of the project’s photographs: two of the images were published in a photography journal in 2018; an exhibition of the work was hung at the University of Pennsylvania in the fall of 2019; and at the time of writing, a selection of images from the project is hanging in the Chazen Museum of Art in Madison.²² This material will reach many people I will never know. Of course, academic research operates like this too. Scholars cannot predict who will and who will not take up the things they write or, for that matter, how readers will respond if they do. But unlike most of the things I write, which are, I imagine, mostly read by South Asianists and maybe others interested

20. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

21. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Book II, Section 40, p. 14. One need not look very far to see that other artists have also been fascinated by the book as art and the library and archive as aesthetically pleasurable spaces. If there was one identifiable moment of inspiration that I can remember when *Manuscriptistan* bored into my head as something more than a hobby, it was in 2012, in Paris, when I came across Bernadette Genée and Alain Le Borgne’s mesmerising documentation of the national archives in northern France. The following year, Dayanita Singh published *File Room*, which appears to be indebted to Genée and Le Borgne (though Singh does not mention their work in the interview she published at the end of her book). These two books and Singh’s recent experiments with miniature art books as wall art, *Kerala Box* and *Pothi Box*, both released through her self-started publishing unit, Spontaneous Books, have also informed how I imagine the Indian manuscript and library as art. See Bernadette Genée and Alain Le Borgne, *Archifolia: Documents* (Paris: Filigranes Éditions, 2012); Dayanita Singh, *File Room* (Berlin: Steidl, 2013); Dayanita Singh, *Kerala Box* (New Delhi: Spontaneous Books, 2017); and Dayanita Singh, *Pothi Box* (New Delhi: Spontaneous Books, 2018).

22. Anthony Cerulli, ‘*Manuscriptistan* 01’ and ‘*Manuscriptistan* 04’, in *Light*, Vol. 7 (Fall 2018), pp. 10–1; *Manuscriptistan*, Kamin Gallery, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA (Sept.–Dec. 2019: 62 pieces, solo exhibit); and *Manuscriptistan*, Chazen Museum of Art, *Faculty 2020 Exhibition*, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, WI (Feb.–May 2020: 4 pieces, group exhibit).

Figure 11. Kerala, 2019. ©Anthony Cerulli.

more broadly in the historical study of medicine and religion—most likely an academic audience—these images will also reach people unconnected to South Asian Studies and academia.

The Indian theorist Bhatta Nayaka (ninth–tenth century CE) said the only genuine response to beauty is complete absorption (*vishranti*), ‘where the subject experiences the pleasure of a consciousness untouched by the things of this world’.²³ Kant gestured to this idea when he observed that art enlivens the human spirit. Aesthetics helps us explore and explain what happens, what we feel and experience, when we are led into another world by the sight, sound, touch or taste of something beautiful. I created *Manuscriptistan* to provoke absorption in viewers, to generate reflection on the substance, forms, colours and textures in the pictures. But the photographs were not staged. I did not move any of the objects or rearrange any of the spaces that viewers see. The spaces and objects I chose to shoot struck me as I found them. My experience was enhanced by certain sight angles, shelving arrangements and lighting, and over the course of dozens of hours in these libraries, I tried to capture the most thought-provoking sights with my camera. In some pictures, the main aesthetic element that jumps out at me is structural durability, in others, it’s a mix of historical wear and tear and environmental decay, while the beauty I wanted to develop and frame in still other images is topographic and evocative of materials and places that have nothing to do with paper, palm leaves or India. The getting lost in other worlds that aesthetics is concerned with, Sheldon Pollock proposed, is ‘an almost everyday occurrence’. I hope viewers of *Manuscriptistan* get lost in the shadowy yet ordinary experience of ‘watching something unreal, and willingly embracing that real unreality’. To do this, Pollock

23. Sheldon Pollock, *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 18.

continued, 'is to enter into a fascinating hall of mirrors. Making sense of the reflections in this hall is what "aesthetics" in part is concerned to do'.²⁴ I am not suggesting that the images in *Manuscriptistan* are otherworldly. They are not. Nor are they mundane, however, especially not in the lives of most Indians today and it is likely they never were. I would like this project to convey visual insights about how and where Indian historical data and ideas have been assembled while at the same time providing images that evoke the weightiness and substance of learning and history, however these things might *feel* for viewers, irrespective of their prior knowledge of India or Indian manuscript cultures.

Conclusion: Aesthetics in context

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the ethnographic part of *Manuscriptistan*. Ethnography involves writing (*grapho*) about people and cultures (*ethnos*). Photo-ethnography expands the media of the method. It is visual and qualitative, rather than a quantitative or statistics-focused type of research. One does photo-ethnography, and in this way it is a research process. Yet photo-ethnography is also a product: the outcome of the method is a photo-ethnography. I see the people at the libraries I visited to be part and parcel of the artistic value of the images in which they appear. Their relationships to the texts and spaces contribute to the contextual aesthetics of the project. The images I exhibit are intended to at once evoke sentiment and convey information about people, places and writing. This theme is present in many of the images I have

Figure 12. Kerala, 2018. ©Anthony Cerulli.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Figure 13. Telangana, 2017. ©Anthony Cerulli.

created since 2003. But it was only in 2015 that I began to make a concerted effort to approach each library with an aim to also document and present some of the people who manage the spaces where manuscripts are held, people whose livelihoods are influenced by and connected to the libraries. These people have stories about the collections and relationships to them that, unsurprisingly, differ from my own. The experiences they bring to the library and archive add to Pollock's hall of mirrors metaphor, since in many cases they literally hold the keys to these spaces and, without fail, they query me about why I want access to specific manuscripts or permission to photograph a library.

This is all to say that sometimes it was a challenge to get into the libraries that I photographed for *Manuscriptistan*. In some cases, I needed multiple connections and introductions from people in positions of power to gain access. And even when it seemed like I was equipped with an arsenal of institutional affiliations and signatures, there were no guarantees of admission. Entry into private collections was just as elusive without the proper people to vouch for me. In a somewhat unexpected turn of events, in a few instances when I gained access to an

archive with permission to do a photo shoot, there was more curiosity about my intentions than in the past when I wanted to read and photocopy specific texts. People were suspicious about why I did *not* want access to the knowledge in the texts. But that was not always the case.

Take, for example, the archivist in Kerala in 2016, who pulled me by the arm through her collection, excitedly saying: 'I just placed a stack of newly-arrived palm-leaf manuscripts on a bench over there. They are in beautiful condition. Not yet catalogued. Come, come see them'. She became my partner on that photo shoot, pointing out the best angles for light as she invited me to take pictures of her posing alongside the glass panels covering the yellow library shelves.

Conversely, a team of four curators at an impressive collection of manuscripts in Uttar Pradesh shadowed my every move through their library in 2017. All of their manuscripts were padlocked behind glass and unreachable to me without their assistance. 'You have only ten minutes', the archivist in charge quickly established. He and his three co-workers shepherded me through the old building as I snapped as many pictures as possible, while a friend who accompanied me chatted with them in the hopes of securing more time. 'How many visitors do you get here each day?' she asked them. 'Lots of scholars come here, even from abroad, though some days no one comes at all', answered the worker I presumed to be the youngest of the bunch. 'They usually come to look at one or two texts, maybe to make copies of them. But they must have special permission from the director to see them'. 'I understand', my friend replied, then asked: 'Is it easy to get permission to see the texts?' 'No', the in-charge shot back, checking his watch. 'How many more photographs will he take?' 'As many as you'll allow', she said. A couple of minutes later, I asked the four men if they would pose for a picture next to the large wooden reading table in the middle of the library. As they got themselves organised, two sitting and two standing, I learned that the senior curator had been working at this library for 26 years. He did not study manuscriptology or conservation, as the two junior employees under him did. He had worked at the library his entire adult life after getting a degree in Sanskrit literature. His ability to read and at least glean the basic thrust of many of the manuscripts the library received every year moved him from acquisitions jobs up to the position of head archivist. I told him that I, too, had studied Sanskrit for several years, which prompted him to probe: 'Then why are you only taking pictures of the shelves and outsides of the manuscripts, even ones in cloth sacks?' 'I am interested in what some of these texts actually say', I replied, 'but I also find this place, the way it's organised, and the impressive collection to be beautiful. Don't you?' I inquired. All four curators shrugged their shoulders and glanced at each other doubtfully.

This experience raises questions about the impact of proximity on the perception of a place as an art space. Conversations with workers at the institutions I have visited since 2015, asking them if they find their workplaces beautiful, and the occasional response of a shrug, beg the question of what distance or closeness in relation to an object and space does in the creation and perception of art. Bringing *Manuscriptistan* to the locations where the photographs were shot would be one way to discover how my framing of these places and objects appears to people who spend time in and around them every day. If *Manuscriptistan* continues beyond its current exhibition

Figure 14. Telangana, 2017. ©Anthony Cerulli.

schedule, maybe the best way to check the influence of distance or closeness on seeing the manuscript library as an art space, as a viewer of the exhibition in Philadelphia encouraged me to consider, would be to hand over the camera to the library staff, as Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman did in *Born into Brothels*, and see if and where their aesthetics align with my own.²⁵

In a very different experience from the one in Uttar Pradesh, in 2015 at a library in Kerala, I was left alone to take all the pictures I wanted and to ask students studying in an adjoining reading room for help, if I needed it. Before I left that day, the head librarian gave me his contact information and a pamphlet about his library, seemingly uninterested in what I was doing.

At a library in Telangana, one of the conservators sent me home with calligraphic renderings of my name in colourful Nasta'liq prints, and he requested that I send him copies of the photos that I took of him and his director, which I happily did. In short, responses to the photographic fieldwork I have done for this project have been wide-ranging.

In the end, I am tremendously grateful to the many people who have assisted me since this project's launch: the librarians, cataloguers and preservationists who have taken the time to walk me through these spaces and explain the holdings and their histories; the professors and students of manuscriptology who have shown me the nuances of different manuscript cultures in Indian history; the office administrators and security guards who have kept the lights on for me when I overstayed my welcome;

25. *Born into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids*, dir. Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman, THINKFilm and HBO, New York, 2005.

and the friends and colleagues who accompanied me to some of the libraries in these images and, so crucial to the work, occupied the workers with conversation and questions while I stole away into the stacks and lesser-used corners to try to get just the right shot.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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