

Queen Victoria's Durbar Room: The Imperial Museum at Home

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Abstract

In 1890, Queen Victoria commissioned John Lockwood Kipling to create a sumptuous 'Indian dining room' for Osborne House, her summer palace on the Isle of Wight. This room later came to be known as the Durbar Room, a great hall in which the queen displayed many of the gifts she received from Indian princes as Empress of India. As a strange amalgam of private and public space, dining room and museum, the Durbar Room was an indulgent project. Originally constructed by Sikh artisans led by Bhaj Ram Singh, the room was only opened to the public after the queen's death. When Osborne House became a convalescent home for retired military officers, the room was maintained as a kind of museum where a selection of decadent Jubilee presents was displayed to an eager public. The Durbar Room is also interesting as a popular subject for picture postcards, and many views of the room have been printed and sent by post since the room opened to the public in 1904. The Durbar Room is a unique case study in the display of Indian material culture and the indulgence that is the private royal museum. This paper addresses the decadence of the Durbar Room, as well as its collections, construction, and popularity in picture postcards, with regards to its status as a uniquely indulgent private collection of Indian art and design.

Queen Victoria's Durbar Room was designed to exhibit her resplendent collections of princely gifts at her summer palace. While the room's origins can be traced to Queen Victoria's personal evaluations of her immense empire, a contemporary understanding of this space is obscured and complicated by its adherence to nineteenth-century methods of display. Uncomfortably positioned between the ideas of a royal palace, family home, trophy case, and tourist destination, the Durbar Room's difficult identity asks how a twenty-first century viewer can responsibly appraise nineteenth-century legacies of imperial display.

On the Cowes waterfront on the Isle of Wight, Osborne House stands as a resplendent Italianate gem of the Victorian era. Positioned at the northern point of the Isle, Osborne looks over the Solent strait towards the southern English port cities of Southampton and Portsmouth. The country retreat and favored sanctuary was built to serve as a less formal royal palace for Queen Victoria. It was at Osborne where Victoria and her husband, Albert, Prince Consort, were able to give their nine children the opportunity to participate in diverse recreational activities on the home's private beach and working model farm.

Built between 1845 and 1851, the house was largely Albert's personal creative project, and he collaborated with the gifted builder Thomas Cubitt in designing the home and its landscaped gardens.¹ After its completion, Osborne House became one of the royal residences preferred by Queen Victoria, which included her English palaces, Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace, as well as her Scottish estates, Balmoral Castle in the Highlands and Holyrood House in Edinburgh. Of all of these superlative stately homes, Osborne House is perhaps the manor most closely allied with leisure and recreation, a distinction attributable in large measure to its exclusive seafront access and relative distance from the southern English coast.

After Albert's untimely death in 1861, Victoria was left legendarily distraught. Her mourning continued through the rest of her life, and the queen consigned herself to wearing black for the next 40 years. It was to Osborne that the bereaved Victoria withdrew. However, because it was conceived as a summer palace, Osborne lacked the requisite amenities for conducting state affairs — there was no throne room, formal dining room, or stateroom. Formal occasions on the Isle of Wight were usually relegated to specially constructed tents on the rolling lawns of the property. This deficiency led to the preparation of architectural plans for a new wing, named the Durbar Wing, which was built between 1890 and 1891.² The substantial addition was to be the only significant alteration made to the house after Albert's passing.

The stateroom that would serve as the center of the new wing was an opulent and whimsical creation — a decadent tribute to Victoria's status as the Empress of India. Though the queen would never visit South Asia, she had the power and means to recreate certain aspects of the subcontinent within her British pleasure palace. The design of the room may have also been influenced, in part, by Victoria's daughter, the Empress Frederick, who wrote to her mother, "You have so many lovely Indian things to put into it, and [Rudolf] Swoboda's heads and studies would look very pretty there too."³ Unlike the comparable displays of Indian artifacts in the Great Exhibition of 1851 or the East India Company Museum, both of which were determined by the values of various contributors, the creation of the Durbar Room was ultimately determined by the singular power and perspective of the queen and her circle.

Famous for its teak carvings and ornate plaster detailing, the Durbar Room became a repository of Indian culture and traditions, as well as a unique museum of Indian art objects. Unlike the imperialist collections of Indian art that were burgeoning in London at this time, the collections of the Durbar Room were almost entirely comprised of gifts made to the British crown by Indian princes. While the Indian collection at Osborne was kept in glass cases, like those found in a museum setting, there may not have been a curatorial objective beyond that of displaying the most impressive offerings from the far reaches of the empire.

Since its construction, the Durbar Room has had difficulty conveying a definitive message about its collections and perspective. This nebulosity may also be attributed to the

¹ Alasdair Glass, "The Durbar Room at Osborne," *Context* 75 (July 2002): 12.

² Ibid.

³ Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 99.

participation of artisans from the subcontinent in the construction of a royal British space. When, in 1890, Queen Victoria commissioned John Lockwood Kipling and the Sikh artisan Bhai Ram Singh (Fig. 1) to create an 'Indian dining room' at Osborne House, she was also contracting an interior that would represent her personal perception of the Indian empire.⁴

As a unique amalgamation of private and public space, dining room and museum, the Durbar Room remained a private chamber for the royal family and state affairs until after the queen's death. When Osborne House became a convalescent home for retired officers in 1904, the room was maintained as a kind of memorial to the queen herself. Around this time, the Durbar Room became a popular subject for picture postcards, and many views of the room were printed and distributed by post.

The Durbar Room is a unique case study in the history of collecting and displaying Indian material culture. It is an Indian room within an Italianate British palace, designed to display precious gifts from the distant and exotic subcontinent. Today, the Durbar Room still features trophies of the former empire, making it a distinctive nineteenth-century collection that can be viewed in its original context. Furthermore, as a historic site of international exchange, the Durbar Room has traditionally functioned as a microcosm — a place that encapsulated in miniature an ambitious scheme of empire, which distinguishes the room as a distinctive Victorian museum of Indian material culture.

The Durbar Room takes its name from traditional Indian princely courts, being the title given to the public audience held by an Indian or British colonial ruler, or the hall where such audiences are held.⁵ As the stateroom for the Empress of India, the Durbar Room at Osborne House transposes the traditional Indian stateroom to the site of the royal British summer palace, making the space a type of proxy India.

Kipling described the room as "a sort of Hinduized version of the work of the Akbar period."⁶ The Durbar corridors leading to the room are lined with Rudolf Swoboda's famous portraits of Victoria's Indian subjects. Slender columns decorate the walls, along with Mughal and Hindu motifs in gold and plaster. An inlaid stucco-coffered ceiling and carpets woven in the women's prison at Agra accent images of Ganesh, as a sculpted peacock watches over the room from above (Fig. 2). Stylized lamps decorated with Indian patterns lit the room in the first

⁴ In her essay "John Lockwood Kipling and British Art Education in India," Mahrukh Tarapor writes of Kipling's cooperation with his Indian students: "Kipling directly involved his students in several of his most important final commissions on buildings, completed between the publication of 'Indian Architecture of Today' and his final departure from India in 1893" (52). "The Queen's new room was the Durbar Room at Osborne House, completed in 1892. In this case Kipling delegated even more authority to native craftsmen: here a certain Ram Singh (a student of Kipling's from the Mayo School of Art in Lahore), who designed and supervised almost the entire decoration of the room, while keeping Kipling abreast of developments through a meticulously written correspondence to India. He informed Kipling equally of design changes by royal request and of tangible expressions of royal approval" (77-78). Mahrukh Tarapor, "John Lockwood Kipling and British Art Education in India," *Victorian Studies* 24, no. 1 (Autumn, 1980): 53-81.

⁵ "Durbar, n.," OED Online, accessed March 2013,

<http://www.oed.com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/view/Entry/58629?redirectedFrom=durbar>.

⁶ Tarapor, 78.

instance of electricity being utilized in a British royal residence.⁷ The environment is unlike any other in the archipelago of Victoria's palaces, and it broadcasts its own difference through the presence of glass display cases. The employment of these cases for the collection distinguishes the Durbar Room as a type of museum — yet, exactly what type of museum it is remains unclear.

It is not surprising therefore that the Durbar Room has a somewhat nebulous status as a type of museum. The character of this museum has changed and evolved throughout the life of the room itself. Its architect, John Lockwood Kipling, was the curator of the Lahore Museum, which may have subconsciously influenced the overall character of the room.⁸ Later, the central glass cases came to display rotating selections of princely gifts from India, which were given to mark Victoria's jubilees in 1887 and 1897.⁹ After Albert's death, all of Osborne House was treated as a shrine to the Prince Consort himself, rather than the culture of the subcontinent. When the house was opened to the public in 1904, it seemed to be dedicated to the Victorian era as a whole, without specific reference to the Indian empire. Julius Bryant, Chief Curator at English Heritage, writes:

By the time Victoria died in 1901, after forty years of widowhood, Osborne had become a family shrine to Prince Albert. Shortly before the house opened as a museum in 1904, the best of the paintings and sculpture were removed to other royal residences (notably Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle). Subsequently, Victoriana gradually arrived from other royal palaces, adding to the sense of museumification. English Heritage [now] seeks to explain how Osborne House was lived in, not only by the royal family but by the politicians and staff of the royal household, whose presence turned this family retreat into the epicenter of the British Empire.¹⁰

Since the English Heritage Centenary Project refurbished and reopened the room in 2004, it has become a kind of museum of Queen Victoria's reign and the message of Osborne House and its Indian room remains uncertain.¹¹ Alisdair Glass, Senior Project Director at English Heritage writes, "Notwithstanding the centenary, the significance of Osborne is not that Victoria died there but that she, and Albert, lived there ... The story of Osborne ... is a story that is particularly relevant to today's multicultural society and to the debate on national character that the present Jubilee has stimulated."¹²

⁷ "...the drawing room chandeliers and candelabra were electrified, at the risk of drilling through the glass branches. The lamp room at Osborne still contains the early Edison and Swan patent light bulbs, glass candles, and yellow silk shades. The gold wall sconces were fitted for electricity, the flex being left conspicuous, as worthy of show. Victoria's continuing suspicion of the latest technology is indicated by the absence of any electrical fittings in her bedroom, which was presumably lit by candles and oil lamps." Julius Bryant, "Chasing Shadows: Exploring the Meaning of Light in English Heritage Houses," *APT Bulletin* 31, no. 1 (2000): 29; Greg King, *Twilight of Splendor: The Court of Queen Victoria During Her Diamond Jubilee Year* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 186.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Glass, 12.

¹⁰ Bryant, 29.

¹¹ Glass, 13.

¹² Ibid.

It seems that the vague character and significance of the room is the product of a number of converging factors. First, because the room was closed to the public until after Victoria's death, contemporary accounts of it are rare. Secondly, the collections and decoration of the Durbar Room have been largely omitted from biographies of the queen and have even been absent from the earlier spate of studies on British reactions to Indian art.¹³ Lastly, once the room was designated as a space of display in 1904, the collections within were not categorized or exhibited as outstanding examples of Indian art. Instead, they were shown simply as gifts. Understandably, an exhibition of general offerings from the subcontinent reflects a far different perspective than a logical and intentional display of Indian art and artifacts.

Although exhibition checklists or didactics from the Durbar Room cases seem to remain unavailable or inaccessible, a selection of likely displayed works can be constructed from a few pieces of evidence. It is known that the Royal Collection accessioned the Indian objects that were displayed during Queen Victoria's lifetime. Some objects can be seen in early photographs of the room, while published primary accounts describe general object types. One guidebook to the Isle of Wight describes the room's cases filled by richly bejeweled gold caskets containing addresses presented to Queen Victoria by Indian potentates and municipalities.¹⁴ From this information, one could begin to attempt to identify works that may have historically been displayed at Osborne House.

With regards to this evidence, one object that may have been historically displayed in the Durbar Room is a golden casket containing an address of welcome (Fig. 3), which was presented to Albert Edward, Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VII) by the inhabitants of Amritsar, during his visit to India 1875-6. Made from gold and encrusted with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, the velvet-lined box features delicate floral decorations and jeweled parrots.¹⁵ Beautiful craftsmanship and priceless materials distinguish this box as an object worthy of consideration. However, when regarded in the ornate and busy setting of the Durbar Room cases, this example was probably viewed as merely one example set within a case containing many similar specimens.

Another object which may have been exhibited in the museum cases at Osborne House is a jeweled attar-dan, or scent vessel, which was gifted to Prince Albert Edward by Vikram Deo,

¹³ In his review of Partha Mitter's *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, J.R. Marr describes the lack of attention to the significance of the room in this important book. He writes, "Also missing is any reference to the Indian collection in the Durbar Room at Osborne House, [in other words].any interest that Queen Victoria had in her newly-acquired Empire is completely glossed over." J.R. Marr, review of *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, by Partha Mitter, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, 43, no. 1 (1980): 157. However, it seems that Mitter later corrected this oversight. In his later book, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, Mitter writes, "The greatest success story of imperial art policy was the decoration of the Durbar Room at Osborne, Queen Victoria's residence on the Isle of Wight, by Bhai Ram Singh, trained at the May School of Art, Lahore, by Kipling." Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 49.

¹⁴ Ward, Lock, and Co. *A Pictorial and Descriptive Guide to the Isle of Wight* (London: Ward, Lock & Co., c. 1910), 151.

¹⁵ Royal Collection, inventory no. 11230.

Maharaja of Jeypore, during the same trip in 1875-6 (Fig. 4). The delicate egg-shaped vessel sits on an ornate golden tray decorated with “hunting scenes, architectural subjects and floral designs; openwork border of green enamel acanthus leaves on the inside and red enamel leaves on the outside with pendant pearls; six enameled and diamond set legs.”¹⁶ The central cup, balanced in the middle of the tray, features red and green enamel and a diamond lotus flower. Judging from available images of the room, which reveal a number of vessels and containers, as well as the period of its accession, it seems that the display of this attar-dan in the Durbar Room was likely.

However, in its early public life at the beginning of the nineteenth century, visitors to the Durbar Room did not seem to specifically react to these individual magisterial artworks. Rather, newspaper reporters and cultural tourists viewed the room as a single art object, considering the whole display instead of its discrete artistic contents. There are almost no available published accounts in which visitors react to a single object or describe the discrete contents of a display case.

In her biographical encyclopedia of Victoria’s life, Helen Rappaport writes, “In 1897 it was crammed, like an Aladdin’s cave, with many of the beautiful gifts that the queen received from royal relatives on the occasion of her Diamond Jubilee.”¹⁷ The magnificent gifts were usually described as a single unit in this manner. Such descriptions were even printed in newspapers as far away as Seattle. The *Seattle Times* reported on March 13, 1904:

Special Cable to the Seattle Sunday Times. London. Saturday, March 12 – Osborne house is no longer a royal residence. It has become a convalescent home for officers of all branches of his majesty’s service. The well-loved home of Queen Victoria is now ready to receive its new tenants. None of the pictures, the statuary, or the treasures of the Durbar room have been removed. In this apartment a portion of the jubilee presents received by Queen Victoria will be arranged for public inspection.¹⁸

The Queen’s collection would continue to be treated in this manner throughout the twentieth century, and the Durbar Room seems to still be organized as a single display of the idea of India, instead of as an exhibition of unique and singular art objects.

Official guidebooks for Osborne House have also traditionally regarded the royal Indian collections in this manner. In Sir Guy Laking’s official *An Illustrated Guide to Osborne*, printed by Her Majesty’s Stationery Office in 1933, the room is treated as a single art object without regard for the individual elements within it. Furthermore, his text reveals that the home’s governing bodies have largely institutionalized this perspective. He writes:

The objects in the Durbar room do not figure in the general catalogue of Osborne House, for, as in the case of the Swiss Cottage Museum hereafter referred to, the contents of the various cases are added to

¹⁶Object description from the Royal Collection, inventory no.11423, accessed March 11, 2013, <http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/11423/attar-dan>.

¹⁷ Helen Rappaport, *Queen Victoria: A Biographical Companion* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 280.

¹⁸ *Seattle Daily Times*, “Osborne House A Hospital. King’s Officers Who Have Become Ill in Service Accommodated. Victoria’s Room, Which Contains Jubilee Presents, Is Kept Sacred,” March 13, 1904, 46.

from time to time by appropriate gifts from their Majesties the King and Queen, so rendering a printed catalogue soon out of date; each item is, however, fully labeled. In the [center] of the room is a large case exhibiting some interesting examples of Indian art, in the nature of arms, metalwork, textiles, and ivory work, including a fine pair of tripod tables of early 19th century craftsmanship which though of Indian work, are seemingly influenced by one of the later designs of Chippendale. In the cases round the walls are certain sections of Queen Victoria's Jubilee gifts. The trophies of armor and arms decorating the walls opposite the windows are nearly all of Indian, though a few are of Persian, origin. They date from the middle of the 17th to the middle of the 19th centuries.¹⁹

Despite the fact that Osborne House was, by this time, gifted to the nation by King Edward VII, the unique contents of the room had not been defined to visitors, denying guests the opportunity to identify, question, and research the unique holdings of this special Indian collection. Despite the presence of formal glass museum cases within the Durbar Room, the objects within those cases are not organized according to any accepted scholarly principles and lack the explanation usually expected from such displays.

This disregard for appropriate museum standards of documentation flouted most museological conventions, and the room seemed to be deficient in the requisite standards for proper museum displays. In 1903, it was reported that King Edward VII intended to continue depositing Queen Victoria's Jubilee presents in the Durbar Room.²⁰ However, one article on the subject was titled "Wanted (?): A Royal Museum," illustrating the general uncertainty under which such directives were issued.²¹

As a result of this mismanagement, knowledge of the Durbar Room's contents has been limited to the general, the brief, and the perfunctory. Visitors are not conditioned to look at the material qualities of the unique objects in the central display cases. Instead, they are encouraged to take in the general interior decor, the plaster panels, teak pillars, and Durbar throne. The overall "Oriental" style of the room is still touted as the main display, and information about the unique objects in the room's collection remains scant.

Even Durbar Room visitors who exhibit an interest in its contents are denied detailed information and, as a result, their accounts of the collection remain quite vague. In his 1913 travel memoir *Through England with Tennyson: A Pilgrimage to Places Associated with the Great Laureate*, Oliver Huckel visited the Durbar Room in an attempt to restage Alfred, Lord Tennyson's audience with the queen at Osborne House in 1862.²² Huckel was on a journey exploring the places featured most prominently in the poet laureate's biography, and Osborne was an important setting on that expedition. He later described:

Among the state apartments we enjoyed most the East India or Durbar room, where were gathered and shown all the magnificent presents that the Indian princes and principalities had presented Queen

¹⁹ Sir Guy Laking, *An Illustrated Guide to Osborne* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1933), 12-13.

²⁰ 1841-1910, reigned 1901-1910.

²¹ E. Howarth, ed., "Wanted (?) A Royal Museum," *The Museums Journal*, vol. II (July 1902-June 1903): 127.

²² Tennyson was Queen Victoria's Poet Laureate. For more on this relationship and his visit to Osborne, see John Batchelor's book *Tennyson: To Strive, To Seek, To Find* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2012).

Victoria at the time of her Diamond Jubilee. So gorgeously beautiful were those shrines and caskets, and of such marvelous workmanship, that they seemed like a vision of the “Arabian Nights.” They gave most vivid impression of the beauty and richness of the golden Indies.²³

Huckel describes the room as a collection without identifying its component parts. The connection he makes between the Durbar Room and the fictional stories of Scheherazade illustrate the manner in which the public was denied meaningful insight into the elements of the display, giving them, instead, a magical impression of overall “Indian-ness,” similar to the enchanted world of the stories Scheherazade told over those one thousand and one nights.

This glorification of the room as a whole rather than of the individual objects within is also reflected in the vast number of postcard views of the room that have been published since around 1904. The opening of the Durbar Room to the public coincided with the international mania for the picture postcard.²⁴ Saloni Mathur writes:

Postcard publishers in Europe and America scrambled to meet the demands of consumers who claimed to be swept away, in the words of one contemporary enthusiast, by the enormous “attraction of these persuasive little agents”... In Britain during 1908, more than 860 million cards were reported to have passed through the British post, a figure that some claim is unmatched in history... The lack of information (on postcard publishers) itself reveals a great deal: postcards were mass-produced across multiple sites, transnational in nature, and anonymously executed. Postcard production around the turn of the century was an international business, encompassing many large national firms and an even larger number of tiny, local operations.²⁵

Although the many postcard images of the Durbar Room remain difficult to identify, there seem to be countless versions in existence. These postcards attest to the view of the Durbar room as a complete artwork, rather than a vision of unique and significant elements.

Some of these images were published by Her Majesty’s Office of Works, including one later example from 1936 (Fig. 5). In this image, the central museum display cases are shown to be a substantial element within the room, although their contents remain unidentified. This approach seems to apply to nearly all postcard views of the Durbar Room, including examples published by Hartmann c. 1910 (Fig. 6), an undated view published by Swain (Fig. 7), a version by the Gale & Polden publishing company, and a view published by Nigh’s of Ventnor (Fig. 8).²⁶ These images all include the room’s glass display cases without focusing on the contents within, expressing a general preference for architectural details over the artistic contents of the cases.

²³ Oliver Huckel, *Through England with Tennyson: A Pilgrimage to Places Associated with the Great Laureate* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1913), 113-114.

²⁴ Mathur, 114.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²⁶ Unfortunately, these postcards do not seem to be publicly catalogued in a scholarly manner, and images and information has had to largely be garnered from websites dedicated to the buying and selling of antique postcards. The world of antique postcard collecting is, unfortunately, a rather nebulous place, though I was fortunate to find a modicum of information through online postcard auctions.

These postcards do not speak to the richness of Indian visual culture or the magnificence of Victoria's Indian Jubilee gifts. Rather, they promote a vision of British superiority over Indian design and architecture. In her essay "Beyond (and Below) Incommensurability: The Aesthetics of the Postcard," Yoke-Sum Wong addresses the types of British visions of imperial treasures that were disseminated through postcard exchange. She writes:

The postcard rendered an empire as fragments. Consider how fragments manifest themselves, interlacing the universe of everyday lives — whole intricate worlds, circles otherwise closed to view, are presented in extract for those who do not take to adventuring, laboring over hard languages, making friends and enemies, learning to "follow" what is said and what is done. Hindu temples, pyramids, medieval castles, wild game, rattan baskets, and scantily clad peoples lay alongside the tea cozies in Victorian or Edwardian front rooms and parlors and were displayed and passed around, pasted randomly or categorically in a scrapbook or by themselves, evoking myriad responses from gasps to sighs, from giggles to outrage, from a brief comment to a less brief discussion — and, often enough, a complete lack of interest.²⁷

What Wong identifies as "a complete lack of interest" in the sending and receipt of postcards could also be recognized as a "lack of complete interest" in regard to viewing the Durbar Room as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art. Here, the individual expressions of Indian art, which are on view in the individual glass cases, are reduced to a single, general overview of the overall character of the space. In exchanging these general views of the room, viewers reduce this particular microcosm of the empire to a mere section. The breadth of Indian design and ideas at Osborne House is subsumed by the unified vision of the room, and the glass display cases are given priority over the contents within.

The cutting and pasting of assorted postcards into scrapbooks is not unlike the way in which the Indian artifacts of the Durbar Room were plucked from the Royal Collection and randomly inserted into the central display cases. In the exchange of postcard views of the room, "whole intricate worlds, circles otherwise closed to view, are presented in extract" to senders and recipients, reducing the already-limited understanding of the cultural legacy of this room and its contents to the miniature world of the postcard picture.

The legacy of the Durbar Room is further complicated by its status as the site where royal pageants, performances, and Christmas celebrations would take place. Not only was the Indian material culture that decorated the room persistently overlooked as a collection of unique and significant objects — the collection would also be continuously dominated by other cultural events which competed for viewers' attention within the very same space. This cacophony of cultural practice may have further and indelibly denied the Durbar Room collections the opportunity to be seen as significant art objects of considerable distinction.

After Queen Victoria's death at Osborne House in 1901, the estate was converted into a convalescent home for officers of His Majesty's Services by her successor, King Edward VII.

²⁷ Yoke-Sum Wong, "Beyond (and Below) Incommensurability: The Aesthetics of the Postcard," *Common Knowledge* 8, Issue 2 (Spring 2002): 356.

This shift allowed more subjects than ever before to visit the royal home, and with this upsurge in visitorship came an increase in printed accounts of the room, its history, customs, and traditions. One news story of 1903 observed the royal use of the Durbar space, remarking:

...this new wing contains the Durbar room, in which so many dinners and other entertainments have since been given. Princess Henry of Battenberg utilized this room to stage her *tableaux vivants*, which she was so fond of arranging in the winter months when the court was in residence. At one end there is a gallery for musicians. This was found most useful when private theatricals dinners or other entertainments were given.²⁸

As the room is considered as a staging area for theater pieces and performances, the significance of the space as a home museum becomes even more confused. Performances of *Twelfth Night* were staged beneath Bhai Ram Singhs' terracotta decorations, upon the Agra-woven carpets and hand-carved Indian mahogany chairs.²⁹ It seems that theater pieces performed in the space did not address its design or contents, favoring English works of music and drama over their Indian equivalents. By most accounts, no efforts were made to acknowledge the material significance of the room while interacting with the space itself.

This complex relationship between the royal family's personal activities and the Durbar Room is perhaps best seen in the room's role as a present room during the Christmas holiday season.³⁰ Tony Rennell describes the Osborne House Christmas traditions in his book *The Last Days of Glory: The Death of Queen Victoria*. He writes:

On Christmas Eve, presents were laid out in the Durbar Room, the banqueting hall built just ten years earlier and fitted out with magnificent moldings of peacocks and elephant gods to look like the throne room of an Indian raja. The family gathered around the Christmas tree, which was hung with lights and French and German bonbons, their gifts for each other laid out on tables.³¹

Victorian Christmas celebrations were a multicultural affair, and Queen Victoria and her family were responsible for introducing many of the traditions still associated with the holiday. Prince Albert introduced to the British court the German custom of decorating a Christmas tree, and the Prince Consort was also partially responsible for popularizing the exchange of presents and holiday cards.³² He introduced many other German traditions, which by the mid-nineteenth century were incorporated into the British conventions, and a number of these customs were then staged in the Durbar Room at Osborne House. Thus, the Indian room in the Italianate villa became a staging ground for German traditions (including the exchange of French candies) as

²⁸ "King Edward's Gift to the Nation: A Convalescent Home for Officers of the Services," *Navy & Army Illustrated* 15, February 7, 1903, 539.

²⁹ HRH The Duchess of York with Benita Stoney, *Victoria and Albert: Family Life at Osborne House* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 195.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Tony Rennell, *The Last Days of Glory: The Death of Queen Victoria* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 54.

³² It is generally accepted that Prince Albert introduced this tradition, though some sources claim that Christmas trees were actually introduced to Britain by Queen Charlotte, consort of King George III.

interpreted by the British Queen. Though the Durbar Room remained overlooked as a significant museum of Indian art, it became renowned as the locus of combining international cultural practices and holiday observances.

Christmas at Osborne became the subject of national fascination, and descriptions of how the royal family spent Christmas were printed in newspapers and magazines. One such 1897 account described:

It may be imagined that on a festal night like this the Durbar Room presents a very gay appearance. The great sideboard is loaded with gold plate which has been polished till it gleams like glass. A mighty Yule log sent from Windsor glows on the hearth. The strong red and green of the decorations contrasts very prettily with the subdued Oriental coloring of the walls. The table glitters with plate and glass and candles and the dessert is adorned with the unusual pomp of flags and crackers in all the glory of tinsel and gelatin. At the head of the table, the Queen takes her seat. Round it her family group themselves in order, the children enjoying the mere fun of taking their places. And there, perhaps, we will leave them with loyal and hearty wishes for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.³³

While the Durbar Room was still inaccessible to the general public, they were able to read descriptions of its use by the royal family. However, these descriptions, especially those regarding the Christmas celebrations, omit many details of the setting of the Durbar Room and its contents.

To this day, Christmas is still observed at Osborne House. Holly and pine trees further embellish the already ornate permanent decorations, and red ribbons are tied around the furniture. Golden holiday angels atop the trees soar high above the ornamental Indian lamps. Instead of functioning as a museum of Indian art and design, the Durbar Room is treated as a hall dedicated to the preservation of the manner in which Queen Victoria used this space and its contents.

When Queen Victoria died at Osborne House on January 22, 1901, she left behind a complicated legacy. In addition to a dysfunctional empire and a class system mired in inequity, she departed this world without articulating the lasting significance of the Durbar Room and its peculiar decoration and contents. What was once a room for state functions and display is now celebrated as a place where the daily operations of the former British Empire were once conducted, and it seems that the unique objects comprising the room's collections are still disregarded in favor of viewing the room as a whole. In many ways, despite the passing of more than a hundred years since its construction, the Durbar Room is still, sadly, little more than a room of "lovely Indian things," leaving much to be done in terms of its scholarly evaluation and interpretation.

³³ B.C. Skottowe, "How the Queen Spends Christmas at Osborne," *The English Illustrated Magazine* 18, October 1897-March 1898, 224.



Figure 1. Bhai Ram Singh at work in the Durbar Room, 1892. From an album at Osborne House titled "Royal Tableaux, Osborne." English Heritage Photo Library, K010289.

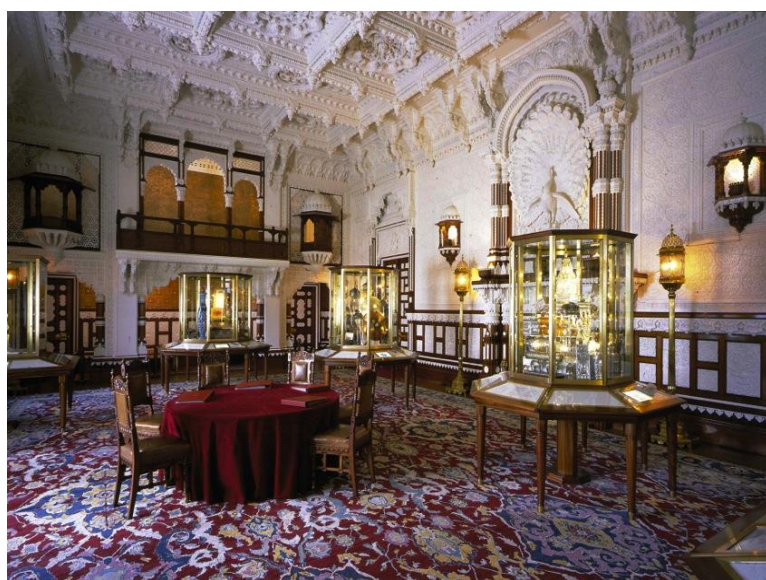


Figure 2. Osborne House, Isle of Wight. Interior view of the Durbar Room looking towards the minstrel's gallery. Some items shown may be on loan from the Royal Collection. Image © English Heritage.



Figure 3. Gold casket presented to Albert Edward, Prince of Wales by the inhabitants of Amritsar, during his visit to India, 1875-6. Gold, diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and velvet, 7.8 x 33.0 x 13.1 cm. The Royal Collection, inventory no. 11230.



Figure 4. Attar-dan presented to Prince Albert Edward by Vikram Deo, Maharaja of Jeypore. Gold, enamel, diamonds, and pearls, 10.2 x 8.9 x 7.0 cm. The Royal Collection, inventory no. 11423.



Figure 5. Osborne House, Durbar Room postcard. Printed by H.M. Office of Works, 1936.

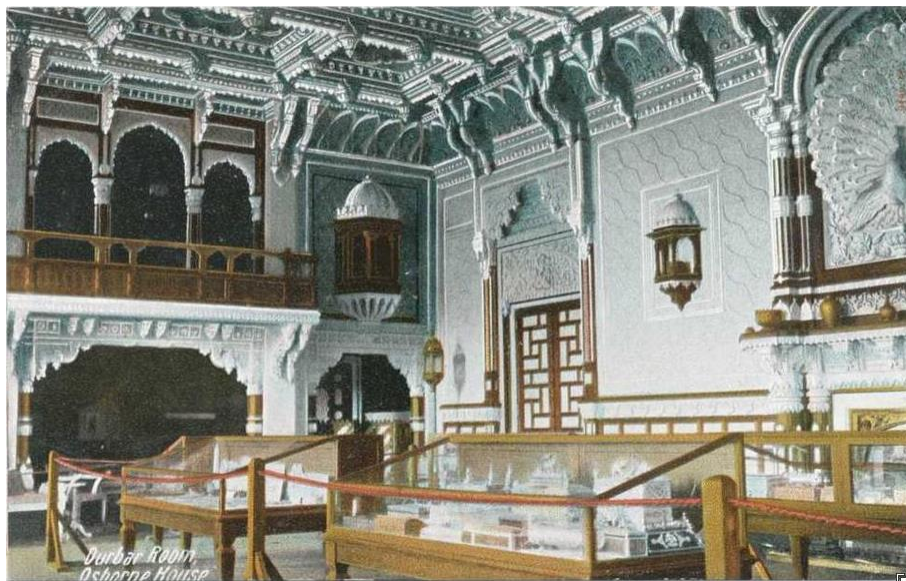


Figure 6. Durbar room postcard. Published by Hartmann, c. 1910.



Figure 7. Durbar room postcard by Swain, undated.



Figure 8. Durbar Room postcard view. Published by Nigh's of Ventnor, undated.

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