

## CONCEPT NOTE

### **ESIND Training School III Comparative Research on European Representations of India: Museums, Collections, and the Production of Institutional Knowledge**

*UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway  
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#### **1. Overview**

ESIND Training School III will examine museums, collections, exhibitions, archives, photographs, performance traditions, and curatorial practices as major sites in the production of European representations of India. The school will ask how India has been made visible, classifiable, narratable, and interpretable within European institutional and representational settings, and how these processes have shaped wider scholarly, public, and cultural understandings of India across time.

Conceived as a three-day, face-to-face programme, the training school will provide Young Researchers and Innovators with conceptual, comparative, and methodological tools for analysing how knowledge about India is produced, stabilised, translated, circulated, and publicly mediated. Its particular contribution within ESIND is to approach European representations of India through museums and collections while situating those institutional forms within a broader field of representation that also includes travel writing, visual mediation, cataloguing, collecting histories, exhibition texts, and curatorial interpretation.

The school will therefore not treat museums as isolated cultural institutions. Rather, it will examine them as part of a wider representational ecology in which texts, images, objects, labels, archives, and public narratives interact. In this way, the Tromsø school will contribute to ESIND's broader effort to develop comparative models for the study of Europe's representations of India across regions, media, languages, and disciplinary traditions.

#### **2. Intellectual Focus**

A central question for the school is how India has been made into an institutional and representational object of knowledge. European museums and collections have played a major role in this process. Over time, they have assembled, classified, and displayed

objects from South Asia in ways that stabilised particular images of India, often privileging certain religious, artistic, and civilisational forms as more representative than others. These authoritative images were produced not only through objects and collections themselves, but also through art-historical discourse, performance traditions, scholarly interpretation, and wider forms of cultural mediation, including the canonisation of certain forms as “classical” India. Such institutional framings have had lasting effects on scholarship, teaching, and public understanding.

Yet museums are not the beginning of this story. The representational work performed in collections and exhibitions is bound up with earlier and parallel forms of mediation: travel writing, descriptive encounter, photography, translated terminology, scholarly narration, and later visual-public forms through which India has been made legible to European audiences. The school will therefore ask not only how India has been displayed, but how particular ways of seeing, describing, and sequencing India have moved across texts, images, catalogues, and exhibitions.

Within many museum settings, India has been represented through canonical forms such as Buddhist and Hindu sculpture, courtly objects, archaeological materials, and elite artistic traditions. These forms have often come to stand for India as such. At the same time, many other materials have occupied a more unstable position within museum and archival systems. Collections from borderland, upland, Indigenous, and minority communities have often been treated as peripheral, ethnographic, tribal, regional, or otherwise less central to dominant institutional images of India. These distinctions are not neutral. They shape authority, legibility, and visibility.

The school will therefore explore the relationship between canon formation and marginality in the making of India as a museum-, archive-, and knowledge-based category. It will ask how institutional classifications become authoritative, how certain objects and traditions are made central, how others are placed at the margins, and how earlier representational forms continue to shape later institutional arrangements. This opens a broader inquiry into knowledge production itself: how archives, museums, labels, catalogues, translations, travel narratives, and curatorial frames work together to produce durable ways of knowing India in Europe.

By examining museums as institutions of mediation, and by linking them to broader textual and visual histories of representation, the school will connect visual and material culture to ESIND’s wider concerns with texts, images, travel, scholarship, translation, and historical encounter.

### **3. Thematic Structure**

The school will be organised around five connected thematic areas.

#### **A. Museums and the Institutional Image of India**

This theme examines how museums, collections, and related forms of cultural mediation have contributed to the making of authoritative images of India in Europe. It asks how particular artistic, religious, historical, and performative forms came to stand

for India and how these forms were stabilised through display, cataloguing, scholarship, and repetition.

### **B. Travel, Encounter, and Representational Genealogy**

This theme explores how museum representations of India are connected to earlier and parallel forms of mediation, including travel writing, descriptive encounter, photography, and scholarly narration. It asks how ways of seeing India move across texts, images, catalogues, and exhibitions, and how these shape later institutional representations. It also opens a comparative perspective on how such genealogies differ across European settings and traditions.

### **C. Translation, Classification, and Knowledge Production**

This theme examines the relationship between museum representation and broader processes of translation and conceptual transfer. It considers how objects, terms, categories, and descriptions move across languages and institutions, and how those movements shape what becomes legible, authoritative, or difficult to classify.

### **D. Canon, Margin, and Difficult Fit**

This theme focuses on materials that do not sit easily within dominant institutional narratives of India. It asks how marginal, regional, or less canonically legible materials challenge established taxonomies and expose the limits of dominant representational frameworks.

### **E. Curatorial Mediation, Ethics, and Institutional Responsibility**

This theme turns to the contemporary implications of museum work. It considers questions of curatorial voice, restitution, digital repatriation, public accountability, and the ethics of representation, asking how institutions might respond more critically and responsibly to the histories and classificatory regimes they inherit.

Training School III is designed as a compact, workshop-based event that prioritises depth, comparison, and methodological engagement. It approaches museums and collections not as neutral repositories, but as active sites in the historical production, organisation, and public mediation of knowledge about India.