



DAG

BREAKING THE MOULD

India's Tryst with Cubism

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OCTOBER 2024

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REGENT'S PARK,
LONDON



BREAKING THE MOULD

India's Tryst with Cubism



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CONTENTS



Preface	5
Introduction	7
Catalogue	
<i>George Keyt</i>	8
<i>Ramkinkar Baij</i>	12
<i>Prosanto Roy</i>	18
<i>Nirode Mazumdar</i>	22
<i>Paritosh Sen</i>	26
<i>J. Sultan Ali</i>	30
<i>S. K. Bakre</i>	34
<i>A. A. Raiba</i>	38
<i>Biren De</i>	42
<i>Laxman Pai</i>	46
<i>G. R. Santosh</i>	50
<i>Rabin Mondal</i>	54
<i>Avinash Chandra</i>	58
<i>Shanti Dave</i>	60
<i>Jyoti Bhatt</i>	62
About DAG	64



PREFACE

Another Modernism

Unravelling facets of Indian modernism—the exciting, diverse, and exceptional routes it has taken and nurtured—is not just interesting, it also puts into perspective the role of Indian artists and their experiments to create art that absorbs local Indian as well as global influences in the creation of art. For too long, we have been lulled into complacency about Western art movements having a hegemony over practices around the world. The time has come to challenge such notions. Influences exist; often, the East, the French Polynesia, and Africa have influenced Western art, just as Indian art has taken these influences into account. But all art is inherently individual—as this exhibition that highlights the amalgamation of cubism into Indian modernism tells us.

We have long believed that cubism in India has a gentle, lyrical, near-poetic quality at variance with its counterparts in the Western world. In most cases, far from using distortion to create compositions that express disquiet, cubism in India has redefined aestheticism to create works of enduring beauty that continue to have relevance in the modern and contemporary art worlds. Of course, this cannot be a sweeping generalisation, as this exhibition reveals. There are works by some artists that are more hard-hitting, even though—in their soul—they retain a strong Indian core. I am convinced that the story of cubism in India has only just begun to unfold, and we at DAG might get to tell it in detail.

In its three decades of existence, but particularly over the last few years, we have undertaken the mission to shed light not just on modernism in India but on the many modernisms that have gone into its making. We have also travelled further back in time to absorb pre-modern art practices—Indian and Western—that have significance for India. We are excited about how these forthcoming exhibitions will widen our understanding of Indian art. We hope you will join us on this eventful journey.

Ashish Anand
CEO and MD, DAG



INTRODUCTION

Breaking the Mould: India's Tryst with Cubism

The ramifications of what Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque set off in the early twentieth century reverberated around the world and found an echo in the Indian subcontinent in ways that were inventive and interesting. Shrugging off the yoke of colonial academic pedagogy, Indian modernism turned assimilative and experimental while also staying close to its roots. Artists across the country looked for fresher expressions to guide their growing interactions with a post-world war world that was no longer isolationist.

India's inherent aestheticism enjoyed a civilisational legacy that impacted the way cubism was absorbed into its art. Divorced from the deep sense of social anxiety and economic despair that prevailed across Europe, India was witnessing a moral upsurge as freedom embraced its shores. The brittle fragmentation that marked Western cubism was replaced in India by a gentle, even graceful, lyricism. In creating its own cubist lexicon, Indian modernism widened its scope and gave it an individual identity.

A number of artists experimented with the trope, and Indian cubism flowered and flourished, to which this curated selection pays ode through the early works of *tantra* artists Biren De and G. R. Santosh, the Sri Lankan artist George Keyt, Bengal masters Ramkinkar Baij, Prosanto Roy and Paritosh Sen, and other modernists such as Avinash Chandra, A. A. Raiba, Laxman Pai, S. K. Bakre, Rabin Mondal, Nirode Mazumdar, Jyoti Bhatt and J. Sultan Ali.

This showcase and acknowledgement of India's tryst with cubism goes a long way in identifying the myriad streams that inform the language of modernism in twentieth century Indian art.



George Keyt 1901–93

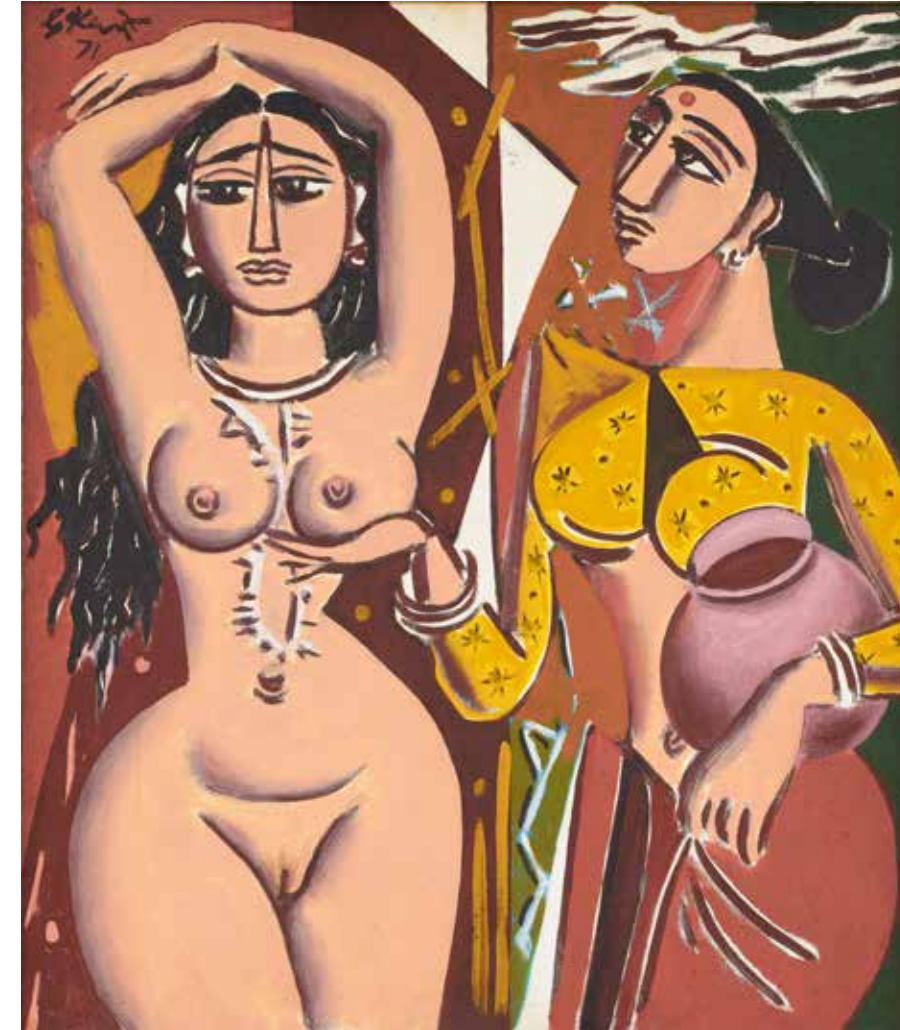


George Keyt may well be regarded as the first modernist to emerge from the Indian subcontinent given his affinity to Western painting styles that were influenced by Henri Matisse, and, later, cubism—to which he adhered for the remaining extent of his career. Born in Kandy, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), his career spanned the island country as well as India, where his imagery found acceptance among a growing community of art-lovers and collectors.

In his own home country, the first exhibition in 1930, organised by Lionel Wendt and featuring works by Keyt and Geoffrey Beling was ridiculed, though Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, at the time in Ceylon, called the duo ‘true artists’. Exhibitions in London, Madras (now Chennai), and Bombay (now Mumbai) followed. Eventually, Keyt was acknowledged as Sri Lanka’s most eminent artist. In 1953, England bestowed its Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) on Keyt.

Born into a prosperous Anglo-Dutch Ceylonese family, he counted actor Vivian Leigh, writer Evelyn Waugh, poet Pablo Neruda, and photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson among his friends. His unorthodox life drew as much attention as his paintings that broke the mould with geometric distortion, marking a departure from the academic realism style taught in the subcontinent’s art schools. Crisp lines and strong structural rendering added character to his compositions.

A member of ‘43 Group, a modern art collective formed in Colombo by a group of young, pro-independence painters who were committed to promoting Sri Lankan modernism, Keyt’s commitment to free expression gave his art its greatest merit: courage. In Bombay, art critic Rudy von Leyden—a great influence on the city’s Progressive Artists’ Group and the rise of modernism in the nation—noted while reviewing Keyt’s work in the 1940s: ‘If he speaks the language of Picasso, he does so in a rich and meaningful idiom of his own.’



Untitled | Oil on canvas, 1971 | 33.2 × 28.0 in. / 84.3 × 71.1 cm.
Signed in English and dated (upper left) ‘G Keyt / 71’ | Verso: Sticker of Christie’s

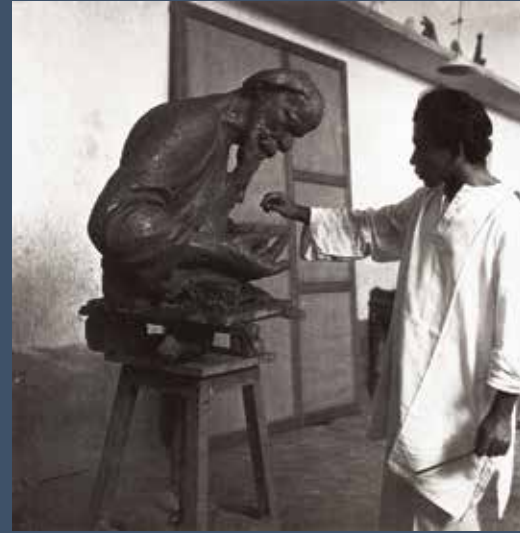
In this late career painting, George Keyt returns to a subject and muse that informed his work throughout his practice—women. In a work of great fascination, he marks everything from the physicality of age to emotions of envy as a young woman looks on frontally, her voluptuous form framing the vulnerability of her senior peer who appears fully clothed as she goes about her house work. In contrasting the two, Keyt depicts the transition from youth to middle age, the replacement of one with the other, and presents the nature of change that governs all humankind in a narration of deep understanding and empathy.

Untitled (Two Women Amid Plants) | Oil on Masonite board laid on wood, 1947 | 48.0 × 65.7 in. / 121.9 × 166.9 cm.
Signed in English and dated (upper right) 'G Keyt / 47' | Verso: Inscription in Hindi 'Gaman';
Scribble in oil and three stickers of Christie's on frame

George Keyt often painted the women he saw around him in his native Kandyan hills, drawing the forehead and nose in one sweeping line. Influenced by Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Paul Gauguin, he held his own in his throwback and regard for classical Indian art, which scholars believe had inspired Picasso, thereby completing a circle. Keyt's cubist imagery consisted of the sharp angularity that he quelled with a ballooning, gracefully rounded line, which formed the faces and torsos of the women he created, with foliage an essential component of the composition. The women he paints sit cross-legged on the floor with a grove of plantains on one side, a field on the other. The woman in the foreground is animated in movement, holding on to a stick, probably a pestle, while behind her another woman is at rest. The interesting juxtaposition of forms, the severe and the soft, makes it a credible painting of a time when South Asian art was liberating itself from the stranglehold of realism.



Ramkinkar Baij 1906–80



Ramkinkar Baij was an unlikely artist who trained under Santiniketan’s Nandalal Bose—regarded as one of India’s foremost painters—and went on to teach at his alumnus, even though he abided by no rules in his own life or art. It is perhaps this that made him one of the foremost modernists of the country, best known for creating a new language for sculpture that followed no known conventions. An iconoclast who challenged norms, defying restrictive pedagogy, his language embraced two distinctive styles: expressionism and cubism. His admiration for Cézanne, too, was well known.

A brief introduction to modelling by a visiting French sculptor led Baij to engage with clay in a unique manner and evolve a innovative personal style that was largely untrained. He introduced cement concrete casting as a cost-effective alternative to plaster. The first artist in Santiniketan to use oil paint and create distinctly modern and abstract works, Baij painted on Santhal wraps with packet colours thinned with linseed oil and drew his figures on silk with a shoe brush as part of his innovations.

Drawn from life, Baij’s figures breathed a bold realism, an earthy strength and spontaneity as seen in his sculptures, drawings, and paintings. A similar spontaneity of action is visible in his transparent watercolours and drawings, particularly in the sequence of nudes. The country’s first truly ‘modern’ sculptor, Baij’s sculptures were often monumental and possessed an inner movement of which the open-air *Santhal Family* and *Mill Call* can be seen on the Santiniketan campus. He would, later, create the colossal, neo-classical *Yaksha* and *Yakshi* sculptures for the Reserve Bank of India in New Delhi.

As a teacher and artist, Baij chose to live humbly, away from campus, in a hut in the vicinity of the Santhal tribals, who provided him with inspiration for his art. Baij was honoured with the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India in 1970.



Dreaming Lady | Oil on canvas, 1960s | 28.7 × 23.5 in. / 73.0 × 60.0 cm.
Signed in Bengali (lower right) ‘Ramkinkar’

In giving an expression to social perspectives in the 1950s, Ramkinkar Baij was underscoring his engagement with issues such as the emerging Left cultural movements that impacted literature, theatre, and art. ‘The artist is also a human being—a social animal,’ he noted. ‘And man, with all his material and spiritual perceptions, is also the theme of his art.’ The Santhal people who formed the subject of so much of his art he tended to depict as earth bound, as heavy as they are monumental, robust but also light. They were often depicted setting out for work, and he was good at capturing their movement. In this restful work depicting a woman snatching a moment of repose between chores, the figural monumentality is not shed by the artist, for whom the woman’s centrality serves to highlight the unlikeliness of such calm against the pictured chaos of the background.



The Poet, made in 1938, is an early cement work, a portrait of Rabindranath Tagore that achieves an incredible level of abstraction and stands out for its unique and startling imagination. Baij imagines him strikingly differently—carved, scalloped-out hollows of the head and the sides, a negative space appear alongside volume—the moulded, relief-like forms of the nose and eyes—and combine with the geometric severity and designs of the beard to vividly evoke Tagore. The form appears to emanate organically from its structural core, as if emerging from architecture, thus creating an architectonic space, with a high relief characterised from almost all angles.

Alongside the lopsided, hanging eyes, each differently crafted, this scooped out and rounded, smooth and rough textured form comes close to Tagore's own distorted, brooding and dark portraits and doodles. Baij captures here a very personal Tagore with great boldness and originality, daring to render a very human and unsettling figure, entirely unseen in the scores of Tagore portraits done by other artists, which tend towards reverence and hagiography.

Baij deployed the opposites of figurative and abstract in his work, with the figurative too tending to the abstract, as he distorted reality to arrive at vigorous abstractions. Working literally with a knife in one hand to carve, while building up alongside a form, layer upon layer, he achieved the opposite effects of hollows and relief, convex and concave surfaces. He would begin work on a sculpture with a model and through subsequent phases of cancellation and reduction, arrive at an abstracted image, completed without the model. This transformed final form, as seen particularly in *The Poet*, is the distilled, abstracted core or essence of the subject. It is the personal and subjective response of the artist to the subject, and not a realistic likeness or observed symmetry. *The Poet* has been called 'symbolic', with 'more literary than visual transformations'. Made in the absence of the sitter, it is Baij's response to Tagore's poetry more than the person.

The Poet is in the original cement done in Santiniketan, a bronze cast of which is present in the collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

The Poet (Head of Rabindranath Tagore) | Painted cement, 1938
Size with base: 22.0 × 11.2 × 11.0 in. / 55.9 × 28.4 × 27.9 cm.
Size without base: 19.0 × 11.0 × 11.0 in. / 48.3 × 27.9 × 27.9 cm.
Signed in Bengali (back) 'Ramkinkar'



The cement head of Rabindranath Tagore was completed in 1938 by Baij, who can be seen posing with it in Santiniketan.



Picasso's stylistic diversity was necessitated by his personality and inner conflicts as well as his response to external events, similar to Ramkinkar Baij's restlessness. Experiments and individuality defined their modernism. It meant testing their syntactic limits in terms of cubism, expressionism, and surrealism while contriving formal improvisations to match their intuitive responses to external stimuli. Baij's experimentation was not an unidirectional progression or purely linguistic exploration as much as his interest in the physical and social world around him while positioning himself outside the sequentiality of Western modernism.



Untitled | Watercolour on paper, c. 1940 | 7.0 × 9.7 in. / 17.8 × 24.6 cm. (each with minor variations)
Signed in English (lower right) 'R.K.'

Prosanto Roy 1908–73



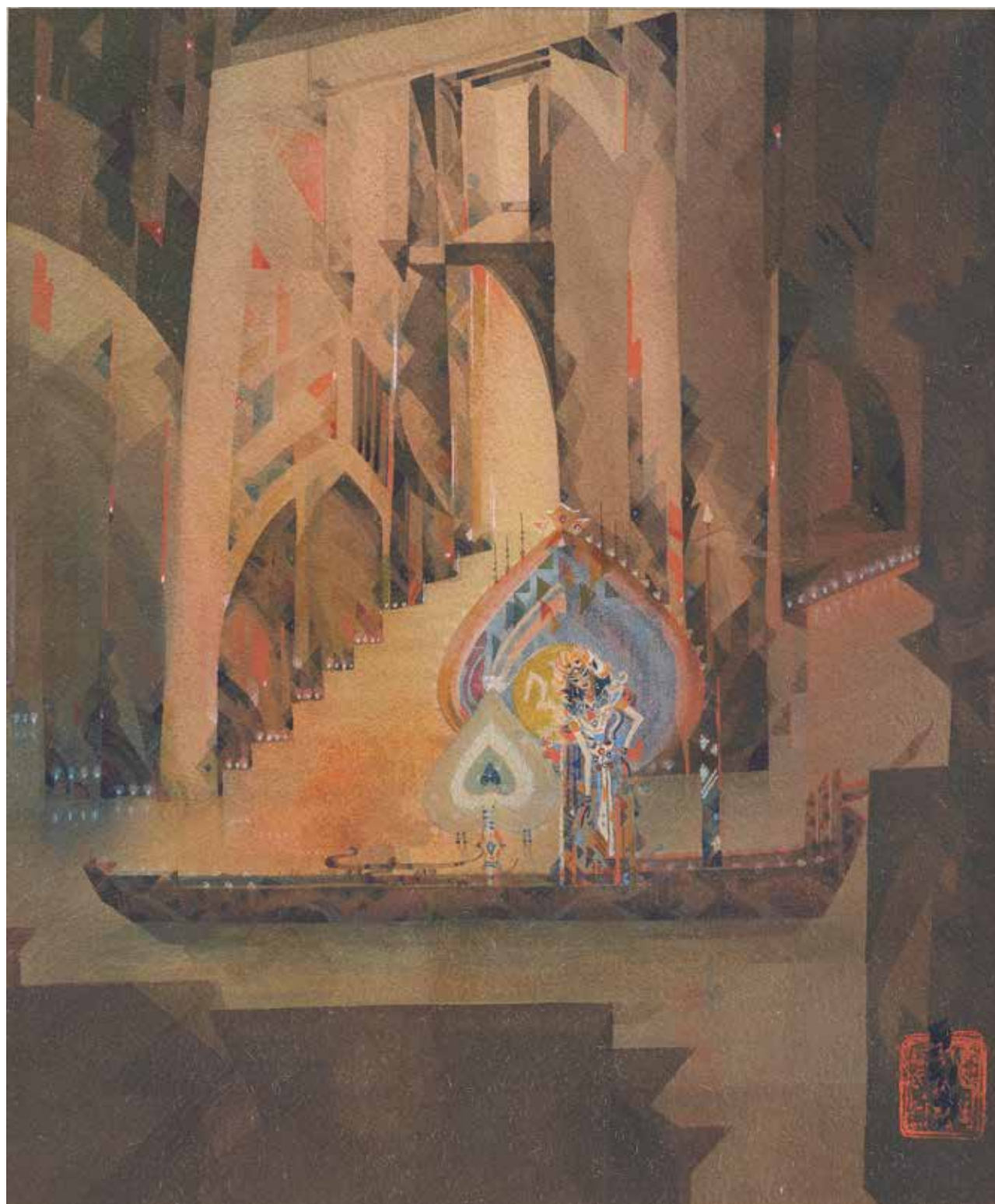
Tutored by Abanindranath Tagore (the pioneer of the Bengal School of watercolour wash paintings) and his brother Gaganendranath Tagore (whose small format paintings marrying the wash style with cubism were distinctive and original), Prosanto Roy boasted an eminent pedagogy that included the Nobel-laureate Rabindranath Tagore who directed his attention towards art. A master of watercolour washes, it was his guru Gaganendranath Tagore's cubist paintings that Roy sought to emulate—with great success.

His proximity to the Tagores framed his lifelong artistic ideology. From Jorasanko, their residence in Calcutta (now Kolkata) to becoming curator of the museum housed in Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan, he found within this hallowed circle his ability to create art that combined delicacy with confidence, lyricism with strength. Combining two such disparate styles as idealised wash paintings with the aggressive distortion of European cubism, he created watercolour paintings of extraordinary individuality.

Using the wash technique, Roy introduced architectural details into his painting in the manner of Indian miniature paintings. Using Chinese ink, he created an intense proliferation of tonal degrees and gradations. He applied warm pigments and expanded them with cool tonalities, thus creating a vibrant pictorial space.

His first solo show was held in New Delhi in 1951-52, followed by shows in Bombay, Gwalior, Lucknow, and several in Calcutta. He exhibited for the last time in Calcutta in 1971 and passed away on 19 December 1973.





PREVIOUS PAGE:

Untitled (Deepavali) | Watercolour on paper, 1954 | 10.2 × 8.5 in. / 25.9 × 21.6 cm.
Signed in Bengali (centre right) 'Prosanto'

FACING PAGE:

Untitled (Princess of Fairyland) | Watercolour on paper, c. 1950 | 11.0 × 9.0 in. / 27.9 × 22.9 cm.
Signed in Bengali with artist's seal (lower right) 'Prosanto'

Romanticism and a reclaiming of the essence and beauty of miniature paintings was one of the tasks of the watercolour washes of the Bengal School style pioneered by Abanindranath Tagore and taken forward by his acolytes, including Prosanto Roy, who mastered the art. But it was in incorporating elements of cubism that Roy's genius flowered. If cubism in the West tended to distort, Roy used it to create elements rich in fantasy, using it beguilingly—almost futuristically—to create a language of ethereal loveliness. The aesthetic helped him create paintings, such as those shown here, that take elements from fantasy, mythology, or reflect a festive cultural spirit, combining them with architectural elements to coax out a fantastical world, the likes of which only Roy could have imagined for the viewer.

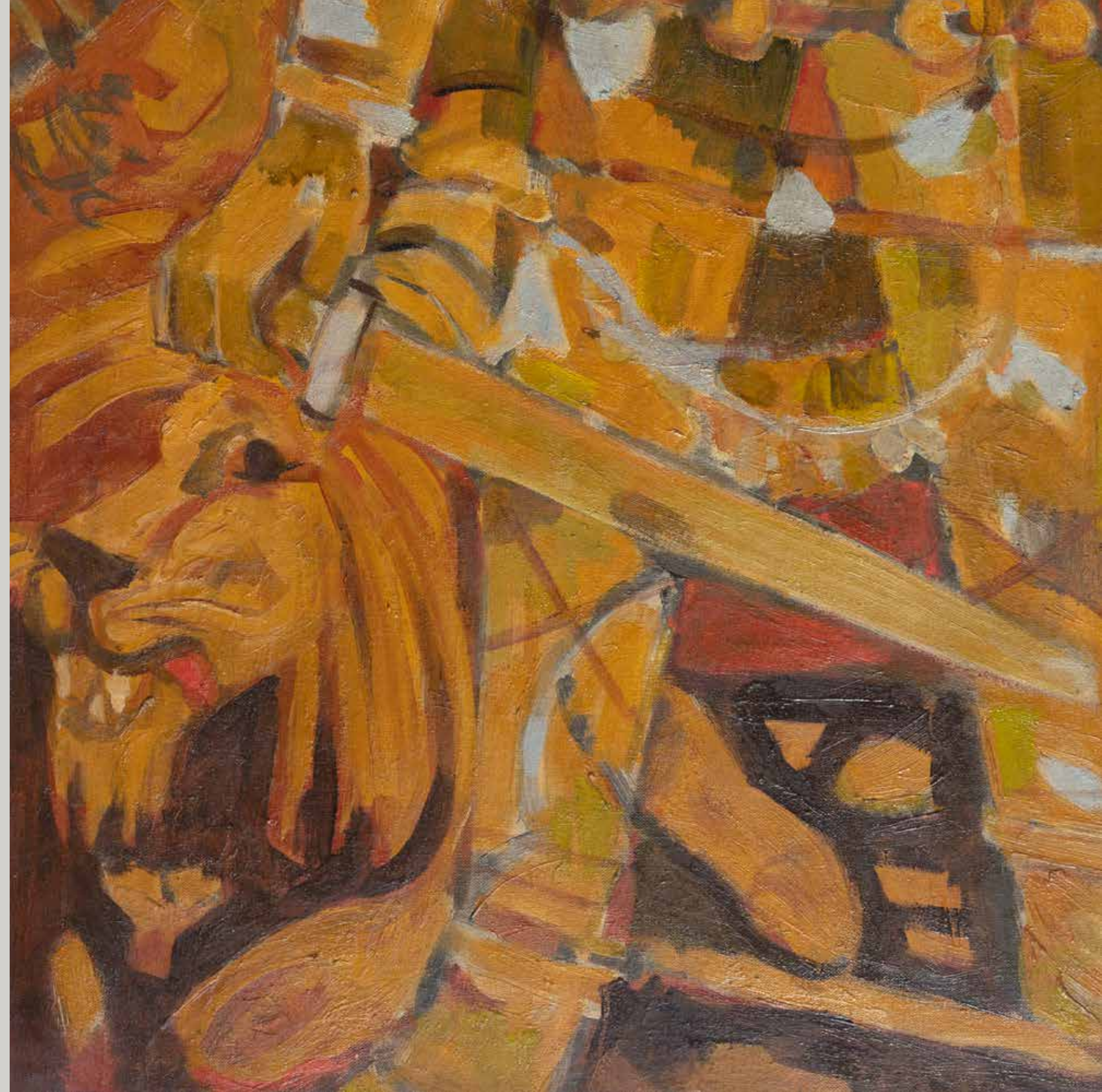
Nirode Mazumdar 1916–82



Born in Calcutta into a family with literary and cultural interests, Nirode Mazumdar trained in art from the city's Indian Society of Oriental Art after dropping out of high school, to study under the stalwarts Abanindranath Tagore and Kshitindranath Mazumdar. He also attended classes on art aesthetics run by American art historian Stella Kramrisch and was one of the founders of the Calcutta Group in 1943. But it was Mazumdar's stints in Paris (1947–51; 1955–58) and London (1951–55) that honed his style, resulting in a highly individualistic form of expression in which cubism played its part.

Drawing his inspiration from regional mythical stories, Mazumdar used short brushstrokes to emphasise social anxieties among people for whom the riots and Naxal violence in Bengal had become a dreaded commonplace occurrence. In playing into the cubist trope, Mazumdar was bridging the gap between Western and Indian modernism in a language that appealed to both, even though his subject was rooted in his native soil. The fragmented brushstrokes define the contours of his figurative images. Using broken daubs of colour in an impressionistic manner, he split up the figural forms to invent a new cubist vocabulary that bore his unique signature.

In Calcutta, Mazumdar's dedication to his practice resulted in a number of exhibitions in the city and his beloved France. *Punascha Parry* (Paris Revisited), a memoir of his time in Paris, previously serialised in the Bengali magazine *Desh*, was published posthumously in the year following his death. An artist who brought in a balance of the heart and the mind—spontaneity and restraint—into his art-making, Mazumdar's eclipsed career is now getting its due with works filtering into the public domain.





Durga Alone, Ready to Fight (Sthira Bhava Series) | Oil on canvas, c. 1970–80s | 36.2 × 25.7 in. / 91.9 × 65.3 cm.
Signed in Bengali (centre left) 'Nirode' | Verso: Two stamps of G. C. LAHA; artist's name and inscription
in English on stretcher

The eight-armed Durga is the patron deity of Calcutta, epitomising woman power in a city where female empowerment is seen as a sacrament. Her hair open, Durga wields weapons with which to attack her enemies as she sets out to extract revenge as a means to end violence. Her form is not outlined, the use of colours separating her from a background with the same tones, both embellished with daubs of colour. Her naked body, garland of skulls, and other attributes are merely hinted at, while an eight-pointed star over her navel establishes the artist's interest in tantric philosophy and the mythologies surrounding germination, birth, and rebirth.

Paritosh Sen 1918–2008



Paritosh Sen had numerous siblings, which likely made it easy for him to navigate the fractured planes that summed up the cubist phase of his practice. He also met with Pablo Picasso in 1949 as part of his European sojourn, and this resulted in a brief body of paintings in which exemplary linework and shattered picture planes introduced a sense of lyrical cubism into the artist's oeuvre. This body of Sen's paintings is almost poetic in its visualisation.

Sen's expressionistic works of the next decade, and his tongue-in-cheek parodies thereafter, would take the focus away from his cubist paintings for which he chose evocative Indian themes as his way of marking his Indian identity.

A student of D. P. Roy Chowdhury in Madras, and a founder member of the Calcutta Group, he participated in its inaugural—and only—exhibition in 1945. It was later in this decade that his travels to Europe introduced him to the original works of Vincent van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and other masters. Here, he would create works of particular delicacy in oil, unlike anything the modernists were creating in Europe. However, he would renounce his cubist foray on his return to India in 1954.

His subsequent paintings were a response to the traumatic sociopolitical changes in West Bengal in the 1970s before turning to humour as a respite. He also wrote on art for leading English and Bengali journals. In 1970, he was offered the John D. Rockefeller III Fund fellowship. The French government conferred its L'officier de l'ordre des arts et des lettres on him in 2002 and the Lalit Kala Akademi honoured him with the title of Lalit Kala Ratna in 2004.





PREVIOUS PAGE:

Untitled (Flautist) | Oil on canvas, 1952 | 23.7 × 17.7 in. / 60.2 × 45.0 cm.
Signed in English and dated (lower left) 'P. SEN / 52' | Verso: Label with artist's name and
title in English on stretcher

FACING PAGE:

Untitled (Portrait Cubiste de Femme a la Cruche) | Oil on canvas, 1952 | 25.5 × 19.7 in. / 64.8 × 50.0 cm.
Signed in English and dated (upper right) 'P. SEN / 52'

These paintings date from the time that Paritosh Sen spent in Europe and were painted a few years after his meeting with Pablo Picasso. On his return to India, his work would turn expressionist to reflect his social and political leanings of the time. However, in Europe, his work tended to be simplistic, averse to anything extraneous or superfluous, to which his interest in cubism greatly contributed. Using lines to divide the structure of the composition's subject into linear grids, Sen was impactful—but also mindful of his Indian heritage. These paintings come from this hybrid space that Sen used masterfully when combining vastly different legacies to create paintings of abiding beauty and merit.

J. Sultan Ali 1920–90



It is difficult to imagine Madras-based artist J. Sultan Ali as painting anything apart from his familiar folk-derived paintings drawn from mythological references, but for a while—at the start of his career—Ali, too, had been in a thrall of India’s emerging response to modernism that gave familiar Indian themes or subjects drawn from Ajanta and the miniature paintings a planar treatment. This resulted in a nod to a delicate, home-grown cubism with which several modernists briefly flirted: Shanti Dave, V. S. Gaitonde, Jeram Patel, even J. Sultan Ali, inspired by such art teachers and practitioners as N. S. Bendre and S. B. Palsikar.

J. Sultan Ali came from a Bombay-based Gujarati business family but chose art as his interest, training under D. P. Roy Chowdhury in Madras, also studying textile design and, in London, a course in photography. He taught art at a residential school before joining the national art academy, Lalit Kala Akademi, in New Delhi in an administrative capacity. During this time, he also travelled to Bastar, India’s tribal heartland, which led to his folk-inspired vocabulary that he pursued at Cholamandal Artists’ Village on the outskirts of Madras, drawing his subjects from regional mythology. Earlier, he had joined the Progressive Painters’ Association in Madras.

A founding member of Cholamandal Artists’ Village and a mentor to artists there, Ali was honoured with the Lalit Kala Akademi’s national award in 1966 and 1978.



To the Pine City | Oil on board, 1961 | 29.5 × 39.5 in. / 74.9 × 100.3 cm.
Signed in Hindi and English and dated (lower left) ‘Ali / Sultan Ali / 1961’
Verso: Title, artist’s name and inscription in English

Scenes from village life dominated the decades after India’s Independence, reflecting a yearning for Mahatma Gandhi’s aspiration for idealised village communities and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision of a socialist society. Playing into that trope, J. Sultan Ali here draws from a pan-Indian appeal for an Indian art that combined subaltern subjects with a past aesthetic to inform a fresh language of Indian modernism—best represented by N. S. Bendre. Here, Ali juxtaposes an ox-pulled cart with its driver and passengers against a Rajasthan landscape, all of them split into grids that recall a primordial vision, imbuing Indian art’s lyrical tryst with Western cubism.



Milkmaid | Gouache on paper pasted on board, 1958 | 17.5 × 14.2 in. / 44.5 × 36.1 cm.

Signed in English and dated (lower left) 'Sultan Ali / 1958'

Verso: Artist's name, inscription and title in English

Tribal imagery and folk art come together in this painting by J. Sultan Ali, painted the same year that he won a silver medal from the Academy of Fine Arts in Amritsar. During this period, his interest in cubism is shared with a decorative emphasis for the female figure, rendered in a modernist version of a heroine from a miniature painting. He breaks up the compositional structure into simple grids in which the central figure looms over vignettes from rural life combining cows and bulls and a gathering of village women. Highly stylised, the milkmaid of the title carries a pot of milk to show for her endeavours.

S. K. Bakre 1920-2007



It would be fair to say that London both made and unmade S. K. Bakre. An alumnus of Sir J. J. School of Art in Bombay and a founding member of the Progressive Artists' Group in 1947, he arrived in London in 1951 determined to prove his calling as both a painter and a sculptor. It was his sculptures with their cubist de-structuring that would inspire his painting. Spiky, edgy forms rose and dissolved, making his sculptures complex; the same language in his paintings was simpler, almost minimal.

Art collector and critic Rudi von Leyden in Bombay introduced Bakre to the modernist movements of the US and Europe, and helped shape his ideology. Dissatisfied with the contemporary art scene in India at the time, Bakre headed for London where he was severely handicapped for lack of mentors, well-wishers or friends, often resorting to odd jobs to keep his practice going, even peddling his paintings in a wheelbarrow in Hyde Park. Bakre potentialised form by transforming it through distortion, fragmentation, and partial elimination. His canvases were executed in a sculptural manner, depicting geometrical grids and abstracted forms in a two-dimensional pattern. Bold and bright colours highlighted the contrast of straight and curved lines in his works.

A much-feted artist, Bakre returned to India in the later years to lead a recluse's life in Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, where he passed away quietly in 2007.



Clown | Oil on Masonite board, 1960s | 35.7 × 24.0 in. / 90.7 × 61.0 cm.

Verso: Signed, inscribed, and titled in English

The clown must be one of the most written about and painted subjects from history. Here, S. K. Bakre renders a version of this jocular figure, painted during the three decades he spent in London. Marked by colours that split up the composition into the sum of its parts, the clown is represented by an eye, part of a face, and a grinning mouth revealing his teeth. A notional 'nose' splits the canvas and separates it from elements that hint at stage design—the almost-natural site for a clown to tell his story. Bakre combines strong and soft tones to situate a figure whose insights into society and people help shatter illusions similar to the manner in which cubism fragments a painting.

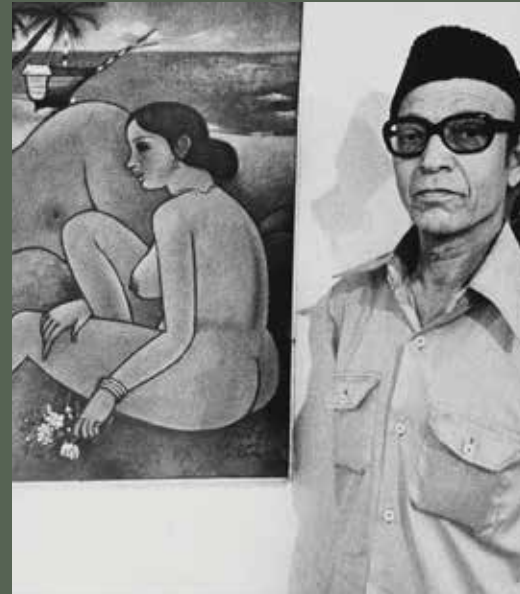


Untitled | Oil on Masonite board, 1960s | 48.0 × 48.0 in. / 121.9 × 121.9 cm.

Verso: Inscription in English

Bakre's shift towards the non-representational came about in the 1960s, a time he became obsessed with the triangle in his paintings and sculptures. This painting's magnificent presence arises from its jagged-edged forms hurtling in different directions. The colour application adds a feeling of urgency; we see multiple hues jostling against each other; a central totemic pole in yellow has a burning red tip around which varied triangular shapes create a vortex. The negative space is accented by darker tones, immediately bringing these to the foreground and turning it into a flat, two-dimensional space. It must have been difficult to switch between thinking as a painter in two dimensions and as a sculptor in the round, yet Bakre achieves this effortlessly in this large painting.

A. A. Raiba 1922–2016



A. A. Raiba's pedagogy seems like an unlikely place from which to trace the origins of his transformation into a modernist with cubist leanings, for he specialised in miniature painting at Sir J. J. School of Art. Contrarily, his work is characterised by bold shapes and strong outlines as well as a hint of surrealism. Yet, the miniature influence persists in the two-dimensional arrangement and use of colours in his compositions.

An eclectic artist, Raiba was also influenced by his stay in Kashmir between 1957 and 1959, where he drew upon the romanticism of miniature painting. Far from being derivative, his works are a result of his personal interpretation of these miniatures, which also feature Christian imagery, south Indian landscapes, and the life of the Konkani community, to which he belonged. Besides painting on canvas and paper, Raiba also mastered the difficult art of painting on jute.

One senses hints of magic realism in his paintings, the seen and unseen both going hand-in-hand. His works are like enactments stopped at a point when something unknown is about to happen, building a sense of suspense. Drawing his sources from history as well as the contemporary times, the unfolding of the dramatic is ideally captured in his use of bold, deconstructed lines set within a structured environment, making the scene appear other-worldly.

Raiba won several accolades throughout his career, including many medals from the Bombay Art Society. He executed multiple commissions for hotels and institutions. He returned to his alma mater in 2013, seven decades after he had passed out, for his first retrospective that charted his progression as an artist from 1943 onwards. It was a rare outing for an increasingly reclusive, near-forgotten artist who passed away in 2016.



Catastrophe | Oil on canvas, 1967 | 24.2 × 31.0 in. / 61.5 × 78.7 cm.

Signed in English and dated (upper right) 'Raiba / 67' | Verso: Torn label with title, inscription, date and artist's name in English

The still-life as a subject was a favourite for artists wanting to prove their ability to combine elements on a table top to create a narrative beyond mere platitudes. Its appeal lay in its everydayness that could, in turn, be vicarious. Here, Raiba sets a scene with a suspended rooster that seems to have its neck sliced off (despite a gun sitting on the table next to it), gloves (why?), a sliced apple, a bottle (wine perhaps), a tablecloth that seems to conceal secrets, and an eerie background. The theatrical element has an unfolding story—if only we knew what it was.



Dilemma of Heroine | Oil on canvas, 1968 | 29.7 × 44.5 in. / 75.4 × 113.0 cm.
Signed in English and dated (lower right) 'Raiba / 1(9)68' | Verso: Torn label with indistinct
inscription, title, date and artist's name in English

A. A. Raiba's *Dilemma of Heroine* presents a familiar setting with its reclining nude evoking Edouard Manet's *Olympia*, which in turn harks back to Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. Unlike Manet's courtesan, or Titian's domestic goddess, Raiba's protagonist lies lost in thought. Unlike the referenced works, where a female attendant lurks in the background, here the figure is placed in the foreground. The bare-breasted woman—one arm raised over her head and the other resting on her breast—emphasises her sensual appeal. This could be the quintessential *nayika* of Indian miniature paintings, waiting for her lover. The difference in the representation of the two figures and the relationship (or lack of it) between them makes up the subject of the painting set against a landscape of buildings, with the cubist element played up with the direct, simple use of lines and colours.

Biren De 1926–2011



A student of the Government College of Art and Craft in Calcutta and a teacher at the College of Art in New Delhi, Biren De, along with G. R. Santosh, is believed to have been a leading practitioner of the neo-*tantra* style of abstraction in India. He spent some time in New York and travelled extensively around the world before arriving at the style that would define his practice.

Before evoking metaphysical introspection through recurrent symbols of the lotus, the sun, the wheel, and bursting seeds, De's art had revolved around the fragmented figure articulated in rhythmic lines, binding it down to the composition. A simplification of forms and the use of contrasting tones helped to express the artist's preoccupation with cubist structures rooted in an Indian context.

But this was to be a brief period of art making in De's career. From 1956 onwards, his figurative compositions began to fragment, turning into free forms. Around this time, too, De began to draw away from the styles of his predecessor to create imagery based on inner experiences. The figure disappeared to be replaced by abstract implosions of energy, the result of an inner consciousness that had a blinding effulgence at its heart. Experimenting with tantric art, he sought to express the physical union of man and woman through abstracted symbols.

Averse to the 'hard edge' abstraction of the West, De's fluid and suggestive geometry—like his earlier cubist-inspired figuration—was about dispersion, diffusion, and dematerialisation. A Fulbright fellow, De was honoured by the Lalit Kala Akademi's national awards in 1958 and 1964, and a Padma Shri from the Government of India in 1992.



The Musician I | Oil on canvas, 1957 | 30.0 × 21.5 in. / 76.2 × 54.6 cm.

Signed in English and dated (upper left) 'Biren de / 57' | Verso: Title, artist's name and inscription in English

The Musician I throws light on the process that led up to the birthing of Biren De's signature abstraction from this early figuration. He splinters the composition with the help of colours into segments that suggest the background and foreground, with the figure represented elliptically and distorted to create postures and positions employed by the musician in the act of creating music. Contrasting darker and lighter hues are also used to suggest shade and light. While cubism focussed on the formal part of a painting, both analytically and synthetically, here the artist has implemented the language of cubism to depict the relationship between a musician, her instrument, and an unseen audience.



FACING PAGE, ABOVE:

Girl Waiting | Oil on canvas, 1957 | 18.0 × 22.5 in. / 45.7 × 57.2 cm.

Signed in English and dated (lower left) 'Biren de / '57'

Verso: On stretcher: Label with title and artist's name in English and date; sticker of Christie's



FACING PAGE, BELOW:

Untitled | Oil on canvas, 1957 | 18.2 × 22.5 in. / 46.2 × 57.2 cm.

Signed in English and dated (lower left) 'Biren de / '57'

Biren De's *Girl Waiting* and *Untitled* oil on canvas belong to his elliptical phase (1951-59), a transition between his early realist portraits and later formalist abstractions. As a semi-cubist representation, both human body and surrounding nature are broken into elementary shapes of ellipse, triangle, and rectangle to arrive at a well-composed modernist design. This formalist experimentation was a precursor to his visual enquiries on neo-tantric metaphysics. If, in *Girl Waiting*, he depicts a woman in a pensive mood, resting on a branch, expunging her grief in the solitude of a forest, in the *Untitled* work he represents a man and woman whose relationship as lovers is evident given their proximity. The imagery is playful, and the outlines distinguish the figures from the background. In masterfully combining Eastern themes with Western cubism, he created lyrical compositions akin to visual poems.

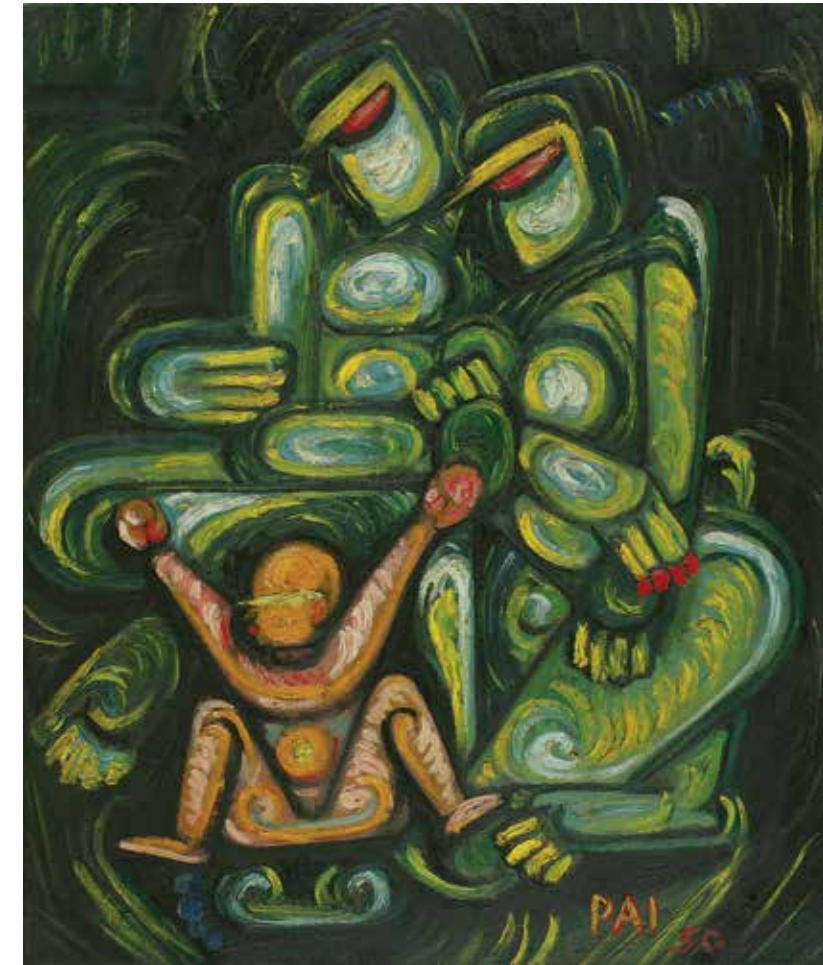
Laxman Pai 1926–2021



Pai was a sentimentalist who sought to represent his native Goa in his art—especially during his decade-long exile in Paris in the 1950s-60s, returning only when it was liberated from Portuguese rule. Sharp angles and lines did not suit Laxman Pai, who preferred the line to dance across his compositions in ways that he could manipulate to a particular design or order. In Paris, his lines flowed with a mind of their own. But before that, in Bombay, having passed out of Sir J. J. School of Art, Pai's modernist practice reflected some of the idioms of the popular Progressive Artists' Group, even though he was not a member. At the time, his art reflected a global sensibility (while, in Paris, it would be steeped in nostalgia). Unlike his preceding generation, Pai's cubist idiom did not aspire for beauty-for-beauty's-sake, nor was it academically driven. Instead, he chose to experiment, making his works from this period difficult to slot into a category.

A contemporary of the other renowned artist from Goa—F. N. Souza—Pai gave expression to life's experiences in his canvases with vigour and a richness of colour but devoid of any commentary or moralistic narrative. Calling himself his own guru, he created a highly individual vocabulary that was accentuated during his ten-year stay in Paris. Influenced by the works of Paul Klee, Marc Chagall, and Joan Miró, Pai created an eclectic intermingling of the traditional and the modern in his work. He explored the stylisation of Indian folk art with modern techniques, such as angular simplification and flatness of the pictorial surface.

Upon his return from Paris, Pai served as the principal of the Goa College of Art (1977–87). He won many prestigious honours, such as the national award of the Lalit Kala Akademi in 1961 and 1963; Gomant Vibhushan Award, the highest civilian award of the Goa government; and the Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan from the Government of India, among others.



Blind Relationship | Oil on canvas, 1950 | 23.7 × 19.7 in. / 60.2 × 50.0 cm.
Signed in English and dated (lower right) 'PAI / 50'

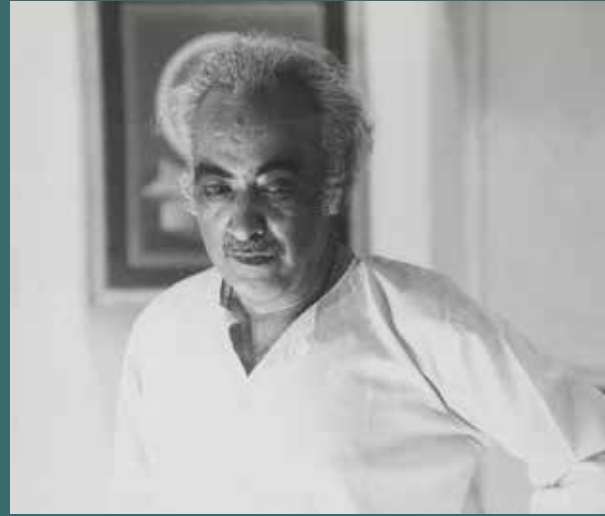
This work was painted during a phase when Laxman Pai was involved in various aspects of the art world—as a teacher at the Sir J. J. School of Art in Bombay, with avant-garde artists such as the Progressives, aware of the dilemmas of modernism in art, while simultaneously attending lectures in philosophy by J. Krishnamurti. This segue of academicism, radicalism, and introspection marks a time when Indian artists were grappling with issues of modernity. The forceful application of paint, the unhesitant brushstrokes, and bright colours embody the zeitgeist of Pai's oeuvre at this point. The main characters are placed centrally, and he has composed them in a taut group—emphasising the bonds that exist within a family. The figures are stylised; the bodies are constructed using tubular forms where aesthetics rule over anatomical mimesis.



Still-Life | Oil on canvas, 1952 | 20.5 × 24.5 in. / 52.1 × 62.2 cm.
Signed in Marathi and dated (lower right) 'Laxman Pai / 1952'
Verso: Inscription, title, date and artist's name in English

Here are all the classical attributes of a still-life—fruit, glass, bottle, knife, cheese, and something indeterminate that occupies one side of the painting. The thin outlines, patches of colour, and an irreverence for hierarchy make this delightful composition an example of Laxman Pai's passing interest in cubism. Eventually, his experiments would veer towards a folksy modernism in which the lines would dance across his compositions as though responding to some unheard music, making this early work—painted before he spent a decade in Paris—extremely rare.

G. R. Santosh 1929–97



A pioneer of neo-*tantra* abstraction, a style with which he is most closely associated, Kashmiri artist G. R. Santosh's work prior to this had included vivid landscapes, figurative compositions, and pure abstraction, each in its own distinctive language. It was his figurative phase—following his training under artist-pedagogue N. S. Bendre—that is aligned with a dalliance with cubism. Yet, unlike the tortured distortion of Western cubism, Santosh has created an almost idyllic world of Kashmiri women and children submitting to the need for an aesthetic based on a past romanticisation.

A Muslim who adopted his Hindu wife's name as his surname, Santosh learnt to paint watercolour landscapes from Dina Nath Raina in Kashmir before studying under N. S. Bendre at M. S. University, Baroda (now Vadodara), on the recommendation of modernist S. H. Raza. In Baroda, he produced a large body of figurative paintings in the cubist style. These would be his only figurative works, and his tryst with cubism, too, would end soon after.

In Kashmir, Santosh found inspiration in the Hindu and Buddhist tantric cults that had coexisted with the region's Sufi mysticism for centuries. At the Amarnath cave in Kashmir in 1964, Santosh had a deeply spiritual experience that turned him towards the philosophy of *tantra*. Driven by the primordial *purusha-prakriti* concept of cosmic creation, he expressed the fusion of the sexual and the transcendental in his works and pioneered the neo-*tantra* school. An acclaimed writer and poet in Kashmiri and Urdu, Santosh wrote on tantric philosophy in English as well.

Santosh was awarded the Lalit Kala Akademi's national award thrice, in 1957, 1964, and 1973, the Kala Ratna Award by All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi, in 1991, and received the Padma Shri from the Government of India in 1977. He also won the Sahitya Akademi award for his collection of poems, *Besukh Ruh*, in 1979.



Untitled | Oil on paper pasted on canvas, 1955 | 22.0 × 30.0 in. / 55.9 × 76.2 cm.
Signed and inscribed in English and dated (lower left) 'SANTOSH / M. / 55'

A rebel and a liberal, G. R. Santosh retained the essence of his native Kashmir in his life and art. It is this element of Kashmir one glimpses in this early painting when Santosh was still taken with the modernist idiom as practiced by the Progressives, with a nod towards cubism that he seemed to enjoy. There is already a hint of abstraction that would follow in the landscape to the left of the painting, where the ground is suggested in a burst of yellow, with trees rising from it, while in the distance can be imagined the dwellings of the people who make this idyllic, rural countryside their home. The main focus of the painting is the four women dressed in the traditional clothes of Kashmir, carrying baskets on their heads of, probably, the produce of the fields and orchards. Their unity and body language create a sense of societal intimacy. The demarcated grounding with a sharp outline of the fields, as well as the women's figures, is part of the cubist mantle Santosh had flirted with before renouncing it—making this an important work from that period of transition.



Aspiration (Diptych) | Gouache on paper pasted on board, 1957 | 48.0 × 60.0 in. / 121.9 × 152.4 cm.

Signed in Hindi and dated (lower right) 'Santosh / 5[7]'

Verso: Three labels in English on additional support

A masterful painting that typifies the best of cubist-related modern Indian art, this work by G. R. Santosh is one of the finest figurative expressions. Set in Kashmir, it depicts a group of women against a backdrop dotted with village huts. Their clothes and jewellery are reminiscent in their sketchy details of Kashmiri women even though the landscape is far from the verdure one associates with the Valley. Santosh's deliberate use of non-realist colours and his rendering of the figures and landscapes in planed panels reflects his dalliance with cubism that lasted for only a few years. In reducing the figuration to its essence, he still manages to retain an emotive quality that lies at the heart of this superlative painting by an artist destined to be known as the pioneer of neo-*tantra* art.

Rabin Mondal 1929–2019



Rabin Mondal's work can be considered primordial or primeval, based on a dissection of the human quest for power, the impotence of people, and the naked vulnerability of leaders. Within this prism one finds kings and queens, deities, those in positions of authority, and, sometimes, people standing up heroically against all odds. This was to remain Mondal's oeuvre for the larger part of his career, but during his early years he found himself compelled to work within the trope of cubism, creating unparalleled works of arresting complexity.

The son of a mechanical draughtsman, Rabin Mondal took to drawing and painting at the age of twelve when he injured his knee and was confined to bed. The Bengal Famine of 1943 and the Calcutta communal riots of 1946 deeply impacted his psyche. A card-carrying member of the Communist Party, Mondal's final refuge and choice of protest was art.

Mondal's figuration derived from a growing abhorrence towards mankind's moral decay in all spheres of life. The cubo-futuristic angularities within the pictorial space evolved into a series of paintings depicting highly distinct human figures that struggled to live a hero's life in a mocking but tragic world.

Mondal's images have a deeply felt iconic appearance. They are static, totemic, tragicomic, ruthlessly shattered and ruined. Having subverted the classical canons of harmony and beauty, Mondal evolved a vocabulary to express his anguish and rage towards decadence in society. The use of expressionistic and bold colours is part of that vocabulary.

Beginning his career as an art teacher, with a stint as an art director in films, he was a founder member of Calcutta Painters in 1964, and from 1979-83 a general council member of Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.



Brothel – I | Oil on canvas, 1962 | 33.0 × 43.0 in. / 83.8 × 109.2 cm.

Verso: Signed in English 'Rabin Mondal'; artist's label with title and inscription in English and date

A work of great complexity—part of a small series on brothels by Rabin Mondal—the painting is a perfect representation of lust and avarice, power and manipulation, by one of India's most honest observers of depravity in public life. The painting's tonal layerings add depth to the figures in the composition, represented frontally and in silhouettes, light and darkness dappling their muscles and highlighting the contours of the body in a stylised cubism as far removed from realism as possible. The angles and curved lines help separate the figures from an indistinguishable background, everything rendered in the same bleak colours. Tormentor and tormented, exploiter and exploited—Mondal's is not a moral fable as much as an epic that moves beyond headlines to serve us a devastating tale for our times.



Untitled | Oil on cardboard pasted on cardboard, 1960s | 30.0 × 22.0 in. / 76.2 × 55.9 cm.
Signed in English (lower right) 'Rabin'

FACING PAGE:

Composition | Oil on paper pasted on cardboard, 1963 | 29.7 × 22.0 in. / 75.4 × 55.9 cm.
Signed in English (lower right) 'Rabin'

Verso: Indistinct inscription in English; title and artist's name in English and date



Rabin Mondal stayed true to his chosen path throughout his career, refusing to make any compromises towards the market in creating a potently excoriating figuration that held up society to the probing lens of enquiry. But for a brief while, when starting out, before he took the route to a primordial fascination for totemic tribalism in his art, he rendered fascinating paintings governed by the tropes of cubism. These two paintings from the early 1960s represent this phase. Though distinct from each other in their choice of colours and subjects, they both use strong outlines to render their protagonists heroically—lovers on one hand, and a woman with a cat in the other. The powerful lines and deployment of colours make these choice representations of cubist art in India.

Avinash Chandra 1931–91



Avinash Chandra disguised forms in his painting so that it was difficult to tell a landscape apart from the human body, one morphing into the other—never seamlessly, for that was not his intent, but in a way in which bits of both produced a tableau that would not have been possible outside of cubism. Like a jigsaw puzzle, the viewer hopes to put the whole together, though it is no easy task and one not undertaken lightly.

The most compelling of these works were created in London, where Chandra practised for most of his career but for a seven-year stint in New York. Born in Shimla and trained in art in New Delhi, he arrived in London in 1956, finding early success as a painter of landscapes, and then humanscapes (often as eroticised body parts). Before settling down in London, he travelled through the US and Europe, studying the language and technique of Vincent van Gogh and Chaïme Soutine, and drawing inspiration from European city landscapes.

Throughout his career, Chandra's recurrent preoccupation remained the female body. Sexual imagery may have played a vital role in his art but was introduced as part of a much larger experience in a wider context. Employing the primitivist trope, Chandra often reduced female anatomy to shapes as though suspended in a space invaded by phallogentric forms.

Chandra was the first Indian artist to exhibit at one of the most important art events worldwide—Documenta in Kassel, West Germany, in 1964. Widely collected, especially by museums in the UK, Chandra won fellowships in the 1960s from the John D. Rockefeller III Fund and the Fairfield Foundation.



Moon and Houses | Oil on Masonite board, 1960 | 36.0 × 60.0 in. / 91.4 × 152.4 cm.
Signed in English and dated (lower right) 'Avinash / 60'

Our familiarity with Avinash Chandra's landscapes lulls us into complacency. Yet, those looming buildings—had we not known otherwise—might as easily have been heads. Chandra, who arrived in London from New Delhi, was inspired by architecture and interiors and would go on to paint nude figures and body parts. This painting could be either, and its cubist detailing could as easily be the artist's attempt to represent the interiors of the city's grand architecture, as it could be to represent the darkest inner thoughts in our minds. A compelling painting, it brings to cubism an exciting freshness by an Indian artist who dared to dream an alternate universe.

Shanti Dave b. 1931



Shanti Dave was among the earliest of India's abstractionists who created his own unique language that lasted him throughout his career. But in that initial phase, while finding his feet, and as a student at M. S. University, Baroda, where N. S. Bendre was his teacher, he experimented with elements of cubism to see how they fit his practice.

They didn't and were soon discarded, but that brief dalliance resulted in works of rare brilliance for an artist who began earning his living by painting signboards and billboards for films. Known for his paintings as well as large murals—such as those that adorned Air India's offices in London, New York, and Frankfurt—his concerns were modernist, which is evident in the formal abstraction in his work, with a focus on the medium and its possibilities more than incorporating ideological narratives. Later, he consciously preferred printmaking, attracted as much to the medium's democratic nature for both the artist and the buyer as also for the possibility of greater textures it offered.

A co-founder of the Baroda Group in 1956, Dave won the national award of the Lalit Kala Akademi three years in a row, in 1956, '57 and '58. He was honoured with the Government of India's Padma Shri in 1985 and received the Sahitya Kala Parishad's award in 1986. The artist lives in New Delhi.



Still-Life | Oil on jute pasted on cardboard, 1954–56 | 30.2 × 12.7 in. / 76.7 × 32.3 cm.

Signed and dated in Gujarati (lower left) 'Shanti Dave / 56'

Verso: Label with inscription, title, date, and artist's name in English on additional support

Among India's greatest—and earliest—abstractionists, for a very brief while at the start of his career, Shanti Dave experimented with figuration and the standard genres of art, especially landscapes and still-lives, of which this painting is an example. Painted in Baroda, before moving to New Delhi, it is a work of supreme confidence. In reimagining the table, vase and flowers and blending them with the background while retaining their individuality and, in fact, separating them, the artist has used the full extent of cubism with great exceptionalism.

Jyoti Bhatt b. 1934



Jyoti Bhatt is one of India's eminent printmakers and photographers, though he studied painting at M. S. University in Baroda under the tutelage of artist K. G. Subramanyan. He began his career as a painter and his works from this period occupy volume by way of colours and lines that are two-dimensional and intended to reduce the form to its simplified version *sans* any emotional loss.

In the early 1960s, he went to the Accademia di Belle Arti in Naples, Italy, on a scholarship and then to the Pratt Institute in New York, where he was exposed to abstract expressionism, and during his time there, also received a grant from the John D. Rockefeller III Fund.

A keen experimenter, while Bhatt's early works reflected the influence of cubism, he later shifted to pop-art imagery, to finally arrive at a style inspired by traditional folk designs. Though Bhatt worked in a variety of mediums, including watercolours and oils, it was his printmaking that garnered him the most attention. In the late '60s, Bhatt began the photo documentation of traditional Indian craft and design, which was born out of an assignment for a seminar on Gujarati folk art but evolved into a lifelong passion.

A founder member of the Baroda Group of Artists, he was also part of Group 1890. He received the national award of the Lalit Kala Akademi in 1963-64, a gold medal at the International Print Biennale in Florence, Italy, in 1967, the first prize for the design of a postal stamp for India's twenty-fifth anniversary of Independence in 1972, and the Padma Shri from the Government of India in 2019. Bhatt lives and works in Vadodara.



Problem | Oil on canvas, 1956 | 28.0 × 36.0 in. / 71.1 × 91.4 cm.

Signed and dated in Gujarati (centre left) 'Jyoti Bhatt / 56'

Verso: Label with artist's name, inscription and title in English; and signed in English

A scholarship to Italy introduced Jyoti Bhatt to trends in Western modern art. His amalgamation of cubism and expressionism was truly indigenous. The objective pictorial grammar derived from cubist sources and the subjective and practical forms of day-to-day life motivated him to explore the possibilities of creating a new art vocabulary. This painting represents a family in a state of depression, their pensive mood and expressive eyes conveying their state of anxiety. Breaking the reality and rearranging it according to a cubist approach, the composition is typified with its minimal colour scheme, where geometric patterns and patches define depth, imbuing it with a two-dimensional effect.

About DAG

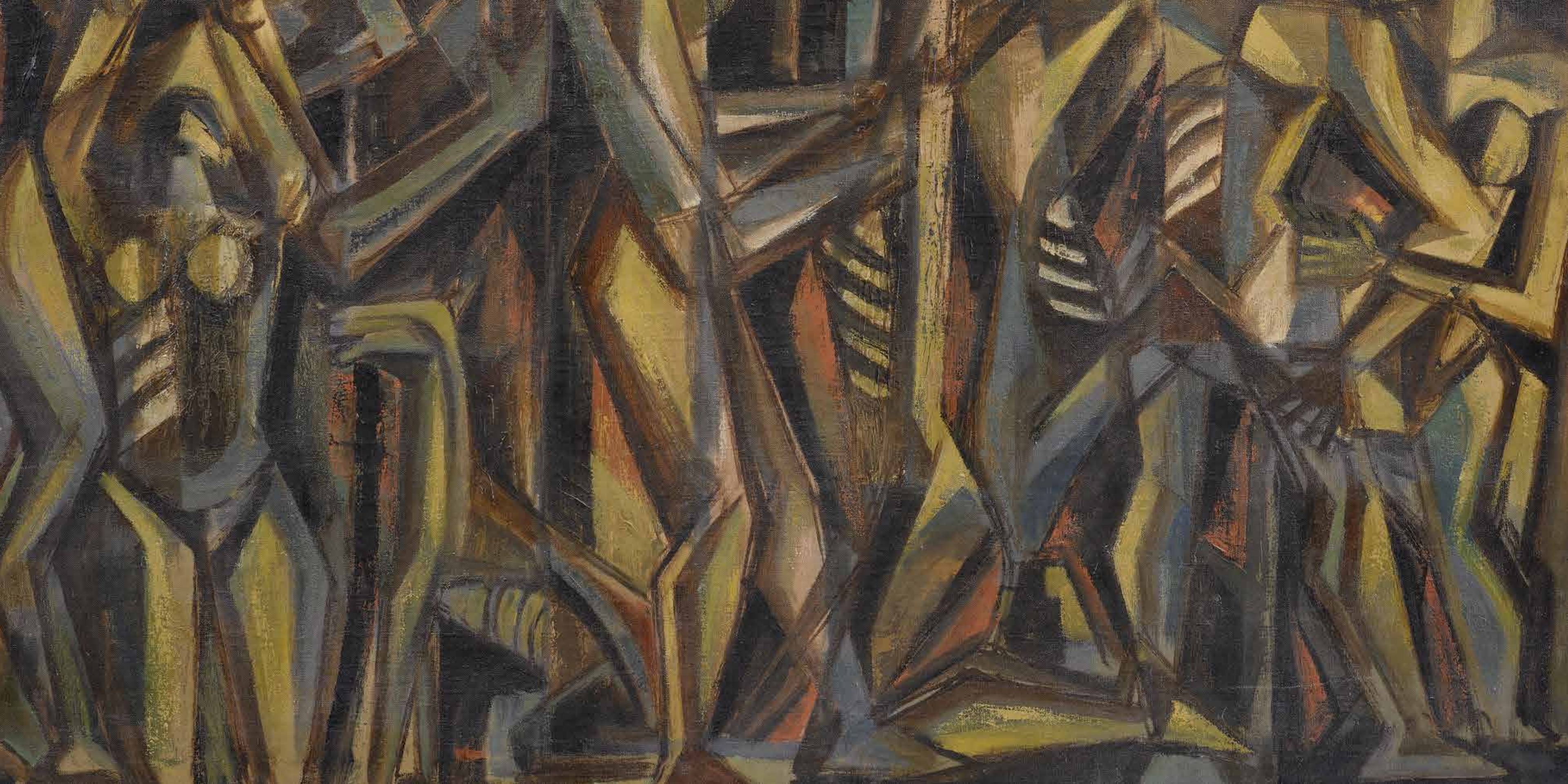
Established in 1993 as an art gallery, DAG has grown exponentially to become India's leading art company with a comprehensive collection starting from the eighteenth century onwards. From acknowledging recognised masters to restoring the legacies of generations of artists marginalised over time, from acquiring the custodianship of artists' studios and estates to bringing back to India works associated with Indian art and heritage from overseas, DAG has revisited the history of three centuries of Indian art practice with a repository of artists that, taken together, tell the story of Indian art.

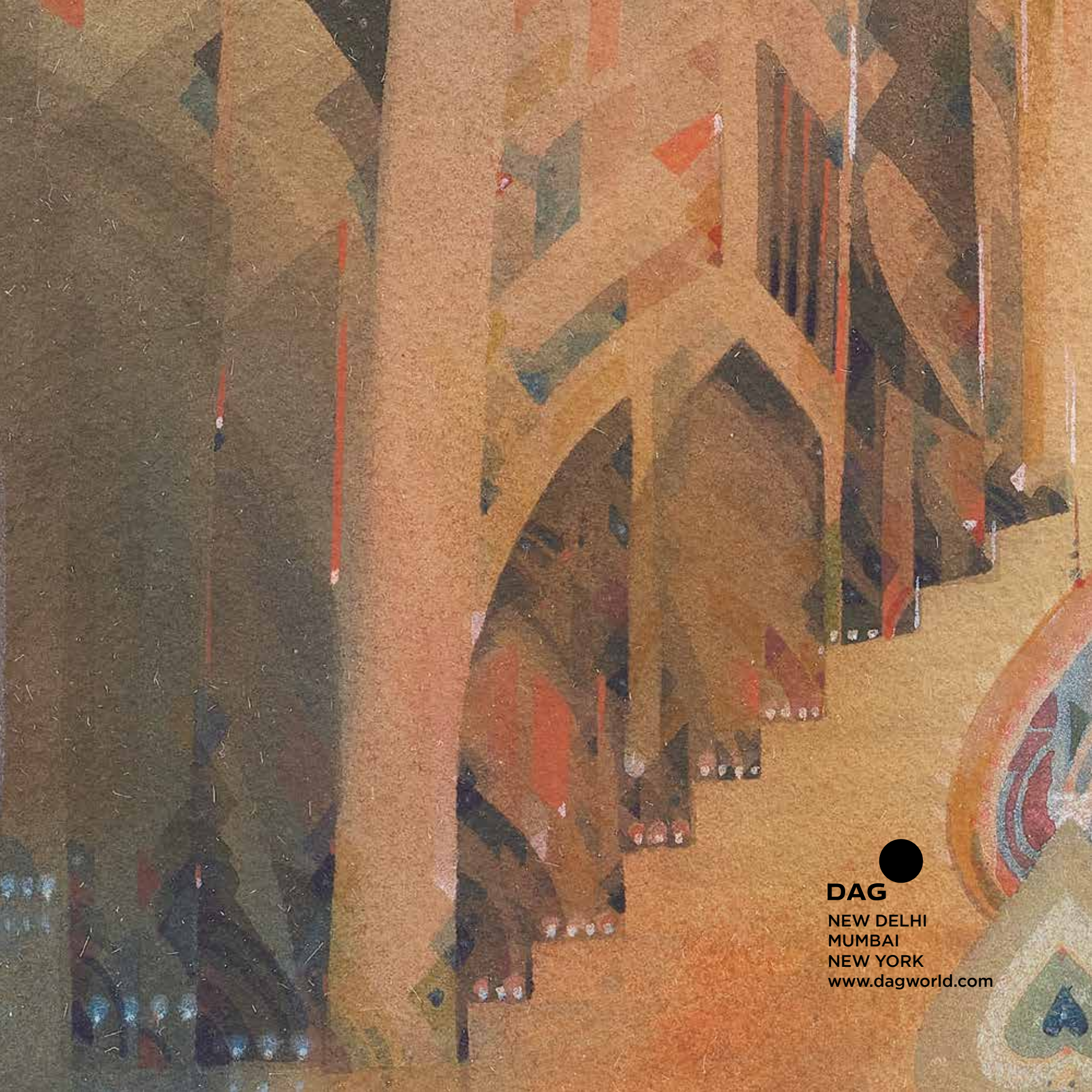
In the over three decades since DAG's foundation, the Indian art world has seen far-reaching changes in which the company has played a stellar role. Its iconic exhibitions that are curated to provide historical overviews have brought to the fore important artists neglected through the passage of time while also documenting critical art movements and collectives. New generations of art lovers have been able to reclaim the inheritance of forgotten masters through DAG's pathbreaking curations at its galleries as well as participation in international art fairs, and collaborations with museums and cultural institutions in India and abroad.

At the heart of the company's programming is ongoing curatorial enquiry and exploration for its exhibitions; a rigorous publishing calendar with an impressive library of books to document Indian art history; a museums programme focussed at engaging the public to increasingly democratise its outreach; commissioning of videos and films in relation to artists and their work; and engagements with artists, critics and the art community at large. Through these initiatives, DAG remains steadfast in its commitment to foster an appreciation for, and the dissemination and promotion of Indian art.

An important aspect of the company's collaborative efforts has been to work with institutions and museums, whether for hosting DAG-organised exhibitions or for establishing immersive public-private museum exhibitions such as those undertaken at Delhi's Red Fort (*Drishyakala*) and Kolkata's Old Currency Building (*Ghare Baire*) with the Archaeological Survey of India. Set up as museums, these exhibitions ran for periods of three years and two years, respectively, garnering an amazing response from large numbers of viewers.

DAG recently acquired Jamini Roy's studio-cum-house in Kolkata and is in the process of setting up its first single-artist museum dedicated to the National Treasure artist. It has galleries in Mumbai, New Delhi and New York.






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