

'It's long overdue' Boom in demand for modern and contemporary Indian art

Hannah Ellis-Petersen
Delhi

For seven decades, the masterpiece had gathered dust as it hung in a private collection and then in the corridors of a Norwegian hospital. But last month, the monumental 13-panel 1954 painting *Untitled (Gram Yatra)* – one of the most significant pieces of modern south Asian art – sold for a record-breaking \$13.8m (£10.7m) in New York.

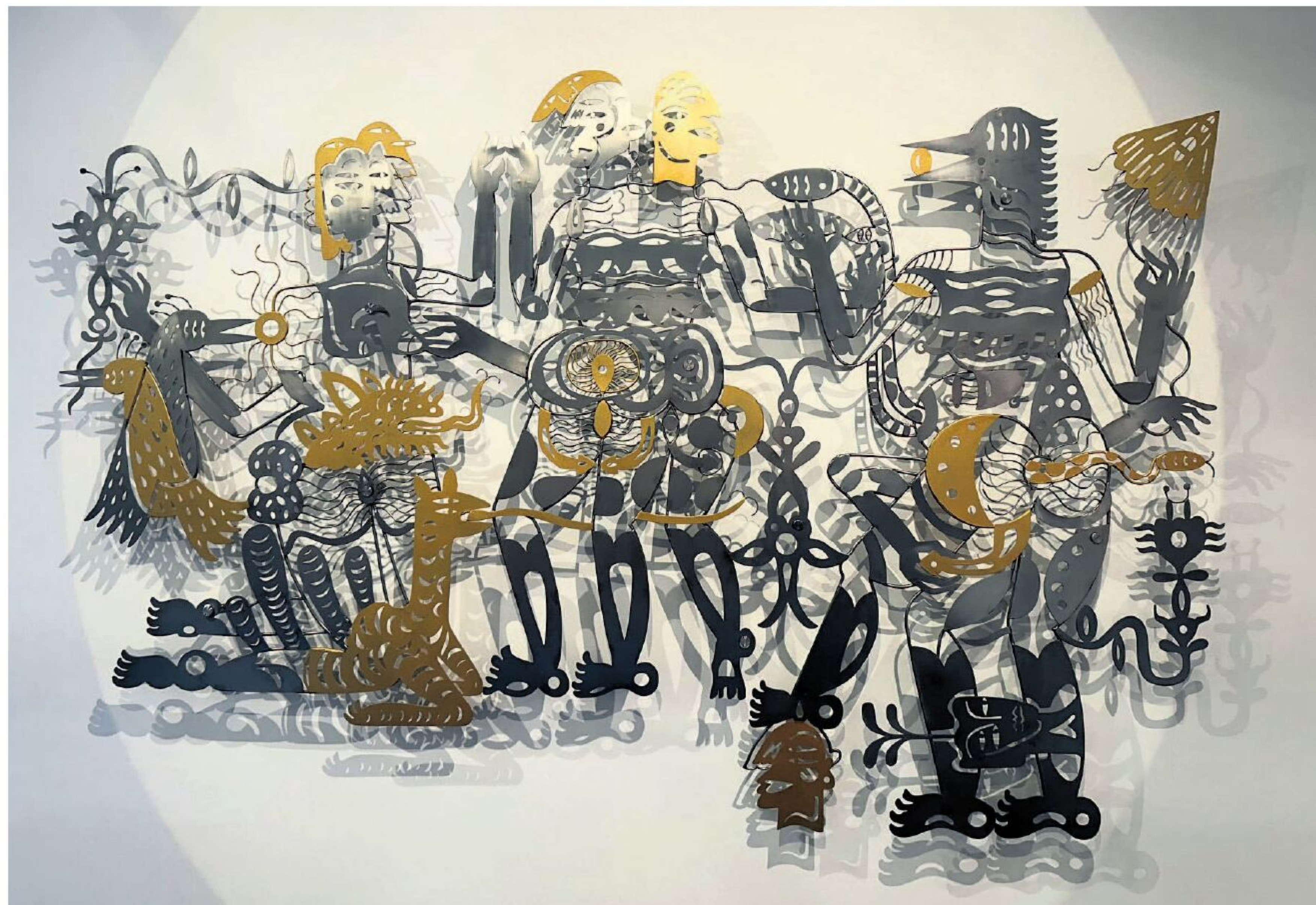
The sale of the painting, by Maqbool Fida Husain, one of India's most celebrated modern artists, achieved the highest sum paid for a piece of modern Indian art at auction – going for four times the estimated price. It also happened to be the most expensive artwork auctioned so far this year.

Indian – and more broadly south Asian – artists have long failed to receive the same recognition as their western counterparts. Few were displayed in the world's great galleries and collections; international exhibitions celebrating their work have been scarce; and their presence at the world's biggest art fairs – the powerful drivers of today's art market – has been minimal.

Yet recently there have been signs that things are changing and Indian art – modern and contemporary – is having what many in the field have described as a “major moment”.

Auction prices for prominent 20th-century Indian artists have consistently broken records over the past few years. Last year, according to the international online art broker Artsy, the demand for Indian artists increased more than for any other nationality.

For Nishad Avari, the head of south Asian modern and contemporary art at Christie's in New York, the record-breaking sale of the Husain painting last month – which took him more than a decade to orchestrate – was reflective of a wider shift in the recognition and momentum of Indian artists,



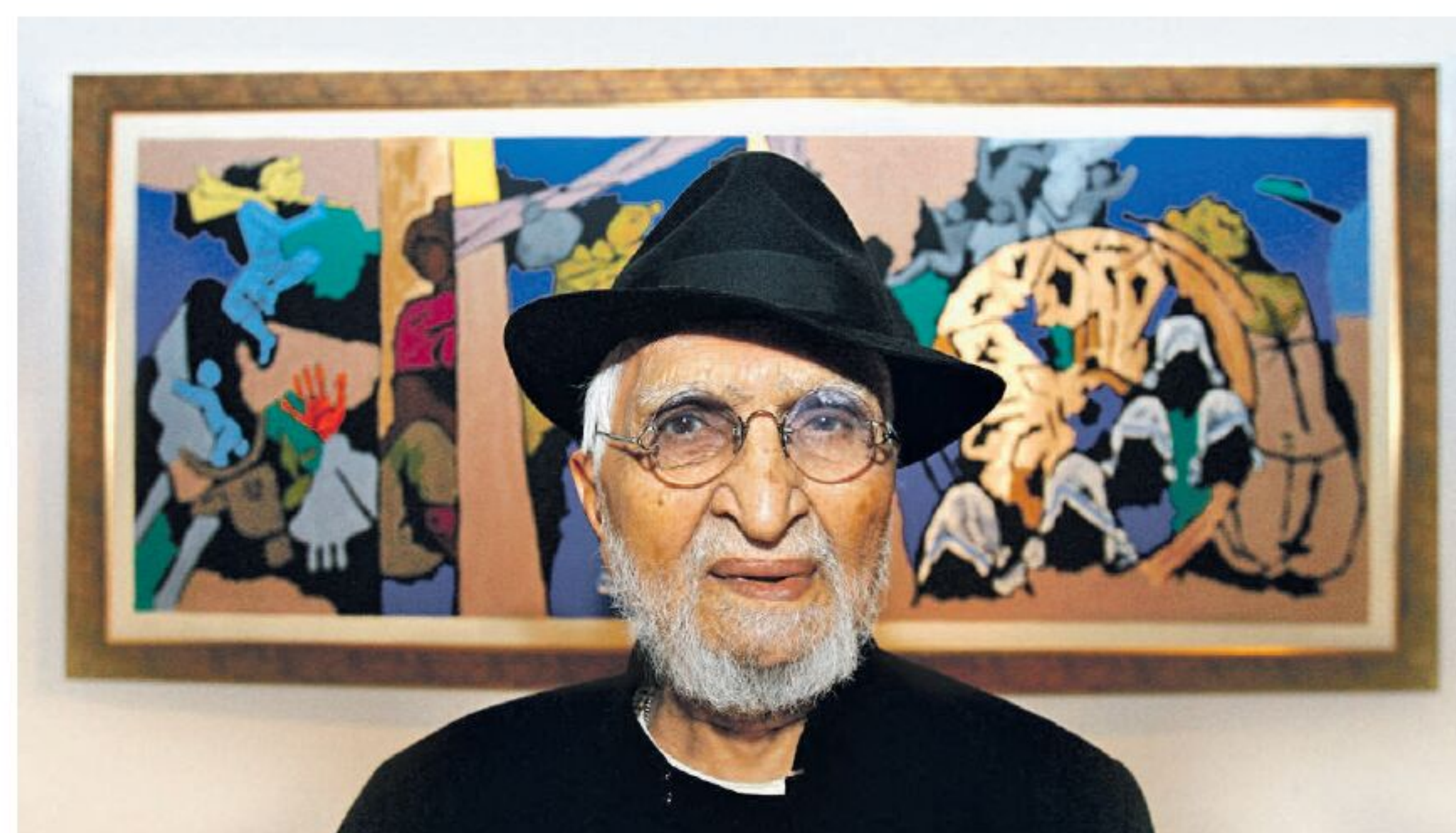
▲ *Tarini Sethi's Undercurrents and the Golden Womb. Sethi is a multi-disciplinary artist who is based in Delhi*

► *Maqbool Fida Husain. One of his paintings recently sold for \$13.8m at a New York auction*

PHOTOGRAPH:
CHRIS JACKSON/GETTY

which he credited with originating from within India. “Over the past couple of years we've seen the ecosystem for the arts in India really expanding,” said Avari. “There are lots of new participants and a newfound confidence that's driving demand and many new conversations are taking place, both in India and internationally. It's all long overdue, to be honest.”

India experienced an art boom once before, in the early to late 2000s, when contemporary Indian art began to be seen as an investment and prices skyrocketed. Yet many viewed it as a speculative bubble driven by a few figures distorting prices as they quickly bought and sold works, and it all



came crashing down after the 2008 global financial crisis.

Artists, curators and gallerists were all in agreement that the environment now is markedly different. Aparajita Jain, the co-director of Nature Morte, one of India's most prominent private galleries, said this time there was a recognition of the value of India's modern artists as well as the contemporary, and that

works were being bought to be hung on people's walls, not to be “speculatively flipped”.

For decades, the arts in India have suffered from a severe lack of state funding, ensuring that museums and galleries are often uninspiring, celebrating just a select few artists. But as wealth in India has grown, so too has the number of Indian arts patrons and collectors, within India and

in the wider diaspora. “The main struggle we used to have is that no one would fund Indian shows,” said Jain. “But as Indians are becoming richer, they want their say in the larger world and they want to see their culture represented, not just through a western lens.”

There has been a recent surge in privately run galleries and museums opening across India, championing the country's 20th-century modern masters but also the next generation of contemporary artists. India has its own flourishing art fair, held annually in Delhi, and a younger generation of Indian art collectors has emerged with a newfound interest in contemporary art.

The Museum of Art and Photography opened in Bengaluru in 2023 and Kiran Nadar, India's biggest private patron and collector of modern and contemporary art, will open a high-profile museum in Delhi next year. Some of the country's biggest billionaire industrialists have recently bankrolled cultural centres in Mumbai and Hampi, and the Jaipur royal family has just opened a centre for the arts in the City Palace.

Nonetheless, Jain said: “For the quantum of amazing art that's produced in our country, we still haven't begun to see the amount of shows that our artists deserve.”

Contemporary Indian artists describe the surge in interest as one of the most exciting moments for the country's art scene. “There is a huge push to invest in and highlight our own artists, whether that's with gallery shows in India or abroad,” said Tarini Sethi, a multidisciplinary artist who works out of Delhi. “For the first time, collectors and galleries want to take a chance on newer voices.”

This momentum has been reflected internationally. In the past year, the Barbican Centre and Serpentine in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Pompidou in Paris have all held prominent exhibitions of Indian artists. At the 2023 Frieze art fair, Experimenter, a contemporary gallery that began in the Indian city of Kolkata, won the prestigious best stand award for its presentation of seven intergenerational female artists.

Rajiv Menon, a gallerist based in Los Angeles, said: “As soon as these [south Asian] artists are given an opportunity to show in the west, they will immediately find an audience. This is just the beginning.”