

The Rhythms of Refuge

Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir (1907-1974)

16 November - 31 December 2024

Galerie 88

The Rhythms of Refuge

Born in Calcutta into a family from Chittagong in 1907, Sudhir Khastgir was an early student of Nandalal Bose at Santiniketan. He was a classmate of Ramkinkar Baij and, like him, a painter, sculptor, printmaker and teacher. Among the Santiniketan artists of their generation, they were the first to take up sculpture seriously. After completing their course in 1928, while Ramkinkar chose to remain in Santiniketan, Sudhir Khastgir decided to be a peripatetic artist and expand his knowledge of sculpture, especially casting. He travelled to Madras and Bombay for this purpose. But in 1933, partly to escape the attention of colonial police who mistook him to be a nationalist agitator or a communist and partly to earn a living, he moved to Gwalior and took up the job as an art teacher at the Scindia School. Three years later, he moved again to Dehra Doon and became the art teacher at the newly founded Doon School, where he taught for twenty years until he moved to Lucknow as the Principal of its Art College in 1956 and taught there until his retirement in 1962. After retirement, he returned to Santiniketan and lived there until he died in 1974.

Sudhir Khastgir began to be recognized as a notable artist while he was in Dehra Doon. By the 1940s, art reviewers saw him as a major sculptor and painter, and he became one of the first artists of his generation to be widely recognized as a modernist. His portrait sculptures of notable public figures and his lively paintings of simple everyday subjects such as peasants, women as mothers and lovers, dancers and musicians, landscapes, flowering trees and so on played a role in this recognition. His marked deviation from the mythological and historical subject matter of the earlier generation of Bengal School artists and the substitution of their somewhat enervated sinuous style with a more robust sense of rhythm and colour added to their freshness and allure. These were both new and appealing, without appearing culturally alien, to his viewers and critics.

However, the very facts that contributed to his success in the 1940s and 1950s have led to his sidelining in recent years. Today, he is remembered more as a painter of agreeable pictures of mothers and children, of rural workers and landscapes, of trees laden with flowers swinging in the spring breeze, and of drummers and dancers swaying to lilting rhythms; subjects too genial and conformist for serious art. Reversing the opinion early viewers, his work is also now seen as more akin to the Bengal School artists than to the path-breaking modernist, progressive artists. Compared to them, he is considered less individualistic, original, and seductive, and artistically neither avant-garde nor a hard-nosed social critic. This shift in reception was more due to a change of taste than a clearer perception. Those who admired him then and those who dismiss him now occlude a deeper aspect of his art. There is more subjectivity to his art than the two contrasting receptions of his work suggest.

That is not surprising. Clearly, Sudhir Khastgir had two sides to him, one social and visible, and the other inner and kept under wraps. A student of his from the Doon School, where he taught for twenty years and gave many of India's future bureaucrats, political leaders and artists their first taste of visual arts and crafts, remembering him fondly on the occasion of his birth centenary wrote, "He was truly a soft-spoken, gracious and caring Master.... [he] never displayed any trace of the grievous tragedy that struck him early in his married life. He bore this wound with courage and fortitude and never allowed it to shroud his cheerful disposition." His daughter Shyamali Khastgir remembered her father very differently. She wrote, "My father was a very introvert type of person by nature. Neither deep emotion nor cheerfulness of his mind were ever expressed."

This outer gracefulness and inner taciturnity together defined his personality and his art. Sudhir Khastgir was articulate and wrote frequently about his career as an artist, enunciated his views on art, and responded to its reception. Yet there is little autobiographical in them. There is some mention of his family in the context of his early life, references to his mentors in relation to his art training and their ideas about art, but nothing about his inner life. Although his students have written about his wife's untimely death and noted its impact on him despite his equanimity, there is no mention of his wife's accidental death, which should have been traumatic, or of his daughter, who was only ten months old when her mother died. However, looking back at his career late in life, he wrote, "I have seen and experienced a certain amount of sad side of life – I need not paint them and make the world more sorrowful. I sublimate my sorrow and depression and produce something which will make people happy and joyful. I have noticed whenever I am depressed, my depression brings out some of my most bright colourful paintings with rhythmic composition."

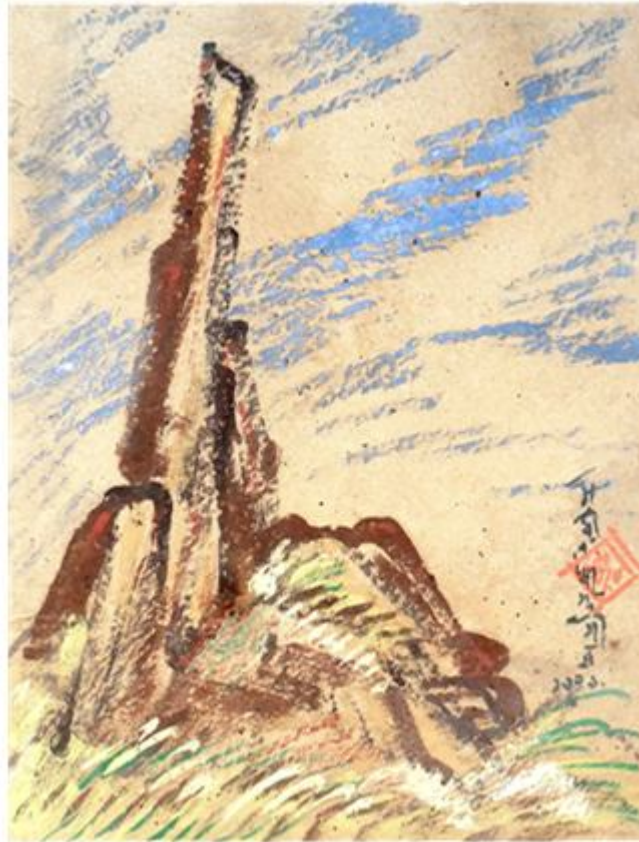
His love of music went back a long way; he has played the flute since he was a boy. His love for nature also went back to pre-Santiniketan days. At Santiniketan, his love for music and nature grew, and dance was added to them. Like many of its early students, it is quite possible that he also participated in Rabindranath's dance dramas and danced in its many festivals. We certainly know that he directed some of Rabindranath's dance dramas at the Doon School. But there is more to the trees, flowers, musicians, and dancers in his paintings than those memories. Anyone looking at his paintings and drawings carefully will not fail to notice that his flowering trees and dancers are not merely joyful but as ecstatic as his representations of passionate lovers, of which there are many. The energy that runs through his representations of flowering trees and dancing bodies borders on libidinal outpouring. Far from being superficial and repetitive, they spring from a deep and insatiate desire, tamed and expressed in choreographed rhythms, almost as forceful as the inner anxiety that set Van Gogh's landscapes awhirl. Art, for him, was a refuge from a disquiet life, a means of vicarious fulfilment, and as personal as it could get.

Prof. R. Siva Kumar

Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Gouache on Paper Board
17.5 x 13.5 inches, 1949
ID:- 189



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Gouache on Paper
16.5 x 13 inches, 1949
ID:- 192



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Gouache on Paper Board
17.5 x 13.5 inches, 1949
ID:- 190



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Meadow
Mixed Media on Paper
18 x 13 inches, 1949
ID:- 448

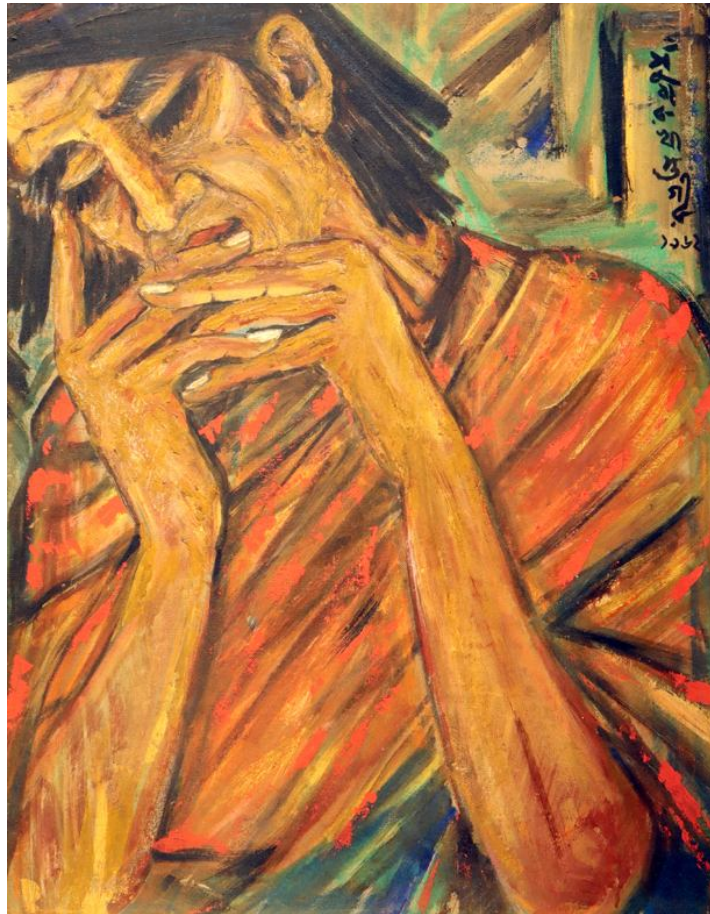


Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Masonite Board
28 x 24 inches
ID:- 004



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Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Masonite Board
30 x 24 inches, 1962
ID:- 007



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Gouache on Paper
19 x 12 inches, 1956
ID:- 156



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Watercolour on Paper
16.5 x 13 inches, 1944
ID:- 191



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Gouache on Paper
20 x 26 inches
ID:- 110



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Pastel on Paper Board
22 x 30 inches, 1963
ID:- 128



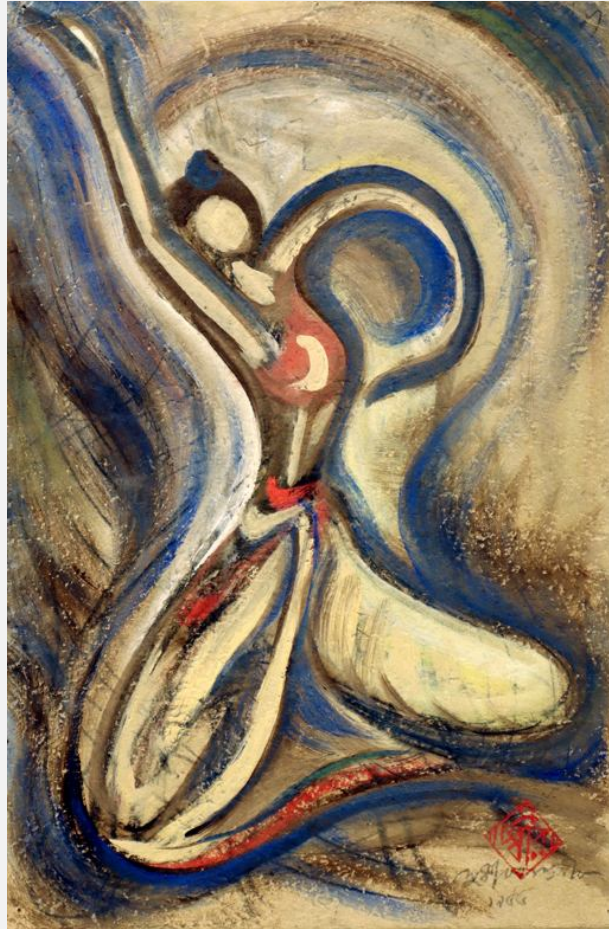
Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Dancing Men
Mixed Media on Masonite Board
36 x 22 inches, 1961
ID:-445



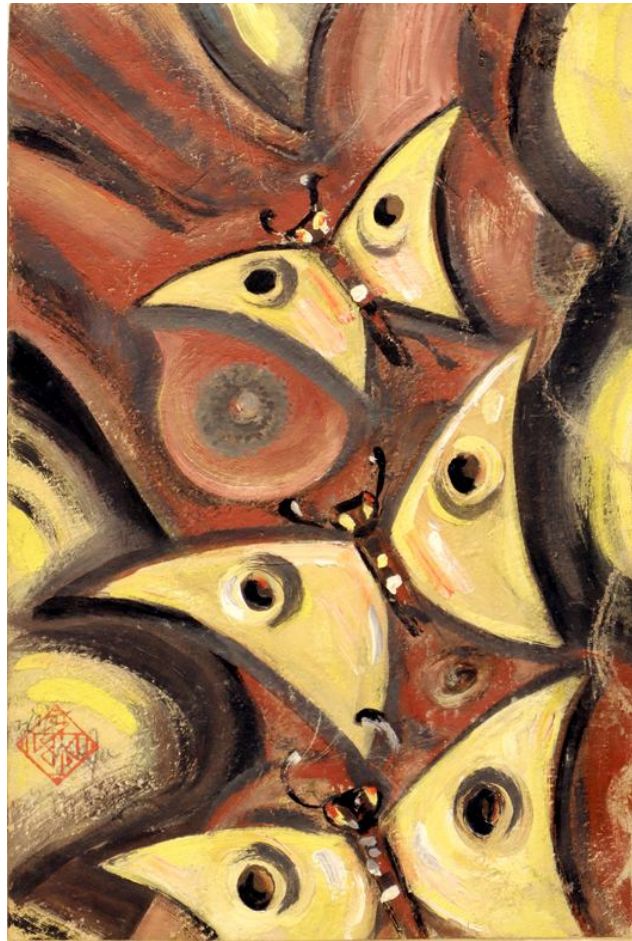
Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper
14.5 x 10 inches, 1953
ID:- 056



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper
15 x 10 inches, 1956
ID:- 176



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Gouache on Paper
15 x 10 inches
ID:- 177



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper Board
25.5 x 30.5 inches, 1951
ID:- 150



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Pastel on Paper
15 x 22 inches, 1965
ID:- 170



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper
10 x 14 inches
ID:- 174



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper
18 x 18 inches, 1947
ID:- 095



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Gouache on Paper
18 x 18 inches
ID:- 139



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper
17 x 17 inches, 1948
ID:- 090



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper
16 x 16 inches, 1948
ID:- 092



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Gouache on Paper
18 x 18 inches, 1947
ID:- 137



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Pastel on Paper
24 x 14 inches, 1962
ID:- 053



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Chinese Ink on Paper
14.5 x 10 inches, 1951
ID:- 182



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper
10 x 15 inches, 1953
ID:- 168



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper
9 x 12.5 inches, 1955
ID:- 180



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper
12 x 23 inches
ID:- 018



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Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper Board
12 x 19 inches
ID:- 183



Galerie 88

Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Gouache on Paper Board
12 x 19 inches, 1956
ID:- 185



Galerie 88

Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Gouache on Paper
13 x 20 inches
ID:- 193



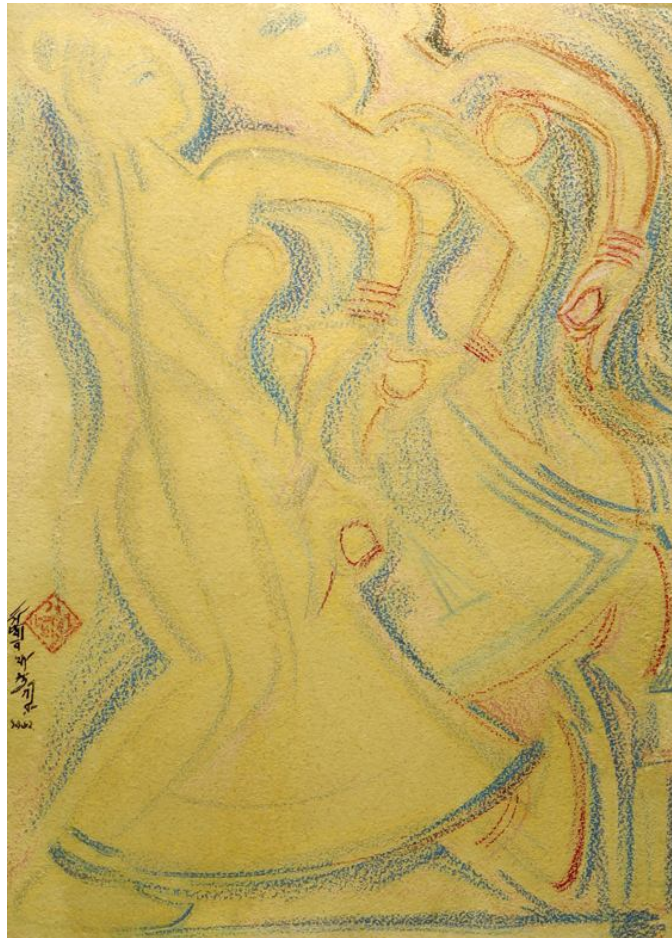
Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper
22 x 30 inches, 1963
ID:- 024



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Gouache on Paper
25 x 20 inches
ID:- 116



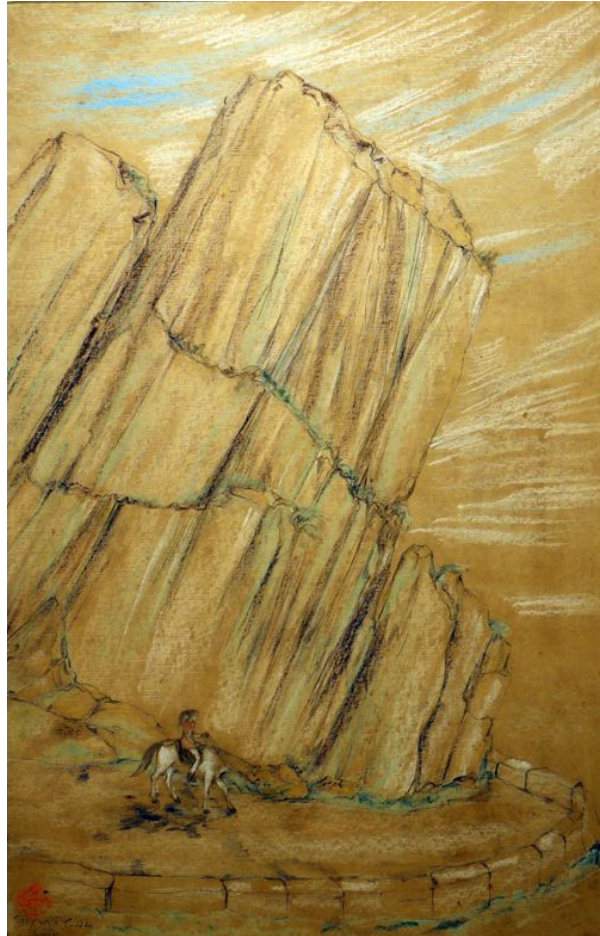
Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper
29 x 22 inches, 1962
ID:- 127



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Gouache on Canvas
11 x 7.5 inches
ID:- 042



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper Board
29.5 x 19.5 inches, 1962
ID:- 112



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Mussoorie
Mixed Media on Paper Board
23 x 13.5 inches, 1962
ID:- 049



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper Board
19 x 25 inches, 1954
ID:- 108



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper
30 x 22 inches, 1963
ID:- 133



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Mixed Media on Paper Board
19.5 x 29.5 inches, 1962
ID:- 115



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Ink on Silk Pasted on Paper
7.5 x 9.5 inches, 1940
ID:- 218



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Ink on Silk Pasted on Paper
8 x 10.5 inches, 1940
ID:- 217



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Watercolour on Paper
11 x 15.5 inches, 1944
ID:- 186



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Watercolour on Paper
10 x 13.5 inches, 1945
ID:- 196



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Charcoal on Paper
16 x 8.5 inches,
ID:- 221



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Chinese Ink on Paper
7 x 7 inches, 1945
ID:- 197



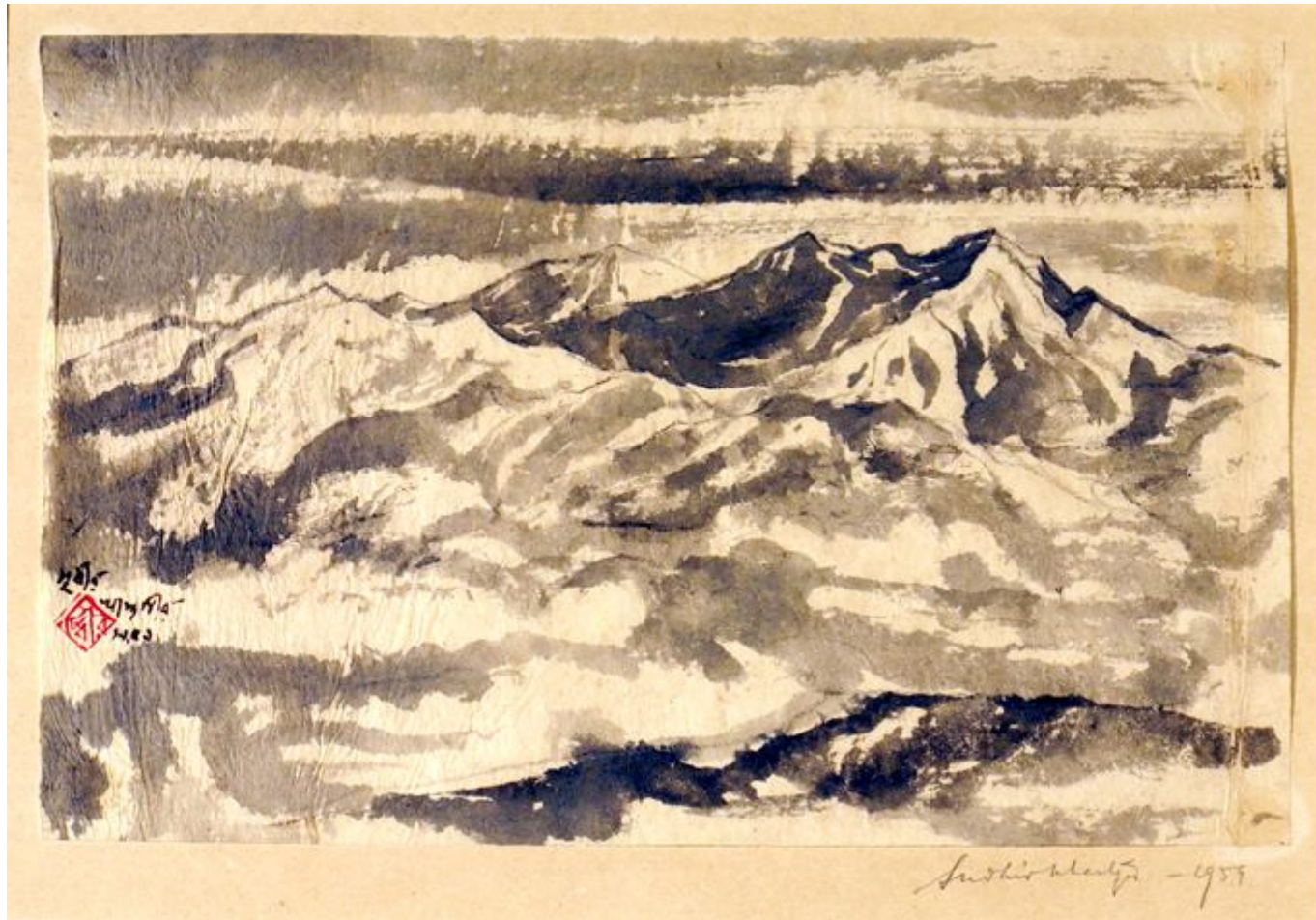
Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Chinese Ink on Paper
6.5 x 9.5 inches, 1959
ID:- 199



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Chinese Ink on Paper
9.5 x 13 inches, 1959
ID:- 200



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Chinese Ink on Paper
6.5 x 9.5 inches, 1959
ID:- 198

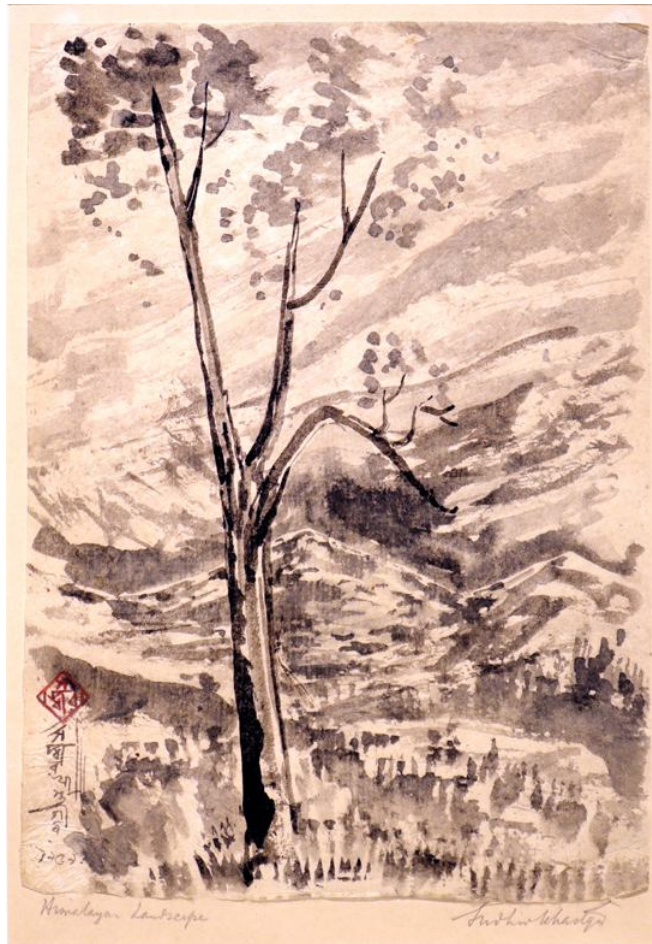


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Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Kurseong
Chinese Ink on Paper
13 x 8.5 inches
ID:- 201



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Himalayan Landscape
Chinese Ink on Paper
13.5 x 9 inches, 1959
ID:- 202



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Srinagar
Chinese Ink on Paper
8 x 16 inches, 1960
ID:- 020



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Bronze
9 x 6 x 5 inches
ID:- 459



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Dancing Woman
Bronze
13 x 5 x 4 inches
ID:- 460



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Nude Study
Bronze
12 x 5 x 5 inches
ID:- 461



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Suicide of a Widow for Food
Charcoal on Paper
6.5 x 13 inches, 1943
ID:- 215



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
The End of a Village
Charcoal on Paper
7 x 12 inches, 1943
ID:- 213



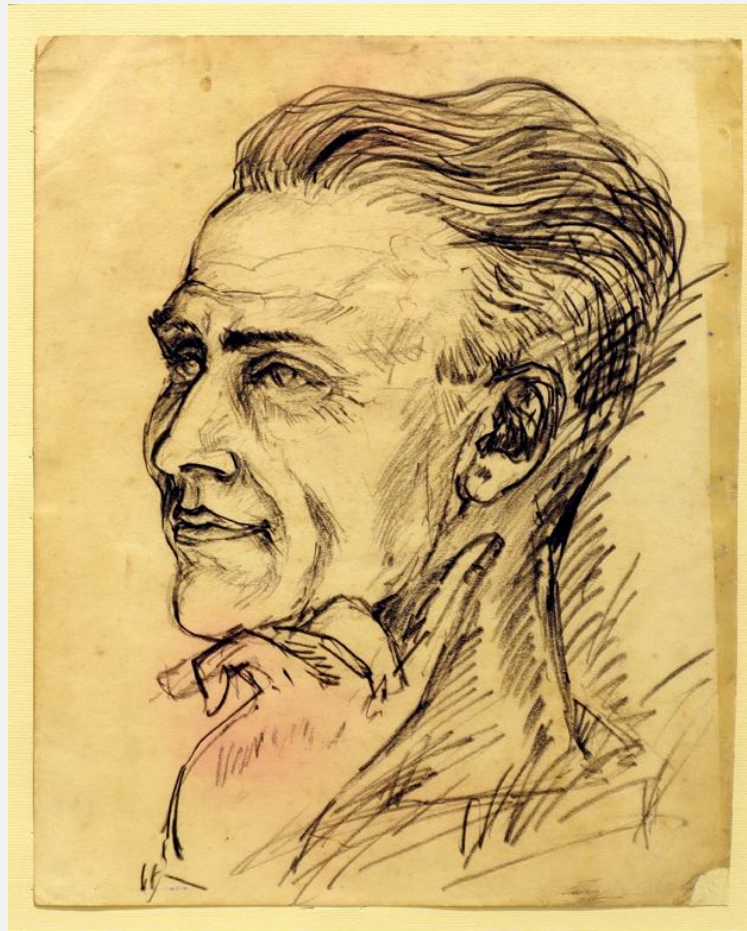
Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Agarwal Bathing
Charcoal on Paper
8 x 13 inches, 1943
ID:- 219



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore
Pencil on Paper
11 x 7.5 inches, 1951
ID:- 234



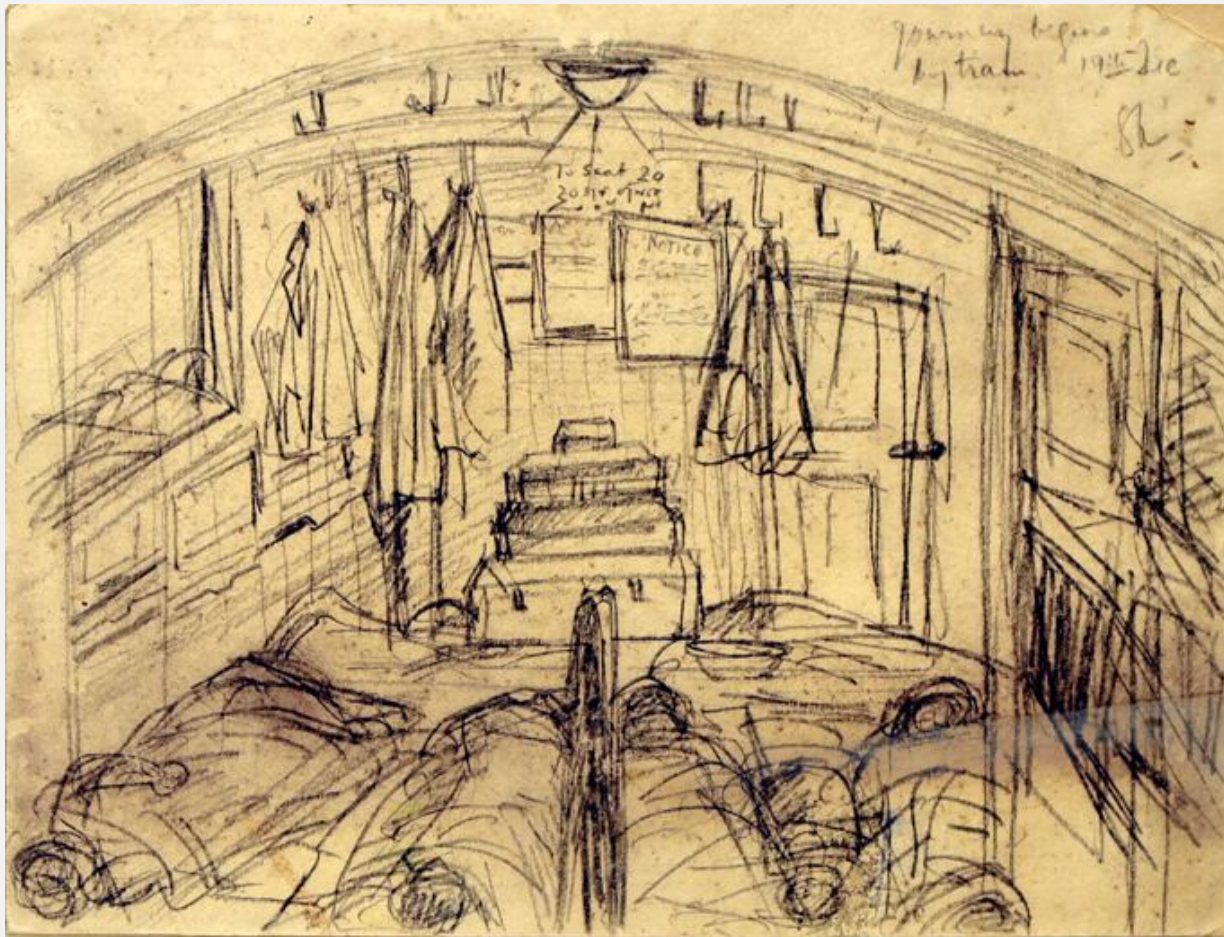
Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Charcoal on Paper
9 x 7 inches
ID:- 243



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Charcoal on Paper
5.5 x 8.5 inches, 1948
ID:- 233



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Journey begins by train, 19th Dec
Charcoal on Paper
9 x 11.5 inches
ID:- 230



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Paris Exhibition
Charcoal on Paper
6.5 x 9.5 inches, 1937
ID:- 231



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Fishing in a dirty canal
Pencil on Paper
8 x 13 inches, 1946
ID:- 052



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Charcoal on Paper
8.5 x 4.5 inches, 1946
ID:- 235



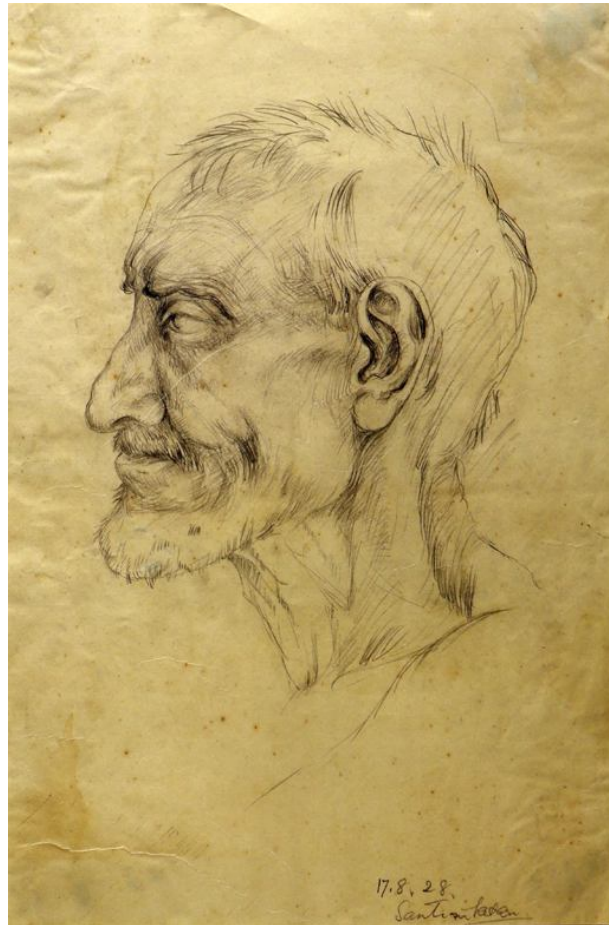
Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Charcoal on Paper
9.5 x 6.5 inches, 1937
ID:- 220



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
On the way to Village
Charcoal on Paper
8 x 13 inches
ID:- 229



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Santiniketan
Pencil on Paper
17 x 10.5 inches, 17-08-1928
ID:- 061



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Charcoal on Paper
12 x 9 inches, 1943
ID:- 212



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Worried Farmers
Charcoal on Paper
5.5 x 10.5 inches, 26 Dec. 1943
ID:- 214



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Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Recto: Paris, 30th July 1937
Verso: *Mother & Child*, 1937
Charcoal on Paper
9.5 x 6.5 inches
ID:- 240

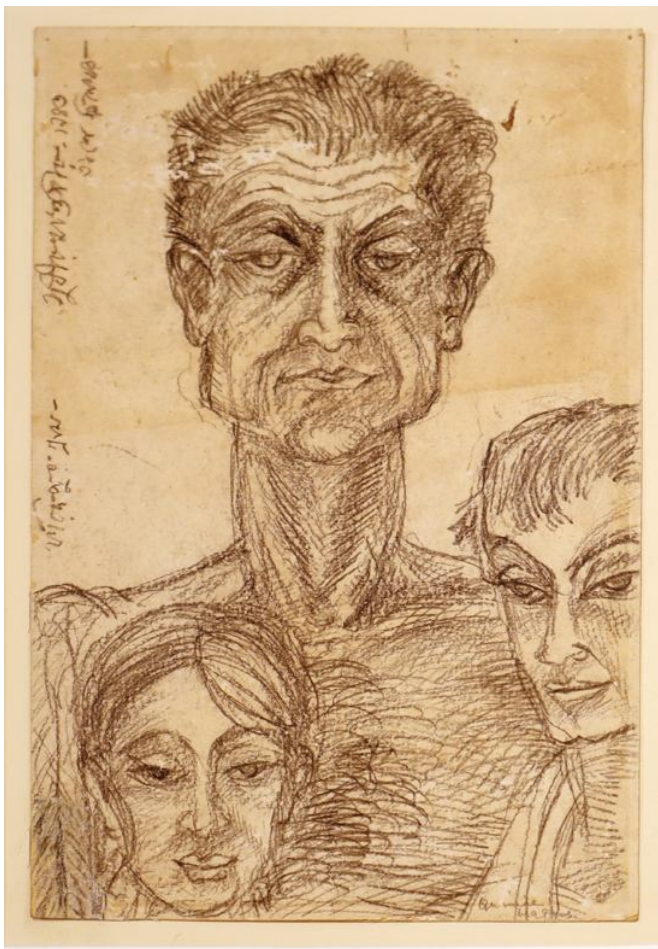


Recto



Verso

Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Charcoal on Paper
13 x 8 inches, 26 Dec. 1946
ID:- 060



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Charcoal on Paper
16 x 8.5 inches
ID:- 221



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Charcoal on Paper
14 x 10 inches, 1938
ID:- 226



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Kontai
Pencil on Paper
8.5 x 4.5 inches, 1943
ID:- 455



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Untitled
Pencil on Paper
29.5 x 19.5 inches, 1962
ID:- 107



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Gandhiji
Woodcut on Paper
5 x 7 inches, 1946
ID:- 026



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Hungry Family
Woodcut on Paper
8 x 6 inches, 1942
ID:- 205



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Drummer
Woodcut on Paper
4 x 7 inches
ID:- 211



Sudhir Ranjan Khastgir
Flyer
Woodcut on Paper
8.5 x 5 inches, 1962
ID:- 210

