

BREATH WITHIN THE SOUL
THE ART OF Sohan Qadri



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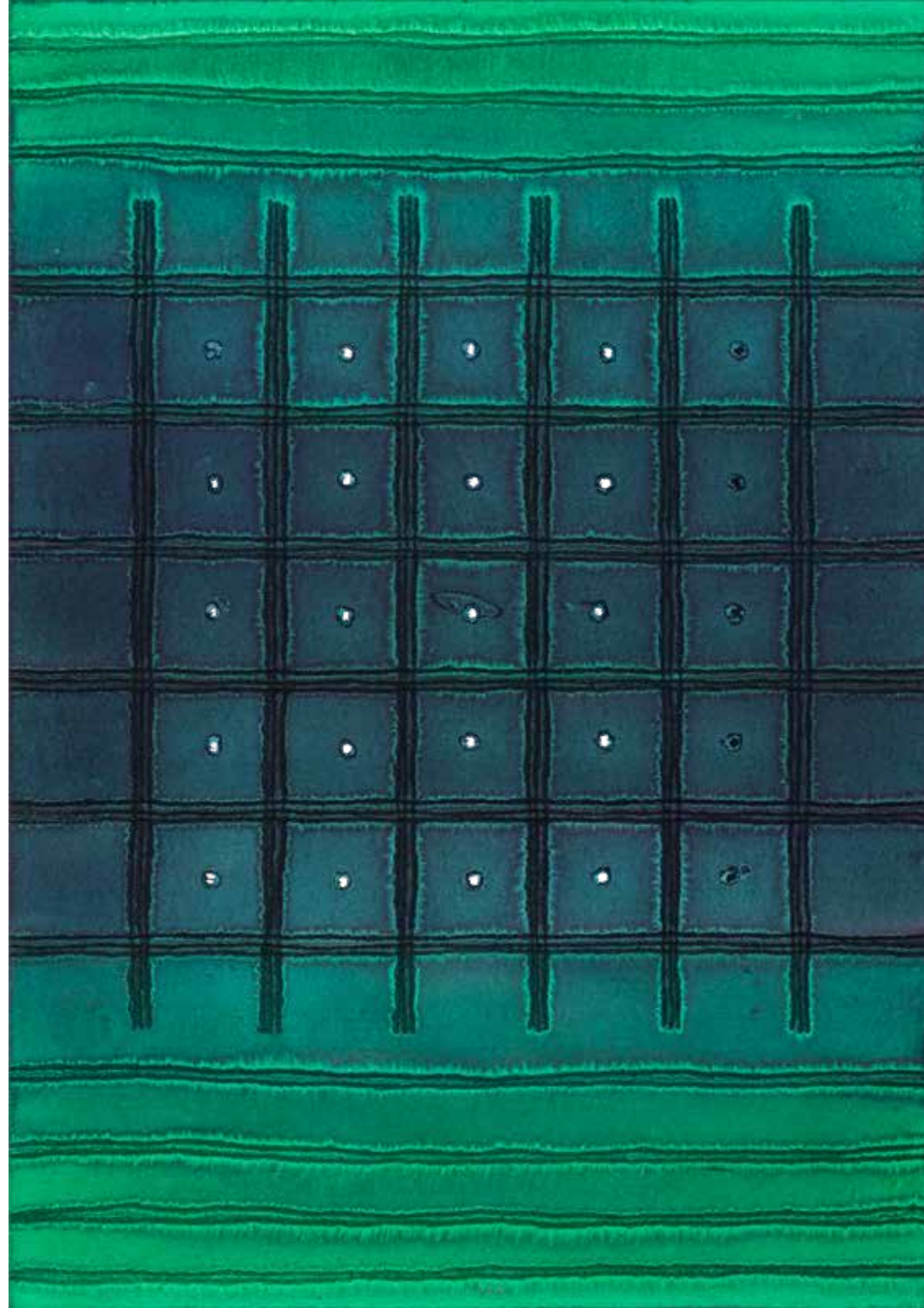


‘The dyes breathe through the paper as though they are alive—they work in ways that are revelations.’

Although born into privilege, Sohan Qadri (1932–2011) chose the life of an artist and bridged his practice with a lifelong spiritual inquiry. He embraced the mendicant way of life early in his youth and travelled extensively through the Himalayan India and Tibet. His restless peregrinations next took him across East Africa, North America, and Europe, finally settling in Copenhagen, Denmark, where his practice ranged across fields as diverse as art, poetry, transcendental meditation, and yoga.

Around this time Qadri eliminated the use of encaustic and oil on canvas in favour of watercolours and dyes on paper. This was motivated by his desire to seek out a higher consciousness through concentrating focus on the quotidian energy in one’s own body. Combining the spiritual and the temporal, Qadri created art as a response to his search for ever-higher levels of mystical experiences. His unique process resulted in incandescent paper tapestries with a tactile compositional surface in monotone or very few colours.

The visceral appeal in Qadri’s work lies in his use of colours—as much Indian as a nod to the northern lights of Scandinavia—and in the incised lines and dots that ripple across the paintings to remind us of an inner world within, which is a reflection of a visual world that we can glimpse through the mind’s eye. Widely collected around the world, Sohan Qadri’s unusual perspective of colour field painting combines his Indian roots with global modernism.



‘My paintings are characteristic for their emptiness and peace combined in a radiation of power. Ultimately it is the energy that is contained and coalesced. It is not really necessary to separate oriental art from western art. Energy is universal and one for all life. Deep and true aesthetic perception is never geographically conditioned. The intuitive experience speaks all languages and knows no formal boundaries.’

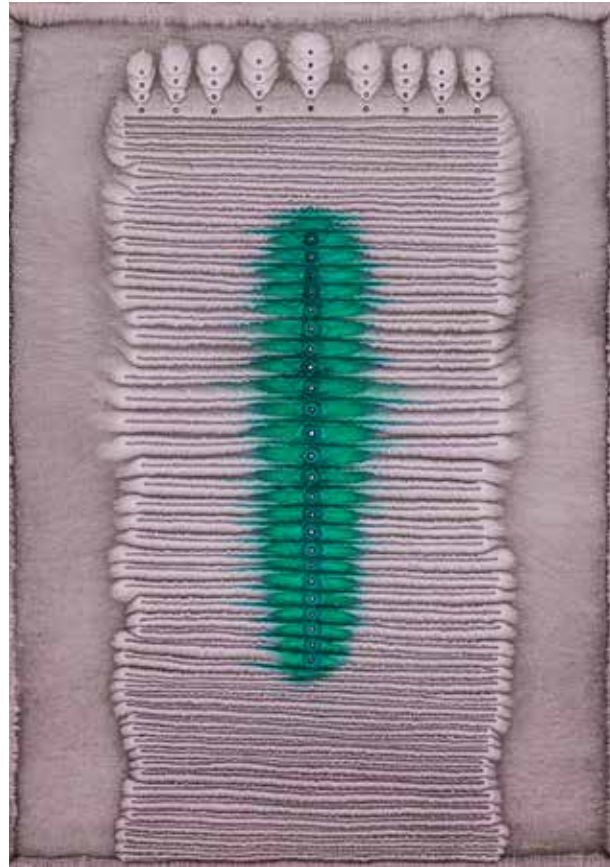
Untitled

Ink and dye on paper, 2001

39.3 x 27.5 in. / 99.8 x 69.9 cm.

Signed in English and dated (lower centre) ‘Qadri / 01’

Verso: Inscribed, signed and dated in English



Untitled

Ink and dye on paper, 2004

55.1 x 39.3 in. / 140.0 x 99.8 cm.

Signed in English and dated (lower right) 'Qadri / 04'

Verso: Inscribed, signed and dated in English



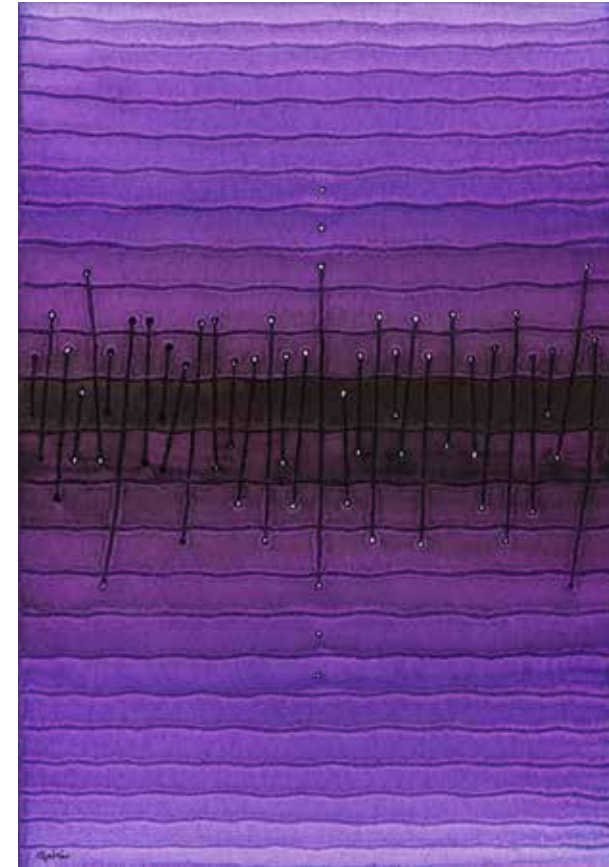
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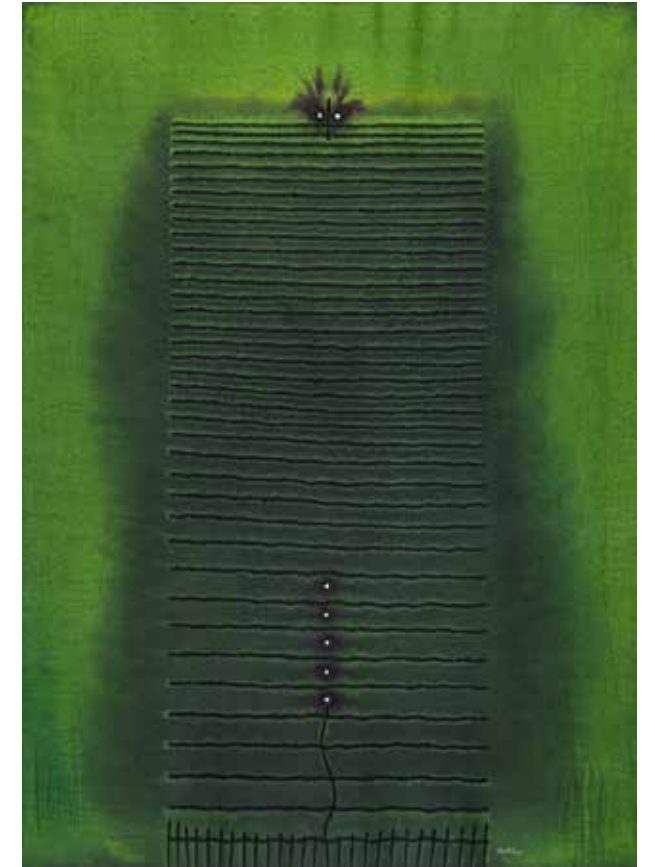
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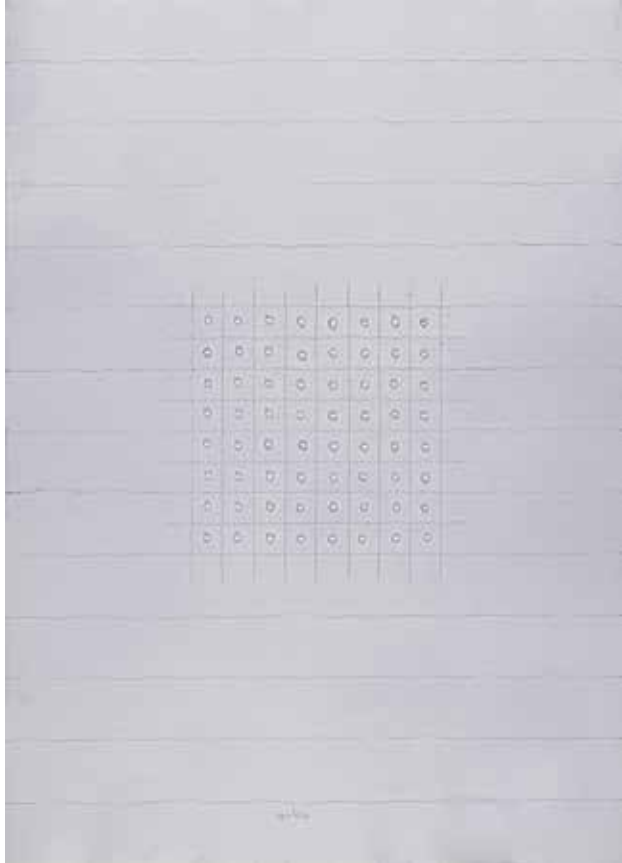
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Ink and dye on paper, 2007

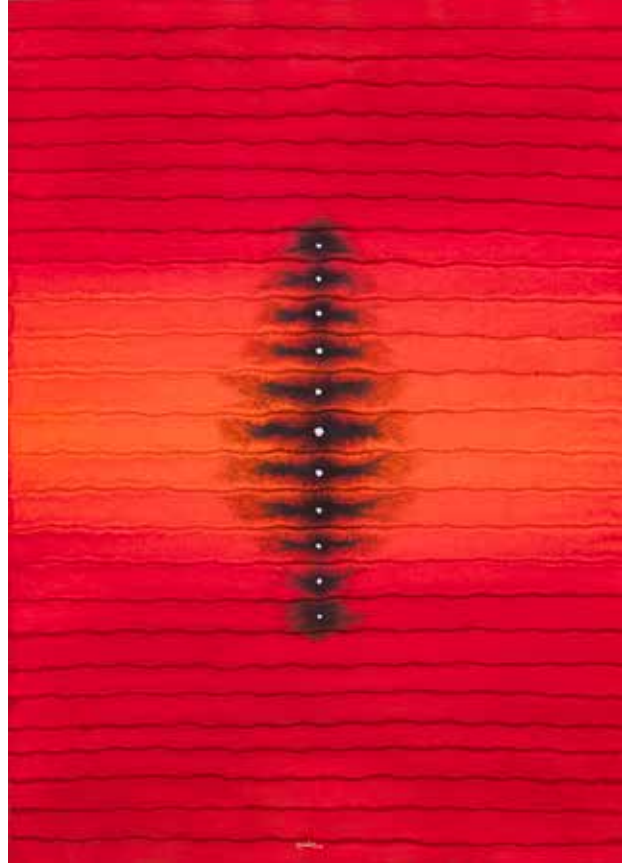
55.1 x 39.3 in. / 140.0 x 99.8 cm.

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Untitled
 Ink and dye on paper, 2008
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 Verso: Inscribed, signed and dated in English

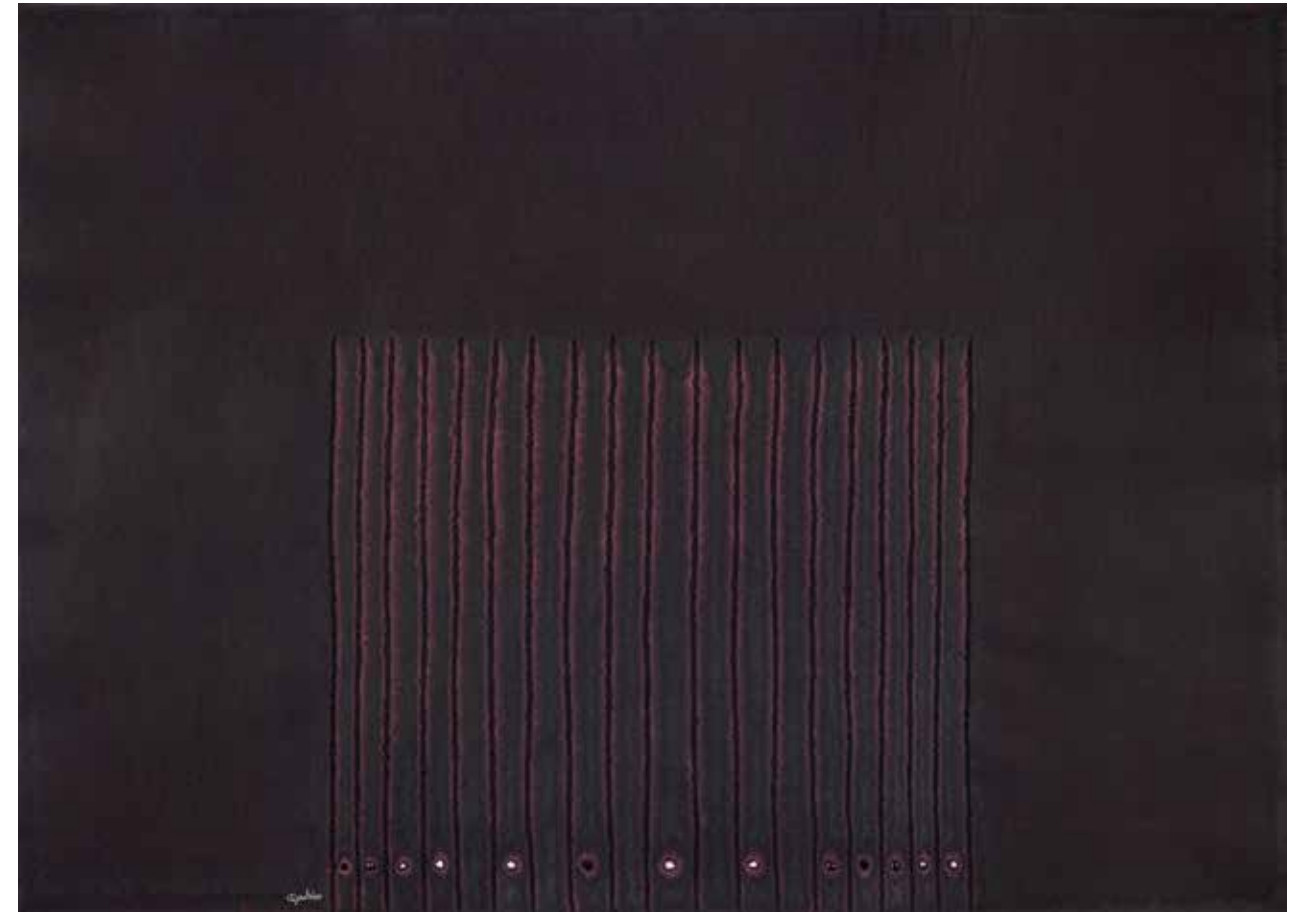


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Facing page

Untitled
 Ink and dye on paper, 2010
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 Signed in English and dated (lower left) 'Qadri / 10'
 Verso: Inscribed, signed and dated in English





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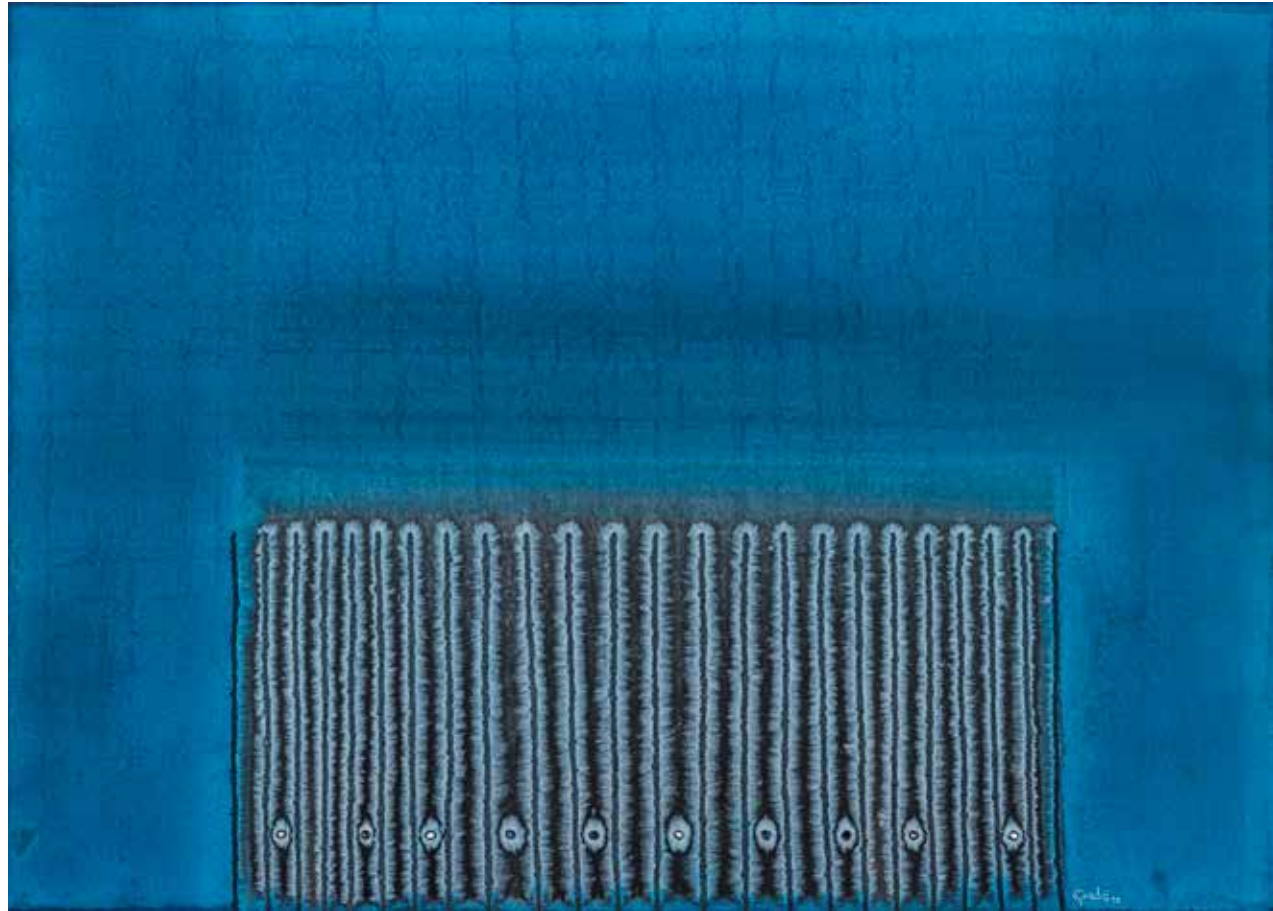
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‘I love to bring out the form and texture of a painting. When I was working in oils, I worked in layers. Then I switched from canvas to paper and the technique demanded a change too. Since it is difficult to create texture on paper, I have created one “in” it.’

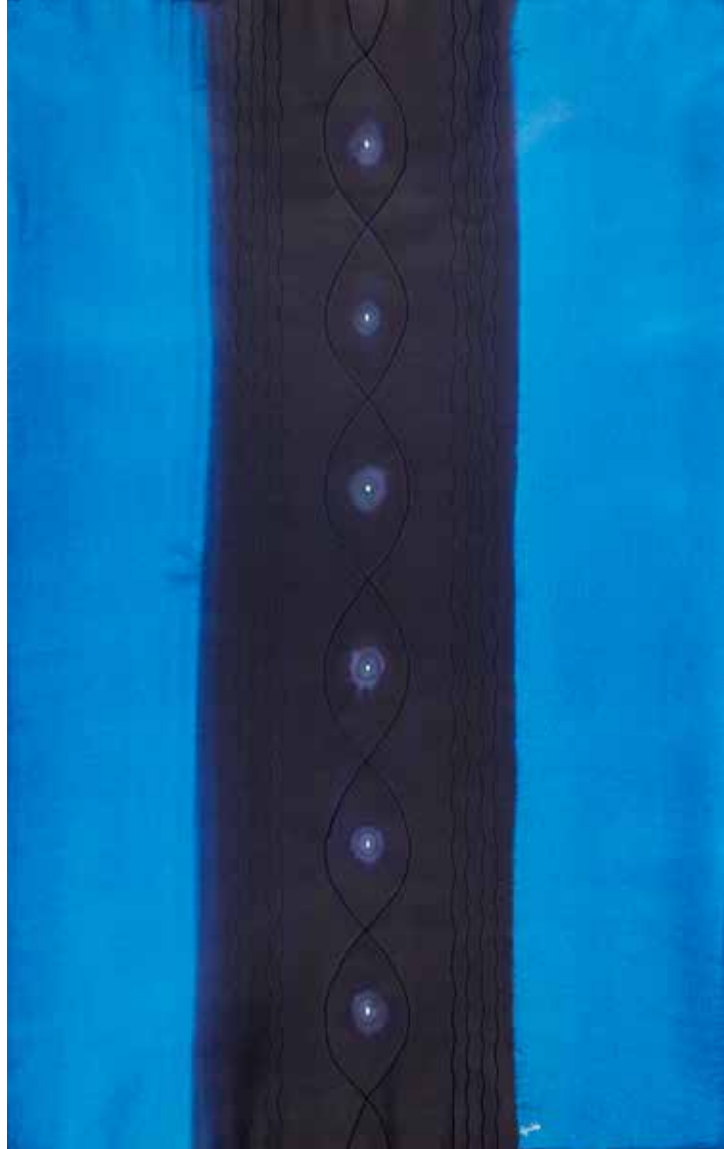
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Ink and dye on paper, 2010

78.7 x 49.2 in. / 199.9 x 125.0 cm.

Signed in English (lower centre) ‘Qadri’

Verso: Inscribed and signed in English and dated



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‘I look for what lies beneath, deep down where there is complete silence, complete darkness. Darkness is where there is complete silence. Darkness is where peace is, it’s synonymous with silence. Our universe is 99% dark, space is dark, we have very little light. We’re replicas of our universe, we’re dark inside. I call this the darkness of recognition. When you look at a painting, it arrests your thought process, your superimposition—then you imbibe it for a moment.’

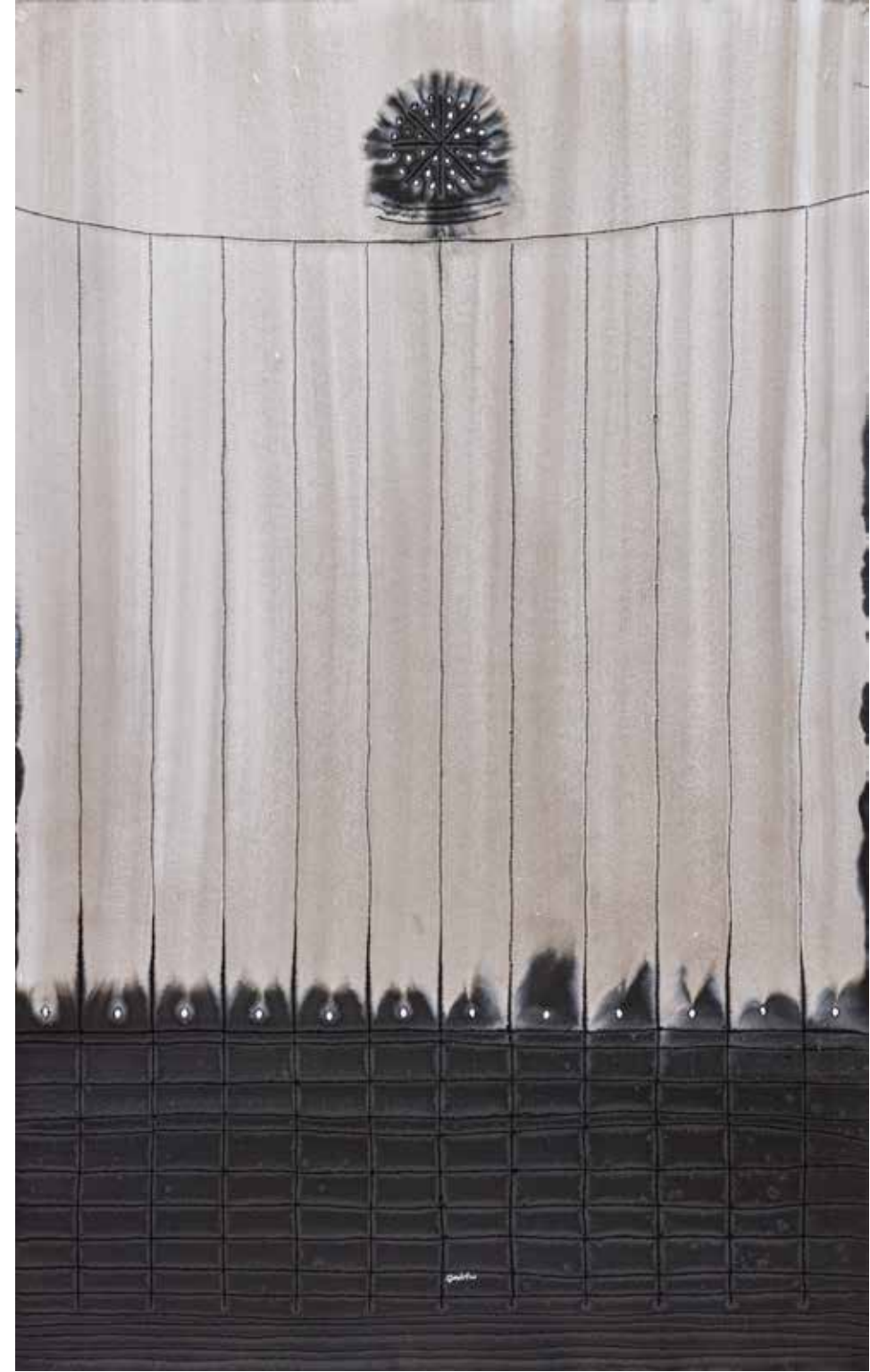
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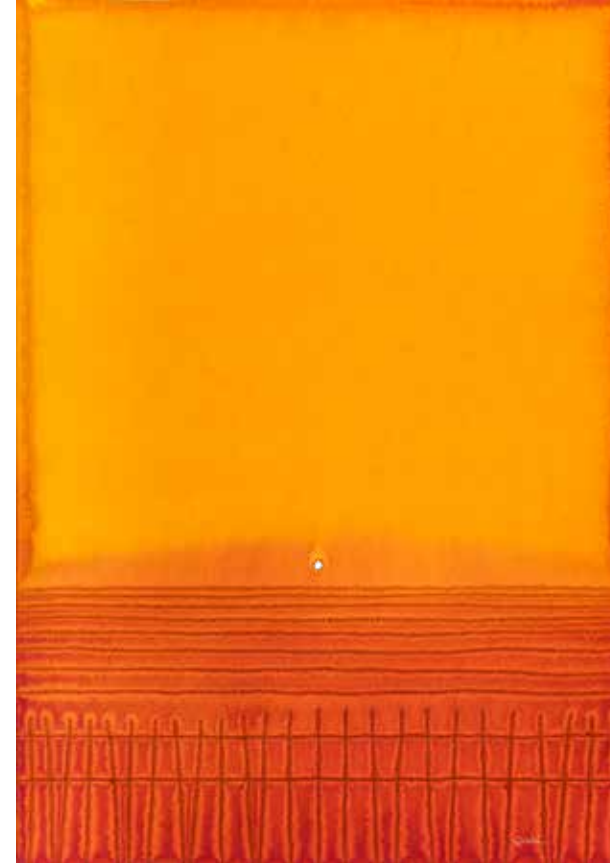
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SOHAN QADRI

The artist as a tantric *guru*

‘I am a tantric *sadhak* first, then an artist.’

In his long sojourn as a guru of Tantra Yoga in Scandinavian countries, Sohan Qadri was creating ever-new yantra compositions for teaching. He initiated students into contemplating a variety of visual power diagrams, and for this purpose he created several compositions based on traditional yantras. The paintings were actively used by him as a means for concentration.

In 1970, almost by accident, while working on a graphic print, he discovered the unlimited possibilities of ink on paper. He found that paper absorbed the ink in unpredictable ways, to create the most unusual patterns.

To achieve newness in each of his experiments, he would soak the paper in water, and the moist surface would allow the dyes to bleed into the paper. To accentuate the effects, he would combine pigments and tonalities—deep yellows set against blood red and white, peacock blue with emerald greens, dense black and deep magentas. By then, he had already developed his own tripartite palette of colours that he used frequently. He divided colours into three, in an ascending order—dark, warm or cool, and light or faded. Dark colours denote the earth element. Warm colours represent emptiness, expelling a certain vibration; they form the middle; and light colours having a vapour quality, the upper level. The process opened out his experiments with texture. The moist paper would be pricked with a blade to create dots that perforated its surface, with horizontal or vertical lines in the centre. Interestingly, the punctures resemble the perforations that are formed through centuries of petrification of sacred ammonite *shaligrama* stones that are worshipped in India as primal emblems of Vishnu. This unusual technique created breathtaking effects of hues and tonalities. The bright colours invariably gurgled round the perforated dots and incised lines creating a dynamic flow with colours oozing out of the crevices. The hues and tones would continue to evolve even after the painting was finished and would acquire their own contour. Thus he would discover new shades of blue or green palpitating on paper. As he said, ‘The



TOP: Sohan Qadri in his studio in Zurich, 1966.

ABOVE: Sohan Qadri hosting a Yoga class in Copenhagen.

dyes breathe through the paper as though they are alive—they work in ways that are revelations.’

Qadri had created a style far removed from the representation of the objective world, bringing back the meditative states to its origins. It ushered in an expression that was abstract and minimal but embedded in metaphor and meaning. He said, ‘When I start on a painting, first I empty my mind of all images. They dissolve into primordial space. Only emptiness, I feel, should communicate with the emptiness of the canvas. I avoid the distortion created by images.’

Qadri was an established poet who published seven collections of poetry. His poetic voice to the dimensionless *bindu*, the ‘dot’, is an important landmark that summarises the yogic scheme of his artistic creativity. The first line of one poem reads, ‘I am the dot of darkness in the dark space—unidentified.’ The allusion here is to the origins—the nascent unmanifested state of consciousness—lost in the mystery of creation, where darkness is folded in darkness with no division, comparable to the black hole of the first creation.

Qadri’s experiments with innumerable variations were compositionally similar. He explained this through a Buddhist philosophical metaphor of momentariness, ‘You cannot step into the river twice because the river has changed and the water has flowed away.’ His repetitive technique, he averred, was ‘akin to *japa*, constant recitation of sacred *mantras*’.

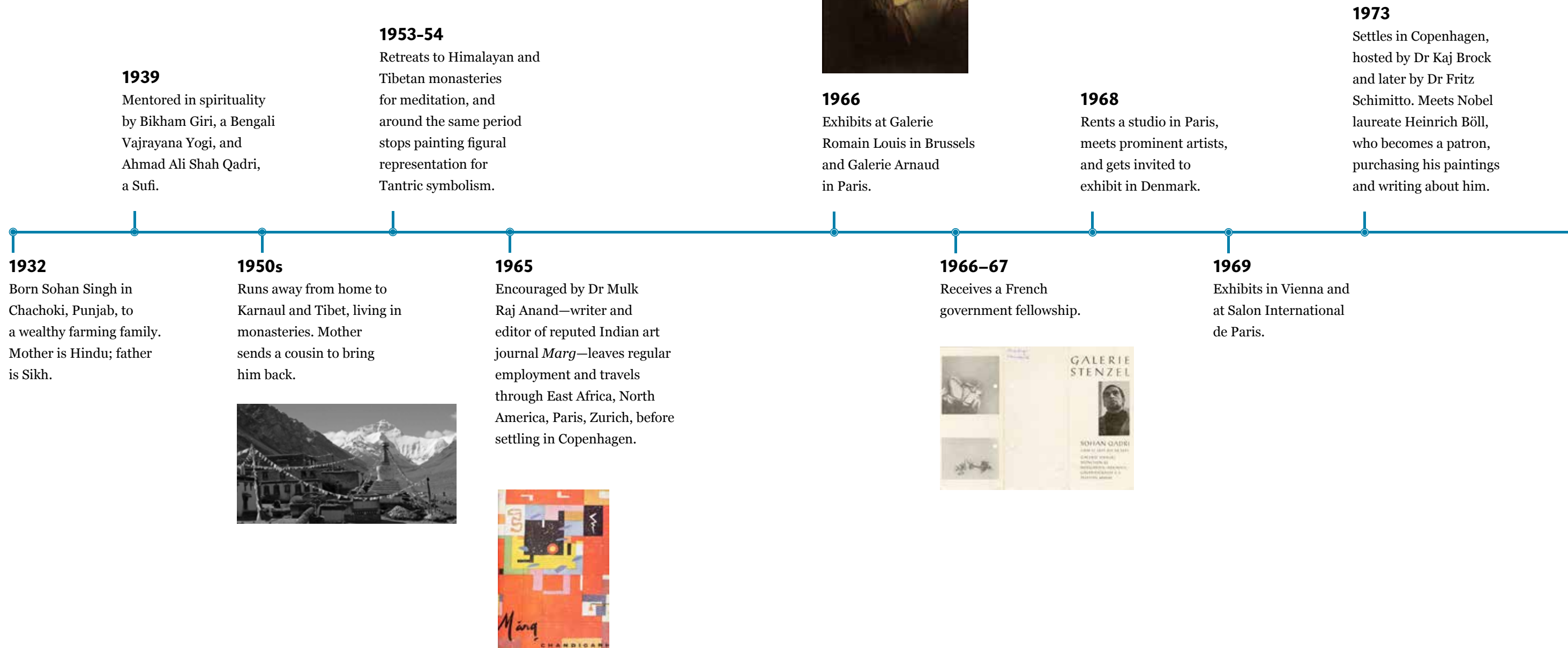
There is no doubt that he has left a rich legacy of Tantra-inspired works and brought in new dimensions ‘...to the discourse of Western minimalism using abstraction to convey transcendence.’ In his aesthetic representations, he brings the philosophical views of *shunya* to its very climax. Doubtless, Qadri is a rare and original painter.

Dr Madhu Khanna

[Excerpt from Madhu Khanna, ‘Sohan Qadri, Khechari: Wandering in the Void of the Consciousness’, in *Tantra on the Edge: Inspirations and Experiments in Twentieth-Century Indian Art*, (New Delhi: DAG, 2022), pp. 151–8]

AN INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MYSTICISM

Sohan Qadri's life across the world



1975

Shows at Basel Art Fair, Switzerland, creating abstract compositions on jute.

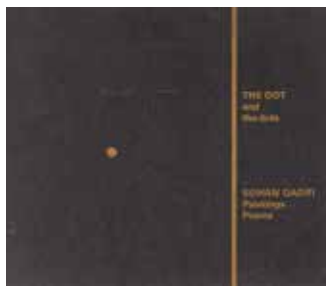


1976

Holds a solo exhibition at Galerie Gilles Corbeil in Montreal, Canada.

1950s

Publishes a poetry book, *The Dot and the Dots*, with excerpts from prominent critics.



1979

Appears on Swedish TV show *Tantra: The Asian Art of Energy*.

1993

Exhibits at Alliance Française, Nairobi, Kenya.



1999

Exhibits at Gallery 93, New York. Around the same period, the artist hosts regular exhibitions in New Delhi.

2004

Establishes Gyan Stumbh-Stupa, a spiritual learning centre in Phagwara, Punjab.



2007

Appears on Talk Asia, CNN International, and BBC News, discussing art and Tantra.

2011

Passes away in Toronto, Canada. Italian fine-art publishing house Skira Editore releases the artist monograph, *Sohan Qadri: The Seer*.

2016

Qadri is part of DAG exhibition *Memory and Identity: Indian Artists Abroad* in New York.

2022

Qadri is exhibited in DAG exhibition *Tantra on the Edge: Inspirations and Experiments in Twentieth-Century Indian Art* in New Delhi and Mumbai. The publication wins Oxford Bookstore's 'Artbook Prize' 2024, New Delhi.



WHAT IS TANTRA?

Sanskrit: तन्त्र (/ 'tæn. trə /)

Earliest traceable recorded usage: 1700–1100 BCE in the Rig Veda

Tantra is an ancient spiritual movement that still survives today as a globally influential tradition. It is a difficult concept to concretely categorise because it transcends geopolitical boundaries, cultural silos, and has elapsed the confinement of time. Tantra has no single definition, no founder, and no singular scriptural origin. Etymologically derived from the Sanskrit root 'tan', Tantra is considered a revelatory science of expanding human consciousness, based on the intrinsic belief in the divinity of the self and the potential to attain elevated states of consciousness. The word '*tantra*' can have as many as eighteen different meanings in primeval Indian literature, one of which is 'loom, warp, weave.' This implies that Tantra can be perceived as a philosophy that arose from the interweaving of various traditions and doctrines.

By the end of the eleventh century, Tantra was widely accepted as a religious path to enlightened liberation, with its own doctrines, philosophy, cosmology, theology, rituals, yogic and esoteric practices, deities, in addition to being a distinct genre of worship using both iconic and aniconic symbols. Tantra as a fluid tradition was permeable and instrumental across diverse regions and religious faiths—Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and various tribal traditions—spanning both the orthodoxy of the Vedas and dissenting lineage traditions, giving it a unique cultural-religious current in India.

Tantra's influence has historically extended well beyond the Indian subcontinent. Esoteric Buddhist practices were established in the Chinese Chen-Yen school; Tantra was absorbed in the Shingon school of Japan; Buddhist Tantra thrived in the Vajrayana and Mantrayana schools in Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan; and elements of Tantra can be seen as far as the Indonesian archipelago of Bali. The flourishing of Tantra cultures significantly influenced extant literature, monumental temples, sculpture, and other forms of visual representation, each increasingly utilising abstract geometric elements like the yantra, mandala, and chakra in ritual worship.



Sohan Qadri at the samadhi (shrine) of guru Bikham Giri, the Bengali Vajrayana Yogi who initiated the artist into the world to Tantra.

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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22A, Janpath Road
Windsor Place
New Delhi 110001
Email: delhi@dagworld.com

Gallery 1 and 2
The Taj Mahal Palace
Apollo Bunder Road, Colaba
Mumbai 400001
Email: mumbai@dagworld.com

1325 Avenue of the Americas
27th Floor, Ste 2716
New York, NY 10019
Email: newyork@dagworld.com

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