

# Vocabulary for Modernism, Transcending all Boundaries

## Abstract

This article is a tribute to the eminent artist The Life and Journey of SH Raza who passed away on 23 July 2016 at the age of 94. The article briefly traces the artist journey, his lifelong efforts and globally acclaimed work, along with that of the others in his league, put Indian art on the world map in a big way.

**Keywords:** SH Raza, Artist, Indian, Modern Painter, Bindu, Neo-Tantric, Gond, Progressive Art Group, Miodernism

## Introduction

SH Raza was not just a fine painter, but a fine mind. He had learned a lot from French artists such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, but remained rooted to Indian tradition and Hindu philosophy, especially the relationship between the self and the cosmos. Raza was a great creative painter of all times and not just a great 'Indian' artist.

## Aim of the Study

A step towards understanding the life and journey of eminent Indian Artists who made a mark not only nationally and internationally. Today the word art is a synonym of glamour little does the viewer realize that years of hard work and sleepless nights go into producing the artwork.

## The Life and Journey of SH Raza

"My attempt is to create an art which goes beyond time and place."

—Syed Haider Raza (22 February 1922 – 23 July 2016)

As a student at College of Art in the 1990s, I used to look forward to SH Raza's exhibitions, when he would visit the country it was celebrated by the art fraternity. In 1983, I remember seeing his vibrant art works at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, where he participated in an exhibition on the Neo-Tantric. His position on this was unequivocal and unyielding, as stated in his response to the Director in a letter. He wrote: "My using a "circle" or a "square" as key motif do not make my painting tantric, even if I have called them "Bindu", "Sourya" or "Zamine". I am aware; Tantric Darshan is far too complex. I know little about its beliefs or rituals. My involvement in work is essentially with the life of form, all my efforts are directed towards a coherent pictorial logic. As a result, my paintings are intrinsically very different, both in a approach and conception, from the mass of work done in India or elsewhere, as a revival of Tantric art. His works were clearly an inspiration for artist during that time I recall our teachers Principal OP Sharma and Professor CL Meena's paintings in my opinion were also inspired by this master painter.

In my tenure at the Oxford University Press, I designed a cover for a sociology book with a painting of the master painter. His suggestions and instructions for usage and orientation made me realize his interest and passion for design and detail. He was kind enough to drop in a line of appreciation after he saw the printed copy of the book.

This year two artist( KG Subramanyan and SH Raza) who lived over ninety years reiterate the fact that if you are passionate about your work years are just a number and the quality of art refines with time. Their death is, indeed, a great loss to Indian art. With the demise of Syed Haider Raza in Delhi, India has lost one of its most globally renowned modern artists. Raza was one of the founders of the Progressive Artists Group of the early 1950s, which comprised the country's influential modern artists including FN Souza, MF Husain, KH Ara and HA Gade. His lifelong efforts and globally acclaimed work, along with that of the others in his league, put Indian art on the world map in a big way.

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Raza in his innate village of kalaiya in Madhya Pradesh was initiated to the idea of Bindu as a focal point of meditation when he was a young boy of eight. It was a means by which his fidgety and roaming young mind was made to focus on a single point. For Raza it became a moment of induction – towards bringing order into a visual world that was rich with distinctions, filled with ambiguities and the excitement of discovery.

The birth place of Raza in vicinity of the dense forest of Madhya Pradesh became the feeding ground for his volatile ingenuity: dark, the darkness of night, the quickening beat of Gond (The Gonds are the tribal community mostly found in the Gond forests of the central India) drums and the flickering flames of torchlight, the reassurance of light at daybreak and the radiant colours of the market place... Most of all, the mesmerizing, dominating power of the scorching sun in central India, and the reappearance of life and humanity along the sacred waters of the Narmada also known as Rewa the lifeline of Madhya Pradesh, and very true to its meaning giver of pleasure. Over the years, his interviews showed that despite living in Paris for most of his working life, he was an Indian at heart. His thorough knowledge of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam helped him add a distinctive touch of spirituality to his works. Though his early paintings were mostly poetic landscapes and seascapes, he transformed his style with his concept of the Bindu. The deeply spiritual artist would talk about it as the 'origin of everything'.

He was awarded the Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, Padma Vibhushan and was also conferred the highest French civilian honour, the Commandeur de la Legion d'honneur. According to Alexandre Ziegler, Ambassador of France to India 'SH Raza's contribution to the art world is immense, in India as well as in France, where he lived for over 60 years. His continuous artistic quest forms allowed him to invent his own vocabulary for modernism. His peerless achievements transcending all boundaries will remain with us forever.'(2016)

The dynamic, colorful growing up year were a constant source of inspiration to him his work reflected and evolved in reminiscence of his childhood. Although Raza was to leave India in 1950 to settle in France, his painting spoke out memoirs of his past, vivified on canvas with a sensibility and colour that is essentially Indian. He and his palette had never left the country of his birth.

According to Geeti Sen, "It was providential that Raza spent his youth close to the soil, in the heart of India, in communion, as it were, with the elements. This developed in him an intuitive understanding of a higher reality. Nature has remained for him a pictorial metaphor. The forest, the mountains, the river. The sun exploding with energy and vibrations, dominating the landscape. These are compelling forces, creating a timeless zone. The Elements become magnetic, as the only forces to control this world and to bring us closer to a sense of harmony and visual order. "

In his series of paintings Bindu, his work was the result of two parallel enquiries. Firstly, it aimed at pure plastic order, from-order. Secondly, it concerned the theme of Nature. Both had converged into a single point and become inseparable. The point, the bindu, symbolizes the seed bearing the potential of all life, in a sense. It's also a visible form containing all the essential requirements of line, tone, colour, texture and space. The black space is charged with latent forces aspiring for fulfillment.

According to Raza importance to describe the actual process of work in a painting such as Bindu (1988). Earlier photographs show concentric circles in bold, defined colours, radiating outwards from an intense black epicenter, to tones of ochres, chrome-yellow, greens, blues, orange and red, to an intense blue at the rim of the wheel. Yet in the final work completed these bold colours have been overpainted to a more subdued palette-with the purpose of the colours vibrating through, as latent forces of energy. The influence of Gond paintings from the tribal belt of central India is evident in Raza's colour palate.

In another series of Bindus, Raza used the logic of colour, moving from the darkest to the palest of tones in the colour spectrum. In yet another painting of white circles on black space, he inscribed a well-known verse from the poet Muktiboth; which summed up his philosophy on colour as originating from the dark void; aspiring to ever-greater brilliance.

Raza's religiosity of temperament combined with an exacting nature, with the search for precision and meticulousness in his work-as indeed, in all aspects of his life. In an interview published in the India International Centre Quarterly (December 1985), he suggested that it is his years of training in France which influenced this preoccupation with formal order; with the precise geometry of the circle, the square and the triangle.

"One cannot pedal on one pedal for your entire life... Raza always kept reinventing. Every painting he created was a breath of fresh air" – Kishen Khanna, Hindustan Times.

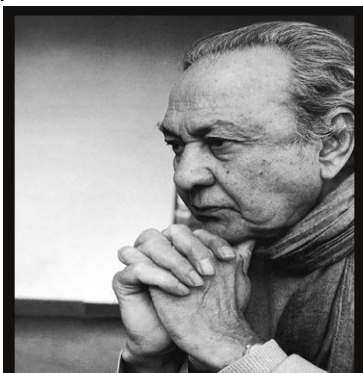
It would be all too easy to miscomprehend this statement, to lead the belief that his approach was that of a formalist or a structural, or even that of a neo-tantric. Nothing could be further from the truth. At each stage of the painting, Raza was open to the rich, innumerable possibilities of variation, and of improvisation. Although his image did not belong to a world of experiential reality, he was intensely aware of his surroundings, and again, passionately involved with every detail of life.

His canvases were related to the texture and rhythm of his own life. For six months of the summer and autumn, Raza and his wife Janine live in Gorbio, a twelfth-century village situated in the mountains, at a distance of seven kilometers from the blue sea of the Cote d'Azur. Within the house that is built of rugged stone, pewter candlesticks and dark wood opening into secret closets blend with the glow and magic of Indian textiles. A Mary Magdalene from Goa reclines over the fireplace. Scared mementos, that recall in their vibrancy certain fragments of these paintings. Every morning, on his way to the studio, Raza used to look in at a church that he seldom visited. Ten minutes of quiet meditation. For him it

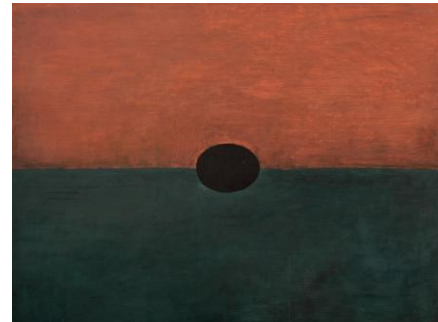
Hardly mattered this is a church or a mosque or a temple. The resulting solitude, the quieting of the mind, yields the same effect, which he had been taught as a boy in his village of Kakaiya in Madhya Pradesh. To empty the mind of all previous concerns, to emphasis upon a single intent. With this spirit of inner tranquility, he used to begin work on his canvases.

“For all the dissonances in Raza’s work, however, it never fails to arouse at the sensuous level and it is in this that his compositions reach their element. His involvement with pigment and colour vibrations are always technically sound and at their best call into play a heady mixture of paint and ecstasy. If this reaches a subliminal peak in his middle period, there is at all times an evocation of the heightened spirit. At his most prolific, Raza retains a passionate link with experiences drawing from indigenous sources, from the hot colours of Rajasthan and the miniatures, from the natural landscape of his country and from its metaphysical and literary thought in a distinctive manner. At its weakest, Raza’s work becomes mannered, where an absence of conflict robs it of its dynamism, and it veers towards the decorative. At its most vital, it retains a passionate link with both formal and intuitive qualities, giving it what the artist most desires-significant form.” --Yashodhra Dalmia

Sh. Raza’s contribution to the art world is immense, in India as well as in France, where he lived for over 60 years, his continuous artistic quest for vital forms allowed him to invent his own vocabulary for modernism. His peerless achievements transcending all boundaries will remain with us forever. His choice of colours was very attractive and rather bright, which was a sign of his yearning for his Indian roots. He was a very generous person, and, there was an old-world charm about him. These qualities set him apart from his contemporaries. To conclude I would quote Harold Rosenberg, an American writer, educator, philosopher and art critic who coined the term Action Painting in 1952 for what was later to be known as abstract expressionism, “The modern painter begins with nothingness. That is the only thing he copies. The rest he invents.”



**Portrait of SH RAZA  
(1922 – 2016) Courtesy  
www.saffronart.Com.**



**S H Raza, Horizon, 1979 Courtesy  
Www.Saffronart.Com.**



**S H Raza, Surya- Namaskar, 1993 Courtesy  
Www.Saffronart.Com.**



**S H Raza, Haut De Cagnes, 1951, Courtesy  
Www.Saffronart.Com**

### Conclusion

This year the art world lost to modern Indian Painters KS Subramanyan and SH Raza. For all the disagreements in Raza’s work, however, it never fails to stir up at the rich level and it is in this that his compositions reach their element. His involvement with pigment and colour vibrations are always technically sound and at their best call into play a heady mixture of paint and ecstasy. Its most energetic, it retains a passionate link with both formal and intuitive qualities, giving it what the artist most desires-significant form.

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