

Colour of money

Indian art site making profits despite dotcom meltdown

Jayant Mammen Mathew/New York

Art was a part of life in Delhi for Projit and Projjal Dutta since their father, Ajit Dutta, was secretary of Lalit Kala Akademi. They inherited an artistic sensibility from him and have now translated that interest into a promising business on the Web. But the business has horizons wider than Indian art.

Artswithoutborders.com, a New York-based company founded by the Dutta brothers, is looking to sell art from India, Israel and Argentina over the Internet. As its chief operating officer Projjal Dutta says, the Internet is a perfect medium to attract a crossover audience interested in the arts and crafts.

It makes sense. Artswithoutborders features about 50 artists, including Jamini Roy, whose paintings are much in demand after his death. Besides well-known masters of the Ganesh Pyne class, upcoming artists like Sanjay Bhattacharya and Anandamoy Banerji have found a place on the site. The Duttas have also showcased the paintings of the maharaja of Baroda, Ranjit Singh Gaekwad.

And it is no-nonsense business. Projjal ensures that experts appraise every work of art before it is priced and displayed electronically.



Art sites can often be an exasperating clutter, but the Duttas mercifully have designed a clean site rich in content. The site offers a sketch of the artists, and their works and paintings can be sorted according to price. And to make you buy that \$10,000 (Rs 4.4 lakh) painting, the Duttas have complemented the Web site with an off-site gallery in New York.

This is an ambitious venture especially when the e-commerce era is coming to an end. But Projjal claims the company is already making a profit. So far overheads have been low because they carry no inventory. And with a healthy mark-up, the margins can range anywhere from 30 per cent to 70 per cent. The paintings are couriered to the customers' doorstep immediately after they make the purchase.

Architect of success: Projjal Dutta, chief operating officer, Artswithoutborders.com

Artswithoutborders has entered into marketing tie-ups with other dotcoms like Ethnicgrocer.com to target the rich and influential Indian community. The clientele is mostly Indian but this should change once the word gets around. The paintings are priced from a modest \$400 (Rs 17,600) to a whopping \$22,500 (Rs 9.9 lakh).

Not wanting to be bogged down selling just original art, the Duttas also deal in prints, terracotta tiles, stone jaalis, jewellery, and ceramic tiles. With this model, the possibilities for expansion are endless. The next step for them is to offer art from other countries as well, and Projjal believes that the company is lean enough to survive any dotcom meltdown.

The Duttas are committed to making Artswithoutborders a success. Projit, an economist, has taken leave of absence from Columbia University, while Projjal, an architect from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is in it full-time. They are so confident that they have roped in their wives, too, while their father lends an expert hand from India. That is good news for the Indian bankers from Wall Street who have invested in the dotcom.