

[Aura in Photographic Reproductions of the Didarganj Yakshi](#)

Presenter

- Dandi Meng, Senior, English (Creative Writing) *UW Honors Program*

Mentor

- Sonal Khullar, Art History

Session

- [Session 2C: Art's Medium, Message, and Matter](#)
- 231 MGH
- 3:30 PM to 5:15 PM

My research focuses on photographic reproductions of the Didarganj yakshi, an ancient Indian sculpture of a female nature spirit. Specifically, I examine how these reproductions, produced at various points in history from the early 20th century to the present, depict the sculpture differently in terms of lighting, location, and framing, and what kinds of effects these distinctions have. I use the concept of "aura," described by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin as the quality of an artwork that confirms its authenticity and uniqueness, to analyze these effects. While Benjamin theorizes that photography, in its ability to produce multiple copies of the same work, negates an object's aura and allows for more responsible alternatives in our relationship to art, I argue that this fails to happen in the case of the Didarganj yakshi. Moreover, I argue that this failure is a result of British colonialism in India and its need to cast Indian art as authentically exotic. I use the Didarganj yakshi in particular for my analysis because of how its meanings and conditions of display have been historically contested on colonial grounds, and because of the long history of its photographic reproductions. By tracing this history and closely examining the different photos in their respective contexts of display, I form a clear picture of how reproductions of the Didarganj yakshi have changed over time and what this implies about the status of the work as a colonial art object.