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ARTICLE

The Unbearable Lightness of Image Travel: The Work of Curation in the Digital Age

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Considers the work of the image in our digital age, and the challenges to traditional notions of bricks-and-mortar curatorship posed by digital humanities but also by the digital proliferation of the image.

Keywords: migration; curation; art; India; Tasveer Ghar; Mughal; *muraqqa'*; Gandhi

I have essayed this short piece partly in response to a provocation offered a few years back by critical visual theorist W.J.T. Mitchell, who suggested that scholars ought to view images as “imitations of life,” since they are “in a number of important senses, very similar to living things themselves” (Mitchell 2011, 59).

Not least of the properties images share with living things is their capacity to move about. In so suggesting, Mitchell proposed a firm distinction “between the neutral notion of images in circulation, moving freely, circulating basically without consequences, and the concept of migration which suggests something much more fraught with contradiction, difficulty, friction, and opposition” (Mitchell 2004, 15). Such a distinction then enabled him to ask:

What would it mean to talk about images as migrants, as immigrants, as emigrants, as travelers, who arrive and depart, who circulate, pass through, thus appear and disappear, as having a native, or original or aboriginal location on the one site or...the illegal alien, the unwanted immigrant on the other? If images are like migrants, do we ask them as they fill out their entry-card to check off a box that tells us where they come from and particularly how to classify them, what group do they belong to, what family do they come from? (14)

For Mitchell, the migration of images is not merely a metaphor but also a meta-picture in that it “provides a picture of the way images move, circulate, thrive, appear and disappear” (14–15). In a more recent essay, he even insists, “migration is central to the ontology of images as such” (Mitchell 2011, 59).

Building on these insights, I ask what we might gain analytically by considering images as migrant travelers moving about in the world. Under what capacity do they move? How far do they get to go, and at whose bidding? Do images of different genres have correspondingly different efficacious capacities that compel or discourage them from leading a life of mobility? If migration is central to the ontology of images, what is the fate of the image that is not mobile or that comes to a standstill, its travels stalled? Does its image-being perish?

I am not sure I will be able to answer these questions at any length in this short reflection, but I posit them here as I wonder about what I am calling, inspired by Milan Kundera’s evocative phrase, the unbearable lightness of image travel in our digital age. The

virtual image dons the mantle of freedom, seemingly released from material moorings. As more and more of the vast repositories of art works across the world get digitized, images are no longer restricted to the walls of the museum or exhibition gallery, nor do we have to necessarily visit these brick-and-mortar edifices scattered around the globe, sometimes at great cost. Instead, at the click of a mouse, we can apparently summon up seemingly any image into our living rooms or onto our computers or phone screens. The image comes to us, even seeks us out. Correspondingly, digitization also appears to spell democratization, apparently allowing images to circulate independent of the checks imposed on them by museums and other agencies of authorization. In this regard, as art and media critic Boris Groys notes, digital images have an ability to originate, to multiply, and to distribute themselves through the open fields of contemporary means of communication. They are what he calls “genuinely strong images,” i.e., “images that are able to show themselves according to their own nature depending solely on their own vitality and strength” (Groys 2008, 83). In other words, in the age of the digital, every one of us is a curator, or has the capacity to become one.

This leads me to the second key concept for this set of reflections: curation, a word that has proliferated in our times alongside the global proliferation of biennials and triennials, and alternate or “flexible” museums and temporary digital exhibitions that supplement the art world’s more longstanding infrastructure of brick-and-mortar museums, galleries, and auction houses in the business of more permanent show-and-tell. Under such circumstances, along with “star” curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, it is worth reminding ourselves of the etymology of curating.¹ The word originates from the Latin *curare*, meaning to take care. In Roman times, it meant to take care of bathhouses. In medieval Europe, the term designated the priest who cared for souls. By the eighteenth century, the word took on the meaning by which we best know it now, namely, looking after collections of art and artifacts.

As David Balzer notes in his tongue-in-cheek book *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else* (2014), today we are all apparently curators: we “curate” in relation to ourselves, using the term to refer to any number of things we do and consume on a daily basis. What does it mean for the conferral of

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/23/hans-ulrich-obrist-art-curator/>. See also Strauss 2007.

value when we talk about “curating” something as basic as our lunch? As importantly, what does this proliferation of the concept mean for the status of art and the fate of the image in our times? In response to this question, I revert to the Latin etymology of the word meaning to “take care,” and ask “what does it mean to take care of the image” in the digital age. In order to answer this question, I begin by sharing two attempts I have made to “take care” of the image, and what I have learned from my acts of curating in our digital times. I will end my reflection with a critique of one recent professional attempt at digital curating and the lessons I gleaned from that example, returning as well to Mitchell’s arguments and observations about medium, materiality, and mobility in the digital age.

Tasveer Ghar: A Virtual House of Pictures

My first attempt at digital curating was a collaborative venture, which began exactly a decade ago, as a trans-national enterprise that was very much inspired by a statement of Walter Benjamin’s: “I have nothing to say. Only to show. I will steal no valuables, nor appropriate any clever turns of phrase. But the rags, the refuse: not in order to take stock of them but to use them—which is the only way of doing them justice.”² Tasveer Ghar (“the House of Pictures” (see **Figure 1**)) came

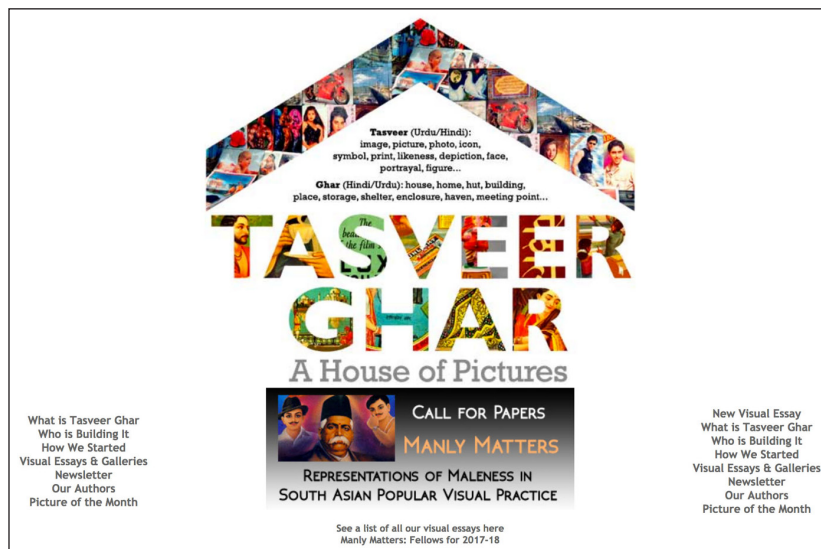


Figure 1: Home Page for Tasveer Ghar, designed by Yousuf Saeed.

² This part of my essay is paraphrased from Brosius, Ramaswamy, and Saeed 2015: 1–4. Unless explicitly footnoted, all references and quotations are drawn from this work.

into existence—as a project, a digital site, but above all, as a house and a home for stray pictures in an act of refusal to reject the refuse of history, to invoke Benjamin.³ Like Benjamin's anonymous rag picker—the *chiffonnier*—we too sought to provide a haven, albeit of the digital kind, for artifacts and images that had long been dismissed as ephemeral, junk, even trashy. We did so with the conviction—inspired of course by Benjamin but also by the work of the many who came to our aid and some of whose writings are represented on our website—that “the materials the materialist rag-picker collects are the stuff that *collective* dreams are made of.” Over the past decade, we have devoted ourselves to the collection, analysis, and re-presentation of those very image-objects of India's vexed entanglement with industrial modernity that were once in circulation—and often in large numbers—and then cast aside in the refuse bin of history. Rummaging around in this bin, we have put these once-productive-but-now-defunct image-objects into circulation again to reveal new truths about the past(s) that produced them and the present that recuperates them.

We started building Tasveer Ghar out of the bits and pieces of India's burgeoning culture industries—mostly mass-produced prints—seizing upon the advantages provided by the digital turn in the human sciences. As we began to do so, we were not unconscious of the delicious irony that accompanied the donning of the mantle of a digital rag picker, as we made use of the newly available electronic media to do the work of a Benjaminian “scavenger.” Yet, inspired though we were by Benjamin, we also took delight in the fact that India's mass produced images—objects disdained until recently by collectors and connoisseurs of the so-called fine or gallery arts but embraced by us precisely for their scandalous rejection of modernist aesthetics and distinctions, their colorful and ripe immediacy—seriously undermined the German theorist's influential argument regarding the loss of “aura” faced by the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. It also gives me great pleasure to note that over the past couple of decades or so, these former strays have begun to be mainstreamed, even treated in some quarters as works of art.

³ <http://www.tasveerghar.net/>.

In allowing the mass-produced work of art to power the engines of our analyses, we have also taken our cue from anthropologist Michael Taussig's invitation to "follow images as they chase other images in a vast, perhaps infinitely expanded chain of images." In chasing images thus, we also pursued some of us more explicitly than others—an understanding of the image as a nomad, a traveler, even a migrant, to remember Mitchell again, moving through space and time, and across media. Be they greeting cards, god posters, patriotic prints, street art, advertisements, or cinema hoardings, the contributors to our website tracked the remarkable flow of mass-produced images, following them as they sought out new homes and journeyed into or through a range of everyday worlds. In this process, images develop complex biographies and relations with other images, equipped with different efficacious qualities that emerge from the narratives they connect to as they undertake their dynamic performative journeys, including taking up residence in our digital House of Pictures.

The fact that an image is mass-produced should not mislead us into thinking that its reception is standardised wherever it migrates and by whomever consumes it. Instead, the authors on our website carefully study and follow the frequently singular trajectories as the "life span" of a particular image or constellation of prints devolves in particular contexts at particular times. In all these years of engaging with India's vibrant and noisy culture industry and its mass-produced work, we have been intrigued on the one hand by the tantalizing dynamics of images, their enticing but by no means arbitrary journeys from one site to another and, on the other, with bringing to renewed awareness the seemingly trivial but nonetheless ubiquitous works of popular and public art. We seek to make visible the thickness and complexity of the social worlds in which they are embedded and which they also produce, shape, and contest.

As curatorial practice, Tasveer Ghar is collaborative and dispersed, with authors drawn from across the world, shaping the "look" of their exhibition in concert with the leadership team, itself dispersed across three continents (North America, Europe, and India). It is also open-ended in the sense that this virtual house of pictures continues to grow and expand, as new ideas and new images come our way, which we often take note of in our "picture of the month" feature. Our galleries allow viewers and users to download the images—frequently at high resolution—and redeploy them in

their own projects. We ask that users get our permission—and they do—but we don't police this very stringently in the spirit of the manner in which these images have circulated over time. Not least, the images that we house and curate are themselves on the “light” side with regard to the meta data we are able to provide about them: their origins, their authorship, sometimes even their medium, is not known to us. They are also “light” in the sense that they are mass-produced and mass-circulated and viewed in the marketplace as such for they are relatively inexpensive.

Going Global in Mughal India: A Digital Muraqqa'

My second attempt at digital curation could not be more different, both in terms of the sort of images I worked with and the fact that it was a finite project whereas Tasveer Ghar is open-ended. In addition to being inspired by the scholarship of others across the world, as well as motivated by the digital technology pioneered by a team of London-based software creators, I felt particularly compelled to undertake this project in my capacity as a cultural historian. My goal was to make available to a wider public some highly specialized arguments regarding the terrestrial globe as an object and its representation in early modern India, specifically the late sixteenth/early seventeenth century, when much of the subcontinent was part of the vast Mughal Empire (**Figure 2**).⁴ My aspiration to do public humanities converged with

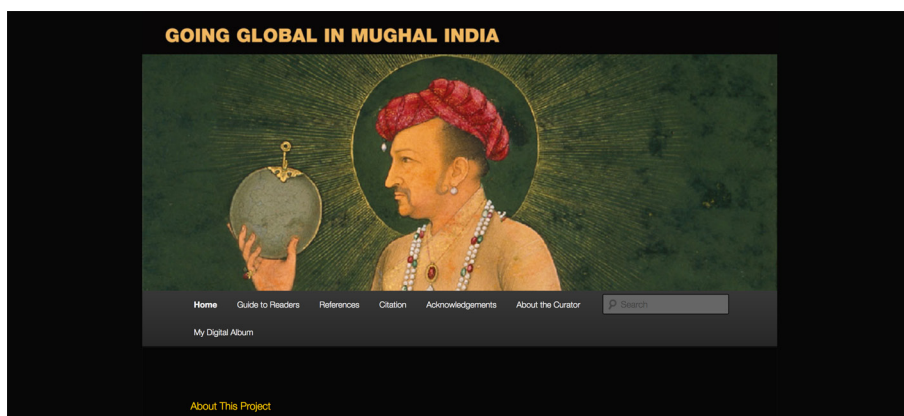


Figure 2: Home page for project, “Going Global in Mughal India,” designed by Jennifer Prather.

⁴ <https://sites.duke.edu/globalinmughalindia/>. Unless explicitly referenced, all quotations in this section are drawn from this work.

the imperative to explore the promise and potentiality of image-driven historical analysis. I have proposed elsewhere that the act of ranging between the “sayable” and the “seeable” constitutes the essence of pictorial history (Ramaswamy 2010).

The album I ultimately created made use of a digital technology called Turning the Pages™ to bring image and word into a complex dialectical relationship in order to recreate some semblance of this act of shuttling between saying and seeing. I have found the digital turn in the humanities most congenial for pursuing these twin goals. In my view, the value of digital scholarship in the humanities emerges from its capacity to interrupt the terms of our engagement with existing archives, to trouble the categories of analog analysis, and to compel our work to chart a different path, propelled by new questions. In contrast to *Tasveer Ghar*, the images I worked with for this project might be characterized as “heavy”—they are singular, very expensive, one-of-a-kind artifacts found only in the collections of the best-known museums or the hands of private collectors. The act of digitizing them makes them more available and more visible, but they nevertheless remain in a tightly curated and controlled environment.

My digital album attempted to simulate the form of a seventeenth-century Persianate imperial album, or *muraqqa'*. Described as “a fine art cousin of a modern scrapbook” by art historian Elaine Wright, the imperial *muraqqa'* was a collection of miniature paintings, drawings, and calligraphic works assembled under an emperor’s direction from the finest paintings produced by his atelier and any others that caught his attention. These were then either loosely placed or bound between luxurious and ornamented leather or lacquer covers. A royal *muraqqa'* was a site of imperial choices and desires. Appearances to the contrary, underlying each album was careful deliberation about which works to include and the order in which to present them. A typical album was the product of years, sometimes decades, of thought, imagination, labor, and investment. Some were clearly commissioned by one patron, the *padshah* (emperor), while others were inherited and reordered, passed on from one generation to the next. Each album is a work of collaboration, at the very least between the emperor, the master painter, the apprentices in the imperial atelier, and the calligrapher. Despite this fact, they must also be understood as repositories

of imperial self-fashioning. In one way, the *muraqqa'* might be a kind of personal scrapbook, but it is also a work of art. As such, an imperial *muraqqa'* allows us to understand the mighty Mughal emperor as connoisseur, collector, and curator.

At the level of content, I want to underscore that this project did *not* involve the digitization of an existing *muraqqa'* or royal album. Instead, I deliberately assembled my own album, combining some 100-odd paintings and digital images of objects in order to make an argument about the itineraries of the terrestrial globe in India. This was the first reason I undertook this project, for my goal was to create a comprehensive archive that would bring together all known images on this theme and present it as a scholarly resource. A second goal was to explore what it meant for a professional historian to become a digital collector and curator of such spectacular images. Additionally, I wanted to investigate what it would mean to do so with a broader reading public in mind rather than just my academic peers. Thus, although I provided metadata regarding these images as well as my own commentary, the album itself is driven by whichever image first greets the viewer, who then must seek out the written words about it. Thus, I also undertook this work in part to consider not only the reach but also the limitations of image-driven scholarship.

A third goal of the project was to simulate a historical viewing environment in order to remind the contemporary viewer that miniature paintings such as those I included in the album (with a couple of exceptions) were not meant to be hung on walls or seen by the general public, but were intended for intimate gazing and for the private pleasure of a select group of grandees. The re-creation of such a viewing environment also pushed me to explore the reach of these works—and hence the scope of the terrestrial globe as both object and representation when it first arrived in the subcontinent.

With one possible exception, no Mughal imperial album has survived into our times intact. As such, this project also aims to get the contemporary viewer to consider alternate forms of book art, as well as modalities of seeing images and reading texts other than those that prevail in our own time. Ironically, thus, the digital technologies of our own times enable the recuperation of “lost” forms from a distant past. Equally ironically, my own engagement with digital media in pursuing

this project made me even more conscious of the materiality of art works, and of their very presence in the world as objects and not just as virtual images.

Painting, to recall the words of Renaissance humanist Leon-Battista Alberti, possesses a truly divine power in that it makes the absent present and represents the dead to the living many centuries later. I took these words to heart along with Walter Benjamin's suggestion that at any given moment the living are obligated to prepare a banquet for the past and the historian is the herald who invites the dead to the table. As herald, the historian is ethically beholden to follow a code of hospitality that provides the most congenial of banquets so that the dead might feel comfortable. My digital *muraqqa'*, virtual in form though it may be, was my attempt to lay such a banquet for the (Mughal) dead, for our mutual delectation and contemplation.

In its own time, the royal Mughal album was not an object that circulated widely. On the contrary, it was most likely shared only with an intimate circle of confidants and friends, as well as quite possibly with men whom the emperor sought to impress via opulent displays of his material wealth and powers of accumulation. The very nature of the object, with its assemblage of miniature paintings filled with intricate details and minute calligraphies, suggests a form of embodied intimate viewing that required peering up close with intense concentration, touching and turning the page, pausing and contemplating, and turning once more.

Using Turning the Pages software, my digital *muraqqa'* paid homage to this important and intriguing art of the book by mimicking some aspects of its form, even while adapting and updating it for a scholarly project in the twenty-first century. Like Jahangir and Shah Jahan's grand imperial albums, which inspired my own, I too brought together an eclectic array of paintings, prints, and photographs of objects spanning genres and historical time periods. I attempted to digitally conjure the spirit of the Mughal album by assembling an artifact in which images are in dialogue with each other in a manner that provokes pleasurable contemplation and immersion, but also discussion and debate.

The art historian Ebba Koch has noted that a *muraqqa'* is a book in form and a picture gallery in function. In the age of digital technologies, the *muraqqa'* becomes

a highly mobile, portable picture gallery that allows us to enjoy—again—wondrous images from a distant past in ever easier ways and by new audiences for whom they were never intended in the first place.

Perilous Digital Travels and Inhospitable Virtual Homes

The portability of my *muraqqa'* and the new audiences it has found return us to my opening comments on the unbearable lightness of image travel and the apparent freedom of the digital image. Freedom, as we know, always comes with responsibility, and in this regard, I am particularly concerned about the responsibility we bear as scholars and curators, and as scholars like myself who turn into curators. My curatorial work over the past decade has convinced me even more strongly of the importance of ensuring that digital images remain strong. It is imperative that their identities not be destabilized or dispersed, especially as a consequence of their apparently free movement. This means we need to honor their origins, biographies, and trajectories of travel, and consciously work against putting them at risk or in danger of misappropriation and misuse.

Further, to recall Mitchell, if movement is central to the ontology of images as such, taking care of images also means that we don't do anything to halt their travel and circulation: this for me is iconophilia. Here I am following the philosopher of science Bruno Latour who reminds us that:

Iconophilia is respect not for the image itself but for the movement of the image. It is what teaches us that there is nothing to see when we do a freeze-frame of scientific and religious practices and focus on the visual itself instead of the movement, the passage, the transition from one form of image to another. By contrast, idolatry would be defined by attention to the visual per se...[and] the iconoclast dreams of an unmediated access to truth, of a complete absence of images. But if we follow the path of iconophilia, we should, on the contrary, pay even more respect to the series of transformations for which each image is only a provisional frame (Latour 1998, 421).

Taking care of digital images in the age of the virtual means recognizing that images, too, have rights that can be taken away by converting them too quickly into language, or taken over by the very technologies that have apparently set them free.

This last point is particularly relevant for a new project on which I am embarking with a Sinologist colleague in Germany, in which we focus on Gandhi and Mao as Asian founding fathers. We are interested in the visual and media culture that emerged around these men both in their times and since then, and our goal is to produce a multi-media online exhibit. However, as we do so, I am very cognizant of the fact that as a thinker and activist, Gandhi had great reservations about all manner of modern technologies. This does not mean that he was a simple-minded Luddite or technophobe, as some have accused. Indeed, he made full use of the industrial transportation of his times, travelling hundreds of miles on steam ships, trains, and even automobiles. As a journalist and editor, he used printing machines, and, as the photographic evidence shows us, he did not hesitate to check out a microscope or a sextant. Gandhi was indeed the most photographed Indian of his time, and although critical of photographers who seemingly dogged his every moment, he was not above posing for the camera if it suited his purposes. Nevertheless, he also delivered a stinging critique of the modern fetishism of technology that he witnessed in his own times, and that has since only accelerated in ours. He insisted that it was “machinery that has impoverished India,” and that machinery has “begun to desolate Europe: ruination is now knocking at the English gates. Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization: it represents a great sin...If the machine craze grows in our country it will become an unhappy land” (Gandhi 1910). Although the jury is still out on whether India is unhappier now than it was in Gandhi’s time, there is no doubt that Indians have succumbed in the last couple decades or so, especially in the embrace of all things digital, to what he called the “machine craze.”

The Mahatma, too, has been swept up in this craze. Across India, numerous Gandhi digital museums have sprung up. Perhaps the most ambitious is the Eternal Gandhi Multi-Media Museum (EGMM), which is located in the very spot where Gandhi

was assassinated in New Delhi, now a national memorial called Gandhi Smriti.⁵ The project director for the EGMM is Ranjit Makkuni, the creative spirit behind the Sacred World Research Laboratory, which for the past two decades has been “engaged in projects that create a link between techno and traditional cultures.”⁶ The driving question for the EGMM is “can the eternal messages of Gandhiji animate and inspire modern product design and information access technology?” This question led Makkuni and his team to “transform Gandhiji’s representation in the older forms of media, such as papers, books and lists on ashram walls to a newer multimedia technology and modern product design. Hopefully, with further advent of newer technology in the future, the Gandhian vision will be represented accordingly” (see also Makkuni 2007).

Using the most state-of-the art multi-media technology, the result is a slick and shining exhibit spread across the entire second floor of the mansion that frequently served in his lifetime as the Mahatma’s headquarters in New Delhi. As one admiring reviewer put it, the exhibits respond to “pressed buttons and interface navigating computer mice, besides reacting to body heat, movement and sound waves.” There is an emphasis on the use of the hands, and on the tactile. In Makkuni’s words, “the role of the hand was central in Gandhi’s work. So, information retrieval in this exhibition takes place through hands.”⁷ A good example of such hands-on digital work is the so-called Harijan Pillar, which lights up when viewers gather around it on sensor pads and hold hands. Another is a display that features sticks fashioned out of glass and implanted with sensors, a digital version of the crude reed staff the Mahatma used on his various marches. Visitors to the Museum can touch one of these sticks and tilt it to relive Gandhi’s famous Salt March. Similarly, they can pick up crystals from a salt urn and hear a playback of various interpretations of the Salt March. Most dramatic is an E-train into which the visitor can step and apparently relive some of Gandhi’s

⁵ <http://gandhismriti.gov.in/index.asp?langid=2>.

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yv4tiWXW_os.

⁷ Subuhi Jiwani, “A Story of Experiments in Multi-Media.” *GoodNews*, January 19, 2006.

railway journeys. Eerily, Gandhi busts with eyes replaced by computers are scattered about, the monitors playing grainy footage from the Mahatma's life and activities.

The Eternal Gandhi Museum no doubt makes Gandhi and Gandhianism "beautiful," transforming the potentially dull and deadening detritus of the past into shiny objects of the present, as witnessed most clearly in the recreation of Gandhi's iconic spinning wheel. Here a minimalist, even rustic, aesthetic is transformed into glowing installations illuminated by LCD screens and LED lights, which shine into the hushed and darkened spaces of a modern museum. While Gandhi stressed the importance of what he called "bread labor" and of "everybody living by the sweat of his brow," here the sweat labor has been replaced by what we might call air-conditioned labor. There is absolutely no reflection of Gandhi's own pungent critique of modern machinery and its relationship to man. While Gandhi once declared that when it came to technology, "the supreme consideration is man,"⁸ as one wanders around the hushed halls of the Eternal Gandhi Museum and watches the average viewer (many perhaps seeing a computer for the first time), one has the distinct impression that now technology is the supreme consideration. The appearance of the Museum—beautiful as it might be—also goes against the Gandhian aesthetic of simplicity and sparseness. Instead of technology being placed at the service of Gandhi, it is Gandhi whose message and ideals have been sacrificed to the work of technology.

Curating, as I have noted, is about taking care, while the digital age in which we live, as has been noted by many a commentator, is one of excess and abundance. In dealing digitally with Gandhi, I am compelled to be true to his ethic of simplicity and minimalism as I take on the task of curating the surfeit of words, of course, but also images and art works about him that proliferate. Any process of digital curation I undertake will necessarily be a melancholic one as I try to re-present this prophet of restraint and moderation to an audience that has gotten used to excess and consumption. Gandhi famously insisted that "good travels at a snail's pace." Highly

⁸ *Young India*, November 13, 1924.

mobile a man as he was, he also maintained the importance of slowness and stillness. The challenge for those of us who curate his life is to encourage slow reading and deep looking in a virtual age where viewers tend towards speed reading and quick glancing.

Unlike the Mughal emperors who were great collectors and connoisseurs of art, Gandhi was neither: in fact, he was rather indifferent and impatient about it all. Yet, paradoxically, the art world has lavished its attention on him, producing beautiful works that are absolutely deserving of attention and analysis for the new truths they reveal and narrative possibilities they promise. Even if Gandhi himself didn't care about art or images, we need to do so, especially at a time when his image is being put to use by those who are at the diametrically opposite end, politically and ethically, from his own sense of self and vision. Such contrary uses of iconic pictures remind me again of the unbearable lightness of image travel.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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