



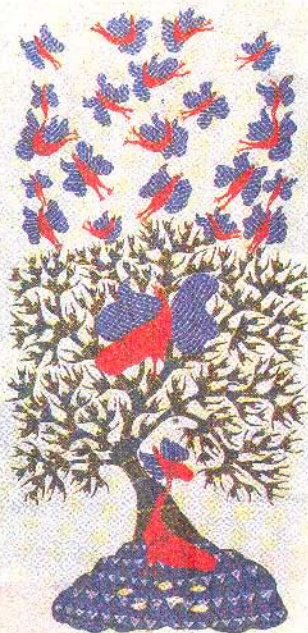
COURTESY, DEVI ART FOUNDATION

COURTESY, JYOTINDRA JAIN



Coming of age

Indian tribal art is making a splash both in this country and abroad, says **Aarti Dua**



COURTESY, CIMA GALLERY

When Jangarh Singh Shyam committed suicide back in 2001, few imagined that he would become the poster-boy of Indian tribal art posthumously. At the time of his death, the Gond artist's works were selling for a paltry few thousands — today they are among the most sought-after pieces of Indian tribal art. Jangarh's *Landscape with Spider* (see cover image) sold for \$31,250 or around Rs 14.5 lakh at Sotheby's auction of South Asian art in New York last month.

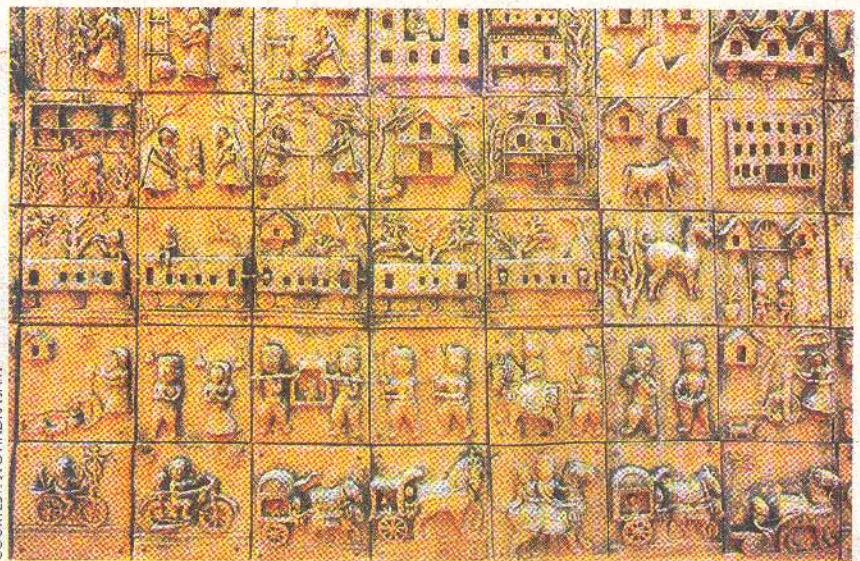
That may sound like peanuts compared to the crores of rupees that an M.F. Husain or even a Subodh Gupta commands but it's the highest auction price ever for a work by an Indian tribal artist. And it's also a sign of the burgeoning market for Indian tribal art both in India and abroad.

Tribal art will have a splashy coming out at a show titled *Vernacular, In the Contemporary* next month. The display, which is being put on by mega-collectors Anupam and Lekha Poddar, will be held at their museum Devi Art Foundation in Gurgaon. Indian tribal artists have also attracted foreign collectors like the Paris-based Hervé Perdrille, who has amassed a substantial collection of his own.

Then, tribal artists like rising star Swarna Chitrakar are appearing alongside contemporary artists in mainstream shows at galleries like CIMA in Calcutta. Or take Jangarh's son



COURTESY: JYOTINDRA JAIN



(From far left to right) *Digital Pichwai*, a video installation by Pichwai painter Kapil Sharma; *Memory of a Railway Line Cutting Across a Warli Village*, a work by Warli painter Jivya Soma Mashe; *Expanding Cities Engulf Villages*, detail from a terracotta mural by artist Khemraj, Molela

Mayank Kumar Shyam, who lives in Bhopal and who's preparing for his own show in Paris next summer. Mayank, who prefers working in black and white rather than the colourful palette of Gond art, is forging his own style. Others like Pichwai

painter Kapil Sharma are also extending their art in new directions—Sharma has done a video installation or digital Pichwai for the Devi Art show. Gond and Pat artists are even keeping their art contemporary by illustrating for Iara Books.

The upcoming Devi Art show will almost certainly be the largest tribal art show in India in recent times. When it opens in November, art lovers will get to see new Chola bronzes, Madhubani paintings and also experimental pieces like a graphic novel by Chitrakar artist Anwar Chitrakar.

"It's the biggest project we have undertaken so far," says Anupam Poddar, who's famous for his collection of cutting-edge contemporary Indian art. "The whole exhibition was like a giant art school," adds art historian and designer Annapurna Garimella, whose practice Jackfruit Research & Design worked for three



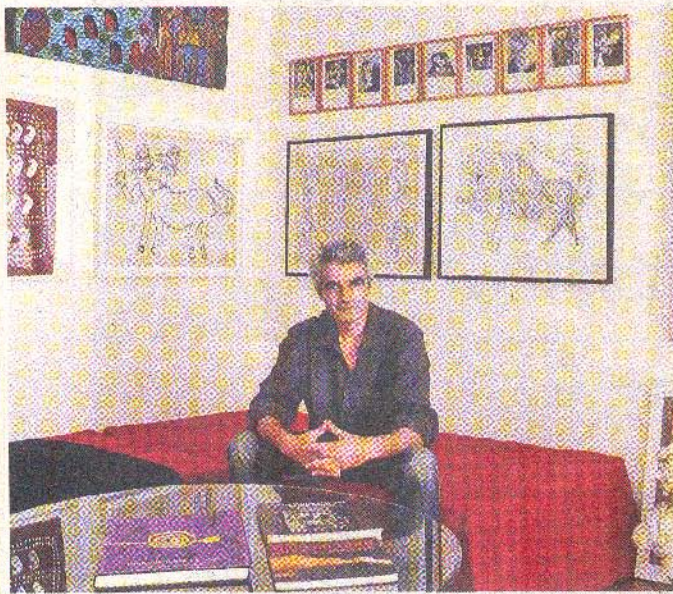
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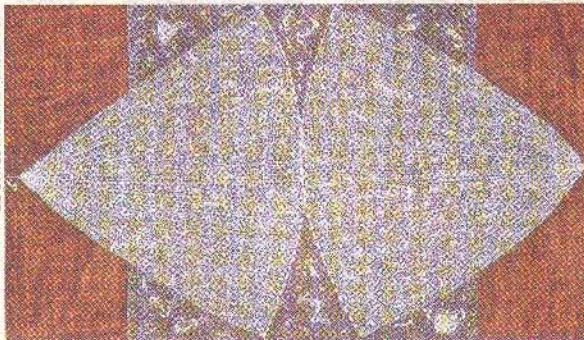
BISHWARUP DUTTA



CIMA Gallery regularly features works like this Gond painting by Ram Singh Urveti (facing page, far left) and tribal artists like Patua Swarna Chitrakar (above) in its mainstream art shows; Lekha and Anupam Poddar are showcasing works like new Chola bronzes (left) at their Devi Art Foundation



COURTESY HERVÉ PERDRIOLLE



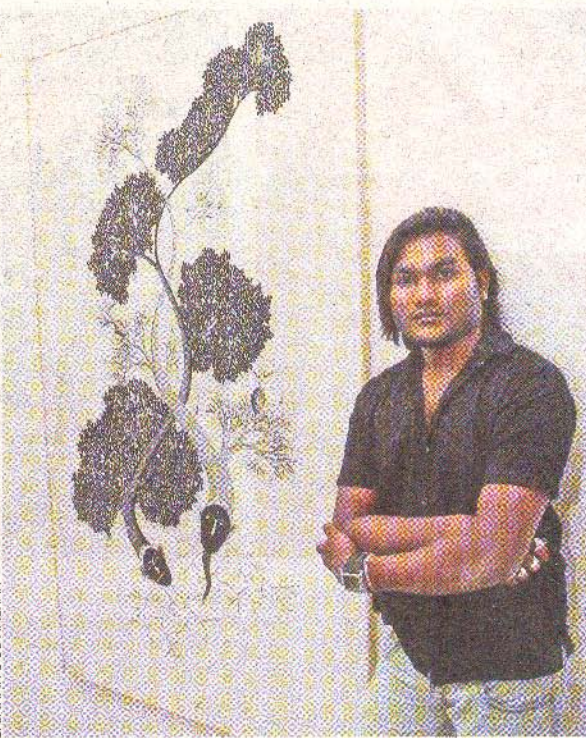
years to curate the show.

But the Poddars aren't the only ones promoting tribal art. Earlier this year, leading art historian and museologist Jyotindra Jain curated a large show *Other Masters of India: Contemporary Creations of the Adivasis* at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. On display were works ranging from Pithora mural paintings to architectural bas-reliefs by women artists from Chhattisgarh. The highlights were solo exhibitions of two of the foremost practitioners of contemporary Indian tribal art: the Warli artist Jivya Soma Mashe and Jangarh.

"There's a fast-growing interest in contemporary Indian folk art today compared to even five or 10 years ago," says Jain, whose first *Other Masters* show in Delhi in 1998 brought together five contemporary tribal artists.

At Sotheby's too, the September auction was the third one since March to include works by artists like Jangarh. "The consistent inclusion of this art in our auctions since 2007 is prompted by our recognition of the talent of these artists and the quality of work that they've been producing for decades,"

GALANAN DUDHALKAR



Young artists like Mayank Kumar Shyam (above) and Pichwai painter Kapil Sharma (facing page) are taking their folk art traditions in new directions; Paris-based Hervé Perdriolle (top left) has one of the largest collections of Indian tribal art, including works like this Warli painting (left) by Jivya Soma Mashe

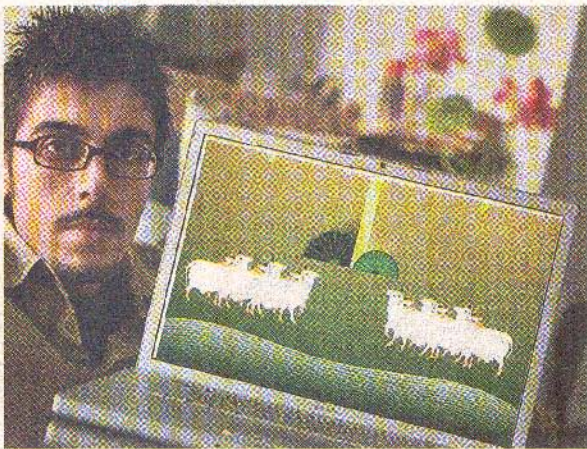
says Anuradha Ghosh-Mazumdar, assistant vice-president, Indian and Southeast Asian Art, Sotheby's.

Not surprisingly, the audience for tribal art isn't confined to India. Take Perdriolle, who began collecting tribal art when he moved to India in 1996, meeting artists in villages. His nearly-100-work collection is among the largest and last year he converted his Paris apartment into a gallery. Perdriolle believes the international interest in this art is recent. "It started with the economic crisis in 2008. Collectors are more aware now of the different trends of Indian art heritage," he says.

Meanwhile, art galleries back home are bringing tribal art into the mainstream. Last year, Chemould Prescott Road in Mumbai hosted a show of works by Jangarh, his wife Nankusi, son Mayank and daughter Japani. Pundole Art Gallery too held a show of Gond artists like Bhuribai. At CIMA Gallery, tribal artists feature regularly in its mainstream shows. So Gond artist Ram Singh Urveti's works were at the *Symbols & Metaphors* show in March. And Mayank's works are in its ongoing show themed *Bharat meets India*. Says Pratiti Basu Sarkar, chief administrator, CIMA Gallery: "We're probably the only gallery that includes the genre in our contemporary art shows."

Commercial factors are also helping bring tribal art into focus. "In comparison with contemporary art, this art is more affordable," says Sarkar. And the West finds it "exciting" too. "There's a history of knowledge of this art in the West," she says.

Indian tribal artists too are moving in new directions, as the



work. She feels Fawzan's images have worked in the context of "lives that are made out to be unnecessarily rural or poor".

"The exhibition is not just about the art forms. It's also about the artists since all of them have significantly altered the terms in which they're making their art," she says.

Actually, curating the show was an elaborate exercise. Jackfruit Research wrote to over 300 artists initially and then asked the 178 artists who responded to send their portfolios and proposals for dream projects. It eventually commissioned works from 59 artists.

The show has allowed many artists to "go beyond their usual art practices", says Anupam. Like Kapil Sharma has transposed the Pichwai tradition into a video work. Sharma, who's a sixth-generation artist — he learnt miniature painting from his grandfather and father in Udaipur — actually studied graphic design at the National Institute of Design and has his own freelance design practice in Mumbai. "I want to revive and renew my traditional art. But I'm trying to build a language which is my own. So the techniques and essence is the same but the medium I use — digital — is different," he says.

Or take Warli painter Reena Umbersada. "She's interested in how she's interpreted as a woman artist. And she's also interested in the the Bible. So she did a work on Biblical women using the visual vocabulary of Warli art," reveals Garimella. The Vernacular show is spread over two exhibitions and Umbersada will feature in

the second one next year.

Elsewhere too, tribal artists are experimenting. Jain says: "When I curated Other Masters I and II, my interest lay in how folk artists were encountering modernity and negotiating it in their art. I was interested in how they responded to their changing social and political predicaments in their work."

His Paris show had many such examples. For instance, in the Santhal tribes' narrative scrolls on their creation myth, "there are repeated visual references to the police leading away handcuffed tribals", says Jain. "Even Shiva, who has a major role in the Santhals' creation myth, is shown moving around escorted by policemen," he reveals.

The tribal artists are constantly expanding "the field of their imagination and innovation", feels Jain. CIMA

A Santhal creation scroll, where Shiva is seen escorted by policemen; art historian Jyotindra Jain (far left)

Many tribal artists are experimenting in form and content. So there's a Pichwai work in video and Santhal scrolls showing handcuffed tribals

Devi Art show will reveal. The Poddars tribal art collection began when Lekha Poddar picked a Jangarh work in the 1980s. After a lull, the mother-son duo restarted the collection in 2002. In the last few years, it has "just taken off", says Anupam. It includes nearly 1,000 works, from Kalighat paintings and *patua* scrolls to Madhubani, Gond, Warli and Saora paintings, miniatures and new Chola bronzes.

But for the Vernacular show, Jackfruit Research has gone beyond collating the works. It sent art historians to research folk artists across India, and commissioned works too. "The focus is on what it means to work in the vernacular, and how these artists are thinking about their work," says Garimella. So the exhibition will have a documentation and photographic segment. Garimella even got glamour photographer Fawzan Husain to photograph the artists at

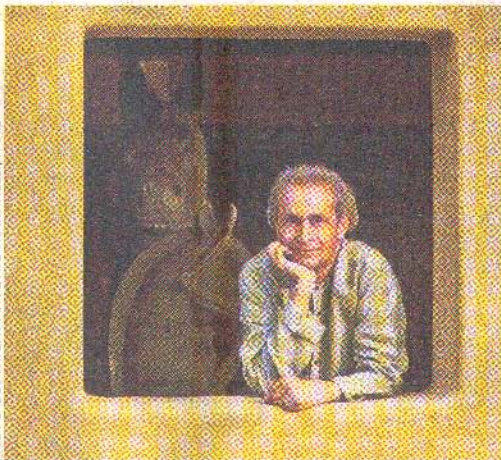


PHOTO: COPYRIGHT ANTONIO MARTINELLI, PARIS



COURTESY JYOTINDRA JAIN

JAGAN NEGI



Art historian Annapurna Garimella and her team worked for three years to curate the Devi Art Foundation's forthcoming tribal art show; (right) Works by Gond artists like Bhuribai are regularly featured at CIMA Gallery

Gallery's Sarkar too points to artists like Swarna, who recently did a scroll about a young woman who resists getting married. "Swarna's exposure to the gallery space is changing her scroll work," says Sarkar. Even Mayank, who often paints urban themes, says: "My father always encouraged me to have my own identity."

Collectors like Perdrille too are looking at emerging voices. Perdrille began by following the footsteps of "historical ethnologists and renowned Indian artists who had been commissioned by the Indian government". So his collection largely covers masters from the Warli, Gond, Bhil, Madhubani and Patua arts. But he has since added works by emerging artists like patua Monimala and Mithila painter Pushpa Kumari. "The emerging artists are evolving around their proper tradition with a strong and personal point of view," feels Perdrille.

Jain points to first-generation contemporary tribal artists like Mashe, Jangarh, Sita Devi and Ganga Devi in Madhubani, and Khemraj and Mohanlal Kumhar in the Molela pottery tradition. Their path-breaking works, he says, "opened up new

COURTESY: CIMA GALLERY



**Curators Jackfruit
Research
got glamour
photographer
Fawzan Husain
to shoot the artists
at work for the
Devi Art show**

directions for artists in these areas". "As happens often, a large number of works coming out of this explosion are mediocre. But there are everywhere some brilliant new voices," he says.

Of course, there are challenges. For one, not all folk art forms are drawing attention. Says Anupam: "While

some forms are doing well and some of these artists are getting to exhibit in museums all over the world, many of them are still struggling to find a strong foothold." So in some cases, the next generation is moving into newer professions.

Then, as Sarkar says: "In India, we still perceive this voice to be craft. So it is considered low cost and therefore, low art."

Nevertheless, the audience for tribal art is growing. In Paris alone, Jain knows at least five major collectors with "formidable collections of Indian folk artists". While the Museum of Asian Art in San Francisco has a major collection of Madhubani artist Ganga Devi's works. Sotheby's Ghosh-Mazumdar too says: "For a long time, their work was followed by a niche audience. An international following is gradually developing with more information disseminated by gallery and museum shows such as the Other Masters of India."

CIMA too is seeing interest from international collectors. And tribal art prices, which range from Rs 60,000 to Rs 3 lakh, are rising by 15 per cent a year, estimates Sarkar.

Don't forget that collectors like Anupam also have a huge impact on the market. As Garimella says: "Anything that Anupam Poddar collects, others start collecting in India." And as Perdrille says: "The richness of these art forms is so vast that the potential is huge." ◆