The Grandeur of Gandara

Posted on

A view of Gallery Red

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The combination of fragrances that surrounded me as I entered the store was sweet and piquant. Rose and lavender were clearly discernible with cinnamon and perhaps sandalwood making a less distinct presence. The rich smell of old wood and brass formed the core of the aromatic blend. These first whiffs of the air were enough to transport me out of everyday life and into the quaint and fantastical world that is Gandhara, a treasury of crafts and artefacts from all over the world.

Making my way through the spacious rooms of the three-storey building on Stratford Avenue was like time travelling around the world, visiting lost civilisations in a matter of minutes. I walked past Tibetan cupboards adorned with dragons and phoenixes. African masks took turns smiling, frowning and staring vacantly at me. Stepping into a room full of far eastern statues of the meditating Buddha, I couldn’t

help but be awed by the diverse sentiments they exuded. A Quranic verse inscribed in Arabic calligraphy – originating in India – was understated in its grace.

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Thrown in tastefully amongst items evocative of times gone by were contemporary pieces such as lamps, vases, glassware, sofas and coffee tables. Discovering the sources of the aromas permeating the store, I found scented candles arranged in baskets and counters, and a structure of shelves holding little bottles of incense.

A jade-green cabinet instantly transported me back to the past, its carvings recalling the architectural designs of ancient royal palaces of Rajasthan. Along the stairway hung reproductions of French posters of a more recent past. Upstairs, parts of old British and European ships such as searchlights and compasses fashioned out of brass gleamed, drawing you into their century old voyages.

This eclectic mix of crafts and artefacts also include Sri Lankan creations such as art, sculptures, linen, tablemats and handloom fabrics. As irrational as it appears to blend these seemingly inconsistent elements together, Gandhara has been designed to help customers apply their own desires and expressions to their homes and personal spaces, no matter how offbeat they may appear. As Chairman of Gandhara, Dian Gomes explains: “Gandhara is basically a combination of art, ambience and romance. We offer a wide variety of artefacts to our customers so that they can choose to define their very own lifestyles. It’s about what defines them. It’s about how they bring their fantasies to life.”

Gallery Red, only a three-minute walk from Gandhara, and another brainchild of Dian’s, exhibits an entirely different character. “Why ‘Gallery Red’?” Dian confers, “Simply because it is dedicated to an unforgettable era, with pictures of some of the most famous communists like Ché, Stalin and Marx.” While portraits of these famous figures radiated a striking aura at the entrance of the gallery, I found the other exhibits to be entirely different to each other.

Framed within a brick wall, the dance of a sculptured Nataraja was made all the

more captivating. A group of monks in bright yellow and orange sparked a warm glow inside me. Impressions on a pair of old Thai doors formed what seemed like ancient gatekeepers. Feathery brushstrokes imparted a dreamy quality to a painting of an old lady.

Though several of the exhibits are by Sri Lankan artists, there are also various other pieces from overseas. This multiplicity of artistic creations at Gallery Red is owing to Dian's acceptance of various types of art. "One thing that I was careful about was not to impose my taste and inspiration on anyone. I make sure to exhibit all types of art in this gallery, not restricting the space only to creations that I am drawn to. People must have a choice," he said.

And choice is exactly what one would feel spoilt for, walking down Stratford Avenue or Gandhara Street as is it increasingly called. Having invited artists and designers to set up shop, Dian has transformed Stratford Avenue into an Art Street. The road is lined with shops, galleries, cafés, coffee shops and even a spa and salon. Artisans seem to sell everything from jewellery, shawls and sarees to furniture, carpets and ornamental pieces. The enchantment and eclecticism of Gandhara and Gallery Red combined with the trendy, upbeat feel of the Street makes you want to come back and spend an entire day exploring it all.

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