

# Own a bit of India

With non-exportable antiques going under the hammer, Pundole's latest auction heralds a braver, bolder Indian art market, says Ranjita Ganesan



**S**tone figurines from the 10th and 11th centuries lie on the floor or lean against walls, waiting to be placed on wooden pedestals in the new Colaba gallery of auction house Pundole's. Labourers covered in sawdust and paint casually step over them while bustling about with preparations before the opening day of a sale preview, likely unaware that these and several pieces around are so old they are deemed non-exportable by the government.

A majority of the 91 lots that will go under the hammer on March 12 are registered antiquities, spanning a wide range of regions, styles and periods. The oldest is the Gandhara stone relief of the Buddha and his devotees from the second or third century. Other significant works include a group of Pala stone sculptures from the 11th century bearing depictions of Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Umamaheshvara and Surya.

Pundole's specialists Mallika Advani and Rob Dean think hard about their favourite pick before arriving at a unanimous answer — a 17th century bronze statue of Indra made in Nepal. "When talking of bronze art in Asia, one immediately thinks of South India's Chola sculptures. Perhaps the only ones that can compete with them are those made by Newaris in Nepal," says Dean. Historically, these statues were in high demand in China and Tibet too.

Another side of Nepal is visible in tankha paintings from the region, made using distemper on cloth. Swiss couple Ernst and Angela Jucker were known for owning many such Himalayan paintings, which were later acquired by an Indian businessman in 2006. Five of these are now in the market.

While lauding the auction for giving people a chance to see the historic pieces, Kishore Singh, publication and exhibition head at Delhi Art Gallery, says the art fraternity also needs to question the government's decision not to export antiquities. "The art is then bought largely by Indians and NRIs which is not the intention of the law," he says. "If a French collector wants to invest in ancient Indian art, what's wrong with that? Besides, the state doesn't do anything to help local collectors who buy and maintain such works." This also keeps the prices artificially low, he notes.

Reserve prices in the Pundole's auction start at ₹20,000 to ₹60,000 for stone sculptures from Northwestern India, and the most expensive modern work is an M F Husain painting estimated to sell for between ₹1.2 crore and ₹1.8 crore. F N Souza's *Crowned Christ* is expected to fetch ₹80 lakh to ₹1.2 crore. "Ultimately, prices are determined by the historical importance of a particular work and an individual's perceived sense of value in the context of their particular collection," says Dean.

Those with an interesting provenance (belonging to an important collection) attract premiums. The pieces in Pundole's sale are from at least six personal collections including a royal one. In this auction, pieces previously owned by Emmanuel Schlesinger and the Juckers are expected to see intense bidding. Schlesinger, who stayed in Bombay from 1939 until his death in 1968, was a patron of Indian artists.

The auction house, which began as a gallery by Kall Pundole in the post-Independence period, is run by Dadiba Pundole and his wife Khorsheed. In the sale preview, antiquities and paintings of varying styles and times share space in a way that seems peculiar until explained. "Husain was influenced by classical Indian sculptures so his paintings are



(above) An early impressionistic work by Jamini Roy; (below) a landscape painted by S H Raza at the beginning of his career

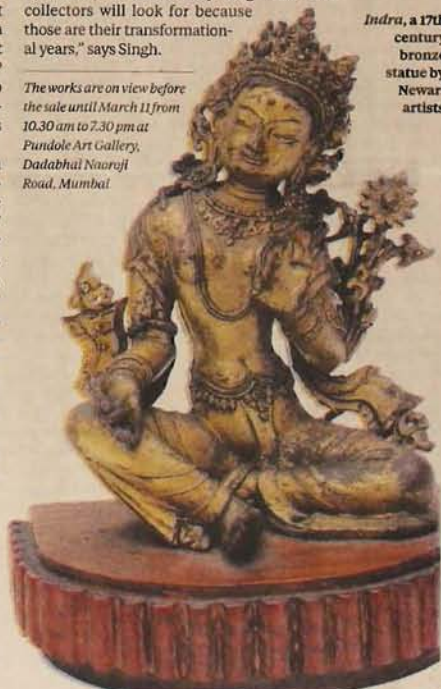


placed next to them. Tanjore paintings from the 20th century are alongside Meiji vases to show the art coming out of Japan during the same period," says Advani.

The modern section includes paintings by all six original members of the progressive artists' movement including lesser-known works of H A Gade and Sadanand Bakre. Another rare sight are Amrita Sher-Gil's drawings of animals from the last sketchbook she used before her death. Other strikingly uncommon artworks include a rare landscape by Tyeb Mehta, an impressionistic work by Jamini Roy and an early figure drawing by abstract artist V S Gaitonde. "Works by artists in their early stages is what collectors will look for because those are their transformational years," says Singh.

The works are on view before the sale until March 11 from 10.30 am to 7.30 pm at Pundole Art Gallery, Dadabhai Naoroji Road, Mumbai

Indra, a 17th century bronze statue by Newari artists



The Devil, an 11th-century stone statue from the Chalukya period



PHOTOS COURTESY: PUNDOLE ART GALLERY