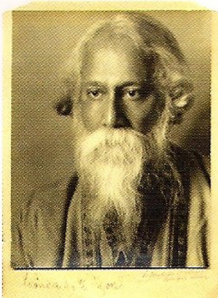


BEHIND THE WALLS / NEW YORK

SUNDARAM TAGORE: THE BUSINESS OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

By Ian Driscoll

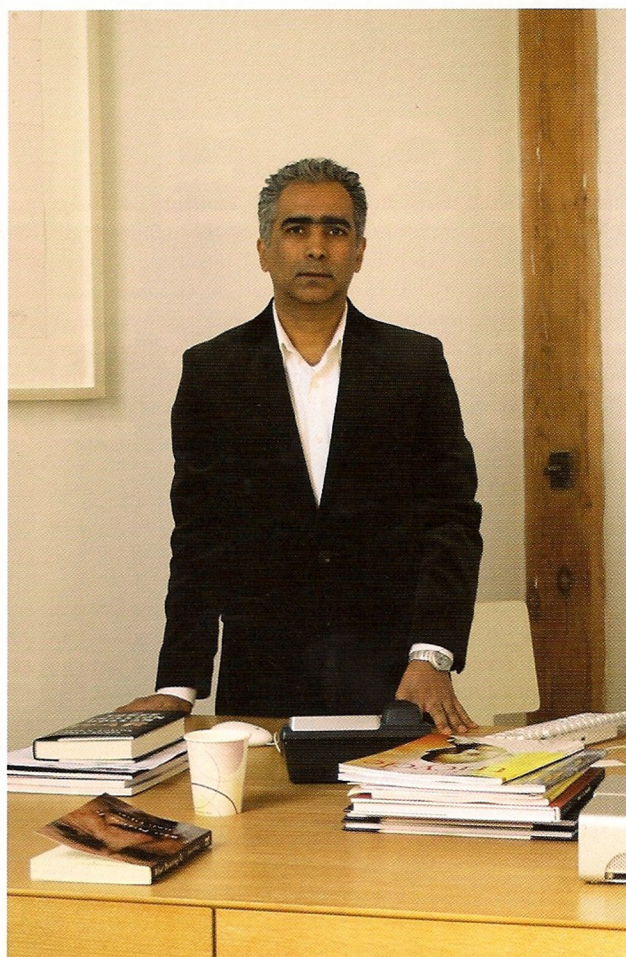


In the early 1990s, Sundaram Tagore was mugged in New York. A gun was shoved into his neck before the assailant made off with his wallet. The incident, he says, represented one of the downsides of the pre-Mayor Giuliani years. But the ebullient Tagore prefers to focus on the upsides of that era, including the preponderance of street art. Oddly, he appears to hold no grudge against the mugger. In fact, had the exchange taken longer, one imagines the ever-charming Tagore not only getting his money back but perhaps also talking the mugger into art history classes.

Seated in a restaurant yards from his gallery in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, the 46-year-old curator and gallerist Sundaram Tagore exudes an easy, cosmopolitan manner. Kolkata-born, Oxford-educated and now New York-based, Tagore hails from one of India's most culturally significant families. Since the mid-1880s, the Tagores have stamped their names on India's literary and artistic cultural heritage. In 1913, poet and painter Rabindranath Tagore, Sundaram's great-granduncle, was the first non-westerner to receive the Nobel Prize. But genetic endowment alone does not explain the family's famed intellectual longevity.

Bengalis by birth and thus distanced from the Hindu world, the Tagores drew on European influences in a manner not shared by their countrymen. The family flourished in this duality and their art, writing and thinking assumed a liberated hue of its own. Today, this legacy of "inter-cultural dialogue" is what nourishes—and propels—Sundaram Tagore.

There was little escaping it. "I was born into art. I opened my eyes and was surrounded by it," remembers Tagore. Sundaram's father, "a very personal and eccentric" collector of Indian miniatures, modern



paintings, ink wells and walking sticks, published the influential art magazine, also called *Sundaram*, which lured both established and unknown domestic and international artists to the family home. "They came from all over the world. Sometimes they spent months with us," recalls Tagore.

Tagore's upbringing suggests privilege, but the family was no longer wealthy. After a long history of philanthropy, the Tagores had collectively depleted previous generations' trading fortune. Tagore remembers a Czarist chandelier being sold off to keep the household running. "We weren't left with anything; my assets were sold off to fund a university," remarks Tagore of the inheritance he and his siblings never collected.

Tagore eventually landed in the US at Wooster College in Ohio, where he studied art history. Eschewing the typical collegiate rituals, Tagore's vacations were focused on museums and galleries. After one school break, he returned with a painting by the American modernist Richard Diebenkorn and a financial hangover that consigned him to a job in the college's library.

In 1990, Tagore headed to Magdalen College at Oxford for further study. By then he had lived in Los Angeles, Venice and Vancouver, and life in a provincial ivory tower held little appeal. When he moved to New York in 1993 to refine his as yet undefended thesis, "Indian Artists' Response to European Modernism, 1940-1980," he was offered a job at PaceWildenstein Gallery. Charged with developing the gallery's presence in nascent Asian markets, he shuttled between Hong Kong, Tokyo, Taiwan and India. "It was 1997, the Thai *baht* fell, and the equation changed."

For a while after, Tagore took freelance art advisory work for



the United Nations and the Museum of Modern Art, but he realized that his future lay in creating his own organization. “In the past, art and culture spearheaded internationalization, and then finance took over,” observes Tagore. “Now, art and culture are trying to reassert their position. It’s the only way to bring people together.”

Tagore opened his first New York gallery in 2000 in Soho, and in 2006 he decamped to a larger space in Chelsea. This year, he set up shop in Beverly Hills and a Hong Kong outpost will open in early May. With a burgeoning art advisory business in the Middle East, Tagore has become a plenipotentiary for inter-cultural dialogue.

Art, globalization and inter-cultural dialogue are themes dear to Tagore. The latter populates his conversation and is reflected in the work he shows. Recent exhibits at his Chelsea gallery have included the metalwork of an Israeli-American, Nathan Slate Joseph; the lush, Scandinavian-influenced paintings by the Indian artist Sohan Qadri; and the ethereal waterfalls of Japanese painter Hiroshi Senju. Tagore’s gallery statement, after all, is to develop exhibitions and host events that “engage in spiritual, social and aesthetic dialogues with traditions other than our own.”

As Tagore points out, much art has already resulted from the co-opting of foreign ideas and forms. But he doesn’t believe that the adaptation of another artistic idiom results in the suppression of all that is dear to the borrower’s culture. The circular genealogy of Indian art, he says, illustrates this. In India, art was historically dominated by *shilpis*, anonymous craftsmen who painted frescoes and miniatures. Colonization and the arrival of Royal Academy-type institutions led to intellectual, secular work by recognized artists. But tradition wasn’t entirely abandoned, although “the modern work was jarring, it was

eulogistic in its use of color,” comments Tagore.

In his work Tagore has found a grand mission: to extract collectors from their comfort zones; to lead them beyond their national and aesthetic borders. In short, he’s out to encourage collectors to stop buying the art of their home nations exclusively. Tagore notes: “Art has become decentralized; the traditional centers are being joined by places like Hong Kong. The global critical eye is identifying artists across new countries and regions.” He also believes that the academic rigor once common across Western art is still found in places like Russia and India.

Tagore’s own collection reflects the broad themes of his life. It is strong in Indian art, including works by many of the Tagores and Gopal Ghosh, and other Indian works from the 1930s and 1940s. “Then I have Rauschenberg, Tom Wesselmann, Shirin Neshat and some Russian art. I have always collected art and now I buy at art fairs, galleries and auction houses as I’m traveling,” he admits.

After dispensing level-headed advice on putting together an art collection, Tagore adds the reminder that whatever a piece costs, collectors must always weigh its elemental value; to judge it on what it does for the beholder. “Art is an area without function. We don’t need art. It doesn’t drive you, it doesn’t fly you. The only thing it does is fulfill the realm of the imagination. And how do you put a value on that?”

(This Page, From Left to Right) J.L. Nehru, Rajiv Gandhi, Subho Tagore and Indira Gandhi. (Opposite Page, Right) Sundaram Tagore. Photo by Alis Atwell for *ArtAsiaPacific*. (Opposite Page, Left) Rabindranath Tagore. All images courtesy Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York.