



# State of the Arts

If you thought that the city's museums were relics themselves, here is why you should think again. **By Neha Mathews**

In the past few years, museums and art galleries in Mumbai have received massive facelifts in terms of restoration, infrastructure and programming, thus, revolutionising our cultural experiences. In an era where the internet, specifically everybody's best friend Wikipedia, is shaping public knowledge and opinion, these institutions are re-establishing themselves as authorities

on heritage and culture and shaping a better understanding of our social anthropology. Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum (BDL), National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) and the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) are three such notable examples. Not only have these prominent institutions been showcasing exhibitions of national importance and collaborating with renowned international museums to

bring travelling shows to Mumbai, they have also developed their children's programmes in a way that makes them enticing and educational in the true sense of the word.

## **DR. BHAU DAJI LAD MUSEUM**

Established in 1872, the oldest museum in Mumbai was awarded the UNESCO award for heritage conservation in 2005 after the restoration of its vast collection



Above and facing page: Scenes from Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum

of artefacts and renovation of its interiors. The museum has been showcasing noteworthy exhibitions for the past four years including *Missives*, installations by the New York-based Israeli artist Ghiora Aharoni; *Homelands*, the ambitious touring exhibition that displayed several works of top contemporary and modern artists from the UK; and two exhibitions in partnership with the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Though, what is truly inspiring is Honorary Director Tasneem Zakaria Mehta's curatorial vision for the museum. She says, "Museums abroad focus more on the quality of the exhibitions. But I feel there should be a separate paradigm for India." Their vision is more education-focussed, given that the audience comprises people from various social and economic strata and a majority

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are less than well-versed in history and culture. This sort of accessibility is conducive to catering to an audience with an innate fear of high art.

More impressive still, is the range of kids' activities held at the museum. The Education Officer at BDL, Alisha Sadikot proudly displays the exhibits that kids have worked on. Kids' workshops are permanent and special projects, centring around the museum's collection and ongoing exhibitions respectively. Using the collection or exhibition as a context, the workshops build on the concepts and skill involved in each piece. For example, after a tour of the ancient silver collection, the children are handed their own silver sheets and taught to engrave and emboss their own designs into the same. A simplified version of the actual silver carving process, the project helps



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children better understand the trade and the intricacy of ancient design. *Mapping Memories* is another popular project among children who visit the museum. Inspired by the *Untitled (Cobweb/Crossings)*, an artwork by Reena Kallat that was on display last year, children are taken on an interactive tour of the museum and are asked to map their own memories of the city, which becomes a factual rendering of experiences that highlights the nuances in individual perspective. This makes it a fun activity for a concept

that would have otherwise gone over any child's head. Clay moulding, Ragmala painting, puppet shows and curation of their own galleries (where the children create their own exhibits) are the other interactive activities that Sadikot enthusiastically leads. The museum will start its summer programmes in May, a compilation of projects open to both children and parents. BDL has a lot on its plate, including opening a new wing, a large portion of which will be the dedicated Kids' Zone.

**NATIONAL GALLERY OF MODERN ART**

Similarly, NGMA has played host to some remarkable exhibitions. *Project Cinema City: Research, Art & Documentary Practices*, held to commemorate 100 years of Indian cinema and the grand Air India collection being memorable examples in recent times. NGMA has gone through a lurch in quality exhibitions, but if the upcoming ones are any indication, the gallery will be picking up pace rapidly. Part of the NGMA's permanent collection,

the travelling Amrita Sher-Gil will be coming to Mumbai by the end of May. Considered as national art treasures, the painting collection showcases the transformation in Sher-Gil's style over the years. A prominent member on the Advisory Board of the gallery, Majoo Godrej says, "Art essentially helps the observer see the world in a different light, how it is perceived by the artist." Since the gallery does not have a full-time education officer currently, programmes aimed at young adults are not frequent. However, workshops are designed depending on the ongoing exhibitions. While *The Last Harvest* (an exhibition of paintings by Rabindranath Tagore) was displayed at the gallery, painting workshops were held that concentrated on portrait-making since Tagore's collection primarily consisted of those. The child not only learns to identify and draw portraits, but other activities are drawn into the mix, like identifying one Mughal emperor from the other based on the given portrait. Quizzes, documentary screenings and music transform the process of learning about culture and heritage into a more engaging activity.

#### **CHHATRAPATI SHIVAJI MAHARAJ VASTU SANGRAHALAYA**

Those among us who remember the days of the Prince of Wales Museum will not believe how professional CSMVS has become today. Mumbai's premier art institution has made a concentrated effort in becoming more vibrant, interesting and, most importantly, relevant. From recent exhibitions that included the best of Flemish painters, a retrospective on the works of Mohan Samant and the Cyrus Cylinder (borrowed from the British Museum), to hosting most of the kids' activities at the Kala Ghoda Festival and creating a dedicated space for kids at the museum, CSMVS has undergone a renaissance of its own. Museum Director Sabyasachi Mukherjee (not the fashion designer) is credited with turning the place around. Not only has the layout of the place changed with more space to travel between artefacts, but he has worked towards increasing funding, bringing in more travelling exhibitions and creating interactive exhibits. Just like the old days, hordes of school kids still mill about in the museum. The only difference? This time, they just might learn something. ■

#### **A word on the travelling exhibit**

**Why has the CSMVS forged partnerships with the British Museum, the British Library, the Los Angeles County Museum, the Reiberg Museum (Zurich), the Dresden Museum and The Cotswold School in London? Mumbai's museum and gallery owners have understood that travelling showcases can be used to draw parallels to their own permanent collections that archive our country's rich, but oft neglected heritage. Mehta explains this in context to the recent exhibition of a marvellous replica of the gates of the Florentine Baptistery. These gates act as an ambassador to the French revolution, albeit representing only the civic sense and aspects of city development. They, however, open up avenues to talk about other factors such as sculpture and art, which is what the workshops at BDL draw influence from.s**

Below and facing page: Scenes from Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, or the friendlier, CSMVS

