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NOT FOR SALE



Tagore Details

In 1997, Sundaram Tagore opened Hong Kong's first international art gallery. Since then it has been often imitated, but never bettered

Sundaram Tagore has a distinct sense of style. That's probably just as well, bearing in mind his status as an art historian and the owner of a gallery that bears his name.

As with his artistic preferences, his personal sartorial style stems from a unique pairing of Eastern and Western sensibilities. Shunning the more traditional suit-and-tie look, he invariably opts for a minimalistic style ensemble, one featuring mandarin-collar suits in blue or beige.

Pressed as to his style influences, he says: "I don't like to follow anyone, that's a principle. Owing to my work, I am constantly travelling and have a few designers and bespoke tailors around the world who I visit when in town.

"I am very loyal to them. In New York, I go to Tanya Lvov, a Russian fashion designer. I usually tell her what I am looking for and she plays around with it and creates something that suits my style. In Hong Kong, I go to a tailor at the Holiday Inn hotel in Tsim Sha Tsui. Of the local designers, I really like Shanghai Tang. I find it gives a distinct flavour of Asia."

In terms of his fashion essentials, he says: "I only wear linen in summer. I like

Sundaram Tagore talks about his definition of art and dispenses some top tips for those interested in investing in the field in his additional online video interview available at www.igafencu.com

Stylish minimalism is the theme for both Sundaram Tagore's personal style as well as his art gallery's decor



2

2 Tagore against a portrait of the renowned musician and poet Leonard Cohen, by LA-based artist Lee Waisler

3 Tagore's aesthetic sensibilities are accurately reflected in his lavish Hong Kong home

the idea that it breathes and has a handmade look to it. In winter I wear tropical wool. As I travel frequently between places with extreme temperatures, tropical wool has proved quite functional.”

Functionality and practicality might not be the watchwords of many in the wider artistic community, but Tagore is an exception. As the great-grandnephew of one of India's most influential literary figures—the Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore—he grew up as part of an aristocratic family, one that was well-known for its artistic and literary leanings, as well as charity work. Unlike many of his forebears, however, Tagore combined his passion for art with a love of commerce and economics.

He says: “For 14 generations, no one in my family worked, since there was ancestral wealth. Our family wasn't about money. They lived in an introspective and idealistic world, which had more to do with ideas and philosophies than the practicality or commerciality of it all. The pursuit of creativity was more important.

“I grew up at a stage in Indian history where the aristocratic structure was dissolving very quickly, to make way for a new modern Indian culture. By the time we had grown up, we realised that all our resources were drying up. We had to face the issue of finding a livelihood.

“Fighting for my ideas and creativity has always been very important to me. The real challenge then was how

to navigate this entrepreneurial and commercial world, while still fulfilling my need to express.”

Tagore, though, found his own way to succeed. Today he has galleries in Hong Kong, New York and Los Angeles. He's also looking at opening one in Singapore. He says: “We have art galleries in a number of different locations and we also publish art books and make films. In total, we have some 30 artists we represent from 18 different countries.”

Despite his self-made status, Tagore acknowledges the impact his family had on shaping his passion for art. He says: “I was lucky enough to have grown up under the influence of art and culture. The Tagore family defined the artistic side of India in many ways, particularly with regards to the issue of modernism.

“Rabindranath Tagore, along with many other family members, was instrumental in creating the pan-Asian movement. They globalised art as early as the 1920s and interacted with influential modern artists from a number of different cultures.

“These artists included Xu Beihong, the great Chinese poet, Wassily Kandinsky, a well-known modernist, and Edvard Munch, the celebrated Norwegian artist. The first



3

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Bauhaus exhibition ever to travel anywhere came to my ancestral home.”

Needless to say, his love of art, long an intrinsic part of his life, remains a passion. He says: “I always knew that, in some form, I would be involved in art. For a while, I actually considered becoming an architect or an archaeologist. Two passions in my life have always been architecture and films.

“I took a course in archaeology in the United States. There I met a professor called Arnie Lewis, a truly brilliant teacher and a genuinely compassionate human being. He showed me completely new avenues for studying contemporary arts, particularly the great European tradition.

“He also introduced me to the finer points of architecture. After studying art

and architectural history, I was essentially on course for being a museum curator.”

The 1980s saw Tagore moving to New York with his wife Kelly, where he made a living trading in art and launching art-related projects. In 1989 he moved to Venice and worked at the Peggy Guggenheim museum as part of an Italian Ministry of Culture scholarship.

Falling in love with the European art scene, he postponed his return to Asia indefinitely. He says: “I applied to Oxford University and went to Magdalene College to study art and architectural history. I then moved back to New York to write up the dissertation for my PhD.

“As fate would have it, my wife got a job in New York. I was six months

away from finishing my PhD when Pace-Wildenstein hired me to promote its Asian gallery. That’s when I first started coming to Hong Kong.”

The events of 1997 and 1998, however, resulted in something of a hiatus in his plans. He says: “The gallery rolled back their ambitions due to the Asian crisis. Their vision was remarkable, but they were a bit ahead of the times. All the things they wanted to start back then, though, are actually happening now.”

Using the contacts he’d made throughout Asia, Tagore eventually opened his own Hong Kong gallery in 2007. It was the first international gallery to open in the city, but it opened the floodgates with a number of others, notably Gagosian and White Cube, soon following suit.

Today Hong Kong is very much home for Tagore, his wife and their three-and-half-year-old daughter, Mia. He says: “Hong Kong really is Asia’s world city. It has great infrastructure, low taxation

and a vital geographic location. All these factors have made it a natural centre for the dissemination and consumption of art.”

Travel remains one of Tagore’s abiding pleasures and his work gives him ample opportunity to indulge. He says: “Thanks to my work I have an incredible lifestyle and I’m able to meet incredible people. I visit symposiums and art fairs all around the world. I have had the privilege of wining and dining with people from all walks of life—from Nobel Prize-winning writers, economists and presidents of America to monks in the remote corner of the hills.”

As well as art, Tagore has also continued his love affair with film. He says: “I was always interested. I have been exposed to it since I was a kid. My father was very good friends with Satyajit Ray, a celebrated Indian filmmaker. He used to shoot our art collection for his movies.

“One day, I bought a camera and I realised I didn’t know the craft of film making. I began taking classes at the New York Film Academy. I made a few short documentaries—such as *The Nail Salon* and *The Curator*—before attempting longer documentaries.” His first full-length documentary—*The Poetics of Colour: Natwar Bhavsar, An Artist’s Journey*—follows the life and work of the artist. It has since been circulated around film festivals and museums across the world.

Given his passion for art, the conversation inevitably turns towards the current creative scene in Asia. He says: “Art always existed here but it was very much in a traditional context. In a more contemporary context, however, due to the overwhelming influence of the West, Asian artists could not find a voice.

“Now, though, they are comfortable in their own skin. There isn’t the kind of insecurity that we possessed as colonial people. If art is a reflection of life, then today it’s reflecting the confidence of Asia.”

Reflecting on the changes he’s seen in the West’s perception of Asian art, he says: “It’s changed dramatically over the last five years. The idea behind my gallery was to build a global community of artists and

“Art used to be an exclusive arena for both the intellectual or financial elite. You need a lot of education to really decode the meaning of art”

create an interpersonal dialogue. When I opened my gallery, people would ask me what I showed at the gallery, and I would say ‘world art’. Back then, no one could grasp what it meant. Now, however, everyone knows it perfectly well.”

Today, world art is also showcased at the Venice Biennale and Triennale Arts expositions—the most prestigious global contemporary arts expositions. This was far from the case a few years ago. Tagore says: “Not so long ago, you couldn’t show your work as a Chinese or Indian artist at the Venice expositions. People used a back-door policy, wherein they would rent a palazzo or a church and have someone else showcase their work there. They would then be a part of the lateral show. Today, you cannot have an exposition without China or India participating. These are the big two markets. The equation has changed.”

Globalisation, he maintains, has also led to the regionalisation of art. He says: “Auction houses have also created local and regional markets. There is an Asian market, then, within it, you have the Indonesian, Chinese and Indian markets. If you are following Chinese art, it doesn’t necessarily mean that you know what’s happening in Scandinavian or Danish art.

“It’s a difficult task to name the important young modern artists based on popularity alone as it tends to vary from region to region. A few noteworthy names, though, are the Chinese artist Cai Guoqiang, the Indian artists Anish Kapoor and Subodh Gupta, the Iranian artist Shirin Neshat, the Egyptian artist Ghada Amer, the Korean artist Lee U-Fan, as well as Japan’s Hiroshi Senju and Murakami.” Among Tagore’s personal art collection several significant names stand out, notably Rabindranath Tagore, Hiroshi Senju and Robert Rosenberg.

While globalisation has fuelled an interest in art, Tagore feels the lack of

exclusivity has proved a downside. He says: “Technology has actually dumbed art down. Art used to be an exclusive arena for the intellectual or the financial elite. They were people who dealt with art in some form, because you need a lot of education to really decode the meaning of art.

“Today, for instance, leading museums, as well as staging great fine-art shows, are also hosting motorcycle shows, such as a Harley Davidson show, or even a fashion show. So either they are saying everything is art if it’s done well or they are trying to encourage visitors. By doing so they are reducing their core programs and dissolving the idea of art education. It’s all about entertainment. The question is how much entertainment you can provide without diluting the value.”

Has art, then, become overly commercial? Reflecting on both sides of the story, Tagore says: “If you value a more introspective world, then you see that art has stretched too far on the economic side of the story and far less on the creative side.

“If, however, you see art as a reflection of the world we live in, then it’s all about commerce and monetisation. In the end, I believe, what will endure is the fundamental—is art by any shape or form extending our vision of the universe? If it is, then that art still has some value.”

According to Tagore, the onus of shaping the quintessential nature of art lies with those involved in it professionally. He says: “Globalisation, like everything else, produces new opportunities. It clears the wastage of the past and allows us to start something new.

“Technology has done that for us. Now the task is to create a strong base. It needs people who are conscious about art, those who are into it professionally and who need to define the language and create the structure for the betterment of society.” ■



Text: Hitesh Shah | Photos: Nic Gaunt