

Outside the Lines: Secular Vision in South Asian Modernism

Exhibition: January 18 – February 22, 2020

Press Preview & V.I.P. Reception: Saturday, January 18, 6:00pm – 8:00pm

35 Great Jones St., New York NY 10012

Gulam Rasool Santosh (India, 1929-1997)

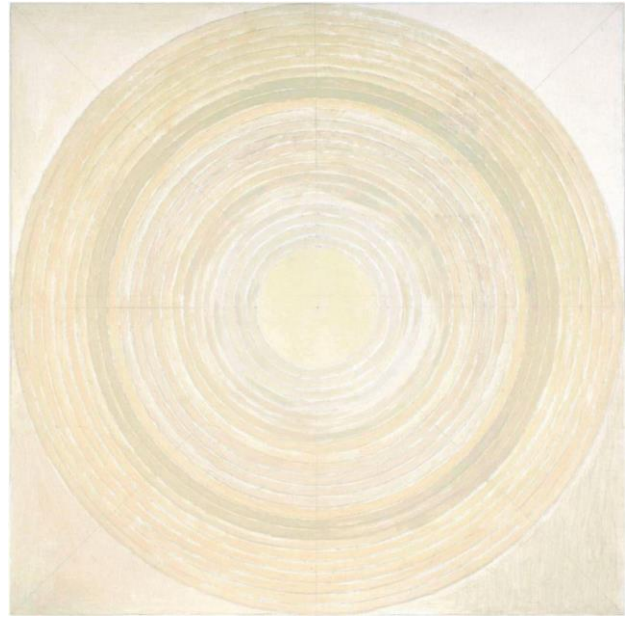
Maqbool Fida Husain (India, 1913-2011)

Sadequain (Pakistan, 1930-1987)

Sayed Haider Raza (India, 1922-2016)

Aicon Art is pleased to present *Outside the Lines: Secular Vision in South Asian Modernism*, a group exhibition that brings together artists who have drawn inspiration from a collective cultural consciousness and produced enduring bodies of work that speak to secular, human truths. Against a backdrop of religiously-motivated political struggle - similar to the present moment - these artists attempted to negotiate a syncretic pluralism while trying to develop a personal idiom. Critic Atteqa Ali has summarized the creative impetus of the time as follows:

'In the mid-twentieth century, India was a new democratic country carved out of the subcontinent and led by the Indian National Congress. During this nascent period of independence, its citizens sought to define its parameters and understand its reason for being. The cultural sphere was highly politicized. Authors wrote stories and poems that critiqued the way nationalist leaders handled the events leading up to independence and the partition of India and Pakistan. Within the burgeoning art scene, artists introduced themselves as modern and secular practitioners.'¹



S.H. Raza, *Shanti-Bindu*, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 47.25 x 47.25 in.

Gulam Rasool Santosh

In the mid-60s, G.R. Santosh developed his own individual style, in sharp contrast to the art of the Bengal School – seeking to focus on compositional elements rather than combining modern aesthetics with folk influences. Born Gulam Rasool Dar to a Shia Muslim family in Srinagar, Kashmir, the self-taught artist took on his wife's Hindu name 'Santosh' as his own, in a move opposing patriarchy and religion. In Kashmir, he found inspiration in the Hindu and Buddhist tantric cults that co- existed along with Sufi mysticism which had a deep impact on his works. His visit to Amarnath caves in 1964 made him stop painting to study Tantra – a philosophy centered around the concept of cosmic creation. He created pure forms that combined male and female forms, seeking to fuse the sexual and the transcendental. The artists' contribution paved the way for what has come to be known as the neo-tantric school.

Sadequain

Syed Sadequain Ahmed Naqvi or **Sadequain** as he was known, was one of the first Pakistani artists to gain international recognition, embarking on his notable career with an award from the Biennale de Paris in 1961. The artist was born in Amroha, India, descending from a family of Qur'an scribes and is recognized as the

¹ Ali, Atteqa. "Modern Art in India." In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mind/hd_mind.htm (October 2004)



Sadequain, *Blue Calligraphy*, oil on canvas, 33 x 48 in.

foremost calligrapher and painter of Pakistan, responsible for the renaissance of Islamic calligraphy in the country since the late 1960s and bringing the art form into the mainstream. In the late 1940s, Sadequain joined the Progressive Writers and Artists Movement and through his career, produced works of thematic content reflected by his commitment to social justice, and the progressive ideals of his peers of writers and poets. Sadequain's unique visual vocabulary stemmed from the complex merging of Eastern (calligraphy) and Western (figurative) traditions in art, alongside Hindu and Muslim ideology. Sweeps of a calligraphic brush are echoed in the artist's flamboyant approach to painting figures but his forms and themes are mostly biographical.

Maqbool Fida Husain

The endless exploration of his cultural roots and his willingness to absorb diverse influences, from both the Eastern and Western art historical canons, made M. F. Husain arguably the most celebrated and internationally recognized Indian artists of the 20th century. Much like the early career of Pop Artist James Rosenquist, who made a living as a billboard painter in New York City's Time Square, Husain painted billboards for feature films in Mumbai, an early experience that fueled his life-long passion for Bollywood. In 1947, he joined the Bombay Progressive Artist's Group (PAG) – the most influential group of Modern artists in India, seeking new forms of expression to capture and convey India's complex past, along with its emerging post-colonial future. In his early work, Husain harked back to his roots, incorporating themes that blended folk, tribal and mythological art. He also received recognition as a printmaker, a photographer, and a filmmaker. Entering into the 1980s and 1990s, Husain painted his country with the eye of a man who knew his subject uncomfortably well; he knew India's insecurities, blemishes and inner turmoil. Beyond the controversy that eventually led him into exile, he was above all an artist radically and permanently redefining Indian art, while remaining unafraid to confront the growing social and political issues of his country's transformations.

Sayed Haider Raza

Since he began painting in the early 1940s in India, Raza's subject, style and technique have evolved in distinct stages through his migration to France, his interaction with Abstract Expressionism through the 1950s and 1960s and his return to a core Indian aesthetic philosophy in the 1970's. These periods of Raza's work, though distinct, form a continuum - one that is a testament to the artist's constant negotiation to develop his painterly vision. In 1948, after completing his studies at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, he travelled across Europe and then settled down in Paris where he lived and exhibited his work until 2010 when he moved back to India. His numerous visits to India and an urge to forge a new artistic direction brought forth the abstract concept of Bindu which, according to him, is the center of creation and existence. After the introduction of Bindu he added newer dimensions to his thematic oeuvre in the following decades. Breaking away from frames like nation and specific locations in time and space, Raza's body of work is trans-cultural in its appeal.

It is an honor to present the work of this distinguished group of artists who have traversed the space between early European modernist techniques and the ever-shifting cultural and historical identities of India. Underscoring the important contribution of these artists, writer Tausif Noor notes, 'As fundamentalism threatens forms of secular dissent, it seems vital to re-examine the Progressives' idealistic vision of India as a nation of commingling and complementary differences.'²

Please contact Aicon Art (dheeya@aicongallery.com) for more information.

² Noor, Tausif. "The Iconoclasts." *frieze*, issue 198, October 2018