

The Sanctuary Interview

Meet Farooq Issa

Heritage protector, Art restorer and Dealer.

Owner of the famed 'Phillips - European and Oriental Art' that was established in 1860,

Farooq Issa is a natural history aficionado and a keeper of India's wildlife heritage.

He met Bittu Sabgal in his exquisitely maintained shop, which looks not unlike a small museum, and spoke of his passion for art and culture... and his fascination for shikar records.

The slaughter of tigers to meet new demands of Tibetans for skins shocked you, but you are probably India's leading expert on shikar documentation.

Yes, I do have a modest collection of books on *shikar* and natural history and also some old *shikar* photographs that I am particularly fond of. But that was another age and is now a part of history in much the way that wars, famines, floods and other human-caused traumas are. I am incensed at the terrible trend in Tibet where the new fashion for animal skins is driving tigers and leopards into oblivion. The fact is that when India's forests were extensive, *shikar* was unable to wipe out most animals. The tiger well and truly began to go under only after its forests were wiped out.

I agree. It is the double-barrelled attack of forest loss and poaching that is driving the tiger to its grave. Tell me Farooq, did you study art history formally, or is all this the result of passion and family tradition?

I studied ancient Indian culture at Elphinstone College. That is what truly set me on my path. What most people must understand is that history is not a dry as dust subject; rather it is a chronicle of human lives with its ups and downs, foibles and fancies. When you come right down to it, history provides us with a window into our own lives.

As I look around, it occurs to me that protecting these priceless documents that record history must be your most difficult task.

You can say that again. The weather in much of India, certainly Mumbai, is not conducive to keeping paper, books, paintings and textiles in good condition over any length of time. Humidity is the real killer. Although



Farooq Issa grew up surrounded by art and antiques and worked part time during his college days at 'Phillips Antiques', a business bought by his great-grandfather in 1920. This lithograph (facing page) from his collection depicts a fanciful combat between elephants and a rhino drawn by W. Daniel, R.A. and engraved by J. Redaway and published in 1834.

restoration is possible, it's always a short-term measure because humidity constantly waits like an assassin to take its toll. A solution would be to have climate-controlled environments for precious collections – but being expensive that is not always an option for most people or institutions.

What about the law of the land? I understand that registering art works can be a nightmare.

I would not quite call it a nightmare, but it's somewhat complicated and cumbersome. As far as heritage laws go, I'm completely for preserving India's treasures. But having said that, I feel some rationalisation is necessary – as is the case in most other countries including Italy and England. What constitutes a national treasure and what doesn't? Surely we can't leave such decisions to those who do not understand history or art. I doubt that anyone would

disagree with the need to protect antiques that are significantly part of the history of a country. But imposing a blanket ban on everything? That hardly protects our heritage. In fact, it is usually counter-productive.

Yours is one of Mumbai's oldest and best known families. What do you make of the changes you see today in Mumbai... in India?

I think I have adjusted to the changes, but mine is the fourth generation in the business and I rather suspect that my grandfather would have conniptions, if he were to step into Mumbai today. Theirs was a more graceful age.

So who actually started the business?

Phillips was bought by my great-grandfather, Soomar, in 1920 from, who else but, Mr. Phillips. Ours was a large family of 13 and Phillips was handed over to two of his

sons. At the time, it was a high-class emporium catering to the British and to wealthy Indians including nawabs, maharajas and the super rich, many of whom were extremely friendly with my grandfather, Ishaque.

Let's come back to shikar. You are not a hunter, but you are totally taken up with hunters and their erstwhile world.

I've always been very fond of reading about *shikar* – have grown up on a staple diet of Corbett and Anderson – and no amount of repeat readings dull the enthusiasm. Had I been born 50 years earlier, I am sure I would have been an enthusiastic *shikari* too, rather than an armchair explorer!

You would certainly have been keeping company with the rich and famous!

I would indeed and, as you might imagine, the rich and famous of the day had very few real outdoor pursuits, of which *shikar* was possibly the most popular. But that was then. Today, it is awful to see India's wildlife going so steadily downhill, especially the tiger. I do hope some sort of international pressure can be brought to bear on China to prevent our tigers landing up as skins in that country. It's the same short-sightedness that is destroying the humpbacks for their meat, sharks for their fins and beluga sturgeon for caviar. The *shikaris* of yore and the maharajas seemed to have a better understanding of how to conserve the animals they hunted by setting aside protected forests and declaring 'closed seasons'.

Was your family keen on shikar?

My grandfather would invariably be invited by his friends and associates to take part in *shikar* parties. He was no mean shot and several trophies continue to be on display in our bungalow near Porbander. But *shikar* was never our business. We dealt in all manner of luxuries. Our shop stayed in business by catering to those who had the money to indulge themselves.

But Phillips sells none of these luxuries today. Around me here, all I see is fine art and memorabilia of a bygone age.

True. But the marble statues, the glass chandeliers, the ornate flower pots and snuff



boxes, *were* the indulgences of yesterday. Today, of course, most homes would not even have the space to keep most of these things.

Everything was imported then right?

Virtually everything. Not because the same things could not be made in India, but because there was snob value to goods brought in 'from Blighty'. In the early 1950s, when restrictions began to be imposed on imports, luxury products from England and Europe – Aspreys' leather goods, picnic baskets, cameras, perfumes and toiletries and the like – became difficult and expensive to bring in. Meanwhile, my grandfather had become an obsessive collector. He thought why not start selling some of these things at Phillips so the art gradually took centre stage and luxury imports took a back seat.

So some of these rare items you have in stock even today were bought then?

Yes. Those were also the golden years for buying art in India because the abolition of privy purses meant that royalty had to sell their treasures to keep going. Hyderabad, Bikaner, Kashmir, Mysore, you name it... all were keen to sell their 'junk' in exchange for cash, which had suddenly become very

short. Many customers – those who had patronised Phillips a decade or so earlier – now came back to Phillips to sell their goods as 'surplus to requirements', which in those days meant huge godowns full of furniture, chandeliers and art.

It's a very technical trade. How did you actually learn the ropes?

I grew up surrounded by art and antiques. My father Habib brought me and my sister Muneera to the shop to play as children. Through college, I worked part time at the shop, meeting customers, dealers, hearing their conversations, learning about great buys from my father and grandfather and also some not so great ones – the pitfalls. People say that great dealers and collectors are born, not made – I'm not sure how true that is, but certainly in my case I'm lucky I was born into a collecting family. It is probably in my genes!

You love this, don't you?

Absolutely. For me the thrill of the chase is a huge motivation – I'm talking about art, not animals! When I am invited to someone's house to 'see their things', I always go. I love to see how people live, what they collect, how they display their things. And if perchance,

I do hope some sort of international pressure can be brought to bear on China to prevent our tigers landing up as skins in that country. It's the same short-sightedness that is destroying the humpbacks for their meat, sharks for their fins and beluga sturgeon for caviar. The *shikaris* of yore and the maharajas seemed to understand much better how to conserve the animals they hunted by setting aside protected forests and declaring 'closed seasons'.



PHOTO.
ERNEST BROOKS.

H.M. KING GEORGE TIGER SHOOTING IN INDIA.

690.A.Z.
BEAGLES' POSTCARDS.

An old print of H.M. King George tiger shooting in India. Phillips' incredible collection drives home the fact that archival records serve as a valuable chronicle of human lives and values.

I find something to buy, that's a bonus. But, it is sad when people are forced to sell treasured possessions because they really need the money. But, I suppose that's life. I must add that at Phillips we often find that those with limited means are the most passionate collectors – willing even to pay in installments every month toward their purchase. My father didn't mind that at all and neither do I. In fact, good taste and money seldom go together.

Is it still the same today?

Collecting trends have changed – the younger breed of collectors – those with the money and, hopefully, taste – are opting for newer collecting fields. Of course, contemporary art is at the forefront, but so is folk and tribal art. It's also something that strikes a chord within me – particularly because it's so little researched and written about. There is still a chance to buy great works and I think people should. There should ideally be a museum for this kind of art in a city like Mumbai.

What is the future of the fine art trade in India?

Possibly the same as it would be anywhere else in the world. Wealth will always chase exclusive art. Phillips has always stocked a diverse range of merchandise, but the really great works like Moghul miniatures, jade,

silver and fine bronzes are becoming practically impossible to find. We therefore veer towards furniture, decorative art, folk and tribal art and, more recently, high-quality reprints of old photographs, maps, prints, lithographs and posters with Indian themes. Many customers for instance want vintage images of Bombay and other cities and originals are truly prohibitive now. Reprints

on archival paper, priced reasonably allow people to enjoy art and learn to appreciate it too. The same goes for old *shikar* photographs and aquatints.

Thank you Farooq. Thanks also for the loan of the incredible images you have always made available to Sanctuary.

It's a pleasure. You use the images to protect what I love. I should be thanking you. 🐦

Sketches such as this one of a large Indian civet *Viverra Zibetha* highlight the invaluable contribution of the natural history artists of the day.





On the cover

One of the rarest sights in Manas, a tiger out in the open. Can we bring the rhino back to this natural wonderland?

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Call of the wild Sanctuary

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A S I A

22 Manas – Looking Back, Looking Forward

The Manas river flows from the gorges of Bhutan and waters one of India's most vital protected forests. This paradise on Earth, once best known for rhinos, has seen major upheavals that have left it tattered, but astonishingly, not completely torn. Dr. Anwaruddin Choudhury writes on the fall and tentative rise of the Manas National Park.



50 The Mating Tusker

Bivash Pandav, a Sanctuary-ABN AMRO Wildlife Service Award winner, writes movingly of the death of a tusker he had observed over time in the Chilla range in the Rajaji National Park. The relocation of *Gujjars* (herdsmen) from Chilla has ushered in rapid and remarkable habitat and wildlife recovery. The author warns, however, that the problems are far from over. Forest corridors are still threatened by all manner of people including worshippers of elephants.



54 Land of Cold Falling Water

The impressive and mystical mountain system of Anggo Ching on the Manipur-Burma border finds mention in the accounts of the kings of Manipur. Salam Rajesh treks through these thick forests that house a rich biological diversity ranging from orchids to macaques. He explored the Trui-li-li waterfall and the Achomaki lake and fell in love with this land of cold falling water.

Contributors



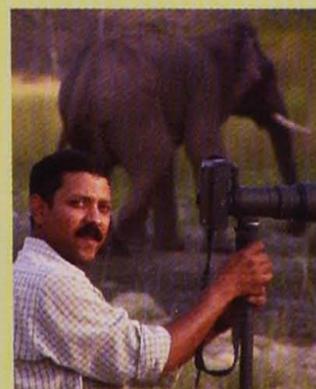
Manoj V. Nair

An IFS officer, he is a wildlife biologist by training and believes that the future of our wilds is in the hands of the younger generation. **32**



Joanna Van Gruisen

A naturalist-photographer, she has spent her life documenting and studying the wildlife of India. **42**



Bivash Pandav

A wildlife biologist and researcher, he is as concerned about elephants in Corbett and Rajaji as turtles in Bhitarkanika. **50**



Salam Rajesh

Natural history writer, researcher and photographer, he is deeply committed to the protection of Manipur's wilderness areas. **54**