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# DECCAN Chronicle

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LIFESTYLE

## Through a collector's eye: A realised dream

DECCAN CHRONICLE | Vishwaveer Singh

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Saloni Doshi, 44, a resident of Mumbai, has managed to create a name for herself on the growing art scene that is truly formidable. As one of the youngest taste makers in the industry today, she runs Space 118, a first-of-its-kind artist residency, which gives the required infrastructure to budding artists, allowing them to bloom in ways that would otherwise have been impossible. Excerpts from an interview:

**As one of the youngest women art collectors in India today, tell us how your journey began?**

I always found myself in an atmosphere that was filled to the brim with artistic influences and exposure. Growing up, I used to be fascinated by philately, collecting different types of stamps and coins. Of course, little did I know back then that these 'curios' would lead to a life-long passion! Around the year 2000, before I embarked on my graduate programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science to study Media and Communication, I worked at Osian's, one of India's earliest auction houses – and that truly opened the doors to my journey.

At Osian's I was in charge of research and the cataloguing process, and that allowed me access to a large pool of books, monographs, pamphlets, catalogues, and literature to peer inside the world of art. This is where I fully found myself immersed in the art of the Gandharas, the Cholas, the Bengal School, the Progressives in Mumbai, and other movements. Being at Osian's helped in establishing my (nascent, yet profound) appreciation of visual arts. Home was not any different; on the personal front, my mother constantly kept me on my toes, training me in the classical dance form of Bharatnatyam. Interestingly, this complimented my tutelage under Shubha Mudgal, who taught me Hindustani Classical for more than eight years in school. Such a constant appreciation of all kinds of arts played an immensely important role in beginning my journey as a collector.

**What advice would you have for a person collecting art?**

My advice would be to train a keen eye that constantly seeks out knowledge. Finding yourself exposed to all sorts of art, and visiting museums and galleries around you will remarkably define an artistic worldview that is very important when it comes to deciding what sort of artworks you want to acquire. Find yourself constantly looking at artworks; from different periods of history and understand how the artistic movements have mutated with the socio-political shifts in that time. Moreover, read as much as you can – the history of what period you enjoy, the genre of art, the biography of the artist(s), as that additional contextual understanding always deepens your visual appreciation. If you have any galleries around you, visit them, be on their mailing lists, talk to the artists they represent. Such an inquisitive sense greatly helped me in my journey, realising that the more you see, the more you learn.

Regarding forming a 'wholesome' collection, I would perhaps say that the collection of art is an endeavour that is built over time. It is not about collecting 'x' number of artworks or checking names off a list, but about collecting a language that speaks to you, collecting a body of works that you wish to see daily, and live with. It is about collecting an aesthetic sense that you wish to be surrounded by, day-in, day-out. People may have different approaches, but what I do know is that such a fundamental thought goes a long way in providing a sense of enjoyment, which, over a period does become 'wholesome' enough to put a smile on your face.

**What inspired you to start an artist residency in Mumbai, giving rise to Space 118, the concept behind it?**

When I began collecting art in my early twenties, I was working with a publication house that once took me on a collector's trip to Baroda. Even in those days, it was a magnificent city brimming with artist studios and practices spread all over, and seeing such a bubbling atmosphere made me deeply interrogate why we've not had a similar outcropping in a central city such as Mumbai. It became perplexing to imagine that we're missing out on so much: access to artists, their practices, their methods. That trip completely changed my worldview about what needed to be done, letting me realise the huge vacuum that our city is left with. Fortunately, we had space at our warehouse which I was subsequently able to convert into a residency space. It became a multi-disciplinary community space where at least 7-8 artists lived at the same time. It took me a while to understand the process completely since I was the first to do it in recent times, but not only did it become a pathbreaking initiative, but that it allowed me to

set standards on how to run a space — a space that involved nourishing the growth of more than 450 artists over thirteen years.

### **How far ahead or behind would you say India is, when compared to other Asian countries?**

Compared to other Asian countries, India is far ahead. Indian arts (especially Indian miniatures, as very recently seen in global auctions) have made global headlines over any Asian country, barring perhaps China. But nevertheless, the quality of art that our subcontinent provides, the prices that our artists fetch, the growing class of collectors emerging, the rising number of art galleries and institutions — the overall strength of the Indian art ecosystem is profoundly and steadily increasing, several strides ahead of our neighbours.

### **How did your love for photography begin? What are some of the most treasured pieces in your collection according to you and why?**

I found myself very intimately drawn towards collecting photographs from a very early age. An intangible, indescribable pull towards the medium that perhaps stems from a photograph's ability to immerse you in a different reality, a present past. I've always wanted to engage not just with a photograph, but the aura around it. The story of the moment just before and just after, the captured moment. I would be keen to understand the different dialects of photography, and how various artists could shift the medium in their own unique ways based on their subject preferences, and instinctive knowledge. After studying under Jeroo Mulla and immersing myself in films by directors like Akira Kurosawa and Satyajit Ray, it was particularly exciting to see how a formally composed photograph dictated the various ways in which we see the world.

Hyderabad is a growing art market, with several youngsters wanting to invest in art for their homes here. Many have gone the pop art route, buying KAWS and Murakami. What artists would you recommend to this generation?

Increasingly I have noticed a trend where I see collectors flocking more towards established names coming out of the West, like KAWS and Takashi Murakami. I'm not entirely certain if it is a matter of an aesthetic sensibility from the West, or having a foreign artist in the collection, or perhaps the idea of possessing that which cannot be readily availed — but I do see this as a trend that is orbiting around our social lives, around our 'Instagrammable' aesthetic where social media services take over every facet of our life (include our tastes and sensibilities towards art), and we have a new crop of collectors that resonate more with this 'movement,' seeking an internet-based identity.

I have a lot of works from internationally-established artists, and have had the pleasure and luxury to visit a lot of exhibitions and fairs abroad. But what I have come to realise is that in our desire to seek art out of the West, we fail to perhaps properly appreciate what is here back at home. There is a certain lack of exposure and lack of knowledge that creates unfortunate obstacles for us to enjoy our art. Hyderabad has such centrality in its artistic history — right from the Cholas, or the neighbouring Bidriware, to exciting contemporary artists like Varunika Saraf — and it is our responsibility to make it visible. As a proud Indian, getting exposed to international art, at the end of the day, only doubles my resolve at appreciating our roots, our culture, our artists — beyond fads and transient heights.

### **Can you see a time when we will have museum spaces like the Met, Guggenheim etc. in India?**

I feel like rather than questioning whether we can mirror another Met or Tate or British Museum in India, it is rather pressing for us to give a proper due to our already-established institutions, for while a cross-pollination of cultural exchanges and the dissemination of ideas across museums is beneficial, it will somewhere or the other only serve already prominent institutes of the West. It is therefore not about whether we can have the resources of the Victoria & Albert Museum (which, like the rest of these institutions, have a large collection of looted and displaced antiquities that pose a difficult question over

the authenticity of these places) but rather how we find ourselves pushing the Chandigarh Museum (which has a fabulous collection of Gandhara art), the Indian Museum, the CSMVS, the Salar Jung Museum, and several other establishments on the world map. Instead of aping the infrastructure of the West, we should find ourselves better suited in making our own culture exciting – for our own citizens, as well as the rest of the world. Imagine a star-studded concert which responds to the collection of the National Museum! It'll not only publicise the collection, but also spark an interest in our youngsters to take stock of works that are not simply Andy Warhol or Jackson Pollock, and find themselves in better sync with our history and society.

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Saloni Doshi

Space 118

Mumbai art scene

Young women art collectors

Artist residency

Indian art ecosystem

Photography collection

Contemporary art trends

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