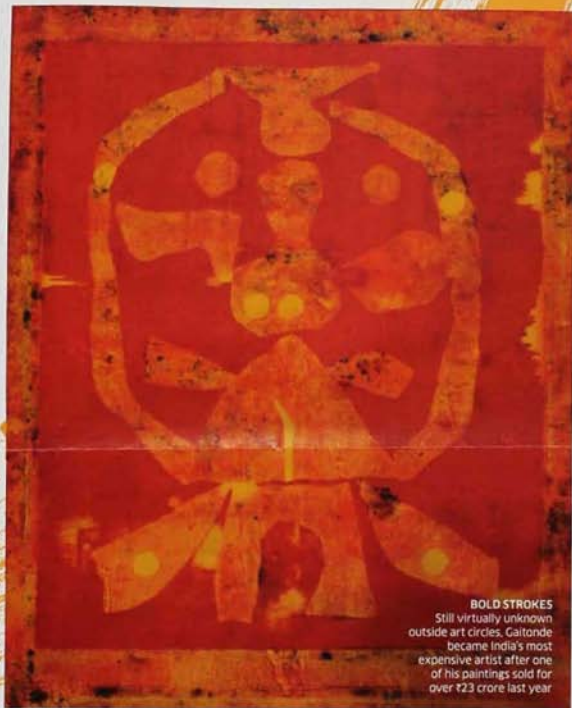


280  
LIGHTING UP  
THE MARQUEE

BY KISHORE SINGH

VS GAITONDE'S LIFE CAN  
BE SUMMED UP BETWEEN  
ANONYMITY AND CELEBRITY

## BOLD STROKES

Still virtually unknown outside art circles, Gaitonde became India's most expensive artist after one of his paintings sold for over ₹23 crore last year



A Guggenheim retrospective is about as serious as things can get for an artist, but when that artist is VS Gaitonde, many in India will have to sit up and take notice. In the hothouse world of art, the reticent, almost unknown artist is suddenly hot property – far from the ignominy of

his penurious existence and death in New Delhi. Not that he was unsung in his life. His work was collected in Mumbai, and famously by the John D Rockefeller III Fund, but his was a name that did not light up the marquee – not, that is, until December last year when he became India's most expensive artist at the first Christie's auction in the city.

Even so, and despite a \$3.5 million (₹23.4 crore) price tag, his remains an unfamiliar name on the celebrity

circuit where the worship of mammon alone marks the scent of success. Fame was a reluctant visitor in Gaitonde's life, something he did little to change. Reclusive both by personality and as an artist, he stayed deliberately out of the limelight. An associate member of the Progressive Artists' Group formed by FN Souza, and with MF Husain and SH Raza as members, he disdained the figurative art of their choosing, subverting himself to the pursuit of the abstract that was almost impossible to explain or understand.

At the start of his career, Gaitonde had been drawn to the idea of calligraphy, but with passing time he eliminated all but colour from his paintings – and then in such severe monotonies that collectors have since referred to them only as "the green work" or "the yellow one" for lack of anything else to label them. Born to Goan parents in 1924, Gaitonde earned himself a diploma from the JJ School of Arts in 1948. In the heady years after Independence, when Indian artists were celebrating their emergence and recognition, Gaitonde chose to stay in the shadows, emerging briefly to exhibit in the Eastern bloc in Europe in 1956, and in New York in 1959 and 1963, drawing the attention of the Rockefeller Foundation, which awarded him with a fellowship in 1964.

It was in America that a critic labelled his work "non-objective" rather than abstract, a term Gaitonde used to describe his style thereafter. In the decades since, Gaitonde vanished from the active art scene, shifting his base to New Delhi, where he lived and worked under difficult circumstances until his death in 2001. During this period, he continued to produce work characterized by layers of translucent paint that resulted in a luminous depth with a zen-like quality.

In recent years, collectors have reacted positively to secondary sales of his paintings in auctions – and 2013 might well come to be referred to as the Year of Gaitonde. Amrita Jhaveri's *Amaya* collection was auctioned by Sotheby's, where Gaitonde commanded a billing of ₹5.4 crore, besting another painting by him at Christie's at ₹3.9 crore. Another of his paintings was displayed by Christie's at Hong Kong ahead of its Asian art auction in May 2013, and critics discovered his "Painting No 4" in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. But it was at the close of the year that the amazing Christie's auction in Mumbai scored the astounding ₹23.4 crore against a sale estimate of ₹6.5-8.5 crore.

A retrospective of his work now opens this month at the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum and will run until February 11, 2015, curated by Sandhini Poddar. The overview, spanning works over his entire career, has paintings sourced from collectors around the world in America, Europe and India. It will establish him among the most significant artists of modern Indian art in the 20th century. Hopefully, the exhibition will travel to the National Gallery of Modern Art at some point, though it is currently scheduled to open at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and then the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim.

For the largely anonymous artist, this will bring the kind of publicity that eluded him in his lifetime, but which endorses his seriousness as "a quiet man and a painter of the quiet reaches of the imagination". Gaitonde might well have preferred this – his art's longevity to his own celebrity. ☺

Kishore Singh is a Delhi-based art consultant and critic

## AUCTION STARS

## TYEB MEHTA

The first to cross the \$1 million benchmark, works by him are rare and hard to come by

## FN SOUZA

The enfant terrible of Indian art, he commands high prices despite the profligate nature of his work

## SH RAZA

For long India's most expensive artist, collectors can't have enough of him

## MF HUSAIN

Outaged by his peers, he remains India's most popularly bought artist