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SMART ART



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Away from the homeland

How must life have been like for Indian artists who chose to live and work abroad at a time when distance was a formidable hurdle? At a time when Indian art did not have an identifiable voice, it is tempting to imagine they must have occupied the fringes of the art circuit as exotic aliens. Figurative Indian art with its references to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* would have found no resonance. Without an available NRI market at the time, any likely buyers would necessarily have had to be locals and expats for whom the nationality of the artist did not matter much, if at all.

How did they manage this? By changing from a figurative genre to another where absolute distortion was key to their practice. Many of these artists preferred to express themselves as abstractionists. This elimination of cultural reference gave them a chance of being able to express themselves. The prime instance among these is of S H Raza who made his home in France for six decades. An impressionistic landscape painter, he turned to abstraction following Mark Rothko's diktat of a gestural style, before switching to geometric abstraction coincidentally at a time when





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interest in Indian modern art began to grow.

Raza might be among the country's better known artists, but a number of others who lived abroad have similar stories to share. Among these is Ambadas, one of India's finest abstractionists who chose to give up India for Norway. At first sight, there is little that is 'Indian' about his abstract paintings, till one sees a seething mass of brushstrokes and a warm palette at odds with the cold weather and sterile atmosphere of his chosen habitat. In an interview a few years back, Ambadas confessed to missing the country of his birth, its sounds and smells — and food. Sohan Qadri took up residence in Copenhagen, a cultural *cul-de-sac* for an artist from the sub-continent, where he was a yoga teacher, and an artist whose brilliantly coloured works were evocative of his homeland. V Viswanadhan, in Paris, arrived at a abstract formulae before Raza did, and in London, S K Bakre found buyers for his works among the local population.

Not everyone worked in the abstract genre, some artists managing the figurative in a manner that had appeal among local collectors. This included F N Souza in London and New York, but his work was hardly considered Indian by his critics. Like him, Avinash Chandra in London became a master of distortion and was better known among collectors there than in his home country. Sakti Burman's magic realism may have been fuelled by the *jatras* of Bengal but consisted of European figures and Western mythology before a strong collecting base among Indians helped him include more Indian figures in his group of subjects. For a brief while, M F Husain flirted close to settling down in Prague, the result of a love affair with a Czechoslovakian woman. Had he chosen to make his home in Europe, India would certainly have lost a figurative artist whose matrix has included the entire universe of past and contemporary India.

Interestingly, works by these artists are now regular at auctions across Europe, placed there by inheritors who have been bequeathed these but are oblivious of their value. While sales of Indian art at Christie's and Sotheby's regularly make news, the real treasures are the auctions in nameless boroughs and at small towns where they are available for a pittance of their real worth. Great news for collectors; less so for artists.

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These views are personal and do not reflect those of the organisation with which he is associated