

EDITORIAL

In the opening pages of Kipling's *Kim*, a lama, guided by the young Kim, finds his way into the imposing museum created by the Imperial authorities in Lahore ('Can any enter?' . . . 'Without payment?' . . . 'I am an old man. I did not know'). Inside, encouraged by the sympathetic British curator (modelled on Kipling's father), the lama breathes life and meaning into the objects on display, grateful for the fact that they have been preserved in spite of the debasement of the religion which brought them into being, and grateful too that the curator can fill the gaps in the message revealed by the exhibits 'where the sequence failed . . . from his mound of books, French and German, with photographs and reproductions'. The lama is, indeed, impressed by Western scholarship: "Your scholars, by these books, have followed the Blessed Feet in all their wanderings; but there are things which they have not sought out". Strengthened in spirit by his visit to the museum, the lama must necessarily pursue his quest – to free himself from the 'Wheel of Things' – beyond the museum's sanctuary.

It is impossible not to be moved by Kipling's tribute to Western intellectual enquiry and custodianship. Yet it is also true that the history of Western interest in Asian (and other non-Western) cultures has been in large measure a history of cultural appropriation, by means of which Western institutions have accumulated both important collections and an impressive body of knowledge. These collections have been formed by, literally, taking objects out of their context, removing them from their past and from the active processes of creation, use, wear, and decay: the knowledge, for all its scholarship, is the knowledge of outsiders. Nonetheless possession of both collections and knowledge has seemed to confer authority on Western pretensions to interpret and to control non-Western cultures; to determine what should be conserved ('You want to preserve everything we want to destroy', Pandit Nehru protested), and to expect non-Western arts to conform to Western preconceptions and desires. These preconceptions and desires encompass the assumption that the only worthwhile non-Western art belongs firmly in a remote past, or in a continuum outside time, which presents no challenge to the triumph of Western civilisation. Hence a

relative lack of interest in or recognition of the arts of living peoples, except insofar as their arts can be confined to repetition of forms with which the West is already familiar and which, remaining free of any signs of development (including responses to Western influence, or reactions to Western attitudes), multiply objects for Western consumption while confirming Western prejudices.

This issue of the *Art Libraries Journal* is devoted to papers presented to the IFLA Section of Art Libraries at the IFLA Conference at New Delhi at the end of August and the beginning of September, 1992. (Only one paper is omitted, because its subject matter lay outside the scope of these pages.) The history of Western interest in South and Southeast Asian art, through colonial activities which enriched museums in Europe as well as founding museums in Asia, to present-day concerns to sustain collections in the West and to deploy Western expertise to conserve artefacts and documents which remain in Asia, is well represented. History cannot be undone; these collections, Western scholarship, and Western expertise in conservation techniques, are important global resources. Yet history is a process of constant change; that there is scope for change is indicated by Francis Macouin's candid admission that *no* French institutions concern themselves with contemporary Asian art; that positive change is possible is demonstrated by Margaret Shaw's paper, which reports that Australia is deliberately moving away from its traditional Western-oriented stance in order to redefine itself, less as a satellite of Europe, more as an independent country situated in the Asia/Pacific region. Most heartening of all are the two – *but only two* (from a conference at *New Delhi*) – accounts of institutions in South and Southeast Asia which are setting out to collect, organise, and provide access to the documentation of indigenous art – without separating art from culture and everyday life; without neglecting the contemporary scene; and (we must hope) without feeling obliged to imitate Western institutions in order to be recognised by Western institutions.