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Noor Dhanju
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Introduction

For this video essay, I chose to adopt the conventions of Philomena Cunk's mockumentaries, particularly "Cunk on Earth", as a way of channeling my critical voice (Cunk on Earth, 2022). She is a fictional investigative journalist and documentary presenter, played by comedian Diane Morgan.



fig. 1 'Cunk on Earth' cover. (Cunk on Earth, 2022).

My project questions institutional authority. The dry, pseudo-documentary style of Cunk on Earth and Cunk on Life uses humour to expose how absurd "authoritative" narratives can sound when you slightly destabilise them.

What interests me about Cunk's approach is her ability to question authoritative systems through humour and mimicry. She speaks with complete confidence about flawed systems, exaggerates institutional language until it becomes absurd, and asks seemingly obvious questions that reveal hidden assumptions (both in her interviewees, and the viewer watching). Rather than directly criticising museums, I use the character of Nilomena Dunk to expose the logic of museum conventions by taking them slightly further than usual. This felt particularly relevant because museums often rely on detached authority, formal language and categorisation systems that flatten meaning. Through Nilomena, I can shorten the distance between institutional narratives and lived experiences, highlighting the absurdity of museum curatorial practices, and how they reduce complex cultural stories to short object labels.

I mimic the documentary's forms: her serious yet bored tone of voice, her guise, the interview segments, her dry jabs/questions, the cliched background music, and her abrupt use of the song "Pump Up The Jam" (Technotronic, 1989). In speaking to my peers, most of whom are not just familiar with, but also adore the series, the combination of these particularities is what makes her show memorable. History can be messy, convoluted, and boring, but Philomena makes it interesting: she brings it to life. And it feels unforgettable.

"Hello science man. What are you an expert on?"

(‘Episode 4: Rise of the Machines’. *Cunk on Earth*, 2022)

"Medicine means we can treat everything from made-up diseases like the plague, to modern epidemics like allegic-ness to bread."

(*Cunk on Britain*, 2018)

I see the humour and satire as a device to sharpen the critique. By adopting a pseudo-documentary format, I am able to interrogate museum authority while making the underlying questions about power, representation and objectification more approachable and memorable. If my enquiry isn't memorable, change can't be enacted at an institutional level.

Written component: expanded script

<Noor dressed as Nilomena Dunk speaking to Camera:>

Museums are places where objects go to become less interesting.

For hundreds of years, museums have taken objects filled with stories and lived experience, and transformed them into small paragraphs next to glass boxes.

This process is known as “curation,” which is Latin for:
“We know what this means better than you do.”

Follow me, Nilomena Dunk , on a journey of understanding this bizarre institution in Dunk on Museums.

<Title: ND on Museums>

<Break the 4th wall here, i.e. hey it's me, to make sure viewers know I'm embodying a fictional persona>

<Interview segment>

Nilomena: Who made the first museum?

Interviewee: It's believed that museums came from cabinets of curiosities.

Nilomena: Why were people so curious about cabinets?

Interviewee: No, it's cabinets of curiosities. They were collections that not only reflected the particular interests of their curators but also social devices to establish and uphold rank in society.

Nilomena: well I'd have one too if I had that many ugly corals.

<Back to Nilomena talking to Camera>

Museums hold power, not just in the curator to viewer dynamic, but in a curator to culture dynamic.

A necklace made by your grandmother isn't presented as “the necklace your grandmother wore while shouting at relatives during weddings.”

Instead it becomes:

“Silver necklace, circa 1970.”

Which sounds less like a meaningful object and more like evidence in a murder trial.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger, says “Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights.” (Berger, J. 2008).



fig. 2 *Filigree necklace at the Victoria and Albert Museum.* (Dhanju, 2024).

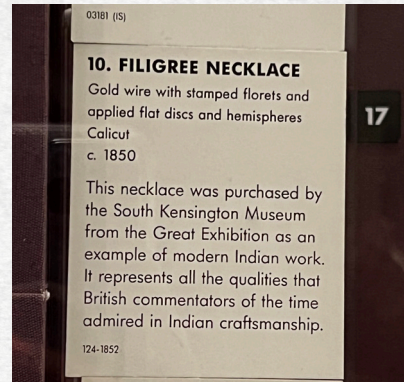


fig. 3 *Accompanying caption for necklace in fig. 2.* (Dhanju, 2024).

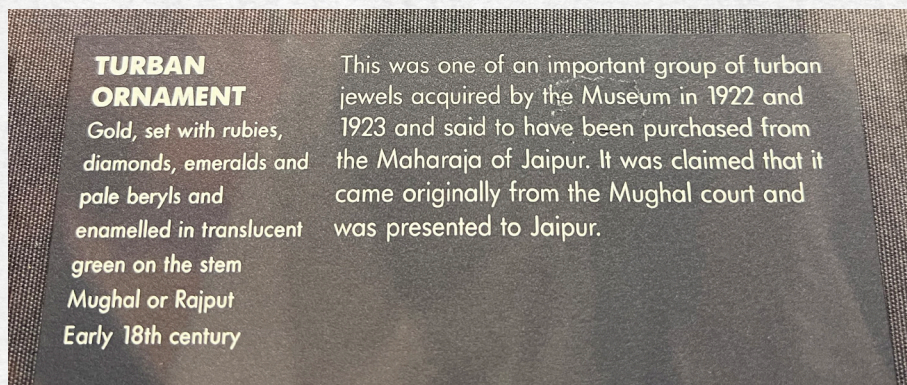


fig. 4 *Museum annotation with what I deem questionable object origins.* (Dhanju, 2024).

Or take this necklace (see fig. 2 & 3), in the V&A museum. The description says “it represents all the qualities that British commentators of the time admired in Indian craftsmanship.” Well thank God for that because I really needed to know what the British liked about Indian crafts, and not what the design meant in an Indian context.

Curators decide:

What matters. What gets displayed.

And what gets turned into a sentence beginning with:

“Origin unknown.”

Also I learned that when something is put behind glass in a fancy building by the Western world, it becomes important.



fig. 5 Flat-lay image of my objects from Oman. (Dhanju, 2026).



fig. 6 Flat-lay image of my chosen objects. (Dhanju, 2026).



fig. 7 Flat lay with enhanced colours. (Dhanju, 2026).

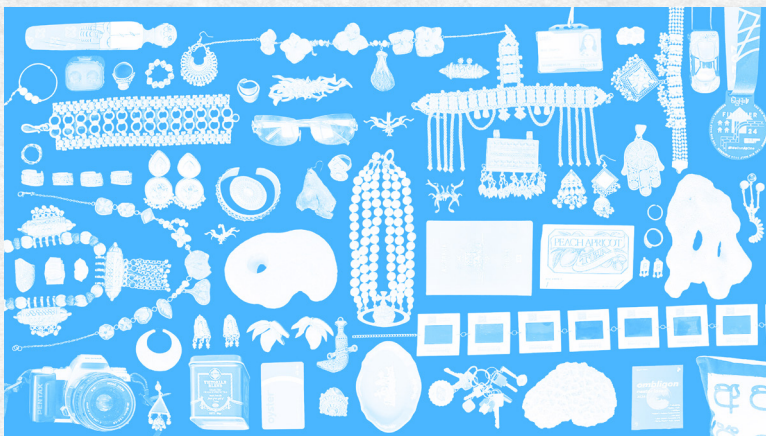


fig. 8 Flat lay with single vibrant colour to add uniformity. (Dhanju, 2026).

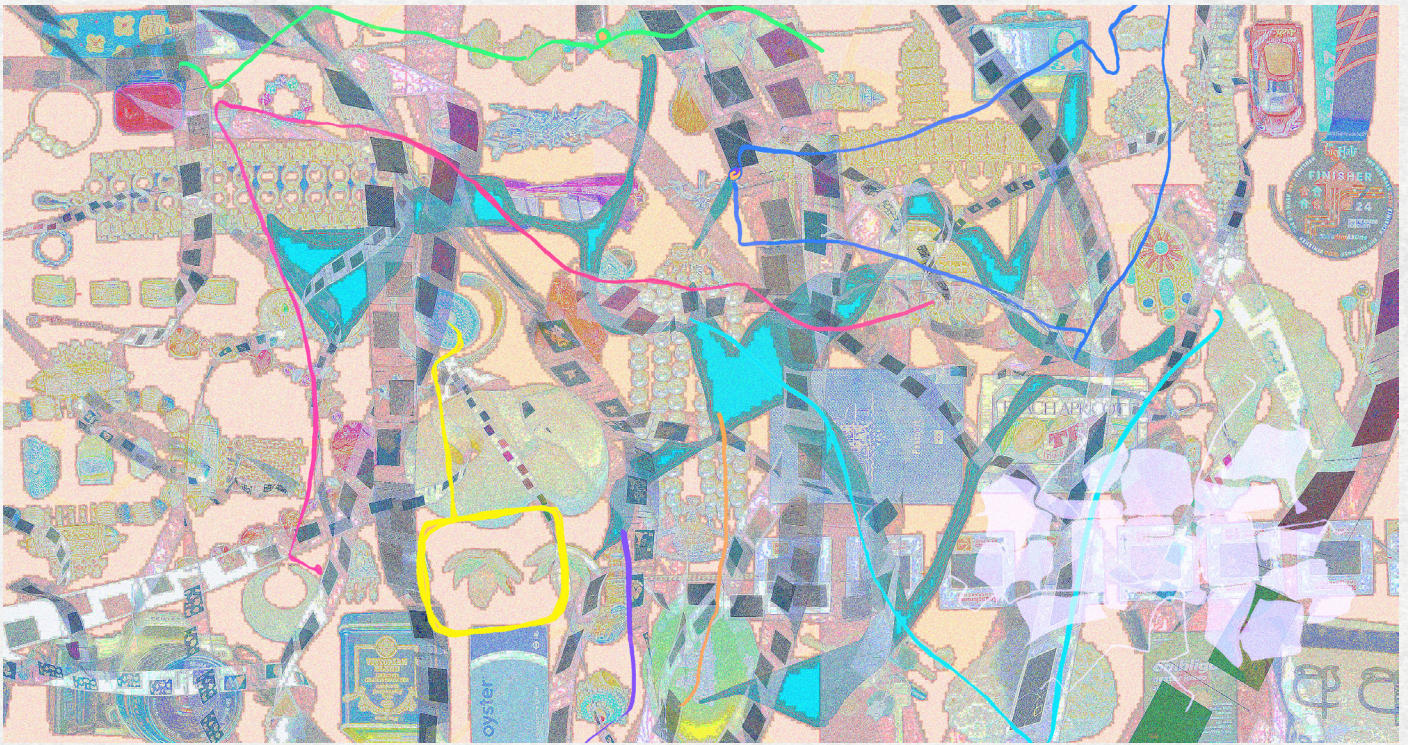


fig. 9. Layered map using my iterations on identity as a concept, inspired by Nao Lee's 'Earthland' poster/ indiscernable map of herself. (Dhanju, 2026).



fig. 10. Earthland (Lee, 2026).

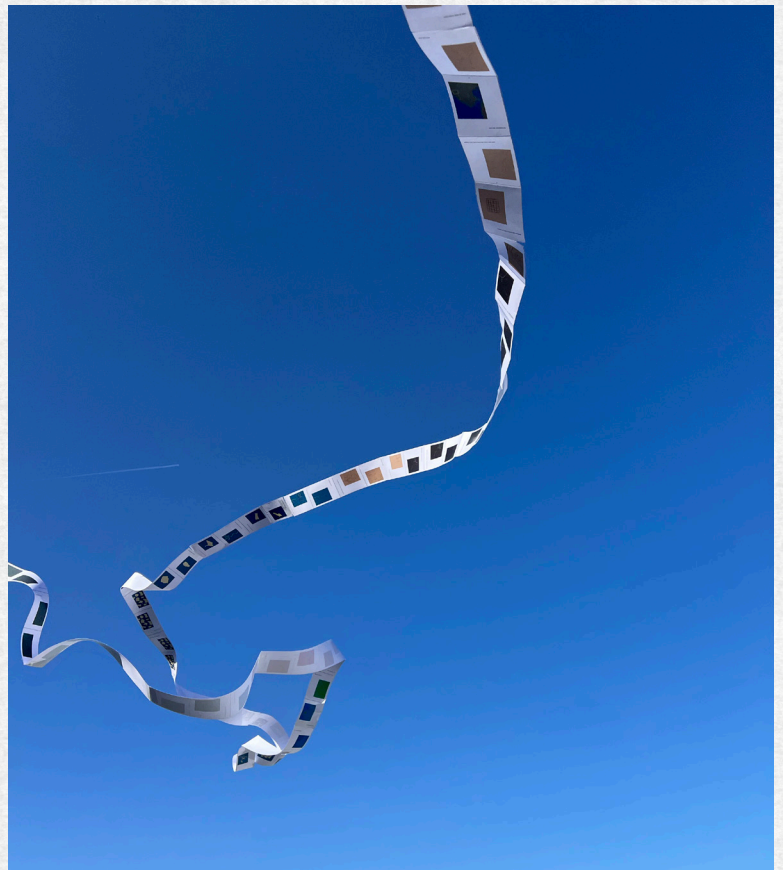


fig. 11. My 100 iteration publication (Dhanju, 2026).

<Nilomena to camera, adjusting wig to once again break 4th wall>

So the question is, how can I interrogate museum conventions through subverting object engagement? (LINE OF ENQUIRY)

I began considering this while photographing objects I use to perform my identity. Even when I changed colours, layout, added descriptions, the objects remained flat (see figures 5-8). Was I immortalising my objects, or removing their sense of aliveness?

I also experimented mimicking Nao Lee's Earthland poster (see fig. 10, 2026), and layered all my iterations thus far to create a map only I could read, but it was a map of my complex identity. This iteration brought life to my objects. So the issue lay with how museums present objects.

If I'm questioning how museums view the world, I must look at my own gaze as well.



fig. 12. 'The Two Noors' from the self-portraiture series 'Kesh', exploring my hybrid Indian and Omani identity, inspired by Frida Kahlo's 'The Two Fridas'. (Dhanju, 2022).



fig. 13. My jewellery drawer, with a fraction of my jewellery. (Dhanju, 2026).

I'm ethnically Indian, moved constantly growing up, and am a graphic designer from a fashion communication background. I also compulsively collect things. Museums call this a "collection" or an "archive". My mum calls this "hoarding".

It's also why I'm interested in storytelling and presenting identity through jewellery (see figures 12 and 13).

I began by looking at the concept of 'My Pangaea' – a fictional place I belong to which is a combination of the various places I call home. I decided to translate this concept through my objects.

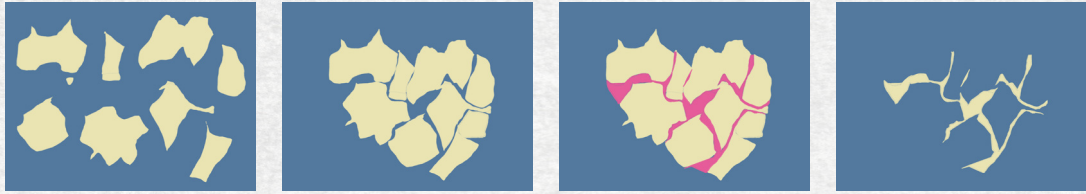
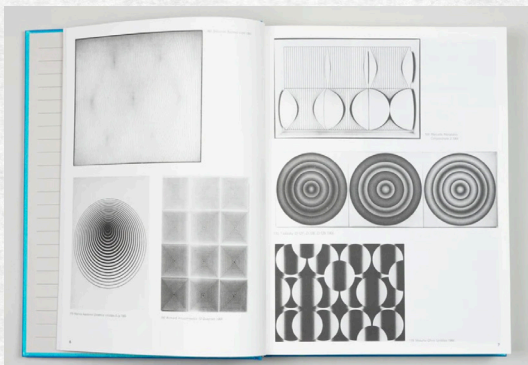
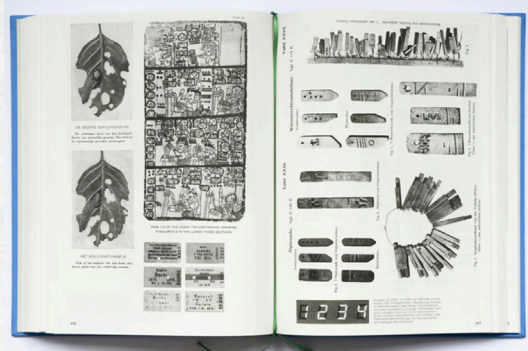
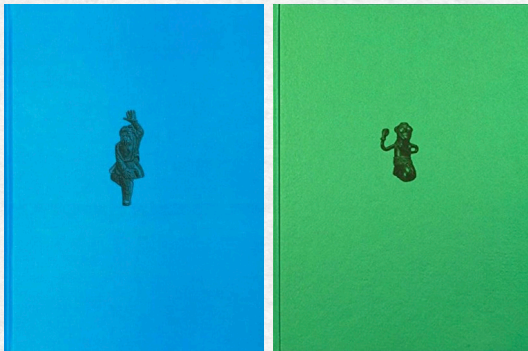
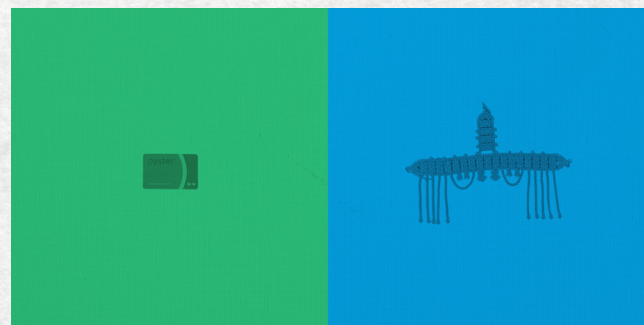
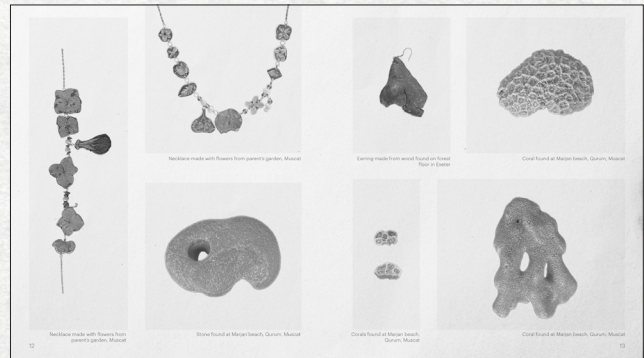


fig. 14. *The formation of my pangaea.* (Dhanju, 2026).

Through the lens of the Parallel Encyclopedia by Batia Suter, I stepped further into the role of the curator.



Top to bottom:
fig. 15-18. *Parallel Encyclopaedia I & II* by Batia Suter. (Donlon Books, n.d.).



Top to bottom:
fig. 19-21. *Iterations; objects grouped by those found in nature, those worn around my neck, and the juxtaposition of me wearing headpieces like a princess but travelling on the Tube in London.* (Dhanju, 2026).

My perception is very different to the west, particularly museums in the west.

Ultimately, I wanted to interrogate the Western Museum as a whole, and created The Noor Museum, with a layered exhibition guide that objectifies my own items using museum-style descriptions. (See figures 23 onwards).

The bottom layer uses formal institutional language in Baskerville, the British Museum's brand typeface. It looks detached and my belongings feel objectified. But when I layered anecdotes from myself and others, the object comes to life through colour, type and language (fig. 25-38).

This interrupts the museum voice and reintroduces subjectivity.

The logo is designed to remain in flux – it doesn't abide by one fixed identity, it is always changing, like humans (see fig. 42-47).

The project was influenced by Hew Locke's exhibition 'What Have We Here?', where museum narratives are physically disrupted by taped amendments on the item descriptions (fig. 22), and Dan Hicks' The Brutish Museums, which critiques the colonial authority embedded within museum collections.



fig. 22. Image from the 'What Have We Here?' exhibition. (Locke, 2024)

<Back to camera, me wearing my wig again, and putting on my jewellery>

Where museums flatten,
The Noor Museum unflattens.

Objects are never neutral.

And maybe the real artefact in museums...
is the authority of the museum itself.

<“Noor it's still rolling” heard from background as I'm taking my wig off>

<Add the pump on the jam music to credits to finish episode>



fig. 23. *The Noor Museum Logo, version 1, parodying The British Museum's logo.* (Dhanju, 2026)



fig. 24. *The British Museum's logo.* (The British Museum, 2020).

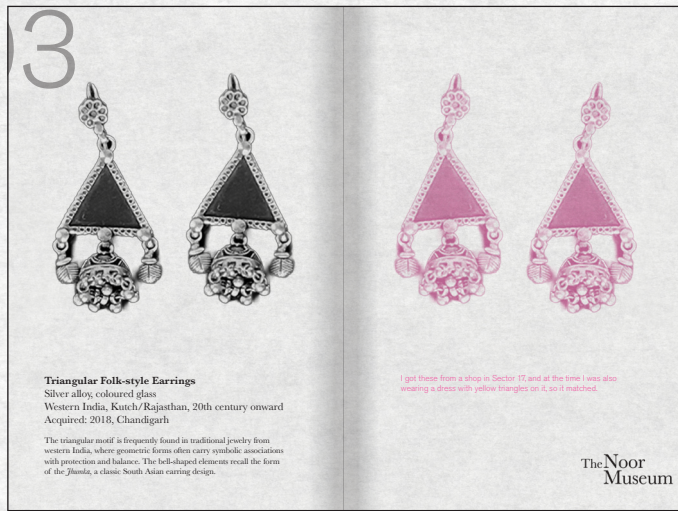
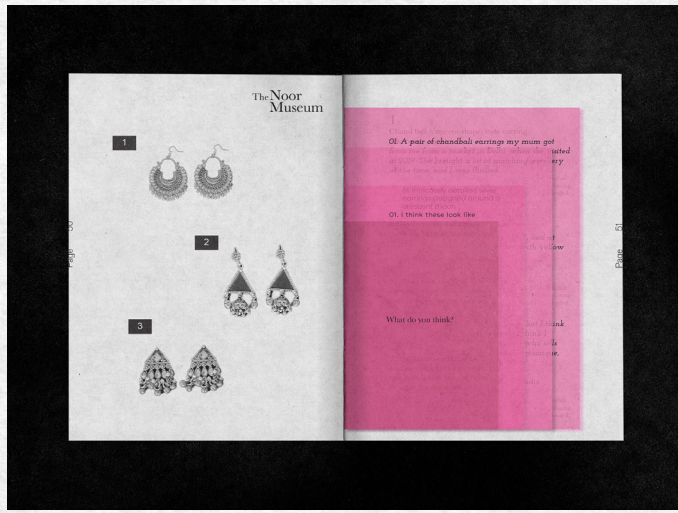
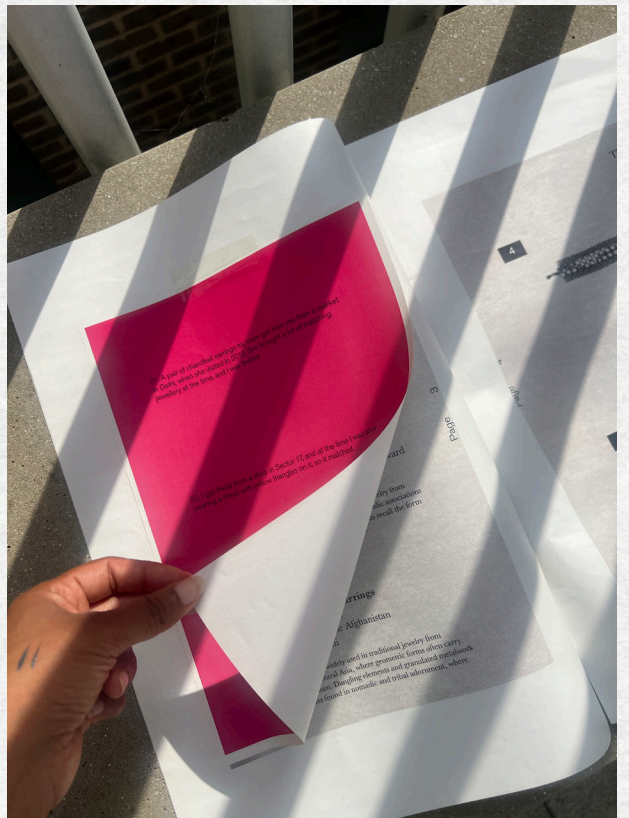


fig. 35-37. Other iterations of the publication. (Dhanju, 2026)



fig. 38-41. Initial print experiments of the publication. (Dhanju, 2026)



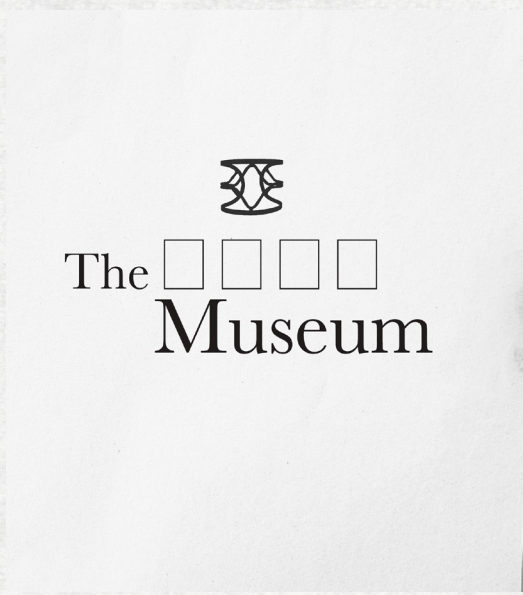


fig. 42-47. Versions of The Noor Museum logo. (Dhanju, 2026)

Please view my extended set of iterations, project development, and experiments on my blog, in the weekly posts of the 'Positions Through Iterating' and 'Positions Through Contextualising' categories.

The video essay has been uploaded to the 'Positions Through Essaying' page.

Thank you.

note

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