



Collecting Art Is Deeply Personal

I view collecting (art) as something deeply personal. Sometimes, as with any passion-driven pursuit, it takes a while for an individual to understand her motivations and vision. In my case, I went through different chapters as a collector, and my tastes have evolved significantly. Still, what remains constant is that an artwork must speak to me, move me in some fundamental way—I have to love it. It's not about what looks good in one's home. Rather, art's appeal is in the unique and truthful perspective on reality that it presents you with.

Since childhood, I have had a keen interest in art, architecture and design. I have never been formally trained in any of these fields, but always embraced the opportunity to explore them. When I was still very young and our family lived in London, my father—a collector of Bangladeshi masters—started taking me to art galleries regularly. I don't recall any holidays that didn't incorporate some form of cultural education and art history, through visits to historical sites or museums. One of my earliest and fondest memories of "buying art" is at the weekly street fairs organized by the Dhaka Art College, where young art students would exhibit and sell their work.

My upbringing immersed me in the world of art, so much so that the privilege of becoming a collector felt like a natural part of coming of age. I bought my first piece of art when I was about 22—a work by the Bangladeshi master, S.M Sultan. At the time, influenced by my family's tastes, my appreciation of art favoured the traditional and beautiful. I also didn't consciously consider art from an investment perspective. I recognized each work as an embodiment of priceless value, as cherished family heirlooms.

After my marriage, I began collecting more seriously with my husband. Rajeeb and I deliberate over each piece we buy, together—it is always a collective decision. My weakness at first was for the Bengal school—over the years, we have collected a large body of works by Tagore and other Bengali masters. I later became interested in the Indian moderns, as well as the European masters. Eventually, my eye as a collector has settled on contemporary art. Art that is shocking or startling in some sense, that is a departure from conventional styles and mediums, makes the greatest impression on me today.

Recently at Frieze, a remarkable and grotesque piece by Huma Mulji, Pakistani sculptor and

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photographer, caught my attention—an androgynous life-size human figure lying debilitated and distorted on the ground, covered in animal hide. I had the chance to speak with the artist about creating the piece—she had visited several morgues as part of her research and creative process. The title of work was 'Lost and Found'—and alluded to missing bodies, missing people. I was awe-struck. When I decided to buy it, even the gallerist remarked, "Are you sure you want to?"

To share another anecdote, on a recent holiday in Istanbul, Rajeeb and I wandered into a gallery and encountered the performance artist Nezaket Ekici for the first time. We watched, aghast, as in an empty room, barely dressed and blindfolded, the artist lay amidst raw chunks of pork. Her performance involved smelling and touching the raw meat; rubbing it on her skin, slapping it on her face, etc. It made my stomach churn, but I was taken aback by the power of the performance. To understand the piece, it requires some



context. As a Muslim, you cannot touch or eat pork, whereas in Europe, pork is a common part of the diet. A Turkish-born Muslim artist who lives in Berlin, Ekici explores cultural identity and confronts taboo through her work. She is a former student of Marina Abramovic.

For me, art has no nationality, I collect from all over the world, I am particularly fond of feminist artists. I have a work by Tayeba Begum Lipi which is an installation of 30 stainless steel razor blade brassieres which is called 'Bizarre and Beautiful' and an artwork by Pakistani artist Naiza Khan, a work titled 'The Robe', which is made of galvanized steel and is a woman's lingerie where she is trying to find a place between love and war, aggression and seduction. Our collection also includes works by the British artist, Tracey Emin—the neon 'Trust Yourself' and a suitcase titled 'International Woman Suitcase'. All these women come from different countries and cultures but are trying to convey the similar message but in different forms.

My advice to young collectors is to tap into what it is they really love. Collecting, as I've said, comes from a very personal perspective. When you like or desire an art object, I think everything else becomes irrelevant. Don't worry about others' opinions about your collection. Rather, see it as a special journey that, in some ways, can help you discover what moves you and also allows you to engage with real issues and imagined worlds that you would otherwise not be exposed to.

There is a popular misconception that art collecting is necessarily an expensive hobby, reserved for a certain segment of society. I have several cherished artworks in my collection for which I paid less than \$200. Moreover, when it comes to truly appreciate an art, it is not necessary that you have to buy everything you appreciate. Collecting is about loving art, and finding what you connect with and relate to.

I run a not-for-profit foundation called Samdani Art Foundation, where I promote and support young Bangladeshi artists. My close interaction with these young artists has allowed me to see them working very hard and recognize that they have tremendous talent but sadly very few collectors. The Foundation is very focused on young artists and contemporary art. The Dhaka Art Summit, which is coming up in February 2014, is a huge platform for artists in Bangladesh, where one can encounter the whole Dhaka art scene under one roof.

We recently took four top Bangladeshi artists to the India Art Fair, and received an overwhelmingly positive response, not just from collectors, but galleries, curators, and the general public. Bangladesh was represented for the first time at the fair—a "new" country in the art world, where cutting edge ideas and artistic talent are taking root. Despite of a lack of a supportive infrastructure to new artists in Bangladesh, be it financial or material, they are still producing wonderful artworks, of the highest quality.

Our philanthropic work with the arts reflects an element of patriotism. More universally, we've all heard stories about how the greatest artists of our times went unrecognized during their lives. I think it's wonderful when a collector looks at what is happening amongst his or her artistic contemporaries. So Rajeeb and I, want to champion artists living in our own time, who need resources and infrastructure to help them grow. We are fortunate to be participating in an important time for Bangladeshi art. ■

Nadia Samdani is a Dhaka-based art collector and, with her husband, runs a not-for-profit foundation called Samdani Art Foundation that organizes the Dhaka Art Summit.