

Timeless chronicler

"Richard the poet, painter, photographer, art critic and above all, a true friend of us all, the artists." — M F Hussain, 10-12-1986.

The Stillwell Road, connecting the North-East of India to South-East Asia, and built by the Allied Forces during World War II across a literally deathly, mountainous terrain, has been witness to many a historical event. But history had not recorded the migration of a young Burmese refugee through that very treacherous road during that period. The young man escaping to India with his family, from possible prosecution by the Japanese who had captured his country, had walked all the way from Mandalay in Burma to Ledo in Upper Assam — and probably walked into history.

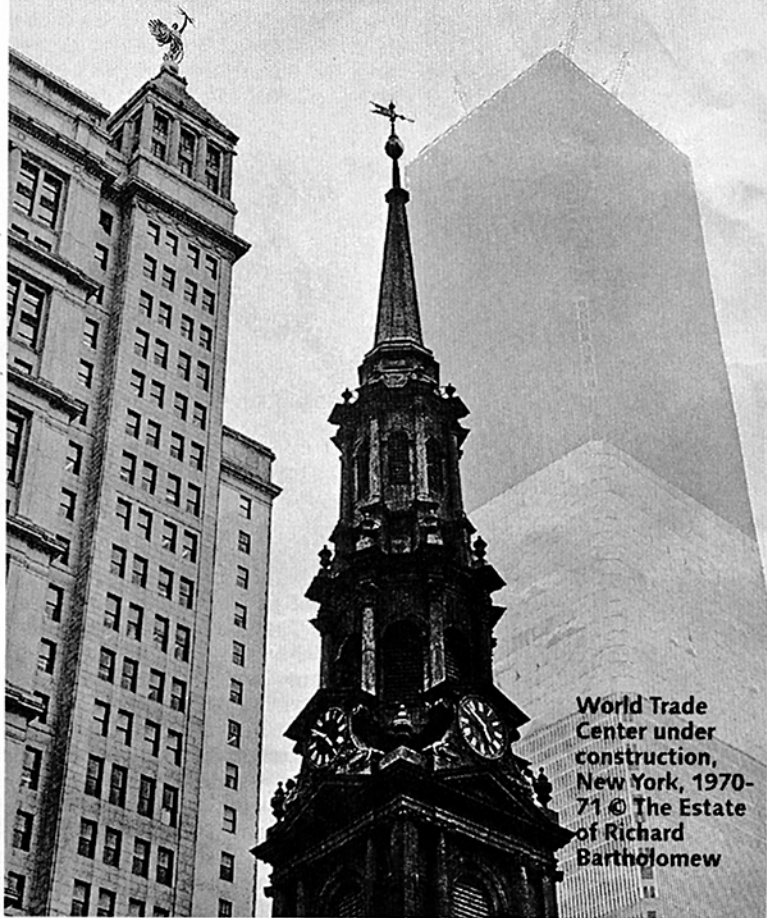
For, that young man was Richard Lawrence Bartholomew, one of the finest art critics India has ever been home to. A self-taught art critic, Bartholomew was a man of many talents, among them photography. His forte was photographing artists, monuments, people, landscapes and a lot else, and he had converted his alertness to capture the most beautiful moment of non-posing subjects virtually into an art form.

Now, 24 years after his death, some 80 black and white photos shot by him have been mounted at an exhibition by his son, internationally-acclaimed photographer Pablo Bartholomew, bringing before aficionados the work of a rarely-seen master from the past. Bartholomew was primarily an art critic, but his camera was almost his lover — at least the photographs give one that impression. The play of light and shadow and the finer details captured in his photographs are almost magical, at least in retrospect now.

Take for example a photograph of M F Hussain, his right hand absent-mindedly pulling strands of his own hair, his legs up on the corner of a table, as he talks on a Rotary Eri-cophone at the World Health Organisation office in New Delhi in 1962. Perhaps Hussain was at one of his most relaxed moments when that photo was taken — contrast it with the tense time the nonagenarian artist is having to spend now, thanks to litigation against and attacks on his paintings by Right wing Hinduvta bodies, allegedly for denigrating Hindu gods and goddesses. Then there are photos of painters like Ram Kumar, Bhupen Khakhar, Jehangir Sabavala, Biren De, et al. — all in moments of informality.

The non-commercialisation of the art world, the yet-to-emerge fierce rivalries among artists and much more of times when paintings were still not commodities worth crores of rupees seep through Bartholomew's photos. As also a lost world, through photos of historical importance, such as one of the World Trade Centre in New York — victim of 9/11 — under construction in the

A photo exhibition of self-taught art critic Richard Bartholomew shows him as a man of many talents, says
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World Trade Center under construction, New York, 1970-71 © The Estate of Richard Bartholomew

early 1970s or the one that shows the Nariman House on the Parliament Street in New Delhi, later replaced by the multi-storied Park Hotel and the DLF House.

Pablo Bartholomew is taking the exhibition, being held at Delhi's Photoink gallery till February end, to Mumbai also, and is open to the idea of taking it to more cities. "This exhibition comprises broadly three subjects — the family, portraits of artists and street scenes of mostly Delhi and New York in the 1950s-70s," he says. Quite obviously, family photos — like a little Pablo holding probably what was his first camera, or his and his brother Robin's various stages of growing up, or of their mother Rati wearing a saree, are not for sale. But the others are. "And in spite of the recessionary trends, the response has been surprisingly good from the buyers," says Pablo, recalling that this is the second exhibition of his father's photographs after his death — the first was in 1986, a year after his death.

But why so less of his photographs have been seen? "That's because he was primarily an art critic, and photography was one of his many

others artistic passions. His working was very quiet, he never used to move around with huge amounts of equipment. I learnt my photography from him, and I too largely follow his philosophy of photographing people and things as they are, without any posing," says Pablo.

The son discovered about 17,000 negatives in black and white and colour, shot by the father, after he died. Most of them were of portraits, painters — as part of his art critic's job, and quite a few of objects of Tibet House in Delhi, where he used to work.

Born in Tavoy — now called Dawei, in Myanmar — the elder Bartholomew was one of those art critics who created awareness about the Progressive Art Movement. Now the son, if possible, would like to retrace photographically his father's journey from Myanmar. "I don't know if I can do that, given the hostile geography and need for permission to travel along the region through which the Stillwell Road passes through." Maybe, that will be the ultimate tribute to a man who overcame early obstacles to pursue his passions.