THE FINE ART OF DECEIT

While contemporary Indian art is being appreciated abroad, back home it is being depreciated by a flourishing trade in fakes. Plenty of dirt and dishonesty in the art world add to the palette.

■ By **Shefalee Vasudev**

It is not a pretty picture. Ask Anjolie Ela Menon whose paintings adorn the walls of the rich and the famous. Last August, she got an e-mail from a potential buyer who had been offered one of her earlier works—*Female Head*. An image of the painting was also attached. Menon knew it was a fake since she had sold the original in 1995 to a buyer from Hong kong. "The fake had been copied from a portion of the cover of Neville Tuli's book *The Flamed Mosaic* and had changed hands between several dealers each time gaining in price," says Menon. The fake had appreciated from Rs 12,000 to roughly Rs 4.5 lakh.

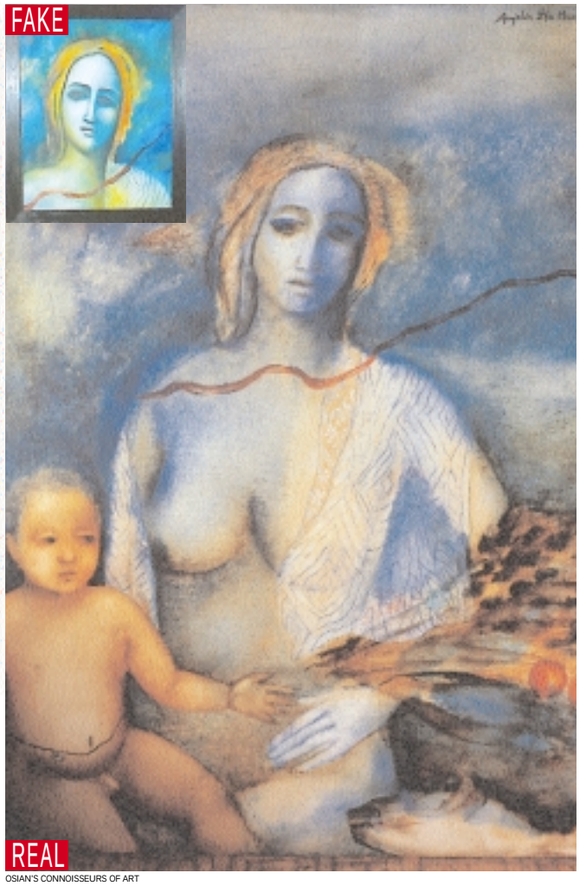
The last dealer was Mumbai's Gallery 7. Its owners sent the art world into a tizzy when in May they conducted a sting operation where Menon's apprentice, Hamid, was videotaped claiming that he often filled her canvases and that this painting had been made by him while she had signed her name. Gallery 7, which accused Menon of having a hand in the fake, now defends their botchy operation as the "last attempt to clear our name". Their claims proved shortlived but the incident is an indicator of how messy the Indian art scene has become. It resembles a runaway economy with all its attendant ills and plenty of dirt. "Too many people are involved. This needs a deeper investigation into all the links," says K.K. Vyas, DCP, Economic Offences Wings, Delhi Police, about the findings of the five-member team of investigators which recently visited Mumbai.

The unprecedented boom in the art marts of India has pushed the market for fakes. Indian paintings now sell for more than the $100,000 (Rs 46 lakh) abroad. As a reflex, it has spawned a multi-crore rupee fraudulent industry that proves the oldest cliche in the art world, "Where there is money to be made from art, a fake will sell as well as the original." Consequently, what is being appreciated in contemporary art is being simultaneously depreciated because of the flood of fakes and their purveyors, from suitcase dealers to fly-by-night galleries, challenging the true worth of original art like never before. A shop owner who sells clothes, art and artefacts from an upmarket Mumbai shop is unabashed as she asks "Would you like a 6X6 green Husain to match your walls, madam?"

"People don't appreciate art for art's sake, they want it to announce their place in the pecking order," says Saryu Doshi, director, National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai. Taking advantage of today's acquisitive wannabe culture are shady galleries that have begun mushrooming all over the country. Mumbai now has approximately 60 galleries and Delhi about 70. Framing shops call themselves art galleries and art gallery owners call themselves historians. Affluent housewives with the right rhetoric but non-existent knowledge sell art through Page 3 type wine and cheese art openings. The art gallery has become the new alternative hub for socialite evenings. As Mumbai-based artist Jehangir Sabavala says, "It is an open field to play. People without experience, expertise, reading or aesthetic exposure become art dealers."

There are, of course, the genuine galleries that sell original works. But there are also those which show original paintings during openings but deliver fakes to unsuspecting customers. In some galleries, art is displayed in such an unarchived manner—with originals, fakes and authorised reproductions put up together—that it leaves customers confused. Meant for the aesthetically ignorant "must-buy-some-art-today" customer is a plethora of paintings—prints, etchings, unauthorised copies, photostats, colour photographs, computer offsets. From Manjit Bawa prints to fake M.F. Husains, from English watercolours to fake Nandalal Boses and S.H. Razas, from Pollock offsets to print copies of Raja Ravi Verma, from Bengal artists on kitchen cabinets to Tyeb Mehta imitations. All are priced between Rs 200 and Rs 20,000 depending upon where you buy what. As Sunitha Kumar of Bangalore's Gallery SKE says, "A gallery in Bangalore sells Yusuf Arakkal for Rs 1 lakh-plus. But it also sells another artist who paints like Yusuf but doesn't sign and charges Rs 10,000-20,000 for a painting. We don't even know whether to call them fakes." That is what customers at P.C. Kejriwal's Chitrakoot gallery in Kolkata ask themselves. He has a roomful of fakes along with originals and claims that he has unwittingly bought many fakes. The art market is a crazy, unscrupulous one.

The value of art has been found through its commerce. "Most people buy art for investment," says Delhi gallerist and collector Renu Modi, adding that bored, rich women come to her



OSIAN'S CONNOISSEURS OF ART

RANA CHAKROBORTY

TWIN TRYSTS: Menon's original *Female Head* has a child sitting on the woman's lap, the fake doesn't. Kejriwal (above) shows an original and fake Jamini Roy.

ROGUES GALLERY

Controversies that have stunned the art world

MUMBAI, 2004: Gallery 7 conducts a sting operation videotaping Anjolie Ela Menon's assistant Hamid who claimed he completed her paintings. This has led to vociferous debates on the need to acknowledge assistants.

MUMBAI, 2003: Menon's *Female Head* is declared a fake by the artist after its latest buyer asks Menon for verification. The painting had changed several hands with its price appreciating every time.

KOLKATA, 2002: A few months after two priceless Hemen Majumdars went missing from a farmhouse, one of them, *Memories*, was found ready for auction by Bowrings in Delhi.

KOLKATA, 1998: Two of Ajoy Ghose's *Chaitanya* paintings were listed in Christie's catalogue as Nandalal Bose's. Ghose's signature had been replaced with a scrawl that read Nando. Their sale, at Rs 3.64 lakh each, was revoked later.

MUMBAI, 1991: Many paintings by K.H. Ara put on sale by art dealer Ashish Balram Nagpal were alleged to be fake even after they had been authenticated by a senior art critic like Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni.

CHENNAI, 1990: Out of the 11 works of M.F. Husain sold by a leading art gallery, nine turned out to be fakes. Husain's son Mustafa sounded the alarm after he spotted that the *Raja and Rani* from the artist's *Raj* series was a fake.

ROYAL MESS: Husain's Raja and Rani, the fake and authentic

REAL PICTURE

How to distinguish the originals from the fakes

A STEAL: Caur accidentally saw a fake of *Time Image* on a TV soap

There are no foolproof methods other than double checking with the artist. But these may help:

ART AUTHENTICATION ARCHIVES: Works best. It files paintings done by the artist annually and locates them. All sales are recorded with names and addresses of buyers. Informs if a painting is up for sale yet again.

PROVENANCE: The history of ownership is a good bet. Unfortunately, some gallerists have been found to be fictitiously creating even these.

ART TECHNOLOGY: An extensive conservation report yields important information such as canvas type and dimensions, thread count, stretcher type, varnish(es), paint, ground, conservation interventions.

CARBON DATING: Helpful but leaves a margin of error.

ULTRAVIOLET (UV) RADIATION: Determines surface anomalies. Varnishes, for example, fluoresce differently depending on composition and age.

X-RAYS: Reveals the working process, shows compositional changes.

INFRA RED REFLECTOGRAPHY: A special infrared camera shows contrast of absorption of various materials and reveals layers of the painting not visible to the naked eye.

with a budget and a list of names they must buy every year. "The old world collectors still rely on brand names to decorate their house," adds art historian Alka Pande.

Catering to this mind-boggling demand are the ubiquitous forgers, found anywhere from hole-in-the-wall basement galleries to reputed ones like the Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai where artists have to book three to four years in advance for an exhibition. "Every month attempts are made to palm off one or two fakes to us," admits K.G. Menon, secretary at Jehangir. "There is a scary increase in the fake trade in recent years." Menon should know, she has been there for 36 years. Art expert and gallery owner Sharan Apparao of Chennai agrees. "Fakers zero in on novices in the new galleries to sell their wares," she says recalling how Delhi's Arushi Art gallery sold her a fake Tyeb Mehta two years ago. "Two days after I bought it, the person who had authenticated it called me saying further research had revealed it to be a fake. The gallery returned my money but even they didn't know it was not an original."

Artists say they have never felt as bad as this when they are forced to fight messy battles against fakes. All their creative energies are used up for lengthy legal procedures. Menon maintains that Gallery 7 forced a "confession" from Hamid to discredit her. "Several other fakes of my work have been traced to the same gallery. They even resold one after it was returned to them," says Menon, adding that she was targeted because she tried to end this racket. Chandra Sachdev of Gallery 7 dismisses these claims, saying she has never sold a Menon in 23 years of business. "Why doesn't Menon explain how Chemould, one of the oldest galleries in Mumbai which also handled *Female Head*, failed to recognise it as fake?"

This is symptomatic of the manner in which the art fraternity is tainting itself all across the country with Kolkata reigning as the fakers' haven. The city is dotted with "fake factories", where fresh, out-of-work fine arts graduates or down-and-out artists are commissioned by racketeers to make copies of the works of famous painters. Often, they don't know where their copies will land up. For a little more money, the dealer brings in skilled signature forgers, to put the finishing touch on the paintings. Some Delhi artists allege that Suraj Sharma, a framer from the busy Lajpat Nagar market, is involved in fraudulent art deals. It is alleged that Menon's fake made its way to Mumbai from his shop. "Big artists themselves do all these things. But I will get into trouble with the Income-Tax Department if you publish my photograph," Sharma told INDIA TODAY not explaining why he should be targeted.

The fake trade is an old octopus with new tentacles. It first gripped the art mart more than a decade ago when Husain's son Mustafa spotted a fake *Raja and Rani* from his father's *Raj* series in 1990 in Chennai. Nine paintings of Husain that had been displayed at Chennai's Sarla Art Gallery were found to be fake. It provoked the artist to send appeals in leading newspapers advising collectors to send him colour photographs of his works for authentication. But Husain himself has been foxed by fakes. A Delhi gallerist recalls how after she got a Husain authenticated by the artist for a buyer, the person expressed shock as he already owned the same set of originals. At another time, during a Husain show abroad, a painting that was termed fake by a loyal collector turned out to be original after the artist verified it.

DIFFERENT STROKES: Hemen Majumdar's original *Tanmay* surfaced as the fake *Village Girl* at an auction

> "Every month someone tries to palm off one or two fakes to us."
>
> **K.G. MENON,** SECRETARY, JEHANGIR ART GALLERY

Such instances, however, can't dilute the profound loss for artists. Ask Kolkata artist Ajoy Ghose whose two paintings from his *Chaitanya* series made their way to a Christie's auction as the works of Nandalal Bose. Ghose's signature had been replaced with a scrawl that read "Nando". Ghose got the sale revoked but is now cynical. "I had always heard about the paintings of the dead Bengal School artists being faked but now forgers have obviously become bold enough to fudge the works of living artists as well," he says.

That is what gives nightmares to painter Arpana Caur. She was once told by one of her collectors that her paintings were available at a New York exhibition though she says she hadn't sold or sent anything to any exhibitor there. Again, once accidentally, her mother spotted a blown up version of one of her paintings, *Time Image*, in an afternoon TV soap called *Shanti*. Caur knew the buyer of the original and deduced that the one on TV had to be a fake. "What will happen when we are dead and no longer around to authenticate our works or raise objections?" asks Caur.

Her fears are not exaggerated. Assisted by technological advance, forging has become a fine art in itself. Last year, Kolkata-based art historian and authenticator Pranab Ranjan Ray was approached by a woman with some sketches allegedly done by Ganesh Pyne. She wanted Ray to give an authentication certificate. "My sixth sense told me something was not right," says Ray. The sketches looked like what Pyne has done—green line drawings on graph paper. Then it struck him that he was looking at excellent colour photocopies. Another time he had to verify a Zainal Abedin painting which turned out to be a cleverly taken photograph.

The trade has become so polished that even connoisseurs get taken in. "Though most gallery owners have a good eye, the fakes are so rampant in the art market that it sometimes becomes difficult to tell," admits Pramila Baid of Sumukha Gallery, Bangalore. By that argument, it is difficult to rationalise the sales of Menon's fake. It is not only smaller in size—the

SIGN OF THE TIMES: Ghose with his painting that carried Bose's name

SOUMITRA GHOSH

ART MART

Who's worth what

The most sold and the most faked artists are Husain, Raza, Mehta, Souza, Jamini Roy and the three Tagores from the Bengal school. Also, Caur, Menon, Pyne and Bose.

M.F. HUSAIN: Large, Rs 50-70 lakh. About 3.75 lakh per sq ft.

TYEB MEHTA: Medium, Rs 48-50 lakh. A Mehta triptych sold for a record-breaking Rs 1.5 crore.

S.H. RAZA: Large, Rs 40-68 lakh

F.N. SOUZA: Large, Rs 30-65 lakh

ANJOLIE ELA MENON: Large, Rs 12 lakh and above

K.K. HEBBAR: Medium, Rs 15-18 lakh

MANJIT BAWA: Large, Rs 15 lakh and above

J. SWAMINATHAN: His Bird and Mountain series sold for Rs 20 lakh in an online auction.

Source: Industry figures from galleries in Delhi and Mumbai

> "I have been targeted because I tried to end this racket."
>
> **ANJOLIE ELA MENON,** ARTIST

original is 3X4 ft, the fake is about 14X16 inches—but it is different in content too. The original shows a woman's entire torso with a child on her lap, whereas the fake has just the head. How such obvious details escaped the notice of experienced gallerists remains a big mystery.

It is a worrying pointer to the overall state of disarray of art in India. As Mumbai-based historian Neville Tuli, chairperson of Osian's Connoisseurs of Art, the first organisation in India to establish an All India Authentication Committee for Contemporary Arts, says, "The Anjolie Ela Menon issue is indicative of the growth of the market and its awareness but it also reveals the inadequacies in the infrastructure that supports art." He feels there is a dearth of financial benchmarking, publications, archiving, exhibitions and such supports that build the credibility of art. "Most of those who enter the art world do so to make a quick buck irrespective of methods, due diligence and wider consequences," says Tuli. "They are unwilling to accept infrastructure building as their responsibility." Curatorial practice and historical study are almost non-existent. "Unlike any other market, there is no knowledge base that supports the demand for art," says art critic and curator Ranjit Hoskote, adding that there is a great need for proper documentation, regulation and transparency.

Artists who group themselves into different categories of the victimised are affected but not entirely innocent. "They look at the complete package a gallerist offers them—commission, coverage, catalogue and guest list—but don't question the contribution of that gallerist to the world of art," says Mumbai gallerist Ashish Balram Nagpal making a pertinent point. Not only do artists shop for galleries with low commissions (the average rate is 33 per cent per painting), they are not always interested in authenticating their works or posing for photographs with their paintings. Some even charge money to verify their own works.

NARENDRA BISHT

STREET SMART: A fake Husain (top right) on display at a Delhi art shop

Now, after the Menon-Hamid controversy, the idea of having assistants is being loudly debated. "There should be integrity," says Sabavala. "Artists should acknowledge their assistants, even if the person is hired for a short period or for a part of the work." He wonders how some artists produce so many works single-handedly in order to meet the demands of the market. Tuli agrees: "Most artists are afraid that their prices will fall if the public knows that assistants are used." In the mad bid to endorse sales, artists seem to forget that art is essentially a movement of ideas and creativity and not a money-making enterprise.

If the tide doesn't turn, all this appreciation—aesthetic and monetary—will go for a toss. There is a consensus for action. Wide-ranging solutions are mooted, from a centralised regulatory body comprising eminent historians and academicians to having database inventories that pinpoint the exact number of works, especially of dead artists. Caur says there should be a helpline to deal with the investigation of fakes and that "creative property rights" be given to artists so that even imitation of imagery is prevented. Delhi gallerist Gargi Seth who has started an authentication online service says that gallerists should be registered like other professionals. While buyers are learning to become cautious by asking for provenances, Nagpal says they still entertain suitcase dealers to escape gallery overheads. As a result they often buy art unverified fake art.

Very few have faith in bureaucratic committees that may check the wrongdoings. But as Hoskote suggests, "ethical self-restraint" might work. Sabavala echoes this. "Everyone must introspect and decide in favour of personal integrity even if it means limiting one's earnings." Else, the currency of fakes will endure, giving dangerous meaning to what artist Tyeb Mehta once said, "To pick up a brush, to make a stroke on the canvas, I consider these acts of courage in this country."

with Labonita Ghosh, Nirmala Ravindran and Supriya Dravid