

Two exhibitions offer rare chance to view the Mumbai of a century ago

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Mumbai: For those with an interest in Mumbai history, two exhibitions offer a rare chance to examine the city of almost a century ago. A Cinematic Imagination opens tomorrow at the Jehangir Nicholson Gallery inside the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya. The show, presented in collaboration with Delhi's Alkazi Foundation for the Arts, showcases 150 original photographs and digital reprints focusing on 1930s and '40s Indian cinema from the Josef Wirsching Archive. There are behind-the-scenes shots from early productions, film stills and publicity photos, all shot on film by the German cinematographer.

A short walk away, at the Asiatic Society of Mumbai, another show opens on March 3 and offers a different view of the period. Architects and Firms That Built Modern Bombay honour 40 people and 20 firms who built stunning Art Deco-style structures in Bombay from the 1930s to the '50s. The exhibition, initiated by Art Deco Mumbai Trust, along with the Asiatic Society's Mumbai Research Centre, features more than old photos. There are archival documents, design drafts, original plans, plaques and personal effects.

To anyone who's lived and commuted in Mumbai, both shows will seem familiar. Wirsching set up the studio Bombay Talkies in 1934, along with actor Devika Rani, producer Himansu Rai and director Franz Osten. "My grandfather always kept his Leica camera loaded with film, which has given us unhindered access to a behind-the-scenes glimpses of what goes into making Indian cinema like never before," says Josef's grandson Georg Wirsching, who maintains the archive. One image, of the film premiere of *Jawani ki Hawa* (1935) at Imperial Cinema, at Grant Road, shows that the area was cordoned off by the police, fearing protests, because two Parsi sisters Saraswati Devi and Chandraprabha were a part of the production much to the displeasure of the community.

The show is curated by Debashree Mukherjee and Rahaab Allana of the Alkazi Foundation. "The narrative focusses on India's cultural labour both pre-and-post Independence and deep collaborations with other artists," says Allana. Accompanying the show is a book, *Bombay Talkies: An Unseen History of Indian Cinema* published by the Alkazi Collection of Photography in association with Mapin Publishing (2023).

At the *Architects and Firms* exhibition, curator Atul Kumar, Art Deco Mumbai's founder and trustee, spotlights the experts who shaped the planned neighbourhoods built along Oval Maidan and Marine Drive, Shivaji Park, Dadar Parsi Colony, Mohammad Ali Road and the by-lanes of Matunga. The buildings there still sport a distinctive style: streamlined façades, curvilinear balconies, chevron windows.

Most of the architects working in the style were born and educated in pre-Independent India, and graduated from Sir JJ School of Art. "Many studied in England and became members of the Royal Institute of British Architects, travelled to Paris where Art Deco was born," he adds. Bhicaji Edulji Doctor is known for the Onlooker Building in Fort, and Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Girgaon. Sohrabji Bhedwar built Queens Court, Green Fields and Eros Cinema in Churchgate. Ganesh L Kulkarni designed Matunga's Aurora Talkies. Perin J Mistri, India's first woman architect, is known for St. Stephen's Church, at Nepean Sea Road.

Their sleek, simple, swadeshi design was "in contrast to the colonial architecture that was imposing, grand and domineering," Kumar says. And much like the images from the Josef Wirsching Archive, they represent a heady period, when the promise of a new India was in the air and creative collaboration trumped competition and crass commercialism.

A Cinematic Imagination: March 1 to April 17.

Architects and Firms That Built Modern Bombay: March 3 to March 10

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/two-exhibitions-offer-rare-chance-to-view-the-mumbai-of-a-century-ago-101709149940643.html>