



Richard Bartholomew's  
self-portrait with camera (1960).

**THE ART CRITIC** IS  
A COMPILATION OF  
SELECTED WRITINGS FROM  
**RICHARD BARTHOLOMEW'S**  
VAST ARCHIVES AND  
PROVIDES AN INSIDER'S  
VIEW OF INDIA'S MODERN  
ART MOVEMENT.

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# THE ART CRITIC AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

**ONE EVENING EARLIER THIS YEAR**, my friend Pablo Bartholomew suggested a celebratory dinner. It had been four years since my colleagues and I had come on board to help Pablo produce and publish *The Art Critic*, a seminal selection of his father's, Richard Bartholomew, art writing. Between Rukminee, the book's designer, Shweta Wahi, the image researcher, and I, the associate editor, there had been more than a few moments during that time when we'd slammed the phone down on a belligerent Pablo, threatened to never speak to him again or had enjoyable griping sessions in his absence. The reason we never acted on our irritation with Pablo was simply because by now, we had come to know his father intimately through his writing, and passionately felt that the bulk of his archive needed to be accessible to the larger art-reading public. We were all on the same page, and that mattered most.

We had each spent about four years on this project, while Pablo had easily spent at least 15 years working with his father's vast and complex archive of more than 17,000 photographs and art writings that totalled more than 300,000 words. A selection of Richard Bartholomew's photographs was first shown in India at Delhi's PHOTOINK Gallery (January–March 2009), giving the viewer a classical taste of not just technically accomplished, sophisticated compositions, but also a flavour of the country's art scene from the 1950s to the 1970s: MF Husain is caught engrossed in a telephonic conversation, one hand holding the receiver, the other twirling a lock of his hair; an agitated FN Souza has been captured mid-sentence (1970–1971) in front of a canvas in his stark apartment in New York; Ram Kumar and Krishen Khanna are deep in conversation with the 1950s prime talent-spotter and gallery owner Virendra Kumar Jain; and there's Jehangir Sabavala, paying attention to the extroverted Biren De, while SA Krishnan sits detached beside Sabavala, puffing on a cigarette.

*A Critic's Eye: Photographs from the 50s, 60s & 70s*, the exhibition and the photo-book published by Chatterjee & Lal, PHOTOINK and Sepia International (2009), gave to the Indian art world a sense that even something akin to a fam-

**TOP RIGHT**  
PT Reddy photographed  
asleep on a bed is testament  
to their camaraderie.

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**BELOW** The Lalit Kala elections.  
**BELOW LEFT** Tyeb Mehta chats with Rati Bartholomew at his exhibition at the Shridharani Gallery.  
**OPPOSITE PAGE** MF Husain at the Shridharani Gallery.



ily album could wholly communicate the ethos of an era of creativity so important that its influence continues to haunt us all.

One could argue that *The Art Critic*, the selected art writings of Richard Bartholomew, is an extension of his photographs: intimate, revealing and filled with the insights of an insider; but they are all these and more. He was a poet, painter and photographer, but, above all else, he was an art critic who made a career out of reviewing provocatively every significant show from the 1950s to the early 1980s. Bartholomew was close to both the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group (PAG) and the Delhi Shilpi Chakra. Read in the historical context of a newly independent nation that was beginning to reestablish a scattered identity across a score of disciplines, *The Art Critic* is the family album you forgot existed or were convinced had been lost. To leaf through it now, decades later, is to be confronted with the most significant, landmark moments of the childhood and adolescence of modern Indian art.

Richard Lawrence Bartholomew, born in the southeastern Burmese city of Dawei, escaped just ahead of the Japanese occupation of Burma (1942–1945). He arrived in Delhi around 1943, finished his schooling at Cambridge School and earned a Master's in English Literature from St Stephen's College in 1948. This is where he met Rati Batra, a refugee from Pakistan, who he would eventually marry in 1953.

When he got into the art scene, the Bombay PAG had already been standing convention on its head since 1947. Among its stalwarts were FN Souza, and it included among its 'Modernist' activists artists such as Husain, Akbar Pad-

amsee, Krishen Khanna, Ram Kumar, Tyeb Mehta and SH Raza. It had been preceded by, and then overshadowed, India's first group of modern artists, the revisionist 'form-over-function' Calcutta Group. The PAG's plinth was the total rejection of the ideals of 'the-past-is-the-future' nationalist Bengal Revivalist Movement.

In 1950, Bartholomew, who found himself in the same milieu as painters Biren De and Ram Kumar, attempted his first unofficial, and rather gushing, review. Years later, rummaging through his papers, he unearthed it and enclosed it in a letter to De.

Dear Biren,

I came across this "review" of your first one-man show while running through some old papers. It has something of the freshness of the days gone by. Very naïve, but perhaps we can see much of ourselves in it.

Yours sincerely,

Richard

From 1951 to 1958, Bartholomew taught English at Delhi's prestigious Modern School. Art critic Geeta Kapur was among his students, and printmaker Kanwal Krishna was a close friend and fellow teacher. Krishna's classroom became a magnet for artists, an adda of sorts where artists of the day interacted with one another and hotly debated pressing aesthetic issues. After the end of his stint at Modern School, Bartholomew became a full-time art critic and assistant editor of *Thought* magazine. Henceforth, the initials *RLB* at the bottom of his weekly reviews became his signation, a critique institution. The Modernist movement in Indian art had begun to blossom with the presence of institutions like the Delhi Polytechnic, the All India Fine Arts & Crafts





Society, the Delhi Shilpi Chakra and the Shridharani Gallery. As artists like Souza, Husain, Khanna, De, Ram Kumar and Satish Gujral began making inroads into the Indian art world, critics like Richard Bartholomew and Keshav Malik in Delhi, and the Shantiniketan-based, Hungary-born Indologist Charles Louis Fabri, came into their best. For the artists of the day and the emerging generation, they functioned not only as witnesses to these new churnings but also as influencers and mentors who communicated directly with the artists, questioned their choices and often brought them down to earth.

At the centre of the art scene was the government-run—but ostensibly autonomous—Lalit Kala Akademi (LKA), set up in 1954, which established the National Exhibition of Art a year later and the Triennale-India in 1968. Given the absence then of private galleries, the Akademi was possibly the only road to recognition for artists. But the LKA was government-run and bent to suit the power structure, and its practices, and its misguided ideals left much to be desired. For years, Richard Bartholomew took upon himself the responsibility to expose the Akademi's malpractices and questionable standards concerning art.

Today, Indian contemporary art has come into its own. Despite the post-art boom economy, the artists whose first and subsequent one-man shows Bartholomew keenly reviewed have become bestsellers whose works continue to break auction records: FN Souza, Tyeb Mehta, Biren De, Ram Kumar, Akbar Padamsee, SH Raza, Krishen Khanna, Sailoz Mookherjee, Bhupen Khakhar and Satish Gujral; sculptors like Ramkinkar Baij, Dhanraj Bhagat, Chintamani Kar, Somnath Hore and Sankho Chaudhuri; graphic artists

such as Kanwal Krishna, Devayani Krishna, Krishna Reddy, Jagmohan Chopra and Jyoti Bhatt; and those photographers of rare renown, Raghu Rai and TS Satyan.

Private galleries are flourishing, and they host, every other week, shows by both older and emerging artists. Curators outnumber critics, and the Modernist moment has given way to the Contemporary. Indian art has established itself, and after 64 years of independence, can be seen as a continuum, with the past, the present, and the possible future no longer a matter of mystique. Given this scenario, *The Art Critic* is a resoundingly significant artefact, and remains a dependable repository of information and analysis. What were initially written as reviews, published painstakingly the day after a show opened, have assumed the relevance of historical documents.

While we were working on *The Art Critic*, more than a few stories of abiding interest floated to the surface. There's one that hints to the undocumented fact about how, at a point in time, Delhi's Nizamuddin and Jangpura areas were artists' hubs. Rents were cheap. Artists like Husain moved from Mumbai into these neighbourhoods, often occupying *barsatis* (a small or one-room apartment on a terrace), and moved between each other's houses unannounced. Bartholomew, who also lived in Jangpura with his theatre-activist wife Rati, used to feed many of these artists. Some stayed over, some sought shelter, though Bartholomew, like them, was never a man of means. But this camaraderie explains how he was able to photograph the Andhra-born artist Pakhal Tirumal (PT) Reddy (1915–1996)—who had organised the Amrita Sher-Gil-influenced 'Bombay Contemporary India Artists,' or 'Young Turks', in 1941, six years before the PAG—

asleep on a bed; or of Biren De at ease outside his studio extension in Civil Lines in Old Delhi (1971); or of Husain's stunning, contemplative silhouette (1958) three years after the government had awarded him the Padma Shri.

Other snippets abound. On Husain's decision to walk barefooted, Bartholomew had this to say in his 1965 review of Husain's show at Shridharani Gallery ('Rare Clarity and Power Part of Husain Make-Up', *Times of India*): "Power, and movement, which itself is a sign of mystery; the clarity that comes between moments of tenderness and brilliant discovery; the quiet, soft spoken man who is tall and who stands on his own feet—Husain walks about bare-footed these days—the gentle and the patriarchal; all this is part of the Husain picture."

Or consider a review of Bhupen Khakhar (1934–2003) first solo show, of which Bartholomew wrote:

It happened on a Wednesday evening. I saw first the photographers. There were painters—Jeram Patel with his Nikkormat and Husain with his Bolex motion picture camera on a tripod. The Government of India's television team had stepped aside, perhaps to make way for the painter-cameramen. When called upon, they threw some light on the art and the artists, with occasional blasts of the sungun. The scene was Kunika-Chemould Art Centre where Bhupen Khakhar is holding his one-man show of paintings. The occasion was the Press Preview. The event a kind of happening. The author of the exhibition, Bhupen Khakhar, posed holding a mike before his own composition *Old Man with a Transistor* and Husain expended some footage on Jeram Patel seated before Khakhar's painting called *M.F. Husain Near a Tonga After Visiting the Darga*, Nasreen Mohamedi and Geeta Kapur, painter and art critic respectively, were dressed in the costumes of a past generation. An hour before they were to crack the jokes—promise "on request" in the gulabi wedding style invitation card—these girls were shot (with the camera). So the facts of the situation got projected on the focal plane and negative material stored away the sentiments expressed. Buttons were pressed, shutters opened, and the cogs turned.

(22 February 1970; *The Times of India*)

Of all the photographs Bartholomew recorded that were taken by the "painter-cameramen", the only one we have access to is the one by Bartholomew himself, of Khakhar holding a mike in front of his painting, *Old Man with a Transistor*. The other photographs elude us.

As the date of the launch drew closer, Pablo started fidgeting with his newly acquired video camera. He had set up interviews with Raza, Ram Kumar, Krishen Khanna, Satish Gujral and A. Ramachandran. He would return from each

interview superficially content but somewhat dissatisfied. When I asked him what was bothering him, he explained that the ephemeral quality of memory had revealed itself to him. There were too many gaps in the conversations that had transpired, too many anecdotes that had been lost because they slipped away into a state of forgetting. This was when I realised most poignantly that although much has been written on the history of modern Indian art and on the individual players who were instrumental in deciding the direction it has taken, it has mostly been told from a sterile, academic perspective, which isn't particularly amenable to recording oral narratives and tends to neglect the power of digressions and the significances of sub-plots.

Someone who can empathise with Pablo's predicament is the art critic S Kalidas who has been working with his father's, Jagdish Swaminathan, notes which were also his memoirs. (Jagdish Swaminathan [1928–1994], 'Swami', was a legendary painter, art critic and Leftwing firebrand.) "I'm working with memory at the moment and it's not easy," he prefaced at a discussion titled 'Memory: Site for Creativity' hosted by the Raza Foundation on 28 August at the India International Centre in New Delhi. *Transits of a Whole-timer*, Kalidas's earnest and important attempt to present what he called "a wedge" from his father's oeuvre, gives us a glimpse of the period from 1950 to 1969, when Swaminathan was building up, as a report says, a stock of "drawings, sketches, illustrations, photographs, paintings (including some prints of early works that have been difficult to source in the original), letters, catalogues and essays" and still discovering his artistic sensibilities. Kalidas's exegesis that was recently presented at Gallery Espace, Delhi, offers us a dose of whatever it is that impelled Swami—from his Left disdain for material goodies, to his bluntness, to the ambitious and controversial publication in 1966 of the magazine *Contra '66* with Octavio Paz, then the Mexican ambassador to India.

*The Art Critic*, which was funded entirely by Pablo with some support from the Raza Foundation, is, like Kalidas's show, an attempt at retrieving and codifying a swath of art history that has been forgotten. As Pablo wrote in the book's "Afterword":

Memory, collectively lost, can now be somewhat regained. This book needs to be out. To reshape some histories, to bring back the forgotten others, to reassess and alter the already hazily known, to redefine some standards of writing and our understanding, thoughts and feelings on an era now lost. More importantly, to allow this man to breathe his words and as a toast to all those who have passed on and to the ones surviving; friends who have been waiting and waiting for these words, maybe once again they will find the joy that described the youth of their lives. ☪