



Tyeb Mehta. *Celebration*. Acrylic on canvas. 240 cms x 510 cms. 1995.

HIGH FLYERS

Christie's is taking Indian art to unparalleled heights commercially
– **Ganieve Grewal** tells us how.

JAMES CHRISTIE CONDUCTED HIS FIRST AUCTION IN LONDON ON 5th December 1766, which included "four fine Indian pictures painted on glass". Thus began Christie's long association with India and Indian art. Auctions brought Indian works of art to a large European audience. In 1781, George III bought a suite of Indian ivory furniture from James Christie as a gift for Queen Charlotte, inspiring her to acquire a substantial Oriental collection. Today, the furniture is in residence at Buckingham Palace.

This association and commitment has continued to grow over the past two hundred years. In 1994, Christie's opened an office in Mumbai, becoming the only international auction house with a permanent presence in India. The first annual auction of 20th Century Indian paintings was held the next year in London along with the *Visions of India* sale, which included Indian jewellery, works of art and other items.

This stand-alone auction of Indian works marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Indian art. In the next decade, many milestones were established, the first of which was the sale of *The P&O Collection of Watercolours of India* by Thomas and William Daniell in 1996. Coming under the hammer at Christie's in London, it sold at a total of USD 1,287,756. This was a turning point, since for the first time, works associated with India crossed the million dollar mark.

As the demand for fine art from South Asia and Southeast Asia grew,

Christie's established its Indian and Southeast Asian Art Department in New York in 1998, conducting its first sale in September that year. To illustrate just how much the market for Indian Modern and Contemporary art has grown over the years, let's look at the figures. In 2000, Christie's global sales of Modern and Contemporary Indian art totaled USD 656,300, but just two years later, in 2002, the sale totaled USD 841,418, with Tyeb Mehta's *Celebration* becoming the first work by an Indian artist to cross the hundred thousand dollar mark at a sale price of USD 320,000.

Sales increased by 73% in the year from 2001. In fact, growth was seen not only in Modern and Contemporary Indian art but also in Antiquities, with a Chola bronze figure of Lord Shiva as the God of Music setting a world auction record of USD 724,300. Simultaneously, new world records were also set at Christie's *Arts of India* sale in London by a Mughal emerald, gold and enamel wine cup, which sold for USD 038,411, and a 17th century Mughal carved emerald set in a diamond brooch, which sold for USD 682,500.

Since then, the growth has been steady. Christie's global sale total had doubled to USD 3,636,800 by 2004. 2005 became another landmark year for the Indian art world, as Tyeb Mehta's painting, *Mabhisasura*, crossed the million dollar mark by selling for USD 1,584,000. The sale total had now reached USD 12,310,880, indicating a marked growth in the market in just three years. This record was only broken in March 2008, when M.F. Husain's *Battle of Ganga and Jamuna*, a painting from the erstwhile Hervitz



M.F. Husain. *Battle of Ganga and Jamuna: Mahabharata.* Diptych. 1971-1972.

collection, sold at Christie's New York for USD 1.6 million. By 2007, Christie's Indian art sale of Modern and Contemporary art alone amassed USD 36,021,000. An example of the rise in value of premier Indian artists is the painting *Vishal* by Atul Dodiya. In 2002, it sold at Christie's for USD 11,491. In 2007, it was sold for USD 398,976.

This remarkable expansion of the market for Indian art can be partly attributed to a rise in awareness among members of the Indian community worldwide. As the quantum of personal wealth within this group has grown, it has begun to search for status symbols and has evinced a desire to 'belong' as well as to cultivate a taste for the more sophisticated and refined pleasures of life. A renewed interest in one's heritage, traditions and art is often attendant upon an increase in disposable income. It is gratifying to see young collectors becoming passionate and knowledgeable about the art that represents the cultural evolution of their country.

In the next few years, Christie's plans to take Indian art further ahead. In addition to collectors from America and Europe, patrons from Asia are becoming increasingly appreciative of Indian and South Asian art. Christie's was the first to take Indian Contemporary art to a pan-Asian audience by including it in a bi-annual Asian Contemporary Art sale held in Hong Kong. By presenting Indian and Pakistani contemporary art alongside Chinese,

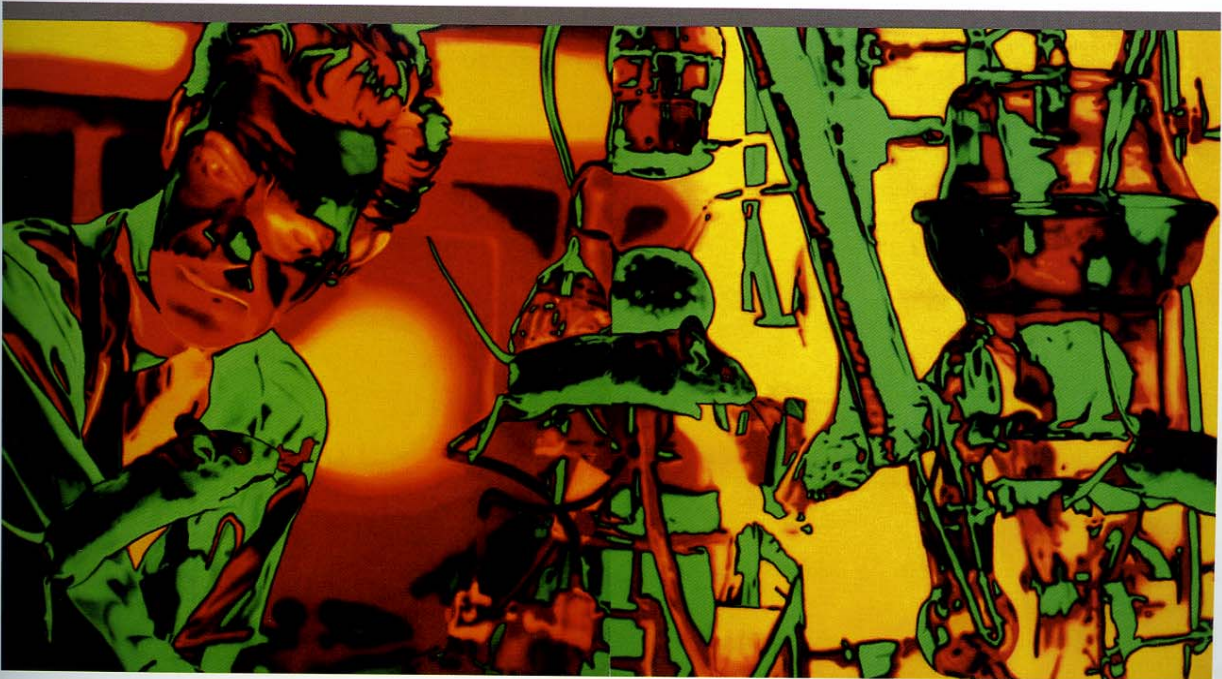
Korean and Japanese art, cross-cultural continental currents got highlighted. Regional and global collectors could now view Asian art with fresh insights.

The Hong Kong sales have proved to be path-breaking. In November 2007, Indian and Pakistani art at the Christie's Hong Kong sale broke 13 records for artists. For example, N.S. Harsha's painting *Mass Marriage* sold at USD 834,293, Subodh Gupta's *Untitled* painting sold for USD 494,789 and T.V. Santhosh's oil on canvas, *Traces of an Ancient Error II*, sold at USD 494,789. At the Christie's Asian Contemporary Art Spring sale in Hong Kong in 2008, bidding came from a truly global collector base, including bidders from Asia, the US and Europe. Subodh Gupta's painting *Saat Samundar Paar (10)* sold for USD 1,190,658, breaking the artist's world auction record. Nine other artist's records were broken at that sale.

Christie's is also committed to bringing international art to India. In October 2007, Christie's was the first international auction house to hold a preview of its Asian Contemporary Art sales and Southeast Asian Art sales in Mumbai, displaying works by top Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian and Filipino artists. Included in the line-up were Zhang Xiaogang, Zeng Fanzhi, Yue Minjun, Nyoman Masriadi and Putu Sutawijaya, among others. The art market has never been more vibrant and global.



Atul Dodiya. *Visbal*. Oil on canvas. 1989.



T. V. Santhosh. *Traces of an ancient error*. Dipych. 2007.