

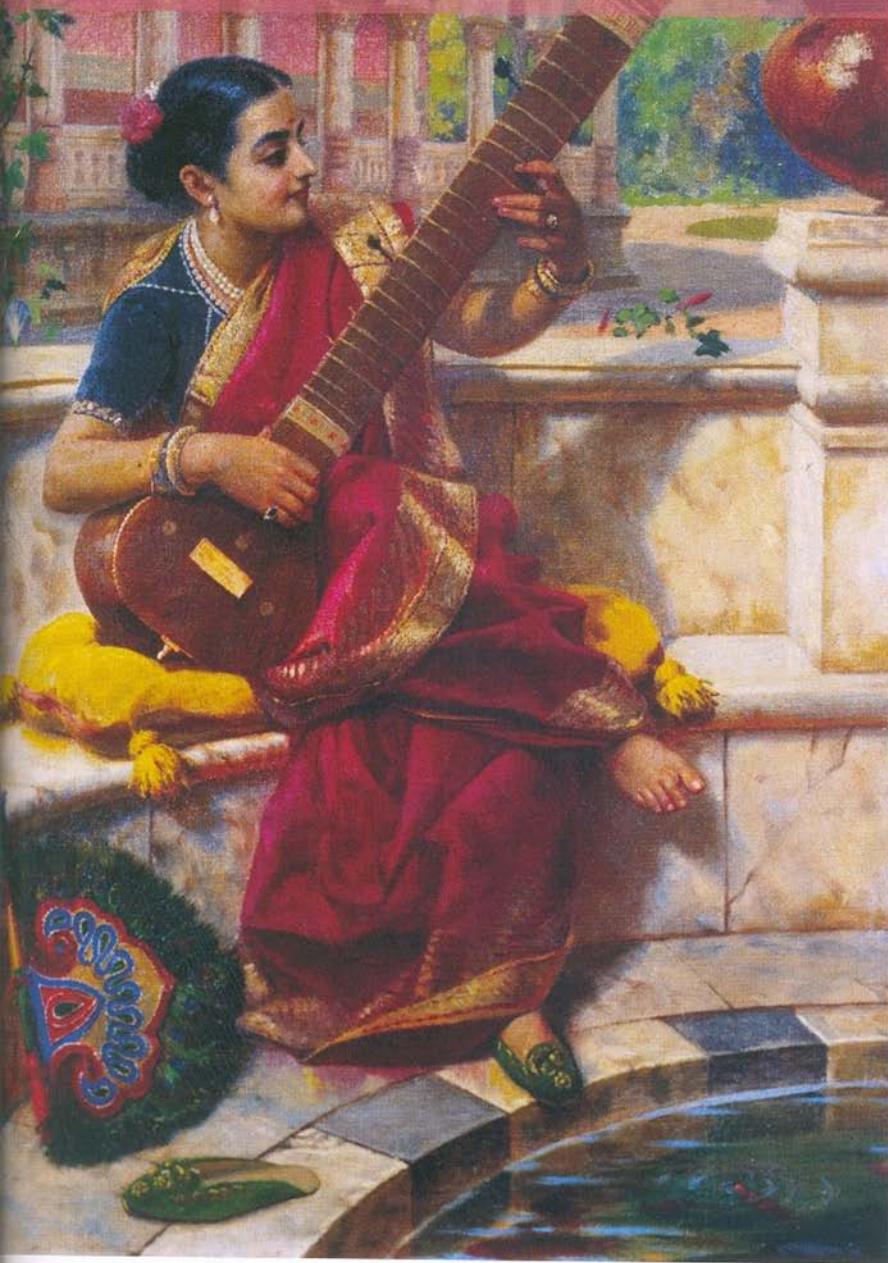
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Collecting Art



A Private Passion Extremely private New Delhi-based collectors Roohi and Rajiv Savara speak for the very first time in the public domain to **Meera Menezes** about their distinguished yet little known collection of Indian Pre-Modern and Modern Art.

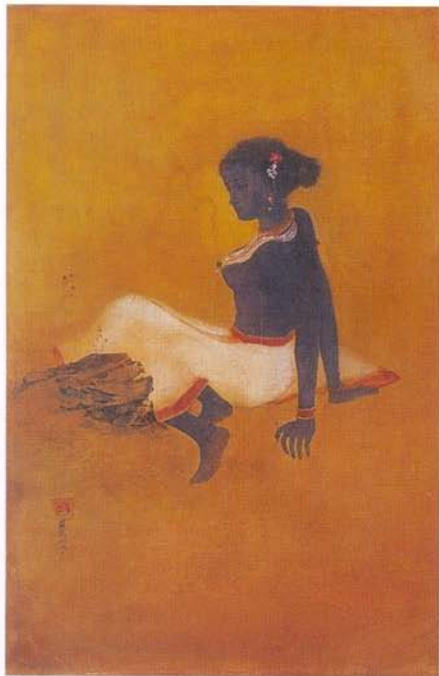


THERE IS A WRITE-UP THAT RAJIV Savara always carries in his briefcase. It describes the sale of the Impressionist Masters from the late Jacob Goldschmidt's Collection at a Sotheby's auction in London, in 1958. The highlight of this event was the sale of Paul Cezanne's *Garçon Au Gilet Rouge* (*The Boy in the Red Waistcoat*) to an anonymous bidder, for an astronomical £220,000. When the buyer, American collector Paul Mellon, was asked a week later by Jake Carter, Sotheby's roving representative in America, whether he had bought "that" wonderful picture, Mellon asked Carter "Did I pay too much?" and then answered himself, "You stand in front of a picture like that and what is money?"

These words by Mellon, whom Rajiv regards as his guru, guide him in his acquisition of works of art. For this passionate collector, it is the sheer pleasure of contact with beauty that he cannot personally create but that thankfully he can acquire and possess. As he emphatically states, "Good art never comes cheap. So, if you have to have the finest, you pay for it."

Together with his wife, Roohi, he has painstakingly put together one of the most significant collections of Pre-Modern and Modern Indian Art in the country. They have also built an impressive collection of Japanese Meiji Art and 19th century Indo-Portuguese and Anglo-Indian furniture. What singles out the Roohi and Rajiv Savara Family Collection is that rather than aiming for a collection representing the entire range of Pre-Modern and Modern Indian artists, their passion has driven, and continues to drive them, to collect select artists based on a courageous commitment to a particular vision of art history – one that is based on the belief

Raja Ravi Varma and his studio. *Kadambari*. Oil on canvas. 72.5 cms x 51 cms. From the 1890s.



Abanindranath Tagore. *Black Girl.* Wash on paper. 32.1 cms x 22.8 cms. From the 1920s.



Ram Kinker Baij. *Gandhi.* Bronze. 19" x 11 1/2". From the 1950s.



Ram Kumar. *Man on Street.* Oil on board. 110 cms x 60 cms. 1957.

that modern culture will be defined by the achievements of only a few great artists. Unlike many collectors, who acquire in an eclectic and haphazard manner, one sees a definite method in their 'madness'. Accordingly, their very personal collection of Pre-Modern and Modern Indian Art encompasses artists who they believe have made a difference and will stand the test of time, say fifty or even hundred years hence. For them, the period between the '50s and the '60s is *the* defining period of modern Indian art.

At their home in a quiet cul-de-sac in New Delhi, there are exquisite works by Rabindranath Tagore and his nephews, Gaganendranath and Abanindranath, on display – the personal thought that has gone into the hanging and arrangement of their pictures and sculptures is very evident. Rajiv will whip out a magnifying glass to point out the detailing in the works besides highlighting the influences of Cubism or even Whistler's painting techniques. A famed sculpture of Mahatma Gandhi by Ram Kinker Baij and works by Somnath Hore find pride of place in the Savara home, which has been built around their art collection. Among the modern Indian artists, you can see seminal paintings by M. F. Husain, S. H. Raza, F. N. Souza and Ram Kumar. Their large collection of abstract

works on paper and canvas by V. S. Gaitonde, whom Rajiv simply refers to as "the God of Art", is a pleasure to behold.

More recently, the Savaras have turned their attention to bronzes by Meera Mukherjee, whom they admire for her passion, dedication and rootedness in Indian culture. Rajiv compares her sculpture *Asboka at Kalinga* with Michelangelo's *Pietà* in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, seeing both monumental works as capturing a poignant human emotion – a mother's grief at the death of her son and Ashoka's remorse at the thousands of deaths during his victory at Kalinga. The Savaras also admire Bhupen Khakhar for his courageous exploration of homosexuality in art, having in their collection both, paintings as well as sculptures by the artist. A wall dedicated to Benode Behari Mukherjee includes *Trees*, Atul Dodiya's tribute to Mukherjee; a portrait of Mukherjee by M. F. Husain; and Mukherjee's own works, thus presenting works by Indian artists across three generations.

Rajiv is like a man possessed once he sees a work he wants. An exceptional gouache of Carcassonne from '52 by S. H. Raza was on offer at an auction in 2006. Its sale made Raza the most expensive French



Meera Mukherjee. *Flying Horse*. Bronze, Lost Wax Process. 67 cms x 19 cms x 17.8 cms. 1971.

artist alive. After the auction, Rajiv's friend Yvette Kumar called him up. Rajiv told her, "I had two choices before me – one was to have a sleepless night knowing that I was in debt. The other was to have a sleepless night knowing that I had lost the painting". Yvette exclaimed, "My God, you are in debt!" "I told her she was right. There was no way, I would have ever let the painting go," Rajiv reminisces.

There are certain cardinal rules that the Savaras follow when buying a work of art. For one, they never purchase a work of art without first physically seeing the piece – even if it entails Rajiv having to fly from one part of the world to another to view it. Secondly, the couple consciously does not befriend artists so that they do not influence them in any manner. As Roohi explains, "We don't interact with artists because it is a romance with a work of art. It is a romance, which I do not want mediated through an artist. What the artist has to say about it or what his thought processes were or are may be interesting but I would rather read about it."

There is, however, a great deal of research and thought that goes into the purchase of any work. This is a trait that the Savaras have acquired from their peer collectors in the West. Apart from the late Paul Mellon, Rajiv's role models are the great American collectors Duncan Phillips and Dr. Alfred Barnes. Rajiv was therefore understandably elated on being nominated recently to the Board of Trustees of The Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia – the first for any Indian! The Barnes' possess one of the largest collections of Impressionist Art in the world.

For the couple, art is a form of worship, or as they put it, "nirvana for the soul", having committed never to make monies off it. The exhibition *Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose (1882-1966)*, shown at the San Diego Museum of Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art last year had the Savaras and the Savara Foundation for the Arts listed as the primary sponsors. They are very clear that their artworks, many of them

uncontested masterpieces, are never going to be put on the block. The Savaras regard them as their 'babies' and do everything to pamper them. They have special UV protection on their windowpanes and have even roped in lighting specialists from London to ensure museum quality lighting in their home.

At one stage, the Savaras had seriously toyed with the idea of building a museum, inspired as they were by the late Duncan Phillips, whose home was converted into a museum and houses the famous 'Phillips Collection' in Washington DC. However, a six-volume book on what it takes to build a world-class museum made them realize that they were simply not equipped for it. The couple decided that they would spend their resources collecting the best that Indian art had to offer instead of pouring their money into bricks and mortar. Referring to the books, Rajiv reminisces laughingly, "Those were the best \$400 I ever spent".

The Savaras guard their privacy zealously (they did not want a photograph of themselves to go with this profile, for instance) and prefer to regard themselves as "incubators for other collectors" – they advise aficionados to collect with passion and with a sense of purpose. For them, collecting is not just a matter of buying works but is about leaving behind a legacy. They do not want to be judged by the future generation as having taken a wrong turn. This implies that often they have to forgo something that catches their eye. As Rajiv emphasizes, "As a collector you see a nice work of art and you feel you must possess it. But to be able to kill your whim or fancy and not buy it so that you never lose your sense of purpose, makes all the difference."

If one has to identify a single distinguishing feature of the Roohi and Rajiv Savara Family Collection, it would be passion. Passion is evident both, in the works themselves and in the relationship the two of them have with the works.