

Sabavala's 'Flight into Egypt' fetches world record ₹3 crore

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New Delhi: Indians seem to be enjoying the excitement of live auctions.

Records fell like ninepins at Christie's first auction last year and, on Friday, Delhi's first live auction in over a decade saw a work by one of India's leading modernist painters Jehangir Sabavala set a new world auction record. Titled 'The Flight into Egypt', the work was estimated at Rs 80-90 lakh but competitive bidding drove it to Rs 3 crore.

Works by the Parsi artist, who died after a year-long battle with lung cancer in Mumbai in 2011, have been scaling the auction ladder in recent years. In 2010, one of his serene landscapes fetched Rs 1.7 crore at a Saffronart auction. In 2012, 'Vespers 1' fetched Rs 2.1 crore.

His wife Shirin Sabavala said she was elated at the news. "We knew it would do well but this was beyond expectations." For an artist considered "not Indian enough", this was long



'The Flight into Egypt' tackled a subject close to Sabavala's heart — exile

overdue recognition. Sabavala, known for his superb handling of light, put up his first solo exhibition at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai after coming back from Europe in the 1950s. "We hired a room at the Taj and they wouldn't let us bang nails in. We finally found a way by getting carpenters to build frames," says Shirin.

'The Flight into Egypt' tackled a theme that was close to Sabavala's heart — exile. Another modernist, S H Raza, went for Rs 8.17 crore at the Saffronart auction at the Oberoi in Delhi which saw a lot of highrollers attending. The sale grossed a total of Rs 38.3 crore, with eight paintings going for over a crore and as many as 96% of lots finding buyers.

Saffronart CEO Dinesh Vazirani said this was the first of many auctions planned for Delhi. "Countries like China have an auction a month but in India, the excitement is still relatively new," said Vazirani, whose homegrown auction house has till now specialized in online auctions.