

PRODOSH DAS GUPTA

SCULPTURES (1912-1991) TRANSCENDING TIME



India Council for Cultural Relations
भारतीय सांस्कृतिक संबंध परिषद



PRODOSH
DAS GUPTA
SCULPTURES

TRANSCENDING TIME

CURATOR : **UMA NAIR**

PHOTOGRAPHS : **PRADEEP DAS GUPTA**

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VISITING INDIAN MASTERS



INTRODUCTION :

“ What is this ‘Contemporary India’? Has it any character of its own, a definite identity to distinguish from other nations of the world? The answer to this question is obvious, in as much as its own character in faith and beliefs, its religious practices, its age old customs and rituals, its manners and habits and in short the way of life of its people, though apparently looks somewhat diffused in the contemporary world. The major factor that governs or moulds the character of the people in no uncertain manner is no doubt the geographical situation that is responsible for the climatic conditions. The sap of the organic life of flora and fauna gets its sustenance from this peculiar phenomenon, which is basically tropical. The basic concept remaining the same, Indian sculpture, has through the ages, entered new phases evolving new styles and forms and characters in different localities under the patronage of different kings in different periods inspired by divergent religious ideals.”

Prodosh Das Gupta



Genesis

Former Curator and Director of NGMA Delhi , Prodosha Das Gupta is amongst India's greatest modernists. Sculptor of rare genius he was always deeply rooted in the power of the human form.

His journey from the Lucknow Government Arts School, followed by Madras School of Arts and Crafts, leading to the Royal College of Art in London as well as the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Paris, is a lesson in learning, research, adaptation and finding his own odyssey. Studying bronze casting at the L. C. C. Central School, London, became an impeccable legion of sculptural practices for Das Gupta.

To enter his legion of sculptures, is to acknowledge his interest in art history, his inherent perceptions, of the materiality and density of bronze to examine the role of everyday reality and the human narrative, to create contemporary moments that defined his evolution over a period of more than five decades.

In a sojourn of ingenuity that runs the gamut of years 1947-1990, we glimpse an intellectual who was an inquisitor of structural form, a thinker of verbal analogies, and an aesthete who translated the rhythms of the earth in idioms that explored the resonant code of contours and benchmarks to find an alchemy that celebrated and refracted the romantic pole of his sensibility. His writings and musings on his own sculptures tell

Reclining woman 4_5 1970 (CAG), Bronze

us that he took a passionate and unabashed delight in the physicality of the forms he created, as he exploited in bronze, its capacity for moodiness and melancholic beauty.

From the naturalist sculptural moulding of Auguste Rodin to the voluminous masses of Henry Moore to the curved contours of Constantin Brancusi and the slim torsos of Alberto Giacometti Das Gupta followed the influences of the masters to find his own journey rooted in Indian realities and rhythms. Perhaps a passion driven portraitist in the strict sense of the term, Das Gupta referred to a creative surge that reflected 'sublimated likenesses', often created from live models, as well as his own experience and imagination. Early examples retain some distinguishing features of his subject, but over the years these features tended to be smoothed away as Das Gupta progressed towards fusing the form and the moment of his subject.





Post Independence and the modernists

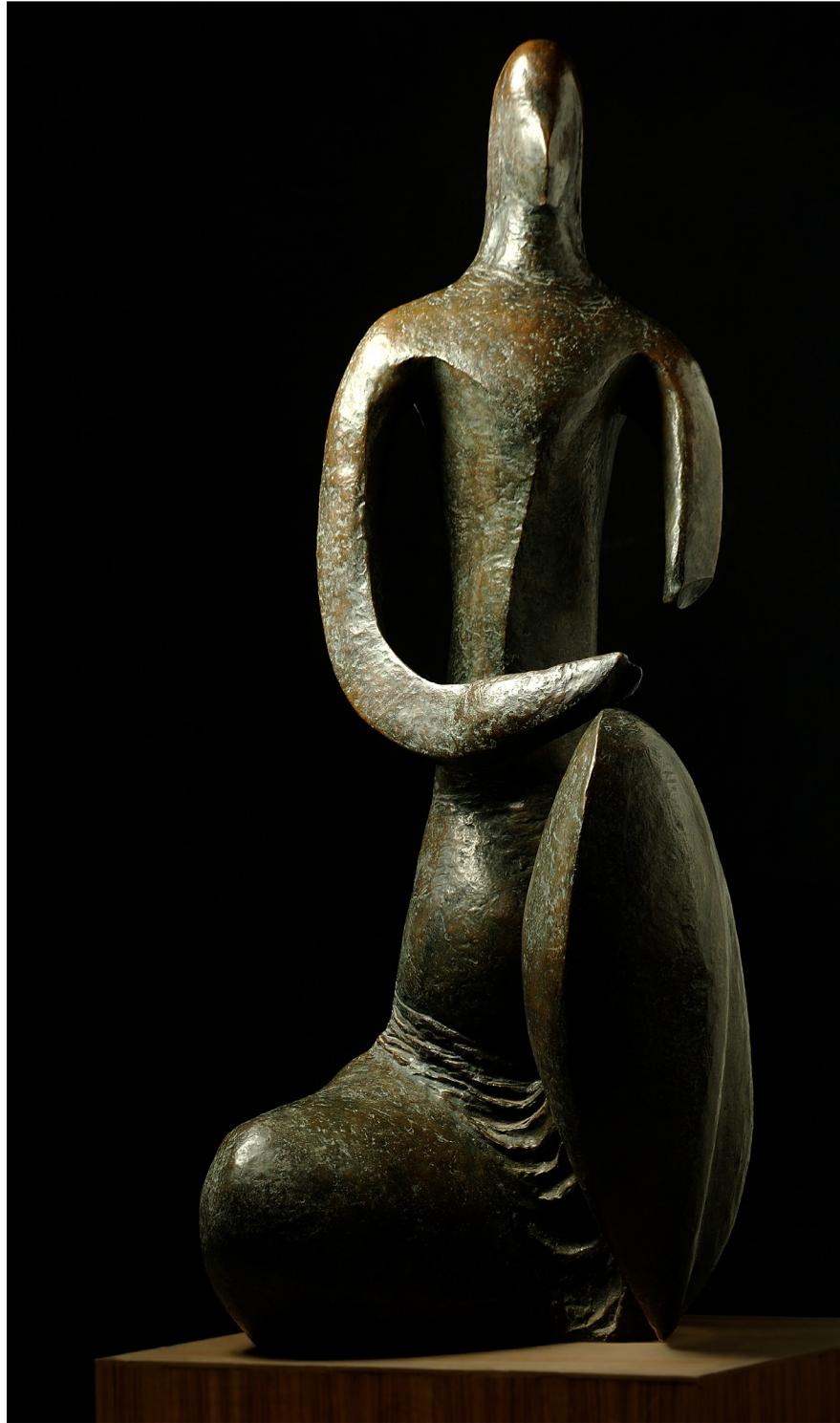
If we go back to the post-Independence days when Indian artists were seeking fresh insight into idioms that were built on the foundations of British and Western grammar and techniques we see that they were indeed hungry for a new language. Das Gupta began with European echoes. Henry Moore and Brancusi both brim into the contours of works like *Egg Bride* and *Sun Worshippers* and *Broken Idol*. But when we look closely, he slowly pared down dogmas and started creating works that celebrated the simplicity of contours. He harnessed his imagery with a feminine fervour amid a love and passion for what he created.

As an Indian modernist, Das Gupta imbibed a lot of Western styles – classical realism, cubism, primitivism and abstraction. But because of the cultural context of the Indian sub-continent, he began to draw on Indian mythology and history. This is evident in works like *Pounding Corn* and *Surya Mukhi*. In *Sun Worshippers*, he blended his innate spirituality with accents of the modernist Constantin Brancusi, enriching his sculptures with neat contours and minimalism. The Indian art world had not seen the likes of his works-Das Gupta used the bulbous human form of Moore in some works and also fashioned his figures to Brancusi's pared-down forms to explore modernism and a kind of abstraction within the human form in the simplicity of the contours as in his reclining figures.

Influence of European Masters

Das Gupta brought about a humanist tradition in sculpture with his series of reclining nudes, we can also see a Rodinesque resonance in two pieces. But it is the evocative elegance of *Egg Bride* and *Unfolding Spring* that are a critic's delight. In both these works, Das Gupta advocates a certain responsiveness. In *Bride*, we sense a longing for the shadows in the overlay of the ovoid and its sliced *entendre*. In *Unfolding Spring*, it's the elegance of abandon and the sinuous curves that speak to us about his admiration and reverence for the female figure. He knows very well that a sculptor must balance the will to expose as well as the will to be sensitive while dealing with the feminine form.

When you see the many female forms in this suite, they seem tactile and palpable softly evocative in their quietude and tranquility. In the



Broken Idol, Bronze

subliminal fluidity of his lines we glimpse and partake of a profound understanding of vulnerability. Perhaps an inherent balance of looking within and without which doesn't hurt the human sentiment but evokes the depth of sensitivity.

Gravity of human figures

Das Gupta followed Henry Moore in his adaptation of the three fundamental poses for the human figure—either standing, sitting, or reclining—he also found the seated and reclining alternatives most stable; as if enthroned, the subject becomes resplendently monumental as in *Family* and *Pounding Corn*. While Das Gupta often gravitated toward the reclining figure for the freedom that this posture offered him.

Das Gupta took inspiration from ancient Indian seated portrait sculptures and gave his work a modernist signature—in the stillness of the moment he used repose and reverie as his rhythm. *Broken Idol* personifies this insignia. Tall and statuesque it sits in majestic mood looking back at the viewer with unseen eyes, Das Gupta used the leaves of the past to define the veins of the present in both moulding as well as mooring. The orientation of the silhouette appears clearly: it is centred on an empty space formed by the concavity and convexity in the section of the torso and the two lustrous thighs. The fact remains that the undulation of the human forms expresses a resolutely feminine sensuality. Despite its extreme simplification, this torso has undoubtedly complex connotations. It suggests that the artist adhered to the traditional notion that sensual beauty finds its best expression in the female body, whose curves are particularly well suited to Das Gupta's curvilinear vocabulary. By preferring the feminine form, he reflects the ancestral symbolism assimilating woman and nature.

This work presents an engagement with the sculptural legacy of the ancient as well as the modern world. It endowed Das Gupta's work with a timely and highly communicable humanist outlook; this dialogue between past and present, myth and modernity proved central to his enduring renown. *Surya Mukhi* is one such illustration of the human feminine form and the sunflower. The allegory that he created raised the work to an awe-inspiring, yet compassionate, image whose womb issue the unending generations and prospect of humankind.



Fusion of trends

It is important to ponder over Das Gupta's own writings to understand his viewpoint and his brilliance as a diarist of art history and sculptural jottings.

“When we look back into our own history of sculptural culture, it becomes quite evident that gradually there has been fusion between the different regional trends, a mixing of the artistic concepts in the formal as well as technical applications to build up the images. The Greco Buddhist fusion was no doubt the starting point in the history of our sculptural manifestations running through the ages. It took time to assimilate the Greek influence into our own indigenous concepts and finally when we see its fulfilment in the stupendous works of sculpture in the Kushan period of Mathura, we realise how a work of art can be developed and enriched with proper understanding and careful handling of the methods and material without surrendering to abject imitation.

“This fusion to my mind has been there throughout the ages and indeed this process is inevitable and most welcome to renovate periodically the indigenous arts to instil into them a fresh breath of life. In this vast world, nothing can remain absolutely pure in its indigenous approach. Mixing and intermixing has always been there from time immemorial. Civilisation today is a variegated phenomenon like the colours of the artist's palette. It is futile to search for the lily-white purity there.”

Mother and Child

The mother and child subject was another beloved series of Das Gupta. His *Mother Earth* is like a Madonna. Das Gupta articulates an emphasis on the mother's nurturing role – the grand iconographic and natural tradition within which he was working with, the subject also provided him with a platform for his pioneering experiments in space and form. When you look at the fused mother and child within the rounded oval perspective you know that he was steeped in the language of modernism of simple lines and eloquent expression.

Das Gupta's *Cradle* is yet another masterpiece in fusing the two figures to a naturally suggestive emotive pose which is filled with evocation and expression. The subject of mother and child and family itself was eternal and unending, with so many sculptural possibilities in it for Das Gupta. He

played with the ideation of the small form in relation to a larger form, we sense the protective moment, the big form protecting the small one. It is the angularity of the arched form that endears and enchants. The mother and child is such a rich subject, both humanly and compositionally it has always been an everlasting and timeless topic for artists and sculptors. The sublime image of the cradling baby in the mother's lap is an image that transcends time. *Cradle* is a sculpture that creates an ethos of maternal love and tender care.

Das Gupta's own words describe his process of thought when he stated:

"The idea of the composition first occurred to me from a rocking chair. I have tried to create the same swinging semi-circular movement in the sculpture. In order to get the maximum effect of rhythmic lines I have taken the liberty in shaping the legs and the thighs of the mother in masses and her breasts in such a way that they do not disturb the main schematic values of line and rhythm. The fluid momentum of the spirit of rocking is

intended to echo through the gliding planes and undulating modelling of the figures."

A sculptor can be gregarious like Picasso or gently private like Brancusi and this is where the deeper rhythms of Das Gupta's sensibility lies. In his forays into the human form, Das Gupta conjures the artist's ability to convey soul and humanity in the most minute of details, producing the beauty of man and woman's bodies as a study of the epoch of the everyday idiom of life. In essence, the artist portrays the ethos of a female/male figure; in a natural, narrative, as a presence occupying space. The feminine/masculine body is there before you, what matters is how you translate the feminine/masculine form into a modernist mould so that it will live and speak long after you made it. This is what signifies your stance and temperament as a sculptor. Das Gupta's odyssey is about understanding the rudiments of realism and abstraction before settling into the niche of the true modernist.

UMA NAIR



Three Legged Animal 2_5 1968 (AP) , Bronze



Bride ACI 1990 (P) , Bronze

THE BRIDE

My first glimpse of Prodosch Dasgupta was at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi at a solo show in 1990's. I had just returned from Washington DC after a summer holiday and my head was full of the imagery of bronzes by European Masters held at the National Gallery of Art Washington DC.

Nestled in a corner at the NGMA in Delhi, I saw *Egg Bride*. A masterpiece in form and fervour, full of the promise of hope as well as a silent feminine pathos. *Bride* belonged to one of the series in this epoch making composition. The great modernist Constantin Brancusi was one of Das Gupta's many influences. The beauty of his understanding of form and grammar was that he translated the contours and lines in the Indian insignia of events and experiences to create his own sojourn.

The dark elemental form of the head and the bent knees rest upon a neat wooden base, at once a symbol of reductive and pure geometry. The interrelationship of the head and the bent knees is very important to the overall composition. The sari covered head full of feminine ardour assumes a subtle diagonal bias that is emphasised by the angularity of the pristine looking wooden base. Although the head of the bride appears passive and inert, its slight angle of emergence from the grants it a restrained yet fervent energy of hope. Its richly modelled mass seems to be contained in one single gesture of the sitter.

The slim and smooth surfaces of the bride's head in this seminal work would find its resolution a few years later in one of the canonical themes of the sculptor's career, with variations executed in the most powerful of sculptural materials-bronze. Here the human features are more strikingly abstracted and streamlined a suggestion thereof of the silhouette. The residue of naturalism is refined and distilled into the elegant geometry of the muse's head, perfect and timeless in its form. Like Brancusi Das Gupta's sculptures strived for the impression of elegance, finding it only within the simplest of human forms. And we must go back to Brancusi's timeless words "Simplicity is not an end in art, but we usually arrive at simplicity as we approach the true sense of things."

In Das Gupta's *Bride* we glimpse a graceful muteness of form, the head poised peacefully. The density and depth of this form can be

perceived, despite its small scale and vulnerable subject.
Bride embodies the essence of purity of, “realism: and Das Gupta’s own
pursuit in pursuit of the inner, hidden reality; where the very essence of the
human form must exist in its own intrinsic fundamental nature. This was
his the depth of his preoccupation with the human forms he created.

Extract from Times of India -Uma Nair Blog



Surya Mukhi (M) 5_9 1978 (AA) , Bronze



Family ACII (T) 1975 , Bronze

“ I believe in my own environment, my own way of life, the atmosphere in which I breathe , I live , my parents , my close relations and associates, who taken together make my life meaningful. I want to identify myself in the same atmosphere, without disregarding the historical truth of my own tradition and culture.”

PRODOSH DAS GUPTA



Unfolding of Spring 4_6 1976, Bronze

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PRODOSH DAS GUPTA



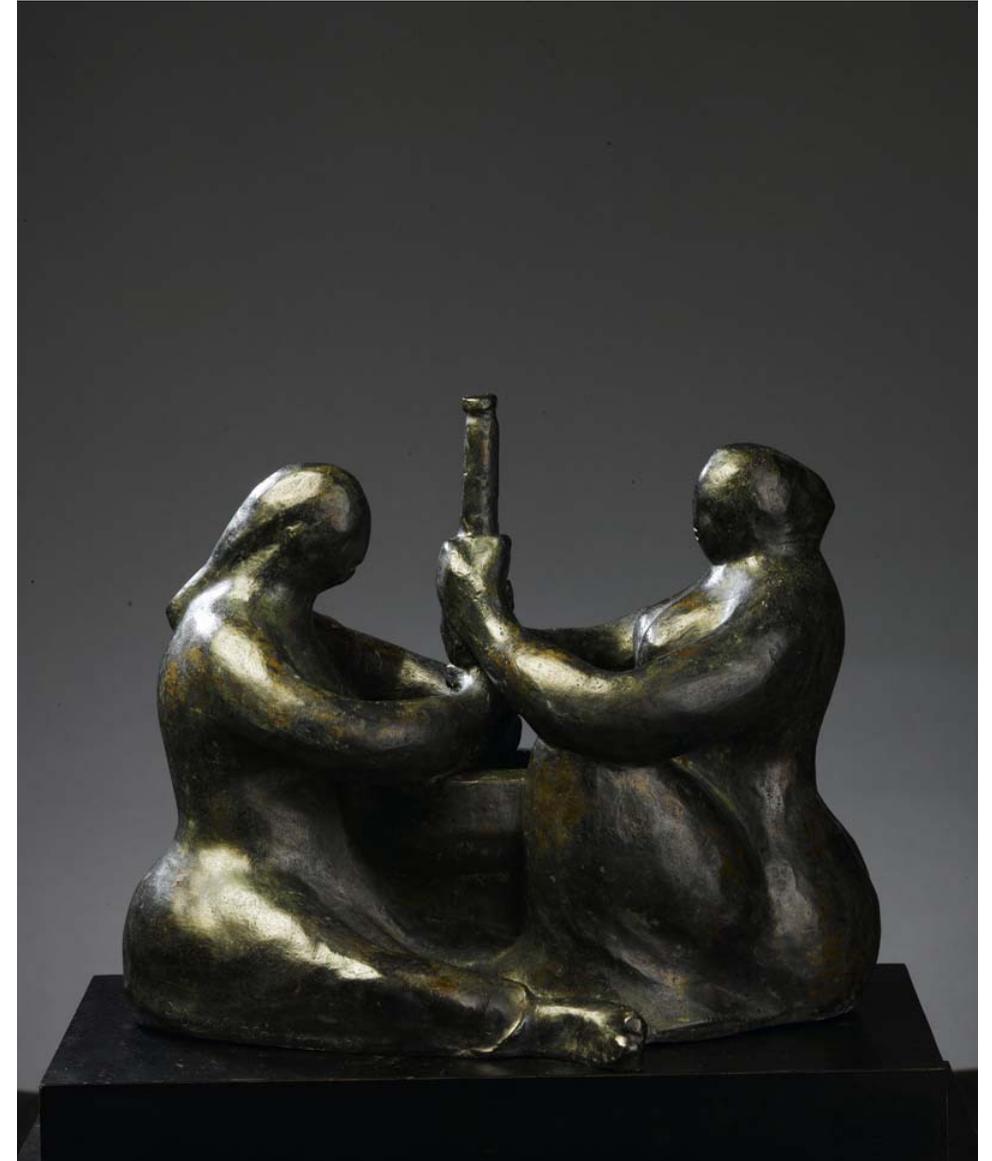
Maternity 4_5 1976 , Bronze

“ This fusion to my mind has been there throughout the ages and indeed this process is inevitable and most welcome to renovate periodically the indigenous arts to instill into them a fresh breath of life. In this vast world, nothing can remain absolutely pure in its indigenous approach. Mixing and intermixing has always been there from time immemorial. Civilisation today is a variegated phenomenon like the colours of the artist’s palette. It is futile to search for the lily - white purity there.”

PRODOSH DAS GUPTA



Devil and Dame 4_9 1947 (AA) , Bronze



Bronze, Pounding Corn 5_9 1949 (AA) , Bronze



Queen AC I 1975 (T), Bronze

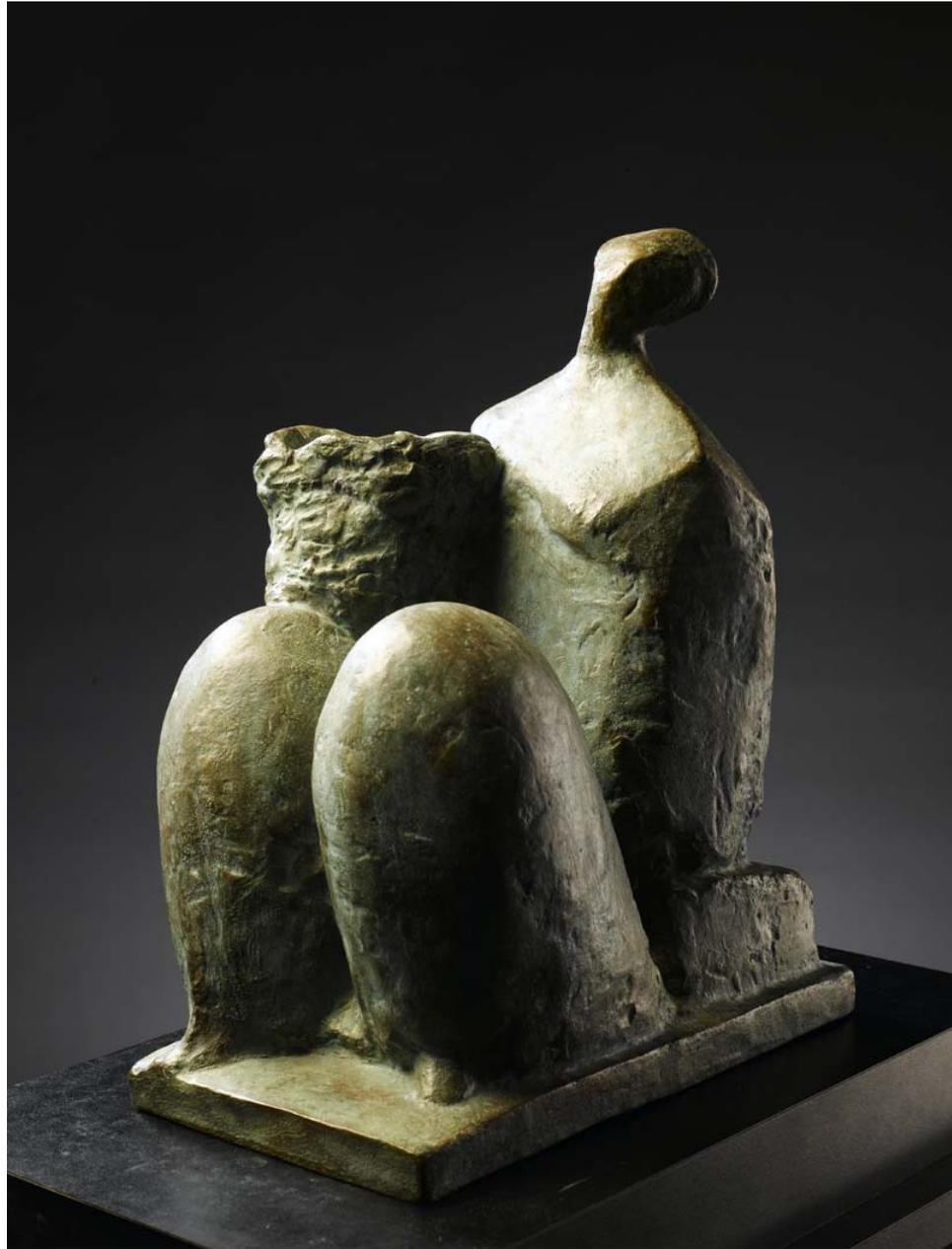


Cradle I 1950 (1), Bronze

Untitled 4_9 1990 , Bronze



Convicts 3_5 1969 (AA) , Bronze



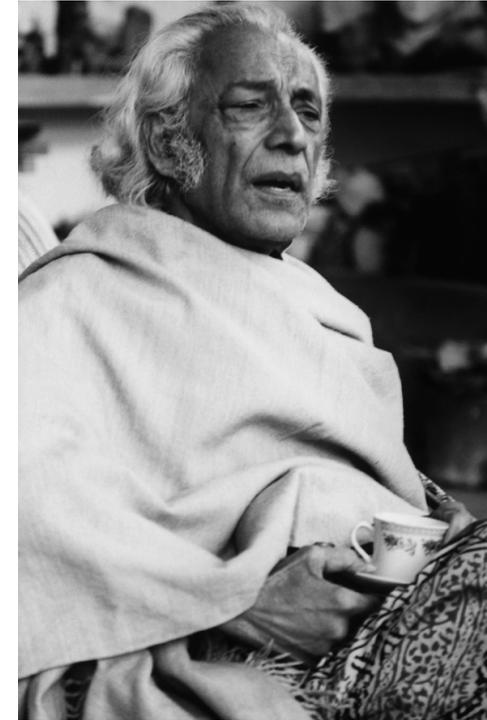
Woman With Basket ACII 1989 (T) , Bronze



Lying Amazon 2_9 1990 (AP) , Bronze



Lovers 4_9 1978 (CAG) , Bronze



Prodosh Das Gupta

- 1912 Born in Dacca (now in Bangladesh).
- 1932 Graduated from the Calcutta University.
- 1932-33 Studied sculpture at the Lucknow Government Art School. Awarded first class diploma.
- 1934-37 Studied sculpture at the Madras School of Arts and Crafts. Awarded the Cotton Memorial gold medal by the Madras government.
- 1937-39 Awarded the Guruprasanna Ghose Traveling Fellowship by the Calcutta University. Studied sculpture at the Royal Academy of Arts, London and At the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere, Paris. Studied bronze casting at the L. C. C. Central School, London.
- 1940-50 Set up a studio in Calcutta and worked as a free-lance sculptor.
- 1943 Organized and founded the Calcutta Group of painters and sculptors. Organized group shows in Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi, besides other all India exhibitions.
- 1945 Held first solo exhibition of sculptures in Calcutta.
- 1950 Went twice to South East Asian countries to gain knowledge of the arts of these countries and to assess the extent of the influence of Indian art there. Was appointed as the reader and head of the department of sculpture, M. S. University of Baroda.

- 1951 Was appointed Professor of Sculpture, Government College of Arts and Craft, Calcutta.
- 1953 Was elected as the only national winner to compete in the international sculpture competition "Unknown Political Prisoner" held in the Tate Gallery, London.
- 1955 Was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, London.
- 1956 Published a book - "My Sculpture".
- 1957 Joined the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi as its Director.
- 1957-70 Served the Lalit Kala Akademi in its General Council and Executive Board.
- 1959 Went to Moscow, Tashkent, and Leningrad as an Indian artist delegate and gave lectures in galleries and museums.
- 1960 Was elected president of the Third International Association of Arts (UNESCO) Congress, Vienna and functioned as an executive board member for three years. Went to Czechoslovakia, Poland and East Germany on invitation from the respective governments.
- 1962 Was invited by ISMEO, Rome to give lectures on contemporary Indian art.
- 1963 Attended the U.S.A. Congress of the International Association of Arts and was re-elected as its executive board member for another three years. Was invited by the U.S. government under the Leader's Grant.
- 1965 Attended a conference on art education in London as an Indian delegate.
- 1966 Participated in a seminar under the auspices of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla and read a paper on "Role of abstraction in modern art".
- 1966-72 Consultant Editor of "Leonardo" – an art journal published from Paris.
- 1967 Participated in the Tokyo Biennale.
- 1969 Published a book of poems – "Fallen Leaves".
- 1970 Retired from the post of Director, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. Gave the Coomaraswamy Memorial Lecture under auspices of the Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi on "Relevance of tradition of plastic art in contemporary sculpture". Held second solo show of sculptures in Gita Art Gallery, New Delhi.
- 1971 Held third solo show in Taj Gallery, Bombay.
- 1972 Published a book "Temple Terracotta of Bengal". Participated in the show "25 years of Indian art", at the Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi,
- 1973 Held fourth solo show in the Taj Gallery, Bombay.
- 1975 Represented India in the Middelheim (Belgium) Open-air Sculpture Exhibition.
- 1976 Held fifth solo show at Taj Gallery, Bombay
Held sixth solo show at Gita Art Gallery, New Delhi.
Went to England and Belgium on an invitation from the Belgian government.
- 1978 Was given an award and citation by the Delhi Sahitya Kala Parishad, Delhi administration, for significant contribution in sculpture.
Joined Visva-Bharati, Shantiniketan as a visiting fellow.
Worked for a year on an experiment in instant expressionism in sculpture and submitted a paper on the same.
Held a show in Kala Bhavana, Shantiniketan with sculptures and drawings based on his new experiment.
- 1979 Exhibited in the Indian National Exhibition held at Moscow.
Solo exhibition at the Taj Gallery, Bombay.
Participated in the Asian Artists' Exhibition, Japan.
- 1980 Participated in the Contemporary Asian Art Show, Japan.
- 1981 Participated in the Small Sculpture Exhibition, Budapest, Hungary.
- 1982 Elected fellow of the central Lalit Kala Akademi.
- 1983 Awarded the Abanindra Puraskar by the West Bengal government.
- 1987 Published "Smriti Katha Shilpa Katha" in Bengali.
- 1990 Published "Modeler Sandhane" in Bengali.
- 1991 Awarded the Gagana Abani Puraskar by Viswa Bharati University.
Exhibition at the Birla academy of Art and Culture, Calcutta. Passed away in July 1991.

UMA NAIR



Curator

Uma Nair has been curating art shows since 2005 in the capital city of Delhi. Her first show Terra Natura, was a show of five seminal ceramic artists that sold out in Delhi.

Her curatorial ventures have spanned painting, photography, ceramics and sculpture.

Moderns, Earth Songs and Gandhi @150 years

History happened when she was invited to curate an archival show at the Lalit Kala Akademi in a show called *Moderns* that was sent to Jordan, Berlin and Vienna in the years 2008-2016.

In researching the archives of the Lalit Kala Akademi in New Delhi her next historic culling was *Earth Songs* a show of 86 works from the Lalit Kala Archives, a study on India's tribal art.

She also curated Gandhi@150 Years an epic show of sculptures paintings and graphic prints and photographs at Lalit Kala Akademi on October 2nd 2019 with 86 artists.

iSculpt I and II

In terms of public exhibitions her most important curatorial exercises have been *iSculpt I (2016)* and *iSculpt II (2018)* at the India International Centre, Gandhi King Plaza. *iSculpt* was a revolution in the making of public exhibitions and public art that expresses fidelity to the idea of a "sculpture of one's own"—in this case, a series of literal and metaphorical works dedicated to material experimentation

and innovation, and in doing so provides a plethora of works for the history of ingenuity among sculptors to take root. The Gandhi King Plaza morphs into a sculptural court for 10 days creating dynamics of a rare aesthetic order.

Photography

Coupling photography and paintings happened with a show in 2007 with Gallerie Nvya called *Darpan*. It looked at how artists and photographers dealt with the concept and idea of a mirror in art. 2011 became an important year when a small show of photographs and paintings and sculptures was held at the India Art Fair entitled *Womb to Tomb* with works by Raghu Rai, Pablo Partholomew and Pankaj Mistry.

Two important solo exhibitions in photography were Pankaj Mistry's *Reverie* in 2009 and Prabir Purkayastha's *Borokhun* in 2011.

The greatest exhibition of photographs happened at Kolkata Centre for creativity in 2019 when she curated Kolkata International Photo Festival with the masters Jyoti Bhatt and S Paul other than many other Indian photographers.

Painting

Nair goes by the discipline that solo shows as curatorial exercises hold greater weight when you curate a show of an artist with great talent specifically for artists who have worked for more than a decade and are still relatively unknown.

Among artists who revel in painting Nair's most

important exhibition was Sanjay Bhattacharyya's *Emerging Krishna* at the Religare Art Gallery in 2012. Iconic oils and a series of photographs became the focus of an exhibition that celebrated form as much as the spiritual aura of the flute player as an incandescent symbol cast against different prisms of light by the master disciple of Bikash Bhattacharjee.

Nair's next curation is Prabhakar Kolte's 50 years of work at Treasure Art Gallery in Delhi.

Printmaking -intaglios and serigraphs

Nair's group shows like *Vriksha*, (2019) *Gandhi @150 years* (2019) and *Yatra Naryasthu* (Women's show at NGMA-2021) have included leading printmakers like Jyoti Bhatt, Zarina Hashmi and Soghra Khurasani.

Her most historic solo exhibition to date has been 84 intaglio prints by the mentor and leading printmaker Jyoti Bhatt. This solo show was a collection of prints and serigraphs from Collectors all over India and held at the prestigious Bihar Museum, Patna.

Sculpture/ Installations

In the year 2010 Nair was invited to write about the Lalit Kala Akademi National Exhibition that was held in Kolkata. At the exhibition she discovered the work of the brilliant bronze sculptor Arun Pandit. She came back and connected with Pandit who was working at Garhi Studios and curated his first solo show in 2012. Later in 2016 his epic show of sculptures *Power and Pathos* was well received with the Alkazi Foundation picking him up as their lead sculptor and buying 4 works for the foundation.

In January 2020 Nair curated Prodosh Dasgupta: A journey of 60 years at Akar Prakar Delhi for the India Art Fair. This exhibition became one of the most highly proclaimed exhibitions because it became an educator's paradigm of modernist moorings.

Ceramics

Nair is both a collector and a great patron of contemporary ceramics. Her first show Terra Natura 2005, became a lesson in history and techniques and the alchemy of textural terrain in ceramics.

The next show she curated was in April 2017 by Architecture Professor Manjari Sharma who had been dabbling in sculptural ceramics more than 10 years. *Sculptour* became an exhibition that spoke of the power and passion for explorations and experiments with clay.

Nair's next solo unveiling was the enigmatic and brilliant ceramic artist G. Reghu's ceramic show at Jehangir Art Gallery Mumbai on January 15, 2018. As a voice in contemporary art criticism it is Nair's in depth analogies and critiques that pitch her amongst the best in the nation.

International

On the international front it is the Lalit Kala Akademi exhibition *Moderns* that has garnered great recognition and appreciation for Nair's curatorial and historical annotations. *Moderns* has travelled to Jordan and Berlin for epic unveilings and rave reviews.

Author

Nair has been writing as an art critic for 31 years.

Nair's first monograph was published in 2005 -25 years of Paresh Maity.

Nair's monograph on Arpita Singh's *Wishdream* was an essay that was penned as far back as 2005 but published by Saffronart in 2010.

Nair's last book was *Reverie with Raza* for Akar Prakar and Mapin Publications published in 2016. It became the last book to be published on Sayed Haider Raza during his living years just before his passing away.

Nair has also penned more than 100 catalogues in 31 years of work. Her most important ones are *ITIHAAS*, *Dhanraj Bhagat at 100*, *Dhvani-Shabd our Chinh* and *Upendra Maharathi for NGMA Delhi*.

She currently writes as critic for: *Architectural Digest India*, *The Hindu*, *The Pioneer*, *EXOTICA Magazine*, and writes a blog called **PIUMAGE** on *Times of India*.



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