

# The initiators

A peek at the trio who shaped—and braved—the pre-boom days of Indian art

BY DHAMINI RATNAM  
dhamini.r@livemint.com

In 1998, *Afternoon Despatch & Courier*, a Mumbai-based daytime tabloid, carried a colourful piece about an exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) and exhorted its readers to view the “seven Tyeb Mehtas, five Husains, the nudes by K.H. Ara and 10 Krishen Khannas,” among the other Modernists displayed across the gallery’s three levels, and stated convivially, “It’s *paisa vasool* on the first level itself”.

The paintings belonged to art collector Jehangir Nicholson who, as a newspaper article from the following year pointed out, wished for nothing more than land from the government to house his sizeable collection of over 800 artworks before his death. Nicholson died in 2001, and a decade later, the Jehangir

Nicholson Art Foundation, a trust formed by godson Cyrus Guzder and lawyer Kaiwan Kalyaniwalla to look after and exhibit his art, opened the Jehangir Nicholson Gallery at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS).

The latest exhibition to open there is titled *Kekoo, Kali & Jehangir: Framing A Collection* and presents the works that the collector, the photography enthusiast and the last heir of a cotton gin and press, bought from two of the city’s first gallerists—Kekoo Gandhi, who set up Chemould Gallery in September 1963, and Kali Pundole, who set up Pundole Art Gallery the same year, in May. The city was home to a vibrant art scene: the Bombay Progressive Artists’ Group, which included M.F. Husain and Tyeb Mehta, were painting prolifically; Bal Chhabda, a film-maker and artist, set up Gallery 59 to

display their works; and exhibitions were routinely held at the Jehangir Art Gallery (that had opened in 1952).

Gandhy had a frame-making shop which he opened in the 1940s, and he would stock his frames in Pundole’s watch shop in the Flora Fountain area of south Mumbai’s Fort district. Their segue into displaying art and selling it was seamless, even though art wasn’t looked upon as investment at the time. “In fact, it rankled him that Kali opened his gallery first, because dad always felt that his claim to art went back longer,” says daughter Shireen Gandhi, who now looks after Chemould Prescott Road gallery. “They were both cordial with each other,” says Dadiba Pundole, Kali’s son, and owner of Pundole’s auction house.

Competitiveness notwithstanding, Kali Pundole and Kekoo Gandhi played a big role in creating Nicholson’s collection. Nicholson bought his first work in 1968 from the Taj art shop (a work by Sharad Waykool which cost ₹500) and soon began to buy works from both. “Jehangir didn’t collect because Indian art was an investment, unlike most collectors today who buy art with an eye on returns,” says Dadiba.

In fact, both gallerists—each continued to sell to Nicholson long after they began working in their respective galleries—agree that he was a cautious buyer. “He was used to buying works in the range of ₹3,000-5,000, maybe a maximum of ₹8,000-10,000,” says Dadiba. But that was Nicholson keeping a check on his purse, more than anything else. “What is significant,” says Shireen, “is that he was a consistent buyer. That was a rarity.” In the 1970s, Nicholson bought a number of what are now highly priced works, including an untitled V.S. Gaitonde for ₹2,000. He also acquired works by Akbar Padamsee, F.N. Souza, Ara, Husain, Mehta, Jehangir Sabavala and Laxman Shreshtha, among others. He also loaned a part of his collection to the National Centre for the Performing Arts, which led to the setting up of the Jehangir Nicholson Gallery of Modern Art.

Then, for a few years in the early 1980s, Nicholson didn’t pick up any work of art, recalls Dadiba. Husain doubled his price and other artworks became significantly costlier, as well. It was an untitled Ram Kumar that broke the collector’s dry spell and he spent ₹18,000 on it. “The collecting group was growing and he



**GenNext:** Dadiba Pundole and Shireen Gandhi at the Jehangir Nicholson Gallery; the untitled Ram Kumar hangs to Gandhi’s left.

felt he was losing out, That was the catalyst,” says Dadiba, who was present that evening when Nicholson walked into their gallery and asked to buy the 1.78m-tall abstract oil on canvas.

Also on display is a work by Jitish Kallat titled *PTO* [May what is threatened not become fact] that Nicholson picked up from Gandhi in 1997. “I remember being surprised,” writes Shireen in the catalogue

that accompanies the current exhibition, “especially because Jitish was new at that time, and Nicholson belonged to the older generation.”

**Kekoo, Kali & Jehangir: Framing A Collection** is on till 31 March, 10.30am-6pm (Mondays closed), at Jehangir Nicholson Gallery, second floor, east wing, CSMVS, 159-161, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Fort, Mumbai.