



# ARTS ILLUSTRATED





**Quicken**, Saad Qureshi, Mixed Media including Wood, Cement, Wattle and Daub, Paint, 900 cm x 200 cm, 2011  
Image Courtesy of the Artist

# The Other Side

By Premala Matthen

INDIAN ART HAS CERTAINLY CREATED A NICHE FOR ITSELF IN THE INTERNATIONAL ART MARKET, WITH SIGNIFICANT NEW TRENDS STARTING TO EMERGE, IRREVOCABLY CHANGING THE WAY INDIAN ART IS PERCEIVED BY THE WEST

On December 15, 2015, at a Christie's auction in Mumbai, a Vasudeo S Gaitonde painting, 'Untitled' (1995), sold at an all-time record price for Indian art at \$4.4 million. It is said to be bought by an international collector based outside India who is not of Indian origin. In fact, Christie's confirms that the top lot for each of its three India sales were all bought from outside the country. Two other record prices for Indian art were achieved in that same year, also bought by international

collectors: \$4.01 million for the F.N. Souza 'Birth' (1955) in September and \$2.92 million for the Amrita Sher-Gil 'Untitled (Self-Portrait)' (1933) in March, both sold in New York. Record price points are not in and of themselves valuable; however, these headline-grabbing figures send a clear message of confidence and positive sentiment to the international art world by increasing recognition for Indian artists, and encouraging interest for new buyers to look for opportunities.

In the past few decades there have been several non-Indian mega-collectors who have single-handedly buoyed the Indian modern and contemporary art market. The American couple Chester and Davida Herwitz started collecting Indian Art in 1967 and in over 30 years amassed one of the world's largest collections of 20th century Indian art. A key portion of their collection was donated to the Peabody Essex Museum outside Boston, and the Herwitz Gallery became the first major public collection of 20th century Indian art outside Asia. The couple was said to find India's art scene 'one of the most dynamic in the world...in style... in technique, plus inventiveness'. Masanori Fukuoka is another 'White Knight' collector of Indian contemporary art. Arriving in India on a soul-searching trip after reading Rabindranath Tagore's 'Gitanjali' over two decades ago, Fukuoka now has a collection of 5,000+ Indian art objects, housed in his Glenbarra Art Museum in Japan. There have been clear stops and starts of international interest in modern and contemporary Indian art. After momentum gathering for decades, the early 2000s saw a splattering of seminal shows, such as Art Gallery of Western Australia's 'Edge of Desire' in 2004, École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts' 'Indian Summer' in 2005, and the Serpentine Gallery's 'Indian Highway' in 2008. Moreover, a flurry of powerful global art influencers began endorsing Indian contemporary art, particularly a group of 10–15 highly sought-after artists. In one example, François Pinault is said to be instrumental in validating the career of Subodh Gupta, currently India's best known contemporary artist abroad, by placing his 'Very Hungry God' (2006) outside the Palazzo Grassi at the 2007 Venice Biennale.

The financial crisis of 2008 was hugely detrimental to the modern and contemporary Indian art market for a host of reasons; nevertheless, an increasing number of international galleries and museums are displaying South Asian artists again. Recent gallery shows include NS Harsha at Victoria Miro, Prabhavathi Meppayil at Pace Gallery, Jagannath Panda at Halcyon Gallery, Faiza Butt and Naiza Khan at Rossi & Rossi, and many more. Top-tier museums are increasingly appointing committees dedicated to South Asian modern and contemporary art. Abha Housego, head of Indian auction house Saffronart's London office observes, 'The Tate has recently featured artists like Nasreen Mohamedi and Anwar Shemza, and a show of Bhupen Khakhar is scheduled next year. The Guggenheim shows for Gaitonde in New York and Venice were also landmark events.' A Nasreen Mohamedi retrospective at Madrid's Reina Sofia is also big news, as is the recent acquisition of a Raza painting in the Louvre museum – more



Untitled, Vasudeo S. Gaitonde, Oil on Canvas, 1995  
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examples of an ever-expanding presence of South Asian contemporary art in the collections of the best-known global museums.

Domestic Indian art galleries predominantly serve a local or regional population; however, one particular anomaly of Indian contemporary art is GallerySKE. Founded by Sunitha Kumar Emmart, a maverick dealer with an expert eye and talent for cultivating an artist's practice, GallerySKE is arguably India's best contemporary gallery. A regular feature at Art Basel in Basel, Switzerland, the most prestigious Art Fair in the world, and the only Indian gallery at Art Basel in Miami Beach in 2015, Sunitha confirms, '70% of my clients are outside India'. A domestic gallery with an international following, GallerySKE consistently transcends national boundaries to be recognised as best-in-class.



● **And Then Came the Prophecy**, Saad Qureshi, Charcoal, Pencil, Indian Ink on Birch Plywood 304.5 cm x 152.5 cm, 2015, Image Courtesy of the Artist

● **Beneath the skin of earth shining souls lie hidden**, Saad Qureshi, Charcoal, Pencil, Indian ink on Birch Plywood, 195 cm x 240 cm, 2014 Image Courtesy of the Artist

● **Wing**, Saad Qureshi, Mahogany, Birch Ply and Far-Eastern Plywood, 496 cm x 91.5 x 210 cm, 2013 Image Courtesy of the Artist

### *Trend Reversal: Antiquities*

The appreciation of Indian antiquities tells a different story. Until recently, non-Indians have been the most significant buyers of Indian antiquities and the best assemblages of Indian classical art are housed in private collections and museums outside India. Historically, there has been resistance by Indians to collect antiquities for many reasons. One may be that the stigma of owning a 'broken deity' to display in one's home was undesirable. Moreover, relating to an antiquity takes a greater understanding of historical context, as opposed to a contemporary work reflecting present-day cognizance. Nevertheless, Mumbai Art Week in late 2015 saw a bronze figure sell for nearly \$1 million, an unprecedented figure in the domestic Indian market.

Dr. Nirmalya Kumar, known to be the largest private collector of Jamini Roy as well as with an extensive collection of Tagores, says, 'India's Bengal School of Art has long been included in the permanent collections of Western museums.'

Moreover, Indian antiquities have also held a firm place in international art museums. Examples such as the Ajanta Caves, Chola-period bronzes, the Taj Mahal come to mind.

A growing number of international auction houses also hold significant South Asian antiquity departments, reflecting the strong global demand and reverence for Indian classical art. Auctionata, the leading global online auction house based in Germany, has a growing South Asian department. Arne Sildatke, Senior Specialist of Asian Art, says, 'Over the past year, Auctionata held and massively developed its position as one of the busiest and advanced global marketplaces for Asian Art. The technology-based approach is especially appealing for Asian buyers and provides a truly 21st century auction experience.' Numerous galleries and museum shows are dedicated to these displays and world-famous museums have wide-ranging

collections of Indian antiquities. There are not the same convoluted questions of quality, longevity and price inflation as seen in the contemporary Indian art realm. Yamini Mehta, International Head of South Asian Art at Sotheby's, comments that an 'A-level bronze statue can be bought for a similar price to a B-level Tyeb Mehta or Gaitonde work, whereas a few decades ago, the opposite may have been true'.

### *A Question of Identity*

The question of attaching a geographical identity to fine art itself causes controversy. Labels are important to categorise knowledge and establish a context or lens to see an art object, yet at the same time does this very lens limit and narrow to detriment? Moreover, does using a Western model of evaluation also distort, or does Indian art need its own framework of evaluation? These are important questions which must be weighed and considered by the international art elite.

One of India's leading Contemporary artists, Rekha Rodwittiya, notes, 'It is imperative for art from any region to be viewed via an informed scholarship that contextualises it appropriately. The paradigms of reference both of content and aesthetics are very often region-specific, invested with contemporary realities of relevance. The engagement with contemporary South Asian art must be a constant endeavour by all museums if world art histories of our times are to be correctly documented and recorded.' Represented by Gazelli Art House in London, Saad Qureshi is a British artist with South Asian roots, and admits that he has struggled in the past to be associated with a particular national or religious background, as this restricts his artistic truth. Nonetheless, Saad says he has come to terms with the fact that a clichéd categorisation is the easiest way to define, and is now indifferent to being viewed through one prism or another, because it is inevitable.



● **Untitled**, Nasreen Mohamedi, Photograph b/w, Vintage Print Silver Gelatin Print, 19.6 cm x 33.6 cm, ca. 1972 Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

● **Untitled**, Nasreen Mohamedi, Ink and Watercolor on Paper, 19.4 x 28.2 cm, ca. 1960 Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

● **Untitled**, Nasreen Mohamedi, Ink and Watercolor on Paper, 34.2 cm x 23.9 cm, ca. 1960 Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi



● **Untitled**, Nasreen Mohamedi, Ink and Graphite on Paper, 47.4 cm x 47.4 cm, ca. 1970 Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

● **Untitled**, Nasreen Mohamedi, Ink and Graphite on Paper, 50.1 cm x 50.8 cm, ca. 1975 Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

● **Untitled**, Nasreen Mohamedi, Ink and Graphite on Paper, 47.4 cm x 47.4 cm, ca. 1975 Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

● **Untitled**, Nasreen Mohamedi, Ink and Graphite on Paper, 18.9 cm x 18.9 cm, ca. 1970 Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

## *The Right Value*

There are many layers of value in fine art, but appreciation of fine art must start with passion in order for a varied spectrum of value to be realised (e.g. emotional value, aesthetic value, decorative value, historical value, etc.). Investment value should be the last layer of importance in evaluating a fine art object for this reason; nevertheless, price movement is an important indicator in any market, and conventional measures cannot be ignored. Anders Petterson, founder of ArtTactic, the leading global art market research firm, has pioneered a theory to explain what creates economic value in the art market – ‘Economic value is largely a function of a process of endorsement by tastemakers within a particular ecosystem.’ ArtTactic has been covering the Indian market since 2006, and believes that it is institution building that will provide the validation necessary for Indian art to play a greater role in the international arena. The best of the best art is not necessarily the most popular; institutions are the vehicle by which value in the art market is established.

The Tiroche DeLeon Art collection focuses on value building of contemporary emerging market art and holds a significant stock of South Asian artists. The Art Vantage investment fund owns the art collection and value is realised by identifying rising stars, supporting artists by providing residency resources, as well as by lending artworks to top-tier international institutions for public good. Serge Tiroche comments, ‘To me, the most appealing of South Asian artists are those who are able to effectively blend local culture, tradition, history and particularly craftsmanship, into beautiful artworks that speak the international language of contemporary art. Prime examples in the Tiroche DeLeon Collection include Jitish Kallat, Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher, Jagannath Panda, Shilpa Gupta and Sudarshan Shetty from India.’

Philip Hoffman, Chief Executive of The Fine Art Fund Group, the oldest and largest global art investment fund and advisory has had an eye on India for over a decade, and he says, ‘We have long-term interest in India. Modern Indian art looks to have a clear growth potential. However, contemporary Indian art is still risky

**Rekha@50, Rekha Rodwittiya,**  
Acrylic & Oil on Canvas,  
69" x 120", 2008  
Image Courtesy of  
Sakshi Gallery



**Matters of the Heart, Rekha Rodwittiya,**  
Digital Inkjet  
Print with Autobiographic  
Photo Images & Hand Painted  
Watercolour on Watercolour  
Paper, 60" x 60", 2013  
Image Courtesy of  
Sakshi Gallery



**The Guarded Megalopolis of  
the Feminine Heart-Version II,**  
Rekha Rodwittiya,  
Image Size - 70" x 22",  
Paper Size - 73" x 25", 2013  
Image Courtesy of  
Sakshi Gallery



**The Guarded Megalopolis of  
the Feminine Heart, Display  
Shot, Rekha Rodwittiya**  
Image Courtesy of  
Sakshi Gallery

**Untitled (Self-Portrait),**  
Amrita Sher-Gil  
Oil on Canvas, 18" x 13",  
Painted in 1933, Signed and  
Dated 'RITA / 1933' Lower Left  
Property From a Private  
European Collector  
Image Courtesy of  
Sotheby's New York



**Matters of the Heart, Rekha Rodwittiya,**  
Digital Inkjet  
Print with Autobiographical  
Photo Images & Hand Painted  
Watercolour on Paper,  
60" x 60", 2013  
Image Courtesy of  
Sakshi Gallery

and needs a greater breadth of collectors. When we begin to operate officially in the region, it will be in an investment advisory capacity, rather than as an investment fund.'

### Looking Ahead

Ultimately, the contemporary Indian art market is still in the process of institution building; we need more education, more museums, more critics, more public awareness, more support and resources for artists to cement a place within the international art scene. There are several disconnects and imbalances still to be addressed. However, there is hope in the

form of a number of exciting and growing art endeavours. Central to this build is Neha Kirpal's India Art fair, running strong in its eighth year, and attracting over 100,000 visitors – one of the largest art fairs by foot traffic in the world. Some of the most moving new Indian art ventures creating a stronger foundation of infrastructure and public engagement are projects such as the Clark House Initiative Artist Union, or Surbhi Modi's homage to public art with the Floodlight Foundation's Publica festival, or Saloni Doshi's artist residency Studio 118 – just to name a few. Preparation for the third Kochi-Muziris Biennale curated by

Sudarshan Shetty is engaging global art power players, as are other South Asian art festivals such as the Lahore Biennale, the Dhaka Art Summit and the Colombo Art Biennale. The list is growing. Conor Macklin of London-based Grosvenor Gallery, one of the most important international galleries in promoting Indian art abroad, says, 'India has thousands of years of culture, so perhaps perception by the West need not be relevant. Indians are one-sixth of humankind – more need to look at their own artwork.' And perhaps that is exactly the kind of perception from the West that we need most.

