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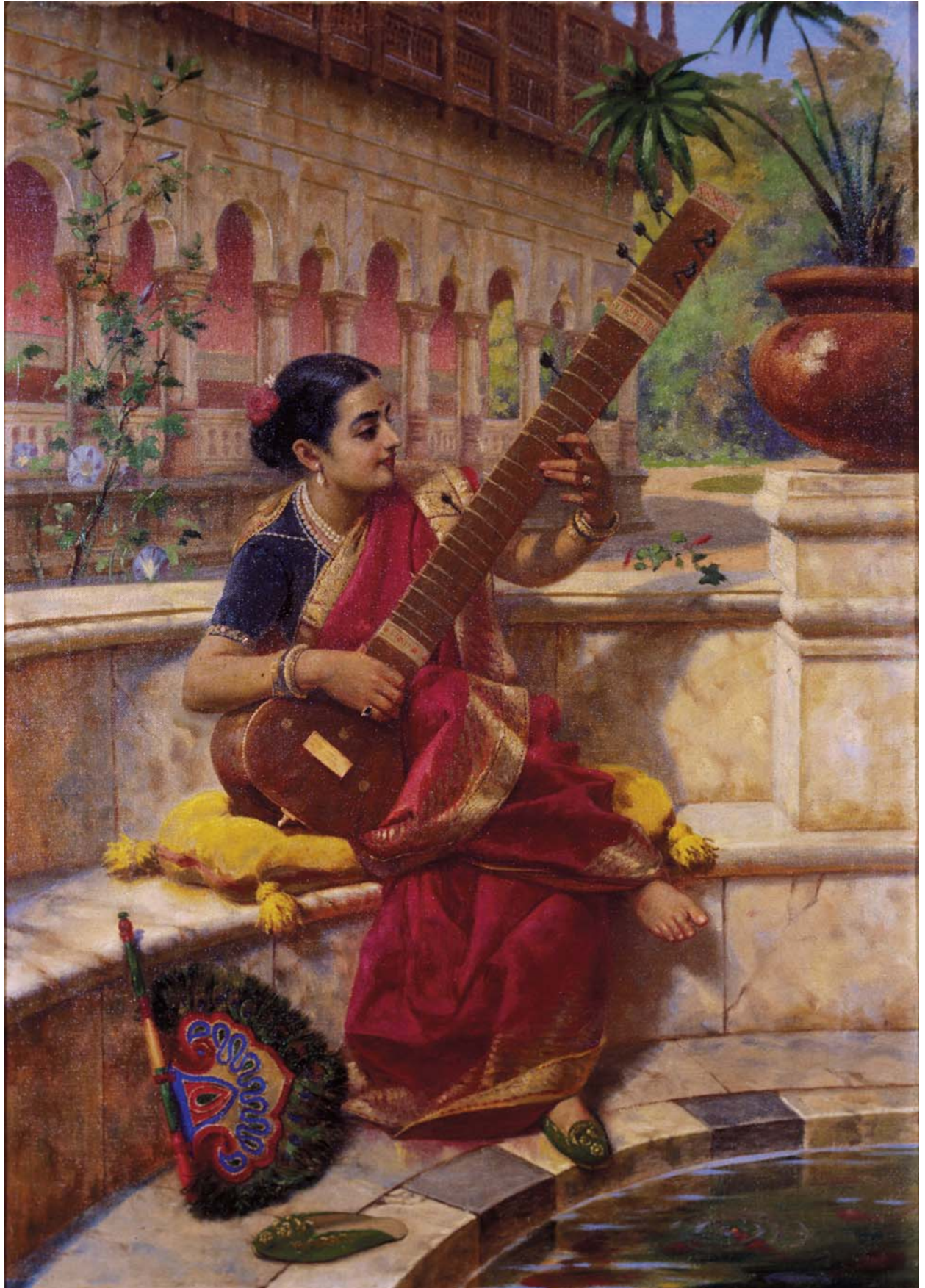
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SHAPING A NATION'S HERITAGE

Having assembled an outstanding private collection of Indian art, Rajiv and Roohi Savara are pondering how best to share it with the public

By **JULIA HALPERIN** • PHOTOGRAPHS BY NAGENDER CHHIKARA

75

RAJIV AND ROOHI SAVARA HAVE MANY RULES: “We never let an auction house buy us even a cup of coffee,” says Rajiv. “We never meet with any artist we collect.” The list goes on.

During the past 10 years, the New Delhi–based couple has amassed one of the world’s preeminent private collections of premodern and modern Indian art. Theirs is among the largest troves in private hands of paintings by Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), who is considered the father of modern Indian painting and whose works are seen in prints and on calendars throughout the country. A significant number of the Savaras’ works have been designated national treasures by the Indian government.

But don’t expect to spot the couple mingling at a star-studded art event. “I’ve never seen the inside of an auction in my life,” says Rajiv, the executive chairman of G&T Oil States Industries, an equipment producer for the offshore oil and gas industries. “And we never go to an opening. Never. It’s nonnegotiable.”

Why maintain a code of conduct so stringent? The Savaras aren’t acquiring art for themselves alone. They plan to donate all of their holdings to a museum within their lifetime. The decision, Rajiv says, was inspired by the tradition of philanthropy established by America’s great art collectors, such as the Rockefellers, whom the Savaras regard as role models. “To build a good collection, you must put your vanity aside. Art is a very incestuous community, especially in India. People can inflate your ego, and you start bidding on works because they tell you, ‘Oh, you must go for this,’” says Rajiv.

Right: Roohi and Rajiv Savara in their New Delhi home. Opposite: Raja Ravi Varma’s iconic *Kadambari*, painted during the late 1890s, from the Savara collection.

For now, the collection—which includes masterpieces by artists from the nationalist Bengali school (such as Ramkinkar Vaij and





Rabindranath Tagore and his nephews Abanindranath and Gaganendranath), as well as works by avant-garde Progressive school artists (among them V. S. Gaitonde, M.F. Husain, Ram Kumar, S. H. Raza, and F.N. Souza)—hangs in their home and has rarely been seen by the public. That will change in 2015, when the Savara collection will become a touring exhibition, to debut at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where Rajiv and Roohi, a retired lawyer, serve on the advisory committee for Indian and Himalayan art. The show will travel to two other venues in the United States and then on to England before it is shown in New Delhi.

Although the holdings date back to the 1890s, the Savara collection centers on two periods: the early 20th century, and the 1940s to the '60s, which they consider a golden age of Indian art. During that time of political instability and religious hostility, artists such as Husain and Raza rejected the nationalist style of Varma and the Tagores to fashion an international aesthetic. It is this emerging modernism that the Savaras trace in their collection. “We trained our eyes in Delhi, but also in American and French museums,” says Rajiv. “We realized that the Impressionists had a deep influence on the second generation of Indian artists coming up in the mid 20th century, the Progressive group. The best decision we made was to acquire works from that period. I don’t think other Indian collectors understood their significance.”

Their oldest work, an 1894 painting by Varma titled *Sita in Ashoka Grove*—which shows the goddess surrounded by women as she pines for her husband—presages that art-historical shift. “You can see Van Gogh’s influence in the leaves,” says Rajiv, “while the women are all Gauguin.” The picture was immediately hailed as a masterpiece; it earned a place in the only book on Varma published during the artist’s lifetime. Commissioned by the renowned banker Seth Lachman Das, the painting was appropriated by the British government after Das died and made its way to the home of the adopted son of Das’s widow after World War II.

That is where Rajiv found the painting six decades later. He flew from New Delhi to Mumbai on a day’s notice after having been told simply that there was an “excellent Ravi Varma painting.” The owner wasn’t ready to sell; Rajiv visited him every few months for more than two years before he finally agreed to part with the piece. “Someone from the West would come in and say, ‘What a pretty lady,’” Rajiv says. “For us, this is the goddess we have prayed to from the time we were born.”



ALL IMAGES: THE SAVARA FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS



The Savaras' dedication to Indian art extends beyond the works alone. They have assembled a comprehensive research library. "We began collecting books very early, because there was nowhere else to learn," says Roohi. The couple also mentors as many as 30 aspiring collectors across the globe and routinely advises auction houses, museums, and dealers on the authenticity of artworks. The Savara Foundation for the Arts, formed with Rajiv's brother, Rahul, sponsors exhibitions and scholarship. "We are a couple with relatively modest means," says Rajiv, adding that their collection is not the product of bottomless pockets but rather of careful planning. "When it is something really important, we find a way."

The couple has not yet determined which institution will receive their holdings. As a board member of the Barnes Foundation, which has suffered more than a decade of legal wrangling over control of its collection, Rajiv has seen firsthand the risks of a private-collection museum. Neither he nor Roohi wants to go that route. "We don't have the resources to set up a museum," he says. They

"WE WANT TO KEEP THE COLLECTION TOGETHER. THAT IS THE CHALLENGE."

have been in talks with institutions in both the United States and India. The choice is complicated by the fact that the national treasures in the Savara collection cannot be exported. "We want to keep the collection together. That is the challenge," says Rajiv. "If we don't find somewhere appropriate in India, the national treasures may have to be left behind." But they recognize the potential benefits offered by an American institution. "If the collection comes to an American museum, it will be seen. It will define Indian art from this period for those who see it," he says.

For now, the Savaras live with their holdings. Paintings line the walls of their New Delhi estate and are propped against bookshelves. Sculptures by Meera Mukherjee and Somnath Hore are on display throughout the house. "We joke that we have art-friendly dogs," Rajiv says of their two beagles. "They understand these are valuable things."

Just as the Savaras collect according to a strict ethical code, they also assiduously protect their art. They do not entertain more than six people at a time. "A lot of people think, 'Oh, you're so particular.' But can you imagine somebody spilling red wine on a work of art that has survived 150 years?"

The Savaras resist specifying exactly how many works are in their collection, despite the fact that Rajiv carries with him a binder of slides and a list of all the paintings they own. When Henri Loyrette, the director of the Musée du Louvre, recently inquired about the collection's size, Rajiv replied, "All I can say is that as far as quality is concerned, it is the finest collection of modern and premodern Indian art ever put together." Then he reminded Loyrette that "you hang a small painting, which is also one of the world's most important: the Mona Lisa." Rajiv paused. "It is not quantity but quality that matters." ■

Opposite, from top: Rajiv Savara spent two years pursuing Varma's *Sita in Ashoka Grove*, 1894; four female figures painted by Francis Newton Souza dominate a sitting room. Above: Varma's *Kadambari* presides over the Savaras' dining room. On the sideboard is an untitled terra-cotta bust from 1982 by Himmat Shah.