In Depth: Absence in Post-War British Painting: South Asian Modernists in Regional Collections

Art Historian Alice Correia explores how the representation of South Asian artists in regional collections can help us rethink the hitherto exclusionary narratives of twentieth-century British art, in an article commissioned by the 'Post War Painting in Regional Collections' Research Group of the British Art Network.

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When I visited Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in February 2020 I was delighted to see Anwar Jalal Shemza's painting *The Wall,* 1958, on display (fig.1), centrally positioned within the gallery dedicated to Modern British art. What made the inclusion of this painting, in this context, remarkable – to me at least – was the fact that throughout his career Shemza had been ignored by the British art establishment, and yet here was *The Wall* in the middle of a narrative of twentieth-century British art. My visit reinforced my optimism that regional art galleries have the potential, through their past acquisitions and future collection and display strategies, to present expansive and inclusive narratives of British art.

Although there was a sizable community of artists of South Asian origin working and exhibiting in Britain during the decades following the Second World War, not one was included in the large-scale survey show *British Art in the 20th Century: The Modern Movement,* at the Royal Academy of Arts (London, 1987), or in smaller, but significant, exhibitions such as *The Forgotten Fifties*, at Graves Art Gallery (Sheffield, 1984); or even, more recently, in shows like *Blast to Freeze: British Art in the 20th Century* (Kunstmuseum Wolfsberg, 2003). The absence of artists such as Avinash Chandra (1931-1991), Balraj Khanna (b.1940), Anwar Jalal Shemza (1928-1985) and Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002) from these and other exhibitions of British art was, to a large extent, unremarkable. Indeed, for the artists concerned, such absences were to be expected, given the general indifference shown to their work by mainstream critics, national cultural organisations and collections.[1] The artists who migrated to Britain from South Asia in the 1950s and early 1960s found themselves grouped under a homogenised 'foreign' identity. Their work was assessed by contemporaneous critics against the criteria of European modernist painting and was found to be derivative.[2] And although living and working in Britain for long periods, if not most of their lives, these artists remain largely excluded from, or at best, marginalised within, art historical narratives of British modernist painting.[3]

Yet the omission of migrant artists from South Asia and elsewhere, from narratives of British painting, whether presented in books or exhibitions, in the decades after the Second World

War has created a misleading sense that racial diversity was absent within the artistic ecosystem at that time. As Ming Tiampo's research shows, significant numbers of international students, mainly from former British colonies, attended the Slade School of Art in London during this period, while Kobena Mercer has characterised London's art scene during the late 1950s as one of 'post-colonial internationalism'.[4] Although many artists who undertook art school education in London returned home, such as Zubeida Agha (1922–1997) and Zainul Abedin (1914-1976) both from Pakistan, many others pursued their artistic careers in the UK, with varying degrees of success. FN Souza arrived in the UK in 1949, moved to New York in 1967, and only returned to India shortly before his death in 2002; Avinash Chandra arrived in Britain in 1956, spent the years 1965-1971 in New York, before returning to London, where he lived until his death in 1991; Anwar Jalal Shemza arrived London in 1956, but finding it impossible to sustain an artistic career in the city, moved to Stafford in 1961, where he died in 1985; Balraj Khanna came to Britain in 1960 and continues to live and work here.

Explanations of why non-white migrant artists have been excluded from British art historical narratives are multi-layered. Certainly, the perception of American post-war painting as the ideal form of modernist artistic practice in this period was a factor, as the British gaze towards America blinded artists, critics and curators to artistic experiments taking place elsewhere. There is little doubt, for example, that Tate's 1956 exhibition *Modern Art in the United States* exerted significant influence over British painters and critics, leaving little room for engaging with art that synthesised multiple, global, referents.[5] But arguably, this explanation lets British critics, scholars and institutions 'off the hook', because it diverts attention away from the overt cultural, and unspoken structural, racism that non-white artists experienced in Britain in the post-war period. South Asian artists in Britain were largely expected to conform to preconceived stereotypes and produce work that demonstrated their 'Indian-ness'; Avinash Chandra was asked for pictures of 'elephants and tigers' by one London dealer.[6] Discussing Souza's solo show at Gallery One, London, in 1955, the critic John Berger noted that he 'straddles many traditions but serves none'.[7] While this lack of uniformity in Souza's painterly styles could be regarded today as evidence of artistic experimentation, for Berger, this lack of conformity to a single visual tradition was seemingly evidence of the artist's indecisive and derivative painterly idioms. Attitudes such as these held sway for decades. Reflecting on his experience of the art world in 1980, Khanna asserted,

> Hypocrisy, superciliousness, vanity and arrogance are some of its traits, mainly located in the cliques that control art journalism, exposure, sponsorship and general patronage. Arguably it is tough for any artist at the best of times, but for some reason it is tougher even for artists as good, say, as Avinash Chandra, Francis Souza and Rasheed Araeen; the lesser ones do not stand a chance. Some may say this is a kind of racial discrimination and they won't be wrong if they do.[8]

Reviewing the 1989 exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in post-war Britain* (Hayward Gallery, London, later touring to Wolverhampton and Manchester), which was curated by Rasheed Araeen (b.1935) and included work by Chandra, Khanna, Shemza, and Souza, the then celebrated critic Brian Sewell argued that this generation of migrant artists failed to establish enduring critical reputations in London because 'they are not good enough. They borrow all and contribute nothing'.[9] Reminiscent of Berger's criticism, by claiming 'they borrow all', Sewell implies that not only do the artists included in *The Other Story* fail to make a unique contribution: that their style and modes of expression are borrowed, but also that they have borrowed or appropriated *indiscriminately*, and that their refusal to conform to one clear style and tradition is an additional failure.

Over the past two decades or so, post-colonial studies, and more recently de-colonial thought, has unlinked conceptions of 'Britishness' from birth-place and national identity. Significantly, as of November 2020, Tate, the keeper of the national collection, now defines British art as 'work by artists defined by their contribution to the history and development of British art rather than by nationality'.[10] The Tate Collection, with its recent acquisition of works by artists of South Asian heritage, including Rasheed Araeen's photographic portfolio, *Fire!* (1975, printed 1984) and seven small ink and watercolour paintings by Tassaduq Sohail (1930-2017) dating from 1978-1993, is evidently seeking to address gaps and historic omissions in its collection. However, that process of retrospective purchasing is slow, and for those seeking a more diverse British art history now, it may be useful to turn to the collections of regional galleries, whether in-situ or online.

While paintings by South Asian modernists in public collections are relatively few, and are scattered across numerous regional galleries, their presence within the ArtUK database, and more recently the Black Artists in Public Collections database, is beginning to provide join-up access to these works, unhindered by geographical distance.[11] Viewing multiple works online that are physically dispersed across the country enables a greater understanding of an artist's oeuvre, particularly when monographic studies or exhibition catalogues with colour reproductions are scarce. ArtUK's database also reveals which institutions supported South Asian artists and when. Leicestershire County Council's acquisition of Souza's *The Emperor* (1958) from the artist's 1958 show at Gallery One, London, and the allocation of his *Supper at Emmaus with the Believer and the Sceptic* (1958) to Wakefield Art Gallery (now The Hepworth Wakefield) by the Contemporary Art Society in 1962, would have been considered progressive at the time. Of the seven paintings by Chandra listed on ArtUK, three are in the Leicestershire County Council Artworks Collection, all bought in 1967; while Bradford Museums and Galleries (Cartwright Hall), owns eight works by Khanna, acquired between 1971 and 2006.[12] In fact, Cartwright Hall's then-curator Nima Poovya-Smith argued in 1998 that Bradford has "one of the most comprehensive collection of South Asian art in Britain today".[13] In addition to works by Khanna, Bradford holds paintings by Souza, Shemza, Amal Ghosh (b.1933), and Shanti Panchal (b.unknown); in 1995, it further commissioned

over thirty artists, including Zarina Bhimji (b.1963) and Perminder Kaur (b.1965) to make work for the collection.[14] Also during the 1990s, Birmingham Museum and Art gallery acquired Shemza's *The Wall,* 1958, along with two works on paper, *Meem*, 1964, and *Love Letter,* 1960, following a retrospective exhibition of the artist's work.[15] In 1999 Birmingham also purchased Souza's painting, *Negro in Mourning*, 1957.

In turning our attention to the collections, displays and exhibitions in regional galleries, it may be possible to rethink hitherto exclusionary narratives of British art. In her recent article about urgent need to diversify British art, Anjalie Dalal-Clayton noted that since the early 1980s, regional galleries such as Bluecoat, Liverpool; Rochdale Art Gallery; and Harris Museum, Preston, have staged important exhibitions of work by artists of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage.[16] Revisiting those exhibition histories reframes our knowledge of British artistic activity, and de-centres London as the locus of progressive exhibition making.

In 2017, *South Asian Modernists 1953-1963* opened at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, displaying work by a range of artists who contributed to a British artistic ecosystem in the post-war period (Fig. 2). In addition to showing works by Chandra, Shemza and Souza, the exhibition included works by MF Husain (1915-2011), Ram Kumar (1924-2018), Tyeb Mehta (1925-2009), Akbar Padamsee (1928-2020), Laxman Pai (1926-), SH Raza (1922-2016), Mohan Samant (1924 -2004), and Paritosh Sen (1918-2008). While each artist was represented by only a few works – just eighteen paintings were included in the show – the exhibition nonetheless provided a snapshot of a group of migrant artists who were actively exhibiting in Britain in the post-war period, in this case at the independent commercial space, Gallery One in London during the 1950s. The 2017 exhibition gave an insight into how each artist was addressing the major debates within painting at that time, including the push-pull between figuration and abstraction; social realism and subjective existentialism; and the possibility of landscape as a meaningful genre in an age of increasing urbanism.

Positioned in the middle of the exhibition, and one of the largest paintings on display, was Souza's *Supper at Emmaus with the Believer and the Sceptic* (fig.2). Taking its subject from the New Testament, this painting depicts the moment when two of Jesus' disciples recognize that Christ has risen from the dead after his crucifixion. Jesus Christ is positioned in the centre of the canvas, looking directly out, in the act of blessing the meal; he holds his left hand aloft, revealing the deep and bloody elliptical wound in his wrist. In contrast to the pinky skin tones of the two disciples, Jesus is depicted with an ashen white complexion and Souza has utilized the directional application of paint to suggest a halo radiating around his head, while short black lines indicate a crown of thorns. In many respects Souza's painting follows the conventions of Christian iconography, particularly in the presentation of Jesus Christ, who looks directly out at the viewer and invites audiences to contemplate the

possibility of life after death. However, the painting's modernist credentials are asserted when compared to perhaps the most famous depiction of this subject, Caravaggio's *The Supper at Emmaus* (1601, National Gallery, London). In comparison to Caravaggio's masterly display of chiaroscuro and dynamic action, Souza's painting is rendered flat and still. Although figurative, Souza's three men are not presented naturalistically, but schematically; the robes of the two disciples do not wrap around three-dimensional bodies, but rather are rendered as containers for areas of pattern.

Supper at Emmaus with the Believer and the Sceptic was first exhibited in the Contemporary Art Society's (CAS) major touring exhibition, *The Religious Theme* (1958). The exhibition opened at The Tate Gallery in July of that year, and later toured to fifteen regional galleries across England.[17] The exhibition included the work of 80 artists, who had each been invited by the CAS to submit a painting on a 'religious theme'. It is likely that the CAS was aware of Souza's work following his solo exhibitions at Gallery One, in 1955 and 1956; indeed, in 1962 critic Edwin Mullins recalled that his 1955 exhibition 'made Souza's name more or less overnight'.[18] Significantly, those exhibitions had included works demonstrating Souza's pre-existing engagement with Catholic iconography; in the mid-1950s he painted several works depicting St. Sebastian, identified by three arrows piercing his neck (see fig.2), while a review of his 1957 exhibition at Gallery One recorded that his 'obsessive imagination remains haunted by the image impaled on a Goan crucifix, "scourged and dripping, with matted hair tangled in plaited thorns"'.[19]

It is currently unclear whether Souza painted *Supper at Emmaus* specifically for the CAS exhibition, or if he submitted an already completed painting; nonetheless, it conforms to the CAS's stipulation that the proposed work be at least 30 inches (76cm) and not more than 60 inches (152 cm) in one of its dimensions, so as to encourage submissions that were suitable in scale for display in museums.[20] The society's Annual Report 1957-8 notes that Souza's *Supper at Emmaus* was one of six works (five paintings, and one sculpture) purchased from the exhibition; other works acquired included Sandra Blow's *Creation*, (Cannon Hall Museum, Barnsley) and Keith Vaughan, *Martyrdom of St Sebastian* (Bradford Museums and Galleries).[21] In his Chairman's Report, Sir Colin Anderson noted that the show elicited 'strangely varied responses … both from the artists in their interpretations and from the public in its reaction to them'.[22] In addition to the invitation to exhibit in *The Religious Theme,* and the purchase of his painting, it would seem that the CAS was interested and supportive of Souza in other ways: the Annual Report 1958-59, dated 1 December 1959, records that 'last month members had a more unusual opportunity, which was to meet Mr FN Souza at Gallery One for a special view of his own exhibition there'.[23] That *Supper at Emmaus* and his relationship with the CAS were of particular significance to Souza's career is evinced by the painting's reproduction in the catalogue marking Gallery One's tenth anniversary, published in 1963, which can now be viewed in the Tate Archives.

Supper at Emmaus remained in the collection of the CAS until 1962, when it was allocated to Wakefield Art Gallery. It is currently unclear why Souza's work was allocated to Wakefield, but it seems likely that the Gallery's forward-thinking and dynamic curator, Helen Knapp played a role in securing the work for collection.[24] The history of what happened to the painting when it arrived in Wakefield is also uncertain; to date, it has not been possible to establish whether it was regularly on display as a 'highlight' of the Gallery's collection, or if it went into storage. The painting's loan history, however, tells a compelling and depressing story about the negligible interest in Souza and his work between 1962 and 1989. Records of only three loan requests to include *Supper at Emmaus* in externally organised thematic group exhibitions are held in Wakefield's archives. These were, *Faith Alive,* Northampton Art Gallery, 1971; *India: Myth and Reality; Aspects of Modern Indian Art*, Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1982[25]; and *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in post-war Britain* (Hayward Gallery, London, and then touring nationally, 1989) (fig.3). The titles and scope of the 1971 and 1982 exhibitions say much regarding the severely limited contexts in which Souza's work was displayed, while the overall paucity of loan requests for *Supper at Emmaus* arguably demonstrates how rarely Souza, or at least this painting, was considered for group exhibitions of British painting. Areeen's inclusion of this and other works by Souza in *The Other Story* (see fig. 3), was a direct attempt to counter that neglect.

In 2002 Leicestershire County Council loaned Souza's *The Emperor* (see fig.2) to the exhibition *Transition: The London Art Scene in the Fifties* (Barbican Art Gallery, 2002). At the time, the inclusion of this painting seemed like a significant step forward in terms of diversifying narratives of post-war British art, but at the same time, Souza was the only non-white artist in that exhibition.[26] Nonetheless, it is encouraging that in the past decade or so, his work has increasingly been present within scholarly and curatorial projects, including Tate Britain's 2018 exhibition, *All too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life*, which featured a room dedicated to his work.[27] Yet while there is an attraction to working on Souza – he was a prolific artist, with work in international collections, an archival footprint, and the subject of important scholarship, particularly by historians of South Asian art[28] – there is also danger that within a British context he and his work could become exceptionalised, presented as simply a cipher of diversity. By which I mean, by including *only* Souza in survey shows and narratives of British art there is a possibility of overlooking other artists of colour working contemporaneously. There is the risk that such treatment will isolate his work away from broader conversations about racism in British art studies, while simultaneously using his inclusion as a marker of progressive decolonial scholarship.[29]

As such, it is imperative that other artists and other histories of art receive the levels of attention that have belatedly been directed towards Souza. Exhibitions and publications addressing a broad range of South Asian artists in Britain should be encouraged and notably, since the display of his work at Birmingham in 2007, Shemza has been the focus of increased curatorial and scholarly attention.[30] But, as I have discussed, there are numerous artists of

South Asian heritage whose contributions to British art are missing from conventional historical narratives. The presence of a significant body of work by Balraj Khanna held across British regional collections underscores his total absence from the Tate Collection. Regional collections then, have arguably more diverse collections than some museums with a 'national' designation, and as such have the potential to counter and expand the narrow histories of British art that currently dominate mainstream understanding of what British art is.

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[1] See Balraj Khanna, 'Obscure but Important', *Art Monthly*, no.36 (October 1980), p.25.
[2] See Partha Mitter, 'Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery', *The Art Bulletin*, 90:4 (2008), 531-548 p. 537.
[3] For example, Souza is mentioned once in Margaret Garlake, *New Art, New World: British Art in Post War Society* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), while no artists of South Asian origin feature in James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in Britain During the Cold War 1945-1960* (London: Yale University Press, 2001).
[4] See Ming Tiampo, 'Slade, London, Asia: Intersections of Decolonial Modernism', online lecture (10 November 2020), https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/whats-on/forthcoming/slade-london-asia, accessed 7 December 2020. See Kobena Mercer, 'Black Atlantic Abstraction: Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling', in Kobena Mercer (ed.) *Discrepant Abstractions* (London: Iniva, 2006), p.186.
[5] See Alex J. Taylor, *Modern American Art at Tate 1945-1980,* https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/modern-american-art-at-tate, accessed 9 February 2021.
[6] Avinash Chandra and Rasheed Araeen, 'Conversation with Avinash Chandra', *Third Text*, 2: 3-4 (1988), pp.69-95, p.70.
[7] John Berger, untitled review of Souza's exhibition at Gallery One, *New Statesman* (25 February 1955), p.8.
[8] Khanna, 1980, p.25.

[9] Brian Sewell, 'Black Pride or Prejudice', *Evening Standard* (4 January 1990), p.25. For more on *The Other Story* see Rasheed Araeen, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in post-war Britain* (London: The South Bank Centre, 1989), and 'The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain, 1989', *Afterall*, https://www.afterall.org/exhibition-histories/the-other-story accessed 7 December 2020.
[10] See *Tate Acquisition and Disposal Policy* (18 November 2020), https://www.tate.org.uk/file/acquisition-and-disposal-policy, accessed 8 February 2021.
[11] See 'Black Artists in Public Collections', *Black Artists & Modernism*, http://www.blackartistsmodernism.co.uk/black-artists-in-public-collections/ accessed 8 February 2021.
[12] For Chandra's work, see https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/view_as/grid/search/keyword:chandra--makers:avinash-chandra-19311991/page/1. For Khanna's, these are: *Forest Walk* (1969); *Anatomy of a Raga* (1980); *Bluebird* (1993); *Nursery Rhymes* (1997); *White Diamond I* (2003); *Mini Tondo II* (2004); *Self Portrait* (2005); and *Great Tondo VI*, undated. See https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/view_as/grid/search/makers:balraj-khanna-b1940, accessed 14 April 2021.
[13] See Nima Poovaya-Smith, 'Keys to the magic kingdom: The new transcultural collections of Bradford Art Galleries and Museums', in Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn (eds.), *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp.111-125, p.115.
[14] *Ibid*., p.116.
[15] *Anwar Shemza*, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (12 November 1997 to 1 February 1998).
[16] Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, 'Developing more representative art collections could not be more urgent', *The Double Negative,* http://www.thedoublenegative.co.uk/2020/10/developing-more-representative-art-collections-could-not-be-more-urgentdr-anjalie-dalal-clayton-on-the-need-to-diversify-the-narrative/, accessed 7 December 2020.
[17] The venues were, Cheltenham Art Gallery, Bootle Art Gallery, Harris Museum and At Gallery, Rotherham Art Gallery, Bury Art Gallery, Batley Art Gallery, Manchester City Art Gallery, Bankfield Museum, Halifax, Middlesbrough Art Gallery, Scarborough Art Gallery, Ferens Art Gallery, Hull, Leicester Museum and Art Gallery, South London Art Gallery and Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery. Tania Adams, Collections Researcher, Contemporary Art Society, correspondence with the author (4 February 2021).
[18] Edwin Mullins, 'Biography', in *FN Souza* (London: Anthony Blond ltd, 1962), p.25.
[19] Nevile Wallis, 'Hot Springs and Snow', *The Observer* (1 December 1957), NP., Gallery One press cuttings album no.2, Victor Musgrave Collection, Tate Archives: TGA 8714/7.
[20] Tania Adams, Collections Researcher, Contemporary Art Society, correspondence with the author (4 February 2021).
[21] See *Contemporary Art Society Annual Report 1957-58* (London: Contemporary Art Society, 1958), https://www.contemporaryartsociety.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2008/11/1957-58-annual-report.pdf, accessed 9 February 2021.
[22] *Ibid*. Further research is needed to ascertain how Souza's engagement with Catholic iconography was explained and contextualised in the exhibition, and how his work was received by the press and visiting public.
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] Abi Shapiro, Assistant Curator at Hepworth Wakefield, correspondence with the author (15 November 2020).
[25] For more on *India: Myth and Reality; Aspects of Modern Indian Art*, see 'Unlearning the Modern, an interview between David Elliott and Hilary Floe', *British Art Studies*, Issue 13 (September 2019), https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-13/floe-elliott-interview , accessed 8 February 2021.
[26] See Martin Harrison, *Transition: The London Art Scene in the Fifties* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 2002).

[27] See Elena Crippa (ed.), *All too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life* (London: Tate Publishing, 2018).
[28] See for example, Rebecca Brown, *Art for a Modern India 1947-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Yashodhara Dalmia, *The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Zehra Jumabhoy and Boon Hui Tan (eds.), *The Progressive Revolution: Modern Art for a New India* (New York: Asia Society/Prestel, 2018).
[29] As its author, I accept that this essay arguably falls into this trap.
[30] Recent examples include, Charles Moore (ed.), *The Roots of the Indian Artists' Collectives,* (London: Grosvenor Gallery, 2019); *Midnight's Family: 70 Years of Indian Artists in Britain*, Ben Uri Gallery online exhibition 2020, https://issuu.com/benurigallery/docs/midnight_s_family_70_years_of_indian_artists_in_br accessed 9 February 2021; and Alice Correia, 'Amal Ghosh: Transcending Vison', *South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive*, https://sadaa.co.uk/studio/files/Amal-Ghosh-essay.pdf accessed 8 February 2021. See also Iftikhar Dadi (ed.), *Anwar Jalal Shemza* (London: Ridinghouse, 2015); the publication of this monograph coincided with his solo 'In-Focus' display at Tate Britain 2015-16. The exhibition *Anwar Jalal Shemza: Paintings from the 1960s* was held at Hales Gallery, London (11 May-23 June 2018).