

MUKHOWTA MASK

RAJ
SHAHANI

ANAMKARA ART

PRESENTS

MUKHOWTA

SCULPTURES BY RAJ SHAHANI

January 2024

Mukhowta
Catalogue January 2024
Copyright © Raj Shahani

Published by Anamkara Art, Delhi

Curated by Sumesh Sharma at Bikaner House: Rotundas (Delhi)
Design : Shamooda A
Artworks Courtesy : Raj Shahani

All rights are reserved under international copyright conventions. No part of this catalogue may be reproduced or utilised in any form or by any means, electronic and mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the artist and the publisher.

I try to bring strong emotional presence in my work, something I see and sense from the people I meet. I want to convey this strong emotional impact it has on me, an inner beauty, a strength. Usually the first stages of work, this is where the energy of creation is the strongest, things start to emerge but the multitude of possibilities is still here. I want to preserve it, I want people to feel this energy through the work. I don't want to hide all these marks of creation under the perfection of the surface and of the form."

"My sculptures are very personal, there is a lot of me in each sculpture. It's always about my vision of life, of the universe, I am just a filter, the idea is always to show something universal but through my own filter.

My energy can be seen in my sculptures, it's all there. I work fast, I want to capture a presence, an emotion. I work a lot with my hands, i do t always finish a piece, leave a part of mystery, leave the imagination go free and imagine things.

"What is interesting in is the moment of creation itself, what happens in the studio between me and my creation, how do I handle this energy, but also all the struggle, the frustration, the deception. I have to deal with all these emotions while creating and to me it's all about that. It's not about what kind of artwork I want to produce, of course I always start with an idea, a concept that I want to express, but all the struggle and beauty happens while I am working and the result will depend on how I interact with all this energy. This is the most beautiful thing to me. "

- Raj Shahani

Sumesh Manoj Sharma
Cairo, 2023

Masks have had an undeniable existence in the history of visual culture of India. Masks act as a spiritual apparatus to performances that are esoteric and magical, used by shamans as acts of divine presence and the clairvoyance. In the districts of the Malabar in Northern Kerala – Theyyam is a calling of nature spirits by shamanistic characters who dwell in a sacred cove called the Kavu, where snakes of fortune from the Nagaloka inhabit as protectors of the forest. The Theyyam dancers dance through the wake of night enthralling an audience into ecstasy.

In the older parts of the city of Bombay, where once the native town stood - now more popularly known as Kalbadevi, merchants were once invited to the city to come trade, hold commerce and inhabit the environs of the port. Diverse communities from Marwar, Kutch, Kathiawad, Chawl, Malvan, Khandesh and Khambhat migrated to the city to make money in the markets of cotton, opium and spice. Bringing with them long traditions of architecture and construction reminding them of home. The port of Bombay also did brisk trade in timber brought down from the forests of Mozambique - ebony, Mahogany from Brazil and teak from Burma. Ceylon - Sri Lanka, Mangalore, and Cochin would also send wood. The traders would use these woods from across the oceans and forests beyond the Western Ghats of Maharashtra to build pillars, beams and corbels of their stately homes, sandwiched between narrow streets and plots. To stand apart the frontal beams were intricately carved. Carpenters of the Mistry caste from across Gujarat would use wood that would withstand the Bombay monsoons and the salty air brought in by the breeze. In the past few years these mansions have been brought down and replaced by skyscrapers which now dot the 'C' Ward of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation BMC's burrow that makes up most of the bazaars, textile districts and temples such as that of the city's Goddess Mumbadevi. Decongesting the

area through high-rises has congested the skylines with gaudiness.

Today the Heritage committee of the city is busy protecting old Neo-Gothic stone buildings that often get axed by enterprising realtors by way of corruption while these old wooden mansions fall and break away each day without notice. Their magnificent beams and brackets get sold by demolition contractors to the 'Lakda Bazaar' or the used wood market near the red light district of Kamathipura. Here they are stripped off their decoration to be made into planks for new age ikea inspired furniture. Raj Shahani was searching through these markets in the lookout for exotic woods for his sculptures when he came across a section of Corbels heavily carved from Kalbadevi and had been part of a Jain temple now converted to marble. They had been damaged during demolition and he decided to repair them using his technique of interlacing one material with a more precious counterpart to project an acceptable persona to a society that often forgets the ravages of time and age. It terms you 'Khandit' or broken, unusable and unnecessary. He masks them with a shining metal or pretense and acceptability.

The Bikaner House in Delhi has an interesting melange of architecture that marries Rajput-Mughal influences with early 20th century functional formalism. Within the main building near the Darbar Hall or the Reception room face two Mughal circular courtyards on adjacent sides called the 'Rotundas'. Each Rotunda has a marble Mughal water fountain reminiscent of Alhambra in Andalusia. The Rotundas are open to air and were made to bring in light and each one of them have a set of alcoves perhaps made for seating or to install sculptures. Choosing them as a site for his sculptures Raj intended to change the place into a grove of wood. We forget that wooden beams and brackets were once mighty forests that were exploited by Colonisers across Africa, Asia and South America for their wood to be used for palaces and institutions of the imperial state. The denudation of these forests is now a legacy we inherit with the climate crisis and the anthropocene challenge



it leaves us post-colonial nations facing.

The metals are bounties of our earth not precious to each other but precious for their utility and effort it takes to mine and mint them. The play between wood and metal seeks an equilibrium of nature and consciousness Raj attempts with his showing of sculptures called 'Mukhowta' or masks.

Raj Shahani places pieces of Burma teak behind shining plates of metal – copper, gold, silver, panchadhatu, bronze, tin, brass and steel, reminding us of the ethereal presence of materials used in sculpture, but it also hides something valuable behind by a veneer of a shining metal. That shining metal is our alter ego, our 'Mukhowta', the mask that we don hiding our real beautiful selves in wood.

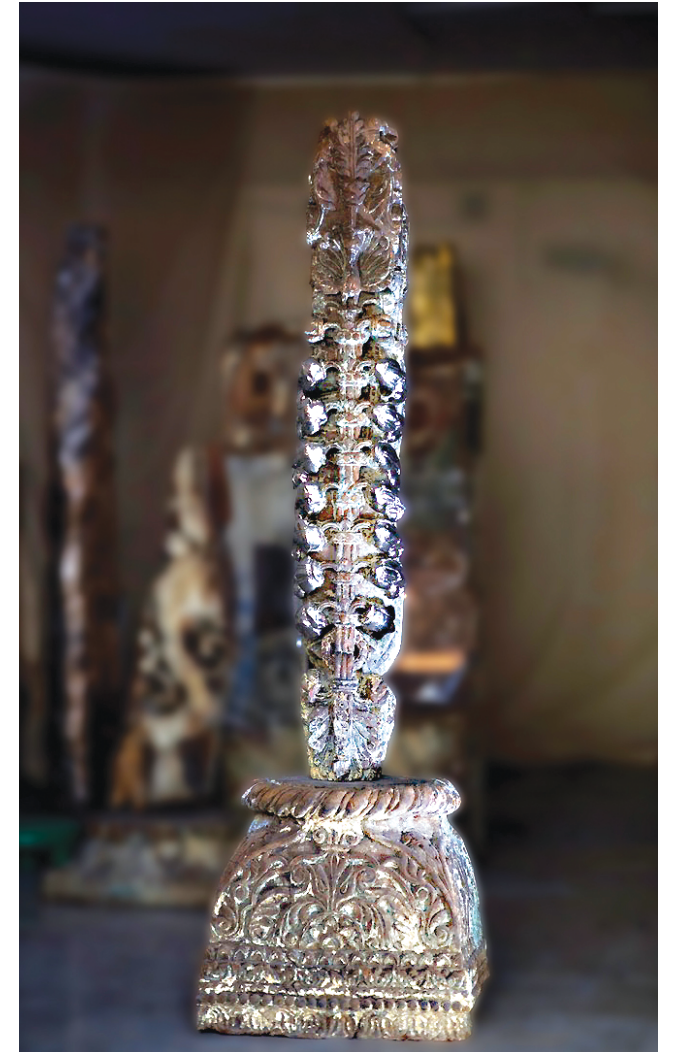
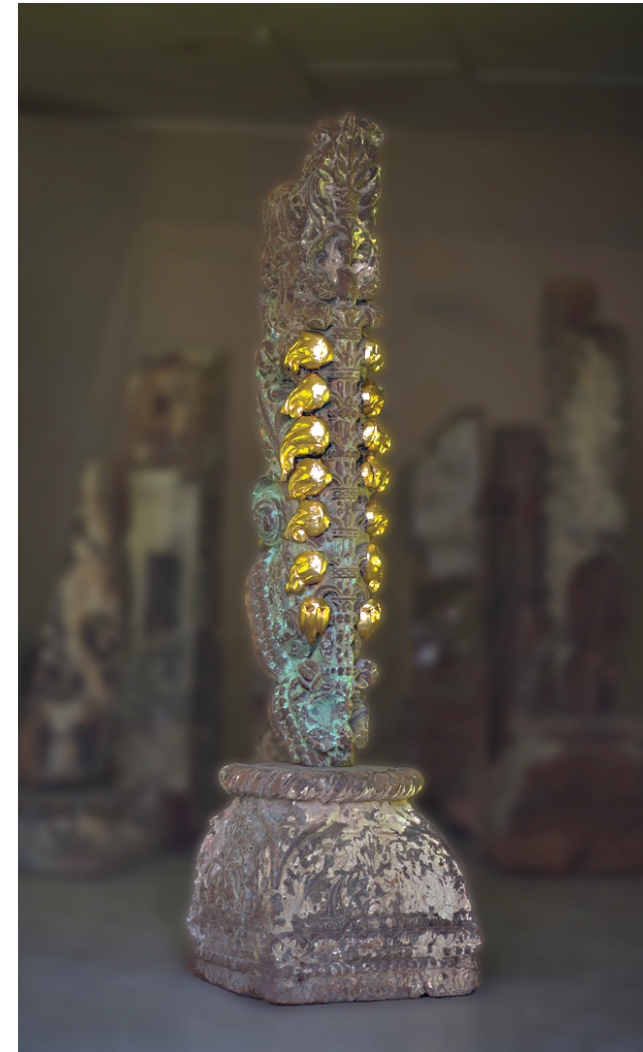
He collected three corbels and their wooden stands with a few cupolas. The wood pieces were heavily carved but painted over many times to give them a new lease of life starting from the 18th century. The pillar bases had been covered with cement, plaster, paint and varnish. Seepage, collected water and years of rough use had worn the teak down. Teak is a wonderful wood that never gets eaten by termites and exists in the most harsh conditions for any other wood. Often used in construction because it has the might of concrete and the durability of steel. He took them to a car wash and had them cleaned under pressure, the water revealed more intricate carvings and patinas in teal green from the past as well as textures of the wood.

A 'Makara' is a mythical sea-animal that is semi-aquatic, often in the form of a crocodile or a Gangetic dolphin. It usually has a terrestrial animal such as a lion head or a bird like a peacock in the frontal body and an aquatic animal such as wide jawed dolphin or fish on the hind. Indian wooden corbels are where makaras are often seen and aesthetically act like gargoyles in Gothic architecture but

here they have a utility of actually carrying weight for the wooden beams in the form of brackets for the roof or the wooden floor in multi-storied structures. Intricately decorated they have floral motifs such as vines with flowers and plumes of a peacock. The 'Annapakshi' a common makara corbel seen in Tamil architecture is formed by a Swan head and beak with a peacock's bloom. The bird holds a vine in its beak as a symbol of being able to distinguish milk from water or truth from falsehood. The 'Yali Corbel' is a makara with a lion head, elephant tusks and an ox body.

Makaras bring protection, abundance, good fortune and beneficence. They act as the vehicle of Varuna - the God of Sea, the river goddesses Ganga, Yamuna and Narmada. They originate from Buddhist sculptural traditions as the seat of Buddha and wisdom and were later incorporated into Hinduism. Makara is a representation of the Zodiac sign Capricorn. The animals chosen to represent come often for their qualities mentioned in the Jatakas. When a makara is crowned by a peacock it often is symbolic of Saraswati, knowledge, wisdom and aesthetic artistic quality akin to the Buddhist Goddess Mahamaya or Ambika in Jainism.

Two of the corbels Raj found are makaras who are crowned by a Peacock perched by a parrot. The peacock is the vahana of Saraswati and Skanda or Kartikeya. The peacock refuses to kill snakes despite being able to, thus according to Jain belief it is seen as a symbol of non-violence. Its feathers are seen as a plume of compassion. The parrot is a bird of wisdom and determined in its faith, for it remembers and reminds us of the name of the 'tirthankaras' or wise humans in Jainism. They emerge through a vine of flowers and leaves that begin in the wide jaws of a dolphin makara. The car wash revealed intricate designs that not only have origin in coastal Gujarat but also from the Middle-East and Iran and maybe Zanzibar. The corbels are held on pillar bases which are both of Indian origin and some that hold Greco-Roman influences. The brackets once held beams together or joined pillars to the ceiling. They are less intricate and minimal but hold on sturdy revealing their age.



SWARNA



GOLD

RAJATA



'Swarna (Gold) ' and 'Rajata (Silver)' are the two anapakshis where the peacocks are embellished with a gold and silver plating.

SILVER

A smaller third corbel has a vine of floral elements emerging from the jaws of the dolphin. He caps this makara with a 'panchoha' or 'panchdhatu' alloy. The Gangetic dolphin is a very sacred animal that is the vehicle or vahana of the Ganges, India's sacred river. Panchaloha or Panchadhatu is an alloy of gold, silver, copper, zinc and iron and is used across Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism to make sacred idols and utensils for worship. Giving the makara of the Gangetic Dolphin a 'Panchaloha' embellishment Raj plays on the dichotomy of sacredness and pollution. 'Makara' in Ancient Indian texts is revered as the vahana or vehicle of the Mother Ganges, a river that has power to purify but one we often pollute. This dichotomy is inherent in the Modern Indian psyche which is lost to grandstanding and statements.

MAKARA



CORBEL



Raj repairs the makaras with bronze, brass, copper, panchaloha, silver, gold, steel and aluminium embellishments that are functional, minimal and simple but made of shining metal. They contrast with the wood but attract the eye due to their luminosity. Much like the clothes we wear to hide our bodies and distract the eye with brands to not reveal ourselves. We fear ourselves for the traumas we hold, the years we spend with our body in the journey of life, but the scars we hide are like the patina and textures the wood takes upon itself with aging. The beauty of old wood lies in its weathering and not the polish. Taking two long worn-out logs of teak Raj makes facsimile of dents, breakages and fissures in bronze and copper. He displays them in the alcoves, the real wood hiding behind the metal.

PITALA



'Pitala (Brass)' and 'Tambra (Copper)' are two sculptures of the logs that in their veins hold memory of the forests.

BRASS

TAMBRA



COPPER



'Kansa (Bronze)', 'Tina (Tin)', 'Loha (Steel)' and 'Alum (Aluminium)' are four sculptures where Raj makes the brackets vertical in an upright standing position by giving them legs using bronze, tin, steel and aluminium. Using the same metals, he fills in the cavities left in by the pillars and wooden fixtures that have been taken apart. By filling them in he makes a cosmetic effort at making them complete again using a shining surface. An aesthetic measure is at play - we aren't ever made to feel complete with our adornments.

MUKHOWTA

KANSA



BRASS

RAJ SHAHANI

TINA



GERMAN SILVER

MUKHOWTA

LOHA



STEEL

RAJ CHAHANI

PANCHDHATU



PENTA ALLOY

MAITRI



SOUL FRIEND



A serene statue of a 'Black Buddha' in 'Ashtadhatu' or eight metallised alloy made of gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc, tin, iron, and mercury sits matching the equilibrium the artist attempts with nature. Buddha preached distance and detachment in the realm of the Nagalokas. Over the years in New York many Afro-American scholars and polymath thinkers such as Cheikh Anta Diop in Senegal, Africa have drawn deep connections with African Animist worship of non-violence with that of the Buddha's teachings. Diop pointed out in his paper *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, 1974 - the African origins of Buddha with examples of his knotted hair and adherence to non-violence. Our forest sanctuary of once discarded wood is now alive in a long tradition of self-reflection and prayer.

SARPA DEVTAS



SNAKE GODS

The two fountains in the courtyard don snake sculptures made from a jute rope adorned with an iron hood and tail. Calling them 'Sarpa Devtas' they are drawn from the sacred Sarpa Kavus or Snake Groves of Kerala, through which water sprouts towards a blue sky above beckoning our belief in nature.

Protecting us.





RAJ SHAHANI

Raj Shahani (1960, Bombay) grew up in Mumbai and lived between the Middle-East and the United States since 1982. Coming out as queer at the age of 37 he began to break away from his career as a product-designer to more artistic pursuits until he began making sculpture at the age of 57 having enrolled himself into the Art Students League of New York.

Interested by the play between material as metaphors of human subconsciousness and ego manifesting in beauty. He had his first solo show in 2019 called *Caesura/Continuum* and then in 2023 'Old Fires Keep on Burning!', both at the Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai. In November 2023 he had a solo presentation at the Centre of Contemporary Art, Bikaner House with a show titled 'Colour , Stone, Chintz, Grain and Statue'. In 2022 he had a solo show at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, New York and Caelum Gallery, Chelsea, New York. He designed the backdrop of Royal Bombay Opera House for a chamber music concert from Switzerland called 'Continuum'. He also designed the award for the New York Indian Film Festival in 2020.

His work has been featured in the Architectural Digest, Vogue, Indian Express, Hindustan Times, Indian Express, The Hindu, Elle, Mumbai Mirror, Mid-Day, Cover story in the Sindhian Magazine, Seema Magazine - New York.

ANAMKARA ART

AnamKara is a space for the arts based in Delhi initiated to commence a dialogue between artistic practices from India and the World. Drawn from the Celtic phrase 'Anam Cara' or 'Soul friend', we hold a universalist mandate as our vision for exhibition-making in the space.

The universal need across humanity to engage and produce art is an essential covenant for Universalism. We at AnamKara through the process of exhibition making would like to engage an audience for artists with diverse practices who use varied mediums, conceptual imaginaries, and cultural contexts. Based in Delhi we inhabit a socio-political reality where we witness an urgent need to participate in an internationalist dialogue in the arts both aesthetically and conceptually. India is at a historic moment in history, a country celebrated for its diversity and known for its radical hospitality which echoes the Zulu phrase 'Ubuntu' or 'Humanity to others'.

The inception of AnamKara stemmed from the shared vision of Priyanka Kheterpal and Sukhbinder S Heer. Priyanka Kheterpal is an HR professional who has worked with the Boston Consulting Group and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Sukhbinder S Heer is a Corporate Finance professional in the United Kingdom and previously the Managing Partner of RSM Robson Rhodes - a partnership of Chartered Accountants. After collecting art for a decade, their global experiences and consulting insight gave them a holistic view of the opportunities that the Indian Art Scene presented. International Artists were seldom seen on the scene and a space dedicated to an international exhibitions program was for the asking.

We conceive a series of residencies that culminate in exhibitions where we work with artists internationally with a focus on artistic practices from the Middle East, Africa, and the Indian Diaspora.

Inviting artists to India to engage with artisans where a collaboration of conceptual ideas with artisanal knowledge will culminate in a syncretic image that mirrors our current cosmopolitanism. We curate exhibitions scenographed for an audience that can engage complex layered artist practices with simplicity. AnamKara has previously worked in the field of home architecture where we have provided turnkey art offerings for interiors. The multiplicity of medium is the chore of our aesthetic vision. Experimentation with art sets our gallery apart and our artists practices have ambitions for a community. We at AnamKara propose to be 'Soul Friends' to our artists, audience, and collectors.



SUKHBINDER S HEER - Co Founder

Sukhbinder is the driving force behind Anam Kara Art, serving as its Promoter and Co-founder. With a background in corporate finance, he seamlessly combines financial expertise with a passion for the arts. Sukhbinder's vision ensures that Anam Kara thrives as both a creative space and a financially solid venture, making it an innovative hub for artistic expression.



PRIYANKA KHETERPAL – Co Founder

Priyanka is the co-founder of Anam Kara Art, where she oversees the gallery's global operations. Her role encompasses leadership in strategy, business development, technology, and finance. Before Anam Kara, Priyanka served as the Global HR Director at Boston Consulting Group, working across markets in the US, Europe, and Asia. Prior to that, she contributed to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle and India.

ANAMKARA

www.anamkaraart.com
[@anamkaraart](https://www.instagram.com/anamkaraart)

*Seeking he goes.
He as an artist,
Raj,
Finds friends.
Who speak back the pain.
The pain of immense happiness.
The Soul Reaper.*

Sumesh-Manoj-Sharma
Jalgaon, 2024

MUKHOWTA

Raj Shahani
Raj@rajshahani.com
Instagram @shahaniraj

ANAMKARA
Delhi | London
info@anamkara.com