

LIFE&TIMES **ART**

Seeing eye for telling art

Curator Dr Debra Diamond tells **Aneeta Sundararaj** about her life-changing experience

TODAY, Dr Debra Diamond is associate curator for South and Southeast Asian Art at the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. She was not always focused on traditional Indian painting, though.

"I was born and brought up in New York," says this daughter of a businessman. "I went to art school and focused on Western contemporary art. Then I visited India and it was a life-changing experience for me."

Still awed by her experiences, she describes observing the act of worship, where milk is poured over a bronze statue of Goddess Lakshmi, "as a form of performance art".

Over the next 10 years, she spent a lot of her time in Varanasi and Jodhpur, immersing herself in Indian culture, even learning some Sanskrit.

When she joined the Smithsonian, Diamond participated in several acclaimed and diverse exhibitions. These included reviews of Asian portraiture from the past 2,000 years, contemporary photography and art.

At one point, she also featured the works of Malaysian-born artist Simryn Gill. "One of her pieces was a striking installation work constructed from collected silverware and red chillies. There were also some beautiful, large format, black and white images that Simryn created. She took texts from books like Robinson Crusoe and put them into parts of the landscapes taken of places in Malaysia, such as Port Dickson."

Recipient of the College Art Association's 2009 Alfred Barr, Jr Award for "outstanding museum catalogue", Diamond created an exhibition that attracted an unprecedented number of visitors — the Garden and Cosmos: Royal Painting of Jodhpur. It is widely acknowledged as a new model for



"My textbooks used to say art in Jodhpur was boring. With these (pieces exhibited), I could show them that they were all wrong."

Dr Debra Diamond

Indian art exhibitions.

Her curatorial development about Indian art was the subject matter of a lecture she presented at the Shalini Ganendra Fine Art gallery as part of its Vision Culture series of lectures. To illustrate the process, she referred to a set of slides about the exquisite paintings she'd discovered.

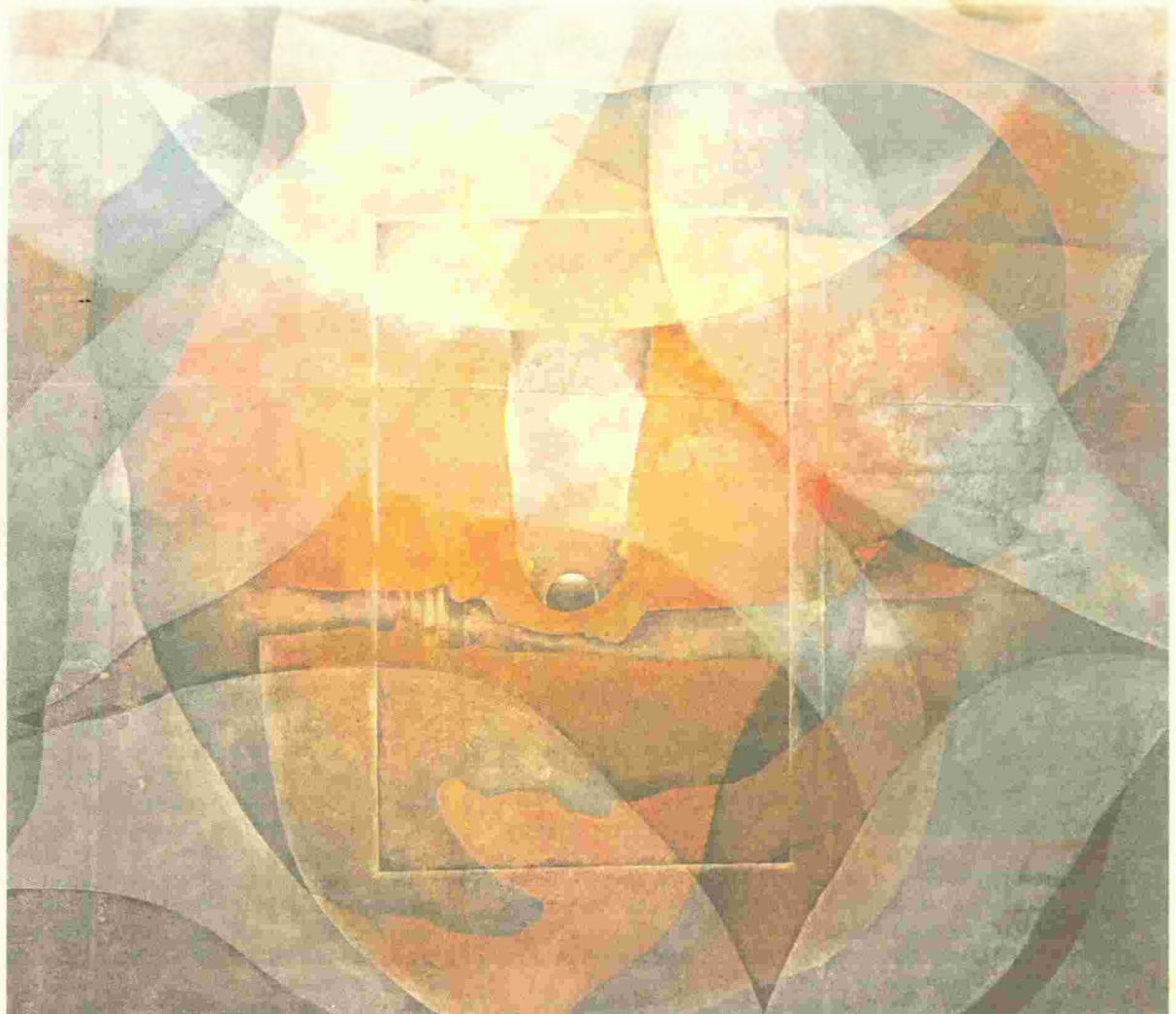
"I was in Jodhpur visiting one of their museums," she says. "After much persuasion, I was allowed into their storerooms. There, I found large boxes, full of paintings. No one had ever seen them before."

Prior to this, she "didn't know much about Indian art. My textbooks used to say art in Jodhpur was boring. With these, I could show them that they were all wrong."

Of particular interest were paintings of three successive kings: the first was of *Maharaja Bakhat Singh* (1725-1751). "This had a more Moghul influence," she explains.

The next, *Maharaja Vijai Singh And The Epic Landscapes* (1752-1793), was about the worship of Hindu deities, "which indicates a decline in the Moghul influence".

Last was the painting of *Maharaja Man Singh — Painting, Politics And Piety* (1803-1843). "With the more yogic influence in this work, I observed how the artists here were grappling with the formless being." As she succinctly put it, "When politics change, so does art."



Beneath Beyond# 19, by Druvinka

In the exhibition, Diamond used simple frames for these paintings. "I wanted the focus to be on the painting." As a sub-text, the walls where these paintings were mounted were painted in colours that are synonymous with India like ochre, red and green. "I wanted people to understand that these are artworks rather than an anthropological study. Look at the creativity and vision of the artists. Look at the oscillating patterns and the colours like lime green and margarita yellow."

Her next major exhibition of sculpture and painting will be the first to reveal yoga's impact on India's visual traditions, as well as its historical diversity and transformations (Smithsonian, 2013).

It will tell the story of the history of yoga through Indian art. "It's bound to be controversial," she says. "What does yoga mean? To some, it's just exercise. To others, yoga is religious."

Indeed, one of the slides she presents shows a manuscript of yoga postures, with a script around them.



Waiting-1, oil on canvas, by Nelun Harasgama

The script is not the Devanagari script of Sanskrit, but Arabic. Even more interesting is that this manuscript was commissioned during the reign of the Moghul Emperor, Jehangir.

Decisions on what to exhibit are not made lightly. They take a long time and involve a number of people, from curators and directors to departmental heads and volunteers. Any feedback comes in the form of what's written in the "sign in" books, on blogs and also formal studies conducted by various bodies.

All said and done, it is Diamond's appreciation of beauty that comes through. "We seem to work all the time and it's not healthy. You don't have to have lots of money to become interested in art. I know a man who collected early Indian postcards. He bought them on eBay and now has a wonderful collection."

After all, why should you have ugly things on the walls of your home? "I'm impressed by people who take time to look and learn, to make their space a place of beauty. They allow a space for art in their lives."

SAMSARA MANTRA

BORN in Colombo, "I've lived all my life in Sri Lanka and I travel all around the island," admits Nelun Harasgama. The underlying mantra for her work is: While we destroy we do not appreciate, and after the loss, we mourn and regret.

"It's my take on samsara — the eternal cycle of wounding death and mourning. It's simple and happens all the time. We wound something, maybe a person, culture or race. It

dies. We then mourn its passing while never learning not to do it again," she explains.

A lot of her work focuses on landscapes and figures in isolation. The reason she focuses on these aspects of her craft is, "They are an analogy for the earth and what lives on it. There is no respite and no direction home from my samsara."

Clearly, her work is infused with emotions of loss, loneliness and

nostalgia. Just where does such sadness come from? "It's all around us. It's in your conscience, in one's genes. We carry suffering within, even if we have never suffered in our lives."

Harasgama's work has been described as "while not haunting, presents a quiet acceptance and resignation to the shifts which unavoidably influence our lives". Is this true? "It is not quiet. It's screaming."