

An abstract painting by Zubeida Agha. The background is a dark, textured red-brown. Scattered throughout are various colorful shapes: circles in green, yellow, blue, and pink; some with concentric patterns. There are also elongated shapes, some resembling musical notes or leaves, in blue and pink. A prominent vertical blue bar is on the right. The overall style is expressive and modern.

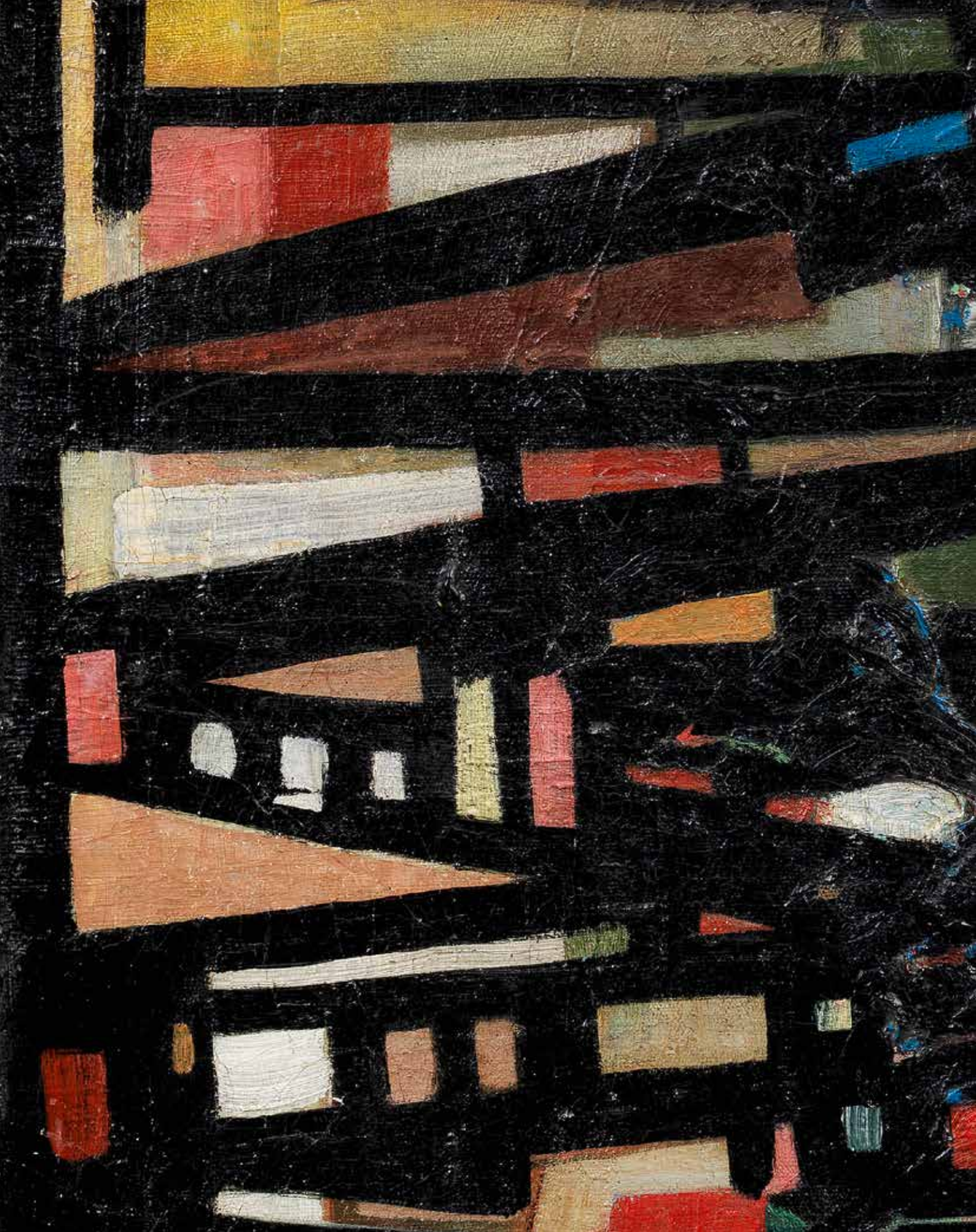
# Bonhams

## Zubeida Agha: Celebrating an Extraordinary Career

New Bond Street, London | 19 - 22 November 2022

Zubeida  
80







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New Bond Street, London | 19 - 22 November 2022

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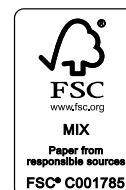
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# Zubeida Agha Exhibition (1922 - 1997)

Bonhams are delighted to be celebrating Zubeida Agha's birth centenary. Zubeida's works have not featured at auction as frequently as her contemporaries works and given her importance in the history of South Asian Art, we wanted to redress the imbalance. Salima Hashmi has curated this exhibition, and with the help of the extended Agha family, we have been able to bring this exhibition to life. Showcasing works from the entirety of her career, we are thrilled that two of the works in the exhibition are up for auction.

# A Loneliness Within - Zubeida Agha 1922 - 1997

By Salima Hashmi

Enigmatic, reclusive in her twilight years, Zubeida Agha never ceased her lifelong engagement with her work, painting until the end. Her centennial year is a befitting time to remember her as one of the trailblazers of modernism in the subcontinent.

She had already made an impression in the years before Partition. A review of art in India and Pakistan by the art critic at *The Statesman*—at the time Charles Fabri, former curator of the Lahore Museum—described her as “that most remarkable artist of this sub-continent, Miss Zubeida Agha, a brilliant surrealist.”

Not everyone welcomed this defiance of convention though. Her works in the first exhibition of the Karachi Fine Arts Society in 1948 drew the ire of a critic who declared they would never have been included had he been the judge. At the time, N. Sen-Gupta wrote that such criticism assumed that “a painting, if it claims to portray something ‘real’, must represent the painter’s extreme effort to reproduce the visual form of that reality. Only those who fail lapse into abstraction.”

Looking at her early works of the 1940s and 50s, one can appreciate the surprise, even controversy, they generated. Only a supremely self-confident artist would have ventured so far from the prevalent sentimentalism of the Lahore School of Painting of the 1940s, which was closely aligned with the Bengal School. Some of Zubeida’s early works, like *The Cotton Pickers*, reveal the use of line and preference for pattern which was not unusual in that era. Her elder brother Agha Hamid, a bureaucrat and art critic, described *The Cotton Pickers* in his introduction to her solo exhibition in 1955:

The rigid intellectual discipline has resulted in a simplification of drawing and a rejection of unnecessary details. There is a deliberate but controlled attempt to simplify the structure of the painting and thus achieve a beautifully rhythmic quality.

This apt analysis holds good for almost all her lifetime’s work. Zubeida herself was averse to offering any explanation of her work.

Females studying in art schools had not been the norm, but she was fortunate. Her family arranged for private art lessons, initially with B.C. Saryal, an eminent artist, and later, more importantly, with an Italian prisoner of war, Mario Perlingieri, a former student of Picasso introduced to her by her brother.

Her association with Perlingieri lasted only eight months, but left a deep impression. Under his exacting tutelage she learned to paint ideas, not pictures, tempered by her study of Greek philosophy, mysticism and Western classical music. As she put it, “The eye can grasp even the ungraspable, the invisible, if it is trained to see, and not just to look.”

Zubeida studied for a year at St. Martin’s School of Art in London before the artistic and intellectual milieu of Paris drew her to the École des Beaux-Arts where she flourished. She held solo exhibitions in both Paris and London before returning to Karachi in 1953. Her homecoming signposted the next phase in her work and a fresh exploration of her palette, accompanied by references to motifs which emerged in her life in the burgeoning new metropolis of Karachi.

Zubeida moved to Rawalpindi in 1960 and soon after set up Pakistan’s first private art gallery which evolved into a pivotal space for artists from the two wings of the country—East and West Pakistan. Her keen discernment of fresh ideas made her a friend and promoter of young talent, bringing both modernists and young contemporaries together—Shakir Ali, Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Raheel Akbar Javed, Ali Imam, Zainul Abedin, and Mohammad Kibria. She had always recognised an exceptional vision when she encountered it—as a young girl, she had admired the work of the charismatic Amrita Sher-Gil, a close friend of her brother.

For sixteen years she worked tirelessly at the gallery until her move to Islamabad, by which time she was established as the doyenne of the art world.

Over the following decades, Zubeida worked with great consistency and commitment in her studio. She kept a sharp eye on political, social, and cultural events around her, but nothing in her work overtly reflected the tumult in the country. Her paintings remained deliberately focused on the act of painting, her works deceptively simple but subtle in the inventiveness of drawing in references from the outside world, every stroke laid out with clarity and careful spatial arrangements.

She had moved away from the often sombre earthy palette of her early practice and was now investigating a range of imagery. The process of developing the imagery, she said, was when “you get hold of an idea and you want to translate it in abstract form. That is how it starts. I used to take down notes and then think of forms and lines to express that in colour.”

Zubeida was particular about stretching her own canvases, meticulously preparing the surface with oil grounds and layering paints and pigments to achieve a translucent glow. She never used varnish, ensuring the intensity of the colours which remain as true today as when she worked on them. The longevity of her paintings mattered to her.

Her passion for colour relationships led some of her contemporaries to label her a ‘colourist’. She herself rejected the epithet ‘woman painter’, confident that she had carved her own niche as ‘a painter’ and gender was irrelevant. She did concede, however, that a certain sensitive delicacy in colour might owe something to her gender. She added that political opportunism had been apparent in the work of her male colleagues, but that “women...are less willing to compromise.”

In defiance of age and frailty, her work grew ever brighter and more forceful as Zubeida continued to paint in seclusion in her Islamabad studio. She once described her paintings as “hiding a lot”, referring to the layer upon layer of paint painstakingly applied until the desired effect was achieved. And in much the same way, the nuances of Zubeida’s single-minded immersion in her work and her fiercely independent spirit engendered a mystique that endures to this day.

Note: This article is based on an interview with Zubeida Agha by Salima Hashmi in Islamabad.



1 \*

**ZUBEIDA AGHA (PAKISTANI, 1922-1997)**

*Untitled (Cityscape)*

signed 'Zubeida Agha 46' lower left

oil on canvas, framed

32 x 55.1cm (12 5/8 x 21 11/16in).

**£30,000 - 50,000**

**Provenance**

The Collection of Imran R. Sheikh; family of the artist.

A very rare early work by Zubeida Agha, it establishes her ability to respect and enhance the two-dimensionality of the canvas. Part of the Agha family collection, it hints at the vision that will eventually define Zubeida Agha's body of work. In the late 1940s, during the tumult of Partition, many homes were looted in the riots and artworks destroyed. This work, possibly because of its location, survived unscathed. Informally titled *Cityscape*, the simplified architectural forms suggest the *mohalla*, a neighbourhood familiar to the artist. There is no attempt to imply deep space, the buildings are defined in flattened, spatial relationships, woven into a composite whole and unfolded across the canvas. The modulated tonal variations and colours suggest a continuity to the city, beyond the limits of the given space. As a young painter, Agha was carefully assembling the forms and assigning them roles as clusters in the city neighbourhood.

Art historian Iftikhar Dadi viewed Zubeida Agha as "an independent painter who stubbornly charted her own trajectory without much influence from other artists or artistic trends." (Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 2010, p.113) She must have been mindful of the audiences of her time and the preference for more recognisable 'pictures' and the picturesque. She chooses instead to design the image in terms of a flowing line which orchestrates a security of purpose, a mature work for a young painter.





2 \*

**ZUBEIDA AGHA (PAKISTANI, 1922-1997)**

*Untitled (Self-portrait)*

signed and dated Zubeida '47 lower right  
oil on canvas, framed  
40 x 30cm (15 3/4 x 11 13/16in).

**Provenance**

Inherited from the artists elder brother Agha Abdul Hamid.

**Published**

*Zubeida Agha: A Pioneer of Modern Art in Pakistan*, Fomma, 2004,  
pg. 11

Credits: Fatima and Agha Imran Hamid.

A young Zubeida Agha looks out at the world, her expression solemn, almost austere, as though sizing up what she sees. The drawing is strong, the features clearly defined, capturing the strong resemblance to her siblings. There is determination in the firm set of her lips, a resoluteness in the prominent cleft chin. The eyes are compelling, at once searching and ruminative. She was on the cusp of a long career, what lay ahead was still to be discovered, but her self-assurance is unmistakable. Agha Hamid termed it "one of the best things" she painted, pointing to "just the right amount of distortion to give emphasis to dominant features and without sentimentality." (Asha Abdul Hamid, Introduction in the catalogue for the exhibition of paintings by Zubeida Agha, Karachi, 1955)

The work is aesthetically different from the self-portraits in vogue at the time in Lahore, although she must have been aware of Amrita Sher-Gil's dramatic self-portraits. They share a sensibility in their self-exploration (Amrita Sher-Gil, Self-portrait #5 oil on paper 43cm x 54.5cm, undated) which is striking, the variegated colour intuitively connecting the background spaces to the subject, thus completing the requirements of well-executed images. Deftly, Zubeida Agha has used an informal, painterly background that ensures a focus on the sitter, the artist herself. The surface quality of this self-portrait is still impeccable after eighty years, a hallmark of her work.



Image Courtesy, NGMA, New Delhi



3 \*

**ZUBEIDA AGHA (PAKISTANI, 1922-1997)**

*The Tennis Players*

signed and dated '47 lower right

oil on canvas, framed

24.5 x 101.4cm (9 5/8 x 39 15/16in).

**Provenance**

The collection of Patras Ahmed Shah Bokhari, first Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations and a friend of the artist, who got it from her. Thence by descent to his son, from whom acquired by the artist's family.

Credits: Manizeh and Imran Sheikh.

The animated figures of the tennis players which stretch across the canvas are connected to a series of work executed by Zubeida Agha, with similar composition and colour palette, before she left for her studies in Europe.

Each figure is depicted in a different stance in the act of playing tennis. Although there is no evidence of Zubeida Agha having taken tennis lessons, one can imagine her accompanying her brothers to clubs where tennis was a popular sport. In her later years she was interested in the Wimbledon tournaments, so this might have resulted from an early exposure to the game. The highly stylized rendering of the figures in no way hampers the staccato movements of the lines across the pictorial surface. The space between each figure is enlivened by the white circles of tennis balls which create a rhythmic pattern akin to that in a textile fabric. The bodies create their own patterns, united by the lines of the tennis net.

This work went with her to Europe and was subsequently exhibited in Paris. Its provenance provides an insight into the life of the work, which became part of the personal collection of the urbane Urdu writer Patras Ahmed Shah Bokhari, Pakistan's ambassador to the United Nations. A great scholar and teacher to the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Patras Bokhari was known as an aficionado of the arts. The work was inherited by his son and eventually acquired by the artist's family.



*The Tennis Payers (top right), Image Courtesy Asian Art Archive*





4 \*

**ZUBEIDA AGHA (PAKISTANI, 1922-1997)**

*Weavers*

signed and dated Zubeida Feb '48 lower left  
tempera on canvas, framed  
37.4 x 151.5cm (14 3/4 x 59 5/8in).

#### Provenance

Inherited from artists brother ( Agha Bashir Ahmed)

Credits: Nabila and Hasib Ahmed

Zubeida Agha gifted this work to her brother Agha Bashir and his wife on their wedding. It is part of the 1940s series which includes *The Cotton Pickers* and *The Dancers*, with compositional links to *The Tennis Players*, also exhibited as part of this exhibition. The greatest similarity is with *The Cotton Pickers*, the women similarly garbed, and their bodies interwoven by a continuous, sinuous strip of cloth that delineates the activity and movement of the women. Stylised limbs featuring a decorative element around the ankles create a rhythm which spans the canvas.

The rhythmic quality is the noticeable component of *Weavers*, *The Tennis Players* and other works in the series. The two-dimensionality of the pictorial space is deftly handled, as is the tonal gradation of colour in each figure, gently balanced, devoid of accents, aspiring to ensure a harmonised order in the image. *The Cotton Pickers* and *The Dancers* by comparison are vivid in colour, the movements more vivacious, the figures deployed against a textured background. The mood in each of these works differs from the other despite common structural elements. *Weavers*, painted very early in the artist's career before she went to Europe, arguably owes something to the new aesthetic propagated by artists like Jamini Roy and Shantiniketan stalwarts, who were investigating rural crafts and commentaries for inspiration as part of the freedom movement. Evocative of her rural roots—she was brought up on a farm in Lyallpur (now Faisalabad)—its tranquil mood reflects a moment of musing rather than emphatic descriptive narrative.



*The Dancers*, Image Courtesy Nabila Ahmed



*Cotton Pickers*, Image Courtesy Nabila Ahmed



5 \*

**ZUBEIDA AGHA (PAKISTANI, 1922-1997)**

*Untitled (Vase in a background)*  
signed 'Zubeida 57' lower right  
oil on canvas on board, framed  
29.9 x 44.5cm (11 3/4 x 17 1/2in).

**Provenance**

Purchased from Salman Batalvi, heir of Ijaz Batalvi, friend of the artist, who purchased it from her.

Credits: Manizeh and Imran Sheikh.

The provenance of this work confirms the milieu in which the artist moved, the members of which were very often both her buyers and her friends. Zubeida Agha was said to be quite particular about who acquired her work. Ijaz Batalvi, the original owner, was a highly regarded intellectual, a writer and a much sought-after lawyer, later remembered for his successful prosecution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in his murder trial. The painting is exuberant in its bold, spatial divisions, the geometric forms emanated from a central core, moving outwards like rays of the sun. These subdivisions are further fragmented into smaller units creating lively, unrestrained 'conversations' and interminglings between colour, line, and shape. But it is still the exceptionally dashing rendering of a profusion of sunflowers hovering over a vase that boldly demands the attention of the viewer.

Could the artist's stay in Europe and possible encounter with Van Gogh's Sunflowers have instigated her own venture into a comparable composition and subject matter? The setting suggests an architectural ambience, perhaps a reference to the cities of Paris and London from where she has recently returned. There is also the mindful 'design' of the background, all in straight lines, not one interfering or jostling for attention in competition with the swirling motion created by the sunflowers. Remarkably, the vibrant colours around the vase in no way distract the eye from the enjoyment of the striking central motif, whose colours stand out from those around it.





6 \*

**ZUBEIDA AGHA (PAKISTANI, 1922-1997)**

*The Deserted Village*

signed and dated Zubeida '60 lower right

oil on canvas on board, framed

28.5 x 120cm (11 1/4 x 47 1/4in).

**Provenance**

Inherited from the artists elder brother Agha Abdul Hamid.

Credits: Manizeh and Imran Sheikh.

This work has a strong similarity to Karachi Burning, done at a much later stage in the artist's life. This painting was undertaken at the time Zubeida Agha was witnessing villages disappearing as Islamabad began to emerge. Fascinated by the transformation of the rural landscape into what was the early footprint of the new capital, she bought a plot of land for herself and a brother who could not afford it. She was closely involved with the design of what would become her house and studio, driving her small Fiat to the site to monitor progress, and she planned her studio on the first floor with a large window that looked across to the Margalla Hills. According to family lore, however, this painting depicts a small village outside Peshawar, where she was staying with her elder brother Agha Hamid.

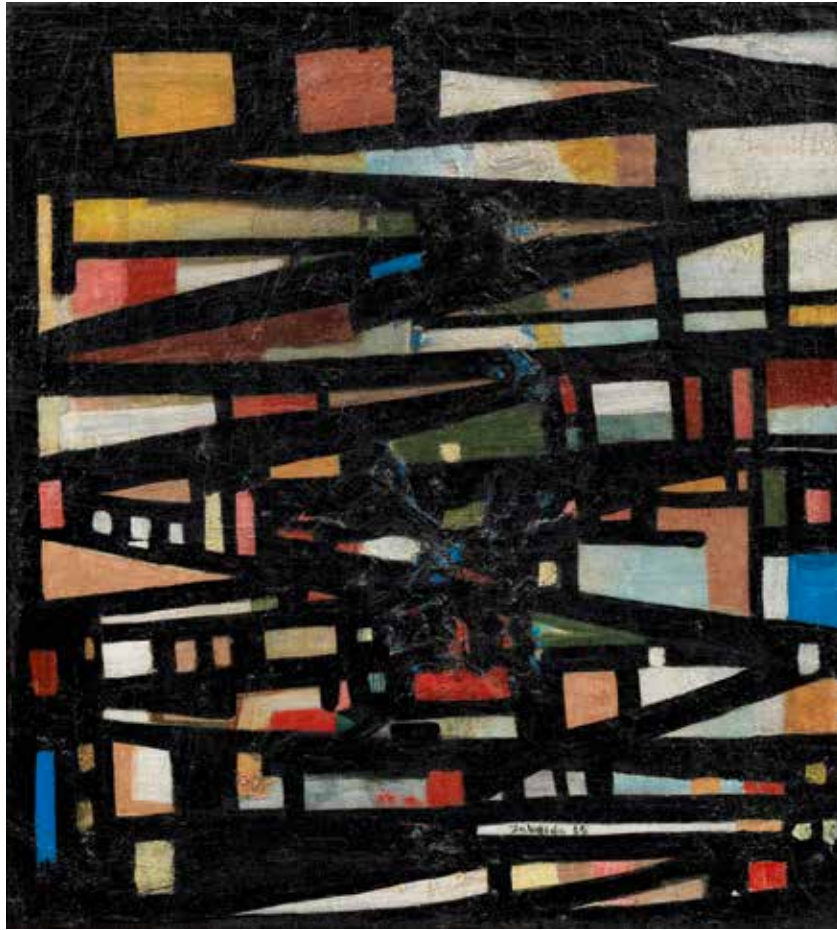
According to his son, Agha Hamid thought the work looked rather stark and suggested she add vertical lines to the composition, a compositional device employed later in Karachi Burning. The two contradictory accents signify the position taken by the artist who insisted that her work was "about nothing... it is just an abstraction."

Iftikhar Dadi notes that, "her work has consistently grappled with developing a visual language of philosophical and metaphysical ideas and moods that were neither representations nor symbols but ideas and moods expressed in architectonic modernist compositions." (Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 2010, p.118)

The appearance and reappearance of the architectural motifs, from her early years to her final phase, underlines this pertinent observation.



Image courtesy Asian Art Archive,



7 \*

**ZUBEIDA AGHA (PAKISTANI, 1922-1997)**

*Untitled (Abstract)*

signed and dated '65 lower right

oil on canvas, framed

56.6 x 51.1cm (22 5/16 x 20 1/8in).

**Provenance**

Purchased from Salman Batalvi, heir of Ijaz Batalvi, friend of the artist, who purchased it from her.

Credits: Manizeh and Imran Sheikh.

This work, also acquired from Ijaz Batalvi, is starkly different in mood and context. Painted in 1965, it could well have referenced Pakistan's war with India; its darkness seems to confirm that possibility.

The composition of colours in the first 'layer' of canvas, light and playful, is overcome, interrupted and superseded by the vehemence of strong, dark lines which zigzag across the surface. There is an underlying gestural quality to the forceful rendering of these lines in a complex arrangement of precise, expressive, almost dramatic strokes. The paint is thickly applied impasto-like, a rare occurrence in Agha's oeuvre. The emotional undercurrents in this work are palpable. Was the artist succumbing to singular circumstances? Could the light colours beneath signal the hope of a brighter future, or is the darkness of conflict obliterating harmony and peace?

Iftikhar Dadi observes, "Agha's works bring an alienated perceptual subjectivity to viewers, disavowing harmony and reconciliation within the picture plane by keeping formal forces in opposition". (Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 2010, p.116-7) This is often true of so much of Zubeida Agha's work yet this particular painting differs from others, because of its almost brutal dynamism bursting out of the picture plane. She was well known for her avoidance of events, recognisable persons, documentation of emotional states of mind, so the work can also be read in terms of being a fully non-objective statement.





8 \*

**ZUBEIDA AGHA (PAKISTANI, 1922-1997)**

*Untitled (Flowers in a Vase)*

signed and dated Zubeida '71 lower right, framed  
oil on canvas

90.1 x 43.8cm (35 1/2 x 17 1/4in).

**£40,000 - 60,000**

**Provenance**

The Collection of Imran R. Sheikh; family of the artist.

Zubeida Agha was a socially and politically aware individual, attuned to what was happening around her, which becomes critical to the viewing of this work. The year it was painted was marked by the civil war in Pakistan, where half the country broke away and Bangladesh came into being. Agha was close to many people 'on the other side', the most eminent among them being the celebrated artist Zainul Abedin, a dear friend. Her anguish at the time was shared by many among the art community.

The painting belies all these circumstances and seems instead to be celebrating a moment of optimism and vigour. This was not unusual for the artist. She was known for keeping her emotions under wraps and her stoicism intact under extreme circumstances.

The vase is placed in isolation against the light, a burst of colour emanating from its form. Agha often painted single bottles and vases which took her fancy. A particular favourite was a bottle of Chianti which made a regular appearance. A vase of Murano glass was another, strategically placed under a painting in which it appeared. These were considered decisions and no accident. The symbolic use of colour and form was intrinsic to her process. In this example, the two flowers stand defiant, rising from the austere form below; the narrative in the painting is deliberate and intentional.



L to R: Zubeida Agha, Shakir Ali, Abedi Abassi, Ishaque Shor, Chughtai (Second right), Zainul Abedin (Furthest right) and others



9\*

**ZUBEIDA AGHA (PAKISTANI, 1922-1997)**

*Evening*

signed and dated Zubeida '80 lower right

oil on canvas, framed

66.3 x 102cm (26 1/8 x 40 3/16in).

**Provenance**

Gifted by the artist to her nephew.

**Published**

*Zubeida Agha: A Pioneer of Modern Art in Pakistan*, Fomma 2004, pg. 62

Credits: Agha Naushab Ahmed.

Painted during Pakistan's darkest political era, *Evening* defies the pervasive mood of pessimism around her. Attempts to elicit the stimuli for Zubeida Agha's works met with no success and subjective interpretations abound. She shunned discussion on her themes and her inspiration remained personal and internalised. Yet it is difficult to view *Evening* as anything other than the determined exuberance of an avowed optimist in a time of great turmoil. The work marks a shift in the artist's palette, previously more sombre with blue the predominant colour. It is celebratory in its choice of forms and symbols, which spread out in a festive explosion against a darkened background. The perseverance of energy is reinforced by the cryptic shapes, which evade the discipline of repetition. There is instead a blossoming of individual form, each different to the other in scale, dimension, hue, and density. This unpredictability is playful and uplifting, inviting the viewer to find hope and joy in unexpected ways.

Zubeida Agha was inclined towards making works in a similar vein, night scenes or evenings of cities, especially in the 1970s when she moved to the Islamabad studio. This space became her refuge where she was able to shut out the world, painting consistently, listening to classical music or reading. This painting has been documented in a photograph of the artist in the process of working on it, in itself an unusual occurrence for the recluse Zubeida.



Image courtesy Zubeida Agha:  
A Pioneer of Modern Art in Pakistan, page 12





10\*

**ZUBEIDA AGHA (PAKISTANI, 1922-1997)**

*Karachi burning*

signed and dated Zubeida '90 lower right

oil on canvas, framed

100.3 x 64.4cm (39 1/2 x 25 3/8in).

**Provenance**

Bought directly from the artist by Nabila (niece) and Hasib Ahmed

Credits: Nabila and Hasib Ahmed

Painted in her Islamabad studio late in life, this work is unusual because its title reveals the artist's frame of mind, something she routinely took great pains to disguise. Any reference to the subject matter was more likely to be represented by intellectually selected and mapped symbols. The forms of buildings in Karachi Burning are culled from earlier paintings about human habits, for example The Deserted Village, but her proportions in this work suggest the high rises of the metropolis. Zubeida Agha was closely associated with the city of Karachi, having lived there for years in the company of siblings and friends and with an appreciative audience of art aficionados and intellectuals. But the same city whose bright lights and vibrant blocks of red, yellow and blue filled the canvas in her 1956 work Karachi by Night was now torn apart by ethnic divide, violent conflict, and rioting. The stark location of the contours of the beleaguered city against a flaming crimson sky is forceful in its message. Menacing

dark architectural forms are interspersed with other pale, disconsolate buildings while sharp lines criss-crossing the cityscape speak of chaos and disarray. The vigour of the colour palette belies the mood of deep disquiet clouding the canvas.

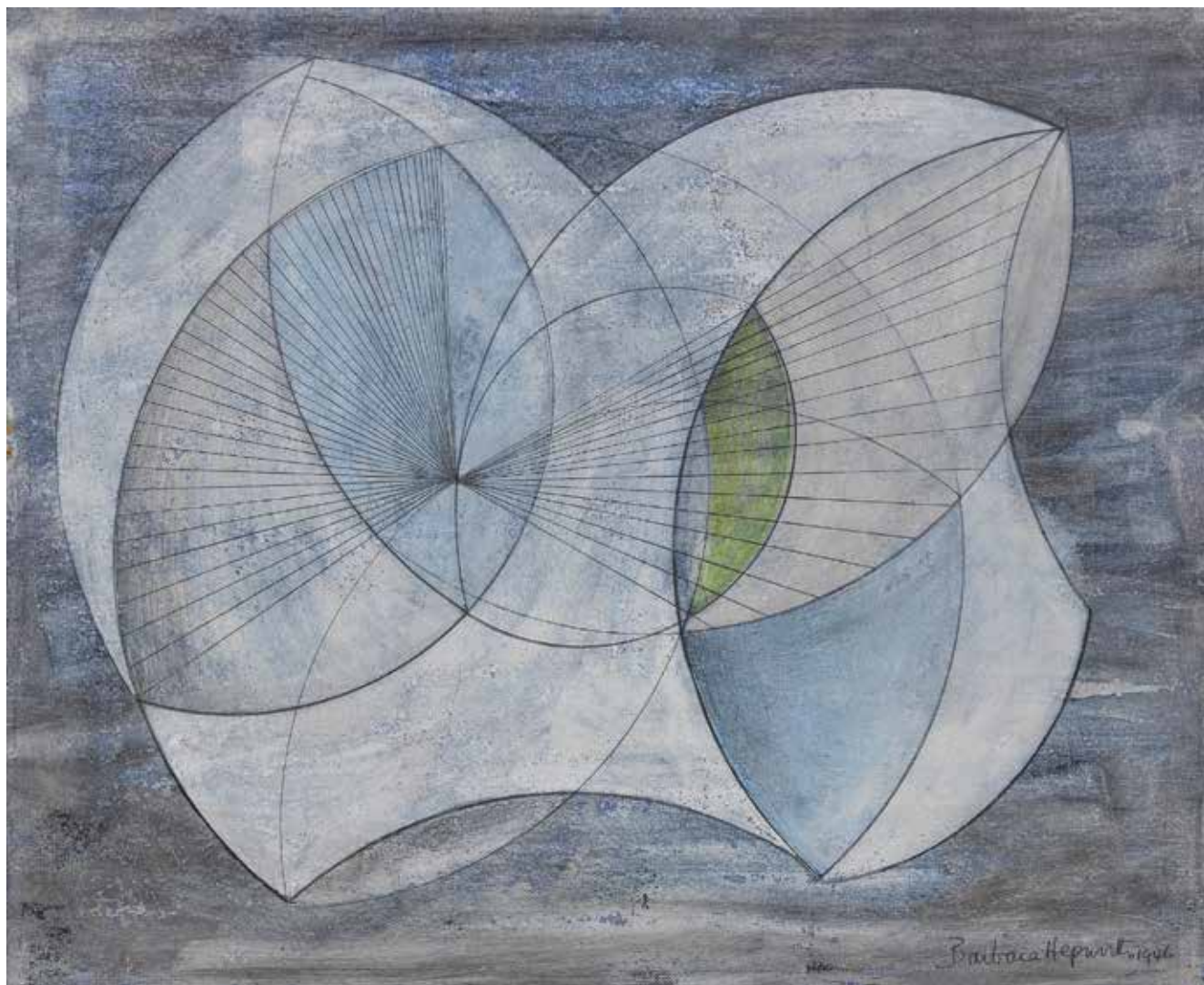
The artist's niece, Nabila Agha, and her husband acquired the work while it still leaned on the easel in her studio, the paint barely dry. The artist shared the title of the work with them, a clear indication of the circumstances and her emotional response.



Image courtesy Zubeida Agha: A Pioneer of Modern Art in Pakistan

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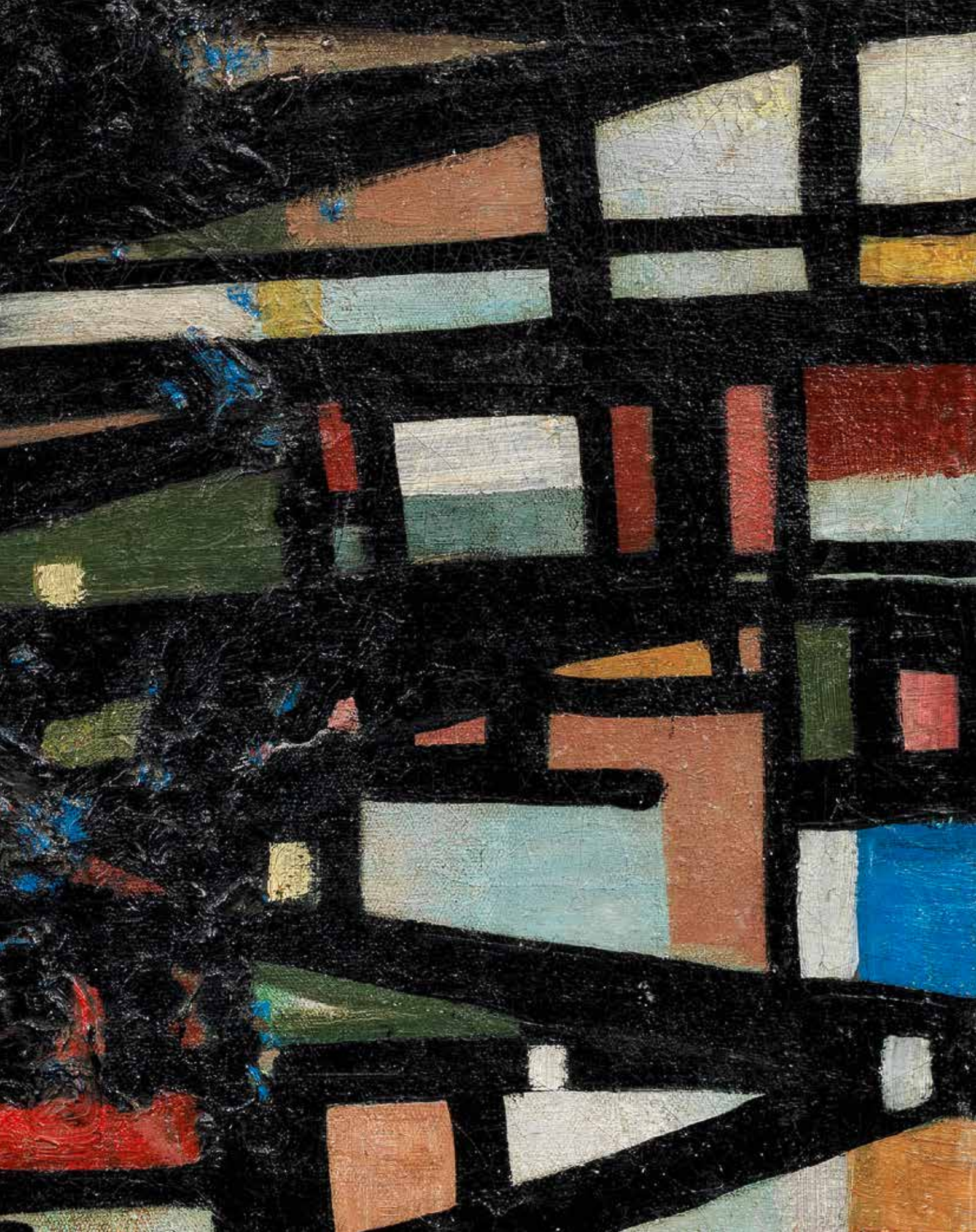
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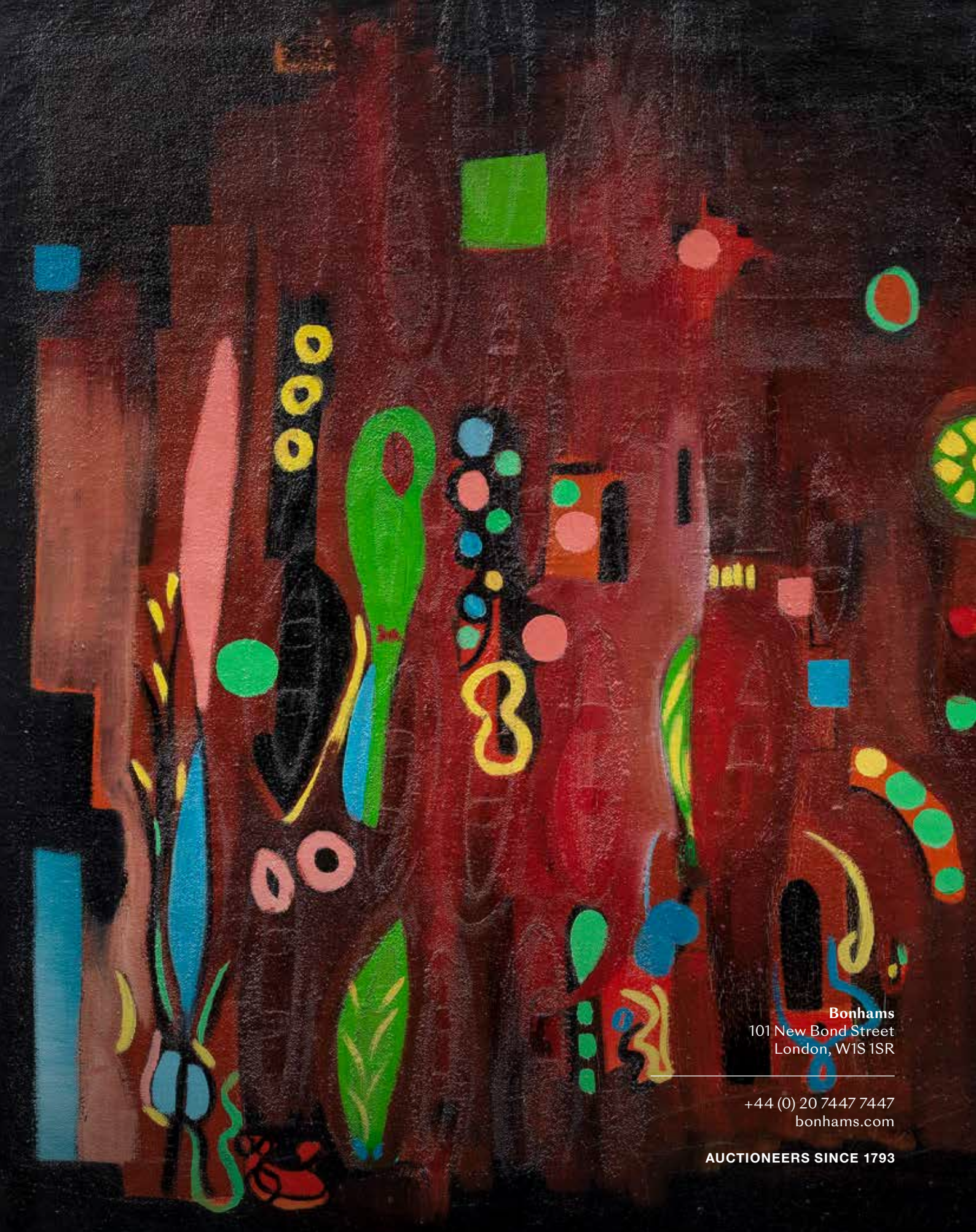
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