

Modernism and Indian Art

Ebrahim Alkazi in Conversation

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Facing page: Fig. 1a F.N. Souza, *Portuguese Gentleman*, 1952, Oil on canvas, 60 x 57 in. (153 x 145 cm)

Following pages: Fig. 1b F.N. Souza, *Golgotha in Goa*, 1948, Watercolour, 15 x 22 in. (38 x 56 cm)

'... I remember taking a handcart full of Souza's paintings and going up and down Oxford Street and Bond Street trying to sell them.'

In post-Independence India there were a few individuals who set the paradigms for modernity and initiated an awareness of art and culture. Amongst these Ebrahim Alkazi could be forefronted as he actively set about filling a lacunae in awareness of modern art and the aspirations for a national identity and a means of acquiring modernity. (Fig. 1a) In the 1940s and 1950s it was Bombay that was the vibrant hub of cultural activity and an impressive array of individuals had congregated there to attend to their respective calling with an enviable zeal. There was Mulk Raj Anand, the cultural impresario; Balraj Sahni, the skilled theatre and film actor; and K.A. Abbas, the socially conscious film director, to name a few. In the world of art and theatre it was Ebrahim Alkazi who consistently organized artistic events and staged theatre productions, thereby creating a trajectory for modernity.

Among his many initiatives was the introduction of a series of eight exhibitions titled 'This is Modern Art' at the Jehangir Art Gallery in Bombay in the 1950s where he opened up a new world of awareness and understanding for art connoisseurs as well as the ordinary person. In this series, since the originals would not be available, he would cut out reproductions from prints and magazines of artists like Paul Cézanne and Georges Braque providing the nuances and distilled essence of their thoughts and art practices. He also mounted a remarkable show on Pablo Picasso in Bombay, rightly feeling that to understand art, the vortex of its initiative had to be grasped by knowing the giant of modernism, Picasso, and in particular his formulation of Cubism which provided the essential tools for art. Alkazi went about organizing, apart from prints, the master's original drawings and ceramics from collections in Bombay to mount this hugely successful exhibition. (See p. 154, Figs. 2a–2c)

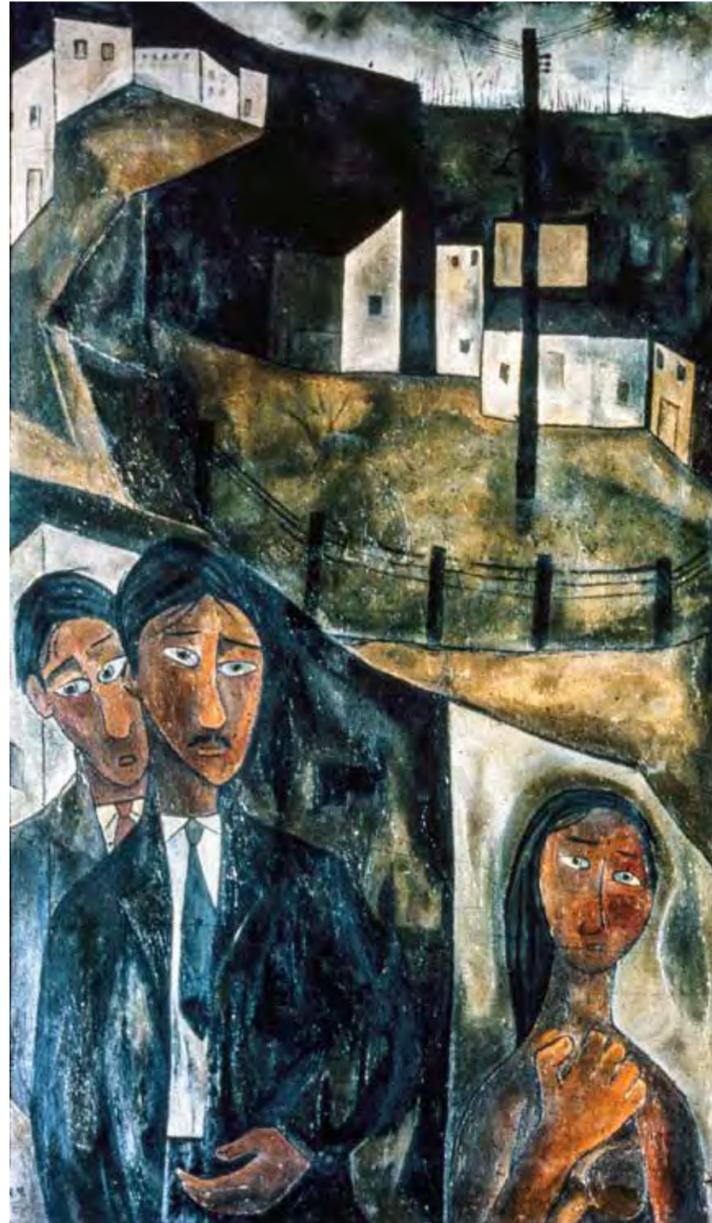
In drawing the parameters of a modernist consciousness, two constituents were essential according to Alkazi's point of view. It was of paramount importance that the melding of Western thought with Eastern aesthetics took place so that a hybrid, pluralistic, and sectarian form of art practice could be created. The other was a holistic approach where no art could be seen in isolation but as part of a larger movement where theatre, film, and art were interlinked and could move seamlessly from one to the other. His theatre activity always took into account the prevailing notions of art and enhanced their thrust towards modernism. Equally as an artist and a skilled set designer, he felt that art when lent to theatre would be enlivened and achieve the greatest exposure. Thus the sets of his production of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* were made by the veteran artist M.F. Husain. (See p. 152–153, Figs. 1a and 1b). The first and largest solo show of Tyeb Mehta with



Above: Pl. 4a Ram Kumar, *Black Forms IV*, 1961, Oil on canvas

Centre: Pl. 4b Ram Kumar, *Greek Landscape IV*, 1960, Oil on canvas, 45 x 51 in (114 x 130 cm)

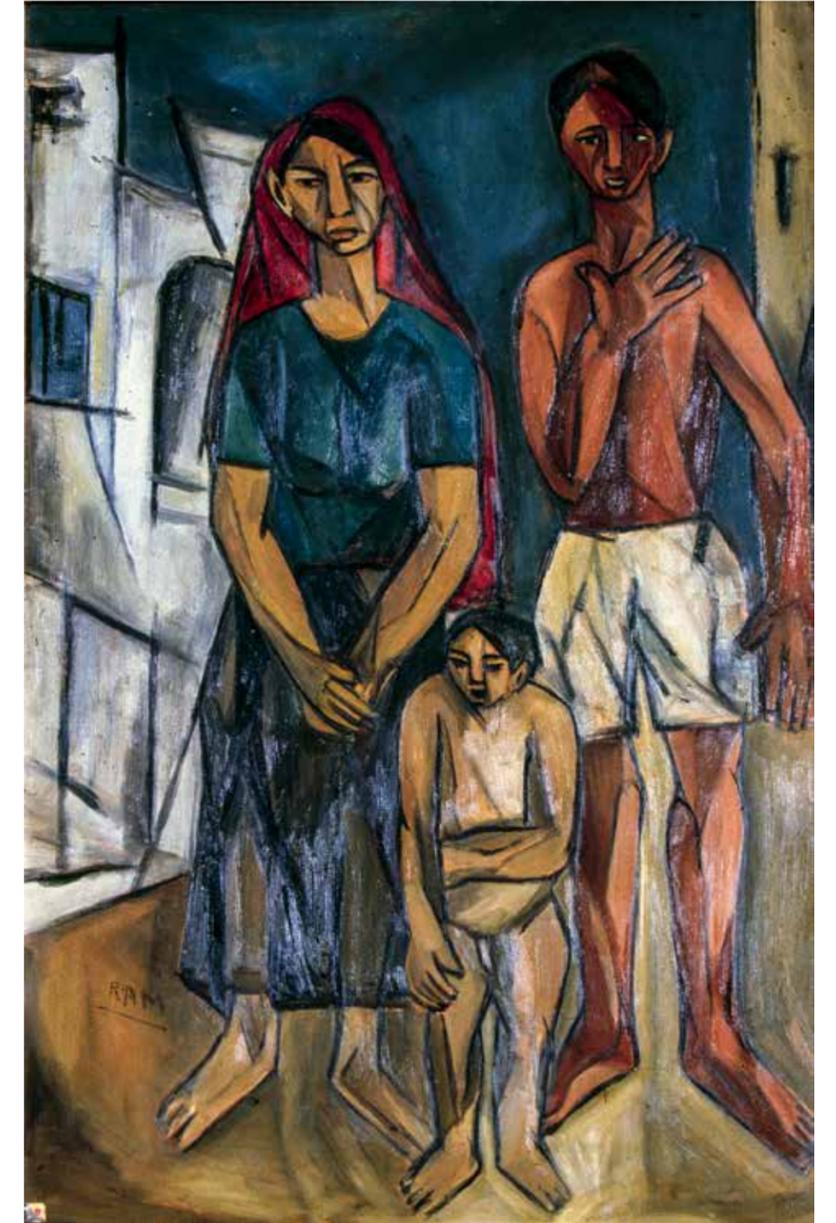
Below: Pl. 4c Ram Kumar, *Landscape*, 1966, Oil on canvas, 45.2 x 51.2 in (115 x 130 cm)



Pl. 4d Ram Kumar, *Sad Town*, 1956, Oil on canvas, 47 x 27 in (120 x 69 cm)



Pl. 4e Ram Kumar, *Vagabond*, 1956, Oil on Board, 47.5 x 24 in (120.7 x 61 cm)



Pl. 4f Ram Kumar, *Worker's Family*, 1955, Oil on canvas, 20 x 13 in (51 x 33 cm)

