



Jehangir's art

Art patron Jehangir Nicholson's dream of bequeathing his collection to the city has finally come true, finds **Zeenat Nagree**. Photograph by **Tejal Pandey**.

On many Sunday mornings, art collector Jehangir Nicholson would drive around South Mumbai with his friend and art collector Ratan Batliboi, looking for a place to turn into his dream museum. But perhaps because he couldn't decide on the ideal spot or the right price, Nicholson during his lifetime wasn't successful in finding a gallery to house his art collection. This fortnight, nearly ten years after he died, the Jehangir Nicholson Gallery opens in the East Wing of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya.

The gallery, which will be inaugurated on April 11, fits one of Nicholson's most important criteria: it is located in South Mumbai, the area that he regarded as the cultural district of the city. The opening of the gallery marks the first time that all the artworks—800 paintings and 100 sculptures acquired between 1968 and 2001—are housed together. A selection of 27 paintings and four sculptures goes on display for the first exhibition titled *Six Decades – Celebrating the Bombay artists in the Jehangir Nicholson Collection*. “The show

highlights iconic works from the collection, to explore what makes certain works remain in the public memory of a city,” said curator Zasha Colah, who has been in charge of Nicholson's collection since 2009. The show-stoppers will include works by India's most celebrated artists including Syed Haider Raza, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee, Francis Newton Souza and Vasudeo Gaitonde.

Nicholson, a cotton merchant born in 1915 began collecting art reportedly to fill the void after his wife's death in 1967. Over the years

Jehangir Nicholson Gallery

Nicholson honed his taste through discussions with artists, collectors and gallerists. "The collection has significant works by members of the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group," said gallerist Dadiba Pundole, who along with critic and curator Ranjit Hoskote and artist Mehli Gobhai is on the advisory board of the gallery. "What makes this collection noteworthy is that very few people were seriously collecting art at the time and still fewer continued collecting throughout their lifetime." Renowned art historian Partha Mitter is scheduled to deliver a lecture on the opening evening.

If Nicholson's collection was slow to gain prominence, it wasn't for want of trying on the collector's part. "Throughout his life, he really tried to gift this collection to the people of the city," Colah said. As early as 1976, Nicholson hoped to set up a museum of modern art in the city and managed to find room for 57 selected paintings at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, which remained there till 2008. More works were shown in the 1998 exhibition *A Collector's Eye* at the National Gallery of Modern Art. "Find me space in the South Bombay area and I would desire to give and build a museum worth its name to the city along with most of my little collection," Nicholson wrote in the catalogue of the exhibition. That the bulk of his collection remained away from public view in his Worli home was always a source of disappointment for Nicholson. "He would invite many people to see the collection," said Kartik Mahyavanshi, who took care of storage of artworks at Nicholson's home and was appointed the collection supervisor at the gallery. "Sometimes, there would be enough people to fill a whole bus."

In his last years, Nicholson became obsessed with the idea of finding a place to display his artworks. Apart from driving around the city fantasising about potential venues for a museum, Nicholson made concrete plans. He drew up a will that made his close friends, heritage activist Cyrus Guzder and his lawyer Kaiwan Kalyaniwalla, executors of his estate. Nicholson, who headed cotton gin and press Breul and Co., directed them to liquidate his assets to set up a private foundation that would finance the maintenance of his collection.

Immediately after he died in 2001, Guzder and Kalyaniwalla set up the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation. But it was only in 2008 that Guzder, who stepped down from the board of the museum to represent the foundation, was able to establish a partnership with the CSMVS, Colah said. Over the last two years, Colah and

her team has worked at a breakneck pace to get the gallery going: artworks were taken out of storage, treated for fungus, restored, catalogued with names and ascribed dates; interviews were conducted with artists, gallerists and friends of Nicholson; and the gallery was designed and constructed. "We have established a mutually-beneficial understanding," said CSMVS director Mukherjee. According to the agreement, Nicholson's collection is on loan to the museum for 15 years in exchange for a 3,000 square-foot gallery, storage area and office at the museum. The foundation receives other benefits too: subsidised rates for conservation of paintings, publication support for books and a chance to lure in over 2,000 visitors who come to the museum every day.

The foundation promises to put these resources to good use. Every six months, a new exhibition will go on display. Unlike the National Gallery of Modern Art across the road, which doesn't display its collection thematically, Colah said that the foundation's exhibition will have a "curatorial focus and will make a statement or pose a question". On the cards is an exhibition that will explore the developments in the Indian abstract move-

ment. The foundation will use the six-month long duration of the show to hold workshops and lectures in English, Hindi and Marathi for various age groups.

That's not all. The foundation's website will feature images of the entire collection and

interested visitors will have a chance to see all the works in person with prior permission. "We want the foundation to have open storage," said Batliboi, who runs an architecture firm and designed the office and storage area of the gallery. Batliboi has created sliding panels for the paintings in temperature and humidity controlled room. He added, "Through our arrangement you can see any work

at any time." Those interested in digging deeper, can browse through the catalogue and books in the foundation's library or look for clues in Nicholson's photographs of openings, artists and their studios. "We're trying to develop ways of working and collaborating that create ripple effects, stretching the singularity of Jehangir Nicholson's wish to give back to the city, as far as it will go," said Colah.

The trustees, advisors and curator of the foundation are intent on not letting the collection get stuck in the past. The foundation plans to support contemporary art projects. It hopes to provide what Colah describes as "encouragement to work outside the gallery, biennale pressure". The dialogue with artworks won't be limited to the Nicholson's collection - artists will have a chance to respond to any of the museum's artworks and objects. When those plans materialise, the foundation will help make CSMVS the second museum in the city to open its doors to contemporary art; the Bhau Daji Lad Museum launched its contemporary art programme in March last year. "Today, the idea of a museum has changed considerably," said CSMVS director Mukherjee. "It's not just a storehouse of old objects but functions as a link between the past and the present."

The Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation knows that it cannot succeed on its own, however. "The challenge is to open up meaningfully to audiences," Colah said. "We have a dream audience, in terms of numbers and diversity. But will they all participate equally? Will we all feel a sense of common ownership? That is the challenge."

The Jehangir Nicholson Gallery opens on Mon April 11. See Exhibitions in Art. To view works in the collection not on display in the gallery, email zasha@jnaf.org.



Open to the public KH Ara's *Nude* (above); Jehangir Nicholson (top); conservators touch up an SH Raza painting (previous page)