

## The Art *Bhandārs* of Ahmedabad

In 1983 I was a student of applied art in Ahmedabad. A Piraji Sagara retrospective was on in the city and we were allowed time off everyday to go to the Sanskar Kendra to see the collection. On one such afternoon, a bunch of us happened to notice a door that was not exactly locked, curious as we were, we ventured in to a dimly lit, air-conditioned room that was welcoming enough from the heat outside. To our surprise it was a small room with a collection of some of the most beautiful miniature paintings I had ever seen up close in Ahmedabad. We were amazed; it was like a treasure we had discovered. Also amazed because none of us knew anything about the collection, no one had mentioned that such a collection existed in Ahmedabad. Many years later when I was working on my thesis I rediscovered the collection, this time housed properly in a special gallery and part of a larger museum. It was only then that I discovered that it was a collection of one man, a Mr. N.C. Mehta, who put every penny he could spare into this fabulous collection of Indian miniatures, representing all the *pahādī* styles under one roof. Ahmedabad is not famous as a city of museums. Ask any *amdāvādī* and the first reaction would be claim the non-existence of museums in Ahmedabad. As an afterthought the Calico museum might be mentioned.

**Comment [G1]:** A print from the collection here

In spite of this Ahmedabad is home to some 14 odd collections, some of them internationally renowned even though little known in their own hometown.

The Oxford's explanation for the word "museum" is a building used for storing and exhibiting objects of historical, scientific, or cultural interest. If these words are to be strictly adhered to, there are many more than the 14 listed museums in Ahmedabad. They could be divided into three types. The first being of a religious nature and housed in, or attached to temples, the second are private collections that are now managed by trusts or foundations and the third kind have evolved from research or educational institutions and are also managed by trusts. The exception in Ahmedabad is the Government or Municipal collection.

The Jain community is possibly the oldest collector in the region; they had what were known as *gyānbhandārs*. These collections went underground with the Islamic invasions only to be rediscovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As they were untouched for centuries and age old conservation techniques had been applied the collections were well preserved. With their rediscovery came to light the so called "Western Indian Style" which to a large extent remains a typical Gujarati style forming the bases for a more city oriented Ahmedabadi Style.

Even today many of the Jain temples and attached *upāshrays* are proud owners of the most beautiful illuminated manuscripts, their boxes and *pattas*. For those interested and well connected these wonders can be visited and viewed under strict supervision. For women it's a question of look but don't touch.

On my return to Ahmedabad I fulfilled a dream; I finally visited the Calico Museum. By then however, it had shifted to its present location in Shahibaug from its original location on the premises of Calico Mills. Empowered with the knowledge I had gained in a foreign university on various art styles and forms I was overjoyed to discover pieces of rare textile in my hometown.

The only word to describe this collection is “awesome”. Textile in every form, colour, texture, technique, size, all in one tantalizing walk through a maze of rooms. Even those who claim have no understanding of art and find museums generally boring cannot resist a full day’s visit to the Calico Museum, the time needed to see everything that is on display. The day conveniently divided into two by a midday break that the museum takes in the afternoon for lunch.

**Comment [G2]:** Insert layout of the area here

Calico Museum cannot be visited without being escorted through the collection by their in house guide; this is an experience in itself. The various collections of religious artefacts, wall hangings, miniatures, textiles are housed in several galleries and buildings belonging to the Sarabhai Foundation which was established in 1959. Set in the serene atmosphere of Retreat where the Sarabhai family resides surrounded by botanical wonders the ambience is perfect for a day out. One gains access to the whole via a wooden *darwājā* which is in line with the *havelī* that lies beyond it.

**Comment [G3]:** A visual of the gate and haveli could be placed around here

The collection has grown steadily over a period of thirty years, emerging as a serious centre for scholarly work, acclaimed nationally and internationally. After the move to its present location in 1983, the museum was housed in two structures at Retreat, the *Sārābhāi-ni-havelī* and the buildings surrounding the swimming pool now known as the *Cauk*. Today, the complete collection of the museum is housed in the *Cauk* complex while the *Havelī* is being used to show objects of the Sarabhai Foundation. The Textile Library, the gallery of Textile Techniques, the Museum shop are also in the *Havelī*. Recently a new gallery with interpretations on Indian Embroidery Techniques has been added next to the Textile Techniques gallery, the idea conceived and executed by Anne Morrell.

The Calico collection includes Mughal tents, royal sashes and tunics. Woven *Patolās & Mashru*, tie and dye *Bāndhanīs* from Gujarat, and some very rare pieces of Coptic weaves.

The Sarabhai Foundation collection that was initiated to create more awareness and understanding for Indian art does just that. Housed within the *Havelī* the Jain galleries exhibit a beautiful collection of illuminated manuscripts, book covers, *pattas*, cosmographic diagrams, metal sculptures and wooden carvings, throwing light on the Jain traditions and styles. Similarly an area where a small shrine is installed with the collection of *pichhwaīs* gives the Vaishnavite flavour. Another gallery houses a collection of miniatures where examples of every major style is available, be it Buddhist, Jain or *pahādī*. Highlights here include folios of the 16<sup>th</sup> century ‘Palam’ Bhagavata, Hamza-Nama and the Padshahnama. A collection of religious bronzes from Southern India collected by Gautam Sarabhai has been recently installed in a new gallery.

In short a visit to Ahmedabad without a visit to the Calico Museum would mean that you have to come back atleast once to see this beautiful collection and presentation of textiles. It is also the most accessible and organised museums probably from the visitors’ point of view.

The next most frequented collection in the city is possibly the Utensil museum that is on the campus of a very popular restaurant. Maintained by the *Vechar* Trust, which stands for Vishalla Environmental Centre for Heritage of Art, Architecture and Research. Mr. Surendra Patel, the managing trustee of *Vechar* started the collection while looking for utensils for his restaurant. Having noticed beautiful metal artefacts being melted down, he decided to start this collection for posterity. Housed on the campus of his village restaurant Vishala that is very popular not

only with locals but also with visiting Indians and non-Indians. When you have paid for your dinner you are requested to also buy tickets to the museum, where you could spend your pre-dinner wait before being called to your table. On campus there are several other means of passing time awaiting the call to dinner. One could take in a folk puppet show, lounge on one of the *charpoy*s around the lantern lit central clearing and enjoy folk music and performances, swing from some branches or take a walk around the museum.

My advice would be to choose to visit the museum, there is enough time to lounge around and partake of the folk performances post dinner, as this is one restaurant where you are not expected to leave immediately on having dined. The museum is to the left of the campus, beyond the shop and juice centre. At night you are guided by dim lanterns placed along the path leading up to the complex. Large cauldrons give a preview as you set out of more that is yet to come. A large square complex with an open courtyard. Skirting the outside as you walk to the large doors is a collection of earthenware. In the dim light against the mud and dung plastered back drop the vermillion of the objects is striking. In all shapes and sizes, kitchen ware to oil lamps, water pots and milk pots they are all there.

**Comment [G4]:** Layout of the museum

Once you have crossed the threshold of the large doors with beautifully crafted door handles | You are surrounded by a collection that is beyond imagination. If you are an Indian you have probably used one or more of the paraphernalia which you will see as you slowly walk past the displayed artefacts in quiet solitude, interrupted by the explanations provided by your guide as he further explains some of the artefacts and demonstrates their use. If you visit in the summer, you will be handed a typical contraption to fan yourself with, while the fountains in the centre provide the necessary cooling.

**Comment [G5]:** Inset of the handles

Most of the collection within the complex is metal with exceptions in wood and leather. The groups of artefacts are: Pots for water and milk storage, containers, trays, utensils with spouts, from southern India, smaller water pots, *hukkahs*, travelling paraphernalia, ritual and liturgical artefacts, oil lamps, writing accessories, kitchenware, dowry boxes and chests, etc. The highlights of the collection are a large collection of some 800 different types of nutcrackers or *surīs*. The collection of padlocks is also worth the visit. The collection's oldest piece is around a 1000 years.

**Comment [G6]:** Inset of the museum & artefacts

The Shreyas compound boasts two separate collections. The first gallery on Folk Art & Culture of Gujarat and the second one is a Children's Museum of Toys, Crafts & Performing Arts. It would be simpler to classify them as an anthropological collection. A large campus set on a hillock, Shreyas Foundation boasts a school for children, an amphitheatre, guest houses, deer park, swimming pool, large play grounds and an infrastructure to facilitate workshops and seminars.

**Comment [G7]:** Place the layout of the campus

Shreyas again is an initiative of a private collector, Mrs. Leena Sarabhai, established since 1947. Today the collection is beautifully displayed, a feast for the eyes. However, since not many visitors frequent the galleries, there is a sense of claustrophobia in the underground galleries. The anthropological value is enormous for researchers or for young Indians who probably in time will not be in touch with the national costumes, folk art and toys, etc.

Unfortunately, Shreyas is not on the way of a regular visitor, one would have to plan a trip to the location. Once at the gallery you have to ring a bell, to have the galleries opened for the visitor. For non Indians this could be the cause of some confusion.

The Sanskar Kendra, a design of Le Corbusier is a kind of landmark in the city. However, the building has been ignored long enough with no permanent function. Today it houses for a part the “Kite Museum” and the “Ahmedabad City Museum”. Many years ago in one of its rooms did I see the wonderful collection of N.C. Mehta.

The Kite Museum speaks for itself, the passion of Bhanubhai Shah it gives an overview of various kites and traditions from around the world. The collection shifted here not so long ago and at first was just exhibited as it was. Today it is undergoing a total revamp. An interesting visit, gives insight to one of Ahmedabad most popular festivals for all ages. One should consider it more of a gallery within the large Sanskar Kendra complex rather than a full fledged museum.

The Ahmedabad City Museum is more a collection of ideas, than a museum. It is a rather recent exhibition that created much uproar during its inception, generating expectations that it does not fulfil. The goal of the collection is not very clear, the collection does not speak to the visitor and the layout is chaotic. Is it a historical museum? Is it a reflection of the city? This is not clear at all. It is at best a kind of glimpses of Ahmedabad provided by replicas, copies and photographs. The few original pieces are artefacts, some textiles and a collection of cotemporary Ahmedabad paintings and photographs.

Though easily accessible and in the right ambience and location, it is a sad visit, for it does not even have an explanation on the building where it is housed. For students of museology the perfect visit to see what a museum should not be.

The building also houses a few antique automobiles and sculptures which border the building to one side. Recently the city municipal heritage department has also moved into the complex, a befitting location for it.

At the start of my journey of Ahmedabad’s museums I mentioned the N. C. Mehta Collection. This collection is today housed in the L.D. Institute of Indology campus in the same building as the L.D. Museum. The collection of N.C. Mehta encompasses a beautiful range of miniatures, covering all the *pahadī* schools. Though no longer as vibrant in colour the miniatures are beautiful specimens of an art and tradition of schools no longer in existence. Some lovely works from the so called western-style of paintings are also on display, along with some book covers of Jain tradition and some *ganjifā* and Korans. Tucked away as it is to the side of the building visitors often have to be pointed in the direction of this collection after visiting the main museum.

The L.D. Museum, welcomes the visitor with three Jain sculptures standing just within the doors. The main collection being Jain in nature, it is paintings, manuscripts, *patas*, sculptures, some carvings, etc. A special gallery is dedicated to the collection from the Hutheesing – Tagore family. The collection of L.D. emerged from donations made to the neighbouring institute of Indology and the efforts of Muni Punyavijayji.

Both collections are worth a visit, easily accessible, and housed in typical architecture of Mr. B.V. Doshi. They have some publications and copies of sculptures and paintings on sale, and probably one of the few buildings which has basic facilities for the handicapped. The last also had a gallery on the Indus Valley Civilisation for school children, but now has been replaced.

Other collections worth naming are the B.J. Institute and the Gujarat Vidyapith exhibition. Both are academic collections and meant for research, however if better maintained and easily accessible they could become good stops on the Ahmedabad Museum circuit.

Though most of the B.J. collection is made up of replicas, they have an extensive collection of original antique manuscripts. The Vidyapith is more of an anthropological view of tribal housing, this completed with more props and explanations would be an excellent compliment to the Shreyas collection.

During the research on Ahmedabadi museums, the Vidyapith made public two more collections. The two presentations include one on Mr. Morarji Desai a former chancellor of the institute and Prime Minister of India, and a second on the Vidyapith. Personally, I found the Morarji Desai collection interesting as it has genuine articles belonging to the late statesman. His clothes and very personal belongings, like his dentures, diary, religious paraphernalia and gifts received during his long term as a politician. All these were willed to the institute. The other collection highlights are the spinning wheels and the photo-reprints of all the convocations chief guests.

More interesting than either collection is the building itself, the original Vidyapith, which Gandhiji set up, the spirit of which can be felt even today.

The odd one in this collection which is no less important and worth a visit is the Gandhi Ashram. Though the site has historical value, it also has an attached museum of sorts. The whole site could be considered a historical museum, as the house in which the great man, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi lived is intact, one can see the room from where he lived and worked, his spinning wheel (*carkhā*), spectacles and the three little monkeys on the desk. A window into the past; a snapshot of history, with Gandhiji having just stepped out and returning any moment to pick up from where he had left off midway spinning on his wheel. Also intact are the other buildings on the compound, where many past luminaries lived for short or long spells, participating in the daily life of the commune. Sandwiched between the banks of the Sabarmati River and the busy Ashram Road it is a little haven, peaceful and serene. It is easy to realise that one can kind find peace and think clearly while at a spot like this. The museum has a large collection of photographs and paintings of the Mahatma in action and reflection, this part is housed in a modern building complex designed by a prominent Indian architect, Charles Correa. Some sculptures and a well laid out exhibition done by the NID (National Institute of Design) can be strolled through. The book and souvenir shop are typical and almost kitsch. Nearby are some other centres started by the Mahatma to encourage the cottage industries, there is a *gaushālā* (where cattle breeding is promoted), a hand made paper mill and a soap factory of sorts. The most amazing out of these neighbours is the *Safai Vidyālay* (Environmental Sanitation Institute) where people are taught how to build toilets, maintain them and everything about hygiene.

Exactly 16 years before the man behind the Ahmedabad zoo passed away, The Padmashree Reuben David Natural History Museum was established in this city. The result of a friendship between David & Dilipsinh Gaekwad of Vadodara, a taxidermist and painter of realistic dioramas. Gaekwad created some 16 dioramas to house some 275 rare birds and animals of Gujarat, which he did together with one assistant shuttling between the cities from the late sixties to the early seventies. On display is also the personal collection of Reuben David's albino birds & animals, freaks of nature, shells, a sword fish, etc. For some time this collection had been wasting away at the zoo, but has been recently revamped by faculty and students of the Vadodara University, Museology Department. The zoo a museum of live animals is a must visit at anytime of the year, and this collection an added attraction.

#### Calico Museum of Textiles / Sarabhai Foundation

Address: Retreat, Opposite Underbridge, Shahibaug, Ahmedabad 380 004  
Telephone no: 079 – 2868172, 2865995  
Fax: 079 – 2865759  
Email: [sarafound@icenet.net](mailto:sarafound@icenet.net)  
Website: [www.](http://www.sarafound@icenet.net)  
Timings: 10:30 – 12:30 (no entry after 11:00)  
4:45 – 16:45 (no entry after 15:15)  
Closed: on all Wednesdays and notified Bank holidays  
Entrance Fee: Gratis  
Other features: Guide. Shop. Toilet. Reference Library can be visited with an appointment only.

#### Utensil Museum / VECHAAR

Address: Vishala Parisar, near Vasna Tolnaka, Ahmedabad 380 055  
Telephone no: 079 –  
Fax: 079 –  
Email: @  
Website: [www.](http://www.vechaar.org)  
Timings: 11:00 – 22:30  
Closed: for half a day on the Hindu New Year, Holi and 14<sup>th</sup> January  
Entrance Fee: Rs. 8  
Other features: Guide. Restaurant, shop and toilets are part of the larger complex.

#### N.C. Mehta Gallery

Address: Gujarat Museum Society, L.D. Indology Campus, Behind Gujarat University Bus Stand, Navrangpura, Ahmedabad 380 015  
Telephone no: 079 – 6306883 / 6309167 ext. 31  
Fax: 079 – 6307326  
Email: @  
Website: [www.](http://www.ncmehtagallery.org)  
Timings: 10:30 – 17:30  
08:00 – 12:30 From 01 May to 15 June

Closed: on all Mondays and notified Bank and Gujarat State holidays  
Entrance Fee: Gratis  
Other features: Guide. Shop. Toilet.

#### L.D. Museum

Address: L.D. Indology Campus, Behind Gujarat University Bus Stand,  
Navrangpura, Ahmedabad 380 015  
Telephone no: 079 –  
Fax: 079 –  
Email: @  
Website: www.  
Timings: 10:30 – 17:30  
08:00 – 12:30 From 01 May to 15 June  
Closed: on all Mondays and notified Bank and Gujarat State holidays  
Entrance Fee: Gratis  
Other features: Guide. Shop. Toilet.

#### B.J. Institute Museum

Address: Behind H.K. Arts College Compound, Ashram Road, Ahmedabad 380 009  
Telephone no: 079 – 6588862  
Fax: 079 –  
Email: @  
Website: www.  
Timings: 10:30 – 17:30  
08:00 – 12:30 From 01 May to 15 June  
Closed: on all Sundays, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Saturdays, notified Bank and Gujarat State holidays  
Entrance Fee: Gratis  
Other features:

#### Gujarat Vidyapith

##### Tribal Museum, Morarji Desai and others

Address: P.O. Navjivan, Ashram Road, Ahmedabad 380 014  
Telephone no: 079 – 7540746 / 7541148 / 7544349 ext. 275  
Fax: 079 –  
Email: [gvpahd@ad1vsnl.net.in](mailto:gvpahd@ad1vsnl.net.in)  
Website: www.  
Timings: 11:00 – 18:00  
Closed: on all Sundays, notified Bank and Gujarat State holidays  
Entrance Fee: Gratis  
Other features: a historical campus with many little collections

#### Shreyas Museums

Address: Shreyas Foundation, Ambavadi, Ahmedabad 380 015  
Telephone no: 079 – 6601338 / 6601378 / 6601588  
Fax: 079 –  
Email: @

Website: www.  
Timings: 10:30 - 13:30 — 14:00 – 18:00  
Closed: on all Mondays and Janmashtmi, Dussera, Dhuleti, Mahashivratri,  
Rakshabandhan, Kite Flying (Makarsankranti), 15 days for Diwali and 15  
days Summer holidays (the last two announced every year)  
Entrance Fee: Rs. 7 / adult, Rs. 5 / child, Non-Indians \$ 1  
Other features: Drinking water & toilets

#### Ahmedabad City Museum

##### Kite Museum

Address: Sanskar Kendra, Near Tagore Hall & N.I.D., Paldi, Ahmedabad  
Telephone no: 079 –  
Fax: 079 –  
Email: @  
Website: www.  
Timings:  
Closed:  
Entrance Fee: Free  
Other features: Drinking water & toilets ?

**Comment [G8]:** Find out postcode

#### Gandhi Ashram

Address: Ashram Road  
Telephone no: 079 –  
Fax: 079 –  
Email: @  
safai@icenet.net  
Website: www.  
Timings:  
Closed:  
Entrance Fee:  
Other features:

#### Padmashree Reuben David Natural History Museum

Address: Kankariya Lake  
Telephone no: 079 –  
Fax: 079 –  
Email: @  
Website: www.  
Timings:  
Closed:  
Entrance Fee:  
Other features: