

JUNE 2002

US\$11.5/HK\$75/£8/€13/A\$23/¥21

Orientalisms

The magazine for collectors and connoisseurs of Asian art



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American Collectors of Contemporary Indian Art in the Northeast

Umesh Gaur and Gayatri Sinha

More than 100 works of art from over twenty private collections are featured in the exhibition, 'India: Contemporary Art from Northeastern Private Collections' (for details see note at the end of this article). This is the first major survey of contemporary Indian art in the United States since the Hirshhorn Museum's 1982 show, and is, to date, the largest of its kind. Emphasis is on the post-independence era (1947 to the present), and the artists represented reflect the broad range of Indian art today; from members of the groundbreaking Progressive Artists Group (Francis Newton Souza, Maqbool Fida Husain), to first- and second-generation modernists (Ram Kumar, Tyeb Mehta, Narayan S. Bendre, Krishen Khanna, Vasudeo S. Gaitonde, Laxma Goud) and artists who have emerged in recent years (Ravinder Reddy).

In the United States, collectors of Indian art have traditionally focused on antiquities and miniatures. Museums with major Asian art holdings have vast collections of Indian artefacts, but have acquired very few contemporary artworks. While institutional collections have remained locked in the past, the increasing number of private collectors testifies to the growing popularity of contemporary Indian art. With such heightened interest, it appears that the vibrant Indian art scene

has finally arrived in America. While most new collectors are of Indian origin, the field is also attracting others from different backgrounds.

American interest in contemporary Indian art dates back to the 1950s. Thomas Keehn of Forest Hills, New York is one of the pioneering collectors. Together with his wife Martha, he went to India to study and research modern-art activities on behalf of a non-profit organization funded by Nelson A. Rockefeller. The Keehns fell in love with the country and stayed there for eight years. During this time they became friends with emerging young modernists, and in 1956, were instrumental in organizing 'Eight Painters', one of the first group shows in New Delhi. The participants in this exhibition (Bendre, Gaitonde, Satish Gujral, Husain, Khanna, Krishna Shamrao Kulkarni, Ram Kumar and Mohan Samant) went on to become major figures in modern Indian art. The Keehns began collecting early post-independence works from the 1950s and 1960s during their stay in India. They often gave a blank cheque to an artist in exchange for his work, only learning how much they paid for the painting after the cheque was cashed. Theirs is a very personal collection, in which each work was acquired through a friendly encounter with the artist.



(Fig. 1) *Yatra*
By Maqbool Fida Husain (b. 1915), 1956
Oil on canvas
Height 82.5 cm, length 106.7 cm
Collection of Thomas Keehn



(Fig. 2) Untitled
 By Vasudeo S. Gaitonde (1924-2001), 1994
 Oil on canvas
 Height 127 cm, width 102 cm
 Collection of Sharad and Mahinder Tak

Yatra by Husain is one of Keehn's favourite works (Fig. 1). Born in Maharashtra in 1915, Husain has emerged as the most important painter in post-independence India. He was a founding member of the Progressive Artists Group in 1947, the formation of which is viewed as the beginning of the modernist movement in Indian art. For five decades Husain has been considered the face of contemporary Indian art, and is the only Indian artist ever to have shown alongside Picasso. Although born into a Muslim family, Husain has painted Hindu myths and culture with affection and imagination. *Yatra* (pilgrimage) has always been an important facet of worship in India. Individuals and even whole families ride, walk or take any conveyance available to visit religious sites and perform *darshan* (seeing). Rendered in his personalized cubist style, Husain has depicted three passengers on a bullock-drawn cart against a barren landscape, while a procession in the far distance behind them seems to be dallying en route. A master of suggestion, Husain toys with the viewer's sense of comfort by placing Hanuman standing in the driver's seat with his arms outstretched as if carrying the houses on the hill above his shoulders – an illusionistic device which refers to the mountain of herbs Hanuman transported across the continent to save Lakshman, Sita's wounded brother-in-law. The *yakshi*-type figure on the left and the contemporary woman facing her seem

to represent the past and future.

Chester and Davida Herwitz of Worcester, Massachusetts were, without a doubt, the greatest collectors of contemporary Indian art. They first visited India in 1961 and began collecting Husain's work in 1966. At Husain's urging, they expanded their horizons to include works by other artists. Over a period of thirty years, the Herwitzes amassed over 3,000 works. The size of their collection and their personal involvement with the artists ensured that the Herwitzes themselves have become part of the contemporary Indian art movement. In recognition of their contribution to Indian culture, the government of India presented them with the Indo-American Society award in 1997, and their long-time friend Husain named a museum he built in Ahmedabad after them. However, with the untimely death of Chester Herwitz in 1999, the collection, once the world's largest, has been dismantled. Most of the works have been sold, or donated to the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, where they will go on permanent display in 2003.

One of the Herwitzes' favourite artists was Laxma Goud (b. 1940) of Hyderabad. They reportedly bought entire exhibitions of Goud's works and collected several hundreds more. Goud is among the generation of Indian contemporary artists who sought inspiration in their own cultural roots. As shown by the painting on this month's cover, the men and women of rural

Hyderabad are idealized in their direct simplicity and energy. Goud typically draws on the erotic potential of his subject, and the easy interrelationship between earth, animal and man. Skilful draughtsmanship and delicate shading imbue the figures with dignity and grace. Although Goud locates himself firmly in his own environment, the direct narrative of intimate familial bonds and the suggestion of urban migration have a universal appeal.

Perhaps the largest private collection of contemporary Indian art in the United States today is that of Sharad and Mahinder Tak of Bethesda, Maryland. After two decades, their holdings now include some of the finest works by most of the prominent senior artists. Mahinder, a physician, began collecting during her medical residency. She has made an effort to befriend most of the artists she collects, and many works were acquired directly from them. A true patron of the arts, Mahinder is an active lobbyist for increasing the visibility of contemporary Indian art in the greater Washington, DC area, and frequently holds receptions for visiting artists in her home. In the summer of 2001, five works from her collection were exhibited at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

The Taks possess several works by Gaitonde (b. 1924). Trained at the J.J. School of Art in Mumbai in the 1940s, Gaitonde was an associate of the Progressive Artists Group. He is probably the only pure abstractionist of the post-independence period, remaining so until his death in 2001. Gaitonde's interest in abstraction began in the 1950s, coinciding with the period when the Paris and New York schools were most influential. His own inspiration, however, drew more from Zen and the principles of minimalism. In the early 1960s he worked at the Bhulabhai Institute, a hub for the arts in Mumbai. From there he wrote to fellow artist Krishen Khanna: 'Since I started taking interest in Zen my painting has changed. My painting will always fluctuate between being and non-being...I am very particular about not having any decorative touch or tinge in my painting.' His canvases are typically divided into zones to create areas of tension through a spatial arrangement of colour. Although Gaitonde had become highly reclusive in later life, he produced paintings with a sensuous palette, in which the distribution of form is determined by its own inner logic. The untitled

work from the Tak collection in Figure 2 was produced during this period.

Despite Rajiv Chaudhri's recent entry to the field, he has emerged as the most prominent collector in New York. Chaudhri, the president of Digital Century Capital, a financial services firm, also collects Indian antiquities and early twentieth century works. He is most attracted to works of significant provenance and importance by senior artists. His passion goes beyond mere collecting, and he is the founding Chairman of the Indocenter of Art and Culture in New York, a non-profit organization dedicated to the presentation and support of modern and contemporary art and culture of South Asia.

One of Rajiv's favourite works is *Quartet* by Krishen Khanna (b. 1925) (Fig. 3). The subject matter relates to the artist's early career in Chennai (1951-61), when he was greatly influenced by Carnatic music, particularly the flautist Mahalingam and the *mridangam* player Palghat Mani Iyer. At that point he devised an expressionistic style of free brushstroke application, often painting with the same dexterous speed while musicians played at his residence on Sunday mornings. Khanna paints musicians as a genre, ranging from the vivid, boisterous bandwallahs to groups of musicians engaged in classical Indian music. The essential difference between the works is in the way the paint is applied, ranging from a vigorous expressionism verging on the abstract, to the more linear definition seen in *Quartet*. As an associate of the Progressive Artists Group, Khanna had exhibited with some of its members. The deep ochres and white seen in several paintings from Khanna's Chennai years relate to the sharp light of the coastal city. The modernist approach to the conventional subject of Indian musicians is quite typical of the period.

Ravi Akhoury, the chairman of MacKay Shields, and his wife Virginia, of Florham Park, New Jersey collect early twentieth century as well as post-independence works. They are also the only collectors with a significant interest in contemporary sculpture and have recently ventured into works by tribal artists from India. The Akhourys have organized their collection in a two-storey gallery at their home, with early twentieth century works on the first floor, and post-independence works on the



(Fig. 3) *Quartet*
By Krishen Khanna (b. 1925), 1956
Oil on canvas
Height 76.2 cm, width 102 cm
Collection of Rajiv Chaudhri



(Fig. 4) Untitled
By Narayan S. Bendre (1910-92), c. 1990
Watercolour on paper
Height 49.5 cm, width 40.6 cm
Collection of Ravi and Virginia Akhoury

second. They use this personal gallery to introduce their friends to contemporary Indian art.

The untitled work by early modernist Narayan S. Bendre (b. 1910) in Figure 4 comes from the Akhoury collection. After training at Indore, Bendre worked in Bombay and Shantiniketan, two centres which influenced his concept of an Indian modernity. Although Bendre painted from life, several of his works have a highly stylized quality. In this painting, the women with pitchers are suggestive of a rural setting. Their dark-hued bodies and rather formalized and conventional posing are quite typical of mid-century artists like Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-41) and B. Prabha (1933-2001). Romanticizing rural India and the placement of a subject within a modernist/abstract frame were also popular with Indian artists during the 1950s and 60s.

Maddipoti Choudry, a practising cardiologist from Brewster, New York, and his wife, Kamla, primarily collect works on canvas. The storage problem associated with collecting large canvases is solved by their frequent loans to friends and fellow cardiologists for display in their homes.

A large part of their collection is centred on two of the most important Indian modernists – Souza and Husain. Maddi is by far the most prominent collector of Souza's work in the United States. Born in 1924 in Goa, Souza was a founder of the Progressive Artists Group. In 1955, he wrote a brilliant but outrageous article, 'Nirvana of a Maggot', which was published in *Encounter*, a literary magazine edited by the British poet Stephen Spender. It contributed to his renown and reaffirmed his reputation as an outspoken, cantankerous, and even angry artist.

Butcher, shown in Figure 5, from the Choudry collection, is a portrait study by Souza, an artist best known for his inventive human forms. The subject of the painting is typical of Souza's malevolent, staring figures whose wild eyes are pushed so high that they displace eyebrows and forehead. The teeth-baring scowl of the subject resembles the snarling expression of a mad dog. Is the butcher going

(Fig. 5) *Butcher*
Francis Newton Souza (b. 1924), 1962
Oil on masonite
Height 205.7 cm, width 111.8 cm
Collection of Maddipoti and Kamla Choudry



(Fig. 6) *Banaras*
 Ram Kumar (b. 1924), 1967
 Oil on canvas
 Height 107 cm, width 81.3 cm
 Collection of Kalpana Raina and Shobo Bhattacharya



(Fig. 7) *Shankari*
 Ravinder Reddy (b. 1956), 1998
 Polyester resin fibreglass with gilding
 Height 43 cm
 Collection of Michael Steinberg

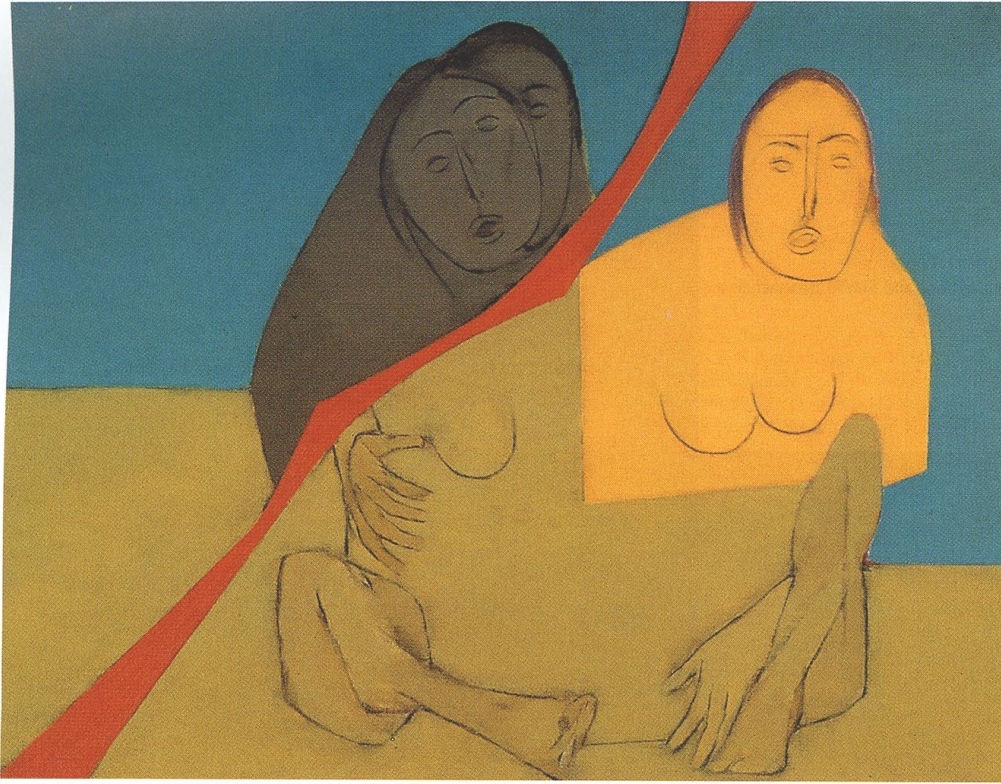


to attack the severed chicken thigh or an unseen protagonist? Undoubtedly the symbolism of *Butcher* comes from the depths of Souza's being, but does it represent the evil oppressor, the marginalized artist or Souza himself?

Kalpana Raina and Shobo Bhattacharya of New York belong to a growing group whose collections are modest in size but exceptional in historical significance and provenance. These collectors are able to display their entire holdings in their home and enjoy the works daily.

Ram Kumar's *Banaras*, in Figure 6, is from the Raina and Bhattacharya collection. Born in Simla in 1924, Ram Kumar's most enduring inspiration has been the religious city of Banaras where dilapidated houses convey a sense of hopelessness. Situated on the banks of the Ganges river, the city is one of the holiest places for Hindu cremations. Ram Kumar made his first visit in 1960 with Husain and spent three months sketching and painting there. This proved to be profoundly influential; it determined the course of his artistic career and led to a highly deliberated, continuous period of abstraction. Ram Kumar's *Banaras* paintings in the 1960s are distinctly sombre, and the city itself is constructed like a rather flat, loose grid. He has continued to paint the city, refining his vision and experimenting with his palette. However, in these nearly monochromatic early works, the cycle of birth and death rituals that are enacted on the banks of the Ganges become a sombre representation. As the artist said: 'Banaras refuted all logic. It was an endless despair. Life there was eternally like that.'

Suzanne Slesin and Michael Steinberg of New York repre-



(Fig. 8) *Diagonal Series*
 By Tyeb Mehta (b. 1925), 1972
 Oil on canvas
 Height 90 cm, width 115 cm
 Collection of Umesh and Sunanda Gaur

sent the growing base of non-Indian collectors who have added a few works by Indian artists to their broader collections. Although such collectors have no specific connection to India, they are attracted to these works for their unique and appealing artistic qualities.

Shankari by Ravinder Reddy (b. 1956), one of India's foremost contemporary sculptors, is from the Steinberg collection (Fig. 7). Invoking the Mother Goddess figure, Reddy transforms the image into a contemporary idea and medium. His present-day nymphs – from coy adolescent girls to sated middle-aged housewives – are often gilded or painted in iconic colours such as blue. These polychrome, polyester-resin fibre-glass sculptures vary in size from modest to monumental, with some reaching six metres in height. They confront the viewer, almost hypnotically, with their large, open eyes. These images celebrate the timelessness of female potency and can be viewed as *yakshis*.

The collection of Umesh and Sunanda Gaur, based in North Brunswick, New Jersey, consists only of post-independence works. Umesh, the president of Gaur Asset Management and Sunanda, a paediatrician, have been collecting for more than ten years. Concentrating on works by senior and women artists, it is perhaps the second largest private collection of such material in the northeast.

The Gaur collection includes a work by Tyeb Mehta (b. 1925) from his *Diagonal Series* (Fig. 8). Mehta visited the United States in the late 1960s as a Rockefeller fellow. In New York, he was influenced by the work of minimalist artists. On his return to India, he introduced a notably different style into his art – large, flat colour masses and figures, rendered with a

remarkable economy of line. Yet he was never satisfied with his own minimalist paintings. One evening, he simply decided to put a diagonal through his work to see what would happen. There was a fragmentation of the image which created movement and definition. Arguably, the diagonal severs and mutilates the figures. Heavy torsos and attenuated limbs of female figures are split and often encased in the pervading field of black. However, the hard-edged colour masses and the broken, seemingly tentative line of the figure, which create a pervasive sense of conflict and irresolution are a dynamic interplay of form and colour. To the extent that the artist uses colour masses to create disjunction within his figures, the diagonal serves to reinforce a sense of the existential isolation of his human forms.

The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum has mounted a comprehensive overview with the help of these enthusiastic collectors. It is hoped that the exhibition will promote awareness and appreciation of contemporary Indian art among institutional collectors and the public at large, and may one day become a significant milestone in documenting and encouraging the collection of contemporary Indian art in America.

Umesh Gaur is a collector of post-independence contemporary Indian art in North Brunswick, New Jersey. Gayatri Sinha is an independent art historian and critic based in New Delhi.

'India: Contemporary Art from Northeastern Private Collections' will be on display at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey until 31 July. The exhibition is organized by Jeffrey Wechsler, Senior Curator at Zimmerli and Umesh Gaur. A full-colour catalogue of the same name accompanies the exhibition.