

Modern Indian art breaks record at auction

MODERN Indian and Pakistani paintings set new world records at bonhams in London. A contemporary picture by the Indian artist, Syed Haider Raza titled 'Black Landscape' made a new world record for an Indian painting on paper at Bonhams in London on October 14 when it sold for £21,510. Estimated to make between £5,000 to £7,000 at an auction of Islamic and Indian Art, the painting tripled its forecast value, finally being knocked down to a New York gallery owner. The artist born in 1922 signed and dated the painting that is gouache, oil, pen and ink on paper. Claire Penhallurick, Head of Bonhams Islamic and Indian Art Department expressed her satisfaction at this record: "We knew it was a great work by Raza, however, we did not expect such interest for a small work on paper for the artist. We were pleasantly surprised that a number of collectors of Contemporary Indian art were so



enthused by this picture." 'Black Landscape' was bought directly from the artist by the well-known collector, Emanuel Schlesinger

who lived in Bombay from 1938 until his death in 1968, the painting passing to his descendents. Schlesinger was one of the key collectors in the region who provided critical feedback and patronage for artists in the western region of India, especially Bombay and Baroda. The painting came to London from Bonhams' Manchester office where it was spotted in a general valuation for a private client.

A number of works by the leading 20th century Pakistani painter - Sadequain also sold well at Bonhams Islamic and Indian Art auction on October 14, two of them making record breaking prices. His 'Red Couple' a modern figurative painting sold for £32,265 (estimate £20,000 to 30,000); and his 'Entwined Nudes' sold for £31,070 (estimate £6,000 to 8,000) Sadequain (1930-87) was one of the first Pakistani painters to gain an international recognition. A man who lived in some spiritual turmoil, the artist is best known for

his figurative images. He believed that human greatness is above nationhood, race and religion and as such he was a very modern man. A visionary he and his work formed a bridge between disparate groups in his own and other societies. At the age of 31 his work was recognised at the 1961 Paris Biennale. In his lifetime he became a cult figure with a large following as his work moved from figurative forms to calligraphy. A long running exhibition of this artist's work in 16 rooms of Karachi's Mohatta Palace in 2002 attracted no fewer than 85,000 individual visitors plus 160 schools. Sadequain employed a technique of using calligraphic strokes to represent human forms. Sadequain's fascination with cacti began in Gaddani, where he had come as a young man in the 1950s to recuperate from an illness. Exhibition organisers said: "In the cactus, Sadequain sees men and words, such as Allah. The rest of his life he painted cacti and yet he painted life-forms." **DAILY TIMES MONITOR**

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Modernism revisited

DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD, LOOKING back at the past to excavate for lost traditions was part of the political and cultural struggle to re-establish national identity. This is what Chughtai claims to have been doing in the twenties along with Tagore and others of the new Bengal School.

In the field of culture and the arts there were basically three courses open to artists in those days. First, to revive the traditional methods of painting (Mughal, Pahari, Rajput and Ajanta); second, to establish links with rural life and village craftsmen and gain from their spontaneous manner of visualising objects and motifs ingrained in their consciousness for centuries through incessant practice; and the third, to acquire the manner and technique of Western painting. All three were wrought with hazards and difficulties. Artists had to be vigilant for they could easily get lost or trip over a pothole. Journeying into past can so easily induce a person to nostalgically recline his head and imagine a heroic past, or be encouraged to rest on bank of a village pond and peer at a herd of buffaloes disappearing into the sunset, through a mystic haze of his personal fancy. The romantic excursions can be observed in some painters even today.

The infatuation with rural life and belief in untainted vision of the village artisan inspired several painters to evolve an idiom of expression that was both national and modern. Amrita Sher Gill in the Punjab had demonstrated a metropolitan way of doing this by drawing upon rural life via the post-impressionism as well as indigenous miniature painting. In Calcutta, Jamini Roy devised a manner of incorporating folk images in his populist version of modernism. It is interesting to note that by now many progressive artists' groups had come into existence. However, instead of adopting a proletarian outlook, the artists continued to focus primarily on folk tradition. Actually there were only a few artists like Zain ul Abedin — famous for his Bengal Famine sketches — in these groups. Majority of the artists had progressive intentions but were moulded by a bourgeois consciousness. Like Sadequain and MF Hussain they could not proceed beyond creating generalised forms celebrating human endeavour and expressing an egalitarian outlook. They were instruments of cultural change but kept away from political activism.

An artist who continuously appropriates a tradition without contributing anything of his own not only exhausts the tradition but also drains him-

THE WAY IT WAS



MIAN IJAZ UL HASSAN

A modern artist in our countries must rely on his physical environment and firsthand experience. At the same time, he should not isolate himself from artists in the west. It is better to learn from others and move on than to stay put and ape oneself. Modernism is an invitation to an artist to be always on his toes and to renew himself

self. In order to sustain and keep a tradition refreshed, new forms and ideas have to be added to it. Failing this, the traditions dies. A number of our artists largely depended on traditional images and motifs, mostly of Mughal and Pahari origin. Archaeological material from the Indus and Gandhara civilisations and ethnic sources were also a rich treasure to plunder. The logical next step for this kind of painting — to which certain forms of calligraphy can also be added — is to rarify and mass-produce it for the tourist trade. More money can be made out of the products with a larger output and slick commercial fabrication.

The problems confronted by the third course were slightly more complex. During the period of

colonisation our intelligentsia was made to believe that in order to develop and modernise ourself we had to learn from the West. Some of us thought that we could become modern merely by wearing English clothes and acquiring a smattering of English. In the same vein, many of our artists believed that in order to improve and modernise they just needed the perspective and the skill to copy the surface effects of European oil painting. To be modern in the colonial period thus required the ability to paint in the tradition of the Italian Renaissance. This is what Anna Molka Ahmed, asked to establish the Fine Arts Department at the Punjab University at end of the thirties, induced her students to practice.

It is strange that while Lockwood Kipling the founding principal of the Mayo School of Arts and the curator of the Central Museum personally visited the homes of old families of miniature painters, persuading them to send their children to join the Mayo School, Anna Molka was not urged to encourage the traditional arts. Most of her students had their noses up on accosting a traditional *desi* artist. Even the great Chughtai was not thought much off. 'Chughtai Art' was regarded as an anathema to the modern sensibility practiced in the Department.

Anna Molka introduced the basic techniques for teaching European painting and equipped students to draw and paint. She spurned the indigenous art and at the same time eyed with suspicion the new trends emerging in Europe after the First War. She published small booklets on aspiring young modern painters like Shemza, Ahmed Pervez, S Safdar, Moyene Najmi and Haneef Ramay and enabled them to exhibit at the Department. Shakir Ali, regarded a pioneer of modern painting in Pakistan today, held his first show at the Department, but Anna Molka didn't really care about the concerns of the modern generation of painters. In 1960, when Sadeqain's painting, *Person at Sand's Pit* — that had quite unexpectedly won first prize at the third National Exhibition — appeared at the Fine Arts Department, everyone was encouraged to find faults with it, particularly its drawing. Frankly, I rather liked the painting and in the pictorial-aesthetic context didn't find anything terribly wrong with the drawing either. But that is how things were at the Department. The students were hardly ever taken to saunter beyond Cézanne. Khalid Iqbal also taught at the Department. He was knowledgeable but held his views. I cannot recollect anyone taking courage to

contest him or look over his shoulder to envisage a vision of his or her own.

In the colonial period, the colonial artist was made to feel that he was at the bottom step of the ladder and the western artist at the top. The west could help him climb up if he agreed to learn to emulate. In the post-colonial era the Third World or the Developing Countries, as they are called today, underwent two distinct phases. In the first phase, the Developing Countries were no longer treated as though they were at the bottom of the cultural graph but made to believe that they were on the fringes of the world's cultural centre, which was first, Paris, and later in the sixties, New York. During that period the Third World artist was treated as a representative of a minority culture who therefore could not be considered really Modern. In the second phase a decade later, the word Contemporary came into circulation. In order to be Contemporary, an artist had to create global art that spurned national and regional perceptions. That is why it is difficult sometimes to tell whether some works of art are from Asia or America. To enter this seemingly Contemporary 'neutral zone', as a critic put it, an artist of a 'Developing Country' had yet again to get his or her visa endorsed from the West. In the context of this third option — to become modern — the artist had to remain on the receiving end and be a perpetual recipient.

The Post Modern Movement seems to defend minorities, gender issues and marginal cultures and expressions. In recent years there has been a growing tendency to emulate its techniques and aesthetic conventions. It is pertinent to remember, however, that Post Modernism itself is a product of the inner crises of Modernism. While it spurns the role of the *avant-garde* and highlights few issues that are everyone's concern, it also eschews high moral ground by trivialising the collective cultural tradition. For an artist from our countries to be modern it is fundamental for him to rely on his own physical environment and firsthand experience. At the same time, he should not isolate himself from artists in the west who have common concerns. It is better to learn from others and move on than to stay put and ape oneself. Modernism is neither a style nor a set of fixed rules and forms. It is an invitation to an artist to be always on his toes and to renew himself.

Prof Ijaz-ul-Hassan is a painter, author and political activist