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The Object Flows of Empire:  
Cross-Cultural Collecting in Early Colonial India

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With its focus on British India of the late 18th and early 19th century, this paper uses the lens of object collecting to reflect on the deep interdependence and enmeshing of cultures that brought together the colonizers and the colonized. It takes up two case studies of private collecting and the building of house museums from the colonial capital, Calcutta – the accumulation of the earliest collection of Hindu temple sculptures by an Irish military officer turned antiquarian, Charles Stuart which brought him the acronym of ‘Hindoo’; and the acquisition of a grand array of neoclassical European sculpture, furniture and art decor by a Bengali merchant-aristocrat, Raja Rajendra Mullick in a Palladian mansion that came to be known as the “Marble Palace”. It wishes to juxtapose the well-known story of the outflow of Indian objects from the colony to the metropolis with the lesser-known scenario of the inflow of a vast, hybrid array of Western objects into the homes of the Indian elite. What would be the changing registers of rights and legitimacies in accessing and the owning of objects? How do new desires of art collecting and museum-making inflect these object flows of empire? What are the unintended destinies and the contingencies of preservation or dispersals that make for the afterlives of these private collections? It is with this set of questions that this paper explores how different pre-histories of the modern institution of the museum are thrown open in colonial Calcutta by General Stuart’s first “Oriental Museum of Hindu Sculptures” and by Rajendralal Mullick’s display of his collection as “India’s first museum of Western art”.

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