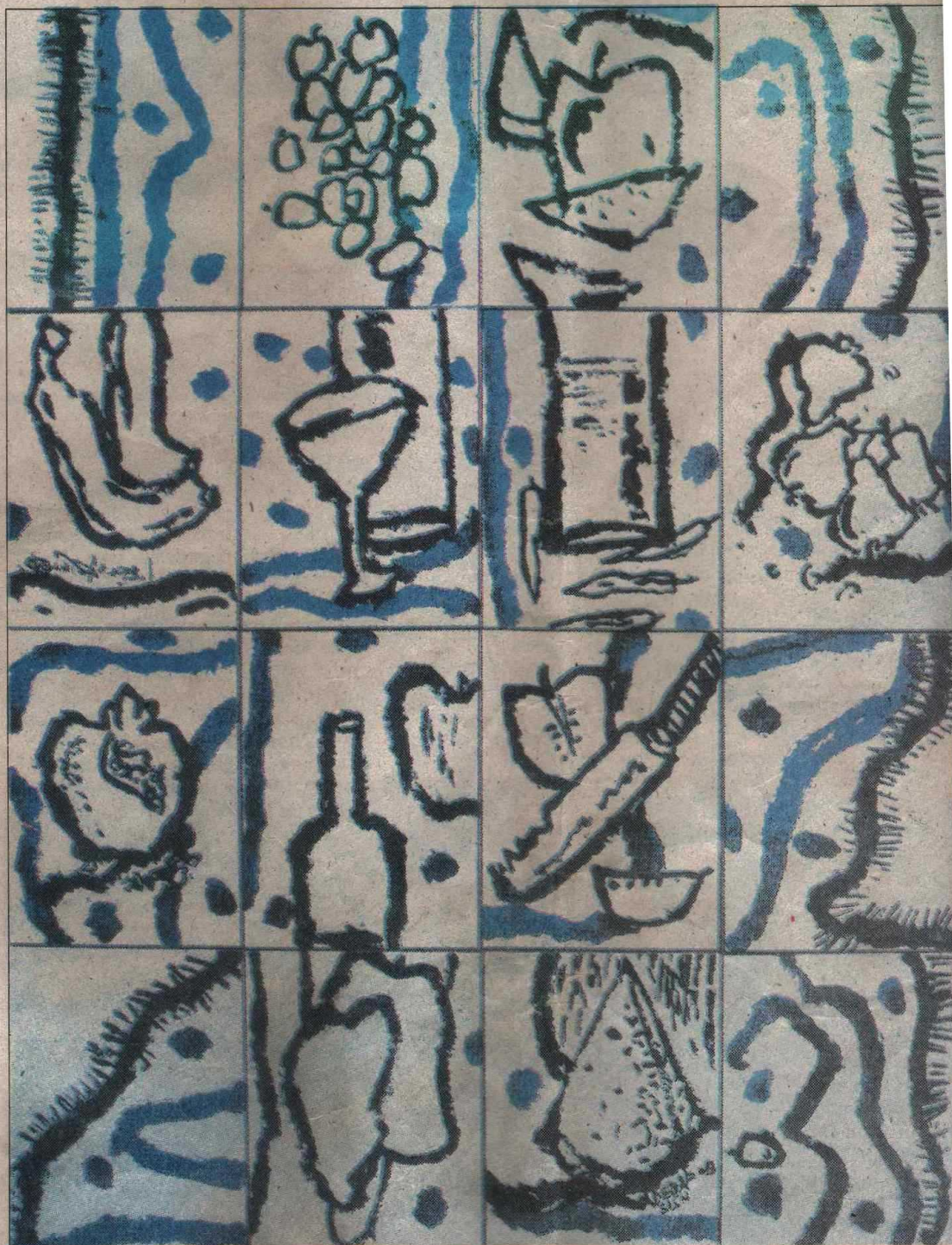


# Art Real and Fake

LOOKING BACK

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**A**FTER a considerable interlude, let me take a pot shot at the prevailing art scene in the country as some recent developments have been causing concern. The art market, estimated between Rs1000 crores and Rs1500 crores today, has grown at an unbelievable pace. Ten years ago total sales hovered around Rs10 crores and Rs15 crores with the best known artists selling their works for Rs 15,00 and Rs 50,000. The sudden flush attracted new investors who realised the wisdom of putting money on paintings and sculptures. The new breed of investors shortlisted a few names and went all out to expropriate anything on which they signed. Most of the artists, tasting success for the first time in life, started production on a massive scale. In the process some allegedly adopted means carrying a dubious tag. Fakes surfaced in abundance too. Kolkata, insiders allege, led in these illegal operations, damaging the good name of the city.

As a logical fallout, Jamini Roy who was at the top of the chart a few years ago with buyers falling over one another at the auctions for a piece, nose-dived. Buyers were no longer ready to risk investing on him. After all, copying Jamini Roy was not a very challenging task! As Jamini Roy, Heimen Majumdar, the Tagores, Sailoz Mukherjee, Ganesh Pyne et al hogged the limelight at auctions, the Mumbai lobby sat up and took notice: something had to

be done to arrest the slant towards Bengal artists. After all, the Progressive Group still claim it was they and not the Calcutta Group who were the harbinger of modernity in Indian art.

Scrupulous manoeuvring by a group of artists, art writers and galleries saw an unprecedented success of Tyeb Mehta, Husain, Padamsee, Gaitonde, Atul Dodiya and a few others. They all are good artists but the exceptional hike in the prices of their works is the result of handiwork, somewhat similar to Harshad Mehta in the stock market a few years ago.

True, in the last 10 years or so prices have been on a steady upswing, the last two years witnessed an irrational rise in the prices. Sitting in his 250-year-old upper floor house in downtown Paris about three years ago, Raza appeared exceptionally smug as he recounted how one of his paintings fetched Rs 17 lakhs at a particular auction in Mumbai. Similar works by him are selling at 10 times that price today. Padamsee's drawings, which sold for Rs 20,000 about six or seven years ago, are having a price tag upward of Rs 12 lakhs today. Tyeb Mehta who was willing to part with a medium-sized work while he was artist-in-residence in Santinkietan in the late 80s for Rs 20,000, today sells similar work for Rs three crores! The Indians living abroad most of who had no clue to any art, Indian or Western, good, bad or rubbish,

suddenly sniffed money in the art market and the fact it also earned them the much-coveted 'cultured' tag, missing all these years. If NRIs can take the lead, can their brethren back home lag behind?

Now it was time for artists, galleries, auction houses, collectors, even old families having a Tagore or Nandalal Bose that was collecting dusk for years, to cash in the mullah. As a result anybody having anything to do with art has been doing well, including some 'experts' allegedly certifying fakes as original for a fee.

In an attempt to share a piece of cake, galleries have mushroomed in the metropolitan cities with mostly women entrepreneurs taking the lead. Using charm and connection, some have been doing well while others have fallen by the wayside. Surprisingly, one of them reportedly tasted success living in New York for two years but never visited the Museum of Modern Art. That much about her interest in art 'since childhood'! It is basically the art auctions that are responsible for the irrational rise in the prices of art objects. A slew of alleged malpractices including planting bogus bidders, returning 'sold' paintings to original owners after the 'sale' is concluded, forming a caucus comprising artists and galleries to achieve their ends, have been some of the reasons for the extraordinary price hike.

Indian art attracting foreign buyers is mostly a myth. While

auctions of Indian art have been taking place in London and New York at regular intervals, bidders are almost always Indians living in those places. Save for an odd Herwitz or Masanori - the former a genuine lover of Indian art, the latter a hard-nosed business man - foreign buyers have been conspicuous by their absence. There is little or no interest in art produced in India not because they are not good, but Americans and Europeans are ignorant about them. Many of them however, are still prepared to stake astronomical sums on an original miniature, something they have known for centuries.

A concerted effort was made by many including one of the largest corporate houses to promote Husain, our best known artist, abroad. These include holding exhibitions, publications of massive books liberally illustrated, keeping him abroad with commensurate publicity, failed to achieve the desired results.

Following the law of nature, the abnormal rise in prices which is higher than the stock market or real estate, has been arrested in the last couple of months. A variety of reasons including the appearance of a large number of pricey paintings in the market by their owners who wanted to cash in on their investment, realisation by buyers of a limit to the extent of swinging a fast buck; and lastly search operations carried out by taxmen who visited galleries, artists, fund operators last month and allegedly did not return empty-handed, have combined to throw a spanner to halt the upswing.

Let us hope through trials and tribulations, galleries and gung-ho, taxman and tax raids, prices will plateau at authentic levels. Like most other spheres of Indian life, transparency is lower in Indian art business with most galleries taking both the artist and then buyer for a big ride. Almost in all countries black money plays a significant role in art market, but it appears to be a little higher in India. Most taxmen have no clue to the intricacies of art market for they still call paintings photos and it will take time for them to get to the bottom of the mystery.

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market, but it appears to be higher in India. Most taxmen have no clue to the intricacies of art market for they still call paintings photos and it will take time for them to get to the bottom of the mystery.

If Mumbai and Delhi have taken the lead, can Kolkata be far behind? Half a dozen galleries have started functioning in recent months while another half a dozen are waiting in the wings to join the fray. It is too early to pass judgement on their expertise and consequent success but Gallery Rasa has already indicated that it is here to stay by holding some thoughtfully curated exhibitions. The first exhibition, a melaige of sculptures from Jamini Roy, Ram Kinkar, Sankha Choudhury to Sunil Kumar Das and Bimal Kundu was well received by art lover and critics. Rakesh Sahni, the owner, displayed considerable courage and made tremendous efforts assembling those sculputres travelling to places like Delhi, Madras, Benaras, Dehra Dun, Santiniketan and other places for his first show. Thereafter, he presented an enormous solo of a little - known artist named Debasish Manna (top and left) and announced that he was open to gamble with good works and would not necessarily confine himself to saleable signatures. It is heartening to know that this gallery is progressing well for most others would not risk it with an unknown commodity like Manna.