

Vivid art that joins East and West

Bhavsar as young talent left India for America

His novel use of pigments creates prized works

PRITHIYELAJA
STAFF REPORTER

Natvar Bhavsar is a world-renowned painter from India whose huge, colourful canvases hang in more than 1,000 private corporate collections and museums, including the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

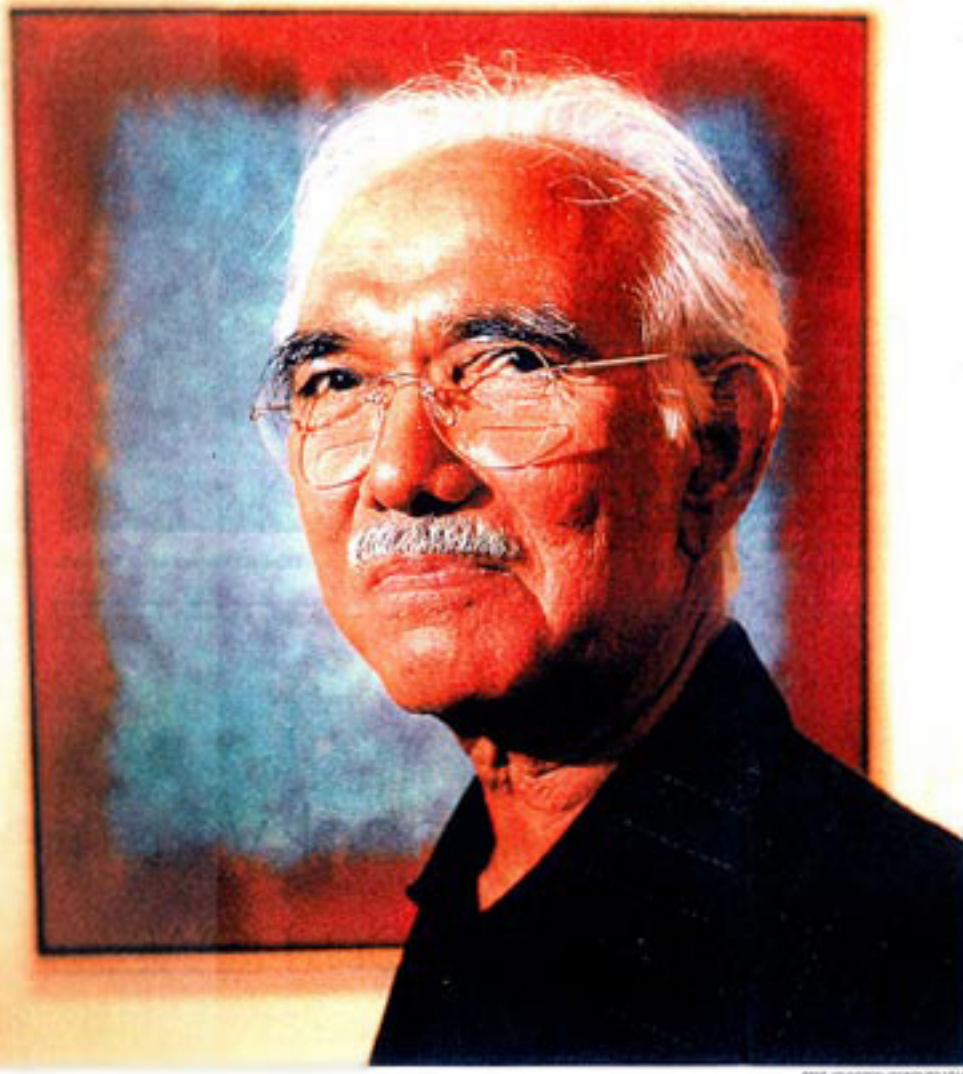
Art critics have described his work, which spans 40 years, as "a fusion of American abstract expressionism and traditional Indian art." His paintings sell for prices ranging from \$50,000 to \$500,000 (U.S.). Some are as large as 6 metres by 12 metres.

"My work has never been shown in Canada before now," says the soft-spoken, laid-back Bhavsar, 70, sipping champagne recently at the opening of an exhibition of his work at the Mira Godard gallery in Yorkville, which runs to Nov. 5.

True to his nature, he's not complaining about overdue recognition. "We have to rejoice in events in the way they unfold — everything happens in its own time," he says with a shy smile.

In his book on Bhavsar, New York art historian Irving Sandler says he brings a unique Indian twist to the colour-field school of abstract American expressionism.

While Bhavsar "has adopted a Western style, he has continued to look to India for inspiration ... Looking both East and West, his vision is transnational, pointing to the universality of the human experience," Sandler writes. "Indeed, what Bhavsar has drawn from Indian life and culture, what he prizes in it, makes his art distinctive and valuable."



New York artist and Indian expatriate Natvar Bhavsar stands in front of one of his vibrant works at Mira Godard Gallery in Yorkville.

Bhavsar creates paintings using a technique similar to rangoli, India's traditional style of floor decoration. He drops dry powdery pigments of brilliant hues — sometimes as many as 80 layers of varying textures and intensity — onto a horizontal canvas coated with an acrylic binder to hold the pigment.

In the early days he used his hands, throwing the pigments into the air and allowing them to "crash" onto the canvas. As his paintings grew in size, he switched to a fine screen attached to a trolley-like device to distribute the pigments.

The process is "very close to how the snowfall happens or how the rain happens," says Bhavsar. "It's an unconventional way of painting and it's given me great joy to expand the vocabulary of painting. My art has taken on its own personality."

Colour is key to his paintings. "I'm convinced that there is some primordial connection between us and colour — it's the ideal food for our psyche because we absorb the light and movement," he says.

His inspiration comes from within.

"I find my art is more akin to finding out what really touches us from inside rather than from outside," he says. "We all know, when you go for a walk in the wilderness your own nature inspires you. The nature outside has a calling to your inner nature, and you're exploring yourself, actually. You're walking the walk that your own inside suggests you walk, and what nature does is provide the platform."

Though Bhavsar showed early promise as an artist — his rendition of Monet's *Flutist* was displayed at his village school in Gujarat state on India's west coast when he was 13 — he considered art to be just a hobby, "another layer of my curiosity," he says. A high achiever, he was headed toward medicine or engineering.

His father's death cut short those dreams. At 19, he began

teaching art to high school students to help support his mother and siblings.

Then in 1962, when he was 27, a wealthy benefactor who noticed his talent urged him to go to the U.S. to study and laid the groundwork to help get him there. He remembers his benefactor's advice to this day: "You're not going to America to eat lentils and rice."

"What he meant was, you should not expect life as it is here in India. Embrace a new life there. As they say, when you are in Rome, do as the Romans do," says Bhavsar.

"When I came here there were very few Indians anyway, so assimilation was natural. We didn't struggle with identity in those days."

He landed in Philadelphia and did a master of fine arts on a scholarship at the University of Pennsylvania, working in a credit bureau at night to make extra money.

After graduation in 1965, Bhavsar moved to Manhattan and with a \$10,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, opened a studio behind Judson Church in Greenwich Village that he shared with a dancer. Those were heady times, he recalls. The church was a centre for anti-Vietnam War activists, while their studio attracted up-and-coming dancers, artists and musicians.

"The mid-'60s were a renaissance in American political and cultural life, and all these things were taking place right at my feet."

In 1968 he moved to a cavernous studio/loft in SoHo, where he still works and lives today with his wife Janet, a fellow artist. They have twin sons, Rajeev and Ajay, 24.

"Art transcends culture and religion. It's the internal uniting force of universality," says Bhavsar. "I want to paint for a thousand years."

In New York, Bhavsar's art dealer is Sundaram Tagore, who has a doctorate from Oxford and

is a great-grand-nephew of Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore.

By using the bold, colourful granules that are used in Indian festivals like holi and rangoli, Bhavsar is "bridging the cultural gap," says Tagore.

"His art is a synthesis of East and West. What his work does is open up a social dialogue in a visual sense, because there's a cosmic, vast expansive element to it and that's very Indian in many ways, but again very much in the format of the modern world."

"His art works as a glue agent, always bringing people together. Having come from the East and lived most of his life in the West, he is part of the diaspora culture, which is the biggest story of the 21 century."

Speaking of the Indian diaspora, where are they in Toronto? Tagore and Bhavsar ask that question later, sipping Darjeeling tea at Four Seasons Hotel.

Only a few, including India's consul-general and his wife, Satish and Priti Mehta, had shown up earlier at the gallery. And virtually none were to be seen strolling along the sidewalks of tony Yorkville.

"In Manhattan there are so many Indians, they're right in your face," says Tagore.

They decide to head off to the east end in search of dinner, and some evidence of the local Indian diaspora they've heard so much about.