



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 4 EPISODE 12 (Late November 2022)

Charkha and Kargha (Powerhouse museum)

Professor Pedram Khosronejad - CURATOR

Tim Stackpool:

Pedram, good to see you again.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Thank you so much. I welcome you and your audiences to the Charkha and Kargha 75th anniversary of Indian Independence Exhibition.

Tim Stackpool:

Now I'm having a look around. We're looking at Indian textiles, right? However, you are the curator of Persian artifacts here at the Powerhouse in Sydney. You're going to tell me there's a bit of a connection there, right?

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes. Well, in museums, in entire world it is rare to have someone assigned, let's say, to Persian art or Indian art. But we need to define what's the Persian arts first, and Persian arts is not only Iran today, it covers the culture of countries that we call them, the Persianate societies probably covers countries that today in 21st century is people that speak Farsi, that practice, Persian culture, calendar traditions and ceremonies, which covers from Xinjiang, China, the Uyghur people, majority of countries of Central Asia, majority of countries surrounding the Caspian Sea, neighbouring countries of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Turkey, Iraq, some countries of Persian Gulf countries, and some of the countries of South Asia.

Because until very recently let's think Pakistan didn't exist, as a result of colonialism. Indian borders was bigger and we're back to 16, 17, 18th century Iran and India, they had very close relationship, especially during the Islamic period, Mongol period of India, an exchange of culture, trade, and courts, kings, they were very close to each other.

Therefore, culturally, these part of textile history production is not far from Persia, but when it come specifically to textile Iran and India, they have a special interest in matter of trade exchange and co-production of Persian and India textiles.

Tim Stackpool:

There's quite a lot here. Pedram, how many artifacts do you have in this particular-

Pedram Khosronejad:

There's 100 objects in this exhibition. Wow. But it's not that big because our Indian collection of Powerhouse inside this collection, we have more than 4,500 objects only from India.

Tim Stackpool:

Gosh.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Which make it probably the biggest collection of Powerhouse museum and probably the biggest collection of Indian objects in Australia.

Tim Stackpool:

So let me ask you then, if there's thousands of objects in the collection, how do you choose what you're actually going to put on the floor here?

Pedram Khosronejad:

The choice here was quite precise because Consul General of India in Sydney, which here I would like to thank Mr. Manish Gupta, and the director of the cultural centre, Mr. Ramanand Gange, they reached Powerhouse for the celebration of 75th anniversary of Indian independence. "Can we do something?" And we said yes.

And as independence of India, which guided by Mohandas Mahatma Gandhi is connected somehow directly to the textile, very specific type of textile in the name of Khardi. We were thinking, oh, this is good occasion to do something, let's say do something about textile, which is also connected to Powerhouse Ultimo, which you work mostly on fashion design and textile since '60s.

Therefore, I was thinking, all right, let's focus on textile. And I went through our collection, which is huge, again, collection of Indian textiles, but I had several bullet points for selecting them. First of all, I wanted to select those objects that arrived in Powerhouse collection in early periods, such as, let's say, 1880s.

Tim Stackpool:

And why was that?

Pedram Khosronejad:

Because I wanted to know what we have in the collection. We never had such an exhibition dedicated, per se, on India and textile. And I was curious as a anthropologist curator to see what we have in the collection and bring it to the eye of viewers in the ends. Let's say that there are two generation of Indians in Australia that I know their children never return to India.

I wanted to show them the richness of their culture that we preserve in Powerhouse collection, make them proud, and when they come here to learn about the riches of Powerhouse and their own culture through our collection.

Therefore, I went from the beginning and another element of selection was which object was showcased before and which object was not showcased before. And I can confirm that majority of these handled objects never been showcased. Rarely.

Then, diversity of techniques used in the production and design of textile very important. Are there silk saris? Are there wool pashmina? Are there tie dye technique, are there woodblock print technique? Are there zardozi and embroidery with gold?

Fourth object was their function. Did they have religious function, the creative function, popular daily use function?

And also, we should not forget, Powerhouse Museum is a museum of applied art, science, technology, and craft. We are not art museum.

Therefore, I wanted to go beyond aesthetic of Indian textile because as soon as we say Indian textile based on two factors, two elements, which is very popular, Orientalism and colonialism, we go to the beauty of Indian textile fashion. Me as a curator, anthropologist wanted to go to techniques, technologies of crafting, creating Indian textile design and production, and choose only one function of Indian textile. This is why you see some garments here in the exhibition.

Tim Stackpool:

So then how have you divided up the various objects that you've got in this exhibition?

Pedram Khosronejad:

From the entrance of exhibition, when you come in the right side, you see some stairs like a step, and the left side you have some beautiful arches in the architecture work, which are part of Powerhouse beauties.

First I sat down with the designer of the exhibition to help him to get a glimpse of traditional architecture of India during 18th, 19th century and how he can interpret the exhibition space and use these beauties.

And this is what you see at the moment. These steps are not like normal steps in museum and galleries. They were made by... based on Indian textile workshops

Tim Stackpool:

Wow. So even the plinths that you've created are to reflect the style of the style of exhibition pieces that you have.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes, exactly. They are really adopted. As I said, this is steps you see beside, for example, Indian rivers where they wash a specific type of Indian textile on those rivers and left them to be dry in sunshine.

Or here if you see these arches beautifully, we hang the full length saris. They are based on Indian textile weaving where they hang the textile. Or if today you go to modern Indian shops, this is how they... So the design was part of curatorial debate, how a curator, based on Indian, something vernacular culture could be adopted for such a specific exhibition.

We don't have separate divisions In this exhibition, we wanted to create a hybrid space when visitors come in, fly, swim between objects and enjoy different things and learn. So the heart of exhibition is dedicated to the diversity of techniques of production and decorational Indian textiles, woodblock, print, embroideries, tie dye techniques.

But I want to go beyond that and connect the past to the present, because Indian textile trade is still very strong in India.

This is why you see in the exhibition I included packaging of the textile.

Tim Stackpool:

Interesting.

Pedram Khosronejad:

And how in such a exhibition we can go beyond only the beauty.

So, packaging always was part of beauty of Indian textile. And these objects are those that we didn't have here. And I should say here, thank you to Liz Williamson, who is, I call goddess of Indian textile professor at UNSW dedicated her life to the Indian textile and techniques of textile weaving and production.

And I see she loaned us those contemporary and more technical aspects of Indian textile that we didn't have in our collection.

Tim Stackpool:

Wonderful.

Pedram Khosronejad:

So packaging are one of them. The other, for example, you can see here that I would like, thanks Deborah Bennett, PhD candidate in textile reading at UNSW that we are showcasing footage of her PhD that's showing us woodblock print techniques in India.

Tim Stackpool:

That's the video that's running.

Pedram Khosronejad:

That's the video is running. This is how curatorial strategy to engage the viewer. This is not like if screens you have in normal show of artist. This is, because as you can see in showcases, we have the woodblock prints from our collection and we have the textiles that show the products of that.

But people need to make connection between these two and Deborah's footage beautifully showcase besides woodblock prints and the textiles of woodblock prints. Therefore, today, Indians, the young children, and non-Indians, when they come here, they can see objects of the collection and contemporary India and connect it visually together. Hybridity in this exhibition was important for me.

Tim Stackpool:

I think the other thing that the video shows as we stand here watching it, is the level of dedication and patience that's required-

Pedram Khosronejad:

Exactly.

Tim Stackpool:

To create these fabrics.

Pedram Khosronejad:

You really mentioned something interesting. Let's see how Deborah titled his project and this footage. "Process and patience: weaving a Pashmina shawl," filmed by Deborah Emmett.

So this film shows nakash draftsman, woodblock printing traditional designs onto their hand-woven shawl ready for embroidery.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, I didn't even actually see this didactic, but it does say, as you said, "Excerpt from process and patience."

Pedram Khosronejad:

So time is very important, but another thing that we will see in real time in, I mean in this screen, is the techniques and technology, which is in India back 2,000 years ago, is still, the technique is very human, and it's very basic, but rich.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, I can see the practitioner is putting some ink on his hand and then-

Pedram Khosronejad:

Warm it first-

Tim Stackpool:

Oh, he's warming it.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Because the ink is very solid. Make it soft, put it on wood. But again, reduce that with his palm before put it on-

Tim Stackpool:

He puts the ink from his palm onto the wood block and then pushes the wood block onto the fabric.

Pedram Khosronejad:

On the fabric. Yeah. Another important point in our exhibition is in very end of exhibition right side, which is dedicated to Gandhian movement. This space shows the importance of Khardi textile, the humble one, that after Gandian's movement became very symbol of independency.

And in this regard, we should not forget the importance of Charkha, the spinning wheels in the Gandhian movement, which we have proudly here, one flat one in our collection. And this is a type of flat spinning wheel that we see in the footage when Gandhi's sitting and use the similar one.

Tim Stackpool:

So to describe this, it's about a meter long. It folds in half.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

Two small weaving wheels.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

And that's about it. Very portable, not much smaller than a laptop bag today.

Pedram Khosronejad:

It is. And the point for Gandhi to make a national call, Indians make your own spinning wheels, make this simple Khardi cotton was for being independent from colonialism. Therefore, you see, yes, simple object can make something beautiful and it's very symbolic for the movement.

So in this space, we try to somehow show the importance of textile independency of India. But as you can see also on the wall in this stage, again, I should say thank you to Indian Minister of Media, they donated 62 documentary films to Powerhouse collection, all regarding the different techniques of textile weaving, textile production in India, and what we have here in exhibition showing the importance of Charkha at the spinning wheel in the history of Gandhian movement prior to independency and after independency.

Tim Stackpool:

So we're looking at black and white footage here of these various spinning wheels, which date back to when, Pedram? Just help me here.

Pedram Khosronejad:

1940s, probably.

Tim Stackpool:

In the 1940s.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes, what we see in this film.

Tim Stackpool:

And those particular methods of which there are hundreds of people in this footage, weaving and spinning, we can actually see those weaving and spinning machines in this exhibition.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes, exactly. And this arrived very late. We didn't know we'll get it or not, but I'm very happy that we have it because now viewers can see the exhibition visit this section dedicated to Charkha and Khardi and then sat down and look what is really happened in Indian contemporary history from the beginning. Very, really basic Charkha to very modern ones. As you can see.

Tim Stackpool:

They're inspiring me actually, if I can weave on something so small or bring one of these things home.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes. You everyone love want to touch that Charkha here. I know it's very basic, very beautiful. Let's bring to attention of your audiences two major important elements of exhibition team.

One is as a curator, again, I wanted to see how we can create our collection, from past to the present. These 100 textile of exhibition collected by Powerhouse during five major periods, 1880s, 1920s, 1950s



and 1980s in the matter of production where these objects, when produced 14th century, 15th century, 16th, 17 until early 19th.

So when you look at it, how you can connect the past to the presence, this is true that this footage help a little bit, but I invited to contemporary artists, young Indian photographer Anu Kumar, as you can see four of her beautiful photographs in exhibition. The project that she titled "Ghar," it means home.

She's a Melbourne-based photographer. She returned to her homeland in India with her family, photographed her family members beautifully. She depicted her family members in the pictures where they are using beautiful Indian textile with the motifs and images.

But the second artist, which is eminent artist and we are very proud, is Geeta Sandragesar Melbourne based artist with Indian heritage. And the name of her installation is "What falls from the sky."

Tim Stackpool:

And you need to describe this, because it's quite spectacular.

Pedram Khosronejad:

It's spectacular and unique and I'm happy to let you know now this installation is now part of Powerhouse collection.

What we have here in front of us is amazing installation of five, long, full length Khardi and silks, all made in India, but dye by Sangeeta here in the sign of immigration and integration.

The green and blue colours are pigments mostly India, and indigo from India. And that beautiful orange-brown that we see in the middle, we call it Australian cherry. And this is a sign of immigration and integration of non-Australian ingredients, pigments and Australians for dyeing. It's very beautiful. What falls from the sky is very poetic.

And I'm very happy that we place the installation in this part of exhibition that when you come to the gallery, you see everything. Then here you see something like comes from paradise. They are free to fly and sometimes they go really fly with the wind in the vision and space. And we are very proud that we have these two contemporary artists with us in this exhibition.

Tim Stackpool:

When I spoke to you about Iranzamin a year or so ago, however long ago that was, I did ask you whether the type of art that we were seeing in Iranzamin whether that is still present in Persia today. I think you're making the point with having these modern pieces in here, that the artisans of India whose work we're seeing here, dating back almost a century or more as you say?

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

That that level of artistic merit still exists today.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes. This India is I think land of magic, which is still... We have amazing master craftsmen. Technology in India and is very ancient, when they are created in area that we call it Mohenjo Daro and Harappa in India is still, when you go to humble workshops all around India for textile weaving, for metal work, for ceramic, for clay, they use local, very simple, humble material and tools, tools of crafts and technology India is like intact like 1,000 ago and nowhere else. I think in the Middle East you can see such a existence and well-rooted of technologies and related tools.

Indians are very lucky to have such a... even country was colonized, but culture always was much more stronger than external forces.

Tim Stackpool:

Nothing has been crushed. No, I know it's hard to have a favourite piece, but was there one particular piece that you uncovered out of the thousands that were here, which actually I guess took you by surprise or you were so pleased to be able to discover that was part of the collection?

Pedram Khosronejad:

Let's talk about three groups. First group are here in front of us, which back... I told you, first series of objects acquired by Powerhouse from India, 1886 when is still Powerhouse was not Powerhouse, one of our first curators was a botanist, famous Australian botanist, Joseph Maiden.

He wrote a letter to Indian government. "Sir, I'm a botanist and I would love to have some natural things from nature fauna of India in our collection." They sent this beautiful material that you can see in flask in front of us, three different type of cottons, normal cotton content, silk and the other ingredients which are for dyeing textile.

Tim Stackpool:

So we're almost looking at a scientific display here.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

There's what, eight large size vials.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

Sealed glass vials which are showing scientific specimens.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes, exactly. And they were unknown before this exhibition because they were not even on the system. So when we went through what I call archaeology of the collection, we found them, we cleaned them, and this is what marvellous things that you have in-

Tim Stackpool:

They could be seeing the light of day for the very first time.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Very first. This is first time that we showcased them, and bring them to the attention of the audiences.

Tim Stackpool:

The story behind the discovery of them is a completely new chapter, a whole different chapter in its exhibition.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes. And this is relevant really to Powerhouse collection where we have 500,000 objects, half a million objects. And you can imagine as a curator, how lucky we are here to have such a collection and we can just dive into it and bring something new to the attention of all audiences. The 21st century curating beyond colonialism and post-colonialism.

Let me introduce you probably to my favourite object, beetle wings. Beetle wings, or as you can imagine from the name are the wings of beetles, insects. And those use in the art or those wings that they fly with beetle wings naturally after mating and put eggs, they die.

The piece that you have we have in front of us is one of the rare ones. And before this exhibition, no one knew museum in the world that we have few pieces of beetle wings here. Normally they were collected from insect from Bangladesh and sent to India where they produced this type of trims for being used in European countries to design the night dress of aristocrat ladies, but mostly British ones.

Tim Stackpool:

These are actual beetle wings.

Pedram Khosronejad:

They are actual beetle wings.

Tim Stackpool:

Woven into this fabric

Pedram Khosronejad:

Woven to the fabrics for make more beautiful, the decoration of aristocratic British ladies in London and other European countries. And this is first time that we showcase in history of Powerhouse these beetle wings.

Tim Stackpool:

It's absolutely beautiful. And the reflections of the wings are of a green, turquoise color.

Pedram Khosronejad:

It's spectacular. Let's bring to your attention last group of important objects that we have here, which again, help us to think how in 21st century curatorial can teach the audiences.

Here in front of us, we have two beautiful pieces that in art history, we call them Fustat fragments. Fustat today is a region close to the capital of Egypt, Cairo. But what they are, actually, they are piece of textile made in Gujarat, India, in 15 and 17th century. Woodblock print, look at the beautiful red colour and deep blue and the quality of the textiles since 15th and 17th century.

Tim Stackpool:

It's incredible. If you take a look at them, they do have pieces missing from them. There's a few tears in them, but considering their age, they're in remarkable condition.

Pedram Khosronejad:

And this is for the first time again, that Powerhouse bring these treasures from the collection. And no museum knew we have them and they will be proud to have these objects. But this brings to our attention the importance and deep rooted trade. Previously we talk about packaging. Now I want to bring you as in trade.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. So these travelled quite the distance.

Pedram Khosronejad:

And the role of the Indian Ocean maritime route and its connections to the Red Sea maritime route. From the India, they went to Indian Ocean and went to Red Sea and go to Egypt, and probably from Egypt to North African countries and Europe. This is how we need to think in 21st century when we use

the objects of the past, how we can put it in globalisation, globalised history of the region. This is Indian textile, but found in Egypt.

What's the role of curator? To showcase them in a gallery for the viewer and connect the past to the present.

Tim Stackpool:

In this case, there's two pieces of fabric here that date back so far. They're quite innocuous, no more than a metre square. And yet they have this most enormous history.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Enormous significance for history of India, Indian Ocean trade and globalisation, which still continues between those countries, this type of trade.

And let me finish with another hero object that we call in this exhibition. What we have here in front of us is a unique wall hanging, a splendid mixture of Islamic art and Indian art.

How Indian art observed Islamic tradition and vice versa. The general panel that you see is a dark blue, is not black, and this is a sky. The dots that we have, they're stars. In front of yourself, you have Islamic mihrab, and from top you have beautiful chandelier hang from the roof.

And in two sides you have two groups of candles. We are in entrance of a shrine temple, Sufi temple, and in the night, candles guiding you inside the temple, they are inviting the devotee inside for the devotion. And as is Islamic tradition, the most deepest devotional times are in your solitude during the night.

So this problem with this piece was the wall hanging dedicated to a religious place. I said mostly Islamic, 19th century. And look at the beautiful art of gold embroidery.

Tim Stackpool:

It's very detailed and extremely fine.

Pedram Khosronejad:

And when you see the... There are gold and they're cream, those creams are silk. Wool, silk and gold embroidery in front of us. And also this piece is for the first time that we bring to the attention of our viewers.

So I think we have 100 objects, but they talk beyond centuries, beyond calendars and regions and connect the past to the present.