

No regulation, counterfeits mar the art mart

India needs to adopt scientific methods, say experts

INDULEKHA ARAVIND

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"I keep getting requests to certify art works, which are counterfeits. When I point out that they are not authentic, the agents try to persuade me by offering more money," reveals Ratan Parimoo, artist, art historian and director of LD Museum and NC Mehta Gallery in Ahmedabad.

"I have even been told there are people in Rajasthan and Indore who have been specifically engaged to produce counterfeits," he adds.

While the Indian art market is still considered relatively nascent, it is no stranger to controversies over counterfeits. In 2011, Parimoo was part of a panel that found 20 of the 23 paintings at a Tagore exhibition in Kolkata's Government College of Art were counterfeits. In January this year, paintings by M F Hussain and Manjit Bawa were withdrawn from an art festival after their authenticity was questioned by the M F Hussain Foundation and businessman and art collector Harsh Goenka. And past week, the authenticity of some paintings that were to be auctioned in New Delhi by Bangalore-based auctioneer Bid & Hammer on Friday was challenged.

But while counterfeits are the inevitable by-product in any art market, Parimoo's remarks are disturbing and suggest the issue needs to be addressed immediately.

Arun Vadehra of Delhi's Vadehra Art Gallery, while underplaying the size of the counterfeit market, agrees that it is a menace that needs to be curbed. He suggests the setting up of a regulatory body to oversee the sale of art works and another official committee to undertake

HOW AUTHENTIC IS YOUR CHOICE?

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valuation, might be the solution. He estimates the size of the Indian art market at \$400 million and counterfeits, he says, would be an insignificant percentage of this. "But it needs to be nipped in the bud," he clarifies.

Ashish Anand, director of Delhi Art Gallery, said it is "high time a regulatory body was created for the regulation of the art industry" in the wake of "recent concerns regarding the trafficking of allegedly fake works by members of the art fraternity". Bid & Hammer, which refused to comment for this article on the grounds that

legal notices had been sent to those challenging the authenticity of the art works it was to auction, has posted a statement on the website alleging Ashish Anand & Company were trying to prevent their auction. According to an Indian Express report, several of the 86 lots were unsold.

Nish Bhutani, chief operating officer of auction house Saffronart, which has been in the business for over 14 years, says ensuring authenticity is the most important activity they undertake. "The documentary evidence we inspect includes invoices and authenticity certificates from the artist or a respected gallery, dealer or auction house, publishing and exhibition history of the work, photographs and letters from the artist, as well as in-person and detailed inspection by our in-house experts." He adds that Saffronart has built up an internal digital and physical archive that has a record of every auction sale of Indian art across all auction houses globally, "as well as virtually every publication related to Indian art". The auction house's experts then cross-check images and documents against this archive and by communicating with the relevant gallery or dealer.

Parimoo, however, says the entire process needs to be overhauled as many galleries, dealers and auction houses are interested only in authentication as a procedure and not in the authenticity of the work itself. "How can you believe a certification of authenticity, even by me? Abroad, there are lab tests, old dossiers and records. We need to adopt scientific methods in India, if you are serious about authentication."