

Feature Article

Beyond Borders

ArtsIndia West in Palo Alto puts on an exhibit of rare appeal.

By Scott DeVaney

Maqbool Fida Husain may be the only living artist you've never heard of who can sell a painting for \$1 million. Known as the Andy Warhol of India, the 90-year-old Husain – who still paints almost daily – was one of the early leaders to emerge from India's progressive art movement that took root in the 1940s, and like most iconoclastic artists, controversy embroiled the painter during his early years.

Husain was raised a Muslim in a predominately Hindu country, and his artwork reflected his dichotomous upbringing. Husain quickly became known for blending Muslim and Hindu themes, much to the chagrin of Hindu traditionalists. After Husain painted partially nude portraits of Hindu goddesses, fundamentalist groups raided his home and one of his privately owned museums to trash the "blasphemous" paintings.



Husain, however, could not be bullied out of pursuing his artistic vision and quickly found camaraderie and support among other daring Indian artists of the day. The Progressive Artists' Group, formed in 1947 by painters Syed Haider Raza and Francis Newton Souza, became the central nervous system for their collective movement. Composed of Indian artists who wanted to bridge the old aesthetics of Indian art with modern influences from the West, such as abstract Cubism and Fauvism, the Progressive Artists' Group went on to create some of India's most celebrated works of the past half-century.

And now, much to the good fortune of Silicon Valley art lovers, dozens of PAG paintings will be on display at the ArtsIndia West gallery in Palo Alto (535 Bryant St., 650-321-4900 www.artsindia.com) as part of the Ashta Nayak exhibit that runs until June 19 (gallery hours are Tuesday – Saturday, 11am – 7pm and Sunday, 12 – 5pm). Admission is free, but if you're just itching to drop some cash, no problem: There will be a number of paintings for sale in the \$7,000 – \$100,000 range.

"There's never been anything like this in the Bay Area," says gallery director Madhurika Dev. Indeed, this will be the Bay Area debut for many notable Indian art legends, including the aforementioned Husain, Souza and Raza, as well as Ram Kumar, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee, V. Gaitonde and J. Swaminathan. Though each artist presents a uniquely individualistic and bold perspective on color and shape, there are a number of common threads that run through the body of work, such as each artist's penchant for abstraction, forceful brushstrokes and sunburst hues. From Kumar's colorfully layered landscapes to Padamsee's, Souza's and Mehta's focus on the form of the human body, Ashta Nayak is a bona fide crash course in Indian modernism and a must-see exhibit for anyone who considers him or herself a connoisseur of international art.