

Curatorial note **Be(Coming) The Museum, Lahore Museum**

By Asma Mahmood

Shelly Bahl *Journey to the Muses*

Articulating the difference in the artistic intervention by Shelly Bahl and the other seven artists in the **Be(Coming) The Museum** group exhibition would not be possible without the exploration *of the other*.

Shelly Bahl is in the throes of claiming legitimacy as a child returning to the land of her ancestors. She is standing outside the sphere of the familial... she knows the address, but she has not seen it. She knows the name, but she has not been able to trace it.

Being in the Lahore Museum gives her the home that the child of refugees seeks. Visiting Multan connected her to the rich soil of her ancestors. Collecting the soil of Multan, as I recommended to her, and taking it to her elders was a service that brought immense pleasure to them.

Shelly Bahl is a necessary presence at the Lahore Museum. Her artistic intervention within the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain Gallery evokes a quiet sense of the spirit of the artifacts within the museum collection, especially the sculptures which were once revered forms of divine worship. These sculptures had a meaningful existence outside of the confines of the antiquated colonial-era museum. Now they bear silent testimony to the ways in which we lived, prayed, learned, and fought.

Our heroes of antiquity were immortalized in the Mahabharata, on the temple walls, on the altars, in the sanctums of the Taxila or the Jaulian Buddhist monastery. They fought in the armies of Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka.

Anonymous individuals also posed for the sculptures and paintings of our most prominent artworks from antiquity, including the *Dancing Girl of Mohenjo-daro*. Posing with one hand on her hip, bangles made of camel bone beneath her shoulders, she stands (or rather her copy stands, as the original one lives in the Delhi Museum), and boldly reminds us that she lived in a city with a complete sewage system, gridded streets and brick paved avenues, alongside granaries full of wheat and the first cotton textile industry. Her civilization is about 5000-8000 years old, but so much about it remains unknown. Even the city's original name is now forgotten and is simply called, *The Mound of the Dead*... Mohenjo-daro. Our sculptures tell our true stories, even though we may now be living in obliviousness or denial.

Bringing this historical focus to our consideration of Shelly Bahl's work is important, and we should also make note of her use of the geometry and patterning sensibility found in classical Islamic art.

Her use of symmetrical designs that emanates from a point and repeat on all sides, references the delicate mosaics of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul or the geometrical elegance of the Taj Mahal in Agra. With her rolls of wallpapers, *Takeaway*, 2000, hung on a wall, flowing down like a loose scroll, or spread out on the steps of a display stand, Bahl has chosen to embrace flexibility, balance and constant change.

According to Bahl, the melted wax figures in her work, *Songs of Lament: Ceremonial-Trinity* (1994), 2022-23, reference the four-headed Lion Capital of Ashoka. I kept thinking about how those connections in her work can be explored further, and then Bahl's sculpture told me her story. A defaced Shiva, broken-nosed Buddhas, headless yakshis... her melting sculpture fit right in with this museum display of antiquities. Sharing an exhibition space with the Lion Capital of Ashoka (not the original, but a plaster copy) is also a creative act of claiming home.

Shelly Bahl had a profound first visit to Pakistan in October 2022. She was able to connect with the land where her families lived for centuries until they were forced to abandon their homes seventy-five years ago to save their lives from the communal violence of Partition that erupted at the creation of Pakistan.

Bahl visited Multan and was greatly moved by the overwhelming hospitality and sense of welcome. The goal to locate the homes of her ancestors let her to the homes of others, and the forging of new connections were created in the ancestral homeland.

Identifying our place, finding our tribes, and the profound connection of *mitti* (soil) with its far-flung people is deep. It grounds us and ties us to the proverbial homeland.