FRANCKESCHE STIFTUNGEN

A »Germany cabinet« in India? We asked Asma Menon why and how she collected.**

The interview was conducted by Jasmin Eppert, 2013-2020 Project Manager of the Museum for Intercultural Dialogue in the Ziegenbalghouse in Tharangambadi

A cabinet of curiosities in Tharangambadi. Were you surprised about this project idea?
Growing up in a home and extended family, all the homes had a cabinet. The same was predominantly filled with porcelain objects, both antique and current. England, Japan {my grandfather had business with Japan}, Germany {my father's sister visited a few times}, Australia and New Zealand {my father had visited} and objects given as gifts by visitors, mainly from overseas, who were guests with us. The concept was not alien. The approach was. When I heard about the cabinet, the first thing was to read about the history of cabinets via Wikipedia. Germany has a rich history of cabinets. On the aside, I did inform the Francke Foundations, that their cabinet was not listed on wiki and that must change to also include Tranquebar.

Would you introduce us to your family?
I am an Indian artist. I was born in an Ismaili family. Our Imam is the Aga Khan. Our family has been living in Madras for the past 125 years. By virtue of this, we are Tamilians. Originally, my ancestors came from across the Khyber and settled in Gujarat, near Rajkot. We are a very cosmopolitan family, with a lot of interfaith and global marriages. My great grandfather, Janab Poppat Jamal, was affectionately called Poppat Bhai by his friends, came to Madras to escape the severe drought that hit his village. He was a teenager then. He worked for the Stag Umbrella Company and later with Porr&Sons, in what is now called Myanmar.
My great grandfather was a respected member of the Ismaili Jamaat. He was a man of great vision. He worked hard and started a small business venture. His younger brother, Moti, and his cousin Zinna joined him in this expanding business. My father was the first born son of the second generation line. My grandmother came from the Padamsee family from Mumbai. Maybe the creative genes that my siblings and I share are on account of her. This was further encouraged by my parents.
I always wanted to become an artist. Formal education in arts started when I was around 10 years old, under the aegis of Balan Nambiar in Bangalore. (We lived in Bangalore from 1971 to 1977). Then, after school I joined the Government College of Arts, Chennai. At age 38, I went back to do my Masters in Art.

What was your motivation to go to Germany for three months?
This question is a misnomer, the motivation is the PROJECT. Not the country. The time frame also has no relevance.
When I first heard about the project from a fellow artist friend, who had other commitments and unable to be away for a prolonged period of time, I then requested, if I applied for the same, would it be okay. On the affirmative, I contacted Jasmin Eppart and spoke to her about my interest.
The collection, to create a Cabinet of Curiosities by a single collector is a pioneering one. I myself was excited and terrified, when the approval came for me to take up this novel, totally unchartered waters realm of work, what better, than to shake oneself up from the comfort zone of existing creative endeavours. It was exhilarating to say the least. Ahhhh the challenge to discover.

The journey was an important one, both metaphorically and physically, to experience a new landscape, culture, society, food, and on and on. It's the opening of the all the senses.

Which places did you visit in Germany? Which places did you like the most?
Arrived at Frankfurt airport , took a train with Jasmine to Leipzig. I started with Leipzig, Steudten, Uebigau, Delitzsch, Falkenberg, Liebenwerda, Naundorf, and visited cities like Halle, Jena, Dresden, Bremen with Worpswede, Goettingen or Frankfurt. Each of the places had a charm of their own. There is no one place, I particularly liked over another. I must say that wherever I went, I looked forward to returning to Halle. As I looked at Halle as my temporary home, during my short stay. And home is after all where the heart is.
The people of Halle are very welcoming to a stranger from an alien culture. At stores, people helped me read labels, showed me, how to punch a tram ticket. I was with people who showed empathy. In life it's not the big things that matter, it's the small gestures that build up a holistic relationship.
I have travelled trough Germany via train. The country is so well connect by their train service, all my trains were on time, down to the minute, except once at Gottengen, when a severe storm broke out. Trains have their charm, looking out the window, guessing who lives in the tiny hamlets. One can spin stories by just viewing the landscape. Yes, I enjoyed it.

How did the journey change your perception of another country?
Journeys are not to do with perception, for me at least. It's to do with knowledge, educating oneself of life's myriad canvas. A jigsaw puzzle is preconceived perception, as with perception comes a pre disposed expectation. As i came to receive and absorb the newness of my environment, I embraced it and lived it to the hilt.
There is a sufi quote by RUMI ((1207 – 1273), a 13th-century Persian poet, Islamic scholar and a Sufi mystic, from Greater Khorasan in Greater Iran, who is one of the most read writers in Middle and Far East, South Asia and North America): »Dive today from the cliff of what you know into what you can't know.«

You've been working with children in the Krokosseum in Halle. Was there no language problem?
I work with children in India. Being in Halle, I realized that the Francke Foundations has on campus a school, an afterschool centre and the children´s creativity centre Krokoseum. This was an opportunity to work with children who live in a culture, different from India and many of them coming from different cultures themselves or of mixed racial background. Thus, I met Friederike and informed her of my request to interact via a creative process. I took workshops at the afterschool centre and the Krokosseum.
The first workshop was the kolam, a geometrical design of lines and dots connecting, decorated with colours and flowers {normally on festivals flowers are added}. With Diwali coming, we made bags decorated with the lamp/diya. And basic tribal art forms from India.
Asita, Shian, Hasan, Sharmilla, Betasa, Camlin are some of the children, who came for my workshops both at the Krokoseum and the afterschool centre.
Children are children, full of beans and like to do fun activities. What was most notable, is the transition, being German, speaking the language and interacting on the same level. Having visited two homes, the children were equally comfortable in speaking the language, that their parents came from and rituals that belong to their foundation culturally. May they be able to

maintain this balance as they grow. The few times I passed Hasan on the road, he would always respectfully wish me with a SALAM ALEIKUM. And I accordingly.

Back to your collection assignment: Where and how did you collect them?
Wherever I travelled, my first objective was, I trust, to find a piece for the museum. Second hand stores in Halle were a treasure trove. I went every week to check if stock had been gathered afresh. Digging through boxes, after seeking permission, I have found nuggets.
The objects were chosen, as per the audience, ie Indian. They needed to see for lack of another word, a spectrum and that each object becomes a conversation piece.
From home to churches to transport to a way of life, different from India.
Easily, the wall plates, especially the Rosenthal ones. The smoking man from Seifen. The advent calendar from the Francke Foundations Store. And the icing on the cake is the contemporary apartment block that is also a clock.

What is »German« to you after your journey?
What is German. I visited and experienced some slices of Germany. Mostly what was once East of Germany, the former GDR. Now of course, too, far east has become west.
Germany as any country are the people, here, the ones I interacted with first, I could have a conversation. A grounded view to family, I made a friend, time, precision, a place for things.
The new multicultural ethos that is unfolding, via the children I worked with. They are the future.
These are my personal views.

*In 2019 we welcomed Asma Menon to the Francke Foundations. Together with the Art Foundation of the State of Saxony-Anhalt and organized by Jasmin Eppert, the project manager of the Museum for Intercultural Dialogue in Tharangambadi, we invited her to Halle for an exciting art project. For three months Asma immersed herself in the city, travelled through Germany and met new friends and old acquaintances. From the many encounters she chose objects for a »Germany cabinet« in the Museum for Intercultural Dialogue in the Ziegenbalg House in Tharangambadi. Her predecessors were the missionaries from Hall, who in the 18th century got to know the culture and everyday life in the then Tranquebar. Their (for the European view) worth knowing and curious discoveries they sent regularly to the Hallesche Orphanage. Here a whole »India cabinet« is part of the Wunderkammer. Inspired by this story, a »Germany cabinet« has now been created in Tharangambadi.