

Shiva Linga *kosh*: Visual Research on the Provenance and Meaning of a Sacred Artefact from Nepal

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Abstract: ‘Shiva Linga *kosh*: Visual Research on the Provenance and Meaning of a Sacred Artefact from Nepal’ explores the origin, provenance and cultural significance of a copper-gilt, four-faced *chaturmukha* Shiva Linga *kosh* (cover) housed at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin. The researchers are engaged in collection-based, multi-sited, multi-layered visual research developed through mutual collaboration combining archival-related and qualitative methodologies employing filming, observation and interviews in Nepal and Berlin. This article aims to outline the challenges and possibilities of a cooperative research approach, illustrated through selected moments from the shared research process culminating in the documentary film *Shiva Linga: A Visual Quest*.

[*Visual Anthropology, Provenance Research, Sacred Artefacts, Knowledge Co-Production, Shiva Linga*]



Fig. 1 Lilla Russell-Smith, Lu Tian, Henriette Lavaulx-Vrécourt, Deepak Tolange, and Katharina Plate with the Shiva Linga *kosh* (I 4877) in the storage rooms of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Dahlem on October 8, 2024. Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst / Pierre Adenis, 2024

Introduction

This article reflects on the process, methodological approaches and selected findings of the collaborative project *Shiva Linga: A Visual Quest*. The research-film initiative seeks to deepen understanding of Shiva, Shiva Linga and a Shiva Linga *kosh*, a sacred Hindu artefact held at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin.

Originating with Deepak Tolange's film proposal in September 2022 and supported by 'the Collaborative Museum', the project has evolved through sustained dialogue and joint inquiry. The documentary film *Shiva Linga: A Visual Quest* is set to premiere in 2026, with screenings planned in Berlin and Kathmandu.

Focusing on the four-faced copper-gilded *chaturmukha* Shiva Linga *kosh*, acquired in 1993 by the former Museum für Indische Kunst, now part of the South Asian collections of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, the project closely examines its composition, materiality, iconography and inscriptions. Its aim is not only to trace the history of the Shiva Linga *kosh* within the museum's collections, but also to explore the circumstances of its removal from its original context and its subsequent acquisition by the museum.

In addition, the project – especially the film – seeks to raise awareness of the absence of cultural belongings in Nepal. Landlocked between Tibet and India, Nepal is rich in tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Since it opened its borders in the early 1950s following the end of the Rana regime, the country has continued to experience a loss of tangible cultural heritage, despite the existence of legal frameworks. Numerous historical and sacred artefacts have been removed from public shrines, temples, monasteries and homes, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. Dhungel claims that almost fifty percent of Nepal's missing cultural heritage that ended up in Western countries has not been displayed or catalogued from the holdings of government, public and personal collections (2010:4).

The basis for the growing partnership and the central idea to engage with the Shiva Linga *kosh* from the Museum für Asiatische Kunst collection were developed and supported by Dr. Lilla Russell-Smith (Museum für Asiatische Kunst) and Henriette Lavaulx-Vrécourt (Ethnologisches Museum). Both co-curated the Himalaya section of the two museums' exhibitions at the Humboldt Forum in the Berlin City Palace.¹ Although the Shiva Linga *kosh* was initially selected for display at the Humboldt Forum, it was ultimately excluded from the 2022 exhibition due to unresolved questions concerning its sacred significance and provenance. A more in-depth investigation was therefore established as a prerequisite for its future presentation. With a shared commitment to collaborative practice, the Shiva Linga *kosh* became the starting point and focus of a joint research project.

1 The second part of the exhibitions within the Humboldt Forum was inaugurated in September 2022

With the launch of ‘the Collaborative Museum’ in 2023, provenance researcher Sophia Bokop joined the team, bringing a new dimension to the project. In 2024, at what was an opportune moment, Deepak participated in the CoMuse-Fellowship programme. This period proved crucial for working together to develop a methodology. This collaborative approach integrates archival and qualitative methodologies with visual anthropology and filming in Berlin and various locations across Nepal.

Rather than presenting concrete research results, this contribution outlines the possibilities and challenges of collaborative research, illustrated through selected moments and findings from the shared process of the research partners. In the meantime, it seeks to reveal the complex meanings and implications of sacred objects within museum collections, highlighting the potential of co-produced knowledge emerging from collaborative provenance research and visual anthropology.

Finding a Collaborative Research Design: Reflecting on Methodological Approaches in International Partnership

‘Creation happens from the union of two’

Shiva Jangam, Priest at the Indreshwor Mahadev Temple, Panauti, 2024

This collection-based, multi-sited, and multi-layered visual research project was developed through mutual collaboration combining archival and qualitative methodologies with observation, filming, interviews and informal conversations in Nepal and Berlin. The study seeks both to trace the origin and provenance of the Shiva Linga *kosh* and to explore its cultural and spiritual significance and meaning, weaving these findings into a cohesive cinematic narrative.

Archival research was conducted in Berlin at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst and the Zentralarchiv, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. The latter houses records from the former Museum für Indische Kunst and the central administrative levels of the museums and the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz. The limited time available has not allowed a systematic investigation of the archive, so agreements have been made regarding priorities and procedures in archival research.

Language, translation and the recent nature of the archival files presented notable challenges in interweaving archival knowledge with, for example, qualitative and visual data within this international and transdisciplinary collaboration. In the meantime, archive-based research revealed itself to involve the intensive examination of the histories of institutions and collections, not least to allocate the respective sources in addressing specific questions. In this particular case, the early 1990s proved to be challenging in the search for archival sources: in the wake of Germany’s reunification, the Staatliche

Museen zu Berlin of East and West Berlin were merged, leading to structural and personnel changes. This is also a period of technological change in museums due to the increasing use of the internet and digital forms of communication. Despite these challenges, this phase of the project offered valuable insights into museum practice and helped shape further questions for collaborative, multi-local research. Unfortunately, due to a lack of proper documentation in Nepal, archival research was not possible.

Qualitative research and field conversations were conducted by Deepak in Nepal. According to the initial film proposal, the envisioned documentary was structured into three chapters: first, the origin and provenance of the Shiva Linga *kosh* (I 4877); second, the meaning of Shiva and Shiva Linga, including associated festivals; and third, the loss of Nepal's tangible cultural heritage. In preparation for the film, Deepak witnessed rituals and various festivals dedicated to Shiva and Shiva Linga. As the research progressed, various experts and knowledge bearers were consulted, including historians, culturists, priests, residents of Gyaneshwor in Kathmandu, and representatives from the Department of Archaeology, among others. Their insights and participation significantly informed the research and the film's development.

In the course of the research, questions and findings were shared with each other and also discussed in relation to the current state of research and literature. Each discovery generated further lines of inquiry. An online visual mapping tool supported joint data storage, visualization and knowledge co-production, being particularly useful during periods when collaboration was limited to virtual meetings. A CoMuse Fellowship enabled Deepak to spend three months in Berlin from October to December 2024, allowing the team to work together on site and to engage in shared archival and visual research.

The emergence of topics or contact persons, the necessity to involve further aspects or knowledge bearers and even the need to include initially unconsidered topics have not only shaped the respective interview situations in the presence of the camera or the focus while analysing the archival remains of a museum's history, they also shaped the envisioned documentary: during the editing process, initially imagined chapters were merged, and the final film no longer follows a clearly defined chapter structure but has a single cohesive cinematic narrative. The film's production may also have influenced the process. Combining provenance research with film enables the immediacy of specific moments and multiple perspectives to coexist, reinforcing or questioning one another in equal measures, all in the quest of better learning and understanding.

Various other commitments have tended to limit the time available for research activities, especially in the museum's everyday context and in the day-to-day work of an independent artist and visual anthropologist. All in all, the project is characterized by the parallel nature of the production of a visual outcome in the ongoing joint research process.

A Quest to Understanding Shiva: Who is Shiva? What is Shiva Linga *kosh*?

‘Shiva is an entity of welfare. Shiva turned into a real being from an abstract. [...] Linga has many meanings. Linga means the point of creation of the world. [...] The union of Shiva and Parvati is the origin of all beings. That is also known as Shiva Linga’
Prof. Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta, Kathmandu, 2024

In Hinduism, Shiva is regarded as one of the greatest gods (see e.g. Bangdel 1987:60; Khanal Parajuli 2023). For example, at Pashupatinath Temple, one of the most significant temples on the bank of the Bagmati River in Kathmandu, he is worshipped as the protector of both the people and the nation as a whole (Schick 1989:25).

The Shiva Linga is considered the mark, emblem, or symbol of Shiva. It is often described as a phallic or cosmic pillar connecting the earth and the universe. A complete Shiva Linga consists of three parts: Rudra (top), Vishnu (middle) and Brahma (bottom), the latter being under the earth. Symbolically, it also represents the union of Shiva and Shakti or Shiva and Parvati, signifying the merging of masculine and feminine energies for the creation of life. There are many forms of Shiva Linga. The *swayambhu* (or self-manifested Shiva Linga) is a naturally formed stone pillar. A Shiva Linga with faces is known as a *mukhalinga*. The Shiva Linga *kosh* in the Berlin collection features four faces and is therefore called *chaturmukha*. Some also refer to it as a *panchamukhal-*

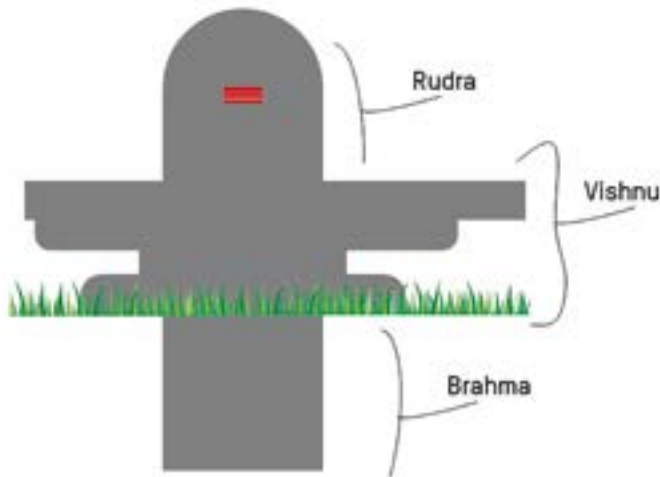


Fig. 2 A complete Shiva Linga showing Rudra, Vishnu, and Brahma parts. Digital art: Deepak Tolange, 2025



Fig. 3 A *swayambhu* stone Shiva Linga enshrined at the Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple in Kathmandu. Believed to have self-manifested, this sacred Linga is deeply revered by devotees and is central to daily worship and ritual practices honoring Lord Shiva. Photo: Deepak Tolange, 2024

inga (five-faced), with Ishana facing upward, whether symbolic or implied. In Tantric traditions, however, Shiva Linga is believed to have six faces (Khanal Parajuli, 2023; and conversation with Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta, 2024).

A Shiva Linga *kosh* is a metal covering or sheath placed over the upper part of the Shiva Linga, specifically the Rudra part. Once consecrated through ritual and infused with life energy (*prāṇa pratiṣṭhā*), the *kosh* is regarded as equivalent to the Shiva Linga itself, embodying the presence of Shiva (conversations with Shiva Jangam, 2024; and Sandhya Khanal Parajuli, 2025).

The *chaturmukha* Shiva Linga *kosh* currently housed in the collections of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst is, first and foremost, a *kosh* – a sacred covering for the Shiva Linga. Upadhyay explains that removing such an object from its temple context results in the loss of its sacred essence (conversation with Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta, 2024). Dhungel writes that when religious art is removed from its original site of spiritual significance, the holy soul of the artefact is lost, leaving only its secular or aesthetic value (2010:8).

The Shiva Linga *kosh*: Insights from Museum and Archival Sources

According to statements made by museum staff, the Shiva Linga *kosh* has been exhibited since the reopening of the Museum für Indische Kunst in Dahlem in October 2000. After extensive renovations of the exhibition spaces in the late 1990s the Shiva Linga *kosh* remained on display even after 2006, when the Museum für Indische Kunst and the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst were merged to form the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. The exhibitions in Dahlem closed in 2017 in preparation for the exhibitions' move to the Humboldt Forum.

In 2000 the Shiva Linga *kosh* as described in the exhibition catalogue, *Magische Götterwelten: Werke aus dem Museum für Indische Kunst* was dated to the year BS² 1888 (1831 CE) and referred to as a *panchamukhalinga* (see Yaldiz et al. 2000:149). This article, including two black and white photographs, is likely the first publication on this Shiva Linga *kosh*, significant for its inscription in particular.³

Founded in the 1960s out of the collections of the Museum für Völkerkunde, the Museum für Indische Kunst was not only one of the youngest state museums, but also the first of its kind in the German-speaking region.⁴ The main motivation for establishing an independent museum was to provide an appropriate venue for presenting 'one of the world's great forms of art', opening it up to an international audience, as well as fostering research on Indian art.⁵ Apart from this concept of a general collection and the institution's mission statement, what motivation could have led to the purchase of the Shiva Linga *kosh*, especially at a time of scarce resources due to the reunification of the museums in 1992 and the planned redesign of the Dahlem exhibitions? What is

2 BS stands for Bikram Sambat, a national calendar in Nepal which is also used in parts of India. The BS is a lunisolar calendar based on ancient Hindu traditions, and its new year begins in Baishak (mid-April).

3 The acquisition of 1993 was published in 1994, in the *Jahresbericht der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin* (Bd.: 36). Here, the published photograph does not show the acquired *kosh*. Instead, a similar object can be recognized in the published photograph, reportedly taken by museum staff. The depicted Shiva Linga *kosh* was not identified as part of the Berlin collections. Research in the photo archive of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst revealed that the Shiva Linga *kosh* I 4877 was in front of the museums' professional photographers' camera at least twice: in 1994 four side views were photographed; in the following year, professional photographs were taken of the details and inscriptions.

4 At around the same time, the first Chair of *Indische Kunstgeschichte* or Indian Art History was established at the Freie Universität zu Berlin, following the engagement and commitment of Prof. Herbert Härtel (Reitz [2003] 2006). Prof. Härtel was head of the former Indische Abteilung [Indian Department] of the Museum für Völkerkunde (today: Ethnologisches Museum) from 1953 and from 1963-1986 first director of the newly founded Museum für Indische Kunst.

5 Anlage 3+4, betr. Denkschrift zur Zukunft der Staatlichen Museen; hier: Außerordentliche Sammlungen und europäische/deutsche volkskundliche Sammlungen, Datum unbekannt [Annex 3+4, regarding the memorandum on the future of the State Museums; here: Extraordinary collections and European/German ethnological collections, date unknown], Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Zentralarchiv [SMB-ZA], II/VA 14844.

documented regarding the circumstances of the acquisition and the provenance of the Shiva Linga *kosh* in the early 1990s?

The acquisition of the Shiva Linga *kosh* by the Museum für Indische Kunst was recommended in accordance with formal procedures at the regular conference of directors of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin in September 1993.⁶ Purchased from the Galerie Peter Hardt, Radevormwald, the *kosh* was documented in the same year with inventory number (MIK) I 4877 as follows:⁷

German: Kupferblech, getrieben und vergoldet. Ø: ;H: ;4-köpfiges Sivalingam mit Devanāgarī und Nandināgarī Inschriften. Nepal. Galerie P. Hardt, Radevormwald, Kauf 1993

English: Copper sheet, embossed and gilded. Ø: ;H: ;4-faced Sivalingam with Devanagari and Nandinagari inscriptions. Nepal. Galerie P. Hardt, Radevormwald, bought 1993 (translation by the authors)

No further provenance details or measurements were documented. The Shiva Linga *kosh* is not the only acquisition by the museum from Galerie Peter Hardt. Since 1984 the gallery seems to have assumed significance for the collecting institution regarding its specialization in art from the Himalaya region.⁸ Consequently, the research team embarked on a search for further documentation on the 1993 acquisition within the archives in hope of gaining a deeper understanding of the circumstances and motivation behind the acquisition, as well as the history of the Shiva Linga *kosh* as part of the museum collections. Not only the archives within the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, but also the Zentralarchiv of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin became starting points for the research.

At the time of writing this text in 2025, no additional documentation regarding the moment of the acquisition and the provenance of the Shiva Linga *kosh* had been found, such as export licenses. This leaves a few questions unanswered at present, such

6 Protokoll zur Direktorenkonferenz 8/93 am 15.09.1993 [Minutes of the Directors' Conference 8/93 on 15th September 1993], SMB-ZA, II/VA 14717.

7 Furthermore, within the Erwerbungsbuch the acquisition is documented under the number IKA 8 as follows: "Metal: 1 vierköpfiges Lingam. Kupferarbeit, vergoldet. Himalaya, 17 Jh." / „Metal: 1 four-faced Linga, gilded copper work. Himalaya, 17th century” (translation by authors); The inventory and collection documentation of the Museum für Indische Kunst is available online on the website of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, see e.g. (1) Museum für Indische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ostasiatische Kunstabteilung et al. (ed.): Erwerbungsbücher des Museums für Asiatische Kunst, 9: Erwerbungsbuch der Indischen Kunstabteilung, <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.69047>, accessed December 12, 2024; (2) Museum für Indische Kunst (ed.): Erwerbungsbücher des Museums für Asiatische Kunst, 10 (1): I 1-5000, <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.69061>, accessed December 12, 2024.

8 See for example 'The History of Hardt Auctions' at www.2bhardt.de/history/, accessed September 25, 2025.



Fig. 4 Edited collage of *chaturmukha* Shiva Linga *kosh* (I 4877). The four faces, from left: Aghor (south), Sadyojata (west), Vamdev (north), and Tatpurush (east). Photos: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst / Iris Papadopoulos, 1994

as whether the museum exchanged information on the subject of exports with the gallery itself at the time, or if it sought contact with the authorities in Nepal in order to obtain information on exports.⁹ The reasons may be manifold. From the perspective of the current research, considering additional storage locations for information such as, for instance, digital archives due to the rapid technological developments in the 1990s appears to be among the relevant next steps in the in-depth examination of earlier museum practices.

⁹ According to a published statement by Marianne Yaldiz, former director of the Museum für Indische Kunst, like other collecting institutions of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, the museum attempted to contact the respective institutions and authorities in view of a planned purchase in order to obtain more detailed information, particularly regarding the export of the cultural property (Hausler and Selter 2025:45). Whether this was done in the case of the Shiva Linga *kosh* could not be verified at this time.

A Closer Look at the Shiva Linga *kosh*: Inscription and Iconography

On 19 October 2022, close-up photographs of the Shiva Linga *kosh* (inventory number: I 4877) were taken in Berlin. The images were digitally processed to enhance their legibility. The *kosh* has four cast heads representing different manifestations of Shiva fixed around its circumference: Aghor (South), Sadyojata (West), Vamadev (North) and Tatpurush (East). Aghor is ferocious with three wide-open eyes, snake earrings on both ears, a crescent moon and a crown of skulls. Sadyojata is calm, wearing floral earrings. Vamadev is an androgynous form (Shiva-Parvati) with asymmetric hairstyles and earrings: floral and snake. Tatpurush is adorned with floral earrings. Each cast head has two hands. The left hand holds the *kamandalu* in *vara mudra* (gesture of blessing), the right hand, when carrying a *rudraksha mala* (rosary beads), forms the *abhaya mudra* signifying fearlessness, protection and divine reassurance.

In Kathmandu, Deepak and Prof. Dr. Ram Chandra Poudel examined the inscription and iconography, identifying its basic meaning in 2022. Subsequently, Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels, Dr. Rajan Khatiwoda, and Dr. Manik Bajracharya transcribed, translated and interpreted the text into English in Heidelberg in February 2023 and in presence of the camera with Deepak in Patan, Nepal, 2024.

Some cracks and repair joints can be seen to the *kosh*, which measures 104 cm in diameter and 35.5 cm in height. In total, five inscriptions in Nepali with some Sanskrit words written in Devanagari script are engraved on the *kosh*. A two-line inscription reads:

स्वस्ति श्री संवत् १८८८ साल वैशाख शुद्धि द्वादशी रोज २ यस महाप्रब
दिनमहा श्री ३ सु इष्टदेवता ज्ञानेश्वर प्रीति गरि सुनाको मूर्ति नाग
समेतको छत्र चाँदीको बेलपत्र माला श्री ३ राजगुरु विद्याकर भट्टज्यू टट्ट
पत्नी श्री विशालाक्षी देवीले सोपुत्र श्री रजनीक भट्टज्यू सहित गरि चढायौ :
जो लोभानी पापानी गरला पञ्चमहापातक लागला शुभम् : ॥

Here, the text is transcribed in Romanised Nepali/Sanskrit, using the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST-style):

Svasti. śrī samvat 1888 sāla vaiśākha śuddi dvādaśī roja 2 yas mahāprava dinamahā śrī 3 su [read: sva] iṣṭadevatā gyañesvara prī[ti] gari sunāko murti nāgasmekko chatra cāḍiko velapatra mālā śrī 3 rājaguru vidyākara bhṭṭajyū ṭaṭ paṭnī śrī viśālākṣī devīle soputra [read: svaputra] śrī rajanika bhṭṭajyū sahita gari cahrāñuṃḥ. jo lobhānī pāpānī garlā pañcamahāpātaka lāgalā. Śubham :।

The text can be translated as follows:

Hail. In 1888 Vikram Samvat [1831 CE], on Monday, the 12th of the bright fortnight of Vaisakha, the threefold venerable Rajguru Vidhyakara Bhatta, his vener-



Fig. 5 (f.l.t.r.) Dr. Manik Bajracharya, Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels, and Dr. Rajan Khatiwoda discuss and interpret the inscriptions on the Shiva Linga *kosh* on March 25, 2024, in Lalitpur, Nepal. Film still: 'Shiva Linga: A Visual Quest' by Deepak Tolange, 2024

able wife Vishalakshmi Devi, together with their venerable son Rajanik Bhatta, in love with their own tutelary deity Gyaneshwor [i. e. Shiva], donated a golden statue together with serpents, a silver parasol, and a garland out of *bel* [bilva] leaves. Whoever, out of greed and evilness, acts towards those offered items, will suffer punishment for the five gravest sins. Auspiciousness :! [closed with sacred marks]

The other four short inscriptions are on the neck of the two figures: Aghor and Sadyojata, and on the left wrist of Aghor, which reads 'shree Sundar Prasad Shah B. [BS] 2037 [1980 CE]'.

The inscription tells how the Shiva Linga *kosh* and associated items were donated to the Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple in 1831 CE by the Bhatta family residing in Naradevi Chowk, Kathmandu. Located in Kathmandu, Gyaneshwor Mahadev is also known as Parasnath Mahadev; locals consider it the source of knowledge. The temple is taken care of by the Bhatta family. Madan Bhatta serves as the head priest. According to Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta, his ancestor, Vidhyakara Bhatta, his wife Vishalakshmi Devi and their son Rajanik Bhatta, who donated the Shiva Linga *kosh* together with other items, were descendants of Lambakarna Bhatta, *Raj Guru* (royal priest). He



Fig. 6 Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple in Kathmandu. Photo: Deepak Tolange, 2024

was invited to the royal court by Pratap Malla, the ninth king of the Malla dynasty.¹⁰ In a family lineage chart compiled by Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta that traces ancestry back to Lambarkarna Bhatta, both Vidhyakara and his son Rajanik are recorded, anchoring the family's presence in Nepalese history.

The differences in metal work and carving, the lack of gilding on two figures and the inscription with a name and date, 'Sundar Prasad Shah B. 2037' on two faces Aghor, Sadyojata, and wrist suggest that these parts were replaced and repaired after a theft and recovery of the *kosh* in 1980 CE, possibly with generous support from Sundar Prasad Shah.¹¹ Local accounts from Shyam Thapa, priest Kamala Shrestha and priest Madan Bhatta confirm the theft and return of the *kosh* to the Gyaneshwor temple. They further state that the *kosh* was never returned after it was stolen for the second time, in the 1980s. After decades of the loss of the original *kosh*, a silver *kosh* has been

¹⁰ The Malla dynasty ruled Kathmandu Valley approximately from 1200 to 1769 CE. Pratap Malla was one of the prominent rulers who reigned in Kantipur (Kathmandu) from 1641 to 1674 CE.

¹¹ Sundar Prasad Shah (1933–2015) was the son of Rajendra Prasad Shah, who was a resident of the Gyaneshwor area. Sundar Prasad served in various capacities in important positions, including Chief Election Commissioner, Secretary at the Ministry of Information and Communications, and the Home Ministry. Conversation with Sanjiv Shah (son of Sundar Prasad Shah) in Kathmandu on July 29, 2024.

offered to the Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple. Its base has approximately the same circumference as the copper-gilded *chaturmukha kosh* housed in Berlin.

Based on the inscription on the Shiva Linga *kosh* and conversations with Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta and his lineage records, as well as insights from priest Madan Bhatta and residents of the Gyaneshwor area, it is suggested that the Shiva Linga *kosh* (I 4877) originally belonged to the Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple in Kathmandu.

From Records to Relations: Archival Memories of International Relations and Museum Practices

In the course of the team's journey examining the museum archives, further insights into the Museum für Indische Kunst's earlier relations with Nepal became apparent. In the following, two examples are considered.

First, the archival files of the former Museum für Indische Kunst indicate that, since the late 1980s, efforts had been made in collaboration with various institutions and museums in Berlin and Kathmandu to organize a joint exhibition project at both locations under the working title 'Treasures from Nepal'.¹² This cooperative exhibition was initially envisioned for 1993 and not realized. However, correspondence with Nepalese cultural institutions and stakeholders indicates former relationships, with processes of defining mutual interests and common museum practices regarding the representation of sacred and cultural belongings and artefacts. Against this background, the team at the Museum für Indische Kunst intensively analysed the art, artefacts and cultural belongings housed by the institution. The team also researched known and published collections with references to Nepal and the Himalayas in both public and private collections in order to sharpen the ideas on representation. This raises the question of what interest and motivation there were for purchasing cultural belongings from the Himalaya region such as the Shiva Linga *kosh*.

Second, the restitution of a limestone relief of Uma Maheshwor (MIK I 5942) from the Museum für Indische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz to Nepal in 2000 proved to be relevant to the collaboration. This case, also described as 'the first ever bilaterally negotiated restitution case in which a public institution returned a stolen object to Nepal' (Hausler and Selter 2025:47; also Selter 2022:121), provides a deeper insight not only into German–Nepalese relations and co-operation at the institutional level, but also into museum practices, as well as restitution frameworks and ongoing debates on returning cultural heritage to the respective

12 'Schätze aus Nepal', see SMB-ZA, II/VA 14771; SMB-ZA, II/VA 14772; SMB-ZA, II/VA 14773. The project was not realized for various reasons, including structural and personnel changes and unsecured financial resources.



Fig. 7 Sophia Bokop and Deepak Tolange researching in the archival files of the former Museum für Indische Kunst in Zentralarchiv, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz on November 14, 2024. Film still: ‘Shiva Linga: A Visual Quest’ by Deepak Tolange, 2024

communities.¹³ The rapid support and approval of the return of the limestone relief following its identification as stolen highlights the impact of early initiatives to seek out and document Nepal’s cultural heritage. The connection between the increasing disappearance of art and cultural assets and an established international art trade is becoming salient, encouraging critical reflections on the role of (Euro-Atlantic) museums.¹⁴

These selected examples have shown what gaps, open questions and further impulses arise from archival research on the provenance of the Shiva Linga *kosh*. While archival research has shed light on the history of the *kosh* at the museum in Berlin, as well as on the relations between the former Museum für Indische Kunst and Nepalese

¹³ A more in-depth analysis of the return of the relief and its subsequent whereabouts, as well as the current discourse in Nepal dealing with absent and/or returned cultural property, is provided by Elke Selter and her current (field) research (see Selter 2022; Hausler and Selter 2025).

¹⁴ See, for instance, the following newspaper articles from August 2000: Berliner Mitteilungen (2000-08-10, Sebastian Pfothenhauer), Berliner Zeitung (2000-08-11, Ingeborg Ruthe), Die Welt (2000-08-11, Corinna Daniels), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (2000-08-10, U.C.), Frankfurter Allgemeine (2000-08-11, C.B.), Herald International Tribune (2000-08-12/13, Camilla Blechen), Nepali Times (2000-08-16/22, Sujata Tuladhar), Süddeutsche Zeitung (2000-08-10, Andrea Exler), Tagesspiegel (2000-08-09, Peter Herbstreuth), The Kathmandu Post (2000-08-12); see also Spice 2000.

institutes, no further knowledge regarding the circumstances surrounding its removal from its context of origin or its acquisition have been found to date.

Absence and Loss: Nepal's Missing of Cultural Heritage

Following the opening of Nepal's borders, the Kathmandu Valley's heritage sites especially attracted European and North American travellers and tourists. The Himalayan region quickly became 'the focus of Western projections of otherness, orientalism, and counter culturalism' (Smith and Thompson 2023:22). Around the same time Tibetan refugees were settling in the region,¹⁵ many of whom brought cultural artefacts with them, which they were ultimately compelled to sell for sustenance. As a result, Kathmandu Valley evolved into 'a regional hotspot for trade in cultural objects during the 1960s' (Smith and Thompson 2023:22). The 1970s and 1980s are often declared to be a significant peak regarding the 'outpour[ing] of Nepali cultural objects to satisfy market demand' (Smith 2022:266). 'Western awareness of the country as a site of mountaineering and "hippie trail" counter-culture lifestyle' and the 'spread of interest in the West in Eastern "spirituality", culture and aesthetics' (Sijapati and Thompson 2024:80) are identified among the factors shaping this phenomenon.

Since 1956, the 'Ancient Monuments Protection Act' has governed the protection of ancient monuments, site excavations and cultural heritage in Nepal.¹⁶ In 1970, UNESCO finalized the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which was ratified in Nepal in 1976.¹⁷ Although the date of 1970 is not considered legally binding on institutions, associations or organizations, it often marks 'a proxy for legality' (Gerstenblith 2013:365), resulting in, for example, museum policies on the acquisition of looted antiquities and cultural heritage.¹⁸ Since then, the question of the provenance of cultural belongings, artefacts and sacred objects offered for sale and the corresponding

15 In the 1950s, Tibetan refugees fleeing the persecution during the annexation and the subsequent suppression of its cultural heritage by the People's Republic of China arrived in Kathmandu (see, e.g., Smith 2022:265).

16 See the Ancient Monuments Protection Act, 1956, available <https://www.unesco.org/en/cultnat-laws/ancient-monuments-protection-act-consolidated-text>, accessed October 23, 2025.

17 According to Gerstenblith (2013), the 1970 Convention 'was created in response to the escalating looting of archeological sites and the dismemberment of historical structures to provide objects for sale on the international art market'; it also 'creates a framework for the regulation of the trade in cultural objects by calling on nations to establish a licensing system for the export of cultural objects' (Gerstenblith 2013:364). The 1970 Convention, online available via <https://www.unesco.org/en/node/66148?hub=416>, accessed October 23, 2025, was ratified by Germany in November 2007.

18 For instance, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) adopted in 1970 the 'Ethics of Acquisition' and later the ICOM Code of Ethics beginning in 1986 (see e.g. Gerstenblith 2013:366).

documentation is increasingly characterizing museum collection practices. The case of Uma Maheshwor mentioned above, which was returned to Nepal in 2000, shows the extent to which there is still a need to raise awareness among collecting institutions as participants in an international art market and to continue critically examining the provenances and histories of collections.

In fact, the systematic documentation of Nepal's cultural artefacts, especially those from the Kathmandu Valley, has largely been undertaken by individuals rather than institutions. Two landmark publications, *Stolen Images of Nepal* by Lain Singh Bangdel and *The Gods Are Leaving the Country* by German author Jürgen Schick, serve as the primary references in this regard.¹⁹ Schick estimates that nearly 50 to 60 percent of the Valley's sacred artefacts have been looted, with many of these losses recorded in their works.

However, conspicuously absent from both registries is any mention of a missing copper-gilded *chaturmukha* Shiva Linga *kosh* in the mid-1980s from the Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple in Kathmandu.

Among the younger generation in Gyaneshwor, there is little to no awareness of the artefact's disappearance. A few older residents vaguely recall the *kosh* being stolen, later recovered, and then stolen again. Unfortunately, those elders who may have had clearer memories of the events have since passed away. Madan Bhatta, the temple's head priest, remembers the artefact only faintly and is unsure whether a formal complaint was ever filed.

Mrs. Sarita Subedi, officer at the Department of Archaeology, reviewed over 400 complaint records, yet found no mention of the Gyaneshwor case. This lack of institutional memory is not surprising: for decades, the documentation of stolen heritage from Nepal has depended almost entirely on the efforts of Bangdel and Schick. If an object was not recorded in their books, it often went unnoticed and left unaccounted for. Subedi reports that a total of 198 objects have so far been repatriated to Nepal from other countries. Most are housed in the National Museum in Kathmandu, some in the Patan Museum, and a few have been returned to their respective communities (conversation with Sarita Subedi, 2025).

For Subedi, one crucial piece of evidence remains: an inscription found on the *kosh* itself (I 4877). Inscriptions are rare among such sacred artefacts, and many pieces, like the similar copper-gilded *chaturmukha* Shiva Linga *kosh* at the National Museum, bear none. Stone reliefs, too, seldom contain identifying inscriptions. The National Archives of Nepal hold no information on the loss of the Gyaneshwor Shiva Linga *kosh*.

Regarding the Shiva Linga *kosh* in Berlin, no written record has been found to indicate its removal from its original context apart from the inscription on the *kosh* itself.

19 Nepalese scholar Lain Singh Bangdel and German lawyer Jürgen Schick both started photographing statues of deities and evidence of their theft independently of each other because '[t]he outpour [sic] of Nepali cultural objects to satisfy market demand became so alarming in the 1970s and 1980s' (Smith 2022:266).

This raises a genuine question: what will happen to the *kosh* after this research? In such an ambiguous and complex situation, former Director Lars-Christian Koch [until the end of 2025]” emphasised the importance of collaboration in identifying gaps, thus making it transparent so that everyone understands the reality. He explained further that once the results are available, the museum will contact the authorities in Nepal. If it is proved that an object was traded illegally according to international legal frameworks, the item will be returned to its country of origin following legal procedures (conversation with Lars-Christian Koch, 2024).

The absence of official documentation and institutional knowledge underscores a broader issue: the fragility of Nepal’s cultural memory and the urgent need to record comprehensive heritage beyond individual efforts. In cases like Gyaneshwor, the traces of lost artefacts now survive only in the oral memory – and those, too, are fading.

Polyphonic Perspectives: Concluding the Shared Experiences and Envisioning Future Paths

Tracing the Shiva Linga *kosh* (I 4877) through collaborative and transdisciplinary approaches makes it possible to re-connect a sacred artefact of Shiva as one of the principal deities in Hinduism. The Shiva Linga represents both tangible and intangible forms of Shiva, while the Shiva Linga *kosh* is a metal covering placed over the upper part of the Linga, which, after specific rituals, becomes an integral part of the deity himself. Within its original context, this sacred artefact holds deep spiritual and religious significance, yet in public or private collections, it is often reduced to a mere *objet d’art*.

Through a detailed look at the Shiva Linga *kosh* in its unique form and an in-depth examination of its inscriptions, its connections to specific individuals, temples and their histories became visible. Moreover, selected examples from archival and qualitative research revealed multiple insights and narratives, offering new understandings of museum practices and institutional and international relations, then and now. These findings also resonate with Nepal’s ongoing struggle against the loss and looting of its living cultural heritage, as well as current debates surrounding repatriation and restitution frameworks and the rightful belonging of the Shiva Linga *kosh* in Berlin, among others. By acknowledging diverse frameworks of knowledge and interweaving research questions with findings, this layered process has opened up new pathways of understanding, creating a space in which to contest established interpretations and to weave multi-vocal stories around cultural belongings and their complex, entangled lives.

The researchers encountered several challenges throughout this process. Embedded within structural and institutional frameworks, conversation and knowledge-sharing unfolded in digital spaces and physical encounters in Berlin, supported by online tools or audiovisual media. Both researchers navigated multiple roles, responsibilities and



Fig. 8 Anna Szöke, Sophia Bokop, and Deepak Tolange in public conversation at the Mechanical Arena in the Humboldt Forum on December 11, 2024. Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst / Pierre Adenis, 2024

institutional expectations. In particular, the role of the filmmaker was challenged by the idea of developing a film during an ongoing research process, causing the ongoing reworking of the documentary storyline. Some answers are still being sought and are awaited.

To conclude, the project highlights the relevance of reimagining and reshaping museum practices by moving beyond the mere collection and preservation of static objects towards an active dialogue with living traditions and cultural continuities. Through cooperative, international research and the interweaving of diverse findings and perspectives, new knowledge emerges, gradually filling the gaps in provenance histories and illuminating the trajectories of sacred cultural artefacts. Such collaborative approaches foster mutual understanding of the future of collections and the shared responsibilities for bringing their stories to light. This holds out the promise of deepening awareness of past and future museum practices, of the continuing loss of Nepal's cultural heritage, and of the profound strength in collaborative practices and processes in seeking answers and new pathways.

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*Conversations and Field Notes**

- Conversation with Prof. Dr. Ram Chandra Poudel at Kathmandu University, on December 5, 2022.
- Conversation with Shiva Jangam, priest at the Indreshwor Mahadev Temple in Panauti on September 11, 2024.
- Conversation with Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels, Dr. Manik Bajracharya, and Dr. Rajan Khatiwoda in Lalitpur on March 25, 2024.
- Conversation with Prof. Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta in Kathmandu in 2024 and 2025.
- Conversation with Associate Prof. Dr. Sandhya Khanal Parajuli at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu on May 6, 2025.
- Conversation with Mrs. Sarita Subedi, Officer at Department of Archeology (DoA) in Kathmandu on April 8, 2025, and May 6, 2025.
- Conversation with Madan Bhatta, priest at the Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple in Kathmandu on August 16, 2024.
- Conversation with Prof. Dr. Lars-Christian Koch, Director of Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst - Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz on December 13, 2024
- Conversation with Sanjiv Shah (son of Sundar Prasad Shah) in Kathmandu on July 29, 2024.
- Conversation with Kamala Shrestha, priest at Ananda Bhairav in Gyaneshwor, Kathmandu on September 16, 2024.
- Conversation with Shyam Thapa (Magar) and Ashok Thapa, locals in Gyaneshwor Kathmandu, on September 16, 2024.

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