

Underrated, undervalued, and underpriced, Indian art is enjoying new popularity due to affluent Indian immigrants in the US and clever promotion on the Web

BY PREETI DAWRA

Ten years ago, the Indian art market was almost non-existent in the United States. For decades, big auction houses like Sotheby's and Christie's were mostly interested in Japanese and Chinese art from Asia. Even major museums held very small collections of South Asian art. However, as the Indian immigrant community begins to prosper and thrive in the United States, the equation is slowly changing. Indian art is gradually finding its way into the mainstream art market.

Hugo Weihe, Specialist for Indian and Southeast Asian Art at Christie's, said "Chinese and Japanese art has been traded extensively and dispersed globally throughout the last century. So it has been recognized by the public eye more easily. Indian art, on the other hand, went unrecognized in most parts of the Western world as most of it was sent only to England due to its colonial links."

Christie's had been holding Southeast Asian art auctions for decades, but their collection never included Indian art. Three years ago, in 1998, all that changed when they renamed the category the "Indian and Southeast Asian Collection." Since then, Christie's has held two large auctions of Indian art every year, in March and September.

Indian art is now being promoted in traditional and non-traditional ways. It is even possible to tap into this growing market via the Internet. In 1997, a portal called Artsindia.com emerged as the largest South Asian online art gallery in the United States. Started in the heart of New York City's financial district, Artsindia.com became the first and only



Arts India Gallery: Showcasing the best of Indian artists.

U.S.-based online gallery for Indian contemporary art, canvas prints, posters and designer crafts. The company currently represents more than 60 Indian artists ranging from such world-renowned figures as M.F. Hussain, Anjolie Ela Menon and Jamini Roy, to younger, up-and-coming artists.

"Artsindia.com arose from the conviction that the best of Indian art compares favorably with the very best in the better-known American and European art world," said Dr. Prajit Dutta, co-founder of Artsindia.com and professor of economics at Columbia University. "However, much of the art remains unseen in the West, and as a result, remains greatly undervalued."

"We aim to creatively use the Internet to generate a global audience and offer high-quality art at affordable prices to a new generation of art consumers," added Projjal Dutta, an MIT architect and fellow co-founder. Visitors to the site can read about the current art scene in India, its history, the different schools and trends, and even recent interviews with the artists themselves.

Artsindia.com has received on average 90,000 hits a month and has built an impres-

sive base of more than 1,000 customers. Last month, the company opened a swanky gallery on Fifth Avenue and 26th street.

"We started this gallery to compliment the online business," said Dr. Dutta. "A lot of customers wanted to come and see the physical art."

While the average price for a painting at Artsindia.com is \$5,000, the average Indian painting sold at a big auction house like Christie's is \$10,000. Still, the market for Indian art is minuscule today compared to the \$57 billion Western art market, and the notion of buying expensive art online is a recent phenomenon.

While Professor Dutta concedes that some customers are hesitant to buy art online, he feels that it's only a question of time before the customer sees art as just another commodity that is being sold via the internet.

"Since we opened our gallery we have had three shows and all of them have drawn a tremendous response," said Dutta. "We are simply overwhelmed and delighted with the interest in Indian art. This response would not have been possible five years back." □

NEW WAVE ON THE ART SCENE: THE ART OF

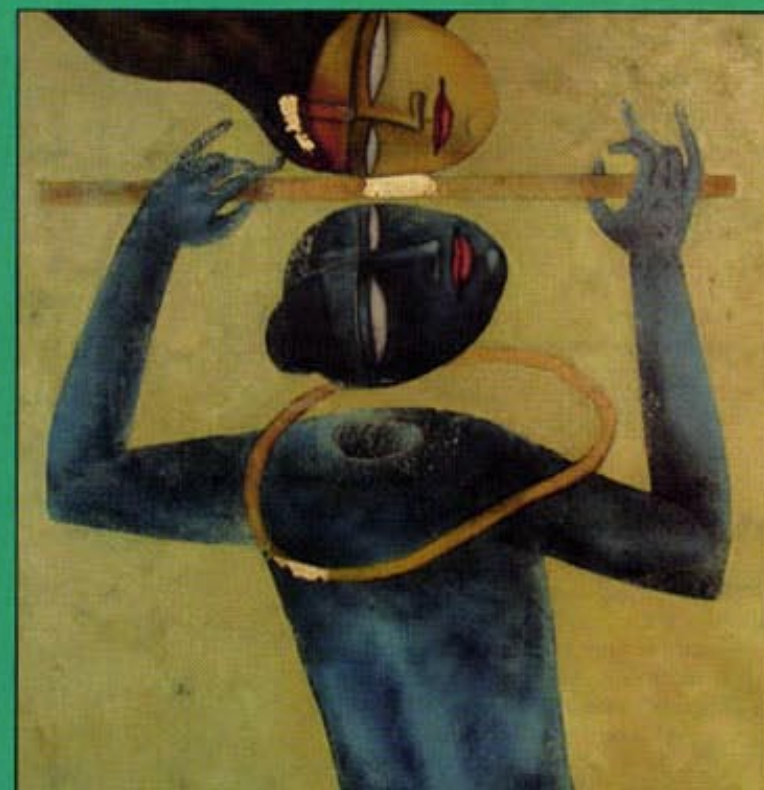
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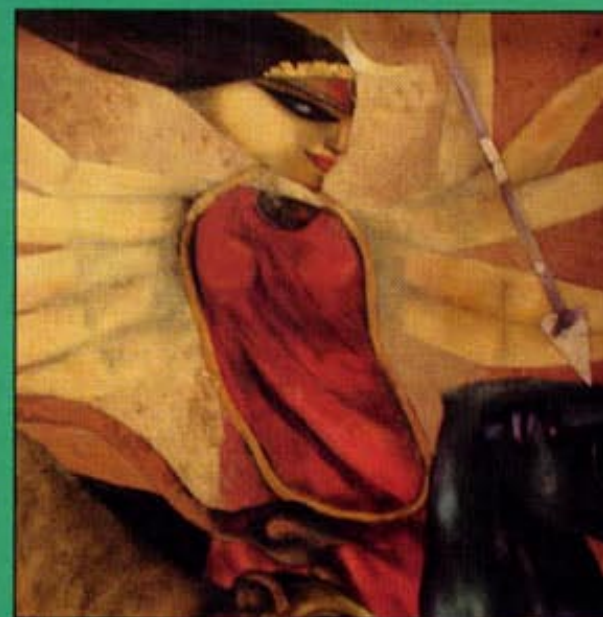
SANJAY BHATTACHAYA, DOORWAY



M. F. HUSSAIN,
GAJA GAMINI: AT THE HARMONIUM



SHUVA PRASSANNA, GOLDEN FLUTE 2



SHUVA PRASSANNA, DURGA 3



M. F. HUSSAIN, THREE ELEPHANTS