

OF CITIES AND TONGAS

Gulammohammed Sheikh

Born in 1937 in Gujarat, Gulammohammed Sheikh is among India's most celebrated post-modernists – an accomplished artist, poet and scholar. At the heart of Sheikh's oeuvre is socially reactive narrative, growing out of a profound immersion in cultural histories, mythologies, artistic traditions and current events. Sheikh interweaves heritage with contemporary expression, voyaging between the personal and public, the past and present, and the near and distant to create saturated and visceral palimpsests that coalesce timelines, cultures, symbols and influences in their interpretation. His work nurtures an inherent curiosity about the world at large, to discover and decode it through motifs of knowledge and belief systems in the hopes of resolving the eternal philosophical conundrum of what constitutes reality.

In his youth, Sheikh experienced two corollaries of reality – the harmonious confluence of multiculturalism in his provincial hometown of Surendranagar, and the cultural dissent that followed in a post-Independence era, coinciding with his move to the comparably bigger city of Baroda. In 1962, Sheikh joined the artist collective Group 1890, spearheaded by fellow artist Jagdish Swaminathan, whose short but intense tenure was united by a disquieting search for the numinous image, or the abstracted, spiritual essence of the artwork, in spite of incohesive pedagogic styles as a group. Sheikh's early encounters with modernist tradition followed its pulse of establishing a distinctive visual language that reconciled with the country's indigenism, but instead of adopting a single-pointed objective as an artistic inheritance, he welcomed an array of broad influences from around the country and the West. In 1963, Sheikh enrolled at the Royal College of Art in London, where he became exposed to the original works of European Renaissance painters as well as Rajasthani and Mughal miniatures that had been drained from India, having previously only viewed their reproductions. Sheikh was keen to articulate the vernacular in art, capturing the diverse, co-existing layers of the India he knew while also embracing a trans-historical position with a pluralism of its own.

Before Sheikh formally pursued the phenomenological diversity of civilizational narratives that has come to distinguish his practice today, often seen in the context of political satire, he remained pre-occupied with the ethos of multi-dimensional subjectivity, creating emotionally charged landscapes that frequently featured horses, trees, portraits and abstractions. This special selection of Sheikh's works from the 1960s, including collage, paintings and drawings, appears caught between the Indian progressives and internationalism, speaking to his developing concerns about the task of the worldly translator capable of cultivating a diversity of ethics and aesthetics into the aura-laden image. They also mark a period of transition in the artist's oeuvre, as he started to move away from the thicker impasto of his early time in Baroda to a smoother compositional plane, with distinct juxtapositions of colour.