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Press Release

CHRISTIE'S

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FRANCIS NEWTON SOUZA REVEALED & CELEBRATED AT CHRISTIE'S IN JUNE



The Art of F. N. Souza

9 June 2010 - Christie's South Kensington

London – Christie's unveils an unprecedented sale of works of art selected from the Estate of Francis Newton Souza to take place on 9 June 2010 as part of the South Asian Modern + Contemporary Art auction. Comprising over 150 lots created throughout the artist's career - from the late 1930s through to the 1990s and through his time in India, London and New York – the sale includes paintings, drawings, collages, watercolours and prints as well as ten revealing sketch books. Estimates range from £1,000 to £150,000, offering collectors an extraordinary and unprecedented opportunity to participate in an event that celebrates and commemorates one of 20th Century India's leading artists.

"Christie's has been given unprecedented access to the life, studio and works of the late F.N. Souza to stage an auction event that will honour this extraordinary artist," said Hugo Weihe, Senior Vice President, Christie's. "This sale encapsulates the evolution of an artist both in terms of media represented and also the chronology of his development. We are also delighted to offer works that were exhibited at the Tate Britain retrospective alongside many previously unpublished pieces".

Early Years in India

Francis Newton Souza was born in 1924 in Goa, India. Raised as a Roman Catholic, he attended St Xavier's, a prestigious Jesuit school in Bombay. In 1940, he enrolled at the Sir JJ School of Art,

Bombay. After the Second World War, the Indian Independence movement revived and his painting became increasingly political, a development he claimed led to his expulsion from art school. In 1947, Souza co-founded the Progressive Artists' Group. Their goal was to find a powerful new artistic expression, distancing itself from established academic traditions. The initial political content of the artists' work gave way to a sensuous eroticism which provoked the disapproval of the art establishment. This attitude may have prompted Souza's decision to move to England in 1949 following an invitation from the British High Commissioner to exhibit there.



A stunning *Self-portrait*, watercolour, dated 1949 (estimate: £12,000-18,000), *illustrated top*, is a study to the life-size nude Souza produced that same year. The latter featured in a solo exhibition at Tate Britain in 2005. This work shows the care that the artist undertook with preparatory works and illustrates the layered application later evident in the oil painting. The angular outlines and strong brushstrokes, coupled with opposing colours, show affinity with artists Oskar Kokoscha and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. From the same period, *Christ Head*, oil on board, 1948 (estimate: £50,000-80,000), *illustrated left*, reflects the artist's occupation with religion, a theme he revisited throughout his career which stems from his strict Roman Catholic upbringing and his anti-clerical stance on the

Church. His perception of sin and oppressive political order informs his treatment of subjects like the Crucifixion and explores man's brutality towards its own species. This heavy impasto work with its stained glass effects was of particular such personal importance that he kept the painting in his possession throughout his life. It is labelled NFS (not for sale) on the reverse alluding to this attachment.

London – 1950s and 1960s

After his arrival in 1949, Souza's first years in Britain were challenging as he was an unknown to the art world, despite his certain notoriety in India. He could not gain access to the support structure that provided teaching posts and grants for British artists, and was further distanced by the pervasive racism of British society in the 1950s. Souza struggled to make a living as a painter or a writer. The turning point came in 1954 when he became close to author Stephen Spender, who helped with introductions in the art world. This led to his first exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA).

In 1955, Victor Musgrave's Gallery One mounted Souza's first solo exhibition in Britain, and from 1956 until the early 1960s, he was also heavily supported by Harold Kovner, an American patron.

"For me, the all pervading and crucial themes of the predicament of man are those of religion and sex" stated Souza in an interview in 1964. His style and subject matter became more extreme after his move to Britain and the raw, expressionist style that he had already developed found a context in the work of Francis Bacon and Graham Sutherland. Bacon had already created works that fused religious and erotic

imagery, however Souza's works did not express the horror of the human condition rather they revealed the salvation of mankind through Christ's sacrifice. Dating from this period is Souza's *Untitled (The Pope)*, signed Souza 55, ink on paper (estimate: £4,500-6,000), *illustrated right*. The artist's travels afforded him viewings of Diego Velazquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1650) and Francisco de Goya's *Pinturas Negras* (c. 1819), which incidentally are often cited as influence to Souza's black paintings of 1965. These works also influenced a series of disturbing images such as this example. Much like Bacon's obsession with this subject matter, Souza also paid attention to the mouth and teeth with heavily-loaded symbolism.



Red Curse, 1962, painted on black satin, is a powerful work exhibited at Souza's Gallery One solo exhibition in that year. Its composition brings to mind the artist's interest in the notions of biological mutations and the nuclear bomb at this time. A dramatic work, it is enhanced by the artist's choice of media as it was typical of Souza to experiment painting on a wealth of different fabrics in his process.



Reflecting London as a source of inspiration are *Red Mansion*, 1964 (estimate: £20,000-30,000), *illustrated left*, a classic Souza landscape inspired by his immediate surroundings. The characteristic lopsided houses and rich primary colours, fractured with bold, black lines, creates a world of choreographed chaos depicted with a rigorous energy that is synonymous with the artist.

Also from this period is *Untitled (Inner Circle)*, signed Souza 1965 (estimate: £35,000-45,000), *illustrated below*, a set of twenty two drawings produced by the artist in 1966 for the Macmillan published novel 'Inner Circle' by author Jerzy Peterkiewicz. This group includes the artist's personal copy of the book along with additional drawings not reproduced for this project.



Late 1960s – New York

In 1967, after shows in Europe, India and the United States, Souza moved to New York. Although he struggled to find an audience in America, his years there produced a dramatic period of technical experimentation.

Unpublished Diary Extract: 5 October 1969

I asked Barbara to describe my work in three words: she said, you paint “Sex, Violence and the Mind!” Matisse said, “I should like any man who is feeling defeated to gain a sense of calm and repose when he looks at my paintings”. I would like my paintings to disturb the calm, the smug – in fact they do and that is why I am described by a German critic as a painter who makes Expressionists look friendly!’

Unpublished Diary Extract: 1 October 1970

New York – Manhattan in particular, is a dazzling hell-heaven on earth. Its truly the most original city in the world, churning out the past present and future day and night non stop.

More Recent Works – 1990s onwards

Building on his skill as a draughtsman, Souza experimented with various forms of interventions in his process, as seen in his innovative ‘chemical drawings’. These used solvents as the artist was fascinated by the notion of creating art out of nothing, painting without paint. *Untitled* (Couple), 1997, (estimate: £5,000-7,000) is a fascinating example. This playful, liberated late work exudes a more lighthearted Souza, drawing figures on recycled wrapping paper that no longer seem tormented and angry but are regal.

Technical Range and Virtuosity

Additional highlights in the sale include sketch books and works on paper which offer a fascinating insight into his working methods and development.

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Images available on request
Visit Christie’s Web site at www.christies.com

Notes to Editors:

Christie’s holds the international auction record for Francis Newton Souza: *Birth*, 1955, realised £1,273,250 / \$2,500,982 US on 11 June 2008. This concurrently stands as the international auction record for any Modern Indian work of art.

Souza died in 2002 in Mumbai. The sale takes place on behalf of the Executors of the Estate of F. N. Souza.

The South Asian Modern + Contemporary Art auction will continue on June 10 with a highly selective sale of works by leading Indian and Pakistani artists.