



Riddhi Doshi

PEOPLE & CULTURE

This brand-new gallery at CSMVS is a tribute to Mumbai and its people

Art, history and popular culture intersect to tell the story of Bombay then and Mumbai now

BY RIDDHI DOSHI
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Mumbai is so many things that it is hard to contain in words. It's the city of opportunities and the city of dreams, each of which is made and unmade every day. It is a metropolis that thrives, heaves and survives, carrying all its 21-odd million people and their collective hopes. For any visitor, migrant, or expat in the city, understanding Mumbai's past is key to understanding its present. And the best introduction to the city and the region is the 102-year-old Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS). This museum is one of the best repositories of India's history in Western India housing artefacts from ancient India, the erstwhile princely states and the British era.



The newest addition to this impressive catalogue is the Mumbai Gallery, which opened its doors on **October 14**. This gallery tells the city's story with 200-plus objects, ranging from contemporary installations to ancient relics, maps, paintings, graphic design, and **AI art**. The gallery is divided into an orientation area dedicated to the cultural history of Mumbai and a special exhibit, which will be changed every year.

Inside the gallery: The sights and sounds of Mumbai

The inaugural exhibit at this new **gallery** is called *People of Mumbai*, curated by Nandini Somaya Sampat of the architecture and design studio SNK. It's an ode to the various people of Mumbai, the migrant labourers, the foreign businessmen, the fisherfolk, dabawallas, Bollywood folks and many others who make the city what it is. It is also a collection of well-known city icons that keep this vast unwieldy metropolis functioning.



People of Mumbai Exhibition - Orange Zone - City of Migrants CSMVS

"When I think of our city of **Mumbai**- it represents the creativity, passion, resilience, commitment, courage and more, of individuals that have collected in this geographical location to co-exist," says Somaya Sampat. "And it is this collective that together represents the spirit of the city," she adds. It is these people's stories, dreams, work and lives that the exhibition is based on. The exhibition is divided into three sections and charts past and present Mumbai as a City of Opportunity, a City of Migrants, and a City of Cosmopolitanism



Art sculpture - Virar Fast - Valay Shende CSMVS

One of the highlights of this show is artist Valay Shende's life-size sculpture *Virar Local*, which is made of steel discs. It shows a group of men, crammed together with their arms stretched above their heads, holding an imaginary metal bar as seen in the local **trains**. It just doesn't show how people commute in the city but also delves into their struggles and their resilience as they go about their lives in the *Maya Nagri* (the city of illusions).



Art Installation - How to cook Bombay Duck? by Parag Tandel CSMVS

Koli artist Parag Tandel's *How to Cook Bombay Duck* is another standout piece. This massive installation features rows of Bombay duck, a fish once abundant in Mumbai's waters but fast depleting because of climate change and pollution. It features the many different ways the Bombay duck is cooked in Mumbai and also highlights the challenges faced by the oldest inhabitants of Mumbai of the Kolis today. In addition, there is a display of photographs from the urban design think tank Bombay61 studio showcasing the life of Kolis in Mumbai spanning many decades.

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Author Govind Narayan's 1863 Marathi book *Mumbaiche Vaman*, regarded as one of the first urban biographies of the island city also rightfully finds a place in the exhibition. It's interesting to read the author's description of the city sounds of 19th-century Bombay and see the continuum as many of them can be heard even today, including that of an itinerant vendor who sharpens people's knives.



Mithai puri Stand | CSMVS

Then there is an old ticket box from the BEST (Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport) museum where one can see the old local bus and tram tickets. Mumbai also had a tram line that ran from Colaba to Pydhonie via Crawford Market and from Bori Bunder to Pydhonie. The very first tram that started in 1874 was pulled by horses which later converted to an electric tram in 1907.

An installation that looks like a street chaat counter is an absolute treat and has a screen playing videos of how different chaats are made in Mumbai.

Inside the gallery: The people of Mumbai

In 1854, Mumbai's first textile mill, The Bombay Spinning and Weaving Company was founded, marking the beginning of the textile industry boom in the city. Subsequently, many mills were established and the diverse workforce that came to the city from across the country started living in chawls. As an ode to these people, the exhibition showcases everyday objects used by chawl dwellers even today like an iron stove, a grinding slab, and a chalk-drawn game board on stone.



Everyday objects used by the Chawl dwellers even today like an Iron stove, a Grinding slab, and a chalk-drawn gaming board on stone. CSMVS

When we talk about Mumbai's people, no conversation can exclude the coolies and the dabbawallas, the very first food delivery people in the city who devised a brilliant logistics system to ensure that the right dabba gets to the right person. The exhibit includes the iconic *billa* (badge) of the coolies and the aluminium dabba containers of the dabbawallas, paying tribute to the men who formed the backbone of everyday work life.

Mumbai's representation in reel life is largely due to the omnipresence of Bollywood. In a hat tip to the film industry, there is a display of costumes by designer Bhanu Athaiya including the iconic dress-saree worn by actress Mumtaz in the film *Brahmachari* (1968).



Saree of Mumtaz - loaned from the Bhanu Athaiya CSMVS

The exhibit turns from the reel to the fantastic with a spectacular installation by artist Svabhu Kohli. He has put together dioramas of the diverse marine and bird life of Mumbai including dolphins, flamingos and stingrays.

People of Mumbai's last exhibit is a futuristic piece by AI artist Varun Gupta. His exhibit *Cyborgbay* is a simultaneous imagining of the past and future and recreates the Mumbai of the 1990s but casts it as a city inhabited by cyborgs and robots.

Address: 1st floor, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, 159-161, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Fort, Mumbai - 400023; Open 10:15am - 6pm daily; Entry fee: Rs150 for Indian adults and Rs 700 for foreign visitors; Website