



# ARTS ILLUSTRATED





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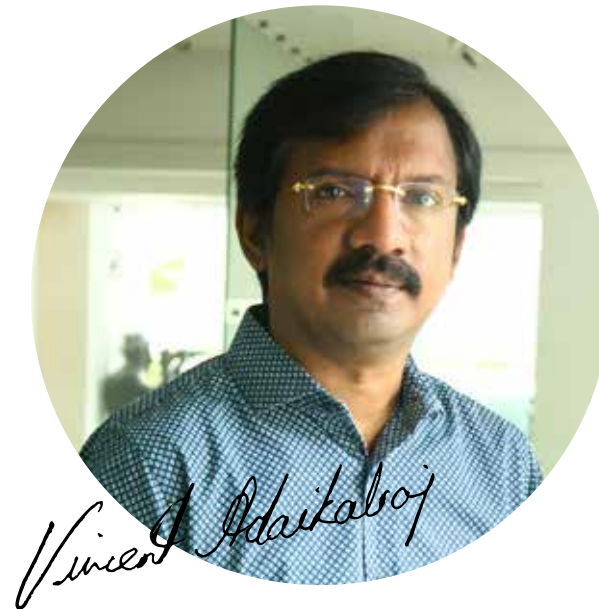
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## Publisher's note

The first thing that comes to our minds when we say 'ghosts' is the supernatural; it belongs to another realm, the unexplained realm, and remains a mystery, one that is constantly colliding with the world of science, the perennially explained realm. But, we think, there is more.

This issue we look at what it means to be invisible, to be ghost-like, to be confined to a space behind the curtain and still exist. We look at artist(e)s who truly engage with the word and understand its connotations in real life – in how, often, our reactions to the unknown become the opportunity for morality, philosophy and science to intermingle; in how we carry the ghosts of our memories; in how we create the ghosts of society; and how, even through the use of language (words and the arts), the ghosts of silence remain.

Vincent Adaikalraj



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### Editor's note

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Working on this issue was like rushing with a suitcase full of stories on a trolley against the wall to get to platform nine and three-quarters; sometimes, incredibly, we got through and found what we were looking for – a train, ready to take us into journeys never imagined – and other times, we crashed against the wall, watching the suitcase fly open, scattering stories into the wind like wayward feathers. This issue on 'ghosts' was equal parts awe-inspiring and maddeningly frustrating. That is, till we stopped seeing things the way they were supposed to be seen, and began to see them for what they were.

Ghosts have been such a big part of our collective memories; no childhood is complete without the 'bhoot' or 'poochandi' coming to get you if you don't finish eating, if you don't go to sleep, if you don't listen. We have been taught to fear that which we cannot see, and that we won't ever 'have' to see if we simply obeyed. As a parent today I completely understand (and indulge) in this need to win the everyday survival battle of exhaustion (parent) and stubbornness (child), but also, through this issue, realised just how deep such a layer could go within our minds. As an adult, living in this increasingly chaotic world, 'ghosts' today hold a whole other meaning, relentlessly and urgently hammering through old conditionings of fear.

As we delved into the realm of the invisible, the voiceless, the unseen, it became clear that we largely build narratives around things that are easily discernable, that are adequately explained, that quietly conform, that are proved beyond doubt as something that exists. Basically things that have legitimate Aadhar cards and bank accounts. For those that don't fall into these categories, the supernatural and the spectral does not seem that far-fetched anymore – for in the landscape of the invisible, there are no neatly cut pigeonholes of definitions nor are there nuanced filaments of dialogue. Here, the ghosts run free. And here, we situate this issue.

Because ghosts might mean a certain kind of death, but it certainly does not imply any kind of an end.



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### Cover

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Cover courtesy Art Macao  
Images Courtesy of the Artists and Cultural Affairs Bureau, Macao

Artists João Ó and Rita Machado installation for Art Macao titled 'Sanctuary' perfectly captures the ethos of this issue on 'ghosts'. For one, because we are specifically not concerned with the supernatural, we love that it is a bright blue sky, with the sun pouring in through the bamboo, the red hammocks, a clever subversion of danger or even the urgency of Facebook notifications popping regularly into our consciousness, inviting us to rest a while, within the patterns of shadow underneath. Two, the spaces between the lines of the bamboo, existing between the intricate structure of order, is where we think ghosts exist – they make the rigidity of straight lines bearable and show us that within the beauty of symmetry, there is also the beauty of chaos. And, finally, the use of bamboo, itself – the wood that straddles cultures, mythology, history, economy, ecology, sustenance and design – is symbolic of what ghosts mean to us: that long, immortal silence gradually bleeding into our worlds, into our words and into our pauses.



Collective Commons

## *A Treasury of Tradition*

As we close the Collective Commons series this issue, we chose a collection with a difference – one that has been inherited in its entirety and yet has a significance of being a national treasure. Housed in the most magnificent and privately held 130-year-old Lukshmi Villas Palace, Maharani Radhikaraje Gaekwad of Baroda is very aware of and sensitive to the importance of the art in the palace. ‘We have the largest in numbers and scale, and the most significant works of Raja Ravi Varma. It is my primary concern to document and conserve these and the other art we have,’ she says. We visit the palace to talk to her about the royal heritage and her personal ambitions.

*Rahul Kumar*

Photographs by *Mahesh Padia*





*Respect for aesthetics was a way of life in my childhood*  
I was born in the royal family of Wankaner. I distinctly remember how my grandmother would focus on decorations in the palace temple. Religious art from the Kishangarh School and miniatures of Mughal traditions were in abundance at our home. Objects of everyday use like textiles and furniture were all made with tremendous attention to detail. Architecture and building facades employed intricate stone carvings. Beauty was a way of life. Art, therefore, was not separate from the usual.

*Growing up in Delhi gave me access to museums and art galleries*

I studied history from Delhi University. Owing to my natural interest in art and culture, I would often visit museums and art exhibits in the city. The focus was always more on heritage rather than on contemporary art movements. Precious objects, textile weaving and embroidery that have been passed on over generations and traditional crafts attracted me. There was an inherent understanding, so much so that I could tell a fake from an original. And all this knowledge was based on what I became sensitive to with the environment I grew up in, not based on any formal education on the subject.

*A short stint in journalism fuelled my appetite for art*  
I completed my Masters in Journalism and worked as a feature's writer with a leading national daily. I often wrote about events in the culture space. This experience furthered my interest to view and experience different art forms. My core interest remained the traditional forms of art, probably owing to my study of history.

*A lot changed when I got married into the royal family of Baroda*

I left my writing job in Delhi and moved to Baroda in 2002 after getting married to Samarjitsinh Gaekwad. Lukshmi Villas Palace was an iconic building that I knew of as a child. And now suddenly it was my home. The palace was filled with the most exquisite collectibles, but the most significant of them are the collection of forty-five large-scale works of the legend Raja Ravi Varma. Originals of some of the most popular works that were recognisable through the oleographs, practically present in home-temples across the country, like the images of goddesses *Lakshmi* and *Saraswati*, adorned the walls of the palace. It was a mixed bag of emotions for me then. There was joy and amazement, but also a feeling of responsibility. These were treasures of national importance and I was very conscious of this fact.

*Gradually I learnt about the contributions made by the Gaekwad family*

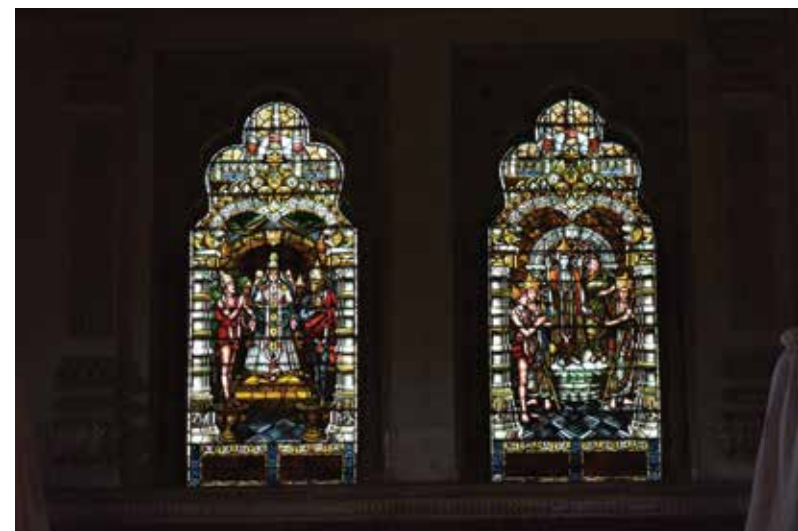
Raja Ravi Varma was a portraitist. His early works were all commissioned by the forefathers of the Gaekwad dynasty. He painted images of the then rulers, including the queens. It was, however, under the patronage of Sayajirao Gaekwad that Varma also painted mythological images and portraits of gods and goddesses. This was a first. For all religious purposes, in temples and for rituals, only sculptures were used till then. Later, a studio was specially built for Ravi Varma and eventually a printing press to mass produce oleographs. Thus, giving both face to our gods and access to the imagery to the layman.

*Documentation became my first and foremost priority*

It was important to formally catalogue the entire collection. I knew it was a difficult task since there were negligible records of the works and other objects. We also have a very large collection of books procured internationally. Even lighting fixtures, for instance, have a story and are precious. From tracking down the original palace from where the work was procured, to the artist's details and timeline, it has been incredibly time consuming. But I am glad a lot has been completed. The current focus on this front is to figure ways to digitise the information.

*Conservation and restoration are the other critical aspects*

Most of the paintings are over a hundred years old. And the scale of the works is so large that it is practically impossible to move them around easily. Just the frames of some of these weigh over one hundred kilograms! Then, to locate a skilled person, who not only understands the technicalities of restoration but also understands the style of the period. The other interesting realisation was that the paintings seem to have acclimatised to the climate of Baroda. Our spaces are not air-conditioned or humidity controlled. Yet, the works have lasted over a century. It may seem contrary to contemporary understanding of preservation and conservation, but we came to realise this about the works. It was an important aspect to incorporate in our overall approach to take care of the collection at large.





*Careful financial budgeting and upgrading the museum are my primary concerns now*

We are a completely private set-up. It is the same source of income that is literally used to run the household that is also used to maintain the properties, give care to the collection and plan the expansion and upgradation of museum facilities. It therefore becomes most critical to prioritise things and take it forward at the same time. We are keen to improve the facilities and also figure out ways to showcase the collection to a broader viewership. We have loaned works to significant shows, one even to the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, in 2004. We would love to do more of it, but the logistics are very complicated, given the fragility, size and weight of the works.



*Preservation of heritage and revival of dying crafts is my focus*

I am involved in the revival of the traditional textiles in the region. Very few weavers exist who can even attempt to work with the material. We have not only had to support the revival project financially but also provide the traditional designs and motifs. None of these exist anymore. Then there are innumerable recipes and jewellery-making techniques that will hopefully culminate into books. My husband, while fully supportive of all these endeavours, is personally interested in sports. That allows for a healthy balance for both of us!



