

जेराम के कैनवस के रंगों ने संवारी सेवक की किस्म

उदारता

वरिष्ठ कलाकार ने पेश की मिसाल, उम्रभर की मेहनत की म्यूजियम के हवाले, सेवक को दिए 1 करोड़ रुपए

दीप्ती सावंत | वडोदरा

SR

दो दिन देर होती तो पानी में बह जाता पूरा काम



जेरामभाई पटेल



डाय़ा भाई



कूची केवल कैनवस पर ही रंग नहीं भरती, यह लोगों की जिंदगी भी रंगीन कर सकती है। कुछ ऐसा ही हुआ है डाय़ाभाई के साथ। वे गुजरात के नामी कलाकार जेरामभाई पटेल के सेवक हैं। उनके बैंक अकाउंट में जेरामभाई ने हाल ही में एक करोड़ रुपए जमा कराए हैं। यह उन्हें मिले दो करोड़ रुपयों में से हैं जो दिल्ली के किरण नादर म्यूजियम ऑफ आर्ट ने उनकी ढाई सौ पेंटिंग के बदले दिए हैं। यह जेरामभाई की ताउम्र की मेहनत के बदले मिलने वाली कीमत की पहली किश्त थी। म्यूजियम ने उन्हें कुल छह करोड़ रुपए देने का समझौता किया

है। आज तक एक भी पेंटिंग न बेचने वाले शर्त पर म्यूजियम को सौंपी हैं कि वह इन्हें जेरामभाई ने अपनी तमाम कलाकृतियां इस केवल प्रदर्शनी में ही इस्तेमाल करेगा। पहली

बीते पांच वर्षों से जेरामभाई का पूरा आर्टवर्क वडसर स्थित जीआईडीसी में एक दोस्त की फैक्ट्री में रखा था। विश्वामित्री नदी में आई बाढ़ में फैक्ट्री के अंदर पानी भी भर गया था। लेकिन आर्टवर्क सुरक्षित रहा क्योंकि महज दो दिन पहले म्यूजियम की टीम इसे दिल्ली ले गई थी।

प्रदर्शनी 2015 में प्रस्तावित है।

मॉडल से सेवक, अब बने व डाय़ाभाई जब पहली बार जेरामभाई की सेवक बन गए थे। उनकी उम्र महज 12 साल थी। के तौर पर एमएस यूनिवर्सिटी के फैकल्टी में जाया करते थे।

पेंटिंग में उन्हें बतौर डमी इस्तेमाल किया जाता था। इसी दौरान जेरामभाई का बड़ा और वह उनके परिवार का सबसे छोटा बच्चा बन गया। बीते 40 साल से वे जेरामभाई की सेवक कर रहे हैं। अब जेरामभाई चल-फिर सकेंगे। ऐसे में डाय़ाभाई ही उनका भरोसा हैं। उन्होंने कहा, मैं इन पैसों से अपना जीवन को पढ़ाऊंगा।

कैनवस के...

नुकसान-फायदे का गणित मैं नहीं जानता :जेरामभाई: जेरामभाई पटेल ने कहा, अब मेरी उम्र हो चुकी है। इकलौता बेटा अमेरिका में है। उसे आर्ट में कुछ पता नहीं चलता। मेरे बाद मेरा काम

कौन संभालता? अपने रहते इसे उचित हाथों में सौंपने की इच्छा थी। म्यूजियम में आकर दूसरे लोग भी इसे देख सकेंगे। खासकर नई पीढ़ी को इससे फायदा मिलेगा। मैंने तय किया था कि पेंटिंग बेचनी नहीं है। इसलिए अब मैं नुकसान-फायदे की गणित में नहीं पड़ रहा।

अमृता शेरगिल से मिली पेंटिंग्स भी सौंप दी: जेराम पटेल ने कई विख्यात कलाकारों से भेंट में मिली सात पेंटिंग्स भी म्यूजियम को दे दी हैं। इनमें हिम्मत शाह की पांच, भूपेन खखर की एक एवं अमृता शेरगिल की एक पेंटिंग शामिल हैं। पांच बार जीत चुके हैं ललितकला अकादमी

पुरस्कार: जेराम पटेल ने जेजे स्कूल ऑफ आर्ट में टाइपोग्राफी व सेंट्रल स्कूल ऑफ आर्ट एंड क्राफ्ट -लंदन में पब्लिसिटी डिजाइन की पढ़ाई की। वडोदरा स्थित एमएस यूनिवर्सिटी की फाइन आर्ट्स फैकल्टी में 1981 से 85 तक डीन रहे। 1957, 1963, 1973 एवं 1984 में ललितकला नई-दिल्ली का नेशनल अवॉर्ड मिला। 1997 में एआईएफएसीएस ने कलारत्न से सम्मानित किया।

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 on a recent Mumbai visit, "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 name recognisable to them at all."

"Although, in the last 13 years after his death in 2001, the market has been supportive of his work, there was no scholarship to substantiate the interest," says Poddar. "No one had seriously researched his work or his position within the history of abstraction in India."

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. "You don't sense a Gaitonde from an image; you only apprehend his work by standing in front of it."

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. He just was," 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 the one to cater to the market or pander to somebody's taste. "He lived the life of a painter," Khanna believes.

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.

Meera Menezes, 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."



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 Menezes, she mentions a 1964 incident involving Khanna and Gaitonde, when the two were in New York. "Commercially, Khanna and Gaitonde did fairly well in New York, and both artists shared a long-standing arrangement, in case either was lucky enough to sell a



Curator Sandhini Poddar says it was a while before the upcoming Guggenheim retrospective of Gaitonde was cleared because "no one has seriously researched his work or his position within the history of abstraction in India"

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I began in Gujarati theatre. It is my real domain. I am like the lion who's tasted blood and craves for it all over again

known for his comic timing in *3 Idiots*, returned to theatre after a decade with a quadruple role in *Raja Raja Ram Aur Main*, an adaptation of the Gujarati laugh riot *Ame Lai Gaya Tame Rahi Gaya*. It was Kedar Shinde, who wrote the original Marathi hit *Sahi Reh Sahi*. The play that opened in July explores an old man's relationship with a philandering wife, and the non-committal will after his death. "I was amused and amazed that even after a decade of theatre, I was scared to go back on stage," he smiles.

He returned, Joshi says, because "I thought it would be cool". He cuts the joke short, and in a moment of reflection speaks of how Bollywood producers would perceive the decision. "A certain section of the industry doesn't treat theatre with the love and respect it deserves," he says. "It is seen as a descent. 'Poor guy', they think."

Hindi cinema, he knows, feeds off perception. And he isn't complaining. After all, the theatre scene in India is hardly as vibrant as in the West.

Yet Joshi, who started his stage journey as a student at Vile Parle's N M College under the tutelage of late stalwart Mahendra Joshi, seems to love it. "I began in Gujarati theatre. It is my real domain. I am like the lion who's tasted blood and craves for it all over again," he laughs.

As a child, he'd accompany his father, stage veteran Arvind Joshi, to Tejpal and the Jai Hind College auditorium because the canteen sandwiches were delicious. "You can say, I grew up in the wings. I'd

help backstage, clear props and pack the cast's bags. I'd get Rs 100 at the end of each show. That was a treat," he recalls.

But after a decade of working in theatre full time, he grew weary. With a performance every night of the week (550 shows of *All The Best*, 365 of *Ame Lai Gaya Tame Rahi Gaya*), he was exhausted.

Meanwhile, "a different enriching experience called films", happened.

But cinema posed its own variety of challenges. When shooting for his first film, *Godmother*, in the late 90s, he was to perform the most crucial scene of the film in the first few days of the schedule. "Although I had to say two lines, I was very uncomfortable," he remembers. Colleagues Vinay Shukla and Shabana Azmi, who are familiar with the stage, allowed him to start four lines ahead before the camera rolled. "I needed the support of earlier lines. That was my theatre training speaking."

At the end of the day's shoot, Azmi explained to him that cinema is about delivering one-liners picked from anywhere in the script. "Theatre, on the other hand, is an actor's medium. You don't deliver your lines based on the convenience of others. You're acting in that moment," he says.

Joshi is looking forward to his next film, *Super Nani*, an October release that sees him play Rekha's grandson. "I try working in films that leave the audience with some sort of message. Having said that," he quickly adds, "I don't want to turn boring. Mindless films are just as exciting."

Laying claim to Kejriwal



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work. 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 retorted, 'No, no, I want a twenty-dollar 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. Eventually, Pundole became his sole representative for more than two decades. "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. Although he was briefly involved with the Progressive Art Group and the Bombay Group, and deeply inspired by Swiss-German painter Paul Klee, by the late 50s, he had veered away from figuration towards non-objective art. 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, practice and choices."

Vienna-based collector, Eleonore Chowdhury-Haberl, who between her three daughters and herself owns eleven works by Gaitonde dated 1954 to 1966, defines them as, "landscapes of the mind. Paintings that baffled and fascinated us and made us meditate over them."

To many, in the 60s and 70s, Gaitonde's monochromatic, dreamlike canvases began



V. S. GAITONDE, UNTITLED, 1955

(Chowdhury Family Collection, Vienna-Mumbai)

Vienna-based collector Eleonore Chowdhury-Haberl, along with husband Bilwa Kanta and nuclear scientist Dr Homi Bhabha was one of the few collectors of Gaitonde's work in the early 60s. "Each Sunday, we'd visit his studio — first at the Bulabhai Desai Institute on Warden Road, then Walkeshwar. Often, he'd come to our Marine Drive home where we'd regularly invite Bombay art lovers and connoisseurs to show them our latest acquisitions. Gaitonde was always there, and in fact, through our parties, he was able to make his work known to new buyers," she says.



After a painting left his door, he didn't think about it. You could burn it for all he cared — AUCTIONEER DADIBA PUNDOLÉ

to resemble 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 works, 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. It was only in 1989 that he returned to working on his larger oils-on-canvas, and the last works from 1997 and 1998 prominently include the circle and the line once again, "formative symbols from his appreciation of Zen," says Poddar.

Khanna puts it in perspective when he says, "there are a lot of correlations I see between how Gaitonde lived, how he worked and his art; which is as an interaction between that which is known and that which is not."

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. 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.

"One always needed an excuse to talk to Gaitonde," says Pundole. "Besides," says Khanna, "if the discussion on art was stupid, as it mostly is, he'd prefer to keep quiet."

Flattery never went down well with him, and money wasn't a concern. Paris-based filmmaker Sunil Kaldete, who released a film on the artist back in the 90s, narrated an incident to Menezes, which she has included in her book published by Bodhana: "... Kaldete 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.