

IMPRINT Riten Mozumdar Curated by Chatterjee & Lal and Ushmita Sahu

Riter Mozumdan

An exhibition at Chatterjee & Lal, January 10 - February 29, 2020

In the creative industries, it is often the confluence of talent and circumstance that produces most impact in the world. The career of Riten Mozumdar is a perfect example. From the early 1950s, as independent India began asserting itself on the international stage, Mozumdar was able to articulate a late Modernist aesthetic through an extraordinary and diverse range of mediums: painting, sculpture, furniture, textiles, fashion, and more. He was active for the whole of the second half of the 20th century, working both in India and beyond. During his lifetime, his work was exhibited in a number of major North American museums including MoMA and the American Crafts Museum. Today, fourteen years after his death, it is possible to appreciate his enormous contribution to art and design.

Riten Mozumdar, the youngest of nine siblings, was born in Kosur, Punjab, in 1927. His father, Surendranath Mozumdar, was a doctor by profession. Whilst still very young, his father passed away and his mother, Prembala Mozumdar, took over the responsibility of her children, bringing them up through the upheaval of the Independence struggle. Riten's eldest sister was Sucheta Kripalani, a renowned freedom fighter who went on to become the first woman chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and of Independent India.

Mozumdar trained in Santiniketan, West Bengal, during the late-1940s. Made famous through the vision of Rabindranath Tagore, this was a time of great creativity at the institution. Young Mozumdar studied under brilliant faculty such as Benode Bihari Mukherjee. Mukherjee would go on to play something of a mentor's role in Mozumdar's early professional years; indeed, it was on his recommendation that the young graduate stayed for some months in Nepal, undertaking training in craft techniques. It was this early experience, working across mediums, that unleashed the polymath in Mozumdar.



Install shots | Chatterjee & Lal





Install shots | Chatterjee & Lal



The mid-to-late 1950s would see Mozumdar travel, work and exhibit extensively in Europe and North America. It was during this time that he worked with Marimekko in Helsinki, producing designs that would lay the ground for his distinctive visual vocabulary. Once back in India, the 1960s and 1970s were an incredibly productive period for Mozumdar, and his creative promiscuity was evident throughout. This was a moment in which both state and private industry were actively engaged in the formation of design solutions appropriate to a young nation. Mozumdar set to work on a dizzying array of activities, both on his own and as part of collaborative efforts: examples include furniture design and product design (Taaru, a Delhi-based furniture company inspired by Scandinavian design, and the All India Handicrafts Board), textile design (M Print, Mozumdar's own label, and Fab India), fashion (Pallavi, a clothes line that was particular popular in the Middle-East and Australia), and exhibition design (in particular, for Sachdev Eggleston Associates who were responsible for major expos of the period). In India, nearly everyone involved in the art and crafts sector would have encountered Mozumdardesigned objects and products in some form or other. In particular, his work with Fab India achieved iconic status and, over the years, has become synonymous with the brand's identity. The startling coloured geometric shapes, especially circular forms, printed on all manner of fabrics for use around the house, were seemingly ubiquitous in urban Indian homes in the 1970s and 1980s.

Mozumdar counted many cultural titans of the period as his personal friends. Charles Correa became particularly close after the two met aboard a ship sailing to India from the UK in the 1950s (it was Correa who was to design Mozumdar's Delhi home). K.G. Subramanyan, the great late modernist artist, was also a friend for many decades and it was he who urged Mozumdar to move back to Santiniketan in the 1980s. The spirit of the age was decidedly cross-disciplinary and encouraged artistic producers to seek out those of a similar mindset.

Described by friends as shy and soft-spoken, Mozumdar was not one for continuous self-promotion. He was, however, very sure of his likes and dislikes, as his private notes and public statements make clear. In a recent interview, Monika Correa, artist and wife of the late Charles Correar, recalls Mozumdar's heightened aesthetic taste:

"Charles wanted to make some sarees for me, so he and Riten went out to buy plain mull cotton for six sarees and Riten pinned them on to his table. Charles made these strokes and borders and Riten steamed them. But when I wore the sarees they did not look as good as they had on the table... Riten said – Charles when you made them on the table, you thought of it as a flat canvas and it looked beautiful as a design. But when it is worn on the body the saree takes on different curves, so the strokes you made can no longer be read as a stroke. The body and design have to be in synergy. You have to place the block where it shows up. You have to understand the way the body moves."



Install shots | Chatterjee & Lal





Install shots | Chatterjee & Lal

Mozumdar's later years saw him return to painting, some forty years after completing his art studies. Employing the technique of acid dyes on silk, he seems to have been consciously collapsing the boundaries between design and art. The artworks produced during this period combine elements of abstraction and calligraphy. Often referencing the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, the letters play hide and seek with the viewer as they merge with swirling lines and blocks of colour. These exquisite paintings are the summation of a life engaged in creative pursuits.

Taking stock of Riten Mozumdar's career, it becomes clear that to replicate the same variety of practice in today's art and design milieu would be virtually impossible. Even in his own day, he stood out amongst his peers for the sheer breadth of his technical know-how. Those early years moving through Santiniketan, Nepal, and, then, Europe and America, formed in Mozumdar a world view that set him apart. The key to his success was his ability to marry a love of local arts and crafts practices with a deep understanding of international design history. In bringing together the different strands of his practice, it is hoped there might be a renewed appreciation of this true pioneer.

~ Mortimer Chatterjee, Tara Lal and Ushmita Sahu

This text was published in Architectural Digest January/ February 2020.



Install shots | Chatterjee & Lal





Install shots | Chatterjee & Lal





Install shots | Chatterjee & Lal



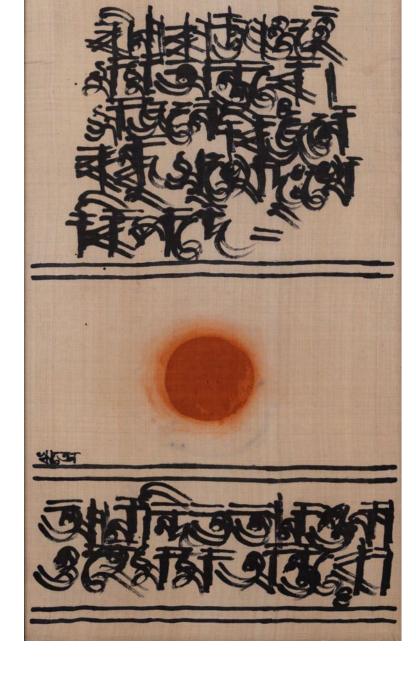


Install shots | Chatterjee & Lal

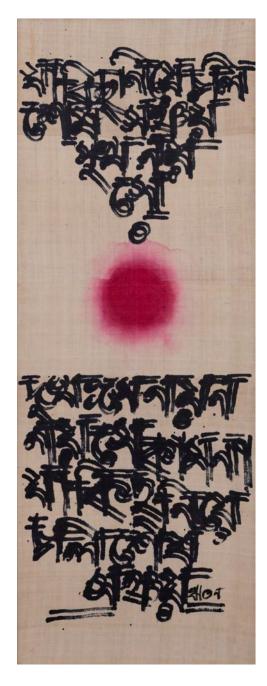




Riten Mozumdar's move to Santiniketan in 1988, marked his return to art making. He created a series of calligraphic paintings made with acid dyes on silk with a drop shadow effect to the clusters of script. Mostly monochromatic relieved at times by splash of red or blue, these works too, exhibit Mozumdar's lifelong preoccupation with text. However, unlike his designs which primarily use it as a pattern or motif, by using excerpts from Tagore's poems such as "Dinanto Belay" (End of the day) which has specific inferences of death and angst, the artist underlines certain conceptual preoccupations. This independent series, beautiful in its austerity marks the culmination of Mozumdar's dynamic and syncretic vision that straddles the spectrum of both the arts and crafts and disavows categorization.



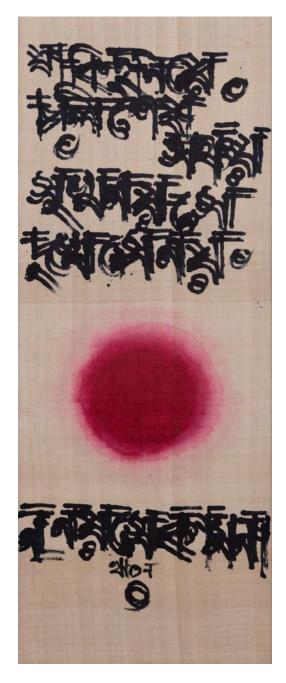
Untitled
Acid dyes on silk
After 1988
Courtesy of Chatterjee & Lal



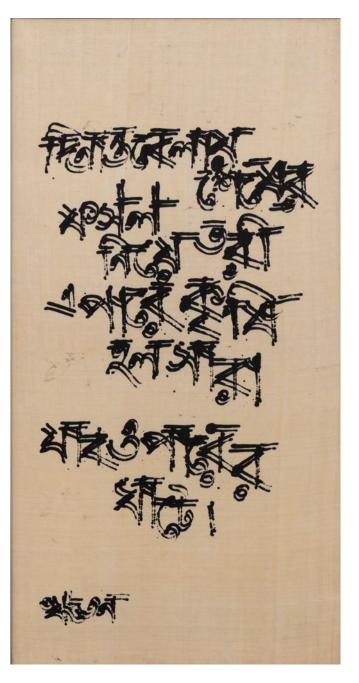
Untitled Acid dyes on silk After 1988 Courtesy of Chatterjee & Lal



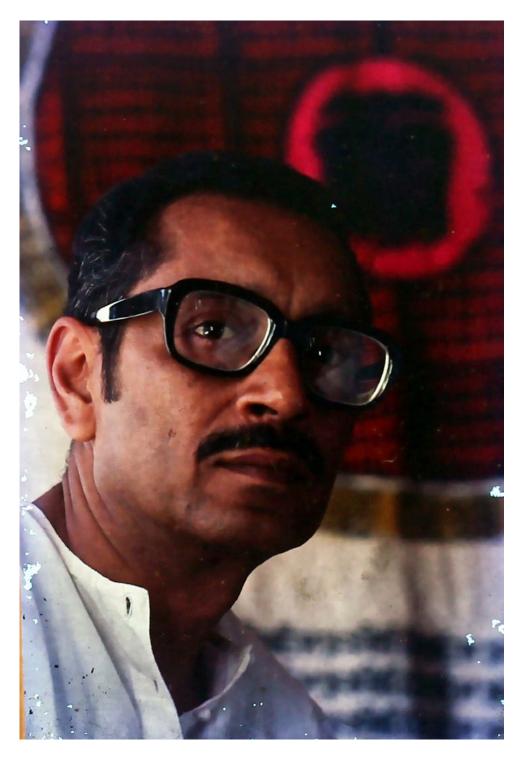
**Untitled**Acid dyes on silk
After 1988
Courtesy of Chatterjee & Lal



Untitled Acid dyes on silk After 1988 Courtesy of Chatterjee & Lal



Untitled
Acid dyes on silk
After 1988
Courtesy of Chatterjee & Lal



# **CURATORIAL ESSAY**

**Ushmita Sahu** 

In the decades immediately following independence, Riten Mozumdar (1927 – 2006) was one of the most significant artist-designers of India's modernist design renaissance. Responding to the socioeconomic and cultural upheaval sweeping through the country, Mozumdar and his contemporaries such as Nelly Sethna, Ratna Fabri, Shona Ray and others, approached design as a complex nation-building idiom with a dedicated focus on modernisation as well as revivalism. Inventiveness, variety and deference for both historical perspectives as well as for newer icons of style and techniques characterised Mozumdar's oeuvre. Between the 1950s and 1980s, his celebrated and influential practice heralded a new brand of aesthetics. He was proclaimed by Jaya Appaswamy as an 'artist-designer whose creativity pointed forward into the future'. Mozumdar's body of work displays a diversity of range and materials exemplifying a rare mastery over mediums and techniques.

Best remembered for his contribution to the world of design, Mozumdar, however, referred to himself as an artist-sculptor. His tryst with art began as a student in Tagore's Santiniketan between 1946-50, coinciding with the dawn of an independent India. Educated in painting, sculpture, design and crafts at Kala Bhavana, by luminaries such as Nandalal Bose, Ram Kinkar Baij and Benodebehari Mukherjee, Mozumdar was the product of a schooling which emphasised engagement with heritage as well as arts and crafts as integral to an all-round education. He cherished his relationship with Benodebehari , who came to look upon Mozumdar as a son.

**Riten Mozumdar and a wall hanging designed by him** At his friend Jasbir Sachdev's residence Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar





Top: Terracotta bas relief of the cooperative tea shop done for Ram Kinkar Baij's sculpture class Kala Bhavana. Santiniketan Circa 1946-49 Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar



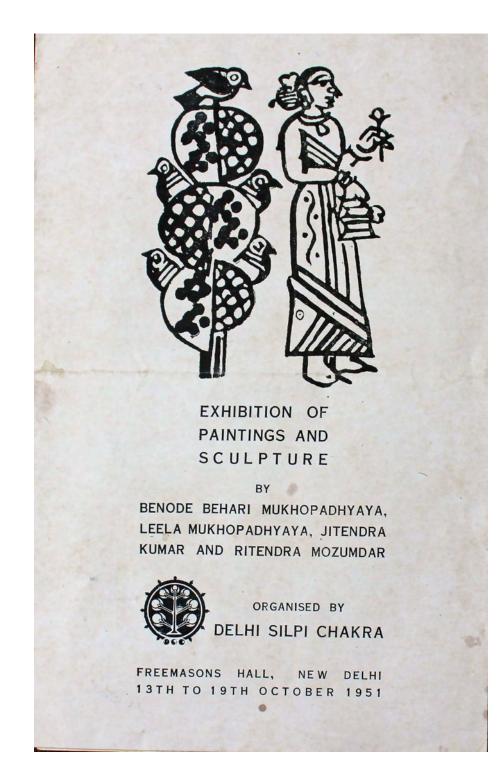
Subsequently, under Benodebehari's quidance, Mozumdar devoted a year in Nepal training in traditional crafts and design with master craftsman Kulasundar Shilakarmi. During the 1950s, Nepal was still a feudal society with no demarcations between art and craft. Here, Mozumdar developed an appreciation for, and knowledge of, indigenous wood and stone sculpting, metal casting, sheet and beaten metal crafts, banner painting and block making for book printing. Around 1951, he went to Delhi and later to Mussourie where Benodebehari had started a summer school and block printing unit. Here, both teacher and student created original block-printed material. By now, Mozumdar had exhibited several times with Benodebehari, Leela Mukherjee and in one instance, with Ram Kinkar Baij. To quote KG Subramanyan "Between 1949 and 57 he broke on the Indian art scene with an impressive spate of exhibitions of painting and sculpture singly or with others."

## Bottom left: **Untitled (Chalta Flowers)**

Tempera painting by Riten Mozumdar, executed in Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan Circa 1946 Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar

### Top right:

Riten Mozumdar (bottom row second from right) with batchmates Private collection Circa 1946-1950 Courtesy Swati Ghosh





From left to right: Benode Behari Mukherjee, Leela Mukherjee, Kularatnam, Kancha and Riten Mozumdar at Kularatnam's house in Kathmandu, Nepal Circa 1949-1951
Courtesy R Siva Kumar

#### Left:

Front cover of 1951 exhibition catalogue Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar

Positive media reviews of his work helped Mozumdar gain a two-year scholarship to study with sculptor Boris Kalin at the Academy of Fine Arts, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia. From 1955 to 56 he trained in an academic style, a marked departure from his previous training at either Santiniketan or Nepal. Whilst in Europe, Mozumdar received another bursary from Giuseppe Tucci, an Italian scholar of East Asian studies, to visit Italy. After completing his studies, Mozumdar made his way to Finland and was working at Arabia, a Finnish ceramics company, when Armi Ratia the founder of Printex-Marimekko discovered him. He worked as a textile designer with Marimekko for ten months between 1956 and 57, making numerous original designs for their collection. The designs that he made here clearly demarcate a departure in perception and process; a move away from his earlier lyricism towards a crisper, more minimal, pared-down approach. Although a full-blown move towards abstract sensibilities would take a few more years.

After Finland, Mozumdar travelled through the United Kingdom and the USA studying sculpture, ceramics, silkscreen and visiting museums before returning to India in December 1958. On the ship back to India, he met Charles Correa for the first time. They would both go on to represent India at the World Design Conference in Japan in 1960 and, indeed, Mozumdar forged a lifelong friendship with the architect. Together with Charles and Monika Correa, Mozumdar's close-knit circle of friends included his sister Chitra and her husband Jolly Barua, a designer who worked with Shilpi and HHEC. They would meet often in Mumbai or at Mozumdar's house in Delhi and discuss art, design, or films. Correa also designed Mozumdar's house in Delhi.



Riten Mozumdar at Academy of Fine Arts Ljubljana, Yugoslavia Circa 1955-1956 Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar



**Riten Mozumdar with Armi Ratia** (founder of Marimekko) in Finland Circa 1956-1957 Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar

Right top: Riten Mozumdar (right) and Charles Correa at the World Design Conference Tokyo Japan 1960 Courtesy Monika Correa

Right bottom:

Monika Correa in a sari by Riten Mozumdar

Block print on Mul cotton

Design entitled 'Rome By Night'

Circa 1970s

Photograph taken by Charles Correa

Courtesy Monika Correa

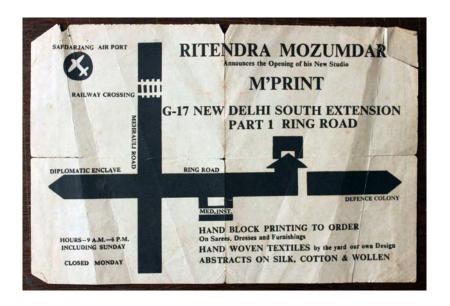






Untitled (Babur's Seal) Screenprint on cloth Circa mid-to-late 1960s Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar

Card announcing the opening of M-Print design studio With directions & address Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar



Upon returning to India, Mozumdar's original vision and distinctive approach gained instantaneous attention. He started a studio - M Prints - out of a garage in 1959, and within two years, had advanced to an outlet in South Extension with a dedicated workshop and thirty employees. Mozumdar crafted fabrics, dress materials, furnishings, saris, household linen and much more. He was involved at every stage of the manufacture, at times doing everything himself, but he also worked with lineal block carvers and printers from Rajasthan and Delhi. Mozumdar adapted traditional blocks to create contemporary motifs. He approached design like an artist, largely making unique or limited edition hand-crafted works.

Throughout his long career, calligraphy and text held a great fascination for Mozumdar. Numerous designs feature various adaptations and permutations of Persian, Tibetan, Pali, Devanagari, Sanskrit, Bengali and other scripts. Inspired by the Namavali gamchas of U.P. and Bengal, Mozumdar produced series of designs celebrating text in its purely visual element, divorced from a religious or social context; in some instances, indeed, superimposition rendered the text indecipherable. He also used images of ancient seals and stamps as elements in his designs. In a well-known work, he magnified the inscriptions on a two-inch Babur's seal into a wall hanging. For Mozumdar, the boundaries between the fine arts and the functional arts were porous. As a result of his art education, his subsequent travels, and learning new design methodologies, Mozumdar was ahead of his time in employing visual exegesis towards the creation of new design perspectives.



**Exhibition of block print fabrics by Riten Mozumdar** Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar



Namdah (felted wool rugs) and furniture exhibition Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay Circa mid 1960s to mid 1970s Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar



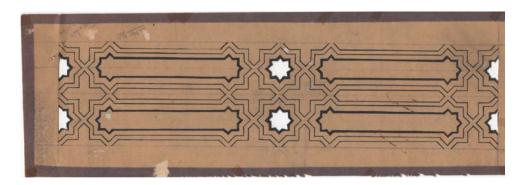
Jalee furniture design All India Handicrafts Board Circa Late 1960's Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar

His work was in high demand and sold through various outlets in India: The Central Cottage Industries Emporium, Delhi; The Cottage and Small Scale Industries Emporium and Chitra, Bombay; and Bengal Home Industries Association and West Bengal Government Sales emporiums, Calcutta. Internationally, products he designed were exported to Liberty's, London; Illums Bolighus, Denmark; and Design Thai, Bangkok. By 1969, he was a name to be reckoned with and counted Prime Minister Indira Gandhi amongst his clientele. She acquired his pieces for personal use as well as gifts for foreign governments and dignitaries.

Between the 1960-80s, Mozumdar was acting consultant to numerous public sector companies and private firms. Prominent amongst these were All India Handicrafts Board (AIHB), TAARU, DCM, Everest Fabrics, Maharashtra Small Scale Industries Development Corporation, The Shop, Handloom Board etc.

In his capacity as a design advisor to AIHB, Mozumdar worked tirelessly to revive the jalee (latticework) work from Saharanpur in Utter Pradesh, and the ivory inlay furniture industry from Hoshiarpur in Punjab. As further proof of his ingenuity, Mozumdar researched and integrated the jalee and archway styles of Indo- Islamic architecture into chairs, tables, screens. Adding hand-cut jalee emphasized light and shade as an intrinsic part of the object, adding airiness and transparency to what might otherwise be solid, heavy and dark pieces of furniture.

Mozumdar designed a line of furniture which could be called contemporary-classic for Minnie Boga's TAARU. He also had his own line of furniture made by his trusted carpenter, Yasin. The foray into furniture could be seen as an extension of his experience in wood carving and sculpture. These contemporary designs had noticeable Japanese, Scandinavian and American influences, although at times using jute strings to weave the seats, he added an indigenous twist. His contemporary designs were indicative of the tastes of the times: low seating, minimal lines, simple and fuss-free.





Top: Ink on paper drawings used for making design templates Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar

#### Bottom: Reception desk designed by Riten Mozumdar Civil Aviation Pavilion, 1972 Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar

#### Top:

Metal template

for jalee work on wooden furniture

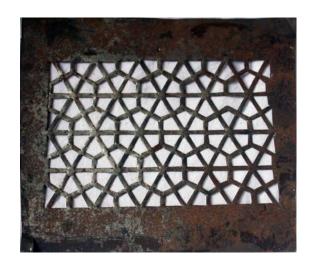
All India Handicrafts Board (AIHB) Circa late 1960s

Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar

#### **Bottom:**

Contemporary furniture designed by Riten Mozumdar

Circa late 1960s to mid 1970s Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar





For AIHB, Mozumdar had also worked with Kashmiri Floor Coverings, Felting, Embroidered & Applique Rugs. Mozumdar re-contextualised and transformed his experience of working with wool, when he combined the traditional Namdah, in an inspired act of synergy, with tie and dye, discharge print, calligraphic blocks and embroidery. Utilitarian rugs usually meant for the floors, in his hands, were converted into objects' des art that could now be proudly displayed on the walls. These comprise an important part of his legacy. Compared by many to tantric art, Mozumdar was insistent that his principal aim was the exploration of geometric forms, and in doing so certain comparisons were bound to arise.

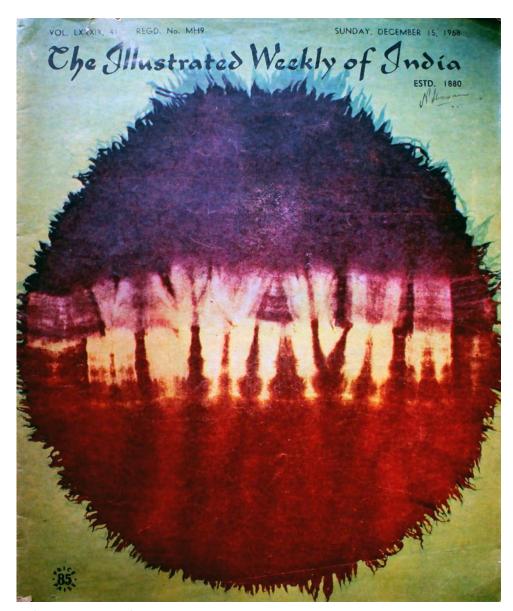
Mazumdar was part of the 'Living India' show at MOMA in 1954-55 and The Scandinavian Design Cavalcade in 1956-57. He represented the Indian Cooperative Union at the World Design Conference, Tokyo in 1960 where he was also exhibited his wall hangings. In 1971 two of his shows -'Tie Dye Rugs'- One Man Show of Felted Rugs, Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York and 'Tie & Dye & Printed Felt Rugs' at the Kunstindustrimuseet, Copenhagen won him recognition and critical acclaim. In 1985 he exhibited in a group show 'For the Floor' at the American Craft Museum II, New York. This International Exhibition of Contemporary Handmade Rugs travelled to various centres throughout the USA. Meanwhile, he continued to exhibit regularly in many venues across India including The Ford Foundation, India International Centre and Triveni Kala Sangam in Delhi and Jahanqir Art Gallery Mumbai.

Top: Page from a namdah sketch book Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar

Riten Mozumdar with namdahs in Delhi 1978 Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar





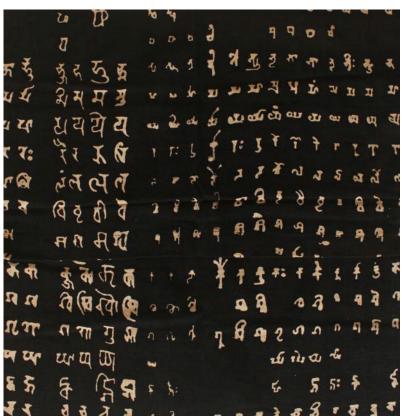


A Riten Mozumdar designed namdah Cover of The Illustrated Weekly of India 1968 Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar



**Cover of Design Magazine edited by Patwant Singh** 1967 Courtesy Meher Wilshaw













An important phase of Mozumdar's career was his association with Fabindia which began in 1966 and lasted until 2000. John Bissell and Mozumdar were very good friends and initially, the latter had created some paisley prints that had been well received. So, when Bissell wished to start a line of contemporary designs in 1977, Mozumdar was given a carte blanche. Using geometrical shapes in bold and colourful blocks and silkscreen, he created a line of household linen that became hugely successful and synonymous with the Fabindia ethos. To quote Meena Chowdhury, Former chairperson Fabindia "Riten burst on the scene with his graphic designs, his bold colours, his stark geometric statement and I think that caught the imagination, particularly of the young. As far as Fabindia was concerned, for almost 20 years there was no stopping the kind of desire that people had for these bold statements and designs... I recall people used to wait for the collection every week."

#### Left (Top to bottom):

Calligraphic motif Wood block Circa 1955-1956 Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar

Nalanda V Cushion cover Block print on cotton Designed for Fabindia After 1977 Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar Target
Bed and cushion cover
Block print on cotton
Designed for Fabindia
After 1977
Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar







In addition to his many accomplishments, Mozumdar also designed garments for Fabindia, Design Thai Bangkok, his label 'Riten', but predominantly for Bharati Sharma's label Pallavi. These were exported to the Middle East, Australia and Canada. His clothing line was simple, striking and used dramatic geometric motifs to create a contemporary allure. Whether for export or the local market, these were made for the independent modern woman.



#### Top to bottom:

#### **Butterfly dress**

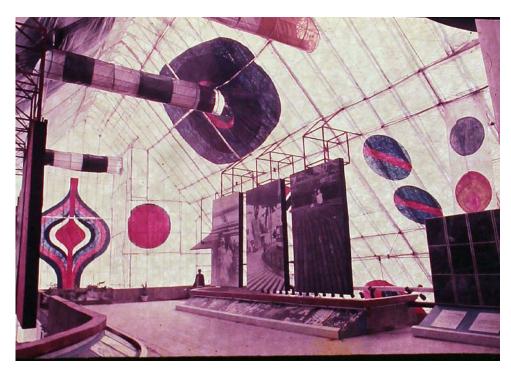
Block print on cotton Designed by Riten Mozumdar for Fabindia Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar

#### Sketch Book

Showing drawing details of Butterfly dress Courtesy heirs of Riten Mozumdar



Clothes designed by Riten Mozumdar for Bharati Sharma's label Pallavi Circa 1970's – 1980's Courtsey heirs of Riten Mozumdar



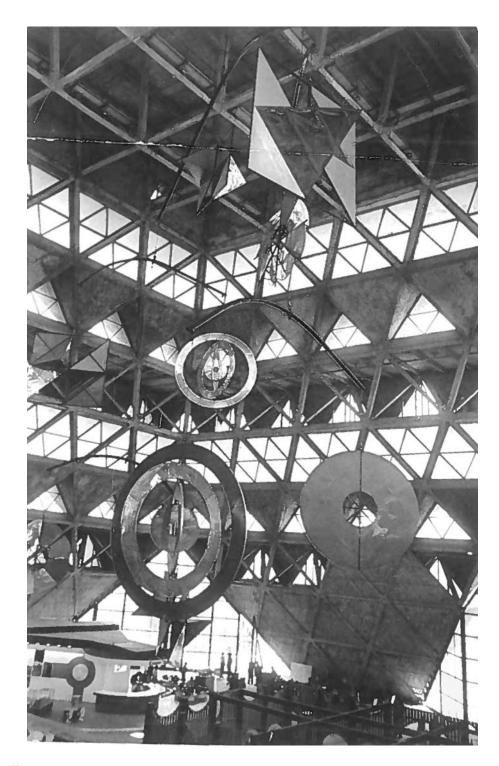
**BHEL Asia '72 Pavilion**Sheathing designed by Riten Mozumdar 1972
Courtesy Sachdev Eggleston Associates

Never one to rest on his laurels, Mozumdar was always on the lookout for newer challenges. His first large-scale public commission was the 1968 Gandhi Darshan-'India of My Dreams' Pavilion for which he created an awning that symbolically depicted the religions of India. For the India Pavilion at Expo'70 in Osaka, Japan, he created a series of wall hangings in wool. Between 1972 and the late 80's Mozumdar collaborated with Sachdev Eggleston Associates on several high-profile and award-winning projects such as the 1972 Third Asian Trade Fair Mural in Plastic for BHEL (Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd.) Pavilion. For the Asia'72 Hall of Nations at Pragati Maidan Delhi, Mozumdar built a massive mobile sculpture in wood, iron, plastic and paint, covering 20 metres in width and 12.5 metres in height that gained reputation as the world's largest mobile sculpture. He worked for International Trade fair in Algiers during the Non-Aligned Conference of 1973, on Interiors for the Ashoka Restaurant in Bangalore, Akbar and Surya Hotels in Delhi and other major projects in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Nepal and Thailand. In each instance, his vision of the design element was always integral to the project as a whole, with Mozumdar displaying a keen understanding of possibilities inherent in any material. He was also appreciative of working collaboratively with architects or engineers and partnered with several important architects of the time, for instance - Jasbir Sachdev, Rosemary Eggleston, Ram Sharma, Rajinder Kumar, Raj Rewal, Ravi Sikri.

Mozumdar was a Member, Governing Council, NID from 1977-81. Upon his return to Santiniketan, Visva Bharati University invited him to take on the role of Honorary Visiting Professor at Kala Bhavana (1990-2002). He was also advisor to the Board of Studies at Shilpa Sadan, Sriniketan. At the request of the University, he had put together a proposal on 'How to set up a printing unit at Sriniketan', although, ultimately nothing came of it. The University also honoured his contributions to the field of art by bestowing him with the Gagan-Abani Puraskar in 1999.

Riten Mazumdar passed away in 2006 leaving behind an illustrious career spanning five decades. In his lifetime, Mozumdar had worked and exhibited prolifically both nationally and internationally, yet today his immense legacy remains largely forgotten. To redress this lacuna, Riten Mozumdar: IMPRINT foregrounds this pioneering polymath's narrative which has, with time, been pushed to the margins of documented history.

Chatterjee and Lal is honoured to host this first comprehensive exhibition based on ongoing research and documentation by Riten Mozumdar scholar Ushmita Sahu. The show assembles never before seen archival material including namdas, furnishings, dress and sarees, scarves, design samples, wood blocks, metal dice for jalee work, drawings, photographs, calligraphy paintings series and more.





# Left to right:

Indian Engineering Trade Fair Monumental mobile sculptures in wood, iron, plastic and paint by Riten Mozumdar 1975 Courtesy Sachdev Eggleston Associates

Silk wall murals designed by Riten Mozumdar Ashoka Restaurant, Bangalore 1972 Courtesy Sachdev Eggleston Associates

# **Acknowledgments**

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Aman Nath

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Bharati Sharma

Bikram Grewal

Bim Bissell

Bratin & Srilekha Chattopadhyay

Chandra Shekhar Saha, Dhaka. Bangladesh

Charu Sharma

Contemporary Crafts Museum, New York

Darshan Shah

David Abraham

Design Museum, Denmark

Didi Contractor

Fabindia Archives

Gaurav Bhatia

Geoffrey Bawa Trust, Sri Lanka

Gulshan Nanda

Ira Chowdhury

Jasbir Sachdev

Jasleen Dhamija

Jogen Chowdhury

Kamal Singh

Kiran Sachdev

Laila Tyabji

Shri Anil Mozumdar

K G Subramanyan

Madhukar Khera

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Malavika Mandal Andrews

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Marimekko Archives, Finland

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Meher Wilshaw

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MOMA archives, New York

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Pria Devi

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Raj & Helen Rewal

Ram Rahman

Ram Sharma

Raseel Basu

Ritu Sethi

Ruby Pal Chowdhury

Sanat Kar

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Swati Ghosh

Tapan Chakravarty

Tim Prentice

Uttara Parikh

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