

# Smart art mart



Prajit Dutta's daily schedule reflects the dual life he leads. Mornings find Dutta, an economics professor at Columbia University in New York, immersed in the theory of his subject. Afternoons, he shucks off his academic garb and sets off to put some of that theory into practice. His destination is a five-storey building on Fifth Avenue in New York's Flatiron district. There, amidst brand name stores like Armani and Kenneth Cole, a sign proudly proclaims, 'Gallery ArtsIndia'.

Dutta, who co-founded this venture dedicated to contemporary Indian art with his architect brother Projjal, slips easily into his second role. It's one he's performed with some success. ArtsIndia's spacious gallery, overlooking Madison Square Park, houses the largest inventory of Indian paintings – 3,500 at last count – in the US. They represent works of more than 120 Indian artists, both established names and promising youngsters, and range in vintage from the 1960s to recent works.

A good chunk are treasures that came their way last August when the Duttas acquired 2,500 paintings from the famed Herwitz Collection, one of the best collections in the Indian contemporary art world. "This was a big step for us," acknowledges Dutta, who admits to tapping outside investors for making the purchase "but we had to do it as it was a rare opportunity to acquire works of such vintage." Last year, ArtsIndia sold more than 400 paintings, notching up a turnover of \$1.5 million and even turning in a profit, claims Dutta. Not bad going for an enterprise that's less than three years old and all the more creditable

given that two similar galleries in New York recently shut down. But a combination of good timing, sharp instincts and an appetite for risk, has served the Duttas well.

The brothers had been juggling with the idea of such a project for the longest time. "We saw that there was an explosion of Indian artistic talent and so much of it was world-class," recalls Dutta. Although Indian artists hadn't hit big-time in the US (and haven't yet), the market seemed ripe for take off. Sotheby's auctions especially from the prized Herwitz collection in the mid-1990s set the stage for an international market of Indian art.

The brothers figured that there was enough of an interest and wealth in the 1.7 million strong NRI community in the US to support an ongoing enterprise. "After you've bought your

mortar model.

Over 90 per cent of ArtsIndia's customers are Indians and as many as 70 per cent are first-time buyers. "Indian art, unlike Chinese art, is accessible," says Dutta. "You don't have to be a millionaire to buy an Indian painting." ArtsIndia's client list includes doctors, tech tycoons, finance honchos and young professionals like Ravi Sinha, managing director at Goldman Sachs and investment banker Zafar Kashif.

Sinha along with his wife Mona have been collectors for almost a decade and are regular patrons. "ArtsIndia's exhibitions reflect the present demand for the artist which is very smart, because their shows sell out quite often. Other galleries sometimes carry only artists that appeal to the owners," they say. Adds Kashif and his wife Sujatha: "The great quality of art that Prajit has access to as well as his professionalism and client focus has won us over."



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second SUV, what do you do? People want something that reminds them of India in their homes," smiles Dutta. The Duttas had something else going for them: direct access to top Indian painters through their father Ajit Dutta, former head of the Lalit Kala Akademi, who knew them personally.

The original plan was to have a non-traditional gallery: source work directly from the artists and sell exclusively online. Within six months, as the dot-bomb imploded, they'd figured that a Web-alone strategy wouldn't work. ArtsIndia quickly migrated to its present clicks and

Believing that the market is as yet nascent, the Duttas reach out to potential buyers in innovative ways. For example, shows of individual artists are regularly held with the painter making a personal appearance. Last year, the gallery hosted a day with Paresh Maity where the artist painted a canvas which was sold. Other shows include those of M.F. Husain and more recently Laxman Goud. Furthermore, ArtsIndia holds regular roadshows in other cities with large Indian populations – Chicago, Texas, San Francisco.

Apart from its aesthetic value, the

Duttas believe that Indian art is a smart investment. In the last eight years, prices in the US have gone up two to three times and the market is poised for take-off. "The Indian art market resembles the Latin art market in the 1980s. Once Frida Kahlo became a female icon and the museums got into the act, it went mainstream. This will happen for Indian art too," predicts Dutta. So M.F. Husain may be a better bet than Microsoft.

♦ NAAZNEEN KARMALI

## Fine fantasy



Of all the films that have blended fantasy with adventure none has captured the imagination or retained the affection of the public as has *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*, which were released last year and hit the market within a month of each other's release. Now the audience is looking forward to the sequels to each of the films.

The fantasy genre has always flourished. An element of fantasy has always excited people's imagination, giving wing to their most extravagant flights of fancy. The remarkable techniques developed by special effects experts have made any illusion possible, from the conjuring up of other worldly spirits to the creation of an entire futuristic civilisation. Moviegoers also crave the undemanding exhilaration that fantasy offers. The results may be more fanciful than factual and the films may provide more exercise for the eyes than for the mind. Fantasy has always been a popular form of cinema entertainment because the camera can lie so well and trick work is most easily used in an unrealistic or fanciful story.

The competition between *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* and *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets* is intense.

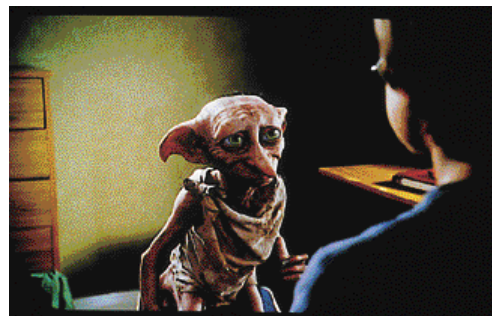
The \$318-million grossing *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone* returns in sequel in *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*, based on the second novel in J.K. Rowling's blockbuster series. In this instalment young

wizard Harry Potter (Daniel Radcliffe) and his friend Ron Weasley (Rupert Grint) and Hermione Granger (Emma Watson) face new challenges during their second year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as they try to uncover a dark force that is terrorising the school. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, published in 1998, made its debut as a number one on the UK's Whitaker Book Track best-seller list. It also made its debut as a number one on the *New York Times*, *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* best-seller lists. More than 42 million copies of the novel have been sold in more than 42 countries. Harry Potter's most devoted fans are children aged between seven and 12 years old.

The movie is two hours and 42 minutes long, nine minutes longer than *The Sorcerer's Stone*. It is a slow-paced film, with few surprises but a lot more adventure. Director Chris Columbus has become more daring with his computer-assisted camera shots across landscapes and locations and he could never be accused of being unfaithful to the books. Cinematographer Roger Pratt's images are crisper. The effects are more sophisticated than the previous film and they keep viewers happy with funny, scary and enhanced action. The lead stars, Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint and Emma Watson have settled well into their roles. The music is exquisitely composed and of high calibre.

*Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* is a dazzling second instalment of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, which picks up exactly where the first one left off. It is not a sequel. It's simply a three-hour second act of an epic nine-hour trilogy called Lord of the Rings. Based on J.R.R. Tolkien's mythical sword-and-sorcery three-part novel, the movies were filmed at once during a mammoth 15-month shoot.

With no need for an introductory prologue we are literally thrown into the movie with its opening sequence. By all accounts episode two moves quicker. The Two Towers pitches Middle-earth into all-out war as Aragorn and the reborn Gandalf The White help to defend the kingdom of Rohan. Frodo and Sam continue towards Mordor to destroy the One Ring, joined by



Stills from *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets* and *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (bottom)

creepy former Ringbearer Gollum, while Merry and Pippin flee their Uruk-hai captors to encounter the arboreal Treebeard. Two Towers is a more adult affair than its predecessor.

Director Peter Jackson delivers one of cinema's most thrilling war sequences, keeping the audience on the edge. The movie is terrific visually. *The Lord of the Rings* stands among the best adaptations of a major work of fantasy ever managed by the movie.

*The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* has won several awards. Competition has forced the makers of *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets* and the *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* to keep their standards high.

♦ RAFIQUE BAGHDADI