



S. H. RAZA

DAG

MASTERPIECES

OF INDIAN MODERN ART



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Untitled (Bindu)

Acrylic on canvas, 1980

39.2 x 39.2 in. / 99.6 x 99.6 cm.

Signed and dated in English (lower centre) 'Raza / 80'

Published: Ballaney, Sonia, ed., *S. H. Raza: The Journey of a Master* (Vadehra Art Gallery: New Delhi, 2014), p. 78; Vajpeyi, Ashok, ed., *A Life in Art: Raza* (New Delhi: Art Alive Gallery, 2007), pp. 120-21

About the Work

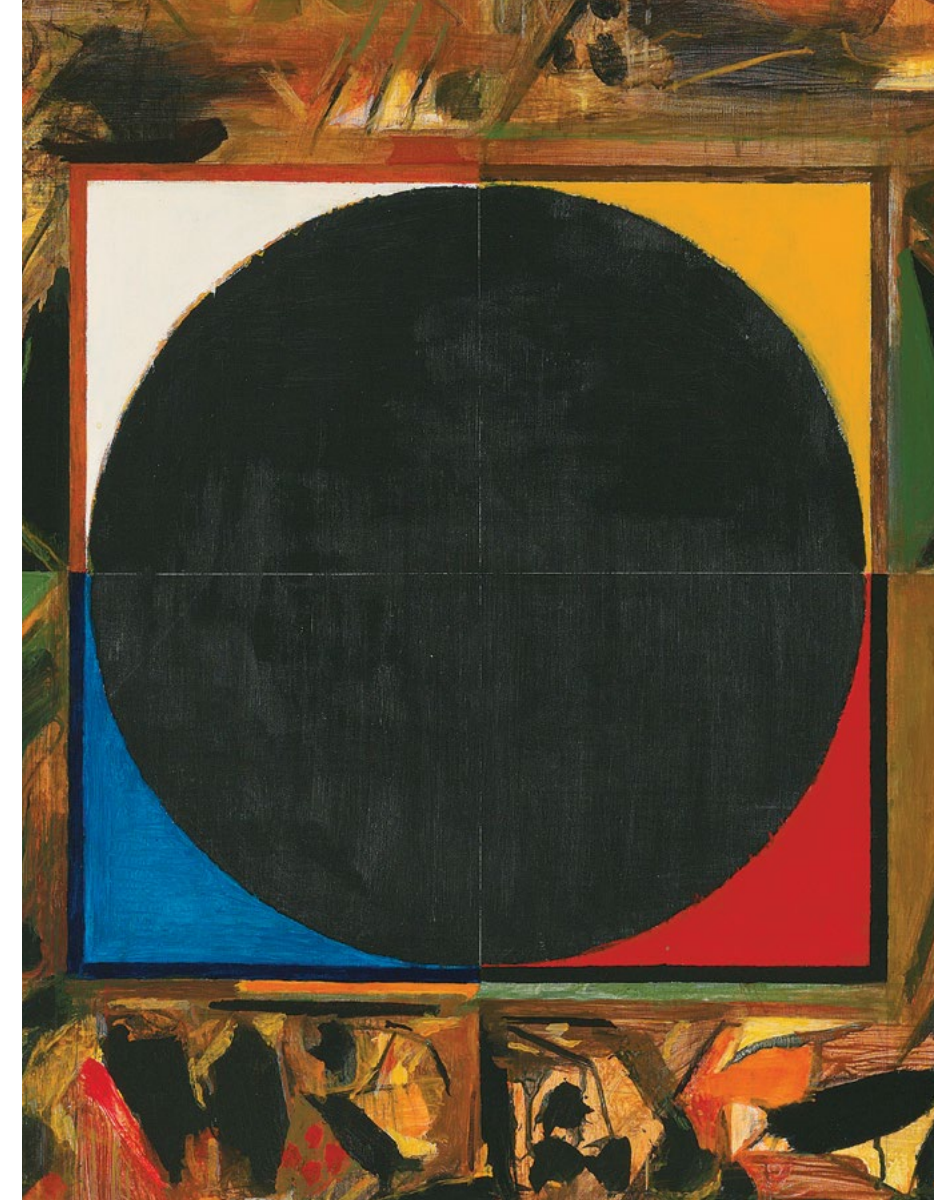
The *bindu*, in India, is considered a metaphysical conceit. Represented in art, or rendered as a philosophy, it is indicative of the cycle of birth and death, the origin of all beings, and things—including the universe. It is the cosmos, the embryo and the seed. It is also the black hole of science—and creation. It has meditative considerations, and it was this that first drew artist S. H. Raza's consideration when he began to question his practice and the absence of 'Indianness' in it.

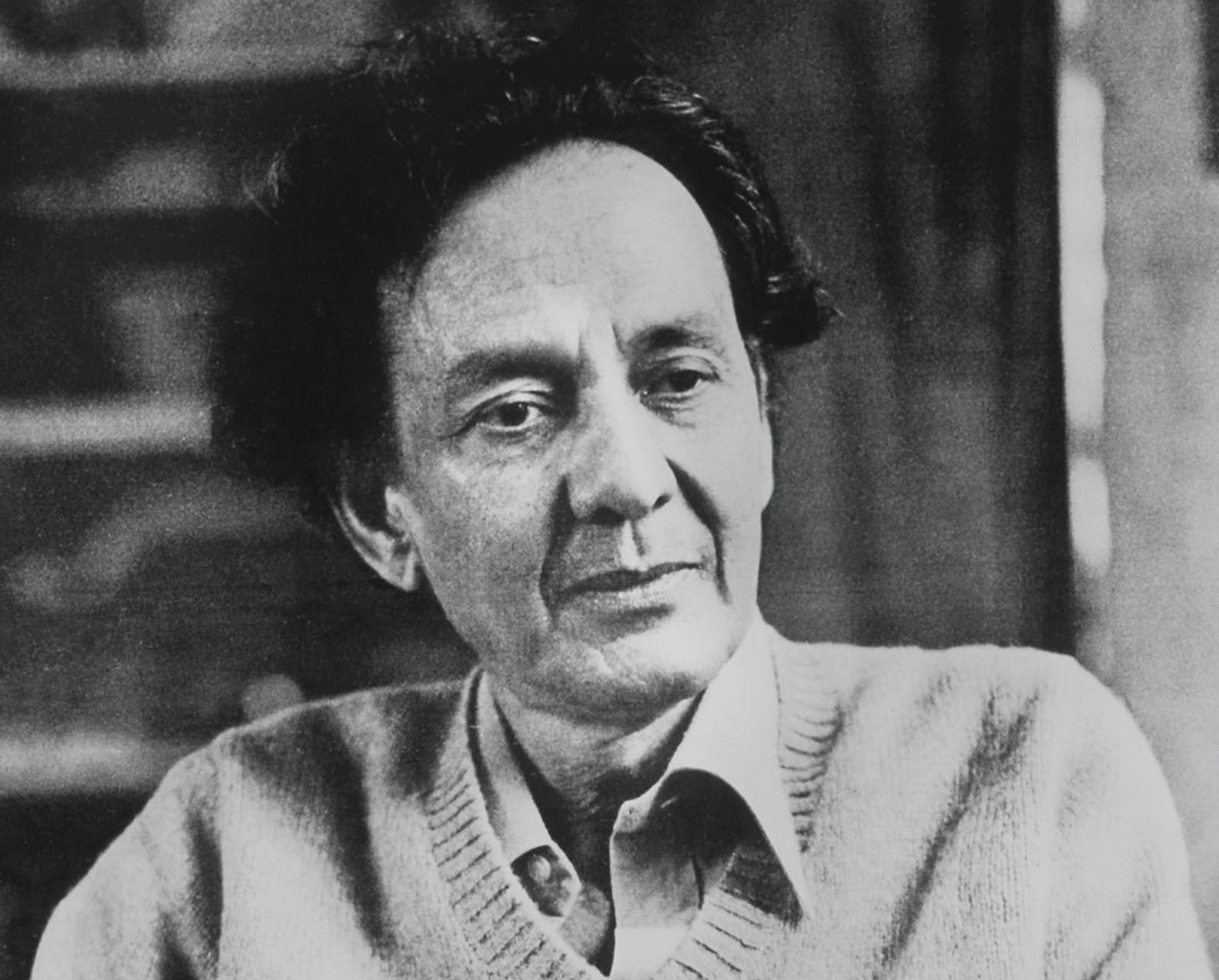
A founder-member of the Progressive Artists' Group of Bombay in 1947, Raza left soon after for Paris; winning the prestigious critics' award soon after. A painter of landscapes—impressionistic watercolours in India, abstract, gestural *impastos* in France—he was a successful artist when he decided to change the nature, and subject, of his paintings, saturating them with his increasing interest in Indian philosophy and spirituality. He remained a painter of landscapes, but the nature of his

abstraction changed and became embedded in the five elements that make up the world—air, earth, water, fire and ether.

Having travelled extensively in India, and imbibed her art traditions, Raza also found himself drawn to the painting style of Basohli miniatures, more specifically their vibrant borders. Extrapolating from these, he began to work on a series of paintings that were influenced by these miniatures, but rendered in the abstract. They appeared to consist of a curious, almost primal energy, as though exploding from the impatient brushstrokes, telling stories of an ancient land in a manner that Raza made his own.

Simultaneously, his *bindus* grew to embrace the language of *tantra*, appearing in *mandalas*, the complex drawings that are ritualised in a certain order. While paying heed to these traditions, Raza went on to create an ordered





world in works that evoked the elements, germination, and the cycle and rhythms of life. In a matter of a few years, his new body of work became so well known, it put into shade his earlier practice.

In this *Untitled* work, Raza has put together elements from the two distinctive styles of painting from the 1980s onwards, making it both unusual and rare. The *bindu* occupies the centre of the painting and represents void or ether—the unknowable. It is surrounded by water, air, fire and earth—making up his quintessential landscape. But surrounding it are his gestural representations inspired by the miniature tradition, the upheaved earth bringing to mind furrowed fields and greenery,

the heat and dust and energy of India and her diverse culture.

At first sight, this resembles a border—except, Raza also creates a formal border for the painting, constituted of bands and lines that are split up in a manner that bring to mind the five elements—another reminder of Raza's engagement with nature. 'My work is my own inner experience and involvement with the mysteries of nature and form which is expressed in colour, line, space and light,' he said. This painting sums up Raza's view just as beautifully.

S. H. Raza didn't think of himself as a 'Western painter or a European one'. He always remained an 'Indian painter at heart'

Voices & Words

“

RAZA'S IMAGINATIVE USE OF OIL AND, LATER, ACRYLIC PAINTS, TO CREATE PAINT STRUCTURES AND EVOCATIVE LANDSCAPES, SAW A DEEP INVOLVEMENT OF THE ARTIST WITH SYMBOLIC METAPHYSICAL FORMS TO UNLEASH A BARRAGE—AND A SYMPHONY—OF COLOURS”

— KRISHEN KHANNA

“

The artist seems to be only a medium, an executor; the dictates come from higher forces which give energy, clear perception...”

— S. H. RAZA

“I believe that in the process of painting, superior, divine and powerful sources operate. The artist is only the medium and without these forces art cannot be born”

— S. H. RAZA

“The equilibrium of forces is as necessary in painting as it is in life”

— S. H. RAZA

“

Raza seems to be furiously painting grace, the possibility of grace in our time... it flows in colours and geometry. It is this grace, this ever-present evocation of a possible force that makes these paintings a kind of spiritual inscription”

— ASHOK VAJPEYI

“

COLOURS EXPRESS ALL THE FEELINGS, BUT I DO NOT ATTACH A SPECIFIC SYMBOL TO EACH ONE OF THEM, THE MEANING COMES FROM THEIR INTER-RELATIONS”

— S. H. RAZA

‘I have interpreted the universe in terms of five primary colours: black, white, red, blue and yellow. A total chromatic expression can be achieved by mixing primary colours with other secondary colours, such as greens, browns, and ochres. From there you can move to a great austerity of colours till you come to a supreme purity of form’

— S. H. RAZA

Profile

S. H. RAZA (1922-2016)

S. H. Raza is among the few artists of the Progressive Artists' Group who almost exclusively excluded the human figure in order to build up his aesthetics. Instead, he was fascinated with landscapes, with which he began his career. His enrolment at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Paris was to be the turning point in his career. In 1956, he became an overnight sensation across Europe after receiving the Prix de la Critique award.

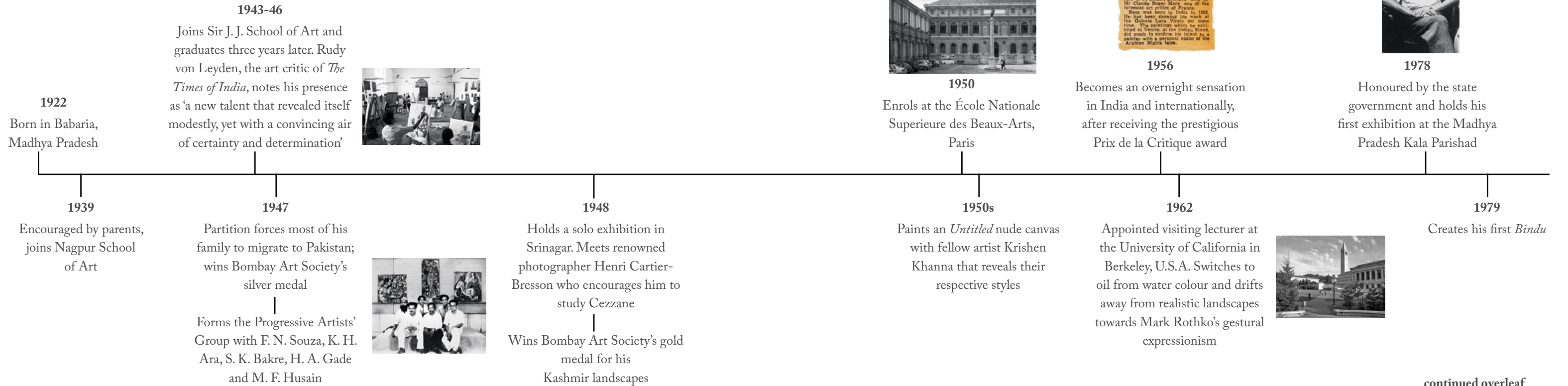
In the 1960s, Raza drifted away from realistic landscapes towards 'gestural expressionism', a form of abstraction that was inspired by the works of American artist Mark Rothko. Ultimately, the themes and forms for Raza's paintings evolved from his childhood memories and impressions—life in the densest forests of Madhya Pradesh, close to the river

Narmada and in proximity to nature, the bright colours of the Indian market, and a black dot to meditate upon as drawn by a schoolteacher for the six-year-old Raza. The black dot became a starting point that transmitted into a series of Raza's paintings known as *bindu*—a symbol of divine and artistic creativity, the essence of any form and movement.

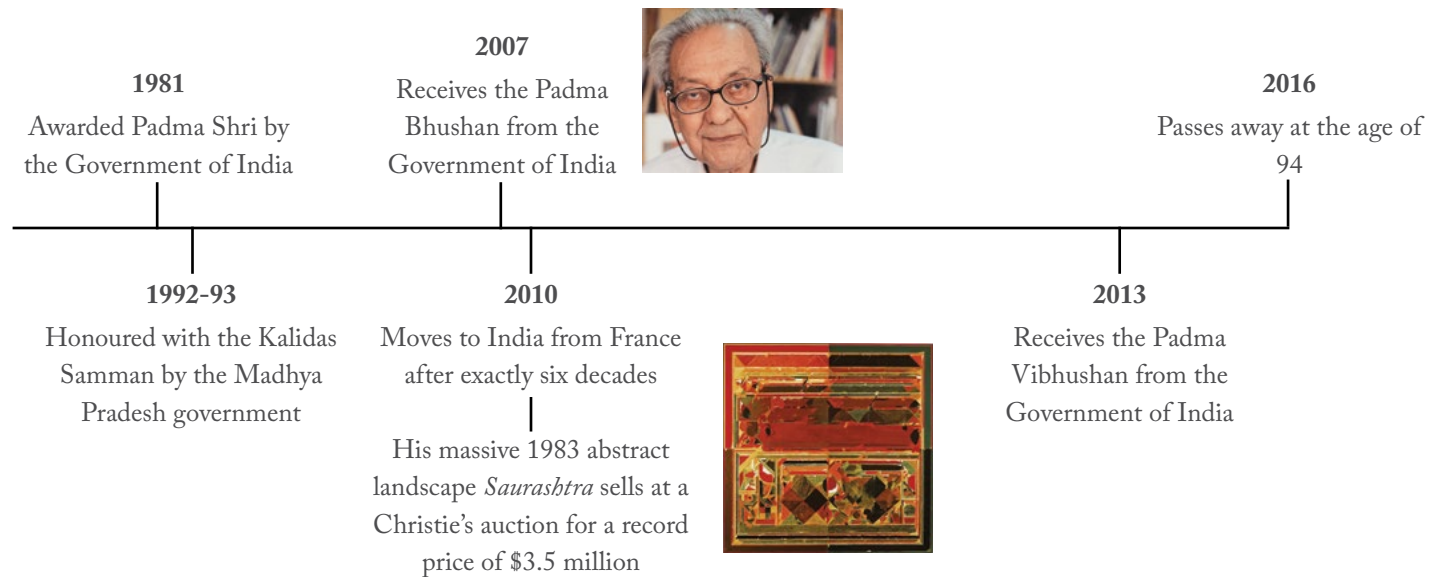
Widely collected across the world, Raza was awarded the Madhya Pradesh government's Kalidas Samman in 1981 and the Lalit Kala Akademi's Ratna Puraskar in 2004. He was honoured with both the Padma Shri and the Padma Bhushan by the Indian government. Raza was a resident of France for six decades before shifting back in December 2010 to India, to live and work in New Delhi. He passed away in 2016.



Milestones



continued overleaf



‘I wanted to visualise my country on my canvas’

S. H. RAZA

My father was a forest officer and continued his services till I completed my studies in Nagpur School of Art. I wanted to come to Bombay or Calcutta (Santiniketan) for my art education but that would have meant staying far away from my family, so I decided to study in Nagpur.

I studied for two years after my parents and my teachers recognised that I was more interested

in painting than in studies. After two years, I stopped my studies abruptly to take a job as a teacher in a primary school in Amravati district of Madhya Pradesh. I got lucky when the Government of Madhya Pradesh decided to offer me a scholarship to go to Sir J. J. School of Art for further studies in 1941.

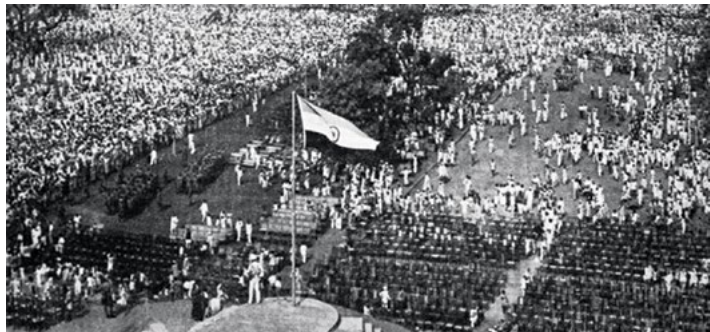
There was some confusion and by the time I had packed and left for Bombay, I was told



S. H. Raza in his studio in Gorbio, south of France: It was here that he 'spoke to plants, the birds, sitting under the olive trees and the bougainvillea plants'

I could not be admitted in the art school in Bombay. Though the Madhya Pradesh government offered me a job in Akola, I was determined to stay back and study in Bombay. I took a job and started working in Bombay and a couple of years later, I joined the Bombay art school. At this point—this is what I want to stress on, particularly to art students out there—you must be determined to work hard and be interested in art so you can continue in spite of difficulties. I continued and after three years of work in Bombay, I got the Gold Medal of the Bombay Art Society.

There was really no real understanding of art at that time. When Amrita Sher-Gil exhibited in 1936 in Bombay, not a single painting was sold, in spite of Dr. Mulk Raj Anand opening the exhibition. In the 1940s, however, things were improving slowly. The essential problem, let me tell you, is that our concept of art in India is very different from the concept of art



in the West, which looked at painting with an understanding of anatomy and perspective. For us, it is *antaryogi* and *antargyan*. It is a total combination of heart and mind and that's what we attempt through our art.

The Times, the Ideas

In 1947, India became independent, in 1950 a republic. We were happy like mad, very happy, and we said, 'Let's take the bull by the horns and let's take our destiny as painters by ourselves;

What do we want to do?' That's when some of us got together—K. H. Ara, S. K. Bakre, H. A. Gade, M. F. Husain, F. N. Souza and a few others came together, joined later by some other senior artists.

In 1948, we opened an exhibition curated by Souza, who was also in our Progressive Artists' Group. It was opened by Dr. Mulk Raj Anand. Though there were hardly about ten or twenty people who appreciated our effort, we were

convinced and enthusiastic and very happy. Even this encouragement was important back then and meant a lot.. Our discussions were on Indian and European art, about Cezanne, Matisse, Amrita Sher-Gil, Jamini Roy, the Bengal School..

People were used to realistic art then but what we did was imaginative. We were thinking in terms of the mind and heart coming together—in the course of time we also realised that whether it is Basohli painting or the cave paintings of Ajanta or Ellora, or sculptures and paintings of other important centers of ancient Indian art, our viewing was not based only on what the eyes saw but what the eyes and the mind put together into perspective to imagine the work of art.

Herbert Reed and Roger Fry said then that Indian artists were talented and gifted, but weak in anatomy and perspective. We



Facing page: Newspaper clippings—and an image—from the day that India gained independence in 1947. S. H. Raza talked of how 'we were happy like mad' wanting to 'take our destiny as painters by ourselves, discussing the works of artists such as Amrita Sher-Gil' (this page)

understood the need for exposure, a reason why we all went abroad. Souza decided to go to London because he spoke English very well and he had certain connections. I wanted to go to France. I started studying French language and after three years of very serious study, the French Consulate in Bombay decided to give me a scholarship for two years to study in Paris.

Souza was very talented, but we were different in our views. He underestimated the Bengal School, he used to say it is ‘bullshit’. I disagreed: ‘Souza, they have brought our mind towards ancient Indian painting,’ I would say. He would say, ‘No, I don’t agree.’ And I would debate further: ‘Jamini Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Asit Kumar Haldar, their works are important for me.’

Our focus was painting according to our way. Ara was doing it his way. Bakre was doing sculptures in his way, Souza was working in



Indian artists in Paris: S. H. Raza (middle) with F. N. Souza (left) and Akbar Padamsee (right) in 1952

his way, and I was working in my way. And we used to meet after work in the evenings to discuss our work. Criticism was difficult for us. When I saw a painting by Souza, I’d say, ‘Ah! This is marvellous.’ When I’d see a painting

by Gaitonde or others, I would say, ‘This is marvellous.’ In the early days, we were unable to criticise, to analyse... Souza could; the rest of us couldn’t because our minds weren’t as developed. We were studying significant forms and we were discussing various things about what was said by famous writers of that time but I couldn’t read so much, nor could Bakre, Ara or Gade, but we talked in our language... whatever we could understand, or what we did not care much for.

Husain was also a very remarkable painter of our group and I hold his work in high esteem. There are complications at the moment about which I don’t want to talk about. And I feel that in spite of everything, in spite of his age because he’s 94, he paints very good works. [This interview was conducted in 2009, when M. F. Husain was still alive]. I have seen several paintings in the collection which are awesome.

Rediscovering Myself

As soon as I went to Europe, Souza came to Paris and we had an exhibition along with Akbar Padamsee. While Souza’s works were not appreciated, Padamsee’s were. Mine was liked by different critics and artists. They offered me a show and ultimately I ended up in a gallery where I showed for about a year. The French critics saw my works and they found it interesting. I got the critics’ award, Prix de la Critique, given to me in 1956, which made me famous overnight. When I was in India, I was drawn towards mediums, concepts and painting. I did some watercolours, something like miniatures and I continued to paint what we call significant forms in European style. In France, I again came to the concept of Cezanne, the French School, and I thought that I had to master this style of painting. I had to find out what is important in painting, how to coordinate colours. Since I was in love with landscapes—and French landscapes are



S. H. Raza with his friend Ashok Vajpeyi in Paris
Image Credit: Ashok Vajpeyi

very beautiful—I painted landscapes in the way that was current at that time. This lasted for almost ten years and my work was appreciated. I showed my work in different galleries in Paris and I continued to work with a gallery for about sixteen years. In 1970-71, I left the galleries because they were really bad paymasters for my work. I was working and they were not paying me. They were buying my paintings at very low prices and selling it very high. So I left the gallery but I continued to work.

I was working very hard and I don't know what would have happened if I had stayed in India; how much time I would have taken—to understand painting, colour and form, and the orchestration of all these aspects of painting—it took me three decades in France. At the end, I realised that in spite of the success my work received in France, I was asking myself some very important questions: 'Why is there something missing in my work?'

'Where is my country?' 'Where is the concept of my country?' In 1975-80, I came to an understanding that despite doing important works, an Indian concept was missing from my art. That's when I arrived at the idea of *bindu*. I told myself, I must go to my source. It is a reason that I used to come to India as often as possible.

Once, I was invited by the Hindi poet Ashok Vajpeyi, in 1978, I suppose, for an exhibition of my paintings, which gave me another insight into Indian culture—this exhibition was followed by Indian music, Indian poetry, talks and discussions, giving me tremendous boost and enthusiasm about Indian culture. I found myself interacting with great poets, wonderful writers, dancers of repute and musicians. I realised, one cannot deny one's [artistic] sources because it's in your blood, your mind and your heart. I turned to studying Hindu religious texts that I had

already held in great esteem. I used to go to temples, mosques, churches—something I do even today. Discrimination of religion, I feel, is a mistake and I entirely agree with Mahatma Gandhi:

*Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram,
Patit Pavan Sita Ram,
Isbwar Alba Tero Naam,
Sabko Sanmati De Bhagwan*

[A rough translation:

*'Bless everyone with the wisdom that we are
all the
product of the same matter and consciousness,
and that all of us strive towards the path of
righteousness and virtue.']*

*Excerpted from DAG's film on
S. H. Raza*

Bindu: The Universal Creation

Artist S. H. Raza's career can be neatly divided into two halves, the first part when he painted landscapes (including abstract landscapes), and the second half during which he painted (and continues to paint) geometrical abstractions centred around Indian metaphysical concepts that have their roots in *tantra*. If in the first half (with the exception of his early years in India) he was considered, for all purposes, a painter in the European style, his later career is almost

entirely associated with an Indian ethos. How did it come about?

Raza himself has spoken about the epiphany he experienced in Bhopal when his friend and poet, Ashok Vajpeyi, recited a poem in Hindi at the *utsav* or celebration that had been arranged in the city. The year was 1979. And Vajpeyi's poem dwelled on a young man's lament when he wonders aloud, 'Mother, when I return, what

will I bring you?' In Hindi, the verse reads thus: '*Maa, laut ke jab aaunga, kya laaunga?*' The line lends itself to several interpretations and for Raza it became a call from his homeland. As an Indian artist practicing in France, where was the 'Indian' in his work? This necessarily opened up ideas about identity and of Indianness, leading him to wonder what he could take back

with him on his return to France that would address the issue back in India.

Those who know Raza will attest to his sentimentality. He had always carried a bit of India about him. His studio had idols or images representing the various faiths that had taken root or flourished there—Hinduism, Islam,

Paintings depicting the *bindu* by S. H. Raza



Buddhism, Jainism—and he liked listening to Vaishnav hymns in particular as a great admirer of Mahatma Gandhi. He had also carried with him memories of growing up in the forests surrounding the Narmada where his father was a forest ranger, of his school where he was an obedient child but with a mind that was rarely still. He recalled his teacher drawing a little dot on the wall of a school corridor and asking him to meditate on it to improve his concentration. It was a thought that came back to him now. But he did not need the dot to quiet his mind now, even though it was in a churn. Instead, he looked to its properties, the tiny little circle that in Indian philosophy meant so many things.

The circle, after all, represented nothingness but also the whole universe, the primordial embryo and seed and origin of all things and the black hole from which all things emerged and into which they all disappeared. In its sum, it represented life, but perhaps also death.

What could he make of it, this *bindu*? I imagine Raza fretting—but not too much. For in 1979 itself, in a major departure from the kind of art he was making, Raza moved away. The first of his ‘dots’ appeared on canvas. These were unlike anything that Damien Hirst would make later.

While the artist himself does not remember what that first painting of this series was, I have chanced upon a few of his works from 1979 and they embody nothing else as much as the circle itself. They are, as they have always been, dark and representative of a presence, almost a living thing. In one, the black hole took over almost the entire field of the painting, leaving but only sufficient space for a black, square frame into which it was inserted.

While the black circle was plain, the surrounding white was thick and textured, suggesting the strength of the ‘I’ which seemed



S. H. Raza at work in his studio in south of France

to have embedded itself into some surface of the universe, or pierced it.

In another work, the *bindu*, now much smaller, lay at the centre of a field divided into two planes of colour at top and bottom, the centre thus forming the horizon and suggesting the celestial and the terrestrial, or more simply sky and earth. Raza’s early *bindus* were similarly simple, almost stark, but soon they would pave the way for more complex readings as the idea of the five elements, the *panch tatva*, came to him. Slowly, layer by layer, the artist began to lay out grids and squares, turning his language of abstract landscapes into geometrical landscapes, but with the dot or ‘I’ as the basis around which the whole idea of nature and the universe rested.

— KISHORE SINGH
Excerpted from London Masterpiece XVII,
published by DAG, 2016

Indian Painters in Paris

The twentieth century has been one of the most receptive periods in the history of European art; many traditions have been simultaneously absorbed in it. Greek and Black, Mexican and Indian arts have all found a place and—under the brush and chisel of artists eager to draw upon distant sources and remote cultures—undergone a transformation. These various contributors have been partly responsible for the remarkable efflorescence of the generation

of individualistic painters grouped under the name Ecole de Paris.

This city—with its rich artistic heritage, the centre of so many movements in pictorial art in the first half of the 20th century—was the workshop, however temporary, of all the great artistic creators of the day in Europe. Thus it could not fail to attract young artists from other lands. Three painters—S. H. Raza,



Landscapes by S. H. Raza done in Paris acquired a different complexion, texture and idea

Akbar Padamsee and Sakti Burman, from India, pursue their research here and actively contribute to the creative dynamism of this home of the arts.

What did these three painters hope to find in Paris? An atmosphere that would favour the development of their art and prove stimulating to work, the possibility of direct contact with the bold pioneers who, in Europe, had attempted to revitalise the dull vision of an ageing world...

In the early Fifties, the movement in abstract art was already on the decline. After more than twenty years of vitality it had fallen into stagnation, become fixed in an official system and was slowly dying of its impotence and

S. H. Raza (second from left) with fellow artists in Paris: Laxman Pai, F. N. Souza (right of Raza) and Akbar Padamsee (extreme right)



its abuses. It had opened the door to facile and easy solutions and on its way out let in incapable artists.

Deprived of competent advisers, the young artists faced a grave dilemma. Luckily for them, their youthful zeal permitted them to find within themselves the confirmation of their own talents. An energetic will permitted them to assert their own personality. Today, the young generation is still searching for the principles that in the midst of the prevalent apathy, will permit them to set up a new artistic expression on a solid foundation. The rule of unrecognised incompetence continues unfortunately, and passing idols overthrown as quickly as they were set up still reign in the world of art. New York claims the honour of having held aloft the torch for the new art, which had unjustly lingered too long on our old continent with its outdated ideas, forgetting that no system can by itself create great art and good

artists. In the giddy pace of American life, styles follow each other in quick succession...

Creativity needs serious meditation and great concentration. The artist must find solitude in the midst of this agitation, discover his wisdom, his needs, the promptings of the soul. Padamsee, Raza and Sakti Burman have wisely turned to their advantage this constant intellectual ferment; they have drawn upon it, each according to the needs of his temperament, and, at the same time, avoided becoming the passive victims of passing trends. Through solitude and meditation they are working out for themselves—and for us—the magic world which they have glimpsed within themselves...

A half-real, half-supernatural world freed from its material chains, defying all laws of gravity—such is the rhythmic and chaotic world we step into with Raza. Conscious of reality, he accepts the initial decisive shock. Then, giving

up the anecdotic, he attempts to seek the vital rhythm in nature, the purity of first sensations. His semi-religious attitude to nature makes him thrust aside appearances. He rejects the tormented deformations that characterise his earlier works to fix upon a more spiritual expression. Raza's mysterious landscapes show the permanent struggle of light and shade, his works display a persistent affinity for vast stretches of dramatic shadow in the middle of which sparkle fiery reds and yellows, the brilliance of the whites contrasted with pure colours and with jerky strokes. The bitter struggle of light and shade takes place in a strange universe empty of all human presence, an ideal mental reconstruction where form generally dominates feelings.

S. H. Raza on his Childhood and Art

'The most vivid memory of my childhood is the fascination of the Indian forest,' says

Raza... 'The nights were strange, hallucinating, only the dances of the Gonds sometimes humanised the ambience. The day brought the feeling of security and well-being. Under a bright sun, the village was a feast of colours on the market day. And then again came the night, with its total contrast, grimness and silence.

After years of work, I find even today that these two aspects of life [the days and nights experienced in the village] preoccupy me. They seem vital and form an integral part of my paintings. There is a multitude of variations but the theme prevails. It constitutes the body of an experience "lived", though in the act of painting the real problems remain essentially formal. They exalt the original sentiment or destroy it. The operation is done in the studio. Coloured masses meet each other. There is life in this movement and vitality in the encounter; also, often, futility. It is important to be constantly present and participate totally in the experience.

Sometimes one reaches a rare exaltation where the idea finds a complete realisation. For the rest, again it is constant research awaiting the perpetual passage of the day and night...

I feel that the infinite can be reached by concentration on simple objects, ideas or on some vital aspects of life. The essential requirement is passionate research, which with persistence can lead to vision and perception. In spite of the overwhelming forces of coloured masses and the significance of their meeting in a multitude of situations, the object prevails. In fact, there seems hardly a vision without an object, though the object remains banal, the vision is essential.'

— DEL TEIL

Excerpted from Lalit Kala Contemporary 4

S. H. Raza photographed shortly after he arrived in Paris



India, Paris, India: The Artist's Footsteps

The forest officer's six-year-old son was a loner, way too restless to focus on anything. Noticing this, Nandlal Jharia, headmaster of the primary school in Barbaria, part of the Mandala district in Madhya Pradesh, where the boy studied, drew several concentric circles around a dot (*bindu*). He then asked the impatient boy to concentrate on the dot. Obeying his teacher, the child focussed so intensely on the dot that it would eventually be indelibly etched in his

psyche, resonating time and again as the *leit motif* in his art.

Syed Haider Raza, the young boy who would eventually be celebrated as one of Indian art's favourite heroes, took this *bindu* to the world with the strength of his paintbrush. Raza, who picked up the paintbrush for the first time when he was twelve years old, was born to Syed Momammad Razi and Tahira Begum on

February 22, 1922, in Barbaria, the same place where he—even if unknowingly—first learnt to meditate.

Since his father was a forest officer, Raza enjoyed the freedom of growing up in the midst of jungles and wilderness. When his father was posted to Damoh, also a district in Madhya Pradesh, Raza not only completed his formal education, he also realised that the liberal environment of his childhood was shaping—and sharpening—his artistic consciousness. Though Muslim by faith, Raza, however, grew up appreciating the tenets and the rich visual symbolism of Hinduism.

Early Days

Confident of his artistic talent, his parents—though quite unusual for that generation and time—encouraged him to study art. As per their wishes, Raza joined the Nagpur School of Art in 1939. He then went to Sir J. J. School of

Art, Bombay. In retrospect, his works done as a student now seem stylistically very different from his later, more mature oeuvre. Clearly, the forests where Raza had lived inspired the artist's earliest works—forest landscapes, their styles having little that would seem Indian or even contemporary. Instead, they hinted strongly at a more Western classical style, owing possibly to the way art was taught in those days. This caused some confusion in Raza's mind for the art that emerged from his brush was too disconnected with Indian reality to have much meaning for him. By the time Raza joined Sir J. J. School of Art in 1943, not only was he trying to clear the confusion in his mind about his art, his personal life, too, was undergoing major upheavals.

His marriage to Fatima, a cousin from Damoh, had hit a rocky patch within the first year itself. In 1942, when he had married her, Raza was teaching art at a government college in order to



An early figurative work by S. H. Raza. His oeuvre would change dramatically in France

help his family financially since his father had retired. The young bride, however, could not understand the strong urge of her husband to paint whenever he found the time.

They had very few interests in common and the rift between them widened when Raza left a year later on a scholarship from the government of the Central Provinces for Bombay to study at Sir J. J. School of Art. Eventually, at the time of Partition in 1947, the couple parted ways when Fatima decided to leave for Pakistan and Raza continued staying in India.

On a professional level, however, this was an exciting period of growth and self-discovery for Raza. Though he didn't immediately study at Sir J. J. School of Art—he had arrived after the admissions were over and the session was already underway—Raza signed up for evening art classes at the Mohan Art Club while working as a designer at Express Block Studios by day.

In time, of course, Raza graduated from Sir J. J. School of Art in 1946 after finishing his art education.

The same year, Raza's first solo show was held at the Bombay Art Society. Awarded a silver medal for his works at the exhibition, this was the artist's initial step towards establishing a formidable reputation for himself in the art world. Meanwhile, the movement for independence was gaining momentum. To express freedom through art, Raza became one of the founding members of Progressive Artists' Group in 1947 with other like minded artists, including F. N. Souza, H. A. Gade, M. F. Husain, K. H. Ara and S. K. Bakre. The group's first exhibition in Bombay was a defining moment in contemporary Indian art.

It was a departure from traditional Indian art, which they considered merely decorative. Their own show, however, got more brickbats

than applause. Clearly, the group was not going to have an easy time rallying against tradition.

Alone in India

At a personal level, this was a difficult period for the artist. His mother died in 1947 and one year later, his father—the man who encouraged Raza to follow his dream—also passed away. Though convinced that he wanted to stay in India, the Partition forced Raza to accept a period of intense loneliness when most of his family, including his estranged wife, four brothers and a sister, migrated to Pakistan.

In 1948, when Raza held a solo exhibition of his works in Srinagar, Sheikh Abdullah, leader of the National Conference, Kashmir's largest political party, issued him a letter allowing him to travel throughout Kashmir without any restriction. It was here that renowned photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson saw his work and advised him to concentrate on

the ‘construction of painting’ and to study Cezanne. This advice stayed with Raza, and eventually took him to France for the most significant phase in his life and career.

Finding Love and Art

His enrolment at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, in October 1950, on a French government scholarship, was the turning point in the artist’s career. He continued to experiment with Western modernist styles, moving from Expressionist modes towards greater abstraction and eventually incorporating elements of tantrism from Indian scriptures. Whereas his fellow contemporaries dealt with more figural subjects, Raza excluded the human figure to focus on landscapes in order to build up his artistic vocabulary in the Forties and Fifties. Raza was initially enamoured by France’s bucolic landscapes. His work *Eglise* is part of a series which captures the rolling terrain and

quaint architecture of the French countryside. What makes this series interesting to Raza’s chroniclers is that it clearly uses gestural brushstrokes and heavy impasto application of paint that marked his later, more mature works. After his studies, Raza travelled across Europe and continued living in Paris. He became an overnight sensation across Europe after receiving the prestigious award ‘Prix de la Critique’ in 1956.

Raza also found, as he would later tell everyone, his soulmate in French artist Janine Mongillat in 1959. Through her, he acquired a deep knowledge of Christianity, the Christian metaphysics and spirituality. The couple married and started their life in a Paris atelier and after a long time, Raza enjoyed a peaceful and happy life on the home front. It was in this phase of his life in the Sixties that Raza painted furiously even though, as he put it in a letter written to Krishen Khanna, his good friend



S. H. Raza in his studio in Paris

and fellow Progressive artist, every painting was taking a lot of time: ‘I have little time to try to understand things. My force is the store of experience discovered in the process of work.’ In 1962, he was appointed a visiting lecturer at the University of California in Berkeley, U.S.A. This marked yet another turning point in the artist’s career as he began to drift away from realistic landscapes towards gestural expressionism—a form of abstract art inspired by the works of American artist Mark Rothko.

This was a significant departure from his earlier style where Raza’s Indian—and early French—canvases had been seen as realistic reflections of the world around the artist. His landscapes



S. H. Raza's landscapes (*left*) changed dramatically given his inspiration in gestural expressionism, which he found through studying the works of Mark Rothko (*right*)



became landscapes of the mind, no longer mere reflections of the artist's world, rather his impressions of them.

Raza's trips back home, to places in Gujarat and Rajasthan, besides Benaras, the Ajanta and Ellora caves, to name some, made him reflect more deeply. Raza's chroniclers believe that in spite of the decades that the artist spent in France, his preoccupation was always with India: 'I didn't become a French painter or a European one. I remained an Indian painter through the years.'

Fame and Fortune

The *bindu* in 1980 marked his rebirth as an artist, bringing to the fore his newfound vision on Indian symbolism, philosophy and ethnography. Reminiscent of the school assignment given by his teacher Nandlal Jharia, Raza began meditating upon the bindu as the centre of creation and existence, the essence of

any form and movement Raza saw the dot as progressing towards forms and colour as well as energy, sound, space and time. His canvases suddenly came alive, pulsating with dramatic energy, becoming more profound than ever. Of his work and its transformation, the artist reflects, 'My work is my own inner experience and involvement with the mysteries of nature and form, which is expressed in colour, line, space and light.'

Over the next few years, Raza added elements to his artistic and symbolic vocabulary, including themes around the *tribhuj* (triangle), which bolstered Indian concepts of space and time, as well as that of 'Prakriti-Purusha' (the female and the male energy). In his long career, Raza has held several solo and group exhibitions in India and abroad. Recognition for the artist followed with the Government of India conferring some of the highest national awards, including the Padma Shri in 1981, the Padma Bhushan in

2007, and the Padma Vibhushan in 2013, among other state awards like the Kalidas Samman from the Madhya Pradesh government.

His style also had the dubious distinction of being popular with art forgers. In 2009, the artist attended an exhibition of his own early works in Delhi, only to find that they were all forgeries. While it was embarrassing for the gallery and deeply annoying for the artist, this incident, nonetheless, brought to the fore an important lacuna in the Indian art scene.

The artist enjoyed adulation, saw prices of his works skyrocket, but never forgot his hardships and struggles as a young aspiring artist. To promote, support and honour young artists from visual, performing and literary fields, Raza, in 2001, set up the Raza Foundation exclusively from his own earnings. This, in fact, is a singular example of a major Indian artist investing a substantial part of his

personal income towards the promotion of the arts among younger generations.

His wife's death in 2002, just before Raza acquired serious global reputation, was a great loss of not just a spouse but also a partner, fellow artist, friend. Over time, Raza decided to return to India for good and in 2010—the very year that his contemporary, and fellow Progressive, M. F. Husain, relinquished his Indian passport to become a citizen of Qatar—Raza came home.

— GEETANJALI KRISHNA

Excerpted from Mumbai Modern, DAG, 2012



Provenance



S. H. RAZA

Title: *Untitled (Bindu)*

Date: 1980

Medium: Acrylic on canvas

Size: 39.2 x 39.2 in. / 99.6 x 99.6 cm.

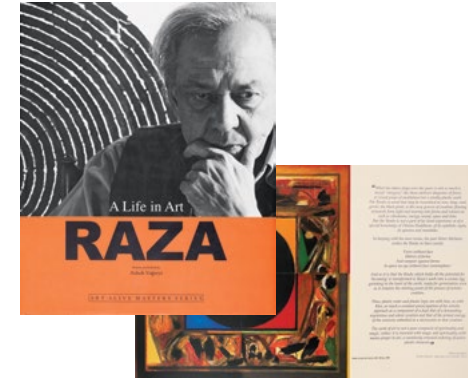
Sign: Signed and dated in English (lower centre)

'Raza / 80'

Acquired from the artist

Christie's, New York, March 23, 2011 (lot 554)

Christie's Private Sale, 2018



This work has been illustrated in:

Ballaney, Sonia, ed., *S. H. Raza: The Journey of a Master* (Vadehra Art Gallery: New Delhi, 2014), p. 78

Vajpeyi, Ashok, ed., *A Life in Art: Raza* (New Delhi: Art Alive Gallery, 2007), pp. 120-21

About DAG

DAG (formerly known as Delhi Art Gallery) recently completed twenty-five years as a premier art gallery and institution with collaborations for its first art-museums with the Archaeological Survey of India at Red Fort, New Delhi, and the Ministry of Textiles, Varanasi. Both were inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and fulfil DAG's attempt to democratise art and take it to the people. *Drishyakala*, as the museum in New Delhi is called, opened with four simultaneous exhibitions of a historic nature.

When it was established in 1993 in New Delhi's Hauz Khas Village, there was hardly any infrastructure for art in India, very few galleries and a pool of talented artists with no

means to promote or market themselves. In the 25 years since its existence, DAG has done seminal work in gaining recognition for India's modern masters whose legacies had been lost to time and apathy in the absence of sufficient viewers, collectors, promoters, curators or scholars.

DAG's focus has always been research-led. It has documented the works of the finest twentieth century artists, lifting them out of recent oblivion to get them their due appreciation while aligning them with various art movements across the country. Ranging all the way from pre-modern art to modern art practices and tracking the changes in response to constant innovation and experimentation,



From left to right: DAG's gallery in New York; the gallery regularly organises workshops with artists; DAG's Drishyakala art museum at Red Fort in collaboration with ASI

DAG has been responsible for the respect that artists of the Bengal 'School' and Santiniketan have earned alongside those of the Progressive Artists' Group, as well as modernists from New Delhi, Baroda, Cholamandal, Hyderabad and other art centres.

DAG's long-term perspective has been at the forefront of most of its activities, whether its historical curatorial exercises, its publishing and filmmaking programmes, its art appreciation

workshops and education initiatives, interfaces with the financial and corporate sectors by way of talks and curated walks, relationship building with institutions and museums around the world, participation in international art fairs, working with students or creating tactile aids for the specially-abled. DAG's galleries in New Delhi, Mumbai and New York are at the forefront of this movement and have provided a destination for those wanting to discover the enduring pull of Indian modern art.



DAG

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