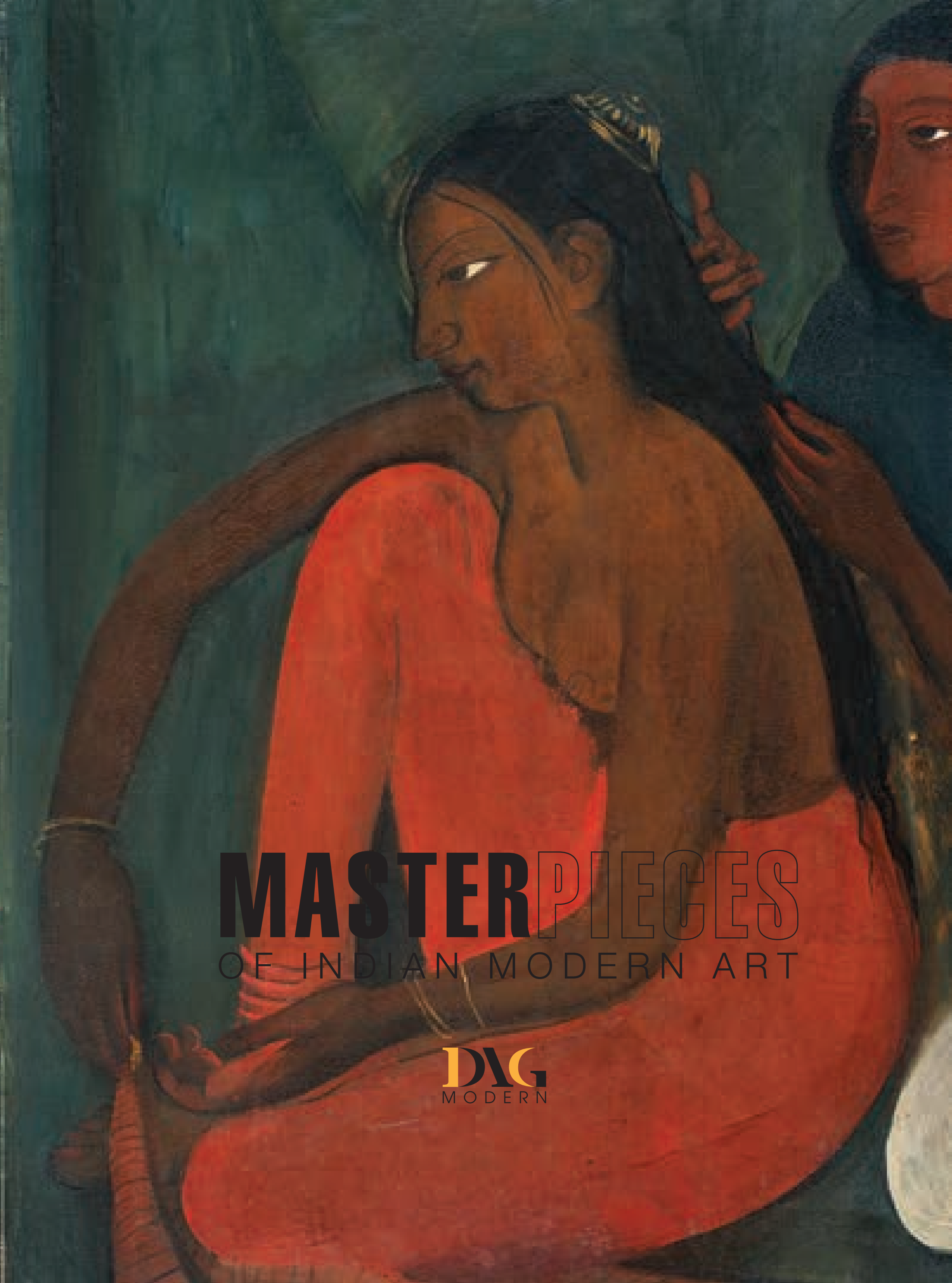

MASTERPIECES

OF INDIAN MODERN ART

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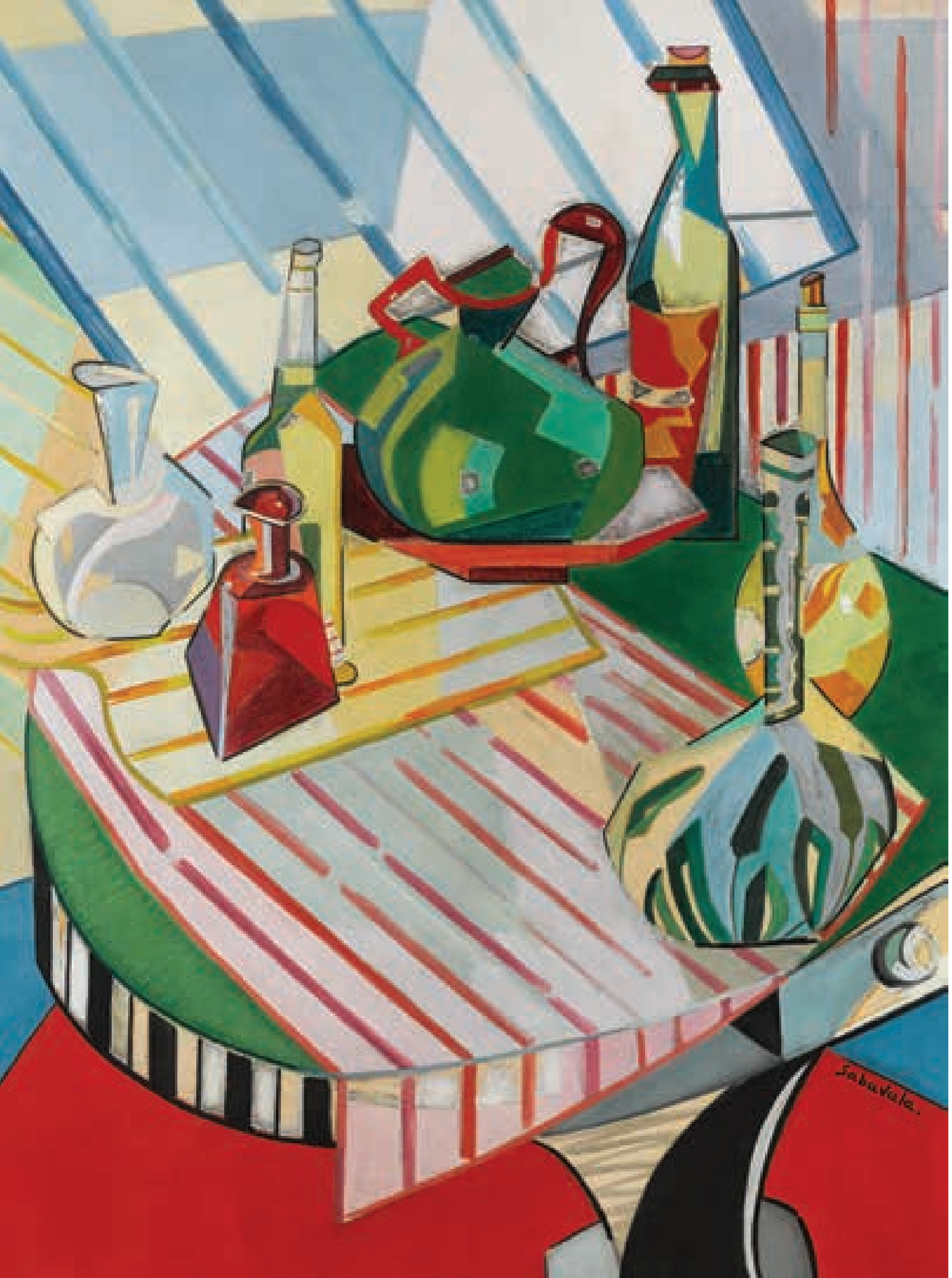

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11 Hauz Khas Village, New Delhi 110016, India
Tel: +91 11 46005300
DLF Emporio, Second Floor, Vasant Kunj
New Delhi 110070, India
Tel: +91 11 41004150 • Email: delhi@dagmodern.com
58, Dr. V. B. Gandhi Marg
Kala Ghoda, Fort, Mumbai 400001, India
Tel: +91 22 4922270 • Email: mumbai@dagmodern.com
The Fuller Building
41 East 57 Street, Suite 708, New York, NY 10022
Tel: +1 212-457-9037 • Email: newyork@dagmodern.com
Website: www.dagmodern.com

PROJECT EDITOR: Kishore Singh
EXECUTIVE EDITOR: Shruti Parthasarathy
PRODUCTION EDITOR: Abhilasha Ojha
RESEARCH COORDINATOR: Nishant
RESEARCH: Poonam Baid, Ipsita Sahu, Mansi Dhiman, Ruchi Sharma
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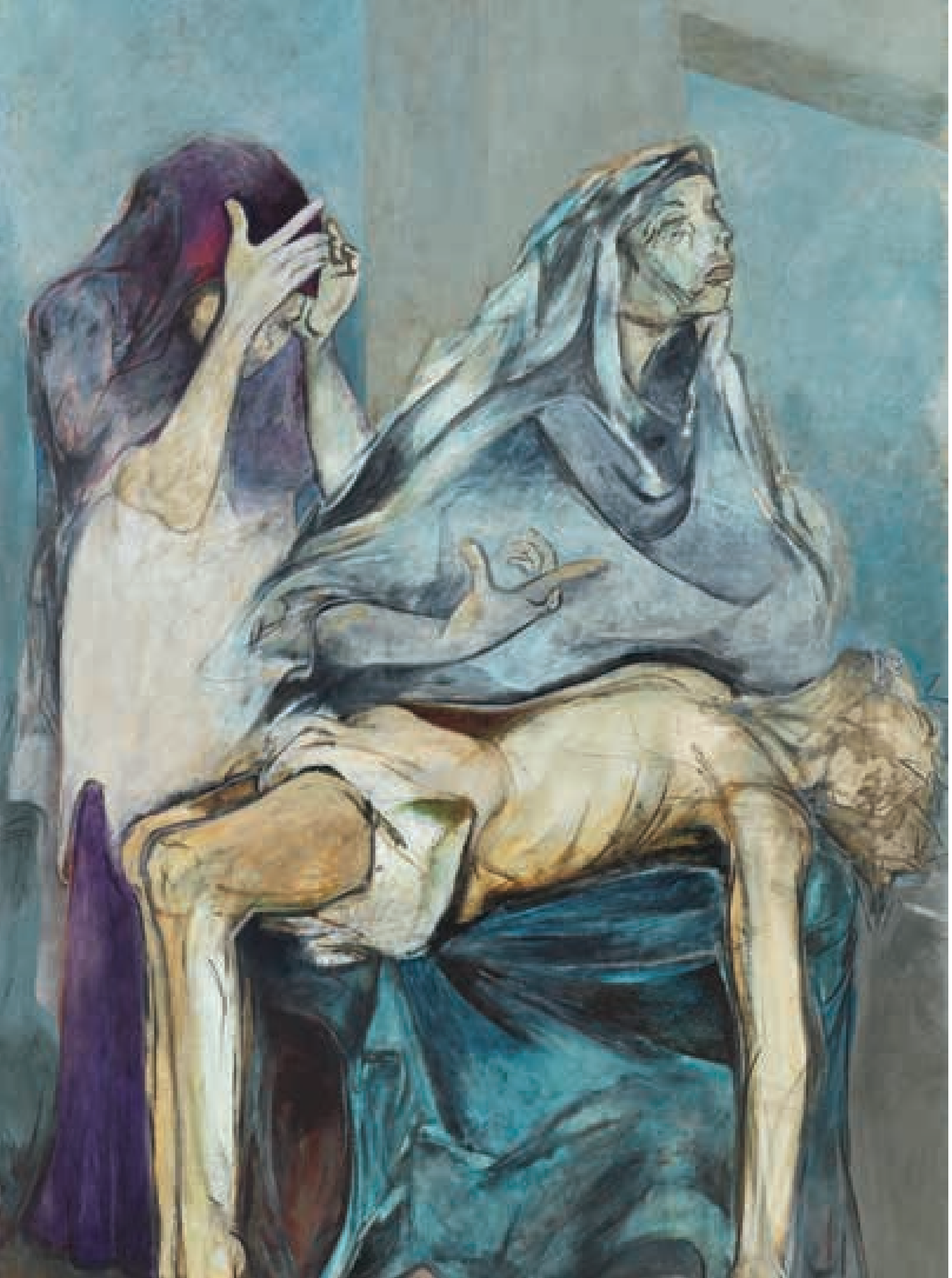


Note from the Director

THE LITMUS TEST OF A MASTERPIECE

One of the most difficult (and thankless) tasks for someone in the world of art is to sift the good from the great, the great from the excellent, and the excellent from – well – a masterpiece. Most artists also make several works that don't measure up to being good, and anything below that benchmark should seriously not be allowed to pass hands, but there is no quality check on art, no rating, no thumbs down that is universal, so we put up with much that is banal because it is signed by an artist with a certain reputation. Because buyers are not often discriminatory, or they don't mind too much and price becomes a criterion, or they don't care anyway and all art is subjective, the art market continues to function because we can't tell a dud from a masterpiece.

What, after all, is a masterpiece? Merely saying all art is subjective is no reason for our indifference to quality and much else that goes into the making of a rare and acknowledged work of art. It is to define what makes a great painting, or sculpture, that we have undertaken this onerous exercise. So, first a disclaimer. This is not *the* definitive list of modern masterpieces – far from it. It consists of works from the DAG Modern collection. There are some truly excellent works of late nineteenth and twentieth century pre-modern and modern art in our public and private museums and among our still small group of fanatic collectors, among families and in legacy collections.

Our task, when we started out, was made more difficult for a lack of understanding of what makes a masterpiece. It is something we have tried to attempt to understand through this book, with writings and material that we hope will make you appreciate and understand the selected art better, if not entirely agree with our selection. Just how difficult it would be has been proved in many ways, but a simple fact should tell you the acrimonious and thankless discourse that has gone into its making. When we set out to assemble these masterpieces, we had hoped to have one hundred works up for review. That was more easily said than done. A hundred masterpieces? We must have been mad. In the end, we've managed ninety-two, and then some. While the litmus test for a masterpiece is explained in the following chapter

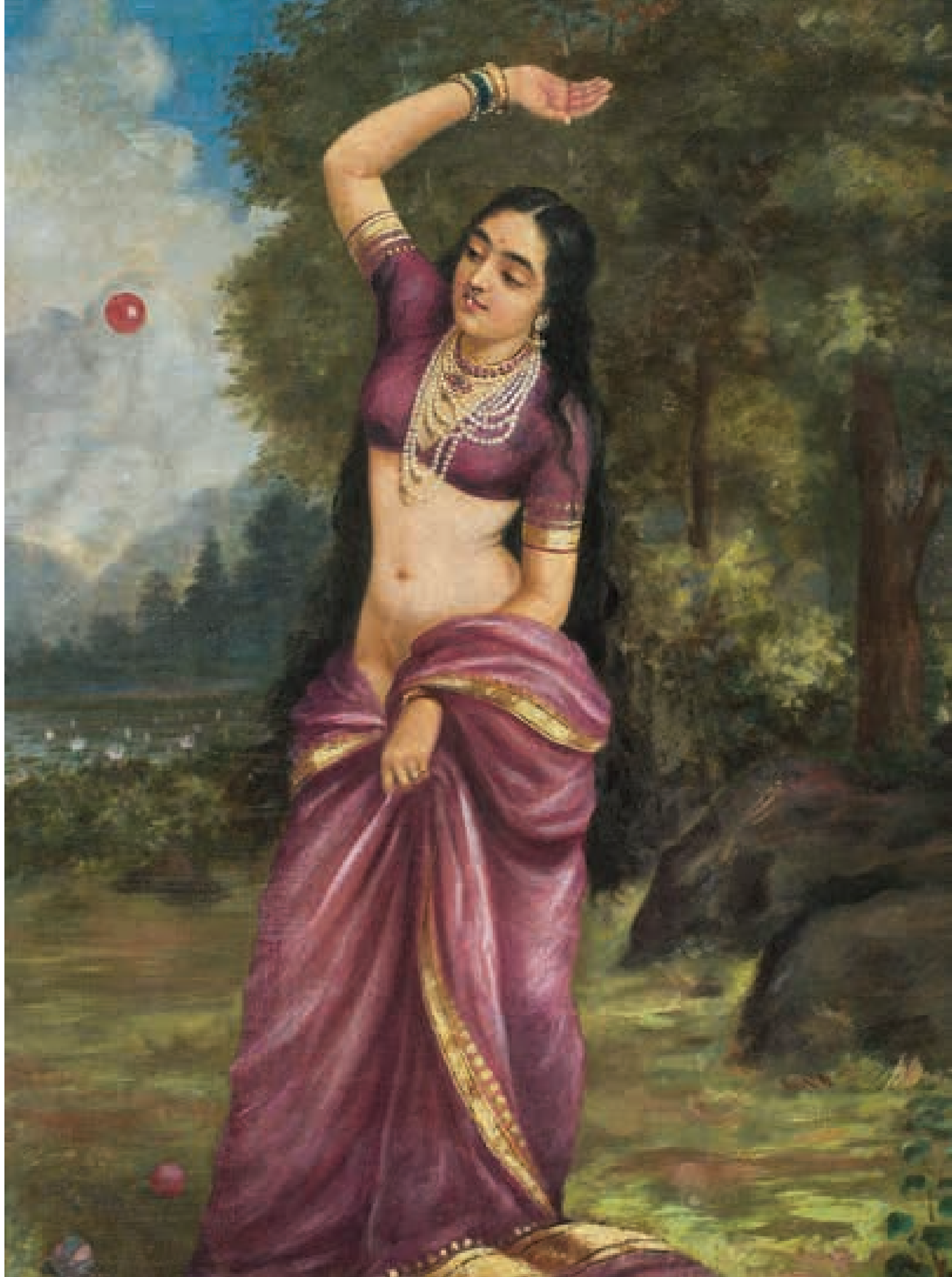
(*The making of a masterpiece*), in parts we became stuck amidst our own choices. A single Kalighat, for instance, did not qualify as a masterpiece – the work was indicative of a great phase of art practice in Bengal at the time – but a large suite that would blow people's imaginations and their reservations away, why that would be a true masterpiece! Which is how the selection of a set of sixty *pats* without any repetition of image but including both the sacred as well as the secular found part in the selection. When it came to Himmat Shah, we chose a set of eight terracotta bottles for the same reason that one could not do justice to such a vision.

In many cases, we may have erred too much on the side of caution. The DAG archive, for instance, is rich in its collection of Early Bengal oil paintings. Our selection of three here is exemplary, but are these the best we have? I would have to say that there are others that could as easily have been our pick but we hesitated because we had shown those publicly before – therefore, we chose to represent that which had not been shown earlier. While this does not dilute from the quality of our pick, it does mean that we have more of what we consider masterpieces in our collection.

There were many, many reasons for our selection, too many to easily record here, and these ranged from something that has the capacity to blow your breath away to historicity, rarity, the touchstone of longevity, originality, to an artist's extremely limited engagement with a subject of emotional poignance that was touching. During its course, we argued, reversed stands, re-examined – and the more we did it, the clearer our perception of very good art became.

I daresay, this is probably the finest selection of Indian modern art that you will see between the covers of any book and it represents the triumphs of the art and artists from the previous century that needs to be acknowledged for its diversity and richness. In times to come, it will remain a record not just of the art but as an outpost of our civilisation, a marker of our times and its rich audacity to represent hope, love, sorrow, anger and passion.

– ASHISH ANAND



MASTERPIECES OF INDIAN MODERN ART

THE MAKING OF A MASTERPIECE

No artist sets out to make a masterpiece — it becomes one due to circumstance and a few attributes that turns it into humanity's great legacy

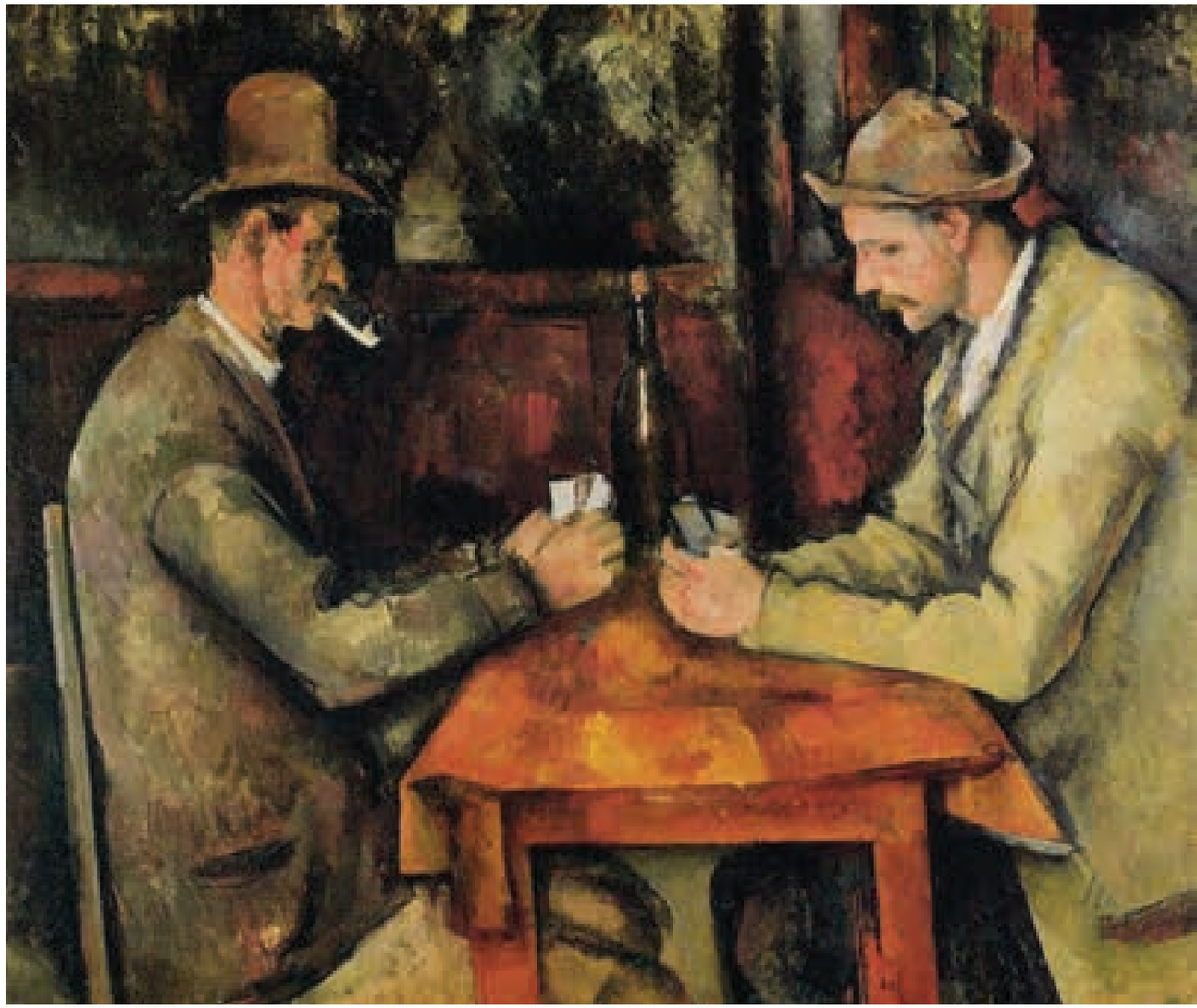
KISHORE SINGH

When the Dutch coined *meesterstuk*, or the Germans *mesiterstuck*, they could hardly have thought that its English equivalent, 'masterpiece' would be so lightly applied to everything from a chef's glorious spread to a fashion designer's couture. If man was considered 'a masterpiece of god or nature', his interpretation of it in trades such as painting, goldsmithy, confectionery or other crafts in a guild to create something that would allow him membership into that union and be retained by it would lead to the creation of a masterpiece. By that measure alone, there should be several hundred thousand masterpieces in the world, yet the term wears about it an air of exclusivity and exceptionalism beyond measure. And though it is lightly, even frivolously, bandied about, a true masterpiece is something that lives on beyond history and geography and belongs to all mankind.

There are some obvious acknowledged examples of masterpieces such as the symphonies of Brahms and Mozart, the plays of William Shakespeare or poetry by Milton and Yeats, the architectural marvels of the great pyramids of Egypt, the Roman amphitheatres and its Sistine Chapel, India's Taj Mahal (but not China's Great Wall which is, well, great, but hardly the stuff of emotion and inspiration). In cinema, we are often surprised, and moved, but Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, or Vittorio de Seca's *Bicycle Thieves*, or, indeed, Cecile B DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, belong to a niche that is not easy to match, though Indians might have their own renditions of cinematic masterpieces, whether the commercial genre of the curry-western *Sholay* or the great historicity of *Mughal-e-Azam*, as distinct from a mere blockbuster, which implies mega-success — but without the capacity to sway audiences decades after the film was made and screened. National anthems everywhere are known to stir emotions but do they have the power of Lata Mangeshkar singing *Ai mere watan ke logon* to bring tears to the eyes of a defeated Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at the end of China's victory over India in 1965? Yet, without universality, can it be referred to as a masterpiece? And with the Oxford English Dictionary choosing, as its word of the year in 2015, an emoji, it is perhaps time to recognise the smiley as a masterpiece of expression, a means of communication that cuts across barriers of language, class, gender, or, indeed, age — the most relevance that a truly emblematic symbol can have. But whatever purpose it achieves — and don't forget that people today recognise so many diverse road signals through a common language of symbols — in itself it isn't a masterpiece of either design or art.

More than anything else, therefore, it is art — painting or sculpture — that qualify as masterpieces of their and future times. Renaissance artist Michelangelo's *Pieta* or, indeed, *David*; Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*; Titian's *Venus of Urbino*; Raphael's *Madonna of the Goldfinch*; Carvaggio's *Lute Player*; Diego Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, J. M. W. Turner or John Constable's incredible water colour landscapes; Paul Cezanne's *The Card Players*; Edvard Much's *The Scream*, Pablo Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* more even than *Guernica*; Claude Monet's water-lilies; Henri Matisse's paper collages; Rodin's *The Thinker*; Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* and *The Potato Eaters*; Mark Rothko's incandescent abstract paintings; Francis Bacon's *Three Studies of Lucian Freud* — these are works that have stood the test of time more than most others. They have the power to enrapture and enchant decades and centuries after they were created, just as, in India, the sculptures in Khajuraho or the frescos at Ajanta and Ellora — created by ateliers of anonymous artists — have the capacity to transcend time and move people from any culture in the world.

'A masterpiece makes us forget the artist,' observes Gabrielle Euvino in *The Complete Idiot's Guide* (Penguin, 2015), 'instead directing our attention to the artist's work. We may wonder how the work was executed, but for the time being we are transposed, so deeply



Paul Cezanne's *The Card Players* — While the subject is commonplace, it is its treatment – radical for its age – that ensured its continuing attention, making it one of the most expensive works of art in the world

brought into this creation that our consciousness is actually expanded. No one walks away from a Rembrandt unaffected.'

Given our mostly Western education, Indians tend to identify masterpieces with largely European and some American artists while remaining almost entirely ignorant of significant artists whose paintings would classify as masterpieces anywhere else in the world. These include several examples of Mughal, Rajput and Kangra miniatures that have been so often copied that for the vast majority of Indians, it is difficult to segregate them from the original — or at least the original inspiration — often rendered cavalierly to do them injustice. The Chola sculptures as, indeed, the bas reliefs on the rock faces at Mamallapuram; the amazing feat of carving the rock-cut temples of Ellora and Ajanta from the top down, and the frescos within these caves that continue to provide inspiration to artists in India at least two millennia later; the Mahaparinirvana statue of Lord Buddha at Kushinagar; the exquisite gate and relief work on the stupa at Sanchi — medieval and ancient India offers a surfeit of instances to so qualify, but this becomes more tenuous in the twentieth century when artists, almost for the first time, began to sign their names to their paintings, giving them both creative ownership and identity beyond a collective group of masons and sculptors.

Several elements go into the making of a masterpiece, and at least some of this has to do with historicity. A work honoured or commended by the Bombay Art Society, for instance, would have been finely tooth-combed by a jury, who would consider its perfection of details and style, if not quite its emotive quality, thus rendering benchmarks not just for art but for the artist too. While such criterion would hardly be sufficient in the creation of masterpieces — bureaucracy and a collective wisdom opting for convention over genius might, in fact, impede it — there is no doubt that together with other elements (about which more later) that historical significance could become an important element in quantifying a work, however arguably, as a

Raja Ravi Varma's *Lakshmi* (above, left) and Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat Mata* (left) are iconic paintings – but are they seminal enough to be referred to as masterpieces?

masterpiece. In India, certain other criterion go into the making of what we consider a masterpiece, chiefly the catalytic point, or period, when a break from tradition resulted in a new form of art that took the art-viewing community by a storm.

In the literal sense, this would include the self-taught artist Raja Ravi Varma's paintings whose tempestuous experimentation into the romanticised realism of mythological and historical narratives gave us such iconic works as *Birth of Shakuntala*, *Shakuntala Removing a Thorn From Her Foot* or *Damayanti and Hansam*, *Mohini on a Swing* on the one hand, and *Lakshmi*, or *Saraswati*, on the other, images with a pan-Indian identity popularised because the artist was able to turn these works into prints at a colour press owned by him, thus giving Indians, in whichever part of the country, images they have related to ever since. While Ravi Varma was creating these 'masterpieces', equally important experiments were underway elsewhere in the country. In Calcutta, Abanindranath Tagore had just completed his *Arabian Nights* series and *Passing of Shah Jahan*; in the same city, Jamini Roy was turning the whole concept of realistic art on its head with his folk-modernist experiments; elsewhere, Amrita Sher-Gil was reneging on the Paris salons to attempt a courageous style of Indian modern art that would place her in a league vastly different from her immediate peers. That she was a woman in a field dominated entirely by men rendered her somewhat of a legend ahead of her time, though eventually it is the longevity and poignancy of her art that has stood the test of time since her premature death in 1941.

It is difficult to sift legend from reality in many such instances. If there is a hopeless romanticism in Amrita Sher-Gil's narrative, there is the popularity that Rabindranath Tagore commanded as India's first Nobel-laureate (that this was for his book of poems, *Gitanjali*, adds instead of detracting from his aura as an artist); the penurious circumstance of most artists of the Progressive Artists' Group added to their appeal in popular perception; and hype and hoopla that form part of the media narrative in recent times has cost

Great masters of Indian art, Raja Ravi Varma (above, right) and Abanindranath Tagore (right) created styles of art practice that brought in catalytic changes in the art making process