THE BIGGER PICTURE

Six sections invite visitors to connect artworks, recurring motifs and the shifting visual language of Indian art

Bindu Gopal Rao

Miniatures, massive stories - a new exhibition in Bangalore is inviting viewers to look beyond the delicate brushstrokes and intricate details of Indian miniature paintings to discover how these works travelled, transformed and found new meanings across centuries.

The exhibition showcases Indian miniature paintings from the 19th and 20th centuries, exploring how the art form adapted to emerging markets, changing patterns of patronage and evolving artistic influences.

Curated by Sonika Soni, Rucha Vibhute and Vineet Kajrolkar, the show draws from a collection of 80 paintings gifted to the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP) by American artist Waswo X. Waswo. Around 60% of the collection is on display.

Waswo moved to Udaipur more than two decades ago and, fascinated by the culture of the region, began collecting works that caught his curiosity. The collection, as Kajrolkar explains, also offers clues to the visual influences that fed into Waswo's own artistic practice.

"He collected for curiosity because he was interested in the culture of the region and to get inspired by this for his own work. And when you start looking at this body of work, a lot of this collection starts making sense because you see certain visual language flowing into it," he says.

But rather than simply present the works as a collection, the MAP team chose to look at them through the idea of the muraqqa, the Persian album traditionally assembled by collectors to bring together paintings, calligraphy and other works they admired.

The idea was partly sparked by an album by engineer-turned-photographer Daruqa Abbas Ali, a colonial-era album of photographs. The connection between the old muraqqa and the modern photographic album offered the curators a new way of thinking about the collection.



A collector's eye

The exhibition is divided into six thematic sections, allowing visitors to make their own connections between works, identify recurring motifs and trace the shifting visual language of Indian miniature painting.

For Rucha Vibhute, who has long worked with collections, one of the key questions was simple: how do images travel?

"It was interesting to look at this exhibition and see how images travel, how they transform, what the material history is and what it tells us," she says.

There was another layer to the question. The paintings had arrived at MAP from a private collector. That meant the curators could also examine the works through the eyes of someone who had chosen to acquire them.

"What would have made him buy a certain painting, certain kinds of paintings, and what do they tell us now that if they come from a personal private collection to an institution, what happens to it?" Vibhute asks.

That shift, from personal collection to public institution, becomes part of the exhibition's story.







Gods, goddesses & living images

The journey begins with gods and goddesses, reflecting the central place of the divine in South Asian visual culture.

Sacred images have long existed not merely as objects to be looked at, but as part of everyday life, whether placed on home altars, carried in pockets or displayed on car dashboards. The section brings together works associated with Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism and Jainism.

The first image visitors encounter is Ganesha, traditionally associated with the arts.

Among the highlights are several charts that reveal how established visual templates could be adapted across traditions and regions. In one Jain chart, the deities share a similar visual format but are differentiated through colour, mounts and inscriptions. In the Dasa Mahavidyas, the figures change while elements of the background recur across different settings. A Vishnu chart, meanwhile, offers a glimpse of local adaptation, with personalised imagery and local avatars associated with the deity.

As Kajrolkar points out, these details show that repetition did not necessarily mean uniformity. Artists could work within familiar formats while introducing regional and individual variations.

When faith travelled

The"'Sacred Viewing" section turns to darshan, the intimate experience of seeing and being seen by the divine, at the heart of the Bhakti movement.

Paintings allowed sacred presence to travel beyond temple walls. From the 18th century, artists in Nathdwara, Rajasthan, developed a distinctive style influenced by Kota and Mewar, centred on Shrinathji, the beloved manifestation of seven-year-old Krishna and his various forms.

For pilgrims, a painted image could become more than a souvenir. It could preserve the memory of a journey and carry something of the deity's presence home.

The 'Revered Preachers' section shifts the focus from deities to godmen, highlighting their importance during royal times. The curators note how these figures appear on the same visual plane as kings, rulers and people holding administrative authority.

Then comes tantric meditation, where art becomes something far more functional than decoration.

For practitioners, artworks could serve as tools for meditation and spiritual discipline. Minimalist diagrams, geometric forms and symbolic imagery were used to guide contemplation, turning abstract ideas into visual maps for inner transformation.

From muraqqa to photo album

The exhibition ultimately circles back to its central idea: collecting and arranging images.

The classical Mughal muraqqa and the modern photo album may belong to very different eras, but both share an impulse to collect, preserve and organise visual stories. The arrival of photography made this process more dynamic, allowing albums to document everyday moments, major events, landscapes and personal histories.

The final work is a line drawing that deliberately raises questions about whether it is complete, or whether its unfinished quality is itself part of the story.

And perhaps that is where the exhibition leaves its visitors.

Rather than prescribing one way to read the works, it asks them to move through the galleries, make connections and assemble their own visual narratives. In other words, find your own muraqqa.

FACT FILE

- What: Reimagining the Muraqqa: Works from the Waswo X. Waswo Collection
- When: Until 21 March 2027
- Where: Infosys Foundation Gallery, Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), Bengaluru
- Tickets: Free Entry