



Andrita Ray's Durga puja in Kolkata plans dashed as she has to shoot for a Kannada film in Rajasthan

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A SILENT PORTRAIT

As New York's Guggenheim Museum preps for a VS Gaitonde retrospective, the curator-collector community – and his buddies – chew over what makes him the poster boy of modern Indian art

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In 1998, Sandhini Poddar, a Masters student at the Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute in Mumbai, visited the National Gallery of Modern Art to view an exhibition of celebrated collector, Jehangir Nicholson. The show included nine paintings by abstract painter Vasudeo S Gaitonde.

She remembers it as a deeply moving experience. "What I walked away with that evening," says Poddar, "was an incredible sense of silence, and a thought – if I ever became a museum curator, I'd like to exhibit a full retrospective of Gaitonde's work." A decade later in 2011, when as associate curator, Asian Art, at New York's Solomon R Guggenheim, she suggested the idea to the museum – two years before Gaitonde became the artist to acquire after a 1971 oil-on-canvas by him fetched Rs 23.7 cr at Christie's – the proposal took a while to clear. "Gaitonde", she says, "wasn't a recognisable name."

Much of the convincing unfolded here in India in March, when the museum's director, Richard Armstrong, came on a visit. The two hopped between the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art and other public spaces that host Gaitonde's work. Armstrong, she says, realised, here was a great artist who required a world art platform, and was happy to offer Guggenheim.

V. S. Gaitonde: *Painting as Process*, *Painting as Life* opens at the Guggenheim on October 24 for three-and-a-half-months. It will display 45 of his pieces, placing one of India's greatest modernists in a global art context, whilst looking at European traditions of modernity, Post War abstraction in America, and Indian modernism in the 40s and the decades after Independence.

Those who knew him say, a retrospective at Guggenheim wouldn't have surprised him.

"Gaitonde was supremely confident," says Mumbai gallerist and auctioneer Dadiba Pundole. "To him, what mattered was the last completed work and the one he was about to paint. After a painting left his door, he didn't think about it. You could burn it for all he cared."

Old friend and colleague, New Delhi-based artist, Krishen Khanna agrees with Pundole. Gaitonde was certainly not one to cater to the

market or pander to somebody's taste. "He lived the life of a painter," Khanna says.

Born in 1924 in Nagpur to Goan parents, Gaitonde was an infant when his father, who worked in a printing press, moved to their ancestral village. It's here in Goa that he spent the first five years before they moved to Mumbai. Art, somewhere, made an early presence. In Narendra Dangle's 1998 article, republished in Bodhana's *An Unstretched Canvas*, the writer quotes Gaitonde, where he speaks about a childhood surrounded by paddy fields: "I clearly remember one of my family members who used to paint on temple walls. Perhaps that was what first attracted me to painting. It was around the same time that I began to paint and realised that I also could draw! I came to Bombay while I was still a student and enrolled into a municipal school and before I knew I was visiting art galleries, looking at exhibitions."

His father, however, had little regard for his passion. He hoped the only son among four daughters would become a doctor. So, when Gaitonde joined Sir JJ School of Art, he had to live under the staircase of their building in Girgaum, where his mother sent him meals, shares Pundole. "He never spoke about family."

In fact, in an interview with a national daily published early this year, Gaitonde's younger sister, Kishori Das said he had broken ties with them soon after he moved to Delhi in the 1960s, and never left an address behind. They only learnt of his death in 2001, days after he passed away.

There's a tale of a love he lost, but Khanna says, "Gai moved to Delhi because Bombay became too expensive for him. Tyeb (Mehta) and he would share a cup of tea at the Bhulabhai Desai Institute because they couldn't afford to buy one for themselves."

In his youth, Pundole says, Gaitonde was flamboyant. Although conscious of his short height, he enjoyed ballroom dancing, watched cricket, and as opposed to popular perception about frugality, "he was extremely fond of good clothes, colour and paint," Khanna adds.

In a forthcoming book on the artist, researched and authored by Delhi-based writer and curator, Meera Meneses, she mentions a 1964 incident involving Khanna and Gaitonde, when the two were in New York. "Khanna had promised Gaitonde that if he managed a sale, he would treat him to a shirt. As it transpired, Khanna did sell a painting, and he went to a store with Gaitonde to honour his promise. "I saw a five-dollar shirt and said, 'That is a nice shirt,'" recalled Khanna, but Gai retort-

ed, 'No, no, I want a \$20 shirt!' Quite clearly, he was not going to be fobbed off with just any ordinary garment!"

"He was known to be arrogant. In fact, he'd often say, in third person, 'when Gai shows, Bombay comes to see,'" smiles Pundole, while recalling an incident that sealed Gaitonde's relationship with his father and gallerist Kali Pundole. "It was during the emergency in 1974. He had a show at the Taj Art Gallery. Nobody showed up on the evening of the opening and he was livid." Bal Chhabda, the only visitor, made an SOS call to Kali, who ended up buying all the works.

Unlike many artists of his generation, Gaitonde wasn't trying to answer the larger questions of life through figurative works. According to Poddar, the 60s became the crux of his practice. "That's when he was developing and mastering a non-objective approach," she says. "Gaitonde became interested in Zen Buddhism and certain philosophers like J Krishnamurti and Nisargadatta Maharaj, who informed his life and practice."

To many, in the 60s and 70s, Gaitonde's monochromatic, dreamlike canvases resembled his American contemporary Mark Rothko. But he didn't appreciate the comparison. Chowdhury-Haberl remembers, "One evening, when looking at an art book with images of Rothko's, I told him, 'Gaitonde, your works remind me of Mark Rothko.' He wryly responded, 'Do you mean to say, that I am copying?'"

From the early 70s to the late 80s, the silhouetting and overlapping of forms became ever more evident in Gaitonde's paintings; as distinguished from his quiet, meditative works of the 60s. As a consequence of a serious accident in 1984, Gaitonde stuck briefly to making ink on paper drawings in the mid 80s.

A non-prolific career stretching over four decades was marked by periods of productivity with spells of comfortably doing nothing. "In late 90s, when I visited Gai at his studio in Delhi, I kept prodding him to paint. And he said he has limited energy.

Meera Meneses, who took this picture in Delhi in 1997 when she interviewed Gaitonde, says, "He definitely didn't look as severe as he did in his photographs. I found him charming, not the dour, stern man I'd expected to meet."



He made pictures in his head and didn't want to waste his energy putting them on canvas," says Pundole.

He needed time for his many passions. He was a voracious reader, a lover of cinema and western classical music. Armstrong, says Poddar, observed that there was a musicality to all his work, "not realising that Gaitonde had western classical music playing in his studio all the time."

Chowdhury-Haberl, who along with husband Bilwa Kanta, shared a close association with Gaitonde, remembers him as, "a very quiet, reticent person who rarely spoke about his work." "When I once asked him — I was a young, naive woman then — about the meaning of one of his abstract works, he said, 'I cannot talk about my work. I just paint.'"

Always curt with those who invaded his time, he even disciplined maverick MF Husain. Curator and consultant Jesal Thacker remembers artist Ram Kumar mentioning how Husain, who was never certain of his whereabouts, made sure he was on time when he had to meet Gaitonde.

Flattery never went down well with him, and money wasn't a concern. Paris-based filmmaker Sunil Kaldade, who released a film on the artist back in the 90s, narrated an incident to Meneses, which she has included in her book published by Bodhana: "... Kaldade remembers that on one of his visits he spied a plastic bag lying around the studio in which there was a packet wrapped in paper. Assuming that there might be some chocolates inside, he opened the packet only to discover, to his utter amazement, a wad of money. Apologising profusely to Gaitonde for the intrusion, the latter stunned him with his simple retort, 'think of it as a chocolate!'"

Whether it was his work or life, Gaitonde valued restraint. "In fact, when I asked Ram Kumar what a retrospective would mean to Gaitonde, he said, 'he'd be happy', and I thought that's quite restrained for a response, but then again, it reflects who he was," says Poddar.



Sandhini Poddar