

## The Emergence of Abstract Art in India

**Image no: 1**

**Caption:** Murad Yldar, *Mud cracks*, 2015, Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 3.0.

**Link:** [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mud\\_cracks.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mud_cracks.jpg)

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**Image no: 2**

**Caption:** Raja Ravi Varma, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1893, Oil on canvas, 120 x 86.3 cm, 1670, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

**Link:**

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raja\\_Ravi\\_Varma\\_-\\_Portrait\\_of\\_a\\_Lady\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raja_Ravi_Varma_-_Portrait_of_a_Lady_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

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**Image no: 3**

**Caption:** Jamini Prakash Gangooly, Detail, *Untitled (Himalayan Landscape)*, Oil on board, 21.9 x 27.3 cm, Christie's.

**Link:** <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5995241>

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**Image no: 4**

**Caption:** Amrita Sher-Gil, *Still Life (1)*, 1932, Oil on Canvas, 43.5 x 61.5 cm, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

**Link:** <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/still-life-1-amrita-sher-gil/0gGkPvK1cpupAA>

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**Image no: 5**

**Caption:** Prabhakar Kolte, *Untitled*, 2007, Watercolour on handmade paper, 138.9 x 81.8 cm, DAG.

**Link:** <https://dagworld.com/koltep08.html>

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**Image no:** 6

**Caption:** Bimal Dasgupta, *Untitled (Composition)*, 1980, Oil on canvas, 121.3 x 90.8 cm, Christie's.

**Link:**

<https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/south-asian-modern-contemporary-art-online/bimal-dasgupta-1917-1995-31/142894>

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**Image no:** 7

**Caption:** Sohan Qadri, *Amisha VI*, 2008, Ink and dye on paper, 139.7 x 99.1 cm, Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

**Link:** <https://www.sundaramtagore.com/artists/sohan-qadri/featured-works?view=slider#6>

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**Image no:** 8

**Caption:** *Doods mostly off for now*, Detail, National Showcaves Center Wales, 2015, Flickr.

**Link:** <https://flic.kr/p/EYIU7V>

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**Image no:** 9

**Caption:** Clay Banks, *A Ficus Lyrata Leaf in The Sunlight*, 2020, Unsplash.

**Link:** <https://unsplash.com/photos/8SXaMMWCTGc>

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**Image no:** 10

**Caption:** Kestrel115, *Detail, Crown shyness*, 2020, Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 4.0.

**Link:** [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Crown\\_shyness\\_at\\_frim,\\_malaysia.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Crown_shyness_at_frim,_malaysia.png)

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**Image no:** 11

**Caption:** *Drone Over Rippled Sand Patterns In Desert*, Envato Elements.

**Link:** <https://elements.envato.com/drone-over-rippled-sand-patterns-in-desert-EKJEZLP>

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**Image no:** 12

**Caption:** *Aerial, Hampi landscape in India*, Envato Elements.

**Link:** <https://elements.envato.com/aerial-hampi-landscape-in-india-KBKHUD5>

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**Image no:** 13

**Caption:** *Passing Through Crosswalk*, Envato Elements.

**Link:** <https://elements.envato.com/passing-through-crosswalk-4k-02-6UDUS4U>

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**Image no:** 14

**Caption:** *Scaffolding in front of the exterior of a high-rise building plastered with cement plaster*, Envato Elements.

**Link:** <https://elements.envato.com/scaffolding-in-front-of-the-exterior-of-a-high-ris-C9D66Q4>

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**Image no:** 15

**Caption:** Hari Ambadas Gade, *Untitled (Bombay)*, 1950, Oil on board, 101 x 76 cm, Christie's.

**Link:** <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-6158235>

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**Image no:** 16

**Caption:** Shanti Dave, *Detail, NO. 15*, 1951, Oil on canvas, 47.9 x 99.1 cm, Art & Beyond, New Delhi.

**Link:**

<https://artandbeyond.gallery/artists/141-shanti-dave/works/11982-shanti-dave-no.-15-1951/>

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**Image no:** 17

**Caption:** Sayed Haider Raza, *Detail, Lumiere D'ete*, 1958, Oil on canvas, 60.2 x 72.9 cm, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi.

**Link:** <https://www.vadehraart.com/artists/63-s.h.-raza/works/32886-s.h.-raza-lumiere-d-ete-1958/>

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**Image no:** 18

**Caption:** Shalini Saran, *Portrait, V S Gaitonde*, Christie's.

**Link:** <https://www.christies.com/features/vs-gaitonde-7387-1.aspx>

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**Image no:** 19

**Caption:** Jyoti Bhatt, *Tyeb Mehta*, BNG 295, Museum of Art & Photography, Bengaluru.

**Link:** N/A

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**Image no:** 20

**Caption:** Bruce Frisch, *V S Gaitonde at work in his studio at the Chelsea Hotel*, New York, 1965, Published in 'V S Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice — 'Meditative', *Financial Times*, December 22, 2015.

**Link:** <https://www.ft.com/content/a6ab6250-a7f3-11e5-9700-2b669a5aeb83>

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**Image no:** 21

**Caption:** Vasudeo S Gaitonde, *Untitled*, 1955, Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 55.9 cm, Photographed by Florian Biber, V S Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, October 24 2014 – February 11, 2015, Artsy.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/vasudeo-s-gaitonde-untitled-25>

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**Image no:** 22

**Caption:** Vasudeo S Gaitonde, *Untitled*, 1971, Oil on canvas, 125.4 x 100.3 cm, Photographed by Anil Rane, V S Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, October 24, 2014 – February 11, 2015, Artsy.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/vasudeo-s-gaitonde-untitled-23>

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**Image no:** 23

**Caption:** Vasudeo S Gaitonde, *Untitled*, 1979, Oil on canvas, 175.6 x 101.6 cm, Photographed by Lee Ewing, V S Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, October 24, 2014 – February 11, 2015, Artsy.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/vasudeo-s-gaitonde-untitled-20>

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**Image no:** 24

**Caption:** Vasudeo S Gaitonde, *Untitled*, 1987, Ink on paper, 36.5 x 27.6 cm, Photographed by Anil Rane, V S Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum,

October 24, 2014 – February 11, 2015, Artsy.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/vasudeo-s-gaitonde-untitled-19>

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**Image no:** 25

**Caption:** Vasudeo S Gaitonde, *Painting No. 6*, 1962, Oil on canvas, 101.3 x 114 cm, Photographed by Anil Rane, V S Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, October 24, 2014 – February 11, 2015, Artsy.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/vasudeo-s-gaitonde-painting-no-6>

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**Image no:** 26

**Caption:** Vasudeo S Gaitonde, *Untitled*, 1962, Ink and watercolour on paper, 55.2 x 76.2 cm, Photographed by Anil Rane, V S Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, October 24, 2014 – February 11, 2015, Artsy.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/vasudeo-s-gaitonde-untitled-18>

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**Image no:** 27

**Caption:** Vasudeo S Gaitonde, *Painting, 4*, 1962, Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 126.6 cm, 1.1963, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs Joseph James Akston.

**Link:** [https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78306?artist\\_id=2051&page=1&sov\\_referrer=artist](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78306?artist_id=2051&page=1&sov_referrer=artist)

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**Image no:** 28

**Caption:** Vasudeo S Gaitonde, *Untitled*, 1963, Oil on canvas, 182.9 x 106.7 cm, Photographed by Kristopher Mckay, V S Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, October 24, 2014 – February 11, 2015, Artsy.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/vasudeo-s-gaitonde-untitled-24>

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**Image no: 29**

**Caption:** Vasudeo S Gaitonde, Detail, *Untitled*, 1975, Oil on canvas, 177.8 x 106.7 cm, Photographed by Christie's, V S Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, October 24, 2014 – February 11, 2015, Artsy.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/vasudeo-s-gaitonde-untitled-21>

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**Image no: 30**

**Caption:** Vasudeo S Gaitonde, *Untitled*, 1995, Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 101.6 cm, Photographed by Anil Rane, V S Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, October 24, 2014 – February 11, 2015, Artsy.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/vasudeo-s-gaitonde-untitled-16>

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**Image no: 31**

**Caption:** Akbar Padamsee, *Jeune femme aux cheveux noirs, la tête inclinée*, 1962, Oil on canvas, 91.3 x 72.8 cm, Christie's.

**Link:** <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-6192217>

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**Image no: 32**

**Caption:** Francis Newton Souza, *Mad Prophet in New York*, 1961, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 115.6 x 73 cm, Christie's.

**Link:** <https://www.christies.com/features/francis-newton-souza-collecting-guide-10035-1.aspx>

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**Image no: 33**

## IMAGE CREDITS

**Caption:** Maqbool Fida Husain, *Virgin Night*, 1964, Oil on canvas, 101 × 74.9 cm, Abby Weed Grey Collection of Modern Asian and Middle Eastern Art, New York University Art Collection.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/maqbool-fida-husain-virgin-night>

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**Image no:** 34

**Caption:** Tyeb Mehta, *Diagonal Series*, 1974, Tallenge Store, Bengaluru.

**Link:** <https://www.tallengestore.com/products/diagonal-1974-art-by-tyeb-mehta-art-prints>

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**Image no:** 35

**Caption:** Tyeb Mehta, *Untitled from the Diagonal series*, 1978, Oil on canvas, 150.4 x 120.1 cm, Bonhams.

**Link:** <https://www.bonhams.com/auction/20833/lot/420/tyeb-mehta-india-1925-2009-untitled/>

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**Image no:** 36

**Caption:** Tyeb Mehta, *Diagonal Series*, c. 1970, Published in 'Firebrands Who Forged a New Art for a New India', The New York Times, September 26, 2018.

**Link:**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/26/arts/design/the-progressive-revolution-review-asia-society.html>

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**Image no:** 37

**Caption:** Tyeb Mehta, *Untitled*, 1973, Acrylic on canvas, 259.1 x 175.6 cm, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem. Gift of the Chester and Davida Herwitz Collection, 2001.

**Link:** [https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/ROEdER7h\\_UkE8A](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/ROEdER7h_UkE8A)

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**Image no:** 38

**Caption:** Barnett Newman, *Onement I*, 1948, Oil on canvas and oil on masking tape on canvas, 69.2 x 41.2 cm, 390.1992, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Annalee Newman © 2023 Barnett Newman Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**Link:** <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79601>

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**Image no:** 39

**Caption:** Tyeb Mehta, Detail, *Diagonal Series*, 1972, Oil on canvas, 90.2 x 114.8 cm, DAG.

**Link:** <https://dagworld.com/mehtat003c.html>

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**Image no:** 40

**Caption:** Tyeb Mehta, Detail, *Untitled (Diagonal)*, 1975, Oil on canvas, 168.6 x 129.9 cm, Christie's. Collection of Abhishek and Radhika Poddar.

**Link:** <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6053258>

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**Image no:** 41

**Caption:** Tyeb Mehta, *Diagonal*, 1973, Oil on canvas, 69 x 59 cm, Artnet.

**Link:** <https://www.artnet.com/artists/tyeb-mehta/diagonal-3muWTq-UVEzxslnlCA8NMw2>

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**Image no:** 42

**Caption:** Tyeb Mehta, *Untitled*, 1969, Oil on canvas, 150 x 125.5 cm, Pundole's, Mumbai. Property of the National Center for the Performing Arts.

**Link:** <https://auctions.pundoles.com/lots/view/1-4T4O5/untitled>

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**Image no:** 43

**Caption:** Tyeb Mehta, *Untitled*, 1965, Oil on canvas, TIFR Archives, Mumbai.

**Link:** <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/tyeb-mehta-tifr-archives/tAH9pHuxMQ1PKA>

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**Image no:** 44

**Caption:** Vasudeo S Gaitonde, *Untitled*, 1963, Oil on canvas, 182.9 x 106.7 cm, V S Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, October 24, 2014 – February 11, 2015, Artsy.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/vasudeo-s-gaitonde-untitled-24>

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**Image no:** 45

**Caption:** Vasudeo S Gaitonde, *Untitled*, 1995, Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 101.6 cm, Photographed by Anil Rane, V S Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, October 24, 2014 – February 11, 2015, Artsy.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/vasudeo-s-gaitonde-untitled-16>

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**Image no:** 46

**Caption:** Tyeb Mehta, *Diagonal*, 1973, Oil on canvas, 69 x 59 cm, Artnet.

**Link:** <https://www.artnet.com/artists/tyeb-mehta/diagonal-3muWTq-UVEzxslnlCA8NMw2>

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**Image no:** 47

**Caption:** Tyeb Mehta, *Untitled of the Diagonal series*, 1978, Oil on canvas, 150.4 x 120.1 cm, Bonhams.

**Link:** <https://www.bonhams.com/auction/20833/lot/420/tyeb-mehta-india-1925-2009-untitled/>

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**Image no:** 48

**Caption:** Prabhakar Barwe, *Chaitra Mood*, 1992, Oil on canvas, 91.5 x 91.5 cm, MAC.01312, Museum of Art & Photography, Bengaluru.

**Link:**

<https://map.cumulus.co.in/client/map/collection#/search/4965?src=srh&q=Prabakhar%20barwe&oq=12&qtp=flt&department=&view=grid&searchField=Department&page=1&sortBy=UserNumber3&sortOrder=ASC>

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**Image no:** 49

**Caption:** Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, c. 1985, Ink and pencil on paper, 71.1 x 50.8 cm, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem. Gift of the Chester and Davida Herwitz Collection, 2001.

**Link:** <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/untitled/uQH1khoRY3IjBg>

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**Image no:** 50

**Caption:** Zarina, *Untitled*, 1978, Laminated paper pierced with sewing needle, 70.5 x 55 cm, Photographed by unknown © Zarina; Courtesy of the artist and Luhning Augustine, New York.

**Link:** N/A

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**Image no:** 51

**Caption:** Prabhakar Barwe, *Yantra III*, 1964, Watercolour, ink and silver paper on paper, 51.8 x 77.2 cm, Abby Weed Grey Collection of Modern Asian and Middle Eastern Art, New York University Art Collection.

**Link:** <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/prabhakar-barwe-yantra-iii>

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**Image no:** 52

**Caption:** PT Reddy, *Shree Chakra*, 1979, Watercolour and tempera, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

**Link:**

<https://pdfslide.net/documents/p-t-reddy-neo-tantrism-and-modern-art-in-india-58eca03978d8e.html?page=13>

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**Image no:** 53

**Caption:** Akbar Padamsee, *Metascape - III*, 1975/1976, Oil on canvas, 1520 x 1525 cm, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

**Link:** [https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/metascape-iii-akbar-padamsee/UgG\\_6GF8fn45iA](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/metascape-iii-akbar-padamsee/UgG_6GF8fn45iA)

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**Image no:** 54

**Caption:** Ram Kumar, *Untitled*, Kerala Museum, Kochi.

**Link:** <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/untitled-ram-kumar/IOEuBfaPO6GUpQ>

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**Image no:** 55

**Caption:** Sadanand K Bakre, *Untitled (Landscape)*, 1968, Oil on canvas, 40.6 x 30.5 cm, Grosvenor Gallery, London.

**Link:**

<https://www.grosvenorgallery.com/artists/30-sadanand-k.-bakre/works/3521-sadanand-k.-bakre-untitled-landscape-1968/>



In the simplest terms, an abstract image uses lines, shapes and colours to convey ideas and feelings in ways that don't reflect reality as we see it. While some forms of art depict people, places and objects as they appear to us, artists often challenge such modes of representation by experimenting with their visual language. Their works might sometimes appear unfamiliar to us, but while we may not always be conscious of this, we encounter textures, patterns and designs that form a part of abstract vocabularies all around us in our daily life. These range from shifting patterns on sand and formations on rocks to striped zebra crossings and latticed scaffolding at construction sites.

In the context of Indian art, abstraction has evolved in a number of ways, and we see this emerging particularly in the 1950s, in a newly independent India. At this moment, artists faced a critical question: how could they create a unique visual language that was simultaneously universal and embraced the country's history and traditions? Let's look at the practices of two artists who have contended with this paradox by experimenting with abstraction in distinct ways.

### **Seeking Solitude and Balance: VS Gaitonde**

Beginning in the 1950s, Vasudeo S Gaitonde (1924–2001) began to move away from the figurative style he was trained in at the JJ School of Art in Bombay and started exploring the possibilities of line and colour in his canvases. Inspired by his lifelong study of Zen Buddhism and Indian philosophical systems, he pursued a sense of quietness and solitude in his works. Spending time looking at some of his paintings we might find ourselves falling into a meditative trance. It's easy to be submerged in the stillness of deep tones, the harmony of symmetrical forms or the textured surface of the canvas scratched with a palette knife or thickly layered in paint.

Some of Gaitonde's paintings evoke the feeling of a landscape, and they have been written about that way. While one can certainly read central planes as horizon lines that seem to separate sky from sea and circular forms as the sun or another element of the solstice, his works also conjure a broader sense of balance. In fact,

he consciously sought a vision free from representation and cultural connotation, even as he drew from Asian spiritual traditions in his process and approach.

While his practice represents a style that eludes meaning, it is important to remember that this is not always the case with abstraction. Some artists who were clear in their commitment to the figure also invented new ways of experimenting with line and form in their work, while retaining representational elements. Let's turn to one such artist whose works exemplify this approach.

### **Integrating Diagonals and Fractures: Tyeb Mehta**

The Bombay-based artist Tyeb Mehta (1925–2009) is particularly known for his series of oil on canvas paintings, titled *Diagonals*, which integrate his lifelong exploration of the fractured figure with the abstracted geometric form of a diagonal that cuts across the canvas.

The diagonal is a device that Mehta invented but – as the artist pointed out – was inspired by his transformative experience of seeing Barnett Newman's *Onement I* (1948) at the Museum of Modern Art while he was in New York on a Rockefeller Fellowship. Seeing this work that uses a vertical band as we see here to simultaneously divide and unite its composition, made him certain of his own intent to integrate the abstract form of the diagonal and the figure.

'In front of a painting by Barnett Newman, I finally understood that I could preserve the sheerness and radiance of large areas of colour without sacrificing the figure. I came back to India and went on trying it for weeks until one day, I gave up and threw black colour to destroy the canvas. Instead, it all fell into place. The diagonal was the solution. And my painting was never the same again'. (632)

While Mehta was visually inspired by Newman's use of the line, the slashing of the composition simultaneously takes on a very different meaning in his works. Belonging to the generation that witnessed the 1947 Partition, which divided British India into the separate nations of India and Pakistan, his use of abstraction evokes the trauma and violence of this moment. Here, the line brutally bisects the figures and their disjointed bodies are suspended in flat geometric planes,

recalling the political division that resulted in major displacement and upheaval across both sides of the border.

Through Mehta's works, we see how abstract forms explore the experimental possibilities of composition while also expressing tumultuous narratives that might be difficult to comprehend in words or through naturalistic representation.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen through two divergent practices, abstractionists in India have been pioneering in their development of unique visual vocabularies. Whether to explore socio-cultural practices, respond to historical moments or to explore the potential of line, shape and colour, artists from the region continue to use abstract vocabularies to engage with different formal, aesthetic and conceptual ideas.

### **Postscript**

While not an official member of the Progressive Artists' Group, Vasudeo S Gaitonde (1924–2001) worked in Bombay during the same period and was briefly associated with them. By the early 1960s, he began to gain recognition outside of India and received prestigious scholarships that allowed him to travel across Asia and to New York. A major retrospective of his work was held at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2014–15.

In 1995, the city's name was officially changed from Bombay to Mumbai, as it is known today. Since this video discusses a time period before the official name change, we refer to the city as Bombay here.

Tyeb Mehta (1925–2009) was affiliated with the Progressive Artists' Group. He lived and worked in Bombay for much of his life, initially as a film editor before studying painting at the Sir JJ School of Art. Mehta was among the first Indian artists to receive critical acclaim through major international exhibitions as well as commercial success, during his lifetime.

The representation of the Partition depicted in this video takes reference from an archival map and is used for illustrative purposes only. We recognise that some of

these borders remain disputed to this day, and are interpreted differently by different sources. Additionally, the film makes reference to the Radcliffe Line that demarcated Pakistani territories in the erstwhile Punjab Province in the West, and the erstwhile Bengal Presidency in the East. While East Bengal was known as East Pakistan following Partition, this region has been recognised as the People's Republic of Bangladesh since the Liberation War in 1971.

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