



**Good as real?**  
Red flags have been raised about a MF Husain self-portrait and (below) Tagore's *Nriya* and B. HAMMER

## Till fakes do us apart

The art fraternity raises its brush in protest as the provenance and sale of iconic works come into question

**T**he controversial Bid & Hammer auction at a posh Delhi hotel is barely hours away. Maher Dadha the founder of the Bangalore-based auction house, is pacing about, phone to his ear, as a few art enthusiasts trickle in.

The atmosphere crackles with tension as Bid & Hammer decide to go ahead with the auction despite several allegations regarding counterfeits in its collection. These range from a legal notice from the estate of MF Husain to objections from Bengal School artist Bikash Bhattacharjee's daughter Balaka and art historian Susobhan Adhikary from Kolkata, who raised a red flag regarding a Tagore painting titled *Nriya*. "This work currently hangs at the Visva Bharati in Santiniketan and there is no way it can be at an auction. I have seen the JPEG image and it is clearly a block print, not a hand-rendered ink on paper," says Adhikary.

A similar allegation was made by Dr Rajeev Lochan, director, the National Gallery of Modern Art regarding the *Woman Sitting under a Tree* (20x33.2 cm), done by Nandalal Bose in the watercolour wash-technique that the Bengal School was best known for. "The work (at NGMA) has a seal of authentication from the artist," says Lochan.

As one walks into the display area, the first painting to catch one's eye is the 34x60 inch *Horses* by Husain. White steeds prance against

an orange background, and the work is accompanied by an authentication certificate in the distinctive handwriting of the painter. While this clearly looks like the work of a great master, a few awkwardly crafted self-portraits have raised alarm bells.

### Under the gavel

Serious viewers and collectors were disappointed that Dadha went ahead with the auction despite the reservations voiced by others, as the established practice at most auction houses — be it a Christie's, Sotheby's or Bowring's — is to remove controversial works from all auctions.

"Even after we told them twice that it is a fake and not my father Bikash Bhattacharjee's work, they went ahead and even sold it in the auction," says Balaka Bhattacharjee, also a painter. "My father has documented 99 per cent of his work, and my mother and I were very close to his art and his process. Anyone with a smidgen of knowledge in Indian art will tell you that in 1972, my father was doing his doll series, working only in oils, and was no longer painting the woman series. Besides, it is technically not even close to the worst of his works," she said from Kolkata.

ta. The work in question is a shaded pastel on paper of a woman facing the viewer, which is dated 1972 and priced at ₹7 lakh.

Dadha, however, disagrees. "We have nothing to hide and we are totally confident of the provenance of the artworks. The people who have consigned the works are respected and well-known. Those who have objections should have come and seen the works that have been hanging in our preview section and have been on our website for months before the auction. This seems like a witch hunt, planned right before the auction, to dissuade our buyers and to besmirch our reputation," he says.

Ruksana Pathan, the daughter of veteran artist KH Ara says, "I received a phone call that my father's paintings were being auctioned, so I went on Facebook, where they were promoting the auction, and looked at the works, two of which I found to be at variance with his style. I usually never authenticate works and I do not consider myself an authority. But I grew up around my father's works and I can tell when it's not his work," she said from Mumbai. She pointed out that an untitled ink-and-gouache work on board, featuring a goat

and a family, are not in keeping with Ara's subject matter or style. "He painted mostly still-life and nudes," she adds, claiming that the second work, *Still Life of Fruits*, is over-worked and the colour palette seems off.

It must be mentioned that in this whole brouhaha, there is no established body or avenue to authenticate artworks and it remains a rather ad-hoc process, dependent on the opinions of a few experts and the descendants of the deceased artist.

On the heels of this incident a group of concerned artists, gallery owners and historians have proposed a regulatory authority to "clear the air on many issues that concern the consumer, who is at a disadvantage in the absence of an authority... in case of sale of problematic/fake works." The signatories were Ashish Anand of the Delhi Art Gallery, Sonia Ballaney of Vadehra Art Gallery, Tushar Sethi, head of Astaguru Auction, Rajani Prasanna, the daughter of KK Hebbar and Samarendranath Mazumdar, the grandnephew of Hemen Mazumdar.

### Need for intervention

According to artist KS Radhakrishnan, it is high time the government got involved and regulated the art market. He believes there is a need for an authenticating body that uses scientific methods like carbon dating and X-rays alongside historical documentation. Dadha welcomes it too, saying, "At least it would break the concentration of power in art cartels that support each other and lynch outsiders like myself."

It has been seven years since artist Anjolie Ela Menon appealed to the government to form a regulatory body. Menon took severe action when she discovered that her assistant was faking her works and selling them through a dealer in Kolkata. The accused found themselves behind bars. But, a decade later, an official authenticating body is yet to be created.

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Some artists believe the government should get involved and regulate the art market

