

Walking the Digital Archive: A Museum Without Walls

SAMIKSHA KUMARI

School of Liberal Studies, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University, Delhi

Archives are commonly conceived as safe spaces for the preservation of our shared histories, as storehouses where the past is shelved, classified, and catalogued inside their walls. However, archives also appear as venues of erasure and marginalisation, where the voices of objects of memory and intimate possessions get lost due to their presence, as mundane objects within the formal structures of record-keeping and preservation. Keeping this in mind, this essay introduces to its readers the Museum of Material Memory, founded by Aanchal Malhotra and Navdha Malhotra in 2017.¹ This virtual museum offers an alternate paradigm of archiving, one that is digital, personal, and effective. As a crowd-sourced repository of material culture, it abstains from the rigidity of institutional archives, and rather curates a mosaic of lived histories and memories through the objects of everyday life from or before the 1970s. This essay explores the Museum of Material Memory as a 'museum without walls', a concept that challenges the very boundaries and conventions of historical preservation. The aim here is to take the reader on a digital walk by foregrounding individual memory as a legitimate source of archival knowledge.

Keywords: Digital archives, material memory, museum without walls, lived histories.

I first came across the 'Museum of Material Memory' some years ago when I was reading *Remnants of a Separation* by Aanchal Malhotra. I was sitting idly on the terrace, gazing at my cosmos flowers with the backdrop of the sky slowly turning crimson, holding the book in one hand and slowly absorbing its words. The words "material memory" mentioned in the book kept resonating in my ears and I had the uncontrollable urge to look up the details of this unique museum on the internet. This was my first encounter with the idea of material memory, a concept that recognises objects as vessels of lived experience, carrying with them not just the physical, tangible past, but also the intangible, emotional, and sensory imprints of those who held and used them in their everyday lives.

¹ "The Museum," The Museum of Material Memory, accessed March 25, 2025, <https://museumofmaterialmemory.com/the-museum/>.

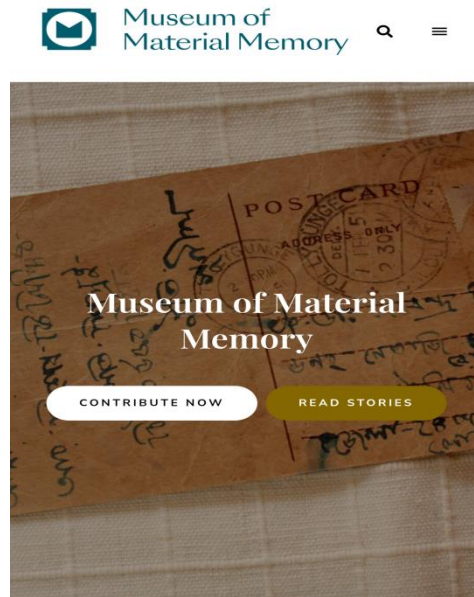


Figure 1: Online Interface of the *Museum of Material Memory*.

Source: "The Museum," *Museum of Material Memory*, accessed March 25, 2025, <https://museumofmaterialmemory.com/>.

Traditionally, archives and museums have operated along distinct trajectories. Archives, as Terry Cook reminds us, are anchored in the logic of evidence, provenance, and the contextual arrangement of records, while museums curate objects for their aesthetic, symbolic or historical resonance, often detaching them from their functional origins.² Yet, the *Museum of Material Memory* unsettles this divide. Although it presents itself as a museum, its affective emphasis on personal storytelling about ornaments, letters, utensils, and their digital preservation aligns it more closely with archival impulses, as a whisper of the forgotten words of ancestors. Unlike the formal, physical Partition Museum in Amritsar or archival projects like the Digital South Asia Library and other state-curated archives, the *Museum of Material Memory* appears as a hybrid space, a living archive of feeling, less about classification and more about communion (Figure 1). The objects displayed on its website, including heirlooms, and even a mini Quran, speak their stories not just as inert remnants of the past but as an emotional residue of history. Each object

² Hugh A. Taylor, "Documentary Art and the Role of Archivist (1979)", in *Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds (USA: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 75-89.

is contextualised within the lived experiences of its custodian. In the *Museum of Material Memory*, the affective force of objects comes alive not only through visual representation but also through the stories that they tell. One such example is “Taarkashi: *Drawing Matrilineal Threads*” by Niyati Bhatia (Figure 2). The post recounts a delicate wooden jewellery box, which became a site of memory and craft learning after an arduous migration, thus becoming a symbol for an inherited loss.³

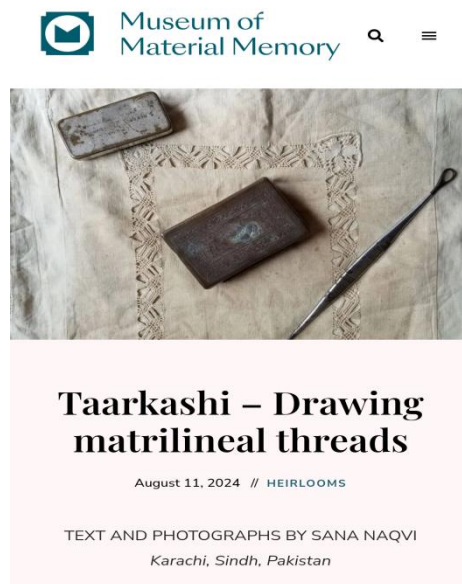


Figure 2: Taarkashi: weaving love and loss.

Source: Sana Naqvi, “Taarkashi- Drawing matrilineal threads”, *Museum of Material Memory*, accessed August 11, 2024, <https://museumofmaterialmemory.com/taarkashi-drawing-matrilineal-threads/>.

This is not to say that within a digital archive objects do not undergo transformation; they do. In traditional museum spaces, material objects demand tactile engagement. The weight of a rusted key, the textures of aged paper, the scent of old wood—all of these need to be experienced on a physical level. However, this encounter depends upon the availability of the object in the museum. In the case of digital archives, such as the *Museum of Material*

³ The phrase ‘inheritance of loss’ is taken from Kiran Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss* (India: Penguin Random House, 2006).

Memory, these objects are translated into images and texts; their sensory dimensions are mediated by the act of storytelling. This raises a critical question: Can a digital archive truly be a substitute for a physical one? While traditional historians may resist the immateriality of digital preservation, the *Museum of Material Memory* demonstrates that archival legitimacy does not necessitate tangibility. Instead, it proposes that memory itself can be a medium of preservation, making the digital archive a space where histories are not merely stored but continuously remain, with the fear of being remaindered.

The *Museum of Material Memory* also functions as a counter-archive, challenging dominant historiographies that often prioritise political and state-centric narratives over personal histories. Many of the contributions to the museum are centered on the Partition of 1947, an event whose official archives are largely dictated by state records, the letters of big men, statistics, etc. In contrast, the digital archive by Aanchal Malhotra reconstructs this history through the lens of the everyday, archiving the fragments of displacement and loss, along with the love that remains unrecognised in state narratives.

This approach echoes Michel Rolph Trouillot's critique of archival silence, wherein he argues that the archive is not merely a passive collection of records but an active space where history is shaped by what is included and excluded.⁴ By emphasising objects as sites of memory, the *Museum of Material Memory* moves beyond state archives, offering a more democratised, affective historiography. The website of the digital archive, thus, is a strong testament to how history is not just written by conquerors or statesmen, but by families, survivors, and descendants who inherit the weight of the past as well.

This essay, which opens with the title 'A Museum Without Walls,' evokes Andre Malraux's idea of an expanded, accessible museum that transcends physical limitations.⁵ The *Museum of Material Memory* is indeed a museum without walls, which embodies this idea by existing in a space that is boundless, unconstrained by geography, institutional bureaucracy, or physical decay. It also raises some thought-provoking questions about access,

⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (United States: Beacon Press, 2015), 1-30.

⁵ Hal Foster, "The Archive Without Museum," *The MIT Press*, no.77 (October 1996): 97 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/778962>.

preservation, and the ethics of digital curation. 'Who owns these histories?', 'What happens when digital archives, which claim to democratise access, still remain out of reach for those without internet or literacy?' These questions keep resurfacing in my mind.



Figure 3: Mini Quran of Jain Family.

Source: Madhavi Jain, "A Mini Quran from Partition: My Jain Family's Legacy", *Museum of Material Memory*, accessed March 30, 2025, <https://museumofmaterialmemory.com/a-mini-quran-from-partition-my-jain-family-s-legacy/>.

Through these questions that instigate new modes of thinking, I have realised that while the digital allows greater inclusivity, it also introduces new vulnerabilities. Unlike physical archives that can survive in chambers of the basement and libraries for centuries while simultaneously providing ample food for thought, digital archives are precarious, subject to obsolescence, cyber threats, and shifting technological infrastructure. The *Museum of Material Memory*, then, not only invites historians to rethink what constitutes an archive but also to confront the transient nature of digital memory itself. At the same time, it is crucial to recognise that the digital, like the museum and the archive, is also not a neutral space. As Ravinder Kaur shows in her exploration of Partition migration⁶, the very act of fleeing was stratified by class. The poor

⁶ Ravinder Kaur, "The Last Journey: Exploring Social Classes in the 1947 Partition Migration," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 22 (June 3-9, 2006): 2222-2228. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4418295>.

who walked barefoot were not just displaced but remaindered, excluded from state records and even familial memory and material trace. The Museum, despite its crowd-sourced ethos, is still shaped by the privilege of those who could afford to hold onto objects, inherit heirlooms and possess the digital access to their stories. Thus it risks memorializing only those who had the means to remember, while those who fled without anything remain unarchived, untold.

Even if the above discussion leaves us with many questions, nothing can stop us from acknowledging the *Museum of Material Memory* as an evocative experiment in archival practice. It compels historians to reconsider the ontology of archives and the legitimacy of memory as history. By privileging the personal over the institutional, the fragment over the totalizing narrative, the *Museum of Material Memory* demonstrates that history is not merely about documents and official records. History is also about the stories that people tell, the objects they pass down, and the emotional landscapes that persist in their memory (Figure 3). In doing so, this digital archive invites us to walk through a space that is not confined by walls, shelves, or state classifications, but one that is mapped across the lived experiences of its contributors instead. This is not just an archive that can be read, but an archive that can be felt, not just through touch but also with the aid of those emotions that have been woven into the narrators' words, from the stories of *Majnu Khes* to the Sindhi *nath* (nose ring) of the Chhabria family.

References

- Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. India: Penguin Random House, 2006.
- Foster, Hal. "The Archive Without Museum." *The MIT Press*, no.77 (October 1996): 97-119. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/778962>.
- Kaur, Ravinder. "The Last Journey: Exploring Social Classes in the 1947 Partition Migration." *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 22 (June 3-9, 2006): 2221-2228. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4418295>.
- "The Museum." *Museum of Material Memory*. Accessed March 25, 2025. <https://museumofmaterialmemory.com/the-museum/>.

Taylor, Hugh A. "Documentary Art and the Role of Archivist (1979)." In *Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds, 75-89. USA: Scarecrow Press, 2003.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. United States: Beacon Press, 2015.
<https://books.ms/main/7B3D14413F9D03D8E0484E3382159C44>.