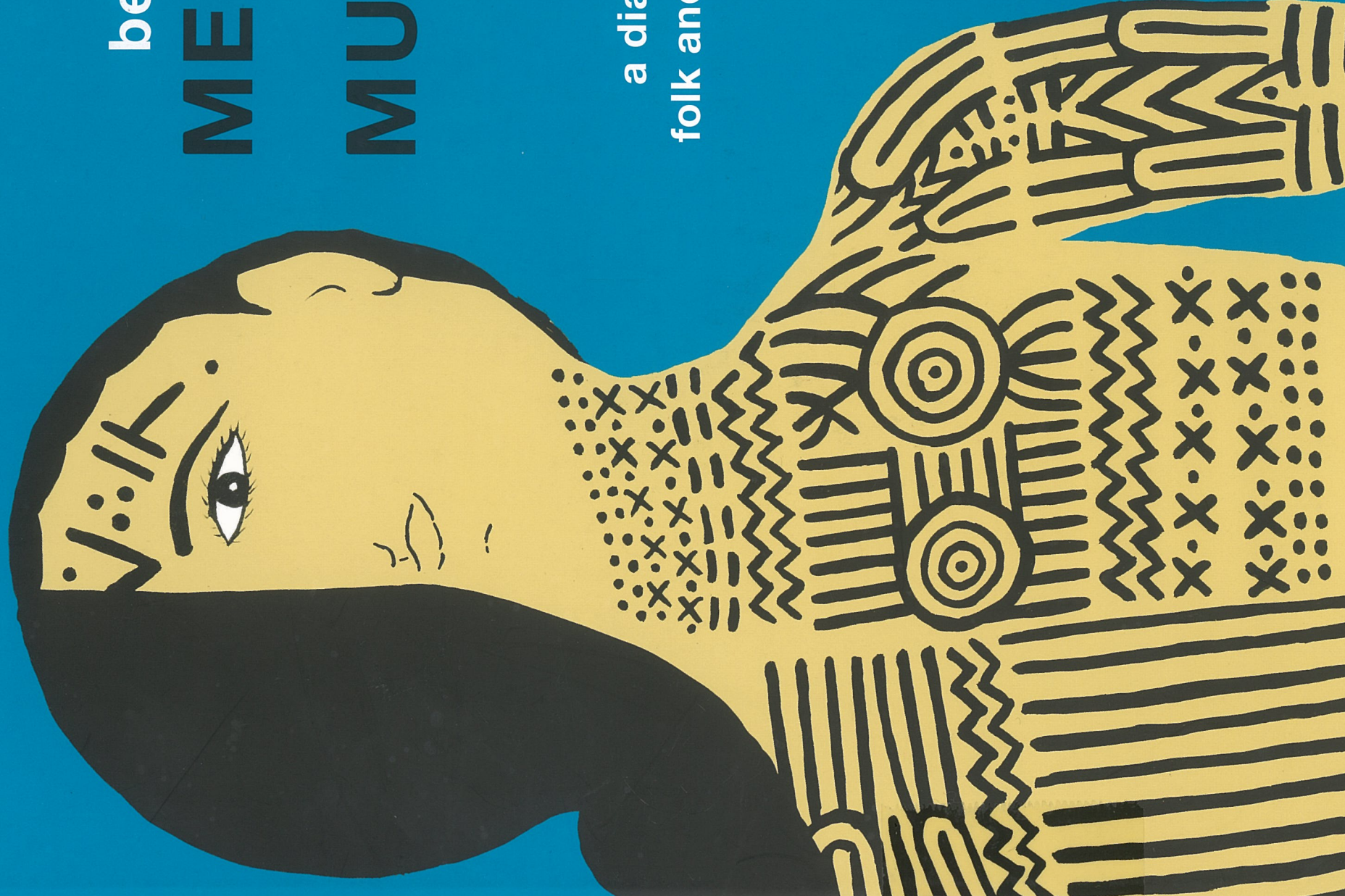


between
MEMORY
and
MUSEUM

a dialogue with
folk and tribal artists

edited by
ARUN WOLF
and
GITA WOLF





Bhuri Bai — Bhitl, Madhya Pradesh



Rajendar Shyam — Gond, Madhya Pradesh



Gond Lal — Ghodna, Chhattisgarh



Bhaddu Hamir — Pithora, Gujarat



Dawat Singh Uikey — Gond, Madhya Pradesh



Gangu Bai — Bhitl, Madhya Pradesh



Durga Bai Vyam — Gond, Madhya Pradesh



Lado Bai — Bhitl, Madhya Pradesh

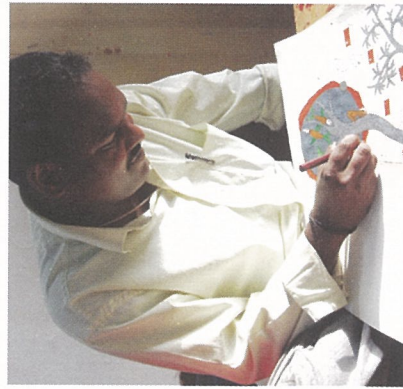


Gurupado Chitrakar — Patua, West Bengal

Rajendar Uikey — Gond, Madhya Pradesh



Manki Wadia — Warli, Maharashtra



Dilip Shyam — Gond, Madhya Pradesh



Japani Shyam — Gond, Madhya Pradesh



agdish Chitare — Mata-Ni-Pachedi, Gujarat



Mayank Shyam — Gond, Madhya Pradesh



Upan Bai — Ghodna, Chhattisgarh



Bhajju Shyam — Gond, Madhya Pradesh

Ramsingh Urveti — Gond, Madhya Pradesh



Malli Bai — Bhil, Madhya Pradesh



Manimala Chitrakar — Patua, West Bengal



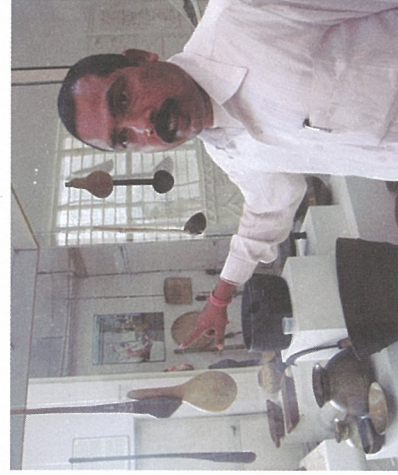
Prasad Singh Kusharam — Gond, Madhya Pradesh



Pradeep Marawe — Gond, Madhya Pradesh



Shanti Bai Marawe — Ghodna, Madhya Pradesh



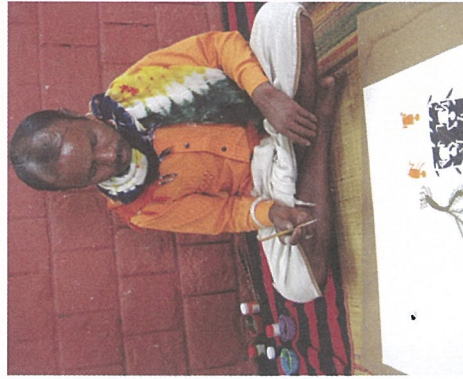
Venkatraman Singh Shyam — Gond, Madhya Pradesh



Ragunath — Warli, Maharashtra



Urmila Devi — Mithila, Bihar



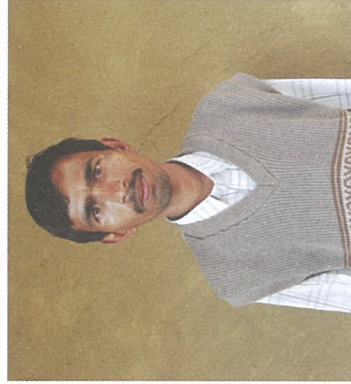
Ramesh Katara — Bhil, Madhya Pradesh



Roshni Vyam — Gond, Madhya Pradesh



Prahliad Moharana — Patachitra, Orissa



Pavan Paswan — Mithila, Bihar



Parvathi Bai — Sarguja, Chhattisgarh



Santosh Kumar Paswan — Mithila, Bihar



Sushila Devi — Mithila, Bihar



Thukka Hamir — Pithora, Gujarat

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edited by
ARUN WOLF
and
GITA WOLF

To Bhajju Shyam, for pointing us in so
many rich directions.



Adivasi societies are not fossilised societies. The historical legitimacy of... forest tribes lies in recognizing their way of life and in analyzing the significance of their contribution to Indian culture since the early times.

Romila Thapar

Early India: From the Origins to 1300 AD (2004)

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Beginnings

The Artists

The Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya – also known as the National Museum of Mankind – is an unusual anthropological museum that showcases a range of art and artefacts from folk and tribal cultures across India. The museum was put together – in Bhopal, central India – with the help of indigenous and folk artists and artisans, who were invited to assist in building the galleries and set up the exhibits. Many of them are still employed there, maintaining the displays or showing visitors around. They are also part of the museum's ongoing activities: events, get-togethers, workshops, commissions to paint or sculpt, storytelling, music and performance sessions.

One of the artists involved in setting up the Manav Sangrahalaya was Bhajju Shyam, from the Gond tribe in central India. Our publishing house has a long history of working with folk and tribal artists, and we have collaborated with Bhajju for over a decade. A few years ago, during the course of conversation, he began to reflect on his experience at the Manav Sangrahalaya. “I helped create a Gond exhibit,” he said. “We built a house and brought in all kinds of things you find in village homes. We made a Gond house, everything was as it is in the village, but it still felt strange to me. It wasn't home, I wouldn't feel comfortable sleeping inside it.” It was this observation – made in passing – which started us on the trail that led to this book. Did the other artists involved with the museum feel the same way as Bhajju?

We began thinking about the way museums represent cultures: do they connect to actual lifeworlds? Do the artists themselves think about their own heritage differently? How do they remember the past and keep it alive? An idea for an extended dialogue with indigenous and folk artists began to take shape.

We sensed that such an exchange had radical potential. Even though the Manav Sangrahalaya had involved various communities in setting up exhibits, the basic question of what a museum sets out to do – and how it does this – had never been under discussion. It was always a given. Museums such as the Manav Sangrahalaya were generally put together on the basis of current anthropological thinking. We were hoping that the artists would not only talk about how their communities could be represented, but also bring in ideas and options outside the museum's usual way of creating knowledge.

In February 2010, we started this conversation – fittingly enough in collaboration with the Manav Sangrahalaya – through a five-day workshop with thirty eight artists from a range of village and tribal communities across India. They had all been

involved with the museum in some way: several had been active in setting it up, and most of them had their work on display in the galleries. For all of them, the museum was an important hub of activities and ideas.

We began by talking about the Manav Sangrahalaya as one particular way of representing culture: how does the museum tell visitors about indigenous and folk cultures, both past and present? What does the space allow for, and what does it keep out? Was this particular understanding of tradition the same as their own communities' sense of the past and present? How did they remember what had gone before, and pass on this knowledge?

We pointed to the fact that the ability and means to represent gives the museum a certain authority. Who has the power to put whom in a museum? And if artists like them were in a position to create a museum about 'modern' urban people like us – the organisers of the workshop – what would they come up with?

Following several lively rounds of discussion, we asked the artists to come up with a visual response to some of the issues we had talked about. They got to work enthusiastically, taken by the novelty of the idea, and excited at being asked to comment on such a venerable institution as the museum.

While they were painting, we talked with each of the artists, asking them to comment on their work, and on the museum as an institution. Several of them were not literate, so we recorded their observations, and wrote it down. The range and sophistication of their responses was extraordinary. Some of them explored the idea of the museum as a repository, a place for safekeeping objects and ways of being that would otherwise be lost. Others were less equivocal: while they were not opposed to the notion of a museum per se, they appeared troubled by its inherent limitations. A few were oblique: they did not seem to respond directly to the issues we raised. Yet on a closer reading, what they had to say did address aspects of identity and collective memory – but through their own, and often very different categories of understanding.

Being part of this process made us realise once more the limitations of labelling artists, and classifying art practices into tidy categories such as 'folk', 'tribal' or 'traditional'. We tend to reduce their rich history and aesthetics to isolated facts, largely to do with style or folklore. The artists' responses came from an awareness and understanding that was far more layered and complex than we acknowledged. At one level, they related to the Manav Sangrahalaya as a space beyond reproach. It had provided them visibility, and opportunities that they were thankful for. At the same time – following our discussions – they began searching for an imaginative renewal of the original mandate that had created such a museum. What this might mean and where it would take them was potentially open-ended.

Over the course of the workshop, as the artists engaged with the project, we could see how the museum – a physical space they were familiar with and cherished – began to acquire new dimensions for them. It became a focal point around which they could reflect about many things: their lives, livelihoods, cultures, and identities. The process involved what we could call ‘memory work’: a way of reconstructing communal memory. This kind of recall of the past is generally associated with oral storytelling, which repeats well-known narratives but ‘updates’ them for the contemporary listener. Memory work through art is unusual. The viewer needs to bring very different associations to the work: it requires an exercise of imagination, and often does not have verbal equivalents. The link with the past is through traditional elements of style, but the themes the images explore are entirely new. The memory work the artists were engaged in was radical in another sense: it was anchored in a lived sense of community and culture, but was actively forward looking.

As the artists engaged with what a museum is, and can be, the idea of seriously re-imagining it took hold. They were struck by the possibility that a museum did not have to be an achieved state – where the visitor merely consumed what had been put on offer – but a site that could be contested. It could potentially take other forms. There were several ways of safekeeping the past, engaging with the present, and debating the future.

The Museum: a brief history

In many ways, the Manav Sangrahalaya is a special kind of museum, a product of the so-called New Museum Movement that emerged across the world in the 1970s. This was a campaign to actively involve indigenous and village communities in the setting up and running of anthropological museums. In India, this mandate acquired a formal shape much later, with what came to be known as the Guwahati Declaration of 1988. The movement also had another additional resonance in India – the need to find alternatives to a long tradition of colonial anthropology that had historically shaped the development of Indian museums.

The Manav Sangrahalaya was part of the impetus to overthrow the legacy of the past. But even so, it inherited many of the facets of what had gone before, which belonged to a longer history of museums in India. To understand the Manav Sangrahalaya in all its complexity, it is useful to place it within this history.

The genesis of museums in India was closely connected to the colonial enterprise. All museums, not just anthropological ones, owed their existence to the colonial project of mapping and classifying the vast and diverse wealth of the subcontinent. An unbelievably disparate set of people – British administrators, scholars, scientists, art enthusiasts and private collectors – were involved in the project. The aim was to gain detailed knowledge of the subject population, in order to govern them more effectively. It did enable efficient, and in many cases ruthless governance, especially of tribal and nomadic populations. But along the way, the exercise also led to something else: the creation of knowledge about different social groups, the collection of cultural objects, and the setting up of museums to preserve them.

British administrators and scholars were assisted by Indian informants when they created anthropological museums. These assistants tended to be educated urban men from the so-called upper castes – almost never from tribal or other modest social groups. So, native informants conceivably shared many of the biases of their employers when it came to the populations they indexed and classified. In this scheme of things, indigenous people were thought of as ‘primitive’ or ‘exotic’, in need of refinement, or in the best case, of protection. This was the basic ethos behind colonial anthropology, and the museums it gave rise to.

It was these kinds of museums that were later inherited by the independent Indian state. The new order obviously called for a radical change, an overthrow of the colonial model. But how this revision actually took place turned out to be interesting: it was not so much the accumulated knowledge about India’s many castes and tribes that came under scrutiny – the collections were, in fact, more or less taken over as they were; the shift was in how these collections were perceived. What museums contained was cultural wealth, and this inheritance was invaluable when it came to the new Indian state’s aim of nation building. In post-Independence India, the policy on anthropological museums was to promote them as sites that exhibited the incredible richness and diversity of the country. Museums were to document and preserve heritage – particularly of rural, tribal and other marginalised groups – and showcase the enormous variety of socio-cultural identities in India. They were to be places where people would come to see, enjoy and learn about all these different cultures. Collections of art, craft, costumes, jewellery and artefacts were curated with a view to educating the public on acknowledging cultural difference while agreeing to the importance of harmony and national integration. Museums were expected to illustrate and celebrate the popular national dictum: ‘Unity in Diversity’.

In practice though, the intentions of the planners and political leaders were not always realised. Most museums tended to be run-down and ill-serviced, with little in the way of interpretative narrative or signage to help the viewer understand the larger significance of what was on display. While rural and urban visitors, as well as generations of school children, thronged the museums of the nation, they did nothing more than stream past the exhibits. Particular galleries featuring distinctive art or craft did better, but in general, visitors to the museum were left to their own devices. Of course, there were regional differences, but on the whole, very little effort was made to elevate the museum into an imaginative or truly pedagogical space. There were a few good private galleries and collections, but the overall official culture was one of benign indifference and neglect.

In the 1970s, there was a movement towards some kind of change and reform. Newer and more sensitive curatorial sensibilities appeared, particularly with regard to tribal and folk groups. Some of this change was connected to global debates on the subject, as well as a self-reflexive turn in anthropological thinking. But other local pressures probably also played a role: the period saw a number of tribal communities across central and eastern India revolt against very oppressive economic and social conditions. This widespread, and at times violent, resistance included forcible possession of land by the poor and landless. The most marginal populations of India bursting on to the historical stage in this manner is also likely to have fuelled the debates around tribes, cultures and representation. At any rate, a full-fledged new museum policy began to be formulated, culminating in the Guwahati Declaration of 1988. New museums were to be 'inclusive' from now on, which meant that, for the first time, the subjects of an anthropological museum were to be consulted about their representation.

This was a radical break from a time-honoured way of thinking, in which cultures were ordered hierarchically – with tribal and nomadic cultures at the very bottom of the development scale. The so-called grand narrative of culture was for the most part a colonial legacy, a linear view of progress, which culminated with Great Britain at the apex. In post-colonial India, the argument obviously no longer held good in this particular form, but the basic idea of a cultural ladder had always been part of the ideology of caste and location. Museum spaces were invariably divided into 'classical' and 'folk', and indigenous cultures almost always viewed in a retrospective light.

Under the New Museum Movement, this relationship was to be reconfigured. Indigenous and folk communities were to become equal, and active, participants in the curatorial process. Artists, artisans, priests, bards, musicians and dancers from folk and tribal traditions were to be involved not only in setting up iconic spaces,

but also encouraged to be the ones to speak about their own traditions. The role of museum professionals – particularly state officials and cultural commissars – was to be restricted to mediating. Through greater interactivity, historically voiceless people were to have a greater say in the way they were represented.

It is to this mandate of the Government of India that the Manav Sangrahalaya owes its existence. The museum was to promote indigenous talent, keeping in mind the need for social justice, as well as some kind of economic benefit for the artists. It was also to facilitate ‘community building’, by putting artists, artisans and other creative people from local communities in touch with the general public.

With this in mind, the Manav Sangrahalaya has recreated outdoor exhibits featuring indigenous and folk architecture and ways of life, in addition to the display of art and artefacts in its galleries. Curated and constructed by craftspeople from local communities, the buildings are made with traditional material and methods of construction on a sprawling two hundred hectares of land that houses the museum. Many of the artists in our group had been part of this initial building of the museum, and some of them are still active in regularly restoring the work.

One of the most imaginative initiatives at the Manav Sangrahalaya has been the effort to nudge traditional art in new directions. For an outdoor project called the Mythological Trail, elderly men and women from different communities were asked to narrate stories and myths they remembered, and artists from the same communities were then commissioned to visualise these myths in varied art forms such as pottery, sculpture, painting, and murals. What they came up with went beyond the borders of the art that they usually practise, and in the process, opened up imaginative ideas and possibilities for further work.

It was with this spirit of open-minded innovation that we were invited to hold our workshop on the theme of the museum itself. Any institution is as vibrant and dynamic as those who run it, and we were particularly fortunate in finding great enthusiasm for our project from the former director, Dr. Vikhas Bhatt.

The Book

The long and supportive relationship that most of the artists in our group had with the Manav Sangrahalaya was another great advantage for us. Each of them had been carefully selected by the museum to take part in our workshop. Intimately acquainted with the Manav Sangrahalaya – some of them since its inception – they

were in a good position to evaluate what the association meant to them. So, we had access to a rich mixture of people and perspectives, and their position of trust towards the museum meant a degree of openness with us that would have been much harder to achieve in the time that we spent with them.

Through all this, we were aware of the great privilege we had been granted: the rare opportunity to have a creative dialogue with such an astonishing range of indigenous and folk artists. India is one of the very few places in the world where this is still possible, and practising traditional artists are not part of history but are our contemporaries, willing and happy to engage in dialogue. This is the fundamental on which this book is based.

We assume in our arguments that these communities, particularly indigenous ones, are coeval with the rest of society: they are part of our shared past and present. To a certain way of thinking, indigenous communities that have held on to tradition in some way are considered mainstream society's romantic pre-industrial 'other'. Their culture and lifeworlds are seen as seamlessly whole and unchanging. Those who feel a certain empathy towards these communities are particularly partial to this view, and the museum is no exception. It is certainly true that indigenous cultures possess a rich store of knowledge that has been systematically ignored and discounted. But these ways of knowing, and the experiential world they come from, are not outside the pull of history. Indigenous communities are as much part of a changing world as we are, subject to the challenges – both internal as well as from the outside – that all societies face. The pressures could be entirely different from the stresses of contemporary urban life, and they may be dealt with differently, but they do exist. So, to look at indigenous communities as an idealistic 'other' to mainstream society is to put them in a separate category to the rest of us. This denies the relationship that we are tied in, and its consequences. Admittedly, the relationship has been and continues to be, unequal. Indigenous people have been systematically oppressed, and the injustices they face show no signs of decreasing. But to view them only as victims flattens their identities as much as romanticising them does. There are no easy answers, let alone solutions, but we felt that letting them speak for themselves was a step in the right direction. It is important that these alternative perspectives are heard, and are seen to have a bearing on the real world. It is especially vital when we consider the future – not least because many indigenous people have held onto visions that are markedly different from modern ideas of unlimited progress. We need to take these viewpoints seriously, particularly so in a globalising world which is being increasingly run on the single-minded logic of capital.

This is the gist of what we hope to bring to the reader, with this book. Based on our workshop with folk and tribal artists, we wanted to gather together some of the rich and disparate elements that make up other views of the world: art, stories, knowledge, ritual, memory, change and a vision of the possible. They are primarily rendered through the medium of visual art.

Finally, despite the questions and ambiguities the book throws up, we would argue that the kind of museum we debate about is important for indigenous and folk artists in the Indian context. Many have to survive in an environment where their lives and habitats are under serious threat from unbridled economic expansion. The market place, where they sell their art, is not particularly interested in their growth as artists. So, it is vital to have institutions in place that provide them an open, nurturing and innovative space. The museum as it stands needs to be enriched in what it has set out to do, and we believe that this first sustained dialogue with these artists is one significant step in that direction.

How to Read this Book

The book is divided into four sections. The first features the idea of a museum and the knowledge that it produces. The second explores the notion of tradition. The third looks at the position of the individual within community art, and the final one traces the relationship of lived histories to indigenous art, with a tribute to the enduring power of the imagination.

Each section builds on the assertions of the previous one to move the argument forward. While there is also a gradual development of ideas within each section, the material on each page has been arranged with no particular hierarchy. It is set in the form of a dialogue among three voices: an image, the artist's commentary, and our narrative. The reader is free to read these in any order she chooses. To use a musical analogy: they are like riffs around an idea, understanding or opinion.

The images speak eloquently for themselves; we have included at least one painting by each artist, from a selection that was sent to us by the museum after the workshop. While they are varied in terms of approach and rendering, they prove – particularly in the case of the artists who are not literate – that their sensitivity, sophistication, and vision need not be connected to formal education or being verbally articulate. We have deliberately labelled the images differently in different sections – in some cases using only the name of the individual and in

others highlighting their tradition and the region they come from. This has been done to draw attention to how the framing of a work of art can change the way it is placed, appreciated and understood.

The artists' commentaries are more than just captions to the images. They are as much about ideas and concepts as they are about lived experience. We would like to draw particular attention to the range of viewpoints, beliefs and opinions that the artists express: all of which illustrate that 'tradition' is not an intact and unified entity, but a way of relating to the past.

Our own text is a mixture of annotation, observation and a setting of context. We have tried not to be academic, but have brought in ideas and theory that we feel would be useful to gain a wider perspective, or move the argument ahead. We have used the word 'museum' to mean anthropological museums, but a lot of the ground covered could also apply to other museums. Our focus is on art and visual art practice, although the basic premise could be extended to artefacts or other cultural objects.

The museum emerges as a burdened, yet hopeful historical institution – a kind of 'tradition' – that needs to be re-imagined in the contemporary world. In this sense, this book offers itself as a model of a 'museum without walls' – a space for thinking about cultures, preservation, communication and memory. If there is to be a final note we would like to strike, it would be to invite readers and lovers of art to re-examine some cherished notions about the meaning of art and its relationship to the world.

Gita Wolf, Arun Wolf and V. Geetha
Tara Books

The Museum is a Way of Knowing

The museum is a place to store, safekeep and display tangible and intangible aspects of a culture that are considered worth preserving. These could be parts of a tradition that are forgotten and left behind as life changes, or material relating to a community and its way of life. The character of a museum and the nature of its collection depend on how and why it was founded: imperial intent, scientific curiosity, a desire to collect objects perceived as exotic, or a sincere commitment to remembering what may otherwise have been forgotten. Each of these impulses produces a particular kind of museum. But something that is common to all museums is that they classify, label and describe the materials and objects in their collections. And when they do this, they tell a particular story about that culture.

Museum collections do not just reflect a collector's intent. They are often made up of what has been found by chance, randomly acquired, or salvaged with difficulty. In this sense, all collections are contingent. The objects brought in to a museum have necessarily been displaced from their original contexts of use, worship or decoration. So, an exhibit begins to mean something only when an explanation is woven around it. But the accounts that locate the objects in a museum can never be complete, there is always more that can be said. Each narrative—however authoritative it may be—tells us as much about the collector as it does about the collection.

I have imagined the gate of a museum, what is guarded by a lion through day and night is held in place by elephants and decorated by deer. I thought of it as a symbol of what the museum holds within and what it keeps out. I've shown the gate as the museum in the form of elephants, and within these elephants are day and night, moon and sun. There is an old Gond story about why the moon is surrounded by stars and the sun is always alone. It's too long to tell here. I just wanted to show how the museum holds stories.



