



ARTS ILLUSTRATED



Editor's note

As part of Bound Writers Retreat in Goa, recently, author Chandrahas Chowdhury said that as Indian writers writing in English we were already at an advantage because of the rich history of stories we carry. It seemed like it was a little more than just serendipity that I was listening to this while we were working on the Mythology issue. It seemed, instead, like some distant, familiar voice from the past was urging me to look at that crust of responsibility underneath the stories, and that the very act of being conscious of the many layers brings a certain gravity, a certain sanctity, a certain reverence to the words I use. And the words I read, even if visually.

While working on this issue, we realised just how pervasive the world of mythology is in our everyday lives, and how, most times, we are scarily unconscious of it. It confronts us when we least expect it, like a hiccup, and like a hiccup it deigns to leave only when it chooses to do so. Like when a child asks you a question about a mythic hero and you struggle to find the right words unburdened by old meanings, conscious of the remnants that linger – did I say the right thing? Or when riots tear through the country when a fictionalised account of a mythological story is about to be released, leaving behind a bitter, anti-climactic aftertaste – did I actually witness that? Or when mythology brazenly becomes a part of the politics of our time, reshaping the contours of memory and history – is this really my reality?

And yet, it is the same mythology that when viewed through the lens of art gives us its true purpose – the beauty of an imagined world, the wisdom of lives lived at another space and time, the tenacity of words to travel distances, across geographies and minds, and the inevitable truth of our future that someday we will become stories, too.

This issue is a peek into that world of myth, of legend, of a saga carrying all the different words of the stories that made us, the stories that we live and the stories we will leave behind.



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Cover Artist



Winged, unbridled horses depict a sense of unabashed freedom, without inhibitions. These characters entered my paintings some time back. I cannot trace a direct influence, but there are various cultures, traditions and myths which turn into my own archetypes. Winged horses and deer have become part of my recent works, referencing an out-of-body experience.

I have subconsciously referenced Pegasus, a character from Greek mythology, where he symbolised freedom, power and victory. Pegasus is an immortal winged horse in Greek mythology. The other character is the fascinating Buraq. 'Buraq is a devotional object, theologically more akin to an archangel than to a many-headed beast of prey. She is, existentially, inseparable from Muhammad – she exists only to carry him on his journey – making her

feminised appearance all the more startling'. This is from 'A Visual History of Buraq, the Quran's Winged Horse'.

Horses everywhere are revered, as in Hindu traditions too. Mythically, the tenth incarnation of Vishnu, Kalki – the machine-man, with a blazing drawn sword in his hand, would be riding a white horse named Vedavgani. The mare breathes fire and stands on the ocean floor. Here, again, the white horse brings freedom and peace.

For the cover of this issue of Arts Illustrated, I am sharing this philosophy through my work with a larger audience. The cycle of creativity can only be completed when the creator creates and it reaches the viewer; it is a triangle between creator, creation and viewer.



Seema Kohli

Cover arranged by Rahul Kumar



Collective Commons

Of Roots and Connections

Growing up in West Bengal in a family of eminent scholars dedicated to the cause of culture, Ina Puri, quite inevitably, breathes and lives art. Her interactions with her uncle, the celebrated film-maker Satyajit Ray, and her maternal aunt, writer and socio-political activist Mahasweta Devi, gave Ina access to a wide spectrum of cultural and heritage orientation. 'For me, art is not just what hangs on walls. Original scripts of Ray or books signed by my aunt are all just as valuable,' says Ina, a documentarian and author herself. As we sip coffee at her Gurgaon home, sitting on heritage furniture procured from Bengal, she shares the story of her collection. Ina lives with her husband, Ravi, an avid golfer, son Arjun, a dean at Jindal University for Liberal Arts, and their German Shepherd Leylaajaan.

RAHUL KUMAR

Photographs by Shantanu Prakash



My collection acts as my anchor, giving me a sense of my origin.

The world seems to be in the middle of a flux. There is so much discourse on migration and movement, acceptance and settlement. I too have relocated and made New Delhi my home. My art and collectibles remind me of who I truly am. When everything around is changing, it is these works that give me comfort. When Ravi and I got married, we walked into a bare house. So, all that we have now was literally built and acquired from scratch. The dining table we are sitting at was bought from *chor-bazaar* in (then) Calcutta. We have only added things to our home; nothing has been discarded.

A KG Subramanyan painting was my first ever acquisition.

My mother gifted a handmade ceramic dinner-set by Ira Chowdhury, wife of the late Sankho Chowdhury, my grand-uncle.

There was immense respect and love for the hand-made for us. It was a very unusual possession for a young bride, and we still cherish it. I bought a KG Subramanyan painting from his studio at Shantiniketan when I was in my early 20s. I had known him as a friend of the family, so I could approach him directly. But I was absolutely certain that I would 'buy' his work. When I chose a work, he confirmed that it was a good choice. That gave me the confidence to take decisions and depend on my aesthetics.

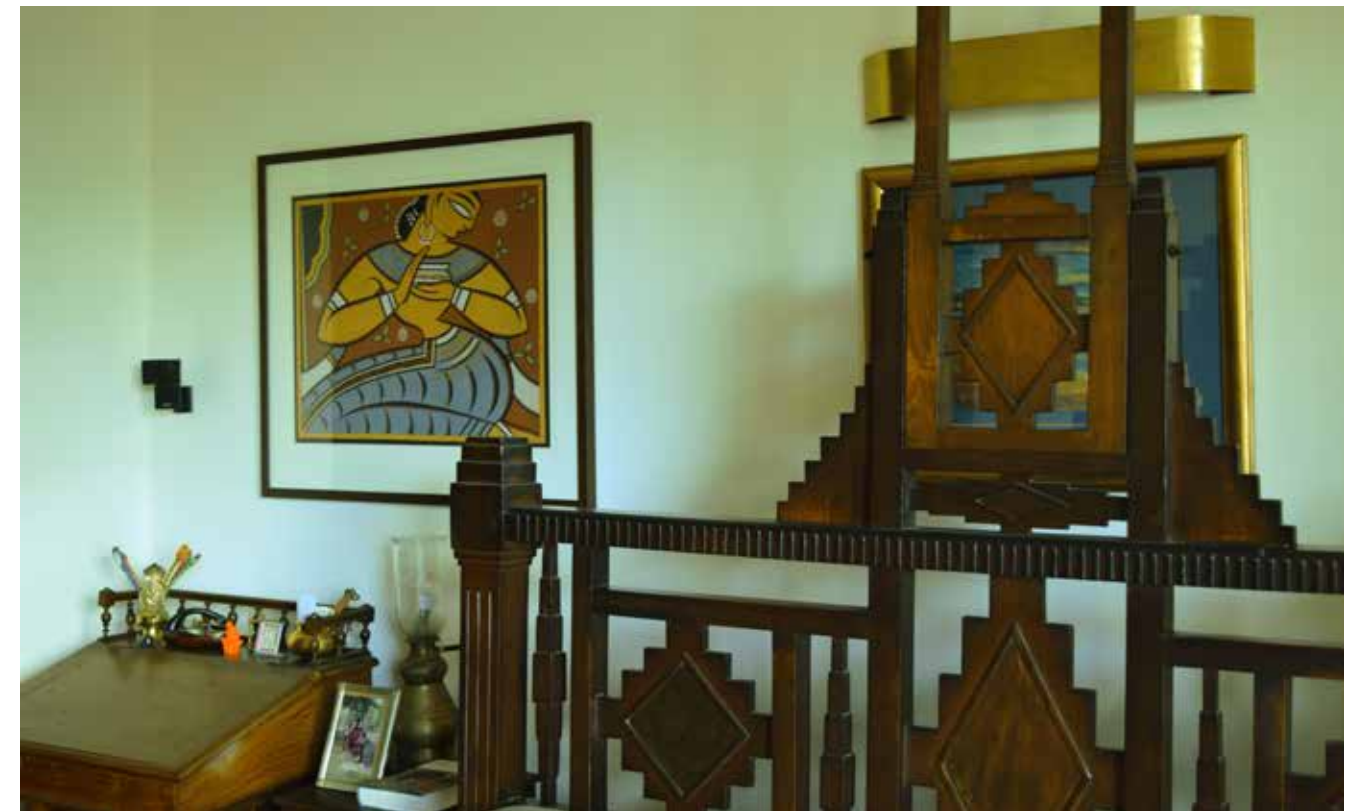
The one artist I know most closely is Manjit Bawa.

I have written his biography. We chatted in his studio for hours and he liked to talk as he painted. Coming from a Sikh family, it was usual for Manjit to go to the *gurudwara* and offer *sewa* (voluntary contribution of labour). The philosophy behind this is to help anyone and

everyone. Religion, caste, or socioeconomic status does not matter. Hearing about his beliefs and life gave me the inroads into his persona. His spirituality made him gentle and compassionate. And, naturally, it is this that also percolated in his paintings. Who else would paint the coexistence of goats and a lion on one canvas?

Nothing random will ever enter my collection. It is always thought through.

History, philosophy and the process of the artist and his practice are very important for me. I do not just react to the mere visual of a work. Aesthetics is important but at the core is my understanding of the creator, his or her concerns and motivations. Almost all the artists whose works we have are ones I have had extensive personal interactions with, or have written about. There are several examples; I know the thought process of Himmat Shah very well. The



same is the case with Nemai Ghosh or Waswo. Then there is art that was gifted to us, wedding gifts or otherwise, like Sunil Das and Madhavi Parekh, who are also known to me very closely.

I like deeper representation of one artist, rather than having a one-off work.

I think of the art and collectibles that we own as 'belongings'. We do not view this as a 'collection', and for us there is absolutely no commercial interest in it. I have always enjoyed expanding the representation of each artist, and within that I have many works that are very different and non-representative of the usual practice of the artist. People point out that such offbeat works do not have much resale value, but that is exactly what we have never cared for. We have terracotta, bronze and ink-on-paper of Himmat Shah. Similarly, for Manjit Bawa, we have his paintings but also several paper drawings. We have a 1970 work, and one would never guess that to





be Manjit's unless you read his name signed! It belongs to the time when he had recently returned from England. Similarly, I chatted with Zarina Hashmi at her show over multiple visits and acquired one of the most non-conventional works. I can dare because it is not meant to be commercial wealth and also because I access the true stories behind these unusual works.

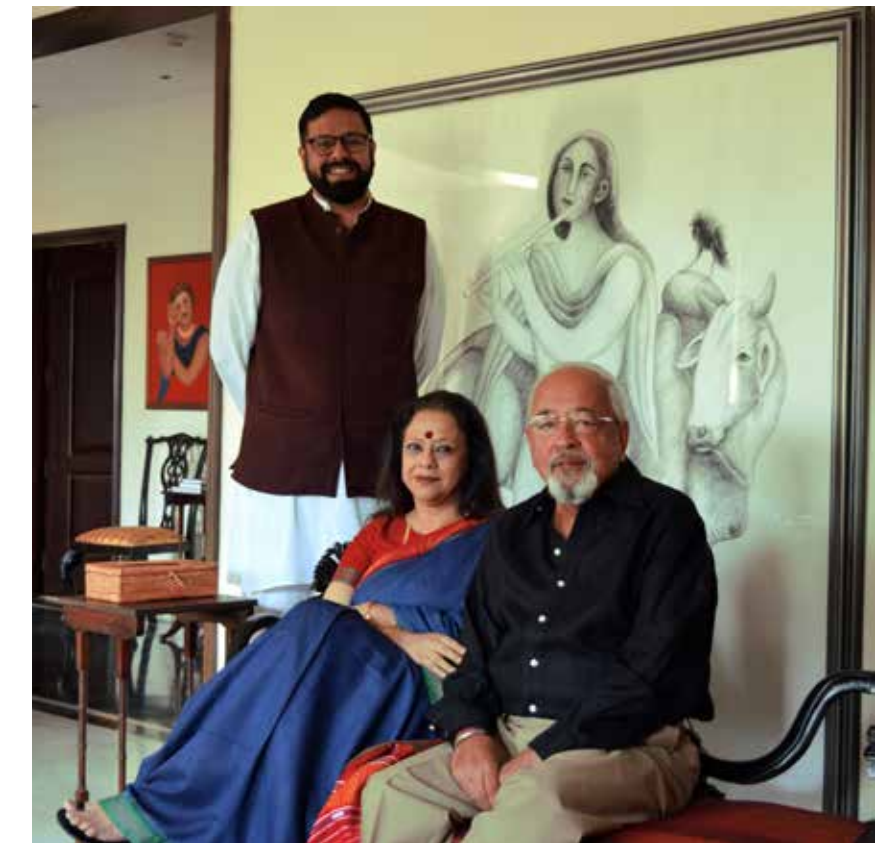
My family has always supported me and never interfered with how or what I collect. To remain objective and to do justice to the works, I requested Prima Kurien to curate the display at our home. She is a friend and has extensive experience in planning shows and doing an impeccable display. Since this was for our home and we had to live with the art, it made sense to get an unbiased view to edit for us. My husband has always been very supportive. In case of big ticket purchases, I do share the cost with him, but that's all. I think the only work he has chosen is a Ranbir Kaleka light-box. He was very enthusiastic about it and it took us two years to get it...Kaleka works slowly.

Everyone in my household is sensitive to art, even my domestic staff. When we were shifting to this house, my household staff took personal responsibility to oversee the movement of the art works. From our cleaning lady to the chauffeur, everyone is completely trained. I was fascinated when our cook yelled at the packers stating that they had no idea how precious this small Jamini Roy painting was! I travel a lot, and can do so peacefully only because I know everything is being cared for. All the drapes are pulled by noon, so no direct sunlight hits the paintings. All canvas works are regularly checked for moisture and fungus. And we do have works stored away, even though they are important and strong works. But,



sometimes, they don't fit the aesthetics of our home. After all, the works share the space with the entire family and I must respect that

All the works must stay together. How can I choose one favourite? There are many works that are close to me. Manjit gave the Soni (based on folklore Soni-Mahiwal) on the first day of the millennium. It was a complete surprise and I am emotionally attached to it. Then the KG Subramanyan work, it was my first ever and put me on the path of discovering my aesthetics. But then there are signed books of scholars, a photograph signed by Pt. Shiv Kumar Sharma on whom I made a film. If I am asked to pick one, I would rather all of them stay together. I cannot pick one.



Ina Puri with husband Ravi and son Arjun.



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