



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

The Indian Ocean: Monsoon Worlds 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 major exhibition to explore the Indian Ocean from geological and 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 will take visitors on an awe-inspiring and complex journey of global 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 2027 to 2028.



Sarpech or turban clasp with mythical “makara” creatures, 18th century, Lucknow or Banares, India. ROM

Formation and the Power of the Monsoons

Continental drift and volcanic activity gave rise to the Indian Ocean's unique geology and biodiversity. This 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 the dispersal of 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.

Hollow seed, coco-de-mer, *Lodoicea maldivica*. ROM



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. ROM



About 300-250 million years ago, India and southern land masses formed Gondwana the supercontinent. Shared *Glossopteris* fossils reveal its breakup and continental drift.

Fossil plant (*Glossopteris*), Permian era, Australia. ROM



The rhythm of the monsoons influenced people's lives, including the art they made.

Poster for film *Barsaat* (Rain), 1970s, Mumbai. ROM

Harnessing the Winds

People from the Indian Ocean World harnessed the power of monsoon winds to undertake early long-distance maritime voyages of discovery and trade. Stretching from eastern Africa to southern China, their journeys were partially mitigated by the invention of sailing by natural means—using stars, birds, flora, and landforms—improvements in navigational instruments, and sometimes by appeals to deities and spirits.



Left: **Astrolabe for navigation**, 17th – 18th century, Iran. ROM



Right: **Portable Shrine to the goddess Mazu**, 19th century, Southern China. Asian Civilisations Museum



Ship cloth (palepai), 18th century, Sumatra, Indonesia. Collection of Thomas Murray

Port Cities

As trade grew, fishing villages morphed into port towns and cities along shores. Monsoon winds caused ships to spend months in one place, giving rise to multifaith and multiethnic spaces. Diaspora, diplomacy, and religion strengthened and maintained connections within and between these port cities—though some encounters brought violence, including slavery.



Woman’s pair of sandals, 19th century, India. Bata Shoe Museum



Indonesian Qur’an, 19th century, Sumatra, Asian Civilisations Museum



Sireh Set Box, 19th century, Indonesia. Asian Civilisations Museum



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

Trade and Innovation

Long-distance sea trade fostered novel inventions, art, and the dispersal of plants and animals that originated in the region. Natural resources, ecological knowledge, and artisanal expertise lead to the innovative production of aromatics, spices, cotton, silk, and porcelain—goods that drove commercial life then and now.

Aromatics such as frankincense and myrrh found only in Horn of Africa and Arabia, and sandalwood from India and southeast Asia 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 BCE, Egypt. ROM



Changsha bowl with underglaze fish decoration, Tang Dynasty, Hunan Province. Asian Civilisations Museum



Pepper pot, 4th century, Romano-British, British Museum



Illustration of nutmeg plant by Sita Ram, 1815, India

Modern Global Demands

European desire for the Indian Ocean's unique goods such as coffee, sugar, and cotton beginning in the 16th century forever revolutionized tastes and fashions around the world. The foods, plants, and manufactured goods they transported in enormous quantities unleashed largescale plantations, forced labour, colonization, and industrial imitation, whose social and economic legacies persist today.



Woman's cotton chintz dress, ca. 1770, India for the European market. ROM



Loango carved tusk, late 19th – early 20th century, Republic of Congo. ROM



First Wave by Heidi McKenzie, 2021. ROM



Coffee Service, about 1745, made by Lowestoft Porcelain Factory, Suffolk, England. ROM

Charting Collective Futures

Long celebrated as “progress and development,” unsustainable industrial production and global consumer demand underwritten by the burning of fossil fuels are now known to bring species extinction, habitat loss, plastic pollution and climate change. Today they threaten all the world, and the Indian Ocean especially which is the fastest warming of the seas. Promisingly, new research, conservation activities, and decolonization efforts at local and transnational levels are charting a new course.



Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Carroll Lewis, 1866 (1st edition). Fisher Rare Books Library

The Dutch settlements encountered the Dodo bird on Mauritius in the early 1600s. Within the century, 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.



Dodo skeleton, collected 1865, Mauritius. ROM



Bleached brain coral. ROM

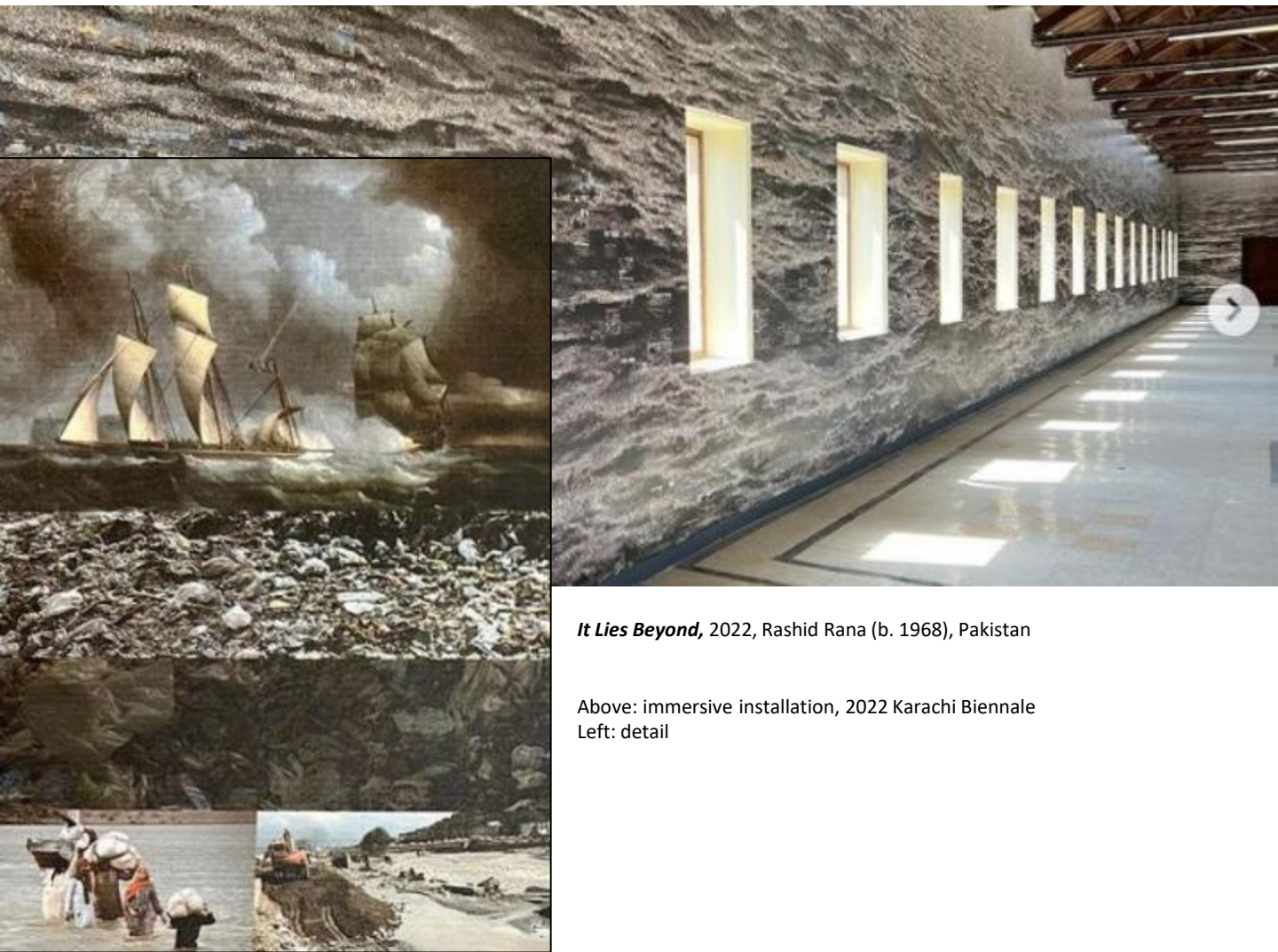
Climate change is most affecting the Indian Ocean, such as bleaching of coral, due to its unique topography surrounded by three continents. Restoration activities are restoring coral reefs and underwater habitats.



Betty 28 by Mulyana, 2024. Sapar Gallery

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 BCE 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. The powerful narrative has been 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

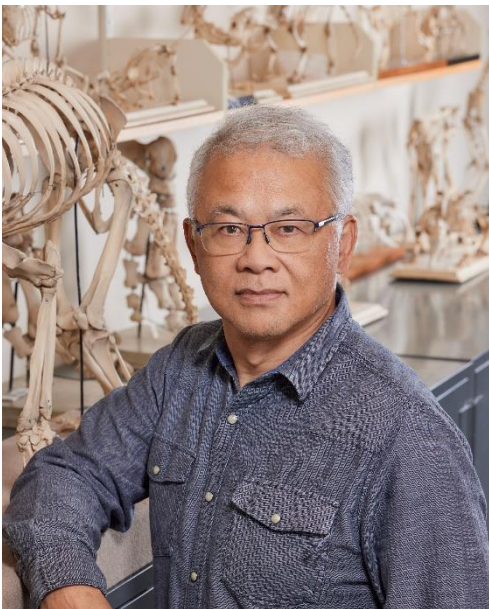
Lead Curators

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 seventeen new species of mammals, which includes four species from China, six species from the Philippines, 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).

About the Exhibition

Availability: Winter/Spring 2028; Summer 2028; Late Fall 2028
4 months per venue

Size: 5,000-6,000 sf / 460-550 m²

Content Includes:

- Approximately 120-150 objects from ROM's collections, international loans, and artworks
- Object mounts and hanging systems
- Text files in digital format (Eng/Fr)
- Digital files (Eng/Fr)

Fees:

- Fee and Shared Costs upon request
- Shared Costs include: crating; packing; reproduction rights; and final dispersal
- Additional Venue Costs: shipping; insurance; casework; ROM couriers for de-/installation; international courier costs (if any); production costs; playback equipment; and all local costs

Catalogue: Available for sale



Door with Mother-of-Pearl, 19th-20th century, Gujarat. Aga Khan Museum

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