

MAXXI L'Aquila, art does justice to history: Annu Matthew's research

Sheltered: at MAXXI L'Aquila, the artist Annu Palakunnathu Matthew reveals the untold story of the Indian soldiers saved by the Abruzzo families during the Second World War

By Maria Teresa Capacchione

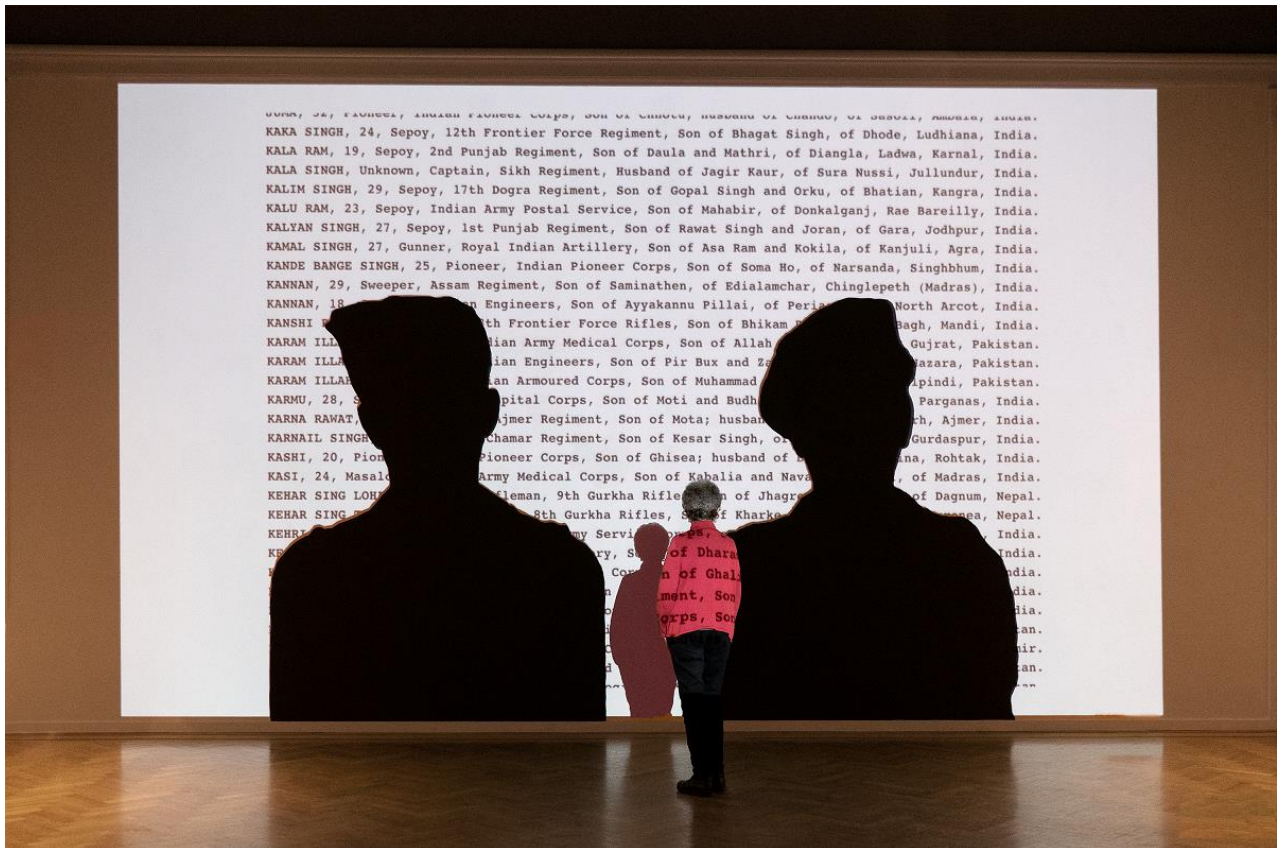
Last October 7, on the occasion of the Contemporary Day, a meeting was held at the MAXXI L'Aquila which, apparently, has little contemporary value because it brings to light events from around 80 years ago. These events created a close connection between two countries – Italy and India – which, especially at the time, could not have seemed further apart. Yet, the fate of many Italians and Indians became intertwined. But few know the story of the 2.5 million Indians who fought alongside their colonizers, the British, during the Second World War, many of whom lost their lives or were taken prisoner on the Italian front while almost simultaneously tens of thousands of Italian soldiers were taken by the British to prison camps in India.

A story that reflects on memory, on the randomness of borders and which, precisely for this reason and not by chance, comes into dialogue with the works of the Indian artist **Shilpa Gupta** present in the other rooms of the museum with the *visible/invisible* exhibition. And bringing this story to light is the artist of Indian origins **Annu Palakunnathu Matthew** (Stourport-on-Severn, United Kingdom, 1964) who has developed an artistic practice in which, starting from archive photos, she questions the past above all the lesser-known one to examine historical narratives and the effects of colonization.

These soldiers, in fact, fought and died in Europe, but in India their sacrifices at the end of the War were considered embarrassing and therefore put aside during the fight for independence from the English and also following the horrors of Partition, which came with the creation of the Indian Republic and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1947.

This is how their vicissitudes have never been told by history books, neither Indian nor English. Remember the controversy caused by the film *Dunkirk* in 2017? There was no trace of foreign troops in the historical reconstruction

proposed by **Christopher Nolan**. Yet three companies of the Indian contingent were involved in Operation Dunkirk, but even today the British struggle to admit that, as the Oxford scholar Yasmin Khan wrote, «The Second World War was fought by the British Empire, not by England alone.»



Credit Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, **UNREMEMBERED**

There were around 50 thousand Indian soldiers on Italian soil. Annu Matthew's research began a few years ago at the Imperial War Museum in London, whose archive includes film footage of the Indian soldiers fighting in Italy. Her installation entitled **Unremembered** took shape from this material: images and films projected onto the gravestones of the Cassino and Forlì cemeteries where many of them are buried.

But Annu's research does not stop here, she follows in the footsteps of those who were taken prisoner by the fascists and nazis and locked up in the Avezzano prison camp and here she discovers incredible stories of courage and solidarity of the Abruzzo families who helped the Indian prisoners to hide and escape.

“As an artist, I am particularly interested in why some stories are less well known” says Annu Matthew. “My goal is to collaborate with the subjects of my research to create works accessible to a wider audience using their family photographs. What happened to them should not be lost from history. When I came across the story of the Indian soldiers who fought during World War II and the generosity of those in Italy who saved them, I was amazed to learn that it was not part of the history books so I decided to dedicate my work to them”.



Credit Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, UNREMEMBERED

The event organized at Maxxi L'Aquila – also attended by the writer **Alessio De Stefano** and curated by **Donatella Saroli** of the MAXXI Foundation – was an opportunity to share some of these incredible stories through the testimony of the heirs of the Abruzzo families (in particularly the Fatato and Scaglione families) who with great courage saved the lives of the Indian prisoners. Stories also told through objects, such as the violin given by an Indian soldier to the ten-year-old son of the prison doctor who, at the risk of his own life, helped him escape. For the first time his grandson wanted to share that violin that crossed continents and battles and after 80 years revived the story of his father and grandfather.

Also thanks to the many people who responded to the Maxxi L'Aquila call to collect stories and testimonies on the topic in the area, Annu Matthew's

research will continue in the coming months by assembling other photographic material, books, interviews, objects with which she will give concreteness to a work whose form we do not yet know but whose power and artistic and historical value we can already imagine.



Maxxi L'Aquila, immagine del talk del 7 ottobre 2023