



Auctions

Art That's Hotter Than Curry

Susan Adams 08.13.07, 12:00 PM ET

Is Indian art about to cross over?

Prices for contemporary artwork from the Subcontinent have been climbing quickly in the last five years, breaking the seven-figure barrier in 2005 when a piece by Tyeb Mehta fetched \$1.6 million at a Christie's auction in New York. But so far, most of the buyers have been Indians, or so-called N.R.I.s, non-resident Indians living abroad in London and New York.

In the last year, however, signs point to increasing Western interest in contemporary Indian art. "More than half the works in our first show were bought by non-Indians," says Prajit Dutta, a Columbia University economics professor who runs Aicon, the largest gallery of Indian contemporary art in the U.S., with showrooms in Palo Alto, Calif., and New York City.

In Pictures: Hot Indian Art

Aicon opened in London's posh Mayfair district this March in a 4,000-square-foot space formerly occupied by top-flight contemporary dealer Gagosian. At its first London show, the gallery featured hip Bombay artist Riyas Komu, 36, whose works are selling for as much as \$200,000 each. Komu is also exhibiting at this year's Venice Biennale. (Dutta also runs two investment funds that invest in contemporary Indian art.)

"It's only a matter of time," observes Yamini Mehta, head of the Indian art department at Christie's auction house, pointing to the inclusion of London-born Bharti Kher, 38, in the Basel, Switzerland art fair this coming spring. At the Documenta art fair in Kassel, Germany, likewise, two mid-career Indian artists, Atul Dodiya and Sheela Gowda were offered for sale.

Meantime, mega-collector François Pinault of France is currently displaying a 12-foot-high sculpture by 43-year-old New Delhi artist Subodh Gupta (who happens to be married to Kher), in front of his Venice museum, the Palazzo Grassi, on the Grand Canal. Constructed from a jumble of stainless steel pots, pans and kitchen utensils, the enormous skull, called "Very Hungry God," has prompted art world observers to dub Gupta the Damien Hirst of India. (High-flier Hirst happened to unveil his own giant skull, made of diamonds, at the Gagosian gallery in London, right around the same time Pinault installed the Gupta piece this spring.)

Before the likes of Gupta, Kher and Komu came on the scene, modern Indian art was dominated by the so-called Progressive Artists' Group, founded in 1947, the year India won independence. Top names include M.F. Husain, the flamboyant, prolific 92-year-old known as the Picasso of India, who sold a piece two years ago to a London buyer for \$2 million. Other Progressives include Francis Newton Souza, Sayed Haider Raza, Ram Kumar, V. S. Gaitonde and Tyeb Mehta, who still holds the auction record.

Some members of the group studied in Europe, and their work, to the Western eye, can seem derivative of European cubists and other modern masters. But the vibrant colors and stances of the figures are uniquely Indian, drawing on the hues and poses of ancient Indian miniatures and sculpture.

A notable feature of the contemporary Indian market: It does incredibly well on the Web.

Seven-year-old Saffronart sells Indian work online for prices Western art rarely achieves in the digital world. The site has repeatedly broken the seven-figure mark for individual works. Its strongest auction to date, in December 2006, reaped a total of \$16 million. Saffronart president Minal Vazirani says the number of Western buyers is steadily increasing, from about 5% in 2001 to 12% today.