

Press Release

Prussian Blue:

A Serendipitous Colour that Altered the Trajectory of Art

Kiran Nadar Museum of Art

Curated by Dr Arshiya Lokhandwala

Preview: Monday, September 18, th 2023

Prussian Blue: A Serendipitous Colour that Altered the Trajectory of Art is a survey exhibition of nineteen artists exploring their engagement with the colour Prussian Blue. This invitation is extended to the artist to explore, investigate, and engage with the colour in their own unique and individual manner. Although Prussian Blue is widely used in the artist's colour palette its uniqueness is relatively unknown, nor is its link between art and science that truly transformed the course of art forever.

Blue has historically always been a colour of great magnitude, symbolizing serenity, stability, inspiration, and wisdom. As a colour blue has been prominently visible since the third millennium BC in ancient Egypt produced by grinding down lapis lazuli mined from the mountains of Afghanistan, and used in jewelry, painting and on the sarcophagi. Its lengthy grinding and washing process makes the natural pigment valuable—roughly ten times more highly priced than the stone it comes from and as expensive as gold. This prohibitive pricing and shortage of the material resulted in blue becoming a color of privilege in which the preciousness of the pigment was reserved for sacred subjects, such as the robes of religious figures, depictions of the Virgin Mary and other votive images commissioned paintings for the nobility during the Renaissance. There is an interesting story that suggests that Michelangelo couldn't afford ultramarine (another name for lapis lazuli) for his painting *The Entombment*, leaving it unfinished as the result of his failure to procure the prized pigment. In a similar manner as the west, ground lapis lazuli was also used to adorn the Indian miniature paintings as color held an extreme significance, both in terms of visual representation and symbolic meaning, sometimes, however making way for cheaper substitute such as indigo and azurite due to its exorbitant costs.

Hence it was by accident in a Berlin laboratory (then a center for alchemy) in 1704 that changed the course of art forever. Two German alchemists, Jacob Diesbach and Johann Konrad Dippel chemists rushed to create a batch of cochineal red (made from bugs) accidentally used potash contaminated by (the iron in) animal blood that turned the concoction a deep blue – henceforth known as Prussian blue or *Berliner Blau*, due to its geographic origins and because the Prussian army dyed its soldiers' jackets with the colour.

This new blue pigment was not only affordable but also stable (colourfast) and became an instant sensation. Previously using fast fading vegetable dyes or indigo for blue, Japanese artists found the new pigment revolutionary. Japanese woodblock artist Katsushika Hokusai used it to create his iconic *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, as well as other prints in his *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* series, in 1830, used the new Prussian blue, in combination with the traditional indigo, to great effect.

Many artists turned to Prussian blue to convey deeper emotions including Pablo Picasso whose work between 1901 and 1904 called his "*Blue Period*" that Christie's Impressionist and Modern Art specialist Allegra Bettini adds 'cast[s] a melancholy shade on his works.' Prussian Blue revolutionized an art industry starved of a stable blue pigment to rival the prohibitively expensive ultramarine. The world's first synthetic pigment was thus born.

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The exhibition features works across a range of media, including, painting, sculpture, video, and installation art. For example, the Cyanotypes experiments *Interplay # 139* by Parul Gupta, or *Sea-wind of the Night 1* a painting by Anju Dodiya on fabric which draws on the Japanese woodblock artist Katsushika Hokusai's iconic *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* or the majestic painting by N S Harsha, *Andhar Bahaar* of an astronaut looming in deep space or Mithu Sen's *Tritanopia* (blindness of Blue) that contains no blue to name a few, allow us to contemplate a deeper understanding of colour and its significance.

Participating Artists:

Anita Dube, Anju Dodiya, Alke Reeh, Astha Butail, Atul Dodiya, Desmond Lazaro, Mithu Sen, N S Harsha, Sheba Chhachhi, Shilpa Gupta, Subodh Gupta, Parul Gupta, Prajakta Potnis, Ranbir Kaleka, Sumakshi Singh, Shambhavi, Thukral & Tagra, Vivan Sundaram, Waqas Khan

Link to press pack [here](#)

Visiting the exhibition

Public View: 19 September – 10 December 2023

Venue: KNMA, Noida

Address: KIRAN NADAR MUSEUM OF ART

Plot No. 3 A, Sector 126,

NOIDA, U.P.

Timing: 10:30 A.M - 6:30 P.M

The museum is closed on Monday and all public holidays

Admission to exhibitions is free

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Notes to Editor:

About the Curator

Dr. Arshiya Lokhandwala is an art historian and curator and [Ph. D. Cornell University] Master of Arts in Curating, Goldsmith College, London], and the founding director/curator of Lakeeren Gallery, Mumbai,

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India. Her recent curatorial projects include *The Archaeology of the Self: Archives, Anarchives and the Artist*, *Art Heritage Delhi*, *Of Mimicry, Mimesis and Masquerade & UFUQ: Zarina a tribute*, *I want Tomorrow: Investigating Mental Health Through Art* at Kamalnayan Bajaj Art Gallery *The Future is Here: Art and Technology in Millennial Age* [2019], *Beyond Transnationalism: The Legacy of Post –Independent from India* at Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai [April 2017] and Raza Foundation, Delhi [January 2017], *India Re- Worlded: Seventy Years of Investigating a Nation* [2017] *Given Time: The Gift and Its Offerings* [2016] both at Gallery Odyssey, Mumbai. *After Midnight: Indian Modernism to Contemporary India 1947/1997* [2015] at the Queens Museum, and *Of Gods and Goddesses, Cinema Cricket: The New Cultural Icons of India* for the RPG Foundation in Mumbai, and *Against All Odds: A Contemporary Response to the Historiography of Archiving Collecting and Museums in India* at the Lalit Kala Academy, Delhi [2011].

She teaches South Asian Feminism, Indian Modern and Contemporary Art at the Art History department of the Art Institute of Chicago since 2019. She has curated over 250 shows at Lakeeren Gallery, which included an international program of artists from India, Pakistan, Iran, and Germany & Mexico City. Dr. Lokhandwala writes on globalization, feminism, performance, and new media with a specialization in biennale and large-scale exhibitions.

About KNMA

Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) opened its doors to the public in January 2010. It is a pioneering private museum of Modern and Contemporary art in South Asia, with two branches in New Delhi and Noida. It is a not-for-profit institution that produces rigorous exhibitions, educational and public-focused programs, and publications. Through its work, KNMA emphasises institutional collaborations, and support networks for artists and creative communities, while extending its reach to diverse audiences. The museum houses a growing collection of more than 10,000 artworks, with a focus on the historical trajectories of 20th-century Indian art, alongside the experimental practices of young contemporaries. KNMA was established through the initiative of art collector and philanthropist Kiran Nadar and is supported by the Shiv Nadar Foundation. KNMA is geared to open its new stand-alone museum building in the National Capital Region of Delhi in 2026.

www.knma.in