

# WIDE CANVAS

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BY AARTI DUA

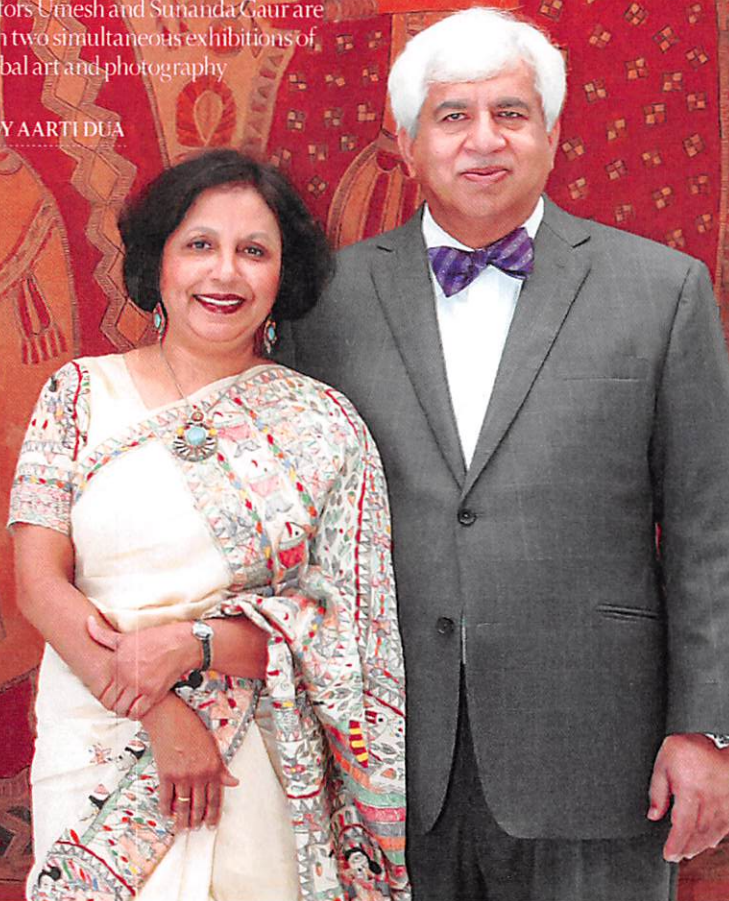




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**ART ALERT**  
Sunanda and Umesh Gaur's ongoing tribal art show in New Jersey includes works like celebrated Gond artist Jangarh Singh Shyam's *Tree and Panther* (EXTREME LEFT) and Mithila painter Bana Devi's *Shiva* (LEFT, BELOW). A gallery view of their ongoing photography show in Boston.

**UMESH AND SUNANDA**  
Gaur are among the leading collectors of Indian art in the US. But this is a first even for them. They're currently showing works from their huge 400-strong collection at two exhibitions simultaneously. What's more, they're not sharing their large collection of Modern and Contemporary Indian painting. But they're showing tribal art and also photography from India.

Take a look at the William Paterson University Galleries in New Jersey. The suburban American public university seems far removed from any indigenous artistic movement let alone a vibrant tribal attack from India. But that's exactly what's happening here with the show, *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India*, which opened on November 1.

So, its walls are brimming with scenes filled with *mahua* trees and panthers, folk tales and even calamities like Tsunamis, all drawn from India's Gond, Mithila (or Madhubani), Patua and Warli traditions. There are works from celebrated indigenous artists like Jangarh Singh Shyam, Bana Devi, Swarna Chitrakar and Jivya Some Mashe.

Cut to the Bakalar & Paine Galleries at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (MassArt) in Boston where the Gaur's are taking Americans on another Indian visual journey with their show, *Looking In/Looking Out*. It's a pictorial commentary on India as seen through the lens of photographers like

Raghubir Singh and Raghu Rai and also artists like Vivan Sundaram. There's documentary street photography, portraits and also performative photography.

Now, the Gaur's are among the leading promoters of Indian art in the US — back in 2003, *Arts & Antiques* magazine ranked them among the top 100 collectors there based on their collection's historical importance and their philanthropic work in promoting Indian art. And they want to turn the lens in America beyond India's Moderns and Contemporary artists to photography and

indigenous art from India.

"Everyone is chasing paintings. But we would rather buy something interesting. I'd imagine we have the largest photography collection in the US," says Umesh, who's the driving force behind the collection and who manages private client investments at his firm, Gaur Asset Management.

He adds: "Indian Modernists and also younger Indian artists have been shown in many places before but photography is relatively new and tribal art is just emerging." Sunanda, who's a paediatrician, says: "I



The Gaur's have converted a part of their sprawling New Jersey home into a gallery





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love the way our lives have evolved around art. It has been so enriching and such an interesting learning experience."

Walk into the Gaurs' sprawling home in New Jersey — they've converted a part of it into a 4,000-sqft gallery, Bindu Modern — and it's clear how art has taken over their lives. Large paintings greet you at the entrance and everywhere in the rooms beyond, there are works from the masters of Indian painting, photography and tribal art.

So, Tyebe Mehta's stunning Diagonal series work mesmerises viewers from one wall while F. N. Souza's *Woman Undressing* stares from another. And M. F. Husain's *Lovers in Japan* draws viewers to another space. In between are works by artists from Arpana Caur to Dayanita Singh to Jangarh.

Says Umesh: "We get the same enjoyment when we buy a work by Raghu Rai as we get when we buy a Souza. The work comes in, we hang it, talk about it, then look at it again. We enjoy each and every work in our collection."

In fact, at Bindu Modern, the couple frequently hosts curated shows from their collection besides giving tours to art lovers, curators and scholars. They also support Indian art at several American museums.

Vadehra Art Gallery's Arun Vadehra, who has known the Gaurs for 20 years, says: "They were among the first collectors who



**COLLECTORS CORNERS**  
The Gaurs' art collection includes significant works like (TOP) Raghu Rai's *Delhi Businessman Feeding the Seagulls, Jamuna, Delhi* and M. F. Husain's *Lovers in Japan* (FACING PAGE). (ABOVE) The Gaurs frequently host art curators and experts like Christie's Deepanjana Klein, Saffronart's Hugo Weihe and Peabody Essex museum's Susun Beon at their Bindu Modern gallery (FACING PAGE BOTTOM)

started buying Indian art in the US. And they're all the time moving into uncharted territories, which makes them unique."

Umesh first began collecting art posters after he moved to the US to do a PhD in chemistry after his master's at IIT Kanpur. He was inspired by his American colleagues, who were into art. Then, in the mid-1980s, he realised there was a whole world of Indian art after seeing M. F. Husain's fans throng around him in Delhi.

The Gaurs bought their first work — a Husain naturally — at Sotheby's first sale of Contemporary Indian Paintings in New York in 1995. Soon, they were picking up works by the leading Modernists. "When Umesh

started to buy art, I didn't think we were going to be collectors. We bought a few works and then a few more. And it just evolved," says Sunanda.

Now, the spotlight is on their two shows. Take a look at *Many Visions, Many Versions*, which originated in a tribal art show at Bindu Modern in 2013. They first encountered tribal art at an Asia Society exhibition in 2005. Recalls Umesh: "I said, 'This is an exciting area, institutions are looking at it so we need to take it seriously.'" In 2007, they bought their first work — a *patua* by Swarna Chitrakar — from a Sotheby's charity auction.

Now, they're showing 47 works at their show, which is curated by social anthro-

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UMESH GAUR | Art collector

pologist David Szanton and art historian Aurogeeta Das. There are works like Umesh's favourite *Tree and Panther* by Jangarh and Madhubani painter Bana Devi's *Shivu*. "It's a different kind of painting from contemporary Indian art so intellectually, it's a new challenge for us," says Umesh.

What's more, they're talking to International Art & Artists, which develops art exhibitions, to do a larger show on Indian tribal art that will travel to nine American museums over three years starting from 2017. "It's a big project. And I think it will change the way Indian tribal art is viewed in America," says Umesh.

Meanwhile, at MassArt, the Gaurs are showing 70 of their 100-odd photography works. They first began the collection in the mid 2000s, when they helped The Newark Museum to put together a large-scale exhibition on Indian photography. "I did not know too much about photography at that time. But I learnt a lot from curators like Gayatri Sinha," says Umesh.

They bought their first work, *Piaus I* by Atul Bhalla, from a Christie's auction in 2006



for around \$10,000. "I didn't know who Atul Bhalla was. But I asked the [Newark] museum if he was in the show. And I got an email saying his work's going on the catalogue cover. And I said, 'Wow,'" recounts Umesh.

"We liked the work because we connected with the *Piaus*. He had taken pictures of these water fountains across Delhi. It looked whimsical and interesting and we like works that tell a story," adds Sunanda.

Soon, they were picking up "significant

works" like Raghubir Singh's Kerala series at auctions. It's showing at MassArt along with works like Vivek Vilasini's photographs with Kathakali dancers.

Undoubtedly, the Gaurs turned to photography and tribal art as Indian art prices zoomed. "We were one of the first collectors to buy works by artists like Subodh Gupta, and we bought them for very little money. They were selling for half a million dollars by 2006-07. So, maybe that was one of the reasons," says Umesh.

He adds: "If we were to buy a top work of Souza, it would cost us millions of dollars today. But you can buy a top work of Jangarh Singh Shyam for \$50,000. And you can buy the best works of photographers similarly. And the enjoyment is in buying a great work."

Sunanda believes that Umesh, who also has a large collection of Indian stamps, has "collecting in his genes". And he goes about it "in a very scientific fashion". She says: "I take no credit for this art collection. It's my husband who started it all and brought me along."

But they're both keen on sharing it with others. For now, it's continuing to grow. So, they bought two Raghu Rai works and some Souza drawings recently. Umesh has also commissioned Swarna Chitrakar to do a large work. They would like their collection to go to a museum eventually. Says Umesh: "We firmly believe that art is there to be displayed and to be enjoyed with other people."

They're certainly doing all of that. ■

ALL PICTURES COURTESY UMESH AND SUNANDA GAUR

