

# Going, Going, Gone Online

How auction houses and art galleries are trying to beat the pandemic blues with a digital push

By Varun Khosla

A hundred years ago, in 1919, Edvard Munch painted himself sitting in a chair, a dark robe enveloping him, his face gaunt and pale staring at the viewer – almost like death. He called the painting *Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu*. Art has always grappled with disease and death and pandemic. How contemporary artists portray Covid-19 has yet to be seen, but there is a section of the art world that is already contending with commercial consequences: galleries and auction houses. They are trying to beat the lockdown blues that has enveloped almost every other section of the economy – by going online.

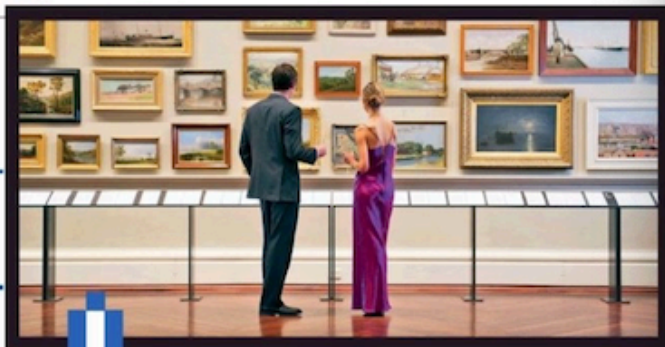
The Vadehra Art Gallery in Delhi has introduced a "Shop" feature on its website. It has put up photographs, limited edition etchings and prints for sale – from an untitled nude photograph by Akbar Padamsee for ₹90,000 to a print from Atul Dodiya's watercolour series on Gandhi, "Reimagining Bapu", for ₹10,000 to a limited edition serigraph of MF Husain's *Horses* for ₹1.8 lakh.

Roshini Vadehra, director, Vadehra Art Gallery, says she

is now seeing an influx of first-time buyers. "It has helped us open up to new audiences for prints, beyond the regular tier-1 cities of Delhi and Mumbai," she says.

The lockdown was a body blow at the beginning, she says. "The first couple of weeks of lockdown were difficult. We weren't initially sure if we should reach out to our clients or not. But at the moment the market is very strong and one has to just hope it stays this way. The economy also has to hold out for art to thrive," she adds.

Vadehra says the art scene is doing reasonably well because during the lockdown, buyers and collectors are experiencing their own homes at a much more intimate level and want to collect. Sudhir Patwardhan's painting *Passage* sold for about ₹20 lakh and Shrimanti Saha's *The Puckage* for about ₹80,000.



## Bid & Hammer, Delhi

**Lockdown Biz:** The auction house gives previews by appointment to buyers; provides high-resolution images of works to those who can't travel

**Online Rush:** Number of registrations and app downloads have seen a rise. Older collectors are adapting to tech tools to bid online

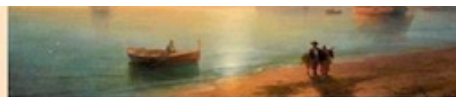
**Big Sale:** MF Husain's untitled painting of a horse went for about ₹20 lakh (plus premium & taxes); and *Theatre of Life 1 & 2* by SG Vasudev for ₹1.9 lakh



Ankush Dadha, director, Bid & Hammer

"Online auctions are picking up and are here to stay. However, raising the winning paddle and outbidding at a live auction will always have its own charm"

Kolkata, used to spend at least 180 days a year travelling



**Big Sale:** Ivan Alavazovsky's painting *The Bay of Naples* went for \$2.8 mn

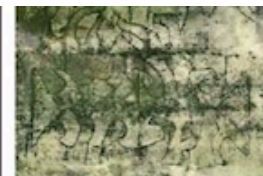


ties up with the auction house Saffron Art to sell the works of Ganesh Pyne and installed a "Shop" button on its own website to sell signed prints of artists for what it says is a 50% discount. Gallery director Reena Lath says the prints are selling well and nearly half of their buyers are first-timers. Like Pradyumn Agarwal, a 22-year-old who picked up a Sunil Das print for ₹10,000. Thanks to online access, art galleries are no longer seen as stuffy, elitist, unapproachable spaces. And artists suddenly at arm's reach.

Lath says the industry has gone through a sea change in a short period. Galleries have been forced to rethink business strategies and ramp up their online presence. "There is now greater transparency in prices and that is less intimidating for fresh art buyers. Art galleries were also known to be much stiffer earlier. Now people are more free to connect with a gallery online. We are entering a new world," says Lath.

Puneet Shah, founder of Akara Art, Mumbai, says clients have realised that works of art can be a solid investment com-

touched \$291 mn globally in Jan-Aug 10; Sotheby's first online 'Day Sale' of Contemporary Art on May 14 set a record \$13.7 mn; since March, at least 12 paintings have sold for over \$1 mn each online



An untitled 1974 Galtonde set the record for the highest price fetched by the work of an Indian artist, when it sold for ₹32 crore on Sept 3

pared with many other asset classes right now and, therefore, their confidence in spending high amounts on valuable works has grown dramatically. "The market for the masters has been very strong, contrary to expectations in April and May," he says.

Artist Sumir Tagra is not convinced. "To me, selling online is very complex. Galleries are creating a lot of viewing rooms to present works for potential collectors but the works aren't well-thought-out digitally," he says. "The exact colours of the artwork are absent and the decision to buy or not is based purely on a JPEG file." Thukral & Tagra – an artistic collaboration between Tagra and Jiten Thukral – have sold just 30% of what they used to during this period. Tagra thinks auction houses could be doing well because buyers or collectors are going for top artists and masterpieces and aren't sure about picking up works of new artists.

For sure, MF Husain's untitled painting of a horse galloped away for about ₹20 lakh (plus premium and taxes) at Bid & Hammer's No-Reserve Auction in August.

This is the trend, globally. Sotheby's chairman for India & Middle East, Edward Gibbs, told *ET Magazine* that "online sales have become the beating heart of the auction house in recent months, with more than 100 online auctions till June". By then, Sotheby's also recorded online sales in excess of \$160 million, more than double its full-year auction total of \$80 million for 2019.

However, Ankush Dadha, director of Bid & Hammer, doesn't want to let go of the charm of live auctions. "Online auctions are picking up and are here to stay. However, raising the winning paddle and outbidding at a live auction will always have its own charm," he says.

## Experimenter Gallery, Kolkata

**Lockdown Biz:** Virtual viewing room; one-on-one video calls with clients; part of online digital exhibition platform [www.artintouch.in](http://www.artintouch.in)

**Big Sale:** Ayesha Sultana's *Pulse*, Julien Segard's *Dark Was The Night*, Krishna Reddy's *In Search of Simultaneity* and Rathin Barman's *Dimensional*

