

## Exhibition Report

# Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis



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Bombay: Bollywood movie poster, MF Hussain 2000

Major cities have always attracted artists and provided rich and fertile ground for creativity. *Century City* explores the relationship between a number of world cities and the production of art during the twentieth century.

In a rather disjointed sort of way, the exhibition devotes room to a number of world cities, including not only the well-known centres of art such as London, Paris, Vienna, New York and Moscow but also Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, Bombay and Lagos.

Each of the cities is seen through a particular 'flash point' of artistic period during the last century. London is represented by the recent '*Art is Dead*' period of 1990-2000, Paris at the birth of Cubism in 1905-12, Moscow and its Constructivists during 1916-30, Vienna at the turn of the century and New York in the early 1970s. As a non-western counter balance, there are a few posters and pages from an art magazine from Tokyo of 1967-73 including works of the Mono-ha movement artists and theorists such as Sekine Nobuo and Lee Ufan. Who, being sceptical about actually making paintings and sculptures, used gestures and materials to reveal 'the world as it is'. There is sculpture, music and hairstyles from the post-colonial Lagos of 1960s; architecture and concretist sculpture from Rio

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of the 50s, and the culture clash between tradition and modernity in 90s Bombay which not long ago gave up its colonial name and reverted to Marathi Mumbai.

Whilst most of the exhibits relating to the major western cities are familiar, the majority of the works from Rio, Lagos and Mumbai are being seen in the west for the first time. The Mbari Club based in nearby Ibadan, which attracted writers, and artist's form across Africa represents Lagos. In addition to music, paintings, sculptures and architecture, there are examples of book jacket designs, photographs from family albums and of wonderfully intricate hair designs.

Rio, the rhythmic city of Bossa Nova (the New Wave) is represented by the Neoconcretist artists experimenting with abstract painting and sculpture to intensify visual expressiveness. There are fascinating folded and hinged sheet metal constructions originally meant to be touched, and handled by the public. In architecture, Le Corbusier's 1936 Education and Health Ministry building, the first modernist building in Latin America, influenced a generation of Brazilian architects who combined the international style with the indigenous vernacular in ways that related to local culture and environment. There is the Oscar Niemeyer Canoas House of 1953 using Brazilian organic forms. Lucio Costa's Parque Guinle of 1954 with its inventive use of traditional elements, and the transformation of the former Flamengo landfill site by Alphonso Eduardo Reidy. Also the landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx into the largest urban park in the world.

Mumbai of course has always been a city full of vitality and contradictions where a variety of influences - colonial and local culture, tradition and modernity, enormous wealth and poverty and high art and folk performance art in the street have long coexisted. A line of painted roller shutters on shop fronts by Atul Dodiya evokes the Mumbai street images. Navjot Altaf's installation *Between Memory and History* explores the problems of social disruption while Rummana Hussains' *A Space for Healing*, part shrine and part hospital, makes references to the urban anguish of a fast-expanding metropolis. A number of photographic studies of daily life by Raghubir Singh show the crammed and colourful life in the city. Through her photographs, Sooni Taraporevala records the city's Parsi community while Ketaki Sheth studies the Gujrati Patels by photographing a number of identical twins. Bollywood produces the largest number of films in the world and is inevitably represented by the huge and ubiquitous hand-painted hoardings now being increasingly replaced by the digital posters.

According to the website Mumbai-Central ([www.mumbai-central.com](http://www.mumbai-central.com)), the things, which prove you are a Bombayite, are, that your idea of personal space is that no one is standing on your toes. That you are suspicious of strangers who are actually nice to you; that stock market quotes are the only other thing besides cricket which you follow passionately. Hookers, beggars and the homeless are invisible, that your door has more than three locks: that you spend more time each month traveling than you spend at home, and that the most frequently used part of your car is the horn.

On the whole, *Century City* is a large informative exhibition which will be of considerable interest to those involved in the arts, architecture, and the creative dynamics of the contemporary city.

*Tate Modern, Bankside, London, 1 February-29 April 2001* [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)