



Bawa's Rolls

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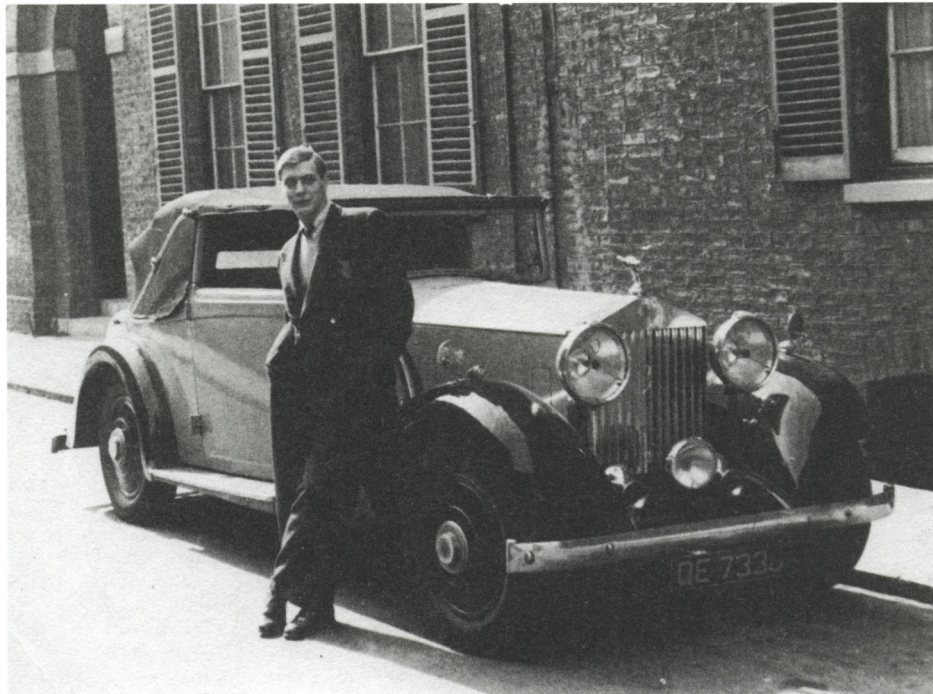
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Above: Geoffrey Bawa, London, 1955
Courtesy David Robson
© Geoffrey Bawa Trust

Below: The 1934 Rolls-Royce drophead
coupé at No 11, 33rd Lane, Colombo
© Sebastian Posingis

Bawa's Rolls

Max Moya

At the Architectural Association in the mid-1950s Geoffrey Bawa was considered the school's tallest, oldest, most exotic, most outspoken and wealthiest student. His height was no doubt a consequence of his parentage, being the second son of Benjamin Bawa, a successful Sri Lankan lawyer of Muslim and English extraction, and Bertha Marion Schrader, whose ancestry was even more complex, being part Sinhalese and part German, Scottish and Dutch. His great age on enrolling at the AA – he was 35 years old when he began his studies in 1954 – was connected to the fact that architecture was his second degree. For after his high-school education at Royal College, Colombo (the 'Eton of Sri Lanka'), Bawa had studied English at St Catherine's College, Cambridge – where he dressed in a cape and carried a cane – then continued a legal training at London's Middle Temple before becoming a barrister in 1944 (all of which would explain his confidence and lack of inhibition). Very soon, however, Bawa seemed to tire of the legal life and left to travel the world for a couple of years. Returning home, he bought an abandoned rubber estate in Lunuganga, where he planned to design and construct for himself an Italianate garden like those he had seen in Rome and the Veneto after the war. Recognising that his grand plan called for a certain level of technical knowledge, he apprenticed with the Colombo practice Edwards, Reid & Begg, but when his mentor H H Reid died after one year he returned to London and retrained as an architect at the AA, even if during his third year he chose to live in Italy. On those occasions when his presence was required at the school, he would drive the whole way in a bespoke 1934 drophead coupé Rolls-Royce 20/25 (a ritualistic commute that clearly advertised his affluence).

As David Robson has pointed out in *Bawa: The Complete Works*, Bawa's cars offer a sort of parallel historiography to his buildings. And from Robson we also know that the allure of the automobile was instilled in Bawa as a boy, with his father's Sunbeam Tourer, his mother's Daimler and the Humber owned by his brother Bevis (who was even taller, older, darker and more rakish). Aged 25, having just passed the bar, Bawa bought his first Rolls-Royce – a Phantom One, 'with an enormously long bonnet and a maximum speed of 150km per hour'. In 1949, during the period when he worked as a lawyer in Colombo, Bawa then exchanged this car with his brother's blue open tourer. His third and favourite Rolls-Royce was purchased in England in 1950, where its original white coachwork was embellished with black running boards and wheels, and then shipped back to Sri Lanka. When Bawa began his architectural studies at the AA this car would accompany him to London, and when he graduated in 1957 it followed him back home.

Bawa died in 2003, having lived a second life as an architect far more distinguished than his first brief life as a lawyer. If you visit the house he designed for himself at number 11, 33rd Lane, Colombo, you will see the ingenuity with which he worked. You will also notice immediately that the house's sole inhabitant is his beloved 1934 Rolls-Royce, for a clause in the Bawa Trust statute, explicitly added by Bawa himself, stipulates that the car has to remain indoors, immobile and never driven, out of fear of the damage that might be inflicted on it by the roads and the ferocious road users of Colombo. Little is said in the same document about the space in which it sits – the magnificent entrance hall of the house. Filled with the Rolls, this space gives an even more participatory role to the car than Le Corbusier's celebrated curving ground-floor half-circle at the Villa Savoye, and is also more daring than the *porte cochère* in Luis Barragán's own home, where the garage acts as a prologue to the *real* hall inside. But look at the quality of the light in the garage of number 11, the delicately perforated wooden door, the high-gloss black-and-white epoxy floor and the elegant *batik mandala* hanging on the wall, and you realise that in Bawa's house the carriage entrance *is* the receiving hall, for what is good for the Rolls is more than good enough for you and me.