

***Dhruva Mistry***

***Amazing Muse, Insight, British Museum Magazine, Autumn/Winter 2006, p5, July, London***

Before going to London on a British Council scholarship in 1981, I was familiar with Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery. In the leafy gardens of Sayaji Baug, there is a quaint building of wooden framework and red brick walls designed by R.F. Chisholm and built by the maharaja in 1887. It is a curious mix of archaeology, ethnology, natural history, art and craft. Its décor and display seem unchanged since 1920s. *There is plaster replica of the Parthenon frieze on the cornice of the building apart from European paintings, Classical plaster casts, an Egyptian mummy, Oriental art, Indian miniatures, paintings, sculptures, textiles, arms, armor, and a skeleton of a whale washed ashore in the region. The basement with large whale attracts throngs of visitors. Like Sir John Sloane's Museum, the ground floor is filled with collectibles of from Egypt to Japan. Imposing stone staircase from the foyer leads to European painting in the front. On the left I see a maze of dark wooden balconies looking down upon the colorful mosaic floor. Changing light on the wooden floor of the balcony remind me of walking into a loft filled with musical instruments, geological specimens, replicas of mammoth's fossils, ethnographical tableaux, stuffed fishes, birds, reptiles, tigers and lions quietly waiting under the glass roof and a buzz of electrical fans.*

I was at the Royal College of Art studying sculpture, seeing and learning. My curiosity to practice sculpture extended my stay until 1997, until I decided to return to work in Vadodara. I routinely visited all museums. There was little to compare with the BM with its ever imposing building and vast array of collection. Like a labyrinth of visual excitement, the BM was enticing as it lured me to walk into another world. I began to learn to see myself in relation to my collective make of variety of cultures. Having spent days at times, made me rather possessive of some treasures. Works on display are like presents for me, wrapped in safe cases allowing me a clear sight. *Some times, larger sculptures in stone allowed momentary touch of hand offering a sense of communion. Often, the weekends seemed over crowded with people at the museum. However, I liked spending week hours to rummage through the place as if looking for lost love. As an Indian artist in the 80s; long before economic liberalization of 90s, mine was a near Spartan mission to understand and learn to deal with difficulties of practicing my art. I minimized my material needs like owning a house, flat, car and other gizmos including power tools necessary for sculptors. To begin with, the BM allowed me to concentrate upon works with simple materials and skills which led to learning from experience to understand nature of form and compelling quality of expression over the period of time.*

The BM helped me plumb depth of human understanding of a world that seem devised to weather taste and endure time. *Here, artifacts divulge their purpose through their materials, tools, technology, skill and culture. I find sensibility, passion and grandiose dedication in many exhibits.* It is great to walk through large spaces filled with objects of insuperable beauty and an imploring spirit. All cultures from the Far East to the West

compel my interest. My repeated visits covered all sections over two years.

Walking through the Egyptian gallery is an ever elating experience. The air seems filled with quiet power of serene and immortal order frozen in space. I frequented tiny gold amulets; exquisitely beautiful figurines defining character of all Egyptian works in wood, lime and stone. *I feel spellbound by fragments large and small as they engage me to reconstruct the whole.* Assyrian winged bulls, rooms with bas relief reveal extraordinary prowess, power, pain and suffering of war and hunt. Parthenon sculptures, Cycladic figures, Indian sculptures, Chinese ceramics, Japanese prints, Greek vases with masterfully crisp line drawings, Egyptian mummies and encaustic portraits, papyrus paintings, frescoes and funerary objects; some looking like toys send me back to isle of enigma seeking ways of seeing. I wonder about magnitude of time infused with care, ease and skill. It is astounding to find works retaining perpetual freshness despite their ancient origins. Observing objects inspire me for the love, devotion and sense of form of their maker creating an unceasing presence. It is a quiet reminder that originality and excellence is based upon learning to absorb values, unlike contemporary self consciousness, ideas of individuality, creativity and art in a rapidly globalizing world.

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*Reclining Figure, 82.5x149x78cms, Metallic Silver on Stainless steel, 2005-2006*