



Step write in

A museum of children's notebooks in Milan offers details of everyday life going back centuries – as well as notes on what children want, the battles they fight, and ways in which they wish their world was different



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(Clockwise from top) An inside view of the museum; a 1950s exercise book from Spain; another on grammar and religion from 1895; and a schoolgirl's notebook from 1977 Beijing. MUSEUM OF CHILDREN'S NOTEBOOKS VIA INSTAGRAM

wknd urban



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govri.s@hindustantimes.com

● “Yesterday was a bad day...” a 12-year-old from Lombardia, Italy writes, during World War I. “Today the sun barely shines and although it’s just one o’clock there have already been three alarms. I cannot understand how I’m supposed to live this way.”

● In 1824, in France, a middle-school girl writes to her mother, asking to be allowed to stay in school. “Your silence began to cause me worry... it is very unlike you to let pass such a long time without writing,” she writes, in careful, cursive lines. “I beg you to give me another six more months... I beg you, Dear Mama.”

● In Jaipur, the diary of a child of about 12 goes from descriptions of daily life to anguish over a fire at an oil depot. Rescue operation cannot even begin for the first 48 hours, she writes. As highways are shut and trains halted, “The fire could be easily seen from my classroom,” she notes. “Nothing is in order.”

We don’t think of children as keepers of history, but as they too navigate the world and attempt to make sense of it, there is emotion, pathos and immense detail in the records they keep; and a view from a unique perspective.

An entire parallel history of this kind now sits in a 650-sq-ft museum of children’s notebooks in Milan. There are 2,500 documents preserved here. Most are notebooks, diaries, letters and journals, sourced via antiques dealers and collectors or sent in by families.

They contain the impressions of children from over 35 countries, written in more than 18 languages. (All names are withheld, to protect identities. Works are translated into Italian and English by museum volunteers.)

The oldest artefact is a penmanship exercise book from Shropshire, England, dated 1773. The most recent additions are exercise books from Ghana, dated 2012.

The Museum of Children’s Notebooks began in 2004, when journalist and photographer Thomas Pololi, then 22, invited people from across Italy to send in their old school essays. These tended to be personal takes on a child’s world, their most recent holiday or routine events from their lives.

As the collection expanded, support and funding grew. In 2014, Pololi founded the non-profit organisation Quaderni Aperti or Open Exercise Books, which now runs the physical museum.

“I believe the universal voice of children is one of humanity’s most important heritage assets, not only for understanding childhood, but for understanding humanity itself,” says Pololi, 44. “We have found this is true beyond national borders and historical periods.”

He points to the diary from Jaipur. As the tragedy disrupts her life (the 2009 fire at an Indian Oil Corporation terminal blazed for 11 days and claimed 12 lives), “it becomes an example of how history on the grand scale intersects with the microhistories of ordinary people, including children.”

Line drawings

Pololi believes the diaries hold something more: clues to ways in which we can make the world better. Leafing through the notebooks is a reminder of what humanity needs more, and less, of.

“The first thing children ask for is often freedom. They want spaces where they can play freely with their peers, and they want to be able to reach those spaces independently,” says Pololi (left). Today, that freedom to play is increasingly threatened.

With fewer physical spaces set aside for them, and many more screens available, they seek this freedom and community online. “Sadly, this can be far more harmful and dangerous than a park or public square.”

Also present through the museum’s collection is the tragic ever-presence of war.

The institute is currently preparing, in fact, for an exhibition titled War Notebooks, that will explore conflicts of the 20th century through such testimonies by children from

Italy, Japan, China, Germany, the UK and US.

Unsurprisingly, another key area of conflict is the pressure of expectations. Children writ of working harder to make parents proud; of adhering to lists of set goals.

It shows, Pololi says, that all too often, what we think of as the kind of discipline that is needed, to help a child become an informed adult, is experienced as a kind of indoctrination, a pressure to be useful, gifted, exceptional — which, by the math alone, the average child simply cannot be.

Send a text

There are scribbles from children as young as four in the museum, “but we generally focus on somewhat longer, more ‘aware’ texts. Those written between the ages of eight and 13 or 14 tend to have both the expressive freshness of childhood and the communicative precision of someone who has already gained real writing competence,” Pololi says.

Only material from people who have reached adulthood are accepted.

“This is partly for reasons of privacy and data protection, and partly just practical: without the “filtering” effect that the passage of time provides, we’d likely end up with far more material than we could ever manage,” Pololi says. “Though submissions are always welcome.”

In the library are accounts of an Australian child who dreamed of travelling to the Moon in the 1950s; the adventures of a group of Finnish Girl Scouts who recorded their outings in a shared diary during the same period; writings by a French girl who enthusiastically described a flight on a Boeing aircraft in the 1970s.

Sometimes, nothing serves as a record of history too.

A tiny pocket diary belonging to a child from Connecticut in the late-1800s notes the repetitive course of his life in rural America. “It is cloudy and looks like snow... It is still very cold. I did not go to school today.”

(To share a text, go to childrensnotebooks.org)



{ PHOTOBOOK } VINTAGE GOAN HOMES

Down memory lane

Anesha George

anesha.george@hindustantimes.com

Wander through Goan homes of a certain vintage, and every corner tells a surprising story, says Ulka Chauhan.

In her photobook, *The Memory Keepers* and *Future Seekers*, the advertising executive-turned-documentary photographer visits six such bungalows, recording a history that could soon be gone.

Within, she represents through 120 photographs furniture with Hindu iconography carved into it, large salas or halls that seem to echo with the music of saxophones and trumpets, a nonagenarian sitting alone at a rosewood table that once seated 20.

Stories spill out of the book. In one, windows have recently been fitted with grilles, in a quiet reminder of how much has changed. Until a decade ago, in most villages here, front doors were left unlocked.

These bungalows represent a permanence that is rare today, Chauhan says.

“Walls still display rows of ancestral portraits, from a time those alive have no record of.” They also hold signs of key turning points: bullet holes from revolts; changing architecture.

In pre-colonial Goan homes, for instance, the aangan or courtyard was the heart of family life. It was with the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century that houses turned outward, with the colourful facades, oyster-shell windows and shaded balconies.

In the different architecture styles preserved, this transition is visible.

Home run

Chauhan’s book was born during a period of

looking inward herself, she says.

Confined during the pandemic to her family’s nearly-80-year-old two-storey bungalow in the suburbs of Mumbai, she found herself thinking about what makes homes endure as heritage.

She was struck at the time by photographer Prabuddha Dasgupta’s photobook *Edge of Faith* (2009), a look at Goa’s Catholic community. In 2021, as the world opened up, she began to make frequent trips to the state.

She became intrigued by the grand houses she saw in the villages she visited most often, and started to visit them to talk to their owners. Through conversations over long lunches and dinners, and one 92nd birthday party, Chauhan pieced their stories together.

This grew into a project for an international photo festival in Zurich. Then came the photobook, with six essays by art writer Samira Sheth, one on each of the families featured.

Each of the six tells a dramatic story. In Ranjeet Pele Jesus Fernandes’s 500-year-old family home in Chandor, there is a hidden underground passageway, and bullet holes in the walls from local uprisings against Portuguese rule. In the deed of the house, a piece of incredible history emerges: it is written in the ancient Modi script.

Fading blueprints

This was, of course, once the heart of a global trading empire, so there is plenty of opulence too.

Chauhan was proudly shown Ming dynasty washbasins, boxes made of the rare Siberian amber, ivory from Mozambique, chandeliers of Belgian glass, and an exquisite purple-and-yellow bedspread bought and muremgrammed in Macau in the 1800s.

In the 300-year-old D’Sa Condillac House in Aldona, she met a structure adapting gently to its owner. Vicente Antonio Clarence Condillac, 79, was once a seafarer and now lives here with his wife Maria da Mercedes Lucia de Santana Godinho e Condillac, 73, and their five dogs.

Every morning, he descends the steep steps with help from a knotted rope he affixed to the ceiling.

“It’s another reminder,” says Chauhan, “that heritage homes endure by slowly evolving with the people who inhabit them.”

It is anyone’s guess how long they will continue to endure.

These spaces bear witness to a way of life that is fast fading, says architect Gerard Da Cunha, who founded the Houses of Goa Museum in 1997. “As the world becomes a place of sameness, these homes offer character, distinctness,” he adds.

These are things Goa is losing, as change continues to race through it.

Tellingly, Chauhan’s next photobook will focus on how now lives in Goa, telling stories, among other things, of migration.



(Above) The 300-year-old D’Sa Condillac House in Aldona. (Right) Yvonne de Menezes Baganha in her family’s 450-year-old home in Chandor. PHOTOS COURTESY ULKA CHAUHAN

{ WITH LOVE }

Simran Mangharam



Match point

Some of the greatest love stories in the world, including a number of real-world ones, start the same way: strangers meet or lock eyes across a room and sparks fly. Is the scepticism of our times killing the chance of such frisson?

The beauty of romance is that a spark can occur anywhere, with anybody. Sometimes all it takes is a glance, and two strangers recognise in each other something they have been looking for: A flash of interest, intelligence, humour, or something else intriguing.

A smile may follow, and a conversation, or more.

Across cultures, this is how it has worked. I’d like to talk today about ephemeral romantic connection. And how the scepticism of our times could be endangering it.

This kind of frisson is so universal and ancient that our stories are full of it: Urdu poems, Latin verse, Shakespearean plays and Bollywood films. The heartbreaking story of *The Bridges of Madison County* (1992) begins in this way (a man stops to ask for directions to a local bridge, and a lonely wife and mother offers to take him there).

One of my favourite such tales is the plot of *Before Sunrise* (1995), a romantic drama directed and co-written by Richard Linklater. An American tourist named Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and a French university student, Celine (Julie Delpy), meet on a train and decide to disembark in Vienna to spend the night together, with the knowledge that they will part at dawn.

Such romances may be short-lived, or may blossom into entire lives spent together.

I had such an experience at the American Embassy, decades ago. Standing in line to enter, I locked eyes with a handsome young man. After about half an hour of stolen glances,



How many of us would smile at a stranger today, exchange numbers, or allow for the idea that they may not be a threat? (Above) A still from *The Bridges of Madison County* (1992).

ces, we finally entered the embassy together and, as we sat waiting our turn, graduated to nervous smiles. I went in first, and, being a true romantic, waited for him outside.

As he exited, I said, “Hi, how was it?” We walked down the road, chatted, exchanged headline numbers, but never called or met again. Thirty years later, I’m still smiling as I write about that day. It took the edge off my nervousness over the interview process.

What inspired me to write about this now were the recent protests, where a number of young people experienced short-lived romantic connections too. From memes about “uninstalling dating apps because the best place to meet like-minded people is here” to people sharing Reels with those they were developing a crush on, this light-hearted approach to love felt so refreshing.

We spend too much of our lives suspicious of each other. The protests, in a way, created a shared space that felt communal and safe. We need more spaces that allow us to feel like this: youth clubs, community centres, third places. Sadly, we don’t have very many.

Instead, we spend our free time gazing into the eyes of strangers who can never really look back at us. And when a person we

don’t know smiles at us in the real world, we are programmed to respond with suspicion.

As a dating coach, I find myself discussing this more frequently with clients. We can’t have meet-cutes in the real world, if we refuse to engage. Safely. With caution. But in ways that allow suspicion to wait its turn.

Honestly, little harm can come of having a conversation with someone at the grocery store (yes, it’s a good idea to get out there yourself and not rely on an app to bring everything, including love, to your door), a doctor’s waiting room, or in queue for a croissant, restaurant table... or visa.

I would offer one important piece of advice: refrain from behaving like a predator. These are not hunting grounds. Do not stare and scour. Do not make strangers uncomfortable. Smile if it seems someone might be on the verge of smiling. Prepare to be wrong, and retreat immediately and with grace.

There is love and joy out there in the world. Don’t snatch at it. But don’t inoculate yourself against it either.

(Simran Mangharam is a dating and relationship coach and can be reached on simran@floh.in. The views expressed are personal)



CHECK OUT Sanjoy Narayan’s essential Rolling Stones playlist

Mick Jagger has said he makes records for today’s listener, not yesterday’s fan. Foreign Tongues is certainly both. (Below) The Stones at a gig in Amsterdam in 2022. SHUTTERSTOCK



{ DOWNLOAD CENTRAL } FOREIGN TONGUES BY THE ROLLING STONES

Let the record show...

Sanjoy Narayan



I have become a born-again fan of Mick Jagger, 83, and The Rolling Stones. Last month, they released their 25th British studio album, *Foreign Tongues* and, during a promotional interview on Conan O’Brien’s podcast, I heard Jagger talk about David Hockney, the great painter who died in London in June, aged 88. He spoke with an almost boyish admiration about a man who had kept reinventing himself right up to his final iPad drawing.

The irony, though Jagger didn’t seem to notice it, is that he and his bandmates — Keith Richards, 82, and Ronnie Wood, 79 — are doing precisely this. Since Hackney Diamonds arrived in 2023, ending an 18-year drought of new Stones material, the band has been rocking — and rocking forward.

Foreign Tongues, 14 tracks and just over an hour long, was assembled from sessions stretching from 2019 through last year. But this isn’t a scraps record. Only four of the tracks date to the Hackney Diamonds sessions. The rest were written and cut fresh. Jagger has described the method as deliberately unfussy: get the song down fast, before anyone in the room has the chance to pick it apart. Which shows.

Where the Stones of the 1990s and 2000s often sounded like a band assembling a Stones album by algorithm — riff here, harmonica there, Start Me Up DNA smeared over everything — this one sounds like the work of men who still enjoy being surprised by what emerges from the amp.

The guest list says a lot about where the band stands. Steve Winwood’s organ runs

through nine of the 14 tracks, less a cameo than a genuine second voice. McCartney plays bass on one track, for the second time (the first was on *Hackney Diamonds*).

Robert Smith of The Cure and Chad Smith of Red Hot Chili Peppers drop in.

And then there’s the quietly devastating one: *Hit Me in the Head* incorporates a drum take from the late Charlie Watts’s final session in 2021, so that the Stones’ original rhythm section is still, somehow, here.

The first two tracks, *Rough and Twisted* and *In the Stars*, set the tone: sharp, crunchy, with a contemporary punch rather than a vintage one. Mr Charm is vintage sleaze, with Richards’s riff at its most disreputable and Jagger doing his familiar wry-observer-of-scoundrels routine, though “scoundrel” recurs more pointedly later on.

Jealous Lover drifts into the soul register of *Beast of Burden* (1978) and *Emotional Rescue* (1980). Jagger’s falsetto still, remarkably, intact. There is a cover of Amy Winehouse’s *You Know I’m No Good* on the album, handled with touching tenderness.

The record’s emotional centre is *Ringin’ Hollow*, a country-inflected track that reviewers call a love letter to America written by men watching it change into something less familiar. Jagger sings of a scoundrel whipping up the crowd, of clocks that never turn back — lines that land squarely in a moment when populist theatre has become the ambient noise of public life.

Where Hackney Diamonds was a comeback statement built for maximum impact with Lady Gaga and Stevie Wonder guesting, and every song earning its place in the “the Stones still have it” narrative, *Foreign Tongues* doesn’t have anything to prove. It has the loose feel of a band that has stopped auditioning for its own legacy and started simply enjoying the company it keeps.

Some critics call it the stronger record, uncluttered by comeback pressure; others find that the back half sags. Both things can be true.

What struck me most was the refusal to lean on nostalgia as a crutch. Jagger has said, more than once on the promo run, that he makes records for today’s listener, not yesterday’s fan. That’s the kind of thing an 83-year-old rockstar is expected to say, except here, unusually, it’s true.

(Email sanjoy.narayan@gmail.com. The views expressed are personal)