



The ‘cheerleaders’ of the art world

Four collectors share how responsible patronage can inspire new exploration — as Ayesha Singh did with 3D sculptures — and build audienceship, as Narayan Sinha discovered with his artwork

1 of 8 |

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Collectors become patrons when they go beyond the act of collecting, and become interested in a long-term engagement with the artists. This could be through the support of loans of their works to institutional exhibitions, making documentation and publications possible, supporting artist residencies or by simply encouraging conversations and engagement with their works

- ROSHINI VADEHRA

Director, Vadehra Art Gallery

Art auctions aren't unlike the stock market. Buzzing with brokers, speculators, and investors, they're a place where artwork is reduced to an asset, established artists are labelled “blue chip” while younger, emerging names are “red”, and purchases are made after a careful assessment of risk, rather than gut instinct. But the home of the average art collector tells an entirely different story.

Here, venerated modernists will occupy the same wall as a spontaneous graduate show purchase; a high-value work may get sidelined by a piece created by a close friend; a seemingly bad investment will take centre stage simply because it speaks to the collector on a personal level. And, occasionally, when an artist makes a significant impact on the collector, their collection will come to include several of their works, marking key moments in the evolution of their practice.

In this vein, a collector isn't simply a buyer — they become a patron, a custodian, a benefactor of the art world. Four Indian art collectors, each of whom have developed long-standing associations with the artists they collect, speak to the *Magazine* about responsible patronage and the different ways in which they offer support.

Expanding the oeuvre

“I think it is important as a collector to not just go ‘wide’ by buying lots of art from various artists, but also to go deep and follow an artist's journey,” says Natasha Jeyasingh, curatorial lead for digital art platform TheUpsideSpace. Jeyasingh, whose own collection includes about 70 pieces, believes that collectors play a strong role in making or breaking an artist's career. “When you have someone's work, it's important to be aware of the fact that you're also storing somebody's history.”

She happens to be the proud patron of the first ever three-dimensional sculpture by Ayesha Singh — it was commissioned specifically for her apartment at the time. “Until then she had been doing her forms in a single plane, but I couldn't buy any of those because they were large pieces and I didn't have the space to keep them. So I asked her if she would make a smaller piece for me.” Singh saw a column in Jeyasingh's home and decided to make a work that wrapped around it, thereby breaking through the flat plane for the first time in her practice. “That was the first piece that led to her working in multiple planes, so again, I have a piece of hers that is historically important.”

In 2017, Jeyasingh co-founded Carpe Arte, a group that organises studio visits, talks, gallery walkthroughs, and events in a bid to support emerging talent, and bring new audiences into the fold. During the pandemic, they backed young artists such as Shubham Kumar, Digbijayee Khatua, Puja Mondal and Gurjeet Singh by using their social media to sell art directly to buyers.

New liaisons

Art manager and consultant Amit Kumar Jain is similarly proactive about connecting with unrepresented talent and giving them a platform. “I have always been more attracted towards emerging artists,” says Jain, who has about 200 pieces in his collection. “That's because of my training with the Devi Art Foundation. The idea was to discover artists doing new things, and because of that I am still inclined towards emerging artists, because that's where I think we need more patronage and support.”

Instagram was a blessing for Jain, especially during the pandemic, because it gave him the opportunity to engage with early-career artists. Through his account @themiddleclasscollector, he makes an attempt to bring talented unknowns into the spotlight. One of the most prominent artists in Jain's collection is Nepal-born Youdhisthir Maharjan, whom he reached out to in 2014 to participate in a group showcase of text-based art called *Reading Room*. “He was a tough one to find because he is not on any social media, even today,” laughs Jain. He acquired a few of Maharjan's works after the exhibition, but now proudly admits that the artist is “beyond his budget”. “He held a solo booth at this year's Art Dubai, which I heard was sold out,” he beams.

Working with institutions

Where Jain attempts to connect artists with institutions, collector, patron and entrepreneur Radhika Chopra is on a mission to empower the institutions themselves. Her degree in public policy gave her insight into how governments and institutions can support various aspects of society. When she moved from the U.S. to India in 2004, she knew she wanted to do more than sell art. “I wanted to create platforms,” she insists.

A conversation with the Vadehras led to the founding of FICA (Foundation for Indian Contemporary Arts), for which Chopra served as director for seven years. “We set up a research grant, an emerging artist award, and a public art grant, and we built collaborations with institutions around the world. It may not necessarily be a platform for collectors, but it does a lot of that groundwork that's necessary.” Since then, she has also been involved with the Asia Society's Game Changers award for about four years now, has supported a collaboration between Khoj, a New Delhi-based non-profit, and the Tate Modern in London, and is also a patron of the Kochi Biennale.

“I recently did something different in terms of supporting an artist,” she shares. “I donated a work by Arpita Singh to my alma mater, Wellesley College, because they didn't really have any contemporary Indian art.” Chopra also collaborated with fellow art patrons Kiran Nadar, Dipti Mathur and Asha Jadeja to acquire Amar Kanwar's *The Lightning Testimonies*, and gift it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Creating new collectors

Finally, there is one breed of art market punter that doesn't get enough credit: the interior designer. They're the ones responsible for bringing art into people's homes, often buying pieces in bulk or commissioning new work. For Joya Nandurdikar, co-founder of Untitled Design Consultants, this easily makes up about 50% of the job.

“We like to collaborate with artists and craftsmen, and we're always on the lookout for people who can add dimension to our work,” says the designer, whose own home is full of art and sculpture. A noteworthy case study is Narayan Sinha, a science graduate who is now a contemporary artist garnering global recognition. Nandurdikar was introduced to Sinha by her firm partner, Amrita Guha, during an assignment for a client in Kolkata. While the project didn't work out, their association with the artist has continued to this day. “When we met him, he was known for his Devi sculptures,” she says. “Our collaborations, on the other hand, have been more contemporary.”

Sinha also went on to do a solo show called *Firelight*, which garnered a lot of international attention. “At the India Art Fair earlier this year, Iram Art Gallery was dedicated entirely to his work,” concludes Nandurdikar.

The freelance writer and playwright

is based in Mumbai.