GREY EXHIBITS 20TH-CENTURY INDIAN ART FROM ITS REMARKABLE HOLDINGS

Abby Grey and Indian Modernism: Selections from the NYU Art Collection
Lower Level Gallery, January 13—April 4, 2015

During four trips to India from 1960 to 1968, inveterate collector Abby Weed Grey—founder of NYU’s fine arts museum—explored the vital art scene that blossomed after Indian independence in 1947. Abby Grey and Indian Modernism: Selections from the NYU Art Collection spotlights Mrs. Grey’s pioneering efforts, presenting Indian modernism through the lens of her ardent engagement with the country and its art. On view from January 13 through April 4, 2015, the exhibition is co-curated by American art historian Susan Hapgood and Indian poet and critic Ranjit Hoskote.

In establishing the Grey Art Gallery in 1974, Mrs. Grey provided it with a founding collection of nearly 800 artworks, more than 80 of which were purchased during her travels to India. With this act of generosity, she created the most important trove of modern Indian art in an American university museum. Yet until Abby Grey and Indian Modernism, these works have rarely been seen in public as a group. The exhibition includes 27 paintings and works on paper, and one sculpture, by 20 artists. These are enriched and contextualized by illuminating ephemera from Mrs. Grey’s travels, and from her diaries, all of which are preserved in the New York University Archives.

Reflecting current interest in this period of art from India, Abby Grey and Indian Modernism will complement a related exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art, After Midnight: Indian Modernism to Contemporary India 1947/1997 (on view March 1–June 28, 2015), which highlights two defining moments in Indian history: independence in 1947, and the nation’s 50-year anniversary.

Grey Art Gallery Director Lynn Gumpert says, “In the early 60s, when Abby Weed Grey set out to collect non-Western modern art, she was intent on meeting, as she later wrote, artists who were ‘breaking with the past to cope with the present,’ and whose ‘works best mark the advance from tradition to a contemporary view.’ Her prescience and generosity have provided a fantastic resource for students and scholars from across the NYU community who are at the forefront of research on alternative modernisms. The Grey looks forward to welcoming them, as well as the broad public, to this exhibition.”

Ms. Hapgood adds, “With this project, we aim to develop nuanced understandings of Indian modernist art that will expand and complicate the existing Western-centric narratives on the subject. We are adding a new twist to the history by closely tracing the crucial role of one individual patron, and exploring the particular ways that her idealist vision overlapped with Cold War politics and the foreign cultural exchange program of the United States Information Agency, as I cover in my exhibition essay.”
In the wake of their country’s independence from British rule, Indian artists began experimenting with new approaches, forming the nation’s first modernist schools. Among the artists Mrs. Grey encountered in India were those belonging to the enormously influential Progressive Artists Group, formed by six artists, including M. F. Husain, F. N. Souza, and Ram Kumar, all of whom are represented in the exhibition. She was drawn as well to works by individuals associated with the Baroda School, the Delhi Shilpi Chakra (Delhi Sculptor Studio), Neo-Tantric art, and artists from the Kala Bhavan art school of Santiniketan. While in New Delhi, Mrs. Grey made the acquaintance of Kanwal Devayani Krishna, active printmakers and teachers whose energy and dedication, visible in their works in the exhibition, impressed her immensely.

One highlight of the exhibition is Husain’s painting Virgin Night (1964), a darkly evocative depiction of a seated woman, possibly smoking a cigarette, with a hookah pipe and spider to her left, as a ghostly hand points down from above. Husain was self-taught, inspired by German Expressionism, and initially made a living painting movie billboards before he went on to achieve great international renown. The image of the spider, which he included in many of his works, is often interpreted to be a sign of protection, derived from an Islamic story about the Prophet that the artist heard as a child.

Mrs. Grey also met several times with Satish Gujral, a painter who spoke about his work in fluent English, and lamented the fact that there was no market for the kind of experimental art that he was making. The exhibition features Gujral’s austerely abstract Christ in the Desert (1960), which Grey described as “lonely, deeply religious, hurt as only the world can hurt one who would like to save the world.” In the early 1950s, in an example of post-Colonial Indian artists’ participation in international cultural dialogues, Gujral traveled to Mexico and apprenticed with Social Realist mural painter David Alfaro Siqueiros.

Abby Weed Grey

Mrs. Grey, who formed The Ben and Abby Grey Foundation in 1961 to support the arts, maintained extensive diaries about her travels. In them she wrote of wanting foremost to “do good,” yet as her involvement with global modernism deepened, she developed a philosophy of art as a form of trans-cultural communication, a universal language. During frequent subsequent travels, she steadily acquired work by contemporary artists from Egypt, Greece, Iran, India, Turkey, and Pakistan. Grey would eventually take eight more trips to Asia, the last one when she was 71 years old. She assembled a collection of over a thousand works of art at a time when few other American collectors were attuned to contemporary work from Asia. In 1974, Grey established the Grey Art Gallery at NYU as a permanent home for her collection, with the intention of furthering her cross-cultural approach in a global academic setting, as well as complementing NYU’s Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies.

Mrs. Grey’s interests, aspirations and vision are reflected not only in the works she collected, but also in the substantial documentation—including receipts, correspondence, catalogues, photographs, artists’ letters, etc.—preserved in her papers, which she donated to NYU Archives. Abby Grey and Indian Modernism will include selections from her archives, recording her impressions in illuminating detail.

Exhibition Catalogue

Abby Grey and Indian Modernism: Selections from the NYU Art Collection will be accompanied by a fully illustrated print-on-demand book, which will also be available online as a free PDF. This will include an introduction by Lynn Gumpert; an essay by Susan Hapgood that mines Mrs. Grey’s archives to paint a vivid picture of her activities and her increasing dedication to collecting; an essay by Ranjit Hoskote tracing the ways in which Mrs. Grey’s collection reflects the diversity and complexity of the modern Indian art scene during the three decades following independence; and complete catalogue entries by Rashmi Meenakshi Viswanathan.
Sponsorship
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About the Grey Art Gallery
The Grey Art Gallery is New York University’s fine-arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City’s Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on exploring art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art’s environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

General Information
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Hours
Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm
**OPEN LATE** Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm
Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed
**Admission:** Suggested donation: $3; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge