

Breaking the Museum Mould

NOT A CONVENTIONAL MUSEUM, SARMAYA BRIDGES THE PAST AND PRESENT THROUGH ITS DIGITALLY-DRIVEN APPROACH

What does it mean for a museum to be modern? Just take a look at Sarmaya – a digital museum with a physical collection that represents the diverse histories and artistic traditions of India. At its heart, it is a carefully curated repository of art, artefacts and living traditions from the larger Indian subcontinent along with Paul Abraham and his late wife Tina's private collection of historical Indian art and artefacts. Set up as an online museum in 2015, Sarmaya, which is an Urdu word that means 'a collective or shared wealth', seeks to do just that. A lovingly nurtured idea, today, it is led by Paul and Pavitra Rajaram, his partner in life and many creative pursuits. We have loved and traced her journey as she relentlessly uncovers and shares India's artistic and cultural heritage, as the Creative Director of Pavitra Rajaram Design, and as the brand custodian of Sarmaya.

With over 9,000 objects, including coins, maps, photographs, engravings, indigenous art, contemporary art, and rare books, it's truly a treasure to cherish. Within their walls, they also house a library of approximately 12,000 books, an invaluable resource for researchers. However, what truly sets Sarmaya apart is its ability



Paul Abraham, who created Sarmaya out of his love for collecting and telling stories around India's cultural history and artistic traditions

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to transcend the physical experience and create an equally fulfilling digital one.

“While at a museum, someone once told me, ‘There’s no substitute for standing in front of an object,’” recounts Paul. “But, I believe, it shouldn’t be a binary choice. For those without physical access, how can you create a digital, immersive experience with storytelling and visuals that still keep people continuously engaged?” Accordingly, Sarmaya thrives in the digital realm, sharing stories of different lengths and depths (visitors can choose their preference) on their website, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube channels.

At Sarmaya, these visitors can read about topics as diverse as Mughal sarais, Golconda diamonds, the animals that frequently adorn Indian coins and how Tamil cinema shaped politics. They can get intimately acquainted with photographs depicting the early architectural landscapes of cities and ancient scribe paintings. And, they can listen to a range of talks by industry experts on topics like hidden languages, the revival of hand-block printing and a cross-cultural look at botanical art. “History was one of the main pillars around which my curiosity developed,” Paul reflects, as he now directs his efforts at Sarmaya into instilling a similar enthusiasm in others.

Throughout all of Sarmaya’s online and offline content, their commitment to the diversity of opinion is evident, keen to encourage dialogue, sensitively accommodate different perspectives, and introduce narratives through the lens of today. “Our goal is to tell a compelling story through a compassionate lens. We want people to engage with us and bring their different perspectives,” says Paul. The pair’s remarkable generosity of spirit in sharing their archive and supporting the work of young historians, artists and conservationists gives us a stimulating and multi-faceted journey into the past, while redefining the concept of what a museum is, and can be, today. ♦ sarmaya.in



Sarmaya’s diverse collection of Indian art and artefacts includes The Silver Rupee of Akbarabad Mint, c. 1130-1131 (Hijri year or AH) and The Temptation (from the Issanama Project), 2017-2018