COLLECTING

Treasure island

Meet Rajiv and Roohi Savara, who have the most extensive collection of V.S. Gaitonde's work

By Somak Ghoshal

In end-March 2011, Richard Armstrong, the director of Solomon R Guggenheim Museum and Foundation in New York, US, met Rajiv Savara at his home in New Delhi on his first visit to India. "It was here that I first made a pitch for Guggenheim to consider hosting a retrospective of V.S. Gaintonde's works," recalls Savara, chairman of the board and founder trustee of the not-for-profit The Savara Foundation for the Arts, which he runs with his wife, Roohi, and younger brother Rahul.

Sitting in the living room of Savara's house, one is surrounded by paintings and sculptures of some of the icons of Indian art—F.N. Souza, M.F. Husain, Ram Kumar, S.H. Raza, Meera Mukherjee, Somnath Hore, every wall and surface has a masterpiece on it.

The eye gets drawn to a magnificent oil painting by Raja Ravi Varma, depicting the forlorn Sita in Ashok *vatika*, Ravana's garden in his palace in Lanka, where she is held captive by ogre-like custodians. Another wall is illuminated by two sublime abstract paintings by Gaitonde, executed in soft green and earthy red, respectively, imprinted with winged shapes. The meditative calm and hypnotic energy commonly associated with the master's style are in full evidence here.

The Savaras are among the most thoughtful buyers of late 19th and 20th centuries—pre-modern and modern—Indian art in the country. For close to two decades they have been collecting the work of 15-16 artists, including Gaitonde, with a singular focus. "We do not have very deep pockets," says Savara, chairman of G&T Oilfield and Offshore Services Pvt. Ltd, an equipment and services provider for the offshore oil and gas industry. "Most of our purchases are the result of scholarship and the pursuit of the very best."

Alongside the buying of works of art, Savara spends a small fortune on acquiring books and documentaries on art and architecture. His sustained accumulations have resulted in a rich library of resources. "We were mentored, amongst others, by a Japanese

Roohi & Rajiv Savara Family Collection/The Savara Foundation for the Arts

Graphic: *(top)* Kultura, *lithograph on colour adhered to board, 1957; and* Untitled, *ink and watercolour on card, 1953.*

Meiji art dealer who would always say, 'You are not building a zoo, but creating a collection'," Savara says. Because of this early training and counsel by some of the most prominent dealers and gallerists both in the West and in India, he spends 3-4 hours every day educating himself. A mentor to numerous collectors across the world, Savara is a member of the advisory committee for Indian and Himalayan Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, US. He has also completed his term as a trustee at the renowned Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia which has perhaps the most distinguished collection of Impressionist Art in the world.

The Savaras do not attend exhibition openings or auctions and seldom entertain guests at home. Their hermetic presence in the art scene is devoted to one mission—to leave behind a legacy. Inspired by the tradition of philanthropy in the US established by great art collectors, the Savaras intend to donate their holdings to a worthy museum in the future.

The Savara Foundation for the Arts is closely involved with the promotion of Indian art. They have sponsored exhibitions and made grants to museums (for instance, it was the principal sponsor of the exhibition, *Rhythms Of India: The Art Of Nandalal Bose (1882-1966)*, which was a collaboration between the Union government and the San Diego Museum of Art in 2008). Yet, loaning their collection of one of modern India's greatest painters has run into insurmountable hurdles.

"After I made the pitch to Armstrong, the Guggenheim decided to host a show of Gaitonde. But on their requesting us to loan Gaitonde's work from our collection, they could not come back to us with a convincing recovery plan, considering the challenges the export and re-import of art pose," Savara explains. "Works have been damaged in the recent past after being held-up in the Indian customs."

Monetary compensation is a poor recompense for the range and complexity of the paintings and prints that the Savaras own. "We have works by Gaitonde from 1949 to the end of his career," says Savara, who bought his first work by the artist from Bowrings (art seller) in 2002. "Frankly, I cannot imagine letting these out of my sight. After all, these are treasures that I wake up to every morning."

The evolution of Gaitonde's aesthetics is not only baffling to follow but provides a striking contrast to the signature style with which he later became identified. In the 1950s, for instance, he was making prints and watercolour that are remarkably influenced by Paul Klee, while in the later years, the figurative approach dissolved in an explosion of colours. Compared to Souza or Husain, Gaitonde worked with a more muted palate, though the intensity of his work remained undiminished till the end of his career.

One particularly haunting abstract work at the Savara residence knocks the wind out of the viewer's sails. An expanse of grey with black strokes is suddenly punctuated by a daub of white paint—the sheer audacity of the gesture, its immense suggestive potential, leaves the viewer weak-kneed.

But, as matters stand, the world will be deprived of such shining examples of Gaitonde's art. The Guggenheim brings together only 45 of his works, with neither the expanse nor the quality that one senses from the Savara collection. "From the 1950s, Gaitonde started using a roller to paint. That makes it virtually impossible to restore his paintings, should they be damaged, regardless of what those in the business may claim," Savara says.

"My response to the hushed criticism being expressed in the world of Indian art on various aspects of the Guggenheim exhibition is that the shortcomings, if any, are understandable in the light of the fact that this exhibition perhaps represents the aspirations of over 1.2 billion Indians," he continues, "the entire project should be seen, to borrow the words of another Armstrong, as 'one small step for man, but one giant leap for modern Indian art!'"

Write to lounge@livemint.com

---

tonde (this still has not happened for Souza), even in 2014. The curator, Sandhini Poddar, hits bullseye when she says "the market has been supportive of his work, (but) there was no scholarship to substantiate the interest. No one had seriously researched his work or his position."

The problem of inadequate or non-existent scholarship goes beyond Gaitonde and Souza, directly to the intellectual underpinnings of the study of art, and art history in India.

Ever since 1947, a misguided ideological bent to studying and writing about art has warped these disciplines to their foundations. The most egregious propagandizing is on behalf of the "Bengal Renaissance" in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which has been unconscionably installed in concrete as "Indian modernism". This ignores all available evidence from early modern encounters in Travancore, French India, and Baroda. But the most glaring omission produced Gaitonde, and Souza and a long stream of other exemplars. This is the erstwhile Estado da India in Goa, and its extended cultural footprint in Bombay.

Indian scholars hate to acknowledge Goa was the first, and among the most impactful crucibles of East-West confluence (today called globalization) in history. Sixteenth-century Goa featured the richest metropolis in the world, larger than contemporary Paris and London combined. Technology, ideas and food from across the Americas, Africa, Asia and Europe flooded into the subcontinent. The first Gutenberg type printing press in Asia, the first medical college, Goa seethed with cultural exchange that comprehensively changed everything.

But the Portuguese soon lost the ability to project power in Goa, and native elites rose to fill the vacuum. They seized European-style political ideas (like republicanism), scientific practice (modern medicine was spread across Asia by doctors from Goa) as well as cultural expression (*Os Brahmanes* by Francisco Luís Gomes was among the first Indian novels).

When Bombay developed into *urbs prima in Indis* in the 19th century, Goans took advantage. The first class at Grant Medical College had eight students: four were Goan, including Bhau Daji Lad. It was the same at Sir JJ School of Art, where the director boasted about adroit "Goanese" students, and A.X. Trindade was the first Indian to be appointed faculty.

Gaitonde and Souza sprang from this milieu. They both spent idyllic childhoods with relatives in the north Goa countryside, before moving to Mumbai where they met at the Sir JJ School of Art. The two Goans shared a lifelong disdain for both the colonial art they were taught, as well as the self-conscious Santiniketan artists who strove in the opposite direction.

Souza formed the Progressive Artists' Group in 1947, and chose and mentored its other members. This band of hungry-eyed college boys with the Goan duo at its core declared they would "paint with absolute freedom for content and technique", their eyes firmly fixed on a place in the world. It is immensely moving to note just how completely their ambitions have been realized in the 21st century.

*****

As evening approached, Souza found me staring transfixed at the Gaitonde painting in my hand. I recall his look of amusement, and his knowing chuckle "You know why you're staring at it? It is the Rosetta Stone of Goa!"

Souza told me that in 1958 Gaitonde found photographs of the earliest rock carvings in Goa's hinterland, and became excited by their possibilities for his art. This piece, *Monsoon*, marked a decisive step into abstraction. He called Souza to tell him he had heard his voice in his head when it was completed. So he kept it in his studio until they met in 1960, when he signed it over to his compatriot.

While Souza told the story, I devoured *Monsoon* with my eyes. The artist reached for a pen, and inscribed his friend's gift to me: "No one has looked twice at it for almost 50 years except you, hopeless Goenkar!"

Write to lounge@livemint.com