

RENOUNED FOR HIS WORKS—NOTABLY, THE *FALLING FIGURE* AND *MAHISASURA* SERIES—PAINTER TYEB MEHTA APPEARED TO BE ON A CONSTANT QUEST TO EXPRESS HIS NOTION ABOUT EXISTENCE AND LIFE'S STRUGGLES

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ART TALK

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STROKES of COLOUR

Tyeb Mehta is a master of line and colour and it is this quality, which makes his work particularly interesting. While stylistically his works changed over the years, he would often revisit the same subjects, such as the *Falling Figure* and *Mahisasura*. Seeing this progression from the early days to his works until his death in 2009 is fascinating. I was fortunate

Santhals. *Celebration* focuses on the joyous aspects of the festival and life itself. This is a seminal work focussing on his iconic aesthetic of simultaneous perspectives combining frontal and profiled angles of vision, while juxtaposing linear and voluminous representation.

Mehta was born into a Shiite Muslim family that remained in India after the post-colonial

(1968) on a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship. He spent most of his career, however, living quietly in Mumbai. He also experimented with film, and his documentary *Koodal* (1970) won a Filmfare Critics Award.

Christie's first sale in Mumbai on December 19, 2013, offered a lovely work by him from the estate of Kekoo and Khorshed Gandhi. Gandhi was

iconic *Mahisasura* series, which he painted throughout the 1990s, and an early portrait from 1962. All works came from important collections and I feel Mehta is mainly acquired by serious collectors in India as well as overseas. The *Mahisasura* canvas was bought by an American private collector and the theme serves a symbolic significance.

Dramatic in its juxtaposition of opposites: good and evil, male and female, death and life, green and red, the work is charged with the visual and symbolic tension that is the hallmark of Mehta's work.

In our March Southeast Asian art sale in New York, Mehta was represented by *Untitled (Bull)*. Painted at the threshold of the new millennium in 2000, this monumental work is one of the largest paintings from the artist's oeuvre, the size of which underscores the significance of the bull in his artistic language. Partially anthropomorphised, this bull, ordinarily associated with immense masculinity and strength, is depicted by Mehta as victimised by circumstance, fate and damnation. This subject can be seen as a visual epitaph of the artist's quest to express strong ideas about existence and life's struggles.



→ TYEB MEHTA (1995), *CELEBRATION*



→ (1925-2009), *UNTITLED (FALLING FIGURE)*

enough to meet him a few times; today, I wish I'd been able to speak to him at length about his works and learn more about him and his paintings in his own words. My favourite work by him would have to be the triptych *Celebration* painted in 1995, which was sold by Christie's in 2002 at over USD 3,00,000.

Celebration is a tour de force triptych inspired by *Charak*, the spring festival of the

Partition. He had later claimed that the violence he observed during that period had a strong influence on his art. He worked with his family in the motion picture industry and studied at Sir J.J. School of Art in Mumbai (1947-52), where he was associated with the Progressive Artists' Group. After mounting his first solo exhibition (1959) at a local art gallery, Mehta lived in London (1959-65) and later in the US

one of his early patrons and the work in question, the *Falling Figure*, was hanging in the collector's house and bought directly from the artist's studio. The *Falling Figure*, a subject Mehta often revisited, was born out of a traumatic childhood memory when he witnessed the violent death of a man during the Partition riots of 1947.

In the same sale, we also had a painting from the artist's

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