

# AUCTIONING HISTORY

**Shabnam Minwalla**, tracks the Pundole Art Gallery continued reinvention in light of the space's recent relocation.

A few years ago, the door of the Pundole Art Gallery at Fountain swung open and an elegant old lady with bright blue eyes walked in and demanded, "Where's that little boy?" Khorshed Pundole was bewildered, and took a few moments to realise that the "little boy" in question was her own husband.

Once the confusion was cleared up, the visitor announced her business. She wanted Pundole's to auction her estate. "Laura Hamilton passed away less than a year later, and we auctioned her estate in 2013," said Dadiba Pundole, recounting this story that brings together so many strands of local history.

For Pundole's is amongst the oldest and most influential art galleries in the city. While

Laura Hamilton was a well-known figure – a Canadian singer who came to Bombay to entertain guests at the Taj during WWII, and stayed on to run the stylish Malabar Boutique in the hotel. It was there that Dadiba met her as a young boy.

Their next encounter was, for Hamilton, a tying up of loose ends. But for Dadiba, it was one of the events that heralded a new beginning. On March 6 this year, Pundole's inaugurated a viewing space in Tanna House in Colaba – a quiet declaration that it has established itself as a permanent auction house in the city. "Pundole Art Gallery will continue to represent artists and hold solo shows," said Rob Dean, a specialist with Pundole's in an interview with *Time Out*.

"This new space is for auction previews, and perhaps lectures and film viewings. We chose it for its heritage feel and because it's located in the cultural hub of the city."

Pundole's new baby is a stone's throw from the Museum and the NGMA. The street outside is clamorous with schoolgirls and tooting tempos, but behind the enormous doors of opaque glass lie white and tranquil rooms filled with exquisite treasures – jewelled Tanjore paintings, gilt bronzes from Nepal, eleventh century stone carvings, all of which will be auctioned on March 12.

This, of course, is the latest chapter in a story that started in 1883 with DR Pundole and Sons. The shop sold Swiss watches under the Beaumont brand name – but



ANURAG BANERJEE

Three's company (L-r) Dadiba Pundole, Rob Dean and Mallika Advani



with Independence and import restrictions, business spluttered to a halt. "The watches were nothing special but I was very keen to use one," said Dadiba, about the shop run by his great grandfather and grandfather. "I was given one for my Navjote, which I immediately ruined."

For a few years the shop near Flora Fountain stood empty. Kali Pundole was a plastic engineer based in the UK. "But then he got married and my mother found the UK miserable, cold and boring," recalled Dadiba. "Around the same time, my grandmother wrote to all her sons, asking if any of them was interested in the shop."

Kali Pundole decided to return to Bombay and set up a framing business – which in 1963 he bravely converted into an art gallery. "I can understand how my father started," said Dadiba. "What baffles me is how he sustained the gallery."

In those early years, there was little profit in art. The big event was the annual Bombay Art Society exhibition at the Town Hall, largely featuring pretty landscapes by British ladies. Modern Indian artists found it almost impossible to reach an audience – and the sale of a single painting for ₹100 was cause for rejoicing. "It was as a reaction to this that Souza, Raza, Ara, Husain, Gade and Bakre set up the Progressive Group in the late '40s," recalled Dadiba, adding that many artists survived on a single meal. "They had their own manifesto and wanted to dismiss the British academic styles of art from our schools. The JJ School of Art actually forbade its students from attending exhibitions held by the Progressives."

For these artists, pioneering galleries like Pundole's and Chemould were a refuge. Kali Pundole and MF Husain, for example, became great friends. "Whenever Husain travelled he left his Ambassador with my dad so the car could be started occasionally," says Dadiba, who was terrified that his father would tootle up to Campion School in that eye-popping vehicle painted all over with bulls and nudes. "Husain's works started selling earlier than



the others. But even so, in the early '60s, he sold for around ₹150 and Ara for less than ₹100."

Dadiba strayed into the family business while studying at KC College in 1980. He was toying with the idea of working as a salesman in a Colaba Causeway shop for ₹150 a month. But his father offered to match the salary, and so Dadiba joined the art gallery instead. "Even then Gaitondes and Padmasee metascapes were going for just around ₹18,000," he says. "Today they would fetch crores."

Indeed, Pundole Art Gallery has witnessed a dramatic transformation over 50 years – initial indifference to art, a blossoming of interest and finally a boom involving unimaginable sums of money. So much so that even a seasoned dealer like Dadiba still finds himself caught unaware. For example, during the first auction that Pundole's ever held.



It was in January 2011 that Dadiba received a call from the Chairman of NCPA. Khushroo Suntook had an urgent request. He needed to sell a part of Homi Bhabha's estate and immediately raise money for the cash-strapped NCPA. He wanted this to be done transparently – and an auction seemed ideal.

Sotheby's couldn't help till June – so Dadiba nervously stepped in. Within hours he rounded up two friends who were familiar with the going-going-gone routine – Rob Dean, who ran a gallery in London, and Mallika Advani, who used to head Christie's in India. The trio chose to auction 20 paintings and expected them to fetch up to ₹3 crores. "Instead we raised ₹11 crores," exclaimed Dadiba. "People went nuts."

Months later, the team emptied out Homi Bhabha's dusty house, learnt about furniture and porcelain, and conducted a second lucrative auction for NCPA. Word soon spread, and people like Hamilton began to approach Pundole's. One opportunity followed another – and today Pundole's is gearing up for its seventh auction. This time in its pristine new space.

The old art gallery, however, still stands amidst dry fruit stalls, hawkers, and the distinctive horse mural on its façade. "The gallery had just been redone in 1990 and the white-tiled façade reminded me of a urinal," said Dadiba. "I mentioned that to Husain and it must have stayed in his mind. On the day the Gulf War started in 1992, he came to the gallery, asked for a jar of black acrylic paint and painted that horse straight on the wall. I think he must have been venting his frustration about the war."

The iconic horse has survived smog and spitty passers-by for over two decades. But how much longer? "I've taken a few opinions," says Dadiba. "But I accept that everything has a life. Nothing is permanent. The important thing is that it's been a lovely journey."

Pundole's Art Gallery, Tanna House, Ground Floor, 11/A Nathalal Parekh Marg, Colaba. 2202-0645. Daily 11am to 7pm.