

Pahadi miniature art back in market after 60 years

After almost 60 years, Pahadi miniatures are now surfacing from their private hideaways to command top-end prices in the booming international art market.

They are being picked up by dealers and new collectors across the world.

'A Celestial Figure', a miniature winged angel in the Persian tradition, painted by the famous Pahadi artist Nainsukh of Guler (a former princely state in the Himalayas), is back on the auction shelf after 218 years.

Sourced from a private estate in Europe, the Pahadi miniature is expected to rake in \$20,000-30,000 at the sale of Indian and Southeast Asian works of art on Sep 19 in New York.

The estimated price of the Guler miniature is six times what it used to be six years ago. And experts see a northward swing in prices in the years to come.

'The collection of miniature Pahadi art is just taking off post- Independence. The new affluent segments of collectors have started buying and I hope to see the market peak in another five years. But this is a market that requires education and connoisseurship,' Anu Ghosh, deputy director of Indian and south-east Asian art, told IANS.

'Miniature art will never be on a par with the rest of the genres in terms of the number of paintings purchased but definitely in value. The market is very individualised at present.'

Ghosh, who is currently cataloguing Sotheby's acquisitions of Pahadi miniatures and promoting them worldwide to attract buyers for its autumn sale, foresees three trends in the Pahadi miniature market.

'The first and the most important trend is the rise in prices in the last two years. There has been a rapid hike. A miniature that I would have expected to sell for \$10,000 in 2004 would now sell for \$60,000.'

The second interesting phenomenon is a big push towards quality. 'Not every miniature painting has seen its price spiralling 5 to 10-fold. Only the quality ones are being appreciated in terms of prices in the international market,' Ghosh said.

Buyers are gradually learning to distinguish between good and indifferent miniature art.

One artist who seems to have reaped the benefit of the market swing in favour of miniatures is the master craftsman from the hills, Nainsukh.

He matured early and enthusiastically took to the fluent naturalism of Mughal paintings that came to the hill region in the late 16th and 17th centuries. He carried his art farther than his father and his elder brother Manaku and brought his family painting style to such a point where it established norms, influencing art throughout the hills.

'We have two miniatures in our collections, 'Krishna and Radha in a Bower' and 'Kamsa Summons

the Wrestlers, Chanura, Mustika and Sala' painted in true Pahadi tradition,' said Ghosh, the deputy director of Asian art at Sotheby's.

'While the former, an extract from Geeta Govinda by Jayadeva, was painted by a first generation Pahadi artist in the style of Nainsukh and his brother Manaku, the second one has been executed by Fattu, Nainsukh's nephew. They are the highlights of our next auction.

'Both these miniatures, along with a group of 140 paintings sourced from the collection of Maharaja Manvindra Shah of Tehri-Gerhwal and acquired by Sotheby's, are part of a legacy of Nainsukh and his ilk of Pahadi artists that has reappeared in the market.'

Miniatures, said Ghosh, have a history of being sold several times over, which is perhaps why royal miniatures from Rajasthan are scarce in the market.

Those available are mostly in the possession of auction houses, dealers and large family collections. Very few fresh miniatures have entered the art market in the last two years.

In contrast, the last two years have witnessed a surge of fresh Pahadi miniatures primarily because collectors from the west are hiving off their stocks to auction houses and the fact that Pahadi miniatures are cheaper than their Rajasthani counterparts.

Sotheby's, according to Ghosh, has sourced a large body of Pahadi miniatures from German collectors in the last two years.

'This has acted as a trigger in attracting more works from private collections from around the world,' the south Asian art specialist said.

The third and the most heartening trend is that miniature art is looked at with interest by Indian buyers - mostly dealers. 'The market in India is still very dealer-driven. I hope more private collectors join the market in making it more buoyant,' Ghosh said.

According to art critic Uma Nair, the Pahadis were considered the epitome of romance.

'The market for Pahadi miniatures is good, but there are too few originals. Most of the originals have been smuggled out of the country because several miniatures passed into foreign hands at the time of Independence, 60 years ago. The Charles Freer Gallery in Washington DC has one of the finest collections of miniatures,' Nair told IANS.

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