Stonewall

SPOTLIGHT ON

BHUPEN KHAKAR

Who are Stonewall?

This resource is produced by Stonewall, a UK-based charity that stands for the freedom, equity and potential of all lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, questioning and ace (LGBTQ+) people. At Stonewall, we imagine a world where LGBTQ+ people everywhere can live our lives to the full. Founded in London in 1989, we now work in each nation of the UK and have established partnerships across the globe. Over the last three decades, we have created transformative change in the lives of LGBTQ+ people in the UK, helping win equal rights around marriage, having children and inclusive education.

Our campaigns drive positive change for our communities, and our sustained change and empowerment programmes ensure that LGBTQ+ people can thrive throughout our lives. We make sure that the world hears and learns from our communities, and our work is grounded in evidence and expertise.

Stonewall is proud to provide information, support and guidance on LGBTQ+ inclusion; working towards a world where we're all free to be. This does not constitute legal advice, and is not intended to be a substitute for legal counsel on any subject matter. To find out more about our work, visit us at www.stonewall.org.uk.
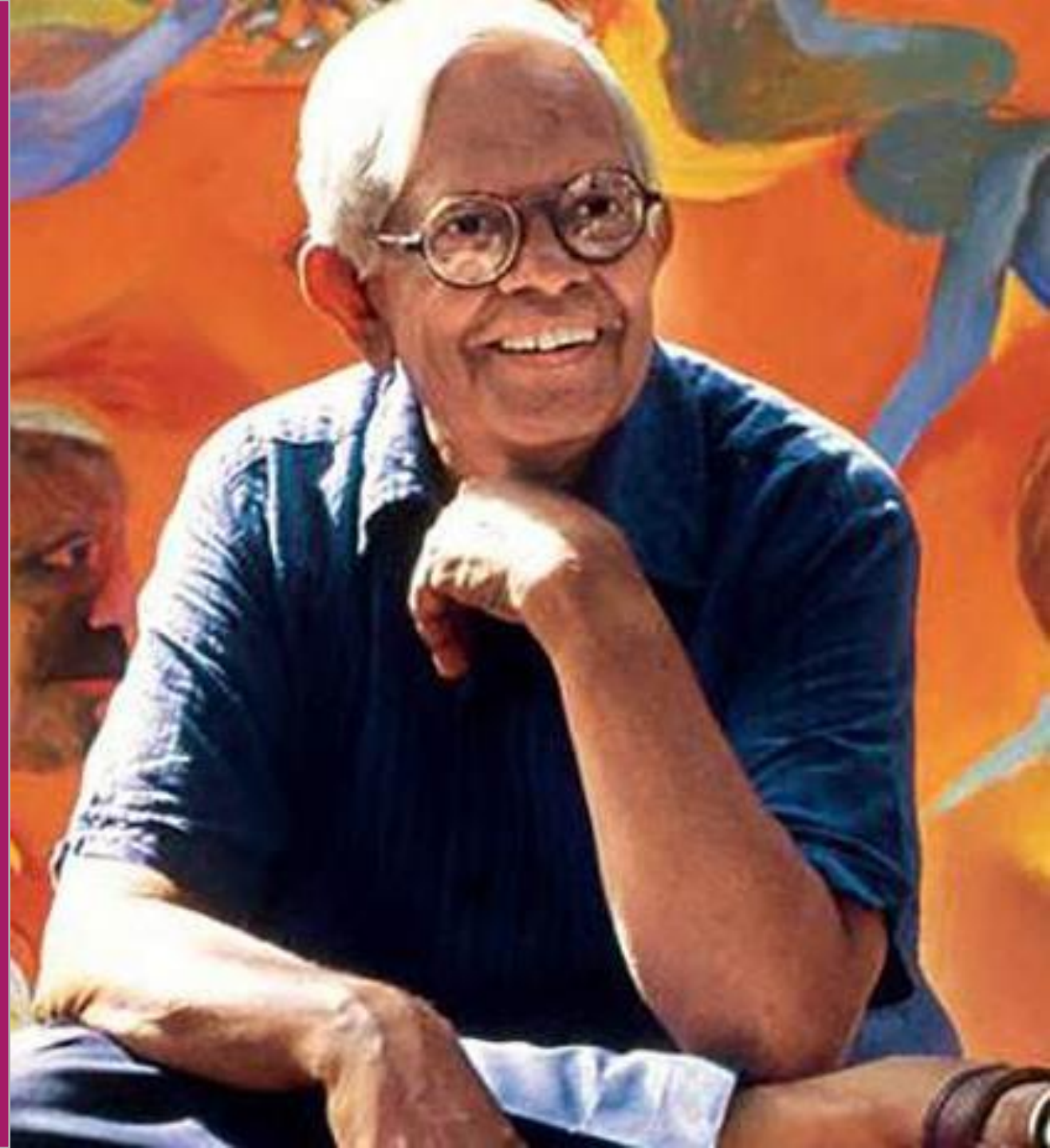
Registered Charity No 1101255 (England and Wales) and SC039681 (Scotland)

Bhupen Khakar
(he/him)

Bhupen Khakar was born in Bombay, India in 1934. He was the youngest of 4 children and their father died when Bhupen was just 4 years old.
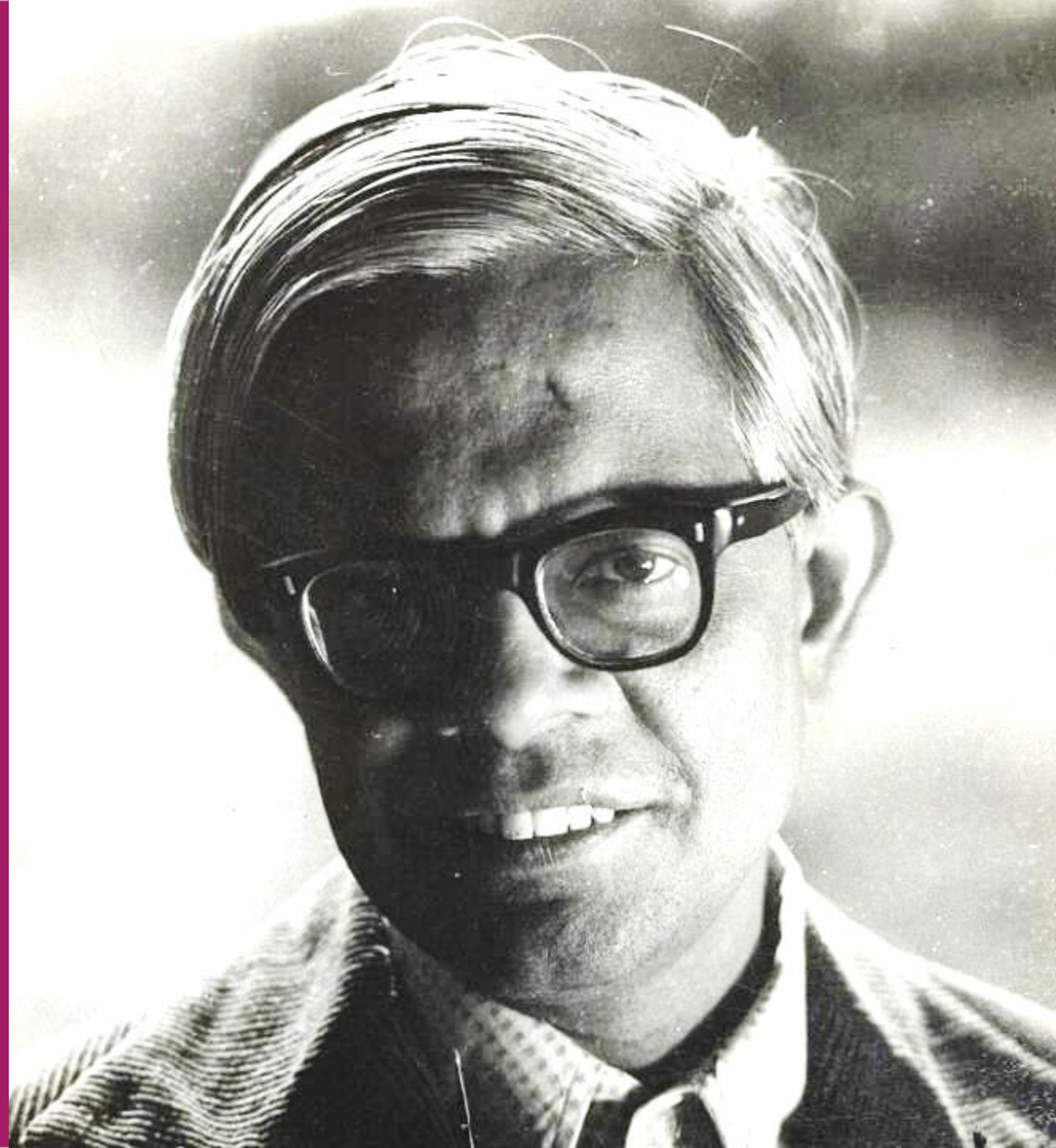
Bhupen grew up speaking Gujarati, Marathi and Hindi. He was 13 when India gained Independence from British Colonial rule.

New directions

Bhupen worked as a chartered accountant for many years, but became an artist after his friend Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh encouraged him.
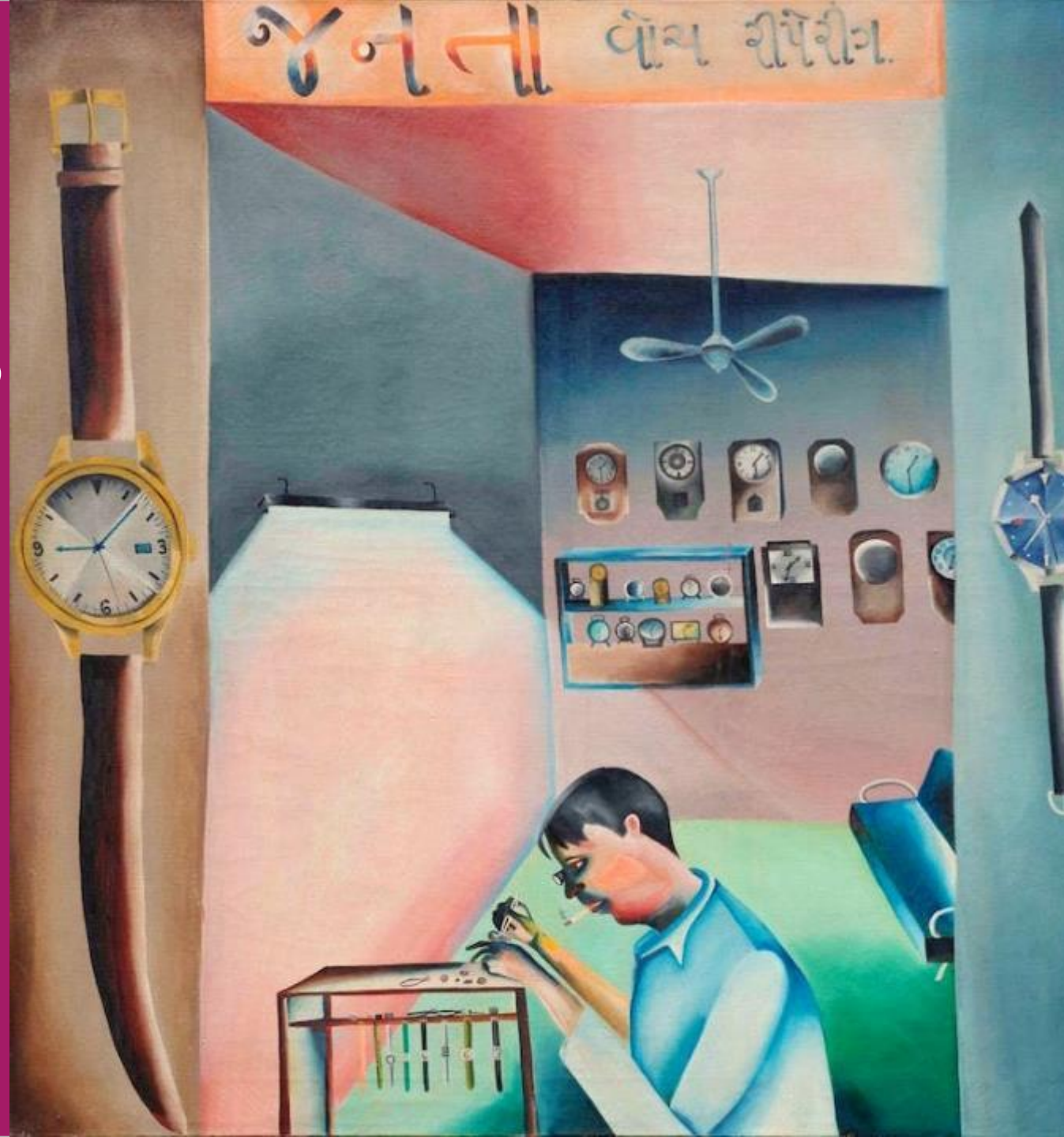
He was a self-taught artist, but joined the Faculty of Fine arts at Baroda in 1962. There was an atmosphere of free thought and Bhupen thrived on it.

Identity and society

Bhupen painted with oil, gouache or watercolour and his work has been compared to that of David Hockney. He also worked with ceramics and collage.

His art work showed people's day to day struggles. His work contains lots of personal references and explores the relationship between his gay identity and Indian society.

"Human beings in their local environment, climate, provincial society: this should be the ultimate goal of the artist"

Bhupen Khakar

International travel

Bhupen's first trip abroad was in 1976 as part of a cultural exchange programme. He visited a number of countries including the UK, where he stayed with his friend Sir Howard Hodgkin.

He returned to the UK for 6 months in 1979 and worked as an artist-in-residence at the Bath Academy of Art.

Coming out

During his time in the UK, Bhupen experienced an increasing acceptance of gay people. He became friends with other LGBTQ+ artists too. After his mother died in 1980, Bhupen came out as gay.

After this, Bhupen spent more time exploring his gay identity through his work. He was with his partner, Vallavbhai, for over 20 years.

Overcoming prejudice

Until 2018, it was illegal to be gay in India. This is because of a law introduced by the British in 1861, whilst India was under British colonial rule.

Bhupen said that he chose to focus on his gay identity through his work because:

"What is happening in India - social rejection - did happen once in countries like USA and Europe."

"The police in all societies have beaten up gays and lesbians. But now they have been accepted by society. For me, there is nothing unnatural about homosexuality."

Success and recognition

In 2000, Bhupen Khakhar was honoured with the Prince Claus Award to honour his work in the field of art. His art has been exhibited around the world, and in 2016 the Tate Modern held a retrospective of Bhupen's art entitled 'You Can't Please All'.

Bhupen died of prostate cancer in 2003, just a few days after the death of his partner.

"When I feel I'm telling the truth, then there is no restraint."

Bhupen Khakar