

*'Occasions of Light: Recent paintings by Jehangir Sabavala'*

# A mystic, rationalist painter of paradoxical art

By JYOTIRMOY DATTA

NEW YORK — As unlikely as Kashmir apples growing in Kerala, or coconuts in Napa Valley in California, is the milieu from which sprang the paradoxical art of Jehangir Sabavala, who is, at the same time, a mystic and a rationalist, a painter of idealized landscapes with geometric figures and shapes.

Born to a Parsi family which gave Mumbai many financiers and at least one mayor, Sabavala could have been one of the pillars of the establishment, capping his career with stewardship of one of the many enterprises of the Tatas. Instead, he became, as his biographer Ranjit Hoskote called him, a "Pilgrim, Exile, Sorcerer."

He, however, retains many of his Gymkhana traces. Sabavala dresses fastidiously, speaks perfect Queen's English and sports a military-style moustache. This interview took place at Gallery ArtsIndia, a 3,000 square feet gallery overlooking Madison Square Park on Fifth Avenue, where Sabavala is having his first solo show in the United States from April 19 to May 12.

Titled 'Occasions of Light: Recent Paintings by Jehangir Sabavala,' the show is not only the artist's first in this country, but also described as the last of his career with that curious mixture of love and detachment that is characteristic of this paradoxical artist.

Asked of his childhood, his first reaction was a shrug. "It is the paintings that matter, not where it comes from," Sabavala said, before launching into his reminiscence of a cosmopolitan childhood in Mumbai, Switzerland and England. "I actually came to the U.S. in 1939, on my way, full of detours and disappointments, to Oxford. I was interviewed for admission to one of the colleges, but the breakout of war inter-

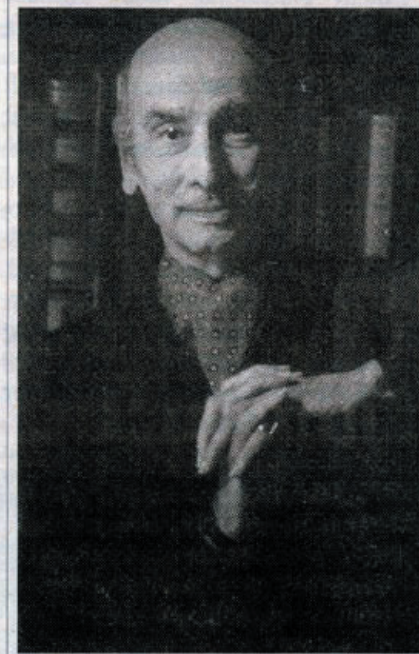


PHOTO ABOVE, 'The City I,' a painting by Jehangir Sabavala at the Gallery ArtsIndia, New York. (Photo: Prakash Rao) PHOTO LEFT, Sabavala, the painter who was honored with the Padma Shri by the president of India in 1997, is holding his first-ever solo show in the United States till May 12. (Photo: Rafique Elias)

ferred with the family's plans to turn me into a scholar." The war over, he returned to England, this time hoping to make a career on the stage, but switched to art, studying at the Heatherley School of Fine Arts, where he was exposed to contrary stylistic movements. He moved to Paris in 1947, enrolling at the Academie Julian. "I returned to Bombay (now renamed Mumbai) in 1951, well grounded, I guess, in the academic, the impressionistic and the cubistic idioms."

Sabavala has been an exception in modern Indian art in that his works are luminous, positive, with a classical element of beauty. As in his painting, 'The Silent Volcano,' done from a sketch he made in Java, the violence of nature is transformed into an image of serenity by Sabavala's art.

A poem by the Pune-based writer Ananda Wood is included in the catalogue for 'Occasions of Light.' Dedicated to Sabavala, the poem captures the essence of this painter's philosophy: "Perceived by sense or thought by mind, all worlds are pictures made of light."

The title of an article Sabavala wrote for *The Illustrated Weekly of India* helps us to understand the artist's belief: "Art Evokes the Mystery Without Which the World Would Not Exist."

In the 51 years since his return to Mumbai from Paris, Sabavala has had 27 one-man shows — he has also participated in over 125 group shows in top galleries worldwide. He has traveled a lot and garnered many honors, including the Padma Shri in 1977, and the Kala Ratna from the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society.