MUMBAI, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2026

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SUNDAY Mumbai Mirror

MUMBAIMIRROR.com

28* Pages Price Rs 8.00 with Sunday Times of India
Rs 12 with Sunday Times of India and Ravivar Maharashtra Times

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DRESSING FOR THE PART

P6

How National Award winner Sheetal Sharma turned budget hacks and street finds into the defining, award-winning looks of modern Indian cinema

Devdutt Pattanaik imagines Valmiki pitching the Ramayana to today's censors. Would polygamy, mutilation, abduction and trial by fire make the cut?

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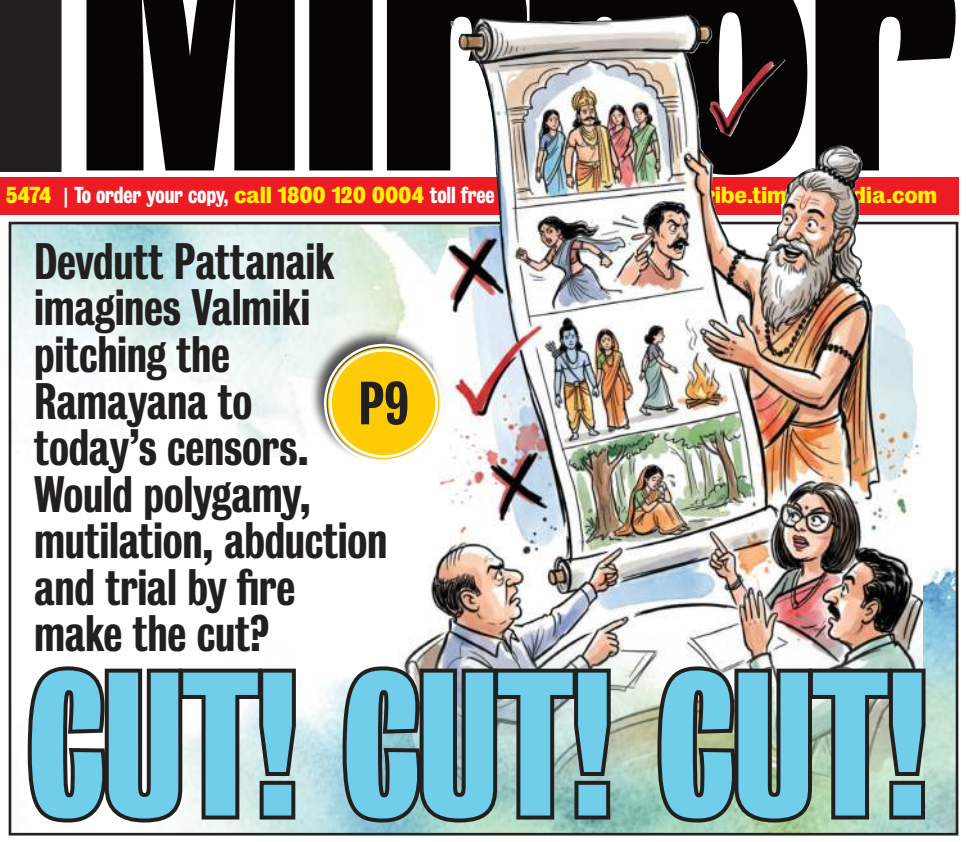

STUCK IN SQUALOR

INVISIBLE INDIA IN THE EMBROIDERY

Indian craftsmen are behind most of the handwork on the world's luxury fashion. Brands are now being asked to credit the artform. But can the workers ever expect to earn more and live better?

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A Fendi Baguette that sells for about 7,800 Euros, roughly Rs 8 lakh, has 39,500 beads and 475 mirrors and required more than 138 hours of hand embroidery. When pictures of it reached Indians last month, social media users accused the house of cultural appropriation and, inevitably, renamed it the "Navratri bag".

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MILAAYA EMBROIDERIES MUMBAI

Artisans at work in a Milaaya Embroideries workshop. CEO Gayatri Khanna advocates for fixed salaries, statutory benefits, and creative partnership over piece-rate labour to ensure fair terms for Indian craftsmen

Where did Air India's art go?

A Husain just fetched Rs 65 crore. In addition to Husains, the Maharaja's collection had Gaitondes, B Prabhas, loads of murals, textiles... a small fortune in art really, but no one can really tell you where all of it is

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On September 24, a 1952 oil by MF Husain called The Red Girl came up at Pundole's auction in Mumbai. Estimated at Rs 3–5 crore, it sold for Rs 65 crore. Only 18 months earlier, Husain's 14-foot Untitled (Gram Yatra), painted in 1954, had fetched $13.8 million (Rs 118.7 crore) at Christie's in New York, the highest price ever paid at auction for a modern Indian work.

Art historian and conservation architect Meera Dass gasps when she does the math. "Air India had 10 Husains, four Gaitondes. They had the only complete run of B Prabha's work anywhere, from her student days until her demise in 2001."

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Collectors Piyush Khaitan (right) and Vivek Matthai

THE SUNDAY READ

Our nation's gallery, lost in transit

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Dass knows the collection unusually well. Based in Bhopal, she spent 2016 to 2018 working through it with Uttara Parikh, Air India's former deputy commercial director and longtime custodian of its artistic legacy. They photographed, numbered and mapped works from the storerooms of the airline's Nariman Point headquarters.

Yet this "wealth of the nation", as Dass calls it, has never been formally valued or exhibited in full. There is not even one settled figure for its size. In 2021, the Ministry of Civil Aviation told Parliament that it comprised about 4,840 paintings and 2,390 other objects, and confirmed that no valuation had been carried out.

Dass nevertheless hazards a figure: "A ballpark figure could run into several thousand crores."

An archival image of Air India's booking office in Paris with some artworks on display

What exactly did Air India collect?

That question is more complicated than it sounds. Through her work, Dass came across not only paintings but thousands of textiles, embroidered wall hangings, kalamkari, Mata ni pachedi, metalwork, porcelain, glass, dolls, photographs, posters, calendars, diaries, crockery and cutlery. There were Mario Miranda drawings that reappeared as panels, calendars and toys, and the vast output of Air India's own Art Studio.

Collector Piyush Khaitan has spent some 25 years studying this larger universe. About two decades ago, he and fellow collector Vivek Matthai began piecing together what became the Air-India Collector archive. "We built it literally piece by piece," says Khaitan, who is based in Bengaluru. It has now crossed 6,000 items. For him, the fascination has never simply been monetary. "What interests me is the history and the story behind an object," says Khaitan. And Air India blurred the distinction between art, object and advertising brilliantly. The airline's own Art Studio produced an extraordinary stream of advertising and Maharajah imagery.

"The airline's own Art Studio created extraordinary work around the Maharajah, and that became Air India's identity for decades," Khaitan says. "This was the time when Air-India was regarded as unquestionably the finest airline in the world (1960s-1980s). The artists and designers who sat under its own roof have been underappreciated." So, is a menu with a B Prabha print an artwork or an artefact? Does a calendar or poster belong in an art collection or is it part of an archive? Change the definition and, suddenly, the Maharajah's treasure grows or shrinks by thousands.

It began with the walls

B Prabha was, in fact, one of its earliest Indian artists. Khaitan traces the story to the early 1950s, when the young painter sold Air India a small group of watercolours, "for Rs 87 and eight annas each. The works were reproduced on menus and displayed in its London booking office, where they remained for decades; when the office was refurbished in 1995, they were reframed and rehung." But Khaitan believes the roots of the collection stretch further back, to the remarkable artistic world of post-war Bombay. Austrian émigré Walter Langhammer, who arrived in the city in 1938 and encouraged emerging artists including S H Raza, F N Souza, M F Husain and K H Ara, also produced work used by Air India. His art appeared on its 1955 and 1960 calendars; Nada von Leyden, part of the same cosmopolitan Bombay milieu, contributed artwork for its 1956 calendar. As Air India opened booking offices overseas, those walls became miniature exhibitions of India. "London was the first one, then Geneva and Paris," says Dass.

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Oscar-winning costume designer Bhanu Athaiya's miniature-style artwork for an Air India calendar

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The artists who came calling

JRD Tata set the tone. He had founded the airline and, even after its nationalisation in 1953, remained its chairman for another quarter-century. His idea was that Air India's offices abroad should offer visitors "a little of India", and he gave an unusually imaginative commercial team room to realise it. Bobby Kooka, the airline's commercial director and the man behind the Maharajah, and publicity chief Jal Cowasji turned art into part of Air India's identity. Cowasji scoured galleries and studios for young artists; works were bought, commissioned for overseas offices and reproduced on the airline's printed material. Money was not always the currency for these deals. Artists sometimes exchanged paintings for air tickets, giving them access to cities and art worlds they might otherwise never have reached. M F Husain later recalled making four or five such trips. Khaitan says Air India was part of a wider culture of corporate patronage that also included the Taj: the airline supported artists with air travel, while the hotel provided accommodation, and artists sometimes contributed works in return. Between them, the airline and the hotel became formidable repositories of post-Independence Indian art

Dass is emphatic about the people behind it. Cowasji, she says, was "the brain behind it" and the one doing the collecting. Kooka, who did all the writing, was "one of the finest brains of India".

Dass remembers the stream of painters who came through the doors: Shanti Dave, B Prabha, and Husain himself, she says, "who came with his jhola to show his work".

"The Progressives of Bombay were there, along with painters of the Baroda and Ahmedabad schools and the Cholamandalam artists' village in Madras. Walter Langhammer, the Austrian émigré who helped usher modernism into Bombay, is in the collection too," says Dass, who sees the German-speaking émigrés who arrived in Bombay in the 1930s and 1940s, together with the principal of the J J School, as a force that changed the course of Indian art, "and the Air India collection holds a record of that moment," she says. The Civil Aviation Ministry's own list of names includes Husain, V S Gaitonde, S H Raza, K H Ara, Jatin Das and Anjolie Ela Menon. Dass puts the number of artists at more than 700. The result was not simply an art collection. It was a record of post-Independence Indian modernism.

Off the wall

Think of the sheer archival wealth: Air India's calendars were prized around the world; "Costume designer Bhanu Athaiya did one based on miniature paintings," Dass shares. And there were posters, diaries, menu cards, postcards and timetables, all produced by an in-house Art Studio. Mario Miranda's commissioned drawings were turned into dolls and stuffed toys, she says. In 1967, Salvador Dalí designed a porcelain ashtray for first-class passengers: a shell coiled with a serpent, held up by an elephant and swans. His requested payment was a baby elephant. When Byculla zoo could not oblige, Air India found one in Bangalore and flew it to Geneva, en route to Dalí's home in Cadaqués, Parikh had told a paper some years ago. Roughly 500 ashtrays were made, and they are scattered around the world. Then, there were also textiles, sculptures, tableware, illustrated books and animated films. Dashrath Patel's Shringaar, a series of folding panels devoted to Indian dress, turbans and sari borders, toured abroad.

"They used art prolifically," says Khaitan. It appeared in offices, on menus, posters, postcards and timetables. That, he argues, is why the airline's artistic legacy cannot be understood simply by counting paintings.

One of his favourite examples is a photograph from around 1955 of Air-India International's reservation office at 7 Rue de Chantepoulet in Geneva. Across its walls is a Husain installation made up of flat, puppet-like wooden figures: Krishna driving Arjuna's chariot, horses, drummers and a dancer.

The photograph came to Khaitan from Nargis Wadia, née Khambata, who worked in Air India's Art Studio and is herself visible in the picture, seated on a sofa. The imagery did not remain in Geneva. Variations appeared in an Air India travel poster, which won first prize at India's National Awards in 1957, and again on the airline's April 1963 timetable. Khaitan says. "As recently as eight or ten years ago, I saw some such creations gathering dust in the basement of the Air India building at Nariman Point," he says.

A Husain under a cupboard

Dass had a similar experience when she entered the collection in 2016. Air India was renting out floors of its Nariman Point headquarters and works stored on the 17th floor had to be moved. She and Parikh imposed one rule: nothing left the store without being photographed. Each piece was numbered and plotted on a grid so it could be found again. Five other storerooms in the building had not been opened.

One day, Dass noticed a roll beneath a cupboard. She insisted that nobody open it until she was present. Unrolled, it stretched to about 15 feet. "It was a Husain," she recalls, with the words 'Bhaskara' and 'Satya' across it."

What struck Dass was the contrast between what she found and how meticulous Air India had once been. Its Art Studio maintained albums, catalogues and registers recording acquisitions, commissions, artists, locations and costs. "In terms of documentation, Air India was one of the finest I have ever seen," she says. Then, somehow, "all this got jumbled up".

Part of the reason, she says, is that the people who understood the collection left. The Art Studio closed. One staff member, she recalls, "stayed on for years and did what he could on his own, but there was no longer a commercial director whose job it was to think about art. The airline's primary objective, after all, was to fly planes and earn a profit." The art was not only in Mumbai, either. Works moved between the airline's offices at Kalina in Mumbai and Safdarjung in Delhi. In Germany, Dass says, the art from the booking offices went into a basement in Frankfurt. Singapore's works were sent to Hong Kong. Australia's, she believes, were consolidated in Sydney. When the Egypt office shut, its art was packed and shipped to Mumbai, where it ended up in those five unopened storerooms. The closures came in waves: in 2013–14 alone the airline shut its offices in Vienna, Chittagong and Zurich, and told Parliament in 2015 that Tehran and Cairo would follow.

Dass says, "The problem is that how the art moved is not recorded. Where did it land up? That is not there." She hopes that cargo, which generates its own paper trail in shipping and freight records, holds some answers.

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"[Works of] The Progressives of Bombay were there [in the collection], along with painters of the Baroda and Ahmedabad schools and the Cholamandalam artists' village. Walter Langhammer, the Austrian émigré who helped usher modernism into Bombay, is in the collection too

– Meera Dass, art historian and architect

Managed by publicity chief Jal Cowasji, the studio produced a stream of award-winning material

THE SUNDAY READ

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A work by B Prabha—from Air India's remarkable collection of modern Indian art

Not everything went missing overseas. In fact, speaking on condition of anonymity, a former senior Air India executive says, "Overseas offices, in my experience, generally kept better records of their art than those in India. Closing an overseas station involved far more than packing up the art. There was furniture, equipment, property, accounts and staff to deal with, while moving art across borders brought insurance, customs and export restrictions. The station manager remained accountable for the assets, but discrepancies did emerge during audits." He goes on to say, "The biggest movement of art objects and antique furniture was soon after amalgamation with Indian Airlines when the HQ was shifted to Delhi. I believe all accountability went for a toss at that time, especially for furntiture made of Burma teak, and many art objects of stone and on canvas."

In July 2017, the artist Jatin Das was asked to authenticate a painting offered on the open market and recognised it as Flying Apsara, which Air India had commissioned from him in 1991. An internal inquiry traced it to a retired executive director who had taken it home on retirement more than a decade earlier. It came back by courier from a fake Gurgaon address, unframed, folded and torn. At the time, only about 3,500 paintings could be vouched for across the Mumbai headquarters and offices in other cities, and the airline admitted that some executives had been given works to hang at home.

The official tally of losses is short and vague. In December 2021, the government told the Lok Sabha that, according to Air India's records, 19 paintings had been destroyed in fires, two scrapped and one broken, and that "a few" could not be traced.

The museum that never opened

For a while, there was a plan to bring everything together. In 2016, Khaitan wrote about a proposed permanent museum and gallery at Air India's Nariman Point headquarters. Dass and Parikh later organised material by theme for it. "The Ministry of Culture sanctioned Rs 5 crore for a museum", Dass says, "but required a guarantee that the space would remain available for 30 years. Nobody could make that promise."

Air India officials could not be reached for comment, while Sanjeev Kishor Gautam, Director General of the NGMA in Delhi, was unable to respond before this article went to print. But Khaitan says, "Much water has flowed under the bridge since then. The airline has been sold to the Tata group, while the art collection remained with the Government of India. There was talk of it going to the NGMA and of a permanent museum being created, but I cannot say what the present status is." Both Dass and Khaitan would still like to see a museum large enough to tell the whole story: art and craft, certainly, but also aviation, design, technology, food, fashion and advertising. But to trace the collection properly, Dass says, "would require aviation historians, textile and craft specialists, art historians and researchers working through old registers, newspapers, cargo documents and shipping records."

And so we have this striking irony. The airline that gave Indian artists walls across the world has yet to find permanent walls for its own extraordinary artistic history.

Why the Tatas didn't get the paintings

When Air India returned to the Tatas in January 2022, paintings and artefacts were classified as "non-core assets" and transferred to the government-owned Air India Assets Holding Ltd, along with debt and other assets that would not form part of the sale. So Tata subsidiary Talace's Rs 18,000-crore deal bought Air India, Air India Express and a 50% stake in AISATS, not the Maharaja's art. In 2023, the art was transferred to the National Gallery of Modern Art.

Air India's Geneva office

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