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## ►Lure of legacy

ART

### Traditional Indian motifs and folk art are witnessing a renaissance

By Neha S. Bajpai

It is amazing how a few steel dabbas, aluminium buckets hanging on a rickety, bronze bicycle and a video of a man smeared with cow dung can fetch an artist anything between \$1,50,000 and \$2,00,000.

Commendably so, Subodh Gupta has managed to enthrall the world with his deceptively simple installations made from everyday objects. Be it the Venice Biennale, Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art or London's prestigious art galleries, Gupta is the face of Indian contemporary art that celebrates Bharat's kitsch. "My work is rooted to where I come from. But at the same time, the expansion of the art world means you have to be aware of international discourses. I try to strike a balance between the two," says Gupta, who started out with conventional canvases in 1980s and moved over to self-portraits titled 'Bihari', sculptures and installations inspired by quintessential India.

"I picked up elements from everywhere—kitchens, temples and streets. I wanted to capture the changing Indian milieu in a global economy," says Gupta, who along with artists like Bharti Kher, Anish Kapoor and Vivian Sundaram, have been popularising desi elements at international platforms.

Gupta's wife, Bharti Kher, is perhaps best known for her bindi paintings—colourful, mesmerising abstractions of the dot that is traditionally symbolic of the link between the spiritual and material worlds. A fascinating fibreglass and bindi elephant by Kher won her the description 'the top-selling woman artist from India'. Art auction house Sotheby's says the elephant, priced at 3 6.9 crore, personifies two Indian motifs and leaves it to the interpretation of the viewer if this elephant, or India, will rise and become an economic superpower or crumble under the weight of its own history and pace of change.

Painter Gopal Khetanchi associates revival with Mahatama Gandhi. Known for painting female figures—the most intriguing being the Indian interpretation of Mona Lisa dressed as a Rajasthani woman with a lotus in hand—the artist is now working on a series of paintings on Gandhi. "I feel Gandhiji's philosophy on mass employment and rural economy is relevant again. Handicraft, which used to be part of every household during the pre- Independence days, had declined tremendously, but we are again seeing a renewed interest there. I want to paint the new idea of freedom and revival as seen in modern India, keeping Gandhi in mind," says Khetanchi who has also been working on miniatures from Rajasthan.

According to art curators and collectors, revival in the Indian art industry has encouraged the use of traditional motifs and an obvious shift from contemporary to modern works of art. "The last 18 months have seen a lot of correction in the market. Before the recession, contemporary art was commanding astronomical prices, while modern art was growing at a stable price. It was very volatile. With the price corrections, both modern and contemporary segments have recalibrated, and this will result in a more stable market environment. The limelight has again shifted to modern artists," says Neha Kirpal, director India Art Summit.

Irrespective of the artist and the acclaim—from Subodh Gupta to Anju Dodiya—contemporary art prices

nose-dived at auction houses across the globe. “Many artists who rose during the boom have no buyers today at any price. The fall can be attributed not only to inflated prices but also to a failure in assessing an artist’s performance over a period of time,” says Deepak Shahdadpuri, art collector and board member of SaffronArt.

The market is back to its heyday for modern Indian artists, specifically the progressives like M.F. Husain, F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza, Akbar Padamsee, Vasudeo S. Gaitonde and Tyeb Mehta. Recently, a large canvas by Husain portraying the artist’s mythological horses sold for \$8,42,500 at Christie’s. A 1962 vintage canvas by Akbar Padamsee sold for \$5,78,500 at the same auction.

Modern art could mean a lot to investors and collectors, but there has been a significant change in the way folk art is being popularised these days. Be it the Tanjore and Mysore forms of paintings, Warli from Maharashtra, patta chitras from Orissa or Kashmir’s calligraphy, traditional art forms have witnessed a steady and sustained renaissance in the past few years.

A few years ago, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) upgraded Raghurajpur, home to artists who make patta chitras, to a cultural tourism site. It now has an interpretation centre, commissioned artwork on the walls of the artists’ homes and a rest house.

Apparently, the mission has been successful. There are tourists who love to take time off from temples, beaches and regular sightseeing to appreciate stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata etched out in miniaturist details on the pattas.

“The kalamkari work from Andhra has also gained prominence in recent years, while heritage temple art in Kerala is being revived through murals transposed on canvas and paper. Newer artists have brought in fresh themes and contemporary sensibilities to the art forms but there’s a lot that needs to be done,” says Milind Saathe, founder-director of Indianart.com.

According to Saathe, these art forms should be popularised through museums and not just used as decorative pieces. “Australia and the US have museums for art by aboriginal and Red Indian artists. We should have something on those lines. After all, our distinct art identity lies in folk art and not contemporary art, which is a derivative of western art,” he says