

The Christopher Ondaatje South Asian Gallery

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To create a new gallery on one of the most diverse and culturally rich areas of the world in an irregular 2,600 square foot space at The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) and in just seven months, was a formidable challenge for exhibit designers Reich + Petch Design International. The gallery displays artifacts from a diverse area that includes India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Nepal and spans 200 million years of history. It is the final link in the cluster of Asian Galleries and there was a mandate by the Museum to involve the local South Asian community in meaningful consultation and input, winning sponsorship support from the ethnically diverse group. Coupled with this, the Museum had hired Francois Confino, French conceptualist and "scenographer," to work with R+P and had tasked their own I-house team of curators, preparators, interpretive planners and videographers with a fast track schedule for opening.

The gallery has two parts and is devoted to the entire Indian sub-continent, one of the most populous and diverse regions in the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that the themes of diversity and unity were chosen to illustrate the rich collection of the artifacts already in existence at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Toronto has been officially designated by the United Nations as the most multi-cultural city in the world. It includes a large, mainly first generation South Asian community and one that is making its presence felt both in the business and cultural field. It is significant in that it is the first permanent gallery in a museum devoted to South Asia in Canada.

Part of the mandate to encourage new groups of sponsors was to create an updateable donor recognition panel at the entrance of the gallery. As more emphasis is placed on private sector funding to museums and galleries we are finding this is a common design request. Rich rosewood panels are used to give a quality feel to the entrance and veneered wood strips with the donor's names are easily inserted or removed for recognizing various levels of giving.

The Museum sought a prime donor to sponsor both the gallery and

the newly created department of South Asia and attracted Sri Lankan-born Christopher Ondaatje, famous philanthropist, financier, filmmaker and writer, and brother of Michael Ondaatje, author of *The English Patient* and other novels. He pledged a healthy \$1 million, providing the gallery opened by the fall of 2000, and challenged the local South Asian community to raise an equal amount for curatorship, and for the Museum to set aside \$1 million for purchasing future artifacts for the collection.

Reich + Petch Design designed both the Egypt Nubia and Birds Galleries at the Museum. The company was appointed in April 2000 as exhibit and graphic designers, and later project managers, to design the galleries and manage the process. To represent the vast range of the sub-continent, a novel approach was chosen. The galleries would be supplemented with pulsed multimedia productions to support the story line and contextualize the exhibits. Members of the community were involved in intensive consultation and were asked what they would like to see and how it should be displayed. It was decided some of the members themselves would be involved as presenters in the gallery and tell their evocative stories on film.

The first gallery has a reciprocal theme of unity and diversity and displays a chronological time line of exhibits from the creation of the earth to the invention of the decimal point to the development of the flourishing IT industry represented by a silicon chip. This cyclical time line and selected objects from the Museum's collection mark important milestones in the geological, historical and cultural record of South Asia. Summarizing its most notable achievements, the time line covers South Asia's natural conditions, the birth of civilizations, its classic religious identities, its cultural complexity, the competition for its resources and modern traditions. Carefully selected religious artifacts of many scales and materials mix with geological rock samples and architectural models, such as the one of the Golden Temple at Amritsar.

Tying it all together is a central and focal symbolic "tree of life" typi-

cal of the Banyan trees found at the center of many Indian villages providing shade, meeting places and reflection. The tree is hung with "fruit" in the form of 60 - 6" mini liquid crystal television monitors on which the landscape, peoples, clothing, flora and fauna, colors, sounds and songs of the Indian sub-continent are displayed in a pulsed audio/visual production. The tree has become the visual symbol for the entire gallery. The audio/visual program, "Visions of South Asia," is a soundscaped series of video images revealing contemporary South Asia's beautiful landscapes, abundant natural life, complex rural and urban lifestyles, and modern-day arts and industry. The 60 monitors display a colorful journey through the region, presenting a global picture of the land and people.

The challenge was to design a minimal stripped down version of the monitor coupled with a flexible mounting so they could be adjusted for viewing angles and prevent picture disappearance often typical of LCD applications. Monitors were obtained directly from the manufacturer, Totevision, and factory adapted and hung from a central space frame by hollow rods (for the concealed wiring) for this installation. The 60 monitors are run from five commercial Pioneer DVD players looped in sync to display staggered content so the visitor views different images in different parts of the gallery. Digital Banyan leaf images form the default mode when the sequence is over cueing the visitor to move on to the next section. The Japanese monitors were electronically modified in the factory and adapted to the installation without too much difficulty. Their cost was around \$50 each and the commercial DVD players were less than \$200 each. "They have had an excellent maintenance run and are economical to replace and the external Technovision PC2 controllers automatically power up and maintain frame accuracy during the day, ten hours a day, through Pioneer SR protocol," says Randy Dreager, audio/visual producer for ROM Media Productions.

GOBO lights, also mounted to the space frame, cast deep shadows from the tree and help create the mood of outdoor, rather than indoor, space. Simple graphics are placed on an inforail and welcome interaction by flipping panels of text and illustrations. Rich materials, such as the hardwoods and sandstone of the Indian sub-continent, are used to contrast the simple contemporary custom made cases, selected so they do not detract from the rich materials and ornamentation of the artifacts selected for display.

Through the juxtaposition of objects and images, through compelling information overlays, and through various themes, the visitor is presented with a record of staggering human accomplishments of the area and its historical periods.

In the transition area between the gallery spaces, an exhibit on the rich contribution of the area in terms of natural spices and raw materials prepares the visitor for the next gallery on textiles and ornamentation. This theme is illustrated through the intriguing story of Ayurvedic Medicine, a holistic therapy based on local medicinal plants, which is still practiced, and the story of Sugar Cane, a wild plant that was first domesticated in South Asia and later became a highly valued commodity around the world. This space has been designed with simple and flexible steel cases, made by Holman Exhibits, Toronto, for changing collections and stories. Rotating information rails again provide for additional information and promote interaction and engagement with the visitor.

The second room of the gallery displays a wide range of rare artifacts from various regions and historical periods, illustrating what people wore and why: sculptures, miniature paintings, costumes, textiles, jewelry, and arms and armor are included. Much of this has new relevance as it has had a profound influence on fashion and ornamentation in the



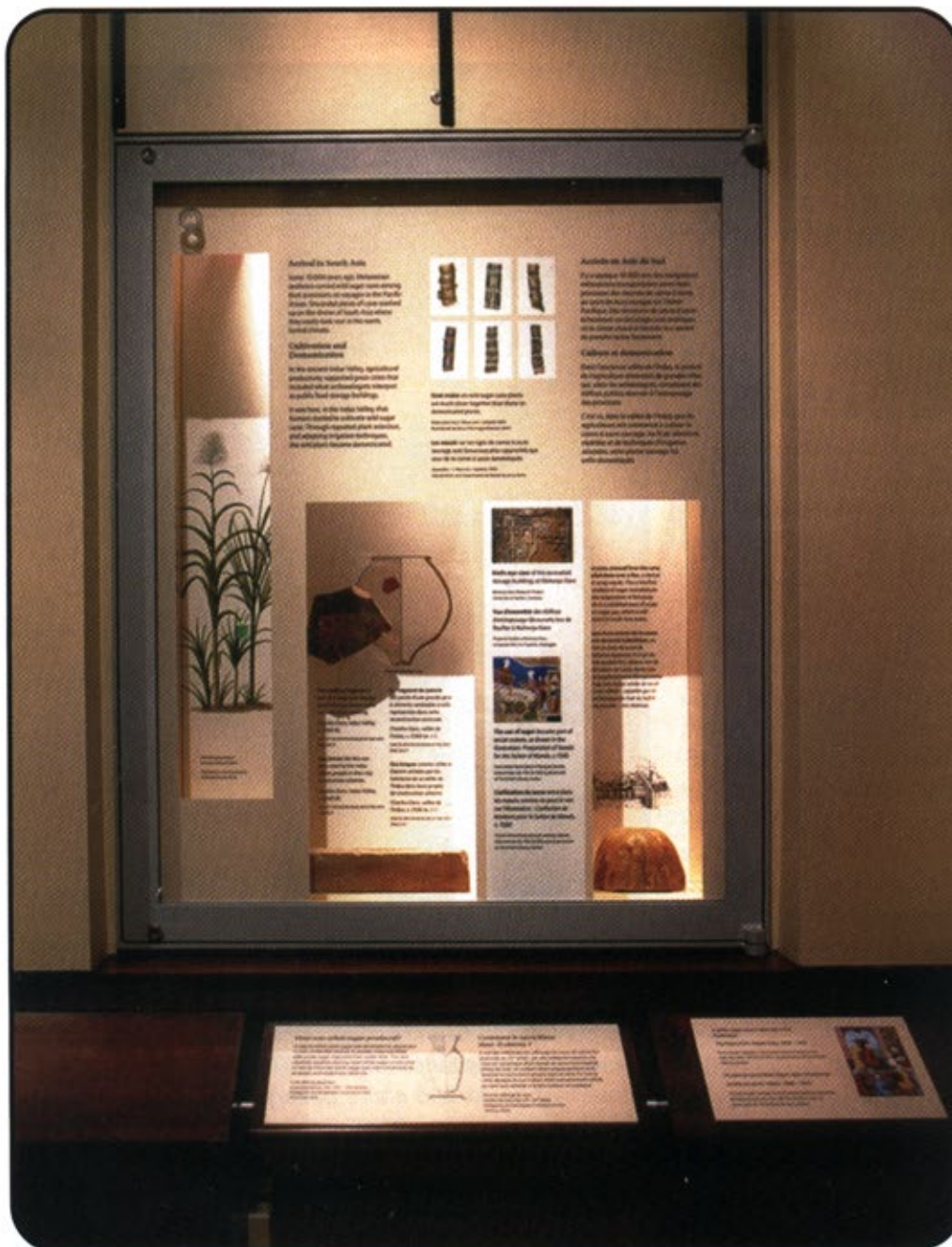
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western world. This exhibit area is also designed for flexibility and change allowing rotation of the large collection in contrast to the more permanent introductory exhibit.

This room is a classical gallery space with an "object theater" that animates the entire room in a series of periodic presentations. Surrounded by a semicircular space, which features richly detailed objects of personal adornment, visitors marvel at the artifacts drawn from the many cultures of South Asia.

This gallery is designed with all of the conservation measures required to permit the display and rotation of artifacts, such as textiles, wood objects and metals, which are both light and environmentally sensitive. Parallel systems to both dry and humidify sensitive artifacts are piped in to the cases from a central source for microclimate control. Reich + Petch used a similar conservation system in the Egypt Nubia Galleries at the ROM where two different types of artifacts were often adjacent to one another but needed completely different control systems.

At one end of the gallery the semi-circular arrangement of cases is placed either side of a back projection screen on which members of the local South Asian community individually present and narrate on film their personalized recollections and stories related to the artifacts in the cases. ROM Media Services undertook the filmed sequences with acclaimed Canadian director Srinivas Krishna. While this occurs, the lighting on the surrounding objects dim to emphasize the objects being discussed. This effect, commonly known as "object theater," is effective



The gallery is a model of cooperation between diverse ethnic groups at a time when such differences are often being emphasized by the media in this troubled region of the world. Without community participation and consensus the gallery would not have succeeded. Christopher Ondaatje commented, "All around the world, but particularly in South Asia, there are so many diverse cultures and countries and religions. Yet in one country, Canada, they have all banded together to sponsor a single artistic achievement. I defy you to tell me any other country in the world that could have done that. It's fantastic."

The gallery is also a model of how multimedia are used to support a mood and context, but does not overwhelm the visitor experience. It illustrates the importance of good lighting in setting the atmosphere of the gallery and controlling the light levels to support the media.

The community successfully raised matching funds for the curatorial seat for the department and the sponsor was happy to part with his generous donation. The contractor, Toronto-based Straughan Construction Ltd. with Holman Exhibits as fabricators, produced the gallery on time and on budget and the project was awarded the highest Canadian exhibit industry accolade -- the 2002 Eddi Award of Excellence and the 2002 Volkswagen Canada Award. *eb*

because it concentrates the visitor's attention on individual items while they are being described and interpreted. At regular intervals the space is dramatically transformed and a series of 90 second video vignettes present individuals from the contemporary South Asian community describing the very objects on view. These "hosts" interpret the objects in a personal way, and the visitors are drawn into the modalities of the South Asian world.

The true significance of the objects is explained in wonderful detail and often in moving descriptions bringing new significance to the inanimate objects. Dreager filmed 25 different segments and six are used in sequence for ten minutes in English and French. Pioneer DVD players with Technovision controllers connected to an Alcorn McBride lighting controller with Lutron dimming system synchronized with the video to complete the effects. An interesting feature is that to obtain a vertical 3x4 aspect ratio, all video was shot with the camera on its side. This sped up the editing and optimized quality in the short production time frame. A Hughes JVC G1000 Digital Projector is used for the rear projection screen. In addition, we mounted the projector on its side and are bouncing the image off a 45° front silvered mirror. This is due to the limited space behind the screen.

The Team

Project managers: Reich + Petch Design International, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Concept consultant: Francois Confino, Lussan, France

Exhibit designers: Reich + Petch Design -- Tony Reich, Stephen Petri, Leonard Wyma, Ron Flood

Lighting designer: Suzanne Powadiuk Design, Toronto

Electrical consultant: Carinci Burt Rogers, Toronto

Mechanical consultant: Sucher Consultant, Toronto

Contractor: Straughan Construction Ltd., Toronto

Exhibit fabricator: Holman Exhibits, Toronto

A/V production: ROM Media Productions -- Julian Siggers, senior producer; Randy Dreager, a/v producer; Drew Gauley, audio post production



Over 25 years, we have evolved our viewpoint about design to create extraordinary moments and opportunities for people to have experiences that change their understanding and perspective of the world they live in.

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