FOUR DOTS IN SOLSTICE

A quartet of Indian masters, born on the cusp of the old and modern. A ceaseless music.

Photograph: NARENDRA BISHT

BY STUTI AGARWAL

SYED Haider Raza sits in his whitewashed studio, carefully lined with colourful canvases that he has painted in the past. He is at work on his next painting. The master painter's signature motifs of dots, triangles, circles and squares fan out on the canvas in front of him in shades of the pancha-tattwa, and the 'Razabindu' rests right in the middle, yet to be painted in black—'the mother colour'. Raza is 93. He has been painting for the last 81 years of his life, and his urge to paint is undiminished. "I don't work as much as I would like to, sometimes an hour, sometimes more, but I cannot not work," he says.

It is this undying drive to keep creating that makes the surviving quartet of old masters—nonagenarians S.H. Raza, Ram Kumar, Krishen Khanna and K.G. Subramanyan—still pick up brush and palette, get coloured with smears and smudges and serve as guiding lights for generations of painters. Their long journeys as artists are but a brushwork of many triumphs and a few failures, a chiaroscuro of happiness and pain. The past exerted influence, credos changed, dominant styles emerged, hardened, then liquefied into something else. The only constant was artistic evolution.

Raza began painting at the age of 12 and soon after school joined an art college. He hasn't stopped since. His personal style has evolved over the years from expressionist landscapes to gestural abstraction, finally incorporating elements of Tantrism from Indian scriptures. The 1970s signified a rebirth for the artist Raza, by then well into his 50s, when in a bid to find deeper meaning in his work and move away from what he calls 'plastic art', he came home to India (he was based in Paris) and studied Indian culture closely. This resulted in his discovery of the 'bindu'—now a trademark in all of Raza's work. "I was in school when my teacher called my father to talk about my

SYED HAIDER RAZA 93

Abstract

Vitan, 2013
Vadehra Art Gallery

"There is a unique joyfulness in Raza's use of colour and form which makes him my favourite painter."

Atul Dodiya
Abstract, Figurative

Cover Photograph: JITENDER GUPTA

Raza had a rebirth in the 1970s, when, in a se arch for meaning, he turned to the 'bindu'.

Photographs: JITENDER GUPTA

RAM KUMAR 91

Landscapes, Cityscapes

Untitled, 1966
Vadehra Art Gallery

"He is a harmonious artist...his handling of colour is fantastical. His colourscape of grey-blue and green-rust is very expressive."

Jayasri Burman
Expressionist

bad grades. Finding me restless, he suggested I concentrate on a bindu he made for me on the board. Seventy years later, it came back to me, and now my work emerges from and centres on a dot," says Raza.

He soon built new dimensions around the bindu, incorporating the 'tribhuj' (triangle) and exploring 'roopadhyatmik' (abstract beauty) from its birth to the end, thereby completing his journey to the abstract. "There is a unique joyfulness in Raza's use of colour and form which makes him my favourite," says Atul Dodiya, a leading member of the younger generation of artists. Both graduates of Sir JJ School of Art, Dodiya and Raza have shared time in Paris, where Dodiya was sat by the maestro over many dinners for long, rambling discussions on world art. The "celebrator of art", as Dodiya calls him, is lionised as the most expensive living artist in India, with his work—*La Terre*—being sold for Rs 18.61 crore last year. He is also one of the last surviving artists of his time and league who still continues to exhibit new work.

Ram Kumar, 91, too is spryly busy. Like his close friend Raza (they seldom meet now), he is among the most frequently exhibited contemporary artists. "As I eat, I paint," says Kumar. One of India's foremost abstract painters, he spends hours in his basement studio, bent over his sketchbooks and stretched out as he paints his oils. Unlike Raza, Kumar started late as a painter. "As a child I was never interested in art of any kind. My brother (Hindi author Nirmal Verma) and I took up writing as a way to earn money. I chanced upon my love for painting many years later during my stay in Delhi," says Kumar. He was an economics student in St Stephen's College when he visited an art exhibition. Intrigued, he enrolled for evening art classes. After three heady years of discovery, Kumar gave up an accountant's job to pursue a career in art and bought a one-way ship ticket to Paris to study under painters Andre Lhote and Joseph Fernand Henri Leger. Since then, he has moved from figurative art to the abstract form (the Varanasi series was a turning point), and from depicting the human condition to painting landscapes in oil and acrylic. His late style is characterised by fragmentary colour contrasts. "I love Kumar's landscapes. They are absolutely intriguing and cannot be seen as just landscapes or abstracts, but always have a great depth to them that keep you in front of the canvas," says painter and sculptor Bharti Kher, who uses the idea of the bindi in her work. Another admirer of Kumar's landscapes is artist Jayasri Burman. "Ram Kumar is such a harmonious artist. Everything on his canvas sings to you, and his handling of colour is so fantastical. His colour-scape of grey-blue and green-rust is very expressive," she says.

Krishen Khanna is frenetic at 90. His feverish excitement about his new work—with large canvases—communicates to all, and he doesn't like to be away from his studio for too long. He has always had the penchant for large works; his mural in Delhi's ITC Maurya is one of India's largest. "Big paintings are a whole-time occupation, and not knowing how the picture is going to turn out is very exciting," says Khanna. He recently had a solo exhibition and is now at work on a six-feet-high and 13-feet-long canvas—a festive narrative featuring his famous bandwallahs. "Krishen Khanna has become famous for his bandwallahs, though that is such a small part of the amazing portfolio that the artist has," says Kishore

A chance visit to an exhibition intrigued Ram Ku mar. Art classes followed. Then, he left his job.

KRISHEN KHANNA 90

Expressionist

Who Is It?, 2008
Delhi Art Gallery

"Krishen's figurative work, derived from mundane lives, I love. He has an amazing quality of making the ordinary attractive."

Jogen Chowdhury
Figurative, Expressionist

Singh, art curator and critic. Khanna's limning of urban migrants at work, his cast of stock city characters and his drawing on mythology and biblical episodes are what mark the artist's oeuvre. His work has evolved from an early emphasis on 'drawing' to a looser structure, his earth colours have expanded to a polychromatic spread from which figures have to be teased out.

It is hard to imagine now that Khanna was a banker for 14 years. He did paint *The Last Supper* when he was seven but he was an executive at Grindlay's bank for well over a decade too. "Financial constraints never allowed me to take up painting full time, so I continued to paint after hours. Soon I realised I couldn't do both, and that is when I quit," he says. But even before Khanna quit the bank, he was part of the famous Progressive Artists' Group based in Bombay. He struck friendships with many 'progressives' when he got a chance to display his work in an anniversary exhibition of the Bombay Art Society—a picture of Delhi on the eve of Gandhi's assassination. "It was by chance that a friend, S.B. Palsikar, met me before the exhibition and took the canvas from me. I think it was a very crude painting, but am glad it has been appreciated for what it is," he says. Painter Jogen Chowdhury feels Khanna is the master of big works. "I first met Krishen Khanna when he was working on the Maurya mural. His figurative work, derived from the mundane lives of people, is something I love. He has an amazing quality of making something ordinary so attractive," says Chowdhury. Khanna is deeply concerned with the everyday human condition and the moral dimensions of urbanised society. "Husain was once asked why his canvases were so people-populated. He asked why they shouldn't be, since his country is so populated," Khanna recalls laughingly.

Though Krishen Khanna's stylistic journey has called at different ports, including the abstract form and is now anchored on expressionism, he does not like to be categorised. From large, searing themes like Partition to quotidian events like the confusion and staged chaos of a marriage procession, Khanna's canvas has space for all. "Painting is not about populating the canvas, it is about telling a story," he says. The artist often revisits his themes, as in his famous *The Last Bite*, where he painted all his friends gathered around a Christ-like Husain on a dhaba table, and spins variations on the old. Khanna is the only one of the many artists of the time who also took up photography and exhibited his prints in his studio. "Every medium of art is important. I am not tied to one vision," he says.

Then there is the versatile and indefatigable master, 91-year-old Baroda-based K.G. Subramanyan—painter, sculptor, muralist, printmaker, calligraphist, writer and pedagogue. He recently held an exhibition of his new drawings and is now working on a book of sketches. "Art keeps me busy, and awake!" he chuckles. "After breakfast, I feel drowsy, so I immediately start scribbling." Subramanyan also makes numerous doodle postcards, which he posts to his relatives and friends every festive season. He says he has a pencil in his hand all the time.

Unlike the others, Subramanyan did not readily take up formal education in art; he accidentally fell into the paint potion when he was thrown out of Presidency College, Madras, where he was studying economics. "I used to be part of Gandhiji's freedom struggle in my college days. During the Quit

The day Krishen Khanna quit his bank job, his fr iends celebrated. Raza threw a party in Paris.

Photograph: MAYUR BHATT

K.G. SUBRAMANYAN 91

Expressionist, Sculptor, Muralist

Untitled, 2006
Vadehra Art Gallery

"He always encouraged freedom and never constricted us to one thing. He coaxed us to take part in any craft, to find our own style."

Thota Vaikuntam
Mixed Media

India Movement, we were jailed for picketing the secretariat," he recounts. After six months behind bars, no government university was open to them. "It was then that I was reminded of the Madras Art School principal once telling me I was in the wrong field, that economics was not for me. So I looked out and found Shantiniketan." Under great artist-teachers like Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and Benode Behari Mukherjee, Subramanyan began his art education at Kala Bhavan. In 1951, he joined the art faculty in Baroda's MS University; in 1980 he went back to Shantiniketan.

Like Abanindranath Tagore and Picasso, Subramanyan took up crafts and sculpture (for instance, his diverse terracotta plaques of the 1970s) along with painting—one of the few artists to do so. "All arts being practised come together and make one big tradition; one supplements the other, and I have always been interested in the panoramic view," he says. Influenced by Cubism and Surrealism when young, Subramanyan has, since the '80s, done paintings on glass and perspex. His earlier, brilliant colouring has since taken on earthy hues.

Subramanyan, apart from painting his Romanesque scenes, enjoys playing with clay, does small sculptures, big murals, and has written and drawn many books, including two children's fairytales. Artist Thota Vaikuntam, a student of Subramanyan, talks fondly of his teacher's versatility. "He always encouraged freedom and never constricted us to one thing.... He coaxed us to sketch constantly and take part in any craft, everything, to find our own style. He has a special place in my heart, for all the things he has taught me," he says.

Inhabiting the art world for over half a century, their paths crossing each other, often caught in a web of acquaintances, collectors, academics, and fellow artists, the four mandarins are friends too.

"Anytime you chat with the four, they talk so fondly of the '60s and '70s; their times of 'adda-bazzi', supporting and discussing art over rum and chai," says Kishore Singh. Ram Kumar recounts a time in Paris when he had gone to receive Raza at the station. "He was new to town, and I had been there long enough. It was welcoming and showing an old friend around," he says. Khanna reminisces of a time when he stayed with Raza on his visits to Paris. They were both part of the Progressive Artists' Group and have many stories to tell of their time in Bombay. "On my last day at the bank job, I was greeted by M.F. Husain, Bal Chhabra and V.S. Gaitonde at the gate. Bal Chhabra took off my tie and told me I wouldn't need it any more," remembers Khanna. The lot then went out to tea and dinner to celebrate. Raza, who was in Paris, threw a party there; they had all wanted him to quit. Khanna has a huge pile of letters from fellow artists, some of which have been compiled into two books by the Raza foundation. They continue to keep in touch through e-mail or telephone. "We all live so far away, meeting becomes difficult to arrange," says Khanna, who lives in Gurgaon. Raza and Ram Kumar are in Delhi, but far apart in the capital's sprawl. And it is not just amongst themselves that they share such warmth. Burman laughs as she remembers a time in Paris when she met Raza. "He seemed to recognise I was Bengali and began singing a Bengali song. I joined in and we sang *Ekla Chalo* top of our voice," she beams.

S.H. Raza, Ram Kumar, Krishen Khanna and K.G. Subramanyan have a vast cumulative experience between them and have

Subramanyan plays with clay, does small sculpt ures, big murals. He has written fairytales too.

travelled the world—learning, teaching, exploring, imbibing and forging their artistic credos. Moreover, their unique styles are recognisable by anyone who knows art—an impressive achievement in itself.

But what about the younger generation of painters, the inheritors of their legacy? "Indian artists continue to do as well as the others," says Subramanyan. But globally the art world has fallen in his eyes. "The global art scene is ruthless; they do not know what they are doing. There has been a disconnect between the human and the art, now everything is galleryised," he says. "Art is no longer poetic. You get dazzled by it for a moment, but it does not stay with you. It has become a chase for money; you continue doing what becomes popular," says Khanna. But Raza, for one, is impressed by the richness of local talent. "The young painters are still experimenting and will find their way. We cannot come to conclusions just yet," he says.

Living legends they might be, but younger artists also have serious competition at hand, so fecund the quartet is still, so fiercely committed they are to art, so inflexible are their exalted standards. And this when they are beyond craving for new awards and recognition (or, indeed, money).

Art historian and curator Yashodhara Dalmia recounts an incident about a recent exhibition she curated celebrating Amrita Shergil centenary. "Raza, who's wheelchair-bound, came and made it a point to see each and every one of the 100 works on display. It is amazing how these artists still continue to see, derive and decipher," she says.

What new and established artists—and the art-loving public at large—can imbibe from these titans of modern Indian art is their unshaken vitality and a totally honest passion they bring to what they love, whether that finds expression in oil, watercolour, acrylic or gouache.

JUMP CUT

ABHISHEK PODDAR

THEIR ONLY CALLING

IN the years leading up to Indian independence, the battles of nationalism were played out not only through political agitation, but, in retrospect, also on canvases. Indian art at the time, moving between aping western idioms and techniques, appropriating and reworking them, and strongly repudiating them, are now a fertile ground for discourses on nationalism and colonialism. A whole generation of artists who were shaped by that moment in time, soon after independence in 1947, are seen today as representatives of Indian art the world over.

Some of the first Indian artists to be recognised and acknowledged by the international art community, artists such as those belonging to the Calcutta Group, the Baroda Group or the Progressive Artists' group established new modes of expression to reflect their times, therein beginning a new chapter in Indian art. Their art is now considered foundational to an understanding of 'Indian fine art' as a category that is both indigenous and yet universal. I have had the good fortune to have personally known many of these stalwarts.

My relationships with these artists did extend beyond the purview of art in many cases, but in the realm of the arts I am indebted to them. They not only took me under their wing, patiently bearing with someone as young and unschooled like me, but also had the humility to insist that I go look at other contemporary artists. Their ardour for art constantly demanded explanations of my choices—forcing me to interpret and articulate my responses.

The pursuit of art—not only in creation, but also appreciation—is a subjective enterprise. Although the latter may in many ways be instinctive, the truth is that one does have to learn to understand its language to look at art, in the same way one must learn Urdu in order to actually read Ghalib. Fortunately for me, and my role as a collector, the people who taught me to look at art, understand it and appreciate it, were these very artists, for whom art was more than a passion; for whom art was not what they did, but who they were.

(Abhishek Poddar is a collector and runs Museum of Art and Photography)

E-mail your columnist: abhishekpoddar@yahoo.com