

'Tracing Traces'

South Indian Palm-Leaf Manuscripts across Space and Time

Public exhibition for the 'Palm-Leaf Manuscript Profiling Initiative'

24 April - 30 May 2025



The public exhibition '*Tracing Traces: South Indian Palm-Leaf Manuscripts across Space and Time*' was developed as part of the ongoing project Palm-Leaf Manuscript Profiling Initiative (PLMPI) hosted at the French institute of Pondicherry (IFP) for the period 2022 - 2025. The exhibition aimed to communicate the objectives and ongoing work of the PLMPI and fulfil the public outreach objectives of IFP to communicate its research activities to a wide audience.

About the Palm-Leaf Manuscript Profiling Initiative (PLMPI)

Established by the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC), a research centre within the Universität Hamburg at the Faculty of the Humanities and the Faculty of Mathematics, Informatics and Natural Sciences, the Palm-Leaf Manuscript Profiling Initiative (PLMPI) aims at reconstructing the history of production and circulation of written knowledge in historical Tamil Nadu. Integrating information from the study of manuscript texts (Humanities) with analysis of their material features (Applied Sciences) will allow researchers to create a frame of reference for their study. Such a reference study and database will provide a solid foundation for the study of palm-leaf manuscripts in Tamil Nadu and represent a pilot model for similar studies on palm-leaf manuscripts (PLMs) from other cultural areas both inside and outside India. PLMPI focuses on the palm-leaf manuscripts belonging to the French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP) and École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), particularly those manuscripts for which the place of origin is known.

CSMC has also developed a state-of-the-art Container Laboratory designed to be shipped anywhere in the world in order to carry out scientific analyses of written artefacts (manuscripts, inscriptions, etc.), in particular to areas where scientific instrumentation may be unavailable or only partly available. The Container Lab is currently stationed in Pondicherry (2024-2025) on its pilot mission.

IFP's Indology Department is anchoring the PLMPI project at IFP. Key activities include liaising with Indian institutional collaborators, building a database of Tamil colophons, and managing the setup and running of the Container Lab.

IFP's Ecology Department is anchoring fieldwork activities across Tamil Nadu, sampling of living palms to build a modern reference catalog. It has also conceptualised a sister 'Silica Project' to test the roles of phytolith composition and silica concentration in the quality of palm-leaf as a writing support.

The PLMPI Mission to Pondicherry (2022–2025) is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), under the auspices of the Cluster of Excellence "Understanding Written Artefacts", hosted by the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC), Universität Hamburg.

More information about the project can be found at:

<https://www.ifpindia.org/projects/palm-leaf-manuscript-profiling-initiative-plmpi/>

<https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/research/working-groups/plmpi.html>

Exhibition Overview

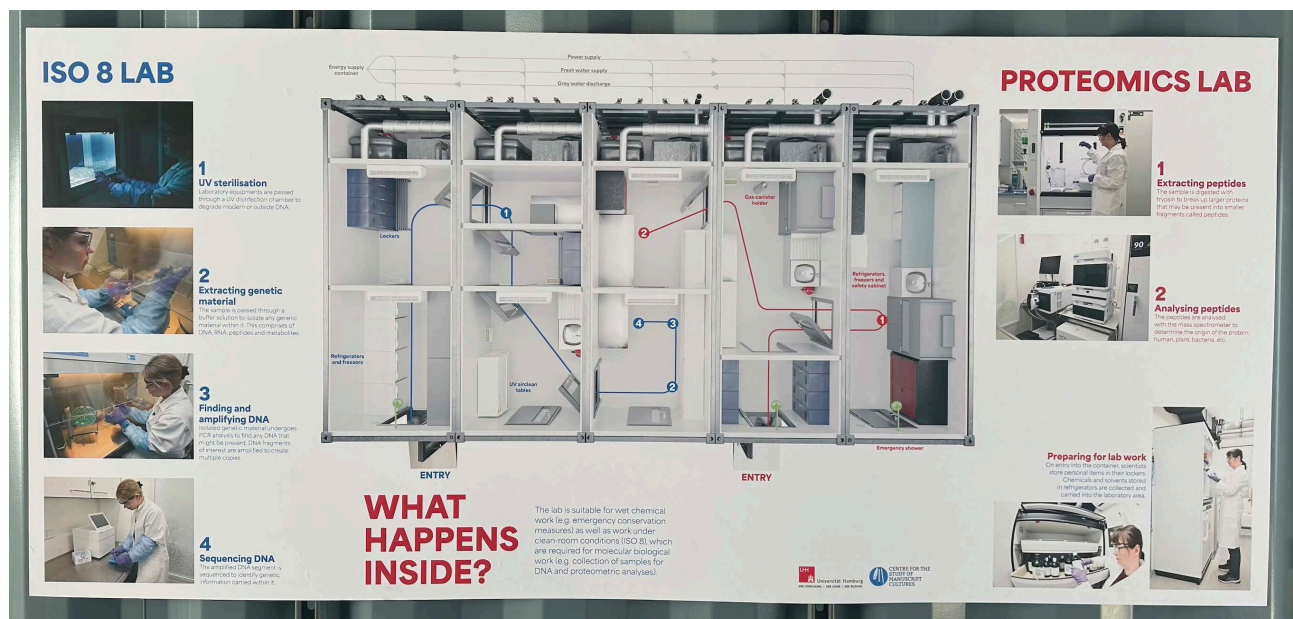
The PLMPI exhibition was developed and produced during the period February to April 2025 and presented in two parts.

A. On-site at the CSMC Container Lab

A small exhibition is installed at the Old Port Campus shed housing the Container Lab, located approximately a kilometre away from the IFP. It explains the design, construction, and testing of the Lab in Germany, its shipping from Hamburg and installation in Pondicherry, and the research activities that it is equipped to carry out for the PLMPI project. The exhibition will remain in place until September 2025 when the Container Lab will return to Hamburg.



Exhibition panels were mounted on the container walls and included an illustrated timeline of its development, explanation of laboratory workflow, and signage.



Panel explaining laboratory workflow.

B. 'Tracing Traces' exhibit at the IFP

'Tracing Traces' installed at the IFP is more comprehensive; charting the history of palm-leaf manuscripts in South India, their continued significance in contemporary times, and their potential as material artefacts to yield more information on the lost art of their craftsmanship.

Exhibition Team

Curator, Exhibit Developer, Designer

The exhibition was curated, designed, and produced by Theresa Alappat, a final year Exhibition Design student of the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad as her Graduate Project (B.Des). Her participation was made possible by a three-month IFP Fellowship.

As curator, Theresa developed and defined the exhibition's messaging creating original written content, selecting assets (objects, images, quotes) for display, and shaping the exhibit's physical design to make it engaging and accessible to visitors. She was responsible for ensuring the exhibition stayed on schedule and on budget.

Theresa worked under the hierarchical and scientific responsibility of Dr. Margherita Trento, Head of the Department of Indology, and Dr. Doris Barboni, Head of the Department of Ecology. In addition, she was guided by Dr. Giovanni Ciotti, PI and spokesperson of the PLMPI project.

Subject-Matter Specialists

CSMC researchers Dr. Marina Creydt (Proteomics and Metabolomics), Nathalie Holz (DNA Profiling), and Dr. Anastasia Poliakova (Phytolith analysis) were hosted at IFP during February-March 2025 to sample PLMs from the collections of IFP and EFEO. They also spent time at the Container Lab to review its functioning, laboratory workflow, and calibrate analytical instruments. This provided an opportunity to undertake photo-documentation of manuscript sampling and lab work inside the Lab. Other teams from Hamburg involved in mechanical and spectroscopic analysis, and bio-informatics interacted remotely with Theresa to explain their ongoing research work.

At IFP, researchers from the Ecology department provided expertise on palm-tree biology and fieldwork, while researchers from Indology department helped translate Tamil and Sanskrit terms, and provided socio-cultural context to ground and interpret the material research.



Dr. Marina Creydt inside the proteomics section of the Container Lab.

Researchers worked closely with Theresa at all stages as she developed the exhibition; checking the accuracy of scientific terms and processes, and helping simplify information for audience readability.

Technical Teams

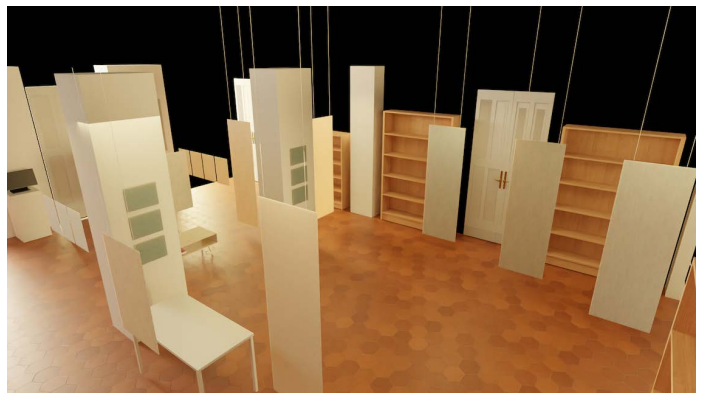
IFP's Geomatics department built a geo-tagged base map of South India combining manuscript locations, fieldwork locations, and soil and climate information.

IFP's Photo Archives identified archival images for use, and undertook photo-documentation of manuscript sampling, phytolith analysis in the Ecology lab, and of the Container Lab.



Photo documentation of manuscript sampling and silica extraction at IFP.

The PLMPI exhibition is the third major exhibition to be held at IFP. Part of the preparatory work included learning from the effort undertaken for past exhibitions; maximising the use of existing furniture, props, and lighting available at the IFP, and use of reliable local vendors for printing and framing. This was ably guided and managed by IFP's in-house technical and IT teams.



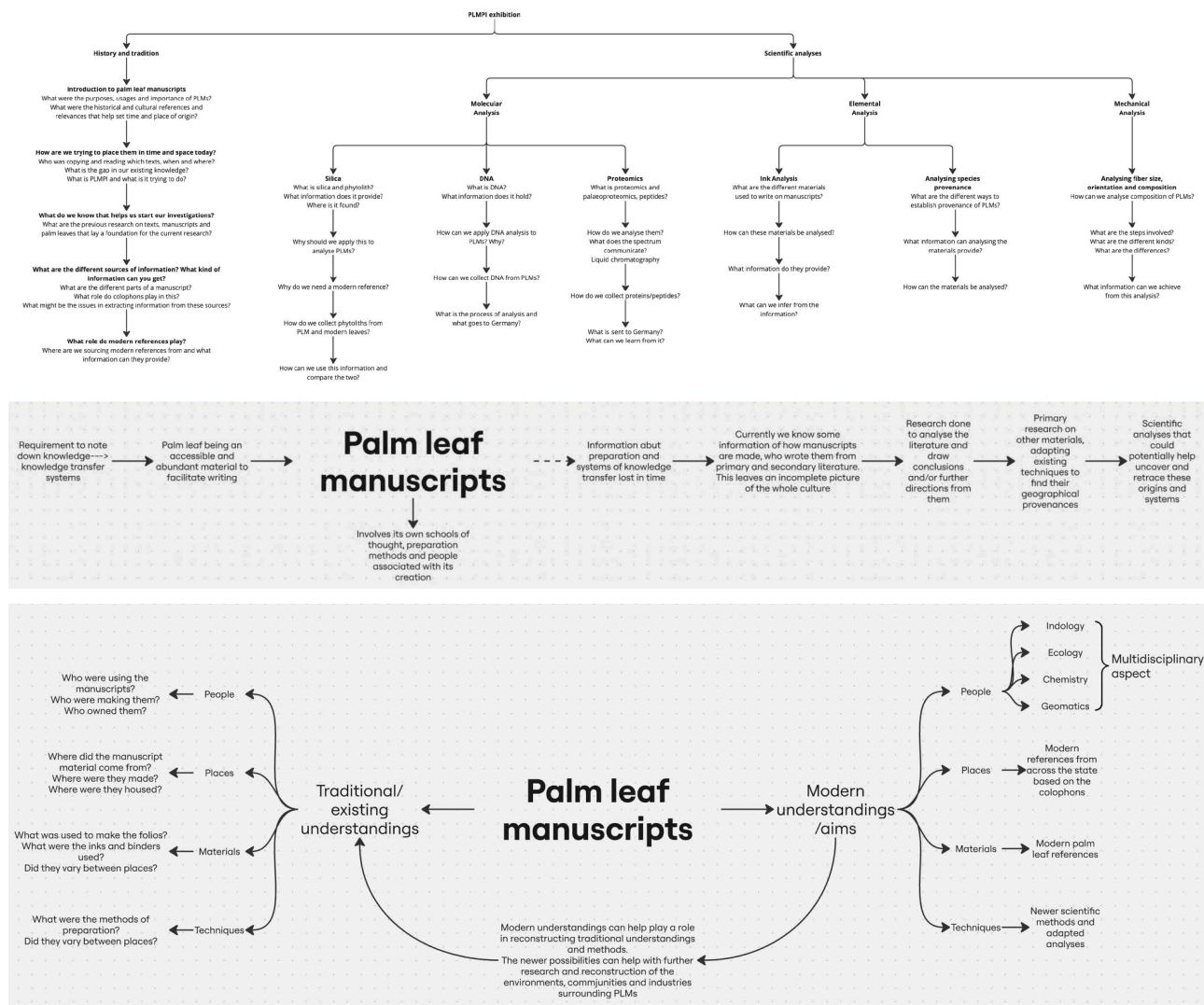
3D mock-up of exhibition layout within the IFP hall.

'Tracing Traces': Exhibition Development Process

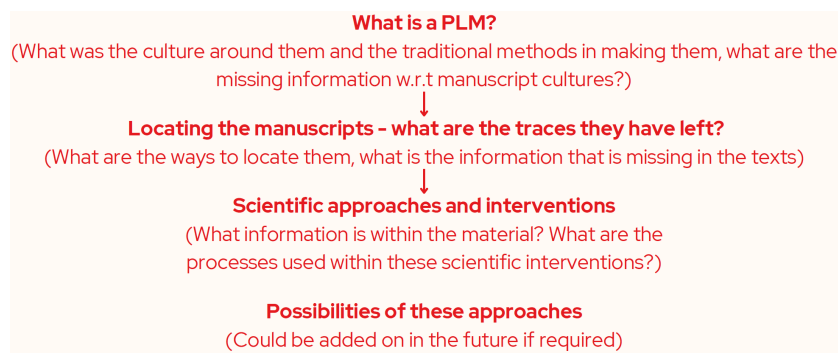
Guiding questions

- Should PLMPI be presented by chronologically or thematically?
- Which slice of the PLMPI story do we tell? What is the *"big idea"*?
- How to effectively communicate the project's message?
- Why should visitors care about the subject?
- How can we relate it to contemporary life or culture?

Mapping the Research



Identifying the slice of story to tell



Interpretive Master Plan

- Establishing the big idea 'Traces we leave behind' as the overarching message that visitors should understand upon leaving the exhibition,
- Setting up key messages to directly support the big idea, and provide a conceptual framework for the exhibition,
- Setting up critical questions to support the key messages and shape the exhibition experience,
- Organising the content thematically, and setting up sub-themes,
- Identifying interpretive tools - images, tactile materials, objects, and media elements for visitors to interact with.

PANEL 1

Information Left Behind: Why Are We Looking for Traces on PLMs?

Everything that comes into contact with an object leaves a mark, even if invisible. Introduce PLMs and how they documented our histories, and how they are the last written documents available. PLMs carry the physical and chemical imprints of those who handled them, the environment they existed in, and the materials used in their creation. PLMPI (Palm Leaf Manuscript Profiling Initiative) is studying these traces to uncover the geographical provenance of these manuscripts.

Objects on display

- Archival images of people handling manuscripts, Gurukuls, and analyses carried out in PLMPI project

Images that can be used



Reference image



PANEL 2

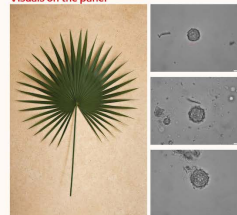
How Are PLMs Born?

PLMs originate from specific trees, and even from their earliest stages, they begin accumulating traces where they come from within their fibres - microscopic imprints. Each manuscript is unique, shaped by its material origins yet similar in its environmental origins.

Objects on display

- Palm leaves from Palmyra and Talipot trees
- Phytolith images
- Images of trees

Visuals on the panel



PANEL 3

Ingredients Used in Manuscript Preparation:

Connection to present day
The creation of a PLM involves natural ingredients, many of which are found in traditional kitchens. Oils, plant extracts, and botanical compounds were used in their preparation. PLMPI examines these traces to reconstruct historical practices and understand localised recipes. List how different analyses are looking for specific elements and how they help look for geographical provenance.

Objects on display

- Cards with illustrations of ingredients, listing their names and uses
- Images of processes of preparation
- Images of analyses

Draft of panel



PANEL 4

4. Writing on Manuscripts: Leaving Behind The Human Trace

Writing is an act of physical interaction—our touch leaves behind oils, residues, and microscopic traces of ink and pigment. Over time, even the slightest pressure from a scribe's hand is recorded in the material. With it are inks used to write and illustrate on the manuscript using styluses of different materials. All of which leave traces on the surface of the PLMs.

Objects on display

- Archival images of writing on manuscripts
- Ingredient cards of inks used

PANEL 5

5. Other Biological Traces: Insects, Fungi, and Preservation Efforts

Beyond human interaction, PLMs bear evidence of their environment—fungal spores, insect damage, and conservation treatments applied centuries later. Analysing these elements can help understanding where these manuscripts could have been housed, how they may have been preserved.

Objects on display

- Archival images of libraries and conservation efforts
- Images of manuscripts that have been attacked by pests
- Ingredient cards of preservatives used and pests



PANEL 6

6. Texts on the Manuscripts: The Role of Colophons

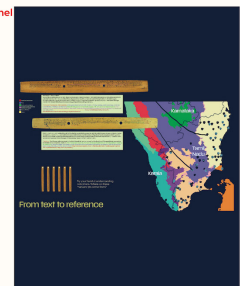
Colophons serve as historical anchors, linking PLMs to their origins and providing crucial reference points for modern research. They help establish provenance and contextualize present scientific findings.

INTRODUCTION: In publishing, a colophon is a brief statement containing information about the publication of a book such as an 'imprint' (the place of publication, the publisher, and the date of publication).

Objects on display

- Map (combination of climate conditions, colophons and state divisions) with colophon locations labelled
- Manuscripts with transcription and translation highlighted
- Smaller facsimiles of manuscripts for people to try their hand at locating them on the map

Draft of panel



PANEL 7

7. Why Should People Care? The Social Object Effect

Every interaction with an object leaves a mark. Just as PLMs accumulate traces over time, so do all the objects we engage with. This exhibition challenges visitors to consider: What trace do you leave behind?

Objects on display

- Sampling done on manuscripts.
- Blank manuscript leaf that people can interact with, understanding the compounding effect of all our interactions on the palm leaf

Establishing the visual language and aesthetics



Structuring the Exhibition Text and Visuals

A “narrative matrix” was built to map and break down individual panels and space within the exhibition. It detailed what each space would be about, what it should make the audience think, what supporting elements are required, and what the accompanying text should be.

NARRATIVE MATRIX

1. Identify Node points in the visitor's movement, from the plan.
2. Identify key themes/takeaways from your exhibition.
 - a. Traditional Craft vs. Contemporary Explorations
 - b. Basic understanding and familiarity with the technique
 - c. Different approaches to the same craft

The Memory of Touch: Traces (Imprints, Remnants) Left on Palm Leaf Manuscripts: Traces We Leave Behind

Narrative Nodes	Key Objects	Narrative Purpose	Theme	Object description i. Medium ii. Mood/Style iii. Impact	Treatment	Further Information required to support narrative?	Supporting Objects	Narrative Emphasis (Stay or walk on?)	Circulation	Description
A	Images of manuscripts and paintings of Gurukuls, occupations + screen with video of PLMPI	Setting the stage for the exhibition and the project's ties to manuscript	Contact leaves traces of information	i. Archival images	Simple graphics, familiarise the traditional setting of manuscript cultures	Yes	1. Exhibition title, intro text 2. Panels that talk about what PLMs are and where they come from in South India	Stay	Linear	<p>Information Left Behind: Why Are We Looking for Traces on PLMs?</p> <p>Everything that comes into contact with an object leaves a mark, even if invisible. Palm Leaf Manuscripts (PLMs) carry the physical and chemical imprints of those who handled them, the environment they existed in, and the materials used in their creation. PLMPI (Palm Leaf Manuscript Profiling Initiative) is studying these traces to uncover the geographical provenance of these manuscripts.</p>
B	Palm leaves + images of phytoliths and leaves under the microscope	Understand the first traces of the leaves, and what phytoliths are, how they differ	Beginnings of traces		Images, understand how science is intrinsic	Yes	1. Panel explaining where the trees are and what they are also used for,	Walk on		<p>How Are PLMs Born?</p> <p>PLMs originate from specific trees, and even from their earliest stages, they begin accumulating traces where they come from within their fibres - microscopic imprints. Each manuscript is unique, shaped by its material origins yet similar in its environmental origins.</p>

Exhibition Elements

1. Main Panels

Canvas panels (2.5'x7') anchored the overall exhibition story and sub-themes, guiding the visitor through history of usage of palm-leaf manuscripts in Tamil society and their decline, the significance of palm trees used to make them, their continued contemporary significance as repositories of knowledge, and as material artefacts under study in the PLMPI project.



2. Scientific Panels

Board panels (30"x40") explain the applied sciences aspect of PLMPI - the six main types of analyses being undertaken by CSMC researchers.

Each panel highlighted the overall aim of study, and research questions. All published papers were cited for visitors to further explore research areas of interest.



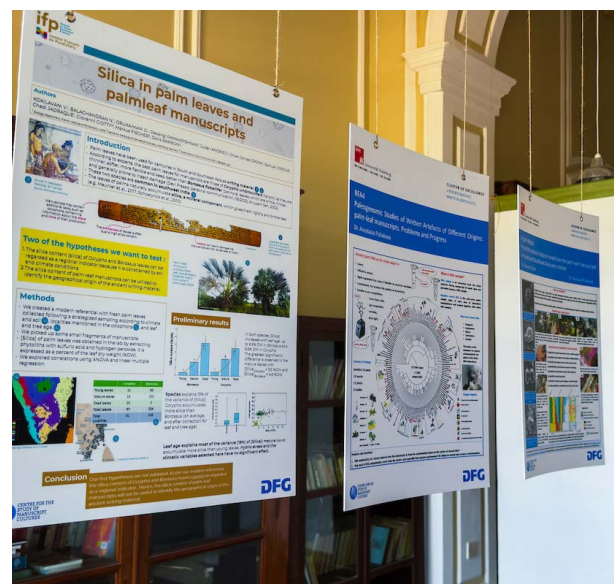
3. Map of colophons and fieldwork

Acrylic mounted panel (4.5'x4') of a map of South India pinpointing locations identified from manuscript colophons, present day fieldwork to collect fresh leaf samples, and the overlaps.



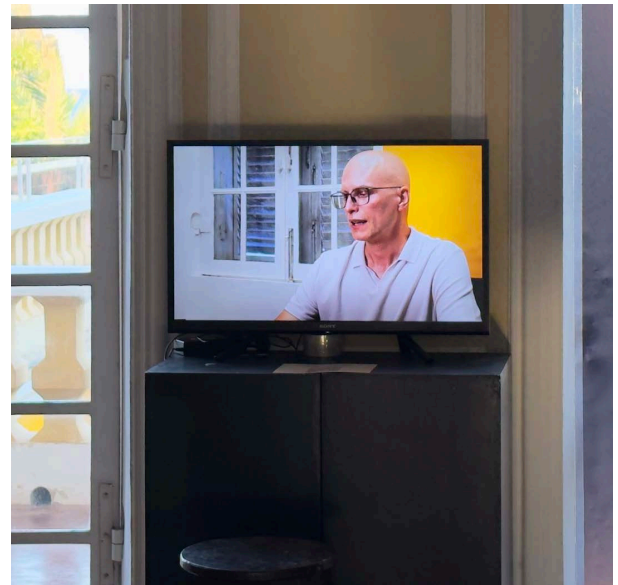
4. Conference Posters

Board mounted panels (A2) of conference posters by CSMC and IFP researchers showcased findings from the different research fields, each of which have progressed at individual rates.



5. Documentary film of Container Lab

A 22 minute documentary film produced by CSMC Hamburg showcases the Container Lab and its pilot mission to Pondicherry for the PLMPI project. The film includes interviews with IFP researchers and montages of the installation of the Lab at the Old Port.



6. Visual elements

Archival images

Primarily sourced from BnF Gallica, V&A London, and IFP's photo collections, British and French Company Paintings served to illustrate the main panels.

Fieldwork photos

Photos taken by IFP researchers during fieldwork in different parts of Tamil Nadu served to illustrate how a modern reference of palm leaves is built.



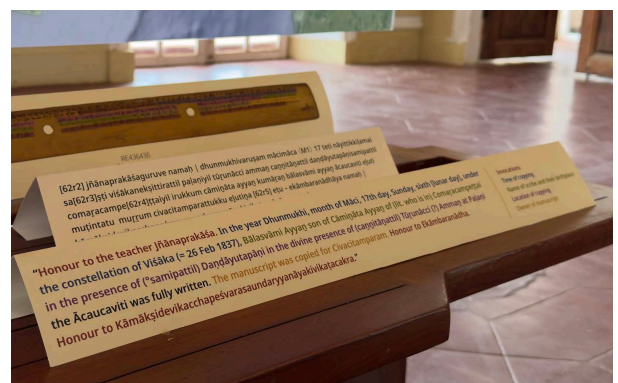
Manuscript ingredients

Ingredients involved in manuscript craftsmanship and preservation; oils, herbs, grains, and soils - that visitors could touch, feel, and smell.



Translated manuscript folio

The location map was supported by three banners; manuscript folio with colophon text highlighted, the transcription, and the translation. This allowed visitors to read a manuscript independently, and understand how humanities scholars study them.



6. Visual elements (contd.)

Parts of a Manuscript

A poster was made to be displayed within the manuscript archival room, with definitions of the components of a manuscript and tools used for incising text onto them.



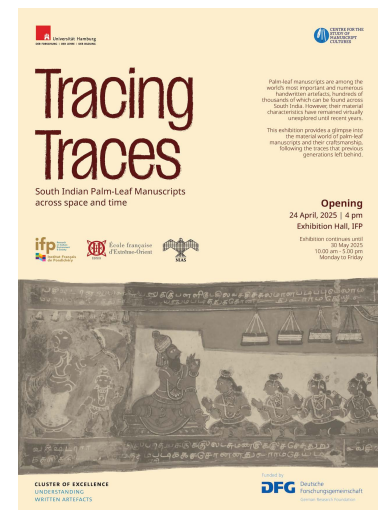
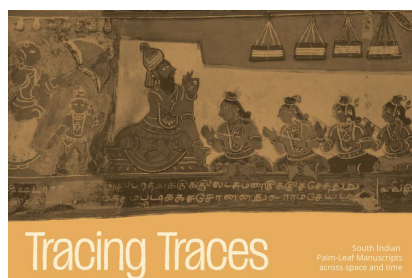
7. Outreach Material

Posters

Displayed at entrance to the exhibition hall at IFP.

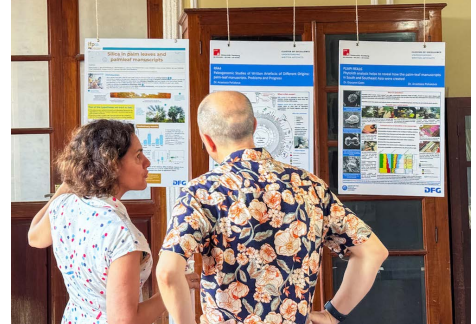
Printed and Email Invitations

Delivered to local partners and across the IFP and CSMC networks.



Exhibition Opening Event

24 April 2025



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Exhibition Design And Development

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Universität der Bundeswehr Hamburg

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