

ON THE PALETTE



Das' mural 'Mohenjo-Daro to Mahatma Gandhi' at the old Parliament building. ALL PICS COURTESY: NGMA, DELHI

A lifetime of restless creativity

Most great artists, across geographies, have stuck to a medium or at the most two, in which their mastery has been celebrated. For 1941-born Jatin Das, the medium has always seemed almost like a backdrop. His six decades of outpouring of creativity have seen him traverse mediums and forms of artistic expression. Graphics, drawings, oils, sculptures, murals, charcoal, tiles, platters and even manhole covers — the range is unparalleled.

As he says, “I like playing with different mediums. I am a painter, wanting to be an artist. But painting is also drawing. Drawing is also sculpting. It is a matter of creating negative and positive spaces. The ecstasy and the poetry of a line transcend tone and colour. Each medium can be rewarding or limiting, depending on how you handle it. I pursue my instinct, my passion, and my concerns.”

Is this a sign of creativity meshed with a certain restlessness? “It all depends on what my inner mind says at the moment, or what is available, then I use that particular medium,” elaborates Das. “There is no real hierarchy in it. There are times when the medium inspires the work. I draw with conté and ink, and paint with oil, watercolour and ink.”

Das’ retrospective, the largest ever collection of his diverse works — about 400, was on view at the National Gallery of Modern Arts (NGMA), Delhi. Curated by his two elder children, daughter Nandita Das, actor, producer, and director and her brother Siddhartha Das, an architect, who works with textiles, it consisted of an exhibition and a book that showcases about six decades of his works.

“A retrospective show is an artist’s lifetime’s work,” Das muses. “There is never enough time to go through one’s lifetime’s work. I began to take out old works that I had

The largest-ever retrospective of renowned artist and sculptor **Jatin Das** was on view in Delhi recently. **Suman Tarafdar** catches up with the artist who tells him why one has to constantly unlearn everything



'Icon In Robe' (natural pigment)

not seen for half a century! I was surprised to see how the figuration in my works has changed and evolved.” He credits his children for this ambitious endeavour. “The artist knows his works the best and can curate them but some distance is also needed.”

Perhaps age has a say in an artist, who, as part of the Bombay Progressives Group, once believed in a pace that could only be termed extraordinary. “I find painting fun but preparing for an exhibition is boring and exhausting,” he says. “You have to take out the works, photograph, mount, frame, and document them. Being an artist, you have to hold shows and sell your work, simply to live. That’s the dichotomy — I live on the sale of my paintings, but I do not

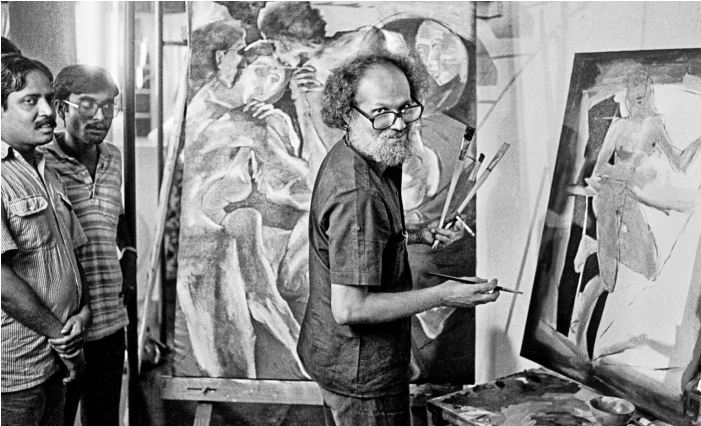
paint to sell. To put out such a large body of work together was not easy.”

The curators admit the challenge. “To sieve through 60 years of the work and life of a prolific painter and a maverick misfit has been an enormous challenge and privilege,” says his daughter. “Siddhartha and I, for many months, made the selection. The first round had almost 1,500 works, many of which we had never seen or had become blurry in our minds. It was like mining gems from the nooks and corners of his studio! We wanted to make sure we had work from every era and every medium.”

She distils his art as perhaps only someone who has closely seen him over decades can do. “Even as his children, we are awed by the large and varied body of work he has created in the last 60 years. His restless energy, spirit, loneliness, pain, search, wonderment — they all find a creative expression. Central are his human figures — iconic and primal — with a life of their own. His spirit is that of a seeker, an observer, who ferrets out the essence of people, places and objects and pours them all out in his art. Though he is a figurative artist, he also draws and paints with equal ease — birds, animals, people, places... whatever catches his inner eye. He embraces every medium with a flourish and with no fear of the unknown.”

He still stands out, especially in relation to today’s art scenario. He notes a tremendous change though. “People talk about the art market and art business, and those who come to see your works are called clients! I have successfully insulated myself from the commodification of my work. The so-called modern education system has created many divisions and has limited the imagination of a child. So, various forms of art are disjointed and completely divorced from life.”

His advice is straightforward. “To find your true self in art, one has to unlearn everything. Then do what your inner mind tells you. Sadly, we are taught to focus on the goal. But what is more important is the journey. I urge young people to experience and explore their surroundings first. Learn from nature and folk and traditional arts, which are the most important influences for an artist.”



Jatin Das shot by Raghu Rai

DISCOVER INDIAN ART

Guardian spirits: Peering into our psyche



Patravahaka yaksha, Madhya Pradesh, 50 BCE, sandstone. PIC COURTESY: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The distinctively wrathful appearance of guardian spirits in South Asian art has enormous mystical significance: it allows the spirits to simultaneously embody and challenge negative, supernatural forces

Standing outside a Thai temple or an Indian stupa, one is often startled by otherworldly creatures — in the form of stone figures and murals — that decorate the doorways, entrances and walls of sacred sites. Bearing sharp fangs and mostly in grotesque forms, these fierce creatures are the guardian spirits in Buddhist, Jain and Hindu mythology. They are said to protect deities and humans from malevo-

lent spirits and control the natural forces within their realms.

For example, yakshas and yakshis — usually benign but occasionally mischievous, sexually aggressive, and sometimes violent nature spirits — are depicted in a stately human form across early Hindu, Buddhist and Jain art. On the other hand, makaras and the many types of yali, showcase animal features and chimeric forms. Guardian spirits such as the rakhandars feature in regional or Adivasi folklore and are worshipped in the villages of Goa, while jimmidaari yaya, is worshipped by the Gond community.

The distinctively wrathful appearance of guardian spirits in South Asian art has enormous mystical significance: it allows the spirits to simultaneously embody and challenge negative, supernatural forces — whether it is demons who attack temples and homes or evil spirits who curse individuals — and repel them, warding off any potential threats against those they protect. Often, a likeness or representation

of the guardian spirit is worn in talismanic pendants, around the neck and hidden under the shirt of the wearer.

Several deities are also believed to avert illnesses and diseases. Goddesses such as Mariamman and Shitala protect their devotees from smallpox. Another goddess, Ola Devi, also associated with Shitala, is worshipped by communities in northern and western India to gain protection from cholera.

Hariti, who is worshipped as an epidemic goddess, was widely depicted in Gandharan sculptures during the 2nd century CE when the region was reeling from the threat of a pandemic. In Buddhist mythology, Hariti grew from a child-devouring demoness to a goddess and is often depicted alongside Kubera — the king of yakshas and god of wealth. Kubera is also a lokapala, guardian of the north, in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions and, therefore, assumes the role of a dvapala, or doorway guardian, in temples.

Such cross-cultural biogra-

phies of guardian spirits are present in many South Asian religious traditions. A significant number of protector deities in Tibetan Buddhism, each safeguarding specific texts, monasteries, regions or the religion in general, originate from local deities in the Indian subcontinent and the Himalayan regions. Thus, defying cultural and caste boundaries, guardian spirits acknowledge and respond to the existential hurt and fear haunting people’s psyche across South Asia.

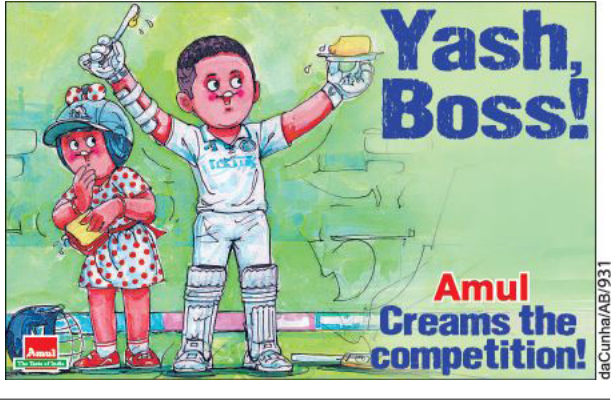
Arun dhathi Chauhan, MAP Academy

Discover Indian Art is a monthly column that delves into fascinating stories on art from across the sub-continent, curated by the editors of the MAP Academy. Find them on Instagram as @map_academy



A pair of architectural brackets in the form of rampant leonine creatures (yali or vyala), from a processional mandapa, Madurai, 17th century, ivory with traces of paint. (PIC COURTESY: THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART)

Young vocalist **Bhargavi Venkatram** has gained a considerable social media following due to her inventive ways of introducing Karnatik music to her followers, discovers **Sudha Balachandran**



Reeling in new fans of Karnatik music

MELODY MAKERS

Vocalist Bhargavi Venkatram is a rising star in Karnatik music. Young, spirited and talented, and a tech-savvy millennial, she commands a huge following on Instagram of nearly 163,000 followers. The short musical reels that she periodically posts are liked by many and draw comments of appreciation and requests for more such reels.

Bhargavi hails from a family of musicians; her father, H K Venkatram, is a prominent violinist while her mother Triveni and aunt Kavitha, referred to as Saralaya Sisters, are Karnatik vocalists who have been performing for well over 25 years. Her grandfather is the legendary H V Krishnamurthy, a great violinist, who set up the Vijaya School of Music that imparted and trained hundreds of youngsters. Several acclaimed musicians began their musical journey under the tutelage of Krishnamurthy.

She grew up listening to music and even as a two-year-old child, she could recognise ragas and kritis. But despite this early influence, she was not keen on learning Karnatik music; her interest lay in pursuing Bharatnatyam, which she learnt till the age of 12. Her grandmother Sulochana Saralaya, a danseuse, was a major influence in her taking up dance. During one of the dance classes, she had to learn the song — *Baro Krishnayya* which proved providential. In the process of learning this song, she saw herself being drawn to vocal music. She was keen on learning music from vocalist T M Krishna — she had attended many of his concerts with her parents and was a huge fan of his singing. When they approached him, he asked her to learn a varnam and sing it; and based on her performance he would then decide if she was ‘student material’. Thankfully, she did well and thus began her formal music lessons.

She remembers her first formal concert that she performed as a youngster during the Ramanavami festival. The first few minutes of the concert were unnerving, but she quickly gained confidence and went on to give her best. In the initial years, the expectation from people to see her perform well considering her musical lineage did weigh on her. But over the years she has learnt to deal with it. She realises that people will have something to say irrespective of

how she performs — if she does well, they will credit it to her family’s and Guru’s tutelage. If she falters, they will certainly criticise her performance. But despite the double-edged sword that her music lineage brings, she is immensely grateful as her learning has been mostly organic — imbibing music while watching her parents perform and grandfather teach.

Bhargavi did a Bachelor’s course in engineering and worked briefly before she decided to become a full-time music professional. She has performed at renowned sabhas including the Madras Music Academy, and Narada Gana Sabha and has earned accolades for her professionalism and talent. She knows the journey is not easy — junior artistes are paid less and sometimes the fee does not cover the expenses. She explains this is the reason many musicians have parallel jobs — to balance their financial needs while fulfilling their passion for music.

She concedes she is blessed to be born into a family of musicians and to have T M Krishna as her guru. When quizzed if it opened doors for her easily, she is frank to admit that in some cases it did. But at the same time, her parents have never pushed or sought favours from music organisers. She has reached thus far in her music journey through her dedication and hard work, she says.

Bhargavi understands the impact and relevance of social media in today’s world. She has found a niche fan following among the younger generation due to her Instagram reels that she puts out regularly. Many write to her thanking her for the happiness they derive while listening to her sing a specific raga, kriti, bhajan or shloka. A woman messaged her saying that her father who was recovering from cancer insisted on listening to Bhargavi’s rendering of a particular shloka every day and drew comfort and strength from it. The thought that she can connect to people across geographies and positively influence them gives her a high that is equal to or possibly greater than a formal reward or recognition. And as she navigates through the ups and downs of being a professional singer, her spiritedness and positivity stand out.



Bhargavi Venkatram