

Culture

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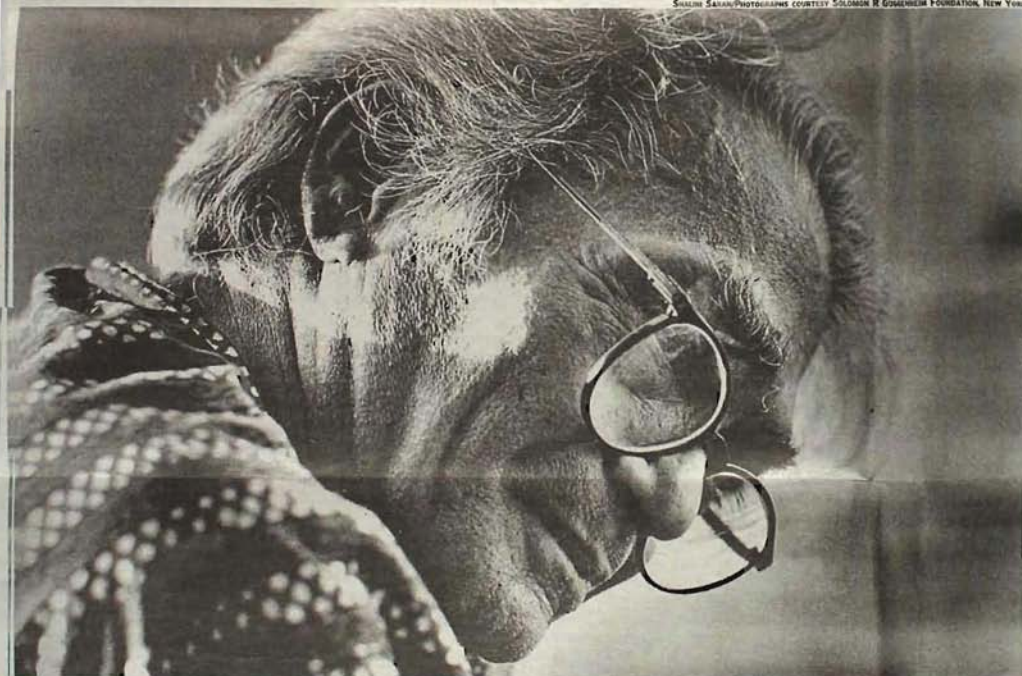
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Points of view: Works on display at the Guggenheim retrospective—(from extreme left) Untitled, ink on paper, 1987; Untitled, oil on canvas, 1963; Painting No.1, oil on canvas, 1962; and (below) V.S. Gaitonde.

IN FOCUS

The Gaitonde narrative

SOLIM SARAN/PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY SOLOMON R GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION, NEW YORK



Among Moderns, he is mythologized yet under-studied. Guggenheim offers a glimpse of his legacy through a retrospective

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In December, at Christie's first auction held in India, when a mustard-hued, resplendent work of oil on canvas by Vasudeo Santu Gaitonde fetched ₹20.5 crore — an unparalleled auction price for an Indian artist — he made headlines. Before that, scholarship on and interest in Gaitonde's art and life were limited. Around the

same time, New York's Solomon R Guggenheim Museum announced its retrospective of the artist.

Organized by Sandhini Poddar and Amara Antilla, adjunct curator and curatorial assistant, respectively, at the museum, the exhibition opens on 24 October with 45 works, including 30 works on canvas and 15 on paper—not a comprehensive show by any standard. Some of the works are not in the finest of conditions. But this is the

repair his works.

He is under-recognized and under studied, but mythologized in his country of birth. He is one of the most successful Indian Modernists at international auctions. His art defies categorization and can't be understood merely as abstract or figurative art. In the most beautiful canvases, his lines, swathes, colours intermingle to produce a deep, quiet and intoxicating expression of the self.

Poddar says the lack of bibliography was a challenge. She met various private collectors and visited public collections. "It was an opportunity to publish something substantial on him and bring a body of work together. We had to measure every painting ourselves, ensure the titles were correct. We found that the few books written on him are erroneous. So it was a mammoth undertaking, building a narrative from scratch."

The show covers two periods of his life, the 1960s and 1980s, and it has works from Museum of Modern Art (Moma), New York, the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation, the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, the Devi Art Foundation and the Glenberrra Museum in Japan, besides works from private collectors.

After Poddar pitched the show to the curatorial team in New York, it took nearly two years before the show was decided. "We are committed to him as an unknown, someone who was such an important figure in his local art history but had not been valorized or studied and engaged on a global basis. Most big museums and art institutions in the West are now trying to achieve an in-depth understand-

ing of certain artist protagonists from the non-Western world—taking up this revisionist history, of trying to fulfill gaps that have occurred in the canonization of art history," Poddar says.

Meanwhile, his reclusive partner Mamta Saran, with whom Gaitonde spent the last few years of his life in Delhi, is working on a book on the artist, and Mumbai-based Bodhana, a publisher of books on Indian art, is bringing out another book to be authored by Meera Menezes and edited by Jerry Pinto.

"Writing this book has been akin to piecing a giant jigsaw puzzle. At times I felt like a detective, ferreting out details and investigating leads. At others like an archaeologist, poring over shards and trying to make sense of them. Gaitonde's reclusive nature engendered several myths about him and the few known vignettes of his life have been blown up to create an often misleading impression of who he really was," says Menezes who first interviewed the artist in 1997. "Much is said about his reclusive and taciturn nature but he could also be gregarious with an impish sense of humour. He could be frugal but he also had an appreciation of the finer things in life. He loved classical music and was an epicure. He was also deeply spiritual."

The Guggenheim show is a glimpse of the master—a repressed narrative finally finds utterance. Gaitonde's legacy needs much more nurturing in the country of his birth.

V.S. Gaitonde: *Painting As Process, Painting As Life*, from 24 October-11 February at Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, New York. For details, visit www.guggenheim.org