

# A CULTURE IN PRESERVE

*From the Tasveer collection: Photographer Sebastian Cortes traipses through a time honoured Sidhpur villa that mirrors the layered cultural make-up of Gujarat's elusive Bohra community*

Inside the house of Abbas Hararwala, a descendant of an affluent Bohra merchant family. This is the central gathering space, where the detailing is at its best. The French style doorways, intricate woodwork and elegant carpets all speak of a great sense of style. The child is a symbolic figure linking a bygone era to today, as he lounges still unaware of the importance of the past and uncertainty of his future. His courtly attitude struck Sebastian, who adds, "Everything in this room is intriguing and part of the puzzle that is Sidhpur" Left The entrance to a large common area, where the family often converges. The photographer was drawn by the painting on the wall, of the current owner's great grandfather, and geometry of the doors



TEXT BY SNEHA ULLAL GOEL PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY © SEBASTIAN CORTES/COURTESY TASVEER & VACHERON CONSTANTIN

At first, Sidhpur seems like a town in limbo, buoyant in transition between life and the end, cloaked in an eerie pall of sanctity. Apart from what is known – this is where people perform Matru Shradh (a ritual for mothers who have passed) – the pious place is also home to Gujarat’s wealthy and mysterious Bohras. Fascinated with towns “fallen off the map” because of socio-economic conditions or historic conflicts and with a group that “needs to externalise a coded message of wealth and a slightly playful sense of presence”, photographer Sebastian Cortes walked about Sidhpur, recording secrets of this populace. He was intrigued not just by how centuries old elements were still intact, but even by the similarities in the architecture. “The houses reflect the glory and subsequent downfall of the community – they speak to those who want to listen,” he explains. “I was perplexed by how quickly the glory vanished, leaving a confusing dust of emotions and challenges, which these people are most certainly working on.”

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One of the bedrooms now used for storage by the older generation, as the younger ones have moved to other cities. It has many elements that blend together in the suffused light. The wooden fixture is a decorative ornament found in many houses and also functions as a cabinet. Left This is one of the more private sitting areas, containing objects of significance from the family’s history. This intrigued Sebastian, as he felt it is a “manifestation of recognition of past glory”. All the other elements are also symbols of treasured moments with the room’s shape catching the photographer’s attention



What you see here are photographs of one of those houses, a 150 to 200 year old bungalow of Abbas Hararwala, a descendant of a rich merchant clan, and as expected, emanating a museum like nostalgia – walls accented with paintings of forefathers and decorated with ornate and elaborate wooden furniture as old as the property itself. Each room was left untouched for Sebastian to observe and freeze-frame. “In all honesty, this house somehow found me,” he confesses. “It had many elements that needed recording, a good family and a historical atmosphere. The inhabitants live a life suspended between the glories of the past (they were certainly an important name in the community) and the uncertainty of the future.” His objective behind this series is simple: To “record and not uncover”. “I want to share with my viewers the joys of observation, which photography offers,” he illustrates, “holding in time patterns of human behaviour and existence which may quickly disappear, possibly to be replaced by a much less evocative atmosphere, less rooted, less creative and genuine.” ♦

Outside the villa. Symbolic elements at play are many: Traditional camel caravans, elegant detailing, the ambiguity of the child and his future, the feeling of suspension created by the far left of the image. According to Sebastian, the story is always the same in his pictures, as he attempts to “convey and hint at the tension between past and present, certainty and illusion, tradition and modernity all elements that are my artistic footholds, as I move from one subject to the other” Left This is the stairway landing with an elaborate use of wood and glasswork that denotes an attention to detail, as do the tiles

Sebastian Cortes - Sidhpur: Time Present, Time Past is organised by Tasveer and forms a part of the gallery's 9th season of exhibitions, in partnership with Vacheron Constantin. It will be on show at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad from October 10-19, 2014

