

In the last decade, the price of art has increased more than ever before

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art issue

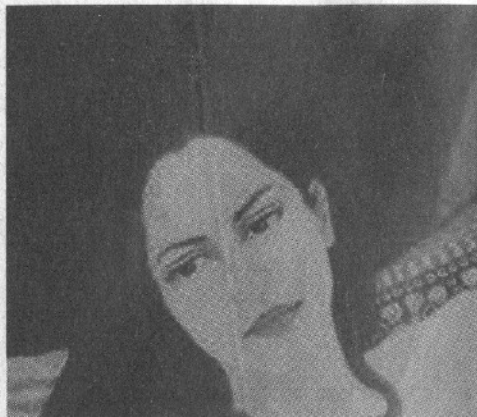
Art
News
26.5.02

There are not many certainties in the realm of art, but one aspect is almost agreed upon, that a work of art is a priceless entity. Yet all (or most) creations of plastic arts carry some monetary value with them. This — the price, an indispensable component of an art object — can cause a huge embarrassment at times when it is directly questioned from the artist. Many artists seem unable and in awkward position to respond to that, and they try to find an honourable/safe exit from this situation. However, the same type of inquiry is normal discourse in a gallery space (not to mention the shops, markets and other such places where this discussion often culminates to the level of haggling, which is mutually enjoyed by buyers and traders of artwork also).

The reason why (most, but not all!) creators of art evade becoming a part in the process of selling lies in a belief: That although the paintings, sculptures and other forms of art are sold and purchased, money paid for them, in reality, is not equivalent to the virtue of these objects (which essentially represent ideas). Similarly many works keep on increasing their worth once they are bought. Actually the concept of monetary value exists only as an abstraction in relation to a majority of collected objects, because it is very rarely that an important piece of art is brought for sale, once it is acquired by a museum or a private collector.

Besides, the business of art is a flourishing activity in our surroundings. It has been noticed that since a decade (or may be longer) the works

Pricing the



Rukh-e-Nilofer's original work



And the vandalised version.

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of art have gained more prices than ever before. The rise of nouveau riche and the refinement of general public's taste, which now prefer the original canvases in contrast to the earlier custom of displaying the printed posters and beautiful calendars, contributed in elevating the rates of art here.

The increase in its currency value has changed the perception of the work as well as affected the art world in multiple ways. First of all, this development has given

the artists an opportunity to survive solely on their creative outputs, a notion not known earlier. Secondly, it generated and accelerated the network of art galleries in the country. That made it possible to show all kinds of work, including commercial and conceptual stuff, well-known individuals' products and new artists' non-saleable pieces.

But a logical outcome of all this is the habit of denoting the artists' status and worth according to their saleable value or the market

prices/rates. These days, in accordance to other norms of society, an artist is judged on the basis of how much his/her work sells for (and whether in rupees, dollars or pounds?) and how many of his paintings or sculptures are purchased in a solo exhibition, or in a group show. The latter has instigated another kind of phenomenon: that the artists participating in a group exhibition tend to have some sort of competition with each other, first through their relative prices and then about

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the quantity of their works picked by collectors. So much so that many established and much-respected artists of the country have started suffering from an inferiority complex, because the so-called commercial painters and sculptors fetch more money for their works compared to serious practitioners.

It has altered the approach of various professionals — they have turned oblivious to the intricacies of selling work, and are more concerned with their creative aspirations, along with earning their livelihood from it. The extreme behaviour of this kind results in making the installation, site-specific and large-scale works, which an individual connoisseur is unable to afford, and can be collected by art museums (but the latter do not exist in Pakistan). Or several artists succumb to the economic pressures and start producing works which can be easily sold, enabling them to maintain their high positions in the art world.

Consequently, the same attitude may be seen at the degree shows of different art institutes of the country where most of the graduating students ask enormous sums for their works. Normally (normal) visitors complain, ridicule and disagree with this practice. They can easily guess the eagerness of the upcoming artists to churn as much money as possible from a single event/exhibition — the degree show. And reacting to that, they do not take these works presented at the end of students' course seriously. Later, the rates drop — but

not in any respectful manner.

Take for instance the miniature painting displayed in the graduating show of 1994 at NCA. Initially the price of this large-scale traditional work was one million rupees. Since nobody purchased it, the price was reduced to a 'humble' thirty five thousand in a group show at Alliance Francaise, Lahore. Still the unfortunate masterpiece could not be sold (perhaps viewers are hoping for the price to drop further — in the fashion of stock market).

Sometimes an art work is priced highly by the gallery. This was observed in the exhibition of Artists' Association of Punjab, recently held at Alhambra, Lahore. The organisers of this show — allegedly — added large sums to the initial amounts. For example, rupee one lakh was added to two miniatures by Khalid Saeed Butt, that were originally priced at 50,000 and 75,000; and the price of Rukh-e-Nilofer's painting was increased to three lakhs rupees — without informing or consulting the painter.

This very expensive work by Nilofer was vandalised in the galleries. The painting, executed in tempera, showed a naked female, covered with a white sheet, lying amid the interior in various patterns. During the show, an unidentified spectator drew a *bindiya* and moustaches on the face of the model. Such an act reflects the incompetence of the organisers, Artists' Association of Punjab, that is responsible for the safety of the works submitted for the

show. It also reveals the state of our art galleries (Alhambra in this case) which remains unguarded throughout the show, providing visitors a chance to spoil the exhibit.

This incident is not the first of its kind — nor the last. Yet, it's an occasion to analyse the behaviour of people towards art works. This act of destroying an art piece is possible only here because, whether we are producers, organisers or viewers of art, we do not consider an art object important despite being aware of its price. Instead of perceiving art as a significant undertaking, we tend to regard it as a manifestation of frivolous pursuits. And it did not come as a surprise when this act of mutilating an artwork generated no serious reaction from the organiser.

On another level, the incident of making *bindiya* and moustaches on a girl's face unfolds a mind set, linked to the apparently harmless and ordinary activity/custom/habit of scribbling, particularly drawing moustaches on female faces — of actresses or politicians like Benazir Bhutto. This perhaps represents a male psyche of adding (unconsciously) the masculine features (virtue?) to those women who are operating and often succeeding in the male dominated society.

Men in our culture fail to swallow any other role/state of women than of a subjugated entity given to them by tradition — as someone in the exhibition could not face the unconventionally dressed woman wearing a shawl only, even on a two-dimensional surface.