

Foreign artists flock to India as business booms

Till five years ago, Indian artists shared space with their western counterparts in shows abroad to lend prestige to their portfolios. Today, artists from the West are finding it commercially viable to work and exhibit their canvases in India in a reversal of the trend.

The GenNext-III, an art show-cum-camp organised by the city-based Aakriti Gallery, which saw the participation of 11 artists from Austria, US, Canada, France, Poland, Italy, Bangladesh and Pakistan, was an indication that India was ready to host artists from the West.

The show began Sep 30 with a preview of 80 contemporary art works by 40 artists from both India and abroad.

'This is just the beginning. India is on its way to becoming an international art destination. It can be attributed to the fact that modern Indian art is being noticed abroad. Once this kind of notice is taken, someone should take the initiative to invite artists from abroad to cash in on the country's artistic legacy and the ongoing boom,' art historian and critic Pranab Ranjan Ray told IANS.

'Though organisations like the Lalit Kala Akademi and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) sponsor foreign artists at the official level as part of cultural diplomatic exchanges, this is perhaps the first time a private organiser is promoting foreign artists on an individual level,' Ray added.

Italian contemporary artist Serena Scapagnini, who has contributed two striking artworks in pencil, charcoal and china on paper - 'Dafne's Silence' and 'On Olive Tree's Branches' - to the show, places the onus of India's rise in the global aesthetics map to vibrant contemporary art.

'Contemporary art is so much in vogue in India. In Italy, the focus is still on ancient and renaissance. Contemporary art promotional events are so rare,' Scapagnini told IANS.

The artist, whose father was a film producer in India, said India had two gifts to give to the West - art and philosophy.

Dhaka-based Ashraful Hasan, a postgraduate in fine arts from the University of Chittagong, who is showing his works for the first time, looks at this new exchange between India, the rest of subcontinent and the West in two ways.

'Foreign artists must capitalise on the booming Indian market to sell their works. I look at economic stability and commercialisation of art in a positive light from a pragmatist's point of view. But I am apprehensive about compromising.

'But intermingling of western and eastern ideas is important for artists from the subcontinent to grow and westerners to take lessons from Indian history,' he said.

Mathew Tom, a contemporary artist from Florida, whose comic artworks 'I'm A Crocodile' and 'This is a Masterpiece' poke fun at social ethos, felt Indian art was versatile.

'Indian art offers a variety of inspirations that I did not have in the US. Little things like the

'chaiwallah' and the 'rickshawallah' inspired me and I incorporated Indian patterns and design fabrics into my works,' he said.

Ray, who has been associated with Aakriti Gallery as member of the artists' selection panel, said GenNext IV would see the participation of more foreign artists next year.

'But Indian organisations, in general, would have to work very hard to attract foreign artists to the country. There are several unseen bureaucratic walls standing between galleries and foreign artists, like reluctance to issue visas to foreign artists and clearance of art objects by the customs.

'The government, along with the galleries, have to take some positive steps to promote India as a full-time international art destination where foreign artists can take part in residency programmes, send across their canvases and find a receptive market. You need more corporate sponsorships to raise more resources for international dos,' Ray said.

Corporate conglomerates are taking to art in a big way. The Modi group is planning to enter the market with a gallery and a hedge fund while Reliance already has a stake in art. The Emami Group collaborates with Aakriti and more tie-ups are in the offing.

Vikram Bachhawat, director of Aakriti Gallery and Emami Chisel Arts, said: 'In three years, art will be the biggest thing in India with the financial institutions and markets collapsing. It will be more valuable than property, which has high maintenance cost, and jewellery, which has security limitations and depreciating costs.

'Paintings, sculptures and all other genres of hand-crafted art will enjoy aesthetic longevity, security and prices that will appreciate. Art has already been declared an asset class. For those interested in raising extra funds, it will be the safest investment bet with high returns.'

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