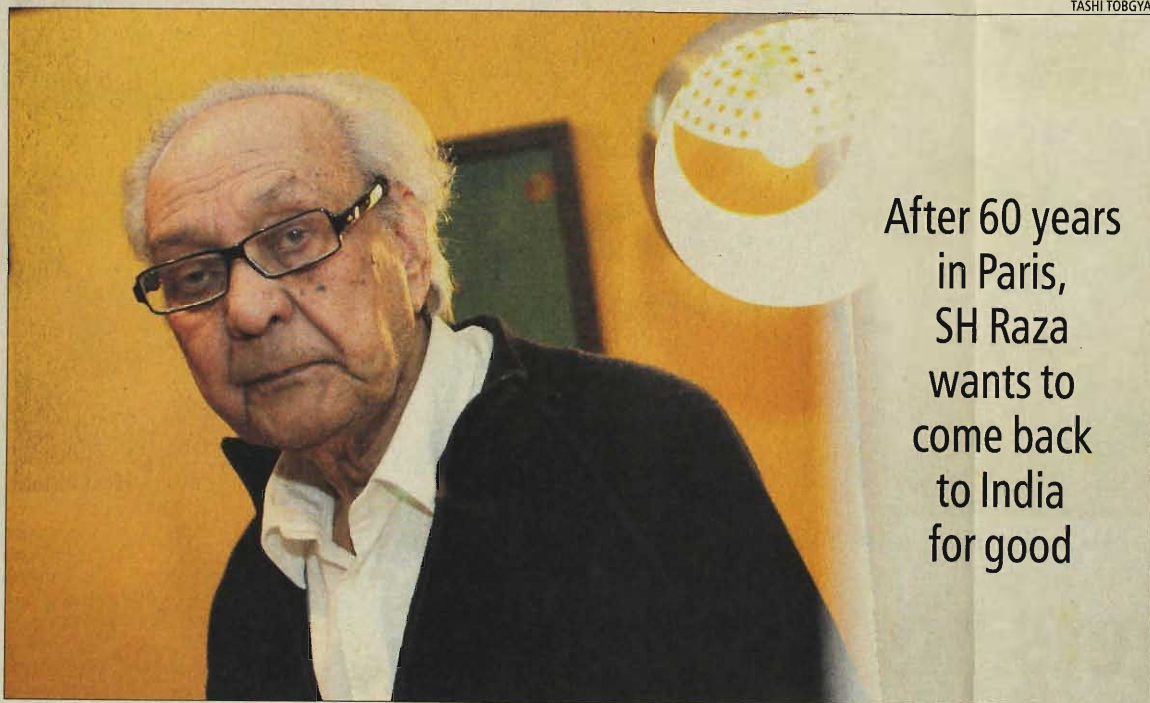


# 'I want to spend the rest of my life in Delhi'

TASHI TOBGYAL



After 60 years  
in Paris,  
SH Raza  
wants to  
come back  
to India  
for good

*At 88, the urge to paint still takes artist SH Raza to his studio every day. A forthcoming exhibition at the Vadehra Art Gallery brings together his recent works and old canvases. As he prepares for the solo, the Paris-based artist speaks to Vandana Kalra about his art and his plans to shift base to Delhi next year.*

**Congratulations, you turned 88 this week.**

Thank you. We had a small celebration. It feels nice when people turn up to wish, but what I really enjoyed was the chance to see some of my

old works that were exhibited at the do. It makes me feel that all that I have done has not been in vain. I have done some good work and people in India appreciate it. France has been my home for several years, but I would move back to India hopefully by next year. I will stay in Delhi. I want to spend the rest of my life here.

**You shifted to France in 1950, when you went to study at Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts. Did you intend to settle there on your very first trip?**

France did a lot of good for my art but it was my marriage to Janine that made me stay in France. She was an only daughter and her mother wanted her to be nearby.

**You continued to visit India each year. How important was the annual visit?**

It was very important. I have a deep relationship with the country. Even now India is an integral part of my work. For the show at Vadehra I have given two new canvases. One is a bindu, the other is based on the Nagas. I'm also painting another

work inspired by Rajasthan. I am constantly reading about India, Indian philosophy and ideology. Now, I'm reading the Bhagavad Gita.

**I believe your schoolteacher at Jharia in Madhya Pradesh introduced you to bindu. You were seven then. He drew it on the board and asked you to concentrate on it. What prompted you to paint it? It did not appear on your paintings till the 1970s.**

I would divide my art into three distinct periods. There was the initial phase when I was still learning the

nuances of line and colour. The second phase began in the 1950s when I moved to France. That is when I did a lot of landscapes, but I found something missing in my art. That is when I went into isolation and started looking at Indian iconography in the 1970s. I travelled a lot across India, including the Ajanta caves and Banaras.

**You were one of the founder members of the Progressive Artists Group that was established in 1947. Do you remember the discussions you had as part of the group?**

The group encouraged each member to find their own way, work in their style. We used to discuss almost everything, from art to our personal concerns. FN Souza talked a lot, I spoke little, VS Gaitonde hardly spoke. We used to purchase each other's work, even gift it. After I moved to Paris, I lost touch with the activities of the group.

**Last year, the Indian art market too was affected by the global economic slowdown. Do such ups and downs concern you as an artist?**

It is cyclic. There are low phases, but Indian art is doing well now. It is up to the artists to continue to do their work.

**What drives you to paint?**

It is the desire to continue. I can't spend long hours in the studio, but I am there two-three hours every day. I even carry my paints while travelling.

*The exhibition is on from March 3 to 24 at Vadehra Art Gallery, Defence Colony. Contact: 2615368*



# it's friday!



Roshini Vadehra of the Vadehra Art Gallery with one of the Raza paintings from her collection. The gallery is hosting a solo show by the artist.

by Archana

## IT'S THE RAZA SEASON AGAIN

As the city gets ready for a show by S.H. Raza, collectors talk about their prized canvases by the Paris-based Indian master

IT'S YET another Parisian spring for the city's cultural calendar. Syed Haider Raza, 88, one of the most celebrated modern Indian painters who made Paris his home more than 50 years ago, is on his annual visit to the country of his birth and the coincidence of his birthday falling around this time — February 22 — gives the city's art frats multiple reasons to fete his famous signature in every conceivable way. However, what makes his present India tour different from the other annual ones is that the Vadehra Art Gallery is hosting a three-week long solo show of Raza's canvases from March 3. The show becomes special because out of about a dozen canvases on display, three will be absolutely new, which Raza has executed in the few months that he has been in India.

There is not much that remains to be known about Raza — the modern Indian master whose art along with those by the likes of M.F. Husain, and the late Tyeb Mehta and F.N. Souza, has spearheaded the flowering of truly modern Indian art, the fruits of which the fraternity began tasting in a big way in the past decade. Born in the Babaria village in Madhya Pradesh in 1922, Raza has gone places — he studied art at the Nagpur School of Art before moving to study the same at the prestigious Sir J.J. School of Arts, Mumbai, and thence at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts in Paris in 1950, which had also trained the other famous painter, Amrita Sher-Gil. Raza's trust with France was meant to last him forever as he has been liv-

ing in Paris ever since he first went there as a student. Now, using the term "prized possession" for his canvases is an euphemism, especially since he is one of the only two masters of modern Indian art whose canvases have sold for whopping Rs 10 crore plus; the other is the late F.N. Souza. Even in a market still recovering from the impact of recession, his canvases continue to get top billing — several leagues ahead of many others with only Husain, Souza or Subodh Gupta for company (See the box below).

So, with Raza in the art air, we decided to speak to some of the important collectors of Raza's art in the city about their association with the master and their favourite canvases painted by him that they would never part with.

One of the most genial collectors in the category is Kuldeep Kumar Gupta, who is unlike many other high-profile businessmen-collectors who don't want to come out in the open about their treasure

chest of art, fearing IT raids. In fact, those who were invited to Raza's birthday bash on Monday got the opportunity to see Gupta's collection of S.H. Raza paintings on display in all their glory, something that the collector says he will never sell.

"I got my first Raza canvas in 1968," says this connoisseur who has since collected almost a dozen canvases by the veteran master. "It's his philosophy that has affected me the most, and he transports it so beautifully on to the canvases. I'm so much in awe of this man that I've even conducted a business board meeting of my company in Nice, to introduce my team to him," shares Gupta.

It, indeed, is the philosophy of Raza's works, especially of the now well-known Bindu, that arrests any connoisseur of art. It goes without saying that Raza's style has evolved tremendously since he began painting as a professional — he started with expressionist land-

scapes which evolved into geometrical representation of the landscapes. From about 1970s, he started concentrating on purely geometrical forms which began symbolising the deeper tenets of Indian schools of philosophy. It was during this evolution that the Bindu was born — a dot in the centre of the canvas which fans out to represent the cycle of creation. Raza is known to have said that he owes the origin of the Bindu to his elementary school teacher who used to draw a dot on the blackboard to make the distracted child Raza focus and develop concentration.

It is his Bindu canvases that attract Roshini Vadehra the most. Vadehra, who is hosting the upcoming show of Raza's art, says, "Raza Sahab's works from 1970s onwards are the transient period when the Bindu series of works started emerging from his earlier style — art my favourites. As a gallery, we have a special relationship with all modernists and we have old vintage works of Raza Sahab too, in our gallery's collection."

For most of these collectors, it's difficult to part with their Raza canvases, as Sumati Anand of Art Alive Gallery shares. Anand has done a big body of work on Raza's art in the past few years, through her collector's item book — *A Life In Art: Raza* (2006) and by publishing the English translation of the

famous French book on Raza's philosophy of Mandalas by the French author Olivier Guerin-Thomas, last year. Says Anand, "I first saw this flaming orange canvas of Raza Sahab at his studio when I had gone visiting him in France with Ashok Vajpeyi, who was writing our book *A Life In Art: Raza*. I had liked it so much that I told him I wanted it. He suggested that he would give me a canvas bigger than this one but I insisted on getting this one only." Anand says that as a gallerist, it's difficult for her to draw a line between the canvases that she can keep for herself and those that she should sell.

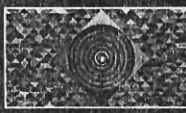
"I've tried to keep a couple of major works; also because Raza Sahab drops hints for some of those, saying 'to ko na becho to achha hoga' (it would be good if you don't sell these)," she shares. What touches her most about the modern master is the way he "looks at your face when you are looking at his canvas."

Ashish Anand of Delhi Art Gallery, who is in the process of putting together one of the most ambitious exhibitions ever on the erstwhile Progressive Artists Group — formed in 1947 by six artists including Raza — recalls his first Raza purchase. "It was his paper works which I bought in 1999 by I.A. Gade. When Raza left for Paris in 1950, he left all his art work with Gade and that is what I bought. I had a show of these paper works but since then, I have

### WHEN RAZA CROSSED THE Rs 10-CRORE BARRIER

When Raza's 1973 oil on canvas *La Torro (red)* sold for \$1.273.250 (approximately Rs 10.88 crore) at Christie's Post War and Contemporary Art Evening Sale in July 2008, he became only the second Indian artist to cross that figure; the first one was F.N. Souza. The art market was booming then.

However, even in a recovering market like the present times, a Raza canvas gets top billing. His 2006 acrylic on canvas *Prakriti Purush* (right) is one of the top-



priced canvases at the forthcoming Spring Auction 2010 by Saffronart. It's expected to fetch anything between Rs 81 lakh and Rs 99 lakh.

JYOTI KAPOOR



## Where you'll see more from Raza

Delhi Art Gallery's Ashish Anand (seen here with Raza on the master's 88th birthday on February 22) will host one of the most ambitious shows ever of the body of work of the defunct Progressive Artists Group (PAG) founded in 1947 by F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza, M.F. Husain, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee and S.K. Bakre. Anand will relaunch his gallery's space at Hauz Khas Village with this show. The PAG had hoped to encourage *avant garde* Indian art in line with international trends, an exercise that has borne fruit worth crores in the past decade.

K. ASIF



Sunaina Anand of Art Alive gallery with her favourite Raza canvas, titled *Pancha Tatva* (2006). It caught the collector's attention when she was visiting Raza in Paris for her book on the artist

bought others too. My most recent buy is a rare art work by Raza, a terracotta vase on which he has painted. It dates to 1990s and I'm looking forward to having it in my gallery," says Anand.

In the Raza season of the city's art circuit, there are many more nuggets on the great artist whose process of painting is universally accepted to be a rainy experience. And none even reflect on the

year scandal when he was invited to inaugurate an exhibition of his own fake canvases.

As Manish and Kamana Pushkale, the Delhi-based painter couple from Bhopal with whom Raza has been staying during this India trip, say, "He has painted three canvases while he has been with us and watching him paint is an experience that cannot be described. It's absolutely spiritual."

Raza epitomises art as it should be and the fact that he continues to paint even when pushing 90 is an experience to be shared by all those waiting in the wings to earn their artistic spurs in the world market.

— S.H. Raza's show will be on at the Vadehra Art Gallery and Book Store, D-40, Defence Colony, from March 1 to 25, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. archana.khare@maileday.in



## स्कूल की सजा से प्रेरित है रजा की 'बिंदु' कला

नई दिल्ली। सोमवार को 88 वर्ष के हुए प्रख्यात कलाकार सैयद हैदर रजा कहते हैं कि उन्हें पेरिस में 60 वर्ष बिताकर अपने घर लौटना अच्छा लग रहा है। उन्होंने बताया कि उनके ज्यादातर रचनात्मक कार्य का केंद्र रहने वाला 'बिंदु' उन्हें बचपन में स्कूल के दिनों में मध्य प्रदेश के एक स्कूल में मिली एक सजा से संबंधित है। रजा की 'बिंदु' कला अक्सर उनके फैनवास के केंद्र में एक रंगीन बिंदु से शुरू होती है और इस बिंदु से ही चौकोर या गोलाकार आकृतियाँ निकलती हैं। रजा के जीवन में बिंदु के जन्म की एक रोचक कहानी है। अपने बचपन को याद करते हुए रजा कहते हैं कि बचपन में मैं एक प्रतिभाशाली छात्र नहीं था। मध्य प्रदेश के एक स्कूल में मेरे शिक्षक नंदलाल झारसा ने दीवार पर एक काला बिंदु बना दिया था और मुझे जमीन पर बैठकर उस बिंदु को देखने के लिए कहा था। मैं डर गया था। यह स्कूल समाप्त होने के बाद की घटना है।

LA

**know?** The idea of India International Centre germinated during a conversation philanthropist John D. Rockefeller III and Indian Vice-President Dr S Radhakrishnan in 1958

**htcity**

# 'AN ARTIST NEVER STOPS'

Before cutting his 88th birthday cake, painter SH Raza talks about life of an artist as an old man



Artist SH Raza during his birthday celebration (seen in left corner of the picture); at work in a basement room in Hauz Khas Enclave

PHOTOS: MAYANK AUSTEN SOOFI

## Mayank Austen Soofi

On February 22, a few hours before his 88th birthday celebration at The Lalit hotel, Syed Haider Raza is struggling alone in a basement in Hauz Khas Enclave. Despite painting for 60 years, he is unsure of how his new creation will appear on completion. Staring at the mostly blank canvas, he says, "I'm trying to give a feel of Rajasthan."

Born in Babariya, Madhya Pradesh, and living in France since 1950, Raza is visiting Delhi to attend a special show in which private collectors will mark his birth anniversary by exhibiting his paintings, that are much sought after internationally. Last year, for example, fetched \$3 million at a Christie's London auction in 2008.

But fame and fortune aren't

helping. "My sight has grown weaker; so has my memory," says Raza. "Standing up is difficult. I'm afraid I'll fall down." Picking the red colour from his palette, he says, "Once I start walking, I gain confidence. It's the first step that's difficult."

## 'Fake' memories

Raza last came to Delhi in January, 2009 to inaugurate an exhibition of his works at the Dhoomimal Gallery in Connaught Place. He walked from one painting to the next, before informing the organisers that most were fakes. "I was sorry, hurt and angry," he says. "It's like stealing somebody's cheque-book and signing it off." The organisers immediately cancelled the show.

## Early life

Raza had his first solo show in

My sight has grown weak; so has my memory. I'm afraid I'll fall down. Once I start walking, I gain confidence.

- SH Raza, artist

1946 in Mumbai (then Bombay). He later moved to France. "That country has a wonderful climate for a young artist to work and evolve. In the India of 40s, artists like me were hobbling in the dark."

Those were the decades when contemporary Indian art was guided by English sensibilities, which emphasised a world as seen through the eyes. "But the retina-view was never the Indian way. We see through the third eye,"

says the artist. Pointing to his canvas, he says, "I want to paint a Rajasthan, the essence of which is seen as much by the eyes as it is by the mind and heart."

For 20 years, Raza has been making annual trips to India. Noting the necessity of studying the works of artists such as Amrita Shergil, MF Husain and Tyeb Mehta, he says, "People shouldn't be taken in by prices." But he adds that he doesn't underestimate the "economics" of art. "The prices that my paintings command help me in having a decent living," he says.

## The show must go on

In Paris, Raza lives in an old convent that was home to nuns in the 17th century. It has 30 apartments and he owns two. He gifted one to his artist wife, Janine Mongillot. She was the

reason why he stayed back in France.

"Being the only daughter, Janine's mother didn't want her to move to India." The wife painted in her studio, Raza in his. They would meet for lunch. "Once the day ended, she would return to my apartment."

In 2002, Janine died of breast cancer. "It has been a sad life since." The couple have no children. "I told myself that the Lord called her and has let me live. And as long as I live, I must be happy. So I started taking care of my health and kept working regularly."

In his apartment, Raza has a maid for housework and an assistant helps him with medical appointments. But no one touches his canvas. "My health is not good," he says. "But an artist never stops."