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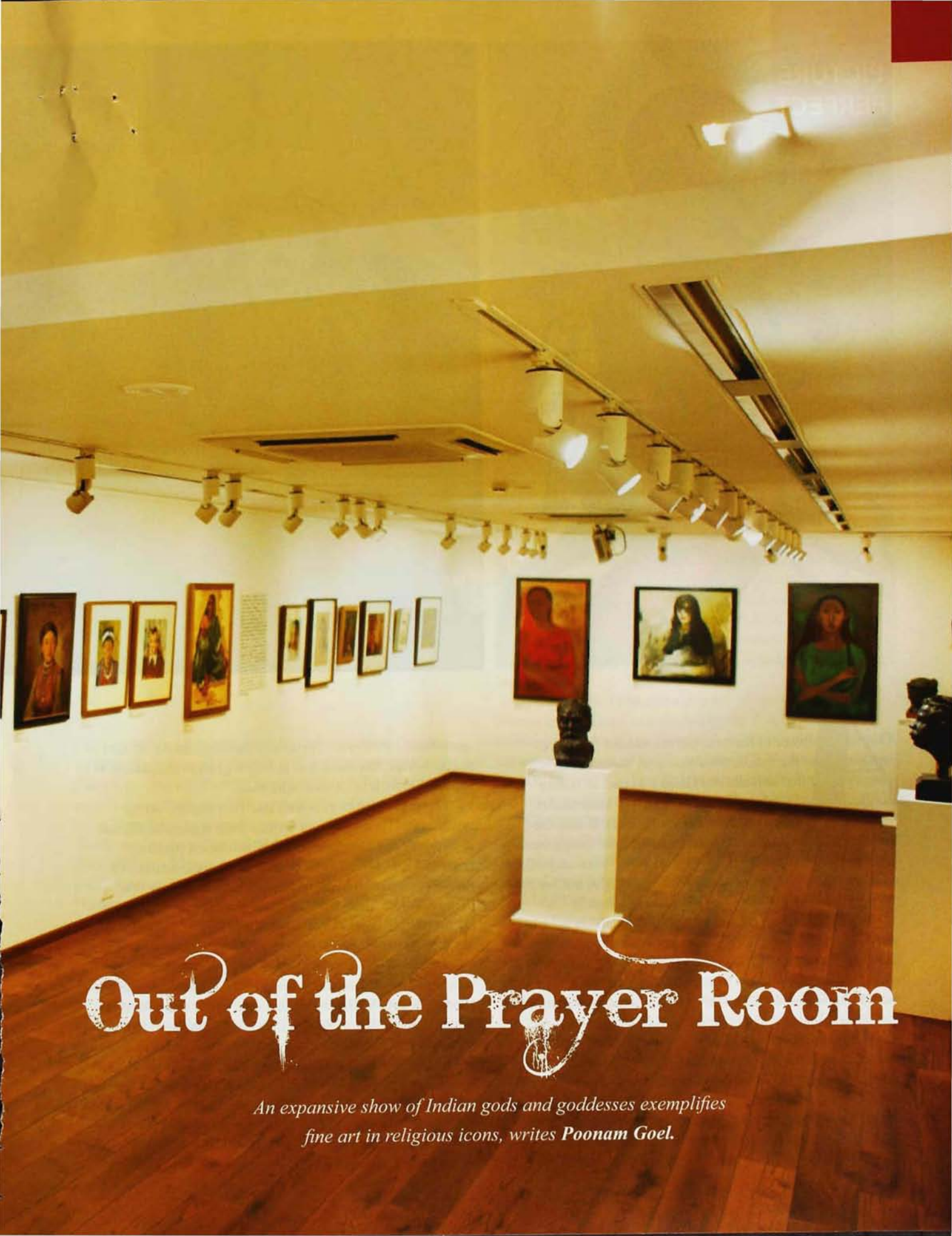
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Picture Courtesy: Delhi Art Gallery, New Delhi



Out of the Prayer Room

*An expansive show of Indian gods and goddesses exemplifies fine art in religious icons, writes **Poonam Goel**.*



A bronze sculpture of Ravana, the ten headed demon, is perhaps one of the smallest works out of those which were recently exhibited at Delhi Art Gallery as part of Indian Divine Gods & Goddesses in 20th Century Modern Art. Sculpted by Debabrata Chakraborty, the work is also the first that sold, a fact that still surprises Kishore Singh, head of exhibition and publication at the gallery. "It's a majestic work and the artist has got the posture just right, but we never thought that Ravana would be the one to go first."

Indeed, this is not the only work which depicts how varied and nuanced our appreciation of the divine is. The show explores the sheer enormity of the divine as a subject which has inspired artists from the earliest of times. And even though the earlier depiction of Gods and Goddesses has been mostly ritualistic, over time it has grown into an art form that is appreciated for art's sake. "We wanted to bring these images out of the prayer room into our living rooms," says Singh, "while at the same time showing how glorification of God is a primal urge around the world and the need to go back to the roots from where Indian art springs." It took Singh around six months to put together the show of nearly 200 artworks by 80 artists and a voluminous book by the



same name. With works priced in the range of Rs. 35,000 to Rs. 4 crore, the show's next stop will be at the gallery's Mumbai branch in October this year.

The exhibition begins with late 19th century art on mythological and religious themes from regions as diverse as Bombay and Bengal and these include oil paintings imbued with Western style deities by realistic artists like Raja Ravi Varma and M. V. Dhurandhar. In fact, in this section, Dhurandhar's works stand out the most. In one of his oil on canvas works of 1899, titled Lakshmi, Dhurandhar has draped the female deity in a white sari, as opposed to the traditional red. Priced at Rs. 8 lakh, the work is also a tribute to female sensuality. Next to the same work, there is another in which Lakshmi is depicted in her quintessential avatar – that of her at Vishnu's feet or Indira Devi, in which a real model has been used, a common way of painting female deities in early 20th century – to depict the same goddess. It is a clever way of displaying works because it forces one to also think of issues of female empowerment in contemporary times.

There is also a vast section of mythological and religious episodes and figures featured in the hybrid style, which is

a mix of Western realistic painting and traditional Indian art from Early Bengal, which is still popular amongst art collectors. One work worth mentioning is C W. Lawrie's oil on canvas from late 19th century, at a whopping Rs. 3.5 crore, depicting the eternal romance of Krishna-Radha. A whole wall of the gallery is dedicated to Kalighat paintings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries depicting gods and goddesses like Kali, Ganesha, Krishna, Durga, Rama, Hanuman in their folksy, dreamy renditions, as well as popular bazaar prints on these themes that flooded the markets with the advent of paper, lithography and mechanical printing. In the range of Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 3 lakh, these prints are as coveted as the canvases.

From here, the exhibition charts the sheer range and expanse of the religious and mythological theme in modern Indian art. The featured works range from the lyrical imagery of the Bengal School, as represented by the historical Siva Drinking World Poison by Nandalal Bose created in 1933, also one of the most expensive works in the show at Rs. 4 crore, to modern renditions of the devi and popular episodes from myth and epics, such as the Mahabharata, from all parts of the country and spanning a diverse range of styles over the

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eventful 20th century and early 21st century. These include images of the female goddess, the most popular of whom is Durga, as imagined and portrayed by such modernist masters as Bikash Bhattacharjee, Ganesh Pyne, K. K. Hebbar, as well as several renditions of popular male deities, such as Krishna and Ganesha, by artists such as Rabin Mondal and P. V. Janakiram.

The exhibition features a number of works on Christian themes and imagery as well, led by the first Indian artist to have explored the theme, Jamini Roy. He is followed by well-known artists such as Krishen Khanna, F. N. Souza, Madhvi Parekh, Kanwal Krishna, S. Dhanapal, and V. Nageshkar, as well as a great number of works on Buddhist themes. "I find that Christian imagery is far stronger than other religious icons," says Singh, "perhaps because we are more sensitive as a nation about Hindu iconography."

And then there are the Husains – an oil on canvas depicting Durga riding the tiger, another made as cover for Ramlila Committee Diary, Delhi in 1980 – which reiterate the master artist's adoration for Hindu gods. Asit Halder's watercolour wash on paper titled 'The Procession' depicting a Ramayana scene of Bharata anointing Rama's padukas (sandals) as king is the largest wash ever done in the country. Priced at Rs. 2 crore, the work takes one back to the ethereal dark-stained frescos of Ajanta and Ellora. While the figurative imagery is predominant in the show – the showstoppers most certainly being J. Sultan Ali's Nagapanchami, a Rs 2.5 crore work and Madhvi Parekh's Last Supper – there is also enough abstraction to drool upon. The tantra works by artists like G. R. Santosh, Sohan Qadri, P. T. Reddy and Sunil Das are the ones to put your money on.

PICTURE
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TOP 8 PICKS FROM DELHI ART GALLERY

Started in 1993, Delhi Art Gallery has built for itself a reputation as India's largest private repository of twentieth century modern Indian art. Its collection spans the spectrum of Indian modernism from its genesis to its most dynamic phase as well as high modernism and the works of modern masters whose careers have stretched to the 21st century. We handpicked for you six iconic works from the gallery collection and tell you why these would be any collector's delight.

UNTITLED, OIL AND GESSO ON WOOD BY M.F HUSAIN

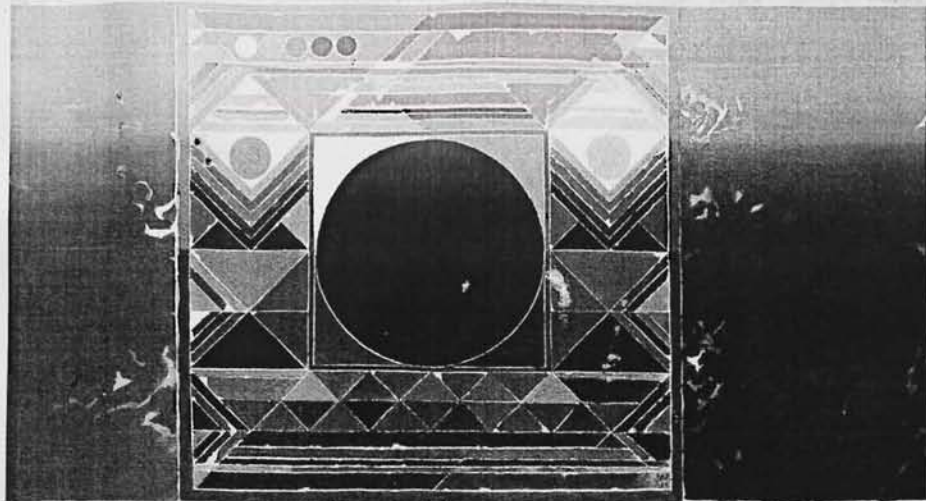
The face of Indian modern art, M. F. Husain was celebrated for his narrative studies of musicians and dancers, of horses, Mother Teresa, the British Raj, even film star Madhuri Dixit. Husain hardly ever painted landscapes though, which is what makes this particular painting important in his career.



A SOCIAL GATHERING, OIL ON CANVAS BY BIKASH BHATTACHARJEE

The realism of Kolkata artist Bikash Bhattacharjee created a world of unease and discomfort, his comment on the violent society that he experienced around him. As in this work where a group of women create an ominous environment, the central figure evokes authority in a manner that appears questionable.





RAJASTHAN-2004, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS BY S.H RAZA

Raza lived in Paris for six decades where he shifted from gestural abstraction to the more 'Indian' metaphor of the 'bindu' and the elements. This stunning work combines these together in a celebration of colours as only the master could paint them.



UNTITLED-1962, OIL ON CANVAS BY F.N SOUZA

This classic pose of a nude woman holding her breast is something all artists have attempted but without the felicity of F N Souza. The artist was wont to paint misogynistic portraits of women, making this work almost sublime in comparison.



UNTITLED - 1904, OIL ON CANVAS BY RAJA RAVI VARMA

This realistic portrait of Lord Amthill's son was painted in 2004 in Madras by arguably India's first modernist and a popular painter. While his mythological narratives are well known, commissioned portraits of Crown officials particularly, are rarely seen.

UNTITLED (KADAMBARI DEVI) - 1936, WATERCOLOUR, BRUSH & INK ON PAPER BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Tagore began to paint in his mid-60s, breaking the romantic convention of the Bengal School. His dark portraits attempt to get under the skin of the sitter - as in this portrait of his sister-in-law; Kadambari Devi, whom he was alleged to be in love with.

