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Photos: Wooden Shoe Maker and Calligrapher, India's Dying Professions

By

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Christopher Lin of Woon Son Shoes used to custom-make wooden shoes to the size of each customer, but now uses standard sizes, Kolkata.

CLARE ARNI

Clare Arni has spent seven years traveling across seven Indian cities -- Bangalore, Mumbai, New Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Jaipur and Goa -- capturing the changing urban landscape through the livelihoods of artisans, traders and laborers.

“Disappearing Professions of Urban India,” her first solo show, opened in Mumbai at Tarq, a new contemporary art gallery, on Monday.

The 51-year-old began photographing the changing urban landscape of Bangalore in 2007, and found that certain professions quintessential to the city were vanishing.



Dhobi Ghats, open-air laundries, are closing down as more people use washing machines, Bangalore.

CLARE ARNI

In the southern city, for instance, she saw generation-old silk handloom workshops, where artisans would typically work four days to weave one Sari, rapidly shut up shop. Handmade silk Saris were being replaced with machine-made synthetic fabrics or silks imported from China.

Until then, Ms. Arni was photographing in Bangalore for a project commissioned by a German cultural institute. But fascinated with how fast India was changing, and in turn, how people were adapting to that change, she decided to make this the subject of a long-term personal project.

The show displays 50 photographs out of a series of 120, including some of Koli fisherfolk, Mumbai's native fishermen, who now face stiff competition from larger boats, as well as Kolkata's leather tanners who were recently relocated outside the city.



Tinning, the process of lining copper pots on the inside with tin, is vanishing because more people use cheaper, stainless steel vessels, New Delhi.

CLARE ARNI

“It’s sad that some skills are being lost,” Ms. Arni, who was born in Scotland and raised in India, said while setting up the show. But “sometimes the old has to give way to the new,” she added.

While greater mechanization and urbanization have hurt some traditional professions, access to education has allowed people to aim higher. “Most people were very passionate about what they did, but didn’t want their children to do it, and the children didn’t want to do it either,” said Ms. Arni, who spent hours chatting over tea with each of the people she photographed.

Oriole Henry, her sister, recorded these conversations, and they were subsequently published in an exhibition catalog.



Duza Siguiera is one of a few remaining potters who makes clay pots by hand in the coastal state of Goa.

CLARE ARNI

Duza Siguiera, among the many interviewees to appear in the show and catalog, is among a few remaining Indian potters to mold clay pots entirely by hand, without a potter's wheel. Ms. Arni, who met Mr. Siguiera at his workshop in the coastal state of Goa, remembers his niece telling her that she found terracotta pots "good for the health" and "delicious to eat from." She added that the demand for clay vessels had fallen with the widespread availability of plastic containers and stainless steel.

In New Delhi, Ms. Arni tracked professions traditionally associated with royal Mughal courtrooms: calligraphers, miniature painters and jewelers. She found Quri Mohd Yaqub, one of the few calligraphers still in business, primarily because computers cannot produce the Urdu script yet. Mr. Yaqub says he receives orders from businessmen who scan his elegant Urdu calligraphy for their shop hoardings, letterheads, or business cards.



Calligrapher Quri Mohd Yaqub still plies his trade, making business cards, letterheads, and shop signs in Urdu, New Delhi.

CLARE ARNI

While some professions have completely disappeared -- artists in Bangalore who hand painted Hindi film posters, for instance -- others have found ways to adapt. Textiles embellished with woodblock printing in vegetable dyes, for example, are now sold at ethnic boutiques such as Anokhi and Fab India. The cloth, delicately interlaced by textile workers in the northwestern city of Jaipur, was once sold by vendors in bazaars and on sidewalks.

Ms. Arni says she also made a deliberate effort to select not only craftsmen, but also urban professionals and laborers. These include Unani hakims, or medicine men, who now compete with modern medicines, as well as dhobis, who typically hand wash clothes against blocks of stone in open-air laundries. The exhibition also displays images of old theatres and cafes, many of which are being replaced with multiplexes and coffee chains.



Ram Jain, who makes traditional medicines, is going out of business as more people turn to modern medicine, New Delhi.

CLARE ARNI

“Once people learned what I was doing, they would keep calling to update me if a store was closing down,” Ms. Arni said. As soon as they did, she would rush to the spot with her camera, creating a digital archive before the shutters closed for the last time.

“Disappearing Professions of Urban India” is on display Monday through Saturday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. at Tarq, F35/36, Dhanraj Mahal, C.S.M. Marg, Apollo Bunder, Colaba, Mumbai. The show concludes late April.