

# THE TIMES OF INDIA

## DUST SCULPTURES AND DAMIEN MOMENTS

*Foreign art shows in India are becoming more common. Are local collectors tuning in?*

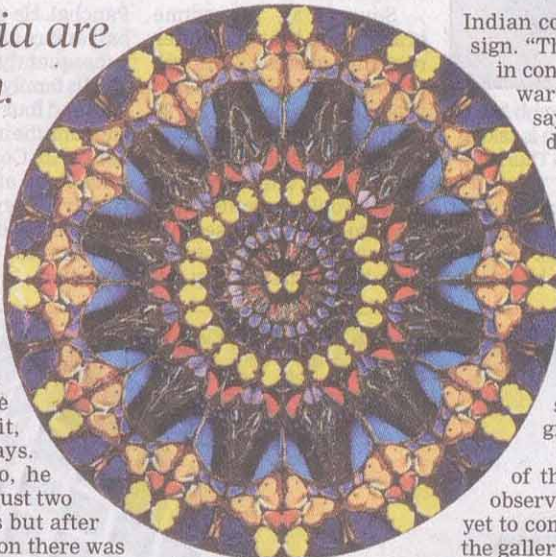
Pronoti Datta | TNN

**Mumbai:** The news that Sotheby's is bringing a selection of works by Damien Hirst to Delhi has the country's art community at attention. Pieces from Hirst's *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever* series will be on display on August 23 at The Oberoi and art lovers will be championing at the bit to see the work of an iconic artist most famous for preserving dead animals in formaldehyde.

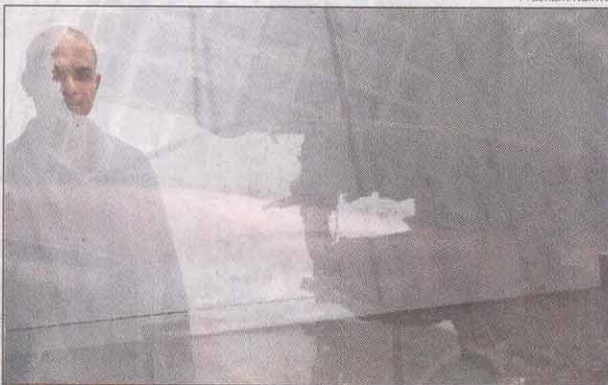
While Hirst is the biggest contemporary artist to have his works displayed in the country, there has been a steady trickle of exhibitions of foreign art in the last few years. Collectors have been buying homegrown art—Raza, Souza and Dodiya—with the same frequency Homer Simpson gobbles doughnuts. Is the Hirst show a sign that Indians are slowly tuning in to international art?

Gallerist Mortimer Chatterjee of Chatterjee and Lal is surprised it took so long. "Why is it that only Indian artists have been shown historically?" he asks. "It doesn't make sense since we live in a global art scene. If I enjoy art why would I want to blinker myself to the art of only one country?" The gallery which he runs with his wife Tara Lal opened in August 2007 with the works of Dutch artist Sophie Ernst. It has since exhibited art by Pakistani heavyweight Rashid Rana and is currently involved in a gallery exchange with New York's Thomas Erben Gallery, which is showing the works of nine individuals that include a German, an

American and a Korean artist. While many Indian buyers resist the idea of investing in foreign art, some are warming up to it, Chatterjee says. Three years ago, he managed to sell just two of Rana's pieces but after the 2007 exhibition there was



Prashant Nakwe



**GLOBETROTTERS:** (Above) A Damien Hirst butterfly creation. Gallerist Abhay Maskara with sculpture by Peter Buggenhout

a waiting list for the artist's works.

Usha Mirchandani of Galerie Mirchandani+Steinrucke has also been successful enough in selling foreign art to keep hefting the enormous costs involved in inviting artists from abroad. In December 2006, the gallery hosted major American artist Kiki Smith. Some of her prints were priced at Rs 50,000, a price that is surprisingly affordable given her stature. "Artists living here bought Kiki's work," says Mirchandani. "To me that

is success. With our own market overheated, it does seem as if quality comes at a very good price with foreign artists."

Collectors looking beyond Indian shores are also tentatively opening themselves to less conventional forms such as new media art. The pieces by Rana that Chatterjee sold were video installations that, the gallerist said, are often less expensive than paintings and can be bought for between one lakh and four lakh. The fact that a heterodox artist like Hirst is being brought to woo

Indian collectors is another sign. "The entire movement in contemporary art is towards the conceptual," says Maithili Parekh, deputy director of Sotheby's. "Damien is one of the finest artists who can conceptualise contemporary issues." Parekh points out that the group of Indian collectors buying non-Indian art is "a small but a fast-growing group".

Despite the growth of the Indian art scene, observers believe that it is yet to come of age. Owner of the gallery Warehouse on 3rd Pasta Lane, Abhay Maskara says that it will take time since we still don't have a mature collector base. He agreed, though, that "there is a paradigm shift in the way in which art is being created, curated and collected". Maskara is perhaps the gutsiest gallerist in town, who operates on the cutting-edge. He launched his gallery in April with German artist Max Streicher's exhibition of inflatable sculptures and is currently showing Belgian artist Peter Buggenhout's sculptures that are made of dust. "I'm after art that really moves me, art that breaks down my preconceived notions," he says.

Buggenhout's pieces look like chunks from a shipwreck and are matted with webs of dirt. They're superbly crafted but haven't generated as much buyer interest as Maskara would have liked. Many Indian buyers don't have the prescience to pick up art that's sure to become valuable, he says. However, he remains optimistic. "When quality doesn't sell in the short term, you cannot get disheartened," Maskara said. "Look at Van Gogh."

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