

# Richard and his friends

A quarter century after his death, RICHARD BARTHOLOMEW'S intimate portraits of the icons of Indian art find their way into a gallery — and a book

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**R**ICHARD Bartholomew was a seminal critic of modern Indian art. His lucid, even poetic articles in journals and newspapers in the 50s and 60s provided the crucial intellectual underpinning to the work of the modernist painters, many of whom like Ram Kumar, M.F. Husain, Biren De were starting out at the time and knew him well. Bartholomew also curated exhibitions showcasing and explicating these artists to India and the world, going on to become secretary of Lalit Kala Akademi, an office in which he died — literally — in 1985. That's the public face of Bartholomew, one that people, very few around now to be sure, largely remember and respect him for.

But there was another, equally important facet to his talents — photography — that is now revealed to a larger audience through the book, *A Critic's Eye*, and a major exhibition of the same name, both of which were unveiled at Delhi's PhotoInk gallery yesterday (the show will travel to Chatterjee & Lal in Mumbai later this year).

Born in Tavoy, Burma in 1926, Bartholomew came to India in 1942 during the Japanese occupation, "walking

It's the milieu he captures — the ubiquitous cigarette in the hand of the artist, the carefully parted hair and attire — which 'acquire, for us today, a historical aura'



**LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON:** A self-portrait, and son Pablo with a camera in 1965 (below R)

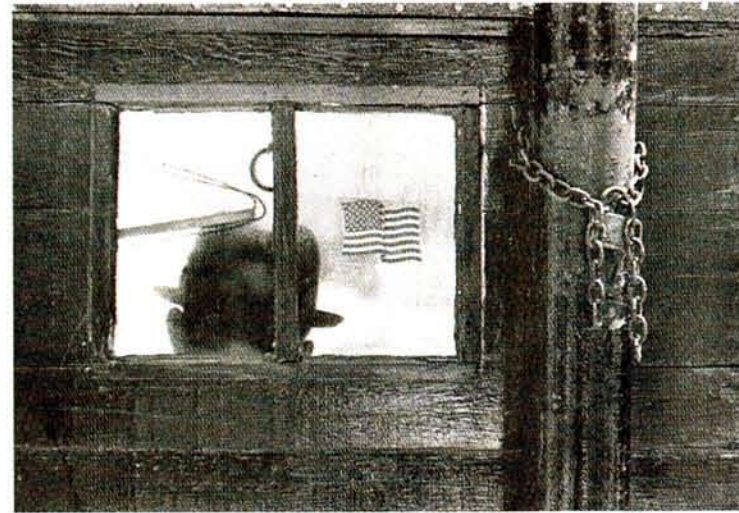
from the plains of Mandalay, through the high, rugged mountain ranges of the Patkai", his son and photographer Pablo writes in his afterword to the book, with only "a few belongings on their heads, and memories of a land they left behind".

But he did well in India. Finishing his MA in English from St Stephen's College, Delhi, he taught for a few years at Modern School, married, and freelanced for newspapers, in between helming institutions like the first Tibetan art museum in New Delhi and Kunika Art Centre, the first commercial art gallery in Delhi. "Money was always an issue," writes Pablo, but it never seems to have stopped his father



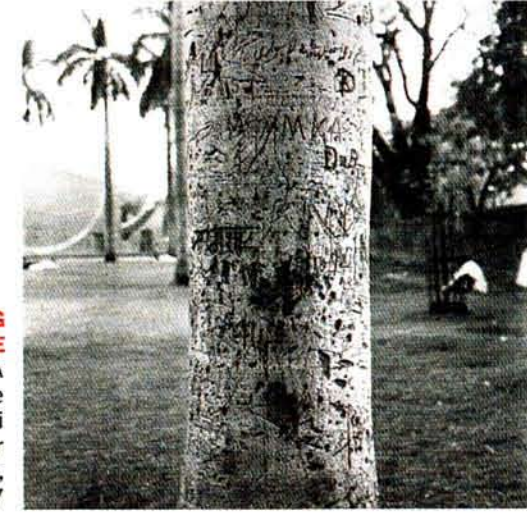
**THREE IS DANDY:** (From left) A 1960 photo of S.A. Krishnan, Jehangir Sabavala and Biren De. As a critic, Bartholomew shared a personal rapport with many artists

**WINDOW DRESSING:** Shuttered windows on a 1970s night in New York. During the same period, he authored *Husain*, a book on M F Husain, published by Harry N Abrams



**THE HAT TRICK:** A man with a hat, shot in the 1970s in the US; Bartholomew was on a Rockefeller Fund senior fellowship

**WRITING ON THE TREE:** A palm tree with graffiti in Jantar Mantar, 1957



from doing all the things he loved — writing, painting, photographing, cooking for all the "artists, writers poets, actors and directors" who "passed through out many rented homes".

The camera seems to have been a constant companion, and Bartholomew left behind more than 17,000 negatives — shots of his artist friends in their studios or in parties and show openings,

luminescent shots of trees, buildings, cityscapes; many of his family and some of himself. His oeuvre, wide in range, is extraordinary not just for the way it foreshadows in its subjects and techniques the work of many a recent photographer — private, domestic photography, for example — but also for the way Bartholomew evokes the essence of a milieu. Line and

light, the two things that draw the eye and the two things that have preoccupied most photographers whose work is now accepted as art, have a dramatic interplay in Bartholomew's work.

Of greatest immediate interest at the show will be the photographs of artists — Husain talking on an Ericaphone, a comic picture as he pulls distractedly at his hair; S.A. Krishnan, Jehangir

Sabavala and Biren De, a dandy threesome; Bhupen Khakkar, posing jauntily in front of his painting — if only because of the legends they've become since. Note the milieu Bartholomew captured — the ubiquitous cigarette in the hand of the artist, the carefully parted hair and attire — which, to quote Aweek Sen from his essay in the book, "acquire, for us today, a historical aura". In a sense, Devi-

ka Dault-Singh of PhotoInk is right when she says, "Bartholomew perhaps understood the evidentiary and historical role of the photograph."

There're two more books to follow — a collection of Bartholomew's poetry and another of his writings on art. The word 'genius' has been used for lesser men.

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