

HAUTE LIVING

THE NEW STANDARD FOR LUXURY

The Indian Influence

By Felicity Sargent

Indian contemporary art shatters sale records at auction houses around the globe.



It seems as though the most affluent individuals are constantly searching for in vogue methods of investing. Jewelry, real estate, and art have long been common outlets for those who make money faster than they can spend it, and lately contemporary Indian art has emerged as an investment that offers near unheard of ROI.

Many Indian artists, both established and new to the scene, have allowed the market to reach its unrivaled heights, and experts are saying it has yet to hit its maturation. Modern Indian art has presented incredible investment opportunities in the last decade, offering embarrassingly high returns. Just this past May, an Atul Dodiya painting, which sold five years ago for \$11,500,

garnered nearly \$400,000 at auction, and there are many stories of artists mimicking this trend of appreciation.

Since 2000, Christie's, the venerable auction house, has experienced unprecedented growth, thanks to the emergence of Indian and Chinese buyers of both Eastern and Western art. Ed Dolman, CEO of Christie's, predicts this trend will continue. "Christie's robust results for the first half of 2008 reflect the ongoing strength of the international art market from growth markets including Russia, the Middle East, India, and China," he explains. Collectively, the Indian art market has risen more than 485 percent in the last 10 years, thus deeming it the fourth most buoyant art market in the world.

The vague concept that there could even been a potential market in existence for 20th century Indian art began circulating in 2000. The trend can largely be attributed to auction houses, Christie's and Sotheby's, who began holding Indian art auctions in art capitals such as London and New York. From this, a spur of national pride was evoked from the country, and news of sale results bombarded the Indian diaspora. The celebrated Herwitz collection, which was comprised of more than 5,000 works gathered by the family during their frequent travels to India, is credited for aiding in the market boom when it was dispersed by Sotheby's New York between 1995 and 2000.

With the realization that many affluent art buyers were following Indian art, the auction houses began making aggressive efforts to accommodate the new demand by hosting contemporary art auctions bi-annually in New York. Simultaneously, the art gallery network in India began growing rapidly, with new galleries emerging regularly in unexpected cities such as Bangalore and Kochi.

In 2003, a huge boom in the real estate market flooded the country's affluent with a surplus of cash. Some of this newfound wealth was directed into the art market. It was reported at this peak in 2005 that "after the Porsches and the Chanel handbag, the latest must-have for Delhi's new millionaire is a piece of contemporary art."

This was a stark contrast to the status that had plagued Indian artists for years. Due to political and cultural constraints, artists struggled to emerge into the contemporary world. India's history of modernism is closely linked to the presence of the avant-garde. Through the colonial divide, India was exposed to cross-cultural influences, which provided the vision to move beyond the post renaissance realism that had long dominated India's art scene. Though the emergence of the contemporary was seemingly exciting, it posed a deliberate contradiction for artists to struggle with: claim a modernist identity for themselves in the progressive art world, and in return, question their own traditional values and antecedents.

Goa-native Francis Newton Souza, whose work *Birth* just set the world auction record for Indian modern art and broke the record for contemporary art in general, is among an early crop of painters who are credited for popularizing Indian art in Western countries. He was thrown out of school in 1942 due to his unyielding support and involvement in the Quit India movement, a group opposing the British rule. Souza founded the Progressive Arts Group in 1947, which encouraged fellow artists to gain a stronger presence and involvement in the international avant-garde movement.

Like Souza, the works of New Delhi-based Subodh Gupta have been integral to the Indian art market's international presence. His work is all encompassing and helps patrons explore the concepts of home, sense of place, and the frictions in India that are being caused by a rapidly globalizing society. He uses the mundane, even the grotesque, to mold his pieces of art. Cow dung found in the streets, milk buckets, guns, kitchen utensils: all refer to the constantly evolving socio-economic status of India. Through these thought-provoking images, Gupta

reaches both international and local crowds on equally impacting levels. Though he utilizes a number of different mediums (sculpture, painting, installation, photography, video, and performance), it is his sculptures that recently broke records at auction houses. Gupta's *Vehicle for the Seven Seas*, a sculpture of a gilded bronze trolley with three pieces of luggage, posted an auction-record price for the Indian artist when it fetched \$785,243 in May at Christie's Asian Contemporary Art Evening Sale. Last September's Asian Art Weeks saw Gupta's works sell high over estimates, further proof of the contemporary Indian art market's strength.

Some of Souza's most influential paintings hung alongside those of other Indian contemporary artists at the recent Aicon gallery opening in Bowery, the newfangled art mecca of New York City. This opening was not only celebration of Souza, but also of Aicon's art investment fund and third gallery branch. Aicon also operates galleries in London and Palo Alto, California; this new location opened in order to meet the high demand from investors and artists. Prajit Dutta, a professor of economics at Columbia University and cofounder of the Aicon galleries and funds, is an expert on art investment. Similar to investing in real estate, the art fund buys a piece of art and holds it for set period of time before the work is sold. Post sale, the profits are dispersed in a fashion similar to a private equity group. Investors are seeing gargantuan returns on their art investments, hence the unparalleled growth of this market. "There is quite a bit of wealth amongst these investment groups," Dutta explains. "A few years ago when this all began to manifest, there was immense faith that this market was going to do very well. All the fundamentals were, and still are, strong."

Looking to the future, experts predict the contemporary Indian art market to follow the current trend. As Dutta says, "This market is going to continue to grow. There is excitement on the collectors' side, there is a huge amount of interest that continues to grow on the curators' side, and there is a plethora of interesting art currently being produced. Indian art is in the process of becoming the next big story of success."