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Well-known artists Sanjay Bhattacharya, Arpana Kaur and Surya Prakash exhibiting their easels at one place? Dr. Prajit K. Dutta has made it possible with his online gallery.



Crossing boundaries, artistically

The market for Western art and designs is estimated at \$57 billion a year; the market value of Indian arts or other countries is unknown. Dr. Prajit K. Dutta took the plunge to explore the untapped Indian arts market and, in the process, started artsindia.com. Aiming to tap the growing online interest in arts, Dr. Prajit K. Dutta took a leave of absence from Columbia University to launch his site.

Following the success of artsindia, which claims to be the first US- based online gallery devoted to contemporary Indian art, posters and designer crafts, last year Dr. Dutta decided to make forays into uncharted territory. He applied the same theory - quality in combination with reasonable pricing -- to a new venture: artswithoutborder.com.

A new online gallery launched this July, Artswithoutborders.com is aimed at displaying the arts of the nonwestern world - in particular, arts from south, central Asia and America. This is the first time anybody has come with this concept, according to Dutta.

The name was inspired by doctorswithoutboundary, a nonprofit organization that won the Nobel Prize last year. Without the World Wide Web, the idea of "without borders" would have been implausible, concedes Dutta: "In the first place, globalization has given a taste for things international. Also, the Internet makes it possible to view art just as easily viewed in New Orleans as in New Delhi."

Dr. Dutta traces his interest in the arts to his father, Dr. Ajit Dutta, a former secretary of the fine arts Lalit Kala Academy (the National Art Academy of India) in New Delhi. "I grew up seeing all the known artists painting hanging in the house. Actually some. we were not wealthy. But the impression has not left us." Along with his wife Susan F. Sobolewski, his brother Projjal K. Dutta, and Mamta Prakash, Dutta founded Artsindia.com in November 1999. Says Dutta, "The response was absolutely astounding, we were working through word of mouth. Now we are doing 300000 page views a month. This is fueled by word of mouth and through press coverage."

So far, contemporary Indian, Israeli and Argentinean art galleries have been launched online. "We want to be the click-and-mortar of arts world. So we have scheduled exhibition in the fall at Silicon Valley and Silicon Alley," says Dr. Dutta.

He adds, "India I can understand. But with so many arts gallery in Israel, we expected someone to have come up with the idea. To our surprise, we found nobody has done it so we took the initiative." The common theme, according to Dutta, is exciting art work. "The art is often in international contemporary style and yet virtually unknown in the west," says Dutta. "There is high quality art, but lot of it is at prices at breathtaking fraction prices of western arts. That is beginning to change with the recent auctions of Indian and Israeli arts by Sotheby's, Christies and Bonham's," says Dr. Dutta.

At the time that artsindia.com was started last November, about 10 artists were featured. "Now we have over 50 artists," says Dutta. "Some of them are real luminaries such as Sanjay Bhattacharya, Arpana Kaur, Surya Prakash and so on."

Since the launch, they have added several new projects posters and canvas prints that resemble original art. "We are doing this because we had good response from corporations looking for posters and prints. Literally, nobody does in this world of reproduction of contemporary Indian arts. After you put enough Monet posters, you should be ready to put up some vibrant Indian art work," Dr. Dutta says.

The company has recently formed a new corporate program by providing companies with end-to-end service starting with art consulting to framing and shipping. The company has raised about \$400,000 from individuals, investors, customers and friends. However, they sought funding only after they had “set up shop.” “That way,” says Dutta, they were able to “maintain the creative independence in the design of our galleries.” Dutta adds, “We have interested parties willing to fund us even now. But we do not need the money.” Asked whether he intends to take the company public, Dr. Dutta said, “Either that or a buy out. We are doing something that nobody has done before. There is natural complement for galleries that have traditionally sold western art. It is very easy for big galleries that have exclusive focused on western art to acquire us than to start from scratch for contemporary art. In what we are doing there is no 800-pound gorilla in the off-line world or space. So anybody who does what we are trying to do will have to build up from the scratch.”

The company has also launched another program to help students, especially Indian Americans, to learn more about Indian art and design by becoming an artsindia ambassador. “As an ambassador,” says Dutta, “an individual receives a kit and then has the option of sell the posters and prints on commission basis.”

Dr. Dutta has not completely cut his ties from his alma mater, however. He is still teaching courses regarding the economics of Internet. “It was a theory and practice working hand in hand, since my team was putting together the nuts and bolts of what we are going to do, even as I was teaching in class the theoretical issues underlying the economics of the Internet. I had a real ringside view,” commented Dutta of his dual roles on dot-com CEO and Columbia professor. Dr. Dutta’s own education goes back to his home country. He earned his masters in economics from the Delhi School of Economics, and a Ph.D. from Cornell University.

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