

# Still life Through the looking glass

Photography too is an art, an art that Indian artists are gaining international recognition for. A feature on Indian photographers and their journey to the top.

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▲ Raghuraj Rai's Flute Player at Varanasi, 2002.

Displaying photography as a stand-alone art form is a fairly new phenomenon among art aficionados and galleries in India. While in the West, photography has been looked upon as serious acquisition for several

years. As early as 1940, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York dedicated an entire wing to the medium. Surprisingly, the history of photography in India can be traced back practically simultaneously with its development in Europe around the

mid 1800s, when the first daguerreotype was exhibited in Paris; the arrival of the new medium attracted hundreds of practitioners and patrons. Photographic societies, as well as a number of successful studios, sprung up in Bombay, Calcutta

and Madras and by 1855, the East India Company had decided to replace its draughtsmen with photographers.

**Tracing 'picture taking'** Royalty in India was quick to embrace the exciting new discovery—



▲ Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's works: Savages, 2003 (above); Primitive, 2003 (below).

documenting their opulent palaces, family members, hunting trips and various other stately functions, the maharajas patronised foreign photographers who enjoyed close proximity with them. Portfolios of these works are prized collectables and have often found their way in publications and western collections.

The Mutiny of 1857 changed photography, which became a tool of the imperial regime and glorified the colonial rule. At this stage of the history of photography, it was used as an instrument for documentation rather than fine art.

Early 20th century was a turning point for photography with the advent of new techniques, equipment and effects. Perhaps, the pioneer of modern Indian photography is Umrao

Singh Sher-Gil (father of the celebrated artist Amrita Sher-Gil). His endless role-playing in front of the camera, dressed in different attire, make-up and compositions can now be seen practised by contemporary Indian photographers such as N. Pushpamala, Nikhil Chopra and Annu Matthew, who are all enjoying popularity on an international level.

Vivan Sundaram, who is a well-known avant-garde artist and happens to be the grandson of Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, uses a photo practice that includes digital photomontages based on the photographs of the Sher-Gil family archive. Sundaram's photomontages involve re-staging of photographs with new insertions



Prior to Independence, many national leaders published newspapers, used photography to generate patriotism and outrage against British rule.

photography to generate patriotism and outrage against British rule. The partition and the making of the new states were brilliantly recorded by French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, while Margaret Bourke-White made photographic records of Gandhi. These pictures gave international exposure to decisive moments of India's Independence.

In the West, during the 1960s, there was a vast presence of commercial imagery, which manifested into a subject for artists who had



no previous connections with photography. In 1962, American artists Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol began silkscreen reproductions of photographs onto canvases. This was considered extremely radical for

the time. Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenburg, rejected abstraction in painting and introduced popular visual images drawn from



▲ Above: Gauri Gill's Nizamuddin, New Delhi 2005. Below: Annu Palakunnathu Matthew's Madonna, 2003. Top: Shahid Datawala's Untitled (Arrow Car), 2004.



a means of documenting their activities and performance.

The parameters of photography have been expanding over a number of years. With the arrival and establishment of computer technology it has become possible to magically transform images beyond the potential of creative imagination. Discovering artistic possibilities of digital photography is being explored on a large scale. Art today has shattered all finite boundaries and dimensions. Artists who

have always been associated with paint and canvas are now experimenting with various techniques of photography in their work.

**To be or not to be** People argue about whether photography

should be considered an art form or purely a mechanical process, produced by chemicals rather than human sensibility. Art connoisseur and photographer Sumeet Chopra comments, "Commercially, photography has been widely used in advertising and films in India. And to now see serious galleries regularly mounting pure photography exhibitions confirms the fact that the medium is finally gaining the recognition it deserves."

A mention must be made about the photographers from across the border who are production amazing works, which are both provocative and accurate in their perception of reality. Bani Abidi, Rashid Rana, Huma Mulji, Durriya Kazi, Ayesha Naveed amongst others are some of the contemporary photographers from Pakistan.



▲ Above: Classic Manoj Jain. Below: An exemplar of Shilpa Gupta's work.

In January 2008, a major landmark exhibition of India's contemporary photography and video art, titled 'India: Public Places, Private Spaces' was concluded. The exhibit, the first ever of its kind in the United States of America, included over a hundred works that intensely mirrored the interior and exterior authenticity of contemporary India. The artists featured included internationally-renowned photographers Raghu Rai, the late Raghubir Singh, N. Pushpamala, Anita Dube, Ranbir Kaleka, Vivan Sundaram, as well as the new generation powerhouse talents: Shilpa Gupta, Tejal Shah, Shahid Datawala, Sunil Gupta, Ram Rahman, Gauri

Gill, Atul Bhalla amongst others.

A private gallery dedicated exclusively to photography will soon be launched this year in Mumbai by Matthieu Foss, one of the founder members of Paris Photo

reinstating the significance of photography as an alternative investment option for the contemporary art buyer. Contemporary art photography by Indian photographers is now thriving, gaining a separate

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and unique identity. With many artists making important contributions in areas ranging from street photography to surrealist photomontage, urbane landscapes and photo-performance, the originality and commitment of fine art photographers is giving them a place of honour among the best in the world of art.

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