

AN EYE FOR ART

Apart from setting up one of the largest contemporary art galleries in eastern India, **Richa Agarwal**, the director of the Emami Chisel Art gallery, has been proactively promoting art by organising art fairs and exhibitions that cater to the masses and the elite alike.

Text ✦ **Vinita Kapoor & Ranjabati Das**

SOMEWHERE AT THE BACK OF OUR MINDS, we almost always expect most women entrepreneurs to don a tough persona. So we were pleasantly surprised when we caught up with the soft-spoken yet articulate Richa Agarwal who manages Emami Chisel Art (ECA), a unit of Emami Group Frankross Limited. It's not too difficult to imagine Agarwal lost in her own world as she gazes at a Jamini Roy masterpiece, or picture her poring over art books at, say, the library at the Tate. She comes across as the sort: quiet, reserved, passionate, dignified.

So how did her in-laws view art—that “most intense mode of individualism”, as described so succinctly by Oscar Wilde? “We are a big family with diverse choices,” Agarwal says. The truth of her statement is evident from the fact that Emami, the fruit of a 40-year-long partnership between R S Agarwal and R S Goenka, has moved far beyond its flagship FMCG interests. And be it cement, retail or health care, the moves were almost always based on individual inclinations. “When it came to our art collection—also owned by both families jointly, like everything else—it meant that we had the luxury of witnessing a wider variety of art than most collectors. It amply reflects the many different preferences of



Richa Agarwal at her residence, which boasts a collection of about 300 pieces of art

our huge family, where no two people have the same tastes,” says Agarwal.

Conversely, because everything is shared by members of the two families (who consider each other siblings, uncles, aunts, etc, as if they were really related by birth), it often happened that a certain piece of art that had earlier adorned a particular wall in the Goenka house, had been moved to the Agarwal house, or vice versa, because a member of the other family had taken a sudden fancy to it. Agarwal loves this borrowing, sharing, influencing and shuffling. She also loves the fact that the two houses were strategically located just a few buildings apart for years till about a month ago, and that despite the Agarwals’ recent move, the families still live only about three kilometres away. She would even go as far as to say that it is this mutual dependence that is key to the group’s conjoined success.



Above: An untitled painting by Ramananda Bandyopadhyay; Right: A cut-out by M F Hussain



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The beginning

In 2008, when the multi-storeyed Emami Tower was being built in eastern Kolkata, the idea was to do up the corporate offices with contemporary paintings. They imagined that it would add much-needed warmth to the corporate environment. As time passed, the idea grew bigger till it took the shape of an art gallery that would ultimately take over a 15,000 sq ft space spread over the ground and first floors of the building. “Since we had a big space, we thought of utilising it, and thus the gallery was born,” says Agarwal. A key influencer was her father-in-law, she says. One would assume that she is talking about R S Agarwal, whose passion for poetry, art and sculpture is well-known. But, Agarwal clarifies that by “father-in-law”, she refers to both Mr Agarwal and Mr Goenka, another keen connoisseur of art. For her, the two families—headed by the two patriarchs whose friendship is the stuff that legends are made of—are but one.

Displaying the best

The gallery displays the Emami Group’s personal collection which is a beautiful

balance of paintings, sculptures and installation arts. “Our own collection, which I keep rotating, fits very well in the gallery which became more of an extension of our family’s passion for beautiful things,” says Agarwal. The collection, a combination of recommendations by consultants and the personal choice of several members of the Agarwal and Goenka clans, consists of works of master painters like M F Hussain (Emami Chisel Art has acquired seven paintings from his Calcutta series, apart from a number of cut-outs created during the painter’s *Gaja Gamini* days back in 2000), Satish Gujral, Jehangir Sabavala, Akbar Padamsee, Jagdish Swaminathan, Tayeb Mehta, F N Souza, Bikash Bhattacharya and S S Raza amongst others. Sculptures found at the ECA include works by Himmat Shah, Chintan Upadhyay, Bimal Kundu, Biman Behari Das, Gopal Prasad Mondol and Subrato Biswas.

At the moment, one of Agarwal’s favourite beau arts creation is a recently acquired installation piece by Sir Anish Kapoor which graces her home, which is already adorned with about 300 pieces of art at present. Not one to mince words,

Agarwal honestly opines that her treasures have not merely been picked up because of their aesthetic value, but because they are investments too. She, like so many others, is not blind to the fact that art is a wise option to park money in.

Culture slant

Emami Chisel Art also organises talk shows, exhibitions, retrospectives and art fairs—the last, roughly, once or twice a year. Besides hosting competitions and events, these shows exhibit sculptures and collectibles made of terracotta and brass, apart from drawings and paintings by both renowned painters and lesser-known artisanal communities of Bengal. They also play a part in promoting new and upcoming artists like Tapas Konar, Aditya Basak, Ashok Bhowmick, Satrapati Datta and many others whom Agarwal finds particularly impressive. In an effort to generate interest in art among city residents, the gallery also houses a reading (not lending) library that boasts approximately 1,000 books related to art.

“We also hold an annual month-long arts exhibition (which concentrates purely on paintings) where we receive hundreds of entries,” says Agarwal. “This year, we received 550 applications, out of which we chose about 160,” she adds. The best entries won a total cash award of ₹2.5 lakh.

The ECA also sells collectibles—

essentially artworks on home décor items like cushion covers, lampshades, fabrics and furniture. “We have ensured that these are affordable as we strongly feel that art is not just for the elite but for everyone to enjoy,” adds Agarwal. “But if you’re looking for a good deal, then the art melas, where artists sell at ridiculously low prices, are where you should dedicate a day,” she tips us off, adding, “A piece that would normally cost ₹50,000, usually goes for about ₹35,000 here. It’s a real steal and some of the young artists are unbelievable! There are about a thousand artists to choose from and the annual show is a three-week affair.”

Art philosophy

Growing western influences on our thinking and preferences may have resulted in an upsurge in the demand for contemporary and modern art, but for Agarwal, traditional art, especially of the Indian and diasporic variety, which deals with subjects drawn from our rich heritage of mythology and spiritualism is “evergreen”. “As Indians, I think we are always looking for a connection to God, a spiritual link to our roots. Traditional art helps us establish that connection,” she muses.

To ensure that everyone is able to enjoy art, the mother of two strives to make art

to play an instrument or sing, as he believed that music went a long way in helping one attain peace and become “one with the self”, Agarwal reminisces. As a result, Agarwal was also initiated into classical Hindustani music as a young girl of 11. Agarwal’s mother, Anita Gupta, paints, while her aunt, Seema Goyal, teaches Tanjore painting (a classical South Indian style of painting that she has taught Agarwal too). Goyal’s shows often sell out days beforehand.

Our conversation gradually moves to her children: her son Vibhash Vardhan is 15 years old while daughter Vidula is 13. Does she wish them to cultivate an interest in business or art, I ask. “Having been exposed to art since their very childhood, they definitely have a strong sense of aesthetics which might turn into something more profound in future, if they wish to go that way,” Agarwal says ruminatively. But she would be happy as long as they grow up into grounded human beings with strong values.

Beating the odds

With a commerce background and no formal training in contemporary art, Agarwal did have her share of hiccups. She made “wrong investments” and had shows that “were not up to the mark”, but support came from family and friends. Setting up an art gallery in a city that already has many famous galleries and a discerning art fraternity was a challenge. “I definitely owe a lot of my success to my Marwari genes and background which have conditioned me to stay focused and overcome challenges in the face of adversities,” says Agarwal, who made the most of her education, utilising the knowledge gleaned from commerce classes to plan the gallery’s finances.

And how did she convince the elders in the family that she could manage the mammoth responsibility? “My earlier involvement in the family business surely helped,” says Agarwal. However, I have a sneaking suspicion that her passion was equally instrumental in landing her this present role. “When I took up the responsibility of running this gallery, I felt a surreal satisfaction that was akin to the emotion felt by a woman when doing up her home,” she muses, and with that I am left with no doubt at all. ✨



Above: Emami Chisel Art gallery
Below: A bronze sculpture by sculptor Somnath Hore

accessible to the general public. This is why her gallery is open to all, and their art melas sell pieces at throwaway prices, despite the quality of the work. For Agarwal, it is all about appreciating the finer nuances of life and transcending socio-economic boundaries to enable everyone to connect to their cultural and spiritual roots. Her dream is to organise art events that the whole of Kolkata can look forward to and celebrate. And it is with these key goals of educating and inspiring the public that she plans to move ahead.

For someone who feels so deeply about art, it is naturally not just an investment. Instead, she considers art as an extension of one’s own philosophy. “You have to love what you see. If you see art as investment you’ll keep it locked up like your jewellery,” she pauses for a moment and then reveals, “For me, art is something I want to live with, as I was brought up in a very artistic family.”

All in the family

Her grandfather, K V Mittal, always encouraged every child in the family to learn

