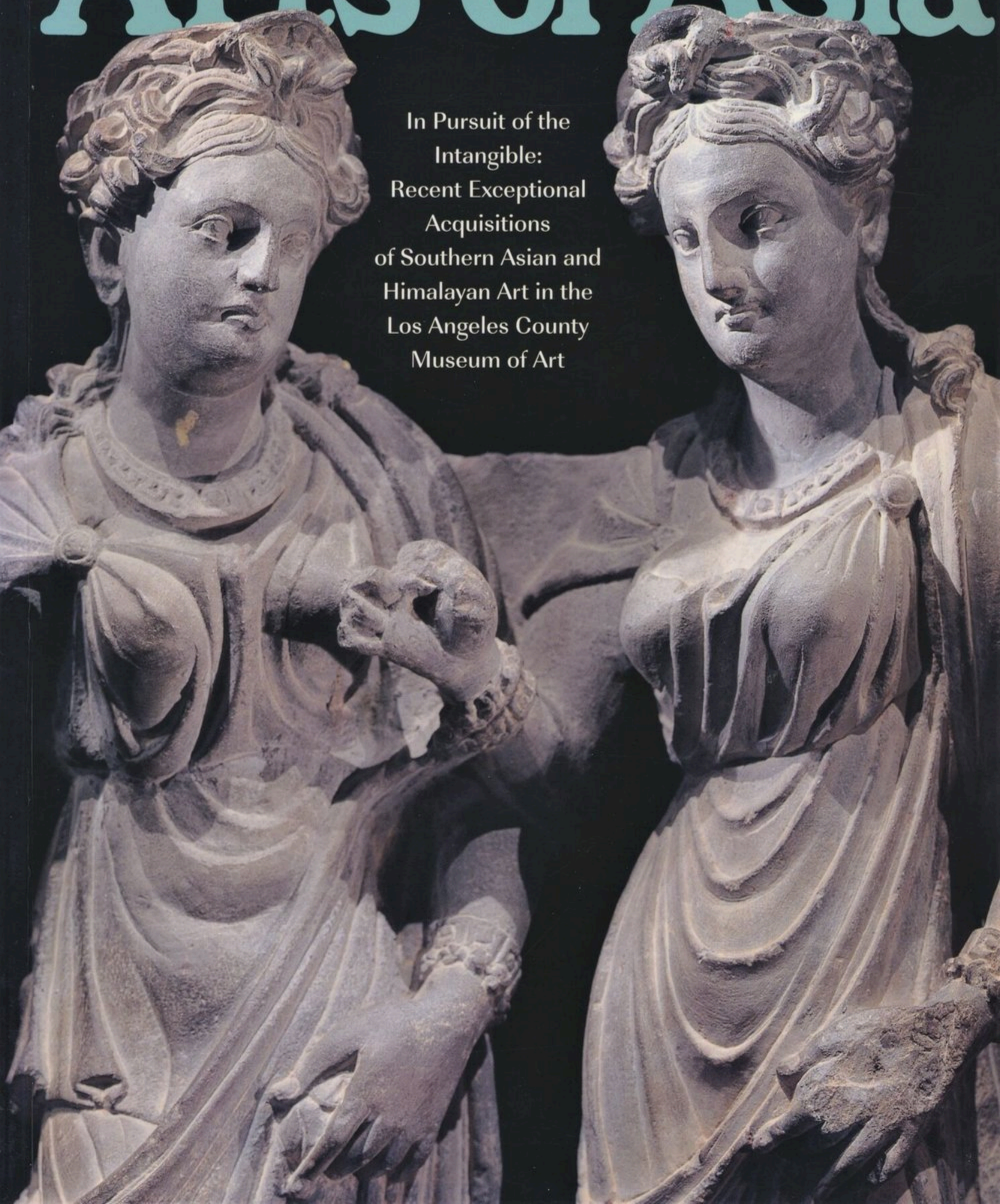


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Arts of Asia

In Pursuit of the
Intangible:
Recent Exceptional
Acquisitions
of Southern Asian and
Himalayan Art in the
Los Angeles County
Museum of Art



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Jack Abraham 1, 5-8, 11-22
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1
Manjit Bawa
Untitled
(*Krishna fluting*), 1995
Oil on canvas, 6½" x 10"

Contemporary Indian Art in Private American Collections

Umesh Gaur and Marcella Sirhandi

THIS SUMMER, the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum of Rutgers University is showing "India: Contemporary Art from Northeastern Private Collections".¹ The exhibition includes more than one hundred works of art from over twenty collections from the northeastern United States and emphasises the post-Independence era—1947 to the present. A broad range of Indian artists of this period are displayed—from members of the groundbreaking Progressive Artists Group (F.N. Souza, M.F. Husain, Krishna Ara, Syed Raza, et al.), to other first and second generation Indian modernists (Ram Kumar, Tyeb Mehta, Ganesh Pyne, et al.), to artists who have emerged in recent years (Atul Dodiya, Jitish Kallat, et al.). This is the largest exhibition of its kind to date to be held in an American museum.

In the United States, private and institutional collectors of Indian art have traditionally collected Indian antiquities and miniatures; proportionately little interest has been expressed in collecting contemporary art from India. While major museums with Asian art collections have vast holdings of Indian artefacts, their collections contain very few contemporary Indian artworks.

This limited interest by museums is perhaps related in part to the first American exhibition of 20th century Indian art, held at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, DC, in 1982. The exhibition consisted of fifty works on loan from the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, and was scheduled to coincide with

an official visit by Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India. The critics smothered the exhibition with an avalanche of negative reviews: "The movement appears caught in crisis..." "Wild styles patterned after famous French, English and German modernists..." "Diplomacy aside, Americans will have difficulty knowing in what context to judge these unfamiliar works".² Thus, the ambitious exhibition was quickly classified "derivative" and swept aside.

No museum has attempted a comprehensive survey exhibition on contemporary Indian art since 1982. But there have been several smaller, focused exhibitions, especially in the last five years. The increased frequency of these exhibitions is perhaps due to the growing number of Americans of Indian ancestry who have maintained their interest in ongoing developments in Indian art, and an emerging openness in Western attitudes toward the art and culture of South Asia.

While American institutional collections of Indian art remain locked in the past, there is a growing popularity of contemporary Indian art in American private collections in the last few years. Although affluent Americans of Indian descent are primarily responsible for this new trend, there also appears to be a growing number of collectors of non-Indian origin.

The greatest private American collectors of contemporary Indian art to date have been Chester and Davida Herwitz of Worcester, Massachusetts. They started col-

lecting in the 1960s and over the next three decades amassed a collection of more than three thousand works. While building this collection, the Herwitzes became intimately involved with the painters that they collected and became a major force behind the contemporary Indian Art movement of the late 20th century.³ Since the untimely death of Mr Herwitz in 1999, most works from this world's largest collection have been sold, or donated to the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, where art from that segment of the collection will go on permanent display in 2003.

The Herwitzes also correctly envisioned that the works, which they acquired over three decades, would eventually sell for several times their original cost. On June 12th, 1995, Sotheby's in New York conducted a sale of 218 works from the Herwitz Collection. The goal of this sale was to raise money to organise a permanent display for the rest of the collection in the greater Boston area. While the renowned auction houses, Sotheby's and Christie's, had been conducting annual sales of Indian antiquities for quite some time, this was the first sale in the United States exclusively devoted to contemporary Indian paintings.

At this auction, the collecting of contemporary Indian art in America took off in a big way. Affluent Americans of Indian ancestry converged on New York to satisfy a pent-up demand for contemporary Indian art, which had been building for a few years. The first lot in the auction, *Gopini* by Jamini Roy, which had been estimated to sell for three to four thousand dollars, sold for US\$25,400 after spirited bidding. Most of the works were heavily contested; eighty-three per cent of the lots were sold (most for prices above pre-sale estimates, and greatly above estimates for all works by Husain). While some of the buyers had been collecting for a few years, there were a large number of collectors who acquired their first work of contemporary Indian fine art at this auction. That day, a new breed of collectors was born.

The success of this sale also created an American marketplace for contemporary Indian art, which did not exist before 1995. Since then, ten very successful sales have been held in New York at Sotheby's and Christie's. It is intriguing to analyse the results of these sales. In the earlier sales there was overwhelming interest in works by India's foremost modernist, M.F. Husain. However, in the last two years, works by other senior artists such as Raza, Pyne, Gaitonde, Ram Kumar and Tyeb Mehta have been setting record prices and drawing increasing interest. In the December 2000 sale at Sotheby's, a work by Tyeb Mehta from his *Diagonal Series* sold for US\$72,625, the highest price ever paid for a post-Independence contemporary Indian artwork at an auction. These auctions have also provided new American collectors an opportunity to acquire fine works at relatively low prices. About twenty per cent of the works offered at these auctions have sold for less than US\$1500.

Galleries specialising in contemporary Indian art have opened in New York. In 1995, Bose Pacia Modern was the first; others include Sundaram Tagore Gallery and Talwar Gallery. In addition, well-known galleries such as Deitch Projects have also had successful shows of contemporary Indian art. These galleries have played a very important role in broadening the collector base to include non-Indian collectors.

It is also interesting to note that American collectors are getting very selective. There is a significant bias towards works by senior artists and less demand for works created in the last few years by emerging artists. Even recent works by Husain have drawn a tepid response. Very few sculptures have been offered, and the response to them has been mixed. This is in sharp contrast to the contemporary art scene in India, where the demand for recently executed art has reached a frenzied level.

This analysis of the New York marketplace seems to be validated by the private collections that were previewed for the Zimmerli exhibition. The contents of these collections evidenced an overwhelming preference for well-established senior artists: thirty per cent by members of the Progressive Artists Group, sixty-six per cent by senior artists, four per cent by emerging artists—and less than two per cent were sculptures. Husain's work was present in most of the collections, as were fine works by all of the important artists of this era. Consequently, the works selected for the Zimmerli exhibition present a fairly comprehensive survey of the post-Independence art.

Amongst the works included in the exhibition, eight categories emerged as a framework to examine a cross-section of the works being collected. Three paintings in the category of Hindu Mythology lead the discussion, not because art in this category is most numerous, but because of their indisputably Indian content. Neo-Tantric art, the second category, is equally Indian in concept, but is far more abstract and symbolic than the mythological paintings. The contrast between two purely Indian themes is provocative. Additional categories are: Personal Narratives, Landscapes, Abstractions, Eroticism, Portraiture, Tribal Art. The last category constitutes an appropriate finale as a thoroughly Indian subject that is very much in current vogue. Three examples have been selected for each area to give an overview of style and content.

Hindu Mythology has been the most ubiquitous and sustained source for Indian artists from antiquity to the present. The Zimmerli exhibition shows how in recent decades artists have portrayed or altered myth to make social/political statements, often cynical, and sometimes just for fun.

Manjit Bawa loves subversion. The playful distortion of Hindu mythology and sacred icons characterises much of his painting. Bawa's depiction of Krishna, eighth avatar of Vishnu, one of the most popular and beloved of Hindu gods, is faithful to the role of the flute-playing cowherd (1). He has the requisite blue/purple skin colour and wears the usual yellow *dhoti*. On the other hand, this Indian god has yellow hair and sits without visible support. The attentive cows manifest Bawa's fascination with oddly joined body parts and unusual gestures such as tongues hanging

¹ The exhibition "India: Contemporary Art from Northeastern Private Collections" will be on display at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey from April 7th to July 31st, 2002. The exhibition has been organised by Jeffrey Wechsler, Senior Curator at Zimmerli and Umesh Gaur, a private collector.

² Sirhandi, Marcella, "Contemporary Indian Art", *Art Journal*, 58 (3), 1999, pp. 7–9.

³ Bean, Susan, *Timeless Visions: Contemporary Art of India from the Chester and Davida Herwitz Collection*, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.



2

Maqbool Fida Husain
Hanuman 13, 1981
 Watercolour and ink on paper, 12½" x 19½"

from mouths like salivating dogs. The red background, though not uncommon in Rajput miniatures featuring Krishna, eliminates the ground line so that Krishna and his cows seem to float. Bawa reminds us that while his imagery can conjure myth, the painting is simply a two-dimensional painted surface, not the real thing.

A seminal artist in India's modernist evolution, the legendary Maqbool Fida Husain, like Bawa, loves sabotage and satire. While many artists of his generation joined the bandwagon of abstract painting, Husain remained figurative and has painted themes truly emblematic of Indian myth and culture. A Muslim by birth, Husain has treated Hindu myths with affection and imagination. In *Hanuman 13* (2), Hanuman, the heroic monkey king of the epic *Ramayana*, confronts Ravana, the lustful ten-headed king of Sri Lanka, who kidnapped Sita to make her his queen. Sitting nude on the thigh of her captor (an evocative ploy by Husain), Sita awaits her fate. In reality, Sita resisted the advances of her captor, who was forbidden to touch her; thus, the depicted state of undress is an artistic invention. The ten heads of Ravana, like stacked grey stones, are equally inventive.

Ganesh Pyne probes deeply into the psyche of myth, choosing characters that personify critical concepts in Hindu philosophy. Karna (3), one of the most tragic figures in the epic, the *Mahabharata*, exemplifies the law of *dharma*, which states that each individual must live according to the requirements of his/her birth and other action will result in disaster. Progeny of an unmarried princess and the sun god Surya, Karna was put in a basket to float down the Yamuna River. He was found by a charioteer and raised to become the greatest warrior. Pyne chooses the moment when Karna, who had joined the inner circle of the Kuru king, abandons his chariot—the wheel was stuck in mud by Krishna's magic—and faces the enemy, his half-brother Arjuna. Karna slings a poison dart, but Arjuna's broad-headed arrow decapitates the hapless soldier. His demise debilitates the Kurus and marks their defeat. Karna was bound to suffer for his mother's



3

Ganesh Pyne
The Kneeling Warrior (Karna), 1990s
 Tempera on canvas, 22" x 18"

indiscretion and as a *Kshatriya* of the warrior class, Arjuna was bound by *dharma* to kill him.

Neo-Tantric art, as an art movement in India, started in the late 1950s. After Independence from Britain in 1947, Indian artists were in conflict over goals of identity. Members of the Progressive Artists Group wanted to make art that competed on an international level; thus they welcomed abstraction and non-figurative idioms. Others believed that art should look "Indian". Neo-Tantric art fulfilled both requirements. Tantric Hindu and Tantric Buddhist art are both endemic to India and purely abstract. They also represent gods and goddesses as well as philosophical concepts dealing with creation and cyclical continuation of the universe.

Gulam Rasool Santosh, a Muslim, was one of the first and most dedicated proponents of Neo-tantra. In his early career, he took up meditation and serious study of tantric literature.⁴ Most of his paintings are based on diagrams of yogis charting *chakras*, the psychic centres of the subtle body. His very abstracted *Yantra* (4) does not chart each *chakra*, but two stand out as signifiers. The flattened head circle at the genitals marks the lowest and basest *chakra*. A reversal of that *chakra* in orange at the top is the forehead *chakra*. These span the psychic centres from base desire to intuitive wisdom. The composition illustrates *yab/yum* (mother/father)—the Tibetan tantric version of a couple in sexual union. Breasts peek out from grey shoulders in the ellipse at top—below legs are spread to receive the *lingam* (phallus). The *yoni* glows golden as sexual union

ensues; this act and the release of semen is symbolic of *moksha* (release from the cycles of life).

Though stylistically consistent with Neo-Tantric imagery, Raza has made it very clear that his art is not based upon tantric sources, rituals or images. The semiotic inferences in his art are universal symbols that can be clearly read on multiple levels.⁵ Nevertheless, the *bindu*, a dot or point of varying size imbued with mystical power, appeared in Raza's work from the 1960s. Through sound and vibration the *bindu* initiates creation of the universe. In tantric *yantra* paintings, the *bindu* is the beginning and end of the visual journey through the painting. Together with the square and its gateways of the four directions, the *bindu* circumscribes a royal palace. The goddess within is represented by a downward pointing triangle and the god by an upward pointing triangle. Raza's *Prakriti* (nature) emulating the geometric containment of *yantra* and its symbols, takes on a life of its own (5). A black *bindu* in the centre of this pictorial grid is surrounded by coloured triangles representing the four seasons. *Bindu* repeats in various guises—as Surya (the Sun) in the upper left corner, and as earth, seas and concentric rivers in the blue square below. Five stacked circles represent the *pancha tattvas*—the five elements of sky, air, fire, water and earth. The title *Prakriti* is proclaimed in script in the red square near the lower right.

Personal Narratives are undoubtedly the most ubiquitous theme in contemporary painting, but are the most difficult to interpret. Some artists are hesitant to discuss their work. Some paint intuitively and do not recognise subtle connotations. On the other hand, many are articulate and eager to discuss their work. Equally important, however, is what the body of work itself communicates.

Arpita Singh is an articulate painter whose work centres around the role of women, home and family, and violence in the city street. These seemingly unrelated motifs often coalesce in a single painting. In *The White Chair* (6) Arpita hints at death, mourning and lawlessness. A widow wrapped in the required white sari without jewellery or other adornment gazes upon an empty chair. Together with the man behind her (the woman bears the burden and is the strength of the family), they mourn the loss of a dear one. Placed in a bed of pale flowers, the white chair, itself dotted with orange—almost blood red, simulate a coffin. Opposite, a seated figure questions the senseless death by pointing at two guns. A small car and tiny airplane suggest the speed at which modern life is leaving old and treasured values behind. In Arpita's composition, the flower-strewn enclave of home is no longer a safe haven, free from the irrational violence of the streets.

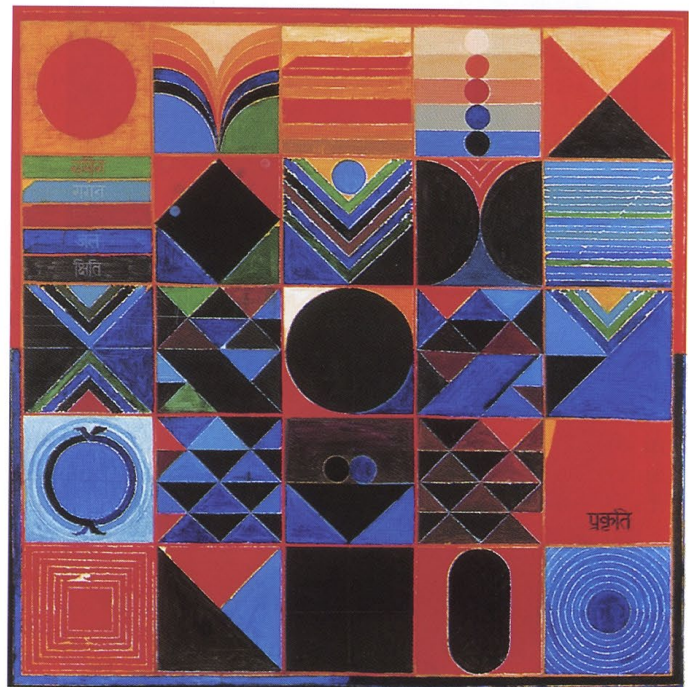
Sudhir Patwardhan uncovers the personality of Mumbai (Bombay) and is known for depicting its urban working class. The labourers in his paintings are often short and dark-skinned, shown at work or interacting with the city that surrounds them. It is the activity that counts; social commentary is not a concern. In *The Fall* (7) a craftsman is

⁴ Sirhandi, Marcella, private interview with Gulam Rasool Santosh, New Delhi, 1992.

⁵ Milford-Lutzker, Mary-Ann, "S.H. Raza: *Prakriti*", "India: Contemporary Art from Northeastern Private Collections", Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, 2002, exhibition catalogue p. 97.



4
Gulam Rasool Santosh
Untitled (Yantra), circa 1975
Acrylic on canvas, 55¾" x 42"



5
Syed Haider Raza
Prakriti, 1999
Acrylic on canvas, 59" x 59"



6
 Arpita Singh
The White Chair, 1986
 Oil on canvas, 36" x 47 $\frac{3}{4}$ "



8
 Bhupen Khakhar
The Banyan Tree, 1994
 Oil on canvas, 69" x 69"



7
 Sudhir Patwardhan
The Fall, 1998
 Oil on canvas, 60" x 42"

about to collapse. He dropped his trowel and reaches to the floor. Perhaps he suffered a heart attack or a stroke. The situation is sad, but this is not a malady confined to lower classes. The bird continues to sing, unmoved by the crisis below, suggesting that life goes on.

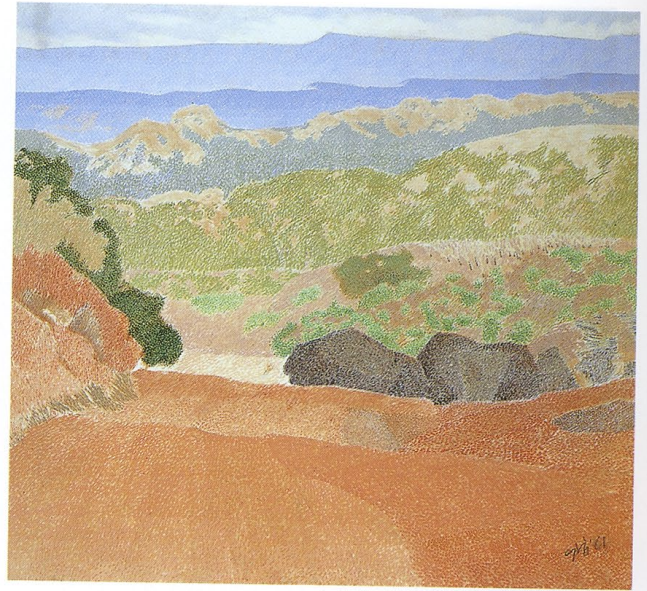
Bhupen Khakhar is believed to be India's first openly gay artist.⁶ At first glance, Khakhar's *The Banyan Tree* (8) seems to record a village picnic celebrating some religious or agricultural occasion. Such trees are a common meeting place for urban locals and often serve as a sacred site, a place to locate the village deity or hold a political rally. However, the gestures of two men about to hug one another suggest that relationships generally hidden are about to be revealed. Whether the message refers to the artist's own situation as a gay male or to broader Indian society is a matter of speculation.

Landscapes have attracted Indian artists less than their Chinese or European counterparts. However, the Zimmerli exhibit illustrates that landscapes in Indian art are more than mere emulation or appreciation of nature.

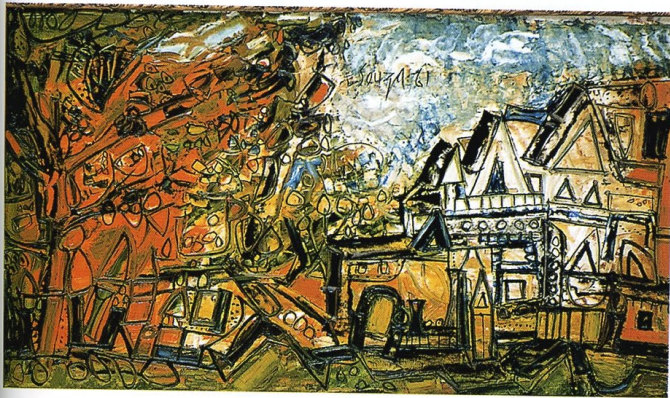
Kattingeri Krishna Hebbar celebrates *Spring* full-blown in the countryside (9), both pictorially and symbolically. Reflecting the strong Indian sunlight, trees shimmer golden, obliterating our view of the sky. Hebbar forsakes the usual representation of tender green vines and colourful flowers and gives us instead the feeling of warmth and bursting ripeness. The scene is full of joy and recalls an ancient and still-practised fertility ritual of spring in which marriage-age virgins run to a tree, embrace the trunk, and touch it with toe and heel. This releases the sap and the tree blooms instantly. In this painting, a couple reaches



9
Kattingeri Krishna Hebbar
Spring, 1990
Oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 54"



10
N.S. Bendre
Untitled, 1981
Oil on canvas, 42" x 45"
Collection: Sharad and Mahinder Tak



11
Francis Newton Souza
Landscape in Orange, 1961
Oil on masonite, 27" x 48"

out to join hands in the centre while a girl at the next tree clings to the trunk, foot poised to give it a tap.

N.S. Bendre's landscape puts the viewer on a golden road overlooking a sparkling valley and snow-peaked horizon with faded blue mountains and a softly clouded sky (10). His impressionist/pointillist technique reminds us of India's eclectic artistic heritage. We are reminded as well of the pristine mountain settings where two lovers of Indian cinema race toward one another to dance and sing. The painting, like the film segment, is refreshment from the tightly compacted and disordered confusion of Indian urban life.

Quite contrary to Bendre's warm, quiet image is a landscape by Francis Newton Souza (11). Souza founded the ground-breaking Progressive Artists Group in 1947. In 1949 he migrated to England. In a brief detour from his usual canvases depicting distorted, tortured heads and defiant people, he produced a series of cityscapes. While the

crowded, rhythmic life of urban London appealed to the artist, the familiar comfort and chaos of India continued to attract him. There is a division between two sides in this painting. The right side is blue, representing cold and cloudy London; the left side, representing India, is warm featuring an orange tree laden with multiple micro-objects. More importantly, the London houses are orderly and the tree, like India, is not. A figure at the cleft of the two sides seems to be running madly toward the jumbled complexity of warmth. Is it Souza ready to escape to his homeland? Here, as in much of Souza's art, is a conscious effort to let the painting appear naive, as if from the hand of an untrained artist, so that raw emotion dominates the canvas.

Abstractions and non-figurative painting were introduced in India in the middle of the 20th century, although the urge to re-conform reality or alter the appearance of a recognisable object can be traced back to Amrita Sher Gil and Jamini Roy in the early 20th century. While abstraction is elemental in the development of European modernism, Indian modernism abides by different parameters.⁷

V.S. Gaitonde is the only Indian artist who has only created pure abstractions throughout his career. *Abstract Form* (12) is typical of his compositions of the 1960s in which the canvas is divided into horizontal zones to create areas of tension.⁸ The painting suggests a seascape with

⁶ Hyman, Timothy, *Blupen Khakhar*, Mumbai Chemould Publications and Arts, 1998.

⁷ Kumar, R. Siva, "Modern Indian Art: A Brief Overview", *Art Journal*, v. 58 (3), 1999, p. 14–21.

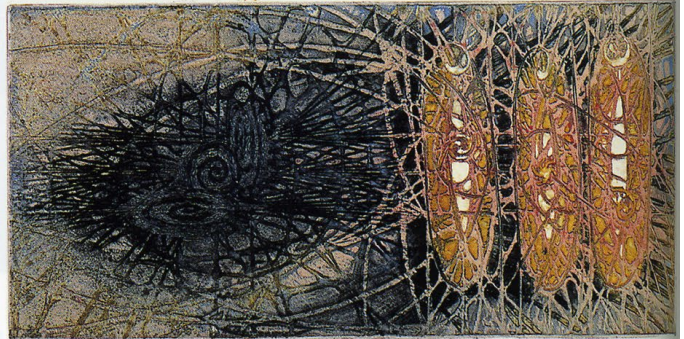
⁸ Sinha, Gayatri, "V.S. Gaitonde: Abstract Form", "India: Contemporary Art from Northeastern Private Collections", Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, 2002, exhibition catalogue p. 49.



12
V.S. Gaitonde
Abstract Form, 1972
 Oil on canvas, 40" x 30"

two projecting islands. Repetitions of smaller forms in pairs above and below give the work a Japanese flavour. Further affirmation of Japanese inspiration is the illusive cloud band that cuts across the centre, a tactic popular with Edo period Rimpa painters. Indian artists were aware of current and historic international trends; like artists everywhere, they used and rejected these sources at will.

After a decade of Cubist-inspired figurative painting, Ram Kumar turned to abstraction in the 1960s after spending three months in Varanasi (Banaras) with artist M.F. Husain. That sojourn determined the course of his career.⁹ In this highly refined version of Varanasi (13), Ram Kumar captures the intensity of religious fervour experienced by pilgrims taking *darshan* of age old icons in



14
Krishna Reddy
Three Graces, 1953
 Colour viscosity intaglio print, 9½" x 19"



13
Ram Kumar
Untitled, 1974
 Oil on canvas, 33¼" x 60¼"



15

Krishna Hawlaji Ara
Untitled (woman with birdcage), circa 1960s
 Watercolour on paper, 26½" x 21½"

sacred temples. Strong colour and slashing brush strokes conjoin temples with boats docked at the ghats on the Ganges River.

Print maker Krishna Reddy, an expatriate artist, is deeply connected to the philosophical roots of his native religion and culture. In 1950, Reddy met Stanley William Hayter, director of the renowned Paris print-making workshop, Atelier 17. As co-director of Atelier 17, Reddy met scores of European print makers and experimented with numerous styles and techniques. In his quest to link form and content, Reddy found answers in the Hindu *Upanishads* (ancient scriptures). The concept of *maya*, the illusion of life, and doctrine of man's unity with the cosmos is revealed in web-like patterns of layered ink (14).¹⁰

Eroticism has a long and diverse representation in tra-

ditional Indian art. Themes of lovers in ecstatic embrace as well as voluptuous nature spirits inviting sex are integral to Hindu and Buddhist iconography. The Zimmerli exhibition shows how contemporary practitioners of eroticism have adopted traditional Indian motifs and created their own.

The shy plump nude woman looking away from the viewer (15) by Krishna Hawlaji Ara, derives from the

⁹ Gill, Gagan, *Ramkumar: A Journey Within*, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, 1996.

¹⁰ Karbhari, Shalaka, "Krishna Reddy: Three Graces", "India: Contemporary Art from Northeastern Private Collections", Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, 2002, exhibition catalogue p. 98.



16

Maqbool Fida Husain
Mithuna—Red Desert, circa 1970
Acrylic on canvas, 44" x 64½"

17

Francis Newton Souza
Lovers, 1955
Oil on masonite, 47½" x 72"





18

Bikash Bhattacharjee
In His Office, 1982
 Acrylic on canvas, 39 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 40"

poetic tradition of mixed Muslim/Hindu metaphors. The caged bird is the Sufi poet, captivated by the coy beloved. On one level, the beloved is God who resides within every heart negating the pain of captivity; on another level, the beloved is a handsome youth or unattainable beauty who tortures the poet with sideways glances. Also, in Hindu lore, when the husband leaves on business, he puts a caged parrot in his wife's care. The parrot will keep her company and report any misdeeds to the spouse on his return.

In *Mithuna—Red Desert* (16), M.F. Husain personalises an ancient motif. *Mithuna* are loving couples, commonly seen in warm embrace framing the doorways of Hindu temples or flanking the entrance to Buddhist *chaitya* (worship) halls. Husain's couple is enacting a flirtatious drama as the ubiquitous crow, the peeping Tom, observes the couple from his perch on a large wheel. Two more lovers enact the tight embrace associated with Tibetan *yab/yum* posture while the strong red colour personifies heat and passion.

Beyond the pale of religion and culture, Francis Newton Souza depicts lovemaking as a base human instinct. Lust-filled lovers meet at sunset and make love in the countryside (17). It is the archetypal fantasy! Yet there is something sinister about Souza's lovers. The female is nude, but the male is fully clothed. His passionate red garment is not reflected in the passionless faces. Are we to believe the fantasy is far more thrilling than its realisation, or is there a personal story that only the artist can tell?

Portraiture, a key characteristic of Mughal painting, achieved sufficient likeness to identify the individual, whereas portraiture in Hindu painting was an idealised generic form. Realistic Western portraiture was a serious commitment at the J.J. School of Art in Mumbai where



19

Sunil Das
The Countess, 1997
 Oil on canvas, 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 32"

European watercolour and oil-painting techniques took firm hold. Today, all forms exist and the Zimmerli exhibition is evidence that portraiture in India often carries a significant social and political commentary.

In His Office, the portrait of a bureaucrat (18) by Calcutta artist Bikash Bhattacharjee, is a comment on the corrupt and dysfunctional Indian bureaucracy, a legacy of many years of British imperialism. Positioned comfortably behind his mahogany desk, in an expensive leather chair with curtains assuring privacy, the executive is a stone-faced mannequin—a prop, immobile like a wooden sculpture. Papers are arranged in stacks on the desk—but wait: something is amiss. There are no pens, no pencils, no typewriter or computer in sight. How can he work? He is the officer-in-charge at every bank, government office and private firm in India—the person you are sent to see, but never given access to. He is a figurehead, too busy and too important to lift a finger. Clerks type and stamp his paperwork and shuffle his files from office to office. There are no eyes painted on the frozen face—maybe he doesn't exist at all!

The Countess (19) is a beguiling portrait that typifies the style of Sunil Das. Like other Calcutta natives, surrounded by extreme class inequity and a volatile political history, Sunil turned to portraiture to express his outrage at man's inhumanity to man. *The Countess*—a reference to royalty—is a misleading title for this woman with a haunting stare. Perhaps she is a *bhairupia*, one of those who wears a mask and takes on another's personality; they can be seen on Indian streets with face painted white and blackened eyes. The colours in the painting are stark and jarring, as is the background with its slashes and gashes. The countess is emasculated—she has no breasts, and only the necklace

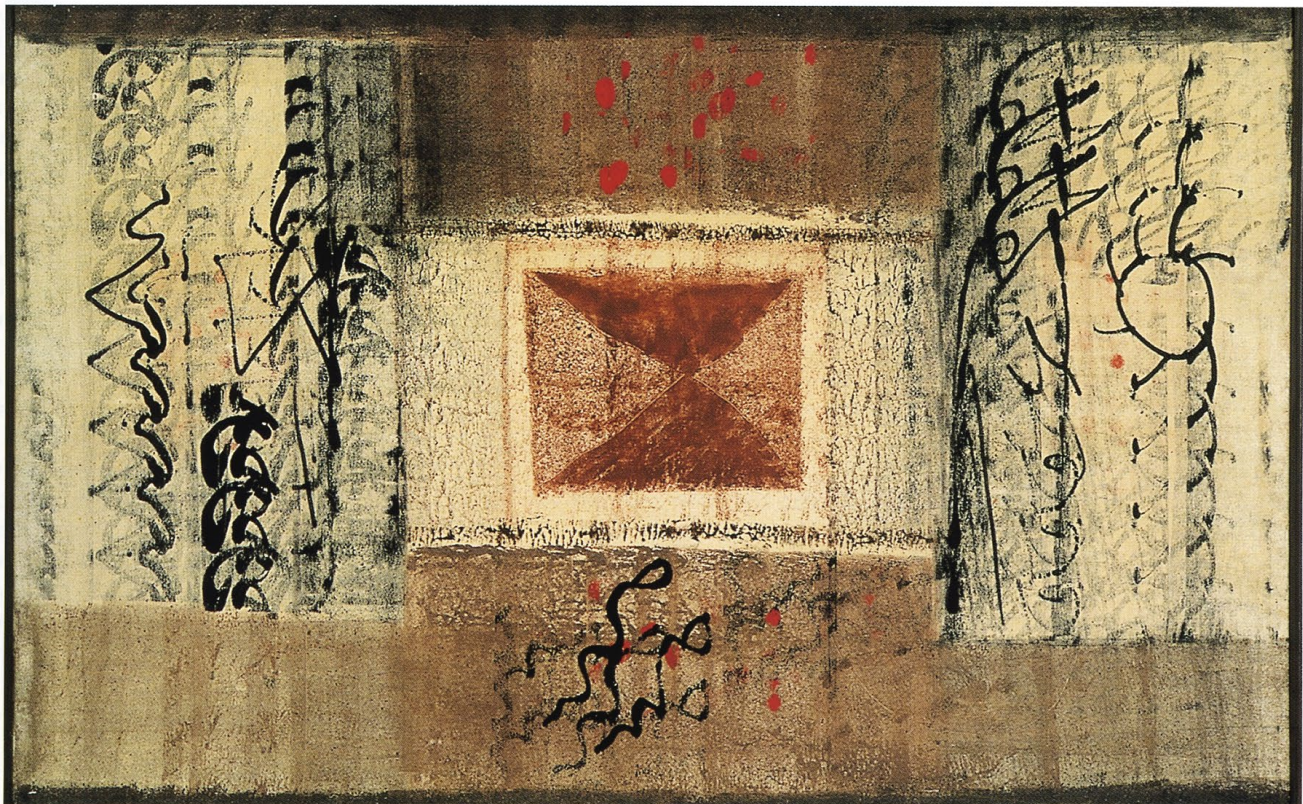


20

Jangarh Singh Shyam
Untitled (stylised trees), circa 1992
Oil on canvas, 46" x 69¼"

21

Jagdish Swaminathan
Text Decoded II, 1993
Oil on canvas, 44" x 68"





22

Madhvi Parekh
On Way to My Home, 1999
 Watercolour on paper, 30" x 22"

and black *tikka* attend to gender. Nevertheless, there is beauty in the painting. "Beauty", according to Das, "is something wonderful and strange which the artist fashions out of the chaos of the world in the ferment of the soul."¹¹

Tribal Art and its urban adaptations are currently enjoying much visibility in India, perhaps because in recent years the distinction between fine art and tribal/folk art has been decidedly blurred. Jagdish Swaminathan—founder of Roopankar, a museum of tribal art in Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal—and Jyotindra Jain, director of the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum in New Delhi, have made significant contributions to the appropriation of folk and tribal art within the urban "high art" context. Jain has been instrumental in bringing together tribal and urban artists for interactive workshops. The Zimmerli exhibition offers three distinct aspects of the urban/village art assimilation response. An untitled work by Jangarh Singh Shyam (20) is the result of a mature tribal artist relocated to an urban environment. *Text Decoded II* (21) is the work of an urban artist, Jagdish Swaminathan, who consciously sought the conjunction of urban and tribal modes in his work. The third, *On Way to My Home* (22) represents the work of a village girl encouraged to paint after marriage takes her to the city.

Like most tribal artists, Shyam painted the walls of his

house with gods and goddess, flora and fauna, to celebrate special occasions. Impressed by Shyam's artistic expression, Swaminathan took the young man to Bharat Bhavan and placed him in the graphics department where Shyam remained for fifteen years.¹² While meticulous detail is typical of tribal art, the use of a foreign medium, oil on canvas, encouraged idiosyncratic experimentation.

In *Text Decoded II*, the urbane, sophisticated practitioner, Jagdish Swaminathan, incorporates elemental symbols such as the *damaru* (two-sided drum) and calligraphic designs suggestive of ancient scripts, into an abstract geometrical composition.

Madhvi Parekh was born and raised in Sanjaya, a small village in Gujarat, and began to paint only after her marriage to artist Manu Parekh. Although she lives in Delhi, she continues to rely on her village experiences for her style and subject matter.¹³ *On Way to My Home* evokes the flat two-dimensional orientation of folk art, but unlike folk paintings, which tell a story, Madhvi's objects are often unrelated to each other. There are curious domed structures that contain animals or potted plants, sometimes capped by a human head; figures float in the bright pink sky keeping company with the birds. Far below, boats and a rearing snake make us feel that anything is possible in Madhvi's imaginative world.

While previewing the 1996 Sotheby's "100 Years of Indian Painting" exhibition, the eminent critic and editor, Peter Townsend, remarked, "these works look very universal, but they could have only been painted by Indian artists."¹⁴ The Zimmerli exhibition and its accompanying catalogue reaffirm that contemporary Indian art is anything but "derivative". The survey shows that contemporary Indian art may at times look Westernised, but it is indeed deeply rooted in the Indian psyche.

Another eminent art critic, Tom McEvelley, who has followed the contemporary Indian art scene, said in 1998: "Indian art is showing all symptoms of an art movement about to go international."¹⁵ The breadth and quality of the works presented in the Zimmerli exhibition show that contemporary Indian art has indeed become a major player on the international scene. Although contemporary Indian art has not achieved significant penetration into American institutional collections, its presence in the American private collections is solid and growing. It is expected that the Zimmerli exhibition, which is the first comprehensive survey of contemporary Indian art since that of the Hirshhorn Museum, held twenty years ago, will promote awareness and appreciation of contemporary Indian art. It may well become a significant milestone in encouraging the institutional collecting of contemporary Indian art in America.

¹¹ *Contemporary Indian Art in 1980s*, Center for Cellular & Molecular Biology, Sarala's Art Centre, Madras, 1987.

¹² Sinha, Gayatri, "Tribal Art: Jangarh Ram Singh", "India: Contemporary Art from Northeastern Private Collections", Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, 2002, exhibition catalogue p. 119.

¹³ Sinha, Gayatri, *Expressions & Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India*, Marg Publications, 1996.

¹⁴ Khanna, Balraj and Kurtha, Aziz, *Art of Modern India*, Thames and Hudson, 1998, p. 47.

¹⁵ Tagore, Sundaram, *Art News*, March 1998, p. 146.