



Mehendi by Hetain Patel, and below right, *The Other Thing* by Subodh Gupta.

magazine’s list of the top 20 most influential collectors around today, alongside François Pinault, Viktor Pinchuk, Eli Broad and Sheikh Saud Al Thani, the cousin of the Emir of Qatar.

“Astute patronage has the power to influence art practice and alter art history,” says Maithili Parekh, a director and the head of Sotheby’s in India. “Anupam Poddar is this kind of patron – he has engaged with artists during the conception and production stages, and therefore been a collaborator in the artistic process.”

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India has other collectors and some, like Poddar, are eager to give back. Rajshree Pathy, who is called the “sugar baroness” of India, thanks to the sugar mills her family owns, is using her extensive art collection to start a contemporary art museum in the

southern city of Coimbatore, her hometown. In New Delhi, Kiran Nadar, the wife of the industrialist Shiv Nadar, has founded the Kiran Nadar Museum of Contemporary Art within an upmarket mall. It houses wonderful works by all the top names, most of which Nadar bought at eye-popping prices (US\$3.5 million, or Dh12.86m, for an SH Raza painting) in international auctions. In Kolkata, Herzog and de Meuron, the architectural firm responsible for London’s Tate Modern, is designing a modern art gallery expected to open in 2013. The hotelier

Priya Paul has allowed Tasveer Ghar, affiliated to the University of Michigan and Heidelberg University, to catalogue her collection. But Poddar, says Sunitha Kumar Emmert of Gallery Ske in Bangalore, is a visionary. “In setting up the Devi Art Foundation, which is a huge gift not only for the art community but also for young students, he is taking collecting to another level,” Emmert says.

In 2008, Poddar and his mother, Lekha, set up the Devi Art Foundation, a non-profit space to encourage experiments without the constraints of commercialisation. Poddar

allows young art students to curate the work, maintaining that they are the critics and the curators of the future and “need a place where they can make mistakes”. Last year the foundation showed the works of 45 Pakistani artists who are part of Poddar’s collection, including Ali Raza, Farida Batool, Imran Qureshi, Ayaz Jokhio, Aisha Khalid, Hamra Abbas, Unum Babar, Saira Wasim and others. “The work coming out of Pakistan is very strong,” says Poddar. “Why shouldn’t Indian schoolchildren get to see Pakistani art? It is such a lovely way of bridging the divide

between our two countries.” Poddar’s current interest is Central Asian art, including works from Iran, Uzbekistan, Oman and Pakistan. He and his mother travel to those countries in search of the best talent. In his study hangs a series of large red photographic plates of rotting meat by the Lahore-based Rashid Rana, which, to Poddar, look like landscapes or nudes. “So you have human bones and rotting meat in a vegetarian household,” he says dryly. The guest wing has burqa art, with photographs, videos and installations by various artists, including Erbossyn

Meldibekov of Kazakhstan and the New York-based Iranian Sara Rahbar, who explores the covering and femininity. There are photographs of the burqa by the Iran-based Shadi Ghadirian, and a video on the burqa by Afghanistan’s Rahraw Omarzad. Poddar and his mother typically find and buy such works, not through galleries but by travelling to the countries themselves.

“You usually begin with introductions from friends, and then one artist will tell you about another and you’ll visit their studios, and someone will mention a book in which you’ll discover other names and perhaps a curator,” says Poddar. “It’s a lovely way of getting to know the people and the visual culture.”

his interest in art comes from his mother, who has a fine collection of modern Indian art including by such greats as MF Hussain, SH Raza and Tyeb Mehta. Family holidays in Europe always involved visits to galleries and museums. Poddar was interested; his brother, Devashish, was not. Now, his brother and their father, Ranjan, run Sirpur Paper, the family firm, while Poddar and his mother take care of the boutique hotels they own, including the award-winning Devi Garh and two new properties in Rajasthan called Devi Ratn and Rasa.

“Anupam has been passionate about art, architecture and design from a very early age,” says Lekha. “He has a keen eye for the cutting edge in the contemporary.”

Poddar’s parents live in the downstairs wing of their contemporary home, while his brother and family live in their own bungalow across the undulating lawn within the compound. Parrots screech and peacocks call, adding to the pastoral setting.

After finishing his schooling in Delhi, Poddar went to England to do his A-Levels and university. It was during this time that his eye for art was honed, thanks to solitary trips to art galleries and museums.

“I would try to convince people to go with me,” he says, “but my college friends thought I was mad to be visiting art museums. In retrospect, it was good for me to see art alone because it allowed me to discover what I liked. There was nobody standing there and correcting me.”

In 1996, Poddar returned home after seven years in Europe, during which time he travelled all over the continent. His parents offered him art from their collection to fill up his space. He took a few works but later

The Poddar file

BORN	August 25, 1974, Delhi	makaan (food, clothing and shelter)
SCHOOLING	Modern School, Delhi; Millfield School, Somerset, UK	SECRET PLEASURE Attending classes in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi
FAMILY	Father, Ranjan; mother, Lekha; brother, Devashish	CAN’T STAND Artists’ fragile egos
FIRST JOB	Hotel management trainee at the Mark Hotel in New York	CRAZIEST THING EVER DONE Way too many to list
WORST JOB	Tedious administrative and accounts in every job I have done	PERSON TO BE STRANDED WITH ON A DESERT ISLAND My mother
LAST BOOK READ	<i>The Golden Gate</i> , Vikram Seth	SIZE OF COLLECTION 3,000-plus works
BIGGEST REGRET	None at all	MOST EXPENSIVE WORK IN COLLECTION I am a bad Marwari (person from the Marwar region of Rajasthan) who doesn’t count his pennies
CAN’T LIVE WITHOUT	Roti, kapdaa aur	

discovered that they didn’t quite fit with what he had in mind for himself. His spending power came from family money – a rich industrialist grandfather on his mother’s side. His first big purchase was a pink fibreglass cow by the artist Subodh Gupta. He threw out his living room furniture to make room for it. He later went on to buy a big installation by the same artist made of dried cow dung.

“Buying that piece really helped to break the restraints I had in my own mind about art collecting,” says Poddar. “I told myself that I am not going to care about what people think, about the smell of dung, about storage and conservation. When we installed it in the living room, my parents almost killed me.



They thought I was insane. The whole house smelt. But if you break down these barriers in your mind, you can have a more engaged experience with art.”

For a decade, Poddar bought fearlessly. He visited art school graduations to scout for young talent. He visited studios, identified work he liked and paid for it in instalments.

“I was young and so were they,” he says. “I’ve spent the last decade being broke because I’ve spent all my money on art.”

Since the foundation, Poddar has become more cautious. He buys work that “makes sense for our collection, which is open to the public over time to come”. He questions

whether it needs to be preserved in a certain way “because we have a limited amount of space and resources”. He misses the carefree innocence of those days but accepts that his collection has become larger than himself.

“At a certain point of time, you are mature enough to say that it is not about ownership, it is not about possession,” he says.

Poddar keeps learning and expanding his horizons. This year, at Zurich’s Rietberg Museum, he spent two days looking at the exhibit of Mughal miniatures. “It blew my mind,” he says. He has friends in the Delhi Jawaharlal Nehru University’s art department, and he wants to audit art history courses. He has stacks of books on antiquities and miniatures that he is poring over.

every now and then, he says, friends offer to curate his collection. Most collectors use themes such as gender, chronology, subject or artist for this purpose. But Poddar is not interested in such obvious notions. “What about courage as a theme?” he asks. “Courage for the artist who made the work, to take it to the next level; courage for the collector to buy and live with it; courage in the use of materials like camphor or cow dung; courage in developing radical ideas. There are various levels at which courage as a concept could work.”

With that, Anupam Poddar sums up the concept that defines his collection: courage in the face of the conformity that occasionally overtakes the Indian (or indeed the global) art world.

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