

A Cinematic Imagination

Josef Wirsching & The Bombay Talkies

This exhibition tells a story of a world across worlds, a story of cultural convergence that brought together Berlin and Calcutta, Munich and Bombay. It draws from the photographic archive of Josef Wirsching, a German cinematographer who made India his workplace and home. Wirsching's archive comprises behind-the-scenes photographs of cast and crew, production and publicity stills that give us unprecedented access to the aesthetic decisions and creative communities that were vital to filmmaking in late colonial India.

Indian artists, at the turn of the century, actively sought to forge an aesthetic language that could be simultaneously nationalist as well as modern. Frustrated with European academic canons and colonialist stereotypes, they turned to local artistic genealogies and avant-garde movements outside the British empire. Germany, with its long history of Indological enquiry, became an ally in this endeavor. Thus it is that Rabindranath Tagore visited Germany in the 1920s, and in turn, the Austrian art historian, Stella Kramrisch, joined Shantiniketan and organized a landmark Bauhaus exhibition in Calcutta (1922). This two-way cultural exchange was keenly felt in the world of cinema; the success of "Oriental" films such as *Sumurun* (1920), *The Tiger of Eschnapur* (1921) and *The Indian Tomb* (1921) was met with the ambition of Indian filmmakers who approached German studios for technical training. Raja Ravi Varma had already popularized German chromolithographic techniques and European approaches to the body through his mass-produced calendar art. In the 1920s, intrepid nationalist filmmakers such as Dadasaheb Phalke, V Shantaram and Himansu Rai self-consciously reworked these influences with inspiration from German Oberammergau passion plays, Bengal School portraiture, *Heimatfilm* rural stories, Art Deco industrial design, and Hindustani classical musical conventions.

WW2 led to a different kind of exchange when Jewish exiles such as Walter Kaufmann and Willy Haas moved to Bombay and entered the local film scene. Bombay Talkies studio, inaugurated in 1934, embodied the cultural dynamism of the moment in its core team led by Himansu Rai, Franz Osten, Josef Wirsching, Niranjana Pal, and Devika Rani. BT played a foundational role in

defining India's commercial film form, producing some of the most iconic musical films of the era which foregrounded urgent issues of social reform. These films borrowed freely from East and West to create a new aesthetic that might be called "swadeshi modernism" - a heady pastiche that begs us to question easy notions of Indian and foreign, traditional and experimental.

Josef Wirsching's artistic imagination infused Bombay cinema with the psychological depth and stylistic ethos of German Expressionism. At the same time, his photographic archive gestures towards another meaning of the "cinematic" - a term that is commonly used to describe moments in reality that seem elevated beyond the everyday. In these images we see the interaction of individuals, objects, and environments, framed by a vision that captures the beauty and drama beneath the surface of the laborious work of film production.

We present this exhibition as a tribute to Josef Wirsching, a transnational itinerant and pioneer of Indian cinema.