

Bollywood Cinema Show Cards: Indian Film Art from the 1950s to the 1980s

This exhibition follows the historic and stylistic development of Hindi film advertising during Indian's independence from Britain in 1947 to the 1980s—just before India entered into the global economy.

Most people have heard of Bollywood cinema: the commercial film industry based in the port city of Bombay-- now called Mumbai-- on the western coast of India.

The term “Bollywood” is derived from combining “Bombay” with “Hollywood” and reflects an early awareness of international cinema in India.

Today Bollywood, alongside other Indian film industries, produces over 800 films a year, making India's film industry one of the largest in the world. Most Bollywood films today follow the *masala* or “mixed” format, a style developed in the 1960s.

These fantastical films tend to be around three hours long and rely on viewers detaching themselves from an everyday reality. Plots tend to have many characters and follow non-linear narratives. Films are shot in multiple locations and the song and dance scenes, a key component of Bollywood cinema, contribute to the spectacular nature of these larger-than-life films.

While Bollywood films have been studied by scholars and received much media attention, the culture of advertising has not. This exhibition seeks to change that by focusing on one specific form of advertising—the Show Card.

Though sizes vary, most Show Cards are roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ of a meter long by $\frac{1}{2}$ a meter wide: some horizontally or landscape oriented, others vertically or portrait. All feature colourful collages of photographic stills that have been mounted on cardboard then hand-tinted. Poster paints were used to depict landscapes and interior spaces, as well as connect the different actors and actresses: the vibrant hues not only enhancing the realism of the image but also

conveying different emotions of the film-- red for passion, green for jealousy, blue for calm, etc.

Show Cards usually came in sets of four or six and were displayed in glass cases outside the theatre or in the lobby. Because they were advertisements, theatre owners tended to dispose of the Show Cards once the film left their venue, hence the excitement behind this rare collection.

This exhibition of more than seventy pieces features many single Show Cards as well as several sets. Most display signs of wear and tear—dirt, dog-eared corners and torn stills-- but keep their visual impact intact.

A bird's eye view of the exhibit space shows the walls arranged in the shape of the letter "X." Organized chronologically, each area of the exhibition is devoted to a specific decade spanning the 50s through 80s. Brightly coloured walls of orange, yellow and pink are illuminated by two chandeliers, meant to evoke the luxury of the Art-Deco theatre of the 1920s and 30s. The exterior walls opposite the entrance display twenty-four dramatic Bollywood posters, double-hung against a vibrant magenta backdrop. The

exhibition also features a film projection and video, and the closing section features various other forms of Bollywood advertising.

WORK ONE

Queen Rani Rupmati

Artist Unknown

This Show Card is from the 1957 film *Rani Rupmati*, directed by S.N. Tripathi. Made in Mumbai, India—the centre of the Bollywood film industry-- the Show Card is one of a set of three. It hangs between its two sister *Rani Rupmati* prints against an orange wall in the 1950s section of the exhibition.

This Show Card measures 52 cms high by 40 cms wide or 20.5 inches high by 15.7 inches wide. Because the print was likely stored in very humid conditions, the cardboard-- originally eggshell in colour-- has turned light brown in patches not covered with paint or photos, as depicted by the two-inch, unfinished border. A thin, olive green interior border enclosing the actual advertisement gives the appearance of a picture frame. Both bottom corners, as well as the top left corner of the print are torn away, likely a result of the Show Card being removed from its glass display case

upon completion of the film's run.

The film *Rani Rupmati* is set during the historic reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar in the late sixteenth-century.

The plot centres around a Sultan's son named Wajid, played by actor Bharat Bhushan, and his friendship with a Hindu woman, Rajkumari Rupmati, played by actress Nirupa Roy.

Focused on India's pre-colonial history, the film enables viewers to revel in the splendors of India's powerful past before British presence. The historical distance allowed the director to explore the tensions surrounding Hindu/Muslim relationships: an extremely controversial subject after the violent partition of India only ten years prior that left the country divided into two states, India and Pakistan.

The focal point of this Show Card is the tinted silver gelatin photograph of a man and woman standing together in the upper half of the print. It's been pasted onto a cardboard background and painted a wispy blue and white. Rajkumari Rupmati is positioned in front of Wajid and the couple stands with their heads turned left, peering into the horizon. Both

have their left arms outstretched with palms facing upward, perhaps in mid-dance, and black shading around them creates the effect of their shadows.

The lower half of the Show Card bears the hand-painted title positioned at 6 o'clock, written in Hindi Devanagari script, featuring bright yellow lettering outlined in black. Further information about the film is written in smaller white lettering surrounding it. The title is set within a mauve-coloured rectangle with a half-moon shape at top-centre and spans the base of the poster.

Above the title is a *vina*, a stringed instrument featuring an intricately-carved, long-necked lute and large round resonator gourd, painted in pale-yellow with white accents. The *vina* is associated with Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning, and is most often used in South Indian music. The instrument underscores the characters, drawing the viewer's attention to them as the main image.

WORK TWO

Sampoorna Ramayana (The Complete Ramayana)

Artist Unknown

Tinted silver gelatin print, poster paint, and letterpress text on paper mounted on board

This show card was created for the Wadia Brother's 1961 film *Sampoorna Ramayana* (The Complete Ramayana). Made in Mumbai, India, it's the only *Sampoorna Ramayana* print in the exhibition, although it originally would have been displayed as a set of four or six.

The *Ramayana* is one of the most well-recognized Hindu epics across South Asia. It tells the tale of good Prince Rama's battle for his wife, Sita, who's stolen by the evil demon Ravana. The original *Ramayana* was sung in Sanskrit and is over 24,000 verses. This film ambitiously presents the entire story in about three hours.

Landscape oriented, this Show Card measures 50 cms high by 60 cms wide or 19.6 inches high by 23.6 inches wide and hangs on a vivid yellow wall in the 1960s section of the exhibition. It's flanked between vertically hung sets of Show Cards for the 1962 film *Aarti* on the left and the 1961 film *Pyaar ka Sagar* on the right.

The print is divided diagonally into two main sections, from top left to bottom right. The right hand diagonal is further divided into a diamond pattern and features two scenes from *Ramayana*. One scene denotes two figures in a forest, painted in a mixture of greens, yellows and blues.

Rama's holding a bow and arrow and glancing at a female, who's coyly looking back at him. The second diamond shows a man kneeling with an offering for Rama. None of the hand-drawn figures are coloured to emphasize the enhanced photo of Sita to the left.

The film title in the bottom corner positioned at five o'clock reads "Ramayana," painted in white capital letters against a navy-blue tapestry background. Although a Hindi film, it's written in English with the Hindi translation scrawled in smaller print below the dominant English version.

The main focal point of the card in the left diagonal features a painted headshot of the female lead, Anita Guha as Sita. It's pasted onto a background of swirling pale pinks and blues; a stone statue of a Hindu god positioned in the background above Sita's head.

The photograph itself is the only non-painted portion of the entire Show Card, save subtle enhancements to the star's image.

Gracefully glancing off to the left, Sita's black hair is pulled back with a painted garland of light orange and yellow flowers and adorned with an elegant *tikka*: South Asian jewelry that dangles down across the forehead. She also wears a pearl necklace with black beads and the beginnings of a light blue sari disappear below the cut-out.

Visible nail holes at the top centre of the Show Card remind viewers that these prints were never intended as works of art but rather as advertisements to market artistic film works.

Because of audience familiarity with Hindu folklore, *Sampoorna Ramayana* is an example of the mythical film genre popular before and for about twenty years after Indian independence. The early 1960s marked the end of the popularity of mythology and, by the 1970s, Bollywood filmmakers had mostly stopped producing the genre, citing audience entertainment as the most important aspect for their projects.

WORK THREE

Garam Masala (Hot Mixed Spice)

Printed by Color Lab; Mumbai, India; 1972,

Tinted and untinted gelatin silver prints on coloured paper and cardboard with screen-printed lettering

This commanding blue Show Card for the 1972 film *Garam-Masala* is bright, exciting and diverse—physically embodying the characteristics of a masala film.

The masala film became increasingly popular in the 1970s. Masalas, or “mixtures” in English, use a number of different characters, plotlines and settings along with lavish music and dance numbers.

This *Garam-Masala* Show Card is one of a set of four displayed in the exhibition. Stylistically similar, each card has one distinct colour depicting a different scene from the film. This particular print measures 50 cms high by 60 cms wide or 19.6 inches high by 23.6 inches wide.

In the 1970s section of the exhibition, the largest portion of the show with 25 prints, it hangs below a bright yellow and to the right of an orange *Garam-Masala* Show Card back dropped by a complimentary vibrant magenta wall.

In *Garam-Masala*, Indian army captain and womanizer Kishore, decides he wants a gypsy woman.

But his plans are foiled when the woman kills herself and her sister, Jugnu, played by actress Aruna Irani, disguises herself as a masked man named “Garam-Masala” or Hot Mixed Spice and vows to avenge her sister’s death.

The large portrait features an azure sky filled with the stars and subtly tinted images of Jugna and Indian comedian Mahmood dominating the middle right foreground. Jugna, on the left, is ornately dressed, wearing a matching set of blue and silver dangle earrings, chunky necklace and South Asian *tikka*. She bears heavy-winged black eyeliner, fashionable in the 1960s, and a slightly mischievous smile. Her head is tilted right, in Mahmood’s direction, but her gaze drifts out at the viewer.

To her right and tucked slightly behind Jugna, Mahmood gazes at her with a lustful look in his eyes. He wears a dark blue pattered *kurta*, a type of South Asian men’s shirt, and his skin is tinged a slight blue-green, making him appear

sickly but was likely meant to convey his desire for the female. A small photograph of a white colonial building, reminiscent of the White House, is pasted in lower left corner.

The landscape-oriented poster is set on cream-coloured cardboard which frames the contrasting blue theme. The bottom quarter of the Show Card features the film title in playful wobbly font and a hand-drawn, black and white painting of two men dueling to its immediate left. The text in this Show Card is written entirely in English, save the small Hindi translation in the bottom left corner.

WORK FOUR

Payal ki Jhankaar (The Tinkling of Anklets)

Unknown artist

Tinted and untinted silver gelatin print and poster paint on textured board with hand-lettering and cut-out title

This Show Card was created for the Satyen Bose's 1980 film *Payal ki Jhankaar (pah-yuhl kee Junk-aar) (The Tinkling of Anklets)*. It was made in Mumbai, India using the same technique of pasting photographs on a painted background

and painting over them. It measures 37.5 cms high by 63 cms wide or 14.8 inches high by 24.8 inches.

This Show Card is one of six shown in the exhibition and hangs on a bright orange wall arranged in grid formation.

The film is about a young woman named Shyama, played by Komal Mahuvakar, from the mountain village of Uttar Pradesh who dreams of becoming a dancer. Through her journey, she meets village drummer Gopal, played by Alankar Joshi, and the two fall in love.

The movie follows Shyama through the hills of the Himalayas and documents her trials and tribulations in pursuit of her ambitions.

Payal ki Jhannkar presents the small village as a fantasy land to which the urban population of 1980s India could escape through film.

The light-hearted plot offered relief to a population experiencing brutal communal clashes that culminated in the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

This landscape Show Card is approximately twice as wide as it is tall and is more heavily photo collaged than the other Show Cards. The background, visible in the upper half of the print, is painted with thick brush strokes showing a distant forest of tall evergreen trees and blue, low-rolling mountains. The sky is awash with surreal hues of pale teal and emerald green, and the entire image is underscored by a two-inch thick stripe of dark blue paint brushed across the bottom.

The focal point of the Show Card features a large photo cut-out of actress Mahuvakari as village girl Shyama, and Joshi as drummer Gopal. Shyama wears a pink and blue striped skirt, that flares as she dances, and a yellow crop top with an intricate black pattern. A sheer blue scarf drapes her right shoulder, trails down her back and over her skirt.

She holds her hands in classic Indian dance gesture: fingers splayed upward and open, resembling a flower. To her right, Gopal wearing white pants and long-sleeved shirt, and a bright blue vest gathered with a red belt, gazes at Shyama--romantically entranced by her dance. Two Nagara drums hang at his waist: two drumsticks occupy his hands.

Behind the lovers, an open field of villagers is depicted in a group dance; a scene cut from a black and white photo and costumes painted in the same vivid colours of blue, orange and red. Numerous onlookers, also originally a black and white photo cut out, watch the performance.

The film title positioned at 7 o'clock has been pasted to the photograph, set before a smaller depiction of Shyama and Gopal in performance.

WORK FIVE

Sholay (Embers)

Designed and printed by Film Art;

Offset lithograph

This poster was designed and printed by Film Art in Mumbai, India in the 1980s or later. It was printed for the 1975 film *Sholay*, the most popular and highest grossing Bollywood blockbuster of all-time which made one of its lead actors, Amitabh Bachchan, a superstar.

The poster is an offset lithograph print, which was a commonly used printing technique before the digital era. In offset printing, an image is transferred from a plate to rubber to the printing surface; in this case paper.

This Show Card measures 92.5 cms high by 69.5 cms wide or 36.4 inches high by 27.4 inches wide and hangs in the poster section of the exhibit on the lower right-hand side of the magenta wall. It's flanked between two of Bachchan's other film posters: 1973s *Saudagar* and 1973s *Namak Haraam*.

This fiery orange, red and yellow upright print captures the powerful energy and action of *Sholay*, often referred to as a "curry" western as it plays off American westerns of the 1950s and 60s. The background is dominated by fire-like shadows and colorations.

Along the top edge of the Show Card are four small portraits outlined in red, each showing a different character emoting a dramatic facial expression to convey different scenes from the film.

Below these headshots, the dominant image features two young crooks-- Veeru, played by Dharmendra, and Jaidev, played by Bachchan-- who are hired by a former police officer to track down a notorious gangster named Gabbar Singh.

Veeru on the left and Jaidev on the right each wield a handgun, ready to shoot. Aggressively poised Veeru, clad in black denim jeans and jacket; Jaidev dressed in the polar opposite of white denim jeans and jacket, seemingly aiming at a villain.

Jaidev is depicted as the quintessential 1970s Bollywood “angry young man”: an anti-hero who challenges authority. This character type struck a chord in a country suffering deep political turmoil and dissatisfaction with government and the film was released the same year as the Indian Emergency: a twenty-one month period of suspended elections and civil liberties imposed by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

The title *Sholay* at the bottom of the poster features black-outlined block letters with an orange crackled pattern resembling rocks or the cracked surface of arid desert clay. Additional film information in pale blue font surrounds the title, as does the title reprinted in Devanagari script in the lower left corner.

