

Bhavsar among biggest names at Venice Biennale

'Abdhee' occupies the central place at Fortuny exhibit

By JYOTIRMOY DATTA

Does the 53rd Venice Biennale mark the end of art?

Most critics have damned it, while recognizing it as the biggest event – in size, noise, and money – of the art fraternity of the world. Beyond the hoopla at the annual extravaganza was an exhibition where Gujarat-born New Yorker Natvar Bhavsar was among the biggest names.

The Biennale, which opened to the public June 7, makes Venice into a city of, for and by artists, with art replete on water-buses, taxis, bars, restaurants and days full of lunches, dinners and parties, as Martin Gayford reports in *The Times of London*. Old and new wealth rub shoulders.

Among the biggest names at Fortuny was Bhavsar, the only Indian painter who finds a place besides that of old and modern masters in any serious European view of world art.

"Evidence of ludicrous wealth is everywhere at the Biennale, which officially opens today. Cartoonishly sleek yachts, all registered in the Cayman Islands, line the Grand Canal near the entrance to the Biennale.

Politicians and art collectors have arrived at the numerous exhibition openings all over the lagoon by water taxi, many of the men with trophy wives in tow," writes the Critic-at-Large of the *Boston Globe*.

Bhavsar and his wife, Janet Brosious Bhavsar, were lionized in Venice, with the artist telling *Desi Talk*: "I was saddened by the contrast between the hoopla and the art. The noise drowned out the thought."

Janet Bhavsar's journal of the couple's trip to Venice was provided to *Desi Talk*.

It gives one an actual feel of Venice Biennale 2009 – of the partying, the notables, the excitement.

The "real story" this year was the "collateral events" notes Sebastian Smee of the *Boston Globe* on June 7.

"The best of these is at the Palazzo Fortuny, the majestically disheveled former residence and workshop of the great textile designer, painter, inventor, photographer and dressmaker Mariano Fortuny," Smee said.

Among the biggest names at Fortuny was Bhavsar, the only Indian painter who finds a place besides that of old and modern



Left, Janet and Natvar Bhavsar on roof terrace of Hotel Focari Palace in Venice. Campanile of San Marco Square is in the distance on left and on right is the dome of Santa Maria della Salute Cathedral. The Grand Canal is below with the Rialto Bridge around the corner. Below, Natvar Bhavsar's painting, "Abdhee," was part of the exhibition "In-Finitum" at Palazzo Fortuny in Venice. Here Bhavsar, center, is seen with New York collectors Liora and Charles Peck.

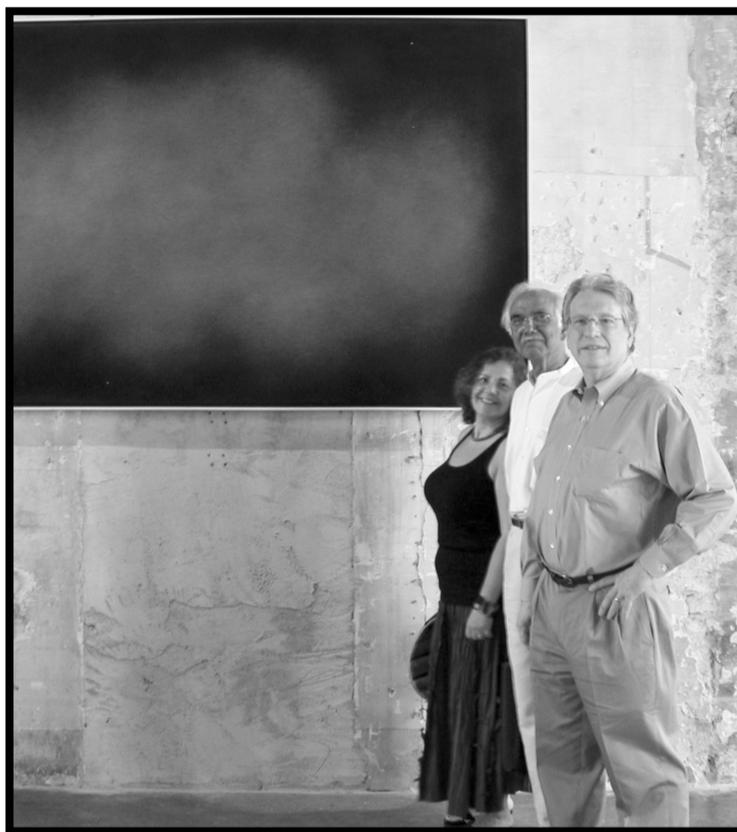
masters in any serious European view of world art.

Not just a place; Bhavsar's sublime "Abdhee" occupies the central place in a show which is about man's deepest meditations on the limitless and the eternal. Venetian writer Myrium Zerbi Fanna described it as "the best painting she had ever seen."

Called "In-Finitum," the show at Fortuny is the third in a trilogy of shows that started in Venice during the 2007 Biennale displaying works by some of the biggest names in contemporary and 20th-century art alongside old masters, ancient sculptures, Asian art, textiles and various installations, Smee reports.

In this show, the presence of Bonnard, Delacroix and Picasso – immortals as they are – is a coincidence.

Bhavsar is inevitable. Without knowing it, the show seems to have been curated around Bhavsar.



Painted in 2006, "Abdhee" has been loaned to "In-Finitum" by London collector Kersti Urvois, who flew to Venice for the exhibition opening with her husband, Louis.

Bhavsar's paintings have no lines, contours, forms, areas or demarcations.

They are without subjects or objects, impossible to copy, indescribable, ineffable, beyond concepts or definitions, unique triggers of ruminations and ideas about the cosmos and creation, but not in themselves harboring any ideas, concepts, thoughts or ruminations.

Janet Bhavsar also made it June 4 to the Peggy Guggenheim cocktails for the USA pavilion, meeting Jennifer Stockman, president of the Guggenheim, her husband David, director Richard Armstrong, and curator Paul Schimmel of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, among others.

At the opening of "In-Finitum" came such exalted figures as Axel Vervoordt, the main curator of the exhibition, a Belgian designer, an art dealer from Turin and a sculptor.

And after the inauguration, the Bhavsars joined Urvois and her designer friend Renzo Zengiaro. Next day, Bhavsar got a private viewing of the Biennale. Smee calls the exhibition astonishing.

"With 'In-finitum,' Vervoordt, guided largely by intuition, has attempted something no academically trained curator would dream of.

In pulling it off, he has created an astonishing exhibition, made all the more so by its unforgettable setting."

Envelope bearing 90-cent stamp fetches \$431,250 at auction

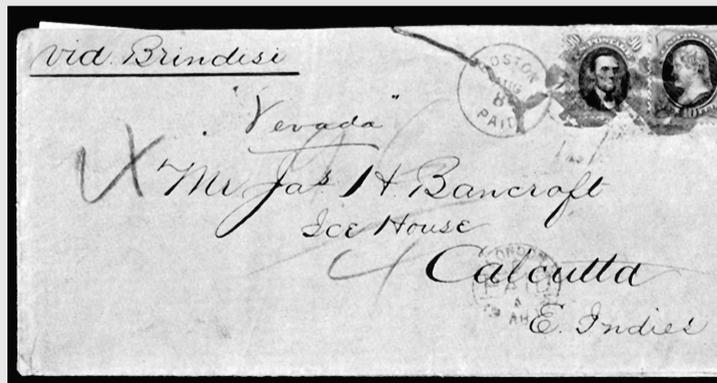
By JYOTIRMOY DATTA

Yet another chapter in the extraordinary adventures of a mailed envelope – which began its journey from Boston to Calcutta in 1873 bearing a mere 90-cent stamp, – was closed in an auction room in New York City on June 13 when it sold for \$431,250.

The torn envelope, known in philatelic circles as the "Calcutta Ice House Cover," bears the nation's first bicolor stamp, issued in 1869, portraying Abraham Lincoln.

Stolen in 1967, resurfacing 40 years later, the storied cover sold above its presale estimate of \$300,000 to \$400,000 and was the star of the sale at Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries in New York City.

It is prized by philatelists



because it is the only authenticated example of the 90-cent Lincoln stamp still affixed to its original envelope.

The cover was first bought by a collector named Grant Squires, who toured India in 1914. It passed from collector to collector until its theft.

The cover was one of 250 envelopes stolen on Dec. 9,

1967, from the home of an Indianapolis stamp collector named J. David Baker.

The crime was part of an organized burglary operation that targeted stamp collectors whose names and addresses were listed geographically in the member directory of The American Philatelic Society.

In 1974, the FBI recovered the stolen Baker collection,

except for the "Calcutta Ice House Cover."

For four decades the cover remained lost to philately. Most collectors thought the thieves had soaked off the 90-cent stamp to make it more saleable.

Then, on a cold winter day in January 2006, an elderly couple walked into a small stamp shop in Chicago and inquired if three stamp items had any value. Two were worthless, but one was recognized by the dealer as the legendary "Calcutta Ice House Cover."

It was about this cover that Richard Searing wrote in "The Chronicle of Classic U.S. Postal Issues" that "I hold little hope that this unique cover survives today.

To survive over a century and be lost in this manner is a sad fate for such a marvelous cover."