

# THE NUDE IN INDIAN ART

From the Antique to Independence



FRIEZE  
MASTERS

13-17 October 2021

Grosvenor  
Gallery





# THE NUDE IN INDIAN ART

From the Antique to Independence

## FRIEZE MASTERS

13 – 17 October 2021

The Regent's Park, London

Booth B05

Grosvenor  
Gallery

## THE NUDE IN INDIAN ART, From the Antique to Independence

*Frieze Masters: 2021*

By **Conor Macklin**

In Indian Art the Nude is everywhere, she is found in religious contexts and everyday life. This has shocked and alarmed the West, who wonders why a temple should be adorned with graphically copulating couples?

Yet to pre-colonial Indians, there was no mystery here. For ancient Hindus and Buddhists, there was no association of women with sin; and in all India's voluminous scriptures there is no Eve. Women were associated with fertility, abundance and prosperity rather than temptation, and there is an open embrace of sexuality as one route to the divine: *"In the embrace of his beloved, a man forgets the whole world, everything both within and without," states the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.* <sup>1</sup>

The Nude, a dark-skinned one, thus became a symbolic icon for the Progressive Art Group which emerged around the time of Independence in 1947. Francis Newton Souza wrote the *"I was... brought up (by the colonials) to believe that Hindu Sculpture and Mogul Paintings were graven images of the heathen."*

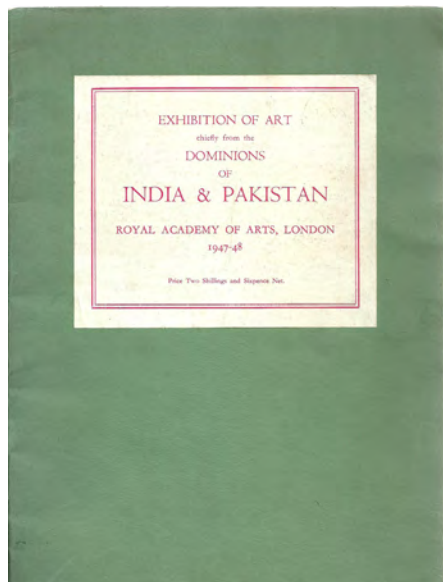
*Left*  
Grosvenor Gallery



The morals of the West and the perception of the Nude as Sinful sunk deep into Indian culture during the Empire or the Raj. The aim is to highlight the beauty and history of Indian antiquities and to challenge the negative view of nudity that is still deeply rooted in India. The Victorian bugs and fleas that Souza rallied and cried against are still very much alive and active but in other forms.

### The Change:

*The Dominions of India and Pakistan, Royal Academy of Arts, November 29, 1947- 29 February 1948.* This was a seminal show, a huge endeavour cataloguing works from the rise and fall of many civilisations and later Empires that shaped India and Pakistan. Souza, Raza and Ara were included in the Modern section <sup>2</sup>. The show had a huge impact on the public in London and New Delhi but also on the young artists of the day.



NATARAJA (Siva as Lord of the Dance). Bronze casting, South India. 11th century A.D. Height 2ft. 2in. Lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum

GROSVENOR GALLERY

*“I remember Souza and Husain came to Delhi to see and suddenly their eyes were opened to the richness of Indian art, particularly in sculpture. The exhibition which was at Rashtrapati Bhavan was the first large exhibition after Independence to be organized by the Indian government in 1948. It later travelled to Burlington House in England. It was the first presentation after Independence of the Indian point of view and was a watershed.”<sup>3</sup>*



This was the turning point for this group of young artists who moved away from the social realist depictions of squalid modern life in the streets of India and started to engage with Classical Indian Art.

It was an exciting time for them all, as Husain recounted to Yashodhara Dalmia in 1992:

*“In 1948 after visiting Delhi with Souza where I saw all the Indian works and then I felt I should paint something else. Till then I was influenced by the Expressionists.... I combined the form of the Gupta period, strong colours of the Basholi period and the innocence of folk art and worked on it and then came out with five paintings that were shown at the Bombay Art Society in 1949. Nobody had seen it – not even Souza. On the opening night, he caught hold of me and took me to the Irani restaurant opposite and said, “Just tell me, what is this? Have you discovered something new?””*



YAKSHI. Bharhut. Red sandstone.  
2nd century B.C. Height 7 ft.  
Lent by the Indian Museum, Calcutta.



YAKSHI. Bharhut. Red sandstone.  
2nd century B.C. Height 7 ft. 4 in.  
Lent by the Indian Museum, Calcutta.

#### DISAPPOINTMENT:

However successful or exciting they were to have reclaimed the Nude, they were equally shocked by the overwhelming tide of prudishness in Indian society. Whilst Souza's paintings were hung in the Dominions of India and Pakistan, alongside nude temple dancers and Apsara's from the 10th Century, his show in Mumbai that included nudes was shut down, and his studio raided on the grounds of obscenity and pornography. Padamsee was thrown into jail following his exhibition in Mumbai in 1954, his paintings executed earlier in Paris of Shiva and Parvati on a bull were also deemed obscene. And more recently Husain was forced to flee the county with threats against his life because he had painted Indian goddesses in the nude. He later died in exile.

#### CONCLUSION:

The hopes and the dreams of India's progressive and secular state captured by Gandhi were shattered by his murder. These artists reflected the hopes and aspirations of this historic time. The image of the Nude became a symbol of their vision. We hope you enjoy this pairing of two great aspects of India's culture; its amazing Classical Sculpture and this incredible group of young artists that captured this period of Independence.



**1. A red sandstone figure of a celestial woman, India, Rajasthan or Madhya Pradesh, 10th-11th century**

Height: 63.5 cm (25 in)

**Provenance**

Collection of Prince and Princess Aschwin zur Lippe-Biesterfeld, New York, 1960s, Property of a European Estate

Christie's New York, 30 March 2006, lot 64

Collection of Tina and Simon Beriro, USA

**Literature**

A. Headington, 'Private World of a Prince: Oriental flair in a Paris apartment,' in *Connoisseur*, July 1988, p. 51, illustrated below



**2. Apsara, Madhya Pradesh, India, 11th Century**

Pink sandstone  
Height: 71cm (28 in)

**Provenance**

European collection since the 1970s

**Literature**

*A India, Pórtico do Norte*. Auditorio de Galicia, Santiago de Compostela, October, 1998,

*Arte Sagrado de las tradiciones Indicas, Hinduismo, Budismo y Jainismo*, Casa Asia, Barcelona, May, 2005





**3. Torso of a Celestial Beauty, India  
(Chalukya, Rajasthan or Gujarat),  
11th/12th Century**

Marble  
Height: 59 cm (23 ½ in)

**Provenance**

Ernst Diez, 27 October 1930;  
Stella Kramrisch Collection;  
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Charles W.  
Harkness Endowment Fund, 1930

**Literature**

H. Hollis, *Indian Sculpture*, in *The Bulletin  
of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, vol. 17,  
no. 10, December 1930, pp. 190-193,  
illustration on p. 198.  
*Handbook of the Cleveland Museum of  
Art*, 1958, no. 759

**Exhibitions**

*East Indian Sculpture from Various  
American Collections; A Selection of  
Sculptural Works by Unknown but  
Outstanding East Indian Sculptors*, Toledo  
Museum of Art, exhibition catalogue,  
1940, cat. no. 18.





4. A black stone figure of Uma-  
Maheshvara, Western India, Haryana,  
12th century

Height: 44.5 cm (17 ½ in)

**Provenance**

Originally acquired from Josephine  
Rosenberg, founder of Vallin Galleries,  
Connecticut (1951-2013);  
Private American Collection, acquired  
privately from Peter Rosenberg (1933-  
2013);  
Sothebys, New York



5. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002)  
*(Standing Nude)*, 1949

Pen and ink on paper  
Signed and dated 'F.N.Souza/ 1949'  
lower right

23 x 15.5 cm  
9 1/8 x 6 1/8 in

**Provenance**

The Estate of the Artist;  
Christie's, London, 18 March 2014



6. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002)  
*Untitled (Nude with Towel)*, 1946

Ink on paper  
Signed and dated 'Souza/ 1946'  
upper right

31.5 x 19.5 cm  
12 3/8 x 7 5/8 in

**Provenance**

The Estate of the Artist;  
Christie's, London, 18 March 2014





**7. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002)**  
***Untitled (Nude Study), 1950***

Graphite on paper  
Signed and dated 'Souza 1950' lower left,  
further studies on the reverse

56 x 39 cm  
22 1/8 x 15 3/8 in

**Provenance**  
The Estate of the Artist



**8. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002)**  
***Untitled (Standing Nude), 1950***

Charcoal and pastel on paper  
Signed and dated 'Souza/ 1950' lower right,  
further studies on the reverse

56 x 39 cm  
22 1/8 x 15 3/8 in

**Provenance**  
The Estate of the Artist



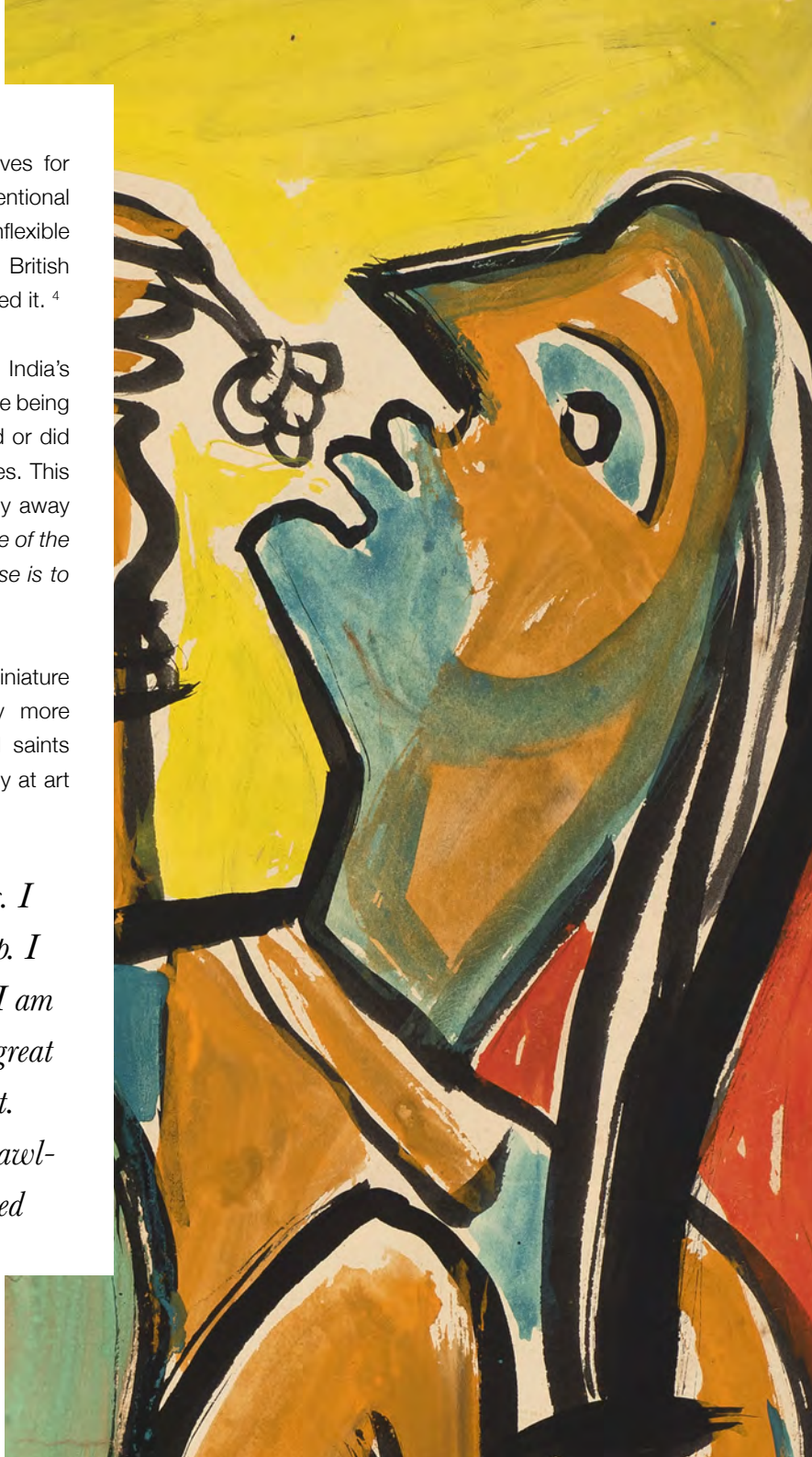
## SOUZA:

Souza admitted to Mullins that one of his motives for producing erotic work was to undermine conventional morals. Souza was brought up in an atmosphere inflexible catholic self-righteousness, and he studied art in British India: “more Victorian than Victoria” as he has called it. <sup>4</sup>

He could not quite believe that the glories of India’s cultural past which he had recently discovered were being ignored in India. Was it being deliberately avoided or did the establishment prefer colonial condoned images. This only emboldened Souza, who was not one to shy away from controversy. Geeta Mehra wrote: “Souza’s use of the Nude is to shock to challenge, his express purpose is to be obscene.” <sup>5</sup>

He had found in classical Indian sculpture and miniature painting a tradition of erotic art incomparably more sensitive and pure than the lifeless figures and saints which as a child he had been encouraged to copy at art school. He also found dark and tanned faces.

*“But my bed in India was full of bugs. I got disgusted. I felt sucked-out, eaten up. I wanted to leave the wretched place.... I am a patriot but I don’t blabber about the great cultural heritage of India and what not. My bed was bug-ridden and vermin crawling and that’s not all! That is why I fled abroad.”* <sup>6</sup>



His nudes have their origins Indian stone carvings and bronzes with high rounded breasts, and a rhythmic pose. Yet in stature, pose and paint they are modern works firmly pinned down by the dark outlines of modernity.

*“Souza used Indian sculpture with more boldness than any of his predecessors, it is true. What the emaciated shame faced models of the art school could not provide him the stone apsaras did, full bodied and generous as they were in form and posture.”* <sup>7</sup>

After Souza moved to Europe he became a significantly successful artist, one of the leading exponents of Post-War expressionism. He above all had the ability “to hold his own in England, partly because of his flamboyant personality and largely because of the brilliant biting articulateness of his work.” <sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Edwin Mullins, *F.N Souza*, Blond Publishing London, 1962

<sup>5</sup> Geeta Kapur, *Contemporary Indian Artists*, Vikas, India 1978

<sup>6</sup> Francis Newton Souza, *Stanzas from Zen, I Flee the Flea Circus*, Thought November 1950

<sup>7</sup> Geeta Kapur, *Contemporary Indian Artists*, Vikas, India 1978”



He navigated the waters with text and paint: *“Speaking for myself, I am neither an Asian nor an Oriental nor ‘Easterner’ an awful word which doesn’t exist in the Oxford dictionary. I am an Indian, and that is all there is to it. Coming even closer, I am a Goan, only because, accidentally, I happened to be begotten in Goa. But I have far more in common with the German and the English than I have with the Chinese, Japanese, Tartars, Greeks, or others, or for that matter even Goans....”*

*“But I’ll say this without bias: “When Eliot quotes sanskrit scriptures it’s great, original! If an Indian quotes Shakespeare (never mind Eliot) it is dismissed as ‘mere quotation’. Van Gogh copied Japanese prints, Matisse drew from Persian miniatures, Picasso lifted from African carvings, Gauguin painted in the South Sea Islands. Even earlier Rembrandt made drawings from Moghul paintings and Beethoven read from the Upanishads... “What do I do? Having studied African, Persian, Japanese, Polynesian art, Hindu scriptures and the Silpa Sastras... I find much in common, regardless of whether East and West are joined together or parted asunder; unaware of what is ‘modern’ and what is ‘ancient’.”<sup>9</sup>*

In India he challenged the conventions of nudity in Art, whereas in England he continued to shock and challenge the notion of being brown or black in Art.





**9. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002)**  
**Untitled (*The Lotus Eaters*), 1951**

Gouache on paper  
Signed and dated 'Souza 1951' upper left

40.5 x 39.6 cm  
16 x 15 5/8 in

**Provenance**  
Dhoomimal Gallery, New Delhi

**Literature**  
Ed. Vinod Bharwaj, *Francis Newton Souza*,  
*Dhoomimal Gallery Collection*, 2009,  
illustrated in colour, p. 78





**10. Maqbool Fida Husain (1915-2011)**  
***Untitled (Head and Torso), 1954***

Oil pastel on paper  
Signed and dated '54 lower right in pencil,  
Chemould Gallery label to the reverse

41.3 x 32 cm  
16 1/4 x 12 5/8 in

**Provenance**

Purchased from Kunika-Chemould Art  
Centre, New Delhi by Douglas and Valerie  
Coombs;  
Thence by descent

The Coombs lived in Bombay from 1967  
to 1973 where Douglas was a British  
Council representative.



*Head, 1954*

A similar work published in *Maqbool Fida Husain*, Harry N Abrams, INC Publishers,  
New York



**11. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002)**

***Untitled (Nude with Necklace), 1955***

Pen and ink on paper

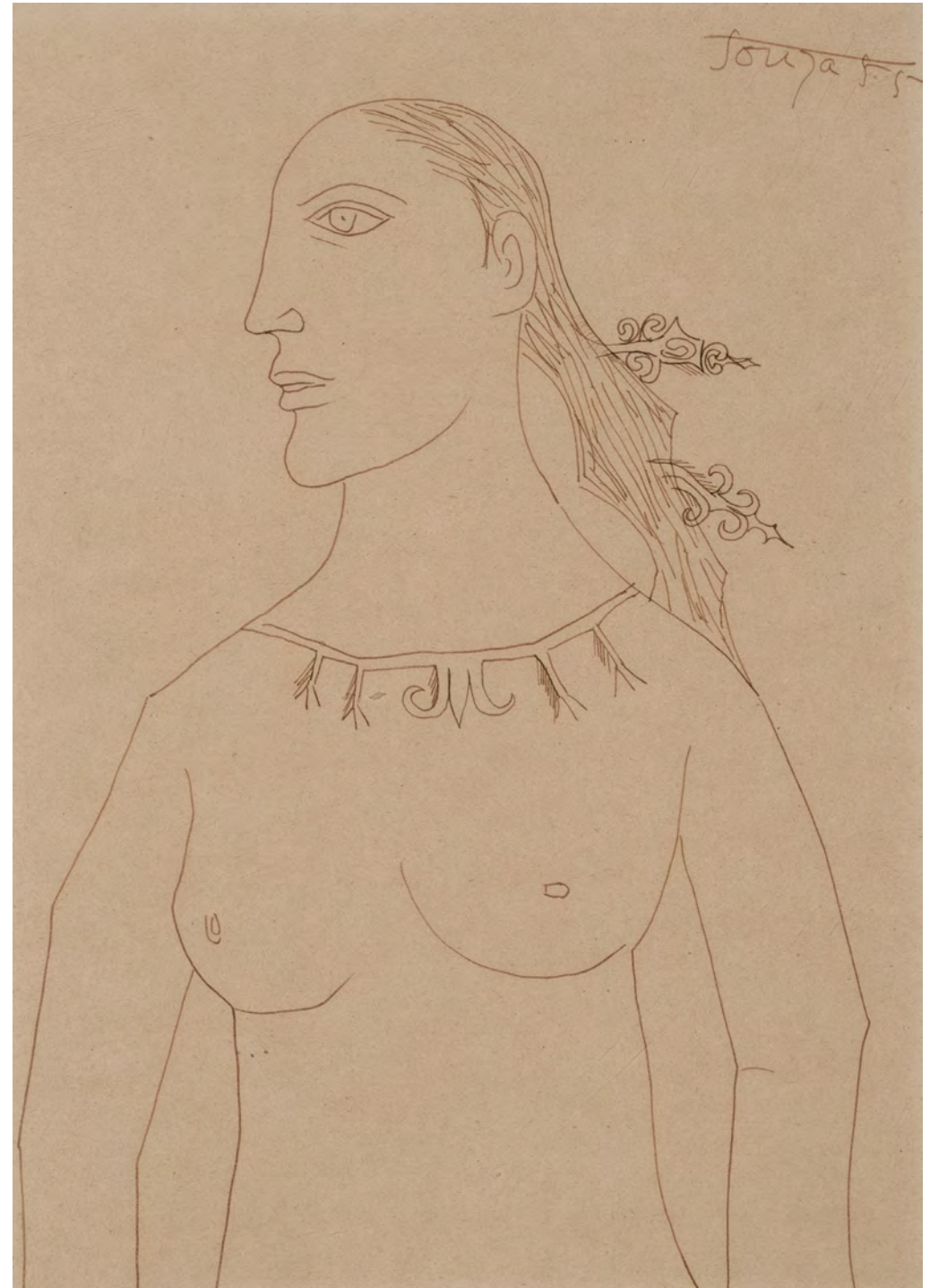
Signed and dated 'Souza 55' upper right

27 x 19 cm

10 5/8 x 7 1/2 in

**Provenance**

Private collection, Paris





**12. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002)**  
***Nude, 1958***

Oil on board  
Signed and dated 'Souza 58' upper right,  
further signed, titled and dated 'F. N.  
SOUZA / Nude / 1958' on the reverse

121.9 x 81.2 cm  
48 x 32 in

**Provenance**

Private UK collection, acquired directly  
from the artist

**Literature**

A. Kurtha, *Francis Newton Souza:*  
*Bridging Western and Indian Modern Art,*  
Ahmedabad, 2006, p. 195 (illustrated)



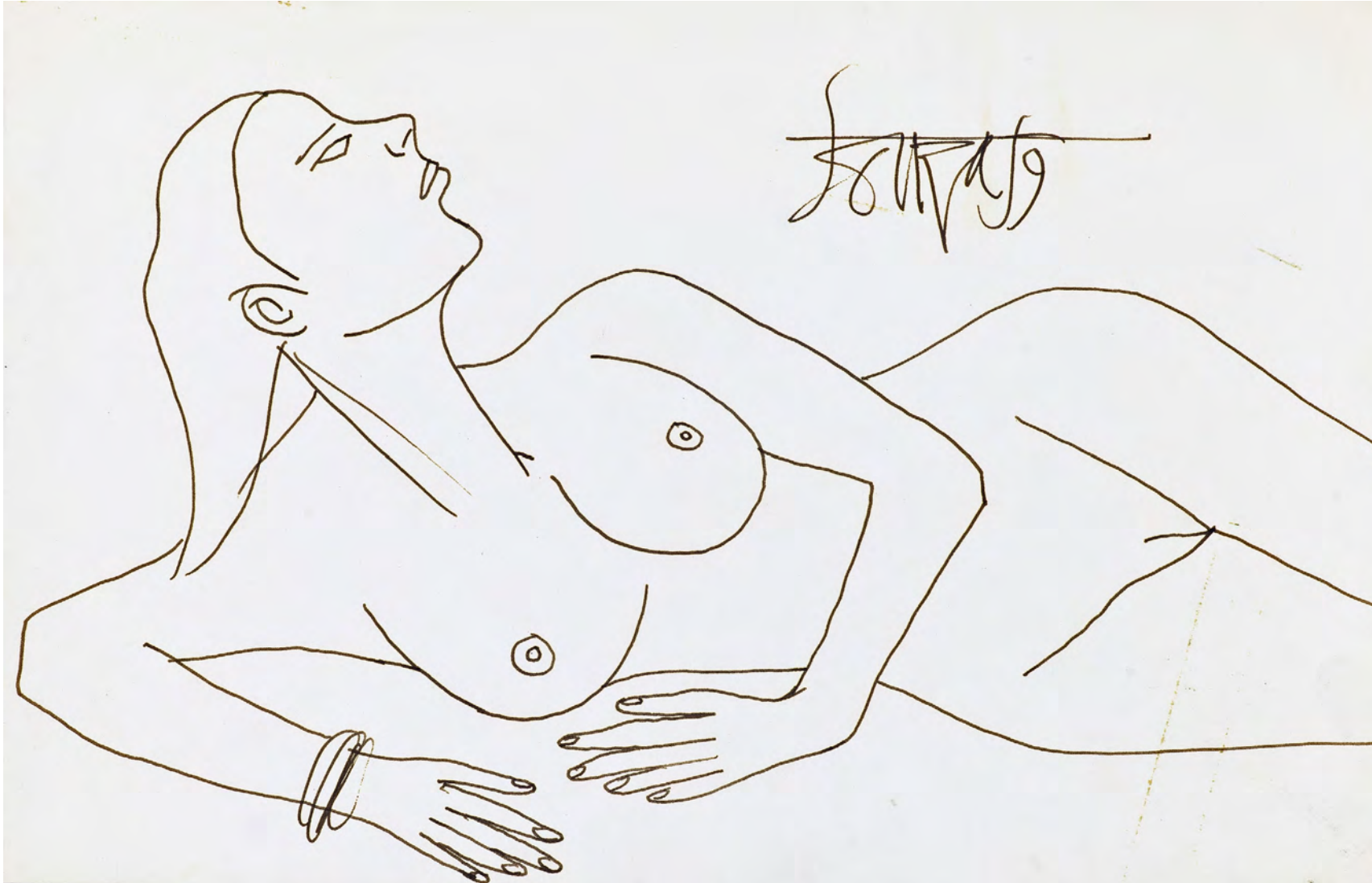
**13. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002)**  
***Reclining Nude, 1959***

**Provenance**  
The Estate of the Artist

Pen and ink on paper  
Signed 'Souza 59' upper right, dated on  
the reverse

**Exhibitions**  
This work is illustrated in the consignment  
listing of Eugene I. Schuster, London Arts  
Gallery, Detroit

27 x 40 cm  
10 5/8 x 15 3/4 in





**14. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002)**  
***Standing Nude in City Background,***  
**1959**

Oil on board

Signed and dated 'Souza 59' upper left, further inscribed, titled and dated 'F. N. SOUZA / "Standing nude / in city background" / 1959' on the reverse

121.9 x 60.9 cm  
48 x 24 in

**Provenance**

Private UK collection; acquired directly from the artist

**Literature**

A Kurtha, Francis Newton Souza:  
*Bridging Western and Indian Modern Art*,  
Ahmedabad, 2006, p.194 (illustrated)

**Exhibitions**

*South Asian Modern Art 2019*, Grosvenor  
Gallery, London, 5 June - 5 July 2019,  
(illust. exh. cat. p.29)



**15. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002)**  
***Untitled (Standing Nude), 1961***

Acrylic, graphite and varnish on canvas  
Signed and dated 'Souza 61' centre right,  
the stretcher inscribed '17 Dennison' in  
four places

58 x 43.4 cm  
22 3/4 x 17 1/4 in

**Provenance**

Gallery One, London;  
Dennison Collection, UK;  
Private UK collection





**16. Abdur Rahman Chughtai (1897-1975)**  
***Untitled (Nude with a Feather)***,  
**circa 1960**

Dry-point etching on paper  
Signed 'Rahman Chughtai' along lower  
edge

30.4 x 26.4 cm  
12 x 10 3/8 in

**Provenance**

Collection of Ms. Ethel-Jane Westfeldt  
Bunting, New Mexico;  
Thence by descent

**Exhibitions**

*Chughtai's Etchings, Editions of a Master*,  
Grosvenor Gallery, London, 29 October -  
8 November 2015, No.15 (illust, exh.  
cat. p.39)



**17. Akbar Padamsee (1928-2020)**  
***Untitled (Standing Nude), 1964***

Ink on paper  
Signed and dated 'PADAMSEE 1964'  
lower right

44 x 31 cm  
17 3/8 x 12 1/4 in

**Provenance**

Private collection, Paris

*“The story goes like this. On the opening day of his exhibition at the Jahangir Art Gallery Akbar was approached by a sub inspector of the CID and asked to remove a painting entitled ‘Lovers’ in which a nude couple stand beside each other, the man touching the breast of the woman with his outstretched hand. The order to do so, he said, came from the high command in the home ministry. Akbar was charged under a criminal act dealing with persons ‘corrupting public morality’, an act, by the way, which usually deals with people conducting immoral traffic, or with the film producers trying to hood-wink the censors with pornographic shots.”<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>11</sup> Geeta Kapur, *Contemporary Indian Artists*, Vikas, India 1978





**18. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002)**  
***Portrait of a Girl, 1965***

Oil on board  
Signed and dated 'Souza 65' centre left

106 x 80 cm  
41 3/4 x 31 1/2 in

**Provenance**

Acquired directly from the artist, circa  
1980s;  
Christie's, London, 21 May 2007;  
Private Collection, USA

**Exhibition**

Grosvenor Gallery, London, *F N Souza:  
Black on Black*, 12 - 28 October 2013,  
No. 25

**Publications**

Aziz Kurtha, *Francis Newton Souza:  
Bridging Western and Indian Modern Art*,  
Ahmedabad, Mapin Publishing, 2006, pl.  
230 (illustrated)  
Zehra Jumabhoy, *F N Souza: Black on  
Black*, Grosvenor Gallery, London, 2013,  
p. 36 (illustrated)





**19. Maqbool Fida Husain (1915-2011)**  
**Totem, 1969**

Oil on canvas  
Signed 'Husain '69' and further signed in  
Devanagari lower right

175 x 84 cm  
68 7/8 x 33 1/8 in

**Provenance**

Collection of the sculptor Ferdy Denzler  
(1909-1991);  
Thence by descent

*“Then there is the work inspired by Khajuraho, where the woman is derived from classical form and the man is more contemporary and somewhat autobiographical. Then there is the yakshini pose, the full-breasted woman with the foot touching the tree. He explored this very pervasive influence of sculpture for quite some time.”*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> E. Alkazi, Ebrahim Alkazi, *Directing Art, The Making of a Modern Indian Art World, Ahmedabad, 2016, p. 81*



*Untitled (Totem Masks), 1963*  
Private Collection

*Bronze and Blue Totem, 1960*  
Private Collection

**Exhibition**

Unknown exhibition, late 1960s/early,  
1970s  
*South Asian Modern Art 2021*, Grosvenor  
Gallery, London, 4 - 26 June 2021, No.19,  
illust. exh. cat. (unpaginated)

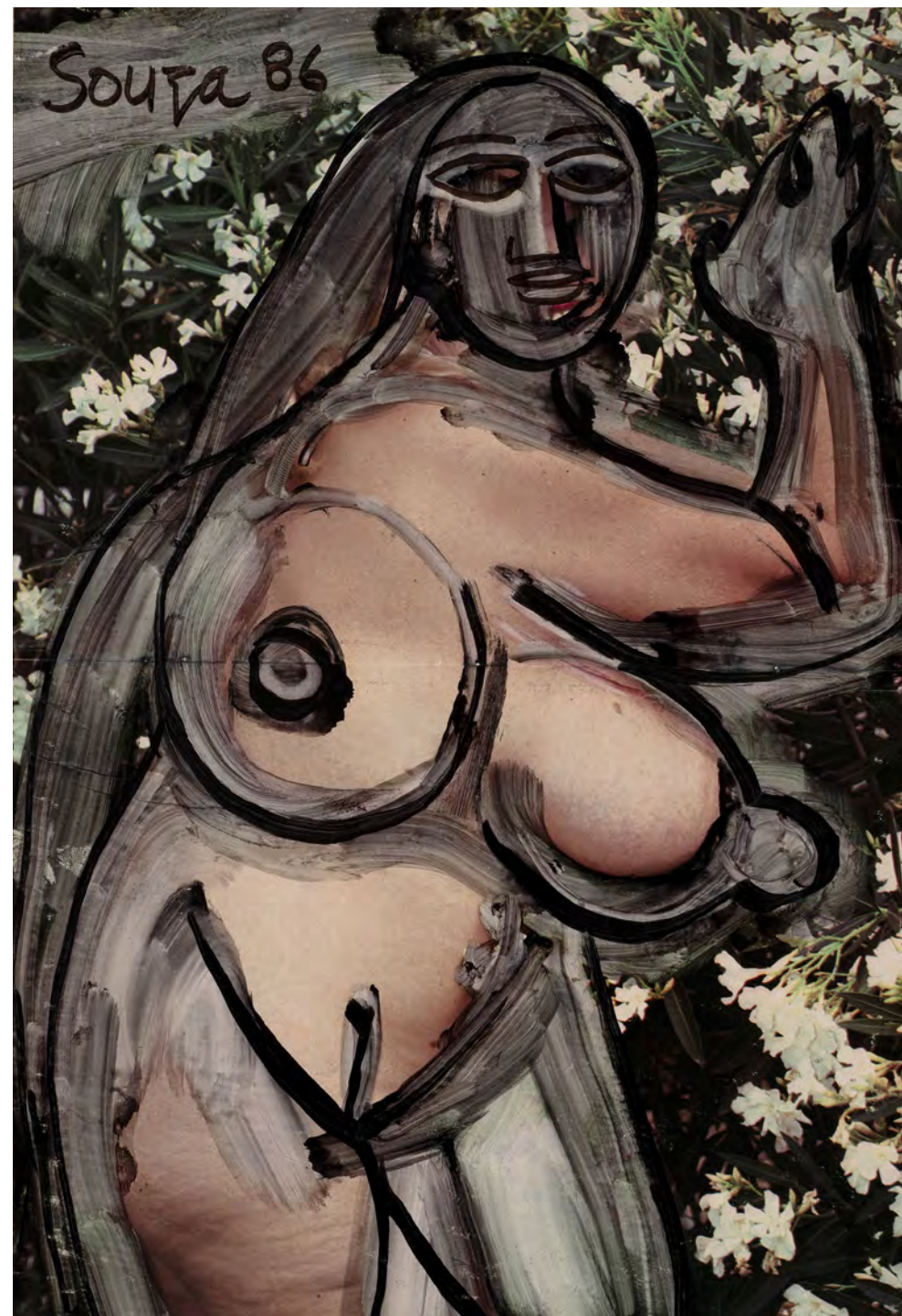




**20. Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002)**  
***Untitled (Female Nude), 1986***

Marker pen and chemical alteration on  
magazine paper  
Signed and dated 'Souza 86' upper left

**Provenance**  
The Estate of the Artist





**FRIEZE  
MASTERS**

# THE NUDE IN INDIAN ART

**From the Antique to Independence**

**Frieze Masters**

13 – 17 October 2021

Booth B05

**Photography**

Justin Piperger

**Design**

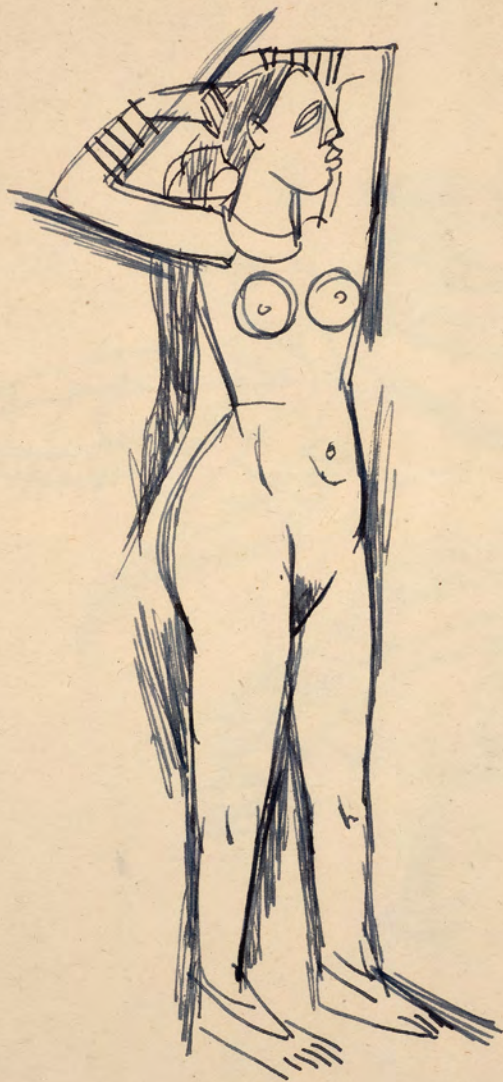
Been Up To Much

**Grosvenor  
Gallery**

35 Bury Street  
London SW1Y 6AU

+44(0) 20 7484 7979  
[art@grosvenorgallery.com](mailto:art@grosvenorgallery.com)





*F. N. Souza  
1949*

**Grosvenor  
Gallery**

35 Bury Street

London SW1Y 6AU

+44(0) 20 7484 7979

art@grosvenorgallery.com