

GLOBAL EYE PAGE II

NURSES ARE BACK FROM IRAQ, BUT WHAT ABOUT THOUSAND OTHERS STILL STRANDED?

BOOKS PAGE V

HERE'S A RAW STORY OF PAIN. KASHMIR VALLEY BEFORE AFTER 1987

BIZ WIZ PAGE VI

CAN PM MODI ENSURE MINIMUM MAYHEM AFTER DELAYED MONSOON?

THE GREAT Indian Art SCAM

There is no law, no single agency, whether government or private, that is empowered to tell you if one is paying through his nose to buy authentic art or is duped into purchasing an egregious fake, reports Nandini Guha



Original Pallipar
by Hemendranath
Mazumdar



Jamini Roy



Rabindranath Tagore



fake painting

It all began one day in early June when Ganesh Pratap Singh, an art restorer who lives near Kolkata, started browsing through the catalogue of a large auction house for a 27 June event. He came across a sketch by Rabindranath Tagore (*Nritya*) – which did not please his practiced eye. He went to his library and pulled out a fat volume of Tagore's art works.

A huge lot of Bengal art – which recently went under the hammer in



It can also be done at the ASI. 'That's the only way you can stop the fake art racket. Even if a government museum is adding a collection, it must get the art vetted,' he points out.

Bickram Bachawat, owner of the Kolkata-based Akriti Gallery, comes up with another suggestion, 'To make things simpler, it would be great if artists or their families declare and register all art works made before 2000, when the Indian art market started picking

ENRAGED ARTISTS SPEAK OUT

Balaka Bhattacharjee

IT CAME to my notice first about two years ago.

I saw the two paintings ostensibly drawn by my father but promptly said that they were fake. In fact, the signature on the paintings was not matching my father's signature at all. But I was told that it was certified by a noted art critic/historian. In fact, within



Rabindranath Tagore (Nriya) – which did not please his practiced eye. He went to his library and pulled out a fat volume of Tagore's art works.

A huge lot of Bengal art – which recently went under the hammer in the national capital – raised quite a few eyebrows among the art fraternity about their origin and authenticity. The works (many of them valued at over a crore) by painters like Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Hemendranath Mazumdar and Jamini Roy, were allegedly fake. With some of the original pieces still lying with safe havens like the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Rabindra Bhavan at Visva Bharati, Shantiniketan, it was logical to doubt the objects on sale. Singh checked with art historians who specialized in Tagore and they raised similar doubts as well. The auctioneers, when challenged, maintained that they were selling original paintings of 'impeccable' pedigree, duly authenticated, on 27 June.

This leads one to the basic question of the authentication system for art in India. There is no law, no single agency – government or private – that is empowered to tell you whether you are paying through your nose to buy real art. Galleries get their stocks vetted by 'experienced' art curators but again that is a personal evaluation... often questioned by families of the artists. Result: fake pieces of priceless works changes hands, art lovers and buyers get duped and our national heritage gets compromised. For example, when artist Bikash Bhattacharjee's family expressed doubt about two works up for auction in this lot, the Society for Contemporary Artists wrote a letter to the auction house pointing out that the works were fake. The auction house wrote back, saying that the two paintings were authenticated by two well-known art critics from Kolkata. What can be done? rues veteran



Painting in Rabindra Bhawan Collection

art teacher and painter, Ganesh Haloi.

Complains Samindranath Majumdar, grand nephew of artist Hemendranath Mazumdar, 'There is a variation of Hemendranath's painting, *Pallipran*, which is probably doctored. The quality or finesse is just missing.'

That leads us to the basic question of who can really authenticate art in India? Singh, who wrote to Prime Minister Modi, requesting his intervention in curbing sale of fake art, says a single window clearance must be made mandatory for all art which is entering public domain. It can be run by the government.

Kolkata-based Akriti Gallery, comes up with another suggestion, 'To make things simpler, it would be great if artists or their families declare and register all art works made before 2000, when the Indian art market started picking up and a whole lot of fake art started circulating in the market.'

Ganesh Haloi, who played a lead role in the artists' movement in the city in 2011, when 19 paintings by Tagore were caught and declared 'fake' by the ASI, suggests, 'All art should be authenticated by a team of experts. An art historian (like Susobhan Adhikary/R Siva Kumar for Tagore) is a must. A technical person (a senior artist or a restorer of art) should look at the age of the canvas and colour and check whether any tampering has been done. Some lab tests should also be conducted before the certificate of authenticity is issued.'

In 2011, a PIL in the Calcutta High Court had brought another scary art scam to the fore. Eighteen paintings ostensibly by Tagore were put up at the city's Government College of Art and Craft on the 150th year of his birth. The ASI was called upon to set up a lab at the Indian Museum. After testing the said works, ASI pronounced them to be fake! The CID was put in charge of the investigation thereafter but there were no arrests. A court order had asked the ASI to form a committee for investigating the paintings in 2011. My suggestion is that a similar panel can be formed now to look at questionable art especially where national treasures are concerned. Also, the offender must be punished immediately', says Haloi.

Also, even if a new law is being framed, there are two existing laws which can perhaps be amended to include legal loopholes fake art: the foremost being Section 420 of the IPC dealing with cheating or forgery. A fake work of art usually

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Stylistically also, my father was experimenting with surrealism in the 70s. He was hardly painting faces of women (one of the fake paintings). Also, our family has photographed at least 99 per cent of my father's works and these were certainly not part of the oeuvre.

The problem of fake art is I guess faced by all artists' families of India since there is no single window authentication system. There is no Government agency or panel of experts one can refer to when we feel the need to verify a work of art or when a fake piece is in circulation. I guess going to court is only one of the solutions. But in a country where corruption is rampant,



Bikash Bhattacharjee

Balaka Bhattacharjee

there will always be loopholes. Art scams will also be the last priority of a Government which can't even detect large scams involving public money. I guess if we go for forensic examination of the signature of my father, we can detect the 'fake' one instantly from the 'originals'.

Debashis Dhar

EVERY ARTIST worth his ilk knows how to copy a pretty painting... especially those by the great masters. Also, every art school teaches you how to copy famous paintings as part of their curriculum, the only rule being the artist/student has to put his signature to what has been copied. It is only when the copy pretends to be the original work of art that it can be called a 'fake' or counterfeit art.

The most copied masters from Bengal are Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Jamini Roy, Hemendranath Mazumdar, Bikash Bhattacharjee and Ganesh Pyne. Tagore is the most difficult artist to copy since he mixed his colours and was an untrained artist. Pyne too did lot of layering and his colours had a glow of their own, not easy to emulate. The most copied European artists are Picasso, Rembrandt,



Gauguin and Van Gogh. Money makes all the difference of course. Though difficult to execute, a good quality copy of one of Bengal's finest contemporary artists, Ganesh Pyne, would fetch Rs 25,000 whereas an original work of Pyne's would cost about Rs 10 lakh. A good copy of Picasso's classic, *Guernica*, would fetch around Rs 20,000 to Rs 25,000. Jamini Roy is also popular 'copy' material since his style is relatively easy to emulate.

While executing a copy, one has to keep in mind several things, like the medium used (canvas/paper), the colour (oil/acrylic/water/guash/mixed media), the drawing, the style or flavor of the painting. Sometimes, if the client wants, he can get a decent artist to paint a classic, though this copy would cost much more than a copy done by an amateur art college student.

has a false signature put to it and perhaps this section be amended for this specific need, say experts. The second law that could be useful in checking counterfeit art is the Indian Copyright Act 1957. Every incidence of copying an original art work without permission can be considered an infringement of the artist's intellectual property.

But as things stand right now, without the existence of a strong and specific law to contain fake art, the guilty goes unpunished even if detected. A big reason why the current art scam is taking place is perhaps that in 2011, although the ASI had given the verdict that all 19 paintings ostensibly by Rabindranath Tagore and displayed at the

Government College of Art and Craft were fake, the guilty went unpunished.

As for now, Kolkata artists have collected signatures and have appealed to the Prime Minister and the President of India for help. A Facebook page is the latest forum where this issue is being debated. So will the PM Narendra Modi take a stand please?

