



Sailing ship to Oman, *Maqamat of al-Hariri*, 13th century, Bibliothèque Nationale de France

The Indian Ocean: Monsoon Worlds Preliminary Exhibition Prospectus

ROM



The Exhibition

The unique monsoon system of the Indian Ocean world gives rise to some of the most generative—and destructive—cultural and commercial activities the world has ever seen.

This will be the first exhibition to explore the Indian Ocean from ancient times to the present, its entwined natural and human histories, and enduring impacts on all the world. With a transdisciplinary approach, the exhibition brings together art, nature, and culture to explore the connections in the Indian Ocean that form our collective past, present, and future.

Outstanding objects, rare natural specimens, and contemporary works of art from the world's most important museums and collections will take visitors on an awe-inspiring and complex journey of trade, unique biodiversity hotspots, technological innovations, and cultural exchanges to a contemporary reckoning with social and environmental imbalances.

Currently in development, this prospectus highlights the themes, objects, and powerful stories of the exhibition that will travel from 2026 to 2027.



Ship cloth (*palepai*), Sumatra, Indonesia, 18th – 19th century, Asian Civilisations Museum

Formation and the Power of the Monsoons

Continental drift and volcanic activity gave rise to the Indian Ocean's unique geology and biodiversity. They generated the greatest weather system on earth – monsoons – that enabled long-distance sea travel, fostering novel inventions and arts, pluralistic port cities, the spread of major religions and ideas, as well as wildlife.



Coco-de-mer, the largest seed in the world, is derived from a palm tree found only on the Seychelles islands. It has been imbued with artistic and religious meaning by cultures around the Indian Ocean because of its unusual size, shape, and rarity. Today conservation efforts aim to protect the habitat of this endangered species.

Left: **Hollow seed, coco-de-mer, *Lodoicea maldivica***, Royal Ontario Museum



Hindu vessel (*goumukhi*) made from the coco-de-mer to pour holy water from the Ganges River, Private Collection



Rare gemstones and minerals drive the earliest long distance maritime exchanges from the Indus Valley to Mesopotamia.

The Star of Lanka, 193 carat blue star sapphire, Royal Ontario Museum

Natural and Artistic Wonders

Monsoon winds, rains, and currents gave rise to unique flora and fauna. From ancient times, trade winds and the search for rarities encouraged the first long-distance maritime voyages of discovery and trade, connecting peoples and ports from eastern Africa to southern China.

Aromatics such as frankincense and myrrh found only in Horn of Africa and Arabia, sandalwood from India and southeast Asia, and ambergris from sperm whales are sought for the body, the home, and spiritual ceremonies.

Spices unique to the Indian Ocean – such as cloves and nutmeg native to Indonesia – drives the Indian Ocean economy. Black pepper from Sri Lanka and southern India inspires regional cooking and draws the whole world to its shores, including ancient Rome.



Myrrh resin, 1700 BC, Egypt
Royal Ontario Museum



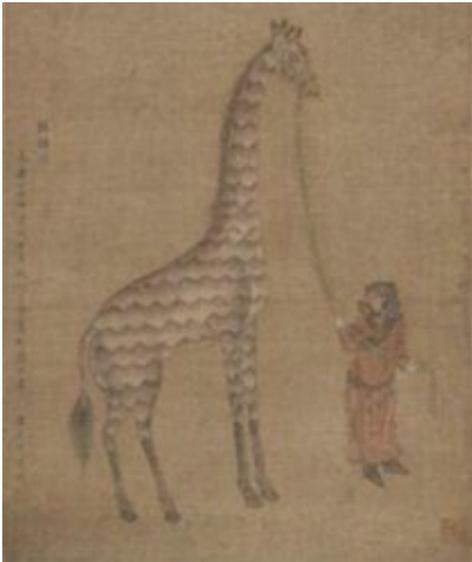
Pepper pot, 300 – 400 AD, Rome,
British Museum



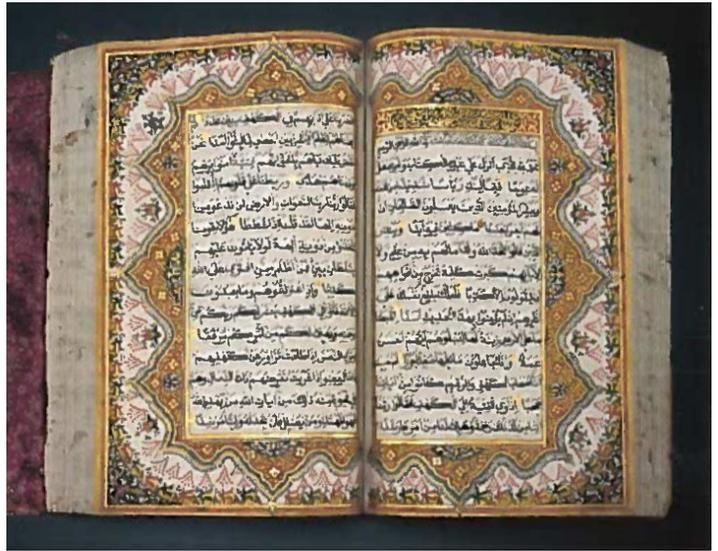
Illustration of nutmeg plant by Sita Ram,
1815, India

Natural and Artistic Wonders (cont.)

The dynamic cultural and material exchanges in the Indian Ocean world spurred technological innovations, creative artistic expressions, and the growth of wealthy, cosmopolitan port towns. They encouraged the spread of major religions, diplomatic voyages, and the dispersal of plants and animals.



Diplomatic gift of African giraffe to China, 16th c., China, Philadelphia Museum of Art



Indonesian Qur'an, 19th c., Sumatra, Asian Civilisations Museum



Astrolabe for navigation, 17th – 18th c., Iran, Royal Ontario Museum



Ruffed lemur, 19th c., Madagascar, Royal Ontario Museum

Carved door, 19th c., Zanzibar, Smithsonian Institution

Global Demands

Global mass consumer demands both past and present disrupt communities and put pressure on the environment. The desire for the Indian Ocean's unique goods such as coffee, sugar, and cotton from 1500 forever revolutionizes tastes and fashions in Europe and the Americas; it sparks largescale plantations, forced labour, colonization, and industrial imitation, whose social and economic legacies persist today.



Clearcut #1, Palm Oil Plantation, Borneo, Malaysia, 2016, pigment inkjet print, Edward Burtynsky



Top: **Coffee, tea, and sugar set in Meissen porcelain**, 1740, Germany, Gardiner Museum

Left: **Woman's cotton chintz dress**, ca. 1770, India for the European market, Royal Ontario Museum

Collective Futures

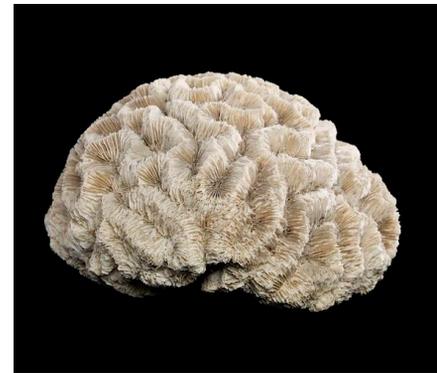
Reckonings are underway to chart our global collective future. Extinction, habitat loss, unsustainable extraction, over-consumption, and climate change threaten all the world, and the Indian Ocean especially. New research, conservation activities, and decolonization efforts at local and national levels are charting a new course.



Spurred by overconsumption, 70% of today's shipping crosses the Indian Ocean on massive container ships. Technological change, scale, and impact are stories to be explored.



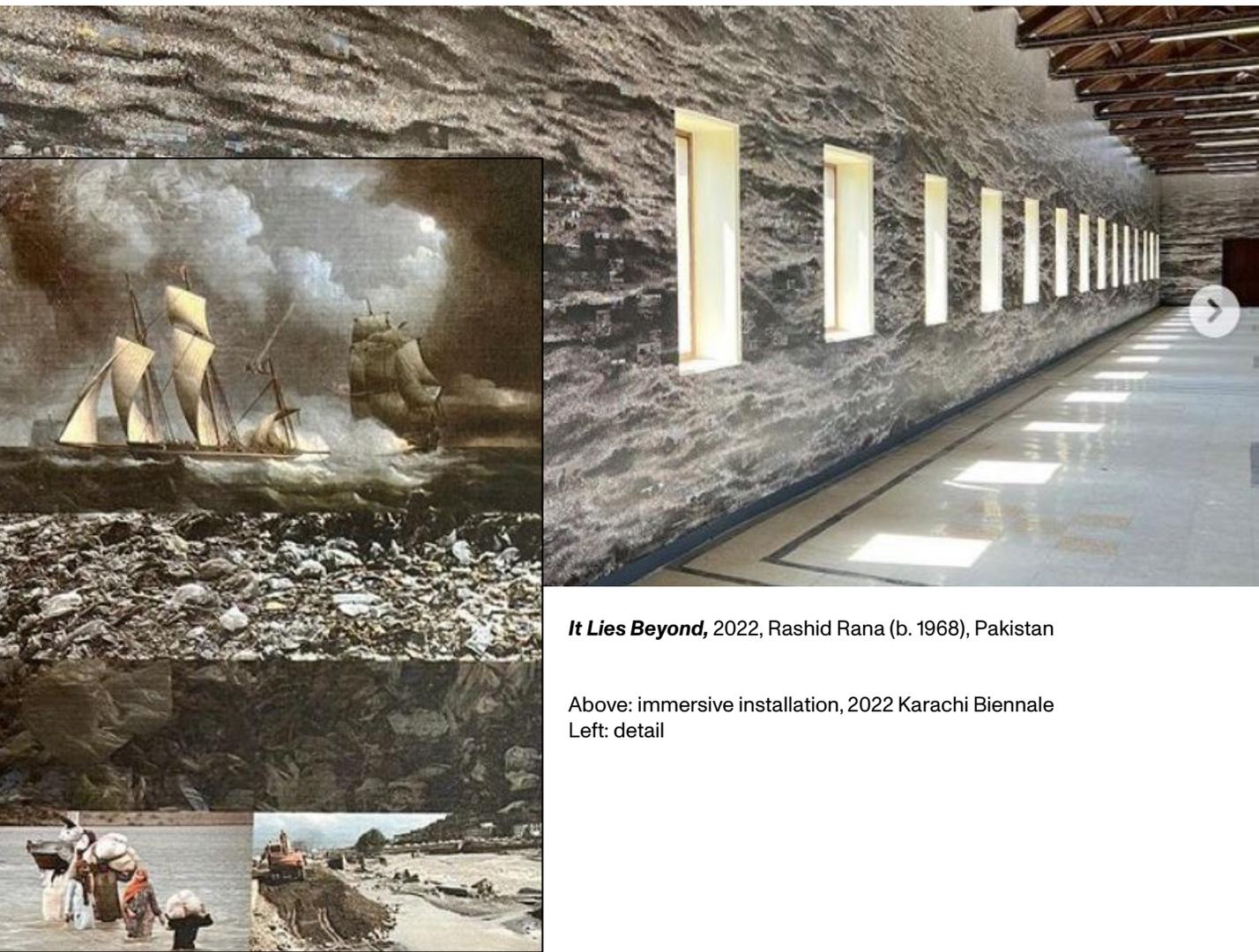
The Dutch encountered the Dodo bird on Mauritius in 1670. Within 70 years it was extinct, but later made famous in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. 17th century paintings offer rare records of what the bird looked like and inspire conservation of biodiversity.



Climate change is most affecting the Indian Ocean, such as bleaching of coral, due to its unique topography surrounded by three continents. Restoration activities like the one below are restoring coral reefs and underwater habitats.

Experiential Highlights

The *Indian Ocean* exhibition will be rich in stories, objects, and experiences – a transdisciplinary approach that brings together art, nature, and culture. It will include an exceptional display of objects from the Tang shipwreck, an Arab ship that sailed between Persia, Southeast Asia, and China during the 9th century AD along the Maritime Silk Route. Immersive video will transport visitors to Indian Ocean waters, shores, and deep underwater. It will include the works of contemporary artists (see example below), objects of extraordinary value and natural beauty, as well as models and objects of scale, such as seafaring craft and shipping containers. As the exhibition develops, we look forward to sharing the object list and powerful narrative, which will be further developed in partnership with expert international advisors and community groups.



It Lies Beyond, 2022, Rashid Rana (b. 1968), Pakistan

Above: immersive installation, 2022 Karachi Biennale
Left: detail

Lead Curators

Dr. Sarah Fee

Dr. Sarah Fee is Senior Curator of Global Fashion & Textiles at ROM and teaches in the Department of Art History, University of Toronto. With graduate degrees from Oxford University and the School of Oriental Studies, Paris, she has for over thirty years researched and published on the textiles and textile trades of Madagascar and the western Indian Ocean. She served as the lead curator for the ROM-original exhibition *The Cloth that Changed the World: India's Painted and Printed Cottons* (2020-2022) and edited its companion publication (ROM/Yale University Press). With contributions from fifteen international experts, the book was shortlisted for the Alfred H. Barr Jr. Award of the College Art Association.

Her field research has taken her to Tanzania, Oman, Madagascar, India, and Indonesia, among other places. Dr. Fee is co-editor of *Textile Trades, Consumer Cultures and the Material World of the Indian Ocean: An Ocean of Cloth* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018), and *From Madagascar to the Indian Ocean* (in press, Editions Hémisphères).



Dr. Burton Lim

Dr. Burton Lim, Assistant Curator of Mammalogy, researches the evolution and biodiversity of mammals, with a specialization on tropical bats. His PhD dissertation (University of Toronto) examined the molecular phylogenetics of New World sheath-tailed bats, their origin, divergence times, biogeography, and evolution of morphological and behavioural characters. He has conducted fieldwork in about thirty countries throughout the world including Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. His research has resulted in the publication of eleven new species of mammals, which includes four species from China and one genus from Vietnam that are new to science.

Dr. Lim supports ROM's collection and programming efforts by sharing his research through dynamic exhibitions, lectures, and experiences. In 2014, he was part of a ROM research team that salvaged a blue whale that washed ashore in Newfoundland and re-assembled it to create the exhibition *Out of the Depths: The Blue Whale Story* (2017). He is also co-curator of ROM's most recent natural history exhibition, *Great Whales: Up Close and Personal* (2021-2022).