



To hold the sky in your hands...

The story of Pundole Art Gallery (PAG) is the story of contemporary Indian art. It is today one of India's foremost galleries with a roster of artists who are at the vanguard of India's creative force.

Dhanishta Shah talks to Dadiba Pundole about Indian art in general and the gallery in particular

THE Pundole story dates back to the tumultuous but exciting days of the post-independence era when Kali Pundole, converted his father's watch and clock shop, that had been established in 1886, into a framing business. On 3rd May 1963 the space finally became an art gallery and since then, the story of the house has been intricately interwoven with that of the Indian art world.

The framing business was perhaps a fertile ground for the establishment of a gallery. "Once you are in this business, you deal with artists, paintings, artwork and that was a natural kind of progression," says Dadiba Pundole, son of Kali Pundole and currently the Director of PAG. We are sitting in the new 'headquarters' of the iconic gallery located in Colaba. The earlier gallery was in the Flora Fountain area. This expansive 4000 square feet space, a treasure trove of Indian art, provides a perfect backdrop for our discussion.

"Modernism in Indian art begins with Amrita Shergil so maybe in the 1930s. But again, I should specify that Amrita had the advantage of spending time in Hungary, after which she came back to India," explains Dadiba.

Even among the artists who lived exclusively in India, the influence of western styles and techniques was evident in their paintings.



Under the hammer

Pundole's Fine Art Sale held at NCPA included 91 lots of Indian, Himalayan and Asian Fine Art. The lots offered were almost equally split between Asian Antiquities and Modern Indian Art.

With only 2 of the 91 lots on offer going unsold, the sale made a total hammer price of Rs. 14,30,00,000, far exceeding its pre-sale estimate. The auction attracted both local and overseas buyers

made to look at art or forced to take an interest in it. Yes, we went to the gallery some evenings but that was about it. I had no particular interest in it when I was growing up," says Dadiba.

There were also early interactions with artists, or rather art prodigies. "I was pretty reserved. As a child, I remember that one day I had to drive with M.F. Hussain from Bombay Central to Fountain. He drove. I sat besides him. We did not say a word. When he dropped me off at the circle, I just said thank you and ran out of the car. I did not have anything else to say and neither did he want to make small talk!" he recalls.

But, as fate would have it, his first job while he was in college was at his father's gallery. While studying at K.C. College, he was looking for a part-time job and his dad offered him one. He has lived the job ever since! The Rs. 150 job entailed everything to do with the gallery. "I started by doing odd jobs. My dad built a sense of responsibility in me gradually. He was a great teacher at work. He let me make mistakes and learn at my pace. I thought I would do it only until I needed it. But from the eighties the business got a little more active and I got more involved. And then there was no looking back!" he reminisces.

Though in the early years there was not much money in the business, things changed after the 1980s,

It seems a natural progression that a more nationalist school of art, such as the Bengal School of Art, should have risen and dominated the art scene soon after. Abanindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore and Jamini Roy were some of the prominent artists of the Bengal School.

The establishment of Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan gave further impetus to that movement. Simultaneously and soon after art groups and schools also sprung up in the Indian metros.

Just before independence, the 'Young Turks', a group led by PT Reddy tried to revolutionise art. However, the group became inactive once he joined the independence movement. Post-independence, the art scene progressed further. The Progressive Artists Group, established shortly after independence brought in fresh new ways of artistic expression. Artist Francis Newton Souza formed this group in 1947 and was joined by M. F. Hussain, K. H. Ara, Sadanand Bakre, H. A. Gade and S. H. Raza.

"The Progressive Artists Group was indeed a collective force. The artists had a manifesto and were clear in what they wanted to establish. Some of it was youthful brashness but they went for it," explains Dadiba.

Did the gallery affect Dadiba's art sensibilities? "If it did, it was at a subconscious level. We were not



slowly at first and then at a more frenetic pace. "We had this crazy period between 2003 to 2008. It was the worst time. I benefitted monetarily of course, I could have taken a lot more advantage of it. On one side there was euphoria and on the other hand there was a feeling of being uncomfortable. I think people were buying art so fast and for the wrong reasons. It rather damaged the system. You had artists painting overtime and galleries trying to mount too many exhibitions. You can't fault anyone. But then, you also need that kind of cleansing to happen for something new to emerge. Now, when I look back, I think it was positive," he recalls.

Coming back to the present, we discuss the realm of auctioning, something that the gallery has recently ventured into. "In a gallery space we are dealing with artists and by and large their recent work. Of course, we also do exhibitions where they are curated in a completely different sense. It has cohesiveness and is somewhat thematic. The auction world is far more eclectic. It depends on what property is being offered to you. We do two kinds of sales. One is a pure fine arts sale and then we do fine and decorative arts. In the latter we have porcelain, ceramic, furniture, coins, collectibles and so on. So first you define the nature of the auction and then go out and source the material. For sourcing, I am not the best in terms of reaching out to people. I rely more on people coming to me. Since the gallery has been in existence since the last fifty years, it is a kind of cycle. My dad's early clients are now looking to sell as they are at the stage of their lives where they are looking at having fewer possessions. So, coincidentally it is working for me," says Dadiba.

He admits to enjoying the auction world more, though he feels that shifting to the new place has now ignited memories of the gallery world. The new space is bigger and offers possibilities, which will be in sync with the growth of the art world.

Their small but solid team for Pundole's auction branch includes Robin Dean and Mallika Advani, both of whom are very reputed and knowledgeable personalities in the art domain. Dadiba's wife Khorshed is also an integral part of the gallery, and the more "practical and level-headed force" as he puts it.

With his kind of experience, he is certainly the right person to comment on the Indian art scene. "I see huge growth potential. Unfortunately, we have no government intervention. Or, maybe that's good! But, it is culture that is the core of nation building. Sadly, no government pays attention to that. Art receives step-motherly treatment. We have a fantastic heritage. But when it comes to laws for antiquities they are archaic. They create more problems. We have a strange policing system in the country. And I don't mean just moral policing. For instance, the Art and Antiquities Act of 1972 needs drastic reform. Forty decades, and not a clause has been modified!" he says.

Despite the seemingly insurmountable odds, this is a good time for art in India. "It is certainly growing and growing very fast," agrees Dadiba. However, he observes that the number of collectors in India is small vis a vis buyers. "Collecting art is quite different from decorating your home. We

have a lot of people who want to display art on their walls and the purpose ends there. But collecting can be a bit of a disease. There is an urge to have more than you need. That is small in India. And, it can only grow."

Another relatively recent development is seeing art as an investment, a thought that Dadiba is opposed to and feels is grossly misused in this country. He does not mince words when he says that if one enters the art world purely as an investment it could be the worst investment!

One has to have a fair bit of knowledge to 'invest' in art. When art becomes truly an investment is when a person passionately collects over his lifetime, and as a result his understanding improves. He believes that any great collection built over a lifetime is an investment.

Another change that he has observed is that there exists a resale market for art, which in the seventies was nascent. "Even in the '80s and '90s, when galleries showed an earlier work, buyers would want the latest work. Today, people pay a lot more importance to the condition and significance of the work, the period in context with the career of the artist. People know what they want and collecting is getting increasingly informed," he observes.

He is unhappy about the current state of art education. "The fault lies with the galleries because we did not do as much as was necessary. The education over the years was more on a one-to-one basis or with interested collectors. We were not addressing a larger audience. Besides displaying art, which is a part of the education process, we did not play much of a role. But as there was not much money in art until the '80s people were interested in trying to make ends meet. I am not blaming my predecessors. I am only blaming myself. I could have done more which I didn't!" However, the new gallery will host a range of education programmes, discussions, talks and film screenings.

His close association with art prodigies has clearly influenced Dadiba. Does he see any marked difference between the older and the new generation of artists? "What you learn from somebody at different stages in life is different. I have interacted with artists much my senior. It took me a few years to build the element of friendship. But with younger artists it is a different experience. With someone your age you both are figuring things out through discussion. There are some good minds and some not so good in each generation."

Dadiba is a dreamer and enjoys being that way. He feels that kids don't have enough time to dream and play, but admits of course, that now he can afford to dream!

"Agriculture is a dream that I don't indulge in. I love fishing and sports. In my head I believe I can still play!" he says. In fact, he had decided to retire at the age of 40 and live on a farm. But luckily, for the art world, he is entwined with the very being of PAG and now it is an inseparable part of him. What is his dream for the gallery? "To be the best it can," he quips.

As we come to the end of the interview, I realise that Dadiba symbolises the best of art in India, the spirit of which can only be summarised in Hussain's words, "As I begin to paint, hold the sky in your hands, as the stretch of my canvas is unknown to me!" ☺

