

Colonial Collecting and Display

Museums and Collections

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As houses of memory and sources of information about the world, museums function as a dynamic interface between past, present and future. Museum collections are increasingly being recognized as material archives of human creativity and as invaluable resources for interdisciplinary research. Museums provide powerful forums for the expression of ideas and are central to the production of public culture: they may inspire the imagination, generate heated emotions and express conflicting values in their material form and histories. This series explores the potential of museum collections to transform our knowledge of the world, and for exhibitions to influence the way in which we view and inhabit that world. It offers essential reading for those involved in all aspects of the museum sphere: curators, researchers, collectors, students and the visiting public.

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Colonial Collecting and Display: Encounters with Material Culture from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands
Claire Wintle

Colonial Collecting and Display

Encounters with Material Culture
from the Andaman
and Nicobar Islands

Claire Wintle



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For Dad, with love.

Contents

List of Figures	ix
Acknowledgements	xiv
List of Abbreviations	xvii
Map of the Andaman Islands	xviii
Map of the Nicobar Islands	xix
Introduction: Imperial Encounters and Material Culture	1
Objects and Empire	2
Island Hopping: From South Asia to England's South Coast	3
The Life of a Collection	6
A Note on Community Delineations and Terminology	9
Objects, Images and Text	10
1 Production, Use, Exchange: Spheres of Influence in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands	18
Contested Trajectories: Making and Trading for Export in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands	22
In the Andaman Islands: Objects as Cultural Envoys	23
In the Nicobar Islands: Objects and Self-Representation	36
Conclusions	46
2 Colonial Perspectives on Material Culture from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands	57
Collecting the Andaman and Nicobar Islands	59
Edward Horace Man: Scientific Collecting Revised	62

Richard Carnac Temple: Collecting for Professional and Social Status	77
Katharine Sara Tuson: Women Collectors in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands	90
Conclusions	101
3 Wider Spheres of Influence: The Andaman and Nicobar Islands in Victorian and Edwardian Britain	113
Illustrated Periodicals and Visual Representations of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands	115
Representations of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands at International Exhibitions: The Case of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886	129
Something 'Spicy' and 'Dramatic': Representations of the Andaman Islands in Popular Literature	139
Conclusions	145
4 Public Property: The Andaman and Nicobar Islands at Brighton Museum, 1900–1949	155
All Change? Official Interpretation of World Cultures at Brighton Museum	158
Provincial Museum Ethnography: Science vs Pragmatism	168
Multiple Choice: The Andaman and Nicobar Collections at Brighton Museum	175
Democracy in the Museum: Patterns of 'Unofficial' Interpretation	183
Conclusions	195
5 Objects and Encounters Today	208
Towards a Postcolonial Display of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands	212
Bibliography	217
Manuscript Collections	217
Object and Photographic Collections	219
Interviews	220
Newspapers	220
Published Sources	221
Index	238

List of Figures

I.1	<i>Hentakoi</i> , Nicobar Islands, c. 1850, wood, paint, 710 mm × 500 mm.	xx
1.1	Small pot, Chaura, Nicobar Islands, c. 1900, clay, 110 mm × 100 mm, one of four donated to RPMBH.	20
1.2	Wrapped skirts, Nicobar Islands, c. 1885, coconut leaf, 223 mm × 85 mm and 130 mm × 100 mm.	41
1.3	Model of circular bundle of wood, Nicobar Islands, c. 1900, wood, cane, 170 mm × 40 mm.	42
1.4	E.H. Man, Photograph of Nicobarese group with a life-sized bundle of wood at Malacca village, Nancowry Harbour, Nicobar Islands, c. 1880, 115 mm × 187 mm.	42
1.5	<i>Hentakoi</i> board, Nicobar Islands, c. 1850, wood, ink.	43
1.6	<i>Hentakoi</i> board, Nicobar Islands, c. 1850, wood, ink.	44
1.7	Model of a <i>kareau</i> , Nicobar Islands, c. 1880, wood, paint, 235 mm × 90 mm.	45
2.1	Pair of waistbelts, Andaman Islands, c. 1900, pandanus leaf, plant fibre, a: 600 mm × 240 mm; b: 600 mm × 260 mm, with nail holes and dust gathered in Temple's home while on display.	58
2.2	Catalogue entry for <i>chū-kai</i> , from E.H. Man. 1887. 'Catalogue of Objects from the Nicobar Islands presented to the British Museum, June 1887', 21, handwritten manuscript held at the Centre for Anthropology, British Museum.	68
2.3	'Lady's Dress'. Waistbelt, Little Andaman, c. 1890, plant fibre, orchid bark, 520 mm × 140 mm × 65 mm, donated to Brighton Museum by E.H. Man, 1920.	71

- 2.4 Man's reinterpretation of Andamanese design, from E.H. Man. 1883. 'On the Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Andaman Islands (Part III)', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 12, 371. 72
- 2.5 Two waistbelts, Andaman Islands, c. 1900, pandanus leaf, cockle shells, a: 529 mm × 28 mm; b: 348 mm × 26 mm, flattened. 74
- 2.6 Unknown photographer. Photograph of A.F. Man and E.H. Man, c. 1914. 75
- 2.7 Unknown photographer. Photograph of the drawing room, Government House, Ross Island, Andaman Islands, c. 1900. 82
- 2.8 Philippe Adolphe Klier. Photograph of the ball room and dining room with Temple's Burmese Nats, c. 1895, Government House, Ross Island, Andaman Islands. 83
- 2.9 M.V. Portman. Photograph of two Andamanese men posed to demonstrate their departure, c. 1890. 85
- 2.10 Philippe Adolphe Klier. Photograph of the hallway with Andamanese and Nicobarese 'trophies', 'Indian arms' and 'pistols of the Burma War of 1824–7', c. 1885, Government House, Ross Island, Andaman Islands. 86
- 2.11 Richard Durrand Temple [?]. Photograph of the hallway, The Nash, c. 1904. 88
- 2.12 Unknown photographer. Formal group portrait of a ship's crew, including a number of British women, Andamanese men and some Nicobarese *kareau* and *hentakoi* carved figures. Presumably taken around the Andaman or Nicobar Islands, c. 1900. 92
- 2.13 Unknown photographer. Photograph of a display of *hentakoi* and *kareau*, c. 1900. 93
- 2.14 Unknown photographer. Photograph of Katharine Tuson with unknown Andamanese women, c. 1900. 95
- 2.15 Unknown photographer. Photograph of an unidentified group of Indian servants, European men and women, Nicobarese women, men and children and an Andamanese man on the Nicobar Islands, c. 1900. 96

- | | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 2.16 | Unknown photographer. Photograph of Port Blair's Amateur Dramatic Society, including Katharine Sara Tuson (second row, fourth from right, marked 'KST') dressed as a nurse, c. 1900. | 98 |
| 2.17 | Unknown photographer. Photograph of an interior, presumed to be Katharine and F.E. Tuson's home on Ross Island, c. 1900. | 99 |
| 3.1 | <i>ILN</i> . 1858. 'Expedition to the Andaman Islands', 27 March, 316. | 117 |
| 3.2 | <i>ILN</i> . 1870. 'The Nicobar Islands', 15 January, 68. | 118 |
| 3.3 | <i>ILN</i> . 1870. 'The Nicobar Islands', 15 January, 69. | 119 |
| 3.4 | <i>ILN</i> . 1875. 'The Solar Eclipse Observatory, in the Nicobar Islands', 26 June, 601. | 120 |
| 3.5 | <i>ILN</i> . 1872. 'The Andaman Islands: Hope Town, with Mount Harriet, showing the pier, where Lord Mayo was stabbed', 24 February, 181. | 121 |
| 3.6 | <i>ILN</i> . 1872. 'The Andaman Islands: North End of Ross Island, Head-Quarters of the Penal Settlement', 24 February, 188. | 121 |
| 3.7 | <i>ILN</i> . 1872. 'Back of Ross Island, Port Blair', 24 February, 188. | 122 |
| 3.8 | <i>ILN</i> . 1872. 'Viper Island, Andaman Islands', 16 March, 27. | 122 |
| 3.9 | <i>ILN</i> . 1889. 'A Village in the Nicobar Islands', 5 October, 443. | 123 |
| 3.10 | 'The Equatorial Camera', 'Browning's Reflector & Spectroscopic Camera', and 'Sig[nor] Tacchini's Observatory', from <i>ILN</i> . 1875. 'The Solar Eclipse Observatory, in the Nicobar Islands', 26 June, 601. | 126 |
| 3.11 | 'Village of Malakka', from <i>ILN</i> . 1875. 'The Solar Eclipse Observatory, in the Nicobar Islands', 26 June, 601. | 127 |
| 3.12 | <i>ILN</i> . 1867. 'New Iron Lighthouse, Table Islands, Cocos Group, Andaman Islands', 18 May, 489. | 128 |
| 3.13 | J. Dinsdale. 1886. <i>Sketches at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition</i> , London: Jordison & Co. | 130 |
| 3.14 | <i>Graphic</i> . 1886. 'Group of Andaman Islanders', 15 May, 540. | 131 |

- 3.15 *Graphic*. 1886. The Bamboo Trophy at the top end of the Imperial Court, from 'The Indian Section of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition', 15 May, 536. 136
- 3.16 *ILN*. 1886. 'Andaman Islander', 24 July, 92. 137
- 3.17 Frederick Henry Townsend, from A.C. Doyle. 1903. *The Sign of Four*, souvenir edn, London: G. Newnes Ltd. 144
- 4.1 Ground floor, Brighton Museum, with three archaeology and ethnography rooms in enfilade, from County Borough of Brighton. 1900. *Popular Guide to Brighton Public Museum*, Brighton, frontispiece. 159
- 4.2 Boar's skull, Andaman Islands, c. 1900, bone, cane, 275 mm × 140 mm × 110 mm, with prominent accession number in red ink. 162
- 4.3 Leg adornment, Andaman Islands, c. 1900, pandanus leaf, twine, 350 mm (full length); 100 mm × 30 mm (band), with small green identifying label attached. 162
- 4.4 Unknown photographer. Group portrait, 19 June 1914. Back row, from left to right: F.E. Tuson, Thomas Cadell, E.H. Man, H.G. Tayler. Front row, from left to right: Mrs Tayler, K.S. Tuson, possibly taken in the garden of Man's home, 251 Preston Road, Brighton. 166
- 4.5 Ground floor plan, Brighton Museum, from County Borough of Brighton. 1913. *Official Guide to the Public Library, Museum and Fine Art Galleries*, 5th edn, Brighton, 4. 169
- 4.6 Postcard, Room I, Archaeological Room, Brighton Museum, c. 1912, showing a series of comparative displays, with 'Modern Savage Stone Tools' in the table case at the far end. 170
- 4.7 Postcard, Room I, Archaeological Room, Brighton Museum, c. 1912, showing a series of comparative displays. The label 'Modern Savage Stone Tools' is partially visible behind the Wild Flower Table. 171
- 4.8 Postcard, 'Wooden Figures For Scaring Devils (Nicobarese)', 1928. 179
- 4.9 Unknown photographer. Photograph of the new ethnography gallery, 1949. 181

-
- | | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 4.10 | E.H. Man. Photograph of members of the Brighton and Hove Archery Club, from <i>Brighton Season</i> . 1906–7. ‘Toxophilites of the Twentieth Century: The Brighton and Hove Archery Club’, 22. | 184 |
| 4.11 | Unknown photographer. Photograph of E.H. Man, from <i>Brighton Season</i> . 1906–7. ‘Toxophilites of the Twentieth Century: The Brighton and Hove Archery Club’, 23. | 185 |
| 4.12 | E.H. Man. Photograph of a group of Andamanese people at Port Blair, c. 1880. | 186 |
| 4.13 | Miss Mavis Bennett as Minnehaha, Mr Joseph Farrington as Hiawatha and ‘Chief Os-ke-non-ton’ as the Medicine Man, from <i>Herald</i> . 1933. “‘Hiawatha’ as Spectacle, Impressive Scenes in the Dome, Music, Colour and Action’, 2 December, 14. | 188 |
| 5.1 | John Barrow. Photograph of the Nicobar case, ethnography gallery, Brighton Museum, 1974. | 211 |
| 5.2 | Nicobar hut built by Obed Heunj, commissioned by the Anthropological Survey of India’s Anthropological Museum, Port Blair. | 214 |

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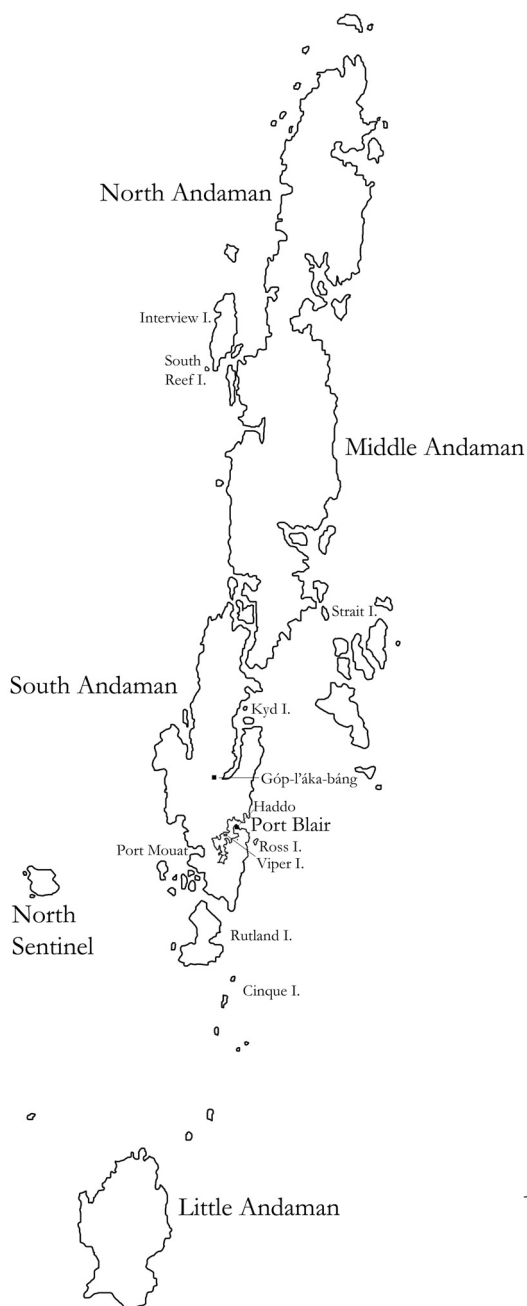
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List of Abbreviations

ACHL	Autograph Collection, Hove Library
ACUMAA	Archive, Cambridge University, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology
APAC	Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, British Library
APEBM	Archive, Department of Prehistory and Europe, British Museum
ARBM	Accession Register, Brighton Museum, Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove
<i>Herald</i>	<i>Brighton Herald and Hove Chronicle/Brighton & Hove Herald</i>
HML	Horniman Museum, London
<i>ILN</i>	<i>Illustrated London News</i>
Proceedings Home	Proceedings of the Home Department, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, British Library
Proceedings Revenue	Proceedings of the Revenue and Agricultural Department/Proceedings of the Department of Agriculture, Revenue and Commerce, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, British Library
Proceedings Port Blair	Proceedings of the Superintendent of Port Blair and the Nicobars, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, British Library
RPMBH	Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove
Sub-Committee	Museum Sub-Committee Meeting Minutes, Brighton Museum, in the Archive of the Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove



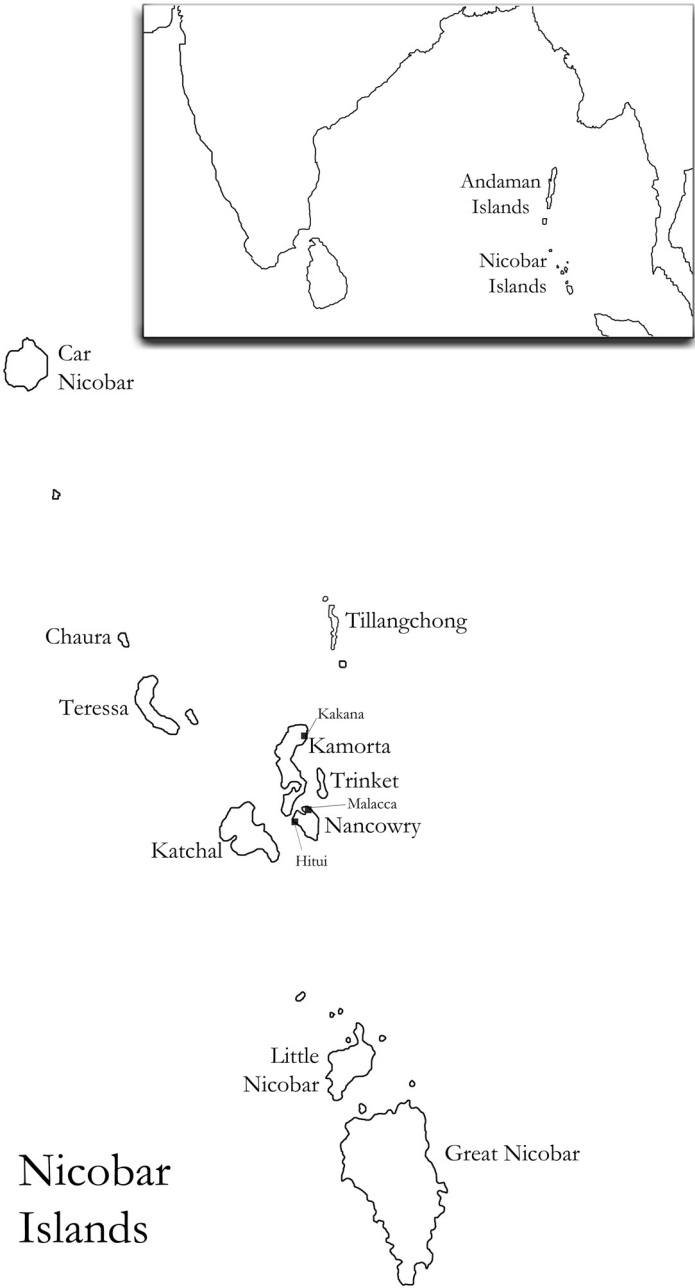




Figure I.1 *Hentakoi*, Nicobar Islands, c. 1850, wood, paint, 710 mm × 500 mm. RPMBH, WA509307[R2467/1]. Courtesy and copyright, RPMBH.

Introduction

Imperial Encounters and Material Culture

This book starts with an object. A beautiful, frightening, squatting wooden figure, with eyes of shell and tin, a hooded head painted red and white, and an open, grinning mouth full of pointed teeth. Probably carved in the early nineteenth century, the figure represents a mythical tortoise-like animal – a *kalipau* – said to be bigger than a human, and to have once existed on the central Nicobar island of Katchal. Known in the Nicobar Islands as a *hentakoi*, this object is likely to have begun its life at the hands of an artisan who, under the guidance of a doctor-priest, would have carved it as an instrument with which to bring back an ailing person's soul and cure his or her specific disease. Later stages of its life may have seen it suspended in the hut of the original patient, eyes twinkling in the fire, and reactivated every new moon to ensure continued good health.

But this object is no longer in the Nicobar Islands. Its feet are later additions, and its left arm, once broken at the shoulder, has now been repaired by the glue of a museum conservation officer. Since its original production, this object has been physically and conceptually reframed, first in the personal possession of a member of the colonial community on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands at the turn of the twentieth century, and then, since 1923, in the anthropology collection of a provincial museum in the UK.

A number of immediate questions arise: how did the *hentakoi* make these geographical and temporal transitions? What are the wider social and economic processes that shaped its trajectory? What impact did this arresting object have on the people with whom it came into contact? And finally (perhaps a slightly less conventional query), if this object could talk, what would it reveal about these processes and peoples?

Colonial Collecting and Display follows the compelling history of a particular set of objects, including the *hentakoi*, as amassed by British travellers in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the late nineteenth century, and then accessioned into the collections of the museum service in Brighton & Hove. Objects have the potential to produce insights into the lives of those excluded from the written colonial archive. In tracing the points of production, collection

and display of these objects, this book reconceptualizes imperial relationships between Andamanese, Nicobarese and British individuals and communities, both in the Bay of Bengal and on British soil. Through a focus on material culture, it develops new analyses of colonial discourse, acts to decolonize written forms of representation and to deconstruct the power relations circumscribed by imperial historiographies.

Objects and Empire

Since the late 1970s, a wide-ranging set of scholarship has problematized the categories and hierarchies of race, gender and class which were mobilized by empire. During this time, histories of dominance, subordination and resistance have come to be rewritten, and the choices and discourses enacted by colonized subjects have been recognized for their contribution to the social, economic and political processes of modern history. The colony has been removed from its lowly position on the geographical and political periphery of empire, and scholars have successfully placed both metropole and colony in the same analytical field, recognizing the two-way nature of the traffic in ideas and influences across these domains.¹ Mary Louise Pratt's reframing of the colonial encounter as 'contact zone', where cross-cultural meetings and their tangible and intangible effects are acknowledged for their improvisational and interactive status albeit often within radically asymmetrical relations of power, has been particularly influential in this respect.² These broad reassessments with an emphasis on interaction have also been tempered with an insistence on historical specificity, a focus on the localized nature of the practices which supported colonial encounters, and a recognition of the contingent and changing categories of 'colonized' and 'colonizer'.³

Simultaneously, and as part of this wider intellectual movement, the tangible 'object' has been conceived of by some as fundamental to postcolonial critique, increasingly occupying a central space in the emerging literature on colonial identities, imperial networks and cross-cultural exchange. Material culture clearly has a particular position at the heart of empire in that much of the colonial project was about material exploitation; imperialism was largely manifested in the material acts of 'consumption, ingestion and decoration'.⁴ Increasingly, however, three-dimensional objects have also come to be seen as central to the forging of social relationships across empires, newly recognized for their ability to act as intermediaries between individuals and communities of different cultures, construct or deny identity and cultural difference, and, as part of a wider visual culture, facilitate cultural awareness and comprehension across communities.⁵

As part of this growing recognition of the causal role of material culture in empire formation and development, an emerging group of scholars have come to advocate the particular use of object-centred research to reveal unique insights into imperial histories. Pointing to the literary orientation of postcolonial studies, and voicing the concern that its methodology makes the colonial project seem 'a largely textual one', the study of material culture has been identified as having

the potential to add new depth and context to postcolonial critique.⁶ The facility to leave a material mark on the world is not subject to the same class, gender and race restrictions which dictate opportunities to contribute to colonial archives or published documents, and accordingly the study of objects has the potential to produce insights into the lives of those peoples who are excluded from these modes of representation. The particular qualities of objects – their tangibility, longevity and ability to travel and thus link people across temporal and geographical distances – allow new questions to be posed, and new answers to be provided.⁷ Palimpsest-like, the erosions, alterations and surface patinas represented in the physicality of an object, formed through its long-term use and interpretation, can help to provide lingering insights into the multiple layers of histories that its form has encountered.⁸

Objects constitute and bring imperial relationships into being; they possess social power and efficacy through their materiality and the demands that they make on the senses and emotions, but objects also remain highly reflective of the ‘regimes of value’ and specific historical and cultural milieus through which they pass.⁹ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has described them as ‘polysemic’, highlighting the ways in which a single material entity can contain multiple and incongruent meanings through its contact with different people and varying situations.¹⁰ It is in this capacity that they become most useful to the postcolonial project: the ‘mutability of things in recontextualization’,¹¹ along with their physical endurance and aptitude for movement across spatial and temporal realms, positions objects as key tools with which to interrogate the many imperial routes, institutions and contact zones that they traverse. By focusing on the similarities and contradictions in a single object’s shifting meaning, formed within these different constituencies, it is possible to reveal multifarious and nuanced subject positions embodied in the imperial process. By foregrounding object-based research on those artefacts which have been implicated in projects of empire – traded in colonial encounters, amassed in colonial collections, and/or displayed and interpreted in Europe’s museums or ‘temples of empire’¹² – these historical processes, and their legacies, can be addressed and interpreted in new ways.

This book takes a position at the intersection of these re-evaluations of colonial power relations and imperial representations, and promotes the potential of object-centred research in postcolonial projects. It enquires into the ways in which objects such as the Nicobarese *hentakoi* are implicated in histories of empire, and aims to connect objects’ capricious significances with key processes of imperialism. What, we may ask, do specific objects and their changing meanings reveal about imperial histories and practices?¹³

Island Hopping: From South Asia to England’s South Coast

In response to petitions for historically specific accounts of colonialism and its cultures,¹⁴ this central question will be addressed through an extended examination of a specific set of objects produced in the Andaman and Nicobar

Islands, transported to the UK at the turn of the twentieth century, and finally accessioned and displayed by Brighton Museum. Brighton Museum, now part of Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove, has an outstanding holding of ethnographic material; its 'World Art and Anthropology' collections have been designated a pre-eminent collection of national and international importance by the Arts Council England.¹⁵ The quality of the collection stems in no small part from the museum's position at the heart of a prominent centre for the retired and returned colonial elite, many of whom donated the tangible remnants of their careers in the colonies to their local cultural repository. Accordingly, RPMBH's ethnographic collections have many regional strengths, and have the potential to act as a conduit to numerous imperial excavations. Their 413 manufactured objects from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, however, have particular potential for research into imperial histories and processes, not only due to their 'designated' status, but also because they shed light on an exceptional microcosm of late nineteenth-century colonial collecting.

In 1858, following the Indian Mutiny-Rebellion, the Andaman Islands were chosen by the British administration in India as the location for a major penal colony in which to incarcerate hundreds of 'mutineers' and other prisoners from the Indian mainland. British settlement was also designed to negate the ongoing threat posed by the region's hostile indigenous populations to shipwrecked crews and refuelling traders on the lucrative shipping routes between India, Australia and the Far East.¹⁶ In 1869, a small, subsidiary penal settlement was established on the nearby Nicobar Islands; this was permanently staffed until 1888, after which contact and authority was maintained through regular visits from officers based on the Andamans. This colonization facilitated new levels of engagement between the Andamanese and Nicobarese peoples and outsiders, creating a unique contact zone in which distinctive social and economic relationships were forged.

During these encounters, after some investigation and speculation by European scientists, the indigenous peoples of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were allocated two of the very lowest rungs of the imagined evolutionary scale which governed scholarship of the time. As a result, information about the Andamanese and Nicobarese peoples' lives, including their material cultures, was in great demand by anthropologists and museum professionals and seen as crucial 'evidence' of wider theories of social evolutionism. Aware of this demand, various materially minded figures amassed and exported great numbers of Andamanese and Nicobarese objects, sending them to cultural institutions across Europe and beyond. Large collections now reside in the university museums of Cambridge, Oxford and Manchester, the British Museum, National Museums Liverpool, the National Museums of Scotland, the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, the Indian Museum in Kolkata, and major anthropological museums in Leiden, Vienna, Dresden, Berlin, Leipzig, New York and Washington D.C.¹⁷

For curators and scholars of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands there are various key figures associated with the material culture of the Andaman and Nicobar

Islands today: the colonial administrator Maurice Vidal Portman is particularly famed for his photography of the Andamanese, but also donated consignments of objects to the British Museum in 1886 and 1895.¹⁸ Between 1906 and 1908, a young A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, now known as a founding father of modern social anthropology, carried out his doctoral fieldwork amongst the Andamanese and donated collections to Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Field Museum in Chicago.¹⁹ However, while these and other donors merit much attention, the vast majority of the major collections from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands currently held in Europe were instigated by the indefatigable Edward Horace Man (1846–1929). Man was a colonial administrator in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands between 1869 and 1901 and instrumental in the creation of most of the collections listed above. He and his senior colleague Richard Carnac Temple (1850–1931), also a major donor of island material to UK museums, were particularly concerned with objects, publishing widely on the material culture and anthropology of the region. As is widely acknowledged, and as later sections of this book will explore in more detail, it was their public collections and academic writings that had a major impact on how the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were perceived by the scientists and curators of Europe.²⁰ With 'scientific' objectives in mind, Man and Temple amassed and donated specifically designed sets of material culture to leading museums specializing in human cultures throughout their career, shipping them to Europe and mainland India directly from the islands. Their last major donations were made to museums in Edinburgh, Kew and Liverpool in 1901.

What is fascinating and instructive about the collection at Brighton Museum, however, is that this institution's large selection of Andamanese and Nicobarese material was donated by Man and Temple years after their respective retirements – between 1916 and 1925 – and to a museum that was much smaller and more generalist than previous institutional recipients. In fact, the Brighton objects are the unique remnants of Man and Temple's private collections; as such, they remain the product of the developing anthropological discourse that concerned these famous collectors and showcase their public, professional ambitions; but they also reveal fascinating insights into their personal and private motivations. Equally importantly, the Man and Temple donations at Brighton are supplemented by the collections of Katharine Sara Tuson (c. 1864–1955),²¹ a close friend of Man who was based on the Andaman Islands with her husband, a colonial administrator, between 1889 and 1905. Man, Temple and Tuson knew each other intimately and would all go on to donate to Brighton Museum around the same time.

Thus the compact size of the two island groups, combined with the frenzied collecting in the region and particular donation patterns of these three individuals, provides an unusual opportunity to explore a concentrated moment of colonial collecting and a range of practices marked by disparate categories of gender, class and profession. An investigation of the collaborative donation patterns of these figures also offers a fascinating insight into the networks and networking of collectors in the early twentieth century. In illuminating these

unusual and revealing circumstances, we can review the dynamics of wider modes of colonial collecting, and, given the far-reaching donation patterns of Man and Temple, shed light on Andamanese and Nicobarese collections amassed in similar circumstances at other institutions across Europe.

The Life of a Collection

Since the 1970s, museum scholarship and practice has come to acknowledge and problematize the cultural and political agendas informing exhibition display and reception, and democratize the curatorial and visiting experience. Inspired by this reassessment, recent research agendas have positioned the processes of collecting and museum representation at the centre of the British imperial project. Analyses of the mechanisms of cross-cultural contact have typically formed a crucial place in postcolonial critique, but increasingly the collection and the museum are being similarly assessed as ‘committed participants’ in colonial histories, and as sites ripe for decolonization and postcolonial interrogation.²² Just as scholars have begun to displace essentialist assumptions about the colonial encounter, they have increasingly sought to link the hierarchies of value inherent in the selection and exclusion of collection formation and display with imperial agendas, explore how the personal predilections of individual collectors and curators were able to and continue to mediate popular perceptions of other cultures, and document the potential for the agency of colonized peoples in colonial collecting and museum practice.²³

The sets of material culture from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands now held at RPMBH have all been implicated in the processes of contact, collecting and display at the centre of these pertinent and ongoing enquiries. By means of these objects – through their physicality and the particularly rich set of contextual documentation that illuminates them – it is possible to supplement and progress these postcolonial literatures, adding an extended, localized case study to complement and critique research on these matters in other regions. In particular, tracing the intertwined ‘lives’ of these objects can be used to re-examine the imperial history of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and provide insights into the ways in which objects mediate the cultural and political dynamics of colonial encounters and representations.

The exploration of the shifting trajectory of a specific set of objects to illuminate human and social context was first advocated by Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff in their contributions to the seminal volume, *The Social Life of Things*.²⁴ Here, it was recognized that in their mobility (as a result of trade, conquest, donation, inheritance, or any other form of changed access and ownership), objects are like humans in that they acquire new experiences and are conceptually reinvented in different social and economic circumstances. More recent scholarship has moved to collapse the rigid distinctions between the human and material world, emphasizing the materiality of the body and the

material and social agency of the object,²⁵ but the tracing and analysis of such a 'life history' continues to be recognized as a fruitful mode of research, and can be particularly revealing of the efficacy, importance and complexity of objects.²⁶ This book employs the 'methodological fetishism'²⁷ of Appadurai and Kopytoff, but constructs the 'social life' or 'biography' of a whole collection as it moves through various spatial, temporal and ideological arenas, exploring and deconstructing the 'regimes of value'²⁸ through which it passes. Indeed, the structure of the book follows the same group of objects through their chronological 'careers', asking how, and in what conditions, they were made variously meaningful, from their inception in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to their display in a museum on the south coast of England.

Five central chapters analyse various stages in the lives of RPMBH's collections, exploring the central contested imperial arenas through which they pass. First, Chapter 1 examines the objects in their original homes in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, specifically situating them as embedded in and constitutive of the social, political and economic circumstances of their creator communities between 1858 and 1905. The manufacture and indigenous use of two specific items of material culture – body adornment in the Andaman Islands and clay pots in the Nicobar Islands – are examined as indicators of the ways in which community cosmologies, trade systems and approaches to personal property impacted upon material culture in the two island groups; they also act as a contextual foil against which to contrast the later twists and permutations which mark these objects' colonized 'social lives'. Here, the objects are also employed as a lens through which to uncover traces of their makers' and traders' perspectives on the British presence in the region, highlighting the agency, facilitation and resistance of indigenous peoples during collection formation. We will see that the structures of these collections, while bound for foreign export, were affected by local cultural and political agendas. Chapter 2 then travels with the objects to uncover their encounters with three British collectors at the turn of the century, first in South Asia, and then in the UK. Through an examination of the objects, as well as their associated written archives, the private and professional agendas of Edward Horace Man, Richard Carnac Temple and Katharine Sara Tuson are surveyed and the common assumption that 'salvage ethnography' was the only motivation for collectors in the region is critiqued.

The second half of the book traces the objects to the public realm, engaging with the objects in their long-term home at Brighton Museum after 1920. Arguing that local audiences would have necessarily informed their understanding of material collections in public museums through information garnered from other sources, Chapter 3 explores the literary and artistic interpretation of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and their material cultures between 1858 and 1949 outside the museum, in popular British culture. Here, examining illustrated periodicals, international exhibitions and popular literature also acts to facilitate a close appreciation of the impact made by different media on cultural representation. Building on this context, Chapter 4 then charts the 'official' ways in which