

Fowler

MUSEUM AT UCLA

India's Subterranean Stepwells: Photographs by Victoria Lautman

May 5–October 20, 2019

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Los Angeles—The Fowler Museum at UCLA presents *India's Subterranean Stepwells: Photographs by Victoria Lautman*, 48 photographs of monumental manmade water storage systems called stepwells, also known as *baolis*, *vavs* and *kunds* in various parts of the country. These magnificent inverted constructions extend down to the water table, ranging from three to 13 stories deep. Villagers, religious pilgrims, and transient traders once descended into the stepwells to find clean water and a cool, quiet reprieve from the heat above. Journalist Victoria Lautman first encountered these subterranean architectural marvels 30 years ago, and has since documented more than 200 sites—some preserved as heritage sites and some restored as functioning community wells and active shrines, while others remain forgotten and derelict. The exhibition will be on view at the Fowler through October 20, 2019.

“Palaces, forts, temples, and tombs are on every tourist itinerary and in every guidebook to India,” Lautman said. “The country’s magnificent subterranean stepwells, however, remain largely unknown within and outside the country.”

Stepwells were engineered and constructed from around 600 CE. This exhibition focuses on documentation of 16 sites, built between the 9th and 18th centuries. As many as 3,000 stepwells once existed across Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, where seasonal monsoonal rains in the parched landscape of northwest India necessitated a water storage system.



Often commissioned by wealthy female patrons, stepwells were sites of communal congregation and conviviality open to all, providing water for consumption, cleansing, irrigation, and ritual use. Built from brick, rubble, or carved sandstone blocks, stepwells were built in Hindu or Muslim architectural styles, sometimes combining both. Post-and-lintel Hindu architecture, with corbeled cupolas and complex sculptural reliefs of Hindu deities dominated prior to 16th-century Mughal rule. Thereafter, Islamic-inspired domes, octagonal shafts, and colonnades with archways proliferated.

Stepwells became obsolete during the early 20th century due to the introduction of piped water and other social changes. India's critically diminished water table means that many stepwells no longer extend to the groundwater. Nevertheless, some continue to be vibrant sites of worship and community gathering. Increasingly, stepwells are being restored by communities, hotel developers, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, the Archeological Survey of India, and in one case, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, not only in recognition of their architectural beauty and irreplaceability as monuments of India's rich heritage, but also as potential offsets to India's water crisis.

"We don't choose our obsessions—they choose us," Lautman said. "I could never have predicted that my first encounter with a stepwell would eventually commandeer a large slice of my life, propelling me throughout India in search of the most fascinating and mysterious structures I have ever seen but, until then, had not been aware of."

Credit

India's Subterranean Stepwells: Photographs by Victoria Lautman is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and is curated by Joanna Barrkman, Senior Curator of Southeast Asian and Pacific Arts.

About the Fowler Museum

The Fowler Museum at UCLA explores global arts and cultures with an emphasis on works from Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas—past and present. The Fowler enhances understanding of world cultures through dynamic exhibitions, publications, and public programs, informed by interdisciplinary approaches and the perspectives of the cultures represented. Also featured is the work of international contemporary artists presented within the complex frameworks of politics, culture, and social action.

Fowler Museum at UCLA

308 Charles E Young Dr N | Los Angeles, CA 90024 | fowler.ucla.edu

Admission to the Fowler is free.

Hours: Wednesday 12–8pm and Thursday–Sunday 12–5pm

Parking: UCLA Lot 4, 398 Westwood Plaza directly off Sunset Blvd, \$12/day

Ride Share Drop-Off: 305 Royce Drive

Related Events

Gallery Talk: Victoria Lautman on Indian Stepwells | Fri May 17, 12pm

Journalist, author, and lecturer Victoria Lautman shares her experiences over 30 years of documenting stepwells across India. These remarkable structures provided communities with water all year long and served as civic centers, refuges, and active places of worship.

Lecture: Victoria Lautman on the Vanishing Stepwells of India | Sun Jun 23, 2pm

India's palaces, forts, temples, and tombs are on every tourist itinerary and in every guidebook. The country's magnificent subterranean stepwells, however, remain largely unknown within and outside the country. Journalist, author, and lecturer Victoria Lautman traces the history of these astonishing structures in her lecture. A book signing and light refreshments follow the program.

CAPTIONS

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Victoria Lautman

Mahila Baag Jhalra (built circa 1780; Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India)

2014

Digital print

Victoria Lautman

Ujala Baoli (built late-15th–early 16th century; Mandu, Madhya Pradesh, India)

2014

Digital print

Page 2

Victoria Lautman

Chand Baori (built c. 800 with an 18th-century addition; Abhaneri, Rajasthan, India)

2014

Digital print