

A house for Indian art

Ahmedabad is a city of museums — kite museum, a museum of utensils, a world-class textile museum, toy museum and more. Any addition to this list would be a mere add-on, unless it of some consequence. Sanjay Lalbhai and Jayshree Lalbhai understood this well and that's why Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum has a character distinct from any other of its ilk.



Figure 1 Where a legacy lives on The impeccable display of exhibits and the warm ambience bring alive the museum's special arrangement

The museum that opened to the public last year, is just a 100 metres away from the famed Calico Museum of Textiles in Shahibaug.

At first, the architecture of this colonial structure draws you in, before the masterpieces inside take over.



Figure 2 Inside view of museum

The pathway, flanked by well-landscaped lush green lawns and a two-tier fountain, leads you to the 113-year-old mansion, which was once home to the Lalbhai family. Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum is one of the few examples of a house turned into a museum, in the country.

Today, the three buildings in the complex display a collection of traditional and folk art from various schools — Persian, Mughal, Rajput, Pahari and modern and contemporary Indian art.

There is also a small amphitheatre to screen films and intimate performances.

Looking back

Kasturbhai Lalbhai was an industrialist who founded Arvind Mills in 1931. He wasn't an art collector, but turned one at the behest of a relative. In 1935, when the artist brothers of Bengal — Abanindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore, nephews of Rabindranath Tagore, faced dire financial circumstances, they decided to sell off the Tagore collection. Since the works had seminal value and relevance to the nation, Rabindranath didn't want it to go out. Lalbhai was convinced to buy it off.

“Since the family lived here, it was not possible to display all of it, so a lot of the works had to be kept in storage, but I remember frequent visits by scholars like art historian Eberhard Fischer, artists, and writers to study these works,” says Sanjay, Lalbhai's grandson and CMD of Arvind Limited.



Figure 3 inside view of museum

Sanjay and Jayshree moved out of the house 20 years ago, and seeing the house deteriorate, decided to give the collection and museum a new lease of life.

Minimal intervention to restore the house to its original glory and retaining the warmth of a house was the brief given to architect Rahul Mehrotra. The curation by Eka Resources is

along similar lines. “Doesn’t it feel like a house?” asks Jayshree, trustee, Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum.

Sitting on a sofa, with a Tibetan Tara (in bronze) behind me; a wooden temple from Patan at the far end of the room; a massive *pichwai* recently acquired by Sanjay on my left, it feels like I’ve been transported to the Lalbhai family’s drawing room, now converted into a sculptures gallery. “I remember Jawaharlal Nehru once sitting on that sofa and asking me, ‘What do you want to become when you grow up?’” remembers Sanjay.

None of the sculptures are encased in glass, a conscious decision. This, according to Jayshree, demands an experience different from other museums. “That’s why we don’t take on more than 20 people in a group. There are only guided tours and you have to book in advance,” she adds.

An unusual collection

While a part of the collection — particularly manuscripts, archival documents — went to the Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Institute of Indology, an engaging narrative of Indian art’s journey unfolds at Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum. It’s impossible to ignore one of the oldest versions of the ‘Khamisa of Nizami’. This is the illustrated *khamisa* or the five poems by the 12th-Century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi.

The visitor can flip through the pages of the manuscript on an iPad. Another rare work in the section is 13 episodes (watercolour, 1920) of the *Ramayana* painted by Nandalal Bose. You can spend hours trying to read postcards sent by students to teachers in Santiniketan from 1913-1940.



Figure 4 inside view of museum

The second building was designed by British architect Claude Batley in 1930 and Mehrotra has given it a contemporary vibe. This is where is displayed the contemporary art

collection of Sanjay and Jayshree. Masters, pioneers and seminal artists from different time periods — MF Husain, FN Souza, Ram Kumar, Anjolie Ela Menon, Manjit Bawa, Nalini Malani, Bhupen Khakhar, Gulam Sheikh, Nasreen Mohamedi, Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher, Alwar Balasubramaniam — introduce the viewer to significant experiments and movements during the course. In the Claude Batley building, Lalbhais also host invited exhibitions and curated shows from their collection.

The Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum is located at Lalbaug Shahibaug, Ahmedabad. Museum viewing is by conducted tours at 10 am and 4 pm (for a group of 12 people). For details, call 91-79-22865456.

Next on the cards

The Lalbhais are busy giving shape to the Indigo Museum, where they will show traditional techniques and experimental possibilities with the medium. Indigo is known to be the oldest dye used for textile dyeing and printing. Exhibits, live demonstrations and immersive events will take place in the museum.