

# The spirit of India

*ArtsIndia West gallery hopes to ride new wave of interest in Indian art*

**by Rebecca Wallace**

In the 1940s, artists from India's nascent Progressive movement trod a difficult road as they rejected nationalist art for a more modern style.

"They rarely had money to eat," said Madhurika Dev, director of the ArtsIndia West gallery in Palo Alto.

Nowadays, though, auction prices for works by the Progressives are booming. And earlier this year Dev's gallery drew a slew of attention with an exhibit on eight Progressive artists.

Modern-day artist Mamta Chandra, whose paintings are now in Dev's gallery and have been shown in several traveling exhibits through ArtsIndia, can hardly keep up with the demand for her work.

"If I had eight arms I would have painted much more and they would have sold much more," she said.

Many artists and art aficionados alike say interest in Indian art is on the rise these days. Besides garnering increased auction prices, Indian art has recently sparked high-profile exhibits of Indian art in New York and Venice.

"The cultural and artistic energy of India is becoming increasingly relevant on the global arts stage," Gordon Knox, who directs an artist residency program at Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga, stated earlier this year in a press release.

Knox's program recently sponsored a show of six Indian artists at Italy's Venice Biennale, a 110-year-old annual exhibition of contemporary art. Knox said this was Venice Biennale's first show of Indian artists in 25 years.

With ArtsIndia West, which opened last year at 535 Bryant St. focusing on Indian artists, Dev and the gallery's founders hope to ride this new wave of popularity.

Brothers Prajit and Projjal Dutta and their wives, Susan Sobolewski and Mamta Prakash-Dutta, started the original ArtsIndia as an online presence in 2000 and then opened a gallery in New York two years later. Silicon Valley, with its diverse population and large Indian community, seemed a natural location for a second brick-and-mortar space.

"The single largest market (for Indian art) after New York is the Bay Area," Dev said.

What's boosting interest in -- and sales of -- Indian art? Many say it's stronger buying power among Indians, especially in the IT sector. Dev also cites a recent marketing push by her gallery and others on Indian art.

"Before, there was not much marketing done," she said. "It (the art) was not well known."

Standing under one of the airy skylights of ArtsIndia West, Dev smiles as she thinks of another reason. Most visitors to the gallery are themselves from India, she says. But often their children have lived their entire lives in America.

Dev points to painter Krishnendu Porel's sweeping portrayal of a Delhi landmark: the 18th-century Jantar Mantar observatory.

"This is a medium for children to learn about India," she says.

After working in IT development, Dev says working in the gallery is a fulfilling change.

"I'm interested in making people cultivate an eye for art," she said. "It's close to my heart."

Art education is an important facet of the gallery, she added. Recent events have included talks by artists, a book reading by an Indian author, and a happening in which a painter demonstrated technique while watching children try their hand with paper and crayons.

Initially reserved during an interview, Dev warms while pointing out her favorite paintings in the current exhibition of two realism artists, "Realistically," which runs through Aug. 14. Porel's architectural curves and angles mix with Chandra's lush, sometimes haunting images of Indian women.

"It's just perfect. It's as if there's someone sitting right in front of you," Dev says, standing before Chandra's "Woman In Gold." Despite the title, the woman is rendered all in shades of grey, but for her golden jewelry and trim on her sari.

Chandra, who was trained at the Sir JJ School of Art in Mumbai, says her paintings focus on images of women from the areas of Rajasthan and Gujarat.

"The phenomenon of color is so fabulous in both of the states: garments, culture, festivals, pottery," she said. "The women wear saris: primarily a long skirt draped around the body and head. The region is so hot that it is used as a protective element from the heat."

While Chandra's paintings certainly have an appeal for her fellow Indians, she and the folks at ArtsIndia hope her work and other art by Indian artists will ultimately find a broader audience.

Many of Chandra's paintings are of women carrying water, a simple act but one that can resonate with everyone, she said.

"While there's a subtlety of representing the Indian woman who is hard at work in the villages of India, there's the aspect of symbolically being able to represent the images of power and sustenance for the family," she said. "It brings about the natural affinity for the onlooker."

*What:* "Realistically," an exhibit of paintings by Indian artists Krishnendu Porel and Mamta Chandra.

*Where:* ArtsIndia West gallery at 535 Bryant St. in Palo Alto.

*When:* Through Aug. 14. The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m.

*Cost:* The exhibit is free.

*Info:* Call (650) 321-4900 or go to [www.artsindia.com](http://www.artsindia.com).