

Ritual slaughter with a Hi-Tec Pilot C # 0.4, Maoist posters, Russian folk, the Bollywood poster reborn, and Brazilian woodcut graffiti. We report on illustration trends from the emergent BRIC economies and look back to a Golden Age of magazines. "In the days of hot metal, I once asked for a cut-out of a man smoking a pipe. When I dared to venture a suggestion that the blockmaker's attempt fell a little short and that it would be good if the pipe was attached to the man's mouth rather than floating in thin air, I remember being curtly asked 'Who d'you think I am? Fucking Rembrandt?'" Martin Colyer, *Modern Magazines* are Rubbish?

18 REPORT: India

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Don, film poster, 1978

## Bollywood Renaissance

Rumours of the death of the spectacular hand-painted Bollywood film poster were much exaggerated. ALLAN DRUMMOND discovers that an art form that was supposed to be a victim of the digital age has been given new life by it

Imagine doing an advertising illustration commission requiring a 60ft by 40 ft oil painting on canvas. Imagine completing it in four days alongside several other commissions. Then imagine the thrill of seeing your painting on display on giant hoarding, becoming part of a city landscape, towering above Mumbai, the most populous metropolis on earth. And then imagine, once your canvas is taken down, people clamouring to own your original art, not for its artistic value, but simply because oil paint on canvas happens to keep the rain out.

Such was the incredible work cycle of India's last remaining movie poster artists, whose pieces regularly rotated from their intended positions high up on spotlit city billboards only to end up being recycled as lowly shanty-town roofing material.

Speed-painting is a term used nowadays in the world of fantasy illustration to describe quick, impressionistic images of characters, landscapes or environments created off the cuff using digital media. But the artists who created the massive Bollywood posters of the recent past were the world's true speed-painters. They worked on a giant scale, in amazing detail, and at a superhuman pace.

Until very recently it was generally thought that digital inkjet printing, television, radio and the Internet had all but eliminated the art and craft of Indian hand-painted movie posters. The last of these artists, who had spent a lifetime perfecting their processes in cramped studios in the backstreets of Mumbai and other cities, did enjoy a brief spurt of fame in the West. Events such as the 2002 show at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London titled 'Cinema India: The Art of Bollywood' celebrated the work of this dying breed of supersize illustration.

### Memorabilia market

The work of these artists was also well documented in fashionable art magazines across the globe. One or two of the best – artists such as Balkrishna Vaidya even toured Europe and Australia showing off their skills. He and others now have a dedicated following of collectors and patrons willing to pay handsomely to own their art. The West's fascination for this craft was partly driven by nostalgia for a dying art form, partly by a fascination for the Kitsch nature of the images and their gaudy colours, and by the increasing scarcity of original paintings.

But an interesting new cycle may have begun in Mumbai. It seems that Indian filmgoers themselves – residents of Mumbai and indigenous audiences – have recognised anew the power of the handcrafted poster. There is considerable local demand within India once again for these images. This time around the vividly coloured artwork is being sought out, not by people wanting to make roofs for their shelters, but by genuine collectors and movie fans. A memorabilia industry centered around Bollywood, is taking off, according to Hinesh Jethwani, Founder & Head of *Indian Hippy*, the world's largest online platform selling Bollywood posters and other vintage memorabilia.

Jethwani tells me that for the just-released movie *Rowdy Rathore*, filmmaker Sanjay Leela Bhansali employed street painters to make hand-painted posters and portraits of the cast. The canvases are photographed and then the images are digitally printed at a smaller size for distribution to movie fans. Recognition of the craft value of painted posters and the whole tradition surrounding it is driving this apparent renaissance, he says.



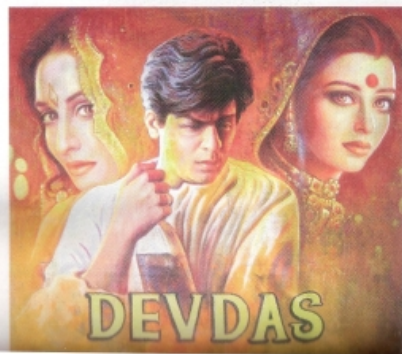


Lucas Mondal at work on a film poster





Mughal-e-Azam, film poster, 1960



Devdas, film poster, 2002



Mother India, film poster, 1957

And in another, perhaps global turn in the cycle, he also says that the new painterly poster for the latest movie *Rockstar* was produced, not in the cramped conditions of a Mumbai backstreet warehouse, but in Berlin by Polish illustrator Grzegorz Domaradzki. The poster's designer was Rahul Nanda but Domaradzki did the rendering – albeit digitally – of the star Ranbir Kapoor looking grim yet rebellious with his flowing locks and overgrown beard. The images were first worked up in pencil by Domaradzki from movie stills.

Jethwani believes the home-based renaissance in interest in Indian movie posters has staying power. He also sells lobby show cards, song booklets, old movie tickets, brochures, and black and white still photos and he firmly believes that his business is no longer driven by nostalgia. Typography and fashion, he says, are being influenced by the revival in interest in the art of the Bollywood film poster.

Indianhippy owns a few of the rarest posters, survivors from the 1930s and 40s, which Jethwani describes as priceless. "These treasured relics will never be sold," he says. But where several copies do exist, some posters sell for thousands of dollars. For example a poster for the 1965 film *Guide* starring Bollywood superstar Dev Anand recently sold at an auction for US\$4,000. "We have an original first print of the same poster for sale at \$2,500. To the best of my knowledge, no one else

in the country has an original, first print copy of *Guide* for sale. It's impossible to find such rare posters today."

Jethwani's collection includes a poster of one of the earliest silent films, *Shirin Farhad* which dates back to 1931, and another rare 1950 classic *Pyaar*.

#### Western taste

Jethwani concedes that as far as speed is concerned, traditional studio painting methods will never be able to catch up with the digital world. Instant distribution and print technology have stolen the show. But hand painting, and the crafted brush-mark will, he asserts, "Always remain sought after for their unparalleled beauty."

Jethwani clearly believes in the integrity of the artwork, perhaps denying the fact that the vivid colours and cheesy, kitsch nature of most of the images appeals to a thread of irony running through Western taste.

The poster art of Bollywood has its roots in earlier religious calendars, and indeed the work of the poster artists is still crucial to the success of a film. Before digital printing, TV and radio, the only way to promote a film was via huge hand-painted hoardings. The very fortunes of a new film depended on an artist's ability to sum up a movie in one busy, blazing hit.

Working from still black and white photos provided by the movie producers, the artists would make use of garish, familiar hues to deliver maximum punch.

Rage (red, yellow), romance (pink, blue) and sorrow (grey, black) were easily understood in this simple language of colour.

The artists pulled all the disparate elements of a story together into a concept and composition aimed at selling the film. Back in the 1960s and 1970s the highly saturated Kodak Eastman process also influenced the highly stylized palette. In later posters, more natural shades reflected newer, more sophisticated film stock and lighting.

Using huge brushes and giant spatula-type palette knives to create textures, the artists gave lifelike expression to the film stars' faces. With these basic, unwieldy tools, all the tricks of the portrait painting trade were employed to stunning effect. A full range of flesh tones and dramatic light and shade was always achieved. The addition of moustaches, spectacles and costume details to set the scene and deliver the context.

As in so many of the BRIC countries, the story here so far is of a craft tradition being usurped by new technology. But the story does continue and the cycle here is far from over. These Mumbai artists are now part of a global community, and who knows how big the future demand for their skills will be.

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For more information on prints go to [www.hippy.in](http://www.hippy.in)