

# A DESIGNER COLLECTION

Chester Herwitz is one of the foremost collectors of contemporary Indian art. He talks to **Girish Shahane** about his collection, his pet peeves and his plans for housing his paintings in a museum.



M.F. Husain. Man Series. Oil. 1950. 122 cm x 244 cm. Picture courtesy HEART.

**D**avida Herwitz welcomes me into a hotel room, where I find her husband Chester lying on the bed. As I walk in, he intones, "Father, I want to confess". Not qualified to grant anybody absolution, I concentrate, instead, on testing my dictaphone. Meanwhile Chester Herwitz rises to a sitting position and recites a litany of ailments afflicting him: "My eyes are weak, and I can't hear too well, and I have an ingrown toenail..."

It's a particular pity about the eyes, because Chester Herwitz is, in his own description, a very visual person. And his self-description is hardly surprising when you consider that Herwitz has accumulated the most extensive and important individual collection of contemporary Indian art in the world. At its peak the Herwitz collection contained about 3,400 works, excluding examples of folk art. The latter must be of considerable interest in themselves, given that the Los Angeles County Museum is

mounting an exhibition of his Kalighat paintings in June this year.

Chester and Davida Herwitz first came to India in 1961. He was a businessman who designed handbags which used Madras plaids, and he wanted to see how the fabric was made within individual homes in south India. Naturally he visited a few tourist spots and was fascinated by the temples of Mahabalipuram. The vibrant colours of Rajasthan made an impression as well, the blue dots on the sarees of women breaking stones on the street, their yellow jewellery. He felt a kind of authenticity in the life of Indians: "people were doing actual things, not seeing everything reflected, whether by the media or something else". Also a sense of vitality: "Vitality is the one thing of value in the United States, and you get a sense of it in India too".

Herwitz was already collecting art at that time, concentrating on the work of a relatively unknown painter called Martin Carey, because "I was interested in his vision, in seeing

through his sensibility". In Delhi he visited the National Gallery of Modern Art, and saw M.F. Husain's *Zameen*, an encounter which proved a turning point in his life. When Husain painted his seminal canvas, the United States was still dominated by the Greenbergian vision of painting. Painting was supposed to be about painting, flat and resolutely non-referential. Husain's *Zameen* was something very different, "an epic way of describing – not village life – but something we could identify as related to the village... and Husain captures the quality of light in India so well.... It brings such richness to the work. And there was something unique in his paintings: the figures might be standing still, but there was so much movement in the canvas, in the way the paint shifted..."

Herwitz began to collect Husain's paintings and developed a close, abiding friendship with the mercurial Indian artist. He might have been content collecting the work of only one



painter as he had done in the United States; "In fact it was Husain's generosity of spirit which induced me to see the work of some other painters. He said, 'you keep buying my work, but there are so many other good painters around,' and took me to the studios of painters like Tyeb Mehta". Herwitz resolved not to collect an artist's work without seeing it for three years, because *beginning* to collect an artist was, for him, a commitment to *go on* collecting the work, so that the collection would reflect that artist's development. Consistency is one of the hallmarks of the Herwitz collection and he values artists whose work shows consistency as well, not in the sense that they go on doing the same thing, but they do not hop erratically from one kind of art to another. In the course of the seventies Herwitz gradually expanded the number of artists whose works he bought, until most of the country's best talent featured in his collection.

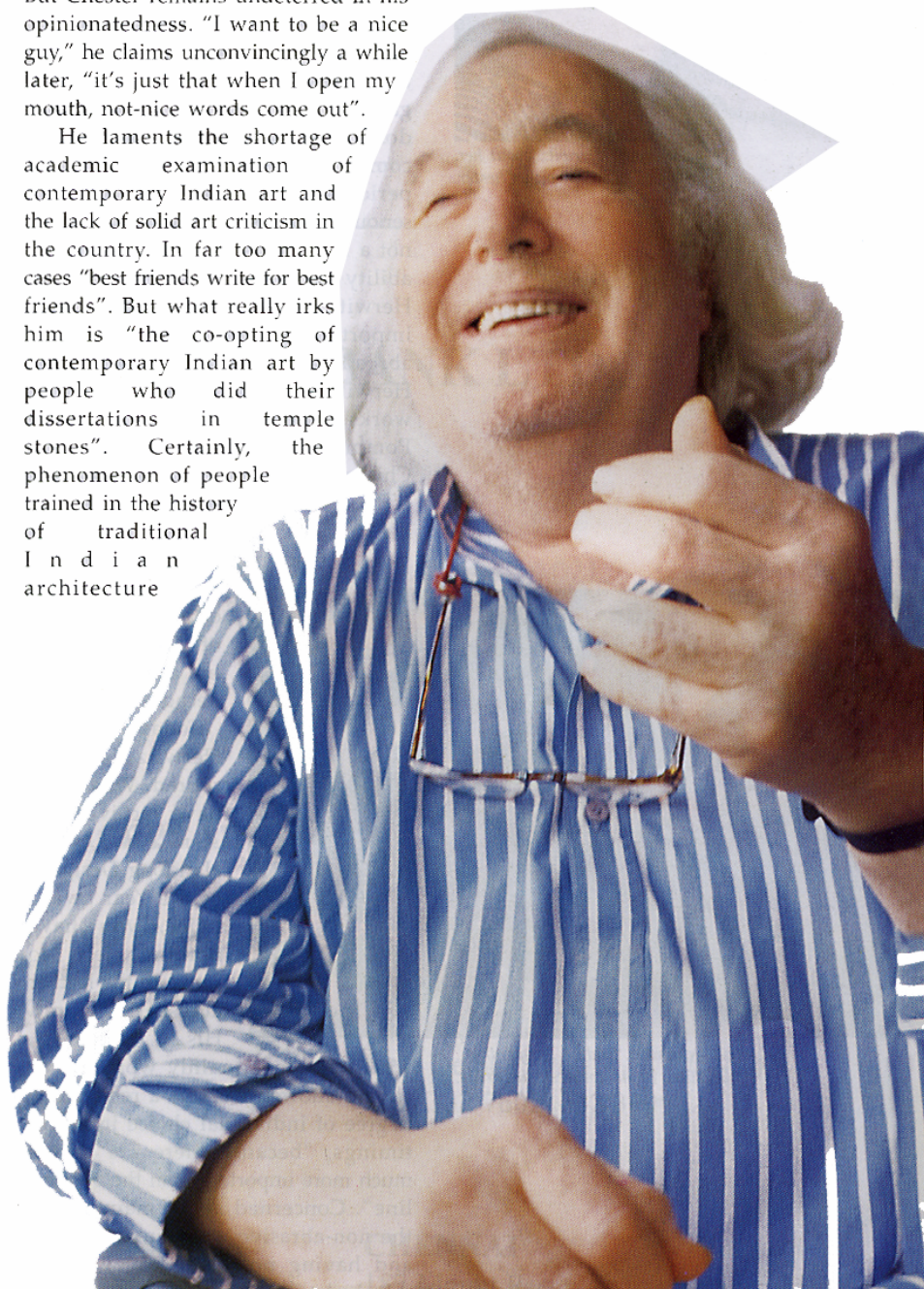
Herwitz does seem to lean towards figurative art, if the painters he mentions favourably – Husain, Tyeb Mehta, Arpita Singh, Ganesh Pyne, Bikash Bhattacharjee, Nalini Malani, Gieve Patel and Sudhir Patwardhan among them – are any indication. Perhaps he is close to painting which is 'about something'. When he talks about the art of the painters he admires, he does so backed by deep knowledge as well as passion, with a natural humility which doesn't draw attention to itself. He often gestures evocatively, as when he describes the adventurous upsweep of an almost-dry brush in an early Rameshwar Broota canvas, which allows the painting to transcend the obviousness of its satire.

When he isn't discussing paintings or painters, though, Herwitz displays a caustic wit, presenting a poker-face and hardly gesturing at all. If you aren't sure if he's joking or serious, the trick is to turn to his wife and check if she's chuckling. "We've known each other 40 years and she still finds me funny," Chester Herwitz says in amazement. They have travelled to India every winter for most of those 40 years, for a month in the early years, for longer periods as their children grew up; they

always stay in the same room at the old Taj when in Bombay. "That television and the cupboard weren't here earlier. So we had this space where large canvases could be spread out," Davida Herwitz explains. She is much more restrained than her impish husband. When he calls one writer a charlatan or refers to a Delhi dealer as a fraud she tries to draw his attention to the fact that everything he says is being taped. But Chester remains undeterred in his opinionatedness. "I want to be a nice guy," he claims unconvincingly a while later, "it's just that when I open my mouth, not-nice words come out".

He laments the shortage of academic examination of contemporary Indian art and the lack of solid art criticism in the country. In far too many cases "best friends write for best friends". But what really irks him is "the co-opting of contemporary Indian art by people who did their dissertations in temple stones". Certainly, the phenomenon of people trained in the history of traditional Indian architecture

**"My ultimate intent was always to establish a museum for my collection. It's ridiculous to pass something like this down in the family. Amazing how people will do it".**



*Despite being unwell Chester Herwitz agreed to a photo-session, even posing as the Grasping American. Photo by Krishnamachari Bose.*



KRISHNAMACHARI BOSE.



Keeping Herwitz about her.  
Davida with Chester.

metamorphosing into authorities on contemporary art is curious. It underlines the point Herwitz makes about the lack of trained expertise in the field of writing on contemporary art. If Herwitz himself could write half as eloquently as he talks about painting, he would be one of the most perceptive critics in the field, but he brushes the possibility aside, saying, "A collector's job is not to write about art. A collector has two functions: first, to inject money into the system. Secondly, to preserve the art he collects, to show it to interested people and loan it to galleries and museums". Herwitz has done exceptionally well on all these counts. He bought substantially in a period when there were hardly any serious collectors of art around in India; not a few artists owe their continued ability to paint as they wish to Herwitz's backing. And most important exhibitions of Indian art abroad have featured work from the Herwitz collection. He has loaned works to institutions like the Centre Pompidou, the Tate Gallery, the Chicago Art Institute and the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, ensuring that the paintings he loves touch the lives of people who might otherwise have

remained ignorant of the achievements of Indian artists in the last five decades.

Today Chester Herwitz is semi-retired. When you have received the American Handbag Designer of the Year award twice, you have nothing left to prove in the leather accessories world.

His business,

which employs mainly women, has always allowed workers a remarkable degree of individual choice in work-timings, "because there are things much more important than the bottom-line". Concerned about maintaining the non-abrasive work environment, and having no desire to work for somebody else, Herwitz refused to sell the business when it would have been

most lucrative. His chief concern now is finding a permanent home for his collection.

"My ultimate intent was always to establish a museum for my collection. It's ridiculous to pass something like this down in the family. Amazing how people will do it. I always wanted to return the collection to India, but no museum wanted it". With funds not forthcoming from Indian business and problems over locating the proposed museum, he realised he would have to endow a gallery himself, apart from donating his collection. It was to this end that he sold some of his most valued paintings through two auctions conducted by Sotheby's in 1995 and 1996, which triggered off the series of auctions that contemporary Indian art has witnessed in the past four years.

For somebody who knows each one of the paintings he owns, the sales were a wrenching experience. "The second sale was unbearable. There was a Sudhir Patwardhan painting called *Keralite*, for instance, a wonderful painting...and works by Nalini, and Gieve...but I realised that having 3,200 paintings plus money was better than having 3,400 paintings and no money. And I wanted to bring the quality of the collection to public notice, so I had to part with some of the best work".

The Herwitz collection will almost certainly be displayed in his home state of Massachusetts. A wing of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, north of Boston, is being readied to house the collection, where, one guesses, it will probably receive more visitors than the National Gallery of Modern Art manages in Delhi or Bombay. A CD-ROM of the collection is also planned.

The length of my stay for the interview is approaching the outer boundary of what could be considered polite. I look ruefully at the list of unasked questions on my writing-pad, saying, "You know, you don't need an interviewer at all. I might as well have just sent across the dictaphone". For once Chester Herwitz is not poker-faced; he smiles and replies, "but you see, I was afraid you'd ask questions I couldn't answer. And I didn't want to take that risk, so I didn't give you a chance. I outwitted you".



One that got away. Sudhir Patwardhan.  
*Keralite*. Photo courtesy the artist.