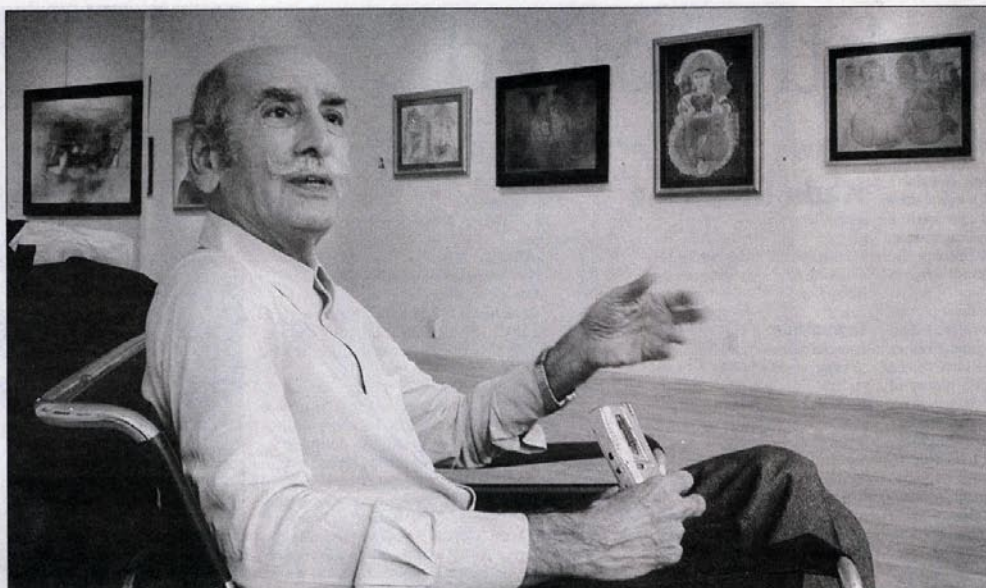


■ ENCOUNTER ■



■ At 79, Sabavala is still evolving

Jehangir Sabavala's landmark exhibition in New York — *Occasions of Light* at the ArtsIndia Gallery from April 19 to May 12 — became something of a major event in the art world of Indians in America.

Other than the exhibition and opening at ArtsIndia, the artist participated in *Flights of Imagination: A Conversation with Jehangir Sabavala* moderated by Geetha Mehra of Bombay's Sakshi Gallery at the IndoCenter of Art & Culture. Mehra also introduced a short film on Sabavala by writer and film-maker Arun Khopkar on April 17.

Sabavala, now 79, is as productive as he has ever been. His career stretches over 50 crucial years of history. The current exhibition is his 31st one-man show but his first in the United States. The new exhibition has 25 of his signature oils on canvas, produced over a four-year period. Each canvas is 5 feet by 3½ to 4 feet, a size Sabavala calls 'medium-large.'

Though recognizable in style and execution as Sabavala, there are some changes evident. For one, there is the palette, which has moved from soft to bright color. Some of the paintings — for instance *Smoldering Sunset* and *Sunburst from 2001 and 2000* respectively — use a blazing range of red tones unusual for Sabavala.

The subject matter is equally unexpected. There are cityscapes spread out under rampant skies, skyscrapers with their windows lit and not, massed clouds scudding overhead. Sabavala has rarely painted the city.

"In my case the thread has been pretty strong, all the way through," Sabavala said, referring to the way in which his work has evolved.

"So if one uses this big word 'evolved' which I'm always a little wary of, you can trace it. There are broken tones but it's what I call a high palette of reds and oranges, which I haven't used for a very long time."

Sabavala told *India Abroad* the work in the current exhibition began after the publication of Ranjit Hoskote's critical biography *Pilgrim, Exile, Sorcerer: The Painterly Evolution of Jehangir Sabavala* in 1998, around the time of the artist's last major one-man show.

"I've been really working quite hard," he said. "I've always worked towards a one-

An epic journey towards the light

TJ Sony meets Jehangir Sabavala on the occasion of his first exhibition in America

man show which roughly takes me three to four years, that's not unusual, I think any painter worth his salt would take that long."

For the first time in his career, Sabavala has also been working towards group shows. Over the last four years, as he worked on the paintings that made up the work in the current exhibition, he took part in group shows. He has sent 10 canvases to various locations.

Those 10 paintings are now part of various group shows all over the world. They are paintings that should have been part of Sabavala's current exhibition. "So I've got 25 here of what should have been 35 paintings," he said wistfully, looking around the large ArtsIndia space, in a building near the Flatiron in downtown Manhattan.

The exhibition opened in Mumbai in January, went to New Delhi in February, and came to New York in April. Though Sabavala has many paintings in private collections all over the United States this is his first full-scale one-man exhibition.

"At one time there was no opportunity," he said. "Where could you show? When I started there was nothing, no galleries, no press, no media. I'm talking about 50 years ago. In these 50 years one has been fortunate enough to live to see the change, all that one worked for, to get the lay public interested in such a thing as painting."

Today things are indeed different. In Mumbai, when Sabavala's exhibition opened, there were 800 to 1,000 people every day. "It was a unique experience of a contact between a painter and his public," he said.

Sabavala has never been the sort of artist

who worked inside a tower, exhibiting for the critics and the buyers, uninterested in the general public. In fact he has cherished the contact with the city and with the people interested in his work. "When you show," he said, "for better or worse, that's the risk you take, it is to contact the city and have as vital an engagement with it as is humanly possible."

For this most engaging of artists, exhibiting is a special time, a time when all the defenses artists have traditionally erected between themselves and the public must come down.

"When it's time for a show, you're off the pedestal. If somebody asks a simple question you give him a simple answer. If he asks a sophisticated question, you must be prepared," he said. "I'm talking about the vitality of the show. What do people think about it? Has it touched them? Has it made them stop and think or have they walked past and thought, Oh technically proficient but it leaves me cold!"

Sabavala is prepared for a wide range of responses from the public. "You do get the four letter word, and rightly so," he said. "It's a huge public, and there will be someone who does not get it. I think he is absolutely justified. You take it in your stride, with the overwhelming response on the other side."

Sabavala's work has the ability to speak on several levels simultaneously. It has evoked the sort of direct response from the general public the artist values and the work has had a long-standing engagement with India's writers, particularly the poets.

Dom Moraes, Adil Jussawalla and Dilip

Chitre have all written about Sabavala. Ananda Wood's poem *Returned to Light* is included in the catalogue of the present exhibition, titled after Ranjit Hoskote's essay, *Occasions of Light*.

The mythological references and the visionary light that suffuses much of Sabavala's pictures are not deliberate, says the painter.

"It's not conscious, believe me," he said. "It either happens, or it doesn't. I struggle in a classic parameter to experiment and work, and I do believe the mind has a lot to do with it."

I asked if the parameters he works within are liberating or confining. He said in his case, they "liberate but slowly." He works long hours, one painting typically takes five to six weeks from the first thought and the first sketch. He makes a master sketch, of things he likes and does not like in the first sketches.

"It doesn't jump," he said. "But if you really follow it and look seriously you will see how the thread grows, how the weave takes place, how the warp and the weft is clearly visible."

He works from 10 am to about 6 pm every day. "It's hard work," he said. "It's not easy. You have to give up a lot of things. Travel, for one. Travel throws me. I need to be at least mentally in my own place."

The pictures are structured and well-thought out. Sabavala's preliminary black and white sketches are already fairly complete before any color is applied. He calls it a slow process of layering and building.

"There is the steel structure and the engineered structure, then you have the texture, which is your flesh, then the color. Then you have to soften it and must be a painting," he said.

Sabavala, at 79, is still evolving. He is as curious and thirsty as a young artist and says it is only now that he feels sure of what exactly a painting is.

"I'm very sure now of what I call a painting, as opposed to what might be technically proficient, able, many things but not necessarily a painting," he said. "It's a triad of the senses. The painter may fail but he makes an attempt."

And then he said: "Finally, if you are very honest, you succeed very little." ■