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AN ONLINE PLATFORM FOR MILLENNIA OF SOUTH ASIAN ART

With over 2,000 entries, the new MAP Encyclopedia of Art aims to make the region's art history accessible to all.

JASMINE LIU

An ambitious new platform aims to centralise the history of art in India and South Asia from pre-history to the present in one digital resource. The MAP Academy Encyclopedia of Art, launched last Thursday by the Museum of Art and Photography in Bengaluru, India, features over 2,000 articles and definitions on topics that span pre-modern art, photography, design, popular culture, and architecture.

Nathaniel Gaskell, the founder of the project, told *Hyperallergic* that he noticed "there was very little scholarship or material on South Asian art history online," with most writing on the topic being exceedingly academic and obtuse, and even then accessible only to those with institutional affiliations.

While the subcontinent has long enjoyed a rich visual culture, represented by everything from lush manuscript paintings and long traditions of textile production to contemporary multimedia conceptual art, the process of classifying and studying this knowledge through the discipline of art history is more recent.

Most of the platform's content currently centres on art from India, but the resource will expand to include "broader histories of South Asia". Some articles focus on recurring motifs in South Asian art; others cover landmark publications or works. Some describe sophisticated craft techniques; still, others summarise important art movements. The interface is encouraging to the curiosity of a generalist, who can digest diverse topics in art history by infinite scrolling from one article to a related next one or by clicking on randomly generated topics on a sidebar. Gaskell's intention was to launch the encyclopedia with a starting pack of articles, and he anticipates it will grow over the next few years.

Anirudh Kanisetti, the research editor at MAP Academy, told *Hyperallergic* about the frustration he has experienced firsthand while tracking down "reliable information about various aspects of South Asian art history online."

"It is difficult to learn about Indian history through online resources; one of the things I'm most frequently asked by people I meet is to recommend good books for them to read, because they cannot find more than two or three very dense academic writings online — which is a stark contrast to how history is written and taught in the US and UK," Kanisetti said.

"Indian art history is even more poorly understood: it is very difficult to find objectively-researched and accessible materials about something as ubiquitous as, say, Tanjore painting," he continued.

Gaskell does not mind if traffic to the site is driven by users who Google specific chapters of South Asian art history and visit the platform briefly before clicking away. By compiling authoritative information, he also hopes that the MAP Encyclopedia will help improve the substance and rigour of Wikipedia pages on the same topics. Visitors can feel relatively secure about the integrity of the entries — a team of about 20 full-time researcher-writers drafted each one before they were subject to review by an academic panel of senior scholars.

Managing Editor Shrey Maurya, who studies topics in South Asian art including miniature painting, Buddhist art, and jewellery, joined Gaskell two years ago as the second member of the team; Varun Nayar, a writer, editor and researcher from Delhi, served as lead editor for a year before leaving for the Aperture Foundation.

The social context that spurred Gaskell to begin this project, as he told it, was the lack of a museum-going public and the absence of general interest in the discipline of art history in India.

"Even at the undergraduate level, there are barely any courses," Gaskell said, adding that despite some 1,600 art schools in the country, only a few offer art history.

"It sort of dawned on me about three years ago that if we really wanted to build a bigger audience and more interest (in the museum), we needed to look more at education. What was missing in education was the arts," he said.

Thus was the impulse for MAP Academy, which in addition to harbouring a fledgling encyclopedia is also publishing online courses such as "Visual Literacy: How to Read Images," "Sculpture: Archeology & Architecture," and "Modern & Contemporary Indian Art." The short version of each course, which takes about four hours to complete, is launching soon; the long versions will launch in 2023. These online courses are meant to both satisfy the interest of autodidacts and support teachers and schools that want to build an art history programme.

While democratising art history and expanding its purview to counteract its Eurocentrism is a noble project, it does not come without its pitfalls. As South Asian art historian Frederick Asher noted in an introduction to a compendium on Indian art from pre-history to the present, the very concepts of "art" and "art history" as applied to South Asian expression imply the imposition of a Western and extractive way of looking.

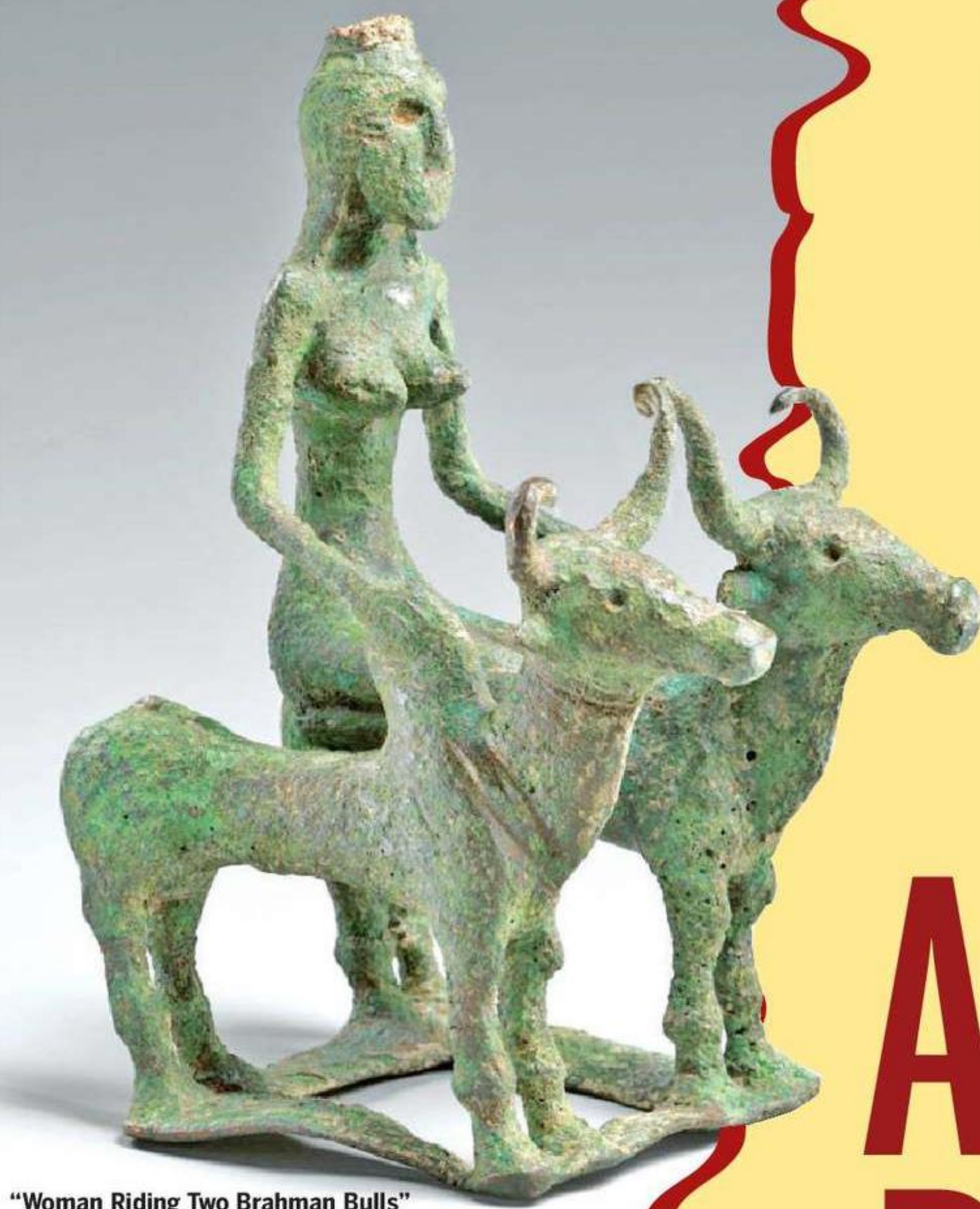
"Only in modern times, when the Western notion of collecting art has been imposed on South Asia's visual culture, have the works assumed a new significance," he wrote. "To a large extent collections of South Asian art, both public and private, were a result of European colonialism." Systems of aesthetic judgement such as *rasa* (taste) have long guided Indian sensibilities, but the enterprise of art history remains one with colonial legacies.

South Asian art history cannot avoid its colonial past, and entries such as one on a taxonomic ethnographic survey of Indian "tribes" or another on an essentialising photographic exhibition representing Indian people yet under-representing Indian photographers are stark examples that what counts as art is synonymous with the exercise of violence and power. And while the online encyclopedia represents an egalitarian point of access to art, a recent *New York Times* article also emphasised what a good resource it could be for collectors and dealers, those who typically benefit from the exploitative potential of art history.

Gaskell said that he hopes the encyclopedia would be used by "regular people who want to engage with the content," people without access to formal curricula or just people with an avid interest in popular history.

"The work we are doing here has the potential to be one of the first things that people will read when trying to learn about Indian art in the future," Kanisetti told *Hyperallergic*. "The fact that it is based on critical research and written for general audiences will ensure it is one of the most influential Indian and South Asian public history resources to come out in this decade."

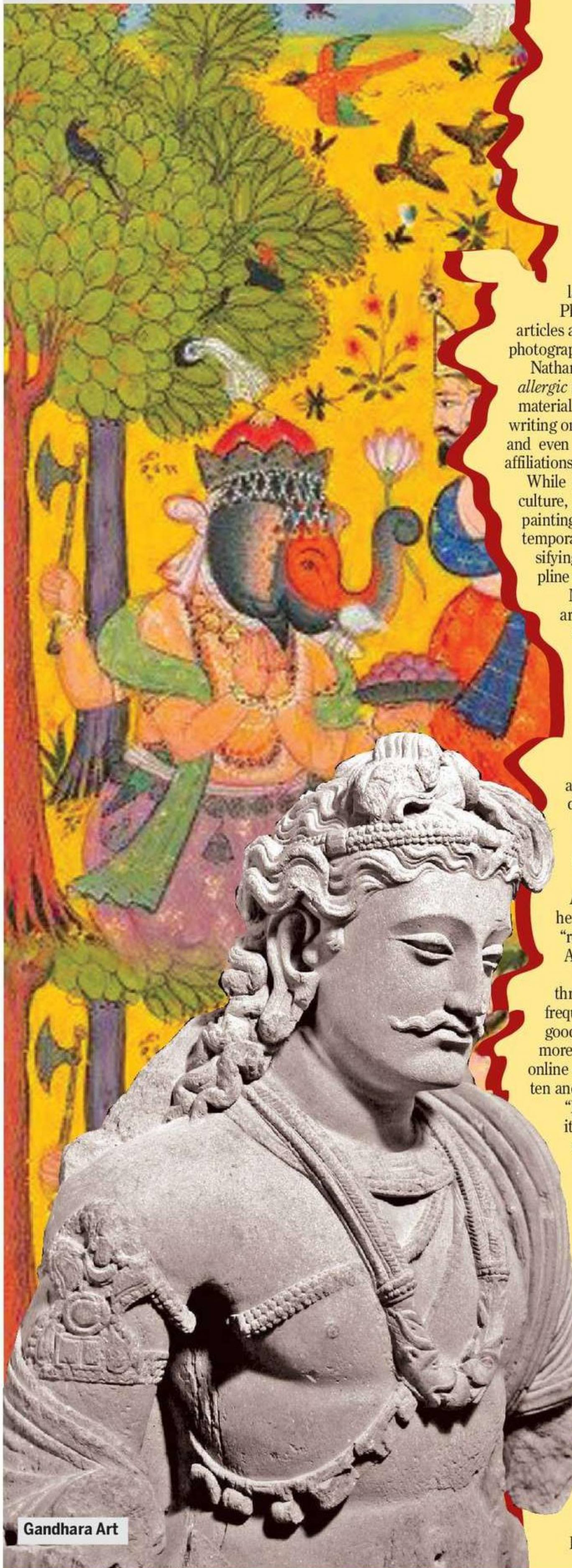
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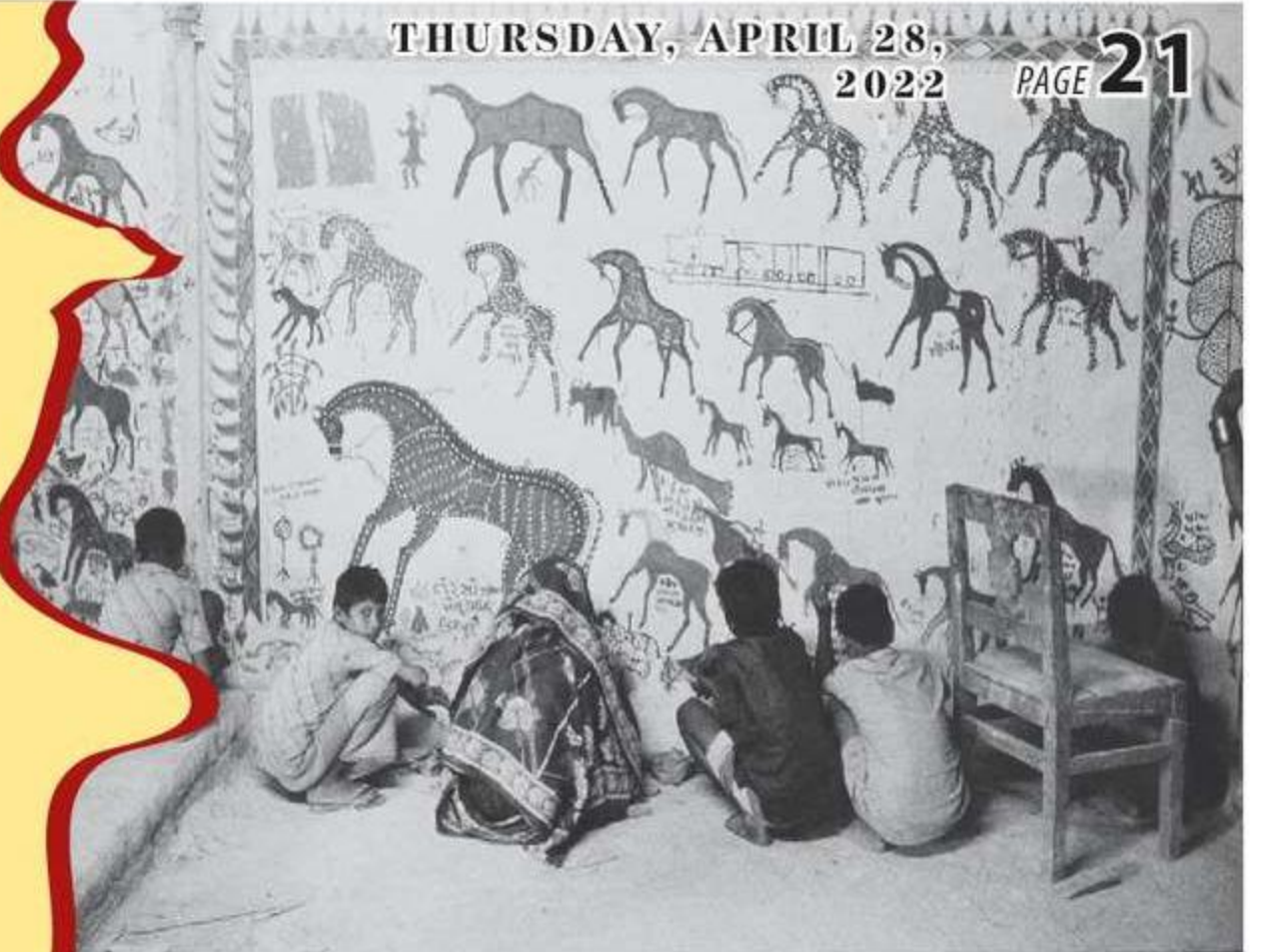
"Woman Riding Two Brahman Bulls" (1750 BCE), bronze. (Image courtesy : the Metropolitan Museum of Art)



"Shah Jahan Hunting Blackbuck with Trained Cheetahs" (1710-15), ink, gold, and opaque watercolour on paper (Image courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Gandhara Art



Jyoti Bhatt, "A Lady and Children Gathered in Front of a Ritual Pithora Mural" (1992), silver gelatin print (Image courtesy MAP)



Henri Cartier-Bresson, "Refugees Exercising in a Camp to Drive Away Lethargy and Despair" (1947), gelatin silver print (Image courtesy: MAP)



Jangarh Singh Shyam, "Annihilation of Sanbarah (The Annihilation of the Boar: An Anecdote from the Gond Epic)" (1992), poster colour on paper (Image courtesy: the Museum of Art and Photography, Bengaluru)

