

Indian Artists Find Cyberspace Home

Arthur J Pais

For those artists in India worried about having their paintings locked up in an art gallery abroad, not knowing when the sale will occur, artsindia.com could offer some help.

The only American online art gallery devoted exclusively to contemporary Indian art and high-end craft, it receives over 90,000 hits a month from not only the United States but also from South America, Canada, France, United Kingdom, Sweden, Spain, Israel, Australia, and over 50 other countries.

The two-month-old site -- located at www.artsindia.com -- owes a lot to the second child of a Columbia University economics professor, who was raised in India, and his pianist wife, a Polish American raised in Detroit.

Four years ago the professor, who grew up in India, and his wife were expecting their daughter, Mayanka, and were looking to move into a larger apartment.

The apartment above their own in New York's Upper Westside fell vacant, providing them an opportunity to create a duplex.

For designing their new apartment, Prajit Dutta and Susan F Sobolewski enlisted the help of brother Projjal and his wife Mamta Prakash, architects, then going to school at MIT.

"The clients" wanted the design to reflect the multicultural character of their family. That led to them acquiring from India a large selection of traditional Indian crafts that could be seamlessly incorporated into the project.



However, given the occupants's love for art and Prajit and Projjal's background -- their father, Ajit K Dutta, had served as the chief executive of the National Academy of Fine Arts (the Lalit Kala Akademi) in India -- a quest for contemporary Indian art became an integral part of the design.

"The buying of art and crafts in India and the subsequent transportation to the United States proved useful, if somewhat daunting, education," says Prajit Dutta. "We realized that Indian art is very undervalued. While relatively unknown artists showing in an New York gallery or even in a graduation show of an art school often got mid-to-upper four figure for their work, Indian artists with critical and commercial acclaim, people who routinely sold out their shows in India fetched considerably less abroad.

"Many of our friends also admired the Indian craft elements -- the sandstone panels, the ceramic tiles and the antique doorways that we had incorporated into the apartment design -- and they were amazed at the prices of such finely wrought items," he says.

There was another reason to start artsindia.com.

"There are scores of Indian artists, well-known and emerging, whose work has universal appeal," Dutta says. "Indian paintings have sold well at recent Sotheby's and Christie's auctions and Indian artists have won prizes at many international shows. So naturally, one thought of a gallery that highlights their work the year round."

But running a physical art gallery in New York City is very expensive.

Instead, Dutta and his partners started artsindia.com. They have agreements with over 40 Indian artists, representing a variety of styles, medium of expression, and reputation. Artists range from Jamini Roy, Shyamal Dutta-Ray, Sakti Burman, Jai Zharotia, Somnath Hore, and Sanjay Bhattacharyya to younger talents like Ananda Moy Banerji, Sohini Dhar,

Tamal Goswami and Sandip Misra. The crafts featured have been used by eminent Indian architects like Joseph Allen Stein, Balkrishna Doshi, and Charles Correa.

The web site also features high quality reproductions of selected paintings in an art poster format.

Dutta is also the author of *Strategies and Games: Theory and Practice*, a book published recently by MIT Press, and considered one of the best game theory textbooks. That book's cover features a lovely composition by Ganesh Haloi, one of India's pre-eminent abstract painters, and an artsindia.com artist.



“Our site has several advantages over India-based sites,” Dutta says.

“We have a small off-line gallery in New York where buyers can view the works prior to purchase, we plan to curate exhibitions locally, we offer toll free lines, and our buyers have confidence in us because we are based here, and we are aware of American consumer protection laws.”

The off-line gallery is located at 601 W 115 Street (and Broadway) and viewers should call (1-877-ARTSIND) for an appointment to visit.

artsindia.com offers the artists and buyers several benefits that traditional art galleries may not offer, says Dutta. “Our overhead charges are far less than a traditional gallery that means our commission is smaller than what they charge,” he explains. “In the unlikely scenario of a customer saying that the real painting did not measure up to what he saw on our web site or, for that matter, (objecting for) any other reason, we offer a return guarantee.” But the painting is not returned to the artist.



“We will try to sell it again,” he says.

The gallery has sold over a dozen paintings including oils, pastels and lithographs in the last six weeks; typically an oil painting sells for \$ 1,000. Pastels and lithographs start at \$ 450 while the posters start at \$ 50.

“We also want to educate our viewers about the vibrancy of contemporary Indian art and crafts,” Dutta says, “to that end we feature in-depth articles on topics in Indian art such as recent developments, in the Delhi Silpi Chakra as well as general discussions as in *Art: A Guide to the Terminology*.”

Finally, all artists featured on the web site have articles on them.

artsindia also plans to have open a small off-line gallery in San Francisco, and to hold several exhibitions in a handful of cities in America, starting with one in New Jersey and one in New York early next year.

They are also preparing ambitious expansion plans.

“We have received feelers from potential venture capitalists,” says Dutta. “We wanted to retain full creative control over the direction of our company so, at first, we were a bit lukewarm to the idea. But now we feel that we are sufficiently far along that an infusion of new capital will allow us to make certain large-scale business decisions that we would like to make and spend aggressively on advertising.”