

# Archival Inspirations

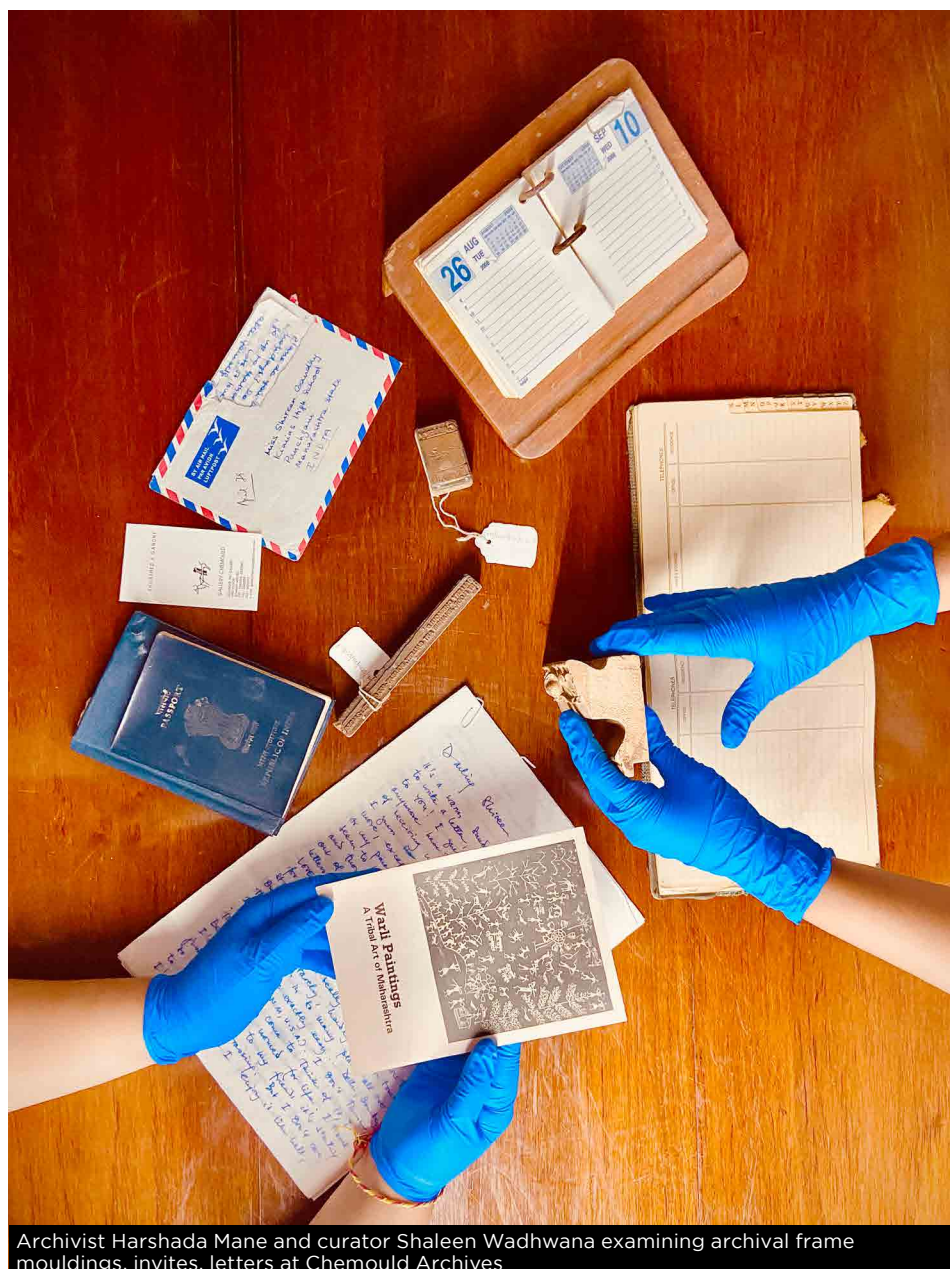
As Chemould, the contemporary art gallery, prepares its months-long celebration of having completed 60 years, we speak to the people behind the scenes of this important Mumbai institution to understand how its archive is serving as the lodestar for curation and creation.

By Vipasha Aloukik Pai

**G**allery Chemould was always a place of possibilities and discoveries.

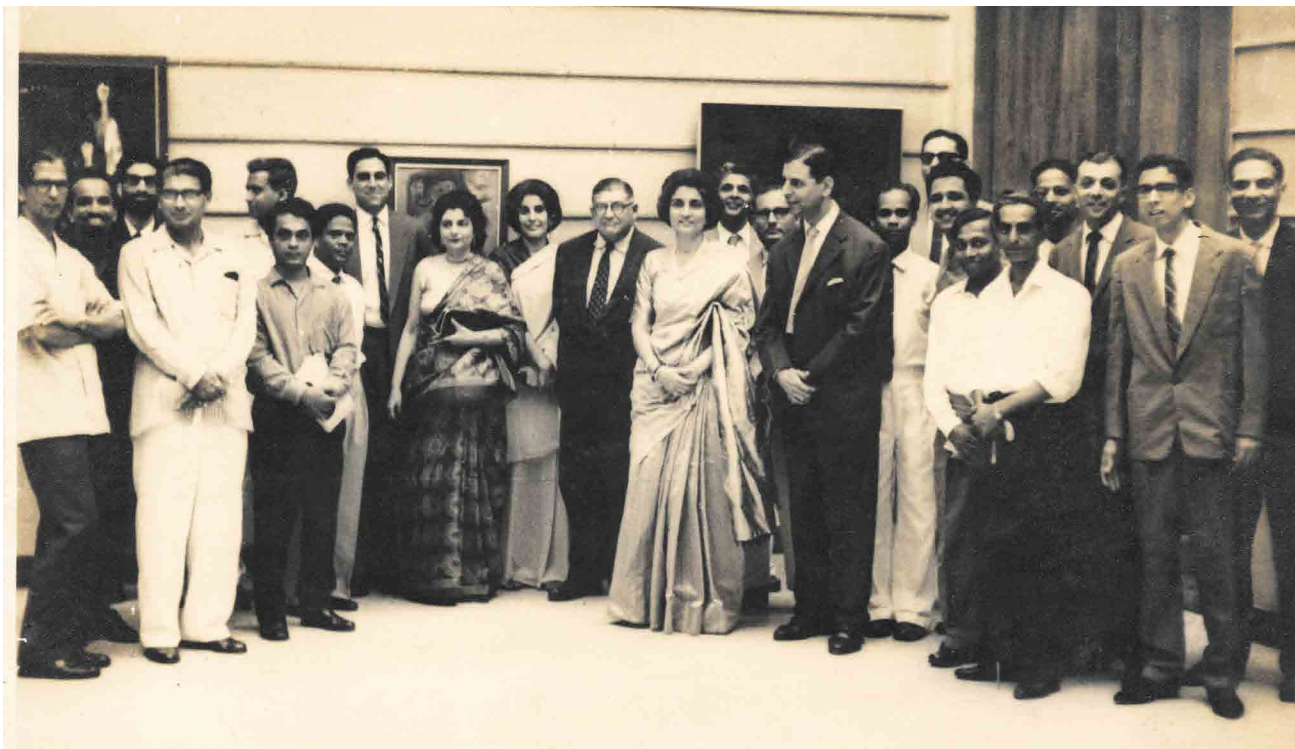
Since the 1960s, anyone who walked in could see the latest paintings by Indian artists who are now considered to be masters. On the list of the most valuable Indian artists, almost every name has been associated in one way or another with the gallery. V. S. Gaitonde, Tyeb Mehta, F. N. Souza, Bhupen Khakhar, S. H. Raza and Laxman Pai, whose works are now considered to be blue-chip investments, were all nurtured by and exhibited at Gallery Chemould.

Chemould, which opened its doors in September 1963, would soon, thanks to its founders Kekoo and Khorshed Gandhi, become an institution that would nurture some of the greatest Indian artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It took risks, it honoured commitments, it made it possible for art to flourish in the city in a way that had not been possible before. In his book *Citizen Gallery: The Gandhys of Chemould and the Birth of Modern Art in Bombay*, Jerry Pinto writes: 'For at least three generations of



Archivist Harshada Mane and curator Shaleen Wadhwa examining archival frame mouldings, invites, letters at Chemould Archives

YASHVI GHILANI



Opening of Gallery Chemould on 16th September 1963. From left to right: K.K Hebber, Laxman Pai, Gal Arya (architect), Siaxes Chandan Gaitonde, other members of the family and staff

## Over 30 contemporary artists have created new works in response to curatorial prompts from the gallery's archive which will culminate in a celebration with four exhibitions—*Framing, Futuring, Remembering* and *Continuum*—in three spaces over the next four months

artists and art-lovers, Chemould was the first magical encounter between what you thought art might mean and what art could be. It could be here and now and it could be signed by an Indian name. It could speak to you without the language you were used to in those slick coffee-table books.'

For artist Anju Dodiya, it was where she saw all her favourite artists. "For a young student, it was an anchor that you always came back to and learnt from," she says. According to Rajendra N. Patil, President of the Bombay Art Society and Founder and Managing Director of the India Art Festival, "Gallery Chemould exhibited fantastic art. Even today, the gallery has a roster of big names like Atul Dodiya, Jitish Kallat, Sheetal Gattani and others. Anyone who gets an opportunity to exhibit at Chemould knows that it means a straight entry into mainstream art. It is a validation, which in the art world is very complicated," he says.

To celebrate its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the gallery has undertaken an in-depth exploration of its own extensive archive, which includes letters, albums, catalogues, photographs and much more. Over 30 contemporary artists associated with the gallery have

created new works in response to curatorial prompts from the archive. This will culminate in a celebration that will include four exhibitions—*Framing, Futuring, Remembering* and *Continuum*—in three spaces over the next four months.

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I am meeting Shireen Gandhi, Director of Chemould Prescott Road, in her ancestral home, Kekee Manzil, located at the edge of the city in Bandra. Surrounded by condominiums and fancy celebrity homes, the mansion, now over 100 years old, stands like an elegant rebel that has vanquished every high-rise-constructing demolition brigade in the area. It is also where her parents, Kekoo and Khorshed Gandhi, lived. Before they became gallerists, the Gandhys ran a frame-manufacturing business called The Chemical Moulding Manufacturing Company with a studio on Princess Street. More than 40 years after Gallery Chemould was established above the Jehangir Art Gallery, it relocated to a bigger space on Prescott Road in Fort in 2007. The framing studio still exists, and the gallery has now added to its macrocosm



Chemould CoLab, a space in Colaba that facilitates summer residency programmes for artists, writers, researchers and the like.

At Kekee Manzil, we are, unsurprisingly, surrounded by a lot of good art. Above the couch hangs Atul Dodiya's 'Shanti moving house' from his Hindi-cinema-inspired series painted during the pandemic while Desmond Lazaro's 'The Baptism Certificate' hangs near the foyer. On a wall by the door are signed canvasses of artists who had solo exhibitions at the gallery between 1963 and 1972. I am looking at signatures, some accompanied by doodles, of Pai, Mehta and Ram Kumar, among others, which, Gandhi says, will be the point of reference for *Remembering*. "It is not unusual to see Gaitondes and Razas now because auction houses do that quite often. But *Remembering* will be sentimental and it will have some iconic works," she says.

When Gandhi took over the helm 35 years ago, there was a significant change in what the gallery chose to exhibit. "That happened naturally. It wasn't planned," she says. "Between 1988 and 1990, there was a shift in the politics of the country and that kind of started changing how artists began to work. In 1992, when the Babri Masjid came down, the artists we were working with felt they couldn't work on canvas anymore." Artist and activist Vivan Sundaram, for instance, stepped away from traditional painting to embrace multimedia because he saw things changing dramatically 'both in terms of the political situation as well as the opening up of technologies'. Nalini Malani, who has worked in several media including video art, has said that for her, painting 'lost its meaning and was seen as something redundant and bourgeois'. Gandhi, who at the time had access to both Sundaram and Malani, says, "They started informing [me] because I was open to those ideas, and that is how the gallery began to shift and change in how we were showing."

Chemould then became a gallery that allowed artists to explore and innovate. "Malani, for the first time, did work which actually covered the ground and

the walls. She was responding to a time that was highly charged for us. We began to have a certain kind of reputation, I think in a good way," says Gandhi. Anju Dodiya, whose first solo show was at Chemould in 1991, says, "The gallery has always allowed me to do what I want as an artist. It has always been about freedom and the need of the artist."

Forward-looking even today, Gandhi has invited 32-year-old Shaleen Wadhwana to curate *CheMoulding* which includes *Framing* and *Futuring*. Wadhwana is the youngest curator of anniversary exhibitions at Chemould—the 25<sup>th</sup> year was curated by Kekoo and Khorshed Gandhi, the 40<sup>th</sup> by art historians Geeta Kapur and Chaitanya Sambrani and the 50<sup>th</sup> by Kapur, all of whom were already significantly established in their careers. When I ask Gandhi why she chose Wadhwana, her response is simple. "I knew I'd never get another Shaleen," she says.

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"There are 33 people living in my head at all times," says Wadhwana, when I meet her at Chemould CoLab, which currently serves as the headquarters of the archive. The 33 people she is talking about are contemporary artists associated with the gallery—Anju Dodiya, Reena Saini Kallat, Jitish Kallat, Shilpa Gupta, among others—who are currently creating new work for *CheMoulding*. Wadhwana, fully aware of the gallery's powerful legacy, says, "I added the 'ing' [in the exhibition title] because we think of Chemould as a verb. For 60 years, they have been a space for free artistic expression. And I find that those spaces have become threatened. To remember that there was and is such a space is very important for my generation and the next," she says.

The Delhi-based independent art educator and curator has been living in Mumbai since March, working on ways to honour, commemorate and inspire while also digging through 28 boxes of archival material, with the help of archive manager Harshada Mane.



From left to right: Shireen Gandhi, Shaleen Wadhwana, Atyaan Jungalwala at Chemould Archives

HARSHADA MANE

Wadhvana is creating an ever-expanding curatorial mind map on one side of a wall and on the other, a detailed timeline of Chemould's history juxtaposed with socio-political happenings and developments in the Indian art movement. She brings to the table a degree of awareness, not just of the task at hand but of the bigger picture. "I have tried to study how human motivation works," she says. "The fact that I'm a curator who looks a lot at socio-political movements and how artists respond to social justice becomes imperative to how I want to communicate."

The art being created for CheMoulding promises to be diverse while connecting with individual artists' practices. Expect wood, metal, multimedia installations, digital artwork, oil acrylic, watercolour, natural pigment paint. Expect paper, canvas, video works, sound works, video and sound works, sculpture from wood, metal and ceramics. Expect a lot of audiovisual content and a reading room that will serve as a bibliography for the exhibitions. "Some artists are paying homage to artists of the past. Some are working with the theme of friendship between the gallery and artist. There are artists working with dates that are important to Chemould."



Shireen Gandhi, Kekoo Gandhi and Khorshed Gandhi in 2003

**"The gallery has always allowed me to do what I want as an artist. It has always been about freedom and the need of the artist"**

Others are working with physical objects that were important. Some are responding to the architecture of Chemould Prescott Road and Kekee Manzil," says Wadhvana. Jitish Kallat, for instance, has proposed a 'radical restructuring' of the gallery space. He says, "For Chemould 60, I am reintroducing the former Gallery Chemould space within the current Chemould Prescott Road. The distinctive circular Chemould wall will be reincarnated within this larger gallery space, nested like a Russian doll or a tree's growth ring." Anju Dodiya, a dedicated user of watercolour, fabric and charcoal is, after many decades, working with oil paint. "I am going to respond to personal family photographs from the archive. I have been looking for the right subject matter to start working in oil paint, and in these photographs, I found something warm and nostalgic, with interesting pictorial possibilities," she says.

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The history of Chemould is exceptional. "We are talking not just about a space showing art but also about intellectual and liberal human beings," says Dodiya. To fully and expansively commemorate 60 years of a cultural institution is a near impossible assignment. But the promise of what we are about to see is alluring. "It is historic because Part 1 and 2,

*Framing and Futuring*, are about 60 years of the entirety of Chemould history and where we're going into the future," says Wadhvana. Meanwhile, work by gallery veterans will be shown at *Remembering* at the old Gallery Chemould (above the Jehangir Art Gallery). Then there is *Continuum*, curated by Atyaan Jungalwala (Gandhy's daughter) and Sunaina Kewalramani, co-founders of Chemould CoLab, which will showcase works by emerging artists.

At the heart of it, though, this is a tribute to Khorshed Gandhi. "The hero in this show is going to be my mother," Gandhi says. In *Citizen Gallery*, Pinto writes, 'She [Khorshed] made him [Kekoo] possible and together they made Gallery Chemould into a birthing room for Indian modernism.' Wadhvana too, while working with the archive, has come to deeply admire Khorshed.

With strong credentials in art history and cultural heritage law, Wadhvana is also an educator in an age in which our history books are being callously edited. If the exhibitions make even a single viewer "a little more aware, more vigilant of our historical truths, I will have done my job," she says. "Because *that* is the embodiment of Kekoo and Khorshed." ■

*The exhibitions celebrating 60 years of Chemould will begin with Framing on 15th September at Chemould Prescott Road. For more information, please visit [www.gallerychemould.com](http://www.gallerychemould.com)*