

The New York Times

Friday, May 28, 2010

SPECIAL REPORT: ART IN PERSPECTIVE

Creating a Narrative of Indian Modernism

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Published: May 28, 2010

NEW DELHI — For a man who grew up knowing nothing about art, Rajiv Savara has amassed quite a collection. In a decade, Mr. Savara, a first-generation entrepreneur, and his wife, Roohi, have built a museum-worthy selection of Indian works spanning the late-19th to mid-20th centuries.



Nagender Chhikara

In a decade, Rajiv Savara, a first-generation entrepreneur, and his wife, Roohi, have built a museum-worthy selection of Indian art works.

Housed in a gated residence in New Delhi that overlooks the Idgah, a 600-year-old monument, the Roohi and Rajiv Savara Family Collection, as they call it, can be distinguished by its focus on specific artists who the Savaras say they believe will, “50 years hence, define pre-Modern and Modern Indian art.” By this they refer to the periods spanning pre-independent India from 1890 to 1947 and after independence, from 1947 to 1985.

While many newly minted millionaires in India seek art to hang as status symbols in their homes, the Savaras, who made their money in oil and gas, have “chosen to focus on and create a narrative of Indian Modernism, especially leaning toward artists working in Calcutta and Mumbai,” said Dr. Darielle Mason, a curator of Indian and Himalayan art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, in an e-mail message. “Because of the quality of each work, the Savara collection is coming to tell the story of Indian Modernism on a level not yet presented, and one that will be able to communicate to a global audience the vitality and originality of this art.”

“They have a superb collection,” said Maithili Parekh, who runs Sotheby’s business in India. Mallika Advani, former head of Christie’s in India and now an independent art dealer, agreed. “It’s unusual to find a collection with such depth. They have selected works that best represent the artist, which is critical to being a good collector.”

The Savaras are recognized internationally as experts on Indian art. They sit on the advisory committee of Indian and Himalayan art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, are trustees at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia and were the principal sponsors of a 2008 exhibition on Nandalal Bose at the San Diego Museum of Art. They are also members of the advisory board of the newly created Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in Noida, outside of New Delhi, which focuses on Modern and contemporary art. And they run the Savara Foundation for the Arts, which provides grants and scholarships for Indian art studies.

The couple own rare and historically significant works, including one of the largest private collections of paintings by Raja Ravi Varma, considered India’s first Modern painter. They also own the largest number of works by Vasudeo Gaitonde (1924-2001), India’s leading abstract artist , as well as significant works by the Bengal school’s Tagore family.

Trained as an accountant, Mr. Savara, 50, “grew up in a regular, middle-class Punjabi household.” Shopping for furniture in New Delhi one day in 1999, he and Mrs. Savara, 49, got talking with a young man who ended up selling them two

works by Maqbool Fida Husain, a living artist whom Forbes magazine said has been called “the Picasso of India.”

That young man was Amol Vadhera, whose family owns Vadhera Art Gallery in New Delhi.

“It’s crazy,” said Mr. Savara. “You go to buy furniture and you build up one of the most important collections of Indian art. There was no looking back.”

Mr. Savara — who is the managing director of G&T Oilfield and Offshore Services, an equipment and services company for the oil and gas industry — reads voraciously on art, including framing, storage and conservation. “I keep telling all young collectors, spend the maximum time on reading,” he said. “I don’t understand how someone will buy a quarter-million-dollar work of art without even studying the artist.”

He and his wife also visit as many museums as they can on their travels. “People say why Cézanne, why Picasso, but that’s how our eyes became sharp,” said Mrs. Savara, a lawyer who no longer practices but uses her legal skills to manage the collection. “We weren’t able to see much Indian art because we don’t have many museums here, so we really learned from the West.”

The artists whose works they own read like a who’s who of the Indian art pantheon: Bose, Husain, Somnath Hore, Syed Haider Raza, Ram Kumar, Francis Newton Souza and Meera Mukherjee, to name a few. But more important, the Savaras have put energy into acquiring “the very finest, most transformative pieces available, the masterpieces” by these artists, according to Dr. Mason of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Many of the works have been classified “national treasures” by the Indian government, which means they can never be exported out of the country.

Mr. Savara says he always carries with him a printout of all the images he owns: “It motivates me to keep working.” But he refuses to divulge how many works are on the list, and shies away from any money talk, quoting the American philanthropist Paul Mellon, “you stand in front of a painting like that and what is money?” Auction prices for works by Varma, however, have fetched anywhere

from \$600,000 to \$2 million, while works by Gaitonde have commanded \$700,000 to \$1.5 million in the past three to five years. One of Husain's works, "Bewildered Brown," which hangs above the Savaras' bar, was sold at auction in September 2009 for \$338,500, according to a Sotheby's press release.

The Savaras say they adhere to stringent rules in pursuit of their art, including never allowing themselves to be entertained by gallerists or auction houses, never befriending artists, rarely making money from their art (they've sold a total of four paintings throughout their collecting career) and actively mentoring potential collectors. Their home has museum-quality lighting and windows and is blacked out for much of the day to protect the artworks.

Because the Savaras are extremely private, their collection has seldom been seen. The couple, who have two daughters — Tejshree, 23, and Taarini, 16 — eschew entertaining at home and attending social art events. They largely shun the news media.

And in a culture where giving away an inheritance is rare, they are planning to donate their entire collection to a museum — they have yet to decide which one — within their lifetime. They cite as their heroes American art patrons like Mellon, Samuel Guggenheim and Duncan Phillips. "They distributed their wealth wisely," Mr. Savara said. "Private enterprise fueled the creation of incredible institutions in the U.S., and that's what required here too. God gives you one chance in a lifetime to create a legacy. This collection really belongs to the people of India."