

TYEB MEHTA

Introduction

Tyeb Mehta was born on 26th July 1925 in Kapadvanj, Gujarat. He grew up in the Crawford market neighbourhood of Mumbai in the orthodox Shiite Dawoodi Bohra community. The Dawoodi Bohras are recognized to be a close-knit community that, like many Muslims, observes the tenets of Islam. From a young age, Mehta developed an interest in cinema and art. The 1947 partition and its aftermath significantly impacted Mehta's work. Witnessing a mob stoning a man to death and many other gut-wrenching incidents during the post-partition riots left an indelible impression on him.

Education

During the initial stages of his career, Tyeb Mehta got an opportunity to work as a movie editor at Famous Studios, a cinema lab in Mumbai. Back then, the work of an editor was hard as it involved manual editing. Mehta thoroughly enjoyed the work because of his passion for cinema. However, he soon realized that his passion for art was much stronger than his passion for cinema.¹ Hence, he decided to study at the famous Sir J.J. School of Arts where he met Akbar Padamsee and joined the Progressive Artists' Group along with other renowned artists like S.H. Raza, F.N. Souza, and M.F. Husain. As part of the group, he embraced modernism and began experimenting with his style.

Early Works

Following a voluntary separation from his extended family at the age of 29, Mehta went to London in 1954 to study Western arts, where he specialized in old art masters and European modernists. In 1956, he completed his first set of artwork. His inspiration stemmed from artist Francis Bacon's macabre distortion. Mehta's modest economic success commenced with his first solo exhibition in 1959 at Mumbai's Jehangir Art Gallery, where he sold his first few artworks.² Following the show, Mehta, his wife Sakina, and his son Yusuf moved to London, where they lived from 1959 to 1964.

¹ <https://www.culturalindia.net/indian-art/painters/tyeb-mehta.html>

² Tyeb Mehta by Bose, Arani Sep 01, 2009
[ArtAsiaPacific: Tyeb Mehta \(1925–2009\)](#)



Oil on hardboard
89 x 59cm (35 1/16 x 23 1/4in).

This painting from 1959 demonstrates his then-customary use of strong impasto, a homage to the Parisian schools of painting. Mehta's fascination with the figure is seen in the work 'Pink Figure.' The Pink Figure is faceless yet not inanimate. Similarly, the figure's impassive face and distant & pensive stance provide a sense of presence and tangibility.⁴The figure, however, whether attenuated or streamlined, denotes the presence of a human being: it is an incarnation, literally a fleshing-out, of the self's aspirations, fears, desires, and transformative potentialities.

³ Provenance:

Private U.K. collection

Acquired from Gallery Chemould, Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai in the 1960s or early 70s

⁴[Bonhams : Tyeb Mehta \(India, 1929-2009\) Untitled \(Figure\)](#)

Interpreting Mehta's Art

Mehta's resplendent images, his falling Figures (which were the representative of the fear and anxiety in the face of a violent and unavoidable cataclysm in society), trusted bulls, shamanic women, and rickshaw-pullers fused with their soul-destroying vehicles defined the basic elements of his work. In Tyeb Mehta's paintings, three noticeable factors— are the isolation of the figure, the violent distortions of the form, and the complex use of colours. The colours provide a visual hold and create an enigmatic presence. Further, the violence and the deformed figures allow the viewers to understand his interpretation of our political history, the affairs of our daily life ,and the post-partition events.

While each artwork conveys a unique amalgamation of anguish and terror, almost all of Mehta's work contains distorted figures. Simultaneously, by using mythological metaphors as a framework for his paintings, Mehta often elevates the distorted figures to a mythical realm where violence is equated with goodness.⁵ Thus, within this framework, violence seems like an act of ultimate sacrifice or salvation which causes the protagonist in the paintings to display anguish and demand for our sympathy.

Further, Mehta's compositions were born out of suffocation and angst against the violence and cruelty he witnessed. His unending contemplation eventually produced some of his best works. His compositions were never crowded as he aimed to capture the viewer's attention and highlight a central theme in the image. He kept the large background devoid of depth or texture to enhance the essence of intensive, yet subterranean activity, distilled by absorption and contemplation. Action and movement were conveyed through his paintings, rather than simply depicted.

His Work During the 1960s

This brief transitional period came in Mehta's work during the time between the early somber portraits he made with heavy impasto and his discovery of the diagonal and complete flattening of the painted surface to remove all traces of brushstroke. In his Expressionist works from the mid-1960s, Mehta relied on vibrant, animated brushstrokes in bright colours to portray his subjects.

⁵ GLOBUS Journal of Progressive Education A Refereed Research Journal Vol 5 / No 1 / Jan-Jun 2015 ISSN: 2231-1335

<https://www.globusedujournal.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/krishanchand.pdf>



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oil on canvas

59 1/4 x 49 in. (150.5 x 124.5 cm.)

This monumental painting from 1965 is possibly Mehta's earliest exploration of the seminal trope of the Falling Figure in his work. This subject embodies the exceptional synergy between Mehta's artistic, political, and social concerns. As his biographer Ranjit Hoskote notes, the artist "started with images which haunted him, burning themselves deep into his mental circuitry [...] these obsessional images, autobiographical in import, gradually gained significance as Tyeb externalized them, reflected on them, and allowed them to shimmer against the wider canvas of society [...]. The falling figure was born from

⁶ PROVENANCE

Kumar Gallery, New Delhi

Acquired from the above by Nordness Gallery, New York, 1965

Bose Pacia, New York

Acquired from the above, circa the early 2000s

another struggle with the self: while Tyeb had decided to abjure the narrative, he found that the accentuation of formal explication could accentuate the forcefulness of the experience [...]. This reading also locates the falling figure in a genealogy that dates back to Greek antiquity, as a descendent of Icarus or Phaethon, the hero punished for an unwitting transgression, an unintended display of pride or recklessness; thus, the evocation of a free fall is also a minatory reminder of the gravity of fate.” (R. Hoskote, Tyeb Mehta: Ideas Images Exchanges, New Delhi, 2005, pp. 14, 17)

Painted in an aqueous palette dominated by shades of blue and green, this early “Falling Figure” represents both a loss of individual control and a collective fall from grace as atonement for mankind’s hubris.⁷ It is equally influenced by the artist’s personal experiences and his study of French Existentialist thinkers such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre ,and André Malraux.

Here, Mehta directly contrasts the cool colour scheme with the hurtling subject’s open mouth, flared nostrils ,and flailing limbs, heightening the moment of undisguised fear he has captured. While the frozen motion of the subject reminds us of a single frame clipped from a movie. The grid-like format of the painting foreshadows the next big transformation in his work, where prominent diagonals begin to divide the painted surface, and often the figure, into discrete planes of colour.

The Diagonal Series

In 1969, Tyeb was frustrated due to his inability to conceive an extraordinarily creative idea. When his frustration reached its peak, he simply took out a brush and drew a black diagonal line across his canvas, hoping that such an act would relieve him of his frustration. However, the simple stroke eventually transformed into a new idea.

The diagonal which he introduced in the very beginning, slashing the canvas in two, dismembering the image and yet the only link between the limbs, is there in many of the works. A pictorial element that serves to divide and energize the canvas, is usually shown as a jagged thick bright line running through the painting that both literally and metaphorically splinters the figure into pieces.

⁷ [TYEB MEHTA \(1925-2009\), Untitled \(Falling Figure\) | Christie's](#)

The head, torso, arms ,and legs are all shown as dismembered parts, and yet, there is an overarching intangible element that keeps the painting cohesive and unified. What simply began as a formal exercise in relating line to colour on a flat plane suddenly turned into something very disturbing.



Oil on canvas
69 x 59 in. (175.2 x 149.8 cm.)

The above work from 1972 shows a bright yellow diagonal that streaks across the canvas slashing the central seated female figure and the surrounding space into two halves. Unlike other works from the same series, the dismembered figure is equally distributed between both halves, thereby balancing the work, Even though Tyeb has used a bright red for the lower half, the monumentality

⁸ [Diagonal | Pundoles](#)

of the figure's face and torso draws the eye automatically upward. The fractured form and the jarring bright areas of colour juxtaposed against each are also fraught with emotional overtones. They are a reflection of Tyeb's vulnerabilities and concerns, centred around man's solitary journey through life and living through the horrors of Partition.

His figures, maybe fractured and disjointed but have been conceived through a highly complex thought process. As the artist states: *'All the distortions and dislocations are done to create space. You put a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional subject and there has to be a mutation for it to come to an end...there is so much mutation that when it reaches the viewer it has another power... The problem with us is that we see the figure. But if we see the painting and forget about the figure you'll be seeing areas concerning each other.'* (Tyeb Mehta in conversation with Yashodhara Dalmia, 1989, reprinted in Yashodhara Dalmia, Tyeb Mehta Triumph of Vision, New Delhi, 2011, p. 13)

The Falling Figures— Kali

Throughout the 1980s, Mehta's paintings grew bolder. He painted a series featuring the royal blue form of the Hindu goddess Kali. He also developed his motifs of the rickshaw, the falling figure, the trussed bull, and the bird by combining two of these motifs into a single canvas.

Mehta's introduction to Kali happened in 1985 when he was an artist-in-residence at the Kala Bhavana, Viva Bharati University. It was during this time that Mehta realized the impact, the historical context, and the importance of Kali in the Indian philosophical scenario. Mehta's Kali is a metaphor for the past and the present, an icon of memory and materiality weaved into the mythic mosaic of history.

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Over his entire artistic career, Mehta painted only three standing Kali figures between 1988 and 1989. There are only a few smaller formats of Kali's heads in later years. Mehta's Kali represents the eternal cosmic dilemma of the human condition - the battle of good and evil, creation and destruction. She has been an inspiration for artists through the ages, and Mehta transforms the image into a powerful one through his unique vocabulary.

⁹ [The Devi's attraction](#) as of Tuesday, 22 May 2018 by Team Viva



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Acrylic on canvas
61 cm × 76 cm (24 in × 30 in)

Why is Mehta's Kali so Monumental?

The provenance of the painting is as significant as the work itself. The painting was once part of the art collection of the eminent and influential theatre director Ebrahim Alkazi. Mehta and Alkazi shared a unique friendship based on mutual respect and admiration." Patron and collector, Alkazi and Mehta's work go back a long way. The former inaugurated the first and largest solo exhibit of the modern master's work at the Jehangir Art Gallery in 1959. This painting thus acquires added meaning not just for its artistic excellence but also

¹⁰ "Tyeb Mehta's 'Kali' fetches Rs. 1 crore" - *Times of India* article dated May 20, 2005

because it symbolises the timeless connection between the artist and the collector.

Minimalistic- The Rickshaw



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oil on canvas
59 1/8 x 47 1/4 in. (150.1 x 120 cm.)

Painted in Tyeb Mehta's instantly recognizable minimalist format, this painting resonates with the quiet emotive poignancy that embodies his art. Here,

¹¹ Acquired directly from the artist
Thence by descent
[TYEB MEHTA \(1925-2009\)](#)

Mehta monumentalizes the rickshaw, making it a symbolic stage on which he casts an abstracted female figure.

Painted in 1994, this portrait displays his virtuoso technique, which eliminates any trace of his hand so that nothing could detract from the primacy of his carefully chosen image.

The ubiquitous rickshaw, normally a benign mode of travel in urban and rural India, takes centre stage in the present painting. It is transformed by Mehta into an allegory for human suffering, indignity, subjugation, and struggle for survival. The image of the rickshaw in Mehta's works dates as far back as the 1950s, but only appears in his oeuvre on a grand scale much later, following two years period from 1983, when Mehta was invited to be artist-in-residence at Viswa Bharati University, Santiniketan. Mehta's stay at Santiniketan allowed him to recuperate from a serious illness and gain inspiration from its culture. It was during this residency that he painted the iconic figure on Rickshaw, a work that was offered by Christie's in 2011 and achieved the world auction record for the artist.

For Mehta, in the above painting, the rickshaw is not a simple means of transport but a sign of bondage, and Mehta's iconic Rickshaw series underscores the anonymity and isolation of the common labourer. Significantly in this painting, Mehta has cropped the image so as not to show the rickshaw puller, casting the viewer into this role of bondage instead. The viewer becomes activated and assumes a leading role, caught in a metaphoric dichotomy that Mehta described as, "The tension between containment and freedom is the nature of the work itself." (Artist statement, N. Adajania, Tyeb Mehta, Images and Exchanges, New Delhi, 2005, p. 358)

In the painting, sumptuous expanses of vivid colour are dissected by the subtle diagonals of the rickshaw handles, wheels, and the flailing marble-coloured limbs of its occupant. The abstract use of flattened forms and the segregated monochromatic areas create a sense of harmony and stillness. Almost androgynous in appearance, the captive figure on the rickshaw is also a formal mechanism within Mehta's composition. Tropes for Mehta are analogous to an artist's palette: tools with which to craft the final masterpiece.

Achievements & Recognitions

Mehta garnered various recognitions in the form of national and international awards.

- ¹²Bombay Society Award, India, 1950
- National Exhibition Award, Lalit Kala Academy, 1965
- John D. Rockefeller 3rd Fund Fellowship, 1968
- Gold Medal, First New Delhi Triennial, New Delhi, India, 1968
- Filmfare Critics Award for the film 'Koodal', 1970
- Gold Medal, Prix Nationale at the International Festival of Painting, Cagnes-sur-Mer, France, 1974
- Kalidas Samman, Government of Madhya Pradesh, 1988
- 'Manpatra', Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 2004
- Gold Medal, President on the occasion of Lalit Kala Akademi Golden Jubilee Celebration, New Delhi, 2004
- Dayawati Modi Foundation Award for Art, Culture, and Education, 2005
- Padma Bhushan, Government of India, 2007

Mehta is the first Indian artist to auction a painting at a record-breaking 26.4 crores (1989 version of Kali). ¹³Mehta is also referred to as the top draw at auctions around the world. Some of his other paintings have also been sold for a mighty 17.75 crores and 11 crores etc.

INTERVIEWS

Mr. Amit Jain
Independent Art Consultant

Q1 How has Tyeb Mehta's artwork changed the way people view art in today's day and age?

Tyeb Mehta is one of the most important modernists of our time. Very early on in his career, he chooses to discover a way to relook at the human

¹² <https://www.indiaonline.in/about/personalities/painters/tyeb-mehta>

¹³ <https://www.culturalindia.net/indian-art/painters/tyeb-mehta.html>

form- not through realism but by looking at the body in multiple planes. He is known to form a diagonal, where he would divide his subject/object to offer different views. He moved towards minimalism with flat planes of colour and unfinished lines. His unique identity on his canvas gave Indian art a new dimension that has strong followers to date.

Q2 How has his artwork impacted the way newer artists think and create?

Most of my answers may be mentioned above but his break from conventional methodology made a foundation for other artists to experiment and find their individual language. The 60s and 70s saw a massive impact of American abstractionism and artists like Tyeb and many others remained at par with these methods.

Q3 Are his works still widely spoken about among artists?

Yes, they are. Both for aesthetic reasons and commercial values.

Q4 Do you think his art carries a perfect blend of Indian art and modern art? If yes how and if no, why?

Most of the modernists of Tyeb's time were greatly influenced by the new India. They had already experienced partition and the emergence of a new nation required a new look to its art. Modernism is defined as a change or a break from the conventional. In Indian art till independence, the Bengal school of dreamy landscapes held strong...and it was through the Progressive Art Group, which included Tyeb, that a new language emerged. Inspired by mythology and folklore, these artists gave a new voice to the tradition. His paintings of the rickshaw puller or the kali are inspired by his India and that's where I argue that he creates a good balance between modernism and Indian art.

Q5 His artwork often portrays violence as a good thing. Are these sorts of ideals common in the works artists create today?

Good or bad, violence can be a subject. What's more important to an artist is the struggle one goes through, and in many modernist artists it was the struggle to survive and to have an identity. Things were changing around them, the national situation was tense, and it was evident in their art.

Most of the artists today, especially in the 21st century are products of international events like war, famine, nationalism, etc. Artists who come with such a legacy are so much impacted by the violence that it becomes a part of their art- how they express it- is another discussion.

Q6 Being an artist yourself, what do you think about the recognition and changes that? Have been brought in Indian art recently?

Though I am not an artist, I follow the trends. The most important change in the last few decades has been the opening of the World Wide Web and the flow of information from one end of the planet to another. In the 90s- the period of globalisation- this made resources available to the artists that could only be achieved through physical travel and snail mail. Trends were shared globally, what impacted one nation could be felt in another. It brought the world closer to India and Indian art closer to the world. This has led to Indian art being recognized globally and artists being included in museum collections and international biennales. Our artists now comment on global politics. Auction records are getting us closer to our peers elsewhere.

Q7 What role have artists like S.H. Raza, F.N. Souza, M.F. Husain ,and Tyeb Mehta himself played in the evolution of Indian art?

The above-mentioned artists belonged to the Progressive Art Group. These are the first lot of known artists who broke the shackles of the Bengal school that was largely Indian art. Artists mentioned above-created art as per their ideas and values that even went anti-institutional at times. It was also the time that there were opportunities for these artists to travel on scholarships to other countries. They created a perfect blend of Indian art which had an international appeal. They continue to inspire generations of many young artists.

Q8 As one of the first Indian artists to gain recognition and acclaim in the international art world, how did Tyeb Mehta change the way critics and collectors view Indian art?

He was the first Indian artist to sell for a million dollars at auction. I guess when stakes go up, critics and collections change their views on art that once looked 'unusual'.

Ms. Anu Bajaj
Founder and Owner of Art Positive Gallery

Q1 How has Tyeb Mehta's artwork changed the way people view art in today's day and age?

Tyeb Mehta (Born: 26 July 1925, Died 2 July 2009) created artwork in a very deep and intense manner. He made many personal and professional sacrifices to get his work to the level where he was satisfied with his painting enough to show it to the rest of the world. This approach, which he was personally exacting made him a bit of a legend among the Modern painters who were also his friends, like M F Husain, F N Souza S H Raza ,and Akbar Padamsee were all part of the Progressive Artist Group (PAG) in Mumbai (then Bombay).

Mehta was particular to the point that he painted with a magnifying glass despite failing eyesight. He continued to work despite ill health. He had an acute heart condition that had left him with only 30% heart function conditions... his dedication ensured that his work and his passion made a deep and lasting impression on the Indian art scene.

Mehta chose to represent his interpretation of the world through a style that can be called Expressionistic. He employed flat planes of colour to conjure space and the diagonal division of many of his paintings. His human forms were strong, structural ,and almost 'cubistic' in that they combined several perspectives of the human body and presented it on the same plane.

In the latter half of his life, he also lived to see his work reap amazing success: Tyeb Mehta's Kali, fetched a whopping Rs 26.4 crore (June 2018) and set a new record for the late artist at the highly successful Saffronart's Milestone 200th Auction. The painting, featuring a blue Kali with a red mouth and a figure of the *asura* protruding out of her back, belonged to the Alkazi Collection. In 2005, when the great artist was alive, he was painting in a studio in Lokhandwala, Mumbai. His painting *Mahishasura* – a modern reinterpretation of the slaying of the demon by Hindu Goddess Durga – had sold at \$1.58 million at Christie's earlier that year. And two years before that, his triptych *Celebration* sold for \$317,500, also at a Christie's auction. Not only was this the highest sum for an Indian painting at an international auction at the time, but it paved the way for the 'Indian art boom'. Sadly, Mehta never directly got any share of those funds that went to the owners of the artwork and the auction house. It is a bigger problem faced by artists in the art world and needs to be looked at and changed.

Q2 How has his artwork impacted the way newer artists think and create?

Mehta is an inspiration for many young artists given that he is such a legend who wanted to study in London in the UK and have exposure to its museums. Mehta even worked in a morgue during the day. What is shocking is that despite all this hard work and struggle Mehta never attempted to cash in on his artwork. He lived a simple life with his wife Sakina and did not chase down mega-deals or tie-ups with big auction houses. This even while his work made such an impact on the art market globally.

In many ways, Mehta had an impact on the students at J J School of Art in Mumbai (where he studied) and even at Delhi College of Art (where he visited for a few lectures). Nationally and globally, his works are studied and understood by younger artists for their style, composition, and dedication. Even though he was a recluse, tales of his passion for his artwork encouraged young artists to paint with such a similar intensity and appetite that it did not matter even if one had to work during the day and then paint at night to be able to afford to buy colours and canvas which is expensive for a young artist. As we may not know, artists have to struggle a lot before they become successful and many do not even live to make big money off their artwork.

Q3 Are his works still widely spoken about among artists?

Yes, as mentioned earlier, Tyeb Mehta made such an impact with his passion, dedication, and also his stunning auction prices, that his representing gallery, Chemould Prescott has come out with many books and big catalogues that document Mehta's life. He even made a three-minute short film *Koodal* (meeting place) in 1970 and won the film fare critic award, that has impacted many artists who have been able to benefit from his artistic approach and his compassion for the less fortunate members of society, like rickshaw-pullers, labourers, migrant workers, and women night workers.

Q4 Do you think his art carries a perfect blend of Indian art and modern art? If yes how and if no, why?

Tyeb Mehta was very much an Indian painter even though he studied modern art both in India and he travelled abroad as a young man to study modern

paintings in museums of London in the 1950s and even Paris. One of his favourite artists was Francis Bacon, but he also loved the Indian miniatures and the local artists of Santiniketan in Kolkata. While spending time in Calcutta (Kolkata) at his grandmother's house where he drew and observed much of the local life in Kolkata, especially the rickshaw pullers. He also visited the Kali Bari where his muse, *Ma Kali* reoccurs in his works. He also used mythology but gave it a very modern interpretation and his works could be seen as the perfect blend of Indian and Modern Art.

Q5 His artwork often portrays violence as a good thing. Are these sorts of ideals common in the works artists create today?

I do not agree with this statement, because Tyeb Mehta never portrayed violence as good. His *Trussed Bull*, one of his earliest notable works (made in the 1950s) speaks of human cruelty towards animals and it captures the horror of the violent act of treating the bull as prey, it does not side with the violence but takes a position against it by portraying the sheer horror and viciousness of slaughtering an animal for consumption.

As a Muslim, Tyeb Mehta personally went through and experienced violence, because of the epic upheaval and bewilderment of Partition in the most intimate sense possible. His family chose to be in India and did not move over to Pakistan although many relatives lived in what then became the 'borderlands'. He portrayed this anguish in his work, and his paintings brought out the evils of contemporary society which can be violent. He actively empathized with the anxieties and turbulences and never thought of it as good, but rather how violence negatively affects society. It has been said that the sight of blood made him paralyzed with fear until he could paint it out of his system and in a 'cathartic' sense get rid of the feeling of being oppressed by it.

Since violence is a reoccurring phenomenon, artists still discuss it as a social evil and something that we as youngsters should be aware of and vigilant towards. Artists often do portray violence but not without being critical of it.

Q6 Being an artist yourself, what do you think about the recognition and changes that have been brought into Indian art recently?

It is high time that Indian art was recognized on an international platform globally. Before it was only our ancient and medieval art that was seen as original and worth collecting and given praise, but now after much struggle,

Modern and Contemporary art is also being recognized as important, and significant and making a contribution to the global art scene, economically, intellectually and on the level of skill and talent as well. I am very happy with this as it opens many doors for young artists.

Q7 What role have artists like S.H. Raza, F.N. Souza, M.F. Husain ,and Tyeb Mehta himself played in the evolution of Indian art?

M F Husain, F N Souza S H Raza, S. Bakre ,and H.A. Gade were all part of the Progressive Artist Group (PAG) in Mumbai (then Bombay) along with Tyeb Mehta and Akbar Padamsee and Krishen Khanna who were members of the extended PAG group. They were the first artists to show Modern Indian Art to the West, especially in Paris which was then the centre of all art activity ,and in England in the UK. They also showed in other parts of Europe but it was mainly these two centres and they made it possible for an exchange of ideas, and styles between the East and the West and most importantly on their terms. Their role has been key and so important to the growth of Indian Modern and Contemporary art.

Q8 As one of the first Indian artists to gain recognition and acclaim in the international art world, how did Tyeb Mehta change the way critics and collectors view Indian art?

As mentioned earlier Mehta has had many record-breaking moments for Indian Modern and Contemporary Art, Kali, fetched Rs 26.4 crore (June 2018) and set a new record for the late artist at the highly successful Saffronart's Milestone 200th Auction. His previous international record was when his 1994 Untitled (Woman on rickshaw) painting sold for Rs 22.99 crores at a 2017 Christie's auction. Besides these stunning figures at the auction house, Mehta has been a very strong artistic voice that commented against the senseless violence of communal riots, on Partition ,and the trials and tribulations of the less privileged of society—whether it was the rickshaw puller or the youth slaughtered in sectarian violence.

Legacy

Mehta has created a legacy that invites the viewer to become part of the moment he captures, temporarily suspended in stasis before experiencing what the ancient Greeks referred to as anagnorisis: the hero's tragic realization of reality. Mehta's paintings have the power to invoke wonder and devastation

simultaneously as he reveals truths that continue to be poignant and universal in the world today.

In this decade, a rise in awareness, critical validation, and mighty commercial valuation of works by artists like Mehta has led to an acknowledgment of contemporary South Asian art within the international art world. A record-breaking sale of Mehta's *Celebration* (1995), a five-meter-long canvas that recalls the colours and composition of the Santiniketan Triptych. Mehta saw an old woman completely lost in her thoughts and with intense concentration holding the sacrificial goat inside the hut. The scene had a profound effect on Mehta. It was almost like a mystical encounter and it brought about changes in his images. He began to take elements from this scene and painted several works. But the painting 'Untitled', popularly known as the Santiniketan Triptych, in the NGMA, crystallizes the profound changes that occurred in Mehta's perception of life. The drama of life and death is enacted in the image with deep sensitivity. The usual terror and angst witnessed in Mehta's earlier images gave way to a note of hope and regeneration. Large groups of people, unlike the single figures in Mehta's paintings, are seen dancing, celebrating, and waiting in anticipation of the climactic moment. In this larger-than-life painting, the old woman and the animal are seen joined in a tender bond. The finality of death is accepted with calm resignation.



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¹⁴ National Gallery of Modern Art, National Gallery of Modern Art
<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/untitled-santiniketan-triptych-tyeb-mehta/ygErToacg3VfxQ?hl=en>

Oil on canvas
4440cm x 2090cm

Mehta spent a couple of years as an artist-in-residence at Kala Bhavana in Santiniketan in the early '80s of the 20th century. There, he had a transformative experience during a folk festival held toward the end of spring. He saw an old woman completely lost in her thoughts and with intense concentration holding the sacrificial goat inside the hut. The scene had a profound effect on Mehta. It was almost like a mystical encounter and it brought about changes in his images. He began to take elements from this scene and painted several works.

The painting that is popularly known as the Santiniketan Triptych, in the NGMA, crystallizes the profound changes that occurred in Mehta's perception of life. The drama of life and death is enacted in the image with deep sensitivity. The usual terror and angst witnessed in Mehta's earlier images gave way to a note of hope and regeneration. Large groups of people, unlike the single figures in Mehta's paintings, are seen dancing, celebrating, and waiting in anticipation of the climactic moment. In this larger-than-life painting, the old woman and the animal are seen joined in a tender bond. The finality of death is accepted with calm resignation —which sold for USD 317,500 at Christie's New York in 2002, led to a boom in Indian art sales.

Throughout his life, Mehta was regarded as a difficult man to please. Being his own harshest critic and strictest editor, he often destroyed many canvases in the process. In an interview with Somini Sengupta for the New York Times, he described his camaraderie with fellow Progressive artists during the early days of Indian independence: *"There was no Indian modern tradition to turn to. One had to create from nowhere. We learned painting together by talking, by looking at each other's work, by criticizing, by appreciating."*

¹⁵

Leaving behind a lasting legacy, Tyeb Mehta passed away on 2nd July 2009. While his images will endure among the finest achievements of Indian art, his true legacy lies in his life choices. In recent years, even though Mehta's paintings fetched a high auction price, his art continues to embody the enduring difference between price and value. Mehta, himself, embodied the ideals of a pure artist. Instead of using his art as an instrument of social

¹⁵ [Indian Artist Enjoys His World Audience - The New York Times](#)

advancement and short-term profit, he dedicated himself to the unforgiving logic of the quest for perfection.