

The Gaur collection gives works on paper their due

A new book featuring works from the Umesh and Sunanda Gaur collection highlights paper's central role in artistic practice



Anupam Sud, 'Tribute', 1989. Images: courtesy Umesh and Sunanda Gaur

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It is always fascinating to see the early works of artists to gain insight into their journey.

Bombay Beggars, a 1944 work painted by Francis Newton Souza when he was still an art student, offers exactly that. A watercolour on paper, it shows the initial steps in his lifelong preoccupation with figuration and nudes. The work, painted when Souza was around 20, is a powerful depiction of the disenfranchised and marginalised in Bombay (now Mumbai).

“The group is shown unclothed—possibly the first among such paintings in which he dispensed with the need for apparel altogether. His later paintings would feature nudes as well as landscapes but in circumstances vastly different from this,” states an essay in the book *Paper Trails: Modern Indian Works On Paper From The Gaur Collection*.

Several significant paintings, such as *Bombay Beggars*, are mentioned in this rare piece of scholarly writing about works on paper from post-independence India. Published by Mapin recently, in conjunction with an exhibition at the Grinnell College Museum of Art, US, between September–December, the book draws from the seminal Umesh and Sunanda Gaur collection. The exhibition was curated by Prof. Tamara Sears, a specialist in South Asian art and architecture, who also edited the book, which features essays by Michael Mackenzie, Paula Sengupta, Emma Osle, Rebecca M Brown, Kishore Singh and Swathi Gorle.

Paper Trails comprises 149 illustrations—watercolours, drawings, etchings, sketches and lithographs by Indian modernists who came of age in the decades following independence. The Gaur collection of works on paper is significant for its depth and diversity, with artists like Souza, M.F. Husain, Zarina, Anupam Sud, K.G. Subramanyan, Bhupen Khakhar, Chittoprasad, Haren Das, Arpita Singh and Somnath Hore featuring in it.

Based in New Jersey, US, the couple—Umesh is the head of an asset management firm and Sunanda a professor of paediatrics at the Rutgers Medical School—has been collecting modern Indian art since 1995 and is today considered quite an authority on the subject. No wonder then that works from the Gaur collection continue to be part of significant museum shows.



Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, 'The Mappamundi Suite 4, Marichika II', 2003

For instance, *Unstill Waters*, an exhibition that draws attention to environmental issues and is based on the Gaur's gift of Indian contemporary photography to the Smithsonian Institution, is now on display at the National Museum of Asian Art in Washington, DC. The Smithsonian is also planning another exhibition based on their collection of works by contemporary Indian artists. This will include photography, works on paper, prints, paintings, sculptures, videos and installations.

“Back in the 1990s, when we started visiting auctions in New York, we were able to buy works by artists such as Tyeb Mehta, S.H. Raza, M.F. Husain and Akbar Padamsee,” says Umesh Gaur, who was in Delhi last month for the India Art Fair. These canvases, which were coming into the market at the time, had been acquired by diplomats from the artists in the 1950s–60s and were being put on sale by their children and grandchildren. “But at that time there was not enough interest in works on paper, which were priced lower than the rest. However, we realised that some very significant works on paper were coming to the auctions, and we ended up buying some important and rare drawings and prints,” he says. “Before we knew it, we had some of the best works on paper in the US.”

For instance, Krishna Reddy—one of the world’s best-known printmakers—created only about 55 unique prints in his lifetime. The Gaurs have 45 of them. “His ability to handle colour and viscosity is unparalleled. If a print of Krishna Reddy comes into the market, you can bet that I will buy that work, as I am constantly looking to add to the collection,” says Gaur.

As both academic and audience interest in modern Indian printmaking grows—with significant exhibitions in recent years at the National Gallery of Modern Art, and at the Asia Society India Centre in partnership with DAG—one can’t help but admire the foresight of the Gaurs.

To fully comprehend the significance of their collection, it’s important to understand the key role printmaking has played in the evolution of Indian modernism. Though perceived as a lesser medium owing to the lower cost of material, which also impacted the price of the work, paper works possess a certain intimacy due to their scale. “Paper has also played an essential role in artists’ creative processes, both in working through compositional details from larger commissions, and in the production of a fully finalised painting or drawing,” writes Sears in her essay, *The Intimacy Of Paper*, in the book.

She adds that in modern and contemporary India, paper offered artists a way of cultivating transnational modernist expression while continuing to explore the potentialities of a medium that had deeper roots in the older traditions of the subcontinent. “Simply put, highlighting works on paper draws attention to the central role that the medium has played in the history of both Indian modernism and artistic production within the subcontinent,” writes Sears.

The book helps one navigate the concerns and themes that have informed this genre. From complex geographies and ideas of home—both real and imaginary—as seen in the work of Zarina, Arpita Singh and Atul Dodiya, to political and social themes in Hore’s etchings and drawings on the effects of war and famine, and Subramanyan’s 2004 depiction of the communal rioting during the Best Bakery tragedy in Vadodara (2002), *Paper Trails* focuses on a myriad subjects.

Personal and metaphor narratives emerge in Khakhar's *Birth Of Water* and Anupam Sud's works. "The medium and the different vocabularies in paper—all of these held an interest to me. The works, being smaller, allow you to come closer as a viewer. They are more interactive—especially if you see the level of detailing in Laxma Goud's works. They continue to fascinate me," says Gaur.