

THE LEGACY OF  
**BHANU  
ATHAIYA**

LIVING TRADITION CENTRE, BIKANER HOUSE



P R I N S E P S









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CURATORIAL NOTE

Bhanu Athaiya was born in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, in 1929. In an era when female artists were rarely acknowledged, leave alone given opportunities or large platforms, a very driven and creative Bhanu came to Mumbai as a teenager to learn painting at the J.J. School of Arts. Little did she know that she would go on to become the only woman to belong to the Progressive Artists' Group ! Her journey was not easy, and neither was fine art her final calling. Bhanu's creative oeuvre led her to go on to contribute to the popular women's magazine Eve's Weekly, following which she found her calling as a costume designer.

Over the years she contributed to Indian art, fashion, and design, and along the way paved the road for many talented designers. In 1952, she became the first woman to win the prestigious Usha Deshmukh Gold medal for the artwork titled 'Lady In Repose'. In 1983 she won the Oscar for Best Costume Design for Richard Attenborough's Gandhi, making her the first Indian to bring home this honour. Her body of work spans years of intense research and passionate creativity. Bhanu's costumes brought life to the characters on screen, which eventually went on to inspire Indian fashion. She worked on numerous films since the 1950s, with noted filmmakers like Guru Dutt, Yash Chopra, Raj Kapoor, Ashutosh Gowariker, winning several national awards for costumes in movies like Lekin and Lagaan. Her contributions to Indian art and cinema continue to inspire costume and fashion designers even today. Women's voices and actions, while often unheard and unseen, have been and will forever be instrumental in shaping the cultural setting of a region.

The exhibition aims to draw attention to the legacy of Bhanu Athaiya and her contribution over six decades to the world of art and cinema. It narrates this story by exploring her childhood, her time as a fashion illustrator and eventually her mastery in costume design. Each of these chapters was integral to her life. This is the saga of an artist whose life was an expressive and expansive creative canvas of myriad shades.

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Early Days: Kolhapur



The City of Arts, formerly known as Kalapur, was a princely state in South Western Maharashtra. With visionary rulers and able administrators, Kolhapur became a progressive and culturally inspiring kingdom. Growing up in an environment such as this played an integral role in shaping the life of Bhanumati Annasaheb Rajopadhye.

Born on the 28th of April 1929, in a three hundred year old ancestral house, Bhanu was the third of seven children. Tracing her roots, Bhanu speaks proudly of her ancestors, whose 'vocation of mastering scriptures took them from central India to Benaras, which was the seat of learning. Then, the Maharaja of Chittod invited them to be part of the court of the Chittod royal family. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaja's ancestors were part of that royal lineage who later moved to Raigad in Maharashtra, taking along my ancestors. Eventually, Maharani Tarabai, daughter-in-law of Shivaji, founded Kolhapur and my ancestors came along with her to work in this princely state'.

Rajopadhye, which in Sanskrit translates to 'royal guru' is the prestigious title Bhanu's family was entrusted with, and, as if the family lineage was not intellectually and culturally stimulating enough, Bhanu was lucky to have both parents take this heritage forward. Her father, Annasaheb Rajopadhye, was a self-taught artist and her mother, Shantabai, a specialist in the Edwardian style of embroidery, a unique and rare craft.

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The Fashion Illustrator

The influence of Hima Devi continued and helped in launching Bhanu's career as a fashion illustrator. A warm welcome into the Devi household while pursuing art at J.J. School of Arts, led to a formal introduction to the editor of a women's magazine, Fashion and Beauty. When Hima Devi's mother, Meera Devi, who worked as an assistant editor shared Bhanu's sketches with Kishen Jhangiani, he offered her a role as a fashion illustrator.

Drawing inspiration from Indian cultural heritage, Bhanu spent a year showcasing her creativity with beautiful illustrations following which, the advertising manager of Fashion and Beauty, told her about Eve's Weekly. A new magazine, this publication turned out to be a great stepping stone in her career.



Eve's Weekly gave her a wider scope to express her creativity. Every Saturday two pages of the magazine would cover Bhanu's large sized fashion illustrations. But working in two different creative worlds was no easy task. She was faced with a big decision, to take her career as an artist forward or continue as a fashion designer. At that point, it was clear to Bhanu that she had to stand on her two feet and fashion designing was the more practical option.

Does she really have no regrets about quitting painting? *"What I would have given to paintings, I have given to costumes,"* says Bhanu Athaiya who gave up oil painting decades ago, sticking to elaborate artistic watercolours for sketching and illustrating purposes. *"There, I would have built a body of paintings. Here, I am leaving behind films. It's all the same."*

When the editor of Eve's Weekly, opened a boutique, Bhanu started designing clothes for a select group of clients including actresses from Hindi film cinema such as Nargis. Her designs soon got noticed by Kamini Kaushal who asked Bhanu to design her clothes in the film 'Aas' in 1953. This moment was the beginning of Bhanu Athaiya's legacy as the doyenne of costume design.

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