

Online Galleries Make Indian Art Affordable

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Discerning Indians have, at the very least, a passing familiarity with such artists like M.F. Hussain and Jamini Roy, yet to discerning Americans and Europeans, their works remain relatively unknown.

To rectify that situation, a professor of economics at Columbia University and a practicing neurologist have each set up their own Websites that not only amplify who is doing what in the world of contemporary Indian art, but have made their works thoroughly affordable.

Through their Website www.bosepaciamodern.com, neurologist Arani Bose and partner Steve Pacia currently offer a monthly auction where for ten days at the beginning of each month, art lovers and collectors can view a work online, valued at 20 percent below the market price, and make their bid.

Similarly, at their artsindia.com Website, economist Prajit K. Dutta and his brother Projjal will soon be holding auctions as well, "so if you're not an artist but happen to have a piece of Indian art you'd like to sell, then you'll be able to have the option of selling it through our auction," Prajit Dutta informed India-West.

Bose and Dutta each have their own gallery in the art districts of New York devoted exclusively to promoting contemporary Indian art, but they both credit the Internet with having generated even greater awareness of South Asian artists -- for two reasons.

"When we started our gallery in 1994, nobody gave a damn about contemporary Indian art, but in the last three to five years, there's been an unbelievable focus in the international art scene on India," Bose told India-West.

First of all, "the international art scene is really looking to India as one of the wellsprings of new artistic development, and they are finding it there," he explained.

But Bose believes the main reason for sudden interest is because "many collectors are quite excited by the investment potential and the fact that Indian contemporary art is the last bastion where normal people can actually afford to buy museum quality contemporary art."

Last Fall, Christie's held an auction of contemporary American art, where canvases were selling from as low as \$250,000 to as high as \$800,000. Around the same time, Sotheby's had an auction for contemporary Indian art and five pieces by M.F. Hussain sold for an average price of \$9,450.

Both Bose and Dutta share the opinion that since Indian artists can match their Western counterparts brushstroke for brushstroke, the Internet is a natural, if not the best, medium to sell their works, "where the price differences for comparable art is huge," Dutta stated.

"The market is going to welcome a development whereby it gives access to a whole new window of art, which costs one-fiftieth, one-twenty-fifth, or one hundredth the price that artists in this country or Europe fetch."

The question arises, then, are collectors rushing in to buy the works of South Asian artists because they are aesthetically pleasing to the eye, or simply because they are rock bottom bargains that may one day turn into a profitable investment?

"Our collectors are really collecting because it's a way of connecting to an artistic output of a country in a meaningful way," Bose responded to India-West, adding that 70 percent of his collectors are of South Asian origin. "But they wouldn't be collecting it if it had no investment value. If people thought it wouldn't hold its value, they wouldn't collect it."

Dutta ventured to guess that “at this point, they’re buying for consumption purposes and it’s not very much for investment.” But, of course, “that can change in a hurry, if the auctions for Indian art take off,” he was quick to point out.

“Currently there is not a resale market. Currently, the market is almost all one-time sales. Once artists begin to be known, the resale market will become much more active, and that’s when the investment angle of it is bound to crop up,” Dutta explained. “As things stand, if you like art, or even if you have some money, what else are you going to do after you buy your Lexus? Ten thousand dollars is not much for the absolute best Indian artist, even if there were no investment angle.”

Bose compared buying art to buying a house. “You certainly buy a house because you love it, but you also buy it because it will appreciate in value. The same kind of thinking applies to art. It’s something they buy, they live with, they hang on their walls, but they also want it to hold its value.”

When it comes to Indian contemporary art, “we’re fortunate that not only do we expect it to hold its value, but we expect it to appreciate in value remarkably, because now, we believe, internationally it is quite undervalued,” he argued.

Although his uncle, Arun Bose, is one of the well-known artists who helped launch the Calcutta Renaissance in the 1950s, Bose candidly admits he had no exposure to the arts when he was growing up because, as he said, “I was leading a fairly science-oriented life.”

Fascinated by memory formation in the brain ever since he was a teenager, Arani Bose attended the Bronx High School of Science in New York and later won recognition in the prestigious Westinghouse Science Talent Search.

But in his freshman year at Stanford University, “I kind of fell into a course on religious philosophy, found it fascinating, and found myself uncovering this whole area that I’d been missing,” he said. “But I never thought I’d end up being involved in an art gallery.”

Bose graduated from Stanford in 1983 with a degree in religious philosophy. He then returned to science, his first love, and graduated from the University of Colorado medical school four years later. Still fascinated by the workings of the brain, he did his residency in neurology at Yale.

During those years at Yale, Bose and his wife Shumita travelled to India in the early ‘90s. They stopped in at a few galleries and came away quite impressed, finding the works on par with Soho galleries in New York, “but at a ridiculously low price,” Bose recalled to India-West.

On his return to New York, Bose called around to see how many galleries sold contemporary Indian art and found they sold everything but. “So it was quite shocking to us that for one-fifth of the world’s population, there was not a single gallery that represented their work,” he said.

The same was true when he called major metropolitan museums around the country. “Outside of the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum, there was no museum that had any knowledge of, or any interest in, twentieth century India,” Bose recounted.

Determined to fill that vacuum, Bose and his wife, together with longtime friends Steve Pacia, a fellow neurologist, and his wife Sherry, went into partnership in 1994 and founded the Bose Pacia Modern Gallery, which is now located in the Chelsea Arts Building at 508 West 26th street in New York.

Within a year of opening their doors they landed a major coup when they held the first North American exhibition of works by M.F. Hussain from the collection of Italian filmmaker Roberto Rosselli, who, because of his friendship with the artist, had one of the most important collections of early Hussain that exists.

In the last five years the gallery has had five shows annually, showcasing the works of both established and the latest

up-and-coming Indian artist.

Consequently, “we’ve been able to establish an international reputation dealing in Indian contemporary art,” Bose maintained.

Dutta, on the other hand, grew up literally in the presence of art.

His father, Ajit Dutta, had worked his way up the ranks to become the secretary of the Lalit Kala Akademy of Art in India, which promoted Indian art through grants and every three years hosted the world-renowned Trinali international art exhibition.

That influence rubbed off on Dutta. “From a very young age, we would be carted off to every exhibition in town, so my interest in art certainly dates from that experience,” he recalled to India-West.

After he graduated from St. Stephens College in New Delhi, Dutta continued his graduate studies at Cornell University and, in 1987, earned his doctorate degree in economics. Since then he has been a professor of economics at Columbia University.

Recently he took a two-year leave of absence in order to devote himself full-time to the artsindia Website.

“I’ve always had a passion for art and always had this desire and ambition of running an art gallery, which had been dormant for the longest time,” he confided to this reporter.

Westerners may know next to nothing about contemporary Indian art, “but even at some level Indians don’t know very much about it either,” he pointed out, “and it has been our feeling for the longest time that this state of things ought to change.”

The artsindia Website made its debut last November and currently features 30 artists, but has a total of 60 artists under contract ranging from emerging young artists to the internationally established.

“One thing we are trying to do very consciously is to maintain quality,” he said. “The flip side of the Internet is that there is the temptation, which we find in a lot of non-Indian Internet galleries, to put up all kinds of things, simply because they have no capacity constraints.”

To ensure quality, all submissions are scrutinized by a jury, which includes his father, along with B.C. Sanyal, an eminent artist in his own right and former secretary of the Lalit Kala Akademy of Art as well, and Biman Das, president of the Calcutta Art College.

Last month, the Website had 220,000 hits “and we’ve been amazed at the traffic,” Dutta said, the site having sold 20 pieces since its inception.

In addition to original artwork, the Website gallery also sells posters. But what has really surprised Dutta and his brother is that, although in the beginning they thought of themselves as a business-to-consumer Website, “what we are finding now is a lot of response in the business-to-business market,” he said.

The company, with its gallery at 601 W. 115th St. in New York, has already filled a large poster order for a Manhattan hotel chain, and a Swedish advertising agency wants to use the Website’s images as part of a promotion in Europe for a new drug manufactured by an Indian pharmaceutical company.

“That’s the sort of thing which when we started off we didn’t even consider might happen,” he said.