

Articles on Indian contemporary art by Swapna Vora

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Jehangir Sabavala (1922-2011): A painter's pilgrimage

Author's note: Jehangir Sabavala called me over a decade ago - in about 2007 - to his home. I did not really know him well and, surprised and delighted, I went across. He talked to me and suggested I write. The result is this article, published here for the first time.

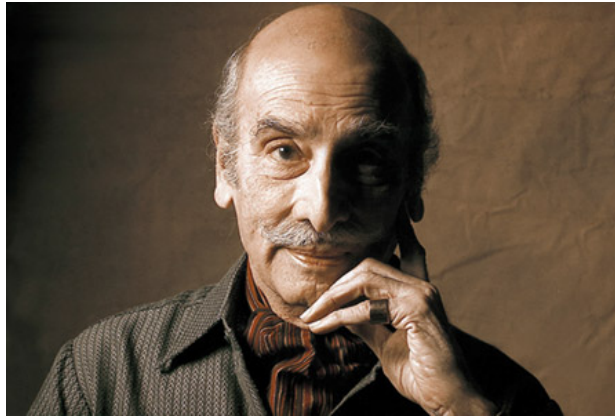
by [Swapna Vora](#)

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Published November 11, 2021

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Jehangir Sabavala: "I would travel, not painting, but observing a new city, a new culture. I took notes, kept track of colors, the memory of shapes. It freed me to work when I returned. I have gone through several avatars: the exile in India and in Europe, the pilgrim in Bihar, the dreamer of alchemy. Figures shrank and almost became a line, wraithlike. Ghostly, mysterious, but still human. The figure became a pilgrim, a pilgrim with his back to the viewer."



Jehangir Sabavala

"Divisions have tended to dissolve. ...it is the rounded pebble of the Himalayan riverbeds that I wish to emulate, awash as it is with time and tide. But with one difference, that within its smooth and perfect oval, I chisel and facet and polish the stone from the inside. So that it glints and gleams from its interior, whilst maintaining the rounded balance of the whole," says Jehangir Sabavala.



Fig. 1

A long, intellectually satisfying, commercially successful career is uncommon especially for an artist, especially an artist whose leanings may have been 'somewhat outside his country's inclinations and immediate history'. Jehangir Sabavala's life represents an era, almost a century, and includes the end of the colonial British Raj. He had studied in a war torn Europe and returned to a free India. After colonization, everything, especially paint, brushes and paper, was scarce. Also, his style of work, with its prisms of soft light,

ghostlike figures and the breaking up of objects into atoms, cubes and linear structures, did not represent the aspirations of a new India but rather what had happened in Europe after the second world war with its atomic annihilation. However his wish that while the outer appearance may be perfect, the inner being should be polished and gleaming, is a major, recurring theme in Indian thought, a longed for ideal, an almost impossible achievement. (Recently 'A Mediated Magic', published by Marg, showed the Indian roots of European Modernism in the visual and performing arts, in architecture and opera, etc. The Hindu connection!)

With his European training, a soft, pale Parsi palette, Buddhist angst at needless poverty and unnecessary suffering, and a Hindu inclination towards seeking ultimate knowledge about our mysterious existence, Sabavala of course represents modern India.

Sabavala has courtly manners with a lovely, old-fashioned demeanor. Born into society, with plenty of culture and plenty of wealth, Jehangir Sabavala lived a life that led from his grand Parsi home to travel across India and

Europe armed with servants, dogs, cats, birds and a gorgeous mother with a great flair for good if eccentric living. In Europe, he was taken regularly to every established museum and every worthwhile art. (Most well-off Indians often say they had the best of everything: a good, safe and indulgent childhood in India and frequent living and learning abroad.) Sabavala, a bored, solitary child, was schooled in Switzerland and accompanied by tutors in Europe. Whilst remaining an international person, he retains the discreet charm of the Parsi community and the orthodox Hindu/Buddhist aspiration to know reality.

After his first degree in Mumbai, Sabavala declared he wanted to act and later, to paint. There was some discussion with his family but he was encouraged and left for Europe. "I was not interested in arithmetic but in art." At one point, he loved the stage and had wanted to act: perhaps this led to the deliberately draped, theatrical figures on his stage of landscapes and waters. "Consciously, in my early twenties, I broke away after college and studied art. My family was immersed in itself! Perhaps I was a disappointment to my Barrister father."



Fig. 2

"Did he see your success?"

"He saw some of my early successes."

"He should see you now!" He smiled for he is among the most successful of modern artists anywhere.

Sabavala lived in art. He had left India in the last days of British rule and returned to a nation, a young republic with Nehru steering it, a country trying to overcome the emotional fractures and fires of Partition. There were many issues. Living in England with its war induced scarcity, he remembers the national relief that followed the end of fighting. London was emerging from the war effort and the strict rationing of everything. After peace arrived, pent-up talent exploded, visual art and music flourished. Sabavala says this was when Graham Sutherland, Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson and that rising, flashing star, Bacon appeared. "I literally saw him emerge, a revolutionary approach. A wonderfully absorbing time for me." About France, he reminisces, "When I moved to France, it was a country freshly released from occupation. I went to study Impressionism and Cubism. I knew how to study. This feeling of Impressionism with its color, stroke and atmosphere was wonderful. They broke down old academics and gave me freedom of color and stroke. Freedom!" He said he returns, somewhat surprisingly, to the works of the rather macabre Emil Nodde and the bright, erotic Egon Schiel. Exactly what you would not expect Sabavala's spiritually oriented, refined palette to like!



Fig. 3

"With Andre Lhote, the last of the great pedagogues, I was trying to understand the bones of Cubism, how to put it on canvas. The spirit of Cubism, what was it? I was lucky to be with him for two to three years before returning to India. One does need instruction, everyone is not a Van Gogh. Learning suited my temperament and later I went to

Italy to paint on my own." He said he learned and worked with some of the great European artists of his time and his years with Lhote were invaluable. "I understood the elements of Cubism. How was I to portray this, how was I paint these multiple structures and images? Lhote taught me this." After getting a degree in Paris, Sabavala kept returning, a couple of years at a stretch sometimes, to learn more and he remembers Lhote with great admiration.

However a decade, from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, found him struggling to move away from Cubism, Impressionism, etc. and to find the style that was his, with muted drifts of color, pale pinks, greens, amethysts and greys in landscapes, seascapes, fields and fountains of water. His work was no longer traditional geometric Cubism but wavy, flowing and peopled sparingly, with shadowy figures.

Today Sabavala's work goes more and more into fractured light, serene monastic contemplation, the sacred search, and examines the quiet magic of human lives. He says his wife, Shireen, led him to Monghyr, India and the Bihar School of Yoga and this led to those Buddhist/Hindu monks and the monastic quietude in his work. It stayed with him. This quest for what is real, what lasts, what is the nature of our human journey: this was the Buddha's quest and involves walking on the razor's edge before, with effort, luck and grace, reaching the final answer. Sabavala has taken this difficult journey, depicted the stations on the way and some of the knowledge received.

"My studio too is cell-like and I am like a monk."

He speaks of the time when he first returned to India as a painter. It meant approaching galleries and there were only three in pre-independence Mumbai then: the Jehangir, the Convocation Hall and the Town Hall. "Then you had to call an audience, give a talk, introduce your work and next time do this all over again."

Few, pretty much all over the world, really knew what this new, possibly vociferous baby was, this 'Modern Art', with its broken up images, worrisome multiple

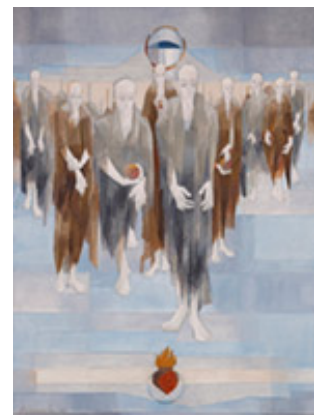


Fig. 4

aspects of one thing, objects shown at once from many angles. The war with its atom bomb had broken the world and we were perhaps, as a life form, never going to be whole again. That deliberate mass destruction was to linger with us forever and splinter us, breaking up our notions of ourselves. Perhaps this art was a part of our representation of ourselves as being broken into cubes, the molecules of modernity. This modernity liked squares, neat triangles, a certain symmetry different from what we had seen and worn comfortably before. (At the wonderful, stupendous exhibition of Central African art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, one sees directly where Picasso got some of his ideas and images. This art, timeless but so like 'Modern Art', is possibly amongst the most powerful and visceral that exists and gloriously beautiful for almost any taste.)

In Europe, the refrain was: there has been a war. In India the refrain was that the British had finally been thrown out as the former colonized nation stumbled to find basics, since that too had been taken by the UK and for its worldwide wars. The British created art schools that existed earlier had been told to teach the Slade School practices: anything else was not considered art. In this era, young Indian artists from the thirties had started painting their own discovery of India and the world. Ironically, talent was abundant but paint and brushes practically nonexistent.



Fig. 5

Sabavala spoke of the total dearth of foreign exchange in a drained India. How difficult it was to get paint, canvas and brushes, let alone travel! "I returned to India in the fifties and began to paint, and ever more seriously in the sixties. Today, all my work is done with Indian paint made by Camlin. Camlin saved the day. The paint is fine. The Camlin people experimented, Subhash Dandekar sent his children to learn how paint was made in Europe. They made brushes. Canvases. I stopped buying paint overseas, including oil

and thinners, etc. for I found their local paint useful and satisfactory." Again, a measure of the new and old country to which he had returned.

"My first show was organized by Roshan Alkazi, (wife of Alkazi, the well-known, established doyen of Asian art). Many came to view, most pictures found buyers. My shows were successful from the beginning and I was able to move them to Kolkata and Delhi and lecture there. Nobody dreamed of a traveling exhibition then, too expensive, too tedious!" Everyone was aghast, mainly for practical reasons, and galleries asked if there even was an audience, especially for this modern art, this splintered depiction of broken rays of light. "They would say, 'We've done well enough in Mumbai, why go to Delhi?'" Sabavala was determined to move his work and slowly took baby steps towards moving entire exhibitions. He persisted, quietly, continuously, explaining the meaning, the implication and possibly even the arrival of this new way of looking at reality, going into its heart beyond ordinary, external

appearances. He lectured, captivating small audiences, and cultivated opinions. He says he reached all types of folk in each city for he wanted people from every walk to come and witness his work. He started the ball rolling and slowly it moved, often sideways, but still going forward where today Cubism and its attendant traits are loved and accepted. Years later, he studied Lyonel Feininger's light filled Early Cubism, free of harsh lines, and this too possibly influenced his work.

"My first show was at the Taj Hotel gallery: even the walls had to be rebuilt. The Chemould Gallery came in the sixties. I built my audience through the Jehangir Gallery. If you were keen to explain, the Jehangir was helpful. This was virgin territory. After all, Amrita (Sher Gill) had died just ten years ago. She forged the way, bringing in the Paris school as opposed to the musty, fusty painting taught in (British Raj era) colleges."

"All you must have wanted to do was to paint but you spent hours and days teaching."

"Yes, I started the ball rolling slowly and," he laughed, "it did gain momentum. It was not only my paintings but also myself on display. I am not separate from my work." One sees his sensitive features, refined bearing and inside the turmoil and joy of the spiritual quest, the quiet struggle of a human, conscious that there is more than the quotidian appearance.

"How was I to integrate my European learned skills with modern India? Skills, training and technique were there but I wanted acceptance by India." He found the bright Indian sun helped to give sharp triangles and rectangles of light, forming abstracts but still showing objects clearly. Andre Lhote's training proved real and useful here. He remembers, "Those days it was very difficult to get acceptance overseas. The change has begun where instead of our (Indians) going to request the west if it would view our work, they are banging at our doors saying, please let us see what you are doing."

"What makes you comfortable?", I ask.

"I am never comfortable with my work. I change and change it but a point comes when you can't change anything without destroying it. It is never finished but I have to say I am unable to express anything further. The idea runs on, it runs further. The hand is not able to follow. The gap between thought and action. The painting is never finished to one's satisfaction."

He is eighty-five and a little frail and I ask him his plans for the next decade, like I had asked his great contemporary colleagues. Raza had said he wants to put down all he has learned in the next few years, Bhavsar said he longed for another thousand years for 'this painting' had given him such pleasure, Husain, self exiled in Europe and Dubai, said he longed for the shabby, lively lanes of Grant Road and Byculla, Pakistan's Chand Saigol said he longed for India, 'for India is what echoes all around me and in my art'. Sabavala answered, "To seek the truth, the essence of our existence. To keep seeking and finding and going deeper." There may be no end possibly but there are

good insights on the way. He talked then of the Sangh, the community of seekers that offers succor, refuge and companionship on the way.

"Who is your Sangh?"

"My work, my thoughts, my family, my seeking deeper and deeper levels of truth in our existence. I came to the Sangh, the Buddhist Sangh, via Shireen and was surrounded by an atmosphere of prayer, pranayam, an aura of contemplation. I am depicting this as my Sangh and also as the source of that which gives birth to thought." Sabavala remains the pilgrim. His work deliberately shows figures wearing monk-like cowls, clothed in floating unstitched fabric. Timeless, it is the most appealing apparel, "the same a thousand years ago and the same today."

"I totally agree with Natvar (Bhavsar). It is only now, after these decades, at this age, you begin to have some comprehension of what painting can mean. I am closer to the end of my life. Here, I am beginning to understand what I am trying to articulate and how, what painting is all about. Beginning to have a greater understanding, beginning to have a grasp."

"The rest? A difficult question. I have had many solo shows, 35, and each involved a couple of years of dedication. Many have been all over India and the world. I have also been in over 200 group shows. I am less interested now in a new one-man show. The important thing really is not to chase more shows!"

"I have had wonderful innings, a good long stay. I remember (the time) when you had to build an opinion, create an audience. Both against and for yourself! Then, there was no such thing. I would like now to go on painting in depth, underline the 'in depth', investigate myself and I'll continue producing, not technically, but from deep within."

"I am one of those who believe in dialogues. I am not one who says, here is my art, you may see for yourself. I am very interested in answers, questions, responses. Unless the situation warrants it and there is deep thought, there cannot be a dialogue. Everything is concept and intellect but painting is more, it represents and describes these concepts. Hence the great masters from Renaissance to Impressionism show what they have endured, what they have established: a soul, a depth, a feeling. Today's digital energy may not yet have this. It can dazzle, create wonderful effects instantly. But the depths?" In his work, he reiterates, method, intellect, and spirit must prevail.

"I want to paint for myself and I think I will paint on successfully. No, not necessarily commercially successful. Yes, that is nice too", he smiles. "Of course I want to sell! I want to be heard and felt."

He speaks of having been described as an exile both from and in India. "Yes, I spent years, formative years, overseas." He remembers that his Parsi community is small and carries the history of its eviction from Persia by Islam. It fled to Hindustan, historically known for being a rich, hospitable place.

Today the Parsi culture is perhaps even more diminutive as many have simply become citizens of the twentieth century rather than remain Indian or even Parsi.

Long ago, he gave a lecture on the well-known Adimoolan.

"Why?"

"I was asked to", he said simply, " and I admired his remarkable draftsmanship. His work covers an era from Rajas to ordinary people. His control over pen and ink is amazing. He is not so much a painter as a genuine artist, with a great ability to draw."

Sabavala speaks of his path, this 'tenacious pursuit' of perhaps an unreachable truth and senses that man's destiny really is sad. He says man's journey is tragic. (I said I saw it as an exuberant chance to go beyond sustaining the animal body, a portal into perception, the thrill of going somewhere you never thought existed. 'A place unlike anywhere we have been or could imagine. Ah, the places we will go!')

"There are happy, wonderful, illuminating moments but all too often around me I see waves of tragedy. The material poverty of this country hurts. People suffer for basic needs and I see the present and the future with sorrow. So many lack education, so many lack even simple, proper food. Bihar and Odisha shock." He said he admired Gandhi greatly when he said, 'Don't forget the grassroots.' (I remembered as a child in newly independent India, people lacked basics in a country devastated by colonization and Europe's wars. Today, flying in from New York and London, I hardly notice the shops overflowing with everything. So, there is hope, for this is the fastest speed of achievement by anyone anywhere!)

"A strong middle class larger than the entire United States?"

"Yes", he says. "But too many are still left out."

He describes himself as traveled, true, but needing to return home before expressing himself in painting. Traveled, yes, but needing to be rooted and painting only after having thought over what he needed to say. He repeats art has given the most joy to so many. "If I had to do it again, I would change one thing: I would travel more. I can't do that now. I need to settle in a place properly before painting. Every three years I had a solo show, a lot of work. I would travel, not painting, but observing a new city, a new culture. I took notes, kept track of colors, the memory of shapes. It freed me to work when I returned home. I have gone through several phases of human avatars: the exile in India and in Europe, the pilgrim with the Buddhist atmosphere in Bihar, the dreamer of alchemy. I used to do portraits, realistic work. And then I moved and became a landscape painter. The figures shrank

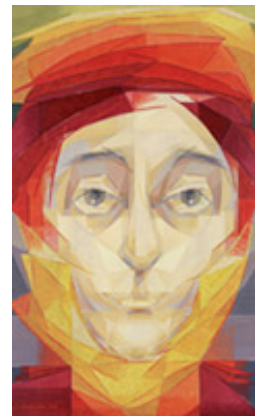


Fig. 6

and almost became a line and then became wraithlike. Ghostly, mysterious, but still you knew this was a human figure. The figure became a pilgrim, a pilgrim with his back to the viewer. This was a series. Alchemy interested me, this was another stage. A range of my works covers the sorcerer and subjects like witchery, alchemy."

Our thoughts were about this amazing, wondrous thing called consciousness, this daily alchemy that transcends our quotidian animal existence. A universe filled with wonder, of starlight that illuminates distant skies years after the mother stars have died, of thoughts that linger and change destiny long after the thinker has passed on. We all share a quiet, private grief at life's tragedies, for those we did not know and never will. The aura surrounding our, the magi's, search for the child of light is dark, somber and yet bubbles with hope. Sabavala shows limitless expanse, soaring space. Yet he speaks of personal and collective sorrow, and the tragedy of seeking another refuge, because of unkindness, politics, religion and other vagaries and vicissitudes of the human condition.

"Then my own exile: being a Parsi, a tiny Zoroastrian community. Hindustan was good to accept us unconditionally, exactly as we were, asking nothing of us. I have never been rooted in Asia, Europe or America. The land does not matter, I feel international, at home everywhere."

"Everyone is taught as a child to speak the truth. No lies, so deep. Most learn to avoid the truth, to veil it, for it is too painful, too many to upset. Where is the truth? You may hide it, hide behind it. A deeper innerself comes out in it. A relentless pursuit. Truth in its fullness is the essence of our existence, this strange journey on earth."

His recent exhibition, 'Ricorso', talks of retracing footsteps and going over already familiar, well-known territory. (Like the Australian dreamtime?) And perhaps really experiencing it for the first time? Perhaps lovingly, perhaps looking for what was overlooked then and now might be noticed and even valued? The motions and events of not what actually happened but rather how they were understood then and are judged now. And coming from the colorful world of post war Paris, how would he not paint landscapes with light and things that glow?

He knows this path has guides but never a guarantee as he notes the anguish and failures of those who could not make it. On the way to the faraway borders of human inheritance and aspirations, he sees medieval travelers, sorcerers, pious pilgrims, the magi and the religious community both here and in other spaces.

Notes:

Jehangir Sabavala, prominent among India's preeminent modern artists, lives in Mumbai. He is among the few then who studied mainly in Europe. Trained in Cubism and Impressionism, he was attracted to the method rather than its subject. Returning from Europe perhaps Sabavala felt a sense of sorrow and



Jehangir Sabavala

displacement after independence. He was practicing 'Modern Art' in an impoverished country, he had personal wealth amidst a country which had nothing, an exclusive education in Montreux and Paris and had now returned to a devastated India where nothing worked. Cubist skills and a Buddhist orientation and sensitivity....

Today, his paintings sell phenomenally well and he has started to make serigraphs so that more people are able to collect them. This has been an ongoing theme for half a century, making art more accessible, taking it to people, moving entire exhibitions when it was considered almost impossible to do so and giving talks, creating and cultivating opinions. "Both for and against one's self!"

Quotes from his book on his exhibition titled, 'Ricorso', September 2008. Some are edited for clarity:

"For me, art is a central force which has given mankind some of its greatest moments – moments of emotional and intellectual joy, of awakened perceptions and spiritual epiphanies. I believe that an artist is not a circus performer who thrills by the daring of his feats. For me, he remains a custodian of values, a tenacious pursuer of the truth."

"As I see it, surrounded as we are by the cacophony of the grotesque, the immediate and the new – a painting is not a painting unless it emerges from within. Stimulation alone is not enough. The sharp clever commentary on social problems, the provocative juxtaposition of disparate elements are self limiting - however brilliant the execution. Discernment and a certain gravitas are essential if art has to lift you out of yourself, disturb and challenge you."

"You have to come to terms with your strengths and weaknesses. It is the latter that need to be dissolved."

Brief Biography

23 August 1922 - 2 September 2011

Education:

1940 - 42 Elphinstone College, University of Bombay

1942 - 44 The J J School of Art, Bombay

1945 - 47 The Heatherley School of Art, London

1947 - 51 Académie Julian and the Academie Andre Lhotse, Paris

1953 - 54 Académie Julian, Paris

1957 Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Paris

Exhibitions:

1951 - 2008 35 solo exhibitions in India, UK and USA

Exhibited work in over 200 group exhibitions and in many international auctions

He has written dozens of articles and received many awards. Over five books have been written and several films made about his work. Arun Khopkar's film on Sabavala's life and art, Colours of Absence, won the National Award in 1994.. In 2010 a film, The Inheritance of Light: Jehangir Sabavala, was made. Mumbai's Sakshi Gallery held his last solo exhibition, 'Ricorso' in 2008.

In 2010, his landscape from the Casuarina Line fetched Rs 17 million at a Saffronart auction.

His painting, Vespers 1, was sold for £253,650 (Rs. 21 million) in London at a Bonhams sale.

Some awards:

1949 Grand Prix de la Peinture, Monaco

1977 Padma Shri, by the President of India

2000 National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay, Citation

2001 All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, 'Kala Ratna', New Delhi

2002 The Dadabhoy Naoroji Millenium Award, Bombay

2003 The Maharashtra Rajya Kala Pradarshan Kalakar Vibhag Satkar

2004 Lalit Kala Ratna Award presented by the President of India

2005 Felicitation by the Society of Contemporary Artists, Kolkata

2008 Felicitation by the Vice Chancellor, Pune University, for The Art Society of India, 90th Annual Art Exhibition

2008 "The Taj Ratna Award" Agra

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